



AN ACADEMY OF  
UNPREDICTABLE MAGIC

HUNT

SADIE MOSS

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*Academy of Unpredictable Magic #5*

SADIE MOSS

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## CHAPTER 1

I'm sitting in a very uncomfortable wing-backed chair, smoothing out the skirt of my dress.

Waiting.

The door opens, and I jump to my feet. It's a small room, not exactly conducive to pacing, which is why I made myself sit down instead of wearing a fucking hole in the carpet.

Dmitri steps in, closing the door behind him, and walks over. He reaches out—and then stops himself, forcing his hand back to his side, as if even in here, people might be watching.

He's wearing a tuxedo that's been perfectly tailored to fit him, and God, he looks so fucking handsome. What would normally make me swoon though? Right now, it's breaking my heart.

Because of the reason he's wearing it.

"You look..." Dmitri stares at me for a moment. "You look beautiful. You're in a dress."

I give a small laugh, trying not to let my throat close up and choke me. "Well, I thought—it seemed appropriate for the occasion."

He gives a small, bittersweet smile. "It is."

I won't lie, it's been a rough summer all around. Rumor has it that Griffin Academy might not reopen, since the cleanup process from the massive battle at the end of last semester isn't complete yet.

I *need* to start my third year. If I don't finish it and complete my exams, I can't get the qualifications that say I'm allowed to use magic, which means I'll have no place in magical society. All the Unpredictables in my

class will be without a way to prove they received the mandatory magical training. We'll be screwed.

Like I said, it's been real fun.

And as if that wasn't throwing my life into enough chaos, there's also... this.

Dmitri's wedding.

At four o'clock p.m., just twenty minutes from now, Dmitri Mikhailov is slated to marry Anastasia Cabot in front of nearly five hundred guests—all important figures in the magical community.

We've been dreading it all summer, counting down the days to this fateful moment like a clock counting down the seconds until doomsday.

The one silver lining, if you want to call it that, is that Dmitri hasn't had to plan jack shit for this event. The bride, his "betrothed", has been allowed to choose some aspects of the wedding, but mostly it's been the two sets of parents picking everything out.

It's supposedly the bride's special day, which means she at least got to pick out her dress and flower arrangements and such. But I know for a fact the guest list was curated by the parents.

And I am most definitely *not* on that list.

Not even Asher, one of my other boyfriends, is invited, and he's from an important and powerful magical family. I think one of his many brothers is invited—he works in magical law enforcement or something—but Asher himself isn't important enough to qualify.

Since he's had no say in anything, Dmitri's just had to sit around all summer waiting as this day drew closer and closer. None of us know why the date was moved up. It could be because of Dmitri's own behavior, or it could be because the water's getting hot for Unpredictables and his parents want him married off so that his "weird" power isn't such a liability, or maybe they just want to move things along before the bride's family can change their minds.

Who even knows?

"How are you feeling?" I ask, even though I know it's a stupid question. Dmitri doesn't want to do this. He hates everything about this arranged marriage. He hates what his father is making him do. But he also doesn't see any other way out.

"Like shit," he replies, the corner of his mouth lifting up.

We're standing so close that I could just reach out and grab him if I wanted to. And I *do* want to.

But I can't.

God, if I could just—just kiss him, over and over and over, his mouth, his jaw, his neck, his forehead, lower, everywhere—

“You don't have to do this,” I whisper.

My throat is so tight by now that I barely get the words out. I know I've said some variation of this plenty of times over the summer. I know I probably shouldn't be saying it again, knowing that Dmitri made his decision long ago, but with everything else in my life in flux, out of my control... this is the one thing I can try to do something about. This is the one thing I can at least try to have a say in.

But Dmitri just shakes his head.

“I do,” he contradicts, his voice hard like it gets when he's trying to hide strong emotions. “It's the only way.”

It hurts my heart to hear him say that, as if someone literally punched me right in the chest, leaving me bruised and winded and breathless.

But at the same time, I understand it.

I don't know Dmitri's family. I mean, I've met them before—unfortunately—and he's told me a lot about them. But I don't know what it's like to be *inside* the Mikhailov family. I don't know what it's like to have parents that controlling and dominating, who hold their affection and approval up like prizes to be won, instead of giving them freely and openly to their son.

So if Dmitri tells me this is the only way, that his father won't be swayed no matter how much we might reason or plead with him, then I have to believe that the dark-haired mage knows what he's talking about.

He knows his father.

And so he knows this is truly the only way.

But God, I hate to see him do this.

“Your tie's a little crooked,” I murmur, reaching up to fix it.

Dmitri holds still while I do it, lifting his chin up to give me room. My fingertips brush against his warm skin, and fucking hell, I want to grab him and never let go.

I want to protect him from this somehow.

But I can't. I have to be here for Dmitri, and that means letting him do this.



What he needs right now is support and love. He doesn't need me to make a big scene and try to talk him out of something I'm sure he's having plenty of doubts about already. This must be hard as hell for him, and the least I can do is keep my shit together so he doesn't have to comfort me while his own heart breaks.

So I ignore the burning ache in my chest, forcing my lips into a shape that I hope at least sort of resembles a smile. Then I smooth my hands over his chest to take care of any wrinkles in his tailored tux and step back.

"Good luck out there," I whisper.

"Thank you, Princess. I'll need it," he replies, just as softly, his eyes warm as they gaze at me.

I nod, not trusting myself to say anything else as my throat closes up entirely. Before my arms can latch onto him and refuse to let go, I hurry out of the room.

The little office where I met him is in the back of the church, far away from the gathered guests, and I wend my way through the empty halls at a fast clip, hoping not to run into anyone.

The wedding is being held at the biggest, fanciest church in Portland. I had to sneak into that damn meeting room to see him, and if I don't get out soon, it'll only be a matter of time before someone finds me. If it's someone on his parents' side of the aisle, I'm sure I'll be kicked out at best and arrested at worst. They'll probably charge me with trespassing or some trumped-up crap like that.

Dmitri's parents don't know about our romantic relationship, but they've met me a couple times now, and they really, *really* don't like me.

I think they might suspect how Dmitri feels about me, or maybe it's just my notoriety as an Unpredictable they don't like. After saving the school four times now and participating in the Inter-Academy Trials that take place between magic schools as a friendly—or *supposedly* friendly—competition, I've sort of become the face of the Unpredictable movement. For better or for worse.

But whether they think I'd accidentally blow the cathedral up with my wild, out-of-control magic or steal their son away with my seductive charms, I'm positive Dmitri's parents don't want me anywhere near this event.

I sneak back out of the cathedral through the small door I entered from. As soon as I step outside, I swear I can feel the building looming behind

me. No ordinary, cute neighborhood church would do for this wedding, apparently. Nope, it's got to be this gorgeous, imposing old cathedral. Because of course it does.

My stomach churns, knotting and re-knotting itself repeatedly as I creep quickly through the large garden to the gate.

As much as I love Dmitri, I'm lucky he isn't the only person in my life. I have three other men waiting for me right now. And since I can't be with Dmitri while he does this, I can at least be with them.

I *need* to be with them.

Roman's car is parked just around the corner—a sleek, dark silver luxury sports model that fits in perfectly with all the other fancy cars parked around here for the wedding. Roman's in the driver's seat, Cam next to him in the passenger seat, and Asher in the back.

I slide in next to Asher, closing the door as Roman and Cam turn around to check on me.

“You okay, Sin?” Cam asks quietly, his blue eyes flashing with concern.

“I should ask you the same thing,” I reply, reaching up to squeeze his shoulder.

Cam and Asher are Dmitri's best friends, and they weren't even invited to be in his damn wedding. Not that they want to be a part of this bullshit, but I know they want to be there for Dmitri, just like I do. They want to support their friend, to be a part of this moment in his life, even if it's a super shitty one.

Being left out, deliberately snubbed by Dmitri's parents, has to hurt. Especially for Cam. His parents died when he was young, so his friends are the only family he has.

The blond mage shrugs, which speaks volumes to me—Cam is rarely without a witty comment or a joke. His mouth runs faster than a NASCAR race.

Instead of saying anything, he pulls out a little mirror, and my stomach tightens again. Getting into the car with my three other men helped me feel better, but now the anxiety that's been building up all summer comes rushing back full force.

The mirror is about the size of Cam's palm, so he can hold it up and we can all watch, almost like showing your friends a video on your cell phone. Earlier today, in the bustle and chaos of the wedding setup, Cam and Asher snuck into the cathedral and enchanted a piece of the stained glass window

in the back of the church to act as a “camera” since it was too risky to leave another small mirror lying around, and any kind of glass will do for the enchantment.

I have to admit, when the guys first suggested we watch the wedding remotely, I balked. A part of me doesn’t want to see this. I don’t want to watch someone I care about have to go through something he doesn’t want, especially when I can’t be by his side to fight for him.

But as much as I don’t want to see this—I really do need to be there for Dmitri somehow. I need to support him, in any way I can. And this is as good as it’s going to get.

So I grab Asher’s hand, squeezing hard as we focus on the little screen.

Everyone in the church is settling themselves down in their pews, dressed to the nines. No nearest and dearest for an affair like this, just a who’s who of magical society. I wouldn’t be surprised if my father was somewhere among the attendees.

*Ugh.*

My dad abandoned us when I was ten and Maddy was six. Our paths recently crossed again, and I got the pleasure of telling him off, which was cathartic and long overdue. In fact, I did such a good job of telling him off that I haven’t heard from him since. I can’t see him on the screen, but honestly, I don’t care all that much anyway. My life’s better without him in it, and so is Maddy’s.

Inside the church, everyone quiets down, and music plays in the background as Dmitri takes his place at the front with the priest and the groomsmen. They’re all handpicked from powerful families, I’m sure, or maybe relatives of Dmitri’s. Or both.

The bridesmaids start walking down the aisle next. They all look lovely, wearing very tasteful dresses; at least they’re not in hideous orange or something.

When the bridesmaids all reach the front, the music changes, and the doors open for the bride to walk in.

I don’t know Anastasia, and I can’t really tell much about her just from looking at her—I mean, who can? But she looks pretty and a little nervous. I feel bad for her. This marriage was arranged on both sides. Her parents pushed her into it just as much as Dmitri’s did with him. She’s been betrothed like an old-fashioned medieval princess since she was crawling around in a diaper.

After what feels like forever, she reaches the front too, and the music dies down. Everyone sits.

The priest starts talking.

“Dearly beloved...”

Cam makes his mouth into a hand and starts making a *blah, blah, blah* motion. Roman rolls his eyes.

The priest finishes his schtick and turns to Dmitri, giving him the prompt to start going through his vows. “Dmitri Mikhailov, do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

*Oh, fuck. Here we go.*

God, I don’t know if I can watch this after all. My stomach is churning like a turbo-charged washing machine, and I think I might throw up.

Dmitri flicks a glance toward the back of the church, toward the piece of stained glass that’s broadcasting his image back to us, and for a moment, I could swear he’s looking right at me.

A small smile curves his lips, then it’s wiped away by a grim, determined look.

“You know what?” His voice is calm. No, more than calm—it’s *decisive*. “I don’t think I will.”

*And... there it is.*

*He did it.*

In the mirror, he turns to look at everyone. “Sorry you’re all having to bear witness to this, but I kind of needed you all here. And, hey, if you’re going to make a scandal, go big or go home, right?”

Dmitri rarely grins, but when he does, it’s a sight to behold. It’s sexy and dangerous, but it also transforms his face, making him look completely different—softer and younger.

“Can you believe they did this?” he asks, chuckling as he gestures at his parents sitting in the front row. “I mean, they basically sold me into wedlock when I was still a baby, and now they’ve organized this farce. It’s kind of hilarious, in a pathetic way. I know you’re all thinking that. I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s a big wedding guest group chat just to make fun of this bullshit.”

My eyes bug out of my head, and I’m squeezing Asher’s hand so tightly by now his bones are probably about to crack. But that’s okay, because he’s squeezing mine back just as hard.

*Holy. Shit.*

This isn't what I was expecting.

Dmitri isn't just calling off the wedding like he told me he was going to. He's actively humiliating his parents in front of pretty much all of magical society. Or at least, the parts of magical society his folks care about.

He's torching his wedding, and his relationship with his parents along with it.

"You know, I can't believe it took me this long to realize trying to make you happy just isn't worth it," Dmitri goes on, turning to face his parents directly. "That the things you want, the things you care about, are shallow and stupid—and that they have never, *ever* involved my happiness or what I want. For years, I thought if I could just become the son you wanted me to be, maybe everything would change. Maybe then you'd love me. But that ship sailed years before I even found out I was Unpredictable, didn't it? There was nothing I could've done to make you be better parents, because the truth is, you just don't have it in you."

I can't see Mr. and Mrs. Mikhailov's faces since they're facing away from the back of the church, but I can imagine them clearly enough. They must be pissed off and shocked... and I kinda hope someone's taking a picture of them.

"Oh, shit! This is going to be all over social media," Cam whispers gleefully.

I'm a little less gleeful. My heart feels like a lump in my chest, and I'm half tempted to check my pulse to make sure it's still beating at all.

I knew Dmitri was going to refuse to marry Anastasia, but I didn't know he was going to make quite such a big... production of it. He'll be as good as disowned for this, and it breaks my heart.

Yeah, I know, I should be glad he's cutting ties with two toxic people who don't deserve him. But they're still his parents. And I know how it feels to wish, even against your better judgment, that your parents will wake up and realize how shitty they were and will do better. To my own surprise, I wished my father would do that when our paths crossed again a few months ago.

I can't help but worry that Dmitri, as angry as he is with his parents right now, might regret this someday. Or that he'll want reconciliation or for them to change their minds, and they won't.

He's burning his bridges with them, and I admire the courage it takes to do that, but it also makes me want to hug him and never let him go.

“Damn. I didn’t know he had it in him.” Cam chuckles as Dmitri says something insulting about his dad.

“He must have been planning this the entire time,” Asher says quietly. “He must have known... that this was the only way to really get out of it.”

Cam’s brows pull together. “What do you mean?”

Roman looks at Asher as if to say *go on*. I know he’s put the pieces together, just like I have, but he’s clearly not up for explaining it.

“Anything less than this probably wouldn’t have worked,” Asher says. “Even getting up in front of everyone in the church and saying ‘no’ when it came time for the vows wasn’t enough. His dad would just find some way to coerce him into it or force him to go through with it. But this?” He gestures to the screen, where Dmitri is still airing his family’s dirty laundry, publicly roasting both of his parents. “It’s putting his father and mother on the spot in front of people they’d do anything to impress. And after that kind of humiliation...”

“There’s no coming back from it,” I add softly. “Now everyone in that church knows the wedding is a sham that was forced on Dmitri and Anastasia. The only way his parents can save face is to let it go. But he’ll basically be disowned after this.”

Cam’s jaw drops as he processes what we just told him, and then the same flicker of sadness I feel gleams in his eyes. He knows better than anyone how much it sucks to lose your family.

Roman pulls out his phone and types out a quick text. “I’ll let him know where we are. I’m sure he won’t want to stick around long after he finishes.”

We fall into silence as we watch the live video continue to play on the screen. A few moments later, Dmitri begins to wrap up his impromptu speech.

“Well, I guess there’s not much more to say except ‘goodbye’. I’d like to say it’s been a pleasure, but I think you all know by now that’s not true.” He looks over at his once bride-to-be. “I’m sorry you got dragged into all of this, Anastasia. I hope you know this isn’t your fault at all. This is on me. I just can’t marry you.”

Anastasia blinks her wide blue eyes, dipping her head in a nod. She’s pretty—gorgeous, really—but it doesn’t even occur to me to feel jealous of her. She doesn’t want Dmitri any more than he wants her, and mostly, I just

feel sorry for her that her parents dragged her to the altar without even asking her what she wanted.

Dmitri kisses her on the cheek, gives his father a sarcastic salute, and then saunters down the aisle out of the church.

He must get Roman's text at some point during his exit, because a moment later he's hustling out, and the next thing I know, he's sliding into the back of the car, cramming me in between him and Asher.

He leans forward toward the driver's seat. "Get us the fuck out of here."

Roman's mouth twitches in amusement. "This is the one time I'll take orders from you."

We drive off into—well, I'd like to say the sunset, but actually we drive off into the mid-afternoon sun.

Away from Dmitri's old life.

## CHAPTER 2

“Nice of you guys to come,” Dmitri says as we drive back to Roman’s house.

Roman inherited the large mansion from his family, and it’s where we’ve been staying all summer. Maddy’s staying there too, although not at the moment—she’s in the city with some friends for the day.

“Of course.” Cam turns around to grin at Dmitri over his shoulder. “Wish we’d known you were going to pull an epic stunt like that though. I thought you were just gonna quietly refuse to marry her.”

“Quiet wouldn’t have driven the point home like I needed it to.” Dmitri gives a small shrug. “That’s one thing my father taught me—if you want to make sure something sticks, do it publicly.”

“I’m proud of you,” Roman says quietly from the front seat.

The dark-haired mage beside me blushes ever so slightly. I know he looks up to Roman a lot. They’re very similar, and God knows Dmitri’s had a shit time with the main male role model in his life—and he has no siblings to fill that void either.

The rest of the drive is pretty quiet. We’re all taking our cues from Dmitri, and he’s not speaking much, so neither do we. I can tell he’s sorting through a lot of emotions, but I don’t think he’s ready to talk about any of them yet.

Finally, Roman pulls into the driveway of his sprawling house, and we all get out.

“I’m just...” Dmitri jerks his chin up toward the second floor, then walks inside.



Cam frowns, staring after him with furrowed brows. “Um, I was going to suggest we bust out the champagne or something. Does he not want to celebrate?”

Asher and Roman look at each other. “I’m sure his feelings are... complicated,” Ash says, ever the diplomat.

“You should go to him,” Roman adds, but he’s not talking to Cam. He’s looking at me.

My heart throbs in my chest as I glance over at the front door. “Um... do you really...”

He nods. “I do, Reckless. You’re the person he wants to see right now.”

“I’m not sure he wants to see anyone.”

Dmitri just made a huge decision, one that’s likely going to change his entire life. And he’s a private person by nature—he must want time to process all of this on his own, right?

Roman gives me a fond look. “Trust me. If I were him, I’d want you there.”

*Well, I suppose I might as well try.*

Even before I make the conscious decision, I’m already moving, my body way ahead of my brain when it comes to Dmitri. Roman’s right. I need to be with him right now, even if he’s not ready to talk. Even if we just sit in silence—or, hell, even if I just sit outside his door.

He needs to know I’m here for him.

I enter the house, which is now so familiar it feels more like home than my old apartment with Maddy ever did, and head up the stairs.

Each of the guys has their own room. I tend to rotate between them, but I also have my own bedroom for nights where I just want to be by myself. I value my independence and my privacy—always have—and after sharing a small one-bedroom apartment with my sister for years, it’s nice to finally have a place of my own to go to when I want.

My footsteps slow as I near Dmitri’s door, and I take a second to wrangle my own wild emotions under control before I lift my hand to knock.

But before my knuckles strike the wood, the door is wrenched open—as if Dmitri has been standing on the other side this whole time, waiting for me, *hoping* for me to arrive.

He’s loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top couple buttons of his crisp white shirt. His suit jacket is gone, and his sleeves are rolled up his

forearms. The dark, almost black strands of his hair are in disarray, as if he's been running his hands through them repeatedly. He looks dangerous and wild, and when his gaze lands on me, something sparks in his eyes.

His hand closes around my wrist, which is still poised in the air from my aborted attempt at knocking, and he yanks me inside the room. I hear the heavy slam of the door a second before I'm pressed up against it, and then all my senses zero in on a single thing—Dmitri.

Our lips meet in a desperate, almost violent kiss as his body covers mine, his thigh slipping between my legs. The solid muscle of his leg grinds against my clit, and I make a startled, pleading noise in the back of my throat. Dmitri swallows the sound before delving his tongue deeper into my mouth like he's searching for more of those moans back there.

I give him one. In fact, I give him several.

Breathless gasps and moans fall from my lips as I try to keep up with the torrent of sensations crashing through me. My hands are in Dmitri's hair, mussing it up even more as I clutch the strands, hanging on for dear life.

I wasn't expecting this.

On the way up here, I was bracing myself for the possibility that he wouldn't even let me inside the room. I was prepared to sit with him in silence for as long as he needed, to offer whatever strength I could while he sorted through the mess of emotions that must be tearing his heart apart right now.

But if this is how Dmitri wants to deal with his grief, if this is what helps him, I've got no objections whatsoever.

"Fuck, Princess," he groans, finally pulling his mouth away from my swollen, tingling lips to attack my neck and jaw with the same ferocity. "I need you. I need you so fucking much."

"I—need you—too."

The words stutter out of my mouth as I shamelessly ride the thick muscles of his thigh, clutching at his shoulders and biceps as I angle my head to let him suck and bite my neck.

Dmitri is hot as fuck. His dark hair is shiny and thick, and he has a sharp jawline, full lips, and broody, smoldering eyes. His shoulders are broad, and he's got the sculpted, lean muscles of a fighter—and I've seen him use those muscles in action when he and I spar, which only makes them hotter.

I'm crazy attracted to this man, but when I tell him I need him, I'm not just talking about his looks or the intense sexual chemistry that simmers between us all the time.

I'm talking about *him*.

Everything that is Dmitri Mikhailov—I need all of it in my life.

That thought makes me realize how close I came to losing him today. If he hadn't been strong enough to stand up to his father, if he hadn't chosen what *he* wanted over his ridiculous family obligations, Dmitri could be married to another woman right now.

Something seizes inside my chest, and I grab his head and haul it back up to mine, kissing him again like it's the last time we'll ever get to do this.

It won't be.

*It won't.*

But I'm having a hard time getting that message through to my heart—and maybe Dmitri feels the same way, because he kisses me back like he's trying to eat me alive. Like the only way to make sure the world never tears us apart is to consume each other completely, to meld our souls into one.

His body moves against mine as he kisses me, and I'm so close to coming already, so close to losing it just from the feel of his mouth on mine and his leg between my thighs. But I don't want to come this way. I want him inside me when I do.

Forcing my muscles to cooperate, I wedge my hands between our bodies and start working on his button and fly. He realizes what I'm doing and backs away a little, allowing me enough space to pull his zipper down. Our lips are still fused together, our panting breaths filling the room as he slips his hands under my knee-length skirt, hooking his fingers into my panties and yanking them down.

“God, I love that you wore a dress,” he grunts.

“Me too,” I mutter back.

I'm pushing down his pants, sliding my hand over the velvety skin of his cock, when he slips two fingers inside me.

“Fuck! Dmitri!”

My head drops back against the door as my spine arches, my hips gyrating against his hand.

He pumps in and out a few times, working my clit with the heel of his hand, and I'm so wet for him already, I can feel myself coating his fingers.

He's breathing hard when he finally withdraws them from me, and he grunts when I squeeze his cock. His nostrils flare as he brings his hand to my face, brushing his fingertips over my lips. I can taste myself on him already, and when he pushes his fingers into my mouth, I suck them in greedily, swirling my tongue around them as my gaze locks on his.

Before he can pull them out, I bite down—not hard enough to break skin, but hard enough to hurt a little. His dark eyes dilate, and when my teeth finally release his fingers, he draws them slowly out of my mouth.

"Lift up your skirt, Princess," he commands, his voice a low growl.

My heart leaps and my core clenches at the sound of his voice. Without hesitation, I do as he says, pulling the hem up to my waist so that cool air hits my naked pussy.

His gaze flashes down, soaking up the sight of me, and I can tell he's holding onto his control by a thread. The desperate, fast movements that drove him when I first entered the room have slowed, but that only means there's more pent up desire behind every move he makes—like a dam about to burst.

With agonizing slowness, he runs his large palms across my hips, over the bare skin of my ass, squeezing and kneading the flesh. When he reaches the backs of my thighs, his grip tightens.

"Hold onto me. Don't let go."

With those words, he lifts me up, keeping my back pressed against the door. And before I can think, before I can speak or beg or demand he fuck me already, the head of his cock finds my entrance and he surges forward.

My legs hook around his waist automatically, and once again, I do what he commanded, wrapping my arms tightly around his shoulders.

The thin thread of his control snaps—or maybe it burns to ash in the inferno that flares between us. We each bury our faces in the other's neck, wrapping our bodies up in a tight knot as he fucks me hard and fast against the door.

Dmitri and I don't always communicate through words—although we're getting better at that—but we're communicating plenty right now.

*I need him.*

*He needs me.*

*And we have each other.*

"You're the one I want. Always you, Princess. Always you," he mutters against my skin in between kisses, licks, and bites.

I'll have some pretty obvious hickies later, I know I will, but at the moment, I don't give a fuck. I give back as good as I get, biting and sucking his skin too, making sure the whole damn world will know he's mine.

His thrusts grow even harder, the rhythm more staccato, and when he slams in deep and grinds his hips against mine, pulsing inside me, I finally stop trying to hold off the orgasm that's been threatening to overtake me.

My muscles lock up as I moan and writhe against him, working my clit against his pelvic bone and driving my first orgasm straight into a second one.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," I chant, because I become very articulate during mind-blowing sex.

"Oh, fuuuck..." Dmitri groans, because obviously, he does too.

With a few more aftershocks that quake through my entire body, my muscles unclench, going deliciously limp. We stay wrapped up in each other for several long moments, just breathing into the silence as our heartbeats slow down.

Finally, Dmitri lifts his head from the crook of my neck, leaning back a little to look into my eyes. The almost manic desperation I saw in his expression earlier has faded, although it's not entirely gone. Something warm and possessive is there now too, and it makes me smile.

He captures that smile with a kiss, and I can feel one curving his lips too as they press against mine. When he speaks, there's a touch of humor in his voice.

"I'm gonna need to do that again. With a lot fewer clothes on next time."

"No objections here," I shoot back, nipping at his bottom lip as I squeeze my inner walls around his cock, which hasn't softened at all.

He lets out a low growl and hauls me away from the door, turning and stalking toward the bed before laying me on the mattress, following me down with his cock still buried inside me.

And just like he promised, we do it all over again.

Slower. Deeper.

With a lot fewer clothes.

By the time our second round finishes, we're both sweaty and exhausted. My body feels boneless, and the knot of fear that tightened my stomach all summer has finally dissipated.

*It's going to be okay.*

I knew his plan all along was to refuse to marry Anastasia, but I think part of me still honestly feared his dad would find a way to trick or coerce him into it. I've heard enough of Dmitri's stories about his parents to know they're capable of some high-level emotional manipulation.

But he didn't let that happen. He came back to me. I have him back.

"How's Anastasia doing?" I whisper.

Dmitri told me a while ago that Anastasia wasn't a fan of this whole "marrying a stranger" plan, either. She's apparently a sweet girl, according to him, just very shy and quiet. She struggles to stand up to her parents, something Dmitri can relate to.

"She was one hundred percent on board," he says with a small grin. "I asked her if she wanted to say anything, but she said no."

"I hope this gives her the courage to stand up to her parents too."

He hums in agreement. "Maybe she will someday. But this way, it's all on me. Her parents were there—they saw my speech. They won't blame her for ending it, so she was able to get out of marrying me without breaking ties to her family."

"That's very noble of you. To be the one to take the fall, so to speak."

Dmitri snorts. "That's the last thing I ever thought I'd be called. Noble."

"But you are." I take a deep breath, resting my chin on his chest as I peer up at his face. "How are you feeling?"

Dmitri stares up at the ceiling. "I'm... not sure." He glances at me, his eyes narrowing slightly as if he suspects maybe I'm having second thoughts about all of this. "Why, Princess? How are *you* feeling?"

I lean up to press a kiss to his lips, to reassure him without words that my feelings for him have never been in doubt. His arms tighten around me, and our kiss deepens for a moment, each of us pouring so much of ourselves into it that we're both breathing hard when we pull away.

My face is still close to his, our noses almost brushing, as I gaze into his dark eyes.

"I'm so fucking happy you're not a married man right now. I just... worry you gave up too much for me. You gave up your family. Your inheritance. The whole world you grew up in."

He shrugs, and I feel the movement more than see it, since I'm practically lying on top of him.

"Sure. But that world was worth jack shit if it meant I couldn't live my life the way I wanted. I couldn't be myself." Then he grins, cocking an

eyebrow at me. “This wasn’t about you anyway. I didn’t do it for you.”

I gasp in mock offense. “*What?* I will never forgive you for this insult!”

Dmitri laughs softly and lifts his head off the pillow to kiss me again.

“I did it for myself,” he admits, his voice a little rough around the edges. “I should’ve done this a long time ago, if I’m being honest. I spent way too many years of my life under my parents’ thumbs. Especially my father.”

My pretend outrage fades away, and I can’t help the rush of pride that sweeps through me. I know Dmitri cares about me—but honestly, hearing that I’m not the reason he called off his arranged marriage makes me happier than I can express.

“I kept trying to fit into a role I was never meant for,” he continues. “A role I didn’t want. I was making myself miserable. And for what? Was the fate of the world resting on my shoulders? Were people going to suffer if I didn’t live up to my father’s expectations? No. I didn’t owe anyone anything, least of all someone who never had my best interests at heart.”

He shakes his head, reaching up to tuck a stray lock of brown hair behind my ear.

“Meeting you made me want to be a better person. I know you don’t always see it, but you’re fucking incredible, Elliot. You’ve stood up for Unpredictables for as long as I’ve known you. You did what was right even when it could hurt you. You went out of your way to fight to protect us. To protect our school. You’re brave and honest. And you don’t give a shit about social niceties or what anyone thinks.”

I bite my lip, trying to contain my blush. Normally, I kind of suck at accepting compliments, but I don’t want to ruin this moment by hemming and hawing and deflecting. It’s a bad habit anyway.

“I wanted to be someone like that,” Dmitri adds softly. “Not just someone like you. But someone worthy of being *with* you. Someone who brought as much to the table in our relationship as you did. You made me want to fight for the life I want. A life where I’m myself.” He cups my face, gazing so deeply into my eyes that I feel like I’m floating and falling at the same time. “And I—thank you for that, Princess. Thank you.”

*Oh, holy shit.*

It feels like my heart is going to slam right through my ribs. I brace myself on his chest and kiss him, slow and deep, savoring it.

He’s smiling softly as our kiss breaks and I settle back into his embrace, and it’s hard to describe that smile. It’s sad, but not in a heavy sort of way.

If anything, he seems lighter now.

Freer.

Despite whatever grief he might have at saying goodbye to his family—  
it's not outweighing his joy at finally being who he wants to be.

And I'm so fucking glad for that.



## CHAPTER 3

**A** weight has been lifted from all of our shoulders, and I can sense it in the atmosphere as we all relax around the house the next day.

It feels amazing.

Last year, I was attacked by an anti-Unpredictable fanatic—*yippee*—and ended up in a coma all summer as a result. Roman brought me here to keep me safe, and the guys all stayed because they were worried—plus, in Dmitri's case, it was a good excuse to stay away from home.

The four men all bonded while I was in the coma, not just with each other but with Mads as well. I was pretty envious at the time, actually. When I woke up from my coma at the end of the summer, it felt like they'd all grown so much closer while I was still sitting at square one.

But this... this is so much better.

I look back at last summer, and while everyone was comfortable then, there was still so much left to discuss, so much left unsaid. Now everything feels a hundred times more settled. We're a proper unit now. The relationship that I once worried was too strange is now familiar, and I love it. We're making it work, all five of us together.

Roman's even put up a few more pictures of his family around the house as the summer's gone on. At first, there was just the one on the mantelpiece. But at the end of last semester, he finally told me the truth about what happened to them, how his Unpredictable power to deliver death through touch killed them when he was just a small child. And now that I know, I think Roman's decided he doesn't have to hide—not from me or himself or his past.

It's nice. I like seeing those pictures around. Roman's family were good people, as far as I know, and it's good that he remembers them. That he *wants* to remember them. I'm sure they would want him to be happy and to not resent himself for what he didn't even understand as a child, what he couldn't control.

In fact, the whole house feels more lived in. The guys have stuff scattered everywhere, and so do Maddy and I. Cam's jackets are draped over the backs of chairs, Asher's notebooks are left open on the couch, his sketches pinned to the fridge, and Dmitri's paperbacks sit in stacks on the coffee table. Even when they aren't around, there are tangible reminders that they were here and will be again. That this has become their home too, in a way.

Our home.

I did my best to make our old apartment a home for Maddy, but it never really felt like it. Not after Mom died of cancer and left us alone. But now, it's like I finally have a proper home again.

A place where I can relax, let my guard down, and be myself.

As a matter of fact, Dmitri and I are currently relaxing on the large porch swing that faces the backyard. We're each leaning against one of the thick arms, our feet tangled together in the middle of the swing. He's reading some book—although it's in Russian, so I don't have a clue what it's about—and I'm watching Roman help Mads with her meditation techniques.

Maddy's not Unpredictable. She has water elemental powers. But no matter what kind of magic a person has, controlling it can be difficult. Teaching control is what Roman specializes in, which makes even more sense to me now that I know what all of his powers are.

He has three distinct powers, just like I do, except all of his revolve around death. Necromancy, demon summoning, and drawing out people's life force. Because each of those powers could potentially be very dangerous, he had to work hard to learn how to control them and keep from hurting people.

Maddy's listening attentively as Roman explains some complex concept to her. It's a good thing it's a warm late-summer day, because they're both soaking wet from her previous misfires, and small bubbles of water are hovering in the air around them. It's hard not to laugh when Maddy slips up and soaks them both again.

From the other side of the house comes the distant sound of a car pulling up. Then I hear the front door open and shut.

I tilt my head back, leaning over the arm of the porch swing to call toward the house, “We’re out back!”

There’s the sound of tromping feet, and a moment later, Cam emerges from the back door, followed by Asher. The blond mage appears frustrated, his brow stormy, and Asher looks a bit more withdrawn than usual, disappointed.

“Hey! How’d it go?” I ask, dropping my feet off the swing and sitting up straighter.

The two men went into Portland today to do some job hunting, and they’ve been gone for several hours. Of course, they could always get jobs outside of the magical community, but few magic users do.

“Not well,” Asher says carefully, his moss-green eyes darkening.

“Nobody wants to hire Unpredictables.” Cam flops down next to me on the porch swing, puffing out his cheeks with a heavy exhale. Then he leans over me to look at Dmitri. “Bet you wish you’d hung onto that family fortune now.”

Asher sits down on my other side, squishing in between me and Dmitri. Cam kisses my neck as Asher wraps his arm around my shoulders. I lean into both of them, relaxing as the scents of sandalwood and citrus surround me. They’re hugely affectionate, these two, and I love it.

“Damn. The brochures are a lie,” Cam mutters as we all turn our heads to watch Roman work with Maddy. “They make it sound like once you graduate, the world opens up.”

“Maybe that was how it once was,” Asher points out. “Before the backlash against Unpredictables. At my interviews today, everyone was interested to hear about my family, but then when they asked me about my magic...”

He trails off, and Cam takes over.

“Yup. On a lot of applications, they ask you to list what kind of magic you have.” He shakes his head. “I put down *Unpredictable*, and the look on people’s faces when I turned the applications in makes me pretty damn sure I won’t be getting many interviews.”

“Whoever this asshole is who hates us so much,” Dmitri growls, “he’s succeeding in getting people to distrust us.”

That asshole, whoever he might be—we don't have a name, and I've only gotten the barest impressions of his face—is the one who's been behind all the attacks on our school. He encouraged the provost of the Phoenix Training Program and fuck knows how many other people to turn against Unpredictables, claiming we're dangerous and untrustworthy.

And like Dmitri said, that shit is working.

"I'm not sure if it's just this guy, though." I lean over Cam to peer at Dmitri. "Maybe I'm wrong, but... he didn't create all this hate in a vacuum. It didn't come from nowhere. If he was able to stir up anti-Unpredictable sentiments so quickly and so powerfully, they must've been there in some people's mind already. Hell, even the fact that our school used to have a collection of dangerous magical artifacts hidden beneath it says a lot about what people think of us. They think we're just as dangerous."

Dean Hardwick, who runs the school, had a deal with the Circuit for many years—as collateral to make sure Griffin stayed open, he agreed to let them store high-powered magical objects on campus. The Unpredictable magic of the students and teachers masked the aura of the magical objects, keeping them safe from thieves and treasure hunters. Or at least, that was the idea.

It still kind of burns my butt that the Circuit was willing to put our safety at risk just to keep their precious artifacts hidden, and that Dean Hardwick really had no choice but to agree.

Shaking my head, I settle back on the porch swing. "I think whoever's behind the attacks has been intentionally taking advantage of the way people were already feeling. Inflaming it. Building on it. And now it's like a snowball rolling down a hill—it just keeps getting bigger and stronger, and I don't know how to stop it."

We all sit in silence for a long moment. Tension gathers on the porch as if the air itself is growing thicker.

*Shoot, so much for our peaceful, relaxing day.*

I know I'm not being particularly positive or cheerful about this, and I want to try, to put on a strong face for the guys and for Maddy. But it's getting harder and harder to do that.

"We'll figure it out," Asher says quietly. "We'll find a way."

I can only hope so.

## CHAPTER 4

A couple of days later, it's time to take Maddy back to her school. My little sister goes to a different academy than I do, but she's in her third year as well. I'm excited and nervous for her, although I know I should probably be more worried about myself. Mads has a regular magical ability, so she'll be fine—get a good job after school and all that—and she's so friendly and easy to get along with that most people instantly like her.

But she's still my little sister, so I worry.

Neptune Academy is farther away from Portland than Griffin is, so she usually takes the shuttle provided by the school, but I decide to drive her so we can spend a few more hours together. After a lot of cajoling and promises to drive the *exact* speed limit, Roman agrees to let me borrow his car.

Mads is quiet the whole way, which is unusual for her. Normally, she's a massive chatterbox. I'm the one who's not all that chatty, especially in social situations. It's why I appreciate Dmitri's ability to communicate without speaking, Asher's quiet understanding, Roman's way of gently coaxing words out of me, and how Cam fills the space all on his own.

"Everything okay?" I ask her as we pull through the gate onto Neptune's campus. "Aren't you excited to be back?"

"I am." She nods quickly, turning to face me. "I just worry. About you."

"You don't have to worry, Mads. I'm going to be fine."

In fairness, I can't actually predict the future. But I'm going to do my damndest to make sure I'm not a liar.

"Are you worried about the intensive?" I press.

"No, not really."

“Good. Because you’ll be amazing at it.”

She rolls her eyes fondly. “I know, Ellie.”

Students at her school who achieve and maintain a certain GPA get invited to take part in an intensive training program where they work with advanced spells and in high-pressure simulated situations. I don’t know exactly how it works, but it sounds like a great opportunity for Maddy.

It means she has to go back to school a week early, but it’s worth it if it helps her get a better job when she finishes school. And I wasn’t kidding—I know she’ll kick ass at it.

Neptune’s campus is larger than Griffin’s, and it’s much more organized and cohesive looking. All the buildings here have the same general appearance as each other, and they overlook the ocean, providing a gorgeous view. My campus is a hodgepodge of different styles and structures, as if the place was designed by twenty different architects—or a single very insane one. None of the structures at Griffin Academy match, and certainly none of them look like traditional school buildings or dorms.

I can’t help but feel anxious as I get out of the car. My stomach and lungs are tight, and it feels like my skin is buzzing a bit. I keep my head down a little as I walk with Maddy, carrying her stuff to her dorm. She’s smiling but quiet, nodding at people she recognizes as we pass by them.

A few people eye my cuff as I heft her bag higher on my shoulder—it’s too hot for me to wear long sleeves to cover it, and even if I did, the way I’m carrying this bag would probably pull my sleeve up anyway.

Unpredictables have to wear small metal braces around our wrists that keep us from doing magic. At least, until we graduate. Then we’re deemed “safe” enough to use our powers without hurting people.

Yeah, it’s just about as fun as it sounds, which is to say: not fun at all.

They don’t hurt or anything, but they’re a constant presence. I’ve got a tan line on my arm from wearing mine. Some people decorate them to try and make them more personal—when I first met Cam, he had a dick painted on his, although that particular cuff has long since been destroyed.

I suppose wearing a thick metal band looks kind of badass if you don’t know what it’s for, but to the people in our community, it’s like a brand.

A marker.

A signifier that we don’t belong.

I wish I could take mine off. Not even to use magic, but just so I wasn’t labeled for everyone to see what I am. It should be nobody’s business what

kind of magic I use, just like it should be nobody's business who I'm dating—and whether it's one guy or four.

We reach Maddy's dorm room on the third floor and put down her stuff.

"You all set?" I ask, glancing around the room. Her roommate must not be doing the same intensive Mads is, because the other side of the room is empty.

She nods. "Yeah. Thanks, Ellie. I'll walk you back to the car."

"You don't have to—"

"I want to," she says firmly. She doesn't say anything more, but she's far from blind. I know she saw the weird looks I got from the people around us. She wants to protect me.

*Ugh. I hate this.*

Most people would be glad their sibling loves them and wants to protect them—and trust me, I *am* glad to know she loves me this much. But I'm the older sibling. I took care of her after Mom died. I'm used to being the one doing the protecting, and I don't want her to get hurt because of me.

I get some more looks as we walk back downstairs, but nobody approaches us. Last time I ventured out into the magical community, shopping with Maddy in Portland, some asshole almost attacked us.

Luckily, a few bystanders stepped in and stopped it, but my heart still pounds when I think about that incident. I still don't know what I would've done if other people hadn't intervened. Punched the guy? Well, I *did* do that, actually. But what good are fists when faced with someone who can do magic? Especially when your own magic is being repressed. It's not a fair fucking fight.

We're just about to the car, and I'm ready to breathe a sigh of relief that we made it without incident when I hear someone say, "Maddy?"

I turn along with Mads, only to feel her go stiff next to me. And not scared stiff—she's blushing.

The guy walking toward us is cute, in a nerd-type way. Which is Maddy's exact type, by the way. The nerds, that's who she always goes for. That TV show, *Timeless*? She thought Rufus, the engineer who flew the time machine, was the cutest. *Star Trek*? No Captain Kirk for her, she liked Spock. *National Treasure*, that hilariously bad movie where Nicholas Cage steals the Declaration of Independence? She thought the guy who played his computer-geek assistant was a ten out of ten.

The guy smiles and waves. He's wearing a shirt that says *Han Shot First* and a pair of beat up jeans. He has skin the color of oak, warm brown eyes, and is a good few inches taller than either Mads or me. He's even got glasses—oh Lord, he couldn't be more Maddy's type if he tried.

Judging by how his whole face lights up when he sees her, I bet he *would* try if she asked. My flirt senses are tingling.

"Justin!" Maddy's voice is higher pitched and flustered. "Hi!"

"Hey." Justin grins at her, both of them acting like I don't exist.

"Hi," I say, stepping a bit in between them like a bodyguard and narrowing my eyes. "I'm Elliot, Maddy's older sister."

Look, everything Maddy's told me about Justin is good, and he seems like a decent guy from what I can tell in the ten seconds I've known him. But this is my little sister we're talking about. Only the best is good enough for her.

His cheeks get a little red, and he quickly holds out his hand. "Hi, I'm Justin. I'm one of Maddy's friends. I saw you on the livestream of the Trials. It was pretty amazing."

"Thank you." I shake his hand. Then I tighten my grip a little as I ask, "So, how long have you and Maddy known each other?"

"Since our first year." Justin catches Maddy's gaze, and hoo boy, I can practically hear the violins. I hope to God I'm not that sappy with any of my guys. Although I probably am. "We were in the same Practical Magic class."

"Justin's done a lot of great work to stand up for the Unpredictables," Maddy puts in quickly.

"I'm glad to hear it. You guys hang out a lot?"

"Uh, yeah, we've got the same friends and all that," Justin replies.

I can't resist poking a little fun at Maddy. It only seems fair. When I was in my coma after Johnson—the crazy asshole in charge of the Trials—attacked me, Maddy spent almost three months with the guys by herself, which means she got to tell them hundreds of embarrassing stories about me while I couldn't even defend my honor.

Now it's time for my revenge.

"Oh, cool. Then you must've gotten to know her pretty well. You've heard all about the pet sock she had when she was little, right?"

"Elliot!" Maddy hisses.



“Yeah, she glued googly eyes on it and gave it a funny voice and everything. Hilarious.” I grin evilly.

Maddy looks like she wants the earth to swallow her up. “Not funny...”

“Oh, come on, I’m sure Justin’s heard all these stories already! Like the home video Mom made of you running around at two years old singing ‘I Can Show You the World’ from *Aladdin*.”

Maddy elbows me, hard. “Nope! Justin definitely does *not* need to hear that.”

“Or what about when you developed a massive crush on Milo from *Atlantis*, and you were heartbroken to find out he didn’t exist?”

“Oh my God!”

“She’s always had a thing for nerds,” I confide in Justin.

Maddy points at the car, angling her face away from the tall, cute boy so she can glare at me. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“Hmm, I don’t know, I think I want to spend some time getting to know Justin better.” Switching gears, I grin fiercely at him, showing a few more teeth than necessary. “It’s so nice to see that Mads is in good hands. She’s my baby sister; I raised her after our mom died. It’s nice to relax and know nobody’s going to hurt her, so I don’t have to carry a baseball bat around anymore, you know what I mean?”

Judging by the look of wariness that comes into the kid’s eyes, he knows exactly what I mean: *hurt my sister, and I will break your damn legs*.

“Maddy’s amazing,” he tells me, his voice earnest. “You’re lucky to have a sister like her. And from what she tells me, she was lucky to have a sister like you growing up.”

Well, that definitely all sounds promising. And as much as I might want to, I can’t stand here and interrogate the poor guy forever.

Relaxing my protective older sister stance just slightly, I turn to Maddy, who’s blushing furiously at Justin’s words. “Okay, you’re right, sis. I really should go.”

She nods, and her blush and smile fade as she grows solemn. “I know. Love you, Ellie.”

We hug tightly. God, she’s so old. Twenty. When the hell did that happen? Every time I look at her, I still see my baby sister. I think I always will.

But she’s growing up. She’s an adult. And she’ll choose her own boyfriend, and her own job, and her own path. All I can do is be here for

her to cheer her on during the good times and support her during the bad.

I manage to keep it together as I pull away from the hug, kissing her on the top of her head before sliding into the car. But after she's waved me off and I'm back on the road to Roman's house... the tears come.

Crying isn't really my thing, even when I'm super upset. But right now, it feels like I need this.

Nothing's changed. I'm going to see Mads again soon. But it feels like so much more than that—like it's finally sunk in for me that she's an adult. That she's going to be living her own life, forging her own path, and no matter how close we remain, we'll never go back to the time when we shared a small one-bedroom apartment in Portland.

She'll always be my younger sister. But she's not my *baby* sister anymore.

## CHAPTER 5

I pull myself together by the time I get back to the house, brushing away any lingering trace of tears.

When I roll up the driveway, there are some suitcases sitting out on the front porch. Ah, for Roman. He's got to head back to campus early too, since he's a professor at Griffin and needs to prep for the semester.

I'm actually glad he's leaving. Not that I want him to go away or anything—far from it. But the fact that he's heading to Griffin means I'm going to see him soon, in just a week when I get back to campus.

Unlike the other guys, who I'll be leaving behind in a week.

Roman gives me a small smile as he steps out of the house, and I toss him the car keys.

"Glad to see you're in one piece," he teases.

"Hey. I'm an excellent driver." I grin as I step forward.

As soon as I'm within reach, he pulls me in for a kiss, his hands settling on my hips, and I press myself up against him. He's all firm muscle and tall enough that I have to get up on my tiptoes to kiss him properly. Kissing Roman is always a full-body experience, and I love it.

I pull away, but just slightly, just enough that I can kiss the tip of his nose and watch him roll his eyes in amusement.

"Be good while I'm gone, Reckless."

"No promises," I reply, waggling my eyebrows. Then my voice softens as I add, "Let me know when you get there safely?"

Normally, I'm not the kind of person who cares if someone checks in with them or not, but with all that's been going on with Unpredictables... I just want to be sure he's okay.

“Of course. Let me know when you’re on your way next week, and I’ll meet you.”

Roman and I hid our relationship for the first year and a half because he’s a professor and I’m a student. It’s not against the rules at Griffin Academy, but it could’ve easily led to people crying favoritism on things like grading.

*Ha. As if.* They clearly haven’t seen my scores in Roman’s class.

But it’s been long enough, and enough stuff was happening, that we decided we had to say something before someone noticed and chose to say something for us. So now, Roman can meet me at the gate if he wants, and kiss me in public if he wants.

And he does seem to want to. Which, hey, I’m sure as hell not complaining about.

“I will,” I promise him.

He pulls me in again, kissing me so deeply he dips me a little. It’s like he’s going away for years instead of just a week. His kiss leaves me dizzy, breathless. I can hardly stand upright by the time he’s finished.

“See you soon,” he whispers, his voice rough.

“See you soon.” I wrap my arms a little tighter around him, soaking up a few more seconds in his embrace.

When we finally break apart, I help him load up the car, then watch and wave as he drives away. When he disappears out of sight, I turn and head inside.

I have one week left with my other three guys.

Dmitri, Asher, and Cam were all a year ahead of me at the Academy of Unpredictable Magic, so they graduated last year. Which is why they’re looking for jobs, and why they won’t be coming back with me.

I’m definitely not relishing the idea of being on campus without them.

We spend the next few days in the house together, the three of us, and I’m constantly with at least one of them. I want to take advantage of every second and not think too hard about how we’ll have to part ways soon. I want to savor it, to be with them and be happy about it, instead of focusing on the looming cloud of melancholy on the horizon.

The guys know there’s only so much time though, and they know I’m not looking forward to leaving them behind. I can tell they’re not looking forward to it either. Even Dmitri, who’s not exactly the clingy type, practically becomes my shadow, sticking close to me at all times.

On the plus side, I'm getting almost as much sex this week as I have in the past two years combined, so... silver lining?

The dark-haired, broody man does need some alone time though—it's just part of his DNA. He confesses as much to me on my last night in the house, and I can tell he feels guilty about it.

Asher and Cam are cleaning up dinner in the kitchen, and Dmitri and I are in the living room in front of the fireplace—not that we have a fire going right now, since it's still summer.

"I don't want you to think..." He pauses, gathering his thoughts. "It's not that I don't want to spend time with you."

"It's okay, I totally get it. I know it's not about me." I pause too, wondering if I should ask this, if I should bring it up. "Is it about your parents?"

I can see Dmitri hesitate for the barest moment, and then he nods.

Ah, yup, I was right. I reach across the couch and take his hand, squeezing it. "Hey. These things take time. When my mom died, when my dad left... it hurts. You don't just go through all the emotions once, and then you're done with them. You have to let them settle in. Take all the time you need. It's okay."

Dmitri looks down at our joined hands for a moment before he nods. He raises our hands to his lips so he can kiss my knuckles, then lets go and stands up. His dark eyes shine with gratitude and tenderness as he meets my gaze. "Thank you, Princess."

I watch him leave, and a few moments later, I hear Asher and Cam enter from the kitchen.

"He okay?" Cam asks.

Asher and I nod in tandem. "He just needs some time," I say.

I'm not concerned—I would have been, back in the beginning when we first started our relationship. But now I have more trust in him, and I know he'll lean on me when he needs me and not just disappear into himself. He's trying to talk to me about this, letting me know when he needs to go off on his own instead of just vanishing. It's progress.

Asher sits down on the couch with me while Cam runs upstairs to change his clothes—he spilled tomato sauce on his shirt while cooking—and the citrus and lemongrass scent I love so much tickles my nostrils as he grabs the remote.

"Netflix?" he suggests, turning on the TV and pulling me into his side.

I curl up with him as he flips through the options, but I don't really want to waste my last night in this house watching a movie. Don't get me wrong, watching movies is fun, but tonight I'd rather do... other things.

I kiss up his neck, slowly, teasing him. Asher stiffens but doesn't do anything for a moment, like he's wrestling with himself.

The moment when he gives in and turns to kiss me properly is so worth it.

Something about kissing Asher always seems to make time slow down—I get lost in this place where nothing else matters or exists but the feel of his lips on mine.

It's one of my favorite feelings in the world, and as our lips stay fused together, I crawl onto his lap, needing to press more of our bodies together. I can already feel him getting hard, his stiffening cock pressing against my clit in a way that urges me to rub against him, seeking more friction.

When I do, he groans into my mouth, dropping his hands to my hips to help me move as he rocks his pelvis against mine.

Asher's out of school now, which means he doesn't have to wear his magic repressing cuff anymore—and that means he could pretty much read my mind anytime he wants to.

I know he wouldn't go prying into my head without my permission; he's very careful with his power and is a big believer in privacy and free will. But sometimes I wonder if he just absorbs my emotions without even trying to. Because he's always been able to read me like an open book—but now? Now it's like he *wrote* the book.

Every touch is like an answer to a question I didn't even know I asked. He anticipates every need, every swell of arousal within my body, and rides that wave like a pro surfer, teasing sensations out of me that I've never felt before.

He deepens and slows our kiss, each stroke of his tongue so thorough and languid that I almost can't stand it. At the same time, his hands slip under my shirt, his fingers and palms skating over the bare skin of my back—and even though he's touched me like this more times than I can count, a shiver runs through me as my whole body reacts to the contact.

"Hmm. Is this a private party, or is there room for one more?"

Cam's voice is a little rougher than usual, and although there's a teasing tone to it, I know he's genuinely asking.

We've all been doing this relationship thing for about six months, and sometimes I can't believe how easy it feels, how well it's working. I think a huge part of that is because, although the guys never leave me in doubt about how much they want me, they don't get jealous or possessive around each other.

They don't get mad when I sleep in one of the other men's rooms, or even if I choose to sleep alone in my own room. They respect me and each other enough that they don't feel the need to keep some kind of ledger of who got what when, or to track how much time I spend with each of them.

Because it's not like that.

I don't love all of them with equal-sized *parts* of my heart; I love each of them with my whole heart.

So if I were to tell Cam that Asher and I need a little time alone, he wouldn't be crushed or mad or think it means I don't love him. He would understand.

Ash and I break our kiss, our bodies still pressed flush together and our noses almost touching. His moss-green eyes sparkle with desire and humor as he lifts his eyebrows slightly in question.

I grin, wrapping my arms around his neck as I turn to peer over my shoulder at Cam, who's leaning against the doorframe with his hands shoved into his pockets.

"This is definitely a three-person party," I tell him. "We were just waiting for you."

The smile that spreads across his face beams like pure sunshine, and my pussy clenches as he strides toward us, his gait long and confident.

Holy crap, my boyfriends are hot.

And speaking of Asher's mind reading abilities, I'm pretty sure he's started using them to communicate with Cam when we're all in bed together. They've pulled off some pretty complicated moves without a word spoken between them, and I don't know how else they could've managed it.

Not that I have any complaints. *At all.*

When Cam reaches us, he sits down on the wide, plush couch, leaning back against the armrest and putting one leg up on the cushion. Without missing a beat, Asher lifts me off his lap, depositing me into the crook of Cam's legs so that my back is pressed against his front. The blond mage tugs me a little closer, and his lips find my ear even as Ash continues to kiss me with his patient, mind-blowing thoroughness.

Asher's hands slip under my shirt again, from the front this time, sliding up over my stomach to massage my breasts through the thin fabric of my bra. Cam's hands are moving too, flipping open the button on my jeans with an easy movement and working the fly down before his large, warm palm slides inside to cup my pussy through my panties.

I lift my hips into the touch, begging for more, and although he leaves the barrier of fabric between us, the pads of his fingers find my clit, moving in lazy, teasing circles.

Asher draws back a little to help me remove my shoes, and then he tugs my jeans down and off, dropping them by the side of the couch as his gaze focuses on his friend's hand between my legs.

The deep forest green of his eyes darkens as he watches, and between Cam's touch and Asher's hot gaze, I'm already squirming, my breath coming faster.

But there's something else I want tonight. Something I've been thinking about for a while and really want to try. I'm a little nervous about it, honestly, but even just imagining it makes me press up harder against Cam's fingers. I'm turned on as fuck by the *idea* of it, at least, and I know these two men will do everything in their power to make it good for me. I trust them completely.

Still chasing the pressure of Cam's fingertips, I reach behind me to hook a hand around the back of his neck as I meet Asher's gaze. "Would you guys ever want to fuck me... at the same time?"

I hope they understand exactly what I'm asking for, but any worries that they won't are banished when Asher's eyes flare with heat and Cam's fingers freeze mid-motion.

"That's a little like asking a man in the desert if he'd like a glass of water," Cam says, his voice even rougher than when he spoke before. "I think the bigger question is, do *you* want that, Sin?"

My heart picks up in my chest, pounding harder with excitement, anticipation, and a touch of nerves.

"Yeah." I crane my neck to peer up at Cam, looking into his sky-blue eyes. "I think I do. Can we try it?"

There's a beat of silence as my words hang in the air—and then I'm lifted from the couch so fast that the world tilts and spins in my vision. I yelp, wrapping my arms around Cam's neck as he lifts me in a fireman's carry. We're halfway up the stairs before I even process what the hell just



happened, and I laugh as the broad-shouldered man rushes up the steps two at a time, Asher right behind him.

I'm half undressed, and I peer down toward the living room as Cam rounds the landing at the top of the staircase, heading toward his bedroom down the hall. "Hey! We left my pants!"

"Yeah, we won't need them for this, Sin." The grin he shoots me is wicked and hot as hell.

He makes a good point. I definitely don't need pants right now.

And as soon as we reach his bedroom and he deposits me on the bed, he and Asher make quick work of theirs too. While they do that, I wrestle with my own clothes, tearing off my shirt and unhooking my bra, then shimmying out of my panties.

As soon as we're all naked, Asher and Cam converge on the bed with me. I end up sandwiched between them, and it's like my words downstairs lit a fire inside all of us. I can feel Cam's cock pressing against my ass as his hands come around to palm my breasts and play with my nipples. Asher's hand is between my legs, his fingers alternating between dipping inside me and working my clit.

I'm already so damn turned on I'm about to lose it when Cam murmurs in my ear, "Come for us, Sin. It'll help loosen you up."

And I do. I grab onto Asher's forearm, holding it in a death grip as my orgasm crashes over me.

It makes my heart speed up and my muscles tremble, but even as I start to come down from the high, I don't feel sated at all—like that was just an appetizer, a small bite to tide me over until the main course.

Cam was right though. It does relax me, leaving my muscles more pliable and my body less tense.

Asher's eyes spark with satisfaction, and he rolls over onto his back, pulling me with him so that I'm draped over his body, straddling him. He reaches up to tuck my already wild hair behind my ears, and I move against him, sliding my wet pussy along the thick length of his cock, which is sandwiched between us.

"You're sure, Elle?" he asks softly, and even though he's not using his mind reading powers, I can tell he's trying to get inside my head, to make absolutely certain this is what I want.

Dammit, I love how much they take care of me.

It's the exact reason I *am* sure.

“Yes,” I say, because I know he needs to hear the word and not just some inarticulate moan.

And then, to make sure he knows I’m not having any doubts at all, I rise up onto my knees, fist the base of his cock, and sink down onto him.

We both groan in satisfaction, and behind me, I hear Cam make a soft noise too. I rise up and glide down again, rolling my hips, bracing my hands against Asher’s chest as I move. The mattress dips as Cam crawls over to the nightstand and pulls out a bottle of lube, and my stomach clenches with nerves and excitement again.

My pussy must’ve clenched too, because Asher puts his hands on my hips, pulling my attention back to him.

“We’ll go slow, Elle. And if you decide you don’t like it, we can stop anytime. You just say the word.”

“Yeah,” Cam agrees, moving back toward us and leaning in to kiss me as I keep riding Asher. “This’ll only be fun for us if it’s fun for you. If it’s not, we’ll find something else that is.”

Fuck. Every word they’re saying is turning me on like crazy. Something about knowing I don’t have to do this, that they’ll stop anytime I say, only makes me want it more. There’s no pressure, no need to live up to some crazy “sex goddess” expectation, which means I can actually relax and enjoy it.

I don’t answer with words, but I kiss Cam harder, sucking on his tongue as I reach down to stroke his cock.

“Oh, shit, Sin,” he grunts, jerking his hips even as he reaches down to grab my wrist. “Give me a fighting chance here. I’m already afraid I won’t last two seconds once I get inside you.”

I chuckle against his lips but release him, finding my rhythm on Asher’s cock again.

Cam kisses me once more, then moves behind me. He gathers my hair and drapes it over one shoulder, pressing his lips to the back of my neck. Then he pushes gently between my shoulder blades, urging me down. “Lie on Asher. Let his body support you, okay?”

I let my upper body drape over Ash’s, getting lost in his kiss again as we move together. Cam’s hands trail down my back, over the swell of my ass, and when I feel cool wetness drip between my ass cheeks, I tense involuntarily.

“We’ve got you.” The rough voice behind me is soothing. “Just focus on Asher. On how good he feels. I promise, we’ll make you feel even better.”

I do what Cam says, closing my eyes and focusing on what feels good.

The slide of Asher’s cock inside me as we rock against each other. The feel of Cam’s hands on my ass. The hypnotic depth of Asher’s kiss.

When a fingertip breaches the pucker of my ass, I manage not to tense. And as it works deeper inside, I breathe deeply and focus on how the new, unfamiliar sensation just heightens the amazing feelings already surging through my body.

“That’s good. Fuck, that’s good.” Cam’s voice is more strained now, and there’s something about that sound that I love.

He’s coming undone. Seeing me like this, *feeling* me like this, is unraveling him. I push back harder against his finger and let out a little whimper when he adds a second one, stretching out the tight ring of muscles even more.

Asher grips my chin lightly, bringing my mouth to his again and pulling me back into the depths of his kiss. The two fingers in my ass move slowly and carefully, and I can feel Cam flexing them against the tight channel, stretching it out.

Getting it ready to take his cock.

A wave of arousal crashes over me at the thought, and I suck in deep breaths as Cam finally withdraws his fingers.

I want this. I haven’t changed my mind, and I know I won’t.

I want this so fucking bad.

There’s an uncomfortable stretch as the head of Cam’s cock tries to breach the hole his fingers were just inside. Instinctively, my muscles tense up a little, and Asher whispers, “I can help, Elle. Do you want me to help?”

My head dips in a small nod, even as I attack his mouth with kisses, chasing the pleasurable sensations to help my body relax again.

And then, I feel... something. Something soft and light that starts in my mind and expands out to fill the rest of me, making my anxiety dissipate like fog. Asher is barely in my head—the feeling isn’t invasive at all—but he’s using his powers to help me relax.

“Oh, fuck. You feel so good,” Cam murmurs as he slips deeper inside me. “Push back against me, Sin. Let me inside.”

I do, pushing back with my inner muscles, and surprisingly, that allows him to slide even farther into me. Thanks to Asher’s soothing help, I don’t

feel pain or much discomfort at all, but I do feel... full.

So full.

Completely full of these two men, surrounded by them, *overwhelmed* by them.

It's fucking incredible.

My breath is coming faster, arousal burning through my veins as I realize I *like* this. That I can handle it.

With one more careful thrust, Cam seats himself fully inside me. He's braced over me and Asher, his hands planted on either side of us, and I can feel the heat radiating from his body, feel the small tremors that move through him as he wrestles for control.

But he doesn't need to be as careful as he's trying to be. He doesn't need to hold back, to hold still.

Asher mostly stopped thrusting into me while Cam worked his way inside, but now I roll my hips slightly, causing both men to groan in pleasure.

"You good?" Cam asks, his breath tickling my ear as he drapes his body closer over mine.

"Yes!" I gasp. "I need—to move. Please! Fuck me."

"Oh, Jesus." His voice is like sandpaper.

Tentatively, as if he doesn't quite believe me when I say I'm ready, he slides out and sinks back in. The sensation is totally different than anything I've ever experienced, especially with Asher still inside me too. Only a thin wall separates their cocks, and it makes me hyperaware of every little movement.

Asher grunts, and then he begins to move inside me too. They both go slow at first, giving me time to adjust, finding a rhythm with each other. I hold on tight to Asher's shoulders, turning my head to kiss Cam before finding the soft lips of the man beneath me again.

As their pace picks up, I throw myself headfirst into the sensations, letting go of any worries or doubts or fears and just letting myself *feel*. Our bodies move in perfect harmony as they fuck me harder, and I feel helpless in the best way, sandwiched between them.

I already came once, but the orgasm building inside me now feels more like a force of nature—a hurricane or a tsunami, maybe. Something that will bowl me over and drag me out to sea, where I'll drown in pure bliss.

"Asher! Cam! I'm... I'm gonna..."

I'm trying to warn them, but I can't get all the words out. I think they know though, because their tempo increases, and I feel them both thicken inside me.

"Fuck, Sin. You feel too. Damn. Good."

Cam's words cut off in a choked grunt as he thrusts a few more times, his cock jerking and pulsing inside my ass. Asher kisses me hard as he comes too, and I follow them both over the edge, crying out so loud the sound bounces off the walls.

I'm gasping and panting as I collapse against Asher, and Cam collapses against me. We all worked up a bit of a sweat, and our skin sticks together as we breathe in unison, our heartbeats creating a syncopated rhythm.

"Wow," Ash mutters. "That was—wow."

"Seconded." Cam sounds dazed and exhausted, and I love it.

"Thirded," I whisper, a smile stealing over my face. "Thanks for letting me try that."

Cam snorts a laugh, and we all groan as it creates a domino effect of sensations through our connected bodies. "Oh, no problem, Sin. I mean, it was a real hardship, but we're here for you."

I chuckle, slapping at his shoulder. He pulls out of me carefully and rolls onto his side, and Asher rolls us over too, slipping out of me as he does.

I don't think I'll ever get tired of these two men teaming up with me, especially because of this moment, in the aftermath, when I'm nestled between them in a warm tangle of limbs, feeling safe and... loved.

Sappy, I know. I've turned into a full-blown sap. What is this world coming to?

I know we'll need to get up and shower and clean up at some point, but not just yet. I don't want to move. I don't want to let go.

When I start school, it'll be the first time I'll be separated from them since we started officially dating. I'm not clingy—far from it—but I'm not sure how to handle being away from them for so long.

I'm a big girl; I'll soldier on. But that doesn't mean I'm looking forward to it.

"You okay?" Asher asks me quietly.

I think he's checking to make sure I'm okay with what we just did—to which my response is a hearty, *hell fucking yeah*—but when I answer, that's not actually what I'm thinking of at all.

“No. I’ll miss you,” I admit in a whisper.

Once, I would’ve deflected, lied about the depth of my feelings, tried to cover up what felt like a weakness—but I’m trying to be more open with the guys. More honest.

“We’ll miss you too, Elle,” he replies, running his fingertips along my jaw. “It’s never easy to be away from the people you love.”

My heart skips a beat.

I know how the guys feel about me—and I know how I feel about them. We show how much we care about each other in everything we do, so it’s not like I’m shocked to hear him use that word. But this is the first time he’s said it, and it hits me harder than I expected it to, making my heart feel like it’s too big for my chest cavity. Like it’s too full to be contained by my ribs.

“Can you... say that again?” My voice is small. Vulnerable.

He knows exactly what I mean, and he doesn’t make me ask twice.

“I love you,” he murmurs, leaning down to kiss the top of my head.

“Yeah. Wait, was that not obvious?” Cam asks, sounding half joking but also half worried. He kisses my temple. “I love you. *We* love you. We love the shit out of you.”

“I love you too. Both of you.”

The words slip out of me, like water flowing out of a tap. Easy as anything.

If only everything in the world could be as easy as that.

## CHAPTER 6

All three guys drive me to school the next day. Even Cam is quiet—normally, he makes jokes to diffuse tense situations, but he’s got three very serious people with him, and I think he can tell that none of us would appreciate him trying to interrupt the silence right now.

“It’s so weird not to be staying here. We’re just guests in this place now,” Cam observes as Dmitri parks his car in front of the girls’ dorm.

For my first two years here, I actually lived with the guys in their dorm. It’s not exactly allowed, but it was either that or room with Kendal, Alyssa, and Megan. Kendal’s actually become a pretty good friend, but I’d rather face off against Johnson again and risk a coma than live with Alyssa and Megan, so I stayed with the guys and we were just very careful about it.

Honestly, I know some of the other residents in the men’s dorm noticed my presence, but I don’t think they cared. With all the attacks on the school, everything around us was in total chaos half the time anyway—so who had time to worry about a girl rooming with three guys when it was all consensual?

“Feeling nostalgic?” I tease Cam. “Want to go up to our old room?”

“Oh, fuck no.” He laughs.

Dmitri doesn’t say anything, but he hugs me so tightly I can hardly breathe when it comes time for the guys to leave. I hold on as hard as I can, and I wish I didn’t have to let go.

Asher kisses me once, slow and lingering, and then pulls away. Cam, on the other hand, scoops me up and kisses me over and over, and although he’s partly goofing off, I can feel the hint of real desperation behind it.

“Go,” I tell them, laughing as I pull away. One of us has to put on a brave face, and thanks to Mom dying and leaving me to take care of Maddy, I know how to do that. It’s my special talent. “Go on, you idiots, I’ll be fine. Go get fancy jobs and take over the world.”

Cam salutes me, Dmitri nods, and Asher smiles.

Then they all pile back into the car, and a moment later, Dmitri pulls away from the curb. My throat closes up a little, but I force myself to smile and wave until the car disappears.

Fuck. I miss them already.

*Steady on, Sinclair*, I tell myself, straightening my shoulders before heading up to my room.

Since I can’t crash with the guys anymore, I had to find another place to stay, so I called last week and talked to a woman in the admin office, and she said she’d move me to someplace new.

I expected to have to fight her a little harder on it, since—on paper, anyway—I still have a perfectly good dorm room with Alyssa and the others. But the woman just put me on hold for a few minutes, then came back on the line and told me it was all taken care of. I think Hardwick might’ve put in a good word. He likes me for some insane reason, and given that I’ve saved the school’s ass four times now, maybe he felt I was owed a new room if I wanted one.

But I have no idea who I’ll be sharing with, and I just pray it’s someone nice who will keep their shit on their side of the room.

I open the door—and see Kendal standing inside.

Kendal is one of those girls that almost makes you wonder if she’s actually real. She’s got gorgeous red hair, bright blue eyes, and just a dash of freckles. She always looks as if she’s stepped out of a magazine—even more so now that she’s stopped emulating Alyssa’s heavy makeup and is letting her own, more natural style shine through.

She’s also one of the most shy and cautious girls I’ve ever met, which is why she hung out with Alyssa and Megan—and their other friend, Cristina—for so long. They’re awful girls... or at least Alyssa is, and Megan and Cristina heartily go along with her petty, vicious behavior. For the longest time, Kendal never stood up to them or disagreed, and it frustrated the hell out of me.

But she’s gotten more and more brave over time, and now I think she’s stopped hanging out with Alyssa for good.



“Hi, Elliot!” She walks over to me, a big smile on her face. There’s no shyness or hesitation about her as she hugs me, and I hug her back without thinking about it.

She pulls back, her smile growing impish. “Or maybe I should say, ‘hi, roomie’.”

My mouth falls open. “What?”

“I asked if I could be changed to a new room, and apparently you asked the same thing, so here we are! There’s another person staying with us too, a first year. Her name’s Gwen—that’s her stuff there.”

She gestures at one of the beds, where a few suitcases sit.

“Oh, cool.” I grin broadly. I don’t mind sharing with a new person, especially now that I know Kendal will be in this room too.

“Yeah. She seems nice. Her power is the ability to find people or things by tracking them,” Kendal confides. “She’s still learning how to use it, and I think she’s still a little freaked out by her magic—but we’ve all been there.”

“Is it just her?” I gesture at the fourth bed in the room. Most dorm rooms on this campus are big enough to hold four people.

Kendal’s eyes darken as her face falls. “Yeah. There aren’t a lot of new kids this year. It’s the smallest class ever.”

Fuck. That means... well. All new Unpredictables are given two choices: go to school to learn how to control their magic, or have their magic taken from them.

I almost chose option number two. At the time, I didn’t care about my magic, and I certainly wasn’t attached to the idea of keeping it. In fact, I kind of resented my new powers. Maddy’s magic sparked a bit late, and as far as I knew, I didn’t have any magic at all. So we weren’t really welcomed into the magical community, even though both our parents were powerful magic users. Nobody reached out to us when Mom got sick and died, and I had no interest in joining a community that had never done anything for me.

But Mads had wanted me to try it out—to give Griffin Academy a chance. I could always let my magic be stripped later if I changed my mind, she said. And now... now I wouldn’t give it up for anything. I like my magic, as annoying as it can be sometimes.

It’s a part of me. A part of my soul.

Magic stripping can supposedly be done without causing extreme pain, but it’s never pleasant. From what I’ve heard, even if it doesn’t actively

hurt, it still leaves you feeling empty, like you're missing a vital part of yourself.

The fact that a lot of people are choosing to give up their powers rather than train here shows how scared everyone is.

My blood boils with rage at that thought. Those poor people.

But a shiver runs up my spine too, a lick of fear cutting through my anger. Hardwick and other school admins have been trying to tell us everything will be okay, but... this proves it won't be. That it's not. Or that a lot of people *believe* it won't.

Shaking myself, I glance at Kendal. "Hey, I'm going to... go for a walk around campus. I'll be back."

*I need some damn fresh air.*

My new roommate nods, mustering up a smile. "Sure. I'll just be unpacking here."

I nod and smile back at her, because it's not her fault I'm upset, and knowing Kendal, she's probably even more scared about all of this than I am.

When I get outside, I wish I could say I felt better. In a way I do—being outside always helps calm me down—but in a way I don't, because now that I'm out on the quad, I can see the remnants of the destruction from last semester.

The asshole who's been attacking us has been getting bolder and bolder, and during our last semester, he somehow managed to construct three towers on the school grounds, then used them as portals to feed an army of demons through to attack us. The towers also had mages at the tops doing a coordinated spell that seemed to be causing the structures to triangulate their energy. I don't know what would've happened if the triangulation had completed—although I'm sure it wouldn't have been good—but Roman killed one of the mages to save my life, and the people who stayed on campus to fight got the other two.

We won the battle in the end, but we tore up the campus in the process. There were huge piles of rubble created by the destroyed towers, and holes blasted into the quad and the main school building. Even though the admins have had all summer, apparently it hasn't been enough time clean up all the destruction.

Most of it's been cleared away, but I can still see chunks of gray stone here and there, and scorch marks on the ground and the sides of buildings.

The grass is dead in places, and they haven't re-planted the flowerbeds that got destroyed.

I wander around, noting how different it feels from when I first came to campus two years ago. That time, I saw activity everywhere. Now, it's quiet. It seems like people are too scared to even relax and hang out in the summer warmth.

All in all, the place feels... desolate. Even the air itself feels off. I'm tempted to run to Roman just to see a familiar, friendly face, but I know he's busy working right now, and I don't want to bother him just because I'm getting the willies.

Instead, I just sit on a bench and look around me. It's beautiful here. We really have a lovely campus. It sinks into my skin, in a way it hasn't before, that this is my last year here. I was so caught up wondering what it would be like without the three guys that I kind of forgot this is my last time doing this.

Who would've thought I'd come to care about this place so much? Not me, that's for sure.

But, here I am.

Well. Crazy shit going down or not, I'm going to make the most of my last year here. It's all I get. No do-overs or hitting pause or rewind. I'm going to savor my time, and maybe actually get some good grades for once instead of just scraping by.

First time for everything, right?

## CHAPTER 7

The next day is Hardwick's traditional start of school assembly.

When I walk into the large auditorium, I hesitate, glancing around. Alyssa and her little posse are settling into seats off to one side, and although her gaze meets mine, she doesn't say anything. That's a relief. She's backed off of me a little as she's lost support among the rest of the students, but I was a little worried that she'd ramp up her bullying again this year.

Pulling my attention away from the blonde girl, I scan the rest of the seats. I'm not sure where I want to sit—it feels strange to claim my usual spot without the guys here with me—but then I see Kendal waving at me from a row near the front.

Of course she got here early to snag a good spot—why am I not surprised?

I trot down the aisle stairs and sit next to her. On Kendal's other side is a young woman with caramel skin and a dark bob haircut.

"Hi," the girl whispers. "I'm Gwen."

"Ah, the elusive roommate." I shake her hand. "I'm—"

"Elliot Sinclair." Gwen nods, beaming. "I know who you are. The whole magical world does. I think it's great what you've done to stand up for us."

I want to tell her I never intended to be the poster child for Unpredictables—that it happened by accident, and that I'm not always happy about it. That it's confusing for me and tends to bring more harm than good, like when that jerk in Portland stopped Maddy and me in the middle of the street.

But Gwen looks so happy and excited, and I don't want to burst her bubble when we've already got so many reasons to be worried and scared. So I just smile back. "Thanks."

"Oh, thank God, I was hoping to find you guys," Tom mutters, coming up and sitting on my other side. A few moments later, Tandy and Erin join us,

holding hands. I look at Kendal and raise my eyebrows, silently asking if they're officially together now. Kendal nods, grinning.

Tom, Tandy, and Erin are three of the students who had their magic stolen last year by the demon bird, and I was able to help them get their powers back thanks to my mirroring ability. It worked, but it nearly killed me. Word to the wise: don't try to hold the powers of six Unpredictables inside of you all at once. Not good for your health.

The auditorium falls silent as we all focus on the stage at the front. Hardwick steps up to the podium, looking older and more tired than I've ever seen him. My phone buzzes in my lap as he clears his throat, and I see it's the guys—we have a group chat that's about a million texts long already.

**Cam:** *Hey, we have a bet going. Is Hardwick wearing that hideous puke-green tie again?*

**Asher:** *I told him it can't be that one. I'm pretty sure he got a food stain on the green tie and retired it.*

I look up, and sure enough, Hardwick's wearing a nice blue tie.

**Me:** *Sorry, Cam. Asher's right.*

**Cam:** *Goddammit, Sin, you couldn't lie for me?*

**Asher:** *What's the color?*

**Me:** *Blue.*

**Dmitri:** *Why what does that mean oh mind guru does it mean Hardwick got laid last night or something*

Dmitri has never heard of punctuation when it comes to texting—which is ironic since in real life, he seems to speak only in very short, punctuated sentences.

**Asher:** *Oh, man. I did not need that image in my head, thank you.*

I have to bite my lip to keep from grinning and giving the game up. I don't want to seem disrespectful to Hardwick by texting during assembly.

Cam makes a joke about brain bleach, and then they all start teasing me about how I'm not allowed to start dating Kendal just because they're off campus, and I can tell they're trying to make me laugh.

It's working, not gonna lie, and I have to keep biting my lip hard to stop from cackling and disrupting Hardwick's speech. It's not as good as having my guys here with me in person, but it sure is better than not having them at all.

Of course, it also means I miss pretty much all of Hardwick's speech. But given how solemn everyone else looks and how frustrated and tired Hardwick appears, I have a feeling I didn't miss out on much. It was probably pretty damn depressing.

Not that I can blame him. What good news is there to talk about right now?

That night, I sneak into the men's dorm to see Roman. It's a hell of a lot harder to do than it was when I already lived in the building, but hey, it's worth it for the look on his face when he opens the door and sees me standing there.

Roman looks tired too. He and Hardwick are close, and my boyfriend is one of the school's best professors. I wonder how much time he's spent with the dean and other faculty members this past week going over the plan for the semester and talking through their fears. Trying to figure out how they can protect us, teach us, and keep things from getting worse for us.

Roman's only about five years older than I am. That's not much. I'm only twenty-four, and God knows *I* don't feel like an adult half the time—he shouldn't have to carry so much weight on his shoulders.

"Want me to come in and distract you?" I ask, biting my lip and fiddling with the buttons on my shirt.

He gives me a small, tired, but warm smile. "You know I'll never say no to that, Reckless."

I step inside, and he shuts the door behind me, his arms already pulling me in close.

Roman and I can get pretty damn energetic in our sex—our first time was a hook-up in the back alley behind the bar where I worked in Portland—but tonight, it's not like that at all. Tonight, it's much more about being connected, being together, than it is about getting to the finish line.

And if I cling to him a little harder than usual afterward, because he's the only one left of the four men I love... well. Roman's not going to tell on me. And he clings right back anyway, so fair's fair.



**C**lasses start the next day, and I throw myself into my studies with the fervor of a third-year determined to prove herself.

I'm not stupid. I never have been. I get good grades when it comes to the academic stuff. My essays are usually quite good, and I take pride in researching and writing them well. But applying my magic practically has always been a bit of a struggle, with lots of ups and downs. The only time I seem to be able to activate my powers on command and use them effortlessly is in fight class with Professor Tamlin.

Fighting just comes naturally to me. The rest? Doesn't.

But this year, I'm gonna turn that all around.

I know I'll miss the hell out of the guys, but the upside is that I'll have a hell of a lot of downtime to focus on homework. Without any major distractions, I can really make the most of my time here, hone my magic, and be ready to go out into the world when I graduate—whether the world wants an Unpredictable like me or not.

I have high hopes for this year. I really do.

And then, only three days into the semester... it all comes crashing down.

I'm pinning Kendal to the floor in Combat class as she tries to escape my hold using a new move Professor Tamlin taught us.

Tamlin walks over, shaking her head. "That's close, Kendal. Very close. But relax your left arm."

She crouches next to us to adjust Kendal's position, and I freeze in place, keeping my grip on the girl beneath me so she can work through the adjustment and figure out where she went wrong.

"There you go." Tamlin smiles, her white teeth bright against her mocha skin. She always makes me think of an African American Audrey Hepburn, except *way* more deadly. She's gorgeous, well dressed, and petite—but she could kick your ass into next week without breaking a sweat. "Remember, you need to be loose and relaxed to fight. Stiffness and tension are your enemies."

She begins to stand, dusting her hands off—and then a noise filters in from outside.

Tamlin's head snaps up, her entire body immediately on alert. She's the most poised person I've ever met, her outfit always perfectly coordinated, without a hair out of place. So her calm expression doesn't falter for an instant, and she stays cool and composed as ever as she says, "Everyone keep practicing. I'll be right back."

I roll off of Kendal, and the two of us sit on the floor and stare at each other, then turn to watch Tamlin walk out the door. The noises are continuing, getting louder.

It sounds like yelling.

*Oh, shit.*

After everything our school's gone through in the last two years, all of us are on edge. I can tell by the alarmed faces around me that everyone's thinking the same thing I am: are we being attacked in some way again?

I clamber to my feet. No way am I going to just sit here and wait to find out what's happening. I'm going to check it out.

"Elliot!" Kendal hisses in alarm as I stride across the massive room toward the door.

"You want to be caught with your pants down?" I hiss back.

Kendal and several others seem to consider this, and a second later, they get up and follow me out the door.

The sounds are coming from the quad, so I trot downstairs to the main floor, head down the hallway, exit out the main doors—

And screech to a stop.

I freeze so suddenly that Kendal runs into me with a soft *oomph*. She starts to apologize, but her voice dies off as she looks past me and sees what I saw.

The quad is filled with a huge contingent of Circuit officers.

*Holy fuck.*



## CHAPTER 8

The Circuit is the magical government. There's the High Circuit, which is like our congress, and then there are local Circuits and regional Circuits.

This does not look local.

Kendal grabs my arm fearfully, and I keep my body between her and the Circuit officers, my big sister instincts kicking in even though we're the same age. The officers look like they mean business, and not the good kind.

Students are yelling, demanding to know what's going on, as the officers talk with the school administration. They seem to be basically demanding that they be taken to the administration wing and are generally bossing everyone around. Typical.

"What's going on?" a small voice asks from behind me. It's Gwen, and she looks scared as fuck.

"It's okay," I say quickly, my protective instincts ratcheting up another notch. She looks nothing like Maddy, of course, but she reminds me of her all the same. "It's going to be okay. Just stick with us."

The Circuit officers walk past us, along with the school staff who've come outside to deal with them. I catch a glimpse of Tamlin as she goes by—her face is smooth and polished like a stone, revealing nothing of what she might be feeling.

They all disappear inside, and then there's nothing for us to do but wait.

Some students vanish, off to their dorms or something, but not me. Nope. I'm staying right the fuck here. I want to know what's going on. Kendal and Gwen stay as well, the poor first-year looking like she's simply too scared to move.

“Was there another attack somewhere?” Kendal asks me in a low voice.

I hear other questions of a similar nature being whispered around us. Everyone is fucking terrified, and I can’t blame them. I’m feeling pretty damn on edge myself, my stomach churning like a damn washing machine.

I pull out my phone. “I don’t know,” I tell Kendal honestly.

“But if there was an attack, we would’ve heard about it on the news, right?” Gwen asks, her voice pleading.

“Maybe they caught the fucker who’s been doing this to us,” says someone else.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” another person replies.

I text the guys, trying to ignore the way my fingers shake as I type out the message.

**Me:** *Circuit’s here. Everyone terrified. You know anything?*

The response is immediate, and the lack of punctuation tells me who it’s from before I even glance at the name.

**Dmitri:** *Know nothing tell us what happens Asher’s getting the car started*

Ah, crap! Of course they’re ready to come barreling in here. I know I’d want to do the same if any of them were on campus right now and I wasn’t, but I still don’t want them rushing into what could be a touchy situation.

**Me:** *No. You three stay put. It’s fine.*

The last thing the admins need is the three of them bursting in here and demanding answers when they’re probably aren’t any. And as much as it would make me feel better to have them here, there’s a comfort in knowing they’re far away from any potential danger too.

I want to text Roman and ask what the hell is going on, but he’s meeting with the Circuit members like the rest of the staff, so he won’t be checking his phone.

*Dammit.* I hate this waiting and not knowing. It’s freaking me out. I’d rather just know the truth, however awful it may be, and get on with it.

We all mill about, waiting, the tension stretching like a rubber band until it feels like I’m going to snap, like we’re all going to snap. The very air around us is too thin, and I can’t breathe properly—

Then the Circuit members walk back out, followed by the admins and staff, and...

Oh, fuck.

Roman looks—I've only seen him this angry once before, when he used his death touch ability to save my life. He looks like he's genuinely considering using it again. And knowing Roman and the strength of his power, he probably could do it, could probably kill all these Circuit members if he wanted to—but I know he won't, no matter how angry he is. He was raised to never abuse his power like that, and his determination to stick to that is part of why I love him.

Tamlin has tear tracks staining her dark skin. Professor Binns looks like an absolute wreck. So do all the staff, actually—even Hardwick looks furious, like he might punch someone, and Hardwick's a gentle guy, the kind of guy who gardens and makes dad jokes.

All my muscles seem to seize up and go limp at the same time. I'm not sure I could move even if I wanted to.

This is bad. This is really bad.

Kendal and Gwen clutch at me, and I try to stand firm, to not let them see that I'm terrified too. Someone has to be the strong one around here.

"Students," Hardwick says, raising his voice to reach all of us. There's a scratchiness, a roughness to his tone, that makes it seem like he's having to force the words out. "If you would all gather in the assembly hall, please."

Everyone looks like they're bursting with questions, but nobody dares to say anything. A few admins split off to gather the students who didn't wait on the quad, and we all shuffle into the auditorium like ghosts and take our seats. Gwen sits beside me, and I can feel her trembling.

I expect Hardwick to walk up to the podium, but instead, another man gets up there. He's wearing a sleek suit and a badge that denotes him as a high-ranking member of the Circuit. He looks like he was carved out of stone, like I could dig and dig and dig and I wouldn't find any trace of warmth or softness in him.

"That's William Staley," Kendal whispers quickly to me, her voice rushed like she's running out of time.

That's sort of how it feels. Like we're running out of time.

Or maybe it's already run out.

Up on stage, the other Circuit officers fan out, and as they do, I realize I recognize one of them. It's Aurora.

She's wearing a gray suit, her white-blond hair slicked back into a ponytail as usual, but she looks... concerned.

Anyone else would probably look outright distressed, but Aurora's always been cool and businesslike. She's the officer who came to see me after my magic sparked and gave me the choice to give it up or come here, and she's not exactly the warm and fuzzy type. Her face is usually pretty expressionless, actually.

But right now, she looks worried.

And that worries *me*.

"Students," the man named Staley says. His voice is gruff and hard as a rock. "Thank you for joining us today."

Sure. As if we had a choice in the matter. My lips press together, and I'm overcome by the nearly irresistible urge to flip him off.

"I'm sorry to distress you with such news," Staley says, not sounding sorry at all, or any other emotion for that matter, "but I am here to tell you that after great deliberation, it is decided that we must shut down Griffin Academy."

...no.

*No!*

Gwen lets out a small whimper, and Kendal's entire body seems to lock up. I'm not entirely sure why I do it, but I grab my phone and start recording, angling it carefully so that it's hidden in my lap but I can still pick up Staley's face on the screen.

"Since the academy is closing down, we'll be transferring you all to a temporary holding facility just outside of Portland," Staley continues. "Because none of you have passed your final exams and been granted your license, you are considered untrained Unpredictables, and so we cannot let you back into society until your magic has been controlled."

Ice slides down my spine, and I hear someone scream—I recognize the voice. I heard her screaming in pain once as her magic was ripped from her, and I know she's thinking of having to go through that horrific experience all over again.

Tandy.

The Circuit officers seem to have expected this kind of reaction, because they start moving immediately, walking off the stage and down into the rows of seats in the audience, surrounding us. Other people are screaming now too, shouting and crying. One student tries to punch a Circuit officer, Gwen's sobbing, and Kendal is white as a sheet. It's chaos all around—and I'm torn between feeling numb and wanting to vomit.

If the school is shutting down, having our powers “controlled” can only mean one thing.

They’re going to take our magic from us.

## CHAPTER 9

**M**y first instinct is to fight. My sonic boom is deadly, and I can mirror other people's powers—my cuff is still off from fight class, so I have all my magic at my disposal right now.

I could get out. I could run, find Asher, Cam, and Dmitri, and make a break for it.

But what about Roman? And Maddy? What about all the scared students around me?

Besides, the officers look like they're braced for us to rebel. Fighting back would just be doing what they expect. It would only feed their prejudice, give credence to their belief that Unpredictables are inherently dangerous.

Instead, I grab Gwen and hold her to me, comforting her—and using her body as a shield as I keep filming with my phone. This has to be shown to the world. This has to get out. If I can get this video to the guys, they'll upload it onto the internet, and the whole magical community will know what's happening to us.

If the Circuit is really going to do this, I'm not letting them do it in secret.

I keep a hold on Gwen, hiding my phone behind my back with one hand as a Circuit staff member affixes a cuff to my other wrist, repressing my magic. Alyssa is loudly threatening to call her parents, promising that the wrath of the Marquet family will fall on the Circuit if they go through with this—and for once, I'm grateful for her bitchiness and her rich family. Not that I'm at all confident they can actually stop this. It feels too big for that by now.

Tandy's having a full-on panic attack, hyperventilating, screaming, struggling, and Erin's ripped away from her so officials can sedate her. Erin starts yelling too, because hey, that's her girlfriend they're taking, and I keep my camera on all of it.

I film them rounding us up and putting us on buses. I film them walking up and down the aisles with magic crackling between their fingers, ready to blast any one of us who looks like we're going to fling ourselves out the window.

I film them taking us to a facility covered in magical wards and placing us in massive dorm rooms with barrack-style bunk beds.

We're finally put into a line, and they start confiscating our phones from us. *Fuck*. I film them taking the phones of some people ahead of me, and then I end the video and send it on the group chat.

I want to explain, to say more about what's happening, but there's no time. I just send six words.

**Me:** *Protect Maddy. I love you all.*

The video sends along with the message. I'm pretty damn sure the Circuit officers will be checking our phones for shit like this, so I hit "delete" on the video, then go into "recently deleted" and get rid of it there too—just in time.

Kendal's ahead of me, and I can tell she's stalling as they confiscate her phone. I know she noticed me filming earlier, and she's been helping cover for me ever since we got here.

When the redhead girl steps away from the Circuit officers, I hand my phone over, then coax Gwen to come along with us. She's no longer crying, just sniffing and staring blankly at the ground ahead of us as we shuffle along.

God, I hope the guys get that video out. I hope they look after Maddy. She's not Unpredictable, but I'm the only family she has, the only family left. I promised her I would never leave her, that I'd look after myself—fuck, did I make a mistake by not fighting? Should I have done what I could to get out and then run to her?

It's too late now. Second-guessing won't get me anywhere.

All I can do is pray that the people I love are all right.

The conditions here aren't awful. There's no privacy, but the guys and girls are split up into separate dorms, and we're told there's a dining hall and a library and an exercise yard.

Feels a lot like a prison, if you ask me. A nice one, but still. A prison.

We're brought into the dining hall for a meal first thing, since we were just on a damn bus for a few hours without food, and I'm surprised to find the majority of the administrators, professors, and school staff are here too. Tamlin looks slightly rumpled, and I catch Professor Goldstein standing near Hardwick, wiping the lenses of her cat-eye glasses with the hem of her shirt.

What are they all doing here? They passed their exams, so they're legally allowed to use their magic. They've proven they can control it. So it makes no sense that the Circuit would make them stay here too.

Before I can come up with an answer to that mystery, my gaze lands on Roman, and I forget about everything else.

"Elliot." He yanks several people out of the way and grabs me, hauling me to him.

I claw at his shoulders, clinging to him, my body shaking with adrenaline I didn't even realize I was holding in check. I bury my face in his chest and breathe him in. God, I'm so glad we declared our relationship to Dean Hardwick last semester. There's no fucking way I'd be able to let go of Roman right now, to pretend he was anything less to me than a man I love.

"Thank God, you're okay," he whispers.

"I'm fine," I reply, my voice muffled by the fabric of his shirt. "I filmed all of it and sent it to the others. They can upload it online, get other people seeing it."

Roman kisses the top of my head. "You clever rebel."

He's trying to tease me, to praise me, but that thread of worry doesn't leave his voice, and he's hugging me so hard he's in danger of crushing me. He's worried.

I can't blame him. This is spiraling out of control, out of the hands of the staff, out of *everyone's* hands.

"Why are you here?" I pull away just enough to peer up into his face, needing to see his eyes. "Why are all of you here?"

"Protest," Roman says grimly, still keeping a firm grip on me too. "We're standing in solidarity with our students."

It's sweet, and it makes me love him even more, if that's possible. It makes warmth flood my chest for all of the school staff and admins. But I know it's bigger than that too. A few years' difference, and Roman could be



like me, a student unable to even take his exams to prove himself, with his magic in danger of being ripped away from him.

Same with any of the administrators, even the ones who graduated a long time ago. They all know that, in a different set of circumstances, this could've been their fate.

I'm so damn glad the guys graduated last year. They're okay. They'll be okay. Roman will be okay. Maddy will be okay.

They'll be fine. And that's what I need to cling to.

Roman isn't allowed to stay with me—we can eat meals together, but then we're separated for bed, in different dorms, and there's a strict curfew. Blank-faced Circuit officers patrol the compound to enforce it.

Yeah, just like a vacation, right?

Fucking bastards.

Everyone in the dorm is quiet. I sit up with Erin, the two of us sitting silent on her bed, until late at night when the door opens and two officers bring in Tandy and a couple others who were sedated. Tandy's a zombie, heavy and loose-limbed, staring dully into nothing. Erin strokes her hair as we lay her down onto the bed.

"What did they do?" she whispers, grabbing her girlfriend's limp hand as tears glisten in her eyes. "What did they do to you, Tan?"

I don't have an answer for her. I don't have an answer for anyone. I just sit up with her and give her what comfort I can as Tandy mumbles and babbles nonsense, until they both fall asleep.

Then I go back to my own bed. I have the bunk above Kendal, and she's still up too, Gwen's head in her lap. She's been singing her lullabies.

"We have to do something," Kendal whispers before I climb the ladder to the top bunk.

I'm surprised to hear those words coming from Kendal, of all people, seeing as she's such a wallflower. She hates confrontation. But when I duck my head to look at her, I see that her shoulders are square and her jaw set. Fear still clouds her eyes, but it's not tamping down her determination.

"We will," I promise her.

I just don't know what.



But the very next day—I start to get answers.

There isn't much for us to do, so we're set loose in the exercise yard to get some fresh air. We're not exactly prisoners, even though it sure feels a lot like it, and it's clear this was a bit of a last-minute deal since nobody seems to know what the hell to do with us. There's no schedule or planned activities or fields they can put us in to get cheap labor.

I'm hanging out by the wall of the building in the shade, watching as Tamlin organizes everyone to do exercises. Of course she's managing to conduct a physical fitness class even after we've been arrested and detained overnight.

Yeah, yeah, technically we're not arrested—but *only* technically.

*God, I hope the guys got my message. I really wish I still had my damn phone.*

The door to the building is several yards away from where I'm leaning against the wall. It opens, and out steps Aurora.

I just about choke on my own spit seeing her. I didn't expect her to be in a place like this. The rest of the Circuit higher-ups—Staley included—bailed before we got here, and now it's mostly lower level officers monitoring us and organizing things. The blonde woman looks horribly out of place next to the rest of us in her neatly pressed and tailored suit. Even the other Circuit officers here look like beat cops in uniform. Not whatever Hugo Boss thing she's sporting.

My surprise only heightens when Aurora scans the crowd in the yard, spots me, and walks over.

*Oh, great.* I feel like I'm going to throw up. I do not want to have to deal with Aurora and smile and pretend everything's fine—but what else am I supposed to do? I can't exactly fight back with my cuff activated and a bunch of Circuit guards around.

And more than being unsure what to do or how to handle her... I feel betrayed. Aurora wasn't exactly someone I had warm and fuzzy feelings for, but I trusted her not to be horrible, not to buy into the growing sentiment that Unpredictables are a problem. She strongly encouraged me to go to Griffin and to not give up my magic. I thought she at least thought we were okay as a group—even if I probably gave her a hard time as an individual.

"Miss Sinclair." Aurora stops less than a foot away from me, her voice quiet. "Elliot. Might I have a word in private?"

I see some people glancing over at us, Kendal among them. Roman's not out here—he's with Hardwick and a few others in the administration area arguing for better accommodations for us—and it's probably a good thing, or he'd be right in Aurora's face.

"Why?" I ask, but even as I say it I know that's a stupid question.

Whether I meant to or not, I've become a rallying point for Unpredictables. And a poster child for why Unpredictables are dangerous. Both sides want to use me, which is a barrel of laughs, and I'd really like to just kind of disappear into the woodwork, thanks.

Aurora probably wants to talk to me about that. How the Circuit would like to use me as an example, in either a good or a bad way, for this whole "taking our magic" business. *Whee.*

Aurora raises an eyebrow. She's poised, like Professor Tamlin, but Tamlin has this warm and friendly air to her, like a big sister who comes in every so often and sweeps you away on trips to the French Riviera. Aurora's poised like a block of ice, like that intimidating principal you had in elementary school.

"I'd like to talk about some delicate matters that I'd prefer everyone else not overhear. You know how gossip spreads under ordinary circumstances, and in a tense situation like this, it's even worse."

She turns, indicating with her hand for me to enter the building ahead of her.

"Oh, so I don't really have a choice in this," I snark as I go inside. "Good to know."

Aurora looks like she's straining not to roll her eyes as she steps in after me, then cuts ahead to lead me down the hallway.

She takes me into what looks like the infirmary, and then into a small office that looks like it's meant for examinations.

"Gee, doc, I'm actually feeling really great," I tell her.

Aurora sighs. Then she raises her voice, shifting her focus to the wall behind me. "Brodie, if you could please come in?"

I don't know who Brodie is, but I don't bother asking since I assume I'm about to find out. There's a slight pause while we wait for whoever it is to enter, and Aurora looks at me the whole time like I'm a puppy that peed on the rug.

Now it's my turn to barely resist rolling my eyes.

*Right, because I'm not allowed to be a little upset about this whole "arrested and detained" thing.*

But before the awkwardness can swell to unmanageable levels, the door at the other end of the small room opens, and a young man steps in. He looks to be in his late twenties, around Roman's age or maybe a couple of years older. Tall, dark blond hair, kind of a scruffy look about him, with weary gray-blue eyes.

I take a small step back. This Brodie guy looks nice enough, but I've learned that people who look nice can actually be plenty nasty. Raul seemed helpless and sweet and was my friend. Alyssa looks like a magazine model. Johnson looked like your friendly, lollipop-gifting uncle.

Brodie sees me and gives a small, tired half-wave. He looks like he hasn't slept much in the past few days, to which I say, *hey, join the club.*

"I'm sorry I couldn't arrange for a better location to meet," Aurora says, stepping forward smoothly, "but I can't afford to take you off campus. If anyone asks, we've been talking to you about your notoriety in the Unpredictable community."

"Notoriety I didn't ask for, by the way," I point out, taking a small step back to put distance between myself and both of the room's other occupants. "And who is this guy, anyway? Why should I trust him? Or you? What's this about?"

"You can trust Brodie," Aurora tells me. "He's Unpredictable, like you. One of the few Unpredictables working in the government." She looks at Brodie. "Perhaps you could tell Miss Sinclair what you told me."

Brodie shifts from foot to foot, looking a little nervous. "Ah, yeah, so... I work in the Circuit. Not a whole lot of people like us in there, like Aurora said. It's been a bad couple of days, I gotta tell you. The Circuit's under a lot of pressure to crack down and require magic wipes for all the Griffin students—to just take their powers away from them. Some people are even saying *all* Unpredictables should be rounded up and purged of magic—even those who've graduated. They're insisting our kind can't be trusted, students or not."

*What?*

That makes my stomach heave. Roman, Dmitri, Cam, Asher—they've all graduated. I thought they were safe, that at least they'd be okay even if everything else goes to shit, but—if they're going to round up all Unpredictables—

“They can’t do that,” I burst out in fury. “Those people proved they can control their magic!”

“The fear isn’t that they can’t control it,” Aurora says, her voice calm but sharp. “It’s that they *can*. People fear Unpredictables will choose to use their powers for evil, for disruption and destruction.”

“Super,” I deadpan. “Is that why you called me in here? To tell me it’s going to be even worse for us than we feared?”

“No,” Aurora says, with an edge in her voice that suggests she’s at the end of her patience. She looks over at Brodie again.

The tall blond man twists the bottom of his plaid button-up shirt around in his hands. “So I’ve been doing research on Unpredictables for my division, because the Circuit needs to be prepared and needs to know where the Unpredictables are. And I was hoping that by tracking down more Unpredictables who’ve graduated and gone back out into the world, we could prove that most of us are really good people, not any worse than any other kind of magic user. I mean, we’re all human, but we’re not predisposed to be these angry, anarchistic...”

“The point, please, Brodie,” Aurora interrupts, sounding tired.

“Ah, right, yes. Well, so I’m doing my research, and I start to notice that I can’t really find a lot of Unpredictables. I mean, I know we’re in the minority anyway, there aren’t a lot of us to start out with—but, I mean, there really, *really* aren’t many of us around that I can find.”

Brodie has this sort of energetic nerd vibe, as if his brain is constantly firing on all cylinders, and his poor mouth just has to try to keep up. I do my best to keep up too, leaning forward as if that’ll help me catch all the words streaming out of his mouth in a torrent.

Because if I’m hearing right, what he’s saying is bad. Really bad.

“It’s like after graduating from Griffin, Unpredictables have started vanishing,” he continues without pausing for breath. “So I start looking up names, and wouldn’t you know, I found a lot of ’em... in the obituary sections of papers. By my calculations—and it’s not one hundred percent accurate, it’s just me doing my best math on my own—but from what I can make out, the statistics are pretty grim. Out of all registered Unpredictables who graduated and passed their tests, seventy-eight percent of them have died or just disappeared off the face of the map since they got their diploma.”

That makes a shiver run down my spine like a mouse with cold feet. “You... but... that’s a huge number. That’s more than three quarters of us.”

Brodie nods. “Yeah, it’s pretty concerning that it’s so many of us, and it’s the ‘disappeared’ bit that really gets me. As for the deaths, a lot of times I couldn’t find a reason, but a good portion of ’em seemed to be accidents—and if you ask me, a bunch of people in a particular group dying from a series of accidents? That sounds like the plot to a murder mystery film.”

“This went unnoticed for years,” Aurora says crisply, “because so many Unpredictables fade into obscurity anyway. Many are disowned by their families, they take up new names, move across the country, or to a new country altogether. Many want to retain their magic but will go somewhere else so they can pose as a normal magic user, or stay outside of most magical society altogether. Tracking down Unpredictables with newly sparked magic has always been the Circuit’s main priority, so monitoring them after graduation was simply not something our administration put much effort into. Why waste the resources? We assumed it was because they had drawn the short stick and were dealing with it as best they could.”

“But now you’re telling me... it looks like someone’s been targeting us.” I speak slowly, feeling out the words even as I say them. “For years. And not one person investigating any of these deaths thought they were suspicious?”

“Even if they did,” Aurora counters, “if you’re an officer investigating someone’s death, do you look for a country-wide conspiracy against them, or are you going to look for the jealous business partner, the spurned wife, the abused son? You’re going to look close to home if you suspect a murder; you’re not going to immediately jump to conspiracy theories.”

“It only becomes obvious when you look at Unpredictables as a whole group and take the statistics into account,” Brodie puts in. “It wasn’t until I had a long list of dead or missing Unpredictables staring me in the face that I started to see, you know, that there was something wrong here.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” I shake my head, blinking at the two of them as horror numbs my body. “What am I supposed to do with this knowledge?”

Aurora holds in a sigh—I can tell by the way her chest goes still. When she speaks, her tone is careful. “I just want you to be aware. This situation is... nebulous and more dangerous than any of us knew, and we’re all just trying to stay ahead of the curve here. I want you to know this because

nobody else is going to tell you. And because whether you like it or not, and you obviously don't, Miss Sinclair, you are the person around whom everyone else seems to be rallying. So forgive me for wanting you to understand that our hands are rapidly being tied, and that we're starting to realize there could be something else very sinister at play here."

"More sinister than a whackjob trying to kill us off for two years?" I shoot back.

The blonde woman fixes me with a stern look. "I'd try not to be so flippant, if I were you. The Circuit is still deciding what to do with Unpredictables. There's a ticking clock over all of our heads, not just yours, and if we don't get the school reopened soon, the Circuit will have to act. I believe that action will be to take your magic. All of you."

That shuts me up. Stops me dead in my tracks. Sucks the air from my lungs.

*Well, shit.*

## CHAPTER 10

**O**kay. So, someone clearly has to do something.

And... I think we all know where this is headed.

If I knew someone else who could speak up, I'd ask them to do it... but who is there? Erin's taking care of Tandy, Kendal's too timid, Gwen's younger than I am—and I barely know her—Tom wouldn't know how to be articulate if a dictionary hit him in the face, and Roman and Hardwick are clearly already doing all they can.

Maybe I could ask Tamlin, since she's so put together...

But that would mean I'd have to tell her what I just heard from Aurora and Brodie. And even though Aurora didn't openly command me to keep it a secret, I can read between the lines. This isn't the sort of thing I should blab about indiscriminately.

She decided to reveal this secret to me for some reason, either as a sign of trust or because she wants me to do something with the information. But the worst possible thing I could do with it is stir up more panic and anger by telling everyone that apparently our kind have been dying off post-graduation and nobody cared enough to figure that out until now.

I'm not just going to sit on that knowledge, though.

If you ask me, I think it's our favorite Unpredictable-hating nutjob who's been making the Unpredictables disappear. If this has been happening for years, and the attacks on the school only started two years ago, that means he probably decided to up his game and just go straight to the source, attacking the very school where Unpredictables train.

This all feels like a long con. Prejudice against an entire group of people doesn't come out of nowhere. It takes time to build—time to twist people's



minds into hatred and suspicion.

Maybe... if he started all this, maybe ending him will end this bullshit too. I know the anti-Unpredictable movement has grown beyond just one person now. But if you cut off the head of the snake, get rid of the leader, then the rest of it flounders. People won't know what to do.

At the very least, we won't have this guy or his minions attacking the school anymore, right?

We're allowed one phone call a day, and I use mine to call Maddy. She's apparently already heard from the guys—they uploaded the video, just like I'd hoped.

"The world is going nuts," Maddy tells me. "We're holding a protest. Justin's leading it, and we're doing it as a sit-in, taking over the dining hall. Are you okay?"

"I'm all right. I'm holding up okay. Some others aren't." Glancing around to make sure none of the Circuit officers are within earshot, I lower my voice. "Hey, tell the guys—I'm not sure they're going to be safe much longer, either. I want you to tell them to be on their guard. Can you do that for me?"

There's a long pause before she answers, and I can practically feel her unspoken fears beating at my eardrums.

"I will. But, Ellie... you have to stay safe."

"Of course, Mads. Always. Someone has to look after your sorry butt, right?"

She laughs and snuffles at the same time, and I promise her I love her and that I'll take care of myself. She promises the same, and even though I'm pretty sure we're both lying a little, it helps.

When my phone call is finished, it's only a couple doors down from the administration rooms.

Which was exactly what I planned.

The Circuit officers who are arranging these phone calls are busy at the moment dealing with a second-year named Chad. The guy is being a spoiled brat about his phone call—as if we couldn't all get this privilege taken away if he doesn't keep his shit together—and I take the chance.

I make a break for it.

One of the officers lets out a yell as he notices that I'm booking it down the hallway, but I reach the door to the administration area before he can stop me, shouldering it open.

There are a few cubicles, and then a large meeting room a little farther on. I can hear voices coming from inside that room.

Balling my hands into fists, I march toward the door, pausing only briefly when I reach it. I'm about to knock, but then I stop.

*You know what, to hell with niceties.*

Lifting a foot, I kick the door open.

Hardwick and about a half-dozen Circuit officers gape at me while Roman smirks as if to say *yeah, that's my girl*.

"I demand a meeting with the Circuit representatives." My voice is firm and strong even though my nerves are jangling. "As the student representative."

Everyone stares at me. "Are you... serious, young lady?" one of the officers finally asks.

I stride forward. "Yeah. I am. My name is Elliot Sinclair. I'm a third-year student at Griffin, and I know you all probably saw me in the Trials livestreams representing the school. I've helped repel the attacks on our school four times now, every single time this person—the *same* person—tried to come after us."

The room is quiet. No one except Roman appears to be at all pleased that I'm here, but they haven't kicked me out yet. Before they can decide to do just that, I forge ahead.

"You clearly have no idea what to do with us, do you? If you really wanted to get rid of our powers, you would be lining us up right now for the magic wipe. If you wanted to keep us in school, you wouldn't have shut Griffin down. But we're here instead, and you're in limbo just as much as we are, I'm betting."

A few people shift uncomfortably in their seats.

*Yup.* My guess was dead on. All the attacks on Griffin have put a spotlight on Unpredictables, and the Circuit probably felt forced to take action. But now they're stuck dealing with the consequences of that action, and there's no easy answer.

"Thought so." I take another step forward, meeting the gazes of everyone at the table. "So while you're waiting around and pulling your hair trying to sort out this mess, why don't you let me go after this guy? He's been a thorn in your side just as much as he's been a threat to us, taking power from you, stirring up trouble, and turning two factions of our

society against each other. He's been the mastermind behind four terrorist attacks now—and don't give me that look, that's exactly what they are.”

I see a few Circuit officers nod, the movements small. Maybe some of them have been privately thinking what I just said aloud.

“Miss Sinclair is an admirable student and person,” Dean Hardwick says, surprising me by speaking up. “And she's right. She's been instrumental in stopping the attacks each time. If anyone has a chance of finding this man, it's her.”

*Yes! Thank you, Hardwick.*

“You want this guy out of your way just as much as we do,” I point out. “If you let me try to find him and stop him, then it's one of your big problems out of the way without you having to lift a finger—and if I fail, then it's no skin off your back. On the other hand, if I defeat this guy, you've got a good rallying point to say that Unpredictables aren't so bad, and you can re-open the school. If I don't, then you can go back to your decision-making and nobody will be the wiser about what happened.

“Without this guy on our backs, the school could re-open. I know you know he's the one behind all of this. He's the reason the anti-Unpredictable movement has grown so strong. He's the reason for all the chaos on campus.” I put my hands on my hips. “If I can stop him, the chaos and the attacks will stop. You'll be able to justify re-opening the school, and you won't have to face the backlash that would come if you tried to wipe all of our magic.”

“I agree with her,” Hardwick says, once again sticking up for me. I'm a little shocked he's being so vocal about this, but maybe I shouldn't be. When I first met Hardwick, I thought he was some pale, boring suit without a personality.

But he's really fought hard for all of us this whole time. I think maybe I should start giving him a lot more credit for that.

“I can also vouch for her,” Roman adds. His tone is businesslike, and I know that right now, we have to pretend we're no more than teacher and student. “You know how much scrutiny I was under in my younger years. None of you trusted that I could handle my powers, and I like to think I proved you all wrong. I hope that my word now means something when I tell you this is an offer we should take her up on. Elliot's been the one to face this man down on multiple occasions, and she's defeated him every time. That's not something to dismiss lightly.”

The officials at the table all hesitate, glancing around. It's as if they're looking to one another to see who will speak first, because none of them are sure what to say—and no one wants to be the one to give a wrong answer.

*Jesus, I'm surrounded by incompetents.*

"I did just kick your door down," I add dryly. "Clearly, I'm not going to take no for an answer."

"Diplomacy is something she could work on," Hardwick concedes, and I see Roman stifle a grin, "but I hardly think diplomacy is what's going to be needed in dealing with this individual."

"We'll discuss this," the officer at the head of the table says. "If you three will please give us a moment."

Hardwick grabs Roman and me each by our elbows and starts leading us out, clearly thinking that if he doesn't physically make us, we won't be going anywhere.

And, well, I mean, he's not entirely wrong.

Once we're outside, the dean heaves a sigh, pursing his lips as he meets my gaze. "You couldn't have been a little more humble and deferential?"

"She's got every right to be blunt," Roman points out. "And now she's shown them she's the kind of person who doesn't take shit, and that's what they need to see if they're going to believe she can take down this asshole."

"Who we still don't have a name or identity for." Hardwick runs a hand down his face before turning back to me. "Do you really want to be starting from scratch like this?"

I swallow. *No, I don't. But...*

"I don't see what other choice I have," I tell him honestly. "Someone has to do something. They're going to take away our magic; I just know it. Maybe they don't even know they're going to do that yet, maybe they think they're still deciding, but I know which way the tide is turning, and I bet you do too. I'm not going to stand for it."

Both men's faces harden, worry glinting in their eyes. I'm not wrong about this, and they know it.

A humorless chuckle falls from my lips. "What else do you want me to do? Lead a protest? People are already doing that. Beg and plead and ask nicely and hope that they listen?" I shake my head. "I'm going to go for the cause of all the trouble, and that's this guy."

Hardwick sighs. "Well, you do seem to be our best hope for taking him down. Whoever he might be."

Before I can respond to that, the door to the meeting room opens, and one of the officers sticks her head back out.

“If you three could please come back in,” she says, her tone betraying nothing.

My heart hammers in my throat as I follow the officer inside. Roman and Hardwick are right behind me. If they’re nervous, they’re doing a good job of not showing it. I hope I look even half as composed as they do.

“After some deliberation,” a broad-shouldered officer says, “we’ve decided that we will allow you to try to track down and defeat the source of this problem once and for all.”

*Holy shit. Really?* I was honestly expecting to be told “no”. I was already formulating my next round of arguments and counter-arguments to try to force the issue.

“But,” the officer continues, “we can’t allow this situation to continue as it is forever. We have to make a decision about all of the Unpredictables being held here, one way or another. We can’t hold them indefinitely, nor can we allow them back out into society without the proper training.” He presses his lips together. “And so we’re giving you one week. If you can find this person and eliminate him in that time, then we can allow the school to be re-opened, and nobody will have their magic taken from them.”

*One week? Are they fucking insane?*

These idiots have been chasing their tails trying to find a lead on this guy for *how long*, and they expect me to do it in just one week? Do I look like some kind of miracle worker to them?

A million snarky responses hover on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow them all back down. I have a feeling the only other option on the table is for me to not go after this guy at all, and that’s much worse.

So, fine. If they want to give me a week, then I’ll take a week. I’m going to make a week work, I’m going to find this guy, and they’re going to be groveling over how grateful they are when this is all over. They’re going to let us finish our schooling and keep our magic, or I’m going to fucking die trying, dammit.

“All right. I accept. But I have one question,” I say. “Since you’re only giving me a week, can I put a small team together to help me?”

The Circuit officials all look at each other again, but this time, a few are already nodding.

The broad-shouldered man—Stephen Booker, if I remember correctly—is the one to speak. “Of qualified individuals, yes.”

*Oh, thank fuck.* That will actually give me a fighting chance.

I immediately list off Dmitri, Asher, and Cam’s names, explaining how they’d contribute to my team. Part of me doesn’t want to bring the guys in on this at all, but I know they’d never forgive me if I didn’t. And besides, I’m not lying to the Circuit officers about how competent and skilled all three men are.

“They’re recently graduated, all excellent in combat, and powerful,” I conclude.

The guys are approved quickly and with little fuss, and Hardwick makes the call to have them come in since I still don’t have my cell phone.

While we’re waiting, my cuff is taken off. I flex my wrist, rubbing at the skin that was covered by the metal brace. Over the past two years, I’ve gotten used to wearing the cuff, but it still feels so damn good to have magic at my fingertips again.

“You’ll need a handler,” Booker says staunchly. “Someone who can make sure you stay in line and keep your magic under control. Roman, I’m sure you would be best for the job, given your background.”

Roman killed his family accidentally as a child, when his death powers sparked. Most Unpredictables get their powers in their early twenties, later in life, as opposed to everyone else who gets them in their teenage years around the same time as puberty. But a very small number of Unpredictables have it the other way around—their powers spark much, much earlier, when they’re young kids.

After Roman killed his family, the magical world was split over what to do with him. Luckily, a necromancer who studied that kind of magic took him in, raised him, and trained him. It’s why Roman’s so good at magic, so in control, and so powerful. He’s always said that I’m very powerful too, but I’ve got nothing on him. The amount of raw magic inside us might be similar, but his unbending control puts him in a league of his own. I’ve seen what he can do, and he could beat most other magic users with both hands tied behind his back.

It’s pretty damn hot, if you ask me.

Roman looks slightly offended at this—which means he’s actually *extremely* offended and is struggling not to show it.

“I don’t think Miss Sinclair needs a handler,” he says, his voice low and even. “She’s proven herself to be more than competent on her own.”

“Nevertheless, we’d like it if she had someone supervising her. A keeper, of sorts.”

Roman blinks a few times, a sure sign he’s trying to hold in his temper. I don’t blame him. I’m feeling pretty damn offended myself at this whole thing but, what am I supposed to do? And I’d rather have it be Roman than some faceless Circuit officer I don’t even know, some stranger who’s going to look at me like I’m dirt on the bottom of their shoes.

And hey, at least this way I get to have him with me. All of my guys will be with me. If there’s a silver lining to this whole mess, that’s it.

Not to mention—it feels so goddamn good to have my cuff off. It’s like I can breathe again. Roman supposedly will be able to put it back on my wrist if need be, but I know for a fact he’s not going to. I’ve got enough control over my powers now, and he wouldn’t want to shackle me anyway.

Roman must’ve just gone through the same thought process I did, because he catches my gaze briefly before turning back to Booker.

“Understood. Of course I would be willing to accompany Ms. Sinclair on her hunt.”

The Circuit officer gives a sharp nod. “Good. You’ll leave tomorrow.”  
*Hoo boy. Here we go.*



**T**he guys arrive the next day. I can see Cam and Dmitri practically straining not to rush up and hug me. Asher’s more controlled, but I know he’s feeling the same impulse they are. So am I.

I wish I could wrap my arms around each of them and smother them with kisses, but we have to be controlled here. I didn’t request them for my team just because they’re my boyfriends—it’s not like this is going to be some romantic vacation for all of us. But if we get all lovey-dovey in front of the Circuit officials, they’ll assume that’s exactly why I asked for these three, and I’ll be in massive trouble before I’ve even begun.

Roman meets us in the administration area of the complex, and the two of us catch the others up on what we’ve learned. Speaking in low voices, I tell them everything Brodie told me about the vast number of

disappearances and deaths among Unpredictables, and how nobody was really aware of it until he started investigating. The guys' faces go pale, just like I'm sure mine did when I first learned about this. The numbers are pretty fucking staggering.

I can't help but feel like there has to be some connection between all those Unpredictable disappearances and the attacks on Griffin Academy, but I don't know what it is. Could one person really be responsible for this much death and destruction? Or is there a wider conspiracy at work here? How many people are we up against?

Regardless of the answer to that, we have to start our search somewhere. The best place to begin is by finding the man behind the attacks on our school, so we dive right into the hunt—with only seven days to locate the asshole and bring him down, we can't afford to waste a second.

Our first order of business is finding out who this fucker is. And unfortunately, there's only one way we know of to do that.

Roman drives us to the Circuit facility where Raul and Johnson are being held. Unlike our facility, it's an *actual* prison, and my stomach knots and my palms sweat as we pile out of the car. No matter how bad it's been for us in our holding facility these last few days, this is worse.

I'm also not looking forward to seeing Raul. I thought he was my friend, and from what I understand, he was all alone in the world and this jerk took advantage of that. He manipulated the poor kid into anger, brainwashed him into thinking acts of terrorism and murder were okay.

Even though Raul killed someone, even though he betrayed my trust, I can't help but feel a little pity for him. There are too many things about the scrawny kid that remind me of myself. If I hadn't had Maddy, if things had gone a little differently in my life, maybe I would've been open to the same kind of manipulation he fell victim to.

We enter the prison and head toward the back, with one of the guards leading the way. Roman's stone-faced, and Dmitri looks pissed. Only Cam seems at ease.

"Of course you'd be fine at a time like this," I tease him under my breath.

He nudges me with his elbow. "Hey, if there's one thing I've learned, it's that people like to have power over you by scaring you. So, if you make it a point to show that you're not scared, that this is all casual for you... then they don't have power over you anymore."



Huh. I hadn't thought of it that way.

"So what are we supposed to do here?" Dmitri asks, and his tone isn't snarky so much as genuinely desperate for an answer. "They've been interrogating these two for months. Trying to crack them. It hasn't worked."

"I can try." Asher's voice is soft.

We all pause in the hallway and look at him.

"Asher," Roman says gravely, "you have to understand. The Circuit has been trying to break the magical wards on Johnson and Raul's minds for months. Whatever spell this man put on them, it's strong."

Ash straightens his spine, determination glinting in his green eyes.

"I can handle it," he says, his voice still quiet but firm. "I want to at least try. What other chance do we have?" He looks at each of us in turn. "Do any of us have better ideas of how to get a lead on the mastermind's identity?"

I certainly don't have any better ideas. And given that I have a bad habit of flinging myself headfirst into danger, I don't think I'm in a position to judge Asher if he wants to give this a shot. It's not like he's risking his life... as far as I know.

"Will it be dangerous?" I ask, looking at Roman. Asher wouldn't lie to me if I asked him, but he might sugarcoat the truth.

"It'll be exhausting," Roman says, his gaze flicking to the quiet, calm man beside me. "But as long as you stop before you expend all of your energy, you should be all right. And we'll stop you before that happens."

Asher nods, his jaw set, looking determined.

None of us want to face Raul. I'm not an expert on the whole "breaking into someone's mind" deal, but I can't imagine it's fun for anyone involved, and even though he is technically a murderer... none of us hate Raul. He's just a kid, he was alone and scared, and someone gave him purpose and mentored him and twisted his mind. How is that truly his fault?

Johnson, on the other hand...

I've got zero guilt over whatever pain he might feel.

The guards have Asher go into the interrogation room alone, while the rest of us watch in an adjoining room through one-way glass, like we're police officers in a cop show. The room I'm looking into is bare, with just a table and two simple chairs. Johnson sits on one side, facing the door. His hands are cuffed to the table so he can't move, and even though I know he deserves it, my stomach twists like I might be sick. I can't help but wonder

if in a week I'll be strapped to a table like that as my magic is taken from me.

Asher is led in by a guard and sits down opposite Johnson. "Thank you," he murmurs to the guard, ever polite.

Johnson glares at Asher with a fuckton of hatred, like he's wishing that his look alone could poison the brown-haired mage and kill him.

I don't know how long it took our mystery man to brainwash Raul, but I doubt he had much trouble at all persuading Johnson to do what he did at the Trials. The ex-provost was probably leaning that way anyway—and with such a powerful mind and magic like Johnson has, it would have been too difficult to completely dominate him. Johnson acted, at least partially, of his own free will.

He truly hates Unpredictables, and I hate him right back for it.

"Well. I see the Circuit still hasn't done the right thing," the bland-looking middle-aged man says, his voice a hiss. "Taking your unclean magic away."

Asher ignores him, because my boyfriend is a better person than I am. I don't even realize I'm growling low in my throat until Cam takes my hand, squeezing it gently.

I blow out a breath, squeezing Cam's hand back as Ash rests his palms on the table, then closes his eyes.

For a moment, nothing happens. The room is completely silent, its two occupants as still as statues. Johnson's sitting there looking smug, like a toad, an awful little smirk twisting his lips.

And then... the look on his face changes.

It grows concentrated, his brow furrowing. Asher's face is twitching, his jaw clenching and unclenching rhythmically. Long minutes tick by, and sweat starts to bead on both of their foreheads.

Johnson's face is going red. I clutch Cam's hand so hard I must be cutting off the circulation, but he doesn't seem to mind. Asher's pressing his hands hard onto the table, like he's using it to brace himself, and I want to go in there, I want to hold him or try to feed some of my strength and power into him. He can't keep this up much longer, he looks like he's about to pass out—

Then Johnson gives a small, odd noise of pain and anger. Asher slumps back in his chair with a gasp, his chest heaving, sweat sliding down his temples. His eyes fly open.

He looks over at the mirror, even though he can't see us, and nods.

*Oh, thank fuck.*

He's got something.

## CHAPTER 11

**B**efore we go, we're allowed to meet with a few others to say goodbye. It's not a lot of time at all—Kendal gets in a quick, fierce hug, and I promise her I'll try to stay safe.

As if safety's actually my priority. I'm catching this bastard, no matter what it takes.

The final people we meet with are a few of the Griffin admins and professors. To my surprise, they're acting like they're going to keep teaching people—even though all of us have cuffs on, so we can't actually do magic. The professors all passed their exams years ago, so they technically should be able to do magic with no cuffs on, but they're not allowed to in this facility. And it wouldn't do too much good anyway, since their students are the ones who need to practice.

"Still, we certainly can't sit around and do nothing," Hardwick says, a fiery note in his voice that I've never heard before. "The students deserve to learn. That's what we promised them, and that's what we're going to deliver. Especially the third years. If we can get in as much training as possible... focusing specifically on training for the final exams... it's not ideal, but if we can get them to pass their exams and get their licenses, at least some of the students will be saved from the threat of having their powers taken. They'll be able to legally practice magic."

A lump forms in my throat. I don't know how to tell him that even Unpredictables who have passed their exams aren't safe anymore—but then, I think Hardwick already knows that. But like he said, what other choice do they have, really? Lie down and take it? I know *I* wouldn't.

“I didn’t know you had such a rebellious streak.” Pushing down my worry and sadness, I grin at him, shaking my head. I honestly didn’t know he had it in him.

Hardwick, to my surprise, gives me a sly smile. “Someday, Miss Sinclair, you’ll have to remind me to tell you about some of the things I got up to in my day.”

*Oh, really?*

I wonder if this is why he’s always seemed to have a soft spot for me—maybe I remind him a bit of himself when he was younger.

Who would’ve thought?

Tamlin’s talking to Roman by the door as the rest of us get ready to head out. My heart skips just a little in nervousness. She and Roman used to date, and last I knew, she still had feelings for him—and even though I know she’d never act on them or try to steal someone’s partner, I can’t help but feel guilty. Not that I ever did anything wrong. She and Roman had already broken up by the time I met him. But Tamlin’s a woman I admire, and I hate to think I’m playing a role in making her unhappy, even though I know that’s not at all logical.

The two of them hug just as I walk up. They’re smiling softly at each other, and I’m glad to see that despite them no longer being together romantically, they’re still friends. Roman is a very reserved person, and he doesn’t have a lot of people in his life, just by nature of his upbringing. I want him to have more people to open up to.

They break apart, and Tamlin turns to me. “I hope you’ll stay safe,” she says quietly as she—pulls me in and hugs me.

Woah. I did not expect that. Not in the slightest. I hug her back automatically, surprised.

“Look after yourself,” she whispers. “Please be careful. And know that everyone here is rooting for you. I’m so glad to have met you.”

She doesn’t sound at all like my poised teacher in this moment. She sounds more like we’re equals, maybe even friends.

Tamlin, like Roman, is only about five years older than I am. It’s easy to forget that though, since she’s so powerful and intimidating and has an almost ageless quality about her.

I like Tamlin a lot, but there’s always been a bit of a division between us, a line between teacher and student. But now... all the lines are blurred. We’re not in school, our fate is uncertain—hell, my life is kind of in the

balance here. I'm under no illusions that if I find this guy and fail to capture him, he's gonna kill me. I don't know how it could go any other way. Or I might just fail to find him at all, and my magic will be ripped from me, and a whole fucking subset of our community lose their powers and be cast out of society.

Everything's upside down. Everything's about to go into the toilet. And so the normal dictation of who's who and what we are to each other... it doesn't seem to apply anymore.

I tighten my hold on Tamlin and feel her squeeze me back in response.

Then we pull away, and she nods and smiles at me before the guys and I head out the door.

I'm allowed to have my cell phone now that I'm out, and the first thing I do when we get into the car is call Maddy again.

"*Ellie!*" Clearly, she's recognized me on her caller ID. When I called her using the landline at this damn place, she answered all businesslike, probably thinking it was a wrong number. "Are you okay?"

"I'm doing fine," I tell her, which is... technically correct, even if it doesn't feel like the real truth.

"Are you guys out of the facility? Are they letting you go back to school?"

"Not exactly. Um. Here's the thing."

I explain to her what's going on. How I'm going after the guy who's been behind all of this, and how I have a week to do it, for the sake of all Unpredictables.

"Well, I should join you," Mads says at once. "The guys are with you, why can't I be? I can help!"

Her enthusiasm and loyalty honestly make me tear up a little, my throat closing and my eyes growing hot and itchy. God, I love my sister.

"Mads, I—thank you." I clear my throat, fighting to keep my voice even. "That means a lot, to know that you're—that you want to join me. But don't. You have school to finish; you can't take time off from that. I won't let you derail your life for this, for me, or put yourself in danger if you can possibly avoid it."

I can practically hear her pout. "I suppose," she says. "But..."

"I'm going to be okay," I tell her firmly. Even though this is possibly the one time in my life where I can't guarantee that I will be. "I want you to focus on yourself and keep taking care of your education. That's what's

important, okay? I'm going to take care of this. You just... just be prepared, okay? For whatever happens. I don't know how this is going to go. I hope it goes in our favor. But whatever does happen, things are going to change in our world, and I want you to be ready."

"I will be," she promises me.

"And don't be alone," I add. I don't want to say I don't want her to be on her own in case the worst happens and she needs a shoulder to cry on, but... "I just want you to be with people."

"Justin's here with me. It'll be fine."

There's a tone in her voice that brings me up short, temporarily pulling my attention away from the hunt for a dangerous madman I'm about to embark upon. "Oh, he is, is he? Are... did you two...?"

"Um..." I can hear the smile in Maddy's voice, and the game is definitely up now. *Ha!* "So, last night..."

"You two are together, aren't you? He finally get up the courage to ask you out? Did you guys kiss?" I make kissing noises into the phone.

Hey, I might love her more than life itself, but I'm still her older sister. I'm going to embarrass her and tease her whenever I can.

"Ew, stop that! What are you, twelve?" Maddy groans. "Yes, all right, he asked me out, and we—we went on a nice walk, and held hands, and then we came back to my dorm and watched the original Star Wars trilogy..."

"Oh my God, what is it with you and nerds?"

"Two of your four boyfriends could compete to win Broodiest Man of the Year," she shoots back, laughter in her voice. "You do not get to judge me for having a type."

*Welp. She's got me there.*

"All teasing aside," I say, gripping the phone a little harder, "is he making you happy? Are you happy about this?"

"Yes," Maddy tells me firmly, without missing a beat. Her voice is light, and I can tell she's smiling, even through the phone. "I'm—he—it's amazing, Ellie, it really is. I'm super happy."

"Tell him to treat you right or I'll fuck him up," I tell her. I mean, I *have* to tell her that. It's practically in the big sister handbook that all bad boyfriends must be attacked, thoroughly, with baseball bats.

She sighs. "I don't need to tell him; he saw you in the Trials and all that. He knows you could squash him like a grape if you wanted to."

“Oh, goodie, excellent.” I grin. “I’m so glad for you, Mads, I really am. You deserve to feel happy. I know that... all my shit’s been on your mind these past couple years, and it’s made things stressful for you. And you’ve probably had to deal with people giving you a rough time because you’re related to me. And I want you to know that I really appreciate it, and I know it’s been hard, and I’m so proud of how you’ve handled all this.”

“I love you,” she tells me, her voice now soft and thick, and I know she’s holding back tears. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too. Now go, have fun, do your homework, wear a condom!”

“Ew! Elliot!”

I’m laughing as I hang up, but my heart still stings. I don’t know if I’m ever going to see my sister again. If I’ll be around to watch her graduate.

I look over at the guys in the car. Dmitri and Roman are talking in low voices while Asher’s asleep, his head on Dmitri’s shoulder, still exhausted from his work with Johnson yesterday. Cam’s doing research on his phone. I can tell they’ve all been keeping an ear out for my conversation, but not blatantly listening in. They’re giving me space, if I need it.

I’m so fucking glad they’re all here. I like to think I could do this by myself if I had to, especially magic-wise. Once I find him, I’ll kick that son of a bitch’s ass into next week. But I have a feeling I’m going to need their support in other ways. Mostly emotionally.

And, well, if this does goes horribly sideways, at least I’ll be with the men that I love.



## CHAPTER 12

“Okay, Professor X,” Cam says, turning to look at Asher as Dmitri gently nudges him awake. “What did you find out while rummaging around in that jerk-off’s head?”

Asher rubs at his temples, blinking as he shakes off the fog of sleep. “It wasn’t easy. Johnson’s got a lot of magical training, and he’s strong willed, and that’s not even counting the enchantments our guy put on him to keep him from talking.”

I clench my jaw, a fresh wave of anger coursing through me. No wonder Asher looks so damn tired. Maybe I should’ve gone in and had a little “chat” with Johnson myself before Asher tried to break into his mind.

“But I did learn that Johnson met with our guy in person just once,” he continues, sitting up straighter. “The rest of their communication was all through encrypted messages. The guy didn’t like to meet in person, to show himself, but I think he had to be face-to-face with Johnson to put up the locking wards on the provost’s mind, and Johnson seemed... wary about the guy.”

Asher pauses, frowning slightly. “It’s not... people don’t usually talk to me in their minds. It’s not full sentences. It’s more like I register an emotion or an impression. And Johnson had a huge amount of wariness about this meeting. He wanted to see this guy in person so he’d know he wasn’t being set up by someone.” He closes his eyes, as if digging around inside himself for every scrap of information he was able to extract from the toadish man. “That meeting really made an impression on Johnson. It was vivid in his memories. I got an image of the place where they met—a bar, in the city.”

“Could you see what the guy looked like?” Cam asks.

Ash shakes his head. “No. The mental block was too powerful. When I saw them talking at the bar, the guy’s face was just a blur. But when I was in the memory... it’s not like I’m reliving it with the person. Not exactly. I mean, you can’t exactly relive your own memories. You can think about them, but it’s not like you feel as though you’re actually there.”

“That’s so fucking trippy.” My head spins just thinking about it—what it must feel like to be *inside* someone else’s mind.

Soft green eyes dance with amusement as Asher catches my gaze. “It is, a bit. When I go in, it’s like I’m looking at a watercolor. Or a chalk drawing on the sidewalk where the water’s starting to make it run a bit. There are always parts that are fuzzy and indistinct. But I’m an observer, so I can kind of see things better than they can in their own memory.”

He pauses and bites his bottom lip, as if he’s trying to find the best way to describe it.

“What I’m getting at is—this guy put an enchantment on Johnson, but he might not have put an enchantment on the other people at the bar. Meddling with non-magic users is risky, especially fiddling with their memories. And I know what those people look like now, the people who were there when Johnson met this guy, because inside his memory, I was able to look around and see them.” He leans forward a little, and even though he still looks exhausted, I can feel excitement radiating from him. “So we just need to go to the bar and see if we can find the people who were in that memory—any regulars, anyone who was there that night—and hopefully I can read *their* minds a lot more easily than I could read Johnson’s.”

“Are you sure that you’re up to that?” I ask. “Getting into Johnson’s head took a lot out of you.”

Asher shakes his head. “I’m good. I want to do this; I can do this.”

I’m still unsure, but I really have no room to judge other people for choosing to overwork themselves or put themselves in harm’s way. It’s practically my hobby by now.

We reach the bar, which turns out to be a dive called Ace in the Hole—*Jesus, Johnson, have some fucking class for crying out loud*—and Roman orders drinks at the bar while the rest of us look for a place to sit.

It’s early evening, so the place isn’t that crowded yet. Or maybe it’s not the kind of place that ever gets crowded.

Dmitri makes a beeline for a booth in the back corner, because the man wouldn't be caught dead in the middle of a room where strangers might actually, *gasp*, try to talk to him. I'm kind of chuckling inside. These are four insanely hot men coming into a bar, does he really think nobody's going to come up and try to hit on them?

I remember when I first saw the three guys, actually—Cam, Asher, and Dmitri—at the bar where I used to work. It's a popular place, so I'm not surprised a lot of the students from Griffin would go there.

I actually considered going up to hit on the three of them that night myself. It didn't work out since they were gone by the time I got off my shift, but I wouldn't be at all surprised if a few enterprising ladies come up to us tonight to try their luck.

Dmitri sits in the middle, making himself the most difficult to get to if you're, say, a woman who's trying to hit on him. He also yanks me in to sit next to him and puts his arm around me, practically hauling me onto his lap.

"I think everyone gets the message, babe," I tell him, planting a kiss on his cheek.

Dmitri rolls his eyes at the teasing endearment, but he doesn't tell me to knock it off, so I call that a win.

Cam slides in on my other side, then Roman on Dmitri's free side, then Asher next to Roman, our resident mind reader positioning himself so he's able to easily get up and out of the booth if he spots a familiar face.

Roman passes us all beers. Cam and Dmitri make faces—Cam likes cocktails, and Dmitri is a snob who will lecture you for hours about proper whiskey and wine if you give him a chance—but we all take sips and nurse our drinks. We're not actually here to get drunk or to relax, we're here for work.

It does kind of *feel* like we're here on a casual date though. Asher keeps his gaze on the entrance, but after twenty minutes pass and he gives no signal that he recognizes anyone, we start to loosen up a little. This is the first time we've all hung out together outside of Roman's house, out in public, and it's... it's really nice.

It takes a little bit, but everyone starts to properly relax. Cam teases Dmitri, who snipes back at him. Roman's foot nudges mine under the table. I hum along to a song playing on the jukebox as we all talk and laugh with each other.

We're actually having a good time.

If it wasn't for the whole Unpredictable bullshit hanging over our heads, this would be a perfect evening. Me with my four men, all of us joking and laughing, relaxed, together, safe.

I turn to Cam, about to tell him that, when Asher stops speaking mid-sentence, his entire body going stiff. "That's one of them. There," he whispers, his gaze zeroing in on a patron who's just entered.

Everyone falls silent and tenses up.

"Great. So... what do we do now?" Cam asks.

In answer, Roman stands up, nudging Asher out of the booth. "We go and we talk to him."

*Hoo boy.*

## CHAPTER 13

**M**y heart is pounding as we all get up and walk over as a group. People must be wondering what we're doing, moving in a pack like this toward the old guy.

The man Asher recognized looks like he's probably a regular here. He's old enough to be my grandfather, and he appears cranky, thin, and worn down.

*Oh God, I hope he doesn't think we're here to rob him or some shit.* If he's uncooperative, I don't know what we'll do. We can't afford to make a scene.

As we walk up, the guy glances at us, looking completely unamused and done with this shit already. He probably thinks we're here to mock him and harass him or something, I don't know.

"Hi." Asher sits down across from him. "I'm sorry to bother you, but do you have a moment?"

Leave it to Asher to be the polite one of our group. Cam stands behind him and gives a warm, friendly smile to the guy. Roman and Dmitri and I are hovering in the background with our arms folded like bodyguards. Which is probably not helping the situation.

"Maybe," the old guy replies, wariness evident in every line of his face.

"We're trying to track down someone," Asher says patiently. "We work for a private detective agency, and I'm afraid time is of the essence for our client."

Something about Asher's voice sounds strange. Oddly... soothing. It makes me want to trust him—which doesn't make sense because I already trust him.

And then I realize what's going on. Reading people's minds isn't Asher's only power; he can influence their thoughts too. I don't know if he's ever done it before outside of assignments where he had to. Asher's big on free will, and I completely understand that. But as he speaks, the old man in front of us starts to relax, to adopt a more laidback posture.

Asher describes Johnson in detail, and the old man listens, his head cocked to one side

"This was sometime last year," Asher adds. "So I understand if you can't remember well. But do you think you could recall seeing this man? And who he was with?"

The man squints, and I see a furrow appearing in Asher's brow. He must be trying to read the guy's mind as discreetly as possible. I've never had Asher rooting around in my head—he's only projected a thought into it, and I've projected thoughts for him to hear in return—but I can imagine that generally, people know when someone's trying to poke around in their mind. Asher must've practiced his ass off to be able to do it without alerting the person.

"Yeah, I remember a bit," the guy says, his voice rough like he's been gargling rocks. "I think I saw... yeah, there was a guy with him. Tall... dark hair... brown—er, no, maybe it was red—or that might've been the lighting... maybe dark blond..."

*Oh my God, are you kidding me?* So he could have basically any natural hair color. Our mystery man doesn't dye his hair bright green. *That's super helpful, thanks so much, really appreciate it.*

It's a struggle not to roll my eyes.

"Thank you so much," Asher says, still in that soothing voice. "Anything else you can remember? Did the man do anything unusual?"

"It was a year ago, sonny, what do you expect me to remember?" the man grumbles.

Shit. We're not getting anything useful here. We should wait until someone else who was there that night comes in—someone who's not a senior citizen.

Asher's eyes narrow, and the old man flinches. I think he felt it that time. But the man's eyes light up with the spark of memory, so I guess—I hope—he shrugged off whatever he felt of Asher's influence. "Wait! There was one thing—I remember at the end of the night, when they'd finished talking... your friend sat at the bar... looked a little out of it." He scoffs.

“Lightweight. But the man you’re looking for... he went into the back hallway. But he didn’t come out.”

“So he left through the back door?” Cam asks.

The old man glances at him, perplexed, then shakes his head. “Couldn’t have. The alley back there is completely blocked off, you can’t reach the street from it. But I never saw him come back out... sat here another couple hours, I did...”

A surge of relief rises up inside me.

*Thank fuck. That’s something we can work with.*

I immediately peel off to check out the alley. I hear Roman saying something to Dmitri, something low that I can’t quite hear, and then I feel the heat of him at my back as he catches up to me, following me outside through the rickety back door.

It’s dark out here and smells a bit stale, the usual alley deal. I can’t help but smirk, though, and feel a little rush of heat as I walk along it. The door didn’t close all the way behind us, so dim light from the bar spills into the alley, giving us enough illumination to see by.

“What’s that look for?” Roman asks as he catches sight of my expression, his voice low and rough.

“Oh, just that it’s you, me, and a back alley again.” I wink at him.

Roman and I first met at the bar where I used to work, and because neither of us was willing to bring a stranger back to our home, we ended up having sex in the alley down the street from The Den. It was hot as fuck, and I tried to make myself forget it, to call it just a one-night stand, but I couldn’t. Especially not when I got to Griffin and found out Roman was one of my professors, someone I’d be seeing almost every day.

Of course it didn’t take us long to get back to hooking up again. And again. And again. Even though both of us tried to deny how we felt.

Actually, I was the one who did most of the denying and running away. I’m lucky as fuck that Roman was patient and stubborn enough to wait for me while I worked through some of my intimacy issues.

“Just like old times,” I tell him with a grin. “Wouldn’t you say?”

“No,” Roman replies, to my confusion.

Before I can ask what he means, his hands grab my hips, pushing me back, pinning me to the wall. A moment later, his whole body is pressed against mine, his mouth devouring me, kissing hotly up my neck before sliding his tongue into my mouth as I whimper and cling to him.

“Now it’s just like old times,” he whispers.

Goddamn. I yank him back down and kiss him again, melting under his touch. Roman’s hands tighten around my hips, making me shudder, making heat slide through me like lava. Fuck, it’s so easy for him to bring me from zero to a hundred, to make me wet, worked up, and desperate. Lucky for him, I don’t mind it at all. Quite the opposite.

“We had fun that night,” I murmur, catching my breath as he pulls away to rest our foreheads together. “Who would’ve thought, huh?”

“That was the luckiest night of my life.” His cobalt eyes burn as he gazes at me. “I met the woman I love.”

My heart stutters.

We said those words to each other for the first time a few months ago, and I still get a thrill that seems to overtake my entire body every time I hear them come out of his mouth.

I pull my bottom lip between my teeth, wild joy making me grin like an idiot.

“You really do love me, huh?”

Roman bumps our noses together. “A little more every day, Reckless.”

“Lucky for you, I happen to feel the same.”

My heart is hammering away in my chest, despite my calm, teasing tone, and I know he can feel it by the way he smirks at me.

Oh fuck. I could really, really go for some alley sex right now, for Roman hoisting me up and ripping my panties aside and fucking me hard and fast...

But we don’t have time. The clock is ticking and we have to follow this damn lead, no matter how tiny it might be.

Roman must be thinking the same thing, because he lightly kisses my jaw and then regretfully pulls away, giving me room to push off the wall.

“The old man was right,” he comments, looking around as I take a second to compose myself. “There’s nothing here. The alley’s all closed off and has a dead end.”

My panties are still damp, I’m not gonna lie—but as Roman speaks, the analytical part of my brain takes over again, and I scan the dark walls of the alley. “Then there must have been something else here. Something magical.”

“Maybe it *was* here but isn’t any longer. A portal of some kind.”



I scrunch up my face. “But our jackass chose this meeting place, not Johnson. That makes me think whatever might be out here is something more permanent. Maybe he picked this place because he knew he’d have access, as opposed to someplace he’d have to create a temporary portal to reach.”

“Good point.”

We look all over, but after ten minutes of searching, we still haven’t found anything. My heart sinks when I hear the bartender’s raised voice giving last call. We’re going to have to come back tomorrow.

*God fucking dammit.*

We meet back up with the others inside. Asher’s looking a little pale and drained, and I’m sure that—on top of sifting through the old man’s memories—he’s still feeling the effects of trying to break into Johnson’s mind earlier. He’s got to be pretty tapped out by now.

As we approach, he catches my eye and gives a small shake of his head, letting me know they weren’t able to get anything else useful from the old-timer.

Shit. I’m not that surprised, though. This guy seems like he might have a hard time remembering what happened this morning, and the phrase “unreliable witness” keeps popping into my mind.

Asher and Cam say polite goodbyes to the man, and Dmitri musters up a head nod.

Then all five of us head out into the night.

## CHAPTER 14

**I**t's too late to go back to Roman's house for the night, since he lives quite a ways out of the city and we'll need to be right back here tomorrow anyway. So we head to a hotel in the magical district, which is only a few miles from the bar.

Roman pays for the room as the rest of us hang back a bit. But without our cuffs marking us as Unpredictables, the receptionist doesn't look twice at Cam, Asher, Dmitri, or me, and I feel a huge surge of relief.

"Just one room?" Cam comments with a gleeful tone in his voice as we enter the elevator.

"We need to cut down on costs," Roman says. "The Circuit agreed to foot the bill for our hunt, but I wasn't exactly given a huge budget for this."

"Does this mean we can't order room service?"

"No, we can't order room service. What are you, five?"

"I was asking for poor Dima here." Cam nudges Dmitri and grins. "He's still getting used to the plebian lifestyle."

"Watch it," Dmitri growls.

Cam just laughs, and I find myself pursing my lips to hold back a smirk. Only Cam can get away with poking at Dmitri and not lose a hand or something for it. Except maybe me. I like to think I'm also an exception.

We reach our room on the second floor, which is moderately fancy and has two large beds and a modern-looking bathroom.

"I can ask them to send up a folding cot," Roman says. "I wasn't sure how we wanted to configure ourselves."

"We could just push the two beds together," I joke. Even as I speak, I'm realizing this is the first time that it's been all five of us in a room together.

Overnight, I mean.

And, well... I can't help myself. My mind starts racing with possibilities.

Possibilities that probably won't actually happen, but a girl can daydream a little about her four hot boyfriends having her all at once, right?

Roman, to my surprise, looks seriously at the beds. "I should probably use an enchantment for that."

"What, you don't think the five of us can manage to shove two beds together? Are you calling us weak?" Cam teases.

"No, I'm saying I'd rather not bother when magic will do it much more easily. I have a levitation charm that should do the trick."

"You know, there are easier ways to get rid of all that tension besides arguing," I point out, shoving my hands into my pockets.

I'm still mostly joking, but when all four men look at me, I grin. I recognize the expressions on their faces. It's been a frustrating day, and I for one would like to get this tension worked out in a fun way.

"Unless..." I shrug. "I mean, we don't have to. That's a lot of limbs to keep track of, you know? I'd hate for one of us to accidentally get an elbow to the face."

The guys all look at each other, and I can practically hear their thoughts racing.

Then Cam springs into action so fast it almost makes me jump. "Asher, grab that end. I'll get this one. Roman and Dmitri, you get the other side."

He's already moving as he speaks, and the other three aren't far behind. Any debate over the best way to move a bed is forgotten as the four of them converge on the one closest to us, heaving it up and carrying it over to the bed on the west side of the room. They set it down gently, nudging it to make sure the mattresses butt up against one another.

I have to cover my mouth to keep from laughing. I don't think I've ever seen the four of them work so efficiently or effectively together as they just did.

*Hmm. That bodes well for the rest of the night.*

Neither of the beds are all that small to begin with, so with the width doubled, they create a single massive surface. As soon as the four men are satisfied with their work, they turn to look at me.

I'm still standing near the door, and as I catch their gazes, a thrill of excitement and nerves races through me. I've done a lot of things with each

of them, and I trust each one of them completely—but this is still new territory for us, a line we haven't crossed yet.

For a second, I gaze at them and they gaze right back at me, possibility hovering in the air around us.

Cam is the one who breaks the silence again, and I'm not sure I've ever been more grateful for the sweet, goofy man.

"All right. C'mere, you."

He waggles his eyebrows and grins at me before marching across the space that separates us and throwing me over his shoulder. I yelp in surprise, and a moment later, I let out a little *oomph* as I'm tossed down onto one of the soft mattresses.

Dmitri and Roman roll their eyes, and Asher smiles indulgently at Cam's antics. But his move did what it was meant to—it broke the ice. All four men don't hesitate as they crawl up onto the bed with me, and I rise up onto my elbows, watching them all as they converge on me like hungry lions.

I've been with Dmitri and Roman at the same time before, and with Asher and Cam together too. But this is the first time we've all done anything together as a group, and I wasn't entirely kidding about being worried someone would take an elbow to the eye.

The guys don't seem concerned in the least though, and when they reach me, they seem to adopt a sort of "divide and conquer" approach. Roman swoops in to claim my mouth in a hot, demanding kiss while Dmitri's large hands find my breasts, massaging and kneading them through the fabric of my shirt. Cam lifts the hem of my shirt to pepper soft, wet kisses over the skin of my stomach.

And Asher? He surprises me by going straight for the apex of my thighs.

Even through my clothes, I can feel the heat of his breath on my pussy, and I whimper into Roman's mouth. That only makes him kiss me more fiercely, as if he's eating up the noises that Asher is gifting him through me. Dexterous fingers begin to work the button of my jeans, and when Asher starts peeling my pants and panties off, I shift my hips to help him. The other men work together to pull off my shirt, and somewhere in the process of that, Cam unhooks my bra.

Then I'm pressed back down on the mattress, and the hands and mouths are on me again. This time it's Dmitri who kisses me, his lips and teeth and

tongue demanding, as Roman rolls my nipples between his fingers, darting his tongue out to lick at them and making me gasp. Cam has moved down to my feet and is working his way back up my leg, trailing his lips over my skin in a way that makes me squirm with need.

And in the midst of all that, Asher's mouth finds my clit.

He's so fucking good at this—almost unfairly good, really—and his usual tactic is to work me up slowly and torturously, bringing me right to the edge and backing off a few times until I'm a desperate, pleading mess. But maybe he knows that tonight, there won't be any slow buildup. That I'm already so far gone I won't be able to handle any teasing.

Whatever he knows, *however* he knows, he gives me exactly what I need.

His lips lock around my clit as his tongue lashes back and forth, the movements fast and hard.

And that's exactly how I come.

Fast and hard.

My back arches off the bed, and my hands reach out desperately, latching onto a muscled shoulder and a thick bicep as I cry out into Dmitri's mouth. He doesn't stop kissing me, and Asher doesn't stop licking me, and I don't stop coming.

I twist and writhe on the bed, and the hands and mouths on me follow my movements, as if they're drinking up my pleasure, drawing it straight out of my skin. My orgasm goes on for so long that by the time it finally subsides, I feel a little shaky all over.

"Holy... crap."

My eyelids flutter as I blink up at the four men around me. Dmitri has pulled back a little and is gazing down at my face, and Asher's head pops up from between my legs, a small, pleased smile tilting his lips.

"I think she likes it," Dmitri comments dryly, and Cam chuckles.

"I... I... holy crap."

"Uh oh. Did we break you, Sin?" Cam's smile is broad, and even as he asks, he leans down to nip at my right breast, sending little zaps of sensation through me.

Roman is kneeling on my other side, and he reaches down to brush a thumb over my bottom lip. "Do you want more, Reckless?"

Forcing my brain out of the loop of "holy crap", I nod emphatically. "Fuck, yes! You guys aren't even naked yet."

*Oh. I guess those were the magic words.*

Shirts and pants fly as the men disrobe in record time, and I blink as I find myself gazing at four sculpted, muscled bodies. They're all hard already, cocks jutting proudly, and it's a losing battle to keep my jaw from dropping open as I gaze at the display of pure masculinity around me.

Jesus, why the hell did we wait so long to do this?

I'm staring at the four men, soaking up the sight of them, and in return, they're staring back at me. The looks on their faces make my body ache, and I reach out, not even sure who I'm reaching for.

Asher is the one who moves first, and I swear to God, he really must be in my head, because he gives me exactly what I need again. He's still kneeling between my legs, and in a smooth motion, he hooks his hands under my knees and tugs me down the bed toward him. Then he drapes his body over mine, letting our chests brush together as he kisses me. I can feel his cock nudging at my entrance—and somehow, knowing that the other three guys are all here, all watching with ravenous eyes, makes my clit throb in time to the pounding of my heart.

"Is this okay?" he asks softly, pulling back to look at me.

I nod, grabbing at his shoulders as I hook my legs around his waist, pressing on his firm ass with my heels to urge him deeper inside me. As he slides in, impaling me fully on his thick length, a soft noise fills the room that might be the best sound I've ever heard—five voices sighing in satisfaction.

Hands and mouths converge on me again as Asher starts to thrust in and out in a steady rhythm, and if I thought it was good when his mouth was on me, it's even better when he's inside me.

I really might die. I might just overload on sensations and die right here and now.

But if I do, at least I'll die happy.

Muffled grunts and curses fall into my ears as my hands encounter two very rigid, warm cocks. Precum is beading at the tips of both, and I want to lick it off, but I can't even lift my head right now. So I use my hands instead, doing everything I can to drive Cam and Dmitri as crazy as Asher is driving me. I want us all in on this—I want it to be good for all of us.

Roman is near my head, and he's leaning over, kissing me upside down, making me appreciate his mouth in a whole new way. When Asher pulls out of me entirely, I whine softly, hating the sudden emptiness, the feeling of

loss. But Roman tightens his hold on my chin, keeping me from looking down as he continues to devour my mouth with hungry kisses.

Then Cam pulls away too, slipping out of my grip. But before I can complain about that loss, I figure out what the two men were doing when Cam slides into me, taking over where Ash left off. Roman pulls back as I suck in a gasping breath, and the look in his cobalt eyes makes me bite my lip.

There's possessiveness in his expression, but something almost like pride too—as if he likes seeing me like this, likes sharing me with these men who have become his closest friends.

My view of Roman is obscured when Cam leans farther over me, nuzzling my hair as he fucks me in strong, steady strokes. Then his lips find the shell of my ear, and he whispers, “Do you remember what you, Asher, and I did the night before you went back to school?”

I clench around him unconsciously as a rush of memories flood me. *Hell yes, I remember.*

He chuckles, correctly interpreting my response. His voice grows even softer, a seductive rasp that pours into my ear. “Do you want to do that with Dmitri and Roman?”

This time, all the men notice my response—probably because that response is a loud, naked cry of, “God, yes!”

Cam chuckles again. His thrusts slow, becoming measured and so deep I swear I feel him everywhere. He drives into me once, twice, three more times, rocking our bodies on the bed. Then he drops a kiss to my lips and slowly withdraws from me.

I blink up at him, my body adjusting again to the feeling of emptiness. He nods encouragingly, smiling at me even as he fists his cock, stroking himself in the same rhythm he was just fucking me.

Feeling suddenly a little nervous, as if I'm asking them to prom or something and really hope they don't turn me down, I sit up a little and glance between Dmitri and Roman. “Will you—? I want both of you. To fuck me at the same time.”

*Oh, I was wrong before. Those are the magic words.*

Roman's eyes flash, the little specks of silver in them seeming to swell and expand, and Dmitri's nostrils flare as he palms the back of my head and hauls me to him for an almost bruising kiss.

When we break apart, the men move together like a well-oiled machine. The next thing I know, I'm being lifted, turned around, and draped over Roman, who's now lying near the middle of the large doubled-up bed. He's already hard as a rock, his cock so heavy and full it's drooping toward his stomach, so I fist the base and line myself up over it.

That same sound of satisfaction fills the room as I sink down onto him. I can feel Dmitri at my back, feel the heat radiating from him, as Cam and Asher resume their worship of my body. Teeth scrape my nipples and fingertips caress my skin as I lose myself in the feeling of riding Roman.

I meet Ash's gaze and nod at the silent question in his eyes, and a moment later, a pleasant sense of ease fills my mind. I can feel my body letting go, opening up to Dmitri's probing fingers as Asher helps me relax.

Not all that shockingly, nobody thought to bring lube on this little outing, but I'm so fucking wet from all the attention I've gotten already that we don't really need it. Dmitri uses the wetness that's dripping down my thighs, slathering his fingers with it before he eases them inside my tight hole.

This time, I know what to expect, so he's able to work his way in with minimal resistance. He scissors his fingers, stretching me out and helping me relax, and I do my best to keep myself soft and open for him.

It helps that I've got three other men all hell bent on making me feel good, and that I'm trying to keep up with them and return the favor. My hands have found Asher and Cam's cocks again, and Roman is helping me keep my balance with a firm grip on my waist as I ride him slowly and work the other two in my fists.

"Fucking hell, Princess," Dmitri groans, withdrawing his fingers and immediately lining up his hard length to take their place. "Are you ready for me?"

"Uh huh," I pant. It's barely more than a breathless gasp, but it's a miracle I can respond with words at all at this point.

When he begins to ease inside, I fight against the urge to lean forward, arching my back a little to make the angle easier but staying upright. I don't want to let go of Cam or Asher. I want all five of us to be connected.

Dmitri presses inside of me with small thrusts, the movements gentle despite the tension I can feel gathering inside him like a taut wire. Each time he slides in deeper, I rock against Roman, and all three of us grunt.



Asher and Cam move closer—close enough that I can reach them with my mouth, so I do. I alternate between my hands and my mouth on each of them, letting Roman and Dmitri take over the rhythm of our hips as they fuck me together. Roman’s hands still hold my hips in a tight grip, and Dmitri’s arms are banded around my torso, steadying me and keeping me upright.

I feel... suspended between all the men. Connected to them, held up by them, and loved by them.

It’s incredible.

The five of us all find a rhythm together, and when I feel Cam’s cock thicken and jerk in my hand, I arch my back even more, offering myself up to him as I pump Asher a little faster. He lets out a low grunt, and the two of them lose it at almost the exact same time. Thick ropes of cum coat my chest as I feel their bodies shudder beneath my touch.

*God, that’s hot as hell.*

Roman’s fingers dig into my hips, his thrusts becoming more erratic too as he stares at my glistening breasts.

“Jesus, Reckless. You’re so damn beautiful,” he grunts.

I’ve been holding off my own orgasm, riding a wave of ecstasy but not letting it crest as I focused on the guys. But I can’t hold it off any longer. I can’t stop it.

Releasing Cam and Ash, I brace my hands on Roman’s chest as he and Dmitri work my body between them. My head lolls, and I bite my lip hard as my pussy and ass clench around them both.

I don’t know which one of us comes first, but it’s like a cascading effect, and before I know it, the two men are groaning and pulsing inside me as pleasure infuses every inch of my body.

Dmitri and I collapse forward, and I know I’m smearing cum all over Roman’s chest, but he doesn’t seem to mind or even notice as he threads his fingers through my hair, kissing me with everything he’s got.

Everyone’s breathing heavily, and I’m glad to see I’m not the only one who got a little sweaty. None of us move for a long time. I can feel Cam and Asher drawing lazy patterns on my skin from where they rest on the bed next to us.

Dmitri pulls out first, and he presses several kisses across the line of my shoulders and down my spine before he moves away. As he heads toward the bathroom, Roman lifts me and lays me gently on the bed beside him.

“Thank you, Reckless.” His angular features soften as he leans up on his elbow, gazing down at me. “For trusting us.”

“Always,” I murmur, turning my head to smile at him sleepily. “And, hey, look at that, no one got an elbow to the face.”

All three men chuckle, and Roman kisses me once more as Dmitri returns with towels for all of us to clean up with.

We leave the two beds pushed together. None of us have the energy to move them again, and besides, I don’t really want the space. To my surprise, none of the guys seem to either—not even Dmitri, who usually prefers to sleep alone.

I fall asleep entangled with all four of them, having no idea where one of us ends and another begins. We’re just all parts of a whole, a unit, and I can’t help but think that I’ve never been happier.

I’m not letting anyone take this from me. Not my magic, not my guys, not my life.

That bastard is going down.

## CHAPTER 15

The next morning, we go right back to the alley. The bar isn't open yet, since it's not quite drinking hours yet, but in the daylight and with a handy little charm or two courtesy of Roman, we manage to get back into the closed off alley without alerting anyone.

We're on an extremely tight deadline with this search, and maybe it's suspicious that five people are poking around back here while the bar is closed, but we can't afford to wait and hang around until the afternoon.

"What are we looking for?" Asher asks as we all gaze around at the alley's dingy walls.

"Some kind of portal." Roman runs a hand through his ebony hair, his brow furrowed. "We couldn't find one last night, but perhaps we weren't being thorough enough. If it's a permanent portal, it'll have an anchor of some kind. But the anchor could be very subtle..."

"We were kind of in a rush last night," I point out. "Now that we have more time and better light, we'll find it."

Trying to believe my own reassurances, I look up at the brick walls. I can see them much better now than last night, but nothing unusual is popping out at me.

Maybe I just need a new angle. A different perspective.

I use my spider climb to crawl up the wall, trying to get high enough so that I can look down at it. Maybe if I—

My hand lands on a brick, and the brick moves.

No, scratch that. It doesn't just move. It *warms*. The rough surface grows almost hot to the touch and I think it's—it's expanding—

I shriek and let go, my powers disengaging in my shock.

“Woah! Princess!”

Dmitri catches me as I fall, holding me to his chest and stumbling a little to try to counterbalance, but managing to stay upright. He sets me gently down on my feet, and we all gape as the brick high up on the wall expands, and expands, and expands...

It’s a portal. A large, glowing portal.

*Holy crap.*

As it grew, it almost seemed to drip down the side of the wall, so now it’s only about a foot and a half off the ground. Easy enough to step through.

“Uh, anyone want to go first?” Cam jokes.

The portal’s surface is a dark blueish color that seems to swirl and shift as I gaze at it, and I can’t see out the other side. I’ve got no idea where it leads.

*Oh, geez. That’s not terrifying at all.*

Roman shakes out his hands, and I don’t see anything different about them, but I know, somehow, that he has his death powers ready, just in case.

“Follow me closely,” he says, and then he steps through.

No way am I letting him go in alone. I dart in after him, and I hear the other three scrambling behind me to catch up.

I’ve never traveled through a portal before, but we’ve studied them in class—and the experience turns out to be pretty much exactly how Professor Binns described it. The thing is, you don’t just step through a portal and *bam*, you’re in a new location. There’s a moment when you’re *nowhere* first, a moment of complete darkness and disorientation that makes you wonder if you’ll ever actually get out.

So even though I’m expecting it, panic hits me right in the chest as blackness swallows me up.

It’s like *being* and *not being* all at once. I try to suck in a breath but can’t, and I wonder wildly if that’s because there’s no oxygen in this dark ether-place, or if my lungs have simply stopped working.

And then, finally, the portal spits me out.

The step that started in the alley finally lands, and I stumble a little. A wave of vertigo hits me as I realize—I’m not on the ground anymore.

We’re all up on a rooftop.

“What the fuck?” Dmitri mutters.

Trying to steady my wobbling legs, I look around. I recognize a few landmarks and buildings in the distance, and based on their relative position to us...

I shake my head. "We're on the other side of town."

The others glance at me before swiveling their heads to take in the view.

"Why here?" Cam squints against the morning sun. "Why this particular rooftop?"

"Fuck if I know." I grimace. Why would someone want to have a portal that brought them up here? A portal could lead anywhere. This feels unnecessarily complicated.

Which I guess makes sense if someone is trying to cover his tracks, but it's damned inconvenient for the people trying to track him down.

"Split up," Roman instructs. "We need to see if we can figure out where our man went. Maybe there's a trap door or something."

Dmitri concentrates, and a moment later, three more of him appear.

"How many duplicates can you make?" I ask.

Dmitri frowns down at himself. "Depends," he replies. All four of them reply, actually.

Okay, now *that* gives me some fun bedroom ideas. One Dmitri is great, but multiple Dmitris, all working together?

*Whew. I'm not sure I'd even survive that.*

"The more duplicates I create, the more my strength and concentration are spread out," he adds, completely unaware of what he and his doubles are doing to me in my very dirty imagination. "So it would depend on how much willpower I have."

I clear my throat, yanking my focus back to the task at hand. "Ah, yeah. Right."

"Try not to fall off the roof," Roman says. "Any of you."

Cam salutes him as all four Dmitris roll their eyes.

We start looking all over the rooftop. This is either an apartment or an old office building, I can't tell which. But either way, we've got a lot of ground to cover. I walk slowly back and forth across the roof, keeping my gaze glued to the ground, trying to find something, anything—an old ward drawn on the cement, a handprint, a boot mark, *something*.

As I look, memories of the Trials float through my head. And more particularly, memories of the challenge that I failed in spectacular fashion. We each had to find a ring that was hidden somewhere in the quad, and

since my magic refused to help me, I was reduced to scouring the grass on my hands and knees, searching and searching with almost no chance of finding what I sought.

*Goddammit, this feels way too much like that moment.*

Helplessness and defeat grow in the pit of my stomach, expanding to fill my entire chest cavity. I keep pushing them down, fighting against the voice in the back of my head that tells me this will never work, that the five of us can't possibly track down a man in seven days when the Circuit hasn't been able to locate him in two years.

*Then again, I'm not sure how hard they were actually look—*

"Hey!" Asher calls. "I think I found something!"

Adrenaline floods my body like a wave as my head snaps up. We all hurry over, converging on the brown-haired mage. He's standing near one of the corners of the roof, and he's holding something in the flat of his palm.

"This was on the ledge here. I think it snagged somehow when he was climbing down."

His moss-green gaze meets mine, and he hands me the small object.

It's... a button.

I hold it up, letting the sunlight catch its shiny surface. It looks like a perfectly ordinary button, nothing particularly special about it. Small, silver, could go on a nice coat or blazer. "How do we know it's his?"

"Who else would be up here?" Cam points out with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "With no easy access down? And that looks like a nice button. If you're up here, you're probably a maintenance worker taking care of the air conditioning or something. You wouldn't be walking around in a nice coat."

Well. It's not much, but it's all we have—which seems to be the recurring theme of this hunt.

"What do we do with it?" Dmitri asks. "How do we use it to find him? Tracking spells are notoriously difficult."

*Ah ha!* This, at least, I have an answer for.

"I know someone," I tell them.

And I do.

## CHAPTER 16

C am wasn't kidding. It's not easy getting off the roof. Whoever used it as a portal access point definitely didn't want it to be discovered, which bolsters my hope that we're on the right track—that the man we're searching for is the owner of the button we found.

Once we're back on solid ground, we head back to the Unpredictable holding facility.

The last thing I want to do is go back there before I have to; I don't even want to be near the place. But it's where we have to go to get what we need, and I'm not going to let a little irritation or pride stop me from following every clue I can.

We can't take any chances here, or waste any time.

As I enter, Roman next to me, the other three guys behind us, I see that the staff have done what they've said they would. They're teaching classes.

It's all theoretical, as we already knew—but they're actually doing it, and my heart swells at the sight. Hardwick's teaching too, and I didn't even know he did that. I mean, he must have at some point, in order to eventually work his way up and become a dean, but I guess I just didn't ever think about it.

All of the students look calmer and a lot more focused as a result. Tandy's a bit more relaxed, sitting with Erin and answering a verbal quiz on different potion ingredients. I don't see anyone screaming or fighting or fainting. Nobody's crying.

Even if they're not able to teach us as well as they could under normal circumstances, if you ask me, this is already doing a fuckton of good, just for everyone's damn mental health. Before, everyone was upset, frightened,

and panicked. Now, at least there's some measure of normalcy. At least there's a task, a goal to focus on, something to think about and do so that people feel in control of their lives again—as much as they can, anyway.

It makes me proud. Everyone's pulling together and soldiering on. Nobody's just sat down and quit. And in its own way, even if it doesn't seem all that powerful, continuing to teach us magic—even theoretical magic—while we're being held here is its own kind of rebellion.

We're greeted by Aurora, who looks a little... well, I'd say worried, if I was able to properly read Aurora's micro-expressions, and I'm not all that sure I can.

"You're back early," she says, her eyes widening and then narrowing. "I don't suppose that you've found and eliminated the threat already?"

"Nope. Not our lucky day," I tell her with a rueful shake of my head. Then I hold up the button. "But we did get this. I need permission to take the cuff off one of our first year students. Gwen. I don't know her last name, actually. She's my new roommate. Her ability is tracking people."

Aurora raises a thin blonde eyebrow. Then she nods sharply. "I'll get Brodie. And we'll fetch Gwen."

We're led into an administrative office to wait. Gwen, it turns out, is in fight class with Tamlin, who is none too pleased when she sees two Circuit officials taking one of her vulnerable first-years out of class. She's so displeased, in fact, that she follows them all the way to the administrative offices.

"I demand to know what is going on!" she shouts, following a half step after Brodie as he and Aurora bring Gwen into the room to see us.

She draws up short when she realizes who else is in the room, blinking in surprise at the five of us. I can see her body relax as she realizes Gwen isn't about to have her magic pulled or something.

"Oh. Hello."

She clears her throat, seeming too off-balance to say anything else. I'm not sure I've ever seen her lose her cool like this, and I wonder if the stress is finally getting to her.

"See?" Brodie grumbles. "I wasn't doing anything. You can lay off now."

She whirls on him, her dark eyes flashing. "You're an Unpredictable! How can you stand to work with them? How can you *justify* working with them?"



“Look, ma’am, some of us—”

“*Ma’am*?! We’re the same age!”

I glance at Roman, who’s eyeing the two of them with a curious, somewhat amused expression on his face. *Huh*. I’m not quite sure what he thinks is funny, but I’ll have to ask him about it later—no time for that now.

He shifts his focus to my classmate, and his expression softens. “Gwen, if you’ll come here, Aurora and Brodie are going to take your cuff off.”

Not even teachers are allowed to take the magic repressing cuffs off of us anymore, I’m guessing. The Circuit probably thought our professors would be too easily persuaded to help us, that they could free us all and start a rebellion or something.

Brodie and Aurora take the cuff off of Gwen, who’s glancing around the room with wide eyes. She still looks ninety percent convinced something awful is about to happen, so I keep my voice and movements gentle as I approach and show her the button.

“Hey, would you be able to use this to track the person it belongs to?” I ask, holding it out.

Before Gwen can answer, Aurora locks the door and makes sure the blinds are down in the office we’re in. She hasn’t said as much, but I’m pretty damn sure this is on the down-low. I doubt the other Circuit members would be happy about taking the cuffs off of even more Unpredictables, even if it’s only for a short time and under supervision. If they went through proper channels, it would probably have to get approved by a committee or something, and we don’t have that kind of time.

Tamlin and Brodie are sniping at each other under their breath as Gwen stares at the button. I gotta say though, it’s hard not to notice how close they’re standing or how Brodie’s gaze keeps darting down to Tamlin’s mouth even as he argues fiercely with her.

Ah. So *that’s* what Roman’s little smile was about.

“Is this really okay?” Gwen whispers, yanking my attention back to her. Shit. She looks fucking terrified.

Asher guides her to sit down at a large desk on one side of the room, then places the button on the desk in front of her.

“It’s okay,” he tells her. “We’re trying to track down the person who’s been attacking the school. This belongs to him.”

“I... I don’t know.” Gwen looks like she might burst into tears again. Or maybe barf. “I’ve never—I only just got my power, I’ve barely used it...”

“Hey, hey.” I sit down on the edge of the desk and take her hand. I can’t help but remember how Maddy was after Mom died, how I had to comfort her through the long nights. “We just want you to try. You might not feel like you know what you’re doing, and I get that. I’ve never had any idea what I was doing either.”

“Really?”

Gwen looks up at me in confusion. I smile softly at her, chuckling under my breath.

“Yep. Not in the Trials, not with that damn demon bird, not with any of it. I was just winging it the whole damn time. And look what happened. I succeeded anyway—at least, most of the time. If you wait until you’re ready to do something, you’ll never do it. I know that you have this in you, even if you don’t think you do, and that’s okay. I’m going to believe in you for you. You don’t have to have faith in yourself, I will.” I glance around the room, at the people gathered around us. “We will.”

Gwen looks up at me gratefully and then turns to focus on the button, staring it down like it’s a charging rhino.

“It’s going to take me a while,” she admits softly.

“That’s okay. I know you’ll get there. Take your time.”

My internal agitation spikes at the thought, but I’m careful not to let any inkling of it show on my face. Time is something that we don’t have, definitely, but it’s not going to help Gwen if I tell her that. I need her to feel confident and to not feel any pressure.

“Would you like us to give you some space?” I ask.

She nods.

“I’ll stay with her,” Aurora offers.

Brodie shakes his head, stepping forward. “No offense, ma’am, but I think she might be more comfortable with someone who’s Unpredictable like her, you know?”

Gwen nods gratefully. “I—I would. Thank you.”

“I’ll stay with you, don’t worry,” he says, reassuring Gwen with a smile.

He does look friendly and harmless, dressed more casually than Aurora—he’s in jeans and a t-shirt, with an open flannel button-down over it. And I don’t even have to ask to know that none of us are going to be allowed to stay with her without a Circuit official of some kind here as well.

Tamlin eyes Brodie, grudging respect warring with the suspicion in her eyes. “That’s... very kind of you.”

He shrugs. “Gotta do what’s right. I work for the Circuit because I want to change things and make ’em better. Not because I think they’re doing the right thing here.” He glances over at Gwen and nods at her.

Tamlin looks a bit taken aback, her gaze flicking over Brodie as if she’s realizing for the first time that maybe she judged him too harshly. He meets her gaze and holds it, not wilting under the power of her stare like I’ve seen plenty of other people do, although his cheeks turn a trifle pink.

*Huh.*

I glance away before either of them can catch me watching their interaction—although I’m not sure they’d notice anyway, considering how focused they are on each other.

After a few minutes, Tamlin leaves to go back to her class and the rest of us step out of the office, leaving Brodie and Gwen behind. My erstwhile roommate has her hands braced on the desk, her gaze laser-focused on the button in front of her.

*God, I hope this works.* Because even though we might’ve found a small lead, it doesn’t change the fact that at the end of the day, we’re running out of time.

Luckily, I think I know something I can do while Gwen’s working.

## CHAPTER 17

Roman is *not* too fond of my idea.

“He tried to kill us,” he points out, putting his body in front of mine as I move to leave, his voice low and hard.

“He didn’t actually want to hurt me.” I stop in my tracks, because I know if I move around him, Roman will just slip around *me* and stop me again. We’re both stubborn enough that we could play that game forever. What I really need to do is convince him I’m right.

“He was upset that it was me,” I continue. “He was disappointed that I was the one trying to stop him. He didn’t want it to be me. I think him wanting to be friends with me was genuine. I think a part of him... really does care. And dammit, Roman, I could’ve been him!”

The man before me starts to shake his head, cobalt eyes blazing, but before he can speak, I lift a hand.

“I know you don’t think so. And maybe you’re right. Maybe I don’t have that in me. But I was so fucking angry and alone after Mom died that if not for Maddy, if not for my promise to take care of her—if someone had come up to me and told me I could get revenge on my father, on the whole community who didn’t help us when my mother was sick and dying and we were alone—who’s to say I wouldn’t have followed him? I was eighteen; I was young and vulnerable.”

Roman sighs, running a hand down his face. “I still don’t think you would have, Reckless. You’re a better person than you give yourself credit for.” Then he presses his lips together, and I see his throat work as he swallows. “But, all right. If you really think it will help, go see him. Just. Be. Careful.”

I nod. “Trust me, he won’t get the chance to get the drop on me. And I’ll have Asher with me too. We’ll keep each other safe.”

Roman nods sharply, as if to himself, then checks to make sure nobody’s around. Satisfied that no one can see us, he kisses me swiftly, softly, pulling away before either of us can give in to temptation and deepen the kiss.

Dmitri, Asher, and Cam walk up, all still with their cuffs off—but only Asher will be coming with me. Dmitri looks about as pissed and agitated as Roman is, while Cam looks more concerned. There’s a little crease between his eyebrows, and he’s chewing his bottom lip so hard he’s liable to take a chunk out of it.

“It’s okay. We’ll be back before you know it,” I promise them, taking Asher’s hand.

I sound a lot more confident than I feel. After all, I don’t know how much resentment might have built up in the two years since my ex-classmate and I last spoke. I don’t know what’s been going on, what the Circuit might have done, to make his hatred burn even brighter.

But I have to do this. We have to try.

We’re going to see Raul.

The drive is quiet and short, since Raul is being held in the same prison complex as Johnson. Asher drives, even though I know he hates it. He’s too empathetic to deal with other drivers’ road rage well, but apparently, Maddy’s stories about my multitude of speeding tickets are still being counted against me. The guys all seem terrified to let me behind the wheel.

My cuff is off, but I put on a jacket to cover up my wrists. I don’t think that prison officials would be happy if they knew my magic isn’t currently being suppressed. In fact, there’s a lot we’re doing that the Circuit higher-ups would probably frown upon, and I’m just glad they seem to have given Aurora carte blanche to handle us, because she isn’t holding us on as tight of a leash as she could be. Or probably *should* be, if she wants to keep her job and position.

We pull up, Asher gives his ID, and we’re escorted back into the prison. It’s just as gloomy and awful as the last time that we were here, and goose bumps rise along the back of my neck. How could anyone stay here and feel remorse? How could anyone stay here and not grow to hate the Circuit even more?

What if I’m wrong? What if Raul hates me?

We're shown into the interrogation room again, but this time, I'm not behind glass watching Asher. I'm with him, sitting down next to him as Raul is brought in to sit across from us.

He looks small, thin, frailer than I remember. I always thought he looked slim and was surprised at how much strength he had and how much magic he could wield. It didn't seem like all that power should fit inside his small frame.

"Hi," I say softly. I try for a smile, but it doesn't quite work, doesn't sit well on my face.

Raul looks me over. "You look good," he tells me.

From someone else, it might be a pick-up line of some kind, but not from this boy. He sounds kind of relieved, actually, like he thought I might not be okay.

"I've heard about all you've gone through," he continues. His voice is rough and quiet. "With the Trials, especially. It's hard not to hear about that with Johnson being here. I'm glad to see you're all right."

"Thank you." I'm thrown for a loop, not gonna lie. This is a lot more gentle of Raul than I ever expected from him. "I'm sorry. For whatever they've done to you here. I really am."

He gives me a butterfly smile—it flits onto his face, lands for a moment, and then flits away again, gone. "I'm okay."

"No, you're not. You're thin."

He shrugs. "I always was."

Asher is patiently sitting beside me, waiting. None of the others would. Dmitri would be smoldering, Roman would be pacing, and Cam would be cracking sarcastic jokes. I'm glad right now that it's just Asher. This man who knows how to be patient, and listen, and give the benefit of the doubt—probably because it's hard to judge people when you can get inside their heads and feel what they feel, see their side of the story.

"We're here to ask you about your boss," I tell Raul. "Or leader, or whatever you want to call him."

I try to keep my voice gentle, in a way that I probably wouldn't bother with anyone else. But even for all he's done... all the hurt he caused... I can't find it in myself to be cruel or vengeful. I was angry at Raul, bewildered and disappointed, but I never hated him. Not like I hate Johnson and the bastard who's organizing all of this.

The gangly boy shrugs. “I can only tell you so much. The rest of it is all locked down. I would, if I could, at this point. At first I didn’t want to. I believed in what he was saying. But I... I felt bad for what... for trying to kill you. And I’m not sure... the more time that’s passed, the less sure I am that I was fully myself when I hurt the others. When I killed Trevor. I can’t remember everything. It’s like I wasn’t always... me.”

“You think he might have been controlling you?” I’m not surprised to hear it, but I am upset. It feels like my skin is crawling as I think about it. Someone taking over my mind like that, controlling me...

No. No, I’d hate it. No way.

Raul shrugs. “I don’t know. It feels like such a blur.”

I’m not altogether sure how I feel about this. On the one hand, I feel bad for Raul. I feel a kinship with him, almost. But on the other hand I don’t—*can’t*—give him total exoneration in my mind, I can’t say that what he did was okay. It wasn’t. He murdered someone.

How do I forget that? *Do* I forgive that? Should I forgive that?

It’s all jumbled up in my head.

“Why are you here, Elliot?” Raul asks after a moment of awkward silence. “I know it’s not just to say hello.”

His tone isn’t accusatory—more curious.

“How much do you hear about what’s going on outside?” I ask. I can’t imagine that the guards here tell the prisoners much.

Raul shrugs. “We get bits and pieces. They let us watch the Trials, for good behavior. That was fun. But I don’t really know all of it. More like... rumors and stuff that come from people overhearing the guards talking.”

“Okay then.” I sigh. “So... the tide’s really been turning against Unpredictables. Your boss has attacked our school again and again, and it’s been working. He’s turning public opinion against us, getting people to think we’re dangerous and that we need to be stopped. That we need to have our magic taken away.”

It makes it feel more real, somehow, to lay it all out like this. To tell someone like Raul who’s got no idea how serious the situation is outside. Everyone else, even Maddy, knows what’s going on for us, has a good idea of the way the tide is flowing.

But Raul has no clue. And saying it to him like this...

It makes me realize that, yes, this is really what’s happening. People want to take our magic away. It makes it horribly, sickeningly real.

I swallow hard and force myself to focus. I'm not going to rail or rant or have a panic attack in this prison, of all places.

Raul's eyes go wide, and he looks alarmed. "I had no—I didn't think—I thought that we would be working to—to liberate Unpredictables. To go against the Circuit, to make them take us seriously, to get—to get revenge."

Asher raises his eyebrows at that, and something of my own thoughts must show on my face as well, because Raul goes a bit red in the face, embarrassed. "I know it wasn't... I know that it was wrong, what I did. I'm not excusing it. I'm just—I guess I was lied to more than I thought."

He takes a deep breath, his chest shaking. "I want to help you guys. If I can. I want to fix this. I just don't know if I'll be able to, with the lock on my mind."

"Your willingness helps," Asher says. "If the person whose mind I'm going into is willing, then it's easier for me to sort through and try to find things."

"You think you'll be able to get through the wards?" Doubt flashes across Raul's face.

"I'm going to try," Asher replies. "I'm Unpredictable. They say that means we're more powerful, without the help of charms and all that, so... here's hoping it's true."

"He managed to get something from Johnson," I add. "And that asshole didn't want to help Asher at all."

"He's the one who attacked you at the Trials." Raul frowns slightly.

I nod. "Yeah. Didn't work hard enough to kill me, I guess."

I'm trying for a joke, but he still looks troubled.

"Hey! Don't go attacking him or killing him for me or anything," I warn.

Raul's an intense person, and he's clearly had his sense of right and wrong manipulated and twisted by whoever groomed him. I don't want him to go and try to kill Johnson out of a misplaced idea of looking for redemption or trying to make it up to me for attacking me.

The boy in front of us looks pointedly down at his hands, which are cuffed to the table. "I don't think that's an option."

"As if you couldn't figure out a way around those if you really wanted to."

The corner of Raul's mouth ticks upward into a half-smile. "I'm going to take that as a compliment."



“Good, it was meant as one.”

Whatever else he may be, this kid is smart—he used to help me with my homework during our first semester, before I was close enough to the guys to feel comfortable asking them for things like that.

“You ready?” Asher asks.

Raul nods, taking a deep breath before locking eyes with him.

You don’t have to be looking someone in the eye to read their mind, but according to Asher, it helps. Eyes really are the window to the soul and all that.

Both men go still and quiet. Asher’s body gets tense, while Raul’s relaxes. Raul has a very blank look on his face, like he’s trying not to think of anything in particular, trying to keep himself open so that Asher can get to where he needs to go inside his head.

Asher’s brow furrows in concentration again. He’s starting to sweat a bit, just like last time, and I want to hold his hand or touch him some other way, to reassure him and lend him strength somehow—but that might just break his concentration further, and I definitely don’t want that.

Raul’s eyelids flutter, and his jaw twitches as if he’s in pain. Is this hurting him? Is it hurting Asher?

Asher clenches his jaw, and I see his palms press harder into the table, his fingers shaking a little.

*Come on*, I think to myself, hoping my thoughts aren’t loud enough to intrude on Asher’s concentration. *Come on...*

After what feels like an eternity, Ash inhales sharply and then slumps in the chair, breaking eye contact with Raul.

Both men are breathing heavily. I put my hand on Asher’s arm, squeezing tightly as I feel the muscle bunch beneath my touch. “You okay?”

Asher nods. “Yeah. The wards are strong. And... no offense, Raul, but your mind’s younger. Untrained. So he was able to lock your mind down even tighter than Johnson’s.”

Raul looks troubled at that, and I don’t blame him. He met his “mentor” before he went to Griffin, so it was before he had any kind of magical training, before he would have had any clue how to handle his magic or how to protect himself. Johnson met the same guy after decades of studying magic and fortifying his mind.

It’s such a scary thought, to be preyed upon like that when you’re young and vulnerable. My stomach twists like it might try to upchuck everything I

ate today.

“Were you able to get anything?” Raul asks. He sounds anxious, and his fingers drum anxiously on the table.

I look at Asher. I can tell that the boy we came to see wants so badly to be helpful, but I like to think I’m becoming an expert in Asher’s facial expressions—that I can see through the careful, calm mask—and I don’t think he got as much as we’d hoped.

“There was a design,” Ash says. He looks toward the one-way mirror, raising his voice. “Could I get some paper and a pen?” Then he turns back to us. “I need to sketch it out before I forget it.”

An officer brings a paper and pen, and Asher draws the design. It looks like maybe it’s some kind of sigil, but not any sigil I recognize. I mean, admittedly, I’m not the best at runes by a long shot. I’m much better at the theoretical, and even with my own magic, than I am with the practical application of enchantments and charms.

But judging by the confused look that Raul and Asher give this design, I don’t think they know what it is either. Raul’s powerful with magic, and he got extra training from his asshole of a supposed mentor, and Asher has a mind like a steel trap. If neither of them recognize this... then it’s pretty damn obscure.

If it even is a sigil at all. It could be something else entirely.

“I also got one other thing,” Asher says. “A color—robin’s egg blue.”

Huh. That’s a soft shade of cyan. It’s also a hugely popular color. That could mean anything from an actual egg, to the color someone’s painted their walls, or any number of other things. I don’t know how much a damn color can help us.

But Raul looks hopeful, and I hate to crush his heart. “Can you guys use that?” he asks. He looks so young and boyish as he leans forward eagerly.

Ack. What the hell else am I supposed to say?

“Yeah,” I tell him. “This is helpful, definitely. Thanks, Raul. Is it okay if maybe we come back and try again another time? See if we can get any more?”

We won’t really have the time for that, not with the clock ticking down the way it is, but I figure... we’re the closest thing to friends he has. I don’t want to tell him that he was useless and now we’re leaving him and never coming back. What kind of response would that be?

“Yeah.” He nods quickly, his head bobbing up and down on his thin neck. “Anytime. I’ll be here.”

I think he’s the one trying for a joke this time, but just like mine earlier, it falls a little flat.

“Thank you, Raul,” I murmur as Asher and I stand. I reach across the table to rest my hand on his shoulder. “Thanks for trying to help us. It means a lot.”

Asher looks even more exhausted and emotionally drained than I feel, but we hold hands as we follow the guard back to the prison entrance, both supporting and drawing comfort from each other.

On the way out of the facility, we’re given our phones back. While we were inside, we each got a text from Cam saying that Gwen’s finished, but it’s late, so they’ve headed back to the hotel again for the evening.

The drive is quiet, and our hands stay locked the entire way back—the only time we broke apart was to get into the car. By the time Asher and I reach the hotel, it’s after midnight. When we get up to the room, the other three are in their sleep clothes, looking both drained and antsy at the same time.

“Did you find anything?” I ask, hardly daring to hope, my heart in my throat.

Roman nods, and Cam gives a small smile.

“Yeah, Sin,” he says. “Gwen found us something.”

## CHAPTER 18

I'm the first one up the next morning, and I don't bother staying in bed. It's only six a.m., but I know I won't be able to fall back asleep, and I won't be able to stay still either.

I decide to let the guys sleep for a little while longer. There's not a lot we can do to pursue the lead Gwen gave us until a more reasonable hour anyway. In the meantime, I can do some research online on the design Asher got from Raul. Maybe I can find something.

First, though, I need to hop in the shower. I went straight to bed last night, exhausted, and I want to feel a little refreshed as I face the day.

I slip inside, carefully closing the bathroom door before I turn on the light so I don't disturb anyone. Roman is a horribly light sleeper, and so is Dmitri. Cam sleeps like a fucking brick though—it's hilarious.

The hot water feels so damn good, waking me up and soothing me all at the same time, helping me feel like I might actually be able to handle what's in store.

*Dammit. We've only got a few days left. They're ticking by way too fast, and I can't keep up, and we're barely getting anywhere—*

The bathroom door opens, and to my surprise, Cam pokes his head in.

"Hey, Sin. Want me to help you scrub your back?"

My spiraling thoughts screech to a halt as a laugh bursts from my lips. I think he used a line like that on me in my second semester, before we were all together, before I even knew quite *what* we were. I'm not sure if he's saying it now because he remembers using it before, or if that's his go-to line when he wants to hop in the shower with someone.

But either way, I know my answer without even having to think about it.

“Get in here.”

I push on the foggy glass door of the shower, holding it open as he quickly shucks his pants and shirt and steps inside.

God, sometimes I forget how comforting Cam is. He hasn't even said anything except his cheesy back scrubbing line, but just his presence is already making my bunched muscles unknot. I'm so fucking glad he woke up and decided to join me.

At that thought, my brows pull together. “Hey, I didn't wake you, did I?”

I don't know how that would even be possible without inviting a twelve-piece band to parade around the room, but you never know.

“Nah.” He grins, reaching for the small bottle of soap on the shelf built into the tile wall. “I was already awake. My mind is running a hundred miles a minute, and I just couldn't get it to stop.”

He pours some soap into his hand and then rubs his palms together, working up a lather. When they're covered in bubbles, he starts at my neck and shoulders, massaging the soap gently into my skin.

“Yeah.” I sigh, letting my eyelids droop at the feel of his large hands caressing me, slippery with soap and water. “Same. There's just so much. So much riding on this. So much against us. So—”

Before I can finish, Cam's lips capture mine in a gentle kiss. When he pulls away, his blue eyes study me seriously. “Do you really wanna talk about it, Sin?”

God, he knows me so fucking well.

Reaching out, I pull him a little closer to me, then reach for the soap too. “Nope. I don't. Not at all. For the duration of this shower, I just want to help you scrub your back.”

“Thought so.”

He kisses me again, slow and deep, as his hands continue to glide over me, soaping up my breasts, teasing my nipples, running along my sides and over the swell of my hips.

I sink into our kiss, going by feel instead of sight as I pour some soap into my open palm and begin to lather him up too, paying particular attention to my favorite bits—the smooth planes of his pecs, the hard muscles of his biceps, every single dip and bump of his six pack.

He must be focusing on his favorite bits too, because he spends an awfully long time cleaning my boobs, to the point where I'm about to make

a joke about how shiny they'll be when he's done. But I can't quite bring myself to break our kiss, even to tease him. It feels too good. Sexy and soothing all at once.

When my hands move even lower, wrapping around the hard length of his cock, he thrusts into my grip. And when I let go and hook my arms around the back of his neck, he lifts me easily in his arms, gripping my thighs in his large hands and stepping forward to bring us both under the spray of water. His thick cock finds my pussy, and he slides into me.

We both sigh, twin sounds of arousal and contentment, and he pulls his head back a little to meet my gaze.

"You know, what we all did the other night was amazing. That was one of the hottest fucking nights of my life. But I like this too, Sin. So much. Just me and you."

My heart does a little *thu-thump* against my ribs, and I shoot him a lopsided grin, speaking past the sudden lump in my throat.

"Same. On both counts." I rest my elbows on his shoulders, running my fingers through his wet blond hair as my chest presses against his. "I'm so glad I have you in my life. The four of you separately, and the four of you together. I love you, Cam."

His smile is radiant, and it disappears only when he drops his head to claim another kiss.

Our fuck is slow and wet and languid.

Maybe it's because we both know that as soon as we get out of the shower, we'll have to think about the challenges and desperate odds that face us again.

Or maybe it's because we're both starting to realize that this thing between us—this *love* between us—is a forever kind of love.

And that means we have all the time in the world.



I knew it would happen, but I'm still surprised at how the weight of my worries hits me like an almost physical force as soon as Cam and I leave the bathroom—having gotten squeaky clean and just a little bit dirty.

The same thing seems to happen to him, because I can see his muscles bunching, his shoulders tightening up, as we rejoin the others in the hotel

room.

Our shower lasted long enough that everyone's awake by now, so once the other three are ready to go, we head out.

Thanks to Gwen, we have a list of locations that the button's been to recently. I had expected some far-flung places, and wasn't looking forward to flying to D.C. or New York or—God forbid—across the ocean, but it turns out all of the locations are in Portland.

Thinking about it sends a chill up my spine. That means that this guy has been nearby, *lurking*, this entire time. What else has he been up to? Did he go to my bar? My old apartment? Could I have passed by him on the street while I was shopping with Maddy and not even known it?

It's sickening and terrifying. And I don't know what to do with that fear other than use it as motivation to track this guy down and make sure he can't get up to this bullshit ever again.

It would be helpful if the button could lead us right to his lair—if he even has a lair. Is that an actual thing, or just something from comic books? But Gwen said there must be some kind of anti-magic wards around it or something, because she couldn't track any kind of permanent location or residence.

So instead we're going to visit all the other places Gwen found for us. Following in the guy's footsteps, so to speak.

Yeah, it feels about as creepy as it sounds. The plan—or, well, the *hope*, let's be honest—is that someone at one of those places can give us a good idea of who he is and what he's up to, maybe even a name and his home address. Or maybe we'll just run into him, and he'll kick our asses and we'll die and it'll all be over.

I'm feeling a little on edge, in case you couldn't tell.

We stop by a few of the places—some of them are pretty generic, like an auto repair store and a coffee shop.

I'm hopeful that one of the baristas at the coffee shop might know the guy if he was a regular. I bartended for several years, and I know it's not as easy to recognize someone as you might think when you see tons of customers every day. But you do get to notice your regulars, so if our mystery man came here a lot, maybe someone will remember him.

But, no such luck.

"It could be he had some kind of charm or enchantment on him so that they wouldn't be able to recall him," Asher points out as we leave a

bookstore in the magical area of Portland.

“It’s odd,” I note, scrunching my face up. “Half of the locations are in the magical district, but on the fringes, sort of. And the other half are in non-magical areas.”

“You think he’s got something against the magical community in general?” Cam asks.

“I’m not sure. Could be he just wants to escape detection.”

I know I didn’t spend a lot of time in the magical community, growing up. I didn’t have any magic as far as Mom knew, and she kind of wanted to keep a low profile after Dad left. He was a bigwig in the magical world even then, and I think Mom just wanted to raise her two kids in peace and avoid scandal or people asking nosy questions.

After Mom died, I admit, I was bitter. I was angry at my dad and the magical community in general, so I stayed away.

Could this guy feel the same? Or maybe he just doesn’t want to mix with magical society until he knows that all the “unclean” Unpredictables are gone from it? After all, once you graduate, you get your cuff taken off—and without that marker, it’s harder to tell an Unpredictable from any other kind of magic user unless you actually see them do magic.

“It doesn’t help we’ve got no description either,” Dmitri points out, his tone grouchy. “You can’t just go into a bar and say, ‘hey, I’m looking for a *man*.’” He gestures around us. “That’s half the population.”

The rest of us share a look as we get into the car to head to the next spot on Gwen’s list. Roman’s driving and Asher’s in front, with Cam, then me, then Dmitri in the back. Dmitri’s been extra on edge lately, and at first I thought it was just the whole pressure to hunt down this asshole thing, but now I’m wondering if it’s something else too.

“Hey. Have you heard from your parents?” I ask quietly.

Dmitri shakes his head. “I think...” He blows out a breath. “I might be crazy. I’m open to that possibility. In fact, I hope that’s the fucking truth—that I’m paranoid and crazy. But I think my parents were behind the pressure on the Circuit to close Griffin.”

“What?” I hiss, struggling to keep from shouting in the closed space of the car.

He nods, his dark eyes shining with anger. “They’ve been pissed about the wedding. Not just angry. Petty. Small-minded. They’ve always been that way. I’m not surprised that’s how they’re handling the whole thing. But



they've also used it to let their prejudice against Unpredictables become even stronger."

I grab his hand, wrapping it in both of mine as the car goes quiet. I can see his neck muscles straining, and I have a feeling he could power a small city with all the agitated energy coursing through him right now.

"Right before I left the wedding, my dad told me that the academy had poisoned my mind." His lip curls. "He wanted someone to blame, of course. I don't think he can handle the idea that he's been so awful his kid would rather walk out of his life than do what he says for another damn second. But he said this was the school's fault. That I had to learn my place. Learn the rules."

"Jesus, Dmitri." My voice is thick as I try to keep my own anger under control. "That's awful."

"They've got plenty of influence. Money. Power. And nobody does revenge like my dad. He's crushed entire business empires before." His face is dark, thunderous, like a storm cloud. "If I ever see him again..."

His voice trails off. Cam reaches an arm around my shoulder to put his hand on Dmitri's arm, squeezing gently in solidarity.

I clutch his hand harder. "This is an asshole move," I tell him. "No doubt about that. They're pricks. But it's not your fault, you know that, right? You didn't make your parents into these kinds of people. And caving to them wouldn't have been any better. You would've been miserable, and so would everyone else because they could feel how miserable you were, and I bet your parents would've wanted to try and close down the school at some point anyway. Their prejudice would've gotten worse, it just might have taken longer, and that's *not* because of you. That hatred, that close-mindedness, that's on them."

Dmitri nods, and the tension in his face loosens a little. He doesn't suddenly smile as if all his sins are absolved or whatever—but he does look like a bit of the weight has lifted off his shoulders.

"Too bad you don't have their money, though," Cam says. "That would be helpful." He winks at Dmitri, clearly joking.

Dmitri rolls his eyes. "I don't want money from them. I want money that I actually earned, not something that was just given to me. And I know my father got it through exploiting and using others. Not exactly a legacy I want to inherit. Even if I didn't do any of the things that earned it, I'd still benefit from those things. Doesn't sit well with me."

“Welp, I guess that means Roman has to be our sugar daddy now.” Cam leans forward in his seat and bats his eyelashes exaggeratedly at Roman in the rearview mirror. “Right?”

“Sure thing, snookums,” Roman says, deadpan.

I laugh so hard I almost choke on my own spit as Cam collapses into hysterics. I see the corner of Roman’s mouth tick upward into an almost-smirk, and I know he’s pleased with himself for thinking up that remark.

For a moment, the mood lightens, and I grin at them all. Asher’s chuckling to himself, and even Dmitri has sly amusement in his eyes as his death-grip on my hand relaxes a little.

Then Roman puts on his turn signal and pulls up to the curb in front of our destination.

The mood drops again at once.

This is the last place on the list—the final location Gwen was able to track with the button.

I lean over Dmitri to peer out the window.

If we fail here, then we’ve reached a dead end. And all this running around Portland will have just been the five of us chasing our tails while the bad guy gets to do whatever he pleases. He’s probably laughing at us right now, wondering how five people could be so goddamn useless at this.

Hell, *I’m* shocked that we could all be so goddamn useless at this. Roman spent his formative years tracking down necromancers who broke laws and things like that with his mentor. Asher’s a hugely powerful mind reader. Cam’s resourceful thanks to growing up without his parents, I like to think I’m no slouch, and Dmitri has connections in spite of his fight with his parents.

You’d think we’d be able to make more headway than *this*.

But here we are. Last chance. Either we figure out who this guy is here, pick up some other lead to follow, or we go home and accept defeat.

And I am not accepting defeat.

## CHAPTER 19

**T**he last location on Gwen's list?  
It's a dry cleaner.

At this point, I'll be honest, I'm kind of worried we might be tracking the wrong guy.

"Are we *sure* this button doesn't belong to some random dude who just happened to be on that roof?" I ask, chewing my lip as we gather on the sidewalk outside the small establishment.

"Why would anyone else be up there?" Cam argues, not for the first time. We've had some variation of this conversation multiple times today.

"Maybe a bird picked it up and then dropped it later?" Asher waggles his head back and forth as he considers the plausibility of his own theory.

"All the places we've been to have been such... ordinary places. A coffee shop, an auto repair place, a bookstore. None of them sound like places someone who's plotting against an entire subset of magic users would go to—I mean, yeah, sure, all bad guys need to buy groceries, right? But this is... I don't know. What if this is just an ordinary person, and we have it all wrong? This is someone with a regular, boring routine."

"Maybe we do have it wrong," Roman acknowledges. "But we have no way of knowing."

"Even if we're wrong and this is someone else, it's better that we're tracking it down instead of sitting around." Cam wraps an arm around my waist and tugs me into his side, his sandalwood scent filling my senses like a balm. "We won't know until we actually track him down, so that's what we're doing, right?"

"Even bad guys need to dry clean their suits," Asher points out.

Dmitri rolls his eyes.

None of us are sure, and that makes me even more nervous. I would've thought that Roman, at least, would have some idea, some *certainty*, but... nope. We're all flying blind.

Great.

Well, there's nothing else for it. I lean up to press a kiss to Cam's cheek, silently thanking him for the support, then step forward and push open the door to the shop, making the little bell over the door jingle. A moment later, I hear the men enter behind me.

We must look like quite a pack, all of us barging in at once to ask questions of the employees. I've sort of wondered all day if we're scaring the people we to talk to. Dmitri and Roman don't exactly look friendly, and God knows, I'm not a ray of sunshine on the best of days.

The person behind the counter is an older Asian woman with a set of horn-rimmed glasses. Oh, great, another older person, and one who needs glasses. Is this going to be like the guy at the bar with the bad memory?

"Hi." I step up to the counter, smiling. Next to me, Cam and Asher also smile.

Roman and Dmitri, wisely, hide in the back of our little group.

"I'm sorry to bother you," I go on as the woman looks up at me, blinking behind her thick glasses, "but we're looking for someone."

Asher goes into the routine he's been perfecting all day, flattering her, soothing her, asking if she's seen anyone tall, with darkish hair, a man. By now, I recognize the tone his voice takes on when he's reaching into someone's mind, and I know if the dry cleaner knows anything, she'll tell us.

But I can tell by the look in the woman's eyes—this awful, blank, glazed look—that she has no idea who this person is. Doesn't help that we've got such a vague description to go on. At least, if nothing else, this is giving Asher a chance to practice his mind influencing ability more.

But that's a small comfort right now.

If only the guy we're searching for had something like a hook hand or a tattoo, something that would make him really stand out—

*Oh my God. That's it!*

I dig into my pocket for a pen. "Sorry, sorry," I say, cutting off their conversation. "But could you—sorry to interrupt, but do you have a piece of paper?"

I don't have a pen, so I ask for that too and then hand both to Asher. "Draw the symbol Raul gave you."

Asher looks confused, but he draws the symbol and shows it to the woman.

Her eyes light up. "Oh! Yes, yes, I know this. I know him. This is a... a birthmark. It's very irregular, isn't it?"

*Holy shit.*

*Holy fucking shit.*

I can't quite breathe, and I can tell by the way the energy changes around me that all the guys are having a similar reaction.

She knows him. She knows the man we're looking for.

It's still possible the button doesn't belong to the mastermind behind all the attacks on Griffin, and we're just one step closer to tracking down an innocent businessman or something.

But we're one step closer.

I'll take it.

"Ah, yes, yes it is. Very irregular." Asher recovers his composure first, finally answering the woman's question.

And she's not wrong. It's a hell of a birthmark, if you ask me. I wonder if the guy's magic had something to do with making the birthmark look like that.

"He's a frequent customer," the woman goes on. "I don't know exactly where he lives, but I know what street he's on—Whipple."

Asher writes down the name, just in case, and even gets instructions on exactly which street it is, in case there's more than one with that name in the city.

"Oh, and his name is Agustin," the woman adds. "I don't know his last name. Most customers pay by credit card nowadays, but he only uses cash. Very quiet, keeps to himself. Always seemed like such a nice man, you know? He's not in any real trouble, is he?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. We just need to return some property to him," I assure her.

Thanks to Asher's soothing mental influence, the woman just smiles at me, completely placated.

I wonder if that effect will linger, or if it'll fade once Asher goes, leaving her troubled. I hope for her sake that she remains content and convinced everything's fine.

“He’s a very nice person,” she goes on. “I always thought he was a water elemental. I never quite confirmed that, of course, it’s always sort of... rude to ask, I was taught growing up. Not polite, you know? But he came in once during a horrible downpour, and he didn’t have a drop of water on him. I’ve only seen water elementals manage to avoid rain like that—with the way the wind was gusting, not even an umbrella would’ve kept him completely dry.”

*Huh. Interesting.*

“Thank you so much for your time,” Asher says, and we hurry out before the woman can grow suspicious or worried again.

As we pile into the car, I stare at the piece of paper in Asher’s hand, my heart thudding hard in my chest. We have it, finally.

A street.

A location.

## CHAPTER 20

The street the dry cleaner told us about—Whipple—is in a magical suburb outside of Portland proper.

There's a main magical district in the city, but there are also small neighborhoods populated by magic users sprinkled throughout the city and the surrounding area. It's not like we have designated areas that are the only places we're allowed to live or anything. The Circuit doesn't police us like that, and the regular government doesn't know we exist.

But if you've got a big secret—like, for example, being able to do magic—you end up congregating with the people who have that same secret. You can commiserate over the problems, share the joys, and you don't have to hide as much.

It makes sense that we'd all start to live and work near each other, and so these magical neighborhoods and districts exist in every city in the country.

This suburb is definitely one of the nicer ones I've seen. Far nicer than what I grew up with—the kind of neighborhood I imagine Mads and I would've grown up in if Dad hadn't split, if he'd used his money to take care of us properly. It's pristine, cute even, with nicely manicured lawns, wide porches, and lovingly touched up houses with fresh coats of paint.

“Gotta be making a cool six figures to live here,” Cam comments, raising his eyebrows as he gazes out the window.

Dmitri wrinkles his nose, clearly not quite as impressed as the blond mage.

“All right, say it.” Cam chuckles, reaching across me to punch Dmitri in the shoulder. “Say the snobby comment, go on.”

“I was just going to say how... *quaint*... it all looks.”

Cam cracks up, and I hear Asher chuckle in the front seat.

“Everything here looks so normal,” I whisper, peering out the window. “I don’t understand.”

Silence falls in the car for a moment as Roman rolls the car slowly down the curving suburban street. I keep my gaze glued outside, and as we pass several more beautiful houses, I start to speak slowly, processing my thoughts out loud.

“We have to be on the right track. If someone wants to take down Unpredictables, then a powerful water elemental fits the bill, right? When he attacked me after the Trials, Johnson was ranting about how Unpredictables upset the balance. That seven is a sacred number, and that there should only be seven types of magic in the world. People who hate Unpredictables the most seem to think we fucked up this perfect natural system or something just by existing. And I always got the sense that elementals are the most attached to balance and order.”

*Not Maddy though.* She’s a water elemental too, and she’s one of the sweetest, most kind-hearted people I know. Just goes to show you can’t actually judge a single person based on whatever group they belong to.

“I just don’t understand it.” Cam turns a little in his seat to face us more fully. “The man we’re looking for has been organizing attacks against the school, sending minions against us, summoning goddamn demons, recruiting Johnson and Raul and who knows who else. And the guy who’s been doing all that... lives here? In Normalville?”

Honestly, I see Cam’s point. You wouldn’t expect someone who’s been basically doing his damn best to start a war to be living somewhere like this, acting like the rest of us. You’d expect him to be above such mundane things, to be cooped up in some villainous lair or up in a penthouse brooding over the city, surrounded by cold riches.

You expect them to be detached, in other words. Separate. Not just another member of society to most people. Not just Neighbor Jeff who waves at you when you take the kids to soccer practice.

Then again... it’s hard to tell what magic someone has just from looking at them. Why should you be able to tell someone’s got evil plans just by looking at them? I couldn’t even guess what Asher wants for breakfast in the morning from just a look, and I know him pretty well.



Roman pulls over and parks on the side of the road. We need to figure out which house belongs to our target—I suppose we could just walk door-to-door and question all the tall, dark-haired guys we find to see if they're Agustin. Like Hugh Grant in *Love, Actually*, except we're not looking for the love of our lives, we're looking for a goddamn criminal.

Also, it's not Christmas.

"We'll cover more ground on foot," Dmitri observes, scanning the neighborhood with wary eyes. "Should we split up?"

Roman shakes his head. "No, best to stay together. The last thing we want is someone getting hurt with no one else around to help them."

I shiver a little. I've been so worried about catching this guy, I almost forgot about the danger we'll face as soon as we find him. And that danger is no joke. This guy has summoned demons and controlled people's minds. He could very possibly squash us all to pulp, especially if we're alone.

Nope. Not gonna happen.

No way am I letting him get near one of my guys if I can help it.

And so the five of us head off down the sidewalk together, trooping up and down the street as we try to find someone who can tell us where Agustin lives.

Not surprisingly, people aren't all that helpful.

We're not in the 1950s anymore—people have busy lives and don't know their neighbors the way they used to, and it doesn't help that we still can't really describe him properly. There are a lot of tall dark-haired men around, apparently. I mean, given that Dmitri, Asher, and Roman all have dark hair...

Yeah.

I'm almost ready to give up, to say that we should just stop and call it a day, this is getting ridiculous... but then I see a house up ahead, a couple houses away from the one we're in front of.

It's painted robin's egg blue.

*Holy shit.*

I grab Asher's arm, my fingers digging into his bicep. "Is that the color?" I whisper. "Is that the color you saw in Raul's head?"

Asher follows my gaze, and his eyes go wide. He nods, just once, the movement sharp.

I start striding toward the house as Asher points it out to the others. I've only made it a few feet—when someone emerges.

I freeze.

A man walks out. Tall, dark-haired, but regular looking. I mean, he doesn't look like a villain or even an asshole. He looks just like a regular person you run into at the grocery store.

For a moment, I honestly start to doubt. I know evil can come in any form. I *know* that. I've seen the documentaries about the serial killers who looked like nice people and had friends and sent their moms flowers. You can be polite and kind to ninety percent of the people you run into and then be a completely poisonous snake to the other ten percent when nobody's looking.

But still. For that one moment... I wonder if I'm wrong. If this is just a normal guy, and the house color is just a coincidence, and I'm being ridiculous.

The guy walks down to the mailbox at the curb and opens it up, pulling out some mail. Looks like bills, and a copy of... is that *Vanity Fair*?

*Huh.*

The guy flips through his mail, head down, and I wonder if I should start moving again.

As if he can hear my thoughts, the man freezes.

My heart picks up in my chest, crashing hard against my ribs, but I can't seem to get a breath in.

Moving slowly, like an animal reaching out with all of its instincts, the man turns around.

Dark, fathoms-deep eyes lock onto mine, and it's like I've been struck in the head by lightning. I might not have seen definite features before, when I glimpsed his face through the bird, through the mage at the tower, but I know—I know in my heart that it's him.

It's *him*.

I know he recognizes me too—and even if he didn't, I bet my shock and anger is clear on my face.

Before I can launch an attack, the bastard turns and sprints for his house.

## CHAPTER 21

**W**hat the fuck?

Not that I was excited about the prospect of going toe-to-toe with this asshole, but seriously—he’s *running*?

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Jerking into motion, I sprint after him.

“Elliot, what the hell?” Romans shouts. Then he and the others realize what’s happening, and they start running with me.

“Don’t let him get away!” I yell, unleashing my sonic boom. “And watch out!”

The guys are used to my sonic boom by now, and they all make sure to hang back just behind me so I can hurl it at Agustin.

The sonic boom sends him flying forward, slamming into his lawn. I hear a *whoosh* of air next to me, and Cam teleports, appearing next to the guy and grabbing him. A second later Dmitri is there, even though he’s still beside me—he’s duplicated.

A blast of water as strong as a dozen fire hoses hits the guys, and now they’re the ones to go flying, landing on their backs as Agustin jumps to his feet.

He whirls around, his face contorted with fury, and *oh, yeah*, I recognize that expression now. He had that same hatred on his face when I glimpsed him through his minions all those times I fought them.

“That all you got, bitch?!” I yell.

Probably famous last words and all that, but hey—I’m allowed to taunt the guy who’s been sending his henchmen to attack my school and try to kill me as a side benefit for the past two years. He’s the reason I was in a

goddamn coma for three months, and he almost permanently stole Cam's magic.

I'm gonna kick this guy's skinny, lily-white ass.

I take off toward him, determined to catch him, but Agustin knows we're here now and he's drawing water out of—out of the damn sprinkler system, it looks like, which is embedded in his lawn. Water's going everywhere, and he's manipulating it a hell of a lot more strongly than I've ever seen Maddy do, whipping it at us like he's a ringmaster fending off hungry lions. I catch a wave to the face that feels like a goddamn slap.

That's all the magic he's using though—water. Looks like the dry cleaner was right about his power. But surely this joker must be loaded down with charms and enchantments like Johnson was when I fought him, right? It almost feels like he's going easy on us.

Well, if he wants to sit back on his heels, that's his prerogative. I'm definitely not gonna go easy on him.

I focus on the thread inside me, the telltale connection I get when someone's close to me and I can mirror their powers. I could mirror the powers of any of my guys, even Roman's death touch. Maybe...

*Shit. No, that would be too dangerous.*

The few times he's used that power, it's almost consumed him, the dark energy overtaking him and making him hunger for more—and I'm still nowhere near as strong in my control as he is. This fight is dangerous enough. I'd never forgive myself if any of the guys ended up dead because I borrowed that dark magic and couldn't control it the way Roman's been trained to.

So I focus on mirroring Agustin's water elementals power instead.

Water from the sprinkler system starts flowing toward me as I try to form it, manipulate it into something useful. At first, it just takes the shape of a pulsing blob, but then an idea strikes me—when Maddy first got her powers, she leaned into what the water naturally wanted to do, creating these long, almost snake-like shapes.

I start to construct a giant water snake, pulling more and more water from the sprinkler to feed it. The liquid animal rears up, towering over Agustin, and I make it strike.

The mage turns his face away just in time and holds up a hand, summoning his own water to create a shield. The snake's head smashes

against the shield Agustin created, bursting apart in a spray of mist. His water creation held stronger than mine did.

*Dammit.*

Roman's flinging spells at him, but it's clear that unlike the rest of us, my dark-haired professor isn't using his full power. I get why summoning a demon would be a bad idea in a neighborhood like this. Too many possible casualties. Already neighbors are coming out of their homes, yelling, wondering what the hell's going on.

"Stay back!" Asher yells, his voice booming unnaturally inside my head, and I realize he's disengaging from the fight, projecting his command into the minds of the innocent people around us. "Go back into your homes! Stay safe!"

A few people seem to be trying to fight his commands, but slowly, jerkily, like robots, they start to march inside. The people who were obviously already scared don't need to be forced by Asher's mind control—when they hear his command, they just bolt for their homes.

"Roman!" I scream. I send another sonic boom, but this one Agustin's ready for, and he dodges it. "Use your powers!"

His necromancy—his ability to raise the dead—isn't helpful here either. But Roman's like me. He's one of the few Unpredictables who has three powers.

His third power is the death touch. And as scary as that ability is, it might be the only thing that will work right now.

But he shakes his head, his nostrils flaring. "No! I'm not taking that chance! Not with you and the others so close by!"

Dmitri gets slammed into the ground, and his double flickers slightly but manages to recover and go after Agustin again.

I launch myself at the man too, throwing my hands out behind me and using my sonic boom to propel myself forward. Even as I fly through the air, I reach out with my senses, feeling my connection to Cam.

Just as Agustin swings for me, I teleport behind him, landing solidly on the ground and giving him a roundhouse kick to the back of the head.

"All right, Sin!" Cam crows. "That's how you fuckin' do it!"

Agustin rights himself and turns, snarling at me. "You loathsome little..."

"Takes one to know one, asshat," I shoot back.

In a flash, all the water suspended in the air around us falls like torrential rain, and I'm disoriented as it crashes down, splashing my face, blinding me, soaking all of us.

I splutter, blinking my eyes open as I spit out water—and then almost choke as I inhale a sharp breath.

With an electric sizzling sound, a strange whip made of lightning materializes in Agustin's hand. He's gripping it, no handle or anything, like he's summoned an actual goddamn lightning bolt and is holding it captive. It snakes in the air, crackling, and I smell ozone.

Holy *shit*.

My gaze scans his fingers, searching for a ring or some other enchanted object that might be generating the whip. But he's not wearing anything.

Now, I don't know a fuckton about ordinary magic users. But I do know they're pretty restricted in what they can do with their power, and that they need to use enchantments, potions, and charms in order to access different kinds of magic—although there are always limitations. It's why so many people are, apparently, wary of Unpredictables. We don't need those kinds of add-ons in order to boost our power. We're not limited by conventional magical rules. It's where we got our name.

And one thing I'm ninety percent certain most ordinary magic users can't do?

Summon a *fucking lightning whip*.

All of us instinctively dive out of the way as Agustin raises the whip. I've never seen anything like that. It can't be some kind of spell or enchantment, can it? He'd have to be wearing some kind of charm object, and even then, I don't think an enchantment would allow him to hold lightning with his bare hands.

I don't have a lot of time to analyze the situation though, because my only thought is to get out of the damn way and pray the others do the same. Asher's mostly clear, standing back and focusing on either keeping innocent people away or trying to break into Agustin's mind—I'm not sure which at this point. But Cam, Dmitri, and Roman are all in the line of fire, same as I am.

And of course Dmitri, my sparring partner, decides that diving toward the maniac with the lightning whip to try to tackle him is a better option than diving *out* of the way of the weapon.

“Don’t!” I yell, even as I tuck and roll on the grass, my body moving without thought—all those fight classes paying off. I’ll have to remember to thank Tamlin later.

Dmitri catches Agustin around the waist, driving him back several steps with a shoulder to his solar plexus.

Then everything happens so quickly that I almost can’t see it, can’t tell what’s going on until it’s too late.

Agustin and Dmitri are scuffling, grappling in a clinch. Agustin raises the whip, and I cry out—because Dmitri’s a tough son of a bitch, nobody’s denying that, especially me as the girl he’s literally knocked into the dirt plenty of times, but this is actual lightning. There’s no way he can survive a direct hit from that thing.

And then Roman shouts words I can’t understand, and something that looks almost like a demon ghost pops into existence behind the two brawling men. Suddenly, Dmitri’s being yanked backward by demon ghost, pulled away from Agustin’s whip just as it flicks toward his back.

The whip misses.

But Agustin cracks it again, and this time, the bright white whip wraps around Roman’s waist. Roman cries out in pain.

And then both he and Agustin vanish.

For a brief moment, I wonder who’s screaming—they sound so angry, so helpless, so terrified—and then I realize it’s me.

I’m the one screaming.

Dmitri staggers to his feet as Asher collapses and Cam teleports to catch him.

“I... I tried. His mind’s a fucking fortress,” Asher manages to gasp out.

Asher rarely swears, so when he does, I know he’s at the end of his rope.

“That asshole... is definitely not... just a water elementalist,” Cam says, his voice hoarse.

I don’t care. I don’t care what he is, I don’t care if his mind is Fort Knox, where the *fuck* did he take my boyfriend?

Roman’s strong. I know he is. He was taking down necromancers when he was a teenager, far younger than I am, far younger than he is now. He can kill someone with a single touch, control demons for crying out loud—but he’s also *human*. He’s got fragile, breakable bones, same as the rest of us, and he’s got a good heart, and he works so hard to be a good person and

to take care of his students, and if I don't get him back in one piece, I am going to seize the world in both hands and *rip it apart*.

"Breathe." Dmitri's hand is on my back and his voice is in my ear. I don't even know when he moved over to me. "Breathe. It's going to be okay, Princess. Hey. Breathe."

My eyes are stinging and my lungs are burning. I know now how Roman must've felt when I was up in that tower last spring, my life in danger as that mage advanced on me with murder in his eyes. Roman didn't even hesitate. He used his death touch, even though he knew what it might cost. I know how he felt when he saw me get attacked by my fellow students in my second year, when they thought I was the one stealing their magic and they surrounded me, mobbed me—and Roman stepped in and stood between us, snarling like an animal, magic crackling between his fingers.

If—*when*—we get him back, I am never complaining about his protectiveness ever again.

Not that I really complained about it in the first place. It's part of why I love him so much.

My chest seizes at that thought, and it takes all my willpower to keep my legs under me. I can't give in to my fear. Fear won't help us get Roman back.

"We have to get to him." I stagger to my feet, shaking Dmitri off. "We have to stop Agustin. He can't—if he hurts Roman, I'm going to—I will rip him to *pieces*."

"We will, okay, we will." Somehow I'm not surprised that with Asher apparently down for the count, Dmitri's the one staying calm in the midst of crisis. "But..."

"The police will be here soon," Cam notes in a tight voice as he helps Asher to his feet. Whether he means the regular, non-magical police or the Circuit or both, I don't know.

"I don't care about the police!" I yell, and I know I sound a bit hysterical, but I can't stop it, I can't help myself. "The only thing that matters is Roman!"

"Where the fuck did they go?" Dmitri snaps, grabbing my shoulders and forcing me to look into his eyes.

I know he's not angry at me—he's just trying to get me to actually hear him and listen. Trying to keep me from spiraling. I can feel myself slipping



into panic, and I grab onto his forearms with a death grip, shaking my head back and forth.

*I don't know where they went. I don't know.*

"I can try... to sense them," Asher says, but he looks pale, like curdled milk.

That's when I feel it. Something in my chest, almost like an echo of my heartbeat.

No, not an echo.

A tug.

Something's tugging at my heart.

It feels like—like what I was supposed to feel back in the Trials, during the ring challenge. For our second challenge, we were each attuned to a small silver ring before it was taken away and hidden from us, and then we had to find our ring before the timer ran out.

Surprise, surprise, I fucked that one up. I'm pretty sure by now that Johnson and the couple of other administrators who were helping him did something to make it even harder for me—maybe severed my connection with the ring or something—but I was also struggling with my magic at the time and had no clue where to even start with finding the damn ring.

But *now* I can feel it, a tug, like there's a string connecting my heart to someone else's—and I just know it's Roman, it has to be.

"This is going to sound very stupid and cliché," I say out loud, fighting to keep my voice steady, "but I can sense him."

The others all turn to stare at me.

"You... what?" Cam asks.

"I can... I can feel him. Roman. It's like my heart is reaching out to his. I don't know if it's my mirroring magic or something else, but—I can feel him. I'm sure of it."

The three men all wear expressions that convey varying levels of alarm and concern, making me sure they've never heard of anything like this happening before either. But I don't care. Maybe it's stupid, and maybe I'm wrong, but it's all we have. That bastard could have teleported anywhere with Roman, and I'm not wasting a second. Not when that's all that could stand between saving one of the men I love and losing him.

Trying to settle my racing heartbeat, I close my eyes for a moment, focusing only on the pull I feel.

The tug seems to be coming from inside the house.

I take off, ignoring the way my body aches from the fight. The front door's unlocked, since Agustin wasn't expecting to get jumped on his short walk from his porch to his mailbox, and I yank it open.

Whatever doubts or concerns the guys might have about my ability to sense Roman's location, it doesn't stop them from having my back. All three of them are hot on my heels, Asher in the rear, Cam in the middle, Dmitri right behind me.

"*Romaaan!*" I scream. I know it's probably not the best or smartest idea—that it could let Agustin know we're coming. But I can't help myself. I have to get to him, and it's like alarm bells are ringing in my head, in my chest, making me want to claw at the goddamn walls. "*Roman!*"

All the furniture and other objects in the house seems ordinary, just like everything else about Agustin. I tear through the rooms, barely noticing the décor, trying to find something, *anything*, that seems like it'll show me what to do, where to go.

There's a lot of blue everywhere. Clearly this guy likes that color. Whoop-de-fucking-doo for him. There are also a few pictures of places it looks like he's traveled. But just like in Roman's house when I first stayed there, I don't see any pictures of family or friends, no group shots.

It's just Agustin, alone.

Nothing around here screams *I'm a villain who hates an entire subgroup of magic users* either. Not that I thought there'd be a big notebook on the dining room table entitled "My Evil Master Plan", or some kind of James Bond interrogation room with a giant laser. But there has to be something. Anything! This guy has been summoning demons, for fuck's sake. That doesn't just happen in your Martha Stewart-inspired French country style kitchen!

I want to scream, to rip the walls apart, to smash his precious little house to absolute bits and then set it all on fire—and then Cam yells from the foyer, "Hey, Sin!"

I barrel back toward the front of the house to find the blond man kneeling in front of what looks like the door to the basement, his hands splayed across the dark wood.

He glances up as I crash into the room. "I think I found it. This thing's radiating magic like nobody's business. If it was a nuclear power plant, it'd be Chernobyl."

Sure enough, as I take a few steps closer, I can sense it.

This is exactly why all those ancient magical artifacts were stored underneath our school. Powerful magic lets off an aura, an energy that you can sense, a bit like how you smell ozone in the air right before lightning strikes. Or the way your skin crawls right before the temperature rises or drops dramatically. The magical artifacts let off that kind of aura, but so do Unpredictables, so our aura was able to mix with that of the objects and hide exactly what was causing it.

Now, this door? It reminds me of the hidden door we found that led to the storage room where all those magical items were being kept. When I brush my fingertips over the wood, goose bumps prickle up my arm. Whatever's behind here, it's powerful.

The tug in my chest gets stronger, like the string around my heart is tightening.

"This is it," I whisper. "It has to be."

I know it in my heart, like I know the sun's going to set in the west.

This is where we have to go.

## CHAPTER 22

“**H**ow the hell are we going to break through?” Cam asks.

Dmitri reaches out, and his fingertips pass through the solid wood of the door.

“I thought so,” he says, as if to himself, and then he phases the rest of himself out and steps through.

That worked on the secret door guarding the magical items too. Dmitri’s other power besides duplication is the ability to make himself insubstantial, and it’s pretty damn rare. It must be, otherwise Agustin would’ve been prepared for it, made it so that the door couldn’t be opened that way or phased through.

But Dmitri passes through just fine.

My heart leaps into my throat and nearly strangles me in the few minutes it takes for Dmitri to unlock the door from the other side. What if there’s a trap? What if Agustin *did* plan for this, and now Dmitri’s dying on the other side, but we can’t hear him, we can’t see him, we don’t know...

The door opens silently on well-oiled hinges, and Dmitri grimaces. “Sorry. There are four fucking locks on this door.”

Jesus. Whatever Agustin is hiding back here, he certainly doesn’t want anyone finding it. I’m sure there are protective wards as well, which we only bypassed because he didn’t plan for Dmitri’s phasing ability.

I peer behind the dark-haired mage and see a steep staircase leading down into darkness. Right away, I know it’s not an ordinary basement, with a simple set of steps that leads into a big room. Nope. These stairs seem to go on forever.

“I think... this is sort of a portal,” Asher whispers, as if someone might be eavesdropping. Who knows, Agustin might well have some kind of surveillance system in place. “He couldn’t have done all of this construction without the neighbors noticing. I think his basement must be in some kind of pocket dimension.”

“Holy fuck. Can someone do that?” I hiss.

“Sure. It’s what we use all the time for our buildings so we can hide in plain sight from non-magical people. It takes a lot of complicated wards and magic, and a long time to set up. You attach the pocket dimension to the building and it’s like adding a hidden pocket to a coat.”

“And he could put anything in this pocket dimension?”

Asher grimaces. “Ah. Yeah. He could.”

Well, we’re up shit’s creek then, aren’t we? Because the last things he sent our way were a magic-stealing bird-demon, a bunch of powerful mages and other supernatural creatures, and three supercharged magical towers that almost destroyed our school.

I think I’m justified in saying that I’m just a tiny bit concerned here.

It’s dark in the long stairway, and we have to feel our way once we make it a few yards down.

“Anyone got a light?” I whisper.

Dmitri pulls out his phone and puts the flashlight on, illuminating the space.

The bright beam of his flashlight bounces off the bare walls and worn steps, and when we finally reach the bottom step, we find ourselves in a dark, slightly cramped hallway—the kind you’d expect to find covered in dust and cobwebs in a horror film, except this one is nice and clean with hardwood floors. Figures, if Agustin comes down here all the time, he doesn’t want to deal with dirt and all that shit.

Just like the stairs, the hallway seems to go on forever. I glance around at the ceiling and the floors, which seem to grow wider apart as the hallway goes on.

“No trap doors or anything that I can see,” I whisper.

“Be on alert.” Dmitri’s voice is low and strained.

We start moving forward as a group, gingerly. Not as quickly as I’d like to. I want to rush down the hallway, to charge into Agustin’s lair with guns blazing, but the asshole has to know by now that we’re coming after him. He must have activated some kind of failsafe.

I'm proven right when we walk up a slight incline and the hallway in front of us vanishes, disappearing into pure blackness as if light doesn't even exist anymore. We all freeze in place, nothing but darkness all around us. A slight breeze drifts past my lower legs, making my shiver.

"Uh..." Cam's voice filters through the blackness just behind me to my left. "Any chance one of you has night vision and has been holding out on us this whole time?"

"Dmitri." I grope around beside me. "Turn your flashlight back on."

"It's still on," he grunts. "Whatever kind of enchantment this is, the light can't seem to penetrate it."

I walk forward, squinting, trying to see if I'm getting any closer to the next part of the hallway.

Nothing.

I run, ignoring the yelled warning of the guys as they start to jog to catch up with me.

It feels like I'm not even going anywhere, like I'm just lost in this darkness, stuck like a hamster on a wheel. The walls have widened out so far that I can't feel them on either side of me. I feel completely lost in space, adrift and untethered.

I stop running. *Dammit.*

"Maybe we should go back and see if the light comes back on? Try to get our bearings and try again?" Asher suggests, panting slightly as his voice grows nearer.

"Yeah, if we can figure out which way 'back' even is," Dmitri grunts. "I've got no clue anymore."

"Hang on. Let me see if I can teleport to where there's more light," Cam says, and I feel a whoosh of air beside me as he teleports.

A moment later, he appears right in front of us—but he looks a couple of feet shorter, his head only about the height of my chest. His phone flashlight is on, and it illuminates his excited features.

"What the fuck?" Dmitri scowls in confusion.

"Remember that incline we walked up a while back?" Cam points to our feet, which I realize now aren't actually on the floor—they're suspended in space, on a filmy surface that stretches out a couple of feet above the actual floor. "I'm guessing he's put some kind of darkness conjuring runes on the walls here. But the floor's only a couple feet below the walkway. From down here, the walkway doesn't feel solid at all."

Because none of us can figure out how to get off the walkway, Cam teleports each of us down to the floor level.

Now that we're off of it and I can see again, I realize the walkway has been enchanted to work kind of like a treadmill, rotating over and over beneath our feet so that we weren't actually going anywhere even if it felt like we were. Thank God for Cam's ability, or we might have been stuck in here forever.

Which I'm sure was Agustin's intention.

We continue through the large space, and after some fumbling around, we find a doorway that leads us into another narrow hallway, same as before. Dmitri's in front, holding his phone up for us to see—

When he steps on a small panel.

I hear a soft click and look down to see the panel sinking into the floor where Dmitri's foot is. "Look ou—!"

A blade slides out of the wall, passing right through him as Dmitri phases out.

The blade retracts, and Dmitri solidifies again.

*Holy shit.* If that had been me, I'd have been sliced in half.

I grab his shoulders in a vise grip, pulling him back. "You all right?"

He nods. "Yeah. Startled the fuck out of me."

"You almost died!" I practically yell. It's possible I'm not handling the stress of all this very gracefully.

"But I didn't." Dmitri puts his hand over mine, squeezing. "It's okay. Let's keep an eye on the floor. Watch out for any more panels."

We walk forward again, gingerly stepping around the floor panels that match the one Dmitri stepped on, until we get out into the end of the hallway.

Here, there's an expansive room—it looks like some kind of workshop, maybe.

We all step carefully inside.

There doesn't seem to be anything in here. Thank God. Unless invisible monsters are about to attack us.

"Any idea which way to go?" Cam asks, eyeing the various doors that lead out of this place.

"How much do you want to bet a bunch of those are booby trapped," Dmitri mutters.

I'm not so much worried about these doors being booby trapped as I am about going down the wrong corridor and getting hopelessly lost. "Asher, any way you can figure out which door we need?"

Asher frowns, a small line appearing between his brows as he concentrates. "I think... if I try to find their thoughts, I can follow those."

I nod. "Yeah. Let's try that before we go making any guesses."

We stand silently for a moment, letting Asher do his thing. He keeps his eyes closed, concentrating, and it looks as though he's barely even breathing. All around us, the very air seems to be still.

Then he opens his eyes, nodding. "Okay, I think they're this way."

He takes us to one of the doors on the right, all of us stepping to the side so we can open it without standing directly in front of it. Just in case, you know, a swinging axe or something appears.

But there's nothing.

I peer my head around the corner, then climb up onto the wall using my spider climb, examining the panels on the floor. "I think we're okay."

The guys follow me as I step back down to the floor and proceed down the corridor.

This hallway isn't as narrow and seems to be used more often. There's lighting in it and everything. I wonder if Agustin even normally passes through the last few areas we were in, or if he just keeps up that part for unwanted visitors like us and teleports to wherever he wants to go in this weird pocket dimension place.

We walk for a while, and I'm starting to get antsy. Is this the right place? Maybe Asher was wrong, or maybe somehow Agustin tricked him, maybe—

Dmitri, still in front with the phone, turns his flashlight off and stops short. I nearly run into him.

We're standing at what appears to be the corner entrance to a large room. "Listen," he breathes, his voice barely a whisper.

I'm about to ask him what exactly I'm listening to.

Then I hear it.

"Trust me. You don't want to do this. I know you think you do, but trust me, *trust* me, you really don't."

Roman.

It's Roman, and he sounds exhausted... and in pain.

My heart clenches.



“Do you know how many people have said those exact words to me?” It’s Agustin. His voice is hissing like a snake’s. “Do you know how many of them have begged for me to reconsider, to spare them?”

“This isn’t about me, you sack of shit,” Roman snaps, a growl in his voice. “This is about you killing yourself messing with something you don’t understand and can’t control.”

I start to creep around the corner, trying to get a look without alerting Agustin that we’re here.

There’s a crash and a cry, and I dart back. I can’t see what’s going on, but I can hear yelling from both men, crashing, the crackle of lightning, bursts of magic—

Then silence.

“Nice try.” Agustin chuckles.

My heart sinks. Roman must have tried to escape, or to attack him, or maybe both.

“You think you’re the most powerful person I’ve stolen magic from?” Agustin asks. “I’ve had this power since I was a child. I’m sure you understand the... burden it can be, to be gifted with such strong magic at such a young age.”

There’s a small pause, and when he speaks again, there’s disdain in his voice. “But unlike you, I didn’t waste it. Look at you, struggling, even now trying to be in control. Pathetic. You could have had the world at your feet if you’d dared to use your powers as they were intended!”

“Sorry to disappoint you by not turning into a mass murderer,” Roman deadpans, but his voice is strained. Shit. *Shit shit shit*. How injured is he?

I finally peer around the corner, and my throat goes dry, my stomach twisting and heaving in fear.

Roman’s on the ground, wrapped in the lightning whip. It looks like it’s low-wattage electrocuting him, burning him, as Agustin towers over him.

I’ll be the first to admit that I have a little problem with anger management. I get irritated quickly, I have no patience for people, I snap, I snarl, I keep my walls up.

But I have *never* in my life felt rage like this before.

It courses through me like it’s a separate being, a monster inhabiting my skin. My blood is boiling, and all I can think is that I am not going to stop at murdering this bastard, oh no, I’m going to put him in so much pain that

he's gonna beg me to kill him before this is all over—and if I'm feeling generous then maybe, just maybe, I'll let him die.

“My power is insatiable,” Roman manages, a bit of—is that blood?!—dripping out of his mouth as he speaks. “Once you start using it, it'll want to consume all life around you. It'll take you over. You won't be able to stop. I had to learn how to meditate, how to focus my mind, build mental shields—with all the power already inside you—it could very well destroy you.”

“If it destroyed me, then you'd be rid of me,” Agustin sneers, like he figured out a fucking riddle or something. “So if you really thought that were possible, you'd *want* me to take it.”

“Maybe I like being alive,” Roman says dryly. “And I know you'll have to kill me to take my powers.”

“No, no. I know you.” Agustin tilts his head thoughtfully. “I've watched you, you know. I once thought we might be similar. That I might reach out to you and offer you a place by my side. If you were stronger, more ambitious, we could've been brothers in arms. Two Unpredictables against a world that tries to crush us—when we should be crushing it instead!”

*Wow, okay, so, textbook Bond villain. Gotcha.*

Agustin's lip curls as he stares down at Roman. “You're too noble for your own damn good. You'd be happy to sacrifice yourself if it meant I'd be stopped—if your power would truly kill me.”

“Maybe I don't think it's worth the innocent people who would die before the power you stole turned in on itself.”

“Or you're lying to me.” Agustin stretches out his hand, reaching toward Roman's prone form. “You know, so many people ask me how I can do this without thought—steal others' magic. And I have to admit, it took time. The first time I did this was to a water elemental. My elementary school teacher. A real pity. I was quite upset about his death, actually. Moped for days. But as time went on, the more I did it... the easier it became. Now? It's no harder than squashing a fly.”

*Okay, that's fucking it.*

The rage that's been simmering inside me, making my skin feel hot to the touch, boils over.

“Good to know,” I say, and my voice comes out in a venomous, spitting tone I didn't even know I was capable of using. “You'll be my first kill, but

I'm pretty sure I won't be moping over you. It'll be just like squashing a spider. A poisonous, fat, ugly spider."

Agustin whirls around, finally realizing he has an audience, but I'm ready this time. I reach out with my magic, feeling for his powers. The water elemental magic is the first one I sense, the strongest—maybe because it's the first one he stole. But now that I know what I'm looking for, I dig deeper.

And he's got—shit, he's got a metric fuckton of powers.

It makes it difficult to mirror him properly. There are so many different types of magic inside him that it's hard to sort out what's what. But I push harder, sorting through the mess quickly to find the one I want, and a second later, I feel the crackle of lightning in my fingertips.

I reach out, molding the air, and a lightning whip appears in my hands, the tip of it crackling.

Fun fact: the tips of whips break the sound barrier when you snap them. That's where the sound comes from—it's a miniature sonic boom.

Seems fitting, given my other power.

Agustin laughs. "Oh, you think your mirroring is so powerful, don't you, Miss Sinclair? Too bad it goes away after a short while. You have to be near the person to use it. Whereas once I obtain a power..."

He releases Roman, who gasps in pain and relief, slumping onto the ground. My throat constricts. I want to run to him, I want to gather him up in my arms and never, ever let him go again.

"...it's mine forever."

As Agustin finishes speaking, his eyes glow with that preternatural orange light I saw in the demon bird.

I'm just going to go out on a limb here and say that somewhere along the line, he stole a power that has something to do with demons. Just, you know, a wild guess.

"So that's your ability. The dry cleaner was wrong—you're not a water elemental at all," I say, talking just to stall, just to give someone time to figure out what to do. "You're an Unpredictable, and you steal people's magic. And then kill them? So they don't report you? So they can't come after you?"

"Oh, no, that's a part of my power." Agustin smirks. "I'm afraid they have to be dead for me to take their magic. I can't absorb it from a live

host.” He pauses. “Feel free to tell your other boyfriends to come out of the shadows. I know they’re here.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Dmitri duplicating himself as he steps out, his duplicates allowing him to fan out behind me like a rear guard. Behind him, using the duplicates as shields, are Asher and Cam.

Except Cam...

*What is he doing?*

He’s got his phone poking out of his pocket, and he’s glancing down at it now and again. Is he texting for help? Calling someone?

Good luck with that. I don’t think we get reception down here in the creepy pocket dimension.

“How do you not die?” I ask Agustin, glancing away from Cam so I don’t draw attention to whatever he’s doing. And part of me is, against my will, genuinely curious to know the answer. “I’ve had other people’s powers in me, okay? From that stupid oversized turkey you sent last fall. It nearly killed me to have all of those powers in me—and that was just from six other people. I could barely hold it all inside me long enough to give the magic back to everyone.”

“And a non-Unpredictable would have died on the spot,” Agustin counters. “It’s my power, Miss Sinclair. The way in which I am particularly gifted. But you are just as gifted, just as strong—well, nearly.” He smirks. “Could any normal magic user do what we do? Never. We are the stronger, the better, the ones who should be in charge.”

He turns away from Roman, his eyes lighting up a little as he takes a step toward me. There’s a fervor in his voice, and I have a feeling that—just like he said he’d been watching Roman—he’s been watching me. I have a feeling this guy keeps tabs on all powerful Unpredictables.

“All throughout history, magic users have been evolving. Becoming better. Until evolution finally created... me.” Agustin shrugs in an *aw, shucks* kind of way, like he’s trying to seem humble even as he brags about being the literal pinnacle of creation. “I can hold *everyone’s* magic. I’m stronger than any other magic user out there. You should’ve seen the faces of the people around me, all those ordinary magical people—Johnson, who thinks his mind is so tough, that he’s on top of his game. Unpredictables who are scared of their power or don’t understand it. My neighbors, who invite me to their insignificant barbecues and holiday parties. None of them

have any idea what I'm capable of, what kind of person is sitting, living, breathing right next to them."

"Nice speech. Forgive me for not clapping," I grate out.

He chuckles, but there's no humor in it. "Ah, the snark. I've missed it so. You make for an... amusing opponent, Miss Sinclair."

"Cut the crap." My hands clench into fists, and the electric whip crackles. "Are you going to monologue all day like you practiced that speech in the mirror, or are you going to actually get some shit done? What the fuck is your *plan*? What are you after? Oh, and get the *fuck* away from Roman, or I will use this."

I snap the whip in the air. Damn, I like this power. I feel badass.

Agustin glares at me. "What do I want? I want to live in my rightful place. I shouldn't have to bow to anyone. I shouldn't be a second-class citizen. I should be *ruling*."

"And you thought discrediting Unpredictables like you would be a great way to do it?" I reply. "How fucking dumb are you, exactly? Are you even hearing yourself right now? Did you peer review this idea before you put it into action?"

"You stupid, *stupid* insolent little girl!" Agustin snarls. "Only Unpredictables like you could possibly oppose me."

Oh.

Shit.

I see it now. It breaks over me like the sun breaking over the horizon, and as realization dawns, I feel my blood turn to water. Not like I didn't know it before, but this confirms it.

Agustin is crazy. Power hungry.

And smart.

"So you turned against your own people." I nod slowly, forcing my voice not to waver. "You discredited us so there'd be fewer of us to try to stop you. And it almost worked. You almost got the Circuit to wipe all of our magic. Too bad for you, they haven't done it just yet." I crack the whip again.

*Cam, what the hell are you doing with that cell phone? Please let it be something that will save us here.*

"I've made myself into the most powerful magic user in the world by stealing power," Agustin snaps at me. His voice barely even sounds human anymore. "I have all the elements at my disposal, each of the seven pillars

of magic, and more Unpredictable powers than you can comprehend. I am a *god*. And soon, I'll have all of your magic as well. The power to kill with a touch... the power to raise the dead..." He glances over at Roman like the man on the ground is a particularly tasty-looking sandwich at the deli. "It will be perfect."

He pivots back to face me. "And I'm sure your mirroring powers will only help me in conquering the magical world. After that, who knows? Non-magical humans really seem to be making a mess of things, wouldn't you agree? Perhaps they just need a firm, guiding hand."

Our number one principle is: do not interfere with non-magical society using your magic. Of course, I'm still a U.S. Citizen—non-magical people and their choices still affect me. I could still be arrested by regular police for drunk driving. And we're allowed to interact with non-magical people as much as we want as long as we don't let them know what we are.

But we can't use our magic to influence things. Not in any way. That is the biggest no-no. It's something even young children, even five-year-olds, know not to do.

And this little worm wants to change that.

The non-magical world would have no defense against someone like Agustin. They've got no clue we even exist. And with... oh, God...

As if he's read my mind, Agustin fixates on Asher. "And you." He smirks. "You got through Johnson or Raul, didn't you? Perhaps even both. You commanded all my neighbors to go home. Quite a feat. I can only control a very limited number of minds at a time, and it takes too much concentration to do it in a fight."

Asher looks pale but stands his ground as Agustin takes a step closer.

Dmitri and his doubles all drop into fighting stances, letting out almost identical low growls. I snap the whip, aiming for Agustin's groin.

I miss, because I'm not used to this weapon, but I hit the ground just to the left of his feet, and he jumps, startled. "Don't even think about it," I snarl.

Behind Agustin, I see Roman start to move. He looks like he's trying to get to his feet, and it makes my stomach clench with fear. I don't know what kind of injuries he has—after the fight we heard, how much more strength can he have left in him?

"With your powers"—Agustin smirks at Asher again—"I could control... oh, hundreds. All those stupid non-magical fools, with such open

minds, so soft, so malleable. It will be perfect. So easy.”

Fucking hell. Cam and Dmitri both look at Asher and me, startled, as if they’re realizing—well, their abilities are certainly nothing to sneer at either, as we just demonstrated. But with my mirroring, Roman’s death touch and Asher’s powerful mind control...

We might have just brought Agustin his ideal powers on a silver platter.

“Hey,” Roman says through clenched teeth.

We all turn and look—just as a portal opens. A portal as black as a void, with unearthly orange light around the rim.

I’ve seen a portal like that before. When we were fighting Raul.

Roman doesn’t even bother with a clever line. He just steps out of the way as an enormous fucking demon, a demon that looks like smoke and ash and broken bones and frozen screams, emerges screeching from the portal and launches itself at Agustin.

Oh, fuck yes.

Time to kick this guy’s ass once and for all.

## CHAPTER 23

I'm going to be honest here, I want to yell *that's my boyfriend!*

And then maybe jump up and down and point at Roman ecstatically. Because, well, look at him. He's bruised and burned and bleeding and staggering on his feet, and he still just summoned a fucking demon.

But the only people in the room already know Roman's a badass, and we're all fighting for our lives right now, so they probably wouldn't be able to take time to be impressed, so, ah, I'll just save that for later.

When Roman and the rest of us are safe, and we can celebrate.

Agustin, unfortunately, doesn't react with the dismay and shock I was kind of hoping for—and that I think Roman was hoping for.

The demon leaps at Agustin, ready to pounce—and Agustin snarls and holds up a hand, making a sort of crushing motion with his fingers like he's got an orange in his grip and he wants to squeeze all the juice out.

The demon freezes, struggling. Then its head slowly turns to look at Roman.

*Oh, fuck.*

"You think you're the only one who can control demons?" Agustin spits.

Roman holds out his own hand, his fingers trembling slightly. Fuck, if he collapses and dies in this godforsaken basement, I'm never going to forgive myself for letting him be taken, for not getting here faster.

The demon struggles, looking from one man to the other, clearly confused. Both Roman and Agustin are pulling at it, tugging with their minds, issuing commands, and I almost feel sorry for the poor monster. It obviously doesn't know what to do.



Well, if nothing else, this is distracting Agustin, and the rest of us can't let that opportunity to go waste.

"You—will—die," the eerily bland-looking man spits at Roman.

Cam teleports nearer to Agustin with a furious yell, the sound cutting off and picking up again as his body blips through space.

"We can't let him get Roman!" Asher calls, still safe behind Dmitri's doubles.

"I can't let him get any of you!" I shout back, snapping the whip at Agustin.

"No, Elliot—if he gets Roman's death touch, he'll be unstoppable. He'll be able to kill people and steal their powers in just one touch!"

*Oh shit. Okay, yeah, talk about overpowered.*

"I'm on it!" Shaking my hand, I let go of the whip, and the electricity fizzles out. Then I focus on Dmitri instead.

Agustin's too powerful. With just five people against him—especially with Roman injured and in a stalemate with him over control of the demon—it's not going to be enough to take him down. Our only chance is to spread him thin, make him use as many of his powers as possible.

I'll be honest, I'm at a disadvantage here. I can only mirror one power at a time. I wish I could mirror all of Agustin's abilities, be his true equal, but as far as I know, I can't manage that.

But what I *can* do is split myself like Dmitri's doing and give that bastard even more people to fight against.

I close my eyes, focus—and split.

*Holy shit.*

Okay, so, here's the thing. I've actually gotten pretty good at mirroring other people's magic, at drawing their power into myself.

Actually *using* that power once I have it, though?

Ahh... not so much.

I guess I assumed that when I had Dmitri's powers, I would be splitting my mind between the duplicates. That I could see what they see and control what they do. And it's *sort* of like that. But it's also like when you're playing a video game and the screen's split four ways like on a team shoot 'em up game—only I'm the person controlling all four screens, and I have to pay attention to all of them at the same time.

It's really fucking hard, is what I'm trying to get at here.

I attempt to have the double on my right run at Agustin, but she ends up running into a wall instead. I feel like I'm a bunch of glitching video game characters.

Jesus Christ, I look like an idiot.

Agustin's still focused on the demon, battling with Roman. Between the two of them, the demon's kind of neutralized. It isn't attacking one or the other, it's just kind of standing there, growling and grunting. Stuck.

But I know that neither man can afford to stop focusing either, because the moment one of them does, the other will gain the upper hand with the demon and use it to attack.

Despite all of that, though, when Cam launches himself at Agustin—the super-powered mage deflects him with a strong backhand that sends him flying.

*Shit, okay.*

“He's got super strength!”

“Thanks,” Cam groans, clambering slowly back to his feet from where he crash-landed. “Never would've guessed.”

Dmitri comes at him, but Agustin throws up a wall of fire, cutting Dmitri—and me—off. *Dammit!*

Asher looks like he's about to collapse as he tries to work his way into our opponent's mind, past the fortifications he has in place.

“Don't push yourself too hard!” I yell.

“I have to!” Asher manages through his clenched teeth. He looks like he's going to either vomit or pass out, and frankly, neither option's all that great.

I'm trying like hell to get this damn mirroring power to work, trying to use my sonic boom, trying to keep track of everyone and not get hit by any stray blasts. But Agustin is wielding fire and water, making the earth move and shift, sending stones flying—he's clearly stolen the magic of all the elements, and he's using them to his painful advantage.

And then he whips up a cyclone.

Cam is knocked off his feet immediately and just manages to teleport back, grabbing Asher around the shoulders and holding him so he doesn't fall. I brace myself, gritting my teeth, and release a small sonic boom to blow against the wind and keep myself standing.

And the whole time—the entire time—Agustin is still locked in his standoff with Roman.

He's controlling elements like it's nothing and holding a fucking demon at bay, and we're getting our asses kicked. And despite every attempt we make to take him down, he's still standing there like it's the easiest damn thing in the world.

And that's when I realize—

I don't think we're going to win this fight.

## CHAPTER 24

**L**et's get one thing straight right now. Just because I think I might be losing a fight doesn't mean I'm going to stop fighting.

I think it would honestly go against my very nature. The score might be ten to nothing against me, but you bet your ass I'm going to keep going until the buzzer announces the end of the game.

Roman and Agustin are still caught up in a deadlock. The demon between them is hovering, suspended, and I'm not sure it's even mentally present right now. From where I'm standing, it looks like it's just a massive body being tugged back and forth by the two men. It's even stopped growling and snarling, and there's something truly disturbing about a blank-faced, silent demon.

What we really need is to get that demon back on our side. We need it snapping and snarling as it goes for Agustin's jugular.

Okay. So that means I need to give Roman some kind of advantage. I need to stretch Agustin thin with his powers, and I need to distract him and potentially do something that will actually hurt him.

I refocus, dropping my mirroring of Dmitri's powers. I feel my duplicates get sucked back into me and it's hugely disorienting, making me stumble, causing my vision to blur for a second before everything rights itself. Holy crap, how does Dmitri do that all the time? I knew he was disciplined, but I seriously underestimated how much work it must take for him to control all of his duplicates so well.

Straightening up, I shake my head out to clear it.

*Okay. I can do this.*

Both men are standing close to me, and I'd like to mirror Agustin, but he's such a bundle of different types of magic—like a snarl of tangled Christmas lights—that I can't even begin to sort out which of his powers is the one I want.

Instead, I focus on Roman.

Roman's three powers are like beating hearts inside of him, hearts I can reach out to. I know exactly which one I want, and I stretch out my hand, using that physical action to propel and direct my magic.

I feel it in my fingers, like a string on a violin—and I just have to pluck it.

Maybe it's because I'm already so connected to Roman, but accessing his magic feels almost unnervingly easy. It's right there, just waiting for me. Keeping my hand outstretched and my breathing even, I reach for it and tug. Just like with Dmitri's power, I'm not quite sure how to use this one, but I act intuitively, channeling the magic through myself as I focus on what I want.

And just like that, a portal springs open, and another demon bursts out.

This one looks like a... a giant slime thing.

The thing about demons, I've found—and the fact that I've seen enough of them to form an opinion at all says a hell of a lot about my life—but the thing about demons is that they're very hard to describe. Every time you look directly at one, it feels like there's something wrong with your eyes. It almost feels like staring at a mirage.

So I can't quite say with certainty that I've just summoned a giant slug.

But, man, that's sure the impression I'm getting from all the damn slime.

"Elliot!" Roman yells, not so much like he's worried about me. More like he's worried because I just turned on a time bomb, and he's wondering what the hell would give me such an insane idea.

The slug demon roars, spraying slime everywhere. Some of it gets on Cam, who looks absolutely horrified, like someone just got red wine on his Gucci jacket or something.

Some of it gets on me too, and it's warm and smells like sulfur and makes me gag a little. But I ignore it and reach out to the demon with my mind, feeling for some kind of connection between us. I'm not quite sure I have it, but I'm pretty sure I feel something, so I think with all of my might, *attack Agustin!*

The slug demon just roars again and goes after one of Dmitri's doubles. Or at least I hope it's a double.

*Goddammit.* Come on, why isn't this working?!

"You can't—just summon the demon, Elliot!" Roman yells. "You have to—control it!"

Agustin feeds more power into the mini cyclone, whipping the air around the large room even more, and it's hard to stay on my feet. Dmitri—the real one, I think—loses his footing and goes crashing into a pole, grunting in pain and clutching his leg.

"Having a little trouble with the mirroring power?" Agustin asks me mockingly. I can hear a bit of strain in his voice, though—could it be that we're having an effect on him after all?

"Do you ever shut up?" I shoot back. It's a legitimate question if you ask me. It wouldn't surprise me to learn he really does practice his evil villain speech in the mirror.

He's also right though, damn him. I don't know how to control this demon. I could summon it, but apparently that was the easiest part of this whole thing. Now that I have it here, I don't know what else I'm supposed to do to get it to listen to me.

"Attack Agustin!" I yell aloud, focusing everything in my mind on that idea. *Attack him, tear him to shreds, rip his heart out!*

The slug demon tries to take a chomp out of the other demon instead.

The smoke demon—the one Agustin and Roman have been fighting over—lets out a roar of anger and attacks the slug demon in return, the two of them going at it in a fury of slime and smoke that I can't even see properly.

At least now Agustin doesn't have even a smidgen of control over the smoke demon anymore.

Silver lining?

Cam teleports to right behind Agustin, who whips around, backhanding him again, his hand lighting on fire as he does it. I duck and dive for cover as flame bursts in an arc toward where I was just standing.

Shit. *Shit.*

We are so out of our fucking depth here.

The demons are wreaking havoc, blasting holes in the wall, smashing into support beams. Rubble goes flying everywhere, and Agustin catches it up in his cyclone, whirling it around at high speeds before sending it

hurtling back toward us. Whatever concentration Asher's been able to muster is shot when he has to duck and cover, diving behind an intact support beam at the last second to avoid flying debris. Two of Dmitri's doubles catch chunks of cement in the face and vanish. Roman, already injured, gets smacked in the back of the head with some rubble.

My stomach pitches sideways as my fear ratchets up to a whole new level. *Goddammit.* I shouldn't have summoned that fucking demon. I refused to use Roman's death touch because I didn't want to risk killing my men, but what if I've done it anyway? What if my recklessness doomed us all?

Fuck. What damn good is this mirroring power if I suck at using the abilities I borrow?

But I can't stop trying. Unlike Agustin, I've got a limited number of powers to draw on, and the mirroring still offers our best chance of success. I reach out with my mind, trying to find something that'll be relatively easy to control, and latch onto his fire powers. I manage to fire off a blast, sending a spurt of flame toward his head. But he blocks the torrent of fire with a flick of his wrist. Fucking hell.

"Well, this has been fun," Agustin drawls, "but I'm afraid I really do have to be going now."

*Oh, no, you don't, you asshole!*

I rush toward him, trying to keep my feet under me with the cyclone still tearing around the room. I leap over a fallen support beam and dodge chunks of flying rubble to hurl myself at him.

"Until next time, Miss Sinclair," Agustin says, and then he just—blinks out of existence.

And I go crashing to the floor.

CHAPTER 25

**H**e's gone.

We all stare at each other for a second, at the spot where Agustin just was, in disbelief.

How—what—he's *gone*?

He ran again.

Roman yells something, a growl in his voice, something what I think is Latin, or maybe Lillum, the language of demons—and the demons we both summoned vanish.

Thank God for that. I have no idea how to banish a demon once it's been summoned. I have a feeling that's the whole catch. That summoning is the easy part, and the *goodbye, see you later* part... not so much.

Note to my future self: do not try someone's exceptionally crazy magical power if you've never actually practiced that power before. Big no-no.

Asher collapses against the wall, sucking in gasping breaths as sweat pours down his temples. Dmitri manages to get to his feet with a wince.

"Is he—he's coming back, right?" Cam says, still in his battle stance, still ready. "He has to."

I have no idea why he'd run away. He was winning—had practically won. He was kicking our asses. Why would he flee?

"He had us," Dmitri says, speaking my thoughts as Asher bends over and makes unpleasant noises that sound a lot like retching. "He had us all. We were getting our asses kicked. You heard him. He said he needs our powers. Well, Elliot's and Asher's and Roman's. Why would he just leave?"

"He had a hot date?" Cam jokes weakly.



Roman coughs, and my heart stutters in my chest. I hurry over to him and get myself under his arm, supporting him, keeping him from falling. He looks like a damn mess. I would think it was badass and kind of hot if I didn't know how close he came to dying, if it weren't for the fact that I know exactly how he earned looking like this.

It's one thing to watch a hot actor in a movie go into a den of bad guys and kick ass and come out with some attractively placed cuts and bruises.

It's another thing entirely when it's your boyfriend nearly dying.

"He'll be back." Cam clenches and unclenches his fists. "He has to be."

We wait, ready and tense, anticipating the moment—that moment when Agustin will reappear with a new weapon, a better weapon, more powers, something to crush us completely. Even as we stand in taut silence, I wonder if we should be fleeing right now, if we're waiting around just to be obliterated.

But the moment stretches on, and Agustin doesn't show.

"What the fuck?" Despite the fact that we were losing that fight, Dmitri still looks pissed he didn't get to finish it.

Cam finally drops his hands and stands up straight as Roman leans more heavily against me, the last of his adrenaline fading. "So he's... really gone, then. Why?"

"At least we know why he was attacking the school now," Asher says weakly.

"Why?" Cam asks, sounding frustrated.

Asher looks like he's in no position to give a speech, but I think I know what he's getting at, so I answer, helping move Roman from the middle of the room toward the wall. "He talked about how powerful Unpredictables are. About how we were stronger than anyone else. How only we could oppose him.

"I bet you anything that he's the one who's been making Unpredictables disappear when they graduate. Disappear or die." I swallow hard. "Remember what I told you Brodie said? He said it was... I don't remember exactly the number, but somewhere around seventy percent. A lot. And it was all because of Agustin."

Cam whistles slowly. "Damn."

"But he couldn't take out Griffin Academy entirely." I'm thinking back on Agustin's attacks. "I'm not even sure his attacks were designed to do

that. But what *did* they do? They threw suspicion on us. They threw us into the public eye.

“Raul didn’t succeed in getting whatever that weapon was, but it meant that the magical items were moved, so there went Hardwick’s collateral to keep the school open. The Trials were the watershed moment that turned people against us, when the anti-Unpredictable movement really started taking hold. The demon bird wreaked havoc and the towers nearly destroyed us. We had a fucking investigation team come in and check to make sure we weren’t making the towers ourselves!”

“So he did all of this to—to weaken Unpredictables?” Cam looks torn between anger and shock.

“Yes. You heard him. He doesn’t think it should be all Unpredictables in power, ruling over everyone else. He thinks it should be *him*. I’m pretty sure he thinks of himself as better than all of us, Unpredictable and regular magic user alike.”

“What a fucking cock.”

Dmitri paces across the destroyed space. If his limp is any indication, I’m pretty sure he’s just as beat up as the rest of us, but he’s still hopped up on the battle high.

I huff a humorless laugh, staring at the place where Agustin disappeared. “We have the best chance of stopping him—so of course he wants to take us all out. Now the public is against us, and we’re out of the school and vulnerable in a holding facility. People distrust us. They think we’re weapons. And the more isolated we are, the easier it will be for him to kill us for our powers.”

I can’t see Roman’s face since I’m helping him stand, and I can’t see Asher’s face since he’s turned away, but Dmitri and Cam look horrified.

Yeah. I feel about the same way.

This man has spent who knows how many years killing people and taking their magic—people with Unpredictable powers like him, people he should be able to understand and sympathize with. He’s just been murdering them for his own psychotic, egotistical goals.

It’s monstrous. He’s a monster.

“With all of our crazy powers, he couldn’t control us. He couldn’t predict us. And he wanted our power for himself. So he—he’s been killing us.” I swallow. “And now we have no idea where he is and only a couple of

days left before the deadline the Circuit gave us, and you know he's got some awful plan that he's going to put into motion any second, and—"

"Hey, Sin, it's okay," Cam says, stepping closer as a small, hopeful, exhausted smile pulls at his lips. He pulls out his phone. "I mean, it's not perfect. It's not as good as stopping him or bringing him down. But I do have this."

He holds up his phone and hits play.

Agustin's voice fills the air, monologuing, and I realize what it is immediately. What Cam was doing with his phone earlier.

"I was inspired by the video you took when you were put in the holding facility," he says. He stops the video and slips his phone back into his pocket. "Now we have proof. They can check this video out, run it through whatever tests they want—they'll see we didn't fabricate this. It's genuine. It's Agustin admitting to all of his crimes, his plans, his hatred of other magic users. If people can see this, they'll have a hard time blaming *all* Unpredictables for the shit that's gone down."

I can't help but grin at him, even though it hurts to do that. "Badass. I love it."

"Yeah, but it won't help unless we get it onto the networks, and fast," Cam points out. "Who knows what he's planning now? What his next move will be."

"We need to fucking go after him," Dmitri growls, finally stopping his pacing.

Cam's face falls, the little burst of hope that lit up his features fading out. "How?"

And that's the kicker, isn't it?

We can't go after him.

He's gone.

## CHAPTER 26

**M**y stomach sinks like I've swallowed cement. We've lost him—we've lost him, and we can't get to him. We have no lead, no hint as to his location.

We've failed.

*I've failed.*

At least we're still in his... well... the only real word for it is *lair*, to be honest. I mean, it's not cluttered with villainous laser machines or giant spiderwebs or what-have-you, but come on. It's a pocket dimension that had a bunch of Indiana Jones style traps that tried to kill us along the way, and Agustin brought Roman here to try to kill him and steal his magic.

I think I'm justified in calling it a lair.

We're all beat to shit—Roman worst of all. I help him to sit down, leaning his back against the wall before checking his body over. He's got bruises, burns, and cuts. I don't think any bones are broken, thank God, and I'm not seeing signs of internal bleeding—but then, who knows? I'm not a damn healer.

"I'm fine," Roman rasps softly, and I realize that more of my concern must have shown on my face than I thought. He catches my hands, stopping them from continuing to inspect him. "This isn't the first time I've had the shit kicked out of me."

"At least your nose didn't get broken this time," I joke weakly.

Roman snorts in acknowledgment, then jerks his chin at the room. "There might be some healing potions around here somewhere. If you can find something, that'll help."

"Oh, right. Good idea."

Healing potions basically rejuvenate your cells and can help you heal minor wounds like cuts, scrapes, burns, and bruises. More serious things like broken bones or a bad infection, you'd still need to see a healer for.

I know I should get up and help search the room, but I can't quite make myself leave Roman's side.

He could have died. He almost did die. I will never forget the moment I saw him with that lightning whip wrapped around him, Agustin standing over him, ready to take his magic, his very life.

And all it would have taken would have been for the guys and me to arrive a few seconds later. Just a few seconds. That's all the difference it would have made between Roman being alive or dead.

"I'm going to be fine, Reckless," he assures me, his voice tender even though it's strained with pain. He reaches up and gently brushes some of my hair out of my face, tucking it behind my ear. "Go on, see what you can find. I just need to rest up."

Hmm. I doubt he just needs *rest*. He needs some proper patching up. But I can't accomplish that by sitting here holding his hand and worrying like an idiot.

I force myself to stand and glance around the space. I never really got a good look at it before the shit hit the fan—I was sort of distracted by everything else.

Asher's got a hand against a wall, bent over, and I think he's trying not to throw up again. He told me once that a lot of intense concentration like he uses when trying to get into someone's mind, gives him a migraine, and I'm not surprised that it's even worse when he tried to get through to Agustin.

Cam's found a door and is stepping inside, hand curled into a fist and cocked like he's got a punch ready to go.

I cross over, readying my sonic boom—only for the door to reveal what looks like a big office.

There was an office upstairs in the house itself, but that just had a laptop and some notebooks on it, what looked like some bills and letters. No taking-over-the-magical-world type stuff.

This office is a different story. It's the kind of office that belongs in a *lair*.

"Dmitri?" I call out. "Can you help me look through all this?"

Dmitri's doubles have disappeared. I would've thought he might summon his duplicates so we could search the area faster, but I suspect that would take more energy than he's got right now.

He walks over to join us, his limp a bit more pronounced, and I wince. He'll need to get that looked after. All of us need a healer. I'm glad there's not a mirror around so I can't look and see exactly how beat up I look. I sure as hell can feel it, though. My whole body aches like one big bruise.

The two of us split up, searching through the large office for a healing potion or anything that might give us a clue where Agustin went.

"I found a summoning circle," Dmitri says after a few moments, jerking his head over toward what looks like the dark entrance to a separate chamber—a tall, arched doorway with some runes carved around it, with nothing but blackness beyond. "I think that's where he summoned demons."

"The bird demon?" I ask.

"I'm guessing. I found what looked like some feathers on the floor. Could be from that. When you summon a demon, it can go on a rampage or try to eat you or something if you're not mentally powerful enough to control it. So you summon it inside the circle to keep it imprisoned until you know it's been bent to your will."

I scrunch up my face. "Roman doesn't do that."

"Roman usually summons demons in battle, and he's strong as fuck. I'm guessing Agustin decided to take precautions since he was giving the bird instructions and sending it far away. He probably needed time to keep it in the circle and strengthen his mental hold on it."

Okay, that makes sense. And it gives me a tiny bit of hope to think that maybe Agustin isn't completely all-powerful.

Cam pokes his head into the office, his blue eyes wide. "Hey, guys? I think I found his war room or something. His headquarters."

Dmitri's face darkens, and the two of us follow Cam quickly, stepping into the room with him.

The blond mage looks up at the doorway. "Runes here too. I think that's why we didn't see this door before."

"I was too distracted to notice a door," I confess. *Too distracted worrying that my boyfriend was going to be murdered in front of me.*

Cam shakes his head. "When I was filming, I was looking through the camera to make sure I got everything, and I definitely would've noticed a

door. Now that Agustin's gone—I think that he stopped trying to keep the runes up or something. Decided it wasn't important."

"Or maybe we injured him enough that he couldn't keep them up?" I ask hopefully. I'm probably grasping at straws but, hey, worth a shot, right?

Dmitri frowns. "Or he knew it didn't matter if we found this. Because it's too late for us to stop him."

He's staring at the opposite wall, the wall facing us. I follow his gaze, and what I see makes my skin prickle with unease. I've seen shit like this in movies and TV shows, but I never thought I'd see it in real life. It's like a collage that takes up almost the entire wall.

Red string connecting pictures of faces, locations, objects. Scribbled pages from notebooks. Newspaper clippings. Printouts from the internet. Post-it notes.

"Like we needed more proof this guy's a total nutter," Cam mutters, a note of fear in his voice.

"Can you film this?" I ask. I don't really want to touch anything, and I feel like the whole villainous monologue was enough proof of Agustin's evil intentions already—but just in case. We have to show our work, like solving a math equation.

Cam nods, pulling out his phone and filming. He shows the desk, and I flip through some of the maps and notebooks on there to show the camera.

One of them is just a list of powers. Things like *demonic summoning*, *disintegration*, and *teleportation*. Most of the powers on the list are crossed off.

A chill crawls up my spine. This is—holy shit. There are far more powers listed here than Agustin showed us in our fight against him. His arrogance is shitty, for sure, but he might actually have been right when he said he was the most powerful magic user out there. In the entire history of our people, I don't think that anyone's had this many powers, actually been *this* powerful.

Maybe, once, long ago. Maybe this is where myths about gods came from. Maybe Alexander the Great or Genghis Khan were this powerful. But not since then. Not in hundreds, *thousands* of years.

It fucking terrifies me.

"We need to let the Circuit know what's going on," I mutter, tearing off the pages and folding them up, shoving them into my pocket. "And we need to get medical help. All of us. Come on."

Cam finishes filming, then follows me out. Dmitri lingers for a moment, glaring around the room, like he wishes he could just set it all on fire. Then he also follows.

Roman insists he can walk, that he's fine, but Cam and Dmitri help him up and drape his arms over their shoulders anyway, and they're proven right when Roman's legs buckle the moment he tries to take his first step.

I help Asher. "You okay?" I ask.

Asher nods, his eyes squeezed shut. "I just need to stay away from bright lights and maybe sleep for a few hours. I wasn't beat up too bad or anything, it's just—a really, really bad migraine."

"We'll put you in the back of the car."

We get back upstairs to the house, where Cam finds first aid supplies—both magical and non-magical—in the master bathroom. Roman drinks two healing potions, and I put bandages on the worst of his injuries, adding some magic ointment that'll accelerate the healing process. Roman takes a look at Dmitri's leg and uses the bandages to rig him up a makeshift cast. Nothing's broken, luckily, but his ankle's been wrenched, and it's better to be safe than sorry.

Cam and I split the final healing potion. I'm mostly just aching and bruised, same as him, and what the healing potion doesn't take care of, my body will heal naturally with time.

When we finally make our way outside, the neighborhood is dead quiet. No one called the cops, I guess, which kind of surprises me. Maybe they were all too scared.

It's such a goddamn relief to see Roman walking on his own that I could cry. After the slow, laborious trek back to the car, he and Cam help Asher into the back seat, and the poor guy lays his head in my lap. Dmitri takes the front passenger seat so that he can stretch out his injured leg, and Roman sits in the back, Asher's legs on his lap, so he doesn't have to try and concentrate on driving while healing.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay? You sure you're up to this?" I ask Cam as he pulls away from the curb.

"Yeah, Sin. I promise. You focus on calling Aurora, I'll focus on the road."

Cam and I have a similar driving problem that Asher politely calls "treating speed limits as suggestions" and Dmitri calls "being suicidal maniacs".



Then again, speed is kind of important right now.

I pull out my phone and punch in Aurora's number while Roman tries to call some person in the Circuit that he knows. I gently run my fingers through Asher's hair as the phone rings.

And rings.

...and rings.

"Dammit. I can't get through," Roman says, pulling the phone away from his ear. I watch him select a different number from his contact list and try again.

Aurora's number is still ringing too.

"What the hell is going on?" Dmitri asks. He's pulled out his phone too, although I have no idea who he's trying to call. "It's like something's clogging up the networks."

Technically, we can use whatever cell network we want. There is, however, a popular service provider that has things like enchanted emojis and such, and we all tend to use that because hey, what is magic for if not to make our lives a little more fun, right?

But right now, nothing's getting through.

"I think..." Roman drops his phone into his lap, and I can practically feel him wishing that he had one of those old flip phones that he could snap closed, or even a landline where he could slam down the receiver. "I think the cell towers are down. Or overloaded."

"Like Agustin took them down?" Cam asks, executing a right turn that's fast enough to make me lurch and nearly slam into Roman.

"Or like people are clogging it all up with phone calls," I reply.

Either option is disturbing.

Roman and I keep trying to call as Cam speeds us out of Portland and back to the holding facility, but there's no luck. Nothing at all is getting through.

My stomach twists with dread. I try calling Maddy, just to tell her that shit might hit the fan, to find someplace safe and stay there, but I can't get through to her either.

*Fuck.* I want to break something in anger, but instead I force myself to breathe and I keep stroking Asher's hair as he naps in my lap, recovering.

We're heading back to the holding facility because, well, where else are we going to go? And besides, that's where the Circuit is expecting us to return so that we can report our findings.

But dread is settling into the pit of my stomach, and I can't help but wonder if there will even be a holding facility for us to come back to.

"Do you think he wanted us to end up in a place like that?" I ask Roman. "Do you think—I mean, this idea of a holding facility for us didn't come out of thin air. Do you think this was a possible... contingency plan? That he knew about it and thought if he could disgrace us enough—we'd all be fish in a barrel there."

Roman scrubs a hand over his chin, looking troubled. "I don't know. Possibly. Fuck."

When we pull up to the holding facility, it's still standing, thankfully. So at least there's that.

I wake Asher up, gently shaking his shoulder and leaning down to whisper, "Hey, we're here."

He mumbles something unintelligible and opens his eyes, blinking groggily. "Hey, Cam didn't get us killed."

A soft chuckle falls from my lips. God, I love these men so much. "Nope. Not this time."

Ash sits up, rubbing his eyes.

"How're you feeling?" Roman asks, concern reflecting in his cobalt eyes as he glances over.

"A lot better. Give me a couple aspirin and I'll be good to go."

We get out of the car, and I can feel all the men tensing around me, ready for anything. I feel the same way. I'm bracing myself for this to be a trap. For the facility to be empty. For us to walk in and find the bodies of people we know and care about.

But as we walk up to the front doors, I realize that at least a few of my fears can't be true. There are definitely still people here. And judging by the volume of the voices that are bleeding through the entry doors, they're all trying to talk at once.

I grab one door, and Dmitri grabs another, and we yank them open.

*Holy shit.*

The interior of the holding facility is in total chaos.

CHAPTER 27

I blink. What the fuck is going on here?

Everyone is yelling and talking over each other. There's arguing, multiple people on their cell phones either typing or pressing them to their ear, and a constant barrage of *I can't get anything through! I can't reach anyone!*

Professors and a few Circuit officers are trying to calm everybody, but it's clear that's a lost cause. Everyone's absolutely losing their minds.

"What the hell happened?" I ask. I try to grab someone, anyone, looking for an explanation. There's nobody in the crowd that I recognize well enough to pin down and ask for information. I can't find Hardwick, Kendal, or anybody else.

Aurora. I have to find Aurora. I have to know what the hell is going on here. Nobody seems hurt, but everyone's in a panic.

Was Agustin here? Is he still here? Is he holding our families hostage or something?

Oh, God, if he's gotten to Maddy...

I stride forward, grabbing someone and yanking them out of the way, not even caring who it is. I've had a long fucking day, okay, and I need answers *now*.

Dmitri's next to me, shoulder-checking people out of the way like it's a hockey game, and behind me, I hear Cam yell, "Oh, sure, just dive into the crazy mob! I'll be right behind you, no problem!"

A few people go stiff and move out of our way, and I realize Asher's influencing them—but he's still exhausted, and he just woke up, so he's not managing much right now.

I'm in the middle of the crowd and spinning in a circle, glancing around wildly. I still can't see anyone who can explain what's going on—*goddammit, goddammit.*

Cam's a few feet behind me, Asher's over to my right, Dmitri's next to me. Roman's still at the front entrance, looking like he's way too old for this shit.

I raise my hand high over my head, waving so that he can find me.

Roman opens his mouth as if to yell, then shakes his head. Then he just... strides forward, glaring straight ahead, like if people don't move out of his fucking way he will crush their skulls without a second thought.

The crowd immediately parts like it's the Red fucking Sea.

*Okay, that was kind of hot.*

The darkly intimidating man reaches us and keeps walking, forcing the rest of us to hurry after him to catch up as he exits the room.

When we reach the hallway, it's a little better. People are clumped up in groups arguing, and a few are whispering quietly to one another. Everyone looks upset and on edge. Some people are crying.

I look around for someone, anyone, who looks like they know what they're doing. Shouldn't there be more Circuit officers around than this? I saw a few back in the chaos of the main entry hall, but there are none in here, and that's far less than there were when we were last at the facility.

What happened? Did everyone leave? Did they abandon us? But if so, why? Unpredictables are supposedly super dangerous—they wouldn't just up and leave us here for no reason. Did Agustin tell them to go? Force them to? I thought his mind control powers were limited to a few people at a time; that's why he wanted Asher's power so badly.

But what if Agustin did somehow convince them to leave us, as a part of his plan? To leave all the Unpredictables here, unprotected, so he could wipe us all out?

Fuck. Did we walk into a trap?

"Roman? Miss Sinclair?"

I turn at the sound of a familiar, slightly twangy voice.

It's Brodie.

"Oh, thank fuck." Cam throws his hands up. "I was thinking we'd have to be in charge, and no offense, but working for the Circuit isn't exactly my dream job."

Brodie rushes up to us, his clothes rumpled and his eyes wide. “Thank God you guys are here. It’s been nuts. Insanity.”

“Yeah, trust me, we noticed,” Cam says, right as Dmitri says, sarcastically, “No, really? We had no idea.”

The two guys give each other looks that say *seriously?*

For the record, shit like that is definitely why I date both of them.

“What happened?” Roman asks, not in the mood to make jokes. “Where are all the officials?”

Brodie swallows. “Yeah. That’s—that’s the thing. Um. Come with me.”

He leads us down the hall a short distance and through the door that leads to the infirmary wing.

I won’t lie—I gasp as I enter and I see what’s inside.

All of the beds are filled—with Circuit officials.

They’re just... lying there. It’s like they’re dead, except...

“Are they in some kind of stasis?” Roman asks.

Asher’s brow furrows and then clears. “Something like that. They’re alive,” he confirms. “But I can’t reach them. It’s like they’re frozen.”

Brodie nods. “That’s the conclusion I came to as well.”

“When did this happen?”

“An hour ago, give or take a bit?” Brodie shrugs. His eyes look a little wild and unfocused. “I wasn’t looking at the clock. Was a bit too busy trying to deal with all the people dropping to the floor around me, you know? It was like they were puppets with their strings cut—they all just went down in heaps. Tamlin and I, and the other professors, we got them in here. We don’t know what else we’re supposed to do.” He shakes his head, shoving his fingers through his hair. “This isn’t like anything we’ve seen before. It’s not a coma, not even a magically induced one. It’s like they’re not even human. Like they’re just frozen, lifelike objects. Suspended in time or something.”

*Jesus Christ.*

I walk over to one of the beds and stare at the official lying on it. It’s true, I can’t see her breathing. There’s no fluttering in her eyelids, like when people dream.

When I was in my coma, I wasn’t conscious of anything going on around me. I honestly don’t even remember dreaming. I just remember waking up and being aware that I’d slept for a long time, and then just feeling really groggy. But the guys tell me that I did in fact dream, or at

least they guessed as much judging by the way my face would twitch and my eyelids would flutter now and then. At first it would make them excited, thinking I was waking up, but eventually they realized those little things were just false alarms.

But this is nothing like that.

The official's skin is a little waxy. Her chest doesn't move. It's like I'm looking at a picture of a person on film instead of an actual person—that's how perfectly frozen she looks. As if, somehow, Agustin has managed to freeze her in time, keeping her in a single moment, sleeping in a skin-tight cocoon.

It's terrifying to realize that he has such far-reaching power. That he was able to do this without killing himself.

How did he get everyone in stasis like this? And why some people and not others?

"Lines are down," Brodie explains to Roman. "Or they're clogged. Our networks anyway. Everyone's trying to get ahold of relatives, you know, trying to see if their loved ones are all right. With communication down, it's hard to get information and figure out exactly what happened, but from what we can tell..." His shoulders slump. "Eighty-five percent of the government is crippled."

I whip around to face him properly. "What?!"

"Including the High Circuit," Brodie says. "It's... it's just us."

My heart pounds, slamming against my ribs so hard it actually hurts.

The government is down. Incapacitated. All the way to the top. Agustin's made a public attack against all of magical society, and we're already losing.

*It's just us.*

The Unpredictables in this facility.

The few Unpredictables like Brodie within the Circuit.

Me and my men, exhausted and beat-up as we are.

It's just us.



**THANK YOU FOR READING!**

Reviews are a book's lifeblood. If you enjoyed this story, please take a second to [leave a review](#) (even a sentence or two makes such a huge difference!).

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