



AN ACADEMY OF  
UNPREDICTABLE MAGIC

# SPARK

SADIE MOSS

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*Academy of Unpredictable Magic #1*

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## CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Also by Sadie Moss

## CHAPTER 1

A sharp whistle makes me wince.

It's a busy night at The Den, and a group of loud-talking guys ogle me as I lean over to wipe down the bar top. I can feel their collective gazes crawling over me like ants. They've been staring at me all night, elbowing each other like they've never seen a pair of boobs before.

I usually wear pretty low-cut tops when I bartend because, I'll be honest, it makes a huge difference in tips. But the downside of my wardrobe choice is that it draws creeps out of the woodwork and makes them feel entitled to treat me like a piece of meat.

For a second, I fantasize about leaping over the bar and slapping the wolfish grins off their faces, one by one. It wouldn't be the first time I've gotten physical with a customer at The Den.

But unfortunately, I can't give them the lesson in manners they so richly deserve.

I list all the reasons in my head like a mantra as I practically scrub a hole through the bar with the damp rag.

*One: you need this job. You've got to take care of your sister.*

Maddy and I are all alone in the world since our mom died of cancer four years ago. Our dad's still alive, but he hasn't been in the picture since I was little, which left me to take care of my younger sister all by myself. My tiny paycheck is the only thing standing between us and a homeless shelter.

*Two: you're on your last strike, and Ajax will fire you eventually.*

Ajax owns The Den. He's a massive earth elemental with a gleaming bald head and a stoic temperament. I know he likes me—that's why I still have a job here at all after the stunts I've pulled. But he had a long talk with

me last week after I dumped beer on a guy who suggested I sit on his lap and “bounce around” like this was a strip club. During that conversation, he made it pretty clear I’m on my last warning. Ajax isn’t a bad guy, but he’s more interested in the bottom line than protecting his employees from dickish customers.

Not that they’re all jerks. We get some interesting people in here sometimes. Portland’s crazy enough on its own, but add in the magic users in the hidden supernatural section of town, and you’ve got a recipe for some wild stories and personalities.

But tonight, I am just so *done*.

Today started off shitty and has only gotten worse. Dad sent Maddy a birthday card this year, which set her off crying for over an hour. I’ve made a private vow never to shed another tear over that bastard, but Maddy still holds out some hope that he’ll turn out *not* to be the self-centered asshole he’s proven himself to be time after time. And every time he lets her down, I have to pick up the pieces again.

*Congratulations, old man, you actually remembered your kid’s birthday for once. Gold fucking star for you.* Sure, it doesn’t make up for skipping out on Mom and us when Maddy was just six years old, but hey, it’s the thought that counts, right?

Like Maddy needs the stress. She’s already freaking out over her magic not manifesting. Mom and Dad both have—

No. *Had*.

Fuck. Sometimes I forget, even though it’s been four years, that Mom’s not around anymore.

Both my parents had powerful magic. People always seem shocked when they learn how powerful my parents were and then hear that at age twenty-two, I still haven’t developed any magic.

When I tell other magic users about my lack of powers, they look at me like I told them my puppy just died. But I don’t need their stupid pity for something that’s totally out of my hands, so I usually don’t bring it up.

Maddy just turned eighteen, and most magic users start manifesting powers anywhere between fourteen and sixteen. It’s a puberty thing. Sometimes people show as early as age twelve—or in rare cases, even younger—but by sixteen, pretty much everyone from a magical family is manipulating air or earth or casting illusions or something. It’s been eating at Maddy that she hasn’t shown anything yet.



Me? I'm used to it. My life's fine without magic. I have a steady job, and I have my little sis—as long as Maddy's taken care of, that's all I need. But Maddy really cares.

And then *bam*, Dad's birthday card arrives, and all he fucking talks about is how he's sure she's such a powerful mage by now, how proud he is of her, and how he can't wait to hear all about it when he visits.

First of all, he's not gonna fucking visit.

Second of all, now Maddy's moping around the house, devastated about her lack of magic all over again.

*Thanks a lot, Dad. How you manage to make my life hell without even being in it, I'll never know.*

So now I'm stuck at work, trying to think of some way to cheer my sister up and figure out how I'm going to pay for her college classes—and what the hell I'm going to do with myself in a week once she's at the state university all day—and on top of all that, I have to deal with a bunch of drunk idiots in front of me who think the height of philosophy is debating *Fight Club*.

Newsflash: if you're a straight male, I can guarantee you missed the point of *Fight Club*.

It's nothing I can't handle, drinks-wise. I just don't have the patience to deal with this, not today.

"Hey, hey, girlie!" one of the guys calls across the loud bar.

"Elliot," I remind him for at least the third time. I kind of regret telling them my name in the first place, but I couldn't take the damn pet names they kept calling me. I'm nobody's "honey", least of all theirs. "You want another round?"

I'm mixing a couple cocktails while I ask—there's a hell of a bachelorette party going on at one of the high tops and their order was to just keep sending all the Sex on the Beach they could handle.

"Elliot!" Ajax calls. "Can I get a scotch, neat?"

"Sure, gimme one sec." I finish the cocktails and put them on a tray, then pass them over to the corner so Carla can grab them and bring them to the bachelorette party. I make the scotch and look back at the guy who got my attention. "What can I get you?"

"Your number," the guy replies, grinning like he thinks this is some killer pickup line.

"Yeah... I don't give that out to customers."

It's *mostly* the truth. Every once in a while I will, but I don't advertise that. I'm a bartender—that means I'm here to work, and that means it takes a real damn hot guy to turn my head.

*Oh, shit.*

A real damn hot guy like those three that just walked in.

My mouth goes a little dry, and I have to force myself not to stare as I watch the three newcomers find a corner table where it's darker and people won't bother them. They look about my age, maybe a little older, and they're talking quietly amongst themselves, clearly not looking to be rowdy.

*Damn it, I wish it wasn't so slammed or I'd go over and take their orders.*

They're all tall, at least six-foot. Two of them have dark hair—brown and almost black, respectively—and the other has blond hair shot through with gold highlights, as though he's spent a lot of time in the sun. The one with slightly shaggy brown hair has a lean body like a swimmer, and the other two are broad-shouldered, their shirts stretching unfairly over their chests and arms.

Jesus. Our clientele is mostly people in their twenties and thirties, so it's not like I don't get a decent share of man candy to scope out while I work... but these three? They make me wish I wasn't on the clock so I could go over and try out my *extremely* rusty flirting skills.

But my shift isn't ending anytime soon, the drunk guys in front of me are still loudly asking for my number, and I've got drink orders to fill. I sigh, shove the three walking wet dreams out of my mind, and get back to work. I have to earn those tips if I want Maddy and me to have a roof over our heads come next month.

To say that it's an exhausting shift is an understatement. Welcome to a Friday right before all the college students have to hit the books again. Everyone's cramming in their last bit of fun. By the time I get off work, my feet are throbbing and my fingers are cramped from being curled around bottles and glasses.

It's so late it's early, so when I tramp sluggishly up the steps to our apartment, I assume Maddy's asleep. I catch sight of myself in the reflection from the glass door that leads into our building. Good lord, I look a fright. My hair tends to gain volume when I sweat, and I was definitely sweating tonight. It looks like a dark bush around my head. My eyes are red with circles under them. At least brown eyes go with everything, right?

I punch in the code, yank open the door, and stumble in, then take the stairs. The elevator's always on the fritz, and I don't want to risk it—there's a family on the fourth floor with fifteen-year-old triplets who are all enchanters, and they did *something* with their magic in that elevator a month ago. Ever since then, it's been wonky. I don't want to be the unlucky person stuck in it when it spontaneously combusts or fills with rocks or something.

When I reach our apartment door and fumble the key into the lock, I'm surprised to hear noises on the other end.

The hair stands up on the back of my neck. I sense... magic?

I might not have magic myself, but when you grow up around it, you get a feel for it. Just like moms have a sixth sense for when a kid, *any* kid, is about to run with scissors. I open the door, my keys clenched between my fisted fingers like tiny daggers, ready to kick the shit out of whatever burglar—

“*Elliot!*”

Maddy's voice rings out from the kitchen. She sounds... nervous, but not scared. Excited, maybe. *Okay, so, not a burglar.*

I close the front door behind me, drop my purse and keys, kick off my shoes—thank God, finally—and walk into the kitchen. Then I stop dead.

*Holy shit.*

Maddy's standing in the middle of the small galley kitchen, her hands out and fingers splayed. She's got dark hair like me but with Dad's blue eyes and Mom's button nose. She's cute as hell.

But what's stopping me in my tracks isn't the fact that my sister's adorable.

It's the snake of water flowing up out of the sink and around the room, like a ribbon my sister is somehow twirling.

“I have it!” Maddy cries out. Her face splits into a wide smile. “Ellie, I have magic!”

Maddy's the *only* one allowed to get away with calling me Ellie.

“You—you sure do!” I blurt, finally getting my feet to move forward again, even as my mind starts racing.

*Holy shit.* This is huge. We have to make arrangements, change our whole plan. She can't go to a regular non-magical school now. But all the magic academies will be filled up this close to the start of the school year,

won't they? I'll have to make some phone calls in the morning, do some research, see who can take her as a last-minute slot.

Something of my racing thoughts must show on my face, because Maddy falters. "Aren't you excited?" she asks, her voice small.

I smile. "Of course I'm excited! This is amazing! Look at you go!"

Maddy screws up her face in concentration, moving her hands through the air. The ribbon of water slowly retreats back into the sink.

*Whew. Thank God for that.* I didn't want to end my evening mopping up the kitchen. And of course she's already doing amazingly well with control. Maddy's a smart kid, and super motivated; she picks shit up fast. A swell of pride washes over me, and I grin at her like an idiot.

"I looked it up!" my little sis crows, rushing over to me and taking my hands. I let her spin me around in a goofy little dance. "I'm an elemental mage! Water, specifically."

"You don't say."

"I was just doing the dishes after dinner, and I was pissed at Dad because... well, you know. And next thing I knew—water was spraying everywhere! And it wouldn't stop until I thought really hard and calmed myself down, and then the water calmed down too."

That sounds about right. Strong emotional response plus hormones equals a jump-start to spark your magic.

I've heard tons of stories about people whose magic sparked while they were having sex for the first time. I might be annoyed at my own lack of magic, but I'm damn grateful that I haven't had to deal with that, at least. Talk about embarrassing.

Maddy still looks a little nervous, like she's worried that I'm going to be jealous of her or upset. And I mean... I *am* a little sad. The magical schools are all farther away from Portland than the regular one she was planning to attend, so I won't get to see her as much. It'll be lonely without her. But that's no reason for me to pull her down into the dumps. She's been wanting this for ages, and she deserves it. I'll never hold her back.

I pull her in and hug her tight. "I'm so happy for you, Mads," I whisper in her ear. "We'll have to work on getting you packed and finding you a school. Gotta get you trained up!"

Maddy hugs me back, her whole body quivering with excitement. "You sure you'll be all right?"

“Don’t you worry about me,” I promise. “I’ll be just fine. So long as you promise to call.”

“I will.”

She’s still practically bouncing off the walls, but I manage to get her into bed—you’d think she was five, not eighteen—and then grab my laptop and settle down on the couch. It’s a one-bedroom apartment, and I don’t want the light from my computer to keep her awake as I research schools.

As I look into schools for elemental magic users, a heaviness settles into my chest.

Depending on people’s type of magic, they go to different academies, since how each kind of magic is controlled and used can really vary. There are seven types of magic, and each has its own specific training system. Elemental magic accounts for four of those types; then there are the illusionists, enchanters, and potion brewers. It’s this whole new world, this whole new *life*, that Maddy’s about to become a part of.

I’m okay without magic. Really. I am. When I turned seventeen and still hadn’t manifested any, Mom assured me I could still live a fulfilled life without it. I mean, look at all the normal humans who live great and exciting lives, no flying or water bending necessary.

But it also feels a little like I’m being left behind. Mom died, Dad skipped out on us, and now my sister has new magic and is going to go to a fun, elite school. And I’m just going to be here. Working as a bartender.

*Fuck.*

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I close the laptop. It’s late as hell, and looking at these school websites isn’t helping my mood. It’s just making me feel lonelier.

I crawl into bed next to Maddy, holding her hand.

If I don’t have a lot of time left with my sister, I should make the best of it.

## CHAPTER 2

**T**hree days later, I'm trying to clean under the damn couch when I hear a knock at the door.

I ignore it. We aren't expecting anybody, and I'm not going to open the door for yet another Jehovah's Witness or Mormon missionary.

But the knocking continues... and continues.

"I'll get it!" Maddy yells.

"No, you won't!" I shout back. If this is a creepy stranger, I don't want Mads to have to deal with them. I get up and walk over to the front door, yanking it open.

"What the hell?" I snarl. "You haven't heard of *going away* when someone doesn't answer the knock?"

The person—it's a woman, well dressed in a dark gray suit that flatters her tall figure, with her pale blonde hair pulled back in a tight ponytail—smiles at me. "I'm sorry to intrude, but I couldn't get a contact number for you."

"Good," I reply shortly. I hate when strangers can get your telephone number. "We're not interested."

I start to close the door, but suddenly I can't. I grab it with both hands and push, but it's like—it's like a strong gust of wind is blowing, keeping the door open.

The woman raises an eyebrow. "I'm here as a representative from the local Circuit."

*Oh.* Now I know why the door won't close—she's got elemental magic, I'm guessing air, and she's using that to keep it open.

I step back, allowing the door to open wider. “Then come on in, I guess.”

We have our own government for magic users. Local ones are just called Circuits, then there’s the District Circuit, which tends to run an entire state, and then there’s the High Circuit, who governs all the magic users in the country. We have a judicial system, cops, hospitals for magical illnesses and injuries, you name it.

I can’t think what I’ve done to get the attention of the Circuit. Maddy and I live a pretty chill life. Neither of us has broken any laws...

And then I remember. *Maddy’s magic.*

“You must be Elliot Sinclair,” the woman says. She holds out her hand. I don’t want to shake it, but I probably shouldn’t get on her bad side. I grip her hand, shake it once, then let go. Stepping around her, I close the door as she steps farther into the apartment, casting her gaze around. “Ah. And this must be Madeline.”

Maddy steps out of the bedroom doorway, her eyes a little wide. I don’t think she’s ever seen anyone who works in the Circuit before.

“So, what can we do for you?” I cross my arms over my chest. It probably looks defensive, but I can’t help it; people in authority tend to bring out my prickly side.

Despite my rudeness, the woman keeps her smile perfectly affixed to her face. She probably has to deal with people like me all day. “I’m Aurora Montgomery, and I work as a recruiter and liaison for the magical training academies. My job is to ensure that young magic users are placed in the program that’s best for them.”

Maddy looks like she could jump up and down with excitement. She’s enthusiastic about everything in life, and I’ve never stifled that. One of us had to be the tough one so we could get by after Mom died, but I was determined not to let it be Maddy.

“Would you like something to drink?” my sister asks. Then she gestures to the couch. “Oh, sit down! Sorry, we were just cleaning.”

I keep my arms folded and lean back against the wall. “I’ve been looking for schools for her on my own. I didn’t get a notice from you guys or anything.”

“We had a difficult time tracking you down.”

“I’m registered.”

All people from magical families have to be registered with the local Circuit so that the Circuit can find them during an emergency or something like that. I can see why we might still be hard to find, though. I haven't really participated in the magical community in years, not since Mom died. Why would I, when neither Maddy nor I had any damn magic?

"Besides, you worked pretty quickly," I point out. "Maddy only showed her magic three days ago."

I've been scouring training academies since then to find the best place to petition for her. I figured I'd have to beg, borrow, steal, or sell my soul to get her in somewhere on such late notice.

"Yes, we've been more proactive lately about approaching people whose magic has sparked and getting them into a proper training academy," Aurora replies. She accepts the glass of water Maddy gives her with a graceful smile, even though I don't think she really wants it. My sister sits down on the couch beside her, gazing at her with something like awe.

Me? I'm a little more wary. It's not that I think Aurora's some crazy, unhinged mage. But I just don't trust people in general. Blame my dad if you want, or blame all the friends who didn't do anything to help when Mom got sick and died, leaving me to raise my sister all on my own. Not that I regret a second of it. I was just barely eighteen when Mom passed away, but I fought child protective services tooth and nail to make sure I got to keep Mads, and it was all worth it. She's the best part of my life.

"Our ability to track new, uncontrolled flares of magic has gotten a lot better over the years," Aurora explains. "We can use it to quickly find and help people whose magic has sparked to life. It helps prevent delays in getting them the help they need."

I narrow my eyes, a little bothered that she seems to think *I* couldn't get Mads the help she needs. "I've been researching schools. But if you have suggestions, I'm happy to hear them."

"Your concern for your sister is admirable and expected," Aurora says smoothly, probably reading the distrust in my eyes. "My belated condolences about your mother, by the way. When you came up in the system, I saw that she passed away several years ago. I understand that Maddy is important to you, and to have looked after her since you were eighteen—"

"We've been fine," I interrupt, raising a hand. I know she means well, but I really don't need her pity. Hell, there are single parents all over the



place, and teen moms all over the place. We all make it work the best we can, and strangers' sympathy doesn't pay the bills. "So, you found a good place for Maddy? Somewhere she'll get the best training possible?"

"We did. Your sister has... I believe elemental magic is what we detected? Is that right, Madeline?"

They say different kinds of magic leave a different kind of aura. Scientifically—and yes, there are people who blend science and magic—it's a kind of imprint in the area where the magic happened. And with the right equipment or ritual, people can actually see the residue of the magic and figure out what kind it was, at least in a general sense.

I don't know exactly how it works. I'm pretty ignorant of the latest news and developments in the magical world.

"That's right." Maddy nods so hard I worry her head might fall off. "Water. It was amazing, the water just exploded out of the sink—"

"Then I'd like to formally give you an invitation to be enrolled at Neptune Academy," Aurora says, gently interrupting Maddy. She looks over at me. "It's our premiere academy for those with elemental magic based on water, and it falls under the auspices of the Phoenix Training Program. The phoenix embodies all four elements: it flies, it bursts into flames at the end of its life, it cries healing tears, and buries its eggs in the earth."

"Okay." I remember that school from my search, and it seemed like a solid program—not that I have a lot of reference points for what makes a magical academy good. "When will she start? Are there any things she needs?"

Aurora pulls some folded papers out of an inside jacket pocket. "All the information you need is right here. When she needs to check into her dorm, what sort of courses she can expect to take in her first year, equipment she'll need... all of it. I took the liberty of securing a scholarship for her, so there should be information on that in there as well."

*Holy shit.* That's... huge. I've been worried about getting Maddy into a program at all. Paying for it was going to be a whole other issue.

"Are you... serious?" I ask, and I know I sound like I'm expecting her to demand one of our souls in return. I'm not trying to seem ungrateful, but I have a hard time trusting new people, even if they're nice.

Scratch that. *Especially* if they're nice.

Maddy gives me an 'Elliot, please' look.

“Completely. There are a number of scholarships available to most magic academies. We don’t want a person’s income to keep them from getting the training they need. It benefits everyone if they learn to control their powers.” Aurora turns to Maddy. “So? What do you say?”

“I say, heck yeah!” she practically squeaks.

“Good.” Aurora still has that calm smile on her face as she hands my sister the papers and takes a polite sip of the water Mads brought her. “We look forward to having you as a part of the magical community, Madeline. Good luck.”

She nods at me, then gets up and shows herself out.

I close the door after her, feeling a little shell-shocked. In two minutes, that Circuit woman just decided the next three years of Maddy’s life.

“This is amazing!” Mads exclaims, with none of the apprehension I feel. She grabs the glass Aurora used, and I follow her into the kitchen as she heads to the sink. “It’s perfect. We looked at Neptune too! It’s the only one in-state I could qualify for. And it’s only a few hours away. You can visit me on the weekends!”

I take the papers from her and flip through them quickly. Everything does seem to be in order. And Neptune was one of the schools I was looking at already, so it all fits—plus, a scholarship is beyond helpful.

“You’re right. It’s perfect.” I put the papers down and smile at her, forcing myself to let go of my stress and worries for a moment. Mads is excited about this, and I’m not going to rain on her parade by thinking about how much I’ll miss her or all the things that could go wrong. “I think this calls for some ice cream.”

She throws her arms around me in a bear hug. “I won’t be too far away, Elliot. It’ll be okay.”

I wrap my arms around her, blinking back tears as I squeeze her tight. “Don’t you worry about me, little sis. I’ll be fine.”



The next few days are a whirlwind of running around and getting Maddy ready. She’s beyond excited, and I don’t blame her. I’ve done my best to give her a normal life since Mom passed away, but she hasn’t had a ton of friends, and she never got to be a part of the magical

community, which I know she's always wanted to. This is the happiest I've seen her in years, and I don't want to dampen that for her.

But... well... shit, this is embarrassing, but Maddy's kind of all I have. I didn't have time for a social life once I started taking care of her. Not that I regret it. She's my baby sister, and I love her to pieces. But it's really staring me in the face now how empty my life is about to become.

Maddy's the person I take to the movies when we can afford them at the two-dollar matinee theater down the street. She's the person I watch stupid TV shows with. I still read to her at night sometimes, except now it's Jane Austen instead of fairy tales. And with her gone, I'm going to have all this free time and nobody to fill it.

It only takes us a day to get her packed. Neither of us has much.

"Look at you," I joke as we survey the suitcases by the door the night before she leaves. "All ready to head out into the big bad world."

Maddy rolls her eyes. "Don't worry. I still remember my self-defense moves, Ellie."

"I should hope so. Be prepared to throw some elbows."

"I'm gonna be fine." She bites her lip. "And you'll be fine too, right?"

"Of course I will be. What are you doing worrying about me for? You're about to head off on a huge adventure! You should be thinking about that!" I give an exaggerated shrug. "I'm just going to be doing my thing in Portland—regular, boring. No trouble here."

"Ellie," Maddy says, huffing out a breath. "I want you to have a life too."

"I *do* have a life. I have a job and everything."

"You know what I mean. I want you to..." She hesitates, glancing away, and when she looks at me again, her blue eyes are serious. "I know you've given up a lot for me. You've taken care of me, and I'm so grateful. You're an amazing sister, and I don't want you to ever think you haven't been enough, because you have been. But you don't have to look out for me so closely anymore. I'm—well, maybe I'm not a full grown adult, but I'm pretty grown up, I think we can both agree."

I laugh in spite of myself. "True. You're not that obnoxious twelve-year-old anymore."

"Hey! I was never obnoxious. I've always been an angel."

"Sure, sure, you keep telling yourself that."

Maddy grabs my hands. “But you really will—you’ll find friends and stuff, right? Go out to parties and clubs and all that stuff? I know we joke that you’re an old lady at heart, but... you’re really not that old. You’re twenty-two. This is when you’re supposed to be having fun and going out and doing your thing.”

“Doing my thing?”

“Doing... men.” She blushes.

“Umm, I think if any of us is going to be hitting a home run in the romance department, it’ll be you,” I tease, squeezing her hands. “You’re not going to break too many hearts, I hope.”

“Har, har, har.” She yanks her hands away and puts them on her hips. “I want you to do things for *yourself*, okay? Have fun.”

“Okay. If it means that much to you, I’ll sign up for a dating app.”

“Elliot!” Maddy laughs, and I grin back. “You don’t have to take care of me anymore,” she promises. “I’m going to be okay. You can take care of yourself now.”

My throat tightens with emotion, but I don’t let it show on my face as I reach over and run a hand over her hair. “Don’t worry. I will, Mads.”

I don’t tell her this as we finish getting ready for her to leave in the morning and settle down to eat dinner on the couch, but... I’m just not very interested in any of that social stuff. Not dating, not parties, not any of it.

Sure, back when I was a teenager, I went out to the odd party, sneaking out and then feeling bad about it afterward, but I was never a huge party person. People can drain my energy really quickly. And I don’t need friends right now. I’m fine on my own. I don’t need a boyfriend, either. It would take a lot for a guy to catch my attention, anyway. I’m not easily impressed.

I’ll be just fine by myself though. I’ve got work and... I don’t know, maybe I’ll take up fucking knitting. I’ll get by. Going to school is what’s best for Maddy, and I’d never hold her back from it. I’ve sacrificed a lot for her, and even though letting her go is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done, I can’t even call it a sacrifice. This is what I’ve always wanted for her.

To be happy.

To thrive.

In the morning, she’s off. A shuttle comes to pick her up—along with other students throughout the city—and take her to the campus about two hours away. I help load up her suitcases and wave her off as I stand on the sidewalk, putting on a smile, trying not to panic inside.

Then the shuttle pulls around a corner, and I'm all alone.

## CHAPTER 3

I'm at work again, doing a double shift. My third double in a row, actually, but so what? Maddy's not around to nail me for it, and nobody else knows or cares. My coworkers are just glad I'm able to cover their shifts. And, hey, extra money for me. I'll stash it away in case some unexpected bills come up for Mads at her new school, although the scholarship helped a lot with defraying the costs.

Our lives haven't been easy since Mom died, but I've never felt actually pathetic before. It's hitting me just how little else I have in my life besides her, and I'm realizing I don't really have any purpose besides taking care of my sister. I have no idea what I'm going to do with my life—you know, long-term. I don't want to be a bartender forever, but fuck if I have any idea what my next step should be.

At least work keeps me busy. I can't think too much about my sister or drive myself crazy worrying about her while I'm serving customers. I can't obsess about whether she's being bullied, struggling in classes, or has awful teachers if I'm telling off men for trying to hit on me, serving drinks like there's no tomorrow, counting out change, and trying to avoid getting busted by Ajax.

I hand off a tray of drinks to one of the servers, Carla, then step back from the bar, wiping the back of my forearm across my forehead as I take a breather.

Now that schools are starting back up, the bar is slowing down a bit, but we still get a rush from about nine to eleven every night. It's after midnight now, so things are slowing down, even for a Saturday.

*I wonder if Maddy's out with friends. Shit, I hope she's not partying too hard. She wouldn't do anything stupid, would she? No way, I raised her better than tha—*

Damn it. I'm doing it again.

Work isn't distracting me as much as I hoped it would, especially now that the rush of orders is slowing down. I need something else.

A soft snort bursts from my nose as I grab a rag and start to wipe down the counter. *Maybe Maddy was right. Maybe I need to get laid.*

I'm not looking for a boyfriend or anything. Fuck no. But I wouldn't mind having someone to work off the stress with, someone to get me out of my damn head. I haven't had sex in forever. Kind of hard to bring a man home when you share a bed with your younger sister. Talk about a mood killer.

Those three guys who came in the other night were fine as hell. If I could find one of them, I wouldn't mind breaking my "no fraternizing with customers" rule.

I scan the crowd. We've got a few tables in the back that are almost out of my eye line, so I subtly lean over the bar just in case I missed them, but they're not here.

*Damn.*

There is someone else, though. A man I've never seen before has taken over one of the corner booths all by himself. A pretty impressive feat if you ask me, seeing as how the bar hasn't completely died down yet, and those booths can seat about five people, six if you really want to squish. He's drinking like he's trying to forget something, or *someone*. The perfect kind of attitude for a one-night stand.

He's incredibly handsome too, with the kind of dark good looks that make him seem like he should be starring in a moody music video. Ebony hair, a slightly hooked nose, cobalt blue eyes, firm jaw, a slight bit of scruff—and holy fuck, his arms look thick and muscled enough that I probably couldn't wrap both hands around his biceps. He's got on a black button-up shirt that's open at the collar, and on a scale of one to ten... he's about a twenty.

*Umm. Shit, yeah.* If I get a chance at that, I'm gonna take it.

He looks like maybe he's in the same kind of mood I am tonight. Maybe he's looking for a distraction, same as I am.

I keep an eye on him, and about ten minutes later, he comes up to get another drink. My knees go a little weak when I see him up close. I don't usually flirt with customers, but fuck it. Time to throw caution to the wind. If he shoots me down, he shoots me down. It'll make a funny story to tell Maddy next time I talk to her.

The guy gives me a small, crooked smile as he sets his empty glass down. That's encouraging.

"You need another?" I ask.

"Yeah. Same kind." His voice is low, a little rough, and sends a shiver down my spine.

Carla must've taken his order since he definitely didn't come up to the bar the first time, but I remember pouring it. Whiskey, top shelf, neat.

"I haven't seen you around here before," I reply as I grab the bottle. This is a longer conversation than I've had with a customer all night, and my nerves tingle with a little thrill as I try to remember how the fuck to flirt. "You're the kind of guy I'd remember. You new in town?"

The man gives a huff of what might be laughter. "Not really. I'm not in Portland very often. I work out of town."

I hum and nod. As I pour his drink, I let him see me looking at him, tracing the way his broad chest fills out his shirt. His gaze trails over me in return, and I shiver again as the heat of his cobalt blue eyes nearly burns me. I'm just wearing my usual work outfit—a black tank top and tight pair of dark blue jeans. Nothing fancy. But it shows off what it needs to show off.

"Out of town, huh?" I breathe, pitching my voice a little lower. *Ugh. That might've been too low.* I raise it a little and add, "What sort of work do you do?"

The guy gives another huff of laughter, tilting his head to one side as he studies me. "Are you actually interested in my work?"

I lean my elbows on the bar top. It offers up a good view of my cleavage, and I see his gaze flick down and then back up to lock onto my eyes. "Not really. But I *am* interested in you."

I'm shocking myself with my own boldness. Not that I can't flirt when I want to, but I don't usually want to. Not at all.

But then, usually the men who come through The Den aren't worth my time. All I want from them is their tip money, and I don't have to flirt to get that. This guy is different though, and not just because he's so damn hot I



want to lick every inch of his skin. There's something about him that fills me with curiosity, makes me want to know more. He's clearly got some kind of story that's mulling around in his head and heart, weighing him down. More than just his looks, it's his attitude, the whole air about him, that intrigues me.

"Oh, are you now?" His eyes narrow slightly as if he's trying to figure me out, but he can't hide the heat that sparks in them too. He braces a large hand on the bar top, and the smile on his face is almost wolfish. "I know you're not the one who checks IDs at the door, but I've got a few years on you. You sure I'm what you're looking for, Reckless?"

"Are you trying to get yourself *not* laid?" I shoot back. Up close, I can see that he's a few years older than me, but who the fuck cares? I'm legal, he's legal. And he's definitely still in his twenties, so we're not even inching toward gross. "Just means you've got more experience. You might actually know what you're doing."

The guy laughs, looking surprised at his own reaction. When he smiles again, there's something different about it—more genuine. "You're bold, I'll give you that."

"Hey, I'm a girl who knows what she wants and goes after it."

This whole *Elliot the Vixen* thing felt awkward and a little silly at first, but as I speak, I realize I'm not playing a role anymore. I really do want this. The tension thickening the air between us taunts me with its heavy promise, and there's a throbbing pulse between my legs that's making my heart rate pick up.

"And I'm a guy who takes what he wants." He tugs his bottom lip between his teeth. His gaze is like fire dragging up my body. "You really think you can handle me?"

*Holy fucking Jesus. I think I just came a little.*

Given the way his voice and eyes make my knees go all wobbly, I'm actually not sure of the answer to that. But I square my shoulders and shoot him my most confident smirk.

"I think I can more than handle you."

The guy leans a little farther over the bar, hooking one finger under my chin and tilting my face up toward his. My breath quickens. I feel submissive, exposed, and my chest heaves slightly. The sheer authority and power radiating from him makes me wet.

"Is that so?" he asks softly.

*Fuck.* Just one touch, one look, a simple murmured sentence, and I'm a puddle.

"I get off work in twenty minutes," I blurt out, my voice a whisper.

He releases my chin, and his fingers ghost down my arm, making me shiver in anticipation. He's looking at me like he already knows exactly how to touch me, how to make me scream for him, beg for him, and I haven't been touched like that by anyone in so damn long.

For a horrible moment, I think he won't say yes—that he'll tell me twenty minutes is too long to wait. Hell, he could have anyone he wanted in this bar right now, even if he doesn't seem to be actively looking for anyone. I haven't flirted in ages, and I'm being really bold here. What if he doesn't like it?

*Elliot the Vixen may be about to crash and burn.*

But then he gives me another small, knowing smile, like he's reading my mind, and my heart thumps wildly in my chest. When he speaks, his words nearly make me come again.

"I'll see you in twenty minutes, Reckless."

## CHAPTER 4

**E**very single one of those twenty minutes absolutely crawls by. I'm about ready to jump out of my skin as the seconds slowly tick past. I don't say anything to my coworkers about it when they ask why I'm so antsy. They've seen me turn down guy after guy, annoyed and irritated and not bothering to be all that nice about my rejections.

If I tell them I flirted with a customer and am planning to hook up with him as soon as my shift ends, they'll never let me hear the end of it.

When it's finally time for me to clock out, I practically yank off my bartender's apron. After our little chat at the bar, Tall, Dark, and Handsome went back to his booth to finish his drink, but I felt his gaze on me the entire time I worked. It revved me up into such a state that I'm already practically panting. He sees me preparing to leave and smoothly slides out of his booth, casting me one more heavy look before striding out the door ahead of me.

My heart is hammering hard as I wave goodnight to my coworkers, trying to act cool and casual.

When I walk out of the bar, he's right there, catching me around the waist, his hands at my hips, pulling me in. He's so close I can smell him, whiskey and leather, and I have to grab his arm to steady myself.

He's all muscle, firm and unyielding, and I was right—when I curl my hands around his bicep, they don't wrap all the way around.

God, I'm already so turned on. He's looking at me like he wants to eat me alive, and I wouldn't mind in the slightest.

I could theoretically take him back to my apartment. Maddy's not there anymore. But just because she's not there doesn't mean I'm okay with

bringing a strange man back home, even one as fucking delicious as this guy. It's still my place with Maddy. My home with her. I'm not quite ready to change our little haven by bringing hookups there—that would make it all so much more real. Like an admission that she really is gone.

“Your place?” I ask breathlessly, hoping he has one. He did say he's not from around here.

The guy pulls back a little, and I see something on his face that's almost a mirror of what I just felt—a hesitance, an unwillingness to let a stranger into that part of his life.

He shakes his head no, his hands still on my waist, his hard body pressed against mine.

*Well, fuck.* I can't really complain about his reticence since I totally get it, but goddamn it, I am *not* letting that stop me.

Taking his hand, I look both ways down the street. It's empty—everyone's either at home already or still inside drinking. “C'mon, follow me.”

I tug him down the sidewalk and turn into an alley; one I know is always dark.

And it is.

It's so dark, in fact, that I stumble on a loose bottle as soon as I step inside, and he catches me around the waist again to keep me from falling. His large hands slide down my stomach as his entire body molds against me from behind, and *fuck*, he's so hard, I can feel his cock even through his pants.

He kisses my temple, and I let my weight fall back against him, tilting my head up, blatantly asking for a kiss.

Tall, Dark, and Handsome doesn't tease me or torture me. Nope, he just goes straight in for the fucking kill. One of his hands moves up to grip my jaw as he kisses me so deeply I can hardly breathe.

Not that I'm thinking about oxygen right now.

That's the furthest thing from my mind as his tongue strokes against mine, tasting and devouring every inch of my mouth. I'm rendered pretty much immobile by his hold on me, so all I can do is let the rush of sensations flow through me.

My knees, already weakened by his sultry voice and fucking hypnotic eyes, threaten to give out entirely, and in response, he just grips me tighter.

I'm 5'8", so I'm not exactly a petite and dainty flower, but he makes me feel small and almost helpless—in a way that makes my panties wet.

By the time our kiss breaks, we're both breathing hard, and I can feel the heat blazing through him, warming me everywhere we touch. He loosens his grip enough to spin me around, and when we're face-to-face, he backs me up against the brick wall. We're only a few feet from the mouth of the alley, so some light from the street still reaches us. It makes his dark blue eyes glint as he looks down at me, his hands moving possessively over my body—tracing the lines of my boobs, my hips, my waist, my sides.

He's staring at me intently, almost like his gaze could penetrate right through me if he looks hard enough. Like he can see right through my outer layers to what lies beneath. It makes me squirm uncomfortably, although it's not my bra and panties I'm worried about him seeing, but other, more vulnerable things.

Like my damn soul.

This is starting to feel... *not* like a one-night stand, and I don't like that one bit, so I grab his head and kiss him, hard.

That snaps him out of whatever weird analysis he was doing as he stared at my face. He kisses me back, matching my intensity and raising me. Our mouths are fused together like we each lost something down the back of the other's throat and are searching desperately for it with our tongues. I delve my hands into his hair, which is thick and soft as velvet between my fingers, arching my back away from the wall to get closer to him.

His warm, long-fingered hands slip under the fabric of my tank, sliding over my stomach before massaging my aching breasts. My nipples are so hard it's almost painful, and every time his palm brushes against them, little zaps of lightning travel from my boobs down to my clit.

"Oh fuuuuck," I groan.

It's supposed to be quiet and breathy, but it comes out a lot louder than I mean it to, giving away the raw need coursing through me. I don't know if it's because I haven't had sex in forever, or if this guy is just that damn good, but I'm coming apart at the seams here.

He pulls away again, and in the soft glow of the street lamps outside the alley, I can see that his perfect dark hair is mussed from my fingers. I like it. It makes him seem a little more human and a little less like some kind of immortal god of sex and power.

“Are you still sure you want this?” he asks, his voice rough and low.

I can't muster any of the false bravado I had in the bar. I know this guy is going to fucking ruin me.

But I also sure as hell know my answer.

I nod, my chest rising and falling fast as I suck in oxygen while I can.

With a low growl, he drops his head again, kissing me until my lips are swollen before trailing his mouth over my jaw, down my neck, and across my collarbone. Then, without warning, he digs his fingers into my hips and pulls me deeper into the alley.

A few more yards in, and we're well and truly away from the light of the street. I can barely make out his silhouette, but I can hear him breathing—his sharp, panting breaths match my own, giving me some hope that I'm not the only one who's unravelling. His leather and whiskey smell invades my nostrils, and fresh wetness dampens my panties. They must be absolutely soaked by now.

His hands on my hips loosen as his deep voice meets my ears. “Turn around. Put your hands on the wall.”

*Holy fuck.* I've never been with a guy who's dominating in bed, and considering how stubborn I am, I wouldn't have thought I'd be into it. But it turns out I was wrong, because I'm practically whimpering as I do as he says.

I reach toward the wall just as he tugs my hips backward, and when my hands find the rough brick, my fingers clench like they're trying to gouge holes in it.

He reaches around slowly, in no hurry at all now that he's got me where he wants me, and unzips my jeans, pushing them and my panties down to my knees in one smooth motion. Cold night air meets my lady bits, and the shock of the breeze hitting my soaked pussy makes me gasp. He hums in satisfaction, and I hear another rustling sound, which I presume is him getting his own clothes out of the way. There's the crinkle of a condom wrapper, and a moment later, his hands are on me again, kneading and massaging the exposed flesh of my ass.

I choke back my groan, trying to keep myself a little quieter now that I've literally got it all hanging out. I really don't want someone to run back here thinking I'm being mugged or something.

Tall, Dark, and Handsome runs his hands up and down my back, sliding them around to play with my boobs again as his sheathed cock teases my

entrance.

*Holy Jesus. This is really happening.*

Alley sex has never been on my bucket list, but I mentally add it now just so I can check it off later.

Then his hips surge forward, and I forget all about bucket lists, Maddy, school, magic, work—all of it. The only thing I can think about is him inside me, stretching me, filling me, hitting spots I didn't even know existed.

I also forget about my plan to keep quiet, and as he picks up the pace, thrusting hard and deep as one hand holds my hip and the other fists my hair, I let out a keening cry that I can only hope anyone passing by will mistake for a cat with rabies. I bite my lip so hard it hurts, grunting softly as I push back against his thrusts, matching his rhythm.

“So good,” he mutters, and I don't think he's even talking to me. He might not even know he's speaking out loud. He sounds as far gone as I am. “So... fucking... good.”

“Uh huh,” I whimper, but that's all I can contribute to the conversation at the moment, because sparks are dancing in front of my eyes, and every nerve in my body is flooding with euphoria as the orgasm to end all orgasms barrels toward me.

Maybe he can sense it, because he lets go of my hair and slips his hand down to my clit, working it with two fingers in rough, demanding circles.

*Oh fuck. That's it.*

Pleasure hits me like a tidal wave, making my breath catch in my lungs as my muscles spasm, my pussy clenching hard around his cock.

“Fuck.” He sounds almost angry, like he didn't want this to end yet, but I can feel him thickening inside me. His thrusts fall out of rhythm, and he grabs my hips with both hands, driving into me so hard I'm pretty sure he's the only thing holding me up. Well, that and the wall, I guess, which I'm still clinging to like a mountain climber on steroids.

He thrusts once, twice, three more times, and then buries himself to the hilt inside me, cursing under his breath as he comes hard. We both collapse forward a little—thank God for the wall—and his front presses to my back as our heartbeats pound out a staccato rhythm.

We stay like that for several long minutes.

Long enough for it to start feeling a little non-one-night stand-ish again. I mean, holding each other afterward is what couples do, right? Not people

who just fucked in an alley.

Or maybe he just isn't sure he can walk yet. I'm not sure *I* can.

I squirm a little in his arms, and he finally releases me, securing the condom as he pulls out. There's some rustling as he disposes of it and pulls up his pants, and I take the opportunity to do the same. My body is still buzzing with leftover pleasure, and I'm not quite sure what the etiquette is in situations like this. What comes next? A friendly handshake? Or do we both skulk back out to the street and go our separate ways like it never happened?

My jacket's still inside, I realize, and my car is parked in the little lot behind the bar.

"Um, thanks," I breathe. "That was..."

I don't really know how to describe what just happened. My brain is still ninety percent mush, making it hard to come up with the right adjective to do it justice. So I just clear my throat and slip past him, making my way carefully through the darkness toward the mouth of the alley.

A hand around my wrist stops me as I'm about to step back out onto the sidewalk. "Wait."

I turn to find him staring at me. His eyes look almost like they have a blue glow now, a little brighter than before. Some guys, once you sleep with them, kind of lose the charisma they had before. Not this one. He's still radiating intensity.

He tugs me back into the curve of his body and kisses me again. It's immolating, and my traitorous knees, already weak from the orgasm, buckle again. It occurs to me that I really don't *want* to go—that I'd be perfectly content to keep kissing him for hours, which is kind of alarming. The last thing I want to do is get attached.

"Tell me your name," he murmurs against my mouth. It's almost like a command, intense and charged, and the answer is on the tip of my tongue—

But, no.

If he knows my name, he can easily ask the other bartenders about me or look up me up online... and while I wouldn't mind another couple mind-blowing orgasms from the guy, it's better if this stays a one-night stand. I don't want it to turn into an actual *thing*. Once is fine, but if you sleep with someone multiple times, you tend to get attached—or at least, I do. That's just how it works, and that's the last thing I need right now.



Besides, I know nothing about this man. I don't think he's creepy or an asshole, and he's handsome as fuck and the personification of sin, but is that really enough to base anything real on? I don't think so.

"Sorry, handsome," I whisper. "You can just call me Reckless."

I kiss him one last time, hard and fast, to give him something to remember me by.

Or maybe it's the other way around, and I'm trying to steal a little piece of him to take with me.

Either way, I pull back quickly.

Then I twist my wrist out of his hold and dart up the street, slipping back into the bar. Grabbing my jacket, I make my way through the late night revelers.

Behind me, I can hear him entering as well, hurrying after me, but I know this place better than he does. I move through the crowd to a small hallway in the back, slip out the door, and I'm gone.

## CHAPTER 5

I'll be honest. Over the next several days, I can't quite get mystery guy out of my head.

It's annoying, to say the least. A few times at work, I catch myself looking for him, eyeing the corner booth where I first spotted him, and then I mentally berate myself for it. I'm not going to moon over some guy, especially one I only met once—and especially not when *he* might've wanted more and I'm the one who turned down that possibility. It's my own damn fault he's gone without a trace, and I refuse to wallow.

At least the hookup did accomplish its main purpose though, which was to take my mind off Maddy and how much I miss her. As thoughts of dark blue eyes and raven hair consume my thoughts, I manage to hold off from pestering my sister with a million texts during her first week of classes.

Finally, the Friday after the infamous alley hookup, I get a call from her.

"Hey!" I say, forcing cheer into my voice. I've just gotten off work, and I'm kicking my shoes off and closing the door behind me as I answer the phone. "How've you been, little sis? You fitting in okay? Liking your classes? What's your room like?"

"Amazing!" Maddy gushes. "All of it's amazing, Ellie! Oh my God, you would love it. My room is great; I'm sharing with another girl named Sharon, and she's been introducing me to people. She went to one of those magical summer camps, so she already knows a lot of people. All the students and teachers here are water elementalists like me, and it's just—it's amazing. I can't even begin to describe it. You kind of have to see it to believe it, you know?"

I do know. I watched Mom do magic often, but I never really spent a lot of time socializing with the magical community after she died. Ajax frowns on people using magic at the bar since it generally only happens when there's a fight, so even though magic users drink there, I don't see a lot of it in action.

Maddy must be in heaven right now. Getting to meet a ton of other people her own age, practicing magic, making friends she doesn't have to lie to about her family past or her powers just to fit in... I can tell she's on cloud nine.

"I'm happy for you," I tell her honestly. "So stinkin' happy, Mads. You're right where you're supposed to be."

My heart aches, though. Hearing her voice makes hot tears prick my eyes as it hits me like a sucker punch just how much I miss her. The apartment's small, just one bedroom, but it feels so big and empty without her in it.

"How are *you* doing?" Maddy asks softly, like she's read my mind. Of course. I forget sometimes that all this time we've spent together doesn't just mean I know her. It means she knows me. "You okay? Are you going out, making friends?"

She sounds worried. I hate that. I'm the older sister; I'm supposed to be worrying about her, not the other way around.

"Of course," I lie, putting a cheery tone into my voice. "I'm living it up big time."

"Okaaay..." My little sis sounds doubtful.

"Don't you worry about me, Mads. That's not your job. Your job is to have fun and to learn. I'm doing just fine, and if anybody's going to be doing any worrying, it's going to be me about you and those college boys."

She groans. "Eliiiiiie. I'm fine!"

I grin. Now we're back on track. "Uh huh. If you say so..."

"I do say so. Geez." I can practically hear Maddy rolling her eyes at me—with love, of course. There's a pause, and then she says hesitantly, "Look, um, I gotta go, we're doing a thing..."

"Go, go!" I say, waving her off and then realizing a second later she can't actually see my hand because I'm an idiot. "Have fun, okay?"

"I will. I love you."

"Love you too."

The apartment feels like it gets ten times colder and emptier once I hang up the call.

Flopping down on the couch, I blow out a breath, stirring a few stray strands of dark hair that've fallen over my face.

*You know what? Maddy's right. I should go out.*

I can't just mope around my apartment forever or work at the bar until I die. I need to have some fun, live a little. I haven't really let loose since before Mom died. I've been the responsible adult this whole time; the alley sex with Tall, Dark, and Handsome was the first crazy, impulsive thing I've done in years. Maybe now's the right moment to change all that, to find my wild, fun-loving side. I mean, I must have one, right?

Heaving myself up from the couch, I head to the bedroom closet and rifle through the back of it until I find an outfit I haven't worn in ages. I'm shocked it still fits, since I think I've grown a little since I last put it on. Tight black pants, a sparkly silver tank top with a lacy black bra underneath that you can see just a peek of, and strappy black high heels: the classic clubbing outfit.

My hair's another thing I haven't done in forever. I usually pull it back into a ponytail for the bar, and at home I just brush it and then call it a day because who's going to judge me? The pizza delivery guy? But this time, I actually straighten it and give it some lift, and then I do my makeup.

I hardly recognize myself when I look in the mirror. I honestly kind of want to go back in time to the bar and ask Tall, Dark, and Handsome what the hell he was thinking hooking up with me then. I actually look *nice* right now, instead of pale and overworked with limp hair.

Well, however I looked a few days ago, I look good at the moment, and I'm going to go out and make the most of it. I have enough money to splurge on a couple drinks, so I can spoil myself a little.

I take a cab to a club called Verve in downtown Portland. A few heads turn to watch me as I walk up the steps, which is a nice confidence booster. Even the bouncer eyes me up and down as he pulls the rope aside and lets me enter.

The thing I'd forgotten about clubs is that they're goddamn loud. And they honestly don't smell so great, between the spilled alcohol and the sweaty bodies and the fog machines and the sex. But something thrills in my stomach as I enter, just because I'm actually here. I'm doing something, veering away from my usual routine, and it's a little exciting.

I don't know anyone in the club tonight, obviously, so I just make my way to the bar. A quick drink'll give me enough courage to go out onto the dance floor. As I wait for the bartender to notice me, I scan the crowd. I'm not seeing anyone I'm too interested in approaching. Nobody here is as hot as those three guys the other night, or the man I hooked up with in the alley.

*Damn it, why am I still thinking about him? Or them?*

Men are a dime a dozen, and I'm not the type of girl to get ridiculously hooked on a guy. Especially not after a one-night stand or just a few glances across the bar.

The bartender finally turns my way, and I place my order. She nods and gets to work. I'm not seeing any women around that look nice enough for me to buddy up with. If only there was another girl who looked as lost as I feel, I could go over to her, but all I'm seeing are tight knit groups of friends, and I don't want to get in on that. I'm not that good with people.

The bartender passes me my drink, and I pay and tip her. Then I turn around—

Only to get slammed into by some idiot.

"Watch it!" I yell. My drink's sloshed all over my clothes. *Fuck*. I'm going to smell like booze all night now. No way is anyone going to want to dance with me when I look and smell like this.

Darn it. I got all dressed up and everything. *Double fuck*.

"Sorry," the guy mumbles.

I grab some napkins and a glass of water from the bartender and rush outside. There's always a massive line for the bathrooms in clubs, and under a streetlight, I can properly see what I need to wipe up.

Ugh, it really did get all over my top, and my pants. It's a good thing the pants are black or it would probably look like I peed myself. *Shit*.

I wet the napkins with the water and start cleaning off my clothes as I silently debate with myself. I'm not sure if it's worth it to go back in after this. Just five minutes in the place and the night's already a disaster. But I got all dressed up and walked all the way over here...

"Watch it, asshole!"

"I'm the asshole? You piece of shit!"

Two men stumble into me and I yelp in surprise, dropping the water glass. "Damn it!"

It shatters, and glass goes everywhere. I stumble back to try to avoid it, nearly falling in my heels.

The men don't even notice me. They're both yelling at the top of their lungs, something about one of them stealing the other one's girl—typical jock-boy bullshit. But as I try to regain my footing, I end up in between them somehow. I grab one guy's shirt for balance, but the other one's already moving, aiming a fist for his buddy's face—

The punch to my temple sends me reeling.

I see stars, and my ears ring like an alarm. I got in my fair share of fights in middle school and high school, but I've never been hit so hard in my life. I've never had adrenaline spike through my veins so sharply, and something inside of me I didn't even know was there snaps.

My hands shoot up as if to shield me, and I feel a strange ripple in my chest, like a wave, rushing through my body and down my arms, out of my hands. I can literally *feel* the air shifting, and then a sound like—like a jet plane, but not, like a really loud thunderclap, but not—explodes out of me.

I'm thrown backward from the force of it.

The two men are hurled away from me, the streetlight bends with a screech of metal, car alarms start going off, my back and head hit the wall of the club, and—

It all goes black.

## CHAPTER 6

Everything is blurry as I wake up. My head hurts, and my eyelids are heavy as lead weights.

I blink a few times. Slowly, like I'm emerging from underwater, my vision clears. I ache all over, like I've just run a marathon while being pelted with rocks. Everything hurts. My mouth is dry, and I'm groggy as hell. Shit. I haven't drunk that much since—

*Wait. No... I didn't drink anything.*

The world sharpens around me, coming into focus, and I realize I'm lying in a hospital bed, in a white-walled room. I'm the only one, which means this is a private room, and I definitely can't afford that on my insurance. How did I end up here?

I try to move—only to hear a loud clanking sound and to find I can't raise my arms.

I look down.

There's an odd silver brace of some kind on my wrist, and my hands are cuffed to the bed.

What. The. Hell?

What happened last night? What did I do?

I vaguely remember being at the club. I definitely remember the earlier part of the day, and even getting ready, but then it starts to get a little blurry.

*Someone knocked into me and spilled their drink. Then I went... I went outside to clean it up... the glass got broken... a punch... something...*

Did I hurt anybody? I know I'm prickly, but Jesus, I don't think I'm violent. And fuck, my head hurts. I think that guy hit me hard enough to give me a bit of a concussion.

Not that I can check my face or anything, seeing as I'm cuffed to the damn bed.

I'm just about to yell for someone to get their ass in here and tell me what the hell is going on when the door opens. A tall woman in a perfectly pressed skirt and blazer walks in.

It's Aurora.

What the fuck?

"What did you do to me?" I demand, shaking the cuffs. I should've known the Circuit would be behind this somehow. Did they erase my memories? Knock me out? Is Maddy okay? What the hell is going on?

Aurora has the grace to look a bit sorry, if nothing else. She pulls up a chair next to the bed. "The handcuffs are the idea of the police, I'm afraid. I've been dealing with them for the last few hours. Modifying a few memories. Do you have any idea what a mess you caused with that stunt?"

"What stunt?" I scrunch up my face, shaking my head. I honestly don't remember.

Aurora raises an eyebrow. "Hiding your magical ability is a punishable offense. You should have registered—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." I struggle to sit up. Aurora helps me arrange the pillows, which is nice and all, but right now it just pisses me off even more. "I don't have any magic."

Aurora's eyes narrow and she stares at me for a long moment, as if she's trying to read my mind. I glare at her.

After a few moments of this standoff, her face relaxes, and she sits back in her chair. "Well. The brace you have on prevents you from doing any magic. It dampens it, so to speak. So you can't use magical means to lie." She taps her fingers on the arm of the chair. "Do you really not remember what happened last night?"

"I remember I went out to a club. I got a drink, but someone knocked into me and spilled it, so I went outside to clean it up. After that, it's all fuzzy, just bits and pieces... until I woke up in here."

Aurora nods. "You were knocked back into the side of the building. And you took a pretty hard hit to the face. Between that and your outburst of magic, I'm sure a bit of short-term memory loss is expected."

"Wait—my outburst of magic?" She's got to be kidding me.

I look down at myself, as if something about me will have outwardly changed to show that I do, in fact, have magic. I still look like me, just in a



hospital gown with some bruises.

Aurora nods. “You let out a sonic boom. It put two men in the hospital and resulted in thousands of dollars worth of property damage... it was one of the strongest bursts of magic we’ve seen in years. We naturally assumed you had to have been hiding your powers from us and training yourself in secret in order to let out such a strong blast. But if you’re serious about not knowing...”

“Are you kidding me?” I can’t believe this. Anger coils in my gut like a snake. “My mom was hugely powerful. My dad is too. You think I *liked* being a disappointment because I didn’t have any magic like they did? You think I would’ve let my sister go off to a magical training academy *alone* if I had magic? Why the hell would I hide it? When my mom died, we lost all connection with the magical community. Nobody wanted us because we weren’t like them. Didn’t matter that we’d grown up with it, spent all our lives around it—all they cared about was whether we could light a candle by snapping our fingers or whatever. You think that was *fun*? That we lived our lives on the outside of everything just for shits and giggles?”

Aurora waits placidly as I explode at her. When I run out of words, she hesitates for a moment to see if I’ll continue. Then she speaks calmly. “I see. Well, you may not have been aware of it before, but our test results indicate that you have Unpredictable magic.”

My brows draw together as her words take the self-righteous wind out of my sails. “I’m sorry, what?”

I’ve never even heard of that, but like I said, I’m a little behind on the ins and outs of the magical community.

“Unpredictable magic is rare,” Aurora explains. “It can’t be categorized and can show up in the form of various powers. Your sister has water elemental magic, if I remember correctly? That means she’s limited in what her magic can do. It has to deal with water. We can help train her and predict what her magic’s limitations and capabilities are because of that. But with you... we simply don’t know. It makes for an interesting and difficult training process.”

She pauses, maybe to give me a chance to speak. But my jaw is hanging open, and I have no idea what to say.

“That would explain why your magic took so long to spark,” she continues after a beat. “Unpredictable magic takes a long time to build and

take shape within a person due to its lack of structure, so it usually comes out in the early- to mid-twenties rather than in the teen years.”

“What does... what does that mean for me?” I indicate the cuff with a jerk of my chin. “Are you going to take me to magical prison?”

“Goodness, no.” Aurora looks appalled at the thought. I half expect her to clutch at some pearls. “We’ll send you to an academy that specializes in training people with Unpredictable magic.”

“Do I get a choice in the matter?” I ask, suspicious.

Aurora opens her mouth, pauses, then closes it. “I’m... well.” She presses her lips together, her expression firming. “No. Not really.”

*Shit.*

## CHAPTER 7

“**W**hy can’t I choose not to go?” I demand, my fight or flight instinct immediately kicking in.

What kind of bullshit is this? I should be allowed to decide what kind of life I want to lead.

Aurora holds my gaze steadily, not even bothering to look guilty. It makes me respect her a little more, because the last thing I want is fake sympathy—but it also makes me want to punch her in the face.

It’s probably a good thing I’m handcuffed.

“We can’t allow you to leave your magic untrained,” Aurora explains. “It’s not just that you’re powerful, it’s that you’re Unpredictable. Without the proper guidance and discipline, you’ll have no way of being able to stop yourself from hurting someone again like you did last night.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. It was self-defense!”

I can’t quite remember all the details of the previous night, but as I say the words, I know they’re true. I’ve never been the type to get into bar brawls or attack people unprovoked. I may not be the friendliest person, but I’m not some raving psycho.

“And I believe that.” The perfectly coifed blonde woman nods. “I’m not saying you had any malicious intent. But that’s exactly the problem. You won’t *mean* to hurt anyone, but you’ll do it all the same. It would be dangerous enough to leave you untrained if you had elemental magic like your sister. If your power was rooted in one of the seven pillars, you could feasibly learn to control it yourself—if the magic in you was weak enough, and you were determined enough. But this... this is serious. We simply

cannot, for the safety of those around you, allow you to go about your life with unchecked magic like this.”

“What happens if I say no?” I ask, shifting uncomfortably. The urge to leap up and make a run for it is strong, and the cuffs binding me to the bed feel even more restricting than they did before. “You gonna jail me or something? Throw me in a deep, dark pit of despair?”

Aurora’s lips press into a thin line. She looks like she’s had just about enough of my sass, and despite the anger bubbling up inside me, I have to keep myself from smirking. Always nice to see the unflappable types lose their cool a little.

“No,” she says at last. “No, we would not throw you in jail. But we would have to suppress your magic. For good.”

My stomach flips, and I can feel the blood draining from my face. My jaw drops open a little. “You—you can do that?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Aurora wrinkles her nose, like the idea is distasteful. Then her face smooths out, returning to its usual calm mask. *Well, good to know she won’t be crying a river over me.* “It’s the only thing we can do to guarantee the safety of both you and the people around you.”

“Does it hurt?” I hate that I probably sound like a child asking this, but I need to know.

Aurora shakes her head. “No, we put you under for the process. It used to, before we figured out the proper spells to keep the subject unconscious, since traditional anesthesia doesn’t work. But we’ve made great strides in the past few decades.”

The word *subject* sticks in my brain, and a shiver crawls down my spine. It’s so clinical, so removed. The Circuit representative doesn’t pick up on my reaction though, continuing on like she’s given this little elevator pitch dozens of times.

“If you choose to have your magic suppressed, you won’t feel any negative side effects. Some people report feeling a bit... empty, but there certainly won’t be any physical pain. You’ll simply go back to living your life as you were before—an ordinary, magic-less person. If you choose to attend the academy, you’ll become a fully integrated part of the magical community upon graduation. You’ll be eligible for jobs that require magical ability and will be allowed to practice your magic”—she glances down at the wide silver brace on my left forearm—“unimpeded.”

“So, basically, I have to choose between being a part of the community or being an outcast,” I growl.

She doesn’t rise to the bait by responding to that. Instead, she rises to her feet with her hands clasped in front of her, all straight lines and poise.

“I’ll give you time to think it over. You’ll have a few days. The Circuit understands this is an important decision, and we don’t want you to make it lightly. We’ve also contacted your sister and the administration of Neptune Academy. The dean agreed to give her permission to miss a day of class so she could come see you.”

My heart beats a little faster as excitement fills me. *Well, that’s something, I suppose.*

And as thrilled as I am at the prospect of a visit from my little sister, I hate that Maddy’s going to see me like this. Just a few days without her around to keep me focused, and I end up in the hospital and possibly in trouble with the police and the Circuit. I guess now we know who the *real* disaster sibling is.

Aurora stands. “The magic repressing brace will have to remain on for the time being, but an officer will be in shortly to take the handcuffs off. I do apologize for that, I know it must be unpleasant. But given the destruction your sonic boom caused, and the witness accounts detailing the incident, you can understand why they felt the need for it.”

My jaw clenches. That’s easy for her to say. She’s not wearing a magic-dampening brace *or* a set of handcuffs.

“We’ll be in touch,” the tall woman assures me, and then she walks out without so much as a goodbye.

I flip her off as she goes. She can’t see it, but it sure makes me feel better. I’ve never felt so goddamn helpless in my life.

What kind of choice is this? Give up my magic for good and never be a part of the community, which means never being a proper part of Maddy’s world, or hold onto this stupid ability and play the Circuit’s little games?

I gave up years ago on going to an academy and being a true part of the magical world. I don’t want to play by their rules. And God knows that developing my powers so late in life—relatively speaking, anyway— is going to make me the object of enough derision and snobbery to last a lifetime.

On top of that, the idea of Unpredictable magic is new to me. I’m sure there are plenty of people in the magical world who knew about this

already, but it definitely doesn't get talked about much. Am I going to be treated as a freak?

*Yeah, that doesn't sound worth it.*

I've been getting along just fine without magic so far, so my instinct is to tell Aurora to fuck right off with her "freak academy" and let the Circuit suppress my powers for good. Except... what about Maddy?

My sister has magic now. What would it mean for her if I cut myself off from the magical world? Would I still be able to visit her? To spend time with her? The magical population doesn't usually mingle with the mundane humans who live near and among us but remain blissfully unaware that magic exists.

And even if I wasn't booted from the community entirely, there'd be a whole aspect of her life that I wouldn't be a part of. An aspect I couldn't relate to.

Before, when I thought I didn't have magic at all, that was one thing. I didn't have a choice, and I was determined to make do with what life had given me. But now, I most definitely have a choice. And I don't want to shut myself out from being able to share in my sister's experiences.

But will it really be worth it?

To uproot my entire life and go to this academy in the hope that getting some training will make me less of a freak in people's eyes?

I'm still stuck in my spiraling thoughts when two police officers come in and remove the handcuffs. They don't seem to notice the brace around my wrist, and I wonder if Aurora cast some spell on it that means they literally can't see it. People who work in the Circuit are good at that kind of magic, casting illusions and messing with ordinary people's minds so they don't notice the magic around them.

*"Some people can't even accept those who have different skin colors; how would the general human population ever accept those of us with frightening, powerful magic?"* my mom told me once when I asked her why we had to be so secretive.

She had a point. And she wasn't even talking about Unpredictables, just people with regular, commonly accepted magical abilities.

One of the cops slips the cuffs into his back pocket, then they leave without a word, convincing me even further that they had some kind of magic performed on them. They seem dazed and a little distant, like they might forget they ever met me as soon as they leave the room.

After they finally wander out, the nurse comes in. She's more alert, and I can tell she has magic of her own—so at least some of the hospital staff must work for the Circuit. She makes sure I eat, then checks my blood pressure and all that. I feel fine, other than my damn head hurting, but I don't waste any time trying to convince her of that. The longer I stay here, the longer I'll hopefully have before I need to give Aurora an answer.

Now that I'm free to move about, I slip into the bathroom and finally get to look in a mirror.

*Ouch.* I look like a walking domestic abuse ad. Between the punch to the face and the fact that I apparently slammed myself into a wall, my skin has some lovely purple marks on it that aren't going away anytime soon.

It looks worse than it is, because Maddy walks in as I'm crawling back into bed, takes one look at me, gasps, and sprints over.

"Oh my God! Oh my God, Ellie, are you okay? Are you all right? What did they—"

"I'm fine, Mads." I pet her hair and take her hand, squeezing gently. "I promise, okay? I'm all right. It looks bad, but it's just some bruises."

"Aurora told me you created some kind of... of sonic boom." My little sister grabs the chair Aurora was sitting in and yanks it right up next to the bed so she can keep holding my hand while sitting in it. "That you knocked a bunch of people out and sent a car flying."

"I don't really remember too much of it, honestly," I admit.

"But you *do* have magic." Maddy sounds excited, and her eyes light up as she speaks. "I mean, I know it's not—it couldn't have been pleasant, the way you found out, but you have magic! That's great!"

"Yeah. Unpredictable magic, which is apparently not all that fun and definitely dangerous."

Maddy falters. "Yeah. I mean, I've... heard a bit about it at my academy."

"Oh?" Based on her tone, I'm guessing it wasn't anything good.

She shrugs. "Oh, you know, just people being people..."

"What did they say?" I raise my brows, making my voice firm.

My spritely little sister squirms under my stare and shrugs again. "Just that..." Her face falls. "That people with Unpredictable magic are freaks. That they should all have their magic suppressed for everyone's safety. That they're... psycho."

*Ah, fuck.*

I suppress a frustrated groan. Of course. *Of course* I get the magic that's going to make people keep me on the outside. Again.

"But it's okay!" Maddy brightens up, ever the optimist. "Because they have schools for that kind of thing, and I don't care what anybody else says—I think it makes you special to have that kind of magic. Plus, it means you can go to an academy like me, and we can learn magic together! I mean, not *together* together, but at the same time. And we'll see each other on breaks. It'll be amazing! I'm so excited for you."

My chest constricts. It hurts to let her down like this, but...

"Mads." I shake my head gently. "I'm not going to go to a school."

Maddy stares at me for several long moments, and I see honest confusion in her face. She's wanted magic for so long that I don't think she can comprehend the idea of someone *not* wanting it.

"What?" she finally blurts. "Why not?"

I sigh. "I know you're excited, but think about it. About what this all really means. You think I want to leave the life I know behind just to be called a freak and be the odd one out again? To play by the Circuit's rules when they've never done anything for me, for us? Nobody helped us after Mom died, nobody even seemed to care that we existed, and now that I've got magic, they expect me to just march to their tune? I don't think so."

"But if you don't..." Her voice drops to a whisper. "They'll suppress your magic. Forever. Aurora told me. You can't give up a gift like that, Elliot."

"It's my gift, my choice. I can and I will."

"But Mom would be so sad."

*Shit.*

Maddy doesn't even know it, but she just played her damn trump card. She didn't say it to manipulate me—my sister would never do that. But the thought of our mother, and of the life she hoped Mads and I would one day be able to lead, makes emotion tighten my throat. Our mom loved us unconditionally, with or without magic. But I know my sister is right.

She looks close to tears when she speaks again. "Mom would've been so happy you had magic, Elliot. She never gave up hope that you'd develop a gift."

I swallow down the lump in my throat. My little sister crying is the one thing that always makes me melt.



“Sweetie, it’s okay.” I force a smile to my face, giving her hand a little squeeze. “I’ll be fine. It’s not going to hurt or anything. Aurora promised me that, and I believe her.”

Actually, I’m not entirely sure I do. But I’d let someone stick hot needles under my fingernails before I’d admit that to Maddy.

She wipes at her eyes. “You’re not happy here, alone; I know you aren’t. You’ve done such a good job taking care of me, and I know you do your best not to let me see it, but c’mon, Elliot. I’m eighteen, and I’m not stupid. I think this could be a really good chance for you to find some people you can connect with, and to make some friends and find a community. You deserve to feel like a part of something.”

I start to shake my head again, but she talks a little faster, cutting off the gesture with her words.

“And I know the magical world isn’t perfect, and the Circuit is kind of strict. But I’ve met lots of wonderful people at my school, and I think you’d meet a lot of great people at yours. You can always change your mind and request to have your magic suppressed later if you really don’t want it, but who knows if you’d be able to undo the suppressing? So why not just give the whole thing a try and see?”

She does have a point, I suppose, about the magical suppression. I doubt it would be easy to unburn that bridge once it’s nice and crispy. And I can always quit school and let them suppress my magic instead if I decide it’s not for me.

And I do really, really hate disappointing my sister. If she wants me to do this...

I mean, it can’t be all that much worse than how my life already is, can it? I’m tough. I can take whatever they throw at me.

I squeeze Maddy’s hand. “All right. I’ll give it a chance. I’ll go to school—if only so I can learn to kick your ass at magic.”

My sister launches herself at me, wrapping her arms around me in a hug. “I’m so happy for you,” she whispers. “And I know Mom would be happy too. I just know it.”

I hug her back then hold out my hand. “All right. Give me your phone and Aurora’s number before I change my mind.”

She grins, pulling out her cell phone and Aurora’s business card.

The polished woman was probably expecting my call, waiting for me to cave, because she answers on the first ring. “Hello?”

“It’s Elliot,” I say. “I’ve thought about it, and I’ve decided to take you up on your offer. Sign me up for the academy.”

My stomach roils with nerves as I speak. Beside me, Maddy is still grinning from ear to ear.

*Well, at least one of us is looking forward to this.*

## CHAPTER 8

I'm not sure what to expect from this magical academy I've agreed to go to.

Sure, I looked up schools for Maddy, and back when I was much younger and Mom still had hope that I'd manifest some kind of magical ability, she showed me some brochures for various schools and stuff. And I figure it can't be too different from a normal college—although, since we've all got Unpredictable magic, I'm guessing most of the students will be older, like I am.

But in spite of my generally low expectations, I can't help but be impressed after a car picks me up and drives me several hours east, out into the woods—and we round the final bend on the winding road toward campus, giving me my first glimpse of it.

*Holy shit. This is beautiful.*

A large stone wall stretches into the distance on either side, probably encompassing the entire campus grounds, and a gate across the road opens to grant us entrance. The car idles as the driver waits for something, and I feel a prickle of magic as we drive through. It must be the protective wards that surround the academy grounds. Maddy mentioned they have something like this at her school too, and I imagine the ones protecting this campus are even stronger than usual. Both to keep threats out and to keep the students' dangerous magic *in*.

My head swivels from side to side as the car pulls forward, my wide-eyed gaze trying to take in everything at once. We follow a short stretch of road, passing the administration building. The road intersects another street that creates a massive loop. Large trees and footpaths criss-cross the grassy

area inside the loop, and buildings are arrayed outside it. We pass what appear to be dormitories first. Several of them are clustered together, like several old sprawling Victorian manor houses got together for a party. Smaller buildings are situated off to the side. Maybe staff and administration housing?

My jaw drops, and I know the driver can sense my awe because he chuckles.

“Welcome to the Academy of Unpredictable Magic,” he tells me.

He goes on to explain that the actual name for the school is Griffin Academy, but apparently no one—not even the teachers and staff—calls it that.

The academy is named after the half-eagle, half-lion creature of legend. Wild and majestic but unpredictable, just like the magic of its students. Sounds kind of cool, I have to admit; and in spite of my misgivings, I can’t find much to dislike about this place so far. It sure beats the crappy apartment Mads and I were living in.

*I hope her campus at Neptune is just as pretty. She deserves nothing but the best.*

“Those were the dorms we just passed,” the driver confirms, slowing the car to a crawl and gesturing out the passenger side window.

As we continue around the curving road, he points out several more buildings and landmarks. The academy grounds are huge, stretching over a dozen acres, but a lot of that isn’t developed. Thick woods surround the school buildings, giving the place a rugged, natural feel. But the most impressive part of the academy is undoubtedly the main school building, which is so big it resembles a small castle.

Lettering in the stone over the large entryway reads *Wellwood Hall*. It looks like something out of a fairy tale, with gables and turrets, massive wooden doors and ornately designed windows that sparkle in the sunlight. It’s several stories tall, with towers that stretch even higher, and the gray stone facade is covered in ivy and creeping vines. A few students are out and about, lounging on the steps of the building or walking in small groups down the paths.

*Wowza.* Despite my efforts to remain cool, I’ve practically got my face squished up to the window as we do a slow drive by.

This place has obviously been around for a while, and I start to wonder just how old it really is. How many students have graduated from here?

And how did I not even know it existed? How did I not know about Unpredictable magic at all?

There's clearly lots to do around here. I see a building that looks like some kind of mess hall, an auditorium, and a massive looking gymnasium. *Guess they don't want their students to get bored.*

The driver loops back around after giving me the tour and pulls up in front of one of the dormitories. "This is where you'll be staying, in our first year dorm. Women on the left, men on the right."

He helps me carry my bags up to my room. It's an easy task, since I really don't have a lot; I got rid of a bunch of stuff before I came here and packed up the rest in three small suitcases. I had to give up the lease on the apartment, since there's no use paying for it while Maddy and I aren't using it. I can't justify the expense. Aurora managed to secure a scholarship for me too, which is amazing, but I'm not exactly rolling around in piles of cash. Mads and I will figure something out for the summer and holidays.

My driver's nice, but it's not his job to babysit me, so once he drops off the last of my bags to my room, he leaves.

And then... I'm on my own.

My room is a quad on the second—and top—floor of the building. Another little tidbit I picked up from the driver is that the school is small, less than three hundred students, so I'm not surprised that the dorm buildings themselves are relatively small. It has a great view, and it looks like I'm the last one to arrive, since the other three sections of the room are already covered in décor. I'm not surprised. Everyone else must have known ahead of time that they were coming here. Me? I'm a week late, and a few days ago, I didn't even know this place existed.

*Super.*

I dump my bags on the empty bed. It's sort of a relief that I didn't have a lot to bring with me. It means there's not a lot to unpack. I get my clothes into the closet, take care of the bedding, and put the framed photo of Mom, Maddy, and me eating ice cream on the empty desk. My small photo album goes in the desk drawer.

Mom had a large, ornate wall mirror and a few paintings, but I packed that all up and sent it to my sister, just keeping one small painting of a sailboat for myself. I hang that on the wall. Mom always loved the ocean; she went sailing a lot as a kid. She always wanted to teach Mads and me to sail, but we never got the chance before she got sick.

When I've got everything unpacked and organized the best I can, I step back to admire my handiwork.

My part of the room is definitely the most sparse. The other three areas have tons of pictures plastered all over, luxurious bedding, tapestries hanging from the ceiling, and desks crammed with knickknacks. It makes my side of the room feel... small. Cold. Inadequate, even.

I shake off that thought. I'm not going to let something as ridiculous as room decorations get me down. So what if I have less stuff than my roommates? The few possessions I do have mean a lot to me, and that's all that matters.

I'm already registered, and I've been given a day to get myself settled in before I start classes tomorrow, or so Aurora told me, so I don't have to rush off to anything just yet. Even though the driver gave me a mini tour, I figure I'll check out the campus on foot, since I missed the official orientation and all that.

And I have to say, whatever else I feel about this situation—the campus is beautiful.

I really mean that. I can see myself going for runs in the surrounding woods, or just lying on the grass staring up at the sky. I wish I could draw, because if I had any artistic ability at all, my fingers would be itching for charcoals and paper. This place is like a breath of fresh air after being in the city for so long—like inhaling deeply when I didn't even know I was holding my breath.

The silver brace is still on my wrist—leaving it on is mandatory, Aurora said—and as I walk around campus, I see that I'm not the only one. It looks like only the older people have their bands off. I'm guessing they're either teachers or staff, because everyone who looks my age or close to it has a magical cuff on their wrist, same as mine. Some are decorated with colors or have names written on them, which I assume was done in case the band gets lost. I think I'll keep mine plain silver. Nothing wrong with that. And I'm not going to dress it up and act like I'm happy about having to wear it.

Although, it's not like I'm super happy to have magic that can destroy buildings either, so... maybe I should just accept the lesser of two evils.

One of the buildings I pass is definitely the campus mess hall. I can smell food as I walk by, and the tempting scents seem to drift down the large stone steps, drawing me toward the large structure. I veer toward it, eager to find out what the cuisine is like here, when I notice three men

lounging near the base of the stairs, idly talking. Something about them catches my eye.

I draw closer—and realize why.

It's the three guys from the bar that night. The ones I couldn't stop staring at.

*Oh, shit.*

What are the odds, right? I mean, it would explain why I never saw them at The Den again. Classes just started, so they've probably been stuck here practicing their dangerous magic and would have to get permission to leave campus and all that.

I quickly pull my gaze away so they won't catch me staring and duck my head as I move toward the stairs. I was one of a couple bartenders on duty that night, and I don't think they even noticed me mixing drinks behind the bar, so I'm hoping they won't recognize me.

No such luck.

## CHAPTER 9

**A**s I walk by, the blond says, “Um, I’ll take two margaritas?” I pause with my foot on the first step and glare at him, folding my arms.

The one with the swimmer’s build and dark brown hair elbows his friend, rolling his eyes. “Don’t mind Cam. He thinks he’s funny.”

His voice is soft and deep, and something about it makes me want to hear him keep talking.

The blond does look a bit sheepish. “Sorry. I would’ve called out your name, but I didn’t know it. You were the bartender last week, though, right? Over at...”

“The Den. Yeah.” I figure there’s no point in playing dumb. I’m a horrible actress. “That was me.”

“I knew it!” The blond—Cam, I guess—beams. He gestures me closer, his vibrant blue eyes gleaming with curiosity. “You a new student here? We haven’t seen you around this week; did you get in late?”

“Um, yeah... something like that.” I walk over cautiously.

“You must be a first year.” He notices my brows pull together and explains quickly, “We’re all second years, and we haven’t seen you around before.”

“Oh, right. Yeah. My powers only... uh, manifested a few days ago.” I gesture to the fading bruises that still mar my face. “That’s where I got these.”

“It’s always a bit of a scare when your magic first sparks.” The brown-haired guy who elbowed the blond smiles gently at me. The man with the



almost-black hair looks... well, I think if I spat on him, he'd look *less* offended by all this.

"By the way, I'm Cam," the blond says, grinning. I already picked up on his name, but I nod anyway, shaking his hand when he offers it. Then he jerks his chin toward the other two. "The judge of my comedic talents is Asher, and Broody McBrooderson here is Dima."

"Dmitri," the surly guy corrects, in a tone that says if I ever call him Dima I'll lose a limb.

"Is that Russian for super friendly?" I snap, annoyed that he's somehow decided he hates me when he's known me for less than thirty seconds.

Asher looks alarmed at the turn this conversation has taken, but Cam just laughs.

"Oh shit! Looks like we finally found someone who'll go toe-to-toe with you, Dima," he says, punching his grouchy friend on the arm. Then he turns back to me. "Seriously, don't mind him. We won't let him bite." He winks, then adds, "You're new; I bet you could use a friend or two."

He's right about that. Hopefully one of them will be able to show me the ropes around here.

And my initial assessment at the bar wasn't wrong. They're all insanely gorgeous. Not that that's the only reason I'm still talking to them, but it's no hardship that they're easy on the eyes. Cam's got this all-American good looks thing going—tall and broad-shouldered, with tan skin and striking sky-blue eyes. Asher is muscled but lean, with forest-green eyes that seem to notice everything. His dark hair flops a little into his face, and he has a quiet, solemn air about him.

Dmitri, the bastard, is breathtakingly handsome as well. He has a razor-sharp jawline shadowed with a bit of scruff, piercing dark eyes, nearly black hair that gleams in the sun, and shoulders that indecently stretch his damn t-shirt.

*Don't do it, Elliot*, a little voice in my head warns. *Do not let yourself be attracted to someone who's such an ass.*

But despite that very sensible voice in the back of my mind, I find my gaze lingering on him several heartbeats too long.

"So, what kind of magic do you have?" Cam asks, and I almost jump. I rip my gaze away from Dmitri, blinking a few times as if to clear my vision.

"Um... it was described to me as a kind of sonic boom."

“It was described to you?” Dmitri scoffs under his breath. “You weren’t there for it?”

“I was a little busy with your mom,” I reply sweetly.

Cam busts up laughing, and Asher ducks his head down, a small grin on his face. I swear I hear Dmitri growl.

“I can absorb magic that’s sent at me,” Cam says, his eyes still dancing with humor. “Gives me a temporary boost of strength and power. And I can teleport, which I would definitely do right now to impress you and show you how awesome I am, but...” He shrugs and holds up his brace, upon which has been painted a dick.

I cock an eyebrow. “Classy.”

He just shrugs, completely unashamed. I find myself grinning in response. I haven’t met someone who’s this damn open and shameless in forever. It’s the complete opposite of my personality. I’m more closed off than a clam shell, but... I like it. I like *him*.

“Dmitri can phase and duplicate himself,” Cam goes on.

“Phase?”

“I can become incorporeal.” Dmitri speaks slowly, like he’s having to tell me what two plus two is. “Allows me to walk through walls and things like that.”

“And Asher here can read minds,” Cam finishes, elbowing him. “Even control them a little.”

Unlike the other two guys, Asher looks horribly embarrassed. “I don’t use it,” he says, shaking his head. “Or I try not to, anyway.”

His fingers trail lightly over his brace, as if making sure it’s still there. It’s clear he feels his power is more of a burden than a gift. I totally get where he’s coming from.

“I’m not sure how I feel about my power either,” I admit, stepping a little closer to him. “I’ve gotten so used to being without magic, I’m not sure how to function with it.”

Asher shoots me a warm, grateful smile, and it lights up his face. My stomach flutters, and I have to firmly tamp down those stupid butterflies.

*No. No way am I going to be attracted to two—okay, fine, three—men at once. That’s just asking for trouble.*

“We’re never going to learn how to function with it with these damn braces on.” Dmitri scratches at the skin around his band like it itches. “It’s

unfair of them to do this to us. The other schools don't make their students wear armbands."

"It's to make sure no accidents happen." Cam shrugs, clearly unconcerned.

"It's because they think we're freaks," Dmitri growls.

"It's because *we* think we're freaks," Asher says quietly. His voice is firmer than I would've expected. I don't think he's the oldest of the guys—that would be Dmitri, I'm pretty sure—but he's got this quiet confidence that makes him seem almost ageless. "Everyone here thought they didn't have magic. That they were a disappointment to their family. They're ready to hate themselves, and it's easier to direct that hate onto other people than it is to unleash it on themselves. Everyone's emotions are running high. That's why the braces are on."

My brows rise so high they must be nudging my hairline. "That was... really insightful."

Asher shoots me a small smile, and I find myself smiling in return, a pleasant warmth blooming in my chest.

"Ash is our resident philosopher," Cam jokes, clapping him on the shoulder with a grin. "And he's got a point. Most of the staff at the school are on our side. If it were up to them, maybe we wouldn't have to wear the magic suppressing bands. But they're in the minority on that. A lot of people didn't think there should even *be* a training academy for us at all—they argued that we were too dangerous and should just get our magic suppressed without a choice."

My jaw drops. "What?"

Jesus. That's fucking awful. At least I had a say in the matter, even if I didn't like what my two choices were. And I can understand why Aurora wouldn't want me walking around with Unpredictable magic unless I knew how to control it.

Cam shrugs. "Way of the world, sweetheart."

"I'm not your sweetheart." The words come out automatically, a knee-jerk response. I actually didn't hate the way *sweetheart* sounded rolling off his tongue, but after a few years of working at The Den, it's second nature to shoot down any guy who tries to call me by a pet name.

"No, you're not." He arches a brow, grinning wider at me. "You're way too fiery for that. How about Cinnamon?"

For some reason, that word sounds even better coming out of his mouth, but there's no way I can admit it. Avoiding his gaze, I clear my throat. "Why Cinnamon?"

"Because it's a little bit sweet, but with a hell of a kick."

I roll my eyes, hoping the flush I can feel warming my cheeks isn't too obvious. "Sounds more like you think I'm a cheap stripper with a heart of gold."

He chuckles. "Nah, definitely not. I can see what you mean, though. How about Cinn?"

"Is that with a 'c' or an 's'?" I cross my arms over my chest, enjoying the fact that I get to negotiate for my nickname.

"Which do you want it to be?"

I don't even hesitate. "'S', definitely."

Cam's bright blue eyes spark with humor and something else that sends a little thrill through me, then he nods decisively. "*Sin* it is then. I like that."

Dmitri grunts under his breath, pushing away from the stone pillar at the base of the stairs. "You two done flirting yet? We don't have time for this. Let's go."

*What a dick. Seriously, what is his deal with me?*

"Sure. Go. I'm not trying to impinge on your busy social calendar," I shoot back, flushing for an entirely different reason as anger flares inside me.

He freezes, eyes narrowing. His striking face turns stony as he gives me a challenging look, like he's daring me to cross some invisible line. His gaze drags down my body and back up again, and it's like I've been set on fire. *Fuck, I want to hear him say other things in that deep, dark, dangerous tone of his.* He has this commanding, dominating aura, and I don't know which I like more, the thought of him ordering me around or of me getting to order him around. Proud and stubborn as he clearly is, I bet he likes to be in charge everywhere.

Heat flares through my body, and I'm instantly appalled at myself. Goddamn it. This guy's an asshole. Why am I thinking about what he'd be like in bed?

Especially not when I just met two sweet, equally hot men who seem more than happy to have my company. I don't need to waste my time chasing after some guy who hates me for indecipherable reasons.

Dmitri hasn't responded to my taunt with words, but his stare hasn't eased up at all either.

"I should get back to my dorm anyway," I blurt, just to give myself something to say to break the awkward silence.

Cam steps forward, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "I'll walk you."

Before I can respond, Asher reaches out and catches my hand, tugging me out of the way as a gaggle of students traipse up the stairs toward the dining hall. They're a big group, and I end up crowding close to him to avoid getting jostled. He smells like citrus and lemongrass, and when I suck in a deep breath, trying to regain my equilibrium, his scent invades my nostrils.

I have the strangest impulse to step even closer to him, to bury my face in the soft fabric of his t-shirt and see if he smells that good all over. I manage to resist the urge—thank God—but I can't quite bring myself to step away like I normally would.

My face must be bright pink. I don't quite understand what's going on. I'm not usually the kind of girl people take to immediately; I'll be the first to admit I'm a bit closed off, maybe even a little cold. But Cam and Asher are both friendly enough to compensate for my lack of social skills. Plus, I'm all alone here and could use some friends, and Maddy's voice is in the back of my mind reminding me to branch out, to be social, to have fun and meet people.

"Sure, you can walk me if you want." Mustering my courage, I glance over at the blond man with a smile that's only a little forced. I start to step away when I realize I'm still holding Asher's hand—and he seems to realize it in the same moment, because he lets go quickly, glancing down and clearing his throat, clearly embarrassed.

Cam just cocks his head at the two of us, wagging his eyebrows with a knowing smirk. "Awesome. C'mon then, show me your room."

"That better not be a euphemism." At least my mouth can keep up with banter even when my brain is a few steps behind.

"Oh, God no." He laughs, his full lips parting to reveal white teeth. "My euphemisms are much worse than that."

That makes me chuckle, and the two men frame me on either side and escort me back to my dorm. Well, technically Dmitri's there as well, but he doesn't do anything except walk behind us like a tenacious storm cloud.

I want to ask Cam what's up with him or see if Asher has any insights, but I don't want to invade Dmitri's privacy or gossip, or talk about him like he's not there. And besides, I just met him. It's none of my business if he's got a stick up his ass.

"I'm up on the second floor, in the southern corner," I tell Cam once we get to the year one dorm I've been assigned.

"Excellent. Now I know which windows to throw stones at," he says with a faux-innocent smile.

"Don't bother, I'll just let down my hair and you can climb up."

It's extremely lame, as far as jokes go, but Cam and Asher both laugh like my response is actually funny. Dmitri's scowl deepens, which I wouldn't have thought was possible.

"We'll see you later, Sin." Cam leans forward and brushes his lips over my cheek in a kiss so soft he might as well be a ghost. But I swear I feel a delicious tingle spreading out from every place our skin touches.

"My name's actually Elliot," I murmur. "Just for future reference."

"Elliot," Asher repeats, a smile blooming across his face as Cam pulls away. "That's pretty. I like it."

The three men leave, and now there's nothing for me to do but go back upstairs to my room and wonder how the hell I ended up with two—three?—gorgeous guys as my only friends on campus.

Not that I'm going to make a move on any of them, necessarily. I'm here to learn how to control my magic. I came to this academy for Maddy's sake, and my mom's. Not to find true love.

Although... if a little fun were to happen, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. I can easily imagine begging Cam to get between my thighs, or having slow, deep sex with Asher.

*Argh! Focus, Elliot,* I tell myself as I climb the stairs. My shared dorm room is a short walk down the hallway on the second floor.

When I reach it, I hear several voices coming from inside. *Guess my roommates are back.*

Taking a deep breath, I steel myself to meet them. Cam and Asher were both so friendly. Hopefully these girls are like them, and not like Dmitri.

Pasting on a smile to counteract my resting bitch face, I open the door. As soon as I step inside the room, the talking stops, and three heads swivel around to look at me.

There are two redheads and a blonde, although one redhead has fiery, carrot-colored hair and the other has darker auburn locks. The auburn-haired one looks startled at my entrance, her gaze dragging over me like she's not quite sure I really exist. The other redhead rolls her eyes, and the blonde looks offended.

"You could knock," she says, every syllable dripping with scorn.

"This is my room," I reply. I close the door behind me and step farther inside. "I'm Elliot."

"Elliot?" The blonde raises an eyebrow. "Isn't that a boy's name?"

"If we're going by the archaic idea of assigning gender roles to names, sure, why not."

The auburn-haired girl laughs, then snaps her mouth shut when the other two glare at her.

"I'm Megan," the carrot-haired girl says dismissively. "The one who thinks this is funny for some reason is Kendal."

Kendal goes pink, pressing her lips together so hard they practically disappear as her anxious gaze flits between the other two. I can immediately sense the pack dynamics here. The blonde who's regally tossing her hair over her shoulder right now is the leader, Megan's the lieutenant, and Kendal's at the bottom of the totem pole.

And here I thought I left all that bullshit clique stuff behind in high school.

*Apparently not.*

"And that's Alyssa," Megan finishes up with a flourish, indicating the blonde princess lounging on the bed closest to mine.

Alyssa's gaze flicks over to me, then she looks away. "Family?"

"Excuse me?"

She looks back over at me. Her dark brown eyes are full of disdain. *Jesus, she and Dmitri would probably get along great.*

"Your family," she repeats, louder. "Who are they?"

*Oh.* "My last name is Sinclair."

Alyssa gives a little sniff. "My parents specifically asked the dean that I room with people who are of our level."

Anger sparks low in my gut. Sure, I've been pretty much out of the loop in the magical community for the past several years. But my parents were damn powerful magic users, thank you very much, even if they weren't from those hoity-toity blue blood families.

“Trust me,” I shoot back in a low voice. “We are definitely at different levels.”

I can and will kick this girl’s ass if she keeps giving me trouble.

Kendal clearly gets the intention behind my words, because her eyes widen even more, and her gaze bounces quickly around between the three of us. When she looks back at me, I shrug, and she gives a small cough that may have started out as a laugh. Her two friends turn to look at her, their expressions a mix of annoyance and studied disinterest.

“I’m from the Marquet family,” Alyssa drawls, directing her attention back to me. She says it with a haughty air, like I’m supposed to know what that means; like I should understand the implications and start kissing her ass immediately.

“Good for you.” *Bravo, you stuck-up bitch. You won the family lottery, I guess. What an amazing accomplishment.*

“Megan here is from the Bergman family, and Kendal is a Chaucer.”

“Congratulations.” I know it sounds sarcastic, but I’m having a hard time caring. I have no idea who any of these families are. Mom didn’t exactly coach me in who had the highest magical market value or whatever.

“I haven’t heard anything about you.” Alyssa eyes me like I might actually be a lizard person in disguise. “How did you get here?”

“Same as you. I have Unpredictable magic.” I fold my arms, deciding to stop playing along. She’s not going to miraculously start being nice to me if I pander to her; it’ll just make her think I’m another nervous sycophant she can lord over like Kendal. Which I am most definitely not.

The blonde girl scowls at me. “Fine. But who are your—”

I hold up a hand. “It shouldn’t matter who my family is. I don’t know anything about the fancy families you come from, and I don’t care, okay? I’m just here to learn how to control my magic. Got it?”

The queen bee of our dorm room looks affronted. Her head draws back and her jaw drops open slightly. I’m sure the people she bullies don’t talk back to her very often. Kendal looks shocked, and Megan is taking her cue from Alyssa and shooting daggers at me with her eyes.

*Jesus. I have to get out of this damn room, or I’m gonna say something I really will regret.*

I turn and walk out the door without another word. As soon as it closes behind me, an explosion of muffled, angry voices floats through the thick wood. My jaw clenches unconsciously. Great. I’ve got a snob and her two



lackeys for roommates, with prissy, rich parents who'll probably make my life hell if I so much as breathe the wrong way near their precious angels. Never mind that those precious angels are "freaks" of magic just like the rest of us who are stuck here.

As I head back down the hallway with no real destination in mind other than *not here*, I do my best to shake off the creeping worry crawling up my spine.

It doesn't matter; I'll manage. I've been in tougher situations than this, and I can handle a spoiled brat or two.

How bad can it possibly be?

## CHAPTER 10

The next morning, I eat breakfast alone. I don't see Cam or Asher, or Dmitri for that matter—not that I'd want to sit with that walking, talking bad mood—and I'm sure as hell not sitting down with a bunch of strangers.

The common room in the dining hall is actually kind of pretty, with big, cozy tables and a massive fireplace. I find myself a corner to sit in where I can keep my back to the wall and observe everyone. It's pretty easy to identify who the other first years are; they're the ones who still look a bit nervous or can't stop fiddling with their wrist bands. Everyone else looks settled in and comfortable, which I guess makes sense. It's a three year program, so that's plenty of time for the academy to start feeling like home for the older students.

I've just finished eating when a bell starts ringing from... somewhere. From inside the dining hall, it's hard to tell where the sound is coming from, but I saw a chapel of some kind on the grounds during my tour. Most people in the magical community practice some form of Wicca, but it's nice to have a meeting place with designated sacred ground. There are some spells that can only be cast in a sacred space too, so I'm not surprised the school has one.

As the bell drones on, everyone gets up and starts moving, and I try to remember what I was told about the schedule. Some kind of school-wide assembly's happening today, I think?

I follow everyone out to the auditorium, which is just one building over. There are rows of seats arranged in the sweeping space, and at the front of the large room is a raised stage with a podium in the middle. Dean

Hardwick stands behind it, waiting for the gathering students to settle. He's a tall man, with salt and pepper hair and a neatly trimmed beard. I haven't met the head of the school personally, but I read his bio on the academy's website, so I recognize him from his picture there. I didn't really look up any of the other teachers; I just wanted to make sure I wasn't going to be put in the hands of a nutcase.

The dean clears his throat, smiling down at all of us as we find our seats. I'm still trying to figure out where to sit when I hear, "Pssst!"

I turn and see Cam, Asher, and Dmitri all sitting together. Cam waves me over, indicating an empty seat next to him.

Unable to hide my relief, I walk toward them—but as I do, Cam moves one seat over, changing the empty seat to one in between himself and Asher.

Smooth motherfucker. Also a good wingman, if that's what he's doing for Asher. I honestly can't tell if Cam's just being friendly, or if he's genuinely flirting with me for himself, or for Asher, or... for all three.

Now *that* sends a shiver down my spine. *Two of them, their mouths and hands on me...*

I sit down quickly before I can think more about that and do something stupid like blush.

"Morning, Sin," Cam whispers, bumping me lightly with his shoulder.

"What's going on?" I murmur.

"Convocation," Asher explains. "It's the formal opening of the semester. The dean gives a talk, mentions some recent achievements by students, and we learn about any big changes over the summer."

"Settle down, everyone, settle down," Dean Hardwick says. In spite of myself, I find myself thinking that he has a rather nice voice. Not sexy or anything, God knows he's old enough to be my dad, but soothing. "Welcome, everyone. To our returning students, welcome back for another school year, and a special welcome to our new first years."

Cam pokes me in the side, and I bite back a grin at his infectious excitement.

"For those of you who may not be aware of our school's history, here at Griffin Academy, lovingly referred to as the Academy of Unpredictable Magic, we work to help you take your special and unique magical abilities and curate them into something that will carry you far in life. To make your magic a tool that you will use, not a tool that will use you."

Holy shit. That sounds ominous. I look around and see that some other students are shifting a little uncomfortably in their seats—probably other first years. Dmitri just looks pissed, more so than usual. But there’s something else in his expression too... sadness, maybe?

“Some of you may be feeling rather lost right now,” Dean Hardwick continues, his voice softening. “Perhaps even betrayed. But no matter what, you have a home and a family here. I encourage older students to welcome your new classmates and help them feel at home.”

Cam nudges me and winks. On my other side, Asher gently squeezes my hand for a second before letting go. My chest warms, the anxiety that’s been squeezing my heart ever since I found out I’m an Unpredictable easing up a little. These two have certainly made me feel at home, whether as a friend or as possibly something more, I’m still not sure. But at least I know they’ve got my back.

The other part of what Dean Hardwick said takes me by surprise though—lost? Betrayed? What’s he talking about?

“This prestigious academy has a long history of helping those with Unpredictable magic find their home in the magical community. We’ve had students go on to be valued members of their communities, including local Circuits and border patrol.”

Border patrol basically means you’re in charge of making sure the illusions that hide our magical communities from prying eyes hold. It’s an exhausting but respected job, given its importance.

“Is it just me?” I whisper, glancing between the two men on either side of me. “Or does he make it sound like parents wouldn’t want to send their kids here?”

Cam pulls a face. “Well...”

“Some people are proud of having an Unpredictable kid,” Asher whispers. “My parents are. So are the Marquets.”

The Marquets. *Right—Alyssa’s family.* I’m a little annoyed I know that.

Asher keeps his green eyes trained on the dean, speaking low under his breath so we won’t get busted for talking during an assembly. “Unpredictable magic is extremely powerful, so it can be great to have someone like that in the family.”

“But other people... don’t see it that way,” Cam says, the light in his eyes dimming. He glances over at Dmitri, and I know without him saying

anything that Dmitri's family is one of the ones who sees Unpredictables as freaks.

No wonder their friend is so pissed all the time. Mom loved me unconditionally, and I know Maddy would never reject me as a freak, and I'd certainly never reject her. But even now, my dad's decision to walk out on us years ago still hurts, and I know it hurt Mom and Maddy even worse than me—for better or worse, I transferred a lot of my pain into anger. And the idea of Mom ever rejecting me... it makes me want to throw up.

Hell, I'd be a little mad at the world too if my loved ones thought I was a freak.

Dean Hardwick keeps droning on. It's all well-intentioned stuff, but honestly, I'd rather just get right to my classes. I want to get this brace off, see what I can actually do, and find out whether any of this is actually worth it.

"What's your first class?" Cam asks when the convocation finally finishes. We all get up and begin to troop out of the building in a massive wave of bodies.

"Magical Control," I say.

There are several different kinds of classes, and they vary a little from year to year. For most of them, we'll be allowed to take our bands off, but not all classes require that—History of Magic, for example. Aurora told me that for the ones where we take our bands off, we'll be in training rooms that have wards on the walls to prevent the magic from leaving the area and wreaking havoc, and that the professors and staff are all trained in how to handle out of control spells and spell casters. At least for first years, anyway. Once you hit your second year, they start to trust that you can actually use your magic without bringing the whole building down with you.

In my year, there's Magical Theory, which is apparently all about how and why some people have magic and others don't, how magical powers manifest, how we organize and classify magic—all that kind of stuff. There's Physical Training, since using magic is really draining, and without physical strength, it can be harder to control our powers. There's Practical Magic, where we'll learn how to use our various abilities in a safe environment. There's Combat class, where we'll learn to fight both magically and non-magically—though why they think we'll need this skill,

I'm not entirely sure. There's a History of Magic class, all about our society and where we came from. And Magical Control.

It's a lot, in other words, and I'm feeling kind of overwhelmed.

"Oh, yeah, first year with Roman." Cam grins, coming to a stop on the walkway outside the auditorium. "You'll love it. He's intense but a great teacher."

"Is Roman his first or last name?"

"First." Cam's brows furrow. "I actually don't remember his last name. Most of the teachers are a little pickier about how you address them. If you called Professor Binns by her first name, I think she'd take your head off."

Asher shrugs. "But Roman's always just been... Roman."

"What, like Beyoncé?"

I hear a snort behind me, but by the time I whip my head around, Dmitri's face is set in a grim mask. Did he really just laugh, or have I finally started hallucinating?

"It's a really helpful class," Cam tells me, the mid-morning sun picking up gold highlights in his hair as we walk up the steps of Wellwood Hall. "Probably the best one to have your freshman year. Being able to control your magic makes everything else easier, and Roman's got an iron clad control on his. It's insane."

"Strong willpower," Asher explains once we walk inside. He looks at me, the corner of his mouth curling upward in a small smile. "Like you."

I feel my face heat up. I'm not really used to new people being nice to me or flirting with me—at least not in a way that I enjoy—and it's totally throwing me for a loop.

"It's on the third floor, east wing." Cam points as he gives me directions. Then he claps a hand dramatically over his heart. "And now, we must part ways. Parting is such sweet sorrow and all that." He grins devilishly. "Take care of yourself, Sin, and try not to set off any sonic booms unless I'm there to see it."

I roll my eyes. "Sure. I'll do my best."

Cam salutes me, Asher nods and smiles, and Dmitri is doing a great job of staring at the wall like I'm not here.

If his family doesn't approve of him being an Unpredictable, his shitty attitude does make a lot more sense—but I have to admit, I'm still a little tempted to punch him in the mouth just to get a reaction.

I make my way through the thinning crowd toward the staircase Cam indicated and wander around the third floor for a few minutes searching for my classroom. It takes me a few minutes to find it, and when I walk inside, I find a wide room with tall windows on two walls and desks lined up in orderly rows. It's large, but still smaller than I expected. Then again, this is a small school, relative to the sizes of the other magical academies. It makes sense, since Unpredictables are so rare. But it doesn't bode well for my avoiding my three oh-so-pleasant roommates.

Sure enough, they're already in the classroom when I arrive. Alyssa is holding court in the back with Megan, Kendal, and some other girl I haven't seen before, and her blonde hair flashes in the light as she whips her head around to stare at me.

Ugh.

Since they're in the back, I choose a desk up at the front, just to make sure I'm out of their way. I don't want to get busted by the teacher for being in the middle of a fight I didn't even start.

Not that I start fights.

I just finish them.

But today, I don't want any trouble, so I studiously ignore Alyssa and her cronies as I plop into a seat right in the front row.

I know that's a mistake the moment the professor walks in. My gaze lands on him as he settles in behind his desk, and my stomach feels like it's doing backflips.

Because I know this professor.

I *really* know this professor.

Roman is none other than my bar alley hookup, Tall, Dark, and Handsome.

He looks even hotter than I remembered, wearing a suit in what's probably an attempt to intimidate the fuck out of his students—not like he needs the help—and also possibly because he's on the younger side for a professor and wants to make sure we all listen to him and respect him despite that. Which is totally fine and understandable, except that his charcoal gray suit and dark blue tie make him look good enough to fucking eat. They highlight the strong lines of his body and muscles I've run my hands over, and suddenly all I can think about is how badly I want that tie wrapped around my wrists while he bends me over a desk.

*Oh God, it's gonna be a long semester.*

Roman looks over the crowd of assembled students, sees me—and his eyes widen.

Yeah, this must be a shock for him too. Especially since classes have already started. Any unpleasant “oops, I accidentally fucked my future student” surprises should’ve happened *last* week, not now that he’s already been teaching everyone for several days.

I stubbornly look him in the eye, keeping a placid expression fixed on my face. I’m willing to pretend it never happened if he is, and I’m more than ready to brush the whole thing aside. It’s not like we had a torrid affair that went on all summer. We fucked once, in the back of an alley of all places, and there sure weren’t rose petals falling from the sky.

*Just an orgasm that curled my toes and set a new bar for men everywhere.*

“Right,” Roman says, still staring at me. I make a mental note never to play poker with the guy, because his expression is completely unreadable. Then he shakes his head slightly and blinks before looking out over the other students. “I see we’re all here, with a new addition.” He glances down at a sheet of paper on his desk, searching for something. When he finds it, he reads the words slowly. “Elliot Sinclair. Everyone, please make sure you help her feel welcome.”

Fuck. I grimace and glare at him, although he’s no longer focused on me. *Thanks for the call-out, buddy, I really needed that.*

Another student scuttles in, making a beeline for the open desk next to me.

“Raul, so glad you could join us,” Roman says.

The poor kid looks horribly embarrassed, blushing. He’s on the thin side, probably a few years younger than me—which makes him young for an Unpredictable, I guess—and he seems kind of skittish. He doesn’t say a word as he throws himself into the seat beside me, sinking down like he’s trying to make himself disappear.

In spite of myself, I feel bad for the guy. I lean over and whisper, “Hey, at least you’re not a week late.” Then I hike both thumbs toward myself.

Raul smiles bashfully. He has slightly large front teeth, dark blond hair, and a smattering of freckles across his nose. “Thanks.”

I nod. I’m not really looking to make friends here, but with three roommates who clearly already hate my guts, I figure... why not be a little friendly and make sure fewer people on campus actively hate me?



Besides, Raul kind of reminds me of Maddy. There's something really vulnerable about him that brings out the big sister feelings in me.

Cam was right—the Magical Control class is really interesting and seems like it'll be helpful when it comes to getting a handle on my insane new magic. I just wish it had a different professor because, I'll be honest, I have a really hard time concentrating as Roman goes through the lesson. I keep having flashbacks of our encounter in the alley, and heat pools in my lower belly, making me squirm uncomfortably in my seat. I could swear Roman notices every subtle shift and movement I make, but he never actually looks at me again for the remainder of class, so I can't be sure.

Over the next couple weeks, I have to play catch-up with everyone else in all my classes. My professors are mostly sympathetic, filling me in on what I missed and giving me a chance to make up assignments I wasn't here for. Roman might be understanding about it too, but I don't know, because there's no way in hell I'm going to talk to him. I doubt anyone would figure out what happened between us—but if anyone does find out, I could get in trouble, and that's the last thing I need.

Cam and Asher are always popping up to help me out, usually with a yell of, "Hey, Sin!" from Cam. He's taken to my new nickname with a vengeance, and I have to admit, it's growing on me. I've always just been "Elliot", or "Ellie" to Mads, and it's kind of nice having a name that only means something to Cam and me.

It's a relief to see the guys every time I cross paths with them. Raul and I have all the same classes since he's a first year too, and by some unspoken agreement, we end up sitting next to each other in every one. He's quiet, shy, and will whisper explanations to me when I get out of my depth in classes, so I don't feel like an idiot. I can tell he feels as out of place same as I do, and I'm a lot better at taking licks than he is, so we kind of stick together. It's nice.

My roommates... aren't so nice. But I'm going to make it work. This isn't high school, for fuck's sake. I'm not going to let myself be bothered by their drama.

And when I have to, I can always hide out in the guys' dorm. Cam, Asher, and Dmitri all share the same room, and I've got an open invitation to drop by anytime I want. I take them up on it pretty often, actually, and I'm amazed at how comfortable I feel with all of them after knowing them such a short time. Dmitri clearly doesn't appreciate my visits, judging by

the perma-sowl he wears every time I come over, but I've come to find pushing his buttons is fun.

All in all, I think I'm starting to get a handle on this magical training thing.

And then it all falls apart.

## CHAPTER 11

**W**e have a Physical Training class that's mandatory for all three years. It's basically just a glorified gym class, but whatever. Using magic is very physically taxing; it drains you. So a powerful magic user needs to be in great physical shape on top of possessing exceptional mental strength. Otherwise, they'll struggle to control their magic, and that's when accidents happen.

Gym was never my favorite period in high school, but considering that being in good shape could mean the difference between life and death someday, I try to keep my internal bitching about the class to a minimum. I keep my mouth shut and do push ups, climb ropes, run sprints, and generally wish I was dead until I can go back to the locker room, take a shower, and start to feel human again.

But this time...

I walk over to my locker, dripping in sweat and feeling disgusting. It's Friday afternoon, and unlike some of our other classes, we have Physical Training every day. I'm exhausted, I need a shower, and I wouldn't say no to a massage if that were an option. My legs feel like cooked pasta.

Megan, Alyssa, and Kendal are all nearby. The fourth girl, I've learned, is named Cristina. Her father's a big businessman with a lot of overseas connections. Alyssa was "kind" enough to inform me that Cristina was supposed to be their fourth roommate, or so all four of them had assumed, and the fact that I'm rooming with them instead is clearly unacceptable.

The four of them are all gathered nearby whispering to one another, clearly gossiping about someone. If it's not me they're bashing, it's

someone else—and I'm sure it won't be long before they're back on me again.

And here I thought I'd left all this behind when I was fourteen.

They watch me as I walk up to my locker and grab the handle. I can feel their gazes on me, but I don't think anything of it—

Until I open the door and green slime explodes outward.

“Oh fuck!” I jerk backward, but I'm too slow. The slime hits me squarely in the face and chest. Ew, ew, ew. This stuff smells like shit. I'm just glad it didn't get in my eyes. Is this stuff toxic?

I spit a few times to make sure none of it got into my mouth, blindly groping for a towel or shirt or something to wipe off my face.

My hand lands on what feels like my t-shirt, and I use it to clean off the worst of the goop. It doesn't hurt, thank God. It's not eating my skin or anything; it just smells like ass. I can feel everyone staring—but only a couple people are laughing.

Alyssa, of course, and her crew.

I toss my ruined shirt in the trash then turn and glare at them, my hands curling into fists. “Oh, you wanna go?”

I've just about had it with these fucking girls. You want to whisper and gossip and be passive aggressive? Fine, that's your damn business, but you can't get upset when someone finally decides to call you out on your shit and makes you face the music. You want to act like an entitled asshole? You have to be prepared for the consequences.

And in this case the consequence is gonna be me kicking their asses.

“Because that's fine with me,” I growl, stepping toward them. “Then let's go.”

Megan's jaw drops, and Kendal looks like she's contemplating turning and running, as though she didn't quite sign up for a fight. But Alyssa just glares at me, her blue eyes cold. “Oh, like you could possibly—”

I'm not proud of this. I just want to say that up front. I'm really not.

But I throw myself forward and basically tackle Alyssa onto the floor.

It's been a tough day, all right?

The bitchy blonde squeals, shrieking that I'm getting the goo all over her clothes, and she does manage to land a good punch, I'll give her that. Everyone's yelling as pandemonium takes over the locker room. A professor is going to walk by any second now and hear what's going on, and I'll probably get in trouble, but at the moment, I don't even care. Not as

I grab a fistful of disgusting green goo and smear it all over Alyssa's face. Her howl of rage is the most satisfying thing I've heard in a long time.

She rolls us a few times, scratching at me with dagger-like pink fingernails, until we bang into the lockers and finally separate. We scramble back from each other and face off, both covered in the green slime. My chest is heaving, and my stomach boils with rage. It's a damn good thing we've got our braces on. With the way I feel right now, I know my magic would be out for sure if it weren't suppressed, and I'd be throwing everything I had at Alyssa.

She looks a mess right now, all covered in goo just like me, and I definitely got at least one good hit in—her eye's starting to swell up. *Ha.*

"You're insane!" she shrieks, her voice shrill.

"Says the girl who booby trapped my locker!" I yell right back.

Everyone's whispering and pointing at Alyssa, and I think she's starting to realize she's not the one who's coming off looking all that great right now.

"You got a problem with me?" I snap. "Then fine. But you settle it like a fucking adult. You don't prank me. What are you, twelve?"

A few bystanders laugh. Alyssa goes bright red. "Well, you—you—" She cuts herself off with a scream of frustration. I keep waiting for her to stamp her foot like a spoiled toddler.

The other three girls glare at me and hustle Alyssa out of there. I just storm off to the shower. *Good riddance.*

I'm not looking forward to going back to my room after this. The goo takes a long time to wash off, but even when the smell is gone and the water runs clear, I stay in the shower, letting the steam and hot water surround me like a security blanket. I can't stay in here forever, but I don't have any other classes today—and as much as I'm not afraid to confront someone when I need to, that doesn't mean it's fun. The adrenaline from our fight is fading, and now I just feel frustrated, worried, and sick to my stomach.

Alyssa probably won't report our fight to the school admins, and I know I won't. But what if she *does*? Technically, I'm the wronged party here, since she and her cronies were the ones who booby-trapped my damn locker. But it's not really gonna look that way if she points out her black eye—the one I gave her.

The way I reacted makes us both look guilty as hell. Would they kick us out of school for fighting? Shit. What would I tell Maddy?

My thoughts spiral as the water in the shower begins to run cold. Once I've scrubbed and scrubbed and really can't think of an excuse to stay in here any longer, I get out and dry off. Then I head out to the lockers to see what can be done about my clothes.

Not much. Everything in my locker is covered in goo, and so are the gym clothes I was wearing when the whole thing exploded.

*Motherfucker.*

I'm not about to walk across campus in just a towel. I've got enough problems already, thanks. Getting in trouble for public indecency would just be icing on the cake.

All the other girls already left, so I can't ask anyone for help. Not that I've got a lot of friends here. And I'm not putting my gooey, smelly clothes back on.

What the hell do I do?

I worry my lip between my teeth, wondering if maybe I should try to take my brace off, see if I can access my powers, and... well, honestly, I don't even know what. That's about as far as my plan goes. A knock at the door makes me jump about a foot in the air, and I hear it opening partway. A cement wall obscures the door from my view, but I spin around, prepared to face Alyssa in case she came back for round two.

"Hello?" a soft voice calls. To my shock, it sounds like Asher. "Um, Elliot? You still in here?"

"Yeah, come on in. It's just me."

I hear the door close, and then Asher walks around the corner. His nose wrinkles, and he stumbles to a halt when he sees the goo everywhere. His gaze lands on me standing in a corner wrapped in my towel, and heat flares in his green eyes, but pity softens them too.

It's strange. Normally anything even resembling sympathy makes my skin itch, but from Asher, I don't mind it so much. I don't know what that says about him, or me, but I decide not to think about it too hard right now.

"Yeah." I shrug, glancing around at the locker room. "It's a mess."

"You all right?"

I nod but don't say anything else. Touchy-feely stuff isn't really my strong suit. Then I notice he's got some clothes in his hands, and my brows draw together. "What are those?"

He walks over and hands them to me. "For you," he says quietly. "I overheard what happened. Everyone was talking about it. I figured you

probably needed new clothes. I couldn't get to your dorm, but..."

I take the clothes and see that it's a shirt I've seen Cam wear, and a pair of Asher's pants. Asher's the smallest guy out of the three friends, so it makes sense he'd think I would have the best chance with his jeans. "This is really sweet. Thank you so much."

"It's nothing." He flushes pink. "I'll go find someone to clean up the mess."

"You really don't have to—"

"I want to," Asher replies, his voice still quiet but firm. He starts to go, then pauses. "People get scared when something new enters their lives. So they respond by attacking it because that way they can feel in control again. That's all Alyssa's doing. I'm not defending her actions in any way, but... just don't let her get you down, okay?"

He gives me a small smile, one that melts my heart, and then he hurries off to find someone to take care of the goo.

I change quickly. There's no sense in delaying the inevitable anymore. When I'm dressed, I stuff what I absolutely need from my locker into my gym bag and chuck everything else in the trash. Then I march across campus in too-big clothes toward my dorm.

The shirt smells like Cam, the pants like Asher. They're both warm, clean scents, and they complement each other perfectly—citrusy lemongrass and an earthier sandalwood smell. It takes a little effort to resist bringing the shirt up to my nose and inhaling deeply.

When I reach my dorm though, all thoughts of how good the guys smell evaporate from my mind. While I was taking my time showering and getting cleaned up, Alyssa and the others made their next move.

All my stuff sits in the hallway outside the room.

I know without even trying it that the door will be locked. Their message is as clear as if they'd scrawled it on the wall in red paint. *You're not welcome here.* And they didn't even bother to pack my things up before they moved me out. Shirts and clothes are spilled everywhere, all my worldly belongings piled up haphazardly. I just hope they didn't break anything.

Well, fine. Fuck these bitches. They don't want me here, and frankly, I don't want to live with them either. If they think I'm going to cry or beg to stay, they really don't get me at all. Besides, I know of a place where I *will* be welcome.

I start gathering my things and packing them into my bags properly, taking special care with the photographs. As I zip the last suitcase closed, I notice something is missing—they forgot to take my mom’s painting off the wall.

Steeling myself, I knock on the door. Alyssa opens it with a placid, triumphant smile on her face. The effect is only slightly dampened by the purple and blue half-circle under her eye.

“Yes?” she asks in a falsely sweet voice.

She’s probably expecting me to pitch a fit, maybe to attack her again. In fact, I bet she’s counting on it. She’d probably love to turn my eviction from our dorm room into a chance to get me booted from the whole school for fighting. But I won’t give her the damn satisfaction.

Instead, I just point behind her. “You forgot something.”

She turns to look, confused, and I slip past her.

“Hey!” she yelps.

I walk past Megan, Cristina, and Kendal, who gape at me. Then I take the painting off the wall. “Just fetching this,” I tell them.

A stunned silence fills the room as I walk past Alyssa again and finish packing up my things.

“Where are you going?” Kendal finally blurts out, a confused look on her face.

“Not sure why you care,” I reply. “But don’t worry. I’m going. You don’t have to live with me anymore.”

All packed once more, I lug my suitcases away, leaving the four of them staring after me in silence. *Ha. That’ll take the wind out of their sails.*

Cam answers the door to the room he shares with Dmitri and Asher, and his eyebrows shoot up to his hairline when he sees me. I must be quite a sight. My dark brown hair is still slightly damp from the shower, I’m going commando under the men’s clothes, and I’m awkwardly hauling three suitcases.

“Oh shit.” He bites his lip. “You look like you’ve had a day and a half, Sin.”

“Don’t ask. Thanks for the shirt, by the way.” I peer behind him. “Long story short, I’m out of house and home. Mind if I crash with you guys for a while?”

“Not at all,” Cam says, grinning.

“Yes,” Dmitri grunts from behind him.



“Overruled,” Asher adds.

“Great.” I nod at Cam in thanks as he helps take my bags and leads me into the room toward the empty bed. “You’ll hardly even know I’m here, Dmitri.”

“It’s against the rules,” the surly man replies, folding his arms and glaring at me.

I meet his gaze head on. “Do I look like I give a fuck about the rules?”

Something that might actually be respect flickers in his dark eyes, and he moves slowly toward me. My skin heats, but I don’t back down even a step.

“So long as you’re willing to accept the consequences,” he murmurs in a low voice.

*Holy fuck.* I know he’s talking about getting busted by the admins, but it sounds like something else—as if the consequences of living with these three men is going to be something very dirty. And like he’s got every intention of helping carry out those “consequences.”

I hope my voice doesn’t betray any of the thoughts and images racing through my mind. My damn overactive imagination is coming up with some very... interesting scenarios, and it’s making my whole body flush.

“I am.” Meeting his gaze, I keep my voice steady. “It’s hardly worth complaining to the school administration. More than likely, they’d give Alyssa a slap on the wrist and just make us keep rooming together. It’s a toxic environment already, and that would only make it ten times worse. If Alyssa and her flunkies aren’t happy with me, then they’ll do everything they can to make *me* unhappy. I’m not gonna play that game. I’m just removing myself from the equation.”

“I think it’s mature of you,” Asher says.

“We’ve got plenty of room,” Cam points out. “This room is meant to be a quad. It’ll be great.”

Dmitri’s jaw tenses, and I can tell he knows he’s outnumbered.

“Fine,” he says after a tense silence. “But don’t let anyone else know about it.”

That’s fine by me.

And hey, if my choices are between Dmitri being quietly cranky or those four stuck-up bitches going after me? I know which one I’d take any day.

As for the fact that I'm stupidly attracted to all three of my new roommates? Well...

I'll just burn that bridge when I get to it.

## CHAPTER 12

**A**lyssa and her crew don't go after me again like they did in the locker, although they're having a grand old time muttering about me and spreading stories whenever they get the chance. For instance, one week I have to deal with the fun rumor that I killed my mother.

*Fucking great.*

I guess Mom did kind of drop off the face of the earth after Dad left her, withdrawing from the magical community—and most people have no idea what even happened to her. From there, I guess Alyssa considers it a logical jump to tell everyone that my mom didn't just stop interacting with magical society, she was murdered.

By me.

Jesus.

Not that I tell Maddy about any of this when she next calls me five weeks into the semester. I just tell her about the classes and the normal stuff. I'm not going to give her any reason to worry about me, especially when there isn't anything she can do about it.

Maddy sounds like she's having a blast at Neptune Academy. She's made tons of new friends—I can't keep all their names straight. She loves most of her classes, gushes about a few cool professors, and whines about some harder classes and the dining room food.

All in all, she's getting the authentic “magic academy” experience. And she's learning a lot more about her water elemental powers, which she never could've done in our tiny apartment in Portland.

“It's amazing!” she raves, her voice squeaky with excitement. “I can do so much, and I had no idea half of it was even possible!”

“I’m proud of you,” I tell her, grinning broadly. “And I can tell you’re having fun. That’s great, Mads.”

“What about you?” she asks. “Tell me more. How’re things?”

I fill her in on everything, including the fact that I’m actually making some new friends too. I tell her I moved in with the guys, but I don’t mention the chemistry that simmers between me and Dmitri or how I wouldn’t say no to hooking up with Asher or Cam. Maddy will just push me to make a move on one of them, and while sex is all well and good, I don’t need to set myself up to get my heart broken. Especially since none of them will understand why I am... the way I am.

Closed off.

Emotionally distant.

People don’t want to hear a sob story, and most of them don’t want to bother waiting around for me to warm up enough to trust them.

But my new roomies are good people, and they’ve been amazing friends to me so far. I’m beyond grateful that they’re letting me crash with them. Why worry or hope for something more than that?

I tell my sister about Raul too, since he reminds me of her. “It’s good to know I’m not the only terrified first year here,” I admit. “Everyone else seems to know what they’re doing, but Raul and I just buddy up and try not to get bulldozed.”

“You? Bulldozed?” Mads laughs. “I’d like to see anyone try that. But what about the girls? You’re making friends with some of them, right? Not just the guys?”

“They’re fine. I’m just... you know me. It just hasn’t worked out that way.”

I absolutely adore my sister, and I’d love to have a close female friend someday, but so far, I haven’t managed it. I don’t think I’m crankier to girls than guys—I like to think of myself as an equal opportunity bitch—but I sometimes have a harder time relating to them. I couldn’t name a fashion designer to save my life, and the last time I painted my fingernails was when I was twelve. Not that all women are fashionistas with perfect nails. I just haven’t found my tribe yet, I guess.

But living with the guys has been great. They’re respectful, and there’s only been a couple awkward moments. I’m enjoying it, actually. I fit right in, Dmitri’s eye rolls notwithstanding. And when it’s just the two of us in a room together it’s... oddly comfortable, even though it’s usually silent.

Being around him, I don't feel like I have to put on a show or hide who I am, and I'm grateful for that.

Maybe it's because he just expects the worst in me. Who knows.

"I'm all good here, Mads, I promise," I assure her. "I have to run to class now—but I love you, and I'm glad you're doing well. Let me know if anything changes, okay? Classes or no, I'll be there in a heartbeat."

"I know you will," she replies. "But you don't need to. I love you too!"

My Combat class is run by this terrifyingly sophisticated woman, Josephine. She's everything I'm not, with her perfectly coordinated outfits, her hair always sleekly styled, eyeliner sharp enough to stab a man... she's the whole package. She tends to wear bright colors, since they go so well with her dark skin, but she's never gaudy. She's so gorgeous and willowy that it'd be easy to underestimate her fighting ability, but she definitely knows what she's talking about.

After saying my goodbyes to Maddy and slipping my phone into my bag, I run to get to Tamlin's class on time. Raul saved me a seat, thank God. In this classroom, like a few others, all the desks are set up in a perimeter along the wall, leaving a huge mat-covered space in the middle for us to practice.

"Overslept?" he whispers.

"No, I was talking to my sister. Lost track of time."

He nods understandingly before turning his attention back to the professor. I don't actually know if he has siblings or not, but I'm guessing not since he's never mentioned any. Or maybe he's one of those people whose families don't approve of their Unpredictable magic.

Josephine—sorry, Professor Tamlin—is only a few years older than the rest of us, maybe late twenties. She must've just been made a professor.

I mention this to Raul in a quiet voice, and he nods.

"Yeah," he whispers, "rumor has it Roman put in a good word for her and that's how she got the post. Not that she hasn't earned it; she's awesome."

My brows draw together. "What? Why did Roman put in a good word?"

"Oh, didn't you know? They dated for almost a year. A real power couple."

*Oh.*

That shouldn't make me feel anything. Roman and I have been keeping our distance from each other ever since I got here five weeks ago. And if

he's a little harder on me in class than he is on the others, that's his business; I'm not going to cause problems by calling him out on it, even in private. Besides, we just had a one-night stand. Less than that, since we didn't even spend the whole night together. I have no rights to him, and no reason to care one way or another about who he dated before or might date after our hookup.

And we can't be together as teacher and student anyway.

So, there.

Raul also said she and Roman aren't even together anymore. They just *used* to be.

But it makes my stomach churn all the same.

"All right," Professor Tamlin says, clapping her hands once. "Today will be another sparring class. I'll pair you off this time, instead of you choosing your own partners."

Well, that'll be nice. Raul's great and all, but I think we were both a little tired of always being each other's partner. I need a new challenge. He's got sound dampening and telekinesis powers, so he'd probably be no slouch at magical combat, but so far, we haven't fought with magic in this class.

I'm already out of my seat, anxious to get started. But my excitement about facing a new opponent dies when Professor Tamlin says, "Dmitri and Elliot."

*Well, fuck.*

I walk over to Dmitri and shrug. "I guess now we can finally work out all that tension between us."

He raises a dark eyebrow at me. "I think that'll take more than just a practice fight."

I know I'm probably reading too much into it, *again*, but damn if that doesn't sound like an innuendo. "What, you think I'm not going to challenge you?"

Not all of our classes are mixed. Some are divided strictly by year, others first and second, but Combat class is the only one that encompasses all years. Dmitri probably feels, as a second year, that he's eclipsed me in prowess.

*Yeah, right.* What I lack in actual training, I make up for with an extreme enthusiasm for ass kicking.

Dmitri grins, and I fervently ignore the way something flutters in my chest at that.

“*Will* you?” he asks, a taunting lilt coloring his deep voice.

Before I can answer, Professor Tamlin blows the whistle that lets us know to start, and I launch myself at him.

I’ve often wondered why they’re teaching us hand-to-hand combat or how to fight with blades and other weapons at a magical school. But I’m definitely grateful for the training, since it gives me the chance to kick Dmitri’s ass.

Not that I’m kicking it, exactly. Dmitri’s strong, and he’s better at this than I am. But I’m determined. No way am I going to let him win this fight easily.

We tussle, scrambling back and forth, and it’s exhilarating. Dmitri is laser-focused, all of his energy and attention turned on me, and it’s stealing my breath away. I’ve never had so much sheer intensity focused on me before, and I can barely handle it. But... in a good way. The best way.

It’s probably why he ends up winning. Well, sort of. He flips me, and I land hard on my back on the mat, just bringing my hands up in time to block him as he falls on top of me. We grapple as I try to throw him off me, and he tries to get a hold on me so I’ll have no choice but to tap out. His thigh slips between mine, and he presses down just as I arch up—

Oh *God*.

Sparks fly up my spine as my clit rubs hard against his leg, the shock of pleasure taking me by surprise. It feels so fucking good that I grind against his thigh without thinking, getting a good angle, making me shiver. Dmitri doesn’t notice at first, taking advantage of my distraction to grab my wrists and pin them on either side of my head.

We’re pressed together, breathing hard, and I realize I can feel...

Oh.

Shit.

Dmitri stares at me as we both absorb the position we’re in—and how the other person is reacting to it.

For a wild moment, I’m tempted to grind down on his thigh again, to rub against the half-hardness I can feel growing against me. But as soon as the thought comes, I tamp it down. We’re in public, in *class*, for fuck’s sake. This is not the place to give into whatever dangerous impulses we’re flirting with.

Dmitri scrambles to his feet like I've burned him, and I stumble to mine, my heart hammering. He's all muscle, and feeling him on top of me like that, pressing me down, feeling the shape of him starting to fill and grow hard because of me...

*Jesus, I need a cold shower. Or a bucket of ice dumped over my head.*

"I didn't say uncle," I taunt instead, because antagonizing Dmitri is fun and easy and—safe. I know where I stand when I'm teasing him. I'm on solid ground. When other feelings rear up between us, it puts me off balance.

"Figured I'd let you off easy this first time," he shoots back. His voice is rougher than usual, pitched a little lower, and his eyes are dark and smoldering.

We stare at each other for another moment, and then I hear the whistle signaling it's time for us to switch to another sparring partner. As we all move, I feel a hand clap onto my shoulder and look to my left. Cam's other hand rests on Dmitri's shoulder as he glances between the two of us.

"Real intense fight you two were having there." His eyebrow cocks slyly.

Dmitri glares at him. "If you were watching our fight, then you obviously weren't paying attention to yours."

"It was easy—took Seth out in thirty seconds. But watching you two..." Cam whistles. "That was one hell of a show. She gives you a run for your money, doesn't she, Dima?"

I can tell he's not just referring to my fighting abilities.

Dmitri shakes him off, avoiding my gaze. "I'm going to get some water."

Cam rolls his eyes as his friend walks away, then turns to grin down at me. "Damn, Sin. You're good. I've gotta say, it's been a while since I've seen someone who can rile Dmitri up like that. And by a while, I mean, never."

"Are you trying to compliment me?"

"Maybe. I'm just saying... Those walls he's throwing up are going to come tumbling down at some point." He winks at me before bounding off to find his next sparring partner.

Hmm. Maybe I *am* making progress with Dmitri after all. I'm starting to wonder if the reason he doesn't like me has less to do with *me* and more to do with the reaction he gets around me.



I don't know. Maybe I'm overestimating myself. It's kind of arrogant to think a guy's being all dickish because he secretly wants to sleep with me, isn't it?

After class, the other students linger and chat while I make a beeline for the locker rooms, still thinking about what happened earlier. I'm not quite sure what to do. I see Dmitri all the time; we have classes together, and now we're rooming together too. Should I say something? Ask him what's going on between us? What his deal is? That was definitely his cock I felt in his pants, and it was definitely hard. Women don't have such an obvious giveaway of their arousal as men do, but he had to feel how turned on I was too. I was squirming under him, practically humping his leg. Surely—

I open the door to the showers and freeze, all thoughts of Dmitri's cock flying from my mind.

There's a girl lying on the floor.

Her body is sprawled awkwardly on the tile. She's fully dressed, one side of her face bruised... and she's not moving.

My heart leaps into my throat, and I dart forward, going to my knees beside her to check her pulse. It thrums a steady beat beneath my fingertips, and now that I'm closer to her, I can tell she's breathing.

*Not dead, thank fuck. Just knocked out somehow.*

What happened? Who did this to her?

"Help!" I yell. When a response doesn't come fast enough, I run out of the locker room into the hallway. "Hey, somebody help! There's an unconscious girl in there!"

One of the practical magic professors, an older man named Nathan Perkins, jerks to a stop several yards from me. His bushy brows draw together, and I'm about to start yelling again when my words finally seem to penetrate his brain. He springs into action, calling for the campus medics and staying with me while we wait for them. It only takes them five minutes to arrive, but by the time they do, several other students have entered the locker room, gaping and whispering in scared voices.

The medics lift the unconscious girl onto an enchanted stretcher that then rises to hover about three feet off the floor. The gathered students part like the Red Sea as the medical staff carts her out of the locker room.

Perkins turns to follow them, but stops and turns back to me, squeezing my arm. "Thank you for raising the alarm, Miss Sinclair. I'm sure Miss Walt will be fine."

I nod numbly, and he slips out of the locker room, seeming relieved to get out of here.

*Miss Walt.*

My brows draw together as I try to remember the girl's first name. I think she's a third year; I vaguely recall seeing her around, but I don't have any classes with her. There are several different sections of the Combat class—since it's a mix of first through third year students, it would be unwieldy to have us all in the room at the same time—and she's not in my section. Aside from passing her in the hall a few times, I haven't really had any interaction with her, and I feel oddly bad about that.

This isn't a huge school, so I could theoretically know everyone's name even if I'm not friends with all of them. But I haven't put a lot of effort into getting to know the whole student body.

Not that my knowing her would make any of this better. I'm not the one who attacked her, after all.

*But who did attack her? And why? Was it an assault gone wrong?*

She was in the showers, so I could almost buy that—but she was fully dressed. And I didn't see any rips or tears on her clothes, so it's not like someone was trying to get in them. There were just those weird bruises on her face. A prank that didn't go the way anyone expected?

Over the next few days, the whole school buzzes with talk of the attack. Everyone's got theories about it, but nobody's got any answers. The administration isn't saying anything either. Cam tells me the rumor is that the girl—whose first name turns out to be Jessica—was attacked from behind and doesn't know who hit her, but I find the whole thing fishy.

My mind keeps circling back to all the self-defense we're being taught.

The fighting.

The sparring.

It's like the academy admins expect us to be under attack—or *on* the attack—non-stop for the rest of our lives.

Like they know something we don't.

And I can't help but wonder—what else is going on at this school?

## CHAPTER 13

People tend to have short attention spans, especially when they're juggling massive amounts of schoolwork and learning how to use dangerous, barely-controlled magic. So by a week and a half after the attack on Jessica, things are mostly back to normal. She's on the mend and back in classes, and I make it a point to wave when I see her in the hall.

See? I'm trying.

Life is a lot more peaceful now that I'm not living with the Bitch Squad, and despite my late start, I've caught up in most of my classes and am doing pretty well in all of them.

Except one.

The one with the professor I still can't look at without feeling a tingle between my legs.

*Magical fucking Control.*

You'd think Roman would do a better job of ignoring my presence, seeing as he's older than I am and therefore, theoretically, more mature. But it doesn't seem to be possible for him. Instead of ignoring me, he's riding my ass into the ground, demanding way more from me than from any of the other students and generally going out of his way to make my life miserable.

Magical Control class is where we learn how to actually manage our magic so it doesn't spike willy-nilly based on our emotions or anxiety. We meditate at the beginning and end of every class, for example, and do mental exercises to work on our focus and control. Maddy told me they have a similar thing at her school. Her goal is to be able to write cursive

using water by the end of the semester—that’s how much control she should have.

As you can imagine, this isn’t the easiest class for me.

And Roman isn’t making it any easier.

The shittiest part is, I’m *not* the worst student in the class. If I were, I’d understand Roman being so damn hard on me. But I work damn hard, practicing my ass off to overcome my limitations. And I’m not the person who’s losing control and causing explosions during meditation, so what the hell gives?

Maybe I’m just imagining things. Maybe it’s the stress of Jessica’s attack and my growing suspicion that there’s another layer to this school. I don’t know quite what it is, but I just can’t shake this feeling that there’s a puzzle piece I’m missing; it’s making me paranoid, to say the least. So maybe that’s what sets me on edge in class.

Or it could just be that I’m sick and tired of Roman complimenting everyone except for me. Sick of him finding fault with everything I do.

Sometimes he’ll walk through the classroom and put his hands on us to help guide us through the exercises. Every single time he does that, I feel a jolt of electricity shoot through me. My body remembers every single place he’s touched me like it’s seared into my skin, and it can’t seem to distinguish between the touches in the alley and the ones in class. Every time he puts his hands on me, I burn for him. And the few times we’ve locked eyes, I could barely even breathe.

Is he being such an asshole because he still wants me? Is he punishing me for that? Is he mad that I didn’t give him my name? Or does he think I’d already been accepted to this school and knew who he was when we met? That I fucked my future professor on purpose?

You know what, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter *why*, what matters is that he cuts it the fuck out.

Two weeks after Jessica’s attack, I decide I can’t take it anymore. I linger after class, taking my time putting my books and things into my bag.

Roman’s standing in front of his desk, flipping through a couple of late papers students dropped off on their way out, but he looks up once the classroom empties out and I start to walk over.

“Miss Sinclair.”

“*Professor.*” I fold my arms. “Any particular reason you’ve got a bug up your ass about me?”

Roman leans back against his desk, bracing his hands on it. “I have no problem with you.”

“Could’ve fooled me. When you tell literally everyone else in the class ‘good job’ when you observe their work and stay absolutely silent about mine, that says a hell of a lot about what you think of me.”

“I don’t think anything about you.”

“That’s a lie.”

Roman pinches the bridge of his nose. “Look. Miss Sinclair...”

“*Elliot.*”

“Elliot.” He drops his hand and gazes at me, his dark blue eyes doing that thing where they seem to see right through me.

I bite my lip. Maybe it’s a little shitty to insist he call me by my first name now, when I wouldn’t even give it to him after we had sex. But I can’t stand the formality in his tone when he calls me “Miss Sinclair”.

God, I hate that I still want him, that I’m still just as attracted to him as I was when I first saw him at the bar. It hasn’t gone away, not even when I’m pissed as fuck at him. If anything, it’s gotten worse. Now that I know what it feels like when he kisses me, how his hands feel on my body, what it feels like to have him inside me... I just crave him that much more.

Roman clenches his jaw. “I thought it would be best if... if there was not even the slightest hint of favoritism. Given what happened.”

My jaw drops in angry disbelief. “What? That’s bullshit! Neither of us knew who the other person was when it happened. It was just a random hookup; it’s not like we were *aware*. The admins can’t fault us for that if they find out, which they won’t. And it was just one fucking time! Unless I’ve got a twin who’s been boinking you on the side, I haven’t done anything with you since then. So why are you still acting so—so weird?”

“Because I didn’t *want* it to be a one time thing, Elliot,” Roman growls. When he says my name this time, there’s not a hint of formality in it, and his deep voice sends shivers down my spine. “I wanted your name. I wanted —” He breaks off suddenly, the muscles in his jaw jumping as he clenches his teeth. “I wanted more. If I hadn’t had to come to the academy, I would’ve gone back to the bar the next night to look for you. What happened between us was—”

He cuts himself off again, and his nostrils flare as he presses his lips into a thin line. My stomach flips, and I’m both glad and disappointed that he didn’t finish that sentence. *What happened between us was incredible.* At

least it was for me. It was the kind of incredible you go back for again and again—because you just know that somehow, it’s going to get better and better every time.

And I didn’t even give him my name.

He wanted more, and I ran away.

With deliberate slowness, he rises from the desk and takes a single step toward me. “Miss Sinclair, do not mistake me for some pathetic moron who can’t get over a *random hookup* being in his class.”

*Ouch. That fucking hurts.* I’m aware I just used that exact same phrase about five seconds ago, but hearing him say it, the emphasis he puts on those two words, makes my chest squeeze painfully.

So of course I go on the offensive, lashing out like a child.

“Oh, so it’s happened before? Is this a common occurrence?” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Very funny.” He’s looming over me just the slightest bit. I don’t think he even realizes he’s doing it, but it makes me want to do something stupid like press back against the student desk a few feet behind me and make him lean over me even more, make him cover my body with his.

“That’s not an answer,” I shoot back with a challenging look.

“Jesus, Reckless.” His jaw muscles pulse again, and he closes his eyes for a moment, like he’s gathering some kind of inner strength. “No, I’ve never slept with a student before. But don’t tell me you’ve never run into a random one-night stand somewhere else. It happens. I’m trying to deal with it the best way I can, but it’s... complicated. I didn’t want us to be just a one-night stand, and I still—” He stops himself, tearing his gaze away from me with a noise of frustration.

“You still...?” I prompt, my voice quiet and breathy.

Fuck. This is dangerous.

I’m not looking for a relationship. I don’t have time for something that’ll inevitably end in disaster.

But... God, he is so fucking sexy. I need a way to work out all this damn stress, and Roman looks like he’s being held back by the thinnest of threads.

He looks at me, his eyes so dark they look almost black. A rush of heat shoots through me. I know what he’s going to say before he even says it.

“I still want you,” he admits, his voice low and rough.

I hate myself for this, but I still want him too, more than I can understand. I've been able to avoid attachments before this, so why can't I stop wanting this man? He's handsome, yes. Good at sex, oh, hell yes. But surely there are plenty of other guys out there who are the same.

Doesn't matter—I crave Roman.

I'm going to get in so much trouble for this, I just know it, but I honestly don't give a shit right now.

"Then why don't you take what you want?"

The words are hardly out of my mouth before Roman's sealing his mouth over mine. I moan, my fingers digging into his shirt, clawing at him, trying to bring him closer. His powerful thigh slides between my legs, spreading them without a second thought, until he's pressed right up against me, and a hot shudder works through me like an earthquake.

Roman's hands slide around my waist to my back, keeping me pinned to him, and he tugs my lower lip between his teeth as I roll my hips against his thigh. I suck on his tongue the way I'd suck on his cock if he let me, my mind filling with dirty images as he walks me backward, bending me over the desk behind me just like I hoped he would. His hands are sliding under my shirt, searing hot trails over my stomach, and I'm trying to get his shirt open and oh fuck, oh yes—

There's a knock at the door, and I nearly fall to the floor as we both jerk in surprise.

"Yes?" Roman calls out, his voice rough. My heart slams against my ribs as we gaze at each other in shock, our chests rising and falling fast.

"Roman?" A soft, musical voice floats through the door. "You got a sec?"

*Oh fuck, it's Professor Tamlin.* Of all people to interrupt us, it has to be the one person on campus Roman used to date. At least, I hope she's the only one. Goddamn it, now I can't stop thinking about that.

"I'm in a student meeting," Roman calls, clearing his throat. "One moment."

He pulls away from me and we quickly check to make sure we don't look like... well, like we were just rounding second base and possibly about to make a run for third.

"I don't deserve for you to treat me like crap just to avoid gossip," I hiss in a low voice, resuming our earlier argument as I straighten my clothes.

“Treat me the way you’d treat any other student. Or I’ll find a way to kick your ass.”

A smile cracks Roman’s serious facade for a moment, and it’s breathtaking.

“I’ve no doubt that you will,” he says softly, a touch of humor in his voice.

Then his stoic exterior falls back into place as he walks over to the door and opens it. Thank God some people are polite enough to knock when they see a closed door, since that door definitely wasn’t locked.

Professor Tamlin walks in, looking as sophisticated as usual. I’m in worn out jeans and a t-shirt, my hair a mess even before Roman got his hands in it, and she’s standing here looking like the African-American version of Audrey Hepburn.

She *had* to have broken up with him, not the other way around. How could Roman possibly dump someone like her?

“Elliot.” Tamlin smiles and nods when she sees me. “How are you?”

“Fine,” I reply, trying to keep my voice neutral.

“She was reading me the riot act,” Roman mumbles in mock annoyance.

“Oh dear, a firecracker. However will you manage?” She grins conspiratorially at me. “Gotta give him hell, or he’ll get too cocky.”

I shouldn’t hang around. The longer I’m here, the better the odds she’ll pick up on the tension that still hangs heavy in the air. And there’s nothing more for me to discuss with Roman, really.

He wants me. I want him. This can’t happen. The end.

“Right. Well, I’ll... uh, I’ll see you later.” I gather up my things, which I dropped when Roman was kissing the breath out of me, and slip past her toward the door.

Tamlin waves and then starts talking to him about something regarding class scheduling as I make my way out of the room.

The whole time though, I can feel the heat of Roman’s gaze on my back.



## CHAPTER 14

**A**fter that, things are normal for a period.

Or as normal as they can possibly get at a magical school, especially one for people with extremely volatile powers.

I'm getting better at controlling my magic, which I have to say is a huge goddamn relief. I don't want to accidentally hurt anybody.

I even realize I have a new ability, a *second* ability. Apparently, that's something that happens to some of us with Unpredictable magic. If the power inside us is strong enough, it'll manifest in more than one type of magic. In extreme cases, a *lot* more. The oldest documented age at which a new ability was discovered in an Unpredictable magic user was seventy-six. I learned that in my History of Magic class, thank you very much, Professor Goldstein.

On the day my new power sparks, I'm in Combat class, fighting with Dmitri again and trying desperately to pretend I'm not hugely turned on, when I decide to mix things up a little.

A bit of parkour never hurt anybody, right?

I figure if I get a short running start and then kick off the wall, I can tackle him and take him down.

But that's not what happens.

Instead, I run at the wall—and keep running.

*Up* it.

“Holy shit!” Dmitri blurts out, his shock overcoming his usual code of grumpy silence where I'm concerned. “Jesus, Elliot, be careful!”

I'd tease him for finally caving and talking to me like a regular human being, but he sounds genuinely worried about me, *hugely* worried, in fact.

And to be honest, I'm... uh, a little panicked myself.

"Um, Professor Tamlin?" I call, trying not to let my voice squeak. "Any ideas on how to get me down?"

Turns out, getting down is just a matter of walking. My footsteps are as solid on the wall as they would be on the floor. It actually almost feels like the wall *is* the floor, which does funny things to my perspective. If I think about it too hard, my heart starts to race and my hands get clammy, so I just focus on strolling evenly across the wall toward the real floor.

Cam catches my gaze, and he must see the slightly terrified look in my eyes, because he starts singing the Spider-Man theme at the top of his lungs. That sends everyone—including me—into laughter, and the anxious knot in my stomach unclenches a little.

"More like a cockroach if you ask me," I overhear Alyssa muttering to her groupies as the rest of the class joins Cam in his song.

Ah, yeah, those four. They're still a problem, unfortunately.

I'm sure I could come up with rude nicknames based on each of their powers—physical transformation, disintegration, conjuring, and telekenisis—but I'm trying to be more mature than that.

If I were a psychologist, I'd probably theorize that Alyssa and her three cronies feel inferior to most of their peers outside the academy because they have Unpredictable magic, and that they're under a lot of pressure from their families to compensate for that and to be the best.

But I'm not a damn therapist. So I'm sticking with the theory that they're just spoiled brats who are pissed they're at the "weirdo school", and they're taking it out on me.

And I *really* don't appreciate it.

There's not really much I can do about it though. And just ignoring them, as much as I hate to admit it, is the best thing.

If I retaliate, it'll become an all out war. Maybe that's exactly what the four of them want. It would give them some drama and excitement in their boring lives, make them feel like they have some control in a world that just yanked the rug out from under them. But I can't afford to play that game. I'm not risking getting in trouble. Sure, I already broke one rule by moving in with the guys, but that risk seems worth it somehow. I like living with them, and I've gotten used to having them all around—even cranky-ass Dmitri. Besides, crashing in the men's dormitory is a bit different than getting into a fight and getting hauled into the dean's office for it.

I'm not hurting anyone by staying in a room where I feel safe. We're all adults, we're all consenting, and I haven't even been in the rest of the men's dorm.

But engaging in a petty high school level catfight with four spoiled girls who can probably call their rich parents and have them put pressure on the school to get me suspended?

*Ha.* Yeah. Not risking that.

At least my new room is nice. Cozy. Safe. Dmitri has upgraded from ignoring me to sniping back and forth with me, but even that feels like it's starting to soften a bit. Like we're settling into a rhythm of sorts, throwing rolled up balls of paper at each other, grouching at each other in the morning before we've both had our coffee, taunting each other about who could take who in a fight—none of it really backed by malice.

It's done nothing to get rid of the heat I feel when I look at him. Or when I look at Cam or Asher, for that matter. Asher is incredibly sweet and helps me with my homework, and we'll sit on the couch together at night and watch movies on his laptop. Cam makes me go running with him every morning, up through the woods, and always insists on carrying my meal tray when we go to dinner.

I'm not sure what to do about the attraction I feel. I don't want to jinx things or ruin them by making a move on any of the guys. Especially when Dmitri's only *just* decided that my presence isn't a total waste of space, even if he still spends most of his time giving me shit. And especially when... well... it's not like I have a favorite.

And I'm not going to trick them into thinking we could have some kind of serious romantic relationship when that's the last thing I can afford. We're friends—for once, I have actual *friends*—and that's new enough, thanks. I don't need to add romance into the mix and make a mess of this whole thing. I'm not pushing my luck.

So I try to keep myself distracted from fantasizing about my roommates by throwing myself headfirst into my training.

A week after I manifest my second power, Professor Tamlin, Dean Hardwick, and Nathan Perkins, my Practical Magic professor, call me into the dean's office to have a talk.

I settle into the plush chair in front of Hardwick's desk, trying to surreptitiously wipe my sweaty palms on my pants. Being stuck alone in a

room with a bunch of very intimidating magic users who all have the ability to flunk me has my heart racing.

Roman's there too, and he's got an almost protective expression on his face as the other professors question me about my new magic. I get the sense that maybe he came to the meeting to look out for me, which I both love and hate.

But fortunately, everyone's surprisingly kind.

They explain that this isn't all that unusual, but it does mean I've likely got a lot of magic contained inside me. They're not sure how many abilities I'm going to manifest in total, but they urge me in serious tones to keep a close eye on myself and take note of any changes or odd feelings.

*You're very powerful*, is the general consensus.

I actually don't get the feeling they're scared of me, which is what I honestly expected. Instead, it feels more like they're all... happy for me. Something like pride gleams in Roman's cobalt eyes as the other professors explain how well I'm doing in class.

"Just don't push yourself too hard," Tamlin advises me. "That's all we're saying. But we're very excited to watch your progress, Elliot."

I can't remember the last time people talked about me, *to me*, like that. Not since before Mom died. Maybe even earlier than that. Mom loved me and was proud of me, but it's not like I was making the honor roll or anything. And now... now my professors are smiling at me like I'm something special, and it overwhelms me.

It's almost enough to make me forget my suspicions about the school, my worries that something odd is going on here beneath the surface.

That is, until another student gets hurt a few weeks after midterms.

I'm not the one who finds him this time. I don't know his name, but I recognize him when I see them floating him out on a stretcher—he's another third year, graduating soon.

"He's okay. Or he's going to be," Asher tells me in a low murmur as we watch him drift away down the corridor. Even with his brace on, keeping him from reading minds, my roommate is good at reading people.

*Something is going on here. I fucking knew it.*

That thought bounces around in my brain as I head back to the men's dormitory after finishing up my last class of the day, Magical Theory. I could barely focus on Professor Binns' lecture about the seven pillars of magic, and I know I wasn't the only one. With the second attack so closely

resembling the first, whispered theories and rumors are running rampant again. And while I'm normally not one to buy into gossip or drama, I can't sit this one out.

Something strange is going on. This isn't just a random set of events. The attacks were carried out on two students, neither of whom have anything major in common. Not their gender or race or magical abilities. They only had a few classes together and didn't seem to be good friends—nor were they enemies.

I know all this because I've been doing a little digging. And the more I ask around, the more confused I get. It doesn't make any damn sense.

What is going on? Why are students being attacked?

The admins don't have much to say beyond the standard safety speeches. They ask us to report any suspicious activity and to avoid walking alone on campus at night if possible. But those are *normal* ways to avoid *normal* danger.

These attacks are not normal. There's something strange going on at the Academy of Unpredictable Magic.

And I'm determined to find out what it is.

## CHAPTER 15

**S**neaking out of a dorm room you share with three roommates is a lot easier than you might expect.

Dmitri's paranoid, so he's a light sleeper—but I don't sleep near him. My bed is set up over by Cam's side of the room, and Cam snores and sleeps like a sack of potatoes. Asher's a pretty heavy sleeper too, although he's quiet. Sometimes I worry he could die in the middle of the night and none of us would know, that's how deeply he sleeps and how little he moves.

I put on a pair of gym shorts and a tank top then steal Asher's black hoodie and pull that on because hey, it's chilly outside, and also, I'll blend in better in the dark.

Something has been bugging me about the first student who was attacked—Jessica, the one I found in the showers. Her memory of that day was apparently wiped out, either from the head trauma or by magical means, so she couldn't give any details about the hours leading up to her attack. But as far as I'm concerned, it makes absolutely no sense for her to have been in the showers.

She was fully dressed, dry, and had no signs of assault besides the bruises on her face. And a shower in a busy locker room is the worst place for a clandestine meeting. If she was meeting someone for some reason, there are better places on campus. Places where people either can't see you, or where you can blend in with everyone else, like the dining hall.

Not to mention, if she'd been attacked in the locker room where she was found, someone outside the room would've heard.

That tells me she was attacked somewhere else and then moved into the showers so nobody would wonder about where she'd been or what she'd been doing there. They'd be asking all the wrong questions based on her location.

I'm not sure how Jessica was moved, but there are plenty of ways that could've been managed. Magically or otherwise.

The guy who was attacked, though, Sebastian. Where was he found?

I was walking out of my History of Magic class when I saw them wheeling him out past me. And that class is over on the east wing of the main building...

The campus is dark and silent as I creep through the grass and along the path toward the main class building. The late hour makes this familiar, friendly place take on a whole new vibe—a much less pleasant one. I keep looking over my shoulder, paranoid. It feels like the whole campus is holding its breath. The darkness seems to hide things in its depths, things I can only glimpse out of the corner of my eyes.

*Steady girl, I tell myself. You're just letting nerves get to you. Nothing's out there.*

The front doors to the building are unlocked. Not surprising. The professors often have their own projects, and a lot of them have teacher's assistants who I imagine might want to stay late to work. Considering how hard the midterms were, I bet come finals week, there'll be a bunch of students in here studying at all hours of the day and night.

I make sure the door closes softly behind me, tiptoeing on the balls of my feet so I don't make any noise. I don't know who might be in here, and I have no desire to get my ass kicked by some custodian for wandering around where I shouldn't.

Besides, two students have been attacked. I really don't want to be the third.

I reach the spot on the third floor where my History of Magic class is, then move past it to the right. The student was taken from around this area.

Wellwood Hall is massive, with a complex, convoluted architectural style. Corridors and doorways are situated in odd places, with no rhyme or reason to the sprawling design. Moonlight shines through the windows, casting blue-white shapes over the stone floors and walls as I search for clues.

Nothing.

Frustrated, I give up searching the third floor after half an hour and head down one level, and then another.

I'm wandering around the far east wing of the first floor—a part of the building I've never been in before, where no classes are held—when I feel... something.

My breath hitches, and I stop short.

*Something's... pulsing? No, radiating, it feels like it's radiating...*

It's like the feeling of being bathed in sunlight, only I can't see anything. What is that?

*I think... it's magic.*

Very, very powerful magic.

For me to be able to physically feel it like this, it either has to be coming from a person using magic, from a very powerful object, or from a place that has magical runes of some kind etched into it, like for protection. If it was someone practicing magic, I'm pretty damn sure I would've heard the sound of movement by now, so that rules that out.

Exactly how powerful would an object have to be to send out this much magic? Crazy powerful. That seems unlikely.

So it's probably a room of some kind, with runes on it that radiate gobs of magic.

But as I follow the corridor I'm in all the way down to its end... there's nothing. It just dead-ends.

I feel along the walls until I find a spot that's practically warm with magic. Something's got to be here—it has to be. But there's no door, nothing. Just a blank wall.

*Hmm.*

I try tapping on the bricks. Nope, nothing.

I look for runes that'll let me open it. Nothing again.

What the hell?

Fine. I don't need to figure this out tonight. It's not like I have a deadline. I'll do some research in the library, maybe, see what I can dig up. Cam's pretty knowledgeable about magical history, maybe he knows something about the school.

I head back toward the building's main entrance, almost getting lost twice. I've learned how to get to all my classes, but it's easy to get lost in the rest of the school.



When I finally find a familiar hallway, I pick up the pace, moving quietly as I turn the corner—

And run smack into a broad, firm chest.

My feet shuffle backward as I rebound off the hard planes of muscle, peering up through the darkness.

Dark blue eyes flash in the dim light. *Roman.*

“Jesus Christ!” I hiss, my heart thundering in my chest. “You scared the shit out of me!”

“Likewise.” Roman grabs my elbows to steady me. “What are you doing in here?”

Ah, crap. I don’t really have an excuse ready. I was counting on nobody finding me. Or that if anyone did find me, it’d be the asshole who’s been attacking students, and I’d be a little too busy fighting for my life to worry about making up a story. Of course this had to be the night my hot professor decided to work late grading papers or something.

“I’m... what are *you* doing here?” I reply, turning the question back on him.

Roman gives me a thoroughly unconvinced look. “Deflecting is not going to help, Elliot.”

“Oh, like you do with me in class? Trying to avoid anyone thinking we fucked by treating me like I’m less than?”

He looks genuinely pained at that, his chiseled features stiffening. He draws me out of the hallway toward an alcove. As if someone would actually come along and see us.

The idea almost makes me laugh, but I guess it’s possible someone might. You never know. Roman’s here late, and so I am. Maybe we’re not the only ones.

“I’m sorry about that,” he murmurs, his voice low and serious. We’re standing so close together I can feel the heat of his skin. My body is already responding to the proximity of his, lighting up under his touch. “I was trying to protect your reputation and mine. Even though neither one of us knew who the other was, it would be our word against people’s opinions. And we didn’t even have friends with us that night who could corroborate our story. My behavior in class was unfair to you though. Especially...”

“What?” My brows draw together as I push him to continue.

We haven’t really spoken since we accidentally made out like horny teenagers in his classroom, but he *has* been slightly less hard on me in class.

After that incident, I resolved once again to let things lie between us, but I've never been very good at leaving things alone.

He clears his throat, and his large form shifts toward mine in the darkness. The lighting is so dim in this little nook that I can only see the silhouette of his face, but it's breathtaking. He looks like a living sculpture of the perfect man. "Especially"—he reaches out, brushing a stray lock of hair away from my face, his fingers lingering on my skin—"because you're one of the strongest magic users I've ever taught."

"That sounds a hell of a lot like a compliment." I huff out a breath, leaning into his touch despite myself. It feels so damn good. "Better watch out, or I might start to think you actually like me."

"Elliot, our problem has never been that I don't like you." His voice is gravelly, and something in his tone makes my whole body flush. His fingers catch my shoulders, squeezing gently, holding me in place.

This is a bad fucking idea. Not only are we on school grounds, we're in a public building. Never mind that it's the dead of night and no one is around—we're still risking getting caught.

I hear the little voice in my head whispering all those warnings, I really do, but... sometimes I don't listen to that voice, okay? Sue me.

"Are you saying you do like me, *prof*?" There's a taunting lilt to my voice, and I angle my head up, licking my lips. "How much?"

Roman gives a small growl, and his body stiffens, like he can't decide whether to pull me toward him or shove me away. "Don't push me, Elliot."

He's right. I *am* reckless. I'm straight up playing with fire now, but I'm too high on the chemistry between us to stop. I rest my palms on his chest and his hands slowly slide down to my waist, like he can't help himself.

"Or what?" I whisper. "You'll punish me?"

Oops. I guess I pushed.

Finally, his control snaps. He makes a delightfully possessive noise and yanks me to him, kissing me hard.

*Oh God, yes.* I dig my fingers into his soft, dark hair, happily messing it up as Roman's lips move against mine, destroying all rational thought. For having only done this a few times, he's quickly figured out how to kiss me in a way that makes my knees buckle. His arm moves around my back, a band of iron, and soon I'm panting helplessly against his mouth, practically writhing as I press my body flush to his. I can feel his cock hardening against me, and I'm getting slick in return, wanting—wanting so badly—

We really shouldn't be doing this.

But dear Lord, I'm not going to be the one to stop it.

"Goddamn it. You drive me insane," Roman grunts, tearing his mouth from mine as his hands slide under my shirt, roving possessively over my bare skin. I'm sure he means that in about every way possible. I haven't exactly been making his life easy since I got here.

But he hasn't been making mine easy either.

And now, we're going to take it out on each other.

My fingers work like mad to undo the buttons on his nice button-down shirt, yanking it open and pushing it off his shoulders while he does the same thing with Asher's hoodie. It occurs to me that we probably shouldn't take off too many clothes, just in case we have to redress in a hurry, but I *need* to feel his skin. It's hot and smooth like I remembered, and the muscles beneath harden under my touch as his breath hitches in his throat.

Giving in to my impulse, I step forward and press my lips to his bare chest, nipping, biting, and licking the skin. I swipe a nipple with the flat of my tongue, and he makes a warning noise low in his throat.

Fucking hell, I want him so much. I don't like to think of myself as sex-starved, but that's how I feel every time I'm around this guy.

Insatiable.

Desperate.

As I trail my mouth up to his shoulders and neck, I reach down and palm his cock through his slacks. He's already rock hard, and he pushes into my hand greedily, as far gone from reason and self-control as I am. I give him what he wants, working my hand up and down as our lips meet again. As soon as they do, he plunges his tongue into my mouth, grabbing my face with both hands and walking me backward until my back hits the wall.

Once he's got me pinned there, he uses that leverage to work his body against mine. I'm trapped between him and the hard, cool stone, and the contrasting sensations drive me nuts. Goose bumps prickle over my skin as I slide my hands around to his ass, groping him shamelessly.

"You got—a condom?" I gasp into his mouth.

He pulls back, and I register an almost shocked look on his face in the darkness.

Shit, did I just ruin this moment? My pussy is clenching, my clit throbbing, desperate for some relief, but maybe I pushed him too far. This is

definitely one of the craziest things I've ever done, and Roman strikes me as a lot more responsible than I am. There's no way he's going to—

But he does.

Gaze still locked on mine, he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his wallet, retrieving the condom tucked safely inside.

Breathing heavily, he pushes me farther back into the recesses of the little alcove, and I hear the crinkle of a wrapper and the soft sound of a zipper. A moment later, his hands are back on me again. Our propensity for having sex in dark public places means I don't get to see the look on his face, but I don't need to. The way his hands move roughly, almost possessively over my body tells me everything I need to know.

His strong fingers tilt my chin up, and I feel his breath caress my lips as he brings his face down to mine. "What the hell are you doing to me, Reckless?"

"I'm trying to fuck you," I joke breathlessly, my voice a low whisper.

The hand on my chin tightens, gripping hard, as if he's struggling to maintain some kind of control. "Christ."

Then he's shoving my shorts and panties down in one quick movement. I kick them off awkwardly, leaving my shoes on, as arousal and nerves fill my body with electricity.

My arms go around Roman's neck, and he lifts me easily, cupping my ass as his cock teases my entrance. He's right there, rock hard, and I'm so fucking wet for him. I reach down between us, lining him up, and as soon as his broad head slips inside me, he surges forward, pinning me to the cool stone again as he fills me completely. We both let out a choked groan as my inner walls stretch to accommodate him. He's big, and I can feel him everywhere, and holy fuck, I missed this.

He drops his head to kiss me, sucking on my tongue, biting my lips, crashing his teeth against mine as he drives into me hard and fast. We're both making a concerted effort to be quiet, so the only sounds in the small space are the rustle of clothes, the soft slap of our bodies colliding, and muffled whimpers and grunts.

But that somehow makes it even hotter, and the more I try to contain my reactions, the more worked up I get. His pubic bone grinds against my clit every time he thrusts into me, and if I thought being fucked from behind in an alley was hot, this is so much better. Facing him, being held in his arms,

makes me feel more connected to him—and I don't let myself think about why I like that so much.

Instead, I just let the onslaught of sensations buffet me, and when the orgasm hits me, I do my best to keep from screaming at the top of my lungs. I'm only mildly successful, and Roman cuts off my low cry with another kiss, pulling the sounds from my body and swallowing them like he fucking owns them now.

"Yes," he grunts. "God, yes."

His cock jerks and swells, and he swirls his hips against mine as he comes, making me shudder with agonizingly sweet aftershocks. His thick length pulses inside me, his release drawing out for several seconds.

When he finally stops moving, we're both out of breath, and I'm pretty sure I've worked up a little sheen of sweat. I can feel the air cooling my bare legs and ass, and my lower back is a little sore from being pressed against the wall.

*Whatever, I think in a daze. So fucking worth it.*

Slowly, as if he's coming out of a trance, he pulls back to gaze down at me.

My eyes have adjusted enough that I can just barely make out his face, and as he blinks at me in shock, it catches up to me too.

Reality slams into me like a truckload of bricks.

What the hell did we just do?

## CHAPTER 16

**O**h shit.

That... was a mistake.

Not that sex itself is a mistake—I'm actually quite a fan of it. And the student-teacher thing doesn't really bother me, although I should probably be at least a little ashamed. But I'm not, and I refuse to be. I kicked shame out the door years ago.

It was a mistake because of the pull I feel toward Roman.

He finally draws out of me and sets me gently on my feet, stepping back to do... Jesus, I don't even know what with the condom. I take the opportunity to grope around in the dark for my panties and shorts and tug them on quickly. Then I do the same for Asher's hoodie, feeling a little bad for dropping it on the floor earlier. Not that it's his most prized possession, but still.

I shove my hands through the armholes and zip it up quickly. Roman is putting his shirt back on, staring at me again as he methodically works the buttons. Crap, I need to get out of here before I do something stupid like cuddle up to him in a post-sex afterglow and indulge in slow, lazy kisses.

The kind that aren't about fucking.

The kind that might mean something.

*Nope. Gotta go.*

I slip back out into the hallway, which is thankfully still deserted. The moonlight coming in from the windows gives me enough illumination to navigate by. But before I can make it more than a few steps, Roman catches my wrist. When I turn back to him, he's got this look on his face like he can't quite believe I'd pull the exact same stunt twice.

“Where the hell are you going?”

“Um, back to my room?”

He tugs on my wrist, and even though his grip isn't hard and the force is light enough that I could resist it, I don't. We're not even hidden in the alcove anymore, but he draws me against his body and presses his lips to mine.

I just came so hard I saw stars, but this kiss? It's something on a whole other level. His mouth moves against mine, his tongue just barely brushing mine, tasting me, savoring me.

“Come back to my place,” he murmurs when he finally pulls away.

Fuck, it's so tempting. To go back to his room, which undoubtedly has a proper bed where we could have sex again, deep and slow. To feel all that muscle over me, pinning me down as he moves inside me...

But I can't. My heart's already twisting dangerously, and I will not let myself get sucked into a romance that will only hurt me in the end. I'm not as strong as I like to pretend I am, and I know I won't be able to just brush it off when Roman inevitably decides I'm not worth it. I can't go through that. Not after Dad left, not after Mom died, not after my baby sister went to school where I won't see her for months and months.

You lose the people you love. It's just the way the world works. And call me a coward, but... it seems to me like the solution to that problem is to not love anyone.

Maybe this is just an infatuation, it's true. It's not like I'm imagining picking out wedding rings with the guy or anything. But that's how all relationships start: with infatuation. It's a slippery slope to bigger feelings, and one I am not sliding down—no thanks, not today, Satan.

I pull out of Roman's grasp. To his credit, he lets me; he doesn't try to force me to stay. I appreciate it, but it also tugs at my heart in a dangerous way.

This is the right choice. I know that.

So why does my chest feel like an elephant is sitting on it?

“No thanks. I can't tonight,” I reply, trying to keep my voice light. “I'll... I'll see you in class.”

“Elliot—”

I slip away, ignoring him. I can feel his gaze on me as I go, and it seems like that's all I've been doing lately—walking away while Roman watches.

It hurts more than I'd like to admit.

Clearly, I've got to go cold turkey and end this. I'm an adult. I can be a good girl and keep my hands to myself.

As long as I'm never, ever, ever in a room alone with Roman again.

That's do-able, right?

I sprint across the dark campus grounds toward the men's dormitory and slip inside. When I get back to the dorm room, I think I'm home free—until the light clicks on.

All three of my roommates are awake, and they're all looking at me.

Cam's sitting on his bed, Asher's leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, and Dmitri's sitting at his desk.

Dmitri and Cam both speak at the same time. "What the hell?" Dmitri says, just as Cam says, "Thank fuck you're okay, we were worried."

The two men glare at each other.

"Of course she's all right. Look at her." Dmitri scowls, gesturing at me. I run a hand over my head as subtly as I can, hoping I don't have a major case of sex-hair.

Cam rolls his eyes. "Oh, come on, Dima. Don't act like you weren't worried too."

"Guys..." Asher sounds exhausted. "It's one in the morning; could we maybe do this later?" He walks over to me and asks gently, "Are you okay? Dmitri woke up and realized you weren't here. We were afraid something had happened."

I nod. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

"Then what were you—" Dmitri starts, but he never gets a chance to finish.

Because at that moment, someone screams.

My heart seizes in my chest, and all four of us bolt out of the room so fast you'd think it was on fire. That wasn't the kind of surprised scream someone might let out because they saw a damn spider. That was *terror*.

Dmitri grabs me by the elbow as we run toward the sound, yanking me behind him. We reach the main hall of the dorm and pause to get our bearings. Other men are out of bed too, wondering what's going on, asking questions in sleep-roughened voices.

I spot Raul coming from the opposite wing. His hair is a little disheveled, sticking up on one side, and his eyes are so wide I can see white all around the irises.

"Raul!" I lift a hand and gesture him over.



He does a double take when he sees me then shuffles toward us, rubbing one hand over the back of his neck. “Hey... Elliot. What’s going on?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

Nobody else seems to care or really even register at the moment that there’s a girl amongst them. Probably a good thing.

“It came from over there!” someone else calls, gesturing down a hall.

“But that’s Roman’s bedroom,” another person says.

“Roman?” I whisper.

“A lot of the professors serve as housing assistants,” Asher whispers back. “You know, making sure nobody breaks the rules, advising students, keeping an eye on things.”

Oh shit. I’ve been living in the same building as Roman this whole time and didn’t know it?

Dmitri keeps me behind him as we move in a pack down the hall to Roman’s room. My heart’s hammering in my throat. I just left Roman. He wanted me to come back to his place with him—what if someone attacked him? What if it was because he was alone? What if he would’ve been fine if I’d gone with him? Or would I just be another victim?

*I hope he’s okay. Please let him be okay.* I’ll be angry at myself later for caring so much, but right now I don’t give a shit. I just want to make sure...

The door to his room is open a crack, and someone pushes on it until it swings wide. I can see inside, but just barely. Craning my neck a little more, I peer over Dmitri’s shoulder, and my jaw drops.

There’s a dead body in the room, but it’s not Roman.

No.

Roman’s the one standing over the body.

## CHAPTER 17

Everyone gasps and mutters in low whispers, pressing closer to the doorway despite Cam's best efforts to make them back up.

Roman hasn't even acknowledged our presence. He's just staring down at the body, not saying anything. His shirt, the one I ripped off his body less than an hour ago, is a deep plum color—something I didn't even realize in the dark. Looking at him now, you'd never suspect the garment had been tossed haphazardly on the floor recently. He looks as put together and controlled as always, except for the single button he missed right above his belly button. Something about that is so normal, so *human*, it makes my heart constrict.

Roman often seems almost inhuman—*superhuman*, really—and while I'm definitely drawn to his power and control, it's this little thing that zaps me right in the heart.

His jaw clenches, a gesture I'm starting to recognize, and he shakes his head as he gazes down at the prone body in front of him. I've never seen him look this upset, and I want to go to him, but... that would be way too obvious. It would tip everyone off to our relationship, and that's the last thing either of us needs.

Not that we have an actual relationship or anything.

"Oh fuck," Cam mutters, biting his bottom lip. "That's Trevor."

My stomach dips as my gaze is drawn back to the body. There's blood matting his hair, and it looks like he was hit on the head with something, like Jessica had been. But whatever hit him killed him.

*Jesus.*

Trevor was a first year. We had all our classes together, but I didn't know him well. He was extroverted and funny, so he had a lot of friends already, and he was always nice to me, even though we weren't close.

Who the hell would want to kill him? And does it have to do with those other students who were attacked? How could it not? That would be a hell of a coincidence.

I look over at Asher. "Do you think you could take off your brace? Just to calm everyone down and get them to clear out?"

He shakes his head fervently. "No. I don't want to control people like that. And I don't think it's possible for us to take the cuffs off ourselves anyway."

*Yeah. I get that.* I nod to let him know it's okay before clearing my throat. Just like giving last call at the bar, right?

"Hey! Assholes!"

The whispered conversations cut off like someone hit the mute button, and everyone stops and stares at me. I think most of them are finally noticing that hey, there's a girl here. At two in the morning. In the men's dorm.

Guess that cat's out of the bag. But I'll worry about my illicit living situation later.

"It's time to clear out," I say, keeping the brash, authoritative tone in my voice. "Tip your waitresses, close out your tabs, yada yada yada. Unless you actually *saw* what happened here, you are persona non grata. So scam before I make you."

Everyone looks at each other, a little abashed. Then they slowly start to clear out, shuffling back down the hall toward their respective dorm rooms.

Cam blinks at me. "Holy shit. That was awesome, Sin."

I shrug. "I'm a bartender. I'm used to getting rid of unwelcome people."

Dmitri looks vaguely impressed, but before I can call him out on it, someone else comes down the hall.

Oh shit, it's Dean Hardwick.

The middle-aged man stops short when he sees us. He looks remarkably put together for two o'clock in the morning. I can't imagine he was still awake at this hour, but nothing about his appearance suggests he just rolled out of bed either. Maybe that's one of the requirements for becoming dean—the ability to appear polished at a moment's notice.

"What are you all doing here?" he asks in his commanding voice.

“Heard a scream from this room,” Dmitri says, glaring. “Came to check it out.”

Hardwick’s gaze flicks to Roman and Trevor’s body, and for a second, I can see the stress written on the dean’s face plain as day. Then his expression hardens, and he squints at Dmitri. “Came to gawk, you mean. Just like the rest of your dorm-mates. Off you go.”

“We can’t!” I blurt out.

“And why not?”

“Hardwick,” Roman says, sounding tired and tense. “We have a problem.”

The dean switches his attention to Roman, brows drawing together. “You’re damn right we have a problem. You know what this looks like.”

“I didn’t kill him.”

“I’m not saying you did, but I can’t just ignore the fact that that’s what it looks like. I’ll have to do a full investigation on this, Roman. You know that.” Hardwick folds his arms. “Unless you can do that little trick of yours and prove it wasn’t you—”

“That’s the problem I’m referring to,” Roman interjects. “I can’t.”

“You can’t? Or you’re just pretending you can’t because you know he’ll say you killed him?”

“Sorry.” I raise my hand, glancing between the two of them as I studiously avoid looking at the dead man on the floor. It’s not like he’s lying in a pool of blood, but there’s also no mistaking the fact that Trevor is no longer alive, and the thought makes nausea roil in my stomach. “What’s going on here?”

Hardwick narrows his eyes at me. He always seemed like a kindly uncle or something, but I’m slowly realizing he’s got a lot more facets to his personality than that. And this side of him doesn’t take any shit. “Not that it’s any of your business, young lady, but Roman is one of the magical practitioners who has learned how to temporarily raise the dead.”

My jaw drops. Excuse me, *what*?

I turn to Roman, eyes wide. “You can do that?”

“Not for long,” Roman says, his voice quiet and soothing. Like I’m the one who’s being accused of murder, not him. “The dead can only answer direct questions, and if you keep them animated for longer than a certain amount of time, they turn into mindless zombies. Only Unpredictables who

pass difficult, specialized exams are allowed to do it. A few necromancers work homicide in the Circuit.”

Well, that makes sense. If you can ask a dead body questions and actually get answers, it must make solving murders a hell of a lot easier. But...

“Why can’t you do it this time?” Cam asks, taking the words right out of my mouth.

Roman looks down at Trevor. “I don’t know. Something’s blocking me.” He sounds disturbed.

“Blocking you?” Dmitri frowns. “How?”

“I don’t... know.” Roman repeats his answer absently as he crouches down next to the body, trying to examine it without touching it. “And that is very concerning indeed...”

“Well, since we can’t do this the easy way and get a name from him,” Hardwick says, “how about you tell me where you were and what you were doing? Preferably *before* security gets here.”

Roman opens his mouth, then closes it. Almost imperceptibly, his gaze flicks over to me.

*Oh fuck.* Right. I’m his alibi.

But if he says that—if he admits what we were doing—there goes our attempt to keep what happened between us under wraps. I don’t know if it’s strictly against the rules for a professor to fraternize with a student, but I know both of us have our own reasons for not wanting it to come out.

“Come on, son,” Hardwick adds quietly. “I’d rather not have security march you out in front of all your students.”

Shit, shit, shit. I can’t let them arrest Roman. Not when I know he didn’t do this. He couldn’t have done it, not unless he managed to sprint past me to the dorm. He had to have just gotten in when I did, and that’s a hell of a small window in which to kill someone. And what was Trevor doing in Roman’s room anyway?

It might put my head on the chopping block, but I have to say something.

“Dean Hardwick!” I blurt. “He couldn’t have done it.”

The dean and my professor both stare at me. Roman’s face is—I’d almost dare to say it’s devastated. He looks horrified that I’m speaking up. Not for himself though, I don’t think... but for *me*.

He quickly wipes the expression off his chiseled features, replacing it with his usual neutral look.

“Oh?” Hardwick asks.

“He was with me,” I continue, not quite sure where I’m going with this yet. “I’m... um, I’ve been struggling in my classes. Since I wasn’t really a part of the magical community before I came here, I started out behind, and I’ve been trying hard to catch up. Roman’s been tutoring me.”

There’s a large element of truth to that statement, which I’m hoping will cover up the part that’s a lie.

Hardwick narrows his eyes, clearly suspicious—but then Cam speaks up from behind me.

“It’s true.” He puts a hand on my shoulder. “We all quiz her, and she’s been working late at night when she can use an empty classroom to practice. I was there with them.”

“We were sparring this time,” Dmitri adds with a small smirk in my direction, and Asher nods.

Roman is staring at all of us, his face a mask of total shock, but he transforms his features into a calm *I told you so* expression when Hardwick looks over at him.

“That’s correct,” he says smoothly. “These three men have been very helpful in welcoming Miss Sinclair to the school and making sure she doesn’t get left behind. She’s extremely powerful but still needs to work on control, and our private sessions keep her moving at the same pace as her classmates without embarrassing her by singling her out.”

Hardwick nods, apparently appeased for the moment. “Well... I’ll need you all to clear out of the room. When security gets here they’ll—take care of the body. Ah, Roman, I apologize, but you have to understand—what this looks like—”

“Of course. I do understand.” Roman frowns down at Trevor’s body, a worried expression clouding his face. “Someone’s clearly trying to set me up.”

“Yes, well, we can discuss that more in the morning. Everyone out, please.”

Roman continues to look troubled as we file out, leaving the dean alone with the dead student.

“Not being able to raise the body?” Asher whispers, leaning in close to my ear. “That’s a *big* deal. Someone must’ve done something to it so that

the spirit couldn't reveal who'd killed him."

"That means powerful magic," Dmitri mutters. "And not the good kind."

"Miss Sinclair?" Roman comes up behind us as we enter the dormitory's main hall. He grasps my elbow with a strong, long-fingered hand and tilts his head toward a shadowy corner. "May I have a word with you?"

I step to the side, allowing him to pull me away from the others.

"You okay?" I ask, my gaze tracing his face. Worry is eating a hole in my stomach, try as I might to deny it. If Dean Hardwick doesn't believe me, if he accuses Roman of murder... what will happen to him?

"I'm surprised you care," Roman says carefully. Not like he's trying to insult me, but like he's genuinely confused. His voice is quiet as he adds, "You've made it clear that this is... a purely sexual relationship between us."

"Well—yes," I stammer.

He's caught me off guard. I mean, on a basic human level, of course I care. Roman's a good guy, and there's no way he should go to jail for a crime he didn't commit. What kind of asshole would I be to not help him out? It's just common decency, that's all.

Right?

"Doesn't mean I was going to let you get hurt for something you didn't do," I reply, realizing I've let the silence stretch on for too long.

Roman grunts softly in acknowledgment of my words. His penetrating gaze is locked on me again, and I really wish he'd stop doing that. It looks like he wants to say something else, but instead, he just nods once. "Well. I appreciate you sticking your neck out for me. You and the others."

He glances over his shoulder, and I see that the guys are, in fact, hovering nearby protectively. Dmitri's practically glaring at Roman, as if daring him to try something with me while the rest of them are here.

My ebony-haired professor turns back to face me, his expression smoothing out. "But it's unnecessary. I don't need your help."

*What?*

His words hurt a little, and they worry me too. I don't need this guy getting himself into serious trouble because he's too proud to let me try to help. This isn't about whatever is or isn't happening between us. It's bigger than that, with consequences that could possibly be far more dire.

“You sure about that?” I scoff under my breath. “Because it looks to me like you do. Someone in this school killed a student. They *murdered* him, Roman. And they tried to frame you for it.” I pull out of his grip, though I swear I can still feel his touch on my skin. Then I tilt my head up, meeting his gaze squarely. “You’ve got an enemy here. You need all the friends you can get.”

With that, I turn and walk away.



## CHAPTER 18

The four of us—me, Dmitri, Cam, and Asher—head back to our dorm room in silence.

I'm not sure where Roman goes after we leave him, and I try not to think about it. The jumbled up mess of *what the fuck* between us is too much for me to handle right now. But I don't care what he says, I'm not letting him get blamed for this attack if I can help it.

The silence only lasts until the door closes behind us. As soon as we're safely ensconced in our room again, Dmitri rounds on me.

"What the hell was that?" he growls. "You just stuck your neck out for that guy—"

"So did you," I shoot back.

"Only because you did."

"Aww, I didn't know you cared."

"And because Roman's a good professor," Dmitri adds, defensive.

I snort. "Sure. Whatever helps you sleep at night."

"Guys, please," Asher says quietly, his voice heavy and weary. "Whoever's been attacking students just upgraded their tactics to murder. I think that's a little more serious than Elliot choosing to do the right thing and protect Roman."

"But she wasn't with him when the attack happened," Dmitri argues. "So how does she *know* he didn't do it?"

"Roman wouldn't kill someone." Cam pulls a face. "He's not that kind of guy."

"Are we sure about that? He's a professor—how much can any student know about their professor? Or even their fellow students."

“I know it wasn’t him because I really was with him,” I reply. “I didn’t lie about that part.”

That shuts them up.

Silence falls, and they all turn to stare at me, their combined gazes practically burning a hole through me.

“Oh. And I’m guessing he wasn’t really helping you with studying,” Dmitri says after a long moment of painfully awkward silence.

I’ve never been the kind of person to be embarrassed about sex—either talking about it or having it. I’m a grown-ass adult, and I can do who I want, when I want, how I want. So even though Roman and I have been keeping whatever’s going on between us a secret, I don’t see any reason to lie about it to my roommates. Especially when they’ve clearly already guessed the truth.

“No,” I say evenly. “We were having sex, if you really want to know.”

Dmitri’s eyes narrow, and he looks like he wants to punch something. He turns and walks over to his desk, facing away from me, bracing his hands on the back of the chair. Asher blushes, his gaze dropping to the floor. And Cam looks... disappointed?

“Jesus. What’s wrong?” I ask, my gaze darting between them. “It was just sex; it’s not a big deal. We’ve all done it, right? You look like I told you I kicked a kitten.”

“No, it’s cool. It’s just... uh... we didn’t know.” Cam tries to reattach his usual cheerful smile to his face, but it keeps slipping.

Well, that’s definitely not the whole fucking story. Is it because Roman’s a teacher? Do they think if I get busted, they’ll be found guilty by association? Or...

“What?” I chuckle weakly as a new thought strikes me. “Did one of you want to go out with me?”

The silence is even thicker this time.

Oh.

Oh.

*Shit. Who?*

I glance around, trying to pick out which of the guys looks the most awkward and uncomfortable, but the weird thing is, *none* of them will meet my eyes.

Asher’s blush deepens.

Cam shrugs as if to say *you nailed it*.

And Dmitri? He's still gripping the back of the chair like he's about to snap it in half.

"You mean..." I trail off, then clear my throat and start again. "You mean you *all* want to date me?"

No one speaks, and my mouth falls open like a fish gaping in slow motion. My brows rise so high they practically invade my hairline.

Their non-answer says more than words ever could.

*Well, holy fuck. If you need me, I'll just be over here picking my jaw up off the floor.*

Finally, Asher clears his throat. "We're all... interested. But we decided at the very beginning of the semester that we didn't want to fight over you. So we won't."

"You guys all want to date me?" I ask again, like a polyamorous broken record. It's the only thing I can think to say though, because they've just thrown me for a serious loop.

Dmitri grunts something under his breath, and I swear I hear the wood of the chair crack. I doubt he'd admit he had feelings for me right now under threat of torture, but that doesn't explain why he's hulking out on the furniture.

I tug my bottom lip between my teeth, gazing at them in shock. I've been attracted to all three of these men since the day I first met them, but I've been trying to ignore it. And there were definitely moments when I thought they might've been attracted to me too. But Cam's an incorrigible flirt, Asher's so withdrawn and quiet it can be hard to tell, and Dmitri—well...

"I thought you didn't like me," I say to his back.

"I'm not saying I do." His tone is defensive, his hackles raised.

"And here I thought I was being so obvious." Cam scrunches up his nose, grinning sheepishly.

"You—you were, I'm just..." Now I'm the flustered one. "I'm just not used to it, I guess."

"What?" He looks genuinely confused. "To guys being interested in you?"

"Not unless they're drunkenly trying to hit me up at the bar." I haven't had time to meet men in any other environment, so I haven't really had any chance to be, well, wooed. If wooing is what Cam and Asher have been doing.

The jury's still out on Dmitri. I don't think the guy even knows what he wants, much less how to express that to anyone else.

Cam looks at Asher, who runs a hand through his hair. Somehow, in their wordless exchange, I'm pretty sure Asher just got nominated to explain this to me. My suspicion is confirmed when he squares his lean, muscled shoulders, turning to face me.

"We're—if you're interested, yes, we want to date you. We talked about it, and we're not the types to get jealous or... well, we're close, let's put it that way. And if you just choose one of us, or *none* of us, that's totally fine. But if you ever want something more... we're not going to compete over you. Not even with Roman." He chuckles softly. "As if any of us could."

Cam nods in agreement, but Dmitri doesn't say anything.

I jerk my thumb toward him. "Is he on board?"

Asher shoots Dmitri a look. "Well..."

"We thought he was." Cam rolls his eyes, shaking his head at his surly roommate. "Come on, Dima! You couldn't stop talking about Sin the day we met her! And after your first sparring session with her? We heard about that for days!"

My eyebrows fly up. *What?*

I honestly have a hard time imagining Dmitri talking nonstop about anything, least of all me. And he certainly can't seem to muster up a single word at the moment. He's still leaning over the back of his chair, his head turned away, but I think I see his dark gaze flick toward me from beneath his long eyelashes.

"He was there when we made the agreement not to fight over you," Asher adds. "And he agreed too."

"Anyway, *we're* definitely on board." Cam grins, gesturing between himself and the green-eyed mage.

My knees feel a little jelly-like, and I surreptitiously put a hand on the door to steady myself. I have to admit, this is pretty overwhelming. Knowing that two—possibly three, if Dmitri ever pulls that stick out of his ass—guys want to date me, that they're willing to share, even...

It terrifies me and thrills me, the idea that these men care so much.

I can't let them get too close to me though. Someone's killing students, for fuck's sake; nobody's safe around here. And I can't risk falling for people that I might find being brought out on a stretcher the next morning.

I know it's dumb, and I know it makes me a coward, but I just don't know if I can do it. I keep my exterior so hard and prickly because on the inside, I'm literally nothing but mush.

But at the same time... I want them. I crave them. And I feel happy and safe with them.

What the hell am I supposed to do?

"It's late," Asher says, probably reading the conflict raging across my face. "We should all get some rest. We can talk more about this another time if we want."

That's a brilliant idea. Nobody's rational at two in the morning.

Cam nods, some of his usual pep returning. "Good plan. I don't know about you guys, but I could use some fucking beauty rest. I'll need it if I'm ever gonna win over Sin here." He winks at me before his face grows serious. "Plus, I'm sure tomorrow's gonna be insane."

He's right. I wonder if we'll even have classes. Would they shut down the whole school over something like this?

It's a little awkward as we all get into our beds. A million thoughts are bouncing around in my head, mirroring the emotions bouncing around in my heart. I'm glad the unspoken attraction between us all is out in the open now, but I have no idea what I'm going to do about it. I don't want to hurt the guys, and I don't want to risk our friendship. It means a lot to me, even though I never thought I'd make real friends here—or maybe *because* of that.

But what they're suggesting, what they're offering? It sounds kind of incredible. Part of the reason I never made a move on any of them is because I didn't think I could choose between them.

Now they're telling me I might not have to.

I need to think about this. I need to figure out what I want, and whether I can really handle any of this.

Between my encounter with Roman, the discovery of Trevor's body, and now this conversation with the guys—not to mention, my general exhaustion—my brain is on serious overload.

I half expect to have nightmares, but instead, I don't dream of anything at all.

## CHAPTER 19

**I**nstructors from the local Circuit are called in to investigate and search the campus the next day, working in conjunction with the campus security, so we're all given the day off from classes. The guys and I are brought in for questioning about Roman, and as far as I know, we all stick to our story. I know *I* do, and the authorities don't drag Roman away in handcuffs, so I guess the guys must've as well.

We meet up once they're finished with us, out on the main lawn.

"Any plans for the day?" I ask. I've got too much on my mind to sit still, and I'm almost sad we don't have classes. I could use the distraction.

Things are still a bit awkward after last night. We all seem to have privately come to the same decision, which is to just not talk about it. But it's making our conversations a little more stilted than usual.

"Asher and I are going into town," Dmitri says, his tone short. "We've got shit to take care of."

"Godspeed then," I reply dryly.

Cam shrugs. "I was hoping you'd want to go on a hike with me?"

We've been running together through the woods every morning, but a hike suggests something a little longer. And physical activity sounds good. "Where to?"

"Up the ridge," he says with a grin. The school grounds are massive and include a section of sharp rises almost like foothills. But we've never gone there since it's a little too intense for a morning run. "What do you say?"

Well, it'll be one way to work off my anxiety. I haven't seen Roman all morning, not even while I was being questioned, and I can't help but worry about him, although I internally berate myself for being so concerned. The

whole atmosphere at the academy isn't helping, either. Everyone's tense and freaked out, so people are either getting off campus or staying in their dorms. It's freakishly quiet around here.

"Sure." Can't hurt, right?

"We'll see you later then. Have a good hike," Asher says, giving me one of his sweet smiles. Dmitri just turns and starts walking away. *Dick.*

"Thanks." I grin back at the brown-haired mage. "Have fun in town."

After they leave, Cam and I return to the dorm to suit up in some proper workout gear, then head for the woods.

"I've always loved the outdoors," he admits as we walk down the path. "Asher and Dmitri aren't big fans, so I'm glad you like going out with me."

"No problem. Helps me work off some steam."

Cam laughs. "Yeah, and you've got a hell of a lot of steam to work out, Sin. I've seen you in Combat class; you're ruthless."

"Old habits," I reply, breathing deeply as we leave the curated part of the campus grounds behind and head into the trees. The forest is peaceful, welcoming, and colorful in the fall. It makes me feel like schoolwork and everything else, all my fears and responsibilities, are far away.

"What, were you a boxer in a previous life?"

"No. Just got used to defending myself."

He glances sideways at me from the corner of his eye. "Sounds intense."

I shrug. "It is what it is. As a bartender, you can get unruly customers. Especially if you're a girl."

"I get that. When you're all alone, you've got to learn to depend on yourself and no one else."

It sounds like he speaks from experience, and that takes me by surprise. "Um... yeah, exactly."

Cam chuckles lightly. "What, you thought my life was all sunshine and roses just because I'm not brooding all the time like Dmitri?"

I feel like crap, because that's exactly what I thought. "Maybe."

Slowing down our speed a little, he casts his gaze up to the sky. "I'm..." He blows out a breath, his blue eyes darkening. "My parents died when I was sixteen. They were scientists, always doing experiments with magic. Seeing how far we could push our powers, what we could do with them, looking at the line where magic ended and science began, and how we could combine them. They were running some tests in the lab one day and

—I guess they pushed a little too hard. I still don't know exactly what happened, but..."

He shakes his head. "Nothing more fun than a Circuit representative coming to your school to pull you out of class and tell you that your parents are gone. I had to fend for myself after that. I didn't want to be put in a home."

My heart thuds hard in my chest, pain for him making my stomach twist. That's awful. Sixteen is way too young for something like that—not that there's ever a good time.

I look up at him, searching his face. "You've been on your own this whole time? But you're so..."

"Cheerful?" Cam shoots me a wry grin. "Well, what else was I supposed to do? I had to get people to like me, to be on my side, so they'd help me out. And so long as I'm laughing... I'm not thinking about the shitty stuff. Best kind of self-medication, and it doesn't cost a fortune. Unlike heroin."

I snort. "That's an awful joke."

"Yeah, not one of my best. But you know what I mean."

"I do." *I really, really do.* "I wish I was as good at that as you are. I've tried to stay upbeat for Maddy's sake, but sometimes, especially when we were younger, I just got so mad. At my dad for leaving—I know my mom getting cancer wasn't his fault, but it felt like it was. And I was mad at the universe for letting it happen. At the doctors who couldn't save her. Even at my mom, just a little, for dying. How could she do that to us? How could she leave her kids like that? It doesn't make any sense, but it was just easier to feel angry than to feel sad."

Cam nods. "I get it. We all cope in different ways. Sometimes..." He looks out over the path, sunlight shining on his thick blond hair. "Sometimes I just want to scream, you know? It's been years, and I'm okay with it. Mostly. No, not *okay*—more like used to it. And then something totally innocent triggers a memory of them, and I get angry all over again because it's just so fucking unfair."

"Yes!"

The word bursts out of me. It's such a relief to have someone else who understands, who knows what it's like. It's hard to talk about this stuff with people who've generally had it pretty easy in life. They don't understand, and honestly, a lot of them would rather not hear about it. I never would've



expected Cam to be someone I could relate to on this level, but at the same time, it makes so much sense.

I look into his sky-blue eyes, which shine with a mixture of sadness and happiness. "I'm sorry."

He cocks his head, frowning. "What for?"

I stop walking, turning to face him. "I dunno. I feel like I underestimated you. You're a great guy, and I knew that, but I guess I just took your jokes at face value. A lot of people take *me* at face value, and I hate it." I feel nerves writhing in my stomach like snakes. I haven't really talked about this with anyone before. Who would I have confided in, anyway? Ajax? The other bartenders at The Den? "People never really... I didn't have many friends before now. I know I'm cranky, and I tend to push people away, so I just wanted to thank you. And Asher. You haven't let me do that. You've been so kind and thoughtful. You've been my friends and helped me feel safe, and I... I just want to thank you."

*Good lord. What a lovely fucking pile of word vomit.* I seriously suck at this.

"Of course." Cam takes a small step toward me, smiling. "Elliot."

"Whoa, using my real name, this *did* just get serious." I laugh, although some rogue butterflies have gotten loose in my stomach and are making it flip-flop.

He chuckles. "I like how tough you are. That's part of why I became friends with you. I mean, aside from thinking you're funny and gorgeous."

I can feel my face heating up. "Shut up."

"Hey, I'm allowed to compliment you. We're friends, and friends can think highly of each other." He winks at me, one corner of his full lips tilting up. "I'm serious though. You might think you're closed off, but you kind of wear your emotions on your sleeve. And I saw that you were like me. It drew me to you."

It slowly dawns on me that we stopped walking quite a while ago. As we've talked, we've drifted nearer to each other, and now we're standing incredibly close. But I don't want to pull away. I should, I know that. Especially since I'm not sure about this whole *relationship* thing. Sex, I can do. But Cam wants more than that. And I don't know if my heart can handle giving it to him.

But at the same time... won't Cam, of all people, understand?

As if reading my thoughts, he reaches out, cradling the side of my face and gently wiping away a bead of sweat from my temple with his thumb. “You say I make you feel safe? The thing is, Sin, I feel safe with you too.”

*Oh, goddamn it.*

I would dare any woman *not* to kiss him after that.

Whatever fears I have about my inability to handle a relationship suddenly become so much less important than pressing my lips to his. I’ve wanted to do this for weeks, and his words just broke a dam I didn’t even realize was overflowing.

Cam makes a startled noise as our mouths meet, but he quickly wraps his arms around me, pulling me against him. God, he’s all muscle, which I could tell by looking at him—he’s broad-shouldered, solid, and his t-shirts stretch across his chest and biceps—but seeing it and feeling it are two entirely different things.

My hands roam all over his body, trying to memorize the feel of him in case we never get the chance to do this again.

Cam kisses quick and fun and dirty, which doesn’t surprise me at all. His tongue slides into my mouth and tangles with mine, making heat rush through my veins. Fireworks explode inside my stomach, killing off the damn butterflies as sparks ricochet through my body.

*Good. Who needs butterflies anyway. This is way better.*

We take a few steps back, and the next thing I know my back is thudding against a tree, and Cam’s leg is sliding between mine. This is a bad idea, but I don’t want to stop. My blood is hot and sparking, and we’re grinding up against each other as our heartbeats pound in a synchronized rhythm. *Fuck*, he’s good at this. Confident and commanding and—

There’s laughter from farther up the path, and we both jump, tearing away from each other. Cam’s mouth is red, his lips swollen, and his chest is heaving. I can see the outline of his cock through his gym shorts, and my pussy clenches in response.

It’s a good thing the approaching group is being loud, otherwise there’s no damn way I would’ve heard them. We could’ve been caught with our pants down.

Possibly literally. I wasn’t exactly thinking clearly.

I can’t believe I got that carried away in public. I’ve never been this impulsive before. First it was sex in the alley, then in a damn alcove in a

school hallway, and now I'm making out on a hiking trail—what's gotten into me?

The group of people coming down the slope are also students. I recognize them from around campus, although I don't know their names. That's pretty standard for me. Despite my promises to myself to get to know more people at the academy, I mainly stick with the ones I've already met. They all know Cam though, and they say hi as they pass by, exchanging some quick small talk before moving on.

Once they're gone, he and I look at each other. I can feel my face heating up, and his cheeks flush a little too. All I really want to do is shove him against that tree and pick up where we left off, but the tiny shred of rational thought I'm clinging to makes me resist that idea.

I'm not opposed to a fun hookup, but only if it's clear that's all there is to it. And with Cam, that wouldn't be the case.

He has feelings for me.

And I have feelings for him.

Which, if I were a normal girl, would make us perfect relationship material. But because I'm me, it just makes me seize up in terror.

"Should we, uh, move on?" Cam asks, gesturing up the trail.

"Yeah, good idea."

He shoots me a lopsided smile before turning and heading up the path, subtly adjusting his pants. I try not to think about that, or how good his ass looks as he walks up the incline. Or the way my body came alive when he touched me, or the way my heart seems to open up every time I'm around him.

*Oh, sweet baby Jesus.*

I've known the whole time that I'm in over my head with this magic academy thing. But I'm only just now realizing... I'm in way over my head romantically too.

## CHAPTER 20

The Circuit doesn't seem to find anything, or at least, there aren't any arrests made. There's a memorial for Trevor, and another school-wide assembly is called. Dean Hardwick assures us that every possible precaution is being taken to keep us safe, but despite his promises, a few families pull their kids out of school.

The shitty thing is, Griffin Academy is really the only option that exists for training our particular brand of magic, so dropping out leaves those students shit out of luck. I understand why they might not want to stay, given the circumstances, but it sucks that they have to make that choice. Hopefully if—no, *when*—the killer is finally caught, they'll be able to return to the academy and catch up on whatever classwork they missed. They shouldn't be punished just for not wanting to get murdered.

Most of us stay despite the danger, but we're all a little jumpy for a few days—literally. Raul accidentally surprises me in class one afternoon and I end up on the ceiling, clutching it for dear life while Raul apologizes profusely.

But as the days pass and there aren't any more attacks, things start to get back to normal. Well, mostly normal. Ever since the attack, Roman's been getting an awful lot of attention from the students.

The *female* students, I should point out.

I actually thought people were going to be more suspicious of him. It surprised me how scared I was about it. I didn't want Roman to be ostracized or gossiped about because of someone clearly trying to set him up, but I really shouldn't have worried. Instead, the opposite has happened. Everyone is furious at whoever framed him and tried to smear the name of

the school's most popular teacher, and the women especially are taking it upon themselves to try and cozy up to him to offer their "condolences".

I can't help but notice Professor Tamlin seems amused by the whole thing. That odd curl of jealousy comes alive in my chest again. I know it's probably because she just doesn't care if girls flirt with him, and I'll admit, I find the whole thing kind of amusing too. But there's a part of my mind that whispers insidiously, telling me she's amused because she knows she can have Roman back anytime she wants.

Worrying about that is stupid of me though. I'm the one who keeps pushing Roman away and ignoring the signs that he wants a relationship of some kind with me. If he were to go back to Josephine Tamlin I'd have nobody to blame but myself.

*Damn it.*

Oh, and speaking of my frustratingly gorgeous professor, Roman has finally stopped being so hard on me in class. He was easing up on me before the attack anyway, but I kind of think he's taken my covering for him the night Trevor's body was discovered as a sign that something else really does—or could—exist between us.

Not that he's been inappropriate in class or anything. But he's been paying more attention to me than the others, helping me with my techniques. It's been good for me. I'm getting better at controlling my magic, and a lot of that is directly attributable to the work he's done with me. I've finally reached the point where I've stopped freaking out about accidentally hurting someone with my sonic boom.

Roman's face when I demonstrated in class how I can focus it on a target is something I'm going to treasure forever. He seemed so damn proud of me, and I couldn't even believe how happy that made me feel.

Alyssa definitely picked up on the look I gave him, which is... I don't know what. Trouble, probably—I just don't know what kind yet. Her capacity for passive aggression is astounding. The other three girls follow her everywhere, sometimes gleefully and sometimes not. I get the impression that sometimes they're tired and don't want to deal with me that day, but they always traipse along after Alyssa and do what she says.

I can't help but wonder if that's what it'll be like in the "real world" too, once I graduate. If I'm going to be playing the game of cliques and in-crowds with powerful magical families for the rest of my life.

*Fuck. I really hope not.*



A few weeks after Trevor's death, just when I think everything is getting back to normal—it all goes to shit.

We're eating breakfast in the dining hall: Cam, Asher, Dmitri, and me. Most of the school is here, since a lot of us have morning classes, and the atmosphere in the massive room is relaxed and sleepy as we all talk and eat.

I'm groaning into my oatmeal about how I'm not ready for finals, which are looming on the horizon, and Cam's complaining about his Monday night seminar when a scream goes up from somewhere near the front of the room.

My heart lurches in my chest, and I half-stand to try to see what's going on. But before I can find the source of the noise, more shouts and screams rise up all around us.

“What's going—*aaaah!*”

Asher's words end in a pained yell, and I whip my head toward him, fear twisting my stomach. The magic dampening brace on his arm is burning away, the metal melting as if under high heat. Then Cam shouts too, and I think Dmitri grunts, but I barely register the sounds because scalding, white-hot pain tears through my forearm, making my nerve endings scream.

I grip my arm as the brace burns away, a yell tearing from my throat as the pain intensifies. All around, people are doubling over, sobbing as their magical cuffs dissolve into liquid metal.

Then a massive bolt of lightning strikes the table next to ours.

Everyone around it ducks for cover, their screams shifting in tone as terror mixes with pain. For a horrifying moment, I think we're under attack. And I must not be the only person who thinks that, because more magic erupts around me. A second year with disintegration power hurls a blast toward where the lightning appeared, and students scream and scatter as the table explodes into dust.

*Oh shit. Our braces. They're all gone.*

No one in the hall has their power restrained anymore, and all of them are scared and hurt. Just like the first time I unleashed my sonic boom, their power is rising to the surface as an instinctual defense mechanism.

And once a few people unleash their power, more students follow suit, creating a domino effect as everyone fights against an enemy they can't

even identify. People are yelling, screaming, and crying, lost in their panic, as bolts of magic fly around the room. Chunks of stone are blasted from the walls as smoke, fire, and dust choke the air. One student with petrification power has turned her entire table to stone.

It's utter chaos.

"Get down!" Dmitri yells, grabbing me and trying to yank me under a table, but I can't get down. I can't be near other people, not with adrenaline and pain flooding my system. Not with my sonic boom. Last time it went off, I put two guys in the hospital.

I pull out of his grip and race for the nearest wall, scrambling up it and out of the way. I'll be above the chaos like this, right? Safe and sound, where I can't hurt anyone.

Maybe I can even see something from up here, figure out how the hell this started. It's a total mess. Some students have a better handle on their magic—the second and third years, mostly—and are trying to use it to subdue the ones who've gone rogue, but it's just adding to the insanity. Cam's tackling someone to the ground, Dmitri's yelling, and now, finally, security is running in.

It's a good thing Dmitri has an eye on me, because I don't have any idea what's headed my way until I hear him yell, "Elliot! On your left!"

I turn just in time to see a fucking *fireball* flying straight for my head, set off by someone across the room.

I don't think. I just react.

My sonic boom tears out of me, sending the fireball blasting back into the other direction.

But it doesn't just hit the fireball.

Asher is below me, trying to grab my ankle, I think with the idea of yanking me down out of the way of the fire, when my boom goes off. He's thrown back, hurled through the air, and his head slams into the table we were eating at with a sickening crunch.

"*Asher!*" I scream. But my voice barely rises above the din of the chaos.

More security pours in, along with the admins and teachers, including Roman. Most of them look pretty shocked, but they all roll up their sleeves and dive right into the fray.

It's clear that while this might not have actually happened before, it's a contingency that the school's prepared for. The staff move calmly and quickly, subduing the most out of control students with spells. The magic

flying around the room cuts off abruptly, and at first, I can't see what the teachers are doing—then my stomach lurches as I detach from the wall with no warning.

I have just enough time to look down and see that a new brace has appeared on my scorched arm, almost like reverse disintegration, and think *well, that's just fucking great* before I'm falling.

"Oomph!" I slam into someone's arms.

Dmitri—the one holding me—glares, and for once it's not at me but at a member of security. "Jesus. Be fucking careful! She could've been hurt!"

He sets me down, keeping a firm grip on my shoulders as his gaze rakes over my body. "You all right?"

I nod. This is the gentlest he's ever been with me, and under different circumstances, I'd appreciate it a bit more. Seeing him like this kind of feels like seeing a fucking unicorn, and I could get lost in the depths of his dark eyes, the emotions churning behind them that he usually keeps so well hidden. But I can't think about any of that right now—I'm too worried about Asher.

I move around Dmitri and hurry over to the tall, brown-haired mage. He's sprawled on the floor next to the table, and he's just... lying there.

My heart claws its way into my throat. "Asher?"

"Ell...?" He stirs slightly, his attempt to speak ending in a groan.

"Don't move," I tell him, running my fingers through his soft, thick hair and over his scalp. I don't feel anything wet, so I don't think there's any blood. Not *outside*, anyway. He might have some internal bleeding I can't see.

Dmitri puts a hand on my shoulder, squeezing almost painfully. I think he's trying to comfort me, but I can tell he's just as freaked out as I am.

"Hey! Medic! We need a medic over here!" he yells, his voice hoarse.

I cup Asher's cheek, my heart thudding painfully in my chest. His eyes are rolled back in his head, and his breathing is low and shallow.

"It's okay," I whisper. "You're going to be okay."

Medical staff are moving around, checking on people. A couple of them come over, levitating a stretcher, and help Asher onto it. Then they dab a healing potion on our arms. The raw, blistered flesh on my forearm begins to repair itself, the outer layers of skin rebuilding until all that's left is an angry red patch. That will fade too, given a little more time.



“Thanks,” Dmitri tells them. His voice is sharp, edged with worry, but the medics just nod as they start to move Asher toward the door. Moans and low voices fill the large dining hall, but it seems almost silent after the screams and booms of a few minutes earlier.

Neither of us speak, but he squeezes my shoulder again, more gently this time.

Doesn't make me feel any less like shit.

I handled that so badly. I did everything wrong. Goddamn it, this was all my fault. I've been learning how to control my sonic boom in class, feeling so proud of my accomplishments, basking in Roman's praise. But when the time came to use it properly in the real world, in a non-controlled environment, I panicked and lost control. I hurt Asher, the nicest person on this entire campus.

Fuck, I hope he's okay. How could I have been so stupid?

“Don't blame yourself,” Dmitri murmurs. “It's hard to fight instinct.”

“I should've done better,” I snap, brushing his hand off. The comforting gesture physically pains me, making my skin feel too tight. I don't want him to be nice to me, can't handle his kindness right now.

Cam limps up to us, one hand pressed to his temple. A thin line of blood trails down the side of his face.

“Nobody's dead,” he says, shoulders slumping in relief as he speaks. “Lots of injuries, though.”

“How the hell did that even happen?” Dmitri growls.

As they speak, my gaze drifts around the dining hall, and I catch Roman looking over at me, his gaze trailing up and down my body just like Dmitri's did. Tears prick my eyes, and I force them back. I don't deserve to have all these men care about me; can't they see I'm just a massive disaster waiting to strike? I give him a jerky nod to let him know I'm all right.

He gazes at me for a long moment, concern creasing his brow, and then nods once, though he doesn't look satisfied. Another teacher calls his attention, and he turns and resumes tending to the injured students.

“A spell,” Cam is saying. “And a hugely powerful one. It literally melted our cuffs off.”

“Yeah. It unbound our magic in the most painful fucking way possible,” Dmitri notes. “Do you think it was the same person who killed Trevor?”

“I wouldn't be surprised if it was. This was different than the individual attacks, but it was still obviously meant to cause harm. We're lucky nobody

was seriously hurt.”

“We don’t know that,” I reply woodenly, staring at the door the staff took Asher through. God, I hope he’s okay. Head injuries are tricky things. If I’ve caused real damage...

I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive myself.

“It has to be either a student or a staff member.” Dmitri’s gaze shoots around the room suspiciously. “Or else someone from the outside figured out how to get past the protection wards on the school grounds.”

“Well, one thing is damn clear.” For once, Cam’s voice is deadly serious. “Whoever this person is? They need to be stopped.”

A growl rumbles in my chest. Now that’s something I can get behind. Whoever organized this spell put everyone in the school at risk. They put me in a position to hurt my friend, and God knows how many other students did the same thing to their friends by accident.

“Yeah.” My jaw clenches, and my hands curl into fists. “They do.”

I’m going to find out who did this, and I’m going to make them pay.

This nonsense ends. Now.

## CHAPTER 21

**Y**ou might think petty gossip would take a day off, given the disaster that's just occurred.

You'd think wrong.

Alyssa and her three minions waste no time, it seems, in deciding this is a damn gift from God, and they're going to use it to their advantage.

I realize something's wrong the next day when people start avoiding me in the hallway. Classes weren't cancelled this time, and I think it's because the admins want to keep us where they can see us. As I make my way down the corridor after History of Magic class, I can hear people whispering, some of them loud enough that they clearly don't care if I hear them or not. After all, why be polite when you're talking about someone behind their back?

To my shame, it takes me a few hours to realize what's being said or where the rumor is coming from. I should've figured it out right away. By now, Alyssa's made her dislike of me well known, so I shouldn't be surprised she'd stoop this low to hurt me.

"Do you know what they're saying about you?" Raul asks in our Physical Training class, his voice a horrified whisper.

"No. What?"

"They're saying you're the one who burned off the repression braces!"

*Motherfucker.* My blood heats instantly, but I do my best to cool it down. We've all got our braces back on, and after another dose of healing potion applied this morning, the skin on my forearm is only a little pink. But even with the magic repression tamping down my powers, I'm determined not to lose control again.

“Well, none of the school staff think that, or security would be on my ass,” I murmur.

He shrugs. “I know. But that’s what all the students are saying. I’m sorry, Elliot.”

Now that I know what’s being whispered behind my back, I can’t *not* hear it.

*“It’s because she can’t stand not being the center of attention,”* I hear one person say. Another person whispers, *“She sent the sonic boom on purpose. I hear she and Asher had a big fight yesterday. She wanted to get revenge, and that’s how she decided to do it.”*

*“She’s a pyscho.”*

*“Out of control.”*

*“Bitch.”*

I always thought of myself as immune to gossip and all that stupid high school bullshit. But it turns out, I’m not.

The whispers and muttered accusations hurt.

I would never, *ever* hurt Asher on purpose. My hands curl into fists on my desk during my last class of the day, and I have to remind myself that turning around and punching someone isn’t going to help the rumors go away. The only thing that matters is that security knows I didn’t do this. They won’t listen to rumors.

They sure as hell aren’t doing anything to stop the gossip from circulating though.

As pissed off as I am about it, Raul seems more upset by the whole thing than I am. He’s a sweet guy, to care about me like that, but I promise him it’s fine.

“My friends know the truth,” I tell him in a low voice. Cam, Dmitri, and Roman believe I didn’t have anything to do with the braces melting off, and clearly, so does Raul. That’s what matters to me.

His freckled nose wrinkles, and he looks doubtful. “I mean, yeah, but... this can make life difficult for you.”

I shrug. “Won’t be the first time.”

Alyssa and her cronies are tittering like a bunch of hyperactive birds in the back of the class. It takes everything in me not to just march right up and demand a duel, right here right now, with magic or fists. Fists would probably be a bit fairer to the Queen Bitch, seeing as how my sonic boom’s a one punch knockout, but I’m sure I could take her out by non-magical

means just as easily. And honestly, a good old fashioned brawl would be much more satisfying anyway.

I'd love to plant a fist in her smug, spoiled face, just once. Just one time.

But would it really be worth it for all the trouble I'd get into afterward?

And it's not like it would convince everyone the rumors she's spreading are false. It would probably just make them think she's onto something, and that they're right to be afraid of me.

This might be my loner status coming back to bite me in the ass a bit. Maybe if I'd made more friends before now, people wouldn't be so inclined to think the worst of me. But it's too late for that now—and besides, I'm not going to pretend to be some bubbly, fun, outgoing person that I'm not just to get some damn popularity points.

If people want to believe the worst of me then fine. I don't care.

*I don't.*

The guys hear about it too, unfortunately. I'm not sure about Asher—I don't even know if he's properly awake yet—but Cam and Dmitri definitely pick up on the rumors circulating. Cam's popular and knows everyone, and Dmitri's like Asher, good at listening. He pretends to be busy brooding in the corner, but he always pays attention.

I walk into our large dorm room, dumping my backpack and jacket on my bed. I thought I left all this crap behind when I graduated high school—both the studying, homework shit and the gossiping, social shit. *Ugh.*

“Rough day?” Cam asks carefully. He's sitting at his desk, a book in his hands, but he's not reading it. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's upside down.

I glare at him as I flop onto the bed. “I know you heard.”

He puts his book aside and turns in his chair to face me, sky-blue eyes shining with worry. “Look, I know you might pretend not to care about what they're saying—”

Oh, God. I don't need this. I don't need a pep talk. If he tries to make me feel better, I'm going to fucking scream. Or burst into tears. I'm not sure which prospect is more alarming.

“It's fine.” My tone is sharp as I cut Cam off, and I feel like an asshole. I don't want to snap at him again, so I sit up quickly and grab my jacket again. “I'm going to the library; I need to study.”

“Sin—”

“I'm fine, Cam.” Damn it, my eyes are already burning. “Just let it drop, okay?”

Blinking rapidly, I make a beeline for the door, only to bump into Dmitri when he plants his large body in front of mine. He catches my elbows, steadying me—and also pinning me in place.

“Where’s the damn fire, Princess?”

I glare up at him. “Move.”

Dmitri glances over at Cam, who shrugs and gives him a *what do you want from me* look. When he shifts his focus back to me, his dark gaze seems to burn a hole in my skin. His expression isn’t exactly *soft*, but he’s looking at me like he sees me, all of me, the real me, and he doesn’t judge me for any of it. It makes my heart thump hard against my rib cage, and I simultaneously want to lean into his touch and run away to hide.

“You know Asher isn’t your fault, right? None of what anyone did yesterday was their fault. It’s all on the person who melted our braces off.”

“Right.” I duck my head and slip out of his grasp. Of course now that I’m trying not to cry, that’s when he decides he’s going to actually be nice to me. Although maybe “nice” is a bit of a stretch; his tone is almost irritated.

He rolls his eyes. “Elliot—”

“Going to the library, see you later!”

I bolt out the door before Cam or Dmitri can say anything more.

Walking across campus is the worst. I can see everyone staring at me as I make my way down the path, some of them whispering, some not, but it doesn’t matter. Talking or not, the expressions on their faces say it all.

I want to disappear into the ground.

Because the thing is, even if I didn’t do what they’re accusing me of, I’m still guilty. No matter how loudly I insist I didn’t mean to hurt anyone, that doesn’t change what happened. I *did* hurt someone—Asher. The nicest fucking person I know.

And I can’t take that back.

*What’s the point of having all this magic, all this power at my fingertips, if it only hurts people?*

Instead of going to the library, I veer left, away from other people and toward the woods. It’s almost dinner time, so most people won’t be out here; they’ll be buckling down on studying for finals or thinking about getting food.

Maybe I shouldn’t have come here at all. Maybe I should call the Circuit and have Aurora come take my magic away permanently. Leave the

academy and try to find some kind of peace with a magic-less life.

Ever since I came to this school, I've had girls with the emotional maturity of twelve year olds jumping down my throat, have made a mess of my confusing relationship-not-relationship with Roman, and have managed to push away or physically injure the three best friends I've ever had in my life—and that's not even counting the attacks on students and the murder.

This whole thing has been a disaster, and a lot of that has to do with me. With who I am, with how I handle things. Maybe I should go back home, rent a little apartment and get my old job back or find a new one, and figure out what I'm going to do with my life. Going to school here is just staving off the inevitable freak-out over what I'm going to do for a career anyway. Maybe this whole time, I've just been using magic and drama to hide from that.

It's time I face adulthood.

My cell service is actually pretty good out here in the woods, and as a side bonus, nobody can hear me and eavesdrop on my conversation. Hoping she's free, I find a large rock to sit on—Cam and I have run past it a lot in the mornings—and call Maddy.

She picks up on the third ring. “Ellie?”

As soon as I hear her voice, the tears that've been threatening all day spill over. I wipe them away with the back of one hand, swallowing hard before I speak. God, I miss her.

“Hey, Mads, how's it going?”

“Great!” I can practically hear her smiling, and the weight on my chest lifts a little at the happiness in her voice. “Having lots of fun. Nothing really crazy to talk about... I wish I had some hilarious story for you or something, but it's all just been same old, same old.”

“Learning magic has become *same old, same old* to my little sister.” I chuckle dryly. “What is the world coming to?”

“Very funny.” She snorts. “How's it going with you?”

I take a deep breath, bracing myself. “Here's the thing, Maddy. Um. I'm going to be leaving.”

There's a long pause on the other end of the line, as my sister probably wonders if she's heard me correctly.

“You're... you're leaving?” she whispers. “Why? Is everything okay? Are you hurt? Are—”

“I’m fine! Don’t worry about me. But there was an accident. I messed up.” It makes me cringe to talk about it, but I explain what happened in the dining room. I don’t mention the student being murdered, though—I don’t want to worry her.

“It sounds to me like that wasn’t your fault,” Maddy says firmly. “You didn’t make those cuffs come off. And you said it burned you like it burned everyone. How is anybody supposed to think when they’re in that kind of pain? It hurts, you don’t know where the danger is coming from, and you want it to stop, so you’re not really thinking clearly. And your magic just goes off. You had a fireball coming at you! That’s terrifying! And even if you didn’t hurt Asher, someone else easily could’ve. You don’t know.”

“Maddy—”

“It was an accident.” Her voice brooks no argument.

*Shit, I know that tone.* Mads is my sister, and just like me, she can be stubborn as hell once she gets an idea in her head.

“An accident that could’ve been deadly,” I insist. “I can’t risk something like this happening again.”

“But that’s exactly the reason you’re there! To learn to control it.”

“Or I could just get it taken care of so I never have to deal with it again,” I murmur, my voice tired.

“So you’re going to run away from the problem instead of facing it? Instead of trying to overcome it?” She huffs a breath. “That doesn’t sound like the sister I know.”

*Damn it. She’s got me dead to rights.*

I’m sure she can sense my glare through the phone. “You’re a real pain in the ass sometimes, you know that, Mads? Actually listening to all the stuff I’ve said to you over the years? How dare you pay attention to me.”

She chuckles, and her voice softens a little. “I’m serious though. You don’t run away from things, Elliot, and you’ve never let me run away from them either.”

It’s true. When our dad skipped out on us, I hated him for it. And I promised myself I wouldn’t follow in his footsteps, although I’m doing a pretty shitty job of keeping my vow at the moment.

“If you leave now, if you get rid of your magic, you won’t really be facing the problem,” Maddy continues. “You’ll just be running away. And I know that you don’t want to do that. If you create a problem—and still I don’t think what happened to Asher is your fault, but I know better than to



keep trying to talk you out of it—then you can't walk away from it. You have to stay and make things better; fix what you broke. That's what you always taught me, and Mom too. Spilled milk."

I grin in spite of myself. "Spilled milk."

As a kid, Maddy didn't understand the whole expression *no use crying over spilled milk*. She thought it was insensitive.

"Does that mean we're not allowed to be upset when sad things happen?" she asked our mom once.

Mom told her that wasn't what the saying meant at all. "*It means when you do something wrong and make a mess, you shouldn't just stand there and say how sad you are about it. Clean up your mess. Because everybody makes mistakes—there's no way to avoid it. But you can choose whether to clean it up or not, and that's what people will remember about you. Whether you're the kind of person who cleans up her mess.*"

I hate to admit it, but Maddy's right. I can't let this school beat me, and I can't run away without cleaning up my mess. If nothing else, I need to woman up and go visit Asher to apologize properly and make sure he's okay.

Squinting in the light of the setting sun, I pinch the bridge of my nose. "You're never going to let me live it down if I tell you you're right, are you?"

"Nope!" Maddy says cheerfully. "But that's okay because you love me anyway."

I grin. "Yeah, I do. To the moon and back. I'll let you know how things go."

"So you'll stay, then?"

"Yes." *For now.* "I'll stay."

## CHAPTER 22

**A**fter I hang up with my sis, I head back down the path toward the school. I've never been to the infirmary before, but I know where it is. I'm pretty sure everyone knows where it is now thanks to all the attacks over the course of the semester. I cross the campus, ignoring the looks from the few students who are still out and about, but stop when I hear my name being called.

I turn and see Roman walking quickly toward me.

Well, at least I didn't literally run into him this time. And at least we're not alone in a dark, enclosed space. Because given my emotional state right now, there's a one hundred percent chance I would jump his bones. And I'm supposed to be *untangling* the mess I've made of my life, not adding to it.

"Hey, prof. What's up?"

He comes to a stop in front of me, and his dark cobalt eyes flicker at my use of the nickname. I called him that once to push his buttons, but now I've decided I kind of like it. If I'm gonna be naughty and bang my professor, I might as well lean into it, right?

Judging by the look on his face, he doesn't hate it either. Or maybe he's just remembering what happened last time I called him that.

Then he shakes his head slightly, seeming to gather himself. "I wanted to let you know—it's not official, so don't spread it around, but there's talk of shutting down the school."

He sounds pissed as hell about it. His expression grows stormy as he speaks, and I can't blame him for being upset. My stomach twists as my heart drops, and I'm surprised by how upset *I* am about it.

A few minutes ago, I was planning to leave the academy, and now I'm angry that it might be shut down. It's a little contradictory maybe, but this isn't just about me.

"That's totally unfair." I shake my head, my anger rising. "Just because one student—or maybe it's not even a student!—is going crazy, that doesn't mean everyone else should get screwed over."

Where will all the people with Unpredictable magic go? Will they just have to give up their magic instead? Will they even get a choice anymore?

Cam has no family. Other kids have families that are ashamed of their status as Unpredictables. If this school is gone, what's going to happen to all of them? Will any of them be safe?

"The Circuit has pointed out that our failure to apprehend whoever did this is a huge oversight on the part of the school. They've come to the conclusion that the faculty are unable to prevent events like this from happening, or to find and punish students who do break the rules," Roman says, his tone oddly formal. It's something I've realized happens when he gets pissed. The madder he is, the more proper his speech patterns become. "And we don't actually have proof that it's all one culprit. It could be that one person carried out the two non-deadly attacks, another person framed me for murder, and a third pulled the stunt in the dining hall. The Circuit is insisting this is evidence that Unpredictables have a propensity toward chaos and violence."

My gut twists at that. No. No. I'm positive it was just one person. And not just because I don't want the hoity-toity Circuit bitches to be right.

"But *you* don't think that, do you?"

"No. I think it was just one person responsible for this mess. But we can't *prove* it, and that's the Circuit's point." Roman clenches his jaw. "I just wanted to let you know so you could start making any necessary arrangements."

"But what'll happen to all the other students? I've got a tiny bit in savings, and I think Ajax would take me back at the bar. So I'd be okay if we all got booted. But what about everyone else? What about our magic? And the faculty? *You!* What'll happen to you?"

He sighs, running a hand through his thick black hair. "I don't know. We haven't really gotten that far yet. Hardwick is trying to think of contingency plans. I can look for a teaching post elsewhere if I need to, but..."

“But the rest of the world doesn’t trust Unpredictable magic. That’s what everyone says. How will any of us be safe if we can’t control our magic? Where would we even go?”

Roman shakes his head. “I don’t know, Elliot. I’m sorry. Just... be prepared. I’ll think of something if it comes to that.”

“It won’t come to that,” I say stubbornly. I vowed the other morning that I’d get to the bottom of this and find out what, and who, made me hurt my friend—and I meant it. Jesus. I want to kick myself for my earlier cowardice. How could I ever think of leaving and letting this asshole get away with it? I’m going to find whoever it is and make them pay.

Roman looks exhausted. He’s not too much older than I am—I did a lot of subtle digging when I first got here and found out that he’s twenty-seven—but I see every one of those years on his face right now. I have the strongest and stupidest urge to hug him, to tell him it’ll be okay.

I hold myself back though. First of all, I have no idea if that’s true. And second of all... well, I guess I’m still a coward about some things.

“I hope you’re right,” Roman says quietly. His hand twitches, like he wants to reach for me, but he holds himself back too. “Where are you off to?”

“Infirmary. I need to see Asher.”

He nods. “There weren’t any major injuries. I’m sure he’s fine. It wasn’t... don’t blame yourself.”

“What makes you think I’m doing that?”

“Because it’s what I would do. And I see a lot of myself in you.”

“Ah.” I purse my lips, squinting at him. “So being attracted to me is just a form of narcissism. I should’ve known.”

A burst of laughter erupts from his mouth, and he looks startled at the sound, as if he’d forgotten how to be amused. I grin. There. At least I’ve helped him somewhat.

“I’ll see you around,” I say. “In *class*. Because the school *isn’t* closing.”

He shakes his head, his darkly handsome features etched with concern. “Be careful, Reckless. Please.”

“Always.”

I shoot him a cocky grin before I turn and walk away, but with every step I take, the smile slides off my face a little more. Despite my bravado in front of Roman, I really am scared as I head into the infirmary. It’s on the

west side of campus, in its own special building, and an air of gravity and importance clings to it.

What if Asher really is hurt, and they just don't know it yet?

What if the school does get shut down?

What if this person strikes again and kills someone else? What if they plan another attack like the one in the dining hall, and next time somebody, or *several* people, get hurt in a way that can't be fixed?

As I walk down the hallway, searching for the entrance to the recovery ward, hushed, urgent voices reach my ears.

I freeze when I recognize Hardwick's smooth timbre.

Eavesdropping isn't something I make a habit of, but what if this is news about the school shutting down? I need to know.

It's also a little strange that the dean would be having a meeting in a room in the infirmary when he's got a nice big office in the admin building. Either he was already here visiting the injured students, or he specifically didn't want to have this conversation in his own office.

Either way, I'm curious.

I stray closer to the door where the voices are emanating from. It's open just a crack, as if someone pulled on it to close it but forgot to make sure it latched all the way. I sidle up, flattening my body against the wall and peeking through the crack. It looks like an out-of-use meeting room, and inside, I can see Hardwick and two other staff members. I recognize them—one's a professor for the third years, and the other works in administration.

"But what if that spell destabilized the protection wards?" the professor, Emmitt Macombe, is saying. He's an unreasonably tall man with a gaunt face and intense green eyes.

"I checked," Hardwick assures him in a soothing tone. "The artifacts are still safe. Nothing's been disturbed by the magical outburst."

I'm guessing the outburst he's referring to is when all of us unleashed our power at once in the dining hall. It was a hell of a lot of magic to have flying around in the air.

"Those objects are under three layers of runes," the woman from administration says, her tone impatient. I forget her name... Ms. Pierce, maybe? "They won't be disturbed that easily."

"But they're under three layers of runes for a reason," Professor Macombe replies, his tone growing curt in response. "They're incredibly

dangerous. If something like the dining hall event were to happen again and trigger any of them—”

Wait, dangerous artifacts? In the school? What the fuck? Who thought that was a good idea? *Hey, I know this school is full of people with powerful and Unpredictable magic that they can't control yet, but let's put a bunch of dangerous objects here too. That can't possibly backfire.*

Idiots.

“We can't move them,” Hardwick insists, still in that calming voice. “First, we can't risk them being detected, and second—and perhaps more importantly—they are our bargaining chip. You know the conditions.”

Conditions? Bargaining chip? I tug my lip between my teeth. What the hell is he talking about?

“The school can be kept afloat even if we're not playing nanny to a bunch of magical time bombs,” Macombe insists. “That was fine when the founders of the academy needed to gain the Circuit's trust to get started, but we have a good reputation now. We can stand on our own two feet; we don't need to keep sitting on a disaster just waiting to happen!”

I tap my fingers together, pulling on various scraps of knowledge stored in my brain to try to make sense of all this. I'm not one hundred percent sure, but I *think* I'm starting to get an idea of what's going on.

Unpredictable magic users are frowned upon—thanks to my history class, I know that the prejudice against us has been around pretty much ever since the first Unpredictable manifested their powers. But then one day a long time ago, some group decided they wanted to start a school for those kinds of people to teach them how to control their magic. If the government said no, what might that group be willing to do to sway them?

Would they be willing to, say, house and protect a bunch of dangerous artifacts in exchange for the right to start an academy for magical outcasts?

*Magic leaves a mark, a residue. That's how the Circuit knows when someone's had their first outburst of magic. It's how Aurora knew about Maddy.*

My mind races as the pieces fly into place faster and faster. A bunch of magical artifacts, dangerous ones with lots of power, all stored in one place with wards to protect them and keep them locked down? The magical residue on all that must be insane. Anyone who came close would be able to tell that *something* was going on.

If the Circuit tried to stick a bunch of artifacts like that in a warehouse, it would be like asking for some evil Indiana Jones wannabe to come in and try to take them. And there'd be no way to hide the objects. Everyone would be able to sense their magic and know something was up.

But not if they stuck an entire school of Unpredictable magic users on top of it.

In that scenario, our magical residue would cover up whatever magic the artifacts were giving off. Anyone who felt the aura would assume it was because of all the students, especially students with such strong and dangerous magic on their hands.

It would keep the artifacts safer than they'd be anywhere else. Better disguised.

That's... kind of ingenious, I have to admit, although I'm not all that thrilled to know somewhere in this school there's a vault with a bunch of... what was it Macombe said? Magical time bombs? Yeah, not happy to have *that* somewhere on the premises, just waiting for a student to let loose an errant sonic boom or something and accidentally set off a magical chain reaction.

But it is pretty clever. And not all that surprising, in a way, especially since no one seems to think Unpredictables warrant the same protections other magic users do.

I pull away from the door before any of them notice I'm here and bust me for it. I've been in enough hot water lately, and with all the heightened security right now, God knows what they'll do if they find me eavesdropping.

Shaking my head, I tiptoe quietly down the hall toward the infirmary.

All the rest of this can wait. I need to tell the guys what I just learned, but right now, what matters most is Asher.

I have to make sure he's okay.

## CHAPTER 23

When I enter the recovery ward, I see that Asher's not the only one who's still here on bed rest. It looks like about twenty students are laid up in the various beds, some just reading or on their phones, others sleeping.

The woman at the front desk looks up as I enter.

"Hi." I try to give her a winning smile, but I think it falls flat. "I'm here to see Asher Prince? I'm his friend, Elliot Sinclair."

"This isn't a hospital, you can just walk on in." She purses her lips like she's hiding a smile.

Oh. "Right, then."

I visited my mom so often in the hospital, the routine is kind of second nature to me by now. But of course this isn't the same as that. Ducking my head to hide my embarrassed flush, I walk quickly between the beds to get to Asher. He's all the way in the back corner, and it looks like he's asleep.

Shit, he looks so exhausted and pale. I grab a chair and pull it up next to his bed, sitting down. Should I take his hand? Fuck, no, that would be too obvious. So I just sit here like an idiot, watching him.

Now that I'm here, I realize I didn't really plan what I wanted to say. *I'm sorry* sounds so inadequate, and it doesn't begin to cover everything I want to tell him. Asher's been so sweet and supportive of me. I don't know how to thank him without sounding like a sap, but I want to.

I'm also scared as hell to say the words.

He likes me, I know he does. And I like him too. A lot. But until my feelings are actually expressed out loud in human English, I still have plausible deniability. Because liking Asher? Caring about him? It's



dangerous. For my heart, and for his damn life. I couldn't ask for more evidence than what's right in front of me. He was my friend, and he got hurt because he was trying to help me. How much longer until something else like this happens? How much longer until the people in my life get hurt and die, or get tired of me and leave?

It's not just Asher I'm starting to care for, either. It's Cam, with his humor and his hidden depths and his determination to be there for me. His sweetness and openness. It's Roman, with his insistence that there *is* something between us, his magnetism and mystery, his conviction that I can become more than what I am now. It's Dmitri, with his silent, grouchy protectiveness, the way he watches out for me and then pretends he's doing no such thing.

I care about all of them.

*God, that's a terrifying thought.*

It makes me feel like I'm at the top of a roller coaster, about to go down a steep drop—except I don't know if I'm wearing a safety harness or not. I don't know whether I'm going to go on the ride of my life or crash and burn.

No matter what else I might be confused about though, there's one thing I know for sure. I really want Asher to be all right.

*Please, I think. Please get better.*

He doesn't ever have to know how confused and messed up I am. He doesn't have to know that it scares me how *much* I care about him. I just want him to be okay.

As I gaze down at his face, Asher's eyes crack open, and he looks at me. I nearly jump a mile, my heart stuttering in my chest.

And then I realize—his cuff isn't on.

None of the patients' cuffs are on in here, probably something to do with the healing process. And that means Asher could possibly hear inside my head.

*Oh God, I hope not.*

"Hey," I murmur, my voice shaking a little. Keeping a smile pasted on my face, I work desperately to erase every private thought from my mind. But it's like when someone tells *you* not to think of a pink elephant, and all of a sudden that's all you can fixate on. "Um... I just wanted to come see how you're feeling. You know, check how the infirmary pudding is and all

that. And to make sure you'll be back on your feet soon. I've... I've got nobody to help me with my homework now."

His lips spread in a wan, tired smile. "You don't have to be defensive with me, Elliot," he says in a low voice, almost a whisper.

I swallow hard around the sudden lump forming in my throat. "What do you mean?" *Deny, deny, deny.*

Asher gives a small sigh, and his gorgeous green eyes soften. "I heard you."

*Damn it.*

He starts to sit up, and I quickly rearrange the pillows to help prop him. "Careful," I hiss. "Don't move too fast."

"As if I couldn't already tell you care," he murmurs, not letting me distract him from the subject. "Elliot, it's okay. You don't have to hide anything from me or anyone else."

That's just the thing. I do. When you let people care about you, and when you let yourself care about them, nothing good comes of it. They leave or you lose them. I've already got Maddy to worry about. I can't—I *won't*—let myself get worked up into knots over anyone else.

Asher reaches out and takes hold of my hand, squeezing gently. I squeeze back before I can stop myself. Every time I touch him, it feels so right, so comfortable, that I have to remind myself all over again why this is a bad idea.

"The problem with my power," he says quietly, "is that I can see sides of people nobody else can see. Most of the time it frustrates me. I wish the world could see how thoughtful Dmitri really is. Or how hurt Cam's been in his life, how much losing his parents still affects him. I wish people who say and do cruel things would let their real thoughts show, because most of the time, they're just scared and lonely and lashing out. I always think if everyone was more honest, more true to how they think and feel, the world would be a better place."

His voice is soft but strong, and his gaze draws me in like a tractor beam.

"But with you... I kind of like that I'm one of the only people who knows how you really are. Who knows what you're really thinking and feeling. And underneath all your cranky swagger, Elle? You're a very, very sweet woman." Asher gives me a crooked, shy smile. "And I like that it's kind of our little secret."

*Oh... wow.*

My heart thumps unevenly in my chest. It doesn't escape my notice that he called me Elle. No one's ever called me that before, not even Maddy, and I... I like it. It feels like that's our little secret too.

And what he just said? *That might be the sweetest thing anyone's ever told me.*

Of course, Asher hears me think that too. I know he does because he blushes in response. I roll my eyes. "I'm never going to have a safe thought around you again, am I?"

"Only until my cuff comes back on," he reassures me quickly.

I can't help myself. He's unbelievably sweet and so goddamn adorable, and I'm so relieved he's okay.

But it's not the relief urging me on. I just really want this.

So I think two words as clearly as I can.

*Kiss. Me.*

Asher's eyes widen in surprise, and he jerks his head up to stare at me. Whatever he sees on my face must confirm what he heard in my head, because a wide grin spreads across his face, growing slowly until it's taken over, like he can't believe I actually thought that "out loud".

He leans in, or I lean in, or we both do, and when our lips press together, it's soft and gentle and feels like summer rain after a long, unrelenting heat wave. It feels like something breaking apart, but in the best way possible.

I get lost in the kiss, so overwhelmed by the feel of him that I forget to worry about all the thoughts he can read plain as day in my head. Nice thoughts. Mushy thoughts. Thoughts that would make me cringe with embarrassment if I weren't so busy kissing Asher like my life depends on it.

He licks the seam of my lips, and when I open my mouth, our tongues meet like long lost friends. I feel both safe and turned on, and before I know it, my upper body is practically draped over his as I try to find some way to get us closer.

But we're in an infirmary. There are people around. He's still healing from his injuries.

That last thought, more than the other two, prompts me to reluctantly pull away. Asher looks happy and a little dazed, and his shaggy brown hair is sticking up where I ran my fingers through it. I lick my lips, tasting *him*

on them as I draw back. For a second, we just stare at each other, still lost in the magical little bubble our kiss created.

“You’re really okay?” I ask him, brushing my fingers over the back of his hand. “You don’t have any lasting damage, or—?”

Asher shakes his head, his moss-green eyes warm and gentle. “No. I had a concussion, but just the kind I needed to sleep off. The healing the infirmary staff can do with magic—it’s not perfect, but it can take care of a lot of things. I’m just fine. I’ll be back in the dorm with you all in a day, at most.”

“No, no, take your time.” I wave him off, quirking a grin. “I’ve enjoyed sleeping in your bed; much comfier than mine.”

He chuckles, threading his fingers through mine and squeezing my hand. And for just this moment, there’s no threat of the school shutting down, no psycho on the loose, no finals stressing me out. Nothing.

It’s just Asher and me, and it’s wonderful.

## CHAPTER 24

The next day, Cam, Dmitri, and I clean the room in preparation for Asher's return, although I'm sure the two men will join me in denying it if anyone asks. The fourth member of our motley little group grins as he enters the room, still moving a bit slowly, like he's getting used to being out of bed and able to walk around on his own again.

"You look like you just got out of prison," Dmitri grunts. "What, did you get tired of all the rest and no homework?"

Asher flips him off good-naturedly before setting his things on his bed and glancing around. "You guys cleaned."

"Don't know what you're talking about." I shrug evasively. "The place is always this neat. Maybe you're just the messy one."

"Nah. Cam's the messy one."

"Ouch!" Cam laughs, pressing a hand dramatically to his heart. "Et tu, Brutus?"

The guys greet Asher with a slap on the back and a punch on the arm—although I notice their greeting is a lot lighter than usual—but I don't feel like punching him, so I duck in for a quick hug. His body is tall and lean, his muscles firm beneath my hands, and he smells like citrus and lemongrass. His brace is back on, so he can't hear my thoughts, which is fine by me. I'm still not sure what to do about that moment we shared in the infirmary, although I've replayed it in my head *a lot*.

Feeling a little awkward that my quick hug turned into a not-so-quick grope, I pull away, avoiding Asher's gaze.

"We're going to be late, you know," Dmitri points out with a grumble.

“Oh, hush.” Him, I’m happy to punch. And I do—hard—on the arm. “Asher’s back. Who cares if we’re a few minutes late to class?”

“It’s not class,” Cam says. “There’s some kind of assembly going on. Students. Staff. Everybody. Hardwick’s giving us all a talk.”

Oh, damn. I don’t want to say it out loud and worry the guys in case I’m wrong, but I can’t help but wonder... if this is it.

If Hardwick’s going to tell us they’re shutting the academy down.

If that’s the case, then I don’t see any reason to hurry. I still have my issues with this school, but I’ve come to realize what an important place it is. To me, and to all the other students and staff too. When I’m here, it feels like I have some sort of handle on my destiny. And I’m not going to let this safe haven for my friends be shut down. Hell no.

“We’d better get going,” Asher says, ever the rule-follower.

Cam and Dmitri look like they’re on the same page I am as far as this whole *getting there on time* thing goes, but they put on their jackets because... well, we’re all kind of trying to accommodate Asher right now. He did just get out of the infirmary, after all.

We head downstairs. The main hall of the dormitory is quiet as we walk through it, and when we push open the doors and step outside, there’s a figure coming up the front steps.

“Roman?” I shoulder past Dmitri to meet him.

He looks relieved to see me. The corners of his eyes relax a little, and his jaw stops clenching. “Elliot, there you are. You’re all right,” he says, his tone carefully neutral.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t she be?” Dmitri demands as he steps up beside me, so close his shoulder brushes mine.

I glare at him. I can fight my own battles, thank you, and I don’t like the implication that I need to have the guys around to look out for me like guard dogs. If I’m okay, it’s because of *me*, not because some big strong man protected my weak ass.

It is nice to know Roman cares so much—and that the guys also care enough to be offended at the suggestion that they’d leave me alone and vulnerable. But I don’t need the darkly handsome necromancer watching out for me so closely. Or Dmitri, either. I’m an adult, I can handle myself.

“We’re going to the assembly,” I tell Roman. “We were just waiting for Asher. You didn’t have to come all the way over here just to check on me.”

“I know. I just—” He breaks off, his gaze flicking to the three men behind me.

*Oh fuck. This is awkward.* I don’t have any kind of agreement or understanding with any of these guys—how could I, when I don’t understand it myself? But there are definitely some unresolved feelings between all of us. I’m not sure if Roman knows that the other three are aware of our hookups, but I can tell he’s trying to play it safe and keep his “professor” hat on, just in case.

“I’m fine, Roman. Really.”

Aware that I’m breaking about a dozen of my own rules, I reach out and touch his arm gently. I feel his muscles stiffen and then relax under my touch, and my heart squeezes as I realize he truly was worried about me.

Given what my three roommates told me about their interest in sharing me, and their disappointment when they found out I was sleeping with Roman, I half expect them to raise their hackles at the obvious connection between us. But they don’t, not even Dmitri.

Interesting. Asher did say they wouldn’t compete with him either. So does that mean they’d be willing to share me with him too...?

I force myself to focus, pushing that thought away. *Jesus, Elliot. Get it together!*

Finals are almost here. Someone’s been attacking the school. And now we’re late for an emergency assembly. There are bigger things to be concerned about than my insane love life.

Tearing my gaze away from Roman’s, I hustle down the steps, calling over my shoulder, “We should go before we’re any more late. The assembly must be important for Dean Hardwick to gather the whole school.”

If he is planning to announce the closure of the academy, I want to be there so I can voice my objections. Not that I expect him to take a vote on it, but someone should speak up.

I turn down the path toward the auditorium, and a moment later, the guys and Roman all follow me. It only takes us about five minutes to reach the large stone building, but as we approach, I feel something... odd emanating from inside.

The hairs at the back of my neck stand up, and I can sense it, like a smell in the air.

Magic.

I hear the men coming up behind me, and their steps become uneven as they drift to a stop. They can sense it too.

My heart in my throat, I open the doors and enter slowly.

Once I'm inside the building, it becomes obvious immediately what the problem is. *Yeah, this is definitely not normal.*

There are a few students ahead of me, and one janitor, but none of them are moving. In fact, they don't even appear to be breathing.

They're not dead—or at least, they don't look it. It's like someone just hit "pause" on a TV show. Everyone's still halfway through taking a step, or mopping the floor, or grabbing a book. They're just... frozen.

"What the hell?" Cam breathes behind me.

Tentatively, my heart still hammering, I walk up to the closest student. I have Magical Theory class with her. I reach out, my fingers shaking a little, and lightly touch her arm.

Nothing. She feels oddly cool to the touch, and she doesn't seem to be breathing or blinking—I can't even feel a pulse when I press my fingers against her neck.

"What the fuck is this?" Cam whispers. For the first time since I've met him, he sounds scared.

"They're frozen in time." Roman's voice is oddly hushed. He seems reluctantly impressed. "It takes powerful magic to do something like this. Hugely powerful."

I shoot him a glance, stomach twisting as I try to master my own fear. "Who could've done this?"

He shakes his head. "I have no idea. Burning off the braces was bad enough, but this?"

"Someone wants everyone out of the way," Dmitri notes, his tone grim. "Freezing them is easier than killing them, and it means you don't have to worry about being sneaky. You can just waltz right into anywhere you want."

"We were late." My voice goes soft as the realization hits me. "We were late for the assembly—that's the only reason we didn't get caught in this spell too." The gears in my mind are turning, whirring, grinding. *Think, goddamn it, think!* I look at Roman. "Hardwick was going to announce the shutdown of the school, right?"

"Yes." His lips press into a thin line. "He fought against it, and he had good leverage but—it seems that it wasn't enough. The High Circuit felt



that the Unpredictable magic users were too unstable and that we couldn't properly police them. As if it's our fault that a psychopath is on the loose. Some members of the Circuit are still convinced that Unpredictable magic somehow makes people mentally unbalanced."

I scrub a hand over my face. "Shit. This all has to connect somehow." I take a deep breath before glancing around at the men. "Okay, so—bear with me here, but when I went to visit Asher, I overheard Hardwick talking with a few other staff members. About how there are dangerous magical artifacts hidden at this school for safekeeping."

Cam's jaw drops. Dmitri glares accusingly at Roman, who looks thunderstruck that I know this. Asher just looks quietly interested, his green eyes sparking with curiosity. It takes a lot to faze that guy—or maybe being in the infirmary for a while put everything in a new perspective for him.

"Is that true?" Dmitri demands.

Roman sighs, closing his eyes and blowing out a breath. "Yes, it is. It was decided that—well, you can't house dangerous artifacts like these just anywhere. They give off too strong of an aura. But at a school like this, with the immense power the students have, the auras from the artifacts would be undetectable. This was planned in secret. Only certain members of law enforcement know, and they're very high up. Very few staff members at the academy know about it. I'm one of only a handful of professors that were let in on the secret, and even I don't know *where* the objects are or how to get to them."

"None of the attacks on students make sense," I point out. "I mean, they do if the attacker is just a psycho, but there was no real pattern. Serial killers are caught because they have a predictable pattern, and this person didn't. And taking off our cuffs? That didn't make any sense. Why do that? Just for the love of anarchy? There was no rhyme or reason to any of it."

Roman doesn't respond, but he's gazing at me intently. He's listening to what I have to say, at least. That's a good start. Because I know I'm onto something.

"None of the attacks make any sense—*unless* whoever was carrying them out was hoping for exactly this. Hoping for a school-wide assembly that would put all the students, faculty, and security personnel in the same place. Unless they wanted to throw the school into a panic and have admins going to check on the hidden artifacts, potentially revealing their location and how to access them. Unless they wanted to set everyone up as sitting

ducks for a time-freeze spell so they could go in and grab the artifacts, taking their damn sweet time, and then bust out of there unimpeded.”

“Fuck.” Dmitri’s lip curls in anger.

“Holy shit, Sin.” Cam’s eyes widen, and he looks at me proudly. “You’re like a damn detective.”

“Yeah, but why would whoever did this put Trevor’s body in Roman’s room, then?” Asher asks.

“I was trying to figure out who was behind this.” Roman runs a hand through his hair, his dark eyes thoughtful. “Snooping around. It’s why I was roaming the halls when I ran into Elliot and we—” He breaks off, his gaze flashing to me. Then he clears his throat. “Anyway. I’ve worked for the Circuit in law enforcement before, and I’m one of the few people at this school, and the only one outside the security team, who can raise the dead to interrogate them for information.”

“You were getting too close, and whoever it is wanted you out of the way.”

“So now everyone’s frozen.” Dmitri crosses his arms over his chest. “Fucking fantastic. What do we do?”

“We’re not frozen,” I blurt emphatically. “And whoever did this is probably going after some very dangerous artifacts right now. I say we stop them. If they think everybody got trapped by the time-freeze spell, they won’t see us coming.”

Roman shakes his head. “No, I can’t allow you to get involved. I’ll handle—”

“No fucking way!” I shoot him a glare. I don’t have time for his protective professor bullshit. Never mind that the thought of him facing some murdering psychopath on his own makes my gut churn with worry.

“Elliot—”

I raise a hand, cutting him off. “No. We’re not your students right now, Roman. We’re all you’ve got. I know we’re not as well-trained as you are, but there’s safety in numbers. And at least having us with you as a distraction is better than going in on your own. You need us. We need *each other*. And besides”—I can’t help the little grin that tilts my lips in triumph—“I think I know where the artifacts are.”

## CHAPTER 25

Roman stares at me. The other three are looking at me as well, three sets of eyebrows raised.

“How do you know that?” Roman asks, sounding surprised but not angry.

“What did you think I was doing that night we ran into each other?” I reply. “I was trying to figure out what was going on in this place too. I found an area in the east wing where I sensed magic—really fucking strong magic. I tried to get in but couldn’t, so I gave up for the time being. And then... I ran into you.”

He nods. I’m glad he doesn’t ask me why I didn’t tell him what I was doing. He’s a smart guy, he’s already figured out that I didn’t know at the time if I could trust him or not.

But I do trust him now. And I hope like hell he trusts me.

Something in my heart warms a little when he speaks with zero hesitation. “All right. Show me.”

“Wait, first things first.” I hold out my arm. “Braces off.”

Roman looks less than pleased with this. “Are any of you able to control your magic well enough?”

Damn. That stings, I have to admit. “I thought you said my control has been improving. That I’ve been advancing well.”

“You have,” he says carefully. “You all have. But using your magic in a life or death situation like this is different. And you’ll be around very powerful magical items. One wrong explosion or spell—”

My sonic boom. I don’t know if Roman is thinking about that specifically, but I know I am. Guilt churns in my gut again, and I have to

avoid Asher's gaze. I can feel him looking at me, probably realizing how I'm feeling even without his ability to read minds activated. But I don't need any reassuring. I'm fine.

Swallowing down the acidic taste working its way up my throat, I take a deep breath.

*I'm fine.*

I have to do this. For Asher, and for the rest of my friends. For all the students here.

"We can handle it," Dmitri growls, stepping up to Roman. "Elliot's right. Face it, you need us. And that means you need us at full capacity. We're not backing down on this."

Cam and Asher nod. Roman looks from Dmitri, to them, to me, and then back to Dmitri again. "Fine," he agrees, his jaw clenching. "But you need to be careful. I don't want any of you getting hurt."

His gaze darts over to me, and I have to fight down my blush. As much as I want to tell him to stop worrying over me, the fact that he does worry is... annoyingly comforting.

Roman walks over to me and presses the so-called pressure points on my brace. Only the professors know how to work the magic to activate the locking mechanism, freeing us from our cuffs for class and locking them back on us afterward. The metal bracelet comes free and Roman takes it off, his fingertips sliding along my wrist momentarily before he hands the cuff back to me. It's a small touch, but it sends sparks shooting through my veins anyway. I have the feeling he wishes he could do more, and to be honest, I do too.

I talk a big game, but I'll admit, I'm a little scared. And if we die trying to stop whatever evil maniac is after those artifacts, I'm gonna be really fucking pissed I didn't grab Roman and kiss him one more time while I still had the chance.

Before I can work up the guts to do just that though, he releases my wrist and moves along to the guys, pressing on their cuffs until they fall off. I shake out my hand as I feel the pull of my magic, so much stronger now that the repressing brace isn't muting it.

Roman looks at me. "All right, Elliot, show us where the artifacts are."

I nod and lead them toward a side door in the auditorium. The place is eerie like this. The students and staff are all in the assembly, which we confirm when we walk by an open door and Roman pokes his head in.

There are a few stragglers outside, running late, but we don't find anyone else who's free of the spell.

"Do you have any idea which object the person could be stealing?" I ask Roman.

He shakes his head. "I don't know what's stored here. I can guess, but I don't know. There are places like this all over the world. Although I'm sure they use different methods to hide their artifacts."

Great. So we're just going to have to play it by ear and hope nothing blows up. While the entire population of the school is frozen nearby.

No pressure, right?

I push open the side door and hustle down the path to the massive main class building. Once we reach it, I retrace my steps from that night when I wandered through in the dark. I go slow, dredging up my memory of that night, and am proud that I don't have to double back on my path once. When I reach the wall that I was sure should have a door, I gesture to it.

"There. Something is beyond here, I'm sure of it. But I couldn't find any runes or anything to indicate an opening."

Roman frowns, his hands in his pockets. He looks like a model on set, darkly handsome and brooding. Only he could make a dangerous emergency look like an editorial photo shoot. "Well... only certain people know what's here."

"But you can feel it," I insist. "Right?"

He closes his eyes for a moment, concentrating. I can practically feel him reaching out with his senses.

"Yes," he finally says. "I can feel it. There's a great deal of magic concentrated somewhere nearby. But only those who are bonded to the lock can see the runes. They'd be the only ones who could open it."

Dmitri smirks. "We'll see about that."

With that, he starts to look more... insubstantial. Like he's no longer made of solid matter but of light. He's vibrating slightly, making him appear almost blurry. He looks the way someone might in a dream, their edges softened by my subconscious.

Then he walks forward—and passes right through the wall.

*Holy shit.*

"He's phasing," Asher explains quietly.

"I can see that," I say, my voice a little faint.

I've actually never seen him do that before. He's duplicated himself in our Combat class a few times, which is trippy as hell. But I think he still struggles with control a bit, like I do—so when given the choice, he prefers to fight with fists instead of magic.

For a moment, there's just silence, and I start to worry. What if whoever it is who's doing all this was waiting on the other side? What if they've hurt Dmitri? What if he phased back in at the wrong moment and now he's trapped inside the wall, or half in, half out?

Then a loud scraping noise sets my teeth on edge. It's joined by a deep rumbling sound, and then—the wall starts to move.

A section of the wall swings outward, revealing a dark set of stairs leading downward. Dmitri's standing on the third step, fully corporeal again, smirking with a smug *I told you so* look on his face.

"These types of things always open way too easily from the inside." He scoffs. "People think so hard about how to keep intruders out, they don't worry enough about keeping things in."

I have to admit, that is pretty clever.

"All right," Cam says, rolling his shoulders like he's itching for a fight. "Let's get this show on the road."

My palms instantly start sweating. Not that I'd ever admit it out loud, but those stairs downward into darkness look... pretty intimidating.

I take a deep breath and force myself to stay calm. Whatever's waiting down there, it's just some asshole who thinks they can own the world. I dealt with privileged shit like that at the bar all the time, and you bet I kicked every one of their asses out when they got too gropey or inappropriate. It's the same thing here.

"What are we waiting for?" I ask. "A dramatic musical cue?"

Cam laughs, Asher grins at me, and even Roman snorts in amusement. Dmitri's trying hard to look annoyed, but he's not quite managing it. I wink at him, glad beyond words that these four are with me, and step through the open door.

Onward and downward.

## CHAPTER 26

I'll be honest, after all this build up and a whole semester of attacks, subterfuge, and even murder, I expected something a little... well... a little more elaborate. Like something out of *National Treasure*, with the dusty staircase and the questionable elevator shaft and the torches on the walls. A real Indiana Jones type deal.

Nope.

That is *not* what we find.

Instead, we creep cautiously down a long flight of spiral stone stairs. The walls on both sides are covered in runes, and when we hit the bottom, the space opens up into a large storage room.

And it looks like something you'd find at your local public storage company.

I look around as we enter, a little confused. "Jesus," I murmur. "They didn't spend their budget on the ambience, that's for sure."

Behind me, I can hear Cam trying not to choke as he struggles to hold in his laughter.

Roman comes up to stand on one side of me, Dmitri on the other.

"Would you prefer some mood lighting?" Dmitri asks quietly.

"Or maybe an ominous warning that he who disturbs the slumber of the objects shall awake the guardian?" Roman intones in a low, dramatic voice.

I narrow my eyes at him. "You two are ganging up on me, and I'm not sure I like it."

The two men shoot each other sly, conspiratorial smiles over my head.

*Oh, yeah, I definitely don't like this. They should not be getting along so damn well.*

The area is massive, making me think of the roots of a tree and how they supposedly mirror the branches above. The school on top of us is huge, but so is this underground space. Bare gray walls are covered in more runes—all protection spells, I’m sure—and dotted around the space sit various crates, each of which, I assume, contains a powerful magical item. Despite the aura of magic hovering in the air, the vibe in here isn’t especially intimidating. In movies, ancient artifacts are always sitting on little podiums in glass cases like they have in museums, but I’m guessing the school admins decided to be smart for once and not put the dangerous artifacts on display where they’d be easy to grab.

The five of us make our way quietly through the huge room. The organizational system probably makes sense to whoever stashed all this stuff down here, but things aren’t exactly laid out in neat rows, which makes it hard to scan the space for any intruders.

My heart pounds so hard in my chest it’s difficult to listen for external noises, but I keep my senses alert as we creep forward.

Finally, about halfway to the back of the massive storage room, I hear a noise.

My hand flies up, bringing the men to a halt alongside me.

We’re not alone.

In the dim light up ahead, a figure is bent over one of the crates, using magic to literally pry open the lid on the large wooden box. The lid goes flying and lands with a crash before skittering across the floor ten feet behind him.

“Any idea what’s in there?” I whisper to Roman, my voice hardly more than a breath.

“No,” Roman admits quietly. “But we’re about to find out.”

The figure straightens up, clearly sensing our presence. Before I can duck into the shadows or hide behind a nearby crate, the intruder catches sight of me. He straightens, his body tensing, and I get my first good look at him.

My jaw drops.

“*Raul?*”

I’m frozen in place, muscles locked in shock. He’s the one who’s been after the artifacts? The one who attacked his fellow students?

“Elliot?”



His voice is soft, almost confused. He doesn't suddenly sound like a cartoon villain or anything; he didn't suddenly grow a mustache he can twirl while he cackles evilly. He looks and sounds just like Raul, the guy I sat next to in class and shared notes with.

I don't understand. *How?*

Raul stares at me, and I stare back at him. The disappointment in each of us is palpable. I can practically hear him thinking, *oh no, not you*, like he's honestly sad I'm the one who's come to stop him.

I'm pretty damn disappointed myself. He was such a nice guy, shy and earnest. I thought... I thought he was like me. I thought we were friends.

And maybe he thought we were friends too, for whatever that's worth. He truly doesn't look happy to see me down here, and I have a sinking feeling that's because he thinks he has to kill me now.

"Elliot." He says my name again, not as a question this time. Then his face smooths out, becomes blank. Like he's forcing himself not to feel anything. "Darn it. This is.... not what I was hoping for. And you couldn't even come alone, could you?"

He glances over my shoulder. I don't dare take my eyes off him, but I can physically feel the glares the four men are directing his way.

"Hey, Roman," the freckle-faced kid adds. He gives a little wave. "I'm not surprised to see you here. I really wish you'd stopped poking around after I gave you that warning though."

"What are you doing?" My voice is low, and even I can hear the emotion in it I'm trying to mask.

Hurt.

"What does it look like?" He shifts his feet slightly, his body tensing. The question might sound casual, but he's ready for a fight.

Goddamn it. This is why I don't open up to people. *This is what happens when you trust people. They betray you, they hurt you, they...*

"Raul, this is wrong, whatever you're doing—whoever you're doing it for—"

"No! I'm not doing it for anyone," he interjects, his voice harder and angrier than I've ever heard it. "Not anymore. That's the whole point of this."

"I don't understand."

"You *should*."

He looks frustrated that I'm not getting it automatically. I want to tell him Asher's the mind reader around here, not me, so I'm gonna need him to break it down for me real slow. But needling him with sarcastic comments when he's so on edge seems like a very bad idea.

So instead, I say in a quiet voice, "I really don't, Raul."

He shakes his head in agitation, strands of dark blond hair falling over his forehead. "You know what it's like to only rely on yourself. To have people try to take your powers away, take your family away. I'm not doing what the Circuit wants anymore." He gestures wildly with one hand. "Look around you! They shove us off into a 'special school' where we're contained, or they cut us off from magic altogether. Because they're *scared* of us. We're too much for them, too powerful for them, so they call us freaks and lock us up. When we should be the ones in charge! We're more powerful!"

"Okay," I say, trying to adopt the soothing tone I use with customers when they're drunk and getting worked up. "You have every right to be upset with how Unpredictables are treated, Raul. I understand that, you're right. I really do get it. But hurting other students?"

"I had to do it!" he snarls. "They poked their noses where they shouldn't have! It's not my fault. And I needed to create panic. I needed to get everyone into the same place on campus—my time freezing spell wasn't big enough to cover the whole school, just this building. I had to rough them up a little."

"You killed a student," I say, keeping my voice calm. I take a few steps toward him, ignoring the worried hiss of breath from Dmitri. "That's not just roughing someone up. Trevor was a fellow Unpredictable, and he didn't deserve to die."

"He knew too much!" Raul is unraveling a little. His voice goes higher with every word, and I'm starting to see the side of him that's capable of attacking his classmates, of committing murder. "I couldn't modify enough of his memory. He was going to tell! And Roman was right on my tail, so I killed two birds with one stone."

"That was a very powerful spell you cast on his body, Raul," Roman says casually, authoritatively. Even in this totally inappropriate moment, that tone sends a shiver of heat up my spine. "Who taught you that? That's not the kind of thing you can learn on your own—how to keep someone from being able to raise the dead."

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Raul sneers. His chest is rising and falling faster, his gaze darting quickly between me and the guys.

We’ve got him outnumbered by a good amount, but a rock of fear still sits in my stomach. Roman’s not wrong. Raul may be a first year like me, but he’s obviously got a hell of a lot of power at his fingertips.

And the five of us are the only thing standing between him and what he wants.

CHAPTER 27

“Raul, please.”

Holding my hands out placatingly, I take another tentative step forward. If I can get close enough, maybe I can try tackling him. It’s not the fanciest move, but in moments of high stress, I tend to revert back to what I know works. And I’ve always been a good scrapper.

“Look, I get why you’re doing this.” One more step forward. “I was so angry with my dad when he left. And I was angry with the Circuit for just waltzing in and taking my sister. And for telling me I could either come here or lose my magic. I felt like I didn’t really have a choice, and that sucks. But hurting innocent people? Do you really want to do that? What are you even looking for here? What are you hoping to achieve?”

Raul shakes his head. “No, I can’t tell you.”

I hear someone inhale sharply and glance sideways out of the corner of my eye.

While I was moving toward Raul, Asher was moving toward the crate. He can see into it now, and whatever he’s seeing, I don’t think it’s good.

“Are you serious?” he whispers, looking up at Raul. “What are you even planning to do with this?”

“What is it?” Roman asks, still standing several feet away with Cam and Dmitri.

Asher swallows. “It’s a Brimstone Orb.”

I have no clue what that is. My gaze flicks to Raul, my brows pinching together. “A what?”

“Think of it like an insanely powerful, massive grenade that also causes fire to rain down from the sky,” he says, “and you’ll have a pretty good

idea. ‘Brimstone’ as in fire and brimstone—hellfire raining down.”

“Nobody thought to call it the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch?” I ask.

Silence. The guys all blink at me.

“*Monty Python and the Holy Grail?*” I glance around, shocked despite my fear. Or maybe I’m just focusing on *Monty Python* so I won’t pee my pants. “No? None of you? Goddamn it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Raul cuts in, waving his hand in a slicing motion to show he’s done with this conversation. “I need this orb. *We* need it. And I really, really hate to do this, Elliot, but if you don’t walk away right now...”

“No.” I take the opportunity to shuffle another step toward him. He tenses slightly, and I know I’m getting close enough that he’s going to have to react soon. “No. Don’t give me a little speech about how you’ll spare me if I walk away. I’m not going anywhere. This has to stop.”

His jaw clenches, his cheeks reddening. “I thought you would understand. You, of all people—”

“Well, I don’t, Raul. Because I may be a bitch, but I’m not a psycho. I’m not a killer.”

He shakes his head, raising his arms. “Then I’m sorry. I don’t want to do this.”

I can feel magic crackling in the air around me and I start to draw some of it into me. This is what we practiced for. This is what I’ve been taking classes for all semester. I can do this.

“Yeah,” I say grimly. “Neither do I.”

Before I can blink, Raul throws his hand out and unleashes a massive bolt of lightning.

*Fuck! I didn’t know he could do that.*

Despite all my training, my sonic boom is too damn slow to respond. Death, in the form of white hot light, barrels toward me, and my breath suspends in my lungs.

“Elliot!” one of the guys yells, I think Dmitri, and a millisecond later, I’m tackled to the ground.

It’s Cam on top of me—he must’ve used his teleportation power. That’s the only way he got to me so fast.

“You okay?” he murmurs, and despite the fact that his massive body knocked the wind out of me when he took me down, I nod. I’m fucking alive, thanks to him. I’m more than okay.

Coughing as I struggle to get my breath back, I peek past Cam's shoulder. Chaos has erupted over our heads. Asher has his hand thrust forward, his fingers splayed out, and he's squinting hard in concentration. He's trying to control Raul's mind, I realize. It's clearly not easy, though, and Raul's throwing everything he can at the men, especially Roman.

It makes sense—as the professor, Roman's got more magical knowledge than the rest of us. He's the bigger threat.

Raul reaches out with a hand, and one of the nearby crates bursts open, whatever's inside flying across the room to him. It's some kind of staff. He thumps the smooth stone floor with it, and suddenly the stone ripples like a massive wave. We're all thrown backward, crashing into more crates. Magical items start going off as they hit the ground, accidentally activated, and it's pandemonium.

Roman is the first to stand, and as artifacts continue to activate around us, he starts muttering in some language I don't know, his voice deep and guttural. As his words grow louder and louder, the air around him seems to rip itself open and something—and I do mean *thing*—emerges.

“What the fuck is that?” I yell, scrambling to my feet. Fuck, my whole body feels like one big bruise.

“That...” Cam mutters faintly, staring with wide eyes, “is a demon.”

I've never seen anything like it. The creature is made of lava and bare, skinless muscle. Of twisting sinew, of living black snakes, and eerie, unholy orange-black-purple light. I can't look directly at its face. Every time I try, some deep, unspeakable terror seizes me, and I have to look away. As though if I stare directly into its eyes, I'll die.

“Did he—did Roman *conjure* that?”

“Yeah,” Cam says, his voice still low. “Now let's just hope he can control it.”

Roman's sweating, his dark cobalt gaze fixed on Raul, his hands out as if he's using the demon like a puppet. Oh, God, this can't end well. If he loses control of that thing...

“Come on!” I grab Cam's shoulder. Roman and Asher are using every ounce of their focus and concentration on controlling their magic right now, so they're sitting ducks. “Protect Asher!”

Cam's teleportation will come in handy, and so will his magic absorbing. If he can just take on some of the blows aimed at Asher...

He pulls back against my grip, panic flooding his features. “Wait! What about you?”

I see Dmitri phasing in and out to dodge the magic that Raul is flinging at him. Our gazes meet for a split second, and in spite of the mortal danger he’s in, he shoots me a cocky grin. Figures this would be the kind of thing that cheers his grumpy ass up.

Turning back to Cam, I give his shoulder a squeeze. Then I rock forward on the balls of my feet and press a hard kiss to his lips. Fuck it. If I’m about to die, I’m not going to waste the last few minutes of my life hiding from my feelings.

“I think all that time getting beat up in fight class is about to pay off,” I say when I pull away. “Go help Asher!”

I give him a shove toward his dark-haired friend then leap up onto the nearest crate—a nice tall one—and scramble to the top using my spider climb. Once I’m perched atop it, I pause and take a deep breath.

*Okay. Okay. I can do this.*

Standing up, I launch myself up into the air, praying I’ve gotten high enough.

Dmitri sees me and freezes in place. “Elliot!” he yells, panic in his voice.

One of Raul’s magical blasts hits him and he goes flying, landing out cold on the ground. *Fuck, no!*

My body twists in the air automatically, trying to get a better view of him, and my hand brushes the ceiling.

I grit my teeth, shoving down the panic, and grab hold.

My hand sticks.

“Yes!” Cam yells in triumph. He’s standing in front of Asher, and it looks like he’s taken at least one blast of magic already. His shirt is shredded, revealing his muscled chest and abs, and his skin is glowing slightly. “Go, Sin!”

I bring my other hand and my feet up, sticking them to the ceiling, staring at the world upside-down.

Gingerly, trying to keep myself from getting sick from the perspective reversal, I let go with my hands and stand up.

I’m right above Raul. He definitely noticed my leap up here, but the guys have been keeping him plenty distracted.

It's not going great for our side though. Asher's struggling, and Dmitri is still out. Cam's working to cover both of them, but he can't keep up with Raul's attacks. Roman looks like he could lose his grip on the demon at any second, and the demon itself is rampaging around the room, doing as much damage as good as it tries to get at Raul. Magical items are going off all around us.

My heart seems to slide up my throat, pulled by the same gravity that makes my hair stand up over my head. It's only a matter of time before something horribly dangerous goes off in here and destroys the whole school. I know what I have to do, but what if I kill Raul? What if I hurt one of the others?

I wasn't lying when I told Raul I'm not that kind of person. I'm prickly and sarcastic and emotionally closed off, but I'm not a damn killer. I don't want to hurt anybody.

Cam gets hit with something he can't absorb enough of and I hear him cry out in pain. Raul's using the magical objects around us to his advantage—either he knows what they are and what they can do, or he doesn't care and is just unleashing them all anyway.

*Fuck. Time to woman up, Elliot.* I can't let him hurt the guys. And I can't let him get out of this room with a goddamn weapon of mass destruction like that orb thing, either. God only knows what he's planning to do with it.

And when have I ever backed down from a fight?

*You got this,* I tell myself. I crouch down low, bracing my feet on the ceiling, then push off hard. My hands extend in front of me, aiming at Raul.

Then I pour all the magic I can muster out through my fingertips, releasing a sonic boom.

The blast hits the ground right beside him, and he's thrown through the air. Cam grabs Asher and Roman and teleports them to the far side of the room, keeping them away from the worst of the blast. It looks like it takes the last of his energy, and I see him collapse out of the corner of my eye as the force of the boom knocks me back upward. My body slams into the ceiling, and I scabble for a grip, trying to get my hands or feet to latch on, but I'm too weak, too disoriented.

For a split second, I'm suspended in air, staring down at everyone—Raul, Dmitri, and Cam all out cold on the floor, a small crater in the stone where my sonic boom hit—and then I'm falling.



My stomach flip-flops wildly as air rushes by me. Jumbled thoughts tear through my mind in a flash, there and gone so fast I can barely register them.

*This is how I die?*

*I hope someone will take care of Maddy.*

*Shit. I should've fucking kissed Roman.*

*I should've kissed all of them.*

*No. I'm not ready to die, goddamn it!*

Shoving aside the whirling, confused thoughts, I force myself to concentrate. The floor is rushing up to meet me, and I'm almost out of time, and I'm so fucking terrified...

But I manage to send out one more sonic boom.

It's a baby one—I have to work hard to keep from unleashing too big of a blast—and as it bursts from my hands, the blowback slows my descent just enough.

I land hard on the floor, feeling like I just got rammed by a truck. The demon is gone—banished, I think—and Roman and Asher limp toward me, both looking like they've been through hell.

“Elliot?” Roman calls, and his deep voice soothes me. I'm glad I'm still around to hear it. I should probably tell him that one day.

But right now, I can't quite get my mouth to work. I feel so tired.

My vision blurs as I see Asher run toward me. “Elliot!”

“I'm... okay...” I manage to slur.

Then the world fades to black.

## CHAPTER 28

**I**t takes about a week to clean everything up, all told.

Well, clean everything up to the point where classes can resume again. The storage room is going to need a lot longer to recover, and in the meantime, I've got no idea where the remaining magical artifacts will be kept. A bunch of them were destroyed in the fight, and it's only thanks to luck and a small miracle that nothing as dangerous as the Brimstone Orb was set off, or the whole school could've been taken out.

The Circuit sends a team out to deal with the broken objects and the spells they've unleashed. One classroom has been completely overtaken by a black sludge that stinks of evil and is apparently sentient. There are several curses that need to be broken too, and a bunch of crates were knocked into a precarious jumble that needs to be sorted out without breaking any of them, like a giant game of Jenga.

Roman gets a stern talking-to from the admins for summoning a demon. Apparently, effective or not, summoning creatures from the underworld is frowned upon, especially when it results in structural damage to the building. Classes have all been moved into the common areas of dorms or outside while the construction crew that's brought in does repairs.

Of course, I miss most of the excitement because I spend the week after the fight in the infirmary with the guys.

Roman comes by often to give us updates. He only had to stay in the infirmary for a couple days, but since we're younger and our magic is less trained, the medical staff wanted to keep us students under observation a bit longer in case of weird side effects.

Asher later tells me that I was the one out for the longest.

“You slept the entire first day here,” he says as the four of us impatiently wait to be discharged on our seventh day in the infirmary. I can see his fingers moving, like he’s itching to reach out and hold my hand, but he doesn’t. “We were starting to get worried.”

“That’s what happens when you’re a badass,” I reply, grinning at him. “You gotta take a longer rest afterward.”

“Excuse me?” Dmitri points at himself, where his scrapes and bruises still stand out against his skin. “I was the first one to wake up, Princess.”

“Who are you calling a princess?” I sit up. “I will walk over there and kick your ass—”

A nurse pokes her head in, gives us all a stern look, and then leaves again.

“Sorry!” Asher calls after her, because of course he does, even if he wasn’t the one about to start a fight in the infirmary of all places.

Still, the room takes on a more serious air as silence falls for a moment. We really did get our asses kicked, all five of us, and even though Dmitri’s fine and Cam doesn’t look worse for wear—in fact, we’re all okay—it still took a lot to bring Raul down.

And that’s... that’s terrifying. The idea that just one person could be so powerful? I didn’t realize, until that fight, just how strong a person’s magic could get.

Speaking of Raul...

“Where is he?” I ask.

The guys all know who I mean immediately. Dmitri gives a low growl while Asher looks over at Cam.

The blond-haired mage sighs. “The Circuit arrested him. He’s not dead, although you really did a number on him.”

Something tight and knotted inside my chest starts to loosen. I probably shouldn’t feel bad for Raul. He was trying to get his hands on a magical weapon of mass destruction. But he was so nice to me, and he really didn’t want to hurt me. I’m not excusing his behavior, but I think in his mind, however unbalanced that mind was... we were friends.

And as awful as a person might be, I don’t want to kill anyone. I don’t want to be a murderer.

“Do you know what they’ll do with him?” I question.

Cam shakes his head. “No clue. We did, uh, hear something—or actually, Roman heard it and told us while you were still out.”

He looks over at Asher, who says quietly, “Raul wasn’t working alone.” Something cold slides into the pit of my stomach and settles there. “What?”

“They’ve managed to figure out that he was in contact with someone outside the school, but he has some kind of binding spell on him. It prevents him from telling anyone about who was working with him. Or using him, more likely.”

My nose wrinkles as I recall Raul’s words before the fight broke out. *We need it.* He wasn’t just after the Brimstone Orb for himself. Then I think of what Roman said—that someone must’ve taught Raul how to do the things he was doing, like the spell to keep a necromancer from raising the dead. So Roman was right; Raul did have a teacher. But not just someone who taught him magic and was none the wiser about what he’d do with it. An actual puppeteer, pulling Raul’s strings.

Stupidly, I feel bad for Raul. I meant it when I said I could understand his anger. I know why he considered it a betrayal when I fought against him, when I stood on the side of the “institution”, so to speak. Ever since I found out I was an Unpredictable, I’ve felt it from nearly everyone—the perception that we’re the freaks of the magical world. Hell, Alyssa and her crew have spent months picking on me just to distract themselves from their fear of what the outside world thinks of us.

I don’t know where Raul came from, or what his family’s like, or what his childhood was like, and I feel bad about that. Like I should’ve known. Like maybe my knowing would’ve stopped him from going so far, as if I could’ve talked him down from whatever ledge he was on.

Maybe this whole loner gig isn’t working out for me so well after all. Although how could I have known Raul was willing to hurt people like this? To kill someone?

Since I don’t know, I can only guess. And I’m guessing that Raul was a lot like me. Alone. No family, or a crappy family. He was probably made to feel like shit for his magic, for being a “freak”. And someone, somewhere, saw that anger and loneliness and decided to use it for their own ends.

It’s a goddamn shitty thing to do, but it’s also scary. Because under different circumstances... that might’ve been me.

God knows I would’ve done anything to help Maddy and to provide for her. And for a long time, I felt resentful of the magical world. After our mom died, it felt like nobody cared about us. And the whole “go to this

academy or lose your powers forever” bullshit that Aurora pulled? Yeah, still not over that.

If someone had found me and said the right things, taken advantage of how alone and desperate I was feeling...

A shudder works through me at the thought.

So no, I’m not angry at Raul. I’m sad for him. I really am.



Once everything’s cleaned up and we’re allowed out of the infirmary, the Circuit decides they’re done taking it easy on us, and they want all five of us questioned about the events of that day, right up until the moment Raul was knocked unconscious and the time-freeze spell began to break.

Roman’s far from happy about it. From what I’ve heard, he tried to take the *I’m the professor and I made them listen to me* stance, but nobody bought that for a second.

The interrogation isn’t fun, even though the Circuit reps in charge of it are pretty relaxed. They want to know what happened, of course, but none of them are looking at us like we had a hand in the attacks. They take us into Hardwick’s office and question us all together, and then they question us separately. The officers talking to me both look kind of young, and they also seem exhausted. This case must be keeping them up around the clock.

“Raul was very clear that none of you were involved in his work,” the female officer tells me. “He did have an accomplice, or mentor, but we believe it was someone outside the school.”

I suppose I should be grateful for that, but a twinge of fear hits me at the idea that whoever else was involved in this is still out there somewhere.

“And you know Roman wasn’t involved in any of this, right?” I ask.

“No, he’s been cleared,” her partner replies. “Raul was very forthcoming about murdering that student. He told us he’d tried to recruit Trevor to help him get into the storage room, but the kid turned on him and was going to report him.”

My curiosity gets the best of me. “And where are the artifacts now? Are they still here?” *Could this happen again?*

“That’s not for you to know,” says a familiar voice behind me.

Turning in my seat, I see Aurora standing in the doorway. I sigh. “I’d say it’s nice to see you again, but I think we both know I’d be lying.”

Aurora looks like she wants to pinch the bridge of her nose but is refraining because she doesn’t want me to know I annoy her. “Miss Sinclair. It seems you manage to cause a stir wherever you go.”

I shrug. “Well, I wanted to give you something to do. You know, keep you on your toes. Must get boring just fetching newly magical kids all the time.”

Aurora walks into the small room in the admin building that the Circuit has taken over for their interviews. “Storing the objects here was a clever move, but now that this case is being investigated, too many people know of their existence. We cannot allow the lives of students to be put at risk that way. The government is already working on finding a new place to house them.”

“Great. But what about the school?” I ask, sitting up straighter. My heart thuds hard in my chest. “That was their collateral. As long as the artifacts were here, the Circuit couldn’t shut them down because that’d mean the storage room would be left unprotected.”

Aurora’s gray eyes flash sympathetically. She’s a real pain in my ass, but I don’t think she’s malicious. “I understand your concern. But if there is any good to come out of this, it’s the actions of yourself and your fellow students. You’ve shown that this school is doing well, fulfilling its mission of training those with Unpredictable magic. Your bravery and skill were instrumental in the success of Hardwick’s petition to get the academy up and running again.”

“Glad to know I didn’t get beat up for nothing.” Relief courses through me, and I lean back in my chair, smiling broadly.

Aurora doesn’t look amused. “I hope from now on you’ll be more careful, Miss Sinclair. You’ll be getting a commendation for your bravery, as will your fellow students, but that was still a dangerous risk you took. I hope we won’t be seeing as much of each other in the future.”

“Yeah, yeah, Mom, and I’ll be home by curfew.”

Aurora sighs, looking pained. She runs a hand over her sleek white-blond ponytail as she addresses the two officers. “She’s free to go.” Then she turns back to me. “And on behalf of the Circuit, allow me to offer you our official thanks and commendation.”

“Do I get a medal?”

Aurora points at the door. “Don’t push it, Miss Sinclair.”

Suppressing a grin, I stand up and scamper out the door.

The guys are all gathered outside waiting for me—including Roman.

“Did you hear?” Cam says with a grin. “We’re big damn heroes.”

“Something like that, yeah,” I reply. I look over at Roman. “And I hear you’re off the hook too.”

“Yes. I’m free to go back to my very exciting life of grading essays and creating lesson plans,” he deadpans in his deep voice, a ghost of a smile flitting across his face.

Dmitri snorts in amusement. *Oh, no.* Are they becoming friends? If those two team up against me, they’ll be unstoppable. I’ll never get a moment’s peace.

“So, now what do we do?” Asher asks. “The whole... after the battle, thing.”

Shit. There’s so much. The school needs volunteers to help move furniture and supplies back into the repaired classrooms. And although I did some studying while we were stuck in the infirmary, finals are looming on the horizon, only a week away now.

I’ve got to call Maddy and give her an update.

Plus, I could stand a shower to get the last of that infirmary smell off me.

But before I deal with any of that, I want to hang out with the guys a little longer and pretend we really are the badass team of heroes people say we are.

“Wanna get some food?” I ask, my gaze traveling over the four of them, extending the invitation to them all. “I’m starving.”

## EPILOGUE

**Y**ou'd think saving the day, the school, and dozens of lives would make time slow down a little—but it doesn't. Life goes on as normal, and despite the insanity of the semester and the literal bang it ended with, we still have to finish our classes and take our final exams.

I didn't miss the stress of huge tests when I graduated high school, and I'm sure as hell not any fonder of them now. But I pull through. We all do. I even pass Roman's class with flying colors.

The day after my last final, I'm sprawled out on a blanket in the quad with Cam, Dmitri, and Asher, watching the clouds roll by. It's chilly but not biting, and after all the late night cramming sessions in our dorm room or the library, it feels good to be outside.

"Do you think the professors were extra hard on us to prove we're not their favorites just because we stopped Raul?" Asher asks. "There's no other reason I can think of for Binns to be that diabolical in our Magical Theory final."

"Makes sense to me." I trace the shape of a cloud with my fingertip.

"You're all such glass half empty people." Cam snorts.

"Oh, so you thought the exam was easy?"

"Well, no..."

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out, grinning when I see who the message is from. "Maddy's here!"

My sister is coming to visit me for a few days to see what my school is like before we both head to Neptune Academy for winter break. Her roommate is leaving for the holidays, so we'll have the dorm room all to ourselves. I can't wait to spend some quality time with my little sis and see



where she's been going to school, but I'm also surprisingly excited to show her around my own campus. Somehow, when I wasn't looking, I became fond of this place.

I sit up and watch as the shuttle full of visitors pulls to a stop near the admin building. The doors open, and several people get out—siblings and parents of students here. My hand flies up in greeting when I see a familiar figure emerge.

Maddy runs over as I scramble to my feet, and I open my arms for her to jump into them. I laugh as she squeals, spinning her around a little.

Asher and Cam climb to their feet too and smile at me—Cam with exuberance, Asher with that usual gentle touch—while Dmitri squints up at us like we're a vaguely interesting zoo exhibit.

“Was your trip okay?” I ask, petting Maddy's hair and cupping her face in my hands. “Did you enjoy it? Do you have your bags? How was the drive?”

“I'm fine.” Maddy laughs, stepping out of my grasp and staring around in awe. “It's gorgeous here!”

“Yeah, well, not all of us can go to academies that are right on the ocean with big, rocky beaches and gorgeous views.”

“No, I'm serious, this is great! I want you to take me all over. I can't wait to see everything!”

“Cam knows all the best running trails, he can show us around.”

Maddy's eyebrows rise, and then she turns slightly and looks at the three men.

Cam waves, his charisma and exuberance pouring out in waves like always. “I'm Cam. You must be Mini Sin.”

“Sin?” My little sister's eyebrows have climbed so high they're almost at her hairline.

Ah, crap. I'm going to get so much shit from her for this. “Nickname,” I say quickly. “And this is Asher, and the party pooper over there is Dmitri.”

Dmitri, to my surprise, smiles—actually honest to God smiles—up at Maddy. “Pleasure to meet you. We've heard great things about you.”

I have never been so betrayed in my life.

“I thought he was the asshole?” Maddy asks, shooting me a confused glance.

Okay, *now* I've never been so betrayed in my life. I pinch my lips together. “I hate both of you. All of you. None of you are allowed near me

again.”

Mads just laughs, and Dmitri, the bastard, smirks.

“There you are.”

The deep voice comes from behind me, and my entire body clenches with anxiety.

*Of fucking course.*

Any other time, I’d be pleased to see Roman. We do probably need to discuss our relationship sometime soon, which I’m not exactly looking forward to. If we’re going to have sex again—which seems likely if we ever end up in a room alone together—we need to clear up some expectations.

Truthfully, I really do want *something* with him. I wouldn’t mind continuing to sleep with him, on a casual sort of basis, and I wouldn’t let it make things awkward in class. But I don’t know if Roman can do that. He’s always wanted more between us. And as much as I might care about all of the guys... I don’t know if I’m ready to *be* with any of them. Or anyone.

The thought of it terrifies me. More than facing Raul did, honestly.

Our interpersonal mess aside, hearing Roman’s voice still makes my heart skip. He’s been busy with grading papers and conducting exams, so I haven’t seen much of him other than when I took his final, and I kind of missed him.

But right now, Maddy’s here. And my little sister is no dummy.

She’s perceptive enough to have already noticed the palpable chemistry between me and my three roommates. And if she meets Roman, it’ll only be a matter of time before she figures out something is up between me and him too.

I turn around, and lo and behold, my darkly handsome professor hasn’t disappeared just because I prayed he would.

“Oh, hey, Roman.”

“Elliot. I...” He stops as his gaze lands on Mads. “Sorry, who’s this?”

“I’m Maddy,” she says, holding out her hand for him to shake because she’s a little shit. “I’m Elliot’s sister. I go to Neptune Academy.”

“Ah, for those with water elemental magic.” Roman shakes her hand, his large grip engulfing her smaller one. “How are you enjoying it?”

“It’s great. Hard work, but I’m having a lot of fun.”

“Glad to hear it. I’m friends with a few of the professors there. Do you know...”

Goddamn it, he's charming her. I really do not need this. I look over at the other men, and all three of them, even Asher, have these absolutely smug grins on their faces that clearly state *we're going to win your sister over whether you like it or not.*

I'm surrounded by traitors.

"That would be great!" Maddy says as I tune back into their conversation. She looks at me. "I'm starved, can we?"

"Can we what?" I ask, feeling a little dazed.

"I offered to take you all to lunch," Roman repeats.

"We'd love that," Cam agrees quickly before I can say anything. He seems thrilled at the idea of all six of us hanging out together. As if he knows the fastest route to my heart is to win over my sister... which is totally fucking true.

*Oh, man, I'm gonna put a dead fish in his backpack.*

Just as I have that thought, something... weird happens. It's not full-on magic, not quite. It's not like I'm unleashing a sonic boom. But something ripples through me, and I can feel the magic in me churning, coming alive in a new way.

Worry clenches my stomach. *Well, shit. That's not normal.*

Asher, ever observant, frowns slightly. "You okay, Elle?"

"Great," I reply, forcing a smile. *What the hell was that?*

Whatever it was, it's gone now. I blink, shaking off the strange feeling.

"Just realizing how hungry I am." Patting my stomach, I give up my battle against all of us going to lunch. The guys aren't going to give up, and neither is my little sis. And maybe a tiny part of me wants her to get to know them a little—wants to make sure she approves. "Let's get something to eat."

Maddy grins at me and takes my hand, and I squeeze it gently. Whatever the hell that weird feeling was, I shove it into the back of my mind to deal with later.

Right now, I'm with my sister, and she's what matters.

Dmitri climbs to his feet and joins us, quietly quizzing Roman on something to do with the final exam. Those two are bonding over their shared crankiness, it seems. Cam's cracking jokes, making Mads and Asher laugh, and Asher himself is quietly at my side, a silent support. He can probably guess, even without his powers, how nervous I'm feeling right now. My two worlds are colliding for the first time.

Maddy leans into me, whispering so that only I can hear her. “I like them. All four of them.”

She’s got a mischievous gleam in her eye, and I scrunch up my nose at her. “None of that,” I warn quietly. “We’re just friends.”

“Whatever you say, Ellie.”

I pinch my lips together to contain my grin as a swarm of butterflies flap around in my stomach.

Cam was right. I’ve always been more of a glass half empty kind of person. But with my sister’s hand in mine and these four gorgeous, amazing men around me, relaxed and enjoying themselves, the afternoon sun bathing us...

For just this one moment, it feels like my glass is overflowing.



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