



AN ACADEMY OF
UNPREDICTABLE MAGIC

THREAT

SADIE MOSS

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Academy of Unpredictable Magic #4

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CHAPTER 1

I wake up extremely warm.

That's a good thing, because it's damn freezing in this big house.

I'm at Roman's place for winter break, and so is Maddy, and so are all the guys. It's an old house, sprawling, a mansion almost—and while he never talks about it, the sheer size of this place gives me a pretty damn good idea that Roman's family has money.

But it's fucking difficult to heat a house as old and massive as this one, which is why I'm glad to wake up warm.

As the fog of sleep clears from my brain, I realize it's because I'm sandwiched in between Cam and Asher. Dmitri tends to want his own space in bed, although he likes having me in it, and I sleep on top of Roman's chest like a cat, but Asher and Cam are total cuddlebugs. They don't even care whether they're the little or the big spoon, since we all end up octopus-limbed anyway.

I stir, stretching a little, shaking off the last cobwebs of sleep. It's been awesome, having all the guys here, being with them officially. Sometimes I worry that one of them will get jealous, or that there will be a personality clash, or that we'll just plain get sick of each other.

But it's been two whole weeks, and so far nothing like that has happened. Everything's been great. I'm starting to think that maybe—just maybe—I get to have this good thing. That it could be permanent.

I think part of what helps is the lack of strict rules about what we're doing and how.

Like the whole bed thing. I do technically have my own room, but I don't always sleep there. Sometimes I do, when I just want to be by myself.

I've always been pretty independent, and whatever feelings I might have for a guy—or, well, multiple guys—it doesn't change the fact that I value my alone time and my space. But a lot of nights, I sleep over with one of the guys, or a couple of them. Dmitri and Roman don't really like sharing beds, but Cam and Asher are, well... like I said.

There's something so intimate and trusting about sleeping with someone. Not that it's all romantic—God no, watching someone sleep is not all it's cracked up to be, thanks.

But you're so vulnerable while you're asleep. Someone could do anything they wanted to you, whether it be draw a mustache on your face or steal your credit card. Not that I really think any of the guys would do either of those things. Not at all. But you can't help but feel... exposed, a little.

Yet in the weeks since we made this thing between us official, every day has felt more and more comfortable, more *right*. Like this is just how it's supposed to be. Like it all makes sense.

It makes me happy. I think I may be genuinely, completely happy for the first time since Mom died. I'm not alone in this anymore; I don't always have to be the adult, or at least not the only adult.

I have a support system. And it's fucking amazing.

As I stretch, I feel Cam stirring behind me, and I can't help myself. He's got a little morning wood going on, and I arch my back, grinding my ass back against him.

Cam's arm draped around my waist while he was sleeping, and now I feel it tighten, pressing me closer to his body. I brush my fingers over his forearm, relishing the feel of the strong muscles underneath.

"Somebody's in a mood," he teases, his voice low and rumbling in my ear.

My face is tucked underneath Asher's chin, and I feel him stirring and pulling back so he can duck his head down to look at my face. His eyes are sparking with mischief as he slides his hands up my thighs to grip my hips, and I can feel him pressing against my hip, nice and hard as well.

Now, this is what I classify as a good wake up call.

"What if I *am* in a mood?" I tease back, grinning at Asher as Cam lets out a low, growly noise behind me. "What if I need a little help with my mood?"

"Oh, Sin..." Cam nips my ear. "We live to help."

Goody.

I lean forward to capture Asher's lips with mine, and he responds instantly, sliding his tongue into my mouth with deep, exploratory strokes. Asher has this way of kissing me that makes the whole world around us seem to vanish, that renders time completely meaningless. It's so unhurried and thorough I could drown in it, and I never want to come up for air.

And having Cam's lips working their way over the back of my neck, brushing the shell of my ear at the same time?

It's fucking incredible.

The sensations bounce around in my body, clashing into each other and setting off little explosions of pleasure. I grind my ass back against Cam's stiff cock and then press my hips forward to rub against Asher, alternating between the two of them as their bodies press closer to mine. Before long, we're one big writhing mess of limbs, breaths, and soft groans.

I don't think Cam or Asher are attracted to each other at all, but they're such good friends that they have no problem getting up close and personal with each other as long as I'm in the middle. I turn my head to kiss Cam, and as he leans up to reach my lips, Asher runs his tongue over the line of my jaw. Our faces are all so close together I can feel our breaths mingling between us, and I love the feeling of being completely encased by these two men.

Cam's hand is on my left breast, which is pressed up against Asher's chest. There isn't a lot of room to maneuver, but the blond man behind me manages to capture my nipple between two fingers, sending an electric jolt through me. I gasp into his mouth, and he chuckles, repeating the action until my ass is bumping harder against his groin, demanding relief for the feelings he's stoking inside me.

We're both breathless when our kiss finally breaks, and Asher tilts my head back toward him, pulling me into his arms as Cam releases me for a second. I feel him scoot away across the mattress and am vaguely aware of the sound of a drawer opening, but I'm falling down the bottomless well of Asher's kiss again, so I can't focus on it.

When Cam comes back, he throws the covers off, exposing all three of our bodies to the slightly chilly air in the room. I suck in a breath at the temperature change—it was nice and warm with three bodies gyrating under the heavy comforter—and goose bumps break out over my skin. Cam's large hand strokes down my arm, warming me up as he settles behind mine again.

“Don’t worry, Sin. We’ll keep you plenty warm. Maybe even help you work up a sweat,” he murmurs in my ear, a smile in his voice.

Oh, I have no damn doubt they will.

And even though I miss the cozy little nest we had under the blankets, now that the covers are gone we have room to move around without getting tangled up in the sheets—plus, I get to enjoy the view.

I’m wearing flannel pajama bottoms and a tank top, but both of the guys slept without a shirt on. Cam’s got a pair of long sleep-pants on, and Asher’s just wearing shorts. And even though I can’t wait to get those offending articles of clothing out of my way, what’s on display already is nothing to scoff at.

Cam’s a little bigger than Asher, with broad shoulders like a linebacker and a lean waist. His hair is golden blond, and it perfectly complements his sky-blue eyes, which are always open and earnest. He’s got an enthusiasm for life that practically beams out through his pores, and it’s hard not to automatically grin when you look at him. He just draws that reaction out of most people.

Asher is leaner than Cam but still ripped. He’s got more of a swimmer’s build than a football player’s, with moss-green eyes that seem to see everything. His Unpredictable power is reading minds, but he’s so empathetic that most of the time I feel like he can read me with no magical assistance at all.

Like right now.

He and Cam have both risen to kneel beside me, and Asher’s hands seem to anticipate what I want before I even know I want it. His fingertips skate up under the hem of my tank top, brushing gently against the undersides of my breasts while Cam hooks his fingers into the waistband of my pajama bottoms and tugs.

I arch off the bed, both to help Cam pull my pants over my hips and to urge Asher’s hands a little higher. A grin tilts his full lips as he gives me what I want, cupping my breasts in both hands, squeezing and massaging them while Cam tosses my pajama bottoms and panties to the floor. The cold air meets my wet pussy, and I squirm on the bed, already so revved up it’s impossible to stay still.

Asher keeps worshipping my breasts with his hands even as Cam peels my tank top up and over my head. Now I can suddenly see what Asher’s doing instead of just feeling it, and the sight pulls a whimper from my

throat. He grins, dipping his head to lick my nipple with the flat of his tongue, and I clutch the sides of his head, threading my fingers through his dark brown hair.

Cam sits back on his heels for a second, watching me writhe under Asher, and I can see his cock jutting out inside his sleep-pants. He slides one hand under the waistband, and my mouth drops open as I zero in on the outline of his fist pumping up and down as he jerks himself off inside the loose-fitting pants.

I want to see more though. I want to see everything.

As Asher moves his talented mouth to my other breast, sliding one hand slowly down my stomach, I reach toward Cam, making an inarticulate noise that may or may not sound like “gimme”.

Whether or not that’s actually the word that comes out, he picks up on my meaning, and a panty-melting grin spreads across his face. Keeping one hand wrapped around his cock, he uses the other to work his pants down, letting me see the smooth motion of his fist as he jacks himself off.

God, that’s so fucking good. Why is it so hot to watch him touch himself like that?

As I’m pondering that question, the hand Asher sent south arrives at its destination, and when he slips two fingers inside me, I suddenly can’t remember what I was thinking about at all. The noise that falls from my lips is louder this time, and my hips roll against Asher’s fingers, inviting him deeper, pressing my clit against the heel of his hand.

Still working his cock in slow, steady strokes, Cam leans down and kisses me, and *oh, holy fucking fuck*. The combination of Asher’s fingers and mouth and Cam’s kiss push me over the cliff of an orgasm I didn’t even see coming, and I free fall into perfect pleasure, crying out into Cam’s mouth as my body shudders and jerks. Neither of them stops, but as the waves of pleasure crest and then break, they slow their movements, giving me a chance to recover.

Cam’s kisses become little pecks to my lips before he pulls back to grin down at me.

“I definitely don’t feel cold anymore,” I breathe, my voice a little shaky.

“No?” His smile widens. “I was gonna say—you look super hot.”

I swat at his shoulder playfully, and he laughs as he drops onto his side on the bed next to me. Asher gives my nipple one last swipe with his tongue then looks up at both of us, sliding his fingers out of my swollen core. His

pupils are dilated, making his deep green eyes look darker than usual, and the expression on his face makes my stomach clench.

“Um...” I wrinkle my nose at him. “I can’t help but notice you’re still wearing pants. You’re way behind.”

“Cam’s still got pants on,” he notes, sitting back on his heels and gazing down at me with a soft smile.

Oh. He’s right. Cam only pushed them down far enough to free his cock—I’ll be honest, after that happened, I kinda stopped paying attention to the pants themselves. They were not priority number one, as they say.

I shoot the burly blond man a narrow-eyed look. “Well, now, this just seems totally unfair. I’m the *only* one who’s naked?”

He grins, and his pants are gone so fast I’d almost swear he has a disintegration ability instead of teleportation and magic absorption powers. When I look back at Asher, his shorts are gone too, and *yeah, this is way better.* They’re gorgeous men under any circumstances, but they’re hot as hell naked. The only things we all have left on are our magic repressing cuffs.

Asher settles back to the bed on my other side, and I find myself sandwiched between their bodies again, lying on my back between them. Cam grabs the condom he pulled from the drawer earlier, tearing it open and rolling it on. Then he leans up on his elbow and kisses me deeply before urging me onto my side facing his friend. I follow his nudge willingly, not quite sure where this is going yet, but one hundred percent positive I’m on board.

“Can you reach him, Sin?” he whispers in my ear. “Can you reach his cock?”

Oh, God.

A shiver races down my spine from Cam’s words alone, and I slide my hand down, wrapping it around Asher’s thick length. His eyelids droop, and his body seems to tense and relax at the same time. I glide my fist up and down a few times, but I need more lubrication, so I bring it back up and lick my palm before grabbing him again.

He makes a satisfied noise, thrusting his hips lightly against my strokes, and I hear Cam take a sharp breath behind me. The blond man’s hand snakes around my waist, sliding down my stomach to play with my clit, and I arch my back, asking and offering in one gesture.

That’s all the invitation Cam needs.

I feel his broad head nudge at my entrance, and then his hips shift forward and he fills me completely. I let out a low moan, the rhythm of my hand breaking as my mind flies into a million pieces. All three of us are breathing heavily as Cam reaches down to hook my upper leg over his, spreading me open so he can get even deeper—and baring me completely to Asher.

Asher's dark green gaze flicks down, and the hungry look on his face nearly makes me come on the spot.

"Fuck, Elle," he breathes, thrusting harder into my grip. "You're incredible. That's so damn hot."

I release him for a second to wet my hand again, and when I wrap my fingers around him, Cam begins to slide in and out of me.

His lips brush the shell of my ear, planting little kisses on the sensitive skin as he whispers, "What I do to you, you do to Asher, okay? We'll see which one of us lasts longer."

I almost roll my eyes, because only Cam could find a way to turn a hot morning three-way into some kind of competition—but then he starts thrusting faster as his fingers find their way to my clit, and my eyes roll back in my head for an entirely different reason.

My hand on Asher's cock picks up the pace too, and the dark-haired man before me lets out a rough groan. *Okay, maybe this was actually a brilliant idea, Cam.*

I watch Asher, and Asher watches me, and every time Cam changes the rhythm of his thrusts, I change the movement of my hand.

Faster.

Harder.

With a swirl of his hips at the end.

Slow and deep.

His fingers keep pulsing around my clit too, but every time I get close to coming, he changes the pattern again, keeping me just on the edge but not—quite—there.

I take out my frustrated arousal on Asher's cock, which he seems to have no complaints about. He finally tears his gaze away from the sight of Cam filling me and palms the back of my head, pulling me forward a little so he can kiss the hell out of me.

Cam must like my body's reaction to that, because his teasing control snaps, and he finally stops torturing all of us. My ass bounces against his

pelvis as he thrusts in a hard, fast rhythm, circling his slippery fingers over my clit with an energy to match.

I'm cursing into Asher's mouth, stroking my hand over his thick length, kissing him hard, and clutching at his shoulder like I need an anchor.

"Shit. Elle, I can't—I—"

Asher tears his lips away from mine, his expression almost pained as his cock thickens and pulses in my grip.

"Oh, thank fuck," Cam groans from behind me, slamming into me one last time and grinding his hips against my ass. At the same moment, ropes of cum spill from Asher's cock, coating my stomach and hand, and the feel of both men losing control pushes me over the edge. My pussy clenches around Cam, and I do my best not to squeeze the life out of Asher as another orgasm rockets through me.

They ride me through it, wrapping their arms around me and bringing us all so close together that no daylight can fit between us. Asher's cum on my stomach is now smeared across his too, but I don't give a shit about what kind of mess we've made.

I'd do it again in a fucking heartbeat.

CHAPTER 2

We stay like that for a few more moments, the two men's bodies pressed tightly against mine, and Cam's cock still buried inside me. I'm definitely not cold anymore. In fact, I think I worked up a little bit of a sweat.

Cam's face is buried in my hair, his warm breath tickling the back of my neck, when I hear him mutter thickly, "Did I win?"

"Of course you didn't win," Asher shoots back, his voice amused and contented. It's also a little muffled, since his face is pressed into the crook of my neck. "If anything, I won. You definitely finished first."

I chuckle, and Cam groans, rocking his pelvis harder against me.

"I'm gonna call it a tie," I say. Then I lift my head, stealing lazy kisses from each of them. "But if you guys ever want a rematch..."

"Fuck yes." Now it's Cam's turn to laugh and my turn to groan.

He secures the condom and pulls out, then disappears into the bathroom for a second before returning with a couple of small towels. He crawls back into bed as Asher and I clean ourselves off a little, then pulls the blanket back over all of us as we collapse back into a pile of limbs and warm bodies.

We're lying here, catching our breaths, when I hear a knock at the door.

Shit, there goes my idea of us hopping into the shower. Unless it's one of the other guys outside. *Hmm. I could use a round two...*

"Who is it?" I call out.

"Ellie?"

Oh, shoot, it's Maddy.

She's the only one who can get away with calling me Ellie. Not that the guys don't have nicknames for me because, oh boy, do they ever. Cam calls me Sin, for example. Long story. But a lot of people over the years have tried the "Ellie" thing on me, and they all quickly realized their error.

"Coming! Just one sec, Mads!"

I'll be the first person to admit that I melt around Maddy. I'm not always the friendliest person to be around; I've been described by more than one person as prickly, and my social calendar isn't exactly bursting at the seams. But my little sister is the sweetest person I know, and she's never going to get anything but love from me, dammit.

I disentangle myself from the guys, who are playfully tugging at me, and climb out of bed. Cam swats my ass as I do, making me yelp as the heat that got me all flushed earlier returns. I flip him off, but I'm laughing as I duck into the bathroom to quickly wash up.

"Did you forget?" Maddy calls through the door. Her voice grows suspicious. "Are you having sex in there?"

"No, I'm not!" I call from the bathroom as I crank the nozzle on the shower. Even over the sound of the water, I can hear Cam and Asher snicker because, well, I'm not having sex right *now*, but... "And of course I didn't forget, I just overslept!"

Maddy and I are having a girls' day out in Portland. Roman's house is about an hour outside of the city, which is great for privacy and all that—his closest neighbors are miles away, which makes it easy to forget the rest of the world even exists. But even though we've all been having a great time hanging out together in this huge house, I don't want Maddy to feel lonely or isolated. I don't ever want her to feel like I'm neglecting her or that she's coming in second place in my affections or anything.

I'm completely falling for these guys, and even though they've pretty much adopted Mads as their sister, I want her to know the bond she and I share is really important to me.

After Mom died of cancer five years ago, Maddy and I were on our own. I had just turned eighteen, and I had to fight tooth and nail with child services to keep her. It helped that Maddy was already fourteen—if she'd still been a young kid, they might've insisted I couldn't take care of her.

But we were each all the other had for a long time. I didn't have many friends, and it only got worse when I had to let go of the idea of going to college and pull doubles at The Den instead so I could pay rent and stuff.

We lived in a small one-bedroom apartment, even sharing a big bed since Maddy had nightmares for a few years after Mom died.

For the past year and a half, we've been separated a lot of the time—Maddy at her academy and me at mine—and even on our break, we're with the guys. And thanks to an anti-Unpredictable asshole sending me into a coma at the end of my first year at Griffin Academy, I didn't even get to spend the summer with Mads. I only woke up with a week of time left before she had to go back to Neptune for the fall semester.

Finding time for just the two of us is really important, so today we're going into town—shopping for Maddy for the upcoming semester, seeing a movie, all that fun stuff.

Freshly showered, I throw on my clothes and step out of the bedroom, closing the door behind me so Cam and Asher can get ready.

“You good to go?”

Mads rolls her eyes fondly. “Yeah, Ellie, *I* was up at a decent hour.”

“It's only nine a.m., that barely qualifies as sleeping in.” I wrap my arm around her shoulders and lead her downstairs to the gigantic kitchen.

Roman's cooking something. I can smell it as we come down the steps, and my stomach rumbles. Dammit, he needs to stop being so amazing, it's completely unfair.

“Omelets,” he says, flipping one over in the pan. “What do you want in them?”

Maddy makes her request and I make mine, and soon we're digging in.

“Where's Dmitri?” I ask around a very unladylike mouthful of food.

“Went for a run. He should be back soon.” Roman fixes an omelet for himself and sits down next to me, our knees brushing under the table.

I snort a laugh, because no matter how much Cam and I try—and believe me, we *have* tried—we can never convince Dmitri to come with us on our runs through the woods that make up part of the Griffin campus. Probably because when we're at school, we have to get up a hell of a lot earlier than nine a.m. to go running.

There's the sound of elephants thumping above us, and then Cam emerges down the stairs, swinging over the banister.

His eyes light up at the sight of breakfast. “Sweet, thanks, Roman.”

Bounding into the kitchen, he grabs some jam and makes himself an omelet with jam in the middle because Cam is a heathen that way.

Asher comes down the stairs like a normal person and makes himself oatmeal instead of the offered omelet since he's not really fond of eggs, and soon everyone's chatting about this and that as Maddy and I finish our meals and get ready to go.

It strikes me, as Cam steals a bite of Roman's omelet and Roman gives him a death glare and Asher starts reading the news on his tablet, just how... domestic this all is. How comfortable I am. This doesn't just feel like a special treat or a holiday. This feels normal. Like it's how life should always be.

It both elates me and scares me a little.

Still, I'm glad I have this. I missed out on all the bonding the guys did while I was in my damn coma all last summer, and even though winter break is only three weeks long, it manages to feel like forever and only a day at the same time.

It's been possibly the best time of my life.

Dmitri bursts in from his run, giving us all a cursory wave as he heads for a shower, moving up the stairs as silently as a cat.

"When do you have to leave by today?" I hear Cam ask.

I was distracted by Dmitri—*don't judge me, he looks damn good all sweaty from his run*—but I turn back in my chair to see that Cam's talking to Roman.

Oh, right. Of course. As a professor, Roman has to be back on campus early to prepare for the start of the semester. Unlike the students, who just have to arrive by the time classes start, Roman has curriculums to prepare, meetings to attend, and all that jazz.

"I'll be heading out this afternoon," Roman answers, running a hand through his dark hair. "Probably around one o'clock."

"We'll be gone," I note, pointing to Mads and myself and trying not to sound sad. I'm not sure how successful I am though.

I know I'll see him again in just a week, but it won't be the same. I won't be able to just sleep with him whenever I want, or wake up to him making breakfast, or tease him and hold his hand in public. We're not technically breaking any rules by dating, but it's heavily frowned upon. So for the sake of his professional reputation, we're trying to keep our relationship under wraps—or as under wraps as possible—until after I graduate.

Roman gives me a warm smile. It transforms his whole face when he does that. The dark-haired, blue-eyed man has a slightly dangerous look to him, like he's the kind of guy who could be leading the mafia, but he looks so very soft and warm when he smiles at me. Like a completely different person.

"Going to miss me?" he teases.

"Oh, yes, terribly. I'll go out brooding along the beach like a romance novel heroine. Weeping and wailing." I press the back of my hand to my forehead dramatically even as I scoot my chair a little closer to Roman so more of our legs are touching. I like the contact.

"You'll catch a cold," Asher points out with an arched brow, moss-green eyes still focused on his tablet.

"Then I'll languish in bed," I shoot back with a shrug.

"Yeah, I really can't see you *languishing* anywhere, Sin," Cam notes, laughing.

We finish up breakfast, and Dmitri comes down to start eating just as we're cleaning up our own dishes. He pulls me into his arms and gives me a soft kiss on the top of my head as I pass. The man isn't really one for words, but he shows a lot through his actions, and that's always been the way we've communicated best.

With pleasantly full bellies and the buzz of caffeine in our veins, Maddy and I throw our jackets on and get ready to head out. It's Oregon, so even though it's early January, it's not freezing, but it's far from t-shirt weather. As Maddy struggles to get her boots on, I take the opportunity to pull Roman aside into the alcove we use to hang our coats.

"Hey. I wanted to thank you," I whisper.

"For what?"

My hands are on his upper arms, and I find my thumbs idly swiping back and forth, feeling the softness of his dark red sweater, the warmth of him, the firmness of the muscle underneath. "For letting us all stay here. You didn't have to. Even just Maddy and me; you didn't have to let us stay all this time. Never mind the guys—"

Roman's hands fall to my hips, and he slowly draws me into him, his head bending down until his lips are brushing against mine. "As if I could do anything other than take care of you," he growls, soft and dominant at the same time, and I shiver at both the sound of his voice and his touch.

“You take care of me *extremely* well,” I reply, grinning against his mouth, knowing he’ll catch the innuendo.

Roman’s hands tighten on my hips and he pulls me completely against him, his mouth catching mine. Being with Roman has been like playing with fire since day one when we hooked up outside the bar where I worked.

I tighten my grip on one of his biceps and slide my other hand up, holding onto the back of his neck for balance as I rise up onto my tiptoes to kiss him back properly. Roman kisses like he’s laying siege, no quarter, no mercy, and I love it. It makes me shiver and melt and beg.

His dominance isn’t the dangerous kind though, although I’m sure it might look that way to those who don’t know him. I’m pretty sure Roman projects that kind of air to keep himself safe, to keep people from getting too close.

Which reminds me.

I reluctantly drag my lips away from his. Our kiss leaves heat thrumming through my veins and reminds me of just how good he can make me feel—and just how safe I feel when I’m with him, like I can lean on him literally or emotionally, and he’ll always be there to hold me up.

But no matter how safe I feel with him, there are times when I still get the sense he’s keeping me at arm’s length a little.

The other three guys are open books where their families are concerned. Even Dmitri, who was tight-lipped about it for a long time, finally spilled the beans about the business deal his dad made that involved promising his son’s hand in marriage to the daughter of a colleague. He still hasn’t figured out quite what to do about that, but at least I know about it now. I can help Dmitri, be there for him however he needs me to be.

But with Roman, it’s different. There’s stuff in his past I’m pretty sure he hasn’t shared with anyone. His ex-girlfriend, Josephine Tamlin—another one of my professors, just to make this whole thing even more awkward, yippee—warned me that he might not *ever* let me in. He certainly didn’t ever let her in all the way.

I’ve tried to be patient. But I can’t stop thinking about that picture I saw on his mantel of his family. He was so young in that photo, and there aren’t any others of him with his parents or sister from after that point. I think maybe his family died soon after that picture was taken—but how? And why is that the only photo I’ve seen of them at all?

“Roman?”

“Hmm?”

I take a deep breath. “I don’t want to push, and I’m not going to. It’s okay that you’re not ready to share everything with me yet. But... you can trust me with what you *do* choose to share. I just wanted to make sure you know that.”

Roman’s cobalt eyes flash, and I know he recognizes the words I chose. They’re the same ones he told me a year ago, when he was first trying to convince me to open up to him. I’m admittedly not great at being emotionally available and vulnerable, and Roman always respected that—but he wanted me to know that whatever parts of myself I chose to share, he would keep them safe.

I want him to know that the same stands true for me.

The tall, breathtakingly handsome man kisses me again. This time, the press of his lips is softer, and he pulls away more slowly. “I promise, I don’t want to keep things from you, Reckless. I trust you, and I want to share myself with you. I want to be with you.”

I nod. I do believe that.

“Ellie! You ready?”

“Coming!” I call, not looking away from Roman. *He won’t be here when I get back.*

He smiles softly, like he knows what I’m thinking, and pulls me in so he can hold me. I hang on tightly, resting my head against his chest, hearing his heartbeat, feeling his chest rise and fall with his breath.

Then I pull away, muster up a broad smile, and turn to join my sister. It’ll be fine. I’ll see him in just a few days, and even if it’s not the same on campus, it’s not like he’s going to the Gobi Desert for five years or something.

Maddy’s waiting by the door, holding my coat for me with an impatient, excited grin on her face. It’s only after the two of us pile into Dmitri’s car and I start up the engine that I realize...

Roman somehow evaded actually talking about his family again.

CHAPTER 3

Shopping is not my thing, gonna tell you that right now.

I've never cared much about how I look, style-wise. I suppose if I had any classifiable style before I went to school and got too busy to even think about it at all, it was something like '90s grunge. And that's only because it was the laziest "style" I could get away with.

Maddy, on the other hand, has always cared about how she looks. She loved to play dress up with me as a kid and practice doing makeup on me—with hilariously hideous results. She likes to put effort into what she wears, and when I go shopping with her, it all becomes fun for me too. It's an activity for the two of us.

We hit up the shops in Portland, sticking mostly to the area frequented by the magical community. This isn't *Harry Potter*, so there's no secret entrance into a whole shopping district or anything. Most regular people who pass through this part of town probably have no idea of the secret second life that lurks under the surface around here, and we like it that way.

When Mom died, I stayed away from the magical community. During her illness, the magic users we knew didn't exactly reach out with open arms to help us. Maybe part of that was because Mads and I hadn't manifested our powers yet, so people didn't truly consider us part of the community. But in any case, I wasn't all that keen on being reminded of everything I was missing out on or being surrounded by people who had turned their backs on us when we needed them.

Maddy, though? She loves the magical world now that she's properly a member of it. She enjoys her schoolwork and her friends, and as we shop, she chatters to me all about the careers she's considering getting into. Her

mind is just full of possibilities, and she's excited and hopeful. It makes my chest warm. I always wanted her to feel like this, like she was on top of the world and could be whatever she wanted.

We traipse in and out of shops, and Mads takes delight in using her water elemental magic here and there, making the liquid in her glass dance when we stop at a restaurant for lunch. I've still got my dampening cuff on, as all untrained Unpredictables are required to. We can take them off for some classes at school, but off-campus, we're required to wear them at all times.

As we walk, I can see a few people eyeing the cuff—I don't think everyone knows what it signifies though, because few people seem to register what I am with either surprise, alarm, or distrust. To most of them, it probably just looks like a fashion statement.

By early afternoon, Maddy and I have settled into a shopping groove—which mostly involves her trying on a bunch of things and me giving them the thumbs up or thumbs down. We're in the dressing room of a little boutique, and I'm lounging on a chair while Maddy checks herself out in front of the mirror.

"You seem happy," she comments, catching my eye in the glass reflection.

"Mm?" I pull my gaze away from the ornate embroidery on the top Maddy's wearing. "Of course I'm happy. I'm getting to spend time with you."

She gives me a knowing look, pursing her lips. "That's not why."

"What, you think you don't make me happy?"

"I know I make you happy, but I also know I used to be all you had. I'm younger than you, but I'm not an idiot, and I'm not a little kid anymore. I know you were lonely for a long time. Now you're not. And you're not just *not alone*; you're loved. I don't know if you even see how relaxed and happy you look. You smile and laugh so much more. You don't look as tired."

My jaw drops open a little, and I blink at her.

Damn. My little sister is insightful. And she sees through me way too well.

In the years after our mom died, I tried to hide my moments of sadness and loneliness from Maddy. I never wanted her to feel like she was a burden to me, or that I gave up too much for her. Just because I'm finding a new

kind of happiness now, I don't want her to think I wasn't happy before. Or that I resented her for even a second.

"Mads, you know I'm not sorry at all that I—"

"I know," she interrupts with a smile, reaching down and squeezing my hand. Then her grin widens. "But I approve of you and the guys. They're good people, and they're definitely good for you. I'm on board, if you want to keep this going."

"Of course I want to keep it going!" I protest. Then I jerk up straight in my seat. "Why, do they think I *don't*?"

"I'm not saying that." She tries on another blouse as her blue eyes twinkle mischievously. "You care though, I can tell. You're nervous—that definitely means you care."

"Oh, stuff it." I stick out my tongue at her and slouch back down, then pause. Mads might be younger than me, and I sort of fell into a mother role after Mom died, but she's still my best friend. I want to confide in her. "Honestly, I do worry sometimes. Not about them leaving me or not being happy. Just regular couple stuff."

"Like...?"

"Like the guys graduating. They're all going to be finishing school soon. They're a year ahead of me, and I like to think we can make distance work, but how many people *actually* make distance work? And that's just when it's two people."

"I think you guys can make it work. You're all already unconventional. Cam practically lives at Asher's anyway, so that's two birds with one stone, and his family likes you. And Dmitri—"

"That's the other thing." I grimace. "You can't tell anyone this, because it was told to me in confidence, and I don't know who else knows. I'm not even sure the other guys know. But Dmitri... he's been promised to some girl. Since he was a toddler."

Maddy drops the pair of pants she's holding. "*What?* Like in medieval times or something?"

I shrug. "His family is powerful in the magical community. He's their only son. They wanted him to marry into another powerful family. I think the father of the girl and Dmitri's dad are close friends or something."

"That's bullshit if I've ever heard it," she says, setting aside the clothes she wants to buy and putting her street clothes back on. "Dmitri doesn't even know her?"

“Not well, anyway.”

“Fuck that. Can’t he say no?”

“Technically, sure, but you know it’s not easy to just say no to your parents.”

Maddy sniffs as if to say *yeah, right*. She and I loved our mom, but we were all opinionated women, which led to a few standoffs—especially between Mom and me. I’m stubborn as fuck and so was she.

Dad split when Mads was six and I was ten. Sometimes I wonder if I would’ve ended up like Dmitri if our dad had stuck around. He’s supposedly important in the magical community, someone powerful, but I don’t really remember him all that much, and Maddy remembers even less. I like to think I’m a stubborn and strong woman who wouldn’t let anybody push me around, but then, Dmitri’s stubborn and strong himself. And look at him.

“But he’s with *you*,” Maddy says softly. Her eyes are big. “That means something, right?”

“Well...” I sigh, my shoulders slumping. “I know he wants to be with me and has chosen me in his heart—oh, geez, that sounds so fucking cheesy —”

Maddy laughs.

“But that doesn’t mean...” I chew my lip. “We haven’t exactly resolved the situation yet. I know about it, and I know Dmitri cares about me and wants me and not her—God only knows what the poor girl thinks about this whole damn thing; I wouldn’t blame her if she’s got her own boyfriend on the sly—but he hasn’t told me anything definite, and I’m not about to be a secret mistress.”

I mean it. I won’t be some dirty secret. Being discreet with Roman until I graduate is one thing. But spending possibly my whole life as Dmitri’s mistress while he’s trapped in a loveless political marriage with another woman?

Yeah, fuck that.

I help Maddy take care of all the clothes she tried on and we make our way to the register. “For what it’s worth,” she says, “I think it’ll work out.”

I put the clothes on the counter so we can pay for them. “You’re optimistic.”

“Well, of course I am. He cares about you. They all do. I know I said you’re happier with them, but they’re happier with you too.” We finish

paying, get our bags, and pull away from the register. “When I was there the summer you were in the coma, you didn’t see them. They were okay, they bonded, but they weren’t really happy. They were all too worried about you. Now it’s so much better. It’s going to work out.”

I stop walking and turn to look at her, gratitude swelling in my chest. I don’t know where my sister gets her faith from, but I’m grateful for it.

“C’mere, you.”

We hug tightly in a tangle of limbs and shopping bags, and I press a kiss to her hair.

“Besides,” Maddy says, her voice muffled against my chest, “you landed the four hottest guys I’ve ever seen in my life. You are morally obligated to hold onto them.”

“Oh, is that so?” I tease as she pulls back.

“You have to bang them,” Maddy whispers. “For the rest of us. Do it for the rest of us!”

“Hardy har har.”

“Hey, it’s not like I’ve got any prospects. I have to live vicariously through you. Not that I’d actually want to date any of them, they’re all like brothers to me at this point.”

“Good to know, I’d hate to think my sister was dying of unrequited love for one of my boyfriends this whole time.”

She sticks her tongue out at me.

“C’mon.” I nudge her with my elbow. “Whip smart, gorgeous girl like you? You could have anyone you wanted. Boy, girl, variation thereupon...”

“Boy,” she informs me with a roll of her eyes. “It would be a boy, Ellie, but thanks for your open-mindedness.”

“Hey, no need to get snarky.”

“I don’t really have any good prospects,” she muses. “I don’t know. I have a lot of friends, but I wouldn’t say I’ve found the love of my life.”

“Tell me about these friends of yours, then.”

Maddy launches into explaining to me who everyone is, and I can’t help but notice that her cheeks get slightly pink and her voice picks up a little when she mentions a guy in her friend group named Justin.

“He’s got the same class schedule as me,” she says, “so we eat lunch together pretty much every day, even when the others can’t join us.”

“Sounds nice.”

I try to keep my voice neutral. Maybe Mads isn't aware of it yet, or maybe she just isn't ready to talk about it, but this guy Justin is definitely a "prospect" in her eyes.

She continues talking, and even as I nod along, humming occasionally to show that I'm listening, I'm freaking the fuck out inside.

I know she's growing up. She's nineteen now, for crying out loud. Even when I became her guardian, she was a hormonal, crazy teenager, not a toddler. But in my eyes... whenever I look at her, I see that four-year-old with chocolate smeared over her face, or the six-year-old who skinned her knee, or the nine-year-old who got first place in the spelling bee.

I think that's what I'll always see, in my heart. My baby sister.

Maddy's not going to appreciate me getting all protective on her though, so I keep my mouth shut. Even if I kind of want to grab her and hold her close and snarl at any boy who so much as looks in her direction.

I hold our shopping bags as we walk down the street, suggesting places we could go to get a treat, ice cream or something—when someone bumps into us.

"Sorry," I mutter automatically. The guy who bumped into me is tall, wearing a jean jacket, and looks a little tired. His hand shoots out to grab my shoulder, stopping either of us from falling.

"Yeah, no prob..." His voice trails off as he gets a good look at my face. He's an all right looking guy, not creepy or threatening, just your average Joe. But something about the look in his eyes when he sees me sends a shiver down my spine.

I automatically step back from him, putting myself between him and Maddy. He doesn't seem to even notice her though. He's still staring at me as an angry light comes into his eyes.

"I know you," he says. "You're that—that girl. From the Trials. The Unpredictable."

The way he says the word reminds me of Johnson, the *ex*-provost of the Phoenix Training Program, who tried to kill me at the award ceremony for the Trials. This guy sounds the same, the word "Unpredictable" sliding off his tongue like something rotten.

Fuck.

I have to suppress a flinch at his tone. No way am I going to let him think he's gotten to me, this random stranger with a bitchy agenda.

“Yeah,” I reply, since I don’t see the point in lying. The Trials were livestreamed; everyone saw me. “And?”

The guy’s anger intensifies, the lines of his face becoming deep and hard as he glares at me. “Didn’t think they let your kind off campus. Kind of like letting the wild animals out of the zoo, don’t you think?”

“Hey—!” Maddy starts, but I reach back and grab her arm, keeping her behind me. I’m not letting her get involved in this. She could get hurt.

“Aww, got a friend? She Unpredictable too?”

I glare at the guy. “Would it kill you to mind your own business?”

“Oh, feisty.”

Other people are starting to stop and take notice of us. *Shit*. Getting attention is the last thing I ever wanted. I know it’s only going to get harder to avoid, seeing as I keep ending up in the middle of our school’s problems, and almost the entire magical community watched the Trials, but still. I just want to be able to walk down the street with my sister in peace. Doesn’t seem like it should be too much to ask.

I could try to diffuse the situation, or even run—but what kind of message would that send? That when someone tries to bully you, you should just flee? Hell, no.

“You gonna attack me?” The guy’s taunting me now. “Huh? I heard you freaks can’t control it, that you’re just like animals. Barbaric and shit.”

I clench my fists. If I didn’t have my cuff on, this guy would be *toast*.

But I do have my cuff on. All Unpredictables who’re still in training have to wear one, even on campus when we’re not in class. It makes sense for the first year, when you might have a second or—in my case—third power making itself known, and when you can’t control even the one strange new power you do have.

After that though, you’d think they’d trust us enough to let us use our magic sometimes.

Guess not.

It’s another reminder that we’re still considered dangerous and second rate by most people, or at least by the High Circuit, the magical government. With my cuff on, I can’t do jack shit. I can punch the guy, sure. And boy, do I want to. But what will that do? He has magic, and *he* can actually use it against me.

“Go on.” The asshole grins. “I’ll even let you get the first shot in.”

“Leave her alone!” Maddy barks, trying to get around me so she can charge him. Her magic isn’t being repressed like mine is, but I don’t want her to have to protect me, and I sure as fuck don’t want her to end up hurt because of me.

“Don’t you have someplace to be?” I say instead, my voice icy. “Douchebags Anonymous meeting or something?”

Even as I taunt him back, I’m looking for a way out. There has to be some store or something we can duck into.

My heart’s racing like it’s in the Kentucky Derby, and my stomach’s churning. We’re in public and in broad daylight, but I can’t help but feel vulnerable. Exposed. And worse than that, Maddy’s vulnerable too.

“C’mon, bitch,” the guy says, and that’s when I lose it. Fight or flight instinct kicks in, and my instinct is always the former.

I wind back with my fist and clock him across the jaw. The man stumbles back, his mouth open, eyes wide, and reaches up to rub at his chin. “You little—”

“Hey!”

A woman, older than us, maybe around our mom’s age if Mom were still alive, steps in between me and the guy. I think I’m about to get yelled at for punching the dude, in which case *tough cookies, ma’am*, but the woman isn’t even looking at me. She’s glaring at the man.

“You leave them alone!” she snarls.

“What the fuck, man?” someone else says, a dark skinned guy built like a Mack truck. He gets in between us as well. “What, women can’t just walk down the street nowadays? Huh?”

“She’s—she’s one of *them*,” the guy snaps. “She’s Unpredictable.”

“And?” the woman replies. “I’m an earth elemental, what’s it to you?”

The guy glares at them, but other people are staring at him now, and none of them look all that friendly about it. I think he can sense the tide is turning against him in favor of me.

“Fine,” he spits. “But I’m not the one you have to worry about. It’s them and their kind. They don’t belong. They don’t deserve magic!”

“Eat me,” I shoot back, flipping him off.

The man gives me a look so venomous it feels like I’ve been slapped across the face. Then he storms off, disappearing into the crowd.

I start shaking almost immediately, the adrenaline rushing out of me now that the danger's over. I struggle to keep my shit together—I don't want to look weak or vulnerable in front of strangers. And I definitely don't want Maddy to think I was scared.

"Thank you," I say to the two strangers who helped us, as calmly as I can manage.

"Are you all right?" the man asks. He looks to be mid-thirties, with a gentle face.

I nod. "Really, we're fine. Thank you."

"You should've let me take him," Maddy mutters. Her face is still flushed red with anger.

The man who accosted us was probably in his mid-twenties. My sister is a late bloomer by regular magical standards; most people who have regular magic start showing it anywhere from age fourteen to sixteen, but Maddy's didn't spark until she was eighteen. So that guy likely had almost a decade of magical training to back him up, while Mads has had less than two.

Yeah, fuck if I was going to let my sister deal with that on her own.

"It's such a pity, what people are saying these days," the woman says, shaking her head. "Do you two need an escort?"

"We're okay, but thank you. Thank you both." I nod gratefully at them, hook my arm through Maddy's, and start walking her back down the street.

She insists we get ourselves ice cream after that, *because we deserve it*, she says—and it does help somewhat, I gotta admit.

But even the relief of knowing that the people around us were willing to stand up for us doesn't outweigh the fear and vulnerability I felt in that moment. I felt helpless, unable to meet that man on even ground, with him able to do magic and me not able to defend myself properly.

Even before the Trials, things weren't easy for Unpredictables. Not everyone liked us. But ever since Johnson gave that radical hate speech against Unpredictables at the Trials and then tried to kill me, more and more people have been speaking out against us. There are people who support us, sure, and that means a lot. But it doesn't change the fact that a random guy off the street just tried to goad me into a fight—a fight he would've probably won.

The whole way home, fear churns in my gut.

This isn't just about me. All Unpredictables are under attack.

CHAPTER 4

I wait until after Maddy's in bed to tell the guys what happened.

Roman's gone, and part of me is relieved that he doesn't have to hear about this, but I also wish he was here so I could curl into him and have him hold me. Roman's always done everything he could to help me feel safe. And I know he would fight tooth and nail to protect me from any danger. It's comforting, even if I'm generally not the type of person who wants someone to fight her fights for her.

Once Maddy's in bed, the guys and I gather in the living room. I know they can tell something's off with me, even if they're being patient and waiting for me to choose when and how to tell them. They've always been good with that. Cam and Asher waited for months for me to come to terms with our relationship, and I'm so grateful they did.

I curl up on the couch, my legs in Cam's lap, my back braced against Asher's chest. Dmitri is sprawled out on one of the armchairs nearby.

"What's up, Elle?" Asher asks quietly.

In a calm voice, trying not to get emotional, I explain what happened. Dmitri stands up almost at once and starts pacing back and forth, his hands squeezing together behind his back. Cam massages my feet, always full of energy but wanting to comfort me as well, and Asher gently kisses my hair every so often.

"I hate how fucking helpless I felt," I admit. "That was the worst part. If I just had my magic—I'm stronger than he is, dammit! I have three abilities! I could've mirrored his powers and fought him that way, or knocked him out with my sonic boom in two seconds, or used my spider climb to get the jump on him. But instead I felt... argh!"

“We all rely on our magic, even regular magic users,” Asher points out, ever the calm and rational one. “He probably only felt as bold as he did because of his magic.”

“I spent twenty-two years of my life thinking I had no powers,” I point out. “I don’t like that in just a year I’ve gone from not even thinking about it to relying on it so much. I can kick someone’s ass without magic. You’ve all sparred with me in class. But I just knew—I fucking knew in that moment that if I went after him physically, he’d still win because of his damn magic. It wasn’t a fair fight, and I felt defenseless. And I’m not!”

“You really aren’t, Sin. You’re one of the toughest people I know.” Cam’s blue eyes gleam in the warm lamplight.

“We shouldn’t have to wear our cuffs!” I blurt, knowing I’m letting my anger show and not caring. I’m good at anger. It’s the more gentle emotions, the softer ones, that I sometimes struggle with. “I get the logic behind them, I do. But it’s shitty because so many people seem to hate us. People are afraid of us, and the cuffs make us vulnerable—we can’t fight back if people decide to turn that fear into hate. There’s all this prejudice against us, and we can’t even defend ourselves if we need to!”

Dmitri keeps pacing. Asher wraps his arms around me, holding me, and I can sense him looking at Cam.

The blond man squeezes my ankle gently. “Next time maybe one of us should come with you.”

“And do what? You have cuffs on too.”

“Maybe just the sight of a big hulking boyfriend will help, though,” he says, his tone light but his expression concerned and serious.

“I don’t want to need bodyguards.” I sigh.

I glance over at Dmitri, who honestly looks like he’s about to punch something. I might have been the one who got in an altercation today, but it seems like it triggered something in Dmitri.

Cam nods at me, and the three of us shift so he and Asher can get up. They both kiss me goodnight, lingering, Cam’s hands gripping me tightly and Asher gently running his fingers through my hair.

Once they’re gone, I shift my focus to Dmitri. “Hey.”

The dark-haired man abruptly stops pacing. He won’t look at me. “You should go to bed with the others.”

I tilt my head. “But what if I want to talk to you?”

He puffs out some air, rolling his eyes, and collapses into the armchair again.

I promptly crawl into his lap, which I don't think he was expecting. His eyes go a bit wide, and I squirm a little more than I have to, smirking at him as his arms automatically wrap around me to secure me in my new seat.

"You're a minx, Princess," he drawls.

If anyone else called me Princess, I'd rip their head off, possibly literally, but Dmitri and I have always shown our affection in weird ways. Usually by poking at each other and beating the crap out of each other in Combat class. I think he appreciates the fact that when he gets snarky and sarcastic, I give him a taste of his own medicine instead of ignoring him or wilting like a flower. Asher brings out my gentleness, and Cam makes me laugh, but Dmitri lets me unleash my sarcastic and antisocial side, and I love it.

"And you've got something on your mind," I say, refusing to let him distract me from the point by flirting with me. Then I gently place my hand on his chest, looping the other one around his shoulders. "What's going on?"

I have to stop myself from saying *Dima* at the end of that sentence. Russian names are a bit complicated. It's not that the name itself is all that hard once you get used to how the sounds work. But everyone's got a name, and then a bunch of variations of that name based on who they're talking to.

Dima is the affectionate, intimate version of Dmitri. Cam calls him that now and again, usually when Dmitri's got his feathers all ruffled up and Cam's trying to soothe him. But I haven't seen Asher or anyone else call him that—and Cam's the kind of guy who can get away with doing what others can't.

I want to call him that right now, to show my affection in that way, but... I don't know how he'd receive it. Dmitri and I are complicated. We're great at being competitive with one another, and that's a good thing. We push each other to be better, to go farther, harder, faster.

But sometimes—okay, a lot of the time—we also rub each other the wrong way. Not as much as we used to since we're no longer denying that we have feelings for each other, but Dmitri's a very private person, even more private than I am, and I don't want to push him into anything he's uncomfortable with. I don't want to go too far or presume too much.

God, though, I really want to. I want to be that close with him, and to have his complete trust.

Maybe with time.

Dmitri doesn't respond to my question at first. He just holds me tighter, wrapping his arms around me until I'm snuggled completely against his chest, my head on his shoulder. I kiss his neck softly and let him hold me for a moment. His grip is tight, not hurting me but definitely strong, like he thinks I'll be ripped away from him at any moment.

I rub his chest. "Dmitri. Please talk to me."

He lets out a long, slow breath, and I can feel him shake just a little at the end of it. I don't push him. I just wrap my arms around him and hug him tightly, molding my body against his.

We sit like that for a while, and at last, after what feels like hours, he starts talking.

His voice is low and rough, and I know this is hard for him to talk about, but I appreciate that he's trying to open up to me and not carry all of it himself.

"My family is important in the magical community," he says. "They're rich and powerful. You know that. And they always taught me that Unpredictables were... were scum, basically. They'd never use that word because they're too 'sophisticated' for that, but I knew that's what they always meant. They taught me that Unpredictables were dangerous and untrustworthy."

I breathe in his clove and honey scent, listening silently as he continues.

"When I got my powers, I blamed myself at first. I thought I must've done something wrong to be Unpredictable. I thought my family would reject me, but I'm the only son, and they don't want to lose their heir. So instead, they act like I'm the exception. 'You're not like *those* Unpredictables', that kind of thing. And they constantly pressure me to prove that, to reject every other Unpredictable and play the game."

Jesus. As much as I've struggled with my magic, I've never had that kind of family pressure. Every choice I made was my own, based on what I wanted. If I'd chosen to walk away from the magical community, that would've been my choice. And it was my choice to keep my powers and to go to school.

But Dmitri... there must be so much he feels he has to live up to. And I could tell him to just walk away, but I know it's not as simple as that.

“They were always *polite* before,” Dmitri says. “If they met someone who was Unpredictable, they were chilly but polite. But ever since the Trials, it’s just been getting worse. They’re actively speaking out against Unpredictables now, pushing for laws against them, that kind of thing. And they’ve got the clout to possibly make that a reality.”

There are a lot of things I could say as cold dread settles in my gut, but I don’t. I let Dmitri keep talking, sharing information at his own careful pace. This isn’t about the danger to Unpredictables like us—I mean it is, but that’s for later. We can deal with all of that once Dmitri’s gotten this out of his system. Right now, this is about his family. This is about Dmitri and his parents.

“They’re a part of the problem,” Dmitri murmurs, his voice strained. “They never see people for who they are, just what their *value* is. I don’t know if my parents even really love each other. They love status and money. That’s what’s important to them. But I can’t even count on them as allies. If it suits their purposes, they’ll try and use me. Or reject me. Or God knows what else.” He looks up at me at last, making eye contact. “That’s the world I come from, Elliot. Those are the people that raised me. And their friends are all the same. It’s a cold and uncaring place. I’m not looking forward to going back to that world when I graduate.”

My heart feels like it’s been slowly ripped in two. The idea of someone I love having to face that kind of environment makes me see red. If I ever see Dmitri’s parents again—I had the unfortunate pleasure of briefly meeting them once—I’m going to tear them limb from limb. I could do it too, with my magic.

How can they *not* love their son? Especially someone as good and hardworking as Dmitri, someone who pushes himself all the time, who looks out for others and is constantly striving to be better.

It boils my goddamn blood.

“You’re better than they are,” I tell him, my voice barely above a whisper. “You might not see it, but you are. You’re so much better than that.”

Dmitri snorts. “Princess, I was a jerk to you the first year we knew each other. Don’t go lying for my sake.”

“I’m not lying.” My voice gets louder and firmer. “I’ll take a painful truth over blissful ignorance any day, you know that. I wouldn’t lie to you just to spare your feelings. You’re amazing. I wouldn’t be dating you if you

weren't. And fuck your parents for not seeing that and for treating you like you're not good enough."

Dmitri gives me a small smile. "You're a feisty one, you know that?"

"So I've been told once or twice. A few times. Mostly by you guys." I pause. "Dmitri... you don't have to let your family define you."

I'm also, on some level, talking about his arranged marriage. I want him to be with me, but even if in the end he decided he didn't want me—I'd still want him to be happy. I'd want him to *choose* someone, even if that person wasn't me. I hate the thought of Dmitri being stuck with someone he doesn't love for the rest of his life just so his family can expand their empire.

I want so badly to tell him to say "fuck it" to his parents, but I can't. That isn't what we're talking about right now. So I leave it.

"You're your own person," I remind him instead, gently cupping his face in my hand, my fingers splaying over his cheekbone, feeling the warm skin beneath my touch. "And you don't have to let their shitty choices be yours."

Dmitri looks at me for a moment, his eyes taking on a soft shine that I so rarely see, and then he surges forward, hauling me against him as he kisses me deeply, passionately.

He kisses me for a long, long time.

CHAPTER 5

Winter break can't last forever, as much as I want it to. I have to help get Maddy packed up and ready to go back to school—something she's reluctant to do for the first time since she got accepted to Neptune Academy.

It's got nothing to do with the school and everything to do with how we were almost attacked by that guy in Portland. Hell, we *were* attacked. It just didn't get physical, thank God.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" she asks me as I drop her off at the bus depot.

"I promise, Mads. It's not like you can come to school with me and be my bodyguard." I smirk at her. "And the best place for me to be is at Griffin. I'm going to be with people who are like me. It'll be a bit of a reprieve."

"Ellie, last time you were at that school, a demon bird nearly clawed your arms off," she points out, tilting her head down to level a skeptical gaze at me.

Okay, fair, but still.

"I'm not going to get attacked by crazy anti-Unpredictable people. And honestly, the teachers would probably know how to handle that if it happened. It's the demon birds that stump them."

She rolls her eyes fondly, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Okay. If you're sure."

"I'm sure. You need to live your life and have fun without me, somehow, if you can survive."

Mads hugs me fiercely. “Stay in touch, okay? Call me if you need anything.”

“Who’s being the worrywart sister now?” I tease, but I hug her back just as fiercely. “Say hi to all your friends for me!”

And tell that boy of yours he better treat you right, or I’m going to knock him into next week.

Maddy pulls away, gives me a worried smile, then grabs her luggage and gets onto the bus.

I can understand why she’s concerned. Every time I’m at my damn school, something goes wrong. And every time I think *oh, it can’t possibly get worse or crazier than last semester*—bam, it does.

I swear, the universe is having a huge laugh at my expense or something. Somebody out there has got to have it out for me.

Honestly, I hope if anything crazy happens at the Academy of Unpredictable Magic this semester, somebody else can deal with it for once. This is my last semester with three of my men. I want to make the most of it, and they’ll be busy enough as it is with their final exams and graduation projects.

The guys and I take one car to the academy campus, filling up the trunk with all of our stuff. Roman’s house feels so empty as I wander through it double-checking that nobody forgot a favorite toothbrush or something. Oh, sure, the furniture is still here. It’s fully decorated. But it doesn’t feel like a home anymore without the rest of us filling the space with ourselves and our things.

It makes me consider how lonely this place must’ve been for Roman before we came to live with him. I think about him all by himself in this big house, and it makes my heart heavy. No wonder he used to stay on campus during the breaks.

I shake myself out of my melancholy thoughts as Cam bellows through the house that it’s “go now or forever hold your pee” time—I adore the man, but sometimes he’s a five-year-old—and join the others in the car.

It’s a peaceful drive. I sit in the back with Asher since I’ve been banned from driving—apparently taking posted speed limits as “suggestions” is *not* a good idea?—and Cam sits shotgun beside Dmitri, taking charge of the music. Asher naps on my shoulder as Cam and I play various car games, and Dmitri plays his own game called “try not to murder Elliot and Cam”.

It’s fun, honestly.

As we drive up the hill that leads onto the school grounds and through the gates with the fancy *Griffin Academy* sign, I get a feeling I didn't expect—a feeling of relief, of tension melting away.

It feels like I'm coming home.

I also feel something else—a little prickle, almost like static electricity, that makes the hair on my arms stand up. I notice the guys shifting in their seats as they feel it too.

"Wards," Asher notes.

"We've always had wards," I reply. There are protective wards to keep out threats as well as ones to keep the magic of the school contained and prevent non-magical from people realizing there's something fishy going on. All schools have them, as do most of our government-oriented magical buildings and other places where there's a lot of magic going on inside. It's to protect both us and non-magical people.

"They've amped them up," Cam says. "Must've done it over the break. I bet you anything these wards are a higher level of protection."

We pass through the magical barrier with no problem, and I'm sure all other students and staff will as well. But if any uninvited guests try to get in...

"That'll be a pain in the ass for anyone who wants their secret girlfriend to visit," Cam jokes. "I bet visitors will need to get a special pass or something."

The old wards were simple, barely noticeable, but now I can feel them in the air around us as we finish passing through, the feeling diminishing only once we're deeper into the school grounds.

After Dmitri pulls into the student lot, we grab our bags and get settled into our room quickly. I live with the guys in their dorm room, and have since before we were all officially together. My original room assignment was with Alyssa, Kendal, and Megan, but they made it damn clear I wasn't welcome.

They didn't know anything about me at the time, and I didn't know anything about them, so I kind of assume they took one look at me, didn't recognize me as the daughter of an important figure in their magical community, were pissed they didn't get placed with their other friend, Cristina, and just decided to take it from there.

But I wasn't going to spend an entire semester, and maybe even my entire three years here, stuck with roommates who hated me. The only

people I knew and felt safe with at the time were Cam, Asher, and Dmitri, so they let me stay with them. It wasn't exactly meant to be permanent, but it just kind of stayed that way. And now that we're all together romantically, I definitely don't see a reason to move out.

We get all our stuff arranged, claiming our usual quadrants of the room, which are each outfitted with a bed, a desk, and a dresser. I technically have my own bed, and I know I'll probably need it when the guys are up studying for finals and I'm by myself, but I doubt I'll be spending too much time in it, at least to start.

The rest of the day is pretty relaxed, and we're all up bright and early the next morning for the usual beginning of semester speech from Dean Hardwick.

As we head across campus, I'm both excited and nervous.

Without trying to, I've kind of gotten a... reputation at this place? I've ended up being the one who keeps dealing with the bullshit attacks against us. I'm three for three now, and it's kind of exhausting. But aside from the whole "my life being in danger" thing, it's meant that everyone knows who I am. Some people seem to think I'm some kind of school mascot, some are intimidated by me, and others—like Alyssa—just hate my damn guts.

When we enter the dining hall for breakfast, I can feel eyes on me. *Yippee.*

The guys must notice the looks we're getting, but if it bothers them, they don't show it. Oh, sure, Dmitri seems cranky, but that's sort of his resting state. Asher's calm and unruffled, and Cam's waving and cracking jokes as we walk by people he knows.

Alyssa catches sight of us immediately from where she's holding court at one of the tables near the front of the room.

Great.

She looks as carefully done up as ever, and there's a sharkish smirk on her face as she walks up to me.

"And here I was taking bets that you'd be in a coma again." She purses her lips, her gaze running over me like she's trying to find some new flaw she can poke at. "All that hero business not wearing you out yet? Ready to take a back seat and stop hogging the spotlight?"

Right. Because I'm actively seeking out things like fighting a demon bird and getting sent into a coma and nearly getting murdered in my first semester by a guy I thought was my friend.

“Elliot!”

I turn and see Tandy waving at me from a table. It’s her, Tom, Erin... basically all the people who had their magic stolen last semester.

“Come sit with us!” Tandy calls, giving me a big smile. “We’re forming a club,” she adds with mock seriousness.

Cam grins. “Hell, yes.”

He leads us over, and I don’t bother saying goodbye to Alyssa. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her huff and roll her eyes before stalking away.

I sit down, Cam on my left, Asher on my right, and Dmitri on Asher’s other side. It’s our usual arrangement.

A moment later, someone else clears their throat tentatively. “Um. Hi. May I join?”

I look up to see Kendal standing near the head of the table.

Kendal always looks pretty. She has gorgeous red hair and blue eyes, with a smattering of freckles and an elfin face. But usually, she looks a lot more... done up than this. Like she’s trying to imitate how Alyssa looks, with her perfect hair and makeup.

Now, she looks so much softer. She’s still wearing a skirt, but it’s a light pink instead of a bright color or black, her hair is in a braid instead of curled and artfully styled, and her makeup is done in earth tones instead of bright red lipstick and dramatic eyeliner.

It looks like she’s actually going with her own style, instead of trying to adopt someone else’s.

Everyone glances at me. *Guess it’s up to me to decide if she can sit with us or not.*

Kendal hasn’t always been very nice to me, at least in the beginning, but she helped me a lot during the Trials. She stuck up for me last semester when Alyssa tried to speak out during a speech and claim I was attacking the students and draining their magic.

And she’s a gentle person. I think she’s just used to letting people step on her, and has been trying to fit in and struggling to express herself.

I nod, shooting her a smile. “Yeah. Of course.”

The redheaded girl lets out a little sigh of relief and sits down on Cam’s other side. I don’t blame her one bit. It was that or sit next to Dmitri, and the man is very intimidating to pretty much everyone except me. In fact, I think that’s part of why he was drawn to me—from the very beginning, I didn’t put up with his bullshit.

I don't talk a lot as we eat, but nobody seems to mind. Everyone's chatting and catching up on what happened over the break. I'm not hugely social, but I'm finding that with nobody pressuring me to actively participate, just letting me sit here and make a sarcastic comment now and again... I like this.

Maybe this whole *being social* thing isn't so bad after all.

After breakfast, it's time for Dean Hardwick's speech. As we file in, I can see that Hardwick looks... tired. We're not right up in the front row, but even from here I can see he's lost a lot of his vitality.

Hardwick's generally a cheerful, unassuming guy who's like an overenthusiastic uncle or a dad who knows all the stereotypical dad jokes. He cares so much about the students and about this school, and he's had to work hard to keep it open, but I can see the strain taking a physical toll.

I can't help but wonder if there was more pressure to shut the school down during the break, and if that was how Hardwick spent his holidays—fighting to be able to keep giving us the training we need.

Once we're all settled, the dean gets up and walks to the podium, clearing his throat. "Greetings, students," he says, and wow, he sounds subdued.

He's trying to sound cheerful, but it's not working. He just sounds tired. Old, even. I don't know what age Hardwick actually is. I kind of assumed he was in his early fifties or something? But right now, he looks like he's seventy.

I don't dislike Hardwick, although I'm not exactly close to him either—but I suddenly have the urge to wrap him up in a hug and thank him for all he's doing for us. Ever since my first semester when Raul started attacking students, Hardwick has had to fight for this school with everything he has, and it's only been getting harder as the tide of public opinion turns against us.

Hardwick gives the usual speech, talking about our accomplishments and the things to look forward to this semester.

"And of course," he finishes, "be careful. Look after yourselves, my dear students. Look after yourselves and each other."

I blink.

He's never said anything like that before. He usually ends his speeches saying something about how he hopes we enjoy the semester.

But now he's telling us to be careful.

To look out for each other.

Worry creeps up my spine like slowly forming ice. All around me, the auditorium is silent. I can't even hear anyone breathing. The last few semesters started out with energy, and mostly positivity, but now...

Now it's like we're all just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

CHAPTER 6

The next morning, Cam and I head out early before class for a run. It's fucking freezing out, but we don't feel it once we start running—and besides, I'm no wimp. I love spending time with all of my men together, but I also make sure to spend time with each of them individually, and Cam and I have always liked doing outdoorsy stuff together. That's our thing.

"What did you think of the speech yesterday?" he asks as we set out. "First time I wasn't struggling to fall asleep."

"He sounded worried," I admit. We head up into the woods that surround our campus. "I've never seen him look like that. Have you?"

"No. Poor guy's been working himself too hard, but who else is going to do it, y'know? This school is his baby." Cam nods in the direction he wants to go, a rougher, narrower path that's less popular.

I have a feeling he doesn't want us to run into any other joggers. I wouldn't be surprised if there's a make-out session in my near future.

We run through the woods silently for a bit, taking in the nature and the atmosphere. The air is crisp and cool, and there are birds around that we can hear but not see, but not many other animals. I don't think anyone else has been up this trail for a while. On our other running routes, there's a clear path from the constant tramping of boots and sneakers, and you can even see people's shoe imprints.

Not here, though.

After another few minutes, we stumble—me almost literally—into a clearing.

Huh.

I pause, and so does Cam, our chests heaving.

The clearing is large, but tall grass and shrubs are beginning to encroach on the edges. And in the middle, there's some kind of... ruin or something. It looks like the remains of an old building.

"I wonder what that was," I murmur. Whatever it may have been originally, any wood used in the construction has rotted away, leaving just the stones. The carved gray rocks are set in a wide circle about forty feet across, almost like a jumbo-sized fairy circle—except made with rocks instead of mushrooms.

Maybe this was a tower of some kind?

"Dunno. But we should probably turn around here," Cam says. "Head back."

I nod and move to start running again, only for him to catch me around the waist, laughing. "I didn't mean right this second, Sin—savor the nature for a minute." He grins down at me, his blue eyes gleaming, and I grin back.

"You seem happy," I tell him, taking a deep breath of his addicting sandalwood scent. And I don't just mean his mood right now, I mean in general.

When I first met Cam, he seemed like the kind of guy who was always peppy, always ready with a joke. And he was, but underneath it was a lot of sadness. His parents died when he was young, and he's been on his own ever since. I know he's had moments of isolation and loneliness.

Now, though, it's like a weight has been lifted, and he's so much more relaxed, his humor genuine and soft, less forced.

Cam, thankfully, seems to know what I mean without me giving him a whole speech about it.

"I *am* happy. And not just because of you, so don't let that pretty head of yours swell up too much." He taps the side of my head playfully, his other hand squeezing my waist, and I lightly thump him on the chest in response as we sway back and forth in the clearing, locked together.

"Ever since we all came together... this whole sharing situation, it feels like I'm finally getting the family I never had. Asher was the only family I had for years. I met him when I was eighteen, and he became my best friend. His parents and brothers have been really kind to me, but I still felt a bit like... like I wasn't fully contributing, as awful as that sounds. Like I had to keep being a good friend to prove I was worthy of their affection, because I always knew—I wasn't really their son."

I squeeze him a little harder, and he chuckles, shaking his head.

“They’d be upset if they knew I felt that way, but... it’s hard, always feeling like you’re on the outside or like you’re a charity case, even if nobody means it that way. But now...” He brushes my hair back from my face, his fingers gently trailing down the shell of my ear, the curve of my jaw. “...now I have Asher, and Dmitri, and Roman, and I especially have you. And you gave the others to me, really. It’s all because of you.”

“I’m glad I could be of service,” I reply, my voice teasing but soft.

Cam wraps his arms around me properly and kisses me, forcing me up onto my tiptoes to kiss him back.

I don’t mind in the slightest.

We kiss a few more times, soft and playful, lighthearted, and the way he holds me, the way he looks at me, the way he says *it’s all because of you...*

I don’t consider myself narcissistic. I like to think I have a realistic view of myself, both my virtues and my flaws. But I dare to think that maybe... Cam’s falling in love with me. Not that I’ve ever doubted he cares or wants to be with me, but there’s a difference between having affection for someone and outright being in love with them.

And this—this feels like the latter.

Which is fine by me, since the feeling is entirely mutual.



The first week of classes is, as always, a fun exercise in struggling to remember all the shit I forgot over break. I’ve never been the best at the practical aspects of learning magic, but I’m definitely doing better with it. I’m getting the hang of how magic itself works.

My mirroring power is still very new. I have the hardest time with that one. The most successful I’ve been with it was when I mirrored the power of the demon bird—don’t even ask me how to pronounce its Latin name, but it translates to “magic eater”—and stole the magic back from the doppelgängers to return it to the students, including Cam, who’d had it ripped away from them.

But that was a trial by fire sort of deal, sink or swim, and using raw magical power in desperate straits is different from the fine-tuned aspects I need to learn now. Like mirroring one person’s power for a few seconds and

then switching to mirror someone else's instead. Half the time, I can't choose who I'm mirroring—if I'm up against two people who are an equal distance from me, it's the luck of the draw which one of them I end up borrowing powers from.

In a way, it's like relearning everything all over again as far as magical control goes. I'm getting really good with my sonic boom and spider climb though, so that gives me hope that I'll get better with my mirroring power too.

To my disappointment, I don't have any classes with the guys besides our usual Combat class; all three years are mixed together for that subject, to give us the chance to fight people of different levels and abilities. It can get pretty damn chaotic, so I respect Professor Tamlin a lot for keeping us all from killing each other.

When I first started taking the class, I thought it was insane that the admins thought we needed it, but now it makes a lot of sense. Hardwick wants us to be able to protect ourselves, and whether we're wearing our magical cuffs or not, he wants us to be able to fight if we have to. The world out there doesn't take too kindly to us, and we have to be ready.

I miss the guys the rest of the time, even though I see them every night in our dorm. But at least we have that one class together, and I'm finally getting better at sparring with magic. I've always been good at sparring physically, but it's about damn time my magic started cooperating as well.

In complete contrast to Combat, in Roman's class, we're working on relaxation techniques.

Magic responds strongly to emotions. The more heightened your emotional state, the harder your magic can be to control. So Roman is teaching us meditation techniques to help us access our powers more effectively and to not let our magic or emotions surge out of control.

I admit I'm... struggling with it. Not that I'm an overly emotional person, but meditation—sitting still at all, really—isn't my strong suit. I have a hard time just letting go.

At the end of our first week of classes, I sit in Roman's classroom with my eyes closed, trying to repeat the mantra he gave us as I breathe in and out.

But my brain just can't seem to shut up. It's going a million miles a minute, and new thoughts keep popping up, and I'm spending all my time worried about shoving those thoughts away and—

Roman's hands land on me, and I open my eyes. I know it's him even before I look up. I know his touch, the leather and whiskey smell of him, so well by now. It's instinctive, like recognizing a part of my soul.

"Don't try to focus on what you shouldn't be thinking about," he says with a quiet, knowing smile. *Busted. That's exactly what I was doing.* "Instead, focus on one thing and think about that. Don't sit there and think about *not* thinking. Just find something and put all your attention on it."

I stare up at him, taking his advice without even meaning to. Because at this moment, *he's* my something, and all my attention has gone to him. To his mesmerizing cobalt eyes, his dark hair flopping a little into his forehead, his rough but handsome features, his hint of stubble, his slightly hooked nose.

I could stare at him and feel his touch for hours and never get bored. There's so much to Roman, so much depth, both in the things he's shown me and the things I don't yet know, and I love it.

He fascinates me.

Roman's hands are on my wrists, his thumbs stroking back and forth against my skin, and for a second, it's like nobody and nothing else in the world exists.

Then he seems to remember himself and pulls away. I blink and come back to myself a little, and I realize that we're very much in class.

In public.

And Alyssa is watching us with narrowed eyes.

CHAPTER 7

Fuck.

I peek over at her again from under my lashes.

Yup. She's still staring.

Alyssa doesn't really scare me in and of herself. She's a petty person who's probably been spoiled her whole life, and I could take her in a fight with one hand tied behind my back.

But even if she's not dangerous on her own, she can get me into trouble with others, like when she accused me of stealing people's magic and a bunch of my classmates attacked me.

And that's what I'm worried about.

Technically, there's nothing in the rules saying Roman and I can't date each other. But I'm not sure that's going to matter to the gossip mill—and Alyssa will take full advantage of that mill if she can, I guarantee it.

As class ends, Roman stops me. "Miss Sinclair, I'd like to go over some things with you about your written exam?"

I hang back as he walks over to his desk and pulls out some papers, gesturing for me to sit.

The moment everyone else has finished filing out though, he shoves the papers back into the desk and stands up, his posture shifting from that of the professor to something more loose-limbed, the way he is with me. I hadn't even realized until now how differently he carries himself when it's just us than when he's being a teacher to everyone, but now it seems obvious.

"I think we need to formally declare our relationship to the dean," he tells me.

Oh, shit. He must've noticed Alyssa watching us as well. Or maybe there was someone else I didn't even see who noticed us. Roman is the most popular teacher on campus, and plenty of students have crushes on him. I wouldn't be surprised if one of them decided to report us in a fit of envy.

"If we talk to Hardwick now, it's our news, and we control the story," Roman goes on. "But if we don't say anything, someone else will. And they'll be able to make whatever claims they want, paint us in whatever light they want. I'd rather tell the dean myself and let him hear it from me."

"Hell, no." I shake my head adamantly. "It could ruin your career!"

"It's not against the rules of the school."

"So? Since when has anyone actually cared about rules? You're a young professor, you're handsome—this can't be the first time someone's accused you of sleeping with a student."

"Yes, but this time it's true."

"What difference does that make?" I stand up straighter, my voice rising a little. "People are going to drag you through the mud for it, and I won't stand for that. I hate even thinking about that, Roman! They'll judge you without even knowing you. I won't let you be discredited."

"And I won't let people accuse you of sleeping with me for good grades," Roman snaps back. He's towering over me, and I hate how hot it is when he gets all fiery like this.

"Yeah, if that were true, you wouldn't have given me a B last semester."

"You earned a B." Roman's eyes are playful as he says it. Then he sobers up, his gaze going dark and soft. "Elliot, I don't care what other people will say about me. They've said worse things before, believe that. I can handle whatever repercussions there are."

"Worse things, huh?" I fold my arms, grinning slightly. "Were they worse the last time you dated a student?"

He scoffs, and I know he can tell I'm not seriously accusing him of anything—I know he dated Tamlin before me, but she's a professor, not a student. I'm just trying to lighten the situation up a little.

But then Roman steps closer to me. My hands fall to my sides, and he gently cups my cheek, his thumb stroking back and forth. "I've never dated a student before," he murmurs, "and I don't plan on doing it ever again."

He's not saying it directly, but he might as well be, and my breath catches. We're not breaking up—far from it—and he'd only say "never

again” if we were breaking up or if...

Or if he thinks this is going to be a forever kind of thing.

None of us have talked about the future. Hell, we’ve been way too busy dealing with the present moment, with my own insecurities and personal walls, with making sure the guys are okay with sharing, with Dmitri, and Roman’s past, and...

Yeah.

But it seems that even though none of us have been talking about it, Roman’s been thinking about it, and he wants to be with me. As far into the future as he can see.

My heart picks up speed, racing in my chest—and it’s not from fear, but excitement. Anticipation. Joy.

I know I’m grinning up at him like an idiot, but that’s okay. Because he’s grinning right back at me.



Roman gets his wish, and we go and tell Hardwick.

Inside the admin building, I raise my hand to knock on the dean’s office door, but Roman just walks right in. I’m not surprised that his approach to authority figures is, apparently, to not treat them like authority figures at all. You wouldn’t exactly know it to look at him, but Roman is a pretty damn sassy guy.

“Oh, hello, Roman. Miss Sinclair.” Hardwick raises his eyebrows. “Please do sit down, so nice of you to drop in. Make yourselves at home, why don’t you?”

I didn’t know the dean had a sarcastic side, but it sure does help me like him a bit more.

“Sorry,” I mutter as I sit. I don’t apologize often, but then again, I’m not one of Hardwick’s trusted staff like Roman is. I’m a student, and I’ve known the dean for a year and a half. The only times we talk one-on-one is when I’m being hauled into the office over some school-wide threat.

Roman doesn’t apologize. “We’d like to speak to you about something.”

Hardwick raises his eyebrows and gestures at us as if to say *go on*.

I look at the tall man standing next to me. I feel like he should take the lead on this one, not because he’s the man or anything—but because I’m the

student, and if either of us is really sticking their neck out by doing this, it's Roman as the teacher.

He gives me a slight, reassuring nod, and then looks directly at Hardwick. "Elliot and I would like to formally announce that we're in a relationship. We've been together for a month now, and we wanted to keep things private since we're both private people but... you know rumors. We wanted you to know officially, in case anyone came to you, or people started spreading stories."

That's a tiny white lie.

Or rather, a very particular version of the truth.

In actual fact, Roman and I started sleeping together before we were even on campus—we first met when he stopped by the bar in Portland where I worked. I didn't even know I had magic yet.

But laying that all out to Hardwick would probably just lead to more questions, and it's none of his business. Besides, we *did* only officially get together at the end of last semester when I formally asked him and the other three guys to be my boyfriends.

To my great surprise, Hardwick just nods, lacing his hands together on the desk in front of him.

"I understand. Thank you for coming forward. This is a school of older students, and there's no rule against this kind of thing for that very reason. We're interested in training Unpredictables, not telling them who they can or cannot form romantic attachments to. But it *is* important that we know."

A wave of relief washes over me.

It's out. He knows. Alyssa didn't get to ruin this for us.

Hardwick doesn't even seem all that surprised, which makes me wonder if we've been anywhere near as sneaky as I thought we were being. But he's basically given us the school's blessing. And there may still be rumors and judgement leveled against the two of us from some people, but at least I know those rumors won't be the first thing Hardwick hears about us. We controlled the story.

And no matter what rumors fly, with Hardwick on his side, Roman's job won't be in jeopardy.

"There's one thing I must warn you about though," the dean cautions. "If there are any accusations of favoritism or special treatment, those accusations will be taken seriously. You're expected to keep your personal and school lives separate, understood?"

We both nod. “I judge Elliot like I judge all my students when it comes to her work in the classroom,” Roman assures Hardwick.

Honestly, I don’t think he could do it any other way. He’s a bit of a hard-ass in class, but he’s fair, and he really cares about helping his students learn. It’s why he’s so popular.

Well, that and his looks. The man’s gorgeous, what can I say?

“If that’s all, then,” Roman says, and I start to stand up from my chair—he never sat down, which I think was some kind of power play—but then Hardwick clears his throat.

“Actually, since you’re here, there is something else. Miss Sinclair, you can stay as well. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t have you hear this, but since you’ve been so intimately involved in the attacks on the school, I think it’s only fair you know about this.”

My blood runs cold, anticipation and fear and dismay all churning in my gut. Something else hasn’t gone wrong, has it? In just the first week back? Motherfucker.

I glance up at Roman, who must sense my fear because he gently places a hand on my shoulder to steady me. The man has literally thrown himself in front of a mob of angry, magic-wielding students to protect me. Just having his touch on me helps me feel safer.

Hardwick sighs, and he really does look old now. “I have some deeply disturbing news. As you know, the Circuit has ongoing, active investigations about each of the attacks on the school. At first, we were certain they were unrelated. The artifacts under the school, though well hidden, were a dangerous proposition from the outset; it was only a matter of time before some foolhardy student or treasure seeker might try to take one. And Johnson is just one of many in the growing anti-Unpredictable movement. As for the demon bird... well, there are still so many mysteries about our magic and how it works, we assumed at first that the bird was merely drawn here by the presence of so much powerful magic, and that someone then saw an opportunity and took control of the demon.”

I narrow my eyes. That all sounds like wishful thinking to me. Hardwick confirms my thought as he continues, leaning forward a little.

“But now the Circuit has told me conclusively that the person who incited Raul to his actions and cast a spell to lock his mind against interrogation was also the man controlling the demon bird. The Circuit

investigators have been working to break through the locks on Johnson's mind, and it appears he was influenced by the same man as well."

"It was all the same guy?" I blurt out. "You're sure?"

Hardwick nods. "Johnson is clearly terrified of this individual and had similar spells placed on him as Raul did, but the Circuit was able to get a bit of information from him. Not enough to identify the mastermind, unfortunately. But apparently, in recruiting Johnson, the man mentioned Raul's failed attempt to steal the Brimstone Orb. And Johnson was the one who told him about the existence of the demon bird and how it could steal magic."

I swallow, licking suddenly my dry lips. I'm nervous, how could I not be? Having more information is good, but it's also terrifying.

"So we've just got *one* asshole who apparently really hates our guts?"

"It would seem so." Hardwick gives a small sigh and his fingers twitch like he wants to rub at his eyes or clench his hands into fists but also wants to maintain his composure. "The rest of the school doesn't know yet. I'm slowly informing the staff so that they can be on guard, but... I don't see any reason to tell the students yet when we know so little."

"Thank you for telling me," I say. I mean it, I really do. Hardwick didn't have to tell me anything. Sure, I've been involved in the attacks, but that was by pure accident. I was late to the assembly that Raul used to freeze everyone else. I'm ninety percent sure Dmitri threw the fight with me in the battle royale so I could win and be in the Trials, although whether it was because he liked me or for other reasons, I don't know. And the bird thing... shit, I'm just lucky I had my mirroring powers.

It's all been chance. *Luck*. And Hardwick doesn't owe me an explanation.

"Of course." The older man nods at me. "You may not feel it, Miss Sinclair, but your work has helped to preserve the reputation of this school, even in the face of those who would discredit us."

I don't quite know what to say to that, partly because I don't see how it can possibly be true.

So I brush past his last statement and return to the main subject of our conversation. "I won't tell anyone about this."

Hardwick nods. "I appreciate that," he tells me solemnly. He looks up at Roman. "We'll all have to be on high alert this semester. Who knows what might come next."

As we leave, everything Dean Hardwick just told us begins to really sink in, and I almost punch the wall as we step out of the admin building. “This is insane! Why would someone hate us so much to stir up a whole movement against us? What the hell did we ever do to this guy? Did an Unpredictable steal his lunch money as a kid or something?”

Roman chuckles, and I feel his hand slip into mine.

I nearly trip over my own feet.

The tall, gorgeous man walking beside me isn't really into public displays of affection. Or at least, I thought he wasn't. Roman's a very stoic and controlled person in general, and I know we've been keeping everything secret, but I didn't think he'd be the type for hand holding in public even if we weren't hiding our relationship.

Turns out I was wrong.

My heartbeat kicks up again as I dare to gently squeeze his hand. He squeezes mine in response, and I try to remember to breathe deeply and evenly as we walk.

We're not hiding anymore. We're together, and Roman clearly doesn't give a fuck who sees it.

I know that it's something small and silly. It's just handholding. But at the same time... it feels like a lot.

Roman tugs on me with his firm grip, and I follow easily as we walk across campus. His hand is large, warm, and callused, and I love the way it fits around mine.

“It almost feels like you're leading me somewhere,” I tease.

“Oh, does it?” He smirks at me. “Whatever gave you that impression?”

I laugh and let him tug me across campus toward the men's dorms.

Anticipation builds inside me with each step we take, a combination of growing arousal and something like nervousness. It doesn't make a lot of sense for me to be nervous—Roman and I have had sex so many times I've lost count by now, and he's never made me feel anything but safe, desirable, and taken care of. But there's something about *this* time, this moment, that feels big.

Monumental, even.

We walk through the common area and head toward Roman's room, and I can feel his grip on my hand tightening a little as we near it. He feels it too—whatever it is. The energy hovering between us that's different, stronger, than the usual explosive chemistry we share.

He unlocks his door and draws me inside, and the moment the heavy wood thunks shut behind us, I find my back pressed up against it. I expect Roman to attack my mouth with fevered kisses, to devour me, to give in to the haze of *want* that surrounds us like a cloud.

But he doesn't.

Instead, he braces both hands on the door on either side of my head, dipping his head a little to gaze at me with intense cobalt blue eyes. His gaze tracks over my face, noticing and collecting every detail, and it reminds me of the way he looked at me in the alley outside The Den the night we first hooked up.

I feel the same way I did then as he studies me now—as if he's peering past all my outer layers of posturing and bullshit, right down to the very core of who I am. The unvarnished, real, messy version of me.

When he did it in the alley that night, it made me squirm uncomfortably, and I grabbed him and kissed him to make it stop. But this time, even though his scrutiny makes my heart beat harder in my chest, makes a flush creep up my neck and warm my cheeks, I don't look away or try to stop him.

I let him look his fill, and I gaze straight back at him, absorbing every detail of the darkly handsome man standing before me. His hair is thick, shining in the light, and his jawline is strong and defined. There's a slight hook to his nose, and I still don't know the story of how and when it was broken, but I want to. I want to know everything about him, from the big things to the little, stupid things.

Sometimes I still can't comprehend how lucky I am that a guy like Roman came into my life—much less that he wants to be with me.

As if he can read my thoughts on my face, he lifts one hand from the door to cup my cheek, running his fingers along my jaw.

"I'm so glad I met you, Reckless," he murmurs softly, and my insides turn into warm honey.

My knees actually wobble a little, and I use that as my excuse to wrap my arms around his neck, pushing away from the door to press our bodies flush together. I can feel him already growing hard, and the knowledge that he wants me—*all* of me, in all the ways you can want someone—settles in my heart and stays there.

"Right back atcha, prof," I whisper, and then I rise up onto my tiptoes and press my lips to his.

His arms wrap around me, securing me tightly to his body as he kisses me back. It's slow and sensual and so fucking deep, and we kiss and kiss like that for what feels like hours. Like we're trying to exchange souls, maybe. Like we actually believe that at some point, it'll be enough.

It won't.

I'll never be able to get enough of this man.

But I can damn sure try.

I push gently against his chest, and he gets the message, walking us backward toward the bed without ever breaking the connection of our lips. He sits down on the mattress and then moves backward, pulling me with him until I'm draped over his body. Our hands move confidently but unhurriedly, slipping under clothes to glide over warm skin, tugging and pulling to remove piece after piece of clothing.

We undress each other like we're each unwrapping a gift, and when we're finally naked, I rub my body against his, letting his hard cock slide between my pussy lips as I coat him in the wetness of my arousal. My breasts press against the warm, solid skin of his chest as my hands glide up and down his arms, over his biceps, down his sides, mapping the shape of him.

When I can't wait any longer, I sit up, lean over to grab a condom from his bedside table, and roll it on over his thick length. His cobalt eyes smolder like banked fires as he watches me rise up onto my knees before sinking down, impaling myself on his cock.

For a few heartbeats, we just stay like that, connected as deeply as we can be. Then I roll my hips, lifting up before sinking back down. Our gazes lock as I keep moving, adjusting the motions to chase the butterfly of my pleasure as it flits from place to place in my body. He rests his hands on my hips but lets me dictate the pace, and I ride him like that as an orgasm gathers slowly in my core.

When it hits, it's not as sharp or intense as others I've had before, but it rolls over me in a great wave that doesn't seem to stop, filling me to the brim and making my toes curl. Roman keeps his gaze on me the entire time, watching me lose and find myself again even as his body tightens like a wire pulled taut.

Only once I've gotten myself off on his cock twice more does his control finally snap. He sits up and wraps his arm around me, flipping me onto my back before pounding into me so hard and fast that I come again

with a harsh cry. He follows me over the edge, resting his forehead against mine as he pulses inside me.

His lips find mine in a hazy kiss, and I wrap my arms and legs around him like a naked, sweaty koala, pinning him to my body and keeping him locked inside me.

I know I'll have to let go at some point. He's got classes to teach, young minds to mold, office hours to fulfill. I'll have to let him pull out of me and put clothes back on to go do all that.

And I will.

Eventually.

Just not quite yet.

CHAPTER 8

A few weeks pass, and holy fuck, it's a goddamn relief how normal it all is.

I have exams, quizzes, essays, lunch with the guys, and runs in the morning with Cam, and I'm hanging out with other students too. Kendal has lunch with us every day, and I'm seeing Tandy and Erin a lot—I think they're dating now—and Tom gets breakfast with me.

Crazy as it sounds, I think I'm starting to actually have friends.

I know, right. Shocker.

It feels like I can finally breathe for the first time since the attacks on the students started during my first semester. Everyone around me is starting to lighten up too. Usually by this point, someone's had their magic stolen or been attacked by a psycho, and I can practically taste the joy in the air as people start to loosen up and think, *hey, maybe everything is gonna be fine for once*.

I even have time to do something as boring and regular as go to the infirmary and talk to one of the healers about birth control. She gives me a potion I'll have to take once a month, and that's that.

As I leave the now too-familiar infirmary building, a little thrill makes butterflies flap in my stomach. The guys and I talked, and none of us are interested in inviting anyone else into our relationship or exploring our options outside of it. We're all together, exclusively, so now that I'm on the potion, there's really no need for extra protection. Plus, the whole *smuggling condoms around in every pair of pants I own* thing is getting a little ridiculous.

On a Saturday morning in early February, I call Maddy to check up on her.

“Your school sounds calmer than mine for once,” she jokes when I finish relaying everything to her.

“What do you mean?”

I’m lying in Asher’s bed, propped up on pillows, letting him try to change the color of my magical toenail polish for some kind of project on the use of refracted light in enchanted objects.

No, I don’t get it either, I just let my boyfriend turn my toenails pink and don’t ask questions.

“The whole Unpredictable issue is really ramping up here,” she says. “I mean, for you guys, it must kind of be quieter since you’re all Unpredictable and you know where you stand, right? But here it’s like—like the school’s split in two or something.”

“Are you okay? Do you feel safe?”

Maddy’s fellow students know I’m Unpredictable. She made a point of telling them, letting them know she’s proud of me and accepts me, but now I almost wish she’d kept it under wraps. I don’t think any of her classmates, even the most virulently anti-Unpredictable, would go after her when I’m the one they hate, but... you can never be sure.

If my sister gets hurt because of me, oh, you bet I’m burning down the motherfucker who did it, and I’m taking the rest of the world down with me. You don’t touch my baby sister.

“I should be asking you that!” Mads protests. “You’re Unpredictable and I’m not. It’s fine, just a lot of stress. Everyone’s tempers are really high. The one good thing is that the people who hate Unpredictables might be getting louder, but so are the people who support them. Justin, the friend I told you about—he led a sit in at lunch to protest the anti-Unpredictable movement.”

My sister’s voice changes when she speaks about Justin. I don’t think she even notices it, but she gets a little more high-pitched when she mentions him, and her voice gets a little strained, like she’s struggling to control it and keep it from becoming all giggly and noticeable.

Newsflash: I raised that kid. She can’t have a thought without me knowing about it.

But I let it slide. I’m sure as hell not one to talk about bottling up and denying having feelings for someone, and Maddy might still be unsure if

she wants to pursue anything with this Justin guy—which is a good thing, because first I need to interrogate him and run a background check. Maybe she doesn't want to talk about it until she sorts out her own feelings.

Whatever her reasons for holding back, I trust her, and I'm going to wait and let her tell me about Justin when she's ready. Until then, my big sister instincts lie dormant.

Waiting.

Ready.

We talk for another twenty minutes about random, stupid stuff and then say goodbye. As I hang up, Asher finally pulls away from my feet, muttering something about divergence and... I don't even know what the last word is. Chroma-something.

"Thanks for holding still," he says, jotting down some notes on his notebook.

"That's what she said," I quip, waggling my eyebrows.

He gives me a fond but exasperated look.

Cam bursts in, dumping his backpack on the floor by his bed. He had a morning study session with some people from one of his senior seminars. "You feeling up for a run, Sin?"

On school days, we get up early for our runs, but I like to sleep in on Saturdays, so Cam and I haven't gone out yet today.

"Yeah, sure."

I crawl toward the end of the mattress and give Asher a kiss before hopping off the bed to grab my running clothes.

We take the path that leads toward the weird ruins again. I still don't know what they are—or were—but I like this path a lot. It feels nice and remote. Private. Like there's nobody else in the world except me and Cam.

We're both in a competitive mood, pushing a little harder, a little faster, trying to out-edge each other. Cam grins breathlessly at me as we set a hard pace, and I grin right back.

Exercise helps clear my brain, but it doesn't stop my mind from wandering a little as we run past the ruins and continue on down the path, going farther than we did last time. I glance back over my shoulder at them as they recede into the distance behind us.

Why are those ruins here? What were they supposed to be?

I mean, they fit the atmosphere of the Griffin campus pretty perfectly. This whole place has sort of an ancient, otherworldly vibe, and Wellwood

Hall definitely looks like a magical school. It's like someone combined a 14th century Scottish castle with Versailles and then added a haunted Victorian manor house for good measure—there's no rhyme or reason to it. Maybe the same architect who built the school building started other projects around campus that never got finished.

We push ourselves past the ruins, and the path slopes upward, making for a hell of a run. My lungs are burning and so are my legs, each breath of cold air stinging—but I love it.

We reach a fork where the path starts to merge into another, more popular path, and our footsteps slow.

“Want to turn around?” Cam asks, breathing heavily.

“Probably a good idea.” I put my hands on my lower back and stretch, letting my heart rate slow a little.

“Race you back,” he offers, a twinkle of excitement glinting in his gorgeous blue eyes.

I grin. “Oh, you are so on.”

We each take off, our feet pounding the earth, but for once my size is in my favor. I'm littler and faster than Cam, who's built like a fucking linebacker, and I pull ahead. The downhill slope we're on now helps, and my body gets to that point where I have to keep running to maintain my momentum, or I'm going to go head over heels and kill myself.

Okay, maybe not literally kill myself, but at least eat shit.

The ground beneath my feet evens out, and I head for the clearing, pumping my arms a little harder as—

What the *fuck*?

I skid to a halt, and a second later—before I can even think to shout a warning about my sudden stop—I feel Cam slam into me from behind, knocking the wind out of me.

His arm is around my waist in an instant, holding me up and keeping us both from falling over.

“You okay?” he pants, craning his neck to take a look at my face. “What happened? Was it a deer?”

I point behind him, because really, there aren't words.

Cam turns around, and his jaw drops open.

The ruins have grown... taller. Another layer of stone has been added to them.

Those stones look heavy, and we were only gone for, what, twenty minutes, maximum? A team of workers probably couldn't manage that, and if they did, we would've heard or seen them. Even now, the clearing is eerily silent. I can't even feel the winter breeze.

My skin crawls, an icy tingle running up my spine, and I grope for Cam's hand, squeezing it hard.

Something very strange is going on here.

CHAPTER 9

Thank God pretty much everyone who works at Griffin Academy lives on campus. It's so isolated here that the staff, administrators, and professors can't just live in town and drive up for classes. It would be way too much effort to get here every day.

And it means I know where Hardwick lives—in a special house on the southwest side of campus designated for the dean. It looks kind of like an English cottage, and even though it's sort of on the outskirts of the main part of campus, I've walked by it several times.

I've never asked him about it, but I'm pretty sure Hardwick's an avid gardener. His rose garden is huge, although right now all of the flowers are covered against the cold. It's kind of cute, and it reminds me that our professors do have lives outside of taking care of us students.

Not right now, though.

Weekend or not, Hardwick needs to know what we just saw.

Cam and I rush up the path to the door and bang on the heavy wood. "Dean Hardwick?" Cam calls.

The door opens, and Hardwick stands there in, of all things, a cozy sweater and jeans. He blinks at us, his brows drawing together. "Elliot. Cameron. What can I do for you?"

This is the most casual I've ever seen the older man look, except for the night we found Roman standing over Trevor's body in the men's dorm. Hardwick usually wears three-piece suits at the school. Seeing him outside of "dean mode" throws me for a second, but then I shake my head and step forward.

“Ah, we—um—I think there’s something strange going on in the woods.”

Hardwick straightens up at once. “Come in.” His voice takes on its usual authoritative tone.

The house is cozy inside, with what looks like a cat bed in front of the fireplace, and a pile of Dean Koontz thrillers on the coffee table next to some copies of *National Geographic*.

“Please excuse the mess,” Hardwick says, ushering us toward a comfy-looking couch. “Now, sit down and tell me exactly what happened.”

Cam and I take a seat, perching on the edge of the sofa as we relay what we saw—how we stumbled upon the ruins on our earlier run, and how the stones somehow had another layer added to them today. Hardwick listens patiently, and as I say the words out loud, I start to worry that they sound crazy. Is this really the kind of thing we needed to disturb him on a Saturday for? An old ruin? A stack of rocks in a circle?

But when we stop speaking, the dean doesn’t laugh at us. His expression is serious as he nods. “Thank you for informing me. I’ll get a team on it right away. You two should stay here for now; I’ll return shortly.”

Well, all right then. If you insist.

He leaves us in the cozy living room and shuts the front door gently behind him as he goes to gather his team.

The owner of the cat bed turns out to be a gorgeous gray tabby named Cleopatra—at least, that’s what the tag on her collar says—and she loves me and hates Cam.

I lord it over him until Hardwick comes back with Tamlin and a few others in tow. Tamlin shoots me a curious glance as we gather outside the dean’s house, but neither she nor any of the other professors are laughing at us either.

Guess with all the shit that’s gone down over the past few semesters, anything out of the ordinary is taken seriously.

“If you could show us to the stones, please.” Hardwick gestures for us to precede them down the path.

We lead the group out to the woods, which takes a little while now that we’re leading a large group and not running at top speed. I half-expect something else to have changed while we were gone—either something sort of mundane like another row of stones being added on, or something

horrible and macabre like a dead goat head mounted on one of the carved gray rocks.

Instead, the stones are just standing there. The added layer still rings the top, but nothing else is different.

“These aren’t supposed to be here,” Professor Goldstein says at once, adjusting her cat-eye glasses. “No building has ever stood here before, and there aren’t any rocks like this nearby. However they got into this clearing, they came from a long way away.”

Tamlin draws a small wand-like device from her pocket and uses it to start drawing some runes in the air, running her own kind of magical tests—probably a field version of the tests she ran on me last semester to see if I was the one stealing magic from people.

The beautiful, mocha-skinned professor has always been kind to me, even when she’s had every reason to be envious or bitter. I know she still has feelings for Roman, even though she hides it well. And here I am, this random girl, a student even, and I’m the one he wants to spend forever with instead of her.

That’s got to sting.

But Tamlin has accepted it with poise and class, and she even tried to give me some advice about how to handle Roman’s darker side. I like her. If we weren’t professor and student, I feel like maybe we could be friends. She’s completely unlike me, but hey, the principle of opposites attract works for friends as well as lovers, right?

After a few minutes of walking around the stones, drawing her runes, checking her equipment, and muttering, Tamlin walks back to us. Professors Perkins and Vela stand ready, probably called in to back up Tamlin if the stones did something dangerous like try to leech her blood.

Can stones even do that? I shiver. Who knows.

“Okay.” She turns the short rod sideways and takes a deep breath as she reads over the results. “It looks like the structure itself isn’t dangerous. It isn’t doing anything. But magic is being done *to* it. Someone or something is making this happen, making the stones gather here.”

“Can you tell us anything else?” Hardwick questions.

Tamlin looks disappointed in herself as she shakes her head. “Not at this time, sir. No.”

The dean sighs, looking like someone’s just placed a heavy weight on his shoulders. Then he straightens up and nods briskly. “Well, we don’t

have time to waste then.”

Another assembly is called that afternoon, and right away, I can tell everyone’s expecting the worst. Probably wondering if another student was killed or had their magic stolen. Everyone’s on edge, and the relaxed mood that was starting to seep into campus has vanished completely.

I know it’s not my fault—Cam and I didn’t do this to the stones; we just found them, that’s all—but I can’t help but feel a bit responsible for ruining the mood. Of course, no one knows what the person behind this is planning to do with the rocks. It could be nothing. Maybe it’s just some weird side project a Griffin senior is doing to procrastinate on their final project. But somehow, I don’t think so. And if it *is* something sinister, then I know it’s a good thing Cam and I found it.

Still...

I sit with the three guys in our usual arrangement, while Roman gathers with the professors up on the stage behind Hardwick.

The dean looks extra put together today, like he’s trying to project an air of strength and calm. My heart goes out to him, honestly.

“Students, I’m sure you’re all wondering and very likely worrying about why I called you here,” Hardwick begins.

Speaking in a level voice, he explains where the stones are, how they were found, and the tests that were conducted.

“We’re cordoning off the area. No one is allowed to approach. We’re well aware how tempting it might be to want to get a closer look at something like this, but since we know so little about how or why they appeared, we can’t take any chances. We’re monitoring this closely. Nobody wants to close down the school, but if anything dangerous or threatening presents itself, that’s what we’ll have to do.”

Everyone in the crowd breaks out into whispers. There are seniors protesting that they can’t shut down the school when they’re so close to graduating, and there are freshmen and sophomores protesting that this is the only place they feel safe, and there are still others who are demanding that more aggressive action be taken and that the stones be removed from the school grounds.

Yeah, it’s kind of chaos.

No one’s yelling or shouting. I can tell the students want to be respectful, that they’re trying to keep their shit together—but they just can’t stop themselves from expressing their opinions and fears.

“It’s just stones in a circle,” one student whispers. “That’s nothing compared to the last time.”

“Silence, please,” Hardwick says, raising his hands. “I don’t want this academy to be shut down any more than the rest of you do. It is of utmost importance that Unpredictables have a safe haven to learn how to use and control their magic, and I believe in this school and in all of you. You and your predecessors have done Griffin Academy proud since this institution first opened its doors, and I’m well aware that there are no other training options for Unpredictables in the country.”

The auditorium goes quiet as the reality of his words sink in. Hardwick’s expression is pained, but he continues speaking into the silence.

“However, our number one concern is your safety. Taking care of you. And I made a promise to your parents and to each of you that when you were here, you would be safe from harm. So far I have failed at that. Students lost their lives a year and a half ago, nearly lost their lives again this past fall, and during the Trials, a fanatic sent one of our star students into a coma. I cannot, in good conscience, risk any of you further. Now...”

As Hardwick begins to wrap up, someone—one of the groundskeepers, I think—hurries through the crowd, down the aisle, and up to the stage. He whispers to Hardwick, and the dean’s face goes pale.

He straightens back up, gripping the podium in front of him with both hands. Even from where I’m sitting in the audience, I can see his knuckles going white. “Ah, my dear students, I’m afraid I’ve just had some further distressing news.”

“A dead body was found ritualistically sacrificed in the stone circle?” Cam whispers.

I elbow him, although I honestly don’t even know if he was joking or not.

“Two more stone circles have been found on school grounds,” Hardwick announces.

The crowd doesn’t erupt into whispers at that. In fact, everyone seems to be holding their breath.

It sounds so... harmless. *Whoop-de-doo, a stone circle. Right?*

But somehow, just hearing that these two new circles have appeared without warning, randomly, in our place of refuge...

It’s terrifying.

I look around and see that everyone nearby us is either pale or red in the face. A lot of people are holding hands tightly, either with friends or with their significant other. Tandy is gripping hard onto Erin and looks like she might faint. Even Alyssa, Cristina, and Megan are huddled together.

I find myself gripping Asher's and Cam's hands too, as I feel all of us collectively thinking, *what the hell is happening to our school?*

CHAPTER 10

There's almost a perverse humor to it.

I actually remember reading an article once that talked about how thin the line between horror and comedy is. I think it was about some assignment where film editors were asked to take footage of a horror film or a comedy film and then re-edit it to switch it to the other genre.

That's exactly what this feels like—a comedy that got turned into a scary movie.

They're just stone circles. That's it. They don't even have ominous messages, runes, or images on them. They're just... rocks. It's kind of hilarious how nervous everyone is over a bunch of carved rocks in a circle.

And yet, we are.

They appeared out of nowhere. They look like they could be the bases of round towers—or, as Asher points out, perhaps some kind of summoning circles. Nobody knows how they got here, who put them here, or why.

And that's what changes it from funny to scary.

The school administration is nervous. They have to admit to us that they don't know what the stones are doing—in fact, the gray rocks seem to be doing nothing other than sitting there, like most stones do—but after the last few semesters, nobody can afford to let their guard down.

Maybe if the last three semesters hadn't happened, we'd all be a lot calmer. We would see this as something weird and mildly concerning instead of letting it incite a near-panic in everyone. But this is our fourth semester in a row of something odd or mysterious happening, and the last three times this kind of shit went down, students lost—or nearly lost—their lives. We can't afford to take chances.

The nervous feeling hovering like a cloud over campus only gets worse over the next few weeks.

Because the towers start growing.

Nobody knows how more stones are added. But you can mark time by them appearing. Every few days, there's another layer of stones on each circle, until by the time we're a few weeks further into the semester, the walls are over our heads, about ten feet tall.

"How is this even possible?" I ask Roman one night as I lounge on the bed in his room. Now that we're open about our relationship, I spend some of my nights over at his place, sleeping over properly and waking up in the morning instead of sneaking back to the room I share with the guys late at night.

Roman sighs, finishing organizing the tests on his desk. "The growth, so to speak, is slow but steady, and we can't see stones being transported to or from anywhere, which suggests that the stones are somehow being duplicated or grown. That's a kind of earth magic, and an incredibly powerful kind too."

"So it's someone with earth magic?"

"My theory is that it's more than one person."

"How so? Why?"

"Mainly because of how much magic is involved." He walks over and sits down on the bed next to me, his cobalt eyes glinting as he catches my gaze. "You'd need a lot of strength to transport a heavy object like a slab of stone from place to place across a great distance. It would take either an incredibly strong earth elemental or someone using multiple charmed objects to accomplish it. But to actually make a stone appear out of thin air? That's even more difficult. Most earth elementals can't generate the raw materials of earth and rock—they can only manipulate what already exists."

"So a second person is making potions or creating enchantment to help the earth magic user?"

Roman nods. "That's my line of thinking, anyway. But hopefully by tomorrow, it'll be a moot point."

"Why's that?"

He smiles at me, moving closer on the bed to pull me in for a kiss. "You'll see."



The next morning, I'm summoned to Hardwick's office.
Super.
What did I do this time?

I wrack my brain as I walk over to the admin building, trying to think of what he could want to see me for. But when I arrive, I find I'm not the only person who's been summoned. Hardwick's office is stuffed to bursting, with about half the school staff, Cristina, Megan, and a few other students present.

I work my way through the crowd, blinking at the faces around me. *What are we all doing here? We have nothing in common.*

"Ladies and gentlemen," Hardwick announces. The professors look like they're more aware of what's going on than the students are. They all look grim and determined, while the younger people in the room just look nervous and confused. "After some deliberation, we've decided that even though we don't yet know the purpose of the stones, the best thing to do would be to try to destroy them."

He steps out from behind his desk, glancing around at all of us.

"We simply can't afford to take any risks. You all have powerful and destructive magical powers. Since we don't know exactly what's bringing these stones here or how to deal with them, or what magic is being used on them, we can't be as methodical as we might like with our destruction of them. So we're just going to throw whatever we can at them and see what works."

Sounds fair enough to me. And now it makes sense why we're all here.

My sonic boom is powerful enough that it's sent people flying into buildings—and cracked the buildings' cement walls. Megan has telekinesis, a very common Unpredictable power, as do some of the other students I see gathered here. Cristina's power is disintegration, which should be extremely useful in destroying the stones.

"Of course, if anyone doesn't want to participate in this endeavor, that's entirely within your rights," the dean adds, his voice serious. "We're not going to make you do anything, and I understand if not all of you are comfortable trying to help. We don't know what dangers might be involved in this, frankly, so there might be some risk. You're welcome to leave if you're not comfortable being part of this."

A couple first-year students scurry out, looking ashamed, their faces red and gazes fixed to the floor. I don't know if they think we're judging them,

or if they're just judging themselves, but I honestly can't blame them too much. They're new to the school, still coming to grips with the fact that they have Unpredictable magic, and they've had less than half a semester to hone their abilities.

Mostly, I blame whoever keeps trying to fuck with our school. *If I ever get my hands on that guy...*

Dean Hardwick nods stoically and waits another minute to give anyone else a chance to slip out. But no one does. A few minutes later, our magic repressing cuffs are taken off and we're brought out onto the quad and separated into three groups. I'm in the same group as Tamlin, Megan, and Cristina, as well as a few others. Tamlin gives me a small, encouraging smile as we walk out to the stone tower in the woods. Cristina and Megan ignore me, but that's fine by me. I'm perfectly happy to ignore them as well. We're not out here to be friendly, we're out here to get a job done.

My imagination could be running away with me, but the air feels extra cold and eerily still around the stones. Like the forest itself is watching and waiting to see what happens.

"All right," Tamlin says, summoning her magical ropes. They remind me a bit of Wonder Woman's lasso of truth. Whatever else she's learned as far as using runes and enchanted objects, this is her innate Unpredictable power. She can even make the glowing ropes into a net if she wants to. It's pretty fucking cool.

The power of her magic crackles in the air as she turns back to us. "Have at it."

And we do.

We really, really do. We throw everything we've got at these stones. Megan works with others who have telekinesis to try and move a single stone together at the same time. Cristina is flinging literal bombs of disintegration at the stones. I'm letting loose with my sonic boom in a way I never have before. Usually, I'm worried about hurting someone or causing lasting damage to something, but not right now. These rocks are getting the full brunt of my force.

And yet, it does nothing.

I think the stones might be absorbing our powers or nullifying them, because if there was a shield of some kind to deflect our attacks, all of us would've ended up flat on our backs from my sonic boom.

Tamlin's growing increasingly frustrated, her usually calm facade cracking a little. The other students just look scared. Cristina lets out a ferocious roar that I wouldn't have expected from her and flings what looks like every ounce of her strength into her next burst of disintegration at the stones—and still nothing.

At last, the petite professor stops us. There's really nothing more we can do, and at this point we're just tiring ourselves out.

And if the stones really are absorbing our magic, there's no telling how and when that magic might be released. None of us should be nearby when that happens.

"Let's see if the others have had better luck," Tamlin says.

"Better luck than a literal bomb of sound or disintegration?" I hear one student mutter.

We meet back up with the other two groups in the quad, only to find out they've all had similarly disappointing results. Nothing seems to be able to affect the stones, which is terrifying in more ways than one. What kind of protection spells could this person—or team of people—have possibly placed on these damn rocks to keep them this well protected from a barrage of crazy Unpredictable magic?

It's clear we're not dealing with amateurs here. Not that I ever thought we were, but this really drives the point home.

Whoever's out to get us, and whatever they're planning... so far, they seem to be winning.

CHAPTER 11

A few more days pass without incident. I suppose I should be grateful for that, but we're all so on edge that nobody can really take advantage of it. We're all just waiting for the next attack to come.

What happens though, feels worse than if we were attacked directly.

On Friday evening, most of the students are gathered for dinner in the dining hall. I'm with the guys, minus Roman, and a few others like Tandy and Erin. We're all subdued, but Cam's cracking jokes and trying to get everyone to laugh when suddenly, a multitude of buzzing, ringing sounds fill the large hall.

My stomach heaves, and I grab at my wrist cuff, waiting for the pain—only to realize that's not what's happening.

The last time everyone was at a meal and something freaky happened, Raul cast a powerful spell that ripped our magic repressing braces off of us. More specifically, he melted them off. It hurt like hell and scared the shit out of people, so everyone basically went into a panic attack or rage from pain, and a bunch of magic was unleashed instinctively. I hit Asher with my sonic boom by accident, landing him in the infirmary.

I like to think I've got enough control by now to keep something like that from happening again, but the memory still scares the shit out of me.

This time, it's not our cuffs though. It's... our phones.

Nearly everyone in the dining hall seems to have gotten a call or text at the exact same time. Dozens of phones around us are buzzing with alerts, calls, and messages.

I grab mine out of my pocket and see that I'm getting frantic texts from Maddy.

Maddy: *Are you okay?!*

Maddy: *Elliot, I know it's not true.*

Maddy: *You have to call me!!!*

What's not true? What's going on? Is someone saying I've been hurt?

Dmitri frowns at his phone with a mixture of anger, fear, and confusion. "I'll be back," he says, pushing away from the table and hitting a button to call someone, walking away with the phone to his ear.

Asher's muttering, "shut up, shut up, oh my God, shut up," at his cell as every single one of his brothers, sisters-in-law, and both his parents text him all at the same time.

Cam just stares at his phone. I look over at him, my stomach twisting at the expression on his face. "What is it?"

My blond-haired boyfriend has subscriptions for several news apps—like CNN and stuff, except for magical news outlets. One of them has just sent him an alert for a breaking story.

He shows it to me, and now I understand, in a rush of cold fear, why Maddy was texting me.

Unpredictables Building Weapon of Mass Destruction at Griffin Academy!

Griffin Academy: Ground Zero

Magical Training Academy or Weapons Factory?

I can feel my jaw dropping open as my head juts forward, my eyes scanning the text again.

"What the actual fuck?" I blurt out in a whisper.

Everyone's yelling at each other, talking frantically into phones, texting as fast as their fingers will let them—in fact, some people are doing all three at the same time.

I hit the call button on my cell, and Maddy answers immediately. "Ellie!" Her voice is high and panicky, and it sounds like she's been crying. "Are you okay?!"

"I should be asking you that, Mads. People at your school know you've got an Unpredictable sister. Has anyone given you shit?"

"N-no, no, I'm fine. I mean, there's lots of arguing going on, but I'm okay—but what about you?!"

"I'm okay. I don't know what's going on though." Even as I speak to my sister, my gaze keeps sweeping over the room, trying to process the chaos that just exploded around me.

“What are those things?” she whispers.

“What things?”

“I can forward you some news stories...”

Cam holds up his phone, and I see he’s opened one of the articles. There’s aerial video footage—*who the fuck got aerial footage, and how?*—of the three groups of students and professors trying to destroy the growing stone structures. Except the news outlets seem to think *we’re* responsible for these towers and are building them ourselves, fueling them with our magic.

What the fuck?

“Who the hell shot this footage?”

“I don’t know,” Maddy says. “Nobody knows anything, really. Everyone’s just assuming and taking sides.”

“We’re safe here on campus,” I promise her. And it’s true, I think. For now. “I’ll let you know if anything changes.”

Like if a bunch of Circuit representatives come to arrest us.

Fuck. I’m in that video, of all goddamn people. Without even planning on it, I’m in the middle of this once again. If the Circuit does come, they probably won’t arrest the entire school. Just Hardwick, some other key staff members... and anyone who was in that video, including me.

Like I said: fuck.

Once Maddy’s calmed down a bit, I remind her that I love her and to stay safe before I hang up.

Asher’s on the phone with his mom, clearly trying to calm her down too. Dmitri’s back at the table, sitting beside Cam, who’s got an arm draped around the dark-haired man’s shoulders and is talking quietly with him. Shit, whatever Dmitri’s parents said, it can’t be good.

“Mom, I promise, we’re fine—and no, we’re not cooking up any evil scheme.” Asher rolls his eyes. “No, I’m pretty sure if there was an evil scheme being cooked up, I’d know about it. Yes, Elliot’s fine. She was trying to destroy the towers, not create them. They just sprang up out of nowhere and keep growing. Yes, I know that doesn’t make sense. Trust me.” It seems even the usually calm man’s patience is being worn thin. “All right. Yes. I love you too. Okay.”

He hangs up and looks at me. “I’ll call her again later and try to talk her down some more. She has nothing against Unpredictables, but she also says she ‘doesn’t know what to think’.”

Yeah, that makes two of us.

The dining room remains in chaos as people demand answers, call relatives, and come up with theories. We were just about done eating, thank God, so we just get up and grab some snacks for the road before heading to Roman's apartment in the dorms.

I want to check on him. I don't think he should be alone—that any of us should be alone—right now. And I want all of my guys with me, for whatever it's worth.

The ebony-haired professor opens the door the moment I raise my fist to knock—clearly he's been waiting for us.

"Come in."

He opens the door wider, stepping back to give us room to enter. As we all file in, he tugs me toward him and wraps his arms around me briefly, pressing a kiss to my hair.

I hug him back hard, then we all find places to plop down. I end up sharing a chair with Cam, curled up on his lap, while Asher's hand lightly strokes through my hair. I can't tell who he's trying to comfort—himself, or me. Maybe both.

This happens a lot now that we're all together properly. Asher and Cam are touchy-feely kind of people so there's no shortage of cuddles for me to enjoy. And right now, I need them. The contact soothes and grounds me, making it easier to keep my heart rate from speeding out of control.

Dmitri sprawls out on the bed, looking like if he could somehow pull a Rip Van Winkle and sleep for a thousand years, he wouldn't mind in the slightest. Roman sits backward on a chair, straddling it and resting his forearms on the back.

Everyone's anxious. Even Roman, although he's doing his best to hide it. He's older than the rest of us, so I think in a way, he feels protective of us, but he can't shield us from the uncomfortable truth.

The tide of public opinion is against us.

"If a single damn news article—if footage like that with no actual evidence or proper goddamn reporting—if that can convince everyone we're evil," Cam says, "then what the fuck are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to keep ourselves safe or even argue that we're not actually monsters when everyone out there is so ready to believe the worst in us?"

"There are also plenty of people who think this is ludicrous and are speaking up in defense of us," Asher replies, ever the hopeful one.

“But it’s never those people that get listened to,” Dmitri argues with a growl. “Because they’re always taking the high road and trying to be good and logical. It’s the fanatics who hate us who will have the power, because they don’t care about being respectful, and they’re happy to take the low road. They’re counting on us to play fair because they sure as hell won’t.”

“I know you’re all worried,” Roman interjects, “but this is something the dean and the staff will take care of. This is our job, to take care of you and protect you. We always knew there was a possibility that public opinion would turn against us again. The founders of Griffin Academy had to fight hard to get this school open, and we’ll fight hard to keep it open.”

“We have to.” My voice is hard, my vocal cords strained with tension. “There’s nowhere else for people to go.”

“I know, Reckless.” Roman’s jaw clenches, but his hypnotic cobalt eyes soften as he meets my gaze. “But we’re prepared for things like this. We’ve always been aware of the possibility that Unpredictables could be targeted. It’s why we train students for combat—so that you can defend yourselves, so you won’t be helpless. And everyone at this school is still protected under magical law, for now at least. If anyone did try to harm you, the Circuit’s job is to protect you.”

At the words “harm you”, Asher’s hand in my hair jerks, and Cam’s arms tighten around me. Dmitri sits up on the bed, his dark eyes flashing as his teeth clench. I think Roman was referring to all of us, to the school in general, but they all seem to have interpreted his words as meaning danger to me specifically, and they all look ready to march out and take on the world if need be to protect me.

I’m not gonna lie, it makes my heart swell in my chest. I don’t want anyone to fight my battles for me, and I don’t necessarily need protecting—but if it comes down to it, I’ll feel a whole hell of a lot safer fighting with these men at my side.

Roman’s eyes flash with the intense protectiveness I’ve seen in him before as his gaze locks on me. “We have to be prepared, and trust me, the staff here are very prepared. We’re going to take care of this. I won’t let anything hurt you.”

The others murmur their agreement, and I burrow closer to Cam.

When Roman says things like that, I actually believe him. If Hardwick or another teacher or even Tamlin had been the one to say it, I’m not sure I

would have. I'm just not used to trusting anyone else with things, especially not something as big and important as my life.

But Roman is the most capable person I know. He's never *not* in control, and he's smart and damn powerful. Possibly the most powerful magic user I know. And I know that he wants more than anything to keep us safe.

If I can believe anyone when they say it's going to be all right, I can believe Roman.

Dmitri doesn't look completely convinced, but he stops arguing about it. He and Roman are very similar, and I think Dmitri sees a lot of himself in our dark, serious professor. Now that I know what Dmitri's parents are like, I'm even more grateful for that. He needs good men in his life to make up for his asshole of a father.

The conversation dies out a bit after that, and we just all sit together in the warmth of Roman's apartment, soaking up each other's strength and holding onto one another.

Wondering what comes next.

CHAPTER 12

I almost wish the next big thing to happen at school was something spectacular and magical, but nope.

It's just midterms.

Yippee.

To be fair, the professors don't really have their hearts in it this time around. They're kind of half-assing things and giving us passing marks on things that they'd usually grade a lot more harshly. And the students are all half-assing it in return. I can barely focus, and I know I'm not the only one.

Alyssa hasn't even had any new barbs or quips to fling at me. I figured since I'm one of the people in the video that's been circulating around online news sites, she'd jump on the chance to come after me and accuse me of sabotaging the school—never mind that her friends Cristina and Megan are in it as well.

But while last semester she was eager and chomping at the bit to get me in trouble for stealing people's magic, this time she's as exhausted and subdued as the rest of us. We're all slumped in our seats during class and barely any more alert during exams. I see a lot of people with dark circles under their eyes, and even without asking, I know it's not because they were up late studying.

Every time someone's phone goes off, we all jump. People are checking the news feverishly. Even professors.

At least we're all trying, even if we can't really put one hundred percent of hearts and minds into it. I do my best on my tests and resist the urge to check my phone nonstop. I study and take notes, and I don't complain that the professors are distracted and seem prone to staring into space. Professor

Binns almost starts crying at the end of one of our classes, and I bring her an apple the next day—I know it’s cliché, but it makes her smile and that helps, right?

Given the way everyone’s behaving, especially the staff, I can’t help but wonder if Hardwick’s been fielding demands to close down the school. I wouldn’t be surprised if that were the case. Griffin Academy originally housed a lot of priceless and dangerous magical artifacts underground, hidden away beneath the main building—both because it was practical and because it was a good bargaining chip to keep the school open.

But now, thanks to Raul’s attempt to steal one of the most dangerous artifacts down there, a Brimstone Orb, all the objects were moved to a new location. Which is great, except that it took away our bargaining chip. It’s one less reason for the High Circuit to want to keep Griffin Academy open.

I can’t help but feel as I finish up my insanely easy History of Magic exam that this is a bit of a farce. That we’re all just trying to pretend everything is normal, that things are okay, while we cling to a sinking ship. It’s like making out with a cardboard cutout of your favorite movie star and pretending it’s real.

...not that I’ve ever done that.

Anyway, it makes me wonder if Griffin would’ve already been shut down if we all had somewhere else to go.

I mention my theory to Asher when we meet up after our last finals. I don’t want to talk to Dmitri because he’s already so pissed and upset about all of this, and Cam would try to cheer me up, which isn’t necessarily what I want at the moment. I just want to be heard, and Asher’s good for that.

He runs a hand over his defined jaw, glancing at me as we walk down the corridor. “I’m not sure about that, Elle. Right now, they have us where they want us. All in one spot where they can easily come and inspect us or round us up.”

Yikes. My stomach twists.

“Do you think they would do that?”

“No. But you have to admit it’s easier to keep all the potentially dangerous people in one isolated place, whether it’s because they distrust us or for our own protection. Whether they hate us or are on our side, keeping us here is easier for everyone.”

Huh. That does make sense to me. A horrible kind of sense.

Shaking my head to clear it of all this junk, I catch his moss-green gaze. “How’d your midterms go?”

He chuckles dryly. “Oh, did we have midterms? I’m not sure anybody noticed.” Then he nods his head toward the end of the hall. “Dmitri and Cam should be coming out of theirs in a second.”

We’re hoping to get some lunch and eat it in our dorm room, put a good movie on that we’ve seen a million times before, and just relax. Some quiet time together would do us all good, I think.

As we approach, Cam and Dmitri come out of their Theory of Magic classroom, both looking a bit haggard.

“How’d it go?” I ask, kissing my blond boyfriend hello.

“It went—” Cam starts, but his words are interrupted by the sound of a loud commotion outside.

“What the hell?” Dmitri says, turning to follow the sound.

We emerge from the main building, heading toward the quad to find a huge group of adults standing on the lawn arguing with the Griffin admins and staff. Most of the newcomers look middle-aged, and all of them look extremely pissed off.

I vaguely recognize some people from when the families of the seniors visited last semester, and I think that most of these people are parents of Griffin students. Not all of them though. Some look too young to be the parents of people in their early twenties. What the hell are they all doing here anyway? What do they want?

The staff, including Hardwick, are doing what they can to try and calm the situation. Personally, I think this is a real asshole move. These fuckers couldn’t air their grievances in an orderly fashion? Send a fucking email or make a phone call? Instead, they have to have this confrontation on the lawn? What is this, kindergarten? Where we all just throw tantrums wherever we feel like it?

And then I hear a voice and catch sight of a face that’s horribly familiar.

“You really claim to reform these children—”

Fuck. It’s Dmitri’s father.

“They’re not children,” Hardwick interrupts as calmly as he can, “and we’re not ‘reforming’ them because there is no need to reform our students of anything. They are being taught to use and control their power the same as any other magic user.”

Dmitri's father looks like he's seriously considering blasting Hardwick with some magic himself, just to show Hardwick his place. It's clear that the man thinks he ought to be in charge around here and is used to being the most important person in whatever room he walks into.

It's also pretty fucking clear from his language that Dmitri was right. Maybe his family isn't as outright bigoted as Johnson was, but they still don't like Unpredictables, not one little bit.

"These are dangerous people," Dmitri's father goes on. "They always have been. And your job is not to coddle them but to discipline them so that they learn to be better. They shouldn't be allowed to think they can just do whatever they want. You are letting them be reckless—"

Dmitri's body jerks beside mine. Before I can even think about what he might be doing or grab him and stop him, he storms up to his father, coming to stand beside Hardwick. Just to his father's left, I can see Dmitri's mother. She looks like she stepped off a runway and is being asked to tramp through a muddy field.

"Father."

"Dmitri." The older man looks imperiously down his nose at his son. "Come with us at once. This place is clearly unfit for your attendance. We should've gone with a private tutor—"

"What?" Dmitri obviously didn't expect the conversation to turn this way and is thrown for a moment. "Father, I'm not going anywhere."

"You will go where I tell you to go." His dad's face, so similar to Dmitri's, twists with anger. "You are my son."

"He's also an adult," Hardwick says gently.

The glare Dmitri's parents shoot at Hardwick is scathing. But the dean stands his ground, continuing to gaze at the two of them politely and firmly.

Huh. Go Hardwick.

"If your classmates cannot control themselves then we are removing you from their presence," Dmitri's dad grunts. "You're better than this. You don't deserve to be dragged down with them."

His father reaches for him, but Dmitri jerks away, his jaw clenching. "Are you serious? Did you forget that I'm like them? If you're going to condemn them, then condemn me too. They're not doing anything wrong. And I'm not leaving."

"Of course you're leaving."

“No, I’m not!” Dmitri snarls. “You don’t get to pretend that just because you’ve made an *exception* for me, it makes you better than any other nutjob who rages against Unpredictables on his YouTube channel.”

Honestly, his father looks more upset about being compared to someone who makes YouTube videos than anything else. I have to hide a laugh behind my hand, although it dies out immediately. Nothing about this situation is very funny.

Mr. Mikhailov draws himself up, his eyes narrowing. “This is precisely my point. If your time at this school has made you to think you have the *right* to talk to me in such a manner—”

“I have put up with so much bullshit from you,” Dmitri interrupts with a growl. I feel Asher and Cam tense beside me, ready to move forward and break them up if this gets physical. “And now you think you can just storm in here and boss around an entire fucking school? I’m not leaving when I’m six weeks away from finishing my training, I’m not letting my friends deal with this shit on their own, and I’m not going to turn my back on the place that’s been housing me and educating me for the past three years.”

“So you’ll turn your back on us instead?” His father has a gleam in his eye that I can only describe as cruel. *Jesus fucking Christ*. “Your own family?” He scoffs. “After all that we raised you to be. Clearly, if you can turn against us like this and lose your entry into the Trials to a untrained girl in her first year, this academy isn’t doing everything for you that it should. You can test out to finish your degree, and that is my final word on the matter.”

“Well, it’s not my final word. And it’s my life.”

“Your life is *mine*,” his father snarls. “You are my *son*, you will do as I say.”

“For goodness’ sake, Dmitri, listen to your father,” his mother says, tilting her head at him like she can’t understand why he’s acting like this. “Sometimes I wonder why you’ve spent your entire life trying to spite us.”

“I’ve never tried to spite you, Mother,” Dmitri grates out.

Her unnaturally smooth face takes on an almost sad look, and I realize immediately what this shit is. She and her husband are playing good cop, bad cop with their son. “It’s rather unfair, darling, wouldn’t you say? After we’ve done nothing but try to give you the best?”

“You and I have different definitions of what’s best,” Dmitri shoots back, but I can see that he’s wavering a little. Not like he’s about to agree to

go with his parents, but like he's about to lose control and is struggling to keep his cool. Dmitri's all about control. I know he would hate to lose his composure, I mean, *really* lose it, in front of not just his parents but everyone else.

"Sometimes I wonder if you even care about your family when you pull stunts like this," his father snaps.

That one really hurt Dmitri—I can tell by the way his jaw clenches. I don't know his full history, but given that he has yet to be public about his relationship with me and fought his feelings every step of the way, I'm pretty damn sure he's done a *lot* to try to live up to his parents' expectations and to be the son they want him to be.

And have they appreciated it? The sacrifices and struggles he's endured trying to earn their love? Clearly not.

God, I hate his fucking family.

I mean, I already hated them, but this is even worse. When I met them before, they were just snobs. This is outright cruelty, and it's directed at their own son, of all people. If this is how they treat Dmitri, someone they claim to love, I can't even imagine how they'd treat a stranger.

And no matter what they might claim, this sure as fuck isn't love. It's possession.

I want to march over there and give those two a piece of my goddamn mind, and maybe a piece of my actual fist while I'm at it, but I know that won't solve anything. It'll only make this all so much worse.

As if he's reading my mind, Asher puts his hand on my arm. "Don't."

"I won't," I promise, grinding my teeth so hard my jaw aches.

Even though I really, really want to.

Dmitri's hands are clenched into fists. "Sometimes I wonder if you care about *me* when you act like this," he shoots back, "or if you just see me as some kind of expensive toy or another business asset. I'm a human being, Father, I'm not one of your stocks or investments that you can just trade and move around however you please."

"How dare you—"

"Everyone, please." Hardwick forcibly inserts himself between Dmitri and his parents, turning to face the rest of the gathered crowd. "If you all could calmly come into the administrative offices, we can properly address your concerns. Standing out here like a rabble is rather undignified, wouldn't you say?"

Shit. Nice one, Hardwick.

That's a damn clever way to get a dig in at Dmitri's parents, and the best way to ensure they'll actually agree to go inside. They want to look sophisticated and on top of the world at all times, I'm sure, and looking like part of the "rabble" must make their allergies act up.

"Very well." Mr. Mikhailov draws himself up stiffly. "But we insist on speaking with you personally, as you are the dean. We didn't come all the way out to this no man's land to be pawned off on some mid-level representative."

"Of course, of course."

Hardwick nods politely as he ushers them away. The man's got a hell of a lot more patience than I do, that much is obvious.

Dmitri gives his father's back a glare that's close to venomous, then he turns on his heel and storms off.

Well, this day has gone to shit.

CHAPTER 13

The group of angry parents and concerned citizens follow Hardwick back toward the admin building, leaving the quad empty except for the students who gathered to gawk at the confrontation.

Cam whistles lightly. "Wow. Okay."

Yeah, you can say that again. "Jesus. I thought people that awful only existed in soap operas."

"Dmitri's parents were raised in wealth," Asher says. "It's hard to be given everything you want as soon as you want it and still retain your compassion. You lose your ability to empathize with others." He lets out a soft, sad chuckle. "Sometimes I think the curse that my family has that gives us so many children is a good thing. Kids are expensive as hell. My parents have a ton of money and social connections, but they also had thirteen boys to raise, so they've never gotten caught up in their wealth. It's kept us from getting swelled heads."

Well, damn, okay then.

I grimace. "So money really can't buy happiness."

"It can, up until a certain point."

"So I can still wish for a million dollars for Christmas?"

He threads his fingers through mine, raising our joined hands to his lips. "I'm not stopping you."

I sigh, giving in to the comfort of Asher's lips caressing my knuckles. Then I glance in the direction Dmitri stalked off. "We should go after him. I don't want him to be alone."

Cam shakes his head. "I'd love to, Sin, you know I would, but I honestly think the person he needs right now is you. Just you."

My heart swells and clenches at the same time, and I nod. Asher kisses my hand again, Cam presses his lips to mine, and then I walk away to find Dmitri.

The dark-haired, broody man isn't really someone who goes out into the woods the way Cam and I do all the time, so I don't think he'll be out there—but he'll definitely want to be somewhere quiet and out of the way. With a group of angry parents complaining and yelling in the administration building, and students having just finished midterms, the school's crazy right now. And our dorm would be too obvious of a place to hide.

Then I remember—in order to fight the demon bird last semester, Dmitri, Roman, and I had to climb up onto the roof from one of the school's towers.

There. That's where he'll be.

I climb up the tower, suppressing the shiver that moves down my spine when I pass the spot where Cam had his magic ripped from him. When I reach the top, I climb out the window, and sure enough, there's Dmitri.

He's just sitting on the roof, looking out over the trees with his arms wrapped around his knees.

I clamber over to him and sit down. "Hey."

Dmitri doesn't say anything. I see he's going to be difficult today. But then, when is he not? If I didn't want a challenge, I wouldn't be dating him.

And today, of all days, I can understand where he's coming from.

I lean into him and put my head on his shoulder. "Came up here to brood, huh?" When he rolls his eyes, I grin up at him. "Broody McBrooderson."

He doesn't respond to that, and I hold in a sigh. I guess humor isn't going to help much in this situation.

We sit in silence for a moment as I scramble to think of what to do to help him. Asher likes to talk things out and is good about that, sorting everything out with long discussions, and Cam likes to go on a run or have a laugh to distract himself. But Dmitri...

The one place where Dmitri and I always work well is when we're sparring. Even when we're at odds, when we spar together, we work it all out and connect in a way that feels natural and instinctual. It's just our thing, like Cam and I have our runs together.

Right now, I can practically feel how hurt Dmitri is. He's almost vibrating with it, and it's making my own heart hurt so much I can hardly

breathe. And I don't think he's going to fling himself off the roof in a fit of despair like we're in a Gothic novel or anything, but being up here probably isn't the best place for him, even if it is away from everyone else.

I reach up and touch his arm. It's so tense beneath my fingertips that it might as well be made of steel. "Hey. Come with me, okay?"

He looks over at me, his dark eyes wary.

"There won't be any other people around," I promise. I know that's important to him right now. He doesn't like other people to see how he's feeling, especially when he's feeling hurt and wounded. I'm the same way. We're so similar in so many ways—which is why we can sometimes drive each other batshit crazy. But at other times, it means we understand each other like nobody else can.

I get to my feet and hold out my hand, hoping he'll trust me enough to follow.

Dmitri wraps his large hand around mine and lets me pull him to his feet, then follows me back across the roof, into the tower, and down the stairs to the combat classroom.

The midterm for that class is over, and everyone else is off working on other things. Tamlin's probably either in her office or helping calm the crazy parents in the administration building. It's dark, and empty, and a little cold.

I flick on the lights and walk to the center of the room. Dmitri's just... *blank* beside me, following me without comment or protest or even a facial expression, and it makes me kind of want to scream. His default expression is annoyance, sure, but that's on purpose—it's what he chooses to project. There's a lot that goes on inside him behind the surface.

But right now, there's nothing. It's as if he's either locked his emotions down so deep he can't access them or has just gone numb.

I don't know which prospect is more worrying.

"C'mon," I say, stripping off my coat and all the rest until I'm just in my first layer, clothes I can properly fight in. I bounce a little on the balls of my feet and shake out my hands, getting loose and warm for the match.

Dmitri shakes his head.

"Come on," I repeat. "Spar with me."

He folds his arms, tension still radiating from every muscle in his body. "I don't want to fight you."

"But you want to fight someone."

His eyes flicker. “Yes. But you’re not that someone.”

“Well, I’m the one who’s here. So unless you want to go to Hardwick’s office and punch your father, I’m what you’ve got.” I drop into a combat-ready stance. “You have to get this aggression out somehow, it’s not good for you.”

Dmitri’s still standing just inside the door, but he does take off his coat. *Aha, one point to me.*

“I don’t feel like fighting you,” he says gruffly. “And I’m pissed as fuck right now. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me.” I know that in my bones. I know it like I know gravity exists. “And you need this. Come on. I’m not giving up, and I can be realllly annoying when I want to be.”

Dmitri just raises an eyebrow at me, although the blankness on his face is fading a little. It’s being replaced by a scowl, but whatever.

I’ll take it.

Straightening a little, I shrug. “All right then.” I pull an exaggeratedly sad face. “I guess we’ll just have to accept that I really am a better fighter than you. You know you didn’t *have* to throw that fight against me in the Trials, I totally would’ve won anyway.”

I still have no proof or confirmation that Dmitri actually let me win that fight so I could go to the Trials. There were a lot of reasons for him *not* to throw our match—he put in a ton of hard work to be the best and do the best, and he had his family breathing down his neck on top of all that.

If he did throw our fight in the battle royale, he didn’t do it for himself or his family.

He did it for me.

Because even back then, he liked me as much as I liked him. Even though we were both too stubborn and chicken-shit to say it.

My words bounce off the high, bare walls and then die out. Dmitri freezes, his eyes flashing. “Did Asher tell you that?”

I doubt Dmitri told anyone his plans, but the gentle, chestnut haired man can read minds. He might be wondering if Ash picked up that little tidbit from his thoughts at some point and then relayed it to me.

Grinning slightly, glad I was able to get a reaction out of him, I shake my head. “If Asher knows about it, then he never told me. He respects people’s secrets. But like I said, you didn’t need to do it. We both know I can kick your ass any day of the week.”

Dmitri sheds another layer and then stalks over, joining me in the center of the massive room. “So you think you can really beat me, huh?”

There’s a familiar smirk teasing the corners of his mouth, and my relief feels like a rush to the head, making me sway a little on the spot. This right here is the Dmitri I know and love. Not that blank, shut down person.

“Oh, I *know* I can beat you.” I wink at him and dance a little farther back, out of his reach. “I’m not the one who needs to prove I can come out on top. Why did you do it, anyway?”

“You were a better poster kid for the Trials,” Dmitri argues. “The world didn’t need to see a snobby kid from some snob parents winning the day, they needed to see someone scrappy who fought hard for what she had, someone just like them.”

“Or maybe they needed to see that even powerful, rich families can have Unpredictable kids, and it’s not just something that happens to poor people or society’s outcasts.”

He pauses for a second, considering that, then inclines his head at me. “Touché.”

“Oooh, did you just concede I might be right? Did you actually admit I’m right about something?” I’m totally baiting him now, and Dmitri knows it, and he knows that I know he knows it, but it doesn’t matter because he’s finally starting to loosen up a little and show signs of real life again.

He cocks a dark eyebrow at me, and that’s all the warning I get before he launches himself at me to tackle me.

There is one very good thing about finally dating Dmitri and having both of us be honest about our feelings.

Well, okay, there’s more than just a single good thing. But one of the good things is that now that we’re together, we can be completely honest about the fact that... well, when we spar?

It’s basically our form of foreplay.

Dmitri grabs me and tries to pin me, but I slip out of his grip, definitely rolling my hips in a way I wouldn’t do with any other opponent. We’re both going for tackles and pins that require a lot of full-body contact, and I can only offer up a false “oops!” when my thigh brushes against his groin and I can feel how hard he’s getting.

He gives me a deeply unimpressed look. Or he tries to, anyway. It’s hard for him to do—no pun intended—when he also looks incredibly turned on.

I'm sure he can see the same thing on my face too. Dmitri's hot as fuck, muscled and lean, and he knows how to use his body. He has almost complete control over every movement—and he knows how to touch me, and where, to get me riled up.

In class, we have to hold back. Nobody wants to see two of their classmates practically dry humping each other on the mat ten feet away. I can feel that he gets hard when we spar, and I definitely get wet, but we can't do anything about it, and we both try to avoid doing things that'll drive us too crazy.

But right now... there's nobody else here. We don't have to hold back.

It's the hottest sparring session we've had yet. Teasing each other, our bodies grinding and rubbing together, Dmitri grabbing me, sliding his hand down my pants for a second, grabbing my ass, biting my ear. I'm so turned on I can barely think, and if this is how he wants to get out all of his aggression, I'm sure as hell not complaining.

God, I want him to fuck me right here, right on the mat, as hard as he can. I want him to pin me down and make me beg and then make me scream.

Dmitri's swearing under his breath as we roll and tussle. I can feel the tension in his body, but it's not the same as it was on the roof—not by a long shot. This is the best kind of tension.

It's the kind that builds inside him just before something mind-blowing happens.

"Say I win," I tease, panting hard. My voice is lower and raspier than normal, and my panties are fucking soaked by now. "Say I win, and I'll let you take my clothes off."

This time, the stream of curses that flow from his mouth are at full volume, and when he rolls us again and ends up on top for a second, I can feel how fucking hard he is for me. He stares down at me, his chest rising and falling, and I think for a second I'll actually win this match by concession.

But I'd rather win the old-fashioned way.

I hook his arm and buck my hips, using his momentary distraction to neatly flip him off of me.

This time, I get his arm behind his back and his head pressed down into the mat. He might've thrown the fight with me last year during the Trials preliminaries, but I've gotten a lot better since then. He's genuinely,

frustratedly bucking and twisting, trying to get out of the hold. I've got him right at his pressure points, and all of my weight is on him. From this angle, he can't get any leverage to get me off of him, even though I'm smaller than he is.

At this point, I just have to keep my hold and outlast him, waiting for him to tap out. But then—

The fucker cheats.

He can't get a good grip on me, and he can't flip me off. But with the angle of my body as I drape across him, he manages to slide his free hand down my pants.

I let out a shocked breath, my whole body jolting as the pads of two fingers find my clit.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Ohhhh, fuck.

Against my command, my hips start to gyrate against his touch, chasing the relief his fingers promise after so much damn buildup. I can hear him chuckle darkly beneath me, his face still pressed against the mat, and so much of our bodies are touching that I *feel* his chuckle too. It vibrates through me, pulling a moan from my lips.

My brain is shutting down, all my blood rushing south, and it's getting harder and harder to coordinate and control my muscles to keep him pinned. He moves his fingers lower, sliding them inside me, then uses the wetness he gathered to continue working my clit, and I shudder, my breath coming in short gasps.

"Fuck. Dmitri. Oh, God."

The words are muffled and strained as I shift my body, trying to tighten my grip on him but also get... just... a little bit... closer.

If anybody walked in right now, they'd find us in an incredibly undignified position. I've still got Dmitri mostly pinned, but I'm also humping his hand, writhing on top of him as I bite my bottom lip so hard it hurts.

"Let me up," he murmurs, his voice rough and teasing. "Say I win, Princess, and I'll make you come."

Oh, Jesus fucking Christ.

Fire burns through me, and I suck in air as his words make my entire lower body clench. For just a second, my hold on him loosens, and Dmitri

doesn't waste his chance. Quick as a snake, he rolls, pushing me off of him and then following my movement so he ends up on top of me, chest-to-chest.

Somehow, his hand stayed down my pants the entire time, and now he grins evilly down at me. "Guess we're even now. You won one, and I won one."

"You didn't win!" I gasp. His hand is wedged between us, his fingertips right where I need them, but he's stopped moving. I take over, wriggling my hips against him, desperate for friction, needing to come so badly I can't even see straight. "I haven't—conceded."

"No." His smile makes my heart and pussy both throb. "But I think you will."

Then he drapes his body completely over mine, burying his face in the crook of my neck and biting down on the skin there while his fingers find my clit again, circling hard and fast.

I come like a runaway train, wrapping my arms around him and digging my fingers into the muscles of his back as my hips roll against the motion of his hand over and over.

"Oh, fuck. Yes. Yes," I whisper, doing everything I can not to let it turn into a scream.

"Do you concede the match?" He lifts his head to nip at my ear, making a new shock of pleasure jolt through me as my orgasm makes me shudder.

"Yes. Yes. Yes..."

It's all I'm capable of saying right now, and Mr. Talented-Fingers Cheater-Pants knows it.

But you know what?

I don't even fucking care.

As my body starts to come down from the high, he raises up onto one forearm, his fingers still lazily stroking my clit, which is already hungry for more. The dark eyes gazing down at me now are anything but blank.

"If we call it a draw, will you still let me take your clothes off?"

I grin up at him despite myself. "Fuck yes."

He dips his head to kiss me so thoroughly I lose my breath again, then draws his hand out of my pants and rolls off of me.

As he extends that same hand down to help me up, my chest heaves and my heart pounds. But it's not from the fight.

It's from the anticipation of what's coming next.

CHAPTER 14

We barely make it back to the dorm room before we're on each other, literally tearing each other's clothes as buttons fly and fabric rips.

I put my body in front of Dmitri's as we speed-walked across campus, trying to keep his raging hard-on from being too noticeable, but now that we're back in the privacy of our room?

Let me at that fucking thing.

He already made me come once, but my body seems to have completely forgotten about it already. I'm buzzing with an electric energy, desperate to touch as much of Dmitri's skin as I can. Our coats and shirts are off already, strewn across the floor in haphazard piles, and I fumble with the button and zipper on his pants, reaching inside as soon as I work his fly down. I grip him through his boxers, and he grunts, thrusting against my hand even as his own fingers tug on my pants.

It takes us longer than it should to finish undressing because neither of us seem very coordinated at the moment, and we keep getting distracted. My pants and panties are abandoned halfway down my legs as Dmitri stops to slide his hands up the backs of my thighs, kneading and massaging the flesh of my ass with a rough grip. He drops his head to the crook of my neck, kissing and nipping at the spot where he bit me earlier, and my back bows as I move my body against his.

We start trying to shuffle toward the bed, but we're both still so tangled up in our clothes that we go down in a heap. Dmitri manages to wrap his arms around me and absorb the brunt of the impact himself, which is sweet but kind of ironic considering he just spent the last half hour purposefully trying to body slam me.

Context really is everything.

And, hey, at least we're horizontal now.

He must have a similar thought, because instead of trying to help me stand back up, he just yanks my pants the rest of the way off before kicking his off too. His cock juts out from his pelvis, hard and thick, and he wraps his hand around it, using his thumb to spread the precum gathering at the tip.

I lick my lips, practically panting like a cartoon character, as he crawls up my body to hover over me, teasing me with the head of his dick, rubbing it back and forth over my clit.

“Oh, God,” I groan, tilting my hips and pressing them upward, trying to capture his cock with my pussy.

But he pulls away, just out of reach, a wicked grin tilting his lips. When I frown at him and let my pelvis drop back to the floor, he resumes his teasing strokes against my clit, using just the tip of his cock to drive me insane.

“God,” I whimper again, wriggling and writhing as I try to get more contact. Just a little more.

“Nah, you can call me Dmitri,” he murmurs, pulling away again when I thrust my hips upward.

I narrow my eyes at him, still breathing heavily. “Are you sure? 'Cause there are a few other names I'd like to call you right now.”

He chuckles low in his throat, the sound full of so much dangerous promise that my core clenches and my stomach tightens. He resumes his torturous circling of my clit, and I swear, I can feel every contour of his cock-head on the sensitive bud. It feels fucking amazing, actually, but at the same time, it's not enough.

How the hell is he doing this? Where did he find the fucking willpower? I'm the one who already came once, but I'm also the one who's about to lose her shit. My body is trembling, need building up inside me like air in a balloon, and the man above me somehow finds it in himself to keep teasing us both.

“Dmitri,” I grit out, glaring up at him even as my pelvis chases his. “I. Will. Kill. You.”

A beaming smile breaks out across his face at that—because of course it does—and the sight actually makes me stop moving for a second. It's beautiful. Breathtaking. Like a rainbow after a heavy storm.

Note to self: do not ever tell Dmitri I compared his smile to a rainbow.

I stare up at him, momentarily distracted from my efforts to get him to just fuck me already, and he slips his cock just an inch inside my pussy.

His hands come to rest on either side of my head, bracing his body above me. “No need for that, Princess,” he says in a low voice. “You know I’ll always take care of you.”

And then he does.

He surges forward, slamming into me in one hard thrust, and *ohhh, fuck me six ways from Sunday, that’s exactly what I needed*. My mouth drops open in a silent O, but no words or sounds come out as pleasure rips through my body. My walls squeeze around him—welcoming him, adjusting to him, stretching for him. The smile on his face fades to a look of determined concentration as he begins to fuck me like he means it. We move across the floor a little each time he pistons into me, and my breasts bounce from the force of the movement.

Dropping down to his elbows, he finds my lips with his and kisses me, the strokes of his tongue matching those of his cock. I wrap my hands around his biceps and bring my legs up, resting my heels on his ass and hanging on for the ride.

I can feel when he gets close. His cock, already so thick inside me, seems to swell even more, and the look on his face becomes almost angry, as if he’s pissed at the idea that this might be over soon. Before I know what’s happening, he’s slipping out of me, and then he grabs my hips and flips me over.

I’m about to go up on my hands and knees, but before I can, Dmitri is already pressing inside me again. His arm slides under my cheek to protect it from the floor, and with me lying flat on my stomach, his cock rubs at a spot inside me that makes my breath hitch. He’s so deep, impossibly deep, and he thrusts slowly as he drapes his body over mine, his clove and honey scent enveloping me.

“You made me feel better, Princess,” he murmurs in my ear as he pushes us both toward release. “You make me want to *be* better. And not just today. Every day.”

The last word ends on a choked grunt as he comes hard. His cock pulses inside me, and I squirm and moan as I follow on his heels, feeling small and helpless beneath him in a way I love.

He pulls out of me and rolls me over again, kissing me over and over as our bodies come down from the high. I'm still breathing heavily, my heart thudding in my chest, when he gets up and stumbles toward the bathroom, returning with a small towel a moment later. He wipes up the wetness leaking down my thigh and then wads the towel into a ball and throws it back into the bathroom before collapsing beside me again.

I chuckle softly. I'll have to throw it in the hamper later, but for now, I can't be bothered. We're still on the floor near his bed, both of us too exhausted to actually get up and move onto it, even though it would probably be more comfortable.

Dmitri grabs a blanket that's dangling off the side and yanks until it slides down off the bed. Then we wrap ourselves in it, our legs tangled, my head on his shoulder and his arm around me.

I don't ask anything.

I don't pry, even though I want to know it all. I want to ask him if he's okay, if that was good for him—I mean, of course it was, not to toot my own horn—not just physically, but *psychologically*. Was that what he needed? Does he want to talk? Is there something more I could do?

I want to be a support for him. I want to help him. And with Dmitri more than any of the others, I feel like half the time I'm stumbling around in the dark. I'm falling in love with him, and I respect him so much as a person, but I'm still learning how to show those things in a way that's right for him. How to speak his love language, if you wanna get all touchy-feely about it.

Before I can even begin to think of what to say or decide whether I should say anything at all, Dmitri clears his throat.

"They're always like that," he says quietly.

I don't have to ask who "they" are. I know.

"Normally they try to be more... passive aggressive about it." His voice is low, rough, just above a whisper. He's not looking at me but staring up at the ceiling, his fingers slowly tracing circles over my shoulder as his other hand grips the blanket tightly.

"They don't want people to *think* they're bigoted." He snorts. "They're always donating to charities, making sure they're seen at the right events, that kind of thing. It's important to them that they look... good, always. But they'll find ways to tear down the people they think are beneath them, even

if they do it with a smile. That's the kind of people they are. They're always right, they're always on top. Nothing can change their minds."

God, I hate them. Everything I learn about them makes me dislike them more. But I keep my mouth shut, wrapping my arms around Dmitri and relishing the closeness of our bodies as he continues talking.

"My father's more controlling than my mom, so he's more willing to get down and dirty like you saw out there. He's fucking ruthless in a board meeting. He wants to be top dog and demands that everyone constantly do as he says. Our family's power is everything. Mother is... she's more worried about how we present ourselves. Perfection. Nothing less than perfect grades, the perfect outfit, the perfect reputation."

A heavy sigh falls from his lips, and I swear I can hear his teeth grinding together.

"They just refuse to accept anybody that isn't up to their standards. And Unpredictable people... well, it's right there in the name, isn't it?" Dmitri huffs out a harsh snort of laughter. "They can't control us. They can't put us into a neat little box the way they can with every other kind of magic user. So they don't like us. They don't like *me*."

He pauses, and for a few moments there's silence.

I want to tell him so many things that it feels like the words all cram up in my mouth. I want to tell him his parents would've been just as awful no matter what kind of magic he had. I want to tell him he can't blame himself for things that are out of his control. I want to tell him screw his parents, and that I think it's a miracle he turned out to be such an amazing person after all the shit they've pulled.

But I have a feeling Dmitri still has more to tell me, so I keep quiet and give him a moment.

At last he says, "Sometimes I wonder... They can't accept anything that isn't up to their standards, anything they can't control. They couldn't control me. Not when they thought I didn't have magic, and not when I turned out to be Unpredictable. Before my magic sparked, I could see the anger and panic on my father's face whenever he looked at me. Year after year, and I never had magic. He was losing his shit."

Dmitri smiles momentarily at the memory, but it's tinged with bitterness. "He was convinced for a while that I already did have magic and was just hiding it from him so I could be free of him. It was amusing. Kind of. But also awful."

I want to say *I'm sorry*, and with anyone else I probably would, but I know Dmitri doesn't want that. He doesn't want my sympathy, no matter how much he knows it's because I care about him.

"Anyway. Sometimes... I worry. What if I hadn't been Unpredictable? What if I'd had regular magic? Fire elemental powers like my mother? If I had... my father would've been much more subtle in his control. He wouldn't have been such a bully to me, he wouldn't have been disappointed and angry. He could've manipulated me. Molded me into his image. To think and act like him."

He scrubs a hand over his face, and I can feel tension gathering in his body. I hold him a little tighter, trying to absorb some of it into myself.

"That... scares me," he admits. "More than I can express. The idea that I could have turned out like him. Snobby, elitist, cold-hearted. An utter bastard. It was being Unpredictable that taught me how to be more open-minded, to accept the differences I saw in people. To be okay with diversity instead of running from it in fear. Without that... who knows what kind of asshole I would've become? And it fucking terrifies me."

My heart squeezes in my chest, thudding hard against my ribs.

I don't think that there's any way Dmitri could've turned out like his father. The guy's cranky as fuck sometimes, sure—but it's because he's withdrawn, used to being alone, used to keeping his walls up, just like me.

His father and mother didn't give him the love and support he needed. How could he possibly have turned out like them, thinking he owned the world, when he couldn't even earn the approval of the two people who were supposed to love him unconditionally?

Dmitri may be difficult to get along with at times. I'm not denying that. But he has a good heart. An amazing heart. He doesn't say much, but he always protects me, looks out for me. He holds me when I need it, he sat by my bedside all summer while I was in a coma... and none of that was because I was Unpredictable. It was because he cared about me.

He's a good friend to Cam and Asher. Cam's a jokester and Asher has the patience of a saint, but neither of them would be friends with a genuine asshole. The fact that they patiently weather Dmitri's darker moods means there's something worth it for them—and that's Dmitri's loyalty, his support, his willingness to have their backs in anything, to stay up until all hours of the night helping them with their homework.

He gives more of himself than I think he even realizes.

That didn't come from nowhere. And it didn't come just in the last couple of years since he found out he was an Unpredictable. It had to be there the whole time.

Dmitri might not believe me if I say all of this though. After all, I can't look into other potential universes or timelines and say for certain that Dmitri would've turned out to be a good person with or without Unpredictable magic. All I have is my faith in him.

So instead, I lean up a little so I can look him in the eyes.

"Asher once told me that it's not healthy to play the game of 'what-if'. You can play it all day, because there are so many different ways your life could've gone. There are so many different paths you could've taken. But what's the point of it? You can't ever prove anything. You can't say for certain that things would've gone one way or another, so all you'll do is go around in circles until the end of time."

I reach up to run my fingers over his jaw, cupping the side of his face, trying to absorb the entirety of the darkly beautiful man gazing back at me.

"We can't ever really know how we would've turned out if things had been different. But that's okay, because we have power over who we are *now*. We can't always change what goes on around us, but that's kind of freeing, right? Like your father—I bet the more he tries to control things, the more out of control he actually feels. All you can do is control your own actions and do what you think is right."

I tilt my head to the side, smiling tentatively at him. "If nothing else, I like you just the way you are." Then my face darkens. "Even if I don't think we should vacation with your family on a cruise ship. Somebody would end up getting tossed overboard, and it wouldn't be me."

Dmitri snorts a laugh, but his eyes are warm and grateful as he gazes at me, a soft smile on his lips.

"I believe that, Princess." His mouth drops to mine, and his kiss is heartbreakingly sweet. "Thank you," he whispers against my lips.

Draping my body over his, I kiss him back with everything I have.

I might not be able to give Dmitri the parents he deserves or fix any other parts of this mess, but I can at least reassure him that there *are* people who care about him.

And I like to think that's something.

CHAPTER 15

“**T**he nature of your combat training will be changing,” Tamlin announces.

We’re all in class the week after midterms, sitting in the desks that line the edges of the large classroom as she paces slowly back and forth in front of us. She’s looking at all of us like a hawk, like she’s taking our measurements, soaking us all up so she can pinpoint exactly where each one of us needs work.

All of us are shifting in our seats, wondering what could possibly happen next. Are they going to shut down combat class? Have the powers that be decided we’re too powerful, too dangerous?

People are already calling for independent outside oversight of the school. They say that Circuit representatives need to inspect the school grounds and the students, that the administration can’t be trusted. Hardwick managed to placate the parents for now, but Dmitri’s folks and others are calling for the school to be shut down, or for Hardwick to be replaced, or for the Circuit to get involved—or some combination of all three. Nobody seems to agree on what needs to be done, just that something *must* be done, and that Unpredictables are dangerous.

The magical news channels are taking all of this and running with it, of course. Sensationalizing all of it. Someone talked to them about the parents coming to the school, maybe one of the parents themselves, maybe even Dmitri’s family. Now the news outlets are all focused on the clash between the magical community’s elite and Unpredictables. There are panels debating different sides... it’s ridiculous.

I hoped that when the parents left, it would be the end of it. Hardwick did a good job of getting everyone to calm down, and I hoped after some adult discussion it would all be fine.

Guess not.

Tension hangs in the air as we all wait to hear what Tamlin might say. Combat class didn't make sense to me when I first got here, but now it feels like my most important class. The only class I really care about, and definitely the only one I'm reliably good in.

I've always thought Tamlin looks a bit like an African-American Audrey Hepburn. Her delicate features are pensive as she gazes at us, and it looks like she's struggling for a moment with a strong emotion before her face smooths over into its usual calm and poised demeanor.

"We're going to be focusing more on defensive moves from now on."

There's a soft rustling sound as people shift in their chairs.

My stomach pitches. I don't know if this new direction is because people don't want us knowing how to attack them, thinking that we're already too dangerous, or if it's because Tamlin and the rest of the staff think it's more important than ever that we learn how to protect ourselves.

Maybe it's both.

I compulsively turn my head to glance out the window, even though I can't see them from this angle. The towers.

They're about twenty feet high now.

Nobody knows anything more about them than we did before. There's talk of the Circuit coming in to inspect them, but some people are against that because it could give the Circuit an opening to inspect all of us and establish their own order in the school.

Yeah, it's a fucking mess.

Hell if I have any idea how to fix it, but I know that what people are proposing so far is bullshit. It just feels like we're stuck between a bunch of crappy solutions with no real good one to turn to.

"I know that this might come as a surprise to you," Tamlin goes on. "After all, I think my favorite saying in this class is..."

"The best defense is a good offense," we all chorus.

It's one of those phrases Tamlin repeats so often it's been ingrained into our heads by now. It's a sign of what a good teacher she is that she's got us all repeating these things at her automatically.

Her dark eyes gleam with pride. “Yes, exactly. But there are going to be times when you need to stay on the defensive. There are martial arts disciplines that focus completely on the idea of using your opponent’s strength and energy against them and working to disarm them and only protect yourself, rather than lashing out and trying to actively disable them.”

Tom raises his hand. “Professor, is this because people think we’re too dangerous? Did the Circuit order this change?”

There’s a murmur from everyone.

Tamlin deflates a little. “No, this isn’t because anybody thinks you all are too dangerous. Although that is a consideration. This is because I want to make sure that if I ever hear any of you got into a fight, you’re all squeaky clean. I want you to be able to say to a judge or an officer that you only defended yourself. I want you to be so in the clear that nobody can even think about charging you with anything.”

The whole class grows quiet, and I realize I’ve been unconsciously gripping the sides of my desk as I listen to her speak.

“And there will be one other change,” Tamlin continues. “From now on, you will no longer be fighting with your magic. Cuffs will stay on. Until you pass your final exams and then get tested on your magical control before the Circuit, you’ll have to wear your cuffs outside of this campus—and it’s outside this campus where you’d be most likely be attacked. Not to mention...”

Tamlin takes a deep, calming breath and gives us a bracing smile. “Not to mention, I honestly don’t know whether a point will come when you’re not allowed to take your cuffs off at all. And I think it’s better to be safe than sorry. From now on, you can’t rely on your magic to get you out of a dangerous situation. So we need you to be able to defend yourself non-magically.”

Given what nearly happened to me while I was shopping with Maddy, I’m grateful for this, at least. I don’t want to be caught with my pants down again, so to speak. Even though whoever has the magic is always going to be the more powerful person, power doesn’t mean shit if they’re cocky or unprepared and you can get the drop on them first.

Tamlin claps her hands together. “All right then. Pair up, and I’ll start demonstrating.”

We all look at each other for a moment, and then quietly begin to pair up. Usually, there's a lot of joking around during Combat class, especially during the second semester. The fall semester, we've got first-years who aren't super confident in their magic or their fight skills, so they're always nervous. But by spring semester, the first-years have gotten comfortable enough to joke around with the rest of us, even if the second- and third-years are still better skilled, generally.

There are no jokes today though. Today, everyone is silent.

Tamlin has us practice the moves over and over again, at "quarter time" to start, which basically means as slowly as we possibly can, so we get the muscle memory in properly. It's frustrating, after so many weeks of training to be more aggressive and fighting in real time, to have to go back to this kind of beginner stuff. By the time we're finished, I feel exhausted and yet pent up at the same time.

I want to fight properly, damn it, the way that I'm used to, not have to re-learn everything and adopt a whole new style. I'm an aggressive kind of fighter, and while I definitely see why Tamlin's thinking this way, it frustrates me.

Besides, you won't find me going at all easy on someone if they attack me, even if it does get me in trouble in a court of law. I'll go down swinging, thanks very much.

Combat class ends, and I can tell I'm not the only one who's frustrated as people mutter quietly to themselves. A lot of people look frightened. Tamlin herself is calm and poised, clearly putting on a brave face, but there are moments where I see her falter just a little, and I know she's probably just as exhausted and scared as everyone else.

As we walk out of Wellwood Hall, Cam pulls out his phone. "Check this out. I've been waiting to show you guys this interview."

We sit on one of the benches in the quad, Dmitri looming over us from behind while I sit on Cam's right and Asher sits on his left.

Cam plays a clip he's saved on his phone—it's from a talk show. The magical community has their own TV shows that are accessible mostly through Twitch and other online streaming sites. It keeps non-magical people from accidentally stumbling on things they shouldn't know about.

This talk show, "Magic Today", is one of those panel style shows. The host is there to mediate and ask questions that will get everyone on the panel arguing, then he'll crack jokes when it gets too close to a bloodbath.

I've heard of the show, but I've never seen it. I don't really watch that kind of TV much here, and before, when I thought I didn't have magic, I wasn't really doing anything magic-involved at all. I know Maddy watches some fictional TV shows, like the one about a bunch of magic-users sharing an apartment after college, one of those comedic "finding life and love" types of stories.

Today's subject on the show is, unsurprisingly, the whole Unpredictable mess. I can't help but notice there aren't actually any Unpredictable people on the panel. It's like when you see the list of people in government who voted on a women's rights issue, and they're all men. One of the panelists is supposed to be an "Unpredictable advocate", but that means jack shit if you ask me. One of us should be on that panel. We should be able to speak for ourselves.

The panelists are going on and on about whether or not Unpredictables are dangerous. One of them is on the younger side and looks way too cocky for his own good. He's got a sharp suit and the kind of "I went to Harvard" look that sets my teeth on edge.

"Here's the thing," he says in a condescending tone. "Yes, you're absolutely right, any one magical user can become too powerful if they have the right knowledge and weaponry. A mage loaded down with charms and enchantments and potions could be dangerously powerful. Nobody's saying they wouldn't be!"

Another panelist tries to interject, but he overrides her, holding up a hand.

"But charms and enchantments and potions all have rules and regulations governing them. You have to pass certain exams and have certain licenses to perform powerful enchantments. You can only get certain potions from certain retailers and those retailers have to regulate and be licensed to sell those potions. You have to put in a request for certain charms, and you have a waiting period, and then you have a license or certificate that says you can own and use it. It's just like owning a car and having a driver's license. We have rules set in place."

God, I want to punch this guy. My hand twitches, but I don't think Cam would appreciate it if I sent his phone flying across the quad.

"And if you didn't have all those tools at your disposal, what would your magic be?" Harvard Boy continues. "Ordinary, not particularly powerful magic. Not dangerously so, and not much more than anyone else."

You need those outside enhancements in order to really pack a punch, and that's why the regulations are in place—so that nobody can use those enhancements to become powerful beyond measure for nefarious reasons. Not without the authorities picking up on it.”

“I take it this prick's never heard of the black market,” Dmitri mutters.

“Yeah, but look at his suit,” Cam jokes. “I bet he's heard about bribes and the power of the almighty dollar.”

“Shh.” Asher lifts a finger, straining to hear.

“Our most dangerous enchanted objects are highly regulated or straight-out illegal. And if someone with ordinary magic were to get ahold of them, all the authorities have to do is take that item away, and the problem is solved. The perpetrator is weakened and can be defeated. It's the *item* that gives them that boost.”

Everyone on the panel is nodding along, following his logic. Dmitri's hand is on my shoulder, and I can feel him squeezing harder as the man continues talking.

“But Unpredictables—they have all that powerful magic *inside* of them! They don't need enchantments or charmed objects of any kind. They don't need to swallow a potion. I mean, God help us all if they do, I can't imagine the kind of power that would give them, but the point is, if we regulate an item that can create sonic boom, why are we not also regulating the *person* who can create a sonic boom?”

He's talking about me, I know he is. My stomach churns. I was in the Trials, representing Griffin Academy, and the Trials were filmed, so... I guess it makes sense that I'm the Unpredictable everyone knows and can use as a poster child.

But I didn't ask for that. Fuck knows I don't want attention. Not for the first time, I wish Dmitri had been in the Trials instead of me... except he's under enough pressure from his parents already.

“Unpredictables are essentially ticking bombs,” Harvard-Boy concludes. “They're way too powerful—and they think they should just be able to walk around unregulated? What if we said ‘hey, anyone who wants to can buy an assault disintegration wand’? But nobody can, because they're illegal and to be used only by Circuit special force officers in the case of magical *war*. But we've got a girl in that video with the stone towers who is clearly using disintegration magic, wielding it like it's nothing. And that's somehow okay?”

Cam closes the video.

I'm practically shaking with rage, and I think he can feel it where I'm pressed up against his side.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

We're not objects, first of all. His whole premise assumes that we're inanimate, that we don't have bodily autonomy or thoughts and feelings of our own. *We're not talking about a goddamn wand—we're talking about a human person!* This is *my* body, *my* mind, *my* magic.

Nobody should be allowed to tell me what I can and can't do with it.

"Well." Asher speaks mildly into the silence. "This is bullshit."

"You can say that again," I snarl. "Did nobody see what Johnson did to me? Or are they all just willing to forget that? I'll bet you anything he had proper clearance for all the shit he had on him that made him so powerful, and nobody thought anything was wrong with him until he was literally trying to kill me."

I can't sit still. Especially after working at quarter speed all through Combat class, I've got too much energy pent up inside me. I leap off the bench and start to pace before I explode.

"I mean, sure, taking out some of his charms helped me defeat him, made him weaker—but how is that any different from clocking me upside the head? I have a sonic boom, I'm not indestructible. I can bruise or break just like anyone else, I get tired and hungry just like anyone else. It's ridiculous! Regular magic isn't any more safe or dangerous than Unpredictable magic, because assholes like Johnson can find ways to take advantage of the system, and they can find ways to use magic dangerously just like any Unpredictable could!"

I'm working myself up into a full on rant now, practically yanking my hair at the roots like a crazy person. But I'm fucking pissed.

"Regular magic users aren't any more trustworthy than Unpredictables! Your magic doesn't define who you are as a person, and the fact that they're acting like we're bombs, we're objects, we're—we're weapons and not people—"

"Come on, Sin. Tell us how you really feel," Cam throws in, one side of his mouth tilting up. "Don't hold back."

I stop pacing to flip him off, but his joke has the desired effect—I smile and take a deep breath, calming down a bit and saving myself from devolving into a screaming rant in public.

“Did—did you guys watch the panel?”

The guys and I look over to see Kendal standing a few feet away, her books held in front of her, chewing nervously on her lip. She’s still pretty shy, but she’s been eating meals with us more, smiling and waving at me in the hallways, and generally coming out of her shell.

Maybe she still seems timid by most people’s standards, but the Kendal I knew last year could barely look people in the eye. She just followed Alyssa around like a shadow, kept her head down, and nodded when she was told.

Now, she makes eye contact, she smiles, she does her own thing. She’s dressing in her own style and she’s eating lunch with different people.

I’m weirdly proud of her.

“Yeah, we just watched it.” Cam sighs, tucking his phone away. “It’s pretty infuriating.”

Kendal nods. “My parents are really upset.”

“They support Unpredictables?” I arch a brow in surprise.

Kendal nods again. “Yes. They’re very competitive people, and when I manifested Unpredictable magic and was barred from competing in magical competitions like my sister—there are lots of rules and things—they were super upset. I didn’t want to compete anyway, I’m not... I don’t care that much about winning.”

I remember Kendal telling me something along those lines when she helped me with the Trials last year. The event was cancelled this year due to the mess the last one turned into, but there are a lot of similar magical competitions that people compete in like sports, both as amateurs and as professionals for sponsorships and prize money.

“My parents care though. They were furious that I couldn’t compete because of my type of magic. They’ve been campaigning for years for Unpredictables to be treated the same as anyone else. They’re different from... from a lot of other parents that way.”

Dmitri goes stiff, but I know that Kendal’s not thinking of his parents—she’s probably thinking of Alyssa, Megan, and Cristina’s. I don’t know details but I do know from Cam that there’s a lot of pressure from Unpredictables in good families to marry into another powerful family to make up for the fact that they’re Unpredictable and can’t advance in our magical society the same way.

Yeah, it’s really fucked up.

“I’m glad your parents are supportive,” I tell Kendal as Asher stands up, jerking his chin toward the dining hall to remind us all that we need to get lunch.

We start walking together, the five of us, with the three guys surrounding us two girls. It’s our usual arrangement—ever since I became kind of notorious at this damn school, the guys sort of circle around me to try and protect me from people coming up and bothering me.

“I just don’t know what we’re going to do,” Kendal admits. “My parents are angry, but I’m scared.”

As we head toward the dining hall, I can see the tower in the woods beyond. It’s tall enough by now that it looms above the trees, visible even from a distance. In fact, it’s taller now than it was yesterday.

A shiver runs through me.

Then we step inside the building, and it’s like a cold grip on my lungs has been released and I can breathe again.

“They’re scary, aren’t they?” Kendal whispers.

I nod. I hate to admit my fear, but I know that however worried I might be, Kendal is doubly so.

“We’re going to figure out who’s behind this,” I assure her.

The pretty redhead looks doubtful. “Whoever they are, they’re powerful. I wonder... sometimes I wonder if it’s the government looking for a reason to crack down on us, just so people stop getting mad at them for not doing anything.”

I admit, it’s not as crazy of a conspiracy theory as some might think. But given that I know there was one person behind the three previous attacks on this school...

Of course, I can’t say that to Kendal. Hardwick told that information to me in confidence.

So instead I say, “Whoever’s doing this, they’re going to an awful lot of trouble, and they’ve got a hell of a lot of resources at their fingertips.”

She nods, her eyes getting wider. “That’s why I was thinking it had to be the government. Who else but the High Circuit could have so much power and so many resources to pull this off?”

“Maybe it’s the work of another demon? Something like that bird, but more powerful?” Cam hazards. “Or we could have a traitor in our midst like with Raul.”

“Ugh, don’t say that. Now I’m going to be paranoid,” I groan, only half-joking.

“Predictable or Unpredictable,” Asher says, “magic or no, there will always be dangerous people out there.”

“Psychos, you mean,” Dmitri corrects.

“I’m not sure they’re all what we would call insane,” Asher replies, his voice level. “But they’re dangerous. It’s not about what type of power you have, or how strong that power is. It’s about how you think about yourself and other people. It’s about your worldview.”

He slips his hand into mine as we head toward the line for food.

“Whoever’s attacking us,” he says softly, “I don’t know if they genuinely hate us or if they just want to create chaos and take advantage of the fallout, or if they want to take control somehow. But whatever their reason, I don’t think what kind of magic they have matters. I think what matters is figuring out what they *want*. That’s the only way we’ll be able to guess their next move.”

He pauses, and he’s got his cuff on so he can’t read my mind, but he manages to say exactly what I’m thinking anyway.

“Because unless we find them and stop them, it’s clear they’re not going to quit until they get what they want.”

And whatever this person wants—it can’t be anything good.

CHAPTER 16

The next week is weird, to say the least.

Everyone's on edge. Usually, when I walk across campus, I can hear laughter and easy conversation and see people teasing each other, couples making out, or people sitting on the benches in the quad trying to soak up whatever sunshine they can. It's full of vibrant life.

Not this week.

Nobody stays outside for long. People move in groups, but silently. Everyone avoids the towers, but you can see people glancing at them from the corners of their eyes, scared and watchful.

It's like we've transplanted to a completely different place, to a funeral instead of a college. The Circuit might not be here, the angry parents and the magical talk show panelists might not be here, but we can feel them anyway.

Cam and I have adjusted our running route to avoid the tower in the woods. So far, the stone towers haven't done anything besides grow and look ominous, but we don't want to take any chances. There's only so much we can do to avoid the two towers that are smack in the middle of campus—one near the faculty housing and one behind Wellwood Hall—but we do our best to skirt around them.

Everyone copes differently. I throw myself into my schoolwork to make sure I'm on top of that, if nothing else. I've always done well with the book-learning side of things, research and writing papers and all that. For the first few semesters, I struggled with the more hands on stuff, but I'm getting a lot better at that too—even learning how to control my mirroring

power more effectively, although I only get to practice it in my Practical Magic class.

Ramping up my focus on schoolwork not only helps my grades, it also helps me feel like things are somewhat normal around here. Homework is the one constant that we have, even as everything else threatens to fall apart.

Different professors handle it all differently. Tamlin's clearly taking the "prepare my class for anything" route. Professor Goldstein, on the other hand, decides to take the "get everyone having fun to distract them" route.

Which is why, on a Friday afternoon in late November, I find myself dressed as David Bowie.

Yeah, you heard me. I'm going full Ziggy Stardust on this, and considering that I'm a woman and look nothing at all like him, I think I manage to pull it off pretty well.

Kendal's in the same class as I am and dressed as Cher. Goldstein teaches History of Magic, and today we're supposed to give presentations "in character" as magical people who've become famous in the human world.

Generally, magic users are supposed to keep a low profile in society. Even people with magical training can sometimes lose control at a vital moment, or someone just might walk in at the wrong time and see us casting a spell or something.

That hasn't stopped magical people from becoming famous anyway.

Not every powerful or gifted person throughout history has been magical. The further back in time you go, the harder it is to determine whether someone was magical or not, because records don't exist like we have today. Apparently, there's fierce debate in the historical magical community over whether or not certain people like Joan of Arc were actually magic users.

Some students are really challenging themselves and are doing presentation on figures like Richard the Lionheart. But Kendal and I decided we were going to go with people we actually know for certain had or have magic.

David Bowie was one of them. His final project for his magical academy was apparently a study on fairies, which makes his film *Labyrinth* make a lot more sense.

Kendal is presenting as Cher, another magical person—an illusionist. Both of them used magic to make their performances on stage even more spectacular and to give their voices an edge, but it's subtle enough that non-magical people haven't noticed. Magical people who start to become famous in the human world come under intense scrutiny from the Circuit to make sure they're not abusing their power or using it in ways that non-magical people would notice.

In any case, Kendal's gone all out just like I have, with a long black wig and makeup and a signature outfit. We're laughing a little as we enter class because we look a bit ridiculous, but in the best kind of way.

Everyone else is dressed up too, because Goldstein made "wardrobe accuracy" a heavily weighted part of our grade, and Kendal and I end up having a good time, laughing and trying to guess who's dressed as whom. People have really put a lot of work into this, and as I listen to the laughter and chatter bounce around the room, I can't help but think this is exactly why Goldstein insisted on the costumes.

We all needed a little break from the anxiety and stress.

When it's our turn, Kendal and I get up together and head to the front of the class. Not all the presentations are being done in pairs, but our chosen subjects were contemporaries, although Bowie has since passed away, and it just made sense for Kendal and me to do ours together. Kendal gets stage fright pretty easily, no surprises there, so it helps her feel more comfortable too.

My English accent is horrible, and the moment I start speaking, the class is stuffing their hands over their mouths to keep from laughing. I actually have a lot more fun with it than I'd thought. After we give our report to the class, I do the whole dance from *Labyrinth* with Kendal as my "bride". And even though I'm 5'8", she's taller than I am right now in her super high Cher heels, so it's even funnier.

I pretend to try and dip her, and Kendal dramatically falls to the floor with a fake cry of exaggerated pain. Everyone laughs.

Professor Goldstein loves over the top stuff like this, and the students who came before us weren't quite as enthusiastic about their costumes and presentation, so I know for sure we'll get an 'A'.

I high-five Kendal as we sit back down and listen to the rest of the class give their presentations. Ours was the funniest, for sure. I don't think of

myself as a comedian, but just having fun with the work can go a long way toward making other people have fun with it too.

“We look ridiculous,” Kendal notes as class ends and we head out of the classroom. Other students are staring at us, knowing that we obviously did this for some class project, but not sure exactly what. “Oof. I can’t wait to change out of these heels.”

“Hey, you were great. You really got into it.”

“That’s because I had a partner. Thanks for going up with me.”

“Yeah, sure. It was fun.” I elbow her gently and Kendal gives me a brilliant smile. I think this is the first time that I’ve seen her give a full-on smile, teeth showing and everything, and my heart warms for her. Maybe it’s the big sister instinct in me, even though we’re the same age, but I’m just so glad—more than I would’ve thought—to see Kendal coming out of her shell like this.

I hold out my arm dramatically. “Shall we head back to the dorms, milady?” I say in my horrible attempt at a posh British accent.

Kendal laughs and takes my arm. “I need your help balancing anyway!”

We walk through the halls and bow and strike poses for our classmates as they stare at us, making people laugh. It feels good to bring people a little joy, even if it’s ridiculous joy, and even if it only lasts for a moment. If nothing else, it’s giving them something to talk about besides the towers and our impending doom.

We’ve just turned the corner to exit through the main doors on the first floor of Wellwood Hall when we find that our way out is blocked.

Kendal freezes, and I nearly trip when I try to keep moving forward and can’t because our arms are still linked.

A group of official looking people in suits are entering the building. And they look like they mean business—bad business.

My stomach tightens and twists, tensing up immediately. Are they from the Circuit? I scan the group, but I don’t see Aurora.

Aurora’s the woman who came to our house when Maddy got her powers and visited me in the hospital after my Unpredictable magic sparked. I don’t exactly trust her, but I’d prefer a familiar face over these strangers. A member of the school’s administration department is trailing behind them, raising his hand and voicing some kind of protest.

I can’t be sure, but this feels a lot like a hostile takeover.

Kendal's still taller than I am in her heels but she shrinks behind me. I can't blame her. These guys do not look fun. Everyone's scurrying out of the way, pressing themselves against the walls, staring wide-eyed and scared.

And then I do see a familiar face.

Honestly, though, I'd rather take Aurora. Because this face?

This face is gonna get a punch in the mouth if he isn't careful.

He's leading the group, because of course he is, and I gently detach myself from Kendal so I can plant myself right in front.

That, *finally*, gets the group of whoever the hell these people are to stop.

Everyone in the entry hall is staring, knowing a showdown of some kind is about to happen, but unsure as to what, or why.

I raise my chin up and look the man before me dead in the eyes.

"Hey, Dad."

CHAPTER 17

The man in front of me is polished, wearing a sleek dark suit. Everything about him is meticulously groomed, from his dark brown hair to his cleanly shaven face to his perfectly straight tie. He looks like he stepped off the cover of a magazine. I can understand why Mom fell for him—he's a good-looking bastard—but the way he looks right now throws me off. It reminds me of Dmitri's father. They have that same calculating air about them.

It makes my stomach twist.

My father blinks at me in surprise, taking me in, and I realize I'm still in my fucking Bowie costume. What was fun a moment ago now feels humiliating and ridiculous, and I quickly yank off my wig, revealing my natural hair underneath.

I think that helps him realize who I am, because I see his shoulders relax a little. He looks different from when I last saw him, and that was when I was ten years old, so I can't imagine how much different I look to him. He left a small child behind, and now I'm a goddamn adult.

It's definitely him, though. There are too many features I remember, some of them ones I see when I look in the mirror every morning. I've always disliked that. Not that I was cursed in the gene pool because of him or anything, but I did not, of all things, need a daily reminder of the bastard who abandoned my mom, my sister, and me.

Everyone's staring—my dad's colleagues, Kendal, random students in the hall. I'm angry, my hands are shaking a little, and I could punch him, but I'm also hugely embarrassed. We're the center of attention, and now my family's dirty laundry is out there for the world to see.

I suppose it's my fault. I could've just let him walk by and not said hello. I doubt he would've recognized me in my getup. But I've done it now and there's no changing it.

We stare at each other for an uncomfortably long time, until I remember that I should probably say something. I clear my throat. "What are you doing here?"

Dad blinks and draws himself up. "I—Elliot, it's so good to see you."

Now I'm the one blinking in surprise. Where is this warm tone coming from?

"I had no idea." Dad gives me a smile that actually looks sincere. "I work for a private consulting firm that liaises with the Circuit on the oversight of unregulated magic. We're here to confirm whether the Unpredictables are building a weapon or some other dangerous object."

My nerves jangle. Given that I'm here, I think it's pretty obvious that the daughter it's "so good to see" is also Unpredictable. Unless he's just dumb enough he hasn't realized that.

Dad's a lot of things, but I don't remember him being an idiot.

"Honestly, this is such a lucky day." He puts his hands on my arms and I have to suppress an instinctive flinch. Not that Dad ever hit us or anything, but I'm not big on random people touching me and this man might as well be a random person for all he's been in my life. I don't know what to do with this unexpected display of warmth.

"I'm so glad we ran into each other. Once this meeting is over, would you be able to speak with me? I've missed you and Maddy terribly."

Didn't miss us enough to come and help out after Mom died, I want to say, but I keep my mouth shut. I'm not going to have a family blowup in front of all of my classmates and my dad's stuck-up colleagues.

"What meeting are you going to?" I ask instead.

"Oh, I just have to speak with the dean briefly, don't trouble yourself about it." Dad smiles. "But you'll wait, won't you? It'll be so good to catch up, I want to hear about everything."

Well, see, first I grew up without you, and then I had to raise my sister all by myself, barely scraping by to make rent...

I have no idea what to actually say, though. Everything I think of turns into an argument. The last thing I want to do is talk with him, but if I say no, he'll want to know why... and we'll land back in an argument again.

To my own frustration, I find myself nodding.

“Wonderful.” Dad squeezes my shoulders and then lets go of me. “We can meet on one of the benches outside, the one right by the door?”

I nod again, and then he’s sweeping past me like a king on his way to his next audience, knowing that everyone’s just hanging around waiting on him. His colleagues follow, and before I know it, I’m left standing alone in the middle of the hallway.

Another hand lands on my arm and I jump in surprise, turning to see Kendal there.

Oh, right. Jesus. I completely forgot she was here.

“Hey.” She gives a tentative smile. “You okay?”

I nod and swallow. My throat feels like sandpaper. “Yeah, thanks.”

“Do you want me to wait with you?”

“No.” I twist the Bowie wig up between my hands. “Thanks. I’ll just... I’m fine.”

Kendal bites her lip like she wants to argue. But then she nods. She gives my arm a gentle squeeze before she turns and walks away, wobbling a little in her platform heels. I move slowly, shoving open the heavy entry door and walking down the steps. I sit on the bench, feeling useless and confused, my stomach in knots. I could’ve let her wait with me, and I appreciate that she offered to stay, but I want privacy for this.

Oddly enough, of all the things my dad could ask about, I hope it’s not my love life. I’m not letting him anywhere near my guys.

It takes about half an hour, and I’m just starting to wonder if I’m the idiot who’s been stood up by her absentee father, when he reappears.

Fuck. Here goes nothing.

Dad sits down next to me. “Elliot.” He says my name like it’s something magical, and he’s looking at me like I’m the eighth wonder of the world. “You look beautiful. So grown up.”

Yeah, that kind of happens when time passes.

“Is this your first year?” he asks. “Your second? Third? I thought you didn’t have magic; this is amazing. And where’s Maddy? Is she all right?”

“She’s fine.” My throat is so tight it’s hard to speak. “She’s at her own school.”

“Oh? What kind of magic does she have?”

Jesus. You could just call and ask her, I think. Instead I answer politely. The whole conversation, I force myself to be polite. Dad’s warm, funny, charming, asking a ton of interested questions and praising me—for my

grades, for my magic, for my hard work, for my care of Maddy. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was all genuine.

But I do know better.

Dad's always been like this. Mom would tell so many stories when we were little, about how Dad knew everyone in the city, how he would get them into bars and exclusive events for free, how he was the life of every party. He knows just how to make people think he cares, in the moment at least.

But if he really cared, he would've been there. He wouldn't have left. He would've taken care of Maddy and me after Mom died. He would have at least sent a check so we were looked after financially. Hell, I know he can afford it. This whole caring routine is a fake out, and I'm screaming inside, so angry I want to punch his stupid face over and over and over—

I can't, though.

Dad's powerful, and he knows tons of people. Mom always warned us about that. I asked her once why she didn't put up more of a fuss when Dad left, why she didn't fight him on it or go after him for child support, and she said that it was a battle she'd always lose. Dad had more people on his side, more powerful allies in the Circuit and in magical society.

Unpredictables—including me—are on thin enough ground already. I'm not going to make things harder for myself or Maddy because I gave in to a moment of anger, justified as that anger might be.

I find myself replying to his questions, nodding along, laughing stiffly at his well-timed jokes. I feel numb all over, and sick, and too hot, and cold, and angry, and a little hysterical, all at the same time.

Is this what shock feels like?

"You know, I was so hesitant to take this assignment." Dad gives a long sigh, like he's overworked and reluctant but taking one for the team. Then he smiles at me. "But I'm so glad I did, because now I get to see you."

It's like the last thirteen years don't even exist to him. Like what he did to us was just no big deal, like it can all be swept under the rug with some smooth words and a twenty-minute conversation.

It's worse than if he was actually honest about how he fucked up and tried to apologize, or openly acknowledged it and insisted that he didn't regret a thing. My God, at least own your fucking decisions, you know? Don't just act like you can't even remember what you did.

Dad gives me a hug, and I try not to squirm away from it.

“I have to rejoin my colleagues so we can start doing work on our oversight,” he tells me. “But it was so good to see you, Elliot.”

The moment he leaves, I practically storm back to my dorm. My stomach is in such knots that I almost throw up.

My dad is here. My dad is here to *investigate Unpredictables*.

And today started out so damn well.

CHAPTER 18

The dorm is empty when I step inside. The guys are probably out working on their final projects—they're always in the library or class these days with their senior workload. It hardly matters on some level, with all the insanity going on, but they're determined to get their degrees one way or another, and I admire that determination.

I'm also kind of glad because it means that right now, I'm alone. And as much as I love my guys... I kind of need that at the moment. Just for a little while.

My makeup and costume are clinging to me, the fabric suddenly feeling too tight and scratchy against my skin, so I rip off my clothes and hop in the shower. I turn the water on as hot as I can stand it, scrubbing and scrubbing, losing myself in the warmth of it. Washing off the dirt and sweat and makeup feels almost like washing off the conversation with my dad—at least, on the outside. He's so clean-cut and charming and put together, but there's something slimy about him, and I can feel his hug like an imprint on my skin. I have to scrub hard to make that icky feeling go away.

Even as I start to feel better outside, though, I feel shittier and shittier inside.

Goddammit.

Why didn't I stand up to my dad? Why didn't I demand to know more about his plans for Unpredictables and this school? Why did I just sit there giving him all this information about me, information he doesn't deserve to have, playing along like nothing was wrong?

My breathing is tight and shallow in my chest as I get out and wring the water from my hair. I wrap a towel around myself, feeling too small, my

skin constricting, vulnerable and exposed.

I step out of the bathroom—and jump in surprise, clutching at the towel and my chest.

“Jesus Christ!” I yelp. “You guys scared me.”

Dmitri and Roman both look contrite. “We didn’t mean to,” my dark-haired professor says, getting up and walking over to me. He pulls me into his arms and I cling to him, wondering what the two of them are doing here. Was he helping Dmitri with some school assignment?

“Kendal told us you ran into your father,” Dmitri says from behind him. “She thought you might need someone after you talked to him.”

I feel a rush of gratitude toward Kendal. She didn’t have to go out of her way like that. Roman tightens his hold on me for a second, kissing the top of my head, and then releases me. Dmitri pulls me in next, hugging me with all of his usual intensity, bone-crushingly tight.

“What’s wrong?” Roman asks.

“What did he say?” Dmitri’s voice is a growl and I have every certainty that he’d damn well march across campus and kick my dad’s ass right now if I asked him to.

I pull away, out of his comfortingly tight hug. My stomach is twisting again, the feeling growing worse and worse as I replay the whole thing in my head.

“It’s not what he said. I mean, sure, he acted like nothing was wrong, like we can still be a happy family, whoop-de-doo. But I’m just... I’ve been so goddamn angry at him for so long. Why the fuck didn’t I *do* anything? Why didn’t I—I don’t know—kick him in the nuts?” I sit down on Dmitri’s bed, still in just my towel. “I always told myself I’d give him a piece of my damn mind when I met him, if I ever met him again, and the opportunity came, and I just... went along with him.”

Both men watch me with dark, serious gazes as I run my fingers through my damp hair, shaking my head.

“He got under my skin and I—I don’t know. I guess I was hoping for an apology? Not an explanation, I damn well know there isn’t one, but something... something more than just acting like he’s cared about us all this time when he clearly hasn’t. I promised myself I wasn’t ever going to be, y’know, one of those girls with daddy issues, or any of that stupid cliché shit, and now here I am, still kind of wanting him to love me and still letting him get under my skin.”

The room is silent for a long moment, and I chew on my lip, fighting back the frustrated, angry tears that try to well in my eyes. I'm mad at my dad. I'm mad at myself. I feel lost and untethered.

Then Roman sits down next to me on the bed. "If I recall correctly, we had a deal about you going easier on yourself."

The corner of my mouth tilts up, and I huff a breath. "That was during the Trials."

"I don't remember setting an expiration date." Roman's voice is deep and serious, with a hint of something else that sends a flush of heat over my skin.

Dmitri sits down on my other side. "I mean, if you need the reminder..." His hand lands on my knee, his palm warm and slightly calloused. "We did say we'd revisit the conversation we had in that classroom."

God, I remember that vividly. The two men sandwiched me between them and teased me, worked me up, made me feel helpless in the best kind of way.

I know exactly what they're doing right now, trying to relax me and distract me a bit, get me out of my own head, and maybe we should talk about what happened with my dad a bit more, but also... I've been fantasizing about being with the two of them at once ever since that day in the classroom.

And I really, really want to make that fantasy a reality.

Dmitri's hand slides up my leg, drifting underneath my towel, and I shiver.

"Why don't we remind you how amazing you are? Why you deserve to take care of yourself," Roman murmurs as Dmitri locks eyes with me. There's so much heat in his gaze I feel like I could combust from it.

Roman turns me so that he's behind me, my back to his chest. Then he reaches down and slowly spreads my legs, opening me up like a gift for Dmitri. I'm completely naked beneath the towel, and even though it reached my upper thighs when I was standing up, I know he can see beneath it as Roman's strong hands grip my thighs.

His eyes darken, and the look on his face makes heat pool in my belly.

Oh, holy God, fuck, yes.

I whimper, and the sound draws Dmitri's attention away from my pussy. He licks his lips, moving toward me on the bed, crouching between my

spread legs. I make another low sound as he reaches up and undoes my towel, my pulse and breath picking up as I try not to squirm with anticipation.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs, his gaze trailing down my body. I bite my lip. I want him to touch me, with his hands and his mouth, and I squirm, held still, pinned by Roman’s hands. “You’re gorgeous, Princess. Inside and out.”

“Okay, that was pretty cheesy.” I laugh, but the sound is breathy. His words hit me right in the heart, and somehow, the feeling trickles down to my clit, making sweet energy buzz through my entire body.

“But it worked, didn’t it?” Dmitri chuckles. “And it’s true.”

Roman kisses slowly up my neck. “It’s your father’s loss, not having you in his life. You didn’t fail. He hurt you, and you’re allowed to feel hurt. It doesn’t mean he won. You have plenty of other people who care about you. Cam, Asher, Maddy, Kendal... us...”

He spreads my legs farther and Dmitri licks his lips, clear intent in his gaze as he bends his head down.

Oh, oh, oh, *fuck*.

Dmitri’s never been one to do things by half-measures, so there’s no subtle buildup, no tentative swipes of his tongue. Instead, he buries his face between my legs and ravages my clit, lapping at it like a thirsty cat before clamping his mouth around it and sucking as he swirls just the tip of his tongue around the hard nub.

My back arches, and I reach up behind me to wrap my arms around Roman’s neck, holding onto him as the tide of sensations threatens to drag me away. Without even realizing it, I jutted my chest straight up in the air, and I feel Roman’s growl vibrate through my body before his hands slide up my stomach and palm my breasts, tugging on my nipples as he massages the needy, achy flesh.

His lips find my ear, and he whispers words of praise, telling me how beautiful I am, how perfect I am for him, for Dmitri, how much they both want me.

And all the while, the dark-haired man between my legs *shows* me. Still driving me wild with his tongue, he lifts my legs and drapes my knees over his shoulders. Then he rises up to kneel on the mattress, lifting my ass off the bed and holding onto my thighs to keep my pussy right where he wants it.

“Oh, fuck!” I gasp.

“Hold onto me, Reckless. We’ve got you.” Roman’s voice is a deep rasp in my ear.

My grip around his neck tightens, and with my head resting on his shoulder, he supports my upper body while Dmitri holds my lower half. I’m suspended between them, held up by them as if I weigh nothing, as they worship my body—one with his hands, one with his mouth.

Dmitri stiffens his tongue and thrusts it inside me, alternating between flicking my clit and fucking me with his tongue, and I let out a keening whine that sounds like a fire engine dying. I hear Roman grunt near my ear, and I force my drooping eyelids open to look up at him. He’s watching what Dmitri is doing to me, and the look on his face makes my insides melt into a puddle of liquid heat.

It’s partly possessive jealousy.

And partly pure, raw lust.

I doubt either of these men have ever shared a woman before, and I think on some level, Roman wants to punch Dmitri right now. But on another level, watching the man between my legs, watching what he’s doing to me, is turning Roman on like nothing else.

The hands on my breasts become rougher, more demanding, like he’s trying to make me come that way before Dmitri can wring an orgasm from my pussy.

I arch and jerk and writhe mid-air, trying to both escape from and demand more of the attention they’re lavishing on me. It’s almost too much, pushing my body to a point where the sensations crashing through me make it hard to breathe, hard to think.

And when Dmitri’s dark gaze flicks up to me, locking with mine as he works my clit with demanding strokes, I stop doing either.

My breath suspends in my lungs and my mind shuts down completely as my muscles lock up. I hold onto Roman so tight I’m sure he’ll have little finger-shaped gouges in his upper back.

“That’s it. Come for us, Reckless. Come on Dmitri’s face,” he growls in my ear.

And I do.

Hard.

Every atom in my body feels like it flies apart as white spots dance in my vision and pleasure cascades through me. I cry out, and Roman

swallows the sound with a punishing kiss, drawing out every whimper and moan as the aftershocks quake through me. When it finally subsides, my body sags a little between them, limp and pliable as a wet noodle.

They set me down gently, but I still feel a little like I'm floating as I sprawl out on the mattress, watching the two gorgeous, dark-haired men slip off the bed and stand above me.

Roman and Dmitri are so similar in some ways, and so different in others. They both have dark hair and chiseled features, but Dmitri's face is a bit more sharply defined and aristocratic, while Roman's is a little rougher and more rugged. Roman's eyes are a piercing cobalt blue with little specks of silver you only notice up close, while Dmitri's are so dark they sometimes look black.

They're both gruff and stoic.

They both have huge hearts they can't quite hide.

And they're both dominant as fuck when they want to be.

A little shiver of anticipation makes my body quake as they both gaze down at me with serious expressions, desire blazing in their eyes.

I just had one of the most intense orgasms of my life, but I know they're nowhere near finished with me.

Roman is the one to move first, stripping off his shirt before flicking open the button on his pants and sliding them down his hips, revealing his straining erection.

Dmitri is in motion a half second later, and by the time Roman is naked, the man beside him is kicking off his last shoe.

Oh, holy shit.

The sight before me is just too fucking good to ignore, so I force my limp body to move, crawling toward the edge of the bed until I can grasp both their cocks in my hands. They let out twin growls of warning and satisfaction as I pump their shafts slowly, and I hide a grin at the similarities of their reactions.

They let me work them for a few moments, and I can see their control start to strain before Dmitri wraps his hand around my wrist, the grip hard as steel but not painful.

"Uh uh, Princess. The deal we made was about you, not us."

I'm about to argue that the deal should really include all three of us, because this is turning me on like nobody's business, but before I can say anything, he swoops down to claim my lips in a fierce kiss. He keeps

kissing me as he lays me back down on the bed, and I feel the mattress shift as Roman joins us.

Four hands roam my body, and I lose track of which hand belongs to which man, losing myself in the hypnotic sensations.

As Dmitri breaks the kiss, Roman growls in my ear, “Do you trust us?” I nod without hesitation, blinking up at the two of them.

Yes. Always.

“Good girl. Turn over. Hands and knees.”

The deep rumble of his voice makes goose bumps rise on my skin, and I roll over, pressing up to my hands and knees in the middle of the bed.

I can feel Dmitri’s hands gliding over my ass cheeks, squeezing and groping them possessively. Roman is on his knees in front of me, and he reaches out to cup my chin in one large hand, tilting my head up slightly to look at me.

“Can you take us both at the same time? Will you let me have your gorgeous mouth while Dmitri fucks you?”

Oh, Jesus Christ.

Someday I’m gonna have to make Roman just sit by my bed and say dirty things to me and see how long it takes for me to come from his words alone.

Then again, if he’s anywhere near me when he starts talking like that, there’s no way I won’t end up jumping him.

He’s still waiting for an answer, his grip on my chin firm as his blue eyes blaze with possessive warmth and desire. I press against his hold on me as I nod, my gaze still locked with his.

Fuck yes, I can. That sounds so hot I can already feel my clit throbbing again.

“Yes,” I gasp.

“Good girl.”

He drops his head to claim a kiss from my lips, and as he straightens, I notice his other hand is already wrapped around his shaft, stroking it in long, even pulls. He must’ve taken over when I stopped, and the sight of it makes me bite my lip, straining toward him a little, eager to wrap my lips around it. I want to be the one giving him pleasure, and I want Dmitri to find his pleasure in my body too.

Roman moves a little closer to me, and I throw a look over my shoulder at Dmitri as he fists his cock too. One hand is still kneading my ass roughly,

and I have a feeling he's already on the edge, as incredibly turned on by all of this as I am.

He watches me with glittering dark eyes, holding his shaft poised at my entrance, and I know what he's waiting for.

I turn around and pull Roman's cock into my mouth, wrapping my lips around the thick girth—and as soon as I do, Dmitri plunges into me from behind. I gasp around Roman, swirling my tongue over his broad head as the man behind me sets a hard, steady pace, drawing out almost entirely before slamming back in. He thrusts over and over, and every time his pelvis collides with my ass, my body rocks forward and my lips slide farther down on Roman's cock.

Roman's cobalt eyes are half-lidded and unfocused as he wraps my still-damp hair around his fist, pulling it out of my way and using the hold to gently guide my movements. He's not yanking me around by my hair or anything, but the slight sting in my scalp only ratchets up the tension gathering in my body.

"She's tight. And so fucking wet," Dmitri grunts from behind me, his fingers digging into my hips as he rocks me forward and back onto his cock.

He's not wrong. I can feel slickness trailing down my thighs, can hear it in the way our bodies slap together.

But he's *telling* Roman, telling him how it feels to be buried inside me in this moment—and something about that is so hot it makes my entire body start to shake, the mother of all orgasms bearing down on me like I'm an old-timey damsel tied to a train track.

Roman's cock thickens in my mouth, and he starts thrusting against my pumps, hitting the back of my throat as I try to relax my jaw.

"She's close." He's gazing down at me with such dominant possession in his eyes I can barely take it. "Aren't you, Reckless? Do you want to come?"

My mouth is a little busy right now, so instead of trying to speak, I just nod, a tiny jerk of my chin. But it's enough. He grunts, running the thumb of one hand over my cheekbone as he looks back at Dmitri.

"Make our girl come. And make it fucking good."

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

I'm spiraling, spinning out, losing the battle against the tidal wave rising up inside me. When Dmitri's hand slips around my waist, brushing over my

stomach before finding my clit, I scream around Roman's cock. And when he starts to move his fingers in quick pulses, it's all over.

My body shakes from head to toe, and I honestly worry for a second that I'll ruin this whole thing by collapsing to the mattress in a heap—but Dmitri's hold on my hips and Roman's hand in my hair steady me, helping me stay on all fours as the two men curse and groan, jerking their hips.

Dmitri slams into me one last time just as Roman grunts out, "Elliot! Fuck."

I take that as the warning it is, and when he explodes in my mouth, I suck and suck and and suck, then swallow.

And then I do collapse, letting go of Roman's cock and sliding off of Dmitri's as my body melts into the bed. Roman pulls me into his arms, wrapping them tightly around me and pressing my back to his front as he kisses my hair. Dmitri kneels before us, breathing hard.

He gives me a satisfied smirk, his skin flushed and his hair a bit disheveled.

"A deal's a deal, Princess. Will you cut yourself some slack now?"

"Or do you need another reminder?" Roman rumbles from behind me.

Well, when they put it that way...

CHAPTER 19

By the time Cam and Asher come back, the three of us have finished round two and managed to clean ourselves up a bit. All my muscles feel like stretched out rubber bands, in the best way possible. I'm wearing pajama bottoms and a t-shirt, and we're watching an action movie on Dmitri's laptop, my head in his lap and the rest of my body draped over Roman's.

"Well, well, well. I see that while some of us were being hardworking students and getting our homework done," Cam loudly and teasingly proclaims, "*some* people were having fun."

Dmitri lazily flips him off.

"Did you three have a good time?" Asher says, and he sounds perfectly polite, like he's genuinely asking—but then I see the gleam in his eyes, and I know he's enjoying teasing us as much as Cam is.

I don't want to ruin the fun, and I don't mind their teasing... and I should probably find a way to be more tactful about it, but I don't know how, so I just blurt out like an idiot, "My dad's on campus."

Asher is so surprised he drops his notebook. "*What?*"

"Daniel Sinclair is in charge of the task force brought in to independently investigate the Unpredictable behavior," Roman explains. *Oh, right.* Hardwick must've told him and the rest of the staff what's going on. "They're here to determine if we're really criminals or not."

"Ah, shit, Sin." Cam folds his arms. "Want me to go beat him up for you?"

I laugh softly. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm okay."

"Okay, if you're sure."

I sit up as Cam walks over, and he hugs me tightly before plopping down near Dmitri's feet on the floor. Asher comes over next and pets my hair, kissing the top of my head.

All this affection definitely helps—as did the multiple orgasms. I would be a hell of a lot more fragile if I was trying to get through this without people around me that I cared about, who cared about me in return.

We end up sort of in a pile, all of us facing the screen where the movie's still playing, but not really watching it.

“He's seriously investigating to see if we're, what, evil?” Cam asks.

I nod. “I don't think he likes Unpredictables that much.” My stomach turns over. “The way he said the word—you just get a feel for it, you know?”

“The world is still trying to find a way to blame us for this,” Dmitri mutters.

“We don't even know what ‘this’ is!” Cam points out. “They're towers. I mean, I don't doubt there's more to them than that, but what are people blaming us for? They're just piles of stones.”

“They'll take any excuse,” I say, and I hate that I truly believe that.

The world is against us, and not even our own campus is safe.



My dad and his team remain at Griffin Academy for a few days.
Yippee.

I don't know the details—nobody does except maybe Hardwick, and he hasn't said anything—but they're doing their own tests and diagnostics on the towers and other parts of campus. I don't know what they expect to find that nobody else has, but there you have it. I guess they just need to be able to tell the Circuit they checked every nook and cranny.

And when I say *every* nook and cranny, boy do I mean it.

They're poking around the school grounds, even in buildings you wouldn't think would have anything to do with this, in our dorm rooms and the sports shed and the astronomy tower. Every time I see him, even from a distance, I want to throw up. Dad's still acting like everything is fine between us in that jovial “love you honey, but not now, Daddy's working”

kind of way you act with your two-year-old when they want you to take a break and play horsey rides with them.

I have to tell Maddy about it. Of course I do. I can't keep something like this secret from her.

Maddy was six when Dad left, so she barely remembers him—and what she does remember is that he was at work a lot.

And she's, well, furious.

"He *what?!?*" she shrieks into the phone. "Oh, you put him on the line, you hear me, Ellie?! You find him and put him on the line, and I'm gonna tell him exactly the kind of snake oil rat bastard he is, coming in there like that and acting like everything was fine—acting like he had no idea you could be there. Where is he pretending he was all this time, the depths of Siberia?! A remote Alaskan fishing village?! He could've looked us up any time and asked how we were doing! I can't believe you have to deal with that fucking asshole!"

My sister never talks like this about anyone. Ever. This is how *I* talk about people. Maddy's the one with a kind word and an alternate perspective. But not right now. Right now, she is the definition of fuming, and it amuses me like nothing else.

"Why are you laughing?" she demands. "This isn't funny, Ellie! I'm gonna rip him to shreds!"

"It's nothing," I assure her. "I'm just—I'm proud of you, Mads. I just want you to know that."

"What, for being a decent person and recognizing that our dad is shit?" she replies, fire still sparking in her voice.

It strikes me as funny that Maddy's acting how I would normally act, how I thought I *would* act when it comes to my dad. I'm acting how I'd always thought she would—hoping against hope that my dad would be better than he's actually shown himself capable of being.

But then, even if I've disappointed myself a little... I'm glad that this is Maddy's response. I'm truly proud of her, and if nothing else, I think I did an okay job of raising her.

Out of all my mistakes and fumbling, I got one thing right. The most important thing.

CHAPTER 20

Finally, fucking *finally*, my dad and his team wrap up. It's been a damn week, how long does it take a team to research and find that we're innocent and have no goddamn clue what's going on?

I kind of wish I could strangle him, honestly. Ugh.

Dad wants to wish me farewell as he's leaving. As if he'll actually stay in touch this time or something. *Ha*. I want to tell him "don't let it be another ten years before we speak again", but I'm not sure I have the courage to start an argument right as he's leaving.

But as it turns out, I don't have to.

I walk up to the quad to say goodbye, wondering what to say, how to really stick it to him, if I'm even capable of that—and then up walk my guys. All four of them.

Huh.

"Mr. Sinclair." Roman's the first one up, because of course he is. He's the oldest of us and a professor here, which gives him a little bit of an edge authority-wise. "It's a pleasure to meet the father of my prize student."

His... *what?*

The bastard gave me a B last semester!

Dad shakes Roman's hand, smiling warmly at him as he cranks out his usual charm. "Always good to meet the people who've been looking after my girl."

"Oh, Elliot doesn't need looking after." Roman's smile is sharp as a knife. "She learned from an early age how to handle herself on her own just fine."

Oh. My. God.

“She’s remarkably resilient,” Roman goes on. “A hard worker, and much more talented than she likes to let on.”

“I’m... so glad to hear it,” Dad says, but I know he can tell what Roman’s really saying.

“You know, we had her and Maddy spend the break with us,” Cam adds. “Bright young thing, Maddy. Great girl. I bet she was adorable as a kid. Just the sort of person you’re lucky to have in your life, pure sunshine, know what I mean?”

Of course, Dad doesn’t know what Cam means; he hasn’t seen Maddy since she was still playing with stuffed animals.

“It’s a real pity,” Asher says. “The idea that people have missed out on getting to know them. People here are finally starting to see how amazing Elliot is and she’s getting her due. I can’t imagine what it would be like to *not* know her. What a loss that would be. She’s kind of the best part of this campus.”

Holy shit. Asher—peaceful, mediating, patient Asher—looks like he wants to take a swing at my dad.

So does Dmitri, actually, but that’s... less surprising.

Instead of lashing out with a fist though, he just raises an eyebrow at my dad. “Pleasure to meet you,” he says, and suddenly his voice doesn’t sound like its usual grumpy growl. It sounds polished, sharp, aristocratic—like his father’s. “I’m Dmitri Mikhailov. I’ve heard a lot about you from my father.”

My jaw nearly drops open. Dmitri *hates* his father, and here he is playing the snob card?! Using his family name to intimidate my dad?

Dad recognizes the name. I can see it on his face. He must know who Dmitri is, who his father is, because his smile falters just a bit. “Ah, of course. I’ve met him. Fascinating man.”

“A man with a lot of friends,” Dmitri replies.

Okay, wow, um, holy shit? The four of them are rubbing my dad’s face in the mud, and I’m kind of living for it.

But I can’t just stand back here like a damsel in distress while the guys fight my battles for me. I’m the one who needs to tell my dad to shove it.

Except—do I?

Why would I bother letting him see that he upset me? He obviously hasn’t cared about Maddy and me all this time. Why should I give him the satisfaction of knowing he stirred me to anger?

I walk up to him, standing up straight and tall, my chin set.

“It was nice to see you,” I tell him, because in a way it’s true. Seeing him clarified some things for me. “It was good to get confirmation that I don’t need you.”

Dad’s eyes go wide, and some color appears on his face, like he’s fighting not to show his anger and embarrassment. “Excuse me?”

“I have really good people in my life. I’m glad you were able to meet them so you can see how well I’m being supported. They care about me and push me to be better, and they celebrate who I am. I’ve built a good life for myself, and for Maddy, and I’m glad you got to see that so you really believe me when I tell you I don’t need you in my life, and that you can stay out of it. Just like you have for the past thirteen years.”

Dad looks scandalized; his gaze darts around, like he’s making sure nobody can overhear this and gossip about him. *Yeah, must really sting, knowing people could start saying shit about you.* Now he knows how Mom felt after he left her.

It’s also pretty pathetic, when you think about it. His daughter is telling him to stay out of her life, and all he seems to be worried about is his reputation.

“I...” Dad does look a little ashamed, his gaze settling back down on me. “Yes. Well. If that’s how you really feel.” For once, he doesn’t sound confident and smooth, he sounds stiff and a little put out.

It feels damn good to see that smooth facade finally crack a little.

“It is,” I confirm. “Have a safe drive. Goodbye.”

Last time, when he left—I didn’t get to say that. One day he was there, then I went to school and came home, and he was gone. Never came back.

I underestimated how good it would feel to say that one little word.

Dad’s colleagues are waiting for him a short distance away, looking curious as to what he’s talking with me about. He turns and walks back over to them, and they all get into their cars and head out—and I feel a weight lifting off my chest that I’d forgotten was there.

For so long, I’ve carried what my father did. I did my best not to let it define me, but it was there around my shoulders, weighing me down. And now—now at last, it’s over.

I got to say what I wanted to say, I got to have some closure. I got to have the last word. And he didn’t have to see me cry or rage, I didn’t have to give him any power. I can finally let go of the part of me I didn’t know was there, buried under the anger—the part that still, like Maddy always

did, hoped he'd do better. Without even knowing it, I'd hoped that he would realize what a mistake he'd made and come crawling back, wanting to fix things, ready to do better.

That he'd want to redeem himself.

Instead, he just thought he could rely on his charm to dazzle me while he was here and put on a good show of being a parent for a week before he swept back out of my life again.

Well, you know what? That's okay. My dad hasn't redeemed himself, and he probably never will. But who needs him?

I grew up all on my own, and I don't think I turned into all that bad of a person while I was at it. I raised Maddy, and I *know* she's a damn good person. I have friends, I have four men who care about me—and give me some insanely good orgasms while they're at it. Hell, I even have some pretty powerful magic to boot. I won the fucking Trials, for crying out loud.

I'm doing more than okay without him.

In fact, I'm doing great.

I turn and grin at the guys—*my* guys, who just went out of their way to stick up for me. “You all really didn't have to do that, you know.”

“Sure we did,” Cam replies with a grin right back at me and a shrug. “What kind of boyfriends would we be if we didn't?”

Roman stares after the spot where my dad walked away. “He needs to know that even if he doesn't appreciate you, there are other people who do, and we're not going to let you be treated like that.”

I kiss each one of them on the cheek.

“Thank you,” I whisper to Dmitri. I know that was a risk for him. His parents could find out about this, and you can bet his dad won't be happy to hear that Dmitri was using his name to stir up trouble with another powerful magic user to protect an Unpredictable, of all people.

“You looked ready to throw down,” Cam teases Asher, who blushes.

“It was nothing,” he mumbles.

I think Roman and Dmitri would pass out if I suggested a group hug, but I do take my turns with each of them, hugging them tightly. They're all gathered around me, relaxed, and for a moment nothing else—not the towers or my father or even exams—exists.

It's just the five of us. Together.

CHAPTER 21

My dad might be an idiot, but at least he's not as bad of an idiot as I'd feared.

The oversight committee has decided that the towers weren't built by the school or by any Unpredictables within the school, citing not only evidence but also simple logic—none of us at Griffin Academy have the knowledge to erect these towers and make them indestructible.

However, like I said, he's still an idiot, so the report also determines that the towers aren't dangerous. The oversight committee has apparently decided—given how convenient it was that there were cameras ready to take footage of Unpredictables trying to destroy the towers, which was then spun into proof of us *creating* them—that someone outside of Griffin set up the towers as a paper tiger to give anti-Unpredictable groups a stronger platform.

I will give them credit, it's a logical conclusion, but the idea that the towers aren't a threat is ludicrous. Just because the structures aren't doing anything at the moment doesn't mean they won't later. They're still growing, still developing—surely that's cause for concern, right? If it was just some dickhead who wanted to make us look bad, that goal has been achieved, which means the towers should've stopped growing. But they haven't.

There's another scheme at work here, one we can't figure out. And all my instincts scream at me that whatever it is, it's sinister, and it isn't over yet.

A week later, I'm vindicated in the worst way.

The towers are finally complete, standing taller than the tallest buildings on campus. And the moment the final stones appear in the merlons at the very tops of the towers, all three buildings begin to glow. It's a strange blue color, as if I can actually see electricity instead of just feel it, like this is what fills the air before lightning strikes.

An odd buzzing, humming kind of noise comes off of them too. It starts out barely audible, but then it grows and grows, and the blue light gets stronger—it's almost like watching a battery charge up.

The administrators and professors immediately go over to see if they can figure out what the towers are doing, but nobody can figure it out.

"It's like they're powering up for something," Roman tells me that evening, "but we can't figure out what it is."

Yeah, that's not terrifying at all.

In light of this, and since we couldn't stop the towers from forming or break them down through any combination of magic, Hardwick calls an assembly.

For once, he's blunt and to the point.

"My dear students." He looks more tired than I've ever seen him. "After much deliberation, it has been decided that we should evacuate the school."

This draws a murmur from the crowd. I can't tell if it's positive or negative.

"While we want to do everything that we can to keep Griffin Academy open and to prevent it from being shut down, your safety comes first, and I cannot in good conscience allow students to stay. Previously, we waited until it was too late to send students away or try to protect them, and I refuse to let that happen this time. And so it is with a heavy heart that I must ask all of you to pack up your essentials."

He straightens his shoulders, keeping his voice measured and even as he speaks.

"Classes are being put on hold. Staff are being asked to please draft up exams that can be done remotely, either through group videos or online or by some other method. We understand that the seniors have worked hard all semester, and we don't want to jeopardize anyone's chances at graduating. Do not pack all of your things—simply pack what you will really need, although we recommend that include your schoolbooks. When the term has officially ended, we can pack your things up for you or possibly look into re-opening the campus so that you can come back yourselves."

Shit. My heart is rapidly sinking into my stomach, and I swear I can feel the acid eating away at it. This is already sounding like a permanent closure.

“Our goal is to handle the evacuation in a timely and orderly fashion, as quickly as possible. I know it’s easy to panic and to get caught up in the mania, but right now the best thing that you can do for yourself and for everyone around you is to be calm. We evacuate tomorrow, and you will need to be signed out by an administrator so we know that you left and weren’t accidentally stuck here.” He gives us a wan smile. “On your marks, get set, go.”

He’s clearly being sarcastic and trying to make a joke, but some people do dart out of their seats like their pants are on fire.

I go right up to Hardwick as the auditorium begins to clear out. “Are we just leaving the school unprotected?”

Hardwick eyes the three guys trailing behind me like shadows and sighs. “Some administration and staff members will be staying behind to do what they can to protect the school. But you must understand, Miss Sinclair, it will be difficult for us to protect ourselves when we don’t know exactly what we’re up against.”

“And so, what, we’re just going to board buses, *c’est la vie*?”

“To keep you all safe, yes. Unpredictables can’t be stopped. They can’t silence us completely and they can never truly stamp us out. We will live on. The school might not, but the school is just brick and mortar. We can find another place, another way, to train Unpredictables.”

I disagree. Not about the whole finding other ways thing, but about this school being just brick and mortar. This is *home* for so many people. It’s become home for me. I don’t want to lose that, and I’m not going to run away from the problem.

How could I live with myself if I stood by while my school fell?

I leave Hardwick and immediately start looking through the crowd for Kendal.

“I’m staying,” I tell the guys, shooting them a look as they surround me like always. “I won’t ask you to stay with me. I know it’s reckless and probably stupid, and I don’t want to force you guys into danger. But please don’t try to talk me out of it. I’m staying here, and I’m fighting.”

The three men glance at each other. “Roman’s gonna have a fit,” Cam says with a grin. “Yeah, I’m staying.”

Asher nods. "Me too."

"What the hell." Dmitri shrugs, but his dark eyes gleam. "I seem to be making a habit out of pissing off my father. Might as well make it a triple play."

I grin at them, relief swelling in my chest. "Then find as many people as you can."

We're going to fight for our school, dammit.

I find Kendal, Tandy, Erin, and Tom, and they find more people, who find more people, and soon we've got a damn good amount of students who want to stick around and fight. If I had to guess, I'd say about a third of us have decided to stay.

Hardwick looks like there's not going to be enough Prozac in the world for him to even remotely deal with this.

Roman, not surprisingly, is against it.

"You're *what*?" he barks as we all gather outside Hardwick's office to give the dean our names. He needs a list so that the staff knows who's leaving and who's staying, in case someone gets lost or hurt.

"We're not leaving," I repeat, crossing my arms over my chest. I care about Roman, and lord knows I love it when he bosses me around in bed, but if he thinks he can talk me out of this, he's in for an unpleasant surprise.

Roman narrows his cobalt eyes at me, then looks at the other three. "And I suppose you're in on this insanity too?"

They all nod, even Dmitri. "We have to do something," he says.

"You're risking your life." Roman's voice hardens as he switches his focus back to me. "Reckless—" His jaw clenches, and he pulls me aside, just far enough so that the others can't hear. When he speaks again, his tone is different. There's something almost... desperate about it. "I can't lose you, Elliot. Don't do this. I need to know that you're safe."

A lump rises in my throat, and I rest my hands on his arms, wishing I could crawl into his embrace and stay there forever—that it would block out everything bad in the world.

But it won't. Sometimes, the only way to stop the bad things is to stand up to them.

"I get that, I do," I whisper. I'd feel the same way if it was Maddy. Hell, I feel that way about the guys all staying. "But I can't leave you to fight this alone, and I couldn't live with myself if I walked away and didn't do anything to help. This school has become my favorite place in the world;

it's given me a home I didn't even know I needed, and I'm going to fight for it. That's my choice, Roman, and you can't take it away from me."

The tall, ruggedly handsome man sighs. I can see a dozen emotions churning behind his eyes, and he cups my face in both hands, gazing down at me like he's trying to memorize me, *preserve* me somehow. Then he dips his head and kisses me once.

"I can't force you to do anything," he tells me as he pulls away, and it's not exactly an agreement, but I have a feeling it's as close to one as I'm going to get.

He hates this.

But he respects me enough to let me make the choice for myself.

And I'm grateful to him for that.



The next morning, while the students who want to leave are evacuating and being taken care of, I take a minute to call Maddy.

I don't want to tell her what's going on. I want her to be safe and happy, and I don't want her to worry. But then, I wouldn't want the guys to keep something dangerous from me, and I wouldn't want Maddy to keep anything like that from me either.

She's still my kid sister and always will be, but she's also an adult, and I need to be honest with her. She's growing up, and even when I try to shelter her, the shitty parts of the world find a way to make themselves known anyway, like that guy while we were out shopping.

I find a quiet corner on the first floor of Wellwood Hall and lean against the wall as I call her.

She picks up almost immediately. "Ellie? How are you? Everything okay?"

"Hey, Mads." I take a deep breath, trying to keep my voice even and calm. "So. The towers are complete, and they've started emitting this crazy... noise. A buzzing sound. It's like they're powering up or something. Like massive batteries."

"What, like they're huge vibrators?"

I burst out laughing, caught off guard by the joke. "Funny."

“I’m hilarious.” I can practically hear her sticking her tongue out at me. Then she sobers. “So what’s going on? What are the admins doing about it?”

“They’re evacuating the school,” I explain. “For our safety.”

“So you’re going back to Roman’s house?”

“No... I’m—I’m staying. We’re all staying. I mean, not the whole school, but the guys and me. A lot of the other students are too. We want to stay and face whatever happens, try to keep the campus protected.”

“Oh.” Maddy’s voice is small and scared.

“I know you want me to be safe, Mads. But I have to stay and help take care of this. I couldn’t live with myself if I just... turned and ran. I don’t blame anyone if they do. I mean, this shit is scary and confusing and it’s the fourth semester in a row we’ve had to deal with it, you know what I mean? Everyone’s fucking exhausted. But I have to stay. I need to stay, for myself.”

There’s a long pause on the other end of the line, and I start to worry that Maddy’s angry. But then she says, her voice a bit choked up, “Okay. I understand.”

“Are you sure, Mads? Talk to me.”

I hear her draw in a shaky breath. “Well, it’s—I’m proud of you, Ellie. I’m just scared too. That’s all. But I’m really proud of you. I think it’s the right thing to do. I wouldn’t leave either if it was me. I just want you to try and...” She struggles to take another deep breath. “I just want you to try and be safe.”

“Oh, Mads, of course I will.” I’m starting to get choked up too now. “You know I’ll always do everything I can to take care of myself. I promised I wouldn’t leave you, and I meant it.”

That’s the promise I made after Mom died—that I would never, ever leave her. Not like Dad did, and not like Mom did.

“We’ll see each other as soon as I finish kicking ass, how’s that sound?” I say, trying to force a bit of lightness into my voice as my vision blurs with tears.

“Okay.” Maddy sounds young and small again. “You promise?”

“I promise. It’ll all be over before you know it, and we can chalk this up to another weird day on this weird ass campus.” I wipe at my eyes. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Once Maddy's hung up, I take another moment to myself.

I'm not scared of dying. I mean, sure, I'd like to stay alive, that would definitely be preferable, but I'm not terrified of whatever will wait for me on the other side. I'm just scared of leaving my sister alone.

Well, I've got no intention of going anywhere.

Time to find out what's going on with our school and stop whoever's responsible.

CHAPTER 22

Once the rest of the students and the unnecessary staff evacuate, the rest of us set up camp in the school's dining hall. Nobody really wants to be alone right now, and I can't blame them.

It's just a skeleton crew, really. The staff and professors who volunteered to defend the school—several of whom are skilled in battle magic, thankfully—a few others who are needed to keep the defensive wards up, and the students who decided to stay.

We're all trying to make plans, but it's hard to plan for something when you don't know what that something actually is. Who knows what those towers are going to do? Maybe they'll just release a huge burst of electricity and fry us all where we stand. Anyone's guess is as good as anyone else's at this point.

We're expecting it to just be us, and we're not feeling all that confident, I admit—but then in the late afternoon, some of the staff are alerted to a group of people gathered outside the campus entrance, setting off the protective wards.

We students are asked to stay here while Hardwick and a few others check it out. Nobody thinks this is an attack—probably the Circuit or something.

But it's not.

It's just ordinary people. Magic users, I mean, but from all the surrounding areas. Students and staff from the other schools that competed against us in the Trials last year. Family and friends of students who go here, ready to help out their kid or sibling or best friend.

Asher's family bursts into the dining hall first—not all of them, I'm assuming because they live too far away, but five of his brothers as well as two of their wives, the ones who don't have kids—and his parents.

"Mom? Dad?" Asher stands up with a smile and hurries over to them, Cam following as the whole family greets him like their fourteenth brother.

"Is Maddy coming?" Dmitri asks quietly.

I shake my head. "I didn't realize that was even an option." I'm glad I didn't know it was, though. Maddy would've wanted to be here, and I couldn't have stopped her—but I'm just so glad she's safe, selfish as it might be.

"You shouldn't have come," Asher's telling his parents. "We honestly have no idea what's going on here. We have no idea what kind of danger we're in, you really don't have to risk yourselves—it could be nothing—"

"Something that comes out of nowhere and can't be destroyed by any kind of known magic isn't just nothing," Asher's mom says firmly.

She's got a point.

I can't imagine how the gentle, green-eyed man feels right now though, with so many of his family members here and in danger. I'm stressed enough as it is with my four men here. If anything were to happen to them...

God, I can't imagine. It makes my heart hurt so much I almost can't breathe. Not exactly the way it does to imagine losing Maddy, but it's close.

Asher keeps talking with his family while we all sit around and wait for something to happen. We set up a guard rotation to watch the towers, but so far, there's nothing.

No change.

No sign.

It sets everyone on edge. Normally, I'd be asking myself if I was wrong, second-guessing, wondering if anything is actually going to happen... but this time, I *know* something will. And so does everyone else.

It's just a matter of time.

Several hours pass, and nobody seems inclined to leave the dining hall. It feels safe in here, comforting to be surrounded by familiar faces and warm bodies when the rest of the campus outside is eerily desolate and quiet.

In the late afternoon, we put together a massive communal meal. I've never been into the school's kitchens before, but we all pitch in to help get

food ready for everybody, just using whatever's on hand. It's kind of fun, almost like a massive sleepover.

Asher's family welcomes me at their table, insisting I sit with them. Cam joins automatically, clearly comfortable with them. Roman's on guard duty, watching the towers, and Dmitri hesitates.

"Sit down! Oh, please, sit!" Asher's mom says, gesturing at the open spot next to me. Cam is on Asher's right side, and I'm on Asher's left. "Our son has told us so much about you." She beams. "We're so glad to finally meet you."

Dmitri sits down, looking wary but also hopeful. I can't help but suspect he's thinking about Cam, and how the blond man was basically adopted by this family—maybe Dmitri's hoping against hope they might do the same to him, give him a replacement family for the shitty one he's got. After all, I know Dmitri cares about us, but we aren't like parents to him. He's never had that in any kind of positive way.

"You know," one of Asher's brothers says, grinning. This one's name is Peter... I think. "We didn't get to tell Elliot last time all about the shit Asher got up to as a kid."

I turn and gape at the man in question. "What? Were you the bad boy of the family?"

"More like the dumbass of the family," another brother says fondly. "This guy was the idiot who decided he was going to ride down the roof of our house in a shopping cart, fly off, and land in the pool."

"It did *not* go according to plan," a third brother informs us with fake solemnity. He has a neatly trimmed beard, and I'm guessing he's one of the oldest of the bunch.

"Thanks to magical healing, he doesn't have any scars from the stitches," Peter says. "Which I'm sure you've noticed." He winks at me.

Asher groans and puts his face into his hands. "Any time you guys wanna stop..."

"She needs to know what she's getting herself into!"

"Okay, but first of all, half the shit I got into was Cam's idea," Asher points out, lifting his head to glare around the table.

"You met Cam when you were eighteen. You did the shopping cart thing when you were like twelve."

"Still! Okay." Asher turns to me, a mischievous glint in his eye. "So Cam comes over to my house to meet my family for the first time, right?"

Now Cam groans. “Sure, just throw me under the bus to save yourself. I see how it is, traitor.”

“This isn’t throwing you under the bus,” Asher retorts mildly. “This is throwing you under a speeding train that’s going a hundred miles an hour.”

“Ah, fuck you too, buddy.”

“So, anyway...” Asher continues, turning to me and resting his hand on my knee under the table as he launches into his story.

I’m grinning like an idiot by now. I fucking love this. I love how Asher’s family clearly loves him and has taken in Cam as their own. I love all the in jokes and crazy stories and Asher and Cam teasing each other and being, well, best friends.

No wonder Asher’s so well adjusted, so peaceful, so good with his emotions. He grew up in this happy, functional family. He’s wonderful because they’re wonderful.

It makes me fall even more in love with him.

“So Cam’s hand is still stuck in the toilet,” Asher says, raising his voice to speak over the laughter at the table, “the phone’s ringing, the dogs are going nuts, there’s cake all over the floor, and—”

An alarm blares.

CHAPTER 23

We all leap to our feet, everything forgotten except for the alarm. My heart leaps up into my throat and hammers there, making it hard to breathe.

Shit. Roman's on guard duty. Is he okay? What's happening? What's going on with the towers?

We all run outside to find the towers are glowing even brighter. The light is so bright I can't look at them directly; I have to shield my eyes.

Roman runs up, and thank God, he just looks grim, not a scratch on him.

"Something's happening!" he bellows, trying to make himself heard over the loud hum of the towers.

A crack sounds in the air. It sounds like thunder when the thunderstorm is directly over your head, loud and terrifying, something huge and malevolent that doesn't care about you or your puny life at all. It reminds me of my sonic boom a bit, but of course, this isn't coming from me.

The tower nearest to us, the one near the faculty housing, vibrates for a moment, and a door that wasn't there before opens at the base, and *things* begin to pour out.

There are people coming out of the tower—magic users, clearly, but human like the rest of us. But there are other figures emerging as well, and those things are definitely not human. They're creatures of some kind, demons or magical creatures maybe. But whatever they are, they sure as hell don't look friendly.

And judging from the grunts, howls, and yells I can hear in the distance, they're coming out of all three towers.

“We have to divide!” Roman yells, starting to separate people into three groups. “Go, go, go!”

Everyone springs into action. Hardwick yells the spell that unlocks our magical cuffs—they all fall off, and I don’t waste a second.

“Everyone duck!” I scream, and I unleash my sonic boom.

The fear or adrenaline or both makes it the strongest one I’ve done since I first accidentally unleashed it outside of the club, and demons and humans go flying backward, many of them landing on the ground or against the outside wall of the tower with a sickening crunch.

I don’t let myself think about it. I can’t get caught up being upset over hurting people. These people, these creatures, are out to hurt us. I can’t let them win just because I got squeamish.

Everyone’s flinging spells, which isn’t my forte, but I’m damn good at my sonic boom and I’m getting better at my mirroring, so I think I’ll be okay.

And then I notice—the towers.

They’re still glowing, but they’re not just glowing around the stones themselves. That bright blue color is stretching out, leeching away from the towers and spreading in two lines on either side of the towers.

It’s like an electric beam of some kind, this pulsing, electric energy that’s slowly spreading out—and I realize—

The towers are triangulated around Wellwood Hall.

Their odd placement on campus was something that made people think the towers were set on top of ley lines or something, and it was one of the things the oversight committee investigated, but nothing came of it. The triangulation wasn’t being used by the towers to summon anything or draw their strength, I realize. It was for now, for this moment, with this spell that’s connecting them or about to connect them.

I might not know what’s going to happen when those beams converge, but I know in my bones that it’ll be very, very bad.

I scan the towers, trying to see through the chaos and haze of battle, and I realize that, on each of the two towers that I can see, there is a figure at the top, gesturing in broad sweeps with their hands. The figures must be conducting the beams, controlling them.

“Cam!” I look around desperately, yelling, trying to find him.

He teleports next to me from wherever he was. “Hey, I’m here.” His blond hair is wild, he’s got a scratch on his cheek that’s oozing blood, and

he looks half-exhausted already.

I grab him by the shoulders. “Get to the other two groups. Tell them they have to get to the top of the towers. The people at the top are the ones controlling this whole thing. We have to storm the towers and get to the top, whatever it takes!”

Cam nods, squeezes my hands, and then he’s gone in a *blip*, teleporting away.

I grit my teeth and race for my tower.

CHAPTER 24

I hate stairs.

I know that's not really relevant to what's going on, with the magical demon army we're fighting and all that, but man, I really do hate them.

And this tower has a *lot* of them.

The stairs go up in a corkscrew, and there's not a lot of room, which is a good thing in that it's forcing whatever magical creatures I encounter to come at me one by one, but is a bad thing for my legs because, oh my God, I'm never moving again after this damn fight is over. And I can't see my opponents coming, so one moment I think I'm alone and the next, there's a creepy half-crab half-goo *something* demon attacking me.

No, I don't know what the fuck is up with that either.

I'm using my sonic boom left and right, sending creatures flying back and then spider climbing along the wall over them, but holy crap, I've never used my magic this much. Even during the Trials, I relied on my wits and my puzzle solving skills and my own damn physical prowess more than my actual magic. And on the one hand, it's kind of cool that I'm good enough at my magic to be able to use it like this, but on the other hand, it's really draining me.

And I haven't even gotten to the big fight yet.

Behind me, I can hear yelling and scuffling, the battle below continuing, but as far as I know, I was the only one who made straight for the tower instead of focusing on fighting the creatures coming out of it, so who knows if anyone's coming up behind me.

Not my smartest move, I know. *I'm all on my own up here.*

I finally get up to the top of the tower, my lungs and legs burning like someone's doused them in oil and set them on fire, and I have to brace my hand along the entryway to the top for a second and suck in some desperate breaths.

Jesus fucking Christ. Remind me to thank Cam for all the morning cardio workouts, or I never would've made it up this thing.

Then I step out onto the very top of the tower, and I see the magic user who's controlling the beams.

He's turned away from me, and I clench my fists. *Okay, fucker, time to end this.*

Then... then I see it. A glimpse. Just like with the demon bird, on the back of this mage's head, I see—a face. A man's twisted, angry face. And he's looking right at me. Like he sees me. Like he knows I'm here.

The magic user stops.

"Ah." He turns around, glaring at me. "I was warned about you."

"Warned that I would kick your ass?" I snarl, even as my stomach knots up in worry. So the person who's behind this attack, and possibly controlling this magic user, is the same guy who was controlling the demon bird. The same guy who got to Johnson. The same guy who controlled Raul.

Fuck. I am in so much trouble.

But you know what? So is he.

"You know what the definition of insanity is, right?" I snap, hoping whoever is behind this man, controlling him from afar, can still hear me. "Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result."

And I unleash my sonic boom.

The mage goes stumbling back, but he's not flying off the edge of the tower like most people would. It's almost like he's managed to... absorb my power, or the brunt of it anyway. His head hits the edge of the wall but otherwise, he seems pretty fine.

How did he absorb my blast? Nobody's been able to do that... except...

One of Cam's powers is the ability to absorb magic that's thrown at him and use it to power himself up. It makes him a really strong fighter, magically at least, because he actually *wants* his opponent to hit him with a spell.

I remember what that asshole Harvard-Boy panelist said about Unpredictables—how we've got all of this massive power inside of us, how

we can wield shit that most people need potions and amulets and charms to do.

Could it be that this guy is an Unpredictable?

But no—*no*, how could that be? This is an attack on Unpredictables. Who would turn on their own kind like that?

Unless this guy was manipulated, like Raul, or perhaps is even being completely mind-controlled.

You know what, though? None of that matters right now.

Not when this jackass is trying to take down my school.

The man shakes his head at me. “Is that really your only trick?” Blue light starts to glow from his hands. “That’s all that you do around here?”

“Nah.” I shrug. “I’ve got a side job as a hooker.”

That throws him off for a second, and I don’t waste my opening. Dashing forward, I launch myself at him with a yell.

I doubt the yell intimidates him, but it helps give me a boost.

I land a punch—one good punch—and then the guy’s grabbing me and blasting me with magic, faster than I can react. I go flying backward and just manage to catch myself.

Okay, fucker, sure, fine, we’ll do this the hard way.

Something blue and white and crystalline starts creeping up his hands and I realize—it’s ice. Is that his Unpredictable power?

I try to still myself inside, to calm my racing heart and hitching breath, practicing the meditation Roman has taught me. Then I reach out with my energy and feel that ice echo inside of me.

Blue-white light starts to flow up my hands as well, mimicking him.

“Ta-daaaaa.” I grin fiercely, then throw my hands out and fling dagger-sharp ice shards at him.

He hurls the ice blades he was generating at the same time, and our two spells collide in the air, pieces of ice shattering like glass. I duck out of the way of the projectiles that make it through the collision, and he does the same—but he’s not quite fast enough. A small blade of ice catches the side of his face, opening up a long, thin cut on his cheek. Blood wells, and I see his eyes go wide.

“So it’s true,” he breathes. “You can mirror.”

“All day long, baby,” I shoot back. My knees are bent, muscles coiled like springs, as I watch him like a hawk, waiting for him to telegraph his next move.

He smirks, reaching up to wipe away the blood trickling down his face. “Mirror this.”

Then he makes a fist out of the same hand, curling his bloodstained fingers—and I notice the garish ring on his middle finger.

Oh, fuck.

My mirroring power is the ability to mirror someone’s *innate* power. For example, Maddy is a water elementalist—her innate magical ability is control over water. Which means that when I’m nearby her, I can mimic her ability and manipulate water too.

But I can’t mirror someone who’s using potions and enchanted objects. Just like all those fucking charms Johnson used, the ring on this guy’s finger—which is loaded up with some kind of offensive magic, I’m sure of it—is powered by a spell cast by an enchanter.

And I can’t mirror a spell, just like I can’t mirror a lamp.

Adrenaline shoots through me, and I draw on his ice magic again. But before I can unleash it, a ball of green light bursts from the guy’s ring. The spell hits me hard, sending me flying back into the wall around the top of the tower. I hit the top edge of the wall and hear my spine crack—fuck, that’s gonna bruise.

Please don’t be broken, spine. I need you.

Forcing air back into my lungs, I stagger to my feet and use my spider climb to get out of the way just in time before I’m hit with another blast. Fuck, this guy knew about me. He’s obviously prepared for a fight like this.

Who prepared him? The guy whose face I just glimpsed?

I saw him once before, when Dmitri, Roman, and I fought the demon bird. And I’m pretty sure the man behind all this was able to see out of the bird’s eyes or something and watch that fight.

So he prepared this fucker to make sure his minion wouldn’t be defeated again.

The guy I’m fighting starts using other magical trinkets and charms, things he knows I can’t mirror, and I try to reach out with my feelings to grasp at his innate power again, but it’s hard to do when I’m also scrambling just to stay alive. We trade blows back and forth, each throwing attacks and dodging others as we light up the top of the tower like the damn Fourth of July.

I’ve reverted to mostly using sonic booms, since that’s the power that comes most easily to me, and I know I could be doing more if I was able to

mirror him faster, but I don't have time to worry about it right now. A single second of hesitation could lend me in a world of hurt.

He sends another blast at me, and I dodge, feeling the hot air of it whistling just past my shoulder—and then he smacks me right in the chest with a fireball. He must've unleashed both attacks simultaneously, using the rings on two different hands.

Fuck that hurts. I stop, drop, and roll, burning everywhere, choking on the smoke even as the fire goes out. *Jesus fucking Christ.*

I'm coughing and sputtering, on my knees, as he advances toward me.

Dammit. Come on, Elliot, throw another sonic boom. Come on!

But God, my head is spinning, and everything hurts, and my lungs are on fire...

"I was given the impression you'd put up more of a fight," the man says, and I can't tell if it's really him saying it, or the man controlling him. How much free will does this man have right now? Does he really believe in whatever he's doing, or is he just a puppet, forced to do all of this?

Either way, he's about to kick my ass.

He raises his hand, and I'm so exhausted and disoriented, I've got no defense, and I can't even muster the strength to get out of the way—

"Don't you *fucking* dare."

My eyes fly open—when did I close them?—as I hear Roman snarling like I've never heard him before.

He must've realized where I went and followed me up the stairs.

The beautiful, dark-haired man bursts through the door onto the top of the tower and grabs my attacker. I choke, coughing a little, as Roman's eyes start to... glow. The rich cobalt color of his irises disappears, replaced by a bright, shifting orange. But not a natural orange. It's the same color the demon bird had, same as the demon Roman summoned to fight Raul had. Something so otherworldly and inhuman it makes my eyes water to look at it, like lava shifting and churning.

It's chilling.

Roman's grip on the man tightens, and the guy screams, a shriek that seems to rip apart the night sky. Then he starts to wither away, and I blink in stunned horror.

It's like *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* or something. His skin dries out and shrinks as he writhes in pain, and after several terrifying seconds, he's nothing but a shriveled up husk, a mummy. It happened so

fast. He was alive and threatening me one minute, and in the next, he might as well have been dead for a thousand years.

The corpse collapses to the ground, crumbling apart like dust, and Roman turns to me.

My heart hammers in my chest, and I can barely breathe. For a wild second, I'm actually scared of Roman.

No.

Terrified.

He doesn't look like the man I know. The person with whom I feel the most safe, the person who represents complete protection—he's not there anymore. This man looks starving, soulless, demonic. As if the power inside him is consuming him, the thirst for life overtaking him...

Then Roman draws in a deep breath and blinks a few times, and I see the shifting orange-black light slowly fade from his eyes. I'm shaking, and I hate that I start shaking even more as he begins to look like his usual self again.

"Elliot?" he whispers. His blue eyes are haunted, and his voice is a low rasp. He doesn't come any closer to me. "Are you all right?"

I nod. I mean, I'm far from all right—I'm battered and bruised and burnt—but I don't want him to think I'm still scared of him. I'm not.

But I was.

Even if it was just for a moment, I was.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the beams of blue light from the other two towers fading, and I know that the one around this tower must be fading as well. The man I was fighting up here was the one controlling the blue light, sending it out to connect with the other buildings. Now that he's dead and no longer directing it, the spell is unravelling. The people on the other two towers must be dead too.

No more creatures or mages are emerging from the tower bases. Below us, I hear the sounds of battle dying out, growing quieter, more sparse—just a yell or a smash here and there instead of a confusing, all-consuming cacophony.

My thudding heart beats heavily against my ribs as all the muscles in my exhausted body seem to unclench at once.

We did it. We stopped the invasion.

This time, anyway.

CHAPTER 25

Roman carries me down the long and winding tower steps, despite my protests. He looks a bit banged up himself, but nowhere near as bad as I feel. My clothes are singed, I've got burns all over, my spine hurts like a motherfucker, and I can feel a bit of blood making my shirt stick to me from where my back scraped against the stones of the tower. I'm one big bruise.

"Just relax," Roman murmurs. "I got you."

I do relax a little, but I can't stop myself from staring up at his face. He seems so normal now. So like himself. It's almost enough to make me believe that I imagined how he looked for those few moments. But I know it was real. I watched him drain someone's life force in seconds, like it was nothing, like a spider sucking juice from a fly.

I try not to think about it. This is Roman, and I trust him more than almost anybody in the world—and besides, I'm okay and he's okay, and we have much bigger things to worry about at the moment.

Like the clean up.

As we exit the tower, my jaw drops a little at the sheer magnitude of the destruction around us. The school buildings look mostly okay, thank God, but there are scorch marks here and there, a few cracks in the thick stone walls, and the quad itself is... destroyed. The lawn is burnt and filled with holes, and there are chunks of massive gray stone scattered everywhere from people blasting the towers, which must have become vulnerable once the glow faded away. There are dead bodies of the creatures and magic users that rushed from the towers, and the sight of their corpses turns my

stomach. The decorative flower beds are demolished, a few patches of the ground are on fire, debris everywhere...

Yeah. It's a mess.

People are starting to gather near the dining hall again, sounding off as they return from whichever tower they were fighting at, making sure everybody is accounted for. I'm terrified that we might've lost someone, or *more* than one, especially any of the students that I talked into staying to help—but most of all, I'm scared for my guys.

"Elliot! Roman!" Cam comes running up, Dmitri right behind him, and neither of them stop until they've got their hands on me, checking to make sure I'm okay.

"Careful, she's injured," Roman cautions, tightening his grip on me. His voice still sounds strained and rough, like it did on top of the tower after the demonic light faded from his eyes.

"Where's Asher?" I croak. Great, thanks to the smoke from the fireball, my throat is a goddamn wreck.

"With his family." Cam smooths my hair back from my face, casting a worried glance up and down my body. "Don't worry, they're all okay."

Roman continues to hold me, and the guys stay with me until Hardwick is finished accounting for everyone and starts getting the healers to work. Some healers approach me with a stretcher, and Roman gently lays me onto it so they can carry me into the infirmary.

It's only once I know that I'm about to get help, that relief is on the horizon, that the full extent of my injuries hits me. The pain I'd been blocking out, refusing to acknowledge, hits me like a Mack truck.

And I'm out.



I spend a day and a half in the infirmary, waiting for the spells and potions the healers used on me to repair my burned skin and knit my wounds back together.

Once everyone's healed and taken care of—which takes a while, since there were a lot of people hurt just as bad or worse than I was—the clean-up process has to begin.

Hardwick apparently hopes to handle the bulk of the clean-up and repairs over the summer so that classes won't be disrupted in the fall. They'll need to find a way to take down the towers and cart the stones away, and then to fix up the quad and the other damaged buildings. It'll take some time and effort, but at least the towers seem vulnerable to magic now that they've served their purpose. So that'll help with getting them down.

In the meantime, some debris isn't going to stop everyone from coming back to finish their exams. Hardwick sends out a notice to all the students who evacuated, alerting them that it's now safe to return to the Griffin campus.

Everyone seems happy that we managed to defend the school, and there's another big dinner in the dining hall to celebrate. It's not exactly a party—everyone's way too beat up and exhausted for that—but it's something.

I hate to rain on anyone's parade, but if you ask me, this fight really isn't over. Once again, we weren't dealing with the actual mastermind behind all of this, just his damn minions. How many times are we going to have to deal with this sort of bullshit before we actually face the man behind it all?

According to Asher, the Circuit has initiated an investigation into the origin of the towers, now that it's clear beyond any doubt that the structures were part of a coordinated, planned attack on the school. They've also been identifying the bodies of the mages involved in the attack—there's not much point in trying to identify the bodies of the creatures and demons that poured out of the towers—but so far, it hasn't yielded any promising leads. Most of them don't even have criminal records or anything.

I'm not surprised. Every person involved in that attack, even the guy I fought on top of the tower, was a pawn. Nothing more.

I know this whole thing was orchestrated by the same man who controlled the demon bird, who was behind all of the other attacks. I just know it. But he's keeping himself protected and safe. He wasn't even on campus—a smart move, sure, but also a cowardly one if you ask me, sending others to fight in his stead.

Pisses me right off, let me tell you that. And apparently, now he's got an eye on me. *Oh, joy.*

With the threat gone, everyone comes back, and we somehow hobble our way through the last bit of classes. After getting released from the

infirmary, I still have to take a couple days of rest to recover, along with a few other students who got the crap kicked out of them. Kendal, Erin, and Tandy stop by to check on me, and the guys are by my side pretty much nonstop.

Well... three of the guys.

Not Roman.

Roman's been in a funk, I guess you could say. It's hard to describe, but it feels a little like he's channeling Dmitri on his worst day—withdrawn, sullen, and cranky. And that's not the Roman I know. He's usually stern and serious, sure, but I've never seen him gloomy or depressed.

Until now.

As we get back to classes the week after the fight, everyone notices it. I can hear other students talking about it in the dining hall or walking in between classes. Roman's a favorite teacher on campus, so everyone wants to know what's going on, why after such a solid victory, he's being so withdrawn and upset.

I don't know what to do, and I've never felt that way about Roman before. Ever. Not since the first damn day we met. I want to talk to him, but I don't how to handle this withdrawn, broody side of him. And he's also pretty clearly avoiding me. I think he visited me sometimes in the infirmary while I was asleep, but he was always gone when I woke up. And we haven't spoken more than a few words since I was released.

After one of my combat classes, Tamlin asks me to hang back.

I expect her to ask me about how I'm doing—I'm still stiff after the battle, and I'm slower in my movements—but instead, she just has me sit on a pile of stacked mats and then perches next to me.

"How are you and Roman doing?" she asks softly.

She sounds like she genuinely cares, not like she's hoping I'll say it's going terribly and that she'll be able to swoop in and get Roman back or some bullshit like that.

I shrug, my chest tightening. I hate this feeling. "I'm... I'm not sure, honestly. I thought we were doing well. He let me and my sister stay at his house over winter break, and we all had a really great time. We told Hardwick about our relationship so we don't have to keep it a secret anymore, and I sleep over in his room a lot. Things felt like they were moving forward between us, getting really serious, but now... it's like he doesn't want me around. Ever since the fight, he's been pulling away."

The ache in my chest expands as I talk, and I rub my sternum absently as if trying to banish the tightness there. I don't mention to Tamlin exactly what happened up in the tower. No one but me, Roman, and the mage who was attacking me were up there. No one else saw what Roman did. I'm not sure who knows about that power of his, but I'm not about to spill his secrets, no matter how weird things are between us right now.

Tamlin sighs, and her gaze grows a little unfocused as she stares at the windows on the opposite side of the large room. "I wondered if that was the case. Everyone on this campus can see that something's going on with him, that he's more closed off than usual. He's obviously struggling with something."

"What the hell am I supposed to do about it?" I ask, turning toward her. I can hear the desperation in my voice, and I'm not sure Roman's ex is the right person to ask about this. But she's the one who pulled me aside after class, and I could use any insight I can get right now.

She tilts her head to one side. "Normally, in a situation like this, I'd suggest talking to the person, but I understand that Roman is not the easiest of people to talk to."

I laugh a little. "No, he isn't."

Not as difficult to talk to as Dmitri, but still. For as open as he can be in some ways—I've never once doubted what he feels for me or that he wanted to be with me—Roman can be very closed off and private too. There are just subjects that I know not to ask him about.

Tamlin gives a small sigh. "I'll be honest with you, Elliot, he shut down when I tried to reach out to him about these kinds of things. It was very frustrating, and I think it's part of why we ended up breaking up. He shut me out, and I let him, and we repeated that cycle over and over. Eventually, that became our 'normal'."

She drags her focus away from the window and shifts to face me more fully. There's sadness in her eyes, but it's an old sadness, a remembered hurt—nothing near as acute as the pain in my chest right now.

"When he broke up with me, it hurt, but I honestly think he was trying to do right by me. It was the best way he could think of to break the cycle we'd fallen into. He had shut down with me and wouldn't let me in—and I'm grateful, in a way, that he recognized that and decided to end things rather than keep me in his life at arm's length." She lets out a breath and then reaches over to rest a hand on mine. "There are pieces of his heart I

don't think Roman has ever opened up to another person. But I think you should try reaching out to him. I think it's worth trying. From the way I see him behave with you... I know he cares about you. Talk to him. Give him a chance to open up to you."

"And what if he doesn't?" I blurt, the words spilling from my mouth before I can stop myself.

I feel a little like I'm fifteen and not twenty-three as I stare into Tamlin's serious, dark eyes. Mom died when I was eighteen, long before I had the chance to get into a serious relationship with anyone. I've never had a woman to give me advice on this kind of thing. I have my own common sense and all that, but sometimes I just wish I had an older woman that I could go to for advice.

Then again, it sort of looks like I do have one. I was just too scared to ask her.

Tamlin doesn't even hesitate to answer my question. "Then you break up with him and you move on."

I blink at her, surprised, as my stomach dips.

She smiles warmly, her teeth perfectly white against her mocha skin. "Elliot. I might've been Roman's girlfriend, but that doesn't mean I can't want what's best for you as well. If you have a partner who can't open up to you, can't trust you and communicate with you, then how can you do the same to them? It creates an imbalance of power in the relationship. They have so much more power over you, when it should be an equal give and take."

Without even meaning to, I find myself nodding. What Tamlin's saying makes sense.

"I'm not saying that you should give him an ultimatum," she adds, holding up a hand. "Not at all. But if he continues to withdraw from you and to not share who he is—there's only so close you two will be able to get. Is that what you want from your relationship with him? Or with any of your guys? But as I said... I think maybe he'll be able to open up with you in a way he couldn't with me. You just have to try."

The crushing tension in my chest eases a little, and I find myself smiling genuinely at Tamlin, grateful to have her in my life for so many reasons beyond the combat skills she's taught me.

She smiles back, and it gives me hope.

CHAPTER 26

When I leave the Combat classroom, I don't give myself a chance to second-guess or chicken out. Instead, I go looking for Roman right away. The darkly handsome professor is, predictably, hiding away in his office. Probably because he thinks I won't go looking for him there.

Surprise.

Roman looks up as I enter, and his cobalt eyes shutter. Usually when he sees me, he relaxes, but not this time. This time, he stays stiff and distant.

Fucking hell.

Already, I feel awkward and uncomfortable, and the cowardly part of my brain that's no good at this kind of stuff is trying to convince me that we don't have to do this right now—that it could wait until tomorrow, or the next day, or maybe the day after that.

But it can't. Because every day I let Roman push me away and just accept it, we get one step closer to that becoming our new normal. And this conversation won't be any easier tomorrow or the next day than it will right now.

Time to bite the bullet.

"Hey," I say, swallowing my confrontational tone and keeping my voice neutral and calm. "Do you have a second?"

Roman nods, setting aside the paperwork he was doing. "Certainly."

He gestures at the chair in front of his desk. Normally, he never keeps so much distance between us. He's not exactly a hearts and flowers kind of guy, but Roman touches me all the time, showing his affection physically. This is the first time he's been this way with me, and I realize... we're at a crossroads.

I reacted to his power with fear.

It was an instinctual reaction to something that was honestly pretty terrifying.

But I have to make Roman understand that I'm not scared of him.

I have to show him that I'm going to accept him no matter what, his powers and all, but that I *won't* accept this distance, this pulling away. I could just let the distance slide and become like Tamlin—become someone he eventually grows away from—but like fuck am I doing that. Even if it's uncomfortable, even if he doesn't want this right away, even if I'm scared about it blowing up in my face... I have to do this.

"Roman." I ignore the chair and walk around to sit on the edge of his desk, right next to him. He tenses like he's about to get up out of his chair and walk away, but I put my hand over his, squeezing gently. "We need to talk about what happened in the tower. Are you okay?"

He manages to slide his hand out from under mine and gets up, walking around the desk to pace the room. *Fuck*.

I turn to face him, craning my neck. "Roman. Please. We have to talk about this. What aren't you telling me? If that—that death magic is your power, then I accept it. My powers can be dangerous too, just as dangerous as what you can do. You don't have to worry about my being afraid of you. I'm not. I feel safe with you; I always have."

The words come easier the more I speak. He needs to know how I feel. I could offer to give him space, but I don't think space is what's needed here. I think it'll only give us both excuses to make this less... *real*, for lack of a better term.

And I want it to be real. As scary as it is to admit, I want it to be forever.

"Should you, though?" Roman challenges, stopping and turning to face me. His cobalt eyes burn with something like anger, but I can see that it's all directed inward. "Maybe you *shouldn't* feel safe, Reckless. Would you really have trusted me all this time if you knew that one slip up, one—"

"You won't slip up," I argue, shaking my head adamantly. "And you know me, Roman. I'll take a painful truth over ignorant bliss any day. You are who you are, that hasn't changed, and I want to be with you. Nothing is going to change that."

He gazes at me for a long moment, his eyes still closed off, his jaw clenching, and then something seems to crumble within him. He closes his eyes and sighs. "Look, I... you know that I have Unpredictable powers."

I nod. I know he has more than one, given that he warned me earlier about the whole “manifesting a new power” thing.

He opens his eyes, and even though he doesn’t step toward me and there’s still way too much space between us, I feel connected to him in a way I haven’t since before the tower fight. Like maybe he’s reaching out.

“I have three powers, just like you,” he continues. “Necromancy is the first one. That’s how I can talk to the dead. The second is demon summoning.”

“Like you did against Raul.”

“Yes.” Roman hesitates for a beat, then looks me dead in the eye. “The third power is the death touch. I can touch someone—and they just die. I drain their life force.”

I nod. “But you can control it.”

“Now I can. When I was a child... I couldn’t.”

Roman walks back around his desk, brushing his hand over mine as he passes by me, and that little touch is everything in this moment. *He’s still here with me. I haven’t lost him yet.*

He sits down heavily in his chair before meeting my gaze. “Most Unpredictables manifest their powers much later in life than the rest of the magical world. But some of us manifest them much, much earlier. As young children. I was one of those kids.”

He lets out a burst of mirthless laughter. “Of all the Unpredictables to have their magic spark early, it had to be the kid with the devastating death powers, right? The necromancy and the demon summoning, those were bad enough, but then—then I got my third power.”

I scoot closer to him, still perched on the desk. “The death touch.”

He nods. “The death touch. It’s not just a power, not like any other kind of magic I know of. It’s like a black hole. It’s a starving, hungry power. When I use it, it takes over, becomes almost a physical force that demands more life, that wants to consume everything.” He runs a hand through his gleaming dark hair. “I had no idea how to control it. I was just a kid. I wasn’t prepared for it. And I—my family—my parents and my sister—”

My stomach turns to heavy ice as I realize what he’s saying. “Oh, fuck, Roman. I’m so sorry.”

He swallows, looking younger than I’ve ever seen him. Not that he looks my age or anything, but he actually looks twenty-eight for once, instead of almost ageless.

“The magical community had no idea what to do with me. They talked about me like I was a bomb waiting to go off. Nobody seemed to care that I was just—I was a conduit for this power. I was too weak to control it or stop it, I was a *kid* who had no clue what was happening. I was scared and alone, and I’d lost my family.”

I bite my lip, unable to hide the look of raw pity that I know must be contorting my features. But my heart is fucking breaking for him.

“A lot of people wanted me to be tried once I became a legal adult, as if that made any sense.” Roman shakes his head. “But a practicing necromancer named Liam Novak offered to take me in and train me. Unpredictables with death-related powers often face an added layer of mistrust and prejudice from the magical community. Liam is a bit of a loner, but if it weren’t for him... I honestly don’t know what would’ve happened to me.”

I don’t know this Liam guy, but I suddenly want to hug him. I scoot a little closer to him on the desk, and Roman’s hard-edged voice softens a bit as he goes on.

“I’ll be grateful to him until the day I die. He was far more patient with me than I deserved. I barely talked the first couple of years. The guilt ate me alive. But as Liam worked with me, I got better. And he really pushed me, threw me into training. It was good, it distracted me. He gave me a sense of purpose and taught me that I can control my powers—*all* of them.”

He shakes his head, gesturing with one hand to encompass the school around us.

“I still had to come here for my final training since it’s the only accredited program in the country for Unpredictables. But I needed barely any training while here. I had a guaranteed job as a teacher here as soon as I graduated, and then I convinced them to hire Josephine. That’s how we met, actually. As students here.”

I nod, trying to find my voice. “I’m... I’m so sorry you had to go through all of that.”

Roman finally meets my gaze. “I haven’t used the death touch since I killed my family. I’ve ignored it. I spent years working to control it, to master it, so I could shove it down and never use it again. But seeing you in danger like that... something inside me just snapped, and I didn’t know what else would work quickly enough or be powerful enough. I knew my magic would work, and I had to stop him.”

The conviction in his voice tells me he doesn't regret doing it, even if he's spinning out a little in the aftermath. It terrifies me to hear that, but it also thrills me—to know that he thought I was important enough to break his promise to himself, to use a power that he's feared and controlled all his life.

I dare to take his hand again—Roman tries to pull back once more, but I squeeze hard, keeping him from slipping away.

“Hey. I love you.”

The words just slide out of me. For all my fears and doubts, all my emotional awkwardness and barriers, those are the easiest three words I've ever said.

Because they're true.

Utterly true.

And it feels so natural to say them I almost don't know what to do with myself.

“I trust you,” I add, because that's true too. “You've controlled your power all this time, and I'm sorry you had to use it to help me, but I'm grateful you did. And I'm not afraid of you. I never will be.”

Roman stares at me, transfixed, like he's not sure I'm real.

Well, I'll just have to remind him, then.

I slide onto his lap and kiss him softly. He's stiff at first, unmoving, but I persist, again and again, just soft kisses that let him know I'm here, still affectionate, still trusting. Still his, for as long as he wants me.

And just when I'm starting to lose hope and wonder if I'm fighting a losing battle—he kisses me back.

His arms band around my waist, and his lips move against mine, and his body relaxes, letting me curve against him so we're touching everywhere.

It's the most meaningful kiss we've ever shared. I can feel it in my bones, in my blood, in someplace deep inside of me that I can't even quantify. It feels like the earth is shattering and reforming all at once.

“Reckless.” Roman pulls away, just enough that our lips still brush as he speaks, his voice low and smooth. “I love you too. So very much.”

I couldn't stop my smile if I tried.

CHAPTER 27

The guys graduate a week later in a small ceremony. There's usually a lot more pomp and circumstance, but everyone's fucking exhausted, and the school's still a mess. Maddy gets in late the night before, and she's seated next to me in the auditorium as we cheer like mad for them.

All three graduate with high honors, and I know they worked their asses off to achieve that. Dmitri is solemn, and so is Asher—except for a slight blush to his cheeks when his family and I start shrieking, the absolute loudest group in the crowd—but Cam saunters across the stage, saluting us all, and fist bumps Hardwick.

Because that's Cam for you.

Dmitri's family isn't in attendance. I hate that they're not here, but I'm not as upset as I might normally be about it. Don't get me wrong, I'm pissed at them for not supporting their son—and I add their refusal to show up to my long list of reasons to hate them.

But part of me thinks maybe it's for the best. They'd only make Dmitri unhappy, and he deserves to have this be a good day, a positive day. A proud day.

The Prince family and I all cheer just as loudly for him as we did for Asher and Cam. And even though he doesn't blush like Asher or strut like Cam, his gaze cuts to me, and there's warmth in his dark eyes.

We all head back to Portland to celebrate afterward. Asher's family is huge, and they want to give him time with just his friends, so we get him for dinner and then they'll take him and Cam for brunch tomorrow.

The guys, Maddy, and I go out for dinner and drinks, and as the night wears on, we end up at The Den, which feels fitting somehow. There are a

few new faces behind the bar that I don't recognize, but several that I do. Ajax is happy to see me, and the earth elementalist sweeps me up into a big hug. He must've forgotten what a pain in the ass employee I could be sometimes—I guess absence really does make the heart grow fonder.

Ajax sets us all up with a free round, and we settle into one of the booths near the back, drinking and talking and laughing. Inevitably, the conversation turns to the three graduates' plans after school.

"We were thinking of getting a place in the city together." Cam jerks his chin toward both Dmitri and Asher. "That way we can be close enough to the Griffin campus to visit regularly. And Portland's not a bad place. There's a pretty big magic community here."

"You're always welcome to stay at my house," Roman says, "but that might be a bit out of the way for getting jobs."

"Oh, man. We have to start thinking about *careers*," Asher mutters. "I need another drink."

I can't stop the warm glow of happiness that spreads through my chest at hearing how their plans all seem to include me. The guys might not be totally sure about what happens next—hell, I know I'm not—but they all seem confident in our bond, our relationship, and I start to feel even more hopeful that we can handle all the changes coming our way.

It's after midnight when we leave the bar, stumbling a little since we're all tipsy, except for Roman, who's the designated driver. I'm just about to offer the guys a tour of the infamous alley where Roman and I first hooked up when Dmitri freezes, staring at his phone.

I almost bump into him and grab his upper arms to steady myself, but he hardly even seems to notice. His body has locked up as stiff and still as a statue.

The other men stop, realizing something is wrong, and I walk around to face Dmitri, who's still blinking down at the phone in his hand.

"Everything okay?" Roman asks.

"It's my cousin," Dmitri says, his voice tight and carrying an odd note I've never heard before. "He wants to know why—why I moved the wedding date up."

Roman's eyebrows shoot up, and Cam makes a startled noise as he and Asher whip their heads around to gape at their friend. I'm not even sure they knew about Dmitri's arranged engagement.

I did know, so my reaction isn't quite as intense as theirs. It's close though, because as I process what Dmitri just said and take in the stunned expression on his face, a creeping unease shivers down my spine.

"What do you mean, the wedding date's been *moved up*?" I ask, forcing the words past my lips.

"Exactly what it sounds like." A muscle in Dmitri's jaw jumps, and his whole body is still rigid. He finally drags his gaze away from his phone and turns it around to show me the text on the screen. "It's been moved. The new date is set for this summer."

Oh.

Fuck.



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