



How to Hack a Hellhound (Hellhounds of Paradise Falls #2)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Quinton

Getting kidnapped and held hostage in a human trafficker's basement was not on my bingo card. Getting rescued by a paranormal being was also not on my bingo card. (Apparently I needed to trade in bingo cards.) The guy who took me may be dead, but I know there are more people behind the operation, and I plan to shut it down. If I need to get the help of one of the creepy glowing eyed dudes to do it, I will. It turns out Liam is incredibly sexy and really good with technology, too. He may be great at hacking into computers, but I'm determined to hack my way into his life.

Liam

Ever since I looked into the feisty human that Dexter rescued from a basement, I've been a little... obsessed. Is it wrong that I watch him all the time and hack into all his technology? I'm just trying to keep him safe. After all, he's sticking his nose into some troubling areas, and I can't deal with the thought of him getting taken again. Of course I offer to help him when I discover his mission to take down a trafficking ring, although my motives aren't exactly pure. The little human attracts me in a way that I can't explain, and my hellhound thinks he's mine, whether he wants to be or not.

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Chapter 1

Quinton

Working in retail was hell, and working in the food industry side of retail was apparently a special level of hell reserved for the truly damned. Yet somehow, here I was.

It was almost closing time at the coffee shop, and there were only two customers left in line. I was making the coffee, because Cass seemed to think calling customers assholes was bad for business. So I had to take my petty revenge by spelling people's names wrong on their cups—or mishearing them totally. Bob? I could've sworn you said Boob. Scott? Are you sure you didn't say Snot?

I took my amusement where I could get it. Right now, though, I was in the existential hell of not wanting to be at work but also not wanting to be at home.

Wasn't I just a ray of fucking sunshine.

You could chalk that attitude up to me being kidnapped, held hostage in a basement by a human trafficker, and then being rescued by some... being that wasn't quite human. And let's not forget being rehomed like some kind of stray animal afterwards.

Yeah, those would all be reasons for a pretty shitty attitude. It wasn't my excuse, though. I'd had this shitty attitude before I'd been kidnapped. Besides, my roommate, Aiden, another "stray," had actually been held captive and abused for like a year or something (he understandably didn't talk much about it). If anyone had a reason for

an attitude, it was him, but he was actually a really sweet guy—when he talked.

Just as I finished the order, the bell over the door jingled, because of course it did.

And, of course, it was Toby.

Toby was like that college professor that wore mismatched shoes and forgot to come to class on time. You knew he was an idiot, but somehow everyone still loved him. Not that I knew much about college professors, because in my old life I'd only taken a few courses while I worked full time.

Toby bounded over to the counter like a freaking shih-tzu or some other miniature yappy dog, all chatty and cheery. His attitude and looks were deceiving, though, because he wrote all kinds of gory shit for a living, and apparently his books were super popular. Conversations with him were odd, at best.

At worst, you might regret having just eaten lunch.

I heard Cass call out the order for the next customer, and it was a pumpkin spice latte.

“Pumpkin spice sucks,” I muttered.

Toby gasped, but the customer barely blinked. He was probably a regular. They were used to my attitude by now.

“Don't worry about him,” Toby said to the guy. “He has a traumatic backstory. Pumpkin spice is lovely.”

I just snorted and made the coffee. Pumpkin spice wasn't lovely. It was fucking nasty. I said what I said, and I stood behind it.

“Besides,” Toby added, “we don’t yuck anyone else’s yum. We accept all flavors.”

I glanced over to see Toby smiling, and I barely repressed another snort. Writers always had to make things into some big thematic lesson. I set the coffee on the counter, turning to see that Cass had mysteriously disappeared into the back, leaving me to take Toby’s order.

Although really, that was probably one of the least mysterious things he did.

Because I was surrounded by fucking nut cases.

Yeah, I had a tragic backstory, and so did my roommate, but I had a feeling we barely scratched the surface when it came to plot material.

The guy, Dex, who rescued me from my basement prison, had glowing eyes and flames all over his body at the time. He’d set fire to the house on our way out and dropped me off to be babysat by the coffee shop owner and his boyfriend, because apparently his friends hated dealing with the “human” police. Plus, I hadn’t really given him an alternative—I didn’t particularly care to return to my old life.

So, yeah, Dex was probably not strictly human. It was kind of a shock, but at that point, I had been so messed up that it barely fazed me (kidnapping will do that to you).

So supernatural beings were just another item to add to my already fucked up bingo card.

Oh, yeah, Dex was also dating Toby, the writer. Jury was out on whether or not Toby was human. If he was, he was probably a serial killer, because I didn’t know anyone else who could be so fucking happy talking about dismemberment.

Then there was Cassius and Kushiell, who had pretty much adopted me. They were also fucking weird as hell, and if I had to bet money on it, I wouldn't guess human for them either. Cassius often stood around talking to thin air, and I learned that it was best not to ask questions, because you never knew what answer you'd get. (I was glad to hear that Great Aunt Bessie was proud of how I was handling everything, but I didn't want to know why Cassius even knew about a great aunt who had died when I was a kid.)

Kushiell was his own level of weird, always going out for nature walks to talk to the trees. Like, literally talk to the trees—whole conversations. I wasn't sure if talking to thin air or trees was weirder, but either way, they were fucking odd.

Not that I could complain about them. They gave me a job, a place to stay, clothes, a phone, and a computer, and they didn't ask for anything in return. I kept waiting for the IOU to come due, because in my experience nothing in life was free, but so far they hadn't asked for a thing. All I had to do was work a shitty coffee shop job, and I even got paid above minimum wage for it. I don't even think I had to work the job. I think Cassius just hired me to make me feel useful.

And honestly, the job wasn't that shitty. Cass was an easy boss, even if he did talk to the air. Aiden worked in the kitchen, because he couldn't deal with the public, and everyone knew to leave him the fuck alone. The college kids that worked here usually steered totally clear of me, and I hadn't met the guy who took over the paperwork and tax stuff. The manager, Steph, was the only total bitch on staff (aside from me), so of course I loved her.

Toby cleared his throat, staring at me and waiting for me to go over to the counter.

Fuck. I didn't even try to stop the dramatic sigh that left my mouth. Toby was going to want something from me, and I vaguely wondered if this was an IOU coming due. There was no other reason for Cass to leave me alone with him.

“What do you want?” I mumbled.

“You,” Toby said, leaning forward against the counter and smiling shyly. Did he just bat his eyelashes at me?

“Uh...” What. The. Fuck. Toby wanted me?

“Tonight! My place, and I can even give you a ride!” he said, gaining confidence as he talked.

“Uh...” I murmured again, because... seriously? He was cute and all, but he was dating the guy who burned things down and clearly wasn’t human. I was not going to his place to... Fuck? Have a date? I didn’t even fucking know. I was flattered, but I liked my skin attached to my body, thank you very much.

“I thought of asking Aiden, too, but I don’t think he’s ready for that yet,” Toby went on. “Maybe if it were just the two of us, but it’s gonna be a group tonight, and I think he needs more time, don’t you?”

I just mutely nodded my head in agreement on that. Yeah, Aiden wasn’t ready for anything. And a group? Was Toby talking, like, an orgy or something?

“A group?” I mumbled.

“Yup!” Toby replied, then he leaned in closer to the counter, and I couldn’t help leaning in too, because I had to hear whatever the fuck he was gonna say next. “But don’t worry, it’s just me and my friends, Josh and Sebbie. And Dex, of course, although he’s very hands off when we do these kinds of nights. He even promised he wouldn’t be intimidating if you came, although I honestly think he’s super sexy when he’s intimidating.”

“I’m flattered, but...” I started, unsure how to even continue. I knew Toby lived a little outside the box, but I hadn’t expected to get invited to some kind of orgy thing.

“Nope. There’s no getting out of it. It’s important for you to get back out there, you know. And if you aren’t enjoying yourself, you can always leave. We aren’t going to make you stay, but you have to at least come and see how it is. And if anything makes you uncomfortable at all, we’ll respect your boundaries,” he stated. “Plus, I already cleared it with Cassius. He said you can leave right at closing time, so my timing was perfect!”

“Uh...” I muttered again.

I was actually fucking speechless. Cass approved? Did he even know what he’d signed me up for? How the hell did I get out of this?

Toby was standing there looking so damn excited and just nodding his head, and somehow I couldn’t think of a single thing to say. I think it was some kind of voodoo mojo or something, because I had no intention of going to an orgy night, but I also didn’t want to hurt Toby’s feelings. He looked so earnest and hopeful.

“I’m not interested in... doing anything,” I muttered, frowning. Maybe that would dissuade him.

Only Toby started nodding his head more vigorously. “Of course. No doing required. Hell, you can just sit in a corner and watch us if you want. Slowly get back into things. Whatever you need, Q,” he answered.

It felt like saying no would be kicking a puppy. I also kind of felt like I owed Dex for saving me. Offending his boyfriend didn’t seem a good way to repay him, even if I wasn’t sure I wanted to witness an orgy. Although in my old life I’d done my fair share of partying, so public sexual acts weren’t really all that shocking. Surely this

wouldn't be so bad.

At least that's what I told myself as I was led out of the shop to Toby's car, although I made sure to tell both Cass and Aiden where I was going and that I wouldn't be more than a few hours.

I had learned that letting people know where you were was always a good idea. The main reason I trusted Toby was because I still thought he was some kind of supernatural being, and I knew Dex was something extra.

Monsters were out there, but so far all the monsters I'd met in real life had been one hundred percent human.

Dear god, it was worse than an orgy. Way worse. I would not have agreed if I had known what it really was.

It was... Fuck. It was like some kind of early 2000 sitcom where all the girls sat around drinking Manhattans and gossiping about the men in their lives, only we were sitting in Toby's living room, drinking wine, and gossiping.

I was in the gay version of Sex in the City , for fuck's sake.

I had passed on the alcohol (I didn't trust Toby's friends yet), and I was sitting crankily in the corner. Seb was even more cheery than Toby, and Josh was clearly the serious one in the bunch. God, did that make me the Samantha of the group?

Fuck my life.

"I just don't think the online dating thing is for me," Seb said, munching on nachos that Toby had placed on a table in the middle of the living room. "After the last two dates, I just think maybe I should try to meet someone a little more organically."

“It isn’t your fault the first guy was upset that you went on eating your dinner after another guy you helped almost died,” Josh commented. “And you saved the last date’s life when he passed out from low blood sugar and hit his head. That’s a good meet-cute story to tell your friends.”

“Yeah, but after I save someone’s life, I just don’t feel the same level of attraction. Maybe it’s a work thing,” Seb answered.

Ok, so maybe Seb wasn’t human either.

Toby seemed to be staring off into space, thinking. “Maybe you’re an angel and you don’t know it,” he mused. “After all, Dex is a hellhound, and he said there are angels and demons in Paradise Falls. Ohhh, maybe you hit your head and got amnesia and you’re an angel with memory loss!”

Josh looked over at me, saying, “Don’t mind Toby. He goes off on plotting tangents all the time. He doesn’t actually think that.”

I just snorted, because Josh was either a really good liar, or he was totally clueless. (I was betting on clueless.)

But hey, at least I knew what Dex was now. Not that I knew what it meant to be a hellhound.

“I don’t think angels can get amnesia? I mean, they’re angels , so they can’t get hurt, right?” Seb asked.

“Unless they’re fallen angels or something,” Josh added, because despite not believing Toby, he clearly humored his friend.

They all looked at me like I had something to contribute.

“Do you remember your childhood?” I asked, because somehow I was pulled into the insanity of the conversation.

“Ohhh, good point! I bet a fallen angel would have vague, manufactured childhood memories,” Toby said thoughtfully, and then he was up, grabbing a pen and notebook and jotting stuff down.

“Great. We’ve officially lost him to plotting,” Josh muttered.

“You guys have met my parents,” Seb threw out. “Right?” he added, kind of unsurely.

Josh sighed, obviously used to dealing with the craziness. “Yes, Seb, we have met your parents. You are not a fallen angel. Your childhood is real. You are one hundred percent human.”

I snorted over in my corner of solitude. Josh also thought that Dex was human, so I didn’t think he counted as an expert.

“Yeah, but you have to admit, a lot of people do die around me,” Seb added.

“You’re an EMT,” Josh answered.

“Besides, they don’t all die,” Toby added, still jotting stuff down. “But yeah, fallen angel doesn’t fit. Harbinger of Death or something, maybe.”

“You just made that up,” Seb said.

This time Josh snorted. “Of course he did. He’s a writer. Just don’t be surprised when you end up in his next book.”

At that, Josh's phone buzzed. As he took it out, his whole body tensed up. Seb was watching him, but Toby was still stuck in his head, jotting notes.

Josh looked at it, and it was like he deflated a tiny bit. "It's getting pretty late, and we've probably kept Q out for long enough," he said, forcing a smile.

"How're things going with Rick? Is that him?" Seb asked.

"Yeah, he's just wondering when I'll be home. Things have been ok. We had a long talk, and we're going to try and work it out," Josh answered. "We love each other," he added.

Yeah, I was pretty good at spotting bullshit, and I called it on that one. Whether Josh didn't really love his boyfriend, or he didn't believe his boyfriend loved him, I wasn't sure. But he was totally lying about something.

We wrapped it up, and somehow I was taking an Uber home with Josh and Seb, which I wasn't too sure about, but I texted Aiden with all the information. Seb would get dropped off first, then me, then Josh, so I also wouldn't be alone with the Uber driver.

Not that I had trust issues or anything.

By the time we got to my place across from the coffee shop, I could sense the tension in Josh, and I felt kind of bad for the guy.

"Hey," I said as I got out. "You're a good person. A nice guy. You deserve to be loved for who you are."

It was sappy as fuck, and I'm not sure what possessed me to say it, but Josh's face sort of crumpled in on itself a little bit before he managed to smooth it back out.

“Thanks,” he said raspily.

I shut the car door and turned to walk into the apartment, keys already out. The car waited until I was inside to pull off, which I was thankful for.

I leaned against the door, staring at the steps up to our apartment. We were on the second floor with a shop underneath us, and we had another locked door and an alarm, which I think Cassius set up just to give us reassurance.

I sighed before trudging up the stairs. I think they all thought I had been stolen when I was kidnapped, and I didn't correct anyone on that. I was paranoid, and the extra locks and security did make me feel better.

I hadn't been stolen, though. Not really. But I was too ashamed to admit that I had gone off with my kidnapper of my own free will. I had known Marcus, the guy who locked me in a basement, and I hadn't even had the excuse of being drunk when I'd gone home with him. I knew it was victim mentality, but I couldn't help feeling like what happened was my own fault in a lot of ways.

As I opened the door, I called out to Aiden to let him know that it was me, and then I went into my room, shut the door, and sat down at my computer, ready to dive back into research.

I may have been stupid for going off with Marcus, and I blamed myself for being such a loner that no one noticed I was gone, but the guy who took me was only the tip of the iceberg. I was determined to find the rest of them. Marcus hadn't been alone in his work, and I was going to hunt down every fucker who sold off people to make money.

I smiled, thinking of Dexter, who was apparently a hellhound. He had the right idea when he set Marcus's mansion on fire.

I was going to burn the whole ring of human traffickers to the ground, even if it was the last thing I did.

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Chapter 2

Liam

Where the fuck was Quinton going?

I stared at the video feed from the CCTV camera outside the coffee shop, watching him follow Toby to a car.

I knew Toby—he was Dex’s mate and he was basically pack, so he was trustworthy.

Still, I didn’t like the deviation from Quinton’s routine.

I double checked the phone I had cloned to his, but there were no messages indicating what was happening. Not that he messaged many people aside from Aiden and Cassius. He didn’t have much family—he was an only child, and his parents had both passed away—and it seemed that he had little desire to reconnect with any friends or acquaintances from before his kidnapping.

That was fine. I liked him in Paradise Falls, where I could easily keep an eye on him. I pulled up various street cams and watched Toby’s car start traveling.

I heard a whimper from behind me, and I turned around to look at the hellbound mortal tied to the chair.

“You’re dripping blood everywhere, you know. Are you ready to seek your placement in hell yet?” I asked.

The man frantically shook his head no, mumbling behind his gag. Mortals. The desire to live was strong. I'd also filled him in on what awaited him once he reached hell, so I supposed he wasn't much looking forward to that either.

Still, I was getting itchy to be done with this one, especially if Toby and Quinton were heading off somewhere to get into trouble. I hadn't spent a lot of time with Toby. I'd met him once or twice at Dex's house, but between wrapping up the sale of my old place and securing the sale of the home next to Dexter's, I hadn't been around much in the last few weeks. I was finally ready to head back to Paradise Falls, since I was finishing with the last hellbound soul in a ring of evil humans I'd been tracking down and disposing of. When it was done, I would be able to focus my full attention on Quinton and the people who hurt him.

Not that I hadn't already started digging into the human who had taken him. That guy was, fortunately for him, dead, but I would find the others who were connected. It was what I did.

I rolled up the sleeves of my black dress shirt and walked over to the man I was currently dealing with. "I don't know what else you can give me. I think it might be time for you to move on."

He made frantic mumbling sounds, and I removed his gag.

"Please. I can tell you more," he whimpered.

"You have given me the name of anyone you knew personally, which was a disappointingly small number. You have given me access to all your accounts. I have erased anything you uploaded to the internet to the best of my ability, and I've planted tracking viruses in anything that is left. I've used your bank accounts to pay reparations to the victims and families of those who have been hurt by your crimes. What more can you offer me, human?" I asked.

He started mumbling about underground networks and blah blah blah, but I looked over at the CCTV cameras again. It seemed that they were headed to Toby's home, and I sighed in relief. At least they'd be under Dex's supervision, although I hadn't hacked into Toby's computers or his home, since I generally had no interest in watching Toby or Dex. I now realized how shortsighted that was of me. From what I knew of Toby, I wasn't surprised he would try and befriend Quinton.

"...and I didn't even hurt any of those people. It wasn't me who did that stuff," the man was whimpering. "I can help you find the truly evil people who did all that. I don't deserve to die and go to hell."

I sighed and looked back at him. "You paid people to rape and torture others so you could watch it, get off on it, and make money from it on the internet. Your soul is black. There is no hope for you. I've already tracked down your associates, and they're all dead. You're the only one left, and I have better things to do than deal with you any further. You may plead your case to the Judge of the Damned in hell," I stated, and then I placed my hand on his chest and engulfed him in flame.

It was quick, and the glory of hellhound flame was that it only destroyed what I wished it to. It made cleanup stress free.

I did like things clean. And neat. And orderly.

Which is why I was not pleased about Quinton not going home.

When the mess was burned to nothing but ashes, I walked over and hit the start button on the robot vacuum I'd bought, glancing down to make sure there were no stray blood droplets on the floor. My old robot vacuum had taken it upon itself to autorun, only a hellbound mortal had still been in the room, dripping blood, and I had been out grabbing some breakfast. The results had been... unfortunate. It had dragged blood across the entire floor, including the carpet, which was of course ruined.

That robot vacuum might have accidentally met a fiery death for its poorly timed decision, but the newer upgraded model I bought didn't make such mistakes. While it started cleaning up the ashes, I put a call in to Dexter.

"What is Toby doing?" I asked without preamble.

"Having a 'guys night' with his friends," Dex answered.

"Why is he bringing Quinton?"

"Uh... I don't know?" Dex answered.

Typical. "Watch over them," I commanded, and Dex merely snorted before hanging up. Asshole.

Dex wasn't the brightest flame in the house fire, especially when it came to dealing with humans, but I knew he'd protect Toby and his friends. And it wasn't like I could really claim any expertise in the human area, either. I didn't interact with humans much outside of the internet, aside from the usual torture and death stuff.

And watching Quinton. But that was a new hobby.

I'd managed to get ahold of the security footage from the mansion where Quinton was rescued, and of course, they'd had cameras throughout the house and the wine cellar. They all went to private servers, but that wasn't a problem. I'd watched the footage before erasing its existence, and the minute I'd seen Dex open the door in the cellar, I'd been captivated by the short, wiry guy who had thrown himself out of the room at Dex, scratching and biting.

He was so feisty, and I was enthralled by his energy.

Then there was what I saw with my other talent. Hellhounds could sniff out evil. It's how we worked. Or at least it was supposed to be how we worked.

When computers had first been invented, I'd taken to them immediately. I'd seen the potential for human depravity, but I'd also seen the potential for hunting down our prey. I don't know exactly when it started, but I had feelings about those I interacted with online. I just figured it was intuition. Yes, that one seems evil, and then I'd find them in person, and I'd smell the rot.

It didn't take long before I realized I was always right. I could tell the hellbound souls from the innocents. I thought I was just good at reading into interactions with humans, but then I started to be able to do it without interacting at all. Just watching their online footprint, reading their mundane emails, or watching them on camera gave me a sense of their souls. It was... almost like a flavor. It was like my hellhound turned into an algorithm that could trace evil.

And the moment I'd seen Quinton burst through that door, my hellhound had perked right up. He was most definitely not a hellbound soul. His flavor was exotic and alluring, though, and I wanted more.

I was used to getting what I wanted. So I watched him, and I only became more captivated by him. It wasn't hard to clone his phone, or to hack into his laptop so I could watch him through his camera.

Not that I neglected my other duties, of course. I checked on all of Toby's friends, but I had no desire to dig deeper into their lives. I did look a little more into Aiden, especially since he was Quinton's roommate, and he presented his own problems. Nevertheless, I wasn't terribly concerned about that. We could handle anything that got thrown at us.

My phone rang, and I wasn't surprised when a blocked number showed up. I picked

up without speaking.

“I see your human manners haven’t improved much,” a gruff voice chided.

“You could have been a telemarketer. No reason to say hello to the bots,” I answered.

Wilder gave a bark of laughter at that. “Boy, don’t pretend that you haven’t blocked all telemarketers from this number somehow. You always were the best with all the technology shit.”

I just smiled. Wilder was, in every way that counted, my father. He was also utterly without bullshit, so when he praised you, you damn well knew you’d earned it.

Wilder had adopted all of us when we were young hellhounds, because we all didn’t fit into our lives for one reason or another. We were now effectively a tight-knit pack, but we’d been working separately for quite awhile—humans got suspicious when you didn’t age.

“Seems like my boys have been busy from the last message you sent. Fill me in,” he said.

I had given him a rough summary in a message, but I went into detail now, telling him how we all felt good about Paradise Falls as a new home base. I also filled him in on Dexter’s human neighbor that he’d decided to keep.

Wilder grunted. “It’s not unheard of for a hellhound to mate a human. Not that Toby is exactly mortal anymore if Dex has claimed him.”

I didn’t quite know what to do with that statement, and if Wilder didn’t want to explain, he wouldn’t. I was never sure if that was because he just didn’t feel like explaining or because he just didn’t know. He was one of the original hellhounds, and

he'd probably forgotten more than I'd ever know in my lifetime, no matter how many centuries long it might be.

"Will you come?" I asked instead. I knew everyone would be happy if Wilder joined us, but I also knew he often had a lot of shit going on. He had devoted decades to raising us into the hellhounds we were, and he deserved a chance to go off and do whatever he wanted.

"Of course I'll come. You think I'm going to let my boys have all the fun without me? Someone needs to check up on you miscreants," he joked.

And that was why Wilder was more of a father than any of our original parents. We were always his boys. Still, I let out a sigh of relief.

"How is everyone?" he asked. "I know you've been keeping tabs. Always the big brother of the group."

"They're good. Atlas has even shown up a few times in Paradise Falls. I think he'll end up staying as well. I've designated a back house on the one property for him if he wants it," I answered. "The sale has gone through on the house next to Dexter's, so we own both properties, and Dexter's mate owns the third. Dex has basically moved in there, so we have two houses between the rest of us, along with the smaller back house. There's a lot of land, and we can expand if necessary."

Wilder grunted in approval.

"There's a decent number of angels and demons running around town, which concerned me at first, but they really seem to be flying below the radar as well. The only demon who showed up to cause trouble was actually dealt with by an angel, an oracle, and Dexter," I added.

“An angel, an oracle, and a hellhound walk into a town...” Wilder joked. He trailed off then, and I let him have a moment to think.

I turned back to the cameras that Dexter had installed around Toby’s property. I could still see lights on inside, and no cars had come or gone, so I was sure Quinton was safely inside. I’d have to hack into his phone’s microphone. It would be so much simpler if I could hear what was going on.

“Ok. I’ll be coming, but right now I’m working on something... delicate. Tell the boys not to worry, and I’ll be in touch,” Wilder said, dragging my attention back to the call.

“I’m not there yet, either. I just finished my last bit of business here, but my place is cleaned out and I’ll be packing up the car for the road trip back to Paradise Falls in the morning,” I answered.

“Good. You boys look out for each other, and you know how to get in touch if any of you need me,” he said.

“Of course. Same for you, you know. We’ll gladly help with anything you need,” I reminded him.

He just laughed. “You boys are wrecking balls. I love you all, but this needs a finer hand than that. I’ll be in touch,” he said, and he hung up without waiting for a reply.

Wilder liked to remind us that he loved us, but he often didn’t give us the opportunity to say it back. That was ok—I think he knew what he’d done for all of us. He’d made us family.

I sighed, turning back to the computer screen. I watched the outside of Toby’s home impatiently, tapping my fingers, until eventually a message popped up on my

computer. Quinton had texted Aiden to let him know he was taking an Uber home. Good boy, letting his roommate know what he was doing.

I checked the Uber driver's background, because of course, I did, and I watched the CCTV cameras to make sure Quinton got home and into his apartment safely. Then I just waited for him to boot up his computer so I could watch him. And monitor his online activity.

Quinton was starting to dig a little too deeply into his own kidnapping, and it was only a matter of time before he caught someone's attention. It would help flush out the ring of human traffickers, because so far they had been good at covering their tracks, but I still didn't want him placed in any danger, which was why I watched him so closely.

Well, I wouldn't lie to myself. It was part of the reason I watched him so closely. The other reason was because I wanted him. My hellhound wanted him. And if Dex got to keep a human, why couldn't I?

Quinton was a flame in the darkness, and I wanted to set him free and watch him burn. I would make sure no one ever again tried to put out his fire.

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Chapter 3

Quinton

It was almost midnight by the time I went to bed. I hadn't gotten very far in my online searching, probably because I really didn't know shit about computers. I could google with the best of them, but unfortunately "sex traffickers who kidnap people" didn't serve up a list of names. I had dived into Marcus's life, but that was pretty much a dead end. The guy would've been caught if he had left any kind of trail that someone as inept as me could follow.

I probably needed to go back to the club where I'd met him. It was something I had avoided thinking about, but I needed to do something. I couldn't just settle into this new life knowing that someone else could be locked in a basement right now. I'd started looking the club up, but my computer kept freezing, so I'd just given up at that point and climbed into bed.

I tossed and turned, and eventually, I must have drifted off to sleep. I was locked back in that basement room, and the door was opening. It was my chance to escape. I shot up in bed, breathing heavily, only to see a dark silhouette in the doorway, the lit hallway behind them.

Despite the dream, I recognized who it was. I let my racing heart slow down as I scooted over and threw back the comforter, inviting Aiden into bed with me. He walked in, leaving the door ajar—he didn't like the dark—and climbed into bed next to me.

I laid back down, asking, “Was it my nightmare or yours?”

Aiden just shrugged, cuddling up next to me. I guessed he was right. Did it really matter what woke him? I wrapped my arms around him, holding him close while his own breathing calmed.

Weren't we just two fucked up peas in a pod. I was a prickly son of a bitch who purposely pushed people away with my attitude—I'd had issues letting people in well before I'd been held captive. Aiden, meanwhile, had a hard time letting people in both emotionally and physically. He didn't like being touched, and yet at the same time, he was incredibly touch starved.

Most nights, Aiden ended up in my bed, snuggled up with me, the sheet an extra layer between us. I didn't mind. Somehow Aiden had become like family, even though I'd tried my damndest to keep him shut out. He was like a puppy dog, though, and you couldn't help loving him at least a little.

God, I hope nothing happened to him.

“Are you staying safe?” I asked.

“I woke up, went to the shop, baked, and came home. I ordered take out to be delivered to the shop before I came home, so no one knows where we live,” Aiden said. Then he added quietly, “You went out today. You ok?”

“Yeah. It was like some kind of weird gay guy version of girls' night. Toby wanted to invite you,” I told him.

I could feel him shaking his head against the pillow, and I chuckled. “Yeah, I agreed that wasn't a good idea. Although they do live out sort of near the woods. It's nice. Might be nice to visit them. Maybe talk it over with your therapist.”

“It’s hard, but it helps,” he whispered. “You should go.”

“Maybe,” I said, but we both knew I was lying.

I didn’t need therapy. I needed revenge.

We both eventually slept, and I vaguely heard Aiden’s alarm at the crack of dawn, although I went back to sleep for a few hours. Aiden usually worked every day, even though Cass yelled at him for it. If he wasn’t over at the shop baking, though, he was baking here in the apartment, and the place did not have a big kitchen. Aiden had once told me that he didn’t think about all his shit when he was baking, so I guess it was like another form of therapy for him.

Sometimes I wished I had something like that. Instead, I laid in bed and stared at my laptop, open and taunting me on my dresser. I knew I needed to go back to the city. If I was going to figure anything out, I needed to go back to where I met Marcus.

I rolled over and groaned before climbing out of bed, grabbing the laptop, and heading into the kitchen. I placed it on the eat-in kitchen table as I poured myself a cup of coffee—bless Aiden for always making it—and grabbed the blueberry muffin he’d left for me. I sat down and woke up the computer, getting ready to dive into more research.

Before I tried on the club again, I opened up my old email account.

It wasn’t like I was in hiding. When Dexter had asked me if I wanted to go back to my old life, I hadn’t said yes because there hadn’t been much to go back to. I didn’t think anyone even missed me. Marcus had chosen someone who wouldn’t be missed, and he’d covered his tracks.

I’d gotten an email from my landlord confirming the cancellation of my lease, so

apparently Marcus had done that and had someone go clean out my clothes and personal belongings—the rental had been furnished, so I hadn't had much.

I had worked at a temp agency, and though I'd been in the middle of an office job as a secretary, I'm sure Marcus had put a call in telling them I quit, because I hadn't even gotten an email from them, although they had deposited my last check into my account.

I guess I was fortunate I still had my bank account and my storage unit, which held stuff from my parents' house that I actually cared about, but I guess Marcus hadn't had me for long enough to fully get rid of my existence. Thank fuck for that, at least.

My email account had a lot of random marketing emails, but that was it. And really, what did I expect? Who the fuck even used email anymore? It was all social media now, and Marcus had used my phone to post on all my accounts that I was taking a social media break to find myself.

I'd left them like that. I hadn't posted anything. I hadn't emailed or called anyone. After all, what was the point?

I had gone missing, and no one had even noticed. No one cared.

It was fucking depressing.

It was mostly my fault, and I knew that. I had lots of party friends, lots of acquaintances, but no one close to me. Not since my parents died and I left my hometown. I hadn't let anyone get close. I had been a fucking island, and it made me easy pickings for a psycho like Marcus.

I leaned my head down against the kitchen table, probably getting crumbs on my forehead in the process, but I didn't care.

I needed to look into Bliss, the club where Marcus and I had met and where I'd been a pretty regular partier. It was perfect for casual hookups and random fun nights, and I'd lost myself there plenty of times. Of course there were always rumors about the place, but weren't there rumors about every popular club? Add in that this was a gay club, and of course people talked shit.

But Marcus had friends there. He knew people. It was a lead I couldn't leave alone.

I just had no desire to go back to that life. I didn't want to see those people, didn't want to pretend that I was the same party guy I'd been before. I didn't know if I could put on that persona anymore.

But I didn't think I had a choice. I wasn't the same anymore. I had a purpose now, and I hadn't had one in far too long.

With that thought, I pulled up the club website, opening tabs as I clicked on all their social media accounts, reading over all the gossip and shit I'd missed over the last few weeks. It was weird to feel like nothing had changed in that world, when for me so much had changed.

I only had about an hour of scrolling before my phone alarm went off, letting me know I needed to get ready for work. I closed the laptop and hopped in the shower, trying to scrub away the feeling of grime from being back in that world, even just peripherally.

I got dressed, grabbed my phone, and walked out the door. I should probably just go to the club. Rip the bandaid off, so to speak. Get back out there and start putting feelers out.

I thought about it as I double checked the locks, set the security alarm, and went downstairs to head over to the shop. It was mid-morning, so it was pretty quiet when I

walked in. Cass was behind the counter, talking on the phone. Except I knew that half the time Cass was supposedly on the phone, his phone was actually not on a call.

I didn't ask questions. I just waved and headed into the back. Aiden had music playing and was mixing dough. I nodded at him and he nodded back. I grabbed an apron and headed back out to the front just as Cass took out his ear pods.

"How was last night?" he asked.

I stared at him, frowning. "You know, I thought Toby was asking me over for an orgy."

Cass choked out a laugh. "Geez, Q, why would you think that?"

"He said he wanted me and batted his eyelashes. He was all awkward in that Toby way of his, and said I could sit in a corner and watch. He said I needed to get back into things. What the hell was I supposed to think?" I groused.

Cass laughed, shaking his head. "Yeah, that sounds like Toby. He's awkward, but he means well."

"Yeah. They have a nice place out there. Would be nice if we could get Aiden out there for a visit. I think he'd like the woods and shit. He won't go with that many people, though. Toby means well, but he might be a little much for Aiden for extended periods of time."

Cass nodded thoughtfully. "I'll talk to Corbin or Jude. Aiden knows both of them. Maybe a visit to see them would be good. Would you take him?"

"Of course," I said. I didn't add that I would probably insist on going. I didn't like the idea of Aiden going anywhere alone. I started wiping down the counter as I said, "I

might go into the city tonight. Aiden was gonna go out for a walk in the woods with Kushiel later, right? Maybe you guys could hang out with him for a bit after that?”

Cass had been leaning against the counter, but he stood up and stared at me. I avoided eye contact. “Of course we can, but Q, are you sure...” he trailed off, and I was saved by the bell chiming above the shop door.

A pretty steady stream of customers came in as lunch drew near, and we got to work filling orders. If Cass kept glancing my way suspiciously, I ignored it. I was a big boy, and I could go into the city if I wanted to.

If the idea terrified me a little bit, that was ok. I’d tell Cass and Aiden exactly where I was going. I had people who would look for me now.

There was a little voice in my head that said even if people would look for me, it didn’t mean they would find me, but I quieted it as best as I could. After all, these weren’t just people. Cass, Dex, and all my new “friends”—I was pretty sure they were all something not-human.

It occurred to me that I should probably ask for help, but that required trust. I trusted Aiden, but I would never ask him. He had his own shit. Besides, I didn’t know anything yet. I’d get some information, and then I’d decide what to do.

Stupid? Probably. But what harm could come from just visiting a club? I knew even as I thought it that those sounded like famous last words.

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Chapter 4

Liam

I was almost back to Paradise Falls, and my hellhound was... restless. I thought about pulling off to stop and check on Quinton, but I knew he was at work now. I'd watched him last night through his laptop camera. I'd also monitored his computer and interfered a time or two in order to subvert his attempts to look into the club that I'd already traced to Marcus.

I'd also watched him sleep for a bit. He usually left his computer open, and it soothed me to see him safely resting in bed. When Aiden came in for his nightly cuddles, I figured the two of them would be ok, and I'd shut down the computer and started the drive.

When I stopped for a break, I found out Quinton had done some research this morning, but I didn't think he'd been noticed. He hadn't activated his old social media accounts or contacted anyone, so he should still be under the radar. As far as the ring who had taken him knew, he'd died in that house fire. I wanted to keep it that way.

I crossed the border into Paradise Falls, rolling down my window and breathing in deeply. I resisted the urge to stick my head out the window. It smelled good here, like home. And Quinton was here. I suppressed a low growl of pleasure at the thought of seeing him in person.

I could wait. I didn't want to scare him. He was feisty and had claws, but he was still

a human. And he'd been kidnapped. That was probably damaging, and he refused to get therapy. Humans seemed to need to process events like that, and I wasn't sure Quinton had done that.

I could be patient.

I pulled onto the drive leading to our pack's group of homes. I thought about adding another house. We could build it without much problem. We all had construction experience in our backgrounds—Wilder had thought it an essential skill. Jude and Corbin were living in Dex's old house, and Dex was living with Toby. For now I could live in the empty house, but I thought Atlas would eventually want his own place. The rest of the pack thought the pool house, built on the third property, would work for Atlas, but I had other plans for it.

Quinton and Aiden lived downtown in an apartment by the shop, but I wanted Quinton closer. I knew he wouldn't go anywhere without Aiden, so it seemed like the perfect solution. Plus, those two were human, and they needed protection. It would be best to have them right in the middle of pack land.

I pulled up the driveway to Dex's house since I could hear them on the front porch there. I checked my phone for any alerts on Quinton, but GPS showed him still at work, exactly where he belonged. I had a couple hours before I needed to start watching him.

"Liam!" Toby shouted as I got out of the car, jumping out of his chair and waving excitedly. Jude, Corbin, and Dex were all sprawled out in chairs on the porch as well, although none of them jumped up to greet me.

"At least someone is happy to see me," I called out so Toby's human ears could hear me. A crow squawked above me, and I looked up to see the trees full of black-winged creatures. Corbin was settling in well, then.

“Ah, here comes the sun. It seems like years since you’ve been here,” Jude joked, and I rolled my eyes, hopping up onto the porch.

“It’s only been a couple weeks,” I answered, reaching down and pulling Jude into a hug. I did the same with Corbin, then Dex. I hesitated when I got to Toby, but he pulled me in for a hug, even though I heard Dex growl just a wee bit.

“The gang’s all here,” Toby said excitedly. “And they said you’re really good with computers, and I have this new idea for a book...”

Everyone groaned, but I just laughed, happy to answer a few of Toby’s questions. He started asking about hacking, then he ran inside to find a notebook to write stuff down.

“Atlas is here?” I asked, because I didn’t smell him, but Toby had said the gang was all here. He hadn’t met Wilder, but he had met Atlas.

“He comes and goes,” Corbin answered. “We thought he’d love the guest house on the last property, but he hasn’t been staying there. He’ll stay in the last house sometimes since Jude and I are staying at Dex’s place.”

“Are all the houses prepped?” I asked. They knew I meant prepped for taking care of mortal hellbound souls.

“Not Toby’s,” Dex rumbled. I nodded. That was ok. We could keep our killing to the two houses and leave his mate’s house out of it.

“We’ve been talking about maybe adding a cabin,” Jude said.

I nodded again, saying, “I think that’s a good idea, although I’d like to make it livable as well, not just a place for work. Wilder might come out.” The guys all perked up at

that, but I added, “Not right away. He said he was in the middle of something. But he seemed inclined to come at some point.”

I could feel a general calmness settle over everyone. Yes, with Wilder here, our pack would be complete. This was a good place to settle, and we’d all be together again. It had been too long.

Toby crashed out the front door at that moment, his head down as he almost tripped over the door frame. Dex was quick enough to pull him into a hug instead of letting him fall. It was like it didn’t even faze the little human. He hugged Dex back then looked at me.

“So, about being a hacker...” Toby said, opening his notebook.

I sat down in one of the porch chairs, checking the time. I had a couple hours to chat before Quinton got off work, and it looked like I’d be learning more about our new human packmate.

“What the fuck is he doing?” I mumbled, staring at the CCTV cameras. I’d filled Toby in and chatted with the pack before heading to the last house to set up my computers. I had chosen a spot and ordered a lot of equipment already, so the bare minimum set-up didn’t take long.

I’d watched as Aiden had gone off with Kushiel—they liked to take walks in the afternoons, only Aiden hadn’t come home. I’d hacked the cameras to see that Kushiel had taken him back to his and Cass’s place.

Quinton had gone home, only he’d used his phone to order an Uber. I stared at the camera outside of his apartment as I picked up my phone and called Dex.

“Find out where Quinton is going,” I said when he picked up the phone.

He hung up without a word. Asshole.

I watched as he walked outside, texting Cassius the info on his Uber driver. He was wearing tight black jeans and a tight black t-shirt, despite the chill in the air, and his hair was casually tousled. I could almost make out eyeliner on him despite the shitty nature of the CCTV feed. He looked... delicious.

Where the fuck was he going?

My phone pinged an alert as Quinton texted Aiden. I'm going to a club called Bliss in the city. I'll be home before 2. Call me if you need me. Bake me something good.

"Fuck!" I hissed out.

I grabbed my keys and wallet as I ran out of the house. I was wearing black pants and a dark button-down, so I should be fine for a club. No way was I letting Quinton go there alone.

My phone rang while I was in the car, Dex's number coming up. I picked up and grunted.

"Cass said Q's going into the city. He was glad I called. He was concerned, but he didn't feel like he could tell Q no, since he isn't a jailer or anything," Dex said. "He wondered if it would be creepy if I went to the club he's going to, cause he sent the name of it to Aiden."

"I'm going," I stated.

"Ok. That's good. He doesn't know you, so he won't know we're stalking him," Dex said.

“We’re not stalking him,” I replied, swerving around a car and looking for the Uber Quinton was riding in.

“You’re already in the car,” Dex said flatly.

“Yeah. I’m on my way there now.”

“On your way to the club I just told you about, because you already knew where Q was going,” Dex said. “Probably because you hacked his phone. Or his credit cards. Or put a tracker under his skin or something.”

I paused, asking, “Can you put trackers in humans?” I hadn’t thought of that, but if that were a possibility...

“Nah, I don’t think so. I thought of it with Toby, but I think they’d notice if they woke up with a scar,” Dex said, and I heard the crunch of potato chips as he took a bite.

“Hmm,” I murmured, swerving around another car. I was about to get on the highway, and according to the GPS on Quinton’s phone, he was moving just about a half a mile in front of me. I’d be able to catch up.

“Anyway, I’ll let you get on with your not-stalking, and I’ll tell Cass you’ll look out for him,” Dex said, then he hung up without a goodbye.

I just rolled my eyes, concentrating on catching up to the car Quinton was in. When it was within sight, I was finally able to unclench my hands from the steering wheel. He was fine. He was in the car in front of me.

Dammit, I really needed to get access to his phone’s microphone. I should’ve hacked that before now. It would be so much better to be able to hear what was happening in

the car.

Nevertheless, I remained relatively calm as we got closer to the city. The club wasn't too far off the highway, and it at least had a parking lot. I'd be able to watch Quinton get safely inside and follow him in. He wouldn't be out of my sight for long.

Fuck. This was such a bad idea.

I thought about taking him before anyone saw him. I could manage it easily enough, but he didn't know me yet. And he'd been kidnapped, so that would probably be kind of traumatic. I didn't think grabbing him and preventing him from going into a club would put me in a favorable light.

I passed the Uber when we were about a half mile out, pulled into the parking lot behind the club, and found a spot to squeeze my car into. It wasn't technically a spot, but the place was packed, and I didn't have time to wait or drive around looking for parking. I kept my eyes on the road, and Quinton's ride pulled in a minute later, letting him out.

He stood there, looking at the club as the car drove off.

"Turn around, Quinton. Go back home," I murmured from inside my car.

He looked entirely too lovely to go into that shithole. He did have on eyeliner, making his eyes appear wider and even more striking. His t-shirt was tight enough to show his nipples in the chilly air, and I swore even from here I could smell his soul—sweet but also with a hint of bitterness, like dark chocolate. I breathed in deeply, thinking again of grabbing him before he could walk in, my hellhound growling at the thought of him in danger.

Quinton scanned the parking lot, looking back in my direction suspiciously. His eyes

lingered in my vicinity for a moment, almost like he knew he was being watched. I was too far away for him to see me clearly, and before I could do anything stupid, like hop out of the car and approach him, he turned around and walked into Bliss.

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Chapter 5

Quinton

This was a bad idea. I knew it was a bad idea. I walked into Bliss anyway.

The door from the parking lot led down a long hallway, and I could feel the bass of the club music in my chest before I even made it to the second entry door, where the bouncers stood. Not much of a line, and I got in quickly enough.

I made my way to a back wall away from the dance floor to get my bearings. I hadn't thought about what I would say if I saw anyone I knew, but it was a Thursday night, and my old crew was most often here on weekends.

Bliss was still pretty packed. Apparently Thursday was the new Friday.

I looked around, and I saw a few familiar faces, but no one who really knew me. No one who I'd partied regularly with or hung out with outside the club. I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't want to see those people. I didn't want to pretend that I'd just been finding myself or some shit for a few weeks.

None of my "friends" would really care, anyway. I was bitter about it for a minute, but they weren't bad people. It was as much my fault as theirs. I had never let anyone in.

"Hey beautiful," I heard a voice say next to me. I looked over to see a tall, muscular guy leaning against the wall. I just shook my head, and he shrugged and wandered

off.

What the fuck was I doing here? It was like the bass in the music was taking over my heart, replacing it with nothing but sound and thumping. I tried to focus on something else, looking at the dance floor, but it was all grinding bodies, arms waving, naked chests, hands groping. I looked away, letting my eyes wander around, looking for... I don't know what.

My eyes stopped on a man who was staring at me. He was standing next to one of the cocktail type tables they had scattered around the place. He was tall, and he looked pretty muscular underneath his dress shirt. A dark dress shirt should've looked out of place here, but instead it just looked incredibly sexy on him. He had short dark hair, stubble, and a chiseled face with beautiful eyes. I couldn't tell exactly what color they were from here, but they were light against his sharp eyebrows.

A figure cut in front of us, and I realized I'd been staring and quickly looked away. I couldn't help taking a peek back, though, and the guy was still staring at me.

Usually I'd take it as interest, and I'd saunter over and flirt. But this guy looked polished and suave, and I couldn't help being paranoid. Marcus had frequented this club. He'd known a lot of people. I didn't trust my judgment of people anymore, and finding him attractive did not mean I could trust him.

Maybe showing up here alone wasn't the best way to look into Marcus and his cronies. It would probably be even more suspicious if I just left, though. I'd get a drink, put a smile on my face for the bartenders, and then I'd get the fuck out of here. I could admit I hadn't thought this through. I just felt the need to do something .

I walked over to the bar, my spine itching like I was still being watched. I sidled up and grabbed a seat just as someone vacated it. I recognized the bartender—his name was James, and he'd served me plenty of times. His eyes widened when he saw me,

then he walked over.

“Man! I haven’t seen you in ages! Where you been?” he asked, looking around.

“Oh, you know, took a break from the club scene. Tried dating life,” I lied.

He barked out a laugh, still staring a little oddly at me. I guess I didn’t seem like the dating type. I’d been in here hooking up with a new guy every week.

He put a napkin in front of me. “Dating life sucks,” he said, winking at me. “The usual?”

“Nah, just a soda,” I said.

He scoffed, and I turned away from his prying eyes to look around. The sexy guy was still staring at me, only he didn’t wink or nod or anything—he just stared. Goosebumps traveled across my body, and I had to make an effort to drag my eyes away as James put a coke in front of me.

“You know that guy over there in the dress shirt?” I asked him, gesturing slightly with my head toward the man as I took a drink.

James looked over and shook his head. “No, but he’s looking your way, and he’s sexy as sin. Looks like you have a new conquest already.” He winked at me again.

I shrugged. As much as that guy looked like sex on a stick, that wasn’t why I was here. James wandered off to take some orders while I sipped my soda, but he ended up in front of me again in a couple minutes.

“You look a little heartbroken. Who were you dating?” he asked. He grabbed a cloth, wiping down the bar and not looking at me. “Was it that guy Marcus? We all heard

about what happened.”

I flinched at Marcus’s name, and James looked at me, eyes boring into mine until I looked away. I took another drink, thinking about what to say. “I wasn’t...” I started, but a wave of vertigo washed over. I suddenly felt like the walls were closing in on me, like my heart was racing. What the fuck?

“Hey, man, it’s ok. Take a deep breath,” he said. Then he called out, “Scotty, take over.” Next thing I knew, he was next to me, grabbing my arm and helping me up. “Too much to drink?” he asked jokingly, and a few guys on barstools laughed.

I couldn’t process it. I hadn’t had anything to drink. I looked over toward where the man had been watching me, like seeing his eyes would bring me back to myself, but he wasn’t there. Had he ever been there?

Everything was fuzzy, the ground tilting around me. “I don’t... I’m not ok,” I said to James. “I think someone... I think...” but I couldn’t get it out. Something was wrong, but my legs weren’t working right, my brain was fuzzy, and all I could keep thinking was that I was not ok. Something was not ok. “There was a guy...” I started.

James led me toward the side wall and through a door. “You think some guy gave you some bad shit?” James asked as he led me down a hallway and into an office, supporting me.

“Didn’t take anything,” I mumbled, my mouth working hard to form the words.

He sat me down in a chair, kneeling in front of me. “You’re having a panic attack,” he told me. “You’ll be ok.”

But that wasn’t right. I wasn’t feeling panicked. I felt like I was floating an inch next to my body, everything slow and fuzzy. I shook my head dazedly.

“It started when I brought up Marcus. What happened to Marcus, Q?” he asked me.

“Marcus is dead,” I whispered, relief flowing through me. I wasn’t having a panic attack, because Marcus was dead. My brain was sluggish, but I looked up at James, whose eyes were staring into mine. I hadn’t taken anything. I’d only drunk a soda.

A soda he gave me.

“You...” I started, but I didn’t want to believe it. James was a friend. Sort of. A flirt. The bartender we all liked best. “You gave me a drink,” I mumbled. “You gave me... something.”

The door opened with a splintering sound at that moment, and the guy from out in the bar walked in, shutting the door behind him. I looked up at him, my head falling back against the chair. He was so tall . And so cute. I smiled at him, unable to resist. He looked me up and down before turning to James.

James. Yes. I was drugged. James had drugged me. “I shouldn’t have come here,” I murmured, barely aware I was talking out loud.

“No, it wasn’t the finest decision you’ve made lately,” the man said.

James stood up. “Can I help you?” he asked.

The man looked at James, and then his hand was flashing out, and James was on the floor, and my brain was flashing big PANIC signs, but my body wasn’t cooperating at all, because all I could manage was a slow roll of my head to look down at an unconscious James.

“This is bad,” I slurred. “Very bad.”

The man came over and lifted my head, prying one eyelid open for a moment and then resting a hand on my wrist. He leaned in and sniffed my breath.

“He gave me coke,” I said. “But not, like, coke the drug, like coke with the polar bears. I always liked those polar bears. Cute polar bears.”

I did like those polar bears. So warm and snuggly looking, and thinking about them was nice. Better than thinking about whatever the fuck was about to happen. I tried to get up, but my legs wobbled underneath me, and the man caught me under the arm. He pushed me into the chair, and things went... wonky.

It was like snapshots.

I drank from a water bottle he held up to my lips.

He helped me walk out a back door, and I thought James was thrown over his other shoulder.

I sat in a passenger seat, and he was putting something in the trunk. I tried to move my legs to get out of the car, only he was there, pushing them back in, reclining my seat, fastening my seatbelt, and closing my door.

“Shhh...” he whispered, getting into the driver’s seat. “You just rest now and let that shit get out of your system.”

“I don’t wanna...” I mumbled, thinking that I didn’t want to die. I didn’t want to be sold or raped or killed or whatever was about to happen.

“Rest, Quinton,” the voice commanded, and there was a firm hand on the nape of my neck, drawing my head down to rest against the seat, and then there was blackness.

Something was banging, and I thought maybe I'd overslept, and the banging was coming from the door. Only I turned my head, and the ache that shot through it made me realize the banging was inside , not outside. My heart was a drum beat in my brain.

I laid still and tried to figure out what the hell was going on, and then I remembered the bits and pieces from last night. My eyes shot open, and I groaned at the little light that was coming in through a mostly drawn curtain.

I was not in my bed. I was not in my apartment. There was a warm body at my back, and I had no idea who the fuck it was.

My breathing stopped for a moment, and then I took stock. I had on sweatpants and a t-shirt. My head felt like shit, but my body felt... ok. My throat wasn't sore, and my ass didn't hurt. My left leg felt vaguely bruised, but otherwise, I didn't feel like I normally would after a night of sex.

The room was... nice. I faced a gray-colored wall, minimally decorated but clean, and there was a nightstand with water and orange juice on it next to the bed. There was a window by the foot of the bed with dark blue curtains that only let a sliver of light in. The door had to be on the other side of the bed.

I slowly scooted toward the wall, sort of rolling off the bed and stifling the groan that wanted to escape at moving my aching head. I could do this. I'd had hangovers that were worse than this. I could sneak out of here, and get away from...

I looked up at the bed, and my heart stopped.

Aiden was laying there, sound asleep.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," I whimpered, scooting back against the wall, holding my head in

my hands and rocking. They'd gotten Aiden? I hadn't thought about my roommate. I'd thought he was safe. He should have been home, inside a nice locked apartment with a security alarm. No, that wasn't right either. Kushiel and Cassius were supposed to be hanging out with him. Fuck—had they gotten them too? I had to hope they could take care of themselves. As for Aiden—I wouldn't let anyone hurt him. I'd fucking kill them with my bare hands before they touched my roommate.

I felt a hand at the back of my head and a water bottle held up to my lips.

“Hey, it's ok. Have a drink. Dex said you'd probably have a headache,” Aiden murmured.

I lifted my head, squinting at him. “Dex?” I asked, confused as fuck. Why wasn't Aiden panicking? We'd been fucking kidnapped, for Christ's sake.

“Yeah. He called Cassius and said you were staying here, because you'd gotten pretty drunk. They told me I was welcome to come stay too, and I thought that would be good,” Aiden murmured, pushing the water bottle at me again.

I grabbed it and took a small swallow, resisting the initial urge to throw up as I drank a sip. I breathed deeply until the feeling passed then took another cautious swallow.

“Here?” I asked, looking at Aiden.

Aiden flashed an almost smile at me. “Yeah, I figured waking up in a strange place would freak you out. I'd freak out. I'd probably still have freaked out even knowing where I was if you weren't here.” Aiden shrugged, but he still hadn't told me where “here” was.

I cleared my throat, then asked, “Where are we, Aiden?”

“Oh! Sorry. We’re at Dex’s place.” He got up then, walking around the bed to the door, which I should have noticed earlier was open. Aiden hated a closed bedroom door. He looked out of the bedroom as he answered. “Well, I guess it’s technically Dex’s place? I don’t really know. It’s like a pool house, I guess? On his property? One of his properties? I didn’t ask too many questions, because I was more worried about you. But there’s a kitchen and living room out here and everything.”

“What happened to me?” I asked. I knew it was kind of a stupid question—if anyone should know that, it would be me.

“I guess you went out and got drunk,” Aiden said, and I could tell he was trying not to sound judgmental. “A friend of Dex’s knew you from the coffee shop or something because they called Dex, and he went and brought you back here.”

“I didn’t drink,” I muttered, letting the flashes from last night replay in my head.

Aiden turned around, looking at me and raising his eyebrows.

“Well, I did have soda. The bartender drugged me,” I admitted. “I thought he was my friend, and he drugged me.”

“Holy shit, Q, are you serious?”

I just nodded my head tiredly. Now that I knew I was safe, weariness was overtaking me. I felt like I could sleep for a day or two. My head was still pounding, and my stomach was rolling.

“We gotta tell someone. Gotta call the cops... or something,” Aiden said, looking unsurely at me.

Cops would not be a good idea, and Aiden probably knew it from his hesitation. Had

someone really called Dex? Or maybe he had followed me? I could see Cassius putting him up to that. If so, what had happened to James and the other guy from the bar? I remembered being in his car. Had Dex found me and... hurt him? I was strangely sad at the thought, which made no sense at all, because I think he'd been trying to kidnap me. But I didn't think he had been with James, because he had knocked the guy out.

I started to stand, only my legs wobbled beneath me. "Ugh. Sleep first," I muttered, managing to stagger to the bed. "Don't feel so great."

Aiden rushed over, helping me under the covers. He sat on the side of the bed, looking anxiously at me. I reached out and patted his arm, mumbling a reassurance that I was ok before sleep took me back under.

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Chapter 6

Liam

I watched on my computer screen as Aiden gently pet Quinton's head while he fell back asleep. Good. He needed to sleep off what the bartender had given him, and I didn't think the few hours he had would be enough. I wished Aiden had given him some orange juice, too, in order to get some nutrition into him, but I'd tell Toby to bring them over some muffins and drinks from Cassius's shop in a couple hours.

Aiden eventually wandered out into the kitchen and living room area, and I added that camera view to the screen, watching as he started rifling through the cabinets and pulling things out.

Maybe I wouldn't need to tell Toby to get them some food after all. It looked like Aiden was going to start baking. I nodded my head in approval. I had a feeling that baking would make Aiden more comfortable in the space.

I'd made sure the kitchen equipment was top notch, and I'd started stocking nonperishables about a week ago. I had already planned to get the two into the pool house, but I hadn't figured out exactly how I was going to make that happen. I certainly didn't expect it to happen so soon. It was a good thing I'd installed the cameras a few days ago. I turned off the kitchen view camera so that only Quinton's room was on the screen. I didn't want to invade Aiden's privacy, after all.

I hoped Aiden liked the apartment. I didn't think Quinton would move without him. I was sure we could come up with a reason why they both needed to stay there and not

in their apartment, especially in light of what had just happened to Quinton.

I looked over at James, the man responsible for the entire evening. One eye was mostly swollen shut, but the other looked at me pleadingly as he whimpered and groaned behind the gag in his mouth when he saw my stare.

“I suppose I should thank you, James. You certainly expedited my plans. That really doesn’t excuse you drugging Q, however. He trusted you.” I tutted at him as I walked over, and he whimpered, his body shaking. “Shh,” I whispered. “No screaming or I’ll cut out your tongue, ok?” I asked.

He nodded his head, and I removed the gag. It was time for us to chat. He’d been nicely softened up, and I felt like he’d be honest at this point.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know that Q—” he started whimpering, but I put my finger close to his lips, making him flinch back and instantly be quiet.

“I have questions, James, and I don’t want you talking unless you’re answering those. Understand?” I picked up the pliers for good measure, and his eyes followed my hand as he nodded frantically. “Good,” I said. “Why did you drug Q?”

He licked his lips, and I could see the hesitation that meant he was probably going to lie.

I sighed. “James, if you lie, I’ll know it, and I’ll rip out your teeth one by one until you tell me the truth. Let’s not waste that time, ok? You like your teeth, don’t you?”

He nodded, looking at my hand with the pliers. I snapped my fingers in front of his face, dragging his attention back to my eyes.

I heard footsteps on the stairs coming down into the basement, but I ignored them.

“Why did you drug Q?” I asked again.

“M-M-Marcus,” he mumbled.

“Marcus is dead,” I said.

James seemed to gain some confidence from that. “Q... Q was with him. When he died. He’s gotta be responsible somehow. I just wanted to find out what he knew.”

“Oh James, that’s not really the truth, is it?” I asked, tossing the pliers from hand to hand, his eyes following as his whimpers got louder.

Dex spoke up from behind me. “I think that deserves punishment. Lies by omissions should still count.”

James whimpered and babbled unintelligibly until I shushed him again, and I sighed as I turned to see Dex sitting on the basement steps.

“What do you want?” I asked, walking over toward him.

Dex shrugged. “Cassius wants to know what’s going on with Q and Aiden. He’s pissed. He did adopt them, and then you stole and rehomed them.”

I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose. “Dex, they aren’t stray pets.”

Dex looked offended. “I know that! They’re stray humans. Obviously. I still don’t think you can just steal and rehome them.”

I just shook my head. Dex was... well, he was Dex. Not the most human-savvy hellhound of the group.

“I didn’t steal them. I saved Q from this one,” I gestured with the pliers toward James, who whimpered again until I shot him a look. “Besides, they’ll be much safer here than an apartment downtown. We’re all here to protect them.”

Dex nodded his head at that, because it did make logical sense. “I don’t usually keep my strays,” he added thoughtfully.

Shit. I didn’t need Dex getting any ideas. “Listen, you aren’t keeping them. They’re just staying someplace safe. They’re not strays anymore anyways. They’re friends now. Friends can stay over. Strays need homes. Ok?” I clarified.

I really didn’t need Dexter to start bringing home every mortal he happened upon that was in trouble. We weren’t starting a compound here, for fuck’s sake.

Dex nodded, then asked, “You want help with this one? He stinks of rot.”

I turned back and looked at James. He looked so unassuming. Quinton had thought he was a friend. I’d watched him cheerily serve drinks, flirt and smile, all the while sensing a soul that was blacker than tar. I wondered how many people he had hurt to deserve such darkness.

I was betting he was involved with Marcus and the human trafficking ring. It made perfect sense. A bartender would know regulars. People would naturally talk to him. He’d know who would be vulnerable, who wouldn’t be missed.

“I got it,” I replied, even though I wasn’t looking forward to using the pliers. It was just so... messy. I did hate making a mess. But still... “He drugged Quinton, and I’ll be getting my answers, one way or another.”

The man started shaking again, and that suited me fine. I stalked back over to James, pliers at the ready as he began whimpering. Yes, I thought lying by omission

probably did deserve a little punishment.

I heard Dex laugh behind me as James started screaming.

I finished drying off, throwing on clean dress pants and a clean shirt. My computer was sitting on the bathroom counter, and Quinton was still sleeping. I wondered if that was healthy. He had gotten up briefly to go to the bathroom, and Aiden had given him some orange juice and a muffin, but he was back asleep.

Perhaps I should ask Cassius about it. Or maybe Toby. He was a human, after all. He should know about normal human stuff.

I buttoned up my shirt, grabbed the laptop off the counter, and made my way into the kitchen. We were in the house that Corbin and Jude had claimed since Dexter had moved in with Toby, but everyone was gathered in the kitchen. Jude was sitting at the kitchen island to eat, scrolling through his phone. The rest of the crew was at the table, with Corbin feeding a crow bits of his sandwich, and Toby sitting in Dexter's lap while they fed each other bites of food. It made me think of Toby as Dexter's version of a crow. Somehow I didn't think Toby would be offended if I said that. He was quirky like that.

I placed my laptop on the table and grabbed a plate and sandwich from the counter. When I sat down, I looked over at Toby, asking, "How long do humans usually sleep for?"

"Well, I suppose that depends. I think seven to nine hours is pretty normal, but some people sleep less. Some people take naps, too," Toby said, directing his attention to me.

"What about if they've been drugged?" I asked.

“Did you drug someone?” Toby asked curiously. “Is he down in the torture basement now?”

“No,” I answered, looking at the computer screen.

Toby leaned over curiously, looking at my computer screen and then gasping. I turned it away from him.

“You shouldn’t invade someone’s privacy like that, Toby,” I chastised.

“Are you freaking serious, Liam?” Toby pulled the computer towards him again and gasped. “OMG, did you drug Q?”

“Of course not,” I answered. “The person who drugged him is taken care of, but he’s been sleeping all night and most of the day, and I wondered if that was healthy.”

Toby blinked at that a few times, just staring at me. Then he turned to Dexter. “Dex, he’s got a camera or something on Q.”

Dex looked up at Toby, puzzled. “Yeah?”

Toby huffed impatiently, looking at Corbin, who was still feeding his crow, and then Jude, who was still scrolling on his phone. “No one is concerned that Liam has a camera in Q’s room? His bedroom ?” Toby demanded.

“Liam probably has cameras all over each of the three houses, the properties, and perhaps even half the town by now,” Corbin said, scratching his crow on the head.

Toby gasped again, and Dex looked up, the first stirrings of concern on his face. He glanced at me curiously and I shrugged. I wasn’t exactly sure what the problem was, either, but I guessed Toby was worried about his own privacy.

“I don’t have cameras in your home, Toby. There’s no need. Dex is always with you,” I said, trying to set his mind at ease.

“Well, I installed cameras outside your house,” Dex clarified.

“Yes, but that’s different!” Toby insisted. “You were protecting me!”

We all stared at Toby in confusion now. How was that different? I was just protecting Quinton and Aiden, although I did have to admit I gave Aiden far more privacy than I gave Quinton. That’s only because Quinton was mine, even if he didn’t know it yet.

Toby looked around at all of us and huffed before turning to me. “Liam, you cannot install cameras and watch people.”

“Why not?” I asked.

Toby shook his head, muttering, “I thought you were the most sensible one.”

“Hey! What about me?” Jude demanded. “I’m totally the most sensible one. I grew up with humans!”

“Yeah, but if you don’t have a problem with Liam spying on people, then apparently not.” Toby turned back toward me then. “Listen, you can’t watch Q in his bedroom . He probably does private stuff in there, and people shouldn’t have their privacy invaded. I get why you watch over them, and maybe I could see cameras in the living room or something, but cameras in the bedroom is a no-no. It’s like installing cameras in the bathroom.”

I stared at Toby, and he closed his eyes in exasperation. “Liam, please tell me you don’t have cameras installed in his bathroom , for Christ’s sake.”

I just shrugged. It wasn't like I watched him while he was dealing with his bodily functions. Anyway, the bathroom camera was new. If it was that big of a deal to humans, I supposed I could take it out. Although... what if he fell while in the shower? I thought I'd read somewhere that humans often had accidents and deaths in bathrooms.

Probably best to just leave the bathroom camera there.

"How did you even get cameras into his apartment? I can't believe Cass agreed to that," Toby said.

"They're not in their apartment. They're in the pool house," Dex told him.

Dex got the death stare then, and I was just glad to be out of the line of fire. I took a bite of my sandwich and looked back at the computer screen while Dex and Toby "discussed" the fact that Dex hadn't filled him in. Jude chimed in to defend Dex, since the pool house thing had only happened last night.

I mostly tuned them out and watched Quinton, who was starting to stir in bed. Good. I was beginning to get worried with all that sleeping.

"Well, at least when they go back to their apartment later they won't be spied on anymore," I heard Toby say.

I looked up, and everyone was looking away from Toby, including Dexter. I huffed. We were a pack of hellhounds, yet no one wanted to contradict one little human. Toby was pack now, but he was still just a human.

"Did you just growl at me?" Toby asked, looking at me. Rather than looking even the least bit frightened, he just looked curious.

“They aren’t going back to their apartment, even though I could still watch him there through his laptop camera. They’re staying here where they’re safe. Quinton was drugged last night, and people know he isn’t dead now,” I said.

I expected an argument, but Toby just stared at me curiously. I breathed a sigh of relief when he pulled out a notebook and pen, but Dexter shot me a disgruntled glare.

“Now he’ll be plotting all afternoon,” Dex grumbled, pulling Toby onto his lap. “I had plans for us.”

Toby smiled at Dex and then looked over at me. “You know you have to take the cameras out. You can’t watch someone without their consent.”

He stared at me until I just shrugged again, and then he was back to his notebook. I continued eating my sandwich, watching Quinton sit up in bed. He was disheveled and looked only half awake, but I could sense his fiery nature even through the screen. I hated seeing his claws sheathed last night because of the drug—I had no doubt he would have ripped James apart himself if given half the opportunity.

Luckily he had me to watch out for him.

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Chapter 7

Quinton

After I woke up for the second time (third time?), Aiden fed me again, and then he got a ride to the coffee shop from someone named Jude. He assured me that Jude had helped rescue him and that the guy was trustworthy, but I still told him to make sure to call me when he got to the shop. I didn't even want just a text. It was easy enough to fake a text, after all.

Cassius told me to take the day off, which was fine by me. I still felt groggy and tired despite sleeping so much. I guess getting drugged would do that to a person.

Some of my clothes were in the dresser in the bedroom, which Aiden had probably brought over last night. Hopefully, a hot shower would put me right again, and then I'd get my own ride back to the apartment. I could ask Cassius, or even Dexter or Toby if I needed to.

Someone knocked at the door, and when I pushed aside the curtain and looked through the glass, I wasn't terribly surprised to see that it was Toby. It was like thinking his name had invoked his presence. He was totally some kind of supernatural creature—I just didn't know what kind.

And he had a notebook and pen in his hand. Well, shit. That meant he was in writer mode, which was never good for anyone. Yay. I couldn't wait to be asked all sorts of questions about being drugged. I opened the door and let him in.

“Are you ok? How are you feeling? I heard you were...” Toby trailed off as he came in, and then he started poking around the living room.

The place had an open floor plan, so the living room led into the kitchen. It felt spacious for a small pool house, or whatever it was, and it was sparsely but expensively decorated. There was a comfy looking couch, a television stand type thing with a gas fireplace built in, and a large television mounted above it. There was a kitchen island that separated the living room from the kitchen area. Toby was currently opening the cabinets and drawers on the tv stand. I had no idea what he was doing.

“I’m fine. I’ll have to thank Dexter,” I said.

Toby stopped and looked at me. “Why?”

“Um, because he saved me from being assaulted or killed or sold into sex trafficking... again.” I chuckled mirthlessly at my last comment.

“No he didn’t,” Toby said, staring at me curiously. “You don’t remember who brought you here?” He opened his notebook and jotted something down.

I barely resisted rolling my eyes. I felt like I should just get the story out of the way so Toby didn’t ask me a million questions. “Aiden said Dexter brought me home. That’s what I was going off of. I was drugged by the bartender, and I remember him helping me into a back room, and then a tall guy with dark hair busted in, and I think he knocked James out, but I’m not sure. Everything is fuzzy and disjointed, because, you know, I was drugged. Then I think the dark haired guy helped me to a car, and I feel like he put James in the trunk, but that’s kind of crazy.”

Toby looked down guiltily at that. Ok, so maybe that wasn’t crazy. I had to remember who I was dealing with here. Maybe Toby was a vampire and he had minions who

brought home people for him to suck blood from.

I tried to muster up some horror at that, but Toby was nice, if a little weird, and he hadn't hurt me or Aiden. If he was a vampire, I bet he was so clumsy and squeamish that Dexter probably had to do most of the bloodletting.

I stifled a chuckle at that thought, because I could totally see Toby going to bite some person and missing their vein like three times and even the person getting exasperated. I pictured some guy saying, Hello, you're just poking holes in me now and barely getting any blood. What kind of vampire are you?

Ok, so maybe Toby wasn't a vampire. But he was still looking guilty, and he had said Dexter was a hellhound, whatever the hell that meant. Based on my rescue experience, I was guessing something with fire. If James was a pile of ashes right now, I didn't really feel bad about that. I probably should, because I had thought of him as an almost friend, but he'd drugged me. Maybe not caring if he was dead made me a bad person, but I didn't really care.

"Toby, is the guy who drugged me dead?" I asked.

"Ummm, well, I mean... I'm not technically sure what happened to him," Toby hedged.

Uh huh. Right. Not technically sure.

"Who brought me here?" I asked, trying a different line of questioning.

That was apparently easier, because Toby brightened up. "Oh, that was Liam. He's one of Dexter's... brothers. Sort of. He was at the club and saw what happened." He shrugged, and then he looked guilty and started poking around the cabinet again.

“Liam was the tall guy with dark hair?” I asked.

Toby mumbled, “Mmhmm,” but he didn’t turn around. He was now kneeling on the floor, ass up in the air as he looked underneath the cabinet.

I rubbed my head. Toby was a lot for me to deal with on a good day, and today was not my best day. “Did you lose something?” I finally asked. I was tired, and my head hurt, and I just wanted a hot shower, and instead I got Toby being... Toby.

“No?” he said, looking up at me. It was more of a question than an answer, though.

“What are you doing? I feel like I’m on a prank show or something,” I muttered.

Toby started laughing a little hysterically as he stood up and dusted himself off. “A prank show! Haha, yes! A prank show! Where people film you without your knowledge because they think they’re watching over you when really they’re just being creepy as fuck because people do not spy on others without their consent .”

Then he stared at me. Like I was supposed to know what the fuck he was talking about.

“Toby, I’m tired, and I had a rough night, and I am not spying on anyone, and I have no idea what you’re talking about, so maybe you could let me go take a hot shower and then give me a ride back to my apartment?”

Toby just muttered something under his breath about cameras and my apartment, then he walked over to the kitchen island where my laptop was set up and closed it (even though the screensaver was on). Then he stared at me, looking nervous.

“Just spit it out, whatever it is,” I sighed.

“If someone was watching you, like through your camera on your computer or little cameras scattered throughout the house, haha, then I’m sure that person would only be doing it because they were trying to watch out for you and make sure nothing bad happened to you, even if it was a total and complete breach of your privacy, but sometimes people who are... different ... don’t always know what’s normal and appropriate.” Toby looked at me beseechingly.

“Is Dexter spying on me?” I asked, tossing the idea around in my head. Did I mind if Dexter was spying on me? I mean, I probably should mind, but he’d rescued me, and obviously I wasn’t out of danger yet, because I’d almost gotten myself taken again last night. I suppressed a shudder at the thought of what would have happened if someone hadn’t been there watching.

Toby looked a little horrified, though. “Dexter would never spy on you!”

I just sighed, walking over and grabbing Toby by the arm. “Ok, I’m gonna shower, and then I’ll call you for a ride to my apartment, ok?” I asked as I led him to the door and opened it, helping him out the door. Once he was outside, I started to shut the door.

“Just make sure the shower curtain is closed when you get naked!” he cried out, and then the door was shut.

What. The. Fuck.

I watched out the curtain as Toby walked off, then I leaned against the door, thinking. Someone was watching me. It wasn’t Dexter, and it obviously wasn’t Toby, because he was horrified by it. This house was on the property that was owned by Dexter and his... whatever they were. I’d seen Jude when he picked up Aiden, and he looked nothing like Dexter, so if they were brothers, it wasn’t by blood.

Either way, I bet it was one of them who had cameras set up in here. Which was... not fine, exactly, but it was their house, so I guessed they could do what they wanted. Although did his last comment mean they had cameras in the bathroom? Because that was kinda high on the creepy factor.

But then there was Toby's comment about my computer. Did that mean that someone was watching me? That someone had been watching me? I walked over and opened my computer up and stared at it. I didn't know enough about computers to know what it would take to spy on someone through their camera. Did that mean they had access to everything on my computer? Because suddenly certain websites closing out was starting to make me wonder if my computer was actually glitchy, or if someone was responsible.

I opened up a doc and started typing. This was probably really stupid, but...

Are you watching me?

I waited, staring at the blinking cursor. I knew it was crazy, but I felt like there was a presence behind the screen, like someone was there, and they were debating on whether to respond or not. My heart almost stopped when letters started to appear on the page.

I have been informed that watching you would be an invasion of your privacy.

So formal, but still obviously watching at least my computer. And able to override it somehow, as well. You didn't answer the question , I typed.

You and Aiden should move into the pool house. You are more protected here.

Ok. Still didn't answer the question.

Suddenly the whole thing seemed kind of hilarious, and I couldn't help a chuckle. Aww, are you asking me to move in with you, my creepy stalker? I almost regretted the words after I typed them, but fuck it. If this guy was stalking me, he probably knew I had an attitude.

I have been informed that people do not ask people they have not officially met to move in with them.

I laughed, wondering who had "informed" him of that. Is Toby there with you? I asked. I was beginning to think it had to be one of Dexter's "brothers" and that none of them were human.

No , the cursor typed. A man of few words, obviously.

Why would you be watching me? I asked.

They know you're alive now. James didn't text anyone, but plenty of people saw you last night.

I sat back. It had to be the dark-haired guy from the bar. Liam, Toby had said. He'd come in, knocked James out, and taken us both back here. He made it sound like he'd started watching me after the whole bar thing, which was only last night, but Toby made it seem like this had been going on for longer.

I shut my computer and went into the bathroom. Liam—if it was Liam—was being cagey with his answers, and I had a feeling I'd get far more out of Toby. I'd shower and then call him up for a ride.

I took Toby's advice and undressed behind the shower curtain, although it did suck having to try and stay out of the reach of the spray while the water heated up. Thankfully, it didn't take very long. And damn, the water was hot . I stood under the

spray for quite awhile, and it didn't even get cooler after five minutes. Their hot water heater was obviously better than the apartment's.

I thought about what the guy had said. He wanted me to stay here because people knew I was alive now. I hadn't thought last night through, or even realized that Marcus's people might have assumed I was dead. Last night had not been the best decision on my part.

Correction: he wanted us to stay here. He'd clearly said that. I fought down a totally weird surge of jealousy. Did he watch Aiden, too?

I kind of didn't think so. Aiden didn't use a computer, and Liam had been at the club I was at, not following Aiden around.

Why did that give me a feeling of satisfaction? Did I actually like that I was being watched?

It did feel kind of... reassuring. Yeah, I knew that was totally fucked up, but I could have been taken again. This guy had stopped that. He'd been watching me, and sure, Toby was right that it was a total invasion of privacy, but this guy had protected me. He hadn't hurt me. He'd taken me someplace safe, brought Aiden to me, and let me sleep off the drugs.

It was sort of sweet.

I started shampooing my hair with a chuckle. Yep, I was officially fucked up beyond belief. Finding your stalker sweet was not normal. Then again, nothing had been normal for me for quite awhile. Plus, he probably wasn't human, which was oddly reassuring. He also obviously knew his way around computers, so maybe he was some kind of hacker.

As I rinsed my hair, I realized I also felt... safe. I hadn't felt that way since Marcus, despite the locks and security system and everything else. Nothing would happen to me or Aiden, and if something did, he was watching. He would take care of it.

I soaped up, wondering if maybe I could hack my way into this guy's good graces and get him to use his computer skills to find the people who worked with Marcus. I started whistling, thinking about watching all those scumbags go up in flames.

I rinsed off and shut off the water, grabbing a towel to dry off. I threw on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, and I was towel drying my hair as I walked out of the bathroom and into the living space.

There was a man sitting at the kitchen island. I froze, my heart racing, my hand still holding the towel to my head. I recognized him as the guy from last night, so I tried not to panic, but still... finding someone in your previously empty, locked, alarmed living space was a little disconcerting.

I supposed he had the keys and codes, and I didn't think he meant me any harm. After all, he'd had every opportunity last night, and he hadn't hurt me. I slowly lowered my hand holding the towel and stared at him. He looked relaxed and even smiled at me. He had two cups of coffee set out—one in front of him, and one in front of the seat next to him.

"I made you coffee," he said, pushing the cup toward me.

I stared at him.

Ok, so he was sexy as fuck, sitting there with his sleeves rolled up, cords of muscle on his forearms, but... this was not exactly normal.

He noticed my hesitation, and he frowned for a moment before he pulled the cup over

meant for me, took a large drink, and then put it back down, sliding it towards me with a smile on his face and a nod.

It took me a minute to realize he was reassuring me it wasn't drugged. Like, you know, that was a perfectly normal thing to do. Right up there with watching someone on camera and breaking into their place while they showered. Well, not technically my place... but still.

I walked over to the other side of the island, leaned against it, and he slid the cup toward me. I took a sip, closing my eyes. It was perfect. It was made exactly to my liking, and it even had some of the peppermint syrup I added when I was having an especially difficult day. Only we weren't even in my apartment, so where the hell had he gotten peppermint syrup?

"Is it not to your liking?" he asked, looking at me curiously. I must have been scowling at him.

"Nope. It's exactly to my liking," I accused. "The perfect amount of cream and sugar, and even some of my favorite peppermint syrup." I stared at him, raising my eyebrows.

Fuck, his eyes were amazing. They were the lightest blue with little flecks of amber in them. He looked like a puppy dog, staring at me, a little confused and unsure at my obvious attitude.

"Would you like something else? I know you just ate, but perhaps you're hungry again?" he asked.

Did he totally not realize how freaking weird it was that he knew exactly how I liked my coffee? That he knew I'd just eaten? He actually fidgeted in his seat, obviously uncomfortable at my death stare, and a tiny growl escaped him, only it didn't sound

threatening. It was kind of cute, actually.

I tilted my head at him. I was guessing he was a hellhound, then, just like Dexter.

Somehow that made things easier. Dexter was fucking clueless, and obviously this guy wasn't much better. He probably thought he was being normal. I almost rolled my eyes at him.

Fucking hellhounds. You'd think they'd be halfway decent at dealing with humans. Still, he had saved me. And, ok, it didn't hurt that he was probably sexier than Henry Cavill (and I hadn't known that was even possible).

"We haven't been properly introduced," I said, taking another sip of my perfect coffee.

Obviously I'd have to take the lead in modeling normal human behavior. If during the course of the conversation, I somehow figured out a way to get him to help me track down Marcus's pals, then all the better.

I was nothing if not determined. He could either help me, or he could watch me take them down myself.

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Chapter 8

Liam

Quinton had been whistling in the shower, so he couldn't have been too disturbed by the whole camera thing. Really, I thought Toby was probably blowing it all out of proportion. Humans were funny like that.

When he came out, though, I had to reassess things. He seemed a little... miffed. I even took a sip of his coffee to show him it wasn't drugged, but he did not appear happy with me for some reason.

I suddenly felt sympathy for Dexter. Humans were difficult to navigate. It was much easier when dealing with them through the computer. I couldn't help the tiny growl of frustration that escaped me when he just continued to look grumpy even after I offered him more food. My little hellcat had claws, and I was worried they were about to be unsheathed on me. At this rate, I'd end up going to Jude for human advice. I still wasn't sure I trusted Toby, even though he was a human. After all, he thought Quinton would be upset about the whole camera thing.

The danger seemed to pass, however, because Quinton seemed relaxed when he said, "We haven't been properly introduced."

Ahh. Maybe that was the problem? I might have been a bit lacking in manners. "I'm Liam," I said, "and you're Quinton." Were we supposed to shake hands? Quinton had his hands on his coffee cup, so I just gave a small incline of my head instead.

“You rescued me last night,” he stated.

“Yes. It wasn’t very wise to go to the club.” Quinton grimaced, but I continued. “Especially not alone. They thought you were dead, but now they know you aren’t. Then you went off with James, and neither of you returned. They’re bound to look for you now.”

“But I wasn’t alone, was I?” he asked.

“Well, no, but you didn’t know that,” I added.

“Yes, exactly,” he said, sipping his coffee and glaring at me. It didn’t feel as dangerous as earlier, but he was obviously not pleased.

Hmm, maybe Toby was right. Could he be a wee bit upset about the cameras? It wasn’t like I had watched him pleasure himself or anything. Ok, so yes, that was mainly because he hadn’t done that while his computer camera was facing him.

Would I have watched if he had? I would have liked to—I found the idea extremely arousing—but that was something that probably wasn’t polite. But he knew about the cameras now, so if he decided to pleasure himself, I wouldn’t have to feel guilty about watching. Toby was worried about consent, so maybe that meant I needed to tell Quinton where all the cameras were?

I shook that fantasy out of my head, though, and got back to business. First things first, and that was convincing him to move in here permanently.

“I don’t think it’s safe for either of you to go back to the apartment across from the coffee shop,” I stated. “This apartment is fully secured, including alarms on the doors and windows—which are a weak point in your apartment. Plus, it has the benefit of being within hearing distance of Dexter, Jude, Corbin, and I. We’d know if there

were any intruders or if something was amiss. One of us is always around.”

“And it has cameras everywhere inside, too,” he mumbled, sipping his coffee again.

“Well, yes, but we could negotiate their use,” I hedged. “I could point out where they are, and I suppose I could remove the one in the bathroom, as Toby suggested. Not that it aims at the commode,” I added to set his mind at ease.

“Hmmm,” Quinton murmured, and I wasn’t sure if we were back in danger mode. He really was like a cat—graceful, fascinating, and ready to attack.

“I look into all of Dexter’s strays,” I answered, hoping to calm him down, but that only made his eyes flash in anger.

“I see. So I’m simply a stray of Dexter’s. You watch Aiden just as closely, then,” he said.

I fidgeted again under his stare. “Well, not exactly,” I murmured.

“You don’t watch Aiden?” he clarified, and he seemed a little less angry at that.

I was so confused. I had no idea what he was looking for, so I figured honesty was the easiest course of action. “I look into everyone, and I’ve watched Aiden because he lives with you and to make sure he stays safe, but I can admit that I’ve, perhaps, watched you a little more closely than anyone else. Toby told me that people found that sort of thing an invasion of privacy, but I certainly didn’t mean it to be. And now that you know about the cameras, it isn’t without your consent, so that makes it ok.”

Quinton just stared at me.

“Plus, people are looking for you. You were taken once before, but you won’t be

taken again. If you are, I'll know, and I'll find you. Always. So really, it's much better to stay here, where there are reliable cameras, as opposed to going back to your apartment, which is not secure."

"And where you can only watch me through my computer camera," he added.

"Well, I could install cameras there, if you insist on going back, but I don't think it's safe even with cameras." I really did want him closer to the pack.

"Hmm," he murmured, sipping his coffee again.

He set his coffee down, then looked at me. I braced myself. He seemed on the verge of something. I had a moment of panic. What if Toby was right? What if he requested that I not watch him? I couldn't very well continue to do so if he specifically asked me not to. That would not be polite at all. I gripped my coffee cup so tightly that I heard a slight cracking sound.

He didn't seem to notice, and he stared into my eyes. He was captivating in person—even more so than on the computer. If I wasn't allowed to watch him, perhaps I could just move in. Surely that would be acceptable. Or he and Aiden could move into the main house. Yes, that would be even better.

Before I could suggest it, however, Quinton spoke. "We'll think about moving into this place, but only if I tell Aiden about the cameras and he's comfortable with them. Are there two bedrooms? I haven't even had time to explore."

"Yes, there are, and there are no cameras in the second bedroom," I added helpfully. With the windows and doors alarmed and a camera pointed at the bedroom door, I hadn't seen any need for one in what would be Aiden's room.

"But there are in my room?" he asked.

“Yes,” I replied, bracing myself for him to ask to have them removed.

“Toby was right. The camera has to come out of the bathroom. Aiden uses it too. I suppose they’re ok in common living areas, but not in the bathroom. People expect privacy there,” he explained.

I nodded my head. He hadn’t mentioned removing them from his bedroom, and I certainly wasn’t going to remind him.

He glared at me then, resting both hands on the kitchen island and leaning forward slightly. I was unsure what had caused the change in his attitude, but he looked ready to hiss at me.

“I’m going to look for the men who work with Marcus, and I’m going to bring them down,” he insisted. “I’m going to do this with or without your help. You’re right that going to the club was stupid of me. It hadn’t occurred to me that they thought I was dead. I guess it should’ve. You’re also right that I’m probably on their radar now, and I won’t risk Aiden. I’m an idiot for putting him in this position.”

I reached forward and put my hand over his. “You couldn’t know. You don’t think like them. You’re not evil like they are,” I reassured him. “You can’t be blamed for not knowing what they’d do.”

He looked down at my hand, and I thought of moving it, but he flipped his hand over and held onto mine. It felt... nice.

“But you know,” he said, looking up at me again. “You know what they’d do.”

“Well, yes, I suppose I do. I’ve dealt with their kind for a very long time.” I hoped he didn’t think I was like them. I most certainly was not. “I’m not evil, though. I only kill evil people,” I added.

“God, you’re just like Dexter,” he chuckled, shaking his head.

“Well, yes, we both deal with evil people, but I assure you I have much more common sense and far better manners than Dexter,” I promised.

He hmm’d in response, but he didn’t look convinced. That was alright. I could convince him, especially if he was staying here.

“I’m going to hunt those fuckers down,” he said again. “Will you help me?”

“Of course,” I answered. Had he doubted I would? “I’ve already begun looking into things. I’d be happy to take care of it for you. You don’t need to be involved.”

He pulled his hand away, and I missed the warmth of it in mine. He began pacing the kitchen, looking agitated. Had I said something wrong? He didn’t seem angry at me, though, so perhaps he was thinking of his kidnapping.

I wasn’t used to feeling unsure, but I didn’t want to press and scare Quinton off. I almost chuckled at myself then. Not that Quinton would scare off. More likely he would unsheathe his claws and eviscerate me before strutting away. It was something I thoroughly enjoyed about him.

I felt a little more relaxed at that. If I had fucked up, I was sure Quinton would tell me exactly how. He wasn’t quiet and unsure. He spoke his mind. He was obviously thinking something through, and he’d no doubt tell me exactly what he needed from me.

He finally stopped and looked at me across the island again. “No,” he said.

I quirked my head, unsure what he meant.

”No, I do not want you to do it without me. I know I don’t have experience, and I’m not... whatever you guys are. I know that. I know I’m just a weak human who got himself kidnapped and locked in a basement?—”

I cut him off. “You are not a weak human. You are a hellcat, all claws and explosiveness. You would have made life miserable for your captors.” I chuckled at the thought. “You would have at least maimed a few of them. You would have fought every step of the way, and I think you would’ve escaped. Don’t ever underestimate yourself, Quinton.”

He stared at me. I wasn’t sure if he was still upset, but eventually he smirked. “A hellcat, huh?”

“Yes,” I said. “And if you want to help, that is your right. I do have experience and knowledge, and I would simply ask that you follow my lead for those reasons. But I will not stop you from getting your vengeance. You deserve it, and I would never stand in your way for anything.”

He nodded, still staring at me.

I pressed on while he seemed agreeable. “You can speak to Aiden after his shift. We’d be happy to drive you both to and from work, but if you’d rather have use of a car, that’s fine as well. You both have valid driver’s licenses, so either of you could drive. I would prefer if you drove together or got a ride, however. After you speak to Aiden, we can easily move the things from your apartment here.”

He smiled at me then, even if it seemed a little exasperated. “People usually like to pack up their own shit.”

“Why? We can do it much more quickly and easily,” I stated.

He just rolled his eyes. “I’ll talk to Aiden. Is someone picking him up later?”

“Yes, Jude or Corbin, since he knows them best and they rescued him. We don’t want him to feel uncomfortable. I have no doubt that Toby will inevitably ingratiate himself as Aiden’s friend, and I’m sure he’ll insist on driving as well, but he does accept boundaries if they’re set.”

Quinton actually chuckled at that. “At least someone does,” he mumbled. I was unsure what he meant, but he continued on. “Ok. I’ll talk to Aiden and let you know. Or you’ll just listen in and find out when you go back to your batcave and watch me from your monitors.”

I didn’t deny it, and he didn’t seem upset about it. “I’ll start researching and seeing who’s looking for James. I haven’t had time to do a deep dive into his online presence yet, but I’m hopeful that it reveals some information. I’ll keep you informed,” I add.

“Good. At some point I want to see you work your hacker magic, but right now I’m gonna eat and relax. Being drugged leaves a shitty hangover,” Quinton said.

He did look tired again. It was probably best if I left him to relax, even though I was loath to leave his presence. Yes, I could watch him through the monitors, but really, it didn’t compare to seeing him in person. I sighed and got up.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked.

He just shook his head as he walked around the island toward the front door, and I followed him. I noticed his feet were bare, and I realized these floors were mostly hardwood. Humans got cold feet. I knew Quinton didn’t love wearing socks, since he never seemed to wear them at home. I’d have to see if he liked slippers, or else I’d have to get some carpeting for beside his bed and the common areas.

He opened the front door, and I came up to stand next to him. He was shorter than me, and I had the desire to dip my head down and kiss his pretty lips. I wondered if he would kiss me back or if he would claw out my eyes.

He looked too tired for either a make out session or an explosion of temper, though, so I leaned down and pressed a light kiss to his forehead before I quickly walked out the door. I couldn't help myself, but I also didn't want to tempt fate.

"Creepy stalker," I heard him mumble behind me.

"Little hellcat," I called back over my shoulder. I heard him chuckle, and then the door shut, and I heard the lock engage.

Good. I'd go back and watch to make sure he relaxed, and I'd start digging into James. I usually worked alone, but the idea of Quinton sitting next to me as I researched, adding in his snarky commentary, was oddly attractive.

I didn't want Quinton in danger, but he would charge headfirst into whatever he wanted either way. All I could do was hang on for the ride and watch over him. Whatever he wanted, I would provide. If he needed to wreak havoc and stand in the line of fire of the human traffickers, then I'd be the shield that protected him from them.

I had a feeling that he would even be interested in interrogating them. I was a little sad that I'd already dispatched James. It would have been fun to see Quinton have a go at him.

Ah, well, next time. With that cheery thought, I walked into the main house. I opened my laptop to see Quinton resting on the couch with a second cup of coffee, and I brought the laptop into my office. I set it down next to my main computers so I could glance over to check on him while I worked.

The sooner I tracked down another person responsible, the sooner I'd get to see my little hellcat unsheathe his claws.

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Chapter 9

Quinton

Hellhounds were fucking weird. I mean, I knew that Dexter and Toby were batshit, even though I still wasn't sure what Toby was. The way that Liam had mentioned that he, Corbin, Jude, and Dexter would watch over us made me think they were all hellhounds. I hadn't really met Jude or Corbin, but if Liam and Dexter were any indication, hellhounds were not the best at people skills.

It made me wonder if all the awkward people I'd met over the years were actually supernatural beings. It made so much sense, when you thought about it. I mean, if I could burn shit down with my mind and see evil people and do who knew what else, I'd probably be pretty unique. Plus, I guessed they might not have had conventional upbringings.

After Liam left, I relaxed on the couch, watching random shit on tv and waiting for Aiden to get home. I must have dozed off, because next thing I knew, the door opened and the daylight coming in the windows had faded quite a bit.

"It's just me," Aiden called out, even though he was probably five feet away. I sat up on the couch as he shut and locked the door. "Jude told me you were still here and brought me over. Are you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm ok. A little groggy, but the headache is better," I answered.

Aiden came and sat next to me. I put my arm around him, and he snuggled into me. I

figured it was best to just spit it out, so I got right to the point. “I did something stupid yesterday, and I’ll explain everything, but the guys want us to move in here.”

Rather than being shocked, Aiden just nodded his head. When I looked at him, he said, “Yeah, Jude was sort of hinting at how nice it would be for us to live here and how they had all this space and everything. He also talked about how it’s got alarms and is safer than the apartment. I kind of figured we were gonna be relocated.”

“Listen, we aren’t being relocated. We can do whatever the fuck we want to, ok? No one has a say in what happens to us but us , alright?” I insisted.

I didn’t want Aiden to think someone was controlling him. He’d had enough of that shit with his captor. He had choices, and I’d make sure he knew it.

“It’s ok, Q. I’m not upset. Jude and Corbin... they’re safe. They rescued me. I know they wouldn’t force me to do something I didn’t want to.”

We just sat for a minute, Aiden warm against my side. I was usually prickly and never hugged people, but with Aiden, I didn’t mind him in my personal space. He was like a kid brother, although he might have been older than me. Still, I felt protective of him, and I hated the fact that I’d unwittingly put him in danger. I sighed.

“What is it?” he asked. “Do you not want to stay here? I’ll do whatever you want, Q.”

“It isn’t that. It’s just... complicated. I made a mistake by going out last night, and now people may be looking for me. I hate that I may have compromised your safety.”

“You were drugged. Someone tried to kidnap you. Thank goodness Dexter was there to save you. If staying here is safer, then we should stay. I don’t want anything happening to you. These people wouldn’t be looking for me. They’d be looking for you. They already tried to hurt you once,” Aiden said, and I could hear the concern in

his voice.

“It wasn’t Dexter who saved me, which brings me to the complicated part,” I said.

I wasn’t sure how Aiden was going to take being watched. He’d been held captive for a year, and I had no idea if he’d had cameras on him during that time. I didn’t want to inadvertently trigger some kind of trauma. Fuck.

I gave him a squeeze with the arm that was around him. “So, it’s actually a guy named Liam who rescued me. He’s... friends, I guess, with Dexter, Jude, and Corbin.” I paused there, unsure how to go on. Did Aiden know that they weren’t quite human? He’d never talked about his rescue, and I’d never really talked about mine.

“Is he... the same as them?” Aiden asked.

“I don’t know how your rescue went, but Dexter set the mansion that I was held captive in on fire. Only he didn’t have matches,” I said, watching for a reaction.

Aiden nodded. “They’re all a bit... different.”

“Yeah, that’s an understatement,” I snorted. “They’re not human, I think. I think they’re dangerous, but not to us. I think they’re only dangerous to certain types of people.”

Aiden seemed to mull that over, and he nodded again. “I’m ok with Jude and Corbin, and once I get to know Dexter and Liam, I think I’ll be ok with them too. I wouldn’t want to ride alone with them to the coffee shop for a while, though. But if you’re in the car, I’d be ok. Is that what you’re worried about? How we’ll get to and from work? Jude already said he’d always be available to drive us.”

“How would you feel about living in close proximity to them, and to Toby? Toby will

inevitably try to be your best friend, but you just let me know if he comes on too strong. He's a little awkward and clumsy, but he means well," I said.

"Did you know the guy who kept me was going after Toby?" Aiden asked quietly. I gave him a reassuring squeeze, because I knew this was hard for him to talk about. "It had been a long time by then, and I knew what it meant. I knew when he captured Toby, he'd kill me. Sometimes that made me mad, but mostly, I kind of felt relieved. And then I felt really guilty, because I didn't want anyone else to go through what I went through. I tried to convince him that I would be a better boyfriend and that we didn't need to 'break up,' as he called it, but he said he and Toby were soulmates." Aiden sort of shrugged.

"Whatever you felt was valid, Aiden. You were in a totally fucked up situation, and anything, any emotion, is ok. You were traumatized, and your brain coped however it could. Don't ever feel guilty about that," I insisted.

Aiden pulled away and sat cross-legged on the couch facing me, and I turned to face him too. The corners of his mouth were tilted into an almost smile.

"You sound like my therapist," he joked.

"Well, obviously she knows what she's talking about, then," I said.

"She could help you, too, Q."

I gave a shrug. He was probably right, but I figured working with Liam and hunting down the fuckers who were responsible would help me just as much. I didn't want to talk things through. I didn't have a year of trauma to work around. Yeah, it had been scary and fucked up, but I hadn't been in that basement for more than a day or two.

Aiden seemed to know not to press, because he asked, "So, what's the complicated

part? It seems like you trust them, and I don't mind living here and getting rides if it'll keep us both safer. It seems like a really nice place. Jude even said there's trails in the woods that are totally safe and protected. I used to hike and do yoga and stuff, and my therapist keeps trying to talk me into doing that stuff again."

"Yoga?" I asked, looking at him. He was pretty flexible, and I guess I could see Aiden doing yoga. "You should do yoga again. It's supposed to be, like, good for spiritual shit or something."

He laughed. "Yeah, not sure I'm up for a class full of people I don't know."

"I'd go with you. We could find a class that doesn't have too many people." I would hate it, but I would do it for Aiden.

"Really?" he asked.

I nodded. I'd definitely look into it. I couldn't stall any longer, though.

"So, the thing about Liam... he's kind of a computer hacker or something. He hacked my laptop and was keeping an eye on me through my camera," I said.

Aiden tilted his head and then asked me, "And how do you feel about that?"

"Now you sound just like a therapist," I laughed. "I guess it's weird, but he saved me last night because he was keeping tabs on me, and that's kind of reassuring."

Aiden nodded.

I blew a breath out. "So, this place... it has cameras."

Aiden nodded again. "Yeah, I noticed them outside on the trees and stuff. Honestly, it

was reassuring, like you said.”

“Yeah, but they’re also inside. Like, in the living room. And kitchen. And my room. But they’re not in the bedroom that would be yours, and Liam has promised to take out the one in the bathroom.”

Aiden looked at me, cocking his head. “There’s a camera in the bathroom?”

“Yeah, but Liam assured me it didn’t point at the toilet,” I added. I wasn’t sure that made it much better, but I suddenly really wanted Aiden to be ok with this.

“So...” Aiden paused, obviously thinking. “All the common living areas have cameras, along with your bedroom. But the bathroom and my room have no cameras. Who watches them?”

“Just Liam, I think.” I wasn’t totally sure, and I’d have to double check that with him.

Aiden cocked his head at me. “And how do you feel about that ?” he asked.

I laughed, glad he wasn’t freaking out, at least. He seemed totally calm and not triggered in any way. “I’m more worried about how you feel about it.”

“I mean... I guess it would sort of be like having him as a roommate. He’d be in the common areas but not in my personal spaces. And I want you safe, Q. I can’t have something happen to you. I’ve lost enough already. Losing you... I just want you safe,” he reiterated.

I blew out a breath. “Ok, then. And you know we can always change our minds. Nothing is set in stone. If we hate it, we can totally move back into the apartment. You always have choices, Aiden, and I want you to know that.”

Aiden smiled at me, and he turned toward the tv. “Great British Baking Show?” he asked.

It was totally his comfort watch, and I was down with that. It put me to sleep half the time, and I was still feeling groggy. I was sure we’d get ourselves together to cook some dinner, since I knew the fridge was stocked, and at some point we’d need to go over and get our stuff from the apartment, but there wasn’t any rush, and I honestly still felt like shit.

Aiden and I both got comfy and watched some British people make biscuits, which are weirdly not actually biscuits, they’re cookies—who knew? Tomorrow would be soon enough to deal with the logistics of moving and everything else.

It was probably around two in the morning when Aiden came into my room to sleep. I was pretty sure I hadn’t been having a nightmare, so it must have been him. He didn’t come in every night, but I expected with the new place it might be more frequent for a few days. He fell back asleep pretty quickly, but I was wide awake. Too much sleeping during the day, probably.

Still, I didn’t mind that he woke me. It was kind of nice to know someone was next to me in bed, and that way I knew Aiden was here and safe.

Yeah, so, we were both a little fucked up in worrying about each other. We might have been slightly codependent (I almost snorted, because it was probably more than slightly), but we’d been stuck together after we’d both undergone trauma. I thought it was pretty natural to become a little attached. Sometimes I woke up in the night and I had to go check on him.

I knew the guy who kidnapped him was dead, but in the middle of the night, you could have all sorts of crazy thoughts. I worried that somehow maybe he wasn’t dead, and at three in the morning that seemed possible. Scary shit was always possible in

the dead hours of the night. Like, what if he hadn't been human, either, and couldn't die? Crazy thoughts, but no crazier than my life actually was.

I also knew that the people who had taken me would just love to get their hands on someone like Aiden. He would've been perfect for them—no one had missed him for a year, and he was off the radar even now. He was cute and had this air of innocence about him, even after what he'd gone through.

And I'd brought trouble right to our door by going back to the club.

I resisted the urge to get up and research—I didn't want to wake Aiden—but I started cataloguing all the bouncers and bartenders at the club, thinking about who was most friendly with James. It was sort of like counting sheep, apparently, because before I knew it, daylight was streaming in through a crack in the curtains, and Aiden was missing from bed.

And I smelled coffee. Thank god.

I got out of bed and felt a soft, plush carpet under my feet. Huh. That was new. How had Aiden gotten it in here when I was sleeping? And where did he get it from? I grabbed my phone from the nightstand to check the time, but it was only nine in the morning. I didn't think he would've had time to go shopping this morning already.

Yes, he got up early as hell most days for the coffee shop, but from the noises in the kitchen, it sounded like he was still here.

I groggily made my way out into the living space, phone in hand, and then I stopped short. Aiden was sitting on a stool at the kitchen island eating some breakfast and drinking coffee, which was fine and normal.

What wasn't normal were all the boxes in the living room. I walked over, flipped one

open, and saw... my clothes?

I turned to look at Aiden, who just shrugged at me.

“Did you—” I started, but he was already shaking his head.

“Nope. I woke up and it was all here. And there’s throw rugs on the hardwood floor, too, which is actually nice, but I gotta admit it’s a little creepy that there was one in your room and neither of us woke up,” he said.

He didn’t look panicked, but I was still bewildered. “They just... In the night...” I couldn’t seem to get my brain to function, and I stumbled my way over to the coffee maker.

Perhaps caffeine would make it all make sense.

Aiden just watched me. I had no idea what he was thinking.

“You ok?” I asked.

He shrugged, which I took to mean he mostly was.

“Cassius called, too,” he added. “He was pissed.” Aiden smiled at that, so I took it to mean he wasn’t pissed at us. No one wanted Cass mad at them. Still, he wasn’t at work...

“He didn’t, like, fire us or anything, did he?” I asked. I had some money saved, and we would get by without the jobs, but it was reassuring and gave us a level of stability I think we both needed in life.

“Nah. He did tell us to take the day off, though, in order to get settled. He was super

mad that we'd been 'rehomed,' which I guess is what Dexter told him." He chuckled. "I would have loved to have heard that conversation. Cass had just gotten off the phone with him and was ranting about how Dexter couldn't just give him people to adopt and then steal them back, and how we were his and Kushiel's now, and we didn't have to go anywhere we didn't want to. It was like they were fighting over who got to keep us. Cass did make a point of saying all decisions were totally ours, and he didn't mean it to sound like anyone owned us or anything, but I let him know it was actually kinda sweet that people cared about us and our well-being."

I had poured myself a cup of coffee and was leaning against the counter, listening and sipping the caffeinated goodness. "I guess it is kind of sweet. We have people who care about us. I didn't really have that before. I mean, I had friends, I guess, but... I don't know. They were party friends. I was kind of lost after my parents died, and I didn't make a lot of connections." I just shrugged, and Aiden nodded.

He knew my parents had died a couple years ago and that it had thrown me for a loop. We'd talked briefly about our families, although all I knew about his was that they were no contact because they were toxic assholes, apparently.

I'd always been a snarky asshole, but I was close to my folks as an only child, and I hadn't made a lot of real connections after they died. I'd puttered around with college classes and worked and gone out partying, but I hadn't let anyone in.

"Yeah, we have people now, Q. We have each other, and we have people who will miss us if we're gone. People who care about us," Aiden said.

We both let that sink in, drinking our coffee. It was really an overwhelming thought, and I almost got a little teary about it. Nope, not doing heavy feelings this early in the morning. As I always told Aiden, mornings were for caffeine and sass (and sex, if you had a cute guy in your bed).

At least I had two out of the three, which, yeah, made me think of Liam. He was a very sexy guy. But that also made me think of the boxes in our living room. I walked back over, poking around some more. Everything looked meticulously labeled—kitchen items, Aiden’s room, Quinton’s room, bathroom...

“So, apparently the supernatural crew packed up our apartment for us and brought it over. I’m surprised they didn’t unpack it, too, while we were sleeping. They’re like fucking house elves or something,” I grouched to Aiden.

My phone dinged at that moment. Aiden and I both looked at it suspiciously. I motioned him to go ahead and read it. He had my passcode to get into it.

“It’s from an unknown number. It says, ‘It was almost time for Aiden to get up, and we didn’t want to alarm him with our presence in your home. We’ll unpack later.’” Aiden looked up at me. “Umm, I’m not sure whether that’s sweet or creepy.”

“Welcome to the club. Everything they do seems to toe the line between the two,” I answered.

The phone dinged again. I walked over to read it with Aiden.

It’s sweet.

I snorted. Another text came through.

I also removed the camera from the bathroom, as requested, although I am concerned about accidents in the shower. Humans die from those.

Aiden snorted that time. “Does he not realize it’s odd to call us ‘humans,’ like he isn’t one? And I guess the cameras in here have sound as well, huh.”

I blushed. “Sorry.” I directed my next words out into the room. “I’m sure we could have Liam turn the sound off if we wanted him to. For privacy. Because surely he would respect our privacy and do as we asked.”

Aiden and I then both looked as three little dots appeared on my phone, then disappeared, then appeared, then disappeared. We looked at each other, and I swear we were both trying not to laugh. Finally a text came through.

Yes.

We both giggled a little at that. All that typing for one word.

“How many times do you think he deleted and rewrote the answer?” Aiden whispered.

I chuckled again, because I was sure Liam didn’t want to turn off the sound, but I didn’t think he wanted to make us uncomfortable either. A message dinged again.

If it reassures you, I very rarely have the sound on.

Aiden shrugged, which I took to mean he didn’t care too strongly about it.

“The rugs weren’t ours, though,” I said to the living room, and the text chime went off a second later.

You walk around barefoot. Hardwood floors are cold.

“OMG, Q, that’s actually sort of sweet. Still creepy, but definitely sweet,” Aiden laughed. He then turned toward the living room, like there was actually someone in there. “Hi. I’m Aiden, which you know, but I don’t know you, so you’re going to have to come over and introduce yourself and stuff, because otherwise it is kind of

creepy. Maybe later after breakfast, ok? And for now, you can stop listening in. Ok?”

We both watched as the phone lit up with an immediate response.

Ok.

“A man of few words,” Aiden chuckled.

I looked at him. “Are you seriously ok with this? I know this is... weird, at best.”

“Q, it’s freaking insane. But you know what, that matches with the last year of my life. At least this type of insanity makes me feel safe and, in a weird way, cared for. That’s probably my trauma talking, and it’s probably fucked up, but I’m going with what makes me feel good. I don’t think my therapist had quite this in mind when she told me to do whatever I needed to in order to find peace and happiness, but...” He just shrugged.

I gave him a pat on the shoulder, and he got up to start cooking breakfast. He hated someone in his kitchen space, so I sat down at the island, watching him cook and looking over the one-sided text conversation.

No doubt about it, hellhounds were fucking weird. And apparently we were living with them now.

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Chapter 10

Liam

I watched Aiden and Quinton eat breakfast through the cameras, but I had turned the sound off at Aiden's request. I was nothing if not respectful of privacy.

"They're pack now?" Corbin asked as he walked into my office and saw the guys on my screen. He sat next to me at the second chair I'd brought in for Quinton to use when he came over. A crow perched on Corbin's shoulder, but at my look, it flew off and... I don't really know where it went. Probably Corbin's room, where he left a window open for them. Hopefully it hadn't gone to shit on my stuff. I hadn't offended the crows that I knew of, and I really wanted to keep it that way.

They were vengeful fuckers, which is why I respected them.

"Quinton and Aiden?" I asked, although that was obviously who he was talking about.

"Yes. Quinton is yours, I think, but Aiden isn't," he stated. "But they both feel like pack. I can sense the bonds there, ready to form."

Corbin was the very unique mixture of being part witch along with being a hellhound. He often knew strange shit, and we knew to trust him on it. He was connected to things that the rest of us weren't.

"If they feel like pack, then we'll treat them like pack. It's good they've agreed to

move in here with us,” I answered. I thought for a moment, then I added, “My hellhound thinks Quinton is mine.”

Corbin just nodded his head, as if that was perfectly normal. After a pause he said, “Atlas is around. He dealt with some difficult humans, and he’ll be in hellhound form for a while. He’ll join us if necessary.”

I looked at him, wondering if Atlas needed assistance from us. I doubt he had spoken to Corbin, but sometimes he would speak to the crows, and they would tell Corbin. If he was staying in hellhound form, he was feeling a bit feral. I raised my eyebrows in question.

“He’ll be ok, I think. Just wanted to let you know,” Corbin said. “Also, we’ll need to build another structure—a cabin I think. Jude, Dexter, and I will get started on it. Back behind one of the houses, but a decent distance away.”

“Now?” I asked. It was a good idea, but there were some logistical issues associated with it. Technically, each house sat on a few acres, and there was plenty of space behind them and next to them to build more. The pool house was evidence of that. Still, getting more property would be a good idea, but most of it was tied up in an open space preserve.

“Jude is good with people. He can find out about acquiring more land, and we can pick a spot and build,” he said, almost like he knew exactly what I was thinking. He probably did.

“Ok. Let me know if I need to fix some things. I might be able to change the acreage and property lines in the human computer systems, but they tend to have a lot of paper documents for that sort of stuff as well, and if we can acquire it the old-fashioned way that would be best,” I said.

With that, Corbin got up and left.

I looked back at my computer screens, but my eyes were continuously drawn away from my research and towards Aiden and Quinton. They had finished eating breakfast. Perhaps now was a good time to go and introduce myself to Aiden. I couldn't seem to concentrate on work, anyway. Plus, I had already spent some time following the money trail and was delving into individuals now, and I thought Quinton might like to be a part of that.

With that, I got up and headed into the bathroom to check myself. I wanted to make a good impression, after all. Satisfied that every hair was in place and my outfit was unwrinkled from sitting at the computer, I headed over to the pool house.

I was about to walk in when I hesitated. Perhaps I should knock? Quinton had seemed surprised to find me in his living room when he came out of the shower, and I didn't want to upset Aiden. He was the timid mouse to Quinton's little hellcat, and I didn't want to get off to a bad start with him.

This whole thing with humans and privacy was all a little ridiculous. We'd never had to worry about such things before.

Of course, we'd never actually kept any humans before, either. We were used to just appearing in a human's house whenever we wanted. Although those were all humans we were planning to kill, so maybe the rules were a little different when it came to ones you were going to keep.

I should've asked Jude. Or even Toby, although he was always saying he was "quirky," so I wasn't sure if he was an accurate indicator for human actions either.

I was about to pull out my phone to text Jude when the door opened. Quinton was standing in front of it, smirking.

“You know we can see you lurking out here behind the curtain. You gonna knock or just stand there being a creepy stalker?” he snarked.

I heard Aiden gasp a bit from behind him. The open floor plan did allow them to see the door from the living room and kitchen area. I wondered if we ought to have the door replaced with something that didn’t have windows. It was good for them to be able to see out, but windows were breakable.

“Well?” he snapped, raising an eyebrow. Oh, my little hellcat’s claws were out. I smiled at him, which only seemed to confuse him.

“I wasn’t sure if I should knock or just enter,” I admitted. “Also, I was wondering if you should have a solid front door with no windows.”

He looked at me, then looked back at Aiden, who I could see sitting on a stool in the kitchen, looking surprised at Quinton’s snarky attitude. I wasn’t sure why that would be the case, though, since he lived and worked with Quinton, so surely he was used to it by now.

Aiden sighed at him, then came over and pushed him gently out of the way. “Come on in. Don’t mind crankypants, here. It’s still technically morning, and apparently mornings are only for caffeine and sass.”

“And don’t forget sex,” Quinton muttered under his breath.

I raised my eyebrows at him, giving him an up and down look. Did he want morning sex? He hadn’t been having any, but maybe he wanted it now? I would be happy to provide for him if that was what he needed. He blushed at my perusal, which was rather adorable.

Aiden was amused. “Did you break him? I don’t think I’ve ever seen Quinton blush,

and you should have heard how that one guy propositioned him at the coffee shop. He didn't even bat an eyelash before he told the guy what he could do instead. I think everyone else in the vicinity blushed, but not Quinton."

Quinton was frozen in place, but Aiden seemed ok. He motioned me in and went to sit down on the couch, and I followed him into the living room. I heard Quinton start to move after me and smiled again. Aiden saw it, and looked between us assessingly.

He patted the seat next to him, saying, "Q?"

Quinton sat next to him, and I sat in the armchair catty corner to the couch. Aiden watched me as he snuggled up next to Quinton, who automatically put an arm around him. He laid his head on Quinton's shoulder, still staring at me. I wasn't sure why.

"So, you'll be our new sort-of roommate," Aiden said.

"Yes, if that's how you'd like to think of it. Everyone here will protect you both, though," I added.

Aiden gave Quinton a kiss on the cheek, which made Quinton look vaguely confused. He really was adorable. His hair was still a bit mussed, and although he was beautiful when he put on eyeliner, he looked softer with a fresh face. I knew he had claws, though, and I thought again of his comment about sex. I'd love to have his claws on my back or my thighs. He was incredibly sexy sitting there in pajama pants and a t-shirt, slightly mussed. It made me want to muss him up even more, which was kind of funny, considering I tended to hate things messy.

Aiden snorted to himself, and I looked back at him. He gently smacked Quinton in the arm. "I see how it is," he murmured.

"What?" Quinton asked.

Aiden snorted again. “I’m going outside to take a walk. It isn’t that cold out today, and Jude said the property is protected. How far does that reach?” he asked me.

“Hmm,” I said thoughtfully. I did have cameras and trackers set up on much of the protected land and on all of our land, plus Atlas was apparently out there. “I would say the woods are safe. I wouldn’t go beyond them, though, although I doubt you’d walk that far anyway.”

Aiden smiled. “No. There’s, like, acres and acres back there. I’m just gonna explore a bit and leave you two to chat.” He went and grabbed a coat and hat, and on his way out, he added, “You need to announce your presence when you come in so we know who’s here. We both do that. I’ll be sure to do that as well. Announce my return. Loudly. But I’ll probably be gone for a bit. I feel like a nice long walk.”

I was unsure why Aiden gave us so much information, but he just smirked at Quinton as he went out the door, which made Quinton blush again.

I wondered if he would blush like that if I kissed him.

He looked back at me, then he rolled his eyes and seemed to find his claws again. “You can’t just keep looking at me like that!” he demanded.

“Like what?” I asked.

He rolled his eyes at me. “Like you want to rip my clothes off.”

“I would never rip your clothes. Unless that’s something you’d like, that is,” I answered. I realized after I said it that the phrase was probably not literal, but Dexter and Toby had ripped some clothes during sex, so I wasn’t really sure.

He smiled at me, and I swear it was a little fond. “Alright, Creepy Stalker, if there’s

no morning sex going on, let's start digging into Marcus and his cronies."

"Is morning sex something you would like to happen first?" I asked.

This entire visit was rather confusing. We'd gotten onto the topic of sex, and Aiden, who I was supposed to be here to meet, had left, and I wasn't really sure what was expected of me. I would love to have sex with Quinton, but Jude had given me a lecture about how I couldn't jump into sex with human packmates like they were some 'randos' we were getting off with for 'funsies.' Still, surely a little interaction wouldn't be bad manners. After all, if Quinton was in need...

"I would be glad to provide you with a release, if you'd like one," I said.

Quinton smiled, all teeth, and got up from the couch, stalking toward me. I had the distinct feeling that my little hellcat was on the hunt, and somehow I had turned into the prey. I sat very still, waiting to see what he would do.

He climbed onto my lap, his legs on either side of mine. My hands came up automatically to hold his back, and he lifted himself onto his knees so my hands were on his ass and he was looking down at me.

He was so fucking beautiful. It took my breath away. His spirit was a flame, burning into my very core. I felt my hellhound stirring, and I was sure my eyes were flames, but I couldn't help it. I stayed very still, not wanting to startle Quinton. He just put his hands on both sides of my face, though.

"Look at you. You're so put together in your slacks and dress shirts, every hair in place"—he ran his hands through my hair at that, purposely mussing it—"but there's fire. I didn't know you wanted me."

I stared at him. He looked predatory, but also somehow vulnerable. This sex kitten

was not the Quinton I knew. Yes, this was the Quinton from his social media pages. This was probably the Quinton who went clubbing, but this wasn't the Quinton I watched every day.

He was staring at me, waiting. I didn't move a muscle.

"Are you going to take what's being offered, Liam?" he asked, leaning down but not quite meeting my lips.

All I had to do was lean up and I'd be kissing him. I would be able to taste him, feel his body against mine. But it was... wrong, somehow. He didn't usually call me Liam; I was his creepy stalker, and I liked when he called me that.

"You're very good at being a sex kitten, but I prefer my hellcat with teeth and claws," I said, looking into his eyes. "I won't take anything from you, Quinton. I'll give you whatever you want, though."

He dropped the smirking, sexy face, and searched my eyes. I'm sure they were still burning, but I couldn't help that. Usually I could, but he was so close, and so warm, and he smelled so good—like dark chocolate or a fancy cup of coffee, sweet and bitter—and my hellhound wanted to roll in the scent of him.

He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. I let him take the lead, our mouths pressing together lightly. He licked against my lips, and I opened for him. His tongue darted out to meet mine, but he kept the touches gentle, little teasing touches that made me ache for more, yet I followed his lead.

I was hard and aching from the taste of him. He was divine.

He eased up and pressed his forehead to mine. I breathed in deep, basking in his scent. It was a little sweeter now, but that hint of dark chocolate bitterness was still

there. It was lovely. I liked my sweetness with a bit of bitter in it.

He leaned back, smiling at me. This wasn't the sex kitten smirk or the hellcat with claws, though. He looked fond.

"Did you just sniff me?" he asked.

I shrugged. "You smell good."

He laughed at that, a real, genuine, laugh, and got up off my lap. "Ok, Creepy Stalker, let's go do some research about the bad guys."

Having Quinton in my office was satisfying. I'd even offered him food and drink, and I never ate or drank in my office. I would have let Quinton, though.

He had texted Aiden to let him know where we were going, and he'd responded with a selfie in the woods on a trail. I'd probably need to talk to Aiden about his personal situation at some point, but I was monitoring things, and I didn't think there was any cause for concern there yet.

"So you can't just, like, track them down through their address or whatever?" Quinton was asking, watching as one program ran through emails on one screen and another program ran through social media on another screen.

"Their IP address? Most humans are just a little tech savvy, and they conduct their business through online chat rooms, or even in chats on games. The human police catch a decent number of them, and they're constantly setting traps up for people who do that," I answered.

"But our guys are more than a little tech savvy?" Quinton asked. "Do they use, like, the darknet or whatever?"

I smiled. “The dark web is really just overlay networks. That means you need authorization or specific software or configurations to access it. Yes, illegal activity occurs on it, but lots of companies use overlay networks as well. It’s all a part of the deep web, which just means it isn’t searchable with something like Google. Your online banking is technically the deep web.”

“I’m on the ‘deep web,’ huh? Cool,” he laughed. “So somehow shit is harder to trace on the deep web?”

“People who are really good at illegal online activity use something like Tor, which is an onion router.” He looked confused, so I explained, “It encrypts user data and sends it onto another relay, or node. So basically, it’s like layers in an onion, and each layer encrypts the data and sends it on. Although not totally impossible to track, it’s extremely time consuming and difficult. Then there’s the fact that people use VPNs to mask their IP addresses. Smart people are very hard to track, and this organization is an established ring that probably has someone giving them directions on what to do, so their people are not doing stupid shit.”

“Unfortunately for us,” Quinton grouched.

“Yes, but fortunately for us, individual people are stupid, and they do things which inevitably leave a trail,” I said, pointing to a picture of James currently on the one screen. “They use social media, they take pictures with people who suddenly no longer go to the club after a few months. Are some of them legitimately just not out clubbing? Sure. Are some of them victims of human trafficking? Unfortunately.”

“Wow. So, you’re like, what, checking all his socials for people who are missing?” Quinton asked.

“Yes. I’m also using facial recognition software to cross reference the camera feeds for the club with missing persons and people who default on their rent and are served

eviction notices. Plus I'm cross referencing social media that has gone dark with people who are friends online with anyone from the club."

"Holy shit. This really is the batcave. You're totally like Morgan Freeman. Or maybe I'm Morgan Freeman?" he asked.

I had no clue what he was talking about, and I looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

"We're totally watching The Dark Knight ," he told me.

I smiled. "I would enjoy watching a movie with you."

"You're such a dork, Creepy Stalker," he laughed.

I wasn't sure why I was a dork, but the affectionate way he said it made it more like a compliment than an insult. I turned back to the computer, which was starting to give us matches of possibly suspicious people.

Quinton and I spent most of the afternoon going through them, listing them and recording his impression as well as the feeling I got from their internet footprint. Quinton was completely impressed with my "technology superpower," as he called it, although I did explain that it was difficult to judge much without doing a deepdive into their online presence. We had a lot of people to go through, though, so it was surface checks for now. Which meant if they pinged my radar, they could be involved in human trafficking, or they could just be mildly shitty human beings.

Unfortunately, there were a lot of mildly shitty human beings in the world. We still ruled out quite a few, though, and we broke for lunch before going back to it. By the time Quinton's phone rang, it was dark out, and I was sad to think of our day ending.

"You coming home for dinner?" I heard Aiden ask.

“Yup. I was just doing research with Liam,” he said. He looked at the clock. “Holy shit, Aiden, sorry—I didn’t even realize what time it was.”

“It’s ok. I knew where you were if I needed you. I did cook, though.” There was a pause, then Aiden added, “Bring your creepy stalker over.”

Quinton lowered his voice, asking, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Aiden said. “We didn’t really get to know each other this morning, because you two were making eyes at each other, so bring him over for dinner.”

They said their goodbyes, and Quinton hung up, looking at me. I knew I was smiling, and he just huffed. “Alright then, come meet Aiden again, and be nice to him, got it?”

“Of course,” I said. “I’m always polite.”

“If you say so, Creepy Stalker,” he chuckled.

“I do, little hellcat,” I replied back. I glanced at my computer before I got up and followed Quinton out. Usually nothing would drag me away from the middle of research, but Quinton... he was definitely something.

Chapter 11

Quinton

“S o...” I said, standing at the island while Aiden put away leftovers.

Liam had left two minutes ago. He’d offered to help, but Aiden had insisted on doing it because he “had a system,” and Liam had seemed to totally get that and respect it. I didn’t think Aiden had OCD—he was just particular about the kitchen since he was the main one who used it—but I kind of wondered about Liam. At the very least, he was a neat freak and really particular about how he did stuff. He had offered to let me drink or eat in his office, but I swear I saw the agony in his face at the thought of it. Still, it was sweet of him to offer.

“I like him,” Aiden answered, packing up leftovers and loading the dishwasher. “And I’m glad he agreed not to turn the sound on unless he was ‘concerned for our well-being,’ so this way we can gossip about him.”

I smirked at that. “Yeah, he’s a little odd for sure, but they’re all odd.” I shrugged.

“You really like him,” Aidan said.

“Does that bother you?” I asked. Aiden and I weren’t a thing—he was like my brother, and I thought he thought of me the same way, but I wanted to check in anyway.

He just smirked at me. “I have zero sexual feelings toward you, Q, so you don’t need

to worry about that. And I know you don't have any for me. We're just..."

"We're family," I finished.

"Yeah," he said, smiling. "Family. I like that." He finished loading the dishwasher and went around the island to slide onto a stool. "I like it here, too. My walk was good, and I did see cameras and motion detectors around, which made me feel safe. They must also have guard dogs on the property?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Dexter rescued two when he rescued me, but I thought he gave them to Cassius to find a home for. Maybe they ended up back here? If they were dangerous, I'm sure Liam would have warned you."

"No, I don't think the one I saw was dangerous. It was huge, and I was a little startled when I first spotted it, but it never really got close and almost seemed to be watching out for me while I walked. It actually made me feel safer." Aiden shrugged. "But let's get back to you and your so-called creepy stalker. You like him."

I smiled. "Yeah. I offered him sex, and he turned me down."

Aiden sputtered a bit at that, and I laughed. "It was sweet, not mean or anything. I just... I don't know, I slid into the old clubbing version of me, where guys always wanted something from me. He just... it's like he values me. Not that there was anything wrong with my random hook-ups. They were fun and it was an outlet, but it's like this has the possibility of more."

"He didn't even blink when I snuggled up to you," Aiden commented.

I looked at him curiously. I wasn't sure what he was getting at.

"Lots of guys would have a problem with that, Q. I mean, we sleep in the same bed a

lot. We snuggle and hug and have no personal boundaries with each other. A lot of people would be jealous or assume something was going on. But Liam didn't even bat an eye at it, and he definitely didn't look at me like he looked at you. He's only interested in you," Aiden explained.

"Did you want him interested in you?" I asked. I assumed he didn't, but this was new territory for us.

"Nope. Absolutely not," Aiden stated. "That's why I kissed your cheek, though. A lot of guys would jump to threesome thoughts, but he was completely focused on you. If he was interested, it would make me uncomfortable. I know it's my own issues, but if a guy showed sexual interest in me right now, I'm not sure how I would handle it. So I'm really glad he didn't. None of the guys do, which is why I'm ok with them." Aiden shrugged self-consciously.

I reached out and grabbed his hand. "Hey, you get to have all the issues you want to, and don't feel bad about them."

He squeezed my hand, and we stayed like that for a couple minutes, each lost in our own thoughts. I was just glad Aiden was ok with Liam, because I really did like him. He was weirdly sweet, in a stalkery way, and he made me feel safe. I knew I kept coming back to that, but when you've had your life ripped out from under you, ordinary things didn't feel safe anymore. Liam made it feel like I could finally breathe again without a constant worry at the base of my neck.

He also didn't seem put off by my prickly attitude. In fact, he seemed to kind of like 'my claws,' as he called them. I smiled at the thought.

Aiden got up, came over, and gave me a hug. "I'm heading to bed. I'm going in to work early tomorrow. Cass is gonna pick me up on his way in. Are you going in? Cass said you can take another day or two if you need it."

“No, I’ll go. I’m ok,” I answered.

With that, Aiden went to his room across the living room, leaving his door open. I headed into my bedroom, shutting the door behind me. Liam had pointed out where the cameras were in each of the rooms at Aiden’s insistence, and Aiden had told him we might turn them around if we wanted privacy. Liam had seemed perplexed by it but had agreed, just telling us to make sure all the alarms were set if that was the case.

My creepy stalker. Yeah, ok, totally weird that I found that sweet. I knew there was a camera pointing at my bed; Liam had pointed it out. I wondered if he’d ever watched me jerk off. I smirked as I grabbed my phone. I renamed the number from earlier in my phone and texted Liam.

Me: Are you watching me?

Creepy Stalker: Would it be a problem if I was?

I laughed to myself and looked up at the camera, shaking my head. I got up and stripped off my shirt, throwing it off to the side. I unbuttoned my pants and shucked them off, bending down to take my socks off as well. Before I could drag down my boxers, my phone pinged on the bed.

Creepy Stalker: I am unsure of the etiquette in this situation.

I did laugh then, typing out, Turn the sound on, Creepy Stalker.

Three dots appeared, then disappeared, then appeared.

I typed again before he could reply. You’re the only one watching this, right?

Creepy Stalker: Yes. I’m in my office with the door shut.

I threw my phone down then, saying quietly, “No more texts, Creepy Stalker. You just get to watch.” I knew he’d hear me through the camera—he said at dinner that he had excellent hearing. I didn’t need Aiden to hear, though, and I was thankful his bedroom was on the other side of the living room.

I drew my boxers down. I was already hard. The thought of Liam sitting in his office watching me was a huge turn on for some reason. I could picture every hair in place, his dress pants all stiff and his button-up shirt done up—so prim and proper, talking about etiquette, all while fire burned in his eyes as he watched me, just like it had earlier today when I’d kissed him.

“I bet you’re all buttoned up sitting in your office, Creepy Stalker. You know, if you really want to earn the nickname, I think you should take out your dick. Just unzip your pants and pull it out. I bet it’s hard already,” I whispered.

I sat back onto the bed, stroking myself slowly. I pictured Liam fumbling with his pants, unbuttoning them, and pulling out his dick. I wondered what it looked like. What it tasted like. I hadn’t really wanted anyone since before... I cut that thought off and thought about Liam again, sitting with his dick out in his office chair.

I laid back onto the bed, my legs splayed wide open and facing the camera. He would have a view of everything this way. Well, almost everything.

“You should install a camera on the ceiling, Creepy Stalker. Then you’d get to see my cum face,” I chuckled.

I started stroking myself again, taking my time to twist my hand around the head, squeezing gently until I knew my dick was a nice dark color.

“Do you like my pretty dick?” I asked. “You better be stroking yours, too. That’s what creepy stalkers do. Did you ever get off to me before?” I chuckled. “Probably

not. You probably weren't sure if it was polite or not. It isn't polite, but that's ok, because you're my creepy stalker, so you don't have to be polite with me . No boundaries necessary."

I imagined him growling possessively at that.

I scooted back, opening the nightstand drawer. Yup, lube was in here. I wasn't even gonna ask who had decided that unpacking that was necessary. Although maybe Dexter and Toby just kept it stocked everywhere. That wouldn't surprise me.

I grabbed it and scooted back down the bed, letting my legs spread wide again as I poured some lube into my hand. I stroked my cock with it first, the sound obscene in the silent room. I bet Liam could hear it. I thought of him stroking faster at the sound, and fuck, it was a turn on. I hadn't realized I was an exhibitionist, although maybe it was only because Liam was watching.

"Do you wish your cock was up against mine? I do. You'd be all hard, and I bet that big ass hand of yours would grip us both so tightly. You'd have me dripping precum."

I groaned at the thought. It wasn't enough, though, and I reached my other hand down, scooping up some of the lube. I rubbed gently against my hole, not entering it, just enjoying the pleasure of rubbing against it with my wet finger.

"Or do you wish you were in my ass? Do you like that, my creepy stalker? I bet you'd feel so good pushing inside me."

At those words, I twisted my upper body so I could reach deeper and slipped a finger in, groaning at the pressure. I gently eased it in and out.

"Would you take your time stretching me open, or would you not be able to wait to

get into my ass?” I asked, and with that, I pushed a second finger inside myself.

I moaned, imagining it was Liam’s fingers rubbing inside me. He’d be able to plunge in nice and deep. I twisted my body more, pushing my fingers further in and managing to hit my prostate.

“Oh god, yeah. Right there, Liam. Right there,” I panted, hitting the spot again and again. I was stroking my dick with my other hand, and my pace picked up. “Keep going, Liam. Want you inside me. Want you to come inside me,” I groaned.

The thought of him filling me up was too much. I was hitting my prostate steadily, stroking myself hard and fast, and cum spilled out of my dick, shooting over my bare body. I groaned in ecstasy, imagining Liam coming at the same time, cum splashing onto his dark suit pants.

When my orgasm faded, I gently withdrew my fingers, smiling. “I hope you got yourself all mussy in your office, my creepy stalker,” I whispered.

I laid there for another minute, the cum cooling on my body, then I got up, wiping it off with a shirt and throwing on my boxers to head to the bathroom to clean up.

I was smiling until I was under the hot spray, and then I started to feel... I don’t know. I’d had a million random hook-ups; I liked getting off, and I liked getting other guys off. I’d never really had a boyfriend—not that Liam was my boyfriend, because he wasn’t. He was... I didn’t know what he was.

But I was having, like... feelings. Ooey-gooey feelings that made my chest hurt. Like my skin was itchy and my eyes hurt and the hot water beating down on my skin wasn’t making me feel any better. And I’d have to look at Liam tomorrow, and I’d just imagined all that shit, and I had no fucking clue if Liam had even been into the whole thing. For all I knew, he’d just stared at me, totally not turned on and just

wondering what the fuck was wrong with me.

Or maybe he'd just shut down his computer and left the room, and that was somehow an even worse thought. Like maybe I wasn't even worth being watched when I was jerking off. Maybe he'd been embarrassed for me and hadn't wanted to see all that.

I gasped out a sob before I even realized I was crying. I ducked my head under the water, leaning my hands against the tiles behind the shower head, and I tried to pull myself together. What the fuck.

This was not me. I did not cry after sex.

Fuck. It hadn't even been sex. I'd fucking jerked off. Maybe someone had watched, that was all. And I didn't even know if he had.

That did not make me feel better.

Fine. I just needed to cry. That was all. I'd cry it out of my system and get over this fucking moment. It was probably just because I hadn't had sex since the whole thing with Marcus. Not that he had done anything to me, but he was planning to. There was the vulnerability that something would be done to me.

Yeah, I probably needed therapy if a jerk-off session made me break down, but fuck that. I wiped at my eyes angrily, but tears were still coming out.

Fuck Marcus, and fuck his friends, and fuck everyone at that fucking bar who watched me leave with him. Fuck everyone who watched James lead me into the back, barely able to walk. No one had said a fucking word. Fuck it. We'd hunt them all down, and I would be fine.

As long as Liam didn't think I was a freak now and avoid me.

The anger fled from me at that thought, and I just let the tears come, quietly gasping under the hot spray.

I gasped again when the shower curtain was pulled back, ready to reassure Aiden that I was fine , everything was fine , only it wasn't Aiden standing there.

My creepy stalker toed off his shoes and then stepped into the shower with me, dress pants and shirt and everything. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to his chest, getting his outfit totally soaked.

"I'm fine, " I insisted, but he only held onto me more tightly, and I pressed my head into his now soaking wet shirt. "I don't know what's wrong with me," I mumbled, tears still coming out of my eyes.

"Nothing is wrong with you. You're perfect and sexy," he rumbled against my head. His face was nuzzling my damp hair.

My creepy stalker must have heard me crying, come over, and come into the shower—and he hadn't even bothered taking his clothes off. It made me feel better to think that he had watched me. I let my eyes drift down, and I tried to steal a glance at the front of his pants to see if they were stained, but it was a little hard to do. I could see his soaking wet socks next to my bare feet, and the whole thing suddenly seemed totally ludicrous.

I stifled a giggle. He breathed in deeply, and he seemed to relax a tiny bit.

"Are you sniffing me?" I asked, giggling again.

"You're not as distressed now," he answered.

"You're in my shower. Fully dressed," I sniffed.

I sort of wiped my face against his shirt, because yeah, it was gonna need to be washed anyway. The crying seemed to have passed, and now I just felt kind of stupid about the whole thing.

“You said that I didn’t have to be polite with you and that there were no boundaries,” he answered. “You were so beautiful and sexy, but then you were upset in the shower.”

“It wasn’t sex,” I said automatically.

“No,” he answered quietly. “It was intimacy.”

I looked up at him, and his eyes were flames, but his face was calm. I might have freaked out, but he certainly wasn’t upset by my weird crying moment. In fact, he looked sort of... pleased.

“You look happy,” I accused.

“I’m holding you, and now I’ll get to stay the night and hold you, because sometimes humans want comfort after intimacy. It’s called aftercare,” he said proudly, pulling me close again.

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t need aftercare. We didn’t even do anything that needs aftercare,” I snarked.

“Maybe I need aftercare,” he murmured against my head.

I stepped back again and looked up at him. He wasn’t making fun of me.

“You look ridiculous,” I said. I knew it was totally bitchy, but I didn’t know what the hell else to say. I’d just jerked off while Liam watched, ordered him to do the same,

had a breakdown in the shower, then cried into his shirt and rubbed my snot on him.

It was not my finest moment.

He just smiled and started unbuttoning his shirt. As much as I wanted to see his sexy body, I also felt weirdly vulnerable about it, even though I was naked, so I pulled the curtain aside and stepped out. I grabbed a towel, drying myself off while facing away from the shower. Liam shut the water off, and I heard the plop of wet clothes as he took them off in the shower.

I handed a towel over my shoulder, felt him take it, and muttered, “I’ll get you pants,” before fleeing the bathroom.

I threw on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, and I grabbed my loosest pair of sleep boxers for Liam. They might still be too tight, but any sweatpants I had would be way too short on him. I rummaged around for an oversized t-shirt I knew was in my drawer too.

Liam came into the room, miles of skin on display even with the towel wrapped around his waist. I threw the shirt and boxers at him and climbed into bed, facing away from him while he got dressed.

I was totally being weird. I knew I was being weird, but I couldn’t help it.

I heard him getting dressed, and then he lightly touched my shoulder. “Slide over.”

I turned around and looked at him. “I sleep on this side,” I grumped, even though I usually slept wherever. I couldn’t seem to turn the snark off, though.

“I want to be between you and the door, my little hellcat. I’ll be able to get out of bed faster if there’s a need to,” he answered.

How could I argue with that? Ugh, why did he have to be so fucking sweet . He shut off the light, shut the bedroom door, and slid into bed. I laid there stiffly until he grabbed me and pulled me close to cuddle me, his head buried in the back of my neck.

“You’re sniffing me again,” I complained, but I relaxed into his hold.

He sort of... purred? It wasn’t quite a growl, but it wasn’t really a purr like a cat either. I started petting his hand where it was wrapped around me.

“Did you watch?” I whispered.

“I did everything you told me to, my little hellcat,” he answered quietly.

I smiled into the darkness.

“And I think I did ruin my pants,” he mumbled, but that only made me smile more.

“Good,” I said, and then the warmth of his hold and his gentle grumbling put me to sleep.

I woke sometime in the night to a faint light and the feeling of Liam rolling away from me. I turned and looked up groggily to see Aiden in the doorway.

Ah, fuck. I hadn’t thought about Aiden. He looked surprised to see Liam there, and I could see him starting to turn away. Fuck.

Before I could say anything, Liam grumbled, “You have to go cuddle Quinton on that side of the bed. I sleep by the door.”

Then he pulled me over so he was on the edge of the bed and I was in the middle, and

he flipped the covers off the side away from the door for Aiden to climb in.

I was still looking at the door, and Aiden hadn't left, but he wasn't moving to come in either.

"Come on. It's cold. Don't worry, just Quinton will cuddle you. He'll be like pillows between us, or whatever weird thing humans do in movies when they share a bed and don't want to touch," he said.

Aiden laughed a little at that, and he came over to my side of the bed, climbing in.

We didn't talk, and I felt his breathing calm down as he cuddled up against me. My eyes were heavy, and I drifted back to sleep cozy and warm between the two of them.

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Chapter 12

Liam

Quinton and I both woke up when Aiden rolled out of bed. He made his way out the door silently, and I snuggled back into Quinton.

“Uh uh,” he mumbled. “Up.”

I took that to mean we needed to get up, too, and I rolled out of bed. He waved one hand at me, shooing me out of the bedroom, while the other hand covered his face. “Coffee,” he mumbled.

I could do coffee. I walked into the kitchen to find Aiden already at the coffee machine, smirking at me. He had three cups out. I heard mumbling and a thump from the bedroom, and I turned around, ready to go make sure Quinton was ok.

“He’s fine,” Aiden said. “He’s not a morning person. Mornings are for caffeine and sass, so be prepared.”

“I thought they were also for sex?” I asked.

I heard another thump and a curse from Quinton’s room, and Aiden laughed.

“Not today, lover boy. Maybe when Quinton doesn’t have work, and definitely when I’m not here to listen in, because no thanks,” Aiden said.

He poured coffee into the cups, raising an eyebrow at me to ask how I wanted mine.

“Black is fine,” I said.

Aiden chuckled as he handed a cup to me across the kitchen island. When Quinton walked in, he handed a cup of coffee to him. “Liam likes his coffee and his men bitter, Q—perfect for you.”

Quinton just grumbled, sliding into the seat next to me at the kitchen island. I moved to put my arm around him, but he lifted his head, glaring a half-open eye at me. I think he even bared his teeth a little.

“No cuddles in the morning,” Aiden warned me. “He’s liable to bite your head off. You want some bacon and eggs?”

“Only if I can be of assistance,” I answered.

So Aiden put me to work, and we chatted amicably while Quinton shot us evil looks from the kitchen island if we talked too loudly. He occasionally threw out a sarcastic comment, and I smiled at him each time, which made him blush and Aiden smile.

We ate breakfast, and then Quinton announced he needed to get ready for work. I just looked at him, taking another drink of my coffee. He huffed, rolled his eyes, pulled me out of the chair, and actually pushed me toward the door by my shoulders. I guess it was time to leave?

“I have to get ready,” he grumbled. “Go home and figure out which bad guys we need to hunt down.”

He opened the door, pushed me out, and shut it behind me, but not before I saw Aiden give me a little wave and a smile.

“Quinton’s got a boyfriend,” Aiden singsonged.

I heard a thunk as Quinton leaned against the door and mumbled, “Shut up.”

“He doesn’t even mind your morning attitude. He’s a keeper, Q,” Aiden said.

I heard Quinton sigh. “He’s really sweet, isn’t he?” he asked.

“Yeah, he really is,” Aiden answered softly. “It’s ok to like him, you know. He’s got good energy.”

Quinton leaned away from the door and turned around, and then he gave the cutest yelp as he saw me outside the front door window.

“Sexy Stalker! Go home and watch me from the cameras in your house like a normal hacker,” he yelled, banging a hand against the glass.

I smiled at him and turned to walk away, hearing another thump against the door as he leaned into it again.

“Oh, you’ve got it bad,” I heard Aiden mumble, and then I was jogging to the house to get them on camera. And to get to work, because I did have some bad people to hunt down for Quinton. Anything to make him happy.

I was smiling and whistling as I walked up to the house, and I heard Jude and Corbin on the front porch. I walked around to find them lounging in chairs, looking freshly cleaned up and a little tired.

“Good night hunting?” I asked.

“Yup,” Jude replied, smiling. “But why are you so happy? We heard you whistling.

That's just fucking weird."

"I've been upgraded," I announced proudly.

Corbin and Jude both raised their eyebrows at me in question. "I've gone from Creepy Stalker to Sexy Stalker. A definite improvement, I think," I answered.

Corbin nodded in agreement, but Jude just shook his head and rolled his eyes. "You guys are all hopeless," he muttered. I ignored him and headed to what Quinton had termed my "batcave." It was time to get some research done, and of course, keep an eye on Quinton at the same time.

The week went by in a flash. Aiden and Quinton got back into the swing of working; Jude took them into work most days, while I made it a habit to pick them up. Quinton would come over and we'd do some research, then he'd head off to eat dinner with Aiden. I popped in twice at Aiden's insistence for dinner as well, and it was nice to eat with the two of them.

Even when I wasn't at dinner, I still got to watch them through the cameras anyway.

Much to my satisfaction, there had been no turning the cameras around. Quinton also never asked me to turn the sound off in his bedroom, and so I hadn't. I was rewarded a few nights later with another "jerk-off sesh," as he termed it. That time I didn't even wait for him to head into the shower. The moment we were done, I was on my way over, and he didn't seem surprised to see me appear in his bedroom door as he was getting on boxers.

He had smirked at my mussed look, then grabbed me and led me into the bathroom. I'd gotten to undress that time, although he had very cutely avoided looking at me naked. I'd hugged him under the shower spray, and there had been no tears, but he had gripped me tightly.

I knew he wasn't over everything that had happened, and that was ok. We would go at whatever pace Quinton was comfortable with. I didn't think he was quite ready for the intimacy of washing each other, so I let him pull away and wash himself off, then I did the same.

He said he supposed I needed aftercare again, to which I simply nodded. After we got out of the shower and dried off, he led me into bed. Aiden didn't come in that night—it was only about half the time that he did—and Quinton and I slept cuddled up until morning, when Aiden's movement in the house woke me up.

I brought them to work that morning and picked them up, and that night, Quinton had whispered “Good night, Sexy Stalker” to the camera before turning off his lights.

I wanted more than anything to be laying in the bed with him, to feel his body close to mine. I knew he wasn't ready for anything more sexually intimate than what we'd done, and that was fine. But I still yearned to be close to him.

I was being patient, though. I could be very patient for Quinton; he was worth it.

Quinton, however, was not the most patient person, as evidenced by his tapping foot as we sat in my “batcave” on Friday evening.

“We have a list of suspicious people. Isn't it time to start invading homes or whatever?” he asked, staring at the list of names and pictures on one of the screens. I knew he recognized some of the people, and I knew that he was angry.

“I wish it were that easy. These are suspicious people. Most of them aren't hellbound yet—they're just... murky souls. Take this guy,” I said, pointing to one of the pictures.

“Todd,” Quinton bit out. “Should've known that bouncer was evil based on his frat

boy name and shitty pick-up line. ‘Todd, with extra D,’ he’d always say while leering at the guys. Like eww, Todd. No one wants your D, asshole.”

I resisted laughing. Yes, the guy on the screen did look like a frat boy asshole (not that all frat boys were assholes—fraternity houses had the same ratio of rotten souls as most other dorms and complexes).

“The problem is that Todd isn’t fully hellbound, so I can’t kill him. There’s still hope for redemption,” I reasoned.

“How about a little torture, then?” Quinton asked.

I did laugh then. “No torture either. Someone could be murky for lots of reasons. Todd has made a lot of questionable decisions. Maybe he knows that James leads really drunk guys out of the club. Maybe he realizes that something weird is going on, but he doesn’t know exactly what. He’s complicit, yes, but without really knowing, he hasn’t done irreversible damage to his soul. He could find out what’s really been going on, be totally appalled, and turn his life around in order to do better and help people.”

Quinton snorted in disbelief.

“You’d be surprised,” I responded. “We’ve seen it happen. Lots of people are morally gray, and sometimes there’s something that tips them over the edge, one way or another. They could have a wake-up call and turn their lives around. Or, unfortunately, they could justify it to themselves and just keep spiraling until they’re hellbound. Free will.” I shrugged. “We can’t know which way Todd will go. Torturing him could inadvertently send him toward being hellbound, when just learning about what happened could send him onto a better path.”

Quinton sighed. “But where are the really bad guys, then? James wasn’t murky, was

he?”

“No. James was actively drugging people and handing them over. That’s a little different than looking away. He was rotten.” I clicked through some of James’s social media, stopping on a recent picture. “Even so, he was pretty newly rotten. He’s hard to judge on the internet. I needed to be in person to tell for sure that he was fully hellbound. Some of these suspicious people might be rotten, but I can’t say for certain without being near them. My computer skills are pretty good, but not perfect.”

“Your computer skills are fucking amazing, Sexy Stalker. You can, like, code which people suck and which people don’t. So don’t sell yourself short,” Quinton insisted, and I felt warm at his praise. “Where are the big baddies then, though? Like the people behind it? I’d think they’d be easy to spot.”

“The people in charge are smart. They’re not using social media, they’re not hanging out at the club excessively, and they’ve made sure they’re not traceable to the guys who do the dirty work,” I answered. “James knew very little. He had a contact number, but it was disconnected after he disappeared. Beyond that, he simply handed people off and had only a vague description of who he was handing them off to. They did most things by call or through untraceable chats.”

Quinton blew a breath out. “It’s Friday night,” he said.

“Yes,” I answered. It was, but I was unsure why that was important.

He rolled his eyes at me. “Aiden’s at home. Is someone here? Aside from us?”

“Yes,” I answered, still perplexed. Was he looking for an intimate moment? It didn’t seem like a sexy time, but why else would he wonder who was around and tell me Aiden was home? I stared at him, and he huffed and shook his head at me.

“We’re going to the club, Sexy Stalker,” he insisted.

Oh. Definitely not a sexy moment, then. I tried not to be disappointed. “I’m not sure...”

“Listen up, Mister. You’ll be there to protect me, and you’re all”—he waved his hand at me—“supernatural and shit, so it’ll be fine. You can’t keep me caged up here, you know. I’m, like, a free spirit and shit.” He crossed his arms and gave me a dirty look.

“I’m not sure who’s working at the club tonight,” I finished. “There may or may not be anyone on our list, but I should be able to access CCTV camera feeds from outside the club and scan faces for who went in tonight.”

Quinton breathed out a sigh. My little hellcat was so cute. He thought I wouldn’t let him out to play. Everyone knew you couldn’t keep cats contained, and I certainly wouldn’t try to do that to Quinton.

He looked thoughtful, then shook his head. “Nah. We’re just gonna go. You’ll protect me, maybe you’ll sniff out some evil, and we can drop some hints to the wrong people about being back next weekend. Maybe then we’ll get some of the wrong kind of attention when we do go back.”

I tilted my head. It wasn’t a bad idea, but Quinton was still a human, even if he was a hellcat at heart. I didn’t like the idea of putting him in danger by letting people know we’d be back. I didn’t want to face an ambush.

“I am not completely invulnerable,” I admitted. “I have no problem going tonight, but I’m not sure setting you up as bait for next weekend is a good idea.”

“You can get someone else to come along as back up next weekend. Besides, if someone took me, you’d find me,” he insisted.

“Of course I would, but you’re mortal. They could harm you before I did. It would take time,” I answered.

“I have faith in you,” he said, and I was touched at how sincere he was.

Still... “How would you feel about a tracker under your skin in your shoulder? Maybe the back of your neck?” I asked.

Quinton laughed and leaned in to kiss me. I wasn’t sure what was funny, but I opened my mouth to him, letting his tongue explore. I leaned toward him and resisted the urge to grab him by clutching my chair tightly.

It might have made a little creaking sound. Or perhaps that was a crack. Oops.

Quinton leaned back. “It’s early to head to the club, so we’ve got a little bit of time to kill,” he said.

I searched his eyes. I wouldn’t rush him, and I didn’t want him doing anything he was uncomfortable with.

He lifted a hand up and cupped my cheek. “Wanna make out?” he asked. He was smiling sexily at me, but he also looked a little unsure.

“I would absolutely love to make out with you,” I answered honestly. I would love anything Quinton gave me.

“Well, that computer chair isn’t really conducive to a good make-out sesh, even if all the clothes stay on,” he joked.

I sensed that he was also subtly laying boundaries down, and I was all too happy to comply. I didn’t move, letting him take the lead. He finally huffed at me and grabbed

my hand, pulling me out of the chair and pushing me over to the couch against the far wall of my office.

He pushed me down and climbed onto my lap. I was already hard from kissing him, and he smelled so damn good. I gripped the edge of the couch, letting him set the pace.

He looked at me, putting both hands on my face. “Look at you, such a gentleman, my sexy stalker. Meanwhile, your eyes are on fire for me, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” I rumbled. My hellhound was scratching to get out, wanting to taste, to touch, to roll in the sweetness and bitterness of Quinton.

“Touch me, Sexy Stalker. Make out with me. Please.”

It was the “please” that undid me. I grabbed Quinton and pulled him into a kiss. He leaned into me, one hand running through my hair, kissing me back just as fiercely. We licked at each other, and Quinton bit down gently on my lower lip, causing me to growl and pull him down more firmly onto my lap.

His hardness pressed against mine, and I couldn’t help the little thrust of my hips. He groaned into my mouth, his hand pulling on my hair. I growled again, nibbling his lip this time before licking at it.

Our tongues danced together, our teeth nipped, and Quinton ground down into my lap, rubbing our hard cocks together. I gripped him firmly in my hands but let him set the pace. He could do whatever he wanted with me.

We were both panting, and he leaned into my shoulder to catch his breath. I bit at his neck, sucking the skin into my mouth. I tasted that bittersweet flavor of him again, like a tart raspberry in sweet whipped cream. I licked at the spot as he moaned against

my neck, his hot breath against my skin.

“Oh god, Liam,” he mumbled against my neck, his hips grinding down into mine. The friction of his hard cock through his sweatpants against mine in my slacks was amazing, and I was thankful I didn’t wear heavy, coarse jeans. Layers of fabric separated us, but I felt the friction and pull as his dick dragged against mine. I could imagine what his bare cock would feel like sliding against mine.

I sucked harder at his skin. I wanted to mark him. If we were going out into the world, into danger, I wanted my scent and my mark on him. He moaned louder, and I bit down, unable to stop myself, growling.

His hips thrust faster against me as he cried out, “Yes! Liam!”

He moaned loudly, and his hand reached down between us, rubbing both our dicks at the same time, pushing them together through the fabric and keeping the friction steady. I bit harder, tasting blood, and somehow it was just as bittersweet as all of Quinton was. I sucked on his neck, and his hips faltered, a cry falling from his mouth as I growled.

His body stiffened as his orgasm overcame him, a cry bursting from him. His frantic hand on our cocks, our thrusting, and the taste of him in my mouth sent me over the cliff, and cum shot from my cock into my pants.

I let up from biting Quinton’s neck and softly licked at it, nuzzling and smelling him. I wanted to bathe in his scent. His hand had loosened, and he was leaning heavily against me. I held him against me, his body soft and lax.

His head was buried in my neck, and he murmured, “You’re sniffing me again.”

“You smell good,” I answered.

“You bit me,” he said.

“I did. Is biting acceptable behavior during making out?” I asked. If the orgasm was anything to go by, he enjoyed it, but perhaps I had overstepped.

He chuckled softly, lifting up to look at my face. He was smiling, so I didn’t think he was too upset. “A little nibbling is fine during making out, my sexy stalker, but I think we surpassed making out.”

“We didn’t take our clothes off,” I pointed out helpfully.

“No, we just came in our pants like two teenagers instead,” Quinton smirked.

“It was worth it,” I assured him. I didn’t care for the mess, and drying cum was certainly not a nice feeling. I added, a bit disgruntledly, “Even if I will need to buy more dress pants at this rate.”

“You know you can wash them or get them dry cleaned or whatever, right?” He laughed at me, getting up and reaching down to pull me up too. “Let’s go get cleaned up. I know you hate being messy. I need different clothes before we go to the club anyway.”

“We can stop in my room before heading to your place to shower,” I told him.

He looked at me, raising an eyebrow. “You’re coming to shower with me?” he questioned, and there were definitely some claws in the statement.

I gave him my best puppy-dog look. “Aftercare,” I murmured.

He sighed dramatically, but there was a little smile on his face as he said, “Alright, grab your shit and let’s go, Sexy Stalker.”

Chapter 13

Quinton

B liss on a Friday night was all energy and chaos. The music blared, the lights were dim, and bodies writhed on the dance floor. I should've been scoping out the bartenders, bouncers, and partiers, but instead I was staring at Liam.

Because... yeah. He was wearing another pair of dress slacks, but his button-up shirt was rolled up at the sleeves, showing off his sexy arms, and the top two buttons were undone, showing just a hint of chest.

He was hot as fuck, and we'd just come in our pants together. I didn't know what was stopping me from grabbing my sexy stalker and riding him off into the sunset (or into an orgasm or two, anyway).

He was just so fucking sweet. He treated me like I was special. The fact that he just held me after orgasms—what the fuck was that? Even my brief forays into dating hadn't had anything resembling cuddles. All the cuddles in my life had been friend-related and not sex-related. I think it was short-circuiting my brain.

Liam turned those piercing blue eyes back to me, because he was actually looking around, and I could see the faintest hint of flames as they landed on my neck. Because yes, I had worn tight jeans and a scoop necked shirt that showed off the love bite on my neck.

I didn't even know I was into biting, but when my sexy stalker had sunk his teeth into

my skin, my orgasm had rolled through my body like electricity. We were definitely not lacking in the chemistry department, that was for damn sure.

Yet I still hesitated on taking him to bed, and I had no idea why. Sex wasn't a big deal. I'd had plenty of it. I knew he would treat me right, and I knew we'd have a fantastic fucking time (pun intended). But something was still holding me back, and it was frustrating. I wanted him. I wanted that dick in my mouth and my hands and my ass, and yet I couldn't seem to take the step to get it.

My sexy stalker didn't seem at all rushed either, and he certainly wasn't pressuring me for sex, which would have made taking the dive easier. Nope, he was just being fucking sweet as can be, asking for aftercare, cuddling me, and sniffing me. It was confusing. Hot, but also confusing.

Liam's eyes were getting more flamy, so I snapped, "Eyes up here, Sexy Stalker."

He looked up at me and shrugged, and I swear to god he was making fucking puppy-dog eyes at me. What the fuck was I supposed to do with that? He was supposed to be the badass supernatural guy here, not the cutesy puppy-dog eyes guy.

"Well?" I asked, lifting my eyebrow. I knew I was being bitchy, but I couldn't help it. Bitchy was my default mode.

Liam didn't seem to mind, because he sniffed the air, then answered, "Lots of murk here, and a couple people who are very, very close to hellbound. No one quite there yet, I don't think."

"Alright, let's go plant the seed with some of the murky ones," I said, getting up.

Liam followed, holding onto my arm. We definitely looked like boyfriends as we made our way up to the bar, and lo and behold, the same bartender that James had

asked to take over the bar when he took me was there.

“Hey, Scotty!” I shouted, grabbing his attention.

He came right over, looking slightly worried. “Hey, man! What the hell happened to you guys? You and James left, and he never even finished his shift!”

I looked at Liam, who shook his head no at me. Huh, so apparently Scotty wasn’t in on it.

“I was drugged,” I said flatly.

“Fuck, man—no way! Let me tell the bouncers, and I’ll let the bartenders know. We all try to be vigilant about that shit...” He was starting to swing his arm up to wave a bouncer over, but I grabbed his hand.

“It was James,” I said.

Scotty stopped and stared at me, disbelieving. I didn’t think he was faking it. “No fucking way.”

“Yup. He drugged my coke. He was trying to take me out the back door to do who knows what, and this beefcake here”—I motioned to Liam, who still held my arm—“managed to be in the right place at the right time. He saw it and hollered that he was calling the cops and was going to report James, and James just fucking dropped me and ran off. This guy took care of me, and we’ve been seeing each other since then. I guess James hasn’t come back?”

Liam and Scotty both looked at me, and I have to admit I was super impressed with my spur of the moment story. It nicely explained why James had disappeared. If James had thought he was caught, he probably would’ve bailed.

“Shit, man. What the fuck,” Scotty said, shaking his head. “James hasn’t been back since that night. No one knew what the hell was going on with the guy.”

“Yeah, and based on how smoothly he had it all down, it probably wasn’t the first time he’s done this,” I added.

Scotty looked around, then he leaned in closer. “You know, James was always the one to help the really drunk people. I just thought... I mean, he just always did it, and I didn’t think anything of it. I thought he was just getting people rides and shit. He always joked about being a good samaritan.”

“Yeah, well, that wasn’t what he was doing,” I snapped.

“Fuck.” Scotty rubbed his hands across his face, and I saw genuine regret there. “If you need me to talk to the police or anything, let me know,” he added.

“Nah. I think they’ve got it covered,” I said.

“I just can’t believe it. I’ll have to let people know. People were really worried when he didn’t come into work on Friday.” Someone hollered for a bartender, and Scotty held his hand up. “I gotta work, but you let me know if you need anything, ok?”

“Thanks, man, I appreciate it,” I answered, and Scotty walked off to take more orders, shaking his head sadly.

The guy sitting in the stool next to me turned to face me when Scotty was gone. He was a cute twink that I’d seen around, but we’d never really partied together. “James always gave me weird vibes,” he said. “Thank god your knight in shining armor was there to save you. It’s a great meet-cute.”

I laughed. “I’m Q. I’ve seen you around.”

“Yeah, you’re usually with a crew of regulars. I’m Danny.”

Liam nodded at him but didn’t introduce himself, and I just smirked. “Don’t mind him, he’s a wee bit feral. I’m still house training him.”

Danny laughed at that, taking a sip of his drink. He then looked at it. “Fuck, I better tell people to be careful, although I don’t think Scotty is shady. But you should have the police check out Todd.” He snorted. “That asshole ‘with the extra D’ is super tight with James.”

We both laughed at Todd’s awful line. I nodded, adding, “Wouldn’t surprise me. James I didn’t expect, but Todd is kind of an ass.”

“Yup,” Danny said. “And I’m not just saying that because we hooked up in the back room once. I know he’s into a new flavor every night, so it’s not like I was expecting much, but the asshole didn’t even give back.” He leaned closer, adding, “And he was a shitty kisser. He took some cute newbie back there a few minutes ago. I almost warned the guy that it wasn’t gonna be worth it.”

“Danny! Bring the drinks!” someone shouted from the dance floor, and Danny got up, adding, “Good luck, man. I hope the cops find James and bust him.”

We both nodded, and Liam led me away from the bar. “Back room?” he asked, and I nodded my head.

I led us over to the same door James had taken me through more than a week ago. Part of me hoped that Todd was up to no good, but part of me also really hoped it was a mutual hook-up, as Danny had implied. I didn’t want to see anyone assaulted by that asshole.

We walked through the door with no issue—not sure who was supposed to be

watching it, but they clearly weren't doing their job. Probably Todd. We made our way down the corridor with Liam occasionally sniffing. I heard the groans behind one of the doors before Liam even had to point at it. It was a room all the way at the back of the club, and when I tried the handle, it wasn't locked.

It was some kind of office, with a chair, a desk, and a couch. Todd had some guy who looked barely legal pressed against the couch, and based on the mauling the guy's face was receiving from Todd's tongue, I didn't doubt the bad kisser story.

I cleared my throat loudly, and Todd looked up, but the other guy just rolled his head drunkenly. He was probably wasted, but obviously that wasn't stopping Todd.

"Time for you to head home, lover boy. Todd and I have business to discuss," I snapped.

"Oh shit, are you, like, his boyfriend?" the guy slurred.

I couldn't help the look of disgust that crossed my face. "I wouldn't fuck him with a ten-foot pole," I answered. "And you're too drunk to be fucking anyone anyway. You got friends out there in the club?"

He waved his phone around, which I could see had a ton of notifications on it. Good, they were looking for him. Todd was staring at us, and he surprisingly didn't interfere when I grabbed drunk boy and led him to the door. I walked him back up the hallway and out into the club, leaving Liam to deal with Todd for the moment. I wasn't out the door more than a minute when someone came over and grabbed drunk boy.

"Watch your friend. He's wasted, and not everyone respects consent," I yelled over the music. The guy looked concerned and nodded, grabbing onto his friend. I turned around and went back through the door leading into the back of the club.

When I got back to the room, Todd was sitting casually on the couch, still mussed, and Liam was standing there in the same place I'd left him. I got the impression no one had spoken a word while I was gone.

"We need to talk about James," I told Todd, watching his face. He didn't look surprised. He also didn't look nervous, and I didn't know what to make of that. Could he just be a normal asshole and not involved?

"Yeah, I guess we do," Todd sighed. He got up, reached into the desk, and pulled out a taser.

"Well, that wasn't on my bingo card for today," I muttered. I saw Liam smirk out of the corner of my eye, but he didn't look concerned. The taser was pointed at him, not at me, so I wasn't sure why he looked so casual.

"You brought muscle, I see. That's ok. I'm my own muscle," Todd bragged.

"You're such an asshole, Todd. And your lines are fucking corny as shit," I added. Ok, maybe not the best response to someone holding a taser, but he was an asshole.

His face twisted a bit at that. "People are looking for you, Q, but no one said anything about your friend. Won't be so hard to incapacitate him, though. Two for the price of one."

"Are you gonna monologue now, Todd? Have you become a cartoon supervillain?" I sneered. "Please, go ahead and share all your evil plans with us. My guess, though, is that you're just a low-level scumbag who doesn't even know what you're caught up in."

Todd looked really pissed now, and he held the taser up higher. "It'll be a pleasure to hand you over, Q."

Liam stepped closer to the taser instead of away. “You really don’t want to do that, Todd.”

“Oh, I really do,” he said, and then there was a popping sound and two little darts shot out of the taser gun, hitting Liam square in the chest.

Todd looked gleeful as Liam fell to the ground. His hand was still holding the taser trigger, and I ran toward him to try and grab it. He pulled pepper spray out of his pocket with his other hand and aimed it at me before I could reach him. I stopped, since I would be no good to Liam if I was blinded. Plus, surely a taser wouldn’t have Liam down for long. I knew he would come and find me, too. I had faith in him. Even if Todd managed to take me, he’d find me.

I looked over at Liam, but he wasn’t moving. I fucking hoped he was ok.

“You think he’s dead? Maybe one more shot will do it,” he said gleefully, and I watched his hand press down on the taser trigger again.

Only at that Liam stood up, and we both turned to stare at him. He looked totally unaffected. He was even grinning a little bit.

“Fuck! What the fuck!” Todd said, pressing the trigger over and over. As Liam stalked toward him, he moved the pepper spray and took aim at Liam’s face, spraying out a stream of liquid straight into his face.

Huh. Pepper spray was actually red, and it came out in a stream. Who knew?

Liam actually smiled wider, and I think he licked his lips, tasting the spray. I just stood there like an idiot trying to process what the fuck was happening. Todd was yelling, and Liam caught him around the neck, cutting off his shouts, and lifted him up into the air.

Todd's feet were flailing, his face was turning red, and Liam just casually looked over at me. "You ok, hellcat?" he asked.

"Well, I wasn't the one tased and pepper sprayed, so yeah, I'd say I'm just dandy," I snarked.

I wanted to facepalm myself. Yeah, supportive and empathetic were apparently not my strong suits in a crisis situation. But seriously, what the fuck? I thought I was pretty calm considering.

Liam smiled wider. "I'm glad it wasn't a gun. Bullets are a bitch to expel. Electricity and pepper spray, though? That's like a shot of espresso to the system. Yummy and invigorating."

Okey-dokey then. Definitely wasn't gonna forget that Liam wasn't a human again.

"Let's say we take him back to the house for a little interrogation?" Liam asked.

"Ok, first of all, you aren't interrogating anyone and getting blood in my house. Second of all, I thought we couldn't interrogate murky souls," I answered.

"Oh no, we have a torture basement set up in the main house. I would never cause a mess in your house, hellcat. And as for Todd here"—he gave the flailing guy a rough shake—"he just tipped the balance into full rottenness. Sometimes it only takes one action. Trying to kill me and kidnap you just sucked out any hope for redemption. There's no turning back for Todd, so he's all ours."

I wasn't even gonna comment on the torture room. Nope. Not gonna ask. I guessed I'd see soon enough, anyway, so I gestured to my sexy stalker to lead the way. He did something to Todd—not sure what—and the guy went limp. He cleaned off his face with some napkins and a bottle of water, but the shirt was probably a lost cause. Then

he threw Todd over a shoulder and peeked out the door, motioning me to follow as we headed out to the car.

Liam dumped him in the trunk, which quite conveniently had some duct tape. “Wanna drive?” he asked, like we were heading to the park or something. “I can erase the camera footage while you do.”

I nodded and got in the driver’s side, and Liam handed me the keys and grabbed a laptop from the back. He got to work on his magic, and I concentrated on driving exactly four miles over the speed limit to get home. I really did not want to get pulled over, and I thought I’d read somewhere that cops didn’t bother with less than five miles per hour over the limit, but they would get suspicious if you went too slow.

I didn’t doubt that Liam could handle the cops, but I really didn’t want to see it happen firsthand.

Liam was closing the laptop as we pulled up the driveway. “Done. All traces of our presence at Bliss tonight have been erased. Pull into the middle house driveway where the rest of the guys live. We’ll use that basement.”

“There’s more than one torture basement?” I asked.

He looked at me as we stopped. “Of course. There are five of us. Six if Wilder comes. We can’t all be sharing the same space. Not that we always bring hellbound souls here, so don’t worry about that. We usually take care of business in the field.”

Liam got out then, and I saw someone jump down off the porch as Liam walked around to the trunk. It was Corbin, who I hadn’t really spent much time with.

I guessed that was about to change. What better way to get to know someone than to watch them torture someone? I followed the hellhounds and the unconscious Todd

into the house and down a set of stairs.

The torture basement was... not as creepy as I expected. It was clean. No dried blood everywhere, although apparently the windows were blacked out and there was a soundproof area. Todd got tied to a chair, still unconscious.

Corbin had a crow on his shoulder, and once Todd was secured, it hopped down onto the man's shoulder and started pecking at his face.

"If that thing starts eating his eyes, I'm out of here. I'm squeamish," I announced.

Liam walked over and put an arm around me, and Corbin smiled slightly.

"We're just waking him up for you," Corbin said. "Then we'll leave you two to your date."

I sputtered at the same time Todd started moaning and thrashing his head, and the crow cawed loudly in his ear before flying back onto Corbin's shoulder. Corbin gave a little wave and started back up the steps.

"You guys are fucking weird," I muttered.

Liam just shrugged, watching Todd. "How squeamish do you get?" he asked. "I don't want to upset you, but I do owe Todd a little retribution. He did ruin my shirt with pepper spray."

I laughed at that, leaning up to give Liam a kiss. "If you want to beat him up a little, that's just fine. I have some questions for him. If more than that is required... Well, I may head upstairs for a break while you do the nasty stuff. Not that Todd doesn't deserve it, but I don't need to see anyone's insides or anything."

Liam smiled. “My pleasure, hellcat. Lead away with your questions.”

Todd started whimpering as we both walked toward him.

Chapter 14

Liam

“Well that’s just gross,” Quinton murmured as Todd peed himself.

I agreed. I had tried to keep bodily fluids to a minimum for my little hellcat since he was apparently squeamish. It didn’t take much to get Todd talking, at least, and Quinton hadn’t seemed to mind the light beating or the various threats of torture.

Quinton was actually rather inventive with torture ideas—he had threatened to cut off Todd’s dick and shove it down his throat, rip out his tongue, pull off each of his fingernails, and cut open his sack and remove his testicles to juggle with them (he had turned around and made a vomiting face at me when he threatened that one, and it had been quite difficult not to laugh).

Quinton seemed to enjoy the threatening part, and my hellcat definitely let his claws out on poor Todd. I didn’t blame him in the least for not wanting to get those claws dirty. After all, that’s what I was for.

“I think we have enough for now,” I stated, wrinkling my nose at the smell of urine and leading Quinton over to the stairs.

Quinton looked at me, raising an eyebrow. “Are you gonna come back down and torture him some more later while I’m sleeping?”

“If you’d like,” I said as we started upstairs. “He’s hellbound, and it wouldn’t be a

hardship. And honestly, once he's dead, the really horrific torture will start. I typically don't do much wet work—it's very messy—but if you have any requests or want me to carry out any of your threats, it can be arranged."

Quinton gagged a little at that, which made me smile. He was so cute.

If he didn't want to see messy torture, that suited me just fine. I didn't much enjoy making a mess of things. Psychological torture, like the threats Quinton had given out, had been quite effective, especially since Todd seemed to sense that I would do anything my little hellcat wanted.

With James's disappearance, Todd had been promoted in the human trafficking ring. His final decision to try to kill me and kidnap Quinton had sealed his soul's hellbound fate. Unfortunately for us, he hadn't learned very much in his short time in the more inner circle. He had a contact, just like James, and I could only hope that we could surprise this one and get him in for an interrogation before he went off the grid.

"So what's next? Going after his contact, I'm assuming?" Quinton asked as we reached the kitchen.

Corbin was lounging in one of the chairs, feeding a crow. He gave us both a nod. "Would you like assistance? Dexter is with Toby, and Jude went over to keep Aiden company. And to steal some baked goods, I think."

I looked speculatively at Corbin, then turned to face Quinton. He had every right to want to be a part of this, but at the same time, I thought about his mortality. Breaking into a hellbound soul's home presented a bit more danger than going to a club.

Quinton sighed and rolled his eyes. "Don't worry, Sexy Stalker, I'm not going to insist on going with you to capture the bad guys. I don't expel bullets, and tasers and pepper spray do not sound like a good time to me."

“You got tased? Lucky,” Corbin murmured from the table. “Bullets are no fun, though.”

I ignored him. “I’ll bring him back here if you’d like to be in on the interrogation. Hopefully he’ll have a few more leads for us.”

“I want you to burn it all down,” Quinton insisted. “Every last fucker who had any part in this.”

Corbin cleared his throat loudly from the table, and his crow even cawed. It was a different bird from earlier, I thought. Sometimes I could tell by the caws.

“What do you have to say, Crow Daddy?” Quinton snapped, turning to stare at him.

I tried not to laugh, and Corbin and his crow both looked disgruntled.

“It’s just that human trafficking is sort of like human snot when you get sick. You blow and blow, and more just keeps coming. It’s almost impossible to get rid of it entirely, because more just gets made before you can clean out what was there to start,” Corbin explained.

“Well that’s a fucking gross analogy,” Quinton said.

“Gross, but true. And tracing human trafficking back to its source would require leaving the country. It would also be like trying to trace the origin of the cold from its original infector.” Corbin shrugged and the crow hopped up onto his shoulder, staring at Quinton.

“What the fuck is he talking about?” Quinton snapped, looking at me.

“Chances are that this ring is part of a bigger ring,” I explained. “We can probably

trace down the people who are connected to this area and shut that down, but there are layers. Shutting down this layer won't shut down all the other layers. The victims are more than likely not kept on US soil—traffickers often smuggle them out of the country.”

“So, what, we shut it down in this area, but then whoever was already kidnapped is just shit out of luck? We can't save anyone?” he asked.

“Not at all. There are hellhounds in other territories. I have contacts across the globe, and once we start learning who some of the victims are and where they went, we'll put other packs on it. We'll work to shut down this layer, and we'll give the other layers to people who are familiar with those areas,” I reasoned.

Quinton frowned, thinking it over. “You have a list of a couple of the missing guys already from your internet sleuthing. You think they can be found?”

“I do,” I answered. “I think we can shut it down here, recover who we can, and pass it along to the next pack to handle. It's what we tend to do.”

I didn't know what shape those men would be in, but I didn't mention that to Quinton. I also didn't think we'd have that many victims from this area. The nearby city wasn't huge, and an extensive operation wouldn't have gone unnoticed by the humans. I had confidence that with my skills and connections, we could find out what happened to those people who were taken.

Quinton looked at me. “It could've been me, Liam. It could be someone I danced with or even hooked up with out there going through god knows what. I don't want to leave them out there if we can save them.”

“We won't,” I promised, leaning down to kiss his forehead.

He breathed out. “Alright. You and Corbin go get this guy. Get names if you can. Let me know what happens. I don’t need to watch the ‘wet work,’ because that’s just gross, but I want to know everything he says. Ok? And I’m helping you do the computer shit.”

I kissed his lips lightly. “Of course, my little hellcat.”

I think he actually hissed at me (so adorable), and then he was turning and heading out the door.

I walked to a window and watched as he made his way to the other property, and when I heard the door slam shut I turned around to face Corbin.

He was smiling, and the crow was hopping excitedly along his shoulder. “Time to hunt.”

“Best bagels in town,” Corbin stated, taking a bite of his bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich.

I rumbled in agreement. There was nothing like a good breakfast sandwich after a night of torture. This shop was the best—the bagel was fresh, the egg perfectly fried, the cheese melty, and the bacon not too crispy but not fatty. Still, nothing beat Cass’s shop for coffee and Aiden’s pastries.

Corbin hadn’t wanted to venture over there, though, and possibly get a million questions. Cassius was a nosy oracle, and he was still probably bitter that we’d rehomed Aiden and Quinton. So instead, we had come here, and we were sitting on a picnic table outside the bagel shop, eating breakfast and watching the sun rise. The only thing that could make the morning more perfect would be if Quinton were by my side.

“You think your mate will be happy with what we got?” Corbin asked.

Rather than answer him, I looked over. “Mate?” I asked.

“Probably,” Corbin shrugged.

Well, that was about as helpful as a pop-up ad on a website. I sighed and thought about the info we had. Our hellbound soul had quite a few names for us, and I was able to track down a decent amount of information through his computers while Corbin did some wet work.

Corbin was right that most of the victims went off the grid to a third-party seller. Apparently only one guy had the information for the third-party seller. That guy also happened to be one of the ones who gave them the victim types, and sometimes even chose the victims—probably based on what sellers were looking for.

Unfortunately for us, this contact knew enough to stay anonymous. So we had a list of seven guys to hunt down who were involved in the ring, and that appeared to be our current layer. It probably wouldn’t be too hard, especially if everyone pitched in. We could finish that in a night or two.

The problem was finding out exactly who the contact was so we could trace them to the third-party seller. Our guy from last night was sure that no one in the circle knew. Those guys did all the messy work, drugging people and delivering them to locations, but they were all puppets being told what to do. They handed over people and got cash for it.

“I think Quinton will want to find the contact person,” I finally answered.

“Especially if he wants to find the victims,” Corbin commented.

“Yeah. They are the key to tracing the victims and finding the next layer of the ring. Taking down this layer will be easy, but the contact can just set up shop elsewhere. All the guys we’re getting so far are just expendable muscle,” I mused.

Corbin finished his last bite and hopped up. I followed suit, heading to the car. I was suddenly itchy to get back to Quinton. I hoped to catch him before his shift at the coffee shop.

We drove back in silence, enjoying the dawning morning and the peace of town. Corbin offered to fill in the other guys, and I agreed. He knew where I was heading when we stopped the car.

It wasn’t until I got to the door that I hesitated. I didn’t want to startle Aiden, and I could hear footsteps inside, so I guessed he was up. Was I supposed to knock? Usually I just walked in, but they were expecting me, or Aiden was in his room and I was coming to see Quinton.

I didn’t have long to ponder before the door was pulled open.

“Hey Creepy Stalker, you can come in,” Aiden said, turning and walking back towards the kitchen. He kept talking as he walked. “I got up early to head into the shop and get some baking done, and Cass is picking me up. Q has off today, so he’s still sleeping.”

“Ah, ok,” I answered. Then, because I couldn’t help myself, I added, “I was upgraded to Sexy Stalker days ago.”

Aiden just laughed. “Yes, you were. But I’m not calling you that. And you were creeping outside the door, so it seemed to fit.”

“I didn’t want to startle you,” I admitted.

Aiden's face softened. "I appreciate that. I appreciate all you guys, just so you know. You're looking out for us, and you don't expect anything in return. And I know Q has all sorts of walls up, but he really appreciates you all too. Especially you."

Aiden handed me some type of pastry, and although I had just eaten, I certainly wouldn't turn down Aiden's baked goods. We both ate in silence for a minute. I thought about Corbin saying Aiden was pack, too. Quinton felt like he was mine, but I also felt a kinship with Aiden. I did want to protect him.

I had information about Aiden, and I didn't want to upset him, but he probably needed to know. This was the problem with humans. You never knew how much to tell them or how they would react. But Aiden had been reasonable about everything so far, even if I knew he had a lot of trauma.

"They're looking for you," I told Aiden.

His face paled, his eyes widened, and the air left his lungs in a rush. Well, shit. Apparently this was one of those things I maybe shouldn't have told him.

"Who?" he whispered, although he seemed to know.

"Your blood relations. Toby has told us all that is not what constitutes 'family,' and they don't seem very familial," I answered.

"I..." Aiden trailed off and sat in his seat. He looked towards Quinton's bedroom, and his eyes got wet.

"I know this is distressing news," I said, unsure how to make him feel better. Perhaps I should call for Quinton? Or even, god forbid, Toby? Surely another human could deal with the tears better than me.

“You’ll take care of him, right? When I’m gone?” Aiden asked.

I was confused for a split second, and then I was angry. Aiden thought he should leave? Was that why he was distressed? Of all the idiotic, human stupidities...

“Aiden, where the fuck do you think you’re going?” I asked, and yes, maybe I was a wee bit angry. But really, we were hellhounds , for demon’s sake. “Do you think we can’t protect you? Did you really think a few humans, no matter how wealthy or dangerous, are any match for us?” I growled.

“Uhh...” Aiden started, staring at my eyes.

Well, yes, I’m sure they were on fire, but really. “I’m sorry, but it’s rather insulting that you have so little faith in us,” I muttered, trying to get myself under control.

Aiden was speechless, but at least some of his color had come back.

“Like we can’t handle ourselves,” I muttered. “Like dealing with your blood relations is beyond our ability. It’s completely absurd. I could bankrupt their accounts tomorrow. I could hack my way into their databases and cause them utter havoc. Never mind the fact that you act like I can’t hide your whereabouts. Do you think I’m that much of an amateur?”

Aiden mumbled something, but I was on a bit of a rant now. “And really, do you think Quinton would just let you run off? Do you think any of us would just let you go it alone? Corbin said you’re pack now, and he would know. And you’re certainly Quinton’s pack, and Quinton is mine , so that means you’re ours . So if you go somewhere or sneak off into the night to try and spare us trouble”—I snorted at the thought, because we loved trouble—“then I will hunt you down and bring you back. Is that clear?”

Aiden was still staring at me, and his mouth was open a little bit.

Hmm, maybe that was a bit much. I remembered a bit belatedly that Aiden had been traumatized. Maybe I came on too strong?

“Of course, I would hunt you down in a very nice way and bring you back willingly,” I said, nodding. “Toby always says consent is important. And if you didn’t want to come back then we’d all just follow you around or something. Although we like it here, so we’d all prefer it if you'd stay.”

Aiden still didn’t answer me. I wasn’t sure where else to go with the conversation. Had I broken him? Could you break humans with bad news? Did they short circuit like computers? It did seem he was frozen. Was there a human reset button? Did he need a hard reboot?

“Should I wake Quinton?” I asked. “I’m unsure how to handle your current distress.”

But Aiden’s eyes got teary again at that, he walked around the kitchen island to me, and he pulled me into a tight hug.

I stood frozen, unsure what to do. I finally hesitantly put a hand up to gently pat his back.

“This is... awkward,” I stated.

“Shut up, Creepy Stalker. You’re getting a hug. ‘Humans’ do that sort of thing,” he mumbled into my shirt. He pulled away and wiped his eyes, taking a deep breath. “Ok. Ok then. I knew they were probably looking, but I still panicked. But I’m ok now, and I’m not going anywhere. Ok?”

“Yes, that is preferable,” I told him.

“Does anyone else know?” he asked me.

“I have been informed that disclosing information I find from ‘spying’ on people who are not evil is not to be shared with anyone,” I replied stiffly. Toby had been quite firm about that fact.

Aiden breathed out again, nodding. “Ok. I’m ok.”

There was a lot of repetition of ok, and I wasn’t sure if that meant he was actually ok or he wasn’t actually ok but he was saying he was.

Humans. So difficult.

I heard a car outside, and Aiden smiled at me. “That’s Cass. I’m gonna go bake, and I have therapy later, so I’ll be ok. I was just surprised, even though I shouldn’t have been. Plus Cass will probably say something to cheer me up, because he always seems to know when I need it.”

Aiden gave me another brief hug—it was still odd, but it wasn’t bad—and then he walked out the door, shutting it behind him. I heard Cass’s voice say good morning and Aiden get in the car, at which point I turned around to head into Quinton’s room.

Only Quinton was standing in his doorway, looking at me. “Well, that’s an interesting sight to wake up to,” he mumbled.

He was adorable, all mussed up from sleeping, his chest bare and his sweatpants slung low on his hips. He also looked pissy, but I wasn’t sure if that was because Aiden had hugged me or because that was his morning face. I didn’t think he would be jealous of a hug, but Quinton did like to be unpredictable.

Rather than say more, however, he shuffled off to the bathroom, ignoring me

completely and shutting the door behind him. I heard him pee, flush, and then wash his hands before he stumbled back out.

He looked at me, looked at the clock, looked at the door, mumbled, “Too early,” and stumbled back into his bedroom.

Decisions. If mornings were for caffeine and sass, I could make him coffee and bring it in, or I could go in and face the possibility of a thorough sassing. I enjoyed being sassed by Quinton, so that certainly wouldn’t be a hardship.

As I followed him into the bedroom, I tried not to think about what else mornings were sometimes for.

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Chapter 15

Quinton

It was too early. I stumbled back into bed and wrapped myself burrito style in my blankets. Liam came in, stripped down to his boxers, and climbed in next to me. I stared at him blearily from my cocoon of blankets.

He scooched closer.

I might have hissed a bit at him before I shut my eyes. Too early. His body pressed closer to mine, and I meant to snark at him, but he was rumbling softly, and it was kind of soothing, and I drifted back to sleep.

When I woke up again and opened my eyes, I turned my head to the side and screamed.

“What the fuck, Liam!” I hissed. His face was like an inch from mine, and he was just staring at me. It was like a horror movie.

He smiled at me, totally unfazed by my yelling or cursing at him.

“Good morning, my little hellcat,” he murmured.

I turned my head, trying to wake my brain up. Liam’s legs were pressing against mine under the covers. I was laying on my back, and he was cuddled up to my side, his body keeping me cozy and warm. His bare chest was pressed against my side, and

his arm was around me. He started gently petting my chest, like I really was a cat. I almost snorted at the thought. He rubbed across a nipple, and it felt really nice.

Like, really nice.

Which is when I realized his hard on was pressed against my thigh. I had morning wood, but I hadn't been thinking about sex. Until now, that was. I didn't think Liam had sex on the brain either. He didn't seem to be grazing my nipple on purpose—he was just petting me. He wasn't thrusting into my hip or anything with his dick either.

Not that I would have complained.

I moved my hips against him, and he rumbled in pleasure. He continued to gently pet me. I thrust against him again, my hips rubbing against his hard on, and I heard his exhalation of breath.

He still didn't take the hint. I huffed in annoyance.

“What does a guy have to do to get a morning orgasm?” I grumbled.

“Oh, is it morning sex time?” he asked, sounding eager and pleased.

“Well, you made me horny,” I complained. “You could at least do something about it.”

“Clothes off?” he asked.

I turned my head to look at him and rolled my eyes. “Duh, yeah.”

Liam leaned in to kiss me.

“Morning breath!” I hissed, covering his lips with my hand.

I moved my hand away only to see Liam smiling at me.

“I like your morning breath. I like all your smells,” he said.

“Ok, that’s just fucking weird, Sexy Stalker,” I complained. I knew I was in full snark mode, but I couldn’t help it. It was early . Fuck. At this rate, he’d be storming out in a huff. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d offended a guy with my attitude.

“You’re adorable,” he murmured, nuzzling into my neck.

His lips and his scruff sent tingles down my spine as he licked and nipped at the skin. My mouth just wouldn’t seem to stop, though.

“I am not adorable. I am full of attitude and sass,” I muttered.

He pushed off the covers and kissed his way to my chest, licking at a nipple.

I gasped but kept talking. “I am a grumpy motherfucker. A force of darkness who can destroy joy with a single barbed comment.”

He chuckled, nibbling down to my stomach. I smacked his head when he hit a ticklish spot.

“I am violence incarnate. I am—Fuck, Liam, what are you—” I gasped, unable to finish the sentence, because Liam had just pulled my pants down and swallowed my cock like it was his favorite candy.

Holy shit. He deepthroated me, swallowing around the head of my dick, and all I could do was moan at the tight, wet heat on my cock. He pulled off, licking around

the head, tonguing underneath it, and his hand gently caressed my balls.

“Fuck,” I muttered again. “I want... Fuck, Liam,” I moaned.

He was stroking my cock with his hand as pleasure rushed through me. “What do you want, my little hellcat?”

“Get your dick up here, Sexy Stalker, but don’t stop what you’re doing,” I demanded.

Liam chuckled and hopped off the bed, shucking off his pants, then pulling mine completely off. He climbed back on the bed facing opposite me, the perfect 69 position.

I’d seen his dick, sort of, in the shower, and I’d felt it, but I hadn’t really had an up close and personal view. It was a beautiful dick, thick and hard with a drop of precum on the tip. I stroked it, enjoying the feeling of the silky hardness in my hand. Liam sucked my cock back into his mouth, his tongue twirling around the head again, and I moaned, squeezing his cock in return.

I leaned in and licked at his dick, teasing him like I was licking a lollipop. When I finally put him in my mouth, he rumbled and grabbed my ass with both hands, pulling my dick deeper into his throat. Holy shit, the rumbling was like a warm, wet vibrator on my dick.

My mouth was full of hard cock, and I slurped and sucked on it, bobbing up and down. Liam’s mouth was on me, his tongue flicking at the sensitive part of my cock and swirling around, then he sucked me back down.

“Fuck,” I groaned. I’d forgotten how fucking good this felt.

Liam hummed in agreement, and then he used his hands to push my hips in and out,

my dick passing over his lips and into the back of his throat, then out again, his tongue swirling the whole time. He encouraged me to fuck into his mouth, and my hips jerked. God, I was gonna fucking come, and I hadn't even had a proper suck.

I squeezed the base of his dick in my hand and sucked him back down, going until he reached my throat. I gagged a bit, but I stayed there, breathing through my nose and pressing my tongue against the hardness in my mouth. I was rewarded with another vibrating rumble that I felt down to my toes.

It wasn't my best blow job, because damn was Liam distracting, but based on his rumblings, he didn't mind. I was sloppy, spit coating his dick as I frantically sucked him. The sounds of wet slurping, our moaning, and his rumblings only heightened my arousal.

I was surrounded by Liam. His scent, his skin, his heat—he was everywhere. He smelled like burning leaves on an autumn day, and his precum was sweet and smoky in my mouth. I jerked as his tongue did something to my dick, holy shit, and I felt pressure building in my toes and the base of my spine.

I moaned frantically around Liam's dick, trying to warn him of my impending orgasm, but at the same time I couldn't stop thrusting into his mouth. His hands were gripping and kneading my ass, and his fingers grazed my hole, making me groan. He pushed me deep into his throat and let his finger just barely enter me, and that was it. Electricity was spiraling out as my orgasm made my entire body shake.

Liam's dick spurted cum into my mouth a second later, and I swear to god he tasted like campfire s'mores. I suckled frantically, still pumping my dick into his mouth through my own orgasm. He rumbled, sucking and spurting into my mouth. We were like a loop of pleasure.

It felt like it lasted forever, but eventually his mouth eased on me, and I realized my

hips weren't thrusting and his dick wasn't spurting cum anymore. I pulled off and rested my forehead against his hip.

"Holy fucking shit, Liam," I murmured.

Before I could do much moving, he flipped around, facing me, and I didn't even have time to worry about morning breath before his lips were on mine, his tongue in my mouth, licking at me. I groaned again, and I swear to god if I hadn't just come, I think I would have been hard again at his frenzied kissing. It was like he was devouring me, and I just held on for the ride.

When he pulled away, I gasped for breath, and he dipped down to my neck, biting that same spot he'd bitten before. I don't know what the fuck happened, but I felt like I had another orgasm just from his teeth in my neck. Sensation overwhelmed my body, and I held onto him, moaning and crying out in pleasure. My entire body was shaking, and it was almost too much. I grabbed onto Liam and rode it out, stars exploding behind my eyes.

I may have actually blacked out for a second. I don't even know, but it was like an out of body experience.

Eventually I came back to myself, cuddled in his arms, his lips gently pressing kisses onto my neck. Holy shit.

"You broke me," I finally mumbled.

My sexy stalker chuckled and held me tighter. I basked in the afterglow, enjoying the cuddling.

That lasted about three minutes before my brain came back online. Liam had been out all night. Then I woke up to him and Aiden having some kind of moment. I had

questions.

I tried, I really did, to keep my mouth shut. We were in our sex afterglow. Liam liked to cuddle. We had a passionate moment, and...

“Did you torture and kill people last night or what?” I blurted out. “Details, please, although not graphic ones.”

I braced myself for some grumbling, or a huff of annoyance, only Liam picked his head up and kissed my nose. “You’re so adorable,” he smiled.

I frowned at him. “I am not. I am attitude and sass. Violence incarnate, remember?”

“And it’s adorable,” he reiterated, kissing my lips gently this time. The urgency was gone, and it was just a soft and slow kiss.

And asshole that I was, I leaned back and smacked his shoulder. “Details!” I demanded.

Liam laughed again, and then he explained the night in detail (without the bloody bits, thank goodness). They’d gotten quite a bit of information from the guy, including most of his associates. There was one unknown who flew under the radar and was apparently quite smart about things, whereas these guys were apparently kinda stupid.

We pulled on boxers and migrated to the kitchen when my stomach started growling, and my sexy stalker put coffee on without even being asked. He fixed me a cup and got me a muffin of Aiden’s while he continued explaining.

It was all so fucking domestic. And sweet.

“What the fuck was going on with Aiden and you this morning?” I asked, cutting him off mid-sentence.

Ok, so I didn’t know how to handle domestic and sweet. It wasn’t even like I was jealous or anything—I did not at all think that there was something weird between Aiden and Liam. I was happy to see Aiden hugging Liam. It meant Aiden accepted him and trusted him, and I wanted that. Because I trusted my sexy stalker, and I wanted him sticking around.

Despite my total trust, however, Liam looked sheepish. I crossed my arms. Oh, this was gonna be good, I could already tell.

“Ah, well, yes, I may have, ah, informed Aiden of some... complicated news from his life before his kidnapping, and the news was, perhaps, maybe, a wee bit distressing to him,” Liam admitted.

I just stared at him and raised my eyebrows.

“Toby has informed me that I cannot impart information I find while ‘spying’ on people who aren’t evil, but I don’t think he meant I should keep anything from you ,” Liam said, like I was somehow special.

Which yeah, ok, gave me a little thrill. I raised my hand, though, cutting him off. “Aiden will tell me whatever he needs to about his life whenever he’s ready.” I didn’t need Liam blurting out Aiden’s secrets. “How distressed was he?” I asked.

“He may have hinted at leaving, but don’t worry, I let him know that I would follow him and bring him back. Not against his will, of course, because I know he has trauma. So I told him if he wouldn’t be willingly brought back, we would all just follow him around.” Liam actually looked proud of himself at that statement.

Fucking supernatural weirdos. “He’s not still thinking of leaving, is he?” I asked.

“No, he seemed to accept that. Then he leaked a bit and hugged me. It was odd but nice,” Liam admitted.

I stared at him.

“Did you just say ‘he leaked a bit’?” I asked.

“From his eyes,” Liam added helpfully.

For fuck’s sake.

Then Liam stuck my coffee cup under my face, saying, “More caffeine to go with your sass.”

I looked at him, but I swear he was totally sincere and being fucking sweet again. I huffed but grabbed the mug. “Fine. Let’s get to work, though. Take me to the batcave and let me see pics of all these guys.”

Liam dutifully led me to the bedroom for us to get dressed, although I swear he mumbled, “We do not turn into bats.”

I recognized two of the guys. One was another bouncer, and the other was a manager at the bar who I’d seen frequently. The manager, Dev, was friendly and always stopped to chat with our group. I thought the other guys might’ve looked vaguely familiar, but that could’ve been my imagination. You see a lot of faces at a club, and they all blend together.

“How involved do you want to be?” Liam asked.

I thought it over. I knew what he was asking—did I want in on every asshole? I also knew that if his group split up, they'd be more likely to take care of these guys before anyone had any warning. He'd said they could take care of them all in a night if they needed to.

"I don't need to be in on the 'wet work,' as you call it, and if they don't know anything else, then I don't need to have any involvement. I really want to get the mysterious guy who is placing the orders for people. He seems to be the main person behind it," I mused.

Liam nodded his agreement. "Unfortunately, it seems he covers his tracks very well. He could be someone across the country or he could be someone working at the club. He's only ever communicated with people through encrypted methods. His familiarity with some of the victims makes me think he's not across the country, but I could pinpoint people in a club from camera images, so who knows."

"Will you bring them back here?" I asked.

"Because we don't want warnings going out, we would probably dispatch them relatively quickly after finding out what we can. But if you wanted someone brought back, that could certainly be arranged," Liam answered.

I looked at the picture of Dev. Another guy I'd trusted and been friendly with. I'd missed out on what happened to James. I didn't really care about the other guys—I didn't know them. I wanted them gone, yes, but it didn't feel personal. Dev felt personal. He'd known me. We'd chatted. I'd been a regular. He'd bought our table drinks.

"I wanna talk to Dev. The rest I don't care about. Find out what you guys can and... do your thing. But Dev I'd like to be involved with, if it's possible. I feel like as manager of the club, he'd know the most, too." I shrugged.

Liam leaned in and kissed me. “Whatever you want, hellcat. I’ll get everyone together, fill them in, and we’ll hunt tonight.”

I leaned my forehead against his, then pulled away when it was getting too mushy and looked back at the computer screen. Liam started pulling up information on each of the guys.

I felt like I was in over my head, and not with the human trafficking shit. I was falling for Liam. Somehow, my sexy stalker had hacked his way into my frozen little heart, and I had no idea what to do about that.

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Chapter 16

Liam

Quinton and I spent the day researching with a break for lunch, and in the afternoon we picked up Aiden from work. After I dropped them off at their place (with a kiss and a “shoo” from Quinton), I met with the pack to discuss strategies for getting the hellbound mortals.

“Best if we split up, obviously, although we need to leave someone here to watch over the humans,” Jude reasoned. “I’m happy to take the first shift and go out later for my hunt.”

“I can dispatch one and then come back and relieve Jude,” Dexter said.

We divvied up the hellbound, and I took the manager. I didn’t expect securing him and bringing him back would take that long, but if Quinton and I were absorbed with him in the basement, it would still be good for a hellhound to be a lookout for the humans. We agreed that aside from the manager, the rest would be taken care of in the field. In a larger sweep like this, it made more sense.

“Atlas will be happy to hunt, too,” Corbin stated.

I hadn’t seen much of Atlas, and he avoided my cameras in the woods pretty well, but I knew Corbin could track him down with crows. He seemed to be generally staying in the area in his hellhound form.

“Point me in his direction, and I’ll debrief him on his targets,” I told Corbin.

With that, we set off. Jude went to find Toby, and he said they’d drop in to see Aiden and Quinton. I guessed they were hoping to be included in dinner plans, and I shot Quinton a text to warn him and Aiden. I had no doubt that if Aiden was uncomfortable, Quinton would kick Toby and Jude out.

I headed to the woods behind the houses, setting off in a swift run in the direction Corbin had indicated. Occasionally a crow cawed at me, and I adjusted course as necessary. I could smell Atlas’s hellhound, but that meant little. He’d been all over these woods—the entire place smelled of him.

When I happened upon a clearing, I was mildly surprised to see the structure of a cabin. It looked like the frame was completely finished, and I guessed the inside was a work in progress.

“This is public land, you know,” I stated, confident that Atlas was nearby. I wasn’t surprised when he sauntered out of the woods in his hellhound form, but he changed forms to converse with me.

“You’ll fix that,” he grunted.

I sighed. “I was hoping to fix that before you guys built a cabin. This is pretty far back, too. Running electricity and water might be a pain.”

Atlas merely grunted, staring at me. Then he smirked. “You’re just mad you didn’t know.”

I growled in response. He wasn’t totally wrong. I liked knowing everything that was going on, and I had wanted to figure out the logistics with the property first. But it was pointless, because my guess was that Atlas had started work on this place before

Jude even mentioned the idea to me. Atlas was like that—all action, no talk.

“I would have helped,” I muttered instead.

Atlas just shrugged, then he sat on the first step leading up to the door of the cabin. It was really a nice place—not a small place, like I had been thinking of building. It had a porch and looked like it would probably hold two bedrooms pretty easily. It would be a good place for Atlas—nearby, but far enough away to give him privacy.

“You’re gonna get splinters in your ass,” I commented. I was used to Atlas walking around naked, but no one wanted splinters, and this was new construction. “And I’m not pulling them out, either.”

Atlas just laughed at me.

I sighed. “You’re going to need clothes if you want to hunt. We have a ring of human traffickers to bring down. You want in?”

Atlas perked up and nodded. He walked inside, and I followed. I explained who his targets were going to be while he got dressed. The inside was covered in sawdust, tools, and construction equipment, but it was coming along nicely. They already had the floors in and the framework for cabinets done. Atlas kept some clothes in a garbage bag, probably so they didn’t get filthy from the construction.

When I was done debriefing him, I turned to head out the front door. I didn’t expect conversation from Atlas, and I was ready to go find the manager.

“The humans?” he asked before I could go.

I turned back around, confused. “What humans?”

“The ones living here. They can’t be left alone.”

Aww, Atlas was worried about our human packmates. That was nice, if unexpected.

“Jude is taking the first shift, then he’s heading out when Dexter gets back.”

Atlas nodded, and I headed out, swiftly jogging towards the houses. I was aiming for the cars, but somehow my feet took a detour of their own, and I ended up at the back house. I could hear Toby, Jude, Aiden, and Quinton all inside, and it sounded like they were all fine.

I hesitated outside the front door until Jude yelled, “Q, Liam’s looking for you.”

Of course Jude knew I was there. A minute later Quinton came out the front door, shutting it behind him. He was smirking. “Did you come for a good luck kiss, my sexy stalker?”

“Yes,” I answered. I hadn’t realized that was what I needed, but I certainly wouldn’t turn it down.

He leaned up, grabbed my face, and pulled me down for a kiss. He tasted delicious, and I had to resist the urge to deepen the kiss even more.

“Hurry back with our guy,” he muttered. “Toby keeps looking at me funny, and I swear he’s trying to get me alone for some reason. I don’t know what kind of freaky questions he’s going to ask. Or, god forbid, what sort of weird plans he has for us to become better friends.” Quinton rolled his eyes at that, and I laughed.

“I will. Be safe, hellcat,” I murmured. I probably would have stood there staring at him, but Quinton turned around and went back in the house, shutting the door in my face.

He was mine. I nodded my head once. Yes, he was definitely mine. My mate. My pack. Dexter had said something about mating humans, and I'd have to find out the details. I'd ask Quinton if he wanted that, of course, because humans liked to be asked that sort of thing, but I figured I had a few decades to convince him if he said no.

I was his sexy stalker. I'd wear him down until he agreed. My hellhound grumbled in satisfaction. We were going on a hunt, and Quinton was ours—life was a beautiful thing.

It didn't take long to hunt down the manager. He was working a shift at a club, and a text message from one of his current lovers was easy enough to fake to get him out the back alley door. When he walked out, I incapacitated him and gave him a light sedative since I knew Quinton wouldn't want to wait to interrogate him. I put him in the trunk and headed back to Paradise Falls, excited to bring Quinton his gift.

Of course, it wasn't quite that easy. When I got back into town, lights and sirens flashed behind me. I looked at the speedometer. Yup, I'd been speeding. I sighed in frustration at myself; I was usually so careful.

I really hated getting pulled over when there was a body in the trunk, especially if the owner of the body was still alive. At least dead bodies wouldn't wake up and make noise.

I pulled over to the side of the road and reached over to shut the computer on the passenger seat that had the cameras in Quinton's apartment on screen. I didn't think that would be easy to explain either.

Maybe the cop would be a crooked one and I could deal with him and move on. I opened my window, but no scent of rot filled my nose. In fact, the cop smelled like sunshine—just my luck. He walked up, and yup, he was definitely a good soul.

Hopefully Dev would stay unconscious. I didn't want to have to incapacitate the cop or figure out what to do with him, and I really didn't want to be shot. Bullets sucked. I looked at his badge and blinked in surprise. Not even just a patrolman; it was the sheriff. He must've been relatively new, because I didn't recognize him, and I'd done research on everyone of importance in the town.

"Good evening, sheriff," I said. "I just realized how fast I was going, and I'm so sorry about that. Would you like my license and registration?"

He looked a little surprised, then answered, "Yes, about twenty miles over the speed limit. I'll take your insurance card as well."

I pulled out my wallet and grabbed the documents, handing them over. "Will the ticket take long to write?" I asked.

He looked even more surprised at that. "Most people aren't so willing to get a ticket. What's the rush?" he asked.

"Just hurrying to get home to my boyfriend," I said. His face softened a bit at that. I wasn't surprised he wasn't a bigot—he smelled way too pure for that.

He looked down at my documents. "Liam Smith?"

Ugh. That freaking last name. Atlas had gotten the honor of picking our most recent last name, and he'd gone with the most boring choice possible. Really, it was better than what Jude or Corbin had come up with in the past. I did not enjoy being Liam Lennon, and Liam Crowe was only vaguely better.

"Yup, that's me." I tapped the steering wheel a bit impatiently. I figured I probably had at least ten minutes before Dev woke up, maybe longer. Still, it wasn't impossible that he'd wake early. "I have a romantic evening planned for my

boyfriend and I, and I hate to keep him waiting,” I explained, trying to rush the sheriff along. I wasn’t lying, either—bringing my little hellcat one of the villains who had orchestrated his kidnapping was definitely a romantic gesture.

He nodded at me and headed back to his car, and I continued to impatiently tap the steering wheel. How long did a ticket take? Would it be suspicious if I went into my trunk to make sure the victim stayed incapacitated? I wouldn’t let the sheriff see in, obviously, but I wasn’t sure what excuse I could have for going in the trunk at all. Plus, if he happened to walk up at the wrong moment, that wouldn’t be fun for anyone.

I heaved out a sigh, and I saw him get out of his car and head back. Well, that was quick.

“I’ll let you go with a warning today, but be more careful,” he said, handing me back my documents. “Your family bought the two houses out by the woodlands, didn’t they? Lots of property out there.”

“Yup, it’s a beautiful area,” I responded. I wasn’t sure what he was getting at.

“That suspense writer lives out there, too. There was a bit of trouble with him, but nothing seems to have come of it,” he continued, looking at me.

“Oh, I wouldn’t know about that,” I said, smiling. I certainly wasn’t aware of the fact that Toby’s stalker had been killed on our property. Nope. Definitely not aware of anything like that.

He looked at me, and I had the urge to shift under his gaze, but I kept still. This sheriff was a predator in his own right, shining soul or not, and I did not need him poking into our business.

“Perhaps I’ll come around and check on him,” he said.

I just shrugged. “I’m sure if he had some trouble he would appreciate that. I haven’t heard much, but I only moved here recently.”

He looked at me for another moment, then he patted my hood and walked back toward his car. There was a light thump from the trunk, and I looked quickly in the rearview mirror, but the sheriff was back at his car. I put my blinker on and pulled out onto the road without waiting. No need to hang around if Dev was going to start thumping and yelling. He was gagged, but he could still make noise.

The rest of the drive back was uneventful and mostly quiet from Dev—he’d probably just rolled around a bit. The sheriff didn’t follow me back, at least. He seemed to know a bit about us, and I did hate for human law enforcement to get involved in things. It was always so messy. I’d have to do some digging into him.

When I got back, I hauled a semi-conscious Dev down to the basement and texted Quinton. He bounded down the stairs not five minutes later.

“Thank god. Toby was getting really shifty looking. He is definitely up to something, and I really don’t want to find out what is on his twisted little mind,” Quinton announced. “What is he, anyway? He said Dexter was a hellhound, not that anyone believed him, but he didn’t say what he was.”

I blinked in surprise. “Toby?” I asked, confused.

“Yeah. Is he like a vampire or something? Shapeshifter? Demon?” Quinton said, walking over to look at Dev. The man was barely conscious and was just sort of vaguely staring at Quinton in confusion.

“Toby is human,” I answered.

Quinton looked at me, raising an eyebrow. “No fucking way. He’s so bloodthirsty, I figured he was something ferocious, despite his cute little exterior. I mean, the guy takes notes on torture methods.”

“He’s a writer,” I reasoned. “Dexter helps him out with plot points sometimes.”

Quinton snorted at that, shaking his head. “I’ll bet he does,” he muttered. He looked back at Dev, pulling the gag out of his mouth.

I had secured Dev to the chair, so I wasn’t concerned with their proximity. My hellcat wanted a chance to get his claws into the hellbound mortal, and I had no problem with that. He really did need to be a little more awake first, however. I walked over to a drawer and took out a syringe.

“Oh, what’s that? Truth serum? A torturous liquid that will slowly burn him from the inside out? Poison that only we have the antidote to?” Quinton asked gleefully.

I shot him a droll look as I injected Dev and then stepped away. “A little bit of adrenalin, just to get him focused and aware.”

“Aw, bummer. But I guess it’ll do,” Quinton said.

Dev was starting to look more aware, and he was staring at Quinton in confusion.

“Q,” he rasped out. “Fuck, where are we? You gotta untie me, and I’ll get us out of here. We must’ve been kidnapped.”

I stepped forward so he could see me, and he gave a little shriek in surprise.

“Oh Dev, Dev, Dev,” Quinton said, shaking his head slowly. “I was kidnapped, but you know that already, since you helped orchestrate it. I’m just returning the favor.”

“Would you like me to torture him a bit before you ask questions?” I asked. “They seem more receptive if they’re softened up first. I could break a few bones, maybe some mild electrocution.”

“Or we could pull out his teeth—very painful and he’ll still be able to talk. I’m afraid cutting off his tongue will need to wait, though. I do need some information from him,” Quinton said, turning around and winking at me with a grin.

Oh, my feisty little hellcat. He might be squeamish about watching such things, but he could play along and make the most excellent threats.

“I don’t... I’m not...” Dev stuttered.

I walked over to the drawer and took out pliers, carefully looking at them. Dev started to whimper as I walked back towards him. I let a little flame show in my eyes.

“Shhh,” Quinton said, pulling Dev’s face back to look into his eyes. “There’s no use in denials. Marcus is dead. James is dead. Todd is dead. The others are all being dealt with as we speak. Who were they again?” he asked me, not turning away from Dev.

I rattled off the names, and Dev grew paler with each one.

“So you see, we know everything already,” Quinton said. “There’s no use pretending you weren’t involved. It will only make things worse.”

“I didn’t want you to get kidnapped! You were a regular!” Dev said desperately. “I figured you would be missed and argued against it, but the buyer was insistent! They said you had no close friendships, and they could cover it up. They knew everything about you, and they wanted you specifically. I swear it wasn’t my idea!”

Quinton looked back at me, raising an eyebrow. That was interesting news, and I

didn't think Dev was lying.

"Who is the buyer?" I asked.

"I don't know!" Dev cried out. "None of us know, but it has to be someone who knows the club and who knows us. They always know details they shouldn't. I thought for a long time it might be the owner, but I don't know. I don't think he knows as much as the buyer does."

I put the pliers down and grabbed a computer. "Time for you to get us some information, Dev," I said, bringing it over.

"You better hope you can get us some good stuff," Quinton said. "Otherwise, it'll be rather bloody for you. Especially if you tip off the buyer."

My little hellcat was so cute. I leaned over to kiss him before I settled in a chair to hack into some of Dev's accounts and hopefully make contact with the buyer.

Some threats, the promise of torture and vengeance, and a little hacking—a romantic evening indeed.

Chapter 17

Quinton

It was fascinating watching Liam work his magic on computers, and he managed to leave a message with the buyer stating that I was still alive. I'd even convinced him to tell them when I would next be at the club.

Liam hadn't liked the plan, but I reasoned that the buyer must already know I was still alive. We were setting parameters this way, and we could have the rest of the pack come to the club and be on the lookout. I wanted to get the buyer, and setting myself up as bait seemed the only way to do it.

After a few hours, I headed upstairs to let Liam do some of the wet work. I loved threatening torture, but I really didn't need to see it up close and personal. I texted Aiden to keep him updated and let him know all was well.

All I got in response from Aiden was a text message that said, Incoming .

What the hell did that mean? What was incoming?

Not a minute later there was a knock at the door. And yeah—I might've jumped a bit. The door swung open right after that, because apparently I hadn't locked it behind me, and in walked Toby.

Alone.

“Hey!” he said, waving awkwardly.

Aw, fuck. I should’ve known I couldn’t avoid him. I sighed, asking, “What’s up?”

He laughed a little nervously, then he gestured at my neck. I put my hand up, thinking of Liam biting me. Yeah, I had a mark, and yeah, I hadn’t hidden it.

“So, um, like, you and Liam...” he trailed off.

For a guy who could talk about dismemberment and methods of death, he sure was shy when it came to sex.

“Yes, Liam and I had sex,” I said. I figured it was best to get it out of the way.

“Ohmygod! I knew it! I mean, he marked you and all, and are their tails not the best thing ever? And that knot! Holy fuck! I have never had better sex in all my life! I mean, thank god we’re mates and tied together permanently, because after that many orgasms riding his knot, I think I’ve been ruined for all other men! It’s fantastic, isn’t it?” Toby gushed.

Only I was confused as hell. Tails? Knots? Mates? Tied together for life?

Toby just kept gushing about Dexter’s knot hitting all the right spots and the magic of tails, and I nodded along. Eventually he wound down, and he must have realized I hadn’t responded much.

He laughed a little self-consciously. “Anyway, welcome to the pack, Q. We’ll have to get together a lot more!”

“Yeah. I gotta go check on Aiden, though,” I said.

“Oh, okay, yeah. Dexter just got back, so I was on my way to him, but I wanted to stop by.” Toby laughed again before he headed toward the door. He looked back at me to give that awkward little wave, almost tripped over the door threshold, caught himself, and then walked out, leaving the door open.

Tails? Knots? Mates? What the fuck? Liam hadn’t used a tail during sex. We hadn’t even had penetrative sex, for fuck’s sake, so I certainly hadn’t gotten to ride his knot, whatever the fuck that was. Yes, Toby thought that his bite meant something, but clearly it didn’t mean much, because I hadn’t gotten any of the special hellhound sex treatment.

I was working myself up into a good mad, and I walked out of the house, shutting the door behind me. By the time I made it to my place, I was steaming, and I might have come in a bit forcefully.

Aiden looked up at me. “Not a good interrogation?” he asked.

“Oh, no, it was a fine interrogation. Everything was just fantastic. Got lots of info. Set up a trap. Liam is doing his happy little torture thing. Everything is just great ,” I seethed.

Aiden raised an eyebrow at me. “Is it?” he asked. He got up and put the coffee pot on, even though it was late as hell, and he took out some kind of chocolate pie from the fridge.

“I mean, just because Toby and Dexter have this amazing sex with all sorts of things like tails and knots and mates and everything certainly doesn’t mean that Liam and I have that sort of connection,” I huffed. “Not that I even want that sort of connection. I am a free soul. I’m not tied down, and I don’t need anyone.”

Aiden set a slice of pie at the kitchen island with a fork, and I sat down and stabbed

into it, taking a bite. I couldn't help the groan—holy shit, it was delicious.

Sneaky fuck that he was, Aiden waited until my mouth was full before he calmly answered, "Well, I love you, Q, and I need you."

The pie was suddenly like cement in my mouth. After a few tries, I swallowed. "Fuck, Aiden."

"It's ok. You don't have to say it. I know you love me, too. And I know you love Liam."

"Fuck, Aiden," I said again, sniffing. And yeah, ok, maybe I was leaking a little bit.

"And Liam loves you, too. I can see it," Aiden said, still looking at me.

"He does not," I denied, and then I started crying even more.

"He does. He would do anything for you. He's obsessed with you. He'd kill and torture people for you," Aiden said.

"Yeah, but he likes doing that, so it doesn't count," I sniffed.

"He'd turn off the cameras for you. If you went and asked him right now he'd take every camera out of here. He'd hate it, but he'd do it for you," Aiden insisted. "He puts up with me crawling into bed with you guys, for goodness sake. When you give him attitude I can practically see cartoon hearts floating around his head. He loves you and your snarky attitude. The way he looks at you... it's magical."

"Then why aren't we having amazing sex with tails and knots and whatever the fuck else Toby was talking about?" I whined. "Oh my god, I'm pathetic." I sniffed, grabbing a napkin and wiping my eyes. "This is why I don't do this love shit."

“I guess it’s too bad that both Liam and I do, then. Because we do love you, Q,” Aiden insisted with a little smirk.

“If you’re laughing at me, I will make you pay,” I said, blowing my nose into the napkin.

Aiden looked serious, and he leaned over the kitchen island, getting closer to me. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe you aren’t having wild and crazy sex because Liam loves you?”

“What the fuck, Aiden. That doesn’t even make any sense,” I argued. “If he loved me, he’d be fucking my brains out.”

“No, asshole, if he loved you, he’d let you go at your own pace. He’d let you take the lead. He’d care about you and your trauma, and he wouldn’t push you. And he wouldn’t let you push yourself, either. He wouldn’t let you use sex to escape your feelings.”

I huffed a breath out. “I don’t use sex to escape my feelings.”

Aiden just raised his eyebrows at me,

“And I don’t have trauma. Not like...” I cut myself off.

“Not like me?” Aiden finished quietly.

“Fuck, Aiden. I’m sorry. It’s just that I really didn’t go through anything. Nothing happened to me. I’m fine,” I insisted.

Aiden looked away from me, his gaze on the far wall. “You know what the really fucked up thing was about being with my stalker for a year?”

I shook my head, afraid of what Aiden would tell me.

He looked at me. “It—sex—was awful, but eventually, it was also just... normal. It was like... I don’t know, going to the dentist or something. I didn’t enjoy it, but I just wanted to get it over with. There were times I would go down on him without him even asking, just to get it out of the way. And he was always sweet afterwards, nice to me, and it didn’t seem so bad to do that in exchange.”

“Aiden,” I murmured, and tears were leaking out of my eyes again.

“What I went through was awful, but eventually it was just... I don’t know... normal. It was my life, and I couldn’t always be in panic mode about it. And he wasn’t always around, so I watched a lot of television. I read a lot of books. I survived.” Aiden shrugged.

“And I’m so proud of you for that. And I would never compare what happened to me to what you went through. There is no comparison,” I said.

“But there is,” he said, looking at me. “At the time, I did what I needed to. I thought, ok, I’ll get through it, and it isn’t so bad, and I’ll be fine. And stuff happened, and I survived. But I couldn’t do it now. I couldn’t go back there again. I couldn’t get on my knees right now for some guy I loved, but I got on my knees for someone who kidnapped me and held me hostage, and I did it willingly.”

“You did it to survive,” I said.

“You did things to survive, too, Q. You blame yourself—I know you do. I know you thought about what would happen to you. I know you thought about what you were willing to give up of yourself to survive. I know because I thought that, too. We make bargains with ourselves. Ok, if I have to do this, it’ll be ok. I’ve done that before with some guy I barely knew, so this’ll be ok, right?”

“But it isn’t ok, because we don’t have a choice. And suddenly that act—whatever it is—it doesn’t feel like it’s ours anymore. It feels like it belongs to someone else. Like we belong to someone else. You weren’t raped, Q, and I know you think that means you don’t have trauma. But you do. You do because you made those deals with yourself. Because you knew what was going to happen, and you let yourself accept it, because you are a fucking survivor.”

I was crying steadily now, and Aiden reached out and took my hand in his. I couldn’t seem to stop the tears. I hadn’t been raped, and I had told myself that I was fine, because they hadn’t done the worst thing. I’d lived it in my mind, though. I’d thought about what I would do. How I would act. What I would give up to survive. Aiden was right about that. It wasn’t the same, I knew it wasn’t, because I had been spared and Aiden hadn’t. But yeah, maybe it had fucked me up a little.

“And sometimes when bad things happen to us, we blame ourselves. We think back on our actions, and we blame ourselves,” Aiden continued. “He used to come to the bar where I worked, and we used to chat. I flirted with him, Q. One night we even made out. So I blamed myself for what happened. I thought, if only I had ignored him. If only I hadn’t made out with him after my shift. And I will never make out with another random guy, because that memory is poison inside me.”

I wiped my eyes with my free hand, squeezing Aiden’s hand with my other hand. “I love you, Aiden. You’re brave and amazing, and you are the best fucking person I know.”

Aiden smirked, and I noticed his own eyes were a little teary. “That’s only because I’m pretty sure Liam isn’t actually a person.”

We both chuckled wetly at that, and Aiden came around to hug me. We stood like that, just hugging, for a few minutes.

Finally, I whispered, “I had sex with Marcus. A couple weeks before he kidnapped me.”

Aiden nodded his head against me.

“It was consensual and we used condoms, and... I don’t know. Maybe you’re right. I do blame myself, because I shouldn’t have trusted him. I feel sick now about all the random sex I had, because I was going to be sold for sex, and Marcus made no secret of that. He joked about it. Joked about what a fine piece of ass I was, and how he could attest to it with the buyers. He made me feel... dirty and cheap,” I admitted.

“You aren’t dirty and you aren’t cheap, and that’s why Liam hasn’t had sex with you. Because he values you. He tries to figure out what you need and then gives it to you. He loves you, Q. All you need to do is ask him, and he’ll tell you,” Aiden assured me.

I hugged him tighter. “How are you so fucking wise and well-balanced?” I asked.

“Lots of therapy,” Aiden joked. “ And I’m not that well-balanced. I talk to the guard dog sometimes,” he laughed.

“Hey, Kushiell talks to the trees, and he’s pretty cool,” I reassured him.

We both laughed at that, and then we ended up in a discussion wondering what the hell Kushiell might be. If the guys were hellhounds, then Cass and Kushiell were probably something weird too. We guessed wood nymph for Kushiell and witch for Cassius, but I had been wrong about Toby, so maybe hellhounds just liked quirky humans.

After all, they liked me. And they liked Toby.

Aiden and I ended up heading into my room and watching tv. I think neither of us

wanted to be alone. If I took comfort from the fact that Liam could watch us through the cameras, well, that was my own weird thing. Since Liam didn't seem to mind (and actually liked watching me), I was just going with it.

I guessed we were all quirky in our own ways, and I was just glad that our quirkiness matched up so well.

We must've both fallen asleep, because I woke up to the tv being shut off and Liam's voice. "It's just me. Scooch over. Don't worry, I showered."

I grumbled, because I was sleeping, but I scooched over to the center of the bed and pushed Aiden over closer to his side, which elicited a little grumbling from him. Liam climbed under the covers, wrapped me up in his arms, sniffed my hair (still weird), and kissed my forehead.

I thought about asking him if he loved me, but before I could think too much about it, my eyes were closing, and I figured any questions could wait until morning.

Chapter 18

Liam

“Why haven’t we had penetrative sex?” Quinton grumbled from the doorway to the bedroom.

Aiden and I had both woken up earlier, and we were sitting at the kitchen island drinking coffee and eating pastries. Well, Aiden was now choking on coffee as he tried not to spit it out or laugh—I wasn’t sure which.

I patted him on the back, and he swallowed his coffee and coughed a bit.

“Yup, well, that’s my cue to leave! See you guys later!” Aiden said, getting up and heading for the door.

Thankfully he had gotten dressed already, so he wouldn’t be walking outside in pajamas.

“That was not the question you were supposed to ask,” Aiden mumbled at Quinton as he walked out the door.

“What question were you supposed to ask?” I said.

Quinton glared at me, which I took to mean he didn’t want to ask whatever question he was supposed to ask.

I got up and walked over to give him a kiss. He was in such a snit that he didn't even stop me because of morning breath. I smiled at him and then led him to the kitchen island, heading over to the coffee maker to get him a cup.

"You're a fucking cheater," he mumbled as I sat back down.

I smiled. "Dev is dealt with. I didn't get much new information, but I did find out who the next victim on the radar was. Corbin is keeping an eye on him for now, but with most of the muscle taken down last night, I don't think anything will happen to the guy."

I handed his coffee to him, still smiling. I think he hissed at me. So fucking cute.

"You didn't answer me," he grumbled, taking a drink.

"Would you like to have penetrative sex?" I asked.

"I asked you first." Quinton was holding his coffee, and I watched him take a sip, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. He glared at me in response. "Get those flames out of your eyes, Sexy Stalker, and answer the question."

I debated what to say. My little hellcat would not appreciate the notion of being coddled. Of course I wanted to have penetrative sex with him. I fantasized about sliding my dick into him, about getting lost in his body and his scent. But if I told him that, it would pressure him. I didn't want to be an added pressure in his life.

I took a drink of my coffee, stalling.

"You're fucking stalling. Do you not want to have sex? I mean, that's fine if you don't, just say that." His face looked angry but I could see the hurt underneath.

I sighed. “My little hellcat, I feel like I am in a field of landmines, and any wrong move will result in catastrophe. Having actually been in a field of landmines once, I can tell you it is not a nice feeling to step on one.”

He looked at me. “You got blown up by a landmine? Actually, you know what, don’t tell me now. You’re distracting me. I just want the truth, that’s all.”

“The truth is that of course I want to have sex with you. I want to have every type of sex with you. I want to watch you masturbate and take orders from you until we both come. I want to suck your dick and have you suck mine. I want to rub against you, both our dicks in my hand, squeezing them together. I want to lick at every inch of skin on your body, including your hole, and open you up with my tongue. And yes, I want my dick buried so deep inside you that we feel like one being. Or, if you prefer, I’d be happy for you to bury your dick inside me. To feel you inside me, touching every part of me. I want to know you and be with you in every way possible.”

Quinton stared at me. His dick was tenting his sweatpants, and I resisted the urge to smirk. I also (barely) resisted the urge to go over and do everything I had just talked about.

“Fuck, Liam,” he mumbled. “Then why...”

“We go at your pace, my little hellcat. I don’t really know what the human pace is, so I let you set it. I’m sorry if you wanted me to move faster or do something I haven’t,” I apologized. “The last thing I would ever want is for you to be upset.”

“You turned me down that time I offered you sex,” Quinton said. He was staring at me intently.

“You offered me your body, and only your body. I could tell that from your interaction. I don’t want only your body, Quinton.”

“What do you want?” he whispered.

I got up then, walking over to him. I took the cup from his hands and placed it on the island, then I wrapped my arms around him. I sniffed at the top of his head, breathing in his morning scent. It was sexy, and I tried not to let our hard cocks grind against each other. Perhaps that would come next, but this had to come first.

“I want all of you. I want your claws, and your morning breath, and your attitude. I want you smacking my hand, and laughing with me, and threatening to torture hellbound souls. I want you sitting at the computer with me and making snarky comments. I want everything, Quinton.” I kissed his head again, running my nose through his hair.

“You’re smelling me again, aren’t you, you freak,” Quinton murmured.

“Yup,” I admitted. “I love your smell. I love everything about you.”

“Do you?” He leaned back to look at me. “Do you really?”

There was a seriousness and a vulnerability to him that I rarely saw. He searched my face, and I felt like he was looking for something. Something about sex was on his mind, and he was supposed to ask me a question, but not a sex question. And he was asking if I loved everything about him, but I thought he wanted to know more than that.

Ahhh. “Are you asking if I love you?”

“What?” he sputtered. “No, of course not. It’s, like, way too soon for that. I mean we haven’t even had the boyfriend talk or?—”

I cut him off with a kiss. It seemed the most efficient way to stop his rant. Then I

leaned my forehead against his. “I love you, my little hellcat. I love everything about you.”

He pulled back and looked at me, searching my face again. I thought his eyes even looked a little wet.

“And I wasn’t aware that we were supposed to have a boyfriend talk. I bit you,” I said.

He chuckled at me. “Ok, Sexy Stalker. Does that mean you’re my boyfriend in the hellhound world?”

“It means you are mine. My mate. My pack. Mine .”

“Does it?” he said, and I could feel claws in the question.

“And it means I am yours, Quinton. Only yours. And if you don’t want to be my mate, then we can... negotiate.”

He laughed at me, then he said, “I’ll think about it.” He was smiling, though, and I knew that was as good as a yes.

I leaned in to kiss him again. Our lips pressed together, and I took my time tasting him. He was still like bitter dark chocolate, and I was addicted to his taste. I licked my way into his mouth, gently exploring, and he did the same, our tongues tangling together. The kiss grew more frantic, and I grabbed his ass in my hands when he pushed himself into me. We were both hard and panting when he drew back.

“Toby said you guys have tails and knots and all sorts of weird but amazing hellhound sex shit,” Quinton muttered.

“Ahh. I see. Would you like my knot, Quinton?” I asked. The very thought was... fuck, yes.

He smirked as he stared at me. “Judging by the burning in your eyes you’d like it.”

“I would like whatever you would like, my little hellcat. I have never knotted anyone before. I wouldn’t think humans would normally find that polite, but I don’t think I’d be able to help myself with you,” I admitted.

“Never?” Quinton asked, rubbing against me. We both groaned at the friction.

“No. I have never used my tail on anyone before either. It comes from our demonic ancestry when it manifests in our human form, and it’s quite...dexterous.”

“Fuck, Sexy Stalker, are you trying to kill me?” Quinton whispered, then he kissed me fiercely, nipping at my bottom lip.

I growled low in my throat and nipped back, eventually kissing my way down his neck to the sound of his moans. “I can pleasure you however you want. Whatever you want, my little hellcat. I will do whatever you want, but if we have sex, I don’t think I’d be able to avoid knotting you.”

“Because you lurve me,” he said, jokingly.

“Yes,” I answered seriously, and I could admit to some nerves. I did want to please Quinton, and I had never knotted anyone before. Perhaps I should have spoken to Dexter and gotten some tips.

Quinton leaned back and looked at my face. He must have heard something in my voice, because his eyes searched mine, and eventually his mouth spread in a slow, sultry smile.

“Why, my sexy stalker, are you nervous?” he asked.

For whatever reason, the idea seemed to give him confidence, so I admitted, “Perhaps a little.”

He laughed. “Don’t worry, baby, I’ll be gentle.” And then he grabbed my hand and turned to go into the bedroom, pulling me along with him.

I followed willingly. When we reached the bedroom, he pushed me onto the bed, and I leaned up on my elbows to watch him as he shut the door. He was the sexiest hellcat I had ever seen. I wanted him fiercely and desperately, and I was nervous. I didn’t want to scare him or hurt him. I wanted to give him nothing but pleasure.

“Oh, the big bad Sexy Stalker is nervous. That’s so cute, Liam. Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll figure out exactly what to do with that monster in your pants.” He pointed to where my pants were tented from my erection.

He started to strip then. Yes, I’d seen him naked, but I would never grow tired of the sight. He was beautiful. He was petite and wiry, but he was all coiled energy, like his skin could barely contain his feisty nature.

“Well?” he asked, raising his eyebrows at me when he was down to just his boxers.

I admit to staring stupidly at him. Well, what?

“Strip, Sexy Stalker,” he demanded, smirking again.

I was off the bed and tearing off my clothes in a matter of seconds. Quinton laughed at my haste. Yes, I liked things neat and orderly, but if I popped a button (or two) off my shirt in my rush, it would be worth it.

By the time I was naked, Quinton was sprawled out on his back on the bed, his legs spread. His cock was beautiful, jutting up and just begging for my tongue and hands. He'd pulled lube out and left it on the bed. At my stare, he dropped his legs open even wider, and I saw his hole peeking at me.

"Oh, my sexy stalker likes that, does he? Your eyes are on fire," he said, giving his cock a leisurely stroke.

"On fire for you," I growled, and my voice was lower, more guttural. My hellhound was close to the surface.

"Fuck, that's sexy. Come make me feel good," he demanded.

Demons, how I loved when my hellcat showed his claws. I hoped he unleashed them on me. I crawled up the bed toward him, stopping at his dick and giving it a long, leisurely lick. He threw his head back and moaned, and I swallowed him all the way down, feeling him in my throat. He tasted so fucking good.

I let my tail come out to play. I had never used it during sex before, although I knew it was usual to. I picked up the lube and soaked the tip, and the wetness felt good on my skin. I let my tail snake towards Quinton's hole, lightly running it along his leg.

We both shivered at the contact, and his dick jumped in my mouth. I was gently bobbing up and down, taking him deep into my throat every so often.

"Fuck, is that your tail?" he groaned.

I growled in response, and my tail reached his hole. It flicked gently against him there, and it felt fucking amazing. It was sensitive at the tip—the best I could explain it was to compare it to the sensitivity of a nipple—and flicking it against his hole was incredibly arousing.

His cock filled up my mouth, and he was leaking precum, filling me with his taste. My hands gripped his thighs, and I reached one down to gently rub his balls. He felt so good in my hands and my mouth.

“Fuck, Liam, put it in,” he groaned.

I was nothing if not cooperative. I sank my tail into his heat, and fuck—I could feel it being squeezed. Warmth and pressure surrounded me, squeezing. He was all slick and tight. I ran my tongue around the head of his cock, and his channel spasmed on me, making me growl out in pleasure.

“Oh fuck, Liam. Fuck, that feels good.”

I continued to suck on him as my tail pressed in, seeking that little bundle of nerves. When Quinton gasped out, I knew I’d found it, and my tail pressed against it. The pressure felt amazing on the tip, and if Quinton’s cry of pleasure was any indication, he enjoyed it as well.

“Fuck, stop, Liam. I’m gonna come. Fuck,” he yelled, pushing my head off of him.

I growled, mad to have my tasty treat taken away. Quinton looked down at me and chuckled at my outraged face.

“Get up here and fuck me, my sexy stalker. I want you inside me when I come.”

I crawled up his body, nipping at his nipples as I passed them. When I was even with his face, he grabbed my head in both his hands, looking into my eyes. He leaned up and kissed me gently.

“Knot me, Liam. Give me everything,” he whispered.

I closed my eyes, overwhelmed by my fiery mate. He was perfect in every way. “I love you, Quinton,” I growled, and then I was pressing against his hole with my dick.

“Fuck,” he gasped. “You’re fucking big.”

I leaned down and bit onto his neck, right where there were marks already from my teeth. It was like his entire body relaxed in an instant, and I slid into him with no resistance. He was moaning and panting, but I heard and smelled no pain.

I was inside him. My cock was in his hole, and my teeth were in his neck, and I had to hold still for a moment so I didn’t come.

I was never letting him go. Not ever. He was mine forever now.

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Chapter 19

Quinton

F uck, he was big, but the minute his teeth sank into my neck, it was like my whole body just loosened up and let him in.

Holy shit, I had never felt so full. He was still for a minute, probably to let me get used to him, but fuck, I wanted him to move.

“Fuck me, Liam,” I groaned, thrusting my hips up and moaning as he flexed inside me.

Ok, so I was being snarky as hell, but Liam just chuckle-growled and began slowly moving inside me. Fuck, he was rubbing against my prostate, and I was already so fucking close to the edge from his mouth and his tail.

Because, yeah—that tail. We were definitely doing that again. Maybe while I had his dick in my mouth at the same time.

I groaned again just thinking about it. His dick slowly slid in and out, rubbing against my insides, sending little sparks of pleasure shooting through my body.

And fuck, he said he loved me. He said he fucking loved me, and then he was all, like, shy and sweet and almost nervous or something. It made me totally not nervous. Because this was Liam . He was my sexy stalker. He would only ever protect me, and he would only ever make me feel good.

I scratched at his back with my nails, because I wanted him to fucking pound into me, and he chuckled again.

“Yes, my little hellcat, mark me with your claws,” he growled.

I dug in harder with my nails, urging him in deeper. “Faster, Liam. More,” I demanded.

He thrust into me hard, and I swear I actually saw stars. He angled his hips a little, and holy shit, he was steadily pounding into my prostate.

I think I was literally mewling. Currents of pleasure were traveling from my core up into my spine. My scalp even fucking tingled, it felt so good. My dick was pressed between our bodies, and it was barely getting any friction, but every little rub against it just made more pleasure shoot up into my body. My legs spasmed, and I couldn’t stop the sounds I was making.

Liam growled against me, and then, holy fuck, his teeth bit into that mark on my neck again. Was it tied to my fucking dick? Was that some kind of hellhound magic? Because every ounce of pleasure magnified, and I came, unable to stop the cry that poured from my lips.

“Liam! Oh god, Liam!”

He bit harder, and something inside me broke open, bliss pouring out. My dick jerked and spurted cum, and my eyes squeezed so tightly shut that white spots danced behind my lids. It was so much pleasure. It was too much.

Then, somehow, he got fucking bigger .

“Holy fucking shit, Liam, what the fuck?” I cried out. I dug my heels into the back of

his legs so he couldn't pull out, and I scratched my nail down his back again. Because holy fuck, it felt amazing.

He was still biting me and gently moving, and he was all swollen inside me, and was this a fucking knot? Because... Fuck. Every little slight movement of his hips had him rubbing against my channel and pushing into my prostate, and it was extreme.

I was going to die. Could you die from orgasming? Because Liam was going to kill me with pleasure.

I cried out again when he thrust in deeply. My whole body shook, and I was gasping for air. I was so fucking full . It almost hurt, but it felt amazing at the same time. It was like there was only Liam's cock in my hole and every other part of me was just an extension of that.

I came again, hard, and Liam growled, and I swear I could feel his cum pumping into me, which only made me whine louder, my orgasm extending. He was still biting into my neck, our bodies rubbing together, and I felt heat lick along my body like a tongue. I opened my eyes and thought there were blue flames dancing on us both, but I couldn't focus because sensation was overwhelming me.

"I love you, Liam. Fuck, I love you," I cried out, and then I was lost to pleasure.

"I think you fucked me to death," I mumbled when I awoke, wrapped in Liams' arms. Based on the tiny sliver of light I could see in the crack between the curtains, I thought it must be morning.

I took stock. I felt... really fucking good. My ass was a little bit sore, but in that I-had-great-sex way. I didn't feel sticky either, so Liam must have cleaned us up when I dozed off. I almost had a vague memory of that happening. My body felt warm and cozy, and I snuggled in, ready to go back to sleep.

Then my eyes popped open. Liam loved me. He had said it. And I was like 99.99% sure that I had said it back in a cum-induced haze.

Liam sniffed and then growled against my back. “Why are you worrying?”

I turned around to face him and smacked him gently on the chest. “Hey, no sniffing my feelings, you weirdo.”

Oddly, he smiled at that.

Fucking weirdo.

He kissed my lips, and I didn’t even have time to yell at him about morning breath. Not that he had morning breath, because apparently hellhounds were fucking perfect like that.

“You told me you loved me,” I blurted out.

“I do love you,” he answered, snuggling me tighter and kissing my head.

I batted him away, leaning back to stare at him.

“Why the fuck would you do that? I’m fucking grouchy. I’m prickly. I don’t like morning snuggles. I’m an asshole,” I muttered.

“I love your claws, hellcat. And I love your asshole,” he said, smiling at me. “And I don’t want you changing even the tiniest bit, and I don’t care if you can’t say it back, but I’ll still tell you.”

I sighed. I felt like I needed to explain. “I’m not using this as an excuse, because I’ve always been kind of an asshole. My parents used to joke that I had mastered sarcasm

by the age of three. But I had a good childhood, and I had friends, and my parents loved me and told me all the time, and I told them too. And then they died.”

Liam just lay there watching me patiently. I didn’t see pity in his gaze, and I was glad, because that might have sent me straight into attitude mode.

“It was a car crash. I was an only child, and we didn’t have any other close family. So after the funeral, I moved away. I worked, I took college classes here and there, and I partied and didn’t let anyone close, because people you love sometimes died, and I didn’t want to deal with that ever again.” I looked at Liam, and he was still calmly staring at me.

“I won’t ever die on you, Quinton,” he said calmly. “I’m a hellhound.”

I snorted. “Leave it to you to focus on that.”

“If I told you I was sorry for your loss, or that I understand you have trauma, and that I love you just the way you are, you would claw my eyes out.”

I smacked him in the chest and then burrowed into him when he chuckled. Yeah, I might have even been a little teary. Liam was so fucking perfect.

So of course I got snarky. “What about you, weirdo? What’s your tragic past? Do you even have parents, or were you spawned from fire or some other weird shit?”

Liam chuckled again, and he started rubbing my back. “We all have parents. Well, except for Wilder, who raised us. He’s first generation and left hell, but the rest of us were born on Earth.”

I leaned back and looked at him. Yup, he was serious.

“My upbringing before Wilder was... fine. My hellhound father raised me—I didn’t know my mother. He was first generation as well, and they tend to be loners, I think. It seems like most packs are made up of second gen hellhounds. He taught me how to hunt and how to pass for a well-mannered human. When he heard there was a first gen hellhound who was taking in kids to “train” them, he dropped me off with Wilder.” Liam seemed totally calm as he talked about it.

“So your dad just, like, fucking left you with some stranger?” I asked, pissed as hell for him.

“Wilder was a hellhound. He knew I wouldn’t be hurt,” Liam answered.

“Fuck that. He was your dad . He shouldn’t have just fucking... abandoned you. Jesus, did he even check in on you? Come back to see how you were doing?” I demanded.

“Why would he?” Liam asked, and he seemed genuinely confused.

“Oh, fuck that,” I grumbled. “What a fucking asshole. Who just leaves their kid with a stranger and doesn’t even check on them? No wonder you’re more comfortable interacting with computers than people. Your father sounds like a fucking heartless robot.”

Liam hugged me tighter, and I let him, running my nails gently across his back. I think he actually started purring at the sensations.

Finally, he answered, “My father wasn’t cut out to raise a child. He didn’t have much emotion, you’re right. He gave me to Wilder, and I got a real father and brothers and a pack. It was the best gift he could have given me.”

He seemed content to leave it at that, but I wondered how often he’d been told he was

loved. He said it so freely to me, and yet I was all shifty about saying it to him. My parents had told me all the time how much they loved me, and I'd told them in return. And I did love Liam. If I lost him, it would feel like a piece of my heart was cut out. I owed it to him to get over my stupid hesitance and give him what he probably hadn't had from many people. Because yeah, he probably knew I loved him, but hearing the words was special.

I leaned back, looked Liam in the eyes, and said, "I love you, my sexy stalker." Then I kissed him, morning breath be damned.

Eventually, we got up and made some coffee and breakfast. Or rather, Liam made coffee and breakfast while I hopped in the shower. He filled me in on the rest of the interrogation while we ate. He was going to do some more of his computer magic, and as much as I would have liked to watch, I had told Cass I would come in for a shift.

Liam offered to drop me off, and I texted Aiden to make sure he was already there. He was—Jude had dropped him off this morning. He made sure to mention that we'd been sleeping when he came back, so at least he hadn't come in for some crazy sex noises. Not that I'd really be embarrassed, because I think my embarrassment meter was broken, but I didn't want Aiden traumatized or anything.

Liam dropped me off with a kiss and a "Have a good day. Love you."

I think I might have even been smiling when I walked in the shop.

"Oh god, did you kill someone?" Steph asked when I walked in. She was a snarky asshole just like me, and I loved her for it.

"I have a boyfriend," I smirked.

“Did you kill him?” she shot back. Then, “Fuck—everyone has a dating life but me. It’s fucking pathetic. You’re a grumpy asshole.”

I raised my eyebrows at her.

She laughed. “Ok, yeah, I’m a grumpy asshole too.”

With that, we got to work, and it didn’t take long for my grumpy assholiness to come back. Because—people. The world would be such a nice place without people in it.

I checked on Aiden in the back when there was a break in the rush, and he was happily baking and listening to music. I probably needed to talk to him at some point about Liam being in our space so much. He didn’t seem to mind it at all, but it never hurt to check in.

I was thinking that when I went through the swinging door back into the shop, and I almost ran into Cassius, who grabbed onto my arm. He got all funny looking for a second, and then he pulled me over to the side.

Oh boy. “Listen, if some great aunt that’s dead has something to say about my life, I really don’t need to know,” I said.

He just chewed on his lip and stared at me. I shuffled from foot to foot. He was starting to make me nervous. He looked super serious. Was I gonna get fired or something? What the fuck?

“Just spit it out, Cass,” I grumbled.

He breathed a sigh out. “What if... what if you knew something bad was going to happen to someone. Something... unpleasant. But you could stop it from happening.”

“Well then I’d stop it from happening,” I said. I had no clue what the fuck he was talking about.

“But,” he added, “what if you stopped it, and then someone really evil got away because of your actions, and they hurt more people. What if the something bad happening was the only way to stop the bad person?”

I stared at Cassius. He was totally fucking serious, and I had the definite feeling we weren’t talking about a hypothetical situation here.

“How bad is the something bad? Are we talking death and dismemberment kind of bad?” I asked.

“No. No, not that bad, because death, dismemberment, and rape are not in this person’s future. But still, we’re talking scary and traumatic and fucked up,” Cass answered, looking totally serious.

I thought hard for a moment. Did I want anyone to go through something scary and traumatic and fucked up? No, of course not. But I thought about myself. I had gone through that, and it had ended up bringing down Marcus and his crew. It would hopefully save others. Toby had gone through some scary shit with his stalker, and it had saved Aiden.

That was what sealed the deal for me, because to think that Aiden could be dead or still locked up with that psycho who took him for a year? I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. I knew Aiden wouldn’t wish that on anyone either. He was the sort of selfless person who would give themselves up to save someone else.

“Then you should let the bad thing happen, especially if it will save other people. That’s what I would do,” I answered.

Cass let go of my arm and nodded his head, but he looked hesitant and vaguely... guilty?

I went back to work. I couldn't think about Cass's weirdness or it would drive me insane, and I couldn't worry about something bad happening to someone I cared about. For all I knew, Cass might even be talking about me and the past. That seemed to make sense to me. Maybe he had known what would happen somehow, and he hadn't stopped it and felt guilty. It had led to bad people being stopped, but I'm sure he would still feel guilty.

I knew I was reaching, because he hadn't even known me then, so I put it out of my head and made coffee for stuck-up assholes. Not that they were all stuck-up assholes. Some of the regulars were pretty cool people who found my attitude vastly amusing.

A couple hours passed when my phone rang, and I stepped off to the side to take it out. The number looked vaguely familiar, and I answered.

"Hello?"

"Oh my gosh, Q, is that you? Man, how are you?" A familiar voice said. Before I could place it, Steph started up the espresso machine.

"Hold on," I said into the phone, and then I gestured my phone at Steph. She nodded, and I headed into the back, but Aiden had the giant mixer running, so it wasn't any quieter back there. I rolled my eyes and walked out the back door.

"Hey," I said into the phone. "Who is this?"

I didn't get an answer before a canvas bag was pulled over my head. I took a deep breath in to scream, but a sickly sweet smell overwhelmed me, making me feel nauseous and dizzy.

“Liam,” I muttered, trying to call out, and then blackness pulled me under.

Chapter 20

Liam

“So how exactly did you mark and mate him?” I asked Dexter.

“Ummm, well...” He trailed off and sort of shrugged.

I resisted the urge to bang my head against my desk. I’d spent most of the morning following money trails, and when Dexter had come in, it seemed the perfect time to do some research on permanently tying Quinton to me.

Of course, I’d discuss it with him first. That was the polite thing to do. I knew consent was important. But he’d opened up to me this morning, and he’d told me he loved me. Twice. I didn’t think Quinton said that to very many people, if anyone.

“You don’t know, do you,” I sighed.

“Well... I mean... I didn’t even know we could do that? So when Cass told me it was done, I didn’t really know when or how or anything.” Dexter shrugged.

“And you never asked?” For fuck’s sake. Dexter was like dealing with a computer that had way too many applications running at once—slow, unreliable, and glitchy.

“Umm... no?” he answered. “Maybe Toby knows, though. He likes to know that sort of stuff. He might have asked Cassius. But he’s writing right now, and he’s right in the middle of having an evil soul tortured by a hellhound, so I don’t want to interrupt

him.

“Dexter,” I growled out.

“What? Art imitates life,” he said.

I put my forehead down then, gently banging it against my desk. I loved Dexter, and I loved Toby, but really, the two of them were like absent-minded meets airheaded. I wasn’t even sure which was which at this point—it was like they switched up the roles and took turns.

My head was resting on my desk when I swear I heard Quinton’s voice utter my name, and then I felt a sharp tug in my chest.

I gasped, lifting my head up and holding the skin above my heart. Something was wrong.

Dexter straightened up immediately, getting his business face on. “What is it?” he said, sniffing the air.

“I don’t know. Something is wrong with Quinton.” I pulled up my tracking app. Quinton’s phone was still at the coffee shop, but it looked like it was out back. Why would Quinton be out back, and why wasn’t he moving? I pulled up the tracker on his keys, but they were in the shop. His wallet was out back with his phone. “Get Cassius on the phone, now,” I demanded.

Dexter was pulling out his cell phone when mine rang. I snatched it up and hit the answer button.

“I didn’t realize it would be so soon or I would have warned you. I thought it was days in the future, not today,” Cassius babbled. “If I’d known it was today, I would

have, I don't know, I would have warned you somehow. But I couldn't warn you too much because if I warned you too much or if you were here or if Q knew then it wouldn't happen, and if it didn't happen then you would never catch the other guy because he's super smart, and if he thought he was made he was gonna disappear into the sunset, and Q is his last loose end so he's gotta take care of that."

It was one long stream of information, and I had a hard time figuring out what the fuck Cassius was talking about.

"Stop," I said. "Breathe. Slow down, and tell me where Quinton is."

Cassius took a deep breath. "He's ok. He's going to be ok. I know that much. I would never have let it happen if I didn't know that. He'll know that, too. He'll know that you'll save him. He'll be ok, Liam."

I felt myself growling, and Dexter placed a hand on my shoulder, taking the phone from me and putting it on speaker.

"Cass, Liam is having a moment, because it sounds like something bad happened to Q. Please tell me nothing bad happened to Q," Dexter said.

"He's going to be fine , because you guys will rescue him," Cass said, and his pleading tone made me see red. Dexter squeezed my shoulder harder, and I realized little flames had erupted along my body.

"Rescue him from what , Cassius?" Dexter demanded. He looked at me and then said, "I swear to god, you're gonna have a feral hellhound over there in about two minutes if you don't explain exactly what the fuck is happening."

"I had a vision. Q was kidnapped by the guy you're looking for. I just saw someone putting a black bag over his head, and then I saw him in a room tied to a chair. He

was fine . He'll be fine, because Liam charges in and rescues him, and you guys will figure out who your bad guy is," Cassius explained.

"You let him get kidnapped?" I growled out. My voice was guttural and low, and my hellhound was itching to come out and burn everything to the ground. Why hadn't I put trackers in his shoes? On his clothes? Fuck.

"If I didn't, I saw that you guys would never find this guy. He'd escape and go on to continue his human trafficking. I asked Q what he would do, and he said he would do whatever he needed to in order to save more people. I have to respect what he would want, Liam," Cassius pleaded.

Of course Quinton would say that. Of course he would sacrifice himself to find out who the last person was. But he would also know I would save him. Cassius was right about that. He would know that this time, someone was coming for him.

"Where was he taken from?" I growled. "I'll use my computer, track the cameras?—"

Cassius interrupted me. "Just use the bond, for fuck's sake. Who cares about your computer?"

I growled in confusion.

"Oh, my god, please tell me you realize you mated and marked him? Fuck! I figured you knew that! I wouldn't have let it happen if you didn't fucking know that!" Cassius yelled out.

"Slow down, Cass," Dexter said. "Liam didn't know, but I didn't know either until you told me."

"Fucking clueless hellhounds," Cassius muttered.

“Focus!” Dex demanded, and Cassius shut up and listened. “You know about this shit, so you just have to tell us what to do.”

“I don’t know!” Cassius cried out. “I’m not a hellhound! I don’t know how you guys track shit! All I know is that Liam and Q are bound, and Liam marked him. You guys are the ones who are supposed to know what to do!”

I growled again, but I pulled myself together enough to say, “Keep Aiden close.” Then I grabbed the phone from Dexter and hung it up. Cass would be no more help.

I tried to breathe. Quinton was in danger. Quinton was kidnapped. I could search the cameras and follow his trail, I was sure, but that would take time, and I didn’t know how much time I had. Cassius seemed to think I had a better way of tracking him.

I looked up at Dexter, who was staring at me anxiously. “What do you feel with Toby?”

“Man, I don’t know,” Dexter said, running his hands through his hair.

“Stop! Close your eyes. Think about the night when you were shot and you went after Toby. Did you know where he was?” I asked. I was barely holding my hellhound back, and I didn’t think it would be long before any reasoning was gone. I needed Dexter to keep it together for both of us.

Dexter closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. I tried not to be impatient as fuck, but the growling was a low steady sound that I couldn’t stop.

“I woke up, and the bullet coming out of my head hurt like a motherfucker. I knew Toby was in danger. I was flaming, and my hellhound was in charge. I just... I just ran towards him. It’s like my hellhound knew exactly where he was. I thought I was following the scent of the rotting soul, but I knew Toby was ahead of him. I knew

they weren't together." Dexter took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

"Ok," I grumbled. "You drive, and I'll lead, then." I got up, letting my impatience surface and letting my hellhound come to the forefront. By the time we made it to the bottom of the stairs, my growl was loud and nonstop. Corbin and Jude were both running in to see what the issue was—they'd obviously heard something.

"Go stay with Toby!" Dexter demanded.

"And Aiden," I managed to growl out. Someone needed to be with Aiden. He was pack, too.

Corbin and Jude both nodded, and we all headed out the door. Corbin went over to Toby's house, and Jude got into one car while Dexter and I got into another. We didn't bother with seatbelts as we peeled out and headed down the driveway.

How long had it been since I'd felt that pain? Ten minutes? Fifteen? Not long. We were not long behind them, and if the hellbound mortal took Quinton from the shop, he'd need to bring him somewhere. We would be right behind them. We would find them.

We got to the end of the driveway and Dexter paused, waiting on my say. I closed my eyes and breathed in. I smelled the bittersweet scent of Quinton, even though he wasn't in the car, and I turned my head back and forth.

"Left," I said, and Dexter pulled out and started driving, speeding up the road.

It was an exercise in frustration at first. I ordered Dexter to turn into the middle of an open field, which didn't seem the best course of action. I was scenting or sensing or whatever it was by direction, not by roads. Driving and looking for the next road to turn down put us past where we needed to be. We kept driving, trying to find roads

that matched my sense of direction, but I knew we were taking longer than we needed to. I felt time slipping through my fingers, and I felt Quinton in my chest. I felt panic but also anger. My little hellcat was going to let his claws out, and I hoped it didn't end up getting him hurt. My heart raced at the thought, and I was reaching for my cell phone before I even knew why.

I couldn't trace Quinton. I didn't know what good my phone would do, but I found my finger clicking on my map app. I zoomed out and looked at the roads, and my vision went hazy. My hellhound had an affinity for computers, and my technology sense didn't fail me now. It was like I could see a pathway to Quinton, and I kicked myself for not thinking of this earlier. Why had I let Cassius tell me I didn't need computers? I tracked with technology. It was part of who I was, and I was going to find Quinton.

I felt a sense of calmness wash through me. He was still ok—I knew that he was, and I knew how to get to him. I gave Dexter directions, and he sped up now that we were confident where we were going.

“Hang on, my little hellcat,” I murmured. “We'll be there soon.”

Of course, nothing in life was ever simple. I sensed we were close when we passed a cop car. Of fucking course. Dexter was most definitely speeding.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

“Keep going. We'll deal with the cops when we get there,” I muttered.

“But he's got lights and sirens going,” Dexter said.

Fuck. Yep. That meant it would be a warning to whoever was holding Quinton.

I looked at the map again. It looked like he was in a house out in the woods, because of course—it was always houses out in the woods.

“We’ll pull off on the main road and run the last mile,” I managed to growl out.

Dexter hummed in agreement, speeding up. I’m sure he hoped to outrun the cop, or at least have a bit of a head start when we got to the woods.

I really didn’t want to be shot at.

I looked in the rearview mirror, and of-fucking-course it was the fucking sheriff—I recognized his face in the window. Shit. This was the same car he’d already pulled me over in, so he knew it was me.

Ah, well, I’d deal with that when I needed to. Getting Quinton was what mattered now, and we could easily outrun the cop. A mile out would prevent the sound of the sirens from reaching the house. If the guy had cameras at his house in the woods, our car also wouldn’t show up, so maybe this was a blessing in disguise. In my haste to get to Quinton, I wasn’t thinking about being seen driving up to the house.

I felt like energy was buzzing under my skin as we got closer and closer. When I could sense we were about a mile out, I growled, “Now,” to Dexter.

He slammed on the brakes and pulled onto the shoulder, dirt flying up and the car bumping along. The cop sped past and slammed on his own brakes. We were out of the car and running, keys left in the ignition.

I heard a shout of, “Stop! Police!” but we ignored it and ran.

Quinton was so close I could taste it, and nothing would stop me from getting to him.

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Chapter 21

Quinton

I came back to awareness slowly. My head felt heavy and thick, and I realized when I tried to move that I was tied to a chair.

Motherfucker. Fucking Cassius and his fucking vague-ass shit. Couldn't he have warned me that the "bad thing" was me getting kidnapped again ?

Fuck. Fuckity fuck fucking fucker.

I struggled a bit with my bound hands, but each wrist was zip tied to a side of the chair, and my ankles were zip tied too. I could topple the chair easily enough, but I didn't think I could break it, and falling over and possibly getting injured didn't seem like the wisest course of action.

I took a deep breath. Ok. I was ok. Liam would come and find me. He would always come find me, and I wasn't going to die or get maimed or injured.

Fuck. Cassius hadn't said anything about a little torture. I really hoped I wasn't in for some non-permanently damaging torture. I mean, permanently damaging torture would be bad, of course, but I really didn't want any torture whatsoever.

Not a fan of pain. Nope. No torture necessary.

A door in front of me cracked open, and someone stumbled in, falling lightly to the

ground. I thought I recognized the brown curls, and I realized who it was a second later.

“Emmett?” I asked. “Is that you?”

He looked up. “Fuck. Q? They got you, too? Oh my god, are you ok? Do you know what’s happening?”

It was Emmett. He was one of the group of people I hung out with and went clubbing with. We weren’t particularly close, and we probably wouldn’t have been friends if not for hanging with the same crowd. We’d gone to battle once or twice over the same hook-up, and I was only a little smug that I was usually the victor. But it wasn’t the time to think about that.

Because, you know, kidnapped and all that.

“Untie me,” I demanded, shifting the chair around a bit.

He crawled over and felt around my ankle, pulling at the zip tie.

“I can’t, Q. They’re zip ties. I have nothing to cut them with,” he said.

Fuck. “Did you see who took you?” I asked.

He shook his head, then said, “What do you know? What’s going on? What’s going to happen to us?”

“We’ve been kidnapped, and we’re probably going to be sold into a sex trafficking ring. So, you know, that’s fun,” I snapped. I wiggled my arms and legs again, but Emmett wasn’t even trying to untie me.

“Does this have something to do with that guy you left with before you ghosted us all?” he asked, looking at me.

I stopped struggling. That guy I left with? Like Emmett didn’t know exactly who that guy I left with was. Like Emmett hadn’t fucking bet me that I couldn’t get Marcus to take me home with him.

Motherfucker.

I stopped struggling. Fucking Emmett? He was... fuck, he was boring. He had fucking dimples, for fuck’s sake. No way was he the guy who was setting people up to be bought. No way.

Only he always had money, didn’t he? He’d said he grew up poor, but he was never short on funds. He’d picked up the tab more than one night out. He lived in a great apartment. He told everyone he was in business, and he did well. He was always vague about his job. Boring stuff, he’d said. He wasn’t really close to anyone, but he knew everyone.

I stared at him, and he stared back at me. He didn’t even look scared, the stupid fuck.

“You know, if you’re going to pretend to be another victim, you should be crying or at least panicking or something. You suck at this, Em.” If he was the buyer’s man, I wasn’t going to bother trying to be civil.

He stood up and brushed himself off. “You’re always such an asshole, Q.”

“It’s a gift,” I bragged. “Got me laid more times than you, didn’t it?”

“Oh, you’re gonna get laid quite a bit in the future, Q, don’t you worry.” He actually smirked at me as he said it.

Fucking bastard.

“How many ‘friends’ have you set up, Em? How many guys have you sold into human trafficking?” I asked.

I figured I’d pump him for as much info as I could before Liam got here. I’m sure he could track my phone.

Fuck. My phone. I jiggled a little, and I realized the weight of it wasn’t in my pocket. I didn’t think my wallet was in my pocket either. I’d left my keys with my jacket at the coffee shop. Abduction hadn’t been on today’s bingo card.

I was going to have Liam put a fucking tracker under my skin at this rate.

Still, he’d find me. He’d track cars and people in and out of the back alley of the coffee shop, and he’d find me. He’d hack cameras and all sorts of shit. It just might take a little longer than I liked.

Emmett was smirking as he stared at me. “What’s the matter, Q? Not thrilled at the prospect of being a drugged-out sex slave? Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you don’t enjoy it. I usually try to make things easier on the guys, but you’re such a prick. You’ve caused enough trouble for the operation that you deserve a little punishment. You’ll have some company when you’re shipped off as well. We’ve got a nice sized shipment of three of you this time.”

“You sick fuck. You’re selling people you fucking befriend into slavery, and you don’t even give a fuck. What the fuck is wrong with you?” I seethed.

“They’re drifters. People who won’t be missed. Men who are on the fringes of society already. Half of them are already on drugs.” He shrugged.

“Because they’re at a fucking club , you asshole. You really think that makes what you do ok?” I hissed.

“Eh. It may not win me any humanitarian awards, but it makes me very wealthy.” Emmett opened up the door and pulled a chair from outside in, sitting down and continuing to stare at me. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you’ve caused us?”

I laughed. “Oh, I have plenty of idea.”

“All the men I work with have gone silent. We can’t find any trace of their arrest, so that means somehow you scared them all away. I suppose that might be for the best, since many of them could be tied together,” he reasoned.

“They’re all dead,” I stated flatly.

Emmett laughed. “Nice try, Q, but you don’t have those kinds of connections.”

I just stared at him, and he must have seen something in my face.

“How did you get away from Marcus? What happened?” he asked.

“Fuck you,” I spat out.

“How did you find the other men? What did you say or do to get them to abandon their homes and jobs?”

“Fuck you,” I said again. I wasn’t going to give him shit.

He shot up and stalked toward me, slapping me across the face.

Fuck, that hurt. Stung like a fucker. I took a deep breath, and then I started to laugh. I was probably a little hysterical sounding, and Emmett backed up a step, staring at me.

“Oh, Em, you’re going to find out exactly what happened to all of them. Don’t you fucking worry. And I’ll be right there to watch it happen.” I laughed again, because fuck, I would have Liam strip his skin from his fucking body for doing this.

“I’ll leave you alone to stew a little. When I come back, I’ll bring my friend, and maybe then you’ll find yourself more helpful,” Emmett said, and then he backed towards the door, opened it, and shut it behind him. I heard a lock click shut.

Fucking asshole.

I really hoped Liam hurried the fuck up.

I struggled a bit with the zip ties, but yeah, they weren’t going anywhere. I contemplated trying to break the chair, but the door was locked and the room had no windows, so that wasn’t going to do me much good at all even if I could manage it.

I had always vaguely disliked Emmett. He was kind of an asshole who thought he was better than everyone else. He was subtle about it, but he couldn’t totally hide his disdain. And he definitely didn’t appreciate my snarky attitude. I had always annoyed him, and I knew it.

When I thought about it, I guessed he made sense as the buyer’s connection. He wasn’t really besties with anyone. He was kind of a prick, but most of the guys liked him—he paid for a lot of drinks. He listened when people talked and loved gossip, which was probably how he knew who to choose. He flashed money around, but he was subtle about it. And no one really knew too much about him.

What a fucking betrayal. It was bad enough that he was scum and was selling men

from our community into sex trafficking. I mean, obviously that was fucking horrible. But we had been sort of friends. We had hung out all the time. We had been on each other's socials. I would be missed in our friend group. And he had set me up to be kidnapped and sold. Why? Because I'd had sex with someone he wanted? It was all so fucking petty. And it was probably the stupidest thing he'd done, because we were linked together.

I heard a thump outside the door, and then it was swinging open, and there was Liam.

"Well, it took you long enough," I snapped. "My fucking wrists are gonna get sore from the fucking zip ties."

He smiled broadly at me.

"Hello? Fucking kidnapped here. Stop smiling like a loon and get me free before fucking psycho Emmett comes back," I complained.

He came over, still grinning like a weirdo, and I felt warmth at my ankles and hands, and suddenly I was free. Well, that was handy.

"Alright, we gotta find Emmett—" I started, but Liam pulled me in and kissed me fiercely.

When he pulled away, he said, "Dexter took him already. He'll meet us at home. He just knocked out the guard, because he's not totally rotten yet, but there's two more innocents upstairs. Oh, and we're going to have company in about thirty seconds."

"Company?" I asked, raising my eyebrow.

And at that moment, I heard a bang from somewhere in the house, and a loud voice yelled, "Police! Everybody freeze!"

I looked at Liam. “Police? Really?”

He just shrugged. “Dexter may have been speeding a bit, and we didn’t feel like stopping. We had enough of a head start to take care of things.” Then he raised his hands and called out, “Down here, Sheriff! We’re unarmed!”

What. The. Fuck.

I just sighed and raised my own arms. Well, this would be interesting. I was sure Liam could somehow talk his way out of this, but I had no idea how.

A man I recognized from the coffee shop came in gun first, aimed directly at us. He was slightly older than me—mid forties, maybe—and he was pretty new to town. I hadn’t known he was a cop.

“Good evening, Sheriff,” Liam said calmly.

I turned to look at him like he was fucking insane, and from the sheriff’s snort—I thought his name was Paul from his coffee orders—he noticed my incredulous face.

“Liam Smith, you’re under arrest for speeding and evading arrest,” he started, but then I turned to look at him.

“Ummm, hello! He was coming to rescue me! I think a little speeding is totally called for, and he’s obviously not evading arrest since he’s standing here with his arms up in the air,” I snapped.

The sheriff sighed, lowering his gun a bit. “Q, how lovely to see you outside the coffee shop. Is this your house?”

“No, it’s not my fucking house. I was fucking kidnapped and held in this room.

Emmett Reese probably owns the house. He told me he was going to sell me into a human trafficking ring. He said he had other people locked up too. Luckily, Liam is a good boyfriend who had me airtagged so he could find me.”

The sheriff sighed again. “It’s illegal to airtag someone without their knowledge.”

“Oh my fucking god, are you listening? First of all, it wasn’t without my knowledge, and second of all, I was kidnapped . I was held hostage . There are other people being held hostage in this house. The guy who did it may still be wandering around.” I waved my arms at him. “Go do something!” I shouted.

“You’re serious? This isn’t just some trick to get out of trouble?”

“Do I look like I’m fucking kidding?” I asked.

Apparently I didn’t, because he ordered, “Stay here,” then he started talking into his radio before he walked out the door, pulling it shut behind him.

Liam sighed.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, human police suck. But this way you won’t get arrested or get a speeding ticket. And Emmett really did tell me he had other people,” I added helpfully.

“Yes, there are two more upstairs. And the guard should still be incapacitated, so he shouldn’t give the sheriff any trouble. Dexter will be long gone with Emmett, so that isn’t a concern. I’m sure the sheriff will just assume he made his escape when I came bumbling in here.” Liam looked proud of himself.

“Only one problem, brainiac—the sheriff would have seen two of you in the car, and if the story is that I was held hostage, where’s the other person?” I asked.

Ok, yeah, I asked really snarkily, but thank goodness someone was here to take care of loose ends.

“Ah. Yes, good point. Let me text one of the guys to come over,” he said, taking out his phone.

He typed, waited a moment, and then there was a vibration. He read and said, “Jude is coming. We can say he just got lost in the woods, and they can be heroes and find him.”

Dexter must have been busy dealing with Emmett, so I guessed we were gonna say it was Jude in the car with him. I’m sure he was gonna love being “rescued” by police officers after he got “lost.” I snorted a little at the thought. Better than nothing, I supposed.

Liam hugged me close, and I heard him snuffle along the top of my head.

“Are you sniffing me again, you weirdo?” I asked.

“I love you, too, hellcat,” he answered.

Fuck. I sighed out and snuggled into him. I really did love him.

We stayed like that, cuddled up together, even when we heard police sirens coming up to the house. We were still snuggled together when the sheriff came back in, looking pale and more than a little disturbed.

I hoped this wouldn’t take long. We had an asshole former-friend to torture, and then I needed some snuggle time with my hellhound. I had, after all, just been kidnapped. Again.

Chapter 22

Liam

The police were, unfortunately, not quick. The sheriff eventually asked where the other person from the car was, and off they went searching for Jude. He was found, and in my opinion, he was a little over the top with the, “Oh, officers, you rescued me and saved my life. How can I ever thank you?” But the police seemed to puff up with the praise.

The sheriff, on the other hand—I don’t know what Jude said to him, but he looked like he was about to smack Jude upside the head at any moment.

I could relate to the sentiment.

Quinton, however, whispered to me that they should get a room. I looked more closely, and perhaps my little hellcat was right. If Jude was actively trying to annoy someone, it usually meant he liked them. That was an interesting development.

The police had found the other two victims upstairs, and they had absolved us of any guilt. Once the guard came to, he fingered Emmett as well. His story about being knocked out went along perfectly with mine when I was asked for details, so we were obviously victims, and I was the boyfriend who had come to rescue my man. Most of the cops thought it was all very romantic and sweet.

The sheriff still looked vaguely suspicious, however, and I was sure we hadn’t seen the last of him. That was fine—it would give Jude plenty of opportunity to annoy the

shit out of him.

It was fading into darkness by the time we got out of there, and I just hoped the sheriff left us alone until at least the next day. I made a lot of noise about how exhausted we were, and Quinton agreed, even adding in that the adrenaline had worn off and he needed to crash.

My hellcat still looked like he could light the world on fire with his energy, but the cops nodded understandingly and finally sent us on our way.

“Thank god,” Quinton mumbled when we finally got dropped off back at our car by a police officer. (They had nicely turned it off and secured the keys earlier.)

We all climbed in, Jude included, and headed back to the house.

“My grandma could drive faster than this,” Jude complained, leaning forward from the back seat. “And can we have some music?”

I growled out a no and continued to drive nice and slow. We didn’t need a speeding ticket to top things off.

“You don’t even have a grandma, do you?” Quinton asked, turning around in his seat.

“Oh, I was raised by humans, so I did a long time ago,” Jude answered.

“Aww. That’s kind of sad that you lost your human family to old age,” Quinton responded.

Shit. That reminded me that I had marked and claimed Quinton, and I had done so without his consent. I hadn’t really been aware that I was doing it, but that would need to be a conversation. He wouldn’t age now, either, and he’d leave behind any

humans he was close to. I hoped he wasn't too upset. I wasn't letting him go, even if I could somehow reverse things.

Although if he really wanted to live a mortal lifespan, perhaps I would figure out a way for both of us to do that. No matter what, I would try to give Quinton what he wanted. I didn't want to take away his choices. I only wanted to love him. I hoped we'd have eternity for that, but I would do whatever my little hellcat wanted.

By the time we pulled up to the house, Quinton was practically vibrating. He flung open the door, calling out, "Time for torture!"

I smiled. So adorable.

When we got down to the basement in Dexter's place, Emmett was already bruised and a wee bit bloody, and he was hanging by his wrists from a chain, his tiptoes balancing him just barely on the floor. Dexter did enjoy keeping things interesting. He was lounging on a chair watching Emmett, who looked unconscious.

He opened his eyes and stared at us, so apparently, he was awake. He looked tired and worn but not terrified. That wouldn't do at all. He even managed a snarl when he saw Quinton.

Dexter stood up and punched him in the solar plexus, and he gasped for air. "Show some respect, asshole," Dexter muttered.

Quinton walked up to him, and Dexter stepped aside. Quinton stared at him for a long moment, and Emmett eventually turned his eyes away.

"You know, I thought about this for the last couple hours. When the police were interviewing me, I thought about torturing you myself. I thought about hearing your screams for mercy. I thought about what you've done to so many innocent men.

Maybe you didn't rape them, but you sold them into slavery. You orchestrated it all.

"And for what? For money. For a nice apartment. Probably for power, too. I bet it made you feel powerful to have that sort of control over someone else's life. I bet you told yourself you were better than them. They were just drifters, you told me. I bet you stopped even thinking of them as human beings.

"You got away with it, and then you decided to take a friend, someone who could be tied to you. You decided you wanted me out of the way, or you didn't like me, or maybe I made fun of you one too many times, because you were an uptight asshole who can't take a joke. And you set me up."

Emmett just stared at Quinton as he spoke, and the man's eyes were filled with hatred. It was poisonous, and his rotting soul stunk. Quinton was right—he didn't even think of his victims as human.

Quinton continued. "I thought about getting my revenge. But then I realized that wouldn't make me much better than you. I drank with you. I ate with you. I remember joking around with you the night of Dave's birthday party, when we were both drunk, and we were laughing hysterically about Dave's dance moves. God, we were falling all over each other because we were laughing so hard."

Quinton smiled a little at the thought, and then he looked sad. I had the urge to go over and hug him, but I didn't want to interrupt him.

"You were an asshole, yeah, and I was an asshole, too, but I still counted you as something of a friend. I still would have gone out of my way for you. I would have looked out for you and helped you. I thought you would have done the same. So I won't torture you. I won't do anything to you. I won't sink to your level."

Quinton turned around to walk away, and Emmett spoke. "You're going to let me

go?” he rasped out.

Quinton turned back, and he looked sad. “Oh, no. You won’t leave here alive. I’m sorry about that, Em, but that’s the truth. There is no other option. But I can give you this much—tell us everything you know. Tell us where the kidnapped men went, tell us who your buyer is, and I can make sure they give you a quick death. That will be my gift to you.”

“Fuck you,” Emmett hissed.

Quinton shrugged. “You have the choice, Em. They’ll torture it out of you one way or another.”

“I’m not telling you shit, assholes,” he hissed.

Quinton sighed and looked at Dexter. “Can you take care of this?” He looked at me then. “As long as you don’t mind?”

“Of course not, my love,” I answered. If he wanted our hands clean of his former friend, then Dexter would be happy to take care of things. I was so proud of Quinton for doing what was right for him.

Dexter nodded his head. “I’ll find out everything you need to know. Don’t worry,” he assured us.

Quinton came to me then. He took one last look at Emmett, saying, “Goodbye, Em.”

Then he led me from the room, shutting the door firmly behind us.

We were silent as we made our way back to his house. I knew he would need to check in on Aiden, and I thought he needed a true friend right now. He had been

betrayed by someone he had counted as a friend, and he needed to know that everyone wasn't like that.

When we got into the house, Aiden just came over and hugged Quinton. Quinton hugged him tightly back, and it made something in my chest lighten.

"I love you, you asshole, and you better not get kidnapped a third time. I can't take that," Aiden mumbled.

Quinton laughed, then he murmured, "I love you, too, Aiden."

They both got a little leaky at that. I was standing and watching them, smiling, and Quinton looked over at me. "Stop grinning like a psycho, Sexy Stalker. You're supposed to be all jealous or something."

"Why would I be jealous of your best friend?" I asked, perplexed.

Quinton made a grumpy face, but Aiden just laughed.

"He's totally a keeper, Q," he said. "You two go shower or whatever—I'm sure you need to unwind. I'll make a light dinner, because I'm sure you're hungry too."

As if on cue, Quinton's stomach growled. They both laughed a little, and I dragged Quinton with me into the bathroom.

I turned the water on to get hot, and we both stripped. When we got under the spray, I just held Quinton close to me, letting the hot water rain down on him. It was like I could feel the tension slowly leaking from his body.

"Are you disappointed?" he asked me.

I was utterly confused. “About what, my hellcat?”

“That I wasn’t your hellcat. I went all soft and didn’t even want to torture Emmett,” he said.

I laughed and kissed the top of his head. “You are always my hellcat, Quinton. You are ferocious and have claws and attack when necessary, but you also enjoy cuddling up—when the mood strikes you—and you can be incredibly sweet. But only sometimes, and it’s better not to call attention to it or someone will get swatted.”

Quinton laughed against my chest.

“You did the right thing,” I assured him. “Emmet is evil, and he’ll get the punishment he deserves, but he wasn’t just someone who took advantage of you. You had fond memories of him, too. That’s what makes the two of you so very different. Torturing him wouldn’t have made him change, but it would have darkened your memories. Sometimes it’s better to grieve someone than to punish them. Grieve the man you thought he was. It’s ok.”

Quinton hugged me tighter, and I kissed his head.

After a few more minutes, he spoke again. “You found me more quickly than I expected. Did you airtag me?” he joked.

“Ah, not exactly,” I murmured. It looked like now might be the time to explain things.

He pulled back and looked at me, and his fire was back. “Sexy Stalker, what does ‘not exactly’ mean? Because that’s a loaded phrase.”

“So, ah, yes, well...” I started, but then I didn’t really know where to go from there.

“Spit it out, Liam. What did you do? Did you microchip me while I was sleeping? Do my sneakers have trackers?” he asked.

“I did think about the sneakers, but I hadn’t gotten around to it yet,” I admitted.

Quinton folded his arms against his bare chest and actually tapped his foot on the shower floor. His hair was wet and he reminded me of a hissing, wet cat—super cute—but I knew better than to say that right now.

“So, apparently hellhounds can mark and mate humans. Of course I planned to discuss this with you, because it would be impolite to mark and mate someone without their consent...” I started.

“Yes,” Quinton cut me off.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Yes, you can mate and mark me,” he answered. Then he looked at my face. “Ah, you already did it, didn’t you, and that’s how you found me. Some supernatural mojo.”

“I didn’t realize I had done it. I would have discussed it with you first. I was already planning on discussing it with you. I’m not even sure how I did it,” I added.

Quinton snorted, holding his hand up to his neck. “I don’t know, brainiac, but biting me and knotting me probably had something to do with it.”

“Yes, that’s a strong possibility,” I admitted.

He snorted, and then he looked at me slyly. “Well, you were impolite to do it without my consent. I know how you hate being impolite. You better make it up to me.”

Ahh, I liked where this was going. I pulled him forward, kissing him under the shower spray. Thank goodness for tankless hot water heaters, because I had a feeling this wouldn't be a short shower.

“Whatever you want, my little hellcat,” I murmured against his lips.

Always, whatever he wanted.

After mutual orgasms (which we kept quiet during out of respect for Aiden being in the house) and a delicious dinner, we fell into bed exhausted. Aiden joined us for cuddles sometime in the night, and we all slept soundly.

It was the wee hours of the morning when I heard the front door open, and I smelled Dexter. I debated getting out of bed, but we were all so warm and cozy, and I was sure that Quinton and Aiden would also want to hear what Dexter had found out.

He came into the bedroom when I didn't come out.

“Awww, look at you guys! All so cute cuddled up! Is it like a puppy pile? Can anyone join?” he asked.

I growled at him. No, Dexter was not welcome to jump into our cozy cuddles.

Aiden and Quinton were stirring awake at his voice, and Quinton opened one eye. “Fuck. It's fucking early, Dexter. What the fuck.”

Dexter just laughed. “I got details. I got names and locations and everything. Passwords. The buyer is based out of a shipping yard about four hours south, and Corbin decided to take the drive to deal with him personally. Once we get details about where people are being shipped, we can contact the pack there and have them rescued. It looks like four guys remained somewhat local, and I have their

information. Jude and Atlas already headed out to start dealing with those. I'm gonna go home to Toby, and then we'll see what's left when everyone regroups. But I thought you'd want to start doing your computer magic."

Quinton grunted. "Good. Now get the fuck out."

I smiled. My little hellcat. "I'll be along to start looking into things," I told Dexter, and he walked out. I kissed Quinton on the head. "I'm going to go start digging. You two sleep in."

Quinton mumbled something, and I think he might have already been back to sleep. When I got up, Aiden smiled sleepily at me. "I'm so glad he has you, Liam. You're so good for him. Thank you."

I nodded at him, and I pulled on some clothes and headed back to my batcave, sure that Quinton would join me once he was up and had some caffeine in him. Hopefully I'd have some more answers for him by then.

Chapter 23

Quinton

A iden brought me coffee in bed, probably because he didn't want to deal with my attitude. "I'm going to work, but I told Cassius you wouldn't be in," he said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Fuck, he was, like, up and dressed and showered already. Fucking morning people. I had a vague recollection of Dexter coming in and Liam leaving to go do research.

"Yeah," I grumbled. "I wanna go see this through to the end."

"I figured you would," Aiden agreed. "I'm glad. I'm glad they'll be saving people and shutting down this ring."

"Me too," I admitted. "It feels almost... I don't know... like what do I do now? After I was kidnapped, revenge was all I could think about. Before that, I was just sort of... existing. What comes next?"

Aiden smirked at me. "Life. Life comes next, Q. Snarking at customers at the coffee shop, or finding a different job if you want, or even going back to school. Having sex with your supernatural boyfriend and snarking at him, because he loves it. Fending off Toby's weird questions and awkward demands for friendship, and maybe even becoming friends." Aiden shrugged. "It's a pretty good life here, you know?"

"How did you get so smart?" I asked.

“Therapy,” he laughed. “Lots of therapy.”

With that, he got up and called goodbye as he went out the door to meet his ride for work. I sighed. It was a pretty good life. I supposed I had never really recovered from the death of my parents, and I had felt alone and without family. It had taken getting kidnapped, but I had managed to fall into a new family quite by accident.

In a weird way, getting kidnapped led me to a better life.

I scoffed at myself. None of that cheery shit. I was a beacon of grumpiness. I took a sip of my coffee and decided to go spread my snark to my sexy stalker. He always appreciated it.

I threw on clothes, grabbed the pastry Aiden had left me, and walked over to Liam’s house. Not surprisingly, he was in his batcave typing away.

“I’ve shut down all their accounts, and Corbin got the name of the overseas seller with relative ease, so I already contacted a pack in that country to deal with them. We have effectively shut down every part of the ring in this part of the country. The other pack assures me they’ll find the victims and take care of the human traffickers,” Liam said without even looking up. I’m sure he knew it was me by smell or something equally weird.

God, I loved the weirdo. And we were, like, bonded together. I was secretly thrilled. And he would never die on me. But...

“I’m going to die someday,” I announced.

Liam stopped typing and turned his chair around. He looked... guilty?

“What did you do, you weirdo?” I asked.

“Well, in mating and marking you, I may have actually tied your life to mine, so I believe you can no longer die,” he said, and then he looked at me anxiously. “If that isn’t what you want...”

I scoffed. “I’m not sure how I’ll manage to put up with you for all eternity, but somehow I’ll do it.” Then I climbed into my sexy stalker’s lap and gave him a kiss. “And what about the local victims? I swear I remember Dexter saying something about that at some ungodly hour.”

Liam gripped onto me with his hands as he replied. “Yes, all four were recovered. Jude and Atlas worked quickly. Jude dropped his recoveries at the sheriff’s office, so that’ll cause a bit of a stir, but...” Liam just shrugged.

“You all work fast, Sexy Stalker,” I murmured, leaning into his neck and giving him a sniff. What? He did it to me all the time.

He shifted under me. Oh, someone was turned on.

“Oh, my naughty stalker, are you horny with me sitting on your lap?” I whispered, giving his ear a little nibble.

He growled, and man, was that sexy. I would never get tired of that rumble sound, especially during sex.

“So all the bad guys are caught, all the good guys are rescued or will be, and you’ve done your computer mojo and frozen funds or whatever,” I asked, turning on his lap so I was straddling him. Luckily the arms of the chair pushed back out of the way—gaming chairs were awesome—and this one was super wide and comfy.

“Yes. I’ve actually put the funds into accounts for the victims in order to facilitate their acclimation back into society,” he said. He had grabbed both my hips, and since

I was on my knees and he was sitting, he was staring up at me for once.

“You did such a good job, Sexy Stalker,” I murmured, leaning down to kiss him gently. It was kind of cool being higher than him.

He smirked at me. “That sounds suspiciously like a ‘good boy,’ and I’m not a dog.”

I laughed, and his face lit up in joy at the sound. I loved that I could make him happy just by being my snarky self. “I love you, Sexy Stalker.”

“I love you too, my little hellcat,” he said.

With that, I lowered down onto his lap so our hard-ons were pressing together. I gasped at the sensation, and I thrust against him lightly while I leaned in to kiss his lips. He took over the kiss in a matter of seconds, his arms wrapping around me and pulling me closer.

“I wanna get you all messy in your office, Sexy Stalker,” I moaned, biting at his neck as I continually thrust down into him, the friction delicious but not enough against my cock. “I’m gonna ride you until we’re both sexy messes.”

Liam growled under me, and I might have made my own little growly sound back. He gripped my hips hard enough to leave marks, and the idea kind of gave me a little thrill. I hoped I had marks to look at in the morning, because apparently I was a little kinky and liked being marked by my man.

I slid off Liam’s lap, and he held on tighter for just a second before letting me go. Always so polite, my sexy stalker.

“Strip,” I ordered, pulling off my shirt. I got distracted watching him quickly but methodically undress, folding his clothes neatly despite his hard cock jutting out in

front of him. He was so fucking sexy.

He came over and unbuttoned my pants, pulling them and my boxers down in one motion. He carefully lifted each leg to strip them off completely, pulling my socks off, too. Then he was sucking my cock into his mouth, and I moaned loudly at the feeling. God, his mouth was perfect. I wanted him inside me, though, so I stepped back and grabbed the lube I had put in his desk drawer.

He smirked at me, raising his eyebrows. Ok, so yes, I liked to be prepared. Besides, I was sure he knew I'd stuck the lube in there. Nothing got by my sexy stalker.

"You wanna ride me?" he growled out. God, I loved when I could tell his hellhound was close to the surface, like he couldn't control himself because he wanted me so much. It was so hot, because Liam was all about being controlled.

I was the only one who could make him lose it, and I might have been more than a little proud of that fact.

"Yes," I said, pouring lube into my hand and watching as he laid back. Ok, if he wasn't complaining about me riding him on his office floor, I sure as fuck wasn't going to, either. I straddled him and started to move my hand back to prep myself.

"Let me," he grumbled, and I felt something dip into the lube on my hand. I looked over to see his tail. Oh fuck, yes. It was thinner than his dick at the tip but thicker than a finger, and it felt fucking amazing inside me.

I leaned down to kiss him, ass up in the air, my legs straddling him. I pressed my lips against his, and he nibbled at my lower lip. I gasped as his tail circled my hole and slid in just a tiny bit.

He continued to nibble at my lips as his tail writhed its way into my channel. I could

only gasp and moan against his lips. Fuck, his tail was so fucking good. It found my prostate and pressed against the bundle of nerves, and my whole body quivered at the sensation. Liam chuckled against my lips.

“Asshole,” I moaned, but he just pressed into the bundle again, making me gasp. Then his tail was undulating inside me, stretching me open. Fuck, this was the perfect way to get prepped.

I ground my dick against his, both of us groaning at the sensation, and his tongue licked into my mouth while his tail pumped into me. Fuck. It felt so good, but it wasn’t long before I needed more. I wanted to be full of him.

“Need your dick,” I moaned.

His tail withdrew slowly, and I felt empty. I sat up and angled my hips up to take his cock in. He held onto my hips to support me, and I grabbed onto his dick to slide it in. I slowly lowered myself down, and we both gasped when he penetrated me.

“Fuck, Liam. I love having you inside me.”

“I love you, hellcat,” he growled, and his eyes were on fire for me.

I sank lower, filling up with him, until I was seated on his lap. God, I was full, but I wanted his knot. I wanted to be filled even more.

I pressed my hands against his chest, and I started riding him, pumping myself up and down, angling myself so he was hitting my spot every time. He thrust up into me as I slid down, and we were perfectly in rhythm.

“Want more. Want to be full with your knot,” I panted.

He smirked at me and pulled me toward him a bit, throwing our rhythm off. I growled at him in frustration, but he just smiled wider. “Patience, hellcat,” he murmured.

He held me still, and I felt something tickling at my hole where his cock was inside me.

“Ohmygod, Liam,” I hissed out. It was his tail. Holy shit, it was his tail.

“Do you want to feel really full, my little hellcat?” he purred, and the tip of his tail slid in next to his cock.

I could barely support myself, and I definitely couldn’t move, because, holy shit, it was so much. I gasped and panted as his tail slid further in, stretching me, rubbing against me.

“So fucking tight and hot,” Liam groaned.

“Fuck. Fuck,” was all I could manage to get out.

His tail pushed in, and it found that bundle of nerves again. I don’t even know what sound came out of my mouth, but Liam groaned as I spasmed around him. Fuck, his tail was pushing into my prostate, and I was filled up with him. He thrust his hips up into me, and without even touching myself, I was coming. My body exploded in bliss, and I was mewling as cum shot out of my dick.

“Oh god, Liam. Oh god. Love you,” I cried out.

“Love you, hellcat,” he answered, and then his tail was sliding out, he was rolling us over, his cock still inside me, and I had barely a moment to be thankful he had a nice plush carpet before he was pounding into me.

It was almost too much—I was sensitive, like a bundle of exposed nerves, but Liam leaned down and bit into my neck, and suddenly the slight pain turned to nothing but pleasure. I felt him grow bigger inside me as his thrusts slowed down, and the sensation was otherworldly inside of me. He bit harder, and it was like his bite activated my second orgasm, because my whole body was spasming and shaking, and I was crying out in pleasure again.

When my orgasm finally ended, it felt like eons later. Liam was still thick and hard inside me, but he wasn't moving. He let go of my neck and leaned over to kiss my lips.

“Hey, I didn't pass out this time, although my body may be broken,” I muttered. “How long am I stuck with your dick?”

He chuckled, and the vibrations sent little sparks through my body as his cock flexed slightly inside me. Oh. Oh my, that felt nice. I gave a leisurely little shifting of my hips, and Liam's eyes flared.

“Hmm, maybe round two will be in order, although I want a bed next time,” I demanded.

Liam chuckled again. “I love you so much, my little hellcat. And that can definitely be arranged.”

“You think you can carry me into the bedroom with your cock still inside me?” I asked, raising my eyebrows. Because, yeah, that sounded like it could be fun.

“Ah, I think we can definitely try,” he growled out, and there were flames burning in his eyes.

“Ok, in just a minute,” I whispered, and I leaned my nose up into his neck, gently

rubbing his back and luxuriating in having him surround me.

And if I happened to sniff him a little?

Well, he fucking smelled good. My sexy hellhound.

Quinton

“I can’t believe you’re subjecting us to those weirdos,” I complained.

I was sprawled across the couch, wearing tight jeans and a fitted sweater. I had to admit that I loved the sexy looks my stalker was giving me. He was all prim and proper in dress pants and a button-down shirt. I wondered if I’d ever get him into jeans? Life goals—I apparently had forever to try.

“You’re one of those weirdos now,” Aiden laughed. He was gathering up some cookies he’d baked to bring over to Toby’s, and he seemed unfazed by my cranky attitude.

Toby had decided that we needed a housewarming party, only it was being held at Toby’s house instead of at our house.

Toby was clueless about a lot of things, but he really did try to respect everyone, and he thought it might be too much for Aiden to have everyone over. So we were doing it at Toby’s house, and there weren’t going to be a ton of people.

I sighed dramatically again, because I supposed I was one of the crazy people now. Fuck. Liam walked over to the couch and leaned down, kissing me on the forehead. “If you behave and have fun, maybe we can sneak out early to do a little work in the batcave.”

My eyes lit up, and I smiled. “Now we’re talking. I respond well to rewards.”

Aiden laughed again over at the kitchen island. “Alright, you lovebirds—time to get going.”

Thankfully, Aiden didn’t seem to mind that we were lovebirds. I worried about him, but he seemed totally fine with Liam.

The three of us walked over to Toby’s house, and when we got there, Toby threw open the door before we even made it up the steps. “Hurray! You guys are here! Aiden, come and meet Josh and Sebbie. You know everyone else. Cass and Kushiel and Steph are all here. So are Dexter and Jude, but Corbin is away working.”

We made our way in, and I watched Aiden carefully as he was introduced to Josh and Seb. He seemed fine, and he obviously knew everyone else, so I relaxed.

We ate and drank, and although it still reminded me a bit of a Sex and the City episode, it was like it was crossed with some supernatural show like Buffy or something, because it was pretty clear that not everyone was human. Dexter kept calling Cass “Oracle” and Cass kept calling Dexter “Hellhound,” and somehow Josh and Seb seemed utterly oblivious to the fact that there were some not-humans amidst them. Everyone was mostly discreet except for Toby, but Josh and Seb didn’t take him seriously, so that didn’t really matter.

Eventually Toby sidled up to me, and he had a notebook and pen. Fuck. I shot a pleading look over in Liam’s direction, but he was talking to Dexter about their “foreign associates” and updating him on their progress.

“So…” Toby started, and he looked at me with these sort of puppy-dog eyes.

I sighed. “What do you want to know?”

“Dexter seemed to think you were chloroformed or something, and I wondered if you could describe the smell, and if there was a taste, and how groggy you were, and how

you felt when you woke up..." Toby trailed off as he was already writing stuff down.

I sighed again and asked, "Planning to chloroform one of your characters?"

"Well, it's a really good idea, and of course the bad guy would get viciously tortured and killed, don't worry about that," he added gleefully.

I still couldn't believe Toby was human—he was such a bloodthirsty little thing.

I eventually managed to extricate myself from his million questions with the promise to chat more later, and I made my way out onto the front porch to get a little fresh air. I wasn't upset, exactly, but it wasn't nice remembering what Emmett had done.

When I got outside, I saw Seb at the railing, two crows hopping in front of him.

"Hey, Seb," I said.

He startled, and one of the crows cawed at me. I put my hands up in a gesture of not meaning any harm, because the crow seemed a little pissed.

Seb just laughed. "It's ok, guys, he's a friend," he said to the birds. Then he motioned me over and grabbed my hand, putting something in it. It felt like a peanut. "Give that to them," he ordered.

I placed the peanut on the porch railing, and one of them hopped over suspiciously and took it, then hopped back over in front of Seb.

"I thought birds were Corbin's thing," I joked.

Seb looked at me. "Oh, cool, does he like crows? I love them. They're totally cool. They're super smart, and they'll remember friends and enemies. You're not technically allowed to have them as pets, because you can basically teach them to

steal from people.”

I laughed. “Now that’s my kind of bird,” I joked.

Seb reached out and actually pet one on the neck, and it tilted its head down for a scratch. Ok, then—maybe he wasn’t human. Shapeshifter? I didn’t think it would be polite to ask, so we made some small talk before I made my way back inside.

I was going to find Aiden and check in on him when I saw Josh standing off to the side. He still pinged my radar. Something was up with him, but I wasn’t close enough to him to pry. Still, maybe I’d ask Toby.

Aiden and Liam didn’t seem to be in sight, and I wandered through the house. I thought I heard voices on the back porch, and I walked over. It wasn’t that I was being sneaky or anything, because I was sure Liam knew exactly where I was at every moment. Aiden was in the middle of a bit of a rant, though.

“—it’s only natural to expect that. And I’ll be fine ,” Aiden was insisting.

“It’s not happening,” Liam answered.

“You think I don’t know it’s weird? I’m a grown man, for goodness sake. I know it’s weird. And I’ll get over it, and I’ll be able to live on my own just fine . You guys won’t be far, and it’s not like I’m not protected, so it’s really okay. It’s natural that you guys will want your own space,” he insisted.

What the fuck? Did Aiden think we were moving out?

“Aiden, enough.” Uh oh, my sexy stalker sounded like he was getting aggravated. “We are not going anywhere. Nothing is changing. You’ll come climb into bed whenever you want, and we’ll cuddle and get up in the morning and bond over Quinton’s foul morning mood. And I’ll continue to enjoy your pastries. End of story.”

I could hear Aiden huff out a breath. “I would be ok. I don’t want you guys to feel responsible for me. I could always adopt Fluffy for company.”

“Fluffy?” Liam asked, and his voice sounded weird.

“Yeah.” Aiden chuckled self-consciously. “I don’t know the guard dog’s name, so I just call him Fluffy.”

“Fluffy.” Liam was making some kind of strangled noise—I couldn’t tell if he was trying not to choke or trying not to laugh.

I didn’t know what was up, but I stepped outside, pointing a finger at Aiden. “Listen, asshole, you are not going anywhere . How dare you think of leaving us!”

Aiden rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t leave you. You guys would just move into Liam’s house. I’m sure you guys want privacy.”

“Why would we want privacy?” I demanded.

Aiden tilted his head back in exasperation, and Liam just muttered, “Fluffy,” and made that strangled choking-laugh sound again.

“Stop making fun of my nickname for the guard dog! He’s super sweet! And he is fluffy!” Aiden demanded, pointing his finger at Liam. Then he looked over to me, adding, “And you guys are going to want to have sex and stuff. Hello.”

“Um, yeah, we already have sex. Lots of sex,” I told Aiden. “What, you think we can’t be creative? Who has sex in the middle of the night, anyway? If Liam wakes me up from a dead sleep for sex, he’s more likely to get his dick punched than he is to get it into any one of my holes.”

Aiden snorted at me, and I looked over to see Liam smiling like I was just the cutest

little feral cat he'd ever met. I rolled my eyes at him.

"Q..." Aiden started.

I cut him off. "We aren't going anywhere, and neither are you. We have plenty of time for sex and we do have a whole other house if we need privacy. And you go for those nice long walks in the woods, or hell, you can use the other house if you want to get away from us. Or you can kick us out for an afternoon or something if you're sick of us, but we are not moving out. We're family, and we're staying."

"I don't get sick of you," Aiden said softly.

"Well good, because you're fucking stuck with us," I scowled.

Aiden pulled me into a hug, and I grumbled, "Fucking mushy shit."

"I love you, too," Aiden mumbled, and he reached out a hand and pulled Liam into the hug too. "I love you both. Thank you."

We may have all sniffled a bit, but eventually we made our way back inside. Aiden headed back to our place not too long after that, and Jude walked him back, telling some story about the sheriff.

Liam and I found ourselves relatively alone in a corner of the living room, and when he sat on the couch, I draped myself across his lap. He kissed me gently on the lips and smiled. I'm sure I was grinning back, because I really did love him. I snuggled into him. I loved that he knew, without even asking, that I wouldn't want to leave Aiden behind.

I realized that eventually Aiden would die, and I apparently wouldn't be growing old and dying.

“What is it, my hellcat?” Liam asked, resting his chin on top of my head.

“You sniffing my feelings again, weirdo?” I asked.

He just huffed.

“Aiden will grow old and die, and that thought just made me really sad,” I answered.

“I know it’s part of life to lose people we love, but... it’s hard.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m not so sure Aiden will be getting old and dying,” Liam answered.

I turned around in his lap, facing him. “What do you mean? Aiden is human.”

“We don’t have a guard dog,” Liam answered.

It took me a moment to puzzle out exactly what he meant. Of course they had a guard dog. Aiden had been talking about the guard dog since we first moved in. Then it hit me.

“Who is it?” I asked. Somehow, I couldn’t imagine Jude or Corbin not telling Aiden it was them, just to put him at ease.

“Atlas, probably.” Liam shrugged. He chuckled then. “I’ll call him Fluffy next time I see him and check.”

I smacked him, but I couldn’t help the giggle that escaped.

I looked out at the crew gathered in Toby’s living room. It was family, and apparently it wasn’t complete quite yet. I looked forward to the chaos that adding more members would create.

They were weirdos, but they were our weirdos, and I loved them all. I snuggled back into Liam. I had my very own hellhound, and I couldn't be happier. He snuffled into my hair.

“Stop sniffing me, weirdo.” I was smiling, because I loved when Liam did that, and he knew it.

“Love you, too, my little hellcat,” he answered, kissing my head.

Yup, life was pretty damn weird, but it was pretty damn perfect, too.