



# These Reckless Hearts

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult

**Description:** Stone Jacobs must...help me. My life has always been defined by two interconnected things: I'm a Wilder. I'm a treasure hunter. What happens when both of those things are threatened? When who I am gets pulled out from under me and my greatest enemy of all destroys me even further? Lance and his mercenaries aren't going to stop. They're going to come at us until they take the treasure for themselves, and they don't care who gets in their way. There's no more family loyalty. No more bonds. It's just us versus them. Through it all, I know one thing: We're the only ones who deserve to find the Wilder legacy. Lance and his hired men will have to kill us if they want it for themselves—and trust me, they're going to try.

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# Page 1

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I have a story to tell you, baby girl.

Cole's words repeat in my head like a skipping record. Everyone I've ever loved—bar the three most important men in my life—has let me down. Dickie cheated my family. My dad...isn't my dad. What do I call him now? Clark Wilder? I'm a fucking Wilder. It's all I know. The treasure is all I know, and Cole yanked out the stable footing of the only thing in this life I was sure of.

I'm Dakota Wilder.

I come from a long line of treasure hunters.

I will find the Wilder treasure.

I've been lying to myself for years, and my dad—Fuck. Clark—is behind all of it. Not only that, but I can't even rage at him because he's fucking dead.

I wrap my arms tighter around Lucas, the beeping of the hospital machine next to us the perfect backdrop to the rampant thoughts strangling me. Cole and Stone are dealing with the shitshow back at the mansion. Two of Cole's bodyguards dropped me off at the hospital so I could be with Lucas and Wyatt, and they're now thankfully stationed outside the room, providing me peace of mind from the clusterfuck that the last twelve hours have been.

I haven't told Lucas and Wyatt what happened yet. I simply slipped into Lucas'

hospital room on my tiptoes and slid in next to him on the bed without a word. He held me to him, welcoming me with open arms and zero questions. Wyatt, too, pulled his chair closer to silently comfort me with a gentle hand on my hip.

Their wordless comfort is exactly what I needed, and not having to voice my wants but having them taken care of anyway, is a blessing.

I keep waiting for the tears to come, but they're blocked by a bitterness I can't escape. I lost the man I believed was my dad. He's gone. Murdered. Taken from me with no hesitation. Yet I'm a dried-up well.

The nurses, for some reason or another, don't balk at me being in the room, no less my spot on the bed right next to Lucas. They do their rounds, and I don't even lift my head away from Lucas' chest when they take his vitals. They want him to rest his vocal cords, so he communicates via marker and a lined, yellow pad. Even laid out in a hospital bed, he's my rock. He's the surest thing I have. With his palms wrapped in gauze, he runs his hands up and down my arm and through my hair.

The only other movement is Wyatt pulling the blankets over me when the nurses come in so they don't spy my blood-stained clothes and arms. Though, I have a feeling that Stone or Cole arranged their silence, so the precaution is probably unnecessary.

I must've fallen asleep at some point because I wake to low whispers from the two men in the room. They're discussing me as I lay here, keeping my eyes closed. "She's so beautiful," Wyatt murmurs, and his fingers trail over my hip bone in soft caresses.

"Strong, too," Lucas replies, his whisper hoarse, and I pray to God that he gets his smooth, rich voice back. I need to hear it again.

Those assholes Lance hired hurt him. They tried to kill us. Anger courses through me

at their blatant disrespect for human life.

My mouth parts, and a wash of reality hits me in the chest. I killed someone today. Funnily enough, I haven't dissected killing Marissa's dad until this very moment. I wait for some emotion to wrack me but it never comes. I feel absolutely no regret. I saw him pointing a gun at someone who didn't deserve to die, and I didn't hesitate. Replaying the scene doesn't do anything to me either. Bloodshed and all, I'm numb.

"Stone's asking if she's talking yet." Short clicks of Wyatt's fingers over his phone screen sound. "He'll be on his way soon. He's trying to get his mother settled."

I tense. "He better not be bringing her here," I blurt, speaking for the first time. I lift my head and stare at Wyatt. "I don't want her at the house either."

I swallow. Man, I've got some balls today. Let me just tell Stone who he can and cannot have in his own house. Oh well. He owes me for standing at an altar with a girl who wasn't me.

"You're awake." Wyatt's fingers stop flying over his phone. He tucks it away, drags me off the bed, and onto his lap, blanket and all. "Let's give Lucas a rest."

Lucas all but snorts. "You've been chomping at the bit to hold her. Just be real."

"Fine. I'm jealous as fuck, and I need a little Dakota time." Wyatt props his feet up on the metal frame of the bed and holds me to his chest, tucked into a ball with my head on his shoulder. His cowboy hat is nowhere to be seen. I reach up to run my fingers through his dark hair, my nails gently scraping the raised ridge on his head.

My family scars can't be felt like Wyatt's but they're still present all the same.

Lucas's private room is fairly large. It's like we're in a bubble, separated from the

chaos out in the hospital proper which only drifts in when the nurses appear. The tinge of sterile cleaning supplies burns my nose. In the corner, a flat screen TV is angled toward us, hanging mere inches from the ceiling, but it stays off.

We have enough of our own drama. We don't need to watch TV for it.

Wyatt's phone rings, and he shifts, lifting his hips to grab it out of his pocket before bringing the device to his ear. "Yeah?" A voice permeates the phone's speakers on the other end of the line but it's not one I expected. It's Cole. Wyatt's gaze darts to me. "The gangster wants to meet with you." He holds the phone away from his ear and gives me his full attention. "Is that acceptable?"

I'm not ready to see Cole yet, but I also don't want to play phone tag either. Since this is my burden to take on, I hold my hand out for Wyatt's phone, and he places it in my palm. "Hello?"

"Hey, baby girl," Cole breathes, a thread of relief washing over his words. "Are you okay?"

I bite the inside of my lip. How in the hell do I answer that question when nothing's really wrong with me physically but mentally is a whole different story? "What do you want, Cole?"

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He takes a moment to reply, and I have this image in my head of him fretting over what to say. It's kind of cute, actually. Or would be, you know, if he hadn't killed the man I knew as my father. "Stone's on his way to the hospital, and I wanted to know if I'm allowed to come too?"

Now that's interesting. Cole's not the type to ask permission.

"There are things I have to tell you, Dakota," he reminds me, not shying away from the information he started to give me when we were at Jacobs mansion.

I close my eyes as if doing so will ward off everything that's happened. I'm not that lucky, though, because when I open them back up, I'm still in a stark hospital room with the beeping machine like an alarm for my brain that tells me with each high-pitched sound that I am now fatherless. Or I guess I always was? I actually don't know. Who is my real father? Or mother? Was my actual mother my mother? Or was that a lie, too?

Pain lashes at my heart like a stinging whip, and even though Cole has the answers I need to all of these questions, I'm not ready to hear them yet. I need time to digest what the fuck is happening before I jump down a rabbit hole of the life I should've had. "I need some time," I choke out.

"Understandable." Silence engulfs us. The only thing I hear is his steady breathing on the other end of the line.

I chew on my lip. "Are you okay?" I hedge. "You were shot?"

“Don’t worry about me.” After a few moments of silence, he murmurs, “Don’t think too badly of me, baby girl.” Then, he hangs up.

I pull the phone away from my ear. Call Ended displays on the screen before it vanishes, and Wyatt’s screensaver moves into view. It’s a picture of me I didn’t know he’d taken. I’m sitting on the beautiful horse I rode the day we went for a trail ride, staring out at the river with the mountains as a backdrop. The sun is streaming in behind me, lighting up my brown curls in a crown of gold.

“I couldn’t not take that picture,” Wyatt remarks. His fingers brush the screen where there’s a smile on my face. “You looked absolutely stunning.”

I don’t have many pictures of me. Barely any, actually. My father—I mentally clear my throat. Clark—wasn’t the type to shell out money for school pictures, so the only ones I have are from newspaper clippings about the Wilder treasure. Seeing myself lit up in these bright colors, it appears as if I’m on top of the world, staring out over my kingdom. A queen. Right now, I don’t feel any of that but to know I have it in me makes me sit up in Wyatt’s lap. “It’s really pretty,” I confess before finding the camera icon.

I’ve seen people take selfies, but in the short amount of time I’ve had a phone, I haven’t tried it. I press the camera, and a view of the blanket on my lap appears on the screen. I start hitting random icons until I see myself. It’s a really unflattering view, staring in concentration at the phone.

Also, I look a mess. Smears of dirt and dried blood mar my face and shirt. Instead of fretting over my appearance, I pick the phone up and center Wyatt and I on the screen. I smile, and he does the same, reaching up to hit the shutter button. Then, I turn my head and kiss Wyatt’s cheek while he hits the button again. There, I think to myself. At least now there are three colored pictures of me out in the world.

“You’ll have to send me those,” Lucas tells us from the bed. “And when I get better, I want selfies with Wild Girl, too.”

“Too bad,” Wyatt teases. “Selfies are now a me and Tits thing. You can suck it.”

Lucas lifts his hand to flip Wyatt off, and I laugh for the first time since finding out that my dead dad isn’t really my dad. I sober up in an instant. If it weren’t for Lucas, Wyatt, and Stone, I’d literally have no one right now. That’s a bitter pill to swallow, but on the other hand, having them has turned out to be the highlight of my life.

The door clicks open, and Wyatt wraps his arms around me, preparing for a medical visit, but we turn to find Stone striding in instead. He’s changed out of his tux and is wearing a dark blue polo and light khakis. He bumps fists with Wyatt, drags his thin-lipped gaze over me, then immediately moves toward Lucas. He bends over, wrapping his arms around his friend. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t there.”

Lucas pats his back. “I know, man. We’re good.” They embrace for another minute before Lucas moves the head of the bed into a sitting position and Stone takes a seat on the edge facing Wyatt and me.

“Well, I don’t see a ring on your finger, so I’m guessing you’re not married?” Wyatt quizzes.

“Nope. Wrong girl.” Stone meets my stare, his gray-blue eyes bright in the stark lights of the hospital room.

“Well, that’s a relief,” Lucas comments, shifting his weight so he can face us. He’s adorable in his baby blue hospital gown. My heart starts to melt but then he hisses and it breaks all over again. The image of him struggling on that wire will haunt me forever. I’ve told this boy that I love him, and I almost lost him. Just like everyone else.



Wyatt breaks the drawn-out silence by updating Stone on what happened in the mountains. As predicted, Stone's going to send the traps off to get tested for prints and anything else they might be able to tell us about who set them. Though we're positive it's someone Lance hired, it would be better knowing exactly who we're dealing with because we all agree that Lance only pushes paper around his desk and makes phone calls. He's not the one out there doing the shit that gets people hurt.

After that part of the story is over, it's my turn to talk. With Wyatt's arms fully surrounding me, I recount what happened at Jacobs mansion.

Lucas and Wyatt are speechless when I finish. I'm not sure which part shocked them more: the fact that I killed Marissa's father or the fact that Cole killed my father or possibly the part about my dad not being my dad. It's a lot to take in, and as the silence lengthens, I feel justified in the emotional torrent I've been in since it happened.

Wyatt leans close to my ear, lips brushing my skin. "You know it doesn't matter, right? Family or no family, you're still you. Names are just names. They don't represent who we truly are inside. You're the same girl who walked into that wedding. Never doubt that."

Of course Wyatt would be the first to pinpoint what's going on in my head. We both have fucked up families.

"You'll get through this," he reassures me.

The beeping machine softens in my head, no longer taunting me with the truth about my dad. It's a reminder that I'm still living, and despite who I really am and where I might have come from, I'm still Dakota. The me inside is still very much me, and like Wyatt said, no one can take that away.

Two days later, I walk next to Lucas' wheelchair as a nurse pushes him down sterile hospital corridors toward freedom. Stone and Wyatt are waiting for us out front. Through the automatic glass doors, I watch the sun stream down on the silver Audi, making the paint sparkle in glittering waves.

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Stone's eyes hide behind dark sunglasses as he stands next to the passenger door, hands shoved into pockets, lips a thin line. Taut shoulders give away just how much his friend's injuries have affected him. Knowing Stone, I'm guessing the guilt has become too much for him at times over the last few days. He's always acted as Wyatt and Lucas's protector, and with Lucas getting injured the way he was, I know it has to be tearing him up inside.

The dark-haired cowboy, however, beams under the wide brim of his black cowboy hat, his chiseled features relaxed as he leans against the back door, arms crossed in front of him. He's the picture of complete joy, and I love him for it.

The four of us all deal with things so differently, but somehow, it works.

Lucas mutters under his breath, clearly not happy he's being wheeled to his escape from the hovering nurses and the confines of the hospital room. His displeasure is written all over his face as he slumps in the chair.

As soon as the wheels stop and the nurse lowers the brake, he stands. White bandages loop around the front of his neck, peeking out above the collar of his green t-shirt. His hands still sport bandages too, but he has full use of them now. The only concerns moving forward are infection and Lucas regaining full use of his voice. He's been told not to push it, and I intend to make sure he doesn't.

Warmth spreads in my belly as he reaches back to grab my hand instead of making a beeline toward the car. Overwhelming joy tingles my limbs as soon as we're all seated inside, just the four of us. With his father on the run, Stone will be staying at Jacobs Manor again, and I can't think of a better time for us all to be united.

Ineedall of them. I need Stone's strength, Wyatt's laughter, and Lucas' calm, steady hand.

"Cole called while you were in there," Stone announces, meeting my gaze in the rearview mirror.

The happiness numbs to nothingness again. I guess Lucas getting out of the hospital is only the tip of the iceberg of problems we have right now.

I bite my lip. I'm putting off the inevitable, but what am I supposed to say to him? I haven't attempted to break down the fact that he killed the man I thought was my dad yet. I try to muster up anger for the gangster, but there's none. Only curiosity about why he would kill Clark Wilder. Was it for the treasure? Was it for me?

If I'd only sit down and speak with Cole, I'd have these answers already, but I can't shake the feeling that I'm not ready.

"You've got to sometime," Wyatt offers, hand wrapping around my thigh and squeezing me there. "We'll be there for you."

I turn in the seat and find the black sedan following us. Two of Cole's guards are always around now. They don't pry. They don't push us to find the treasure. They're here for our protection against Lance's hired men—I think. And I have to say that I never saw that coming. When Cole first showed up with the black smoke of my family's house billowing in the background, I thought he was the villain. I'm not saying he's the hero because he's not that either, but what if he's both? A heroic villain. The bad guy with a conscience. That would be something, wouldn't it?

I turn back around in the seat, inspecting the hard lines of Stone's jaw while he drives. He's itching to know everything Cole does. I wouldn't be surprised if Stone already asked him what it is that he has to tell me. It's getting to the point where even

I have to admit that I'm being ridiculous.

I just need to get out of my own head.

My phone rings, and I sigh. There are only a few people who call me, and of the four who do, three of them are in this car. That leaves only one possibility as to who the caller is. The very same person I've been dreading talking to.

I pull the phone from my pocket and glance at it. Sure enough, Cole's name scrolls across the screen. This is the first time he's attempted to make contact since I told him I needed time. He's called Stone, however. Apparently, cleaning up dead bodies after a massacre endeared them to each other. Who knew?

I take a deep breath and hold it in my chest before answering. "Hey."

"Where are you?" he bites out. He's out of breath, voice tight. A round of rapid gunfire thunders in my ear, practically deafening me.

My heart flutters, nerves skittering over my skin. "Are you okay?"

"Where are you?" he demands.

"In the car, taking Lucas home."

The black sedan behind us speeds up. The engine roars to life before they cut in front of Stone and slam on the brakes, effectively making a shiny black barrier. Stone curses and we come to a skidding halt amid a screech of tires. Our fender just kisses their bumper.

"Jesus Christ." My fingers ache from the death grip I have on Lucas' seat.

“My guys are there with you?”

Another round of gunfire sounds from the phone’s speaker, this one much closer than the last, and I can’t help but think that Cole is literally firing a gun while he’s on the phone with me. Who does that? “Yes. They cut us off.” My heart beats like crazy in my chest, a machine-gun rhythm that matches the movie-like sound effects that are in fact very, very real.

“Go to Stone’s place. Make sure my guys go in first so they can check it out, then hunker down and wait for my call.”

“Cole, what? Are you—?”

The cacophony on the other end of the line abruptly ends, and I yank the phone away from my ear to find the familiar Call Ended message. My fingers strangle the phone. He and I have to talk about being hung up on.

Ninja strides toward the driver’s side and leans down to talk with Stone. Before long, we’re following them to our house, and we do as Cole says: stay in the car and wait for the two of them to come out and give us the okay.

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When we're met with their solemn nods, we all step out of the Audi. My nerves skitter like cockroaches over kitchen tile. Ninja lingers on the front walk, typing out a message on his cell that's no doubt intended to update Cole.

"What did you do?" I ask, gaze flicking from Ninja to the open door of Stone's house.

"Checked for explosives, cameras, that kind of thing." He finishes his message and slips his phone into his back pocket. My mouth nearly drops. Explosives? Cameras? Whoever Lance hired is the real deal if they're worried about that. "You'll be fine in there. We'll be out here if you need us."

I peek at Stone who stands to my right, frowning at his house. I can't help but wonder what he's going through right now, knowing what his father is trying to do to us. I also can't help but think that we're safe because he's with us. As fucked up as Lance is, he wouldn't have his own son killed. That's why his hired men targeted Wyatt, Lucas, and I while we were in the mountains and Stone was safely away, about to get married and ruin his life...but that's a different matter altogether.

Stone shakes hands with the other black-clad bodyguard, and the four of us enter the house. He sets the exterior alarms once we're inside, and I let out a heavy sigh. Unfortunately, the moment of relief only lasts a millisecond before a ball of nerves knots my stomach. Cole was most definitely in a fight for his life when he called me. I check my phone but there's nothing. I tell myself that he does this all the time, and that's not to mention how loyal his Dragons are to him. Ninja threw himself in front of Cole when he thought his leader was going to get shot—literally threw his own body in harm's way to save Cole. Call me crazy, but I don't think you would do that

for just anyone. It's not because of some job requirement, it's out of allegiance. Out of respect.

I still grapple with Cole, but with everything that's happened and what my gut instinct is telling me, I'm happy I took out Marissa's father to save him. Even knowing now what the gang leader did to Clark, I wouldn't take it back.

"Alright, I'm going to say it," Wyatt starts as he leans against the arm of the pure white couch. "I can't figure this fucker out."

It's clear who this fucker is. Cole's the only one we're currently grappling with which side to put him on—good or bad.

Lucas walks toward the opposite couch and sits back, face drained. "I still don't like how he's involved himself in Dakota's life. With killing Clark and everything else he's done? He has to be here for her and not because of Lance and his rich prick friends."

Stone's teeth dig into his lip in concentration. "I can't figure it out either." He tracks his gaze to me. Free of sunglasses, his gray-blue eyes pierce every shield I have. He and I haven't broached the topic of his almost-marriage to Marissa, or anything else that happened at his father's house for that matter, but we need to. Facts litter the floor between us like broken glass, but sometimes, more needs to be said than just a play-by-play of events.

Stone stood on the altar next to Marissa, listening to the officiant, but when Cole intervened, my blond-haired babe punched his father in the face. Behind all of that, there's a discussion that needs to happen, feelings that need to be talked through and meted out before he and I can move on.

The phone rings again and as soon as I answer it, a single shot rings out. "Jesus, I'm



on the phone,” Cole barks.

“Sorry, boss. That one was still moving.”

I shudder. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out what was still moving.

“Dakota?”

“Here,” I answer.

He breathes a sigh of relief. “I wasn’t sure if they were tag teaming us. You know, trying to take us out at the same time.”

“We seem to be fine,” I report, peering around the house as if someone’s going to come running down the hallway with a gun in their hand.

“You are. My men checked your place from top to bottom. You’re safe. I’m sending more guards there now, just in case.”

“Why?” I question. Lucas and Wyatt are right. Why did Cole insert himself into our lives? That’s the part of this that doesn’t make sense.

“To protect you.”

“I get that you’re doing that, but why?”

Cole breathes out. “That’s part of the reason I need to talk to you.”

“So talk,” I demand, finally fed up. Lucas is home, so now I can explore the answers I need. It’s becoming painfully obvious that staying in the dark is a risk I can’t take anymore.

“Not over the phone. In person,” Cole affirms, reminding me of the way he likes to do business.

I roll my eyes. “That’s right. I forgot. Business is business.”

“You’ve never been business, baby girl. I just don’t want to throw this at you like some callous asshole. I need to be there.”

I run my hand through my mass of curls, inspecting his words for a lie. When I don’t spot one, my shoulders sag. “Sure,” I agree. “In person.”

Moments of silence greet me until Cole replies, “I can’t get to you for another day or so. I have to clean this up, and I’m in the Heights again. I brought Finn back, thinking you were going to be MIA for a little while to process.”

My stomach twists at the mention of my trainer. “Is he okay?”

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“Finn? He’s fine. He wasn’t with us.”

I let out my own sigh of relief, a flicker of surprise registering. How did I get so attached to these people I barely know? There’s just something about them that drew me in. “That’s...good,” I hedge.

“Debatable,” Cole remarks blandly, and it sounds like there’s a story there somewhere beneath his muted words. How can I feel like I know someone so well but barely know anything about them? “Take care of yourself, Dakota. I’ll be there when I can. And by the love of all that’s holy, don’t trust Lance Jacobs. With anything.”

My jaw hardens. “No worries there.”

“Excellent. See you soon, baby girl.”

I hang up the phone and glance around the room at three expectant faces. “He’s back home. He has to do some cleanup but then he’s going to come here to tell his story.”

“Good. We’ll get some answers,” Wyatt remarks.

Stone walks up to me and wraps a curl of hair around my ear. “We’ll get through this,” he promises. “Together.”

“Not without some enchiladas,” Lucas smiles. He takes a throw pillow from the white couch and chucks it at Wyatt.

“Yeah, yeah,” Wyatt responds, plucking the pillow out of the air and dangling it from

his fingers. “I promised, didn’t I?”

“You sure as hell did. I think I milked out several meals from this.” He teases the bandages with his fingertips and his face immediately sours. He’s been dealing with irritation and itchiness due to the wounds healing.

I start toward him, and Wyatt groans. “I don’t know why I agreed to the food milking. You’ve had enough milking it from all the time with Dakota.”

He’s not wrong. I spent all three nights in the hospital with Lucas, curled up by his side. As of yesterday, I can cross off hospital sex from my risqué to-do list.

This brush with death solidified a few things for me. With it now firmly behind us, I don’t intend to take time for granted. The lingering looks I get in return make me think we’re all on the same page about that.

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A couple of days later, Wyatt walks into the main room as I perch nervously on the couch next to Lucas. My cowboy slips his gun under the sofa across from us, below where he plans to sit. I raise an eyebrow at him, and he shrugs. “Just in case. I’m not in the Cole’s-a-good-guy camp yet. I need to hear whatever story he has to tell first. I wasn’t a fan of your father but I didn’t kill him.”

I take in a shuddering breath, eyes closed as if to ward off the truth in his statement. All last night I ran through scenario after scenario in my head, trying to guess what Cole’s going to tell me. The facts as I know them so far are: Clark wasn’t my father and Cole killed him.

I don’t know why he killed him. What I do know is that Cole will be one hundred percent honest with me today. He always has been in the past, and I expect it of him

now. He'd planned on coming clean with me even before Stone's mother opened her mouth to reveal his secret.

"Good idea," Lucas states, placing his arm around me and pulling me into his side. "We'll make our judgments about Cole after all of this, but it can't hurt to be prepared."

Stone walks in next, inspecting where we're all sitting. He drags his gaze over the room in a once-over as if he's preparing for a major meeting—which I guess that's exactly what this is. "I'll sit on the other side of Dakota. Wyatt you'll be good there. I think we need to let Dakota do the talking since this is between her and Cole. He hasn't been aggressive yet, but we'll definitely step in if necessary."

Wyatt huffs. "Yeah, I mean I only got stabbed by one of his guys. I guess that's okay."

"Quit your bitching," Lucas teases. "I almost got decapitated."

The four of us laugh, but it's riddled with nervousness. It's really not a funny situation, and Wyatt's right, Cole has done some fucked up shit to us.

That's the thing about dealing with Cole, we don't really know where we stand with him because we don't know what his objectives are. My gut is telling me he's not someone to fear, however, I could be completely wrong. We might walk out of this meeting with another enemy, and the last thing we need are the Dragons as foes.

The doorbell rings, and I almost come out of my seat. I really fucked myself over by waiting to hear what Cole had to say. Now the anticipation is cutting me up inside, filleting me open with little slits across every nerve in my body. At least we'll have more information at the end of this, and as Cole once told me, knowing all the answers makes you powerful.

Stone strides toward the door in a button-up shirt and a pair of dark khakis. He's the best dressed out of the four of us. I think he wears those fancy outfits because it makes him feel like he's in control even when he might not have any.

"Just say the word," Wyatt says after my eyes lock with his. I swallow. He's prepared to take Cole out if I want him to. My gut wrenches at the thought, like it already knows that would be the wrong decision. But if our situations were reversed, I'd feel the same way. We don't know anything about Cole, really.

Stone walks ahead of Cole down the short hallway that leads to the open-plan living and kitchen area. Unlike the son of the businessman, Cole is dressed in a white t-shirt and jeans, sneakers scuffing the tile floor. Ink wraps up his arms, culminating in the fiery tattoo scoring his neck. A five o'clock shadow matures his face, making him appear angrier and meaner than he has in the past. His dark eyes soften when they find mine, brightening a little as we connect. "I'm glad you're okay," he says, shoulders drooping as if he's been carrying the weight of my safety around.

He moves toward me, and Lucas stiffens. Cole's demeanor flips to the hostility in which a gang leader should possess. "Chill, Govern," he sneers, holding up a wooden box. "The answers to Dakota's questions are in here." He holds out the hinged, pale-wood container to me that couldn't be more than six inches squared. I take it from him, hands shaking. Placing it on my lap, I stare at it like it's the shadow in my closet that I don't ever want to go near.

Eventually, my curiosity wins out. I let my fingers trail over the darker knots in the finish. A small bronze clasp keeps the lid closed, and I'm afraid to flick it open. The weight of the box feels like a giant elephant decided to prop himself on top of me.

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“I’m glad you were willing to talk with me.” Cole’s voice sounds almost unsure, and it makes me glance at him again. I stare right into his eyes, inspecting them as if I can pull the truth from his mind without having him utter a word.

Stone takes a seat next to me on the cushion and gestures toward the open couch next to Wyatt. Cole sits there, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Despite the tattoos and earrings, his leg jumps up and down, betraying the badass bravado I’ve seen from him since the beginning. He hasn’t come here with his entourage of gang members either. It’s just him—open and vulnerable. If I’m honest, it’s exactly what I expected of him.

He holds his clasped hands in front of him, his knuckles bouncing off his lips until he lets them fall forward. “I want to get one thing out of the way first since you’re probably the maddest about this. Yes, I killed the man you knew as your father, and I won’t apologize for it. I came to Clary to kill him and he deserved it. But when I read how he raised you in the file I had compiled about you, I wanted to make him suffer before he took his last breath.” His jaw feathers, knuckles turning white. “Clark Wilder was a sick son of a bitch. The only thing that stopped me from torturing his ass was what it might do to you.”

I narrow my eyes, inspecting Cole’s every movement, but Stone’s not having any of that. “Why?” he blurts.

Well, there goes our plan of letting me talk.

Cole ignores him, his eyes pleading with mine, and I’m sure he can read how badly I want to know, but he’s waiting for me just like I asked. I take a deep breath and try to

muster all the courage I can. It's time to put on the armor I'm used to. I have a feeling this is going to be one hell of a story. I lean into Lucas to steal some of his strength. "Why did you kill him?"

Cole twists his fingers together, his movements so harsh it looks as if he could snap his own bones. "Nineteen years ago, Clark Wilder and his wife stole you from a loving family." He nods toward my lap. "There are baby pictures of you in that box. You had a brother who loved you, a mother and father who cherished you, a family that was devastated when someone else's selfishness took you from them."

I suck in a breath, mind whirring. Ever ready to deal with anything, Stone steamrolls ahead. "Are you saying Dakota was kidnapped?"

Again, Cole doesn't even glance at Stone. He doesn't appear to care that any of them are here. His eyes are plastered to mine, letting me decide what I want answered first. "Who are they?" I ask, voice shaky. My whole body trembles. Lucas is trying his best to calm my nerves, but I can't stop the tremors wracking my body.

Cole looks away, and I swear on my life, the badass gang leader's eyes are glassy with emotion. "I didn't know your real parents," he answers softly. "I knew your brother." He clasps his hands together until his knuckles turn white. "He was my gang brother. We weren't blood, but it damn well felt like we were. We joined the Dragons at almost the same time. He was just a kid—" He clears his throat and glances back at me. "His parents—your real parents—are dead. Your mother killed herself on what would've been your tenth birthday. She couldn't handle your loss anymore."

My heart squeezes, agonizing over a woman I never knew, but I can't help the longing that builds for the woman who birthed me; for the woman who loved me so much that she couldn't live a life without me.



How could I not know these people existed? “And my real father?” My voice wavers. The numbness I’ve been dragging along behind me like a lead weight is long gone. I’m feeling everything now.

“Your father died when Charlie was seventeen. You would’ve been fifteen. He told me it was of a broken heart. Hospital records,” he says, pointing to the box, “confirm that it was of a heart attack of an otherwise healthy man.”

I take in several deep breaths to slow the rapid degradation of my ability to process everything. The perimeter wall I’ve built keeps crumbling and crumbling. Every time I find sure footing, another rock slips out from underneath me.

“My brother’s name was Charlie? What happened to him?” Cole closes his eyes. A shudder rips through him, and in this moment, I feel connected to him. He’s feeling for a brother I never knew, and in this, tendrils are pulling us tighter and tighter together. Weirdly, the only connection I have to a family I never knew is in this gang banger. I get to my feet, carrying the box with me, and make Wyatt move over so I can sit next to Cole. I put my hand over his. “Tell me what happened. Don’t leave anything out.”

Cole places his free hand over mine, and it shakes too. “We were on a mission for the leader of the Dragons at the time. Shit went south, and your brother didn’t make it, Dakota. He was shot.”

His jaw tenses, and he grieves for the friend he once had. It bleeds from him, ripping through his tough guy façade until it’s spilled on the floor at our feet. I can internalize the grief for someone I didn’t even know but this was a real person to Cole. His friend. His brother. My heart aches for him more than it does for me in this moment.

“He loved you, baby girl.” Cole shakes his head as if he can will away the emotion taking control of him. “He talked about finding you all the damn time. I knew the

whole story inside and out. Anyone who was close to him knew; it's all he ever talked about. The only thing he wanted was to find you. For himself. For your parents.

“His suffering became mine, and when he was bleeding out in that rat-infested hotel room, I made him a promise. I told him I'd find you and that I'd make the fucker who took you pay. I sent him to heaven with that knowledge, and you've been my number one priority ever since. That's why I killed Clark Wilder. I witnessed my friend's pain every single fucking day. I heard what it did to his family, and I saw with my own eyes the toll it took on him. I wasn't letting Clark get away with that.” He pauses for a moment, the fierceness in his gaze returning as easy as a flip of a switch. “After Charlie died, I made it my mission to bring you home.”

The hair on the back of my neck stands. My mind is so full of questions that I can't process one because another pops into my head right after it. Cole squeezes my hand that's still engulfed in his. Wyatt's touch skirts up my back, rubbing along my spine. “Why did they take me?”

Cole drops his hold on me, his face an angry red. He's transitioned fully from the mourner to the violent person he is. “They found out they couldn't have children. I think you can guess the rest, knowing how important family legacy is to the Wilder treasure. Clark couldn't stand for it to end with him. He needed a child, so he took one. He brought you back to Clary where he lived like a hermit. He hid you with hope that you'd never be found. He changed your name, he didn't take you to the doctors—hell, he barely took you anywhere. He did everything in his power to keep you hidden so no one would ever come looking for you. As far as everyone in Clary knew, you were his—if they ever thought of you at all, that is. Most people weren't aware you existed until you showed up in Kindergarten, and that's because you didn't. At least not as Dakota Wilder.”

Different facets of my life slot together like some fucked up version of Mad Libs.

Let's take the most outrageous thing someone can think of and fill in the blanks of Dakota's life. The worst part of it all? I can see my father being so desperate to do what Cole is accusing him of. It all makes perfect sense. The man made me promise to have kids. At the time, I understood it on a basic level, but now it makes so much more sense. He was speaking from experience. He made me vow to have kids so that the crime he committed didn't fail. He wanted to keep the Wilder line going. Above everything.

"I feel sick," I croak as my stomach sloshes. Everything my father said and did to me is now twisted into a new meaning I couldn't have imagined. To know he wasn't just a hermit who didn't like people but someone who was actively trying to hide me makes my stomach roll and squeeze in bouts of nausea.

Lucas leans forward. "You're turning white."

I shove the box into Cole's arms and run for the closest bathroom. There, the tears finally release as well as the lies coiled up over the years. I expel it all into the porcelain toilet, eyes burning, body shuddering. I wretch and wretch, an exorcism of the life I've lived, and I can't help but wonder what will be left when everything comes up.

This isn't a case of wrong paternity—my mother loving another man and my father stepping up to take care of me in his place. No, this is something far more sinister. Not only am I not a Wilder, I'm not anything I believed I was.

Footsteps sound behind me, and I peek between my curls to find a pair of foreign sneakers next to my knees. Cole kneels as a tremor racks my body. He rests his forehead against my back and runs his hand up and down my spine. "Charlie was my brother, and now you're my sister. I'll protect you with my life, baby girl. I can't help this part. You already know how I feel about being the smartest person in the room. It's going to suck. It's going to hurt. But when it's over, you'll come out the other

side stronger. I promise.”

4

The house grows quiet. After Cole left hours ago, I told Wyatt, Lucas, and Stone that I wanted to be alone to process things. The box with all the proof Cole could find sits unopened on my dresser like a siren’s call. Every time I focus on something else, it keeps pulling me back. The hardest part about looking at the contents of that box will be knowing that it wasn’t my life. Not even close. My body buzzes; my mind pulling in all different directions, glitching in the most extreme way. Should I be upset? Do I mourn the family I never had? Or do I mourn the father who raised me even though he may have done a shitty job?

I’m numb when it comes to Clark Wilder, but it doesn’t mean I hate him. I can’t. I hate what he did. I can be pissed as hell and want to kick his ass up the Superstitions and back, but I can’t hate him.

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And that part pisses me off. It makes me want to scream into a void because that's exactly where I am right now. No up or down or backward or forward. I'm living in a state of nothingness.

I heave my pillow at the dresser, taking my anger out on the box. The pale wood skids across the top with the brunt force of my throw before coming to a stop on the edge, half teetering over. I groan in frustration because that actually did nothing to help the feelings ratcheting through me.

Stepping out of the room unburdens my heart a little. I walk down the hall until I get to Wyatt's door, and I knock quietly. He opens it sans cowboy hat, and I marvel at how different he looks without his favorite accessory.

"Hey, Tits, how are you?"

He steps back, and I follow, closing the door behind me. I lean against it. "I needed some space from the box."

The corner of his lips turn up. "And you came to me?" A smile overtakes his face, filling me with warmth.

"I came to you, cowboy."

"Well, what kind of fun could we possibly get into to take your mind off shit?" He stalks toward me, each step a tease that I came here for. Already, worry has lifted from my chest piece by piece like the billowing of a dandelion's petals on the wind.

I bite my lower lip. “I was thinking...maybe a little skinny dipping? I haven’t skinny dipped in a pool yet.”

His blue eyes flash a sexy, dangerous taunt that has me turning the doorknob at my back and running down the hall, leaving him to chase me. Wyatt’s quick footsteps close in as I shove the glass door aside and step out onto the cement patio still warm from the day’s heat.

I whip my shirt over my head and work my shorts off next. Standing there in my bra and panties, I watch Wyatt pull his shirt over his head, his abs stark in the moonlight. I unclasp my bra, slipping it off my shoulders and letting it fall on my discarded clothes as Wyatt stutters to a stop, gazing at me with a torrid heat that tells me everything he wants to do to me.

I shimmy my silk panties down my legs, slipping them past my calves before I’m completely naked, watching Wyatt finally disrobe the rest of the way. He doesn’t hide his semi-hard cock, letting it bob proudly. Courage builds inside me, a strong, feminine power that tells me I at least have control over some things. I may have lost some strength, but at my core, I still hold cards. Little by little, I feel myself start to piece together again.

I step toward the stairs. Gripping the railing, I lower myself into the warm water that caresses my heated skin until it laps against my thighs, and then hits my navel.

“I don’t know if I’ve said this to you enough,” Wyatt starts, swallowing, “but you are so damn sexy.”

I don’t know how he knew I needed to hear that in this moment. Goosebumps sprout over my flesh, hardening my nipples. He moves to the side of the pool and dives in gracefully. Neither one of us turned on the pool lights, so I don’t see him again until he starts to break through the surface. His dark hair plasters to the crown of his head

as he emerges and wades over to me. His pecs are brilliantly taut and athletic, and I take my fill unabashedly.

“Why did you come to me, Dakota?” Wyatt probes, head turned in a way that his curiosity shines.

That’s an easy answer. Stone would’ve fucked me senseless after trying to get me to talk, and I’m not sure I’m ready to make the physical leap with him yet with the miles of baggage between us draped in wedding flowers and lace. Lucas would’ve held me, which also would’ve led to a good fuck, but the silence afterward would’ve made my mind wander right back to what’s plaguing me now. Wyatt, however, is the one who could bring a smile to my face. The one to play with, make me feel normal for a little while. “Because cowboy...” I blink, trying to memorize him like this. “You make me happy.” A smile teases my lips. “Somehow, you always know how to lift the stains from my heart.”

His lips part in the most beautiful picture. For a hot second, we just stare at each other until a slow grin spreads over his face. “And here I thought you were going to say something about finding me irresistible.”

“There’s that, too,” I admit, basking in what he does best. I’ll never hold back the feelings these three give me. Not from them. Not from me. I shrug, giving him a teasing stare. “Or maybe I just felt bad because you’ve been so jealous of all the time I’ve spent with Lucas.”

He throws his head back and laughs, as carefree as anyone I’ve ever met. I admire that about him. I used to think of his laughter and joking as a façade, and maybe they sometimes are, but maybe they’re not that at all. It’s possible Wyatt is stronger than any of us. To have emerged from the ashes of tragedy and set fire to the world in his own way—his teasing smirks, his smartass comments, his ability to bring joy into not only my life but others’ .... That’s a fucking gift that I want, a gift that people need.

“Do you know how to do a handstand in the water?”

“Considering the first time I’ve been in a pool was a few weeks ago? No.”

“Well, get ready, Tits, because you’re about to get a lesson in pool games.”

First, he shows me how to go underwater without plugging my nose. That takes more time than I’d like to admit, but then we launch right into handstand training. The fact that we’re naked doesn’t deter me. It makes for a tremendous view, and I’m sure if anyone saw us splashing around in the pool like a bunch of kids, naked, they’d want our heads examined, but it’s exactly what I needed.

I dive into the water, placing my palms on the concrete floor. In the past, I might’ve been scared, but I’ve pretty much been through it all at this point, right? A little pool handstand isn’t going to take me out. I don’t get my feet up the first time, but the second time, I do. It’s surprisingly easy when you’re not worried about plugging your nose.

Wyatt smacks my ass on my fourth attempt, and I yelp underwater. I splash back down only to come up to swipe my hand against the surface of the pool to soak him. “Wyatt Longhorn,” I scold.

“Please, you liked it. Besides, I couldn’t help myself. Your ass is goddamn perfect.”

I roll my eyes and playfully shove him back. “What else can you teach me?”

“Somersaults?” He dives into the water, uses his hands to flip himself in a circle, and comes back up.

I tilt my head. “This is what kids do for fun in the pool?”



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Wyatt shrugs. “Pretty much.”

I do as he showed, but I turn sideways and have to break the surface to catch my breath. “Okay, that’s harder than a handstand.”

He winks. “We’ll try diving next.”

My heart thumps in my chest, letting all my cares go away and concentrating on the somersault. I dive into the water like he did the first time and windmill my arms around. I break the surface with a huge gulp of air. “Was that it?”

He makes a face. “Kind of.”

I groan and try again. This time, I push off the concrete bottom and launch myself forward, making the flip easier. I come up for air with a smile on my face. I know I got it that time.

Wyatt high fives me before tugging me close and laying a huge, smacking kiss on my cheek. “Killin’ it, Tits. You ready to try diving?”

I step toward the side of the pool and pull myself out. Rivulets of water stream down my body, and Wyatt pauses to stare before hoisting himself out after me. “You know this is killing me, right?” He steps close, hands coming up to cup my breasts, fingers tracing my hardened peaks.

“I’ll make it worth your while,” I promise, moving further into his touch.

“Just being here is worth everything.” His husky voice speaks volumes, and I know if I’m not careful, I’ll get swept away with what my body wants to do.

I place my hands on his hips. “You promised me a diving lesson.”

He groans but steps away, walking backward toward the deep end. His toes grip the edge when he turns. “I learned on the side of the pool first. It’s easier than starting on the diving board. The first thing you do is hinge at the hips and fall forward.” He shows me, entering the water with his hands straight out in front of him, cutting through the surface smoothly.

He swims toward the ladder and climbs it until he’s standing next to me on the concrete again. Positioning himself behind me, he’s too close to be anything but a tease. He bends me over at the hips with a strong hand down my spine, then tugs me back against his thickening cock. My ass cups him, and my pussy floods with want. “Hold your hands out in front of you,” he instructs. “Let yourself fall and try to bring your legs up behind you when you do.”

He squeezes me one last time before backing away, letting me dive even though I know he wants what I want in this moment.

I do as he says, letting myself fall into the pool. My knees splash in, so there’s no way I went vertically, but I keep trying until I can evenly push off the edge and glide through the water. On my last dive, Wyatt’s waiting for me in the shallower end, hands stretched over his head in victory. “Smartest student I’ve ever had.”

I swim to his position on the ramp, his chest half submerged in the water. “I bet you could teach me a lot of things, cowboy.”

“I can,” Wyatt grinds out. “I can’t get one image out of my head.” He backs me against the pool edge then turns me around to face the mountains. They’re only a big,

black shadow in the distance, but I know they're there. The stars shine down on them from high in the sky, and I take a moment to gawk until Wyatt's hand sneaks around my midsection. He presses me back, the heel of his palm skimming over my skin while his fingers seek the area between my legs.

I let out a gasp of surprise and widen my stance. The water laps at us in caressing waves while he finds my clit and swirls. He drapes his chest along my back, his heavy breaths flirting with my ear. "I want to fuck you like this, Tits. I've been staring at your gleaming pussy all night, and I need it."

He sinks his finger inside my core in one sure thrust, and I cry out, my hands gripping the cement lip in front of me. "Yes," I breathe, pushing my ass back and butting against his hard cock. He works his finger in and out before retreating only to re-enter with two. My knuckles turn white as I revel in the plethora of sensations—Wyatt's touch, his hard body, the water adding yet another pleasurable caress. "Is this part of my pool lesson?"

"You know it, babe." He leans over and bites my neck. Pain lances my skin, but his lashing tongue smooths it over until I'm working my hips in time with his movements, making sure I rub against his cock.

With his palm on my stomach, he uses his free hand to skirt up my spine and lean me over. The water teases my nipples until I'm aching so badly for him I can't stand it. Extricating himself from my pussy, he then rubs my clit in frantic motions as he lines us up. I push back, searching for the head of his dick, eager for him. "Wyatt," I gasp, pleasure building in delicious waves. He thrusts inside, the pad of his thumb pressing down on my clit until I come, my core clenching around his cock repeatedly.

"Yes," he grunts. He retreats and then fills me in one solid movement, working my orgasm higher until I'm panting at the crescendo. Holding my hips in place, he hammers sure strokes into my core. I bend at the waist to change the angle and both

of us groan. “Jesus, Dakota. You undo me.” He wraps my wet hair in his fist and pulls until I lock eyes with him. The adoring, passionate stare gracing his features makes me work back against him until our movements slow to steady exclamation points of powerful thrusts. “You’re the strongest woman I know. Smart. Beautiful. The sexiest part about you is that you know who you are, what you want, and how you’re going to get it.”

I bite my lip as his words sink into me. Damn, this boy. Of course he would find a way to build me up while he threatens to make me crumble at his feet. He doesn’t let me glance away; he keeps my face turned toward him as he wrings pleasure out of both of us. My arcing back demands gratification while he gives it freely and openly. The water around us shifts to tumultuous waves crashing the edge of the pool as our movements become more frenzied. This is exactly what I needed. He’s turned this position of vulnerability into one of utmost strength.

“Take it, Dakota,” he moans. I push back against him, and his mouth falls open. “Fuck, fuck.” He lets go of my hair and grips my hips, slamming into me until he comes, the noises passing his lips a secret between us that I’ll lock inside my heart. He breathes out, shudders once, then spins me around. His lips find my mouth, kissing me desperately, plunging his tongue inside as he kneads my breasts in his hands. He hoists me in the air, breaking the kiss. My ass finds the edge of the warm cement while he pries my knees open and settles his face between my legs. His hot breaths hit my soaked core, and I lean back on my hands, widening my stance to give him as much access as he needs.

He doesn’t use words anymore to mold me into someone new. He uses quick flicks and long licks of his skilled tongue. His fingers dig into my hips as I prop my heels up on the poolside—completely exposed under the light from the stars—letting him caress me from back to front.

He delves deep until short cries part my lips and there’s nothing but pleasure coaxing

my body higher. “Wyatt, yes, that feels so good.”

He moans over my clit, and my toes curl.

“Fuck me, that feels amazing.”

He tongues my bundle of nerves until I’m rocking into him, my cries expanding and heightening. When my orgasm crashes into me, a short scream escapes that leaves me moaning in the aftershocks.

I lay back on the cement, trying to catch my breath. He pulls himself out of the water and hauls me to shaky feet before throwing me over his shoulder. “You’re in my bed tonight, beautiful girl.”

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I shriek as he runs around the pool. We bypass our clothes and head straight for his room as I giggle against his back—his ass cheeks jiggling on our short trek.

Once we're in his room, he throws me down on the bed and wags his eyebrows as he climbs over me, pretending to take big biting chunks out of my body as he goes, growling until I'm laughing so hard, I'm crying.

Yes, Wyatt Longhorn was exactly what I needed tonight.

5

I wake up to an empty bed but a full heart. I stretch my hands out, curling my fingers in the sheets. My knuckles brush something foreign, so I open my eyes and find a cowboy hat propped on Wyatt's pillow with a note on the brim. "For you, Tits."

I bite my lip, holding back the maniacal grin surfacing. I pull the covers away and swing my legs over the side of the bed. Utter peacefulness swallows me as I hold the hat in my hands. My feet hit the tiled floor, and I half run to the bathroom to try it on. I situate it on my head, glancing right and left, and I think it looks pretty damn good, actually. I take it off for a moment only to steal a pair of Wyatt's boxers and a t-shirt before placing it back on my head and heading toward the kitchen. As soon as I open Wyatt's bedroom door, the familiar smell of delicious bacon hits me.

Lucas is milking this, but I'm not going to complain. I've never had food as good as Wyatt's.

I tiptoe out to the kitchen where Lucas is the first to see me. He smirks but pretends

to frown. “Oh no, he’s ruining her.”

I chuckle, but the look on Wyatt’s face when he turns is so well worth it. His mouth drops. He shoves the spatula he’s holding into Lucas’ chest and comes toward me, placing his arms around my waist. “Well, hello there, ma’am.” He dips me backward, and the hat tumbles off my head and onto the floor. He rights me, pulling me toward him to place a tender kiss on my lips.

“I hate to break this up,” Lucas teases, sounding like he couldn’t give two shits about doing just that, “but I’m still waiting on my pity breakfast.”

“Fuck off, Govern,” Wyatt says against my lips. “Tits and I are having a moment.” He cups the back of my head and kisses me senseless. When we finally pull away, both of us are breathless, and I sway on my feet as Wyatt returns to the kitchen as if nothing happened.

Lucas watches me. His bandages are off today, and the reminder of his injuries twists my stomach. I bend to pick up the cowboy hat and walk right to him. “How’d you sleep?”

“Tossed and turned. Mostly thought about buying a big bed so all of us can sleep with you.” He screws up his face adorably. “Then debated whether or not that would be worth it, considering I’d end up having to sleep next to Wyatt, too.”

“I’ll have you know, I’m a really good bed companion.”

“Dude, I’ve slept next to you in a tent. I know exactly what I’d be getting myself into, which is why I said I was weighing the pros and cons.”

I lift a brow at him. “And did you come up with a decision?”

“Yeah, I decided anything is worth it as long as I’m next to you.”

His words filter over me like a bucket of sunshine, and I bask in them. I bring my hand up to trace my fingertips next to Lucas’ wound. It’s going to scar. There’s no way around it. “I’m glad it was me,” he answers, as if he caught on to my line of thinking. He twists his neck so I can get a better view. “I wouldn’t have been able to forgive myself if it was you.”

“Don’t say that,” I whisper, my heart skidding to a halt. “What someone else does to us is uncontrollable.”

The front door opens, and I peer over Lucas’ shoulder. Stone comes striding in, a huge bouquet of red roses in his hand. He stops when he sees me, cheeks turning pink. “Damn it. I was hoping you wouldn’t be up yet.”

I tease my lip, staring at the bright crimson petals. I’ve never gotten flowers before. In high school, the student council sold carnations that you could send to your crush on Valentine’s Day. Each year I’d yearn for one, but one never came. Something Meghan was all too quick to point out. “Those...are for me?”

“Well, they’re certainly not for Wyatt.” Stone stands there staring at me, and I do the same. Neither of us makes the first move. Butterflies dance in my stomach, wings teasing my nerve endings. Finally, he steps forward, loafers skimming over the tile. His dark sunglasses are propped on top of his head, a rich boy exclamation point on the rest of his attire—a pair of gray khaki shorts and a lime green polo. He looks like he’s walking off the cover of a magazine—complete with the backdrop of fine furniture and everything. I don’t understand how I ended up here considering where I began, but I’m going to hold onto this with everything I have.

Lucas turns away to give us a private moment, and I meet Stone halfway. He tosses his car keys onto the kitchen island and reaches for my hand. “I know I have a lot of



groveling to do, and this in no way makes up for any of it, but it's a start. I'm hoping, anyway. That's for you to decide." His fingers entwine with mine, like roots digging through the earth on a sunny day.

He hands the flowers to me, their beauty punctuated by an ornate, black vase. I let go of his hand to take them, leaning in to breathe in their absolutely divine and intoxicating aroma.

"I wasn't sure what your favorite flower was." He hesitates, peeking at me. Seeing this unsure side of him only endears him to me more.

"I don't know, actually," I admit, biting the inside of my cheek to keep my emotions from shining through.

"Then I'll keep buying you different kinds until you decide."

I lift onto my tiptoes to kiss Stone's cheek, the stubble gracing his jaw scraping over my lips. I settle back to inspect him. Sunken, dark eyes meet mine, definitely not normal. His pallor is a little off, too, and I make a mental note to watch him. Lucas' injuries took a lot out of Stone, but he's home now, so something else must be bothering him.

I move to the coffee table and set the flowers down before I notice the card in them. I pluck the envelope off the plastic stick and open it. Stone hovers nearby, watching me intensely. My fingers shake a little, my nerves getting the best of me as I read the note.

I'm sorry I did that to you, Dakota. If you'll let me, I'll keep making it up to you. All my love,

Stone

My heart pings painfully, thudding against my ribcage. I didn't imagine I would get my first flower while I was dressed in another man's clothes, but that's what the four of us signed up for, and now that we have it, I wouldn't change it for the world.

Memories of Stone and I blip by like flipping through a photo album. The first time he touched me on the half-moon bed. The love in his eyes when he said we were going to have treasure hunting babies one day. Letting Stone back in, if he was ever out, seems like an inevitability—fate's true progression at work, something that's useless to fight against. And trust me, fighting against it is something I won't be doing.

I return the note inside the envelope and slip it back in the bouquet. Stone's watching me when I lift my gaze, so I walk up to him, tangle my fingers with his, and bring him back to the kitchen island where Wyatt is whistling happily and placing our breakfast on plates.

"Let's eat on the patio," Lucas suggests. "I'm sick of being stuck inside."

We carry our food out, Stone in the lead. He steps over mine and Wyatt's discarded clothes from last night and heads toward the cement table. Lucas chuckles. "Looks like a couple of you had way too much fun last night."

"It turns out, I like skinny-dipping," I tell him. "Who knew?"

We sit at the table, serving ourselves eggs, bacon, and toast from platters. Here at

Jacobs Manor, I'm in a cocoon of safety. I'm so enveloped by love that it makes it easy to forget about everything else that's going on.

Stone changes that though. "I had an idea," he starts. The three of us look at him expectantly. "We know my dad's on the run because he's scared shitless of Cole, but I think we can flush him out by going to his associates. My dad feeds off money. Wealth is everything to him. It's his most prized possession."

"Except for you," I state.

"I don't think he has use for me anymore," he says, running his fingers over his jaw. "I went against him." I shrug because I'm not entirely convinced but Stone continues. "I thought Dakota and I could set up some meetings with his treasure investors and tell them we're no longer associated and that they should move their investments to us."

Wyatt squints in the sun. "This could ruin him financially. If you got people to jump ship, anyway."

"I think Dakota and I would be quite convincing, especially since we can prove that my father was only the pencil pusher. It's our team that knows about the treasure. They'll pull their funding, and when they do, my father won't have the means to pay anyone to take us down. Cole can retaliate, and then..."

"Then what?" Lucas inquires. "How far are you willing to take this?"

Stone clamps his jaw, muscles popping out of his neck. "He tried to kill you. All of you. I no longer have ties to him."

Part of me wants to fist bump him, but the other part of me knows how this feels. To be let down by someone you loved is gut-wrenching. His words come out smooth and

easy, but I think I've found the reason for the dark circles under his eyes. I just hadn't been paying attention before.

"What do you guys think?"

His question catches me off guard. Stone's not one to make sure everyone's on board before he runs right into something. "I love the idea," I confirm.

"Me too," Lucas answers. "At the very least, it'll put the money where it should go, and that's with us."

Stone swallows. "Good because I've already set up a couple of meetings for today."

Of course he did. That's the Stone I know.

He checks his watch. "And if we want to make it to the first one on time, we'll have to hurry."

I scarf down my plate and then run toward my bathroom, picking up the clothes from last night as I go. I shower and primp, then open my closet to search for something appropriate to wear to a business meeting. I should've guessed Stone would've already planned for this. Several different dresses and skirts await me.

I pull out a modest black dress and slip it on. It hugs my ass, but not in a scandalous way. I pull the top half of my hair up and place it in an elastic because the barrette I tried first broke. A pair of slip-on flats later and I'm ready.

When I walk out, Lucas and Wyatt have moved the coffee table against the couch and are hovering over several topography maps on the floor. Wyatt whistles, making me blush. I glance over to find Stone waiting for me in a suit and tie, and I nearly trip over my feet. Jesus. He's so damn pretty.

He holds the door open for me, and I wave to Wyatt and Lucas as we exit. “Are we on time?”

He checks his watch again. “We’re good.”

Ninja and the other security guard get out of their car as we approach the Audi that’s pulled around the front of the house. “We’re heading into Phoenix,” Stone informs them.

“We’ll follow,” Ninja reports. At those words, Stone gazes worriedly behind him. “Our orders are to stay with Miss Dakota.”

Cole wasn’t kidding when he said he was going to treat me like his sister. After I pulled myself away from the bathroom last night, he told me he would be there for me every step of the way until I found the treasure—and after. We’ve all agreed that Lance won’t stop looking for it, and despite the fact that I’m not technically a Wilder, I feel the treasure’s call deep in my bones. I can’t get away from it, and I’ll still die if a Jacobs finds it before I do. Well, one Jacobs. I guess I would be satisfied if Stone does—as long as I’m at his side.

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I pull my phone out of the little clutch I also found in the closet and send Cole a text letting him know where Stone and I are going. Now that I know he's here for me and not against me, it feels natural to keep him updated with what we're doing. Also, when someone rubs your back while you puke, that person suddenly isn't so scary. He's turned into a giant teddy bear in my eyes.

BE CAREFUL OR I WILL CASTRATE JACOBS.

Hmm. Maybe not a teddy bear. A stuffed lion? Your guys are with us. I'm good.

Take care, baby girl. Keep me updated.

I put the phone away and slide into the Audi. Stone closes the door and strides around the other side. The car starts with a low hum, and then we're off. Stone pulls out onto the main road and runs his hands through his hair, checking his reflection in the rearview mirror. "I think all of us should put in requests to place our matriculation on hold."

My chest constricts. I've been wondering how we were going to juggle everything, but I've been hanging onto school with a tight grip. "How would that work? My scholarship—"

"I'll handle it," Stone answers. "It'll be fine. We're vulnerable at school, and besides, whoever my father has hired to find the treasure won't be worried about schoolwork or going to class. Once this is all over, we'll start back up again."

He's right, but I can't help but feel defeated. School was my only ticket out of my

father's house, and to think I'm giving up that goal right now hurts even though it's only being put on the backburner.

Stone reaches over to place his hand on my thigh. "I'm glad you liked the flowers."

"I loved them."

The silence that stretches between us on the way to Phoenix isn't awkward. When we pass the city limits, however, nerves get the better of me, but Stone's steady hand does wonders for calming my frayed emotions.

Our first meeting is in a glass high-rise building. He parks on the street, grabs his briefcase, and we walk toward the front entrance hand in hand. We take the elevator to the penthouse and the secretary greets us, smiling. She leads us straight into a conference room where Stone stops so abruptly that I run into his back.

"There he is," a familiar voice grinds out, and my stomach tightens. I peer around Stone's taut body and find Lance's beady eyes greeting us. The wicked glint shining there promises danger, and after what happened at his mansion, I know he can follow through.

6

Stone guides me behind him again, shielding me from his father's view. He reaches back to clasp my hand, squeezing my fingers tightly. "Hello, Father. Mr. Cummings." His hard voice is all business, bursting in calm confidence—the complete opposite of the cacophony buzzing inside me.

"Come. Sit down," Lance demands.

I peek at the other man in the room. He's balding, sweat dots his brow above sharp

eyes and a wide nose. He flicks his stare between father and son, and it's evident that he's not comfortable being here.

"I see you're in another meeting," Stone says, nodding at Mr. Cummings. "I'll wait to speak with you when you're free." Stone starts to lead us from the room, but his father's dark laughter stops us.

"Mr. Cummings insists. Don't you, Fred?"

"Please. Stay," the man deadpans in a voice that brooks no arguments. These are powerful men, and the fear deadening my limbs tramples any idea of running at the moment. I've seen what Lance can do.

Stone's father beckons two men forward who are standing on the other side of the glass wall. They close ranks around the entrance, guarding the door. There are no visible weapons, but the threat is clear. We're not to leave, and Lance, once again, is holding all the cards. For all I know, these two muscular guys could've been at Jacobs mansion that night, toting guns at his behest. Who's to say they wouldn't do the same right here, right now?

We turn to face the room again, and it's clear how we walked right into this trap. The only person that can be seen through the wall of glass is Cummings, seated on the opposite side of a long, rectangular table with round corners. Lance Jacobs sits in the shadows to our right, hiding just behind the only solid wall in the room, a square jut out that most likely conceals a closet.

Stone turns to me, an apology in his blue-gray eyes. I shake my head, letting him know this isn't his fault. He traces his fingers over my chin, a loving gesture that belies what's really going on. "I won't let anything happen to you," he whispers so only I can hear, his featherlight touch only grazing my skin. I tuck the feel of him away, memorizing the feel of his skin on mine so I can call it forward to use as



strength if I need it. Stone turns, straightening his shoulders to address the room. “I thought you were hiding, Father.”

Lance snorts. “From what? You? No, Son. That won’t be necessary.”

I nearly laugh because if Lance isn’t afraid of Cole, he’s a moron. The smile on Stone’s face says everything I’m thinking. “You know who from.” Stone pulls out one of the high-backed chairs at the table and waves me into it before sitting to my right. Mr. Cummings and I lock gazes, and I can’t help but think that he and I are on the same page. His guarded expression is one of necessity, but his stiff demeanor says it all. Neither of us want to be here, and I wonder how the hell he got pulled into this shit.

“Thugs don’t bother me,” Lance growls.

I clench my hands into fists in response. I no longer count Cole as a thug. He may look the part, but there’s so much more to him than that. The way he opened up yesterday, I’m pretty sure I have a ride or die for life in him.

Slowly, I open the clutch on my lap. I don’t know what’s about to happen, but this isn’t the place to be with no backup. Ninja and the other guard are around here somewhere, but nothing is out of the ordinary at present. For all I know, they’re standing in the penthouse lobby, watching for threats anywhere else but here.

However, if I can contact Cole, there’s the added bonus that we happen to know Lance’s current location. I lift one end of my clutch until the corner of my phone peeks out.

“Well, you’ve got us here, what do you want?” Stone demands.

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I peek up to find Lance lifting his hands as if in surrender. “I wanted to talk to you two. Just you two. I’m willing to overlook your transgressions regarding those half-wits Marissa and Cole. Perhaps I was too hasty in trying to marry you off when you’re so clearly enamored with your stepsister.”

Mr. Cummings glances at the two of us in disapproval, but he’s literally sweating bullets, so he has no room to judge. I tip the clutch a little more, trying not to draw attention to myself.

Stone scoffs. “You only say that now because Edward is dead.”

Mr. Cummings shifts in his seat and fans the sides of his suit open. Red streaks blotch his cheeks.

“I guess that’s one way to solve a problem.” Lance sighs. “I didn’t know Dakota had it in her.”

“I have a lot more than that,” I state, refusing to back down from this man’s scare tactics. He may hold all the cards in this boardroom, but he doesn’t out in the real world.

“Ahh, she speaks. I was wondering if you were going to let my son talk for you this whole time.”

I chuckle. He’s only attempting to get a rise out of me, but gaslighting won’t work.

“Why don’t we get this discussion over with.” Stone glares at Mr. Cummings. “My

father's presence must mean you're not interested in moving your investments to Dakota and I who are—and always have been—the real team behind finding the treasure. Thank you for your consideration, but I have my answer.” Stone pushes his chair back, and attempts, once again, to flee the room with dignity.

“What’s interesting,” Lance starts, “is the information I found out about our thug friend and his connection to Dakota.” He pauses as if we’re either going to confirm or deny, which we don’t for obvious reasons. When we don’t bite, Lance leans over the table to lock gazes with me. “So, now I have a proposition for Dakota. I’ll leave your friend alone if you come work with my team. I know that together we can find the treasure.” He switches his attention toward Stone. “And I’ll no longer try to keep you two apart. I’ll wholeheartedly back your relationship. I’ll pay for your wedding, reinstate your family accounts, and give you everything that the union between you and Marissa entitled you to.”

My stomach churns. What does he mean reinstate Stone’s accounts? I had no idea he’d pulled anything from Stone, but I can’t act as if this is news to me. I school my features into a dead stare as Lance capitulates, “The Jacobs and the Wilders can once again work together toward greatness.”

His bullshit makes me want to laugh. He talks as if we’ve been working together for years, and that he didn’t blackmail me into joining forces with him in the first place. He never wanted to pair up, he needs me, and he’s finally realized it. That’s what this is all about. He’s now comprehending that he knows nothing about the treasure, and we do.

I peek at Stone’s profile to see where his head is at and recognize the stubborn feathering of his jaw. No, there won’t be any partnerships today.

Lance tries again, shifting his eyes to me. The color is so like Stone’s but lacks the empathy and feeling I’ve come to love in his. “I can make you a rich woman, Dakota.

Someone who's grown up like you needs what I have. You work with me and you'll never have to worry about anything ever again."

"Except my conscience."

"What's a conscience when there's a treasure to be found?" His eyes brighten with intrigue, but it rings faulty to me. He's excited by all the wrong things. He wants the treasure for self-serving reasons. It's not about history or recovering something great for him, it's about prestige and wealth. Looks like one member of the Jacobs family is exactly as I had them pegged in the first place.

"You know, Lucas is going to be okay." Stone's voice dips into dangerous territory, snapping me back to reality where the treasure isn't the most important thing. There are far more heinous reasons why I can't work with Lance. "I thought you'd want to know," Stone all but growls.

Lance laughs. "I heard about that. You think that was me?"

"Oh, I know it wasn't you." Stone's hands clench on his lap, and I once again try to get my phone out now that this is heating up. "You wouldn't dare get blood on your hands, but the people you hired were only doing what you ordered." Stone turns toward Mr. Cummings. "He's ruthless, and by the state of you, I'm guessing he has something over you, too. Get as far away as you can, Cummings."

I flick my gaze up and find the man pale as fuck and looking as if he could pass out at any moment. I can't believe this is the guy we were trying to get an investment from. He's so meek.

"I'll destroy you," Lance snaps. "Do you really think you can survive without me? You don't have any money. I'll place barriers at your every turn. The only reason you're anybody is because of your last name—myname."

“No, Dad,” Stone sneers before I can speak up for him myself. “The only reason why I’m anything is because of my real family. Consider this our answer: Fuck off.”

Stone gets to his feet, and using his response as a distraction, I pull my phone out and press my contacts icon. Cole just happens to be my first contact by alphabetical order, so I press his name and then the Call button before slipping it back into my clutch. I hope if anything happens, he’ll be able to hear it and call for help.

“You’ll be ruined,” Lance taunts.

Stone reaches out for my hand and helps me to my feet. He keeps me on the opposite side of his father while we stroll toward the door, leaving Cummings behind. I almost feel bad for him. Whatever shady shit Lance is involved in must be big to have people sweating bullets while they sit at the same table as him.

“Son, turn around.”

“We’re leaving,” Stone calls out. His firm voice steels my shoulders. We’re feet away from our escape now. We just—

An unmistakable click sounds, and Stone and I stop in our tracks. I close my eyes, wondering how this is happening again. Our plan was to come here, plead our case, and ask men in suits to invest in us instead of Lance, but that’s not what’s happened at all. I’ve now completely immersed myself in a world that’s more dangerous than treasure hunting—and that’s saying a whole fucking lot.

I peek behind us and sigh. I didn’t see this coming. Cummings is on his feet, a silver pistol in his right hand. He aims the barrel at us, moving from my chest to Stone’s and back again.

“Don’t do this,” Stone pleads, slipping in front of me.

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Lance stays where he's at, safely concealed. "Reconsider your position."

I grab onto the back of Stone's suit, bunching it in my fists. He works his hand back to tangle with mine in reassurance. Heart beating rapidly, I peer around his body as Cummings wipes at the sweat dripping down the sides of his face. He flicks his gaze toward Lance, then back at us. Mumbling, he squeezes his eyes tightly before turning the gun on Lance. He darts his eyes toward us. "Leave," he demands. "Go!"

He doesn't have to tell us twice. We turn, and now there's only the two guards at the door to get through. We rush forward, but Ninja and the other Dragon race into view, completely incapacitating the two suited men. Stone shoves me forward. Lance curses behind us, his words blistering the air as he tells Cummings what a piece of shit he is. I push open the door, and Ninja guides me quickly toward the elevator, his huge boa-constrictor arms wrapped around me and restricting my view. When we get in the elevator, I'm relieved to find Stone and the other bodyguard right behind us.

The doors close, leaving us safely inside, and Ninja presses a finger to his ear. "We got her, Boss." He pauses. "Yes, sir."

Stone walks toward me, forehead dropping to mine. "I had no idea," he breathes.

"I know." I'm surprised to find my voice shaky. Stone entwines my fingers in his, calming the tremors.

"Was Jacobs in the room?" Ninja questions.

I nod, and if I thought Lance's litany before we left the conference room was bad,

Ninja's is on a whole other level. When he calms, he explains, "We'll take you to the car. We won't be getting the fucker today. By the time we get you two to safety and head back up, he'll be gone."

"I got an ID off one of his guys," Cole's other guard says

I rub my forehead, trying to relieve the pounding in my temples. "Thank you for helping," I tell them both, adrenaline still coursing through my veins. I don't think anyone believes they're ever going to have a gun aimed at them, and this is more than once now. It doesn't become old hat, at least not in my case.

"You did good," Ninja praises. "Calling Cole was smart."

"You called Cole?" Stone asks, his blue-gray eyes flecked with worry but also admiration. "Jesus, Dakota." He wraps his arm around me, tugging me close. "That was perfect."

His hard, warm body soothes my tremors. The elevator beeps, and Ninja and his friend flank Stone and me. They don't pull weapons though I have no doubt they're armed to the teeth. We walk through the lobby and head straight for the Audi parked at the curb a few spaces down. Ninja stays with us while the other walks the perimeter of the car, taking out a device and staring at the screen as he makes his rounds. "What's he doing?"

"Checking for explosives and cameras," Ninja explains.

I should've known. I'm relieved when he returns with the all clear. Stone slams his fist against the hood. "Fuck!" he roars, garnering the attention of a few oblivious passersby. I rest my hand on his back, and he tenses. He stays this way for a while before turning toward me, determination brimming in his irises. "What would you say about still going to the rest of the meetings? I can't let him win, Dakota. I've been

under his thumb my entire life, and there's no way he'll show up at every single one of the meetings. That was his shot, and he didn't get what he wanted."

Stone's eyes are complete fire, desperately calling to me. "You didn't tell me about your accounts."

He shakes his head. "He hasn't taken everything. I'm a lot smarter than he thinks."

"But?"

"But he's taken a lot." Stone worries his lip. "I need some of these investors to choose us, Dakota. It's imperative."

I already knew my answer, but I turn to Ninja for a safety confirmation. "If we go..."

"We'll be in the conference room with you. Boss is already going to have our asses, so maybe this will be a bit of redemption." He mashes his fists together, and I quake at the idea of being on the receiving end of those knuckles.

I flick my gaze to Stone and squeeze his hand. "Let's do it. I have faith in us."

7

Two of the four meetings ended in contracts with Wilder-Jacobs Treasure Hunting. Yep, Stone did that. In his briefcase were legally binding contracts with our conjoined name, and I didn't know that fucking someone in a boardroom was on my sex to-do list, but it became a goal of mine today.

He put me first.

He put me first.



He explained to the apprehensive businessmen that Lance had already effectively voided their previous contracts for a violation of one provision: the gentleman's clause. Turns out, shady motherfuckers shouldn't put a provision in a contract that says all treasure hunting attempts will be honest, true attempts with absolutely no illegal activity.

At the end of the day, we got the bastard where it hurt him most—his bank account.

Word must have gotten out that we were splitting from Lance because two of his other investors called Stone on our way home to negotiate a deal with us. The extra contracts were more than we'd hoped for. Well, it was more than I'd hoped for. I didn't think any of the businessmen would take us seriously. I thought they would take one look at me and decide there was nothing I could do that Lance Jacobs couldn't. However, it turns out Stone is an excellent negotiator. He even had me convinced that by search-end we would have the treasure in hand and the only reason we were going to do that was because of me. I am the cornerstone in this venture.

“Did you really mean all that?” I ask as Stone drives us home.

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He drops one hand from the steering wheel to his lap. “What part?”

“You said I was the key to finding the treasure. You told everyone that.”

“I’ve always believed that,” he tells me, briefly glancing at me to drive his point home.

“Because of the information my family has?”

He shakes his head. “Not even remotely, Dakota Wilder. Because you’re you, that’s why. Because even when you looked as if you were dragged through the trenches, you always showed up, determined. Your light always burned brighter than your father’s.”

My heart squeezes. I don’t know if I’ll ever get over thinking of Clark as my father and hating that I do at the same time.

“Sorry.” Stone reaches out to trace patterns on my thigh, flirting with the hem of my dress. “Can I ask you a question?”

I push my tongue against my teeth. I have a feeling this is about my dad which is a little too close to home right now. I want to dance in the knowledge that we bested Lance today, not dwell on what Cole told me yesterday. But, I wouldn’t have any of this if it wasn’t for Stone, so I can’t refuse him. “Anything.”

He presses his lips together, peeking at me from the corner of his eye before moving his stare back to the road. He shifts in his seat, and I start to squirm. Nerves on Stone

bother me. It's like an electric voltage sign near water. "Why didn't you want Cole to tell you what your real name is?"

I flinch. Truth be told, my initial reaction spurred right from my gut. When Cole asked, I all but yelled no at him. I couldn't get the word out fast enough. I kick my flats off and flex my toes on the rubber floor mats.

"Aren't you curious?" he continues.

"Yeah," I admit, hating the clashing, swirling thoughts inside me. "I am, but...." I breathe out. "I already feel like I'm slowly being unraveled, and I have to grasp onto something. If he told me my birth name, it would be like seeing the truth in black and white. It would mean a total upheaval.

"I know you're going to tell me that it doesn't matter what my name is, I'm still me, and I agree with you," I murmur, hating the taste of the lie on my tongue. I understand the logic, but that doesn't mean my mind is on board with that feeling. "All my life, I've been told I'm special because of my last name, that my whole entire family legacy hinges on the fact that my last name is Wilder. I really can't fucking deal with the fact that it's not—that I'm a lie."

My eyes burn like tiny matchsticks are being lit behind them. I hate that I can't keep my emotions under control. This part kills me the most. Not that Cole killed the man I believed was my father. Not that my father was actually not my father. It's that I have no reference for who I am. Hell, I hated a boy for most of my life that I now love because I was a Wilder and I had to hate the Jacobs'. They were our arch enemies. Finding out that was a farce makes me feel as if I don't know what, or who, I am at my core.

Stone nods, wiping his palm down his cleanly shaved jaw. "Right now, I think I'd give anything not to be a Jacobs."

His words punch a hole in my gut. He's been betrayed, too, but his was hidden in shrouds, lurking in the evil shadows of his father's business dealings. "You think I should know who I am, don't you?"

Stone turns toward me, eyes flaring. "No. Not if you don't want to. None of us are in your shoes, and I'm not going to tell you what to do with that dumpster fire that was forced on you. No one should." He shifts in the seat again. "If you ever change your mind, I'll be there for you. And Lucas and Wyatt will be there for you, too, at the drop of a hat."

"A cowboy hat?"

Stone rolls his eyes. "If Wyatt has his way." He drums his fingers over the leather-bound steering wheel, a frown tugging at his lips. His whole body sighs as if he's just decided to let go of the last remnants of rope he'd been holding and fall into what lies beneath. "I'm devastated I did so much for my father... things that I knew were wrong, but I wanted to please him. Now, I want as far away from him as possible." He stares at me, knuckles turning white on the wheel. "I'll never be able to apologize enough. I hate myself for what I did to you. I can't help but think that some of this uncertainty in who you are is because I stood up on that altar with Marissa when the only person I've ever dreamed about marrying is you."

Fuuuuck. There it is again. I press my knees together. The marriage talk gets me every damn time. Maybe there's something hardwired in my brain that makes me turn to goo at those words. From someone who thought she'd never be able to escape her family's isolation, I grasp onto Stone's every promise of somethingmore. He saw me when no one else did. When I was invisible to my own father, he was there. He watched. He dreamed.

I want to straddle him and fuck his brains out. I want to erase the memory of his almost wedding because even though it was a huge farce, it chipped a piece of my

heart. I don't care who you are, if you see the man you love standing before an officiant with another woman, you're going to change. No matter how much I want to give in to him—how much my body wants it, too—we need to be on stable ground before we can move past it.

This isn't me making Stone pay in some fucked up withholding sex game to make sure he truly feels bad about what he's done. In fact, it's not about sex at all. It's about having more dignity for myself. It's about making sure I'm ready to move forward without the chains of what I saw holding me back. It's about being able to give my all to him when I'm absolutely sure it won't break me.

But also, I'm horny as fuck, so...it's complicated. I guess it's a good thing I have two other dicks at home.

Without a word, I grab Stone's hand, teasing his fingers with my own and drawing out the connection between us both. He captures mine in a firm grip and holds me the rest of the way home.

Home. I've never felt the significance of the word until I shared one with Wyatt, Lucas, and Stone. Inside the Spanish-style house sit two more pieces of my heart. Whatever brought us together, it's our strengthening ties that will keep us a unit.

Stone walks me to the door, opening it for me like the gentleman he is. I press up to my tiptoes to brush a kiss across his cheek before turning toward my room. Words fail me, otherwise I might explain everything that's going on in my head, but I think he gets it.

"I love you, Dakota," he calls out after me.

I turn, walking backward with my flats in my hands, my bare feet against the cold tile. "You know how I feel, Stone Jacobs."

Tension releases from his shoulders, and he watches me disappear down the hallway. I retreat inside my room, shutting the door and letting the cool glass against my forehead relieve some of the heat from me, but it doesn't work. I crawl up the bed, lie on my back, and hike my dress up. I find my pussy with my hands, using the fabric of my panties as friction to work myself up. My mind wanders to my guys, picturing them fucking me with their hard cocks, and even though I can get myself off, I want more, and I want to keep Stone's face as far away from me as possible so I don't break down. I reach inside my clutch and FaceTime Lucas. He picks it up on the second ring, and it takes him no time at all to figure out what I'm doing. "Wild Girl..." he breathes. "I didn't know you got home."

I bite my lip, my curly hair swirling around my pillow in the screen. "I need you." A breathy cry escapes. "Lucas...."

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He growls as he gets to his feet. “You’re not supposed to want to touch yourself.”

“Come fuck me then.”

The next thing I hear are footsteps outside my room. He opens the door, slipping inside and closing it behind him. Having discarded his shirt somewhere between my room and his, I watch his bare, muscular chest rise and fall as he studies me. After a moment, he works on his zipper, yanking his pants and boxers down to his ass before reaching inside and stroking his cock. “Damn that dress.”

I desperately want him, clinging to the idea that I may have lost him in a single moment. I dig my heels into the bed, furiously playing with my clit while I wait for him to make his move.

“Pull your panties down.”

I stop what I’m doing to hook my thumbs around my panties and slip them past my knees, spreading my legs wide to give him a view. He hurries to undress the rest of the way, and I refrain from moving my hand back to where it was, hoping he’ll relieve me soon enough.

He walks toward the bed in sure strides, making the mattress dip with his weight as he moves over me. He pauses over my clit, flicking his tongue out to tease me. The noise I make is one of relief and ecstasy rolled into one. “Did Stone do this to you?” He flutters kisses over the top of my thighs. “Did he turn you on?”

I force my pussy higher, hoping he’ll give me that sweet, sweet touch. Instead, he

forces me back down to the bed. “Did he?”

“Mmm-hmm,” I acknowledge, relegated to watching his slow, meticulous movements as he refrains from touching me right where I want him.

“You love him, Wild Girl?”

My fingers twist in the covers. “Yes. So much.”

Lucas turns his head and nibbles the inside of my thigh. “He deserves your love. But I’m a selfish bastard, so I’m going to take it right now.” He moves up, and in one thrust, enters me with a groan.

I wrap my legs around him. “You’re not taking anything I’m not giving,” I tell him, loving the relief of his sharp thrusts.

He stutters, dropping down to stare into my eyes, and slowing his movements. He pales, eyes lighting over my face as if trying to memorize me in this moment. “I didn’t say this before because I was scared I’d screw it up, but I fucking love you, Dakota.” He punctuates his words with a hard thrust, but he’s not going to distract me.

I reach up to touch his cheek, making him look me in the eyes. “I fucking love you, too, Lucas. Now, fuck me until I’m coming around your dick.” I trace his lips with my thumb, and he bites down hard enough to leave a mark. He captures my hands, leading them over my head where he does exactly as I asked. His thrusts turn me inside out. I’m just one nerve ending firing until the lava-like heat spreads when he finally brings me to the edge. I dive headfirst over the cliff, delighting in the waves that crash over me as Lucas follows quickly after, pumping his seed into me with a determination that fissures my heart.



We're well past the initial, burning embers stage of our relationship. I've delved deep into love and obsession to the point where I would do anything for all of them. None of us have had the family we deserve, but we're finding it in one another—sometimes slowly, sometimes with the speed of a comet hurtling toward Earth. But timing doesn't matter. It's this, this right here. It's the look in Lucas' eyes that tells me even though he's scared shitless to put his love and trust into another human being, he's done it for me, and he'll continue to do it for me.

I just need to be a gentle caretaker of his heart—of all of theirs. I can do it, I know I can. And I trust them to do the same.

8

Raised voices wake me. I sit up in bed, heart beating fast as if my subconscious is already aware of what's going on and I'm only now getting yanked into it. I recognize Wyatt practically growling, and I wonder what the hell happened that they're yelling at each other again?

I untangle myself from the sheets and find my dress on the floor, hurriedly pulling it on, then march toward the voices as they reverberate around the living area.

"I'm refraining for her. Remember that. I'd just as soon kill your ass."

I gasp. That wasn't one of my guys. That was Cole.

I pick up the pace, running now.

"Bring it on, thug," Wyatt spits.

I speed around the corner, jogging toward them. They're all crowding Cole, but Wyatt is the only one in his face.

Stone glances my way, eyes widening when he sees me. He sidesteps the altercation and moves in my direction, gaze dropping to the hem of my dress that's ridden up from running. "Dakota, put some clothes on."

I stop in my tracks, turning a hard glare on Stone. "The fuck did you just say?"

He holds his hands up, lips pulling into a frown. "I'm sorry, okay. It's just—"

"Your alphas think I want to fuck you," Cole growls, peering down his nose at Wyatt. Each of them vibrating in anger, fists clenched, muscles taut. Cole shifts his stare to me and immediately relaxes. The veins poking out of his fire tattoo retreat, and he steps back from Wyatt and makes a move toward me.

Lucas shoots out his hand, banding around Cole's midsection. Cole lets out a growl that hardens my spine to cement. "Tell him to fuck off before I make him," the gangster warns.

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The tension in the air cracks and sizzles. Over half of it is coming from me; that they would even think I'd do that to them. Bringing Cole in would throw off the balance of their friendship—of ours.

“Let him go.”

The muscles in Lucas' back ripple. He's only wearing the joggers he wore into my room last night. His neck injury is pinched and red. Yesterday, I tried to soothe his wounds. Right now, I kind of want to give him one of my own.

“That's not all we were trying to talk to him about,” Stone clarifies.

Cole shakes his head. “That was the most important part.”

“Lucas....” I seethe.

He hesitates before dropping his hand. Cole strides forward, wrapping his arms around me when we meet. I do the same, tucking my chin in the crook of his shoulder. We owe Cole so much. Just yesterday, he saved Stone and me. Ninja, who's probably still sitting outside since I've never seen him get a break, is only hanging around because of this man right here.

“I was worried about you,” Cole whispers, sinking his fingers into my back. It's a desperate hug, a reassuring one that speaks volumes. I don't want to drag him into my room and fuck him the way I do Stone, Wyatt, and Lucas. This is something different. “I showed up last night, but they wouldn't let me see you.”

“Yeah, because I was in bed with her,” Lucas gloats with a scowl.

Cole stiffens in my arms. He turns, but before he does, I witness the murder in his eyes. “Talk about her like that again.” He marches angrily toward my lost, disheveled guy, pointing a finger at his chest. “I’ve held back when it comes to you three because you make her happy. Talk about her like she’s a possession again, and I’ll rip your fucking throat out and introduce her to some men who’ll treat her with fucking respect.”

Lucas’ brown eyes alight like boiling pits of tar. The threats spewing from Cole’s mouth are reflected there, teetering on the edge of spilling out.

I intervene. I have to. I step between them before Cole can make it all the way to Lucas and make good on his promise.

Cole skids to a halt before slamming into my back. He takes several deep breaths, the anger seeping from him like a tornado swirling around me.

I don’t like them fighting. I love the three in front of me, and Cole is nothing short of the only family tie I have. Like a brother, he’s comforting and protective. It’s a different kind of love.

“I thought I made it clear,” Cole grunts. “Dakota’s like my sister. I don’t want to fuck her because that’s disgusting. Not that you’re not beautiful, baby girl,” he comments, his voice softening as he all but whispers in my ear. When Stone, Wyatt, or Lucas do that, I have a visceral reaction but there’s nothing when it comes to Cole. He continues, and I can tell he’s making a real effort to wrangle himself under control. “I would never do that to Charlie. Where I’m from, you don’t fuck with someone’s sibling. That’s grounds for murder.”

“Not to mention,” I start. “That I—”

“That’s right. You give it to them,” Cole snarks.

I turn my head slowly to glare at him, but all he does is smile. It’s endearing up close like this. A flame wraps up his jaw, the tip landing on the defined line of his chin, but the smile soothes the rough edges away. Honestly, I’m thankful I have someone like Cole in my corner. I turn toward Wyatt, Lucas, and Stone. “We can discuss this another time.”

Cole practically pouts. “What she means is that she’s going to kick your ass later for assuming that even if I wanted her that she’d drop her pants for me. Isn’t that right, Dakota?”

“Actually, yes.” I cross my arms. “That’s exactly what I was going to say.”

Each of them study me, and though they’re still hyped from arguing, their eyes soften—hopefully with contriteness.

“Now,” Cole says, drifting backward to the sofa, “we can talk about your other concerns like civilized men.”

Cole pats the couch next to him, and I sit there. I’m not done with the other three yet, and yes, they are going to get a piece of my mind. I just don’t need to do it in front of Cole to embarrass them further. Fucking possessive assholes.

Not that I don’t love it a little, but damn.

Wyatt, Stone, and Lucas squish together on the opposite couch. Cole waves at them dismissively to continue, and Wyatt doesn’t lose his chance. “You told us part of the story, but you didn’t tell us everything. You didn’t explain why you partnered up with Lance. You didn’t tell us how you killed Clark or where he is.”

I bristle, and Cole growls. Wyatt gives me a pained frown. It'll suck to hear it, but maybe that's something I should know. That part of my life still feels incomplete. Maybe I can bury the secrets along with Clark if I can get his body back?

"I figured Dakota would ask me when she was ready, just like when she wants to know her given name. I'll tell her anything at any time."

"I don't ever want to know that," I state definitively. The talk I had with Stone only reinforced my decision, making me put to words what I was feeling inside. I'm Dakota. That's all I need to know. I may not be a Wilder on paper, but I'm still Dakota. If I go down the rabbit hole of my past, it will infiltrate my cellular makeup, and I'll end up living as a hermit like my father.

"And that's your decision. I don't care." Cole turns to me, the diamond stud in his ear sparkling in the morning sun. After a moment, he says, "And it's up to you if you want to know what dipshit over here wants to. I'll tell you everything I did and why." He glues his eyes to me, and I see the sincerity for myself—not that I doubted him. I was scared shitless of him, but I never really doubted he'd tell me the truth.

I take a deep breath because I have a feeling I'm going to need it. "Start from the beginning."

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He leans back on the couch, hanging his arm over the back. “I told you I used the Dragons’ resources to find you. If it was the last thing I did, I wanted to do it for Charlie. So, I hired a lot of people to find you. They produced a file I pieced together which led me to the Jacobs’, and call me crazy, but I didn’t think showing up to your dorm room as the leader of the Dragons would’ve endeared you to me.”

“Neither is stabbing me,” Wyatt interjects.

“Ididn’t stab you,” Cole sneers like the idea of it is wholly beneath him. He scowls at Wyatt before continuing. “So, I got to the closest thing in your life, the treasure. I’m not immune to the treasure either, but I wanted it so badly for you. All the information I had said that’s everything you wanted. Then, when we finally met, I saw it in your eyes, and it clearly defined you for me.”

“Why did you have your guy stab me then?” Wyatt questions. “That part doesn’t connect for me.”

Cole turns to Wyatt. “Let’s make one thing clear. I don’t give a fuck about you. I came here for Dakota and Dakota only. The fact that you’re attached to her is the only reason you’re not dead right now. Any other time, there would’ve been a bullet in your head, Longhorn. Right under the brim of your stupid hat.”

I pat Cole’s leg, giving him a silent cue to move on. I don’t like the talk of putting a bullet in my cowboy.

Cole stretches his neck. “Plus, I was already playing my part as Jacobs’ partner. It was never about Lance. It was always about you. I told you to find the treasure,

pushed you toward it, because I want you to find it, baby girl. More than anything, I want that for you. Acting that way also helped reinforce my business partnership with Lance. I wouldn't have hurt you. I only ever tried to get close to you. The texts and bringing you to the Heights, those were my attempts to form the bond I knew would always be there because you're Charlie's sister. I would've died for him, and I'd die for you, too."

Lucas, Wyatt, and Stone all peer at each other. Silent communication passes between them, and I get it. If I was Wyatt, I'd have my doubts too, but Cole had good intentions. He always does.

Stone catches my eye. The gray-blue in his are bright this morning. They're absolutely captivating, and they sweep me off my feet in an instant. He licks his lips, nodding at me, and I nod back. "Tell us about Clark now. Dakota needs to put an end to that chapter in her life."

Cole swings his gaze to me for confirmation, and I give him a smile. He leans forward, dropping his forearms to his thighs. "Clark was complicated. I couldn't let the man live because of what he did to Charlie. That didn't mean I wasn't—a little—unsure. I never had any intention of keeping it a secret and didn't want Dakota to hate me for it when she found out. Killing him ended up being fueled by what he did to her as a kid. He didn't just take her away from a family who loved her, he kept her hidden; he didn't give her proper care; he treated her like she was a business partner instead of a fucking kid."

Cole's angry voice matches the sinister glares on my guys' faces. I've known that they didn't care for Clark in the slightest. In fact, they're the ones who started to reveal the layers of my childhood for me—to show me what life should be like. I thought my dad wasn't sure how to bring me up because he lost his wife and then he was a recluse on top of that. It turns out it wasn't that at all.



My hands turn to fists, but Cole continues. “I followed him to the trailhead that day. He didn’t make it very far. I confronted him about what he did and told him why he was going to be on the receiving end of my bullet.” Cole fuses his gaze to mine. “I don’t know if this helps or hurts, but Clark Wilder loved you—in his own way. He was...visibly upset about what he did to you. I’m not a psychologist, so I’m not going to attempt to break down what his thoughts were, but I can read people and Clark welcomed the death I promised him because of you. Of what he did to you,” he clarifies, pushing his tongue against his lips. “His last words were: ‘Tell Dakota she deserves to find the treasure.’”

I stare straight ahead, imagining my father on the very earth that intrigued him, that kept him living, telling this gangster that I deserved to find the treasure. Of all the things to say....

Tears rim my lids, threatening to spill over. But that’s it, it’s done. I wipe below my eyes, catching the wetness before it can fall.

“Where is he?” Stone asks.

“Buried in the back of the Wilder property.”

I snap my head toward Cole. “Yeah, by the way, you blew up my house.”

“It was a shitty house,” he explains. “I’ll build you a better one.”

“I’ll build her a better one,” Stone snaps.

Lucas grits his teeth and glares at his friend. “We will.”

I get to my feet, anger wrapping around every nerve. “How about I build it my fucking self?” I seethe.

“That’s right! Girl power.” Wyatt lifts his fist in solidarity, but I give him a glare that fizzes his sentiment right back to his lap.

Before I can tell them all off, Cole’s phone rings. He has it out of his pocket in no time at all, staring at the screen. “Shit.” He answers it and gets to his feet. “Fuck. Be right there.” He ends the call and lifts his gaze. “Your jeweler friend’s been shot.”

9

“What?” Stone exclaims, pushing to his feet.

Cole is already striding toward the front door. “Let’s go,” he calls back. “I’ll explain on the way.”

Lucas sprints to the bedrooms as Wyatt reaches for me, and I stare at his hand before taking it. No matter if I’m upset with what they did, I’m not going to withhold my love from them. Life’s too short for that shit.

“I know I fucked up, Tits,” Wyatt tells me, gripping my hand and leading me after Cole. “You can figure out how to punish me later.” When we emerge into the bright sun, Cole’s giving orders to the two guards while he waits next to the Audi in the driveway.

Stone gets in the front seat, and Cole slides in beside him. Wyatt opens the back door for me as Lucas emerges from the house with a handful of clothing. He squishes into the seat next to Wyatt and me, and Stone pulls out of the driveway behind the black car.

Lucas and I get dressed, and I prompt Cole to tell us what’s going on. “If the jeweler got shot—”

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“You were watching him?” Stone interrupts. “You knew where we went?”

“Of course I did,” Cole sighs. “I knew everything you were up to. We’ve been watching the jeweler to make sure he didn’t go to Lance and that Lance didn’t get to him.”

“Obviously, you’re doing a shitty job of it,” Wyatt snarks.

Cole turns in his seat, eyes flashing. “I’m sorry, do you run a gang? Do you understand the ins and outs of surveillance? Some things happen in the blink of a fucking second. You get that, don’t you, cowboy?”

Wyatt scowls, and I’m getting a fucking headache from all this fighting. “Can we not bitch at each other?” I snap. “This is already too much without your dick measuring contest on top of it.”

“Anything for you, baby girl.” Cole winks before turning around in his seat, and Lucas and Wyatt stiffen next to me. I swear Cole did that to get a rise out of them, and it’s clearly working.

Tension fills the car and only increases the closer we get to our destination. I don’t know where that is until we reach a hospital—the same hospital Lucas was in. Lucas shifts next to me, clearly uncomfortable. My stomach squeezes as we pull around the emergency entrance.

Cole turns toward us. “Stone and Dakota, out. Wyatt, park the car.”

We all do as he instructs. The emergency room doors open as soon as we get close, bringing too many bad memories for me. “They’re not going to let us in.”

Cole laughs darkly, tendrils of shadows blacking out what’s supposed to be an expression of humor. We march right through the other automatic doors that say we need permission to be down this hallway, but no one stops us. No one utters a word, and I turn toward the nurse’s station to find Ninja in front of the window, a tight smile on his face.

These guys are scary. I’d be doing whatever the fuck they wanted, too.

It’s not hard to pick out the room that our friend the jeweler must be in. Two guards dressed in black are standing outside it. They avoid meeting Cole’s gaze, and he warns them they’ll be having a discussion later. Afterward, he strides into the room with authority.

The scent of blood tangs the air and settles on the tip of my tongue as I stride inside to find the jeweler we entrusted lying in a bed. He’s pale as fuck, eyes closed. I stop where I am, but Cole reaches back and drags me forward to the bedside of the middle-aged man that we brought into this. He’s only lying in this hospital bed because of us. Jesus. Every time shit hits the fan, I wonder what the hell we got ourselves into. Fuck Lance for doing this to an innocent person.

Cole grips the plastic barrier beside the bed, and it squeaks. The jeweler’s eyes flash open, clearly startled. He glances over everyone in the room. He calms when he finds Stone. Clarity moves in, and he relaxes though his pupils are blown wide. I can only imagine that they have him on some heavy pain killers. He’s shirtless, white bandages tinted in crimson wrap around his midsection.

Any one of us could be lying in this bed. Hell, not a week ago it was Lucas. Whoever Lance hired is dangerous. They don’t care who they hurt. They don’t care who gets in

their way. Either Lance ordered this guy taken out, or he's given free rein to the men he's hired. However it went down, it's not good for us.

Luckily, we have someone on our side who's as dangerous as them.

"I'm friends with these two," Cole begins as a rather rudimentary introduction. He smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "First off, how are you?"

"I got shot," the jeweler croaks, grimacing when his voice breaks. He studies the rest of us apprehensively. "Right through my living room window. I didn't know what hit me. I didn't understand what was going on until a couple of guys I've never seen before broke into my house and called the ambulance." He eyes the fire tattoo poking out the collar of Cole's shirt.

"Those were my guys," the leader confirms. "We were helping keep you safe due to the important information you were researching for my clients."

"I think I'm alive because of them." He tries to change positions and grimaces.

"I'm sorry this happened," Stone shares. "So sorry. But I need to know what you found out about the artifact you studied."

The jeweler's shaky hands rise up to lie gingerly over his bandaged stomach. "It's so strange. I was getting together my report when everything happened. I was going to call you later today to set up a meeting."

Lance's team must have been watching him, too. They knew everything we were doing, too, which means they might have the information we hired this guy to get us.

Fuck.

“Where is it?” Stone inquires. “The report?”

“At my place.” His eyes droop, fighting off sleep, and my heart goes out to him.

“What did you uncover?” Cole’s question makes the jeweler drag his eyes open again. I’m almost unnerved the big bad gang leader is being so nice to this man. He’s not even using his gun to get answers.

“You have a very special piece, Mr. Fleming. As suspected, it’s European, but I was also able to track down its origin. You have a ring that belonged to Spanish Queen Maria Luisa. It’s highly valuable, supposed to have been lost in her treasure horde to Mexico which was a Spanish territory in 1753.”

My heart beats faster at his words. Stone finds my hand and clasps it, giving my fingers a reassuring squeeze. We have answers about the ring. Not only that, we have the name of the person who owned it. Holy shit.

“Where is it?” Cole asks, glancing over at us as my chest heaves up and down.

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“Safe,” Stone whispers the word with dual meaning. It is safe, and it’s in a safe.

Cole turns on his heel, and I linger only a second before I realize the jeweler’s now fallen asleep. We won’t be getting anything more from him right now, and we might not need to. The next step is to go to his house and get the report he was drawing up. We can’t let that fall into the wrong hands if it hasn’t already.

Stone and I walk slowly away from the bed and turn down the hall. I glance up to find the two guards Cole had posted outside the jeweler’s room following their leader down the corridor. I peek over my shoulder—no one is watching the room anymore. I drop Stone’s hand and walk quickly to catch up with Cole. “Hey, aren’t they going to stay with him?” I whisper.

We enter the waiting room where Wyatt and Lucas sit in chairs. They get to their feet when they spot us.

“Cole?” I urge.

“There’s nothing we can do for him now.”

“But what if they come back to finish the job?”

Cole spins toward me, his lips downturned, but with a firm jaw. “Baby girl, I can’t watch him forever. He’s no longer of use to us, so he’s on his own.”

He turns to walk away, but I grab the sleeve of his shirt, stopping him in his tracks. “I’m not asking you to guard him forever.” I keep my voice low. The guards next to

us pretend they're not listening to the conversation.

Cole puts his arm around my shoulders and leads me from the hospital, guiding me away from the front entrance where he stops me on the sidewalk. "Listen, Dakota, I don't expect you to understand this...." His guards now stand several feet away to give us some space. Wyatt, Lucas, and Stone hang back, too, though they're outright staring.

Cole rubs his chin fiercely, looking away before dark eyes return to me. "Okay, the thing is, this is what this life is like. Yeah, they might come for him again. They might kill him. I kept him alive until he gave us the information we needed. He might not die, though," he offers as an afterthought. "If I had eyes on everyone who gave us information or anyone who I personally believed was worthy of my protection, I wouldn't have any members left to do other things. You get that, right? I only have so many Dragons with me. I'm stretched thin. I can't watch over your jeweler, but even if I did, when could I stop? A couple days from now? A year? The threat could come at any time. He was sitting in his living room and the shot came through his window. Who could have predicted that?"

My insides turn to a twisty mess. Logically, I understand his reasoning. But personally, there's someone in that room that we brought into this fucked up scenario, and he's now lying there without any guards whatsoever. "He got shot because of us. Because of me," I grind out.

"Don't ask me to do it," Cole snarls. "Just don't. I don't want you disappointed in me."

I nod, already knowing my answer if I were to. I'm not going to pretend to know how to run a gang, I'm just talking about human decency here.

Cole leaves me standing there without another word and approaches his men. "Tell



me you searched the room for information.”

His tone is laced with disappointment and warning. His guys stand there with their shoulders back, but I can tell they’re worried by their stiff movements. I wonder what kind of leader Cole is? Does he react first, ask questions later?

One of the Dragons reaches into his back pocket and produces folded papers. Cole takes them from him and holds them out to me. “That’s all we found.” This gang member can’t be that much older than me. Neither can his partner, but the tattoos winding up their arms and the hard set of their features make them appear harder. Stronger. Older.

Looking at Cole, I wonder what he’s had to endure? Not just the death of his gang brother but probably a lot of other things. He told us he challenged the leader of the Dragons for his position. That sounds like it’s a story right there. I watch as he talks with his guys, wondering if I’ll get to hear any more of his past or be a part of his future.

Stone moves to my side, catching my eye then peering down at the papers in my hand. I unfold them as Wyatt and Lucas approach. Several different things are clutched in my fists: White computer paper in the form of a report, but also scraps of a notebook. It’s going to take a minute to go through this if it’s not written up nice and organized for us. As the jeweler said, he was literally in the middle of putting the report together.

Stone reaches out, takes my chin, and makes me look at him. “Hey.” His gray-blue eyes search mine. “I’ve already called in a security team to watch him. Okay?”

I drag in a breath. “But the money.”

“I told you, Lance didn’t take everything from me. Plus, we got some major

investments yesterday. We're going to be fine for a while, babe."

I throw my arms around Stone, squeezing him. He kisses the crown of my head, lips lingering as I listen to the beat of his heart. Thank God for Stone Jacobs.

After I pull away, I fold the papers and clench them in my fist, "We do have to talk about earlier still," I tell him, then shift my gaze to Wyatt and Lucas, too.

"I plead jealousy," Wyatt shrugs unapologetically.

I poke him in the chest. "Plead whatever you want, it won't help you."

I walk away, leaving the trio behind. I'm not really mad at them. It's not the worst thing that could've happened, but I do need to remind them that walking around like Neanderthals is not a good look.

Oh, and that I'm a girl and I can handle my shit on my own.

10

Cole leaves with his two guards to do gang leader things while Lucas, Stone, Wyatt, and I go back home. I need a shower, stat. I feel like I could fall asleep, but I also want to learn more about this Queen Maria Luisa. I can't believe that my family has had a piece of royal jewelry in our possession all these years. I always knew it was special. Just looking at the ring, I could imagine all sorts of different scenarios about princes and princesses. To know that wasn't far from the truth sets the butterflies in my stomach flapping their wings.

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“Tomorrow, I’m going to withdraw us from school,” Stone announces to no one in particular. “We’ll start back up again after this is over.”

It’s too bad after this is over is open-ended. I don’t think any of us know when that will be.

My family has been searching for the treasure for hundreds of years. My father believed we were close. Now with Stone’s technology and assistance, we have a real chance at finding it sooner rather than later. Sometimes, I pinch myself. I wouldn’t have kept searching if I didn’t actually think I could find it but planning on actually finding a Spanish cache of gold and jewels, sounds so...fiction. It’s something I would read in a book, and trust me, I would read the shit out of a book with a treasure hunt in it.

As long as the girl got to have several boyfriends. That sounds like a freaking masterpiece.

“It’s the best-case scenario.” Lucas draws over my thighs with his fingertips. “Also, Cole interrupted breakfast, so I’m hungry.”

“Speaking of...” I start, “you three are in trouble.”

There’s dead silence in the car before Lucas breaks it. “We were worried. You can’t be mad about that.”

“I get that part. What I don’t understand is the getting in his face, wondering if he wanted to fuck me part. If he did, that’s up to me. Just because I’m fucking the three

of you doesn't mean I'm going to drop shorts for anyone."

Stone glances in the rearview mirror to meet my eyes. "I'm with Wyatt. I'm pleading jealousy."

"Plead stupidity and sexism and I'll be more apt to forgive you."

Lucas grips my thigh. "I didn't think you were going to jump into bed with him, but I was worried about his intentions. Coming to find you, helping us, telling you the truth. It seemed like there was something there."

"I like him," I tell them all, making sure to look at each one of them, including Wyatt who's turned around in his seat to stare at me. "But like a friend. He's helped us so much, and he doesn't have to. You all need to learn how to get along with him."

Wyatt's face pinches, and I understand his apprehension. One of Cole's guys actually hurt Wyatt—freaking stabbed him—and I don't expect him to get over it so easily, but Cole explained that he was playing a part. He had to be the big, tough gang leader back then.

"Promise me that if you're worried about something in our relationship it stays with us. I could've spoken to Cole about his intentions myself without you guys acting all macho to prove a point."

"I'm not sure we scared him anyway so it is a moot point," Wyatt throws out, completely disgusted by the fact that their little argument this morning had no impact on Cole whatsoever.

"I'm sorry," Stone states, meeting my gaze in the mirror. "Really."

I'm surprised he's the first to say it. He must really be trying to butter me up after

almost marrying Rissa.

“And I’m sorry for wanting you to put something else on. That was wrong. I was wrapped up in the moment, and you had this just-fucked face that—”

Wyatt groans. “I know what you mean. She gets this look and—”

I flick him on the shoulder.

He smiles back at me. “I’m sorry, too. But also, I’m not going to stop being me, and if I think a guy is looking at you like he wants to fuck you, I’m going to say something.”

“Me too,” Lucas admits. He gives me one of his lazy smiles. “I’m not going to be able to hold that part back, but I’m sorry you were upset about the way we handled it, and I’m even more sorry that we didn’t express our concerns to you ahead of time.”

I flex my fingers, trying to release the tension building up in them. “So, are we all on board with Team Cole then?”

“Please,” Stone scoffs. “I think Cole’s Team Wilder-Jacobs.”

Wyatt runs his fingers along the brim of his hat and scowls out the windshield. “I’m cool with it unless he brings his dangerous shit to us.”

“Yeah, what Wyatt said,” Lucas agrees. “We need him because the shit Lance is pulling is in his wheelhouse, but after all is said and done, we’re not going to play one big gang family with him. We’re staying out of that shit.”

“Well, of course,” I agree.

Lucas blinks over at me, his lips a thin line. He stares, watching my expression as if he's expecting me to do something.

“Good, now that that’s over,” Wyatt says, “I’m looking forward to being punished for my transgression.”

Stone shakes his head. “Jesus....”

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Lucas smiles and leans forward to punch Wyatt in the arm. “Look, you finally drove Stone insane. He’s at a loss for words.”

“He’s just mad he didn’t say it first.”

Stone meets my stare in the mirror again, features softening. He understands that I need some time. The flowers were a nice touch, and the idea to pay our own security team to watch over the jeweler was also spot on. Now I won’t be consumed by guilt that he might die because of us. But my heart needs to do a little more mending and forgiving.

Stone’s phone rings, and his car flashes the number. I only see Security before Stone yanks the car to the side of the road, kicking up dirt. He slams on the brakes, and Lucas holds his hand out to shield me.

“What the fuck, bro?” Wyatt growls as he grips the dashboard in front of him.

“It’s the security company to the house,” Stone grits. He presses the answer button, and a recorded voice fills the car alerting us that the police were dispatched to our house due to a zone alarm trigger. “Fuck!”

The ring.

Stone pulls back out onto the road. The tires finally grab the cement, and we peel out. We’re about ten minutes away—too long to get there in time to do anything if someone has broken in. If Lance’s team were listening in on the jeweler, they know about the ring now, and it would only stand to reason they would try to steal it.

“Stone....”

“I know,” he growls. His eyes narrow as the car revs underneath us. “They won’t touch the ring. I promise. That house has maximum security.” He takes a curve too fast and the wheels screech against the road before he straightens the car again.

“What if they get to it before the police get there?” Cole seems to think Lance hired ex-military personnel. If they’re that good, they could be in and out before our second-rate law-enforcement show up.

“They won’t find it,” Stone promises. He doesn’t meet my gaze in the mirror again which makes my stomach clench, fear dousing me in ice until I’m shaking.

Lucas rubs my back, and I swear the drive is the longest seven minutes of my life. When we get there, a Clary police car is in the driveway. He waves Stone down at the start of the cement walk that leads to the front door—which is wide open. “This your house?”

Stone completely ignores him. He exits the car and runs into the house, leaving Lucas and Wyatt to deal with the uniformed cop. I try to run in with him, but Wyatt grasps my hand to keep me from doing so. The patrolman tells us we’ve had a break-in, and that there’s no one in there anymore. He wants to know if there was anything that was stolen. Lucas asks him for his card and tells him they’ll get in touch if they find anything wrong. The deflection is just a story. If the ring is gone, law enforcement won’t be able to do anything about it.

The cop doesn’t have a card, so Lucas puts the officer’s number in his phone. I swear, Clary police wouldn’t know their asses from holes in the ground.

Stone comes back out as the squad car pulls out of the driveway. A moment later, he gets a text. He reads it with a frown. “It’s our security team sending us an update,” he



explains.

“The ring, Stone,” I remind him, practically jumping out of my skin. It’s my most prized possession. I can’t lose it. Especially not to Lance Jacobs.

“It’s there.” Stone drops the phone to his side and makes his way to me. He places his arms around my shoulders and squeezes. “It’s there. I saw it. They don’t know where the safe is, and even if they did, it would take a bomb to get it open. I promise you. I wouldn’t have put it in there if I didn’t think it was secure.”

I sigh, relaxing a little with that knowledge. We all stride up the front walk to find the main door dented near the lock. “Fuckers,” Wyatt growls. “It’s a steel fucking door.”

“We’ll get a better one,” Stone assures, flicking his gaze away from it as if it’s the least of his worries.

Wyatt whistles, shaking his head as he inspects the damage. “The side of the house is damaged, too.”

“Our security was already here before the police came. No one left anything. No recording devices. No bugs. They’ve watched the cameras, and it was a team dressed in black, completely trashing the place. More than likely searching for the safe.”

I step further in and gasp at the wreckage they left behind. The sofas are overturned. Paintings that were on the wall are now on the floor, ripped away haphazardly.

“They didn’t take anything,” Stone reads, still staring down at his screen as if he’s giving us the highlights from the report.

Shit in the kitchen is pulled out of the cupboards, and drawers are lying on the floor. I start down the hallway and notice the same with our rooms. They’re ransacked.

Things all over the floor, torn away from the walls and out of dressers. They really looked everywhere for the safe.

“They were systematic,” Stone calls out. “Professionals. I’m going to call the housekeeper and tell her I need her to work some overtime, and I’ll call a handyman for the door, too.”

I lean against the glass wall to my room, thankful that it’s only a bit of mess we have to deal with instead of the soul-crushing idea that they got the ring. Or anything else that was in my family’s hidden canister—our legacy.

I pull the sheets back up on the bed, making it as best I can. Then, I work on the closet and dresser until everything is packed away again. I work on my en suite next, which wasn’t really touched except for towels littering the tile floor.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Stone tells me as I walk back into my room.

“I know. I just....” I shiver. “I couldn’t stand to think someone was in here, messing with my stuff.”

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“We’re completely safe,” Stone repeats. “I wouldn’t let us stay here if I didn’t think that. Hey.” He walks up to me, concern filling his eyes. “It’s been a long day already, and it’s not even 10:30am. Let me draw you a bath.”

“A bath? I only have a shower.”

“You haven’t been in my bathroom yet, have you?” He tugs on my hand, and I follow him into his room. He opens his bathroom door, and off to the side, is a jetted tub surrounded by windows that overlook the mountains.

He turns the faucet on, checking the temperature before allowing it to fill. He drops in a round, blue circle, and the water starts to fizz. “What’s that?”

“A bath bomb.”

An intoxicating aroma fills the air, and he shows me how to turn the jets on, then brushes a kiss across my forehead before leaving the room. I peel my clothes off, stepping into the humongous, oval tub. The warm water caresses my tired skin, and the scent of the bath bomb overwhelms my senses as well as tingles along my skin. “This is nice,” I say aloud, leaning my head against the back. Then, I remember to turn the jets on and that’s a whole different experience. It’s like heaven in a bathroom.

I don’t know how long I spend in the bath, but by the time I get out, the entire house is back in order. It’s as if the whole thing never happened.

I find Stone in the living room with his laptop across his knees, typing away. When he hears me coming, he sets it aside and jumps up. “Wyatt made you something. He thought you’d be hungry.”

He saunters into the kitchen, a pair of sweats on. Even the lazy look suits him. He has a way of making thrown together clothes sexy because he knows he looks damn good in them. “Where is he?” I ask, figuring he’d be out here, too.

“He went with Lucas to the store to pick up a few things for our next trip up the mountains. We were thinking we should go as soon as possible, and since school won’t be a factor, we can go for as long as we want.” He retrieves a plastic-wrapped plate from the fridge, placing it on the granite countertop in front of me. Turning toward the cupboards again, he grabs a bag of chips while I peel off the stretchy film. “It’s turkey breast. He whipped it up while you were taking a bath.”

“That bath....” I sigh. “It’s divine.”

He smiles as he empties some chips onto my plate. “You’re welcome to use it whenever you want.”

I pull the sandwich toward me. “I think I lost track of time watching the mountains. Sometimes I stare so long thinking they’ll give me a sign or something.”

Stone chuckles. “Wouldn’t that be nice? I’m all for a big X somewhere.”

I take a bite and chew slowly. This is way better than the lunch meat sandwiches we used to eat at home. It’s got some substance to it. Wyatt never goes half-assed with food.

Stone places his elbows on the counter and leans toward me, worrying his lip. “I was also thinking we should take reinforcements into the mountains with us. Dad’s not

going to just let us find the treasure, and we can't let him find it because it's yours."

I blink up at him and swallow hard before I choke. "We can't let him find the treasure because he doesn't deserve the money and power it would give him."

Stone shakes his head. "The treasure is yours, Dakota. It was always meant to be yours. We're going to find it, and you're going to get everything you've ever wanted."

My heart fills, expanding until it feels as if I won't be able to hold it in my chest any longer. "What if I've already found everything I've ever wanted?"

Stone pulls back, eyes widening. It only takes him a second to recover. "We could drop everything right now." He moves around the island, stopping in front of me. I turn in my chair, and he grasps the back of my neck, pulling me out of my seat. "We could leave this behind. Go to school somewhere else. Clary would only be a memory. Outside of its shadow, we could find out who we truly are."

His words weave a dream that's easily attainable. I could pluck it out of the air, nod, and Stone would make it happen. He'd build my fairytale for me from the ground up. I know he would.

"I could work full-time on you forgiving me."

"I've already forgiven you." His fingers squeeze me tighter, biting into the base of my skull. "I just need to bleach the memory from my subconscious, that's all."

"You already know I dream of you." His breath falters. "I dream of little girls who look like you in overalls and curls hidden in braids, freckles spackled across their noses from the sun. They'll give me those same eyes you used to when you were a little girl, and I'd be a goner for them, too. Just like with you, I'll give them every

damn thing they've ever wanted."

Heat pricks the base of my spine, echoing out to wrap flames around my core. "Will the boys resemble you?"

"Me." He drops his stare to my lips. "Or Wyatt. Or Lucas."

I step off the seat and into his space. "You're talking about something very unconventional."

"Screw people's limited minds. I don't care about that, and neither do Wyatt and Lucas. All we care about is that we get to have you every day, and that our house is filled with the love we never got when we were small."

"Is that why you want kids so badly?"

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He delves his fingers into my skin, massaging small circles into my neck. “No, I want kids because I can’t think of a better way to spend my life than with you and little humans who are pieces of you.”

My heart squeezes. Taking a page out of Wyatt’s book, I attempt a joke. “You’re really hammering this apology home, aren’t you?” This kind of talk scares me. It’s not that I don’t want it, it just all seems too big for little old me.

“It’s not an apology. It’s a promise.”

My cheeks flush. This is different than my father making me agree to have kids and keep the Wilder legacy alive. No, this is something else entirely. This is the sharing of dreams. Of lives. Of souls.

“It’s the truth,” he articulates. “One day, I’m going to ask you to marry me because I want to. It’s not going to be an arrangement between families and businesses. It’s going to be a representation of the single greatest thing in the entire world: love. I probably would’ve asked already if I thought you’d say yes.”

I grip his wrist, sliding my thumb over his skin. “What makes you think I won’t?”

Stone’s gaze hardens, and the lines of his jaw tense. “You’re killing my resolve, babe.” He moans, the sound vibrating through my core. “I think....” He groans. “Honestly, I think you’re too busy to enjoy it. I think you’d worry about Wyatt and Lucas and the treasure and everything else going on. We’d be starting out on a rocky slope instead of the solid foundation you deserve.”

I swallow. “What about Wyatt and Lucas?” Neither of them has said anything about marriage, and I’m not actually sure I can get married to all three, but that doesn’t really matter, does it? A marriage license is a piece of paper. There are many ways to be tied to someone. Not only in the eyes of the government, but in hearts and promises, and that’s exactly what Stone is offering.

I want to take it. Capture it in my hands and run away just like he offered.

But....

“The treasure,” he guesses, reading my face with a smile.

“I can’t shake it.”

“It’s not a bad thing.” Stone steps between my legs until our chests brush against one another’s with every breath we take. “It’s who you are, and I love who you are. All that other stuff can wait because my love for you sure as hell isn’t going anywhere.” His Adam’s apple bobs. “I’m sorry if standing up with Marissa stained us. I was going through the motions. I hated every damn second of it. I had a picture of you in my head the whole time. You were everything I thought of. And when it’s you and I standing together, it’ll be everything. I can promise you that.”

I press a finger to his lips. “I don’t ever want to hear the name Marissa again. I don’t ever want you to bring up what happened either. It’s done.”

He swoops forward, capturing me in a blistering kiss. “Done,” he mumbles against my mouth, then continues to erase every thought that pops into my head with his skilled tongue. My brain haywires until he melds it back together so that bitch isn’t even a blip on my radar.

Picking me up, he wraps my legs around his waist. The ultra-thin barrier of his



joggers has me rocking into his stiffening cock.

He stops my movements, digging his fingers into my ass until I cry out against his lips. He walks toward the couch and sits me on the cushions, untangling my limbs from him before getting to his knees in front of me. Closing his eyes, he bows his head, throat working.

“Don’t you do it,” I warn, worried he’s going to apologize again. I thought that’s what I wanted, but it only reinforces the image of him almost marrying someone else, and right now, I want nothing to do with it. I just want this. “I already forgave you.”

Pressing his palms into my thighs, he runs them up my legs until he curls his fingers around the waistband of my pants. He gives them a tug, and I lift my hips to allow him easy access to pull them down. He traces his fingers up the inside of my leg, over the soft spot of my knee, and to my inner thighs where he pushes to widen my legs.

My breath hitches at the mere idea of him going down on me. Juices trickle out, and I moan. “I’m going to ruin the couch.”

“Then I’ll buy a new couch. Right now, I want to taste you. I’ve been watching the video we made in the car. Fuck, Dakota, I think I’ve jacked myself raw.”

I sit up, reaching for his tented sweats. “Maybe you need a kiss.”

He catches my hand before I can touch him. “This is about you.”

“This is about us.” I pull my shirt over my head, then unclasp my bra until I’m bare. I lie on the couch, lifting a brow at him. “Undress and straddle my face, Stone Jacobs.”

His chest expands.

“Now,” I demand.

He pulls his shirt off hesitantly. I salivate over his hard muscles and the V leading into his sweats. When he stands, I get an even better view as he teases his waistband with his thumbs hooked under the elastic. He drops his pants, his erection rigid and waiting. “Let me lie down, so I don’t choke you.”

He pulls me into a kiss that bruises my lips, suffocating me in the best way. After he pulls away, he lies on the sofa, his body a masterpiece of hard lines and taut muscle. “Now, straddlemyface, Dakota Wilder.”

I don’t hesitate. I position my knees on either side of his head and lean forward to close my mouth around the head of his cock. He jerks before cupping my ass and moving me down to trace his tongue over my pussy. Both of us moan at the same time.

Moving my lips down his cock, I relish his moans. “Yes, Dakota,” he whispers, his hot breath caressing my swollen flesh.

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His salty precum coats my tongue as I wrap my mouth around him tighter, bobbing in strokes that match his. His fingers delve deep into the tissue of my bottom until he moves one hand around to play with my nipple. I tremble uncontrollably as spikes of pleasure ricochet through me.

“So good,” he praises, concentrating on my clit. “You’re perfect.” He suctions my tight bud until I’m panting, unable to do anything but flick the tip of my tongue over his slit. When he doesn’t let up, I take him in as far as I can. He stops his onslaught to moan, and I continue my attention at a rapid pace while he bucks into me. “Yes, yes....”

Without warning, he reaches around to grab my hair and gives it a tug. His dick pops out of my mouth, and he keeps pulling until I’m in a sitting position.

“I’m going to come if you don’t stop,” he explains. “And that’s not happening. Not before you.”

He doesn’t let me get a word out. He runs his hand over my body to the apex of my thighs and circles my clit with his fingers. His tongue works in unison, and I try to stay upright as he drives me higher and higher. My body is a shaking mess. My thighs clench, and I worry I might suffocate him, but then I break apart unexpectedly. I call out Stone’s name, and he presses his palm into my skin, holding me in place, milking every last ounce of pleasure.

Still enjoying the aftershocks, I lean forward, sucking him into my eager mouth, wanting to give him the same thing he gave me—a physical reminder that he’s forgiven, that it’s done. Over with. Our past.

Not everything is going to be roses, but we can strive to put each other first. All of us. We can work hard toward making the past our worst memories and our future filled with love.

His hips jerk into me, and I quicken my movements until he explodes down my throat, my name a strangled cry on his lips. He shudders as I lick him from base to tip, reveling in his pleasure. With a satisfied sigh, he lifts me from him, and pulls me back down. Lying side-by-side, our hearts beat a war cry of freedom.

He presses a kiss to my temple, then runs his fingers through my hair. We don't move from this position until we hear the key in the lock, and even then, it's hard to drag myself away from Stone Jacobs.

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Wyatt storms into the room. I sit up, attempting to put my clothes on, and he covers me, slamming me back into Stone. "Wyatt, what the fuck?" Stone growls.

Lucas marches past us, jumps onto a shelf in the corner, and rips the camera off the wall. He throws it on the floor and stomps on it, the plastic splintering into pieces.

"Dude." Stone's mouth drops in horror.

"Shh," Wyatt demands.

Lucas runs into the garage, his face a mask of fury.

I tremble for completely different reasons than the orgasm ripping through me. Wyatt grips my leg, running his thumb up and down the curve of my knee. "Just wait a second."

“Done!” Lucas shouts.

Wyatt lifts off the couch and turns slowly, taking his hat off briefly to run his hands through his hair before putting it back on. Lucas joins him, tossing a blanket to the two of us, and I pull it over my shoulders—not that I care about being naked in front of them, but with the expressions on their faces, there’s clearly something else going on.

Stone flicks his stare between the two of them. “What is it?”

Lucas frowns, sympathy teeming in his eyes. My gut clenches, and I’m almost afraid to ask what this is about. “Wyatt and I both got emails from Saint Clary’s about fifteen minutes ago. We thought maybe you sent in the withdrawal forms, so we opened them.” He pauses. “It wasn’t that at all. It was a live stream...of you two.”

I glance to where the camera used to be which had a perfect view of the couch we were lying on. The perfect view of us 69ing. I shake my head, denial lapping at my beating chest. “No.”

“I’m sorry, Dakota.” Wyatt yanks his hat off and throws it across the room. “We tried calling.”

Stone untangles himself from me and stands, yanking his sweats on. “How in the fuck did this happen?” He starts for the garage.

“I turned the whole thing off,” Lucas calls after him. “When we couldn’t get ahold of you, we called Cole. He’s on his way.”

Stone spins. “The security company....”

“They either got hacked or—”

“Or my dad bought them out. Motherfuckers!”—his eyes widen—“If they were watching the video, then they know where the safe is.”

“No, no, no....” I stand, yanking the blanket around my body. Stone’s already sprinting toward the safe. The rest of us run behind him. Fingers shaking, he has to put in the code several times before it opens.

It’s bare.

There’s absolutely nothing inside.

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I fall back, stepping on Lucas' toes. He places his arm around my waist, holding me tightly to keep me upright. Stone hangs his head. "I cann.... What? This...This is...."

Wyatt places his arm on Stone's shoulder as a heavy shroud covers us all. "This isn't your fault."

Stone shrugs him off. He peeks at me for a fraction of a second before looking away. He brings his hands up, turning them into white-knuckle claws. "I'm going to kill him. I'm going to wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze so fucking hard." He's still growling threats as he leaves the room, and Lucas kisses my temple.

"I'm so sorry, baby," he whispers.

I'm in such a state of shock I can barely think. I keep staring at the safe, seeing how empty it is, and wondering who put an invisibility spell over my family's legacy? There's no way Lance got it, right? This is a terrible dream.

Wyatt, who followed Stone out of the room, calls out, "Where are you going?" When no other sound comes, he shouts, "Dude."

The front door slams, and Lucas' arm tightens around me, squeezing me once before running out into the main room. I sway on my feet, internally freaking out. Several other voices fill my ears, and it takes me longer than normal to recognize them, but when I do, I make my feet move. First one foot, then the other. I pull the blanket tighter and find Wyatt caging Stone in near the front doorway. He's plastered his body against his friend's, palms outstretched on the wall. Both of their faces share a furious shade of red as they struggle.

Cole shifts his gaze to me. “I’ve got my guys surrounding the house, and a new security company coming in.”

Ninja peers over at me but immediately glances away.

“What are you going to do, Jacobs? March over to that huge mansion and demand answers?” Cole sneers.

Stone roars, fighting against Wyatt.

“It doesn’t matter,” I lament, voice breaking. I drop onto the couch facing away from them. “It’s gone. It’s all gone.”

“Jesus Christ, would one of you take care of baby girl? She’s pale as fuck.”

When Wyatt turns his attention to me, Stone slips out of his grip, elbows him in the ribs, and runs off. It’s as if I’m watching a movie. We’re in another reality. One where Lance Jacobs got the best of us. I want to jump back into the right reality because this shit is fucked up.

Lucas squeezes my shoulder. “Dakota.” His eyes are round, frightened. “You’ve got to stop Stone. He’ll only listen to you.”

He tightens his grip again, and I shake my head as if fighting off cobwebs.

“Stone,” I whisper. “Where is he?”

“He’s leaving to track his father down.”

I get to my feet. He can’t do that. He’ll put himself at risk, and he’s worth more to me than my family’s legacy. “Stone, stop!” I scream, but he’s already down the



walkway.

I run to the door, and Cole stops me. “Let him go.”

I glare at Cole, then turn back. “Stop, please!” I yell.

Stone hesitates with his hand on the car door of the Audi before ripping it open.

“I can’t lose you and my family’s things,” I call out, hoping that will get through to him. I turn pleading eyes to Cole. “Stop him. He can’t do this.” Nothing good will come of him going to see Lance.

Cole nods at Ninja, and Ninja strides toward the driveway. “Don’t hurt him,” I squeak.

With Ninja off to gather Stone, Cole sighs. “Now, will someone take Dakota to get some clothes on, please?”

Wyatt grabs my shoulders, turning me away as Ninja approaches Stone. The cowboy holds me close, rubbing his hands up and down my arms as he walks me to my room. He takes me directly into the bathroom and turns on the shower. My body trembles of its own accord while Wyatt strips down with me and moves us under the hot spray.

“What could you see?” I croak. “In the video.”

“It was clear enough. If people didn’t know it was you guys at first, they would’ve figured it out if they watched the video long enough. We heard you call out each other’s names.”

“They?” I freeze, my body turning to ice despite the hot water pelting me.

“It was a college-wide email,” Wyatt murmurs. “They made it appear as if Stone sent it.”

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Wyatt hauls me up when my legs fail me. It's one thing making a video when you're aware. It's another thing altogether to be recorded in secret and have something so intimate be shared with others without your consent.

"It's down now. We called the school's tech department, and they shut it down."

"That doesn't mean people still don't have it."

"Cole and Stone are going to take care of this," Wyatt promises. "And Lucas and I will do anything to help."

"We need to move," I cringe, thinking about Saint Clary's. I can't go back there now. Right? Everyone's seen.... Oh my God, and we had to be experimenting, too. We couldn't have been having boring missionary-style sex, we had to be 69ing.

"No way. If anything, you made every girl in that school so damn jealous. When we go back, you're going to walk into Saint Clary's with your head held high."

"It's different for guys," I explain to Wyatt. "Everyone's going to look at Stone like he's the man for getting his dick sucked, but everyone's going to stare at me like I'm a whore."

Wyatt makes me peer up at him. A bead of water clings to his nose before dripping to the shower floor. "You can't let other people make you feel that way. Besides," he starts, running a hand down my soaking wet hair, "I'll kick anyone's ass who says that. I'll protect you for life, Tits."

We stay under the water until it turns lukewarm. Turning the knob off, he hands me a towel. While I dry off, he dresses in the same clothes he came in with, then offers me a pair of shorts and a t-shirt from my dresser.

I'm sick to my stomach to go back out there and face this, but I have to. I have to make sure Stone is okay, that he doesn't blame himself for what happened. I also have to make sure Cole's taking care of security because if they got into the house once without us knowing, they can do it again.

Wyatt places a finger under my chin as soon as I'm dressed. "Head up. Nothing gets to you. Okay?"

I wish that were the case. I worry about the loss of my family's legacy; about the loss of my reputation. But Wyatt's words remind me that I have control over some things. People can say whatever they want but that doesn't mean I have to listen to them.

We walk out, and the first thing I notice is Stone sitting on the couch with an ice pack over his eye. "What the hell?" I race toward him and drop to my knees. He glances away, and I glare at Ninja.

The guard pulls a face. "He fought me."

Cole chuckles, and I scowl at him. "I said not to hurt him."

"Rather he has a black eye than a bullet in his brain," Cole snarks.

Well, when he says it like that.... I turn back to Stone. "Are you okay?"

He swallows, emotions clogging his features. He can't even look at me.

"Hey," I try again, attempting to not get in his face but failing. He needs to see that I

don't blame him for this.

He gently moves around me and stands, still holding the ice pack to his eye. "Where do we stand?" he inquires.

Lucas takes my hand and pulls me to the couch beside him. "Don't worry," he whispers. "He's just mad at himself."

"My tech guys should be here in fifteen minutes. They'll take a look at your cameras and replace or rewire, whatever they have to do. They might be able to recall the footage to see who it was that took Dakota's treasure stuff." He turns to me. "I'm sorry we weren't here." He shakes his head, hands balling to fists. "I won't make that mistake again."

I rub my temples.

"Even if they do get the footage, I'm sure we won't be able to see who it was," Lucas states. "They always wear masks."

"I'll put my feelers out. People who do illegal shit sometimes band together. I'll see who took Lance's contract if I can. In the meantime, me and my men are staying here. I don't want Lance's assholes that close to Dakota ever again."

Wyatt sits on the coffee table. "We were going to head into the mountains soon."

Cole glances toward Ninja, and the Dragon guard shrugs. "Never been much of a hiker, but I'll do my best. You can count on us," he says, locking gazes with the four of us.

Ninja's not so bad. I actually kind of like him, as weird as that sounds.

“I’ll stay here and hold down the fort.” Cole turns toward me. “I can’t disappear for a few days. Shit would fall apart.”

“It’s good that we’ll be split up,” Wyatt remarks, backing up Cole’s decision. “In case they try anything while we’re gone.”

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I can't imagine Cole up in the Superstitions anyway. That shit would be funny.

"I hear one of you assholes can cook," Cole states. "We haven't had a good meal since we've been here."

Wyatt takes in a huge breath before shifting his gaze to me. I see the gleam in his eye that he wants to tell Cole off, but when he sees me, he relents. "Yeah, sure. I can make something."

"I'll help," I tell him, getting to my feet. Ninja and the other guard—and Cole, too—have done a lot for us, and the least I owe them is a good meal.

Cole reclines on the sofa, asking where the remote is. Lucas throws it to him before joining Wyatt and me in the kitchen. The three badasses with dragon fire tattoos licking up their necks sit on the sofa as Cole flicks through the channels, settling on *Forged in Fire*, a cable show about bladesmiths who make accurate representations of historical knives and swords. Watching them act as if this is their home makes me grin.

Cole peers into the kitchen, catching me staring. He smiles, and I nod back. Stone, however, leaves the room entirely after throwing the ice pack in the kitchen sink.

"I should talk to him," I tell Lucas.

He shakes his head. "Give him a couple hours. He needs to calm the fuck down first. Then, he'll come to you."

I worry my bottom lip. We'd just, and I mean just, gotten over the hurdle of him not needing to apologize to me, and now something else has popped up. Stone can't catch a break. "It's not his fault."

"No, but he's not going to get that," Wyatt remarks, taking out a frying pan. "He'll hate himself for this."

"We'll get it back though," Lucas assures me.

I can only hope he's right. Those artifacts mean the world to me.

Behind me, a low voice promises, "You bet your ass we will."

I turn to find Cole at the bar, eyes promising danger. A shiver starts in the base of my spine. I'm pretty sure Cole would do anything to get me my things back.

Literally, anything.

13

After a couple days of focusing on the treasure and everything else being quiet, we head up to the trailhead with Ninja and Dave. I figured it was best to actually learn Dave's name instead of always thinking of him as Cole's "other guard." Speaking of, the big bad gang leader doubled over with laughter the first time I called his stealth-like guard by my nickname, and despite all the tattoos and muscles, Ninja himself blushed like a besotted schoolboy. It turns out, Ninja's real name is Rodney, but I'm going to stick with Ninja.

If anything, it'll be good to have the extra help with us, not only for safety reasons, but they're also excellent pack mules. We brought every bit of equipment we could think of, plus extra food in case we decide to stay in the mountains longer.



We take more breaks on our trek up the Superstitions with Ninja and Dave. They're in super good shape, but when you're not used to hiking up a mountain, there's nothing that can prepare you for it. Depending on how long they're stuck with us, they could be getting accustomed to it quickly though.

To pass the time, Ninja questions us about the treasure. I tell him my family's part in it, and I swear by the time I'm through, he has gold bars in his eyes. It's called the treasure craze. There's something about the idea of hordes of gold somewhere that people home in on. It's that kid in every one of us who played pirates or talked themselves into believing they'd actually find something buried in their front yard with their little plastic shovel.

In my case, it was way more than a pipedream. I actually had a story to go along with my treasure fantasies. I had a definitive reason to want to search.

"You're so beautiful," Lucas remarks, rubbing his shoulder with mine.

"W-what?" I stammer, completely taken off guard. I was off in la-la land.

"Something comes over you when you talk about the treasure. You get this awe-inspiring gleam in your eyes." His eyelashes fan over his cheeks, and I nearly jump him right then and there, but Ninja interrupts us.

"How close do you think you are to finding it?" He loses his footing on the rocks and catches himself. After wiping his hands on his pants, he peers up at me expectantly.

"Since we all hooked up, I have a really good feeling." I glance at Stone who's still avoiding me. I'm hoping this trip will help him get over himself. Yes, I'm upset about losing the contents of my family's safe, but I also know that after seeing Lucas almost get hung to death right in front of my eyes, that there are more important things than antique papers and a ring I don't wear.

I mean, averyfew things, considering the gold nugget was going to be used as undeniable proof that we actually found my family's gold vein. However, Stone just happens to be one of them.

While we're here, Cole is going to check in with the analysis team we sent the traps to so we can see where they areandmake sure they're also not double-crossing us. He's using whatever evidence they discover as another way to help mete out who's working for Lance. Cole thinks if he knows who the team is, he might be able to attack them in another way to get them off our backs.

My hope is that if the people Lance hired follow us up the mountains, they won't have any idea how to survive it. After seeing the two big, strong guards Cole sent with us struggle, I figure we have a good shot of being better than them at one thing.

Stone takes over answering a myriad of questions about the equipment we brought. At the end of the conversation, I'm wondering if Ninja's going to jump ship from the Dragons and come work with us. When I jokingly tease him about it, Ninja stands straighter. "No can do, Dakota." His lips are pulled taut and thin. "Even if I didn't owe Cole everything, I couldn't. Once you're a Dragon, you don't leave."

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My stomach knots. “Not ever?”

“Not unless you want your former friends to hunt you down and kill you,” Dave chuckles.

I’ve learned that the “other guard” is a little off. He’s awkward as fuck without very many personable personality traits. He loves guns and violence though. The only time I hear him animated is when they’re discussing dark things like what they’ll do if the team Lance hired follows us up the mountains.

Thankfully, he doesn’t talk all that much.

With everything else going on, I’m relieved we never placed my family’s treasure map in Stone’s safe. We kept it in our bags along with all the other modern maps we bring with us. The ex-military team didn’t think to search there. Considering they don’t know we have a map, I can breathe easy about it.

I tried talking to Stone about the fact that we still have the map, and he brushed it off, telling me he should’ve been able to keep everything safe.

We stop a few more times for water breaks. The weather is absolutely gorgeous today, but there’s no way Ninja or Dave would be able to handle this trek in the summer. They’d be puddles of sweat soaking into the mountain floor, the sun making them evaporate right in front of our eyes.

When we get to camp, they’re absolutely exhausted. We take another break while we bring out the equipment, deciding what we’re going to focus on first. It’s later in the

day than it usually is when we arrive at our search destination, so we're working on limited time.

Stone pulls the metal detector out. I walk toward him, knowing there's nowhere he can avoid me up here.

Behind me, Wyatt answers Dave's question about how we all go to the bathroom. That's important mountain etiquette right there, and I'm glad he's explaining it to them.

I wrap my fingers around Stone's arm, and he flinches. I pull back with a sigh. "You know, you've got to stop that. I'm going to get a complex that you don't want me to touch you."

"I want you to. I just want to be worthy of it."

I place my hands on my hips, anger rushing to the surface as I watch Stone try to deflect me again. "Okay, this is seriously getting frustrating. I let you have your little pity party but enough is enough, Stone. It's done. It happened. We can be pissed about it or we can make something out of it. Cole's working on getting it back."

Stone's lip curls. "I should be finding it."

I close my eyes. His reaction is so uniquely him, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. "You don't have to save the day every single time. You're of better use up here, and also, you know, alive and uninjured." I'm still not over the fact that he was going to track his father down into who knows what mess.

"You entrusted me with one thing," he growls.

"I've entrusted you with more than one thing. The ring and the papers, yes. But this,"

I say, pulling his hand away from the metal detector and placing it on my chest. “This is the most important thing, and right now, you’re breaking it.”

His gray-blue eyes soften. “I just—”

“I know, I know. Blah, blah, blah. You’re gonna say something about you sucking and I’m going to turn around and say what I just fucking said. We’ll get the ring back. We’ll get the other stuff, too. And even if we don’t, you know what we can do to get back at the fuckers who took them from us?”

He hides a smile, but his eyes are still fierce. “What?”

“We can find the rest of the treasure and throw it in their faces.”

He lets the smirk out now. I positively glow under the curve of his lips like it’s the first daybreak I’ve seen in a hundred years. “That’s true.”

“Now, can we be the Wilder-Jacobs team again and actually put all these investors’ money to good use by finding the treasure? We have a shot to do what your father never could. Won’t all those buttoned-up business blowholes who didn’t side with us be super pissed? They’ll probably have heart attacks on the spot.”

Stone chuckles. “You’ve been spending too much time with Cole. He’s warped your brain.”

I stretch onto my tiptoes and kiss his lips. He doesn’t take it further which tells me he’s still not one hundred percent okay. It’s fine. I have all the time in the world up here on this mountain. I can keep working on him.

Stone brings out the grid map, using what we worked on in previous trips to narrow down the area that we’re going to search today. He informs the newcomers that the

item he's holding is probably the most precious thing we have in our possession. In fact, when everyone else gets down to business after his little speech, he takes a picture of it with his phone.

He's not wrong. This map tells us where we've already searched so we don't waste our time looking in the same places again.

Even though Stone still hasn't let me back in completely, he makes sure we're partners for the rest of the time we have left to search tonight. Ninja tells us he's been ordered to stay wherever I am, so the three of us head to our new search grid.

Once we get there, I stare out over the landscape and see familiar landmarks of where we've already searched. It's starting to look like we've actually accomplished something. No, we haven't found the lantern yet, but we have found where it's not. It's like what Edison supposedly said about making the first lightbulb: I didn't fail. I just found 2,000 ways not to make a lightbulb.

If that kind of thinking worked for Edison, it'll work for us, too.

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Once Stone and I start sectioning out our metal-detection area, Ninja loses all concern about the treasure. He keeps his eyes peeled, and I'm impressed by his single-mindedness. He holds his gun in his hand, lowered to the rock and sand at our feet as he starts a perimeter walk and doesn't stop.

The familiar beeping of our equipment starts, and Stone and I stay together as we do our up and backs, making sure to overlap slightly over the line we just searched. Today, we have a bunch of hits, but they're nothing big: bits of old flatware from miners, antique metalwork. It's obvious this area was used for a camp back in the day. We don't find what we're looking for, but it's still exciting. The constant beeps from the machine keep us on our toes, but it also slows our search because we dig up each and every detection.

Each time it sounds off, nerves flutter in the pit of my stomach. Sure, after the fifth fork it kind of gets redundant, but I've always been a story-loving girl. The fork may be insignificant, but what about the tale behind it? What if my previous treasure hunters used one of these forks? Better yet, what if it was my original ancestor himself, making camp while he searched for a vein he could mine on? We're talking years and years of history.

If the Superstitions could talk, they would tell one hell of a tale. Green vegetation dots the brownish-red rock and dirt terrain that make up the mountainside. To our north-east, the crags of the mountain jut toward the sky in sharp lines. It's formidable and beautiful at the same time. I've counted myself lucky on so many occasions to be able to enjoy this landscape in a way that not many other people do.

"You have that look in your eye again," Stone almost whispers.

I peek at him. The detector is in his hand, but he's staring back at me as if he might have been watching me for a while now. "Sorry, I was just thinking."

"You're so breathtaking up here. I fell in love with you surrounded by these rocks. To me, you'll always be the mountain girl with the big eyes and determination that makes me think I can do anything."

"We can, can't we?"

He shakes his head, finally smiling again. "When I'm with you, I always think so."

He reaches for my hand, and I take it. For the first time in days, he touches me. He rubs his thumb up and down my knuckles, and I hope that this is Stone finally getting out of his own head.

The moment is short-lived. Both of us stop when we hear the telltale sound of trouble. Straining my ears to hear where it's coming from, I gasp in a breath and hold it.

Fuuuck. It's off to the south, right where Ninja is walking. "Stop!" I yell.

Ninja freezes, his narrow focus darting at eye level for the threat.

"Don't move," Stone demands.

We check the ground around us to make sure we're okay. When it's clear, we walk toward the rattle. When you've been in the mountains as much as us, you get used to this. We never leave for a trip without our snake guards, and we made sure Ninja and Dave had some, too. But that doesn't mean snakes can't bite around the guards.

The rattle sounds again. "Shit. Fuck," Ninja curses. "Is that what I think it is?"



“It’s a rattlesnake, man.” Stone keeps his voice low and steady. “Stay where you are. Dakota and I are coming.”

My heart beats a mile a minute. Ninja could get seriously hurt or even die from a bite if we can’t get him medical attention right away.

“I don’t like the sounds of your voices. Am I fucked or what?”

We creep closer, careful to keep our eyes peeled for the predator. We come within feet of Ninja, searching the ground near him. Rocks of all sizes greet us with sand interspersed throughout. When the rattle sounds again, we spot the snake next to a fairly large boulder about a foot and a half away from him.

That’s...not good.

“Okay,” Stone starts. “It’s to your left. What you need to do is move very slowly to your right. When I tell you to,” he rushes out, speaking up when Ninja starts to move automatically. “Very slowly,” Stone explains. “I’ll tell you when to take the steps, okay?”

Ninja nods, and I don’t think it’s my imagination when I see more sweat dotting his brow now than before.

“Now,” Stone tells him.

Ninja takes one step, then we wait to see what the snake is going to do. It stays where it is, however, the rattle gets louder. “Dude....”

“It’s fine,” I soothe. “He’s not near you.” My words are calmer than I am. This is really nothing to fuck with. One wrong move....

“Now,” Stone instructs again.

Ninja takes another step.

The snake uncoils. Stone and I take a step back, keeping our distance. “Now,” Stone repeats once the snake settles again.

Ninja takes another step, moving slowly just like Stone told him to. If he moves too fast, the snake could perceive it as a threat and lash out.

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His next step crunches the gravel, and I grimace, wrapping my fingers around the small knife I keep in my pocket. The rattling heightens, and the creature lifts its head, forked tongue slithering out of its mouth. Its top coil rises into the air, beady reptilian eyes glued on Ninja who's not far enough away yet.

"What's going—" Ninja starts, but the snake makes its attack, darting through the air. I whip my knife out and throw it. The blade slices through air, coming to a stop near the snake's head. The limp reptile falls to the rocky ground in a heap.

Stone's mouth drops. He stares at me in wonder and then at the snake. "What the fuck?"

"What is it?" Ninja demands. I can see his knees quaking from here.

"Jesus Christ." Stone runs his hands through his hair as he strides toward the snake for a closer look. Sure enough, I got him.

"Can I fucking move or not?" Ninja bellows.

"Move," I tell him.

Ninja hightails it out of there, whipping around with his gun aimed at the floor where Stone is. "Whoa, whoa," Stone calls out, lifting his hands into the air.

Ninja's eyes round. "What the fuck happened to it?"

"Dakota got him."

Stone drives the blade through the body, completely severing the head. Ninja looks from the dead snake to me and lowers his weapon. “You did that? Jesus, why didn’t you just do that in the first place then?”

I walk over to Stone and get my knife back. “I don’t like killing them if I don’t have to,” I explain. Then, I grab a sweat rag from my pocket and pick up the snake’s body. It was a big boy, that’s for sure. I grin. “I’m about to show Wyatt how to cook a rattlesnake without killing us.”

“I am not fucking eating that,” Ninja protests, still a little red-faced.

“Why not?” I tease. “It was going to eat you.”

14

As promised, I show Wyatt how to skin and cut up the snake, so we can put it over the fire. Rattlesnake is a delicacy if you know how to do it right, and I’m lucky to have had a fa—well, a person in my life who knew these mountains in and out and taught me how to do it.

Ninja appears pleased with himself under the shadows of the flames. He lies back, then immediately sits up to stay where the light from the fire still hits. Big, scary guard fears the desert predators now. “If any of you tell Cole I almost shit my pants...” he warns.

Wyatt laughs. Dave nearly chokes on the snake meat in his mouth. “First thing when we get back, I’m telling.”

“No can do,” I tell him. “What happens in the Superstitions, stays in the Superstitions.”

Dave narrows his eyes. “Did you just steal Vegas’ motto?”

“Vegas stole it from us,” I inform him.

Stone curls his hand around my body. He’s been beaming ever since we called Wyatt, Lucas, and Dave back to make camp. He can’t keep his hands off me. Wyatt nearly tripped over himself when he saw the snake in my hands. He was an excellent student as I taught him how to filet our meal, which is good because one wrong move, and we could poison ourselves. “That was fucking epic,” Stone gloats. “I can’t believe you killed the snake with your knife.”

“Fuck you,” Wyatt grouses. “I really wish I’d been there.”

Lucas chuckles, his eyes gleaming orange under the glow of the fire.

These are the times I miss in the mountains. The camaraderie, the thrill of the hunt, the search. I’ve been so focused on one thing that I lost sight of the fact that being up here can be a hell of a lot of fun.

Stone leans into me, gaze trailing over the two burly bodyguards. “How are we going to ditch these guys tonight, hmm?”

My face flames, and embers ignite in my core. Who knew killing a rattlesnake would get Stone all hot and bothered? “Are you asking if we should sneak away from our private security detail tonight?”

He bites my earlobe, tugging on it playfully. “I sure as fuck am.”

I hadn’t thought about this problem. With Dave and Ninja here, how are we going to get any sexy times in? I doubt Cole wants to get a report with our sex schedule added in. From 1–4, they metal detected. From 4–6, they fucked like rabbits.

The satellite phone Cole made us bring is eerily quiet. He told us if he heard something, he'd keep us updated. It's possible Lance's team isn't attempting to get us up here this time. Now that Stone's up here with us, Lance's plan might have morphed. He might not try anything with his son in the line of fire.

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I'd like to think that Stone's presence would automatically make him take a step back, but I'm not so sure. He's a horrid man.

Stone blows on my ear. "Where did you go? Come back to thinking about me fucking you in the stream."

"Is that what I'm supposed to be thinking about?" I croak out.

"That's what I'm thinking about."

Dave groans. "Ugh, horny teenagers."

I don't think Stone cares who's watching. He kisses a trail down my neck. But me, I pull away. This isn't a sideshow. "We're not teenagers," I throw back, lip curling.

Ninja scowls at his guard buddy. "Dakota's our charge. We don't say shit when Cole's getting his. She's the same."

"In case you haven't noticed, we're in nature," Dave grunts, then takes a swig of water. "It's not like they can go in another room." He leans back, still looking properly disgusted at mine and Stone's display of affection.

All of a sudden, the firelight catches something shiny in the air. My eyes dart right to it, but I don't know what it is until Dave hisses. "What the fuck? You threw your knife at me?"

Ninja winks. "I guess my aim isn't as good as Dakota's. Get the fuck up and do your

rounds. If you hear a rattle, don't move. We'll be out to help. Maybe."

Dave gets to his feet, holding his pinky. A single drop of blood seeps between his fingers. He glares at Ninja as he gets his gun out and starts walking the perimeter.

Ninja also gets to his feet. "I'm sorry, Dakota. He'll be spoken to. We're your guards. We're here to keep you safe while you're going about your normal business. We're certainly not supposed to have commentary on what you plan to do with your time. He's a good guard, he's just...odd."

"Oh, well...."

"Good," Stone butts in, his face dark as he glares at Dave still shuffling away from camp. "Make sure it doesn't happen again, and Dakota will expect an apology from him."

Ninja nods. When he's out of earshot, I push Stone playfully. "What was that about?"

He gives me an amused grin. "They take their jobs seriously, so we should take them seriously in return. Cole's going to be pissed about what he just did."

Please. He's not fooling me. "You just wanted them both out of here for your nefarious plans."

"What are those plans?" Wyatt asks, smiling from ear-to-ear. The brim of his cowboy hat blocks his eyes, but his smile says it all.

"I'm wondering the same thing," Lucas purrs.

"You guys should've seen our girl kill that rattlesnake." Stone gets to his knees and crawls over me. "You'd be as hard as I am right now if you had." He looms over me,



forcing my back to the ground. I drag deep breaths into my chest as he hovers just out of touch.

“I don’t need her to kill a rattlesnake to get me hard,” Wyatt answers, his voice closer than it was a moment before.

“No, just teach you how to cook the rattlesnake she killed,” Lucas taunts. I hear a smack, but whoever was on the receiving end doesn’t react. “Is anyone else thinking that skinny dipping in the stream is a great idea? That way we’re not on full display for everyone.”

“Dakota will have to be quiet, too,” Wyatt warns with a growl. “If she can.”

Stone suddenly lifts from me, then grabs my arm to haul me to my feet and over his shoulder. A squeak gets caught in my chest as the four of us head toward the riverbed. Wyatt and Lucas strip while they walk, and I enjoy the view of the moonlight playing off their skin while their cocks harden.

Sharing myself with all of them at the same time sounds like a game I can get on board with. Especially up here in one of my favorite places. I always knew this area was the stuff of legends, and right now, I’m about to play out my own mythical fairytale. A foursome. I’ve only read up to *aménage à trois* in books, but I have an imagination to fill in the rest.

I rake my fingers up Stone’s muscular back, and he moans before lowering me to my feet, dragging me down his taut body. My core settles over the tent in his pants, and I suck in a breath.

“You like that, baby?”

I nip at his neck like he did to me earlier, then nod. He groans, hands searching up my

back, tangling in my shirt, and whipping it off while he leans back to stare at one of the bras he bought me. “Best money I ever spent.”

Lucas wraps his arms around me from behind and palms my aching breasts. “I don’t know. At this point, I’d pay good money to stay at a nude commune.”

I drop my head back to his shoulder, arching my chest into his adept hands.

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“Jesus,” Stone growls. “She likes that.”

“She fucking loves it,” I confirm.

Stone lowers the zipper on my pants, revealing the matching midnight-blue silk panties he bought to go with this bra. He tightens his hold over my hips possessively, keeping me in place. The fresh air blows a couple of curls over my face, and he sweeps them aside before returning his firm grip.

Not to be left out, Wyatt brushes his fingers down my side, making my nerve-endings spark. He crouches until he’s at waist-level. Peeking at him, the wild look in his eyes tells me he has something wicked planned. He bites the waistband of my pants and peels them down with his teeth, scraping the skin of my thigh as he goes. I shudder, dampening the crotch of my panties.

Being in the middle of my man-sandwich is testing my resolve. They’re everywhere. Touching me. Staring at me. I’m their damn spotlight, and I can’t get enough.

Lucas slips past the silky cups of my bra to squeeze my tits almost to the point of pain. He kneads my flesh, and I moan into the night, my pleased cry mingling with the night insects’ chirps.

Stone lets Lucas take all my weight as he steps back to tear off his shirt. His muscles glisten in the light of the stars and moon like the beauty of a meteor arcing through the sky. I trail my gaze down his chiseled planes with anticipation.

Wyatt’s hand on my calf grabs my attention. His bright blue eyes lock on mine as he

removes my shoes and finally yanks my pants away, tossing them to the side. He holds my stare before tracing a finger over the curve of my panty line, gently caressing my folds through the thin fabric. I mewl, eagerly awaiting his next move. He pushes the material aside to run his fingers up and down my slit. “She’s wet for us,” he announces with a sexy growl.

My mouth opens in a silent cry as he teases my pussy, claiming my lower half as his own while Lucas buckles my legs with his breast play. Stone’s eyes devour his friends’ movements. Lips parted, he takes everything in as if he’s trying to commit it to memory. Finally, his fingers move to his waistband where he slowly slides his pants to the ground in the most glorious scene I’ve ever laid eyes on. Inch by inch, he reveals his stiff dick and muscular thighs. He cups his huge cock right through his boxer briefs, giving it a slow tug before he mercifully looks at me. “Move her bra to the side. I want her in my mouth.”

I nearly combust on the spot. Pleasure trickles between my legs, and Wyatt uses it as lubricant, continuing his ministrations along my slick skin, intentionally skirting my hole without ever dipping inside.

Lucas does as Stone commands, peeling the cup of my bra away and offering my breast to him as if it’s the main course.

Wyatt angles to the side as Stone steps forward. Focus now on my heaving chest, Stone dips his head, darting his tongue out to circle my nipple. Lucas squeezes my tit, and Stone responds by sucking the puckered bud into his mouth, moaning like he’s a man starved.

At the same time, Wyatt slips a finger into my waiting cunt and I buck against him, letting out a low cry. I pin his hand to me, thrusting against him, searching for relief from this sweet torment by all three of them.

“We should get into the stream now,” Wyatt practically chokes out. He swirls his finger in my channel. “She needs dick.”

“So much dick.” I gasp as Lucas tugs at the cup holding my other breast, and Stone moves to the other side, ravishing my pebbled nipple with the tip of his tongue. A gust of wind caresses my bare chest, sending goosebumps shivering over me. Lucas palms my free breast, using the wetness Stone left there as friction to pull and play, peeking my nipple until it’s hard enough to carve rock. “I’m not trying to be dramatic,” I breathe, still pressing against Wyatt’s finger. “But I might come soon, and if one of your dicks isn’t inside me, I’m taking a vow of celibacy.”

Three moans meet my ears. Wyatt removes his finger to tear my panties down, and Stone doesn’t waste any time hoisting me in the air and impaling me with his big dick. I wrap my legs around his body, clutching him, remembering the first time I saw his huge cock which is currently trying to fucking ruin me.

I fail at keeping quiet, letting out a cry that leaves nothing to the imagination about what we’re doing if anyone’s within earshot. In my defense, it’s probably physically impossible to stay silent during a foursome. I have very limited experience with the matter, but if the last few minutes tell me anything, muting myself is going to be an unattainable goal. In this moment, I can’t bring myself to care.

Lucas removes my bra from behind, and Stone walks me to the creek with his lips teasing the sensitive skin of my neck. Biting, then soothing, he laps at me, following quickly with little nips that make me buck against him.

Wyatt helps support my ass while I dig my heels into Stone’s backside, fucking him. My cowboy’s fingers sink into my flesh, helpfully moving me against his friend, kneading and pushing. “Fucking Christ,” Stone bites out, returning my fervor with his own pronounced thrusts.

Wyatt's chest presses against my back, and he licks the curve of my ear. "That's right, Tits. Fuck him so hard he starts talking about all those babies he wants to have with you. I know you love that."

My pussy spasms, and I nearly come. Each stroke fires all my nerve-endings in quick succession.

Lucas hums in agreement. "Take him deeper, Wild Girl. I know you can."

Droplets of creek water hit my skin as we wade deeper, desperately seeking at least a little camouflage to our naughty fling. As soon as my ass hits the water, we splash as we come together again and again. Water flies everywhere, dampening my heated flesh. The slight wind off the mountains caresses the slick trails of moisture beading down my body, lighting up all my senses.

"Fuck, this is next level," Wyatt groans. His chest envelops my back, his cock nudging the base of my spine. He pushes the head of his dick lower until it rubs over the crack of my ass with each movement, flirting with my puckered hole. I lose it. Ecstasy shoots through me, and my pussy clenches around Stone's dick.

He takes control, holding my hips as he fucks me mid-orgasm, grinding against my clit. I scream, clinging to him during my aftershocks as I have the longest orgasm of my life.

Afterward, he slows the pace while my chest heaves against his. He moves one of my feet to the bottom of the stream until I'm standing on top of his own, then hooks my other leg under his elbow to change the angle.

"Don't be a show-off," Lucas warns. "We don't want to hurt her, and I get the feeling she might want to experience all three of us."

My pussy tightens around Stone involuntarily. “Yep. Yes,” I pant, nodding. “That’s what I want.”

“The only thing Dakota has to do is enjoy me, and I’ll be filling her with my cum in no time.”

I lock gazes with my gray-blue-eyed tormentor. He glides in and out with so much power. I squeeze my pussy around his dick, and he shudders. “Fuck yes.” He reaches up, fingers splayed against the back of my head. Yanking me forward, he kisses me feverishly, sucking on my lower lip before turning my head. I nearly groan in frustration until my stare lands on Lucas.

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The dark promise of his eyes tells me this sexual escapade is just beginning. I trail my eyes lower. Beads of water glisten his torso, dripping over his carved abs. He pleasures himself in slow strokes, using his finger to catch his pre-cum to lubricate his shaft. The water comes up to his thighs, and out of the three, of course it's Lucas that's standing there proudly, letting everything out for the world to see. "I'm waiting for you, Dakota." His low voice more like a warning than a promise, and I'm so damn happy that he got his lush voice back. "I'm going to fill you so damn fast."

My pussy clenches again, and Stone quickens his pace, slamming into me while Wyatt curves me backward to take my nipple into his hot mouth. He lashes his tongue across me in whip-sharp movements. I can't see Lucas anymore, but I hear his moans of appreciation as I reach out, clawing the air for purchase during this freefall of absolute bliss. My nails find Stone, and I dig them into his abs. He stiffens, and I lock gazes with him over Wyatt's retreating head. In one swift movement, he yanks me up and against him, grinding out his release through clenched teeth.

"Fuck," I pant, tethering myself to the fire in Stone's eyes. His dick jerks inside me, and I gouge my heels into his ass to keep him fully seated.

The water calms around us as we come up for air. It licks against my navel while Wyatt moves to my back again. The heat my cowboy radiates makes me shiver. I can't see him, but I know he's running his hand up and down his shaft because he caresses the head of his cock across my ass cheek in the process. "Sorry, Lucas," he grinds out. "I'm going to blow if I can't have her right now. I got way too fucking excited."

Stone leaves me with one last thrust. The friction tightens the bundle of nerves above



my pussy. My feet don't even make it to the rocky bottom. Wyatt bands an arm around my middle, positioning his cock between my ass cheeks again. "I want you like this, Tits." He rocks forward, sliding into my greedy cunt. I gasp as he presses his thumb on my clit, reminding me that my cowboy isn't the lovey-dovey type during sex.

He turns us so I'm facing a tortured Lucas whose movements have quickened, crease lines forming along his brow.

Wyatt wraps my thighs around the outside of his, and with the added buoyancy of the water, I stay where I am in my cowboy's able hands. Even when he leans me forward slightly with a sure hand at the base of my spine and starts to move inside me, I only rise and lower on his cock.

"Fuck me," he grunts. He bites my neck playfully. "Play with your namesake. Let's give Lucas a show."

I grin as I drift my hands toward my tits. I break the surface of the water, cupping my mounds and plucking my nipples while locking my gaze with Lucas'.

"Aw, fuck," he grits.

"Let's see if we can break him," Wyatt whispers.

I drop my head back to Wyatt's shoulder, pinching my pebbled buds, letting a moan pierce the air between us.

"Mmm," Wyatt groans in my ear. "I had to feel you. Best. Fucking. Feeling. Ever," he grunts, punctuating his words with sharp thrusts.

It's hot as fuck knowing Lucas and Stone are watching while Wyatt fucks me from

behind. He lowers his pinky to trace my clit. I tremble against him. “Oh, yes.”

“You like that?” He lowers his hold on me, digging the heel of his palm into my abdomen while his finger circles my tight bud.

“Wyatt, please. Fuck.”

“Oh my fucking...God.” Wyatt loses himself, jerking his hips forward until he pulses inside me on an unrestrained cry. He rubs my clit, and I come all over him, strangling his cock with my climax. He digs his fingers into me as he rides our joint pleasure out. We’re the loudest pairing yet, and I can’t help the noisy pants that escape. “Fuck, Dakota. I want to live inside this perfect pussy.” Tremors still subsiding, he drops a kiss to my shoulder.

Lucas lets out a low growl of refusal. His movements have slowed once more, but his fingers have tightened around his base, almost as if he’s squeezing his cock into submission.

Unsurprisingly, I’m staring at him like I can’t wait for him to be my next ride. I’m not wrung out or tired. I’m still heady with the scent of the four of us in the air. Fueled by their passionate gazes, I get to my feet and wade toward Lucas.

He waits for me, hands by his side now, with his perfect body bobbing in the small laps of water. Lucas is the most alpha during sex—and trust me, I love that about him. But something in the look he’s giving me tells me this might be my only shot to take charge.

I place my hand on his chest and move him backward before tripping him on purpose. We fall together, and he catches us gracefully, his upper half out of the water on a sandy patch beside the stream. My core aches for him, and I crawl over his body to straddle his hips.

He digs his heels into the stream, then grimaces.

“Are you okay?”

He nods his head. “Never fucking better.”

I grip his cock, lining us up before lowering myself over him. He makes a strangled growl as I clench around him. “Fuck me,” he breathes.

It isn't a demand, it's a saying, but I take it as a command, my rite of passage. I ride his dick like it will be the last ride of my life. I bounce on top of him, water splashing everywhere again.

Wyatt's hands move around my chest, cupping my heavy breasts in his rough palms. “That's right, Tits, my little cowgirl. Tame him.”

I set out on that path, but we end up taming each other. Every thrust I give him, he gives right back until we're meeting with so much earnest that I swear he's reaching parts inside me I've never felt before.

Stone tangles his fingers in my hair, making me look up at him. He drops his lips to mine, kissing me senseless while I fuck Lucas' cock. Wrapped in these three men, it's not long before I feel the inkling of a massive orgasm. It rushes forward, and I break the kiss, crying out, “I'm going to come. Yes, Lucas!”

As soon as I say his name, he drives me higher. “Come with me, Wild Girl.” Desperation laces his voice. “Fuck yes.”

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I nearly black out. Feelings sweep over me with so much force that I lose all time and place. I ride his cock, pleasure barreling at me from all sides. My cries echo around the mountains, reaching my ears the second time around as I keep clenching and clenching, prolonging both mine and Lucas' orgasm.

Lucas' face is set in concentration as he loses himself, fingers gripping my thigh painfully. When I'm finally done, Wyatt and Stone carefully move me forward until I'm slumped over their friend's rapidly rising chest.

No one speaks for a solid minute. Eventually, Wyatt says, "Next time, I want to be the caboose."

A ripple of pleasure hits me again, and I shiver over top of Lucas. "I guess the good news is there's no way they could have heard us, huh?"

The three of them chuckle. "You keep believing that," Wyatt snarks.

"So what if they do?" Lucas throws out, pulling my damp hair around my ear. "We're just four people in love." My pussy clenches again, and he groans. "Are you doing that on purpose?"

"Not even remotely. Stop saying nice things."

He locks gazes with me. "I love you, Dakota." My pussy flutters again, and he closes his eyes and moans, "Jesus hell."

I bite my lip, enjoying the mini aftershocks. "Do you think you guys broke me?"

Wyatt chuckles. “I think you might break Lucas if you don’t get off.”

My cowboy helps me to my feet before dropping a kiss to my temple. Stone tangles his fingers with mine, and we stare at each other as if we’ve already found the Wilder treasure. It’s right in our damn faces.

Lucas stands, but he comes to an abrupt halt, hissing.

“What is it?” I ask, temporarily dazed by our most recent events.

I don’t see him hop out of the stream until he falls to his ass again. I step closer. “It’s not your injuries is it? We shouldn’t have—”

“No,” he growls. “I stepped on something in the creek.”

Stone bends, fingers searching the riverbed for whatever sharp object hurt Lucas. His stare narrows as he tugs on something. “Found it but it won’t come out. It feels like metal. Wyatt, get the shovel.”

Wyatt peers down at himself. “Yeah, I’ll get right on that.”

The glare Stone gives him makes my cowboy grudgingly move toward our packs, mumbling something under his breath. I inspect Lucas’ foot, but whatever got him doesn’t appear to have broken the skin.

Wyatt comes back with the shovel, and Stone takes it from him. He drives it into the sand, pulling up wet mud and water and tossing it to the side. Wyatt, Lucas, and I move closer while Stone works until he reaches below the surface.

He removes an object from the ground, water cascading from it in rivulets that temporarily disfigure what it is.

When it comes into clear view, I gasp. “Ho-ly shit.”

It’s a lantern. Exactly like the kind we’ve been searching for.

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“No....” Wyatt exclaims in wonder.

We all stare at the item hanging off Stone’s pinky in amazement. I run toward it, splashing through the creek before taking the base in my shaking hands. I move to the bank of the stream and use the shallow water to wash away the remaining sand clinging to the metal, then set it on a nearby flat rock. In the waning light, it’s difficult to see anything other than the general shape, but I can tell it’s the kind of lantern we’re searching for. The glass is obviously long gone, and the metal is rusty and eroded, but this is the right lamp for the time period.

“Bring it to the fire,” Stone instructs. He starts striding away, still free balling it, before he seemingly remembers the state we’re all in. “Fuck. Let’s get dressed first.”

I practically fumble getting my clothes together and decide to shove my bra down my pants without putting it on. My hands still tremble as I bring our find close to the fire. Once there, I inspect every last inch of it. If it’s the lantern we’re searching for, it will have the inscription on the metal.

At least, that’s our theory.

“Do you see it?” Lucas questions. My stomach twists into knots, and Stone practically knocks me out of the way to look for himself. He brings out his phone and turns on his flashlight app. Slowly circling the rusted piece of metal, he uses the light to scour every last inch, angling the phone for different views.

The problem is, it's so corroded, evidence of it being in water for quite some time.

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Stone hands it off to Wyatt who takes his turn searching. Lucas is next, each of them handling it like it's a newborn. When we finish, we all sit back, staring at the item in varying degrees of apprehension and excitement. I bite my lip and have to tell myself to stop before I draw blood. I'm teeming with questions, with exhilaration that I need to pull back the reins on. Really, we're not even sure if Stone's theory about the three letters is actually correct, though his idea makes the most sense out of any I've heard.

"In the stream..." Stone starts, bewildered. "Is it even possible that the lantern we're looking for is there?"

I spy the trickling water in the distance. We're certainly within the area of the map we've designated as the place of interest.

"Streams change course over time," Wyatt offers. "A hundred years or more ago, it might not have been in the water."

I hold my head in my hands and start to rock. I know the treasure is real because I had the ring. But to think that the map my family has had all this time is actually usable? I can barely wrap my head around it.

I want so badly for this to be the right lantern which is why I'm keeping my mouth shut. I don't want to jump to conclusions. I don't want to be one of those treasure hunters that automatically takes a piece of possible evidence and runs with it, declaring that they now know where the treasure is without authenticating anything.

"It would explain why no one in your family had found it yet." Lucas presses his lips together in thought. "I kept thinking maybe it was under a fallen rock, but the water



works, too. What if it was there all this time, hidden in the creek bed?"

Wyatt reaches over to rub my back. "Are you okay, Tits? You're not saying anything and you're starting to scare me."

The three of them peer at me. My mouth is so dry that it takes several tries to lubricate it enough to talk. "I'm...processing," I murmur.

"We have to get a professional to clean it," Stone dictates, ever the one moving us forward. He eyes the lantern like a puzzle. "That's the only way we'll know for sure."

"And even then," Wyatt continues, "the water could've eroded the letters away."

I want to add that even then, we're only operating on the assumption that Stone's theory about the letters is correct. My stomach squeezes and nausea rolls over me. "If this is what we've been trying to find, we better be able to figure it out."

Stone gets up, runs to his pack, and brings out the maps. He returns and lays them out on the rocky, desert floor, then places small rocks on the corners so the wind doesn't whip it up. "If this is it..." Stone starts eyes widening. He stops himself a second later and breathes through his nose. He eyes us each in turn. "And I'm not saying it is... I want to do research first, but if it is—"

I point at the valley between two cliff faces. "That's where we go next. It's exactly as the map is drawn. It's why we were looking here."

Stone nods. "It would be up there."

The four of us turn to stare into the shadow-filled valley. It's pitch-black, the two cliffs blocking all the light from the moon.

Wyatt rubs my back again. “I thought you would cry from joy if we ever found this. I didn’t expect complete silence.”

“We don’t know if it is that,” I counter right away.

“I know,” he acknowledges. “It’s a lantern from the same time period, though. Right in front of us... It’s even intact for the most part. We haven’t found anything like this before. Ever,” he reinforces.

My swirling thoughts rise up like a tidal wave. I bite the knuckle of my thumb to keep it all down because there is one tragic note lifting above the others: I want my dad to be here.

How fucking fucked up is that? He’s not even my dad.

But, in a way, he kind of was, wasn’t he? You don’t have to be blood related to be family. Taking the fact that he stole me from my real family out of the equation, he’s the only family I’ve ever known. I never had a reason to think otherwise.

He told me it was okay for me to find it. He told me I deserved to.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Wyatt whispers. He gets in my face and makes me look at him. “I don’t care what it is that you’re feeling, it’s right. You hear me?”

I shake my head. Wyatt would be the first to tell me that my father was a lying sack of shit, or worse. He hates him.

And for fuck’s sake, when will I stop thinking about him as my father?

A weaning cry escapes my lips. I shove my palm over my mouth to stifle it, but Wyatt takes my hand away and holds it, pressing his fingers into me. Stone and Lucas

crowd in, too—the lantern temporarily forgotten. I feel dumb for garnering so much attention, but I just can't with the emotions barreling through me right now.

Lucas scoots behind me, moving his legs around my hips, and makes me lie back on him. He cocoons me in his warmth as Wyatt and Stone stay on either side of me.

Right now, I understand why Wyatt got drunk and went to the jail where his mother is a prisoner. I get why he wanted to be so close to her while also probably hating her guts at the same time. Feelings are fucking tricky. They don't always make sense. It's easy for me to tell Wyatt his mother is a piece-of-shit excuse of a human being for killing his father and not caring if Wyatt got in the way of the process. Just like Wyatt can tell me until he's blue in the face that my father was a fucked-up man. I get it...logically. But fuck, feelings aren't sensible, they just are.

"I need a drink," I mumble.

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Wyatt presses his lips to my shoulder and then gets up, moving toward the tent where he disappears for thirty seconds before coming back out. “Since we had extra help, I packed one of these away.” He shows off a bottle of moonshine. “Straight from the Black Licorice,” he grins, referencing the moonshine bar in town. It’s actually a really cool place. They sell all different flavors, sweet and spicy. Some that will burn your throat like you just drank a lava stream, and some that will trick you and bite you in the ass the next day.

“What kind is it?” Stone asks, grabbing the bottle from him and gazing at the label.

“Chocolate caramel. You know I like it sweet.”

Stone smiles while he twists the lid off, then he pours some back, throat moving as he swallows. He gets it down and then shakes his head a bit. “It’s got a kick but it’s damn good.”

He hands it to me, and I take a swig. It’s sweet when it hits my tongue, but when it glides down the back of my throat, it gets hot, the kick that Stone was talking about in full force. I hand it to Lucas.

“If we had cups, we could toast to this occasion,” Wyatt laments, gaze drifting toward me to see how I’m doing.

Damnit, I love this cowboy.

Lucas hands the bottle off to Wyatt, then wraps his arms around me once again. I lie back against his chest, staring at the stars. Footsteps travel around us in circles about

fifty yards out, but I block the noise of the guards and stare at the twinkling sky. The midnight-blue expanse seems bigger here, like it's waiting for us to make wishes. I can't tell you how many times my silent hope was that my dad and I would find the treasure; that he'd be the one to do something his family couldn't.

Wyatt passes the now significantly less-full bottle back to me, and I take another swallow, warming my belly, before Lucas takes it off my hands.

We sit there and drink. They don't ask what I was upset about—not because they don't care, but because I think they already know, and they don't want to force me to talk about it. I'm grateful for their silence. I can't even untangle the mess in my head, let alone try to explain it to them. It's one of those things that defies logic and understanding. My heart feels one way in one instant, then changes drastically in the next. It's like whiplash of the soul.

Whatever I may think in any given moment, Clark Wilder will always be a part of my life, and that's something I can come to grips with. Like Wyatt said, I'll allow myself to feel. I'll allow myself the thoughts—whatever they are. Even if I don't agree with them. Even if they make me want to crumble.

I lick my lips, watching the glitz above me. It's as if the stars sparkle just for us.

I may have found the lantern, Dad. I may have found it.

In my heart, I know that if there's any possible way he can watch us right now, he is. He lived and died for the treasure. He committed a heinous crime for our family's legacy. He'd do anything, including getting a front row seat up in heaven for the search.

“What do you want to do?” Stone asks, once again passing the decision making to me. It probably kills him inside, but he's trying, and I adore him for it. This gift might

even be better than any bouquet of flowers.

It only takes me a moment to come up with the answer. “We’ll leave first thing in the morning. If this is the lantern, we need to verify it ASAP, then we’ll know the route to take. If it’s not, we need to know that, too, so we can keep searching.”

“But tonight,” Lucas gushes, lifting the bottle of moonshine up, “let’s get a little tipsy and pretend we just found an important piece of evidence to the Wilder treasure.”

My heart thumps. It’s easy to believe when the alcohol is doing its job and deadening the stress, letting wild ideas take over. I take the bottle from him and lift it into the air. “Here’s to having sex in the stream and possibly finding the missing link. Who knew sex literally solved everything?”

Wyatt swipes the bottle of moonshine away from Stone before he can get it next. “I knew that. I literally knew that all this time.”

Footsteps approach as Wyatt gulps down more than his fair share. The good dude that Ninja is, he doesn’t avoid our gazes even though I’m positive he heard way more than he bargained for. My voice echoed and echoed and echoed.

I’m not kidding. It kept going. That’s the nature of the Superstitions. It’s science or some shit.

I giggle, happiness clinging to me. Maybe I don’t care that Ninja and Dave were an audience to our foursome because I’m starting to feel really good. Moonshine will do that to you.

Ninja tilts his head as he watches us pass the bottle around. “Having too much fun?”

I nudge the lantern with my toes, and he focuses on the piece of metal. We explained

to him the significance of this item on our way up here. Maybe we shouldn't have shared so much, but he was such a keen listener that we may have gone overboard. And obviously, Cole trusts him, so it's probably okay.

"You're shitting me?" he effuses.

I shrug, feeling giddy. "It might be."

He stares at it, mouth hanging open. The treasure will do that to you. He's already jumped on the loot train. Chuga-chuga-choo-choo. All aboard!

Lucas chuckles into my ear, and it's then I realize I said that aloud. Oh well. I have my guys around me and maybe the first piece of evidence found in well over a hundred years.

Take that, family legacy. I'm not even a Wilder and I'm going to find your shit.

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This time when we return to Jacobs Manor, we do it as winners instead of losers—also with a hell of a moonshine headache. Even with that, I can't wipe the smile off my face.

We dump our bags in the living area, and I search for Cole. The car he's been using—a standard black sedan that doesn't seem to fit him in the slightest—is in the driveway, so I know he's here somewhere. I gave him my room, knowing I can bunk with any of the others, and I'm heading that way when Wyatt chuckles, the sound deep and rich.

I turn to find him staring out at the pool, and I nearly lose it myself after I follow his gaze. Cole's lying out in the sun, pale as a fucking ghost. He's nearly a reflective surface, he's so damn white. The only color to his skin is his tats.

I squeeze in front of Wyatt to step outside, failing to contain the laugh that bubbles to the surface. I don't think I ever imagined a leader of a fucking gang literally sunbathing. It should be a meme, truly. People would laugh their asses off.

Feelin' cute. Might kill someone today...IDK.

Cole sits up from his spot on the half-moon bed, lowering his sunglasses.

"I hope to God you're wearing sunscreen," I joke.

He gives me the middle finger while he replaces his glasses. "A phone call that you were coming home would've been nice." This is directed at Ninja who's also smirking. Dave hasn't uttered a peep since he was reprimanded yesterday. Fine by



me.

Honestly, when the sun isn't glaring off him and hurting my eyes, Cole has major definition. He's got a six-pack and then some with a defined upper body. He hides it well under all that black, or maybe I didn't notice before because I'm not attracted to him.

"Well, bro," I say. "Don't you want to ask us why we're back early?"

Lucas and Stone have joined us now, so we're all clustered around the back patio by the pool. Cole inspects us. "Hmmm, you all look like death so either you got bit by something poisonous or you were drinking last night."

"Hey," I scold.

"Except for you," Cole smiles, taking back what he just said. "Everyone else looks like death, but you're stunning."

Well, that's more like it.

A smirk teases his lips. "So, I'm guessing you either got so mad you didn't find anything and you started drinking or you were drinking for a much better reason. Since you're smiling, I'm going with the second option."

I sit next to him, and he swings his feet to the ground. "We found something," I beam. "Well, we may have found something," I correct. "I don't want you to get your little gang-leader hopes up, but if you want to check it out, it's currently sitting on the coffee table in the main room."

Cole takes the towel sitting next to him and wipes the sweat from his face and torso. Then, he throws his black shirt back on, hiding most of his ink until just the dragon-

breathing flames peek out of his collar like usual. It's honestly a kickass fucking tattoo, especially now that I've gotten to see more of it.

We head into the main room, Wyatt going into the kitchen to more than likely get us some real food. We've only been gone for a day, but it's always a joy to not have to eat beans or rice or whatever else we have to cook up there just to keep satiated.

I gesture toward the lantern with a flourish. Cole takes the sunglasses from his face and narrows his eyes at it. "Hate to break it to you, baby girl, but that's a hunk of junk."

I stifle a laugh. "Well, it's not the treasure. Yet."

Ninja speaks up, "Yeah, this is the item they need to find that should take us to the treasure."

Cole gives Ninja awhat-the-fuck?scowl. I'm telling you, we could have Ninja on our side. I might even be able to ask Cole to give him up without repercussion—not that I would do that, but it goes to show the allure of the rich stuff.

"We don't really know for sure yet," Stone informs Cole. "We have to take it to a professional to get it cleaned, however, we need it done on the downlow. We'd prefer it if the person we take it to doesn't get attacked."

"Funny thing about that," Cole interjects, sitting down on the pure white sofa that somehow has stayed a brilliant white this whole time. The housekeeper they use is a rockstar, I swear. That's all there is to it. Cole's lips thin as he glares at Stone. "I sent my guys to check on the jeweler now that he's home and there was already someone there...."

"I asked him to do that," I confide. "Besides, I thought you couldn't do anything for

the jeweler?”

Cole glances away. “Yeah, well, I found myself wanting to give you an update on his health, only to find out that Jacobs here had already saved the day.”

Stone gives him a humongous smile that’s so sexy I can’t stand it. Though, I doubt Cole is having the same thoughts as me. He kind of looks like he wants to deck Stone. These two are ridiculous. Each of them wants to be the knight in shining armor when it comes to me.

“Well, you can help us with this then,” I offer, trying to break the tension between the two of them. “Stone has someone who can work on the lantern, but we need to ensure their safety, and we also don’t want to alert Lance and his team that we have a possible something.”

“Speaking of,” Wyatt starts. “Do you know if his team followed us up the mountains?”

Cole shakes his head. “I had men stationed incognito at the trailhead and no one went up after you. If they went up another way, that’s another story.”

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That's a relief, anyway. Not that we can plan on that always being the case, but I'm glad we weren't followed yesterday—which may turn out to be one of the most important trips I've ever taken up the mountain.

“So...can you help us?” I ask, lips threatening to tug into a smile. No matter how much I've told myself to not let anticipation build up, I'm useless to stop it. When something you've wanted all your life is within your reach, the sparking of hope is as inevitable as getting wet in a rainstorm.

“If it gets you one step closer and keeps you safe in the long run, I'll do anything,” Cole promises.

“I'm safe,” I tell him, eyes moving directly to Wyatt, Stone, and Lucas. With the addition of Ninja and Dave, I'm more than protected. “Promise.”

Cole stills, gaze darkening. His hands turn to fists, and the shadow that shrouds his face pulls in tight. “Please don't say that to me ever again.” Cole stands and stalks off toward the hallway.

We all watch him walk away. I blink at my guys, and they have matching looks of curiosity. Ninja and Dave avoid my stare. They glance away, focusing on the wall.

It dawns on me that something similar to this happened once before. I said almost the same thing to Cole and he lost his shit about it over the phone. “I'm going to talk to him,” I tell them, getting to my feet.

Lucas speaks up. “Wild Girl, are you sure?” He stares at the hallway as if he doesn't

think that's the best idea right now.

"I'm sure," I tell him. Cole looks scary as fuck, and I'm not saying he can't be, but he checked on the jeweler for me while we were gone—and he's done nothing but try to protect me since he came into my life. If that doesn't truly reflect the kind of person he is, then I don't know what will.

I find Cole in my room, sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. "Got sick of sitting outside?" I ask, my poor attempt at breaking the ice.

He startles, then glares at the empty space behind me. "I'm glad I pay my guards so well. They're really on the ball," he snarks.

"You really need guards for me?" A painful tug twists my gut. "I can leave."

Cole shakes his head. "No, I'm just...fucking lost in a memory. That's all. It's not about you really."

I sit on the edge of the bed. "You want to talk about it?"

"No, but if you're anything like Charlie, I'm guessing you don't give a fuck."

I shrug. "Yeah, I guess I am." It's odd to hear him talk about my brother like that. I wonder if genetics really does tie people together? It's not just that you're brought up the same, but that DNA makes you share similar traits. It's a fascinating idea if you ask me.

I wait in silence for a little while, but when it stretches out for as long as I can stand it, I say, "You freaked out on me once before when I said that word—the one I'm not supposed to say to you anymore. Do you want to tell me why?"

Cole blows out a breath, standing from the bed with his fists clenched and moving to the dresser where the box of my family's things still sits. I haven't opened it yet, and I wonder if he has. "You have a right to know, so I'll tell you," he hedges. His leader of the Dragons persona is back in full force. His skin is taut, jaw feathering from the tension building in his body. The darkness in the room seems to close in with the morphing of his mood.

A hollow drum of apprehension beats a rhythm in my heart as I wait for him to go on. "Promise...." he whispers. "It's what Charlie said to me right before he got shot."

He sighs while I hug my hands to myself. "It was a routine job passed down from the big boss. These guys we went to see owed money for some drugs that had passed hands or something," Cole tells me, the tenor of his voice as if he's speaking straight out of a daydream. "We were to go in there and rough them up a bit, make sure they knew the Dragons meant business. Usually, people hand over the money when we show up. We were like enforcers at the time. Some of the best, actually.

"Nothing seemed wrong until we got to the place and the people who owed the Dragons were not run-of-the-mill fucking miscreants on the street. They were packing their own heat, which we were never informed of ahead of time. They opened fire right away." He turns and pulls his shirt up, showing off two puckered scars on his abdomen. "I got hit." He lowers his shirt. "We were making our way the fuck out of there, calling for backup, and I looked at Charlie and knew he was in way worse shape than me. I told him not to fucking die on me, and he said... 'promise.'" He side-eyes me, and even though his vibe says scary as fuck, he pulls at my heartstrings. "It's funny how one word can bring you right back to something you wish you could forget."

"Yeah," I choke out, moved by his story. I don't know if it's because I can see the pain it gives Cole or if I'm mourning the loss of a brother I never met. "I wish I could have known him."

The corner of Cole's lips pull up. "Well, look in the mirror and pretend to be a boy. There, you got Charlie."

"Is that the real reason why you don't want to fuck me?" I tease. "Because I look like your best friend?"

He pretends to gag. "That and I'm pretty sure the fucker would find a way to come back and kick my ass for it." He flashes me a smile. "Plus, it seems like you have enough boyfriends."

"Ha. Ha," I remark right back to him. "Don't knock the harem life until you try it."

He rolls his eyes. "Jesus, one woman would be all I could handle."

I tilt my head. "I mean finding a girl you share with more than one dude."

"I'd shank their fucking asses." When I laugh, he doesn't laugh back. "I'm not kidding. I'd kill someone who so much as thought of touching what was mine. They wouldn't be able to breathe another fucking day." He smiles. "Not that I blame you for having your own. More power to you and all that shit, but I'm way too fucking possessive of my woman to share her."

"You got a girl?" I'd be shocked to learn that. I don't know why.

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He laughs. “No, not at all. Surprisingly, people are afraid of me.”

“I think it’s the tattoos and the guns and the fact that you have guards keeping you safe 24/7. I mean, that’s my best guess. It’s like a billboard saying No Fucking Thank You.”

“Fuck off.” He grins at me, and I love the easy banter between us. He heads toward the door. “Now, let’s get your shit handled before anything else bad happens.”

17

Stone’s guy works for a college in Phoenix, and he’s able to pull some strings so the archaeology professor will see us right away. We place the lantern in a box and surround it with bath towels, and that’s how we transport the single most important artifact Wilder treasure hunters have found in a hundred years.

At least they’re really soft towels, likely purchased from a high-end boutique if I know Stone.

Cole tells us he has something else to do, but he sends four guards with us—none of them are Dave. When I ask Cole about that, he tells me it’s gang business. Ninja’s hiding a smirk though, so I wouldn’t be surprised if the mouthy guard got himself demoted. Or put on some sort of leave for making comments he shouldn’t have. I guess I’ll never know since they’re so tight-lipped about it.

Ninja and his new partner—I’m not sure if I should try to remember his name—scare the shit out of the working professor once we get to his upstairs lab. The two burly



dudes move in to clear the room, hands on the guns hiding in their waistbands as if they could pull them out at a moment's notice if they needed to. They're not trying to hide anything, and I don't complain because they afford us the privacy of being with the archaeologist alone in his preservation room and the peace of mind knowing that he's not going to end up like the jeweler.

This guy, I really like. His name's Nevin, and he lifts a brow at us as soon as the muscle leaves. "Now, I'm intrigued." He's pushing mid-life crisis age, and is suave in that dorky, intelligent kind of way. He's very sure of himself, which makes me think he's probably smarter than I'll ever be.

Lucas takes the box and places it on a steel table, the only flat surface in the room that doesn't have pieces of equipment or plastic containers or Ziploc bags stored on top of it. He must have cleared the area for us.

"Any context I should be aware of?"

Stone shakes his head. We're here under assumed names again. We're not taking any chances, and we're definitely not saying a word about the treasure. No one but descendants of the Wilder family would know we were even searching for a lantern to show us the next step in the hunting journey, but that doesn't mean we should announce that we're here about gold and jewels either. That would be asking for trouble. The not-so-cloak-and-dagger routine with the guards won't help us fly under the radar, but we also want to make sure we don't drag the professor into our problems either. It's a trade-off.

"The artifact," Stone starts, the area between his eyes pinching, "...is highly important to us. We're searching for a possible inscription on the object, as we've been told uncovering it will denote it as a family heirloom."

Nevin gives us a tight smile. I'm not sure if Stone is trying to pass us off as family

members, but if he is, Wyatt should probably stop touching my ass. Even so, the half-truth works for me, and I'm kind of impressed by my blond hottie right now.

“Alright, let's see what we got. Do you know how old the object is?” He holds out his hand, waiting.

Lucas gently unwraps our find. In the bright light of the fluorescents, the lamp really does resemble a hunk of junk, just like Cole said. A thin, rusted-out circle sits atop the lantern, which couldn't be more than four inches in diameter. A hook would've attached to it to hang in the cave, but that's long gone. Off the circle is a flat top that bevels out. When new, glass would've contained the area that held the flame. Now, however, three strips of metal connect the bottom to the top. The cylindrical base has a square cutout where the fuel would've been fed through to light the flame.

The body is misshapen in some areas from oxidation and dirt that we couldn't quite get off for fear it would hurt the relic.

“Ahh,” Nevin croons as soon as he sees it. “Mining lamp circa late 1800's. She's in good shape.”

Ha. I'm going to file that compliment away to tell Cole when we get back.

“A piece like this would've been made with tin and some copper. In fact, these”—he points to the connecting pieces—“would've been constructed with either alloy depending on the exact year this was made.”

He brings down the glasses he had sitting atop his head, placing them on the bridge of his nose. “So, you say there's possibly an inscription of some kind?” He turns the lantern in a circle like we all did when we first got our hands on it. “Do you know where?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Stone confirms.

“I’ll have to be careful when cleaning, then,” he explains, lips thinning as he gets down to business. “Please take any available seats around the room, but I’m going to have to ask you not to touch anything. I’ll start the process.”

Wyatt meets my gaze and smirks now that Nevin has gone into his professor-like persona.

You wouldn’t think that watching someone painstakingly polish an artifact would be fascinating, but it is. He does an overall cleansing with a white cloth, rubbing a clear liquid over it. I’m curious about his process, but I stay mute, not wanting to bother him as he works. The sooner we get answers, the better.

Next, he arranges three glass jars beside the lantern, each no longer than my thumb and containing some sort of liquid. He dips a Q-tip into the farthest one, then delves into the nooks and crannies. Rust colored debris slowly stains the pristine white swabs.

When only the base is left to clean, I walk toward the table to watch him closely. All of us have been gravitating that way the more the real lantern is revealed. Anticipation builds until it feels like a hundred ants are crawling around inside my stomach.

My feet pinch from standing as the work drags on. One section takes him a half hour to uncover, and when he finishes, there are no score marks. The antique is cleaning up well despite its age and being in the elements all these years. Sure, the metal is pocked and discolored, but when Nevin finishes, it’ll be easy to imagine this in my ancestor’s hands while walking up the Superstitions.

I’m so caught in my own head that I don’t notice the pure concentration that’s

crossed Nevin's face until Stone tangles his fingers with mine and squeezes. I snap out of it, leaning over the table for a closer look. "Did you find something?"

He runs a Q-tip over one spot, and my heart nearly trips over itself when I see a definite score mark in the metal. It's faint and could very well be a scratch, but it's a noticeable blemish.

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Nevin takes his white cloth that isn't so white anymore and polishes the area he's focusing on. "It certainly seems like there might be something here." He bites his lower lip as he throws out the Q-tip and grabs a fresh one, dabbing it in the clear liquid that's closest to the lantern. Flecks of oxidation come off as he scrubs it harder than I think he should. My heart leaps into my throat, and Stone and I tighten our grips on one another. It's so tense in the room that the clicking on and off of the A/C system sounds like a bomb. Outside, students' voices waft up to the third floor where we wait to see if what we surmise is actually true.

I'm so excited I could pee. And actually, I don't think it's all from excitement because we've been here for hours. Hunger gnaws at me, too, but I block out everything except the brushes Nevin makes on the lantern. "N, I think," he murmurs, surprising us all.

I drop Stone's hand and join the archaeologist on the other side of the table. He points with his pinky, marking the strokes of the N just over the surface. "Holy shit...." I grip the metal edge for support.

Nevin chuckles. "I guess. Yes." He starts on the next section. "L? I'm not sure yet." His eyes are sharp, laser focused as he works.

I grin up at the guys who are too busy staring at the archaeologist's hands to notice. Honestly, we could probably stop right here. We have the proof, right? He said N. An L could definitely be the start of an E.

On the other hand, we need to be sure. We need to see the proof with our own eyes.

Twenty minutes later, Nevin has that area as clean as he's going to get it. His guess is that it says NCL because the middle stroke inside the E is worn, and the C of the third letter is very square, but we know exactly what it says: NEC.

I'm teeming with pride as I stare at the lantern. He sprays it with a chemical that will help keep it preserved, then, gives us plastic to wrap it in before placing it back in the box.

My knees weaken as he and Stone move to the corner to conduct business. I don't trust myself to hold onto the box, so when Lucas tries to hand it to me, I take a step back and shake my head. I'm too jittery, and my legs feel like butter. I'll hate myself if I drop it. Wyatt grabs it instead, hooking it under his arm like a football, which gives me greater anxiety. But I trust him to hold on to it. I mean, I think I do.

Stone throws his arm around me when he's finished, and we walk out of the college lab, a breath held in my chest. I expel it as soon as we're in the hallway, but almost immediately suck another one in when Stone lifts me in the air and spins me around. He holds me to him, grasping me so tightly I can't breathe. His sunshine and paper scent that's so uniquely him fills my nostrils.

"You were right," I tell him, almost not believing it myself. All those years my father and I had the map, and we believed something completely different. If I hadn't teamed up with them, I don't know where I would be right now.

"I'm just glad I could prove to you that it was worth taking us on."

I chuckle, then pull away and stare him down. "I knew that before we saw the inscription."

"Well?" Ninja queries as Stone and I enjoy our little celebration.

“Dude, we got it,” Lucas informs him. The pure joy in his voice pulls at my heartstrings.

The unmistakable sound of a high five echoes through the corridor, and I turn in time to see Ninja’s cheeks flaming as he returns to the stoic guard he’s supposed to be.

Lucas lifts his eyebrows as he turns to me, then holds his arms out. I run into them, and he bear hugs me, his chest rumbling. “I think we make a great team.”

“The best.”

“I’d hug you,” Wyatt interrupts, “but I’m holding something pretty damn important. By the way, does anyone have to pee as badly as I do?”

Lucas squeezes me one last time before letting me go. “Thanks for ruining the moment, Longhorn.”

Ninja and the newcomer wait for us outside the bathrooms at the end of the hall. I hurry because I can’t wait to get back home. I can’t wait to get back in the mountains. We have to put together a new plan, decide where we’re going next, what we’re searching for. All of the treasure information in my head is a tangle of knots that I need to weed through and make sense of.

I wash my hands and am about to exit when Wyatt and Stone’s raised voices filter through the huge wooden door. “You should’ve fucking told us.”

“I was handling it,” Stone growls.

“You don’t need to do everything your-fucking-self. Jesus, dude. How long have we been friends?”

“I didn’t want her to know,” Stone seethes.

Oh, well, I can’t let that go, can I? What other ‘her’ could he be talking about?

I push the door open and place my hands on my hips. “You didn’t want me to know what?”

Several female students walk past the guys, and I can’t help but notice their lingering gazes. Lucas is leaning against the wall with his head propped up by the cream-painted cement blocks, glaring skyward. Tension slithers around us, and Ninja and his new partner are definitely avoiding the situation.

“Thanks,” Stone deadpans, glaring at Wyatt. “She already has enough to worry about.”

I dart my gaze around them. “If it’s about you, then I need to be involved.”



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“I was waiting to say something until I figured out a solution. That’s all.” He moves forward, concern filling his tight expression. He and I have been through this before. When will he learn that he doesn’t have to be my knight in shining armor?

Ninja clears his throat, nodding toward the hallway that’s now filling with students. “I don’t want to break this up, but it would be better if we left.”

As much as I want to have this conversation with Stone right now, Ninja’s right. My chest tightens as we head down to the parking lot. Ninja upgraded to a huge SUV, making me think the Dragons must have unlimited dollars to spend. I wait until we’re all in the vehicle to eye each of them. “Okay. Now.”

Stone turns in his seat, grabbing my hand. “One of the accounts my father took me off of was tied to the house. He legally owns it.” He swallows, pain washing over his features.

“He’s evicting us, Dakota.”

18

Ninja pulls around the circular driveway, kicking up tiny pebbles as he locks the brakes. I haven’t said a word to Stone since he told me the news and informed me that the Chief of Clary Police was currently at the house, trying to get Cole to leave. Cole must have been the one to tell Ninja to get us here as quickly as possible, and I’m thankful for it.

I love this house. It’s not just walls and windows with a spectacular view, at least not

to me. This is the first place that ever really felt likehome. I have my own room. I have my own thoughts and decisions. Within these four walls, there is so much love, and the idea of Lance taking that—of him stealing another thing away from me and making his son homeless—makes me want to shank his ass. Stone, Wyatt, and Lucas even lived here as a family before they brought me into it, and look what Lance is trying to do to them. It's fucked up.

I get out of the car and march right up to Lionel. When he sees me coming, he glances away, and I hope by the grace of sanity that he feels remotely bad about the last altercation we had when my house blew up. He called the destruction a gas leak for fuck's sake. Just because it worked out for the better doesn't make it right. Now, he's trying to take another house from me.

His jaw feathers. "Hello, Dakota."

"Lionel." When he was telling me they had to call off the search for my father, I didn't push. I didn't argue. Because to me, it was just another example of this town letting me down. Now, though, I'm not keeping quiet. I don't know if it'll make any difference, but I'm sure as hell not going to sit back and take it. "What's going on?"

"It's a private matter."

"Oh, as private as a gangster blowing up my house and you calling it a gas leak?"

He swallows hard but has the decency to look properly scolded. I'm sure he doesn't get paid very much to be the Chief. Money is most likely an enticement for him, but he's on the police force to protect the people he serves, not watch out for himself.

"Yeah, that was wrong." Cole tsks from the front walk. "You shouldn't have done that."

I turn my glare on him. I kind of want to hit my new friend upside the head at this moment.

Lionel nearly splutters, eyes bulging out as he gazes in surprise at the leader of the Dragons. “I—”

Stone pulls me aside and drops his voice. “Legally, the house is my father’s. He can do whatever he wants with it.”

“It’s not right,” I fume. I’m sick of everyone taking everything from me; of making decisions for me while I have to ride the wave of consequences. I don’t care if it is Lance’s house on a technicality, it sours.

“It isn’t,” Stone growls. “I’m as pissed off as you, but this is what my father does. I defied him, so he’s going to hit me where it hurts. I’ve offered to buy it from him, but he won’t sell it to me. We’ve been communicating through lawyers for a few days.”

Cole, who’s been standing close enough to listen in on our conversation, barks out, “You should’ve fucking told me, rich boy.”

“Why? So you can save everything again? I want to provide for Dakota.”

“Then fucking do it,” Cole snaps at him. “Man up and handle this shit.”

Stone marches toward Cole, back ramrod straight, but Ninja steps in front of him before he even gets close. “Not today, kid.” He crosses his arms and stares down at Stone with thin lips.

Stone changes direction now that the hunk of muscle is in his way. He strides toward Lionel, and with each step, his shoulders bunch. By the time he gets to him, an icy shiver runs down my spine. They stand toe-to-toe, noses almost touching. “I’ll have

your job if you don't leave right now," he threatens. "I have proof that you took money from this miscreant—"

"Hey," Cole protests lamely, crossing his arms. But underneath it all, his lips are slightly turned up as he watches the scene in front of him

"—and falsified police records. I'll make sure you never get a position in the police force again, here or anywhere. I'll ruin your name. You'll be blacklisted all over the country. You'll be followed from this point forward. I'll know everything you do or are thinking of doing, and I'll make you pay. Don't think I will? Test me."

Lionel's face turns a smarmy red. His eyes narrow to beady, black pupils, but an undercurrent of fear leaks from him as potent as preteen cologne. I can smell the horror on him, and so must Stone. He knows he has him. Lionel clears his throat. "I guess you have residency rights. You deserve some time to prepare for eviction."

What a slimy bastard. As my father used to say: He doesn't know his ass from a hole in the ground.

He's pathetic.

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Cole starts forward, but Stone holds out his hand, stopping him. Instead, he takes a step closer to Lionel. “How much did he pay you to come here, huh? How much did he give you to threaten us? You should know that my father isn’t the only Jacobs who can fight dirty. You hurt my family again and you’ll find out he’s the least of your worries, Chief.”

Lionel’s lips thin. He’s buzzing with his own anger now. I watch the exchange, a pinch in my chest. I don’t want Stone to have to do that, but on the other hand...I might also be super turned on at seeing him stick up for us—for me.

Lionel spins on his heel and walks toward his cruiser. He thought he could intimidate us into leaving. He believed the power of the guy behind him would scare us, but I think we—well, Stone—have shown him we won’t just roll over and let him do what he wants.

Chief Lionel leaves without looking back, turning at the end of the driveway toward Clary. In a way, I feel sorry for him. None of us want outsiders to get pulled into this mess, but we’re certainly not going to let people bully us either.

Stone turns, hands clenched to fists at his sides. Nostrils flaring, he focuses on all of us, and some of the unease lifts from him when his gray-blue eyes settle on me.

“I’m impressed,” Cole states.

Stone growls. “Fuck you.”

Undeterred, Cole keeps speaking. “I wasn’t sure you had it in you, but that’s exactly

the type of person Dakota needs in her corner for life.” His discerning stare passes over all of us, lingering on Wyatt, Lucas, and Stone. He nods as if he’s just accepted something. “The hunk of junk?”

Stone’s still too busy trying to wrangle his emotions in, so I inform him, “We found the inscription.”

The gangster smiles—a true, genuine one that lifts the darkness from his face. “That’s great, Dakota. I’m happy for you.”

He pulls Ninja and the new guard to the side, leaving us alone. We walk into our house, and Wyatt sets the box on the coffee table. I wrap my arms around Stone’s stiff form from behind. “Thank you,” I tell him. His corded muscles pull tight until he realizes it’s me.

Turning, he grips my hips. “I told you I’m making a life with you, and I won’t let him take our home away from us.”

I peer into his eyes, and it’s as if he knows how important this house is to me without me ever having said a word. I don’t think it’s only me either. Wyatt and Lucas are looking around as if they could’ve lost something extraordinary. Our relationship began here. They wormed themselves into my heart surrounded by these walls. We worked toward a common goal, and somewhere along the way, I found where I was supposed to be.

“Lucas,” Stone whispers as he cups my chin. “Lock the door. I’m going to sit Dakota on the bar, in our house, and we can take turns eating her perfect pussy. I don’t think Cole wants to walk in on that.”

Wyatt smirks like the devil himself. He and Stone undress me while Lucas locks the door, effectively making Cole wait this out as their tongues tease me into submission

more than once. More than a few times, actually.

Then, when I can't even stand on my own two legs, Lucas lifts me from the island, wrapping me up like I'm the historical relic, and we hide the evening away in Stone's room, sharing our love with each other in our house, under our roof. Together.

\* \* \*

It turns out, we do our best treasure planning naked. At some point, Stone leaves to get the maps from his hiking pack. He brings them to his room and spreads them out on the floor while we gather around.

It's obvious we have to go up the valley next and follow the trail that slithers between upside-down V's that most definitely symbolize mountains. The squares and X's are the only characters we have yet to figure out. Maybe they're entrances to mines? Maybe they're other landmarks but we won't know that until we look for ourselves?

Knowing we're on the right track makes me itch to leave and figure it all out.

"We still don't know the scale." With those few words, Stone brings me back to reality. Kneeling in his boxer-briefs, he's damn near delectable. Part of me wants to crawl over him again, forget about the treasure, and focus on something I can find right now: Another orgasm at his hands. That journey is quicker and much more enjoyable.

Lucas elbows me. "Down, Wild Girl. We need to recover from earlier."

"Speak for yourself," Wyatt gibes.

The look he gives me has me squeezing my legs together, but... "Lucas is right. This is important." I stare back at the map because that's the only safe focus right now.

“One thing we haven’t talked about is how Lance is going to retaliate since we didn’t leave the house.”

Stone finally glances up. “With an ex-military team at his disposal, it won’t be pretty.”

“You should make sure your mom is safe.” I still don’t particularly care for the woman, but she is the mother of one of the men I love.

“I have her in a safe house being watched 24/7.”

“And you have the money for that?” I bite my lip, not positive he’ll be honest with me. We got investors for the treasure, but that doesn’t mean we have money for his mom’s surveillance. That isn’t treasure related at all.

Often, I’ve lamented growing up with no money. I was always constantly reminded that I was the poor girl, and that feeling is coming back to me with a vengeance now—like a noose around my throat, tightening and tightening.

I used to think Stone was invincible because he had money at his disposal, but I don’t know if that’s the case anymore.



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“I’m taking care of it,” Stone promises, meeting my eyes briefly. “Trust me.”

I squeeze his bicep. “I do, but you also wouldn’t want me to worry if you didn’t.”

“I’ve got money, too,” Wyatt offers, switching his gaze between all of us.

Stone grits his teeth. “That’s your inheritance, and it’s supposed to go toward your ranch. I’m fine,” he seethes.

“It’s there, anyway.” Wyatt refuses to growl back at his friend, even though I can see the muscles poke out of his arms. “You are my family. What better way to spend it?”

Lucas leans over and kisses my temple. He brushes his lips against my skin until he reaches my ear. “Rich people,” he grouses, sighing.

I hold back a smile. I don’t know what it feels like to have a lot of money, but I’ve been dreaming about it my whole life. Finding the treasure was always the reward after a long journey. To think we’re one step closer than my father got makes me believe I can actually attain it.

“Since your father has the ring, he can also research Maria Luisa. He’ll know what we’ve been able to figure out, too.” Uncovering her story has been interesting. It turns out, the Spanish monarchy was trying to move gold and jewels to Mexico when this area flooded. Not a lot is said in the history books about where they left the horde, only that it was in a huge mountain range high enough to avoid the increasing waters.

“If you ask me,” Lucas starts, “placing the cache inside one of those cliff faces in the valley seems likely. Since they were dealing with rain and flood waters, they would’ve wanted to place it somewhere with elevation. We already know that Dakota’s family discovered it in their mining cave. Maybe no one else stumbled upon it because it was a tricky spot to get to.”

Stone turns toward his friend. “You want to scale the cliff face?”

“Well, first I want to scour the area to see if there are openings in the rock. I say if we find any caves along these walls”—he points to the valley in the map—“we check all of them.”

“It’s a sheer face,” I remind him. “How in the hell are we going to do that?”

Wyatt shrugs. “We’re rock climbers. We took lessons for this very reason.”

“You’re shitting me.”

Stone grins. I should’ve known this is something they would do. Rock climbers go up the mountains all the time, but I’ve always watched them like they were crazy. I’m perfectly fine with my feet firmly planted on the ground.

“It’s safe,” Lucas tells me, letting his fingers whisper down my spine.

Yeah, sure, and so is treasure hunting. We all know that’s a freaking lie.

But what they’re saying makes sense. If the cave was easy to find, someone would’ve already stumbled upon it by now.

“Rock climbing it is,” I mumble, even though my stomach twists at the idea. I’m going to have to suck it up, though. No way am I going to be the only one on the

ground while they head up the rock face searching for my treasure.

19

Somehow, Lucas and I are able to escape Ninja the next day to go to a rock climbing facility in Leedsville. I figured I should probably get some instruction before throwing myself into it, even though every hour we're not on the treasure's trail makes me antsy as fuck.

My family's legacy is always a hum under the surface of my skin, something that's helped propel me forward. And right now, I can feel it vibrating. I wonder if this is how my dad felt all the time?

I shake my head. I refuse to think about him today because I need to focus.

"Ready?" the instructor asks. He's the same age as Lucas and me with red stubble along his jaw.

I step into the harness and pull it up. He helps hook me in and then grabs the end of the rope as I stare at the colored foot- and handholds that are spaced haphazardly up the wall and plot my course to the top. Lucas is already halfway up the angular wall. Seeing him work gives me courage. I'm not afraid of climbing this here, but I'm trying to envision doing this out in the mountains where there are no safety nets or pretty colored ledges or a beginner's track I can start out on. That is intimidating.

I approach the wall, rubbing my hands together, then place my left foot on the first hold, grab two other holds with my hands, and hoist myself in the air. As I get going, moving between ledges and pulling myself higher, excitement fills me.

Lucas calls out, and I glance up to find him at the top already. "You dick!"

He laughs, throwing his head back. “I was just going to say you look like you’re having fun.”

“I am having fun,” I hiss, speeding up. There’s no way I cannot make it to the top now.

However, just as I think I’m getting into a groove, I hit a snag. The instructor below starts calling out different ways I can make it out. I have to reach toward one ledge and trust I’ll be able to hold onto it while I get my feet on two supports. Easy, right? I swallow down the butterflies in my stomach and make the leap. My fingers clench onto the hold, but immediately start to slip. I scramble, trying to gain purchase on a foothold, but eventually, I fall back.

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I panic for about point three seconds until I feel the safety engage, and then I'm being held up by the miracle of straps and ropes. I kick off the rock face, pissed that I didn't make it.

Lucas careens past me and hits the ground in a superhero stance that I'm secretly super jealous of. As soon as my feet touch the ground, I glare at him. "Remind me why we didn't start my training on this earlier?"

He comes over, still connected to the hoists and wraps a piece of hair around my ears. "You're so cute when you're frustrated and mad."

"Obviously I'm not doing it correctly, then," I half growl, frowning at him.

His smile only widens. "Oh, you're doing it correctly, I just happen to find you cute all the time, Wild Girl."

I push away from him before he can steal a kiss and return to the wall. The instructor stands at my side and shows me how I got stuck, telling me a better path to take next time. I analyze it, using imaginary moves to track the path and see where I made the mistake.

Rock climbing is fun, but I am doing this for a purpose.

I start off again, and this time, I make it to the top. Lucas is already up there, one leg swung over the side. He beams at me. "I knew you could do it."

I peer down where my instructor is smiling and giving me a thumbs up. "Yeah, but

the actual rock we're talking about climbing is three times the length of this and doesn't have any fancy safety equipment."

"Well, just because the face is that tall doesn't mean the cave is going to be at the very top." He gives me a placating grin. "This is only a precaution because we know damn well if we find the cave and you don't get to go in it, you're going to be super pissed. We want to prevent that from happening."

"Aw, you know me so well," I tease. I would never forgive myself if we actually found the treasure and I couldn't bring it out myself. "Race you down?" I throw myself over the edge and grin through the split seconds of weightlessness until the bands pull taut. When I swing closer to the rock, I kick off and land on my feet, replicating Lucas' superhero squat.

My instructor gives me a high five. After telling me what I did great and what I need work on, he suggests trying the first path I failed to see if I can complete it.

I accept his challenge and climb the wall until I get to my stuck point. This time, I make the jump, squeeze my fingers with all my might and flail around until my foot hits something solid. It's more luck than anything else, but at least I make it to the top this time.

After I conquer the intermediary course, Lucas and I take a small break. We've been here all day, and my body is starting to feel it. My thighs are killing me, but most of all, my fingers are sore from the strain. Joints I didn't realize I had ache from all the gripping I'm doing.

Lucas takes my hand and starts massaging my fingers. The round table we're sitting at in the middle of the wide-open space gives us great views of other climbers. A couple of guys scale the expert level course—which has portions that stick out almost horizontally from the floor and then jut back in again. That's the section that

resembles the Superstitions in real life. I gulp, hoping we won't find a cave worth scaling seated above something like that.

"Can you do that one?" I ask Lucas, gesturing toward the incredibly difficult section with my chin. Just as I do, the bell rings out at the top of the course and the person below calls out the climber's time.

"Yeah, I've done it," Lucas shrugs. "Honestly though, we've all gotten out of practice. Other things seemed like a better use of our time."

My chest squeezes. "Is that so?"

He leans forward, nuzzling my cheek to whisper, "Way better. Much more fun. Much more...satisfying."

"Are you trying to seduce me in the middle of a rock climbing facility?" I tease, the thought of it turning me on.

"What do you expect? I've been staring at your ass in that harness all day."

"Tell you what...." I bite my lip. "You climb the expert level track and I'll make it worth your while," I singsong.

Shadows fall over Lucas' face, making his honey-brown eyes spark. "In what way?"

"I'll sleep in your room tonight," I offer.

"Consider it done."

He pulls me in for a quick kiss, then shoves a granola bar toward me. "You should eat."

I pull my phone out of my bag while taking a bite. “I’m surprised we haven’t heard from Wyatt and Stone all day.”

Lucas glances away, avoiding my gaze. He’s done that every time I’ve brought them up. “I’m sure they’re just planning our next trip.”

I frown at him. They’re keeping something from me—I think. It may not necessarily be something bad, but the look on Lucas’ face and the way he checks his phone makes me wary.

In the next moment, he grins, easing my worries. His demeanor smooths out some of the tension gathering in the pit of my stomach. If there was something wrong, we wouldn’t be here. “You ready to watch me knock this out of the park?”



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“You bet,” I tell him, shoveling the rest of the granola bar in my mouth and following him to the other side of the facility. He hooks his harness up, then starts. He’s light on his feet, and his upper body is super strong. If he had his shirt off, he’d be a masterpiece right now—dimples of his lower back on full display, rippling muscles that firm and tighten as he climbs.

He scales the wall like an ape, swinging toward the difficult section with no problem at all. He rings the bell, and the worker at the bottom calls out his time. When Lucas returns to the ground, the employee says, “Nice, man. Quickest time today.”

Lucas raises his eyebrows at me. “I guess that means I should get an extra special gift.”

I shake my head, smiling the entire time. Lucas and I turn in our harnesses and start for the door. He checks his phone again. I happen to spot the restrooms off to the side—several co-ed ones with dark blue doors—and an idea quickly takes shape. They’re nice and private, and I did promise him something special.

I tug on his hand, and he holds back when I reach for the door to the last bathroom. “What are you....”

“Shh,” I scold, smiling from ear-to-ear as I shove him into the room and lock the door behind us.

His eyes widen as I move his back against the door and sneak my hands under his shirt, fingertips smoothing across his overworked muscles. He groans when I tweak his nipple. “Is it time for my prize, Wild Girl?” he asks in that rich voice of his.

I reach up on my tiptoes to kiss him silent. He moans into my mouth while my hands work back down again, cupping his ass and moving him toward the ache in my core. He's already hardening in his shorts.

He breaks away, eyes glimmering with mischief. "You want my cock that badly?"

I nod, squeezing my legs together. My panties dampen from his words.

Even though we're in a restroom, it's the type you'd find in a private residence. Bath & Body Works soap sits on a marble counter with an undermount sink. A box of tissues rests on another ledge with a vase of beautiful flowers. There's even a wicker bench off to the side.

I yank his shirt up and drop to kiss his abs, making my way down to swirl my tongue along his belly button, tasting his salty skin.

"What's my prize, Wild Girl?" he coaxes, shoving his fingers into my hair as I trail lower.

I work on removing his shorts. "Me."

He grins. "I already knew that. You're my number one prize. But I want you on your knees with those lips wrapped around my stiff cock."

I stroke him through his boxers, my palm riding over his hard ridges as he leans his head against the door, hips moving in time with my movements. "God, Dakota, every time you touch me...." He works his fingers through my hair, squeezing at the nape of my neck before pushing me lower.

I reach for the bench, snagging a sage green cushion off the top and throwing it on the floor below me to save my knees. I drag his boxers down with me until the head of

his cock is straining toward my lips. I lick the tip, moaning at the salty taste in my mouth.

He fists his base and, still with a hand at my nape, nudges my mouth. "Open up for me, baby."

I do what he demands, and he slides himself all the way in as I use my tongue to lick down his length.

"Fuuuuck," he growls. "Yes, give me some more of that." A knock sounds on the door, and Lucas calls out, "Occupied." He forces my head back around him, careful not to choke me. He knows my limits, but he wants to be in charge, too. When he's like this, I get so turned on I can barely stand it.

I replace his hand with my own, moving him toward me while he tightens his hold, rocking into me.

I moan, heat swirling from my core like a rushing wave.

"I love those noises you make when you're sucking my cock." He takes charge again, moving me over him. "Touch yourself. I want to hear it."

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I snake my hands under the waistband of my pants and find my clit through my panties. I moan over his cock as I rub my bundle of nerves.

"More," Lucas demands, his pace steady. I flick across my clit, increasing the pressure until I'm sucking Lucas' cock with abandon. "Jesus Christ," he groans. "You're so fucking good at this."

I'm lost in my own world of pleasure. I quicken my movements, and I swear I've

given my fingers too much of a workout today because they cramp like crazy, but it's so worth it. My orgasm builds from the base of my spine, spiraling outward. I coax it forward, my lips pressing harder against Lucas' stiff cock while my hand trembles over my point of pleasure. Rising and rising, my toes curl just as I reach my climax.

I cry out, the sound a muffled, waning moan because of the dick occupying my mouth.

"Fuck. Yes," Lucas pants. He rocks forward three more times, tremors overtaking him. I stop playing with my clit to cup his balls, and that's when he loses it, hot cum hitting the back of my throat. The strangled cry he gives sounds surprised as he holds me on his spasming cock until I swallow every last drop. I lick him from base to tip on his removal, and when I sit back, he stays leaning against the bathroom door, involuntary tremors running through him.

When he calms down, he tucks his dick away, pulls up his shorts, and yanks me to my feet. "That's only a prelude to tonight," he promises wickedly, growling.

We take a moment to clean up until his phone rings. Despite the fact that he's eye-fucking me through the mirror, he reaches for his phone immediately. "Hey."

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His face falls. He meets my eyes again in the mirror, and a solid plate of ice forms in my stomach.

Whatever it is, it's not good.

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The sound that comes out of my mouth can only be described as a screech. A squawk. Something almost inhuman. Have you ever watched a video where a woman completely loses her shit, but it's entirely justified because the people around her are insane? Yeah. That's me when I find out what the worried look was on Lucas' face.

I am the squawker, and I'm about to sharpen my talons.

"You did what?" I seethe.

Stone's lying on the white couch that isn't so white anymore. Droplets the color of dried blood pepper the surface like a crime scene. And it actually is a crime scene. Stone's been shot but "not to worry because it's just a nick."

That last sentiment was from Cole, and in all actuality, he might know what he's talking about but that doesn't mean I can't be pissed.

Stone's pale ass is refusing to look at me. His upper arm is wrapped in a bandage from his "bullet graze," the dark crimson already seeping through.

"We tried to recover the ring," Wyatt informs me, arms crossed over his chest like

it's no big fucking deal that they tracked down Stone's father when they know he's heavily guarded by an expert team of ex-military professionals.

"You forgot the part where you didn't tell me."

A smug smirk graces Cole's face. "I told you she was going to be pissed."

"You didn't tell me either," I accuse. My glare focuses on him, but it doesn't seem to have any impact whatsoever.

"I don't answer to you. Sorry, baby girl." At least his smile is apologetic in a get fucked kind of way.

He's right, though. He doesn't answer to me at all. The thing is, I know the Dragons aren't going to let anything happen to him, but my guys are a different story.

When none of them answer, I breathe in deeply, my nostrils flaring. Seeing Stone lying on the couch like this makes me sick to my stomach, but it's overpowered by rage. "I don't need the ring," I rasp. "What I need is all of you safe. You can't be safe if you go off acting like fucking macho men."

Lucas opens his mouth to say something, but I spin to face him. "And you...you lied to me all day. You let me suck your dick when you knew they were risking their lives for something so stupid."

"On that note," Cole mumbles, lifting from his position on the arm of the couch. "I'm going to see myself out of this conversation. I'll be in my room when the talk about the dick sucking stops."

Lucas crosses his arms. He waits until Cole exits the room, then says, "Just because you're mad now doesn't mean you can take back wanting to suck my cock."

Arrogant ass. The worst part is, the tilt of his head and the way he's still eye-fucking me makes me want to agree with him.

Fucking hormones.

I sit on the couch. Stone tucks his legs in so I don't sit on him, and I drop my head in my hands, thinking back to the mess I was confronted with when I went to the mansion. I can't believe they willingly went to Lance when they know he means business.

"We did it for you." Wyatt moves closer, taking Cole's spot on the arm of the couch and dragging his fingers down my spine. "You love that ring, and it belongs to you. We were hoping we'd get it, without Stone getting shot, and you'd be praising us instead of yelling."

I shake my head, my curls falling over my hands and swaying in front of me like a weeping willow.

"The only reason Lance has it is because we urged you to take it out of its hiding place to begin with." Stone finally speaks up, voice firm though a little scratchy. "It's our responsibility to get it back."

"Your responsibility to me is to be my partner. Nothing more."

"I'm not going to let my father take something from you."

I flip my hair so I can stare Stone down. "And how'd that work out?" I get to my feet. "The last thing I'll be worried about if something happens to you is what he stole from us. Are you three just too pig-headed to realize that? Maybe I'll go on a solo mission to retrieve my family's things. In fact, I think I will. I'll go have a talk with Cole about that right now." I spin on my heel, but don't make it a step before strong

arms band around me from behind.

Lucas drags me back to his chest before spinning me around. Stone is half off the couch and Wyatt is two steps away, each of them sharing matching looks of fury.

I lift my chin. “Yeah, how’d that feel?”



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“It feels like the last time you marched off without me to stop Stone’s wedding.” Wyatt’s glare flickers with pain, temporarily shadowing his blue eyes.

Well, fuck. Yeah, I did do that. But.... “I told you I was going. I had to.”

“We didn’t want you to worry,” Lucas consoles, lips brushing my ear. “We didn’t know Stone was going to get himself shot.”

“Almostshot,” Stone clarifies. “It’s nothing.”

“So, what happened?” I break free of Lucas’ grip and stand at his side so I can watch the three of them. “Where’s Lance?”

Wyatt slumps back onto the couch. “Cole found out he was lying low in his Phoenix office. He’s had his people watching the building. All intel pointed to the fact that no one was going to be there, but evidently, Lance has more people than we figured because when we showed up, there was a slight scuffle and Stone got...injured. We naively believed that since Stone used to be a regular at the office that no one would bat an eye to him showing up. However, Lance let all of his old employees go. The whole floor has new personnel who didn’t recognize him.”

“We honestly didn’t think it would resort to any type of fighting whatsoever,” Lucas clarifies. “Stone was just going to search the office. We only took Cole and the Dragons as a precaution.”

I keep glancing at Stone. I don’t like his pallor, and my heart is dislodging my anger at this point. I finally relent and lean into him. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he mumbles, avoiding my gaze.

“I’m fine, too. Thanks for asking, though I kind of hate you right now.”

“Lies,” he murmurs, his gray-blue eyes finally meeting my stare. “You don’t hate me.”

He’s so right about that. There’s no way I could hate him. “That doesn’t mean I like you at the present moment.”

“I gotta know...,” Wyatt starts, and from the tone of his voice, I know he’s about to say something ridiculous, “How did Lucas get his dick sucked but Stone took a bullet for your family’s stuff, and he hasn’t?”

“It was a graze,” I mimic. “Talk to me when he actually gets hit.”

“Harsh,” Wyatt quips.

Stone ignores the bantering, but I lean into it. Wyatt has a way of normalizing things. I’m still pissed beyond belief that they would come up with a plan to recover the ring and not tell me about it. I don’t care if they didn’t want me to worry. There may be a double standard in there somewhere since I also left Wyatt and Stone to confront Lance but, in these cases, a short memory is pardonable.

We’re all on edge.

Stone tangles his fingers with mine. “We need the piece of gold to confirm that your family’s vein matches whatever vein we find. It’s as important as the ring.”

“Once we find the treasure, we’ll know we’re in the right mining cave,” I tell him, trying to prove that we don’t need to take that many risks.

“We don’t know how many caves there are. What if there are several different tunnels? The mountains are filled with old shafts. It would be a lot easier to identify the right site if we could take core samples and match them up with the nugget. Since we’re going back into the mountains soon, hopefully to find the cave, I... it just felt really important to have that piece of gold, and now we don’t. My father does.”

I shrug because I get it. I fucking do, but I don’t think risking our lives to try to get that stuff is worth it. I have faith that one day it will be in my possession again, but until then, the treasure is the priority. “Are you even able to search with us now?” I ask, not liking the bright red on his bandage, but also realizing it’s pretty much dry. There’s no new blood, at least.

“It’s barely a scratch,” Stone remarks, giving the bandage a cursory once-over.

“He just wanted to be cool and have scars like us,” Wyatt playfully scoffs.

I bite my lip. He’s right, and I hadn’t thought about that. Each of them is now boasting scars because of this hunt. Wyatt’s knife wound. Lucas’s neck. Now Stone’s arm. “If you ask me, he got off too easy.”

Stone lifts his hand to flip his friend off.

“Plus, he’s now going to get all the attention instead of me,” Lucas teases.

“Yeah, I’m with Tits. We should hate him.”

I flick my gaze to the cowboy. “Your humor isn’t going to make me forget this happened, you know that, right?”

He shrugs. “It was worth a shot.”

“Try feeding her,” Lucas suggests. “She likes that.”

I scowl at him. “Just fuck you all.”

Wyatt places his hands on the top of his jeans. “If you’re offering....”

I shake my head and lean back on Stone’s legs. He shifts so I’m lying against his chest with his arms wrapped around my waist, holding me there. “I’m sorry,” he breathes. “Getting back your things is important to me.”

I pat his leg. “We’ll figure out a way.”

We stay there for hours. Having them next to me—talking treasure, Wyatt cooking in the kitchen—is what my dreams are now made of. Half the fun of having a treasure to find is searching for it. I lose sight of that sometimes with everything else that has happened and with the added pressure of needing to recover it before Lance. But, I could be happy just searching with them. After all, what’s life without hopes and dreams?

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The next day, we’re back at it. Stone’s fine; I made him show me his arm before we left early this morning, and it really is only a scratch. Cole thinks it was a warning shot. A bullet meant to ward them off. It’s all just speculation though.

Cole informed us this morning that he’s close to tracking down the identity of the team Lance hired. If they can graze Stone’s arm like that, I have no doubt they’re the professionals we always believed they were.

Ninja and the new guard, whose name is Pete, sit under an overhang in the shade as Lucas, Wyatt, Stone, and I walk up the pass between the two rock faces. We brought rock climbing gear with us, but right now, we're taking turns using binoculars to search out any caves.

"We have to remember, too, that whoever deposited the treasure had to get it up there." If that's where it really is.... I frown at the sheer height and incredible feat that would've been.

"The thing is," Stone starts, peering through the binoculars. "We don't know what they used to get up there. They could've built something like scaffolding or some other contraption. Do you remember that article from the paper a few years ago about the wooden ladder they found near the lake? Everyone thought they'd finally found it."

I almost roll my eyes. Not everyone believed they did. Dad and I laughed our asses off when the article came out. "Yeah, I remember. The ladder itself was impressive. Dad and I have been all through here, though, and never found any climbing tools."

Wyatt practically snorts. "Of course not. If you were going to hide gold and jewels, why would you leave a ladder leading up to the cave?"

"Or a gold vein," I add, laughing right alongside him. Even if—and it's a very big if—the men who hid the cache left a ladder or scaffolding, my ancestor would've dismantled it as soon as he found his vein. He wouldn't have left any clue as to where his claim was—or the treasure.

"Let's pretend we're Maria Luisa's men," Lucas proposes, shielding his eyes from the sun as he stares upward. It's unseasonably hot today, and the collar of his shirt is damp with sweat. "The area is flooding, and they have to get the horde somewhere safe, so they bring it up into the mountains."

“They’re in a foreign territory,” I add. “They wouldn’t have understood anything about this area. They just kept climbing to get away from the water.”

“Exactly,” Wyatt agrees. “And they needed a place to dump it safely, then return later so they all didn’t get hanged for losing the treasure.”

“They didn’t get hanged,” I protest.

Wyatt laughs. “Of course they did. When the history books say no one knows what happened to this set of people or that set of people, you can guarantee they met with a bad end. Especially people who lose a treasure. Can you imagine? Of course they got their heads chopped off or something equally gruesome.”

“I wouldn’t have returned,” Stone claims, finally passing the binoculars to Lucas.

“Maybe they didn’t.” Wyatt suggests. “They knew what was awaiting them.”

“Then why didn’t they stay here, come back for the jewels, and use it for themselves?” I offer.

“It would’ve been pretty obvious what they were doing when they tried trading tiaras and precious gems. It’s not like they were inconspicuous items.”

He has a point there. Wyatt winks at me, then inspects the cliff face. He might be the most changed from when we first met. This morning, he wrapped me up in a hug so tight he almost broke my ribs. Instead of shying away from intimate moments, now he gravitates toward them. He’s fully accepted me into this group, even though he’s only ever trusted the two men next to us. After what happened between his mother and father, I can’t blame him. That’s why he doesn’t approve of Cole in my life yet. Cole represents the things his mother did. Cole’s the guy you hire to kill your husband for money, and for Wyatt, being associated with someone like him isn’t

acceptable.

I reach out, closing my hand around his. He squeezes me back, wrinkles appearing at the corners of his eyes as he smiles. “What would you do if we found the treasure?” I ask him.

He turns toward me, blue eyes blazing in the brightness of the sun like icy diamonds. “This is the Dakota and Stone show. I’m just here to help.” I tilt my head at him, and his face softens. “The only thing I want is my ranch.” He glances away, but not before I see the worry lines return to his face. “Too bad it’s tainted.”

“If you don’t want to start that one up again, you could start another one,” I offer.

He shakes his head, sighing. “You’re too much like Stone. I’m pretty sure he’s told me the same thing about a hundred times.”

“So? What would you do?” I press.

He rubs the back of his neck. Stone and Lucas slow as if they want to hear his answer as much as I do. “I don’t know,” he muses. “I’ve actually been thinking lately that I’d like to go back there. Try it out.” He bites his lip, peering at me with the most vulnerable eyes I’ve ever seen. “I want to show you where I grew up. Show you my horses. Since I saw you on that other ranch, I’ve had a picture of you in the big ol’ open space of my family’s land.”



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I tug on his arm to bring him to a stop. “I’d like that.” My stomach squeezes as two red blotches appear on Wyatt’s cheeks. My masculine cowboy sharing his feelings makes the lasso he has around my heart pull tight. I chuckle. “I don’t know anything about running a ranch, but I’ll try.”

“Told you,” Stone teases, the corner of his lip quirking up.

“What would you do, then?” Wyatt quizzes his friend, playfully shoving him in the shoulder.

Stone shrugs. “The only thing I want is to be next to people who care about me. I’ve spent too much of my life trying like hell to win affection. It would be nice to just enjoy love without having to try so damn hard to win it.”

Wyatt’s eyes widen as if he wasn’t expecting Stone to get so deep, and he claps his friend on the back a couple of times.

“You thought you could win your dad over with the treasure, huh?” I inquire, realizing how much Stone worked before we teamed up.

He nods. “It’s funny. I tried so hard to find it because that’s what he wanted, but now I want to find it before him. Don’t get me wrong, I was always intrigued by it, but I had other motivations.”

We’re a fucked-up group. Even with my life’s story—a father who isn’t actually my father—I don’t have the craziest tale of us all. Deep down, I think Clark Wilder did love me. I’m not sure about Lance loving Stone, though. It seems like the only reason

he had him was so he could raise a miniature version of himself.

“Lucas?” Stone prods. “Your turn.”

Lucas starts walking again. “Whatever makes Dakota happy.”

“You must want something,” I encourage, catching up with him. “Anything?”

He stops and studies the ground when my hand grips his forearm. “I already have the family I’ve always wanted.”

His admission hits me like a ton of bricks, slamming into my heart with a force that almost knocks me off my feet. We’re the same in that. If they weren’t here, discovering my true lineage would have devastated me. But not now. Not with them.

I swallow through the thickness in my throat.

Wyatt reaches out to squeeze my hand. “There’s no crying in treasure hunting.”

“I’m not crying,” I protest through fractured tears. After I pull myself together, I continue, “You know, I’ve been thinking. Even if we don’t find the actual treasure right now, we’ve found the most important thing.”

“So, you want to stop searching?” Stone queries, eyebrow raised.

“Fuck that. I’m taking your father down.” I smirk, and they laugh. “I’m just saying, I used to think my life would be over if I never found it, but I don’t think that anymore. Actually, I don’t know what I would do with myself if I did actually find it. I’ve been training for this my whole life.”

“You’ll finish school,” Stone states.

“You’ll come with me to my ranch,” Wyatt adds.

“We’ll all come with you,” Lucas corrects.

“I wasn’t excluding you, dude.” He squeezes his friend’s shoulder. “I’d love to see your ass mucking out stalls.”

“Sounds smelly.” I wrinkle up my nose.

“You get used to it.”

“That sounds like a lie.” Stone’s face looks a lot like mine, and I press my lips together to keep from smirking.

We walk in silence for a while, the scenes of our possible future filling my head. I don’t know what to wish for anymore. I went from wanting to fulfill my family’s legacy most of all to college to these three. What do you do when you have everything you want? Do you keep going? It feels greedy to want the treasure, too. I want to prove to everyone that my family wasn’t crazy this whole time even though I’m not sure I owe that to anyone anymore.

A finger on my chin makes me look into Wyatt’s blue eyes. “You’ve still got to find the treasure, Dakota.” He tugs on one of my curls hanging over my shoulder that escaped from my bun.

“Maybe it’s not mine to find,” I tell him.

Wyatt shakes his head. “I’ve realized something over the last few weeks. I used to shy away from what happened to my family. I didn’t want to be associated with it, and I know I’ve said some shit about your dad, which I meant,” he tacks on, “but it’s still yours to find. You’re still a Wilder. The last Wilder. No one knows your history

but us. You can make yourself whatever you want.”

“You already know I think it’s yours to find,” Stone agrees.

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Lucas hands me the binoculars. “Absolutely.”

My father’s words wrap around me. Tell Dakota she deserves to find the treasure.

I bring the binoculars up and start searching the cliff face, the niggles of doubt in my stomach dulling to a smolder. It’s hard when who you are gets ripped out from underneath you. Instead of dwelling on that, I do what I do best: start searching.

The cliff faces sparkle in the bright sunlight. I’m sure there’s a science-y reason for it that’s probably been explained to me before, but science was never my forte. I always preferred books, fairy tales, and dreams. If I had to write my story, I’d write it with a happy ending. It’s changed since I was a little girl. It used to be me, my dad, and the Wilder legacy. Now, it’s me, Lucas, Wyatt, and Stone. Together. If the treasure comes, that’s cool. But as long as we’re together, that’s everything.

I turn to study the other cliff face but stop when I spy something unusual. Straight lines usually aren’t found in nature. I bring my hand up to mess with the binoculars, zooming in. “That’s...interesting,” I report, not knowing if what I’m seeing is important or not. High in the brown rock face, close to a pitched ledge, is a carving. The Apaches etched a lot of things into the rock here, so it’s not out of the realm of possibility to find markings, but it’s interesting that this is a square that matches one of the symbols on the map.

“Did you find a cave?” Stone’s voice is so close it almost makes me jump.

I shake my head. “No, I think I found a rock painting. Or carving. It’s a square. Like from the map.”

I hand the binoculars off to Stone who changes the magnification, moving the lenses until he's focused on what I found. I can't see it without the binoculars, and actually, it's just dumb luck that I caught it at all. The sun must have hit it just so as I was sweeping the landscape.

Before I can ask, Lucas takes out the map, unfolds it, and spreads it out on the ground, smoothing the edges. It's such a delicate piece of paper. The crude lantern drawing is at the end of the canyon—step one, I think of it as. No one has ever figured out what the x's and squares mean, only that they could've represented cave entrances.

If this square is what's on the map, it's not a cave entrance at all. It's a drawing.

Stone hands the binoculars off to Wyatt and kneels next to Lucas and me. "Hmm, it doesn't match the map. The x's and squares are outside the canyon." He sucks his lip in, nibbling as he surveys the drawing my ancestor made.

"We should still notate it," I express. "If it ends up meaning something, we're going to need to know where it is."

Stones takes out the GPS, climbs the little rocky hill and stands directly under the square carving as directed by Wyatt. He enters the coordinates.

Only time will tell if this means anything. I only hope it doesn't take us another hundred years to figure out step two. Then the Curse of the Wilder treasure would be handed down to another generation.

At the end of the day, we find another square and three x carvings. We make multiple passes in the valley, recording the coordinates of each symbol. I don't know how they

fit into the map yet, but my gut tells me they're important. It tells me we're on the right track. We just have to figure out what they mean; or what they're pointing to. Putting myself in my ancestors' shoes so far isn't working.

Knowing we're a step closer than my family has ever been should make me feel freer, but instead, a weight settles on my shoulders. I wonder if it's one my dad also held onto. Now that we've made it this much further, I want to take the next step and the next. I want to find this treasure once and for all. I want to take the glory away from Lance Jacobs, but more than that, I want it for the Wilder family.

The mountains have always helped me think. The crags and rocks a point of self-reflection. The majestic beauty a blatant symbol that there's so much more out there than our regular lives. While we found the x's and squares today, the back of my mind worked on the issue I've had since finding out I'm not really a Wilder. My dad said I deserved to find the Wilder legacy, but that's the exact point I've been struggling with. The Wilders always deserved to find it, but now that I'm not one, I'm not sure I do.

But the thing is, you can't break from your ties that easily. I may not be a Wilder in blood, but I was brought up one in name, in legends and stories that go back hundreds of years. And if I don't have that, what do I have? I need something to grasp onto. Whether it's technically accurate or not, I'll always be more Wilder than I am the sister of Cole's friend.

Now I need to come to terms with that.

While the campfire licks toward the overcast sky, Ninja and Pete tell stories about being Dragons. It's evident they both revere Cole, which only solidifies my feelings for him. He may be the leader of a ruthless gang, but he isn't all barbs and prickles. Maybe at the end of all this, I can learn more about him. And, in a way, become closer to Charlie.

Wyatt will hate the idea, but the cowboy will have to get over it. Maybe we could have Cole out to his family's ranch. Now that will be a sight. Cole on a horse? I might die laughing.

Lucas wraps his arms around me. "What are you smiling about?"

The flicker of the flames reflected in his brown eyes draw me toward him, but there's no way I'm making him privy to my thoughts. "Nothing." My lips turn up into a teasing smile.

"I love to see you happy," he murmurs. Sometimes when Lucas looks at me, I see the loneliness in his childhood recede further and further away. The hardness melts, warmth takes over, and who Lucas is at his very core shines through like a beacon.

I lean closer. "You can want things for yourself," I murmur as Ninja talks about putting a bullet in a drug dealer's skull. "You were the only one earlier who said you only wanted me to be happy and didn't want anything for yourself."

"I thought you understood," he breathes, gaze settling on me. "I have everything I've ever wanted right here." He pulls me closer until we're only a whisper of a breath away. "A family to share my life with. To be there when I wake up in the morning. To talk about my day with. To share dreams and memories. For the longest time, I never made any memories worth remembering." He stares off into the distance. The dark night is eerily calm, shadows lurking everywhere, making shivers run up my arms. "When I met Stone, things changed. Then Wyatt came into the fold. But you clicked everything into place, Dakota. For all of us. It was as if this whole time, I was looking for you and I didn't know it. I wouldn't care if we stopped searching for the treasure right now; if we ran off and started a new life together, just the four of us. But I know how much it means to you...and Stone."

He shakes his head and smirks. "Stone can say all he wants that he's doing this for



you, but he's full of shit. He's fallen for the whole idea of the treasure just as much as you have. And like you, it's never been about the riches like it was for his dad. He wants to find it for the challenge, for rewriting the history books." Lucas tilts his head to stare at his friend whose eyes are wide as saucers as he listens to Ninja finish his tale. "He wants it bad."

"And Wyatt?" I move my stare to find that he seems to be enjoying Ninja's story more than Stone. He's chuckling at all the gory parts.

"He needed the distraction. Until he found you." Lucas peeks back at me, and we lock onto each other. "You're a way better distraction than the treasure ever was. Healthier. Sexier...."

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“Keep going.” I smile.

He chuckles. “The best kind of distraction is the one that makes you grow. The one that proves that maybe it’s not needed anymore because you’ve risen above it. And that’s what he got with you. He hasn’t gone off the rails in weeks. He hasn’t slipped away to drink himself into oblivion outside his mom’s cell, and that’s about all we can ask for.”

Heat spreads in my belly. “Maybe you should be a psychologist, Lucas Govern. Can you read me, too?”

He grins. “No one needs to read you, Wild Girl. You wear your heart on your sleeve.”

I lean closer to Lucas and a raindrop splatters my nose. My mouth drops in surprise, and I move to stare up at the sky. I knew it was cloudy, but I didn’t realize they were rain clouds. “Did you feel that?”

“I felt it,” Wyatt says, staring up at the sky with his hat tilted back so the drops splatter his skin. He looks like an angel letting the rain trickle onto his face. A country angel, sure, but an angel nonetheless.

“We should head in,” Stone suggests, getting to his feet.

Lucas stands next and pulls me to a standing position. “You sure you don’t want help?” I ask Ninja.

He gives me the same incredulous look he’s been giving me. I just don’t know when

the guy freaking sleeps. “You already know what I’m going to say.”

“That Cole will dissolve your balls in acid?”

Ninja’s eyes widen. “That’s a new one. Let’s not give him any ideas, okay?”

Wyatt smacks my ass, hauling me over his shoulder. “We’ll make sure she’s too preoccupied to think of any more ways for Cole to enact punishment on your balls.”

“Keep carrying me like an ape and it won’t be for Cole who I’m thinking up ways to torture. It’ll be for myself.”

Wyatt laughs, the rainstorm dampening the usual echo. It’s just his deep voice threading through my veins. He dumps me on my feet as soon as we get into the tent. The last thing I see is Ninja giving instructions to Pete as the rain increases before Stone zips us in.

“This wasn’t in the forecast,” I grumble. Tomorrow might be a complete wash out. If it is, we’ll have to pack it up and head home. It doesn’t shower a lot here, but when it does, it ruins everything.

Raindrops hit the tent in splatters. It’s not hard yet, more than a sprinkle but definitely less than a deluge. We won’t have to worry about flooding or anything like that.

Stone frets over his lip. “I’m going to tell Ninja to let us know if it gets worse. Just in case.”

I smile at him as he turns. We’re always on the same wavelength.

Wyatt moves around the tent checking for traps. He turns on his phone flashlight and does a once-over. Ninja and Pete have been insanely thorough, but we’re paranoid

now.

“We’re good,” he proclaims, sitting on the air mattress we brought with us. It was a creature comfort we decided to indulge in since we had the extra manpower to help carry stuff. My dad would be mortified if he knew I was using an air mattress up here, but it’s so much nicer than the hard-packed ground that’s never even.

Maybe it’s the bed in Stone’s house that’s making me a big baby because I never noticed the difference between sleeping on the family couch and sleeping on the desert floor, but I feel it now. My bones thank Stone Jacobs, that’s for sure.

Now that we’re away from the fire, the cold seeps in. The rain’s made the temperature drop, too. I quickly change into my joggers and oversized sweatshirt that used to be Stone’s from his old college. We push the two queen sized air mattresses together and pretend they will stay that way even though we know they won’t. One or two of us will definitely end up sleeping on the ground. I just hope it’s not me this time.

Stone steps back inside. He sheds his outer layers and then gets in bed next to me. He holds me close, fitting me into his side. Wyatt throws a sleeping bag over us, and I’m so cozy, it takes me no time at all to drift to sleep.

I awake one time when the zipper opens. Lucas answers Ninja, and I can tell by the sporadic drops on the tent that whatever little rainstorm we had passed through already. Maybe we won’t have to pack everything tomorrow and head home. It would be nice to stay up here until we figure out what the squares and x’s mean. If we could just match them to the map—if that’s even how it works—that would be great.

I stay up for a little while, my mind working on the problem, but Stone kisses the back of my neck. “Go to sleep, babe. The problem will be there tomorrow.”

He's right. I curl myself into a ball and heed his advice, drifting off once again.

The next time I wake, though, is not for anything good. It's not at the soft caress of one of my guys. It's not from the steady pitter-patter of rain hitting the tent. It's not even with ideas to work out what the symbols might mean.

It's because I'm soaking wet...and moving.

Water rushes into the tent, carrying us away in a driving current. I sit up, my hands splashing in chilled water. I gasp as the cold ices my skin. Our air mattresses butt against one another like rafts, and I grip the side in terror.

It's like we're on a dangerous, dark water slide, twisting and turning through the mountain valley. We slam into something rock solid, and the tent collapses around us. Stone and I are thrown into the air, only to land again in a deluge of water pinning us against the same hard surface. The rapids lift higher and higher until I'm choking.

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In the chaos, I can't find Wyatt or Lucas—and now Stone. Hell, I can barely breathe. The water forces the tent flat against me like cellophane, pinning me in place. I shove it away just to breathe, but without warning, a wave takes me under.

Objects in the tent are thrown against me: camping gear, clothes, limbs. I don't know what's what. I reach out blindly, searching for air because that's all I'm begging for.

My lungs start to ache, and the impulse to take a breath overtakes everything until I drag water in and choke.

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The burning intensifies. I scream internally, choking and spluttering on the roaring fire ripping through my chest and throat. I can't take much more. I push off anything I can, but I don't know which way is up. The sides of the tent stick to me like vacuumed plastic. I shove against the material, trying to feel my way through to something.

The rapids change course, and a swift current leads me away from the hard surface. Finally, the force of the water propels me upward, and I emerge on the surface, immediately breathing in welcome gasps of air. Another head pops up next to me as I'm thrown about, and Wyatt's frantic eyes meet mine. "We've got to get the fuck out of this tent!" Its soggy weight is like a second-skin on our backs, but it billows out in front of us. The air mattresses must have popped but other gear is riding the white water just like us.

Somewhere in here, Lucas and Stone must still be underwater.

I spit murky liquid away from my mouth, and hiss when my leg snags on something that tears my skin. “Where’s the zipper?”

A hand wraps around my knee, and I plunge my arm under to haul whoever it is upward. Lucas breaks the surface, gulping in air. His eyes are bloodshot and wide. He coughs, choking on the rushing water that threatens to swallow us again.

“Where’s Stone?” I cry. He was holding me when this started. I met his eyes right before we upended.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Wyatt reiterates. He brings out a knife and flicks it open. Taking the tent into his fist, he drags the blade through the thick material.

Water pushes us faster and faster, hurtling us down the mountain. We freefall for a few seconds, our screams filling the tent until we come to a jarring stop and have to swim our way against the current to resurface.

“Fuck! I lost my knife!”

Stone’s head bobs into view.

My heart pinches, and I screech at seeing his limp body. Lucas and I flip him over, but he’s not breathing. “Wyatt! Please!”

Wyatt frantically searches the side of the tent. He disappears for a few moments as branches start to tear holes into the canvas, and the water turns murky with dirt and rocks. Lucas and I hold onto Stone like we can do something for him, but all we can do is hold him above the rapids so he doesn’t get lost again. Breathing raggedly himself, Lucas forces Stone’s mouth open with his finger and pounds on his friend’s chest.

Wyatt finally appears again, breaking through the crest with a huge breath. “Got it!”

All of a sudden, a massive rush of water sweeps through as if a drain has opened. I get sucked under, hauled over rocks and tangles of branches as I fight for air once more.

I lose them, all of them. The physical pain is nothing compared to the feeling of loneliness closing around me.

My body twists and turns from the rushing water taking me this way and that. My limbs ache and burn from fighting against the force of the current. Out of sheer luck, I emerge again and drag in a breath of much needed oxygen.

The tent rushes past me, and I scramble toward the creek bed I spot to my left. My fingers sink into the muddy bank and drag as I try to gain purchase. The current is too fast to stand up in even though the water isn’t deep. Branches and other natural objects tear at my clothes. Something sharp sticks into me, and I cry out.

Finally, my fingertips wrap around a bush lining the bank, and I force my hands together. I hold on with all my might as the rush batters me on all sides. The usually tame creek that runs through the mountains has somehow turned into a massive whitewater river complete with rapids and current and crests of white. I use everything I have left to put one fist over the other, tugging myself higher and higher until I’m able to throw one leg out of the creek and scramble onto the dry, rocky mountain floor. Dragging in breaths that feel like a hundred pointy objects stabbing me all at once, I attempt to get my bearings. My clothes are torn and soaked through; my usually wild hair is a mess of tangles and mud.

I pull myself to my knees. “Stone!”

Once my vision clears, my mouth drops. I’ve never seen anything like the sight



before me. It's literally as if I was discarded into a raging river. The rain we had couldn't have done this. I don't think. But it's the only explanation I can come up with as my brain tries to make sense out of what's happened.

It doesn't matter anyway. What matters is that I don't know where they are.

“Wyatt!”

My cries become desperate, ending on sobs that rip my heart open. Stone was underwater for a very long time. He wasn't breathing....

“Lucas! Please!”

Trees, bushes, and rocks get swept downriver, thrown against boulders and over drop-offs that end in waterfall-like turmoil before moving on again. I can only imagine the hard surface we were thrown against was one of those huge, gray rocks that can weigh up to a ton. I start to shiver as I search for the tent. I don't know if they're still inside it or if they got sucked out like me.

“Ninja! Pete!”

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With the way the river is moving, we could be a long way from camp.

My knees dig into rocks as the rush of water fills my ears, drowning out everything but the icy feeling that I don't know if I'll see my guys again.

"Someone! Anyone!" My throat catches, and I cough. Pain explodes in my chest cavity. "Please," I croak.

I drag myself up and stumble down the mountain in bare feet. I slice the bottoms raw on rocks and pebbles, searching for any sign of the tent or Wyatt, Stone, and Lucas.

The river keeps raging, almost like the Hoover Dam burst open. I cry out for them every few seconds until my throat is as tender as my feet.

My body was numb after I pulled myself out, but as feeling starts to return, I realize how battered I really am. There's an excruciating pain in my side I'm afraid to inspect, and the blender-like rapids left me with considerable bruising.

Through the shadows, I spot a piece of cloth that's stuck on a tree that barely peeks out from the rapids. I run to the edge of the river, poke my foot into the water, and nearly get swept away again. I force myself back, screaming the guys' names as loud as I can. Another whitewater rush comes through and takes the scrap with it, along with the branch it was on. It tumbles over itself, and I lose sight of it in a few seconds, taking with it any hope I'd had that it could've been a piece of clothing or the tent or something.

"Turn around," a voice demands.

I still. My breath catches in my dry throat. My heart leaps, hoping it's Ninja or Pete, but as I turn, those hopes get dashed when I find a man dressed in tan fatigues. He has a bandana wrapped around his forehead, and an automatic rifle pointed at my chest.

I don't think. I run. I take off toward the river, scrambling along its side. The intruder curses behind me. He shouts something, then a mechanical voice responds, "Roger that." It dawns on me that this is probably Lance's military crew, and they have walkie-talkies or another comms system.

Ninja was carrying our satellite phone last I knew. I can only hope he still has it and is calling someone for help.

I don't get very far before a hard body slams into me from behind. I fall to my stomach, the wind getting knocked out of me. "Don't run," he demands.

"Who are you?"

He shoves my head into the dirt and rocks, sand sticking to my lips as I suck in staccato breaths. He places his knee between my shoulder blades and leans his weight on me. "Don't. Move."

I groan at the extra load shifting on my already sore body. "Did you do this?" I ask. I strain my ears toward the river, listening—hoping someone will come.

"We had to flush you out somehow." He chuckles darkly like he's said something truly funny.

"Stone!" I yell, using every last ounce of strength I have.

He chuckles again. "We didn't hear anyone else but you, so keep trying, little girl. Not that it will matter. You were our only objective."

Pain rips through my chest as the sound of boots crunching alert me to other people, but they're not mine. The voices are the same dull, professional tone my captor uses. They talk about "recovering the objective" as if finding twenty-year old, treasure-hunting females is their job.

"Told you it would work," one of the fatigue-wearing men hollers from above. "Just like we did in Iraq."

"Congratulations," I spit. "You're pinning a girl to the desert floor. I can see the cause for celebration."

The pressure on my shoulder blades increases. "We don't care what we do as long as we get paid, sweetheart," my kidnapper informs me.

My stomach turns over, but mercifully, he lets up and yanks me to my feet, pushing me toward another body. I almost fall but am wrenched to a standing position at the last second, my arms pinned behind my back. It's too dark to make out the finer features of the men's faces, but there are five of them—each dressed in the same tan camouflage. Military boots, hats, and guns round out their uniforms.

"Make the call," the one who found me instructs. "We'll bring her in."

"You know you're working for a sadistic asshole, right?" I question, trying anything to get out of this. They ignore me, so I put my mouth to better use. "Wyatt! Lucas!"

"Jesus. Someone fucking gag her."

Just as I'm dragging my next breath in to call for Stone, a rank piece of cloth is shoved into my mouth. I gag, eyes watering, but I breathe in through my nose instead. I struggle against the fabric, the area behind my eyes heating.

While they march me away, tears slip down my cheeks. I peek back at the river, but I'm forced around again and hustled forward. The crunch of their boots on the desert mountain floor drown out everything until I think I hear the faint call of my name.

I stop, and the man in control of me runs into my back. He curses, pushing me forward again, and I hiss when I stub my toe on a rock. When he grabs my arm, instincts kick in. Finn showed me a move to get out of this hold, and the possibility of my name being called erupts a flood of hope as ferocious as the one that took me away.

I capture his hand with my other, windmill my arm around to put him in an armlock, then kick out his knee. He falls to the ground, releasing me, and I take off, yanking the disgusting cloth from my mouth. "Lucas! Wyatt! Sto—"

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Another body slams into me from behind with the force of a cement wall, and I fall to the ground in a heap. Pain explodes against my skull. “Now, shut the fuck up,” a voice seethes, and I realize it’s my original captor. He seems like their leader.

He hauls me to my feet. I’m dizzy now and, if I’m not mistaken, blood oozes down the back of my head. He must’ve hit me with the butt of his gun, the son of a bitch.

He throws me toward the guy who’s rubbing his elbow. “Do you think you can handle her now?”

He glares at me. “I wasn’t expecting her to fight back. Especially not with a fucking armlock.”

“Well, start expecting it,” I threaten, but I’m fairly certain I don’t get all the words out. If I do, they’re slurred. The world around me spins. Several times, it feels like the desert floor is moving up to slam into my face, but a quick tug on my arm brings me back to reality and saves me from faceplanting. We walk for hours. I try to get my brain working to figure out where I am but it’s impossible. I’m in and out of consciousness, my eyes drooping in sync with the heaviness in my heart, and it’s all I can do to stay on my feet. Attempting escape again is futile.

I’m being marched out of the Superstitions like a POW. Lance must have ordered them to get me. Just me.

By the time we reach the trailhead, the man guarding me is practically dragging my feet along the ground. I lift my head to read the sign and immediately close my eyes again. We’re on the other side of the damn mountain.

A soft glow lightens the horizon, a line of yellow peeking through as the rest of the world comes alive. A metallic Range Rover pulls up next to us, and my brute of an escort opens the back door and shoves me inside. My cheek presses against leather, and it's all I can do to pick my feet up before he slams the door on me.

The vehicle starts moving right away, the rumble of the engine lulling. My eyes droop even more, sleep calling to me after the hell I've been through this morning.

Before I know it, I'm passed out—my soaked clothes clinging to me, my curls flattened to my forehead, and my body aching more than it ever has before. In all this, sleep is a welcome peace until my dreams come and all I hear are Wyatt, Stone, and Lucas calling for me as much as I was calling for them, except I can't answer, and I don't know if I ever will again.

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The calls in my sleep are ghosts as I blink awake. I'm lying on top of a twin-sized mattress that sits on the floor in a small, square room. Blinds shield the windows, but they're broken in some areas, allowing rays of sunlight to pierce through and splatter the walls in hazy illumination.

I groan as everything that happened hits me like a ten-ton truck along with the pain searing my limbs. The most pressing issue is the pulsing ache in my side. When I glance down, I spot blood on the mattress. I breathe in and out as I gingerly lift Stone's sweatshirt. I'm caked in dried dirt, turning my pale skin a muddy brown everywhere I look.

Jesus Christ.

Surrounded by grime-stained skin, I spot the coagulated blood spanning a three-inch gash above my left hip. There's no fresh blood, just hardened crimson the color of the

Black Licorice's cranberry moonshine.

Breathing through my nose as if that will somehow block the pain, I pull myself up as white-hot agony lances my midsection. I slouch against the wall for support and wait for the trauma to die down before I attempt sitting again.

The blocky room is nondescript. The white floor tile is kind of fancy even though the trim on the doorway is simple and muted tan walls stare back at me. There are no furnishings in the room. It's completely bare. Wherever Lance's people brought me, it doesn't appear to be lived in currently. I most definitely don't think I'm at his building in Phoenix—the room is too cozy to be in a high-rise office building.

My water-logged head pounds. My throat still burns, and my chapped lips take great effort to force apart. I don't remember anything about the ride here. I must've been really out of it but thankfully, it looks as if they literally just tossed me on the mattress and left me here, soaking wet clothes and all.

"Hello?" I call out, only it comes out as a whisper. I clear my throat and try again, managing a choked sort of sound.

The door is thrown open, and a man in the same tan fatigues sticks his head in. He's gruff with weathered skin. He's quite possibly the same age as Lance or maybe a little younger but aged in a way Lance never will while he's sitting on top of his ivory tower. "Oh good, you're awake." He slams the door closed, and I groan at the noise.

"Hello?" I cry out again, my voice firmer this time. I bring myself to a sitting position and hiss. "I need medical attention. Hello!" He doesn't return, and I doubt they care if I need help. They said their only objective was to get me and most likely bring me here. Wherever here is. I doubt Lance is far since this is all his doing.

I search the room again, looking for anything that might help. There's an old phone



hookup in the corner, but no phone—the line just lies on the floor, intersecting the joining of two tiles. There’s another door in the room, and I drag myself to my feet while my body screams at me to stay still. I push past the pain and hobble to the opposite wall. I tug the door open only to find a closet with empty hangers. “Fuck.”

I place one hand on the doorjamb to steady myself, and my opposite hand curls into my side where the worst of the pain is. Actually, that’s not true. The worst of the pain is emanating from my chest because I don’t know what happened to Wyatt, Stone, and Lucas. Stone’s unbreathing form flashes in front of my eyes, and I hold back a sob with shaking fingers.

“I need to get out of here,” I whisper. “I need to find out what happened.”

I limp to the window, the tiny cuts on the underside of my bare feet protesting every step. I have open sores that need to be cleaned out on my legs, too, but I can’t think around the giant mess in my head. Where are they? Facts keep hitting me hard and fast. We were separated. Our gear, the map—I don’t know where any of that is. Ninja and Pete, too. Did those men do something to them before the flood happened? Or did they get swept up in it, too?

I still hold onto the hope that Ninja got a hold of Cole; that Stone, Wyatt, and Lucas were able to make it down the mountain, back to the SUV to go for help.

I yank on the string that raises the blinds only to have the whole thing crash to the floor. The incoming rays of sun shower me in heat, reminding me that the world is still turning out there. The door bursts open again, bouncing against the opposite wall, and I jump at the sudden intrusion. Turning, I find a figure in the doorway squinting from the incoming fresh light.

The guy drops a bucket of water to the ground, some of it sloshing over the sides. “I thought you could use something to clean yourself with.” He takes a t-shirt and camo

bottoms from his shoulder and drops them next to the bucket, right into the puddle of water forming.

“Where’s Lance?” I croak.

“He won’t be by until later. You’ll have to sit tight. Don’t even think about leaving this room. We have the area surrounded. You won’t make it three steps before a bullet rips through your skull.”

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I glare at him despite fear overtaking everything. Part of me thinks they won't kill me because there must be a reason why Lance wanted me here, but the other part of me wonders if they're only waiting to put that bullet in my skull until Jacobs gets here. "What happened to the people I was with?"

The man smirks. He has blond stubble and striking eyes. "No idea. Not our assignment."

"You always play someone's bitch, then?"

His eyes harden. "It's called working for money, not that you know anything about it."

I laugh because I haven't heard anything so funny in my life. "You think I have money? That's rich." Laughter keeps pouring out until my side protests, and I seal my lips together, swallowing a moan.

My captor tilts his head, but a voice calls out behind him, and he immediately shuts the door.

I drop to my knees by the bucket and move the shirt and pants away from the puddle. They're still drier than the clothes I'm wearing so I don't waste time stripping. A sponge bobs on the water's surface, and I use it to coat my skin in the freezing liquid. Asshole didn't even warm it up for me.

I scrub and scrub, rubbing away all the mud and bits of pieces of mountain shrubbery that I brought back with me, carefully washing out my injuries to take better stock of

where I'm at. The gash on my side hurts the worst. I don't dare scrub away the hardened blood because I'm pretty sure that's the only thing keeping the wound from bleeding. There's also a laceration on my right calf that I think was caused by a tree branch when I was being swept away in the water. It, too, is held together with dried blood that I don't touch no matter how much mud is also caked around it. I have nothing to dress it with and better that it doesn't start bleeding again.

Dipping my hands into the water to cup some in my palms, I throw it against my face, waiting for it to rinse off right back into the bucket. It's a far cry from Stone's rainfall showerhead, but it will have to do.

I step into the bottoms and pull them up, leaving the waistband open since it hits right at my injury. Internally, it feels a lot worse than it appears, and I wonder if I've bruised my ribs from being thrown up against that hard surface that I believe was a boulder.

I wiggle into my shirt, then sit against the very edge of the mattress where it's dry. I tug my shirt over my knees and curl into a ball, staring at the light shining in through the window. I'm sure he wasn't lying about this place being heavily guarded, there's no doubt about that, but in my condition, I couldn't run away anyway. I don't think they'd kill me, but they'd probably drag me right back here in worse condition than I am right now.

"How about some food?" I call out.

"Jesus. She's worse than the Iraqi mercenaries we had to deal with."

"Pain reliever?" I shout more forcefully. "I'll even just take some drinking water."

"I figured you'd had enough of that," someone rasps from outside the door.

I grit my teeth. My fingers curl into my skin, giving me something to focus on. Finn helped me a lot, but he didn't teach me how to defeat a five-man ex-military unit.

Hours drag by. I sleep some, but I'm more awake than dreaming. My stomach is a dull pain of hunger, but I'm used to that. Or I used to be. It's harder to ignore how hungry I am now that I no longer have to live that way. By the time the door opens again, I'm surprised if it's not because he can hear my stomach growling.

A different face greets me than the one who brought me the bucket. He has the same tough exterior only with darker hair. He doesn't smile at all. His lips are a thin line and nothing about him and the gun he has hanging by his side tells me that this is a conversational visit. "Get up," he demands.

I struggle to my feet, wincing as the pain in my mid-section drives home again. "I could really use some pain reliever," I choke out.

He ignores me altogether and gestures with his gun. "Go through the door and await my further instruction."

I do as he says, trying to walk as normally as possible even though the bottom of my feet feel like they're shredded. There's a reason why we wear hiking boots in the mountains. Being tossed around in a sudden raging river aside, I was bound to have some scrapes and bruises just from walking over the mountain floor.

"Turn right," the voice orders.

I turn right and find myself at the end of a corridor. There are doors on either side of a hallway that stretches about ten feet in length before opening up. Further into the interior of what I now realize is a house, I can only see slots of light fanning in from gaps in the blinds in the otherwise unlit space.

The furnishings are nice enough. It's a step up from the house I lived in with my dad, but it doesn't even come close to the Jacobs' houses. I'm beginning to think this might not have anything to do with Lance at all unless he's really trying to throw me off. I can't imagine him in a space like this. He'd turn his nose up at it.

"Keep going," the guy barks.

I increase the pace as much as my body will allow. Every step I take, I wish that Stone, Wyatt, and Lucas were with me. Maybe I've become too accustomed to having them in my life. Now that they're not, I'm freaking out. If Lance hurt them, that will be the last thing he does. I don't care what I have to do. I'll die on that mission as long as Lance feels my wrath.

"There's a chair in the corner of the room, move toward it."

I emerge into the living area where a plaid couch sits awkwardly angled away from the wall. Turning to my right, I find a dining room chair sitting in the corner and move toward it as I've been instructed. I keep studying my surroundings and note we're most likely in an uninhabited house. Maybe a newly sold house that hasn't been moved into yet? It's missing pretty much every comfort of a home, and that has nothing to do with the military professionals sitting at a connected dining room table with guns. The one who tackled me to the ground twice grins at me. He's missing a tooth just to the right of his front set. "What happened to the people I was with?" I ask again, thinking that they must know something. They must have seen something.

"She doesn't listen very well, does she?" the one who I assume is the leader deadpans. The missing tooth isn't the only odd thing about him. Two jagged scars mar his cheek.

A firm hand on my shoulder shoves me into the chair, and I breathe through a flare of pain in my side. "I just want to know that they're okay. Please." My voice shakes as I

beg. I don't care that they're looking at me like I'm a naïve little girl that they could grind under their shoe. I need to know what happened to Wyatt, Stone, and Lucas. And I might as well throw Ninja in there, too, because the big, burly Dragon has endeared himself to me.

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“Stay here,” my escort orders. “And you might as well save your breath. You won’t get any information from us.”

The four men in fatigues chuckle, and the two who turned to face me now turn back around. They’re all playing cards and drinking from solid blue mugs. The guard who brought me in here stops outside the entrance to the kitchen and turns, facing the opposite wall and standing completely still.

Out here, the hunger is worse. It overpowers me with the smell of coffee in the air. I don’t even like coffee, but I love the smell. I can’t hide the sound of my stomach growling—it has a mind of its own as it fills the room in angry spluttering.

For a moment, I think they’ve moved me out here as another form of torture. They act as if I don’t exist, carrying on conversations in a hushed tone that I can’t quite pick up, no matter how hard I try. They don’t give anything away, and eventually, I do stop asking questions and try to reserve my energy.

Right before the daylight almost completely filters out of the room, a car pulls to a stop outside, the tires crunching gravel. The engine shuts off, and I open my eyes, peering at the tan-clad guys for clues of what’s about to go down. Sure enough, they’ve expected this. They don’t flinch when footsteps stomp up a set of metallic stairs outside. The door opens, and a rush of fresh air enters along with the waning rays of light. Lance Jacobs moves into view.

My stomach tightens. I hate the sight of this man more than I’ve hated anything in my entire life.



“Dakota Wilder.” He smiles, but it’s more evil than anything I could’ve imagined. He chuckles to himself. “This is the Dakota I remember.” He sneers at my appearance. “A dirty, old street rat.”

“Fuck you.”

His grin widens as he lets the door shut behind him. “An uncharming, unwitty, degenerate. Not even hanging out with my Stone could change you.”

The mention of Stone has me snapping my mouth shut. Above all, I need to find out what happened to him—to all of them.

The camo-wearing soldiers disperse without Lance saying so. He moves into the kitchen to grab a chair, dragging it a few feet until he stops in front of me. He makes a show of sitting down and crossing his legs. “Now that I have your attention....”

25

The Lance Jacobs in front of me isn’t the usual Lance Jacobs.

He’s tried his best to hide the wrinkles in his suit and the shadows under his eyes, but you recognize the face of the person you hate as much as the one you love. He’s withered and beaten, and I bet I know why.

“You can call me as many names as you want,” I tell him, conjuring up a smile through all the hurt. What he thinks of me means nothing. I know who’s most important.

He tilts his head. “I have to say, I was surprised when you showed up at Stone’s wedding. Even more surprised when you shot that bastard. Can’t say I hadn’t thought of that myself over the years.”

“You’d rather make deals with devils instead?”

He unbuttons his cuffs and leans back in the chair. It protests under his weight, and he rolls his eyes as if the very thing itself aggravates him. “I make deals with anyone if I think it’s worthwhile. Kind of like your friend Cole.”

I can’t argue with that. I think it’s fairly accurate, but to me, there’s a vast difference between Lance Jacobs and Cole. For one, the Dragons look at Cole with respect, and I don’t think that’s the case with Lance at all. I haven’t been to any of his business meetings, but if his own son talks poorly of him, I think that explains it all. I don’t bite on his bringing up Cole, though I’m dying to know where he is and if he knows what’s happened. I half expect him to come running into the house with the Dragons at his side and dragging me away from here.

“Where’s Stone?” I ask instead. He has to be worried about his son. There was that incident with Stone getting shot but that can’t have been at the request of Lance. He wouldn’t. At least, I have to hope he wouldn’t.

“They said you were asking about him. All of them, actually.” He narrows his gaze. “Am I to understand that you’re in a relationship with all of them?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Don’t you care about my son’s reputation at all? He won’t be allowed back into the inner circle if he’s having relations with men, too.”

I snap my mouth shut. “That’s what you’re worried about? You think Stone is gay?”

My words alleviate his concerns. The deep creases in his forehead loosen, and I want so badly to tell him to go fuck himself. It’s not any of his business what Stone does, but I’m afraid by telling him the truth that I might hinder my chances of finding out

anything. He takes a linen cloth out of his pocket and wipes his strained face. “I have to give my son credit. I didn’t think he’d go after me like he did. Not just through business, I taught him that, but the other part.”

“You mean him trying to take back what’s rightfully mine?”

His toothy grin tells me I walked right into what he wanted to talk about in the first place. Of course he wants to know about the ring and the gold nugget he found in the small canister. “I’m shocked that old Clark had it in him. He had a piece of the treasure this whole time and never let it out.” He shakes his head almost chastisingly so. “He could’ve made a lot of money on those pieces. He definitely could’ve moved you both into a better situation.”

“My dad did what his family wanted him to do. Show loyalty. Something you know nothing about.”

The sharp lines of his cheekbones pull back to reveal a scowl. “You think I don’t know about loyalty? That would be my son you’re talking about.”

“Then he learned it from you. You know he got shot, don’t you? That the men you hired didn’t hesitate to pull the trigger aimed at him.”

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He snaps his jaw shut. “I was told it didn’t hit him.”

“And I’m sure they’re super trustworthy that you should believe everything they say. They’re trained killers.”

“They were trained by our government. I’m just employing them for our needs. If the government can do it, why can’t I?”

“Because this isn’t fucking war!” I snap.

“That’s where you’re wrong. You declared war on my family as soon as you made it your mission to find the treasure before me.”

I shake my head because his logic doesn’t make sense. “The Wilders were here way before you. You should’ve found your own riches to hunt down. But I guess that would’ve involved you actually looking for it yourself, which we know is never going to happen.”

Lance smirks and crosses his legs. “I’ll never know why lowly people take pride in doing things themselves. I’ll get the work done, and I won’t have to lift a finger.”

“Then what are you doing here now? Maybe we could’ve had this discussion over the phone.”

He smiles at me again, and it’s far more threatening than I’ve seen before. “Certain circumstances have made me take more of an active role. The team I hired are here to do one thing. I would usually ask Stone to do it, but since you took him away from

me, I had to pivot.”

Pivot? He throws professional words around like we aren’t talking about a father-son relationship. If anything, Stone is lucky he survived with all of this...ridiculousness sitting across from me. The fact that he fared as well as he did proves what kind of person he is. “Is Stone okay?” I’m burning to ask about Wyatt and Lucas, too, but I don’t want him to bring up our relationship again.

“I can answer your questions, Dakota, but I have a few of my own first. You know how this works, right? You’re here. You’re not in the safety of your gang friend and my son and his friends, anymore. You’re all alone, with me. I have the upper hand.”

I cross my arms. His words sit like a heavy brick in my stomach. He’s completely right. I’m at his mercy. I’m tired, hungry, and dirty; I need something to eat and drink soon before I pass out; I need a shower; I need some fucking pain reliever; and—most of all—I need to know what happened to Wyatt, Stone, and Lucas. So I need to play his game for at least a little while.

I swallow. “I think my brain would work better if I had something to eat and drink.”

He narrows his eyes. “I don’t know what kind of garbage they have in the house, but you’re welcome to sift through the cupboards.” He sneers at his surroundings and what I’ve believed up until now is clearly true. This isn’t Lance’s house.

I can’t help the widening of my eyes at his offer. I hesitate, and he snaps, “Go look!”

I stand from the creaking chair, and Lance flinches as if a shot went off. He immediately covers it by appearing bored as I drag my ass into the kitchen. The first cupboard I open has a few glasses in it, so I turn the faucet on and fill the cup, drinking it greedily before filling it up again. I move to another cupboard and find crackers. I open the box and dump out a couple of sleeves and snag one.

“Sometime today, Dakota. I’m a very busy man.”

If I had a knife, I’d throw it at his fucking head. Sucking in a breath, I peek behind me and notice he’s scrolling through text on his phone. I turn back around and pull open the closest drawer. There’s nothing in it. I keep searching until I hit the drawer by the sink. A set of knives rest in there, and I don’t know how sharp they are, but they’ll do. I take one out and slip it into my pocket. The stiffness of the camo pants hides the outline and when Lance huffs again at my taking too long, I grab the glass of water and the sleeve of crackers and return to my seat.

I give him a smile when I sit. He waits while I open the plastic and chew a few crackers, taking my time, less to annoy him and more to savor the fact that I’m finally eating. This isn’t a meal like Wyatt makes, but I’ll take anything to deaden the hunger pains twisting my insides.

“All set?” Lance inquires.

I hold up a finger and talk with my mouth full. “Almost.”

He glowers at me, and I’m surprised at how easy it is to get under Lance’s skin. He’s so used to people jumping at everything he demands. Plus, bad manners seem to get under his skin more than most. He was probably more mortified when I hijacked Stone’s wedding than he was when I shot his business partner. “And how are dear Rissa and her mother doing?”

“Better off, if you ask me,” he says, picking at a crease in his pants. “They gained a lot of money when you killed the head of the family.”

“Money isn’t everything.”

“Says the girl who searches for treasure.”

It's not worth my time to argue the point with him. The treasure has always been about money for him and nothing more. That's not what it meant to me and my family. Instead of explaining it to him, I shrug.

Lance lifts a brow at me, and when he finally thinks I'm ready to answer his questions, he starts, "What did you find out about the ring?"

"You don't know?" I ask. "You had the jeweler attacked."

He breathes out heavily as if I'm a child that needs to learn a few hard lessons. "I already told you the team I hired are here for one purpose only. They're not doing research or any searching. You took my researcher."

Of course he would refer to his son as a researcher, a mere partner in helping him find the treasure instead of what he really is. "Then why not send them after the jeweler again?"

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“Because their job is to trail you,” he informs me, voice pitching higher.

“Apparently not just trail me,” I counter.

“The ring, Dakota!”

“It’s Spanish,” I tell him. There’s no reason to lie; he could easily find the information out on his own if he wasn’t so preoccupied with us. “You know you can hire another researcher?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary. Stone will return home soon.”

I laugh, the sound bursting from my lips, sending pieces of cracker everywhere.

He scowls at me in disgust. It’s not the face that makes me pull myself together, it’s the fact that he believes Stone will go back to him. He doesn’t think he’s pushed it too far already. That’s just...crazy.

“You kept his mom hostage.”

“I wasn’t going to do anything to her,” he retorts. “I was teaching her a lesson since she didn’t fulfill her end of our bargain.”

“Maybe she liked my father better than you?”

Lance stands, hands flexing at his sides. He marches toward me and hovers until I lift my head back to stare into his depthless eyes. He winds his hand back and slaps me



across the face. I choke, spluttering to regain my breath with crumbs of food inhibiting every intake of air. My cheek blooms with fire, but I level a glare at him when he returns to his chair like nothing happened.

Stone's mother used my father to get away, and I see why in front of me. He's careless and heartless, too full of his own self-worth to be concerned with anyone else's. He tugs his suit coat together, buttoning it up to appear more professional. Again, he crosses his legs, sliding his joined hands over his knee.

He is a monster in a business suit.

"About the ring, Dakota...."

I place another cracker in my mouth, chewing it painstakingly slow. I eye him up and down before swallowing. Then, I tell him the story of the ring—at least what we were able to unearth. I tell him about the Queen and the adventure the treasure took from Spain toward Mexico and why it got stuck in the Superstitions. "That's all I know," I finish.

"Did you find out how much it was worth?"

My stomach tangles into knots. If Lance sells my ring, there's no chance of us getting it back. It would be lost forever. "You took out our jeweler, remember?" He glares at me, so I think fast. "Plus, we weren't sure if we needed it to find the treasure's location. It might point to something. There had to have been a reason why my family kept it."

I watch as the understanding glints in his eyes, and I close my own when I think that it might be safe for a little while. Sure, we'll still have to steal it back from Lance, but at least it won't be lost in a black market dealing. That's the only way to get rid of something like that; the moment he mentions it's part of the treasure officially, the

government will want to get involved.

“Now tell me about the gold nugget.”

His demand reminds me again just how much I lost when he had his men infiltrate Jacobs Manor. He paid our security team for the footage. He gave us the perfect distraction, and we led him right to the most precious thing we had. It kills me to talk to him about this, and I know my father is definitely rolling over in his grave. A Jacobs now has the one thing that the Wilders always had above them.

At least they don't have the map. I can breathe easy about that.

I lick my lips, setting the crackers aside for a moment and drinking the salty taste out of my mouth. “The nugget is separate from the treasure,” I tell him. “It was part of my family's gold vein from the same era. We held onto it to compare the gold we find to the gold in the cave, to make sure we're in the right area when the time comes.”

“Fucking Clark Wilder,” Jacobs tsks. He almost seems impressed. Enraged, sure, but impressed all the same. I doubt he ever believed my father was a worthy adversary, but none of that matters anymore anyway. “Did you get the gold tested?”

I shake my head. “We didn't have anything to compare it to yet.”

“And all that was buried in the back of your family's land this whole time?”

“All that,” I disclose, confirming his suspicions while keeping secrets of my own. I can't let him think that there's anything else, though he'd be a fool if he wasn't suspicious. If his team has been following us, they might know about the lantern, even though we took every possible precaution to keep our dealings hidden.

This time around, our precious find is sitting in a safety deposit box in a bank. We weren't going to take any chances of that getting out, too, even though that's of more historical value than intrinsic. Still, it means something to me. It means that my family isn't a bunch of crackpots. They actually had a vision to help us find the treasure all along. The squares and x's are a part of that, too. I just need my team back to figure it out.

"Now, tell me about Stone, Wyatt, and Lucas. Are they okay?"

Lance chuckles darkly. The deep noise guttural and sinister. "I'm not done yet, Dakota. I have more questions."

The way he glares at me makes me queasy. "You said you'd tell me if I answered your questions. I answered two, and you haven't answered one of mine. Are. They. Okay?"

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“Still not in a position to demand answers, little girl. Your family never was. Or...” he offers, “I guess they were, but they never did know how to use things to their advantage. When my team found the canister and brought it back to me, we found the ring and the gold nugget, but I’d be surprised if there wasn’t more.”

I swallow, my throat suddenly thick and the beating in my head returning with a vengeance. “More than an actual piece of the treasure? Why would you think that?”

“Tell me what else you have.”

“There’s nothing,” I growl.

He presses his lips together, the humor all but gone. “Nothing?”

“Nothing,” I reaffirm, my hands clenching to fists at my side. My pinky brushes against the knife I stole. It’s probably dull, but at least it’s something if I need to defend myself.

“You wouldn’t be trying to hide anything from me, would you?”

I scoff, trying my best at acting. Lucas says I wear everything on my sleeve, but I pour every ounce of believing into that one action. “What more could you think we had, Lance? Don’t you think if we had anything more that we would have found the treasure a long time ago?”

Lance leans against his chair, making it creak, but this time, it doesn’t break his concentration. He’s too fixated on me. “I would’ve believed that, but you see, I found

something else in that canister. Something you might have overlooked. It was stuck in the lid. A little folded piece of paper.” Lance reaches into his pocket and takes out a square of lined notepad that he unfolds in slow motion until I’m almost coming out of my seat. I don’t recognize it at all.

He clears his throat, placing one hand on his sternum as if he’s about to give a speech. “Dear Dakota....”

The earth tilts. I grip my thighs, putting every ounce of new energy I have into not falling over.

Lance peers over the piece of paper at me, as if to make sure I’m still paying attention, but I don’t think it’s that at all. I think he wants to witness the part where I pass out. To finally see a Wilder where they belong: on the floor and hyperventilating.

He smiles, turning the note around to show me the stilted writing on the other side. “I can see that you don’t know what this is, but you’re probably guessing correctly at this moment. It’s a letter from your dad. Your long lost, missing father.”

The sides of my vision turn dark, and all I see is that lined notepad page. I can envision him hunched over his messy desk, writing something to me. But, my brain also rejects the idea. Wyatt, Stone, Lucas, and I opened that canister, and we didn’t see a thing.

“Shall I read it to you?”

My brain buzzes with retorts, but I swallow them down. I’m caught between wanting to hear it and outright dismissing it as a fraud right here, right now. But with the way Lance is acting, he certainly thinks he knows something I don’t. “I reckon I don’t have a choice, do I?” I tell him, falling back into a pattern of speech my father used.

“No, you don’t. You seem to need a reminder about what else was in that canister. But I don’t need to give it to you, your father’s going to. Right here in his own words, Dakota.”

My mind whirs. “What does it say?”

My father wouldn’t have known he had to keep anything a secret if he left a note for me. We never intended on that rugged safe of ours to ever make it into anyone else’s hands. It was only a tin can with a screw top. It’s nothing like the safes they have nowadays with locks and passwords and codes. We thought the land would hide it. After all, the same kind of land had been hiding my family’s legacy all along.

But we were wrong.

I’m to blame for this. For all of this.

I can only cringe as Lance begins to read from my father’s note from the grave.

26

Dear Dakota,

If everything happens as I see it happening, you’ll be the sole keeper of this safe. I knew the things I did in my past would come back to haunt me at some point. I worried I would never find the treasure, but what I feared more was the day you found out what I did to you.

Someone has been following me, closing in on me for my wrongs. I’m too much of a coward to tell you to your face, so I’ll leave you with this: No matter what you learn, you’re a Wilder. It’s all your mother and I ever wanted. And I’m sure you have your doubts about my intentions, but a child is more than a vessel to pass a legacy down

to. You were so much more than that to me. I may not have always had the capacity to show you that, but I hope that by saying it now, you'll see.

Take care of our legacy, Dakota. You were always the one who deserved to find it. Use the map. It's the key, it has to be. Remember the stories. Make them come alive for a new generation.

I know it's too much to ask of you, but I'm going to do it anyway.

I love you.

Dad

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Nothing could have braced me for what the note said. They are words I need to sit down with, to repeat in my head a hundred times, dissecting every last meaning and punctuation to make sense out of it. In a way, words from my father might have been the only ones I would've trusted regarding the treasure. His letter says both everything and nothing at the same time. He doesn't apologize for what he did; he accepts it. He doesn't even apologize for my childhood, but that's quintessentially Clark Wilder. I wouldn't have expected him to change despite the trouble he was facing. And in the end, it was always about the Wilder legacy.

Lance leans forward and snaps his fingers in front of my face. I focus on him, tears welling in my eyes. He's broken me from my daydream, and I long to go back. I want to be surrounded by my father again. "Sounds like Clark had a lot more secrets than I ever expected." He shakes his head again as if he has more admiration for him now that he's unraveled some of my father's mysteries. "I never saw that coming either. I believed him to be a crazy old man who neither had the intelligence nor the means to find the treasure."

"My father was a far smarter man than you."

Lance laughs, the sound echoing off the bare walls. I've been ripped from the confines of my mind and placed firmly back in this rickety kitchen chair with the problem still in front of me. My father mentioned the map in the note. After he died, he figured I would dig up the canister, and he was right. It would be my turn to keep it safe how I saw fit, but what he didn't know was that I would dig it up for a completely different reason. He didn't foresee Lance Jacobs, and he certainly didn't foresee Stone, Wyatt, and Lucas as anything more than pesky searchers—a gnat to swat at when the annoyances became too much.



He didn't know they would change my life.

Lance crumples the note in his hands and throws it carelessly to the ground. I leap from my chair like it's a valuable artifact, my body protesting, but I end up retrieving it. Smoothing it out, I fold it back up, slipping it in my pocket where the stolen knife waits for me.

I don't know where Lance's security detail went. They're probably right outside and would come running in if they heard us fighting, but I also wonder if his protection is part of the deal? He might have just hired them to follow us, and they wouldn't care if I slid a knife into his beating heart.

I bite my lip and take my seat on the chair again. It's an enticing idea to end this right now, but I don't know if I need a repeat of killing Stone's father. Stone could barely look at me after the first time.

"You need to stop lying," Lance demands. "I know there's a map. I want to know where it is."

My heart beats in my chest like rapid gunfire. I've been taught to safeguard the map as much as I would watch out for my own life. Now that it's out in the open with someone I don't trust, I don't know what to do. I swallow. "There was a map."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, an eerie calmness takes over. "The thing is, your team of psychos literally flushed me and my entire camp out of the Superstitions. I don't know where the map is now. Most likely ruined, thanks to yourself." Lance's eye twitches, so I keep going. "You don't think there's mud caked in my hair for no reason, do you? Your team literally flooded us out. The last time I saw your son, he wasn't breathing. He was pale, his lips and eyelids a soft blue, the color of a corpse. With everything that was happening, I didn't see where the map went. I was too preoccupied worrying about Stone's life, something you should be

doing. So, congratulations, you're an asshole and you ruined the only map to the Wilder treasure."

Lance leaps forward and tackles me to the ground, the chair digging into my spine as my body erupts in pain again. The back of my head bounces against the tile and stars dot my vision before Lance's forearm closes over my neck. "You better hope you made a copy!"

I claw at his arm, but his suit coat is in the way and my fingers keep slipping. He places more pressure on my throat until he completely cuts off my air. I choke and thrash about, panic seizing me as my lungs start to burn again. He lets up, and I suck in a breath. Leveling my eyes at him, I growl, "There is no copy."

Lance roars in my face, spittle dotting my cheeks. I rumble back at him, dismissing the sting in my throat.

"And you say your father was smarter than me."

"More copies means it would've been easier for the information to get out." I swallow back the tightness and keep going. "You've been searching for the treasure for how many years and just now found out that there was a map? Yes, I'd say my father was smarter than you."

"Then you're ignorant." He pushes off my neck and stands. I drag in a few laborious breaths as he paces and runs his hands through his thick head of hair that's always rung fake to me. Even at his age, he doesn't have any grays—no doubt a dye job.

"Either way, the map is gone because of you."

"Then I guess I need you alive for a little longer, huh?"

My stomach drops. Queasiness overtakes me at his implication. I'm now only alive because I know what the map looks like, have burned it into my mind. That's why we never took copies. My father and I both studied it in every possible way. We could've gotten rid of it ages ago, but it was a piece of history. A piece of my family's legacy that we wanted to come out at some point—displayed under glass, gawked at by strangers, dissected by experts.

I may have it memorized, but it's not the same.

I right my chair and sit back in it. My midsection protests, but I ignore the pain and pull my shoulders back. "We're in quite the predicament here, aren't we?"

"You Wilders have always been a pain in my ass!" He's screaming by the end of his proclamation.

"The feeling is mutual, Jacobs." I shake my head. "The fact that any of them ever looked up to you boggles my mind. You're pathetic. You're unethical. And I'm not sure you care about anyone but yourself."

The corner of Lance's mouth turns up. "You don't want to talk to me about those boys. You think you know them, but you don't."

"They're not your boys," I seethe.

"Lucas only wanted someone to pay attention to him. He was the most easily manipulated, if I set Stone aside for a minute. Lucas was so desperate for a family, it was almost laughable. Wyatt was a harder nut to crack. The loss of his father shook him, and all it took was a little help with lawyers and advice and he would've done anything for me, too."

"You built yourself a nice little entourage." I swallow the bile rising to the surface.

He knew what he was doing to them all along, exploiting their loyalty. I wonder how long it took them to realize Lance Jacobs was a piece of scum using them to do his dirty work? Unmarked hands aren't a sign of strength and wisdom. You have to get on the ground and do it yourself to grow.

Once they figured out who he really was, there was no chance in getting them back.

“Too bad you hurt them, too,” I snap, the knot in my gut twisting more since I don't even know what happened to them. I thought I heard a faint call as we were leaving, but that could've been wishful thinking—an echo taunting me. “If you hurt me, you'll never get them back.”

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Inspecting him now, I realize he doesn't think Stone will be the only one to come back to him. He thinks Wyatt and Lucas will, too. He had to hire this other team, but they're strictly business. They're loyal to money. The best kind of team is one you can manipulate in other ways—with feelings. No wonder he thinks I took that away from him. He doesn't get that he did it to himself. Eventually, when you treat people like shit enough times, they start to understand who you truly are.

"I can't hurt you, Dakota. I need you. You're going to help me find the Clary Treasure."

"The hell I am."

He narrows his gaze and stalks toward me. "You will."

I laugh because he's out of his fucking mind. He can't manipulate me like he did them. He means less than nothing to me. I shake my head. "Not ever."

"I told you before that I'd share the money with you, but you're quickly losing that dangling carrot. Keep denying me and you won't see one cent of the treasure."

"It's not about the money for me. I won't help you because you don't deserve to find it. It's my family's legacy."

"Maybe you didn't understand the gist of your father's note.... You're not a Wilder."

His careless words ding against my armor, but they don't sink all the way through. The note in my pocket says it all and more. I don't have to have Wilder blood to be a

Wilder. “It doesn’t matter.” We glare at each other for a long time, and I can practically see the gears turning in his head. He’s trying to figure out his next step. I smirk. “A wise man once told me that ‘in order to have the upper hand, you have to be the smartest man in the room. The one with the most knowledge.’ And that’s not you right now, Lance. I hold all the cards. Let me go.”

He sneers, the glint in his eyes so different from Stone’s, it’s hard to see the likeness. If there is any, it’s buried so deep it’ll never see light. “You mistakenly believe you know more than me.”

“I’m the only person in the world who knows that map inside and out. You need me, but I will never help you. It’s over, Lance. Let me go.”

In response, he places two fingers in his mouth and a loud whistle rips through the room. The metallic stairs outside clang. The door opens, letting in a waning, sunset glow before it shuts again. It’s the leader of the merry band of troops who tried to kill us—the one who tackled me twice last night or whenever that was. He zeroes his gaze in on me as he stands behind Lance, his gun crossed in front of him.

“Dakota needs persuading to help us.”

“She does, does she?” He grins and the missing tooth stands out.

“She has something that I want inside that practically non-existent brain of hers. She thinks I won’t do whatever it takes to get it.”

The leader glances at Lance. “Torture is extra.”

My mouth drops. Of all my wildest dreams about what could go wrong while searching for the treasure, this was never it. I never imagined it would get this far. I know people die in the Superstitions, and I know not all of them are natural deaths,

but this? This is something extraordinary.

“They’ll never forgive you,” I tell him, grasping at straws.

“You underestimate me again.”

I shake my head. “You underestimate me. You always have.”

Lance turns to the leader. “How much extra?”

He looks me up and down. “I think she’ll talk for ten thousand.”

Ten thousand? Jesus Christ. How much is he paying these assholes?

Lance nods toward me. “Make it happen. I need her alive and somewhat functional.”

The leader grins at me, a sadistic glint in his eye. These guys get off on this, that much is clear. It may be about the money, but no one willingly gets into this shit unless they like it, right? Even Cole must crave the power in some way or else he wouldn’t lead a gang.

“Yo!” he calls out.

The stairs creak again, and Lance moves to the background as the five men approach me. “The girl needs some persuasion to talk.”

“How far are we going with this?” the one who brought me the bucket asks.

“Keep her limbs, but I don’t think it’ll take much to get her singing.”

I swallow the fear down. I’m sick of people underestimating me. I didn’t sit back for

years listening to all the bullying and snide comments just to give in now. This will be another test of my fortitude, and they can all go eat a bag of dicks because I'm not giving in.



The knife drags across my thigh.

The blade isn't from the same set as the one in my pocket—fat lot of good that did when two huge, trained men came at me, restraining me to the chair while three more lingered in the background. No, this blade was pulled out of a weapons belt. It isn't the type you have to flip open like Wyatt's, either. It's a knife that glints in the light, its sharpness parting skin like warm butter.

The cut stings, pain flaring out, but I grit my jaw, breathing roughly through my nose.

“Tell Jacobs what he wants to know,” the leader demands, standing back with his arms crossed. He fractures in front of me through tears I refuse to let fall.

“She's going to show us where the treasure is,” Lance announces, finally moving out around the gang surrounding me. However, as soon as he sees the blood dripping down my leg with my sweats hiked practically to my panty line, he steps back out of view where he's been hiding this whole time.

Fucking coward. He can't even watch while his team works. “You're weak,” I bite out at Lance. “Watch them do this to me.”

He doesn't give in to my taunt, but I think I see a glimmer of respect from the man holding the sharp blade. Not that it changes his mindset because he goes back for another cut.

My leg looks like a gory movie as blood spills down my skin in rivulets. The first crimson drop splatters on the tile floor.

“Show us where the treasure is,” the leader commands. His face says he can do this all day, so I try to give him the same one back. I don’t know how long I can last with blood loss, but I’m not showing Lance where my fucking treasure is. I would never forgive myself.

“It’s been missing for a couple hundred years. If my family could’ve found it already, we would have.”

“But you have the map,” Lance scoffs from the back.

I growl. “We’ve had the map this whole time. The son of the original finder drew it. It hasn’t helped.” I thought changing tactics might work, but it doesn’t. The ex-military crew doesn’t care. I wonder how many slices ten thousand dollars buys?

My tormentor draws the blade across my skin again, and a fresh cut opens up, this one a smidge deeper than the others.

My nostrils flare as I breathe out, determined not to cry.

“But you’re closer, aren’t you?” Lance guesses. “I see what Stone was doing now. You had the knowledge, and he had the technology. How much more ground have you covered with them than you ever did with your father?”

I press my lips together. Mr. Blade Happy peeks at me, then shakes his head. He makes another cut, the fourth horizontal slice over my thigh, and I grind my jaw through the pain. “The least you could’ve done was draw me a picture.”

Lance roars in the background. “Is this really worth it, Dakota? If you help me find

the treasure, you can go on with your life. It's done. It's over. Isn't that what you want?"

"You don't understand any of it," I tell him, tears slipping over now as the cuts become too much. "You never did." The two men holding my wrists cinch their grip tighter, and pain flares.

"Tell me you'll help me find it," Lance growls.

"No."

This time, Mr. Blade Happy uses the very end of the blade to prick my skin. The tip plunges lower, and he keeps going and going until I scream. He yanks the knife free and a flow of blood immediately follows—the crimson color running out turning my stomach. Dizziness sweeps over me, and my head hangs.

"Patch that one up," the leader demands.

One of them retreats to the kitchen and brings back sterile bandages like the ones we used on Lucas. The memory of Lucas, Stone, and Wyatt keeps me still. It captures hope in my heart. I don't know what they went through in the flood, but if they lived, I can do the same for them.

Bucket Guy wipes at the blood with a paper towel that I hope won't give me an infection, then he dresses the wound and tapes it up, slapping it when he's done. I growl, kicking out at him. "Sadistic fucks."

Mr. Blade Happy laughs. "I don't know, I kind of like her."

"She's a penniless whore," Lance calls.

“Not everyone has money to throw around,” he counters.

I eye Lance’s hired team. “You can keep going, but I’m not giving in. Not to him. Not ever. He’s the worst kind of human being.”

“And I reckon he doesn’t care about that,” Mr. Blade Happy offers.

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“Neither do we,” the leader barks, nodding toward me. The guy with the knife slices my thigh again, faster this time, and I’m almost positive it didn’t hurt as badly.

Black spots dot my vision, the edges of the room turn fuzzy, and their figures start to swim in front of me. If I pass out right now, will they stop or will they keep torturing me? Maybe I can be asleep for most of it? That would be nice.

One of the guys holding my hands yanks my hair back, and my head snaps up.

Well, it was a nice thought, but it’s not going to happen.

“Help me,” Lance commands.

“Fuck. You.”

Bucket Guy lifts my shirt. He finds the now-bruised area where my ribs have been hurting and digs his finger in. The pain is so white-hot that I gasp, unable to scream. My eyes feel like they’re going to fall out of my head if they get any wider.

Eventually, he lets up, and I can’t help the whimper that leaks out.

Lance peeks around his team, eyes widening slightly when he sees me. “You know what you need to do, Dakota.”

“What I need to do is make sure bullies like you don’t win.”

“You’ll be no good to my son dead.”

“But I won’t have given in,” I reiterate, words slurring now even though my conviction is still strong.

“We’re going to have to take a break,” the leader informs Lance. “Torture is more effective when done in spurts.”

The two behind me let go of my hands, and I slump forward, only I don’t have the strength to keep myself from falling over. I drop all the way to the hard tile, my head bouncing against the cool ceramic.

I close my eyes, conjuring up a picture of Wyatt in his cowboy hat while he rode that beautiful horse. Of Lucas naked in bed with his hands behind his head. Of Stone smirking at me with that cocksure grin. These scenes are when my guys are the most confident. I wrap my fist around the images and squeeze, not wanting to let them go even though darkness threatens.

“I’ll give it to her, she’s strong,” one of them says.

Lance sniffs. “She’ll give in. They always do.”

“We’ll make sure of it,” the leader promises.

I smile to myself because they have no idea who they’re dealing with. They don’t know that it’s been ingrained since childhood that the treasure comes before all else.

This is where that belief is going to come in handy.

“Christ,” Lance snaps, gathering my attention again. A slight vibration sounds in the background. Even with my inexperience, I’m pretty sure it’s a cellphone. “It’s—” He cuts himself off, then answers while walking over to me. He kicks me, and I groan. “Hello, Stone.”

My eyes snap open, a choked sob escaping. He's alive. God, he's alive. "Stone!" I call out.

Lance hits me again, and my cry ends in a moan.

"Yes, I have her. I've been too busy to answer your phone calls, but I think I have a way you can be useful now."

"Don't say anything," I cry out.

"Shut her up," Lance snaps.

Mr. Blade Happy comes over to wrap his hand over my mouth. "Bite me and you won't fucking like it."

His hands are humongous. Even if I had enough strength to bite him, I'm not sure I could actually grasp on to anything so I just lie there in silence, listening to a one-sided conversation.

"No, we're not going to give her back," Lance murmurs as if he's placating a dog. "Dakota, here, is going to help us."

"No!" I try to scream but it comes out muffled. Mr. Blade Happy gives me areally?look.

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Lance chuckles into the phone. “Yes, she’s being resistant so far, but she doesn’t understand that I have the upper hand.” He pauses for a few seconds. “Have you ever seen her bleed, Stone? It’s kind of crazy how the blood keeps coming and coming. She’s practically taking a bath in her own life force.”

I hear screams through the phone. They’re unintelligible, but I get the gist.

“No, I won’t stop. I’ve had enough of playing games with the two of you. Now that I know you’ve had a map these last couple of months, I’m even more intrigued to push through. Now, now, don’t lie. I know for a fact.”

Lance chuckles lightly. “I would’ve taken you up on that offer if you agreed two weeks ago. You had your opportunity. Don’t you remember me teaching you that? You never offer the same thing twice. Once they refuse the first time, you come at it from a different angle and a lower offer. Just remember that you had your chance, Stone.”

The leader drops to his knees beside me and uses the paper towels to mop up some of the blood, then starts applying more bandages. It’s a matter-of-fact transaction, as if he’s taking money out of an ATM. He’s not doing it to help me, he’s making sure I don’t lose too much blood so they can continue in a little while.

Mr. Blade Happy meets my eyes as Lance talks in the background. “He’s a dick, isn’t he?”

I narrow my gaze at him. I really might fucking bite his hand now if he doesn’t stop acting like we’re friends.



“This is the reality of where we find ourselves,” Lance continues. “She’s refusing to help me find the treasure. Torture doesn’t seem to bother her because she has no value for her own life, apparently, but I know what she does value, Son. I think you know, too.” He pauses, sighing. “It doesn’t matter how many times you ask, I’m not going to let her go. It’s getting trivial now. I’m going to give Dakota one last threat that I know she won’t be able to pass up. Are you listening, Son?”

My heart beats in my chest so hard and so loud I can feel it in my head; I can feel it everywhere, as if the very world stopped turning and is waiting for Lance’s next move. I wait on bated breath to hear his demand, already knowing that I’m going to hate it, but it doesn’t matter. He can do whatever he wants to me. I won’t give in. Stone and Cole, Wyatt and Lucas, they’ll figure out a way to get me out of here. Eventually.

Hopefully before I die.

“You see,” Lance starts, and even in the tease of his voice, he makes me want to vomit. “Dakota mistakenly thinks the only thing she has to gamble with is her own life, but that’s not true.” He moves into view, and I peer up at him from the ground. “If she refuses to help me find the treasure, my team will find you and they will kill you.”

His words knock the breath right out of me. Mr. Blade Happy tugs his hand away from my mouth. “You wouldn’t,” I protest.

Lance takes the phone away from his ear and grins. “Do you really want to bargain with his life? I can already tell you that Stone will make it easy. He’ll try to find you, he wants so much to be someone’s white knight, and in his attempt to rescue you, I’ll kill him. I’ll wipe him from the face of this earth. Then what? You might have the treasure but at what cost?”

“You wouldn’t do that to him,” I choke out.

“I think the question is, would you do that to him?”

My heart squeezes out a cry. Stone yells unintelligibly through the phone again.

Lance ends the call and grins down at me with a confident mile. “That’s what it’s like to hold all the cards. Your friend was right, but you really do have to have everything. Stone would’ve done better to explain to you how business works. You have to be ruthless. You have to go for what you want with no qualms. And most of all, you can’t care. That’s where you went wrong. You have feelings for Stone, and that means I own you now.”

“You won’t hurt him,” I say, using the only angle I think I have left. “He’s your son.”

Lance taps his chin. His hollow eyes alive, and that scares me more than anything. He thinks he has this won now, and I...I agree with him. I won’t let anything happen to Stone. “I don’t know. I wouldn’t count that out, but if I can’t bring myself to hurt my son, you can bet that doesn’t extend to Lucas and Wyatt. I have no problem whatsoever using them as chess pieces. Frankly, death would be welcome in both their lives. Lucas has no one, and no money whatsoever, and Wyatt’s family is as fucked up as they come. Neither of them has what the Jacobs’ have, and that’s why they’re expendable. I’d just as soon be rid of them and their influence on Stone.”

He licks his lips, crouching next to me. “I hope we see eye to eye now, Dakota. You can put an end to this or I’ll put an end to them.” He stands, Stone’s matching cocksure smile on his bastard face. “Next time, make sure you are the smartest person in the room before you go making bold claims.”

At that, he walks away, and the walls close in around me.

We're so fucked.

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I wake up under the hot spray of a shower, choking on water, and it's as if I'm back in the river, fighting for my life. When I open my eyes, though, I'm in a small bathroom, the door slamming behind a retreating form. I relax, only to peer down and find that I'm in the only dry outfit I have. Scrambling out of the shower, I pull out the crumpled note from my father and toss it on the simple vanity before it gets too wet.

Once the shock wears off, the sting of my injuries pushes to the forefront. The water seeping behind my new bandages make my skin throb, and that's not to mention the searing pain in my side. I grip the plain countertop in front of me, breathing in through my clenched jaw. However, I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. I undress slowly, tossing my now damp clothes to the floor and careful not to put too much weight on my leg since my fresh wounds protest my every move.

The warm water welcomes me back into the shower like an old friend. Well, an old friend that also likes to backstab. Everywhere I'm not injured, the hot spray feels like heaven. Everywhere I am, it stings like a bitch.

Leaning against the wall, I let the showerhead pressure sandblast the yuck right off me. The knowledge that Stone's alive mutes the internal outcry of my battered body, and I only think one thing: He's safe.

I press my cheek to the cool, white tile surrounding the shower. Everything about this house is cookie cutter—like it was flipped by the most boring investor ever. A search of my surroundings turns up no shampoo or conditioner or even soap for that matter, so I hobble under the showerhead and let the spray itself clean the mud from my hair. For several minutes, the water runs brown, then it lightens little by little before I run my fingers through my soaked, curly strands despite the warning tug in my side.

A gruff voice calls out from the other side of the door, “You have two minutes.”

I should’ve realized they were right there; that this wasn’t some charity shower. Everything is planned and scheduled. And now that Lance has me right where he wants me, I can’t deny that I won’t help him. I’ll do anything to keep Stone, Wyatt, and Lucas safe.

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A sharp knock sounds on the door. “You’re done.”

I keep rinsing my hair. “You got blood on my pants. Any chance I can get a new set of clothes?”

The guy—I can’t pinpoint which one it is—sighs. When he doesn’t answer immediately, I take his silence as a yes. I finish in the shower, stepping back out gingerly. It feels like I’ve run a marathon, and I’ve barely even moved. Bending for the pants I took off, I breathe through the pain and feel around for the stolen knife. It’s still there. Still hidden, thank God. It may be of no use whatsoever, but it’s the only weapon I have, and I’m going to take it. Finn taught me that—use anything at my disposal.

I tuck the blade in the shower, sliding it all the way to the edge where hopefully it will go unnoticed.

Just as I step out, my current guard comes in. “Ugh, God,” he turns away in disgust. “You’re young enough to be my daughter.”

“How lucky for her to have a father like you,” I deadpan.

He scowls, plopping new clothes on the vanity. “You have thirty seconds to dress.” He slams the door behind him, and I don’t waste time grabbing the knife from the shower and slipping it into the new camo pants. I dress through the pulsing pain, and my head swims. When I’m finished, I catch my reflection in the understated square mirror above the vanity. I’m pale, dark shadows riddling the area beneath my eyes. I also look exactly likethem, and it bugs the shit out of me.

The new pants are a little baggier this time, which allow me to actually fasten them over my side. It also helps toward concealing the only weapon I have.

When the door opens again, I'm running my hands through my hair, letting the water soak through the back of my shirt. It's one of the guys who restrained my hands during the torture. "Follow me," he demands.

He turns left out of the bathroom, and I already know he's not taking me back to the main room. The door to the bedroom I was in before is wide open, and he stands to the side, gesturing for me to enter.

I step in, hoping I'll be alone for a little while and the torture will at least take a break. "We'll let you know when Lance is ready to see you again."

I raise my hand and flip him off. He smirks. "If I were you, I'd rest that leg."

"Does any of this goodwill extend to some pain reliever?"

"I thought you were tougher than that."

"Fuck off, then," I snap, moving toward the mattress. I crouch with my leg out straight so I don't pull at the wet bandages. I hiss through clenched teeth. Every movement I make hurts somewhere. Either the sting of my cuts, the throb in my side, or the general ache of being tossed and turned in a washing machine-like river.

The coils give way as I lie on the lumpy makeshift bed. The door shuts, leaving me to myself. I find the most comfortable spot and stay there, only looking at the window to see if I can figure out what time it is—or at the very least what part of the day. It must be the middle of the night because the shades I ruined earlier are still on the floor, but no light streams into the room.

My mind wanders to Stone and the guys. If he's alive, Wyatt and Lucas have to be okay, too, right? He was the one in worst shape. They must have dragged him out of the water. I rest my palm over the beating pain in my chest. Anguish washes over me, but I close my eyes and with each breath, I force hope into each pump until it spreads over my limbs in a natural pain reliever, even if it is only in my mind.

I stare at the ceiling, imagining the Wilder treasure map stretching out over its length, the squares and x's popping up outside the valley like stars in the sky. I breathe easy, knowing I still have it at least in my brain. I could probably draw it out by hand again. It wouldn't be the same but it would be something. The image fades to the valley between the cliff faces—our destination. The picture is so clear in my mind. I hate that I'll have to show Jacobs where we're searching, but I don't have another choice.

He's going to be irate when I can't produce the treasure. I already know it. He doesn't understand a single thing about the search. Yes, we are closer than we were before, but I don't know how much. We can't even figure out the squares and x's.

Agitation quickly overwhelms me even though it's ludicrous. It took us almost two hundred years to find the first clue, we're not going to find the next over night.

But if it means saving Wyatt, Stone, and Lucas, I'm going to have to. Jacobs was right. He holds all the cards.

I conjure up the map again. It would've been too easy to make a key, wouldn't it? A little notation in the bottom right corner that said the squares mean this and the x's mean that. Why show the valley and the squares and x's? They must go together.

My father's belief was that the symbols represented certain landmarks or mountain features. If we could figure those out, it would help us find which valley the lantern was buried in.

Maybe I've been taking that thought as gospel when I shouldn't? Stone is the one who figured out that the letters under the lantern were probably inscribed on it. What if I came at this with fresh eyes? Completely throwing out everything I thought we knew?

We've now found those same symbols on the map in the valley. The problem? The symbols on the map aren't in the valley. They're outside it, scattered across the map like fireflies.

Since they match they have to mean something though.

I keep the image up of the map and overlay the picture of the valley. I gasp and sit up. Searing pain reminds me that's a terrible fucking idea, so I lie back down, holding my hand over my side. The pulsing reminder of my injuries can't black out the idea taking shape in my head. I can't fucking believe it. It might be my mind trying to force a round peg into a square hole, but I think—it's possible, anyway—that if we stood in the right location and held the map up, the squares and x's would match where they are on the cliff faces, like it's a map within a map.

I'm running through the idea in my head when loud voices pique my attention. I sit up only to lie back down again in discomfort, but the noise gets closer and closer. My heart hammers in my chest as I listen through the cheap, thin walls. I hope it's not my mind playing tricks on me because I think I hear Stone Jacobs, curse words spewing from his mouth.

The closed door protests as someone jostles the handle. More insults fly before someone calls out, "Let him pass!"

The barrier between us flies open, and a distraught Stone stands in the entryway.



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He's wearing the same pants he wore to bed when the river came up and washed us away. He has a new t-shirt on, but it's wrinkled and hanging off his shoulders. The shadows under his eyes lift when he sees me, and he drops to his knees. "Dakota."

My heart seizes. "What are you doing here? You have to leave," I plead at the same time I attempt to crawl toward him. I hiss as my body reminds me what a terrible idea that is. He scrambles across the tile and makes me lie back once more. The moment we connect, fire awakens under my skin. Hot tears press against my eyes. "He's using you against me," I warn, whimpering.

Stone shushes me lightly like he's calming a child. He runs his fingers over my hair. "I'm here now. You don't have to worry."

Tears track down my cheeks, fracturing my view of him, and I'm instantly angry at myself for screwing up my view of our reunion no matter how mad I am that he's here.

His father has him pegged for sure. He wants to be the white knight. Lance knew exactly what Stone would do, and I don't want to admit it, but he did have the upper hand all along.

I hate him.

"Don't cry," Stone soothes.

"Wyatt and Lucas?"

“They’re fine,” he promises. “They want me to tell you they love you so damn much. Wyatt cried when we washed up on the side of the bank and you weren’t there.” A tear forms in the corner of Stone’s gray-blue eyes, and he wipes it away. “I’ve never seen him do that before. In all the time he’s lost it about his parents, I never saw him do that.”

I press my lips together. Emotions lap at me like the ocean current. They’re never-ending and overpowering. “You shouldn’t be here,” I reiterate, while at the same time clutching him like a lifeline.

He crushes chapped lips to my forehead, and even though they’re cracked, they feel like heaven. “Don’t worry about anything,” he whispers, mouth moving over my skin. He yanks back like he’s been jolted out of a dream. “Are you okay? How badly are you hurt?” I shake my head and try to pull him closer, but he glares at me and moves away. “Dakota, let me take care of you.”

He inches his fingers toward my shirt, and I let him lift the hem. I sigh. “There’s something wrong with my rib, I think. Then there are the cuts on my thigh.”

He growls. “I’m going to kill him,” he rages. “You won’t have to worry about him anymore. I promise.” His fingers shake over the dark bruising on my stomach. Then, he reaches down, and I help him lower my bottoms so he can see the thigh bandages. Fresh blood seeps through the one where Mr. Blade Happy stabbed me. Stone immediately gets to his feet and bangs on the door. “I need a medical kit.”

“Fuck off,” the guard snaps.

“Father!”

I jump at Stone’s furious roar. I can’t hear exactly what Lance replies with, but the guard curses and retreats down the hall.

“We need to get out of here,” I blurt before the guy returns and overhears. “We have to leave. Lance is going to hurt you and Wyatt and Lucas. I know it.”

Stone comes back over and nuzzles my cheek, carefully avoiding touching any part of my body. “We have to play his game, baby. Please don’t worry.”

“Don’t fucking say that to me again,” I grind out.

He takes my hand and squeezes, devastation morphing his features. “Relax, please. We need to get you better and then we’ll work on what to do next.”

I groan, hating the worry on his face. I stifle a yelp as I reach out to touch his cheek. “You better have a fucking plan that doesn’t involve sacrificing yourself.”

He glances away, and the truth hits me. He doesn’t. He impulsively came here to save me, but that’s as far as his planning went. I’d be willing to bet on it.

The ex-military guy barges in, throws a medical kit at Stone’s feet, and slams the door closed again. Inside, the contents are all strewn about. Alcohol wipes, antiseptic, and bandages all mix together. There’s even a small bottle of hydrogen peroxide and another vile the color of burnt amber.

“I don’t know what happened to your stomach,” he grimaces. “It’s scabbed over already.”

“Something stabbed me when we were in the river. A branch or something. But that’s not the part that hurts. It’s my rib, I think.”

Stone dumps alcohol on it anyway, and I gag as the potent smell hits my nostrils.

“Sorry,” he breathes, staring down at me like I’m a broken china doll.

“It’s fine,” I assure him, my stomach roiling.

He helps me get my pants all the way off, then carefully peels away the bandages on my thigh. Fresh blood spills out, especially from the stab wound. He grimaces. “This is going to hurt.”

He moves before I can stop him. I press my lips together and scream with my mouth closed as he dumps alcohol all over the cuts, both big and small. My fingers curl into the mattress as fire rips through me.

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“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he repeats. His fingers shake as he opens the butterfly bandages. He uses three on the stab wound, pressing the skin together tightly and sealing it up. He uses two more on the deeper cut, and gauze and medical tape on the others. He even takes care of the slice on my calf, which looks superficial now compared to actual blade wounds. After wrapping my leg in more gauze, he covers everything with the tan sprain bandage, clipping the metal pieces on to keep it closed.

Afterward, he rummages through the kit and takes out a small, white package.

Tylenol. Thank fuck.

He opens it and offers the two capsules to me in his palm. “Do you want me to ask for some water?”

I shake my head. It takes some effort, but I eventually swallow the two pills and lie back to wait for them to do their thing.

Stone stretches out next to me, pushing the kit out of the way and tangling his feet with mine. He rests his hand lightly on my hip.

“Why did you come here, really?”

“You know I can’t let anything happen to you,” he murmurs, lips thinning. “From the minute Lucas got me breathing again, I’ve been worried sick. I’ve been trying to call my father ever since we got back to Clary, but he wouldn’t answer.”

“Ninja and Pete?” I ask, realizing I hadn’t asked about them yet.

“Fine,” he reassures. “Pissed as all hell. But I don’t think anyone was more pissed than Cole.”

My voice breaks. “He’s okay, too?”

“He really cares about you,” Stone admits. “The four of us trashed the house in our grief. I apologize in advance when you see it.”

A small smile tugs at my lips. “Maybe Lance won’t want it now.”

“He’ll be dead before he can make good on his threat to evict us. I’ll figure this out.”

I try to turn on my side, but the pain reliever hasn’t kicked in yet, so I stay where I am and glance over at him instead. “Ninja and Pete are really okay?”

Stone nods. “They said they didn’t have time to react. They heard the rushing of the water, and the next thing they knew they were being carried away with it. The military assholes dammed up the creek, waiting for it to gather as much water as it could. With the rain, it gathered so much that it took out everything in its path once they let it go.”

“These guys are professionals,” I whisper. “I heard them say something about Iraq.”

Stone nods. “Cole found out who they are with help from the evidence on the traps they left in our tent. They’re the type of people you hire when you have no fucks left to give. Those are his words, by the way.”

I chuckle at that.

“Ninja and Pete ended up at the bottom of the mountain. They’re bruised like the rest of us, but they’re completely fine. They started making their way back up as soon as

they could, but it was dark and they don't know the trails as well as we do. The SAT phone was ruined. It was practically a miracle that we even found them again. We helped each other down and caught a ride from someone parked at the trailhead. I think the man shit his pants when Ninja approached him."

"I would've liked to see that."

"It was pretty funny. Ninja was not in a laughing mood, and I'm sure the way we looked scared the crap right out of him."

I hum under my breath, finding humor despite our situation. It doesn't last long. I lick my lips, hating what I'm about to reveal. "Your dad knows about the map."

His face falls. "I know, baby. It's okay."

I shake my head because he has no idea. It's not okay. Not even a little.

Hope in the wrong hands can make that person damn near indestructible.

29

As expected, Lance doesn't let our reunion last, and before long, Stone kisses me awake. Thanks to the Tylenol and extra sleep, my head is clearer and my injuries are muted. I groan as he pulls me to a sitting position. "Dad wants us out there."

I shake my head, grogginess still lifting from me. "This is a bad idea. He's going to hurt you."

He doesn't reply, which makes my heart do a little flip. He knows what he signed up for, and he doesn't care.

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A knock sounds on the door. "Give us a minute," Stone barks, clearly agitated.

"You have five seconds," the voice warns, and I recognize it as the leader's.

Stone helps me with my pants, and they're barely over my ass when the door flies open, hitting against the opposite wall. My gray-blue eyed boy blocks me and glares.

The leader laughs, sneering at us like pests. "You think I'm afraid of you?"

I pull myself to my feet, holding onto Stone. Now that we're heading back out there, I'm kicking myself for sleeping instead of making a plan. I should've told Stone about the weapon I have in my pocket. Above all, I wish I could tell him not to do anything fucking stupid.

Of course, that's the first thing he does.

He marches right up to his father and shoves, smacking his head against the wall. The two Jacobs' square off. "You hurt her," Stone accuses.

"Technically," his father growls, "it wasn't me." He pushes his son off him and adjusts his suit. "If you two thick-headed children would've listened to me in the beginning, this could've been avoided. I'm wholeheartedly disappointed in you, Stone."

"I don't care what you think. You're already dead to me."

Lance glowers, looking more menacing than when he was dealing with me. The



leader makes me sit in the corner again.

“Have a seat,” the elder Jacobs orders, gesturing toward the chair opposite mine. “We need to discuss business.”

Stone sits. He’s vibrating in anger, but he softens when his gaze connects with mine. The only guard in the room is the leader, though I have no doubt the rest aren’t too far away and can show up within a moment’s notice.

Jacobs grins at the two of us. “So, here we are. As expected, Stone’s come to save you. Aren’t you happy your stepbrother loves you so much?”

The leader’s eyebrows raise. I’m pretty sure he mumbles “kinky” but I’m too busy rolling my eyes. Lance really hates the fact that his son fell for me. From his point of view, why wouldn’t he? I have nothing that’s important to him—I have no money, my family isn’t big in the business world, and no prestige.

“I guess we’re not talking now, are we? Should we just start with the torture, then?”

I scoff. “You couldn’t watch them cut me up, do you think you’ll be able to stay in the same room when they do it to your son?”

“I find the whole thing barbaric, but if it gets the job done....”

“If someone else gets their hands dirty, you mean.”

Lance places his hand on his son’s shoulder, and Stone flinches away. A growl works its way up my throat as the elder Jacobs squeezes until his knuckles turn white. If I were fast enough, I’d take him out for daring to even touch Stone. But in my current condition, I’d be stopped before I made it a couple steps.

Jacobs huffs. "As I've told you before, what does it matter as long as it gets done? We're not going to sit here and argue over semantics. Are you going to help me find the treasure or not?"

Stone answers for me. "No."

His father tightens his grip. Stone presses his lips together. Now that we're sitting directly across from each other with shafts of sunshine streaming through the haphazard blinds, I notice what rough shape Stone is in. He still has smears of brown over his face from the muddy creek, mixing in with some purple-blue bruising on his cheeks. He took some hard knocks while we were in the water. Understatement of the century, considering when I saw him last, he wasn't breathing. "Don't touch him."

"If the idea of you two together didn't make me want to lose my lunch, I'd be happy my son found someone to love. It's a shame she's not good enough for us, Son. You know that, right? Like I told you when I arranged the marriage with Rissa, Dakota Wilder isn't someone you marry. A mistress, maybe."

He's picking at a scab I'll probably always have. Stone is better than me. There's no getting around it.

"I am going to marry her," Stone boasts, staring straight at me. His lips turn up, and I notice the skin around them is discolored. "We're going to have babies, too, and I don't care if I have to give up my last name and take hers to do it. I don't want to be a Jacobs anyway."

Lance slaps him across the face. "Family is all we have!" he bellows, his face an angry red.

I get to my feet, only to feel a strong arm band around me, then throw me into the chair again. I hit with such force that I teeter on the back legs for a moment before

falling forward.

Stone just grins. “You’re right. Family is all we have, and it’s been a long time since you’ve been family to me.”

His father starts to pace again. I can see in his gait and the stiff set of his shoulders that he doesn’t want to hurt his son like this. He still thinks he can gain control somehow.

When he turns back around, he nods at the leader. The toothless, ex-military man whistles again, calling everyone in. Two of the men return to hold me in the chair while the others restrain one of the men I love. We stare at one another, and my heart breaks all over again. I’m so close, but I can’t do anything to help. I’m useless.

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Lance focuses on me. “Tell me you’ll assist us.”

Stone shakes his head, drilling his gray-blue eyes into me. But when Mr. Blade Happy unsheathes his knife, I panic. Revulsion nearly swallows me whole. I can’t go through with seeing him hurt. I can’t even pretend it wouldn’t shatter my world.

A hollowness creeps into my limbs as the guy holding the knife smirks at me. The sparkle in his eyes hardens my heart. He starts to bring the blade down slowly toward Stone’s cheek, and I can’t rush the words out fast enough. “Stop!”

A knowing smile forms over Lance’s face. I turn toward Stone who sits up straighter. “What are you doing, Dakota? Don’t.”

I shake my head. “No, they’re not going to hurt you, too.”

Memories of my father flash through my head. Wilders have always protected the map, protected our legacy, but I’m not willing to risk the people I love.

I bite the inside of my cheek and fight back the emotion rising to the surface. I take a deep breath and hold it before moving my gaze to Lance. “I’ll help.”

“Dakota,” Stone warns again.

I shrug and glance back at him. “You gave me no choice. I’m not going to sacrifice you.” I pull my shoulders back and address the elder Jacobs. “I’ll try my best, but what I said before is true. We’ve had the map for a century and that still didn’t help us.”

“You’ll find the treasure or Stone dies,” he states simply.

I think he’s bluffing, but I also see the warning in his dark gaze—if it’s not his son, it’ll be Wyatt or Lucas. I can only hope they’re someplace safe. Some place far, far away from us.

But I also know that’s highly unlikely. Stone didn’t say as much, but they must know where we are. They won’t stay away for long.

Which is why I need to press forward. “I imagine all of our gear got ruined in the flood?”

Stone glares at me but nods anyway. “We’ll need new.”

“And since daddy dearest is funding this, I’m sure he can handle that, right?” I lift a brow at Jacobs, as if I’m begging him to counter me. When he doesn’t, I grumble, “You better get some gear for yourself, too.”

He lifts his brows. “Me?”

“Absolutely. It’s about time you actually put in the work. Don’t you want to make sure everything goes according to plan? It’s kind of hard to run the show from the sidelines. You do know the treasure’s in the mountains, right?”

“I’m well aware,” he retorts.

“Wyatt and Lucas will want to help, too,” Stone notes. “Now that we’re in this.”

A flash of fear tightens my gut. He just said the last thing I wanted him to say. “No.”

“Yes,” he practically growls at me.

We lock gazes, but I know it's already done. I shake my head, wishing we could take it back. I want to keep them safe, and wherever that is, is going to be miles away from us and Lance's hired group of money-hungry assholes willing to do anything he says if given the right price.

I scowl, turning toward Jacobs. "No one's to hurt anyone."

He grins. "As long as you keep working toward the treasure, I can promise you that."

The spark of darkness in his eyes makes me wary. Why do I think he wanted Wyatt and Lucas involved all along? I close my eyes, hoping we didn't just put everyone we love in the path of a madman, even though it's a fruitless wish. "We'll leave in the morning," I tell him. "So you better get the gear we need today."

Stone starts listing off equipment like he's reading a grocery list, and his father scrambles when he realizes he doesn't have an assistant to take notes. Instead, he gets his secretary on the phone, and the list is repeated, Stone detailing to the lady that we need it all delivered to the trailhead by five am the next morning. When his father hangs up, Stone glares at him. "Better get some sleep, old man. You're about to get a rude awakening."

Lance lifts his chin in the air. "I'm sure I can manage."

Now that is laughable. Stone and I glance at each other with matching smirks. Lance is going to be less than a treat up there. No fancy chairs, no boardrooms. We're talking about real, physical work. He won't know what to do with himself.

Stone stands. His father waves the two military men away when they look to him for their next move. My blond-haired guy crosses the distance between us and reaches for my hand. I wrap mine in his, and he squeezes before helping me to my feet.

We start down the hallway when Lance calls out, “You can come home.”

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“I am home,” Stone says, peeking at me.

A rush of love fills me so fast it's as if I'm practically brimming over with it. He ushers me into the small bedroom and shuts the door behind us. When we're away from everyone else, he lets his mask slip. “What are you doing?” he pleads, desperation dripping from his words. “Your treasure...”

I grip his forearms, running my palms up and down his cracked skin, relishing that I can even actually do this. When he first bobbed to the surface in those rapids, I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to touch him again. “Unimportant when it comes to you.”

He brings me forward and kisses me. It's sloppy and careless, infused with passion. It's unlike any Stone kiss I've experienced before, but like the others, I'm taken with it immediately. It's raw and heady between two people who are desperate to remind each other that they're still here.

Eventually, Stone pulls away. He presses a kiss to my forehead, breathing out over my skin until I'm trembling in his arms.

He smirks, his lips moving just over my brow. “Cole will be disappointed I didn't get tortured.”

I blink. “Wait. What?”

“He told me if I came here, I deserved whatever I got. I think he wanted me to get roughed up.”



“It’s not an option,” I growl, the flash of Mr. Blade Happy flicking through my mind. I shudder to think he’d do the same thing to Stone that he did to me.

Stone bends to seal our lips together again. He takes his time, caressing me softly. “I was worried I’d never taste you again...never feel you again.”

I clamp my jaw down, unable to mirror his words back to him. I can relate, but I don’t want to think about that.

“Are you okay?” he whispers, fingers coming up to trace over my cheekbones. “Let’s get you lying down again. You’re probably exhausted.”

He leads me toward the flimsy mattress, but it’s better than having to lie on the floor. My muscles relax as soon as I’m sprawled out. He shifts beside me, propping his head up on his elbow. When I keep peeking over at him, he traces his fingers down my arm. “I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?”

“If I had it my way, I’d never leave your side again.”

His words make me breathe a little easier. “Let’s not do this again, Stone Jacobs.”

He chuckles. “It’s not on the top of my list to re-hash.” He brings my knuckles to his lips, brushing a soft kiss there. “I wouldn’t mind re-living the first time I saw you.” His lips move into a sad smile. “I wouldn’t mind experiencing our first kiss...or the first time we made love.” He brings my hand to his chest, and I feel the hard thump of his heart underneath his ribcage. “Maybe that time when we first showed up at your dorm because even though you were absolutely furious, I couldn’t get over how beautiful you were.”

I hum happily at his memories. “I’m pretty sure I’d enjoy a replay of every time I saw you shirtless.”

“Speaking of,” he says, reaching behind him to fumble with the First Aid kit. “Let’s get you some more pain reliever.”

I take the two capsules from him eagerly, but then hesitate. “Maybe I should keep them for tomorrow.”

He shakes his head. “I told his secretary to send some with the new camping gear. It’s okay.”

He nudges me, but I still hold back. “Are you okay? Do you need it?”

“If you think for one second I’d take those from you on my deathbed, you got hit too hard in the head when we were in the river.”

Business Stone is back, so I take the pills, choking them down over my raw throat.

He tangles his feet with mine again, staying close even though he doesn’t dare touch me. His warmth is all I need. “For real, though,” I manage to get out without my voice cracking, “I think I’d relive the moment when you guys busted down my door, too. I’d let everything I know now change what we did. I wouldn’t spend one moment arguing with you, I’d just—”

“Throw yourself at me?”

I turn toward him and nod. “Yeah. Basically.”

He blinks, reaching out to cup my cheek. “I wouldn’t change a single thing. I love you, Dakota.”

Emotion clogs my throat. Fighting back the terrible memories of the last day, I whisper, “I love you, too.”

I shuffle closer, and when he realizes I’m not going to let up until we’re lying together, we find a position that doesn’t hurt too much. I fall asleep with my head in the crook of his arm, his thumb trailing over a spot on my hip.

My good leg jumps up and down early the next morning while we make our way to the trailhead. Stone and I are seated in the back of the Range Rover. He grips my hand fiercely as we come around the corner to find the Audi already in the mixed-gravel pull-off. I nearly come undone, my heart threatening to split in every direction. Stone's assured me a hundred times that Wyatt and Lucas are fine, but I need to see them with my own eyes, and I'm about to burst out of my skin if I don't get to do it soon.

When the vehicle stops, I hop out with as much grace as I can considering my injuries. Wyatt swings the passenger door open just in time for me to walk into his arms. We both groan. It's not a pleasurable sound. It's a mixture of relief and, on my part, nursing my sore ribs. "Jesus, Tits," Wyatt huffs.

"Sorry," I mumble into his shoulder, gripping him like he might get washed away without me again.

"No need. It's worth it." He turns me around and uses the Audi to prop me up as he pulls away. His blue eyes, though sagged with shadows, are bright. He takes his cowboy hat off and leans forward, kissing me softly with eager lips.

Retreating, he nods toward Lucas, and I limp toward my stray cat-like boy. Oddly enough, we all fit with him right now. Even Stone's hair is a mess, and I don't want to know what unholy power has nested in my slept-in curls.

Lucas places a few wild strands around my ear. "You're the most beautiful thing I've

ever seen.”

My throat catches. I certainly don’t feel beautiful. I feel like I’ve been run over by a semi. “Are you okay?”

I inspect him for injuries but before I can get too far, he tugs me into a hug. It’s a pleasant sort of pain, one I would gladly receive again and again if it was so I could touch him for the first time again. “I don’t care about me. Are you okay?”

Luckily, the whole night of rest has done wonders for my aching body. I’m far from one hundred percent, but I feel as if I can make it up the mountain, which is all I need. “I’m sore,” I hedge, not wanting to lie but not wanting to tell him the whole truth either. We need to focus on getting through this.

Reaching up, I feather my fingers over the scars on his neck. He probably has more now. Thankfully, scars can heal. We might always be reminded of them, but they don’t stick around. Not like grief.

“Touching,” the leader of the ex-military group muses unaffectionately. “We’re patting you guys down.”

Stone leads me away, and two of the men in bland camouflage move forward to search Wyatt and Lucas. Miraculously, Wyatt doesn’t have anything on him, and I wonder if that’s because he knew they were going to do this. Surely, they weren’t just going to let us walk into the mountains with weapons to protect ourselves.

After Wyatt and Lucas are cleared, the leader checks his watch. “He’s late.”

“Unsurprising,” Stone grinds out. “He hasn’t seen this time of day in years.”

Despite the situation we’re in, I’ve always loved the Arizona skyline early in the

morning. When the first rays of daybreak shine over the peaks, it appears as if they're just waking up too. It's awe-inspiring.

An engine sounds in the distance, and we all turn toward the bend in the road until a white van drives into view and comes to a stop next to us. "Delivery for Stone Jacobs?"

Stone moves forward, raising his finger in the air. "That would be me."

"Sign here, please."

The driver hands a clipboard out the window, and Stone hastily signs the paper before returning it.

"It's all in the back," the man grunts, hiking his thumb over his shoulder. The driver isn't paying attention enough to notice that some of us have guns. Either he's been paid to keep his eyes down, or he's just that fucking clueless about what's going on.

The men Lance hired approach the rear of the van like it might hold an explosive device. When they've checked everything over, they move away so we can start grabbing the equipment. Now that we have a lot more bodies to carry things, there's a lot here.

Lucas brushes his hand down my side, and I turn toward him with a slight frown. "How did you know we were going to be here?"

He flicks his eyes to Stone. "We didn't. We've been hanging out at the trailhead because we thought you'd eventually come here no matter what."

I eye the team with the guns. "Yeah, with company."

“Did they hurt you?” he asks.

I shake my head because there’s no reason to go into that right now. It’ll just piss Lucas off. Stone and I changed my bandages again early this morning after he showered. The team was still watching us, but they weren’t acting as if we were prisoners like they were before. In fact, Stone had to wait in line while the rest of them showered, too.

Wyatt and Stone give our new company a brief course on the mountains to which the men respond with derision. The leader pretty much tells them to fuck off since they’ve all been in way worse terrain than this. Wyatt shrugs at me when everyone disperses. At this point, it’s thirty minutes past when Lance was supposed to get here. I just want this over with, and it seems like everyone else does, too. I’m eager to see if my idea about the map actually works, and if it doesn’t, then hopefully Jacobs will discover that finding the treasure isn’t as easy as he thinks it’s going to be.

I sit on a boulder on the side of the road while the leader attempts to call Lance. I take the opportunity to ask my guys where Cole, Ninja, and Pete are. Wyatt takes his hat off, runs his hand through his hair, and puts it back on. “They’re staying back. We all thought it would be better, but don’t worry.”

“And the map?” I hedge, my gut twisting because I already know the answer.

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“Actually,” Wyatt draws out. Stone looks up, and I know this is new information for him, too. My heart leaps in my chest. “Lucas and I found the spot where all the water drained to. Our water-logged gear was all there. Most of it was ruined, but the pack that had the map in it was still intact.” He finally meets my eyes. “It’s in rough shape, Tits.”

I can hardly believe my ears. “But...you have it?”

He nods, a smile tugging his lips. Then, he gets up and walks toward the trunk of the Audi.

Bucket Guy whirls, aiming his firearm at Wyatt. “Stand down, Cowboy.”

Wyatt lifts his hands. “I’m just getting something out of the trunk. Trust me, your boss will want this.”

“Boss?” he snarks.

“You know, the dude paying you.”

“We don’t answer to anyone, now stand back so I can get in there first.” He moves around Wyatt and checks the trunk. After a quick perusal, he makes Wyatt take the bag out, and he sets his gun aside so he can rifle through it. He takes out a satellite phone, sneering at Cowboy. “We won’t be needing this.” He drops it on the ground and crunches it under his boot.

“What the fuck?” Wyatt growls. “That’s for emergencies.”



The soldier brings his gun up to aim at Wyatt again. “Or so you can call for help.”

I stare at the broken radio, my heart squeezing. That was probably how we were going to get in touch with Cole. Fuck.

“We might need to call for help for other reasons than you shoving weapons in our faces,” Wyatt spits, batting the end of the gun away.

Before I know it, Bucket Guy has Wyatt’s face smashed into the fabric of the trunk. “Don’t touch a man’s firearm. You got that?”

Wyatt’s lip curls in a sneer.

“What’s going on over there?” the leader calls out.

He gives Wyatt’s head one last shove and then stands upright. “Nothing. Just giving these punks a lesson.” He scoops the bag up off the gravel and continues going through it. When he finishes, he drops it on the ground and returns to his team.

Wyatt flips him off as he walks away, then grabs the bag to bring over.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he scowls. He takes several deep breaths, then crouches. He pulls out the map and gently unfolds it. It’s faded, some parts almost completely wiped clean, and there are new holes spotted about too. I have to breathe steadily before reaching out.

“Be careful. I don’t know how much longer it’s going to last. I didn’t know if we should bring it with us.”

My hands shake as I grasp it. I blow out a breath. “I have an idea, actually, about the

treasure...and the map. Do you have any paper in the car? Something I can trace the squares and x's with?"

Wyatt ends up finding an old homework assignment in the glove compartment, Bucket Guy at his hip the entire time. I don't know what he thinks we're going to do. Take on five professionally trained badasses? We're not stupid.

While we wait for Lance, I lay the map on the inside of the trunk and place the paper over it, using it to trace over the very faded squares and x's. I think a few of them are missing, but I can't worry about that right now. When I'm finished, I stand back. "We should leave the map here. If we can keep it out of Lance's hands, I'd feel better."

I slip the traced paper into my back pocket, and Wyatt closes the trunk with the map still inside. Finally, another engine revs in the distance. Stone raises his brows. "So, what's your idea?"

I peek behind me to where the sound is coming from. "I think that the squares and x's might match up on the map. Like, if we were standing in the perfect position and we held the map up, the squares and x's would align where we found them in the chasm."

Stone blinks and tilts his head as he mulls the new information over. "Like a visual aid? Showing us right where to stand? That would be...genius."

"But what would that mean?" Lucas questions.

I shrug. "I don't know, but I'd think it would have to mean something. That we're on the right track? Or we're right where we should be?"

A black car finally comes into view, and Lucas moves his body so we're angled away. "What are we doing guys? What's the plan?"

I lick my lips, watching the car pull up on the side of the road. “The only plan is to stay alive. I don’t care if Lance gets the treasure. All I want is the four of us to walk out of the Superstitions together.”

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“Dakota....” Stone starts.

I shake my head. “I’m not sacrificing any of you. I mean it. We play their game until we don’t have to anymore.”

“We can still do this,” Stone assures me. “We’ll figure out a way.”

“Not at the expense of any of us,” I answer. “This team of his is fucking scary.”

Stone swoops in, grabs the back of my neck, and pulls me toward him. His kiss is so forceful, I trip over my own feet and almost lose my balance. He pulls away, keeping his eyes on me. “Don’t lose faith. We’re going to do this.”

He walks across the road to greet his father who steps out of a hired car. I’ve never seen the man out of a suit and tie, but here he is, in a pair of chinos and a black shirt. He looks absolutely ridiculous. If that’s what he thinks we hike up the mountains with, he really is clueless.

Lucas takes my hand, and we all move toward the trailhead. Behind us, Stone says, “Now that you have us here willingly, Father, I think it’s time you let your hired men go. They won’t be of any use to us in the mountains.”

Well, damn. That’s worth a shot.

Lance’s sinister laugh echoes in response. “I never pegged you for a comedian, son. The men stay. They’re my backup to make sure you don’t start anything funny up there. Remember we always talked about odds when you were growing up? Four

against one doesn't make for good odds. But, four against five highly trained men at my command? That's good enough for me." He slaps his hands together. "Now, let's get to it."

My heart plummets, but of course Lance wouldn't have taken the bait. He's nothing if not a smart businessman.

Stone sneers at his father's back as the elder Jacobs starts marching up the trail. Of course, he would act like he knew where he was going and decide right away that he shouldn't have to pull his weight.

"Father," Stone barks. "You need a pack. No one else is going to carry your food or water for you." He grabs the bag we designated for Lance from the ground and chucks it at him.

His father catches it, nearly falling on his ass when his foot trips on a rock. He frowns, testing the weight in his hands but shoulders it anyway.

"And these," Stone says, throwing snake guards at him.

Lance catches one, but fumbles the second, and it lands at his feet, kicking up dirt. He inspects it with curiosity, but it isn't until Stone thrusts his foot out to show his father what they're for that he gets it.

"Unless you want to get bitten by a poisonous snake?" Stone mocks. "One of your men ruined our only communication off the mountain, so there won't be any helicopter rescues if one of us gets bitten."

Jacobs sticks his chin in the air. "I'm sure he acted in my best interest." He takes forever to secure his snake guards as the rest of us pull our packs on. The hired men make all four of us go up the trail first.

I'd prefer to push the envelope to prove to Jacobs he's a pussy but my battered body refuses. A sheen of sweat appears on my forehead far sooner than normal as the ache in my side pulses. Coupled with the slices on my thigh, I'm slower than slow. Wyatt, Lucas, and Stone take turns assisting me, taking on most of my weight through the rougher terrain. Even still, Lance falls behind, huffing and puffing. We pretend we don't hear his wheezes and put off a water break for as long as we can until it's evident I need one.

Wyatt sits me on a boulder that's about three feet tall, locking me into place with his blue eyes. "What aren't you telling us, Dakota?" He eyes my body as if he can see right through my clothes.

Stone pulls a First Aid kit out of his pack and kneels next to me as the hired men and Lance find their own places to relax. He turns, glaring at the guys over his shoulder. "Help block her. You're about to see something that's going to piss you off, but you absolutely cannot react. Okay?" His words started out as a warning then ended on a strained swallow.

Wyatt closes his eyes, preparing himself. Lucas pulls his shoulders back, and then they move into position as Stone helps lower my size-too-big hiking pants to my knees. I've got to give the guys credit, they don't give in to the murder I see in their eyes. Instead, they move closer, allowing me privacy and checking out the injuries themselves as Stone changes the bandages.

The skin is red and puckered, inflamed from all the physical activity, but there isn't any fresh blood. He wraps me back up and hands me two white capsules from a separate container that didn't come from the kit. He gives me a worried smile. "They're extra strength. Hopefully it'll make the next leg of the trip easier."

I use the canteen to take the pills, praying they kick in soon. Wyatt helps me to my feet, and he and Lucas move in, hugging me at the same time. Wyatt's "You're the

strongest person I know,” is overridden by Lucas’ dark promise, “They’re going to pay for that.”

After a few minutes, we start back up the mountain. Stone eyes his father every chance he gets, watching his movements. If we were alone, I’d ask him what he’s up to. What he sees. Maybe he’s looking for something he doesn’t see? I know I’m always trying to find the link between the two of them. I used to see it as clear as day. They were both Jacobs’. Both my enemies. But now, that line is blurred. Stone is as much of an enemy as I am to myself. Lance, on the other hand, is a monster. He’s not scary up here. His true, worthless colors are being drawn out by the mountains as I knew they would be, but he still holds power. It’s just at the hands of five professionally trained, heavily armed men.

Not only that, but Lance has the capacity to bring Stone down. And that’s a major concern for me.

Because we take less breaks, we get to the area where we discovered the lantern sooner. The sun isn’t as hot today, and I feel cheated because I have major doubts that Lance would’ve been able to make it up this far if we were closer to summer. What a shame.

“What are we stopping for?” Lance huffs.

“This is where we’re searching,” Stone informs him.

“Is this where the map said to go?” He sucks down water and then drags in breath after breath. Sweat dots his brow, and he surveys the area as if he’s searching for shade or perhaps an air conditioner—neither of which he’ll find here.

“We’re still trying to decipher the map,” Stone explains, gazing at me as if he’s not sure how much he should say.

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I take a drink from my own canteen. “We know we have to go through this valley,” I say, pointing to the area between the two cliff faces.

“Then where?” Lance quizzes.

I sigh. “This isn’t a step-by-step guide to a recipe, Jacobs. Not that you would know how to use those either.” I take a deep breath, trying to settle my annoyance. “They made it hard to find for a reason. If it wasn’t, you might’ve even already found it.”

“How do you want to proceed?” the leader asks Lance, hiking his gun up like he’s ready to use it.

Lance stands drenched in sweat, but he still has that demanding air that he’s been perfecting in offices all over Phoenix. He has power, and he knows it. “We’ll see how this plays out for now. I’m sure they understand that if they’re just taking us on a leisurely stroll, there will be consequences.”

“I can nick one of them again,” Bucket Guy offers.

Stone turns toward him, scowling. Well, now we know which one got him, I guess. In answer, the guard lifts his brows suggestively.

Lance shrugs. “Sure, start with that one.”

He points out Lucas, and my heart drops. “What?” I exclaim. “No.”

I barely wrangle in my surprise before all five guns turn toward my messy-haired



guy.

“A reminder couldn’t hurt,” Lance crows, smirking.

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I throw myself between the assault rifles and Lucas. “Stop!”

“Dakota!” Stone screams. He lunges for me but stops when one of Lance’s team swings the barrel to his chest.

Lucas growls behind me. “Get out of the way.”

“No.” I glare at Stone’s father, fighting back the sudden dose of adrenaline pumping through me. I keep my voice steady even though I want to shake the shit out of him. “I’m helping you. I have an idea to try, but you have to understand that we’ve been searching for this for over a hundred years. It’s not going to magically appear once you pull guns on us. It takes research and sleepless nights and actual boots on the ground. You don’t just get to wave your finger at a problem and have it go away, and if you think for one second that if you do something to one of them that I’ll be in any sort of mood to give you one fuck’s worth of time, you’re the ignorant one.”

“Show me something quickly,” Lance threatens, boredom moving into his voice since he’s not gulping in air like a greedy bastard.

I didn’t want to do this in front of him, but I meant what I said. We all get out of here alive or it means nothing to me. I take out the trace of the map I did.

This piques Lance’s attention. “Is that the map?”

“Sure. My ancestor who took...” I turn the paper over. “...Chem 103 wrote the most

important document in Clary history on the back of their homework.”

Lance sputters something, but I ignore him as I unfold it, then motion to Mr. Blade Happy. “I need your knife.”

He unsheathes his blade and hands it to me handle out. I curve my fingers around the black, well-worn grip and move toward the huge boulder, smoothing the paper out and using the tip of his very sharp blade to cut out the traces I made earlier. Afterward, I give the knife back and hold up the map.

“What are you doing, Dakota?” Lance asks, frustration clearly evident.

“I told you I have an idea.” My stomach churns with a mix of doubt and excitement. If this matches up, we won’t know what it will mean but it’s a start.

Wyatt, Lucas, and Stone crowd around me. “I think we’re missing some of the squares and x’s,” I hedge. We need to show them something, but this is the only idea I have. If it doesn’t pan out, I don’t know what we’re going to do.

“But if all the others match up, that’s what we need.”

“Where was the first one we found?” Lucas asks. From the corner of my eye, I see him inspect the cliff face on the right.

“About halfway down the chasm. Maybe a quarter of the way down from the top.”

“It has to line up with this one,” Stone offers, pointing to the outermost square on the map.

“We have to line it up with the outermost on the opposite side,” I state. “I can make the square show through now, but it has to match up with another in order for this to

mean something.”

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Wyatt nibbles his lips. “Two of us should go down there and stand underneath the first two.”

Lucas drops his voice and peers at our surroundings. “We’ll be way outnumbered, then.” Lance’s team still hold guns on us, as if we’re suddenly going to find a way to attack them.

“At least you’ll be away from them.” I hold his stare, the fear that ripped through me when Lance so casually gambled with his life bubbles to the surface again.

Lucas grips my shoulder. “Don’t worry.”

“Wyatt, you stay with Dakota,” Stone demands, taking charge. “Lucas and I will go down and stand in front of the two outermost squares, and we’ll see if they align.” Once we agree, Stone turns and informs his father of our plan. The leader nods toward Stone and Lucas’ retreating forms, and I suck in a breath as two men follow after them. Of course they would. Goddamnit.

Wyatt threads his fingers through mine. “Just relax, Tits.”

I close my eyes and breathe in. My heart pings in my chest as Stone and Lucas eventually take their places underneath the carvings in the rockface. They both yell to me where their symbols are, and with their help, I can just barely make them out, though the one above Stone is obscured by a bush growing out the side of the mountain.

I keep the traced map out in front of me while Wyatt guides me over the terrain,

being my eyes and ears for poisonous creatures and trip hazards. The closer I get to the square on the left fitting into place, the hair starts to stand on my arms.

First, we found the lantern together. If this is the next clue, this is huge. All those years my father and I searched together, and all those years he searched before me, he never got to this step. He'd be ecstatic to know that I did it.

"We're almost there," I breathe, checking both sides. We're pretty far into the valley now. The terrain is trickier, so Wyatt holds my forearms to keep me stable. "Right...here," I murmur, stopping.

"They actually match?" Wyatt tightens his grip on me. I hand him the map and move so he can stand exactly where I was. "Holy shit," he whispers.

I give Lucas and Stone a thumbs up. "We got it!"

Lance scrambles forward, tearing my attention away from Stone and Lucas' excitement. "What did you find?"

"The two carvings on the map match up." I bite my lip, praying that the rest will, too.

"So, where do we go next?" he rushes out.

If I could, I'd grab one of the bigger rocks at my feet and hit him over the head with it. "We have to match up the other carvings," Wyatt answers for me before I lose my patience.

The man who's used to air-conditioned offices sighs.

"We're a step closer," Wyatt confirms. We exchange an exasperated glance at Lance's impatience. I hope he's right. If not, Lucas could become a target again. And

after him, it will be Wyatt.

Then Stone. Or me. I don't know whose life Lance would value more at this point.

Wyatt places his hands around his mouth. "Go to the next carvings!"

Stone and Lucas start moving up the valley, their followers trailing behind with their guns drawn. "We need to get rid of them," I whisper to Wyatt.

He presses his lips together, barely humming out a response. "We'll figure it out."

"If you know something I don't...." I trail off, hoping like hell they do. Cole wouldn't let us come up the mountains alone unless he had a plan, right?

Wyatt checks behind him. Whatever he sees, he lowers his voice again and moves in closer. "We had a plan, but then that fucker destroyed the SAT phone."

I close my eyes. I figured as much. "I have a kitchen knife in my pocket," I tell him. "They don't know I have it. It's Lance's fault. He's kind of an idiot."

Wyatt holds back a smile. "You want us to fight off five dudes holding guns with a kitchen knife?"

"Did I mention it's probably dull?" A laugh bursts from me. It's not funny at all, but I'm teetering on the high wire of stress and it feels damn good to laugh.

"This is why Lucas calls you Wild Girl."

I pull myself together. "Do you want the knife?" I ask him, lifting a brow.

He shakes his head slowly. "Keep it. Use it if you need to. Just start swinging but aim

for the throat. Even a dull knife can puncture skin.”

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The cement block that's been chilling in the bottom of my stomach hardens. I don't like the "last resort" talk. Thankfully, Lucas calls out to interrupt my thoughts. "Found it!"

Lucas's voice echoes as he explains the proximity of the carving. As Stone and Lucas continue up the valley, pointing out more symbols, it's difficult to match them up. Years of growth and rocks falling have changed the cliff face. Not to mention, the etchings have dulled over time.

"Does it match?" Wyatt asks, peering over my shoulder.

"It's hard to say, there's a little jut out on the face there. I think it could be blocking it, but I'm not sure."

Wyatt takes the map and looks for himself. "We might have to have them climb up and point it out."

I frown at that. "I really don't want to add rock climbing into the mix."

"What are you two discussing?" Lance prods, moving closer. "Does it fit or not?"

"It's hard to tell." I turn to face him. "It's called erosion and a century's worth of natural damage. Sun, wind, storms. Growth. Things you would actually know to think about if you weren't sitting up in your office and letting Stone do all the work."

Lance charges me, but Wyatt intercepts him. The older man's nostrils flare. "I think she needs a reminder of what she's doing here. Maybe open up an old wound?"



Mr. Blade Happy comes at me. Wyatt does his best, but the leader pins him on the ground as his friend whips his knife out. “You shouldn’t be so snarky,” he admonishes.

I walk backward and trip over a rock, falling on my ass. I crab walk backward over sand and rocks. “You can’t tell me it doesn’t irk you that he’s the one giving orders.”

“Hey!” Stone shouts from above. “What’s going on?”

I hear a commotion—boots crunching stones—but there’s no way they’re going to get here in time. And even if they did, it wouldn’t matter.

“I don’t like it, but I’m not getting paid to be his friend.” He drops his knee into my side, and I cry out. Even the extra strength pain reliever isn’t going to mute this sharp pain. I snap my jaw shut and breathe through the flare. Stone and Lucas call out again, concerned voices stretching over the expanse of space between us. Mr. Blade Happy smirks down at me. “Don’t worry. Just the tip this time.”

He yanks the sleeve of my shirt, exposing my shoulder. Just as he threatened, he digs the tip into my shoulder blade. I dig my heels into the mountain floor and hiss.

“Get off her!” Wyatt screams.

As quick as he jabbed me, he pulls the knife out. Tugging me close, he warns, “Just fucking do what he says.”

Moments after he stands and walks away, a First Aid kit is thrown toward me, and Wyatt scrambles to my side. He’s vibrating with rage, but I grip his hand, closing my eyes and pretending not to feel blood roll down my skin. “Patch me up.”

“I’m going to kill them.”

I hold him tighter. “Tell Lucas and Stone I’m fine.”

He glares at me. I can tell he wants to refuse, but he calls out anyway. The cursing stops immediately. Wyatt patches me up with thin lips, taking extra time to do it as softly as he can.

Lance steps forward. “Now, can we proceed?”

I nod, and Wyatt helps me to my feet.

“Return to the carvings!” Lance calls out, throwing his hand in the air as if he knows exactly where they are.

Lucas and Stone search for me in the distance. When their eyes meet mine, their shoulders sag. Each of them is worse for wear, dustier as if they were rolling around on the mountain floor, and they very well could have been fighting the two guards with them. I’m sure those two men weren’t going to let them get to me.

When Stone finds his next carving, he yells out its location, and Wyatt and I get into place. That one, I can actually see through the hole in the paper.

“It’s working,” Wyatt whispers next to me.

Though my shoulder is throbbing and my midsection now aches despite the pain reliever I took this morning, excitement buzzes the surface of my skin.

There are three more markers on the map, and when they call out the locations, they’re either spot on or very near where the holes I made on the map are. I can’t see every single one of them, so to be sure, Wyatt digs out the binoculars and we peer through the holes to verify.

I study the ground at my feet. It's just an inconspicuous stretch of gravelly sand. There's nothing extraordinary about it. There's no X that marks the spot. I don't get chills when I stand here like I'm standing on the edge of a vortex, but this, this right here, is important. It's another clue. It's proof that we're headed in the right direction.

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Lance is going to want answers, and I don't know what to tell him, but for right now, giddiness pours over me.

Wyatt pulls me into a hug. Careful to avoid my shoulder, he wraps his hands around my midsection. My old wound burns like a motherfucker, but I smile through it, letting him hold me. "You did it," he beams.

I bite my lip. I wish I could take this moment in, but Lance's presence ruins everything. "I'm not sure what to do now."

"We better find out." He moves away, and I notice worry lining his eyes. "He won't wait long."

I nod in understanding.

"Well?" Stone calls, expectation clear in his voice.

Wyatt waves him and Lucas back in. We hold the map for them and they peer through the holes with the binoculars to see for themselves. Even Lance takes his turn, confirming that he sees what we do.

The answer was in plain sight on the map the whole time. We never could figure out what the squares and x's meant, only that we believed the x's could've represented caves, and the squares were anyone's guess. Now we know.

They brought us to this moment right here. We've already taken more steps in the last two weeks than my immediate family has taken in hundreds of years.

Stone grabs my hurt shoulder, and I hiss. His eyes turn dark when he realizes why, and he glares at his father before moving closer to me. “You can do this, Dakota. You can figure this out.”

“We can,” I tell them, meeting each one of their stares.

I wouldn’t have gotten this far in the journey if it weren’t for them.

“So?” Lance starts. “What now?”

And there it is. The question I’ve been dreading. My pulse beats at my wrist so loudly that my head is consumed with the thud, thud, thud. I have to come up with something, and I have to come up with it quickly.

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“We have to think.” Stone scowls at his father. “Just like you don’t make business deals in a day, you can’t find treasure in a day either.”

“We’ll search this area,” I say as the two Jacobs eye each other. “Stone, can you mark the GPS coordinates here?”

He does as I ask, bringing out a brand-new GPS to save the exact position we’re in. I only hope that our other coordinates are saved in the cloud or some shit. Whatever that means.

“Should we metal detect?” Wyatt suggests.

“Couldn’t hurt.”

There’s something nagging at me, though. Why here? Why this spot? I close my

eyes, block out the conversation around me, and pretend that I'm the one who drew the map. The x's and squares were put on the cliff face to match up to this exact spot. The next clue has to be right here—or within viewing distance.

Lance and his team hang back as Wyatt, Stone, and Lucas get to work. The telltale beeps of several pieces of equipment sound, but I don't think we're going to find anything with them. Stone runs the metal detector over the spot directly where I'm standing, and it doesn't go off. He frowns up at me, and he must be thinking the same thing I am. If there's nothing right there, we're not going to find anything away from this spot either.

I stare straight ahead, searching every last nook and cranny before turning counterclockwise and searching again. I look for a cave; for another etching. I look for a neon fucking arrow—anything that will help us get out of this mess right now. Lance isn't going to sit around and wait for us to find something. We know he's being unbelievably arrogant and ridiculous, but he doesn't understand that. He's used to commanding a room. He snaps his fingers, something gets done. If only treasure hunting worked the same way.

Sweat dots my brow that has nothing to do with the fact that the sun is high in the sky now. It must be bordering on midday. We would usually stop for lunch, but there's no time for that. Each passing second is like the ticking of a time bomb. If the crunching of the gravel behind me is any indication, Lance is getting impatient.

“Anything?”

“No,” Stone barks.

I swear those two are going to end up coming to blows before the end of this. Not only because his father is a raging lunatic, but because he obviously had no idea what he was sending Stone off to do every summer. If I think back to when they started at

Saint Clary's, the trajectory all this took makes so much sense. We were destined to dangle off the end of Lance's rope. He's not a man used to hearing no, and he's heard no in regards to the Wilder treasure for too long. He was bound to break at some point.

"Perhaps Dakota needs a reason to work faster?"

I spin where I am. "I'm doing my best," I affirm, like I'm trying to talk someone off a ledge. "You have to give me some time to think."

"Find me the treasure!" he bellows.

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I lick my lips and try to keep my own temper under control. If not for my sake, then for the sake of Stone, Wyatt, and Lucas. Lance looks like a man who's losing control—his face is an angry red; he's sweating; he's guzzling water like it's candy.... He's acting as if he's two steps away from losing it.

"There's some shade back there," I offer. "Why don't you have a seat?"

"I don't need shade!" he rages. "What I need is for the millions of dollars I've invested in this to finally pay off. Get it fucking done!"

I take a step back. His arrogance is completely insane. He's been up here for not even a day and he thinks it's going to fall into his lap. Like the rest of us haven't been searching and putting in all the hard work for fucking years. It makes me want to stop what we're doing right now, and I would if I wasn't scared for our lives.

I take back what I thought about Lance not being scary up in the mountains. If anything, he's turning crazier up here. He's losing his sanity.

"Dad...." Stone starts. The look on his face has morphed from irritation to concern. I don't think it's as much for his father's well-being as it is for what his mental state means for our well-being. He has five ex-military personnel at his disposal. If he tells them to kill one of us right now, they will. No questions asked—except for maybe how much he's willing to pay to get the job done.

The soft tone Stone uses on him starts to work. Lance lets him get closer, and they talk in hushed tones. He's approached him like a tiger in a cage, and I wonder if it was a horrible idea to insist the elder Jacobs come up here with us. I thought he



would see how difficult it is, but I'm not sure he realizes that at all. Powerful men don't understand how the real world works. They say something, it gets done, but they don't know the steps it took to make it happen. Like yesterday, when he had his assistant prepare all the equipment we needed for today. All he did was make one phone call, but I bet that girl was up all hours of the night arranging, maybe even shopping herself for the equipment we needed.

Lance doesn't know a hard day's work. This might be his first time in years—in fucking decades.

I try to re-focus on searching the area in the same pattern, but Lance and Stone's voices rise. "No!" Lance shouts as their conversation comes to a head.

I turn in time to find Stone falling to the ground. I move toward him, but the soldiers raise their guns, at least one barrel pointed at each of us, keeping us at bay.

"She needs a reminder," Lance announces.

"Tahoe," the leader says.

A gun goes off—the sound so loud it echoes and echoes—and I scream as terror rips through me. For a moment, time doesn't compute. Sound doesn't compute. I stare at the scene, blinking and blinking until everything becomes clear again.

Lucas is on the ground. He's clenching his hip as blood dampens his clothes. I start forward, but a hand yanks me back, and throws me to the rocky ground.

"If you don't finish this, Lucas dies," Lance threatens.

I push myself to my elbows to find Lucas digging his heels into the dirt, writhing. I shake my head. Lance has just done the unthinkable.

I rush to my feet, grabbing the knife out of my pocket, and storm Lance. “You bastard!” His eyes widen right before I get tackled.

Another gun goes off, and I nudge the body on top of me. Shouts rise up. Lance screams, “Not the girl!”

“Shh,” Stone urges in my ear. “It’s me. He was going to shoot you.” He pecks me on the cheek, grabs the knife from my hand, and stands. He faces his father, staring him down with the contempt that I know has been building for a long time. “You shot Lucas.”

“I didn’t shoot Lucas.”

“Take responsibility for your actions!” Stone growls. “Isn’t that what you’ve been telling me this whole time?” He points to Lucas’ bleeding form. “He’s looked up to you for most of his life, you selfish fuck.”

Lance holds his hand out. They’re spitting images of one another right now. If ever I was looking for their similarities, I can find it when they both lose their tempers.

“Give the word,” the leader grins, gun aimed right at Stone’s chest. I glance at Lucas to find that Wyatt has taken his shirt off and is holding it over the wound. Lucas is pale as fuck.

This can’t be happening. He won’t survive a wound that severe up here. Helplessness consumes my thoughts, threatening to pull me into its deep shadows. I can’t lose him.

“You’ve killed him,” Stone states simply, and my heart breaks at his words, tears threatening my eyes.

I pull myself up, my body feeling like it’s weighed down by the truth of what’s

happening right now. I'm sucking in air around choked sobs because it's too painful to breath. All I wanted was for us to get out of this alive. I close my eyes. I never wanted the treasure this much. Not enough to sacrifice the people I love. But Lance doesn't have that type of mentality. Fueled by greed, he knows no other way.

"It isn't worth this," Stone chokes out, his hand shaking. He keeps stealing glances of his two friends.

"It has to be."

Stone shakes his head. "You were a father to him."

The look on Lance's face never changes. He's still incredulous, using strategy to answer his son's allegations—as if he's just talking about taking over businesses.

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“To think I thought you cared about at least one thing.” He darts his gaze to Lucas again, Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. “I thought you had a shred of humanity left in you.” He brings the knife up.

It happens in a blur.

Gun barrels focus on Stone.

My heart dislodges, and I start to run forward only to be taken down, my head bouncing off a boulder. Bullets rip through the air, and I scream. I close my eyes and scream for everything to stop, as if this is all a bad dream. My imagination conjures up horrible images of Stone and Lucas lying on the mountain floor, pale as death. The pictures rip at the seams of my heart.

I’m too scared to look but I can’t stay hiding forever. I have to help them. I get to my feet, using the boulder for support. I sway on my feet, my head pounding and my ears ringing. My thumb brushes over indents in the gray rock, and I gasp when I come face-to-face with an etching. NEC.

No fucking way.

More bullets and another foreign noise yank me out of my shock. Air swirls around us, kicking up dirt and tiny pebbles. It’s so strong hair whips in front of my face, temporarily impeding my view of everything. I curl it back around my ear, and immediately, a body falls to my right. I glance down and find a hole in Bucket Guy’s tan bandana, blood starting to turn the fabric into a muddy brown.

I spin, searching the scene for Wyatt, Lucas, and Stone. One more of Lance's team is on the ground with fatal injuries. The leader and Mr. Blade Happy still stand with Lance.

Stone's limp form is crumpled on the ground. I swallow a scream, but I'm immediately distracted when Mr. Blade Happy leaps at me and yanks me against his chest. Raising his gun, he aims it toward a helicopter that finally flies into view. Thewhoop, whoop, whoopof its blades hover above us. Bullets slice through the side of the chopper. Between the strands of hair flying in my face, I spot men leaning back out of it through a gigantic doorway. Dirt kicks up at my feet as bullets soar past me. I stand stock still until my captor stumbles, nearly dragging me down with him.

I shuck him off, and he lands face up, eyes wide with blood spattering his forehead.

My stomach roils, and I crouch next to the NEC boulder to take stock of what's going on. Lance has taken off, running down the valley. He trips, falls, and ends up sliding the rest of the way on his ass. To my right, however, the leader returns fire at the chopper, his war cries raising the hair on my arms until he slumps to the ground with a hole in his temple.

I shield my eyes and peer up at the metal beast in the sky. Cole leans forward in the passenger seat wearing a headset, his eyes darting everywhere. I nearly fall over with relief. When he sees me, a relieved smile breaks out over his face. I fall to my knees, running my hands through my hair, my body shaking from head to toe.

A rope is lowered from the huge opening, and an armed man rides it down. He moves toward me, raising his voice as he approaches with his hands up. He's dressed all in black tactical gear, similar style but different color to Lance's ex-military men who lie dead on the mountain top. He's armed with a gun and a tool belt around his waist with God knows what weapons at his disposal. "I'm with Cole," he calls out.

I nod, and he moves in closer. “My friends,” I yell, my voice breaking. “They’re shot, I think. You need to help them.”

I turn toward Lucas who is still lying where he was. A layer of dirt covers him and another swirls above his head like a sandy tornado. He has his hands over his mouth, and his eyes firmly closed. I point him out, and the guy moves in that direction.

Another man dressed in black uses the rope to descend as I crawl on all fours to Stone. Rocks kick up behind me while I make my way to his side. “Stone, Stone!” I hover my hands over his body, scared to touch him. When he doesn’t answer I glance to the right to find two men helping Lucas to a basket that’s waiting on the rocky ground, tethered to the helicopter by ropes. “Wyatt!” I call out.

My mind races a mile a minute. “Just be safe. Just be safe,” I cry as I turn toward Stone again. My cheeks feel wet, and it’s then that I realize I’m crying. I shake Stone. I run my fingers all over his body and don’t find blood or anything sticky. His dusty clothes aren’t tinged red, but he just won’t move.

I grip his shirt in my hands and bend over him, my forehead dropping to his chest. I squeeze and squeeze, wishing I could pray him alive.

His chest moves under me.

I startle back, searching him all over again. It’s then that I find red seeping out from under his head. “Stone!”

Hands come in from behind me and drag me away. I start to fight back but Wyatt’s reassuring touch makes me pause. My cowboy bends over Stone, hat long gone, and checks the back of his friend’s head. When he pulls his fingers away, blood runs down them.

Another body joins him, and I recognize Cole's form. He rips his shirt off and wraps it around Stone's head. He ties it tight and then turns toward the chopper, shouting orders.

The spinning of the helicopter's blades creates its own kind of chaos. Hair flies in front of my face, and my mouth fills with dirt, making my teeth crunch when I shut my jaw. Cole waves two men over as Lucas gets lifted in the basket. My wild-haired guy makes eye contact with me and fresh tears spill over my cheeks. His head lulls back, hitting the side of the basket, and a howl rips through my chest.

Everything has gone to hell.

A voice calls my name, and I nearly jump. "Dakota!" Wyatt calls again right in front of me.

I spin to find him waving me over. Moving closer, I nearly come apart when Stone's eyes open. A wail bursts from my mouth, and I lean my forehead on Stone's chest again, grabbing his clothes in my fists as his hand sinks into my hair. We stay that way until Wyatt tugs me back so that two guys can help Stone to the basket and take him up. Wyatt stands with his arms around me as we watch him ascend.

When he's safe and sound, I turn toward Cole. Dust covers him from head-to-toe. "You came for me?"

"Baby girl." He wipes at my eyes, flicking away the fresh tears. "Are you okay?"

I nod, even though it feels like a lie. I may be fine physically, but I'm about to come apart mentally. "Just get them to the hospital. Please," I beg.

The badass leader of the Dragons pulls me in for a hug, kissing my cheek before turning away. When the basket is sent again, the remaining men are picked up and

elevated back into the helicopter. They disappear over the cliff face toward Phoenix, Cole in the passenger seat cockpit once again. His hard face tells me all I need to know. He'll make sure Stone and Lucas are attended to.



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It takes a while for the sound of the blades to fade, and I can't believe I didn't hear it approaching. Then again, it was complete chaos down here.

Wyatt grips my hand, surveying the same landscape I am. We overlook the dead bodies at our feet and focus on one thing. "Where did he go?"

I point down the valley. It's time to end this.

It's time to make sure Lance can't hurt anyone again.

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If he's not dead already, Lance would have no idea how to get out of here. Hopefully someone shot his ass so Wyatt and I don't have to inform Stone we killed his father. We can tell him it was just an outcome of a tragic day.

"Dakota!"

Wyatt and I both come to a skidding stop to find Ninja hiking down the valley toward us with Pete by his side. "Holy shit." I start toward them, my feet picking up the pace until we're only a few feet apart.

Ninja reaches us first. He wraps an arm around my shoulders, and I squeeze him through the pain. "What the hell are you guys doing here?"

Our trustworthy guard beams. "Do you think I'd miss a chance to get those bastards? When we couldn't contact you, Cole sent the two of us up here to get into position.

I'm the one who took out the mean-looking one."

"No wonder," Wyatt exclaims. Dirt stains the side of his face, clear paths of sweat interrupting them. He shakes his head. "They thought the helicopter was their only threat."

"Exactly," Ninja says. "We lured them in and then surrounded them."

"Well, except for one," I remind them, nodding over my shoulder.

We all start down the chasm again in the direction that Lance ran, Wyatt with a firm arm around my hips. Let's see how haughty he acts now that his muscle is gone. I know for sure I have the upper hand this time, and I sure as hell will exploit it.

Ninja runs a hand through his hair. "Are Lucas and Stone okay?"

Wyatt peeks at me as if I might break if he answers honestly. "We think so. We don't know for sure, though."

I close my eyes for a moment, sending up positive thoughts. "Cole saved us," I choke out. "If he didn't come with the helicopter when he did, we all would have died up here."

Wyatt hugs me to his side. Despite how painful it is, it feels better to know he's here with me. That he's right next to me, and no one is going to try to take him away again.

"Cole has a way of doing that," Ninja muses. "He figured shit would get unstable."

"Because Stone's father is a fucking lunatic," I grind out. I stop in my tracks, a realization hitting me in the chest. Now that we're not being shot at, the etching I

found bubbles to the surface. “I almost forgot. I think I have the next clue.”

Wyatt blinks at me. “What?”

“I found something during...everything.”

Ninja stands up straighter. “That’s all well and good, friends, but why don’t we take care of one problem at a time?” He nods down the valley, and we turn to find Lance crouching next to the creek. It’s a little higher than normal, but at least it’s not a raging river anymore. He’s splashing water on his cheeks. His canteen is gone—probably lost in all the commotion he commanded.

“Jacobs!” I yell, marching toward him with Wyatt’s assistance.

He jumps and turns. He stands on shaky legs, moving backward until he’s knee deep in the creek. “I have money. A lot of it.”

I shake my head. “You’re a pathetic piece of shit.” The first words out of his mouth are about money? He should be demanding to know what happened to his son.

Wyatt strides forward. As soon as he’s close enough, he pulls his arm back and punches Jacobs in the face. Lance tries to block it, but his feeble attempt is laughable. His head snaps around, and blood immediately gushes from his nose. It doesn’t deter Wyatt. He keeps punching, his knuckles bloody, until I say his name softly, asking him to stop.

Lance crumbles to his knees. When he gazes up, his pathetic nature truly stands out above everything else. He blinks, studying all of us before his stare falls on me. “Where’s Stone?”

That’s more fucking like it. I gulp. “On his way to the hospital.”

His mouth drops, and he gasps. “Is he okay?”

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Before I can answer, Wyatt steps in front of me. “We don’t know.” He crouches next to him. “I can’t believe I ever looked up to you. I can’t believe you were ever anything more to me than the selfish fuck who’s groveling before me right now.” I swallow at his words. He deserves this moment. He deserves it and then some for the way Lance talked about these guys. I hope everything Wyatt gets off his chest is getting through to him, but I doubt it. “We’re all so much better off without you.”

Wyatt shoves him, and Lance topples over, splashing into the stream before flailing about and finally stumbling out of the water with a gigantic breath. His fake hair is plastered to his head as he struggles to his feet. Ninja and Pete hang back, waiting for our orders, and honestly, I’m not sure what to do. I’d like to never see him again. I’d like to never have to lay sight on this man who’s done so much more damage than he probably even realizes.

He gazes between all of us. “What are you going to do to me?”

Wyatt and I glance at each other. As much as I want to see him dead, I can’t take that decision away from Stone. Lance would’ve done it to us in a heartbeat—hell, he tried to multiple times—but if we turn around and do the same to him, what does that make us?

Justified, obviously. But I don’t want to be anything like Lance fucking Jacobs.

I want to be so much more. I want to surround myself in love, not power. I want to make decisions for the good of the people around me, not for the benefit of myself. I want to have a life filled with happiness, not money.

That's how I want to live.

That's what my guys have been trying to tell me this whole time. When they were trying to get me to live, this is what they meant.

Gold or no gold, I can choose to be the person I want to be in this moment. Wyatt nods at me as if he and I are on the same wavelength. A minute ago, I wanted Lance dead. I still kind of do. He doesn't deserve anything more.

But also, I'm not sure I can pull the trigger on that decision right now. He's practically shaking in his boots. He's no harm to me nor anyone I love right now.

I might regret this but.... "We'll take him back to Clary. I can tell the police how he kidnapped me and walked me up the mountains to make me find the treasure for him. Unless Stone wants something else by the time we get there."

"If Stone's alive," Wyatt growls.

Okay, so he and I are definitely not on the same page.

"We have some time to think about it," Ninja hedges. "Looks like we'll be hiking back to the main road."

I nod, and we start making our way down the mountain. I look back before the valley goes out of sight. It sucks to be walking away from the next clue, but I can't be selfish. Stone, Lucas, and Wyatt helped me get this far. I can't go off finding it without two of them, can I?

First, I need to make sure they're okay.

We meet up with the trail and about halfway down, we hear ringing. Wyatt and I both

stare at Ninja as he digs a SAT phone out of his pocket.

When we stop, Lance practically slumps against a tall shrub. He's been slowing us down this whole trip. Ninja kept shoving him forward until Lance started falling to his knees every time. He's far from the man who ordered Lucas shot. He's pathetic.

Ninja answers the phone, squinting. A strong voice yells from the other end. He takes the phone away from his ear. "Where are we?"

Just as I'm about to tell him, the whooshing of helicopter blades echo down the mountain. Ninja turns and looks toward the sky. "We hear you. We're headed back toward the trailhead."

The metal beast starts as a tiny object dotting the horizon until it flies closer and closer before hovering above us again. We shield our faces from the wind, then Ninja yells, "Yes," into the receiver before ending the call. The basket lowers, and we all move toward it, Pete pushing Lance forward.

When Wyatt and I are inside, I hold onto the rope as we raise into the belly of the helicopter. My hair swirls around my head, tangling. Ninja, Pete, and Lance get smaller and smaller until we're hefted onto solid ground. I scramble out as fast as I can, and the basket lowers again right afterward.

A hand closes around mine. I turn to find Stone sitting in one of the bucket seats, belted in, and I dive toward him. He wraps his arms around me as my cheek comes to a rest against his stomach. Relief washes over me. My head rises and lowers with his every breath, and my throat works. I dig my nails into his side, and he grasps me with the same force, his fingers tangling in my hair. When I finally take the time to peer up at him, he has a fresh, professional-looking bandage around his head. He's clearly already been to the hospital and released.

How handy helicopters must be for transportation.

Someone shoves a helmet on me from behind. “Babe, you there?” Stone’s crackly voice asks.

I nod at Stone as I’m helped to my feet and shown the seat next to him. Hands belt me in just as another black-clad man is doing the same for Wyatt across from us. Cole sits next to him.

I raise my arms so they can secure the fasteners. “What’s going on?”

“Pretty boy, here, wanted to come back up.” The connection isn’t clear, but it’s evident Cole is the one who responded.

“Shouldn’t you be in the hospital?” I scold, looking to my right.

“I hit my head and split the skin open. I got some stitches. I’m fine.”



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I sigh at his words. “I thought you’d been shot.”

“No, just passed out.”

I grab his hand once I’m settled in. “Lucas?”

“In surgery,” Cole speaks up. “The bullet lodged in his hip bone. He’s going to be fine, but they took him directly into the operating room.”

I lean my head back against the seat, squeezing Stone’s sure fingers. The urge to kill Lance is once again very strong.

As if on cue, the two guys at the mouth of the helicopter drag the basket between us. Ninja, Pete, and Lance step out.

Cole’s voice comes through the headset loud and clear. “Now it’s on you.”

The tone in his voice says it all. He probably would’ve killed him already, and really, maybe it would’ve been easier if he’d died in the shootout.

Stone glares at Lance. “I have a fate worse than death for my father. Something he’ll hate more than anything.”

Lance peeks at his son. He can’t hear what we’re saying but he’d be a fool if he didn’t know we were discussing him. Two men close the helicopter up, and we start to turn. Lance scrambles for purchase, using one of the straps hanging from the roof. His feet glide over the floor, and he struggles to stay upright until the vehicle evens

out again.

Stone moves his gaze to Cole. “If we can arrange it so he spends the rest of his life in jail, he’ll die slowly. His freedoms will be taken away. His power. His money. Everything he holds dear will slip through his fingers.”

Cole, who must have grabbed a new shirt while he was at the hospital, rubs his chin. “There are a bunch of dead bodies in the mountains right now. They can be pinned on someone.”

“We can dig up evidence that he kidnapped Dakota,” Wyatt adds.

Stone shakes his head, turning toward me. “I want her out of this. She’s already had to go through so much because of him.” To Cole, he says, “If we can pin the dead bodies on him, I want it done.”

Cole unbuckles his restraints. “I’ll see what I can do.” He gets up from his seat and moves into the cockpit with the pilot, leaving us with the black-clad pseudo-military men. I don’t know who they are. They don’t necessarily look like Dragons. At the same time, I highly doubt the gang has the reach to commandeer a rescue chopper.

Actually, I don’t care how Cole did it. He did, and that’s all that matters.

Lance stares at his son, face drawn and lips moving. He must know Stone can’t hear him. He must know we have no idea what he’s saying. Stone promptly ignores him, grasping onto my hand as tightly as he can. He saved my life today. We can have the discussion another time about how he thinks he dragged me into his father’s shit. It’s all bullshit. I’ll be telling him I was always destined to be in his father’s shit ever since he started searching for the treasure.

Wyatt locks gazes with me. If I had it my way, the three of us would be alone, and I’d

be able to touch both of them, feel both of them. If only to prove to myself that we're still alive. But even then, a part of us would be missing. I lean my head back as the helicopter around me vibrates. We're coming, Lucas.

I bite the inside of my lip as the emotions start to flow. There are so many things I want to say. So many things I want to tell the guys, but maybe it's a good thing that talking is difficult right now. Maybe I need a quiet moment to sit here and think about how we're all okay.

When things were really bad up there, I was terrified of how things were going to end. I didn't see a way out. Some—or all of us—were going to die.

Stone wasn't moving. Lucas was bleeding. And I couldn't find Wyatt.

Those are the moments I don't want to relive again. Those are the images that make me believe searching for the treasure isn't worth it, it never was, and it never will be.

How could it be when everything I really need is still alive? Still here?

Wyatt, Stone, and Lucas are my life. And I need to protect them with everything I have. Which should be so much easier now that the threats are gone.

"I love you." Wyatt's voice crackles through the earpiece.

I open my eyes and smile at him. We all need some major recovery time after this. Not to mention arranging whatever is going to happen with Lance. Stone's thought of the perfect punishment. He's right. Jail is better than death in this case. Death would be too easy. What would make things even worse for Jacobs is if Stone takes over all of his business ventures for himself. Now that's an idea I can get behind.

"I love you, too, cowboy," I murmur, vowing to tell them those words every day for

the rest of our lives.

He grins. “I suppose this means Lucas is going to get all the attention again?”

I laugh, the tension inside me dissipating. It’s like exhaling all the fucked-up shit that happened today, and it feels so good. “You suppose right.”

He chuckles. “Guess I should have gotten myself shot.”

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I lift my hand and flip Wyatt off. “Nice try.”

Stone shakes his head with a small smile creeping over his lips. As Lance watches, Stone, Wyatt, myself—and Lucas from afar—form tighter bonds in the face of adversity. Something he never could’ve hoped to accomplish with them. Something so much bigger and brighter than what he’d given the boys.

I gave them a family. And in the midst of doing that, I gave myself one, too.

### Epilogue

“I found the treasure by accident.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Wyatt chimes in, stopping me. I look up from the paper I’ve been scribbling on over the past few days. He’s sitting on our new, white couch that boasts exactly zero blood stains—just the way I like it.

“What?”

“You’re going to tell them that you found the treasure by accident?”

I smile. “You think I should tell them I found it when I was bum-rushed by an ex-military, pay-for-hire nutcase, fell, hit my head, and ended up finding the last clue as I was getting to my feet while bullets flew over my head and bodies dropped to the ground?”

He bursts out laughing. All of them do.

It's been months since that day, but I can still see it clearly in my mind. The fear. The pain. The uncertainty of our future. The only thing that's made it worthwhile is getting to spend every moment since with the three men in front of me.

He shrugs. "Continue then."

I clear my throat, hands shaking a little. Tomorrow, I'm expected to give a speech at the grand opening of the Wilder Treasure Museum. As one-fourth of the founders and the only one who happens to bear the name Wilder, I was designated as the speaker even though everyone knows Stone should do it.

"I found the treasure by accident. You'd think that would be a misnomer since I've been trying to find the treasure all my life, but at the moment I discovered the last clue that led me to the mine, I was actually just trying to stay upright." I pause. In my head, I imagine people chuckling in the crowd tomorrow. I mean, it is supposed to be funny. "That's right. I fell into the treasure." I glance at the guys who are all still staring at me. "Obviously we know what really happened, but semantics."

Lucas gets to his feet, pulling his walker in front of him. He uses it to get around when he tires himself out. His hip replacement surgery went well, but rehab is ongoing.

It took us ages to head back into the mountains to actually figure out the last clue, but even faced with having it within reach, I suddenly wasn't in so much of a hurry. I love those months I spent helping Lucas in rehabilitation and forming the family with the three of them that we'd always wanted. The calm after the storm. I'll treasure those moments the most.

With two hands gripping the walker handles, Lucas leans over to kiss my cheek on his way to the kitchen. "The truth is much more harrowing. Think of all the little girls who'll be listening to your speech tomorrow. If you tell them you fought off attackers

in the midst of finding a historical treasure, you'll be the new Wonder Woman."

Stone watches his friend move toward the kitchen with a grimace. Lucas gets pissed if he catches us studying him. It's hard not to hate what happened while simultaneously being so thankful that he's still here with us.

"Maybe say...you were just walking by and the sun shone in the perfect moment in the perfect spot. You gasped, and there the initials were: N. E. C." Wyatt's theatrical diatribe is somewhat impressive, but I doubt I could pull it off. He pulls me onto his lap. "You don't like it. I can tell by that little pout."

I sink into his embrace, then place my feet on Stone's lap. He immediately starts rubbing them for me. Despite the trouble I'd thought we'd have with Stone's father, it all worked out smoothly. Cole absolutely knocked it out of the park, and since we already knew Lionel was on the take, it wasn't that hard to get Lance convicted of capital murder five times. Now, he sits in the same damn prison as Wyatt's mother—a place we'll never set foot in again.

"Can you believe NEC meant North East Corner this whole time?" I ask for about the thousandth time.

Stone shakes his head. It's one of those duh moments that once you discover what something means, you ask yourself why you didn't see it in the first place.

Since the initials had come up again on the boulder, we researched what they could mean while Lucas was recuperating. We knew it had to point to something. It wasn't the initials of a person like my father and I had always suspected. Not even close. North East Corner. And the mine? You guessed it. It was in the northeast corner of the valley. There. All that time.

Sure, it was hidden by brush and a well-placed rock that I think my ancestors left

there on purpose but knowing where to search was not half the battle, it was the whole battle.

Stone, in particular, still grouches that we didn't pick up on the NEC thing earlier.

He tickles my feet, and I screech. "Hey!"

"You're bringing that up to pick on me."

"Not me," I protest. "That sounds like a Wyatt thing to do."

Wyatt shrugs behind me. "What can I say? I'm rubbing off on her."

"Ugh. Stop," Stone complains, playfully shoving my feet off him. "No one wants that."



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He's hired someone to run his father's businesses while he finishes school. We haven't matriculated back into Saint Clary's yet, and since finding the treasure, we actually don't need to, but...what else are we going to do?

We have to find something to do with the rest of our lives.

Lucas has an idea for another treasure hunt. He's been reading up on the outlaw Jesse James stashing gold around the southwest, but I don't know. The Superstitions are my home, and now that I have a museum to run, I might want to follow in my family's footsteps. Not treasure hunting—been there, done that—I'm talking about adventurous treks up the mountains. I'm sure tourists would love for the finders of the Wilder treasure to take them through step-by-step how they did it.

Stone holds his hand out, wiggling his fingers. "Let me see the speech."

My stomach turns, but I hand it over anyway. I know he'll give it to me straight.

Lucas hobbles back to his seat, past the tulips Stone bought me on the kitchen island, and I glare at him. "Um, walker?"

"I'm fine," he says, waving my worries away. And really, he usually is. He went up into the mountains to get Maria Luisa's treasure with us. Sure, he was laid up for a while after we got back, but he recovered.

Today was another one of those rough days. We got to go in the museum today for the first time and walk the different exhibits. I actually stood in front of a glass wall with the Wilder treasure map safely encased on the other side through a quarter-inch

thick glass casing. Yes, I was making sure nothing else ever happened to that map again. It'll never be back to its former glory, but at least we still have it. It's sitting exactly where my father and I always wanted it.

All the walking at the museum got to Lucas, but tomorrow, he'll be back to almost his normal self. The doctor says he'll be brand new as soon as everything properly heals. He's not supposed to do anything too strenuous, but the treasure—and his libido—win out. Eventually, he'll make a full recovery though.

Stone hands my speech back. He clears his throat, and I stare into his glassy eyes. I suck my lip into my mouth. "Is it good?"

He nods. "Yeah. It's really good, Dakota." He clears his throat again.

The injury on the back of his head healed in no time. He really did just hit it on a rock and knocked himself out cold, which is probably good so he wasn't standing when the bullets started flying. None of us were.

"What is it?" Lucas asks his friend, worry creasing his brows.

"Nothing," he tells him, avoiding our gazes.

"Aww," I move over to Stone, straddling his lap. His gray-blue eyes focus on me, and I melt. "It's really good?"

He runs his hands down his face. "Yeah."

Wyatt plucks the speech off the couch and reads it himself. He's quiet when he finishes, and when Lucas calls for it, he walks over and hands it to him. Lucas blinks a few times, then stares at me. "You're going to have to get over here now."

"No. No way," Wyatt protests. "We're far past Lucas getting special attention."

I move to the other couch despite Wyatt's teasing, and Lucas pulls me down next to him and stares at me. "Family is the greatest treasure of all," he recites, quoting the last line of my speech.

There's a bit before that, where I talk about how we all came together to make my dreams come true, but then when we found it, I realized I'd already found my treasure after all.

Not going to lie, the gold was a win though. And the jewels. So. Many. Jewels. Many of the pieces sit in the museum for everyone to see. Others got shipped off to the Smithsonian and several museums in Spain.

But two pieces, I still own. Two that we stole back from Lance Jacobs. The ring, which we never told anyone we had, and the gold nugget.

Stone and Wyatt move over to us. Stone touches the ring on my right hand. He's already told me that one day he's going to make me wear it on my left. I'm already bound to all of them, so when that day comes, it'll just be a formality. A fun formality, but one nonetheless.

"I think your speech is perfect," Wyatt shares, dipping his head low so I can barely see his eyes under the rim of his cowboy hat. Next week, he's taking us to his ranch like we'd planned. We would've gone sooner, but we needed to settle things here before making the trip. I can't wait to see the land my cowboy loves so much.

"She's perfect," Lucas murmurs, feeding his fingers through my hair.

"They're going to love it," Stone confirms. "And even if you tell them you discovered the last clue by accident, we know the truth, and that's all that matters."

After a few moments, Wyatt asks, "Is Cole coming tomorrow?" He and the gang leader are on much better terms now.

I hold back a smile. Cole's been busy in the Heights, but he still finds time to text me every day. He doesn't want me involved in his gang life, so he isn't around as much anymore. One day, he's going to want out, and I told him when that day comes, he's got a place to stay.

I answer Wyatt's question with a nod. "Yeah. He said he wouldn't miss it."

"Of course not," Stone states. "He knows how much the museum means to you."

Looking up, I take in the faces of my guys. In each pair of eyes, I find the same overwhelming love I hold for them.

A piece of them is in me, forever scored on my heart and soul. And now, a piece of us will live on after we're gone.

Our pictures hang in the showroom of the last exhibit. I opted for a group photo while the rest of my family has single portraits, including my father. Seeing his picture today, just before mine and after our generations of ancestors, brought everything full circle. My eyes welled with tears, and I knew in that moment that I'd never be able to thank the man I knew as my father enough for what he brought into my life.

I'm Dakota Wilder. I come from a long line of treasure hunters. Because of me, the Wilders will go down in history. Maybe the line won't end. Maybe it will. If it doesn't, it'll be up to future generations to find their own treasure, and I'll make sure they know that it's not always about shiny things. Treasures can be found in everyday life—a cool breeze on a balmy day; a foot rub after a long hike in the mountains; the touch of a man you thought you were going to lose forever....

But the only way you're going to find those treasures, is if you actually live.

Something I plan on doing every day of the rest of my life with Wyatt, Stone, and Lucas by my side.