



Homecoming (The Guys: Finding My Home #4)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Atlas

Blackbreak is boring as hell, and I couldn't be more relieved when Alaric says that he needs help on a job. A simple informant meet up doesn't go to plan when Blake gets to him before us.

This is going to get messy!

The guys

She's home.

****This is the last book in a set of four novellas, all happening in the year before Ever came back!****

Warnings: Please be advised that this book contains dark themes, including abuse, graphic violence, flashbacks to past abuse, and cursing.

Themes suitable for mature audiences 18+.

Total Pages (Source): 22

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Atlas

Weapons class.

I always find it a bit ironic that I have to take this class when I could most likely outshoot everyone here, and the teacher as well. Not that he would appreciate that being pointed out to him. He tried to do one of those typical teacher power moves when I first started here and joined Rage. He wanted to humiliate me in front of all of the other kids, who were wary of me anyway because of my scars.

I'm not entirely sure what he was trying to prove, but he set up a target that would have been way too far away for a novice, which is what he assumed I was, and handed me a gun without telling me how to use it, again he assumed that I was a novice so that was an incredibly dangerous and stupid move on his part. He then told me to shoot the target with a smug grin on his face; of course, me being the shit I am, I didn't just shoot it; I shot a smiley face with a bullet hole through the middle of the target as a nose.

He backed off after that, and it quickly spread around the school just how good I am with a gun, amongst other things, which immediately made people fear me. That's okay; funnily enough, I am okay with being feared.

The teacher now just leaves me to my own devices in class, and focuses on helping the other kids, which he does really well actually, so I have no idea why he had a problem with me. Unless he were here when my father was here, that would explain a lot.

The buzzing of my phone in my pocket pulls me from my thoughts; I lower the gun and pull it out, reading the message on the screen from Alaric. I quickly take apart my gun, put it on the table in front of me, take off the ear defenders, and then head toward the door of the classroom to go and find Rage.

“Atlas!” the teacher shouts after me, “I didn’t give you permission to leave!”

I don’t bother replying; I just wave my hand behind me dismissively as I walk out the door and close it behind me. He knows that there is fuck all that he can do, and he fucking hates it. It makes me smile.

After our first meeting, around a year ago now, I couldn’t give a shit, I will respect someone who shows me respect and he still won’t. I don’t have the time for his petty games anyway.

Moving through the vast hallways of Blackbreak, I see a couple more teachers, but none of them stop me or say anything at all really. Finally, I come to a stop in front of Rage’s class. I actually really like this teacher, so I knock on the door before I enter and disrupt the lesson.

“Atlas, is everything okay?” He asks me once he has called for me to enter.

“Yes sir,” I reply, “I need Rage.”

“He didn’t come to class today,” he replies.

I nod, “Thanks.”

I don’t have to worry about him not being here; there is only one place that he will be, and that’s the stables. I keep telling him to get his horses up here, but he hasn’t managed it yet. His cunt of a mother is making things difficult.

We have all of our gear in the car since we decided that it was probably a good idea to keep it all in there; Alaric calls on us at random times, including when we are in class, like today, and it's just easier if we are ready to go when he needs us. My car is parked outside of the main entrance to the building that holds the majority of the lessons, including the indoor shooting range, or at least one of them.

It takes me no time at all to hop into my car and drive over to the stables. It takes me slightly longer to find Rage, simply because they are so vast.

"What's up, man?" Rage asks once I've finally found him.

"Alaric messaged, we have got to go. He's going to pick us up from the front gates, like usual." I explain.

"Awesome, I could do with getting out of here," he looks around and adds, "Well, not specifically here, but the school as a whole."

I chuckle as we head out to the car and get in, "Dude, I knew what you meant."

"How long ago did he message?" Rage asks.

"About twenty minutes; it took me a while to find you. He should be waiting by now," I reply.

"Good, it's too damn cold to be waiting out by the gate. I always feel like I'm going to freeze my nuts off," he replies with a shiver just for emphasis. "I miss summer. We haven't been back that long, and it's already cold."

"Yeah. Alaric is going to have to start messaging when he's outside and just wait for us rather than the other way around," I reply.

As we get out of the car, having parked it in the lot by the gates, he says, “You can tell him that he likes being told what to do about as much as you do, and that’s not at all.”

“Fuck off,” I grin, grabbing my bag and locking the car.

“You know I’m right,” Rage replies.

I just shrug, making both of us laugh, we both know that he’s right. He has known me since we were little kids, there isn’t much that he doesn’t know about me.

“Hey guys,” Alaric greets us as soon as we get in the car.

“Hey, man,” I reply. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. After a somewhat quiet period, I think things might be picking up again, and we might have a better chance of actually stopping Liam soon,” he replies.

“What about Blake?” I ask.

My brother is just as big of a problem as my father is, if not more.

“He will be taken down along with Liam; he’s involved, and we will take the whole operation down,” Alaric replies firmly.

“Good,” I reply.

My father, Alaric’s brother, Liam, is as bad as they come as far as criminals are concerned. He deals in pretty much everything that you can think of and doesn’t discriminate. Drugs, weapons, people, he doesn’t care; he will sell it all to the highest bidder. He is so prominent in the crime world that even just the sound of his name

holds power, and if you are a known associate of his and preferred by him, then you are almost untouchable.

No one would risk retribution from my father.

It works the other way though as well, if you work for my father and you displease him, then he will end you, without remorse, and without hesitation. I would know, I have seen it happen when I was far too young to be witnessing things like that.

Alaric managed to get me away from him and, more importantly, my brother Blake. My father may have been bad, but Blake targeted me, he fucking hates me, and he let me know that he did my whole life. He tortured me, and I'm not talking about the usual sibling shit, I mean actual torture. He has nearly killed me, and if my father hadn't found us when he did, I would be dead. So, I guess I do have something to thank the old man for. I think it might have been that incident that was the catalyst that Alaric used so that he could finally get me away from them. I don't remember my dad putting up much of a fight, but then again, I was pretty fucked up at the time, and I don't remember much.

I remember being in the hospital, slipping in and out of consciousness, and Alaric holding my hand tightly, whispering that he loved me, and saying that he was going to fix it to make sure that nothing like this could happen again. He also said sorry, but I slipped back into unconsciousness before I could ask him what he was sorry for, and so much time has passed now, it seems odd and awkward to ask.

Blake is Liam's right-hand man, and whereas Liam has a few grey and shaky morals, Blake has absolutely none. He will kill you just for looking at him the wrong way. I remember when we were younger, he killed one of his best friends just because he was in a bad mood, and he didn't even regret it. So, it wasn't like he did it in a fit of rage; he knew what he was doing the whole time and still killed him.

Blake is a psychopath and is made even more terrifying because he was raised in the world of crime, and he has a lot of skills because of it. Skills that he utilizes regularly. He is a force to be reckoned with, and if I'm being honest with myself, he scares the fucking shit out of me. I have seen the things that he can and will do without a second thought.

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Atlas

The silence in the car is interrupted as Rage says, "What's the job?"

I have never been more grateful to be pulled out of my thoughts than I am right now. I hate thinking about my fucked-up family unless it's a case of when we are going to be taking them down. Anything else, and I shy away from it. Yes, I am more than aware of how unhealthy that is.

I simply don't care.

"Can you remember that job we did a few weeks ago, where the informant told us about a meeting happening at a tiny bar?" Alaric asks.

"Yeah, of course," I reply.

"The fucker knew that we were coming and escaped," Rage replies.

I frown, "After he had caused a massive bar fight to distract us and slow us down so we couldn't chase him."

Alaric nods, "Yeah, that's the one."

"What about it?" I ask, and then add before he can reply, "Are we going after the same target? Did you finally manage to find him?"

"No, he is still in the wind. We have some of our best people looking for him, but he

seems to have just vanished.” Alaric replies, his frown deepening.

“He’s not been spotted with Liam?” I ask.

Alaric shakes his head, “No. Which is really odd because he was with him pretty consistently.”

“Is he dead?” Rage asks bluntly. “That could be why no one has been able to find him.”

Alaric hums, “I suppose he could be. He was one of Liam’s favorites though, so I doubt he would have killed him.”

“That doesn’t mean that someone else didn’t,” I point out.

“Very true. Until we have a body, we will carry on looking for him. We can’t really risk just assuming that he is dead without any proof,” Alaric replies.

“No, of course not.” Rage replies.

“We got off track,” I start. “What’s the job?”

“The informant that gave me the tip in the first place said that he has got some more information for us, so we are going to meet him and see what he has to say,” Alaric replies.

“That seems simple enough,” I reply.

“It does seem that way, but he can be a bit tricky hence why I need you two as back up,” Alaric replies.

“Visible backup or hidden in the shadows?” Rage asks.

Alaric thinks about it for a moment, “We will approach together but if you see a good vantage point on the way, then one of you can view the meeting from that point, and I will take the other person with me as silent back up.”

“Okay,” I reply. “You said he’s tricky. Are you sure that he isn’t setting you up?”

Alaric thinks about it for a moment, “I don’t think so, but never say never and all that. As we always do in this situation, we approach with caution, and we make sure that we are as safe as we can be. I want you both armed.”

“We always are,” I grin, opening my jacket to show him just one of the weapons that I have on me.

He chuckles, “You are so my nephew.”

“Damn straight,” I reply.

There isn’t much more that we need to talk about when it comes to the case. Rage and I know what we are doing, we know where we’re supposed to go and what our roles are. We also know that if anything kicks off, we shoot first and ask questions later. Which, if we are both being honest with ourselves, is what we are good at anyway.

One thing that I do wish that would change about our jobs with Alaric is that they weren’t always so far away. It’s not likely to change though. Blackbreak is in the middle of nowhere and isn’t exactly a traditional school. It is somewhere that is completely safe from Liam, and therefore Blake. Neither of them will touch me while I’m at Blackbreak which is why I was enrolled there.

Threats were starting to be made far more regularly while we were living in

Serendipity. We put off moving for as long as we could without it starting to threaten the guys, and Alaric tried really hard to deal with the threats so we didn't have to leave. He knew how important the guys had become to me, and he didn't want to make me leave. In the end, though, I had a close call with someone who actively tried to end my life. He didn't get very far and ended up losing his instead, but it was a wake-up call. I realized that there was no way I could stay in town and not involve the guys, and Alaric absolutely refused to put me in danger at all.

Not danger like this anyway. I am in danger every time that we go on a job, but that is somewhat controlled, this was unpredictable and coming at us from all angles. Alaric got in touch with one of his best friends, Ryan, who runs Blackbreak, and I was enrolled. I had the option to attend from the start with Rage. I refused simply because it was somewhere that my father wanted me to go, and it meant a lot to him.

I must admit that it was nice when the threats stopped; it was also nice knowing that the guys weren't going to be dragged into this shit. Something that I am still fighting; even Alaric has mentioned it a few times now. He has kept tabs on them, knowing that they do jobs through contacts that I gave them. He has been really impressed with what they are capable of, and the way they handle themselves and difficult situations. He keeps saying they would be a great addition to our team, but I outright refuse to have them involved.

I want them kept safe. Alaric pointed out that they aren't safe now. I didn't have a comeback for that at the time, so I just let the conversation drop and changed the subject.

"We're here," Alaric says.

I look out of the window at the huge factory in front of us, it is absolutely giant, and I am assuming it is closed down because it's still during the workday and the place is completely deserted. I can tell that it's a factory, but I have absolutely no idea what

they do here or rather did. Alaric turns the car around so that we are facing the other way and then puts it in park.

We have driven up a driveway, through winding roads and past other factory buildings that are in the same complex to get here. I'm not going to lie; it feels a little bit like we are being led into a maze so that we can be trapped here. I hope I'm being overly cautious and paranoid and that I'm proven wrong and the meeting goes smoothly.

I don't see any other vehicles around, which means the informant isn't here yet, he has parked somewhere else, or we are being set up.

"We need to take this really slowly," Alaric says as we get out of the car and pull our weapons out.

There is no way that we are going in that building without them drawn. The others are clearly feeling the same way that I am about our current situation, because they are scanning the area and holding their weapons just as tightly as I am.

We approach the door that leads into the warehouse as silently as we can. My eyes scan our surroundings, checking the rooftops and windows of the surrounding buildings for any sign of a sniper. As one myself, I know what signs to look out for, and I am only slightly relieved when I don't find any of the usual signs. That doesn't mean that they aren't there, it just means that I haven't been able to spot them, and if they are there, they are damn good at what they do.

"Door's ajar," Rage says, his voice a whisper so he doesn't attract any attention.

Alaric and I both nod and then, with Alaric leading us, we slip through the door, being extra careful not to open it any more than it already is.

When we get inside, I am somewhat relieved to see that there is plenty of machinery and equipment that we can use for cover. We silently move forward. Alaric is moving with purpose, and I am assuming that he knows where we are going. At least, I hope he knows where we are going. The inside of this factory is almost as maze-like as the roads were to get up to it.

Getting lost in this place would be incredibly easy, and it would take someone hours if not longer, to find you. That worries me a lot. The place seems as deserted as everywhere else. At least, that is what I think until we hear voices. Alaric motions us forward slowly so we can get eyes on who is talking.

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Atlas

As far as I am aware, we were only meeting one informant, so the fact that we can hear more than one voice is a massive red flag. We manage to get into place so that all of us have a view of what is going on.

This is not good at all.

Blake stands over a cowering man, who I am assuming is the informant.

“We know you have been talking to people you shouldn’t,” Blake says in that deceptively calm voice of his.

He has four other men with him, but none of them are my father. My gaze takes in the surrounding area as I check for anyone else hidden in the shadows, fortunately I don’t see anymore.

“I-I-I haven’t,” the informant stutters.

Blake laughs, and the sound sends a shiver down my spine, “You just decided to take a drive to an abandoned warehouse for fun?”

The guy nods rapidly, “Y-yes, I like to explore abandoned buildings.”

Blake’s eyes flash with anger. He asks again, “You haven’t been giving information to our enemies?”

I don't know why he is so dead set on getting the guy to admit that is what he has done. I honestly don't think that the informant's answer will change what Blake is going to do.

Blake likes killing; he gets some sick and twisted enjoyment from it, and he doesn't even need an excuse to kill. So, now that he is being presented with a traitor and a perfect reason to shoot someone, he is very unlikely to pass that up.

My mind spins with possible ways that we can get the guy out of this alive. There are six of them, including Blake and three of us, so the odds aren't great.

Keep him talking , I silently beg. If he can keep Blake talking for a bit longer, one of us might be able to think of something because I know for a fact that I am not the only one who is trying to come up with a way that we can save the informant without losing our own lives.

"I haven't, I swear," he replies. "I would never do that. I am loyal."

Blake shakes his head, "We have proof that you have been talking to someone. I want to know who!"

Ah, that explains it.

Blake knows that the guy has been giving out information about them that he shouldn't have, but his own informant clearly isn't that good because he has no idea what information has been given out and who, too. I'm assuming that he doesn't know what information because if he did, it wouldn't take much for him to realize that the information was being given to us just because of the kind of information that we were interested in.

"I haven't given information to anyone," the informant whimpers, "I'm loyal to

Liam.”

I don't know why, but that was clearly the wrong thing to say as Blake's eyes fill with unfettered rage. That is an odd reaction; Blake should be happy that he is loyal to Liam; after all, that's who Blake works for. Without Liam, Blake wouldn't be where he is now; with the power that he has and people who listen to what he says when he orders them to do something, he would have none of that if it weren't for him. He would be a psychopath and most likely out murdering people, but he wouldn't have people to back him up and for him to control, not like he does now.

He should be thanking the guy, not getting as angry as he is. It makes me think that there is something more going on here, something that we aren't aware of and perhaps something that no one is aware of. Maybe that's what the informant was going to tell us, although you would have to wonder why he would say he was loyal to Liam if he knew that it would be something that would make Blake mad.

Unless he knows or hopes that we are here and he is trying to tell us something without outright, telling us it and giving away that we are here. That seems like a little bit of a stretch, but I suppose anything is possible.

Blake has clearly had enough, he raises his gun, and I know that I'm out of time to come up with a way that I can help. This is not good at all, but we are outgunned, and there is no way that we could get to the guy in time to save him without losing our lives, too. None of us can beat a speeding bullet, and it happens so fast that none of us can even process what has happened until after the informant falls to the floor, a bullet hole in his head and blood spreading around him rapidly.

Fuck.

Blake starts to turn toward his men, no doubt to tell them that they need to clear the scene and move the body. When his eyes land on where we are hiding behind the

machinery, we are pretty well hidden, but if we can see him, then there is a good chance that he can see us.

He narrows his eyes, and I share a look with the other two. We have two options: stay where we are and hope that he doesn't see us and is more concerned with removing the body of the informant, or we get up and make a break for it, hoping that we can get out of the door and to the car before one of us gets hit with a bullet.

The decision is taken out of our hands.

"Boss?" one of the guys with him asks.

I frown. Boss? When did Liam's people start calling Blake Boss?

There are lots of things that aren't making sense about this encounter, and it was supposed to be a simple job. Although, our jobs are never really simple when they are supposed to be, so really, we should have known better.

"I think the people that he has been sending the information to have arrived. Go and check over there," Blake orders as he points in our direction.

That settles it.

Alaric raises his eyebrow and Rage, and I nod. Let's do this. If we stay here, we are definitely going to get killed. We need to move if we don't want to be shot.

We all jump up, and I see the look of surprise on Blake's face before it quickly turns to anger, and he raises his gun and starts erratically shooting. We run like our lives depend on it because they do and return the fire haphazardly behind us.

I really hope that whatever is still left in this factory isn't flammable or easily

exploded because there is a lot of equipment being hit. Fortunately, we manage to find our way out of the maze of factory equipment, bullets still flying in all directions. We burst through the door and head straight for the car, climbing in haphazardly as Alaric starts the engine and drives away, wheels spinning in his haste to get away.

Once we are out on the road again, and don't appear to be being followed, Alaric says, "And that boys is why you always make sure that the car is pointing in the direction that you can escape. We would have lost precious time turning it around otherwise, and we would have been shot and or caught."

I raise my eyebrows, "I wondered why you did that when we arrived, but I was too distracted to ask."

Alaric nods, "There is a reason for everything."

"That was an absolute clusterfuck," Rage says.

"It was," I agree.

Alaric sighs, "It was strange how angry he got when the informant mentioned that he was loyal to Liam."

"I'm glad I wasn't the only one who noticed that," I reply.

"It was weird that they called him Boss as well," Rage adds, a deep frown pulling down his eyebrows.

"Yeah," Alaric agrees. "Leave it with me, and I will look into it. I need to call this in, especially since there is a body now, so you two need to stay quiet."

“Got it,” I reply. “We will make sure that we aren’t being followed.”

Alaric nods and then presses some buttons on his steering wheel, and the sound of the dialing phone fills the car.

“Alaric,” a voice that we have come to recognize says.

“Mr R,” Alaric replies. “There was an incident at the meet. Blake was there and shot the informant. There were shots exchanged, I’m fine. I will file a proper report when I get back, but a team needs to be sent to the location to pick up the body.”

“Very well. One is on the way,” Mr R informs Alaric.

“Thank you, sir,” Alaric replies.

“Oh, before you go,” Mr R adds.

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Atlas

“Yes, sir?” Alaric questions when Mr R stays silent and doesn’t continue his sentence.

“Sorry, I had someone come in,” Mr R explains. “We have had another informant come forward with some information that they claim would be of interest to us. We can set up a meeting for this afternoon. The location is a couple of hours' drive from where you are now.”

Alaric glances back at us to see if we are interested, and we both nod. I don’t mind being kept away from school for longer.

“Yes, I can do that. Send the location through, and I will head there straight away.” Alaric confirms.

“Excellent,” Mr R replies, and then hangs up without saying goodbye.

“Let’s hope that this one doesn’t end up going the same way as the meeting that we just left,” I say drily.

“Agreed. Having Blake at two of the informant meetings would be bad luck all around.” Alaric replies.

“Let’s just hope it’s not a day of it,” I reply with a frown, “they say bad luck comes in threes.”

“Speaking of bad luck,” Rage starts, and I groan. He smirks at my reaction but instantly becomes serious again as he explains his statement, “Three cars back, an older, dark blue SUV. They have been following us for the last few miles and have taken every turn that we have.”

“Good eye,” Alaric praises as he immediately spots them in the rearview mirror. “Alright, let’s see if they are really following us or if it’s a coincidence.”

We stay silent as Alaric takes the next exit and we drive into a large town. This is the perfect environment to check if someone is following us. We will drive around in a big circle and then if they follow every turn that we make we will know that they are following us. They have already followed us into the town, but so have a couple of other cars so it really could be a coincidence.

“Can you find me a loop to drive on the navigation?” Alaric asks.

“I already have it up,” I say. “Take the next left.”

“Thanks.”

I direct Alaric around in a big circle for the next twenty minutes or so. And Rage keeps an eye on the car.

“They are still following us,” Rage says. “Although they haven’t noticed that we have driven around in a big circle, so they aren’t that bright.”

I chuckle.

“So, what is our next move now that we have established that they are following us?” I ask.

Alaric is teaching us when we go on these jobs. I think the idea is that once the Liam and Blake thing has been dealt with, and Liam's empire has been successfully dismantled, and, of course, we turn eighteen, we will join him at the organization.

To be honest, it all seems incredibly far off, and I don't imagine that we will manage to end Liam's business and all of its associates before I turn eighteen. This is a long game situation, and I'm not sure that the organization would allow someone to join whose father and brother run such a powerful crime organization, not unless they helped take it down in the first place.

The organization has no idea that Rage and I are involved, although they know that Alaric has people that help him that have insider knowledge of Liam's business. I think that Mr R has an inclination, but doesn't acknowledge it because we are only seventeen. We shouldn't be capable of the things that we are, but neither Rage nor I have had a traditional upbringing, and whereas normal kids were given games consoles, I was given a gun and so was Rage.

It made us grow up a lot quicker than we should have, but it also meant that I am now in a position where I can take down my father and brother and stop the terror that they spread everywhere. If we can successfully end their business and all of their associates, we will be making a massive dent in the drug, weapons, and human export business, and that is a really good thing.

So, while it might be a long time until we can officially join the organization. I appreciate that Alaric is taking the time to teach us as much as he can. Not only does it keep us safe when we go on these jobs with him, but it also prepares us just in case we do join him.

"We try to lose him," Alaric replies. "As you know, it is usually easier when you have another car with you. One car can drive one way, and another goes the other, and by the time that they have figured out who to follow, it's too late."

“Or, if the person following you is unaware that you have another car with you, then the second car can do things to hold them up, like waiting until the last minute to go through lights, that sort of thing,” I add, we have done that a few times back in Serendipity when Tomlinson have been ass’s or even when I have done jobs with guys. This lesson from Alaric is really more of a refresher than an actual lesson because I have been following or being followed by people for as long as I can drive, and I’ve been driving since I was twelve.

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Alaric says.

It takes me a second, and then it clicks, “We can try to lose them at the next set of lights.”

“Exactly,” Alaric grins.

“There are a couple of cars between us and them now, so it should work even better than if they were directly behind us,” Rage adds.

“Atlas, can you find out where the next set of lights are on the map?” Alaric asks me.

I nod and start to study the map, trying to find the closest set but also the ones that will give us the best chance of escape.

“Okay, there is one set coming up, but the turn offs are really obvious, and otherwise, it’s a straight road, so I don’t think we should do it at that one,” I explain as I study the map. “The next set has a bend after it, so it’s not just a straight road; if we go up there and then take the second turn, we can get back onto the main road and carry on the journey to the location where the next informant is.”

“Got it,” Alaric replies, a proud glint in his eye and in the uptick of his lips as he says, “you are really good at this.”

“Thank you,” I reply.

I’m not used to compliments, and I don’t handle them very well at all when I get them. I just don’t know what to do. So, I settle for awkwardly saying thank you. What else do you say? You too? That doesn’t work, and if you compliment them back, then I feel like they think you are only doing it because they complimented you, and it’s not a genuine compliment.

I tend to overthink it if I let myself, so I just stick to a simple thank you.

Fortunately, Alaric knows me very well, and he knows that compliments make me nervous and on edge, so he changes the subject instead.

Glancing at the rearview mirror at Rage he asks, “How many cars are behind us?”

“There are three between us and them,” Rage replies, “I haven’t been able to make out who is driving, or any one in the car so I can’t identify any of them, but they are definitely following us. I do not have any doubt about that.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that is a safe thing to assume now,” Alaric replies.

“Go through these lights,” I tell Alaric.

“Got it,” he replies.

We carry on driving for a while longer once we’re through the lights. The next set is quite a drive away, which seems like a design fault to me in a city like this, but it actually works in our favor so I’m not complaining.

“These ones?” Alaric asks me.

“Yeah,” I reply.

We are about to piss off a lot of people. The light goes green, and Alaric stays where he is; he doesn't move forward, even when people start honking angrily because he's holding up traffic. At the very last second, he drives through the green light. It turns red just as we go through it, and the cars behind stop at the lights, not willing to risk an accident.

“The car has gotten held up,” Rage confirms with a grin as we round the corner.

“Thank fuck for that,” I reply. “That was getting tedious.”

We take the second turn and then head back out onto the main road. Hopefully, we have lost them, but we all keep an eye out in case they manage to find us again.

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Atlas

We are about an hour into the drive, and we haven't seen the car again or anyone else suspiciously following us. So, we are in the clear and have successfully lost our tail. I'm glad because the next step after trying to lose them would have been to confront them, which could have stopped us from getting information from the second informant.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I frown, unsure who could be calling me; I don't get many calls, especially now that I don't speak to the guys because it's safer for them that way. I suppose it could be one of the guys from Blackbreak telling me that someone is trying to cause shit in our absence. I hope not though because I am in absolutely no mood to deal with that shit.

"Who's calling you?" Rage asks, sounding just as confused as I was.

"Fuck off, I have friends," I retort, slightly offended that he sounded as incredulous as he did.

Rage chuckles, "You don't have friends who call you apart from me. Well, you have the guys, but you put a stop to that."

I decide to ignore that comment as I glance at the caller ID, and then I smile smugly, "It's Jynx. I told you I had friends."

Rage just shakes his head and laughs.

I decide to ignore him and answer the video call from Jynx, “Hey!”

“Hey, just calling to check in,” Jynx smiles happily.

Rage leans forward, and I angle the camera so we are both on the screen, “Hey, Jynx, hey guys!”

Gathered behind Jynx and trying to get on the screen so that they can see too, are Jynx’s men; by that, I mean they are all together. She loves them, and they love her. It works for them. The guys actually spoke about doing something similar with Ever when they found her and, of course, if she was interested. Honestly, I think what Jynx and her guys have is very rare, and I think the guys would get jealous of each other if they tried to do something similar with Ever. Just because I thought that didn’t mean that I wasn’t going to try and help them find her. I know how much she means to them and want to help them. I am still trying, and I have still had no luck. It’s definitely strange. I have a lot of contacts on both sides of the legality line. I have people looking for her, but I still haven’t been able to find her. It’s almost like someone is trying to hide her.

Jynx’s family is made up of Rome, Malachi, Mason, Rip, and Ace. They have and will kill for Jynx, and she has and will kill for them. They are all deadly and incredibly good at what they do. The way that they met is actually an incredibly interesting story; Jynx got a shock inheritance from a grandmother she didn’t know existed; she was just getting over being kidnapped, so she wasn’t actively working for D at the time. The conditions of the inheritance said that she had to move to a specific town and attend the school, but the grandmother had done her research on Jynx and knew her reputation when it came to schools, so she said in the letter that she had to behave. Jynx being Jynx took that as a challenge, and completely changed her personality at school, the guys thought she was innocent and tried to protect her from their deadly lifestyle, and in doing so managed to piss her off. Long story short, she let her true colors show and shocked the shit out of them. As if that wasn’t enough,

they then found out that they were linked in a way that none of them could have predicted.

It was a fucking wild ride. I am still not sure that I have the whole story straight.

They do a similar thing to what we do, except they are a hell of a lot less legal, and they pretty much always do the assassination jobs. Jynx is the best at what she does in the criminal world, and has been for years which is an even more impressive fact when you take into consideration that she is in her twenties.

D is her uncle, and he is a bigger crime boss than my father and brother by far. The difference is that D does jobs for the organization that Alaric works for, and because of the nature of them and how good he is at his job, the organization leaves him alone.

I really don't know how that came about, or how he still gets away with it, but he does, and it works for everyone involved. My point was that he is her uncle, and she has been raised in the life much like Rage and I have. She actually taught me what I know about a sniper rifle, and she is the only reason why I am as good as I am.

D is also another one of Alaric's best friends.

"Hey!" Ace greets us, as happy as always. Don't let that fool you though he is as deadly as they come, they all are. "Been up to anything fun?"

"By that he means deadly," Jynx grins, her smile sharp.

"The same old," I reply and then add, "Oh, we just got shot at. Does that count?"

"Definitely," Malachi replies. Curiosity sparking in his eyes as he asks, "Do tell, what happened?"

“Liam happened, what else,” Alaric says.

I turn the camera so that they can see him.

“It’s been a while, Alaric,” Jynx says fondly.

I try to move the camera so that I have sort of got all of us in the shot, and we can at least see her.

“Were you on a job?” Rome asks.

“Yeah, technically, and it wasn’t Liam,” I reply. I quickly fill them in on what happened.

“Fucking Blake,” Jynx spits. She knows exactly what he is like and what he has done to me, and it’s safe to say that she is not a fan. “Just say the word, and I will take him out.”

Rage grins, “We know you would. I think if it were completely up to us, we would get you to step in, but the organization is involved.”

Alaric takes over, “I don’t want to risk you, even though D is involved with the organization there are special circumstances that protect him. It would protect you to a certain extent, but we don’t want to risk it. Neither of us would be happy to have you guys that close to an organization run operation.”

Jynx sighs and rolls her eyes, “I know, and I love you guys for that, but if you need me and my services, just say the word. I am sure that we can figure out something that would keep everyone involved safe, and Blake dead.”

“She’s right,” Rip smirks, “we have our ways, and we have plenty of resources. If

you need help, just yell.”

“Got it,” Alaric smiles warmly, “thanks, guys.”

We all know that we aren’t going to do that, it’s like Alaric said, we don’t want to risk them. Alaric is technically on the opposite side of the law to them. He is above the normal law enforcement, but he is still on the side of the law, Jynx definitely isn’t.

“How are the grandparents?” I ask.

Jynx smiles, “They are great. We are actually heading out to see them in a couple of days.”

“That’s great,” Rage replies. “I bet it’s still an adjustment, even though it’s been a while.”

“Yeah, it is. I mean, they mostly remember us as little kids, so I think they have been struggling with that more than we have,” Rome replies.

“I can see why that would be odd,” Alaric agrees with a frown.

“How is Sawyer and the rest of the Conspiracy?” I ask.

Jynx doesn’t really talk about the grandparent's situation that much, but then again, Jynx doesn’t really talk about anything much. It’s just the way she is, the only reason why I know as much about her as I do, is because we run in the same circles, or rather our parents and her uncle did, plus her uncle, D, is best friends with Alaric. We have pretty much always been in each other's lives.

“Amazing. They are handling a lot of shit for us at the moment so that we can do a

couple of jobs for D, and they are doing great.” Mason replies. “Fucking awesome to hang out with, too; you guys will have to meet them at some point.”

“Sounds good to me,” I reply. “You guys talk about them a lot. I would love to meet them.”

“Yeah, you would get on really well. They are all a bit stabby,” Jynx chuckles, making the rest of us laugh. She suddenly gets this look in her eye, and I know that whatever she says next will not sit well with me. “So, when do I get to meet the guys? You brought them in yet?”

I groan.

“I’ve been telling him that he should. We could use their help,” Rage immediately answers for me.

“I’ve been keeping an eye on them,” Alaric adds, a smile on his face, “they stopped a guy from selling his partner, found out that he was the one that stole drugs and money off the local crime boss, gave the fucker up to him and then relocated an abused woman and child far away using their own money and a made up scenario to ensure that they were safe. She now owns a house, thanks to them, and is fully settled in her new town.”

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Atlas

My eyebrows raise, “They did?”

“Fuck, they are good. Did they know what would happen to the guy they handed over?” Rip asks, looking impressed.

Alaric’s chuckle is dark, “Yeah, I don’t think they cared. Jimmy said that he found the guy black and blue and unable to walk again, thanks to the knife wounds in his knees. He said it was a mercy to kill him.”

I smirk, “That sounds like Jensen. He must have said or done something really disturbing for Jensen to do something like that.”

Ace whistles, a massive grin on his face, “I like the sound of Jensen. I predict we are going to be excellent friends. When we meet of course, and make no mistake, we are going to meet.”

I choose to ignore that. I want them to meet the guys. I do when it is safe.

“Wait, Jimmy, Jimmy?” Rome asks, “As in the one who is in charge of three states and friends with D, that Jimmy?”

Alaric nods, “Yep. He told D, and D told me, and I put two and two together since I was watching them anyway.”

“Atlas,” Jynx says, “you need to get them in on this. They belong in this life as much

as you and me.”

I sigh, “I can’t, I just can’t risk them. Shit has picked up recently with Liam and Blake, and I just don’t want to be responsible for them losing their lives.”

Jynx’s expression softens, “Alright. I hear you, but think about it, okay? They are your chosen family, and I know you miss them. It’s not like they are normal guys.”

“I know,” I sigh.

Jynx nods before her expression changes completely, and she winks at me, “Oh, I forgot, Maria was asking about you.”

Alaric immediately sits up straight in his seat, and Rage and I share an amused look.

“Who me?” he asks.

“Who else?” Jynx retorts. “She wanted to know when you, Ryan, and D were going to see her again.”

Alaric chuckles, “We don’t really go and see her. She calls for help with a job, and we go.”

“Yeah, you all manage to do that, huh? Despite how busy you all are, she calls, and you just go,” Jynx smirks, teasing Alaric.

It is well known between all of us that Alaric, D and Ryan all have a soft spot for Maria. Because of Maria’s traumatic past though, she keeps them all firmly in the friendzone, and has done so for years. The guys now try to ignore what they feel, but every now and then Jynx gets a kick out of winding them all up.

Putting the heat onto Alaric has successfully taken it off me though, so I'm grateful.

Alaric clears his throat, "I don't know what you are getting at."

"Sure, you don't," Rome chuckles, "just like D doesn't either."

Clearly desperate to change the subject, Alaric asks, "Did the conspiracy tell Harley that they like her yet?"

Jynx chuckles, "Subtle." She clearly decides that he has had enough teasing though because she answers, "Yeah, actually. They nearly lost her; it was a whole thing."

As usual, that is all the information she is willing to share, and I smirk. One thing is for sure, if you tell Jynx a secret, you can be damn sure that she won't share it with anyone.

"Good, I'm glad," Alaric replies. Even he knows not to push Jynx for more information, "We should probably get going, we are nearly at our destination."

"Wow," I say, "have we really been on the phone for that long?"

"Damn," Ace replies.

"We should probably get going too, actually, we have a job that we need to look through a bit more thoroughly so we can decide how we are going to handle it," Rome replies.

"I will come and see you as soon as I can. I miss you guys," Jynx says. "It might be a while though. We are pretty busy."

"We miss you two," Rage replies for both of us.

“You won’t be able to get into Blackbreak without authorization,” Alaric warns her.

“He’s right,” I agree. “If you let me know when you are coming, I can make sure that you are authorized to come onto campus.”

“It’s not like other schools, remember,” Rage adds.

Jynx smirks, her eyes sparkling with mischief, “Challenge accepted.”

Before any of us can argue with her or point out that it is probably dangerous to sneak onto a campus that is so well secured, she hangs up.

I can’t help the laughter that escapes me, “To be honest, if anyone can get on campus, then it’s going to be Jynx.”

Alaric grins, “Yeah, you are probably right. She has a gift for being able to get into areas and buildings that she shouldn’t be able to access, and no one would know that she had been there unless she wanted you to know.”

“You know, sometimes she scares me,” Rage admits.

I nod, “Yeah, me too. I am damn glad that she is on our side.”

Alaric chuckles, “Absolutely. The meeting point is about five minutes away, so we need to switch back to work mode.”

“Got it,” I reply.

“This time I want you guys in the shadows. Any advantage points that you can get so you can keep watch on the situation, and also if we are going to be interrupted.” Alaric orders, “Last time was far too fucking close, and I don’t want to go through

that again.”

“Agreed,” I say.

I am more than happy to watch from afar and guard Alaric while he gets the information that we need. Rage nods in agreement too.

“Good,” Alaric replies, clearly having expected us to put up some sort of fight.

A couple of minutes later, we pull up outside yet another factory, “Your informants like factories, don’t they?”

“Apparently so,” Alaric replies, turning the car around, which I now understand the reason behind, and then he motions for us to get out. “The meeting this time is being held outside, in one of the courtyards. You should be able to find vantage points on the roofs of the nearby buildings.”

We both nod. He shows us on the map that he has on his phone, where he wants us to be and where we are going. We have parked on the other side of the building and Alaric tells us that we are cutting it pretty close to get into position before the informant arrives.

“Got it?” he asks us, studying us closely to make sure that we understand what he has been saying to us.

“Got it,” we say together.

“Good,” he says. “Stay safe and stay alert and watch my back.”

We both nod and then move away from him, heading in different directions and to the buildings that Alaric has assigned us. I move through the abandoned building, making

sure that I always know which side of the building, the courtyard, Alaric is meeting the informant. I finally come to a stop around two floors up, and a window that already has had the panes of glass broken, so I don't have to do it.

Looking out of it, I can clearly see Alaric below, and I will also have the perfect view of the informant. If he tries anything, I will be able to see and stop him. My position is such that I doubt that he will be able to spot me easily, and he should be too focused on giving Alaric the information that he wants and getting out of there before he is caught or arrested so that he won't be looking too closely at his surroundings.

Of course, it could go the other way as well and he could be hyper vigilant instead. The kinds of people that are informants are either just looking to make some quick money, or they have found themselves stuck in a life that they don't want and are trying to do something about it. At least those are the ones that I have met.

I scan the building that Rage is on to see if I can find him, but I can't even see a hint of where he might be, so I know that he has done his job as well as he usually does and has set himself up with a vantage point that is as concealed as mine should be.

Now, it is just a waiting game.

I hate that Alaric is so exposed just standing in the middle of this courtyard and waiting for the informant, especially after what happened before with Blake. It is certainly not a safe position for him.

At least here he has us up in positions that we can watch his back. Hopefully, this meeting will go a lot better than the previous one and we will actually get the information that we need. With any luck, the information that this informant wants to give us is the same that the now very dead one tried to tell us.

The thing with informants is that unless they are your people undercover, you can't

entirely trust that the information they are giving you is accurate and worth it, at least not until you take the time to look into it and see if there is any evidence to back up the informant's claims. They risk their lives by giving information, but they can very easily be playing a double agent and giving us information that Blake or my father wants us to know.

It is a double-edged sword, and we have to be very careful.

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Atlas

After what seems like far too long of a wait, but probably isn't, a man with his hood up and his hands in his pockets approaches Alaric from the other direction. I train my weapon on him. I do not like the fact that his hands are in his pockets. I like to be able to see someone's hands in this situation, so that I know for sure that they are empty and that the person is not carrying a weapon.

He could be concealing a weapon easily enough in his hoody pocket, it's certainly baggy enough. I ready myself to pull the trigger the second that it looks like he has something in his hand that he shouldn't have. I see Alaric glance at the informant's hands, and I know that he has picked up the risk as well. I can't hear him from here, I am too far away but he will fill us in when we get back to the car.

My breathing is calm, and my hand is steady on my gun as I watch them closely. I do wish that I had my sniper rifle instead of my handgun, but I don't tend to bring that with me unless Alaric tells me that I need to.

I know that Rage will be doing the same thing as I am and finding the perfect angle to take the shot if he needs to. Alaric says something to the guy, and takes a step back, his hand moving to his hip where his gun is and his other hand held up in warning. He doesn't pull out his gun though, he looks like he is just warning him, so I wait.

The informant very slowly removes his hands from his pockets and holds them up, showing that they are both empty and that he is not concealing a weapon. Well, he could still be concealing a weapon on him somewhere, and probably is, I know I would be if I were coming to give a cop inside information. The point is, he isn't

about to shoot Alaric on the spot.

I won't lower my gun; it wouldn't be a smart idea to do so, and it could put Alaric at risk.

While I am focused on Alaric, I also make sure that I am paying attention to my own surroundings, and listening for any slight noise or shift in the air that could indicate that I am about to be snuck up on. We didn't spot anyone when we arrived, and I didn't spot anyone walking through the building, but this place is enormous, and there is a good chance that we could have missed someone, or someone could have arrived while we were focused on the meeting and Alaric.

Thankfully, there have been no signs of Blake either, which I have mixed feelings about. On the one hand, him not being here means that the informant isn't going to die and that none of us are going to get caught in the crossfire, or rather just shit because Blake wants us all dead. On the other hand, if he walked into the courtyard now, and made a threatening move, which he would because it's Blake and that is pretty much the only thing that he knows how to do, then I could take the shot. That may sound harsh; he is my brother; however, after what he has put me through and what he puts others through, I would most likely be saving hundreds of lives by ending him.

I am okay with that, and I am aware that most people in my position wouldn't be. However, I don't think that there are many people that will ever be in my position, it's pretty unique.

These sorts of meetings don't tend to take very long, but Alaric and the informant have been speaking for quite a while now, and the informant is gesturing wildly. I have no idea what he could be talking about, but Alaric doesn't look concerned in the slightest, in fact, he looks quite amused and slightly frustrated.

Finally, the conversation seems to wind down. The informant walks off in the direction that he came from, and Alaric stays where he is for a while longer to make sure that he has really gone. When he turns to leave the courtyard area, I finally pull my gun in from the hole in the window and quickly make my way back through the factory that I am in so I can meet him back at the car.

Fortunately, it doesn't take very long to get back to the car and I don't run into any trouble on the way. Alaric and Rage arrive at the same time that I do, and I raise my eyebrow in question.

"I will fill you in when we are safely away from here," Alaric says.

I nod in agreement and pull open the door of the car.

Once we are all seated, we immediately drive off. We have already been here for far longer than is technically safe, and we now need to leave as quickly as possible. Anyone could have spotted us arriving, and then either told Liam or sent someone to lie in wait for us. It is for this reason that we remain on edge until we are heading back in the direction of Blackbreak, although now, we have a six plus hour drive instead of the original shorter drive.

"So, what did he say? He seemed very animated," I say.

Alaric shakes his head, "Yeah, when Mr R sent me the details, and it mentioned his name, my memory pinged, but I couldn't figure out for the life of me why. It wasn't until he started telling me about his cousins, best friends, sisters, husband's aunt, whoever the fuck that is, that I remembered why I tended to avoid any meetings with him."

I burst out laughing.

“No way,” Rage chuckles, “you mean that some of that conversation that lasted far longer than it should have was because he was giving you gossip about people that you don’t even know?”

Alaric raises one eyebrow looking thoroughly unimpressed as he replies, “The information that he had to give me was that there was some unrest between Liam and Blake. That Blake was taking on some parts of the business, and making decisions that Liam is not happy about. He is using the parts of the business that he has taken over for human trafficking, among other things.”

“We knew about the human trafficking,” I point out. “Blake’s reaction to the first informant saying that he was loyal to Liam makes a bit more sense though. If Blake and Liam are fighting, then Blake would have taken that as an insult.”

“Oh, he definitely would have. I’m surprised that Blake didn’t shoot him as soon as he said it,” Alaric replies.

I shrug, “He wanted information.”

“Hang on,” Rage says, interrupting us. “Are you telling us that is all he told you? So, for the rest of the time, which was probably like what? Twenty? Twenty-five minutes? He just talked shit?”

I look at Alaric expectantly; I hadn’t actually thought of that.

Alaric nods, “Yes, that is exactly what fucking happened. I swear, I will never meet him again. I have always tried to avoid it, but now I will categorically refuse to meet him. Someone else can do it; I just can’t handle the talking. I know more about him and his family than I probably do about my own.”

His rant sets me and Rage off, and we both fall about laughing.

Once we have both calmed down Rage asks, “Can we get food before we go back?”

“Of course,” Alaric replies.

Rage

We have just picked up the food and are on our way again when my phone rings.

Atlas smirks, and I know what he is going to say before he even says it, “Who is calling you? You don’t have friends, only me.”

“I did not say that, you snarky fucker.” I reply with an amused smirk.

Atlas grins, “Seriously, who is ringing you?”

I glance down at my phone, and my eyebrows rise in shock, “Erm, D.”

“Probably wants you on a job,” Atlas replies as he takes a big bite of his burger.

“Hey, D,” I say as soon as I answer.

D’s voice is gravelly but full of warmth as he replies, “Rage. I have just had a chat with Jynx, and she told me that you were currently with Alaric?”

I nod, even though he can’t see me, and reply, “Yeah. We have just done a job with him. What’s up? Did you want to talk to him?”

Alaric’s eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror curiously.

“No. But I do need him to drop you off somewhere.”

“You have a job for me?” I ask, excitement spiking through me; I fucking love doing jobs for D. “Atlas too?”

“No, this one requires more of your skillset, and I only need one of you. It’s delicate. Because of that, I can’t give you as many details as I usually do. Are you interested?”

I am immediately intrigued, so, of course I reply, “Yes definitely, just tell me what you can.”

“You are going to be going undercover as a cop, a SWAT cop. You will be covered from head to toe, so no one is going to know that you don’t belong. You will be at the location they are raiding, and you will blend in and enter with them. Once inside, your only job is to take down one target. His name is Marvin, and I am sending you his picture to your phone; delete it as soon as you have memorized it. As soon as your job is done, you are to leave immediately and make your way to the pickup location, which will be outside the trailer park. They will drop you back at Blackbreak.” D explains as quickly as he can, “This job is riskier than the usual ones I send you on, but I needed someone that I could trust completely to carry it out. You need to use the confusion and activity of the raid to get the job done and then leave as quickly as you can, or you are going to get caught.”

“Understood,” I reply. My heart is pumping already, and I have a massive smile on my face. I love shit like this. I also feel incredibly privileged that he is trusting me with a job that is important to him.

“I’m sending an address to you, get Alaric to drop you off there and I will meet you and get you kitted up.” D says. “This job is sensitive, so the details need to stay between you and me.”

“Okay, I understand,” I reply.

“This is our only chance; we most likely won’t get another one,” D emphasizes the point again.

“I understand; I won’t let you down,” I say honestly, hoping that he can hear the sincerity in my voice.

He hangs up immediately like he always does. It is actually something that he has always done, and Alaric does it too. They both hang up without saying goodbye, and I have always thought that there is a reason behind why they do it, but I have never figured out what that reason is. Every time I think about asking either one of them, they have either already hung up, or it isn’t the right time.

Like now for example, now would not be the time to ask Alaric why neither of them ever says goodbye. I feel like it wouldn’t be a simple answer; instead, it would be a conversation, and I have more important things to think about right now. Like the job. Which sounds intriguing as fuck, and I’m excited to get started.

“Is everything okay?” Atlas asks me, and then grins, “Never mind, I know that look. You have a job, haven’t you?”

I grin, but before I answer, I get a text message and look down at my phone, “Alaric, D asked if you could drop me here,” I say as I read out the address and then add, “I think it’s in Fresno.”

“No problem,” Alaric grins.

This is going to be fun.

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Ever

Just as my eyes start to droop closed, ready to sink into the oblivion of a nightmare-filled sleep, an almighty bang rocks the trailer, causing me to shoot up in bed. There is a brief moment of silence before all hell breaks loose, and the silence is replaced with gunfire and shouting. I can just about make out someone shouting 'police,' and I heave a sigh of relief. I quickly take my two knives out of my sleeves and hide them under a loose baseboard, covering them with my English book and the only spare hoodie I have, just in case.

Then, I throw myself down on the floor and place my hands behind my head. I am not being shot in the crossfire, most likely on purpose by one of my father's employees. I know an awful lot of information that could get a fuck-ton of people in trouble.

This isn't the first time there has been a raid, but I haven't said anything before about what I know. I guess because I was worried that it would somehow get back to my father that I had talked, and I would end up dead or worse. I always figured as soon as I was eighteen and could get away without the police bringing me back for being a runaway, that I'd move as far away as possible while still staying in the U.S., then go to the police in whatever state I ended up in and try to report all I know about it there.

I would have a slim chance of escaping with my life that way or at least have a decent enough head start. However, after what my father said earlier about whoring me out, I am seriously considering telling the police everything now. So long as all the leading players have been raided and not just my father.

It is not a risk I am willing to take if they haven't.

I wouldn't put it past him to decide to whore me out before I turn eighteen. It's a small mercy that he hasn't already, and I feel like I am walking on a knife edge as it is. As soon as I turn eighteen, I can escape, and no one can bring me back, but if he decides to put me to work on my back before that and I run, I'll just be brought straight back here, and I shudder to think of the consequences that would await me.

I will do anything and everything I can to prevent that.

Even though I am expecting it, the sudden crash of my bedroom door flying open still makes me jump. The locks easily give way, and I let out an embarrassing squeak. It is silent for a moment before I feel a soft touch on my wrist, causing me to lurch away, a knee-jerk reaction I have absolutely no control over. I don't particularly appreciate being touched.

"Hey, it's going to be okay, young lady. You don't need to be doing that. We need to take you down to the station though, so can you stand up for me?" A kind voice asks me.

I slowly peer up at the officer, dressed in full tactical gear, as I try to determine if it's some kind of trick.

I keep my hands up where he can see them at all times and slowly stand, taking the opportunity to look over the officer in front of me. He has got a kind face, and his eyes soften as they study me. He has soft lines around his mouth and eyes that tell me he smiles a lot. I can only just make these details out from behind the helmet of his tactical gear, but living the life I do, it is essential to notice the small details. They can tell you a lot about a person and what they are really like.

He smiles softly at me.

“I'm Jim. I need to take you down to the station and ask some questions. Is that okay?”

I just nod and walk out of my room ahead of him, it's not like I really have a choice, but I appreciate him asking me if it was okay anyway. I rarely get asked if I am comfortable with something happening these days. As we walk through the main part of the trailer, I don't look at the bodies on the floor and keep my gaze straight ahead, ignoring the other officers milling about, some in tactical gear and some in the white suits of the forensic team. I've been around this sort of violence ever since my mom died and my father went off the reservation. I learned pretty damn quickly it is never a good idea to look.

“Is my father. . .?” I have to ask. It's like a burning need to know if he has survived or not, and my freedom relies on the cop's answer.

“He was shot down when he fired at the officers. I'm sorry.” He says it in order to comfort me, but there is no truth behind the words. He feels no sorrow for my father's fate.

A quick glance in his eyes shows me that he is sorry for the perceived effect it will have on me though. He's a good cop.

“Okay.” I nod, unable to say anything else because I am a terrible person. My father's just been killed, and I'm relieved.

So incredibly fucking relieved.

The cop eyes me warily as I get into the back of a police cruiser, and I can't say I blame him. Mine is not the usual reaction someone has when a member of their family dies. We may have been bound by blood, but that man was not my family, and if the cop knew what my supposed father had put me through, he would probably be

wondering why I'm not dancing and shouting with joy.

Thankfully, they have been watching my father and his associates long enough to know that they need to put me in an unoccupied cop car. I don't want to be near any of my father's surviving associates for obvious reasons, but more than that, I can feel the heat of their glares from here. They think I tipped off the cops.

Maybe I should have, but I didn't. It would make no difference to them if I were actually bothered enough to tell them that. They have already painted me as guilty. Which means they will be planning their revenge and ways to punish me for a misdeed I didn't even commit. I can say for sure that it wouldn't end well for me if I were placed in one of the cars with them.

I just want to be free from this life.

I want to graduate and go to college, then have a simple and predictable future, but most of all, I want to be safe, and that is never going to happen if I don't take risks in the first place. A dark part of me whispers that I could never really settle for a mundane life. I like punishing those who prey on innocents. The darkness inside me has grown over the years spent working for my father and being forced to do things that I would never have chosen to do. Instead of fearing the dark though, I welcome it, and if I am completely honest, I fucking revel in it.

No, the white picket fence life may not be for me, but I can punish those who deserve it on my terms. I can keep myself safe.

My resolve hardens as we pull up to the police station, and the cop lets me out of the car. As he is escorting me inside, he remains respectful of my aversion to touch and keeps a respectable distance between us. He ensures we aren't touching, but he is close enough to grab me if I decide to run. That small amount of respect that he gives me is more than I have been shown in a long time and solidifies my decision.

I turn to him.

“Was the raid just on my father’s place?”

He watches me cautiously but replies, “No.”

Nodding, I state firmly as I bend the truth slightly. “I will tell you everything, his associates, the drop-off points. I will tell you everything I know. I will even testify, but I want all charges against me dropped. I did nothing willingly.”

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Ever

I am reasonably sure they don't know about my less than savoury activities that had nothing to do with my father. After all, if they did, he wouldn't be showing me kindness right now, despite the reasons behind why I do what I do.

I will tell them everything, even if I have to go back to juvie for a while, but I figure it's worth a shot to ask.

"There weren't going to be any charges held against you. We are well aware that you were not a willing participant." He growls.

The strength of his reaction confirms my suspicion that they have been watching my father for a while. It also tells me that they aren't aware of everything or my part in it. That is something I will not be sharing with them. I have a feeling that they would be less forgiving if they found out just how dangerous I really am.

Dear old Dad wasn't shy when he dished out the beatings, only being cautious enough that the school wouldn't notice anything was wrong. The people he surrounded himself with didn't give a shit, and in the last week or so, he had struck me in front of them on multiple occasions. If the cops were watching him as closely as it seemed, then they would have seen it. It could even be why they made a move when they did. I know this is my life, and I have accepted it, but normal people don't take kindly to grown men using their seventeen-year-old daughters as punching bags.

I nod as he leads me to an interrogation room with a woman officer and then takes my statement. It takes a while, but I tell them everything. They both look horrified at

what my father has put me through, but then again, any decent human being would be. I give them my statement with a blank expression, keeping my emotions locked down. There is no room for them right now. This recount of my life should always be told with no emotion.

Emotions are a weakness, one I can't afford to have and one that has been used against me before.

"Is that everything?" The woman cop asks softly.

She is a detective, and the guy in tactical gear who escorted me into the station is also a detective. Despite how uncomfortable he must be, still in full gear, he's stayed throughout the whole process.

It's become evident that they aren't part of the local police either, but federal, which means my father was into a lot more shit than I knew. My suspicions were correct.

"Yes," I say curtly.

There is a knock on the door before either of them can say anything, and a cop in uniform enters, glancing at me with pity that has my jaw clenching. He steps up to the woman detective and leans down, talking quietly in her ear. She nods once and then turns to me as the guy leaves, closing the heavy door of the interrogation room behind him.

"While you have been here, we have managed to get hold of some people mentioned in your mother's will. As your father didn't seem to have one, we had to do some digging."

My heart clenches. No, please, God, no. Please don't say it.

“They were more than happy to take you in and get all your school transcripts transferred to their local one. We will have to keep your previous school’s name out of the records due to the nature of this case.”

Fuck, please, don’t say it; I silently beg again.

I can't go back there; I am broken, damaged. They won't want me anymore, and they are my happy place. I can pretend that they would still want me right now, but I'm not stupid enough to think that would actually be the case if they saw the kind of person I have grown into. I live in the dark, and I don't completely hate it. In fact, sometimes, I crave it. I may have said that I want a boring, predictable life, but I have already realized it's not for me. I know myself better than that. I wanted to escape my father, sure, but I wouldn't have been able to stay away from the temptation of the darkness. The adrenalin and thrill of the fight would have tempted me away far too easily, and the temptation to use the darkness in me to protect those who still have their light would have become almost overwhelming.

I can't have my happy place taken away from me; I won't survive it.

“Rob and Jenny Parker are who your mother mentioned. In fact, there were quite a few people mentioned in her will, all of them from the same town. We had several officers contacting each of the people mentioned, and all of them wanted to take you in. As far as I am aware, they ended up discussing it amongst themselves, and Rob and Jenny worked out the best. Do you remember them?”

Fuck!

Of course, I remember them. How could I forget? They are Trick's parents. They are sending me back to the only place I have ever really considered my home.

“I, erm, yeah,” I stutter, showing the most emotion I have shown throughout this

whole process.

“Good, I'm glad. A woman from social services is waiting for you and will take you to get your belongings from the trailer and then drive you to Oregon.”

Crap, I won't be able to take my bike then. I might have to call in a favor to get someone to bring it down to me, although the fewer people that know where I am going, the better, just in case. D would be the safest bet, but I don't have any way to contact him.

Echoing my thoughts, the cop continues, “There are only a handful of people who know where you are going, and we are going to keep it that way. No one else has seen your mother's will, and your father won't be able to point anyone in the right direction.” She adds somewhat reassuringly, leaving the rest of the sentence unsaid. He won't be able to point anyone in the right direction because he is dead.

I just nod. My mind is still stuck on the fact they're sending me home; I'm going to see my boys again—the boys who are my happy place.

No.

They aren't mine anymore, and they won't want the me that I have been forced to become through circumstance. I am not the carefree child who would laugh at pretty much anything and who would run away screaming if I saw a tiny spider. I have since learned there are far worse things out there than a harmless arachnid.

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Ever

I awake with a jolt, sitting up before my eyes are even properly open, my knives drawn. Before I can work out what woke me up, there is a soft knock on the door.

“Ever, dinner is ready!” Jenny calls through the door.

Thank fuck she didn’t come in to wake me up. That would have been hard to explain. I slowly force my grip to loosen on my knives and release a heavy breath.

“Coming!” I call out, my voice groggy.

I only arrived today, but Jenny offered for me to have a nap before dinner, and I was tired enough that I couldn’t help it and fell asleep.

I am half tempted to try to go back to sleep, but my stomach effectively squashes that plan when it growls loudly at the mention of food. It has been days since I ate something more than a couple of crackers.

I jump up and place one knife back under my pillow and the other in a pocket, similar to the sheaths on my jacket that I have sewn into the waistband of my jeans. Until I can prove to my illogical and damaged side that I am safe here, I’m going to have to have at least one of my knives on me at all times. Especially if I don’t want to have a panic attack. They are sort of like a fucked-up version of a security blanket.

I move my stuff away from the bedroom door and briefly wonder if I could get away with taking my bag down with me without looking as crazy as I clearly am. Probably

not.

I take a deep breath and walk out of the room and down the stairs, leaving my bag behind. I easily remember the way to the kitchen. Most of my daydreams took place in one of the boy's homes, and I have never forgotten the layout of them.

As I approach the kitchen, I stand cautiously on the threshold, unsure of the usual protocols for this situation; as I peer in, my eyes land on Rob, Trick's father. I'm once again startled by how little Rob has changed. My father looked haggard and at least ten years older than Rob or Jenny does, but then again, I guess drugs will do that to you. They both spot me at the same time as Jenny places the last dish on the table.

"Ever, it's so lovely to see you." Rob greets me.

I can tell that Jenny warned him of my ratty appearance since outwardly, he doesn't react in any way apart from the sorrow, which I still don't understand, shadowing his eyes. I offer a small smile, grateful that he didn't try to hug me; that wouldn't have ended well.

"Come and sit darling," Jenny says.

I move further into the room, my eyes widening at the massive mound of pasta, a giant bowl of salad, and a heaping plate of garlic bread set out on the table. I don't think I have seen this much food in years. My mouth begins to salivate.

"Help yourself. I may have gone a bit overboard. The boys eat like they are starving animals most of the time, so I have gotten used to making huge quantities." Jenny and Rob chuckle, and I smile at them, desperately wanting to pile my plate high with food.

I wait until they've both filled their plates before loading my own with helpings of

pasta, garlic bread, and salad. I am so focused on my food and getting it into my mouth as fast as possible so it can't be taken away from me that I am not paying attention to my surroundings.

I finish my food in record time and suddenly remember my dusty manners. That was rude, right?

I stiffen and glance up at Rob and Jenny, only to find them both staring at me with wide eyes. I shrink in on myself, and my cheeks heat with embarrassment. Before I can thoroughly think through the repercussions, I blurt out the truth.

"I'm sorry. I haven't eaten for a while, and I can't remember the last time I saw this much food or had a hot meal. It was delicious, thank you. I'm sorry." I say quietly, cursing my honesty once I have finished.

Rob clears his throat, and out of the corner of my eye, I see him exchange a look with Jenny.

"That is quite alright, Ever. I'm impressed. You ate as much as the boys," he chuckles, although the sound is strained, "When was the last time you ate?"

"I had some crackers at a gas station on the way here." I figure there is no point in trying to dodge the question now, and I already promised I wouldn't lie.

"Before that?" Jenny asks gently.

I sigh heavily, scrunching my face up, trying to remember, "A couple of days, maybe."

I hear Jenny gasp before she quickly covers it.

“You will never have to go hungry again, Everleigh,” Rob says fiercely, and I just nod dumbfounded. These people actually give a shit. How novel.

“Right, if you’ve still got room after that mountain of food, there’s chocolate cake for dessert.” Jenny grins.

I smile my first genuine smile, probably since I left this place all those years ago.

“I haven't had chocolate in years. There’s always room for chocolate.”

They chuckle at my answer, although it doesn’t entirely cover the sadness that still hides in their eyes.

I help them clear the table and then bring the plates over for the cake. Jenny cuts me a giant slice, and I am in absolute heaven after the first bite. I quickly finish my cake, and Rob confirms what I had already guessed when he tells me I will be going to school tomorrow. He offered me the rest of the week off, but I would rather not miss any more school if I can help it. Jenny tells me again that the boys will all be back by mid-morning and will be at school by lunch. I decide not to focus on that bit.

Denial is my friend. I internally scoff.

It’s not long until we say goodnight, and I traipse up to the room I’m sleeping in, not sure I will ever be comfortable calling it mine.

Although I had a short nap earlier, I am still tired, and having a full stomach for once is making me sleepy. I put my hoodie back on and take my boots off, this time knowing I’m not ready to leave both off yet. I have pushed myself far enough today. However, I leave one knife in my jeans, still easily accessible but not under the pillow where I usually keep it, so baby steps. I settle down for a night of tossing, turning, and more nightmares. I rarely sleep without them plaguing me.

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Ever

The following day, I awake from another nightmare-filled sleep, clamping down on the scream that tries to make its way out of my throat. It's still early, but I'm not going to get back to sleep now, so I pull out my spare outfit and get changed in record time. I pull on ripped black skinny jeans, a Falling In Reverse band tee, and my red and black plaid shirt. I tug my bike boots back on, shooting looks at the bedroom door the entire time I am changing. I really hate not having a lock on that door. Throwing my black hair up in a messy bun, I line my eyes with black kohl and call it good. I mess around in my room for a bit, straightening things and exploring before I hear Rob and Jenny moving around and figure it's okay to venture out for coffee.

Grabbing my helmet and bike jacket, I transfer one of my knives to the sheathe in my jeans and keep the other in my jacket. I know I shouldn't take them to school, I know I am safe, and I know that this neighborhood is nowhere near as dangerous as the one in Fresno, but I can't bring myself to leave them behind. There's no doubt that I have dangerous drug and gun dealers looking for me. Even though the likelihood of them finding me here is slim, it's not a risk I am willing to take.

I learned very quickly always to be armed, and it has saved me more than once. It's another habit that is going to be hard to break. I quietly pick my way back downstairs and toward the kitchen. My eyes widen as I see the spread Jenny's set out on the breakfast bar.

“Good morning, sweetie. Help yourself to the food. There is plenty. What would you like to drink?”

“Oh, erm, thank you. Coffee, black, please?” I ask, taking a seat and piling my plate high.

She raises her eyebrow but thankfully doesn't say no. I need my morning coffee. Jenny chats about random things over breakfast, and I listen with half an ear while stuffing my face.

She reminds me once again that the boys will be at school by lunch.

“Are you going to be alright riding your bike to school?” She asks, a bit apprehensive.

I shrug.

“I will be fine. I rode it to school back home.” I cringe at calling that shit hole home before shrugging again, “Besides, I have been riding since I was twelve. I am probably safer than most.”

Her eyes widen at my confession, and I inwardly curse again. It's so different out here. No one would have given two fucks if I had said that back in Fresno. It was odder not to have been able to drive from that young. I can just imagine her face if I told her I have been racing bikes for that long, too.

I am hoping to find somewhere around here to race; it's my escape. When I'm racing, everything fades into the background, and I'm free. It's just me, my bike, and the speed. There is no hunger, bruises, wandering hands, drug deals, nothing. For however long the race is, I am fucking free, and I crave that. I didn't get to keep whatever winnings I made; they went straight to dear old dad since the only races were run by him. I tune back into my surroundings as Jenny nods, then leans forward and gives me a quick hug. She steps back as soon as I stiffen and smiles sadly at me.

“Have a good day, Ever. See you after school.”

I offer her a tight smile before spinning, putting my helmet on, and rushing out of the door, not wanting her to see how much her words have affected me. The last person to say something like that to me was my mom. A pang hits my heart, and I breathe deeply as I swing my leg over my bike, nudging the kickstand away. I give a short wave to Jenny before starting the engine and pulling away. I remember, at the last minute, to stick to the speed limit. I have a feeling the cops in this town are more concerned with speeding than back in Fresno. The cops back home had bigger things to worry about, like murders and gang disputes, so unless it was affecting the public, they usually turned a blind eye. I don't think that will be the case here.

Jenny gave me directions to the high school this morning, and I vaguely remember driving past it as a kid. Making it there in good time, several kids turn and stare as I pull into a space in the lot.

I subtly glance around, realising there are no other bikes here, and although not all the cars are fancy expensive brands, there are no second-hand, barely running, dented old bangers either. Huh, I am so not going to fit in here.

Ignoring the stares, not really giving a shit either way, what these kids think of me, I take off my helmet, hoping my locker will be big enough to store it. I don't enjoy the idea of lugging it around all day, and I am sure as shit not leaving it out here where anyone can mess with it. It's bad enough I have to leave my bike out here. I have trust issues; can you blame me?

Straightening my shoulders and keeping my head held high, I walk toward the school.

“Hey, new girl, I've got something you can ride,” a guy snickers from behind me.

I glance over my shoulder, giving the guy a once over; he has got greasy dark hair,

mud-brown eyes, and obviously thinks he is worth something at this school.

“I don’t think you do.” I scoff, “I think I’d be very disappointed.” The corners of my lips tilt up as I wiggle my little finger in his direction before giving him the one-finger salute, spinning on my heel, and walking toward the big double doors again. This time, laughter follows me.

Just before I step through the doors, someone steps up beside me. I give her a cursory glance. She is about an inch taller than my five-foot-three frame and dressed in a similar style to mine, but her clothes are in much better condition. She has blonde hair cut into an edgy pixie cut, several piercings in her ears, and bright blue eyes.

“That was fucking brilliant. Ralph thinks he runs the fucking school when the football team is away just because he rides the bench as a wide receiver. He has never even played a game.” She chuckles. “I’m Rylie.” She grins, and I feel myself responding. I can already tell she is good people.

“Ever, and thanks.” I chuckle.

“Nice to meet you. The office is this way,” she points toward a door off to the side.

I smile my appreciation. I am usually more cautious when it comes to new people, but something about Rylie puts me at ease.

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Trick

We pull up to the house that we rented for this job, and although the neighbours are really far away, I am still grateful that it is the early hours of the morning and that they won't be able to see us clearly in the half light of the dawn.

We are covered in blood, and if you looked closely at us, you would easily be able to tell that it's not our blood. None of us have any injuries. It would definitely raise some questions and probably freak people out, too. With this in mind, we all rush inside just in case there are any crazy neighbors that have binoculars or some shit. If it hadn't happened before, I would assume that we were being overly cautious, but we almost got caught once because of a nosey neighbor with more equipment to watch people than we have.

"It's a damn good job that we decided to hire a house for this job," Jensen says as soon as we are inside.

He heads over to the fridge and pulls out a beer, opening it and taking a swig.

"Yeah, there is no way that we could have gone back home looking like this," Luc grimaces.

Cash points at him, "We are heading straight to school. We are supposed to be at a football game, remember."

"Shit, I don't think I could forget. Coach is pissed that we bailed at the last minute," Luc replies.

I shrug, "I know. He will get over it though. This job was an important one, and none of us wanted to turn it down."

"We have just got to make sure that we head into school at the same time as the rest of the guys from the football team," Riot reminds us.

"Which means we all need to shower and change quickly. We haven't got long, and we're going to have to drive straight back to the school." Rafe signs.

"Do we actually have to go back to school?" Jensen asks, starting to sit down before remembering that he is covered in blood and thinking better of it. "Can't we just go home and sleep?"

I tilt my head, "I suppose we could. The parents won't mind if we miss the rest of the day off school, especially if we say that we are tired from the game. Don't forget they think we're there too."

"Let's do that then," Luc agrees.

"I still want to leave quickly, so go and get showered," I reply.

"Yes, boss," Jensen teases, and I flip him off.

Fortunately, we kind of figured that this job would in some way be a bloody one, and we knew that we would be on a time crunch to get back in time, so Cash booked us a house with enough rooms for everyone and made sure that each room had a bathroom attached. This means that everyone is showered and in the truck in no time at all.

As I am waiting for everyone to get in and sort their shit out, I rummage through my bag to find my phone. This job was a particularly sensitive one, so we all turned our phones off and left them in our bags, and they have been there for a couple of days

because we got caught up on location and couldn't leave, and the job took longer than we expected. The parents rarely text when we are away at football games, and because it's a school sanctioned event they don't panic when we don't reply immediately. Fortunately, the away games tend to last for a few days as we arrive early and leave the day after.

"Shit," I curse as soon as it has switched on again.

"What?" Cash asks immediately.

"I have ten missed calls from Mom and a bunch of messages, but none of them tell me why she wants me to call. Have you guys got anything?" I explain.

Cash tenses, "Probably. Hang on." It only takes him a moment to turn his phone on, and then he sighs, "Yeah, I've got the same."

"Me too," Jensen replies, with a frown, "my dad never messages, and definitely doesn't call this much."

"Mom's been ringing me too," Rafe signs. "Although, none of her messages say anything about why. They just say call me."

"Your mom has rung me," Luc says to me, with his eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Kat has messaged me as well," Luc adds.

Neither of them seem to be surprised that their own parental figures, whether that's Luc's parents or Riot's aunt, have messaged them. In Luc's case, that's a good thing; I think we would all be incredibly worried if they had. In Riot's case, though, his aunt is absent more than she is around.

“She did?” I reply. “Alright, let's get on the road and then I will call mom back. If they have tried to get hold of all of us then they probably want to talk to all of us, so it will be easier through the car so everyone can hear anyway.”

Everyone mutters their agreements, all looking confused as I start the car and pull out of the driveway. Once we are on our way, heading down a long stretch of road, with fields or trees on either side, I press dial and the sound of ringing comes through the speakers.

“Trick!” Mom exclaims as soon as she picks up.

Her voice sounds excited and nervous all at the same time and I have absolutely no idea what is going on. I don't even have a vague inkling.

“Hey, Mom, sorry I didn't answer; you know what it gets like at games,” I reply. Hoping that she is not going to be too pissed and isn't about to ground me.

“I honestly don't care,” she replies excitedly, shocking the shit out of me. “Are the guys with you?”

“Erm yeah, of course they are,” I reply, sounding as confused as I feel.

“Am I on speaker? Can they all hear me?”

“Yes, mom. You are freaking me out now,” I reply.

Luc interrupts, “You are freaking us all out.”

“Sorry, sorry,” she replies. “It's just, I'm freaking out a bit myself, we all are.”

“It's amazing news!” Kat yells.

“Mom?” Cash questions.

“Hey, Baby,” Kat replies excitedly.

I feel like we are just going to carry on going around in circles, especially now that we know that Kat is there too. Considering she wanted us to call her back so urgently she is taking a long time to tell us why she wanted us to call in the first place.

“Mom, what is amazing news? Why did you call us?” I ask firmly.

“Ever’s back! She’s at school now,” Mom replies.

The car swerves.

I manage to correct it before we hit a tree, and I am very grateful that we are on a reasonably empty road.

“What?” Jensen asks, his voice hushed.

“Ever is home, she’s back,” Mom repeats.

Kat takes over, “She would have stayed with us, but it was decided that it was better for her to live with Jenny and Rob.”

What.

My brain is just like white noise at this point. I need to ask questions, but I also need to make sure that we don’t crash, and I’m in shock. Deciding it’s safer, I pull over.

“Mom,” Cash starts, his voice strained, “can you guys please explain from the beginning.”

“Ever’s home?” Luc asks, his voice gentle as if he is worried that if he speaks any louder, it will break whatever magic is weaving through this moment.

Maybe we fell asleep?

Shit, maybe the job went sideways, and we died?

I am pulled out of my morbid thoughts when Mom starts to explain, and we all just listen in shock.

“Sorry, yes, of course I can explain. I know it’s out of the blue,” she starts. “We got a call from child services; we were listed in her mom and dad’s wills as guardians should anything happen to them. Her dad was into some illegal things, and her place was raided; he was shot and killed in the raid. She is going to testify against his associates.”

What the fuck.

“Fuck,” Jensen curses, echoing my thoughts.

Neither of the moms chastises him for cursing.

Mom continues explaining, “We were all listed as guardians, but it was decided that she would stay here, since she used to stay a lot when she was younger, she still has her room here, and it’s very familiar. She has been through a lot.”

“Where is she now?” I ask, shock and hope riding me hard.

“She’s at school,” Mom repeats, and I realize that she told us earlier.

“What?” Riot asks.

“She’s enrolled at school, and it’s her first day today. I told her that you guys would be back before lunch and would try to find her. I hope that is okay?” Mom asks.

I almost burst out laughing. We are going to get back there way before lunch now, and we will be tearing the fucking school apart to find her.

Trying to keep my excitement and pure happiness from bubbling over, I reply, “Yeah, of course, Mom. We will find her.”

“Good, I have got to get more food in, especially chocolate,” she replies, an edge to her voice that I don’t understand.

I don’t have time to ask her about it though because she hangs up.

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Trick

We all just sit there in silence for a moment, only a moment, and then the truck is filled with shouts of joy and yelling as we just let all the happiness out.

“Fucking hell,” Cash comments once we have all calmed down, a smile on his face that I haven’t seen in a long time.

“She’s home!” Rafe signs.

“Can’t believe it,” Luc adds, “but at the same time, I know that the parents wouldn’t lie to us.”

Riot shakes his head, “Not about this, they wouldn’t.”

“Guys,” Jensen says, worry in his eyes, “Jenny said that she had been through a lot and that her dad had just been shot.”

“And that she was going to be testifying against people he worked with,” Cash adds, his face falling into a deep frown.

Rafe starts signing, “I don’t think our hope that she had an easy and happy life is going to come true.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” I say. “There is a chance that she lived a rich life and had no idea where her dad got his money from, and she is testifying against people that she knew just as his friends.”

“That’s flimsy,” Cash points out.

I sigh, “I know. I still don’t think that we should jump to conclusions, though. Her dad could be in trouble for a number of reasons, some of them aren’t too bad. Like money laundering.”

“Or stolen goods?” Jensen suggests.

“Exactly, they are illegal, but not too bad.” I reply.

“Yeah, you’re right. Let’s just get home and see her,” Cash suggests, his smile coming back.

We can worry about everything else later. Right now, all we want to do is see her with our eyes, damn I fucking missed her.

“What are you waiting for?” Jensen asks, “Put your fucking foot down.”

I don’t need to be told twice, and I grin as I pull out and do just that. We are going to get home a lot sooner than lunchtime.

We have been driving for thirty minutes and only have thirty left until we get to school. That first thirty minutes went really slowly except it didn’t, not really because that part of the drive took us nearly an hour on the way up here.

“I know that we want to get there quickly, but we still need to make sure that we time it for when the bus with the football team gets back,” Cash reminds me.

My foot eases up on the accelerator, “Shit. You’re right. We don’t want to raise suspicions, and the parents ground us from seeing Ever.”

“That wouldn’t go well for anyone involved,” Jensen mutters. “For a start, my dad will learn really quickly how good I am at sneaking out.”

“I don’t think they would.” Cash replies, “They all know how much Ever means to us and how much we miss her. I have spoken to my mom about it loads.”

“You have?” Luc asks.

Cash nods, “Yeah. Usually on Ever’s birthday or the day that she left. Mom always knew, of course, she loved Ever as much as we did, so we reminisced, and talked about seeing her again one day.” He frowns, “We haven’t done that for a couple of years.”

“I used to do that with my mom as well,” I say softly. “They wouldn’t stop us from seeing Ever. I think they would all realize that it wasn’t going to stick, and we would make sure that we could still see her. I mean, it didn’t work when we were little; why would it now?”

The truck fills with laughter.

“I had forgotten about that,” Riot smiles, “when one of us got in trouble, the others would all go and rescue them.”

I smile fondly, “Yeah, or we would sit with them in time out.”

The car is silent for a moment as we all reminisce in a new light, one that isn’t tinged with sadness anymore but is instead tinged with hope.

“We are way ahead of schedule,” I say, interrupting the silence.

“We could get coffee?” Luc suggests. “It would kill a little bit of time. I don’t think

any of us are going to fall asleep any time soon, but we have been up for god knows how many hours now.”

As I said before, the job that we were on was more complicated than we thought it was going to be, which isn't a new thing, but this time those complications meant that we ended up getting trapped in the building that the target was in. We were there for two days before we managed to do the job. It meant that we slept in shifts when we could sleep and even then, none of us slept for longer than an hour, it was too risky.

“Coffee wouldn't hurt,” Cash replies, looking thoughtful, “we should really get some sleep, but I am definitely not willing to wait any longer than we have to see her. Coffee is our next best option.”

“I agree,” Jensen adds. “Even though it is like torture that we aren't going straight to her. I don't plan on sleeping until I do, and coffee is going to help that.”

“Coffee first,” Rafe signs. “Although, I agree with Jensen.”

With that decided, I pull off at the next place that does coffee and to waste more time, we all get out of the car and have a wander around trying to waste time that we really don't want to waste. Plus, Jensen is completely incapable of staying still in the state that he is currently in, and he was bouncing the truck, as well as his leg, we had to get out.

“He's like a dog,” Riot comments.

The comment is so out of the blue that we all just look at him like he has lost his mind and wait for him to explain himself.

He is too busy sipping his coffee and looking around to realize that we are all staring at him.

Finally noticing that it's silent, he says, "What?"

"Who is like a dog?" Cash asks with his eyebrow raised.

"Oh, Jensen," Riot replies and then explains, "he gets too excited and needs to exercise so that he doesn't misbehave in the car."

We all burst out laughing while Jensen tries and fails to look indignant at the comparison.

"Dude, I take offense," he exclaims.

Riot chuckles, "No, you don't."

"You're right I don't," Jensen agrees with a shrug and then looks at me and starts bouncing on his toes, "can we go and get our Ever now?"

Our Ever.

That has a nice ring to it.

"Yeah, come on," I reply with a smile.

I have to tell Jensen to stop running and drawing attention to us at least twice, but finally, we are on the road again.

An idea occurs to me, "Message one of our people, someone that we trust and see what they can tell us about her. Don't mention her by name; just say that you heard there is a new girl, and we want info."

"Good idea," Cash replies as he pulls out his phone and starts typing.

“I miss Trev. I can’t believe he didn’t come back to school after the summer,” Jensen mutters.

“Me too, man. We wouldn’t have even had to ask; he would have already texted us the information. We most likely would have gotten it quicker than we did from the moms.” Luc chuckles.

“Exactly,” I agree with a smile. “I get it though, his mom needed better treatment than we have available here, so they had to move to the city.”

“I understand why he moved,” Jensen replies, “I just miss him, and not just because he is awesome at information gathering.”

“Our guy has texted me back,” Cash says, his eyes flashing with anger.

“Why do you look like you are about to murder someone?” Riot asks.

Instead of replying, Cash reads out the text, “He said: Yeah, there’s a new girl, and she is fucking smoking hot . . .”

He is interrupted by sounds of anger that come from the rest of us, apparently, we aren’t very fond of that and are a tad bit possessive. Who would have thought?

Cash smirks, knowing that we have reacted exactly the same way as he did. He continues to read, “She is hanging around with Rylie. Ralph tried to hit on her, and she handed him his ass; it was fucking epic.”

I grin, saying proudly, “That’s our girl.”

“Rylie?” Rafe frowns, trying to place the name.

“Wait, Rylie, that helped when we had that whole Ryan thing?” Luc asks, “She helped the girls and got them to write statements. Then, she got the statements to us, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Cash smiles. “Rylie is good people. Ever is safe with her.”

“Good, I liked her,” Jensen adds.

Cash looks down at his phone again and frowns, “Just got another text through. He says that the girl that has deluded herself into thinking that she means something to you, Trick, seems to have it out for her, Ever isn’t backing down at all.”

“Fucking Serena,” I curse. “She has become obsessed since we got back from summer break.”

“We are apparently trophies to be had now,” Cash chuckles. “What should I reply?”

“Ask him to keep an eye on Ever. Then add that he needs to tell everyone hands off or we will take theirs,” I grin sharply.

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Cash

I chuckle, I like that reply, and I quickly type it out pressing send.

“A bit violent,” Jensen smirks.

Trick shrugs, that deadly smile on his face as he asks, “Am I wrong?”

“Nope,” he admits immediately.

I burst out laughing earning looks from the others until I read out the reply that I have just gotten, “He said: Yes, boss. Sorry. Didn’t mean anything by it.”

The other's laughter soon joins mine.

“You scared the shit out of him, the poor fucker,” Riot says through his laughter.

“As Trick pointed out though, we would follow through on our threat, it’s definitely not idle. So, really, we are doing him and anyone else who tries to hit on Ever a favor, and preventing them from great amounts of pain,” I reply, with a smirk.

“So, what you are saying is that we are saints,” Jensen chuckles.

“Definitely not that,” I reply.

“Never that,” Rafe signs with a smirk.

We all laugh again. I honestly can't remember when we laughed this much, it's like a heavy weight has been lifted and we haven't even seen her yet.

"I'm glad she is with Rylie," I say, "I liked her, and she's obviously a good person since she managed to help the girls."

"I ran into her just after that, when the girls had all taken the money and dropped the charges against Ryan. She was mad as hell," I explain; lots of shit happened after that, and I don't think that I remembered to tell them about it at the time. "It wasn't until I told her that we were going to keep an eye on him and that we knew where he was that she calmed down a bit."

"She was involved in that quite heavily, but I haven't heard or really seen her around since then," Trick says.

"Well, that's mostly because you spend your time fighting off Serena," Jensen chuckles.

Trick frowns and rolls his eyes, "She really doesn't understand 'no, I'm not interested.' It's becoming an issue."

"She's ridiculous," Luc replies, "her friends are just as bad. Maybe we should stop telling her nicely."

"Yeah. I think we are going to have to." Trick replies.

The car falls silent again after that, and I swear that each mile is taking ten times longer than it usually does, although I know there is no logic in that thought, I can't help it.

"What if she doesn't remember us?" Luc suddenly asks when we are nearly back at

the school.

“Dude, she is going to remember us,” Jensen says with confidence, that darkness that he always carries in his eyes is not quite so prominent.

“How can you be so certain,” I ask.

He grins, “One, we were best friends for eight years; there is no way she has forgotten us. She promised that she never would. Two, she is at Trick’s house, and you know Jenny, she will have talked her ear off about us. She did say that she told her that we would find her at school.”

“That’s a really good point,” Luc replies, “I had forgotten about that.”

“See, so she is going to remember us just because she’s been at Trick’s house,” Jensen repeats, clearly pleased with himself.

“Shit,” Trick curses.

“What?” I ask, worried that we have forgotten something major, maybe with the job or something.

“I can’t remember if my room is tidy,” he replies worriedly, “what if she goes in there, and there is shit everywhere, and she thinks I’m a slob.”

The car is silent for a moment as we absorb the absolutely crazy that has just spilled out of his mouth.

Jensen scrunches his nose, “Dude, why would she go in your room?”

Trick shrugs, “I don’t know. Curiosity? Girls like to snoop, don’t they?”

“Erm,” Luc replies but doesn’t say anything else because what is there to say? Trick is in full freak-out mode, over his room, of all things.

“Ever isn’t just any girl,” Rafe starts signing, his usual calm hopefully rubbing off on Trick as he continues. “Even when we were kids and spent every single day together, she would still ask permission to touch stuff that wasn’t hers. I highly doubt that she has changed that much. Not only that, but she has just been dropped off by child services, possibly witnessed her dad die, or was at least in the house when it happened; I doubt that she is going to be concerned about your room.”

Trick groans, “Shit, you’re right. I’m sorry for taking you guys along on my crazy ride.”

We all chuckle, but there is an edge to it now.

“Shit, she has been through a lot recently, hasn’t she?” Riot says, his voice sober.

“Yeah, she has,” I reply. “But we can be there for her now, and we can help her through it.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Riot replies. “Hell knows we are all somewhat acquainted with dealing with trauma.”

“Yeah. Come to think of it, we are probably the best people to help her,” Rafe signs.

“Er, what about the Tomlinson shit?” Jensen asks. He adds, his voice full of deadly promise, “If they touch a single hair on Ever’s head, I’m going to end them in the most bloody way possible. Boyd is going to count himself lucky that he is in juvie and wasn’t involved.”

Whoa, okay, there is that darkness that we all know and love.

“I don’t think we have anything to worry about from Tomlinson,” Riot says with a frown dragging down his features.

“He’s right; ever since Cash lost it and beat the crap out of Billy and Lucky, they have backed right off. So have their people. I think they realized that all that shit that it was rumored that we were capable of, we actually were, and it made them second guess themselves. They have kept their shit to their side for months now.” Trick replies.

“You’re welcome,” I grin proudly.

“Yeah, we haven’t even been called for any fights since school went back,” Luc adds.

“Shit, I hadn’t even thought of that,” Jensen admits. “I hope they have because although they are all assholes, I would hate to have to torture one of them.”

“Dude,” I say with a sharp smile that matches his, “you might want to tone back that sort of talk around Ever.”

“Fuck,” Jensen curses, “good point.”

I don’t think we are going to have to worry too much about Ever and her reaction to who we really are. Unfortunately, if her house got raided then she most likely has pretty good knowledge of the darker side of life. I hate that if I am being honest, but it does mean that we don’t have to worry about some of the things that we say shocking her.

Having said that, I hope that I am wrong and that she has no idea about anything illegal and knows nothing about what her father was up to. Even though that might make his death more difficult to come to terms with at first, at least she would have been safe from the horrors that happen in our world.

“What do you think she looks like now?” Trick asks quietly.

I shrug, “She is probably still tiny.”

The guys smile fondly.

“She always hated that she was shorter than us. She used to say that one day she would be taller, and then we would all have to look up to her,” Riot chuckles.

“Apart from Luc,” I grin. “He was shorter than her right up until she left. He had a growth spurt just before she went.”

“Thank fuck for that,” Luc winces. “I was really worried that I was going to be shorter than Ever forever.”

“We know,” I reply. “Ever knew? That’s why she was as happy as the rest of us when you grew taller than her.”

Luc’s cheeks tinge slightly pink, “Someone told me that boys were always taller than girls and that girls didn’t like boys who were shorter than them. I was worried that she wouldn’t like me.”

The lightbulb turns on for all of us.

“Oh! You know that makes a lot more sense,” Trick says with a smile.

“Dude, you know that Ever never gave a shit about things like that? She would have still liked you no matter what,” I point out.

He nods but adds, “I’m still glad I’m taller than her.”

“If she’s still tiny, then you will tower over her,” Jensen teases, “don’t worry.”

“Fuck off,” Luc replies with an amused smirk.

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Jensen

Finally, we arrive at school. I don't think I have ever been this happy to get to school.

"Guys, the bus isn't back yet, we are going to have to wait." Cash says, the impatience and disappointment easily identifiable in his tone.

"Seriously?" I ask, my leg once again bouncing and moving the whole car with it.

Trick grimaces, "Yeah. We can't really risk it."

All of us groan. For fuck sake, this is like torture, except they don't want any information. If they did, I would scream it from the fucking rooftops if it meant that I didn't have to wait in this car for a moment longer and could go and find Ever.

I don't know who 'they' are.

All of us are tensely waiting for the bus to arrive, and apparently, none of us feel like talking because the car is silent. We don't even have any music gone. I am staring at the clock, watching the minutes go by so fucking slowly.

"Is your clock broken?" I suddenly ask in the silence, "Is it going slower on purpose? Does it know?"

"Know what?" Trick asks as he turns to look at me, raising his eyebrow.

“That we are desperately waiting for a bus to come so that we can see Ever, who we have been looking for, so it’s deliberately making time go slower?” I explain.

“I really hope that you aren’t serious right now because I can’t tell, and that worries me,” Cash replies with a frown.

I smile but don’t tell him that I’m only joking because I’m a dick, and I like messing with his head.

The car falls silent again, but this time, it only lasts for a few minutes instead of what felt like hours before.

“Alright, I have had enough. It is close enough to when the bus should be getting back. Everyone can just assume that we took our car to the game and drove home,” Cash exclaims.

“That’s a good point, actually,” Trick agrees. “Text our guy and see if he knows where she is right now?”

“Already on it,” Cash replies.

“Thank fuck,” Riot says, sighing heavily like he had been holding his breath this entire time.

“He said that she should be by her locker, so in the main hall,” Cash replies.

“Where are we in the day? What class is everyone in?” I ask; I honestly can’t make my brain think of anyone or anything but Ever; she is literally consuming my thoughts.

“Erm,” Luc says and then looks at his phone, “lunch.”

“So, the hallways should be pretty empty then if we’re lucky,” I reply.

“Yeah,” Trick replies, and opens his door, “let’s go.”

We all get out of the truck quickly, and my clumsy curse very nearly takes over, but I refuse to end up on the floor and then have Ever see me for the first time in years, covered in dirt. That wouldn’t make a good first impression at all.

“Nice save,” Cash smirks.

“Why thank you,” I retort with a fuck you smile.

As we walk across the lot to the front of the school, my excitement builds, and my heart starts pounding in my chest.

Fucking hell.

“We can’t just suddenly surround her. We might freak her out,” Trick suddenly says.

“In other words, I need to calm the fuck down?” I ask with a grin.

“Yeah, go slow,” Trick replies with a smile.

I shoot him finger guns and grin, “Got it.”

“Since when have you ever done finger guns?” Rafe signs, looking confused.

I frown down at my hands in confusion, “Since now apparently.”

The laughter from my statement seems to break the tension slightly, which is what I had hoped, although the finger guns sort of surprised me, too.

“Wow, that bike is stunning,” Luc says, bringing me out of my thoughts about wayward finger guns.

“Yeah, someone has clearly spent some time on that,” I agree, as I appreciate the bike for a moment. “Wasn’t Vinnie talking about getting a new bike?”

“Yeah, I think I remember him saying something about it,” Trick replies. “I didn’t think it was going to look as good as this though.”

We admire the bike for a moment longer, only for a moment though and then we are all heading through the doors and making our way through the halls to where the lockers are.

As soon as we turn the corner, we all stop, and my eyes immediately find her. I swear my heart stops and then starts beating double time.

“She is stunning,” Luc whispers.

“She’s fucking beautiful,” Riot adds.

“That’s an understatement,” I mutter.

I can’t take my eyes off of her. She has her back to us, but there is absolutely no mistaking that it’s her. We know absolutely everyone in the school. We have to for their safety and ours. She has definitely never attended here before, and it’s not like we could get her confused with a new student because we rarely, if ever, get new students.

Plus, I would know Ever anywhere. She may be older and have gotten curves in all the right fucking places, but even though I can’t see her face, I can still tell it’s her. Her raven black hair is up in a braid, and I remember helping her do that exact style

when we were kids. She has always had really long hair, and it used to hurt her arms to braid it, so we learned how to do it.

I tilt my head slightly as I study her, there is something different about her though, and I know she is bound to be different. She is a lot older now and we already know that she has been through some stuff. This is more, I can't quite put my finger on it, but she has this confidence about her, an edge.

It makes her even more intriguing than I already knew she was. I take my eyes off her for a moment as I look at the other guys, seeing if they are as dumbstruck as I am. Which in hindsight was pretty stupid of me because they are all staring at her with varying looks of awe, and hope. I don't think I have seen them look like that in years, probably not since she left and we realized that she wasn't coming back.

This feels like a turning point, I don't know what it's turning us toward but I really fucking hope that it has Ever is in it. I know for a fact that none of us are going to let her out of our sight again. We have only just laid eyes on her again and it feels like I'm stepping into the sun again after years of living in the dark. I don't know how to explain it.

Rafe

She is actually here. I can fucking see her.

I thought it was a dream or some sort of fucked up joke. Not that I really believed that the parents would do that to us. We were devastated after she left, and I think that had a lasting effect on the parents; I don't think that they would be willing to go through that again.

I can't stop staring at her.

She's beautiful. She looks like she easily personifies the Dragonfly nickname that we always called her, strong and beautiful. For some reason though, I get the feeling that she's fragile, not fragile as in she could break at any moment, Ever has always been too strong for that but fragile like a bomb. Like she could explode if the conditions were right.

She has been through a lot; we know that, and I think that it has probably changed her. I just hope that whatever she has been through, however she is coping with what has recently happened, I just hope that we can help her.

Cash

My heart is pounding so hard that it feels like it is going to beat straight out of my chest. I can't believe that she is actually here. I put my hand into my pocket and pinch myself hard. When the pain rolls through me, I almost laugh out loud in complete relief; it's real.

I'm not dreaming; if I can feel pain, then it's real. She is actually fucking here.

Our Ever.

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Riot

For some reason that I can't explain, I feel an immense wave of relief pass over me as soon as my eyes land on Ever. It's like for all the time that she has been gone, I have been on edge, and now that she is home, somehow, on an intuitive level, I know that everything is going to be okay now, and I can finally breathe properly.

It scares the fuck out of me.

Trick

Ever. It's really her.

I always know what to say and do. But I am lost.

She is finally Home.

Luc

I can tell the moment that I see her that it's Ever; she always had this air about her; she looked all innocent until you said the wrong thing to one of us, and then she would go off like a firecracker. It was absolutely stunning to watch then, and I bet it would be fucking breathtaking to watch now.

I find myself hoping that she still defends us like she used to; even if she doesn't, my heart feels like it's going to burst with happiness.

My Firecracker.

Jensen

“We should probably go and talk to her rather than just staring at her like a bunch of weirdos,” Cash points out.

We don’t need to be told again, and we all move down the hallway toward her; I have to constantly remind myself not to run; that would probably freak her out.

Somehow, I am the lucky fucker that manages to get to her first. She is just bending down to grab her backpack, her back still to us, and I momentarily get distracted by her perfect ass.

What do I say? This is a monumental moment. Keeping it simple will probably work best. Otherwise, I’m going to spew a load of shit that she just doesn’t need to know, and then we are back to freaking her out again.

Reaching out, I touch her shoulder and say, “Hey . . .”

Trick

My eyes widen in shock as my feet stay glued to the spot, and I watch Ever grab Jensen’s hand on her shoulder, and with very little effort at all, she flips him over. He lands with a hard thump on the floor, Ever follows him down, her knee landing on his sternum and pinning him in place as she holds two knives at his throat in such a way that she could easily slit it. If I’m not mistaken and I force myself to take a step back and look at this from someone who is not emotionally involved, then I would almost be tempted to say that she had done that before. The neck slicing, not the flipping, she has obviously done that before. That was clearly muscle memory.

That would be crazy, though.

Jensen

Before I can say anything else, like tell her who I am and why I'm talking to her, I am flying.

At least that is what it feels like, and I don't mean I'm so happy I feel like I'm flying, no, I am actually flying through the air.

What the fuck is happening?

I land with a hard thump on the hallway floor, and it takes me a moment to realize what the fuck just happened.

She flipped me; this tiny, delicate-looking woman just flipped me like I weighed nothing. I have to stop myself from kissing the shit out of her; that was the hottest thing I have ever seen. Just as that thought crosses my mind, I have to take it back because I realize that she is holding knives to my throat, knives that I didn't even see her pull out.

Knives! I'm in love. She's like an avenging angel.

I can't help it; I just stare at her. If there was any doubt before that this is our Ever, there is none now. I would recognize those eyes anywhere. It's because I am staring at them, at her, that I see the panic flash through them. I want to reassure her, to tell her there is nothing to panic about, I'm not going to freak out, and that actually I think it was fucking amazing, but I can't. The words are just stuck in my throat.

I can't get over the fact that she is here and real.

She jumps up, immediately sheathing her knives. She handles them with such ease and is clearly very, very comfortable with them. As hot as I think that is, I'm not sure I like what that may mean about her life.

Her eyes move from me to the guys, and she starts mumbling, and I fight my smile, clearly some things haven't changed at all.

"I'm so fucking sorry, I thought," she appears to think twice about what she is saying and instead says, "it doesn't matter what I thought, fuck."

I just stare at her in what I am sure she is correctly perceiving as love-struck awe. She glances up at the others, and I don't know what they do but she immediately takes a step back, dropping down into a fighting stance.

Whoa, I was not expecting that. What the fuck has she been through?

"Look, I thought you were someone else. I am so sorry it won't happen again," she says, trying to diffuse a situation that doesn't exist as she straightens out of her stance.

"What the flying fuck are you guys thinking? Since when do you give a shit about new kids enough to introduce yourselves? If that is even what you were fucking trying to do!" I hear Rylie before I see her and she walks around me, looking down at me and giving me a smirk.

She grabs Ever, and her bag gives us a warning look that seems to hold more than I am capable of understanding right now and storms off in the other direction.

I stay where I am. I don't think I could move if I wanted to, and I just watch her walk away. None of us are stupid enough to go after her after a reaction like that, and especially not since Rylie gave us that warning look. We kind of need to regroup

anyway.

“She doesn’t recognize us,” I say.

“She was in fight mode; I doubt she would have recognized anyone in that situation.”
Trick replies to me.

“She’s fucking magnificent, isn’t she?” Cash adds.

“She is damn skilled, that’s for sure,” Riot replies, “I’m just not sure that I like the reason why she is that skilled.”

All of us make some sort of sound of agreement, we have all thought the same thing.

Cash’s face comes into my eyeline, and he smirks down at me as the others move so that I can see them, too.

“Do you want a hand up?” he asks.

I shake my head, “Nope, I want to stay in the moment.”

“Come on, the sooner you get up, the sooner we can work out how to approach Ever in a way that isn’t going to make her flip one of us,” Riot suggests.

“I don’t know, it looked kind of fun. I don’t think I would mind being flipped by Ever,” Trick chuckles.

“Dude, she actually sliced you!” Luc suddenly exclaims, his eyes on my neck.

My hand searches until I feel a sting of pain, and I grin, “I didn’t even feel it; she keeps her blades fucking sharp.”

Cash reaches down and pulls me up, and my hand immediately goes back to my neck.

He frowns slightly, “Which means, they aren’t just for show.”

“Fuck,” Trick curses as he realizes he is right. “Come on, let’s go to lunch; she should be in there, and we can figure out a game plan.”

“Do you think this will scar?” I ask, “Please say it’s going to scar?”

The guys don’t answer me, and instead, all shake their heads.

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Ever

"Thanks for getting me out of there," I say as we enter a deserted classroom. My head drops, and my breath comes in gasps.

Shit.

I flinch as I feel hands touch my shoulders but relax when I realize it's just Rylie.

"Deep breaths, Ever, or you're going to have a full-blown panic attack. Take it easy. I promise you; you are safe right now."

"Thank you," I smile tiredly at Ry.

"No problem. I've been there. I have a feeling you'd do the same for me."

"Abso-fucking-lutely."

"Lunch?" She grins at me.

"You're not going to ask me what that was about?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"You've been through some bad shit, and it's left shit behind that you still have to deal with on the daily. I figure you will tell me when you're ready, just like I'll tell you when I am, and if you never are, that's good too." She shrugs like it's no big deal, and I just gape at her.

I mean, that's always been my view, but I have never met someone who feels the same. People usually like to pry.

"You are so mother fucking awesome, Ry," I say sincerely.

"Oh, I know. Aren't you lucky?" She smirks.

We make our way through the lunch line quickly. After my panic attack, I am absolutely starving, but since I have no money and forgot to bring anything from Jenny and Rob's place, I'm going to have to wait. I do find a dollar and some change in my bag though and I manage to grab a coffee. Once we find a seat, I glance around, there are the normal curious looks I have been getting all day but no more than usual, so I'm assuming those guys haven't told everyone about my crazy ass. Yet.

"You think those guys will cause me trouble?"

"Normally, I would answer that with the usual, well, they rule the school, no one ever messes with them, and you somehow managed to flip one of the star football players over your head like it was nothing," she pauses as I let my head smack onto the lunch table.

Of course, I would piss off the stars of the fucking school. Dickhead. Rylie smirks at my theatrics.

"As I was saying, miss drama queen, normally I would be saying something along those lines, but none of them looked particularly pissed. They looked more curious than anything." She shrugs.

"That's even worse." I groan. "I don't need to be on some jocks' radar!" I groan.

She chuckles and shrugs before nodding over my shoulder. I glance back and see all six of them looking at me with expressions varying from confusion, awe, frustration, sadness, and even fear. It's those last two that I just really don't fucking understand.

“There used to be seven of them. Dude was a scary motherfucker, he transferred in at the beginning of freshman year, and within the week, he was as close to the guys as brothers. Some shit went down over the summer last year, and he just up and disappeared. No one ever knew much about him. He only ever spent time with the guys, and everyone else was too damn terrified to try to get to know him, but we all thought his parents moved him due to what went down with Tomlinson High.” She shrugs.

This school just got a whole lot less boring; I'm tempted to ask what went down, but I'm distracted by the guys at the table again. As I watch them, the one with light, sun-streaked blond hair that curls in gentle waves around his forehead and ears, emphasizing his gray eyes, smirks at me.

The expression seems so familiar that I find myself tilting my head to one side and scrunching my brow, trying to figure out why that expression is so fucking familiar.

I have nearly grasped at the link when queen bitch plops herself down on his lap. She smirks at me, missing the briefest look of frustration and, if I'm not mistaken, disgust that crosses blondie's face.

Without missing a beat and dismissing my earlier thoughts that he is somehow familiar, I act all shocked and offended when she subtly gives me the finger by scratching the side of her nose.

Blondie is still watching me and looks confused for a split second before he catches on to what she is doing.

He looks ready to explode at her for some reason. I grin savagely at queen bitch, causing her eyes to widen. I hold my finger up to her in a one-second gesture and then close my hand into a fist, using my other hand to pretend to turn a crank like on a jack in a box, slowly raising my middle finger.

Once it's up, my grin turns into a smirk, and I blow her a kiss.

Her entire table erupts in laughter, the guys that the incident occurred with laughing the loudest. I can just about hear her screech over the sound of it as me, and Rylie leave the cafeteria for history.

"You are going to stir so much shit up," Rylie says, linking her arm through mine. "I can't fucking wait."

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Luc

That was fucking hilarious. As soon as Ever left the cafeteria, Serena finally got the fucking message and what Trick had been telling her the whole time and left in a huff.

“Fucking Serena,” Trick growls, clearly pissed off.

“It’s nice to see that Ever hasn’t lost her sense of humor, though; that was brilliant,” Rafe signs.

“I think I saw a slight flash of recognition then,” I add. “Almost like she thought she recognized us but couldn’t place exactly where she knew us from.”

“Yeah, I caught that as well,” Jensen says.

Riot shrugs, “If you really think about it, it isn’t really that surprising that she didn’t recognize us. We all look a hell of a lot different than we did when we were eight.”

“Well, yeah, it would be weird if we didn’t,” Cash replies. “But I see your point.”

“At least we know that Rylie has her back though, not that she seems to need it.” Trick says. Adding with a proud smile, “The way that she flipped Jensen was fucking amazing and instinctual.”

That has us all smiling, especially Jensen who is really proud of his slice on his neck and keeps showing people, although he is at least being smart enough not to tell

anyone how he got it.

“What’s our next step then?” I ask. “We already decided that approaching her wasn’t a smart move, it seemed to freak her out and we don’t want to scare her, that’s the last thing that we want to do.”

The table is silent for a moment as we all try to think about how we can work this so that she doesn’t hate us for freaking her the fuck out.

Trick sighs, “I hate to say it, but maybe we should wait until after school when she is back at my house?”

“That would probably be best,” Cash agrees, although you can tell that he isn’t that happy with it. “Being in your house will probably jog that seed of recognition so that she finally realizes who we are.”

“Exactly,” Trick replies.

“That doesn’t mean that we have to just leave her though, does it?” Jensen asks, clearly not liking the thought. Not that I can blame him.

I smile, “No, I don’t think so. I don’t see why we can’t just be there in her classes. She might recognize us before the end of the school day then.”

Rafe shrugs, “It’s possible. She seems to recognize us a little bit more every time she sees us.”

“Text whoever it is that has been giving us information so far, and see if he knows what her next lesson is,” Trick says.

Cash pulls out his phone and just nods.

We all wait silently for Cash to get an answer; I suppose we could go and find the guy, but that will probably end up taking longer, and we have no idea where he is, so it would take longer to find him than it does just to wait for him to message back.

“I miss Trev,” I sigh. “I know we already said that on the car ride here, but damn, we definitely took him for granted.”

Trick nods, “Yeah, we did. He is irreplaceable.”

“He said he doesn’t know what lesson she has next since it’s already started,” Cash starts.

We all look around as we realize that the cafeteria has emptied and none of us have any idea when it happened. We don’t have to worry about any of the teachers having a problem with us being in here; they will leave us alone like they usually do.

It’s a bonus for us to have the reputation that we do. Hopefully, none of them decide to call our parents either.

“Well, shit, when did that happen?” Cash asks.

Trick chuckles, “I have no idea. Does he know anything?”

“Yeah, he said that he does know that the lesson after this one is gym.” Cash replies.

“Well, I guess we will be going to gym then,” Rafe signs.

I pull a face, “Have we been to gym class this year?”

“Nope,” Jensen replies with a grin. “I can’t wait. I’m going to check my class and see if she’s in there.”

“I’ll come with you,” Riot says, “I’m going to lose my damn mind waiting here for much longer.”

“Why do you think I’m leaving?” Jensen retorts.

“I know I’m not going to focus in class, so I will wait it out here,” I reply and then add, “text us if she is in either of your classes though?”

“Yeah, of course,” Jensen replies. “We will check both; if she’s in one of them, then obviously, we will both stay in that class; if not, then we will come back.”

We watch them leave and then all fall silent, I think we are anxiously waiting to see if they have managed to find her or not. I know that is why I haven’t tried to start a conversation with the others yet.

The longer we wait, the more I wish that I had gone with them, but I kind of think that I would have made a fool of myself anyway, so maybe it is a better idea that I stay here.

Finally, Trick gets a text.

“Well?” Rafe signs.

Trick smiles, “She is in there and studiously trying to ignore them.”

I chuckle, “Tell them not to stare too much.”

Trick types out a reply and then bursts out laughing, “He said: too late, sorry, not sorry.”

“Typical Jensen then,” Cash chuckles.

“What are we going to do until then?” Trick asks, as he looks at the time on his phone, “Oh, never mind. Mom’s calling.”

We all chuckle as we listen to his one-sided conversation.

“Wait for it,” I mutter, to the others, “she is going to ask him to put her on speaker phone any second now.”

“Want to bet?” Rafe asks with a smirk.

“Sure,” I reply, confidently.

We all place a bet on different times, we all know that at some point she is going to get Trick to put her on speaker phone so it would be pointless and wasted money to bet otherwise.

Cash is the one that ends up being left in charge of the betting and who loses and when.

Rafe and I are out by the time that Trick’s side of the conversation starts to sound like he is about to put her on speaker.

“Just a little bit longer,” Cash says.

“Yeah, Mom, hang on one second, and I will put you on speaker,” Trick says.

I chuckle as Cash throws his hands up in victory, and Trick shakes his head; he has been aware of what we have been doing this whole time.

Hopefully the conversation with the moms won’t last too long, we have got a gym class to get to.

“Am I on speaker now?” Jenny asks.

“Yes, Mom,” Trick replies, rolling his eyes.

“Don’t you roll your eyes at me,” Jenny says immediately.

We all share a shocked look and then look around us to see if she is actually standing at the window or something watching us.

“How did you know I rolled my eyes?” Trick asks incredulously.

Jenny’s voice comes through the phone, sounding smug, “I am your mom. I always know.”

“It’s true,” Kat’s voice adds, and I know that Jenny has us on speaker as well. “Have you seen her yet?”

“Yes, we have,” Cash replies to his mom. “She didn’t recognize us, and then it was lunch.”

“Oh,” Kat says, sounding slightly crestfallen; she perks up again and replies, “I’m sure she will. You look a lot different now. Most of you are at least twice the height that you used to be. Even you, Luc.”

We burst out laughing; even the parents knew that I was worried that I wouldn’t grow.

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Luc

“Thanks Kat,” I reply drily, “it’s not like that is an embarrassing memory for me.”

“Oh hush, you big baby, you grew,” Kat replies.

I can’t help but laugh again at her no-nonsense reply.

“Mom, you wanted to be put on speaker, and I’m assuming that it wasn’t because you wanted to wind up Luc,” Trick says, with a smirk, trying not to laugh but also trying to get the moms back on track or this conversation is going to last through the rest of the school day and most likely through dinner too.

The moms can really talk when they want to.

“Oh, yes.” Jenny says, “We were thinking of having everyone up to the house after school as a little welcome home get together, and then we will throw a proper one in a couple of weeks maybe.”

Jenny starts to explain, all of us share a worried look. Ever is jumpy, that is clear from how easily she went into flight mode in the hallway, I don’t think that she is going to appreciate the parents throwing her a small get together tonight, and certainly not a full-blown party in a few weeks time. I know that they mean well, and that they are both just excited that she is coming home but Trick needs to come up with a way to put a stop to it.

“We were wondering if you boys could pick up some stuff from the store for us?” Kat

asks before plowing on without waiting for an answer, “We need party food, balloons, and banners. We are going to start cooking what we have in a moment, but we need a few more bits, and we aren’t going to have enough time to go to the store ourselves.”

“Momma,” Cash starts the Italian use of her name, instantly getting her attention. “I know that you both mean well, and it’s an awesome idea, but I’m not sure that Ever is going to appreciate it as you think she will.”

“What do you mean?” Kat asks.

This is what I love about them both, they are genuinely asking, they aren’t mad or defensive, they have listened to Cash and want to know more.

Trick takes over, “Well, think of everything that she has gone through in the last few days, even today, she has started at a new school and that’s got to be really overwhelming.”

“Maybe just hold off on doing it today and wait until she’s settled in a bit more if it seems like something that she would like,” Cash adds, trying to be diplomatic.

“Yeah, I mean, she seemed like she was a bit shyer than she used to be; I don’t think she would like everyone’s attention on her,” I add, although I have a slight smile on my face, as I think about the way that she has been dealing with Serena.

That is not shy, but there is no other way that we can explain why we think a party might not be a good idea.

“Shoot,” Jenny says, “you’re right. I don’t know what we were thinking.”

“We got too excited and forgot all about what the poor girl has been through,” Kat

replies.

“You meant well, Mom,” Trick replies softly, relief on his face.

“Thank you for reeling us in, boys,” Kat says, sounding proud, “you saved Rob and Marc a job later when they would have walked in, and no doubt realized the same thing that you did.”

“No problem,” Trick chuckles.

“Well, I guess I will see you when you get home,” Jenny says.

“And I will make sure that I’m not here,” Kat says, which surprises me, “I don’t want to overwhelm her in any way.”

I’m about to point out that her being there is probably not going to be an issue. It’s more the party with everyone there that might be too much, but they have already moved on with the conversation, and maybe it is for the best in the long run. They say their goodbyes and hang up.

“Well, I think that was probably a bullet dodged,” Rafe signs.

“For the moment, yeah,” Trick replies, “I mean, we might have it completely wrong, and she may love a welcome home party, and then the moms can throw one in a couple of weeks.”

“Yeah, true.” I agree and then add, “I don’t think we have it wrong; she didn’t like all the attention on her when she was a kid.”

“Good point.” Trick replies with a fond smile.

“I was thinking,” Rafe starts.

I look at him, “When we have been on the phone?”

“Well, it’s not like I speak,” Rafe signs, somehow managing to convey his sarcasm by facial expression alone, which is fucking impressive and makes me smile.

“Sorry,” I concede, “what were you thinking?”

He smirks, but then his face becomes serious again, “I think we should send a message to Luke and explain the situation as succinctly as possible and tell him that we don’t want to do any more jobs. Think about it: do any of you want to leave Ever now that she is home?”

“Fuck no,” Cash practically shouts, the panic evident in his tone and expression.

I have to say that I agree with him, I can feel that same panic start to overtake me, like if we left her, she would disappear again and this time we would have no hope of finding her again.

“I definitely don’t want to do any jobs,” I reply.

“I’m not leaving her; what if Tomlinson decides to start shit back up again?” Cash explains a bit more, as if his initial outburst wasn’t answer enough and shaking his head for good measure.

“Same, I’m not doing it,” Trick adds fiercely.

“No way,” I add simply, aware that my expression is most likely swimming with emotion.

Rafe smiles and starts signing, “We have only been using Luke the last few months anyway, and not the others. Message him and explain. Then send a message to anyone else that we have used in the past and say that we are out and that we won’t be doing any more jobs for the foreseeable future.”

“On it,” Cash replies, pulling out his phone and sending two very different messages. We don’t have to wait long until we have a reply. “Everyone said some version of okay. Luke said that he was really happy for us and that he completely understands, no more jobs will be sent our way.”

“Awesome,” I reply, feeling relieved after that momentary panic that seemed to engulf the group as a whole.

If Riot and Jensen were here, I know that they would have had a reaction to the suggestion of us carrying on doing jobs as strongly as we did. The idea was horrible to me, and I wasn’t a fan at all.

Thankfully, I wasn’t alone in my reaction, so I didn’t feel like I was going crazy, or at least if I am, I’m in good company.

“Can we go and see Ever yet?” Rafe asks, hopefully.

Cash checks the time on his phone, “Yeah, we can go now, it’s about the right time for gym to start.”

“Let’s go and see Ever,” Trick says as he gets up from the table, and we all follow him.

Let’s face it we were hardly going to stay behind, not when the other option is to go and see Ever.

I don't think that any of us are ever going to want to go anywhere without Ever again. After our reactions to us going on jobs, which is something that we have loved doing over the last couple of years, I think that we may have some unresolved issues around Ever leaving.

I still can't believe that this is happening.

I'm really sleep deprived from the job and I'm running on adrenaline at this point, I am worried that I might be dreaming. I shake that thought from my mind as I follow the guys to Ever's gym class.

I have never been so excited to go to a gym class in my life.

Ever

History was pretty much what you would expect; it was all about the past. It was probably quite an interesting lesson, I usually enjoy history, but my mind was focused elsewhere, like on the six hot as fuck guys. One of whom I almost cut up, and all of whom are so freakishly familiar to me, but I just can't place them.

Oh, and two of them happen to be in this damn class with me and have not stopped fucking staring. Assholes. Before long, Rylie's dragging me toward the changing rooms and shoving a newly packaged gym uniform in my arms from a cupboard inside the girls' changing room. I grimace. I was sort of hoping I could get away with not getting changed just for today. Rylie rushes us to the back of the changing rooms, where a few private cubicles are set up. She winks at me before shoving her way inside, and I enter the one next to her.

I change quickly in the privacy of the cubicle, incredibly grateful that I don't have to parade my scars in front of everyone. The shorts are so short, they aren't going to hide the six-inch-long scar on the top of my thigh, but that's easy enough to explain away. Especially since there's only one, the scars on my back and stomach would be a bit harder to explain.

I exit the cubicle and stuff my bag into a locker, ensuring it's locked securely. I managed to secure the smaller of my two knives in my bra. It's not ideal, but I've done it before, and the padding should protect me to some degree if the blade moves. I can hear the whispers start as the other girls spot the scar on my thigh. If they only knew.

"Oh my god, it's so ugly. No wonder she wanted to get changed in a cubicle." One of queen bitches' followers announces loudly as if it should embarrass me. I just roll my eyes; they have no idea.

I would say it's what's on the inside that counts, but honestly, my insides are just as fucked up as my outsides.

"Ignore them," Rylie says as she leads us through the double doors and into the gym.

"Don't worry, I am. It's quite entertaining listening to the theories they come up with." I chuckle.

Apparently, all we're doing for gym today is running laps, which is more than okay with me. I may not like gym, but I am by no means unfit. I couldn't afford to be. It was a matter of survival for me. If I couldn't outrun the dangerous men that could potentially be chasing me, then I'd be dead or worse, and trust me, there are definitely worse outcomes than being dead. I notice that the guys who were a part of the incident earlier are in this class, too, and seem to be getting odd looks for some reason.

"Why is everyone looking at the incident guys like that?" I ask Ry as we slowly make our way around the track.

"Incident, guys?" She questions with her eyebrow raised, I just shrug in response, and she chuckles. "Probably because they aren't usually in this class. I mean, this is their class, but since they are football players, they normally run their drills during gym. They haven't been to one gym class this year," she looks at me, smirks, and raises her eyebrow, "I wonder why they're suddenly interested in coming to class, hmm?"

"What? It hasn't got fuck all to do with me, and even if it did, they're probably just scoping me out, finding out how to exact their revenge." I burst out laughing, unable

to keep a straight face and instantly drawing the attention of said jocks, "Fuck, now look what you made me do, Ry."

"What? How the fuck was that my fault?" She says in mock outrage, causing us both to giggle.

We glance back over to them to see them all still watching us. Queen bitch, I really should find out her name, maybe; she spots where the guys are looking and starts toward us, a snarl marring her pretty face.

My focus, however, is divided as I continue to watch the guys.

"They are all staring at you again," Ry says quietly.

I narrow my eyes at them, "No, they are fucking not. They're staring at the scar on my leg."

"Dicks." Rylie growls.

"I got this," I say, and she chuckles.

We stop running, as have several of the other kids, and the coach doesn't seem to give a shit. I make sure they're still focused on my leg, and then I slowly run my hand down my leg, watching as they all instantly focus on it. As soon as I have their attention, I bring my hand up, their eyes following, and flip them the bird, adding my deadliest glare for good measure.

The biggest guy, built like a brick shit house and all muscle, with dark brown hair thrown up into a man bun and deep blue eyes, gives me the slightest smirk imaginable. I'm suddenly thrown back into a memory of a much, much smaller boy with messy hair flying in all directions. That's his smile. He had a really bad stutter

when we were younger and was bullied for it until we started fighting back for him. That's probably where my need to protect those who can't defend themselves comes from. Looking at him now, I can say for sure that he can take care of himself.

He hated his stutter, and it got to a point where, even with speech therapy, he wouldn't talk around anyone else but the guys and me. Even his parents got a limited number of words. That smile was the smile he used to give me when we conspired to pull a trick on the others. His big smile was absolutely beautiful, and even when I was eight years old, it used to make my heart beat a bit faster, but that little smile that was just for me, and that one was my favorite.

That's my Rafe.

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Rafe

The second that we step into the gym, we find her, and we just stand there and watch her. None of us are pretending that we aren't, we are being blatantly obvious in the fact that we are watching her and only her. Jensen and Riot have already proven that they are willing to just watch her and don't give a shit who knows about it.

We have already sent the message, and our guys have been spreading the word that she is off limits. No one should be surprised that we are here, except, we are still getting stared at, probably because we are actually in a gym lesson for the first time this year. None of us are fans of gym, it seems like a pointless class to all of us, so we don't bother attending.

The teacher gives us a few cursory looks but doesn't bother to tell us to join in or get out or anything really. Hell, we aren't even in our gym kit; I don't think that we own them, actually. At least I am sure that I don't have one. Well, I might have one from seventh grade, but there is no way that would fit now; it would look comical.

And then I notice her leg.

What the fuck.

The scar on her leg is big, it is huge and must have been really fucking painful when it happened, and I find myself wondering how it happened; it looks too big to have happened in a fall, but I could be wrong.

I am suddenly very thoroughly distracted from her scar as she runs her hand down her

silky thigh, and I find my eyes following that instead. She brings her hand all the way up her leg. She has the attention of every male and some of the females too on her, and I want to snap and growl at them all to make them look away.

It's the first time in a very, very long time that I actually want to use my voice. I haven't used it, not even when I have been by myself. I do use my vocal cords to laugh, grunt, growl, I even hum. So, it's not like they haven't been used for all of those years; they have. I just haven't uttered a word.

I have no idea if I still stutter; hell, I have no idea if my voice will actually still work despite the fact that I still use my vocal cords.

But right now, with everyone watching her and thinking lusty thoughts about her, I want to use it.

I want to threaten them all, and I glance at the guys to see that I'm not the only one who is aware of how everyone else seems to be watching her. Although, she seems to be completely oblivious, her attention only on us.

For some reason, knowing that she is only focused on us settles my growing fury.

They are all looking at her, but she's only looking at us. I kind of like that. Probably more than I should.

She makes sure that she has all of our attention, which, of course, she has; where else would we be looking right now?

Once she is certain that our eyes are on her and her hand, she sticks her middle finger up at us and gives us a deadly looking glare.

It is such an Ever thing to do.

I smile, her smile, it's the one that I always saved for her, because she made me feel like there wasn't anything wrong with me, when I couldn't get through a sentence without stuttering and I kept getting frustrated. She was patient, and always calm. She didn't rush me or push me; she just waited and told me it was okay; she made me feel like I was okay, and I loved her for that, I still do.

She was always so proud of me when I managed to get the sentence out, and she used to ask me to read to her. I loved reading, and it is something that I still love. My speech therapist said that reading out loud was something that could help me and my stutter.

I hated it.

It was turning something that I loved into something that I hated and Ever could see that, so she made it into a game. She turned it into something that was special for us, something that me and her shared, and when she left, I didn't want to try anymore it hurt.

It really hurt. So I stopped trying, and I refused to read out loud any more and then I stopped talking out loud too.

I fucking missed Ever.

I was devastated; we all were when she left, and that was the way that I chose to deal with it. It wasn't healthy, and I know that I was told that by multiple therapists, but it was easy for me to stop talking. The guys had already learned a lot from Ever, and because we were all hurting, they just accepted that this was the new me and then threw themselves into learning American sign language so that they could communicate with me.

I fucking love them for that.

I don't know why but my smile seems to trigger something in her expression, I really fucking hope that something is recognition.

"That was really fucking hot." Jensen comments.

"She recognizes us," Riot says, as his gaze switches between Ever and me.

Pride fills me.

She thought she was proving a point when she ran her hand up her leg, and I am willing to bet that she thought we were staring because we were judging her. She hadn't recognized us at that point, or she would have known that we would never judge her on her appearance.

In reality it was quite the opposite, we were in shock, and that was the least of the emotions that I felt.

She has a scar on her leg that is huge. All of us are more than acquainted with scars; all of us have one somewhere from our various exploits. It is because of those exploits that we are also all aware of what knife scars look like, and there is no doubt in my mind that the scar on her leg was inflicted by a knife. I really hope I am wrong.

It is highly unlikely that she inflicted a wound as jagged and obvious as that, and that means that someone did that to her.

Rage, unfiltered and almost uncontrollable, fills me as that thought and what it means floods my mind.

Someone deliberately took a knife to Ever.

My Ever.

Our Ever.

Someone hurt her, and they did it with intent. There is no question about that.

I am going to kill them. I'm going to get her to tell me the name of the person who did this to her, and then I am going to use the contacts that we have gathered over the years to find them, and then I'm going to kill them, making sure that I give them the exact same wound that she has.

I can't even begin to imagine the amount of pain that she was in when that was made, and since my eyes are now back on it, I realize something else, and I really hope I'm wrong.

I nudge Cash next to me to get his attention so that I can ask him the question that I really hope he knows the answer to. "Does her scar look like it was stitched?"

Cash's eyes narrow as he realizes why I am asking and then he looks back at Ever and the scar on her leg. He squints like he is trying to see it better.

While he studies her leg in order to answer my question, I look at her and she is frozen to the spot, staring at all of us, her eyes playing over each one of us, and I can practically see the memories playing behind her eyes.

I really hope that she is remembering us right now.

"No," Cash says, the anger making his voice harsher than it usually is. I glance over at him, and his face is blank, "That wound was not stitched."

I growl, I didn't think it had been, but I was really hoping that I was wrong. Ever has been through even more than we had thought she had, and I fucking hate it. I want to protect her; I don't want any harm to come to her. But I can't protect her from her

past, and I find myself hating her father for taking her away from where she was safe and exposing her to something so dangerous.

If he hadn't taken her away, then she would have stayed here and stayed safe. We would have made sure of it.

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Ever

I am thrown back to the present, and my eyes widen in panic.

"Fuck!"

"What?" Ry asks, reading my panic.

"What are their names, Ry?" I softly ask, my eyes never leaving them.

Rafe pushes up to his height, realizing I'm putting it together.

"Rafe, Trick, Riot, Jensen, Luc, and Cash."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck."

They all start toward me, and I freak out.

"I'll explain, I promise but buy me some time to get away from them, please? I just need to get my stuff from the locker." I look at Rylie with wide eyes, and she just nods.

"I got you, girl; this I do need an explanation for though!" She winks.

"Fuck yes."

She starts toward the guys, and I kick my jog up to a run, sprinting past the ridiculous

queen bitch still on a fucking warpath.

I can hear them yell behind me and all hell breaks loose as Rylie does whatever it is she decided to do to give me time to escape.

Jensen

Rylie heads over to us with a determined look on her face, and I instantly pause going after Ever.

“Rylie,” Trick starts to warn her.

“You don’t understand, it’s not what you think,” Cash adds.

Rylie shrugs, “It doesn’t really matter. I really like Ever, and she asked me to stall you, so that is what I’m going to do.”

“No offense, but how are you going to stop us?” Riot asks, and he makes a good point, but I think it would be a terrible idea to underestimate Rylie.

She has already proven herself capable and I have a feeling that she is about to do it again.

“Rats!” she yells, making her voice sound absolutely panicked even though her face is smiling. It is fucking impressive, and I would appreciate it a lot more if she hadn’t done it to allow Ever time to get away from us.

All hell breaks loose.

Everyone starts screaming and panicking, jumping up onto things to get away from the imaginary rats that Rylie screamed about. Just when it starts to calm down again, she starts everyone off.

“Oh my god, it’s huge,” she screams, pointing and screaming again.

It doesn’t escape my notice that she is pointing near Serena and her cronies and that they consequently freak the fuck out, which makes everyone else freak out even more.

“Ever,” Trick says as he spots her head out of the doors coming from the locker room and clearly making a break for it.

We rush through the crowd, ignoring everyone and plowing our way through them; I don’t even care at this point. I don’t understand why she is running. I really don’t want her to fear us, but I don’t think that is what this is; I think she is freaking out, but I’m not sure why.

Ever

Not having the time to get dressed, I just grab my stuff from my gym locker. I fish out my bike keys and sprint toward my locker to get my helmet. I am not stupid. Just as I pull it out, I hear the doors behind me crash open.

"Everleigh," one of them growls, like legit growls, and it does things to me I am not going to admit right now, but damn.

"Sorry, I don't know who that is. Got to go!" I yell over my shoulder while sprinting down the hall toward the front doors and my bike.

One of them chuckles behind me, and I grin.

Cash

I can’t help but laugh at her words. There is the Ever that I knew, and I am happy to see that part of her. She is so fucking sassy and so full of confidence.

The thing none of us quite understand is why she is running from us. She clearly has a fight or flight response, the one that we have seen triggered was fight, and yet here she is running.

I really didn't think that we were that scary, but she even sent Rylie over to us to try and distract us so that she could escape, not that Rylie could have stopped us, and she realized that pretty fucking quickly. I have to say I respect her for trying though, she knows what we are capable of, and yet she still stepped in between Ever and us because Ever asked her to, I can appreciate that especially since it's only been a day that she has known Ever.

They have clearly bonded in that weird way that girls do, when they just instantly become best friends, I hear my own thoughts, and I roll my eyes. I pretty much just described what happened with us and Atlas, maybe it isn't a thing that is specific to girls, maybe it's just something that happens when you find your people.

Atlas is definitely one of our people, and I actually really wish that he was here right now, he would like Ever. I think they would understand each other more than either of them would expect.

We crash our way through the front doors of the school, following Ever, who can run fucking quickly.

I screech to a halt along with the others as my jaw drops and heat fills me.

The bike is hers and is a thousand times sexier now that I can see her straddling it. It suits her, and I am not surprised in the slightest that this bike is hers.

Not when I really think about it.

She always said that one day she was going to ride a motorcycle, and that she didn't want to drive a car because, in her words, cars were boring and you ended up having

to give lifts to people you didn't like. That always made me chuckle.

She obviously finds our expressions amusing because she grins wickedly; that smile has us all reacting at the same time as we start to walk down the steps.

Ever obviously doesn't want us to catch her though and showing extreme skill, she fishtails the bike around so that it is now facing the right way and she speeds off, popping a wheelie as she goes.

"Did she just . . ." Jensen starts and then trails off, unsure what just happened.

To be honest, I think we are all a bit dumbfounded.

"Come on, let's head back to mom's. I bet that is where she is going," Trick says, and we all run to the truck. We aren't even going to pretend that we aren't in a rush.

As we all pile in the truck, Jensen says, "I wish I had my bike. I bet I could fucking catch her."

"Let's go and get our Ever," I say as Trick starts the car, and we drive quicker than we probably should.

It feels like this is the beginning of forever.