




Hills
THE
Kings
BY KROYDON HILLS

UNDER
Pressure

BELLA MATTHEWS



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THE KINGS OF KROYDON HILLS BOOK 4

BELLA MATTHEWS

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Bella Matthews

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*This book is dedicated to my very own Coop. Thank you Brianna.
For every text. Every laugh. Every phone call.
For every late-night voice memo.
I hope our mutually forced friendship lasts a lifetime.*

In one lifetime you will love many times but one love
will burn your soul forever.

— UNKNOWN

UNDER PRESSURE PLAYLIST

Kings & Queens – Ava Max

Closing Time - Semisonic

Dream – Imagine Dragons

Without Me - Halsey

I Hope (feat. Charlie Puth) – Gabby Barrett, Charlie Puth

Savage Love (Laxed – Siren Beat) – Jawsh 685, Jason Derulo

Hey Mama (feat. Nicki Minaj, Bebe Rexha, Afrojack) – David Guetta, Afrojack, Bebe Rexha, Nicki Minaj

Unstoppable – The Score

Can't Hold Us – feat. Ray Dalton – Macklemore & Ryan Lewis

It's Where My Demons Hide – Gavin Mikhail

All I Want - Kodaline

What We Live For – American Auhtors

Sweet but Psycho – Ava Max

Good as Hell – Lizzo

A Thousand Years – Christina Perri

Take It All Back – Judah & the Lion

Don't Stop Believin' - Journey

<https://bit.ly/UPplaylist>

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PROLOGUE

SEBASTIAN

Superstition is a funny thing. Very few people would admit to believing in superstition, yet most of us abide by the laws of it, at least on some level. This is especially true when you grow up in an Italian family like mine. I've had red wine in my glass at dinner since long before I turned twenty-one because it's bad luck to toast with water. I'd never throw my hat down on my bed because that's what's done when you die. Rain on your wedding day or the day of your funeral is considered good luck—God's blessing. My father was full of this shit. Nonna, my dad's mother, still believes in every last superstition she grew up with in Calabria before she and Pappa moved to Philadelphia over sixty years ago. Growing up, my dad would randomly spout off about it. I don't know if he actually believed it, but he respected it.

I wonder what my father would think about the snowstorm of the century that's blanketing the city during his funeral today. The weatherman actually referred to it as "thundersnow" this morning. They're calling for nearly a foot of it before the end of the day, but that's not slowing the mourners down. When the Don of Philadelphia dies, everyone shows up. My family. THE family. My friends. The

FBI. You name it, they're here. And here I sit, under a canopy across from his black and gold casket. Nonna is sitting between my brother, Sammy, and me, and on my other side sits Emma. My friends not so affectionately nicknamed her "Train Wreck" a few years ago. She's holding tightly to my right hand as if her life depends on it. Up until today, it might have.

My friends stand off to the left at the back of the crowd. I feel their eyes burning into Emma right now. They don't get it. They've always been free. Free to choose the life they want. Free to choose how to live and who to love.

We all moved out of our parents' houses at eighteen. For them, that was the epitome of freedom. For me, it was just a holding zone for the life that was being forced down my throat the same way they're lowering my father into the ground today.

Today is a day for mourning, but what does it say about me that I hope today's mourning leads to tomorrow's freedom?

When I glance over at my friends, I see her, and I know what I have to do. I know what freedom means, and I know what choice I have to make.

ELEANOR

JULY

“*M*ax, I get it. I’ll be back in Philly in time for dinner tomorrow night.” I glance over to my best friend, Juliette, who’s patiently waiting for me to get off the phone. “Right. Dinner is at seven. Family dinner.” I roll my eyes, even though my oldest brother can’t see me. Probably better that way. “Love you too. Okay, see you then.” I end the call and slide the phone in the pocket of my shorts.

“Finally, bitch!” Jules wraps her arm around my shoulder and squeezes right before she stumbles in her stilettos. We may have pre-gamed a little too hard with the vodka before we left the condo. “You should have told Maxie-poo to pull the massive stick from that tight, firm ass of his and relax for one goddamn night like you’re going to. You’ve been back in this country for less than two days. The Kingstons will have their hooks in you soon enough. Monday, you belong to them. Tonight, I call dibs on my ride or die.”

The two of us continue down the sidewalk toward our favorite beach bar. O’Malley’s has been a landmark here since before either of us were born. It’s one of those bars where labels peeled off beer bottles line the ceiling. If you wear open-toed shoes, you know your feet are going to be touching liquids far worse than spilled booze all night.

This place is always so crowded, it's necessary to be at least a little bit buzzed before you walk through the doors.

It's fucking fabulous, and I love it.

"Love you, Jules," I tell her as we walk past the line of people outside of the bar, waiting to be let in, and right up to the bouncer she's been sleeping with all summer.

Jules is not just pretty, she's gorgeous. She's five foot ten with beautiful blonde hair and stunning brown eyes. Graceful and refined, she can bring a man to his knees with one look. She's dabbled in modeling, but nothing keeps her attention for too long. So, I'm not surprised when the bouncer—who looks like The Rock and Vin Diesel found a way to procreate and he was the uber gorgeous offspring—can't take his eyes off my bestie as soon as he sees her strutting toward him. "Hey'ya, handsome." She leans in and gives him a quick kiss on the cheek. "You on the door all night tonight?"

"Nope. I've got another hour, maybe two, then I'm off." He leans in closer to Jules. "And you know, my favorite thing to do when I'm off is get you off."

Jules pulls on his shirt before kissing him again as she starts to walk past. "Come find Lenny and me when you get off *work*, and maybe I can help you with that." She grabs my hand and pulls me behind her into the bar.

"You ditching me in an hour, Jules?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

She smiles her megawatt smile. "Maybe two. At least you'll have the condo to yourself. Shawn's place is just down the street, so we usually go there."

I don't bother telling her that her condo is a half block from here. Not exactly what I had in mind for tonight, but oh well.

O'Malley's has a back room where there's always a hot new DJ spinning the newest music. They usually have the wall open, giving easy access to the outdoor bar complete

with a sand-covered dance floor. You'd think that would be the room to be in, but Jules and I love the room you step into as soon as you walk through the front doors. We have ever since we got our first fake IDs three years ago.

There's just something about the vibe in here.

The bar is dark and packed. The lights are low, and the volume is loud. The music they play in this room is classic eighties bar music. "Sweet Caroline," by Neil Diamond, "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," by The Charlie Daniels Band, and "Lola," by The Kinks are just some of the house faves that get every person in the room singing along. It's a rite of passage to come to this place, and I couldn't be happier to be here tonight.

Jules turns to me and grabs my other hand. "Listen, I'm gonna do a lap and see who we know and who to avoid. Will you get our drinks?" She spins away without another word. This is our routine. She scopes the place out, and I fight to get the bartender's attention.

I make my way to the front of the bar on the left. It may take a thrown elbow or two, but I get there. Getting the bartender's attention is another story. With guys twice my size standing on one side of me and a girl—whose boobs are showing so much, I think the string bikini I wore to the beach today may actually cover more than her shirt does—on my other side, I may be screwed.

Once the bartender is finished serving the double Ds, I yell out, "Excuse me," and wave the cash in my hand before dropping it back down on the bar and blowing out a frustrated breath.

I'm getting one night of freedom before I'm summoned back home. One night before I become another cog in the Kingston empire. The position my brother offered me in the family company is my dream job, but it comes with strings . . . My family is overbearing on a good day,

obnoxious on a normal one, and I can't even describe how they are on a bad day.

And now, I'm going to be working with them every day.

One of the reasons I moved to another country to go to college was to take control of my own future. My own life. Now, I'm voluntarily placing control over my career into my brother's hands. But tonight is mine to control, and I might be clinging to that.

I need one more night before I go home and face them all.

Please don't let my one night be a total wash.

"Want some help?" A sexy voice asks, coming from the guy standing next to me.

I turn my head and get my first look at him since noticing the overall height of the group of guys he's with.

I nod my head. "Apparently, you need to have your boobs hanging out if you want to get his attention."

This guy is tall. Well over six feet, maybe six-five or six-six. His dark hair is messy, like he's run his hands through it too many times. His blue eyes are crystal blue, and whoa, momma, is he built. He looks familiar, but I can't place him right away. "Yes, please. I'd love some help."

He leans forward on the bar and calls out for the bartender, who immediately turns around.

What the hell? Am I invisible?

When the bartender leans his elbows on the bar and asks, "What can I get for you?" I'm partially relieved and partially annoyed.

I yell across the bar, "One Jack and Coke and one Corona and lime, please." Once he walks away, I turn to fully face my helpful stranger. "Thank you."

The bartender comes back, and my new friend drops a twenty down before I can, then pushes my drinks toward me.

"Jack and Coke and a beer. You here with someone?"

I glance around the room, looking for Jules. “I am. My best friend and I came together.”

A giant ginger of a man throws his arm around Mr. Mysterious. “So did this handsome guy. It’s his birthday too. Wanna give him a present?”

The handsome guy throws an elbow in the ginger’s side. “Back off, Murph.”

Murph backs up into the rest of the group they’re with, and the other three turn around.

I glance around at the giants surrounding these two and realize precisely why Mr. Mysterious looks so familiar. One of those giants is Declan Sinclair. The championship-winning quarterback for the professional football team my family owns.

I quickly clock them all.

Brady Ryan is here. He’s the quarterback for the Kroydon University Crusaders. He’s most likely going to be up for the Heisman this year. Last season, he threw for 4,500 yards, 310 completed passes, 402 attempts, and 23 touchdowns.

That makes the ginger giant Aiden Murphy, who averages 12 tackles per game and 1.8 tackles for loss per game.

I’m guessing, judging by who the others are, that the dirty blonde military-looking guy is Cooper Sinclair. He was a force to be reckoned with as a tight end in high school before he decided to forgo college and his potential football career to go into the Navy. I probably wouldn’t know this if his father wasn’t the head coach for my family’s football team.

This brings me to my mystery hottie.

Damnit.

Sebastian Beneventi.

I know there’ll be a file sitting on my desk with his information when I start work next week. I’m the numbers girl. Analytics are my jam. I’m kind of a savant. For the past

three years, my brother has asked my opinion on players' stats. The first time, I was only in my first year at Oxford, and I began unofficially working for the team.

Now that I've graduated, it's official.

And working on stats for the scouting department is at the top of my to-do list.

I shake myself out of my stupor and try to shut off my computer-like brain. I told Max once that I think like the terminator. It all just comes to me like a computer read-out—name, height, weight, stats. I don't have an eidetic memory, but my brain is pretty amazing.

When this guy smiles, it transforms his entire face. "I'm Bash."

"Elle." That's all I give him, not ready for the night to go the way it would if this group of guys knew who I am.

The bimbo from my other side bumps into me, causing me to trip and fall into Sebastian as Jules's whiskey sloshes down the front of my shirt. "Sorry," I utter as Sebastian steadies me with both arms. I slam back Jules's Jack and Coke before dropping it back on the bar.

Crystal blue eyes travel up and down my body before settling on my face. "I was wondering if you were the whiskey girl or the beer girl."

I push the lime down into my bottle of Corona, holding my thumb over the lip before I put it to my lips and drink. When I pull it away, I lock eyes with his. "I'm the beer girl. The whiskey was for courage."

Sebastian turns and orders two more Jack and Cokes before passing one to me. He clinks his glass with mine. "To courage."

"To courage," I toast. Maybe this night won't be a total wash after all.

SEBASTIAN

Over the course of the night, I've learned a few things about the sexy as sin woman currently screaming Cheap Trick's "I Want You To Want Me" at the top of her lungs. The most amusing thing is she's completely tone-deaf. She and her friend, Jules, who joined us after our second drink, have sung along with almost every song, and each one is worse than the last. But the two of them are having fun while they do it and don't seem to care what anyone else thinks.

You've gotta admire that.

When the song changes to Bon Jovi's "Livin' On A Prayer," every Jersey girl in the place starts screaming, and the girl I can't take my eyes off starts dancing just for me before she throws her head back and screams along with the eighties hair band, who might as well be a national treasure in this state. When she spins in a circle, laughing and shaking her tight little ass, I'm pretty sure I've fallen in love.

Not really, but I'm having a hard time telling that to my cock.

She's sarcastic and funny. I've enjoyed watching her spar with Murphy.

Anyone who can sling it back to Murphy as good as he gives it gets bonus points in my book.

Not to mention this girl is fucking gorgeous. She might not be able to get a bartender's attention for shit, but she's grabbed the attention of half the male patrons in this place without so much as even glancing their way. Her wild and wavy dark hair, grayish-blue eyes, pillowy pink lips, and tan skin with a hint of red from too much sun, making the freckles across the bridge of her nose pop even more, have kept my dick straining against my zipper and looking for relief all night.

But would she be down with one night?

A single night is all I have to give.

Would this girl be the kind of girl I'd date if I could?

Fuck yes, she would.

But with my complicated family and a forced engagement looming at the end of this year, I can't do the serious relationship thing I've watched my friends fall into, one by one, these past few years.

Not when I'm still fighting for my own future.

Not when every day I'm forced to accept my fate a little more.

She's also a girl who doesn't seem shy about going for what she wants, and lucky for me, I seem to be wanted. When the song changes to Def Leppard's "Pour Some Sugar On Me," I get grabbed by the front of my black shirt and pulled toward her right before her tanned arms go up in the air and her hips start shaking to the music. This only lasts for a minute before Jules pulls Elle away. The two of them end up dancing on top of the bar, and my eyes are glued to this sexy woman.

"Hey, man." Declan adjusts his ball cap lower over his face. He was hoping to avoid getting recognized tonight. A few funny looks have been thrown his way, but no one's

come up to him for an autograph yet. These days, that's a successful night for him. "Coop and I are heading back to the house. You staying or coming with?"

I glance over at Elle, whose gray eyes are no longer locked on her dance partner but now travel between Dec and me, before answering him, "I think I'm gonna stay here for a while. You good if I let myself in later?"

"You know the code," Dec tells me with a sly smile on his face. Then he lowers his voice. "Wrap it up, brother. It only takes one time." He claps my back, then turns to leave. Coop gives me a quick nod and a ridiculous thumbs-up as he follows his brother out.

Brady slides over next to me. "I think we're gonna get going too. Nattie just texted me a pic from bed. I gotta tell you, I love you guys, but I'd rather be there." Not surprising, considering those two have been attached at the hip since our senior year of high school. We've all shared a house since we started college. Brady, Nattie, Murphy, and me. Murph's girlfriend, Sabrina moved in halfway through freshman year, and the rest is history. It's funny to think that's all going to change after Brina and I graduate this spring. The other three have one more year of college left, but the two of us have enough credits to graduate early. Next fall, Sabrina starts law school, and I'll be off to med school.

It's the plan my father agreed to.

Another piece of my life that's being dictated by circumstance.

A piece that's not getting figured out tonight.

Murphy and Brady turn to leave, and, out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of the big bouncer with Jules thrown over his shoulder as he carries her away. She's waving goodbye to Elle, who's climbing down from the bar when I move in front of it and help her down, then pin her up against it. "Looks like your friend left with the bouncer."

She reaches out, grabbing my shirt once more and pulling me down to her height. “It sure does. Seems like we’ve both been ditched.”

“What do you think we should do about that?” I ask, leaving it up to her.

The hand that’s still fisted in my black t-shirt pulls me closer. “My condo’s one block from here. My roommate’s spending the night at Shawn’s, so I’m going to be all alone.” Those pale gray eyes study me before she continues, “And I really don’t want to be alone, Sebastian.” I allow her to pull me closer, leaving only a breath of space between us. “Spend the night with me tonight before I turn into a pumpkin and have to face reality tomorrow.”

“Reality, huh?” I ask, curious about what’s wrong with this beautiful girl’s reality.

A soft breath escapes her pouty lips. “Reality bites. Let’s have one night where we don’t have to think about it.”

“You’re intriguing, that’s for sure.” She sounds like me, and that does funny things to me.

Things I push back down.

Elle lets go of the hold she has on me and moves her hands to my face. “I don’t want to be intriguing, Sebastian. What I want,” I watch the column of her throat work as she swallows deeply and continues, “is to go back to my place and spend the rest of the night fucking you.”

“Bold.” I lean my face closer. “I like a woman who knows what she wants.”

I don’t know who moves first, but in the next instant, my tongue is sinking into her mouth the way my cock is dying to sink into her heat. My hands move to the smooth, warm skin of her bare back, and I know I need to get us out of here. Now. We wouldn’t be the first people to fuck on a bar stool at O’Malley’s, but that’s not my style. When I pull back, Elle

appears momentarily confused until I turn around and give her my back. “Hop on.”

“What?” she laughs.

I take a step back and grab both of her legs, wrapping them around my hips. “Wrap your arms around my shoulders and hop on. Let’s get the hell out of here.”



Elle wasn’t lying when she said she was only a block from the bar. Her condo is a penthouse on the top floor of a beachfront building only steps away from O’Malley’s. She slips down from my back before unlocking her door and pushing it open. Once we both step through, I cross the room to the entire wall of floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the ocean. “You’ve got quite a view.”

“It’s not actually mine,” Elle offers, kicking off her shoes before moving to open the glass doors leading to the balcony. “Jules’s family owns this place. She’s been staying down here for the summer. I just popped in for the weekend.”

I follow her outside and watch her place both hands down on the balcony’s waist-high white railing while she stares out over the dark ocean. The crashing waves below are the only sound we can hear. “Isn’t the view amazing?”

“Yeah, it is,” I answer honestly, my eyes never straying from the woman in front of me. The stars dotting the dark night’s sky are lighting her up in a beautiful pale glow, and I move behind her, sweeping her dark hair back over her shoulder. One arm wraps around her waist, my palm flat against her warm skin under the scarf she’s calling a shirt.

My lips skim up her neck, the hum of electricity between us too strong to ignore any longer.

Elle spins around in my arms. Soft hands dive under the hem of my shirt, roughly shoving it up and over my head.

“It’s not the view I want though.” My shirt gets dropped to the ground as this insanely sexy woman grabs my hand, pulling me with her over to the daybed in the far corner of the balcony. She pushes me down and lets her eyes roam over me, sighing like this is what she’s been waiting for her entire life. Then she sits down, straddling my legs and wrapping her arms around my neck. “This is more like it.”

Demanding lips crash down on mine, and our tongues twist together teasingly. My hands move to cradle her face, angling it and taking back the control I’ve let her think she’s had up until now.

Elle’s hands trail down my abs, tracing them along the way until she gets to the belt of my shorts, and I stop her. “Hey.” I pull back. “You sure this is what you want?”

I may want this girl more than I have any business wanting someone, but I still need to make sure she’s with me.

The urge to claim her . . . to make her mine, is already strong.

I might be better off if she backs away now.

Hell, if I were a good man . . . a smart man, I’d back off.

But tonight, I’m not a good man.

Gray eyes sparkle as her lips tip up in a smile that would bring even the strongest man to his knees. She answers me when both arms reach up and untie the bow at the back of her neck before sliding down and doing the same to the knot at her lower back, baring the most perfect breasts I’ve ever seen.

My hands slide to the curve of her breasts, and I let the weight fill my palms.

Perfect handfuls.

My thumb dances over her dark pink nipple, eliciting an “mmm, yes,” as goosebumps break out over her skin. I continue until I can’t take it anymore and replace my thumb

with my mouth. Her skin tastes sweet, like spun sugar. My other hand drops down to the button of her tiny black shorts, suddenly desperate for more.

Elle squirms on top of me when my fingers slide through her drenched sex and find her clit. She rides my hand hard, her long nails digging into my shoulders and taking what she needs, until her mouth drops open and the sexiest sound I've ever heard escapes from her soft lips.

That single sound flips a switch in me, and I spin us, lying her flat on her back, then peeling her shorts down her toned thighs and tossing them aside.

One night. I force myself to remember I only get this girl for one night.

Once I've grabbed a condom and shucked my jeans, I move toward the vision in front of me until she grabs the condom out of my hands. "May I?" she asks with a gleam in her eye.

She sits up, her hand wrapping around my dick and pumping before rolling the condom down the hard length and pulling me to her.

I sink slowly into my own personal nirvana before hearing "one night" leave her lips.

"One night," I echo back, already knowing it will never be enough.

ELEANOR

When Bash leaves my bed a few hours after we finally made it inside, I force myself to remain still and keep my eyes closed. This is for the best.

Was the sex earth-shattering? Yes. Yes, it was.

That man did things with his hands and mouth that put even my favorite book boyfriends to shame. A one-night stand isn't supposed to make you feel what I felt last night. It's not supposed to leave you wanting more.

More time.

More sex.

More of him.

However, a relationship with this man just isn't in the cards. My new job with my family's football team, the Philadelphia Kings, starts Monday. Working with my family is going to bring enough complications. I don't need to add one more . . . no matter how much I wish I could.

I'm the numbers girl. The person heading up the Football Data and Analytics Department to be more precise. It's a fancy title for a newly created position within the organization. I'm in charge of a department of one . . . myself. My oldest brother, Max, has been trying to modernize the behind-the-scenes aspects of the

organization since my father's death nearly three years ago. A big part of my job involves telling the head coach, Joe Sinclair, and my brother Max, the general manager, who to recruit and why. Hell, I was half the reason Max pushed so hard to get Joe Sinclair on board as our head coach a few years ago. Not to brag, but in the three years I've been unofficially doing this for the team while finishing up my BA and master's at Oxford, I haven't been wrong yet.

And my gut is telling me we need to draft Sebastian Beneventi.

Sebastian hasn't been on anyone's radar in a tangible way because he's shot down any chance of going pro by insisting he's going to medical school at the end of the upcoming year. Boy genius wants to be a doctor. If I'm right about him, med school can wait for a few years while he dominates the Kings' defense.

And I'm always right.

I can feel his muscular body standing next to the bed, hesitating. Crystal blue eyes are boring into me. Eyes it was so easy to get lost in last night, but I stick to my guns and refuse to open my eyes, feigning sleep.

It's better this way.

I feel his fingers gently move my hair from my face as he whispers, "One night," before leaving my room. Once the front door shuts behind him, I get out of bed and lock it.

Six o'clock is my usual wake-up time, but today it feels like hell. We spent all night making the most of our time, and whoa, mamma, it was incredible. My body hurts from being used in the best possible ways. Eyeing the espresso machine in the kitchen, I debate between going for a run and making myself a cup. Running wins. I sat coxswain, head of the boat, for the men's intercollegiate rowing team for four of my five years in college. I might not have been the one rowing the boat, but I sure as shit had to be in good shape to

keep up with the guys. Running was my favorite way to do that.

My hair gets thrown up in a Philadelphia Kings hat, and I slip into a sports bra and running shorts. Once I stretch out my sore muscles and tie my sneakers, I'm off. It might not be the River Thames or the Delaware River back home, but man, the Atlantic Ocean along the Jersey shore is one of my favorite places to run. Give me the salty air and a quiet beach any day.

Time to clear my head.



When I'm getting out of the shower an hour later, I'm greeted by the smell of espresso wafting through the air.

Jules is home.

I throw my short black robe on and make my way into the kitchen. She's still wearing last night's mini dress and makeup when she looks me over. "Did somebody get dirty last night?" she asks sarcastically, eyeing my freshly washed hair as she hands me my cup of espresso and tapping her tiny cup to mine. "To the boys of the Jersey shore. May they get us filthy before we head back to the city."

I clink my white ceramic cup to hers, adding, "You do look especially filthy this morning, Juliette. Seriously? At least wash your eyeliner and mascara off. What would your mother say if she saw you?"

Jules laughs me off. She knows I'm right. "Whatever, bitch. Did Mr. Sex-on-a-Stick *stick* it to you good last night?"

I sip my espresso and smile, thinking back to all the things Sebastian did to me last night. All the ways he made my body sing. Normally, I'd give Jules all the dirty details,

but something about last night was different. I feel oddly protective of our night together. So, instead of dishing the dirt, I simply tell her, “He most certainly did,” and leave it at that.

“Did you get his number?” Jules sits down next to me at the island.

“Nope. One night. That was the deal. Real-life is calling, and I need to get back to Philly today. Last night was a one and done.” I lean my head down on her shoulder and focus on what happens after I leave the Jersey shore. “Tonight isn’t just dinner. It’s an official family dinner. Everyone’s going to be there.”

Jules runs her fingers through my wet hair. We’ve been friends since we met in kindergarten. She knows me better than any of my siblings, so she knows how much I’m dreading this dinner. “You want to skip? I could totally have the jet fueled up, and we could escape.”

I lift my head and look at her. “Love you, Jules.”

“If you had a dick, I’d marry you, Len. There are just some things I’m meant to not give up, and sadly for you, dick is at the top of that list. I mean, unless they come up with the ultimate vibrator. But seriously, none of them are *that* good yet.” She stands. “As you so generously pointed out, I need to shower. When are you heading home?”

“I don’t know. An hour, maybe.” I stand and place my cup in the dishwasher.

Jules nods and starts to walk away, “Love you, Len.”

“Back atcha, Jules.”



When I get back to Kingston Estate—yes, my father was one of those people who named his home—I’m caught off guard by the empty house. Dad

bought this house before I was born. He was married to Max, Becket, and Scarlet's mom at the time. My dad had four different wives during his life. As a staunch Catholic, we always joked he didn't believe in birth control because there are eight of us, but divorce wasn't a sin he was concerned with.

Turns out, fidelity wasn't really high on his list either.

Max, Becket, and Scarlet's mom, Adaline, was wife number one. She was the love of his life . . . until she wasn't. Once word of his infidelity spread, Adaline left him, divorcing Dad a year after Scarlet was born. It was messy and played out all over the news. Or so I'm told.

Adaline got a fat divorce settlement and married a media mogul not long after.

One year later, Sawyer and Hudson's mom, Elise, started working for him as his new admin, and boom, Dad, found the new love of his life.

He divorced Elise a few years later. He had a better lawyer and a better prenup that time, but Elise is still set for the rest of her life. At least he was a generous ex-husband. Turns out, he met my mother at the country club a few months before he ended his marriage. They got married the weekend after his divorce from Elise was final. My mom had me seven months later, and Jace came a few years after me.

My mom, Kristin, really was the love of his life. They were married for fifteen years before she died from breast cancer. Dad waited a few years before he married Ashlyn. She's a former Olympic silver medalist figure skater, and she's only four years older than me. Ashlyn was twenty-one when she married my father. He died from a stroke less than a year later, three months before my sister Madeline was born.

Ashlyn and Maddie still live at Kingston Estate, along with Max, Hudson, and Jace. I guess, technically, I live here again too. I moved out five years ago to live in England while

I went to college. Finding a place of my own is close to the top of my to-do list. I just want to get situated at work first, and then that's my next move. When I drop down on my old black and white polka-dot bedspread and look around the room I left at the age of eighteen, I contemplate moving it up to the top of my list.

This house holds incredible memories, but it also has reminders of exceedingly painful moments. Memories of watching cancer take my mother from us a little bit more each day. Memories of knowing she was going to die and there was nothing any of us could do to stop it. Of trying to figure out what I was supposed to do after she was gone. Of my siblings trying to force me to get over her loss before I was ready. Memories I force to the back of my mind before I brush myself off and get dressed for the family dinner.



“*T*he prodigal daughter has returned,” my older brother Hudson calls out when he sees me coming down the winding stairs a little while later.

I catapult myself at him when I'm a few steps from the bottom, throwing my arms around his broad shoulders and holding tight. Hudson has always been my favorite sibling and the one I'm closest to. He's less than two years older than me, and he and I were always the two getting into trouble together. We'd sneak off whenever someone wasn't paying attention and go on some kind of adventure. I squeeze my arms around his neck tightly. “God, I missed you, Hud.” I pull back and really look at him. “You look good, big brother.” Dirty blonde hair, a chiseled jawline, and the eyes most of my siblings inherited from our father, mixed with that ever-present tan making his skin glow like a

Greek god's, make my brother so handsome, women throw themselves at his feet.

“Missed you too, Lenny.” He deposits me on my feet and slings his muscled arm around my shoulder. Where Max, Becket, Scarlett, and I all have careers revolving around the Kings, Sawyer, and Hudson don't. Sawyer changes careers more than Jules changes her nail polish. Currently, he owns one of the hottest bars in Center City, one of the larger areas of Philadelphia. Hudson, however, has been a professional MMA fighter since he graduated from high school, much to our father's annoyance. Dad thought it was beneath him, but Hudson didn't care. He's good too. He's been training at Crucible. The same gym as former world champion Cade St. James for the last ten years. When Cade retired and started training my brother, it may have been the best day of Hudson's life. “You ready for this?” he asks, with his eyes twinkling at me.

“Not even a little bit,” I tell him on a sigh.

ELEANOR

“*I*’m sorry. Can you repeat that?” I look around at my brothers, sisters, and stepmother, expecting them to be in complete shock, but it appears I’m the only Kingston needing to be clued in on this little tidbit. I raise the white linen napkin to my lips before throwing it on the table and leveling my oldest brother with a glare. Max sits at the far end of the table, opposite our father’s empty seat. He’s always looked like a younger version of Dad. Dark hair, broad shoulders, a stocky, athletic build, and the Kingston blue eyes. He’s not the tallest of my brothers, but the powerful presence he exudes without effort is 100 percent all Kingston. “Did you just say we only have ten months left to find a missing sibling, who, prior to sixty seconds ago, I’ve never been told existed? Oh wait, and if we don’t find this missing sibling, we won’t be able to access our trusts?” I look over at Hudson, who has suddenly found his empty plate fascinating. “Why wasn’t this announced at the reading of Dad’s will?”

My older sister, Scarlet, glances between Max and Becket before placing her palms on the table and rising from her chair. I’m practically a carbon copy of Scarlet with our dark hair and sharp features. The only difference between us is

that she has Dad's blue eyes and mine are gray, like my mom's. I'm a little shorter than her, and I've always thought I'm a little nicer too. I was hoping that now that I was home and a little older, maybe we could develop the kind of relationship I'd always wished we'd had. "Listen, little girl . . ." I'm currently rethinking this wish. "The big boys were handling it while you were away, rowing your little boat in England."

I stand up so fast, my chair nearly tips over. "Fuck you, Scarlet. I was getting two degrees," I yell across the table.

"You were running away," she says much more calmly than me. "Your mom died, and you ran away. You've been home five times in five years. Jesus Christ, Eleanor, you didn't even come home for Christmas last year." She's the only one in the entire family who calls me Eleanor.

It grates on my last nerve.

"I took classes over the break." I cross my arms defensively over my chest, hating when she's right. "Besides, we all talk all the damn time. We FaceTime, we Skype, we Zoom, we call. Seriously, the damn group texts happen every day. I think we've all become more codependent since I left than we were before." In a quieter voice, I add, "Definitely more since we lost Dad."

I look around the room, trying to decide if I'm furious or devastated. "Not a single one of you thought it would be a good idea to tell me we have a half-sibling out there because . . . shocker, daddy dearest couldn't keep it in his pants?"

My stepmother Ashlyn raises her hand like she's in a classroom. "For the record, I thought you should be told." She's gorgeous, like a porcelain doll. Blonde curls frame her delicate face. Her lips are small and pouty, like a kewpie doll. She's also the kindest out of all my siblings' mothers.

“Really, Ashlyn,” Scarlet scoffs. “No offense, but Dad had colds that lasted longer than your marriage did. You don’t get a vote. You just hold Madeline’s proxy.”

“Scarlet,” Max cuts off our sister, then turns back to Ashlyn. “You’re the mother of our sister. That makes you a part of this.”

“It most certainly does not. I don’t see any of the other mothers sitting at this table,” Scarlet scolds Max. Scarlet has hated Ashlyn since the day she met her. I’m sure it doesn’t help that Ashlyn is three years younger than Scarlet.

Becket cuts in, “Scar, you know the other moms aren’t involved because they no longer have kids to raise and are both off spending their divorce settlements in other countries.” He reaches out and takes Ashlyn’s hand. “You’re part of this family, whether Scarlet admits it or not.”

“Can someone at least tell me whether this mysterious sibling is a boy or girl?” I ask, so ridiculously over this conversation, it’s physically paining me not to get up and leave the room. I refuse to do that, though, because it would only be proving Scarlet right, and I hate the idea of that more than the ongoing argument . . . at least for right now.

Becket’s eyes soften as he focuses on me. Becks is the family lawyer and also one of the vice presidents for the Kings organization. He’s always been the peacekeeper out of all my siblings. He’s handsome in a movie star kind of way. Blonde hair, those Kingston Bermuda blue eyes, and the height and build that could have made him famous if he wanted. That would have never made him happy though. Becks is the only Kingston in this room whose IQ rivals mine. “The only things we know are how old this sibling would be and the name of the mother before she was placed in Witness Protection. We’ve hired the best of the best for the last two years, Len, and no one has been able to find anything.”

“Your father received a letter from the mother a few months before he died. She said she was sick, and she was worried about their child. She left a number for him to call, but it was no longer in service by the time he called. He started this process that very next week.” For someone who spent her life in the spotlight, Ashlyn hates to be the center of attention now. Her voice is timid in a room full of loud, aggressive personalities.

We were raised to be this way.

Kingstons are strong.

We take no prisoners.

Each of us shares the strongest trait our father could have given us.

Determination.

Becks smiles at Ashlyn and Madeline, who’s so used to this noise, she’s falling asleep in her chair with her sippy cup slipping from her tiny hands, curly blonde pigtails framing her petite face, and her blue eyes starting to droop.

“Lenny,” Jace grabs my hand, his eyes begging me to understand. “You were an ocean away. There was nothing you could do.”

I want to call him a traitor.

I want to yell that he’s my little brother and should be on my side.

Instead, my fingers link with his, and I sigh as I look at the only other sibling to share my eyes. Jace and I look more like the mother we share than the father whose name all eight of us carry. “Fine. You all thought you were doing what was right.” I look around at the monstrosity of a table that seats the nine of us and has one seat open at the head, where my dad reigned over us all. “Well, I’m home now. No more secrets. No more lies. No more hiding anything.”

“No more running.” Scarlet’s voice is firm.

You'd think in a family full of boys that the only two girls who are out of diapers would stick together, but it was never that way.

I nod my head and agree because it's the only thing left to do. "No more running."

SEBASTIAN

Summer always hangs on longer than you expect in Philly. We're approaching the end of the first week in September, and walking off the practice field today, the sweat dripping into my eyes makes it hard to believe fall is coming anytime soon.

Taking off my pads and helmet never felt so good.

Murphy is spraying water over his head when Brady joins us. "Hey, we heading over to the Kings game together tonight?" The two-time big game winners are starting their season with a Thursday night game against their division rivals.

"Nah, man. I'm meeting Sam and Pops for dinner first. I'll catch up with you guys at the stadium."

"Beneventi!" Coach Barnett calls out as we walk off the field and head for the locker room.

"Yeah, Coach?" I stop and turn toward him.

Coach Barnett, Kroydon U's head coach, is a legend. He's won everything in his forty years coaching for the university, earning the respect of every player who's walked through his doors in the process. When he talks, you listen. "Shower, then meet me in my office."

“Sure, Coach.” Cleary dismissed, I jog to catch up with Murph and Brady.

Murphy makes a stupid face. “Somebody’s in trouble,” the fucker singsongs.

“Knock it off, Murph.” Brady, always the quarterback, turns to me. “What does Coach want? You okay, man?”

Fuck if I know. “Guess we’ll see.”



Once I shower and throw on jeans and a t-shirt, I knock on Coach Barnett’s door and wait for the go-ahead before I enter.

Coach is sitting behind his desk when he motions to the chairs across from him without looking up from the computer screen. “Have a seat, Sebastian.”

I pull out the small, worn, brown leather chair on the opposite side of the desk, and sit down. My eyes are on Coach as he finishes typing something hunt-and-peck style. His white-gray hair and weather-worn face may give away his age, but Coach is far from being ready to retire. “Everything okay, Coach?”

He reaches over to his metal inbox and grabs a red folder with my name written across it on masking tape, then drops it dramatically in front of me on his desk. “Sebastian, I know your plan for next year is med school, and I meant every word I wrote in your recommendation. But I’d be failing you if I didn’t point out what you’ll be giving up.” He leans forward and steeples his long fingers in front of him, waiting on my response.

Okay, I’ll bite. “Point away, Coach.”

Coach forces back a laugh. “You know, everyone thinks Murphy’s the smart-ass, but that’s just because you hide it better.” He smiles and leans back in the chair. “Your size,

your intelligence, the numbers you threw up last year, and the result of our pre-season combine have put you on a lot of radars, son.”

I lean my arms on my knees, about to speak, when Coach gives me a look I know well, forcing me to realize he’s not done.

“Hear me out. The average pro career is five years. Five years and you could pay for the entirety of med school with the cash from your signing bonus alone. You’re graduating at twenty-one. You’re already ahead of most men your age. Play until you’re twenty-six or twenty-seven, and you’ve still got plenty of time to become a doctor.” Coach sits, staring and searching for an answer I can’t give him today.

“If you enter the draft in the spring, they’re projecting you could go in the second or third round. Just think about it, Sebastian. You don’t need to declare your intent for months. Just don’t rule it out yet. You’ve got a God-given talent and a size most athletes wish they had. I’m not trying to tell you to live out someone else’s dream. I’m just asking you to make damn sure that it’s not part of your dream before you rule it out. You’ve got options.” Coach shakes his head and smiles. “Think about it, Bash. That’s all I’m asking. Just think about it.”

I pick the folder up, the weight of it in my hands shocking me. I didn’t know I was on this many radars. I never considered going pro past the fantasy every young kid has the first time he picks up a football. My next step has always been med school. “I’ll think about it, Coach. Thank you for your confidence.”

Coach nods. “Now get the hell out of my office. I have a meeting to get to.”

I push back in my chair and stand to leave before Coach stops me once more. His voice quiet as always. “Sebastian.”

I turn back to look at him.

“The Kings are sitting on top of that list. You may want to talk to Joe Sinclair.” His face transforms into a mischievous smile. “I think you may know him.”

I laugh. “Yeah. I might know where to find him. Thanks, Coach. Have a good night.”

“Walkthrough tomorrow, Bash. Don’t be late.” Coach starts typing on his computer, effectively dismissing me.

Damn.

I know I’m big, and I know I’m a good athlete, but knowing the Kings are actually interested still catches me by surprise. A few teams have shown interest, and it was easy to dismiss them.

But the Kings?

There’s no dismissing Coach Sinclair and the Kings.



An hour later, Sam and I sit in a U-shaped corner booth in Dad’s favorite restaurant. The red leather benches and dark wood accents make this place a cliché of an Italian eatery, but the mouthwatering smell of tomatoes and garlic floats through the air, reminding you that it’s the best food in town. He bought Saporito for my mother when Sam and I were still little kids.

She died in a car accident a year later. Dad never remarried.

He never stopped talking about her, making sure we never forgot her.

He keeps an office in the back of the restaurant and does a lot of business out of it to this day. I always wondered if it was because he felt close to Mom here.

Sam’s answering messages on his phone as I talk, and we both wait. My brother is nine years older than me, but we look similar. I’m taller, at six foot six to his six-three. But

he's broader than me. He likes to think he's stronger, but he's not. That's where the difference in our appearance stops. We both have dark brown hair, nearly black, really, and pale blue eyes. We've got our father's Roman nose and olive complexion. But while Sam has stepped into the family business, much to my father's satisfaction, I've avoided it my whole life with Sam's help.

We're the Beneventi princes.

On two separate paths.

But deep down, we're more similar than either of us care to admit.

"I'm telling you, man, there were at least ten teams in that folder that are interested in me. The Kings were sitting on top. I never thought about pushing back med school. Never thought about playing for a few years before med school. I just looked at it as an either-or situation. But why not?"

My brother puts his phone down and looks up at me. "The Kings, huh?" He loves the Kings. Always has. Even before Declan and he struck up an unlikely friendship a few years ago. "You thinkin' about it? If you want it, go for it." Sam has always been my biggest supporter throughout my entire life.

"Maybe," I answer honestly. "It doesn't have to change anything except my timetable."

The air around us changes as my father slips in the booth next to me, his back to the wall. "What are you thinking about, Sebastian?" At sixty-one, Pop is an intimidating presence. We get our size from him. He's six-three, built like a bull and just as strong. I don't think a day has gone by where I haven't seen him in a bespoke Italian suit with one of his many silk ties. His jacket is slung over the back of the booth, a gray tie hanging loosely around his thick neck. His sleeves are rolled up, displaying the tattoo of our family crest

that each of us has somewhere on our bodies—Pop’s on his forearm, Sam’s is on his shoulder, and mine is on my chest.

“The Kings want Bash, Pops,” Sam answers before I get a chance.

I glower at my brother, not ready to discuss this with my father.

“Is this true?” He looks from me to Sam. As if we’d lie to him. “What about med school? I let you choose the path you did because you said this is what you wanted. Are you changing your mind?”

I fucking hate how my father can turn anything into an interrogation. I’m acutely aware I’ve never lived the life he wanted for me, or the life I’ve wanted for myself. We’ve spent years in a stalemate. We’re still arguing over whether I’m marrying Emma Sabatini. When your father is not only the head of your family but the head of *The Family*, disobedience is not an option. It’s a weakness.

The mafia always comes first.

“Maybe just postponing it, Pop.” I lift my bottle of Stella and watch the annoyance cross his face. He’s not a beer drinker and doesn’t think we should be either.

He pours himself a glass of the house wine, made from our family vineyards in Calabria, and then swirls the deep red liquid in the stemmed glass before announcing, “I need you both at the house Sunday for dinner. The Sabatinis will be there, and you’re both to be on your best behavior. Understood?” The question is asked as if we’re children instead of men, but no response is expected. It’s a given we’ll both show.

Sam because, at thirty, he’s my father’s right hand, and me because no isn’t an option. I have more freedom than most sons in my position would be given, and if I want to continue living my life this way, I have to do as I’m told,

when I'm told. It's not that he'll withhold something from me. It's that the stakes are always high in his world.

Life or death.

I'm reminded of something my mom used to say when I was young.

Pick your battles.



The tension in the humid night air hangs thick when Sam and I walk to our cars after dinner. "Sam, man, I know you keep telling me that I'm not going to have to go through with this engagement, but I don't think I have a choice. I can't be the reason our families go to war. No way Pop is letting me out of this." I hit the locks on my black Hummer and open the driver's door before turning to look at my brother over the top of his black Bugatti.

"Have I ever let you down, little brother?" Fucker knows he hasn't. "Just trust me. I'll get you out of this."

"I think we're running out of time." Emma Sabatini and I have known each other our entire lives. Calling her a friend is a stretch.

She's more like an occasional fuck buddy.

I don't think either of us wants this marriage, making her a possible ally.

Changing the topic, I ask, "You coming to the game?"

"Nah. I've got shit to take care of. I'll see ya Sunday." With that, he slips into his car, the engine purring, and he's gone before I even have my door closed.



nce I've arrived at the stadium, flashed my lanyard at security, and am escorted to Coach Sinclair's box, I realize I'm the last to arrive and just missed the national anthem. The box is crowded tonight. Brady, Murphy, Chloe, and Tommy sit in the outside seats, ready to watch the game. Nattie is seated inside on the floor, playing with the twins, while Katherine helps Callen with his dinner. Belle and Amelia sit at a high-top table, watching the team take the field. Belle's sipping ginger ale.

She and Dec shared the news a few weeks ago that she's pregnant again. Due in April. Just one this time. We're already taking bets on it being another girl.

My heart melts when the twins see me. Evie starts to toddle my way, followed by her sister. Those chubby arms reach out. "Bas. Bas. Bas." It's Evie's version of my name. Gracie repeats her sister's words, but they come out a little less clear.

I squat down, arms out, and wait for the two of them to crash into me. Scooping them both up into my arms, I stand and laugh at the annoyed look on Nattie's face.

"No fair," she whines, jealous the girls left her for me.

Two little blonde heads lean on my shoulders, and I smile. "Sucks to be you, Nat. They know who's cooler."

"Whatever." She stands and brushes off her shorts, which barely show under her oversized black and gold, number thirteen Sinclair jersey when we hear the door open behind me.

Belle stands up. "Hey, Max. How are you?"

I turn around, expecting to see Max Kingston walking into Coach's suite. But I'm shocked as shit when Elle walks in next to him. The wild girl I haven't been able to forget from that night at O'Malley's a few months ago is gone, and in her place is some kind of businesswoman. Her dark hair has been straightened with not an ounce of her wild waves

detectable. A sexy black pants suit, a silky-looking white shirt, and sparkly gold heels make her look five years older than she did the night she spent with me, but there's no doubt it's her.

“Hey, Annabelle. Everyone, I'd like to introduce my sister, Eleanor Kingston.” Max's words shock me before he turns to the room. “Len just got home from Oxford this summer. She's the new head of analytics for the team.”

What the actual fuck?

SEBASTIAN

*A*nnabelle is the first to cross the room, offering her hand to Elle. “Annabelle Sinclair. Nice to meet you, Eleanor.”

The conversation continues around me, but all I hear is a buzzing sound in my ears as I try to reconcile my Elle with the Eleanor in front of me.

When Murphy catches my attention, holding a plate piled high with wings in one hand and a beer in the other, his look of utter confusion mixed with a touch of mischief tells me I’m about to be outed.

“Isn’t that . . . ?” Murph raises his beer in Elle’s direction. He’s trying to place her, but he can’t at first. Until . . . “That’s her. That’s the chick from the bar. The one you were all mopey about after O’Malley’s—”

“Murph,” I cut him off but not before we draw Elle and Max’s attention.

“Aiden Murphy,” Elle cocks her head to the side, a single eyebrow raised, possibly contemplating her next move. “You had a good season last year. You need to work on your combine scores, though, if you want scouts to take you seriously after this season.”

Murphy chokes, then looks at me with his mouth hanging open.

Yeah, man. I feel the same way.

Elle's eyes shift from Murphy to me, and I brace myself.

For what? I'm not sure. But I don't see this ending well for me.

"And that means you must be—" she starts, but I interrupt.

I refuse to let this dressed-up, stuffy version of the woman who's starred in my favorite spank bank reels since our night together get the last word. Instead, I step forward, passing Gracie over to Nattie, and offer Elle my hand that's not holding Evie. "Sebastian Beneventi."

Elle eyes my hand warily and then locks those gray eyes on mine. "Oh, I know who you are, Sebastian." She blatantly looks me over from head to toe before crossing her arms over her chest and speaking. "You ran the forty in 4.82 seconds and the twenty-yard split in 2.74 seconds. Your vertical leap improved from 36 inches two years ago to 38 inches last spring. Seventy-eight inches tall. Two hundred seventy-two pounds. Arm length is 35 inches, and your hand size is 11.15 inches. Your spring combine last year was impressive. I can't wait to see what you do this season." She cocks her head to the side, obviously pleased with her extensive knowledge of my stats, and I quickly see a glimmer of the confident girl I met last summer.

"You have me at a disadvantage, Ms. Kingston. It's obvious you've done your homework, but I haven't done mine." Something I'll be rectifying tonight.

I notice Max eying his sister. He looks weary or maybe skeptical, but I don't know the GM well enough to be sure.

Evie decides to let me know she doesn't want to share my attention when she places both hands on my cheeks and

turns my head to hers, covering my lips with her pudgy fingers. “My Bas.”

I kiss her tiny palm. “Yeah, Evie. Your Bash.” When I turn back to Elle, her smug smile from moments ago is gone. Replaced by a look of discomfort.

That’s interesting.

I can’t help but wonder if she knows this much about me now, what did she know then.

Max places his hand behind his sister. “It was great seeing all of you.” Then he looks at Belle and Katherine. “Enjoy the game, ladies.”

“Nice to meet you all,” Elle adds, avoiding my eyes, and I find myself staring after her as she exits the suite.

Evie plants a slobbery, wet kiss on my cheek. “My Bas.”

“Yeah, baby. He’s your Bash,” Belle tells Evie before taking her from me and placing her down on the floor. She lowers her voice, perceptively adding, “But I’m pretty sure at some point he may have been Eleanor Kingston’s Bash too.” The grimace on my face has Belle clapping her hands together like Nattie would if she wasn’t holding Gracie. “Ha, ha! I knew it! Spill the beans, pretty boy!”

“What the hell, Annabelle?” She never calls me that. That’s what the guys call me when they’re busting my balls.

I saved Belle’s life a few years ago. Well, I helped. It was Sammy, me, and Amelia, one of Belle’s best friends, who’s so engrossed in the game, she isn’t paying any attention to us. Belle was pregnant with the twins at the time, and a crazy ex of Declan’s had taken her hostage. Since then, we’ve grown really close.

“Oh, come on. Admit it. You slept with her.” Evie begins pulling at her mother’s shorts, trying to get Annabelle to pick her back up.

Murphy, who’s no longer carrying any food, returns to where we’re standing. “He totally fu—”

“Murphy,” Belle cuts him off. Then her eyes stop on each baby in the room before glaring daggers at Murph.

Murphy swallows, contemplating his next words. “He totally licked that fudgie pop.” Murph smiles, impressed with his alternative terminology.

“Hey.” I stop him. “I didn’t lick any fudgie pops. You don’t lick one-night stand fudgie pops.” Then I slowly add, “That’s how you get diseases, Murph.”

Nattie, who’s just joined our circle, adds, “Wait, are we talking about back door fudgie pops? Is that why it’s fudgie? Because I’m thinking there has to be a whole lotta nights happening before my mouth would go there. That’s not stranger territory. That’s more like stranger-danger territory.”

I interrupt them both, “There was no front or back door licking of any fudgie pop. Just . . .” Christ, I don’t even know where to go with this visual.

Murphy looks around the room, his eyes lingering on Belle’s younger brother, Tommy, who’s just plated up some food from the buffet.

“Ok. Got it.” Murph’s eyes move from Tommy to us. “No licking any fudgie pops. Our boy, Bash, just slid his hot dog into her bun. I’m betting a few times,” he says, that damn, self-satisfied smile back, He puffs his chest out like the peacock he is, proud of his newest comparison until I smack the back of his head.

“It’s at least a damn sausage,” I grumble as I look over annoyed at Tommy’s skinny fucking hot dog.

“Children,” Belle stops us, holding back her smile. “Focus.”

“I kinda want a fudgie pop now,” Murph tells Belle with a straight face.

Nattie looks through the window, her eyes lingering on Brady. “I’m gonna get all the sausage I want tonight.”

“Sausage. Me want Sausage.” Leave it to Gracie, who’s been quietly sitting on Nattie’s hip this entire time, to pick now to say her first sentence.

Belle turns her pissed-off eyes to me, and I do what any grown man would do in this situation.

I bolt to the outside seats to hide.

The taste of a certain fudgie pop plays games with my memory for the rest of the night.

ELEANOR

I cringe as Max and I exit the Sinclairs' suite and head toward the owner's box. I probably could have handled that better. For Sebastian's sake as well as Max's. But seriously . . . what was I supposed to do? Is there a rule for how to handle a one-night stand the next time you see them?

It doesn't take a psychic to know Max picked up on the weird vibes in there. I'm sure that's not going to help with the whole campaign to get my family to take me seriously.

Hey look, guys. I slept with a possible future draft pick.

Oh yeah, and I didn't tell him who I was.

Really screams responsible.

To them, I'll always be an impressive brain wrapped up in a flaky exterior. I spent the years between my mom's death and my move to Oxford hopping from one interest to the next. From one guy to the next. From one school to the next. Nothing ever stuck.

I was called a party girl, and I let everyone think that was the real me.

I may not have always made the best choices, but what teenager does?

That changed the day Max called me a few years ago and asked if I could analyze one of his potential players. To break down the numbers the way I needed to, I wanted to be able to compare him to everyone on that year's Kings roster. I analyzed every single player that weekend before sending all the information to Max on Monday morning, unknowingly beginning my unofficial internship for the Kings.

I finally knew the direction I wanted to go.

I didn't know what the title would be or what the job would entail.

I didn't know how hard I'd have to fight to get the position created.

I just knew it would be worth it.

This was how I'd forge my path within my family.

I refuse to look at Max as we finally make it back to the owner's box. He's stayed quiet, so maybe I'm wrong and just projecting my guilt. Unlike the Sinclairs' box that was only half-full and seemed to be only close friends and family, our box is filled to the brim. There's a mix of people I don't know, along with one hometown-boy-turned-big-time-Hollywood-actor who loves the Kings, two of the local baseball team's players, and a few of my siblings.

When Max gets cornered by a pudgy, forty-something guy who's wearing so much plaid he looks like he should be golfing, I dart away to the corner of the bar that Becks, Scarlet, and Hudson currently occupy.

"Done being pranced around like the new prized pony?" Becks asks as he takes the bottle of beer out of Hudson's hands and passes it to me.

I shrug. "It wasn't too bad." Taking a sip of beer, I glance between the three of them.

Scarlet eyes me warily. "What are you hiding, Len? You hate having to schmooze. Or has that changed?"

“You *are* a shitty socialite, Len.” Hudson nods at the bartender, letting him know he needs a refill.

“Amen to that, big brother.” I lean into him for a moment. It’s been years since I’ve watched a game from this box with these people. A sense of longing for the days when my parents would fill this box with us kids hits me seconds before I catch the glare on Max’s face as he slides in next to us.

He doesn’t even place an order before a glass of scotch is handed to him. After thanking the bartender, he turns back to me, his shoulders tight and clearly aggravated. “What the hell, Len?”

“What the hell, what, Max?” I ask innocently.

Max’s left eye twitches as the muscles in his face strain. “Don’t play stupid, Lenny. It’s not you.” He rubs his temple with his thumb and forefinger, before continuing, “Seriously. You slept with him?” My siblings all stare with rapt attention.

“Ohh.” Fucking Becket. His ever-present smile grows. “Who’d you sleep with, Len?”

Hudson laughs. “If there was sleeping involved, he was doing it wrong.” His laughing stops when I pull the hair on his arm. The big baby backs up, scowling.

“Was it good? If not, it doesn’t count. Don’t admit to anything, Eleanor.” Scarlet shocks me with her response. It almost sounds like she’s on my side.

I feel heat rise in my cheeks before embarrassment flames to anger, and I turn on my oldest brother. “How exactly is it any of your business who I do or do not sleep with, Maximus? Are you my mother or my father? Oh wait, nope. They’re both dead. I’m twenty-two years old and have been responsible enough to live on my own for the past five years. He’s not our player or our employee, so you can keep your opinions to yourself.”

“She’s got you there, Max. Even if he were our employee or player, there’s no rule against employee dating. The organization was built on nepotism.” Scarlet surprises me yet again when she grasps my hand in hers and tugs me away to the soft chairs in the opposite corner of the room. “Well, at least you’ve grown a damn backbone, Len.”

“Umm, okay. Thanks, I guess,” I tell her honestly. “I thought I always had a backbone.”

Scarlet sits down, crossing her long legs primly and looks around for a waiter. “You let the kings tell you what to do. You always have. In person, in text, on the phone. You never push back.”

Scarlet and I always called our brothers Daddy’s little kings. We’ve always been considered Philadelphia’s royal family. My father was the true king, and he groomed my brothers in his image. They may seem like refined gentlemen at the top of society’s food chain, but deep down they’re ruthless royalty. One way or another, our kings get things done. And they tend to steamroll anyone who gets in their way.

But they’re not as smart about it as Scarlet and me. We might be the most ruthless of all. We just do a better job of masking it behind pretty words and prettier smiles.

“I let the guys think they’re telling me what to do, Scar. But I was a continent away. As soon as I got off the phone, I did what I wanted. It was easier to let them think they were getting their way. Less waves made meant less grief given.” I sip my beer and take in the impressed look my sister gives me.

“So, who got Max’s panties in a twist?” Scarlet asks before the waiter takes her order.

I sigh, knowing I have to own up to it. “I slept with Sebastian Beneventi over the summer. I analyzed him for Coach Sinclair and Max the following week. I think he should

be someone we're looking at for the draft in the spring. I suppose that's what pissed off Maximus."

Scarlet purses her lips. "You know, he hates when you call him Maximus."

"I do. That's why I did it. He pissed me off. It seemed only fair to return the favor." That's what we do.

She agrees, then asks, "Now, Sebastian Beneventi . . . ? Really? Pretty sure your IQ says you're smarter than that, Eleanor."

"How do you know him?" I ask, surprised by her question.

The waiter comes back and places two martinis on the table. Only my sister would order a martini at a football game. Scarlet swirls her glass and pops a blue cheese-stuffed olive in her mouth before bringing her eyes back to me. "He saved Declan Sinclair's wife's life a few years ago. It was pretty big news. He was stabbed in the process. Hit the training circuit pretty hard the following year and had a hell of a season last year. Max has been following him since then. That's why he had you analyze him. Problem is, he doesn't want to go pro. He wants to be a doctor." She looks around, making sure no one is paying attention to us. "You rode that stallion? Not that I blame you one bit. That is one good-looking man. His older brother is even prettier. The older one went to school with Becks. Too many rumors surround them though."

Now, I'm intrigued. "Really? He and Becks know each other?"

She sips her martini. "They do. Pretty sure they work out together at Hud's gym."

"Huh." I don't know why, but something about that surprises me. "Wait . . . What kind of rumors?" Numbers are my thing, but public relations and media management are

my sister's. She's always up-to-date on all the goings-on in Philly.

"The kind you should know about before you let a man like that into your bed, Eleanor."

If she was going to say anything else, it gets cut off by the simultaneous alerts from our cell phones.

Becks: Lenny already has a boy-toy on the side.

I look across the room to the now-empty corner of the bar. Becks is lucky he's not there anymore because I'm going to fucking kill him.

Jace: On the side of what? Did she have a boyfriend packed in her suitcase that I missed?

Hudson: Why aren't you at the game tonight, jack off?

Jace: I hate when you call me that, Huddy.

Hudson: Fuck off.

Scarlet: Boys. Our little sister is allowed to have sex with whomever she wants without answering to you.

I look across the table and smile appreciatively at my sister, thanking her for her defense of me.

Scarlet: I mean I'm sure I'm not the only one who'd rather she didn't screw a mafia prince . . .

My eyes practically bug out of my head when I read her second response. "What the hell, Scar?"

Sawyer: WTF. Aren't you all in the same damn room?

Becks: Nope. I'm outta here.

Max: The game's not over, asshole.

Becks: Things to do, Maxie-poo. The three of you have it handled.

Hudson drops down into the open seat next to me. “Damn, Len. Jumping into bed with the mafia.” He whistles. “Ballsy. Didn’t he get shot a few years ago?” The ass can’t keep a straight face.

Scarlet corrects him, “Nope. Knife wound. Get it straight,” and then pops the remaining olive into her mouth.

“Where’d you meet? Down by the docks?” Hudson smirks. He’s being an ass on purpose now.

I shake my head. “No, you dick. This isn’t *On The Waterfront*. We met at O’Malley’s when I spent the weekend with Jules in July. I didn’t exactly ask him to strip so I could check out all the scars on his body before we hooked up. I’ll make sure to ask him to do that next time.” Kinda wondering how I missed that last time.

“Next time?” Of course, that’s when Max enters our conversation. “Do you really think that’s a good idea, Len?”

I feel myself losing my patience and count to ten before answering, “It was a slip of the tongue, Max,”

“I’ll bet you got a slip of the tongue.” Hudson leans back, placing his arm on the back of my chair.

I reach back and pat his hand, then do exactly what he taught me to do when I was younger. I bend his thumb back as far as I can without breaking it.

“Fuck, Len. Uncle. Uncle.” The big bad fighter tapped out awful quickly that time.

“Jesus, guys. Try to remember where you are, and that you’re representing the family, please.” Max always reverts back to being the oldest.

Always in charge.

Never any fun.

“Fine.” I let go, then stand up and wave my finger between the three of them. “I may be back home guys, but that doesn’t give you all free reign to stick your noses in my love life, not that there’s a love life to butt into. Honestly, it was one night. I doubt it will happen again. I didn’t even tell him who I was.”

Hudson lets out a long, low whistle. “Damn, Len. So, you knew who he was but didn’t tell him who you were?”

“Ouch. Yeah. You’re not hooking back up with that guy, Len. A man isn’t going to forgive that.” Scarlet gently pushes her martini glass away and pulls my untouched glass in front of her, swirling her new toothpick of olives.

Max crosses his arms over his chest. “She doesn’t need forgiveness because she’s not seeing him again. Isn’t that right, Len?”

“Damn, Maxie pad. That’s harsh,” Hud chuckles.

“Don’t fucking ‘Maxie’ me, Huddy. Some of us are on the clock tonight.” The vein in Max’s forehead bulges.

“Listen, guys. I should probably talk to Bash.” I turn to Max. “It’s only right that I apologize.” Even as I say the words, I know it’s a bad idea. But damn, seeing him again brought back all the memories from that night.

They were good memories.

Toe-curling memories.

Memories I haven’t been able to let go of, if I’m being honest with myself.

“Go get ’em, tiger!” Scarlet cheers me on. “I want a scar count tomorrow.”

I laugh as I walk away, flipping her off as I go.

Maybe we could have a repeat of our one night and go our separate ways in the morning.

Would that be so bad?

SEBASTIAN

The Kings are winning twenty-one to six when Evie finally passes out on my shoulder. Gracie and Callen passed out over an hour ago, but Evie wouldn't give up the fight until moments ago. I'm standing inside the windows, looking out over the stadium, swaying back and forth like I've watched the moms at church do with their babies my whole life, starting to wonder when exactly I handed my balls over to a one-year-old. Her mother's been nauseous all night, reminding me, yet again, why I'm so fucking happy not to be a girl. Instead, Evie and I continue our little dance while she stays tucked against my chest.

Belle comes out of the bathroom, looking pale before placing a hand on Evie's back. "Want me to take her?" she whispers, sounding exhausted and looking a little green.

"Nah. I'm good."

Callen and Gracie are sleeping in a playpen in the corner of the suite, while the majority of the rest of us are sitting outside watching the second half of the game. It's surprisingly quiet in here, which is why Belle and I both turn when the door slowly opens, revealing Elle. She steps inside as Belle lifts her finger to her lips in the universal signal for quiet.

Elle nods and lets her eyes skim over me, coming to a stop on Evie. The same look she had earlier crosses her face before a mask descends, covering any emotion that may have been there. She glances between Belle and me, before stepping closer but not speaking.

Belle's hands go to Evie's back. "I think she wants to speak with you, Sebastian."

"Want me to put her down?" I tip my head toward the playpen and kiss Evie's little blonde head.

Why do babies smell so good?

Like innocence mixed with baby powder.

Belle runs her hand over Evie's blonde curls, and nods before turning to Elle. She's perfected her pissed-off mama bear face over the past few years, and she's definitely directing it toward Elle right now. After I've got Evie down next to her sister, I move back in between the two ladies, and wait.

Elle grabs the staff lanyard around her neck and pulls on it nervously before straightening her spine and meeting my eyes. "Can we talk?"

I cross my arms over my chest, but before I can answer, I'm cut off by Annabelle.

"I don't see anyone stopping you. Especially now that we all know exactly who we're talking to." Belle takes a step in front of me, and my shoulders shake from the force of holding in my laughter.

Pissed-off mama bear.

"Umm . . . Alone?" She looks around Annabelle so she can see me. "Please, Sebastian? I owe you an apology, and I'd like to do it without an audience." Elle glances over my shoulder before she brings her eyes back to us.

I look back and see Brady standing in the outside entrance. "Yeah. Okay," I tell her before squeezing Belle's shoulder. "Wanna let everyone know I left?"

She looks past me. “We don’t like liars, Miss Kingston.”

“Noted.” Elle’s eyes dart nervously around the room, before adding, “Why don’t we talk in my office? There’s a little more privacy there.”

Without looking behind me, I can feel our audience growing. “Lead the way.”

We’re silent as this bombshell disguised as an uptight executive leads me to a private elevator. She swipes a card, then waits for the doors to close behind us. “My office is on the first floor.”

The tension in this box hangs heavy in the air, not helping the tug-of-war my mind’s been stuck in all night. I just can’t seem to reconcile the two versions of this girl. However, the urge to push her up against the wall of the elevator and remind her of who she was that night is strong. Instead, I lean against the wall and watch her fidget with that damn lanyard, which, of course, doesn’t help my battle to not stare at her chest.

When the elevator stops, we continue our silence as I follow her down the hall to her office. As soon as we’re through the door, her black jacket gets thrown over her chair and her shoes are kicked off, shrinking her down at least three inches. She turns to me, arms crossed defensively. Her silky looking white tank pulls tight over her chest. “Well?” she asks.

I lean my back against the door, crossing my feet in front of me. “Well, what?” If this is the game she wants to play, that’s on her.

“That’s all you’re going to say?” A beautiful red is crawling up her neck, reminding me how much fun it was to make this girl flush. Everywhere.

“I didn’t barge in on you, interrupting your night with people who don’t lie to you and ask you to talk. That was all you. If you’ve got something to say, say it. If not, I’ll get back

to my friends upstairs.” I’m going for unaffected, but there’s no denying the effect this woman has on me.

“You’re right,” she huffs. “Let me start over.”

“From the beginning? Because I’m good with that. How about this time, you give me your full fucking name? Or how about you tell me you already knew exactly who I was. Who I am.” Okay, fuck unaffected. I push off the door and cross the room. There’s a current of electricity in the room bouncing between us, just waiting for the chance to connect. “Wait, am I jumping a couple of spaces on the game board you seem to be playing on? Do we need to roll the dice to decide what square we should start on?”

Elle steps back until the backs of her legs hit her desk. “I’m not playing a game, Sebastian.”

“Coulda fooled me, Eleanor. Oh wait, or is it Elle?” I stalk closer to her.

She reaches her hand out in a handshake gesture, causing me to stop short. “Eleanor Kingston, but my friends and incredibly annoying siblings call me Lenny. Nice to meet you.”

I stare at her offered hand. “I’ve been inside you, Lenny.” The name leaves my lips on a curse, but I have to admit it fits her. “Don’t you think it’s a little late for introductions?”

“I didn’t lie to you, Sebastian.” Her hands drop to brace against the desk behind her. “A lot of my friends at Oxford called me Elle. It’s just not a name I use here.”

My eyes are drawn to the heavy rise and fall of her chest. “No. You didn’t lie. You just omitted a whole hell of a lot of the truth.” I crowd her, the draw nearly impossible to ignore. “At the very least, you knew who Declan was. Tell me you had no clue who I was. Tell me you didn’t play me, Lenny.”

“I knew who you were,” she whispers into the charged air surrounding us.

“Why the fuck wouldn’t you have just told me?” I ask on a growl, the sound echoing off the walls of her small office.

“It was a one-night stand, Sebastian. Did you want my entire pedigree?” That pedigree kicks in when she raises her nose high in the air like the Philadelphia royalty her family is. “You weren’t exactly screaming your last name from the rooftops.”

I lean into her, my palms leaning flat against the desk, caging her in, her expensive scent washing over me. “I wasn’t the one screaming that night, if memory serves me right.”

A gasp leaves her beautiful lips right before her hands grip the front of my shirt. We stay locked in an internal battle, neither of us willing to give an inch, until she pulls me toward her. “I’m sorry, Sebastian. I should have told you who I was. Who I am. I knew who you were, but I didn’t want it to change how you saw me. How you treated me. I wanted you that night.” Her pink tongue darts out to lick her lips. “I still want you.” She leans in, her lips barely brushing mine as I pull away.

Straightening to my full height, I back away. “Apology accepted.” I watch confusion ghost over her pretty face before anger takes its place.

“But . . .”

“See ya around, Ms. Kingston.”

“That’s it?” she asks, annoyance lacing her tone as she stalks after me.

“I don’t play games, Lenny. Call me when you can say the same.”



Group Text:

Murphy: Where'd you sneak off to during the second half of the game Bash?

Bash: Like you don't fucking know Murph.

Cooper: This sounds promising.

Declan: Dude . . . You didn't stay for the game?

Brady: Didn't Belles fill you in?

Declan: She had her hands full.

Cooper: Oh... I'm sure she did.

Declan: She was puking, asshole.

Murphy: I'm thinkin Bash's hands were full.

Declan: Full of what?

Cooper: Full of who?

Brady: I think it's whom.

Cooper: Seriously?

Bash: Fine. Max Kingston introduced his sister/newest hire Eleanor to all of us tonight.

Murphy: AND . . .

Bash: And she's the girl from that night at O'Malley's.

Cooper: The hot brunette? So you're banging Declan's boss?

Declan: She's not exactly my boss.

Bash: It was a one-time only thing.

Declan: Yeah. I've heard that before. A few months later we had the twins.

Bash: Yeah well I don't have the choices you did. Catch you all later.

SEBASTIAN

I'm sore as hell when I wake up Sunday morning. But we won the game yesterday, and that always helps dull the pain. I don't really feel like getting out of bed, but the smell of coffee and bacon are calling to me. There's a cloud of dread hanging over me, knowing what I've got to do today. Dad wants us at his house for dinner tonight . . . with the Sabatinis.

Emma and I have known each other for most of our lives, but it's only been in the last few years that our parents started talking about aligning our families. Some people would call it an arranged marriage. I call it my own private hell. My dad hasn't allowed me many choices in my life, so I knew when he let me go to college instead of joining the family business that he expected something in return. There was no way he was letting me out of the family business without some kind of iron-clad string wrapped around it. That's just not his way.

The first time he mentioned the idea of me marrying Emma was four years ago, I thought it was a joke. I was a senior in high school.

I'd never gotten serious with a girl and wasn't looking to.

That summer, before I moved out of his house, I was told it was written in stone.

It might as well have been written in blood.

I was eighteen years old and told I was going to marry someone I didn't even like. We had until we were twenty-one, and then it would be announced. We'd be married before we turned twenty-two. Sam argued with my father about it for weeks, but Dad wouldn't give in. Sam promised me he'd get me out of this sham of a marriage, but I don't think it's going to happen.

She turns twenty-one in three months. I don't even want to consider what's going to be discussed at this dinner tonight. This is the part of my world I don't share with my friends. This is the part of me they'll never understand. How can they? This isn't normal in their worlds. In mine, it might not be frequent, but normal isn't a far stretch.

My pops runs Philadelphia.

Emma's dad runs Atlantic City and South Jersey.

My pops has the power hers has always wanted.

It's gonna be a shit show.

At this point, if this marriage doesn't happen, people could die.

It's the way of *The Family*.

I shove my legs into a pair of jeans and look around for my basket of clean clothes. *Guess I left it downstairs*. I was heading that way for breakfast anyway, so I go down shirtless, knowing Nattie's gonna bust my balls about it. With the smell of bacon making my stomach growl, I decide not to care. By the time I get to the bottom of the stairs, all four of my roommates are bringing plates to the table.

"Come on, Bash," Nat calls out. "If you eat topless, I eat topless."

"The fuck you do, Natalie Sinclair." Brady smacks Nat's ass as she walks by him with a bowl of bright red

strawberries in her hands.

“I’m getting a damn shirt. Just give me a minute,” I grumble as the doorbell rings.

“Wanna answer the door first?” Nat asks as she beans Brady in the head with a berry, leaving a squishy red imprint on his forehead. Whatever.

I don’t know who I was expecting when I open the door, but it definitely wasn’t Eleanor Kingston. “What do you want?” I hold the door, not inviting her in.

“Who is it, Bash?” Nattie calls out.

I hear a crash, followed by Murphy’s “Princess, you can’t put it in my face like that and not expect a reaction.”

“There’s plenty of food. Tell them to come on in,” Sabrina adds.

I look Len over, waiting for an answer. She looks good. Tight jeans and a white V-neck t-shirt, dark wavy hair down around her shoulders, and a pair of pale blue flip-flops on her feet. Way better than that stupid fucking pants suit.

She cocks her head to the side. “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

Nat pops her head under my arm. “Of course, he’s going to invite you in. He’s got manners. They’re just missing at the moment. Maybe they’re with his shirt.” Nat smiles as she starts to move away. “Hope you’re hungry.”

I start to say, “Lenny was just . . .”

At the same time, Lenny answers, “I was going to invite Sebastian out to breakfast with me, but whatever you guys have cooking smells fantastic.” She turns her body and slips between me and the door frame. “I’d love to join you.”

The two women walk toward the table as Sabrina sets an additional plate. “Murphy made a ham, Parmesan cheese, and basil quiche, and Belgium waffles today.”

Murph smiles at his girl. “Don’t forget the hand-whipped cream and cinnamon sugar syrup.” He smiles at Brina.

“We’ll have to save some of that for later tonight.”

Sabrina blushes before hiding her face like we didn’t all just hear that.

I stand back, watching Lenny look around, taking it all in before she turns to me. “Did you cook?”

Murph pulls out her chair. “Nope. Bash only cooks on pasta night. This feast is all me.” Nattie places a cup of coffee next to the newly added empty plate, and Brady asks, “Want some orange juice, Eleanor?” like they’re all here to serve her and drive me crazy in the process.

“No, thank you. Coffee is perfect. And please, call me Lenny.” She turns her head and smiles in my direction and then sits down next to my open seat. “Did you already eat, Sebastian?”

“No.” What the fuck is she doing here? I quickly grab a shirt from the laundry room.

When I come back to the table, Brady hands me a glass of orange juice, then takes his seat next to Nattie.

I begrudgingly sit down and start filling my plate, my hunger not allowing me to skip breakfast.

“So, Lenny, we didn’t really get a chance to talk to you the other night. Why don’t you tell us about yourself?” Leave it to Sabrina to get right down to it.

Nat sips her coffee before leaning forward. “Seriously, you employ half my family. I feel like I should know you better. You basically fund my tuition.”

“I don’t think Lenny came by to be grilled over breakfast.” I have no idea why I feel the need to protect her. And I still have no idea why she came by today. But for some reason, I don’t like the idea of the girls not liking her.

Len’s leg brushes mine under the table before her eyes smile. “It’s okay, Sebastian. I’ve got nothing left to hide.” She turns back to everyone else. “Well, as I’m sure you all now know, I met the three of them,” she points between the

guys, before adding, “and both of Natalie’s brothers over the summer. I didn’t mention who I was because sometimes it’s a nightmare telling people you’re a Kingston. I’d just flown home from Oxford, where I finished my master’s in business analytics. I’d been there for the past five years. Coming home already had me a little shaky, and I didn’t want to be a Kingston for the night. I was stopping by today to apologize for that.”

She looks at me and smiles. “Again. I’m not usually a giant asshole, and I’m pretty sure by not mentioning who I was, I put myself in that category.”

The girls nod in agreement like it’s no big deal.

Brady jumps to my defense. “Pretty sure being a giant asshole came into play because you didn’t mention knowing who Sebastian was rather than not mentioning who you were.”

“Brady,” Nattie hisses.

Brady shrugs. “Just telling it like it is.”

“He’s right,” Lenny agrees. “I should have told you guys that I recognized you. I didn’t at first, but once I saw Declan, it was easy to place everyone else. I’ve followed all your stats. You’re an impressive group.”

She butters the guys up just enough that the rest of breakfast goes by without any more awkward moments . . . for them. The entire thing sucks for me.

This is the girl.

She’s who I’d date if I could.

She’s who I’d want to see again if I wasn’t having dinner to discuss my impending engagement in a few fucking hours.

She laughs with my roommates over the next hour while I sit back and watch.

I don’t join in.

What’s the point?

This isn’t the life I get to have.

ELEANOR

*B*reakfast ends, and everyone scatters to get on with their day. His friends are kind of crazy but sweet. Natalie and Sabrina both took my number and invited me to watch next Saturday's Kroydon Crusaders home game with them. It might not be a bad move if the Kings are thinking about potentially drafting Sebastian. Not that we don't have scouts who do nothing but that, but I can definitely use it as an excuse if I need one.

I'm not sure when I started needing an excuse to go after what I want.

I'm even less sure exactly when I decided Sebastian Beneventi is something I want, but he is.

Fuck.

That thought alone has me itching to run as fast and far in the opposite direction of this man as I can. Maybe I should. It would be easier to give up now, that's for sure.

Murphy gave me a standing invitation for Sunday breakfast at their house. Apparently, he cooks like this every weekend. Not gonna lie, it was delicious. I was impressed. Brady was a little more protective of Sebastian than the others. A little less welcoming. But I respected that. I'd be

the same way for Jules if the roles were reversed. Hell, we probably would have been worse.

Sebastian, who's been quiet throughout the morning, stands, pulling out my chair. "Let me walk you to the door."

Guess that's my cue to leave.

A chorus of *byes* and *it was nice to meet yous* echo around us as his roommates head in different directions. "I take it I'm dismissed?" I ask, not sure why I'm disappointed and slightly annoyed by the thought.

Sebastian opens the front door but purposefully stands in my way. "Why did you come today, Len? You apologized last week. What more is there to say?" His voice is tight with frustration, but his eyes hold mine with a promise of something I'm not ready to give up on yet.

The man standing before me in jeans and a tight Kroydon University t-shirt stretching across his chest is a spectacular sight. But his eyes are what demand my attention, crystal blue and holding me hostage while I decide my next move.

Run or stay?

Push or give in?

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you," I blurt out. I guess honesty is what I'm going for. "So, I thought I'd do something about it. I didn't like the way we left things the other night."

Bash crosses his arms over his deliciously muscled chest, stretching his shirt tighter. "I can't do the relationship thing, Len. My life is . . . complicated."

His answer throws me. The words are said with certainty, but I hear regret in his voice. At least I think I do. "Umm . . . Now whose jumping a few spaces on the game board, Sebastian?"

"No games, Len. Not my style." He reaches out as if to touch me but changes his mind, and instead, pushes the door

open further before stepping out of the way. “Thanks for stopping by. I’ll see you around.”

What the hell? “I’ll see you around, Sebastian.” I slip through the door and walk to my car, wondering what exactly I was thinking coming here this morning. I feel his eyes tracking me until I slam the door on my car and watch the entrance to the house do the same. Seriously, what the hell? “Call Jules,” I tell my Bluetooth. When I get her voicemail, I hang up and try something new. “Call Scarlet.” Fuck it. I need to talk to somebody, and I don’t think one of my brothers will do for this conversation. I must be desperate if I’m opting for Scarlet.

“Jesus Christ, Eleanor. This better be good.” She’s breathing heavily like she’s . . .

“Oh my God,” I screech. “Please tell me you didn’t just answer your phone during sex?” I really wouldn’t put it past my sister. But eww!

Scarlet sighs before I hear her moving around. “Please, Len. I love you, but not that much. I mean, I might be willing to turn my vibrator off for you, but that’s about it.” She sighs dramatically. “I’m finishing my workout. You should give it a try. Your thighs have been starting to look a little thick since you came home.”

“What? I do not have thick thighs, Scarlet Lee!” I yell.

“Might want to watch the junk food for a little while, Lenny Lou.” The bitch middle-names me right back. “What are you doing calling me before noon on a Sunday?”

Why my siblings insist on believing I’m a good-time girl who parties all night and sleeps all day is beyond me. Even when I was at my worst during my early years in college, I wasn’t that bad. I hate sleeping late. I pull away from the pretty house just off the campus of Kroydon University and head onto the streets of Philadelphia, navigating my way home. “I went to see Sebastian Beneventi this morning.”

There's a pause, giving me another chance to regret calling Scarlet. I don't know what I was thinking.

"When I asked for the scar count on Friday, you told me nothing happened the night before," she says, accusation lacing her tone.

"Nothing did happen. That doesn't mean I didn't want something to happen though," I tell her more honestly than I'd usually be with my sister.

"Listen, Len, maybe nothing happening was for the best. I mean, can you even imagine getting involved with a mafia prince? I'll bet his family makes ours look like the Brady Bunch."

I hate when my sister's right. "Yeah. But there's just something about him, Scar. I mean, you should see him holding a baby. Seriously, I think my ovaries exploded. His big hand took up her entire back. Come on . . . Even you're not cold enough to be unaffected by that sight." Lordy, I wish I was exaggerating. "He answered the door today in jeans with no shirt and bare feet, Scar." I've got such a thing for a guy in jeans and bare feet.

"Yeah," she hums. "That's a good look on a man. I'll give you that one. But six-pack abs don't outweigh a life of crime, Len. Max will have a coronary."

"He's a college student, applying to med schools. I hardly think he's leading a double life. College student by day, crime lord by night sounds a little far-fetched. And it's a good thing my parents are dead, isn't it? Max does not get to control who I date." I breathe out an annoyed huff. "You'd never let Max tell you what you can do. Why should I?" I pull up to the brownstone I bought on the Main Line a few weeks ago and wait for Scarlet's answer.

"Oh, little sister. I'm not telling you to give up on that sexy mountain of a man. I'm just prepping you for the fallout. If you want him, take him. You're a Kingston. We

don't get told no. I don't care who his daddy is." My sister clicks her tongue, then waits. "When are you seeing him again?"

"I don't know. He blew me off." I look at my house and contemplate going in there alone. I used to love my privacy, wanting nothing more than to be alone after growing up surrounded by nosey siblings. Now the silence sucks. All of a sudden, I wish I were a little kid again, surrounded by the noise of my loud family.

I don't think adulting is all it's cracked up to be.

"Since when do you let that slow you down? Come on, Len. He's a man. Just remind him who he's dealing with. You're too smart to be this stupid."

I choke out an annoyed laugh at my sister. "And how exactly am I supposed to do that? I don't beg, Scar."

"Oh, Lenny, play your cards right, and he'll be the one begging." I hear water turn on in the background before hearing an exacerbad sigh. "What are you doing today?"

"Laundry. Why? What are you doing?" I should get out of the car and go inside. But I don't. Instead, I wait for Scarlet's answer and wonder if this is her offering an olive branch.

"I'm about to jump in the shower. Meet me at my place, and we'll plan your next move."

"Why are you helping me, Scar?" I wish I wasn't so skeptical, but this is so very un-Scarlet.

"Because we're Kingstons. Being told no is unacceptable. And maybe this guy will be what it takes to keep you from running away. Just tell the doorman who you are, and he'll let you up. See you in a few, Len." She disconnects the call, leaving me wondering what I've gotten myself into and yet, happy to know my sister is still a bitch.

Is Sebastian Beneventi worth this kind of effort?

I guess that's the million-dollar question.

SEBASTIAN

I close the door and look out the window to watch Len pull away.

What the hell was she thinking coming here? What can she possibly want from me?

We said *one night* for a reason. Seeing her again doesn't change those reasons.

It can't.

My roommates are all talking as I pass by them and go back upstairs to my room, dropping face-first back down on my bed. I'm not ready to deal with this shit today.



After I've slept a few more hours, showered, and finally dressed for what's likely to be a nightmare of a dinner with the Sabatinis, I give in and head downstairs.

Time to get this shit over with.

I'm surprised to see Nattie sitting on the couch, balancing her MacBook on her lap. The house was so quiet I assumed I was the only one home. "Where is everyone?" I ask, leaning against the back of the couch behind her, surprised when she slams her laptop closed.

“Hey. I thought you left a while ago.” She drops the computer next to her on the couch and stands to face me, shoving her hands into the back pockets of her jean shorts.

“What are you up to, Nat?” I point at her face. “You’ve got that look going on. It’s in your eyes, Nattie.”

“Nothing,” she squeaks.

Before she can do anything else, I snatch her computer and hold it high in the air as the five-foot-two pixie flies over the top of the couch, trying to grab it back and landing flat on her ass in the process. I walk away, laughing as I lift the lid of the laptop. The screen comes back up, displaying a word document just as Nat jumps back up to her feet.

“Give me that back, Sebastian,” she demands, stomping her foot with her hand on her hip. Nat looks so damn funny when she’s pissed. Total Tinker Bell vibes. But I don’t dare tell her that for fear of retribution. Nat can get mean with a glitter bomb, and Murph’s been on the receiving end of that a time or two.

“He brushed her hair away from her face,” I read from the document that’s still open on the laptop, “taking her face in his hands.” I look over at Nat. “What is this?”

“You’re going to think it’s stupid,” she says, not making eye contact. “Just give it back to me, Bash.”

She holds her hand out to me, and I suddenly feel like an asshole. “I’m sorry, Nat.” I hand the MacBook back to her. “I was just kidding around.”

She hugs the rose gold computer close to her chest before raising her eyes to mine. “You remember that creative writing class I took last year?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I took it because I wanted to be able to turn my sketches into greeting cards and thought it might help. It didn’t help with that, but it did give me an idea. You know, you guys are at football practice, like, all the time. Brina’s

been studying non-stop for the LSAT, and Chloe's in school on the other side of the city. I've had more time on my hands than I used to. So . . . I kinda started writing a book." Nat's blue eyes drop to the floor as a flush of embarrassment rushes up her cheeks.

"Nat, that's awesome. Why are you hiding it?" I wrap an arm around her shoulders and squeeze her to me. "What's it about?" Not that I can't guess from what I just read. "Is it like *Fifty Shades* stuff?"

Nattie laughs and tries to shove me away. "No, asshole." She thinks for a minute before adding, "Maybe like twenty-five shades. Anyway, nobody knows yet. Please don't say anything until I'm finished and ready."

"Whatever you need, Nat." I kiss the top of her head. "I gotta get out of here."

"Dinner at Dad's?" She grimaces.

I haven't talked a ton about what's going to happen this year, but my friends know. "Yeah. Time to deal with the devil," I tell her as I start to walk away.

"Hey, Bash?" she calls out.

I turn my head to the blonde pixie who's become my little sister over these last few years. "Yeah, Nat?"

"Don't let the devil burn you, okay?" I wish there was a joking Sinclair smile on her face, but she's completely serious.

I nod. "I'll try, Nat. Lock the door behind me." I walk outside and slide into my Hummer, thinking about it. They say it's better to deal with the devil you know, but I don't know if that's true when the devil is your dad.



hen I walk through the oversized, arching black wooden doors of the monstrosity that is my father's house, I'm

greeted by the decadent smell of Nonna's cooking. Garlic, onions, peppers, and tomato mix in the air with the scent of home-cooked bread and the sounds of Frank Sinatra coming from the speakers in the kitchen. My nose leads the way as my stomach grumbles loudly.

Nonna turns from the stove with her ever-present wooden spoon in her hands. "Sebastian. You are too thin. Come. Try my sauce." The spoon is lifted to my lips. Always a funny sight, considering Nonna is barely four foot ten.

I take the spoon from her, lick it clean, then bend down and kiss her cheek.

"I'm making your favorite, my little prupetta." She gently smacks my face the ways she's done since I was a little boy. "Mi manchi."

"I miss you too, Nonna. What do you say, you and me get the heck out of here and go to dinner in the city? We can go to The Victor Café. You know you love listening to the waiters singing opera while they serve dinner."

"Nice try, asshole," Sam says as he walks into the kitchen.

"Linguaggio, Samuel." Nonna hates when we curse in front of her. Always has.

I raise an eyebrow and egg Sam on. "Yeah. Language, Samuel."

Sam waits for Nonna to go back to stirring her sauce before quietly whispering, "Fuck off," to me, then sticking his finger in her sauce, earning himself a smack with her spoon. Sam backs away like our eighty-two-year-old grandmother is scary. "Dad wants us," he tells me. "They're here."

Nonna turns to us both. "Go. Go. I'll meet you in the dining room. Go." She shoves us along. She may not involve herself in Pop's business, but she knows everything that

goes on in this house. I think she knows more than she lets on. Her hearing is excellent for someone who acts deaf most of the time.

I may as well be walking to my own grave with the weight of a thousand pounds of dirt sinking down on my chest. When Sam and I enter the living room, Dad is passing out glasses of red wine to Mr. and Mrs. Sabatini, the three of them smiling like they don't know this is making their children miserable.

In our world, we're raised to do our duty.

To not question.

To never show weakness.

Emma's playing her part to perfection tonight. Her long dark hair is down around her shoulders, pushed back off her face by a thick headband with some kind of knot at the top. She has on a black sweater set, a knee-length gray skirt, and black heels.

It's obvious her mother dressed her.

This girl is anything but safe and boring. She's unpredictable and unashamed. What she's not is this Stepford wife standing in front of me.

Sam and I stop next to Emma, just as my father turns, telling us, "We're going to my office. We'll meet you in the dining room in a few minutes." He ushers the Sabatinis out of the room, and Emma takes her first deep breath.

"What the hell are you wearing?" I ask more harshly than I mean to.

Sam shakes his head. "I can see this is going to be a happy marriage."

"Shut the fuck up, Sam." Emma glares at him. "My mother forced me to wear this. I'm dressed head to toe from her closet."

"Everything?" Sam smiles, raising a brow. "Even . . ." He reaches forward.

“Shut up, Sam.” She levels him with a glare and slaps his hand away. “You will not be seeing what’s underneath my anything.”

Emma and I have never been anything more than fuck buddies, but that doesn’t mean I want to think about Sam going there. Although the way she’s looking at him now, he might have a chance.

“Fuck off, you two. I guarantee if our parents tell us this is happening tonight, nobody is getting laid. You’re a fun screw, Bash, but I thought you were getting us out of this. I swear to God, if I walk out of here with a diamond on my finger tonight, my first act as your fiancée will be to punch you in the face with it once our parents aren’t in the room.” She means it too. Emma likes it rough.

“Relax,” Sam crosses the room to the bar cart and pours three shots of Sambuca, passing them out to each of us. “I’ll handle this.” He looks directly at Emma. “You will never walk down that aisle.”

“Will it be because I’ll be dead, Sam?” Emma asks dryly.

Sam taps his glass to hers. “I don’t kill women.”

She throws back her shot. “Am I supposed to find that comforting?”

“I don’t really care what you find it. I’m not watching my brother get forced into a marriage to fix something our fathers fucked up in the first place. Just go with the flow tonight, no matter what they say.” Sam drinks his shot and slams it back down on the bar cart. He rubs his hands together, announcing, “Showtime.” Then he walks into the dining room.

I shoot my shot. Then turn to Emma. “You ready for this?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. Not even a little bit. You?”

For some reason, Len’s face comes to mind. “Nope. But we might as well get on with it. This is life. Well, our life, at

least.”

Emma tilts her head back to look at me. “Yeah, it’s life, Sebastian. But it’s not living.”

No. It's not.

It’s not living at all.

SEBASTIAN

Later that night, I walk into our house, grateful that the lights are off.

Secrets, lies, and anger are all easier to deal with in the dark.

I'm met at the door by Butkus, my wanna-be watchdog who's more likely to lick a stranger than bark at him. After receiving a quick scratch behind his ears, he waddles into the kitchen and sits in front of the cabinet where Rocky's and his treats are kept. He waits patiently, wagging his stumpy, gray and white tail until I give him his reward. Once his mission is accomplished, I'm completely ignored as his stocky legs carry him back into the living room, where he flops down on the big bed Nattie bought him last year.

Spoiled dog.

Even he's not in the mood to play tonight.

Yeah, me neither, buddy.

I grab a glass and the bottle of whiskey we keep in the liquor cabinet above the fridge, bringing both with me to the kitchen table. I consider drinking it straight from the bottle for a moment before I give in and pour myself a generous double shot, enjoying the initial burn as the Jack Daniels slides down my throat.

The light turns on, momentarily blinding me before a groggy Brady appears, wearing sweats and a frown. He doesn't say anything, just grabs himself a glass and sits down next to me. After a minute of staring, he asks, "Gonna make me beg for the bottle?"

I push the bottle toward him and watch him pour himself a glass half the size of mine. "Never good to drink alone, my friend." He lifts his glass to me. "Salut."

"Salut," I answer back and finish my second glass.

We sit in silence for a minute before heavy footsteps make their way down the stairs and in our direction. Murph steps into the kitchen and looks around. "What the fuck? Nobody thought to include me?" He grabs himself a third glass and joins us. "What are we toasting tonight?" Murph asks as he and Brady both look to me for an answer.

"To my last three months of freedom. My engagement is going to be announced on December seventh. The wedding is in June. The clock is ticking." I pour myself another glass before telling them what they're waiting to hear. "There's no way out. If we don't go through with this, there will be retaliation. Retaliation means violence, and I refuse to have that on my conscience."

Brady takes the bottle away. "I thought Sam was getting you out of this shit." He's pissed, but Sam's not the right place to direct his anger.

"So did Sam," I tell them, wishing like hell he could. "But I don't see any way that's gonna happen. Even Sammy doesn't have that kind of pull. He doesn't out-rank my dad." My gut clenches, admitting that. Sam swore to me again tonight that he'd get us out of this. But I don't think even he believes that anymore. Emma certainly didn't when she stormed out of the house with her mother following behind her, trying to get her to stop, and her father apologizing

profusely as he left—promising my father his daughter would fall in line and do what was necessary.

“You can’t marry Train Wreck, man. She’ll make you fucking miserable. I mean, you’re no ball of sunshine now, but you’ll fucking hate life married to her. You can’t do that to yourself.” Murph grabs the bottle from Brady and refills our glasses.

“You gotta stop calling her that, Murph.” I push my cup toward him.

“Dude, she’s a mess. Maybe if she weren’t an attention-seeking nightmare who occasionally does the walk of shame from your room while stirring up as much shit as possible, I’d be nicer to her.” Murph and Emma have never hit it off.

“You don’t get it. I don’t have a choice, and neither does she. Emma’s just playing her part in all of this. It is what it is.” I push back from the table before a tiny ball of anger bounds into the kitchen. Nattie’s wearing one of Brady’s t-shirts. Her hair looks like a rat’s nest, and her blue eyes are flaming with fury before she crosses the room and shoves hard against my chest.

“Sebastian Beneventi! Don’t you dare do this. You can’t marry her. You can’t. You can’t give up. You’ve got to fight this.” She’s standing in front of me in all her pissed-off glory, and I think, not for the first time, just how lucky my best friend is.

To be able to choose who you want to love.

Who you want to spend your life with.

To have found that person.

I’ll never get that.

“Nattie.” Brady pulls her back before she throws his arms off her and spins around.

“Don’t you Nattie me, Brady Ryan. This isn’t fair.” She turns back to me. “You can’t give up, Bash.”

I gently grab her shoulders. “You don’t get it, Nat. None of you do. Be grateful for that.” I look at the three of them. “I’m going to bed, guys. See you in the morning.” I grab the bottle from Murphy’s hands and take it with me.

Fuck this night.

Fuck my father.

Fuck my family.

Fuck this life.

ELEANOR

Numbers may be my jam, but sometimes they dance across the screen, making absolutely no sense whatsoever. Let's face it, I'm human, and some days concentrating is more challenging than others. Today is one of those days. It's Wednesday morning, but this week has already dragged on so much, my brain wants it to be Friday night.

I want . . . Hell, I don't even know what I want. But I do know I don't want to be staring at the numbers on my screen anymore.

The numbers that are telling me that Declan Sinclair and our offense are carrying our defense. Washington took our D-line and made them their bitch last week. If it weren't for the O-line, we'd have lost that game. There's a reason Sebastian Beneventi's stats have their very own folder on my desk, and it's not just because his picture is on the inside cover. It's because I think my recommendation at the end of this season is going to be to trade two of our existing defensive linemen and possibly one of our defensive tackles. Sebastian's stats make him my one player to watch for the D-line position.

Not that his stats are the only thing keeping me interested in Sebastian Beneventi. There's just something there, something pulling me into his orbit. Call it a gut instinct. He's someone I want to get to know better, but I think he's also someone who doesn't want to be known. Scarlet and I threw around a few different ideas last Sunday over a few too many martinis before I gave up. Much to Scarlet's disapproval, I don't think plotting and planning will get me what I want. And I've come to the conclusion that I want Sebastian. I don't want to run away this time.

Instead, I'm going to have to figure this out the old-fashioned way.

Perseverance.

The reward will be worth the wait. At least I hope it will.

I'm leaning back in my white, leather, ergonomic desk chair when my cell phone chimes with an incoming text.

Unknown Number: Hey Lenny. It's Natalie Sinclair.

Well, this is interesting. Maybe I'm being rewarded sooner than I thought.

Lenny: Hey Natalie. What's up?

Natalie: I need your help.

Okay, vague, but I'll bite.

Lenny: What can I help you with?

Natalie: It's time to give Bash something to fight for.

Lenny: Umm . . .

Natalie: Want to come to a football game this Saturday?

Yes, please! This is it. This is my in.

Lenny: Am I showing my hand too early if I say I'd love to come to a game this Saturday?

Natalie: Nope. I'd say you laid those cards down when you showed up at our house. Bash is a good guy, Lenny. He's got a giant heart. But I need to know—Are you going to screw him over?

I flip my phone around my fingers a few times, thinking about my answer. If I don't really want this . . . now's the time to cut and run. I may need reinforcements.

Lenny: That's not my plan . . . Would it be okay if I brought my best friend with me?

Natalie: Sure. Let's meet at my house. Why don't you come by around 1:00/1:30 ish. The game starts at three.

Lenny: Sounds good to me. Thanks for the invite, Natalie.

Natalie: Don't thank me. Just make sure you look good and be ready to put up a fight.

Natalie: See ya Saturday.

Lenny: See you Saturday.

Well, that was interesting. I pick up my desk phone and dial Jules immediately.

"Hey, bitch. What's up?" I can picture the exact face she's making as she says this.

"I need you." That's all I have to tell her, and I know she'll drop everything for me. It's our golden rule. We only use those words when we truly mean them. Before I can say anything else, there's a knock at my door, and Scarlet pops her head in and waits for me to nod. She walks in, followed by Becket who's carrying a box of takeout.

"Helloooo? Did I lose you, Len? Tell me what's going on?" Jules sounds like she's in an enclosed space. Her voice is bouncing off something.

“Where the heck are you?” I ask as my siblings glare at me, expecting me to drop everything and get off the phone for them. I put my finger up and whisper, “Hold on.”

“I’m in the make-up trailer for a photoshoot in the Bahamas. Where do you need me and when? Name it, and I’m there. Are we burying a body? I mean, I need to know what to wear.” Then I hear her tell someone she needs another minute.

“Listen, can you be home this Saturday?” I glance between Becket and Scarlet. Their timing sucks. “I need you to come to a football game with me.”

Scarlet sits down and crosses her legs while Becks looks at me, trying to figure out what I’m doing.

“Saturday? Like a Kings game?” Jules wants to know.

“No. A Crusaders game. Can you be in Philly this weekend?” I turn my chair so I’m looking out my window instead of at my annoying brother.

“Sure can. I gotta go now though. I’ll call you later so you can give me all the deets.” She makes a smooch sound and hangs up the phone.

I spin my chair back around to face the firing squad but get saved by the bell. Well, by the sound of Becks’s phone.

“Becket Kingston,” he answers, and I dive into the box he put on my desk and start taking out two salads and a few wrapped sandwiches. Sometimes it’s nice to work with your siblings. They like to feed me, and since they both have assistants and I don’t, they tend to order lunch for me too. Winning!

“Okay. Listen, I’m in Lenny’s office right now, and Scarlet’s with us. Are you nearby? We can see if Max is available too, and you can fill us all in at one time.” Becks nods and then adds, “Great. Will see you in a minute then. Thanks, Dino.”

I look over at Scarlet, who already has her phone in her hand, texting Max.

Becks pockets his phone and looks from Scarlet to me. “That was Dino. He’s got information on the missing Kingston. He was pulling into the parking lot when he called, so he should be down here in a minute.” Becks glances around my tiny office. “Should we take this upstairs to my office? It’s bigger.”

My door flies open, and Max storms in. He takes in my space and our lunch before trying to grab one of the sandwiches. “Thanks for the lunch, guys.”

Scarlet smacks his hand. “Get your own assistant to order your lunch.”

I grab a bag of kettle chips and pop one in my mouth as another knock sounds at my door. “Come in,” I call out around a mouth full of food.

“Next time, we eat in my office,” Scarlet tells me while Dino DiCerone walks in, taking up twice as much space as my brothers. Dino is the fixer for the team, and I didn’t realize until just now that he was the one working on finding the missing Kingston.

Max turns around and takes control. “What do you have for us, Dino?”

“Everyone get comfy. We finally have a lead.”

ELEANOR

*A*t five o'clock that evening, my siblings and I meet at Kingdom, the bar my brother Sawyer owns in Center City. It doesn't open on weeknights until eight, so we've got the place to ourselves for a few hours. Everyone's here except Ashlyn and Madeline. Scarlet hates including Ashlyn in anything. Guess we'll fill her in later.

We're all sitting around the main bar on the first floor while Sawyer puts glasses away and we wait for Max to get off the call he's finishing so we can get started.

"Is Maximus gonna get off the goddamn phone so we can get this started soon?" Hudson asks as he looks at his watch.

Sawyer snaps him with a bar towel. "Why, Hud? You got a hot date?"

"Fuck off, asshole. I've gotta get back to Crucible. I teach a Judo class tonight." His blue eyes find mine. "You should come, Len. You used to love Judo."

"Pass. The only thing I want to do after this is soak in a hot bath with a cold beer." Lord, that sounds heavenly.

Scarlet's gasp bounces off the walls in the cavernous room. "Ladies drink wine, not beer, Eleanor. Isn't England the birthplace of ladies and etiquette? What did you learn over there?"

“Well, I learned how to give a mean . . .”

I’m interrupted by Max, who brings his arm down on my shoulder and squeezes. “Dear God in heaven, please do not finish that fucking sentence.” He smiles at me, but it’s bordering more on the side of a cringe.

“I was going to say a mean right hook.” I shrug my shoulders and smile. I love to torture my brothers.

Jace rolls his eyes. “Sure you were. Be careful with my virgin ears there, sis.” The saccharine sweetness dripping from his voice is enough to make me gag.

“Oh, please. You’re four years younger than me, and I’m pretty sure you lost your virginity before I did.” I smack his arm and smile. “Those hockey groupies like it fast and loose.”

“Puck bunnies,” Jace corrects me. “And they like it hard and fast.” He raises his eyebrows, preparing for my comeback.

Hudson finishes his water and brings his glass back down harder than necessary. “Can we get on with this? I’ve got shit to do.”

“Dino DiCerone came to talk to us at the offices today. They still haven’t found the missing Kingston, but he said they’re close.” Max slides his hands into the pants pockets of his navy-blue suit before continuing, “So, the story goes, Dad met Allison Rivell twenty-six years ago in Atlantic City. She was a cocktail waitress at a casino, working one of the high-end poker rooms. They had an affair while he was still married to Elise.”

“No big surprise there,” Sawyer flicks the straw he’d been chewing on across the bar. Dad’s rumored to have had a few affairs while he was married to Sawyer and Hudson’s mom.

Max looks at him for a moment before continuing, “Apparently, Allison saw something she wasn’t supposed to and got herself a ticket into Witness Protection. She was

whisked away to Oregon and never got the chance to tell Dad she was pregnant. A few months later, Anastasia Green was born to Heather Green, formerly known as Allison Rivell. New name. New baby. New life.”

“Anastasia.” Scarlet starts laughing hysterically while the rest of us watch her spiral out of control. “She named our sister after the lost Romanoff princess.” She looks around at all of us, who are still wide-eyed. “Come on. Am I the only one that can see the irony of the missing Kingston being named after a long-lost princess?”

Sawyer places seven shot glasses on the bar and fills each of them with tequila. “Before we hear the rest of this story, can we at least toast the sister who should have grown up as fucked up and privileged as the rest of us but instead grew up with a life based on a lie?” He’s glaring at Scarlet, who’s still giggling under her breath.

“Fine,” Scarlet concedes and raises her shot glass. “To the missing princess.”

Becket hops off his barstool and guides Max to sit down. “What our brother is taking too damn long to get to is the new Heather Green got herself a new baby, a new life and eventually a new husband and new job. Bob, the husband,” he adds dramatically, “was a pilot, and Heather got a job as an airline attendant.” Becks starts pacing. “But really, Bob and Heather’s jobs were to smuggle drugs in and out of the country.”

“Seriously?” Jace asks disbelieving. “And we thought we were messed up.”

“Oh, it gets worse,” I answer.

“It sure does,” Becks continues. “So they run drugs for this cartel out of Canada for a few years, but Heather gets sick.”

“Where’s the princess while this is going on?” Hudson sounds like he actually cares, which is a nice change from

how the rest of us reacted when we first heard this story earlier.

I smile, thinking about what Dino was able to tell us this afternoon. “She was studying at the Oregon Culinary Institute in Portland. She didn’t have anything to do with the drug running.”

“Right. So our missing princess was tucked away in the castle while mommy dearest was smuggling drugs. But Heather got sick. Cancer. When she realized she wasn’t going to make it, she sent Dad that letter.” Becks picks up his shot and drinks it before continuing, “Long story as short as I can make it, Mom dies. Anastasia rushes home. Bob tries to console Anastasia, but his version of consoling is attempted rape. According to the police report, Anastasia got away from him, grabbed the gun out of Heather’s drawer, and shot him in the thigh. Anastasia gets cleared. Bob goes to jail. And Anastasia drops off the face of the earth.”

“Is she dead?” Jace looks like he’s going to be sick.

Max cuts in. “No. They don’t think she’s dead. They think she changed her name and left—this time without the help of the FBI. The trail runs pretty cold at that point, but Dino says his contacts have a few leads. They think they can find her.”

“They never found the real Anastasia. Why does he think they’re going to find this one?” Scarlet asks, sounding annoyed.

Hudson turns to her. “Weren’t you there for this meeting?”

“No.” She pulls the bottle of Patrón out of Sawyer’s hands and refills her glass. “One of the team babies needed me. Dumb fuck got caught on tape having an orgy last weekend. I ended up dealing with that mess instead of this one. Not to mention I missed my lunch.”

Sawyer reaches under the bar and throws a granola bar at Scarlet, who catches it and smiles. “You’re my favorite brother.”

“Hey!” Becks looks between the two of them, annoyed. “That’s my title.”

“You snooze, you lose, old man.” Sawyer pours a glass of seltzer, adding a lime and nudging it Scarlet’s way. “Stop drinking on an empty stomach.”

“Whatever.” She glares back at Becks. “So that’s it? No more info?”

“Yes,” Max answers definitively.

“No,” I correct him. “Dino thinks she may be somewhere near Philly.”

“Why?” Hudson asks as Sawyer, Jace, and Scarlet all stare.

“Because apparently, Heather kept photos. Lots of photos. They were all of Philly. She talked about this town all the time. She talked about growing up here and loving it. The people, the places. She always talked about coming back home. Bob doesn’t admit to knowing she was in WitSec, but he did tell Dino’s guy that if Anastasia went anywhere, he thinks it would be here.” I look between Becks and Max, remembering the way the hair on my arms stood on end with what Dino said next. “Dino thinks if she’s found, her life may be in danger for ending a successful drug pipeline. He said other people may also be looking for her.”

Max stands back up and moves next to me. “The problem with us finding Anastasia is that means other people can too.”

“Fuck that.” Scarlet pushes back from the bar and stands. “We’re all we have, and one of us is out there. We protect our own, and she’s ours.”

Max stands between Scarlet and me. “We need to take a vote. Are we willing to risk what happens next if we find

Anastasia?”

“You mean, are we willing to risk her safety?” Hudson clarifies.

Max shakes his head. “Not just hers. If we protect her, we could be putting ourselves at risk too. I know what my vote is, but I think it needs to be unanimous.”

Six other ayes are said before Max finishes his sentence.

ELEANOR

Jules flew in late last night, and we spent the next few hours catching up on everything going on in both of our lives. Admittedly, mine is a bit crazier than hers at the moment. But hers is more glamorous than mine all the time. She just finished a swimsuit photoshoot and is about to hit Milan next week to take a few meetings. There was a time not so long ago where I would have jumped at the chance to hop on a jet with her, but the idea of running away from everything doesn't hold the same appeal it used to.

A few too many dirty martinis and way too many blue cheese-stuffed olives last night meant neither of us woke up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this morning. I'm paying the price for that now by rushing around to finish getting ready before we have to leave in a few minutes.

What Jules can do in twenty minutes takes me close to an hour.

Lucky bitch.

The doorbell chimes throughout my three-story brownstone just as I run my fingers through my hair one last time. Guess this'll have to do. "Hey," I holler down to Jules. "Can you see who it is? I'll be down in a minute."

“Gotcha!” She sounds a little too peppy for the hangover I’m nursing.

I hear the front door open, and then Max’s voice floats up to me from downstairs.

Great. Just who I want to deal with today.

I glance quickly in the mirror to make sure everything’s in place for another September scorcher. Summer is desperately hanging on by its fingertips, and the humidity today is supposed to be disgusting. My daisy duke jean shorts cup my ass perfectly, covering just enough to help my baggy, boho peasant top and tan suede open toe booties look sexy and bohemian. At least that’s the look I’m going for. A few layered gold necklaces, my hoop earrings, and a couple of bangles, and I think I’m good to go.

When I get to the bottom of the stairs, I swear to God, I see Jules coyly batting her eyelashes at Max, who’s staring at my best friend like it’s the first time he’s ever seen her. Her jeans are essentially painted onto her body. She’s wearing a tight, white racerback tank with her hair up in a messy bun that looks like it was thrown together but really took years of practice to perfect. “Umm, Max.” He turns his head to look at me. “You might want to put your tongue back in your mouth.”

I laugh. Jules laughs. Max growls.

“Juliette was just telling me you two are going to the Crusaders game.” He looks me over from head to toe. “You don’t look like you’re on Kings business, Len. Why are you watching a football game on your day off?”

“Why do you care what I do on my day off?” I answer with a childish eye roll before I can stop myself. “And what are you doing here, Max?”

“You’re a grown woman, Eleanor. You can do anything you want, as long as it’s not going to affect the rest of us. And when it involves Sebastian Beneventi, the potential for

blowback could be catastrophic.” Max runs his fingers through his dark hair, and Jules hums her approval.

“You’re the one who wants to draft him,” I mock.

Max stays calm and blows out a breath. “To work for us, Len. Not to—”

I cut him off quickly, “Do not finish that sentence, Maximus.”

“Damn, Max. Have you been working out?” Jules interrupts. “Do a little spin for me. You’ve always had a great ass.” She’s distracting him. Not that she doesn’t mean what she says, because she’s always had a weird fascination with my oldest brother. But I think this is to get him to back off.

Max’s eyes bug out of his head before his face flames red. “Uh . . . Um . . .” Max sputters

“Jesus Christ, Max. She’s kidding.” I move down from the staircase and cross into the kitchen in time to catch Jules’s glare.

She cocks her blonde head to the side and purses her pouty red lips. “No, I’m not.”

Max shakes his head, looking between the two of us before settling on me. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Lenny. Don’t fuck this up.” With those words lingering threateningly in the air, he walks out the front door, slamming it behind him.

“What the hell?” I ask as I steal Jules’s coffee from her. “Did he even say why he stopped by?”

“Pretty sure when Maxie-poo envisions you with a playboy prince, the guy’s an actual prince. Not a mafia prince.” She grabs the cup back and dumps it in my sink. “Now, come on. If you want a chance to win your man, you need to win over the women in his life.”



As our Uber pulls up to the house Sebastian shares with his roommates, Jules turns to me. “Okay . . . How are we handling this? You know you need to be nice, right?”

“What? I’m always nice,” I tell her as we thank the driver and get out of the car.

My best friend stops dead in her tracks and turns around with a pinched look on her face. “No, you’re not. That’s me. I’m the nice one. You’re kind of a bitch, Len. You suck when you’re in a room with new people. I may not remember all of our conversation last night, but I remember you saying you thought this guy might be something special. Well, your in is through those doors. It’s through his friends. So just be nice, and they’ll have no choice but to love you like I do.” She spins on her heels and walks right up to the front door, leaving me to stand and stare after her like she didn’t just say that.

I’m not a bitch. At least, I don’t think I am. *Am I?*

“You coming?” Jules calls back as the door opens, and Natalie smiles.

“Come on, Len,” Nat calls out as she welcomes Jules inside.

When I get to the door, I can’t help but return her smile. “Thanks for the invitation, Nat.”

She links her arm through mine and shuts the door behind us. “Thanks for coming. I hope you’re ready for this. Because Bash is good at the whole brooding thing, and he’s not going to make this easy on you.” She escorts Jules and me into the kitchen, where a few women I recognize are already gathered, and two baby girls are running around after an adorable, miniature-looking bulldog.

All talking stops as all eyes turn to us as we walk in.

“Girls, I know you’ve met Lenny. This is her friend Juliette.” She turns to Jules and winks. “So, let’s see how I can introduce everyone and not make us sound like the

incestuous bunch we kinda are.” Nat laughs at her own joke, but Annabelle glares.

She reaches her hand out to Jules. “Hi, I’m Belle. Nice to meet you, Juliette. You’ve obviously met my sister-in-law, Nattie.” She points at the blonde next to Natalie with pretty pink streaks in her hair. “That’s Chloe.” Then she nods to the woman next to her. “The brunette is Sabrina.”

They both smile and greet us. Then one of the beautiful little blonde babies comes over and falls on her butt at my feet. I squat down. “Well, hello there, sweetheart. What’s your name?”

She looks up at me with the most amazing blue eyes and starts babbling as she reaches up to me with both her hands. “Don’t let that smile fool you. That’s Everly. She’s a terror disguised as a cherub,” Annabelle picks up the other girl and bounces her on her hip. “And this is Gracie.” Belle looks around, then adds, “My brother, Tommy, is around here somewhere.”

“So, do you all go to school here at Kroydon?” Jules asks curiously.

The girl with the pink hair sips her drink and laughs. “Nope. Baby mama over there is old and out of school, and I go to the Fashion Institute on the other side of the city.”

That’s all Jules needs to hear before she moves over next to Chloe and starts talking shop as Chloe beams. I guess my bestie really is better at doing the new people thing than I am.

Damn.

Sabrina takes pity on me. “Lenny, do you want a drink? We’ve got margaritas in the pitcher, beer in the fridge, and water for the pregnant people in the room.”

I look around at the rest of the girls as Natalie chokes on her margarita. “Umm, do you hear what that sounded like?” The two of them laugh as Annabelle gives them a death stare.

She turns to me. “I’m the only pregnant one in the room. They just like to pick on me.”

“Because you’re always pregnant, Belles. You’ve gotta give that—”

Annabelle cuts her off, “If you finish that sentence in front of your nieces and nephew, I will skin you alive, Natalie Sinclair.”

Natalie sticks her tongue out at Belle, then turns and walks away.

“I think I’ll take that beer now,” I tell Sabrina and pray that this was the right move.

SEBASTIAN

Football is played best with a clear mind, or so they say. I don't agree. Maybe that works if you're a quarterback, but I'm a defensive end. My job is to stop the offense by whatever means necessary. Controlled aggression is a phrase that's been burned into my brain by many coaches. I've taken pride in knowing I'm able to harness the inner anger that I've walked around with for years and use it to defend my team when I set foot on the field.

The aggression that builds from being part of my family.

The aggression that builds from the reality that I have little control over my life.

It's ever-present and bubbling just under the surface, like a volcano ready to erupt at any moment. Football has been my release. It's a pressure valve, allowing me to get rid of enough of my anger each week to maintain control.

But today, there's nothing left to maintain. The anger building for weeks has come to a head and exploded on this field.

I don't even see my opponents as men.

I only see the chance to hit something.

To hurt someone.

To let it all out.

To make me feel.

We've got two minutes left in this game, and I've already sent two of the Falcons' players off the field with the medics. They're not coming back today. Their season might be done. It's been a tight game, but we're winning ten to seven as we come to the line of scrimmage with the Falcons trying to get within field goal range to tie the game.

I've always been good at tuning out the noise. I don't hear the fifty thousand screaming people in the stadium. I don't hear the cheerleaders or the band. My mind clears, and I listen for the possible audible. I listen to the cadence of their quarterback's voice. I listen, knowing if the count is sharp and deep, he's keeping the ball. I listen and know he's passing this one because he elongates his words when that's his move.

I watch their QB, as if in slow-motion, drop back and throw a swing pass to the running back, who stretches his hands up high over his head.

Fucker doesn't know he's already dead.

His hands reach up into the air, leaving his body exposed, and I make my move, launching myself at him. Driving my shoulder through his rib cage, I take him down with a deafening crack.

The thud of the hit brings the loud stadium to a halt and the concerned crowd to their feet.

When he doesn't move, their QB waves for help. Murphy moves next to me as we all take a knee. "Thought doctors were supposed to save lives, man. You fucking drilled him."

I watch the running back be placed on the medics' golf cart and taken off the field.

"It is what it is." I look over to see sixty seconds on the game clock. "Let's finish this."



After the game, we're all gathered in the locker room and getting dressed when Coach Barnett comes back in. "Good game today, men."

We all roar in response.

Coach smiles and lowers his hands, trying to get us to quiet down. "I think it's safe to say that today's game ball goes to Bash Beneventi." He hands me the ball, then shakes my hand. "You were a beast out there today, Sebastian." Coach lets his eyes scan the room before clearing his throat. "I know I mentioned this earlier in the week, but I cannot stress this enough. There are to be no parties on campus tonight. You know there's been an issue with some of your fellow athletes in the last few weeks. Their houses are off-limits. The football house is off-limits. Go out and celebrate, but do not, under any circumstances, do it on campus. Got it?"

A round of "Got it, Coach," is heard throughout the locker room, followed by loud, unhappy grumbling. Some accusations have been made against a handful of athletes in the last few weeks. Luckily for us, none of them were against our team, but the entire student athlete population at the university will be under scrutiny for a while.

Murph, Brady, and I grab our bags and head for the exit. "So, where are we celebrating tonight?" Murph looks between us. "Our house?"

Brady shakes his head. "No. I don't want the whole team over." Just as we make our way through the double doors leading to the hall, Nattie launches herself at Brady. He grabs her with one hand behind her back, and they kiss like they haven't seen each other in weeks instead of hours. Lucky fucker. Guess we know how he's celebrating tonight.

I look over to our group of friends and am surprised when I see Eleanor Kingston and her friend from the night we met standing next to the girls and Tommy.

“Great game, guys,” Sabrina tells us as she’s tucked under Murphy’s arm.

Tommy reaches his hand up to me for a high-five, then smiles a huge smile. “You were awesome, Bash.”

This kid never stops amazing me. He used to barely acknowledge you if you were talking to him, and now he’s starting conversations while he looks right at you. “Thanks, Tommy boy. Did you have fun?” My eyes are locked on Tommy, but I can feel Len’s presence next to me.

“I did. That was a fun game.” His dimples pop deeper. “The pretzels from the concession stands are bigger this year.”

It’s hard not to enjoy that method of measurement.

“Bas, Bas, Bas.” Evie reaches out to me with both arms as she tries to dive out of Chloe’s hold.

When I reach for her, I’m warned, “Be careful. She’s getting a tooth and drooling like a monster.” Belle smiles and hoists Gracie up higher on her hip as she says this.

I turn to the two new additions to this group. “Hey, Len.” I nod to her friend. “Juliette. Nice to see you again. I didn’t realize you ladies were coming to the game today.” My eyes search for Nattie, knowing she had something to do with this.

Len dazzles me with a beautiful smile, hiding a hint of mischief. “I needed to see if all the hype I’ve been looking at on paper was the real deal in person.”

Murphy moves in closer. “Pretty sure you’ve tested that out already, Kingston.”

“Murphy,” Sabrina admonishes as she pinches his side. “Don’t be rude. We were just trying to figure out what to do after the game.”

Nattie and Brady finally come up for air and join the group. “Still no party at the football house tonight?” she asks.

“Nope.” Brady kisses her head. “No parties on campus right now. Coach’s orders.”

“I might know a place,” Len pipes up. “My brother Sawyer owns a bar in the city. Kingdom. I can ask him if he’s got room on the second floor tonight. It’s the VIP area.” She looks at me with a sweet smile on her pretty face. “Not that I want to overstep.”

Murphy’s smile grows. “Hook us up, little Kingston, and we’ll see you there.”

“Oh my lord. I hope you know what you just offered.” Sabrina shakes her head.

Lenny’s eyes find mine, and I nod. “See ya there, Len.”

“Yeah, you will. She’s coming back to the house with us,” Nattie chimes in before a conspiratorial look passes between the two of them.

I think I’m in trouble.

ELEANOR

I'm watching Sebastian say goodbye to Annabelle and the kids when Juliette leans in to whisper in my ear. "Damn, girl. That man is hot as hell already, but when you put a baby in his arms, I'm pretty sure my ovaries fucking exploded. I mean, seriously! No man should be that hot." She's fanning her face as we both watch Evie cling to Bash.

Chloe joins us and laughs when she tracks our eyes and sees what we're both looking at. "Yeah, he's pretty hot, isn't he?"

"That is one fine man. Why aren't you hitting that, girl?" I stare at my best friend, wondering where the hell she's going with this.

Lucky for me, Chloe just shakes her head. "That man used to blow up my Barbies with his GI Joes. That might have worked for Sabrina and Murphy, but not for me."

"Really? That's it?" Jules asks as Nattie bounces back over.

"Yeah, Chloe. Really? It doesn't have to do with anything else?" Nat wiggles her eyebrows.

Chloe shoves Nattie away with a push to the forehead. "I'm a little more fluid than the rest of the girls. Pretty girl.

Hot guy. They both get my attention.” She shrugs her shoulders slightly. “I’m not really drawn to a certain gender as much as I am a certain type of person.” She glances at me. “I promise you, Bash is a really good guy, but he’s more like a really hot brother to me.”

Nattie hip-checks Chloe. “You already have a really hot brother.”

“Uh-huh. And I don’t think of him that way either. What’s your point, Nat?”

Jules laughs, “I feel like these girls would fit in really well with your family, Len.”

“Why?” Nat asks with an overly serious expression on her face. “Are they crazy too?”

“Yeah, you could say that.” I think about it for a moment, trying to decide the best way to describe my family before finally settling on, “They’re a lot to handle.”

“So are we,” Chloe answers before turning back to Sabrina. “Can I get a lift back to the house with you two?”

Sabrina nods, and Bash walks our way. “I can bring you both back with me if you need a ride.”

“Thanks, Sebastian. We all walked over together.” I might as well have just told him I carried a damn watermelon.

Jules bats those eyelashes again and smiles. “Actually, it’ll just be you two.” She cringes slightly. “I have an Uber waiting in the parking lot. Sorry, Len. I promised my parents I’d stop by tonight since I was in town. The jet’s leaving tomorrow for Milan.” She looks between Sebastian and me. “There’s still a spot on it for you if you want it. Text me in the morning.” She leans in, kisses my cheek and whispers, “Fight for this one, Len. I like him.” She waves at everyone, tells them goodbye, and then ditches me for her parents.

“Damn. Your girl ditched you again.” Bash adjusts his bag over his shoulder and places his hand at the small of my back as we follow the rest of the group through the hall to the

stadium parking lot. He guides me over to a black Hummer H2 and opens the door for me, then waits for me to get in to shut it.

I try to do the reach-over thing to unlock the driver's side door, but the damn car is too big.

Sebastian slides into the driver's seat, turning the car and the air on and then turns to face me. His brown hair is damp from the shower he must have taken after the game. The charcoal gray suit he's wearing fits perfectly to his beautifully sculpted frame and makes his crystal blue eyes appear blindingly blue against his skin. I watch the muscle in his cheek tense before he finally voices the question that's on his mind. "Why'd you come today, Len?"

"Because Nattie invited me," I tell him bluntly, failing to mention that I was looking for a reason to see him again.

Bash thinks about that for a second. "Is that the only reason?"

"Nope." I shake my head, adjust the air conditioning to blow directly on me, and then turn back to look him in the eyes. Reminding myself of what Natalie said. "*Fight for him.*" "I came today because I wanted to see you again, Sebastian." I don't know how I expected him to react to that statement, but I was hoping for at least something. Instead, I get nothing. Not a single word. The air conditioning finally starts to cool the inside of the car, so I lean back in my seat and buckle my seat belt.

Once I'm situated, I pull my phone out of my pocket and scroll through my messages. "Sawyer says we can use the second floor of Kingdom tonight." I look up from the phone and find Bash's face so close to mine that I can smell his minty mouthwash.

He pushes my hair over my shoulder and studies my face for a moment longer before leaning back in the driver's seat and buckling his own belt. "You look really pretty today,

Len.” Bash shifts the car into drive and doesn’t say another word as we sit in bumper-to-bumper stadium traffic the entire way back to his place.



*A*n hour later, Chloe, Sabrina, Natalie, and I finish our second margaritas and have just done our first shot of tequila while we wait for the guys to finally come down the stairs. “So Lenny, what exactly are your intentions toward our friend?” Chloe asks before she sucks on her lime.

“Come on, Chloe. That’s not fair.” Nattie shoves Chloe’s arm and somehow manages to spill the salt shaker everywhere.

“No, it’s okay, Nat.” I look between the three ladies and like the idea of them being a little protective of their friend. Something tells me he’s probably really protective of them too, and that idea warms me in places that have no business warming up right now. “My intentions are to get to know him better. We had fun when we met over the summer, but it was just one night. I wasn’t sure if or when I’d see him again, and I don’t want to waste this chance. Second chances don’t come around all that often. Pretty sure if I screw this up, there won’t be a third.”

“I fucked up pretty early on with Murphy,” Sabrina adds before she licks the salt off her hand and takes another shot. “I was insecure and almost ruined it before we even had the chance to start.”

Chloe clinks her glass against Sabrina’s. “Yeah, you did.” She giggles. “Pretty sure I told you to drop to your knees and force him to forgive you.”

Sabrina nods her head. “Yup.” She points her empty glass at me. “You should try that. It worked like a charm.”

“I don’t think he’s actually mad at me. There’s something else going on.”

Before we have the chance to explore that, the guys finally make their way down the stairs, changed and ready to head over to Kingdom. Bash looks good in dark-washed, well-worn jeans and a soft gray V-neck shirt. He’s wearing a black chunky leather-banded watch on his wrist, and I see a hint of his tattoo peeking out of the top of his shirt. How’s a girl supposed to resist that?

“Breaking out the tequila already?” Brady asks the girls but only has eyes for Natalie. “Gonna be an early night, huh?” He leans down and takes her lips, then snags the bottle from the table and walks into the kitchen.

Bash moves to stand next to me, and I have the urge to wrap my arms around his lean waist but force myself to resist. “Who’s riding with me?” he asks.

Chloe pops up and turns around. “Why don’t I ride with Murphy and Brina, and you can take Brady and Nat. I’m not in the mood to watch my brother shove his tongue down Nat’s throat tonight.”

Nat boops her on the nose like she’s Alexis Rose on *Schitt’s Creek*. “Only if I’m lucky.”

Chloe fakes a gag and grabs her purse, and we all head outside.

Nattie and Brady take the back seat, leaving me to sit with Bash up front. “So tell me, Len. What’s it like to grow up in such a big family?” Nattie asks as soon as we close the doors.

“It’s kinda like the dynamic you guys have going on but multiplied by ten. We obviously grew up in a huge house, but there was never any privacy. Someone was always up in your business.” I smile, thinking about it. “But that also meant you were never alone. I always knew I could depend on one of my brothers if I needed them.”

“What about your sister?” Sebastian asks, never taking his eyes off the road.

“We’ve never been really close.” I study his strong profile as he drives. “I moved out when I was eighteen and didn’t come back that often. Scarlet was already in her mid-twenties when I left. She’d spent four years at UPenn and wanted nothing to do with a selfish teenager. We’re working on it now that I’m home.”

Brady has his arm wrapped around Natalie while he plays with her hair. “How long are you home, Len? Are you planning to stay in Philly?”

Bash glances at me quickly.

“I think I’m here to stay. I didn’t realize how much I missed my family until I was back with them. I mean, we’d text and FaceTime and talk every day, but it’s not the same. I’m finally at a point in my life where this is where I want to be. I just bought a house. I’ve got a great job. I see a few of my siblings every day. I never knew this is what I’d want, but it is.”

Nat leans forward and grabs the back of my seat. “You make adulting sound fun, Len.”

I can’t hold back the laugh that bursts free from me. “Oh, trust me, it’s not. My family has enough drama to fuel a few seasons of a reality show. I’m just learning how to navigate it while I try to force them all to realize I’m not a little girl running away from the world anymore.”

Jesus. When did I become so damn open?

“Oh, I think we can all sympathize with the family drama. Don’t you agree, Bash?”

“Natalie,” Brady admonishes.

Bash nods. “Yeah. A lifetime of family drama is enough to make anyone run away for a little while.” His hand, that had been resting on the center console, moves over slightly. It

isn't resting on my leg, but it's up against it and giving me goosebumps.

It may be just a tiny move, but wars have been waged with less hope than I have now.

SEBASTIAN

*B*y the time we pull up to the bar housed in an old brick building on the cobblestone streets of Old City, I'm in a fight with myself. I can't deny that I'm drawn to this woman. Having her this close is forcing me to acknowledge how much I want her. And that's the thing. I don't just want one night. I want this woman in a way I've never wanted Emma, and I hardly know Len.

I'm so fucked.

A car horn beeps, and I'm surprised to see a line already forming in front of the entrance this early in the evening. Len points toward the valet stand. "If you're okay with handing over your keys, I'm pretty sure Sawyer put us on the list."

We all climb out of the car. As soon as I round the front, she takes the keys right out of my hand before walking over to the guy standing at the valet stand. "Hi, I'm Eleanor Kingston. I think my brother Sawyer put us on a list." The statement comes out sounding more like a question as Len leans her arm against the top of the wooden stand, making eyes at this wanna-be tough guy.

"He sure did, Miss Kingston."

Oh, come on . . . I don't like the way he's looking at Len, so I move next to her with a wide stance, staring him down. This dude has no idea how much I'd welcome a confrontation tonight. Today's game barely scratched the surface of the rage that's been fueling me, and the extra hours I've spent lifting this week haven't helped nearly enough. Maybe a good old-fashioned fistfight is what I need.

Len wraps an arm around my waist, possibly sensing my annoyance. She leans her head against my chest before dropping the keys in his hand. "Awesome. Does that mean you'll take extra good care of the Hummer for us?"

And that's all it takes for me to give in. That one simple move. Her head against my chest. Feeling her body against mine. Smelling the sugary sweet smell of her hair. I want to claim this woman in front of everyone. To tell them all to fuck off and stop looking at her.

"Anything for you, Miss Kingston." Dude's eating this shit up. He might as well have hearts in his eyes instead of pupils.

Fucking idiot.

Without thinking, I wrap my arm around her back, enjoying the way she fits against me.

Len looks up at me with a glint in her gray eyes and smiles before turning back to the valet. "Thank you so much." She grabs my hand and spins around, looking for Murphy, who's walked up behind us. She quickly grabs the keys from his hand, as well, and hands them to the valet. "The Escalade is with us too."

"No problem, Miss Kingston."

We start to walk away, and he's immediately mocked by Chloe. "No problem, Miss Kingston." Chloe's version of the phrase might actually sound more manly than that dude's. "Jesus, Len. Do you think he wanted to wipe your ass for you too?"

“Eww, Chloe! Gross.” Nat scrunches her face up. “What kind of weird fetishes do you have?”

Chloe shrugs, smiling. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Len tugs on my hand to move me along as I stare down this shithead who’s still looking at her ass. The seven of us bypass the line waiting to get in and stop in front of the bouncer, where Len goes through the same dog and pony show as she did a moment ago. Once we’re finally through the doors, I drop the hand that’s tugging me behind her and grip her hips instead, leaning down to whisper, “That last name of yours seems to get you everything you want, doesn’t it, Miss Kingston?”

Big gray eyes look up at me over her shoulder. “It hasn’t gotten me you yet, has it, Mr. Beneventi?”

My fingers flex against her hips possessively, even though I know there’s no way this woman will ever be mine.

I’m pulled out of my spiraling thoughts when Murph speaks up. “Alright, little Kingston, where to?”

“What the hell, Murphy? Am I being replaced, or are you just not that creative?” Nat asks, looking a little annoyed.

“You will always be little Sinclair, Nat. But come on . . . She’s the youngest of like, twenty-seven siblings. She’s legit a little Kingston,” Murph argues back as he moves over toward the bar.

Lenny takes a step forward. “Umm . . . I have seven siblings. Two sisters and five brothers. And I’m not the youngest by like, twenty years, Murphy.” Her hand reaches back and grabs mine again. “Follow me, guys. We’re supposed to be upstairs.”

We get to the bottom of the stairs and check in with another bouncer, who lets us know we just need our friends to mention the Kroydon group in the VIP area, and they should be let up.

I follow Len up the steel staircase, trying to act like a gentleman and not watch her ass the entire time, but I fail miserably. She has long, lean legs and a tight round ass that I didn't give nearly enough attention to this summer. The lingering emotional high of this afternoon's game still has me seriously amped-up. All the reasons this is a bad idea are right there in the forefront of my brain, but I force them aside as we grab two tables in the corner of the room and push them together.

All the while watching her smiling with my friends.

Imagining how she'd fit into my world.

Maybe for this one night, I can let this be my life.

The table is next to a half wall overlooking the dance floor below. There's a bar up here with a shiny, dark wooden top and cement sides. It has glass beer bottles inlaid and is underlit by blue LED lights. Tables are scattered throughout, leaving enough room for privacy. A pool table in the opposite corner with two leather couches and a coffee table round out the cool, relaxed vibe up here.

A waitress in short black shorts and a white button-down shirt comes over to take our order and is about to walk away when Murphy adds, "And a round of Kamikazes too. In honor of the way our boy Bash went all kamikaze on the Falcons today."

Len leans into me, her warm breath tickling my ear. "It was kinda hot watching you out there on the field. I may have grown up watching the game, but I never got turned-on during one before."

I'm about to ask her exactly how turned-on she got when a guy walks over, and Len pops up from her chair. He drops his arm around her shoulder and squeezes, then looks over to the rest of the table. "Welcome to Kingdom. I hear congratulations are in order. Nice win today."

Lenny is beaming. "This is my brother Sawyer," she offers as she looks up at him. He's about six-three and looks like a male version of Len. He's also eyeing me. "Sawyer, this is Sebastian, Murphy, Sabrina, and Chloe." Then she points over to the other side of the table. "That's Natalie and Brady."

"Ahh. You're Coach's daughter, right?" He asks Nattie, not knowing she hates to be referred to as someone's daughter or sister.

"Guilty. I'm Coach's daughter and Dec's sister. And you're Lenny's brother, right? Oh, and Max and Becket's brother?" One eyebrow goes up while she waits to see if Sawyer realizes his mistake

"I gotcha. Sorry. Force of habit." The waitress walks back over and starts passing out our drinks when I catch Sawyer turning back to Len. "Where's Jules? The family rumor mill said she was with you today?"

"Yeah. She was earlier." Len picks up her bottle of Corona and pushes the lime in with her thumb. "She had to stop by her parents' tonight. She's flying out tomorrow, so I lost my wingman."

"You going with her?" Sawyer asks, and I find myself, yet again, very invested in the answer.

Len glances my way before shaking her head. "Nope. I'm staying here."

Sawyer smiles softly at his sister as he nods his head approvingly. "Good to know."

"Can I get you guys anything else?" the waitress asks, holding her empty cocktail tray against her chest.

"Put them on my tab for the night." Sawyer looks around the room as a few of our teammates begin to arrive. "Just this table. Pretty sure the rest of the Kroydon guys can cover their own tabs." He winks at her, squeezes his sister again, then looks back at us. "It was great to meet you guys." His

eyes focus in on me. “Don’t let Lenny push you around. She’s used to getting her way.”

I nod but don’t answer, not sure what he knows or thinks he knows.

Len watches him walk away. “Well, that was Sawyer.” She sits back down next to me.

Murphy raises his shot. “A toast.”

He waits for us to all raise our glasses to his, then continues, “To today’s MVP, Bash.”

“To Bash,” everyone responds, and I want to kill my best friend.

“To living,” Nat adds with a mischievous gleam in her blue eyes, and I resist the urge to shake my head.

These fuckers think they’re so fucking smart.

Everyone falls into their own conversations, with some of our teammates coming over to talk. Len gradually inches closer to me on the bench seat until we’re touching from hip to toe. My fingers dance across the bare skin of her leg under the table, and the fire that’s been flickering since I saw her outside the locker room grows hotter. I don’t understand the insane effect this woman has on me.

Am I drawn to her because I know I can’t have her?

That she can never be mine?

Len turns toward me, bending her knee and resting it on my leg. “What are you overthinking over there?” Her thumb reaches up and traces my temple, bringing a spark of electricity with it before dropping back to her lap.

“You don’t want to know what I’m thinking.” I let my fingers play with the fringe of her cutoff shorts before moving them just under the fabric.

“What if I told you I do?” she whispers soft and low. Something about the question reminds me so much of the night we met.

Before she can say anything else, Lizzo's "Good as Hell" starts pumping through the speakers, and Nattie jumps up.

"Come on, ladies. Let's dance." She reaches her hands out to get the girls up.

Len gives me a look I can't decipher and squeezes the hand that's been resting on the bare skin of her thigh. "To be continued, Sebastian." She stands and takes Nat's hand, and my eyes follow as they head downstairs to the dance floor.

As they move to the center of the room, every set of eyes, including mine, is on the four of them dancing like no one is watching.

They might as well have a spotlight putting them on display down there.

I feel someone move next to me before Brady offers me another beer.

"Thanks, man." I turn back to the dance floor, my eyes drawn back to the gorgeous woman below.

"Can I give you a little piece of advice to go with the beer?" He leans on the railing, his eyes trailing Nattie.

"You're gonna give it to me either way, so go ahead." I watch a guy move behind Len and try to put his hands on her hips where mine just were before she turns and tells him something I can't see. He backs off, and she takes Chloe's hand and spins in a circle.

"You told me once that I needed to get out of my own head. That I needed to go for what I wanted. That it'd be worth it." Fucker's throwing my own words about Nattie back in my face. "Remember?"

I sip my beer and think back to that night and everything that happened that weekend. "Yeah, man. We were at your parents' beach house. I remember."

Brady leans back and studies me. "You told me to go for it that night. It was the best advice I've ever been given."

I raise my eyes and wait, knowing my friend's not done. After a few moments of annoying silence, I finally give in and ask, "What's your point?"

"Go for it."

ELEANOR

The girls and I keep dancing long after Lizzo stops singing. I'm bummed that Jules couldn't come out with us tonight, but these ladies are hilarious. They don't take themselves too seriously and have had me laughing all day. Without a doubt, Jules would have enjoyed this too. She said I'm the bitchy one, but these girls make it easy to just have fun.

Nattie backs her ass up in front of me before spinning around and laughing. "They're watching." She looks up to the balcony next to our table, and my eyes follow. "Brady always watches me." The smile on her face is genuine and happy and leaves me longing to feel like that. "But girl, Sebastian is definitely watching you, and that's something completely new."

Sebastian and Brady push off the ledge of the wall and move away just as the band finally takes the stage and introduces themselves. "Hey, Kingdom! How's everybody doing tonight?"

A loud round of hollering bounces off the walls of the bar before they continue. "We're Sinners & Saints, and we're going to be entertaining you tonight. We love being here at

Kingdom, so let's get this night started with our favorite Kingdom song."

A stunning redhead starts off the song on the keyboard before the hot-as-hell blonde front man starts singing an even sexier version of "It's Where My Demons Hide" by Gavin Mikhail.

Chloe and Sabrina bail as Nattie and I start to sway, enjoying the music. Before they even get to the chorus, strong hands wrap around my waist, and the deliciously sexy scent that's all Sebastian envelopes me. I lean back against him, and we sway in time to the song. This feeling shouldn't be as all-encompassing as it is, but I can't push away the overwhelming need I have for this man. I've never been this viscerally attracted to a person before. It's not just that he's gorgeous. It's as if my body is drawn to him on a deeper level, like my soul knows his.

Like we were supposed to find each other.

Strong fingers gently push my hair away from my face before he leans down, whispering, "Now who's thinking too hard, Len?"

I tilt my head to the side so I can see his face. There's a hunger in his blue eyes I have no doubt is reflected in my own. The strength of these feelings shocks me. I knew I was attracted to him. I knew I was interested in seeing where this could go. But I had no idea until now just how much I need Sebastian to give this a chance.

How much I'd be willing to fight for this.

I turn around in his arms and circle mine around his waist. I reach up on my toes and ghost my lips over his before pulling back and answering, "I don't want to think tonight, Sebastian." My hand reaches up and traces his face. "I just want to feel."

One strong hand reaches up underneath my hair and holds the back of my head, and our eyes lock as the band

continues on behind us. Everyone else disappears. Bash lowers his lips to mine, and the need that I have for him becomes a living, breathing thing. His tongue traces my lips before I open for him and slide my arms around his neck. He's holding me tightly, but it's not enough.

I want to be closer.

I need to be closer.

With one hand on my neck, he moves the other to my back, holding me to him, and a moan slips past my lips.

When the band changes to a fast-paced version of "High Hopes" by Panic! At The Disco, I'm jarred by a girl bumping into me as she jumps around. I look up at Bash and smile, knowing we both just felt that. My eyes scan the room for Nattie and see Brady and her already halfway up the stairs, rejoining the group. "We should go be with your friends."

"That what you really want, Lenny?" The desire flaring in his crystal eyes is hard to ignore.

"Lenny Lou, what are you doing here?" Hudson grips my shoulder harder than necessary, and I see Bash's entire body coil like a snake ready to attack.

I move my hand from Bash's waist to his chest. "I'm going to fucking kill Sawyer. What are you doing here, Hudson?" Before he gets a chance to answer, I turn back to Bash. "Sebastian, meet my older brother Hudson. Hudson, this is Sebastian."

Hudson holds out his hand, but Bash hasn't relaxed yet. He looks from Hudson to me before taking his hand and shaking it.

Hud smiles like a creepy fucking clown. "What are you two crazy kids doing here tonight?"

"Oh, please. Like Sawyer didn't call and tell you exactly why I was here tonight. Don't bullshit a bullshitter, Hud." My fucking brothers . . . Grr.

“Come on, Len. All Sawyer texted was that you were here with a guy. He didn’t say you were . . . What exactly *were* you doing out here?”

The joking tone of his voice makes me smile, but Sebastian looks more annoyed by the minute. I drop my hand from his chest and lace our fingers. When I lift my eyes, it’s to see his staring at our interlaced hands as if it’s the strangest thing he’s ever seen. I try to pull my hand away, but he tightens his grip and meets my eyes. I don’t know that I’ve ever communicated silently with anyone besides my siblings. Still, there’s no doubt I know what Bash is telling me.

I pull his hand behind me and wrap it around my waist, letting Hudson know this isn’t casual, at least not to me, and he needs to back off.

My brother watches the motion and smirks. “I gotcha, Len. Listen, I’ve got a date and was just dropping something off for Sawyer. Wanna meet for breakfast tomorrow?”

Jesus Christ, I’m gonna kill him. “Nope. I’m good, Hud. Have fun on your date.”

He leans in, kisses my cheek, and nods at Bash. “Nice meeting ya, man. Be good, Len.” Then he turns and walks toward the bar, where I see Sawyer watching us too.

“Maybe coming here wasn’t the best idea,” I grumble.

Sebastian tightens his hold on my waist. “Why? Are they gonna give you a hard time after this?”

I laugh. Loudly. “Define a hard time.” When Bash doesn’t look amused, I continue, “No, not really. It has nothing to do with you. You’ve got to remember, I moved to England right after high school and barely came home for years. My brothers haven’t seen me date since I was eighteen years old. They’re just making up for lost time. Do you have any siblings?” I know Scarlett mentioned one.

His hold begins to loosen. “I do. I have one older brother. It’s just the two of us.”

“And is this older brother as handsome as you?” I tease.

Both arms tighten around me. “I don’t share, Len.”

“Good. Neither do I, Sebastian. And I don’t want to be shared.” I watch pain ghost across his face.

“I can’t make you any promises, Eleanor.”

I refuse to lose what we’ve only just started to build. “Uh-oh. I just got full-named.”

“You’ve been full-naming me all night. My friends call me Bash. You’ve been calling me Sebastian.” One hand trails back up to my neck and squeezes.

“Sebastian fits you,” I tell him honestly. I wait a beat, then add, “And I’ll take whatever I can get for now. No promises. Not yet.”

“I can’t make you promises. Not yet. Not ever.” The pained look is back, and I want so badly to take it away.

“I hear you, Sebastian. I’m not asking for promises. I’m asking for tonight.” I’ll work up to everything else.

Both his hands move to cup my face. “We tried one night. It didn’t end well.”

“We both know what we’re getting into this time. No running. No hiding. No lying.” My hands grip his wrists and hold him to me. I want this man more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life.

“No lying.” He pulls my face to his and claims my mouth, practically lifting me off my feet. He pulls back and licks his lips before asking, “Wanna get out of here?”

“God, yes.”



en minutes later, we’re back in the Hummer, and I’m expecting Bash to ask me for my address. When he starts

driving toward South Philly, I'm caught a little off guard. "Hey, where are we going?" I cross my legs and angle my body toward him. The need to get closer to him has me contemplating climbing on his lap while he drives. But I know better.

My vagina might think that's a good idea, but my brain shuts it down.

He quickly glances over, then drops his hand to my bare knee and moves it up my leg. "You hungry? We left the bar before you got a chance to eat anything."

"Yeah. I could eat." I shiver as his hand continues on its path until stopping to rest high on my thigh. "Where are we going?"

"What do you think of Italian?" he asks, and I lick my lips thinking about the Italian I'd like to eat.

"I mean Italian food, dirty girl." His full lips kick up into a crooked smile, and my brain practically short-circuits.

"I didn't see you complaining before." I run my nails along his muscled forearm and watch the baby-fine hairs stand on end.

His fingers slip under my shorts and caress the seam of my panties. "I'm not complaining now either. I just want to get you fed, so you have enough energy to keep up with what I have planned for you tonight."

"Promises, promises," I gasp as his fingers slip under the lace of my panties and run along my needy pussy.

"You're so fucking hot, Len." A blunt finger circles my clit. "Seeing you standing outside the locker room today." He sucks in a breath and pushes his finger inside me. "I've wanted to fucking taste you since then."

Sebastian's thumb traces my clit as he adds a second finger to my pussy, and I rock against his hand.

"Oh, yeah. God, right there, Bash." This man has no problem finding that mythical spot I never believed in before

him and then sending me into a complete frenzy.

“You gonna come for me, Lenny? You better get yourself off fast. We’re almost there.”

I look around, disoriented, and realize we’re at a red light. A big blue truck is next to us, and the driver is looking down. I can’t even bring myself to be ashamed. I grind down and tilt my head to see Bash’s face as he pulls away from the light.

He watches me out of the corner of his eye. “You need to come now, Eleanor.” He parks the car on the side of the road, quickly placing his other hand against the hollow of my throat before attacking my mouth and swallowing my moan.

My body pulses around him as I come hard enough to make my legs quiver and my heart skip a beat. I lean back against the leather seat and try to catch my breath while Sebastian pulls his hand away. He places his thumb against my lips and pushes gently inside for me to suck before pulling it back and sucking his remaining fingers clean.

“Fucking perfect, Len.” This intense man leans in and kisses me again, sharing the taste of me on our joined lips.

Anticipating all the places on my body I want him to taste tonight.

SEBASTIAN

This was probably one of the dumbest decisions I've ever made.

I don't know why I thought to bring Eleanor Kingston to this restaurant, but I did.

I round the front of my car and open her door, offering my hand as she gets out. Then I lead us down the alley next to Nonna's, my brother Sammy's restaurant in South Philly. We head toward the back entrance, which is less likely to get us noticed.

"Uhm, Sebastian?" Len asks as we walk around a dumpster and are met by my cousin Dean, who has his phone raised to his ear until he sees us.

He looks between Len and me, then tells whoever he's talking to, "I'll call you back." Pocketing his phone, he moves toward me and gives me a one-armed hug. "Hey, there, college boy. What'cha doin here tonight?" He looks from me to Len, then raises his brow. "And who's this you brought with you?"

I turn to Lenny. "This is my cousin, Dean. He's my brother's best friend. They've worked together for years."

She reaches her hand out, having no idea who my cousin is, or how dangerous he can be. "Hi, I'm Len."

I notice she didn't offer her last name. Smart girl.

Dean raises her hand to his lips and kisses her knuckles as Len pulls it away.

"Knock it off, Dean." I shove his arm away, forcing him to take a step back. "Stop laying it on so thick. Is Sammy back there?"

A very unfeminine snort of laughter comes from the woman beside me.

When Dean and I both turn to look at her, she laughs harder. "What's so funny?" Dean asks skeptically.

"Seriously? Sam and Dean?" she starts laughing again. We've heard this a million times, but somehow coming from her, it's funnier than usual. "Like *Supernatural*? Is the Impala parked around here somewhere?"

"Ha ha. Very funny." Dean motions to the back door. "Come on inside. Sammy's in his office."

We follow Dean in through the kitchen, where the smells of garlic and onion waft through the air, making my stomach growl, and over to Sammy's office door. Dean knocks twice, then opens it. "Hey, boss. Sorry to interrupt, but your brother's here."

I hear a voice I recognize before the door is swung open. "I'll call you if I find out anything else. Thanks, Sam."

"Any time, Snow White," my brother answers before Amelia turns around and looks like a deer caught in headlights when she sees me. She glances between Len and me for a quick minute. "Hey, Bash. I heard you had a great game today."

"Thanks, Amelia. You okay?" I ask, worried about her and why she could possibly be coming to Sammy for help.

"Nothing for you to worry about, pretty boy." She glances at Len before looking back at Dean and me. "See ya later, guys."

Amelia leaves the same way we just entered, and Len and I step into the room.

Dean stays where he is. "I'm getting out of here, Sam. Let me know if you need me later."

Sam nods as Dean follows Amelia out. "Close the door, Bash." He looks Len over from head to toe. "You gonna introduce us?"

"Sammy, this is my friend Eleanor Kingston." I see a knowing glint shine in his eyes before I continue. "Len, this is my brother, Sammy."

Sam points at the couch across the room. "Have a seat, guys. You hungry?"

I look to Len, surprised when she answers, "Starving. How's the food?"



Two hours later, the three of us are cracking up over a story about Lenny splitting her shorts wide open two minutes before a regatta. Sam taps his beer bottle to hers. "You're a beast, Ms. Kingston."

I glance over at Len, and we both start laughing again. "Dude, you have no idea the way this girl can manipulate people with her last name."

She leans into me, bumping me back with her shoulder. "Shut up, Sebastian. My brother is his boss. Of course, he was going to be nice."

"He wants to fuck you," I tell her straight-faced.

She shakes her head. "Nope. No way."

"Lenny, show me a guy not trying to get in your pants, and I'll show you the guy whose pants he's trying to get into," Sam says matter-of-factly as he sits back in his chair and crosses his arms. He looks up at the clock on the wall,

then grimaces. "Sorry to cut this night short, guys, but I've got a meeting to get to."

"It's almost midnight." Len studies Sammy. "What kind of meeting could you possibly be going to this late? Does she have a name?"

"Yeah," Sammy laughs. "Bruno. And he's about three hundred and fifty pounds. Not really my type." Sam stands and walks back over to his desk. "You okay to drive, Bash?"

"Yeah, man. I'm good. Thanks for tonight." I pull him in and pound his back.

"Thank you," Sam tells me, "for introducing me to the lovely Miss Kingston." He smiles at Len who's moved next to me. "I hope I get to see you again, Lenny."

She leans her head against my shoulder. "Well, that's up to your brother. Have fun at your meeting, Sam."

A few minutes later, the two of us are back in the Hummer when I realize I don't remember the last time I've been so relaxed.

"Hey, Sebastian?" Len reaches over and places both palms on my face.

"Hmm?" Her hands anchor me to the moment, keeping me in *this* reality. They keep my mind from wandering down the path I've tried to avoid tonight.

"Stay with me, Bash. If tonight's all we've got for now, I want you with me. Body, mind, and soul." Her pale gray eyes hold me still.

"You're asking for a lot, Len."

"I'm asking for it all, Sebastian. I want all of you for as long as I've got you." She climbs over the console and into my lap, crashing her soft lips down on mine. Her hands hold my face to hers as my hands push up the back of her soft white shirt and press against the smooth skin of her back to pull her tightly against me. "I need you, Sebastian."

“How far from here do you live?” I lean my forehead against hers, trying to slow my racing heart.

Her hand reaches down and unbuckles my jeans. “Too fucking far.” She palms my cock and squeezes.

I look around to see if any restaurant guests are lingering outside, but the lights are off in the front of the place, and the street looks pretty bare. “Lenny.” Her name comes out on a long groan, and this smart, funny, sexy woman jacks my cock exactly how I need it. “Jesus, Len.”

“Do you have a condom?” she whispers into the quiet night.

I lift my hips and hand her my wallet, then watch as she masters the confines of the interior of my car. Len sheaths me before wiggling her way out of her shorts, moving the seam of her white lace panties to the side, and sliding slowly down my dick. Both of us moan at the exquisite sensation of me inside her.

Filling her perfectly.

As if she were made for me.

She throws her head back, and my hands hold her shoulders so she doesn't end up leaning against the steering wheel.

One of her hands wraps around my neck while the other braces her weight against my thigh as she finds the rhythm she needs. The rhythm we both need. “Jesus. Fuck. Sebastian.”

My eyes are trained on her beautiful face, on the perfect O of her mouth and the heavy-lidded gray eyes I've been studying all night.

I want to rip her clothes off.

I want to worship her body more than I possibly could in the confines of my car.

Instead, I shift my hips, going deeper than I thought possible in this position and move my thumb to circle her

clit.

It doesn't take her long before her pace picks up as she starts chasing the release we're both desperate for. Len leans forward, licking the seam of my mouth before she starts sucking my bottom lip, kissing me in time with every thrust of her hips. "I'm so close, Sebastian."

I run my finger down the wet seam of her pussy and back up to her clit before pushing down, and my girl explodes around my cock.

Then I lose all semblance of control as she milks every last drop of come out of me, her aftershocks rippling long after we've both stopped moving.

She drapes her body over mine. Her hair a curtain of privacy from the outside world and whispers in my ear, "You don't think your brother has any security cameras, do you?"

We sit there for a second, breathing each other in before we both laugh.

ELEANOR

Hours later, Sebastian is sitting on one of the stools at my kitchen counter while I try to forage for some food. Fuck, my fridge is bare. I turn to face him with a Greek yogurt in one hand and a carton of eggs in the other. “Umm, I think I need to go to the supermarket. I don’t really have much to offer.”

Bash moves behind me, places his hands on my shoulders, and guides me out of the way before smacking my bare ass.

I threw on his t-shirt before we made our way down here earlier and love how the soft material feels against my skin almost as much as I’m enjoying being surrounded by his scent.

When Bash turns back around, he’s holding grapes, strawberries, and a package of pre-sliced cheddar cheese. “You got something against meat, Len?” He grabs a plate from my drying rack and adds the fruit and cut-up cheese.

“Pretty sure I’ve proved I have nothing against meat, Sebastian.” I cock my eyebrow and steal a strawberry from him, then grab some crackers from the cabinet.

A slow, sexy smile spreads across his chiseled face. “Yeah well, you’ve got none in your fridge. Are you a closet

vegetarian?”

I add the crackers to our plate and grab us two bottles of water as Bash carries the food into my living room. This man should be on a billboard in Times Square looking exactly as he does now. In a pair of black boxer briefs and absolutely nothing else. A perfectly sculpted chest with a sprinkling of dark hair leading its way down to every indent of his abs that are on full display. His thighs are thick and strong, and the things he can do with his hands make me think he's going to make an amazing surgeon one day.

“Earth to Len.” Bash stands in the other room, staring at me. “You gonna come join me?”

I move into the room next to him and sit down on my silver microfiber couch, then smile. “Sorry. What was the last question?”

We've spent the night getting to know each other better in between blowing each other's minds, among other things.

A question for a question.

They've been as lame as our favorite colors.

Mine is a dark purple. His is black. Shocker.

We've gone a little deeper but nothing too deep. Not letting it go there . . . not yet.

“Why England?” Bash asks before he pops a grape in his mouth.

I crisscross my legs underneath me and really think about that. “You know, I think I'd have had a different answer a year ago. I probably would have told you that Oxford was something I always wanted, that the program there was the best in the world.” I run my fingers along the hem of the long t-shirt and follow them with my eyes, not knowing if I can look at him right now. “I wouldn't have been lying, but it also wouldn't have been the truth.”

“No lies,” Sebastian reminds me softly, and I lift my eyes to meet his crystal blue ones.

“I was running. I’d just lost my mother, and as much as I loved my father, he was never someone I could depend on. Everyone thinks of the great John Joseph Kingston as a talented businessman and a generous local philanthropist. With so many kids and so many photo-ops through the years, he looked like such a great dad, and truthfully, he wasn’t awful. He just wasn’t overly involved. Especially for me and Scarlet. He loved us. We never doubted that. I don’t know . . . I didn’t want to be here, in this city, in my parents’ home without my mom. I didn’t want to watch as my dad started to date again. I didn’t want to be under a microscope while I tried to figure out who I wanted to be or how I wanted to fit into my big, overwhelming family of overachievers.”

Sebastian’s fingers trace circles on my arm, until they make their way down to lace with mine.

I take a deep breath and force my shoulders back when I realize I’ve curled protectively in on myself. “What about you? Why medicine?”

“That’s easy,” Bash answers with a squeeze of my hand. “I wanted to live a life as different as humanly possible from the one my father leads.” His eyes search mine. “I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors about my family, right?”

“I’ve heard rumors.” His grip slackens, but I hold tighter, not willing to lose this connection. “But all powerful families have rumors, Sebastian. Don’t think our families are all that different. Mine has just always hidden its sins better.”

“I wanted to save lives to balance out the sins of my family.” His eyes dart around the room, looking at anything but me.

“Wanted?” I ask, picking up on his use of the past tense.

Sebastian’s hands move to my waist before I’m picked up and placed on his lap. Possibly my new favorite spot in the world. “I told you earlier, Len. There are some things I just can’t talk about. Want versus wanted. Have to do versus want

to do. I can't." He tucks my messy hair behind my ear, his hand trailing it down my back. "I don't have the same choices you do. I can't tell you more than that."

I settle into him, draping my arms around his neck. "Tell me this one thing, Sebastian. If you could choose to do anything with your life at the end of this year, would it still be going to med school?"

He shakes his head no. It's almost imperceptible, but I see it. I see the pain on his face. I see the tightness in his features. I let the tips of my fingers run down the lines of his cheek and feel his whole face curve into my palm. "Okay. No more questions." I give in, adjusting myself so I can feel his erection pushing against the constraints of his boxer briefs below my naked thighs, and hum my approval.

That single sound flips a switch in this complicated man. Where he was touching me moments ago with softness and reverence, his fingers now grip my hips fiercely as he spins me so my back hits the couch and pulls my legs to wrap around his waist. Hard eyes look down at mine, and my core tightens in response. Those hands I've enjoyed all night roughly shove my shirt up over my head, and I pull my arms through.

Oh!

I try to sit up as my hands reach for the elastic waistband of his boxers, but his hands stop me. "Wait. We left the condoms upstairs."

My hands still as my eyes meet his. "I'm on the pill," I whisper into the silent house. "And the last person I was with before tonight was you over the summer. I'm clean."

"Lenny," he breathes as his hands hold my wrists. "I'm clean too, but I can go upstairs."

"I don't want you to," I softly plead. "I want to feel you, Sebastian. Just you."

The grip he has on my hands loosens, as I pull down his boxer briefs and watch them get thrown on the floor. Those big hands go back to my waist, flip me over onto my knees, and smack my ass all in what feels like one fluid motion. Before I even moan in ecstasy, his tongue swipes up the length of my pussy. My head drops down on the cushion, and my hands try to find purchase on the couch.

His hands knead my hips as his tongue laps at my core, and then . . . nothing.

Cold air hits me.

“Sebastian,” I whine before I feel the head of his cock pushing at my entrance.

Teasing. Moving in the tiniest bit, only to move right back out.

“Jesus, Len.” His lips dance their way down my spine. “You feel . . . I . . .”

When I whimper in frustration, he slams his cock into me and wraps his arm around my chest, pulling me up and back so we’re both on our knees. Me in his lap. Lips brush my shoulder. One hand holds my throat while the other rolls my nipple between deliciously calloused fingers.

When he pinches hard, I moan loud enough to wake up the neighbors on both sides of my house.

“You like that?” He increases his pace.

This is intense.

This is raw.

“Fuck, yes. I like it.” My orgasm is right there, trying to surface.

I force it down, not wanting this to end.

Not this moment.

Not this night.

Not this feeling.

His hand moves from my throat to my hair as he wraps it around his fist and pulls my head back. His mouth slams

down on mine, our tongues tangling before his lips move to my ear. “Come, Eleanor. Come on my cock. Come now.”

The hand that was on my nipple moves down to my pussy and starts circling my clit as he slams into me one last time. My orgasm explodes, and the electricity courses through my body. My toes curl. My muscles flex and pull as I enjoy the aftershocks.

Sebastian supports all my weight as he pulls out and lays me down on my back before thrusting back in. His hands lock my knees around him, and I cry out.

“It’s too much, Sebastian. I can’t . . . I can’t . . .”

Bash’s hand moves behind my back, and he lifts me with ease. Bringing me back to his lap. Face-to-face. “You can, Len. Give me one more. I want it all.” His lips move to that sweet spot where my neck meets my shoulder and sucks, sending shivers down my spine.

My fingers dance through the hair at the nape of his neck before angling my face back to his and kissing his lips. There’s a desperation in this kiss, a sense of finality that I refuse to accept.

I want to give this man everything.

He shifts us for a better angle. An angle that lets him go deeper. Push harder.

This time when my orgasm washes over me, Sebastian follows off the cliff. I feel him empty inside me. Something I’ve never felt before. Something I want to feel again. My entire body relaxes, and I go limp in his strong arms, sure that he’s got me.

Content.

Protected.

Safe.

A fool who wants to give her heart away to a man who has already said he can’t take it.

ELEANOR

Sebastian and I manage to stay awake until the early hours of the morning, finally crashing sometime around six a.m. We made our way back up to my bedroom and finally passed out when neither of us had anything left to give. I remember looking at the clock on my nightstand, realizing it was later than the time I set the alarm for Monday through Friday. I don't think I've pulled an all-nighter like that since my early days of college.

Bash didn't have a certain time he needed to leave this morning, and the Kings are away today, so I didn't have a specific time I needed to be anywhere either. It was the perfect way to finally give in and close my eyes, knowing he'd still be here when I woke up.

Knowing we didn't need to be in a rush to discuss what comes next.

Bash was adamant that this can't go any further than last night.

No promises.

I refuse to accept that. I just don't know what I'm going to do about it yet. But I will do something. He may have spoken the words, but his body . . . his actions told me everything I need to know. He gave me my reason to fight.

When my doorbell sounds, bringing me out of my half in/half out of sleep headspace, I realize that must have been what woke me up in the first place. A quick look at the clock tells me it's barely eight-thirty.

What the fuck?

I push the covers back and sit up, annoyed but ready to find out who the hell thought ringing my bell was a good idea at the asscrack of dawn on a Sunday morning.

Bash rolls over, throws an arm around my waist, and pulls me back. "Don't leave," he mumbles, leaving me wanting nothing more than to curl back up in bed with him.

But when the obnoxious asshole I'm guessing I'm related to rings the damn bell for the third time, I force myself out of his arms, immediately feeling the loss. I grab Bash's shirt from last night and slip it back over my head, then pull a clean pair of panties out of my drawer and pull them up my legs. The shirt hangs down mid-thigh, so I likely won't be flashing anyone when I open the door and attempt to refrain from strangling whoever is on the other side.

When I make it downstairs and swing open the white wooden door, it's to see Becket and Scarlet standing there, smiling like fools. Becks has two brown paper bags in his hands, and Scarlet's carrying a cup carrier with four to-go cups of, I'm guessing, coffee. "What the . . . ?" I trail off as my brother and sister walk past me right into my house.

"Mornin, Len." Becks leans down and kisses the top of my head.

Scarlet puts the brown paper cups down on my kitchen table and pulls one out and up to her lips before she sips. "Good morning, Lenny Lou." The sinister smile that graces her face belongs on a cartoon villain more than it belongs on my socialite sister.

"What are you both doing here?" I look between the two of them, my emotions vacillating between slight annoyance

and full-fledged anger. “Who am I murdering?” I look at Becks first, then at Scarlet. “Sawyer or Hudson?”

I hear the heavy thud of footsteps coming down my stairs as Becks answers me, “I’d start with Max. But Sawyer and Hud were definitely giving him a run for his money.”

Scarlet sucks in a breath as Sebastian descends my stairs, in jeans with no shirt. Purple bruising covers his ribs, and his hair looks messy, making me blush, remembering all the times my hands grabbed at those luscious locks last night. I bite down on my bottom lip, thinking about how badly I want to do it all over again.

Sebastian walks over to join my siblings and me, and Scar immediately offers him her hand. “Well hello, handsome.”

Bash looks from her to me before shaking her hand. “We’ve actually met before.” His eyes move between Scar and Becks before he offers his name. “Sebastian.”

Becks tries unsuccessfully to hold in a laugh. “Oh, we know who you are.”

“Yes, we sure do.” Scarlett unapologetically looks him over like he’s a prime piece of Wagyu beef and she’s trying to decide if she wants to take a bite.

I may actually want to throat-punch my sister.

“Uh, Len.” Bash ignores the two of them and waits for me to look at him. “I kinda need my shirt back. I’ve got to get going.” He looks shy. Nervous. Not at all the man I spent the night with, and I hate that.

“Oh, right.” Damn. Guess I don’t get to keep it. I look at my siblings. “This is not done. I’ll deal with the two of you in a minute.”

Becks shakes his bags. “But we brought breakfast. You can’t be mad at us.”

I flip him the bird and pull Sebastian up the stairs with me. Once we’re back in the safety of my room, I strip out of the shirt and toss it across the room to him. Then I walk into

my closet and put on a pair of cotton shorts and a black tank. When I step back out, it's to see him lacing up his boots. "You're leaving?"

He crosses the room to me, grabs my face, and presses his lips to mine in a chaste kiss. "Last night was everything, Len. When I'm fucking miserable a year from now, I'm going to think about last night to get me through it." He tries to pull back, but I stubbornly grab his arm.

"No. You don't get to do that, Sebastian. Last night was not a one and done. It didn't work for us in July, and it's not going to work for us now."

"Len . . ." He tries to cut me off, but I refuse to let him.

"No. I know you can't make me any promises yet. I'm not sure why, but you've made that clear. That doesn't mean I'm letting you leave here, thinking this is it. What are you doing next weekend?" I pull his arm, not giving up.

"We have an away game against Ohio next Saturday. I'll be back late." Bash has a stern look on his face. He's made up his mind already. But he's never gone up against a Kingston before.

I nod. "Okay. Let's do something after."

"Eleanor . . ."

"Then just come here, Sebastian. Come here. Nothing can touch us here. I'm not asking for forever, but I want right now. I want next week. I want whatever you can give me for as long as you can give it to me."

Bash's hand covers mine. "Why? Why would you be willing to settle for so much less than you deserve? This isn't fair to you, Len. I know that. But there's nothing I can do about it."

"There's just something about this, something about us. Don't give up on it yet." He watches our hands as I lace our fingers, refusing to give up.

"You're going to hate me, Len."

“Let me make that decision for myself, Sebastian.” I may not hate him at the end of this, but I think I run the risk of hating myself.

ELEANOR

As I shut the front door on Sebastian's retreating form, I spin angrily on my brother and sister. "What the actual fuck?"

"Calm down, Len." Becket's hands fly into the air to protect himself as I punch him in the gut the way Hudson taught me when I was thirteen.

Scarlet tsks, "Oh, Becks, Becks, Becks. No wonder you can't keep a woman. How do you not know better than to tell a woman to calm down?" She shakes her head and hands me a coffee.

"Why are you guys here?" I ask before adding enough creamer to my cup to make it resemble the color of pale chocolate milk instead of the dark brown color of coffee.

Becks takes the caramel pecan creamer out of my hand and peeks in my cup before I sip. "You want a little coffee with that cream, Len?"

"Fuck off, Becket. I notice neither one of you has offered me an answer. What the hell are you doing here? Who sent you?" I sit down on the barstool Bash was sitting on last night and wonder what would have happened if these two hadn't shown up.

Becks starts digging through one of the brown paper bags until he finds a bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich and tosses it my way. “Eat something before you bring hangry to a whole new level.”

“Yeah, Len. Aren’t you supposed to be basking in a post-sex glow right now? Please tell me it wasn’t bad sex. Because the image that man provided walking down those steps like that screams multiple orgasms.” Scarlet sits next to me, pulls the bag over and roots through it until she pulls out a chocolate croissant.

I take in a few deep breaths, attempting to calm myself.

It doesn’t work.

I keep thinking I must resemble a cartoon character who has fire coming out of the top of her head. “Listen to me, you little cockblockers. I love you, but I’m feeling a little extra stabby at the moment. So, you two need to get to the point of this little visit. Quickly.” The smell of bacon makes it hard to resist taking a bite of my sandwich, so I give in and eat while I wait and glare.

“Kingdom? Really, Lenny Lou?” Scarlet rips apart her croissant and pops a bite-sized piece in her mouth before she continues, “Were you trying to get the family gossips going? With all the different ideas we came up with last weekend, there had to be a better option than a place where you had to know your whole family would hear about it and where at least one member of the family would be. I mean, come on. Sawyer and Hudson are the two biggest gossips of all of us.”

“You knew they were dating?” Becks asks, sounding a little hurt.

I drop my head in my hands, wondering precisely what I’m going to have to do to get them to leave. “Listen to me.” I point my sandwich at Scarlet. “This is new and on shaky ground. I need the Kingston masses to back the fuck off. Give

me some space to figure out what I'm doing. Can you please help me control our brothers?"

Scarlet sighs dramatically. "That's asking for an awful lot, Eleanor."

"Hey. I resent that," Becks protests.

I point my sandwich in his face next. "Come on. You're supposed to be the level-headed one, Becket. Help me."

This asshole leans in and bites my sandwich right out of my hand. "Love ya, Len. But did you really need to pick such a complicated guy to be your first relationship back on US soil? There are a shit ton of things about that family you can't possibly know yet." The look in his eyes, tells me he may know a thing or two himself.

"Listen to me, and listen good, because I'm only going to say this once. So feel free to pass it along to the rest of the horde. There is something about the man you essentially kicked out of my house this morning. I can't put my finger on it yet, but he's special. This is different." My palms get sweaty, and my heart speeds up as I admit out loud, "Mom used to say when you know, you just know—no rhyme or reason. But no doubts either. Well, I freaking know. I have to see where this goes because that man is mine."

Becks sucks in a breath, and Scarlet's smile is slow and knowing. "Well, alrighty then, little sister. Consider the kings dealt with."

My head spins. "Why would you help me? You don't even like me."

"Everyone thinks you're the smart one, but you keep proving us wrong, Eleanor. You might be a giant pain in the ass, but I love you. We all love you. Even when you make it hard. You haven't wanted to be here in years. You haven't wanted to be with us. You haven't wanted to be an active part of this family. Not in over five years." She levels me with her piercing glare before continuing, "But now, you're back."

You're finally putting down roots. You're finally coming back to this family. I don't know if Sebastian Beneventi has something to do with giving me my sister back. But if you want him, if you say he's yours, I'll help you. But you don't get to leave again. If I help you, you have to promise not to run away anymore. Got it?"

She waits for me to nod in agreement. Something I'm struggling with after the truth-bomb she just dropped. Tears gather in the corners of my eyes that I refuse to let fall, and I continue to nod my head like a bobblehead.

With a slightly maniacal smile on her face, Scarlet leans into me, adding, "The kings will fall in line. They're all scared of me anyway."

"Not all of us," Becks mutters. Then he glances mischievously my way. "Can't put your finger on it, huh, Len? Hope he had more luck with that." The moron laughs at his own joke in an attempt to lighten the mood, and I throw my sandwich at his head.

"Gross, Becks."

"Yeah. Whatever." He picks the sandwich up off the counter and takes another bite. "I'll buy you some time with Max. But you gotta figure this out, Len." Becks coughs, then adds, "Sebastian's a good guy. I know his older brother, and Bash isn't involved in Sam's world. Figure your shit out. I'm on your side, Len."

"I'm trying."



Later that night, I'm lying in bed alone, trying to figure out if it's too early to call Sebastian or not. I've never been a girl who's had to pursue a guy before. I only dated a few guys at Oxford, and they were always the ones doing the pursuing. None of them ever felt serious. I

never thought those relationships would turn into more. Hell, I think even using the term “relationship” to describe them was going too far.

I wish I could explain why Sebastian feels different.

Not for my siblings' sake, but for my own.

This man has warned me away more than once.

Why the hell am I not listening?

What is he keeping to himself?

Only one way I'm going to get answers . . .

Lenny: Hey. Sorry for the interruption this morning.

Bash: Not a big deal.

Lenny: Wanna try to get together one night this week?

Bash: I've got a crazy schedule this week.

Lenny: Oh.

Well, that sure feels like a blow off.

Bash: Saturday? After the game?

I'd be mortified if anyone else saw the little happy dance I just danced. I definitely have my work cut out for me with this man.

Lenny: My house?

Bash: Your house.

Lenny: See you then Sebastian.

I drop my phone next to me on the bed, wishing Saturday wasn't a week away.

SEBASTIAN

Monday night, Murph and I are in the living room playing *Madden* when Nattie walks in with a scrunched-up expression on her face and her cell phone in her hand. “Umm, Bash.” She walks over to the couch and hands me her phone. “My dad wants to talk to you.”

I return her confused look before answering, “Hey, Coach.” Coach has managed to become a father figure to all of us over the years since Cooper and Nattie moved to Kroydon Hills, but I’ve never talked to him on the phone before. And he certainly has never asked to talk directly to me.

“Sebastian. Do you have time to meet with me tomorrow? I’ve got a few things I’d like to discuss with you.” I hear the shuffling of papers in the background and what sounds like the phone dropping, followed by an exasperated, “Shit.”

“Yeah, Coach. I can meet you. I’m out of class by ten-thirty tomorrow and don’t have to be at practice until three.” I see Murph out of the corner of my eye, staring in disbelief as Nattie picks up my discarded controller and begins to kick his ass in *Madden*.

“Good. Then be at my office at the Kings facility at eleven. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The call ends, and I'm left staring at the phone.

"Take that, bitch!" Nat yells as Murph's team loses the game.

I pass her the phone back and move Butkus off the couch to make room for me.

Nattie hands me the controller. "What did Dad want?"

"He wants to meet with me tomorrow. He says he has something he wants to discuss." I run my fingers through my hair and start filtering through scenarios.

Nat bounces in her seat.

Murphy puts down his controller and turns to face me. "Dude. What'd you do?"

Nattie shoves his shoulder. "It's more like what are you going to do, Bash?"

"I don't have the answer to that yet, Nat." One more question to add to my growing list. Now, if I could just come up with a good answer.



Lenny: How you doin'?

Bash: Hey. Was that a *Friends* reference?

Lenny: OMG! You got it!

Bash: It's Nattie's favorite show. We've all gotten sucked into it at some point.

Lenny: She's got good taste. So . . . How are you doing? Is your busy week kicking your ass yet?

Bash: Not yet. But it's getting stranger by the minute.

Lenny: ???

Bash: Coach Sinclair called today. I'm meeting with him tomorrow at 11 a.m. at his office.

Lenny: Oh yeah? Wanna grab lunch afterward?

Bash: I've got practice in the afternoon.

Lenny: Okay. I'll have something delivered. We can eat in my office. You gotta eat Sebastian. You're a growing boy.

Bash: I am around you.

Lenny: Was that a joke? OMG. Did you crack a smile?

Bash: Now who's got the jokes?

Bash: I'll see you tomorrow Len.

Lenny: Sweet dreams Sebastian.



On Tuesday, I can't help but look around in awe as I walk up to Coach's assistant's desk. She's on the phone but sees me and points over to the chairs, indicating I should have a seat . . . I think. I've been in the Kings stadium more times than I can count since I was a kid, but I've never been in the offices before. This side of the massive facility is new to me.

I guess that's a lie.

There was that one time with Len. My mind wanders back to that day, and I wonder how the hell we went from there to here. From then to now. Nothing has changed, and I can't let myself act like it has.

Maybe I should cancel lunch.

"Sebastian?" The pretty redhead I've met once or twice over the years calls my name. "Coach is ready for you."

I'm guided into his office, where he's sitting behind his desk with his phone to his ear. He hangs up when he sees his assistant and me. "Thank you, Emery."

"Do you need anything else, Coach?"

"No. I think I'm pretty good for now." Coach waits until she's left the room and the door is closed behind her before looking at me. "Well . . ." He eyes me, then the chairs. "Take a seat, Sebastian." He seems annoyed. Not with me, per se.

But I've been around him enough to know something's bugging him.

"Sure, Coach. Everything okay?" I ask.

"Don't worry about it, Bash. Tell me how you've been doing, son."

I wish I could answer him honestly. Tell him that life fucking sucks and is kicking me in the balls right now. Instead, I do what I always do. "It's good, Coach."

Coach tosses a black folder with my name written on it at me. I eye it, then look at him. "What's that?"

He barks out a laugh. "Generally, when someone gives you a folder with your name on it, it's safe to assume you can look at it, Bash." He pushes it toward me. "Open it."

I quickly glance through its contents. The folder contains all my stats broken down by game for the last three years. "I don't understand why I'm here, Coach. I know my stats."

"Care to tell me what's changed?" When I don't answer, Coach continues, "Sebastian, I want you to read me the notes on the first page. They're from one of our scouts."

"Come on, Coach." I close the folder and drop it back down on the desk.

It barely hits the wooden surface before Coach is snapping it up. "Cerebral. Good football IQ. Solid player. Those are the notes from the first page. Those are the notes from last year."

He looks up to make sure I'm paying attention. "Endless energy. Motor never runs dry. Mean. Nasty. Ferocious. Those are this year's notes."

Coach closes the folder and lays it carefully down. He steepled his fingers in front of himself and looks at me hard. "Your tackles are up 25 percent over this time last year. Your sacks are up 15 percent. And the names you add each week to the ever-growing group of players you've put on the injured

reserve list show a huge difference in your play. What's changed?"

How am I supposed to answer that? Life fucking sucks?
"You wouldn't understand, Coach."

"Try me, Sebastian."

I shake my head. "I can't."

"This kind of output is every coach's wet dream, Bash. But I'm not just a coach. I'm someone who's invested in you. I've watched you grow up, and I'm worried about you. Angry young men make good football players. And your stats show you're angry, Sebastian." Coach leans back in his chair like we've got all the time in the world.

"I've spoken with Coach Barnett. I know he told you the Kings are interested in you. I also know we're not the only team that's watching you this season, waiting to see if you declare your intent for the draft. I'm not going to hide that I want you on my team, but I want to know what you want. Is your plan still med school?"

I don't know how to answer this man I've idolized since we met when I was seventeen. I'd give my left nut to play football for him, but I don't think I can. "I don't have a choice, Coach."

"We all have choices, son. It may not be easy, but life never is. Your time playing ball is finite. You've got this opportunity now, but if you don't take it, it won't come again. You could do this first, then go to medical school if you want to play ball but not give up on being a doctor."

"That's what Coach Barnett said too," I mumble.

"Smart man." Coach stands from his desk and holds the folder out to me again. "Think about it, Bash. You don't need to decide today. You're the only one who can make this decision, and, when you do, I hope you make it for yourself. Not anyone else. Not even me. But if you decide that you're not done with football yet, I better be one of the first people

to know. If I have to find out from my sons or daughter, I'll still do my best to draft you, and then I'll make you pay during training camp." An evil smile that's identical to Nattie's makes me laugh.

I take the folder from his outstretched hand. "Thanks, Coach." I turn to leave but stop when I hear him call my name.

"Think about it, Sebastian. You only get one life. Live it for yourself."

I nod and walk through the doors.

If only it were that easy.

ELEANOR

I check my cell phone for the tenth time in the last hour for any sign of a text message from Bash. Well, maybe it was really only thirty minutes. But come on. How long does a meeting with Coach last? And when did I turn into this girl? This girl who wore her sexiest black skirt suit and teal cami with the highest black heels she owns, which make my ass look amazing. This girl who put extra effort into her hair and makeup this morning just because she knew she was going to see Sebastian for what . . . an hour, tops?

I drop my head in my hands and groan in frustration just as my door swings open, and Becks walks in, carrying a cardboard box piled high with to-go containers. “Lunchtime, little sister. Hope you’re hungry cause I’m fucking famished.” He places it on the corner of my desk and drops into the seat across from me. “Scarlet said if she doesn’t make it down, she’ll grab her lunch later. She was busy fixing something for somebody.”

When I stare at him without saying anything, he finally stops and looks at me. “What?”

“I told you I couldn’t do lunch today. That I had plans.” I run my fingers through my hair, exasperated, then smooth it

down, worried I messed it up.

Fuck this. “But you knew that. You don’t forget anything. Like, ever! Get. Out. Becket.”

“Aww. Calm down, Len. I brought food.” The goofy fucking smile on his face gives him away.

I stand up and point at the door. “Out. Now.”

“Lenny . . .” he cajoles.

“Get out,” I manage to yell just as a knock sounds at the door. “Oh, for fucks sake,” I grumble as I walk over to open it to find Sebastian standing on the other side. No man should look this good in jeans and a soft t-shirt, but oh my, the way that shirt stretches across his chest makes my brain think all sorts of stupid thoughts.

Until I hear a throat clearing behind me. “Aren’t you going to invite him in, Lenny?”

I look up at Bash and mouth, *I’m sorry*. “Come on in, Sebastian. Becket was just leaving.”

Bash walks in and eyes Becks, who’s still sitting happily in his chair, now slurping what I’m guessing is his sweet tea through a straw. “Hey, Sebastian. Good to see you again.” Becks kicks his feet up on my desk. “I brought food.” He pauses, before adding, “Again.” Becks nods his head to where the box sits on the corner.

“You did, brother dearest. And now you’re going to take it and go eat in your own damn office.” I pick the box up, then open the door and wait for Becket to catch on.

“You’re no fun, Len.” The fucker actually pouts like a six-year-old before he finally takes the hint and stands. He turns to Bash to offer him his hand. “You know, if you and Len actually want to become a thing, it’s better to get the Kingston firing squad over with early. We back off when you’re not the shiny new toy anymore.”

Sebastian shakes his hand and nods his head but never actually answers Becket before Becks walks over to me and

takes the box out of my hands. He leans in and kisses my forehead. “Lock the door, Len. You wouldn’t want to give the gossips anything to talk about.”

I reach into the box and grab the cookies I saw wrapped in wax paper, then shove him through the damn door. “Zip it, Becks. You are the gossips.” I shut the door behind him and lock it for good measure before my eyes land on Sebastian. “Sorry about that. My family is . . .”

I’m not sure how to finish the statement until Sebastian finishes it for me.

“Protective?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of insane. But protective works too.” I hand him a cookie, then unwrap mine and take a bite.

A sexy as sin smile graces his GQ-worthy face just as a small laugh escapes. “You know who’d be good at handling your family?” He chuckles again. “Nattie. She’d have them eating out of the palm of her hand.”

I stand there, quietly staring in disbelief.

“What?” Bash asks.

“You just laughed.” I look at him in shock. “Twice.”

Bash puts his cookie down on my desk, then places his hands on my hips, pulling me toward him. One hand moves over the pulse point on my throat before his lips brush gently over mine. He swallows my hum of anticipation, while my arms wrap around his neck. “You make me smile, Len.”

That single statement hits me hard, knocking me off balance and making me want to jump for joy.

He feels it to.

That single statement means he feels it to.

Now, I just need him to acknowledge it.

I manage to pull my lips away, even though this is a much better use of our time. “I had lunch delivered.” Wow. My voice comes out as breathless and weak as I feel. “I know

you've got to get back for practice, and I wanted to make sure you ate."

Sebastian's hands go back to my hips, and I'm turned around to lean against my desk before those same hands travel up my legs, bringing my skirt with them. "I'm definitely going to eat, Len." He picks me up as if I weigh nothing at all, and places me on my desk before sliding down on his knees. His calloused hands grab the backs of my thighs and pull me to the edge of my desk.

I lean back on my elbows on a gasp.

Those crystal blue eyes look up at me as he licks his way up my thigh, and I hold in a moan.

His fingers play with the lace of the teal thong I'm wearing, tracing and teasing. "Did you think of me when you put these on today, Eleanor?"

"I . . . Oh my God."

Sebastian licks a line up my pussy with his flat tongue, and what little ability I had to form a coherent sentence moments ago is now long gone.

I moan long and loud.

Bash pulls his head back, leaving only cool air in its place. I immediately feel the loss. "If you want me to keep going, you've got to be quiet, Eleanor."

I nod, then reach down with one hand and run my fingers through his thick dark hair. When his tongue goes back to my clit, I manage to contain the moan threatening to break free and am rewarded when he finally pushes a finger inside of me. Then another.

Please, dear God. Do not let this man stop.

Please let me figure out a way to keep him.

Between the delicious feel of his tongue on my clit and the sensation of those skilled fingers curling inside me, I feel my orgasm building.

I kick off my red-soled stilettos and plant my feet on the edge of my desk, giving him easier access, and am rewarded when he doubles down on me. “Oh, God.”

I try to sit up. To watch what he’s doing. But one of those hands moves up to my chest and gently pushes me back until I’m laying with my back on top of my closed laptop, and I can’t even bring myself to care. That same hand holds me down while Sebastian eats me like I’m his last meal. “Sebastian . . . Bash . . . I’m gonna come.”

“Good,” is growled into my pussy as he pulls me closer to his face, pushing me over the edge, and I explode on his tongue.

His lips ghost along the inside of my thigh, sending my hypersensitive nerves into overdrive. Then he stands and helps me right my clothing before helping me off my desk and into one of the chairs. I tuck my feet up underneath me and watch the smug grin play out on his handsome face. “You should smile more often, Sebastian.”

That wipes the contented smile away as he sits down across from me. “It’s easy to smile around you, Len. Especially when your taste is still on my lips.”

“You may have to wait a minute for me to grab our lunch. I’m enjoying the after-effects and can’t move yet.” I stay tucked into my seat and watch him.

He moves over to the cardboard box that’s holding two sandwiches, two soups, and two waters. Bash turns around with the sandwiches in one hand and the waters in the other. He hands me one of each and sits back down. His grin comes back right before he tells me, “Thanks for lunch, Len.”

“I’ll feed you every day if that’s the thanks I get.” The scary thing is I think I mean that too. I watch Sebastian erect a wall between us, but not before I see a moment of something . . . pain maybe, reflected in his eyes. “We still on for this weekend?”

He nods and takes a bite of his sandwich, and I can't help but wonder what thought I just lost him to.



Group Text:

Jace: Any update on the missing princess?

Max: Can we please not call her that?

Jace: That's not an answer Max.

Sawyer: Aren't you supposed to be in school jack off?

Jace: Again with the baby jokes. Real original Sawyer.

Where's Huck Finn?

Lenny: Boys – neither of you are funny. Do we have any news, Maximus? Or is it time to let the big girls handle this?

Scarlet: Speak for yourself Lenny Lou. The only thing big on me is my brain.

Hudson: And your bitch.

Scarlet: That doesn't even make sense. I wouldn't say it was wrong. But it doesn't make sense Huddy.

Becks: Calm down children and let the adults handle this one.

Hudson: In other words you and Max aren't any closer to finding our missing sister than you were a month ago.

Max: We're working on it.

Jace: Work fucking harder.

ELEANOR

As often as I see Scarlet and Becket for lunch during the week, it's almost shocking how little I see Max. His office is on a different floor than mine. His schedule is very different than mine. Max is typically one of the first guys in the building, and if the rumors are to be believed, he's always one of the last to leave. He lives and breathes for this organization, and I may be avoiding him just a smidge. In all honesty, maybe a bit more than a smidge.

He's made it perfectly clear more than once what he thinks about Sebastian and me dating.

If that's even what we're doing.

I like to think I made it even clearer that I don't care what he thinks, but that's a lie. I do care. It may not be a deciding factor, but it bothers me nonetheless.

I don't want whatever semblance of a relationship developing between Sebastian and me to have to cross the hurdle that is my brother. We've got enough hurdles to cross, and I don't even know exactly what half of them are.

Bash and I have talked every night this week. Our nightly conversations started out with me doing most of the talking, but my strong, silent man is slowly coming around.

We've continued our game of fifty questions. We each get to ask one a night. Last night, he asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I laughed at him before answering, "Scarlet. I want to be my sister. She knows what she wants and goes for it. She loves her job, and she's good at it. And she's the strongest, most confident woman I've ever met. I just want to be a less bitchy version of her."

When I asked Bash the same thing, he told me he'd let me know when he figured it out, and oh boy, do I want to be there for that. The energy that surrounds him sucks me in like an F-5 tornado. And the potential fallout scares me to death.

Not the fallout with my family, even though I'm headed up to my eldest brother's office right now after being summoned a few minutes ago.

The fallout if I can't keep him.

We haven't made any promises. I've told him I'll take whatever he can give me, but I want more. Every conversation. Every touch. Every hard-earned smile I'm gifted makes the possible fallout more than I think I can handle. Now would probably be the moment that a more careful woman would back off. She'd quietly step away and stop fighting. But I've never been careful or quiet.

I saw a quote once that said, "Don't tiptoe through life. Let them hear every fucking sound." Maybe I'll adopt that as my motto.

When I get to the spacious corner office that was once my father's, my heart stutters. It hasn't been his office for three seasons, and yet, I still expect to see him behind the desk he sat at for my entire childhood—a cigar in one hand and a scotch in the other. My mother would bring us along when she brought him lunch. Somedays, it was the only time I saw him.

In place of the old mahogany desk and formal office I saw growing up, I'm greeted with my brother's modern, chrome, minimalist office. It's sleek and cool. Nothing's out of place. It's basically boring and suits him to a T.

His door is open when I knock on the frame to announce myself and peek my head in.

"Come in, Len. Take a seat." Max points to the couch on the opposite side of the room, where I see bottles of water and two plastic containers of salad sitting on the coffee table.

"Umm, Maximus? Are you trying to feed me? Did you order lunch?" I love teasing him.

Max sits down on the couch and cracks open his water. "Shut up and sit down. Becks isn't the only brother who can order lunch."

"You ordered this?" I raise a brow. "Or did your assistant order it?"

He pushes my salad my way. "Eat the damn salad, Eleanor. I even asked Scarlet what you liked. It's the cranberry walnut one with blue cheese."

"Aww, Maxie-poo."

I'm leveled with a glare. "Don't Maxie-poo me here, Len. And don't get carried away. I'm actually trying to buy your affection. Well, not quite buy your affection, but butter you up so you're not too pissed with me at the end of this conversation."

I close the lid on the salad I just opened and put the box back on the table with a thud. "This is sounding ominous."

"I need you to travel with the team this weekend. I can't be there, and neither can Scarlet or Becket." Max looks at me like this should explain everything.

It doesn't.

"Okay. Act like I'm a newbie here, Max. I may need this to be spelled out. Why do I have to go?"

“Lenny, have you not noticed that one of us is at every game? The family is always represented.” A look of annoyance crosses his eyes before he forces himself to smile a very tight, very fake smile.

I take a deep breath in and blow it slowly out before answering. “I thought that was just you being anal-retentive.”

“Well, it’s not. So, consider yourself tagged in. You’re the Kingston in charge this weekend. The plane leaves Friday afternoon.”

Well, doesn’t this just throw a wrench in my weekend plans?

Did he know about my plans?

Is this Max’s way of interfering in my life?

I don’t think even my family is that all-knowing, but I did tell Hudson what I was doing this weekend. Did he let it slip to Max? “And what if I have plans this weekend too?”

“Cancel them. You’ve got the least seniority of the four of us. I need you there.” It’s in the way that Max looks away from me then that I know there’s more at play.

“Max . . . Are you sure the only reason you need me there is because it’s my turn? Because I’m pretty sure there’ve been games without one of us present before.”

“Plane leaves for California at two p.m. on Friday, Len. Be on it. I’m not asking as your brother. I’m telling you as your boss.”

Well, damn.

SEBASTIAN

Thursday night, Sam and I are eating outside on a wooden picnic table at our favorite taco place on South Street when my phone pings. “What do your domestic partners need you to bring home tonight, little brother? Milk? Orange juice? Tampons?” my brother mocks.

One fucking time Murphy texted asking me to pick up orange juice on my way home from dinner with Sammy, and this motherfucker is never going to let me hear the end of it. I glance quickly at my phone and see that it’s Len, not Murph. “Fuck off, asshole. It’s Lenny.”

Sam’s smile is genuine when he tells me, “Then go ahead and answer. At least this message leads to you getting ass. Maybe it’ll loosen you up.”

When I all but growl at my older brother, he cocks an eyebrow at me in surprise. “So it’s like that already, is it?” When I don’t answer, he continues, “Good. I liked her. Bring her to dinner next week.”

I shake my head. “It’s not like that. This already isn’t fair to her.”

Sam bunches the tinfoil that was wrapped around his burrito into a ball and free throws it in the trashcan like the basketball player he never got the chance to be. “Listen to

me, little brother. I've already started making my moves. You are not marrying Emma Sabatini. I don't fucking care who her father is."

"Oh, yeah? What about Dad? You're not head of the family yet. I don't want to hurt Len, and that's exactly what I'm going to do. She doesn't deserve this." I pull my phone out of my pocket and read the text.

Len: I was just told I need to fly with the team to California tomorrow. Won't be back until after the game on Sunday. Raincheck on Saturday night?

Bash: K.

"What about you, Bash? What about what you deserve? I've spent my whole fucking life making sure you're able to get out of this world. To make your own choices. This marriage isn't happening." When I don't give him any response, he slams his hand down on the wooden table. "Now figure out your fucking future. I'll marry her myself before I let you do it."

"The hell you will." The crazy fucker means it too. I won't let him bite this bullet for me. Sam has watched out for me for as long as I can remember. But I'm not a little boy anymore, and grown men don't let their brothers handle their problems for them.

Fuck waiting for him to do it.

I'll figure this shit out myself.



*F*riday afternoon, I'm sitting on the plane chartered to take us to our game in Ohio, waiting for everyone to board and trying to sleep, when Brady drops

down into the seat next to me. I feel his stare as everyone finishes boarding the plane. Finally giving in, I lift my sunglasses and look at him. "What?"

"You wanna tell me why you're pissed off at the world, man?" He settles in and waits for my answer. "Don't tell me you're not. The team's got an over-under going on how many guys get taken off the field on a stretcher tomorrow."

Coach Barnett picks then to stand at the front of the plane and give us the same speech he's been giving for years about representing the school and the program. Internally, I'm thanking him for saving me from this conversation, but my appreciation is premature. Once Coach takes his seat, Brady shows me the tenacity he's needed to be such a great quarterback all these years, and he picks right back up where he left off before the interruption.

"I miss my friend, Sebastian." When I roll my eyes, he continues, "You've been distant and closed off for months. It's like, I get little glimpses of my friend, but then you go back into hiding."

"Okay, Dr. Phil," I answer, not wanting to have this conversation.

"I'm not fucking joking, man. What's going on?" he pushes. "Is it Train Wreck? You never talk to us about it."

"Because I don't want you in that fucking world," I seethe, trying to keep my voice low. "Brady, man. I don't want to have this conversation. And I can't have it here. I'm trying to figure shit out, and it's not fucking working. I'm angry."

"Tough shit, Bash. We're worried about you." Brady lowers his voice slightly. "What's going on with Train Wreck?"

"I hate when you guys call her that." I may not want to marry the girl, but my protective instincts kick in all the same. She's as much a victim of her father's world as I am.

That thought rattles around in my brain, pissing me off more with each passing second.

I've never been a victim a single day in my life.

Why am I letting my father force me into that fucking category now?

Fuck this. I pull my phone out and text Sam.

Bash: Do whatever you have to do. Anything short of you marrying Emma. Tell me how to help.

Sam: I already am. Don't you worry about helping little brother. I've got this. Give me one month, and your engagement will be over before it ever started.

Bash: I can't just sit here and do nothing man.

Sam: Not this time.

Bash: I have to Sam. You've got to give me something to do.

I look over at Brady, not having heard a word he just said, my mind reeling from my revelation. "Listen, there's only so much I can tell you guys because I want to keep you out of my family's world. You know there's shit with Emma." Brady looks confused. "Train Wreck . . . Emma. There's shit with Emma that neither of us wants. But seriously, you don't tell either of our dads no. It doesn't work that way. Sammy's working on getting me out of it, but nothing's concrete yet."

Brady leans forward in his chair. "This shit's been going on for years. What haven't you told us, Bash? What's changed?"

"Jesus Christ, man. Since when are you the pushy motherfucker in this friendship?" I ask, half-kidding, half-serious.

The look on his face morphs from angry to sad. "Since you're the one who needs pushing. You've always been the friend I could depend on to tell me like it was, the one who

pushed me. Seriously, man. You've been a ticking time bomb lately. What's changed?"

I think about that for a minute.

What's changed?

I know exactly what's changed. "Lenny."

Brady's eyebrows raise, a strange mix of surprise and understanding dawning.

"I think I just accepted that my life was gonna be what it was before I met her. Then I got a taste of what it could be."

"So, what are you gonna do about it?" I hear from the seat behind us.

I turn to see Murph leaning over the cream leather chair and shove him back with a palm to his forehead. "You guys fucking suck."

Murph leans his arms on the back of my seat. "Is Sammy dealing with it? What do you need us to do?"

"This isn't the movies, guys. You need to stay as far away from this shit as possible." Murphy begins to say something, but I level him with a glare. "I mean it, Murph. I gotta trust my brother."

Brady thinks about that. "And what are you gonna do about Len?"

"I think I need to back off, at least for now. I don't know how this is going to play out. And it's not fair to her." It fucking hurts to even think about it, which should tell me all I need to know about my feelings for Eleanor Kingston.

"Are you going to tell her what's going on?" Brady asks, concerned.

"No," I answer immediately. "I need to keep her as far from this shit as possible."

Murphy sucks in a breath. "So, you're what? Gonna just stop answering her calls and hope she understands a month from now?"

Well, when he puts it that way, I'm fucking screwed.

ELEANOR

There's nothing like sitting alone at a hotel bar, reflecting on your life, to seriously depress the hell out of a person.

Maybe it's just me. I've had no less than five guys hit on me over the last hour, and not a single one of them can hold a candle to my . . . My what? He's not my boyfriend, not as far as he's concerned. I received a one-word answer—no, a one-letter answer—from him yesterday when I told him I needed a rain check on tomorrow and haven't heard from him since.

I texted later, asking how dinner with his brother went. . . And got nothing.

I texted today, asking what time he was flying out to Ohio . . . Nada.

So maybe, he's just my fuck buddy, and I didn't realize it. Maybe I chose not to see it.

Maybe that's what he's been trying to tell me all along. Maybe he just doesn't want a relationship, and there never was some big bad secret. I lift my glass to my lips but realize it's empty and signal to the bartender for a refill just as someone pulls out the seat next to me and slips in.

The waiter hands me a dirty martini, then turns to my new neighbor and takes her order. Annabelle Sinclair orders a water with lime and then stares, assessing me before she says, "I thought you were a beer girl."

"Oh, didn't you hear? I'm representing my family this weekend. Beer is not at all appropriate for a Kingston to drink." I stir my martini with my olive pick, my eyes never leaving hers.

She squares her shoulders and continues to stare at me. "Are you drunk, Eleanor?"

"No. This is only my second drink, and I've been here for over an hour, Annabelle. What does it matter to you? You've already made your feelings about me well-known," I tell her, attempting to hide my disappointment.

Her lips tip up in a sly smile. "Oh, yeah? And what are those feelings? Please fill me in."

"You don't like me. It's fine," I lie, hating how much I wish she liked me. "I get it. You think I hurt Sebastian."

"Hurt has nothing to do with it." She sips her water. "You lied. That makes me nervous. I don't tolerate liars."

"I didn't lie," I answer honestly.

Annabelle cocks her head to the side, her eyes telling me exactly what she thinks of my statement. "A lie of omission is still a lie, Eleanor."

"Not that it's any of your business, but I've already apologized to Bash. We've moved on. Why is that still bothering you?" I ask, wanting to understand the woman in front of me. She means something to Sebastian. He's the godfather of one of her daughters. I'm pretty sure if she hates me, I'm fucked.

"I don't know what you know about me, but I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt. My brother and I had no family before I met Natalie Sinclair. Then all of a sudden, we had these people who accepted us with no questions asked.

Who loved us unconditionally. Who we could depend on. And I'm not just talking about teaching my brother to throw a football or helping him with his homework. It's way deeper than that."

She swirls her straw around in her water before looking back at me. "I'm talking about them being people you turn to when things get tough, when you feel like you've got nothing left to give and the tears are threatening. When you just need a shoulder to cry on or someone to call for help. And all that was before Sebastian and Sammy literally saved my life and the lives of my daughters."

She laughs a dry, sardonic laugh. "That stupid man, who's smarter than anyone I've ever met, jumped in front of a butcher knife for me and got stabbed in his side and twenty-seven stitches for it. If that had been me, I might have lived, but I'd have certainly lost my daughters. So yes, I'm as overprotective as they come when it concerns Sebastian Beneventi. And the woman who finally wins his heart sure as hell better be good enough for him because no one is better than him." She shakes the ice cubes in her glass and smiles a beautiful smile. "Well . . . except for my husband. But he's already taken."

She hands me a cocktail napkin. "Now, wipe those tears from your eyes. I wasn't trying to make you cry, and I'm pregnant and hormonal. If you cry, I'll cry."

"Sorry." I sniff as I wipe my eyes. "It's just . . . I don't think you have anything to worry about. I'm the idiot who put my heart on the line for him to take, and it's still just hanging there." I feel the first tear roll down my cheek and angrily wipe it away. "He warned me. He told me this couldn't go anywhere. I just hoped he'd change his mind."

Maybe it's time to walk away.

When I meet her eyes, I'm surprised to see them welling up like mine. "We all hope he's wrong. If he's keeping you at

arm's length, it's for your sake, not his. The people in his house gossip more than the *Real Housewives*, and the scoop on you is that he cares more than he wants to admit. Don't give up on the big oaf yet."

"I thought you hated me?" I sniff.

"I don't hate you, Len. Jesus, if you can make Bash smile, I'll throw you a damn party. He used to smile so much more than he does now."

"He's got a great smile." On a sigh, I rest my elbows on the bar and my chin in my hands. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do now. I'm not very good at waiting."

Annabelle finishes her water and stands from her stool. "I heard Nattie gave you some good advice." She pins me in place with her eyes. "I'd take it if I were you. That man is worth the fight." She throws some money down on the bar, then turns back to me. "I've got to get back to my room. My mother-in-law has Tommy and the girls. We're all going out to dinner tomorrow night with Declan's brother, Cooper. You're welcome to come."

"Thank you for the offer, but I'm sure Max has my whole day scheduled with team things. Enjoy your dinner." I add to her pile of cash and also stand from my stool. Just as she moves to step away, I call after her. "Annabelle . . . Thank you. For your understanding, and for your advice. I'm not a bad person. I just made a bad call."

"We all make mistakes, Len. It's what you choose to do now that matters." Both of her dimples pop in her cheeks as she smiles at me. "He's worth the fight." I watch her walk away, thinking about what Nattie said. What Jules said. And now, what Annabelle said.



few minutes later, I'm back in my room, freshly showered and in my favorite worn-out Kings t-shirt and panties. My wet hair is piled high in a bun on top of my head, and my cheeks are flushed red from the hot shower. I flip my cell phone over in my hand a few times, debating between calling and FaceTiming Sebastian.

Screw it.

FaceTime wins out.

The phone makes that annoying ringing sound once before I'm sent to voicemail.

Damn.

I wasn't expecting that.



Sunday morning, I'm standing at the back of the ballroom and observing the team while breakfast is being served. I've met a few of these guys throughout the season, but for the most part, we're strangers. Most of my job is observing and analyzing. Emotions and friendships don't factor in.

"How are you doing, Eleanor?" Coach Sinclair has taken a spot, leaning against the wall next to me.

"I'm good, Coach. Thanks. How are you? Did you get the file I sent up to you last week?" I ask, looking for something to talk about with this imposing man. I hate that he makes me nervous. But yet again, I find myself having another conversation with someone who cares about Sebastian.

Coach's eyes light up before a low laugh rumbles from his chest. "I think you know I got that file. A little birdy told me Sebastian left my office and went straight down to yours."

"Umm, busted?" I ask, not knowing what else to say. "And who was this little birdy? Becket?"

“I plead the fifth.” Coach shrugs. Then he turns to a player who approached him with a question. Before he steps away, he quickly turns around. “Max is looking for you. I think he might be in the break-out room that’s connected to this one.” And then he’s gone.

I look around but don’t see my brother, so I make my way to the back of the room and through the doors connecting it to the smaller space. And there he sits with his phone to his ear, alone.

“What the fuck, Max? I thought you couldn’t make it this weekend. That’s the whole reason I’m here.” I stalk across the room, becoming more pissed off by the second.

“I’ll call you back,” he says into the phone before hanging up.

“Was this a test? Were you testing me to see how I handled the team? Because it’s a well-oiled machine. They didn’t need me for a damn thing. Nothing. So please, tell me why I’ve needed to be here since Friday if you were planning to be here for the game today.”

“Sit down, Eleanor.” He nods to the chair across from him, but I ignore his command and instead, cross my arms over my chest and glare at him like the child he thinks I am. “It wasn’t exactly a test. But if it had been, you’d have passed with flying colors.”

“Damn it, Max!”

“Lower your voice, Len. Come on. You’ve been with the team for months. Scarlet, Becket, and I have been doing this for years. We needed to know you could handle it, and you did. You did a great job.” He pushes the silver coffee pot across the table, knowing I can’t pass up caffeine.

I eye the pot like a snake is going to pop out. “I didn’t do anything, Max.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You handled that thing with Watkins.”

Dean Watkins, our newly appointed starting running back, got a little drunk at a club Friday night after he should have been in his room for curfew. And because this isn't a first time for him, the press picked up on it. "I called Scarlet. She handled it." Giving in, I finally take the offered seat and pour myself a cup of coffee.

"Exactly. That's what you're supposed to do. She's PR. She's the one you should have called. Handling it yourself would have been the wrong move. You have experts at your fingertips. Use them. The first thing you learn in management is delegation." He lifts half of his bagel off the plate and pushes the other half to me. "You also made sure everything was running smoothly all weekend. You checked in with Coach and the hotel daily and, I believe, answered a few reporter's questions yesterday. You did well, Len."

I fight back the smile that's threatening to emerge thanks to my brother's praise and instead, offer one hesitant word, "Thanks."

"I took the jet here, so you're flying home with me after the game. We should be home by ten if you have any plans you want to reschedule." The knowing look on his face has me asking the question I've wanted to have answered since he ordered me to travel with the team.

"Who told you I had plans?" There's no way he doesn't know.

Max shakes his head before answering, "I'll never tell. Now eat something. We've got a long day."

I take a bite of the bagel and steal his grapefruit while I'm at it.

"I'm proud of you, Len. Dad would be too."

Wow.

I had no idea how those words would affect me. "Thanks for giving me a chance, Max."

I knew I wanted to prove myself to Max.

To my siblings.

What I didn't realize until now is how much I wanted to prove myself to my father too.

And in his own way, Max just gave me that.

SEBASTIAN

Sunday morning, I'm woken up by my phone blasting my father's ringtone. "Hello," I croak.

"Be at my house in an hour," he commands.

My groggy, hung-over brain doesn't comprehend fast enough. "What?" I ask before I think better of it.

"I didn't stutter, Sebastian. And don't come in here smelling like a brewery." The line goes dead, and I have to resist the urge to throw my phone across the room. It's never good to be summoned by my father. I slam a pillow down over my head, momentarily contemplating going back to sleep, but I know better.

Forty-five minutes later, I'm pulling around the circular driveway of my father's compound, wishing I were anywhere but here. I drank too much at the bar we went to last night and slept like shit. Not to mention we got our asses handed to us during the game yesterday. Fucking Ohio beat us twenty-one to seven. It was our first loss of the season, and it hurt.

Nonna opens the door before I even make it to the top step. "Oh, my little prupetta. Come, come." She holds both of her frail-looking hands in the air until I lower my head for

her to reach. Then she tips my head down to kiss me like she's done since I was a little boy.

"Buongiorno, Nonna." I lift my head and place a gentle kiss on her cheek. "I've got to meet with Pop first. Then I'll come find you." She links her arm through mine and lets me walk her back to the kitchen. She's already got her Sunday sauce cooking on the stove where it'll simmer for the next six hours.

"Your father is in his office. You come find me when you're finished with him. I've got fresh biscotti and espresso for you." She pats my arm, then shoos me away.

As I walk down the hall toward my father's office, I hear him discussing something loudly with my Uncle Nick. He's the family's attorney and my father's trusted advisor. He's one of the few people who can disagree with my father and get away with it. The door to his office is not entirely closed, so I clear my throat to make my presence known before knocking on the door.

Uncle Nick opens the door with a pinched expression on his face. "You're a pain in my ass, kid." He opens the door wider and lets me walk through.

I look from him to my father before Nick gestures to one of the leather chairs across from the desk. He then leans against the wall off to the side. Guess this means he's staying for whatever this conversation is.

I sit down in the chair and brace myself, not having a clue what's coming.

My father picks up a manilla envelope and throws it at me. "These were delivered to the house this morning, Sebastian."

I hold the envelope in my hand, not wanting to see what's inside. The ball of dread is growing by the second.

"Have you lost your fucking mind? You want a side-piece, you can have a side-piece. But you don't bring her to your

family's restaurant. And you don't have her be someone as high-profile as a fucking Philadelphia Kingston." My father's eyes flame with anger as I untie the envelope and pull out the pictures of Len and me in my Hummer in front of Sammy's restaurant.

"Sebastian, do you realize how weak you made your father look?" Nick asks seconds before my father throws him out of the room.

"And shut the goddamn door behind you!" is roared by my old man before he eviscerates me with a single look. He runs his fingers through his hair, then pushes his sleeves up his arms. These are both my father's tells. He's trying to control his rage. It doesn't look like it's working.

"Bash, I need you to listen to me. You wanted out, and I allowed it. The only condition I gave you was Emma Sabatini —"

I cut him off. "The only condition was my life. You gave my life away!" I yell back. Maybe not the best move.

He stands from his chair and glares down at me. "Do you think I did that lightly? I'm the fucking head of Philadelphia. That family has to come before my family. Before my sons. Before everything. This helps keep us safe." He plants both hands flat on his desk and leans over me. "Our way of life is changing every day. We're fighting the Irish, the Russians, the cartels, the gangs, and the fucking feds. We're running out of allies, Sebastian. New York has wanted to swallow us and make us part of them for years. You have no idea the lengths I've gone to keep that from happening. This way, you're safe. This way, we're all as safe as we can be. This gives us an ally. Atlantic City is in our backyard. This alliance will help keep them from getting swallowed up by north Jersey, who already bows down to New York."

He points his finger at me. "But you, you stupid fucking boy. You don't want to play nice. You agreed to this

arrangement as a man, but you keep kicking and screaming like a goddamn child. And now, you've put me in a precarious situation. You've made me look weak. Fucking WEAK!" he roars.

"I'm not going to be here forever. One day, your brother will sit in this seat, and I need this family strong for him. The stronger we are, the stronger he'll be. The stronger we are, the safer your children will be. Go home, and fucking think about that, son. Think about that the next time you want to get your dick wet, and find somebody lower fucking profile than a goddamn Kingston."

"Pop . . ."

He sits back down and blows out a breath, his eyes softening. "You have your mother's soft heart, Sebastian. You'll learn to love Emma if you let yourself. And if not, find someone else to love. But the family businesses are for wives, not whores."

"Fuck you," I seethe. "This isn't my fucking mess, it's yours." I rise slowly from my seat, attempting to contain the anger bubbling at the surface that's trying to break free. "I'm only doing this for Sam. Not for you or even for me. But for Sammy." I turn to walk out of the room but am stopped by my name.

"Sebastian, don't fuck up again. People in our world don't get second chances. These pictures came from one of our own people today. Next time, it could be someone looking to blackmail us. You can't fuck up like this, Sebastian."

I walk out of the room without ever turning around.

I stop in the kitchen to let Nonna know I can't stay for breakfast and call Sammy once I get back in my car. "Hey, you home?" I ask when he picks up after the first ring.

"No. I had business out of town. I won't be back for a few hours. You okay?"

I back out of the driveway, anger clouding my judgment. “Do you care if I crash on your couch for a few hours? I need some sleep and don’t feel like dealing with everybody right now.”

“You’ve got a key,” he answers without hesitation. “You okay, Bash?”

“Have you talked to Dad yet today?”

“No. Listen, I can’t talk right now. Go to my place. Crash for as long as you need. I’ll be back in a few hours, and we can talk then.” Sam doesn’t wait for my response before he ends the call.

Later, as I’m trying to fall asleep in Sam’s guest room, my mind won’t shut down.

What am I missing? What angle am I not seeing in all of this?

I cycle through the many conversations I’ve had over the past few years.

Looking for the missing piece.

There has to be something I can do to gain control of this situation . . . To gain control over my life. The life I want to live, not the one I’m being spoon-fed . . . But what is it?

My frustration mounts because the answer is right there, dangling just out of reach like a fuzzy memory I can’t bring into focus . . . I close my eyes, and try to relax, when the answer smacks me in the face.

What’s the one thing Sam hasn’t tried yet?

I reach for my phone and dial a number I haven’t used in a while. “Hey, Emma. I think I know a way out of this. Can you meet me?”

Emma breathes a sigh of relief. “Thank fuck.”

Now let’s just hope this works.

ELEANOR

*M*ax was right. We were circling the runway, waiting for our turn to land at nine forty-five that evening. I'd be on the ground by ten if I wanted to attempt to reschedule my original plans. Now I just had to decide what my next move was going to be.

I'd spent the ridiculously long flight from California back to Philly thinking.

Thinking about my job within the Kings organization and where I saw that going.

Thinking about my brother's words today and how they made me feel.

Thinking about Annabelle's advice on Friday and what I want to do with that.

Everyone keeps telling me to fight for Sebastian, but I'm not sure I should keep doing that if this thing between us is as one-sided as I fear it may be. As he wants me to believe it is. It was this last thought that started to get me pissed somewhere over Chicago.

I have no problem fighting for what's mine, and I still think this man is mine, although I'm starting to wonder why. What I have a problem with is him allowing me to

doubt myself. To doubt whether I'm enough for him to fight for. For him to choose.

I'll fight. But it can't be one-sided.

With my mind made up, I kiss my brother goodbye once we land, then ask my driver to take me to Sebastian's house. I'm getting an answer one way or another, and I'm getting it tonight.

When I get out of the town car a few minutes later, I've managed to work myself up into what my mother would have called "a good old-fashioned snit." I've moved past feeling hurt that he keeps sending me to voicemail and have come to a screeching halt in the middle of the raging anger zone.

Fuck him if he thinks he gets to ignore me.

I'm a goddam Kingston. We don't get ignored.

My knuckles rap loudly against the door, and I take a step back.

Waiting.

When the door opens, I hear the laughter echoing inside the house and see a big goofy grin appear on Murphy's face as he looks me over. "Hey, Len. We getting another roommate?" He glances down at the little rolling suitcase that I had with me from my flight and then winks. "Hey, Bash. The door's for you," Murphy yells over his shoulder before he takes my suitcase from me and strides back into the house. "We're playing Cards Against Humanity, if you want to join in."

The fire fueling my anger earlier momentarily subsides as I catch a gorgeous smile spreading across Sebastian's face when he sees me. His long legs cross the room before his big hands run over my hair and cup my face, and then he whispers, "God, it's good to see you."

I hear Murphy mumble something about giving us some privacy, but I pay him no attention.

Sebastian smells delicious, like clean air and sexy man. But even so, I force myself to stay strong and push him away with both hands on his chest. “Can we talk?” I look around at the four other people in the room who’ve temporarily paused their game to watch us as if we’re their favorite soap opera. “Somewhere a little more private?”

Sebastian must read the cool tone of my voice because he drops his hands from my face, grabs my suitcase from Murphy, and leads me up the stairs with his bulldog, Butkus, trailing behind. His room is neat and minimalist. It reminds me of Max. Everything in its place, and a place for everything.

A few pictures of him and the guys and of Sam and him sit on a shelf. A picture of Annabelle’s twins blowing out identical pink birthday cakes sits on his desk next to an enormous biomedical engineering textbook open with a yellow highlighter on top.

“Bathroom’s through that door,” Bash offers as he points to one of the doors in the room. “I share it with Murphy and Sabrina’s room, so make sure to lock the other door if you need to use it.” Butkus’s doggie bed is next to that door, and he’s curled himself into a ball as he lays on it, his eyes glued to his human with his head resting on a giant stuffed football.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I try to channel my anger from earlier but have a hard time reaching it now that I’m in his calming presence. Instead, the hurt comes out. “Why do you keep declining my calls?” I shove my hands in the back pockets of my skinny jeans, trying to resist his magnetic field drawing me to him.

Why do I want to touch him so badly?

Sebastian sits down on the edge of his perfectly made bed, then looks up at me. “I’m sorry, Len. I’ve been trying to figure a few things out. I wanted to have answers for you . . .”

He leaves the sentence open-ended, hanging in the air and frustrating me. “And do you? Have answers, I mean? Because I had a long flight home tonight to think up a few more questions that could use some answers too, Sebastian.” I pace to the opposite side of the room, trying to break the spell he has on my body. “You told me, ‘No promises, no lies.’ But I had a conversation with someone the other night who pointed out that a lie of omission was still a lie.”

I lean against his desk and face him. “Why can’t we have more? What are you keeping from me? I’m not sure who you’re used to dating, but I’m not a child, Sebastian. I don’t play games, and I didn’t think you did either. But it certainly felt like that was what you’ve spent the last few days doing. You run hot and cold worse than the old pipes in my first dorm room.”

He opens his mouth to answer, but I put my hand up, stopping him. “No. I’m not done, and I’m worried if I don’t say this now, you’re going to touch me, and all the strength I’ve mustered to get through this will float right out that window. You have this energy that just pulls me in. We barely know each other, and yet, I know you. The real you. The you that you hide from everyone else. But every time I make a tiny bit of headway with you, another door seems to quietly close. Not a loud slam. But a quiet creak that leaves me wondering if it actually happened or if I’m imagining it.” I blow out a deep breath, trying to keep my composure. “I’m also worth fighting for, Sebastian. And if you don’t see that, it’s your loss.”

There. I said what I came to say. I push off his desk and move to stand between his legs. With one finger, I lift his chin, forcing his eyes to mine. “Tell me this is one-sided, and I’ll leave. Tell me this is one-sided, and I won’t fight. Tell me you don’t feel this, and you’ll never hear from me again.”

Sebastian's hands move to my waist, pulling me toward him. "You have no idea the lengths I'm willing to go to, to fight for you, Len. I feel it. You're not alone. And if there was ever someone I wanted to be able to tell it all to, it would be you. But I can't. Not yet."

When I start to interrupt him, I'm pulled down onto his lap, and his lips gently brush over mine. "I know you want answers. And you're right. You deserve them. I'm doing everything in my power to be able to give them to you. You've just got to bear with me a little while longer." His arms wrap around me as he buries his face in my hair. "You *are* worth it, Len. I told you 'no promises' because it's not fair to you for me to make them, not because I didn't want them. You're the first person I've ever wanted them with."

I let my fingers dance through his hair. "What changed? What happened between my office Wednesday afternoon and you ignoring my every call and text all weekend?"

"The level of control I thought I had over my own life changed." His blue eyes gleam in the dim light of his room, and I want to kiss away all the shadows of distress I see in his eyes.

"It's your life, Sebastian. You have to take control. I learned the hard way that running from your problems doesn't solve anything. They'll always be there, waiting for you. You've got to own them and deal with them. I don't know if that works for whatever your mysterious problem is, but it can't hurt."

His arms pull me closer and hold me tighter. "Can you give me just a little more time, Lenny?"

"Time to do what? How much time?" I ask, annoyed at the cryptic nature of his question but still unable to walk away from him.

"I'm not sure," is the only answer he gives.

“Sebastian,” I sigh, frustrated. “How am I supposed to agree to this when you can’t tell me anything? I’m an instant gratification kinda girl. I like my answers now. Not possibly, at some time in the, maybe, near future. If you knew me at all, you’d know that.” When I try to push off his lap, his arms hold me tighter.

“Oh, I know you, Eleanor Kingston.” He kisses my forehead.

“I know you love your brothers and sisters even though they drive you nuts.” He kisses my nose. “I know you missed them when you were in England, but you felt like you needed the space to find yourself. I’m pretty sure your overbearing family is part of what you were running from.”

He kisses both cheeks. “I know you like numbers because there’s always a right answer. Numbers are concrete. They don’t need to be deciphered.” He peppers kisses along my jaw. “I know you love your job because it combines your love of numbers, love of family, and love for your father.” Sebastian pulls down the shoulder of my sweater and kisses the skin at the base of my neck.

“I know your best friend is Jules, and you’d do anything for her. You protect those you love fiercely.” His hand moves to my throat, applying just a hint of pressure. “And I know that you’re smart. You’re strong. You have a wickedly sarcastic sense of humor. And patience isn’t your virtue. I’ve been asking questions too, Len. And I’ve been paying attention to the answers.”

I don’t wait for him to kiss me this time before I throw my arms around his neck and attack his lips. His tongue slips into my mouth, tangling with mine as his erection grows beneath me. By the time he pulls back, my core is throbbing with need, and my heart is about to explode.

“Lenny. I need you to understand something before we go any further tonight.”

As if cold water just doused me, I immediately retreat. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“When I say I need you to give me time, it means I can’t be seen with you. Not until this is all over.”

I slowly climb off his lap. “I’m sorry, did you just say you can’t be seen with me? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

He reaches for me, but I back up and right my sweater.

“Len . . . I have to take care of something before anyone can know we’re together. It’s not safe, but I’m trying . . .”

A slap across the face would have hurt less than those words just did. “Well then, I guess you don’t know me as well as you thought you did, Sebastian. Because contrary to popular belief, I’m not a liar. And apparently, I don’t know you as well as I thought I did because I didn’t think you were either.” I pick up my suitcase and grab the handle of the door.

“Figure your shit out soon, Bash.” I don’t turn around as I say this to him. I don’t turn around as I walk through the door. Instead, I keep my head held high and pull the door shut behind me, pull up my Uber app, and request a get-away car.

ELEANOR

The day after I stormed out of Sebastian's house, pissed off, the texts started. We'd been asking each other questions for a while, but they were always asked while we were texting about other things. These were different. Now, he was just flat-out texting questions.

During week one, the texts were pretty simple.

Bash: What's your favorite flower?

Lenny: A peony.

Pretty pink and white peonies, wrapped in brown paper were on my door step the next morning even though they were out of season. Every few days over the next few weeks, a new bouquet would appear out of the blue. Different color combinations each time. And each prettier than the last.



Bash: What's your favorite car?

Lenny: A 1969 Mercury Cougar convertible.

Bash: Sweet car. You wanna know what mine is?

Lenny: Nope

Bash: It's a 1967 Chevy Impala. Hardtop.

Lenny: You're lying.

Bash: Nope. It made you asking Dean about the Impala even funnier. I've sworn I was going to buy one for years.

Bash: What color is your dream car?

I didn't answer his last question, but after that, a matchbox version of my Cougar would come with each bouquet. Each time it would be a different color, and a note.

Am I getting closer?



Bash: What's your favorite food?

Lenny: Sesame chicken with fried rice.

Bash: You gonna ask me mine?

Len: Nope. But you're going to tell me anyway. I'm betting it's something your Nonna makes.

Bash: It's her minestrone soup. She always made it for me when I was sick. It's my favorite comfort food.

Lenny: That sounds delicious. Has she always lived with you?

Bash: Yes. I don't remember a time when she wasn't there.

Lenny: You're lucky.

Bash: I never thought about it like that.

Lenny: You should.

The next day, sesame chicken and fried rice was delivered to my office at lunch. Two days later, someone dropped off homemade minestrone soup and fresh bread.



he following week, he began to expand his questions.

Bash: How was your day?

Lenny: Long.

Bash: Me too. I can't wait until our bye week. My body needs a break.

Lenny: You doing okay?

Bash: Yeah. It was just a rough game this weekend.

Lenny: Your stats keep getting better. Why is that?

Bash: You keeping tabs on me, Miss Kingston?

Lenny: Only because I'm paid to, Mr. Beneventi.

Bash: Well maybe I've got something to prove.



Bash: Who's your favorite sibling?

Lenny: At the moment? Madeline. She's the only one not giving me shit today.

Bash: Isn't she a baby? Can she even talk yet?

Lenny: More toddler than baby. She's three, and she's got a feisty little temper. But I can give her back to Ashlyn when I don't feel like babysitting. My older siblings are pissing me off.

Bash: Why? What's going on?

Lenny: You don't want to know.

Bash: I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to know.

Lenny: They're all trying to play matchmaker.

Bash: What the fuck? Why?

Lenny: Because they think we broke up. No one is listening to me when I tell them we were never actually together in the first place.

Bash: Because we were together. We are together. I just need a little more time.

Lenny: Can you tell me why?

Bash: You know I can't.

Lenny: And that's why we're not together.



Bash had no idea that every text made me miss him more and resent him more at the same time. I'm an analytics girl. I'm a classic left-brained person. I work through problems methodically. The fact that I'm unable to work through whatever mysterious problem is lurking out there is turning me into a crazy person. I'm angry. I'm sad. I'm basically fucking miserable. So here I sit on my couch, wearing the same pajamas I woke up in this morning. Which was . . . oh, say, twelve hours ago. Binging the entire first season of *Bridgerton* for the third time since it came out and drinking a cranberry juice that may or may not be more vodka than cranberry.

Not my finest hour, but at least no one's here to see it. Well, no one, that is, until my sister Scarlet lets herself in my front door with the key I gave her for emergencies. When I see her walk in with a grocery bag in her hands, I crinkle my eyes and stare at her. "What's in there?"

"Well, hello to you too, sister." She takes a quick look around my living room and then stops and stares at me. "Jace called me earlier. He said you were sick." She picks up the empty container of Chinese food that's sitting on my coffee table, scrunches her nose at it, then carries it to my kitchen and throws it in the trash.

"Hey! I wasn't done with that," I yell at her.

She wipes her hands on a towel as if they just touched filth before she starts unpacking her grocery bag. "Jace is worried about you. Said you sounded sick when he talked to you this morning."

I watch her place tequila, Cointreau, limes and salt on my counter. “You thought I was sick, so you brought margaritas?”

“No. When you’re sick, you don’t answer your phone. I knew you were blowing off our little brother, so I brought margaritas.” She looks around my kitchen before turning back to me. “What I want to know is why?” She starts opening cabinets. “And where are your pitchers and glasses?”

I point to the shelf above the fridge then sit down on one of the bar stools, still wrapped in my fuzzy purple blanket.

“You look like ET wrapped in that damn blanket,” she says as she starts mixing a pitcher of margaritas. “Now, are you going to tell me why you’re avoiding the boys and being pissy at work? Because it’s not going unnoticed, you know.” She pushes a glass my way, then adds a sliced lime before lifting her glass and clicking it with mine. “Bottoms up.”

“Come on, little sister. You look like you’re going to fall off the damn chair. Let’s move back to the couch, and you can tell me all about your man troubles.” Scarlet looks beautiful in a pair of dark-washed skinny jeans and a white turtleneck sweater. Her dark hair is down around her shoulders and not an ounce of makeup is out of place.

“How did you know it was man troubles, Scar?” I tuck myself back into the corner of my couch and sip my margarita, wondering if would taste better with more vodka and less tequila.

She sits down next to me, placing her glass next to my cranberry from earlier and eyeing it skeptically. “Have you seen yourself today, Lenny Lou?” Her eyes flick over me. “You’ve got man troubles written all over you. So spill the tea. Tell me what happened between you and the mafia prince.”

“You ever been in love, Scar?”

She takes a big gulp of her drink. “No. Too messy. I don’t do emotions. I have my family. My job. And I can get sex any time I want. I don’t need a man messing up my life. But you’re not me, Len. You used to watch all those old movies where they lived happily ever after and then make me reenact all the scenes with you and your Barbies.”

“But none of that was real. I thought this was.” I pull my knees up to my chest and wrap my blanket tighter around myself. “I think he’s the one.”

She crosses her legs and leans back on the couch. “Then what’s the problem?”

“He doesn’t want me,” I verbalize the thoughts that have been wreaking havoc in my brain. “I don’t know . . . Maybe he does. He just has stuff going on.”

“What does that mean, Len?” The look on her face tells me her patience is already running thin. I know the feeling.

I blow my hair out of my face and try to gather my thoughts so I can put them together in a way that’ll make sense to my sister. “Something is going on. He won’t make me any promises until he can deal with whatever it is. And he won’t tell me what that is, but he wants me to wait for him to figure it out.” Okay, that wasn’t too painful. “Does that make sense?”

“I think so.” Scarlet nods slowly. “So he’s got some stuff to deal with and wants you to wait for him. Do you want to wait for him? Has he told you how long this is going to take?”

“One question at a time, please. My head is already a little spinny. He hasn’t told me how long it will take. And I was willing to wait for him, that is, until he told me we couldn’t be seen together until he takes care of it. All of a sudden, I felt cheap, and I’m a fucking Kingston. One thing I know I’m not is cheap.”

“Cheers to that, little sister.” She taps her glass to mine. “I want you to think about something, Len. His family is tied to the mafia. Maybe he can’t tell you because he literally CAN’T tell you. Maybe this is his way of keeping you safe. Which leads me to point B. Have you really taken time and thought about what being involved with this man means?” She kicks off her heels, uncrosses her legs, and pulls them up underneath herself on the couch.

“I think so. I’ve thought about it, but I haven’t talked to him about it. Weren’t you the one who said that our families weren’t that different?” I ask as my head starts to swim.

“Just because I don’t care about finding love doesn’t mean you shouldn’t, Len. If he’s the one, then don’t let his family stand in the way. You don’t come from a family without its own power, little sister. I’ve seen what our name can do.” I watch an odd look pass over my sister’s face before she smooths my hair over my shoulder. “I think you need to lay down, Len.”

I nod my head, and let my big sister lay me down on the couch and tuck me in.



Bash: Want to know what kind of stats I had today?

Lenny: Well. Well. Well. If it isn’t the reason my sister is passed out on her couch.

Bash: Len? What are you talking about?

Lenny: No. It’s Scarlet. I’m at Lenny’s house. She’s passed out on the couch after she had a little too much to drink. Apparently, man problems have her upset. Now, let me tell you a little something, Sebastian Beneventi.

Lenny: I know exactly who you are. I know who your brother is. I know who your family is, and I still told my sister to go

for it. To trust you. Because Declan Sinclair and his wife trust you, and they're pretty good judges of character.

Lenny: Plus you made her smile. I liked that.

Lenny: But she's not smiling now. Now she's sad and that's your fault. So fix it. And fix it fast. Because you may think your family has power, but let me tell you, mine has power that goes back over a hundred years in this city. I will destroy you if you hurt one single hair on her head.

Lenny: If you want a chance at making this right, I'm leaving in thirty minutes, and she's asleep on the couch. I'd rather not leave her alone. Prove me right, Sebastian. Prove to me that you're not another overprivileged shithead with a little dick.

SEBASTIAN

*S*park two streets away and walk down the alley behind the yards until I get to Lenny's house and hop the fence to get to her back door. This is a stupid fucking thing to be doing. If my father finds out, he'll kill me, figuratively speaking. But I hated what Scarlet said almost as much as I hated knowing I was hurting Len.

I talked to Sam yesterday, and he told me that the plan Emma, he, and I came up with was going to work. We need just a little more time. Another week, two weeks tops, and then I'd have control over my life. It can't come soon enough. But now is not the time to be taking stupid risks. I tap lightly against the sliding glass door in Lenny's kitchen and wait for Scarlet to let me in.

When she slides the door open, she moves her body outside instead of inviting me in. "Listen to me, little boy. My sister is a strong woman who's doubting herself right now. Do not prove me wrong about you." She walks back into the house, picks up her purse, opens the front door, then declares, "Swear to God, I will ruin you if you fuck her over. Lock this behind me." And she's gone.

I do as I'm told and lock the door before turning around to see Lenny bundled under a blanket, snoring softly on the

couch. Moving around the first floor, I shut off the lights and check the windows before lifting her from the couch to carry her upstairs. She buries her head in my chest and then sighs sweetly before letting out a loud snore. I chuckle, wondering if she'd be embarrassed to know how loudly she snores.

Once we're upstairs, I lay her down on her bed and stare at her for a few minutes, debating my next move. This is not staying away. But I kick off my shoes anyway and lie down next to her. As if she can sense me there in her sleep, she wiggles back against my side, trying to get comfortable. After a few moments of watching her fidget, I pull the blanket up over us and wrap my arms around her. Within seconds, her body relaxes, and her breathing evens out.

But it's my body that can't relax. My thoughts refuse to calm down. It's nearly November, one month from when this fucking sham of a marriage is going to be announced. We're almost there. We almost have what we need to barter our freedom. But almost isn't enough. I can't tell Lenny what's going on. I can't give her the explanation she deserves.

Not yet.

Not until I know I'm not putting a target on both of our backs.

I kiss her shoulder and whisper into the night, "Stay with me, Len. Don't give up on me yet," before closing my eyes and forcing myself to get some sleep.



I feel her moving before her feet touch the ground. The beautiful body that spent the past few hours draped over mine was trying to sneak out of bed. "Lie back down, Eleanor. It's the middle of the night."

The bed shifts, and I open my eyes. "Were you trying to sneak out of this bed, Len? It's your bed. Where did you think

you were going?” Jesus, she’s beautiful. Pale moonlight trickles in through the shades covering her windows, giving off the faintest glow behind her. But it’s light enough to see she’s confused as she sits back down.

“What are you doing here, Sebastian? How did you get in?” Her dark hair is wavy and wild, like the night we met, and her gray eyes are red and tired.

I reach over and tug at a long strand of her hair before relaxing back into the pillows. “Scarlet let me in. She didn’t want you to be alone.”

“I thought you didn’t want to be seen with me?” There it is. The hurt in her voice I knew I couldn’t avoid. The hurt I put there.

“Lenny, do you really believe that? There’s a big difference between want and can’t. I can’t be seen with you yet. It’s not safe. It’s not smart. And it won’t help me fix the problem that’s keeping me away from you. But I want it. I want it so damn bad, I’m willing to go against my father. Against my family. I have to because you make me want something I didn’t think would ever be possible.” I lift my arm, and she scoots back onto the bed and rests her cheek on my chest.

Her hand slips under my shirt and caresses my skin. “Oh, yeah? And what’s that? What do you want, Sebastian?”

“I want a life. Happiness. A future that doesn’t revolve around righting my father’s wrongs.” I bring my hand up to cup her cheek, but she grabs my wrist, pulls my palm to her lips, and places a sweet kiss in the center.

“Do we turn back into strangers tomorrow?” I nod, and she straddles my hips. “Do you promise to tell me everything when you can?”

My hand moves under her sweatshirt and up her smooth back before I lean forward and whisper against her lips, “Everything.”

“Then take me tonight. And make it a memory I can hang on to until you can come back.” Our mouths crash together in a tangle of teeth and tongues, two bodies aching for each other. She backs away and stands from the bed, then pulls her shirt over her head and shimmies out of her black yoga pants. Once she’s done, she stands there bared to me. Perfect
A siren calling me home.

When I move to stand up, she lays her palm flat against my chest and gently pushes me back down. “My turn, Sebastian,” is whispered into the darkness before I feel her hands unbuckling my belt. “You slept in these?” She pulls my jeans and boxer briefs down my legs and discards them on the floor. My sexy siren crawls between my thighs and grasps my cock in her hands before quickly kissing my lips.

“I didn’t want to be tempted. Figured sleeping in my jeans was safer.” My hands reach for her face, but she pushes them away.

Her tongue travels down my chest and around my nipple, sending a shiver of need down my spine. She traces each of my abs with her fingers then her tongue as she licks her way down my body. It’s not until her warm, soft mouth swallows my cock that I nearly jolt off the damn bed.

Her sweet moans of desperation drive me crazy as she sucks me like I’m her favorite lollipop. Those ethereal eyes look up at me through her long dark lashes, and any semblance of control I had left leaves my body. I sit up and reach forward to lift her onto my lap where she wraps her arms around my neck and sinks slowly down on my dick.

This woman is everything.
Everything I’ve ever wanted.
Everything I’ve ever needed.
And she’s mine.
Body, mind, and soul.

We both groan at the unimaginable perfection of her body stretching for me—neither of us wanting to move just yet. I slide one hand up to hold her face and drop the other down to rest on the small of her back as I help guide her movements. Slowly . . . so slowly, she starts to gently rock her hips as I press my lips to hers. “God, I missed you, Len.”

Her head drops to my shoulder, shielding her face from me.

Concealing the pain I know she doesn’t want me to see.

I drop my lips to her neck, licking until I stop behind her ear and suck that spot she loves. The spot that makes her body shiver. Her hips pick up speed.

With my hand holding her neck, I force her face to mine.

Her tongue pushes into my mouth as she wraps her legs around my waist, changing the angle. Both my hands move to her shoulder blades to hold her weight as she leans back and takes what she needs while giving me everything she has.

I’m never going to be able to let go of this woman.

“Jesus, Sebastian,” she moans. “I can’t. I’m so close.” She pants breathlessly.

Knowing what she needs, my lips move to her breast, and I suck hard on the most perfectly pink nipple as my girl falls apart in my arms, my name a chant in the air.

Once I feel her start to crest, I finally give in to my own need for release. I pull her hips down hard against me as I thrust deep inside and come with her name a roar on my lips.



*J*ust before dawn that morning, I kiss Lenny’s head and whisper for her to wake up. “I’m so sorry, Len. I’ve got to go. I promised myself if I came here last night, I’d leave before the sun comes up.” I frame

her sleepy face with my hands. “This won’t last much longer. I swear it, Len. But now, you need to wake up, so you can lock the door behind me.”

She nods, not saying anything, and a lump forms in my throat. Was last night a mistake? I watch her wrap the sheet around her body and follow her as she walks quietly down the stairs. When she turns to the front door, I stop her. “I need to leave through the back.”

Her face falls even more, and I wince at the look of hurt I see. I turn and cage her against the door before she has a chance to open it. “Just a little longer.”

She nods her beautiful head. “Okay.” Her small hands trail over my face. “Just a little longer.” She leans up on her toes and kisses my lips, then ducks out of my arms and opens the door.

I step outside as the sun is rising in the distance and turn to look at her. “Soon, Len.”

She nods. “Don’t keep me waiting, Sebastian.” And then she blows me a kiss and closes the door.

ELEANOR

When Becket, Scarlet, and Max walk into my office with lunch nearly two full weeks after the last time I saw Sebastian, I want to groan in annoyance. I love my siblings. Really, I do. But they're driving me crazy. Operation Cheer Lenny Up has been in full force since Scarlet left my house that night, and it's getting old.

They act like I'm moping around, miserable. They've been trying to set me up with one of the guys Hudson trains with at the gym. They've been taking turns trying to get me to go out. They've basically been taking turns being a giant pain in my ass.

Case in point . . . what's the first thing Becks says when he walks in?

"Cheer up, Len. There's other dick in the sea." Becks places the box he's carrying down on my desk and starts handing out sandwiches.

Max groans and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Did our mother drop you on your head as a baby?"

"That would explain so much," Scarlet adds, as she and I swap sandwiches before she steals the remaining chair, leaving Max to stand, glaring at Becket until he finally gets up and sits on the corner of my desk, giving Max his seat.

I attempt to shove Becks off my desk, but he doesn't budge. "Remind me again why we keep doing this in my office? It's the smallest one," I grumble, managing to annoy myself in the process. I am not this whiney girl. I'm not sure when it happened, but I've got a fairly good idea, and that pisses me off even more.

Max and Coach Sinclair have the only two offices on the top floor. There are two different conference rooms up there, but theirs are the only offices. Becks, Scarlet, and a few others have offices one floor below them, with their teams set up in pods on the main part of the floor. My office is located on the bottom floor. There are a few others down here, as well, but they're mainly for scouts who are out in the field more than they're here. It's a great little office . . . until you have four loud-ass Kingstons standing inside.

Yes. I'm including myself.

"Actually, Len, that's what we wanted to talk to you about today," Max says with stern authority in his voice. "Up till now, the organization has had both the College Scouting and the Pro Scouting departments reporting to Becket as the Director of Pro Personnel. As of Monday, we're splitting the departments."

"Yeah," Becks interrupts. "Now that you're here, and you've proven you can handle yourself and anything we throw at you, College Scouting is all yours. It's going to be announced next week. You'll still be working your numbers magic, but we're going to be adding more to your plate. So, you better be ready." Becket's smile is infectious.

When I look from him to Scarlet and then Max and see three proud smiles on each of their faces, I think I might cry. Did I really do it? Did I actually prove to my siblings that I'm a responsible adult who can be an asset to the organization?

My eyes lock on Max's. "You think I'm ready for this?"

Max nods.

“You were born ready for this, Len. But you’ve got to let me take you shopping. You need a better wardrobe.” Scarlet’s eyes travel over me once before she winks. “And we’ll need to decorate your new office.”

“Oh my God!” I screech at a decibel only a dog should be able to hear. “I get a new office?”

“Don’t get too excited.” Max tries to calm me down. “It’s two doors down from Scarlet’s, and you share a wall with Becket.”

“And you get your own assistant,” Becket adds.

“Guys. Won’t everyone assume I got this because of my last name?” A myriad of thoughts begin running through my mind.

“We can’t hide your last name, Len. You own the team.” Max looks around the room. “We all do. But you also have an MBA from Oxford, and the blood this organization was built on runs through your veins the same way it runs through Scarlet’s, Becket’s, and mine.”

“We *are* the Kings, Lenny Lou.” Scarlet crosses her legs and sits back in her seat. “Never shy away from who you are. You can’t run from it. Embrace it.”

Becket finally moves off my desk and turns to look at me. “Yeah, and if anyone thinks you got this job on your last name alone, just show them your IQ score. Pretty sure you’re the only person working for this organization who’s a member of Mensa.”

“Guys.” My smile stretches across my face. “And to think, I thought you were coming in to try and cheer me up again.” Okay, so I might be a member of Mensa, but I’m obviously not that smart if I just brought the conversation back around to that without thinking it through.

Scarlet reaches forward to steal a piece of Halloween candy out of the bowl on my desk. “Speaking of that. We’re done letting you hide out. Hudson’s birthday is Saturday,

and Sawyer's throwing him a party at Kingdom." Before I get a chance to tell her that I'm not really in the mood for a party, she adds, "No arguing. You're coming."

Max stands from his seat. "Nope. I'm out. I've got a meeting to get to and don't want to hear about how you're missing my potential future player."

"Max." He turns away from the door to look my way. "Are you going to be okay if I end up dating a potential player while I'm in charge of scouting him?"

"No."

My heart sinks with his answer.

"You won't be the one in charge of scouting Beneventi. Pass it off to one of the guys under you. Hell, hire someone new to scout him if you want. But it can't be you. Whoever scouts him has to report everything to Becket and you." He looks between the two of us. "That way we can honestly tell the board that your potential, possible relationship had nothing to do with it."

"Really?" I jump up and give him a hug. "Thank you, Max."

He awkwardly pats my back. "I just gave you a huge promotion, and you're hugging me over *this*?"

I squeeze him tighter. "Love you, Maximus."



Late Friday afternoon, I'm unpacking the single box of belongings I moved from my old office to my new office when Scarlet pops her head in. "You about done?"

I look at the two framed pictures, my half-dead bamboo plant, and my laptop all sitting on my desk, then at my sister. "Yup. That's all I had to move. Max said maintenance would bring up all my binders. I didn't have anything else." I

sit down in my new ergonomic, white leather chair and spin excitedly in a circle like a little kid.

“Well, come on then. Let’s get out of here.” Scarlet grabs my purse off the floor and starts heading toward the door.

“Where are we going, Scar?”

She looks at me as if that were the craziest question I’ve ever asked. “To celebrate over sushi and shopping. You need some new clothes, and I need something to wear to Hudson’s birthday party tomorrow. Have you gotten him a gift yet?”

I shake my head no.

“Well, we’ll add that to the list. Now move it.” I take my bag from her and look around at my empty office.

Maybe it’s time I embrace some new beginnings.



Later that night, once Scarlet and I have had dinner and spent more time shopping than I’ve done in the last year, I swing by my father’s house to see if I can find a picture that used to sit on one of the shelves in his office. It’s of me playing under his desk while he sits behind it working.

This room is a tomb.

Not a thing has been changed since he left us alone.

Max refuses to use it, and no one else has a need. Taking a seat behind the massive desk is an almost eerie experience. I know it’s not possible, but it seems like I can still smell the sweet scent of his cigars lingering in here.

It’s not until I’ve gone through all but one drawer in his desk that I finally find a box of photos. Pulling the box out, I begin to finger through the pictures, and it’s like watching a home movie of my childhood. Some hold happy memories. All of us at the beach house or on the ski slopes. A few of

Hudson, Sawyer, Jace, and me in the backyard, lazing away our summer days in the pool.

Then I find it. The one I was looking for. I never noticed before that while I was playing with my doll under my father's desk, he was looking down, watching me.

Not fully prepared to deal with these sappy emotions or let them take control after banishing my maudlin mood earlier, I shove the rest of the photos back in the desk and slip the one I wanted in my purse. I think it's time my siblings and I discuss doing something with this room.

When I stand up and glance through the French doors leading to the backyard, I notice the old tire swing that's still hanging from the oak tree on the side of the yard.

Max hung that swing for me one summer when I was a little girl. I slip through the doors, moving through the damp, cold grass and bend my body in half to sit gingerly in the swing. I sway the tire side to side with my feet planted firmly on the ground to judge the strength of the rope holding it up. When nothing snaps and I don't hear any creaks coming from the thick old branch, I push off a little harder and sail through the chilly night air.

With summer lingering through September, and the frigid winter temps starting by mid-October, we skipped over fall this year. My eye catches on our names carved into the tree. I drag my feet across the ground to stop myself, then turn and run my fingers over the names. The creak of the back door has me looking up to see Jace joining me. "Do you remember when Sawyer cut his thumb trying to carve his name?"

Jace throws his head back in laughter. "Yeah. I remember." He moves behind me on the swing and gives me a good push. "Mom looked like her head was going to explode when she realized why she had to rush him to get stitches."

I pump my legs. “Madeline’s name is the only one missing.”

“Madeline and Anastasia’s,” Jace corrects me.

“I guess I hadn’t thought about it that way. Do you think we’re going to find her?”

Jace pulls the tire to a stop and spins it so we’re facing each other. “I think if she wanted to be found, we’d already know where she was.”

“Could you even imagine coming into our family as an outsider? I never really thought about how hard it must have been on Ashlyn. I don’t think we made it easy on her.” I was basically gone by then, but I know I wasn’t the most welcoming Kingston.

Jace helps me out of the tire, then wraps his arm around my shoulder. “Ashlyn was replacing Mom, Len. She wasn’t one of us. Anastasia *is* one of us. I think it’s more about her wanting nothing to do with us than it’s us not wanting something to do with her.”

“Do you think she knows about us?” I ask, my curiosity piqued.

Jace squeezes me to him. “Maybe one day we’ll eventually find out.”

Eventually is becoming my least favorite word.

SEBASTIAN

*M*y favorite games are the ones played under the stadium lights. There's a different energy during night games. Hot or cold, rain or shine, there's an excitement in the air playing under those lights that can't be duplicated anywhere else. Factor in that tonight's game was nationally televised, and we were playing our conference rivals. Combine that with the cheer of the packed stadium and the way the team has been killing it all week at practice, and you've got the perfect storm of crackling energy building in the air.

There was no chance we were letting this team win.

Not on our field.

Not in our house.

Brady reminded us all tonight why he's one of the best college quarterbacks in the nation. He was up against a strategic defense and still managed to school them on how an elite quarterback owns the field, unlike Murph and me, who were both up against a lackluster offense. They may have had a few nice plays, but we were able to shut them down with little effort.

In the end, we won the game thirty-five to three.

With a towel tied around my waist, I exit the showers and head to my locker to get dressed, listening to the team razz me about not sending someone off the field on a stretcher for the first time this season. They're exaggerating. There have been a few times they've walked off on their own. They just never came back.

Once I'm dressed, I grab my phone from my locker and check my messages. There are two missed calls from Sam and a string of missed texts.

Sammy: We did it. We got what we needed. You were right. Emma's girl came through.

Sammy: I'm meeting with Dad tonight to turn it over to him.

Sammy: Go get your girl. You earned it, Bash.

Sammy: You're free.

I read the texts over a few times, making sure I'm understanding them correctly, then swipe to call Sammy. He answers on the first ring. "Took you fucking long enough to call me back, douchebag."

"I was playing a game, asshole. I just got out of the shower and saw your texts." I pause and swallow before asking my next question. "You got it?"

"I sure did, Sebastian. You. Are. Free. You were right. Emma pulled through. We got what we needed. I just pulled up to Dad's. I'm giving it to him now. No way he's going to let you marry a Sabatini after tonight. We fucking did it." The confidence Sam exudes gives me my first taste of hope. "Go get her, man. Go get your girl."

I lean against the locker and suck in my breath. "Sam, I . . . I'll never be able to pay you back for this." Brady's locker slams shut next to mine, and he stares, wanting to know if he's hearing me right.

"You don't pay me back, Bash. Well, I mean, you could always name your firstborn after me. Sam's a strong name."

He laughs. "I love you, brother. I'll call you tomorrow."

"You sure you don't need me to come to Dad's?" I ask nervously, contemplating my next move.

"Not tonight. I need to talk to Dad without you there." He pauses, letting that sink in. "You can't be there for this part. This is business, Bash. We'll meet tomorrow."

"Thanks, Sammy."

He ends the call, and I'm left staring at Brady

He must have an idea of what just happened based on my side of the phone call. "What's the good news?"

Before I can answer Brady, Murphy rounds the corner with his bag thrown over his shoulder. "How are we celebrating tonight's win, gents?"

My eyes shift between my two best friends. "I'm getting my girl tonight, guys."

"Well, hot damn," Murphy hollers as he rubs his hands together. "Let's go get your girl!"



Nattie, Sabrina, and Chloe beat us home and are already having their own post-game celebration around the kitchen table when we walk through the front door. "Behold the conquering heroes!" Nattie gets up from the table then jumps at Brady, wrapping her arms and legs around him. "Great game, babe. I'm so proud of you!"

"So, what's the game plan, boys?" Chloe asks as she sips her drink.

I hoist my bag up higher on my shoulder, then face my friends. "It's time to get my girl, but she's not answering her phone. Gotta figure out where she is."

Sabrina picks her phone up from the table and starts scrolling. "Did you check her socials?" I look at her, waiting for more. "Oh, come on, Sebastian. It's right here. Looks like

her whole family is at Kingdom. It's her brother's birthday. I'm sure we can find her there."

Murphy kisses Sabrina's lips. "Princess, you're smart and beautiful."

"You guys better get changed. We've got a party to crash." Nattie winks at me, and the noose that's been hanging around my neck for months starts to loosen.

Chloe smiles. "Well, what are you waiting for? Go. Go. Go."

Looks like we're going to Kingdom.



The treatment we get at Kingdom without having Lenny with us means it takes for-fucking-ever for us to even get through the front door. Once we actually make it into the bar, Nattie turns to me. "You know, they're probably upstairs. I mean, it is a party for the owner's brother. I doubt they're down here."

"Oh, yeah. I see Hudson Kingston looking over the balcony. That man is hot!" Chloe points to the top floor, and she's right. I see the professional fighter staring down at the dance floor. My eyes follow his to find Lenny dancing with Scarlet . . . and some dudes.

"What the fuck?" I growl. Lenny is ignoring the guy behind her. At least it looks like she's trying to. I can't tell if she wants him there or not. That is until the guy curls his arm around her waist and holds her to him. At this point, the other dude has Scarlet turned away from Len. Len looks like she's trying to break the guy's hold, but instead, his hand starts to move south.

That's it.

That's when I see fear in her eyes.

That's when I see red.

That's when I charge across the dance floor and push this asshole off her without thinking twice.

He takes a drunken swing at my face, which I easily dodge and counter with an uppercut to the chin, knocking the motherfucker on the floor.

From there, all hell breaks loose.

I wrap an arm around Len, moving her behind me, and then see Scarlet stomp someone's foot with her stiletto and twist as if she were stomping out a cigarette.

When Brady and Murphy rush into the fray, I shove the girls toward them, ordering, "Get them out of here," before I dodge another fist from one of this guy's friends, only to be bum-rushed from the other side.

I may not be the most skilled fighter, but I've got size on my side.

I turn into the guy as he rushes me, wrap an arm around him, and slam him to the ground.

Before I know what's happening, someone gets a good shot in on my ribs.

Murphy circles his arms around the guy who just landed the hit, lifting him off the floor and tossing him like a bowling ball into the crowd of people watching the fight.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a beer bottle coming at my head.

Then it's gone.

Hudson Kingston has the guy who threw it in a rear-naked chokehold like he'd use on one of his opponents in the octagon. His eyes meet mine, and he nods, letting me know he's good.

The guy who started it all stumbles, getting up off the floor.

His face bloody.

His nose bleeding. "You fucking hit me."

His hand touches his bloody nose in shock. “Look around you. Look at the phones out. Look at everyone taping this. I’m gonna call the cops. I’m gonna have you arrested.”

I grab him by the front of his shirt, eerily calm. “Go ahead. I’m sure there’s a camera somewhere that caught what you were trying to do to her too.” I raise my voice for everyone to hear, “Make sure to tell them my name is Sebastian Beneventi.” The piece of shit’s eyes widen. “Need me to spell it for you?”

He looks like he may have just pissed himself as a few bouncers make their way across the floor with Sawyer Kingston by their side.

Fights may feel like they last hours, but it’s more like seconds or minutes at best.

Murphy and I move off the dance floor, stopping once we finally make our way over to Lenny and the girls.

Brady is there with them and Len’s siblings.

I ignore everyone except her. Framing her face with my hands, I check her over to make sure she’s okay. “Did he hurt you?”

She looks up into my eyes and shakes her head. Then she wraps her arms around my waist and buries her face against my chest.

“What the hell happened out there?” Max storms over to us, but Scarlet stops him.

“Sebastian just stopped someone from hurting your sister.” She glances predatorily over at Brady. “And this one helped me.”

Nattie steps into Brady’s side. “Sorry, but this one’s taken.”

Scarlet’s smile grows. “That could be fun.”

Wide eyes give away Nattie’s shock. “Umm . . . No. Sorry. I don’t share.”

Sawyer and Hudson join the growing circus.

“Thanks for the save out there, man,” I tell Hudson.

Sawyer answers me. “I had those guys thrown out. But it might be best if you get out of here too. Just to calm the place down for now.” He runs his hand over Lenny’s head. “Why don’t you both get out of here?”

“Why don’t we all meet back up for brunch tomorrow morning? Ten o’clock at the house?” Max asks.

Lenny lifts her head and looks at Max. “Umm . . .”

“We’ll be there,” I answer for her.

Her eyes turn back to me—a timid smile on her face. “We will?” she asks, with an emphasis on the *we*.

“Yeah, Len. We will.” I run my fingers along the edge of her face. “But for now, we’re getting out of here.” I turn to her siblings. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Nattie giggles. “Don’t do anything we wouldn’t do!”

I lift Lenny off the ground and throw her over my shoulder in a fireman’s hold.

She squeals, “Put me down, Sebastian. Everyone can see us.”

“Let them see, Len. Let them all see.” I smack her ass. “I’m not hiding anything anymore.”

“Really?” She lifts up, making me grip tighter.

“Never again, Len.”

Truer words have never been spoken.

And have never felt this good.

ELEANOR

Sebastian sits me in the passenger seat of his Hummer and buckles my seatbelt before getting in himself. Once we're both in the safety of the car, he leans across the console, grabs both sides of my face with his hands, and kisses me. His lips aren't soft. They're not unsure. They're demanding and perfect. When he pulls back, he does it slowly, his strong hands lingering on my face. "Can we go to your place?"

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" I ask in return, knowing I can't keep going on like this. Knowing if I don't get the answer I want, I have to end this.

Sebastian links his fingers with mine. "I'm going to tell you everything, Lenny."



When we get back to my house, I brew us two cups of coffee and take them to the couch Sebastian is standing in front of in my living room. "Okay, we're here. We're alone. And we've got a full pot of coffee, so we can talk all night." I hand him one of the mugs. "I even have food in

my fridge because my siblings find it disturbing that I order so much takeout. So, sit.” I point at the couch. “And talk.”

“Have I ever told you that you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen? That you take my breath away? Or that having to stay away from you was the hardest thing I’ve ever done?” He puts his mug on my coffee table, pulls me into him, and inhales. His hand runs gently over my head before he sits down and pulls me with him. “I’m going to tell you everything, Len. But what I’m about to share with you can’t leave this room. You can’t talk to your siblings about it. You can’t share it with Jules. I’ve known Brady and Murphy for years. They live with me, and they still don’t know everything I’m going to tell you.”

I resist the urge to reach out and wrap my arms around him. “Then why are you telling me?” I whisper.

Scared he’ll change his mind.

“Because if you think you want to be with me, you need to know it. All of it. You need to understand it.” Crystal blue eyes search my face for understanding, and I gently nod. “And if at the end of this, you don’t want to be with me because of it, I’ll completely understand.”

I settle into the corner of the couch, pull my legs up underneath myself, and clutch my coffee, waiting.

Knowing that when this night ends, it could change the course of my life.

“I’ve never lived in a world where my father wasn’t the head of the Philadelphia mafia. I’ve always been given more freedom than Sammy. He was the firstborn son, the heir apparent. He always knew the responsibility of being head of the family would someday fall on his shoulders. But our father never forced that life on me the way he did Sam. I was the spare. My mother once told someone that Sam was our father’s and I was hers. She knew I’d never want it. Sometimes I think Sam didn’t either. He just knew he had no

choice, so he made the best of it. And I think she knew she couldn't protect him from it. She was raised in that world. She understood how it worked." He looks over my shoulder, lost in thought for a moment.

"After our mother died, Sammy became my protector. He pushed for me to play football. He pushed for me to join clubs at school. To hang out with my friends more. To do anything that would keep me away from the house. At first, I didn't understand why he never wanted me around. But then I did. Then it made sense. He wasn't pushing me away. He was *keeping* me away. Away from the business. Away from the life, as much as he could. He was still a kid himself, but he was keeping me safe."

Strong fingers reach out and grab my hand. "By the time I was a senior in high school, I knew exactly who my father was, what my family did, and that I wanted no part of it. I decided I wanted to go to college. I wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to save lives and balance out the lives I knew my family had taken. I never gave the idea of anything else a chance." His calloused thumb absently traces circles over my hand.

"Most fathers would be ecstatic if their sons came to them, telling them they were offered a full scholarship to an Ivy League school. That they wanted to be a surgeon. Mine simply told me that if he allowed me this, I'd owe him." He shakes his head. "I know what owing my father means. I know it now. I knew it then. When he collects the debt, you don't say no. It's not an option."

"Oh my God, Sebastian," I gasp, starting to understand, my heart hurting for him. "That is awful. That's not love."

Bash shakes his head. "Here's the thing, Len. It's how things are done in his world. He does love me. But our family will never come before *the family*. I had a good idea what the consequences would be back then. But I was willing to take

the chance. I was willing to give up a piece of my life. Until I met you.” His hand moves from mine to my face. That same calloused thumb is now caressing my cheek. “You were the game-changer, Len. Sammy and I had been trying to get me out of it for a few years, but we hadn’t figured out a workable angle. I’d basically accepted my fate.”

I turn my head into his hand and kiss his palm. “Accepted what, Sebastian? What is *it*?”

“I was supposed to marry Emma Sabatini.”

Bash drops that bomb, then waits. His eyes stay locked on mine. “Calling her a friend would be stretching it. I’ve known her all my life. Her father runs Atlantic City.”

“Wait . . . what do you mean, runs Atlantic City?” I ask.

“He’s my dad, but on a smaller scale. Atlantic City instead of Philly. Smaller city. Less power. The alliance was supposed to make both families stronger, give both families an ally, which is something that’s getting harder to find in their world.”

I put my empty mug down on the table and move closer to Bash. “That’s archaic.”

“It is what it is. We both knew it was happening. Neither of us wanted it. But neither of us were given a choice.” His hands move my hair over my shoulders and frame my face. “It’s why I couldn’t make any promises. It’s why we couldn’t be seen together in public. It was supposed to be announced in December.”

“Holy shit,” I exclaim. “That’s a month from now.” I tilt my head to the side and examine his face. “What changed?”

“Emma and I met with Sam a few weeks ago. He told us what he’d been doing to get us out of this sham of an engagement. Sam had never brought Emma into it before, but I forced him to that day. She’d said something to me more than a year ago. It gave me an idea. An idea we brought

to Sam. I haven't gotten it all from him yet. I came right to you. I'll get everything from him tomorrow."

"My God, Bash. That's a lot to take in," I tell him honestly. "Are you in danger?"

"Not any more than I've been my entire life. My last name puts a target on my back in certain circles. For the most part, it's known that I have nothing to do with the family business. I get to live my life. This should cut the only tie I was worried about. I'll never cut ties with Sam."

"And how do I fit into this?" Please let me fit into this.

"That's up to you, Len. Me getting my freedom means I'm free to choose what I want to do with my life, who I want to be with. You asked me before to give us a chance. It's my turn to ask you that now." The hopeful look on his face is killing me.

"Are you sure, Sebastian?" I place a finger over his lips before he answers. "I mean, really sure? Because I can't do any more of this push, pull, hot and cold thing. It hurts too much. It makes me want to run, Sebastian. And I promised myself I'd be an adult and not do that anymore."

Bash wraps his hand around my wrist, then opens his lips and kisses the tips of my fingers. "I'm so sorry, Len. I never wanted to hurt you. I tried to stay away. I tried to warn you. But I'm a selfish bastard. I knew it wasn't fair to you, but I couldn't let you go." He places my palm flat over his heart and covers it with his. "It's yours if you'll take it. It's never been anyone else's before. But it's yours, Len."

I suck in a sharp breath. "Sebastian . . ." I gasp and feel warm tears gathering in the corners of my eyes. My body moves without thought as I climb into his lap and wrap my arms around his neck. "You, Sebastian Beneventi, are mine. I called it weeks ago. I just had to convince you of it."

"Called it?" he questions as his strong arms move around my waist.

I nod, so ridiculously happy in this moment. Nothing could wipe the smile from my lips. “Ask Scarlet and Becks. I told them right before I threw them out the morning they showed up and you left. I told them you were mine. And Kingstons fight for what’s theirs.” I let my lips brush over his.

“Why did you throw them out?”

Giggling, I pull my face back. “Sebastian, aren’t you supposed to be a boy genius? I threw them out because you left. If they hadn’t meddled, you’d have stayed, and we could have had the whole day together. Instead, you left. So, I gave them the boot. Well . . . I let them feed me first.”

“Do you even know how to cook, Eleanor?” he asks with a wicked smile on his lips.

I tilt my head and soak in the sight of a playful Sebastian Beneventi. “Nope. Not at all. Is that a deal-breaker?”

“Hmm.” He tightens his hold on me, then stands, lifting me along with him, his hands moving to hold my ass. “Nope. I can cook pretty damn well. I’ve just never told Murphy, so he keeps cooking for all of us.”

I wrap my legs around his lean hips and tighten my arms around his shoulders, loving this incredible demonstration of strength. “Hey, Bash?” I ask as he carries me up the stairs two at a time.

“Yeah, Len?”

I run my fingers through the dark hair at the nape of his neck. “Can it be time to stop talking now?”

“I think I can find a few other things to keep my mouth busy.” He steps through my door and crosses my room before he drops me on my bed with a bounce. I can’t help the laughter that bubbles up in my throat.

“Promises, promises.”

SEBASTIAN

When I drop Lenny on the bed, she laughs, and I swear that sound makes me feel like the Grinch when his heart grew three times its size and beat out of his chest. My eyes devour this woman in front of me. “You sure about this, Len?”

Those gray eyes lock on mine moments before she leans up on her elbows and bites down on that pillowy bottom lip. She nods her beautiful head in agreement, but it’s not enough.

“I need the words, Eleanor.” I lean a knee on the bed and hold her face in my hands. “I need to know that you understand everything I’ve told you.” My thumb moves to trace her pulse point as it beats wildly at her throat. “I laid a lot at your feet tonight.”

She snakes one arm around my neck and pulls my lips down to hers. With barely a breath separating us, she whispers, “I understand. I told you, you’re mine, and I’m not giving you back. Now take me, Sebastian. I’m already yours. I have been for months.” Her tongue peeks out as she licks my bottom lip and then sucks it between hers.

When we kiss, it’s not rushed. It’s not frantic.
It’s slow and full of promise and passion.

My hand slides up the back of her head and into her hair as she pulls me closer, neither of us willing to give an inch. The need to consume her is overwhelming me.

I push the flimsy, strappy, silk top she's wearing up and over her head, baring her breasts to me. She arches her back as my tongue traces down her throat and along her chest.

Her body breaks out in goosebumps. "Sebastian . . ." she hums.

I don't stop as I kiss a trail down her taut stomach, licking the dips and valleys while I pull her jeans and panties down her long legs. When I slide off the bed onto my knees and pull her to the edge, I lift my eyes. "Yeah, Len?" I ask before I lick a long line up her soaking wet pussy, my eyes never straying from hers.

She plants her feet flat against the mattress. "Oh God" is all she says before her hands move to my hair and her knees fall open on the bed.

My fingers tease her while my tongue attacks her clit. We may have only been together a few times, but I pay attention. I know this woman, and I know her body. I know how to make it vibrate around me. My girl likes the tease as much as the reward.

"Bash," she pants. "More. I need more."

"What do you want, Lenny?" I lean back on my heels and pull my shirt over my head, then drape both her legs over my shoulders and eat her like she's my last meal and death is knocking at my door tomorrow.

"I . . ." Her whole body shakes as I curl two fingers inside her. Her fingers dig into my scalp, letting me know she's close. "Ahh. Don't stop. Please, Sebastian. Please."

I couldn't stop. If there were a gun to my head, I wouldn't stop. Not now. Not when I feel her body tightening around my fingers. I circle her clit one last time before grazing it

with my teeth, and she rewards me with a loud gasp as her body shakes.

I stand and kick off my jeans while Lenny lays on the bed, spent, her head turned to the side, watching me.

When I climb on the bed, she wraps her legs around my waist and pulls me to her. Once I'm closer, she trails her hand down my chest, circling my tattoo. "Your body is a masterpiece, Sebastian. The way you wear your skin. The way you hold your strength." Her fingers slide to my back, and she sucks in a breath as I rub my cock along her slick core.

The sweetest sigh I've ever heard leaves her lips before her nails graze my skin.

I grab her wrists and pin them above her head before slowly pushing in.

Nothing has ever felt more perfect—more like coming home. Our lips meet, and I wrap my arms around her, holding her close against me as I roll us over, positioning her on top. Her long dark hair hangs wildly around her, brushing my fingertips that grip her waist as she slowly begins to rock her hips.

She leans down, her nipples brushing my skin.

Her hands on my chest.

Her eyes lock on mine, telling me everything we haven't said.

Promises we make each other with our bodies, stronger than any words could ever be.

It isn't until she shatters around me that I realize what it all means, and exactly how much has changed tonight.



ours later, with Len's head resting on my chest, and the tips of her fingers tracing my pecs, a feeling of contentment

washes over me.

It's not a feeling I'm used to. It's . . . peace.
I gently press my lips to the top of her head.
“Lenny?”

She tips her head up and meets my lips. “Hmm?”

I love her like this. Soft and sleepy. No fight left in her. No front put on. Just this woman who's knocked me on my ass.
“Thank you.”

“For what?” she asks. As if she didn't just give me everything I wanted but thought I could never have.

“For this. For listening. For understanding. For waiting,” I tell her, not knowing how to say what I want to say. “For all of it. For giving me this chance.”

She laughs lightly, a laugh I'm falling in love with. “Someone told me early on if I wanted this thing between us, I'd have to fight for it, Sebastian. I don't know if I've ever been so grateful for meddling friends.”

“Friends, plural?” I ask. Curiosity getting the better of me. “Who meddled?”

“First, it was Nattie. Then it was Annabelle. Well, it may have been Belle more than once.” She props herself up against my side, looking down at me with mischief in her eyes. “You've got a whole lot of people who love you, Sebastian. But don't worry. In a few hours, you're going to properly meet the whole Kingston crew, and their meddling ways will put Nattie and Annabelle to shame.”

I should tell her now. Utter those words I've never said before. But I don't. Instead, I smile back at her. “Oh, yeah? Should I be scared, Len?”

“Of my family?” She taps a finger to her chin as if in deep thought. “Nope. They're a bunch of pussycats. They're loud and obnoxious, so maybe alley cats would be a better description. Possibly stray cats. For all the wealth we grew up with, we certainly forget every etiquette class we ever

attended and every piece of advice on how to behave in public when we're together as a family in private. But they do mean well." She lays her head back down on my chest. Her fingers begin absently tracing once again. "Don't let them scare you off, okay?"

"Nothing could scare me away from you, Len."

ELEANOR

I wasn't nervous about this brunch until we pull up in front of my childhood home and I see all my siblings' cars already lining the long driveway. "Damn," I mutter.

Sebastian puts the Hummer in park, then grabs my hand. "You doing okay, Len? We can turn right back around if you don't want to be here."

"I'm just being silly. I know they're going to torture me this morning. I'm used to it. Just do me a favor . . . Don't take anything they say too seriously. Okay?" He leans in and kisses me, making me forget my rising anxiety.

I don't hear the door opening in the distance, but I do hear my little brother, Jace, as he yells, "Come on, Lenny. I'm fucking starving. Can you suck face after I eat?" I pull back and look at Bash, trying to gauge his reaction to the little shit, when he screams, "Please," at the top of his lungs.

"So, that would be Jace." I shake my head and pull my coat tighter as we get out of the car. "He's my little brother. We had the same mother."

"Right," Bash places his hand on my back as we walk through the door. "Your dad was married more than once, right?"

Becket comes to a stop as he descends the staircase and gives Bash an amused look. “Yeah. Our dad was married four times. Good luck trying to keep track of it all today.”

Ashlyn, who was walking down the stairs behind Becks, cringes. She takes Madeline’s hand, moves around Becket, and smiles shyly at me. “Hi, Lenny.”

Madeline pushes in front of her mother, her arms reaching for me. “Lenny Lou, where have you been?”

I squat down in front of my little sister and nuzzle her nose to mine. “Missed you too, Maddie.”

Ashlyn turns to Bash with a cheeky expression on her face. “Hi, I’m Ashlyn. Wife number four.” She reaches out and shakes Bash’s hand as Becks grumbles something under his breath and walks away.

Madeline refuses to let go of my hand as I introduce her to Bash. She peeks around me and smiles sweetly at him, then giggles.

Oh yeah, sister. He has that effect on me too.

We follow Ashlyn into the kitchen to find a considerable buffet spread out on the white marble island and the majority of my siblings adding food to their plates. Madeline runs to Jace and takes the chocolate chip muffin he’s holding out to her.

All talking stops as everyone stares at Sebastian and me.

Fuckers.

“Okay, let’s get this over with. Everyone, this is Sebastian.” I link my arm through his. “Sebastian is mine. So treat him accordingly,” I tell them sternly, eyeing each of them and waiting for the inquisition to start.

Hudson sputters out a laugh. “What the fuck is wrong with your eye, Len? It’s doing a funny twitchy thing.”

“You’re such an asshole,” I tell him, then turn to Bash. “Might as well get the introductions out of the way. That asshole,” I point at Hudson, “is Hudson.”

Bash does the guy head nod thing. “Thanks for the help last night, man.”

“No problem.” Hud moves next to us and shakes Bash’s hand. “Nice to know Len found somebody who isn’t afraid to keep her safe.”

“Ahh, Len is right here, and she can take care of herself. Don’t act like I get into trouble on the regular, Huddy.” I pull Hud’s earlobe, and he smacks my hand away.

“Good luck, Sebastian. You’re going to need it. She’s trouble.” Then he gives me a wet willy before backing away.

“Oh my God. Grow up!” I point to Sawyer. “You’ve met Sawyer before. He owns Kingdom. In the crazy family tree of ours, Huddy is older than me, and Sawyer is older than him.”

“Huddy?” Bash grins.

Hudson glares. “What the hell, Len?”

“We’re big on nicknames.” I shrug. “Moving on. You’ve met Becket, Scarlet, and Max before. They’re the three horsemen of the apocalypse.”

“Oh, yeah?” Bash slips his hand to my waist. “Weren’t there four horsemen?”

Jace picks Madeline up, knowing I won’t hit him if he’s holding her. “Lenny knows numbers. History, not so much.”

Becks laughs at Jace. “Three and four are numbers, kid. You can’t be a dumb jock your whole life.”

Scarlet moves next to Bash and me. “Nice to know you took my advice, Mr. Beneventi.”

“It was good advice.” Bash smiles like a little boy telling his teacher he did his homework. *Brownnoser*.

“You heard Jace from the door earlier.” I point at him as he stuffs a piece of bacon into his mouth. “He’s also the one who can’t wait to eat until we get to the table.”

“I’m a growing boy. What do you want from me?” Jace asks, as bacon crumbs land on his shirt.

Max enters the kitchen with his phone in his hand and smacks the back of Jace's head. "Could you at least act like you have some manners in front of our guest?"

"Yeah, jack off, shows some manners." Becks picks up a biscuit and takes a bite, then continues with crumbs falling from his lips, "I mean, we need to make a good impression on Lenny Lou's new man. He's the first person any of us has ever brought home to meet the family."

And I want to strangle the pig with my bare freaking hands. "You're such a douche."

Ashlyn clears her throat as Madeline asks, "What's a douche?"

"Well—" Scarlet gets cut off by Max, who bends down to answer Maddie.

"Someone we'll make sure you never have to deal with. Don't listen to Lenny." Max rises and looks around the room. "I just got off the phone with Dino. He's on his way over now. How about we take our plates into the dining room and try to eat before he gets here?" He turns to Sebastian and me. "Could I speak with the two of you first though?"

"Go easy on him, Maximus. We may never find someone willing to deal with Len's shit again," Sawyer says louder than necessary as he walks away.

Sebastian tightens his hold on my hip as I count to ten, trying to control my desire to call my brother a word that Madeline should not be repeating. We follow Max out of the kitchen and away from prying eyes. But I don't think there's a spot in this ten thousand square foot house far enough away that nosey ears wouldn't be listening. "Is my sister safe with you, Sebastian? I don't mean from heartache. I mean, is she physically safe?"

"Maximus Kingston!" I exclaim. "How dare you?"

Sebastian takes my hand. "It's alright, Len. Your brother has a right to ask. He's protecting you." He squeezes my

hand, then looks at my brother. "I'm not involved in my family business, if that's what you're asking, Max."

"Good. Because your family doesn't have a clue about the kind of power the Kingstons have or how far my reach is. If a hair on her head is hurt because of your world, you'll wish you'd never been born."

Fury blinds me as I shove my brother back with all my strength. "Back off, Max. I can't believe you. I don't need a white knight."

The doorbell rings, and Max walks away as if we weren't just in the middle of a fight. I can't hear what he says, but Dino walks through the front door, and I feel Sebastian tense beside me.

"Uncle Dino?" he asks, obviously surprised to see him here.

Dino embraces Bash. "Good to see you, Bash. How have you been?"

I look from Max to Bash, not registering what's happening.

"I'm good, nipote. We'll have to catch up soon."

Dino turns to my brother. "Do you want to do this in private, Max?"

"No. He stays." Max surprises me with his answer, his eyes locked on mine, making sure I realize what he's doing and the acceptance he's offering.

I lean up and kiss Max's cheek. "Why don't you two go into the dining room? Bash and I will be right behind you after I fill him in."

Once they've left us alone, I place my palm against the front of Sebastian's Kroydon Crusaders hoodie. "So, apparently, today is your baptism by fire."

His hands go to my shoulders as he studies my face. "Just spit it out, Len."

“Okay . . . long story as short as I can make it. My father had an illegitimate child that none of us knew about while he was alive. The only person he told was Ashlyn. But he changed his will, so we all found out when he died. The catch is, he was only told about her a few weeks before he died. Unfortunately, her mother is dead, and the missing Kingston princess has changed her name. We’ve been searching for her. I’ve only known about this for the last few months. Anyhoo, it doesn’t seem like she wants to be found. That’s where your Uncle Dino comes in, which, by the way, we’ll have to revisit later. I want to know all about that connection.”

“Missing princess? Was her mother royalty?” Sebastian asks, taking me more literally than I meant for him to.

“No. Her name is Anastasia. Like the missing Romanov princess. Scarlet thought it was hysterical, and it kind of stuck—poor girl. Anyway, as I said, Dino has been helping us try to find her. I guess he’s here with an update.” I don’t know why, but my stomach drops. “I hope it’s good news.”

“I guess every family has their secrets.”

“Guess so. We better get in there before they start talking.” Sebastian and I enter the room, taking the two empty seats next to Max. Then we all wait for Dino to begin.

“I was hoping to tell you that we found her, but I can’t yet. We’re close. She’s close, closer than we knew. The last ping we got indicates she was in Philly. We don’t know if she stayed or not, but she was here.” Dino reaches inside his coat and pulls out a picture that he passes to Becket, who’s sitting at the opposite end of the table from me.

Becks glances at it and passes it along to Hudson, who shakes his head and passes it to Jace. He stares at it for a moment before handing it to me.

I know this woman.

Her dark hair and alabaster skin.

I've met her before. Holy shit. Where have I met her before?

I focus on her face. It's slightly out of focus, but I know it. Why do I know it?

Sebastian looks over my shoulder, just as it comes to me. "Isn't this?" I look up at him, and his shocked eyes are all the answer I need.

I offer the picture to Bash, and he gingerly takes it from my hand.

Staring in shock.

Max, whose patience has worn thin, takes the photo from Bash's hand and examines it. "She looks so familiar."

"Maximus," Scarlet interjects slowly, "give the photo back to Sebastian." My sister is studying Bash with sharp eyes. "I think he knows our missing princess."

A now-annoyed Max hands the picture back to Sebastian. "Do you know her? Do you know where she is?"

"Who is she?" Sawyer asks quietly.

Concern laces Hudson's voice when he adds, "Is she okay?"

"Is she safe?" Jace asks, his voice cracking with emotion.

"Nipote," Dino gets Sebastian's attention. "Do you know this woman?"

Bash glances down the table. "I do, zio. But I don't know if she wants to be found."

"That's not for you to decide," Max slams his hand against the table.

"Back off, Max," I tell him, taking the picture from Sebastian's hand. "It's her, isn't it?" An almost imperceptible nod confirms my guess, and a gasp leaves my mouth.

I glance around the table, my eyes stopping on Max. "We know who she is."

“Listen,” Bash is talking to everyone but looking at Max. “You don’t know me well, but I know her.”

Scarlet gets up, tired of waiting her turn, and moves around the table to grab the picture from my hands. “Oh my God. That’s—”

Bash cuts her off. “The woman in this picture is Amelia Johnson.”

“She saved your life,” Scarlet adds.

“She saved Annabelle Sinclair’s life. My life was never in danger,” Bash answers Scarlet before explaining further to the rest of the table. “But you need to know that Amelia is skittish. She’s not a sharer. She keeps to herself, even now. After years of her being one of Annabelle’s closest friends, I barely know her, and I’m around her on a weekly basis.”

Max runs his fingers through his short hair. “I’ve met her. I’ve met our sister. She’s in the Sinclairs’ box at the stadium all the time with Annabelle.”

Sebastian’s phone buzzes loudly in his pocket. Once he’s read whatever text he’s just gotten, his face drops. He leans into me. “I’m so sorry, Len. It’s the lunch I told you I had to go to with my brother. I’ve got to leave.” He kisses me quickly before standing. “I’m sorry, but I’d already told my brother and father I’d meet them for lunch today before I knew we were meeting this morning. I hope I get to see you all again.”

Bash pushes his chair in, then turns to Max, who’s still staring at the picture. “Let me know if there is any way I can help with Amelia. She’s a good person. She’s funny in a dry sort of way. She’s an amazing baker, and a shit dancer. She loves Annabelle and Declan’s kids like they were hers. I’d like to help. Amelia doesn’t trust anyone easily. Keep that in mind when you’re deciding your next move.” He squeezes my shoulder and walks out of the room, leaving me to stare after him.

Once the front door closes, the questions start. “Dude, your boyfriend knows our sister.” Jace exclaims.

“She killed the woman who stabbed Sebastian and tried to kill Declan Sinclair’s wife,” Scarlet clears her throat, then adds, “with a single shot to the head.”

“Holy shit.” Hudson whistles.

Becket stands and shakes Dino’s hand. “Looks like we’ve got a name and some recon for you to do.”

“On it. I’ll have more information for you soon.” Dino nods his head and exits the same way Sebastian did minutes before.

Jace, ever the impatient one, looks like a kid in a candy shop. “So, when are we going to talk to her? How are we going to do it?”

“We’re going to wait a little longer. You heard what Sebastian said. Anastasia is skittish. She ran once. What’s to say she won’t do it again?” Max stands. “Let Dino do some digging now that we know who she is. Let’s get a little more information first. Then we’ll build our plan.”

Our plan.

Our plan to meet our missing sister.

A sister who Sebastian knows.

Who was at his brother’s restaurant.

A sister I’ve met.

Holy Shit.

SEBASTIAN

Saporito isn't open when I pull up behind my brother's car that afternoon. My father's restaurant doesn't open to the public until four on Sundays. So, the only people here are Pops, Sam, a few employees getting set up for the Sunday rush, and Pop's driver, who's sitting at the bar and reading a newspaper, when I walk through the front door. This is my father's favorite time to be here. He likes it best when it's empty, says it's easier to breathe.

"Sebastian, come here." I'm waved over by my father, who's already sitting in his booth with Sam. The wine glasses sit on the table next to the house red. It's never too early for a glass of wine in our family, and judging by Pop's face, we're celebrating.

Not gonna lie and say I wasn't worried that something would blow up, and I'd get shit news today. They both stand when I get to the table. Sam hugs me quickly with a pound to the back, but my father wraps both of his meaty arms around me and squeezes like he hasn't done in years. "I'm guessing you spoke to your brother last night before your reckless behavior at that bar?" he asks with an enigmatic tone in his voice. "I'm certain I told you to lay low with this girl."

Sammy holds his fist to his mouth and fakes a cough like he's covering something up. "Pretty sure you told him a Kingston couldn't be a side-piece, Pop."

What the fuck?

"Ahh, yes. That is what I said."

I steel myself for what comes next. The lecture I'm undoubtedly about to receive. I may have come up with a few counterarguments on the drive over, knowing I'm not willing to give Lenny up.

Not now.

Not again.

Not for anything.

"Has college turned you into an idiot, Sebastian? Because your antics last night made it back to me before you and the Kingston girl left the bar. That's not laying low. It's certainly not staying away from her—"

"Pop—" I attempt to cut him off, but he ignores me.

"You'll have to bring her to dinner when this is all over. Sam tells me Nonna will love her. It's been too long since my mother has had a woman to fuss over. Give me a week or two, and then we'll have a proper Sunday dinner."

Sam fills our glasses with red wine while I stare at my father in shock.

"Might want to close your mouth before you catch flies, Bash," Sam mocks.

Pop's body tightens. "There are no flies in Saporito, Samuel." He lifts his wine glass toward me. "To the freedom you've wanted your entire life, Sebastian." Then he turns and tips his glass to Sam. "To proving you're worthy of the seat you will someday take in our family, Samuel." Pop looks between the two of us, and I swear there's a tear in his eye. "The two of you have made me so proud to be your father. I've raised two strong men. My only regret is that your mother isn't here to see it."

“What the actual fuck is going on? Am I in the twilight zone?” I turn to Sam, then to Pop. “Are you dying?” They both smile. “Swear to God, somebody better tell me what the hell is happening.”

Pop finishes his glass of wine before refilling it and leaning back in his seat. “Your brother and I have been working on getting something on the Sabatinis for years. You were never going to marry that girl. I promised your mother the day she married me I would let our children make their own way in this world, make their own choices in this life. Unfortunately, you were a means to an end, son.”

Pop sips his wine. “There are things at work that I can’t go into with you because of the choices you’ve made. But you did well. Sam told me it was your idea to bring Emma into this. That it was you who remembered what she’d mentioned to you. Some things will never be discussed with you, Sebastian. But know this, your brother and I were never going to let that wedding happen, even if it meant bombing the fucking church on your wedding day.”

My mind is bombarded with so many questions, it’s hard to focus on just one.

Anger is warring with relief.

Anger is winning.

“I . . . You . . . Pop?” I’m struggling to speak when I finally settle on one question. “You used me?” Once those words leave my mouth, my anger wins the fight. “Are you fucking kidding me?” I push back from the table, my chair tipping back as I stumble and face my brother. “And you knew? You knew it was a sham?”

Hurt takes its place in the mix with anger and relief.

Hurt that they kept this from me.

I could understand this from my father, but not Sam.

“Sebastian.” My father orders my attention back to him with that one word. “Your brother had his orders. You chose

not to be a part of the business. These are the consequences of your actions as much as the consequences of ours. If you're angry, be angry with me. Sam didn't know at first and fought me every step of the way until I told him what my plan was and what part he needed to play in it."

"Bash—" Sam starts but doesn't have the chance to finish.

My father cuts in, "Sebastian, this is over as far as the three of us are concerned. I will deal with the Sabatinis tonight. That is as much as you need to know. Now, sit back down and enjoy the food. I want to hear about med school and the draft. Sam tells me that you're considering playing professional football."

I glare at my brother. How the hell did he keep all this from me? "Pop, I have so many questions."

"And maybe one day they will all be answered, but today is not that day, my boy. So, are you going to be the first Beneventi doctor or the first Beneventi King?"

How is it possible to get everything you ever wanted in one weekend?

Not money.

Not fame.

Freedom.

My father sits across from me, offering the freedom I thought I'd given up years ago. "Would you be agreeable to me declaring for the draft and pushing med school back a few years?"

"Do you honestly have a chance to play for Philly? You know, your grandfather used to take me to the games when I was young. The stadium had cement seats back then. They knocked it down before you were born, but we always enjoyed ourselves at those games. My boy, a King."

"Dad," I can't believe we're having this conversation. "If I go into the draft, the Kings may not take me."

“Joe Sinclair would be a fool not to.” It’s like I don’t know the man sitting across from me. With each question that goes unanswered and every conversation the three of us have during the rest of the afternoon, I’m left to question the last few years of my life a little bit more.

Once we finish eating and Saporito readies to open its doors, my father’s driver approaches and whispers something in his ear. Pop nods his head. “Go. Be with your wife. Let me know if she has a boy or a girl. Sam can drive me home.”

Sam looks up from his phone. “Yeah, I got ya, Pops.”

My phone’s been blowing up for the past ten minutes, so I pull it out of my pocket.

Group Text:

Murphy: Oh Bashy boy . . . Seriously dude. Come up for air.

Declan: You’re a dick Murph.

Cooper: What’d I miss?

Murphy: Bash threw his girl over his shoulder last night and left the bar. None of us have heard from him since.

Cooper: Who’s his girl?

Declan: Coop you in this country?

Cooper: That’s classified dickhead.

Brady: Bash finally found a girl to put up with his broody fucking ass.

Cooper: No shit? Seriously?

Murphy: Hell yeah!

Declan: Leave him alone.

Brady: Another one bites the dust. That just leaves you Coop.

Cooper: Yup. It’s gonna stay that way too. This life is too hard on the wives. I’m not getting serious until I’m out.

Declan: When’s that gonna be?

Cooper: You sound like Nattie.

Brady: Well actually . . .

Cooper: I can kill you in ways where no one could ever identify your body, man. I don't want to know what my sister sounds like.

Brady: Declan doesn't care.

Declan: Declan just ignores you. Besides it's more fun busting Murphy's balls than listening to you try to break Coop's.

Declan: Watch and learn boys.

Declan: Hey Murph – Belle says your mom thinks she might be pregnant again. Know what that means her and Dad are doing?

Murphy: Fuck off Dec. It was an immaculate conception.

Declan: Do you think Callen was immaculately conceived on the kitchen table or the dining room table?

Murphy: You fucking suck Dec.

“Sebastian.” My father gets my attention. “Come over one night this week, and we can discuss this more. I have a meeting I have to get to now.” He stands and looks at my brother, who takes a deep breath and pockets his phone.

“Guess that's my cue to drive him home. I thought I was getting promoted after this, not demoted to driver, Pops.” Sam grabs his coat.

“Shut up and turn the damn car on. It's fucking freezing out. Did you see they're calling for snow this week? In fucking November? Goddamn weather is crazier than it's ever been.” Pop buttons his long coat and walks through the front door ahead of us.

Sam and I follow. “We'll talk this week, Bash. Go home and celebrate because it's over. Try not to be too pissed that it happened. You got what you wanted. You got your freedom. You got your girl. And you get to choose what you

want to do now. I'd say I've secured the title of brother of the fucking year."

I shoot Sam a look that has him raising his hands in surrender. "You may have helped . . . a little."

My phone rings in my hand, and Murphy's name blinks on the screen. Sam tips his chin. "Tell the dumbass to buy his own orange juice." Then he turns toward his car.

"Sam. It's fucking cold. Start the car, and let me in. It's locked," my father bitches.

I slide my finger across my phone and answer, "Hey, Murph. What's up?"

"Where the hell have you been?" There's laughter in the background that makes me smile as I watch my brother grumble while he pulls out his key fob to let my father in and start the car.

"I was having breakfast this morning with Lenny and her family. Then I met Sam and my dad for lunch. I'm heading home now." I'm heading home free.

I can't fucking believe the way this day has gone.

As I start walking toward the Hummer, I see Sam hold out his key fob and hit the remote starter button.

From there, everything happens at once.

The noise. A boom unlike anything I've heard before.

The heat so hot it singes my skin.

The wave of power, which throws me from my feet and through Saporito's front window.

Like an earthquake . . . but not . . .

It's followed by silence.

Deafening silence.

I lay on the ground. Shaken. Confused. The world tilted on its side.

Unable to move.

Unable to force myself to get up.

Unable to get my eyes to focus.

Maybe if I just close them for a minute . . .

ELEANOR

*M*y family and I decided today was a good day to put a little more of the past behind us. After we stopped being floored by how close we are to finding the Kingston princess, we all sat around the table talking. It was surprisingly normal . . . well, normal for us. Since we were all together, I suggested going through Dad's office. I expected groans and excuses. Instead, Scarlet was the first to say she thought it was a good idea. All our brothers fell in line behind her.

The way these grown men are scared of our sister is comical. Nobody wants to piss her off. So here we are, hours later, sitting around Dad's office. We've gone through his desk. We've gone through his pictures and his files. We've boxed up what we thought we might need, want, or just can't part with yet. Everyone's taken something to keep—something of our father's that meant something to them.

Not surprising that each of us has our own memories in this room.

"I lost my virginity on that desk," Scarlet announces.

"No fucking way," Jace contradicts as if it weren't possible.

Max's cheeks turn red. "Jesus Christ, Scarlet. Why the hell would you tell us that?"

"Why would you lose it here?" I ask as I move away from the offending piece of furniture and consider washing my hands.

Scar looks at me like I'm stupid. "Shock and awe."

"I've had sex in here too." Hudson raises his hand.

Becks fist-bumps him. "Yup. Me too."

"You people all have daddy issues." Sawyer crosses the room to stand with Max and me. "I never thought I'd be on the uptight end of the sibling spectrum."

I smack him. "I'm not uptight."

My cell phone that's sitting on my father's desk begins to ring. Jace picks it up and looks at the screen. "A scorching hot blonde is calling you, Len."

"Give me the phone, jack off." I hold my hand out to him. "It's Natalie Sinclair. Excuse me." I walk out into the hall to take the call and swipe to answer, "Hey, Natalie. You know, I owe you big time. I mean, I don't know—"

Natalie cuts me off on a sob, "Lenny, it's Bash."

"Nattie, what's happening? What's wrong with Sebastian?" I lean against the wall for support as the room starts spinning around me.

I hear a man's voice in the background, telling her to put the phone on speaker. "Lenny, can you hear me?"

"What's going on?" I ask, not caring who it is.

"Bash is at Kroydon Hills Hospital. Something happened when he was leaving lunch with his brother and dad. I don't have all the details yet, but I'll call you as soon as I know anything," the voice, who I assume is Brady Ryan, tells me.

"Don't bother, I'm on my way. I'll see you soon." I end the call and close my eyes.

This isn't happening.

Not now.

Not when I just found him.

“Len . . .” Hudson wipes away the tears I hadn’t realized were streaming down my cheeks and then wraps me in his arms. “What happened?”

I bury my face in his shirt while I try to pull it together. “I’m not sure. Something happened to Sebastian.” I pull back and look up at Hud. “They don’t know what. He was taken to Kroydon Hills Hospital. They’re on their way now. I told Brady I’d meet them there.”

I feel a hand run through my hair. “Come on, little sister. I’ll drive,” Scarlet offers as everyone starts to file out of the office.

I reach out and grab her hand. “We need to go now.”

“Then let’s get going, Lenny Lou.” Scarlet moves into the kitchen and grabs both of our purses.

When I look across the room, I see Jace approaching with our coats. Everyone’s behind him and getting their things together. “What are you doing?” I ask the room as a whole.

Max doesn’t stop. He just opens the side door leading to the garage. “We’re going with you. Come on.”



When I finally walk into the smaller, more private waiting room of Kroydon Hills Hospital, my eyes scan the area until they land on Natalie, Brady, Sabrina, and Murphy. They’re tucked away in one corner while a few men stand off to the other side. No one else is in here making deals with the devil for their loved one’s life.

Nattie gets up as soon as she sees me and rushes over. She grabs my hands as her eyes roam over the crowd of people I brought along. “They haven’t told us anything yet. We’re not family. That bitchy nurse wouldn’t know family if it crawled

up her tiny ass and bit her. She told me we were lucky to be allowed to wait in here.”

Jace chuckles, and I glare at him. Max walks over to the desk as Nattie brings me back to their corner to sit with them. My siblings scatter around us.

Max eventually joins us. “Sebastian is okay. He should be out soon. He’s refusing to stay overnight for observation.”

“How did you get that out of Nurse Ratchet?” Murphy asks.

Max almost looks embarrassed when he admits, “We funded the cancer wing a few years ago. It’s hard for them to say no to you when your name is on a wing of the hospital.”

I reach out and squeeze his hand. “Thanks, Max.”

There’s a commotion by the swinging doors leading to the ER before Sebastian appears, followed by his cousin Dean. I stand but stay in place when the men at the opposite end of the room surround him.

He slips by, leaving Dean to handle them.

I don’t realize I’m moving until I’m standing in the center of the room with my arms wrapped gingerly around his waist while his hold me close to him. I’m not sure how long we stand like that before his hands move to my head.

I lift my eyes to his and examine his face. He’s scratched and scraped. Little knicks cover his handsome face, but it doesn’t look like significant damage. I let my eyes travel his body, finding it’s in a similar condition, except for a bandage wrapped around his forearm. “Are you okay?” I whisper, knowing he wouldn’t want everyone in the room to hear his honest answer.

“Physically, I’ll be fine, Len. But they haven’t given me any information on Sam or my dad yet.” He pulls me back to him and presses his lips to my forehead before we join his roommates and my family parked on the hard plastic chairs

in the corner of the room. Sebastian sits down, pulling me down into the chair next to his, never letting go of my hand.

“Bash, man. What happened? One minute you were there, and the next, it sounded like a bomb went off. What the hell was that?” Murphy asks, his face as white as a ghost.

I hadn’t realized Murphy was on the phone with him when Sebastian was hurt.

Sebastian drops his head in the hand that’s not holding mine, then looks up at Murphy. “Sam’s car exploded.”

I don’t know if I ever truly understood the significance of the expression “you could hear a pin drop” until now. No one moves or utters a single word. There is no noise as the reality of what Sebastian just said sinks in.

“Bash?” Nattie asks everything I want to know with just one word.

I grab Sebastian’s arm with my other hand, needing so badly to give him any strength I have, terrified of his answer and what it will do to this man I’ve fallen in love with.

“I don’t know, Nat. They’re both in surgery now. Dad was closer to the car than Sam. That’s all I know.” Sebastian’s eyes track Dean as he crosses the room. But a woman’s voice from beyond the waiting room catches everyone’s attention before Dean makes it to us.

“I don’t give a flying fuck whether you’re supposed to tell me what’s going on or not. I am his family.” When Annabelle Sinclair pushes through the waiting room doors with a pissed-off nurse hot on her heels, it’s with a frightening look of rage on her face. I wouldn’t want to be that nurse.

But it’s not Annabelle running across the room with tears streaming down her face that stops my breath.

It’s the woman who walks in behind her.

A woman with pitch-black hair and alabaster skin.

It’s the woman we just learned this morning is our sister.

It’s Amelia.

SEBASTIAN

“*A*nnabelle . . . Baby . . . You’ve got to let go of him.” I look over Annabelle’s head at Declan, who’s trying to convince his wife to let go of me. It’s not working.

The woman who’s the closest thing I’ve ever had to a big sister holds me tighter as her head spins around like something out of *The Exorcist* so that she can yell at her husband. “Back off, Sinclair. I’m pregnant and hormonal. And I need to convince myself he’s okay before I let go.”

“Belles, I’m okay. I’ve got a little burn on my arm and a bump on my head. It’s not even a concussion. I’m fine.” I gently rub her back and kiss the top of her head. “They even cleared me to play in next week’s game.”

She sniffs loudly and wipes her face with her sleeve, then points her finger at me. “Don’t scare me like that again. You are not allowed to get hurt. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Amelia, who walked in quietly behind Belles, moves around her. “Bash . . . ? They said Sammy was with you.” She shifts from foot to foot, obviously shaken, but not wanting to show it. “Is he okay? Is he here?” She looks frantically around the waiting room.

“He’s in surgery. That’s all I know.” They haven’t updated me on either of them yet, and I’m trying not to read too much into that.

Amelia drops down in the seat directly behind Annabelle and starts chewing her thumbnail. “What happened?” she asks softly.

“I don’t know. One minute we were walking to our cars, and I was on the phone with Murphy. The next minute I was thrown ten feet backward through a glass window, and an ambulance was bringing me here.” I don’t tell her I can’t get a straight answer out of anyone or that I have no idea what state Sam and my dad are in because no one will tell me. Instead, I turn around and find Dean. “Is someone with Nonna? Does she know what’s happening?”

He leans in and quietly tells me, “We’ve got guys all around the house. No one has said a word to Nonna though. Thought we’d leave that up to you. With your dad and Sam out of commission right now, Uncle Nick has it under control.”

“Thanks, man.” I pat his back and turn around to find Len. Instead, I see seven Kingstons staring directly at Amelia. Well, fuck. “Hey, Max, can I speak with you for a minute?” I nod my head toward the far corner of the room and hope to God he follows.

It takes him a minute, but he eventually makes his way to me, his eyes straying to Amelia the whole time. “Don’t do this to her tonight. Don’t do it here. I don’t know what’s going on with her and my brother, but she’s upset. Don’t add to it now.”

“We’re not doing anything tonight. But I don’t think any of us were prepared to see her here. It’s safe to say we’re in shock.” Max turns his head slightly toward Amelia. “My sister is sitting right there, and she doesn’t know who she is.”

“She knows who she is. But she doesn’t know who you are. Keep it that way for now.”

A doctor pushes through the double doors and looks around. “Could I please speak with the family of Mr. Beneventi?”

“That’s me,” I tell her as I walk across the room alone. But by the time I get to the surgeon, Lenny is standing beside me, holding my hand, offering me strength I didn’t know I needed.

In a calm voice, the doctor introduces herself, “I’m Dr. Paparo. I’m Sam’s surgeon.”

“I’m Sebastian. Sam’s brother. How is he?”

“Why don’t you follow me?” Dr. Paparo guides us down a hall into a small beige room with a table, chairs, and a fake Ficus plant in the corner. Once we’re seated, she continues, “Sam arrived at the hospital unconscious but responsive. We performed a CT scan that revealed internal bleeding due to a lacerated kidney. He was immediately taken to surgery where we were able to repair the damage. He has some second degree burns that will require a few weeks to heal, but it could have been much worse. He’s in recovery now and will be moved to his own room shortly.”

I blow out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding and stand from the table, pacing from the nervous energy. “How long is his recovery expected to take?”

“Five to seven days, assuming everything goes smoothly. We’ll need to keep him here for a few days under observation to monitor for post-op infection and possible complications, but I’m expecting a full recovery.”

I stand behind Lenny’s chair and rest my hands on her shoulders, squeezing. “Thank you so much, Dr. Paparo. Do you have any news about my father? He’s in surgery too.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know anything about your father. I can see what I can find out for you and send someone out to fill

you in as soon as we have some information.” She stands, sliding her chair back from the table, and shakes my hand. “Sam was lucky today. I hope everything goes well with your father too.” She turns and walks out of the room.

Lenny stands and wraps her arms around my shoulders. “He’s going to be okay.”

I bury my face in her hair, taking comfort in having her here now, but knowing she’s not going to like what I tell her next. “Thank you for coming today, Len.”

“Sebastian . . . Where else would I be?” She kisses a cut on my jaw and holds me tightly to her.

I move my hands to her arms and pull them back down. “I need you to do me a favor.”

“Why do I think I’m not going to like this favor?” she asks, already not happy.

“I need you to go home. Not just you. Everyone. I’m going to stay here for the night. I’ll probably move back and forth between Sam’s room and my dad’s once he’s out of surgery. I don’t want to have to worry about you sitting in a waiting room. Go home. Spend the night at your dad’s house so you’re not alone.”

“Sebastian . . .”

“Please, Len. Do this for me. I need to know you’re safe. I need to know you’re not alone. And I need to concentrate on Sam and my dad. I can’t do that if I’m worried about you.” I kiss her lips quickly. “Please, Len.”

“Fine. But I’m not happy about this. You’ll be taking care of them, but who’ll be taking care of you?” She traces a scratch below my bottom lip with her finger. “If you leave tonight, promise you’ll come to the house? Or just call, and I’ll come to yours. I don’t want you to be alone either.”

“I promise,” I say, pulling her head back to rest on my chest.

“I don’t want to leave you, Sebastian.”

“You’re not leaving me. I promise.” I cup her face in my hands and wonder how I ever thought I’d be able to walk away from this woman. “Didn’t you already tell your family I’m yours this morning? Wanna know something?”

“What?” she crosses her arms and pouts, and it’s the cutest face I’ve seen my fierce girl make.

“My dad told me today that he wants me to bring you to dinner. He wants me to introduce you to Nonna.”

The pout disappears and is replaced by a self-conscious smile. “Really?”

I pull her toward me. “Yup. You’re not the only one who did some claiming today.” I take her hand and pull her out of the room with me.

Once we’re back in the waiting room, I move us in front of her family. “Thanks so much for coming today, guys. I appreciate it. I’m going to go sit in my brother’s room and wait for him to wake up. Len told me she wants to go back to her dad’s house for the night so she’s not alone. Can one of you take her home?”

“I’ve got her.” Hudson wraps his arm around Len’s shoulder. “Let us know if you need anything, Bash.” He shakes my hand.

Len pulls away from him. She moves up on her toes and gently places both palms on my face. “Call me tonight, Sebastian. Call me, or I’ll never get to sleep. Let me know what’s going on, or I swear I’ll drive right back here and make the ruckus Annabelle caused earlier look like child’s play.” She brushes her lips over mine, then whispers, “Be safe.”

“I will, Len.” I kiss her quickly and watch her walk away as her siblings all say goodbye.

Scarlet moves next to me. “We’ve got her. You just take care of your brother and father. Don’t worry about Lenny.”

“Thanks, Scarlet. I appreciate it.”

Scarlet surprises me with an awkwardly stiff hug. “If you need anything, just call. And don’t forget I’m a PR genius. I can spin anything, and I’m happy to help.” She whips a business card out of her purse and hands it to me. “My number’s on there.” She points at the card. “Make sure you call her tonight, or she will drive herself right back over here.”

“I gotcha, Scarlet.” I turn to sit, but Max Kingston pulls me aside.

“Keep my sister safe, Sebastian.”

“That’s why I want her to go home, Max. She’s safer there tonight.” I might tower over Max Kingston by at least five inches, but he has the presence of a giant.

Max levels me with a glare. “That’s not the sister I’m talking about.” His eyes shoot quickly to Amelia, who’s sitting with Annabelle, curled up on the hard chair. “I’ve spoken with the staff. If you have any issues tonight, tell them to call me. We are the hospital’s biggest donors. You shouldn’t have any problems.”

“Thanks, Max.” We shake hands, and I turn to sit with my friends but am interrupted by a nurse.

An older woman with her white hair up in a bun, floral scrubs, and a pair of light pink Crocs comes over to speak with me. “Mr. Beneventi, your brother’s been moved to a private room. He’s sleeping, but you can go in now.” She looks around at the crowd of my friends surrounding me, then adds, “He can have two visitors at a time, but that’s it. I’ll be at the desk. Let me know when you’re ready to go back.”

“Thank you,” I tell her. Then turn back to my friends. “Guys, I appreciate you all coming, but you should go home. I’m going to spend the night here.”

Amelia surprises me when she stands up. “I’m staying with you.” She turns around and looks at Belles. “And I don’t

want to hear a word about it from you.” Then she marches over to the nurse from earlier and waits for me.

When the rest of us stare dumbfounded at Annabelle, she just smiles and shrugs. “I know nothing.”

Murphy cracks a smile. “Yeah, okay, Jon Snow.”

If this day has taught me anything, it’s that she’s not the only one who knows nothing.

SEBASTIAN

Sam has a private room with a small couch and reclining chair in front of a big window. Amelia drops her purse and her jacket on the couch, then sits on the edge of the bed. She picks up Sam's hand and leans down to whisper something to my sleeping brother.

Leaning against the wall at the foot of the bed, I feel like an intruder. The room is dark. The only light is coming from the machines monitoring his heart rate and oxygen. It's strangely intimate, and I'm the outsider. "Can I ask what's going on between you and my brother?"

Amelia moves back to the couch and pulls her legs up in front of her. She wraps her arms around them, and watches Sammy. "Nothing is going on. We're just friends."

"Friends?" I'm not buying it, but I'm not going to push her tonight.

Amelia glances my way before looking back over at Sam. "Yes, Sebastian. Friends. Your brother has been a better friend to me than I deserve." She balls her jacket up like a pillow and shoves it behind her head. "It shocked the hell out of me too."

I sit down on the recliner. "Guess we might as well get comfortable."

“Why?” asks a gravelly voice.

I jump up and move next to the bed. “Hey, you’re awake.”

“Leave it to the smart ones to always state the obvious.”

Sam’s voice comes out strained. Raspy.

Amelia pours him a glass of water from the pitcher on the rolling table and adds a straw. She holds it up to his lips.

“Don’t try to sit up yet. Just take little sips.”

I watch Sam wince when he doesn’t listen to her and tries to sit up. “Wait, you stubborn jackass. Let me adjust the bed. It’ll be easier for you.” I pick up the little remote and push a button to slightly lift the top part of his bed.

“Could you two stop fussing over me? I’m okay.” He groans when he tries to take the plastic cup from Amelia’s hand.

“Really convincing, Sam.” Amelia pulls the cup back and places the straw back at his lips. “Let us help,” she orders. Then she quietly adds, “We were worried about you.”

My brother’s face is covered in cuts and bruises. The stitches above his eye are red and angry. Gauze peeks from the top of his hospital gown, covering his burns. “Sam—”

My brother cuts me off, “Where’s Dad?”

“He’s still in surgery. We haven’t gotten any news yet. Dean and a few of the others are still in the waiting room.” I try to fill him in as best I can.

“The house. Who’s at the house with Nonna?” Sam asks.

“Uncle Nick has it under control.”

A disgusted noise leaves Sam’s throat. “Nick doesn’t have shit under control. Get Dean in here. I need to talk to him.” Before I can protest, Sam grabs Amelia’s hand. “I need you to go home. Don’t go to your home. I need you to go to my father’s home. It’s the safest place for you right now.”

“No.” Amelia sits down on the couch and crosses her arms. “I’m staying. Don’t bother arguing. You won’t win,

Sam.” She glares at my brother, and I’m left wondering again what the hell is going on between these two.

“Amelia, don’t argue with me. Haven’t I kept you safe? I promised you I would, and I’ve kept my promise. Now, listen to me and go to the house. Go. Tell Nonna that Bash will be there soon.” He looks at her in a way I’ve never seen my brother look at anyone before.

I turn a shocked face to Amelia. “You know Nonna?” Then I look back at my brother. “She knows Nonna? What the hell’s going on, Sam?”

“I don’t know, little brother. But there’s a whole lot going on that you can’t know. Now. Go. Get. Dean—” Sam is cut off by a knock on the door.

A surgeon in navy blue scrubs like Dr. Paparo was wearing earlier comes in. “Mr. Beneventi’s family?”

“That’s us, Doc,” Sam tells him. Amelia and I flank either side of the bed, and I don’t miss her reaching for Sam’s hand.

The surgeon pulls his surgical cap off his head, a look of exhaustion crossing his face. “Your father was unconscious when he arrived at the hospital. He’d suffered trauma to his head, chest, and abdomen from the explosion. He took shrapnel to his head and chest. We did everything we could but were unable to stop the bleeding from his liver. I’m sorry to tell you that your father didn’t make it through surgery.”

Does the ability to help people even out days like this?

Where a surgeon has to tell someone they lost a father. A son?

Maybe this isn’t what I want to do with my life.

The surgeon continues. “If there’s anything you need, please let the nurse know. If you need any questions answered, she has my contact info. Again, I’m sorry for your loss.” He slips out of the room, much the same way he came in. Leaving us to deal with the aftermath.

My dad is dead.

“Bash . . . Bash.” Sam grabs my hand and pulls me to him, effectively snapping me out of the shock I’ve spent today in. “Sebastian. Go get Dean. Get him now. Bring Sal back with you too.” As I step out of the room to find my cousin and one of my dad’s top guys, I hear Sam talking to Amelia.

“Don’t argue with me. You need to go to the house. Sal will drive you. I’ll be there as soon as I can get out of here,” he tells her.

“You have to stay here where they can watch you, Sam. You just lost your father. Don’t make me lose you.”

My father is dead.



Later that night, I’m reminded why I want no part of this world as I sit and listen to my brother discussing with Dean the possibility of going to war. Sam doesn’t want to, but he doesn’t know if it can be avoided.

“They killed the boss,” Dean says, fury lacing his words.

Sam’s eyes close. “It was my car. It was meant for me. We need to find out who was behind that bomb. We can’t just assume it was the Sabatinis. Not yet. We have to be careful. Every move needs to be calculated. Precise. For now, the only planning anyone should see us doing is planning a funeral befitting the man who ruled this city for forty years without ever going to war.”

I’ve been sitting next to the bed, observing.

Listening, but not speaking.

“Bash, I need you to go home. The house is secure. Go to Dad’s.”

“Sam . . . Is Lenny safe? My roommates? Is my house safe?” I ask, worried but desperately needing to know the answer.

Dean places his arm on my shoulder. “Uncle Nick handled that for now. There are men at both locations. Nothing is going to touch your world, Sebastian. Your father always made sure everyone knew that.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “I need to go to Len first. Then I’ll go home.”

“Let Nonna sleep tonight. Don’t tell her about Pop until tomorrow. Don’t talk to anyone, not yet. As far as our world is concerned, you’re still with Emma. Go to Len tonight, but you can’t go back to her after that until after I deal with her father.”

“Sam, I can’t . . .”

“You can, and you will. It’ll only take days, Bash. And it’s for her safety as much as everyone else’s. Let me get the fuck out of here. Let’s bury Dad. Let me figure this shit out. This just got bigger than the Sabatinis.” He grabs my hand. “Days, Bash. Tell Len I give you my word. Just a few more days. Dad didn’t . . .” Sam eyes harden. “Dad didn’t get to talk to the Sabatinis before this. I can’t do anything until after the funeral. Even if the rest of the world is up in the air, I will end the engagement after that. Play along for now, Sebastian. I’ve got to get shit under control.”

I cover his hand.

An understanding between us.

It’s his now.

This world is his to reign over. To fight for. To control.

It doesn’t matter that he just lost his father or that he’s five hours out of surgery. My brother’s world just changed irrevocably. Whether he was ready or not.

“I’ll do whatever you need, Sam.” I look over to Dean. “Can I borrow your car?”

ELEANOR

On a typical day, Max, Hudson, Jace, Ashlyn, and Madeline are the only family who live at Kingston Estate.

Today is not typical.

We've all been rocked by today's events.

No one went back to their respective homes after we left the hospital. Instead, we all congregated back at the estate. We ordered enough pizza to feed a small village and took turns sneaking some to Madeline. Ashlyn tries to keep her away from what she considers junk food. The rest of us are a terrible influence on our little sister.

After Madeline is tucked safely in her little princess bed, Ashlyn comes downstairs and starts asking the hard questions we've all danced around this evening.

She sits down on the couch next to Becks, takes the bottle of beer out of his hand, takes a sip, and then asks, "So what was she like?"

"Distraught that Bash's brother was hurt," Jace answers first.

Hudson adds, "She came in with Annabelle Sinclair, the quarterback's wife. They looked close."

“I told you she killed someone to save Annabelle. I’d say that makes them close.” Scarlet mocks Hudson as she picks a piece of pepperoni off her pizza.

Sawyer walks back into the family room where we’re all gathered, sitting on the couches and floor. “Len, is there something going on between Bash’s brother and her?”

I take the glass of wine he offers. “Your guess is as good as mine. The night I met Sam, Amelia was leaving the office at his restaurant. Bash seemed surprised she was there. That’s all I know.”

“She’s hot.” Becks whistles.

Jace scrunches up his face. “Eww.”

“She’s your sister, Becket,” Max lectures.

Becks’s entire body slumps as he looks at Max. “I didn’t say I wanted to fuck her. I said she’s hot. Scar and Len are hot. Hopefully, this one is a little more . . . Hmmm . . . What’s the word I’m looking for?” he asks Hudson, who’s sitting next to him.

“I was thinking less, not more. As in less bitchy,” Hudson offers.

“I was going for more. Like more sane, if you ask me,” Sawyer at least looks apologetic as he says it before he adds, “Who knows? Maybe this one will be a sweetheart.”

“Hey!” I yell at him. “I’m a sweetheart.”

The doorbell rings as everyone around me starts laughing. I stand up and flip them all off.

Our housekeeper/cook/nanny, Mrs. Burns, who’s been a constant in our lives for the last twenty years, walks in the room with Sebastian behind her, and all laughing stops.

“Bash,” His name leaves my lips on a sigh of relief as I weave through my siblings to get to him. “You came.” I take his hand in mine and don’t say anything to anyone else as I guide Sebastian out of the room and up the winding staircase to my old bedroom.

When I shut the door behind us and switch on the light, he squints his eyes, until I turn it back off.

“Sorry, Len. I’m just so damn tired.” He sits down on my bed and hangs his head.

I pad across the room to stand in front of him and lift his face. “Are you okay?”

Sebastian’s eyes water as he answers me, “No.”

God, I want to take away his pain. Slowly, I drop down on my knees.

“What are you doing, Len?” Bash asks, confused.

Ignoring him, I start to unlace his boots. “Taking your shoes off. I want you to lie down.” Once I stand back up, I look him over and trace his face. “Maybe take a warm shower first. Wash the day off. I’ll be here when you get out, ready to talk or listen or just sleep. Whatever you need. Let me just go grab you some clothes. I’m sure Hudson has some sweats that’ll fit.”

I move to turn away, but he grabs my hand and pulls me toward him. Even sitting on my bed, his head still comes to my chest when he rests it against me. My fingers move through his dark hair as his circle my waist. “My dad died tonight, Len.” He doesn’t look up, and I don’t force him to. “I don’t think I even really knew him these last few years, and now he’s gone. My chance to know him is gone.”

“I’m sorry, Sebastian. I know from experience there’s nothing I can say that’ll make you feel better right now. But I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.” I don’t mention that when I lost my mother, I ran away from everyone who loved me and pray he doesn’t do the same.

I don’t know what I’d do at this point if I lost him too.



ater, once Sebastian has showered and changed into the
sweats and t-shirt I stole from Hudson, we're lying in
my old bed. Neither of us has said anything. I've been
curled up in his arms, listening to his heartbeat for
the last hour when he finally speaks.

"How's your family handling having seen Amelia after
what they learned today?" His calloused fingers have been
rubbing lines up and down my arms, lulling me into a trance
and nearly putting me to sleep till now.

"They're okay. A little shaken. A little shocked. They want
to know her. But they know they have to wait." I lean up and
look down at this man who's slowly taken over my heart.
"How was she after we left? Did she get to see your brother?
She seemed really upset."

Bash pulls himself up to lean against my headboard.
"There something going on there, but I'm not exactly sure
what. She said they were just friends, but he sent her to my
dad's house for the night. She's met Nonna before, and I had
no idea. Those aren't things we do with someone who's just
a friend."

"How's Sam?" I ask as I sit up next to Sebastian and
crisscross my legs.

"Stubborn. He's insisting on checking himself out of the
hospital tomorrow." Sebastian palms my cheek. "Lenny, this
next week is going to be crazy."

I place my palm over his and lean into him. "I know,
Sebastian."

"You *don't* know, Len." The exhaustion is back, thick in
his voice. "My father died before he had the chance to talk to
the Sabatinis. Sam will handle it but not before the funeral.
With so many things in limbo right now, I'm not going to be
able to see you again until after we bury my father."

My hand drops. "You can't be serious. So we're supposed
to, what? Go back to acting like we don't know each other?"

Like you don't already mean the world to me?" The words come out strangled and shaky. "Sebastian . . . How?"

His bandaged arm comes to the other side of my face, both hands cupping it gently. "This is the last time, Len. As soon as this is over, I promise you no one will ever question how I feel about you. I'll tell the whole world how much I love you."

"You did not just tell me you love me right now, Sebastian Beneventi." My heart does a somersault as my brain stays firmly planted on the pissed-off side of my emotions. "Not when I'm already mad at you." Hot tears trail down my cheeks.

"I love you, Len. It's the easiest and hardest thing I've ever done. I'm yours, and I'm not going anywhere. We just have to get through this next week. Sam has to handle it, but he has to handle about a hundred other things too." He pushes my hair out of my face. "Please don't give up on me now."

I nod my head and wipe angrily at the tears on my face. "One week."

I don't think my heart can handle more.

Fuck being an adult.

This is why people run away from their problems. Embracing them sucks.



Watching Sebastian drive away before the sun rises the following morning is one of the hardest things I've ever done. He promised this is only for a few days, but it feels like so much more. And that's the frightening part.

I didn't tell him last night.

I held back and didn't tell him that I loved him. It was my last chance to guard the heart I gave to him months ago. Because if he doesn't come back to me, I don't know whether I'll ever get it back.

"Len?" Max comes down the stairs in his pajamas. "Are you okay?"

I shake my head, then answer with a sob, "No."

Max wraps his arms around me. "What happened?"

"I'm scared I'm going to lose him, Max. I don't want to lose anyone else." I hiccup.

"Shh. You're not going to lose him, Len. That man was willing to go toe-to-toe with your whole family if he had to. He's not going to let you go now."

"God, I hope you're right."

SEBASTIAN

Dean's sports car is not made to fit someone as tall as me. He's not a short guy, but he's not six foot five either. My legs are hitting the fucking steering wheel as I drive away from Lenny's family home to Kroydon University. I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay in that bed with my girl in my arms and forget everything else.

Forget that my father is gone.

Forget that my brother has to take his place.

Forget that I have to spend one more night without the woman who's stolen my heart.

But that's not real-life. Real-life kicks you in the balls just when you think things are too good to be true. If you're thinking it, they probably are.

I attempt to let myself in my house as quietly as possible but might as well have not bothered. Rocky and Butkus meet me at the door, tails wagging and barking as if it'd been weeks since they had seen me instead of a day. "Guys. Shh. Be quiet before you wake the whole house."

"Too late." Brady comes down the steps, followed by Murphy. At least it doesn't look like the girls are awake.

"Sorry, guys." I pocket my keys and grab a bottle of water from the fridge. "I just need to grab a few things from my

room and some stuff for Butkus, and then I'll be out of here."

"Oh no, you don't, Bash." Nattie comes rushing down the stairs. "You better sit your butt down and tell us what's going on, and you better do it now. We're worried about you. I'm worried about you. You don't get to blow in here and blow right back out without filling us in. How's Sammy? How's your dad?" She walks into the kitchen and turns the coffee pot on, then sits on the kitchen counter next to it, staring me down. "Sit down and start talking."

"The Sinclair women get scarier every day," Murphy grumbles as he pulls out a chair.

Sabrina enters the room and drops down on his lap. "You better be quiet, Murph. Your mom's a Sinclair woman now."

I look over at Nattie, who points to an empty chair. "Sit."

"Fine." I sit down and run my hand along Butkus's brown and white fur when he leans against my leg. "My dad didn't make it."

Brady sits down next to me. "Bash . . ."

"Oh, Sebastian." Nattie hops down off the counter and throws her arms around me. "I'm so sorry. Is there anything we can do?"

"No, Nat." I look around the table at these people who are more my family than half the people who share my blood. "I appreciate it, but for now, I need to lay kinda low. I need to go back to my dad's house and check on Nonna and Amelia. I need to help Sam plan Pop's funeral."

"Amelia?" Nattie asks. "What's Amelia doing at your dad's house?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Nat." I look over to Brady. "Listen, I'm gonna call Coach later. I know I'm skipping practice today. Not sure what's going to happen for the rest of the week yet."

Sabrina lays her hand on my arm. “Let us know if there’s anything you need, Bash. Even if it’s just help planning the funeral.”

“How’s Sammy doing?” Murphy asks, having known Sammy the longest.

I blow out a frustrated breath. “When I left him last night, he was convinced he was leaving the hospital today. The docs want him to stay until tomorrow at a bare minimum. So we’ll see who wins.”

“Do you know when the funeral will be yet?” Brady asks as he gets up and starts pouring the coffee.

I take a mug from Nattie and let the scorching hot liquid burn my throat as it goes down. “I’m thinking Thursday or Friday. I’m sure we’ll have family flying in from Italy, and Sam will have to be moving around pretty well before we do it. He hadn’t gotten out of bed when I left last night. I think he’s gonna be in a hell of a lot of pain when he tries to walk today. So I’ll wait and see what he wants to do. He’s the head of the family now. I’ll follow his lead.”

Everyone at the table quiets, letting those words sink in. They know what that means and the weight it holds.



After I’ve packed a bag and grabbed everything Butkus needs, I take a moment to wonder how the hell Annabelle does this for Dec, Tommy, the girls, and herself. Seriously, I feel like my dog needs more shit than I do.

I said my goodbyes earlier. The guys were going to the weight room this morning, and the girls were going back to bed. So, I’m caught off guard when I see Nat sitting alone at the kitchen table. “You okay, Nat?”

Nat stares at her coffee mug like it holds the answers to all the world’s secrets before she finally speaks. “I’m

worried about you, Bash. I don't know if you even realize this, but ever since I met you, you've been the one keeping us all safe." She looks up at me with tears pooling in her big blue eyes.

"That's not true, Nat."

"It is. That summer we met, there was that fight at the beach with Darby. Who was the one that made sure Brady didn't do something stupid?" she asks, already knowing the answer. "And a few months later, who kept Cooper from killing Darby when he found out what happened with the pictures? Who offered to talk to his dad for me? Huh?" She looks at me, waiting for an answer I'm not going to give. "I didn't hear you."

I look away.

"Oh, that's right, it was you. Who made sure Murphy was okay when Jamie died? Who relayed all the information from Dixon? Who talked to Coach Barnett? Who talked to Jamie's parents? Oh, that's right. That was you too." Nat grabs a napkin off the table and wipes the tears from her face. "Who's always the one offering to be the designated driver? Hmm . . . Yup. That's you."

"Nattie . . ." I plead, needing her to stop.

"I'm not finished, Sebastian." She starts shredding her now-damp napkin. "Who rushed in to save Annabelle and the babies without even thinking about whether he was going to get hurt? You're not invincible, Bash. We could have lost you that day. We could have lost you yesterday. And I'm scared for you. Who's going to protect you if you push us all away now? Who's going to pull a Bash and be the one protecting you?" Her baby blue eyes meet mine and break my heart. "We love you, Sebastian. But if you push everyone away, who'll have your back?"

She gets up and wraps her arms around me, squeezing tightly.

“I promise I’m not going to do anything stupid, Nat. I’m not going to get hurt,” I tell her, my voice barely above a whisper.

Nat pulls back slightly, her eyes rimmed red from tears. “That’s not good enough, Bash. Don’t lock us out. Not now. You’re never the one who needs us, and that’s fine. But maybe we need you to let us in, to let us help you with this.”

“You can’t, Nattie. Not this time. I’ll come back. Let me bury my father. Let everything calm down, then I’ll be back. I promise. Honestly, the best way you can help me right now is to let me leave. You have to stay away.” I stand up from the chair, towering over the little pixie by well over a foot and wrap my arms around her shoulders. “I love you, Nat. You’re the best little sister I could have ever asked for, and I’m so fucking glad Coop shared you with us.”

She laughs a strangled laugh. “You know I’m older than you, right?”

“Yeah, but you’ll always be little Sinclair.”

SEBASTIAN

*B*y the time I walk through the front door of my father's compound later that morning, it feels like a lifetime since I left the hospital last night. I want nothing more than to go to sleep. But first, I need to get a bowl of water and food down for Butkus and find Nonna. The smell floating in the air tells me she's in the kitchen, but I wasn't expecting her to be in there with Amelia, discussing Nonna's secrets for the perfect biscotti.

"They truly are the most perfect biscotti I've ever tasted," Amelia tells Nonna as she sips her coffee and examines the cookie like it's a puzzle she has to solve.

"Of course, it is, principessa. These are not recipes that can be found in books. Bring me to your kitchen one day. Let me see you work. Let this old woman feel useful again. I may even share a recipe or two." Nonna sits next to Amelia at the table and watches her eat with a contented smile on her face.

I wonder if Amelia has any clue the weight of the title just bestowed upon her by my grandmother. The smile on Nonna's face grows twice in size when she sees me in the doorway.

"Prupetta. Come. Come. There are biscotti for everyone."

“He looks more like a string bean than a meatball, Nonna,” Amelia tells my grandmother, surprising us both by her understanding of the Italian nickname. She meets my eyes, then excuses herself, faking a phone call she has to make so that I can be alone with my grandmother to tell her that her only son has died.

“Nonna . . .” I sit down next to her, not knowing how to do this.

“Spit it out, Sebastian. When you were a little boy, you used to say my name and wait whenever you had something you didn’t want to tell me. Just say it. The hardest part is going to be getting the words out.” Her tanned, wrinkled hand covers mine.

“Nonna, Sam, and Dad were in an accident last night.” She closes her eyes and lifts her head to the ceiling. “Sam had emergency surgery, and he’s okay.” I let that sink in first.

“Your father? He is not okay.” It’s not a question as she opens her eyes and pulls her miraculous medal out from under her white blouse. She kisses it and looks back at me. “He is gone, yes?”

I grasp her hands in both of mine. “He is, Nonna. Dad didn’t make it.”

Tears pour from her eyes, but she doesn’t sob.

She doesn’t wail.

She pats my hand.

“Stay away from this life, Sebastian. Live in the sun, not this dark world. Live a long life. This life will take that from you.” She stands on shaky feet. “I’m going to get changed and go to church.”

“Nonna,” I try to stop her. “I don’t think Sam wants you going anywhere today.”

“I’m an old woman, Sebastian. This life has taken my husband and my son. I’ve buried your mother, the only

daughter I've ever had and so many family members, I've lost count. I'm going to church. If it's my time to meet my God, then it's my time." She pats my chest and walks out of the room, reminding me where I get my real strength from.



I toss and turn, trying to catch a little sleep.

My thoughts keep drifting back to when we lost my mother—the hurt, the pain. The loneliness I felt in those early days. I was a little boy, and she was my world. She was kind and soft, beautiful and fun. She loved us without question and told us that every day.

The pain of that loss was different than what I'm feeling now. Until yesterday, part of me wanted to hate my father, but I never completely let myself. I hated the things he did, so I buried my head in the sand. I wanted to offset the hurt he caused by healing people. I wanted to hate him for forcing me to marry Emma. But then he surprised me yesterday, and suddenly, I saw things from his point of view. Not that I would have ever agreed with what he was doing, but I would have tried to make peace with the *why* of it all.

I'll never get the chance to tell him that.

To thank him for being the best father he could be.

Even if that wasn't always the father I wanted or the one I needed.

I knew I was loved and hope to God he knew I loved him too.

I finally feel myself drifting off to sleep when a loud knock on my door startles me.

When I crack the door open, I see my cousin Dean on the other side. He's in the same wrinkled black suit he was wearing last night. His eyes are bloodshot from lack of sleep,

and his dark hair looks like his hands have run through it one too many times.

“What’s up, man?” There’s a scratchy tone in my voice from my lack of sleep.

Before Dean has a chance to answer, I hear Amelia’s normally soft voice booming from somewhere in the house. “Are you out of your fucking mind? You had major surgery less than twenty-four hours ago. You should be in the hospital with nurses and a doctor there to take care of you. Not here. With who? Me? I’m not a nurse, genius. I swear to God, if you weren’t already hurt, I’d smack some sense into you.”

“He didn’t?” I ask Dean, who frowns. “Fuck.” I draw the word out on a groan, throw on a shirt and head downstairs, following the sound of the argument.

Sam is sitting in my dad’s office.

He’s pale, and looks terrible, but there he sits.

In our father’s chair.

It’s a shock to my core to see him sitting there, even though I knew it was inevitable.

When Amelia hears me walk in, she throws her hands up. “Maybe you can talk some sense into him.” She spins around, her typically pale skin a fiery bright red as she fumes, then storms out and slams the door behind her.

Once she’s gone, I take the seat across from Sam, and stare questioningly at my brother. “Wanna tell me again that you two are just friends?”

“It’s complicated,” he answers as he relaxes back in the chair and the color drains from his face.

“What the hell are you doing home, Sam? You’ve got to know this isn’t a good move.”

Strain is evident in the muscles of his neck as he answers, “I signed myself out. Dean has a nurse coming to the house. She’s going to stay with us for a few days. Just until I’m up

and moving. I can't be in that fucking hospital, not when there's so much to do here."

"You're a stubborn pain in the ass. You know that, right?" I start mentally assessing what needs to be done. "You willing to sleep in Dad's room? It's the only bedroom on this floor other than Nonna's. And I don't think you can walk up the stairs tonight."

"Stop worrying about me, little brother. I'm paying a nurse to do that."

Suddenly, Amelia stalks back into the room. "Oh, yeah? Where is she? I don't see a nurse, Sam." She places a glass of water in front of him and a bag of prescriptions on the desk. "Give me a minute to go through these. Dean didn't have a clue what you should be taking and when." Her voice softens. "Did you eat anything? It looks like you need to eat with some of these pills. Nonna mentioned earlier she has minestrone soup in the fridge."

"Where is Nonna? How is she handling everything?" Sam asks.

"Well—" I start, but Amelia cuts me off.

"She's at church, praying for your stupid ass. When she told me she was going, I tried to talk her into staying home. I told her your father wouldn't want her going out right now to pray for him."

I stare at Amelia in shock. "How well do you know Nonna?"

"Wanna know what she told me?" Amelia asks Sam, completely ignoring me. "She told me she wasn't going to church to pray for him. She was going to pray for the two of you. I don't know what exactly she's praying for, but I hope it's for God to bless you with some common fucking sense." Amelia marches right back out the way she came in, leaving the two of us staring in her wake.

I turn back to my brother. “Damn. When did Amelia become the type to yell? And how did I get lumped into that tirade?”

“There’s so much you don’t know, Bash.” Sam swallows a handful of pills and stares out the door.

“About that . . .” Maybe I should fill him in on the Kingstons.

ELEANOR

The weathermen have been calling for snow all week, getting everyone all worked up. Even so, I don't think anyone expected to actually wake up to several inches of snow this early in November. They get it wrong more often than they get it right around here. But the ground outside is already blanketed in a glistening white, making the world look pure and peaceful.

Not at all what you imagine when you think about a funeral.

We're burying Sebastian's father today.

Other than a few texts telling me he missed me, Sebastian's been radio silent. It's what he told me had to happen. But it still hurts.

I've spoken to Natalie a few times and found out he's been freezing them out too. I'm supposed to be meeting them at the church in a little while. But trying to figure out what to wear to your boyfriend's father's funeral when you won't even be sitting with said boyfriend is not an easy task.

It's also a mouthful.

Add in that your shoes need to be snow-friendly, and it feels herculean. Giving up, I throw on a pair of black tights, a black boatneck dress, and a pair of low-heeled black riding

boots. Heels would look nicer, but when I'd inevitably fall flat on my face in the snow and draw all sorts of attention to myself, I know I'd regret that decision.

I'm fastening my mother's string of pearls around my neck when my doorbell rings.

My siblings have been taking turns checking in with me all week, so I'm not surprised when I open the door to find Scarlet and Becket standing on my step. What surprises me is that they're both dressed in black and the remainder of my siblings are getting out of their cars and walking up to my front door. "What are you all doing here?"

"Open the door and move aside, Lenny Lou. It's snowing, in case you hadn't noticed." Becks pushes his way in, leading the way for the rest of the Kingston masses.

Scarlet shakes the snow off her Louboutins. Of course, the snow wouldn't scare her. "We're not letting you go to the funeral alone today, Len."

"I'm not going alone. I'm meeting up with the Sinclairs and Bash's friends." I grab my black mohair coat off the back of the chair and look around at my siblings.

"There's way more of us than them, Len. Safety in numbers, and all that shit," Sawyer counters.

"Guys, I appreciate what you're doing. Truly I do. But most of you are too high profile to be there today and not draw attention." I scan the room. "I'm a big girl. I'll be fine."

"I'm a nobody, Len. I'm going with you." My little brother tells me, leaving no room for argument.

"You're supposed to be in school, Jace," I argue.

Max takes a step forward. "Let him go with you, Len. Keep your head down, and don't draw attention to yourselves." He kisses my forehead like Dad used to.

"Okay." I slip my arms into my coat and grab my purse. "Love you guys."



We met up with the Sinclairs and Sebastian's friends at The Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul in the Logan Square section of the city. I knew this was a big church, but my family was never much about going to mass, so I had no idea how massive this church is. We waited a few minutes for Amelia to arrive, and then we all walked in together.

I had to tell Jace to stop staring right away.

Jesus. In the madness of this week, I hadn't really considered that she'd be meeting up with everyone here. I guess I just assumed she'd be with Sam.

Any hope I had of wanting to stay under the radar disappeared when I heard the whispering about Declan Sinclair start. As we wait in line to pay our respects, I'm sandwiched between Nattie's brother, Cooper, who was able to get a two-day leave to fly out for the funeral, and my brother, Jace. I try to get lost between the two of them, but I feel Sebastian's eyes burning into me the entire time we inch along in line, even if I try not to look back at him.

And it was a long damn line.

It gives me plenty of time to study the woman who's standing at Sebastian's side, playing the part of the doting fiancée. She's pretty in an *It Girl* sort of way. She looks like a social media influencer. Perfectly put together. Not a hair out of place. She's standing between Sebastian and Sammy. I want to kill her and put her in the coffin with their father on principle alone.

She's not touching him, not doing anything to indicate they're intimate. But it's the fact that she's up there with him instead of me that's burning me up.

By the time we arrive at the front of the receiving line, I've had enough, and apparently, I'm not the only one.

Amelia is a few people in front of me in line. When she gets to Sam, he reaches forward to hug her, but she sails right past him, *accidentally* steps on the foot of the woman standing between him and Bash and gives Bash a big hug. It's almost comical to watch. That tiny little action tells me so much about her.

My sister.

When it's my turn to move along, I shake Sam's hand and tell him how sorry I am for his loss. Then I bite my tongue as I ignore the woman standing next to him and move on to Sebastian. I give him a quick hug that he doesn't reciprocate and turn around to the chair Bash's Nonna is currently sitting on. Instead of continuing down the line of pews like I should, I bend over and tell her how truly sorry I am for her loss.

She places one hand on my cheek and smiles as if she knows me. "I'll see you again soon, dear."

Jace wraps an arm around me, moving me along so we don't hold up the line.

As I look back over my shoulder, Sebastian isn't the only one staring at me.

His grandmother is too . . . and she's smiling.

SEBASTIAN

The icy white snow on the ground is a few inches deep and covering all our sins by the time we follow the eight men carrying my father's coffin out of the Basilica. Fat flakes are coming down fast and sticking to everything and everyone. Sam is helping Nonna into the limo that will follow the hearse to the cemetery. Lenny is tucked into the safety of our friends when Emma's perfectly manicured fingernails dig into my forearm like sharp little daggers. "Stop staring. You're supposed to be with me," she hisses. "You can't be so obvious, Bash. Not today when everyone's paying attention."

Emma loosens the death-grip she has on me and links her arm through mine.

She's not wrong.

We need to sell this.

For all of our sakes.

We have no idea who was responsible for the car bomb or whether it was meant for Sam, my dad, or both of them.

For now . . . For the next few hours, Emma and I need to be in love.

Sam stands with his arm resting on the open door of the limo while I help Emma in. "There are eyes everywhere,

Bash.” He lowers his voice, adding, “Beneventis can’t show weakness.”

He ducks into the limo, allowing me to catch sight of Lenny once more in the distance. She’s tucked under Jace’s arm. Snowflakes catch on those sparkling gray eyes that have tried unsuccessfully to ignore me the entire morning. I’ve felt their hold during mass. I’ve felt their fire burning into me as Sam, Nonna, Emma, and I followed the procession out of the church. I feel them now. What I can’t feel . . . What I don’t know, is if they’re sparkling from sadness brought on from sympathy or hurt brought on from my actions or lack thereof.



Sitting under the black tent covering my father’s final resting place, I tune out the priest canonizing a man who followed no commandments but his own. Tune out the prayers. Don’t utter the responses. Instead, I observe. Everyone here is here for a reason.

Grief. Duty. Respect. Friendship. Love.

Then there are those who are here for far less commendable reasons. The feds who want to take down our family. The other families who want to see for themselves whether our family’s power is up for grabs. The men who are already sizing up my brother, making their initial assumptions on the type of leader he’ll be.

The strength he’ll bring to the table.

Was it one of these men who set that bomb?

I’m pulled from my wayward thoughts by movement as my brother helps Nonna place her red rose on the black casket, followed by Sam. Emma elbows me gently to get me to stand up, and I suddenly realize I’m holding a flower. The four of us stand there for a moment as Nonna says a final

prayer, then we turn and head back to the limo. Once we have Nonna and Emma securely tucked inside, Sam shuts the door and turns to me. “Go. Say hi to your friends but make it brief. Pull Brady or Dec aside. They’re quieter than the others. Tell them not to come back to the house. We’re handling Sabatini this afternoon, and I do not want them or Lenny there. Got it?”

I nod and trudge back through the thick snow covering the cemetery. Once I get close enough, I wrap an arm around Cooper. “The SEALs give you time off to fly across the country for this?”

He turns and hugs me back. “I was stateside, so it worked out. Flew in last night, and I’m flying out tomorrow. So sorry about your dad, man.”

My eyes lock with Lenny’s, and she tips her lips up in a hesitant smile. “Do you need anything, Sebastian?”

I shake my head, then look away. “I appreciate you all coming today, but I’ve got to get back to the house. I’ll see you tomorrow for the game, okay?”

“Sebastian . . .” Nat moves toward me, but Brady pulls her back.

“Call if you need anything, brother.” Brady pounds my back.

Jesus, this fucking sucks. “I’m sorry, guys.”

“Be safe, Sebastian.” Belles wraps her arm around Declan’s waist and wipes a tear from her eyes.

My eyes stray back to Len’s, knowing I’ll see hurt there but not being able to resist the pull. “I will. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

When I get back in the limo, Sam is already inside with Nonna and Emma and waiting for me. “You good?”

“Not even a little.” I think about it, then turn to Emma. “You ready for this?”

For the first time since I met her when we were kids, Emma looks frightened. “You sure he isn’t going to know I helped you?” She looks between Sam and me. “He’ll kill me if he thinks I did.”

Nonna’s frail hand clasps Emma’s. “Straighten your spine, my dear. If you’re going to live this life, it must be with a spine of steel.” She pulls Emma’s hand onto her own lap. “You trust my boys and absolutely no one else with your secret. With anything that puts you at risk. You helped them, and they will return the favor. Remember this. It is the only way to stay safe. If you need to, you come stay at my house. I’ll fatten you up. You’re too skinny.”

We all stare dumbfounded at Nonna, having never discussed any of this with her.

“Close your mouths, all of you. I may be old, but I am not deaf.”



Within moments of us getting out of the limo, my father’s house is full of people. Italians take mourning very seriously. Food and wine are everywhere as people mill about, stopping me every few feet to tell me what a good man my father was.

He wasn’t a good man, not in the traditional sense.

They think that’s going to ease the pain of the loss.

It doesn’t. It just eases their need to say something.

Emma has stayed close to my side all afternoon. Her mother has been preening like an overstuffed peacock, fanning her feathers for all to see. She thinks her daughter is going to be the next Beneventi principessa, but that couldn’t be farther from the truth. Emma knows it’s coming. Keeping yet another promise to me, Sam is ending this farce of an engagement today. He has his own reasons for doing it now.

I'm not privy to them, but I understand the reasoning behind them.

I'm caught off guard when Dean taps my shoulder. "Your brother wants to see you in his office."

"Thanks." I don't know how long it's going to take to get used to it being Sam's office and not Pop's.

Emma's eyes go wide as she squeezes my hand. "I think I'm going to go have a smoke out back. Come find me after, okay?"

"Yeah. Sneak out. Don't let your mom see you." Emma may have been the linchpin that got us what we needed, but Sam and I are the only two people who will ever know that.

Dean and I make our way to the office and knock on the door.

Sam's deep baritone commands, "Come in," before he even knows it's us.

When I walk in, I immediately see one of the two monitors on his desk is set up in a multi-split screen showing several boxes containing the security feed of the house, including the one directly outside of this door. This is new. Dad never had this in his office.

Dean shuts the door behind me so it's just Sam and me in the room. "I thought you'd want to be in here for this, Bash. You earned it. If you hadn't remembered what Emma told you, we'd still be trying to figure out a way to deal with this shit."

I sit, wordlessly praying for a quick end to this particular nightmare.

Sam continues, "I'm crossing a line by allowing you to sit in on this conversation, but it's your life, and you deserve to hear this." A knock on the door has Sam checking the security display before saying, "Showtime."

When Carlo Sabatini walks in alone, I decide he's the stupidest man I've ever met. Sam could kill him right now,

and no one would be here to stop it.

“Carlo, please take a seat.” Sam gestures at the leather chair across from the oversized desk.

Carlo looks across the room to the couch I’m slouched on and glares. “What’s he doing in here?”

Sam leans forward, elbows sitting on a manilla envelope on the desk.

A manilla envelope whose contents will buy me my freedom.

Last year, Emma and I bumped into each other at a party. We partied afterward and got to talking as I drove her home the next day. She mentioned something one of her friends had seen. It was a dead body that had been in the news. It didn’t sound right to me at the time, but I stay away from my family’s business and never thought of it again . . . Until last month.

I had a thought.

An idea.

But it meant we had to trust Emma.

It meant we had to bring her into this with Sammy and me.

Her father can never know or there’s no doubt he’d kill her. So it’s just Sam and me sitting with her dad.

“He’s here as a witness. After all, it’s his life you bargained my father for years ago. And it’s his life I’m about to give back to him.” A wicked smile curls at Sam’s lips as Sabatini balks at the statement.

“What the hell are you talking about, Beneventi? That was an agreement made between men. You can’t break it now,” he declares, spittle flying from his disgusting lips.

Sam picks up the envelope and hands it to Carlo, who eyes it like he’s waiting for a king cobra to slither out of it and attack him.

He's not wrong. He's just looking in the wrong place for the danger.

"Open it." Sam's words are cold and calculated.

I can't see the pictures, but I see the face of the man looking at them.

I watch a mask slide firmly into place. But it was there. The *Oh, shit* moment.

He's caught, and he knows it.

"Why am I looking at a picture of a dead man, Beneventi?"

"Because that's not just any dead man, Carlo. That's Thomasso Darpino's grandson. Funny. I'd think you recognize the Don of New York's heir, especially since he died in Atlantic City. Your city. If memory serves me correctly, you helped find the Russian who killed him. But the Russian isn't standing next to that body holding a gun. It's you."

Sabatini throws the envelope across the desk at Sam. "A conveniently photoshopped picture proves nothing."

"You and I both know that photo is the original. You should also know that I have copies, as well as the other photos taken that night."

Carlo throws his chair back as he stands, fury overtaking his face.

Sam stops him. "Do you think the grieving Don will care to investigate whether that photo is faked? Do you think he'll listen when you lie? Or do you think Thomasso Darpino will take one look at the body of the heir to his empire, lying dead on the floor of one of your casinos—with you standing next to him, holding the gun—and then order your death and the deaths of your entire family without question or care?"

Sam's question is met with silence. Carlo has no answer because he knows he's caught. When he sits back down, his anger is gone, replaced now with a friendlier smile. The

smile of a desperate man who knows there's no way out. "I assume you have an offer to make me, Beneventi."

"As far as you're concerned, there will be no engagement between my brother and your daughter. That's my only demand tonight. But when I call, Carlo, you need to answer. Don't get any ideas. If something happens to me or those who are mine, the Don will have the photos in minutes, and you'll be dead before dawn."

Carlo Sabatini says nothing. He sits there, a defeated man, waiting to be dismissed.

"Go, Carlo. Go get your wife. Get your daughter. And get the fuck out of my house."

ELEANOR

Jace and I are sitting on my couch watching a *Fast & Furious* marathon while the city continues to be blanketed in what's now a foot of luminescent snow. The news said earlier that not since 1979 has Philly gotten snow this early in the season and never this much this early in November.

Jace came back to my house with me after the funeral, and he's refused to leave me alone. My little brother is a senior at a local private high school, and hockey is his life. His first game of the season is next weekend, so we thought we'd have a movie night tonight before his schedule explodes.

Even as that word floats through my mind, I cringe.

Explodes . . .

I keep picturing Sebastian being thrown backward through that window and imagining all the ways everything could have ended even worse than it already has. "Hey." Jace snaps his fingers in front of my face. "Earth to Lenny."

"Sorry, what?"

"I asked if you wanted more popcorn. I'm going to pop another bag." Jace gets up and throws his blanket at me. He gave me shit earlier that my fridge isn't exactly stocked with

easy dinner options, and nobody is delivering today because of the storm. We've made a meal from popcorn, cheese, crackers, and chocolate. It makes me miss the time when my siblings were stocking my fridge.

"Nope. But I'll take another bottle of water if you're offering." He walks back into the room a few minutes later with a big white mixing bowl full of popcorn, a bottle of water, and a bottle of beer in his hand. "Umm, is that beer for me, jack off?"

Once the popcorn is on the table, he tosses me my water and twists off the cap on his beer. "Nope. Come on, Len." He peeks through the curtain at the snow that's starting to mix with ice. "We're not going anywhere tonight, and judging by the looks of it, you're probably stuck with me tomorrow." Then he gets closer to the window. "Uh, Len . . . ? Someone just pulled up out front in a black Jag. Well, they sort of slid into the spot more than parked in it."

I stand up to look but stop in my tracks when Jace adds, "It's Sebastian."

My heart skips a beat when I open my front door and see Sebastian unfolding himself from a sleek sports car that doesn't look like it was made to fit someone his size. He gets out with a gym bag slung over his shoulder and nearly falls as he straightens. Once he's steady on his feet, he reaches in and grabs a canvas tote bag, then slams the door and looks up.

I can't read the expression on his face. It might be hope, but it could just as easily be exhaustion. This man, the one I haven't stopped thinking about since I met him, makes his way slowly up to my front door, occasionally slipping on the mix of ice and snow that Jace and I haven't bothered to shovel yet. When he's finally standing in front of me, all thought, all common sense, all ability to speak leave me, and I'm left staring at the love of my life, a man I'm

simultaneously furious with and desperately want to comfort. There's another part of me that wants to apologize for not telling him earlier how I feel.

"You gonna let me in, Len?" Bash holds up the canvas tote. "I brought leftovers."

"Let him in, Lenny. I'm starving, and your fridge is a fucking barren wasteland." Jace pushes me aside, effectively pulling me from my trance. He takes the tote from Sebastian and leaves us alone as he brings the pilfered meal into my kitchen.

"You came," I whisper, almost afraid to get my hopes up only to have them shattered again.

He drops the bag from his shoulder on the floor and grabs my face with both hands. "I came, and I'm not ever leaving again."

"Dude, Len. He brought lasagna," Jace yells from the kitchen.

Sebastian brushes his lips over mine "Does he know not to put metal in the microwave?"

"Put it in the oven Jace!" I yell back. "Don't break my microwave."

Sebastian and I are locked in place when Jace walks back into the room. "I'm gonna give you guys some space while the food warms up. Fair warning though. When the alarm goes off, my ass is running back down here. That stuff smells a-maz-ing. So, you've got twenty minutes. Do with it what you will." The little shithead wiggles his eyebrows at us before taking off up the stairs.

My hands pull at the front of Sebastian's Kroydon Crusaders hoodie. "I'm so mad at you right now—"

Bash cuts me off. "I know you are, Len—"

"No." My fingers rest against his lips, taking back my turn. "I wasn't done. I'm so mad at you right now, but I understand why you had to do what you did. I'm not happy

about it, but I do get it.” I bite down hard on my lower lip, scared to ask my question. Even more scared of the answer. “Is it over? Are you here for the night or are you here with me . . . ?” I don’t know how to ask what I want to know.

“I meant what I said, Lenny. I’m not leaving. It’s over. Sam, Emma, and I took care of everything. I’m so sorry I hurt you. I promise you if there had been any other way to handle this and keep you safe, I’d have done it. But it’s over now. I’m free.”

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and bury myself in his chest, hiding my tears and sighing with overwhelming relief. “I’m still mad at you, you know.”

“I know.” He runs his fingers through my hair. “I’ll make it up to you for the rest of our lives if you let me, Len. I love you, and I’m willing to wait for however long it takes to earn your trust and your love.”

My head tips back to look at this gorgeous man who stole my heart the very first night I met him even if I didn’t realize it at the time. “I love you too, Sebastian. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I’m sorry I let you leave last week thinking that this was one-sided. It wasn’t. It hasn’t been. I’ve just been too scared to admit it out loud.”

Sebastian’s strong hand cradles the back of my head as his mouth seals over mine possessively. His tongue licks the seam of my lips before pushing in.

Teasing. Tasting. Taking what’s his, what will only ever be his.

All my fears dissolve with this kiss.

I let go of my anger.

Let go of my worry and melt into him.

We’re interrupted by Jace stomping loudly down the stairs, giving us fair warning that we’re no longer alone. It’s only when Sebastian pulls back that my brain registers the timer in the kitchen is going off, announcing the lasagna is

ready. "Sorry guys. Not looking. I swear." Jace mumbles as he zooms past us, lost in the heavenly scent of lasagna permeating my house.

Sebastian links our fingers. "Come on, Len. Let's eat something, and I'll answer any questions you have."



This man didn't just bring leftovers. He brought an entire meal. Lasagna. Garlic Bread. Ravioli. Chicken marsala. Salad. Tiramisu. "Damn, Bash. Was this all left over from the wake?" Jace asks around a mouthful of food.

"No. Nonna spent the week cooking. According to her, food makes everything better. She even let Amelia try a few of her recipes."

Jace chokes at the mention of our sister.

"Sorry," Bash offers. "I . . ."

"No, it's okay," I tell him. "We haven't really talked much about what we're going to do about Amelia since last weekend. Dino said he'd have some information for us soon. I guess we're all just waiting for that before we make any plans or decisions." I look over at Jace as he coughs across the table from me.

I know that look. That's the look he used to get when we were little kids and he was about to get busted. "Jace . . . What did you do?"

Red rushes to his cheeks when he realizes he just gave himself away. "I might have stopped in her shop after school once or twice last week."

"Jace!" I yell at him.

"I wanted to see her, Lenny. I always had a hat and my jacket on. I wasn't obvious. I just got a coffee and a cupcake and left the first time. The second . . . Well, the second time, I

sat at a table in the corner while I ate and watched her. She didn't even notice me. I don't stand out." My little brother has no idea how much trouble he's going to be in with Max when he finds this out.

"Don't do it again. You sound like a creepy stalker." I feel bad that I haven't given Amelia much thought this week and instead kept all my thoughts wrapped up in the man beside me. "Do you think you could possibly help us with Amelia, Sebastian?"



After dinner, we cleaned up the kitchen, and Sebastian and I went to bed, leaving Jace to finish the movie marathon alone on the couch. Kroydon University's game tomorrow was canceled. The other team couldn't fly into Philly because the airport was shut down due to the storm. "Are you bummed about your game?" I ask as I slip out of the leggings and sweater I spent the second half of the day lounging in.

Sebastian sits on the bed in his black boxer briefs, his golden skin glowing in the moonlight, watching me. "No. I haven't practiced this week, and I can think of a much better way to spend a snow day." He prowls across the room, takes the t-shirt I was about to put on, and drops it on the floor.

A nervous laugh bubbles up from my throat. "What are you doing? Jace is downstairs."

"Then we better be quiet." His hands trace the curve of my hip before picking me up and wrapping my legs around his waist. He sits on the bed with me in his lap and peppers kisses along my collarbone and shoulders. His fingers play with the thin straps of my black silk bra. "I love the taste of your skin." He licks a line down my chest and pulls the lacy

cups down, exposing my nipples to the cool air, then to his hot mouth.

My fingers move to his hair as my body moves wantonly in search of relief from the need that's been building for hours. When his hand dips into my panties, I fight the urge to cry out. "I need more, Sebastian."

"You're finally mine, Lenny. I'm going to spend the night worshipping you."

Those words are a balm to my scared soul.

His.

I move out of his arms and off the bed, pulling his boxer briefs down as I go. Then I add my panties and bra to the pile of clothes on the floor. Standing in front of this man, I feel more confident . . . more sensual than ever before. "Worship me later, Sebastian. Fuck me now."

I climb back onto his lap, lining up his cock and sinking down slowly, putting us both out of the misery we've been in for the last week without each other. His lips take mine in a bruising kiss. "Jesus, Len. I've never wanted anything the way I want you, the way I need you."

"I'm yours, Sebastian. Take me. Take all of me. Just promise you'll never let go." My hips move of their own accord as he wraps his arms around my back and thrusts up in perfect rhythm, pushing me over the edge.

"Never, Len. I'll never let go."

ELEANOR

It's a warm, sunny Friday, nearly five months since we buried Sebastian's father along with the chains holding him back from the life he wanted. I'm scrambling in the war room in the Kings facility as we wait for our turn to announce our pick for the second round of the draft. As the numbers girl, I had to be here, an entire state away with the rest of my Kings scouting department and a few of my family members. But my heart is with Sebastian at Madison Square Garden as he waits backstage for his name to be announced.

Because Bash was a graduating junior and had only used three of his four-years of eligibility, he had to request special approval from the league to enter the draft. Once that was granted, things began to get real. I worried someone else would scoop him up before it was our turn. I never imagined I'd be annoyed that we won the championship game again last season which positioned our team in the last slot of the draft order this year.

Becks moves over, offering me a cup of coffee. "Calm down, Len. He's ours. Everyone knows it. You've got four more spots to get through, and then we can announce it. I

can't handle a crazy, stressed-out Max and a crazy stressed-out you too." He looks around. "Where the hell is Scarlet?"



SEBASTIAN

*H*ave you ever looked around a room and wondered what someone's story was?

What it took for them to get where they are now?

I do that often, but not today.

Today, I'm focusing on what it took to get me here. On my friends and my family. Sam's not with me in New York. He's very careful about being seen with me these days. That's not to say that we don't see each other as much, if not more, than we used to. We're just more careful about the when and the where of it. He was worried my connection to him could jeopardize my potential position once I decided to delay medical school and commit to the draft instead. The league doesn't like it when you have ties to the mafia.

Lucky for me, Max Kingston and Joe Sinclair don't care about those ties as long as they don't affect the Kings.

Lenny and I have discussed the possibility of me being picked up by another team before the Kings get their chance at me. She's convinced that's not going to happen. But even if it did, we'd work through it. The diamond ring I've been carrying around in my pocket like a good-luck charm for the last week means we're going to get through all of it.

Together.

But today is as big a day for my girl as it is for me. Draft weekend is huge for her. And this is her first one as a vice

president for the Kings. She's had a whiteboard taking up space in her dining room for weeks, constantly updating numbers along the way. And while I'd have loved for her to be here at my side, I'm just as excited knowing she's doing what she was born to do back in Philly.

Instead, I'm surrounded by my friends. My other family. Brady, Murphy, Declan, and Annabelle have all been trying their best to keep me calm. Funny how the tables have turned. That's usually my job. Nattie and Brina both had midterms today and couldn't come. Although Nat hasn't stopped pouting about it yet, it was the right move.

Belles puts a hand on my bouncing knee, halting it. "Try to relax, Bash. One more to go." She leans back and runs her other hand over her beach ball of a baby bump.

"Have you come up with a name for him yet?" She and Declan have been fighting over baby boy Sinclair's name for months.

She whispers, "Don't ask. I swear, I'm going to name him myself in the hospital. What's Dec going to do? Tell me no when I've just pushed his ten-pound progeny out of me?"

Murphy cracks up, and Declan levels him with a glare.

The crackle of the microphone alerts everyone to the new announcement. "And now, the final draft pick of the second round. The Philadelphia Kings . . ." Belles grips my hand tightly while everyone else leans in close, "pick Sebastian Beneventi of Kroydon University."

I look around the table and see everyone hooting and hollering as I stand up in a daze. There's a man ushering me to the stage when I realize Declan is walking with me. When he follows me up the stairs, I ask, "Declan?"

"Did you honestly think I'd allow anyone else to give you your hat and jersey?" he asks before we get to the podium and I accept my spot on the team.



When I let myself in the front door of the brownstone later that night, it's with my own key. I haven't officially moved in with Len. Not yet. I have another month before classes are over at Kroydon, and the plan is for me to move out then. Most of my clothes are already here. Butkus spends as much time at Lenny's as he does at Kroydon now, and he is the first one to greet me when I walk through the door. "Hey, buddy." I rub between his ears. "Did you hear? We're staying in Philly."

"Sebastian!" Len squeals as she runs down the stairs in one of my t-shirts and nothing else, her hair soaking wet. There's no makeup on her face, and she's never looked more beautiful. I drop my bags and catch her mid-leap as she jumps for me. "I'm so proud of you." She squeezes me tightly and moans when I push her up against the wall. Then she hums. "Wait. I want to hear all about today before we celebrate." Her legs unhook from my waist, and she wiggles back down to her feet.

She picks up the bags I dropped and examines them. "Flowers?" Her fingertips caress the pink peonies wrapped in brown paper that sit inside of one of the bags.

"For you." I kiss her head and take the other bag into the kitchen, then pull a bottle out of the bag and two champagne glasses from the cabinet.

She fills a vase and arranges the flowers. After placing them in the center of the table, she pulls herself up to sit on the kitchen counter. She's always sitting this way because it brings her closer to my height. "We're celebrating you today, Sebastian. It's your big day."

Fingers crossed that it's about to get bigger. "This weekend was your first draft, Len. It's just as big a deal for you as it is for me." I open the champagne and pour it into

the flutes, then stand between Lenny's legs and offer her one. "I'm so proud of you, Len."

When her eyes fill with unshed tears, I realize I'm somehow fucking this up. "What's wrong?"

She wipes her face and shakes her head, laughing at herself. "I just can't believe we made it here. To this point in time. Together. When I think back to last fall . . ." She shakes her head at the memory. "I love you, Sebastian."

I place my glass next to her on the counter, reach into my pocket and pull out the black velvet box I bought weeks ago. "Eleanor Kingston, a year ago, I was damning the institution of marriage, dreading the day I'd have to go through with it. I never thought I'd be able to feel an ounce of the love you give me every day. But you opened my eyes. You showed me what real love is, what happiness can be. I love you, Lenny, and I'm going to love you every day for the rest of our lives." Her tears are spilling down her beautiful face when I ask, "Will you marry me?"

She nods her head as her arms are thrown around me. "Of course, I'll marry you. You've been mine since the day I met you, and I'm never letting go."

EPILOGUE

ELEANOR

Nearly two years after we met, Sebastian kisses me goodbye as he and the guys head back to our favorite beach bar to celebrate Brady Ryan's bachelor party. I'm sitting on the back porch of Annabelle Sinclair's house smiling as I look out over the ocean. Sebastian and I bought the home two houses down from Belle and Dec and right next-door to Coach and Katherine a month ago. Last night was the first night we slept there, and it felt perfect.

Everything has felt so right this last year.

Gracie and Evie run out on the porch, their bulldog, Goober, hot on their little heels with Coach and Katherine's son, Callen, not far behind, yelling after them, "Give me back my truck!"

Katherine follows him outside and places a bottle of champagne down on the table, adding it to the bottles of wine already sitting there unopened. She kisses Nattie and Sabrina on the cheek, then sits down and hugs me. "Raising a toddler was so much easier when I was younger. Murphy and Carys were such sweet babies. Callen is a little hellion." She looks around. "Where are the others? Carys said she'd be over in a minute, but where are Chloe and Belle?" Katherine

uncorks the champagne and begins pouring it into the flutes on the table.

Belle rounds the outdoor couch and plops down with a sleeping Nixon on her chest. “I swear to God I’m going to kill Declan.”

“Oh, no. What did my brother do this time?” Nat giggles as she sips her bottle of water.

The one-year-old yawns so big his mouth appears to unhinge. Nixon Sebastian Sinclair was born ten pounds, nine ounces a week early. He’s a big boy who never wants to be put down. This kid is going to be a bruiser and a momma’s boy. What a combination. Belle pats his bottom until his little eyes close. “He knocked me up again.”

Everyone jumps up, congratulating Belles.

Katherine puts down the glass she was handing her. “Oh, sweetheart . . . Another baby! That means no champagne for you. Guess that leaves more for the rest of us.” She hands the flute to Nattie.

Okay, so maybe hiding this is going to be a little trickier than I thought.

Bash and I found out a few weeks after Murphy and Sabrina’s wedding that I was nearly two months pregnant, but we didn’t want to take away from Nattie’s day, so we’re keeping it a secret for now. When she hands a glass to me, then picks up her own without handing one to Sabrina, all eyes turn on to the newly married Mrs. Murphy.

“Sabrina . . .” Nat drags out her name. “Is there something you aren’t telling us? Maybe a honeymoon secret?” She places her flute down on the table and turns to Brina, whose face has flamed red.

A stricken look falls over Sabrina’s face. “We didn’t want to say anything yet, Nat. We didn’t want to take away from your wedding.”

“Oh. My. God. You’re pregnant?” Nattie jumps up from her seat. “Do you know what that means? Our kids are going to grow up together?” Nattie exclaims.

“Uhm . . . Nattie?” Belles asks pointedly.

Nattie glances around the table as if only now realizing her slip of the tongue. Her eyes land on Katherine. “You can’t tell Dad. I don’t want him knowing I had sex before the wedding.”

The entire table erupts in laughter. “The cat’s out of the bag on that one, Natalie. Your father is not a stupid man.” Katherine smooths Nat’s hair down with a proud smile.

“Yeah, but there’s knowing, and then there’s *knowing*. I was going to let him live in denial just a little bit longer,” Nat says sheepishly.

Sabrina picks at the sandwiches laid out on the table. “Murphy’s still in denial that you and Coach have had sex, Katherine.”

“You’ve already married the man. You can’t give him back now because he’s a little dense, dear.” Katherine sips her champagne, almost giddy. “So many grandbabies to love.”

“Lenny, when are you and Bash finally going to set a date? The girls should be professional flower girls by now. Might as well get them while they’re in their prime,” Belle offers, eyeing the untouched glass of champagne in my hand carefully. She and I have become extremely close over this last year. She knows I never turn down champagne, and we’ve been fortunate enough to have many reasons to celebrate.

“Soon,” I tell her. “We might do something small at the estate before the season kicks off next month.” We haven’t been in a rush until now. A piece of paper wasn’t going to change how we feel about each other. But now, we want to do it before the baby is born in February.

“Are you rushing for a reason?” Nattie prods, and everyone leans in as if to squeeze the secret out of me.

Placing the flute down on the table with the others, I give in. “We weren’t going to say anything until after your wedding, Nat.”

“Shut. The. Front. Door,” Nat yells as Katherine stands up.

“Katherine . . . ? Are you okay?” I ask, eyeing her as she moves away from the couch.

She smiles broadly. “Oh, I’m more than okay. I’m thrilled. I’m just moving away from all of you. If this is contagious, I don’t want to catch it.”



When Sebastian comes home that night, it’s earlier than I expected. Butkus and I are cuddled up on a chaise on the balcony off our bedroom overlooking the bay. A thousand twinkling stars light up the night sky as I watch a smile stretch across the face of this man I love more than anything in this world. “Hey.”

Bash scoots Butkus off the chair and sits next to me. Running his fingers through my hair, he gently kisses my lips. The faint taste of cigars and whiskey lingers on his breath. “How are you feeling?”

Nausea has been kicking my ass for a few weeks now. “I’m okay. Did you have fun?” His dark hair is windswept, and those crystal blue eyes are a little hazy.

“I may have spilled the beans about our secret tonight, babe. I’m sorry. I just couldn’t hold it in. I wanted to tell the whole damn bar. In fact, I may *have* told the whole bar. Are you mad at me?”

Oh, this silly man. I pull his face to mine and graze his lips. “No, Sebastian. I’m not mad. The girls kind of pulled it

out of me too. Did the guys tell you their news?”

“Yeah. I thought Coop was going to kill Brady. It was pretty fucking funny.” Sebastian picks me up like the most precious thing in the world and carries me to bed. When he lies next to me and wraps me in his arms, I know I’m where I’m supposed to be.

“I love you, Sebastian.”

“More than anything in this world, Len.”



SEBASTIAN

The wedding of Natalie Sinclair and Brady Ryan was written in the stars. As an eighteen-year-old kid, I remember wanting what they had. Being so jealous of it and yet, so happy for my friends. Standing between Brady and Murphy, with Cooper, Declan, and Tommy rounding out the bridal party at the front of the alter on this warm sandy beach, I stare in wonder as my beautiful fiancée walks down the aisle in a pale pink, strapless dress, her dark hair flowing around her shoulders, and her eyes trained solely on me. We haven’t been in a rush to get married. Life took off like a rocket heading for space after we became engaged, and we never took the time to plan, much to Max’s dismay. It bugged the hell out of him for some reason. But it just didn’t matter to us.

Until now.

Now, I wish she was wearing a wedding band on her finger and my last name was hers. She’s still the most cluelessly gorgeous woman in any room. She never knew or believed it, but it’s always been true.

And she’s going to have my baby.

Once all the women have walked down the aisle, Evie and Gracie manage to make their way through the sand without throwing rose petals at each other, with Callen only smacking each of them once with his small, satin ring bearer's pillow. Then, Nattie and Coach come into view. The violins begin playing "Here Comes the Sun" by the Beatles, and Coach looks like he's a split-second away from crying and dragging Nattie as far away as he can rather than handing his baby girl over to Brady.

But Nattie . . .

Nattie is practically dancing down the aisle the same way she dances through life.

When my eyes make their way back to Brady, I see a tear in his eye, and I get it.

I understand that kind of happiness, the kind of love that I was once envious of. But now, I get it. It's not worth being jealous or envious of someone else's relationship. You have to be patient and wait your turn. Because if it's not the right person, it's not this kind of love . . . It's not the love that most of us standing at the front of this beach are lucky enough to have and would do anything to keep.

Before long, Nat is crying through her vows and throwing her arms around Brady's neck as he lifts her off her feet for their first kiss as husband and wife while the crowd stands in applause.



The reception is at a beautiful country club on a private beach one town over. By the end of the night, we've danced, we've laughed, and some of us have cried more than others. But no surprise, the core group of us end up on the white Adirondack chairs surrounding a brick firepit on the back lawn near where the grass turns to sand.

The music drifts through the open doors of the reception, and we're all just enjoying the night.

Declan and Belles left an hour ago to take the kids home, leaving Brady and Nattie, Murph and Sabrina, Cooper, Carys, Chloe, and Lenny and me to reminisce.

Nat smiles at me from her place on Brady's lap. Her long white dress covering their legs. "Pretty sure I need to thank Chloe and Bash," she laughs. "If it hadn't been for the two of you, I may never have gotten Brady's attention."

"Oh, sweetheart. You had my attention the first second you walked into that kitchen." He kisses her, and we all groan and look at Coop.

"What?" Coop asks. "I can't yell at him for kissing her anymore. He married her."

"Do you have to go back tomorrow, Cooper?"

"You know I do, Nat," Coop tells her solemnly.

Carys grabs her glass of wine and stands. "I'm going to check on Mom. See if she needs help with Callen."

Cooper watches her for a minute, then turns to us. "I don't fly out until tomorrow night. Who wants to sunrise surf in the morning?" We all groan, and Murph throws a balled-up napkin at his head.

The DJ announces the last dance of the night, and we all stand. I lift my glass in a toast. "To the new Mr. and Mrs. Ryan."

"To the Ryans" is echoed back before Nattie adds, "To family."

Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" drifts through the open doors, and I lean in and kiss Len. "Love you, Len."

"I love you, Sebastian." Her arms encircle my shoulders, and all is right with the world.

We all start singing along with Journey at the top of our lungs.

Dancing.

Laughing.
Believing.
Grateful.
Family.

The End

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Not ready to say goodbye to Kroydon Hills just yet? Don't fret. Our original Kings may have gotten their happily ever afters, but this world is just beginning. Follow the Kingston family as they each figure out what comes next while falling in love in the new series, Restless Kings.

The first book in this series, Rise Of The King, will be releasing on December 9th.

Pre-order it here - <https://books2read.com/RotKing>

Want a glimpse into Sam and Amelia?

Prologue

Sam – Age 16

I've always known one day I'll be king. My father has been telling me this my entire life. And when Vito Beneventi speaks, you listen. Pop is the head of the family. Not just my family—*The Family*. His father was in charge before he died, and I'll take over after Pops dies. It's the way of our world.

Most of my life can be broken down into before and afters.

Before my mother died, she wanted my brother and me to be sheltered from this life. She was born into it. She knew what to expect, knew she couldn't protect us. But I heard my father and her argue about it anyway. Mom knew my life was planned out the minute she gave birth to a boy. But still, she tried to keep my little brother and me as far from harm as possible.

Eventually, she accepted my fate.

That's when she started telling me, as the big brother, my job was to always keep my baby brother, Sebastian, safe.

She made me swear it on my life before she died.

After she died, Pop began pulling me into this life, a little at a time. By the time I was fourteen years old, I was doing a little bit of everything for everyone. I cleaned cars. Picked up dry cleaning. I was the food delivery guy. Whatever was needed by one of the family, I was supposed to make it happen.

I was a glorified gopher.

It was the first step in my eventual ascension.

It wasn't until my sixteenth birthday a few months ago that my father told me I'd start training with my mother's brother, Uncle Nick. My uncle is a guy who has a smile for everyone. But that smile hides the monster inside. He's brought me with him on his collection runs for the last

month. I've watched him smile while we collect money that's owed. He asks about everyone's family by name. He knows what sports their kids play. According to him, this makes the job easier, shows the guys they're dealing with that someone knows where they live and who they love. And those guys never miss a payment for the same reasons.

Until they do.

Until they can't pay us.

Then Nick unleashes that monster.

I've watched him make men twice his size cry for their mom.

But today is different.

Today, he's brought me to an empty warehouse. Inside is a man who's been beaten. His eyes are swollen shut, and dried blood cakes his naked chest. He's dangling by his arms from a meat hook attached to the ceiling when we enter. I look around quickly and clock seven of my dad's men scattered around the room . . . waiting.

"What's going on, Nick?" I ask, needing to understand what's expected of me.

He puffs on his cigar and leans against the wall before answering, "Hold tight, Sam. Your father will be here soon."

No sooner do the words leave his mouth than my father walks into the room. Dressed from head to toe in a bespoke black Italian suit and leather shoes, he looks every bit the boss he is. "Jesus Christ. Somebody cut him down." Order given, he crosses the room toward me, muttering something about dramatics and then stops in front of Nick. "We sure it's him?"

Nick nods once as I watch the pathetic fuck fall to the floor in a lump, crying.

Pop's icy glare is momentarily locked on mine. "Come with me, Sam. Say nothing."

I don't answer. I just follow as we move to stand in front of the broken man on the floor. His eyes are two small slits amidst swollen flesh, but they're both focused on my father. "Please, Vito. Please . . ." he begs, sobbing. "They were going to kill my family. Please."

"So instead, they killed mine. I should gut your wife in front of you. Make you watch while she takes her last breath. But that would be granting you the goodbye I never got." My father's voice doesn't shake.

There's no hesitation.

It's cold, calculated, and it elicits the exact reaction he's looking for, judging from the piss trickling down the guy's legs. My father pulls his prized revolver from inside his coat and hands it to me. "This is the man who sold out our family, Sam. This is the man who caused your mother's death."

I don't hear anything else my father says. When they told us our mother had died in a car accident, no one said it was related to *Family* business. I suspected but never knew for sure. A haze of rage threatens to take control of my body as I move next to the man on the floor, put the gun flat against his temple, pull the hammer back, and shoot. A spray of red blood hits the floor seconds before his body follows.

Some things you're trained to do.

Other things you're born to do.

This is the first life I've ever taken.

It won't be the last.



Amelia – Age 10

My mom looks over her shoulder every time we leave our house. Her shiny, black hair always bounces when she turns her head, and her pretty brown eyes look around everywhere we go. She doesn't think I've noticed, but she's done it for as long as I can remember.

She still walks me to school every day. It's only a few minutes' walk from our home. A few of the kids from our neighborhood walk together without their parents. But not me. No . . . My mom says I'm not old enough to walk alone. I honestly think my mom would be happy if she could strap me in a baby carrier and take me with her everywhere she goes.

I'm not even allowed to go to any of my friends' birthday parties.

I get invited, but she always says no. She never lets me go to anyone else's house.

I used to think she was just paranoid, that maybe she watched one too many murder shows on TV.

But that was before today.

After school, we went to Mom's friend George's house. I love it there. It's a big cabin in the middle of the woods, sitting just on our side of the border between Washington State and Canada. It doesn't look that big from the outside, but once you're inside, it's enormous. George lives there with his wife, Luna, and their daughter, Sierra. She's a few years older than me, but she gets to do even less than I do. Sierra homeschools with Luna and rarely leaves their property.

George and Luna are survivalists.

They grow their own food in a greenhouse at the back of their property.

A generator runs their electricity.

Sierra told me once they've never ordered a pizza.

What kind of child abuse is that?

Sierra and I usually bake for fun while the adults go into the basement and do whatever they do. Occasionally, we sneak an episode of *The Great British Bake Off* on my phone when no one's paying attention. I never knew what the adults were doing down there.

We've been coming to this house for as long as I can remember.

Sierra was my first friend.

But today was different.

Today, I didn't get to stay with Sierra.

Today, I didn't get to bake the turtle fudge brownies we were planning on making.

Today, I learned what Mom and George have been doing in the basement all these years because today, they included me.

Mom told me that George was going to teach me something important. She told me I wasn't allowed to be scared. That I had to listen to everything George said very carefully. That I had to be her big, strong girl.

Today was the day I learned to shoot a gun.

They walked me down the steps of the basement and through a long hallway lined with cans of food and jars of homemade preserves before we reached a metal door with two large locks on the outside. Once we were on the other side, George unlocked a cabinet bigger than my bedroom which was filled with all sorts of guns. Some of them looked longer than me. Others were small. A few were shiny, most were scratched up. Two were even pink. He said they were Sierra's.

George picked out one of the small pink ones and then guided me over to a special lane with metal walls on either

side. There was a piece of paper with a bull's-eye in the center hanging down from a fancy metal hanger that moved at the touch of a button. Mom stood behind George and me . . . watching.

George spent a lot of time going over gun safety.

Treat every gun as if it were loaded.

Never disrespect the power and responsibility that comes with holding a gun.

Never point your gun at something you're not willing to destroy.

If you're going to shoot, shoot to kill.

Mom stepped up and shot a few rounds. Her shots were perfect.

Dead center. Bull's-eye. She didn't hesitate. She wasn't scared. Her hands didn't shake.

She appeared to be enjoying herself.

When George placed the small, cold gun in my hand, its weight surprised me. It was heavier than I expected.

I was startled by how loud it was when I fired my first shot with George standing behind me, his arms supporting my arms and a set of earplugs muffling the sound.

I'd heard the noise when Mom and George took turns demonstrating for me, but it was different when I fired the gun.

Louder.

Scarier.

George promised, with enough practice, it would become less scary.

With enough practice, it would be easier.

With enough practice, I'd never have to be afraid.

I don't know what he thought I was afraid of.

After an hour in the basement, it was dinnertime. Mom headed back up the stairs and into the kitchen. But George stopped me as he was locking the gun back in the cabinet.

“You did well today, Anastasia. I want you to promise you’ll remember what I’m about to tell you. Are you paying attention?”

I nodded my head as he placed his big hands on my shoulders and waited for him to impart the final rule.

“When I was with the Rangers, we were taught to shoot center mass.” He motioned toward the center of his chest. “‘Aim little, miss little,’ they said.” George squatted down so he was at my eye level and then continued, “That’s not what I’m going to teach you.”

George drew a T with his finger across his forehead, right above his eyes, and then straight down his nose. “This is the T-Zone, Anastasia.” He tapped the spot between his eyes. “If you ever have to shoot someone, you shoot them here. That’s the shot. That’s final.”

I don’t know who George thought I was going to be shooting. But when I looked up at him, thinking I should be scared of what he was saying, I wasn’t. “Can I come back and practice again, George?”

His eyes sparkled back at me. “You’re going to come back every day until I’ve taught you everything you need to know.”



Don't miss out on Scarlet Kingston's upcoming book. The second book in the Restless Kings series, Broken King will be releasing March 10th.

Pre-order Broken King here - <https://books2read.com/RK2>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bella Matthews is a Jersey girl at heart. She is married to her very own Alpha Male and raising three little ones. You can typically find her running from one sporting event to another. When she is home, she is usually hiding in her home office with the only other female in her house, her rescue dog Tinker Bell by her side. She likes to write swoon-worthy heroes and sassy, smart heroines with a healthy dose of laughter thrown and all the feels.

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