



The Prom (Rockwell Academy #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: He's not the hero she needed. He's the threat she never saw coming.

Imogens life at Rockwell Academy was already complicated.

Between barely making it to class and navigating her confusing, slow-burning relationship with Jesse—a boy who hides too much behind his charming grin—she wasn't prepared to literally crash into someone new.

Drake Bellingham is devastatingly attractive, undeniably intense, and her new history teacher.

But what starts as a spark quickly spirals into something far darker.

Because Rockwell Academy has secrets—secrets that go far beyond complicated romance.

Beneath its polished halls, something dangerous is brewing. When prom night turns from glitter to chaos, trust shatters, alliances twist, and Imogen finds herself caught between two men: one with a dark secret, and another who might not even be who he says he is.

As betrayal creeps in and foundations crumble, Imogen must decide who to trust—if anyone—and how much of her heart she's willing to risk before it all burns down.

Trust is torn, hearts are broken and everything they believed in is shattered into darkness.

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IMOGEN

I'm late for class and that angers me more than anything. My alarm failed and now I'm playing catch up.

As I race from Willow Tree House into the bright sunshine, I bemoan the fact I only had time to pull on yoga pants and yesterday's t-shirt.

My hair is a mess, and make-up wasn't even a consideration. My teeth are clean, but my hair could use some work, but I'll worry about that later. For now, the most important thing in my life is to get to history before the bell goes.

I'm guessing I slept in late because Jesse insisted on demanding my time and I wasn't against that. I like him. He reminds me a lot of The Reapers back home. Cheeky, full of wit and banter and the way he stares deep into my eyes with a soft smile, has my heart fluttering like a bird in a cage.

We kiss, we touch, we make out, but we don't progress any further.

I'm guessing we are alone in that because when the others head to their respective rooms, they are not alone.

Jesse wants to but there is something holding me back from taking it further.

I'm guessing it's because of the niggling doubt in the back of my mind that he is keeping something from me.

It's the rather bright smile blinding me to the angst in his eyes that tells me Jesse is hiding a secret that is cutting him up inside.

He is respectful but the passion in his eyes is a darker kind.

Not the soft lustful passion of a man toward the women he cares about.

He opens up but not entirely and it's probably only because this is so new and I shouldn't expect any different.

But I want the whole of him before I give him the whole of me, and I am so wrapped up in my deliberations I don't even see the wall in front of me before I hit it and fall to the ground with a resounding thud.

"Fuck!" My books scatter and my head hurts as I meet the ground in a daze, wondering what just happened.

I must have concussion because the wall suddenly speaks to me and drops down before me, reaching out a steadying hand, a deep husky voice whispering, "Hey, are you okay?"

I attempt to focus and as my eyes drag toward the source of the concern, I blink against the image in front of me.

Did I die because this must be what heaven looks like? A guy is staring at me with concern, his bright blue eyes disturbingly like mine and his dark hair short but sexy as fuck as it flops over one side of a worried expression.

His mouth is set in concern, and his eyes sparkle with apologies and as my eyes drift lower, I swallow hard because his body is struggling against the confines of a dark blue shirt, the muscles rippling in his forearms as he reaches out to steady me.

“I’m sorry.” I apologize because this must have been my fault for not looking where I was going and he raises a concerned eye.

“I’ll help you to the medical room.”

His words release my defenses and I shake my head, replying quickly, “No. It’s, um, fine. I wasn’t looking where I was going and well, I’m sorry.”

Relief reflects in his devastating smile as he whispers, “Let me help you up.”

I stand, my blood hot as I stare at the perfection in front of me and as he hands me the books that fell with me, he says with concern, “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes.” I roll my eyes, and a nervous laugh escapes me. “I’m such a klutz and known for it I may add.”

His soft smile causes my heart to race and as I regard the empty hall, I say quickly. “I should, um, go. I’m late and well, you know.”

He nods and his gaze is thoughtful as I smile quickly and turn, heading toward history, which is now merely a distraction from what just happened. Who the fuck was that guy?

As I slip into the classroom, I head to my desk, Cassie chuckling as I slide in beside her.

“What happened to you, Imogen? Don’t tell me Jesse caught up with you before class.”

“Jesse?”

“Your boyfriend.” She rolls her eyes. “Honestly, Imogen, what’s got into you today, or was it as I first thought, Jesse?”

“As if.” I cut her smile dead with a toss of my eyes, and she smiles sympathetically.

“Still not any further forward with that?”

“No.” I attempt to regain control of my breathing and say with a shrug. “I don’t know what to make of him – or the situation if I’m honest.”

“Why not?”

Cassie is concerned, it’s obvious in her anxious gaze and I shake my head.

“There’s something he’s not telling me and it’s seriously concerning.

The trouble is—” I sigh heavily, staring at the books piled on my desk.

“We are a couple under the rules of The Claiming and so I’ll have to figure it out because I have no choice.

He will want more and to be honest Cassie—”

My smile is faint as I whisper, “I’m just not ready for that.”

She reaches for my arm and squeezes it reassuringly and whispers, “Then wait. Just because you’re a couple as determined by The Claiming, it doesn’t involve sex unless both parties agree.

Make him work harder, honey. You deserve the whole of him and not just the part he wants you to have, which is probably just his cock.

I mean, let's face fact, it's the only part that matters to a guy anyway. ”

I laugh out loud, loving how Cassie always has the ability to cheer me up and shake me out of my moods and as the classroom door opens, I gaze up with a smile still on my face as somebody familiar heads through it, causing my heart to jerk like he's pulling it on a string as my mysterious stranger enters the room and heads to the desk at the front of it.

The room falls silent as he stares around the room with a firm smile and as his gaze settles on my shocked face, he says loudly, “My name is Drake Bellingham, but you can call me sir.”

His gaze leaves me as he smiles at the rest of the class. “I'm your replacement history teacher. Mrs. Fields had a family emergency, and I was brought in to replace her. So, any questions catch me after class but now open your books at page thirty-five and we'll begin.”

Cassie nudges me as I stare at him in confusion.

“Wow, thank God for family emergencies. That's all I'm saying.”

I shake myself and shrug. “If you say so. I hope Mrs. Fields is okay.”

Cassie laughs. “That's why I love you so much, Imogen. You are always thinking of others first. You have such a genuine soul.”

She turns her attention to the lesson but the words on the page swim against my vision as two gorgeous soul-filled eyes stare back at me.

Drake Bellingham.

Be still my beating heart because something is telling me that he will be extremely bad for me and just like that, my life has gotten a whole lot more complicated.

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ONE

IMOGEN

I can't concentrate. My mind is racing as I attempt to get through the morning and all because of one man. One extremely forbidden man who spiked my pulse rate faster than anything in my life so far.

I'm deep in thought as I head to the cafeteria to meet up with the others and jump out of my skin when an arm lands around my shoulder and a familiar voice whispers, "Hey, baby, I missed you today."

"It's only lunchtime. The day is hardly over yet."

I roll my eyes as Jesse squeezes me affectionally. "I can miss you a minute after I left you if I want to. You are so far inside my head rational thinking is impossible."

"Idiot."

I force a bright smile on my face. "So, what's going on?"

"As in—"

"Now. Are you coming for coffee, or do you have another engagement?"

I detect the weariness in his smile that he attempts to disguise by dropping a light kiss on my cheek and whispering, "I'm all yours."

We walk in silence, both of us not really buying his last statement.

If Jesse was all mine, he wouldn't be missing in action most of the time and it makes me uneasy.

I'm aware he has a few problems, mainly one concerning an ex teacher here and despite the fact she was fired for inappropriate behavior with the students, I'm sensing their involvement may not be over yet.

We reach the cafeteria, and I'm not even sure why I don't ask him outright.

You're afraid of the answer.

My inner voice reminds me of what a coward I am and I wonder if I'm more in love with the idea of having Jesse as a boyfriend than the reality.

I want it to work. We hang in the same friendship group, and they are mostly coupled up.

It would be so easy. I also like him. He is gorgeous to look at, just my type in fact, and when he's not stroking his secrets, he's a fun-loving, easygoing guy.

He makes me laugh and my heart flutter and I consider I'm a fool for thinking this isn't a match made in heaven.

He holds open the door like a gentleman and, as I enter the cafeteria, I spy Cassie and Frankie huddled together in our usual spot.

Jesse nods toward the counter. "I'll fetch the coffee. Do you want anything to eat with it?"

“Sure, a club sandwich would be good, with some potato chips.”

I rummage in my purse for the money and Jesse smiles softly. “My treat, babe.”

“No, I—”

He captures my objection with his lips and, as he kisses me softly in a surprise attack, I hate that another man’s face is behind my closed eyes.

Before I have time to process that, he pulls away and smiles his usual cheery grin.

“Go and join the others. I won’t be long.”

I nod and as I turn, my heart is beating faster than normal. Was it the kiss, the public display of affection, or a different man altogether?

“Hey, Imogen.”

Cassie waves me over and I plaster a smile on my lips and slide in opposite the happy couple. Frankie and Cassie are a match made in hell because they fit together like a bullet in a custom made gun.

They are dynamic, ruthless and have no fear and love one another just as hard.

Frankie is watching me with his usual thoughtful expression, and I don’t know why I’m squirming on my seat under his dark gaze.

Cassie adds conversation by leaning forward and saying in a low voice, “Wow, that history teacher is something else.”

Frankie yawns as I downplay my fascination with the new guy and shrug. “He’s

certainly different to Mrs. Fields.”

“Don’t give me the disinterest, Imogen, because we both know you couldn’t drag your eyes away from him.”

She jerks her thumb at Jesse. “Should I tell him he has competition?”

“Tell him what you like.” I shrug. “I doubt it would change anything.”

Frankie’s gaze spears my soul as he asks, “What makes you think he doesn’t care?”

“Don’t pay any attention to what I say.” I attempt to paper over the crack. “I haven’t seen much of him since The Claiming ceremony and, well, I suppose he’s studying.”

Cassie snorts. “Jesse? Don’t make me laugh. There’s only one subject he likes to study, and I’m looking at her.”

Frankie says nothing and his dark eyes flash as he turns to his approaching best friend, who is balancing a tray filled with coffee and food, and drops a cheeky wink at Cassie.

“Hey, I ran out of room. If you want more coffee, I’ll fetch it if you like.”

“I’m good. Thanks for asking.” Cassie smiles and, as always, her smile is genuine. If anything, it settles my doubts a little because if there was anything to be concerned about, Cassie would have picked up on it.

“So—” She leans forward, the excitement shining from her eyes. “The Prom.”

The guys grin as I unwrap my sandwich. “It should be good.” I admit, and she nods enthusiastically.

“I can’t wait. Have you decided what you’re wearing yet?”

“No. Have you?”

I take a bite of the sandwich and she shrugs. “We should take a trip into town with Siri and Summer. There’s a great dress shop there and it would be fun to try some outfits on.”

“Sure. When did you have in mind?”

“Saturday?”

She cocks her head to one side and Frankie casts a pained look in Jesse’s direction. “We could wait in the bar. They could take all day if they like.”

Jesse shifts in his seat and I don’t miss the interest spark in Frankie’s eyes as Jesse mumbles, “Sorry, I have plans for Saturday during the day.”

“What plans?” Frankie’s voice is steady but loaded with accusation and Jesse stuffs his bagel into his mouth, cutting the conversation dead. I sense a shift in the atmosphere and Cassie catches my eye with a worried frown and I wait with held breath for Jesse to answer him.

“Well?”

Frankie won’t give it up and Jesse leans back in his seat and attempts to make light of the question. “It’s no dark secret, Frankie. I’ve got plans, and I’d rather not talk about them now, if you don’t mind.”

Cassie reaches for her coffee and leans back as Frankie holds Jesse’s gaze for the longest minute before saying abruptly, “Cassie, it’s time to leave.”

“Why?” Cassie’s eyes widen as Frankie stands, reaching for her hand.

“Because I say so,” is his usual cutting response and I wait for Cassie to voice her objection because she isn’t one to be ordered around by anyone.

However, there must be something in Frankie’s expression that checks her voice because she smiles apologetically.

“I suppose so. Well–” She smiles brightly.

“Enjoy your lunch, guys. I’ll see you later, Imogen, Jesse. ”

Frankie says nothing and as they leave, Jesse exhales sharply. “I love him like a brother, but Frankie seriously pisses me off sometimes.”

I could take this opportunity to ask him where he’s going, but I’m more surprised to discover that I really don’t care.

Jesse leans back and rakes his fingers through his hair.

“Imogen, I–”

I carry on eating as I wait for him to tell me exactly what is going on inside his head and I’m surprised when he reaches for my hand and squeezes it hard.

“I’m sorry baby. I’m a shit boyfriend.”

He grips my face and forces me to look at him and his eyes soften as he whispers, “I’ll make it up to you. I don’t want there to be any secrets between us, but well, this one is a lot to deal with and, well, personal.”

“You can trust me, Jesse.” Compassion replaces indifference, and he nods, resting his forehead against mine as he sighs. “It’s to do with my home life. You know how difficult it is back there.”

I remember him telling me he lives in a small puritan town where he is expected to marry a local girl after graduation and set up a farm. I’m aware of what’s expected of him and my smile softens as I understand the dilemma he’s in.

“It’s okay, Jesse. You don’t have to explain.”

His pained expression tells me otherwise, and he sighs.

“It’s a lot to deal with. Part of me wants to run the other way after graduation and never look back.”

“And the other?”

He groans. “They’re my family. How can I walk away from the people who raised me and were my world until I came to Rockwell? Until I met my friends—until I met you.”

His lips hover against mine and my heart melts. Perhaps it’s the compassionate nature of my soul that enables me to see things more from Jesse’s side than mine and I instantly forgive him for his disinterest, explaining it away as a turbulent past.

“It’s okay, I understand. You do what you must and I’ll see you at the house afterwards.”

His soft kiss is my answer and as I make out with Jesse in full view of our fellow students, I could be forgiven for believing that everything is right with our world. Mine and Jesse’s. The man who claimed me and I owe it to him to make this work.

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TWO

IMOGEN

Willow Tree House is a great place to live at Rockwell. It's set apart from the dorms and sits in a pleasant location, flanked by the reason for its name. Two weeping willow trees stand proudly guarding the property and the women who call it home.

Cassie lives in The Elusive House which is only a short walk away, along with Frankie and Jack and Siri also live there. Ordinarily, I would hate being away from them, but when I met Summer, Frankie's sister, and we were offered a room each here, I loved the freedom it gave me.

All of my life I have lived under one roof with a crowd. When you live in a motorcycle club, it kind of restricts your freedom.

There are always watchful eyes on me when I move around the compound, which is why I am enjoying my freedom here.

The house is inhabited by women only and yet many of their guys often sleep over, despite the rules banning that.

Part of me wonders if I will ever reach that stage with Jesse. If I do, will he want me to move into The Elusive House with the others, or remain here? The thought of leaving this sanctuary is not an option right now and as I head through the front door, Kennedy James is heading out the other way.

Kennedy is the person who offered us the room and is a cool girl who has become a good friend since I got here.

“Hey, Imogen. What’s up?”

“Nothing.” I force a smile on my face. “How about you?”

She smiles. “I’m off to meet Amos. We’re heading into town for an intimate meal at the Wild Olive.”

“Sounds good.”

I’m not lying, it does, and I wish my relationship with Jesse involved intimate dates away from the academy. Rather than parties at The Elusive House and making out in the corner of the bar.

“I’ll catch you later.”

Kennedy smiles warmly and as she leaves, I turn to the kitchen, wondering why I am dragging a heavy heart behind me. I should be happy. I’ve got an amazing boyfriend who I really like, but there is something missing and I can’t figure it out.

When I reach the kitchen, my friend Summer is making coffee, and she points to the barstool set against the countertop.

“Just in time. I’m the barista today and you are the lucky recipient of my speciality.”

She grins and I return it with a genuine smile because Summer is a breath of fresh air in an increasingly turbulent day.

“So, tell me, how is life as Jesse’s girl?”

“Good.” I reach for the coffee mug. “And how is life as Luca’s girl?”

I reference her rather dark and seriously hot boyfriend who claimed her at the ceremony last week.

“A wild ride in every sense of the word.”

Her satisfied smile and cheeky wink causes me to giggle. “Spare me the details.”

She shrugs. “You asked and well, to be honest, I can’t remember my life when he wasn’t in it.”

A dreamy smile lights her face and she sighs. “Actually, life is pretty good right now despite the fact I apparently fell in love with the devil himself.”

“Love?” I raise a questioning eyebrow. “So soon.”

“When you know, you know.” She grins. “Why hide it? I am insanely in love or lust with that guy, but he really doesn’t need to hear that.”

“Noted.” I sip the coffee and nod my approval. “This is good. What’s in it?”

“Cream and a little dash of brandy to get us in the mood to party later on.”

“It’s seriously good, Summer.”

I could drink several of these and as she sits beside me, she smiles.

“Things worked out well for us. We are all on the same page and life couldn’t get any better.

Cassie keeps my brother away from interfering in my life, which is all good.

Siri is head over heels for Jack and now you and Jesse are the golden couple.

I met Luca and quite frankly, I believe we are soulmates because there is nobody else I would rather be with. ”

For some reason, her words only increase my anxiety because I agree.

The other three couples are deliriously happy and only have eyes for one another but I don't place Jesse and me in the same class as them.

There is something holding us back, and part of me wonders if it's all because of him.

Do I really want this? I'm not so sure and I must ask myself the question that I would never voice out loud.

Is it him or me because I'm not certain that if he declared his undying love for me tonight, I would be thrilled with that.

Summer heads off to get ready for the party later on and, rather than do the same, I decide to head out for a run to clear my head.

It's something I do a lot back home and spend endless hours running through the grounds of the compound where we live, loving the sense of space it gives me because it's the only time I am truly alone.

As I hit the fresh air, my mind instantly switches off. My ear buds are firmly in place and I am looking forward to some quality alone time.

I head off on my usual route, hugging the tree line. Conversation isn't what I want

right now and dodging my fellow students is more desirable to me for at least the next two hours.

The grounds of Rockwell academy are vast and my route soon takes me through the trees toward the dungeons that are used for Frankie's pet project, The Claiming.

In this dungeon, five masked guys, dressed as centurions, wait in a locked prison cell for five willing girls to take up the challenge to escape them.

They are given a head start and take off through the tunnels in the hope they put up a good fight at least before they are caught and shackled to the guy who they will be paired with for the semester.

The only way to break the commitment is to choose to twist at the Twist ceremony that is held at the beginning of every semester. The fact I entered at all is still something I haven't figured out yet and I'm guessing it has a lot to do with falling in with the rest of them.

As I jog through the trees, my mind is full of centurions, dark tunnels and hooded figures and I must have zoned out for a while because the next thing I know, I'm sprawling on the ground after tripping over a tree root.

"Fuck!" My ankle turns as I go down and as I fall, my hands brush against a bare branch, the wood splintering under my skin.

A sharp pain slices through me as my body attempts to work out what just happened and I must be delirious because once again, somebody drops to the ground in front of me and a concerned voice says huskily, "Hey, are you okay?"

I attempt to focus and as the shape takes on a human form, my heart almost dives out of my body because staring at me with concern is Drake Bellingham, who appears to

be making a habit of picking me up when I fall.

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THREE

IMOGEN

I say nothing because I'm speechless and as I stare into his bright blue eyes, I lose myself in the process. I am drowning. I can't breathe and yet there's a lightness to my spirit I haven't felt for quite some time.

I can only stare and only when his fingers trickle against my skin, do I realize exactly what an idiot I must look like right now and I gasp, "I'm sorry, I, well, I wasn't looking and um, tripped."

His eyes flash with concern.

"Does it hurt?"

I wince as my ankle throbs. "Kind of."

His strong hands reach for my ankle and as he lifts it onto his muscular thigh, his fingers untie my laces and he eases the sneaker off my feet, his touch surprisingly gentle.

"It's sprained."

I try desperately not to pant as he massages the ankle with a strong, reassuring touch and gazes at me with concern.

“I don’t think it’s broken, but we should get some ice on it.”

“We?”

“I’m not going to leave you to deal with this alone” He raises his eyes and as his gaze connects with mine, it floods my entire body with a surprising reaction.

I catch my breath and he peers at me with concern. “We should get you to the doctor.”

“It’s fine; just a sprain.”

He shakes his head. “You’ve turned as white as a ghost. There’s no reason to hide your pain. I’m here to help.”

He studies my ankle with a worried frown and says firmly, “I’ll bind it to prevent it from causing you any further discomfort.”

I say nothing as he removes his sweat soaked t-shirt and rips it into shreds with his insane muscles. I swallow hard as I stare at a chest scripted in black ink that travels down over his shoulders and note the sweat glistening on his toned abs as he binds my ankle with what remains of his t-shirt.

I can’t breathe as my body reacts in desperate lust to a person who is one hundred percent male kneeling before me.

The concentration on his face distracts him from realizing I am openly staring at his chiseled features that are set in stone as he tends to my ankle.

I am insanely attracted to this man despite knowing he’s my teacher and I excuse that because he can’t be many years older than me, anyway.

“I’ll help you up. Don’t put any pressure on your foot and I’ll take you back.”

His husky voice disturbs the fantasy playing out in my mind where he forces me to the forest floor and helps me off with all of my clothes before showing me exactly what happens to little girls who wander foolishly into the forest alone.

“Back?” I have obviously lost the power of rational speech and he must think I’m an idiot as he stands and pulls me up with him as if I am a leaf from the forest floor.

“You have a choice. I can carry you back, or you can try to hobble. It’s your decision.”

Merely the thought of him holding me in his arms makes me dizzy because it hasn’t escaped my attention that he is nearly naked.

His broad chest is gleaming with sweat as he appears to have been on the same mission as me.

Just imagining my face pressed to his hard muscles causes my entire body to fold and I gasp a deep breath, as I say hastily, “It’s okay. I’ll attempt to walk.”

The excruciating pain that almost causes me to cry out is unbearable and I clamp my teeth on my lower lip to hide the fact it hurts like hell.

Then, before I can register what’s happening, he lifts me effortlessly from my feet and swings me into his arms like Hercules, and every wish I ever had is granted in one single act of chivalry.

“I–” My protest is cut short as he tightens his hold and says sternly. “No arguments. It will be quicker this way.”

As he sets off at a brisk pace, my face burns because aside from the fact I'm in man heaven right now, this is also the most embarrassing moment of my life.

"So—" he chuckles. "Are you always this accident prone?"

Despite the circumstances, his question causes me to giggle. "Not normally, only when you're around, obviously."

"Do you often run on your own?"

His deep voice rumbles against my cheek as I rest my face against his chest. "I do. I love the freedom it gives me."

"Same."

He sighs. "Life can be overwhelming and running offers an escape from that. When you are alone, you are in a safe place."

His words surprise me. "What do you mean by a safe place?"

"Nobody can reach you. They don't want something from you, and you can process your thoughts and make plans."

"And recharge and make sense of the shit life throws at you." I add and he chuckles softly, the low rumble vibrating against my cheek causing me to smile.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

His gentle voice soothes and the fact I can't see his face removes any barriers and I surprise myself by whispering, "Sometimes we do what is expected of us rather than what we want."

“As in?”

I check my answer and sigh. “It’s nothing, really.”

“It doesn’t sound like nothing.”

I’m not sure if it’s my imagination or not, but he appears to tighten his hold.

“Peer pressure, I suppose, and the hatred of letting anyone down.”

“Then be honest with them. What’s the worst that could happen?”

I pause before whispering, “Because I would be alone again.”

He doesn’t reply and as we head out of the trees, I realize that we have reached the river and he says softly, “We’ll sit here for a moment and catch our breath. It’s not far from civilization, but I have a feeling you could use a little space.”

As he lowers me gently onto the ground, he sits beside me and I’m touched when he lifts my ankle onto his lap and says huskily, “It’s best to keep the ankle elevated.”

“Of course.” I’m not sure where to look because now I have no place to hide. When he carried me, I couldn’t see his face, and it brought with it an easy acceptance of the situation. Now he is staring at me with concern and it’s a little overwhelming because this man is freaking gorgeous.

Conversation stalls as we sit silently gazing at the river and after a while, he says in his deep husky tones, “This is a beautiful place.”

I note the sparkling river surrounded by lush greenery, the sun catching the gentle waves as the river gurgles toward its destination. Birds flutter overhead, their sweet

song serenading the moment, and a gentle breeze causes the leaves to dance in the trees.

“I love nature.” I admit, and he smiles.

“Nothing compares to its beauty.”

His gaze burns a trail through my body and I must admit that nature was having a very good day when she created him.

Up close, he is a perfect example of mankind. I’m guessing he must be in his late twenties. Tall, dark and handsome were words invented to describe him, from his gorgeous blue eyes to his strong jaw, his mouth set in an easy grin and his body the result of meticulous training.

It’s awkward as I surreptitiously attempt to sear this moment into my mind for eternity without appearing too interested in a man who is strictly off limits.

“You mentioned peer pressure.”

His statement comes from out of nowhere and I nod, my despondent sigh his only answer.

His eyes burn into mine as he whispers huskily, “You only get one life and there is no point in using it to please others above yourself. If you do, you will be cheating yourself and them by covering the truth and altering your destiny.”

I swear I could listen to his husky voice all day and I am desperate to learn more about him, but it would be overstepping the boundary.

Instead, I nod my acceptance of his statement.

“I know you’re right, but it’s complicated.”

“Not really.”

There is nowhere to hide from his searing gaze, as he apparently reads every thought in my mind.

I don’t miss how he is holding my ankle carefully in his strong hands as he stares deep into my eyes and as moments go, this one will be revisited several times as a memory I still can’t believe I can call mine.

As I smile back at him, I notice a flicker of concern, or is it apprehension, that quickly passes when he says with regret, “We should go. Your ankle should be strapped and you could probably use some painkillers.”

“I suppose.”

As he stands, my breath halts as I stare at his awesome body and before I can object, he swings me back into his arms and heads off at speed, as if I weigh nothing at all.

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FOUR

IMOGEN

Drake Bellingham must be superhuman. I conclude that because he hardly even breaks a sweat as he covers the distance to the academy,

As we break through the tree line, he leans down and whispers, “It’s probably best if we stop at my house while I grab a t-shirt before I take you to the medical room.”

I see the sense in his statement but my mouth dries at the idea of spending any time at his home.

I hate how desolate I am when I realize my time with him is over as he says softly, “I’ll set you down and if you place your arm around my shoulders, I’ll help you hobble.

I’m not sure it would be appropriate to carry you to the medical room while I’m half dressed.

We would have some explaining to do, and it would attract unwelcome gossip on both our parts. ”

“Of course.” He isn’t wrong and as I leave his safe arms, I taste regret as reality brings me back to our current situation. He is a teacher. I am a student. It will never be anything more and he was merely doing what was right at the time.

We hobble what turns out to be the short distance to his house set on the end of a line of teacher's accommodation and yet it is hidden behind a few strategically placed trees that ensure privacy.

We reach the wooden steps leading up to his small veranda and he guides me down to sit on one of the steps.

“Wait here. I won't be long.”

As he heads inside, I attempt to breathe again and shake myself back to reality and accept what this is. It strikes me that Jesse hasn't crossed my mind once this entire time and yet I don't feel guilty about that.

I'm not alone for long and Drake reappears, a fresh t-shirt stretching across his toned body, carrying a welcome glass of water in his strong hands.

“I guessed you could use this.”

He offers it to me and I gulp it down gratefully, not realizing just how thirsty I was.

“I would give you some painkillers, but it's probably best if you get those from the nurse.”

“Probably.”

I hand him the empty glass with a smile.

“Thanks for this and, well, everything.”

My face heats as his eyes burn into mine and a soft smile lights his handsome face.

“Any time, Imogen.”

Just hearing my name on his lips causes my heart to curl with pleasure and I don't even get a chance to process that before he reaches for my hand.

“Come. We have a date with the medical room.”

As we make the journey in silence, a huge dose of disappointment sits heavy in my heart because this encounter is over and it's very doubtful will ever be repeated, no matter how much I wish it was.

Drake, or Mr. Bellingham, as I should now think of him, leaves me at the medical room and explains what happened to the nurse, who it appears can't stop staring at him either.

I hate my reaction to that as she openly flirts with him, despite the fact she's in her forties and happily married, judging by the wedding band on her left finger.

He is cool and professional and nothing like the man I met in the forest and as he leaves, he smiles in my direction. “I hope you recover soon, Imogen. Take care when running in future and make sure you always have your phone to call someone.”

“I will and—” I swallow my disappointment and smile brightly. “Thank you for helping me, sir.”

He nods, but I don't miss the resignation in his eyes before he turns and leaves, effectively relegating our association back to teacher and student.

The nurse turns to me and smiles. “Thank goodness Mr. Bellingham was on hand to help. It's doubtful you would have made it back alone.”

“Yes, I’m very grateful to him.”

As she busies herself strapping my ankle, I replay the events a thousand times in my mind and hate how desolate I am knowing that my time will be spent with Jesse and not the handsome history teacher who sets my soul on fire with just one smile from his heavenly lips.

Cassie peer at me with concern. “Fuck, Imogen, are you okay?”

She came flying over to Willow Tree House as soon as she took my call.

The nurse gave me crutches to use and instructed me to rest my ankle for twenty-four hours, which would have been cool had it been through lessons but it’s the weekend and all it means is I’ll spend it in my room instead of partying with the others.

“What happened?”

She peers at my ankle and I shrug off her concern. “I tripped and fell. It was lucky that Mr. Bellingham was also out jogging and he helped me to the medical room.”

I make light of the situation and she smirks. “Lucky you. What’s he like?”

My heart races when I think of him, and as she studies me carefully, I attempt to conceal my obvious interest in our teacher. “He was kind. He didn’t say much and just helped me to the medical room.”

I conveniently gloss over the way he stripped and used his shirt as a bandage. I don’t mention the way he held me so tenderly in his arms as he carried me to safety and I ignore the way my heart raced when he stared into my eyes and lit the end of a fuse that really should be left dormant.

She appears disappointed with my story and sighs. “I’ll wait with you tonight. It’s not fair if you sit here alone while the rest of us have fun.”

“Don’t you dare.” I fix her with a firm glare. “I’ll be fine. I have some work to catch up on and there’s a movie I’ve been meaning to watch. To be honest, I’m kind of looking forward to it.”

“It doesn’t sit well with me.”

Cassie’s brow is furrowed in indecision, and I shrug. “It’s fine.”

“And Jesse?”

Her concerned question causes my heart to plummet as I revisit my current situation.

“What about him?”

“You tell me, Imogen.”

Cassie’s eyes flash. “Something isn’t sitting right with me about your relationship.”

“Relationship?” I raise my eyes. “We don’t have one—not yet, anyway.”

I shrug, wondering why I am so empty inside where it concerns Jesse. The Claiming was supposed to bring us together, but Jesse has other plans.

Cassie sighs, worry etched on her brow. “Frankie’s worried about him.”

“What did he say?”

I’m curious and Cassie huffs, “He’s not convinced he’s telling the truth.”

“About?”

“About his involvement with Miss Sloane.”

“But she left.” I’m aware of Jesses’s relationship with our former art teacher who left under a cloud when the principal discovered her preference for the students.

If anything, I sympathize because I’m certain that if a certain history teacher gave me one sign he was interested in me, I would fuck the rules and go there like a shot.

“She still has her house in town.”

“How do you know?”

Cassie looks down and mumbles. “Frankie went there and even though she was nowhere to be seen, all of her stuff is still there.”

“And you believe that Jesse is still seeing her?”

My heart drops and Cassie attempts to reassure me. “I don’t, but Frankie thinks he is holding out on him. That he’s hiding something and Frankie is worried it concerns her.”

I say nothing because I share the same thoughts regarding him. There is definitely something on his mind, and I gaze at her thoughtfully.

I recognize the gleam in her eyes and I laugh softly. “Do you want me to do some digging?”

“You read my mind.”

We smile because this is not unfamiliar territory for us.

We share many secrets and will always work as a team, along with Jack, who we both grew up with.

Living with close on fifty bikers taught us survival skills not many other kids learn and the three of us share a close bond that I doubt will ever be broken.

“Leave it with me.”

She nods with relief. “I hoped you’d say that.”

I smile. “You should be going. You don’t want to be late for the party.”

“I don’t like leaving you.”

I wave her concern away as I point to the door. “I’ll be fine. I’ve had enough excitement for the day, anyway. Go and have fun, and I expect a full report in the morning.”

As she leaves, I breathe a sigh of relief because I wasn’t kidding.

I could really use some time alone and figure out exactly where I go from here.

One thing was certain, my reaction to Jesse doesn’t even come close to how I react after one lingering glance from a certain teacher and I am clueless about how to manage that.

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FIVE

IMOGEN

I must have fallen asleep because I jump with a start when a loud voice yells, “Hey, baby, the cavalry has arrived.”

I blink furiously against the sudden light that illuminates the room to find Jesse carrying a box of pizza and two root beers, grinning cheekily from the open door.

“Jesse.” I blink in confusion and as he drops down beside me on the bed, he balances the beers on the box and grins. “I brought the party to you.”

“I can see that.”

His cheeky wink drags a smile out of me and as I take one of the beers, I’m grateful for the cool shot of regeneration it gives me.

“Cassie told me what happened. You should be more careful, baby.”

“I know.”

He hands me a slice of pizza as he crams one into his mouth.

“You really didn’t have to do this.” I remind him and he shrugs.

“I wanted to. Why would I prefer spending time with the guys when I have you

waiting for me?”

He grins and my heart melts because when Jesse wants to, he can turn on the cheeky charm and discard all of my reservations in a heartbeat.

He flicks the remote and the movie I was watching bursts into life on the screen and he scoots up the bed and leans against the pillows, resting his arm around my shoulders and pulling me close.

“This is nice.” He whispers as he drops a light kiss on my head and as he reaches for another slice of pizza, I kind of admit it is.

Jesse is easy going at the best of times and this is when he shines. I decide to use this to my advantage and enquire, “What did you do today?”

His easy response chases away my doubts. “Gym, then I caught up on my overdue essay and shot some pool with Frankie and the guys.”

He peers at me with concern. “I heard about your ankle. That sucks.”

“It’s fine.” I snuggle into his side, strangely loving this situation. It feels good, almost natural and, if I’m honest, was always what I envisioned a relationship to be like.

The movie distracts my attention and we eat in silence, absorbed in the story, enjoying a peaceful night together with none of the distractions of our friends.

If anything, it makes me like him more because there is no pressure. We are away from curious eyes, and I’m certain that wouldn’t be the case at the party tonight.

Jesse is one of the popular Elusive guys. They live in a house together, along with Cassie, Jack, Siri, and Luca, and are considered the top dogs at Rockwell. Summer is

Frankie's sister and therefore we were included in their exclusive club and Jesse is one of the main players of that.

Many girls covet my place by his side and it's only now I see the attraction.

When he's relaxed, Jesse is impossible to ignore.

He is handsome with his super fit body and blondish colored hair.

His eyes mesmerize and his easy smile is sexy as hell.

Any girl would kill to be where I am now, and I must remember that.

When Jesse plays himself, there really is no other competition, but it's the secretive edge to him that has my guard up.

The movie ends, and he yawns loudly. "I never saw that twist coming." He refers to the thriller we just watched, and I nod. "Same. I loved it, and I never suspected for one minute the mother did it."

"Same, although where I come from, moms aren't all apple pie."

"In what way?"

I'm so curious about Jesse's hometown because, on face value, they have a strict upbringing there and iron clad morals.

Jesse is expected to marry a local girl who will be a virgin and set up a farm for the good of the community.

I just can't see that happening, especially knowing he was such a man whore before I

arrived.

He tugs me a little closer and says sadly, “Bolder Rock isn’t a place listed on any tourist map, and if it were, it would come with a warning attached.”

“What’s so bad about it?” I keep my voice low because this is the most he’s spoken about his hometown and I don’t want him to change the subject.

“You wouldn’t be free there, Imogen.”

His voice is loaded with regret and he sighs heavily. “Women are controlled and when they reach eighteen, they are gifted to a family their father considers respectful.”

“Gifted!” I sit up, my eyes wide and Jesse surprises me by reaching up and holding his hand flat against my face, peering into my eyes and saying softly, “You are so pretty, Imogen. You would be sought after in Bolder Rock.”

“Jesse, it sounds awful.”

I can’t comprehend a life that holds such disregard for women’s emotions.

A flicker of pain lights his expression and he whispers almost to himself while staring into my eyes. “My family is considered respectable. My father works in the offices of the town president.”

“I don’t understand. What is a town president?”

His thumb drags against my cheek as he whispers, “The appointed head of the chamber of business. The machine that drives our existence. Every family in the town has an obligation to pay into the joint wealth. If we farm the land, the profits of any

sales out of town are gifted to the chamber. The women make jams, sew clothing and make jewelry and sell it at markets and online. Once again, any profits are deposited into the chamber's bank account. ”

“But why?”

I can't comprehend how that would work and he shrugs.

“There is one bank account in town and it's the Chambers.

The president accepts all the income into it and pays each family the same monthly wage regardless of who contributes the most or least. We are given enough to exist on, pay the bills, groceries, and any small items we require. The town provides what else we need.”

“How?”

I'm fascinated by this and he sighs. “If we need money for, say, a new car, or horse, animals, or repairs, we go before a committee where they decide whether we are eligible for the money. It's a controlled community to keep sin from our door and subsequently our freedom is also under scrutiny.”

“I'm sorry, Jesse, it sounds—” my words falter because I don't have the right ones to describe how awful that place is and he smiles.

“It's okay. It's all I've ever known until I came here and met the guys.

It opened my eyes and made me realize I want more.

I don't want to be controlled, Imogen. I will make my own way in life through my choices, not theirs. ”

“I understand that, Jesse. What will you do?”

He continues to stroke my face and leans forward, his lips resting against mine, and whispers, “I’m not going back. Frankie has assured me of a job with him and I’m taking him up on the offer.”

“What job?” My breathing comes faster as Jesse’s touch sends sparks through my body and he brushes his lips against mine and whispers huskily, “It’s best you stop your questions there, Imogen, because you may not like the answer you receive.”

Before I can process that, his lips caress mine softly, almost leisurely, creating something inside me I never knew was there. I forget about Mr. Bellingham, I forget that I’m uncertain about Jesse. All I can think of is that this isn’t enough.

I like it. I want more and I am so ready to dive into the deep end and see if I can swim or not.

Jesse groans against my lips and presses in deeper, his tongue searching for mine as he claims it in a delicious dance inside my mouth.

His hand drops and fists my hair and as he deepens the kiss, I tremble inside.

I shift closer and his other hand reaches underneath my top and as it connects with my bare skin, I moan into his mouth, his fingers rough against my soft skin, applying pressure as his thumb searches for my aching nipple.

He cups my breast in his hand and rolls the nipple with his thumb and as I return the favor, I push his t-shirt upward, my fingers caressing the hard muscles of his taut body.

He shifts and presses me further down onto the mattress, his hands wandering, lifting

the fabric away from my skin, exploring with a lazy urgency that tells me his intentions far more than words.

My pussy is throbbing as his hand moves lower and slips inside my sweatpants, tugging them down, his fingers inching inside my panties, brushing against my throbbing clit.

“Jesse, I—”

He kisses my neck, sucking the soft skin and as his finger dives inside me, I moan his name, “Jesse, oh God.”

I arch my body toward him as he pulls down his jeans, just enough to free his hard cock that lies rigid against my stomach.

It doesn't escape me that we are still fully dressed, only our pants pushed down enough to offer unrestricted access to something I have yet to experience.

His low groan tells me he wants this as much as I do, and as his cock presses against my aching pussy, he whispers, “Wait a minute.”

I hear rustling and with one hand he wraps his cock and then it suddenly dawns on me what his intentions are.

“Jesse, I’m—”

It's as if realization is an icy bucket of water drenching my libido as I face up to the fact this is going way too fast and as he presses against my pussy, I shake my head, “I don't—”

“Relax, baby.” He kisses away my concerns and I shift under him, my hands pushing

against his chest.

“No, I—”

“It’s okay, baby, this is what we both want. It will bring us closer.”

“No, I, um—”

My words fade into a scream as that cold bucket of water comes to life and icy water rains down on Jesse’s parade, courtesy of the sprinklers.

“What the fuck!”

Jesse pulls back as the heavens open above us and I take my chance and push him away, pulling up my sweatpants and swinging my legs to the side of the bed.

“What’s happening?”

Jesse dives to the window and says in disbelief, “It appears that Willow Tree House is being evacuated.”

I hear screams and hobble to the window, witnessing my fellow house members diving through the front door out into the yard in various states of undress.

Jesse grasps my hand.

“There must be a fire. Come on.”

As we attempt to leave, my ankle holds me back and Jesse yells, “We should get a move on! This place could go up like a rocket.”

“I’m trying.” Tears stream down my face as the pain hits me from all angles and, with an impatient groan, Jesse slings me over his shoulder and heads to the staircase.

As we spill out into the night air, I notice the curious glances thrown our way and as Jesse sets me down, several teachers run toward us, Principal Constable leading the charge.

“What’s happening?” She asks and one of the girls yells, “The sprinklers activated, but I don’t see any fire.”

“I’ll call for the fire department.” The principal says and as she dials the number, Jesse whispers, “I should get out of here. We don’t want her asking questions about why I was in there.”

He winks and then presses his lips to mine and whispers, “We have unfinished business. I’ll arrange a different place so we’re not disturbed next time.”

He pulls away and with a devilish wink, he slides into the shadows toward The Elusive House, leaving me wondering what the hell just happened.

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SIX

IMOGEN

Summer appears shocked as she stares around the sodden house.

“Look at the damage. Our stuff is ruined.”

We have been instructed to pack up and move into temporary accommodation until the principal arranges for the house to be restored to normalcy.

“It’s a disaster.” I stare at the wet furnishings and wrinkle my nose at the smell of damp.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d blame my brother for this.” Summer’s eyes flash and I laugh softly.

“Why would Frankie destroy Willow Tree House?”

“To make me move in with him, of course. He hates me having freedom, and this is a page out of his little black book in getting what he wants.”

She pouts and appears so furious it makes me laugh, despite the situation.

“He got his wish then.”

She frowns. “Only temporarily.”

She sighs. “Are you okay with moving in there until this is ready?”

“I’m fine with it.” Actually, I am because I’m having Cassie’s room as she shares with Frankie, anyway. Summer is pissed because she was given the spare room next to Frankie’s, which is far enough away from Luca’s, causing them a huge problem.

It’s almost amusing except for the fact that Jesse also lives there and when he learned of the new sleeping arrangements, he whispered that Cassie’s room isn’t far from his and to make sure not to lock my door at night.

The thought of it sets me on edge because I haven’t forgotten what happened just before the sprinklers malfunctioned. It’s the only explanation anyone can find because there is no evidence of any fire or heated device that could have set them off.

The fire crew couldn’t explain it, and neither could the company who installed them.

I’m grateful for it though because things were getting pretty heavy back there and I’m trying not to think about the fact that Jesse wasn’t going to stop anytime soon, despite my obvious reluctance.

The guys help us move our stuff and Summer glares at Frankie the entire time, who merely grins when he catches her. It’s obvious he likes to control her, and I pity her for that.

As I hobble beside Jack, who is holding several of my boxes, he says in a low voice, “Are you okay, darlin’? You don’t seem yourself lately.”

“I’m okay, merely adjusting to everything.”

“The Claiming?” Jack, as always, hits the nail spot on and I sigh.

“I was meaning to talk to you about that. When you claimed Siri the first time, Cassie told me it was a setup. You didn’t want to claim her in any other way than to save her from Frankie’s control. Are you happy with the outcome of that?”

I’m asking because our situations are almost identical. Jack saved Siri and my aim is to save Jesse, but taking our relationship to the next level wasn’t really on the agenda.

“Of course.” He smiles at the girl walking in front of us, deep in conversation with Summer.

“Admittedly, at first I wasn’t sure. I was confused because of Cassie, I guess.”

“You wanted her.” I state the god-damned obvious because for my entire life I’ve always known they share a close bond that I hoped would deepen into love one day. I suppose it did, just not the kind of love I hoped for them.

“I wanted the dream.” Jack smiles. “You understand how it is, Imogen. We live the same life and are surrounded by men and women who are fiercely devoted to one another. I am the same with both you and Cassie, whereas I always regarded you as my little sister. My relationship with Cassie was more—” he sighs. “Complicated.”

“It may happen one day.” I attempt to reassure him because I’m still not certain Jack is over the idea. Despite how good things are with Siri, I still catch the yearning in his eye when he watches Cassie and Frankie making out, and my heart bleeds for him.

“It may, but I’m happy with Siri. Really, I am.”

He lowers his voice. “Why the questions? Are you having second thoughts about Jesse?”

“A little.” I admit because there is no point in lying to Jack.

“I understand why.” A flicker of concern passes through his eyes.

“Jesse has a lot of demons to fight and I hate that you’re caught up in that.”

“Demons?” I hold my breath and he nods.

“His involvement with Jenna Sloane affected him deeply. Did you know she fed him drugs and tried to control his mind?”

“I heard a whisper about that.” I remember what Cassie and Summer told me and I whisper, “But she’s gone. Surely the drugs are out of his system by now.”

“Or he found another supplier.” Jack’s expression is grave, and he stops and glances around before saying in a dark undertone, “Watch him, Imogen. Don’t get me wrong, Jesse is a good guy, one of the best, but comes from a town that gets off on controlling its inhabitants.

Jenna Sloane saw that and selected him for that reason.

He is used to being controlled and is a willing student to anyone who offers him freedom.

She did a lot of damage to his mind and word is, she isn’t done with him yet. ”

“I think you’re wrong, Jack. Jesse wouldn’t let her control him. He told me he wants out of that life.”

“Then I hope you’re right, Imogen, because if Jenna Sloane isn’t controlling him, somebody else may have stepped into her shoes.”

“What makes you say that?”

The urgency in his voice doesn't escape me and he appears worried, which isn't like Jack.

“Frankie told me that Jesse is hiding something. He guards his phone and ignores text messages that come in and passes them off as nothing important. He intends on discovering Jesse's secret, but so far, Jesse hasn't made any moves.”

“Perhaps he hasn't got any moves to make.”

I don't know why I'm defending Jesse, but something is telling me he's innocent and just trying to deal with a shit upbringing colliding with the freedom Rockwell is giving him.

Jack sighs. “It's good that you and Summer will be under our roof. You may hate it, but it's the safest place for you.”

“But Jesse lives there and from your own words, Jack, you believe he is the biggest threat to me.”

He grins and chuckles softly. “You are a shrewd woman Imogen and I rate you against Jesse any day. Just take it slow with him and be certain before you do anything you may regret.”

He glances at Siri and a soft smile lights his face. “It worked for me and I can safely say I have never been so happy.”

As we continue our journey to The Elusive House, Jack's words roll around my mind.

I don't need him to tell me something isn't right with Jesse, but he's given me an idea.

Is someone controlling Jesse and is that person here at Rockwell?

Once thing's certain, I'm in the perfect position to uncover the mystery and if it means saving Jesse, then hold my drink, I'm going in.

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SEVEN

IMOGEN

A week has passed since we moved into The Elusive House and it's as if we have always been here. Perhaps it's because our friends are under the same roof and I must confess, it sure makes things easier.

I love being part of the family and wandering into the kitchen and seeing their familiar faces is a pleasure I never understood.

It's the same now as I head in to fix some breakfast and find Cassie and Siri already there.

"Hey, Imogen." Siri smiles. "How's your ankle?"

"Better." I reach for the coffeepot and smile. "It was merely a nasty sprain and now I've rested it, it feels normal."

"I'm glad." She giggles. "I'm guessing Jesse's magic touch had a hand in that."

"Jesse?"

She rolls her eyes. "Your boyfriend. Honestly, Imogen, keep up."

I don't miss the concern in her eyes and I seek to reassure her.

“Sorry, of course, Jesse. My, um, boyfriend.”

I force a bright smile on my face as Summer joins us and huffs, “I am seriously thinking of moving out. Do you know what Frankie did last night?”

“What?”

Cassie’s eyes widen as Summer hisses, “He freaking locked me in.”

“No way.” Siri is angry for her friend and I love how they work together. If Summer is pissed, Siri is too, and I’m guessing it’s much the same as my relationship with Cassie and Jack.

Summer’s eyes gleam.

“Luckily, I have someone on my side who isn’t afraid to step up, and Luca let me out when I texted him.”

She glances at Cassie and grins. “If you’re wondering where my brother is, you will find him in his room with no way out. Let’s see how he likes it.”

“You locked him in.” Cassie bursts out laughing.

“I’m saying nothing.”

Siri giggles. “I would love to see his face right now. How did you manage that, Summer?”

“It was easy. Ever heard of a chair propped up under the handle? He’s going nowhere fast.”

“He will be pissed.” Cassie shrugs as she butters her toast. “I’ll give it thirty minutes. He could use a lesson in control.”

It certainly lightens the atmosphere and as we take a leisurely breakfast, it strikes me how much I love being around these women. They are all strong and capable, fierce even, and whatever happened with the sprinklers certainly did us a favor.

“What are your plans today?” Cassie whispers as the others chat about people they know.

“After class, I intend on heading into town.”

“Do you want company?”

“That would be great.”

I offer her a warm smile because it’s been a while since I spent a few hours alone with her.

Frankie is usually cemented by her side, and I love watching them together.

Back home, Cassie is a force to be reckoned with.

It kind of goes with the territory given who her father is.

Ryder King is the fiercest guy I have ever met and has taught his daughter well.

Nothing gets past Cassie, and it’s obvious Frankie was made for her.

I’m still not loving that idea because I always wanted her and Jack to work out, but even I must admit, Frankie fits well with Cassie and vice versa.

After breakfast, Cassie heads off to free Frankie and Summer disappears with Siri, leaving me to gather my stuff for class.

As I apply makeup and fix my hair, it strikes me how careful I'm being with that today.

I'm telling myself it's because I want to look nice for my journey into town but if I'm honest, it's because I have history first period and it will be the first time I've seen Mr. Bellingham since he rescued me in the forest.

It's been an eventful week and my head is buzzing with everything that happened and yet one incident occupies my thoughts more than any other.

When Drake Bellingham carried me in his arms.

My blood still heats when I think of it and I already know it's different to how I felt with Jesse. I'm still processing what nearly happened between us and part of me wonders if I would feel differently if it was Drake's arms holding me rather than Jesse's.

I am so conflicted, and it doesn't help when I walk into history and the first person who meets my gaze is the hot teacher himself.

My mouth dries as soon as I see him because how can one man be so god-damned hot?

His piercing eyes hold me spellbound as he appears to stare deep into my soul as he holds my gaze.

His rippling muscles are contained in a black shirt tucked into black pants that merely accentuates his muscled legs and his brown leather belt matches the shoes he is

wearing.

A silver chain peers out from his unbuttoned shirt and, knowing how dark ink trails against his skin, causes delirious heat to spread through my entire body.

I almost trip over my feet as I attempt to break the spell he has cast over me and the distraction of the other students piling in is significant to refocus my mind. I stagger to my seat, busying myself with my books while I attempt to drag my mind out of the gutter.

Luckily, our lesson today requires watching a movie about World War Two and as the lights dim, I can breathe again now he isn't in my line of vision.

As I watch the events on the screen, there is silence in the room and yet my mind is screaming out loudly because Mr. Bellingham is perched on the window ledge beside me as he watches from there.

It's impossible to concentrate because he is so close I could reach out and touch him.

Any slight movement distracts my attention and my breathing is a touch faster than normal.

It doesn't help that my mind is wandering and imagining an alternative outcome to our last encounter and I squirm in my seat as a different kind of movie plays out in my mind.

I couldn't even tell you what it is I just watched when the movie ends and he shifts from beside me and opens the blinds, light flooding into the room.

The bell sounds and as the class scrambles to leave, he stops by my side and whispers, "May I have a word please, Imogen?"

I swallow hard. “Of course.”

My hands shake as I gather my things and as the room empties, he perches on the edge of my desk and his gaze sears through my body as he smiles.

“How are you?”

I’m guessing he is referring to my ankle, and I smile. “I’m good, thanks. It was a sprain and has healed nicely after some rest.”

“That’s good. You were lucky.”

I am trying so hard to focus because being this close to him is messing with my mind and he appears a little lost for words, which is surprising.

The silence is intriguing and I wonder what he is trying to say and then he sighs heavily. “I’m sorry to ask this of you Imogen, but I could use your help.”

“Help?”

I wasn’t expecting this, and he groans. “Principal Constable has asked every teacher to work with a student regarding the prom and, well, I kind of hoped you could help me out here.”

The fact he is obviously so awkward about asking is seriously endearing and I smile. “You. On prom committee.”

I giggle as he groans. “Mad, right?”

He huffs, “So, you see my dilemma and you were the first person who came to mind, so please, Imogen, can you help me out here? I would be forever in your debt.”

“What do we have to do?”

I push away the way my heart curls with pleasure when I refer to us as ‘we’.

I’m also celebrating the fact we will undoubtedly have to spend time together and I’m way too happy about that.

I push away the warning flags that are almost blinding me right now because this is a gift I’m happy to receive.

“Come up with a historical theme for the prom and locate some props to help with the visuals.” Is his reply, and I shrug.

“I thought the theme was masquerade?”

I bite my lip in concentration as I lean on my elbows, staring at him in confusion.

For a second, his eyes flash and the expression in them causes my breath to hitch and as he stares into my eyes, a spark of electricity sizzles between us.

It’s as if time stops and oceans are still as we stare at one another with a million wishes flickering around us. It’s almost as if he is mirroring my soul as I see my longing reflected back at me. It’s intense, revealing and dangerous and words are irrelevant as we communicate in a different way.

A sudden noise outside brings us back into the room and he coughs and raises his eyes to the ceiling before exhaling sharply. “So, will you help me?”

“Of course.”

I lean back in my chair and regard him as blankly as possible, and he nods. “Good,

well, um, shall we meet at six?”

I raise my eyes and he says quickly, “To discuss the theme.”

“Of course.” My face heats as I imagine all the kinds of danger we are placing ourselves in because, as sure as I fancy the pants off my teacher, I kind of get the vibe he feels the same.

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EIGHT

DRAKE

I watch her leave and exhale sharply on the click of the door. Fuck, that was more difficult than I thought it would be.

I run my fingers through my hair and note how hard my heart is beating right now. Fuck!

I'm used to keeping my cool, but for some reason being around Imogen changes that. When she bit down on her lip and stared at me through those baby blues, I nearly lost my mind. I can't believe I'm attracted to her. It's wrong on every level.

This is a disaster. I'm her fucking teacher, or so I'm meant to be. Not some wide-eyed kid who is fixating on a girl who is so out of my league, it's laughable.

From the moment we collided on the first day, she has lived rent free in my mind.

When I saw her out jogging, I shamelessly followed her and it was no chance encounter I was there to help her when she tripped.

I'm such a fucking loser. It's pathetic and now the principal has gifted me the opportunity to spend more time with her. Necessary time for this to work.

My next class is due and I wish I'd never set foot in Rockwell Academy. This is a fucking joke—I'm a fucking joke and who the hell thought this would be a good

idea?

The class descends on me like a swarm of locusts, reminding me what I'm here to do and with a sigh, I turn my mind to the civil war and once again bemoan the fact I was the only fucking option for this job.

Thank fuck for television because I use it to my advantage and get it to do the work for me. I'm out of my depth and the way I'm feeling now, I'm liable to throw in the towel.

I take lunch in the staff cafeteria and, as I claim my seat by the window, I gaze out on the students below.

Chatting, sitting in groups and just hanging out, with no worries except for how they will make it through the day until they can party.

I remember my own college days and wonder if I knew back then what my future would be if I would have changed direction.

I almost wish I had because being here right now is the worst form of torture as I spy the woman in question, slightly limping as she makes her way to the cafeteria with Jesse Anderson.

A low growl rumbles through me when I note his arm around her shoulder as he whispers shit in her ear, causing her to giggle.

My fist tightens as I observe the scene and as he drops a light kiss on her cheek, I hate how she giggles up at him.

“Mr. Bellingham.”

The use of my name distracts me from my anger and my attention returns to the room as Principal Constable drops into the seat in front of me.

“Ma’am.” I offer politely and she rolls her eyes.

“Angela, please. There is no need for respect in the teacher’s area.” She grins, and I don’t miss her fluttering lashes as she attempts to flirt with me.

I note the way she has unbuttoned her blouse just low enough to offer a glimpse of a satin bra. The way she is licking her lips and staring at me with hunger rather than the food makes my heart sink. Fuck, this is all I need. She’s an attractive woman, but way too old for me.

Because you prefer girls who are one step away from childhood, you creep.

My inner voice reprimands me as it reminds me I’m balancing on a very dangerous wire right now.

“Angela.” I smile, the effects of which cause her to blush and she leans closer and whispers seductively, “You are fitting in well at Rockwell, Drake.” She says my name with a curl of pleasure in her smile, and I stuff my burrito into my mouth in place of an answer.

This is all I fucking need.

“So, the prom.”

I nod as I chew, hoping like hell the bell goes soon.

“I have put you on patrol along with myself, Miss Richardson, Mr. Ives and Mrs. Jameson.”

“Ok.” I nod as I take another bite and she licks her lower lip and whispers, “We should team up. We will work well together.”

“Sure.” I reach for my soda and lean back in my chair, regarding her through a hooded gaze that appears to only increase the desire in her eyes.

“Perhaps we should discuss our plans over dinner tonight, um, Drake.”

Fuck and double fuck. This cannot be happening.

Must I really screw this woman to throw her off the scent?

It wouldn't be the first time I've used such tactics, but fuck me—no.

Not the principal and definitely not when all I can think about is screwing my freaking student who is so off limits, its hilarious.

I chug down my soda and decide avoidance is my best course of action, and I frown.

“Sounds good, um, Angela, but I can't make it this evening. I have a prior engagement.”

“You do?” Disappointment flares in her eyes. “May I ask what?”

Resisting the urge to tell her she fucking can't, I shake my head. “I'm meeting with a friend who lives nearby.”

“A friend?”

Her eyes narrow and I say hastily, “Yeah, Chuck and I go way back and he doesn't live far, so we're catching a few beers.”

She visibly relaxes. “I see. Well, maybe tomorrow night.”

I nod and am thankfully saved by the bell as I jerk my head toward the door.

“Duty calls. Catch you later, prin—, I mean, Angela.”

I must take the record for exiting a room as I dump my tray and head out of the door, wondering how the fuck I got into this mess. If Principal Constable clocks me with Imogen later, I have a feeling the shit will really hit the fan.

NINE

IMOGEN

For some reason, I am walking on a cloud all afternoon.

Lunch was nice with Jesse. It was good spending time with him out in the open with no worry about what could escalate between us.

He is good company and kept me in hysterics, with tales of Rockwell and stuff that happened to him back at home.

It helps that he is drop dead gorgeous and when he wants to be, effortless company.

I don't miss the envious glances from the other girls either, and it's a powerful aphrodisiac. Jesse Anderson is one hot guy and I should be thanking my lucky stars he picked me.

Then why aren't you? Why do you prefer your encounters with a man who is so out of your league you will trip into oblivion if you reach for him?

The nagging voice never goes away as it reminds me how tricky my life is right now.

Cassie and I have a free period and choose to take in some sun in the yard. We sip sodas and shield our eyes from the glare while we recline on cushions laid out on the grass.

“This is nice.” She says with satisfaction, and I nod.

“It sure is.”

“So, Jesse.” Her gentle teasing causes me to smile.

“What about him?”

“He seems happier, less stressed, and I’m guessing I must thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome.”

She raises her eyes. “What about you, Imogen? I detect a spark igniting that I haven’t seen before.”

“You’re mistaken.”

She nudges me. “You forget I know you well. It’s as if someone has lit a fuse inside you. Which can only mean—” She breaks off and props herself up on one elbow as she stares at me in delight.

“Did you?”

“What?”

“Jesse! You know, placed the sausage in the oven.”

“How old are you?” I laugh out loud. “No, but we came pretty damn close the other night before the heavens opened and dampened the flames.”

“No way.” Cassie grins. “And you haven’t got down and dirty since?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

I’m not sure how to answer her and it would be so easy to tell her of my reservations, but I’m wondering if it’s just me. Perhaps I’m a frigid bitch who should really loosen up and so I bite back my words and admit, “We haven’t had the opportunity.”

That much is true because since moving in to The Elusive House, most of my evenings have been spent resting my ankle and studying for an exam that isn’t far away.

“Jesse has been missing a lot.” Cassie voices her thoughts out loud and I hate how I’m grateful for his absence.

“Where does he go?” I ask, and she shrugs.

“Frankie told me he works out at the gym. Jesse also likes to disappear into town. He told Frankie that Rockwell is a lot to deal with for a guy who is used to wide open spaces and a certain kind of freedom.”

“And you believe that?”

Cassie shakes her head. “Fuck no. Jesse is up to something and I hate saying this Imogen, but I think he’s seeing that teacher again. Jenna Sloane.”

I sit up and stare at her in shock. “Really?”

Cassis nods miserably. “Frankie is convinced because when Jesse comes back his eyes are glazed, which can only mean one thing.”

“Drugs.” My heart sinks.

Cassie nods. “It explains his mood swings. I’m sorry, Imogen. I wanted you to know before things get well, heavier between the two of you.”

“Thanks.” I smile at her thoughtfully. “It would explain a lot. What can we do to help him?”

Cassie smiles softly. “Typical Imogen. I tell you your boyfriend is probably screwing another woman and off his head on drugs and you want to help him. What am I going to do with you?”

The fact I’m relieved more than concerned tells me I’m the worst kind of human being, and I shrug. “Anyone would do the same.”

“No they wouldn’t.” She sighs. “Frankie is pissed and wants to follow him.”

“When?”

“Tonight.” Her eyes flash as she whispers, “I’m going with him. We’re taking off on the pretense of a date night and heading to Jenna Sloane’s house in town. We believe she is still living there, and it’s where she meets up with Jesse.”

“What will you do if he is there?”

She shrugs and, glancing down, mumbles, “Frankie has a plan but he won’t tell me the details.”

“I see.”

I’m aware Frankie is a dark soul only matched by Luca and I can only imagine what

his idea of a plan would be.

Cassie isn't like that. She believes in helping people rather than punishing them, and I wonder when she fell onto the dark side.

From her expression, she is up for whatever Frankie has planned, which makes me worry about my friend.

Cassie is changing before my eyes, and I'm not sure how I feel about that.

She sighs heavily. "So, I'm afraid we will have to postpone our journey into town. I'm sorry, Imogen, Jesse is a problem that needs dealing with and the prom isn't for a few weeks and can wait."

"It's okay, I understand."

I'm relieved knowing I won't be the one to cancel because my reason isn't far off the same one as Jesse's.

If anything, I sympathize with him because if I got the chance to move things along with my teacher, I wouldn't hesitate at all.

Perhaps I am more like Jesse than I care to admit, and we should cut him some slack.

You can't help it if your heart has other plans from your head and on that subject, Jesse and I are firmly on the same page.

TEN

DRAKE

Why am I nervous? I am never nervous and I'm putting this down to the impossible situation I'm in.

Earlier, I texted Imogen after securing her number from the database and told her to meet me in my classroom at six. It's not original, but I'm unsure how to move this on under the radar. I would love to take off and conduct my business outside of the grounds, but I must tread carefully.

If anybody saw us together here, they would only imagine it had something to do with history, which is exactly what I want them to think.

On the dot of six, the handle turns and Imogen enters with a slight hesitation, her nerves mirroring mine, and I push them down and smile.

"Hey, right on time. Take a seat."

She smiles briefly and heads to the chair by my desk and I battle my fascination for her because hell, she is blowing my mind.

Her long blonde hair swings to her shoulders, her slight fringe dusting against those smokey blue eyes.

She is wearing yoga pants and a tight top that I'm trying not to stare at too hard as it

accentuates the soft swell of her breast. She is wearing sneakers and as outfits go, she has dressed down for the occasion but wouldn't look out of place in a magazine spread.

Imogen could be a model easily so. She has the figure, the looks and the height and a wholesome vibe that is more alluring than her looks.

“So—” She smiles shyly, “I brought a notebook with me. We may as well make a list.”

I arch my brow. “A list?”

“Of action points.”

I watch as she removes a pencil from her purse and immediately chews on the end while staring up at me from under her long lashes.

Fuck! This is unbearable and as my cock hardens in my pants, I picture the principal in mind because I need to douse these flames and fast if this is gonna work.

“Do you have a theme in mind?”

“Do you?” I'm curious to hear her thoughts on it and she nods, her eyes flashing with excitement.

“I thought of ancient Rome.”

“Okay.” I perch on the edge of her desk and she blushes adorably before glancing down at the blank page in front of her.

“I thought we could stick with the original plan of a masquerade, but theme it with Romans and centurions. Togas would be good, lots of gold, and it gives us the scope

to be creative.”

She raises her eyes and smiles. “It would also be easy to find some props, you know, the kind of thing, marble pillars, ivy, golden statues and decadence.”

I’m trying hard not to picture Imogen dressed in a toga, looking so adorable any gladiator would kill to win her fair hand.

“It’s good.” I nod my affirmation. “It would tie in nicely with the history department and allow the students to feed their imagination. Good call, Imogen, we’ll run with it.”

“Really?” Her smile brightens and something hits me hard. If anything, I am stunned by my reaction to her. I never, for one moment, entertained the idea, but from the second she stared into my eyes, I was lost.

Fuck and double fuck. This is bad.

I stand and move to the window, desperate for distance and heave in a deep breath and say carefully, “I’ll put the idea forward to the principal and she can circulate it among the other departments. They will work on that theme, leaving us to research the props.”

“What would you like me to do?”

Her soft voice washes over my raging libido like a soothing balm, and I swallow hard.

“There’s a warehouse on the outskirts of the next city that I understand provides props for movies, theater and events. Perhaps we could take a trip there and select some items.”

“We?”

I turn and note the excitement in her eyes and God knows I should turn and look away, but I can't.

“Are you free tomorrow after final period?”

She nods and I quickly add, “The warehouse closes at six, so we'll need to leave dead on four. It's an hour's drive which only gives us one hour to choose our pieces.”

She nods. “That's fine by me. I have a free period last thing tomorrow, so I can be ready when you are.”

“Same.” I heave a deep sigh and plunge head first into oblivion.

“Then we'll leave at three. It will give us longer and may prevent a few curious eyes from watching us leave together.”

“That could be a problem.” She shakes her head. “Students don't need much of a reason to gossip. Perhaps I should meet you by the gates and you can pick me up as you drive through them.”

“As if we have something to hide?” I raise my eyes and she giggles, a sound that is pure torture for my tainted soul.

“We don't, but they would find a reason to spread gossip, so it's best this way.”

Part of me is pissed that she has agreed to ride out of the protection of Rockwell with a stranger.

I really must educate her in that, but I'm relieved she is doing exactly what I planned

all along.

This entire orchestration was to get her alone in the first place, and I am still dealing with what that means for me.

She stands. “I should go. You must be busy.”

As she prepares to leave, I call out like a lovesick freshman. “It’s fine. I was, um, going to order pizza. They have an offer, two for one. I’m happy to share it with you in return for your help.”

Her eyes widen and a soft blush steals across her perfect face and she nods shyly. “Sure, I am quite hungry.”

I jerk my head toward the grounds.

“If you like, we can eat on the veranda of my house. It’s hidden away and only visitors can see it and I don’t get any of those. Why not give me thirty minutes and I’ll meet you there?”

She hesitates and I find myself holding my breath and then she nods, a shy smile causing damage to my rusty heart.

“Sure, I’ll bring soda.”

“It’s a—” I stop as she raises her eyes and I add, “plan. It’s a good plan.”

She smiles brightly before turning and making a swift exit, leaving me wondering what the hell has gotten into me. I’m here for one thing only. To do a job. An important one and not to develop a fascination for the one person I can never have.

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ELEVEN

IMOGEN

I can't believe this is happening. I am shaking as I attempt to slink in the shadows towards my freaking teacher's house.

He almost called it a date. He never said the words, but he was going to.

A date with Drake Bellingham. I can't believe my luck.

Is this good or bad? I have yet to figure that out.

I want to go there anyway—because every time he looks into my eyes, I'm undone and led willingly down a path I have no right to be on.

He's your teacher. Walk away and fast.

My inner voice attempts to tug me back as I glance down to the ground, my baseball cap firmly covering my hair and my headphones on.

I am pretending to be out for a jog and only the rucksack behind me disguises the cans of soda and key lime pie I took from the freezer. I'll replace it when we head to town.

We. Why do I picture Drake and me as a we now? There is no we. There will never be a we.

I consider turning around and running fast the other way, but something is compelling me to continue my journey.

I want to go even knowing there is something between us that could ruin us both.

I'm not a fool. I see the battle waging in his eyes because I am fighting the same one.

I want my teacher and I am officially going to hell in a handbasket.

I see him almost immediately, and my heart flutters. He's waiting on the veranda and appears more like a student than a teacher in his tight t-shirt, shorts and sneakers with mirrored shades perched on the bridge of his nose, a bottle of beer hanging loosely in his hands.

He nods when he sees me coming and chuckles softly, "I like the disguise."

I grin. "Sorry, I didn't want anyone to see me heading this way."

It's a little awkward as I head up the wooden steps and hesitate, staring at the only other seat which happens to be right by his side. There is only one chair on this veranda and it's a double one.

He sets the beer down as I shrug off my rucksack and hand him the soda and pie with a shy smile.

"My favorite."

His blinding smile only increases my nerves and I attempt to swallow them and tease, "I must have known."

He nods toward the seat as he chucks me a can.

“I’ll put this in the fridge and grab the pizza.”

As he disappears inside, I perch nervously on the chair and attempt to get my breathing under control.

This is wrong on every level. I shouldn’t be here, but for some reason I couldn’t have said no if I tried.

Part of me wonders what I’m playing at—what he’s playing at because if I consider this is wrong, what must he be thinking?

He should know this is not a common practise for a teacher.

Inviting their student for pizza on their veranda.

I wonder what his plan is because it’s obvious he has one. I’m not stupid and have always had a heightened perception of situations ever since I was a kid.

He returns with two boxes of pizza and hands me one with a smile.

“I hope you like the toppings, pepperoni with extra tomatoes.”

“My favorite.” I shake my head. “How did you know?”

“I didn’t. It also happens to be my favorite, too.”

As he joins me, the chair dips a little and as his bare leg catches mine, a little more of my soul slips away.

“Are you going to wear your disguise for the entire time?” He jokes and I blush as I pull a piece of pizza apart with my fingers.

“Probably.”

“Are you always so careful?”

“One of us has to be.”

He raises his eyes and I blush a little.

“I mean, wouldn’t you be in trouble if anyone saw us?”

“Why?” He appears genuinely confused.

“We’re having a meeting over pizza regarding the prom. Out in the open with nothing to hide.”

He appears concerned. “Does this make you feel uncomfortable? I wouldn’t have asked you if I thought it did.”

Now I feel stupid and relax a little. “Of course. I’m overthinking it.”

His words reassure me, so I pull off my baseball cap and allow my hair to fall to my shoulders and, for some reason, the air stills. Silence takes charge as we eat in silence and even the birds stay away, creating a cocoon where only we have a key to the door.

I’m aware of the heat from his body as we sit side by side, his leg pressed against mine because it has nowhere else to go. After a while, he says guardedly, “So, ancient Rome. What gave you the idea?”

“I don’t know, really. I watched Gladiator a while ago and loved the staging. I suppose that was fresh in my mind.”

“You’re studying history. What do you want to do when you graduate?”

“I’m not sure. I never really thought about it because the idea of leaving home is a scary one.”

“Where is home?”

I’m careful with my answer.

“Not far from here, as it happens.” I take a deep breath. “Would it shock you to learn I live in a motorcycle club with close to fifty bikers, of which my father is one?”

There’s an awkward silence and I wonder if I’ve shocked the hell into him.

“No.”

I turn to stare into his eyes and swallow hard at the way he is staring into mine.

“No?”

“No, it doesn’t surprise me at all.”

“It should.”

He shrugs. “You still haven’t answered my question. What do you want to do after graduation?”

“I like the idea of teaching.”

He raises his eyes and I add. “Kindergarten mainly. I love young kids and would hope to make a difference to their earlier years.”

“That’s an admirable ambition.”

“What made you decide on teaching, sir?”

“Call me Drake. Sir sounds so formal.”

“But you told me to call you sir.” I remind him of his instruction to the class on the first day.

“Did I?” He shrugs. “If I did, that was before we became friends.”

He grins and raises his soda to mine. “We can be friends. I don’t believe there is anything in the rule book that says otherwise.”

“Of course.” I touch cans with him and lean back, staring at the tree line, loving the privacy this is giving.

“What made you decide on teaching, um, Drake?”

It’s a simple enough question, but he stalls on his answer.

After a while, he says in a low voice, “This is my first job and I kind of fell into it.”

“How?” I’m surprised at that and he leans forward, the can dangling from his fingers as he considers his answer.

It’s as if the air changes and something almost sinister creeps in and then he says carefully, “I’d rather not say.”

“Why not?” I detect tension between us and as he turns, I’m alarmed at the pain I see etched on his face as he whispers, “We all have a past, Imogen. Secrets, things we’d

rather not revisit and choose to park for another day.”

My breath hitches as I sense he is clinging to a secret I may not like and yet I’m curious and won’t let this lie.

“Sometimes it helps to talk.”

“Not in this case.”

He shakes his head and takes a swig of soda. “Anyway, we have pie and I kind of love pie.” He winks and as he stands, he drops the can on the table. “I won’t be long.”

As he heads inside, it leaves me with more curiosity than nerves, and I take my chance and follow him inside. Drake is hiding something and I won’t leave until he opens up to me because if I am going to help him, I want to know who I’m dealing with first.

TWELVE

DRAKE

This was a bad idea. I should have kept her at a distance.

My decision to invite her for pizza was a stupid one and now I'm paying the price.

Imogen is an intelligent girl and won't swallow my lies easily, and yet the truth could blow this entire thing apart.

I wasn't meant to engage so closely. But I can't help myself.

She's a magnetic force I can't resist, and even sitting beside her on the bench was torture.

I'm shocked at my reaction to her and worried if I'm honest. She is off limits and I have a hankering to cross the line and be damned. And I would be—damned that is because actions have consequences and I'm fully aware of what they are concerning her.

"Tell me." Her determined voice cuts through the air in the room as I peer into the fridge and my heart sinks at the determination in her voice.

I close the door and set the pie on the counter, noting how she leans against the doorjamb, watching me with a hard glare of distrust.

“I don’t have to tell you anything.”

I attempt to regain the upper hand and remove the knife from the drawer and slice the pie into quarters.

She heads toward me and the sweat trickles down my back as my body reacts to that one simple act.

I can’t tear my eyes away from her flashing blue eyes, the steel in them shocking me a little.

For such a sweet girl, she sure has fire in her veins and as she stops at the counter, she fixes me with a determined, “Why are you really here, Drake?”

Her question catches me off guard and she leans closer, the air between us filled with tension and something else way more destructive.

She holds my gaze and whispers, “Why me?”

There are so many things I could say right now and the truth definitely isn’t one of them and for a few seconds, my mind races as I struggle to answer her.

I glance down at the knife in my hand and search for the answer in the gleaming blade and she forces more steel into her voice as she demands, “Look at me.”

I raise my eyes and her icy stare collides with mine as she whispers, “It’s all adding up to a mystery I want to solve.”

“What is?” Even now I attempt to deflect and she reaches out and grips my wrist, the blade falling as she applies pressure, and I chuckle softly. “That’s some move. I’m impressed.”

“I have many moves to protect myself, Drake, which is why I want you to answer my god-damned question.”

Despite the tension between us, I grin. Loving her determination, finally understanding the woman I am dealing with, realization calming the situation.

“When we met in the hall on the first day—” I attempt to explain and she nods, “I remember.”

I clear my throat. “Well, it shocked me a little.”

“Why?” Her hand is still on mine as she pushes it down on the countertop, facing me with a determined glint in her eyes.

I pull my hand away and lean back against the fridge door, almost hoping the ice inside calms the situation.

“It gave me inappropriate thoughts concerning you and it shocked me.”

“Oh.”

Her eyes widen and lose a little of their fire and I swallow the sigh of relief that almost escapes.

“When I found you in the woods, I followed you. I was out jogging and saw you in the distance and couldn’t help myself.”

I run my fingers through my hair and smile apologetically. “You must think I’m a crazy stalker.”

She shrugs, a little of her guard rising as she absorbs what a psycho I am.

“I chose you to be my prom advisor. That much is on the record. There was no other student I wanted to spend time with, so I seized my chance.”

My admission has knocked the questions from her eyes and I breathe a sigh of relief. For now, anyway.

I smile regretfully. “You have every right to leave, Imogen. You are probably grossed out by this, and I wouldn’t blame you.”

“Why?” She relaxes a little. “You’re not much older than me, Drake and well, I kind of understand where your heads at because—” She blushes and appears so awkward something shifts inside me.

“I kind of get the fascination because, well, I’m thinking along the same lines concerning you.”

We say nothing, both of us coming clean and once again, I hate the position we’re in and wonder what the best way to deal with this is. I need Imogen for a reason; one I’m not prepared to divulge until I’m ready and this is definitely not that time.

We stand on opposite sides of the room, staring awkwardly at one another, trying not to voice what it is we both really want right now.

It’s like a lit rag of gasoline burning brightly between us. One step and this entire situation could go up in flames and I bite back the insatiable need to dive head first into hell and say regretfully, “Perhaps this was a bad idea.”

“Perhaps.”

Her voice is soft, almost regretful, and she whispers, “I should leave.”

“Perhaps you should.”

She hesitates and I hate how the thought of her leaving kills me inside and as she half turns, I move quickly.

Before I register my intention, I grasp her hand and pull her around, and she almost stumbles into me.

I reach out to steady her and as her eyes raise to mine, I am broken apart by the yearning in her expression.

Unable to check my own stupidity, I bend my lips to hers and unlock the door to hell.

Her lips are soft, perfect and as if they were designed for my enjoyment.

I cup her face in my hands and feed off her innocence, tasting a certain kind of victory.

She kisses me back with the same urgency.

Almost desperation as we contemplate this one and only time.

A small moan escapes into my mouth and I’m unsure which one of us put it there.

Her hands slide around the back of my head as she deepens the kiss and my cock jerks inside my pants as it senses judgment day.

Passion replaces desperation and as I push her hard against the wall, I kiss her deeply, almost roughly.

Desperate for every taste, every delicious second of her lips against mine.

Her tits graze against my chest and the fabric between us is an irritant I leave in place because, as sure as I have overstepped the boundary, I don't have a fucking death wish, despite how it looks right now.

I'm in no hurry to stop what should never have started, and neither is she as we continue an act that will only have serious repercussions in the end.

Her breathing is fast and as our hearts bang in unity against our chests, I'm aware that one kiss is not enough.

I always knew it wouldn't be.

I press in closer and she shifts into me. We are now as close as two people can be with their clothes still on.

“Drake!”

A loud voice douses water on the flame pretty damn quick and I freeze as Principal Constable's voice invades my space.

“Are you in there?”

Fuck!

I clamp my hand on Imogen's mouth and yell, “I'll be right out. Wait there.”

Her eyes widen with fear as I nod to the counter and she wastes no time in sprinting behind it and crouching down.

I head to the door, meeting the principal in the hall and she smiles. “Ah, there you are. I was hoping for a word.”

“Sure, um—”

I rake my fingers through my hair and she flashes her eyelashes as she purrs, “Aren’t you going to invite me in? I could sure use a coffee after the day I’ve had, or even something stronger perhaps.”

I don’t miss the interest in her eyes as she casts them over my entire body and it appears that Karma really is a bitch and has delivered me Angela Constable in all her glory.

It’s obvious what her intentions are and as she casts her eyes behind me, sweat rolls down my back like a raging torrent.

“Sure.” I gulp. “Take a seat outside and I’ll fetch it out there. It’s such a warm night we would be more comfortable there.”

“Okay.” She smiles flirtatiously and turns on her six-inch heels.

I wait for her to leave and as she reaches the door, she turns and her sharp gaze rests on me. “Are you okay, Drake? You appear to be a little on edge.”

“Sorry, I um, well, just got off the phone with my girlfriend. She’s pissed that I haven’t been to see her since I started here and, well, you know how it is.”

Lies easily drip from my tongue and she sighs, disappointment rife in her eyes. “You have a girlfriend?”

“Yes, um, Sonia. We’ve been together since college.”

“I see.” She hesitates and then smiles. “But you’re not married yet.” She winks and I swear I should receive an Oscar for not revealing how disgusted I am at the thought

of me and the principal.

“I’ll wait outside and maybe I can improve your evening.”

As she leaves, I wait for her to close the door before heading back into the kitchen.

As I make my way behind the counter, I’m surprised to find it empty and as the breeze rustles the drapes, a slow smile spreads across my face.

I knew I liked this girl.

Apparently, Imogen wasted no time and got the hell out of Dodge and as I come to terms with what happened here tonight, I’m surprised to discover I wouldn’t change a thing.

THIRTEEN

IMOGEN

Oh my God, I kissed my teacher. I kissed a freaking teacher, and it was the most passionate kiss of my entire life. It was nothing like kissing the usual boys. He was all man and what a difference that makes. His lips still burn on mine and my panties are drenched with the effects of it.

As soon as the principal called out, it was as if fate brought me to my senses and I wasted no time in getting the hell out of there, creeping around to the front of the house and slipping my rucksack through the slats on the balustrade.

My cap is firmly in place as I jog through the trees, my heart pounding as much as my sneakers because, for fuck's sake, I kissed my teacher.

Really kissed him. More than that, it wasn't enough.

I wanted to go further. I still do, and it certainly brings my relationship with Jesse into perspective.

It is not even close to how I felt when Drake kissed me.

I reach The Elusive House and calm my breathing as I trip up the steps, noting Ali and Santi lounging on the veranda as they chug down more beer than is good for them.

“Hey, Imogen.” Santi calls out. “It appears you could use a beer.”

“Thanks.”

I wander over and sink down into the comfy chair, seizing the beer with a grateful smile.

“Good run?” Ali asks, a gleam in his eye that unnerves me a little.

“Great, thanks.”

I chug down the beer and love how the cool liquid calms the furnace inside me, and Santi grins. “Jesse was out here looking for you.”

“Was he?” I shrug. “We didn’t have plans. I thought he was out.”

“He was.” Ali frowns. “Did he say where he was going?”

“No. Then again, he never does.”

Santi nods. “He’s a closed book, for sure.”

We are interrupted as the man himself heads our way and his eyes light up when he sees me.

“Hey, babe, where have you been?”

“Jogging.” I remove my cap and run my fingers through my hair and his eyes light with sudden interest.

“I’ll help you with the sweat if you like.”

The others chuckle and I roll my eyes. “I’m good, thanks. I’m old enough to wash myself, but thanks for the offer.”

“I wasn’t talking about washing the sweat off, baby, more along the lines of creating some more.”

I dismiss his words with a toss of my eyes. “Down boy. I’m heading inside—alone. I’ll catch you later.”

As I leave, my face burns because what the fuck? Even the mere idea of Jesse’s hands on me set my teeth on edge, which is a new reaction that caught me off guard.

As I head to my room, I meet Siri coming in the opposite direction and she smiles broadly. “Hey, there you are. Cassie wondered if you fancied grabbing a girl’s night. We’re all out tomorrow and wanted some time without the guys for once.”

“Sure. I’m up for that.” I smile, the relief hitting me hard.

She laughs softly. “I doubt Jesse will be happy. He’s been looking for you and, by the looks of it, he has other plans.”

“He’ll live. He’s always taking off and not explaining where, so he can suck it up and put in the work before he reaps the reward.”

“Good for you, girl.” Siri high fives me and then lowers her voice. “Seriously though, something’s off with him. Jack hoped The Claiming would focus his mind a little. I mean, you’re one hot chick, and why would he go anywhere else?”

“But he does.” I remind her and sigh. “The thing is, Siri, all the time Jesse’s mind is elsewhere I’m not interested and under the rules of The Claiming, we are meant to be together.

I'm not ready for that level of commitment if he's not on the same page as me, so I don't know where I stand with that. ”

Siri's worried frown doesn't help and she sighs. “I see your problem. The Twist ceremony is months away, and that's a long time to be with the wrong guy. Maybe have a word with Frankie and tell him of your concerns. He may grant you an exemption.”

“It's worth a try, I guess.”

I shrug. “I really should shower. Where are we meeting?”

“The basement. Cassie told the guys it's out-of-bounds tonight and they must entertain themselves.”

“Great. I'll see you there in—” I raise my eyes and she glances at her phone.

“Thirty minutes. We've ordered pizza. It will be delivered round about then.”

As she leaves, I shake my head. Fuck. More pizza. I'm going to look like one at this rate.

When I head into my room, I'm careful to lock the door behind me because I wouldn't put it past Jesse to try his luck, despite my obvious knock back.

For the first time since meeting Drake, I am alone with my thoughts and as I wander across to the window, I glance out at the tree line and a small smile lights my lips as I remember exactly what happened back there.

I kissed my freaking teacher, and I liked it and, more importantly, I would do it again in a heartbeat.

I meet the others in the basement bang on thirty minutes and Cassie's smile is bright when I walk into the room.

"Hey, where did you go?"

"For a run." I avoid her eyes because Cassie knows me better than anyone and would instantly see there is something different in my smile.

"Pizzas arrived."

Summer heads down the stairs, balancing boxes in her hands, and Siri races to help her.

Cassie pours us each a glass of wine and as we settle down, loud music plays out from the hidden speakers.

It gives me a moment to collect my thoughts and as I eat my third slice of pizza this evening, I cast my mind back to the last one I ate. Fuck Principal Constable. I wonder what would have happened if we hadn't been interrupted. Would things have moved on? I like to think so.

"So, the prom." Cassie is excited. "Does anyone know what the theme is yet?"

"The Roman empire." I add, and Siri gasps with excitement.

"Who told you that?"

I shift in my seat and shrug dismissively. "My history teacher asked for my help and I suggested it. As he's in charge of coming up with the theme, I guess you can thank me for that."

Several pairs of stunned eyes are trained on me and Cassie is the first to voice her thoughts.

“Fuck, Imogen, when did this happen?”

“Today.”

I act as if it’s nothing. “He asked me to meet him after class to run through the prom. Apparently, all the teachers have a part to play and must draft in a student to help them.”

“That’s true.” Summer adds. “Kennedy has been asked to help with the music.”

“Why Kennedy?” Cassie laughs. “She isn’t into music, or so I believe.”

“Think about it.” Summer grins. “Kennedy James is the queen of Rockwell. It’s not what she knows, but who.

If she’s on the prom committee, they are guaranteed interest because she will demand it.

Kennedy will make certain it’s the best prom Rockwell has ever seen and Mrs. Hunt was a genius in drafting her in. ”

“I guess.” Siri laughs. “I’m jealous of Imogen though. Mr. Bellingham is way too hot for his own good. Lucky you for spending alone time with him.”

“It’s not like that.” I dismiss her words as if they are nothing and as Cassie stares at me thoughtfully, I set my expression to indifferent.

“So, I look great in a toga.” Siri adds, and the conversation turns to what we will

wear.

After a while, we change the subject and once again I'm under the spotlight as Summer asks, "What's happening with Jesse?"

"Why do you ask?"

She shrugs. "I don't know. I suppose I hoped you would be all over one another after The Claiming, but it appears to be business as usual for Jesse as he slopes off to God only knows where."

Cassie nods, a firm set to her lips. "Something is off and—" She glances around before lowering her voice.

"Frankie wants to follow him. He's certain that Jenna Sloane is still pulling his strings, despite being fired from her job here."

"I just don't get it." Siri smiles at me with sympathy. "Why would he want a freak like that when he has Imogen? It's wrong on every level."

"He doesn't have me."

The room falls silent apart from the music and as they gaze at me expectantly, I sigh heavily.

"We almost got there the other night, but the sprinklers rained on our parade."

"Fuck." Summer groans. "But that was last week. Why not move it on since then, if that was the way it was heading?"

I squirm a little and Cassie's sharp gaze pierces the truth from me.

“I’m not sure I want to—move it on, that is.”

The girls wait for an explanation and I groan, “Think about it. Jesse is running around in the shadows hiding something and we all believe it’s another woman. Why would I be interested in starting anything with a guy who is cheating on me before we have even begun?”

“It makes sense.” Siri hisses, “Jesse is a fool. He should be dragged back to that chamber and made to confess everything. There are repercussions for going against The Claiming and if he’s being unfaithful, he must face the consequences of that.”

Cassie nods. “I’ll ask Frankie. It’s his game after all, but he makes up the rules as he goes along and Jesse is his best friend.”

Summer frowns. “Luca also considers he’s up to something. Fuck, Jesse is on the road to hell if he pisses Luca and my brother off. I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes if they turn on him.”

They stare at me with interest.

“What are you going to do?” Summer voices what everyone is thinking.

“Back off.” I shrug, acting as if Jesse’s commitment is the issue here.

I still haven’t forgotten what almost happened the night of the sprinkler malfunction and the way he was going to take something from me I wasn’t ready to give him.

It’s played on repeat on my mind ever since because despite his easygoing nature, if Jesse wants something, he doesn’t ask if it’s okay and he would have taken it despite my obvious reluctance.

FOURTEEN

DRAKE

It's been less than twenty-four hours since Imogen left through my kitchen window and I've dodged Principal Constable for most of it.

She wouldn't leave, despite my hints, and I spent the entire evening fending off her advances without laying out the fact that I don't find her attractive—at all.

She finally left at nine pm and popped up before class, asking for a breakfast meeting.

When I took lunch, she joined me and flirted outrageously and I'm almost certain she will be waiting for me when the class finishes.

Thankfully, I have a free period and as I head to the car, I take a deep breath and attempt to get my head back into the reason I am here in the first place. Imogen.

The kiss was a distraction. I'm not saying I didn't want to—ache for it even, but she was asking too many questions and it was too close for comfort.

If anything, the principal did me a favor and diffused a situation that should never have occurred in the first place and as I head toward the academy gates, I wonder how this will end tonight.

I see her waiting, a slight figure with a cowboy hat pulled down over her silky hair.

A plaid shirt is tied around her waist, her white vest hugging those curves that have no business being so tempting.

She is wearing jeans tucked into white cowboy boots and her eyes are covered with mirrored shades and fuck me, I'm hard already as I imagine riding that particular cowgirl into oblivion.

I stop and she wastes no time in jumping in and smiles. "This feels like a covert operation."

"And you would know a lot about those, I suppose?"

I raise my eyes and she giggles as she fastens her safety belt.

"I do as it happens."

"What are you, a spy now?"

I tease her and she laughs softly, a sound that is like sweet music in my ear.

"Not personally, but through association."

"Tell me about it."

She takes my question literally.

"My father's work takes him off on what many call missions. He can be gone for days and we don't know when he'll be back."

"What does he do?"

“Missions.” She grins and I beat down the urge to pull over and revisit what we started yesterday. Why the fuck did she dress like every fantasy I ever had and she has no business looking so desirable when she is out of bounds?

We head off onto the highway and it’s awkward as fuck because I am finding it extremely hard to voice my thoughts.

“So, what did the principal want?”

Her innocent question does a good job of lightening the atmosphere, and I groan. “Me.”

“No way.”

She laughs out loud and I snap, “I’m glad you find that funny. I spent the entire evening fabricating a childhood sweetheart called Sonia, who is the love of my life.”

“Sonia?” she chuckles softly. “I’m guessing Sonia wouldn’t be happy if she knew you were kissing your students and then spiriting them away in your car.”

“She’d be okay with it.” I grin. “We have an open relationship.”

“Obviously, that doesn’t extend to the principal.”

I shiver with revulsion. “Definitely not.”

“So, tell me about Sonia.”

Imogen raises her eyes and I wink. “She’s gorgeous. Much like you, really. Tall, slim, blonde and the prettiest girl I have ever seen.”

“She sounds like a stereotype.”

“No. She’s goddamn amazing. I mean, she has a quick wit, nerves of steel, and is a quick thinker. I mean, she’s fierce and boy can she kiss.”

“She sounds, um, incredible.”

Her voice softens and the tension increases in the car as I whisper, “She is beautiful. An angel, in fact.”

“Drake.” Her husky whisper almost makes me crash the car as she says softly, “What’s happening here?”

I spy a service area ahead and grin.

“We’re grabbing coffee.”

She nods but can’t hide her disappointment and as I pull into the drive through, I place our order, noting the appreciative gaze the server throws her way.

He can’t stop staring at Imogen, and I share his fascination.

She is like nothing I have ever seen before and I can’t be mad at someone for feeling the effects of her as much as I do.

We move to the next window and as I hand her the Styrofoam cup, she smiles her gratitude.

I place mine in the holder and decide to park at the end of the lot, away from the other cars.

As soon as I draw to a stop, I turn to her and take the coffee from her hand and place it in the holder next to mine.

“Drake—” She makes to speak, but I wrap my hand around the back of her head and whisper huskily, “This needs to be done.”

As I lower my lips to hers, I experience a spark so strong inside me, it causes my heart to race and my cock to jerk so much it’s almost painful.

I decided the moment I met her that one kiss would never be enough and now I must be content with two because as soon as she learns exactly why I wanted to get her away from the academy, she may never want to see me again.

I kiss her in the knowledge this is probably the last time and in one selfish act of self destruction, I go there anyway.

She tastes of forbidden lust and unrequited endings, and I never realized how devastating that would be for my heart. It’s a goodbye of sorts. An ending to something that never really started and I’m a selfish prick for taking something that was never mine to take.

She shifts closer and wraps those soft hands around my head, raking through my hair with her long pink nails.

She tastes of innocence mixed with devil’s ruin because if I’m not mistaken, kissing is as far as this woman has ever got.

Just imagining those guys pawing at her causes my blood to boil and my kiss is dangerous for both of us.

I want to protect her, but I’m throwing her to the wolves and will watch while she is

ripped apart as punishment for my sins.

My hand moves against my better judgment and I cup her breasts through her vest, her gasp of longing giving me the green light despite the fact they are fixed firmly on red.

I ease my hand under her vest, colliding with her soft skin, edging her bra aside and allowing her soft flesh to ignite my passion further.

It's almost painful as I explore her body with no business being there and as she returns the favor and eases her hands under my t-shirt, I love how her nails rake against my abs, drifting tantalizingly lower.

It's hard to come to terms with the fact my cock will never enjoy the pleasure of her innocence.

That pleasure is firmly reserved for somebody else and I hate how desperate that makes me, knowing she will walk away and never look at me in the same way after today. After this.

I'm a greedy selfish bastard as I pull her closer, not prepared to stop anytime soon and it would be so easy to say fuck it and go there anyway, but I'm not about to end my life for a selfish moment of pleasure.

She is not mine to take.

That sentence is screaming at me as I kiss her so deeply I almost think I'll come out the other side.

She groans into my mouth and as her hand drifts lower and eases inside my jeans, I pull back and say gruffly, "We should stop."

Her eyes flicker with pain and rejection and I heave a deep breath and say huskily, “I’m not the man for you, Imogen. This ain’t right.”

“Because you’re my teacher.” She nods, accepting something that isn’t the real reason, but I’ll run with that because she would hate the truth even more.

She sighs and reaches for her coffee. “It’s okay, Drake. I don’t want to place you in a difficult position. Perhaps we should just head to the warehouse and park whatever this is between us.”

Her sad eyes steal my heart as she slumps in her seat, blinking away her tears and, as moments go, this is the worst fucking one of my life as I take a deep breath and prepare to ruin everything.

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FIFTEEN

IMOGEN

One minute this is as natural as breathing and the next he reminds me how wrong it is.

I've got whiplash as I attempt to dull my emotions.

It's impossible though, because that kiss alone sparked something inside me I never thought was there.

Lust, desire and desperation mixed into a cocktail I would happily call my favorite from here on in.

It's as if the kiss sparked more than lust though, because the tension in the car is stifling.

It appears that Drake is choking on it because his breathing is hard and there's an awkward atmosphere I can't define.

He initiated the kiss, demanded it even, and now he's acting as if what happened is dirty somehow.

I almost wish I had never come and sink lower in my seat as I sip the coffee in an attempt to regain some kind of calm.

“I haven’t been honest with you.” His voice is husky and laden with regret and I tense as I anticipate change.

“In what way?” My voice is dull, reigned even, and he leans back in his chair and groans.

“I’m not a teacher.”

I wasn’t expecting this and stare at him in shock. “Then how did you get the job?”

My heart resembles a menagerie of butterflies as they flutter around a cage in panic mode.

“If I tell you, it must remain a secret.”

“Then don’t tell me.” My eyes flash as I face him. “Whatever is going on, I would rather not know. It’s obvious you lied to me and I’m not happy about that. Take me back to Rockwell, Drake, and spare me the details.”

I’m angry. Fucking livid in fact, because it’s obvious Drake is writing his own agenda here and none of it is good judging by his tortured expression.

“Listen to me.” There’s urgency in his voice that sparks alarm and my fingers tighten around the cup as I wait for the ax to fall.

“You’re in danger, Imogen and I was sent here to protect you.”

I wasn’t expecting that and my mouth drops as I stare back at him in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

My voice shakes as his eyes gleam with anger.

“Have you heard of an organization called The Serpent Society?”

“No.”

“So, nobody has told you about it.”

He appears almost angry and I’m confused. “Why would they, and who are we talking about?”

“Cassie, Jack and—” He pauses before adding, “In fact, most of your friends.”

I digest this information, something tearing at my heart as I face the fact I’m the only one in the dark about this and it’s not a good place to be knowing my friends are involved in something that may be a threat to me—or them.

“Then perhaps you should enlighten me.”

I take a deep breath and he nods, switching the atmosphere to a business one.

“It’s run by a man called Christian Duprey. It’s not a society you would want membership of but his recruitment campaign extends to Rockwell Academy.”

I say nothing and let him speak and he says dully, “Jenna Sloane is one of his recruitment officers and even though she was fired from Rockwell, she is still working nearby.”

“What has any of this got to do with me?”

“Nothing directly but indirectly you are involved more than most.”

“But I’ve never met the woman, so why would it concern me?”

“Because Jesse is currently signing the membership paperwork.”

“Jesse?” My eyes widen and he nods, a grim set to his jaw.

“She has been working on him for several months, feeding him drugs to control him and trapping him with depraved sex.”

I feel sick and yet it’s all slotting into place. It explains a lot, and I fall silent as Drake continues.

“Jesse’s initiation involves controlling another student. He must prove he has the capability to dominate and drag another person under his command, much like Jenna is doing with him.”

“And I’m the chosen one, I’m guessing.”

I state the obvious fact and he nods. “Yes.”

“But I’m not controlled by him. To be honest—” My words falter as I face the fact I’ve kept to myself until now.

“If anything, I want out. He, well—”

I stop, heaving in a deep breath as I whisper, “I’m a little scared to be alone with him.”

“Why?”

His voice is dripping in anger as I admit, “The night Willow Tree House was flooded, Jesse was, well, pushing me into something I wasn’t ready for.”

He is silent, and my voice quivers. “I’m not saying he was forcing me, but well, I changed my mind.”

“And did he?” His voice is tight, angry even, and I whisper, “No. The sprinklers calmed the situation.”

“Thank fuck.” He heaves a sigh of relief and then surprises me by chuckling softly. “Apparently it worked in the nick of time.”

“What did?”

He appears almost guilty as he grins. “I couldn’t be certain, but saw him enter Willow Tree House, and I knew you were vulnerable because of your ankle. It would have been the perfect time for him to make his move because you were unable to fight back and when?—”

He stops, and a chill hangs in the air as he whispers, “When I heard what was happening, I had only one course of action without blowing my cover and I activated the sprinklers.”

“Wait, what?” I stare at him in shock. “When you heard what was happening!”

“Yes.”

I can’t even describe the betrayal I’m experiencing right now as I stare at the stranger beside me, who now sparks fear in my heart.

“You’ve said enough. I don’t want you to say anymore and for your information, I’m done with this and I’m done with you.”

I make to leave and as the door struggles to open, realization dawns. He’s locked me

in and for the first time, I face the fact the only danger I'm in is from him.

SIXTEEN

DRAKE

Fuck. This isn't going to plan, and now I've terrified the shit out of her.

"Listen to me, Imogen."

She edges away from me and I detect the tremor in her voice as she gasps, "Please, Drake, open the door. I want to leave."

"I can't until you hear me out."

I attempt to reassure her, but she shrinks away from me as I sigh heavily, my hand dropping to my side.

"I'm not the bad guy here, Imogen. I was sent to protect you and I've fucked that up big time."

"I don't understand."

I take a deep breath. "I'm not a teacher, Imogen. I'm a—"

I almost can't form the word, knowing this will blow her world apart.

"You're a what?"

Her voice is tight, angry and determined and my mind buzzes as I lower my voice and say softly, “I’m a Reaper, baby. I work for Ryder.”

Her eyes widen and she stares at me in shock and as realization dawns, tears fill her eyes and she visibly relaxes as she slumps back in her seat.

“I don’t understand. How are you a Reaper? I’ve never seen you once at the compound.”

“You won’t. I’m a patched in member with no patch.”

I refer to the tattoo the Reapers wear for identification purposes.

“I’m an undercover operative that merely heads from one job to another.”

“Operative.”

Her eyes widen and I nod, happy to see she has calmed down and is no longer afraid. I had to reveal my identity because it was the only way she would trust me and yet I’ve opened a can of worms because now she’ll know exactly why we can never be together.

“I was an undercover operative in the military. I was good at it too and remained undetected, even to this day.”

“Until now.” She reminds me and I nod, a smile ghosting my lips. “Until you.”

She nods, a little of her animosity fading as curiosity replaces it.

“A year ago, I was called in by my commanding officer and given a choice. Continue working for the military. Nothing would change except for my missions, or work for

the government in another capacity.”

“As a Reaper.”

Imogen is only too aware that the MC Club is a cover for government assassins who do the country’s dirty work when the courts will fail and I nod. “Swap my commanding officer for Ryder King and keep the country safe from the inside.”

“I don’t understand what that has to do with Rockwell, though.”

“The Serpent Society.” I note her hands trembling as she grasps the coffee and hate how she’s involved in this shit.

“Kidnap, rape murder.”

Her mouth drops as I lay out their mantra.

“I don’t understand.”

“Call it their code. In order to gain membership to the society, that is the path. First you kidnap a girl, guy, whatever. Then you rape them before killing them in cold blood.”

Tears fill Imogen’s beautiful eyes and she looks so fucking terrified I instinctively reach for her hand and whisper, “I’m here for you, baby, and I’m good at my job.”

“So, Jesse—” She gulps. “Do you think he’s going to use me to get in with that sick society?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“Fuck, Drake.”

She appears so small and defenseless and I growl, “Which is why I had to warn you. I can only protect you so far but that stunt Jesse pulled at Willow Tree House proved I can’t be there all the time.

It kind of backfired though and sent you straight into the lion’s den and now you’re under his roof. ”

“Does Cassie know about any of this?” Imogen’s voice falters and I nod.

“Of the society, yes. Of Jesse’s involvement in it, no, but she’s suspicious. They all are, which is why they engineered your involvement with him.”

“They used me.”

Her lower lip quivers and I’m guessing betrayal is a tough pill for her to swallow as she considers that possibility.

“To a degree, but not to cause you harm. If Cassie and Jack realized how deep in Jesse is with Jenna, they would never have allowed it. Nobody knows but Jesse, Jenna Sloane and now us.”

“So, what happens now?”

“I can’t do this alone, Imogen. I need eyes on the inside and you can work with me to save Jesse and allow Ryder and the Reapers to take the Serpent Society out.”

She nods, grim determination in her eyes as she whispers, “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

I heave a huge sigh of relief but add, “It has risks.”

“I don’t care.” She smiles shyly. “I’m a patched in member of your team now, Drake. We will get this mission done.”

My heart physically aches as I stare at the brave woman who looks so delicate she could break like china, but inside she is made of steel, which turns out to be a lethal combination that has already trapped my soul.

“What happens now?”

“You carry on as before, but with your newly learned information, report back on anything suspicious.”

“Carry on as before.” She slumps in her seat. “That means to act as Jesse’s girl, I’m guessing.”

“I’m sorry, baby, it’s the only way.”

“And us, Drake. Was that just to get my attention?”

The hurt filling her eyes causes me to swallow hard because fuck, she believes I’ve betrayed her, too.

“To get close to you was the plan, but to kiss you, to touch you and to want you was strictly forbidden.”

“Forbidden. Who?”

“Your father.”

I groan as her eyes widen and she whispers, “My father warned you off me?”

“Of course.” I shrug. “It didn’t work though, and I’ve crossed the line. I should have been stronger. I’ve let both of you down. I was supposed to protect you and I took advantage of that, which is why?—”

I stop because I can’t form the words and she says gently, “Why?”

“Why it can’t happen again.”

“I see.”

My words have crushed her spirit, and she sighs, glancing out at the sky, where normal life carries on around us.

“Well, you’ve got my attention.”

She laughs, but it’s a dull sound. Not the giggle I love or the innocent smile of a woman who doesn’t realize men like me exist in the world.

“If I could change things, I would.”

I want her to believe me because it’s true. If I met Imogen in normal life, she would be exactly the kind of girl I would go for. She is that girl, which is why my situation is dragging a rusty blade to my heart as I contemplate my life without her in it.

“I’m guessing my father will be pissed if he finds out.”

She sighs. “Well, he won’t hear it from me.”

“I’m not asking you to lie for me, baby.”

She turns and the sadness in her expression causes my breath to falter as she

whispers, “I liked it. If it’s any consolation, you are the first guy I considered, well—”

She falters and blushes and I just can’t help myself and reach for her hand, tangling our fingers together as I nod. “I feel the same. Life sucks.”

Her smile surprises me as she chuckles, “Ryder must be losing his shit, knowing Cassie is in the thick of a mission.”

“You could say that.” I grin. “It’s the reason I’m here. He loves his daughter, and she’s happy here and if she considered for one minute he was removing her from Rockwell, he would never hear the end of it.”

“And Jack doesn’t even know? I would have thought he was your obvious choice, given he’s heading to the military and keen to prove himself. Why me? I thought I’d be your last option.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Imogen. You are the perfect operative who will fly under the radar with no suspicion at all. Sometimes the obvious isn’t the best choice. It’s the one who has nothing to hide who makes the most difference.”

“Okay.” She smiles. “I’ll help you—whatever it takes.”

She points to her coffee. “I could use another one of these.”

“Sure. If you like, there is a diner not far from here and we could grab some food.”

“But the warehouse?”

“Was an excuse to get you alone and away from Rockwell.”

“And the prom?”

“That was true. It was the perfect cover and your idea was a good one. Ryder put Bonnie onto securing the props. She loves that shit and it will all be delivered right on time and invoiced accordingly.”

“That’s Ryder.” She rolls her eyes. “And you, is Drake Bellingham your real name, or did he fake that along with your qualifications and resume?”

She has definitely been around the Reapers too long and I wink.

“My name is Drake, but it’s Drake Fielding.”

“That’s good to know.”

I resist the urge to reach out and cup her pretty face in my hands and reassure her that I would kill for her. Nothing will stop me either because if Imogen is in the vicinity of danger, I would shred bodies to save one hair on her head.

For a moment, we share a longing look that speaks way more than any words.

This is an impossible situation but a necessary one and I have no business dragging her into my world because when this is over, I’ll be heading off on my next mission and she will be beginning her future that will ultimately be with anyone but me.

SEVENTEEN

IMOGEN

My head is spinning. We leave the gas station and head north on the interstate to a small town nearby. We end up at The Road Shack diner and as we settle in a booth near the back, there's an awkward atmosphere between us.

We study the menu and after making our selections, the waitress heads off and Drake stares at me with concern.

"Now is your chance to ask any questions. When we return to Rockwell, we must communicate via text only and then delete the thread when it finishes."

"I get the idea." I rest my elbows on the table and stare at him with interest.

"So, what must I do first?"

"Carry on as before, but now you are aware of what's at stake. Second guess everything Jesse tells you and don't be alone with him without others within shouting distance."

He says firmly. "Definitely don't agree to go anywhere out of the academy with him unless Cassie and Jack are with you and watch your drinks in case he spikes them."

"Seriously?" I can't comprehend what I'm hearing, and yet Drake's expression is grim.

“It’s how they control their victims. Jesse was drugged by Jenna and still is, to a degree.”

I cast my mind back on the glazed expression in Jesse’s eyes when he heads back from wherever he’s been, and it all makes perfect sense.

“You think he will drug me and—” I can’t even say the rest of the words and Drake nods.

“It’s a possibility, but if it’s not you, it will be someone else.”

“But how can you be so sure? Jesse is a good guy, I can tell.”

“Because of where he comes from.”

“The small town that sounds like shit.”

I think back on what Jesse told me and Drake nods, stopping as the server brings us soda and as she leaves, he leans forward and whispers, “It’s text book.

They find a guy like Jesse who has been controlled his entire life.

He hates his future and they are offering him a way out.

Membership of the society is a good replacement because he’ll be free to pursue whatever career he wants and will be assured of wealth and his freedom to a degree.

It’s a powerful carrot to dangle before him. ”

“So, Jesse gets a new life and his freedom and more money than he would have at the town, but what does the society get out of him?”

“A willing soldier. You see—” Drake glances around and motions for me to move closer and as our lips hover against one another’s, he whispers, “They are a sick society who get off on depravity. To assure their anonymity, they control their members and make it in their best interests not to divulge any information to anyone outside it. They are trained to enjoy things most of us would be sickened by, but they get off on it. They protect their members and once a month meet in a huge mansion and carry out their mantra of kidnap, rape, murder. Each member brings a sacrifice and the other members enjoy the show.”

I falter because this is wild and for the first time I realize the danger I could be in and Drake obviously reads my expression and to my surprise, cups my face in his hand and whispers against my lips, “I will protect you, baby. Follow my lead and you’ll be safe.”

“But you can’t be everywhere, Drake.”

I blink away my tears. “How do we save Jesse?”

He smiles softly and runs his thumb under my eyes and capturing my tears, whispers, “By breaking the hold they have on him. Keep him close, Imogen, but not so you are in danger. Dig for information and discover where he goes. Make demands on his time and play the petulant girlfriend if you must, but keep him away from Jenna Sloane and that should be enough to break the hold she has over him.”

I nod, determined to play my part, but being here with Drake is a bitter pill to swallow. I don’t want Jesse. I never did, but knowing Drake is off limits has crushed my heart because I thought we had something.

He stares into my eyes and whispers, “I wish it was different. I wish I met you in a bar in town and we could explore this like a normal couple. I wish you weren’t part of this and I wish you had stayed at your previous college.

But it's our reality now and we must deal with it, but if I do nothing else, I will keep you safe. You have my word on that."

I can't help myself and move closer and steal a kiss.

This can't be the end of us before we even begin.

Fate is a cruel bitch who delivers and takes without warning.

He may not be allowed to kiss me, but I have no such order and as I run my hand behind his head, I deepen the kiss, tangling my tongue in his, taking what I want and to hell with the consequences.

A discreet cough makes us spring apart, and the amused server places two plates of food before us.

"Get it while it's hot guys." She winks and as she tosses us an amused grin, she heads off, leaving my face flaming as I pretend to be extremely interested in the food.

We eat in a companionable silence and when Drake settles the check, I head to the restroom and stare at my flushed face in the mirror.

Drake brings me alive. I have never been surer of that than anything and fuck my father and Ryder.

If I want Drake and he wants me, nobody will tell us otherwise.

I just have to save Jesse first before I demand my reward, and if they thought Cassie would lose her shit if she didn't get what she wanted, they have underestimated me.

We head back to Rockwell and as he drops me by the gate, I say nothing.

He waits for me to enter the grounds and it's a solitary, lonely walk back to a life that has changed in a few hours.

I even feel different because I'm a Reaper now.

This is what Drake does. He goes undercover and I'm kind of discovering what that is like.

The first person I meet when I head inside is the man of the hour, Jesse.

"Imogen, baby. Where have you been?"

"Prom duty."

I brush his curiosity aside and he groans. "Bad luck. A few of us are heading to the dungeons. The Claiming ceremony is tomorrow and Santi wants to check everything is set. Are you up for being a centurion rather than a challenger?"

"Me?" I grin. "Really. What must I do?"

He slings his arm around my shoulder as he guides me to the kitchen.

"Cassie and Siri act as centurion guards in the tunnel chamber. Frankie has allocated you and Summer my old position by the riverbank."

The riverbank is the finish line for anyone who escapes The Claiming and I'm guessing not a lot happens there.

"Sure."

To be honest, I don't mind because it means I get to spend some time with Summer

and we won't have to do anything.

He grins. "Great. That leaves me as head cell keeper and I get to release the centurions into the wild."

"I thought that was Frankie's job?"

"He swapped with me because he wants to be in the chamber where it all begins with Luca. I'm not complaining, though. It will be fun watching those centurions squirm."

"You're an asshole, Jesse." I toss my eyes and he grins, leaning on the counter, gazing at me with puppy dog eyes as he winks.

"I'm your asshole, Imogen, and I'm rather happy about that."

He tosses me a cold beer and, as I catch it, I can see why all the girls fall for Jesse.

He is a great guy most of the time, but the lure of that sick society is too great for a guy who faces a prison sentence when he graduates.

I can't comprehend what his life will be if he falls in line and does what's expected of him, and yet this is no way out.

He's merely swapping one master for a sicker one, which fuels my desire to help him. Whatever it takes.

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EIGHTEEN

IMOGEN

If I thought anything would change, I'm disappointed. The week passes in the usual blur of class, lunch, parties and headaches. Mainly the biggest one for me is keeping Jesse at bay.

It's a double-edged sword because on the one hand it's important I keep him away from Jenna Sloane and on the other he wants something I'm reluctant to give him. Me.

We make out, it's impossible not to and yet that's where I draw the invisible line.

Occasionally, I witness the impatience in his eyes, the anger even when I smile apologetically and tell him I'm not ready.

It's hard because everyone else around us is tight with their couples and I'm certain Jesse now considers me a freak.

Tonight is The Claiming challenge and I'm interested to spend time with Summer. It's been a while because she is so heavily involved with Luca, who still terrifies the panties off me.

As we make our way to the dungeon as a group, I walk with Summer and Luca as Jesse chats with Frankie and Cassie.

I love the way they are with one another.

There's an unspoken bond between them that requires no conversation, but I don't miss the gentle smiles and the way they are always connected in some way or another.

His eyes follow her constantly, checking she is okay, and she drags the enigma out of him and sometimes he appears almost human.

If anything, I wish I was free to explore my fascination for Drake, but that will never happen all the time we are at Rockwell Academy.

I haven't seen him since we left the grounds and have had nothing but the odd check-in text. I've reported back, but it's as if a cool wall has sprung up between us and I hate how hollow that makes me feel inside.

Summer chuckles as we follow the three in front. "You know, I'm kind of jealous that Cassie and Siri get the tunnel chamber. We could have fun with that."

I nod my agreement. "It would be more interesting than watching the river flow."

Summer laughs. "The river flow. Wow, we're in for an entertaining evening."

Luca groans. "The sooner it's over, the better, in my opinion. It's boring as fuck standing watching Santi lord it up over the challengers. He really gets off on power."

"Do you think he'll ever take part himself?" I'm curious about Santi, and Ali, for that matter, because both of them resist tying themselves to one woman, preferring to whore it around with any willing female who has the misfortune to stumble blindly onto their radar.

“They have no reason to.” Luca surprises me by joining our conversation. He isn’t one for gossip, speaking even and yet this is a side to him I like. It almost makes him appear human.

“Why not?”

I’m curious about them and Summer interrupts, “Ali is a mysterious soul who has more sexual freedom than anyone I’ve ever met. He comes to Rockwell for a rest and considers one or two fucks a night a welcome break from what his usual tally count is when he is at home.”

“That’s seriously disgusting.”

I wrinkle my nose and Summer says with amusement, “Just don’t accept any invitations to visit him on the holidays. He would corrupt every bone in your body.”

I shiver with revulsion. It’s not that Ali isn’t seriously gorgeous. I mean, those Arabic good looks are a definite draw to most of the girls here. He has an exotic beauty that is mesmerizing, and I’ve seen him pile on the charm and he is assured of success with any woman he chooses to entrap.

“What about Santi then?” I’m curious and Summer shrugs.

“I’m not sure. I mean, most of the time he’s as easygoing as Jesse is and would make any girl a fantastic boyfriend.

Then there’s the side of him that is still in kindergarten and I doubt he has the emotional maturity to hold down a relationship. ”

“You got that right.” Luca almost sounds amused, and yet he still wears his sinister aura like a shield.

I am so curious about him and his life—Frankie's too.

I'm aware it's nothing like the easy nature of living with the Reapers, and a cold shiver passes through me when they stare around them with cool indifference.

Summer lives that life, Siri too, but for some reason the girls have an openness that the guys severely lack.

We reach the dungeon and as we head inside the cool damp stone walls, a shiver of fear passes through me that catches me every single time I come here.

It's as if the souls of the damned from the past scream at me to stay away. It's foreboding and creepy as fuck, which suits Frankie's personality perfectly.

We make our way past the cells that are empty for now as they await the newest set of challengers, who are all up for hunting one of the girls who want to be claimed.

It's a strange situation because life at Rockwell has always been a time to explore relationships, test connections and enjoy a certain level of freedom, but Frankie's challenge reverses all of that and tests loyalty instead.

I still haven't figured out why so many people want to sign up for the commitment and I suppose it's because of the route there.

The thrill of the chase. The darker side of commitment involving being hunted and claimed.

Something different, depraved and wrong on every level.

It lets the darkness out to explore something alien in the world outside and if I had a choice to enter the challenge with Drake, I wouldn't even hesitate because my

motives would be very different to the ones I had when I agreed to help Jesse.

I certainly never thought it through and now I'm fending him off at every opportunity and running out of excuses to keep him at arm's length.

We are handed our centurion robes, which I shrug on happily, loving the anonymity it offers. Here we are an army. A faceless army and as I hold the golden mask in my hand as I listen to Santi's instruction, a shiver of expectation hits me as I anticipate an entertaining evening ahead.

I almost wish I was in the tunnel chamber too, watching the challengers crawl around on their hands and knees, remembering what that felt like knowing someone was hunting me. It was an unexpected thrill that I would experience again in a heartbeat.

As the centurions take up their positions, Summer joins me. "We should head to the riverbank. Trust us to have the longest journey."

Cassie overhears her grumble and joins us.

"There is another way; a quicker way."

"If you believe I'm crawling through those tunnels and then swimming to the other side, think again."

Summer groans and Cassie grins, her impudent smile lighting up the darkness, causing me to chuckle softly. I am fully used to Cassie's wild spirit I have grown up with it and I'm never surprised when she tells me something I never even considered.

"There's a tunnel that leads there under the set of ones we use for the challenge."

Summer nods. "I remember. I, shall we say, fell in to one when I was taking part and

they are creepy as fuck. It would be easier to walk around and more pleasant.”

Cassie shrugs. “You can use your phones to light them. I’ll ask Frankie to show you the way if you prefer.”

I glance across at her guy and shiver inside.

Frankie may as well be the devil commanding hell for the aura he gives out, and yet his sister is one of the nicest people I have met outside of the compound.

It’s unbelievable they are related and yet on occasion I have detected the same fire in Summer’s eyes, which she badly needs to control Luca Romano.

Her brother’s unofficial twin of darkness and I wonder what the future holds for all of them.

Cassie waves Frankie over. “Can you show them to the riverbank through the tunnels? It will be quicker.”

He nods. “Sure, but we must leave now. We don’t have long before the challengers arrive.”

Summer grins. “Sounds good to me.”

She blows a kiss at Luca who is chatting with Jesse and as he stares at her, the temperature definitely increases in the room.

They are one dynamic couple and I kind of envy them that.

They are free to explore their fascination for one another, and I am still holding onto the hope that one day I will enjoy the same level of freedom with Drake.

NINETEEN

DRAKE

This is not good. Why the fuck am I nervous? It doesn't make sense and yet I'm guessing it has everything to do with the guilt I'm nurturing inside like a bomb about to go off.

I see them waiting for me and swallow hard because they really don't need to know what happened with Imogen for all our sakes.

I've been summoned to a disused house set halfway up the mountain around thirty minutes drive from Rockwell. As I pull into the yard, I note the two Harleys gleaming in the moonlit sky and the two huge leather clad bodies sitting on the steps of the crumbling veranda.

My headlights dim as I come to a stop and as I cut the engine, the only sound is that of my frantically beating heart.

I am never nervous around these men, but now I have something to hide I'm terrified of slipping up. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if they already know and my time on this earth is a matter of minutes away.

As I head toward them, they stand and Ryder's deep voice greets me. "Hey, Drake. It's good to see you."

"Ryder." I offer him my hand and prepare myself for the usual painful experience of

having mine crushed in his fist.

Flash glares at me, which causes my heart to still as he searches my expression with an anxious one of his own.

“Drake.” His handshake is less destructive and as the pleasantries fade, Ryder resumes his position on the step.

We won’t venture inside the house. Instead, we conduct our meeting out in the open, which is the usual procedure to watch out for intruders.

I’m aware the house will have been searched already, two other Reapers stationed inside and several more dotted around the perimeter, checking we are not interrupted.

Not that I saw them when I drove in. I would be disappointed if I had because these men are the best in their field and are Reapers for a reason.

We are all the best at what we do, which is why my guilt is driving a stake through my heart right now.

I let them down. I disobeyed a direct order, and I’m the fool who must now live with that.

We wait for Ryder to speak. The information that man knows astonishes me. It’s as if the world’s problems are run past him first and he commands an air of wisdom that impresses the fuck out of me.

“Christian Duprey has cut ties with Jenna Sloane.”

I say nothing as he shares the intelligence he is gathering daily.

“I’m guessing it’s because she exposed their operation in getting fired and has left a hole in his recruitment campaign.”

I sense Flash’s eyes on me and squirm a little inside. It’s as if my interest in his daughter is written in blood on my forehead and he will be an unforgiving slayer of my soul.

“Their relationship goes way back to high school, and she is a volatile problem, liable to cause him concern.”

“Do you believe she is in danger?” I reply thoughtfully and he nods, a faint smile ghosting his lips.

“From him, undoubtedly. She is a loose end that needs tying up before the entire operation unravels.”

“That does us a favor, right?”

“In a way, but she’s a known operative we now have eyes on. If we lose her, we are unaware of her replacement, which could be a huge problem.”

“Is there anyone in Rockwell who has raised your suspicion? Could there be another recruitment officer already in place?” Flash asks, a deep frown on his usual jovial face.

“Not that I’m aware of.” I shrug. “The only person I know who is connected to that society is Jesse Anderson. He is currently undergoing initiation.”

Flash grinds his fist into the wooden step that shatters under it.

“Imogen’s fucking boyfriend.”

The anguish on his face is a bitter pill to swallow and yet we are aware that was the reason I was drafted in the first place. I must choose my words if I'm going to survive this encounter and temper my words carefully.

"Imogen is aware of the situation."

Ryder nods and Flash breathes a sigh of relief. It was under Ryder's instruction that I brought her in and this meeting is to educate them on how that went.

"Imogen wants to help, more Jesse than anything, because she is worried about him."

Flash sighs. "She was always too caring for her own good. Unless she has caught actual feelings for the creep. Then I seek permission to take him out myself."

Flash's statement isn't surprising because God forbid any future daughter of mine was in danger. I doubt I would be so accepting of the situation.

Ryder adds, "Imogen's safety is the priority here. All of their safety."

The fact we are here at all is largely because of Cassie.

When Ryder heard his daughter was involved with Frankie Majerio, I thought her days at Rockwell were numbered.

Nothing gets past Ryder and knowing his daughter is involved with the son of a fucking mafia dynasty can't have been easy, and I suppose Cassie has her mom and Jack to thank for his acceptance of the situation.

When they returned for the holidays, Ryder grilled Jack on Cassie's movements at Rockwell.

Despite being a loyal friend to Cassie, Jack isn't dumb enough not to voice his concerns with the president of our club.

He was right to and assured Ryder he was close enough to step in should Cassie be in any danger.

Ryder, so I've heard, erupted like a fucking volcano and only Ashton possesses the power to calm him the fuck down.

All credit must go to her for diffusing the situation and channeling Ryder's mind in a different way to help his daughter.

If Cassie discovered his involvement in this shit, they are too alike for it to go down well.

So, Jack has been tasked with keeping Cassie safe and my involvement was to enlist the help of Imogen and search for any possible leads within the academy itself.

It backfired big time though and unbeknown to Cassie, she now has three guardian angels watching her back, none of who are aware of the others involvement.

Ryder is thoughtful and I ask him a burning question that has confounded me since I learned of the mission.

"Why don't you take Christian Duprey out? You want to extinguish The Serpent Society. Surely the best way to do that is to cut the head off the snake."

Ryder shakes his head. "First, you must locate the snake for that to be an option."

"But you know where Christian operates from."

I'm aware that Ryder has every pin in the map concerning that shit show and I still don't understand why the Reapers haven't moved in already.

Ryder exhales sharply. "If it was that easy, we wouldn't be sitting here now. You see, Drake—"

He fixes me with his usual dark, enigmatic glare. "It has come to my attention that Christian Duprey is merely a figurehead. The real snake is so far underground, even I can't flush him out."

As I process this new information, I see his dilemma.

"Any ideas?" Flash asks and Ryder shakes his head. "Not one, which is why I need more intelligence rather than risk defeat."

"So, what's the plan?" Flash is trying not to sound anxious, but it's obvious he is fast losing his shit.

"We follow Jesse and Jenna Sloane. They are our only leads, and we allow them to do what comes naturally while protecting our own."

"That's your fucking plan!" Flash yells with frustration and I've got to hand it to him. He's a braver man than me to raise his voice against Ryder King.

The air stills as he realizes his mistake and as Ryder fixes him with a hard glare, he holds up his hand.

"I'm sorry, prez. I trust you, of course I do, but Imogen is up close and personal with a fucking maniac and I'd rather just pull her from the situation along with Cassie and Jack."

Ryder nods, understanding heavy in his eyes.

“And you think I don’t?” He huffs a frustrated sigh before saying wearily. “Ever heard the saying, keep your friends close but your enemies closer?”

“Of course.” Flash answers and I nod my affirmation.

Ryder sighs, “Ashton reminded me of that when I blew my shit when I found out in the first place. She told me to trust my daughter’s judgment and possibly the safest place for her is in the eye of the storm.

Frankie Majerio may be born into a fucking deranged dynasty, but they have a moral code I respect when it comes to their own.

Jack assures me that Frankie is protective of Cassie and that was enough to set my mind at ease. Imogen, however—”

He offers Flash a sympathetic smile. “She is nothing like Cassie. She’s soft, compassionate and doesn’t like to take risks. Her heart is spun from pure gold and many view her as a vulnerable option. But we know she is not. She has a skeleton of steel inside her that will serve her well.”

“But unlike Cassie, she is tight with a fucking deranged maniac.” Flash groans, and I’m surprised when Ryder shakes his head.

“Jack assures me that underneath it all, Jesse is a good guy who is just easily manipulated. He believes they can divert him away from Jenna Sloane and that may be true, but the lady herself may have other plans.”

“So, what are your plans, Ryder? Because the sooner this is over the sooner I’ll sleep at night.”

I detect frown lines on the face of a usually easy-going guy and my heart spears me from inside.

I've let him down and I should come clean but instead I fall silent as Ryder huffs, "The plan is to wait for Jenna Sloane to make her move with Jesse. Imogen is aware of the danger and has her guardian angel in place."

He turns to me and a thoughtful gleam lights his eyes. "Keep her close and eyes on Jesse. If you haven't already, tell her never to be alone with him without help a call away and to be on her guard in a crowd."

"Fuck!"

Flash's tortured groan doesn't help the situation, and Ryder sighs.

"So, we will monitor Jenna Sloane's movements and you do the same for Jesse.

They will lead us to Christian at some point and, if I'm guessing correctly, it's only a matter of time before we learn the identity of the snake charmer himself.

Jenna is in danger and we must deal with that and Drake—"

Ryder's eyes find mine and he growls, "Your mission is to keep Imogen safe and discover if anyone else is involved. A new teacher or an existing one perhaps because it's doubtful that Christian would let a gold mine for recruits like Rockwell be without an officer installed."

I nod and as he wraps the meeting up, he nods at Flash. "Join the others. I need a word with Drake."

Flash nods and before he leaves, he thumps me on the back and whispers, "Take care

of my little girl, Drake. I'm depending on you."

He leaves me feeling like the biggest asshole who ever lived and as he disappears into the darkness, Ryder fixes me with a hard glare.

"Anything to tell me, soldier?"

Fuck and double fuck. Of course he knows.

He leans against the wooden strut, holding the veranda up and I stand before him like a naughty kid caught stealing apples from the farmer's field.

"Imogen."

I don't know where to begin, and I sigh heavily. "I may have overstepped the boundary."

It's always best to come clean to Ryder. It's not worth hiding the gruesome facts, especially as it's obvious he already knows something went down.

He remains silent and I add, "How do you know?"

The fact I've admitted nothing is inconsequential. It's as if we are speaking telepathically as he shrugs. "You were uncomfortable around Flash. You told me yourself by your actions."

"Fuck."

I run my fingers through my hair and he adds, "Flash is so eaten up with concern he never spotted the signals. So, I repeat my question, do you have anything to tell me, soldier?"

“I like her.” I jump on the edge of the blade because it’s the honorable thing to do, and he is almost sympathetic as he smiles briefly.

“Like?”

“Really like.”

He almost smiles.

“And Imogen? Does she really like you, too?”

“Yes.” I swallow my fear and face him with honesty.

“We have agreed it’s not going anywhere. We can’t act on it because?—”

I break off and he huffs, “Because?”

“Because of who we are. She is one of our own and we don’t shit on our doorstep.”

Ryder surprises me by laughing softly. “So, tell me soldier, because I’m interested in your thinking. Why do you consider yourself unworthy of being with one of our own?”

If anything, I’m shocked into silence and he casts a look into the darkness where Flash disappeared.

“I’ve always warned the bikers off women under our care.

You are aware of that. It’s the honorable thing to do.

However, that shit blows up in my face most of the time and I have learned that you

can't fight a person's feelings, no matter how many threats are issued. ”

He peers at me with a frown.

“They have a habit of going there, anyway.”

I'm speechless as he lowers his voice. “Sometimes the best weapon to launch is the one with the most to lose. If you have developed feelings for Imogen, you are the best man to keep her safe.”

Ryder never fails to leave me speechless. His mind has always worked in mysterious ways, and it's almost as if he has planned this.

I finally find my voice and deliver it with a sigh. “I'm not sure Flash would see it in the same way.”

“He only wants what's best for Imogen and what is better than a Reaper?”

“You make a valid point.”

For the first time, I relax and as he slaps me hard on the shoulder, he growls. “You have one mission, soldier. Keep our girls safe, whatever that leads to. Just don't take on something you can't finish.”

His warning isn't lost on me. If I'm serious about Imogen, it's until she is done with me. I must be honorable in my intentions and accept it if it doesn't work out.

I nod, my gratitude shown in my relieved smile.

Ryder points to my car. “I'll be in touch.”

As I turn and walk away, I hold back my grin. Fuck Ryder King, how the hell does he do that? It's a skill I wish I had, but the most important thing is, I no longer need to hide from my feelings for Imogen and that is the greatest gift he could have given me tonight.

TWENTY

IMOGEN

Thank God for Frankie's brilliant flashlight as we make our way down the long, dark tunnel toward the riverbank.

It's interesting spending time with the siblings. Summer offers Frankie none of the reverence the others do, and it amuses me to hear them bickering.

"Fuck, Frankie, can't you install electricity down here or something? This place is creepy as fuck."

We are making our way down the tunnel shrouded in our black hooded robes, the gleaming gold masks hanging from our fingers. It's a relief not to wear them unless needed and I can't understand how the guys manage to chase their prey wearing this immovable object.

"I like it this way." Is his only reply and Summer turns to me and grins, the whites of her teeth gleaming in the darkness.

"So, how long do we have to stay there?" Summer grumbles and Frankie sighs.

"As long as it takes. Just enjoy the peace and quiet; you've got the easy job."

"Unless someone crawls out of the tunnel and falls into the freaking river."

I laugh softly as Frankie replies, “Then it’s a nice night for a swim.”

“If you imagine I’m going into that cesspool, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“What would we do if somebody does—go in I mean?” I ask, and Frankie shrugs.

“Say a prayer. How do I fucking know?”

“That’s your plan? Seriously, Frankie, God won’t help you. You’re too aligned to the other side to ask for his help.”

I chuckle softly as Frankie sighs in exasperation.

“It’s happened twice since we started running these challenges.

Siri attempted to swim to safety but was injured, so Jack helped her.

Then there was Karen, and Jesse used the boat to bring her to the other side.

She never fell in though, just stood on the riverbank and yelled for help.”

He adds, “But if you’re worried, there is a lifebelt a few steps away.”

“But the river is wide. How the hell do we throw it that far?”

Summer is ever practical, which is a great character trait of hers.

She plans absolutely everything down to the last detail and Frankie groans.

“Honestly, Summer, I haven’t commissioned a freaking risk assessment for every dumb fuck who falls into the river.

They know the score and wouldn't be in it if they didn't want to be claimed.

It's in the fucking title. The Claiming.

If they find themselves on the edge of the riverbank, they mostly crawl back inside, anyway. You have nothing to worry about."

"Well, if they do, you're facing Principal Constable to explain it."

Summer huffs and it strikes me how long Frankie's challenge has remained undetected from the teachers. It's astonishing really because if they were aware of what went on under the tunnels of Rockwell, I'm guessing this challenge would be banned.

We reach the end of the tunnel and I note some trees at the entrance. As we pass through them, I'm amazed to find we are standing a short distance away from the edge of the river.

"Well, fuck me."

Summer gasps and Frankie hisses, "Can the language, sis. Anyway, my job is done." He says over his shoulder, "I'll send Luca to get you when it's ended. Enjoy an hour or two of conversation. I'm guessing that's all that will happen, anyway."

As he leaves, Summer groans. "Just our luck to get the boring job."

She stares at the mask in her hand. "We should probably put these on. Though why we should is a mystery, because we're alone out here."

I stare around me at the darkness and shiver. "But what if someone comes past?"

“They won’t.” Summer shrugs as she pulls on the mask and I must admit it’s intimidating as fuck.

I do the same and we giggle as we regard one another and she points to the bank by the river.

“Let’s make ourselves comfortable. At least I brought supplies.”

She chuckles as she reaches inside her robe and drops a small rucksack onto the ground, and proceeds to pluck two beers from inside.

“A party for two.”

I grin as I hold the beer to my lips, the mask cut away at the mouth, enabling me to drink it.

“This is weird shit.” Summer giggles. “I must admit, I love how powerful I feel in this disguise. I could be anyone.”

“True.”

I agree with her. It’s almost comforting to be anonymous and as we settle down on the ground, she hugs her knees to her chest and says softly, “Tell me about you and Jesse. How’s it going?”

My stomach flips and I’m grateful for the beer.

“Okay, I guess.”

She must sense the reluctance in my voice and say sharply, “What’s he done?”

I wonder whether to confide in her about the night the sprinkler activated, but having already discussed it with Drake, I decide to keep it to myself.

“I’m not feeling it, Summer. I hoped The Claiming would bring us closer but it’s not happening, for me anyway.”

She places a sympathetic hand on my arm. “I’m sorry, honey, that sucks.”

“Not everyone is as lucky as you.” I shrug. “It sucks seeing you all so happy, though. The Claiming worked out for all of you, but I can’t find the same happiness with Jesse. Do you think it’s because of his, well, problem?”

We are all aware of Jesse’s fascination for our former teacher, and Summer sighs heavily. “Did you know he is still seeing her?”

“Yes.” I admit sadly and Summer hisses.

“It’s a fucking disgrace. You shouldn’t have to put up with this. He’s gone against the rules and if I were Frankie, I’d toss him in the cells to rot for the duration of the semester.”

I love how defensive she is on my behalf, and yet I only have compassion for Jesse.

“I blame myself if I’m honest.” I admit and she growls, causing me to chuckle softly. “No really. I mean, if I was, well, giving him what she obviously is, he wouldn’t have the need to go there. Perhaps I’m the problem, Summer.”

“No fucking way Imogen, and stop being such a doormat.” She says furiously, “Jesse’s problems are of his own making and nothing to do with you.”

If he was fantastic, you would be all over him like a rash.

No. it's obvious you're not into him and I don't blame you.

Leave it with me, I'll have a word with my brother.

He'll get you out of it and if he refuses, I'll slice his balls off in his sleep. ”

“Summer!” I can't help laughing out loud. “You're so fierce, he should be very afraid.”

“You know it.”

She chugs some more of her beer and groans. “Do you think they've started yet?”

“Doubtful.”

She leans back on the grass, a strange sight in her golden mask and hood.

“This is gonna be a long night.”

“Hey, girls.” Before the final word even registers, the familiar voice is behind us and as I turn, I note the centurion standing close by.

“Jesse.”

I gasp, now concerned that he picked up our conversation, and Summer says quickly, “What are you doing here?”

“I came to spend time with my girl. You can swap with me, Summer.”

“No way. If you believe I'm walking through that tunnel alone, you're joking, and I'm definitely not haunting the woods like a crazy ghost from the past alone.

Anyway, I thought you was on cell duty?”

“Frankie changed his mind, and I decided Imogen was better company than Luca, so if you don’t want to spend time with your guy, I’ll leave you to inform him of that.”

Jesse has said the magic word because the idea of being with Luca is an offer she couldn’t resist if she tried, no matter how close we are as friends.

Jesse adds, “I’ll walk you back through the tunnel and Imogen can wait here for me.”

I’m not certain that’s a good idea knowing what Jesse is being groomed for, but I comfort myself knowing that he would never survive if anything happened to the most protected girl on campus.

If Frankie didn’t get him, Luca surely would.

However, she surprises me by saying roughly, “Fuck off, Jesse. I want to be with Imogen and enjoy some downtime from the guys. It’s only two hours at the most, for christ’s sake, so thanks, but no thanks. ”

Jesse is surprised as he stutters, “But—”

“But nothing. No thank you.”

Summer effectively ends the conversation, and Jesse sighs. “Fine. Have it your way.”

He turns his attention to me and, leaning in, whispers, “We’ll catch up at the party afterwards. Don’t go anywhere. We need to talk.”

I nod, glad of the mask that is covering my face because if he could see behind it, he would know in a heartbeat that a word with him is the last thing I want.

As he heads off, I whisper, “Do you think he heard us talking about him?”

“I’m not sure, but I wasn’t taking any chances.”

“What do you mean?”

She lowers her voice. “After our conversation, I wasn’t going to turn my back and leave you with him.

If he is playing away with Jenna Sloane, he doesn’t get the perks of alone time with you.

He will have to work harder than that on my watch, so honey, drink up because there are plenty more beers where that came from. ”

I laugh out loud as she rummages in her bag and pulls out two more beers and as we settle down for the long wait, I am more than happy it is Summer sitting beside me rather than Jesse.

TWENTY-ONE

DRAKE

I breathe a little easier from my vantage point in the trees when I see Jesse head back the way he came. Watching the two girls chugging beers wearing the sinister costumes is a glorious sight to behold.

It amuses me to picture the challenge they enact every Friday night throughout the semester.

It's an interesting one for sure, and when Ryder told me about it, I could tell he didn't share my amusement.

Jack came clean about a lot of things relating to life at Rockwell and, if anything, I admire Frankie's imagination. It's pretty harmless unless you count the first one, when one of the female challengers was abducted by a member of The Serpent Society.

Jack assured Ryder that Frankie had stepped up security, and it appears to have worked because there have been no other incidents since the inaugural one.

It appears that centurions are recruited from Frankie's select band of the chosen and I'm not surprised that Summer and Imogen were given the riverbank.

When Jesse attempted to take Summer's place, I held my breath because watching Imogen make out with another guy was a sick scenario I'm not certain I could

stomach.

I even formulated an intervention plan where I would casually jog past and question their costumes. However, I settle back in my virtual cage as I notice Jesse slink off back down the tunnels.

Ryder studied the blueprint of the tunnel network and I have also memorized every twist and turn just in case I'm needed. Security has already been set up by Frankie and I must hand it to him he does all the right things in caring for the people he loves.

After the first challenge, when a girl was abducted through the tunnels, they were discovered and steps taken to make certain it never happens again.

However, if I was planning any dark deed, the tunnels would be my first choice.

Imogen's soft laughter floats toward me on a breeze, causing me to smile softly. Ryder's acceptance of the situation is one huge step, but Flash may have other ideas.

We are good friends that will count for shit when he learns of my interest in his daughter, and I must be respectful of that.

It's probably best to leave our involvement right where we left it and revisit it when the dust has settled and Imogen is back at the compound, away from Rockwell and making decisions for her future.

A future that may not include me .

Two hours pass without incident and I see another centurion head out from the tunnel with a flashlight. The girls follow the light and as they disappear into the darkness, it's as if they were never here.

Part of me wants to race after them and break up the party that always happens after The Claiming ceremony. Jesse will waste no time in hitting on Imogen and I must swallow my aversion to that and trust that she can take care of herself.

With a sigh, I dust myself off and start to jog the way I came and as I near my house, I groan when I register Principal Constable waiting on the veranda.

She calls out as I approach. “Drake, at last.”

“I’m sorry. Did we have a meeting planned?”

She shakes her head. “No, but I was at a loose end and wondered if you fancied grabbing a drink in town.”

Fuck, this is all I need and my mind races to come up with an excuse.

“Sounds good, but I’m meeting—”

“Sonia.” She adds, and I smile apologetically.

“Yeah, she’s in town and I’m meeting her there.”

“I see,” Principal Constable huffs with frustration.

“Never mind, but before you go, I really could use a word.”

“Sure.”

I join her on the veranda and she leans back on the seat, my heart sinking when I realize how close that will make us. Sitting here with Imogen was a pleasure. I can’t say the same about Angela Constable.

She moves even closer and lowers her voice.

“Drake, I um—” She giggles nervously. “It’s, well, a little delicate.”

I really wish I was anywhere else but here right now, and she shifts closer, her hand resting on my bare knee.

“We work well together.”

She states a fact that isn’t one, and I wonder where she’s going with this.

I say nothing and she whispers huskily, “It can get kind of lonely stuck in the academy away from our loved ones and sometimes it’s important to form connections with the other members of staff.”

“Connections?”

Her finger draws circles on my knees and I shift uncomfortably.

“What I am about to tell you must remain confidential, Drake, even if you decide it is not for you.”

“I’m listening.”

She whispers, “A few like-minded teachers have formed a club if you like, one with an exclusive membership. The only requirement is an open mind, and I am here to extend that invitation to you.”

My heart thumps as she prepares to deliver the invitation, and she says in a low husky voice, “We meet every Friday night in my suite of rooms. It’s the only place we are guaranteed our privacy.”

She increases the pressure on my leg, her nails scratching against the skin, sending a prickle of revulsion through my entire body.

“There are no strings attached to membership. No judgment and no questions asked, just pure fun and what happens in those rooms stays there. It has no bearing on any academy business but can offer a few benefits to your professional life. Club members stick together and I am here to issue you an invitation to become one of them.”

I take a deep breath. “What does membership involve?”

She leans closer, her lips hovering at my ear. “You’re a grown up, Drake. What do you think it involves?”

I swallow hard.

“There are seven of us. There were eight but Miss Sloane, as you know, left the academy and hasn’t been replaced. After consulting with my fellow members, we were unanimous in selecting you.”

She smiles provocatively. “An equal number of men and women. You get the idea, although I would also suggest an open mind is a requirement, as a person’s sex doesn’t really feature in our pursuit of, shall we say, satisfaction?”

I say nothing because what the actual fuck? A swingers club in the principal’s apartment wasn’t high up on my priority list and I struggle to act interested.

“Who else is involved?”

“Does it matter?”

Fuck, yes, because if she considers I'd be content with screwing the old hag from the English department, she's got another thing coming.

Come to think of it, there is no member of the teaching staff I want to get up close and personal with, but Ryder's instructions ring in my ears when he told me to find out if there are any other teachers involved.

If they are, I'm guessing this club is the perfect place for them to practice their dark art and, for the first time since coming here, I regard the principal in a new light and something detonates in my mind.

Hidden in plain sight .

A prickle of apprehension passes through me as a million dots connect in my mind and when she whispers, "Are you interested?" I have no other choice but to bite the bullet.

"I'm interested."

She withdraws her hand from my knee and nods as if our meeting is concluded.

"We meet at nine, but as you have a prior engagement, you will be excused this time. So—" She stands and smiles suggestively.

"Next Friday, my apartment at nine pm. We will be expecting you and Drake—" Her eyes flash in the darkness.

"Be prepared for your initiation. It's rather fun actually and a pleasurable experience for all involved. "

As she heads down the steps, she flings over her shoulder, "Send my regards to

Sonia. I'd like to meet her one day."

As she wanders back into the shadows, my heart pounds as I consider what I just learned.

Could this be the breakthrough we need, or is it merely a group of debauched teachers attempting to claw some excitement back into their lives while they wait out the end of the semester?

I wish otherwise, but that club is one I must check out, no matter how much the idea appalls the hell out of me.

TWENTY-TWO

IMOGEN

Frankie leads us back down the darkened tunnel and I'm glad it was him who came to find us. I'm strangely nervous about tonight, and it's due to the fact I'm hating the idea of fending Jesse off.

If I'm honest, I wish I'd never agreed to help him. I never realized I'd be sacrificing part of my soul in the process, and meeting Drake demonstrated what happens when you meet a man you connect with on another level.

All we've done is kiss, shared a few conversations and many longing looks, but it's as if I have known him all my life and I'm guessing it's because he is one of us. A Twisted Reaper, and that settles my mind more than anything.

"Hey." Cassie is the first person we see as we make it out of the tunnel where the iron door leads into the tunnel chamber.

"How did it go?" Summer asks and Cassie grins.

"Five challengers claimed with no drama. Perfect really, because it means we get to party without having to deal with the shit that drama leaves.

"Were they happy with their pairings?"

I'm anxious about that because being chained to one person who you can't stand is a

lot to deal with. I won't say I can't stand Jesse, but I'm increasingly ambivalent toward him.

"I think so." Cassie shrugs. "There was a lot of giggling and flirtatious banter, so I'm guessing they're happy. I'm sorry you got the riverbank. Perhaps we should rotate next time."

We make our way back to the main chamber, which is always an experience because we must crawl through another tunnel with our robes and masks and it doesn't make it easy.

When we enter the main chamber, the others are disrobing and hanging up their masks, and Jesse heads straight for me.

"Hey baby, I missed you."

"Same." I force a smile on my face as he slings his arm around my shoulders.

"At least we have the party tonight and I'm going to devote all of my attention to my pretty lady tonight."

Cassie chuckles beside us. "I'm sure that's not all you'll devote to her."

I cringe as Jesse's eyes flash. "You'd better believe it. Getting time alone with this babe is increasingly harder, so forgive us if we're a little unsociable tonight."

He winks, and I shrivel up inside.

Frankie joins Cassie and immediately takes her hand. I envy them as she gazes up into his eyes and a silent message passes between them. Despite my wish she was with Jack, I must admit they suit one another. The same for Siri and Jack, and yet I'm

struggling with my own pairing.

We head off to The Elusive House that has become home in a short period and as we walk, Jesse whispers, “I meant what I said back there. I want some alone time with you tonight, babe. I mean, I’m guilty of neglecting you and that stops now.”

“Why now?”

My ears prick up and his eyes gleam in the darkness as he whispers, “Because it was brought to my attention that I’m a shit boyfriend and you deserve better.”

“By who?”

“Jack.” He rolls his eyes. “He warned me that unless I was serious and devoted all of my attention to you, he would arrange our twist ceremony personally and it would be a premature ending.”

“Jack did?”

My heart sinks. I understand why he did it.

He is trying to save Jesse from Jenna Sloane and that was always the plan, anyway.

Be coupled up with me to distract him from her and because I liked Jesse and wanted to help, I agreed willingly.

The trouble is, I never thought it through, and now I’m fending him off, wishing it was someone forbidden in his place instead.

I refuse to think of Drake in that way anymore. He made it clear our involvement must remain strictly professional from now on, and I must remember he is here to do

a job. Now that job is on my list, so I smile. “I’d like that. I haven’t seen much of you since, well—”

“Movie night.” He reminds me of how we left it before the sprinklers rained on our parade.

“I’d like to revisit that night, Imogen. If you agree, that is.”

I say nothing because we reach the house, but my mind is frantically working out ways to deflect that activity from his mind.

It’s inevitable he wants a more intimate relationship—all the other couples fell into it as naturally as breathing, but it’s a lot for me to agree to.

Jesse would be my first and I never imagined my first time as a favor to my friends.

It doesn’t take long for the beer to flow and the music to thump and soon we are partying hard. Relieved another challenge was successful. There is always a risk we will be discovered and shut down and it intrigues me why that hasn’t happened—yet, anyway.

Luckily, the guys all drift into a corner to chug beer, leaving the girls to congregate outside on the comfortable seats set around the fire pit.

We’re not alone as the couples from The Claiming get to know one another better and tuck themselves away to make out and talk about what just happened in the dungeon.

“So, tonight’s the night.”

Siri fastens her curious gaze on me and the others lean in with interest.

“So it would seem.”

I don’t even pretend to be dumb about her meaning and Cassie says anxiously, “You don’t seem happy about that, Imogen. You can say no.”

“I know.” I sigh. “To be honest, I probably will. I’m just not ready for it.”

“I’d be the same.” Summer speaks up. “I mean, any guy who disappears off to meet another woman doesn’t deserve the benefits of being with a girl like Imogen.”

“Is he still sloping off?” Siri’s eyes widen. “I thought Jack warned him about that.”

“He did.” I sigh. “Jesse told me and said that from tonight I would get his complete attention.”

“What does that mean?” Siri gasps and Cassie’s eyes flash.

“It either means that Jenna Sloane is out of the picture or that Jesse is.”

She leans forward and lowers her voice. “He may have had a change of heart. They could have fallen out, she is done with him, or he woke up and discovered he wanted out. Whatever happened, it sounds as if she is out of the picture—for now, anyway.”

“So our plan worked?”

Siri smiles. “We saved him from her.”

I’m uneasy and don’t share their enthusiasm, and Summer obviously agrees with me.

“I don’t buy it.”

We turn to her.

“It’s a sudden change of heart which tells me it’s a forced one. Something has obviously happened between them, but it doesn’t necessarily mean that she is out of the picture. I’m with Imogen on this. Make him wait until you are ready and not because he is.”

Cassie nods. “Of course. It should only happen if it’s the most important thing in the world to you because sex with someone isn’t to be taken lightly and I agree with Summer. Jesse doesn’t deserve you—yet, anyway.”

“But what will I say to him?”

Silence falls on the group as we struggle to come up with a plan, and Summer groans. “This sucks. Poor Imogen.”

Cassie’s eyes flash as she says fiercely. “Imogen can stand up for herself and we are all under the same roof and just a yell away. Mind you, I doubt if Jesse knows Imogen is a bad ass and can defend herself if necessary.”

I think back on the night Jesse almost forced himself on me and vow not to be in that same vulnerable position again and I smile. “I’ll be okay. Nobody is going to force me to do anything. I can look after myself.”

There’s an uneasy tension surrounding us as the others face what I’ve known for a while now. In saving Jesse, I may lose myself in the process and I’m not sure if I’m prepared to do that.

We chat some more and soon the others drift inside to find their men, and Jesse heads out to join me.

“Hey baby.” He drops into the seat beside me and tilts my face to his, dropping a lingering kiss on my lips and then whispering, “I want to be alone with you.”

My stomach churns, and I heave a sigh.

“Not yet.”

“Why not?” His eyes widen and I take his hand.

“I have questions.”

“Go on.”

I stare at him to read his expression and detect a weariness behind his smile that he attempts to disguise with banter.

“What’s going on Jesse?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Where do you go when you duck out?”

It’s the first time I’ve asked this question, and it obviously catches him by surprise.

“I don’t understand.”

I smile gently. “It’s obvious you’re not really into me. I mean, if you were, you wouldn’t be missing most of the time and I’ve, well, I’ve heard rumors.”

“Tell me.”

I can tell he is shutting down behind a solid wall of self-preservation as I attempt to slide my foot inside before it closes on me.

“I know about Jenna Sloane, Jesse.”

I decide confrontation is the best form of defense and his eyes widen.

“What about her?”

“You’re involved with her.”

I state it in the present term as a test and if anything, a moments panic enters his eyes and then he huffs out a breath of despair.

“I’m sorry, Imogen. I wasn’t aware that you knew about her.”

His mouth sets into a grim line. “Who told you?”

“Everyone.”

He shakes his head as I add, “Except you.”

“You deserve an explanation.”

I’m surprised when he admits that and he jerks his thumb at the academy. “I’ll tell you, but not here.”

My nerves flutter inside me because this isn’t what was agreed. I must stay within shouting distance at all times, and yet Jesse is offering information that may help Drake.

In a second's decision, I nod. "Sure, but we stay out in the open and take a seat by the fountain."

"You have nothing to fear from me, Imogen." He appears almost hurt by that and if anything, it helps relieve my anxiety.

"I know, but I've always found fresh air, privacy and common ground is the best place to have a serious conversation."

"I guess."

Jesse stands and offers me his hand and as we head off to the fountain, I wonder what he is about to say.

TWENTY-THREE

DRAKE

I'm caught between a rock and a hard place because lying to Angela means I can't stay here. I told her I was heading to town and if she sees my car she'll realize I was lying.

With a sigh, I grab my keys, intending to drive around the block and park it somewhere before heading back to be here if Imogen needs me. It's torture knowing she is currently with him. Jesse. The same man I must protect her from.

As I head to my car, I glance in the direction of The Elusive House and torment myself with images of them making out inside.

It doesn't take long to stash my car on a side road and jog back to the academy, slipping inside the perimeter without being detected by the security cameras.

If Angela studies the cctv footage, she will see me leaving but not returning until morning.

The perfect alibi ensuring I avoid unwelcome questions.

As I hug the shadows, I make out a couple sitting on a bench by the fountain and my heart stills when I note how familiar they are.

Fuck.

I blend back into the shadows and stand still, watching them, grateful for the opportunity to be on hand if she needs me, but hating the possibility of watching them make out before my eyes.

It's obvious they are having a serious discussion and then I'm distracted as my phone lights up with a call from Imogen herself.

I glance over and note her listening intently to Jesse and as I answer it, it's his voice on the other end.

I press the receiver to my ear and listen in, my mouth twitching as I realize exactly why Imogen should never be underestimated.

This is a classic Reaper move, and she has learned her craft well and as I settle down on the floor, I prepare to listen to a conversation that may reveal another piece of the puzzle.

"It's been a lot to deal with, baby."

He sighs heavily.

"When Jenna first showed an interest, I was merely in it for the kick. I heard stories of Frankie's father and uncle screwing a teacher in the supply cupboard and I wanted that on my resume, I guess."

Fuck, why not tell it to her straight and leave out none of the gory details? Jesse is sinking lower in my estimation with every word he speaks.

"It didn't take long either."

Imogen is silent and Jesse falters a little in his speech.

“You, well, you probably hate me for admitting it, but I want to be honest with you.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

Imogen’s voice is soft and forgiving and despite the situation, I smile to myself. She always tugs that reaction from me because she is the kindest soul I have ever met, aside from Ashton, Ryder’s wife.

“I didn’t expect what happened.”

He falls silent and I flick my eyes to the scene and note he reaches for her hand and my chest tightens.

“It soon spiraled into a crazy, destructive path I wasn’t prepared for.”

He heaves a huff of frustration. “She fed me drugs in my drink, forced me into situations I would never have done had I been conscious, and then threatened to leak the videos online if I told anyone.”

“Jesse, I..,”

“It’s okay, baby, I should have been stronger, but every time I attempted to cut ties, she came up with another threat. Soon, she controlled me, calling me to her home, plying me with drugs and, well, using me for sex.”

“Using you?” Imogen’s voice shakes. “But you could have said no, walked away, surely.”

“Not when you’re as high as a kite and desperate for more. Not when you are so addicted to what she’s providing, you can’t even think straight. The most shocking thing of all was how quickly it happened. What started out as a kick soon became an

obsession.”

They fall silent and I notice Imogen reach up and stroke his face and I can only imagine the caring smile she is giving him right now.

Jesse leans into her hand and whispers, “I tried so many times to break the tie. To ignore her calls, to tell her I was done and to threaten to expose her myself. That one worked well.”

His laugh is bitter. “She played her trump card.”

“Which was?”

“Threatening to tell my folks.”

He falls silent and slumps forward, his forearms resting on his knees as Imogen pats him reassuringly on the back.

“I’m not sure who I’m more afraid of. Jenna Sloane or the place I call home.”

“Tell me about that?” Imogen’s question is encouraging, and he groans.

“I told you how it is. When I graduate, I must marry a local girl and work a farm for the good of the community. I will only receive a standard wage for my efforts and it’s a lifetime commitment.

Do you know what’s it like to face years of hard labor with little reward?

To lie with a woman chosen for you by the town council and produce no more than two children. ”

“Why only two?”

“Because it’s all that’s allowed.”

“What happens if more than two come along? I mean, twins or triplets or just a mistake?”

“You don’t want to know.”

My blood chills as Imogen’s voice falters. “I do.”

Jesse’s voice is delivered wrapped in steel as he scoffs, “They are sold at auction.”

Imogen’s shocked gasp spears my heart and my anger is sharpened as I imagine the scene played out several times over the years.

Couples forced to give up their babies with no say and a lifetime to wonder if they are even alive.

It’s sick as fuck and a small part of me understands exactly why Jenna Sloane targeted him.

He has nothing to lose and everything to gain and is the perfect student.

“Did you tell Miss Sloane this?” Imogen voices my thoughts, and it strikes me at how in sync we are.

“Yes.” Jesse’s voice is loaded with regret.

“We talked about it a lot. She was appalled, devastated for me, and told me she would help. That she knew a man who could help me and to leave it with her to arrange a

meeting, if I was up for it.”

I stiffen as the picture enlarges to reveal another image and Jesse hisses, “It turns out the man she was referring to was an even bigger monster than the one I am running from.”

“In what way?”

“If you think Jenna is depraved, allow me to introduce you to Christian Duprey.”

Thank God I am recording this call because Ryder will be extremely interested in this.

Imogen asks, “Why, what happened?”

“I’m sorry, baby.” Jesse heaves out a sigh. “I really don’t want you to hear any details about that man. Just understand I am no longer interested in his solution, Jenna’s help, or any of the sick games they play. I’m out and—”

He falters and my heart lurches when he turns to her and cups her face in his hand and stares into her eyes.

“I want you, Imogen. I want to be the college guy who has the hottest girl on campus. I don’t want the dried up old hag with a deviant mind or the future I am destined for.

I want an uncomplicated relationship and the freedom to make my own choices after graduation, and so I’m drawing a red line in the sand and starting over.

I want to devote all of my time to us and being good enough for you, so please accept my apology baby and be sure that is all behind me now. ”

As I watch him kiss her softly, deeply and with more right than I have, a sudden pain spears me through the heart. Jesse is right. This is the time when their life should be easy, the only complication being the usual ups and downs of student life. Not this shit show that has exploded around them.

I am no better than Jenna Sloane because I am corrupting Imogen's mind. I have no right. In the eyes of Rockwell, I am her teacher and I should slot into that role and push aside my infatuation with her. Jesse was right when he spoke of obsession and Imogen is fast becoming mine.

The call ends, and it's the final blow to my heart.

She cut me off mid kiss with the guy she is chained to for the semester under the rules of their Claiming ceremony.

I understand exactly how it works and Jesse has more rights than me to be beside her now and if she is honest with herself, she will know that I am right.

TWENTY-FOUR

IMOGEN

We head back to the party a different couple than before. Jesse's arm is slung casually around my shoulder and we stop at intervals to snatch a cheeky kiss or three. This is the Jesse I am interested in. The irresistible cool guy with the smoldering grin and dusky eyes.

But it is too late.

That inner voice inside my head reminds me of another guy — sorry — man who has stolen my attention. Compared to him, Jesse is no competition at all.

Drake is everything I know and love coupled with an attraction I never saw coming and despite Jesse's confession, it doesn't change a thing.

I don't want this.

I don't want him, not in that way. As a friend—definitely, but I doubt that is on the playlist.

We head back to The Elusive House and before we head inside, Jesse stops and pulls me around to face him, a serious expression in his eye.

“Stay with me tonight, baby.”

I open my mouth with a negative reply and he clamps his hand over it and sighs. “I only want to hold you. To be close, to try to make up for the asshole I’ve been around you. Nothing more, just affection until you are ready.”

It would be so easy to say yes. To slip into his bed and snuggle up, loving being beside a man like him. If he had asked me last week, I would definitely have said yes, but nothing has changed since our conversation. He’s not the guy for me.

I blink and his hand leaves my mouth and I smile into his anxious eyes.

“Let’s take it one step at a time, Jesse. Tonight was the first one and I would rather see how things go after it before I allow myself to catch feelings.”

“I deserve that, I guess.” He shrugs, disappointment heavy in his eyes. “But I understand. I will prove that I mean what I say and back up my words with actions because I kind of know you’re worth the fight and you are right to be cautious.”

He plants a soft kiss on my lips, and it’s definitely not unpleasant. If anything, I would normally be ecstatic kissing a guy like him. The trouble is, when I close my eyes there’s another face smiling at me and until that changes I’m not adding a second one to stand beside him.

As soon as we step foot inside the house, the noise bangs against my eardrums, telling me it will be a long one tonight.

Sometimes the afterparty of The Claiming is a short one because the newly formed couples are more interested in spending time alone, as are the centurions who usually get off on the entire experience.

Cassie once told me she went to the tunnels with Frankie dressed as centurions, and they recreated the chase.

When he caught her, it was a different kind of claiming and it was evident she loved every second of it.

That's Cassie. A rebel with a big heart and she loves shit like this, which is why Frankie Majerio is perfect for her.

Jack is like me, easy going, true and loyal.

Not risk averse, but not risk takers. Rockwell has been good for Cassie, and I wonder what she would say if she knew of my experience here.

A lot, I'm guessing, and as she waves me over, I excuse myself from Jesse's side and oblige with a huge smile on my face.

"So?" Her impudent grin lights her eyes as she hands me a cold beer

I nod to the corner, the furthest one away from the speakers.

As we lean against the wall, I relay the conversation, and her eyes sparkle with relief. "Thank God. He's come to his senses at last. Good job, Imogen."

"Do you think?"

I'd like to agree with her, but I'm not as accepting of words as Cassie apparently is.

"He must be. He would be a fool to promise one thing and then do another. If anything, it's a relief knowing he won't be stealing off to Miss Sloane's house anytime soon."

I nod my agreement as Summer and Siri wander over.

Siri rolls her eyes. “The guys are shooting pool and have the beers lined up the length of the bar. It appears they are more interested in shooting those balls than their own tonight.”

Summer laughs out loud. “That’s not what Luca told me. In fact—” She glances at the time on her phone. “I have exactly thirty minutes before he wants me naked in his bed.”

“Gross.” Siri pretends to gag and I’m surprised at Summer.

I never had her down as the submissive type and she catches my concern and winks.

“That’s the easy part. Tonight, I have a notion to tie him up and have my wicked way with him.

Torture him a little for choosing the guys over me and ordering me around. ”

Siri nods emphatically. “You go girl, mind you—”

Her gaze drifts to Jack, who is currently bent over the pool table taking his shot and smiles dreamily. “Jack treats me with respect in every way. When I’m with him, I’m a princess. He is considerate attentive and—”

“Boring.” Summer yawns, earning her a sharp nudge in the ribs from Siri.

Cassie joins in the laughter. “So, we still haven’t fixed our idea for the prom. We should agree on a theme.”

“But—” I open my mouth to tell her we already have the theme and she holds up her hand.

“I mean, our theme. I’m thinking masked Roman goddesses. Bagsy Bellona.”

“Who is she?” Siri asks and Cassie grins.

“The goddess of war. Her main attribute is the military helmet worn on her head; she often holds a sword, spear, or shield, and brandishes a torch or whip as she rides into battle in a four-horse chariot.”

“Good luck recreating that.” Summer chuckles, “Although I’m jealous of the whip.”

Siri nods. “I’ll be Minerva. Another goddess of war who wins with strategy rather than force. She is multi-faceted, as she is also the goddess of wisdom, law, and justice and medicine. That’s a lot to occupy her time and I call that one.”

Summer shrugs. “Choose one for me.”

Siri grins. “What she means is, she knows fuck all about Roman goddesses.”

“Busted.”

This time Summer nudges Siri and they share a grin that has developed over years of friendship.

I think of one and add. “I say you’d be good as Nemesis. The Goddess of retribution, vengeance, and balance.”

“I like that.” Summer grins. “Sums me up nicely.”

They turn to me and Siri smiles. “Imogen is definitely Venus. The Goddess of love, beauty, and fertility.”

“Less of the fertility, please. I’m not ready for that.”

We share a collective grin as our theme has been set and Cassie smiles happily. “We should research the kinds of outfits they wore. Definitely gold masks and—”

“Not centurion ones.” Summer says firmly.

“No way.” Siri smiles enthusiastically. “I’ll get onto it. I can’t wait to trawl the internet. There are some cute ones on there—not that I haven’t already got several marked on my prom Pinterest board.”

“Then we’re all set.” Summer casts a longing gaze at Luca whose own expression, as he stares directly at her, would scorch the soul of the devil himself.

“So, that’s a wrap.” Summer raises her eyes. “Sorry guys, I must dash. You know, things to do, places to go and all that.”

As she leaves, Siri remarks drily, “More like one person in particular to do.”

We watch her leave, closely followed by her dark prince and Cassie’s eyes immediately swivel to Frankie, who nods his head in the direction of the stairs.

“That’s my cue.” She winks. “And I’m not talking about the one he’s holding, either.”

Another one bites the dust, leaving Siri gazing longingly at Jack and Jesse, who are still deep in conversation.

If anything, I’m glad about that and decide to make my escape and say apologetically, “Do you mind, honey? I’m beat and could use an earlier night than planned.”

“Sure.” She sighs, gazing around at the emptying basement. “I could do with some alone time. Jack knows where to find me.”

I don’t even explain my absence to Jesse and slip out before he notices I’m here at all and as I head up the steps from the basement, it’s not the ones leading to my room that I’m heading for now. It’s a different set of steps entirely.

TWENTY-FIVE

DRAKE

After Imogen left, I went home and forwarded the recording to Ryder. I hope he doesn't share it with Flash because hearing his daughter making out with the number one suspect would be a red rag to the bull.

I attempt to shift my mind away from what Imogen could be doing right now and take a cold shower and curl up in front of the television in an attempt to distract my attention.

Halfway through the movie, my phone lights up and I stare at Imogen's name on my screen. My heart nosedives because what if she's in trouble and I reply immediately, "Hey."

"Hey." Her soft voice melts my heart as I picture her soft smile and she whispers, "Can I come over?"

Fuck! My immediate response is hell yeah, but common sense overrides my wishes and I say guardedly, "It's not a good idea."

"Why not?" She sounds hesitant and probably imagines I'm here with another woman and I curse under my breath.

"We agreed."

“I want to discuss the conversation with Jesse.”

She adds in a whisper, “I don’t know what to do about him. He wanted to spend time together tonight in his room, but I made up an excuse and got out of it. I doubt I’ll be so lucky next time.”

I understand her concern and the idea of him placing any one of his hands on her rouses the jealous beast inside me, who is ready to spring with claws drawn where it concerns her.

“I see your predicament.” I groan inwardly, knowing that if she heads over here in the middle of the night, this won’t end well for either of us.

But I go there anyway.

“Sure. Just don’t be seen.”

“I’m already outside.”

I spring up and bolt for the door and as I open it, she shifts inside quickly, and I lock the door behind her.

All the lights are off in my house because of the lie I told Angela and so with only the moon to light her heavenly face, we face one another awkwardly.

“Thanks for the call earlier.”

I attempt to bring us on topic because fuck me, Imogen is worth dying for tonight.

Her bright blue eyes are sparkling and her blonde hair frames them like a silk curtain.

Her lips are parted in a smile and her willowy body looks good in a figure hugging dress that dusts just above her knees, silver sandals on her feet, revealing perfectly red painted toenails to match her fingers.

“You’re welcome.” She peers past me into the darkness and smiles. “I don’t suppose we could take a seat. It would be good to talk about that conversation.”

“Sure.” I stand to one side and allow her to pass and as she heads into the living room, she perches on the edge of the couch and I swear my testosterone levels are maxed out.

I take the seat opposite and lean forward, my arms resting on my knees as I face her, wishing like hell I took the seat beside her.

“What did you make of his conversation?” She asks with concern, and I shrug.

“He seemed genuine enough, but you were right to insist on actions rather than words.”

“It was the only excuse I could come up with.”

“You needed an excuse?” I raise my eyes. “If you’re not feeling it, darlin’, tell him. You should never do anything you’re not one hundred percent certain of, no matter how they sugar coat the offer.”

She nods. “I kind of already made that decision, but Jesse may call my bluff. There may come a time when my excuses run out and I hate stringing him along like this.”

“You’re not stringing him along. He made his bad choices and is having to live with that now. No man should ever expect a lady to do something she isn’t sure about.”

“So, I’m a lady now.” She raises her eyes. “I kind of like the sound of that.”

“You should. You deserve the title.”

I jerk my head toward the kitchen. “Fancy a coffee? There’s some in the pot.”

“Sure, thanks.”

As I head into the small kitchen, she follows me in and now we’re in a smaller space, my senses are on red code danger.

I detect her light fragrance following me as I pour us two mugs and as I hand her one, our fingers touch and it’s as if lightning strikes my soul.

Her eyes widen as she stares at me with an expression of desire and I groan inside at how unfair life is sometimes.

Ryder’s statement plays on repeat in my mind as he almost gave me the green light to dive a little deeper but his word is one thing, however, Flash’s anger will be another if I even lift a hesitant finger toward his daughter.

“Drake.” The soft use of my name curls around my heart with pleasure and she whispers, “I don’t want Jesse. I want—”

She blushes, and it’s so god-damned fucking adorable I almost break the mug in my hands as my fist clenches it hard.

“You.” Her lashes flutter as she peers from under them and whispers, “I’m sorry if that makes you uneasy, but I couldn’t leave what happened in the car. I can’t get it out of my mind, and I suppose it was the main reason for rejecting Jesse.”

I should shut this down. Walk away. Tell her to leave and revert to business, but seeing Imogen standing in my kitchen, staring at me with those soul-filled eyes, takes my doubts and tosses them out of the window.

I set my mug down.

She sets her mug down.

I take one step toward her.

She takes one toward me.

As we meet in the middle, I reach out and curling my hand behind her head, I pull her closer, my eager lips settling on hers.

As they connect, I swear a dozen shooting stars explode in my mind and her soft moan escapes into my mouth, firing up my libido like a lit match on a can of gasoline.

With my other hand, I pull her in closer, my hand resting on the small of her back as I deepen the kiss, her body closer to mine than it has ever been.

She kisses like an angel and I am definitely not worthy of being the recipient, but as I savor the moment, no doubts remain in my mind.

TWENTY-SIX

DRAKE

I can't believe she's here. That she made the first move and laid out her wishes like a petulant child.

She wants me.

Nothing is clearer in my mind and I'm aware of the risks involved but kind of think she's worth all that.

My reaction encourages her to be bolder and as she slides her hand under my t-shirt, it rests on my firm abs, causing me to groan out loud.

I pull away and stare into her eyes, a flash of determination in mine, and she gasps, "Please, Drake. I'm beg—"

I shake my head, fire lighting my eyes. "Never beg me for anything, Imogen, because I would give you the world willingly."

I crush my lips to hers and push aside common sense. Fuck being respectful. There is no man who would treat this woman better than I can.

Lust mixes with protective instinct and I push her against the counter, demolishing her lips like a crazy maniac. Nothing feels wrong about this—at all, and I go with my gut instinct and demonstrate exactly what happens to the woman I can't shake from

my heart.

She kisses me back with equal passion and as my hand slides under her dress, it rests on her thigh, not daring to presume to go any further.

She shivers against me and whispers, “I’ve never—”

“I know, and you don’t have to now. It’s your choice.”

“I want to.” She pulls back and stares into my eyes and smiles and any last remaining doubts are pushed firmly aside.

“If we only get one night, this is the one. I want it to be you, Drake, and the conversation was merely an excuse.”

I admire her bravery and yet her smile quivers as uncertainty creeps in and I shake my head, her brilliance dulling a little as she senses a refusal.

But I can refuse her nothing and so I take her hand and press it to my heart and stare deep into her eyes and whisper, “Tell me to stop at any time and I will.”

She nods, tugging her bottom lip into her teeth, and I cup her face and reassure her. “I’ll be gentle, darlin’.”

“I know.”

I clasp her hand in mine and pull her from the room into the darkened bedroom illuminated by moonlight. I turn to face her and as she holds my gaze, she shimmies out of her dress, the fabric falling to the ground in a heap, revealing a set of black lingerie that causes my eyes to pop.

“Fuck.”

My low whistle commands my cock and as I shrug out of my sweatpants, her eyes widen at the sight.

“Fuck.” She repeats my words back at me and then smiles and it’s as if an angel lights the room with the halo surrounding her.

My angel. My gorgeous angel and one of cupid’s arrows spears me directly in my heart.

I cross the room and pull her against me, dipping my lips to her neck, sucking and savoring innocence in all its glory.

Her small moan spurs me on harder and as I transfer my attention to the swell of her breast, she mewls like a kitten.

With practiced ease, I slip off her bra and tug down her panties, dropping to my knees.

Her fingers tangle in my hair as I inch her thighs apart and lick her clit softly, loving the first taste of my woman.

It’s a honey I could get addicted to, and she parts her legs as I tease her clit, drawing out her innocence, claiming it as mine.

She holds tightly onto my head as I tease her into my submission and as her glorious honey coats my tongue, my deep groan informs her I am her servant now.

She shivers against me and I kiss my way up her body, fastening my lips to hers and as our tongues collide, I press her backward onto the bed. Positioning myself between

her thighs, my hand stroking her face as I stare deep into her eyes.

“Tell me to stop.” I almost beg her to save me from my imminent crime because tasting forbidden fruit is a delicacy I never appreciated until now.

“No.” Her eyes light with mischief. “I want you to make me a woman, Drake. It must be you.”

My cock twitches against her thigh and she smiles suggestively and reaches down, circling it with her fingers, applying enough pressure to drive any doubts from my mind. Then she cups my balls and squeezes them gently and whispers, “I’ve never done anything like this before and to be honest—”

She kisses me on the lips before saying, “I like it.”

With a groan, I reach for the condom on the bedside table and holding it up in front of her, I raise my eyes. “Last chance.”

“I stand no chance of ever saying no to you, Drake.”

The honesty in her smile is as damaging as in those baby blues and as I wrap my cock, I savor the moment as she gazes trustingly into my eyes.

“This may hurt.” I warn her and she shakes her head.

“It will hurt more if you don’t.”

Its enough permission for me to press the head of my cock against her virgin territory, and the sudden panic in her eyes almost makes me stop.

She must register the flash of concern on my face because she almost commands me.

“Do it, Drake. I’m not begging this time. I’m ordering you, soldier.”

Her irritated frown drags a chuckle from my lips as her sass overpowers me.

I say nothing and just ease in gently, allowing her pussy to settle around my cock and accept it on her terms. With every inch that invades her space, a gasp of longing tells me she likes it.

I more than like it. I am delirious with lustful celebration and as I push in harder, sheathing my cock to the hilt, her eyes widen and her skin flushes and her eyes glaze as my balls slap against her ass.

“Oh my god.” She gasps and I press down on her clit and start to move, watching her reaction, enjoying the moment when she learns what all the fuss is about. We move slowly as one person because that’s exactly how it’s felt since we bumped heads on the first day we met.

My cock is dancing in paradise as her body accommodates mine and we move together, our sweat acting as lubricant along with her honey.

I steal a kiss, tugging her lower lip into my mouth this time, biting down gently as I press down harder on her clit. She shivers against me, her small groan lighting a firework inside me and as it explodes in my mind, she pulls me in deeper.

“Harder.” She demands and as I pull out and then thrust in harder, suddenly and with force, she screams, “Drake! Oh fuck!”

Her nails claw my back as I ride her hard, shattering her virginity, marking the territory as mine.

In and out, hard and deep, I am giving my cock the dance of its life as I savor every

delicious moment of making this angel mine.

I'm not in battle now. I'm not slaying the enemy. If anything, it's the other way around and yet the adrenalin that shoots through my veins is more than any battle I've fought. Any enemy destroyed, or any friend saved. This is the ultimate in winning and I am in no hurry to stop.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:13 am

TWENTY-SEVEN

IMOGEN

I'm really doing this. We are really doing this, and it is every bit as amazing as I was led to believe.

As I hoped it would be, and I'm certain it's because of who I'm doing it with.

Drake is the only man I wanted to experience this with and as he moves inside me, I commit every sweet second to my memory.

He is everything I wanted and wished for and I can't believe I made this happen.

I am a woman now. His woman, for this moment, anyway. He may other ideas on that and as I kiss his shoulder that rests against my lips, I squeeze my eyes tightly shut as his cock claims my body as his. It didn't even hurt, not a bit, and I am in no hurry for him to leave.

"God, you feel good." He groans as he pushes in harder, his sweat clinging to mine, signifying the best workout of my life.

"I love this, Drake." I admit, no shame here. That lies in tatters on the floor along with my drenched panties.

He pulls away and gazes down at my heated face and whispers, "You are so beautiful, angel. I love being inside you."

“You’re welcome.” I smile and his eyes glaze with lust as he rocks gently inside me, reminding me who’s in charge of this body now.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No” Leaning forward, I kiss him slow and lingering, driving a deep groan from inside him as I stroke his face.

It’s an intimate act that complements the sexual one, telling him I accept him unreservedly and have no regrets—never any regrets.

A building pressure flutters inside my soul as he pushes in and out, back and forth, commanding my clit with his rough fingers.

The body flush against mine has been sculpted from battle and bears the scars along with the inked on memories.

His stubbled jaw scratches against my smooth skin and his dark turbulent eyes glare into my soul with the promise he is in charge.

Every nerve ending is dancing to his tune and as he works his magic, it’s as if I am floating on a cloud, delicious sensations powering through me as a sudden burst of heat explodes inside me.

His name is on my lips as I surrender to a man I am so not done with yet.

“Fuck.” His tortured groan meets mine on its way down and with one last gigantic thrust he roars, “Fuck, Imogen, that is so fucking good.”

Hearing him call out my name as he explodes inside me is like nothing I ever imagined. It’s empowering and knowing I have given him pleasure means a lot.

As we come down, we lie close, our bodies relaxed, burning with the effects of the unexpected.

His heart beats against mine and reality bites.

I gave my virginity to a Reaper . A fucking god-damned Reaper and I wouldn't have it any other way. It was written in the stars and caused a planet to explode and as he stares with concern into my eyes, I reassure him with mine.

“Thank you.” I whisper shyly as he lies flush against my sweat-soaked body.

“I should be thanking you.”

He grins, which is a homecoming of sorts. I love how familiar he is. It's almost comforting and I ruin the moment by voicing my concerns.

“What happens now?”

A flicker of pain in his eyes causes my heart to drop, and he pulls me closer. “We get the job done.”

He reminds me why we're here and yet I add, “After the job. What happens then, Drake?”

He sighs and rolls onto his back, reaching for a tissue and wrapping his condom before tossing it into the bin.

“We'll figure it out, but darlin'—”

His expression is almost fierce as he whispers huskily, “This changes everything between us.”

“It does?” I’m anxious that I may not like what I hear, but I needn’t have worried because he says fiercely, “I’m not walking away from this, Imogen—from you, until you tell me otherwise.”

“Really?” I turn onto my side and gaze into his eyes. “This wasn’t the only time?”

He almost appears angry.

“Is that what you think? That I’m just out for a quick fuck?”

I shrug. “I wouldn’t blame you. I kind of tore your clothes off back there. You didn’t really have a choice.”

He laughs softly. “I like that you know your own mind. I want a strong woman to be by my side, and that position is yours for as long as you want it to be.”

“What are you saying, Drake?”

My eyes widen and he reaches out and runs his finger over my lips and fixes me with a firm, “I wanted this to happen even though it went against my moral code. If you even consider I did that lightly, you’re mistaken.

I wanted you, Imogen, from the moment we bumped heads and that hasn’t changed.

If anything, my infatuation has grown and now we’re in big trouble. ”

“My father?” My heart sinks. “I’ll talk to him.”

“No.”

He shakes his head before saying, “ I’ll talk to him.”

Fuck! This won't go well.

He sighs and appears almost resigned to the coming problems. His voice is sad as he pulls my face to his and grips it between his hands and whispers, "Even if I can't have you in the light, I will love you in the dark."

My eyes fill with desperate tears that he wipes away and smiles.

"As Ryder said—"

Wait, what? Ryder is involved in this and my expression must say it all because he chuckles, "We may be warned but when the heart wants something it kind of goes there anyway and after all, why wouldn't he be happy his girl is with a Reaper?"

"He makes a valid point."

I breathe a little easier.

"So, we're a team."

"You had better believe it."

"With a mission."

"With a mission."

We bump fists and for the first time I relax, wondering if this really will go the distance.

"So, what is our mission now?"

He pulls my head down onto his chest and kisses my head. “We wait for a bit and then I’ll show you what happens next. Sleep is overrated, anyway.

When the sun pushes the night away, I am almost sad. It’s the end of our beginning and yet hope is on the horizon.

I have no regrets as I head back through the trees.

The new day dawning lifting my spirits as I applaud the fact I took a chance last night.

It was almost an act of desperation because in talking to Jesse, it made me realize that life is too short to be dictated to by others.

To be controlled and forced down a path you didn’t choose.

I chose me last night and I chose Drake and I don’t regret a second of it.

Somehow, I manage to slip inside my room undetected and the first place I head to is the shower. It’s early but I’m too elated to sleep. What happened with Drake was life changing—for me anyway, and it’s as if a different person walked back in here.

When I’m clean and in a fresh set of clothes, I head to the kitchen for coffee and a snack. Sex sure makes you hungry and I almost float on air as I start a fresh day with more hope than yesterday.

By the time the first person surfaces, I have cleaned the kitchen, stacked the dishwasher and mopped the floor and as I’m fixing some breakfast, Santi wanders in bleary-eyed.

“What time is it?” He stares at me with concern. “Please don’t tell me I’ve overslept.

If I miss practice, the coach will haul my ass.”

“Relax.” I chuckle softly. “It’s seven and you’re up early, even for you.”

“Then why?” He appears puzzled as he notes the sparkling kitchen and the fact I’m fully dressed and ready.

“I’m an early riser.” I shrug and he rakes his fingers through his hair and groans.

“No wonder you don’t sleep with Jesse then. We’ll be lucky to see him before nine.”

My heart drops a little at the mention of the man I’m supposed to be sleeping with and yet I push it aside and say brightly, “Coffee?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

Santi sits at the counter and yawns loudly. “You know, I may take part in The Claiming myself if I get someone to make me coffee and breakfast.”

“I’m not making breakfast for Jesse. He can do that himself.”

“Seriously though, why did you enter?”

He fixes me with a sharp gaze, and it surprises me. Santi is a joker, the master of the ceremony, and that is all I know about him. He is also incredibly buff and underneath his lumberjack beard hides an extremely handsome face.

His question takes me by surprise and I consider my answer carefully.

“I like Jesse and suppose I couldn’t see myself with anyone else.”

“Cut the bullshit, Imogen.”

He stares at me with a hard expression.

“Jesse is a project, and nothing more. You think you can save him—from himself. It’s noble but foolish.”

I’m stunned because is it that obvious?

He sighs. “Listen, we all want to help Jesse, but I wouldn’t compromise myself to do it. Jesse is a big boy who can learn from his mistakes. You are not expected to sacrifice your time here at Rockwell for him.”

I’m surprised at the venom in his words and probe a little deeper.

“Why are you fired up, Santi? I thought he was your friend.”

“He is.” He slurps the coffee and I stare in wonder at the muscles that ripple on his chest as he stretches.

“Listen, don’t get me wrong, I get it. Jesse is a great guy with a lot of baggage. It’s admirable wanting to help him, but it isn’t your job.”

He leans on the counter, his gaze burning into me. “What do you want, Imogen?”

I shift on the spot, sure my cheeks must be on fire right now.

“To be happy, I guess.”

“Does Jesse make you happy?”

“Yes and no.”

I’m honest and he nods. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“Why do you care about my intentions, Santi?”

I’m curious why we’re even having this conversation, and he appears a little sheepish.

“It’s best you don’t ask.”

“But I have.” I fix him with a determined smile. “You asked me a question, now answer mine.”

He sighs heavily and bangs down the mug, standing and growling, “You may not like this answer, Imogen and Jesse definitely wouldn’t, but perhaps I’m pissed at you because I would kind of like the opportunity to get with you myself.”

He smiles ruefully and heads out of the room and tosses back as an aside. “And you’re wasting your time with Jesse. He’s screwed, and it would take an angel to save him.”

He leaves almost as quickly as he came, but my heart is racing as he leaves his intentions behind.

Santi likes me.

The biggest man whore in this house is pissed that he didn’t get his chance with me. I probably can’t take that declaration seriously because knowing him, one taste and he’d be hitting on the next in line, but something in his expression tugged on my heart.

We all want someone and perhaps his promiscuity is merely a cover for that. It's doubtful he will find it by fucking his way through the list, but I wonder if The Claiming is exactly what Santi needs.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:13 am

TWENTY-EIGHT

DRAKE

As weeks go, this one has been the best and the worst mixed with the indifferent.

I spend my time pretending to be an expert on history, which is something I never appreciated the art of before.

Faking a resume and a past comes easy for Ryder, which is how I got the job in the first place, but faking knowledge is a different thing entirely.

It helps that I studied history at college and did well at it. However, the military ended my interest in that and now I'm expected to be shit hot on the subject.

Then there's Imogen.

When I see her, I want her. When I don't see her, I'm thinking of her and worrying if Jesse has his hands on her. Since that night we haven't spent time alone and due to the nature of my mission, contact is limited.

It sucks being here knowing she is an arm's length away most of the time and it's difficult to conceal my feelings toward her when she sits in my class.

Then there's Angela. Fuck, that woman won't give it up. She's there when I head into the staffroom, the cafeteria, or when I head home in the evening. I've taken to spending most of my spare time at the gym because that's a place she rarely ventures

inside.

However, tonight is the night I've been dreading because it's initiation night, whatever that involves and as I can kind of guess, I'm prepared with my excuses.

She catches up with me in the staff cafeteria.

"Drake." She sits opposite and I instantly lose my appetite.

"Angela." I nod, remaining impassive as she openly flirts with me, batting her lashes and sucking in her lower lip. I'm guessing she has dressed provocatively to send a message and her silk shirt is low, revealing rather a large cleavage.

"Tonight."

Her voice drips suggestion and I remain impassive as I remark, "Tonight?"

I pretend to be clueless and then frown. "Oh, I remember. My bad, I'm so sorry Angela, I must meet Sonia. Maybe next week."

A flash of anger causes her to frown, and she shakes her head.

"That is not an option, Drake."

I'm surprised at the hardening of her expression and the steel in her voice.

"Excuse me?"

She shakes her head as if she's disappointed.

"We cannot conduct this conversation here. Please meet me in my office in ten

minutes. You may change your plans after that.”

She scoots back in her chair and stands, gazing at me with a strange gleam in her eye.

I’m surprised at the transformation because, after one refusal, she has morphed into a warrior.

The obvious displeasure on her face is matched by the angry gleam in her eye and I’m a little stunned because I never saw this coming.

As she leaves, she snaps, “Ten minutes, Drake. “

I watch her go and wonder what brought about the change and I can only think it’s because I mentioned the fictitious Sonia.

Somehow, my appetite has deserted me and so, with a sigh, I push my food away and reach for my water bottle. I may as well get this over with and something a lot like dread accompanies me out of the room.

When I reach her office, I take a deep breath as I knock and wait for her command to go inside.

I’m not nervous. I’ve faced worse, and if Ryder had looked at me in the same way, I would be fearing for my life as I wait for permission to enter.

However, this is Angela Constable, and I’m only mildly interested.

Whatever she has got to say is irrelevant anyway because as soon as this mission is a successful one, I will high tail it out of here and back to anonymity as soon as the red tape is tied up.

“Enter.”

Her abrupt command tells me whatever she’s got to say won’t be wrapped in the usual sugar and as I head inside, she peers at me and her lips are set in a thin line as she points to the chair opposite her desk.

“Sit down, Drake. This won’t take long.”

I face her, withholding my irritated sigh, and as she glances up, I detect an excitement in her expression that baffles me.

“You may want to reconsider your evening tonight because it comes with consequences.”

“I don’t understand.”

She toys with a folder lying on her desk and her smile is almost triumphant as she hisses, “I wonder if this is Sonia?”

She removes a photograph from inside and slides it across the desk toward me.

When I see the subject matter, my heart sinks. What the fuck!

It’s a photograph of Friday night. When Imogen came to the house and we spent it in my bed. I stare in horror at the photographic evidence of the two of us fucking and the blood must drain from my face because she laughs softly. “Who is a very naughty boy?”

I glance up and yet rather than be disgusted, she appears almost euphoric.

“This changes things, Drake.”

“In what way?”

I note several other pages inside the file and she taps her fingers on it almost triumphantly.

“It may surprise you to learn that this isn’t the first indiscretion I’ve dealt with at Rockwell.”

She leans forward, her cleavage accentuating the lines around her neck.

“It’s an occupational hazard, shall we say. Young, virile students are like a red flag to the teachers and the students are fascinated with an illicit tryst with their tutor.”

She laughs softly. “It was the same for Jenna Sloane, although she was fired because her indiscretions were beginning to shine the spotlight on the academy and we would all burn for her mistake.”

“All?”

She shrugs dismissively. “The members of my Friday night club are there for a reason, Drake.”

“What reason?”

“To pay for their mistakes.”

She pulls out another photograph of Imogen naked as I lick her pussy and she laughs. “I wouldn’t mind a go at her myself. She’s delightful.”

I feel sick as she says forcefully, “So, here is the deal. You continue your games with this young woman for all I care, but remember to be discreet. If I hear otherwise, your

days here are numbered. And in return for my silence and generous nature—”

She crosses her legs, her skirt high above her knees as she says seductively, “You join our club where the grown-ups play similar games, although a tad more depraved, if you get my meaning.”

“How depraved?”

I’m starting to question whether I overlooked something obvious the entire time. We believed Jenna Sloane was Christian’s recruitment officer, but possibly it was someone much higher up than that.

“You will discover that in your initiation ceremony. I’m certain Sonia will understand. If she exists, that is.”

I’ve got to hand it to Angela Constable. I definitely underestimated her, and she laughs softly.

“Oh Drake, your expression is hilarious. It’s okay, I’m not one to judge others of what I am guilty of myself.”

“You?” I raise my eyes.

“Yes, Drake. What goes on behind these doors would probably shock you even though you’re a man of certain tastes yourself.

It’s what transpires in my apartment during my Friday night club that would shock you more, so I’ll expect you on the dot and park your morals firmly outside the door. You won’t be needing them.”

As surprise attacks go, this one scored a direct hit and my mind races as I stare at the

folder on her desk. I wonder how she got the evidence and say carefully, “I have one question, Principal Constable.”

“Go on.”

“Who took the photographs?”

She shrugs. “We all guard our secrets, Drake. My spies are mine and will not be compromised. You see, I run my academy with no stone left unturned. Take the students as an example.”

“What about them?”

She grins. “They think they’ve outsmarted the staff. Their little challenge they run every Friday night in the dungeons, for one.”

I remain impassive, but my mind is racing. Fuck, she knows.

The dungeons always were my particular favorite part of Rockwell.

I enjoyed many exhilarating evenings there myself and understand its appeal.

I must hand it to Frankie Majerio though, the centurion costume is a pure stroke of genius, and when they located the tunnels that run underneath the academy, it did alter my plans a little. ”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

I play dumb and she shrugs. “We’ll run with that if you like, but understand one thing, Drake—”

She fixes me with an almost maniacal grin.

“Sometimes I like to play dirty and if the students ever get in the way of what I want, I dispose of the problem because protecting Rockwell and its secrets is what I do. It’s what lies within its walls under the cover of darkness when this place really comes alive.”

She studies her chipped nail varnish.

“You know, Drake, that girl in the picture really is beautiful. She was a virgin too, if I’m not mistaken.”

Cold knives press against every organ inside me as she says almost conversationally, “She would be the perfect pet to join us. Perhaps you will indulge me this once and bring me a sacrificial lamb to the slaughter to prove your allegiance?”

“And if I don’t.” I keep my expression impassive and my voice even, and she shrugs.

“Then we may just take her, anyway.”

She peers up at me. “Nine pm tonight, Drake. The students enjoy their game as we do ours. All occupied at exactly the same time, so our business remains secret. If they discovered that was the reason they remained undetected for so long, they would be shocked. Wouldn’t you agree?”

She glances down at the photograph and trails her fingers over Imogen’s body, licking her lips as she whispers, “Well done for bringing her to my attention. You will be rewarded for your service to my secret society.”

If I was waiting for the moment the penny dropped, this is it. I may finally have my lead and as my nerves scream at me to waste this monster now, I hold back and

prepare to deliver the intelligence to Ryder instead.

Principal Constable by day, a serpent at night, but is she the one really calling the shots, or is Christian, or somebody even more depraved than the woman who is expecting me at nine pm on the dot?

Even worse, she knows my Achilles heel and I'm fully aware that was her reason for mentioning Imogen.

Jesse must be one of her recruits and after one word from her, Imogen will be in danger and I'm the fucking idiot who put her there.

TWENTY-NINE

IMOGEN

It's the final Claiming ceremony before the prom and enthusiasm is high for the event of the semester.

As we walk to the dungeons, we chat with excitement about the event itself.

"I understand it will take place in the ballroom, also known as the gym." Summer remarks, and Cassie shakes her head.

"Apparently, it's being held in the great hall and they intend to provide break out rooms where students can relax, chat and eat?"

"It sounds cool." I say, loving the sound of it.

"Our costumes arrived today." Cassie nudges me. "Togas and golden masks. Mine has white feathers attached.

"I ordered gold ones." I remember, and Siri nods.

"I went with black and Summer chose white. At least we'll all be able to tell one another apart."

"True." Cassie grins. "Frankie and the guys are dressing as gladiators. I can't wait to see him. It will suit him."

“All of them. They’re certainly buff and could wrestle an alligator if they needed to.”

My attention turns to Siri, who smiles dreamily. “It’s so romantic. We get to dance and everything. They are even bringing caterers in and I was told the DJ is that cool one from the local radio station.”

“Who, Grayson Jones?” Summer’s eyes widen. “I love his show.”

“It will beat trudging through these tunnels for kicks.” She adds with satisfaction and Cassie chuckles.

“I don’t know, there is a certain appeal to this. I wonder if we’ll have any trouble tonight?”

“Who knows?”

We’re wondering because last time two centurions got into a fight over the same woman.

Luca and Frankie had to drag them apart and leave them to cool off in the cells.

The girls were pissed because it meant that two of them were out of the game and it got a bit heavy.

The girls are allowed back tonight, but the guys were put to the back of the line, so neither of them got the girl they chose in the end.

“Where are you tonight?” Cassie whispers, and I shrug.

“I’m with Jesse in the tunnel chamber. At least that’s what he told me.”

“But that’s where Siri and I usually are.” Cassie sighs and yells to Frankie, who is a few steps in front of us.

“Frankie, where are we tonight?”

“In my bed!” He calls back, and she yells, “You know what I mean. At the challenge.”

“Usual place.”

Cassie is confused. “You must have misunderstood Jesse, Imogen.”

I shrug. “Maybe. It doesn’t matter, anyway. At least I won’t be at the riverbank.”

Frankie drops back and immediately reaches for Cassie’s hand.

She smiles and once again I am stunned by her reaction to him. Her relationship with Frankie has surprised me more than anything because discovering she’s with a guy like Frankie would bring her father a swift heart attack.

Dark, dangerous and deadly, best sums up Frankie Majerio and the way he gazes at Cassie is nothing to how he looks at the rest of us.

Most of the time I’m scared to even look at him and along with Luca, they make a formidable pairing.

Summer and Cassie are probably the only girls in Rockwell who can handle them and, as my thought turn to Drake, I physically burn to tell Cassie my secret.

But I can’t.

I have sworn an oath of sorts, and it's our secret. Mine and Drake's, however, Cassie is my best friend, and I used to tell her everything. I almost hate what is happening because nothing is the same anymore and yet I wouldn't change a thing, anyway.

I wonder what Drake is doing tonight. I wish it was me and then a heavy arm lands around my shoulder and Jesse kisses me hard on the lips.

"Hey baby, tonight's the night."

"The last one. Before the prom." I add and he laughs out loud.

"If you like. Anyway, we are on tunnel duty."

"I thought Cassie and Siri had that position."

He winks. "I never said which tunnel."

A sense of apprehension passes through me as I consider being stuck in a dark tunnel with Jesse.

This isn't good—at all and I wonder if I should act.

Swap with someone perhaps, but then it would look suspicious.

I can't even call Drake because the signal doesn't work down here and the centurions rely on headsets rigged into a system that Ali set up to communicate.

At least we have those, so I relax a little and act interested.

"What tunnels?"

“The lower ones.”

I shiver, remembering our passage through them to the riverbank.

“Why there?”

“Because a challenger may find the secret trap doors and fall into them. Safety first baby.”

Santi calls out, “Jesse!”

He winks. “Duty calls. See you in the tunnels.”

As he leaves, Summer catches up with me. “I overheard what he said.” She frowns. “Are you okay with that?”

“I’m not sure.” I sigh. “He’s my guy, Summer. I shouldn’t be worried about being alone with him.”

“This is Jesse we’re talking about.”

“I’m aware of that, but I can’t keep on avoiding him or—”

“Sex with him.” She huffs, “Of course you can. Just because you’re a couple, it doesn’t mean you have to put out. He caught you—remember. It’s all on him to make you want to stick, not twist. If you’re not feeling it, tell Frankie and he’ll arrange a position for you somewhere else.”

“It’s fine.” I attempt to smile. “I’ll be safe and perhaps it’s what we need, anyway.”

The conversation ends as we reach the dungeon and as we head inside, a shiver of

uncertainty tells me that I'm not okay with this. I don't trust him and I certainly don't want to get close to him because my heart has left the building and is now living somewhere else.

Perhaps now is the time to break things off. To take a step back and tell him I'm not interested. It would be for the best and I'll just deal with the repercussions of that because I've never heard of a couple breaking up mid-semester who committed to one another at The Claiming ceremony.

This is a week of firsts I suppose, so my mind is made up. Jesse has already broken ties with Jenna Sloane, so I will be his friend but nothing else.

THIRTY

DRAKE

It's nine pm and my heart feels heavy as I head to Angela's apartment at the top of the academy's main building. More than anything, I'm curious to see who else might be there—this could be the breakthrough we've been waiting for.

I've already updated Ryder on the latest developments. He's doing his usual digging into her background, and I expect a report by morning. With any luck, I'll uncover more tonight and give him something new to work with.

I stop outside the door and, taking a deep breath, I knock, my heart heavy and my misgivings in place as I wait for the door to open.

It does, but the person operating it is standing behind it and as I step inside, it slams behind me.

I turn and a figure is standing there, dressed in a red cloak, a red mask placed across their eyes, effectively concealing their identity. The cloak is open at the neck and the naked body of a woman painted in gold causes me to do a double take.

She points to the room in front of us and as I turn, she follows behind and it's eerie as fuck. So much for identifying the other members if they are all dressed like this.

I enter the room and note several other similar figures surrounding the room in a circle. There is a gold throne set before the arched gothic windows with their leaded

panes. Candles are flickering around the circle where a rubber circular mat takes up space on the floor.

Angela herself is sitting on the throne completely naked. Her body is also painted but red instead of gold, a black mask adorned with feathers being the only addition.

“Drake.” She sounds amused. “Welcome to our club. You must forgive our appearance. Tonight is special because it’s your initiation ceremony. We don’t usually stand on ceremony unless an important occasion like this arises.”

She waves her hand, introducing the hooded figures.

“Your fellow members will welcome you. But first you must take off your clothes.”

Fuck, this isn’t good, and she considers me with an amused grin as I realize I have no other choice.

I unbutton my shirt and toss it to the side, focusing my attention on her as the tension increases in the room.

“I have questions.”

My voice is hard, demanding answers, showing none of the fear I should be experiencing right now. If Angela is part of The Serpent Society, or even the head snake herself, this evening will end very badly for me.

“You are allowed three questions. Choose them wisely.”

If anything, I’m surprised by that and nod.

“What if I don’t want to take part?”

She shrugs. "You are aware of the repercussions of that. I made it perfectly clear in our meeting earlier. If you value your job, you will play the game and, who knows, you may even enjoy it."

She leans forward and hisses, "Take off your trousers."

I rip the belt from my waist, holding her attention with my eyes and as my jeans drop, her eyes glitter with lust.

"Second question." I add as I stand before her in my boxers.

"What if I was leaving, anyway?"

She raises her eyes. "Then we persuade you to stay."

"How?"

"Is that your third question?"

I shake my head and she chuckles softly. "I'll allow it for free. If you leave, we take something in return. The next best thing, as they say."

Her eyes flash. "Possibly the sweet little student you were balls deep inside the other night. It would be fun to corrupt her young mind and body."

She directs a hard glare at one of the robed figures and snaps, "Step forward number three."

Tension increases in the room as the figure moves and she hisses, "Approach me."

The figure soon kneels before her and she settles back on her throne and glances over

their shoulder.

“Number three took a shine to a girl in his class. He invited her to his classroom after dark on the premise of extra tuition. He bent her over his desk and fucked her from behind instead. She didn’t agree.”

She gazes at him with derision. “The girl came to me and confessed and put her faith in me to do what was right. She was fearful of telling her folks or the cops. He told her that nobody would believe her. That it was his word against hers and as he was a respected member of staff, she would be wise to keep her mouth shut.”

She spreads her legs and hisses, “You may begin.”

The guy laps at her pussy like an eager dog, both hands clasped behind his back and Angela stares into my eyes and groans. “Such a good pet.” She squirms on the throne and then screams as her orgasm hits, the room silent and still as we watch the show.

When she is done, she snaps, “Fall back in line.”

Her gaze finds mine. “Punishment takes on many forms, Drake. What you did to that student will be paid for by your soul. You can’t walk away from the devil, so you may as well play her game.”

She clicks her fingers and one of the other figures hurries to her side and as Angela points to the vacated space at her feet, the person drops her robe and kneels, once again her hands clasped behind her.

“Number five disobeyed me.” Her voice is hard as she nods to one of the group on the other side, who steps forward, pulling a whip from out of their cloak.

“She formed an attachment with another teacher, one not in our club, which is against

the rules. You will watch her pay the price.”

The whip lands hard on her back before I can speak and her screams fall into the silence as she receives five lashes for the sin of falling in love.

“Stop!”

I yell but the whip lands another cutting blow and as I reach for the hand holding it, Angela screeches, “Are you interfering with society business, Drake, before you are even a member?”

“You bet I am,” I growl, staring into her hateful eyes that burn pure venom.

She changes like the wind and laughs out loud, putting on a girly voice as she sings the words like a song, “Then I will just have to invite your friend to my office. I wonder what she will find there.”

I clench my fists, accepting the situation for what it is. If I play my hand now, months, if not years, of observation will count for nothing and I have no choice but to see this through.

“So, Drake. The decision is yours. Become my slave every Friday night between the hours of nine and twelve. Do what I instruct you to and be rewarded well for it—or—”

She pauses for effect. “Or your friend pays the price in your place. It’s your decision.”

The fact we are so close and almost have what we want, causes me to growl, “I’m in on the promise you leave Imogen out of this.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

Angela clicks her fingers and the two figures drop back in line and her gaze is now firmly fixed on me as she whispers huskily. “Now take off your pants and kneel before your queen.”

I have no choice and reluctantly do as she says and as she parts her thighs, her glistening pussy reminds me what a bad choice this was.

“You may worship me now, Drake. Take a part of me before I take all of you.”

She places a hand on my head and pushes me down and then, as I make toward her, someone yells, “Fire!”

I pull back and note one of the candles has caught a robe that is burning like a dry tree in a bush fire.

Screams of pain are mixed with yells as she drops the robe, the paint on her body shriveling on her skin.

I act fast and, grabbing the burning fabric, I grasp a vase of flowers on the side and toss the water on the robe, dampening the flames. The sound of sobbing adds to the confusion and Angela yells, “You stupid idiot! Look what you have done.”

“She’s hurt. Can’t you see that?” I can’t believe her reaction and as the woman sobs in pain, I head to the bathroom and grab some towels, soaking them under the water in the tub.

Another person ushers the woman into the room and I wrap the towel around her seared flesh as she sobs on the edge of the tub.

Her mask reveals tear-streaked eyes and I whisper, “You should go to the hospital. That burn needs seeing to.”

“I’m okay.” Her voice is low as she whispers, “Don’t anger Angela. You won’t like the repercussions involved.”

Something about the anguish in her voice speaks to me and as her lip trembles with pain, she whispers urgently, “I’ll find you. Just play along for now. I’m begging you.”

“You did that on purpose?”

Realization hits and she shrugs. “If you say so.”

Something about the pleasure in her smile tells me she may have the answers I need and then Angela appears and yells, “This is all I need.” She hisses, “Leave us, Drake. Wait with the others. I’ll see to number six.”

I step outside the room, wondering what the hell I’ve fallen into but have an overwhelming premonition it goes by the name of the lion’s den.

THIRTY-ONE

IMOGEN

It's eerie as fuck as Jesse leads me through the iron door into the tunnel below the dungeons. I had no other choice but to go with him and my heart is thumping so loudly I'm sure he can hear it.

Jesse has a flashlight that illuminates the dark space and as we walk, he holds tightly onto my hand.

"This is what it takes to get you alone, Imogen."

His teasing tone causes me to smile. "You only had to ask."

We stop where the tunnel splits in two, and Jesse sighs.

"I'm sorry, baby. I've been a shit boyfriend."

"Don't apologize, Jesse. I've hardly been the greatest girlfriend, either."

"I want to be." He pauses and turns and as his eyes bore deep into mine, I see regret more than anything. Apology even, and I sigh. "Perhaps this was never going to work. It's been intense and we are too young for that."

"I understand."

He squeezes my hand and says regretfully, “We are standing underneath the tunnel that brought us together.”

I glance up. “How do you know?”

“I planned it.”

His eyes glitter as he cups my face in his hands.

“I brought you down here for a reason, baby.”

My chest tightens as he says huskily, “I want us to start again.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Under the rules of The Claiming, we are a couple for the rest of the semester. We must honor that, of course, but I don’t want to make you. So here’s the deal.”

He smiles and I relax for the first time because there’s an expression of honesty in Jesse’s eyes that I haven’t seen there before.

“We make our own pact under the place where we began. To set ourselves free but carry on as friends.”

I’m shocked as Jesse says the words because I never thought it would be this easy.

He smiles softly. “But I want more, Imogen. I meant it when I told you that, but you are not there with me yet. So—”

He takes a deep breath and the uncertainty in his eyes is endearing as he whispers, “Will you go to the prom with me as my date for the night?”

My heart actually melts as I sense his uncertainty, and yet before I can answer him, he holds up his hand. “I want us to start again. A boy asking the girl he is obsessed with out on a date, hoping like crazy she says yes and hasn’t already given her heart to somebody else.”

My heart sinks. How can I possibly agree when he’s too late? My heart has already gone.

He carries on. “I’ve told you what’s expected of me when I leave. I’ve already made the decision I’m not returning home and will live with the consequences of that.”

“Where will you go?”

I’m shocked but not surprised. He shrugs. “I have options. Frankie offered me a job with his family, but well, I’m trying to save myself and would you sign a deal with the devil to escape a demon?”

“You make a valid point.” I grin. “He would look after you, though. I already know that. You’re his friend, and loyalty means everything to the Majerios.”

“Sure, but I have other plans.”

“Like what?”

“It definitely doesn’t include farming.”

He frowns, causing me to laugh out loud, and it strikes me how nice this is. How natural, and I appreciate his openness.

“I would like to travel for a year and I’m thinking across the states. I don’t have a passport so international is out, but I would kind of like to see a lot more of this great

country and can turn my hand to anything along the way.”

“It sounds like a lonely plan.” I’m worried about him and he shakes his head.

“I’ve been alone all my life. I’m good company.”

“Jesse. I—”

I raise my hand to his face and hold it flat against it, smiling into his eyes as I whisper, “I will be your date to the prom because there is no one else I would rather go with.”

I don’t mind that he kisses me, a soft pressure with no demands.

A sweet kiss between two people who share a connection.

More friendship than sexual and completely different from the ones I share with Drake.

This is the Jesse I fell for when I arrived.

Open, honest, cheeky as fuck, and attentive.

I’m happy to be his date to the prom but as friends only.

Perhaps I can help him that way rather than a full-blown relationship and I appreciate his handling of this situation.

Footsteps running toward us cause us to break apart and as Jesse shines the flashlight, we see Summer heading our way, her phone lighting her path.

“There you are.” She pants, “Frankie wants you in the main chamber, Jesse. He sent me to take your place.”

“He did?”

Jesse seems surprised at that and sighs before turning back to me.

“I’ll catch you later, baby, and thanks.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Jesse. I should be the one thanking you for the invitation.”

He smiles softly. “We’ll talk later.”

He drops a soft kiss on my lips before heading back the way we came, securing his golden mask in place as he leaves us and Summer whispers, “I’m sorry, but I couldn’t bear the thought of you alone with him down here. I still don’t trust him and Luca doesn’t either.”

“Why not?”

She shrugs. “Because of the people he mixes with when he’s missing in action.”

“The teacher?”

I’m such a hypocrite and hate the double standards playing out here.

If anything, I kind of understand Jesse more and I’m probably worse than him because I’m crazy about Drake willingly and not because he drugged me into submission.

That makes me guilty and Jesse a victim, and I'm increasingly uncomfortable about that.

Summer groans. "This place is creepy as fuck and the battery is low on my phone. Let's head back to the tunnel chamber. There's nothing to see here, anyway."

"Literally." I laugh softly. "It's crazy to think of the monks patrolling these tunnels back in the day, subjecting their prisoners to despicable acts while they pretend to be holy as fuck."

"Sometimes evil is wrapped in innocence, Imogen. I happen to trust an openly corrupt person way more than one who pretends otherwise, and then lulls his victim into a false sense of security before inflicting the killer blow. It's black and white in my world with no gray shadows in between.

If anything, that's more honorable than those who pretend otherwise. "

I don't miss her warning and wonder what else Luca told her, but something about the way Jesse looked at me tonight was different.

There was sincerity in his expression and a willingness to do right, and I wonder if somehow Jesse has found a way to break free of all this and put himself first for once.

It changes nothing between us, but I will be a good friend to him. He deserves that because nobody should be alone in a crowd. Not on my watch, anyway.

THIRTY-TWO

DRAKE

Sometimes life throws up challenges, and last night was definitely one of those times. The fire closed things down and the party, for want of a better word, ended early when one of the guests literally went up in flames.

Angela called time on our attendance and I'm still none the wiser who my guardian angel could be.

I made certain to send my findings to Ryder and I can only imagine his astonishment at what went down last night.

It's sick as fuck and I'm still not sure what would have happened in the moment because sure as I'm not a fucking history teacher, I was not going down on Angela flaming Constable last night.

Even the thought of it turns my skin green.

No way would I subject myself to that, no matter the mission.

I'm used to fighting with my hands, my mind and my body, but that physical act was definitely a step too far.

When I returned home, I received a text from Imogen reporting in on events during her evening.

She told me Jesse had decided to take a step back and wanted to start again, finishing up by inviting her to the prom as his date.

I attempted to read between the lines because I still don't trust that guy, but at least he is backing off from anything else, for now, anyway.

Prom night is looming ever closer and something is prickling at the back of my mind.

At least I'm expected to be there in my professional capacity, but if I was planning something, that would be the perfect night to execute it.

The students are buzzing at the thought of it, but I can't share their enthusiasm.

We are no further forward in discovering the secrets of this place even though I have my suspicions about Angela.

When I'm at a wall with no place to go, I use physical exercise to channel my mind and as I return home after a two-hour run, I notice a white slip of paper tucked under my front door.

It's simple words offer no clue to the sender.

I'm waiting at the boathouse.

There is no indication of what time it arrived, but I'm guessing that means now, so after chugging down some fluids, I turn around and resume my run, this time in the direction of the boathouse that sits some way from the academy.

I proceed with caution, my training kicking in and I move stealthily through the trees that frame the riverbank, watching out for any signs of danger, but not really expecting any.

It's early. Most of the academy is still in their beds, especially on a Saturday morning.

Students party hard and evidently so do the teachers and, subsequently, aren't early risers.

It's probably the perfect time to arrange a secret meeting and part of me hopes its Imogen because I am desperate for more time with her.

I note a small figure crouched low against the edge of the boathouse, its crumbling dock definitely a health hazard.

They are dressed in black, their head concealed by a baseball cap and I can't tell from this distance whether they are male or female.

I approach with caution and as I draw near, they raise their eyes and I detect a young woman who I have never seen before.

She appears anxious and glances around her nervously and as she catches my eye she beckons me to join her.

She moves into the shadows and as I follow her, something about the way she is nervous tells me she is fearful about something.

I maintain my guard and edge inside the boathouse, making certain not to back myself into a corner.

We head into the shadows and I'm surprised when she parts a curtain of greenery and enters what appears to be a cave in the side of the riverbank. As we head inside, she turns to face me and whispers, "I wasn't sure you'd come."

“Why did you ask me to?”

She is nervous, her eyes flicking into every corner, and her frightened expression tells me she has a lot to lose from coming here.

“I wanted to warn you.”

“Of what?”

Her tongue darts out, and she nervously licks her lips and she is almost shaking as she whispers, “I was there last night. I saw everything.”

“Last night?” I play dumb and she sighs.

“At Angela’s. Say hi to lucky number six.”

She confirms my suspicions, and I smile with concern. “How is your leg?”

“Sore, but there is no lasting damage. It looked worse than it was. The paint didn’t help, but as I planned the entire distraction, I was careful to put out the flames before any serious damage occurred.”

“You risked your life for me—why?”

“Because I’m hoping you can save mine.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because you aren’t scared of her yet.”

“Angela?”

Her expression dims and fear twists her smile.

“Last night was pretty tame. A test if you like.”

“You call that tame?” I raise my eyes and she nods, misery etched on her frown.

“Angela uses fear to control her slaves and your invitation was issued the minute she had something to use against you.”

“What was your sin?”

I’m curious about this woman because I’ve never seen her before. I don’t think she’s a teacher. I haven’t seen her in the staff room.

“I’m her maid, for want of a better word. Housekeeper, if you like.”

Her heavy sigh rumbles through the darkness as she whispers, “I was a student here not long ago. Close to graduation day, my parents died in a car accident and I had nowhere to go.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” I reach out and touch her arm in a show of compassion and she nods, biting on her lower lip as she blinks away the tears.

“I don’t have any siblings and neither did my parents.

No grandparents, anyone really, and I was alone.

We rented our home, so I had nothing. My parents lived hand to mouth and subsequently, I had nowhere to go.

Angela took pity on me. She helped me through a terrible time and when the academy

closed for the holidays, she told me I could stay here with her.

She would employ me and give me a home and I was so grateful I didn't think twice.
”

Her voice is full of regret as she hisses, “I should have taken my chance at homelessness. It would have been the better option.”

Fuck! Hearing her story boils my blood because this is shit Reapers are used to and have heard a million times before.

Most of the women who enter our world follow this route in.

Destitute, down on their luck, every single one of them with a sad story to tell.

They are usually running from something, and this woman is a prime candidate for a seat at our table.

She smiles regretfully. “It began as it should. A kind woman helping out another in her time of crisis. I was given housekeeping jobs and a small set of rooms as my place to live. Angela was a good friend. She checked in on me and often invited me to eat meals with her. Then I began to feel a little strange. Huge parts of my memory were missing. I couldn't remember what day it was sometimes and what I'd done the day before.

I was confused and Angela assured me I wasn't sick and it was just the effects of my grief.

She gave me pills to help, and I had no reason to believe she was being anything but kind.

I relied on her. My headaches were getting worse, and she arranged for a doctor to call.

He confirmed it was a reaction to my grief and issued more drugs to help with that. ”

Her eyes flash as she hisses, “It turns out the doctor wasn’t even qualified. It was a man as twisted as Angela. A person that stars in my nightmares because it wasn’t a doctor she called that day. It was the devil himself.”

Her story sickens me but is a familiar one. A young vulnerable woman, exploited by people with no morals for their own gain, and I can almost guess what happened next.

“I was soon addicted to the fake prescription meds. It was as if I couldn’t get through the day without them, and Angela was the only source of my happiness.

My mind was all over the place and I would do anything for a fix.

It began gradually when she told me she loved me and wanted to care for me.

She kissed me like a lover and I responded to whatever she dished out.

I was lonely, desperate for affection, and inevitably it led to more.

We became lovers. I wanted to please her, fearful she would send me away and I would do anything – I did everything to keep my place by her side. ”

Her smile is sad and I clench my fist as I imagine what she has been through.

“Angela controlled every aspect of my life and I was glad of it. I would do anything and soon I was drafted into her sick game.”

She shifts closer and her voice is so low I almost can't hear her. "Once a month, I accompany her to a house not far from here. It's always on the last Saturday of the month. Angela meets that man along with several others and it's not liquor they bring as an offering, it's a person like me."

She heaves a desperate sigh. "They call themselves serpents and their victims prey. The idea is to groom a person into becoming their slave. The gathering is graduation day for their students before they send them out into the world. They are littered throughout the country as well. That one man traveling to all of them to oversee their allegiance? Angela works for him and brings many members to the society through her team at Rockwell."

"Team?"

"The members of her Friday night club."

She shrugs. "Teachers mainly. They are there through fear and their task is to groom a student and mess with their mind like she did to me. When they will do anything for them, they are instructed to prove their loyalty in a final act."

Her voice falters. "Kidnap. Rape. Murder."

She's obviously worried that she's said too much already and I match her urgency and growl, "You can trust me. I will keep your secret and help you. Firstly, who is under threat here at Rockwell right now?"

She chews her fingernail before whispering, "Jesse Anderson. River Callahan was, but he was shipped off to a hospital a few weeks ago for help."

My blood runs cold as she sighs. "The other members of the Friday night club are victims of Angela. She controls them through fear and uses them for her personal

enjoyment. To my knowledge, none of them are involved in the monthly final act, not since Jenna Sloane left.”

“What happened to her?”

“She was bringing suspicion on the society so she was cast out. When I say cast out—”
Her eyes burn into mine.

“I mean, she must lie underground until the dust settles and they find her a new position where she isn’t known.

I overheard Angela talking on the phone and she mentioned a place in California where they intend on sending her.

A college there for troubled kids, and she leaves when the next semester begins. ”

“Where is she now?”

“In her house nearby. Angela visits her there and sometimes I am expected to accompany her.”

She shivers. “I want to escape, Mr. Bellingham, which is why I am trusting you by telling you this. You are new to her club. I could tell the idea of it disgusted you and I may be wrong to confide in you, but you’re my only hope. Please help me escape this place. I’m begging you.”

“Listen to me.” I smile reassuringly. “Tell me what you know. Every single thing and together we will finish this. I can help you, but first I must know your name.”

“Why?”

“Because you are a person darlin’ and not a number. We will start there.”

Her lower lip trembles. “It’s Delilah.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Delilah. Do you have a surname?”

“Grimes.” Her shy smile tugs on my heartstrings.

“You’re not on your own anymore, Delilah Grimes and your days working as Angela Constable’s slave are numbered. Now you have a choice to make and consider it carefully.”

“A choice?”

Her eyes widen.

“Help me bring this society down, or walk away to safety now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I have a place you can go that’s ready when you are. A safe place where none of them can get to you. I can arrange your room for immediate occupation, or you can stay a little longer and help me close this down.”

“I’ll stay.” The determined set to her jaw impresses me no end and as I hold out my hand, she clasps it with a surprisingly firm hand.

“Then we’ll shake on that.”

Her smile lights up the darkness. “I knew you would help me. You have the kindest eyes I have ever seen.”

Part of me wants to call Ryder and arrange her transportation out of here, but she will make my mission a lot easier and possibly help save more students than she will ever know.

As we make our pact, my resolve hardens because Angela Constable will walk out of this over my dead body and I don't intend on dying anytime soon.

THIRTY-THREE

IMOGEN

What with my studies, the prom and The Claiming, my life is full of activity, but there is really only one I'm interested in. Meeting up with Drake and since our night together, I am burning for more of them.

The others decided last night that we'll head into town for breakfast this morning. It's a nice idea but I'm not really feeling it and so I get up early and text Cassie.

Hi, honey. I'm going to skip breakfast this morning. I must be coming down with something, so I'll pass. I'm just heading out to clear my head. Have fun.

As I leave the house, I turn my face toward the morning sun.

It's early, which means it's deserted. Students aren't known for being early risers and definitely not after the night before.

Friday night is always party night and if they aren't involved in The Claiming challenge and subsequent after party, they attend one of the other parties thrown around campus.

I head off at a gentle jog, drawing in some fresh air, inflating my lungs with oxygen to blow the cobwebs away.

Last night was closure of sorts, but the door isn't firmly closed and I'm still worried

about my relationship with Jesse.

What if he really likes me and I'm thinking about someone else?

I should shut him down and not offer him false hope, but he is the only lead we have to The Serpent Society.

I feel bad that we're using him and hope like hell I'm right about him and that he is merely waking up to reality and doing the best he can with the information.

Will he travel across State after leaving Rockwell, or will he submit to the wishes of his family and end up returning home after all?

Then there's the job offer with Frankie.

Could he really compromise his morality and work for a family who are not known for their honesty?

I'm surprised how much I like the Majerios.

Luca Romano is a different kind of animal and keeps himself closed off most of the time unless your name is Summer, or Frankie even.

Like-minded souls who understand one another and I'm worried that Jesse wouldn't thrive in their world because he is nothing like them.

I jog toward the river. It's my favorite route, mainly because of the privacy it gives me.

Not many people come here because the terrain is uneven, and it's a fair way from the academy.

As I hug the riverbank, I notice the boathouse in the distance and as I head toward it, a movement catches my attention.

On the edge of the old wooden dock where the decrepit boat lives, I notice a figure edge into the sunlight, apparently through the creepers at the back of the boathouse.

I stop and merge into the trees as I strain to see if I recognize them.

I'm aware of the entrance to the tunnels nearby and wonder who is using them so early in the morning.

I almost expect to see Frankie or one of the guys. Instead a small figure emerges closely followed by a very familiar one.

My mouth dries and my heart beats faster as Drake emerges into the sunlight and as the small figure turns to him, I watch them embrace.

I feel sick. It's obvious the figure is a woman from their build and a flash of blonde hair falls from the baseball cap as his arm knocks it askew.

She hugs him hard and appears emotional and as she steps away, his gaze trails after her as she heads quickly off in the direction of the academy.

My heart is undone as Drake stares after her, and as he rakes his fingers through his hair, I can tell he is concerned.

Something is telling me their meeting is significant, but why hide unless they didn't want to be discovered?

Is he seeing another student and playing me off against others?

He can't be, he's a Reaper, and it's not in their DNA.

It must be something else, so with a deep breath, I emerge from the trees, acting as if I've just arrived and continue jogging in the direction I was heading in.

As I get closer, he catches my eye and I'm relieved when he beckons me over to the boathouse. I don't hesitate because I need answers and as I near the place where the girl vacated, he motions for me to follow him inside the tunnel.

I take one glance around before heading inside and as the creeper curtain swings back into position, the only light we have is the sunlight filtering through the gaps.

It's enough to light his expression and the soft one he throws back at me eases my mind—a little.

“You're up early.” He appears concerned, and I shrug.

“I could say the same to you.”

“I couldn't sleep.”

Something about the pained expression in his eye raises concern and I take a step toward him. “Did something happen? Who was that girl?”

A flicker of amusement on his lips is my answer, and he reaches out and pulls me in against his chest. The audible sigh of relief that escapes is my answer.

He pulls me hard against him and groans. “I missed you. Fuck, last night was torture picturing you with him.”

“You didn't answer my question, Drake,”

Jealously flares inside me and he whispers, “She was a surprise wake up call, darlin’.
A broken angel.”

I push back and stare into his eyes, noting the concern. A broken angel in the Reaper world is a woman who needs our help. Somebody down on their luck with no place to turn, and I don’t miss the gravity of the description.

“Is she a student?”

He shakes his head. “She was, but life dealt her a hard blow and she ended up working here.”

He isn’t giving much away and I note the frown lines deeply routed in his brow, and he sighs. “I fucking hate this place.”

“What, the tunnel?”

I gloss over the severity of his words because something is telling me I won’t like the meaning behind them.

He crushes me to his chest and wraps his hand protectively around my back, holding me close, his heart beating a frantic message against mine. If Drake is worried, things must be bad because there is nothing a Reaper can’t deal with, and I’m wondering if this may be the exception to that.

For a moment there is silence and then he whispers huskily, “I’ve missed you.”

“Same.” I cling onto him and bury my face in his chest and he groans. “I usually have all the answers, Imogen, but I’m struggling with the questions this time.”

“Then take them one at a time, because the answer may be easier than you thought. It

doesn't always have to be complicated, Drake. Not when you take things slowly and think about it carefully."

"I guess."

He pulls back and sighs into the darkness. "This place is creepy as fuck. It suits the academy perfectly."

He releases me and grasps my hand. "I need to get the fuck out of here. Are you up for that?"

"Where?"

My heart rate increases as his smile catches on my uncertainty.

"Wherever the road takes us."

"Sounds good to me."

"Meet me in the lane as before in twenty minutes."

"I'll be there."

He dips his head and as his lips find mine, it's like a sigh of relief for my heart. Kissing Drake puts all the problems right, and nothing can interfere with us. We are a team—at least I hope we are and whoever that girl is, she is a problem that Drake will solve. I have no doubt about that.

THIRTY-FOUR

DRAKE

I need to get the fuck out of here. The academy is messing with my mind and I'm not leaving Imogen behind. I need her where I can see her - care for her – protect her – love her.

Love isn't something I've experienced before.

Not in this way. I love my Reaper brothers, the life we have and the job I do.

I love my family, my friends and my life, but I have never loved a woman.

Not in this way. Not where I ache when they aren't with me and they consume my thoughts.

I shouldn't be with her. She is my forbidden obsession, and I'm shocked at how easily I disregard that.

It's as if none of that matters. She is mine and I must protect her.

We are a team no matter what anyone says and if her father has something to say about that, I'm prepared to argue our case to the bitter end.

I respect Flash. Fuck, more than most guys, but I fell in love with his daughter, which is a huge problem for me. She is in danger, and I'm not known for treading carefully.

I'm liable to burn this fucking cesspit down if anyone lays one finger on my girl.

I see her waiting in the lane and my heart clenches. She is so beautiful. The perfect woman in every way and today is a selfish act of taking what I want and fuck the consequences.

"Hey."

Her smile blinds me as she slips into the passenger seat and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Hey."

My smile is gentle as I note the concern in her eyes. "Are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"Of course."

I steer the car toward the open road and the tension fades with every second we leave the academy behind.

"Last night was an education in more ways than one."

"What happened?"

I don't miss the anxiety in her words and hate it.

"It appears that The Claiming isn't as undetected as you all think."

"They know!" Her horrified gasp echoes through the car and I nod, my expression grim.

"The principal has her own club and while you are all occupied, so is she."

“Club?”

“It’s not one you want membership of.”

My knuckles tighten on the wheel.

“If you are handed a membership card, it’s because you have a lot to lose and it’s your only way out.”

“So, how are you aware of it?” Her voice trembles and I attempt to reassure her.

“I’m sorry to say this, darlin’ but she knows about us.”

“She?”

“The principal.”

“F-u-c-k...” Her slow use of the word makes me smile because rather than panic, she accepts it as fact.

“So, what are we going to do about that?”

I reach out and grasp her hand and squeeze it hard.

“Nothing.”

“That’s your answer?”

Her soft laugh lightens my mood and I nod. “It changes nothing. It was merely her reason for drafting me into her world, which was a move that is more to our advantage than hers.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“The plan is to carry on with the plan.”

“That’s your plan?”

Her soft giggle lightens the atmosphere and I chuckle. “It helps knowing the cards we are dealt. It makes the game easier.”

“The girl?”

I was waiting for this because I’m aware Imogen is curious about her.

“She was part of the club last night and saved me from an extremely distasteful encounter with the principal.”

“No way!”

Her soft laugh dismisses any fear she would be jealous and I grin. “Principal Constable used our relationship against me to suit her own agenda. She promised to remain quiet if I became her—” I groan. “Slave.”

“Fuck, Drake.” Imogen laughs out loud. “As in sex slave?”

“You got it.”

“No way.”

Her incredulous tone causes us both to laugh, and it’s all I needed to bring clarity to the situation. Saying it out loud reduces its importance and is a welcome breath of fresh air in an otherwise toxic environment.

“So, how did this woman save you?”

Imogen sounds more curious than jealous and I don't sugarcoat my words. “She set herself on fire.”

Her stunned silence reminds me of how brave Delilah was last night and Imogen's voice waivers. “Is she okay?”

“She is. Apparently, the flames merely burned on the paint that covered her body and caught the cloak she was wearing on fire more than her skin.”

“I'm sorry, but what the hell is this club the principal has formed?”

“Hell is the right word, darlin'. If you thought The Claiming was depraved, step inside Principal Constable's mind while she takes a bow. You ain't seen nothing yet.”

Imogen leans back heavily in her seat. “Why did this woman save you? I still don't understand.”

“Because she sees me as her ticket out of hell and wanted to save me from falling further into the abyss with her. She needs a hand out of there, and I would be better equipped to deal with that from the outside.”

“So, you're sending her to the compound, right?”

Imogen's voice is firm and my heart softens. “Of course. I must have a conversation with Ryder first, who, as we know, will be preparing her room at the end of it, but first we must use her information to tear this organization apart from the inside.”

Imogen nods and reaches for my hand. “Then tell me how I can help.”

“Enjoy the prom. That’s all I want you to do, and that requires treating every drink you are given as spiked, accepting no invitations to step outside and spending time with your friends and not leaving them for a minute. If I know you are safe, I can deal with this shit.”

“That’s it?”

She sounds disappointed.

“Yes, darlin’. That’s it.”

She changes the subject. “So, where are we heading?”

“Cripple Creek.”

“But that’s—”

“Two hours away.”

I sigh. “It’s far enough to give us some privacy and take a break from this shit and if it’s okay with you, I want us to spend the entire day locked in a hotel room.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Her soft laughter is enough to reassure me and as we head toward Cripple Creek, we leave our problems behind us. They can wait. The world can wait because all I want now is to spend much needed time with my woman.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:13 am

THIRTY-FIVE

IMOGEN

This is exactly what we both need. A day with no problems or complications, just time with each other.

After a pleasant journey chatting shit about everything other than the situation at Rockwell, I know more about Drake than I do any of my new friends at the academy.

We spoke about our childhood, his time in the military.

What music he likes and his favorite food and color.

We are also compatible star signs, which he dismissed as having no meaning at all, which didn't surprise me.

Reapers deal in fact, not fantasy, but I'm a believer in the stars and their meaning.

By the time we arrive at Mountain Valley Hotel, my anticipation has built to desperation.

Drake is my drug and I'm craving a shot and even the smirk on the receptionist's face doesn't concern me as she hands us the room card.

"You're on the second floor overlooking the mountain. The elevator is through the double doors."

Drake slips her a wink, and I'm amused at the blush that stains her face as she watches us make our way to our room.

As soon as we step into the elevator, Drake reaches for my hand and grins.

"I'm a selfish prick, but I want you to myself today.

It's not very romantic bringing you here, but I want privacy. "

"It's perfect."

The lust gleaming in his eyes causes my heart to race, and I still can't believe my luck.

I'm in love with a god-damned Reaper and it's as if I've won the state lottery.

He is gorgeous inside and out and I trust him one hundred percent.

I have no doubts—none at all and as the elevator door slides open, my heart flutters as we head to our room.

"Wow!" I gasp at the sight in front of me as we enter paradise. The room he booked overlooks what appears to be the entire mountain range. It's breathtaking and the room itself isn't too shabby, either.

"Drake, this room must have cost a fortune."

My eyes widen as I stare around a comfortable room with a huge king-sized bed, the bedding crisp and perfect, with scatter cushions nestling against huge pillows.

It appears newly refurbished and there is even a fireplace in the corner with two easy

chairs set before it, the view from the floor to ceiling doors opening onto a terrace outside.

“It’s what you deserve.” His soft voice reminds me of what view I should be staring at right now and I gaze at him with a sudden shy smile. My heart races as he smiles softly and lust burns heavily in his eyes as he reaches for my hand.

“I missed you, darlin’.”

The yearning in his eyes matches the one in my soul and as he tugs me gently against him, he kisses me with a softness that strips passion away and replaces it with tenderness.

His hand cups my face and his thumb rubs gently against my cheek as his kiss lights places in my soul even I haven’t discovered yet.

Kissing is enough for now. I could do it all day with him and after a while he breaks away and whispers, “Let’s check out the bathroom.”

I nod, my pulse racing as we head inside a large room with a huge tub taking pride of place.

Drake reaches for my top and eases it off my shoulders, staring into my eyes as his burn with what could be mistaken as love.

I slide my hands under his t-shirt, loving the firm abs that dance underneath my fingers and his eyes flash as I pull it over his head, admiring the craftsmanship that several hours at the gym rewards you with.

He unhooks my bra and pulls me against him. My tits crushing against his skin, a burst of heat flooding my panties.

His fingers tangle in my hair and he pulls my head back and kisses me with more passion, his tongue searching for mine and claiming my attention.

I work on his belt and slide off his jeans, and as he steps out of them, I cup his balls through his jockey shorts.

“Fuck, baby.”

His low moan is a sound I will never tire of and as I drop to my knees, I ease his shorts down with me.

“You don’t have to do this, darlin’.”

I don’t reply and merely lick the tip of his cock with a satisfied groan.

His fingers tangle in my hair as I guide his cock into my mouth, loving the taste of him as he leaks a little into my mouth.

“Oh, fuck.” He hisses as I rotate his balls slowly, sucking and licking his cock as if it’s a popsicle. He thrusts harder, filling my entire mouth and I increase the pressure, desperate to please my man.

He pulls away and groans, “This could be over embarrassingly fast if you carry on doing that, darlin’.”

As he pulls me to my feet, he unleashes a desperate kiss, attacking me with passion, lighting a spark in my soul.

He guides me backward into the huge shower and, as he thumps his fist on the control, freezing water rains down on us.

“Fuck!” I stumble and his arms wrap around me protectively and now our kiss is more intense, almost desperate. The cool water calms my heated skin and as he spins me around, my face presses against the porcelain tile, my tits flat against them, and he presses against me from behind.

He kisses my neck, almost brutally, as he puckers my skin and an intense throbbing sensation wages a battle between my legs. He bites my neck before nipping at the skin on my shoulder, my entire body in shock as the cool water soothes the raging heat inside me.

His kiss trails down my body until he bites my ass really hard, causing me to yelp and as he sucks the burn and eases his thumb on my clit, pain turns to pleasure in a hot damned second.

He works on my body like a paramedic, bringing it to life when it was on the brink of death. I’m slowly opening up to let the life inside my soul and as he replaces his finger with his tongue, he licks me from behind, plunging his fingers inside my raging inferno.

I bear down on his fingers as he licks my desire and my entire body shivers as he curls his finger against my g-spot.

I am delirious, out of my mind and as a huge orgasm crashes through me, he pulls away and stands, spinning me around mid orgasm and buries his cock deep inside me.

It causes another orgasm to rip through the existing one and I scream against the palm of his hand as he fucks me hard against the shower wall, holding me effortlessly up as he hammers inside me.

It’s as if I weigh nothing at all as I come hard, almost violently and once again, just when I think I’m done, he bites down hard on my neck, his finger deep inside my ass

as he fills me from both sides.

My startled gasp is captured in his mouth, and it's as if he is invading every single part of me as he fills my body with his.

A third orgasm almost gives me a heart attack as he pumps inside me so hard, I swear he almost comes out the other side.

It's as if I'm merely a rag doll that he is using for his pleasure, but the ultimate pleasure is mine.

I am losing my freaking mind as one orgasm begins before another one ends and multiple orgasms are a pleasure I could get used to.

Before I can check my mind is still operating, his loud roar alerts me that he is coming hard. He pulls out in the nick of time and pumps his seed against my drenched pussy. It mixes with the water and runs down my leg, the cool water raining down on us both in a futile attempt to calm the flames.

My gasp is captured by his gorgeous lips as he kisses me hard, his hand splaying out in the arch of my back, pulling me against him, holding me tight and as the fireworks explode in my mind, this is the exact moment I fall deeply in love with a Reaper who goes by the name of Drake.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:13 am

THIRTY-SIX

DRAKE

I knew it. It was as if I could see into the future—to this day—when I bumped heads with Imogen the first time we met.

What just happened rocked my world because I never realized how intense it would be when you make love for the first time in your life.

I wanted her to have the world and my intention was to chain her heart to mine.

I need Imogen to fall madly in love with me because I have already fallen madly in love with her.

Her body is limp as I turn off the shower, swinging her into my drenched arms as I forego the use of the towel. I carry her into the room and lay her carefully on the bed, wrapping the sheet around her as I slide in carefully beside her.

She whispers, “I’m sorry to say this, Drake, but I think I love you.”

My chest tightens. Hearing those words fall from her lips, said out loud, causes my blood to heat as if I’ve just had a transfusion. I am revitalized, full of energy and as her eyes flutter closed, I kiss her softly on the lips and whisper, “I think I love you too, baby.”

Her pretty smile rests on her lips as she drifts off to sleep, her entire body sated and

exhausted.

As she sleeps against my chest, I am wide awake, relishing the comfort of her body against mine as I shut the world away and steal this precious time with my girl.

No cameras recording us, no dangers lurking behind the door, and no other person coming between us.

This is our moment, the one we need like oxygen, and I will not sleep for a second and savor every moment I have her.

As she sleeps, my thoughts inevitably turn to the mission.

I must remind myself this is one and I will see it through to the end.

It took a surprising turn last night and hearing Delilah's story hardened my resolve.

I'm aware that Ryder has all the bases covered but the inside intelligence was needed to discover the identity of the head serpent, him or herself.

Is that person Angela Constable? We already learned it's not Christian Duprey, but until I see them together I won't know for sure.

Christian is the person who binds the tribe together.

He travels across the country making sure the society is thriving.

Is Angela merely one of his list of recruiters?

Feeding depravity into a system that exists with that one sole aim in mind.

Who are the brains behind the operation?

Not Jenna Sloane, not Christian and possibly not Angela.

It will be interesting for sure, but not at the cost of my woman or the broken angel who is relying on me for her deliverance.

It doesn't occur to me that she's part of the trap. She could be and I would be wise to consider that option, but something about the fear in her eyes drove that worry aside. She is scared shitless, and that holds a lit match to my rage.

Imogen stirs against me and says sleepily, "Don't let me sleep. I don't want to miss a second of this day with you."

"Are you hungry?" I ask with a smile on my face, and she nods. "Desperately."

"Leave it with me."

I grab the room service menu and lift the receiver, placing our order for a selection of dishes and lots of black coffee.

When I finish up, she giggles sweetly. "That's a lot of food. I'm not that hungry."

"I won't expect you to clear your plate, darlin'."

I chuckle to myself. Being a Reaper comes with many rewards and money is just one of them. We all have a black credit card that is paid for by Ryder from our funds. No questions asked, just rewards for our commitment to the cause.

We don't own fancy homes, motorcars, or expensive things.

We live a simple life in the compound with everything we require.

I'm away all the time, but there is a suite of rooms there with my name on it.

It's vital to have a place to call home, even if that home remains unoccupied.

I wonder if that will change when Imogen returns to the compound?

Can I dare to imagine a future where we both live in that apartment as biker and old lady.

Is that what she wants? Is that what I want for her?

It's early days and I can't believe I'm thinking along those lines, but I just can't help it.

"This is just what I needed." She says with a satisfied smile.

"Me too." I admit, curling my arm around her shoulder as she sits beside me, our backs against the pillows.

"Tell me about the girl I saw you with earlier."

I detect the uncertainty in her voice and seek to reassure her.

"She used to be a student at Rockwell and lost her folks in a car wreck. The Principal offered her a home when she discovered she had no place to live."

"That was kind of her."

Imogen sounds relieved and I hiss, "Save your admiration for that woman."

I heave a deep sigh. “There’s something you should be aware of and you’re not gonna like it.”

“What?”

She turns to me and I detect the anxiety in her expression and take a deep breath.

“I was called to The Principal’s office, and she had compromising photographs of us that night in my house.”

“Oh my God!”

The blood drains from Imogen’s face and her eyes fill with tears.

I hate how her earlier happiness is extinguished like a puff on a match and I growl, “It’s what she used to blackmail me into joining her club. Apparently, the other members have similar red strikes against their names and rather than lose their jobs or face the law, she blackmails them into becoming her slaves.”

“That’s disgusting. You should report her to the authorities.”

“And then all the others in her club would lose their jobs, too.”

I huff. “It’s not only the club. She is involved with Christian Duprey, Jenna Sloane and the entire fucking Serpent Society, and Jesse is also one of her victims.”

“Seriously.” Imogen’s lower lip trembles. “How do you know?”

“The young girl. She told me today in the tunnel.”

“So, what is your plan?”

Imogen swallows hard and faces me with a determined frown and I can't help myself and kiss her softly on her sweet lips.

As always, she returns the kiss, deepening it, causing me to lose concentration as it rests solely on the pleasure of this act alone.

Reluctantly, I pull away and shake my head. "I could kiss you all day, darlin' but shit needs putting in its place and we need to be on the same page."

"Go on." She sighs, resting her hand on my chest, and I groan.

"I'm off the hook until Friday night, when the next club meeting is scheduled. It coincides with the Claiming—which, as everyone knows, has now been replaced by prom."

"So neither will go ahead and we have longer than one week because the club will resume the Friday after prom, surely."

"Ordinarily, yes, but I have a feeling the principal will use the prom to her advantage."

"How?"

"Think about it. All the pieces will be in place under the same roof. Now I may be wrong, but if you're a depraved psychopath, that's a golden opportunity to get your fix."

"So, you think she'll do something at the prom?" Imogen appears confused. "What could she do?"

"I don't know the details of that, if it's going to happen at all, but I know someone

who will.”

“Who?”

“Delilah.”

She nods, realization dawning in her eyes.

“She is going to inform me if she hears anything, and I will prepare for that.”

“What can I do?”

My heart shifts at her trusting expression and I cup her face and staring deep into her eyes, whisper huskily, “You stay god–damned safe darlin’ because if I considered for one minute you were involved in any of this, I would burn the academy down with the principal locked inside.”

Her face softens and tears glisten in her beautiful eyes as she whispers, “Right back at you, Drake.”

Once again we kiss, desperate for contact, savoring the moment and the time we have together, wondering if we really stand a chance, or if fate has other plans.

THIRTY-SEVEN

IMOGEN

I meant what I said to Drake. I am in love with him, but I added the ‘think’ so as not to scare him away.

However, now, as we kiss like the lovers we are, my heart is conflicted.

It’s as if a huge cloud is surrounding us and I can’t see the dangers lurking inside.

A storm is brewing and we have no weapons to defend ourselves, the shadows harboring demons intent on destruction, and only our wits can save us from damnation.

The arrival of room service distracts us and we are soon wearing white robes as we eat on the balcony overlooking the mountains.

“I love this.” I admit as I sit with my feet up on Drake’s lap, chewing a French fry, as I stare on to paradise.

“Me too.” He smiles and massages my feet with one hand while he devours a sandwich with the other one.

“It’s not enough though.”

“What isn’t?”

I raise my eyes and he says huskily, “One day isn’t enough.

I want all of your days, all of your smiles, your gentle looks and touch.

I want to hear your voice when I wake and for it to be the last one I hear when I fall asleep.

I want to know you are one touch away at all times and that scares the shit out of me.
”

“What does?” I love how he speaks and I’m of the same mind and I don’t even consider we are moving way too fast on this. It’s as natural as breathing and as if I’ve met my other half, the one who completes me.

He huffs a despairing sigh.

“I can think of many reasons why we won’t find it easy.”

“My father?” I raise the subject we’ve been avoiding like the plague and shake the problem away with a toss of my head. “I’ll talk to him. He only wants what’s best for me and that is you. He’ll understand.”

“I have every faith in you, but I’ll be the one confessing this to him. I’ll not hide behind you, darlin’ and I never will. I’ll be the one standing in front of you, defending you with every weapon in my arsenal. I’ll take the pain so you don’t have to and nothing will change my mind about that.”

Seeing him now, massaging my feet, gazing at me with adoration and defending my honor like the hero he is, I can’t imagine ever being with another man and I will do whatever it takes to keep us together.

When you know, you know, as they say and I know, believe me I know, so I whisper, “We’ll be okay. I’m certain of that. Just you stay safe for me, Drake, because that fear works both ways.”

We fall silent because we are only too aware how dangerous the life of a Reaper is.

They take out the enemy and sometimes they may be injured or worse.

It hasn’t happened yet because they are good at what they do, but there is always a first time and I won’t allow that first time to involve either of us.

The rest of our day is spent in bed, talking, sleeping and making sweet love as if we have all the time in the world. We take a deep bath together and the shower is put to good use, but most of all we enjoy every delicious second of this time we have when we are free to be together.

Leaving is bittersweet, and as we pull out of the lot, reality bears down on us like a baby desperate to be born. There’s no stopping it and we are unsure what we will find, but the nearer we get to the academy, the more anxious I get.

Drake drops me in the lane as before with the promise to be in touch if there is anything I need to know, and as I jog through the gates, I wonder what excuse I’ll give for my absence today. As it turns out, I don’t have to fabricate a reason because the house is deserted when I return.

It’s unusual and as I check my phone, I note there are no messages either. It’s as if something happened and everyone just up sticks and left.

I head toward the cafeteria, wondering if they are grabbing a snack there, and as I head inside, I spy at least one friendly face.

“Kennedy!” I call out and she waves me across.

She’s sitting with Amos, her boyfriend, who is always by her side, and she smiles as I approach.

“I thought you’d be with the others.”

“Where are they?”

She seems surprised that I’m unaware of their whereabouts.

“The Great Hall.”

“Why are they there?”

The Great Hall is, as its name suggests, the biggest space in the academy and was used back in the day as the monk’s dining room. Today it is used when they call the entire student body in to discuss matters of importance. It doesn’t happen much though, and I wonder if something big is going down.

“They called on The Elusive House to help decorate the room. They were caught on their way back from grabbing breakfast in town and the principal insisted they do their bit and begin erecting the props and backdrop to the prom.”

She turns to Amos. “We get to help with the banners and are on the planning committee. Our stint is tomorrow once the props are firmly in place.”

“I should go and help them.” I’m relieved it’s as simple as decorating duty and I’m amused to see how the guys are handling that.

When I head into the hall, the first person I see is Cassie, and she wastes no time

heading my way. “Are you okay, honey?”

“Sure.”

She smiles with relief. “I didn’t want to disturb you. When I got your message earlier, I told the others to leave you alone. Are you coming down with anything?”

As I picture Drake going down on me several times today it brings a smile to my face, and she peers at me with concern. “You do look a little flushed, glowing even.”

“I feel better now, thanks.”

I distract her attention when I see Luca leaning against a pillar on his phone.

“Luca doesn’t appear happy to be here.”

She rolls her eyes. “He’s spent more time dragging Summer behind the pillar than erecting it and no prizes for guessing what pillar he was erecting.”

“Cassie. Oh my God.”

I blush even more furiously and she grins. “The guys are pissed. It would have been better if they’d been somewhere else when the principal caught us. Jack’s the only one doing any actual prop building. The others are merely complaining or attempting to make out with their girls.”

She glances around the room. “Speaking of which, Jesse is concerned about you. He’s bent my ear all day about you and asked if you’ve said anything about him and does he think you’re still interested.”

“I’m sorry, Cass.”

I smile my apology and she shrugs. “I couldn’t answer him. Are you still interested in Jesse, Imogen, or has that ship never really got into the water?”

“I like him, but as a friend.”

She nods, understanding reflecting in her smile.

“It’s what I thought.” She sighs. “We can’t win them all, I suppose. What are you going to do about it?”

“I’ve already told him.”

Her mouth drops. “Did you tell him in a different language because he doesn’t appear to have understood?”

“Why, what’s he said?”

I’m concerned that he missed the memo, and she lowers her voice. “That the prom will make or break your relationship and he’s going to try to make it right for you.”

“He’s too late.” I shrug. “It shouldn’t be so difficult to be with a guy. He created this mess and I’m not the one who wants to clear it up.”

“I understand, babe. I’d be the same.”

Jack heads our way and huffs with frustration. “Can you have a word with Jesse, Imogen? He’s been pining for you all day and has been as much help as a chocolate pot on a fire.”

Cassie makes to speak and I say hastily, “Sure. Where is he?”

“Nailing Rome to the paneling, if I’m not mistaken.”

Jack grumbles as he walks away, a hammer hanging limply from his fingers.

Cassie sighs. “Sorry. We’ll work it out, don’t worry, we always do”

As she heads back to her task, I head off in search of Jesse. I find him cursing as he attempts to fix a backdrop to the wall, and his eyes light up when he sees me.

“Hey, baby. I’ve missed you. How are you feeling now?”

Guilt is a hard thing to shake and it must reflect in my smile because an anxious shadow crosses his expression.

“I’m good. Thanks for asking. Now—” I glance around, taking in the mess he has caused. “What’s going on here?”

“Backdrop scenery. I fucking hate manual labor.”

“Which is why a career on the farm is not for you.”

I remind him of his possible future, and he shakes his head. “We have already established that is not an option.”

He winks. “So, help me out and I’ll treat you to pizza.”

Somehow, we manage to fix the scenery in place and as we take a breath, we stare at our efforts.

“This does look good.” I admit in admiration, and Jesse nods.

“It’s a good theme. I can’t wait to see you in a toga, baby.

For your information I’m a gladiator and I would fight to the death for your fair hand.
”

“Idiot.” I nudge him and he surprises me by reaching out and cupping my face in his hands and, all joking apart, his expression turns serious.

“I want to make it up to you, Imogen. To be the man, I should have been from the beginning. The prom will be my fresh start and I’m not expecting you to allow it so easily, but I want us to try again.”

My heart is heavy as he smiles into my eyes and luckily Summer yells, “Put her down, Jesse. We’re heading back to the house.”

Jesse sighs and drops his hands with a cheeky wink.

“Come on baby, they can go back to the house, but I want some alone time with you. Now—” He slings his arm around my shoulder. “I prefer pepperoni, but you can choose any topping you want.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

IMOGEN

The week passes in a flash. What with college classes, prom preparation and the relentless parties the guys throw most nights, it passes in a blur.

I haven't seen Drake since our magical day, except in the distance.

I try so hard to ignore him and to not give anything away that may arouse suspicion, but it's hard not to stare.

He is incredibly gorgeous, both naked and dressed casually, but in smart trousers and a shirt he is freaking dynamite.

The mood is high as the students prepare for prom night and as we cram into Summer's room to get ready, the wine is flowing as freely as our mouths.

"So, Summer." Siri raises a glass to her friend. "Tell us about Luca and that amazing house of his."

Luca has a mansion near to the academy and we have never been there. It's where he takes Summer when they want to be alone and he won't invite anyone else inside, much to the guy's displeasure.

Summer grins. "We're heading there the day after prom to recover. You know, he has this amazing natural swimming pool that appears to be carved out of the rocks and is

lit up at night. He even has a freaking waterfall and we adore skinny dipping on a hot day.”

“You are so lucky.” Cassie groans. “Frankie’s idea of a night in involves tying me to his bed and doing what the hell he wants to me. I’m not complaining, though.”

“He ties you up?” My eyes widen and Summer tosses her eyes.

“Ugh, spare me the gruesome details, but it doesn’t surprise me. Frankie is a weird fucker who gets off on the strangest things.”

Siri shrugs. “Well, Jack is a rough gentleman. He is so sweet, kind and considerate and so hot in bed I’m surprised we don’t scorch the sheets.”

It’s a little uncomfortable hearing her description of Jack because he’s like a brother to me and imagining him, well, in that way, isn’t an image I’m comfortable with.

Cassie catches my eye and I note her sad expression and my heart catches a little.

Cassie is like me and Jack. We are pure bred Reaper and Siri’s description matches Drake.

Cassie, it seems, gave her virginity to Jack and will be only too aware of what he’s like.

It must be bittersweet, especially as Frankie is a different kind of sex animal.

I’m guessing that’s the attraction because Cassie always was a wild spirit.

Frankie may be her type, but I can’t help manifesting Cassie and Jack together and I’m still secretly holding onto that hope.

We drink wine and chat shit while we apply our theatrical make-up. Gold eyeshadow, bright blue glitter and dark eyeliner is a far cry away from our usual look.

Cassie is sitting beside me as we share a minute and whispers, “Summer looks amazing. Her make-up is almost professional.”

“You don’t look so bad yourself, Cass.”

I admire her handiwork and she smiles. “It is kind of fun. I can’t wait to see the guys in their costumes.”

“Where are we meeting them again?”

I’m aware that Frankie—as always—has devised a little game for this evening to ramp up the thrill.

We are all making our way to prom alone.

When we arrive, it’s up to us to identify our partner and when we think we are right, we are to kiss them on the cheek and if they are our guy, they will take our hand and kiss the back of it.

Cassie replies, “In the hallway set before The Great Hall. It’s where the staff and volunteers will dish out the punch.”

“I wonder if we will guess correctly?”

Cassie’s eyes gleam. “It would be amusing to kiss someone else and wait for the fireworks. Frankie never thought this through because I may do it for the hell of it.”

“You always did like living dangerously, Cassie.”

I roll my eyes as she grins. “Is there any other way?”

Summer overheard us. “I’d know Luca from a mile away. It’s as if a dark aura surrounds him on a permanent basis.”

I kind of agree with her. Luca stands out from most of the guys because he refuses to tone down his dark, demonic appearance.

He prefers black leather to sweats and torn black jeans to blue denim.

His silver chains and leather bracelets are a dead giveaway, along with his dark flashing eyes.

He commands attention wherever he goes and with Summer beside him, they make a striking couple who turn many heads.

Summer has the easy option tonight, and she knows it.

“I can’t wait.” Siri giggles. “I love a challenge, and Jack has promised not to make it easy for me.”

She grins. “Wouldn’t it be funny if I kissed Jesse, and you kissed Jack?”

“Knowing my luck, I’d end up kissing Santi and then God help me.”

I roll my eyes and Cassie adds, “He would love that. That guy is pissed he never got a crack at you before Jesse stepped in. I’m convinced he would join The Claiming challenge if you were in it.

“Nonsense.” I shake my head, the conversation I shared with Santi not long ago still fresh in my mind. There is only one guy I’m interested in and I am sure he will be

one of the staff volunteers and out of everyone, I wish I could kiss him on the cheek and be done with it all.

We all drift to our subsequent rooms to change and as I appreciate a moment alone, I wander to the window and glance down at the yard outside. The calm before the storm. It certainly feels that way and a gentle knock on my door causes me to turn and say hesitantly, “Who is it?”

I receive no answer and I move to the door, opening it with caution.

There is nobody there, but as I glance down, I notice the box propped up on the wall beside the door.

I drop down and lift it into my hands and head back into the room, placing it carefully on the table. My fingers shake as I open it and I smile when I see the delicate corsage made out of pretty white roses and eucalyptus leaves.

There is a card inside the box nestling against the white ribbon and as I read it, my heart flutters.

For the most beautiful girl at the prom tonight. I may not be your date, but I’ll be close by. Wear this and know I am watching you.

It’s so beautiful and just like Drake to make such a sweet gesture. As I fasten it to my wrist, I lift my arm and take a deep breath of the heady scent. It’s so beautiful and I can’t get enough of it and I expect it’s because I am madly in love with the person who sent it to me.

As I spray some scent and tuck my phone into the small white bag attached to my wrist and the corsage on the other, a flutter of excitement passes through me as I anticipate the night ahead.

More than anything, I want to steal some time with Drake, but I'm aware we have a mountain to climb before that will come as easy as breathing.

For now I will have him close in another way and what with the corsage on my wrist and the love burning brightly in my heart, I'm certain I'm invincible.

THIRTY-NINE

DRAKE

I'm on edge. I usually am when I sense danger and tonight promises to be an evening I hope will be memorable for all the right reasons.

My duties include dealing out punch, all the time checking that nothing extra is added to it. They may be college students who drink like sailors, but when the evening is run by the academy, the principal is taking no chances.

Luckily, I've managed to avoid her for most of the week and only in passing did her meaningful smirk place me on edge. I've done everything possible to stay out of her way this week and somehow it's worked.

I'm guessing if she really wanted my attention she would have summoned me to her room, but somehow I've gotten away with that and as I busy myself with the preparations, I make certain that I check out this place for every eventuality.

I wouldn't put it past the principal to stage some kind of distraction and my heart bangs mercilessly for Imogen as I sense unease.

As the students drift into the hall that sits beside the great one, I dish out punch with a smile as I applaud them on their costumes.

They have excelled themselves. The guys are resplendent, dressed in either togas or as gladiators.

An array of masks covering their features adding to the drama.

The girls are mainly wearing togas, their hair intricately styled in the roman way, masks covering their eyes with suggestive smiles painted on their lips.

Fingers brush against mine as I hand them the drinks and eyelashes flutter behind the masks.

I'm used to this. Most of my lessons are spent fielding lascivious glances from the girls in the class, along with some of the guys.

History teachers aren't usually built like me it seems, and I can't wait for the day I can relax back into my jeans and t-shirt.

My leather jacket sitting comfortably on my back.

Undercover work sucks most of the time and I hate knowing that Imogen will be hit on by most of the drunken jocks here and I must be content with a front-row seat, unable to take part and watch the drama unfold.

My flesh creeps when Angela catches up with me and her hand on my arm almost gives me hives.

"Drake." She whispers in my ear. "I have plans for us this evening."

Fuck me. I hoped I'd escaped and she whispers, "As soon as we finish up here, meet me in my office and remember to lock the door behind you. It's about time I welcomed you to the club personally."

She moves away, smiling at the students who pass and I am sick to my stomach at the mere idea of what her welcome would involve.

I hand out drinks and even recognize a few of the students behind their masks, but I don't detect any of Imogen's friends at all. It's as if they aren't here—then again, the costumes are so carefully contrived to disguise, I may have missed them already.

I note two guys chatting on the edge of the group and am convinced that one of them is Frankie Majerio and the other Luca Romano.

Luca kind of gives it away by the leather tied around his wrist and the way he sets himself apart from the crowd with his usual arrogant boredom.

I've studied all the members of The Elusive House the entire time I've been here and Luca is the one who freaks me out the most. The others appear almost normal compared to him and yet he never puts a foot wrong.

He's quiet, gets on with the work and causes no fuss—none that I've heard about, anyway.

A soft voice distracts me, "May I have some punch please, sir?" My heart leaps inside me as I stare into the bewitching eyes I know so well.

She smiles sweetly and tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear and I note the beautiful corsage tied on her wrist.

"Nice flowers." I whisper, and she nods. "They were given to me by someone special."

She accepts the punch and as her fingers brush against mine, I resist the urge to grasp them tightly and never let them go.

Imogen is achingly beautiful most of the time, but tonight she is a goddess. Literally. She told me she would be one, but for the life of me I can't remember who, but it's

immaterial, anyway. Imogen is a goddess, and she is the only one who doesn't know that.

She disappears into the crowd, and my eyes follow her, drawn to the delicate corsage adorning her wrist. Whoever gave her that is a genius because it allows me to identify her in a crowd, which I am extremely grateful for.

Something strikes me as I stare at it and her words haunt me.

“They were given to me by someone special.”

From the expression in her eyes she's convinced that was me and a prickle of fear stabs me.

Something isn't right.

The students are relentless and my attention is distracted meaning I soon lose sight of Imogen.

She is swallowed up in the crowd and I reassure myself that she won't leave the room with anybody, even her friends.

Eyes on Imogen is my number one priority because with Jesse Anderson as her date, it can only spell trouble.

As soon as the punch runs out, I make my excuses to fetch some more and carefully make my way through the room.

Most of the students have already ventured into the hall and I curse the fact I stick out like a red flag in a sea of white ones.

I am without a disguise—unless. I'm surprised I didn't think of it sooner, and as I head determinedly towards the drama department, I aim to fix that as quickly as possible.

FORTY

IMOGEN

I am floating on air. I love everything about this. The staging, the costumes, the lighting and the general buzz of excitement that surrounds me. As instructed, we split up and I haven't seen any of my friends, not that I can recognize, anyway.

I am stopped occasionally. A husky word in my ear that is quickly rebuffed. Guys coming onto me who chat shit and throughout it all, I still haven't found my gladiator.

I notice Summer and Luca already making out in the corner of the room, and I smile to myself. Of course she found him. He may as well not have worn a costume because his aura gives him away every time.

I resume my search for Jesse and as I stumble across Siri, she whispers, "I haven't found Jack yet. Have you seen him?"

"No, the only ones I've seen are Luca and Summer."

"That figures." She rolls her eyes. "Where do you think they are?"

I detect a familiar pair of sneakers and whisper behind my hand, "I'm guessing that's your man."

Siri grins. "Well spotted. I'd know those laces anywhere. Why didn't I think of

looking down rather than up?”

I follow her with my eyes and chuckle softly as she kisses him on the cheek and he immediately spins around and grasps her hand, kissing it gallantly before pulling her into his arms. It's such a sweet act it makes my heart flutter and I've got to hand it to Frankie, his imagination is second to none.

A gladiator brushes past me and the familiar aftershave gives him away and as my eye lower, I note the red socks with gold circles on, telling me this could be Jesse.

He's so OCD and loves to match his socks with his outfit.

His costume is red and gold and the guy who purposefully brushed past me is of the same build.

My heart hammers as I reach out and stop him by placing my hand on his arm and as he turns, I plant a soft kiss on his cheek. Immediately, he raises my hand to his lips and half bows and, without another word, grasps my hand tightly and pulls me after him.

I love the mystery of the occasion, and as the music switches to a slower tune, he pulls me into his arms and holds me flush against his golden breastplate.

It's sexy as fuck and yet I must remind myself that it's Jesse behind the mask and as we dance, I close my eyes against the music as we sway in time to the seductive song.

I imagine Drake is now holding me. We are dancing among the clouds, his hand stroking my back, dusting the skin, sending shivers through me as I imagine him in the place of Jesse right now.

I am intoxicated by the music, the mystery and the man holding me as if I am the

most valuable piece of china and as the song ends, I shake myself as he grasps my hand and leads me through the open door onto the terrace outside.

“Jesse, I—” I glance over my shoulder because I’m not permitted to leave with him. Drake was firm on that, and we are alone out here.

He says nothing and pulls me into his arms and as I make to resist, he raises his hand and presses a soft cloth over my mouth. My eyes widen as a low voice that I don’t recognize growls, “Don’t fight this baby. Welcome to your final act.”

I struggle but the door slams on the music as he pushes me hard against the wall and hisses, “Such an innocent soul to corrupt. Jesse has chosen well and will be rewarded.”

My mind is hazy and my eyes unfocused and as his voice fades slowly away, the last words I hear are, “Welcome to The Serpent Society, angel. You’re in for the night of your life, and your death will be my pleasure.”

FORTY-ONE

CASSIE

The Final Act

It doesn't take long to find Frankie. I could sniff him out from another room.

I slide up behind him and kiss his cheek and as he spins around, the sight of him in all his gladiator glory causes my breath to hitch.

"You took your time." He raises my hand to his lips and rather than kiss it, he drags a leisurely tongue the length of it and then, taking each of my fingers in turn, he sucks them long and slow.

"Fuck, Frankie." I am so turned on and his eyes gleam behind his mask as he whispers huskily, "I can't wait to fuck a Greek goddess."

"Oh, God."

I am almost panting and his husky, "Not God, baby, you just kissed the devil and now your soul is his." is enough to make me gasp, "When can we leave?"

His soft chuckle makes me smile and as he pulls me close, he whispers, "Later. There is business to take care of first."

My heart jumps as I detect the serious tone of his voice and as I glance over his

shoulder, I notice Luca and Summer by the door.

Siri and Jack are heading their way and I say fearfully, “You had better be kidding me.”

“I’m not.”

Desire is quickly replaced by fear and I growl, “If he hurts her, I’ll—”

“You’ll join the line, baby girl.” Frankie’s tone is pure venom and as we race to the exit, he snaps, “How long?”

“Five minutes.” Luca’s tone is even, with no urgency at all. It’s as if he is calm when inside I am raging. My eyes find Jack’s and the helplessness in them causes me to snap, “Why are we still here?”

We head outside and as we run at speed toward the parking lot, I tug off my mask and my heart bashes against my ribcage as I face the fact we messed up big time.

As we pile into the SUV, I almost don’t have time to fasten my belt before Luca squeals out of the academy like a formula one driver hot off the grid.

“Did anyone see her leave?” I ask anxiously and Jack growls, “I saw her. She appeared to be out cold.”

“And you didn’t stop him?” I yell and Frankie says in a calm voice.

“That wasn’t the plan, Cass. Calm the fuck down, we talked about this.”

I am not thinking straight and swallow my fear, my mind working overtime as I attempt to remember the plan.

We have been working on this for the entire semester and when Jesse finally confessed, Frankie unleashed his creative mind.

Jesse informed us that he was to kidnap Imogen from the prom and take her to the final act.

The house they use once a month in their sick games, where he would rape her in front of the other members before killing her in cold blood.

Frankie almost had to beat it out of him, and Jesse spent a long time locked in the dungeon cell before he confessed.

Frankie and Luca were determined to break the society's hold on Jesse and yet when he confessed the plan, Frankie thought Luca was going to end him on the spot.

Instead, they devised a counter plan, and Jesse slowly came back to us. The drugs they fed him left his system, and he agreed to help us bring the society down.

Imogen was never supposed to be in danger. We would follow her movements and keep eyes on her the entire time. The corsage was my idea because when we were in costume, she could easily slip out of sight.

It worked to an extent and Jack, as always, kept a steady eye on her, but now we are racing across town to the house we were informed he is taking her and I hope like hell that Jesse told us the truth about that.

I glance at the app on my phone that is tracking her in my 'find a friend' and I remember the last time I called it up, when she appeared to head off to Cripple Creek. The way she glowed when she returned confirmed my assumption that Imogen has a man and one she doesn't want us to know about.

I have my suspicions though and that worries me too because fuck if history isn't repeating itself — excuse the pun, none intended. First Jesse and Jenna Sloane and now Imogen and Drake Bellingham. I saw the way they stared at one another and it didn't take a genius to work out the attraction.

“The guy who took her. Any idea who he is?”

Siri's tone is grim and I confess, “I have a mind it's Mr. Bellingham.”

“The history teacher.” Siri gasps and Summer nods in agreement.

“I saw the way she looked at him and something about the way his gaze lingered on her confirmed my suspicions.”

“What is it with the teachers in this fucking academy?” I yell, anger mixing with guilt that we have placed Imogen in this position at all.

Frankie turns and the expression in his eyes reassures me a little. “We've got this covered, Cass.”

His eyes glitter with danger, and that is something I sure need right now.

I must place my trust in him because he assured me several times over the past few weeks that he's got this.

He has spent many hours with Luca as they covered every eventuality and this was always an option.

Imogen was the natural choice to save Jesse because out of everyone at Rockwell, she is the only person who interests him.

My thoughts turn to Drake Bellingham and my heart pounds.

How did I miss this? Of course it's him.

When Jenna Sloane was removed, they sent another recruitment officer in her place.

This time they targeted Imogen and I'm guessing it's because of Jesse, who is, to our knowledge, the only person they are currently grooming at Rockwell Academy.

Frankie and Luca have been in touch with River, who is on the way to recovery and desperate to help.

He told them everything they needed to know about the society and how it works and it's down to him we knew what to do to get Jesse back.

Now we are in a car speeding toward God only knows where, hot on the tail of my best friend and the guilt is overwhelming as I face the fact we may be too late.

FORTY-TWO

DRAKE

I waste no time in heading to the drama department.

I can't believe I never thought of it before.

A mask will give me the ability to blend in with the crowd and I must hand it to them, the gladiator costumes was a stroke of genius.

It completely covers the wearer's identity and I can watch over Imogen without discovery.

It will also keep me the fuck away from Angela, who is like a constant bad smell under my nose.

How I detest that woman and can't wait to deal with her as a Reaper clears up shit.

That is one broken angel who should be hurled into the trash.

Women like her aren't broken, they are smashed beyond repair.

I move fast and as I edge inside the drama department I waste no time in taking the stairs up to the wardrobe department where they keep their costumes. I'm convinced I'll find what I'm searching for there, but it turns out, I discover way more than I bargained for.

As I inch inside, a muffled groan alerts me that I'm not the only one in here and as I flick on the light, I'm on my guard as I search the room.

I note a figure tied to a chair, tape covering his mouth, almost naked save for his boxer shorts.

"Fuck, Jesse." I make haste and rip the tape off and note the swelling on the side of his head, blood trickling down past his eye.

"Imogen." His voice is urgent. "She's in danger."

Chills run through me as I grasp an item of clothing and press it hard against his wound and as I untie him with my other hand, I growl, "Tell me everything."

"We don't have time. He's taken her to Redrock Canyon. There's a house there set low down in the mountains. Call the cops. They'll get there before us."

I pull out my phone but it's not the cops I dial and as Ryder answers, I urgently fill him in on the details.

I'm guessing it will take them two hours by road, but we have other forms of transport at our disposal and the helicopters will be a quicker way to travel, but the mountains may make landing more difficult.

The darkness also presents a challenge, but our transport is designed to deal with that.

I fill him in and he wastes no time in issuing instructions and I throw Jesse some clothes off the rail and say quickly, "Take yourself to the medical room. That wound needs tending to."

"No."

He scrambles into the clothes. “I’m okay. You need me and I’m coming with you.”

He grabs a black robe from one of the rails. “This should work.”

I don’t question him and as we head toward my car, I hope like hell we’re not too late.

He fills me in on the journey.

“I was heading to prom when I got a call to meet someone. It was a guy I know, someone you don’t ignore.” His voice falters and he whispers, “His name is Christian Duprey.”

It’s as if a samurai sword is shaving off parts of my heart one by one as fear grips my soul. If Christian Duprey has Imogen, this is worse than I thought.

“I met him in the drama department, where he told me that tonight was my final act and I was to bring my victim to the house at Redrock. To kidnap her, to—” He falters and my knuckles turn white against the steering wheel.

“Anyway, I told him I wasn’t doing it. That I was done with his society and wanted no part of it. He was angry. He told me I had let the society down, that I had failed my probation and he would punish me by taking something I cared about.”

Jesse’s voice shakes and his painful gasp causes me concern as his hand presses against his head.

“I tried to get away. I saw the madness in his eyes but he flew at me and I’m embarrassed to admit he overpowered me.

I felt a blow to my head and woke up tied to the chair, minus my costume.

The bastard even took my socks. I couldn't move and my head hurt like hell.

It still does, but all I could think of was Imogen. ”

“And then I found you.” I heave a sigh. “Thank God I did, because now we at least stand a chance of saving her.”

“How?” Jesse sounds worried. “You don't know who you're up against. The man is psychotic, they all are?”

“Then it's a fucking good job I'm more of a psycho than them.”

My voice is grim, my heart breaking and my resolve overflowing. I failed Imogen. I let her out of my sight and if anything happens to her, I doubt I can live with that.

I'm also concerned about Jesse. His breathing is fast and I'm aware how head wounds can bite when you least expect it.

This isn't good and I check my watch and note we will arrive at the house in thirty minutes.

I calculate that Ryder will get there around the same time and if Imogen was taken somewhere, I only have Jesse's word on that.

I last saw her twenty minutes ago. Therefore they have a twenty minutes head start on us and a lot can happen in that time. It's a fine line between life and death and my blood runs cold when I face the fact we could be too late.

Jesse is battling consciousness and I say loudly, “Tell me about the society.”

I need him to remain focused and talking will help with that.

“It’s not a club anyone should join.” His voice is bitter, as if he is finally facing the facts, and he groans. “It started off as a game. Fucking the pretty teacher was a tick on my college list. I didn’t expect her to be so depraved and it kind of excited me.”

His painful gasp isn’t good and his voice is dimming as he whispers, “She drugged me, messed with my mind and promised me deliverance from the desperate future my folks had planned out for me. She was offering a lot, and I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Those early days were exciting. I couldn’t get enough and then the drugs kicked in and altered my mind and I changed inside.

I would do anything to please her. It became increasingly difficult to do that and, combined with the drugs affecting my mind, the things she asked of me started to feel ordinary.

There would be no consequences, just more of a high, and I was chasing that harder than a forbidden fuck with an older woman. ”

His breathing is labored, and I put in the call and as he passes out, I will get nothing more from him. Jesse is a victim just as much as Imogen, and I will not let anything happen to him, not on my watch. Despite everything he came through in the end and my anger turns toward one man.

Christian Duprey. He will not survive the night. Not if I have anything to do with it, because when the Grim Reaper comes calling, the only place you’re going is straight to hell.

FORTY-THREE

IMOGEN

I must be dreaming. My eyes are heavy and I'm obviously in bed because I'm lying down, but I can't open my eyes. They are so heavy and impossible to move.

I attempt to move and my hands are like lead weights. I can't even lift them. It's the same with my feet. Am I paralyzed?

The fog in my brain begins to clear and as the memories come rushing back, they bring fear with them as an unwelcome passenger.

That man wasn't Jesse. He was dressed like Jesse, but his voice was cold, unfeeling and brutal.

He is going to kill you.

Even my inner voice sounds panicked and yet I'm not relaxing at all. Just lying in state, almost. Waiting for death. Waiting for him to end it.

"She's waking up."

It's a familiar voice. One I can't place and yet my eyes remain tightly closed. They don't want to cooperate at all.

"Good." The rough voice of my captor grates on my nerve endings and yet I still

can't react or move.

“Are they ready?”

His gruff voice forms a question that receives a ready answer.

“They are all in place.”

“Perfect.”

I hear movement, metal on stone, and the bed moves. Is this a hospital trolley? Am I delirious?

We begin to move, the screech of the wheels against the stone foreboding, warning me to escape, but I have no energy. My body has given up on me.

My inner voice is screaming at me to wake the fuck up. To take charge of my body and fight like hell. I'm aware of what I must do, but I have no ability to move. It's as if I am trapped inside my body with no way out.

A blast of cold chilling air wafts against my skin, reminding that I am still living—that's good at least. It's a start.

The shadows behind my eyes change as we move, from light to shade and then to darkness.

We enter a room that's eerily silent, only the screech of the wheels against the uneven stone floor.

I am spun around and pushed against an immovable object and then he speaks.

“Fellow serpents, I welcome you all here today with your dedication to the cause.”

A strange hum is his answer and a rattling of what sounds like chains and he says loudly in a voice that would cause the devil himself to shiver.

“We have two final acts today. Both are unusual. Rather than initiate a member into our club as normal, we are facing two betrayals instead.”

A horrified gasp echoes around the chamber and as it subsides he says cruelly, “Our trusted soldier, Python, discovered her slave was working with the enemy. That slave is Delilah and her punishment is that her life ends here today.”

He says loudly, “The other final act is a different form of sacrifice. The apprentice backed out and betrayed the society.”

There is a shocked murmur of discontent and the man yells, “His victim means something to him and we will take her instead to teach you all that the society is the only thing that matters. Total obedience is required or lose something valuable to you and live with the consequences. This final act will be carried out by every serpent here. We will finish what he started as vengeance.”

I’m aware that somebody is beside me. Is this the girl they spoke of, the slave? I remember the young girl with Drake, emerging from the tunnel dressed in black. He told me she was helping him. It must be her.

I try to speak, but my voice is lost and I can’t move my head. What did he give me? I can’t fight back. I am paralyzed and I finally face the fact that this is where my life ends tonight.

FORTY-FOUR

CASSIE

We reach the house set at the foot of the mountain and my blood chills. It's like something out of a horror movie and doesn't appear occupied at all. There are several cars already here, and yet it appears deserted.

"What are we going to do?"

I am fearful we're too late and Luca says darkly, "We are here for Imogen. We do nothing but watch."

"Nothing!" The hell I'm doing nothing and leave my best friend in the hands of a psycho creep.

Summer rests her hand on my arm.

"Ssh, Cassie. We're not supposed to be here at all."

"I don't understand."

It's as if everyone else knows something I don't, and Frankie reaches out and grasps my hand tightly.

"I know the back way in. Follow me. There's a galleried landing that runs the length of the main room they are using. We can observe from there."

I'm shocked when he removes a case loaded with guns from the trunk and hands one to Luca and Jack in turn.

"I want one." I say through gritted teeth and Frankie shrugs.

"If you're a good enough shot, then you can have mine with pleasure but only at the opportune moment."

"You may shoot, Imogen. It's not safe." I hiss, overwhelmed with anxiety.

"That's why you're here, baby girl."

He drops a light kiss on my head and Siri adds, "So we get Imogen while you cover us. Is that your plan?"

"It will work." Luca says with a sinister gleam in his eye.

I stare at Jack in dismay, but his expression is grim. "It will be okay, Cassie. Trust us to have this sewn up."

He adds briskly, "We're wasting time."

We head toward the back of the house and as we reach the door, it opens without force. I have an uneasy feeling about this as we creep inside, the house in darkness. Is it a trap? It could be, and I'm not happy at all.

I follow Frankie up a staircase leading to the top of the house and he places his finger on his lips as we reach a landing. I hear voices coming from below and as we crawl in the shadows and lie low on the floor, I witness a sight that will live with me to my dying day.

Red cloaked figures are arranged in a semicircle around two trollies.

On each is a young girl, a blindfold tied around their eyes and they are held down by handcuffs on their wrists and ankles, shackled to the beds.

They are wearing the clothes they were dragged here in and my heart almost gives out on me when I spy Imogen in her white toga.

She isn't moving.

Are we too late?

I swallow the sob that is threatening to reveal our location to the figures below.

One of them steps forward and a familiar voice fills the entire room.

"I sacrifice my slave. She betrayed me and told a stranger our secrets before asking for his help to escape me."

A shocked murmur fills my head and then the man at the foot of the trollies says loudly, "I sacrifice the victim of an apprentice who betrayed the society. She will pay the price for his sins and her blood will be on his hands."

I gasp as he parts the robe and draws out a sword, the blade gleaming in the darkness as he growls, "Get ready my fellow serpents. Kidnap is complete. It's time to move on to the next part of the challenge."

As the first man parts his robe, I notice he's naked underneath and as he approaches Imogen, Frankie stands up and yells, "Not so fast!"

A shocked sea of faces glance our way and as we all stand, Frankie, Luca and Jack

train their guns on them and Frankie hisses, “Set the girls free.”

The man turns, and it chills my blood to the bone as he laughs out loud. “How amusing. You have come to save your friend. Do you really believe I didn’t anticipate that?”

The click of a gun pressed to the back of my head causes me to freeze and as the others suffer a similar outcome, my world stops spinning as the man says with amusement, “It appears that we have some more victims. What a night this is turning out to be.”

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FORTY-FIVE

DRAKE

I called ahead and dropped Jesse on the corner of the highway, where an ambulance was told to wait.

After a brief explanation, they head off on blues and sirens and my heart settles.

Jesse passed out ten minutes ago and after stopping to check he was breathing, I made the call and hope they can treat him in time.

As I speed toward the house, I detect the gentle hum of several helicopters and my relief is put on hold. Are we too late? Fuck!

As soon as I screech to a halt, I note Frankie's car and my fury consumes me. What the fuck. If Frankie is here, it's possible that Cassie is too and Ryder King is about to explode like a nuclear bomb.

It strikes me how many fucking cars are here. Did they sell tickets or what?

As I move through the shadows, I head to the back of the house, my weapons that were stored in my trunk now firmly around my person. I will wage a small war if they have got my girl and Cassie and as I stick to my training and proceed with caution, my machine gun is primed and ready for attack.

I hear voices and curse when I hear Frankie yell, "Not so fast!"

I stop and listen and as I glance up, I notice the surprise attack coming from behind the kids. Fuck and double fuck. He knew they were coming, or prepared for it. Of course, he has security. He would be a fool not to.

As soon as he finishes speaking, a slight movement in front changes to several around me and out of the shadows emerges Satan's army.

Men in black suits, more at home in a boardroom than a shootout and as the man laughs at how clever he is, a sinister voice says smoothly, "Now what do we have here?"

It's as if a small army has descended on the room and the guns trained on the hooded figures are definitely not their own.

"What the fuck is going on? Who the hell are you?" Christian is fast losing his cool and the newcomer laughs, which sends shivers down my spine.

"First, tell your men to lower their guns and let the kids go."

"Now why would I do that?"

The man sneers and as he speaks, several gunshots crack the air and my heart almost fails as I notice every single gunman fall behind the kids upstairs.

"That's why?" The newcomer sneers and heads toward Christian Duprey, confident that several guns are backing him up.

Christian obviously doesn't realize that and wields his sword, stepping toward Imogen and holding the point to her heart.

Thank god she can't see what's happening and I take aim with my gun, the middle of

his head in my sight and as I prepare to fire, the man says, “Consider your society is now closed for business. Consider yourself my prisoner and consider yourself well and truly fucked.”

There’s silence and then I notice the kids backing away from the edge and I swear to God I will never ask for anything else in my life because the familiar sight of my team reassures me they are now safe.

I’m astonished at how many guns are trained on one group of people and knowing the Reapers will be marking every single man here settles my heart just a little.

As soon as the kids have left the room, the guy who’s now in charge laughs softly. “You’re a brave man threatening a woman who is tied up and defenseless. It reminds me what a fucking nobody you are.”

Christian sneers, “You know nothing about me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I know everything about you.”

He raises his arm and two similar figures step to his side and he growls, “Allow me to introduce my brothers. Dante, Romeo and I’m Lucian and in case you’re in any doubt, we fucking hate everything you stand for and our one pleasure in life—call it a hobby if you like, is heaping more misery on people like you than they have ever done in a lifetime.

Consider yourself our prisoner, as well as your sick friends and for your information, our prisons are a one-way trip. ”

“You’re such a big man.”

Christian laughs out loud like a maniac. “But I am in charge here and if you want to

save these women, you will do everything I say.”

“I don’t.” Lucian shrugs. “My only interest in this has already left the building. If you kill these women, their blood is not on my hands.”

Christian’s eyes flash as the two men stare one another down and as he lifts the sword, I don’t even hesitate. My shot releases from the gun and hits him square between the eyes and as soon as the bullet enters his brain, all hell breaks loose.

Under the cover of fire, I run at speed toward Imogen, knowing my brothers have my back as they take out every fucking member of this society. The guys in black fall to the ground in cover, as Ryder yells, “Get down on your hands and knees and don’t move!”

A shower of bullets finds every mark and as I reach Imogen, I seize the samurai sword and cut the chains binding her to the bed.

I am joined by another Reaper who does the same to Delilah and as we shield their bodies from the gunfire, I kiss her softly on the cheek and whisper, “I’ve got you darlin’. You’re safe now.”

It’s a strange thing to say when we are experiencing Armageddon, but as my body shields hers, the bullets would have to pass through me first. Imogen dies under my dead body and that will never change all the time I’m allowed to protect her.

The silence is surprising. As the last body falls, it’s eerie as fuck. No groans, no cries of pain, merely calm deadly silence.

Then it comes. “All Clear.”

I waste no time and pull away from Imogen and stare anxiously at her face. She’s not

moving—at all.

“Fuck.” The low growl from Blade, who is in a similar position beside me with Delilah, reinforces my thoughts exactly.

“They’re drugged.” He growls and as I remove her blindfold, I swallow hard when Imogen’s beautiful eyes stare back at me, full of tears and something else, but despite everything, it’s evident she can’t move a muscle.

I stroke her face tenderly and whisper, “I’ve got you darlin’.”

I wish she could smile, could answer me even, and then I am pushed aside and before I can react, Flash pulls her into his arms and cradles her like a baby.

“I’m here darlin’. I’ve got you.”

The torture in his voice will live with me to my dying day and Blade growls, “They need a doctor.”

The screech of a siren outside answers him, and Ryder’s concerned voice at my ear says gruffly, “The paramedics are here. They’ll take care of them.”

“I’m going with her.” Flash says gruffly and Ryder slaps him on the back, genuinely concerned.

“Of course.”

If ever there was a time I felt helpless, this is it. I failed. Imogen is here because of me—because I failed to protect her and I will never forgive myself, even if she makes a full recovery.

I can't even find the right words to comfort Flash. He's my brother, and I have done the unthinkable. I not only fucked his virgin daughter, but I let her down—both of them down.

Ryder places a strong hand on my back and says roughly, "Good job, soldier, but it's not over yet."

He issues his instructions like the commanding general he is.

"Take the girls to the ambulance. The paramedics have no other business here."

He refers to the bloodbath in the room. As Reapers, we are used to cleaning up shit for the government and there will be no repercussions for what happened here tonight. However, explaining that to civilians is another matter entirely.

I watch helplessly as Flash carries Imogen out of the room, shielding her face from the carnage as she lies helplessly in his arms. Blade does the same for Delilah and I pray to God she makes it.

It's as if that fucking samurai sword is speared straight through my heart as I turn my attention to the job at hand.

Ryder approaches the Romanos, who are obviously pissed their prize has been snatched from them at the last minute.

He offers Lucian Romano his hand, and I'm surprised when he says gruffly, "Thanks. I appreciate your help."

Lucian nods coolly. "I can't pretend I'm happy about the outcome. I wanted nothing more than to deal with that creep myself."

He sighs. “But the outcome is the same. It’s done and another sick society has been disbanded.”

Ryder nods, a grim expression on his face. “Your son.” He turns to Dante, who shrugs, apparently unconcerned his son was caught up in this. His words are delivered in a husky drawl. “Luca was acting for the family. He will never be contained when men like that prey on others.”

Ryder nods and I’m surprised when he says grimly. “That’s his excuse and I understand his involvement. I don’t understand Frankie Majerio’s.”

Dante grins as Lucian laughs softly. “Strange things happen when families work together. His uncle, Malik, was brought in when Frankie’s friend was involved.

The Majerios are loyal to their friends, and Frankie required Malik’s help with that.

Malik discovered that I was already aware of The Serpent Society and we pooled our resources.

It was through his information that I learned of this place, the people involved, and the location of the other houses dotted around the country.

As we speak, the rest of Club Mafia have carried out similar raids on their houses and every member of The Serpent Society is now presumed dead. ”

“I see.” Ryder sighs heavily. “Then our job is done. All that remains is to clear up this shit and have a strong word with our kids.”

My heart physically shakes when a flash of anger heats his eyes, and I wouldn’t want to be Cassie or Jack right now when he turns his attention to them.

Then my heart sinks further when his gaze turns to me and he angles his head to the door.

“A word, soldier.”

He shakes the Romano’s hands and jerks his head toward the carnage left in the room. “We’ll clean up. Thank you for your time.”

As we walk away, the Romanos and their men slink back into the shadows and as we hit the wall, Ryder says in a low voice, “I’ll expect a full debrief in the morning. There’s enough to deal with tonight, and the questions can wait until then. Just one thing though before you leave?—”

My heart sinks.

“Flash is aware of your interest in his daughter.”

“You told him?”

I’m surprised at that and Ryder shakes his head. “No.”

“Then who?”

Ryder grins. “It appears that Imogen did what most girls do when they want their daddies knowing something.”

He grins. “They tell their mom and ask her to tell him first.”

“Jennifer did?”

“Apparently, Imogen called her and told her everything. She also said that if her

daddy had a problem with her loving a Reaper, he should question his own mind. If it's good enough for her mom, then why not his daughter and he should be thanking you."

"I let them down."

"You protected her. You saved her life."

Ryder states fact. "Without your tip, we wouldn't be here now. You did your job, soldier, and you did it well. Now haul your ass over to the hospital and go and get your woman, while I have a very stern word with my daughter."

FORTY-SIX

CASSIE

My mind is spinning, and my heart is heavy. What have we done? All I can think of is Imogen and what happened to her. Is she okay? I'm so worried about her. We left an extremely volatile situation back there and I feel sick not knowing she's safe.

When that psychopath took his sword and held it toward her, I swear my heart stopped beating. Then events spiraled out of control and when the cold barrel of a gun was pressed against my head, I thought that was it. Our plan had failed and rather than helping her, we had made everything worse.

Luca's family may have arrived too late and yet when the gun behind me dropped as the result of one bullet to its owner's head, my legs almost gave way. Frankie reached for my hand to steady me and then before I knew what was happening, the guy behind me was replaced by a familiar sound.

"Move with me, darlin'. I've got you."

I will never forget how relieved I was when I recognized the voice of my father's best friend and right arm, Snake. He is the closest uncle to me and it was then I realized we were safe. The Reapers were here. They would deal with this.

We left under the protection of the Reapers, who guided us out of the nightmare, instructing us not to look back or down. I'm not sure where Lucian Romano's men went, but I'm guessing they just stepped aside and continued to guard their don from

the shadows.

As soon as we leave the building, tears blind me as Snake pulls me in hard and buries his face in my hair, whispering, “You nearly gave us a collective heart attack, darlin’.

Safe to say, you have some explaining to do.”

I blink back my tears and hold on to him hard as I whisper, “But Imogen is still in there.”

I jump when the sound of gunfire echoes through the entire house, and as Snake holds onto me tightly, he whispers, “She will be fine. Let the Reapers do their job and understand Imogen is our number one priority.”

“My father.” I gulp as the word sticks in my throat because he’s in there. I know he is and Snake sighs, “Let him rage, Cassie. He’s freaking angry, but it comes out of fear. Don’t give him any sass. It won’t go down well.”

I fall silent because I’m extremely aware of how my daddy operates. He will be pissed. I already accept that, but more than anything, I wish it was his arms I was in now, no matter how much Snake is a very close second.

The others are huddled together, several Reapers watching over them, their machine guns slung over their arms, their hardened expressions taking no shit.

I catch Frankie’s eye and his eyes flash with concern, but I know better than to leave Snake’s side.

It is not an option right now. Instead, I smile reassuringly at Frankie and hope like hell there’s a good outcome for us in this.

Sirens disturb the eerie silence, and as the ambulance screams to a halt, I note the

paramedics exiting at speed. Maverick and Jet step forward and they are all deep in conversation and the paramedics stop where they are, as if waiting for the all clear.

My heart is thumping so hard I may need their life saving skills myself and then the door opens and Flash and Blade emerge, holding the two girls in their arms.

“Oh my God.” Tears stream down my face as they disappear into the ambulance that soon takes off with the four of them in it.

“Will they be okay?” I’m not even sure why I’m asking, but Snake always appears to hold the answers, and he reassures me. “They’ll be fine.”

“How do you know?”

Because if there is a god, which I firmly believe, he will be keeping an eye on them. She also had another guardian angel in that room who I’m assured wouldn’t let anything happen to either of them.”

This is news to me and I gasp, “Who?”

“Drake.”

“As in Bellingham. The history teacher?”

Snake nods. “Of course. Haven’t you learned anything, Cassie?”

Have you forgotten who your daddy is? We’ve known for some time about the threat at Rockwell Academy and have been working with the Romanos and Club Mafia to share intelligence.

Drake went undercover to monitor the three of you, mainly Imogen. ”

He heaves a sigh. “When she hooked up with our number one suspect, Flash nearly pulled her out. Ryder insisted Drake would protect her, and he soon filled her in on things. They’ve been working together to save your friend and bring the society down from the inside.”

I can only stare as I digest his words. Imogen was working with a Reaper— Drake is a Reaper and now everything makes sense.

He wasn’t trying to corrupt her, he was saving her and my eyes shine with tears when I consider how brave my friend is.

She was aware of the risks and agreed to help Jesse.

I’m guessing she also had another motive in mind, and I don’t blame her.

Drake is seriously hot, but I’m not a fool.

They will have a lot of explaining to do when Flash learns the news that his daughter is in love with a fellow soldier. This may not end well. For any of them.

It seems to take ages for the dust to settle and then we note the Romanos and their men leaving the building.

“It’s over.” I remark to Snake, and he nods.

“So it appears.”

He listens to his headpiece and smiles. “The threat is gone. You can go and join your friends. Don’t move an inch, though. I’m still watching you.”

I make to leave and then turn, heading back and throwing my arms around his huge

body. As I press my face against his strong chest, I whisper, “Thank you, Snake. I love you.”

“I love you too, darlin’.” He presses a kiss to my head and squeezes me hard.

“Now go and reassure your friends, but not too much.”

He chuckles softly and as I run to the crowd watching us, I fall into Frankie’s arms and it’s a homecoming of sorts. As they wrap around me, he whispers softly, “I’m sorry, baby. That didn’t go as planned.”

Jack joins us before I can answer him and says gruffly, “Fuck, Cassie. This is bad. My dad is pissed as fuck, so God only knows what you’re about to face.”

I glance over his shoulder and note Brewer’s concerned face and yet he drops me a wink and a sympathetic smile without his son seeing.

Like Snake, Brewer is one of my closest uncles, and where Snake is my father’s right arm, Brewer is his left. We are a family. We always will be and I swallow my emotion because it’s so god-damned reassuring that they are here now.

Frankie’s phone lights up and he nods with satisfaction. “Uncle Malik.” He explains. “They’ve taken out several houses tonight. The Serpent Society has been extinguished and is no longer a threat.”

“Thank God.”

Luca is deep in conversation with his father and uncles, and a shiver runs down my spine.

Luca is hard to deal with on his own and with four of them standing there, surrounded

by somber guards, I can only imagine the life he leads.

It certainly explains a lot, and I wonder if I would have the same reaction if Frankie's family was standing here now.

I'm guessing worse because there are more of them.

Frankie can be every inch as dark as Luca, but not with me.

Never me and I reach for his hand and squeeze it firmly as I prepare to face the wrath of my father as I introduce him to my guy.

FORTY-SEVEN

CASSIE

We don't have long to wait either because emerging from the house with an extremely grim expression is the man who means the entire world to me and despite my misgivings I break away from Frankie and run like hell toward him.

I fall into his outstretched arms and sob like a baby as they close around me, holding me close, protecting me, always there for me.

I cry tears of relief mixed with guilt. I went against everything he ever taught me. I took things into my own hands and never asked for help.

He kisses the top of my head and says gruffly, "You tryin' to give your old man a heart attack, princess?"

"I'm sorry, daddy."

I snuggle into his chest and his sigh of relief doesn't make me feel any better because I've caused him pain and I will never be okay with that.

He pulls away and stares deep into my eyes, and his expression terrifies the shit out of me.

He is so angry. His dark eyes flash with anger and his features are stretched across his face like a canvas over a trampoline.

“It appears that I need to remind you of something, Cassie.”

I hold my breath as his husky whisper is loaded with emotion.

“You are the beat of my heart, my reason for living, and if you hurt, I hurt one thousand times more. If anything happens to you, I die inside. You will destroy me because you are the best part of me. The part of me that is so proud I struggle to breathe when I look at you. The moment you were born, I learned what love is and if this has taught me anything at all, it’s that I still have a lot to teach you about surviving this sick and twisted world.

But it’s also taught me that you’re a woman now.

My little girl has grown up and makes her own choices, no matter how bad they turn out to be. ”

His eyes flicker to Frankie, who is standing a short distance away, staring at us with concern. Then he swings his gaze to Jack, who is bleeding remorse close by and he sighs heavily.

“You did what you thought was right for your friend. You attempted to solve shit on your own and I hope you’ve learned a valuable lesson from that.”

I hang my head and whisper, “I’m sorry, daddy.”

He tilts my face to stare up at him and his eyes glitter as he whispers, “No matter how old you are, no matter how old I am, I will always be here for you. Run it by me first and what you can’t ask me, ask your mother.”

“I promise.” Tears blind me as his warning hits home. I disregarded the most powerful weapon in my arsenal and endangered all our lives. I made a stupid mistake

and my regretful tears burn as I whisper, “I nearly got us all killed. I’m such a shit friend.”

He grips my face and forces me to look at him, and his voice is firm. “You did what you thought was for the best. This doesn’t mean I’m not insanely pissed at you, princess. I am so angry I am tasting venom.”

His eyes flick to Frankie and he growls, “I want a word with your guy now.”

Fuck. Part of me dies inside as I turn and wave Frankie across. The fact he shows no fear is either impressive or god-damned stupid, and when he arrives, my father glares at him.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you now.”

My shocked gasp is the only sound as Frankie nods.

“I wouldn’t blame you, sir. It was my plan, not Cassie’s. We thought we had it covered with Luca’s family as back up. I should never have involved the girls.”

My eyes flash, hearing me dismissed as a girl and yet I’m not stupid enough to interrupt right now. The hell, I’m being left out of anything and my father nods. “I’m glad you realize that. I also want you to realize this.”

He glares at Frankie with an expression that could melt iron and hisses, “If my daughter is sad, upset, or even doubtful about anything you do from now, or in the future, you won’t be so lucky and I don’t care who your family are.

You guard my princess with your life because if anything happens to her, yours will be worth shit. Do I make myself clear?”

“You do and I’m sorry, sir.”

“Sorry for involving her in a potential death trap or sorry you were unsuccessful in your mission?”

I cringe as Frankie faces him with an angry gleam in his eye and huffs. “Both sir.”

For some reason, his answer eases the building tension and my father shakes his head. “It’s an honest answer, and I respect that.” He sighs heavily. “Go back to Rockwell. And just so you know, we are not done talking about this yet.”

Frankie reaches for my hand. I swear that guy has balls of steel as my father’s eyes disappear into his hairline.

I clasp it firmly and smile at the man who is trying to keep his shit together and whisper, “I love you, daddy. I always will.”

He nods, a small trace of emotion showing on his chiseled expression and as we make to leave, he hisses, “Send Jack over. He has some explaining to do.”

As we head toward an anxious-looking Jack, I walk with a huge ball of guilt dragging behind me. I let them all down and I vow never to let that happen again.

FORTY-EIGHT

IMOGEN

It's as if I'm watching a scene in a movie and am not part of the action. It's the most surreal experience of my life. I hear the words and understand them, but am powerless to react. I'm locked inside my own body, and it's the scariest thing that has ever happened to me in my life.

I thought I was going to die. The man in the red cloak, the samurai sword, and his evil words will haunt my nightmares forever.

There was nothing I could do but where my body had no reaction, my mind did.

Fear prickled on every nerve ending as I awaited my fate, accepting it would be a painful ending.

Then I heard Frankie and my fear increased ten hundred because if Frankie was here, so was Cassie.

There was another voice, a deeply disturbing chilling voice that made my flesh sizzle. Then shots, so many shots before salvation.

As soon as Drake whispered he had got me, I couldn't even cry tears of relief. He saved me and I had no way of thanking him.

Then he was replaced by my father and I swear if it was possible, I would have

broken down. I will never forget that emotion inside me when my father lifted me effortlessly off the trolley and carried me to the waiting ambulance, the emotion in his voice so very hard to bear.

I am not alone in the ambulance. The other girl was brought in with me and with two Reapers and the paramedic it's pretty crowded in here. He says nothing, but his anxiety reaches out and fills me with fear. What if I never recover and am destined to live life locked in my body with no way out?

"She's been drugged." The paramedic explains to my father as he lifts my wrist and checks my pulse.

"Will it wear off, or is it—" Daddy's voice catches and I have never heard real fear accompany his words.

"Possibly, but the doctor at the hospital will understand it better. I've never seen this myself, but her signs are normal, so it may be temporary or the doctor may have an antidote."

He radios ahead and daddy reaches down and strokes the hair away from my face, whispering as he smiles tenderly, "It's okay, Imogen, the doctors will work their magic on you and the poor girl in this with you."

I wish I was able to reassure the girl beside me.

She must be as scared as I am but unlike me, she has nobody to comfort her.

As if he can read my mind, daddy turns to her and says brightly, "Same for you, darlin'.

We'll make this better for both of you. You're safe now and nothing, or nobody, will

hurt you again. ”

I wish I could explain. Chase away the fear in his eyes, but I am powerless in every way.

The paramedic finishes his call and smiles reassuringly.

“I spoke with the duty doctor and he thinks it’s a drug that is widely used these days, usually in date rape cases. There is a shot he’ll give you when we arrive that he’s eighty percent convinced will restore physical function with no side effects.”

“Only eighty percent?” I detect the worry in my father’s voice and the guy nods. “We can never guarantee one hundred percent, as I’m sure you understand. Eighty is good, though, especially in this doctor’s case. He does tend to be on the more pessimistic side and usually gives odds on two to one.”

He winks and then turns to the girl beside me and checks her signs and once again my father strokes my face and whispers, “We’ve got this, Imogen. You’ll be fine. I know in my heart you have nothing to worry about.”

Just seeing his face is enough. Whatever happens, I am safe, and that reassures me more than his gentle smile of encouragement.

Luckily, it doesn’t take long before we screech to a stop and the doors fly open, several doctors pulling the trollies out of the ambulance and racing us down a clinical hallway into the hospital.

My father follows by my side and as we enter the emergency room, he steps back as the doctors crowd around me and I imagine they are doing the same for the girl who traveled in with me.

The lights are blinding, they almost hurt my eyes and as the voices blur into a mixture of medical terms and practicalities, I put all my faith in them to know what they are doing.

It doesn't take long before I feel something. It's as if a river of knives is slowly making its way through my body. Almost like my nerves are being jumpstarted one by one and as my finger twitches, the doctor smiles, "It's working."

"Same." Another voice reassures me that I'm not alone in this and as the sensation returns to my body, I weep tears of relief.

Gradually, my body comes back to me and the doctor says kindly, "Can you wiggle your toes?"

I do as he says, and he nods. "Good girl. We'll move you to a ward and continue to monitor you. You gave your daddy quite a scare back there and—"

He leans down and whispers, "It's possible he needs medical attention more than you right now for shock."

A soft giggle from deep inside me causes tears of relief to fall from my eyes and the doctor smiles and says gently, "It's okay to cry. Let your emotion out and be assured there should be no lasting damage. In twenty-four hours, you should be back to normal."

He steps back and as the porters wheel the bed toward the double doors, my father holds my hand as he walks beside me, not letting go of my hand for a second.

We are soon alone.

I am resting in a private room holding my father's hand and he whispers, "You gave

me quite a scare back there, darlin’.”

“I’m sorry, dad.” I smile my apology and he raises my hand and kisses it softly.

Just seeing him is emotional because he may not be my biological father, but he ticks all the other boxes and more besides.

I love him as my blood and that will never change and I whisper, “I’m sorry. Does mom know about this?”

He heaves a deep sigh.

“No.” He shrugs. “She thinks we’re on a mission. I spared her the details.”

That doesn’t surprise me because he has always shielded her from the harsh realities of the world we live in.

Mom knows what they do but none of the details, and I love how much he cares for her.

He must carry so much inside him that only another Reaper can understand, which is why it’s good that we live together as one happy family.

The guys have someone to offload to in the bar at the end of a tough day and the women are there to ground them and provide normality—well as much as normal exists in our world.

There is a burning question scorching my lips and I hesitate in asking it because I’ve put him through enough for one night and yet I can’t focus on anything other than Drake right now. He saved me. He threw his body over mine in a hail of bullets, and I broach the subject tentatively.

“Um, is—” I search for the right words as I hesitate and he squeezes my hand and whispers, “Is Drake alright?”

My eyes widen and he sighs heavily.

“Your mom told me, darlin’.”

An expression of resignation is my answer before he shakes his head.

“I can’t pretend I’m good with this. Drake is a man and you are my baby girl. I’m struggling with that.”

“But he’s a Reaper, daddy.” I smile softly. “Surely you must be happy I fell in love with a man like that.”

“Love.” He visibly winces. “Stab me in the heart and be done with it.” He exhales sharply. “No man is good enough for you, darlin’ but if I had to choose one and if I’m honest with you, Drake would be number one on the list.”

“Really?” My eyes widen as I sense victory and he nods, a miserable pained expression on his face.

“Drake is a shadow in our organization. A ghost if you like, and I don’t know much about him because he is always undercover.

When he does return, he takes off on his bike to clear his head.

But he’s a Reaper, and that badge is enough to gain my approval.

He’s also not much older than you, five years give or take and yet has earned his patch in the military and subsequent operations, this one included.

But more than all of that—" A smile of sudden admiration lights his face as he squeezes my hand and whispers, "He saved my baby and I will always be indebted to him for that."

Pure emotion lights his eyes and my lip trembles as I whisper, "I love you, daddy."

He shifts and as he pulls me into his huge arms and crushes me to his chest, he buries his face in my hair and says gruffly, "I love you more, darlin' and I always will."

I'm not sure how long we remain like this, but a soft chuckle disturbs us as he whispers, "I kind of think there's someone desperate to see you out there."

"Who?"

He pulls away and grins. "The guy who saved you. He keeps on peering through the window and if I don't put him out of his misery soon, he'll end up in the emergency room under the defibrillator."

I turn my attention to the window, and Drake's anxious face stares back at me. I half wave and smile my reassurance and as my father stands, he says gruffly, "Give us a minute, darlin'. I need a word first."

As he leaves the room, I lean back against the pillow, a small smile on my lips. It will work out fine. I have no doubt about that, although I would love to be a fly on the wall of that hallway when my father has his word with the man who saved my life, in more ways than one.

FORTY-NINE

DRAKE

The expression on Flash's face is grim when he exits Imogen's room and I prepare myself for a confrontation I am resigned to.

He leans against the door blocking the way in and frowns, causing my heart to sink.

"She's okay." He reassures me, and I heave a sigh of relief. "The doctors gave her an injection to reverse the one in her bloodstream, and they said there will be no ill effects."

"Thank God."

I didn't expect my relief to be so enormous and I exhale deeply, his words overwhelming me.

"I owe you everything, Drake."

I glance up and note the pained expression in his gaze. "You saved my baby girl, protected her and shielded her from harm, and I will never be able to repay you. I owe you Imogen's life."

I make to speak, but he holds up his hand and his eyes glitter, his voice gruff. "That doesn't mean I give you her life. Give her to you with my blessing as a prize for your efforts."

I say nothing because he's obviously waging an internal struggle right now.

"Which leaves me with a huge problem."

His decision hangs between us and I'm unsure which way it will fall, and he heaves a desperate sigh.

"But you're a Reaper, Drake. One of my brothers. The finest there is. Why wouldn't I want a man like that for the most precious thing in my world?"

Emotion doesn't usually come easily to us and yet it's so present I could touch it. He shifts off the doorjamb and heads my way, extending his hand and I'm not sure if he's going to strangle me with it or thank me.

It appears to be the latter and as his fist closes around mine, he says with rare emotion, "Thanks, man. I will never forget this and if—" He groans and shakes his head. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but if, well, you want to date my daughter, I won't stand in the way of that."

I make to speak, but again he holds up his hand.

"Save your words. I really can't deal with them right now. I'm going to check on the other girl. You have a ten minute warning before I return."

With a huge sigh, he walks away and rather than reflect on what he just said, I waste not a second of it and head straight into the room.

My heart jerks like a lovesick jock when I see Imogen's soft smile directed firmly at me.

"Drake." Her eyes swim with emotion and I cross the room in two steps and yet

hesitate in touching her. She appears so fragile, and I can't forget what an ordeal she's been through. But she's having none of my concern.

"I could use a hug right now."

I don't even hesitate and as my arms wrap around her fragile body, she clings to me and whispers, "Thank you for saving my life in every way possible."

She pulls back as I swallow the lump in my throat and smiles before leaning closer and pressing her soft lips on mine. As my heart bleeds emotion, I kiss her back, softly, gently, as if she could break at any second.

We don't require words at this moment. It's as if telepathy is our new love language.

It's an unspoken agreement between us that this is where we begin. The ashes of what's past raining down on us as we start a new journey—together this time.

When Flash returns, I'm sitting in his place, holding Imogen's hand as we share soft smiles and hushed whispers. We don't pull away when he enters the room, and he groans out loud. "Fuck. This is freaking weird."

Imogen shrugs. "It was always going to happen one day. You should be glad it's not, well, Luca or Frankie."

We share a grin as Flash nods vigorously. "Too right. Ryder definitely never saw that one coming."

He perches on the edge of the hospital bed as Imogen says with concern. "Is the other girl okay?"

"Delilah." I add and Flash nods.

“She’s okay. Shaken up, understandably. Confused, scared and emotional.”

“She has nobody.” I add, worried about her. “Her only crime was asking me to save her.”

Imogen sighs and turns to her father. “She could have a home at the compound until she figures things out.”

“Already done, darlin’. Bonnie is preparing her room as we speak.”

A huge weight lifts from me because Delilah is going to be okay. With our help, she will start again, somewhere safe. Somewhere that will be right for her.

“I’m glad.” Imogen squeezes my hand. “She put her life on the line and if you hadn’t been looking out for her, well?—”

“Don’t even go there.” I say sternly, and Flash nods his agreement.

“You can’t dwell on what might have been. It’s facts that count. Deal with things when they happen and not before.”

I nod, his words part of the Reaper mind-set. “We deal in facts, darlin’, not what ifs and maybes. The truth is, Delilah is fine, will make a full recovery and go on to live a happy life somewhere safe.”

“I know you’re right.”

The door opens and I swallow hard when Ryder marches in, only the weariness in his eyes betraying the emotion inside him. To outsiders he is calm personified, and he heads straight for Imogen and smiles gently. “It’s good to see you, darlin’. How are you feeling?”

“I’m good—thanks.” She smiles shyly at our overbearing president and he nods his approval.

“Cassie and your friends are tearing up the flooring out there. They’re worried about you.”

He groans. “My instructions were for them to go back to the house, but obviously she took that to mean via the hospital. I don’t know where she gets her stubborn streak from.”

Imogen giggles and Flash grins and I disguise my smile as Ryder’s eyes twinkle. He winks at Imogen and then turns to us. “I need a word. Let the kids have their moment.”

As I stand, Imogen grips hard on my fingers and her soft smile almost makes me disobey an order. It physically hurts to walk away from her, but hopefully this won’t take long.

“I’ll be right back, darlin’. I won’t leave you.”

She nods, her eyes burning with something akin to love. I beat the notion away because Imogen deserves better than to fill her heart with love for me because I wasn’t there when she needed me most and I will never forgive myself for that.

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FIFTY

IMOGEN

Two people replace the three previous ones and as Cassie and Jack head tentatively into the room, the guilt and grief on Cassie's face is too painful to see.

"I'm okay." I reassure them with a smile and Cassie wipes away her tears and sniffs.
"No thanks to us."

Jack appears as concerned and his expression is tight, guarded and yet desperate.

"You frightened us." He whispers and I nod.

"I frightened myself, but it's all good. It worked out in the end."

They sit on either side of me, perched on the edge of the bed, and I ask, "What happened?"

Cassie shares a look with Jack, who sighs heavily. "We gave you the corsage to keep eyes on you. The masks were a good idea to a point, but they also meant we could lose you in a crowd."

Cassie adds. "The plan was to keep tabs on you in case Jesse went back on his word. Luca had already received a text from his father telling him they were hitting on The Serpent Society tonight — all of them."

“I don’t understand.”

Jack nods, a stern expression on his face. “Frankie told me his family was involved. They had enough intelligence to take out the whole god-damned society in one go. They had pinpointed their locations and were moving in and by the end of the night, The Serpent Society would be no more.”

“It was Frankie’s idea to follow Jesse.” Cassie adds. “He wasn’t convinced he was being honest with him and when he saw him enter the room and make straight for you, he was pissed.”

“But it wasn’t Jesse.”

Their eyes widen.

“He was dressed as Jesse, even down to those ridiculous socks he wears, but he wasn’t the guy who drugged me and took me to that house.”

“Then where is Jesse?”

Drake chooses that moment to head inside and catches the tail end of the conversation.

“Jesse is here in the hospital.” He sighs heavily.

“I found him bound and gagged in the drama wardrobe department. Apparently, he told Christian he was out and wouldn’t be taking part in the final act.

Christian was angry and knocked him out and stole his clothes and intended to finish the job as Jesse’s punishment for betrayal. ”

“He’s here.”

We stare at Drake in surprise and he nods grimly. “Ryder checked up on him and he’s got a concussion but should be good to go in twenty-four hours. Same for you, darlin’.”

“And Delilah?” I ask, and Drake’s expression softens.

“Will leave with Blade, who has been detailed with bringing her home.”

“For fuck’s sake, hasn’t she been through enough?” Cassie groans. “He’ll terrify the crap out of her.”

Her response lightens the atmosphere and Jack stands. “We should go and check on Jesse. The others will want to know. They want to come in here and check on you, but that’s a fierce nurse you’ve got guarding you out there and it’s only due to Ryder’s powers of persuasion that we are here at all.”

“You should get some sleep.” Cassie smiles, genuine concern in her eyes.

“I don’t want to sleep. I can’t. So much has happened. My mind is buzzing.”

Cassie leans down and hugs me carefully, whispering, “I’m sorry I let you down, Imogen. We should never have asked you to help save Jesse.”

“I would have been madder if you hadn’t.” I reassure her and her hug is soon replaced with Jack’s and as we huddle together, the three musketeers again, I wonder if that will ever change.

IMOGEN

Six weeks later

I thought this semester would never end.

“Why do I hate the idea of heading home this time?” Cassie grumbles beside us as we head to the cafeteria for lunch.

“Because of Frankie, I’m guessing.” I tease her and she grins, her smile instantly lighting up her eyes at the thought of her guy.

“And probably because your dad is still pissed at you.” I remind her, and her smile fades pretty damn quick.

“Don’t remind me.” Her eyes flash. “You know, I wish we could just take off, a road trip perhaps. All of us, to a beach house or villa somewhere. Three months is gonna kill me.”

I sympathize but can’t relate because I have three months I get to spend with my family and Drake.

A warm glow hits me as I contemplate how well everything worked out. My recovery was quick but the fallout from prom is still going on today.

The students were told that Principal Constable was called away on urgent family business to explain her absence. For the most part, the students here don’t suspect a

thing and life settled down into one with very little excitement and just a lot of partying.

We reach the cafeteria and Siri scans the room.

“I’ll grab our table if you don’t mind fetching me my usual, Summer.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll fetch yours if you like, Cassie.”

“Would you, honey? That would be great.”

As Siri and Cassie bag our table, I join the line with Summer.

“What are your plans this summer, um, Summer?”

I grin as she smiles broadly. “We’re heading off to, well, a place we have in the middle of nowhere. Standard procedure, but in a few weeks I’ll be taking a vacation in Italy.”

“Wow, lucky you.”

“I’m aware that Summer’s family is from Italy. Her folks live there most of the time anyway and she usually divides her time between the mysterious home she has in the middle of nowhere, as she puts it, and her family home in Italy.

“Will Siri be with you?” I’m aware they share the unknown home and Summer nods.

“Yeah, usual thing. It’s kind of cool. There are so many of us it never gets boring and by the time we return to Italy, I’m in need of some alone time, anyway.”

She fixes me with a grin. “What about you?”

She is unaware of my involvement with Drake. They all are except for Jack and Cassie. They had left the building when he saved me and were never told, which is a good thing really.

“Back to the compound, I guess. I do have one trip I’m looking forward to.”

“Where?”

We almost reach the front of the line and a warm shiver passes through me as I picture the beach vacation Drake booked with my parent’s consent. It will be the first time I’ve ever done anything like this and knowing we have my parent’s blessing is an outcome I never dared hope for.

“The Florida Keys.”

The envy on Summer’s face makes me feel bad because of course Luca lives in Florida and she would kill to spend time with him there.

“Say hi to Luca if you see him.” Her face falls. “It sucks not being able to make our own decisions. What I wouldn’t give for a few weeks in the sun with him.”

“Would he survive the sun?” I tease because it wouldn’t surprise me if Luca lived in an open coffin by day and only came out at night. He is that dark.

Summer grins. “Possibly, but as he lives in Miami, I’m guessing he can’t escape it.”

She sighs heavily as she turns to place her order, and I wonder what the future will hold for them. They come from extremely closed off families—even I know that and I can sympathize because living with the Reapers is much the same.

We head back to the others and it's not long before the guys join us.

It always amuses me to watch the other student's reaction to them when they enter a room.

Awe mixed with lust and jealousy flit across the expressions of most of the students and I doubt I will ever get used to experiencing a thrill from that when they head our way.

Being part of a group like The Elusives is what has made my experience at Rockwell memorable for all the right reasons. There is never a dull moment.

I smile broadly as Jesse slips into the seat beside me and drops a kiss on my cheek and whispers, "Here's my favorite girl."

"Don't you say that to all the girls?" I raise my eyes and he grins, one that I could receive every single hour of the day. When Jesse was discharged, he was a changed man. He lost his haunted look and became the easy-going guy that Cassie told me he was when she first met him.

We are no longer together. Frankie retired The Claiming and subsequently the rules that went with it. He decided he was done with it after what happened that night and we now live a normal college life with none of the drama.

Jesse soon returned to his old ways and most night is balls deep in one of the other students, but none of us are complaining.

Along with Santi and Ali, they are the only ones who get to enjoy that freedom in our house and they take advantage of it—every night.

I watch as Frankie slings his arm around Cassie and she settles against him, smiling

up at him as he drops light kisses on her lips. Summer is in much the same pose with Luca, whose expression only lights up when he is with her.

Siri and Jack are deep in conversation as always. She can talk for hours and Jack is an easy-going guy who allows her to. They have probably the most natural relationship of everyone and it's good to see, despite how much my heart still wishes it was Cassie who sits beside him.

Then there's me and when I finish, I excuse myself and head out of the room. I have a date with the principal of all things and it can't wait any longer.

It doesn't take long and as I stand outside his office, my heart lurches as I raise my hand and knock gently on the door.

His deep voice raises a smile on my face and as I enter, I make sure to lock the door behind me.

His wicked grin lights my soul every single time, and as Drake rises from his seat and meets me halfway, I wish this would be a more permanent arrangement.

Ryder moved his usual mountain and Drake became the acting principal.

Not for any other reason than tying up any loose ends.

It gives him access to Angela's files, personal apartment and office and most of his day is spent rifling through it all, searching for evidence that we missed.

The Serpent Society spanned many states, and it's vital we shut down every strand because, like most cancers, they have a habit of spreading if anything is left and it's up to us to make certain that doesn't happen.

“I’ve missed you.” Drake pulls me into his arms and kisses me deeply, his lips fastening over mine as if we are two halves of the same coin.

I tangle my fingers in his hair and drown in my lust for this man, and I still can’t believe we made it this far.

He moves so my back hits his desk and he whispers against my lips, “You know, if you’re up for a fantasy of mine, I would owe you forever.”

He kisses my neck and I groan. “Anything.”

The fact I can deny him nothing makes whatever this is an easy ask, and he growls, “I want to bend you over this desk and fuck you senseless.”

“Oh God.” My breath catches and a burst of wet heat is my answer and without another word, I turn, bending down so my chest hits his desk and my ass wiggles in his direction.

“Fuck, Imogen.”

His lustful groan paints a soft smile on my face and as he pushes up my dress, so the skirt is bunched around my waist, I hear his zipper and I smile.

Yes, I will always agree with his suggestions because fuck me I couldn’t say no if I tried.

He drags down my panties so they rest around my ankles and as his cock presses against my pussy from behind, a low moan escapes me. I want him so much all the time and as he slides inside, I relish every single second of it.

Drake is every fantasy I ever had – will ever have and as he reminds me who owns

my heart and body now, I am probably the only one of my friendship group who is assured of a bright future with the man I have given my entire heart and soul.

The Railway Station

My heels click on the stone, and my fingers bleed with the effort of carrying two heavy cases. There's a chill in the air and as it closes around me, I relish the way it cools my heated blood.

There are a few other people on the platform. An old man, wizened from many years of living. If I had to guess, I'd say he was mid-eighties. What must it be like to live with eighty years of memory? I wonder if I'll reach it that far and be able to live with mine.

A woman is holding a child as they stand too close to the edge. The imminent train a hazard that will play heavily on her mind.

I stare at the track and shiver inside, picturing a moment of desperation as I fall in front of the train. Ending it all, delivering me from evil. Would it have that effect or send me on a direct route to hell?

It would be no different to living, anyway.

My ankles ache and my back is shot. I could murder a cup of coffee, but there is no place to ease that craving here. It's doubtful I will until I reach my destination. It's a long road ahead and I wonder if I'll make it that far.

A young man catches my eye and holds my gaze a little too long. I'm used to that and I smile as I take the vacant seat beside him on the bench.

We say nothing but the air crackles between us with sexual tension and I smile inside.

He holds his phone and I note it lights up with the picture of a young woman who is calling him.

His finger hovers over the green button, but then he ends it in a moment of decision.

I settle back, wondering if life will ever change.

The platform fills up as the train is imminent and my thoughts turn to my destination.

I wonder what to expect when I get there. More of the same I'm guessing and the depraved part of me can't wait, however, the weary part of me wishes I could be done and bring an end to the situation on the track before me.

The guy moves and his leg brushes against mine and it was no accident. He shifts up to allow an older woman to join us on the bench, and I smile to myself. Why do they make it so easy? Young men are ripe for the picking and I harvest—a lot.

The pressure of his thigh against mine stirs my lust, and I close my eyes and picture a more enjoyable journey than I anticipated.

The noise of the train in the distance is a comforting one as it signifies the resumption of my journey. The destination is certain but the journey there is not and as I make to stand as it rolls into the station, the young man says in a deep voice, "Please may I help you with your cases, Miss—"

I flash him a blinding smile, one that never fails. A mixture of sweetness and innocence, with the underlying promise of depravity. He gets the message, they always do and as he lifts one of my cases, he says huskily, "My name is Drew. It would be good to have company on the trip."

“Thanks, Drew, I’d appreciate that.” I smile into his lust-filled eyes and say huskily.
“I’m Jenna. Jenna Sloane.”

He nods, his eyes beating a trail to the swell of my breasts against my low buttoned blouse and whispers, “It’s my pleasure, Jenna.”

“No Drew.” I smile suggestively. “The pleasure will be all mine.”

Rockwell Academy has closed for the summer and soon a new set of students will take up residence.

Our friends will be back to continue their journey and as expected it will not be an easy one.