



AN ACADEMY OF
UNPREDICTABLE MAGIC

THIEF

SADIE MOSS

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Academy of Unpredictable Magic #3

SADIE MOSS

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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](#)

[Also by Sadie Moss](#)

CHAPTER 1

Cam

I plop down in a chair beside my favorite girl and shoot her a look. “Hey, Sin, love what you’ve done with your hair today.”

She hasn’t done anything new with her hair at all, but that’s the point of the joke. And yeah, I know it’s lame, but I’ve gone through most of my best material already.

“I talked to Asher this morning,” I tell her. “He’s coming back today—should be meeting up with Roman and Dmitri soon, actually. Oh, and he said not to do anything crazy while he’s gone. So, you know, try to control yourself.”

Asher’s gone home a few times over the summer to visit his family. He’s the youngest of thirteen kids, all guys—no, I’m not kidding, it’s insane—and his oldest brothers are married and have kids now, and he wanted to go see them.

I can’t blame him. I’ve been tight friends with Asher for a while now, and his family’s always been good to me. They know I don’t have any siblings or parents of my own—mine died when I was sixteen—and they’ve always made it clear they’ve got room for a fourteenth son. Real good people. And one hundred percent okay with Ash being an Unpredictable, which you don’t see too often.

Maybe it’s ’cause he’s one of thirteen—with that many offspring, his folks feel like they can afford to have one crazy kid. But honestly, I don’t think that’s it. I think it’s just that they love the hell out of Asher and would support him no matter what. Regular magic, Unpredictable magic, *no* magic

—it wouldn't matter to them, because it's *him* they love, not his powers. My parents were the same way, and I like to think if they'd still been around when my magic sparked, they would've supported me like that too.

I'll never know now, but it's those kinds of thoughts that keep the hole in my heart from hurting too bad some days.

Ah fuck. Got off topic.

Shaking off the melancholy that's creeping over me, I refocus on Elliot. I'm supposed to be entertaining her, after all, not wallowing in my own shit—keeping things positive and upbeat.

“‘Don't do anything crazy,’ he says... I don't know what he's talking about.” I shoot her a lopsided grin. “It's not like we nearly burned the house down with that enchanted pasta maker Dmitri got or anything. Don't think I don't know that wasn't all your fault, by the way.”

The house we're staying at is Roman's. It's massive, with enough guest rooms for all of us to have our own with plenty of space left over. I can't quite figure out how he ended up with such a huge house, or why he needs it, since he's at Griffin Academy nine months out of the year anyway. But it somehow fits his personality perfectly.

And I don't mean that as a dig. I like the guy a lot; he's a great dude. Intimidating as fuck though, seeing as how he's my professor, and y'know—he's *Roman*. I didn't even know if Roman was his first or last name for a long time—turns out it's his first—because he's kind of one of those people you only expect to have one name. Add in that he's tall, jacked, and has this dark, stoic thing going on, and it makes you feel like you're a kid all over again. Which is unfair, if you ask me, since he's only four years older than I am.

“Here's the thing with Roman I don't get, Sin,” I continue, “and you can disagree with me if you want—but why all the secrecy? I mean, here we are in this big house out in the countryside, and I have no info about it. He tells us he got it through family money, but where's his family?”

I shoot a glance toward the door, pursing my lips.

“Not that I'm planning to push him about it, you know that. After what happened to my parents... I'm not gonna pry. I didn't want anyone's pity or questions, and I know you wouldn't either, with your mom and all that. I'm just... curious. I know there's a lot going on with him that he hasn't told us.”

My gaze moves back to Elliot as I cock an eyebrow.

“I know you’re curious too, even if you won’t admit it. You know him better than we do, but... I get the feeling he keeps a lot of shit close to his chest. Just like you, actually.”

I take her hand and squeeze it so she knows I’m just teasing, no hard feelings.

As curious as I am about how Roman ended up with this place, I can’t deny it’s really fucking lucky he has it. There’s nowhere else we could’ve gone that’d be big enough for all of us—Dmitri, Roman, Asher, myself, Elliot, and Maddy. And it’s in Oregon, just outside Portland and only a few hours from school, so we can get back for the semester quickly when the time comes.

Yeah, we had to bring Maddy here too. She had nowhere else to go. Not when her sister...

Well.

My gaze shifts back down to Elliot’s sleeping form. Her gorgeous brunette hair spills over her shoulders in soft waves, and the brown eyes that always make me think of melted chocolate are hidden behind her lids.

She doesn’t move, doesn’t speak, doesn’t show any sign at all that she’s heard me.

Same as it’s been all summer.

My smile fades from my face. I’ve tried to keep things light and cheerful—joking around with her and teasing her just like I’d do if she was awake. I figure maybe she can hear us somehow, in spite of her coma. She has to, right?

Fuck. It’s hard not to lose hope.

Dmitri’s been skulking around the house, acting way moodier than usual—which is saying something. We’ve all been trying literally everything and anything we can think of in case it wakes her up. We’ve had the best healers brought in, thanks to Roman’s money and connections. They’ve given us various potions and enchanted objects to try, but none of it’s fucking worked.

Maddy’s busted up as hell about it. I can’t blame the poor kid. Asher’s gentle with her, and I try to cheer her up as much as I can. We’ve driven into town a few times to go to the movies and get ice cream, that kind of thing—just to get out of the house for a little while.

She’s a real good kid, which I know has a lot to do with Elliot, who basically raised her after their mom died. And she’s only five years younger

than I am, so I guess I shouldn't call her a kid, but she still seems young. I remember when I was nineteen; I thought I was so mature. *Ha. Now I know better.*

I squeeze Elliot's hand again. "You gotta come back, Sin," I whisper, kissing her knuckles. "Come back to us. Maddy needs you. *We need you.*"

My heart feels like it's had a pile of bricks sitting on it all summer. Damn it, I knew I cared about her. How could I not? But now that she's stuck like this—in okay health physically, or so the healers tell us, but not waking up—I get more nervous every day, and I'm realizing just how *much* I fucking care.

Several pairs of footsteps sound in the hallway. A moment later, Dmitri pushes the door open and comes in, Roman and Asher behind him.

"How is she?" Asher asks. He hasn't seen her in a few days, and I can hear the urgency in his voice.

I shrug, keeping my hold on her hand. Her skin is soft and warm, and sometimes I need to touch her just to remind myself she's still alive. "Same as when you left."

"We got the potion," Roman says, pulling a glass vial from his pocket.

"Well, thank fuck." My lips tilt up, and for the first time all day, the grin sticks. "Who'd you have to sell your soul to for that?"

"I just promised them Dmitri." Roman jerks his chin at the dark-haired mage beside him, a slight smirk on his face.

Dmitri rolls his eyes. "Don't be jealous, honey," he mocks. "Just because I flirted with her a little—"

"Is it the real deal?" I interrupt. Normally, I'm all for banter, but...

Bricks.

Heart.

Roman nods. "If it isn't, I'm going to make some people's lives very unpleasant."

Dmitri flashes a feral kind of smile, as if to say *I'll help.*

This potion we've been trying to hunt down is super hard to make, so finding someone who can do it for us has been hard. It's an extra-strong potion for breaking curses, and we're pretty damn sure that's what we need for Elliot. Her body's healed all right, although she took a scary as hell beating from that fuckwad, Johnson. But she's stayed unconscious for weeks now—which the healers tell us indicates magical interference.

I'm just glad we got it. It's been tearing me up inside to watch her like this; every day it hurts a little worse. I haven't known Elliot all that long, but she's become one of my favorite people in the world, and I just want her back.

At least the other guys are back. That's something. The room doesn't seem so awfully fucking empty anymore. I'm not the kind of person who likes quiet; I'm outgoing, and I like having people around me. I had more than enough quiet after my parents died, when I was all on my own. I hated that time, and I don't ever want to go back to it.

"So, how's it all work? What do we do?" I ask, giving Sin's hand one more squeeze before standing up.

"We give it to her, wait a few days, and see what happens," Roman says. He's got a grim look on his face as he gazes down at her. Then again, Roman always looks grim, like he stepped out of a mafia film, with his slightly hooked nose and his looming figure.

"What if nothing happens?" Dmitri growls. He's asking the question we're all thinking, but I fucking hate that he says it out loud.

"Then we'll find something else."

Roman's answer is simple, but it's all that needs to be said.

We'll keep trying for as long as it takes.

Asher and I help prop Elliot up on the pillows and open her mouth. Thanks to a few other potions Roman was able to get his hands on earlier this summer, she hasn't had to have a feeding tube or anything put in. She's resting in a sort of stasis, so if it weren't for the pallor of her skin and the unnatural slackness of her face, she'd look like she just popped down for a quick nap.

Roman guides her into swallowing the potion while Dmitri watches us with folded arms, his jaw clenching hard.

The liquid goes down her throat, and then... that's it.

Nothing to do but more damn waiting.

CHAPTER 2

Dmitri

Moonlight stretches across the floor of the large room, and I stare at it unblinkingly.

Fuck.

This is bullshit.

I can't sleep. Can't stop thinking about the asshole that did this to Elliot. We've been holding on all summer. Waiting for some kind of fucking miracle.

Scrubbing a hand through my hair, I throw the blanket off and pad toward the door. I can't lie still anymore. I need to fucking move.

The hallway on the second floor is wide, with high ceilings and gleaming hardwood. It reminds me of my parents' house in Fairfield—except home always feels claustrophobic as fuck, and this place doesn't. In this house, I can breathe properly.

My parents wanted me to come back for the summer. *You have to get ready*, they said. *You have your duties. You have plans. You have a future.*

But it's not the life I want. It's *their* plan; a future they laid out the moment I was born.

Besides, there's no fucking way I'm leaving this house until the princess wakes up.

If she wakes up. It's been two days since we gave her the potion, and nothing's changed.

And I can't fucking sleep.

I head down the stairs and tiptoe into the kitchen. It's a big house, so I'm not worried about waking anyone up. But we've all been working around the clock to get Elliot back. If the others can get some shut-eye, I'm happy to let them.

Leaving the light off, I open a few cupboards before deciding that what I really need is a damn drink. I find a bottle of whiskey in the liquor cabinet and uncap it.

A few swigs help, stinging down my throat.

Motherfucking goddamn it. It should've been me in those Trials. Not Elliot.

I took it easy in that fight between us in the battle royale. I didn't *let* her win, but... I could've fought harder.

She's a powerful magic user and a fucking badass fighter. She's the one person I didn't mind losing to, and I had no doubt she'd do well in the Trials. But I had no idea some fuckstick would try to sabotage the whole thing. If I had, I would've stepped up and taken that hit, no questions asked. Elliot didn't deserve to be in danger.

And now she's hurt. And it's my fucking fault.

The alcohol's good but not enough. I put it back and go looking for something sweet.

Yeah, I've got a sweet tooth.

Tell anyone and I'll kill you.

I open the fridge, casting a pale light over the kitchen as I peer inside.

"Hey."

"Jesus fuck!" Slamming the fridge door closed, I wheel around.

Maddy stands in the darkened doorway, fiddling with the hem of her pajamas. They've got little black and white things on them—panda bears, I think. I dunno, I haven't looked that close.

"Sorry," she whispers, taking a quick step back. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's... fine." I try to look a little less like I'm about to rip her head off. "Couldn't sleep?"

She shakes her head, brown hair tumbling over her shoulders.

"Yeah," I grunt. "Me neither."

"I didn't want to wake anybody else up." She steps into the kitchen and pads over to take a seat at the marble-topped island while I open the fridge again.

“You want something to eat?” I toss her a look over my shoulder as I open the fridge again.

“Yeah. Thanks.” She nods eagerly, sitting sideways on the barstool and draping an arm over the back of it.

Elliot’s little sister is a good kid. Sweet. She looks a lot like Elliot—except her eyes are blue, not brown—but their personalities are wildly different. Maddy’s more of a rule follower. She’s polite, bubbly, and likes talking to people. She and Cam get along the best—no surprises there.

Elliot’s not a people person at all. She’s sarcastic. Grumpy. Stubborn as shit.

My kinda fuckin’ girl.

“Uh, what do you want?” I ask Maddy.

“Is there any ice cream left in the freezer?”

...well. Since she wants some too.

I pull out the Moose Tracks and grab two spoons. We eat it right out of the carton at the kitchen island. The room is dim again, illuminated only by the moonlight streaming through the windows, and I’m okay with just eating in silence in the dark. Nothing wrong with that.

But after a few minutes, Maddy speaks.

“Do you like Elliot?”

A dull ache throbs in my chest, but I just dig the spoon into the ice cream again, lifting my shoulders in an evasive shrug. “Yeah. Sure I do.”

She drops her chin, cocking a brow as she narrows her eyes at me.

Okay, I’ve seen that look on Elliot’s face dozens of times.

She looks so similar to her sister in this moment that I have to force myself to swallow down the bite of ice cream I just took. It barely makes it past the fucking lump in my throat, and I look away, rubbing the back of my neck with one hand.

“You know what I mean, Dmitri,” she insists.

“Do I?”

“It’s okay.” Her voice is soft, and when I glance her way, she smiles gently at me. Elliot’s all thorny edges, but Maddy’s softer. It makes me feel protective—like I need to watch out for her while her sister can’t. “If you do like her, it’s okay. I’ve seen how you look at her.”

“Yeah, well. Looks can be deceiving.”

“I know.” She rests her spoon in the ice cream tub, watching me closely. “But I don’t think I’m wrong about this. Am I?”

She seems so earnest, like she really cares. About her sister. About me. About *us*, together.

Damn it.

I clear my throat, shifting uncomfortably in my seat. “Look, would I be here? All summer? If I didn’t... care?”

That answer is about as vague as I can make it, but the hitch in my voice on the last word gives away more than I meant to.

Maddy’s eyes soften, and she looks at me for a long while before speaking. “I thought so. I’m glad. And it’s not such a bad thing, you know. Needing someone.” Her brows crease, and pain flashes in her eyes. “I know it can be scary. After we lost Mom, it was easy to think I shouldn’t ever care about anyone again, that it would just be too hard to risk losing anyone else. And I’m so scared for Elliot right now... I hate it. It’s awful. But we can’t just close ourselves off. That’s no way to live, even if it feels like it keeps us safe. And the joy that can come with caring about someone—I think it’s worth it. Don’t you?”

I look back down at the remains of the ice cream. Damn, Elliot’s little sister is pretty fucking insightful. Maybe she’s right. I...

Jesus, I don’t know.

Where’s that fucking whiskey?

She must be able to see the sudden tension in my shoulders, because Maddy lets it drop. She takes one more bite of ice cream and slips off the stool. Then she pats my arm a little awkwardly. “Thanks for talking. I hope you can get some sleep. Nights are the worst, aren’t they?”

“Yeah.” I let out a breath. “They really fucking are. You too, kid. Get some rest if you can.”

She gives me a small smile and then heads out of the room, disappearing into the darkness. I clean everything up and take another swig of whiskey, thinking maybe that’ll help knock me out, but I’m still too damn wired to go back to my room just yet.

Instead, my feet take me to Elliot’s room.

She looks peaceful and calm as she lies on the mattress. And even though she’s fucking beautiful, I’ve come to hate the way she looks while she sleeps, just because it means she still hasn’t woken up.

She’s still not okay.

We don’t have any idea who did this to her. There were so many charms and enchanted objects being activated during the chaos that day, we weren’t

able to track down where the spell that hit her originated.

Maybe it's just as well we don't know, because if I ever find out who did this to her—I'm gonna wring the fucker's neck.

I sink into the chair next to her and take her hand. Nobody's around to see, so what's the harm, right?

It's not such a bad thing. Needing someone.

My jaw clenches as I remember Maddy's words. *Yeah, kid, but you don't know my family. They'd devour Elliot alive.*

I just mean to stay with the princess for a minute. Just long enough to make the crushing ache in my chest ease a little. But between one blink and the next—I'm asleep.

Fuck's sake.



When I wake up, it's light out. The sunlight creeping in through the windows still has the gray tinge of dawn to it though, so it must be pretty early. The others will be up soon, but I think I'm the first one awake.

Goddamn. I sit up and stretch. I've got a bad crick in my neck from sleeping in the chair all night like an idiot.

Elliot's hand fell from mine during the night. I pick it up and squeeze it gently. She's still asleep, just like she has been for weeks, and fear grips me at the realization that the latest potion we tracked down isn't working.

I kiss each of her knuckles softly. I can't help myself. And nobody's around to see me. Nobody has to know I let myself do it, or that my hand shakes a little as I bring hers to my lips.

Fuck, I don't know how much more of this I can take. Why won't she just open her goddamn eyes?

"I'd give just about anything for you to wake up, Princess," I mumble. Then I snort softly. "Think a kiss on the lips would do it? Like in a fairy tale?"

No response. Of course.

"Yeah, you're right. I'd probably have to be a damn prince for it to do any good, and I think we both know that shoe doesn't fit." My jaw clenches, and I swallow hard. "But you'd better fucking believe I'd do it in

a second if I thought it would help. I'd do just about any damn thing to bring you back."

I kiss her knuckles again, looking down at our joined hands. Her fingers look so small and delicate next to mine, and it makes something inside me hurt like hell. I should've done more to protect her. I'm not sure I'll ever forgive myself for letting this happen.

"Your sister says it's not so bad to need someone, " I whisper hoarsely. "But it scares the shit out of me to think that... I need you."

A sharp intake of breath meets my ears.

I freeze.

My heart seizes in my chest as hope, elation, and shock flood through me in a rush.

When I look up, Elliot's brown gaze meets mine.

CHAPTER 3

Elliot

My eyelids peel open slowly. It feels like they're glued together, like they've been stuck that way for far too long. The room around me is too... too *bright*. I squint, blink, and squint some more as the world slowly comes into focus.

I'm lying in a soft bed, in a room I don't recognize, and sitting next to me, holding my hand... is Dmitri.

I gotta admit, out of all the people I might expect to find watching me sleep while tenderly holding my hand, the dark-haired mage sits squarely at the bottom of the list. Maddy and Asher would tie for first, then Cam, and then maybe Roman if nobody else was around to see us, since we're still professor and student and are keeping our relationship on the down-low.

But... Dmitri?

Huh. Maybe I woke up in a parallel universe.

But no, this is real. Dmitri—and it has to be the real one, not even one of his doubles or anything—looks like he's close to crying with relief. His eyes shine wetly, and his thumb is rubbing soft circles over my knuckles. And he hasn't blinked or looked away from me for even a second since my eyes first opened.

Something hangs in the air, and I don't know what to say. He's staring at me like he can't believe I'm actually awake, and I want to ask how long I've been out. My memory's kind of fuzzy, but the last thing I remember is blasting that bigoted asshole Johnson off the stage with my sonic boom.

Then his shielding spell came down, and something else hit me, and it hurt so much that the pain dragged me under.

I want to ask what happened after that, what's been happening since then. But my mouth won't form the words.

My brain can't seem to process anything except Dmitri. His handsome, angular features. His dark, dark eyes, more full of emotion than I've ever seen them before. The look on his face, beautiful and heartbreaking all at once.

My hand tightens reflexively, my fingers curling around his, and he grips mine back so hard it's almost painful—a good kind of pain.

His throat works as he swallows, and the tears glistening in his eyes spill over, cutting twin tracks down his cheeks.

I blink, my heart beating harder in my chest. I've never seen this man cry, and I never, ever expected to see him do it over me.

“Dmitri,” I whisper, and the sound of my voice saying his name seems to physically affect him in some way. His whole body tenses, and his breath stops.

Then he leans down and kisses me.

His lips meet mine, a little wet from his tears, and even though it's a chaste, closed-lip kiss, I feel it through every inch of my body. I'm still dazed, my brain still fuzzy around the edges, but I know I'll never forget anything about this kiss.

I draw in a breath through my nose, relishing the sweet honey and clove scent that's all Dmitri. My lips tremble a little as I press them against his, and when he finally draws back, my head lifts off the pillow, reaching for him, trying to maintain the connection between us.

He's breathing hard as he looks down at me, and he tugs his full bottom lip between his teeth like he can still taste me on it.

“Princess...” he rasps. “I—”

Footsteps and voices sound outside, and we both jump. Dmitri quickly pulls away, setting my hand down and standing up, swiping the back of his forearm across his cheeks just as the others come in.

Cam, Asher, and Roman.

For a moment, the three of them stare; they clearly weren't expecting me to actually be awake. Then Cam and Asher streak toward me, and Dmitri has to jump out of the way as Cam throws himself on the bed next to me and plants a huge kiss on my cheek.

I chuckle, letting Asher help me sit up, and then he's softly kissing my forehead, and Cam's demanding to know when this happened, and Asher's kissing my other cheek, and they're clearly doing it all to make me laugh. Roman rolls his eyes and tells them not to damage me, but his lips tilt up as he speaks.

When Cam and Asher move out of the way, Roman takes my chin in his hand, tilting my face up, his cobalt eyes flashing with concern.

God, I missed him. I missed all of them. How long have I been out of it?

"Are you okay?" he asks me in that gravelly voice of his.

I nod. I feel perfectly fine. Groggy, like I just woke up from a nice long nap, but nothing hurts or aches. The only reason I think anything might be wrong is how everyone else is behaving.

Roman gives a small sigh, like he's exhausted and relieved all at once, and then he leans in and kisses me softly on the lips.

That knocks me for six.

I mean—okay, we've all talked in one capacity or another about the idea of the four of them sharing me. Cam and Asher were upfront about that from the start, and Roman told me he'd be open to it a semester into our sleeping together. Dmitri hasn't said it in so many words—but then again, he also hasn't even said he likes me, although I know he's attracted to me. But he was there for the sharing conversation with Asher and Cam, even if he was being all broody in the corner at the time.

Dmitri and Roman cornered me in Roman's classroom that one time during the Trials, which was—holy God, still *is*—one of the hottest things I've ever experienced. And Cam, Asher, and I got to third base in an empty classroom together during the Inter-academy Ball, but this... this feels different. The three of them just kissed me in quick succession, in front of each other, and it was casual, easy, with no explanations needed or given.

Could this thing between us all actually work? Could we really do this?

"Ellie!"

My heart jumps. I know who that is—only one person in the world calls me Ellie. I turn and see Maddy bound through the doorway, grinning, her blue eyes sparkling.

"Hey, Mads." I open my arms for her, and Roman moves to clear the way as she launches herself at me.

I hug her tightly. Maddy clings to me a little, and for a second, it's like she's fourteen all over again and I'm eighteen, and Mom's just died, leaving

us with only each other to depend on.

“Did I scare you?” I whisper. “I’m sorry, Mads. I’m so sorry.”

I promised my sister I’d always be there for her. Dad might’ve skipped out on us, and Mom might’ve died too soon, but I’m not *ever* going to do either. That’s what I promised her, and now I’ve gotten myself into danger and scared her. Almost broken my promise, maybe.

“It’s okay.” She pulls back, beaming down at me. I can still see the fear behind her eyes, but it’s eclipsed by so much joy at the moment that her smile almost blinds me. “You’re back now.”

“How long was I out?”

There’s a long beat of silence as everyone exchanges glances, and the nervous feeling in my chest expands, making my heart beat faster.

“It’s August,” Roman says at last.

My stomach flips. *What?*

“We moved you here,” Cam explains, still sitting on the bed next to me, like he can’t stand to move too far away. “To Roman’s house. We couldn’t keep you on campus while it was pretty much closed down for the summer, so we’ve all been here.”

“All summer?”

“I went home to visit my family a few times.” Asher grimaces almost sheepishly.

“Good! I... That’s good. I’m glad you did.” Asher’s close with his family; I don’t want him missing out on seeing them because of me.

Holy crap, have I really been out for almost three months? What kind of damn spell hit me?

I rub my eyes, trying to process all the new information I’ve just received. “So... you five were here all summer. All of you. Hanging out together. And I was asleep?”

Everyone nods.

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

I had four hot guys who are apparently all getting along and willing to bang me, *and* my baby sister all here for an entire summer and I *slept?* Through *all of it?*

Somewhere in the universe, someone is laughing at me.

And that someone is a dickhead.

“You must be starving,” Asher says. He’s always good at sensing and diffusing my bad moods, even when his magic dampening cuff is on and he

can't read my mind. "Let's get you something to eat."

"Yes, please." Some of my incensed anger fades at the mention of food, and I sit up more, pushing the covers off. "If I've really been lying here all summer, I don't want to spend another second in this damn bed."

The guys all hover anxiously around me as I find my feet, but when it becomes clear I'm not about to keel over, they let me walk to the bathroom without an escort. *Thank goodness.* This whole thing is weird enough as it is, and I appreciate that they're trying to give me a little bit of normalcy.

I take a quick shower and change into some clothes—Maddy brought all my stuff from school—then head downstairs to find that one of the guys went a little overboard with cooking breakfast. The kitchen island is laden down with pancakes, bacon, scrambled eggs, the works.

"I'm not going to be able to eat all of this," I warn, although I fully intend to try.

"I'm finally cooking for someone who will appreciate it," Roman replies, giving me a look that makes my insides melt. *Huh. I did not take him for the cooking type.* "Unlike these four."

There's some good-natured teasing as the others all assure him they love his cooking, and I stare around the kitchen in shock as they load up their plates. Since I'm not moving, Cam fixes one for me, piling it high with some of everything.

"Do you remember anything?" Dmitri asks gruffly, glancing up at me from beneath his eyelashes as he stabs a pancake with a fork, transferring it to his plate.

I have no idea what to do about him. No idea what that moment between us meant, what that *kiss* meant, or how to talk about it and get it back. He seems to be off-kilter, and I'm not used to that from Dmitri. He always keeps his emotions locked down pretty tight.

"Um, yeah." I nod, trailing after them into the dining room. Cam sets down my plate at a spot between him and Asher, and I tuck into the food with gusto, covering my mouth with my hand as I blatantly talk around a huge bite. "Provost Johnson decided to go full psycho and try to kill me. I defended myself, knocked him on his ass like the little cock he is, and then something hit me and I blacked out. Now I'm here."

"Do you remember before that?"

"The whole Trials thing and getting sabotaged? Hoo, yeah. Did any of you thank Kendal for her help, by the way?"

She may be part of a group of nasty girls who like to give me a hard time, but she's actually not too bad herself. I think it's peer pressure that keeps her with them. In any case, she helped the guys keep the sabotaging mages at bay so I could compete in the final challenge of the Trials fair and square. I owe her.

"No gaps in your memory, then. We did wonder about that," Roman murmurs, his shoulders relaxing a little. It hasn't escaped my notice that all four of the guys, and Maddy too, keep shooting me worried glances as I eat.

"Do you have any clue what caused all of this?" I ask, glancing around the table.

Roman shakes his head. Dmitri looks pissed as shit, while Cam and Maddy seem worried. Asher looks pensive and a little sad.

"We don't know what made you fall asleep for so long," Cam tells me, squeezing my leg under the table. "Spells were flying around like crazy that day. But we got the bastards who started this shit, so that's what matters."

"The Trials were being live-streamed," Maddy says. "We saw the whole thing in my dorm. I watched your final challenge and everything, and Johnson going nuts at the award ceremony. And then the fight that broke out—all of it was on the live-stream. The whole magical world saw you be a badass."

She sounds really proud of me, and I grin, feeling my face heat up. I want my sister to be proud of me—that means more to me than almost anything else in the world.

"The Circuit's been looking into things," Roman says. He's watching me eat as if to make sure I don't leave a single bite of food on my plate. Not that I would. It's fucking delicious. "Johnson's... not the only one of his kind."

That stops me. I set down my fork for a second, glancing around the table. "What?"

"There's this whole movement starting up," Asher explains with a grimace. "The Circuit's intercepted propaganda and messages meant to radicalize people, to turn them against Unpredictables."

"It's clever," Roman acknowledges, although it sounds like it physically pains him to admit it. "Whoever this is behind it, a person or a group, they know what they're doing."

"Lucky for us, most of the magical community isn't completely nuts," Cam throws in. "Not yet, anyway. Most people are taking our side."

“People are uncomfortable around Unpredictables.” Dmitri’s voice is quiet and taut, and he stares down at his plate. “But they don’t all want us to be treated like animals. A little casual prejudice is fine though, right?”

There’s a world of pain in his voice, and I want to reach out and help him, comfort him somehow, but I don’t know how—and I’m not sure he’d welcome it.

“So... do they know who’s behind all of this?” I ask instead.

All five shake their heads. “No clue,” Asher says. “And that’s what has the Circuit worried.”

Well, great.

At least I’m feeling like myself, which is good. Weaker than I’d like to be, but I guess that’s what happens when you spend three whole months in a magical coma.

I go back for seconds of everything, and as we finish breakfast, the conversation moves on to other topics. I mention that I’ll have to work hard to get back into shape for classes, and the guys all seem eager to help me exercise and eat properly—anything they can do to assist in my recovery.

Three. Months.

I’m slowly wrapping my head around that, getting over the shock I felt when they first told me. And it’s no wonder they all keep shooting me worried glances. I wasn’t really aware of time passing, but they’ve spent weeks waiting for me to wake up.

But if there’s one benefit to this bullshit... it’s getting to see how they all behave around each other. The guys are kind and loving to Maddy, treating her like a little sister. Even Dmitri is sweet and gentle with her. Cam and Asher tease her and joke with her, and Roman’s been teaching her some magical theory stuff so she’ll have a leg up going into her second year.

Everyone’s become really close. The slight gap I felt between Roman and the other three has disappeared, and they’re all getting along.

It’s amazing, although it makes me even more pissed at whatever fuckface threw the spell that knocked me out. As cool as it is to see the way things have shifted between them all, I feel a bit left out, honestly. They got three months of bonding, and I got... Sleeping Beauty Syndrome.

And there’s another thing too, something that’s been stuck in my mind ever since Roman kissed me in front of the others.

If the guys are all on board with this sharing thing, if they're all getting along and liking each other... taking this in stride...

Then there's really no excuse for me to keep being a damn coward, is there?

It might be time to grow a pair and admit what I feel for each of them.
Admit how *much* I feel for them.

CHAPTER 4

Thanks to that fantastic spell I was hit with, I woke up with only a week left before school starts. Which is, in my humble opinion, a complete load of bullshit. I missed out on summer vacation and on all the guys and my sister bonding—and now I have less than a week before my return to the school where I’ve become notorious for several reasons?

Super duper.

At least I’m pretty sure whoever knocked me out with that spell didn’t actually mean to hit *me*. I was just a casualty of the general chaos and confusion caused by Johnson’s attack. But honestly, that knowledge only helps a little.

I get in as much time with Maddy as I can before she has to go back to her own school, Neptune Academy. Mads is an elemental mage who can control water, and she’s going into her second year of training just like I am. Cam, Asher, and Dmitri are good about giving the two of us some one-on-one sister time, which I appreciate. Roman is too, but that’s partly because duty calls—he has to leave early to set up for the semester anyway, since he’s a professor.

He pulls me aside the night that he leaves. I’m not sure what he’s going to say or do, and I’m a bit nervous as we walk into the master bedroom, the one he’s been using this summer. We haven’t really gotten much alone time since I woke up a few days ago, and I forgot how overwhelming his presence can be, how powerful the pull I feel toward him is.

Roman’s bags are sitting by the bedroom door, packed and ready to go. He’s only got two small suitcases, probably just clothes and a few books. I’m tempted all over again to ask him about his past, about why he has this

huge family home that's beautifully furnished but somehow still seems a little empty—about why he can pack his entire life so easily into two little bags—but now doesn't seem to be the right time.

Besides, I've been the one who's been gun-shy about our relationship getting more serious. He probably would've told me a lot more about himself by now if I hadn't been pushing him away this whole time. That's something I need to fix, and after everything that happened this summer, even if I wasn't awake for most of it, I really want to.

He's told me straight out that he wants to be with me, wants a real relationship with me, and that he's willing to share me with the others... but maybe even more importantly, he's *shown* me the truth of his words over and over. Roman has never given me a reason to distrust him.

So maybe it's time I give him the trust he deserves.

"See you at school, prof. I'll make sure to sharpen all my pen—" I start to say, because my instinct is to make jokes when I'm nervous, but Roman grabs me and hauls me to him, kissing me, and I just about forget my own name.

Roman's not exactly a man of many words, but holy *fuck*, can he kiss.

I wrap my arms around his neck, kissing him back, pressing myself up against him as his large hands flex around my waist, his mouth pouring fire into mine. It spreads through my whole body, lighting up my nerve endings and igniting the craving for him that never seems to be satisfied no matter how often I try to quench it.

My hands thread through his hair, and my clit throbs in time to my heartbeat as he pulls me closer, grinding our hips together. I was unconscious for most of the summer, unaware of time passing—but it's like my body knows how long it's been since we last did this and is trying to make up for lost time.

When he finally breaks the kiss, I'm gasping.

"Sorry," he murmurs roughly, pulling back an inch or two as I drag in a shaky breath. *Damn. I can't feel my legs.* "Just wanted to do that one last time before the semester started."

My arms tighten around his neck. "Are we going to be..."

"We'll be fine." His hands worked their way under my shirt while we were kissing, and now his thumbs rub soothing circles into my skin. "We're not breaking any rules. There's nothing in school policy that says we can't date, although... it is frowned up. But we're all of age, and I can prove in

your transcript that I'm not giving you better grades or special treatment because of our relationship."

I snort. "Yeah, that's for damn sure."

A smile quirks his lips, and his cobalt eyes shine with possessiveness and humor. He kisses me again, hard and dirty, and I shudder. Fuck, I'm going to miss being able to touch him however and whenever I want, to flirt with him as much as I want.

We break apart slower this time, more reluctantly, as if neither of us wants to let go of the other.

"But listen, if anything does come out," Roman adds, resting his forehead against mine, "I'll take responsibility."

I gently stroke my fingers through the soft, dark hair at the back of his neck. "Hey, it's not like you tricked me into this."

"I know. But you've already been through enough, and I can take a little heat. If this does get out, let me bear the brunt of it, all right?"

"...fine." I'm not happy with that, but I know Roman's as stubborn as I am, if not more so.

He kisses me on the nose, the tender gesture making a cascade of butterflies flap around in my stomach, and then grabs his suitcases and heads out.

I hate how much it hurts to watch him go.



For the rest of the week, it's the five of us—Maddy, the guys, and me—and I can tell the others are trying to cram as much good stuff into it for me as they can, making up for what I missed out on. We have a *Lord of the Rings* marathon, go to the beach even though it takes us two hours to get there, and have a few cookouts. Just fun summer shit.

Despite having a blast with the guys and my sis, I'm feeling a little... out of it. I'm still kind of weak from being asleep for so long, but it's not just that. It's like I'm a bit outside of space and time somehow, like everything's slightly tilted to the side for me.

At least everyone else is acting normal. Cam's an adorable goof, Asher's soft and sweet, and Dmitri... well, he's gone back to being cranky

and withdrawn around me. And honestly, I'm not as relieved about that as I expected to be.

Last semester, there was a moment when I thought he was going to confess that he had feelings for me. At the time, I almost didn't want him to say anything—I didn't feel ready to face all the unspoken emotions between us, to admit the depth of my own feelings for him.

But now? I'm not sure I want to hide from those things anymore.

When I woke up from my coma, I got just a little taste of what Dmitri's love would be like, and I can't stop thinking about it. I want *more*. I don't want our relationship to just be about poking at each other from behind our fortified walls. I want to tear those walls down a bit and see what could happen between us if we both stopped hiding from our feelings.

Dmitri though, seems to have had the exact opposite response.

He hasn't mentioned what happened between us, and if anything, he's acting more closed off now than he was last spring. He's still fiercely protective of me, we still banter back and forth, and I still catch him gazing at me with intense heat in his eyes sometimes—but he seems to be actively trying to keep things between us exactly the way they've always been. To not let them change at all.

Which... sucks.

I try not to let it stress me out as we enjoy the last couple days of summer vacation though, and before I know it, I'm saying goodbye to my sister again.

God, this part never gets fucking easier. I hate being away from her. I squeeze her as tightly as I can and press a kiss to her hair and remind myself that we're in the twenty-first century, which means I can call or message her pretty much anytime I want to, and she can do the same with me. We're never as far apart as we feel.

It's just... hard, after living in each other's pockets for so long, that's all.

We get Maddy onto the shuttle for Neptune Academy, and then we're off to Griffin. Dmitri's driving, because Cam is in charge of the music and Asher has "road anxiety."

"You know how most people have road rage?" he says. "Where they get angry? I panic instead."

The admission makes me laugh out loud because it doesn't surprise me one bit, and I plant a kiss on his cheek. He's such an empathetic person,

even beyond his mind-reading abilities, that I can see how dealing with a bunch of other rage-filled drivers would stress him out.

So that puts Asher in the back seat with me. I'm not allowed to drive because Maddy, the traitor, told the others about my little speeding habit. I also haven't owned or driven a car in about four years; we had to sell the car after Mom died, and I didn't really need one anyway since The Den was pretty close to our old apartment.

Still, did she have to tell the guys about my speeding tickets?

The drive is fun though, and after only couple of hours, we pull through the large entry gate into the Griffin Academy campus.

I'll be honest, when I first got to this school, I was nervous as hell. I was only doing it so my magic wouldn't be taken away and so I could stay in Maddy's world. No way would I leave her on her own in the magical community and let myself be cut off from it.

I felt a little blackmailed by Aurora, as though I didn't really have a choice. So I was jittery and cranky going in, and I really didn't think I'd like this place at all.

But now, as Wellwood Hall comes into view, I get this feeling of peace and happiness. Excitement, even. I'm glad to be back.

Our school is beautiful, so that helps. The academy grounds are massive, and the stone wall around the campus encompasses an area that stretches over several dozen acres. Most of it isn't developed though—just the area surrounding the school buildings. Thick woods take up a large portion of the grounds, and Cam and I went running through them often last year.

We drive past the ancient-looking dormitory buildings, the faculty and staff housing, the dining hall and auditorium, and finally, Wellwood Hall. It's an impressive structure that looks like it was designed by an insane architect—three or four stories high in some places, six or seven in others, with towers that seem to pop up in random places. Gables and turrets give the whole thing an old-timey feel, and the windows and doors are all ornately detailed.

On the west side of campus, there's a small lot that's enchanted to accommodate a good number of cars without taking up too much space. Most students take the shuttle in from Portland—I'm pretty sure it costs an arm and a leg to park on campus, which is why Dmitri is the only one of the guys who keeps a car here.

I'm still staring out the back window at Wellwood Hall as we drive up to the lot. I sort of got used to it all last year, but looking at it again with fresh eyes, this whole place really looks... magical. As we pull in, a large bird takes off from the roof of the school building behind us, its wings backlit by the sun like in a goddamn movie.

"Glad to be back?" Cam teases as we get out of the car.

"A little, actually, yeah," I admit.

We grab our bags from the trunk and haul them up to our room. I've lived with the guys since a few weeks into my first semester, although student housing still doesn't know about it. If they did, I'm sure they'd pitch a fit. But since my original roommates were Alyssa, Megan, and Kendal, I have no desire to leave the men's dorm.

Alyssa is the rich brat who's been annoying me like it's her job. Megan is one of her hangers-on, the loudest and most dedicated of her crew. Cristina's another one, but she's generally silent, like the world's preppiest assassin. Kendal's also a groupie but she's... oddly sweet. Shy. Not like the others. I think she feels like she *has* to hang out with them. They're all from old, powerful families so there's a lot of pressure to do the "right thing" socially.

Anyway, it worked out for the best. Living with the guys is awesome—and not just because I'm crazy attracted to all of them. We actually room well together, which, with four wildly different personalities in a small space, is saying something.

The room is large, with beds, desks, and small dressers in each of the corners and a large couch in front of a TV along one of the side walls. We all move automatically to the quadrants we claimed last year and start unpacking our stuff.

"Home, sweet home," Dmitri says sarcastically, and I laugh because it really kind of is.

I'm the last to finish emptying my suitcase, and when I turn around, I see all three guys standing there staring at me.

"You want to get something to eat?" Asher asks.

I frown, tugging the zipper on my empty bag closed. "Umm... I mean, not really. You guys can go get something if you want."

"Nah, we're good," Cam says, sitting back down on his bed.

My brows pinch together as I narrow my eyes. *Hmm.*

I'm pretty damn sure the men are hovering—and my suspicion is confirmed when, for the rest of the evening, they stick to me like glue. Even Dmitri. God knows he's trying to pretend he isn't, but when he's always in the same place I am, well... a girl starts to get suspicious.

I can't really call them out on it, though—or blame them. If one of them had been in a magically induced coma for three months, I'd probably be hovering a little too. And it's not like we don't already spend almost all of our time together. I don't really have friends on campus outside of these three and Roman. Blame Alyssa and my own tendency to be a hermit.

So I keep my mouth shut and just try to enjoy their presence, hoping that in a few days, once we get back into the swing of classes and they realize I'm not going to drop back into a coma at any moment, they'll relax a bit.

The next morning, there's an assembly after breakfast. I'm assuming Dean Hardwick will give a speech as usual, probably something about welcoming the first-years and how it's cool to be Unpredictable and how proud of us he is. Hardwick means well, really, don't get me wrong. I like the guy well enough, and I know he cares about this school and the students here a lot. But he's got a fine line to tread between acknowledging the prejudice Unpredictables are faced with and encouraging us to celebrate who and what we are.

We walk in a bit of a pack, the guys around me, but even though I'm in the middle, people still seem to spot me from a mile away.

"Hi, Elliot!" one girl says as we head down the steps outside the dining hall.

I've never met this girl in my life.

"Umm... hi?" I reply, confused.

"Hey, Elliot, glad to see you're doing better!" says another guy from my History of Magic class last semester. I don't remember his name, seeing as we've never once spoken to each other.

It keeps up like that as we make our way to the auditorium. Everyone's saying hi like we're close friends, like they were all holding candlelight vigils all summer to make sure I woke up safe and sound. Several first-years—they tend to move around in terrified packs—gape at me, mouths open and eyes wide.

"Why does everyone know who I am?" I mutter under my breath as we enter the assembly hall.

“First you stopped Raul, then you won the Trials,” Asher whispers. “That’s going to get you some attention.”

“You kind of became a school celebrity by the end of last year,” Cam adds. “You were asleep for it, but you were all people talked about for a few days.”

We walk past Alyssa, who glares at me. Honestly, her venom is almost comforting. It’s good to know *some* things haven’t changed. And at least she’s honest in her dislike of me, I guess. If she was gushing and pretending to be my friend now, I wouldn’t just be alarmed, I’d be annoyed that she’d think I’d fall for something like that.

We find spots near the back and sit down, Asher on my right, Dmitri on his other side, Cam on my left. Just like old times.

Hardwick steps up to the podium, and the whispers around the room die down.

Oh God, I wonder how many of those whispers were about me.

“Greetings, everyone. A hearty welcome to our new first-years, and welcome back to our returning students.”

After a few minutes, I start to tune him out. It’s almost the same speech as last year, so I’ve heard it already.

As my attention shifts to the crowd, I notice a hell of a lot of people are staring back at me. People will peek over at me, realize I’m looking, and glance away hurriedly, their faces turning pink. It’s like they’re trying to catch a glimpse of a celebrity.

I’m... not a fan of this. Maybe Alyssa would like the notoriety. Maybe Cam would be able to handle it well. But I’ve always been a loner, and even if I’ve been coming out of my shell a little more lately, getting a ton of attention isn’t my thing.

I wasn’t even *trying* to get attention. I didn’t ask for this. Stopping Raul was the right thing to do, and it wasn’t like I could turn down being in the Trials—well, okay, I did almost turn that down, but I was persuaded to change my mind.

Whether I asked for it or not though, all this extra attention worries me a little. Not just in general, or for myself, but... because of the guys, and my relationship with them.

Especially Roman.

CHAPTER 5

After Hardwick's speech, we have the rest of the day off to pick up our schedules and cram in a last bit of lounging around before classes start.

Tomorrow, I'll officially begin my second year at the Academy of Unpredictable Magic.

I'm actually looking forward to resuming my training. I like learning and always have, even if I'm not exactly a top-notch student. I was never up for valedictorian, if you know what I mean. But the curriculum at a magical academy tends to be a lot more interesting than what I studied in high school, so that helps.

As excited as I am about the classes themselves though, I'm a little worried about the whole... struggling with my magic thing.

Last semester, I barely made it through the Trials alive. And yeah, part of that was because some nutjob and his underlings were trying to kill me, but another part of it was due to my own fumbling magical skills. I don't want this to be another semester of me struggling to keep up with the rest of my class. Especially since I'm in my second year now.

Cam can tell I'm nervous, so he gets me up in the morning and takes me out to our usual path in the woods. He's an athletic, outdoorsy guy who loves being in nature, and our campus is gorgeous and perfect for that. There's a massive forest on the east side of campus with trees and hiking trails everywhere, and Cam and I know a lot of them by now thanks to our runs.

"Come on!" I tug on his arm, trying to get him to actually *run* with me instead of just walk at a moderately brisk pace. It's beautiful around us.

Early dawn light seeps through the woods, painting everything gold, pink, and purple, but I'm not out here to admire the view. I'm here to exercise.

"You shouldn't be running just yet," Cam replies, resisting my attempts and digging his heels in. "You need to build up your strength."

"I need to get back to where I was before all this happened." I let go of his arm and stop walking entirely, a sudden wave of frustration nearly bowling me over. "I need to be in better shape, need to regain the ground I lost. I can't let Johnson have this victory over me. I don't want to start classes feeling tired all the time or not being able to fight the way I used to! I could kick Dmitri's ass before, and now... look at me!"

My voice cracks a little, and I can feel my eyes getting hot. I swallow quickly and look away. I didn't mean for all of that to come out. Cam doesn't need to bear the brunt of my messy emotions. But it's true—I missed out on my entire summer because of that bigoted jackass Johnson. I could've died if I'd gotten hit by a worse spell, and he told me people like me were filthy and unclean. I can't let him win.

Cam takes my hands and pulls me into a hug, his bright blue eyes shining down at me with sympathy. "Hey, it's okay. You're going to get there. Just the fact that you're standing and walking around—that's a victory. You aren't weak, or not good enough, or any of that other shit for taking it easy and being smart."

I hug him back, letting myself melt against the hard planes of his body for a few seconds before pulling back and sighing. "Yeah, tell that to the others. You're all hovering over me like I'll break, even Dmitri."

"Ah, Dmitri's just on edge because it's our third year. Last year before graduation and all that. And there's a parents' weekend for third-years scheduled right after midterms. It's a ways off, but I think he's already dreading it."

I remember Asher telling me he went to visit his family during the summer, but I don't think Dmitri did. "Is his family really that bad?"

Cam shrugs. "He was glad for an excuse to stay away this summer, I'll put it that way."

I get that. My dad... well, I was ten when he left us, so I haven't actually seen or spoken to him in thirteen years. There's a lot I've probably forgotten about him in that time. But what I do remember, more than anything, is how he skipped out on us. Left Mom to take care of two little girls all on her own. And then when Mom was sick and dying, did he call

even once? Did he come to look after his own children and make sure they were okay?

Nope. I raised Maddy for the last five years. Not him.

Sometimes he sends a birthday card, usually on the wrong day. It's like he's purposefully mocking us with how little he cares.

I wonder if he'd show up to the parents' weekend thing in my third year if I invited him. I hate that I kind of wish he would—just so I could rub it in his face how well I'm doing, how well Mads and I are both doing, without him.

Yeah, I defeated a rogue magic user and won the Trials, and it was all without your help, Dad.

There'd be a kind of sick satisfaction in that.

“Did Dmitri have a good summer then?” I ask. I'm not about to dump all my father issues onto Cam or anyone else, thanks.

“Yeah.” He grins, cocking his head. His blue eyes sparkle in the morning light, and his blond hair is a little longer than it was in the spring. “I'm pretty sure he did. We all did, in a way, even though it was awful in another way. I'm sorry you missed out on it. We all got closer—especially Roman. The guy's intimidating as fuck sometimes, but he's really great. I never thought about how small our age gap is before. He acts so much older a lot of the time, but he's only twenty-eight.”

Dmitri's twenty-six, Cam and Asher are twenty-four, and I'm twenty-three, so it's only a five year age gap at most between Roman and the rest of us.

And he's already a professor. Just goes to show how determined and skilled he is.

“Yeah, he does seem older,” I agree with a fond smile.

“It's all the mysterious brooding.” Cam stares off into the distance, clearly imitating Roman. “I must... go out... and brood on the moors... like the hero of a Brontë novel...”

I throw my head back and laugh because that's a damn good impression. Cam grins, pleased to have broken me out of my funk, and then he pulls me in and kisses me—like he can now, and he wants to, so he will. Like he's got an impulse he just can't hide. I grin into the kiss, wondering how many times he's wanted to do this before and had to hold himself back.

Poor guy. I'll have to make it up to him somehow. I've already got so many ideas...

His lips move against mine, fun and flirty with a layer of heat and need behind it that makes my toes curl a little.

But as the kiss deepens, I start to feel—odd. Lightheaded and dizzy. The world seems to pitch beneath my feet like I'm on a boat in choppy waters.

What the...?

My muscles suddenly go weak, as if someone flipped a switch inside me, and I slump in Cam's embrace.

He yelps in alarm, the strong bands of his arms tightening around me. "Sin? Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"I'm... fine," I slur.

What—what was that?

A wave of nausea hits me and then vanishes, leaving a strange, unsettled feeling in the pit of my stomach. I blink as the world comes back into focus.

Cam helps me find my feet. My knees literally buckled earlier. "I think we should finish for the day. Walk back to campus. Classes will be starting soon anyway."

I nod, feeling like my cheeks are going to burn off from how hot they are. I can't believe I nearly fainted, just from going on a walk and kissing someone. Geez, what's wrong with me?

"Yeah. That's probably a smart idea. Just... don't treat me like an invalid, okay?" I ask, my voice still a little shaky.

"You're not an invalid," Cam replies, lacing his fingers with mine as we walk back down the path, "so we won't."

I squeeze his hand, grateful.

But as we make our way through the woods toward the main part of campus, I can't stop feeling like... like there's something in my chest that shouldn't be there.

Something foreign and strange and not entirely a part of me.

It feels like something isn't right.

CHAPTER 6

C am doesn't hover when we get back to the dorm, or at least, no more than usual. I'm glad about that, and when no more bouts of weakness assail me as I shower and get ready, I start to feel a bit more confident.

He's right. I should take the fact that I'm here at all as a win.

Yes, I was physically inactive for three whole months, but since the coma was caused by magic, its effects were a little different than a regular coma. It's almost like I was put in a temporary stasis, which—in theory, at least—means I should get back to normal pretty quickly now that I'm awake.

I just need to work hard, focus, and not let myself fall behind.

That sounds easy enough when I'm giving myself a little pep talk in the shower, but as I quickly discover, classes are definitely harder in the second year.

I've got Theory of Magic with Professor Binns, Goldstein again for History of Magic—which is great, because she makes history seem anything but boring and dry—and Magical Control with Roman. Combat, Physical Training, and Practical Magic have all ramped up their intensity this year too. Not a single one of my professors seems interested in cutting us any slack.

During the first week, I pump the guys for as much information as possible, learning which second-year classes are hardest, which professors will spring pop quizzes on you, that kind of thing. And the one piece of great news is that I've got a much better handle on my magic than last year. I'm pretty sure I'm still behind the rest of my class, but at least I'm doing the work that needs to be done.

And boy, is there a lot of damn work.

I'm not in the Trials this semester, which is what made my workload so crazy the last time around, but I might as well be for all the homework I have on my plate this fall.

As the semester gets going in earnest, I push hard to keep up with everything, but I make a conscious effort to take care of myself too. And it helps. Three weeks into classes, I'm sleeping well, eating loads, and I can go out for real runs with Cam, covering longer and longer distances each time.

Whatever that weird wave of dizziness was that hit me on the first day, it's gone. Saying I'm on top of my game again would be a lie, but I think I'm finally on the road to recovery. It feels amazing.

The guys stop hovering and treating me like I might break—although they'd probably deny doing any of that in the first place if I asked them—and focus on their studies instead.

Well, all of them except Dmitri.

Speaking of that little shit...

Look, Dmitri and I—we have something. Even if he doesn't want to talk about it. Even if he's never brought up the moment we shared when I first woke up in Roman's house and has gone right back to being hot and cold on me as usual. Even if we never say a word about it, the sexual chemistry between us is palpable and intense.

Besides that, I genuinely care about him, as much as he irritates the shit out of me sometimes.

And he cares about me too; I'm pretty damn sure of it.

But that does *not* give him an excuse to pull his punches with me in fight class.

I don't have many classes with the guys. Most of them are separate now, since the third-years are taking all these intense seminars and half my classes are still with the first-years. But fight class is a mix of all three years, and Dmitri and I have always enjoyed sparring with each other.

Okay, maybe "enjoy" isn't quite the right word. We get a kick out of trying to one-up each other because we're both stubborn and competitive, and we hate letting the other one win.

I've always been Dmitri's equal. When I started at Griffin Academy, I was scrappy and tough. The combat stuff came pretty naturally to me, and by now, I've added some serious fight training to my list of skills. So when

I go up against the cranky, dark-haired mage, I know we're evenly matched; sometimes he'll win, and sometimes I'll win. In fact, I beat him in combat for the right to compete in the Trials. But now?

Now, I can tell the fucker is taking it easy on me.

And I'm not going to stand for it.

We're three weeks into classes. I'm almost totally recovered from my coma. So this crap ends now.

In our Friday afternoon Combat class, I pin Dmitri to the floor. He taps out, but I stay on top of him, not letting him get up. "Flip me off."

He twists his head around as much as he can to glare at me. "What the fuck do you mean?"

"I mean, asshole, flip me off you! I know you can." He's done it before, letting me pin him for just a second so I think I've won and then flipping me and turning the tables.

Dmitri rolls his eyes and flips me—but then leaves me sprawled on the mat and stands up, brushing himself off. "That's it. We're done. You won, match over."

I jump to my feet. "No, it's not." I'm practically snarling, my teeth bared. "Come at me again."

He glares at me, dark eyes narrowing. "No."

"Oh, what, you scared I'll still beat you even if you throw everything you've got at me?" Yeah, I'll admit it's a bit of a low blow, but I don't care. "Scared you'll be your big, bad self and I'll still win? I guess if you pull your punches with me, you can always tell yourself that you *let* me win. That you're actually still the best. I see how it is."

Dmitri storms over to me, getting right in my face. "I can and I will kick your ass if you really are that desperate for it, Sinclair."

"Ooh, using my last name, scary," I shoot back. "Come on, stop cutting me slack. Would you want me to cut *you* any? Huh? How come you get to be all angsty and surly, and I have to be the delicate invalid who can't be pushed too hard or she might break? Fuck that."

"Fine!" Dmitri takes a few steps back and drops into his fighting stance. All around us, our classmates are staring. They're used to Dmitri and me being intense, but not like this.

"Good. Now come at me!" I snarl, dropping into my own low stance. "And this time, fight like you actually mean it."

My heart is pounding hard in my chest, my muscles tense and ready as I focus on his broad-shouldered form and scarily beautiful face, tuning out everything else around us.

Asshole thinks he can give me some weird, twisted form of protection by not fighting me like an equal, then make out with me whenever he feels like it, but he won't actually open up to me or tell me anything or—

Oookay... so maybe I have some resentment I need to work through here.

And I'm going to work through it by kicking Dmitri's ass to kingdom come.

We launch ourselves at each other, and I catch a glimpse of Asher literally wincing as everyone in the room hears the loud *smack* of our bodies hitting each other. Someone—Cam, I think—is shouting for us to knock it off, and then I hear Professor Tamlin asking what's going on, and several cheers from people who've taken sides in this.

Dmitri really isn't letting me off easy now, and I appreciate it—but it also reminds me how evenly matched we really are. *Goddamn, winning this is going to be hard.* His punches fucking hurt. But I'm dealing mine right back at him, and I'm landing some damn good blows if I do say so myself.

It's all a whirl, instinct taking over as my body moves without thought—which is a good thing, that's how it *should* be when you fight. You should know the moves so intuitively that you don't even have to think about them anymore, because the second you stop to think is the second your opponent beats you.

The thing is though, Dmitri and I are also fucking *pissed* at each other.

I want him to feel every goddamn blow, and I'm not pulling my punches either—if he wants to think I'm weak, then I'll show him who the damn weak one is. And Dmitri's probably going harder than he even would normally just because he wants to prove something right back to me. We're furious, and I don't know if I want to kill him or fuck him or some combination of both, honestly.

It doesn't help that our bodies are pressed up against each other, that my leg twists over his, around his waist, that he's grabbing me, that his mouth is so close to mine, his hands everywhere on my body, and honestly, I could just fucking scream from the tension that's pent up inside me.

The way he's looking at me... Everyone in the goddamn room has to see it, right? I'm not crazy? Would it be too much to ask that he *admit* he

likes me?

Or maybe he doesn't like me as a person and just wants—to fuck me—which would—be—*fine*—if he—would just—*admit it!*

We both go crashing to the floor, rolling, and Dmitri gets on top of me with my arms over my head, pinned. “There! Will you actually fucking look after yourself now?” he grunts, his face a mask of fury, his dark eyes flashing with heat.

“That depends. Are you gonna stop treating me like I’ll break? Oh, wait, that might mean you have to admit you *care*, God forbid.” I hook my foot around his ankle and use the momentum to flip him so now I’m on top.

Dmitri glares up at me. “What, just because I don’t want to see you sick and exhausted again makes me the bad guy? Just because I don’t want to lose you to a coma for another three months? That makes me an asshole?”

He flips me so he’s on top again. I hear Asher sigh. “Guys, could you please...”

I headbutt Dmitri, which sends him reeling, and I gain the upper hand again. “Look, either you don’t care about me and you don’t pull your punches, or you *do* care and you least admit you’re pulling them. It’s not fucking rocket science!”

Dmitri’s breathing hard, his gaze locked with mine as his chest rises and falls. I’m practically straddling him, and I realize with a jolt that I can feel him a little hard against me, between my legs. I’m panting, a bit wet, and it’s not the first time I’ve gotten turned on while sparring with Dmitri—because, you know, God forbid I *not* get turned on in public where all my classmates could notice and make fun of me, right?

But as I stare into his eyes—

A horrific scream, like nothing I’ve ever heard before, fills the room.

I whip my head around, going limp in shock, and Dmitri uses the opportunity to grab me and yank me underneath him, crouching over me like someone’s about to launch themselves at us.

But nobody’s fighting.

Cam and Asher are staring in horror, and so is everyone else, as another student collapses and writhes on the floor. His name is Tom, and he’s a second-year like me with gravity manipulating powers. His body jackknives with convulsions, and the sounds tearing from his throat are terrifying.

I can’t tell what’s happening to the poor guy. There’s nothing attacking him, yet he’s screaming like he’s on fire.

Professor Tamlin runs over to him, going to her knees beside him and putting her hands on his chest. He's still panting and twitching, crying in pain.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Cam murmurs hoarsely. "What the fuck?"

"Tom." Professor Tamlin looks rattled for the first time since I've met her. She takes the guy into her arms like he's a child even though he's bigger than she is, shaking him gently. "Tom, talk to me. What's going on? What happened? Tom!"

"It... it's gone," he moans, clearly still in pain. His red hair is damp with sweat, and I can see his body trembling from here. "My—it was just... oh, God, it hurts so fucking bad... help—*help* me... it's gone."

"What's gone?" Tamlin asks, but Tom just keeps groaning, muttering half-formed sentences. She looks up, eyes wide, dark skin a little ashen. "Kendal, get the medics."

Kendal nods and rushes out the door.

Dmitri helps me to my feet. His arm goes protectively around my shoulders, and for once, I don't try to push him away or question what it means. We're both still staring at the man in our professor's arms, shocked and wary.

"Tom," Tamlin repeats, smoothing his hair back from his face. Her tone is calm but commanding, and if I hadn't had her as a teacher all last year, I might not notice the slight panic underlying her words now. "What's wrong? Help is coming, but you have to tell me what's wrong."

"My magic," Tom groans, his voice rising with each word. "It's my magic. It's... it's been taken. It's gone... My magic. My magic's gone!"

My heart skips a beat, and Dmitri's arm tightens on my shoulder as I turn to look up at him, our horrified gazes meeting.

What the actual fuck?

CHAPTER 7

Kendal rushes back a few moments later, healers right behind her. “Everyone stand back,” Cam says, gently moving people out of the way. Dmitri tugs me to the side as the healers hurry to Tom.

“I don’t understand,” Tamlin says, her voice shaking a little as she stands back to let them work.

I’ve never known Tamlin to be anything other than put together and sophisticated. Now, she looks like she’s seen a ghost, her face tense and eyes wide, the tips of her fingers trembling minutely.

Tom is whimpering in agony and terror, and it’s awful.

I remember when Maddy was little, one time Mom and I stayed up and watched *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and Mads woke up and crept downstairs and saw some of it. She was terrified for ages, and she cried and whimpered in fear the exact same way Tom is now. It tugs at my heart and scares the shit out of me at the same time, because he’s a twenty-one-year-old man.

If he’s scared like a five-year-old, whimpering inarticulately like a child, then how bad is this? How horrific must losing his magic be to reduce him to this state of fear?

The healers are trying to get him to calm down, but he’s not responding, just repeating what he told Tamlin over and over again.

“Holy shit,” one medic says softly. “His aura is—it’s gone. It’s really gone.”

“We’ll have to sedate him,” another man says, holding Tom’s shoulders while the first speaker grabs some medicine out of a kit.

Tom finally passes out as they inject him, and when he stops jerking and shaking, they get him onto a stretcher. Once he’s strapped into place, it rises

up to float about three feet off the floor, and they carry him out toward the infirmary. Everyone around me is shaking, even Alyssa. I've never seen her look anything but smug or pissed off, but right now, she looks like she might lose her breakfast.

Even those of us who hate being Unpredictable would rather be that than have no magic at all.

Tamlin clears her throat and pats her hair, making sure nothing's fallen out of place. It hasn't, because she's Tamlin. Even in the midst of chaos, she's one of the most poised, elegant people I've ever met. She's already gathering her wits about her, doing a better job of recovering from the shock than I am. I'm still trying to decide if I should throw up or cry first.

"Well. I think in light of that, we should end class a little early, don't you?" She gives us a smile that doesn't reach her eyes at all. "Good work today, everyone. Remember, we have a test next Friday."

Everyone immediately books it for the door. Half of them—Alyssa for one—are talking, blurting out theories and opinions. The other half are eerily silent.

Dmitri's still got his arm around me as we join Cam and Asher. I keep thinking I should put some distance between us, but I can't bring myself to do it. His hand on my shoulder, the feel of his body beside mine, is the only thing keeping me upright at the moment.

I just can't get over how Tom looked. The way he screamed. How... how broken he looked. How utterly destroyed.

The whole reason I came to this school in the first place is because Aurora, the representative from the Circuit, told me it was that or have my magic stripped away from me. I didn't care too much about my magic at the time; I was more worried about being cut off from Maddy.

Magical society and non-magical society don't really mix. Most ordinary humans don't even know magic exists, and the people from magical families who end up without any powers tend to sort of fade into a weird middle ground between the magical and non-magical worlds. And I didn't want to leave Maddy with this whole part of her life that she couldn't really share with me. I didn't want to be on the outside of her world like that.

So instead, I opted to keep my magic.

Now that I've had it and used it for a year, it's hard to imagine my life without it. Yeah, my powers have been a pain in the ass most of the time,

but... I've grown to accept them as a part of me. I used to hate my sonic boom for how it could hurt people, for the dangerous things I could do, but now I'm oddly attached to it. If anything, Johnson's crazy ramblings at the end of the Trials made me determined to stay an Unpredictable and to be proud of that status, not to let some asshole convince me I'm a freak.

I mean, I am a freak, but not because of my magic.

...that joke sounded better in my head.

Now I can't help but wonder—is this what Aurora and the Circuit would've had in store for me if I'd decided not to go to school and to get my magic removed instead? Would I have been left screaming in agony, terrified and hurt like a small child?

What the actual fuck?

"Jesus," I whisper as we step out of Wellwood Hall into the cool fall air. "Is that what having no magic feels like? Is that what the Circuit wanted to do to us?"

My stomach churns. I'm *pissed*. I want to find Aurora and get in her face and demand to know what the hell she was thinking even offering that to me or any magic user. But more than that—I'm scared.

"No. It's not supposed to be like that," Asher murmurs, though his face is pale and his voice lacks conviction. "There are ways of removing it gently, or dampening it so much that it basically becomes non-existent. But both of those options don't destroy the root of the magic. They don't affect your soul."

"Yeah. Tom's magic was—ripped out of him." Cam looks like he wants to barf as he says the words.

The sun is shining brightly, and the day isn't all that cold, but a shiver works its way down my spine anyway. My footsteps slow then stop.

Ripped out?

"You okay, Sin?" Cam whispers, slipping an arm around my waist.

Dmitri lets go of me, but he's still standing right next to me as Asher takes my hand, squeezing it gently. We all huddle together like that as we watch Tamlin leave Wellwood Hall and walk quickly toward the infirmary.

"That's—" I swallow, needing to hear it again to be absolutely sure. "That's *not* how the Circuit takes people's magic?"

"No," Cam says, shaking his head. Dmitri and Asher are quiet, but neither of them look all that happy. "There's a much gentler way to do it.

What happened up there... that was like someone performing surgery with a butter knife instead of a scalpel.”

“It never feels pleasant,” Dmitri adds shortly. “My family wanted me to get mine removed at first. They talked to several people who’d had their magic taken away. They said it doesn’t feel good no matter how carefully they do it. It’s like losing a piece of yourself; you feel this empty space inside. You’re fine, but you’re not the same, and you can tell.”

“But how did it happen to Tom? That’s what I want to know,” Cam says. “How did someone do that? I mean, shit, the process of removing someone’s magic, something so intrinsically tied to their essence? That’s not only delicate work—if it’s done gently—but it’s not easy. It takes incredible power, incredible strength, and someone just—did that.”

Someone just *did that*.

I shudder.

Who could even be capable of doing magic like this? And who would want to?

And who could be next?

CHAPTER 8

I try not to talk about what happened to Maddy, but she ends up getting it out of me anyway a week later during our usual phone call.

We try to talk on the phone at least once a week so we can stay up to date on each other's lives. The past two semesters, I had a lot of crazy stuff going on. Maddy's school life is exciting, but it's more of a *regular* kind of exciting. You know, big exams and parties and who's dating who. That kind of thing.

"So..." She sounds hesitant. "I've heard some... rumors..."

Ah, *crap*. I suppose I should be grateful they're not rumors about Roman and me? Or me and the other three guys?

"Are you okay?" she asks, concern clear in her voice. "I heard that—that it happened in your class, to one of your classmates. The stories..."

"It wasn't fun," I say, because there's no reason for me to beat around the bush, but I'm not going into details either. "It was more the fact that it came out of nowhere that made it so scary. Nobody was bleeding or anything; it wasn't gruesome. It's just that... someone stole magic from a student without being caught or even noticed. There were over thirty people in that room, and none of us saw anyone acting weird. Whoever it was got away scot-free, and I don't even know *how* they did it."

There's a pause while she absorbs that, and then she asks, "Has it happened to anyone else?"

"No. The professors are on alert, and we were all interviewed by Hardwick about it. But nothing."

"How's the student doing? The guy whose magic was taken?"

"Tom. I hear he's okay."

That's... a bit of a lie. I haven't heard much, actually. I just know his parents have come to visit him, and that he's being dosed up by the medical staff with painkillers and potions to help keep the pain at bay. I'm not sure whether it's because of all those things in his system, but apparently, he's been quiet, not really talking.

"It could've been a freak accident," I venture, trying to reassure her. "Our magic sparks to life inside us suddenly, so maybe his just... *unsparked* somehow. I've never heard of that happening before, but as my Theory of Magic professor always says, our understanding of magic is far from complete. It can still surprise us. Case in point—Unpredictables."

"Yeah." Her voice is quiet, and I can picture her nose scrunching up in my mind's eye, the way it always does when she's not buying my bullshit.

I sigh. "Even if it was a deliberate attack, Mads, it's possible it was just a one-off. Some experiment gone wrong or something, even. Nobody has any suspects."

"I suppose," she says slowly. *Nope. She's definitely still not convinced.* "Just... I hope you'll be careful."

"Of course I will be. Promise. I'm... I'm sorry that I've seemed pretty reckless the last few months," I say, forgetting for a moment that the last few months were actually the least reckless I've ever been, considering I spent them unconscious in bed. It was the months *before* those that were the problem. "You know I'm not going to do anything to risk myself on purpose, right, Mads? I'm always going to be there for you, okay?"

"I know." She makes a little noise that tugs at my heart. "I'm not—I'm not worried about you, Ellie. I mean, I *am*, but not about what you'll do, more like... everyone else."

"What's that mean?" There's a layer of worry underneath Maddy's tone that sets my internal alarm bells ringing.

She sighs, filling the phone with static. "Over here at Neptune, people are starting to talk. The students are really divided. At first, everyone was really against what Johnson did, calling him a psycho and saying he was unhinged. But now, some people are starting to say he might've had a point, that maybe there are problems with Unpredictables..."

My chest constricts.

Ah, fuck. I mean, it's bad enough to know there's a portion of the magical population out there who despise people like me. *Whoo. Fun.* But to have my sister have to listen to that...

Helpless anger makes my jaw clench. “You know you don’t have to say anything, Mads. Just ignore them.”

If Maddy gets bullied because of me or gets into a fight because she feels like she has to defend my honor, I don’t know if I could forgive myself. Even though I know it wouldn’t be my fault, exactly. Not directly, anyway. But my sister’s the only family I’ve got left, and I promised Mom I’d take care of her no matter what.

“I don’t care about me!” she blurts out, sounding much younger than her nineteen years. “I care about you! I want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’ll look after myself, Mads, I promise. You know me—I always keep my wits about me.”

“Yeah, I know you do.” She giggles, and the tightness in my chest loosens a little. She’s heard stories about all the bar patrons I had to put in their place over the years, and she knows I always kept mace and a taser on me when I walked home alone at two in the morning.

“No comas this time,” I promise her. “We’re both going to be okay.”

But her classmates sure as hell won’t be okay if I get ahold of them. Fucking assholes. Unpredictables are just as good as anyone else, and making my sister so worried and upset just gives those douches extra bad points in my book.

“Okay.” Maddy sighs. “I just worry.”

“Well, I worry about you too, so it’s even. I think maybe that’s how families work.”

She laughs. “Yeah. Maybe so. Um, hey, I gotta go. I’m going out with some friends, but let me know if anything else crazy happens, okay?”

“Of course.”

“And say hi to the guys for me.” There’s a definite teasing note in her voice, and I remind myself I’m going to have to grill the men over what exactly happened with them and Maddy over the summer.

In other words, I want to know exactly how many embarrassing stories she told them about me while I was passed out and couldn’t defend my honor.

“Har, har, har,” I reply. “Say hello to all your very annoying friends for me.”

“You don’t know they’re annoying.”

“They’re friends with you, aren’t they?”

“Har har, very funny. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mads. To the moon and back.”

We hang up, and I toss the phone aside, just lying in my bed and taking a few deep breaths. *Fucking hell*. I never asked to be an Unpredictable, or to be the target of Johnson’s bigoted, violent behavior. Now I’m like some weird spokesperson for Unpredictables, like the poster child for “our kind”, and I don’t like it.

I especially don’t like what it could mean for Maddy.

The door to our dorm room opens, and Asher steps in, shrugging off his backpack. I prop myself up a little. “Hey. Where are Cam and Dmitri?”

“Stuck at the library working on their exegesis of the *Necronomicon*.”

“Let me guess. They procrastinated, and it’s due tomorrow.”

“Maybe.” Asher gives a lopsided grin that tells me I nailed it and comes over to sit down next to me. “How’re you doing?”

“I should ask you the same thing. You were in that class with me.”

“I didn’t mean that, I just meant... with everything.”

“I’m not going to faint on you, don’t worry.”

“Worrying is kind of a part of the package.” He catches my ankle with his hand when I try to poke him with my foot, his thumb brushing back and forth along the thin, delicate skin there. My breath catches as tingles race up my leg. “I’m finished with my homework, if you want to relax or something.”

“Yes, please! I could use a distraction from ancient runes.”

We pop in one of Cam’s lighthearted action movies. Dmitri tends to like those super serious and dramatic films that are nominated for Oscars, and Asher has a soft spot for romantic comedies. I’m more like Cam. I don’t care if the plot is bad, just give me explosions. And maybe giant robots.

We’ve got this large, well-worn couch set up in front of the television. The cushions are so soft you sort of sink into them like a beanbag chair, and I’m not sure how it even got into this room. The guys aren’t sure either—although I suspect Cam’s lying and it’s actually his—but in any case, it’s super comfy. Asher and I flop down onto it as the movie starts, our sides pressed together pretty much from ankle to shoulder.

It’s... distracting.

More distracting than I’d planned.

I’ve known from the second I saw these guys that I was attracted to all of them. They each look like they could rock the cover of a *Sports Illustrated*, although for different reasons, so you really can’t blame me. But

this whole time, I've kept my shields up. Told myself that I couldn't be with them for all of these different reasons.

Now I'm having a harder time remembering why. Especially after how well everyone was getting along over the summer, and how all four of them have continued to stick by me despite all my prickliness and sarcasm.

I've started to think about them more as possible partners.

Partners in life. Partners in crime.

Partners in all the crazy bullshit the world might throw at us—the kind that makes you want to grab the best people you know and keep them close by.

And these four men *are* the best people I know, outside of Maddy.

I want them. So much.

I've already made out with Asher a few times, and I can remember each of those times as clearly as if it were yesterday. There's something about the way he takes his time with me, how he refuses to rush and seems to read my body like an open book, that just completely unravels me.

When he and Cam took me into that empty classroom at the Inter-academy Ball... holy fuck, that was one of the hottest experiences of my life, and we didn't even go all the way. But the way they worked together, Cam kissing me while Asher worked his tongue over my clit—Jesus, they had me dripping wet and begging for them.

My mind is drowning in memories, and they're all so vivid they're making my body flush. My core feels hot and swollen, and an ache is building inside me that makes me shift restlessly on the soft cushions.

Asher's hand falls to my knee, giving a gentle squeeze.

I know him pretty well by now, so I can say with ninety percent confidence that he just means the gesture to be reassuring. But that's sure as hell not how it feels. Heat crawls up my body, and I have to swallow hard as I try to concentrate on the movie.

The bad guy just ran into a warehouse, and the two mismatched buddy cops are debating whether they should follow or wait for backup, but right now, I just can't bring myself to care.

Asher is so warm next to me, and I can feel the firmness of his muscles. He's trim, but he's a swimmer and a good fighter, and you can tell when you touch him. There's no give anywhere. And he smells so good, like citrus and lemongrass. We're close enough that I could easily turn my face and bury it in his shoulder.

I want to.

I want to inhale him, to imprint his scent on my soul.

My body's been filled with tension this whole week after the attack on Tom, on top of how I was already feeling, and now my mind is screaming at me about a very good way to relieve that tension.

Asher's hand stays on my knee, his body crammed up against mine, for the next ten minutes... and then I just can't take it anymore.

I grab his wrist and slide his hand up from my knee to the top of my thigh.

He stiffens, then turns his head and looks at me. His expression changes immediately as he reads the look on my face.

"Elliot..." His voice is rough, and his gaze flicks down my body. He looks like he's starving for me.

Good. I'm starving too. I'm dying for this.

So I take it one step further and move his hand right between my legs. His breath hitches, and his fingers shift, one dragging along the seam of my jeans, pressing down on my clit through the denim, rubbing in small, concentric circles. I whimper, shivering as heat pulses through me.

Then I push up and swing my leg over so I'm straddling Asher's lap, taking his face in my hands and kissing him deep and slow.

"Asher... please, fuck me," I whisper.

CHAPTER 9

Okay, so maybe it's not the most demure, ladylike way to ask for what I want, but that *is* what I want.

And for as deliberate and careful as Asher can be, as gentle as he can be, I want to see him—*feel* him—lose control.

I want to be the reason he loses it.

He's staring at me, our faces so close together that his forest-green eyes have to dart back and forth to focus on mine, and we're cupping each other's faces like we're each holding a precious object.

God, he's so damn beautiful.

And he's not the kind of guy who would be threatened by me calling him that either. He's secure enough in his masculinity to just take the compliment, probably give me one back, and go about his day.

His features are perfectly balanced, elegant and aristocratic, and his hair is the most gorgeous shade of rich, chestnut brown. His lips are full and eminently kissable. But what's making me want to devour him right now isn't his lips, but the way he's staring at me.

He looks... overwhelmed. Grateful.

And so fucking hungry.

"Are you sure, Elle?" he whispers, moving his head forward just slightly so our noses brush together. "God, I've wanted you for so long. But I can wait. If you need more time..."

I don't.

I appreciate every bit of time he's given me, the fact that he and the others have waited while I figured my shit out and worked my way through some of my stupid fears and doubts.

And I may not have *all* my shit figured out yet, but I am one hundred percent certain about what I want right now. I want Asher's lips on mine. His body surrounding mine, *inside* mine.

Even though I know it'll change everything.

He's not the kind of guy who could do something like this and not have it mean something big. But what I'm ready to give him *is* big.

It's way bigger than my body, way bigger than just sex, and it's filling this room with something so achingly sweet I can't even stand it.

So I whisper, "I'm sure," because I know he needs to hear the words, at the same I grind down against him, working my clit against the swelling bulge beneath me.

We both gasp and groan at the same time, and the sound gets muffled as our lips finally meet in another kiss.

He shudders, his hands leaving my face to move over my body, trailing up and down my back before sliding beneath my shirt. His fingertips on my bare skin send little trails of fire racing through me, and I stroke my tongue harder against his. *Oh, yes, please.*

I'm still holding onto his face, and even though I want to touch his body everywhere, to slip my fingers under his clothes and explore every ridge of hard muscle hidden beneath, I can't seem to let go. It's like I need an anchor, need to keep my hold on the strong line of his jaw as he kisses me or I'll be swept away.

He kisses like he always does, in a way that's thorough, consuming, and unhurried—as if he's got all the time in the world.

Well, he might, but *I* don't.

My breaths are coming faster and faster, and every time I rock against him, my clit throbs harder.

Shit, I'm about to come from dry humping, like a horny teenager in the back of a Toyota.

Jesus. How does he do this to me?

I attack his mouth even harder, kissing him with more desperation, as if that'll hold off the impending orgasm. But then his hands settle on the curve of my ass and he hitches me against him harder, pressing me closer as his hips buck up toward mine, and it's all over.

My body convulses, my thighs squeezing tight around his hips as my release floods through me. I tear my lips from his, moaning his name as I bury my face in the crook of his shoulder, tasting his skin and inhaling his

clean, warm scent. His arms are still wrapped around me, and he presses kisses to my hair as his chest rises and falls beneath mine.

I have a vague feeling that maybe I should be a little embarrassed I came so quickly, so easily. But I'm not.

Partly because it's Asher, and I trust him, and partly because I know we're not done yet.

Not by a long shot.

When my breathing is a little more under control, I lift my head from his shoulder, biting my lip as I gaze down at him. "Thanks, sailor. I think I needed that."

He grins at me, soft and sweet and hot. Then he slides his hands under my thighs and lifts me with him as he stands. I wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck as he carries me over to his bed.

My back hits the mattress softly, and I scoot backward, propping myself up on my elbows to watch him strip his shirt off. I've seen him shirtless plenty of times before—kind of hard not to when you share a room with someone—but let me tell you, context is everything. The hard planes of his stomach, the curve of his shoulders, the sexy V at his waist? They're all on display, and it feels like I'm taking them in for the first time.

I stare unabashedly at him, licking my lips like a hungry cartoon character. My eyes are probably bugging out of my head a little too, and he chuckles softly as he shucks his pants and crawls up onto the bed with me. He left his boxer briefs on; I can see the bulge of his cock straining at the fabric. I remember what it felt like in my mouth, what it tasted like, and my clit throbs hard, needing more attention already.

As he crawls up my body, I start to sit up to reach for him, but he puts a gentle hand on my sternum and presses me back down. "Let me, Elle. Let me take care of you, okay?"

Oh geez. He's got this soft but commanding thing going on that makes me want to do anything he says.

So even though it kind of kills me, I let my body relax back onto the comforter, gazing up at him and waiting. For a second, he just looks at me, like he's trying to take a picture with his brain, to imprint this moment in his memory so completely that he'll never forget it.

The intense focus makes me squirm.

Normally, I'm not great with this kind of vulnerability, but this feels... good. It's like how a little bite of the right kind of pain only enhances

pleasure; his gaze is lighting a fire inside me, making me burn for him.

I keep waiting for him to take pity on me and move this along a little faster, but of course, he doesn't. Instead, he undresses me with deliberate movements, his green eyes growing darker with each layer of clothing he removes. And every inch of skin he uncovers is a new playground for him to explore, a new part of me for him to worship. His hands and mouth and teeth work their way over my body, and I try to stay still, I really do—but by the time he hooks his fingers around the sides of my panties and draws them down my legs, I'm shaking from head to toe.

My earlier orgasm is forgotten, and my clit is trying very hard to convince me it might die if it doesn't feel his mouth soon.

I hear you, girl. I fucking hear you.

“Asher! Goddamn it,” I rasp out as he traces a line with his tongue from my belly button to my pubic bone. “I always thought Dmitri was the dick. But I was wrong. It's you.”

I can't see it, but I *feel* his smile against my skin.

Oh, he really is an asshole.

But before I can sit up and demand he put me out of my misery or flip our positions and see how he likes getting worked over till he's a quivering mess like this, his hot mouth settles over my clit, and his tongue lashes back and forth in broad, quick strokes.

Oh, did I say asshole? Forget that. He's a fucking saint. A god.

My hands fly to his head, clenching his hair not-at-all gently as the tension he's been slowly building within me breaks, and I fly apart for the second time tonight.

His tongue dips lower, thrusting into me as aftershocks ripple through my body, and I know he can feel my pussy clenching around him. He works me through the very end of my orgasm, drawing it out and making it feel like it goes on forever. Then he pulls away, pressing soft kisses to the insides of my thighs, which send small jolts of energy through me.

My heart is pounding hard in my chest, and I think I've got a little sheen of sweat going, which is sort of ridiculous considering all I've been doing is trying to lie still.

Asher lifts his head to meet my gaze, and I purse my lips at him, trying not to grin. “Okay, maybe you're not so bad.”

He laughs then crawls up my body until he's hovering over me, just a few inches of space between us. I can feel the hardness of his cock against

my lower belly, feel the little damp spot where precum has soaked through his boxer briefs.

I guess if he's been torturing anyone here, it's mostly been himself. I've already come twice, and I can tell he's as worked up as I am.

"Sorry, Elle. I won't always drag it out like this." He dips his head to kiss me, and keeps kissing me as he speaks, the words falling out in between pecks to my cheeks, my jawline, my neck, the shell of my ear. "But I've... imagined this... more times than will make me sound cool to admit." He draws back slightly to look at me. "We'll only get this first time once. I want to make it special."

My eyes burn a little, and I blink quickly because *oh my God, I am not going to cry during sex*, but I reach up to run my fingers along the straight line of his jaw.

"It already is special, Ash. It's *you*."

Fire sparks in his hypnotic green eyes, and when he kisses me again, there's an urgency, an uncontrolled edge to it that makes my toes curl and my stomach flip with excitement.

Oh, goody. I think I said the magic words.

The only damn thing still separating us is his boxer briefs, and when I reach down to get the stupid things out of the way, he helps me. Together, we work them down his legs until he kicks them off, and then he leans over me slightly, reaching for a drawer in the dresser by his bed.

I hear the crinkle of the condom wrapper, but that's the last thought I give it because suddenly he's kissing me again, and I'm kissing him back, our mouths fused together like we need this connection to survive. He pulls his hips away for a second to roll the condom on, but his lips never leave mine, and when I feel the head of his cock nudge my entrance, I hook my legs around his waist, determined not to let him slow down this roller coaster we're on.

But Asher really must be able to read my mind, cuff or no cuff, because he knows exactly what I need.

He surges forward, burying himself inside me to the hilt, and when I gasp into his mouth at the sudden exquisite intrusion, he pulls back and thrusts in again.

Oh fuck, yes. Yes.

My body is spiraling upward again, the first two orgasms just an appetizer for the main course, and Asher's making these low, deep noises in

the back of his throat that hit my ears and land somewhere near my heart.

I cling to him as he drives into me over and over, running my hands over his broad, lean back, digging my fingernails into his skin.

“Asher. Oh fuck!”

His strokes get harder and deeper, the tempo less even, and I feel him thicken and swell inside me. My hips crash into his, meeting him thrust for thrust, and when he bottoms out inside me and grinds his hips hard against mine, the pressure on my clit makes fireworks explode inside me. My pussy clamps down hard around him as he comes too, both of us panting and shaking and clinging to each other.

We come down slowly, wrapped up in each other’s arms like that. His body is draped over mine, but the weight is pleasant, grounding, and his breath tickles the hair near my ear.

After a few moments—though much sooner than I’d like—he pulls out, pressing a kiss to my nose before disappearing into the bathroom. When he walks back out, I haven’t moved an inch, and he returns my sated smile as he crawls up beside me on the bed and lies on his back. I roll over to rest against him, draping a leg and an arm over him as our lips meet in a languid kiss.

“Okay, I definitely needed *that*,” I murmur.

“I think we both did.”

He holds me close, gently untangling my hair, threading his fingers through it. I feel like a sleek, satisfied cat, practically purring. *Holy shit, that was fucking amazing.* Better than I imagined—and I think I could give Asher a run for his money in how often I’ve fantasized about the two of us together. Good thing we’re in a corner dorm room so I didn’t have to worry about making noise, although if one of the guys had walked in—

That thought stops me short.

Oh my God.

What if Dmitri or Cam or both had walked in on us?

Something of my thoughts must show on my face, because Asher gives me a fond smile. “What is it, Elle?”

I shrug. “I was just thinking—what if the other two had walked in? I mean, this is their room too. That would’ve given them a hell of a shock, right?”

Asher looks thoughtful for a moment, his free hand sliding down to lightly stroke my thigh. I shiver. Then he smiles and shrugs, a mischievous

glint in his eye.

That's when I remember being with him and Cam in the classroom again—it was the two of them, kissing and touching me at the same time, and I was between them, pinned, two mouths and hands and—

What if the guys *had* walked in? What if they'd done it while Asher was inside me? I get the image of Dmitri holding down my hands, pinning me, whispering dirty things in my ear as Cam kisses me, puts his mouth on my breasts, and Asher's still inside me, fucking me...

Holy motherfucking dirty saints and angels.

It's the hottest thing I've ever imagined, and I can't help but roll my hips, grinding against Asher's leg a little, as a thousand other ideas fill me.

Their hands and mouths on me, in me, encouraging me to be a good girl and come for them just one more time...

"You're wet," Asher notes, his hand creeping up my thigh to slip between my legs. "You like that idea."

If I didn't know better, I'd say he was reading my mind. He starts stroking me again and oh, God, yes.

Instead of answering him, I press my lips to his, climbing on top of him, and our bodies start moving together again. It feels amazing. Perfect.

But as we kiss...

I can't help but hope a little that we *do* get caught.

CHAPTER 10

We didn't get caught, unfortunately. Cam and Dmitri didn't make it back to the room until after 1 a.m., when Asher and I were curled up in his bed, mostly asleep.

It was still incredible, though. He knew exactly where to touch me, and when, and how. He had me moaning helplessly, putty in his hands, and just remembering it makes me hot all over.

I swear it was like he was in my head, even with his cuff on. Of course, his cuff was on and activated, so there's no way he was actually reading my mind, but he might as well have been. It was like he knew everything I wanted even before I knew it. Thank God we were already in our dorm room, because my legs were shaking so hard after that second round—

Professor Perkins raps on my desk, and I jump.

Fuck. That's what I get for daydreaming in Practical Magic class.

Perkins gives me a stern look and then goes back to his lecture, walking up and down between the rows of desks. "Now, as you can imagine, the more complex the rune, the faster you need to draw it in order to complete it, otherwise the magic will think you're doing another, simpler rune and behave accordingly."

Our magic dampening cuffs are off for this class, but it's probably the most frustrating and boring of my cuff-less classes. Runes are difficult as hell, and we're not doing anything fun with them anyway. They're usually used in conjunction with enchanted objects, which theoretically makes them accessible to anyone, since the *object* is providing the magic, not you. But even though this is a practical class, it's dense work, and Perkins tends to get pretty long-winded in his explanations.

And to be honest, after getting my butt handed to me by Johnson last spring thanks to his arsenal of charms and enchanted jewelry, I feel a little bitter about this aspect of magic.

Still, even if I don't find the subject all that interesting, I can't afford to be lazy in this class. I have to work my ass off if I want to stay on top of my grades this semester.

I focus back in and listen—or try to. I feel unusually hot. Not turned on, but like the room is too hot, like my skin's too tight, like I can't...

Jesus. What's going on?

I tug at my collar, feeling like I'm choking a little, trying to get some air. Am I the only one feeling this way? Everyone else looks fine.

As I drop my hand back down—

Lightning bursts from my palm.

It's just a little zap, really, but it's freaking *lightning*, so it's strong enough to fly across the room and hit the opposite wall. It only misses Professor Perkins by a couple of inches, and my mouth drops open in horror. Fuck! I could've killed him if that zap had hit.

Perkins jumps and whirls around, his gaze zeroing in immediately on Daria, my classmate who has the ability to use lightning.

She's also sitting right in front of me today.

"Put your cuff on, Daria," he orders, keeping his cool a lot better than I would if I'd almost just been struck by lightning.

"But—" My classmate sounds totally shocked. Her black curls frame her head like a halo, and she sits up straighter, glancing around.

"Now, please." He raises his bushy brows, tilting his chin down. "I like to think I'm not quite so bad a professor that you all want to assassinate me, but I'd rather be safe than sorry."

There's some laughter around the room. Daria looks around, like she's trying to figure out who just pranked her, but then puts her cuff back on slowly, still confused.

Shit, that was totally my fault, not hers. I did that. But how?

I'm not exactly about to raise my hand and say so in front of everyone when I have no explanation for what just happened.

Instead, I wait until after class. The school admins are very strict about when, where, and how we can take off our cuffs, and I don't want Daria to get in trouble for something she didn't do. Remedial students or those having a hard time maintaining even basic control sometimes have to keep

them on even during cuff-less classes, which is always super embarrassing. It's the magical academy equivalent of having to sit in the corner with a pointy dunce cap on.

"Hey, um, professor?"

Professor Perkins turns to me, adjusting his bowtie as the other students file out. "Yes, Miss Sinclair?"

"Daria didn't create that lightning strike. I think... I think it was me." I can still feel the tingle in my fingers from it, like there's a little bit of electric energy left over.

Perkins chuckles, his ruddy cheeks rounding as he smiles. "I appreciate you trying to cover for Miss Hayes. But don't worry, she's not in trouble. Sometimes volatile energy magic like hers can be hard to control, and I know she didn't mean to do it. There's no reason for you to worry. That's why we have the magic dampening braces."

"I'm—"

I *am* worried, he's not wrong about that. I don't want another student to get in trouble because of me. But I'm not just making this up to cover for her, damn it, it's the actual truth.

Or rather... I think it is. *Could* it have been Daria? The idea of me summoning lightning like that... It's crazy, right? Maybe I just imagined it? I'm tired. I didn't get much sleep last night, and I do sometimes zone out in this class.

"It's kind of you to worry about Miss Hayes. You always keep an eye out for others, and that's an admirable quality," Professor Perkins goes on, probably thinking of when I found Jessica in the locker room after Raul attacked her. "But I'm afraid it's also quite difficult to cover for someone when they have a very specific magical skillset. If we were all fire elementalists, that would be one thing— but with Unpredictables, where everyone has their own very unique power, it's near-impossible to take the blame for someone else's slip-up."

"Right."

My fingers have stopped tingling. Were they ever really tingling?

Yeah, they must have been.

I'm so confused and honestly a bit freaked out, because I have no idea how I made that lightning happen... or if I even did it.

"Have a good rest of your day, Miss Sinclair," Professor Perkins says, gathering up the books on his desk. He's clearly got other things to do.

“Right. Yeah, you too, professor.”

Slipping my cuff back on, I hurry out of the room. I curl my fingers into fists as I walk, as if I’m worried some stray bolts of electric magic could fly out of them at any moment despite the dampening brace I’m wearing.

I’m glad Daria won’t get in trouble, even if she was a little embarrassed to be called out in front of everyone like that. But that still doesn’t explain what happened.

My head feels a little fuzzy. I *was* daydreaming in class, and I’m tired, and rune magic fries my brain like nothing else. But I can’t have entirely imagined what happened, what I did.

I need to figure out what’s going on with me.

CHAPTER 11

The weirdness only gets worse over the next few weeks.

It's not lightning. No, that would actually freak me out less. It's all *kinds* of magic.

I don't know what's going on. It feels like a new sort of magic is bubbling up inside me—only my body can't seem to decide on what kind of magic it is.

Once, when I'm working on a project with my classmate Leo in Theory of Magic class, I find myself moving at super speed out of nowhere for a few seconds. Another time, I'm sparring Dmitri when I feel my hand start to phase through him. At first, I think he's the one doing it, that his arm is phasing and I'm still solid. But no... I'm pretty sure it's me.

I don't think anyone else notices those weird blips of magic I manifest, they're there and gone so fast. But both times, I throw up after class.

What's happening to me? What kind of magic is my body going to settle on, and when will it fully manifest?

I have no clue, and it terrifies me. The first time my sonic boom happened, I nearly killed myself and two other people, and the second time I unleashed it, I sent Asher to the hospital by accident. I didn't do any of it on purpose. Now I've got all kinds of magic coming out of me, way more powers than anyone should be able to have. And they're so random, these little spurts that come and go so fast I almost can't believe they're real.

For the first time, I truly start to feel Unpredictable. It makes sense why we're called that—I can't tell when or how or where my magic will appear, or what power it'll be this time. I'm terrified a moment will come when I hurt someone.

The guys know the basics of what's going on. I can't *not* tell them, seeing as we share a room together. But I don't want to worry them too much. They've only just stopped hovering over me and obsessing about my recovery from the whole coma thing. So I tell them I've been feeling a little wonky and that I think I'm developing a new power and leave it at that. Unpredictables generally have one or two powers, but there are a few with three, so it's not unheard of.

I also can't help but wonder if this is because of what Johnson hit me with. Did he fuck me up magically?

If he did, I'm gonna find him and kick his ass all over again.

Of course, because nothing is ever normal at the Academy of Unpredictable Magic, my powers aren't the only freaky thing going on.

Two more students lose their magic.

I'm not there to witness either of the events. Asher's there for one of them, and he spends the rest of the night pale, silent, and withdrawn. I end up sleeping in his bed with him just to cuddle and help him feel better.

Nobody knows who's doing it, or even how. There's nothing suspicious going on that anyone can track, no student or faculty member conducting weird rituals right beforehand or showing any sign of doing magic.

The administration, of course, seems hesitant to openly admit that anything's wrong. I think Dean Hardwick's really feeling the strain. Fuck, I feel kind of bad for him. First Raul went on a rampage looking for the Brimstone Orb, which caused the school to lose the insurance that came with storing magical artifacts for the Circuit in an underground vault. Then the Trials brought a ton of national attention to our little academy—not all of it positive.

No wonder poor Hardwick is walking around looking like someone ran over his dog.

Like I said, though, nobody wants to act like the school might actually be cursed or something, so after midterms, family day for the third-years goes ahead as planned.

The admins and professors want to show skeptical parents how just three years of training have helped their “uncontrollable” and “dangerous” kids become proficient and skilled in their magic, able to control their powers and ready to be a functioning member of society. Makes sense to me, considering how many parents seem to look down on their children for being Unpredictable.

I'm weirdly nervous about the whole thing, even though it's not *my* family coming. I'm not even a third year, and I don't have any family who'd want to visit me besides Maddy—and God knows I wouldn't be nervous about seeing her. But Asher and Dmitri... I'm not even officially dating either of them, especially Dmitri, but I'll have to meet their parents at some point, won't I, if they're on campus all day? The only way to avoid it would be to hole up in the dorm room until everyone leaves, and that would be way too obvious and probably wouldn't work anyway.

Cam hangs back with me as the people with families surge out onto the quad to meet them. He squeezes my hand reassuringly. I know he's met Asher's family a lot and has only heard stories about Dmitri's family the way I have. He looks a little sad, and I realize he's thinking about his own parents and how they'd probably be here if they could.

I know Mom would be here if she could.

Squeezing his hand in return, I lean against him, trying to reassure him and show that I understand. He shoots me a grateful look and kisses my temple, his sky-blue eyes warm and open.

"Elliot!" Asher rushes over, grinning. "C'mere, I want you to meet my folks."

He grabs my free hand and tugs me away from his friend. I have a moment to shoot a panicked look back at Cam—who grins and waves at me, the bastard—before Asher's dragging me over to...

Oh, wow.

Not all of his brothers came today—that would be insane, there's twelve of them—but a lot of them did, and *holy crap* is this a big family. Two older people are standing at the front of the group, smiling, both with dark brown hair. The man has blue eyes though, and broad shoulders with a strong jaw, and the woman is slim with the same deep green eyes as Asher. I guess he must take after his mom then.

"Mom, Dad, guys, this is Elliot." Asher sounds insanely proud. "My girlfriend."

I almost choke on my own tongue at that. I know we've been inching toward this moment, but I wasn't prepared for the burst of joy and adrenaline that explodes in my chest at the sound of that word.

Girlfriend.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I say in my customer service voice. "I've heard great things about you."

“Asher here won’t shut up about you,” one of his brothers jokes.

The man in question glares at him, and I laugh a little in spite of myself. This is payback for Maddy and all her embarrassing stories about me.

The Prince brothers and Asher’s parents immediately launch into asking me questions. I’m genuinely happy to answer them, even though my nerves are churning in my gut like clothes on a spin cycle.

“I gotta admit,” one of his brothers says—I feel awful but I can’t possibly keep all their names straight, not when there are so many of them. “We were shocked our little bro actually worked up the courage to ask you out.”

“Oh?” I nudge Asher, grinning. “Is he usually shy?”

I can’t point out to his brothers that the reason Asher’s so bold with me is thanks to Cam basically outright saying Asher and he both have feelings for me and are willing to share.

There’s also the fact that anytime his cuff is off in our shared classes, he can read the thoughts in my head that make it painfully apparent how much I want him. I know he still doesn’t feel comfortable with his power and tries not to use it if he can help it, but what he does pick up from my mind has to give him a major confidence boost.

Besides, I want to hear all about Asher’s mishaps.

What? That’s what a girlfriend meeting the family is for, right?

“Oh, he’s the worst,” one of his other brothers tells me. I think this one’s name starts with a J. “He had a crush on this girl in elementary school...”

“Do we really have to do this?” Asher scrubs a hand down his face.

“Yes,” his brothers chorus.

I laugh. “Don’t worry,” I promise, grinning at him. “I won’t tell a soul. I’ll just remind you periodically of all the excellent blackmail material I now have on you.”

He rolls his eyes, and I bat my eyelashes at him exaggeratedly. His brothers all laugh. They seem to like me, although that might be because Asher’s got his arm around my waist and he keeps giving me those puppy dog eyes of his. I hope they like me for me, but his attitude toward me definitely helps.

“I hate to interrupt,” Mrs. Prince says. I do remember her name. It’s Linda. “But you wanted to give us a tour of campus, honey, and we should probably get going on that.” She lowers her voice and whispers to me conspiratorially, “It’s a pain in the ass to get us anywhere; we’re a herd.”

“I hope you guys have fun.” I grin, and it feels more genuine now that I’ve relaxed a bit.

“You’re welcome to come,” Asher’s dad offers, but I really don’t want to join.

No offense, of course. It’s just that talking to a bunch of new people is one thing. Charming people at the bar when I’m working for tips is another. But hanging out with my sort-of-probably-boyfriend’s family for hours?

I’m not sure I’m quite ready to handle that yet.

Not when this is still so new between Asher and myself—and the other guys too. Plus, I don’t want to be rude and cut in on their family time. Their son already spent most of his summer watching over me while I was in a magical coma. I don’t want to take him away from them any more than I already have.

“No, don’t even worry about it,” I tell them with a smile. “I have to go see some other people, but it was really great to meet you all. You’re all lovely, it’s easy to see where Asher gets it from.”

Ash looks like he just choked on air. I don’t think he’s heard me be this polite to people in... well, ever.

I kiss him on the cheek, wave at his family, walk away—and promptly try not to have a panic attack.

Holy shit, I actually survived that. I think they actually like me.

Quick, where’s a corner so I can hyperventilate?

I don’t see a convenient dark corner for shrieking and freaking out in. I don’t see Cam or Roman either, buddying it up in their “no family” club. But I do see Dmitri.

Huh.

He’s with his parents, two people who look like they’ve just stepped off a private jet and are wondering what sort of peasant party this is that there isn’t any caviar. Dmitri takes after his father in looks, clearly, with the dark hair and eyes, but I suspect his mother’s actually got dark hair too and that her blonde locks are an expensive dye-job.

Dmitri looks actively miserable.

Okay, in fairness, the man’s not a exactly a bucket of sunshine on a good day. I admit this. But let me put it this way. When I showed the guys my essay on the intersection between the spiritualist movement in the United States and necromancy magic, Cam told me all the things that were great about it, Asher fixed my grammar, and Dmitri took one look at it and

said, “your conclusion is weak and you ramble too much in the third and sixth paragraphs.”

And I need that. He didn’t just say “it sucked.” He told me what needed work so I could make it better. Dmitri sees the weak points, he sees what’s wrong or missing, but he also sees ways to make it better. Sure, he can be negative, but at least he’s constructive about it. He’s snarky and sarcastic, but so am I, and he’s never actually insulted me.

This? This isn’t negativity or sarcasm or crankiness. He looks like he desperately wants a bolt of lightning to strike him so he can die quickly.

Shit. I can’t just leave him like that.

I change course from my dark-corner-searching to walk over and join them. Then I put on my sunniest, *what can I get you, drunk bachelor party on a Friday night* customer smile, and say, “Hi, you must be Dmitri’s parents!”

Dmitri goes bug-eyed for a brief second—then his face settles into a disconcerting mask. He likes to try and play his cards close to his chest, but he’s not nearly as good at it as Roman and Asher are. Those two can actually hide what they’re thinking when they want to. Dmitri usually just radiates irritation.

But right now? I’m not getting anything from him. It’s like I’m staring at a robot.

What the fuck?

“I’m Elliot,” I say to his folks, since robot-Dmitri seems to have momentarily powered down. “You must be so proud of him.”

The two of them stare at me like I’m something that crawled out of the Black Lagoon. I stop myself from extending my hand to shake theirs, because I’m honestly not sure they’d deign to touch me.

Dmitri clears his throat. I’ve never seen him look this awkward. “Mother, Father, this is my... classmate.”

That brings me up short.

I don’t gape at him, because I’m not dramatic and I don’t like to cause a scene and I’m definitely not going to let the people around us realize an argument might be brewing. But I sure as fuck want to.

Classmate? Classmate?!

My initial response is to consider asking him if he just casually feels up all of his classmates, waits by their bedside for three months, and sheds

tears when they wake up from their coma—but even *I* realize saying that in front of his parents will be like setting off a bomb.

But it still fucking hurts to be dismissed by him like this. More than I would've thought, honestly. He didn't even call me his *friend*, and I think that crushes me the most. The way he just introduced me to his parents makes it sound like we've only run into each other in the halls a few times, nothing more.

I thought... Fuck. After I woke up from my coma, I really thought there was something between us. We haven't put it out there in words, but then, neither of us is all that good at that. And I know I spent a long time—all of last year—pushing the guys away, every single one of them, but I thought things had changed. I've been opening up, things have been moving forward, we've all been getting closer. I hoped...

And Dmitri can't say anything?

Dmitri, who's never worried about saying anything to anyone in his life? Dmitri, who goads me into fighting him in Combat class and talks back to the teachers and can clear a path through a crowded room just by radiating intimidating power? *That* Dmitri isn't being honest with his parents about who I am? Not even to acknowledge we know each other beyond casual acquaintanceship?

I maintain my smile, just barely. Thank God for my bartending job; it's the only way I'm able to hide my emotions.

Is Dmitri really that ashamed of me? Of... us?

"It's so nice you two could come all the way out here to visit," I say. I'm not sure where his family actually lives, but I know they're super rich, Russian, and I heard something once about a second home in Paris, so wherever they're from, I doubt it's near here.

"Mm, yes," his mother says. She doesn't offer up her name, or her hand for me to shake. In fact, she's smiling fixedly like I'm a particularly dirty, mud-covered dog that she doesn't want me touching her nice, clean dress. "We thought it best to see what kind of place Dmitri has had to put up with. What kind of... people."

Great. Nice to know she thinks I'm dirt under her heel.

Screw this. I'm not putting up with this bullshit for another second.

"Well, it was great to meet you," I blurt out with false cheer. "I hope you guys enjoy your visit! Thanks for introducing me, Dmitri."

Yeah, it's a passive aggressive little dig at him, but I don't give two shits right now.

I smile at them, wave, and then walk off. I force myself to keep my steps measured and slow, my breathing even, until I make my way across the quad and into Wellwood Hall.

That's when I finally let go.

CHAPTER 12

The school building is quiet since so many students are outside greeting their families or their friends' families. I brace one hand against the wall and try to control my breathing, but I can't seem to get myself to stop gasping. I'm horrified and ashamed of the way tears prick at my eyes.

Dmitri and I aren't—Jesus, it's not like he proposed to me under the moonlight or anything. We haven't been passionately dating for months. We've barely even started on this... this thing between us, whatever it is.

But that makes it even worse, somehow. Like he's killed a tiny plant before it even had a chance to grow.

"Elliot!"

It's Dmitri, calling for me in hushed tones.

What the fuck does he want?

I push away from the wall and start walking again, blinking hard as I straighten my spine. "Fuck off."

Dmitri grabs me by the wrist. "Come here."

I yelp in anger, but he drags me into an empty classroom, closing the door behind me. I yank my hand back.

"What the hell was that?" I demand. "I'm just your classmate? Not even a fucking *friend*, but a classmate? If you really don't want anything to happen between us, fine! That's great! But you should've said something right around the time you were making goo-goo eyes at me and kissing me like I was fucking Sleeping Beauty. Or do you do that with everyone you just want a quick fuck from? Although—gotta say—if a quick fuck is all you wanted, you're moving slower than the goddamn continental drift!"

Dmitri glares at me. “I’m sorry, am I being insulted because I didn’t just bend you over and fuck you the first chance I had?”

“No, I’m insulting you, you idiotic two-bit shithead, because you spent an entire year playing hot and cold with me and getting horny with me when we spar and fucking crying over my goddamn sick bed—and then you turn around and tell your parents we’re just *classmates*! God!”

I start pacing back and forth, all of my irritation at him spiraling out of control, like a rollercoaster that’s had the brakes taken off and is in danger of careening off the track completely.

“If you didn’t want anything to do with me, then you should’ve said so instead of practically seducing my panties off in Roman’s classroom, telling me you care about my happiness and all that shit. Or just tell me you want to fuck, we can fuck, and then boom! Done! We move on! I didn’t ask for you to stay with me all summer. I didn’t ask for you to be there. I didn’t ask for any of it.”

Ohhh, yeah. Turns out I have a lot of pent up feelings where Dmitri is concerned. It makes sense, I guess, considering it’s been a year of one step forward, two steps back with this guy. But right now, I’m not interested in analyzing the hows or whys of the anger boiling up inside me. I’m only interested in expelling it in a fiery torrent like a volcano.

I take a step closer to him, leveling an angry finger at his chest.

“So *excuse* me for thinking maybe we were something more, and excuse me for thinking you’d actually have the balls to introduce me to your parents properly, because God knows you make this big fucking show of being so tough that nothing scares you. Except, oh wait, maybe you’re a coward after all—because if I *am* something to you and you just lied to your fucking parents—”

I shake my head, breathing hard.

“I’m not going to be some dirty little secret, someone you shove aside when people you *really* care about are around. I’m not the kind of person who—don’t you think for one second that—and *God*, would it have killed you to just—”

Nothing I’m saying is making much sense anymore, but my mouth won’t stop moving. My thoughts just keep pouring out in a jumbled up mess.

“I didn’t ask for anything! You’re the one who decided to stay and get all soft on me when I woke up, you’re the one who decided to look after me

and kiss me! You chose all of that! And I'm pretty fucking sure you threw the Trial qualifications fight, bucko, so—"

Dmitri grabs my wrists, jolting me into a halt. He's glaring at me, his eyes burning, and I'm not scared of him—I never have been—but I have to admit seeing him like this pulls me up short in my tirade. He looks like he's about to go off on a rant himself, and I can see the muscles in his neck and jaw straining as he tries to hold himself back.

"It's not like that," he snarls. He squeezes my wrists, seems to realize he's possibly hurting me, and lets go. "Jesus Christ. It's not like that."

"Then what is it like, genius?" I snap. I'm not going to cry in front of him, I'm *not*, and the only other option I have is anger.

"I do care—"

"Yeah? You have a funny way of showing it."

"Damn it, Elliot, I'm trying to tell you I'm engaged!"

He's—

What?

"What the fuck?" I blurt out.

Dmitri stills, staring at me. He draws in a deep breath and lets it out, his expression drawn and strained. "I don't want you for just a quick fuck, Princess. If I did, I would've slept with you when we first met, or I would've moved on by now. I *do* care about you. More than I should. But the reason I kept trying to keep you at arm's length is that I'm—"

"Engaged." My lips form the word, but I can't believe I'm saying it. "Yeah, you mentioned that. Does your fiancée know you've been as good as cheating on her?"

Without waiting for an answer, I head for the door. I don't need to hear this. I feel sick. I helped someone basically cheat on some poor, unsuspecting girl—

Dmitri barrels around me and gets in the way, pressing his hand on the door to stop me from opening it. "Fucking hell, you are an impossible woman. Will you just hold on and let me explain? I'm not—it's not exactly a traditional... I didn't propose or anything."

I stop trying to shove past him, stepping back and narrowing my eyes. He sighs, leaning against the door like he just can't stand under his own power anymore. He looks pissed off and frustrated, but more than that, he looks exhausted.

“Look, my family is high up in magical society, okay? Powerful. So when I was a kid, my father and a good friend of his from another powerful magical family—they decided I was going to marry this guy’s daughter. I think I was about three years old at the time. Really fucking young. It was a handshake agreement. So I’m not engaged, more like... promised. It was basically a fucking business deal, a plan to merge our magical families and our financial assets through this marriage.”

Holy shit.

That—that’s closing a business deal all right, but with people’s *lives*. How does this poor girl feel? I know I wouldn’t like it one damn bit. My dad’s an asshole for splitting, and I’ve spent the past thirteen years hating him for that, but at least he hasn’t tried to control my life like this.

I’d rather he be out of my life entirely than trying to dictate how I live it.

Jesus. His own father set this up. If that’s the kind of guy who’s been Dmitri’s parent, the person in control of his life as a child... no wonder he is the way he is. So much about him makes sense now that I know this.

I just wish understanding Dmitri better didn’t come at the price of all this fucked up shit.

“You...” I lick my lips, trying to organize my whirling thoughts. “You aren’t going to go along with it, are you? I mean, you’re one of the most stubborn people I know. You talk back to professors, you never give me or Cam or Asher a break, I think you’re the only person besides me who isn’t intimidated by Roman—you’ve got to stand up to your parents, right? They can’t control you. You’re an adult; you’re twenty-six, for God’s sake.”

Dmitri just presses away from the door and paces halfway across the room, every muscle in his body tense. He stands there silently, and I feel a hysterical laugh bubbling up in my throat.

“You’re not serious!” I choke out. “You don’t even *like* your parents, why would you throw your whole life away for them? Let them plan everything for you?”

He swallows hard, clears his throat, glares—or tries to—and then finally looks away, like he can’t bear to look at me anymore.

I want to ask if this is it—if we’re breaking up—except that, well, we were never officially together. We weren’t really dating, just... kind of developing into something organically. Cam and Asher are the ones who stood up and said, “we want to date you.” Dmitri never said that.

Maybe he just got swept up in this because his roommates were into me, and hey, the two of us do have chemistry. Maybe he ended up in my orbit without really wanting to be there.

It feels like someone is sitting on my chest, making it impossible for me to breathe.

Fuck. Is this what heartbreak feels like?

I'm not a child. I'm not even a love-struck teenager. I've never really been in any serious relationships, and after Mom died and my life became about taking care of Maddy, I sort of gave up on it. Casual flings are all I know, not this serious stuff. I've never been able to say that I've been in love, and I liked it that way. But this...

Is this what it feels like?

The silence seems to stretch on for ages, until I want to scream. We're staring at each other. Dmitri's not saying anything, and I'm not saying anything, because what the fuck would I actually say? The ball's kind of in his court here anyway, and I'm just wondering if I should leave—

When the door opens.

“And this is where our...”

Asher trails off as he sees Dmitri and me glaring at each other.

The entire Prince family is behind him, and *oh fuck*. How the hell are they going to react to their brother-slash-son's girlfriend having a private argument with another guy?

Luckily I'm not crying, and Dmitri and I are standing a good bit apart, not touching or anything. Asher looks from one of us to the other, and I know he's about to ask what's going on, so I just quickly slip past him.

“I'll see you at dinner,” I tell him under my breath.

Asher catches my hand, squeezes, then nods and lets me go as his family stares in confusion.

On my way out, I hear him say to Dmitri, “What the hell did you do now?”

I'm pretty sure it's the only time I've seen Asher truly pissed, but I ignore it in favor of walking as fast as I can until I burst through the doors into the crisp fall air.

People are still gathered in the quad, so I make a sharp left turn, heading toward the woods. As soon as the babble of voices behind me fades, I break into a run, and I don't stop running until I'm deep in the forest, leaving everything behind.

The twisting, aching feeling in my stomach though?
The invisible hand squeezing my heart?
Those stay with me.

CHAPTER 13

The next week is... um... it's...
Okay, it's awkward as hell.

Dmitri and I aren't talking. I've got no interest in talking to him, and he's clearly got no interest in talking to me. Everything else in our lives keeps going on as normal, but just... without him acknowledging that I'm there.

And it's making me realize that maybe I really was wrong all this time.

I must have misinterpreted this whole thing. I've been putting way too much importance on Dmitri's supposed feelings for me, on this connection I thought I felt between us.

I feel awful. Absolutely awful. If it wasn't for the connection between his friends and me, Dmitri and I probably would've been a quick one-night stand, wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am, and then never talked again. But instead, this whole time he's tried to ignore his attraction so he wouldn't give the wrong impression, the impression that he wanted more, and I still *assumed* he did, and I just—God, I feel like such an idiot.

Here I was trying not to get attached, and I went and did it anyway.

Of course... it's not entirely my fault, here. I mean, why the hell wasn't he honest with me in the first place, huh? Why couldn't he just tell me he didn't like me and that I shouldn't assume anything from him? It's fifty-fifty here, buddy, and I don't see him apologizing for his part in things, and that annoys the fuck out of me.

When I think about the group of men that's formed around me *without* him in it... God, I hate to say it, but it breaks my heart, okay? It breaks my fucking heart. I don't want to lose Dmitri. I care about him, more than I

think I even let myself admit before all this bullshit came to light. And what about the other guys? Roman, who's started treating him like a brother, and Cam and Asher, who are his best friends. How can any of this be the same without him?

I'll be honest, worrying about all of this kind of eats up my week. I throw myself into my homework so I have something to think about, but God knows I'm not paying attention to anything else. Alyssa and her crew can tell, I think, because they leave me alone, probably figuring I wouldn't even hear them if they did throw a taunt my way.

Another student gets her magic stolen, bringing the total up to four. I'm not in class with her, she's a first-year and it's an introductory class—poor girl, her magic *just* sparked, and now it's gone for good—but honestly, I don't pay as much attention to it as everyone else does. It's whispered about in the halls constantly, just like Raul's attacks last year, but all I can think about is Dmitri and how the fuck I'm supposed to fix this.

If I can even fix it. Maybe whatever I try to do will just make it worse. It feels like everything I've done so far has just fucked things up more.

I get a few weird magical blips again, different powers flaring and then receding, but I ignore them. It's not like I can control these strange burbles or stop them from happening, and nobody's getting hurt. *Probably just something Johnson fucked me up with in our battle.*

The only class I'm really enjoying right now is Combat, and that's just because I get to turn off my brain for a couple hours and work out some aggression with my fists and magic.

I never spar with Dmitri anymore though. It'd be pretty hard to fight someone you're ignoring, and besides, I wouldn't trust either of us not to actually try to hurt the other one right now.

The third-years have special projects throughout the year, and one of their senior seminars involves a two-day field trip. So on a Friday class in late October, they're all out and it's just us second- and first-years. We're a mixed bag for Combat so the students can get all kinds of experience and practice against different levels of fighters, just like in real life.

I miss the guys. I've gotten so used to having them around that it definitely feels weird when they're gone. But maybe it's a good thing to have a little space, given... everything.

Cam and Asher know shit's hit the fan. Asher couldn't not know, walking in on us like that, and Cam's the one who found me in the woods

afterward and brought me back to campus. They're both worried for us, and I don't know if Dmitri's silence or their concerned looks are making me feel worse these days. I don't want them to worry.

I just want this all to be fixed somehow.

Kendal actually asks to spar with me first. I'm—surprised, and a little touched. Alyssa and the others have noticed how I've been acting, so they definitely know something's wrong, and Kendal's still hanging out with those idiots, but I can't hate her the way I used to.

It's harder than you'd think to pin Kendal. She's not competitive in the slightest, but she knows a lot thanks to her parents and her siblings, who do magical competitions for a living, and she's a slippery one. I see a quick grin from her when I finally get her down, like she's proud of me, and then we shake hands and she's off to her next opponent and I'm with mine.

It's another second-year, Tandy. I don't know much about her, and as far as I know, she doesn't know much about me. We're in classes together, we've nodded at each other when we've found seats next to each other, but that's about it. She seems nice.

Not that her niceness is going to stop me from wiping the floor with her.

Tamlin calls a start to the next round, and Tandy and I go at it. She's not as skilled as Kendal, but she's a lot more fierce. I've got every belief that she'd break my nose if that was what it took to win this.

Perfect. Just my style.

Tandy's power is levitation, which makes for an interesting challenge next to my spider climb. I race up the wall to use it as a launching-off point while she's hovering in the air about two feet off the floor. When I'm six or seven feet up, I pivot and push off the stone wall, and then—

I'm levitating.

What. The. Fuck.

I land on her, and we scuffle in midair. She's fighting hard, trying to push me off her—I'm pretty sure she thinks I'm only staying up in the air because I'm holding onto her. But then she properly shoves me off and I stay hovering, same as her, a couple of feet off the floor.

Holy shit.

We gape at each other. I have no clue how I'm doing this. This feels different than my other magical blips. This isn't just a little lightning strike that I can't replicate. No, I'm fully doing the same magic she's doing, with

just as much strength, like I'm... feeding off her somehow. What's going on?

Yeah, I'm gonna have to talk to Tamlin or Roman or Dean Hardwick about this after class. Whatever the hell is going on with me, it's gotten too big to downplay or ignore.

A few of our classmates who are wrapping up their own bouts turn to look at us, probably wondering why we're staring at each other with our mouths open like terrified goldfish.

We recover at the same moment. I see determination in Tandy's gaze, and I'm sure as hell not letting her kick my ass, weird new magical powers or no, so I go right back at her.

I unleash a little of my sonic boom, and we go crashing to the floor, me on top of her. I try not to use that power too much. It's still hard to control and tends to just send everything flying, which could really hurt people if I'm not careful. And besides, I don't want to rely on a single power too much; I don't want to become dependent on it.

Tandy fights furiously, jabbing and punching and twisting and kicking, but I manage to get the upper hand and pin her to the floor, her arm wrenched behind her back.

She thumps the floor, yielding, and I get off of her, helping her up to her feet.

"Good fight," I tell her sincerely, and she nods.

"You too."

I turn to find another partner, only to have the blood in my veins freeze as I hear one of those piercing, gut-wrenching screams.

Tom was the only student who lost his magic that I was around for. The others all happened when I was somewhere else. But even though I've only heard it happen once, I'll never forget the way he shrieked, and the moment I hear Tandy—I know what's happening to her.

I whip around, and the rest of the class stops what they're doing to stare as the willowy girl falls to the floor, screaming in agony.

Tamlin rushes to her, calling over her shoulder as she does. "Someone get the healers! Now!"

Kendal's nearest the door, and she books it, headed straight for the infirmary. All the other students are huddling in fear, unsure what to do, how to help. Despite this being the fifth time this has happened, none of us

are prepared, and my gut is heaving so hard my breakfast is about to reappear as Tandy writhes on the floor.

Tamlin's power is this magical web or rope made of energy that she can use in various ways. Right now, she wraps it around Tandy, trying to do something—stop her powers from being ripped out, maybe, or ease her pain—but it doesn't seem to be working. A guy and girl run up, dropping to their knees beside Tandy. I think they're her friends. They start trying to soothe her and to get her to listen to them, to calm down, but she's having none of it. She's in too much pain. She just keeps screaming, a sound that seems to be ripped out of her along with her magic.

Oh fuck, I might actually vomit.

Tandy suddenly goes limp, like a puppet with its strings cut, and lies on the floor, eyes glassy, chest heaving.

Jesus. Poor Tandy.

I know that sounds condescending, but I really don't have any other words for it. This is so fucking awful.

"Oh my God."

The voice belongs to Alyssa, and judging from her tone, she isn't just scared and horrified like the rest of us. She sounds... vindictive.

I turn to look at her and find she's staring right at me, a dangerous glint in her eye.

"You did this," she murmurs.

"What?" My voice is flat, disbelieving. *Great one, Alyssa, I clearly stole Tandy's magic when I wasn't even doing anythi...*

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

Just a few minutes ago, I was somehow imitating Tandy's magic. The whole class saw it. That's why Alyssa thinks it was me.

"You did this," she repeats, advancing on me.

Her blonde hair is a little wild and disheveled, and I see it in her eyes now. She *is* scared and horrified, maybe even more so than anyone else in this room. But the vindication is there too because she thinks she found the culprit.

Me.

My heart, which has been racing ever since Tandy first screamed, skips a beat and then thuds heavily in my chest. This can't be happening. Surely no one will actually believe that I—

“You took it from her!” Alyssa yells, pointing a shaking finger at me.
“You stole her magic!”
Well. This is just great.

CHAPTER 14

My gaze darts around the large room as more of my classmates turn to stare at me. I realize I'm surrounded, cut off from Professor Tamlin, who's still trying to help Tandy—not that my classmates planned it this way, but it's sure not helping that they're all clustered around me right now.

Their faces are pale and sweaty, their eyes wide, chests heaving. It's only first-years and second-years in class today. The third-year students are gone. My *friends* are gone. Everyone who's left is in a state of panic and fear.

That's when it hits me just how much danger I'm in.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

"I always knew you were a snake in the grass," Alyssa hisses.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cristina preparing some kind of spell, which is especially concerning because her power is disintegration. *Jesus*. I really don't want to lose a fucking limb before I can clear all this up.

"You've been out to get us, all of us, from the start! What, was winning the Trials not enough for you? You needed *more* magic? More attention?" Alyssa's voice is becoming high-pitched, reaching hysteria.

I clear my throat, trying not to let my panic show. "Um, Professor Tamlin? A little help?"

Tamlin's busy with Tandy, who's regained consciousness and is groaning pitifully. But she looks up when she hears me, and her eyes go wide as she flings out a hand, sending her web of blue magic toward the threat. "Cristina, *no!*"

Too late.

The dark-haired girl sends a blast of magic at me just before Tamlin's magic wraps around her wrists. It erupts from her hand as a sort of transparent ball of red-orange light, and I know exactly what'll happen if it touches me. I've been in class with Cristina for two and a half semesters; I've seen her use her disintegration power plenty of times.

I instinctively fire off a sonic boom toward her, leaping up onto the wall in a spider climb to dodge the ball of magic, which tears past the spot where I was standing just seconds earlier and hits the wall. Because this room is primarily used for combat training, the walls are enchanted to be resistant to damage, but her disintegration spell still makes bits of dust crumble from the gray stone.

Fuck. That means the blast she threw was strong enough to have done some serious damage if it'd hit me.

"You're insane!" I shoot back.

"No, *you* are!" Alyssa's practically shrieking by now, and the other students are following her lead. My sonic boom bowled a few people over, but they leap back to their feet quickly, and then a dozen different kinds of magic are thrown at me at once. I scramble up the wall, half sprinting, half crawling, trying to evade the mass of spells.

My heart's pounding, blood is rushing in my ears, but the thing is—I don't want to harm anyone. I don't. If I use my sonic boom to its full extent, it'll send all of them flying dangerously. They could get concussions. Break limbs. They could die. And my spider climb is only so good for evasion.

But—I used Tandy's levitation powers a few minutes ago. I didn't take them from her like Alyssa's accusing me of at the top of her lungs. But I borrowed them, somehow. And I used Daria's lightning power in Perkins' class, and she didn't lose her magic. So...

We learned this in one of our theory classes: if you want to cancel out someone else's magic, you either have to use a spell that's completely opposite—like fire and water—or you have to use the exact same spell. My innate powers aren't exactly the opposite of anyone's in this class. I don't know what a sonic boom would be the opposite of anyway.

But... I can mimic their powers. Fight them off that way.

I don't want to hurt anyone, and this could be the solution. I've never actually tried to mimic someone's powers before. Or maybe *mirror* would be a better term. After all, mimicking is an imitation, and this is the real

deal. It's like I'm just suddenly able to do what they can do, at least temporarily.

I take a deep breath. *Okay, Elliot, you can do this.*

Another student steps forward to attack, and I focus on her, letting my body relax, remembering that odd feeling I got right before the lightning strike and the other blips of magic. She's a first-year named Phoebe, and she can generate and manipulate light.

Okay, it's on.

She summons a burst of light that's nearly blinding and so hot it raises the temperature in the room several degrees. I reach out with my senses desperately, feeling the light power, trying to draw it into myself. Then I send a beam of light right back at her, making the two bright flashes flare in the air between us. They collide and seem to swell, pulsing like a single dying star before winking out.

Holy fuck. I did it.

I can't help but grin a little in triumph. I can do this!

...maybe.

It's still two dozen to one, and Tamlin's yelling for people to stop, using her magic web to restrain a few students, but she's also got poor Tandy writhing on the floor in front of her, screaming like her soul is on fire. Her focus is split, and she's only one person.

Tristan, a guy with gravity manipulating power, uses it to force me down the wall—it's a good thing I'm only about ten feet up, but it still hurts like a bitch when I land.

After the initial onslaught, my classmates took turns for a little while, but now everyone seems to realize that going after me one at a time is just ridiculous when there are far more of them than there are of me, and they all attack at once.

Fuck, I can't mirror them all at the same time.

My magic seems to be taking over a bit, flowing out of me instinctively, like it always does when I'm in danger. I'm mirroring more quickly than I can even keep track of, and thank God for that, because it's the only thing keeping my head above water. If Dmitri were around right now, I'd actually thank him—our intense sparring and his constant push for me to be better have made it so I don't even have to think, I just have to react, and I manage to throw a second-year over my head, sending her crashing to the floor.

Another student tackles me. A big guy named Carl.

Shit, they're trying to grapple me.

More hands land on me, and in that moment my chest goes tight and I can feel myself starting to panic. I release a sonic boom, just enough to get them off me, and pray that nobody's too badly hurt. I don't want to injure anyone, but I'm also starting to feel like I might not make it out of this room alive.

I've never felt so helpless. My magic is powerful, and I'm a tough, scrappy fighter. But I can't turn the tide here. I shove two off only to have three more pile on, and I can't keep this up. I'm drowning under bodies and spells and—

The snarl that comes from Roman is practically unreal as he shoves me behind him, appearing out of nowhere, magic crackling in the very air around us like a veil's been torn open.

“What the *fuck* do you all think you're doing?” he demands.

Roman's known as a popular professor. He's aloof and hard to read, but he's also young. He gets the slang, he's a snazzy dresser, and he relates personally to the students, calls them into his office if he sees they're having a hard time, that kind of thing. He's the kind of stern but fair guy that people appreciate, and I think a lot of students look up to him as an older brother figure—the ones who aren't crushing on him, anyway.

But right now, everyone's seeing their favorite professor look at them with complete and utter fury, and I gotta say, it's pretty hot, but it's also pretty damn vindicating.

“I wasn't aware that *Lord of the Flies* had started,” he snarls. Magic is still crackling around us, like he's keeping it leashed by the thinnest of threads and will call up a demon the size of Godzilla if someone so much as steps a toe out of line.

My body aches all over as I stand on wobbly legs. I'm bruised, exhausted, and out of breath—but it's not until the students all start to back away, giving Roman and me space, that I realize I'm shaking.

“Cuffs on!” he barks. “If you can't stop yourselves from using magic to attack someone, then you shouldn't be allowed to use your magic at all.”

The students all stare at him, slack-jawed, and I know what a blow this is. Unpredictables are already in danger of having their magic taken away by the Circuit, and now to have a favorite person tell them they might not deserve it? *Ouch*.

He's got a point, though. They attacked me without any evidence, out of nothing but panic, fear, and misguided distrust. They hurt me, and they could've killed me. I don't know how much longer I could've held out, mentally or physically, if Roman hadn't stepped in.

A few people shuffle out of the way as healers move in, and I realize Roman must've come in with them. Kendal is standing near the door of the large classroom, her blue eyes wide and her freckles standing starkly against her pale skin. Her gaze darts from me to Tandy to Roman and back again as she tries to figure out what the hell she missed while she was away getting help.

"I said get your cuffs on," Roman intones as the students continue to stare. "*Now.*"

Everyone scrambles to obey. Nobody seems to want to look at him, or at me, for that matter. Alyssa looks pissed, but also... embarrassed? I know she's one of the students with a crush on Roman, so maybe having him yell at her has finally knocked some sense into her dense blonde skull. Maybe now she'll stop and logically think through whether I could've been the one who stole Tandy's magic.

Or maybe not.

"Josephine?" Roman turns toward Tamlin, his voice gentling a little when he speaks to her. "If you could make sure those cuffs are in place?"

"Yes. Of course."

My combat professor looks shaken herself, and she throws me an apologetic glance as she crosses over to check the students. I know she was overwhelmed trying to deal with everything, and I honestly don't know if I would've handled it any better in her shoes, but when I think about what could've happened...

I'm shaking so hard I think I might throw up. Roman turns, sees me, and his shoulders slump.

"Fucking hell," he murmurs, pulling me roughly into his arms. His voice is low in my ear, gruff and full of regret. "Jesus, Reckless, are you all right?"

I grab onto him—cling, really—and I know I shouldn't, that we're still in public, but I can't help myself. I need this. It's the only thing in the world I need right now.

"Shh." Roman rubs my back, and I realize I'm crying. My breath is coming in short gasps as tears stream down my face. "It's okay, I've got

you.”

You could, if you wanted, take the excuse that I’m clearly having a panic attack to say it’s okay that Roman’s hugging me. I’m a scared student, and I was just attacked. It’s not out of the realm of possibility that he’d want to comfort me.

But at the same time... I know we’re hugging a lot longer, and a lot more intimately, than we should be. I know we should stop, but I can’t make myself let go. I just can’t.

I need this, need *him*, too much.

My gaze lifts, tracking past Roman’s shoulder as he continues to hold me and soothe me, and I see Tamlin looking at us. She’s moving through the gathered students making sure everyone’s magic dampening brace is securely back on, but her steps slow as she watches the two of us. A distinct flicker of hurt flashes in her eyes.

Ah, damn it.

She may be Roman’s ex, but I like Tamlin. It’s not like we’re besties or anything, but she’s a sweet person who I respect a lot. And I know she still has feelings for the man holding me in his arms, so I feel kind of like shit that she’s figured out there’s something going on between us.

Then a new thought strikes me.

...oh, crap.

If Tamlin’s made the connection, then how many other people have figured it out too?

Just how deep in shit am I?

CHAPTER 15

The healers roll Tandy onto one of their levitating stretchers to take her down to the infirmary. They carry her out the door, and the room grows quiet as her moans and cries fade into the distance.

Roman escorts me out of the classroom. He says something to Tamlin about taking me out of the way while she informs Hardwick about the situation—it's clear they both think I need to be kept away from the other students, although whether it's for my own protection or because they genuinely think I might have done something to the others, I can't tell.

My classmates all give me a wide berth. The only one who doesn't look scared is Kendal, but she just looks confused, having missed the whole thing.

Roman hasn't let go of me this whole time. He keeps an arm around my shoulders as we walk out of the classroom, so I'm pressed up against his side. I know I should pull away a little and make us look less like... well, make us look less *close*, but I can't manage it.

I've never had a panic attack like that before. I couldn't stop shaking, I was crying, my chest felt painfully tight—it's better now, I'm coming down from it, but I've never felt so helpless. Not even in the middle of the Trials when my magic felt inadequate and I knew someone was trying to sabotage me.

My classmates start whispering among themselves as we walk out. I can't tell if it's about me and what I did—or what they *think* I did—or if it's about the fact that Roman is still holding me as we walk, but either way...

Goddamn it.

We've been so careful this whole time. For over a year, we've worked to not let anyone know about our hookup at the bar or everything that's developed between us since then. On one level, it's not even that scandalous. I'm of age, a fully grown adult, and there's only a few-year age gap between us. It shouldn't be a big deal... but he's my professor. People could claim he was giving me better grades or something because of our relationship. If the wrong people get upset about this, Roman could get fired.

Fuck. Like I needed one more thing to worry about.

Roman ignores it all. I don't know if it's because he doesn't see it or—no, he has to see it. He's smart and observant; he notices everything. He's just choosing to ignore it, then, either too angry to care or just not caring in general.

I wish I could say the same, but I *do* care. I don't want either of us kicked out for this, of all things.

Although I probably should be more worried about everyone thinking I've, you know, stolen Tandy's magic.

But that wasn't me. I'm sure of it.

If I really could steal someone else's power for my own, then I'd still be able to levitate, wouldn't I? And I can't. Every time I "borrow" a power from someone else, it never seems to last very long. I want to scream at them *use your heads! Use some goddamn common sense! I didn't do it!*

But none of the students looking at me suspiciously want to listen to reason right now. They're scared, and they want an enemy they can recognize, an enemy they can latch onto and attack. It's probably more comforting to blame me than to live with the idea that we don't know where these attacks are coming from or how to stop them.

Roman doesn't take me to his office like I expect, but to the dorms—to his room. He leads me in gently, but the moment the door closes, he grabs me and hauls me to him, kissing me.

I gasp into his mouth, grabbing at his shoulders, surrendering for a moment because, oh God, I need this. I want to forget everything, let the rest of the world disappear for a while and just lose myself in Roman—

But...

I pull back, pushing him away slightly. He stops at once, his touch gentling, becoming less frantic.

“I’m sorry,” he says, his voice rough. “I shouldn’t—you’ve just had a rough time, I shouldn’t—”

“No, no, it’s not about that. You’re not taking advantage of me or anything.”

God, no. I appreciate that he’s checking though, that his first thought is to take care of me, and a rush of warmth fills me. Damn it, when did I become such a sap for him? For all of the men?

“It’s that...” I blow out a breath. “Tamlin knows. I saw it in her eyes, and I’m sure by now a lot of the students know, or they suspect at least. And we can’t—we have to be careful—”

Roman shakes his head, a growl working its way up out of his throat. “No,” he says. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me against him. “I don’t care.”

“You can’t not care—”

He kisses me again, stealing my breath, and damn it, I love and hate that I’m such a sucker for him. I kiss him back, grabbing at him, letting him slide his hands up underneath my clothes. His touch sears my skin, setting me ablaze in the best way. Just like it always has.

“We really should stop,” I murmur into his mouth, but God knows I’m not actually making a move to stop him, and my voice comes out breathy and desperate. “We should... we’ll be in so much trouble...”

“I don’t care,” he repeats, conviction echoing in his voice.

He should though. We both should.

It’ll be bad enough if it comes out that he’s sleeping with a student and has been for months, but when that student is the one everyone thinks is a magical thief? And hell, maybe I am—*somehow*—although I don’t feel like I have Tandy’s or Tom’s or any of the others’ magic inside me. I truly don’t think I stole anyone’s power, not even by accident. But then again, I’m Unpredictable. The whole nature of our magic means we’ve often got no clue what’s going on with it.

Roman sleeping with a notorious student, a student with the kind of reputation I’ve got right now—it could destroy his career. He could be fired, at the very least. I’m terrified at the thought of it.

But I can’t make us stop.

His hands, his mouth, his body on mine, his body *in* mine—I’m addicted to it. I want him in a way I’ve never quite felt before, a way that borders on *need*.

I want to shove away everything that just happened, to forget about my panic attack and the claustrophobia of having my classmates surround me and attack me. I want to shove away the paranoia, anger, and helplessness.

I want there to only be Roman and me.

Just us, joined, nothing else in the world.

Maybe he senses my weakening resolve, or maybe he's just driven by the same need that's burning through my veins, but he presses me up against the door, attacking my mouth and neck with greedy, demanding lips. I tilt my head up, soaking in the feeling of his mouth on me, trying to give more of myself to him.

My hands work through his soft, dark hair, mussing up the perfect strands like I'm trying to mark him as mine. When his teeth bite down on the junction of my neck and shoulder and he sucks hard at my skin, it occurs to me that maybe he's trying to do the same thing—and the thought makes a surge of wetness dampen my panties.

Jesus. Why is that so fucking hot?

To be marked by Roman.

To be claimed by him.

He releases the bite and runs his tongue over my skin, soothing the sting as I whimper and writhe against him. We're already smashed up against the door, but I hook my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist, fusing our bodies together even closer. My nipples rub against the fabric of my bra as I move against him, the little buds already peaked and sensitive.

We kiss like that for so long that my lips are swollen and tingly when he finally drags me away from the door. I think he's going to carry me to the bed, but instead, he sets me down on a low dresser on the opposite wall. Once I'm sitting on it, he unwinds my legs from around his waist and steps back. His lips are red too, and his cobalt eyes are even more intense than usual.

Without saying a word, he walks to his nightstand and retrieves a condom from the drawer, then comes back and sets it on the dresser. Then he takes the hem of my shirt in both hands.

"Arms up."

I do as he says immediately, watching him closely as he tugs the shirt up and over my head. His gaze scans my body, and his eyes darken. When I glance down, I immediately realize why.

Bruises and red marks from my attack decorate my skin. Nobody got in a good enough hit to do any real damage, but my body does bear evidence of the fight I just went through. To be honest, I've gotten more banged up just sparring before, but... context is everything.

A low, angry, hot-as-fuck noise falls from Roman's mouth. His body is tense and radiates danger like a predator about to strike, but when he lowers his head and kisses a bruise on my right shoulder, his touch is heart-wrenchingly gentle. He reaches behind me and unclasps my bra as he presses a kiss to another small bruise. Then he works on my pants and panties, and I kick off my shoes as he slides the garments down my legs.

He kisses every single mark on my body before he lets me take his shirt off. When I finally get my hands on the warm skin of his chest, I swear it feels like fucking heaven. He's so solid and masculine, his large form making me feel smaller than my 5'8" stature, and I love it.

My hands go to his button and fly, and then I push his pants down just enough to free his cock. I lick my palm, and he lets out a harsh groan, his breath picking up, as I work my hand over his smooth, velvety shaft. He shoves his pants the rest of the way down and steps out of them, thrusting his hips against my strokes.

"Fuck, Elliot." His words are a groan, a deep murmur, like they're being pulled out of some primal part of him. "I need you. Do you even know how much?"

He pushes my legs wider apart, then his own hand finds my pussy and he drags a finger up my folds before circling my clit. He slides two fingers inside me, and when he feels how wet I am already, his cock throbs in my grip.

"Condom."

At his harsh, one-word command, I release him immediately, groping for the little packet on the dresser beside me. I tear it open and slide it on him, my core already clenching hard, my clit throbbing. I can't wait any longer. I need this *yesterday*.

When the condom is secure, he wraps an arm around me, tugging me closer to him so my ass is just barely on the dresser.

He grasps my chin with his other hand, and when I meet his gaze, raw desire stares back at me.

"Look down, Reckless. I want you to watch me fill you up. I want you to see how your body takes me. How fucking perfect it is."

A shudder works through me at his words. I swear, the tongue on this man could make me come in more ways than one.

He releases my chin, fisting his cock and lining himself up with my entrance, and I do watch. I watch the broad head nudge apart my folds, watch my body welcome him in, and it's one of the hottest fucking things I've ever seen. I wish we were bare, skin-to-skin entirely, nothing between us, and I resolve that one day soon, we will be.

I need to feel him like that.

He pushes into me slowly, agonizingly slowly, and both our gazes are riveted to the connection between us.

When he's completely rooted inside me, he holds onto my hip with one hand while his other thumb finds my clit. Then he begins to thrust, circling his thumb in time to his movements, and it feels too fucking good. I breathe in soft pants, holding onto his shoulders for balance as he sets up a punishing pace, like he's trying to claim me in this way too.

My legs are wrapped around him, heels digging into the muscles of his ass, which flex as he thrusts hard and deep. The dresser smacks against the wall, the rhythmic sound mingling with our heavy grunts and moans. I lose myself in the sensations as he drives into me, letting them wash over me, overwhelm me, sweep me away.

And I realize I got my wish.

Right now, there's nothing in the universe but Roman and me.

“Oh God. Roman... I...”

I can't form a full sentence. I can't form a full thought. My body is spiraling, and at this point, I don't think there's any damn blood left in my head. It's all gone south for the winter.

“I've got you, Reckless,” he grunts, picking up the pace until it becomes almost frantic, teetering on the edge of control. “I'll always have you. Let go. Let go and come for me. Scream for me.”

As if it was just waiting for the command, my body obliges, hurling me off a cliff into an orgasm so intense it feels like I'm coming apart at the seams. My head tips back and I scream out his name, convulsing around him as he groans.

He cups my face again, running the thumb that was teasing my clit over the seam of my lips before slipping it inside my mouth. I taste myself on his skin, and I bite down, clamping his thumb between my teeth and sucking hard as his thrusts grow wilder, more unrestrained.

“Fuck, Elliot. Fuck. *Fuck.*”

The last word is punctuated by a heavy roll of his hips as his cock pulses inside me, his orgasm drawing out for several long moments. He slides his thumb out of my mouth, and I see little teeth marks on it from where I bit down. My pussy clenches around him again, and he lets out a stuttered groan. Then he palms the back of my head and kisses me long and deep.

When we finally break the kiss, he secures the condom and pulls out. Then he tosses it into the nearby trash can before lifting me from the dresser and carrying me over to the bed.

Roman has never been... well, he's not cold or anything in the afterglow. He's caring and will sling an arm over me or let me rest in the crook of his armpit. But I've always been the one keeping a distance, and he's aware of that—he doesn't push for more or get too cuddly or romantic.

Today though, as we lie together on the bed, he curls around me and holds on like he'll never let go.

I reach my hand up, gently pushing back his dark hair, running the tip of my finger down the line of his slightly hooked nose—broken long ago, I assume, in some kind of fight.

“You're worried for me,” I whisper. It's not a question.

Roman swallows. His beautiful cobalt eyes have little flecks of silver near the iris, but you can only tell when you get almost nose-to-nose with him, the way I am now. They're mesmerizing, and they almost seem to glow sometimes, as if a light is shining from inside.

“You looked—when I came in there—” His jaw clenches. “You were surrounded. I couldn't even see you with all the students around you.” He huffs out a dark bite of laughter. “It was almost like one of those stupid zombie movies where they all converge on a person to tear them apart. And you... I don't know if you even know it, but you were yelling when I came in. I could hear something in your voice that I never—”

He shakes his head, then takes my hand, squeezing tightly.

“I never want you to feel like that again. To be... attacked like that again. And I don't care what the consequences are, I will protect you.” A small smile tilts his lips, although his eyes remain serious. “I know you're capable of defending yourself, this isn't about that. I don't think you're weak or need a lot of protecting; you're one of the strongest women I know. But we all have moments where we're overwhelmed or are hit with more

than we can take, and I won't—I *can't*—let that happen to you. And if I do lose my job over it, so be it.”

I blink up at him.

Holy shit.

My eyes are getting hot and wet again, only this time, it's not from panic but from just being completely overwhelmed. He cares so much, more than I could have ever thought possible. More than I thought someone—anyone—could care about me. Anyone other than Maddy, I mean.

“Don't cry,” Roman says, half laughing, half reassuring. He kisses my knuckles softly. “It's going to be okay, love. We'll find a way to deal with everything.”

I don't think he even notices the endearment that slips out, but it makes my heart skip a beat.

Shit, I'm so done for. I'm turning into a sap, it's official.

“I do feel better,” I murmur, breathing in his whiskey and leather scent. “And a lot of that is thanks to you. But... you have to admit, this is pretty damn impulsive for a guy like you.”

He shrugs. “Maybe on the small scale, yes. Taking you back to my room where anyone could find out right after the fight you just had. But on the large scale? No.” He tucks some of my hair behind my ear. “Not at all.”

I can read between the lines here pretty damn easily. Our relationship, this thing between us, is real enough to him that he doesn't care if everyone knows about it, if everyone's talking about it, if he gets fired.

Our relationship is real. What we have is real. It's not going anywhere.

Not even with all the insanity that faces us.

I feel warm all over, *safe* all over, and I wrap my arms around Roman and hold on tight, and I let him hold me close in a way I never have before. We don't say anything—but then, we don't need to. I've kept him at arm's length this whole time. I'm the one who's been pulling away, and he's the one who's been trying to get closer.

Now I let him. I let him hold me, and I hold on too, as tightly as I can, and I pretend that we'll never have to let go.

Honestly, I always thought it would be like falling off a cliff, but instead, it's like turning on a light in a dark room, illuminating what's always been there.

Roman's in my heart, and it looks like he'll be staying there.

CHAPTER 16

You know, I didn't really have a lot of friends before this whole "magic stealing" thing. My only good friend besides the guys was Raul, and we all saw how that damn debacle went.

But it was different when I was just *choosing* not to talk to people and we were all still existing peacefully together. People would nod or smile at me in the hallway, and there was no problem if I had to team up with someone in class for a project or sparring.

Now, it's like there's a goddamn scarlet A on my chest.

Or maybe a T, for "thief".

Everyone is shunning me. People avoid meeting my eyes, or their gazes slide right over me like I'm not even there. The former are the people who're now scared of me, terrified I'll rip out their magic. The latter types are people like Alyssa who clearly want me to know they're pissed at me and blame me for all of this but also don't want to do me the courtesy of acknowledging my existence.

The guys are rallying around me, and I'm absurdly grateful. I've always been kind of a loner—but there's a huge difference, I'm realizing, in being alone because you decide to be and being actively shoved out by everyone else.

Even Dmitri's sticking by me, to my shock. We're still not talking, and that still sucks, but he walks me to and from each of my classes and glares at people, which is definitely something.

He might not have romantic feelings for me, and I might have misread that whole thing, but Dmitri's a decent person. I like to think he knows I

wouldn't do something as awful as steal someone's magic, and I know he's a good guy who'll stick up for someone who's being unfairly accused.

But the question that keeps floating around in the back of my mind is... *am* I being unfairly accused?

As much as I want to... I can't entirely dismiss the idea that I might be the cause of all this. How, I don't know. I wasn't even there for most of the attacks, just the two in Tamlin's class. But I'm the only lead anyone's got, and it wouldn't be the first time something weird happened around me. Do I have a flashing neon sign above my head saying *Chaos and Calamity Welcomed Here* or something?

The next two days are awful, what with everyone either flinching away from me or glaring daggers at me in the halls. The professors are all on edge too, and even though classes usually ramp up in the second half of the semester, everybody seems to be having trouble focusing.

Even though a bunch of people saw Roman escort me from Wellwood Hall with his arm around me, we're still playing things cool in public. There's a good chance a lot of people know or suspect something is going on between us, but that doesn't mean we have to broadcast it and eliminate any doubt in their minds.

God, I hope he's not in trouble.

Roman might have no problem with burning bridges for my sake, but I care about him, and I don't want him to lose a job he's worked very hard to get and is damn good at.

We've just finished Tamlin's class a few days after the incident, and the four of us are headed down the hallway—Cam, Asher, and Dmitri acting like bodyguards around me—when Hardwick's administrative assistant, Cheryl, walks up.

"Miss Sinclair?" She gives me a smile I hope to God is sympathetic. "The dean would like to see you in his office, please."

Oof. Why am I not surprised?

"Alone?" Cam demands, stepping forward protectively.

"It's okay," I blurt, before any of the guys can get into an altercation with her and land themselves in hot water.

Asher helps me, grabbing Cam and Dmitri by the elbows and tugging them back.

"We'll get to class," he says quietly. "Find us after?"

He might be playing the peacekeeper, but the look he shoots me tells me he's just as worried as the other two. Squaring my shoulders, I nod at him. I'm not going to let them know I'm scared, or they'll never leave me. And I have to go to this meeting.

Might as well get it over with, right?

I follow Cheryl out of Wellwood Hall to the west side of campus where the administration buildings are.

To be honest, I'm bracing myself to possibly see Aurora sitting in Hardwick's office. She's the administrator from the Circuit who came to our house after Maddy got her powers to offer her a spot at Neptune Academy, the school for water elementalists. She came to talk to me in the hospital after my sonic boom sparked too—she was the one who told me about Griffin Academy.

She's also, I'm guessing, the person they'd send if it was time for me to have my magic stripped.

I take a deep breath and follow Cheryl into Dean Hardwick's office. There are a few people standing around, but none of them are wearing Aurora's familiar power suits or have her pale blonde hair.

She's not here.

My legs nearly buckle in relief.

When it first manifested, I really wasn't sure I wanted to keep my magic, but I love it now, problematic as it is for me. I don't want to lose it.

Although I might have to, if it turns out I'm the one responsible for people losing their powers.

The room's occupants all turn to look at me when I enter, and I recognize them—it's Tamlin, Professor Binns, and a third-year professor named Emmitt Macombe.

Hardwick stands as well, nodding at me from behind his desk. "Ah, Elliot, thank you for joining us." He's clearly going for a slightly lighthearted air, probably to soothe me.

"Did I have a choice?" I point out.

I can't help but notice that Roman isn't here. I'm not sure if I should read anything into his absence, but it makes me anxious for some reason. He was at the faculty meeting during my first year after my wall walking ability manifested, so I wonder if he was deliberately left out this time.

Man, I hope not.

Hardwick sighs, looking troubled. “I’m sure you know why we called you here today. We’ve been hearing concerning reports from several students that you’re the one who’s been stealing other people’s magic.”

“I’m not!” I blurt out before he can say anything else. I realize my hands have balled into fists, and I try to relax them. “I would never do that to anyone. I wouldn’t hurt anybody like that.”

Now I know why these specific professors are here. Macombe teaches Advanced History of Magic, while Binns teaches Theory of Magic. Whatever new power they think I might have, it’s probably rare or unheard of, and Hardwick must’ve wanted their expertise.

As for Tamlin... Well, she teaches Combat, overseeing my sparring class. If anyone could take me down if I went crazy, even without magic, it would be her.

My stomach tightens with nerves as I gaze around the room.

The moment I told Cam, Dmitri, and Asher what’d happened that day in class and that I didn’t think I’d stolen anyone’s magic, all three of them got this look in their eyes—a light, like sunlight glinting off steel, warm but full of conviction. They didn’t even have to say anything for me to know they believed me and that they were on my side.

With these four, though, I don’t see that.

And it makes my palms feel a little clammy and my heart beat harder in my chest.

Hardwick nods at Cheryl, and she leaves, closing the door behind her. I sit down, since what the hell else am I gonna do, and Hardwick clears his throat.

“Elliot, you’ve shown remarkable growth since you arrived at our academy,” he says. “You represented us well in the Trials and overcame quite a lot in the process. More than you should’ve had to, as we now know. We were all relieved to hear that you recovered from your ordeal over the summer. And before that, you saved countless lives when you stopped that unfortunate student from stealing the Brimstone Orb.”

Nobody knows who compelled Raul to try and steal that artifact, or what exactly they planned to do with it once they got it. Whoever it was, they manipulated his frustration and feelings of anger toward the magical establishment to radicalize him against his own kind. Then they put some kind of binding spell on him so he couldn’t spill the beans.

I feel bad for the kid, honestly. Even though my relationship with magic has improved a lot, I can understand his anger. There but for the grace of Maddy, I might've gone.

"All that is to say, we trust you, Elliot. I don't think you're the kind of person who would do something like this intentionally," Hardwick continues. He folds his hands together, interlocking his fingers, and rests them on the desk. "I hear nothing but good things about you in your classes. That you're focused, fair-minded, and driven. That you work hard and keep to yourself."

Yeah, all true. Notice I'm not winning the most popular student of the year award.

"But there is still the possibility that you've been doing this without realizing it. Forgive the cliché, but it's like the werewolf who transforms on the full moon without knowing it, goes out and wreaks havoc, and then wakes up in bed human again and none the wiser."

Hardwick has a thing for speeches and metaphors, in case you couldn't tell.

"It's why we call Unpredictable magic... unpredictable." He shrugs. "I don't think you want to hurt anyone, but it's the only lead we have, and we have to take precautions. We'd like you to please submit to some testing to see whether you are in fact the cause."

Do I want to be tested? Have my magic poked and prodded? Hell, no. But it's better than them just hauling me off and yanking my magic out of me. And it'll be good to get official confirmation that no, I'm not doing this. Some students might still gossip, sure. I bet Alyssa will be one of them. But it'll stop most of the nasty rumors from spreading, stop people from looking at me like I'm either a murderer or the dirt under their shoe.

"Okay," I say, and I'm impressed that my voice doesn't shake. "How does that work?"

"Josephine?" Hardwick asks, looking over my shoulder. "How will it work?"

I swivel my head around, my heart dropping into my stomach.

Wait. Tamlin's going to be the one testing me?

Oh, fucking hell.

CHAPTER 17

I meet up with Tamlin a few days later in her office. She wanted a few days to prepare, I guess—to set up the equipment and all that.

Truthfully, I can't help but wonder whether she also needed a few days to get over what she knows about me and Roman.

Tamlin is one of the people I didn't set out to like on this campus, but who I ended up liking anyway. We're not friends, mainly because we're professor and student, and partially because I'm not all that good at making friends. *Big surprise, I know, considering the whole school currently hates me and thinks I'm some magic stealing psychopath.*

I don't like to think I've hurt her, even if I didn't mean to. And I really don't like the idea that she might dislike me now.

Tamlin looks impeccable as always—I really don't know how she does it. Her hair is done up, her makeup is light but perfectly applied, and she's wearing a powder-pink top.

"Elliot, thank you for coming. Right this way." She holds the door open for me, and I enter her office.

It's neat and organized, just as beautiful and stylish as Tamlin herself. I assume I'm just going to sit at the desk, but instead, she walks around and opens a back door. I thought it led into a closet or storage space or something, but it actually leads to a small back room.

"Follow me." She walks through.

I do, sweeping my gaze around the space as I enter. It actually does look like it might be a small storage room, but whatever is normally stored in here has been emptied out. Now there are just some runes on the walls and

a table in the middle, with cushions and paper laid down on it like in a doctor's office.

Tamlin offers me her hand. "Climb up."

I cock an eyebrow. "Do I have to strip and put on a paper gown?"

Usually, I can amuse Tamlin in class. She never laughs at my dumb jokes or anything, but I often see her mouth give a small twitch as she struggles to hide a smile.

Not today. Her face is still serious. "No."

Oh God. Awkward.

Trying to tame the unsettled feeling in my stomach, I hop up on the table and lie down with my head on the small pillow at one end. Once I'm settled, Tamlin picks up what looks like a wand or some kind of futuristic video game controller. She mutters something, and the wand-device-thing starts to float into the air, glowing with a soft blue light.

She directs the wand to start scanning me, and it starts at my feet, hovering about two feet over my body. All around us, the runes on the walls start to glow the same color as the wand.

"This is going to take a while," she says. Her voice sounds strained, and I can't tell if it's because it's taking a lot of effort to use the enchanted equipment, or if it's because of the sheer level of awkward in the room.

I lie here, and Tamlin wheels in her chair from behind her desk in the office, and for a few minutes, we just sit silently together.

A while, she said. How long is that, exactly?

All I know is, it feels like an eternity when the person I'm stuck in a tiny room with is my boyfriend's ex... who still has feelings for him... and is also my teacher. Oh, and my boyfriend is my teacher too, *and* I've been accused of basically ripping people's magic from their souls.

So, you know, just normal mid-twenties stuff, right?

Staring up at the ceiling, I get lost in my thoughts as the wand works its way slowly over my body. I don't know how to make things right with Tamlin, exactly. I can't take away her feelings for Roman, after all, and he's not interested in her anymore—so it's not like I can say, "okay, here, have him back," and even if I could, Roman's not a toy. He's a person, and it's his choice who he wants to be with.

But I also... I don't want her to think I don't care about her or respect her. I might be somewhat dating three men right now—*and fuck whatever Dmitri is, my reluctant acquaintance? Who even knows at this point?*—but

I've never done that before, and I'm not a cheater. I don't collect guys like Pokémon. I'm not just after as many men as I can get, and I would never help someone to betray someone else.

So I take a deep breath, knowing this is probably a mistake but forging ahead anyway, and clear my throat. "Um, Professor?"

Tamlin blinks, her eyes going a bit wide. I think I startled her—she must have been more deep in thought than I'd realized. *Crap, am I the only one who thought this was awkward?*

"You never call me Professor," she says, her posture relaxing again. "Not unless you're sassing me."

Ah, guilty as charged. "Maybe I wanted to be a little more respectful to the person conducting a weird magic examination on me?"

She doesn't smile, but she doesn't look upset, either. Might as well get this over with, I decide.

"Look, um, I wanted to let you know—nothing happened between Roman and me until after you two had broken up. I mean, I didn't even know he was my professor at first. He wasn't, actually; I hadn't even gotten my magic yet when we hooked up. It was at a bar, and then... then I ended up here. But you two had already—I would never—"

"I know," Tamlin says. She winces, but her tone is tentatively reassuring. "Roman isn't the type to cheat; he just wouldn't do something like that, it goes against everything he is. And I'm fine with it. I'm not sure how... others might feel, but you're both good and responsible people. I don't judge either of you."

She might not be judging us, and she might trust us, sure, but I have a feeling it's not quite true that she's "fine" with this. I've seen too many glimpses of Tamlin looking at Roman to believe her. She might understand in her head that things are over between them, but it doesn't change the fact that her heart still has feelings for him.

And I can't help but feel kind of like crap for that. Even though I know it's not my fault and it's out of my control.

"I would just like..." Tamlin leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "This isn't a speech about how Roman is full of darkness and is complicated and you can't handle him, or anything like that. He's a perfectly good man, a wonderful man, and I think you two are good for each other. But there is..."

She pauses for a second, tapping her joined hands to her lips. When she looks back up at me, I feel like I'm seeing more of the "real Tamlin" than she normally shows in class. The one I might get to know if we ever went out for a drink or something. The one who's not that much older than me, and who—despite her put-together facade—doesn't have her whole entire life figured out.

"There's what?" I prompt, because she's got me dying of curiosity and a bit of nerves over here.

A small line appears between her brows. "I'm not sure I should say anything; I don't want to insert myself into your business. But I feel like I should warn you, because I worry you'll start to feel the same way I did—left out of something."

It takes conscious effort to keep my body still as I turn my head slightly to look at her better. The blue-white light bathes her face as she continues.

"Roman is very private about his past. We dated for a year, and I don't know much about it. I never pried, and it's not exactly my business, but you want to know those kinds of things about the person you're dating. It's natural, you want to know everything about them."

Yeah, she's got that right. From the first minute I met Roman, all those months ago back at The Den, I wanted to know more about him. That craving has only increased as things have progressed between us, although like her, I've done my best not to pry or push too hard.

She sighs softly. "I never learned his whole history. But I knew enough to know that there was... something. It still pains him, and sometimes it'll make him retreat into himself or need to spend time alone. And that's not your fault. I thought it was my fault, that there was something I wasn't doing right, that if I could just... be *more*, somehow, he wouldn't feel that he had to push me away during those times. But if he does do that with you—it's his choice, to let you in or not to, and you can't blame yourself."

Then she shakes her head and winces. "I'm sorry. I sound like I'm lecturing you. I don't... I don't mean to be. I hate when people condescend to me. I guess he just needed something different from me... and I just couldn't give him what he needed. I do hope he gets that from you, but if you're ever... it's not you, that's all I'm saying."

"Do you know something?" I ask. "About—"

"He's not violent," Tamlin assures me. "He won't ever hurt you. He's not going to use whatever's in his past as an excuse to manipulate you or be

cruel to you or anything like that.”

That’s reassuring, I suppose, but it’s not what I meant—and I think she knows that. I think she was deflecting.

The magical wand beeps, and Tamlin gets up to check on it, smoothing out her skirt. I can almost see her drawing an armor back around herself.

She glances up at me, releasing the wand to continue its path over my body. “The machine wants to inform me that you’re in good health and that you don’t have cancer, so I suppose that’s a good thing.”

My brows shoot up. “I thought this was scanning for my ability to steal magic.”

“It’s diagnosing your magical ability, yes, but it comes with side effect features that I couldn’t quite turn off.” She gives me a brisk smile, the kind she gives the whole class, and I know she’s slipped back into professor mode.

I get it, I do. Tamlin’s younger than every professor here besides Roman, and she’s a woman, and only a few years older than her students. She has to establish her authority constantly.

Still stings a little bit.

I hope she at least doesn’t hate me. She doesn’t seem to, but I could be wrong. It’s just—I have enough people against me right now; I’d really like one of the people I respect most at this school to not be one of my enemies.

“Ah, here we are.” The wand has reached my head now, and Tamlin plucks it from the air and begins pressing some buttons on it. “The marriage of technology and magic, it’s really quite fascinating.”

My heart races. Now’s the moment we find out the truth—if I’m the one who’s really taking people’s powers or not.

God, I hope it’s not me.

Not just because that’s an awful thing to do, but because it would mean I’ve been using this power against my own will, without being aware of it. I was so certain I wasn’t the culprit because I haven’t felt it, or tried to do it, or anything like that. But if it’s been unconscious this whole time, and I didn’t even know...

It would make me a danger to everyone around me.

Tamlin looks up, giving me a smile. Is it just me, or is it a bit stiff? “Ah, good news. You’re absolved, Elliot. You don’t have the power to steal people’s magic.”

“What’s going on with me, then?”

“You do have a third power: mirroring.”

“Mirroring.” I roll the word around on my tongue, grateful beyond words that she didn’t say “stealing”.

“Yes. It’s not something we see very often, even in Unpredictables. I’ve never met another person with that power, actually. I’m sure it will be quite a valuable skill once you learn how to control it properly.”

“Yeah.” I nod emphatically. “I’ll definitely need to work on control. Do you know how mirroring works?”

She brushes a delicate hand over the wall, and the runes on the walls stop glowing. “You can mimic the ability of another person in your proximity as long as you maintain your concentration. It’s an excellent defensive ability, since fighting fire with fire is quite effective. Or you could use the ability of, say, someone standing to your right to attack someone to your left. But it will take time to properly master and to maintain the mirroring for more than a few seconds.”

So much relief floods me that I nearly faint, feeling lightheaded and dizzy. I was right—I wasn’t the one doing it. I’m not hurting anybody. Thank God.

But that means...

“Then who *is* doing this, if I’m not?” I ask.

Fear flickers in Tamlin’s eyes for a moment, although when she speaks, her voice is calm.

“That is a very good question.”

CHAPTER 18

After the way students went after me in Combat class, Tamlin confirming my innocence privately in her little makeshift back office isn't enough—the whole school needs to know that their mass hysteria was wrong, and that I'm not the person responsible for these attacks.

Hardwick calls an assembly to talk about it. He wants me to sit on the stage beside him while he speaks, but I put my damn foot down on that. I just had everyone glaring at me and whispering about me nonstop for days. I'm not going to go up onstage and be gawked at like I'm a circus sideshow freak.

Instead, I sit in the audience. Cam's on my left, Asher on my right, and Dmitri on Asher's other side. Cam has his arm around my shoulders and Asher's holding my hand. They're both physically affectionate people, and that's only increased as things have gotten more serious between us. But this feels different than their usual casual touches. I told them what happened, how Tamlin's weird magic-reading machine cleared me, but I think they're still worried the other students won't believe it or that something will go wrong.

"Students." Hardwick's tone is measured and gentle—fatherly, almost. I don't think I've ever heard him get really angry. According to Cam, he went on a rampage after the Trials, but I was asleep for that. "We have looked into the accusations against Elliot Sinclair, and I would like to publicly announce that her innocence has been proven."

A noise like wind through trees or rushing water fills the auditorium as people whisper to their neighbors in a soft voice. But Hardwick raises a hand, and silence falls again.

“In the interest of honesty, I’ll explain to you in brief that Miss Sinclair’s new ability is to mirror magic. What that means is that she can, with concentration, mimic the magical abilities of those around her for a short period of time, so long as the person she’s mirroring remains in her proximity. That person still retains their magic, and will experience *no* negative effects from having their power mimicked. Unless you count your pride being wounded if she uses your magic better than you.”

There are some muffled chuckles around the room.

“I am, of course, glad to announce that someone who has represented our school so well in the magical community is not the culprit behind these attacks,” the dean goes on. “But that does bring with it bad news. It means that we still don’t know *who* is actually behind the magic thefts. It saddens me to admit that magic of this nature cannot be done remotely, and so it has to be someone on this campus.”

Everyone starts whispering immediately, probably debating theories about who it could be. I can practically hear the war drums, and I wonder who everyone will decide it is next, or if the student body will be splitting into paranoid factions.

“We’re not closing the school down just yet,” Hardwick says, a heavy sigh falling from his lips before he gathers himself and straightens. “But that is a possibility if this continues. We urge anyone who sees anything suspicious to report that activity, no matter how small or insignificant it might seem.”

He pauses, casting his gaze over the entire auditorium, meeting students’ eyes.

“Please be mindful that this is *not* an excuse for a witch hunt—pun not intended. If you go out of your way to accuse someone who stole your boyfriend or copied your essay, you’ll only be causing more headaches for us to sort out, and possibly setting other students up to have their magic stolen because we’ll be investigating the wrong people. But if you do see something that strikes you as odd, no matter how paranoid you might feel for saying something... it’s better for us to be safe than sorry, at this juncture. Thank you all.”

Everyone starts talking again after Hardwick finishes, but quietly, like they’re scared of making too much noise. Raul’s attacks during my first semester hit people hard, but he only took out three students—although one

of them died. Whoever's stealing magic has taken out five, and there's no end in sight.

Alyssa, of course, can't let it go. As we all start to leave, she stands up, apparently having activated some kind of charm that makes her voice louder, like she's using a microphone.

"It *has* to be Elliot!" she yells, her voice a little shrill but echoing through the room. "Anyone who knows her knows she hates this place. She never even wanted to come here! She's the most ungrateful little—"

"Oh my God, would you quit it with Elliot already?"

My mouth literally drops open as the last person I ever expected to speak up for me stands up and shuts Alyssa down.

It's Kendal.

Kendal isn't a bad person. I figured out a while ago that her decision to hang out with Alyssa and the others was mostly because of peer pressure. But cowardice isn't an excuse for letting other people do bad things. Kendal sitting quietly by while Alyssa bullied me like we were all still in middle school was just as bad as if she'd joined in, as far as I'm concerned. I try not to judge, but it frustrated me, I admit.

I know Kendal helped me out during the Trials, both above board and on the sly, but that was because it helped the whole school if I won. I never expected her to actually care about me as an individual—and definitely not enough to stand up to her queen bee over me.

But that's exactly what she's doing.

The whole room—which means the entire damn school—is staring, riveted by this new drama.

Kendal is standing close enough to Alyssa for the amplification charm to work on her too, so her voice carries just as much.

"Look, I don't know what your problem with Elliot is. She's done nothing but avoid you. There's no reason for you to be so harsh to her, and honestly, it makes me not want to hang out with you because you just want to gossip about her. I'm sorry if you feel so insecure because of her, but this isn't a game!"

Holy shit. Go Kendal.

Oh, but she's not done.

"If the Circuit believes Elliot is the one doing this, then she'll get her magic taken away. Do you understand that? Her magic will be stripped! That's so much bigger than whatever petty game you think this is. You're

not just *inconveniencing* her, you're putting her at risk, you're putting *all* of us at risk. Because if you make people think it's her, then the real culprit goes free and can attack again—and more people will get hurt!”

Kendal isn't panicked, but I can see that she's starting to be. She must be terrified, standing up to her friend like this, but clearly, defending me is more important than her fear. And she's right. If I'm labeled as the guilty party, then the real culprit goes free and more people could get hurt.

Alyssa looks shocked. Her face goes pale, and then red with embarrassment as she realizes everyone is staring at her.

Glaring, she whips around and storms off. Cristina and Megan follow, leaving Kendal alone.

I could just go... but...

Maybe I need to stop walking away—stop hiding from people who make an effort to reach out. I'm starting to realize that maybe the reason I don't have many friends at this school, why all my classmates were so ready to assume the worst and turn on me, is partly my own fault. My own behavior.

I know I've been rather closed off with the guys. Not letting them in, not letting my walls down. I've done the same with people around me, even just in a casual way. The only person I started to consider a friend was Raul, and it hurt and scared me when that went so wrong. After that... I stopped trying.

I think it's time I changed that.

Kendal's gripping the back of one of the seats and looking terrified, like she's just realized she might have committed social suicide.

I walk up to her and touch her shoulder. She turns, looking surprised to see me, her cheeks flushing.

“Thanks,” I tell her. “Honestly, I mean it. Thank you. That meant a lot to hear.”

She smiles tentatively at me, tucking a lock of auburn hair behind her ear. “Well, someone had to say it. She's out of control. And you don't deserve that bullshit.”

I never would've thought I'd hear a word like “bullshit” come out of shy, quiet Kendal's mouth, and I laugh a little.

Her smile widens.

“Nice one, Kendal!” Cam throws an arm around my waist, pulling me tight against his body as he beams at her.

“Yeah. Well said.” Asher smiles quietly at her.

She glances at the floor, her face flushing bright pink from their combined attention and praise. I can’t blame the girl. I’ve been on the receiving end of a lot of their affection, and I can say from experience that it’s a little overwhelming.

In a good way. The best damn way possible.

Dmitri doesn’t say anything, but he hovers in the periphery, and the look on his face is one of fierce approval. I mean, he probably would’ve preferred it if Kendal took Alyssa down with a roundhouse kick rather than with words, but he still looks supremely satisfied with the result.

It makes my heart twinge a little. I wish I could tease him about how bloodthirsty he is. I wish we could joke around and banter like we used to. The silence between us has stretched on for so long that it’s starting to feel insurmountable. It’s starting to feel like the new normal, and I hate that more than anything.

Before my mood can spiral into a nice deep, dark depression, I wrench my gaze away from the dark-haired mage and look back at Kendal, determined to at least foster this little seed of friendship.

“We were all going to head over to the dining hall for lunch. Do you want to come with us?”

She still seems a little flustered by the guys, but she blinks and then nods, grinning shyly.

“Yeah. I’d like that.”



Kendal’s shutdown of Alyssa shifted something.

If you’re thinking it made Alyssa into a nicer person, sorry, but wrong guess. She seems to hate me just as much as ever—but what *is* different is that she starts keeping it to herself. Maybe it’s because she knows she doesn’t have as much support for her vitriol as before, since most of the school seems to have taken my side after Hardwick’s speech and Kendal’s outburst.

It feels good. I feel vindicated and so relieved not to be the object of everyone’s suspicion anymore. And even though Dmitri hasn’t forgiven any of the people who ganged up on me in our Combat class—and honestly, I

don't think Cam or Asher have either, although they're a lot more subtle about it—I decide to try to make a fresh start.

I mean, sure, I've already been at this school for almost a year and a half and am about to hit the midpoint of my training, but it's never too late to try, right?

Over the next couple weeks, I make a concerted effort to be a little more friendly and outgoing. I'm not gonna lie, it's hard, and I'm still not that great at it. I'll never reach Cam levels of friendliness, and I really don't want to, but I at least learn a few more people's names and join in some conversations in the hallways.

It helps that nobody else has lost their magic since Tandy, so the grand total of magic-less students in the infirmary still sits at five. As days go by without another attack, people start to relax a little, although an edge of anxiety still permeates the entire school.

My determination to be friendlier to people is put on a bit of a hold when Thanksgiving break rolls around, because campus almost completely clears out for the holiday. I think more people go home than usual this year because they want to get away from whoever's stealing magic.

Originally, Maddy was supposed to come to Griffin Academy so we could spend the week together, but now that someone's been attacking people, I don't think it's smart. I can't put her in danger, no matter how much I want to see her. She goes to a friend's house instead, and I get to hear about the good time she's having when we call and text.

Maddy's never had a problem making friends, and I'm so glad. I feel a twinge of sadness—that old fear that she'll forget about me, that she's flown the nest and will never come back—but overall, I'm just relieved that she's somewhere safe for the break.

The campus goes eerily quiet, since most of the students are home and a lot of the faculty are too. The professors still have work to get done, like grading papers and planning exams, but they're doing it off campus with family, visiting parents, that kind of thing.

All of the guys stay at school. Cam doesn't have a family to go home to, and I think Dmitri would rather set his hair on fire than go see his folks, which... I understand better now than ever. Asher explains that it's just too much to try and get his family all together for Thanksgiving.

"My parents are fine with me staying here," he tells me. "We have a big gathering for the winter solstice, anyway, and that's in a month. So I'll see

them all soon.”

With just the four of us and only a handful of other students and admins around, the dorms and school buildings grow quiet. Well, the *five* of us. Roman’s still around too, since he doesn’t really have family to go visit either. I sneak into his room and spend time with him, since the guys are all studying for tests and special third-year projects and all that. But he’s busy with grading and lesson planning too, so even though I could happily spend an entire day naked in his bed, I try to give him breaks so he can work.

I was so ahead on my homework going into the holiday that I don’t have much to do. Turns out being unpopular and hated by the school for half the semester actually makes you really fucking productive.

Go figure.

I know I should probably relax for the week. It’s been a crazy semester, and I should use this chance to unwind and take it easy.

But I don’t feel like relaxing.

I want to investigate.

Look, some asshat is attacking students, and I nearly took the fall for it. Alyssa’s out for my blood like never before, people are running scared, and that bullshit is just not gonna stand. I don’t appreciate bullies and never have, and this is my goddamn school.

It was a gradual process, my falling in love with Griffin Academy. But it happened. The same way I fell in lo... er, started to care a lot about the men in my life.

The longer I’m here, the more I appreciate the importance of this place, and I’m not going to watch it be attacked. There are other types of magical academies all over the country, but this is the only one that trains Unpredictables. It’s our only safe haven. And if the last semester with Johnson’s freak-out at the Trials proved anything, it’s that we’re not completely safe in the rest of the magical world. Our protected bubble here is threatening to burst, and there are people out there who hate us and would possibly rather see us dead than let us wield our magic among them like equals.

So, a practically empty school? Sounds like a great time for me to do some digging and find out who might want to steal students’ magic, and how, and why.

Of course, I’m not planning to do all of this alone. I’m not the idiot chick in a horror film, thanks. I’m going to get backup.

On the third day of break, I find Cam and Asher in the library. It's where they've practically been living the last few days, now that classes are out and they can devote all their time to studying. Cam's a laidback guy and full of energy, not the type you'd expect to find in a library, but he's been plugging away faithfully. Both of the guys have had me grill them with flashcards and stuff.

Dmitri could probably use my help too, but God forbid he ask me for it.

Damn it.

Anyway, Asher and Cam have taken over one of the tables in the deserted library, Cam bent over a thick tome and Asher diligently tracing runes over an object that looks like an extra thick dinner plate.

I walk up behind them just as Cam's chin slips off his hand and he almost face-plants on the book.

Yup, he was totally dozing off.

Looks like it's the perfect time for them to take a study break. I sidle up and plop down into the seat between them, and without even hesitating, they both reach out an arm to touch me. Cam's hand lands on my thigh, his warm palm sending a delicious tingle up my leg, and Asher's fingers thread through the back of my hair.

It's one of my favorite parts of this thing developing between us—how easily and how often they touch me now. It's casual and automatic, and my skin reacts to the contact every single time. It's as if at any given moment, our bodies would rather be touching, so whenever we're near each other, it's the most natural thing for them to do.

I lean into Asher's hand, letting him massage my scalp even as his other hand keeps tracing runes on the large disc.

"What are you up to, Sin?" Cam asks.

"Oh, nothing." I wrinkle my nose. "But it could be something, if you guys are finished cramming..."

"We'll never be finished," he says, in the tone of someone announcing the zombie apocalypse.

"Pretty sure there are scientific studies on why it's good for your brain to take breaks from studying. It helps you to relax and retain the information better."

Cam gives me a look through squinted eyes, like he thinks this might be bullshit but doesn't know enough about neurology to dispute it. I give an

over-the-top pout and bat my eyelashes, making him crack a smile. He enjoys theatrical dramatics.

Asher fucks up the rune he was tracing somehow and curses, hanging his head in his hands. “Ugh.”

“You guys need a break. Seriously.” I grab each of their hands and tug. “C’mon. Please?”

“Fine,” the blond-haired mage groans, getting to his feet. “But if we fail our classes and you’re stuck with us for another whole year, you’ll have only yourself to blame.”

That actually sounds amazing. I can’t even stand to think about being here without them in my third year, so the idea of keeping them around makes me smile. I’d never want to hold them back though, and I know they’re way too smart and driven for that to ever happen. They’re going to graduate with flying colors.

But in the meantime...

I pull them toward the door, still holding each of their hands.

“What are we doing?” Asher asks.

I grin. “We’re going to find out who’s been stealing magic.”

CHAPTER 19

Asher is the responsible one out of the three of us, so of course he has some reservations about us poking around campus to try to find the culprit.

“What if we get hurt?” he points out. “What if we get in trouble?”

“It’ll be fine,” I assure him.

Honestly, at this point, how could it possibly get any worse for me if I do get in trouble? After having the whole school suspect *me* of the thefts, it’s hard to worry too much about something like getting caught snooping around.

“If worse comes to worst, we can say we snuck off to have sex,” Cam points out with a wicked grin.

I bust up laughing, and Asher rolls his eyes but cracks a smile.

These guys are two of the very best people to be around if I want to relax. Roman’s not high-strung or anything, but he’s a very passionate and intense person, like Dmitri in his own way. Asher and Cam are both more laidback—but in different ways. They balance each other out. Asher’s calm and collected, but relaxed, while Cam’s energetic and always has a joke ready.

It’s really nice.

We start by going through the classrooms where the incidents occurred, just to see what we can find. I don’t know what we could stumble upon that the professors and admins didn’t discover when they inspected the rooms after the attacks, but you never know.

“We should check the registry,” Asher says. “See if we can find a link, a student who was in each class.”

“But whoever did this just had to be on campus, right?” I counter. “Or maybe in the same building as whoever they were stealing magic from? The culprit could’ve done all of this from the bathroom, for all we know.”

“Fair enough.”

We finish going through our large combat classroom and move on to another room on the third floor where first-years have their Theory of Magic class.

I really wish we had Dmitri with us. Cam and Asher are bantering back and forth, and I love it, but I’m so used to seeing them with their other friend as well. I’m not sure where he is at the moment—he’s been spending a lot of break away from everyone, and I don’t know if it’s because of his family or school or me, or some combination of all three.

We go well together, all five of us. Or we seemed to anyway, in the little time I was awake at Roman’s house. I don’t know what to do to get that back, to have Dmitri join us again. He and I are still in this silent standoff. He’s not willing to say anything to break the silence, clearly, and neither am I.

I know what I’d *like* to say. I’d like... well...

Look, I’m not the begging kind. I’ve never chased after a guy in my life. I never knew a man who was worth it before, and besides, I wasn’t going to sacrifice my dignity like that. But I admit that what I really want is to ask Dmitri if we can work things out, if we can repair things somehow or grow to a better place.

Even if I was mistaken about how much he cares for me, it doesn’t change the fact that *I* care for him. A lot. We’ve spent a lot of time together. And I know he’s attracted to me sexually—it’s sort of hard to fake that.

Surely we could become something more?

I want him to pick me. For the first time, I want to be that girl jumping up and down yelling *pick me, pick me, pick me*. I feel almost like Alyssa or one of her friends, on the hunt for a guy to marry to up their status since they’re Unpredictable and can’t make it far in magical society as a result.

But it’s not because of Dmitri’s status or money that I want him. I don’t care about shit like that. And he’s cranky as all get out, but he watched over me when I was in my coma, he stayed with me all summer, he’s helped me when I needed it and protected me this whole time, and I can’t let go of that.

And for all his snippy words, he’s never actually been a jerk. He’s never been cruel or hurtful. I’ve always felt safe with him. Protected.

I wish it was as easy as just asking him to please choose me. But I don't know how to say that, and I don't think he'd want to hear it.

"Hey, Sin." Cam pauses in his perusal of a desk and looks up at me. "Everything okay?"

I'm tempted to ask him if he knows about Dmitri's, ah, situation. That the guy is promised to some girl to secure a family alliance like we're back in the Middle Ages or something.

But if Dmitri had told Cam, I know Cam would've told me. Asher might have kept his friend's secret for a little while, out of respect for his privacy, but I'm sure he would've told me too as he saw things getting more serious.

And it *was* getting more serious, at least for me. I may not have meant to, but I've been falling for Dmitri right along with the rest of the guys. Asher knows that. He's a mind reader, so I can't hide my feelings around him when his cuff is off—or even when it's on, honestly. He sees right through me.

Which makes me pretty sure neither of the guys knows about Dmitri's "betrothal". He would've been embarrassed to talk about it, I'm sure. He plays his cards close to his chest.

And I can't betray his trust by telling them.

"It's nothing." I shake my head, trying to summon a carefree smile.

Cam snorts. "C'mon, I might not be a mind reader like certain people I could name—"

Asher gives him a deadpan look.

"—but I know when something's on your mind," he finishes. "You get a little line between your eyebrows when you're lost in thought. What's up, honestly?"

I might not be able to tell them the full truth, but I can at least admit a little bit of what I'm thinking.

Perching on a desk, I let out a small sigh. "It's stupid, I know, but Dmitri's bugging me."

The two men exchange looks. "Yeah, what was your argument about?" Asher asks carefully. "You looked really upset when I walked in on you guys."

I grimace. "Yeah, sorry about that. I must've made your family wonder..."

“No, no, you were fine. They know Dmitri’s hard to get along with, and it wasn’t like you two were making out or anything.” He gives me a wry, teasing grin before he sobers up again. “What happened?”

“I tried talking to him about it,” Cam says, “but he’s keeping a lid on it. I know it’s not the same as what you’re going through with him, but Dmitri doesn’t always let us in either. It’s fucking frustrating, but it’ll pass, and he’ll talk to you in time. He’s just moody, and I don’t think he’s ever really had friends before, or a real romantic interest, y’know? This is all new to him.”

“It’s not easy,” Asher acknowledges. “But if you’re patient, he’ll come around.”

The thing is, while I appreciate their sympathy—and it’s good to know that I’m not the only person Dmitri tends to shut out—this isn’t just a difference of opinion or a quarrel. This is a big hurdle, and a fundamental... difference in outlook, I guess you could say.

I want to be with him.

There, I’ve said it. I want to be with him, and I thought I kind of *was* with him, but I never asked for clarification, and I lumped him in with the others when I shouldn’t have, and I was wrong. He doesn’t want me the same way, and even if he did, he’s fucking betrothed like some modern-day royalty or something, and he’s not going to go against his parents. I think he’s made that point clear.

Not exactly the same thing as when Dmitri and Cam had an argument over whether *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* is better.

When I don’t speak for a few moments, Cam gets a small, mischievous smile on his face and saunters up to me, taking me by the hips and tugging me off the desk before kissing me softly, slowly. I can feel myself melting just a little. I swear to God, his lips have some kind of magical stress-relieving properties. Is that an Unpredictable power? Because if it is, he’s got it.

“I think...” he murmurs, “somebody... needs a little distracting.”

“Oh, do you?” I shoot back, but I’m laughing as he kisses down my neck.

Mmm, okay, yes, I am one hundred percent on board with this. I feel Asher take my hand and kiss my knuckles as his body moves in behind mine, sandwiching me between him and Cam. *God, yes...*

“How about we take a break from this wild goose chase for a little bit, huh?” Cam asks, pulling back and grinning playfully as his tongue darts out to taste me on his lips. “The campus is practically abandoned. And I can think of more fun things to do in an empty classroom than search for clues.”

Well, I can’t argue with that, now can I?

My entire body tingles as I remember what kind of fun the three of us got up to last time we were in an empty classroom together, and Asher pulls me closer, pressing my back flush against his front. I can feel his cock already growing hard, and I’m sure he’s remembering the exact same night I am. I’ve been with each of the guys separately since then, several times, but the night of the Inter-academy Ball remains one of the hottest things I’ve ever experienced.

Of course, that was at night, under the cover of darkness—right now, late afternoon sunlight streams through the classroom windows. But Cam was right. The entire campus is nearly empty, with only a handful of staff, students, and teachers remaining.

The odds of anybody walking in on us are pretty damn low.

And besides, Cam is currently kissing up one side of my neck while Asher trails kisses down the other, and their lips on my skin are rapidly destroying my most responsible brain cells. The only ones left are jumping up and down yelling “fuck yes!” so if I’m hoping they’ll talk me out of this, I probably shouldn’t hold my breath.

Four hands are roaming my body, sliding up under my shirt, brushing the undersides of my breasts, slipping beneath the waistband of my jeans. I can’t really move because I’m trapped in an Asher/Cam sandwich, so I just let their solid bodies support me between them as zaps of electric pleasure dance across my skin.

Cam’s lips find mine, and he kisses me like we haven’t fucked in weeks—and even though that’s totally not the case, I kiss him back the same way, because it feels like it’s been way too long. He’s hard too, and when he slides a leg between mine, immobilizing me even further, I feel his cock grinding into my hip. I also feel the solid muscle of his thigh against my clit, and I let out a little squeak of pleasure, which he swallows up with a chuckle.

“Yeah? You like that?”

“Uh huh,” I gasp, then groan as they both roll their hips simultaneously, pressing all of us closer together exactly where it counts.

Jesus. What would it be like to have them both at the same time?

I've never done anything like that. It still freaks me out a little, to be honest, but holy shit, the idea of being fucked by both of these men at the same time is making my body threaten to spontaneously combust.

I grind down hard against Cam's leg, even as I press back into Ash's body, wriggling my ass.

"Oh, she *does* like it," Asher says from behind me, and I can hear the pleased grin in his words. There's a slight rasp to his voice too though, as if he knows what I'm thinking about and it's doing the same thing to him as it is to me.

"Fucking hell," Cam breathes. Then he attacks my mouth with another kiss, and I can feel how turned on he's getting by the way his lips move against mine, hot and hungry and dirty.

Asher's hands move to my hips, and they pull me backward until he's perched on a stone windowsill on one side of the classroom. I end up sort of sitting on his lap, only he's not quite sitting down, so it's more of a lean. I'm still mostly vertical, but he's supporting my weight. My legs fall to the outsides of his, and Cam's still in front of us, keeping our little sandwich intact.

The blond mage's blue eyes sparkle with heat as he pulls back slightly, and then he slowly draws my shirt up. He doesn't even take it all the way off, just bunches up the fabric above my boobs, exposing my stomach and bra-covered breasts.

Oh fuck.

Ash and I have our backs to the window, and we're on the third floor—so even if someone were to walk by and look up, it's unlikely they'd see enough to guess what was going on. But having our backs to the window means we're facing the classroom door. If anybody does walk in, they will *definitely* know what's happening in here.

Still, when Cam dips his head to suck on one of my nipples through my bra, I don't push him away. I don't even pretend this isn't what I want.

Hmm. Do I have some kind of exhibitionist streak I never knew about? I've had more sexual encounters in public places in the past year and a half than in the entire twenty-one years before that.

It's not like I *want* to get caught though.

I just don't want to stop.

Cam's hand palms one breast as his mouth works the other, and my nipple hardens as he pinches and rolls it between his fingers. I arch my back, chasing the sensation, as Asher's hand slides down my stomach toward the button of my jeans. He flicks it open and works my zipper down, and then his hand dips inside.

"Do you like it when we both show you how crazy you drive us?" Cam whispers, his blue eyes shining as he darts a glance up to my face.

"Yeah, it's—" I suck in a breath as Asher slides a finger inside me. "It's okay," I pant, the casual tone I was going for totally destroyed by the needy plea in my voice.

Cam grins, straightening slightly and arching an eyebrow.

"Just okay, she says." His gaze moves behind me to Asher, and his smile turns sinful. "Guess we'll have to try a little harder."

Then he steps in closer, grabbing my face in his hands and angling my head for a deep kiss as Asher uses the wetness he's gathered on his finger to work circles over my clit. His other arm bands around my stomach, holding me secure as my hips twist and jerk. I know I'm grinding my ass back against his cock as sensations flood me, and I know he likes it, because pleased little sounds are rumbling in his chest.

Cam's hands go back to my breasts, kneading and massaging them, and I wrap my arms around his shoulders as Asher licks and bites my neck and the blond mage kisses me like there's no tomorrow.

When Asher slides his finger back inside me and uses the heel of his hand to keep pressure on my clit, I grab Cam's ass and haul him even closer. I'm pretty sure the bulge of his cock is pressed up against the back of his friend's hand, but he doesn't seem to mind. We're all so close again, moving in a three-part, syncopated rhythm, and it's so fucking hot, so perfect, so—

My clit spasms hard, my pussy clamping down around the intrusion of Asher's finger as I press up into his touch, chasing the orgasm even as it crashes over me.

My mouth opens as a loud cry works its way up my throat, but Cam just uses the opportunity to devour me with another kiss.

Aftershocks tremble through my body, and our lips cling together as we all breathe hard. Asher draws his hand out of my pants, trailing it up the front of my body and presenting it to me as Cam and I break apart.

Oh, that dirty, dirty boy.

I lean my head forward and draw his entire finger into my mouth, wrapping my lips around it before withdrawing slowly, sucking on it like a lollipop. Cam's jaw drops open, heat flashing in his eyes, and I can feel a shiver work its way through the man behind me.

"Goddamn, Sin." Cam stares at me for another few seconds, looking turned on and totally entranced, then he shakes his head slightly and takes another step back. "Um, maybe we should get out of here. A comfortable horizontal surface wouldn't be a bad thing to have right now."

I laugh because that's such a very *Cam* way of putting it.

And he's not wrong at all.

I have a condom in the little front pocket of my jeans. I stole the idea from Cam, and my preparedness has come in handy more than once. But if this is going the way I think it might be, we need a bed, and we definitely need to be someplace we won't have to worry about getting caught.

"Yeah," I say, still a little breathless. "Good call."

CHAPTER 20

Asher stands up, helping me find my feet again. I turn my head to kiss him before he zips and buttons my pants back up. Cam helps straighten my shirt, and the two of them adjust themselves as well, getting things a bit better, er, situated for our walk back to our dorm.

We all look a little disheveled and flushed, but since no clothes actually came off, I don't think it's *completely* obvious what we've been doing. And when Cam opens the door and peeks into the hallway, he gives the all-clear sign right away.

Odds are high we won't even run into anyone on our way back across campus.

"It's a good thing I don't have any classes in that room this year," I say with a grin as we head down the steps outside Wellwood Hall. I'm holding hands with each of the guys, and we're all walking at a pretty fast clip, eager to reach our destination. "I'd never be able to focus on a lecture again."

Cam lets out a disgruntled noise, shaking his head. "You're right about that. I've got Theory of Magic in the Inter-academy Ball classroom this semester, and the number of times I've almost popped a boner in that class... I mean, Professor Binns is totally gonna get the wrong idea."

I throw back my head and laugh, and Asher chuckles, squeezing my hand. The two of them continue to banter back and forth, and I look back up at the massive school building as we cross the quad, curious if I can pick out the window we were in front of, when movement draws my eye.

My gaze tracks up to—

A bird.

It's large, *really* large, and its wings catch the sunlight as it swoops down to land on the roof, disappearing from sight behind the uneven gables and turrets.

Unconsciously, my footsteps slow, my brows drawing together as I stare up at the roof of Wellwood Hall.

I know I've seen that bird before. When...?

Right. On our first day back. As Dmitri was pulling his car into the student lot, I peered out the back window, admiring the massive old stone building. I saw a bird on the roof then. It took off against the sun, and I remember thinking *oh, wow, this place really is beautiful...*

Now the bird is back, in the same spot as before. And it's bigger than I remember—it's hard to judge size very well at a distance, but it looks bigger than any kind of bird of prey I've ever seen.

And the thing is, I don't remember seeing any birds like that around here last year. There are swallows and sparrows and that kind of thing in the woods, a few crows or ravens—I can never remember how you tell the difference—and I'm sure there are owls. But no birds of prey like this.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up a little. Maybe I'm reading too much into things—it's just a stupid bird after all—but my instincts are good. They haven't failed me yet. And right now, those instincts are telling me that something is up with that thing.

"Elle? You okay?"

Asher's voice shakes me out of my thoughts. I didn't realize it until now, but my footsteps stopped entirely as I tried to figure out where I'd seen the massive bird before. Now both the guys are looking at me with curious and slightly concerned expressions.

I shake my head to clear it, suddenly remembering why we were headed back to our dorm room.

And I got distracted by a damn bird?

Come on! Priorities, Elliot!

"Um, yeah." I try to brush away the weird feeling that's still making the back of my neck prickle. "It's nothing."

"You sure?" Cam narrows his eyes at me. "You look like you saw a ghost or something."

"No, nothing like that. It's just..." My gaze flicks back up toward the roof. I can't see the bird anymore, but I know it's there. I would've noticed if it took flight again.

“Just what?” Asher’s brows draw together.

“Um...”

Oh Lord, I can’t believe I’m about to say this.

I have two heart-stoppingly handsome men in front of me who just rocked my world, who’d be more than willing to do things to me that I’ve only ever imagined in my dirtiest fantasies—and yet, when I open my mouth, the words that fall out are, “Can we go check out the roof?”

The guys both glance up.

“Why?” Cam asks, curiosity in his voice.

“I saw a bird land up there.”

Two sets of eyes—one pair sky-blue and the other mossy green—look at me in surprise.

“I’m sorry, are you saying a bird is more interesting than”—Cam clutches at his chest, feigning a grievous injury—“than *us*?” He shakes his head, eyebrows rising. “Elliot, I am *wounded*. I am betrayed, I am hurt, I am—”

I shove him in the shoulder. “You’re a dingus, that’s what you are.”

“Ouch! I haven’t been called a dingus since I was, what, twelve? Woman up, Sin, call me a dumbass like you mean it.”

“I thought you wanted to get laid sometime this decade?” *I did too, damn it.*

“Children, children,” Asher says, his voice weary but his eyes warm with amusement. Then he turns to me. “Do you really want to check out the roof?”

I nod, biting my lip. “I know it’s probably stupid, but...”

“No, hey, it’s obviously important to you. There’s always time for...” Heat flares in his eyes briefly, and I decide I really must be the dumbest person on the planet to not already be in our dorm room, naked in bed with these guys. Then he clears his throat. “We’ll have the whole rest of the evening to do whatever we want. Let’s see if we can find a way up there.”

“How?” Cam asks, his gaze already scanning the building.

The thing about Wellwood Hall, and a lot of the other buildings on campus too, is that they’re not your typical school buildings or dorms. I’m sketchy on the details, but once, this school was supposed to be some rich person’s estate. Or a couple of estates that made up some kind of rich person community. Something like that.

The point is, the architecture of Wellwood Hall is a little crazy. Whoever built it seems to have changed their designs several times while in the middle of construction, and they obviously drew inspiration from a variety of architectural styles, because the massive building has towers, crazy staircases, levels of various heights, and all kinds of crazy stuff. I think some of the original rooms and hallways were taken down to create the wider hallways and bigger classrooms that we need for a school, but you can still tell the space isn't being used for its original intended purpose.

Roman told me once that was why the Griffin Academy founders ended up getting this place—it was a rundown failure, so the board was able to get it cheap and fix it up enough to make it a school, since the High Circuit wasn't all that keen on spending a ton of money on Unpredictables.

Yay.

This all means that the roof is uneven, not one flat surface, so it'll be a bit tricky to figure out how to get up there. But there is one round tower on the southwest side of the building that rises above the rest.

“There!” I point to it. “There are a couple windows in that tower wall. If we can make our way up inside it, maybe we can get one open, then shimmy out onto the roof proper from there.”

Asher looks a little doubtful. “I don't want you to fall.”

“We're all athletic,” I point out. “Plus, I've got my spider climb if I need to bust it out.”

That seems to set aside most of his fears, so we head back inside Wellwood Hall and poke around for a bit, trying to find the way into the tower.

“When was the last time anyone was up in that tower?” Cam asks as we search the hallway.

“Probably not for years.” Asher shrugs. “Prepare for a lot of dust. These places in the building don't really get used that often—I think mostly it's just people looking for a quiet place to make out.”

“Well, hey, if nothing else, we can use it for that,” I point out, still sort of kicking myself for dragging them along on this goose chase instead of back to our dorm room.

“I'm not going to fuck you on a stairwell when there's a perfectly good bed I can take you to,” Cam deadpans.

Maybe he forgot about the stack of mats in the Combat classroom. Although those were more comfortable than stairs, I guess.

Still, I can't help but tease him a little. "Are you sure? Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Hey! I think I found it," Asher calls, gesturing to a corner door at the end of a short hallway.

Right next to a janitor's closet. *How romantic.*

Cam jimmys the lock open and pushes on the door. It groans slightly as it swings open, and he has to put his shoulder into it. Asher was right—I don't think anybody's been in here in a while. Dust stirs up as we enter, but there are windows placed along the spiraling staircase, so it's not as creepy as it could be. Hopefully the light has kept the spiders at bay.

"Damn. Guess maybe the janitorial staff decided to take a pass on this one," Cam jokes. Then he starts up the stairs.

Out of the three of us, he's the most energetic, so he gets ahead quickly. Asher and I hurry after him, taking the spiraling stone steps two at a time.

"Slow down!" I call up, laughing. "Jesus, if you're that eager to get this over with so we can get back to the room and have se—"

My voice breaks off and my stomach flips when Cam lets out an ear-splitting scream of pain.

"Cam!"

The word is wrenched out of me as my blood turns to water. Asher is hot on my heels as I bolt up the steps, yelling at the top of my lungs.

There's a crashing sound, and then I'm nearly knocked backward as Cam falls into me. Asher braces his hands on either side of the wall and holds with all his might as I crash into him, saving all three of us from toppling down the winding staircase.

"Oh, God, no. Cam, Cam, Cam," I chant in a panic, grabbing him. He's sweating, groaning in pain, and before he even says it, I know what's happened—I've seen it twice now.

"It's gone." His blue eyes are wide with pain and shock. He looks panicked. No, *terrified*. "It's gone. Fuck, Sin, it's gone... My magic's gone."

CHAPTER 21

Cam's in a huge amount of pain.

He can't stand. He can barely speak coherently. His large, muscled body is shaking from head to toe, and it breaks my heart and makes my stomach churn with fear to see him like this.

I don't want to move him, but how else will we get him help? Neither Asher nor I have the training to heal him or stop the pain, and Asher's not leaving me and Cam alone to go get the healers—and like fuck am I leaving the two of them alone.

Someone could still be up in this tower.

The only solution is to carry Cam.

I'm shaking almost as bad as the blond mage as Asher picks up his top half, arms hooked under his shoulders, and I take his legs. That way Cam can still see my face.

"It's okay," I tell him, lying with everything I have as we carry him out of the tower and head toward the infirmary. "You're going to be okay. We're getting you help, just concentrate on me, it's okay."

It reminds me of when Maddy would get awful nightmares after Mom died. While Mom was sick, my little sister was fine, fine, fine, brave and smiling—but then as soon as she was gone, Mads just crumbled. She used to dream all the time about losing me, usually to something awful, which is how we ended up sharing one big bed. It was just easier, since I always ended up holding her and rocking her back to sleep.

Now it's the same but worse, because this isn't a nightmare. It's real, and inescapable. Cam's magic—a part of him, a part of his damn *soul*—is just gone, ripped away.

I can't even imagine what that feels like.

Asher doesn't say anything, but his face is pale and his eyes are darting around as we carry Cam across campus, and I know he's thinking the same thing I am.

We're practically alone out here. Sure, there are students, faculty, and staff still on campus—but with so many people gone for the holidays, it's only a skeleton crew left. There's nobody nearby. Nobody that can help us if whoever attacked Cam chooses to attack Asher and me too.

My heart is pounding with fear and adrenaline by the time we get to the infirmary.

"Help!" I yell. "Help! We need help! He's been attacked!"

I don't even have to explain further—everyone knows what that means.

The infirmary doors open, and two healers hold the doors out of the way so we can enter while two more rush to us. Cam's still sweaty, moaning in pain, his breath harsh and shallow, his chest heaving. My heart twists and jolts with terror. *Please, please let him be okay.*

"We've got him," one of the healers says firmly but kindly. "You can let go."

It takes effort to peel my hands away from him. I don't want to let him go, don't want to let him out of my sight. But I know they can take care of him better than I can right now.

Asher and I release him, and the healers levitate Cam onto a stretcher. When they start to carry him away, my feet lurch after them.

"Wait! Can I—I need to be with him—"

"I'm sorry," another healer tells me, "but you need to stay out of the way."

"No, but I—he needs me. He—I have to—" My throat is closing up, and my chest is tight. Cam's in so much pain, and it's reminding me way too much of my mom. "I have to stay with him—"

What if something goes wrong? The others who've had their magic taken have all survived so far, but when magic is ripped out this violently... what if something goes wrong, and Cam doesn't make it?

What if—

Asher catches me by the shoulders and tugs me back. I turn toward him, holding on with everything I have as we watch the healers rush Cam down the hall.

“You’re okay,” he whispers. “It’s okay, Elle, it’s all right. I’ve got you. He’ll be okay. Cam’s tough as hell, he’s not gonna let anything keep him down.”

I can’t stop the words tumbling out of my mouth. My legs aren’t supporting my weight anymore, and if it weren’t for Asher’s arms around me, I’d be in a pile on the floor.

“My mom... Her last moments were—I wasn’t even there. I was in the waiting room with Maddy—I didn’t—we didn’t get to say goodbye. They just took her—Asher—”

“Cam’s gonna be fine.” His voice is quiet and terrified, but full of conviction. He strokes my hair, speaking into the top of my head. “He’s gonna make it. This won’t be like your mom, Elle, I promise. I promise you, okay?” He guides me back toward a row of chairs that line the hallway so we can wait. “I’m here. It’s okay. He’s going to be okay.”

We sink down into the chairs, Asher’s arms still around me, and I cling to him. I’ve never been this way with him, with any of the guys—this panicked, this close to tears. It’s been a rough semester for my emotional stability.

“Oh, Jesus fuck.”

We turn as Roman and Dmitri careen into the waiting area, both of them breathing hard.

“The fuck?” Dmitri spits. “I go to the lab for two hours, and what the fuck happens—”

“We heard the scream,” Roman explains, as Dmitri collapses into a chair, breathing heavily. “I was advising Dmitri on his final project, and my windows were open.”

“I knew it was Cam,” the dark-haired mage croaks. It’s the first time I’ve seen him look this off-kilter. Not just angry or upset, but seriously knocked off his axis. “I recognized his voice. I’ve never heard it like that...”

“He was attacked,” I say, and now I’m really starting to cry. My vision blurs and my eyes sting. “We were investigating—goddamn it, I know it’s stupid. I’m sorry, it’s my fault—”

“No.” Roman’s voice is rough, definitive. He strides over to me and kneels so we’re at eye level before he takes my hands, squeezing them. “Elliot, no. Listen to me. *You* didn’t do this. The bastard who’s been going

after people's magic did this. It wasn't your fault. You wouldn't have been safe anywhere on campus."

"We went up into the tower..."

"Yeah, we know. We saw the door hanging open." Dmitri runs a hand through his almost-black hair. "We ran partway up, realized Cam must've had one or two of you with him, and ran for the infirmary."

"You weren't alone, and that's what's important," Roman affirms. Then his brows draw together. "What made you want to go up to the tower?"

"We were looking for—I thought... I wanted to find out who was doing this," I finish lamely.

We were looking for a stupid fucking bird. That's why I put Cam at risk?

Roman might say we wouldn't have been safe anywhere, but I can't quite make myself believe that. If we'd been back in our dorm room, if I hadn't diverted our course, maybe none of this would've happened.

The doors to the back open, and a healer steps out.

"Do any of you know the emergency contact for this young man?" she asks.

Asher stands up, letting go of me. "I am. Me and my parents."

Of course. Cam doesn't have any family, and Asher's his best friend—Cam's spent most holidays with Asher's family since they met.

"I'll need you to come with me, then," the healer says.

Asher kisses the top of my head. I catch his hand and squeeze it hard, then he's through the doors and gone.

Roman sighs, standing. "I knew Hardwick should've evacuated the school. How many of us are going to lose our fucking magic before he listens?"

"He's worried about the school closing permanently," I say dully, trying to muster some sympathy for Hardwick. This school is the only one of its kind in the country, and the administrators have had to fight for its very existence every step of the way. And for the past year and a half, it's just been one thing after another. Raul, the Trials, now this...

The universe really must have it in for us, huh?

"It will close permanently," Roman growls, "if this person isn't stopped."

I wipe the back of my hand over my eyes, an ache spreading through my chest. "Yeah."

He swoops down and kisses me swiftly. “Stay safe, Reckless. I’m going to talk to Hardwick.”

Then he turns, nods at Dmitri, and storms out.

I suck in a breath as my tears finally start to slow.

Fuck. I would not want to be Hardwick right now. The only time I’ve even gotten close to seeing Roman’s full wrath was when he protected me from the other students in fight class, and even then, I don’t think that was all of it. He was angry but also disappointed, and he knew the students were scared. And he’s a professor—as angry as he might get, he knows there are some lines he has to maintain.

But right now, he’s pissed as shit, and I doubt he’ll hold back on Hardwick; no way would I want to be on the receiving end of that.

Once he’s gone, silence falls.

I want to go into the back, to see how Cam’s doing, to hold his hand, but I’m guessing they’re not even letting Asher do that right now.

Poor Asher. His best friend just got attacked, and he has to fill out all this paperwork and stuff, and he’s all alone.

Drawing in a deep breath, I look over at Dmitri... only to find him glaring at the wall like he’s trying to melt it.

What the hell?

“What’s your problem?”

He barks out a harsh laugh. “My problem?” His dark gaze lands on me as his eyes narrow. “My problem. Wow. That’s rich, coming from you.”

I sit up straighter. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re the one with a fucking problem.” He grips one of the armrests, glaring at me. “You couldn’t have left well enough alone, could you? You just had to *investigate* and see what you could find. And now you’ve gotten Cam hurt.”

“I didn’t cast that spell—”

“You put him in danger—”

“He chose to come with me!”

“Of course he did!” Dmitri snaps, standing up. “He’s in love with you! Of course he’s not going to let you do this alone.”

It’s true that I sought him and Asher out, asked them to join me. Maybe I should’ve been alone after all. Then I’d be the one without magic... All alone in the stairwell, in the tower, in too much pain to get up and get to the infirmary.

Jesus. I shudder involuntarily. Who knows what might've happened to me?

But I *do* wish it was me, if it has to be any of us. Not Cam. He's already been through so much in his life, and he's never let it beat him down. He's always trying to make others smile, to brighten their days. Why should he have to be the one to suffer when all he wants to do is make other people happy?

"You should've left this to the authorities," Dmitri continues, his voice sharp and stinging as a whip crack. "You should've let them handle this—the professors and the Circuit. This is their job, it's what they're supposed to do—"

"Well, they weren't doing anything!" I snap, jumping to my feet as well. "Or not enough!"

"And you figured out all the puzzle pieces, did you?" Dmitri shoots back. "You figured out what everyone else couldn't because you're that special, is that what I'm understanding?"

"What? No, that's—"

He steps up close to me, almost but not quite in my face. "You need to learn to mind your own damn business, Princess. First Raul and then the Trials and now this. You never leave well enough alone—you always have to get involved. Can't you just cut it out and leave it alone? For two fucking seconds? Stop trying to save everyone!"

Before I can defend myself, or even fully process what he's said, Dmitri turns on his heel and storms out.

CHAPTER 22

What. The. Fuck?

No way am I letting Dmitri just storm off like that.

We might be on the outs, but I'm not gonna let him fucking yell at me and stalk off like he's got the high ground or something. I know dragging the guys up to the tower wasn't the smartest thing, but I noticed something nobody else had, and I wanted to find out if it meant anything—and without any evidence of shady activity, what was I supposed to tell the Circuit anyway? *Oh, hey, I saw a bird?*

They'd have laughed their asses off.

And what right does Dmitri have to yell at me? It's not like he offered to help me, the fuckhead. He doesn't get to judge me, not him of all people, not after he's spent half the semester pushing me away. Asking me to *stop* trying to save everyone? What does he care? What right does he have to act like he actually worries about my well-being when he's made it perfectly clear he doesn't want anything to do with me?

"Hey, Dmitri, wait!" I yell.

He doesn't respond, though the angry line of his back speaks volumes.

I hurry after him and catch up with him pretty damn quickly, grabbing his forearm. "Oh, no, you fucking don't."

The dark-haired mage whirls around, whipping his arm away from me. "Leave me alone."

"No, I won't! Not until you explain to me what the fuck your problem is." I spy a door and grab him by the wrist, yanking him through it.

It's only once I get us inside that I realize this isn't the exam room or office I assumed it was—it's a storage closet.

Oops?

It's cramped in here, the walls lined with shelves and boxes. Not exactly ideal for a confrontation—but who cares? I'm not about to go searching around in a rage, dragging Dmitri behind me, until I find the perfect room to yell at him in.

"God, I swear I'm going to strangle you someday," I snap. "What the hell is your problem, huh? Would it kill you to just pick one program and stick with it?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you, you stuck-up moron!" I wave my hands in the air wildly, nearly knocking a stack of small boxes off a shelf. "Or is the stick so far up your ass it's reached your head and is scrambling your brains? One minute you kiss me like you can't live without me, the next you're telling me to stay away. You fight with me, then you ignore me, then you yell at me about putting myself and the others in danger. You try to act like you blame me for what happened to Cam, but then you tell me to stop trying to save everyone like *I'm* the one you're worried about."

Dmitri's lips are a thin line, his body tense and stiff. I have a feeling he's trying to hold himself back from his own rant, but he's gonna have to wait his damn turn, because I'm not done yet.

"You tell me your parents promised your hand in marriage when you were a baby like we're in *Fiddler on the Roof*, but you don't give me any clue what I'm supposed to do with this information—and I'm pretty damn sure I'm the only one who knows about it! You didn't even tell Cam and Asher, so why tell me?"

I suck in another huge breath of air, chest heaving. "I'm sick of you playing hot and cold! You can't just cry over someone's sickbed and kiss them like that and then shove them away the next chance you get. That's not how this works! If you don't want anything to do with me, then *fine*, just *tell* me."

I've really worked myself up into a lather now, practically yelling in Dmitri's face. He's trying to maintain this stone-like composure, but his jaw is twitching and there's a light in his eyes he can't suppress—one I can't quite read. I don't know what's going on in his head, and I feel like I'm on a speeding train with no brakes, the words spilling out of me in a torrent. It's too late for me to stop them, to slow down, to think. It's just all bursting out of me.

“Whatever your choice is, I’ll respect it, okay? But you need to tell me what you want. You can’t yank people’s emotions around and think they’re going to be okay with it!”

Dmitri folds his arms, almost like he’s trying to protect himself. “Sorry I’m not fawning all over you, Princess.”

“Ohhh, no! Don’t you fucking play that card with me! We are not playing this game. I am not asking people to fawn over me and you know it, dickhead.”

“Wow, real original there. Nice insult. I’m deeply wounded.”

“Would you rather I called you a coward?” I snap. “Because that’s what you are! You’re a coward who won’t stand up to his parents and won’t even tell me what’s wrong with him, with *us*—”

“There is no *us*!”

“There *is*, whether you like it or not, genius! *There is!*” My voice cracks a little, but I keep glaring at him, my chest rising and falling fast. “Now tell me what the hell your problem is!”

“You are!” Dmitri yells, his arms dropping, his hands curled into fists. His whole body is taut, like he’s about to fall off a cliff and ropes are holding him back, just about ready to snap. “You’re my problem, just—*you*. You’ve been fucking with my head ever since we met!”

“How is that my fault?! I’m not trying to do anything. In fact, I’ve been trying to stay away from you—”

“Right. That’s why you keep getting in my face.”

“Yeah, because I can’t take your bullshit anymore. Half the time you act like you give a shit about me, before you do an abrupt about-face and give me the cold shoulder! What am I supposed to do with that, huh?” I shove him in the chest, and Dmitri, startled, stumbles back a step.

He glares at me. “You just can’t leave well enough alone, can you? Not with me, not with anyone. Always sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.” He shoves at me, lightly, not nearly at his full strength, more to get back at me than to actually hurt me.

“Sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong is how Raul got apprehended.” I smack his hands away. “I didn’t see you complaining all that much then!”

“Oh, yes, when you got to be the *hero*.”

My nostrils flare.

That's a low blow. Dmitri knows I didn't want all the attention that came from stopping Raul and then from being in the Trials. I didn't do it for attention, I did it because it was the right goddamn thing to do. I hate the notoriety I got because of it, the reputation, the way people stared at me at the beginning of the semester.

"At least I'm true to myself," I snarl. "I do what I want. I'm not under Daddy's thumb, just giving in and letting someone else rule my life. I'm not a damn coward."

Dmitri's face flushes. "And at least my father cares enough to be in my life."

...oh, I'm gonna kill him.

"Maybe yours *shouldn't* be in your life!" I shout. "Maybe then you'd have the backbone to go after what you want."

"And maybe you'd understand that not everyone can have what they want," he grits out. "Some of us have to make sacrifices. We can't have it all."

"I don't need a life philosophy lesson from you—"

"No, you need to learn to back the fuck off—"

I shove at him again, but Dmitri's ready for me this time. He grabs my wrists and twists, whipping me around and shoving me into a wall, pinning me between the shelves and his body.

"Princess," he growls, his face only an inch from mine, "you need to learn when to stop."

"You want me to stop? I'll stop the second you tell me to! I'll never fucking talk to you again if you ask," I growl right back. The emotional strain of everything that's happened in the past few hours makes me feel raw, like someone scrubbed my soul with a wire brush. Angry tears burn my eyes again, and I don't even bother blinking them away. "But you have to tell me. Say it to my fucking face. Is that what you want? Huh?"

"I want *you*." Dmitri's voice is low, harsh, and dangerous. His breath whispers across my skin, and his eyes are so dark they're almost black. "But I can't. Fucking. Have. You."

"Can't or *won't*? I'm right here, Dmitri. I'm right fucking here!" I push against his hold on me like I'm trying to shove our bodies together. My heart is racing, and I can feel myself flushing, hot all over. "Goddamn it! You drive me insane. You're such an asshole sometimes, but I still want you so bad it fucking kills me. And if you really don't want me, then just

tell me, and I'll leave you alone. I'll get over it eventually—I'll figure out some way to move on. But don't tell me you *want* me and can't *have* me, because that's a load of bullshit, and you know it. I'm right here, and I want you! I want your heart. I want your mind. I want your crankiness and your moodiness and those little moments of sweetness that slip through and make me feel like I really *am* a goddamn princess. I want every single annoying, frustrating, irritating thing about y—”

I don't get the rest of my sentence out, because before I can say anything else, Dmitri smashes his mouth against mine and kisses me.

I'm startled by the suddenness of it, and I nearly fall backward, wrapping my arms around him on instinct, and for a second, it's all clashing lips and teeth like we're at war. And then Dmitri hauls me to him properly, gets his hand in my hair, tilts my head, and then—oh, then it's good. It's intense, chaotic, and deep, just like Dmitri, and I'm not surprised in the slightest, but it's still so *much* that I have to cling to him for fear that I'll melt.

Now that he's started, it's like all the ropes that have been holding him back are cut loose, and he's free-falling. He's pouring everything into this kiss, and I'm helpless, unable to do anything but try to keep up and go along for the ride.

Not that I'm complaining. Dmitri knows what he's doing, and his dominance is hot as fuck.

He's muttering into my mouth in between kisses, something that sounds like, “It's you. It's always been you.”

I feel those words down to the depths of my soul, feel them almost as much as his hot, demanding lips on mine, and they light me on fire.

It's *me*.

It's *him*.

It's *us*.

This is happening.

Fucking *finally*.

He's still kissing me like he's trying to consume me alive, and he releases his grip on my hair so his hands can roam possessively over the rest of me. We keep banging up against the shelves, knocking things loose, moving around the little room erratically as we battle each other and the laws of physics that refuse to let our bodies meld into one.

When he fists the front of my shirt in both hands, I quickly grab the hem of the fabric. I have a feeling it's going to be demolished if it doesn't get out of his way in about point two seconds, and I don't have a backup shirt with me. I'm fairly certain anybody walking by could make a good guess as to what's going on in here, but if I walk out of this closet with my shirt shredded into a vest, they'll know for sure.

He lets go of the fabric as I tug it from his hands and haul it over my head, and when his gaze drops to my chest, which is rising and falling fast as I try to get my breath back, the look on his face nearly makes me come on the spot.

He looks entranced.

Hungry.

Possessive.

With a growl, he yanks me back into his arms, and his lips descend on me again, working their way down my throat, across my collarbone, over the swell of my breasts. He keeps moving downward, pressing me back against a shelving unit as his mouth trails down my stomach. His hands are way ahead of his lips, already working the button of my jeans, sliding the zipper down, pushing them over the swell of my hips until my light purple panties are exposed.

He drags his nose across the already damp fabric, and my knees almost buckle. I fist his hair in both hands, fighting to keep my drooping eyelids open. I feel a little drunk, to be honest—the massive emotional swings of the past hour coupled with his touch are making me feel dazed and desperate.

But I'm coherent enough to remember this isn't an abandoned classroom on an upper level of Wellwood Hall. We're in the infirmary, in a storage closet, and I *know* there are people in this building.

"Dmitri!" I gasp, forcing my brain to function long enough for my mouth to form words. "Door!"

He pulls his face away from my pussy, and I miss the heat of his breath immediately.

"Fuck."

He looks over his shoulder at the door and then back to me, and the gleam in his eyes makes me shiver. He doesn't seem worried about someone busting in on us, exactly; he looks more like he hates the idea of anyone else seeing me like this. Like this moment is his and his alone.

Without another word, he stands and strides to the door. It's got a simple lock on the handle, and he turns it with slow deliberation.

Jesus Christ.

I never thought watching somebody lock a door would turn me on so fucking much—but I swear, that's one of the hottest things I've ever seen.

Because I know what it means.

As the locking mechanism slides into place with a soft *click*, Dmitri's gaze snaps back to me. I'm still leaning against the shelves, arms draped over them to help support my weight as I stand here—shirtless and disheveled, with my pants pushed halfway off my hips and what I'm guessing is a visible wet spot on the crotch of my panties.

I'm sure I look like a mess, but Dmitri seems to love everything about it. His dark eyes blaze with fire as he stalks back toward me. He catches my face in one large hand, and before I can prepare for it, his lips are on mine again.

We kiss wildly, our low grunts and moans filling the small space as we tear at each other's clothes.

Look, maybe one day I'll make a real effort to cut back on having sex in public places—but today is not that fucking day.

I grab the condom from the little front pocket of my jeans before Dmitri yanks my pants all the way down my legs, pulling my shoes off and tossing everything aside in a pile. He's still got his pants on, but his shirt is off, his broad chest and sculpted muscles on full display. He shoves his pants halfway down his thighs, and his cock springs free, long and thick and so hard it looks almost painful.

How long has he been wanting this? Craving this?

Probably about as long as I have.

My fingers shake as I try to open the condom wrapper. I'm nervous for some reason, and so turned on I can barely see straight.

Dmitri's large hand closes over mine, stopping my frantic movements. His gaze locks on my face as he takes the condom from me in a deliberate motion, tearing it open quickly before sliding it on with quick strokes of his fist.

Then he kisses me so deeply my toes curl against the hard, cool floor. When he pulls back, he tilts my head up to look at him.

“We need to keep quiet, Princess. Do you think you can do that?”

Um, with the way he's looking at me? With the way my clit is throbbing like it has its own heartbeat? With the way sharp gasps are already falling from my lips without my permission?

Fuck no.

"Yes," I promise, nodding my head vigorously.

He smirks, like he knows that's a damn bald-faced lie.

Then he grabs my hips and spins me around. My fingers scrabble for a handhold on the shelves as I feel his warm hand sliding down my back, all the way from my neck to the base of my spine. I lose his touch for a second just before his palm connects with my ass in a sharp slap.

It's not hard. It doesn't really hurt, but the sound and the slight sting against my flesh make me cry out softly—and I'm already breaking my word about staying quiet.

Dmitri chuckles, a low, dark sound that makes my pussy clench. Then he grabs onto my hips and plunges into me, bottoming out in one thrust. If I weren't already soaking wet, it might be too much. But I am, I'm so wet for him, and the feel of him inside me, of his hips pressed flush against my ass, is everything I need right now. I let out another involuntary sound, and Dmitri growls behind me.

"Bad Princess."

There's humor in his voice, and I know he loves every noise that falls from my lips, that he considers each one a personal victory.

But we do need to try to be quiet, so when he slips a hand over my mouth as he begins to pump in and out of me, I lean into his touch, spilling my soft noises into the warm skin of his palm, biting and panting as fire licks through my body. He's got his other hand on my hip, gripping hard, using that leverage to thrust into me faster and deeper.

Oh god, oh fuck, oh yes.

"You got that fucking right," Dmitri grunts on a whisper, and I realize I didn't just think those words, I muttered them against his hand.

I'm barreling toward an orgasm that I'm only thirty percent sure I'll survive when suddenly, Dmitri stops. He pulls all the way out of me, but before I can groan out my frustration, he's spinning me around to face him again, hauling me up into his arms.

"I need to see you. I have to fucking look at you."

The words are barely out of his mouth before he slams into me again, holding me up as I wrap my legs around his waist.

I don't know what he sees on my face in this moment, but the look on his makes my breath catch.

It's... worship.

Fierce need.

Maybe even love.

It's too much—the emotion in his eyes, the feel of him inside me, his body fused to mine, his arms supporting me—and I whimper loudly, unable to contain all the sensations rocketing around inside me.

He shakes his head, breathing hard and fast. “I need you to be quiet for me, Princess. I know you can. Just hold onto me.”

So I do, wrapping my arms and legs around him tight and burying my face in his neck as he braces me against one of the shelving units and fucks me like we both need this to survive.

It's not exactly comfortable—the cool, unforgiving metal of the shelves digs into my low back and my shoulders with every hard thrust—but those little discomforts hardly matter compared to the pleasure crashing through my body like a raging river.

“Dmitri,” I mutter, trying to warn him. The orgasm that was creeping up on me when he pulled out before is back, and it feels like maybe it's brought reinforcements. I'm about to come like a fucking freight train, and I honestly don't know if I can keep my mouth shut when I do. “Dmitri!”

“Oh God, I can feel it, Elliot. I can fucking feel it. Are you ready, baby?”

I nod, muttering some kind of choked response into the skin of his neck. He fists my hair close to the roots, lifting my head up, and then that same hand moves to cover my mouth again. His other arm still supports my weight, and his thrusts slow, becoming so deep and hard I swear I can feel them everywhere.

Our faces are only inches apart, and I can't look away from his eyes. He's watching me, absorbing every detail of what he's doing to me, and the shelves rattle and shake behind me with the force of each of his thrusts.

One more.

One more deep drive, and I lose it.

I cry out against his hand, my inner muscles spasming and clenching around him as sweet ecstasy floods my body.

He groans and trembles, pressing his lips together so hard they turn white as he holds in his own cry of release, and I feel him throb and pulse

inside me. Our bodies shudder against each other as our gazes stay locked, like we're sharing a secret between us, passing a message back and forth.

Finally, my muscles go limp, and I feel him relax too. His hand slips away from my mouth as we both let out a long exhale.

“Holy... fucking... shit.”

Those words, I *do* keep quiet. They're barely a whisper, but they make Dmitri smile anyway.

He brushes my wild hair back from my face, dipping his head to kiss me again like he can't quite get enough. Like he'll never get enough.

“You got that right.”

CHAPTER 23

We kiss for a while longer, as his cock starts to soften a little. The sex we just had was so intense, driven by months and months of pent up need, that it feels kind of amazing to kiss like this, slow and deep and lazy, while he's still inside me.

Finally, he breaks away, securing the condom and pulling out before setting me gently on my feet. He ties it off and drops it in a trash bin near the door, and I can't help checking out his ass as he does. He's got a great fucking ass, and I've never seen it bare before, so I want to soak up the view before he pulls his pants back up.

His dark gaze flicks to mine over his shoulder, peering at me from beneath his lashes, but I don't even pretend I wasn't just checking him out.

Instead, I grin cheekily. "Nice butt."

A smile tugs his lips up at the corners as he arches a brow at me. "Glad you approve."

"Oh, I definitely do."

We still haven't discussed exactly what this means. Whether we're officially together now—what the labels are and all that. I know we probably should, just for clarity's sake, but... Dmitri and I have always been the two who communicate without our words.

And besides, regardless of what we decide to call it, something has definitely shifted, and I don't think it'll ever go back to the way it was.

All the tension between us, that feeling of a gulf, of distance, of anger... it's gone. Almost like it never existed. I just feel relaxed and close to him.

Something's softened about him as well. Not that he'll ever be Mr. Sunshine and Rainbows. Dmitri's still Dmitri and I wouldn't want him to

suddenly become this smiling, soft romantic—that's not who he is. I want him to keep demanding the best of me, pushing me, being cranky, and showing me with his actions how much he cares.

But it's like there's a weight gone from him now, and as he touches me in the aftermath, as we put ourselves back together, it feels like... like we're freer now. We're easy and relaxed, as if this is what we always should have been. Like all the tension since we met was because we were holding back from this, and now that we've given in, it's all just fallen into place like puzzle pieces.

Dmitri helps me clean myself up, gently tucks my hair behind my ear, fetches my clothes, and basically... takes care of me, the way he always has.

I can sense that he's no longer holding back. Now that we've both admitted our feelings and acted on them too, he's letting himself be all that he can be, wants to be, with me.

It's such a relief I can't even stand it. I feel like I can breathe properly for the first time in months. As if I had a corset or something constricting my chest, holding me in—and now that it's gone, each lungful of air feels like freedom.

We finish cleaning up, and Dmitri takes my hand, grumbling about how we have to do this on a bed next time because there's not enough room in a fucking storage closet—as if this whole thing wasn't his damn idea in the first place—and we exit the small room, only to run smack into Roman.

The ebony-haired man catches me by the shoulders, looks at me, looks at Dmitri... and promptly turns away, ducking his head.

What the hell?

I start to move toward him, a little concerned. Did I hurt him? Is he—? Then I realize his shoulders are shaking.

Keeping my feet planted right where they are, I fold my arms and glare. “This isn't funny.”

Roman makes a choked noise and holds up a finger, asking me to wait. After another moment, he turns back, his face mostly under control. “I'm sorry, but it's very funny.”

“Let me know the next time you two hook up,” Dmitri says dryly. “I'll be sure to stand outside the door and laugh when you're finished.”

The other man arches a brow. “I can dock your grades, you know.”

“But you won't.” Dmitri smirks, and I have to laugh.

Then I remember where Roman just was, and the post-sex haze of happiness dissipates like fog in a strong wind. There's so much we're up against. So much shit to figure out. "Wait! How—how did Hardwick take it? Is he going to close the school?"

I'm honestly worried the person doing this might be one of the students, and that closing the academy will mean the culprit gets off campus and can flee, but maybe it's worth it if no more students are hurt. If Roman or Asher or Dmitri lose their magic too, I don't know if I'll be able to handle it.

Roman's face slides from amusement to frustration in a split second, his brows furrowing and his jaw clenching. "Hardwick won't close the school."

"What?"

"Why the fuck not?" Dmitri demands.

"It's not exactly his fault," Roman amends, but he still sounds plenty pissed. "It's the board. He's under an extreme amount of pressure from them and from the donors not to close the school. With Johnson's outburst and all the negative propaganda about Unpredictables that's been going around..." He sighs, running a hand through his hair. "Don't get me wrong, we've still got some very vocal supporters. More people than I might've expected."

"That's good," I say, but I can barely muster up any optimism in my voice.

Vocal support is all fine and great, but if there are people out there who'll do anything to bring us down, will it be enough?

Roman seems to be thinking along the same lines I am, because he sighs. "Yes, it is. It's still creating a divide in the magical community though, and... we can't just assume our side will win out. We have to do whatever we can to show that we're staying strong and steady. You did a lot for us actually, Elliot." He gives me a small, proud smile. "Your work in the Trials? The whole magical world saw that. You impressed them. And that's huge."

Dmitri's hand slides into mine, giving it a gentle squeeze as Roman continues.

"But people are starting to claim these incidents are proof that Unpredictables can't be trained, or shouldn't be trained, that this school is a failed experiment. If we close down now, even temporarily, it'll be like a nail in the coffin. They'll start calling for us all to be stripped of our magic."

“What kind of bullshit—” The words fly out of my mouth before I can stop them. “What the actual hell? This isn’t our fault! We didn’t do anything—”

“I know,” Roman says quickly. His voice is tense, and I can tell he agrees with me but is trying not to fly off the handle. “Trust me, I know. It’s putting students’ lives at risk to keep this damn place open right now, but if we let everyone go, it’ll be as good as admitting that Griffin Academy never should’ve existed in the first place.”

“Is it because they think a student did this?” Dmitri’s eyes flash.

“What else could it be?” Roman shakes his head. “You think the janitor was doing it?”

“The janitor’s closet was right by the tower where Cam was attacked,” Dmitri scoffs a little, like he’s making a joke but is too pissed off to do it properly.

I get that. I’m pretty damn pissed myself. Especially now that Cam’s been attacked. He’s always taken such joy in his magic. I’ve struggled with accepting it, and especially with accepting my Unpredictable status. So has Dmitri, I know. But Cam’s just so full of... exuberance. Magic is his connection to his parents, who were magical scientists. It’s his connection to their community and culture.

Out of all the people who could’ve been attacked, why did it have to be him? Why did it have to be the most joyful of us?

I can’t believe this bullshit. They’ll put the lives of students at risk just to prove a point. And I get what Roman’s saying about Hardwick being in a tight spot—I don’t blame the dean. If he’s going to keep this safe haven afloat, he has to look at the bigger picture, play the politics of the situation. So no, I’m not angry at him. I’m angry at the people in the magical community who think pushing a political agenda one way or another is an excuse to toy with our lives.

Judging by Johnson’s attitude, and the attitude of others, they don’t care about our lives at all. Not if we’re Unpredictable.

“We have to do something!” I blurt.

“Like what?”

Dmitri’s shoulders slump. He doesn’t sound like he’s snarking at me, but like he’s frustrated and would genuinely love to hear any suggestions I have.

That brings me up short.

What *can* we do? Break into the rooms of all the students and see if they have a journal where they've written *mwahaha, today I stole another person's magic?*

Yeah, right.

We can't just go invading everyone's privacy, and I doubt we'd actually find anything. In fact, the only odd thing I can think of on campus...

...is that damn bird.

We were about halfway up the tower when the attack happened, but we never made it onto the roof. Cam was in front, the one highest up the stairs. The one closest to the roof. Was he attacked because we were getting too close to something important? I have no idea what kind of bird is up there. I just know when I saw it flying toward Wellwood Hall this afternoon, something about it looked and felt strange. *Wrong*.

It's a risk—and a big one—to try going up to the roof again, considering what happened last time. But what other choice do we have?

"I think we need to go up to the tower."

Dmitri raises his eyebrows at me. "Because it went so well last time?"

"Why were you up in that specific tower anyway?" Roman asks.

I explain about the bird. How I noticed it when we first got back to campus and saw it again today. How it's in the same spot on the roof, but it's not like any bird I've ever seen before. Bigger. Weirder.

"I knew it was probably nothing," I finish up with a grimace, "but we thought, hey, why not check out the roof? So we decided to use the tower to get up to it."

"And that's when Cam was attacked," he fills in, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully.

"Yeah." My chest aches all over again as I remember it. "And you're right. There could be no connection at all. Maybe the same thing would've happened to him no matter where we were. But like Hardwick said, at this point, we need to take even the smallest leads seriously. We can't afford not to."

"But what would be up in that tower or on the roof?" Dmitri asks. "What would a *bird* have to do with it?"

Roman puts his hands on his hips, frowning in concentrated thought. "I'm not sure. Having not seen it, even from a distance, I can't make any guesses."

“Then it sounds like we need to go up there and figure this damn thing out once and for all,” I say decisively.

Oh man, I really don't want to. I can't deny I'm scared as hell. I don't want to lose my magic. But I'm also determined to help Cam.

The two men share a doubtful look, and I fold my arms. “Look, I'm going up there whether you want me to or not. Good luck stopping me. So you can either come with me, or you can let me do it alone.”

Dmitri rolls his eyes, but unlike earlier when he told me to butt my nose out, I can see fondness and fierce pride in his expression.

Roman sighs. “You're impossible, Reckless, do you know that? Did you sign a contract at some point vowing to be as rebellious as possible all the time?”

“Yup. Lifelong contract, no loopholes.”

He holds out his hand. “Give me your arm.”

It takes me a second, but then I realize what he's doing—he's going to take off my cuff.

I hold out my wrist and let Roman do the spell that all the professors—and only the professors—know, which disables our magic dampening braces. He then does the same with Dmitri.

“I'll tell Asher where we're going,” I say quietly.

The other two nod, and I slip into the infirmary.

Asher's sitting next to Cam. It's easy to find them, since he's the only one in the ward sitting upright. The healers are all in their offices while Cam and the five other affected students sleep.

“Hey,” I say quietly as I approach. “Everything okay?”

“As okay as it can be.” He looks up at me, and I don't have mind reading powers at all, but I know when he's hurting. I sit down in his lap and wrap my arms around him, holding him for a moment. Asher's arms come around me, and he squeezes me tightly, his face buried in my shoulder. I feel his body shake and then relax a little against mine, and I wish we could stay like this for so much longer.

“I'm going to go up to the tower again,” I whisper. “With Roman and Dmitri.”

He nods. “Roman's a badass. And Dmitri will be able to keep you safe.”

It's true—even without his magic, Dmitri's a powerful fighter. But then, so am I. Not that that'll help me if I'm writhing in pain from having my magic stolen.

“We’ll be back,” I promise. “It’ll be okay. If he wakes up before we return...”

Shit. I don’t know how to finish that sentence.

So I wrap my arms tighter around Asher instead, letting him hug me back, and then I kiss him softly and slip back out to rejoin Roman and Dmitri.

They’ve got their heads together, probably trying to strategize some kind of plan that covers a million unknowns, but they look up when I enter.

I square my shoulders. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

For all my big words, I’m nervous as fuck. The thought of losing my magic makes me want to barf. Ironic, I know, given how ready I was to let Aurora take it from me after it first sparked. But things have changed. *I’ve* changed.

We head over to Wellwood Hall and walk down the corridor that leads toward the tower. Roman grabs my wrist lightly as we walk, tugging it to draw my attention.

“I want you to be careful,” he tells me, his voice low. Not like he doesn’t want Dmitri to hear, but like he thinks someone other than the three of us might be eavesdropping.

At first, I think he’s talking about keeping myself out of danger, and I’m about to tell him where he can stick that idea, but then he adds, “When you first manifest a new power—it can come on suddenly and be hard to control. The results can be... catastrophic.”

Roman’s expression remains impassive, but his face seems to harden and become etched with pain. There’s a timbre to his voice I’ve never heard before, and I’m not sure what it’s about, exactly—just that it sounds like sorrow mixed with anger.

I remember what Tamlin told me about his past. That she doesn’t know everything about it, but that there’s something in his history he still struggles with, something that hurt him. I can’t help but wonder if that’s what he’s thinking of right now, and if so, what happened.

Not that this is the time to get into it. I don’t know if there’s an ideal time for grilling your unofficial boyfriend—one of four—about his past, but when you’re hunting down an unknown threat and possibly about to lose your magic is definitely *not* it.

At the base of the tower, the door is still ajar from when Asher and I carried Cam out. My shoulders and jaw are tense, and I have to force

myself to relax. *I'm a badass. I can do this.*

But unlike in the Trials, or even with Raul, there's not an active enemy to fight against here. I don't know who's stealing the magic, so I can't fight back properly. It's a spell from an unknown source, not a physical opponent I can see. So I feel... defenseless. I can't protect myself, or see the attack coming, or strike back.

There's nothing else for it, though. Someone has to do something, and if we wait until after break when we can get a proper team in here, either school admins or Circuit investigators, it could be too late. And the students will all be back on campus by then—more people could be attacked.

We can't risk that.

I shove the door farther open and step inside, moving up the steps, refusing to let myself pause or hesitate. *One step, two steps, three steps, four...* I count them in my head as we climb higher and higher, past where I stopped last time, up to where Cam was standing when he got attacked.

My heart thumps painfully in my chest, hard and fast, like a horse trying to break out of a stable. I'm trying not to let my breathing get heavy and panicky. I don't want Roman or Dmitri to see that I'm nervous—and I especially don't want any enemy who might be watching to see.

Any second now, my magic could be ripped from me. I'm almost expecting it to happen, bracing for it, my heart climbing into my throat, my ears ringing—

Waiting as I climb up, and up, and up...

And up.

CHAPTER 24

Despite my entire body bracing for it, nothing happens to me as I climb the twisting, circular tower stairs.

Instead, I get to the top and jimmy open a window. Roman helps me while Dmitri looks around the tower, standing guard, waiting for something to jump out at us from the shadows.

I gotta admit, I sort of expected some monster to leap on me as soon as I reached the top step, as if I were some chick in a horror film who should've turned back when she had the chance. But there's nothing up here—or at least, not so far.

I can't tell if that makes it all better or worse.

We get the window open, and I climb through onto the roof, gripping Roman's hand tight for extra balance. He climbs through next, followed by Dmitri.

I'm actually feeling pretty confident up here on the roof. I've been practicing my spider climb a lot, I feel like I could control it if I started to fall—and my sonic boom can be used as an odd way to slow my descent to earth, if I don't mind blasting a crater in the ground beneath me.

Up here, now that I'm actually on it, I can see more clearly that the roof isn't just one level. It's several different levels, some lower than we are, some a bit higher or slanted. I can also see the whole damn campus from here, and man, it's gorgeous. Dusk fell while we were in the infirmary, and the sky is a dark gray-blue color. Moonlight spills across the quad, the forest, and the old, distinguished buildings around us, making everything look otherworldly.

It occurs to me that I really love this place. Maybe not the people, exactly; I could stand to get better about that. But this actual campus, and its purpose, I love that.

I want to defend it.

Dmitri leans against the outer wall of the tower, as if this is just a fun trip to the beach and we're all hanging out. "All right. What do we do now?"

I shrug. "We investigate."

Hey, it's not like I've got some master plan or anything. But I want to see if I can find that bird. I didn't realize how large it was when I saw it that first day, but the student lot is on the very far west side of campus, so I was a long way away. When I saw it earlier today from just below Wellwood Hall, it looked a *lot* bigger—which makes me wonder how big it actually is.

"Stick together," Roman cautions.

I want to reply that I'm not sure what sticking together will do for keeping our magic inside our souls. But Roman's a teacher, and aside from any personal feelings he has for me specifically, or for Dmitri as a friend, he must also feel a responsibility for us as his students.

So instead of being snarky, I just do as he says and stick close to both men as we start to carefully move across the roof, checking for anything suspicious. A trap door to a hidden magical lab or something, maybe? Wacky and out there, yeah, but at this point I feel like anything is possible.

We climb around for a few minutes, and I'm starting to think this whole thing was another wild goose chase—that I really am an idiot. Who puts something dangerous and secret up on the roof of a school anyway?

But then I get a little ahead of the guys, climbing over a pointed ridge in the roof—

And I see it.

There's a large, uneven shape looming in the darkness ahead of me. It looks almost like a pile of debris, but it's got some kind of proper shape to it.

I get down on all fours and crawl closer. I don't want to alert anything or anyone that might be nearby. Behind me, I hear Dmitri hiss my name, and then the muffled sound of two pairs of feet as the guys follow after me. I move even closer, squinting to make out a bunch of twigs, sticks, mud, and...

Is this a nest?

Holy shit.

I rise to my feet again, blinking in shock, as I realize this nest thing is taller than I am. The rim of the nest is probably about eight feet in the air, and the whole thing is at least twelve feet across. It's huge.

What the hell is going on?

"Give me a boost," I whisper.

Roman drops to one knee and helps me up.

"What the hell?" Dmitri hisses. "Princess, what are you doing?!"

"What's it look like I'm doing?" I call softly back, getting a good handhold on the branches. It's like one of those wattle-and-daub nests, where the birds use the mud to press the sticks into it. I learned about it on a Netflix nature documentary I watched when I was wallowing in misery after fucking up in the Trials.

It takes a bit of awkward kicking and wiggling to get a good foothold, but then I'm able to haul myself up so I can look down into the nest.

I nearly fall backward.

Inside the massive bowl-like structure are a bunch of eggs—and they're big.

No, I mean *big*.

Like, people sized.

Holy fucking shit.

I haul myself up the rest of the way and climb over so I can inspect one of the eggs. They're tall, smaller at the top than at the bottom, smooth to the touch, and warm. I press my ear to the shell and knock gently.

I can't hear a heartbeat inside, and when I knock, I just hear a vague liquid sloshing sound.

This would probably be the part of the horror film where a creepy hand slams itself against the inside wall of the shell to try and get me, but nothing like that happens. *Huh*.

I hope this isn't a rabbit baby situation—apparently if you touch baby rabbits, the mom will smell the human on them and kill them.

Yeah. That nature documentary wasn't all sunshine and roses.

"What do you see?" Dmitri calls quietly.

I haul myself back up onto the top ridge of the nest and peer down at them. "Eggs," I whisper back. "There are six of them."

That's when it hits me—there were six students attacked, including Cam.

Okay, but that's just a coincidence, right? I mean, what the hell do eggs have to do with stealing magic? Do the eggs need to eat the magic or something? Does the bird need to have the magic to lay an egg? All of those possibilities sound insane.

Roman frowns. "What do they look like?"

"I'm gonna be honest, they look like massive chicken eggs. Not exactly what you'd expect." No crazy pulsing colors or veins or anything. "Do you have any idea what this is?"

Dmitri shakes his head. "Beats me."

"It's not a griffin or anything?" I suggest.

God, that would be fucking ironic, if our school mascot was the thing attacking us.

"No, griffins are only part bird. You would've seen the lion half of it while it was in flight," Roman explains, brows furrowing. "Same with a hippogriff. It's not a phoenix. The nest is too large. And it's not a roc; those are desert dwelling birds."

The fact that even he doesn't know what this is concerns me. He's a teacher and an expert in weird shit. When we fought Raul, Roman decided to just go full badass and say to hell with caution and summoned a goddamn demon to fight. It was insane.

It's also a testament to how powerful Raul was that the kid actually went toe-to-toe with the thing.

"You should get down, Princess," Dmitri whispers, reaching up for me. The muscles of his arms are bunched with tension. "Before the bird comes —"

He freezes, his eyes going wide.

Oh shit.

Before I even turn around, I know what's in store. Behind me and above my head, the air stirs, wind blowing at the back of my hair as the bird comes in for a landing. I don't hear anything though, no flapping of giant wings—it's completely silent.

Which is fucking terrifying.

If Dmitri hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have known it was there.

Not even really thinking about it, I dive, and Dmitri catches me, staggering but managing to keep his balance—it helps that he's a good several inches taller than I am. He sets me on my feet just as the roof trembles with the force of the bird landing.

I turn and get my first good, direct look at this thing.

Ohhhh my God.

Okay, so it *is* a bird. I think. But holy shit, it is not by any means a normal bird. And it's not like any magical bird I've ever heard of either. I was right about it being huge. It's nearly human-sized—about the size of the eggs, actually, which means they must've grown a bit since it laid them.

Up close, what I thought were kind of brown feathers actually have this weird orange outline to them. It's almost like an orange that's black. I can't even describe it properly. Something about the color is familiar, but I can't quite place it.

And then there are its eyes.

Look, animals can be plenty intelligent, I won't say they can't be. But this is not animal intelligence. This is pure malevolence. It has slitted pupils like a snake, and the irises are molten orange like lava, and I swear to God, it's staring directly into my soul and thinking about ripping my heart out.

Sweat pops out on my brow, my stomach churns, and I start to feel panicky. Like I should run away. Like running away is the best idea I've ever had in my life.

Dmitri grabs my hand and squeezes it tight. The bird tilts its head, and its razor sharp beak catches the moonlight. It flexes its huge claws, and then it spreads its wings and lets out an awful shriek.

Not a cry, or a caw, or any sound a regular bird might make. I mean a goddamn shriek, as if the souls of the damned are taking their best shot at breaking the sound barrier. I clap my hands over my ears and squeeze my eyes shut, feeling hot and cold at the same time as terror grabs hold of my heart and squeezes.

"Fuck," Roman swears as the shriek dies down. I open my eyes. "This isn't a bird," he spits. "I'm not sure what kind it is, but this—this is a demon."

It doesn't surprise me he recognizes a demon when he sees one, and I realize that was what struck me as familiar about the strange orange color of its feathers. It's the same hue as the demon he summoned last year.

Unnatural. Alien. A color my eyes couldn't quite process—because it's not really of this world.

Jesus effing Christ.

"I think we know what's been attacking the students," Dmitri says dryly.

"You *think*?" I shoot back.

That's when I hear it—a cracking noise.

And I realize the bird wasn't just shrieking to intimidate us.

Oh crap, oh crap, the eggs are opening. Oh crap!

We can't take on six more of these bird-demons, even baby ones. Can we? I know *I* can't, even with my new mirroring power. And would that even work on a demon? What powers does this thing possess, anyway?

The rustling, cracking sounds continue, but we stand our ground. It's not like we can just run and abandon the school to these demons up here. And if we did try to run, that would just mean turning our backs on this thing—no fucking thank you, not today, sir.

The bird rustles its feathers. I swear it has a gleam of triumph in its eyes. If birds could smile, this one would be smirking evilly like it's the villain in a James Bond film. As its feathers ruffle, I hear not the movement of natural, soft feathers but the scrape of metal, and I realize—those feathers are deadly sharp, like blades.

Ahahaha. Fuck. We are so fucked.

"Run," Roman whispers to me. "I'll cover you two."

"No way!" I hiss. "I'm not leaving you."

"I'm the demonology expert."

"And I'm stubborn and reckless, remember?"

Before he can respond to that, a hand shoots up out of the nest and grabs the rim.

I jump, my stomach twisting in fear. *What the hell is that?*

The hand clenches, grasping at the sticks and hardened mud of the nest as more of the body rises into view.

And I see someone I recognize.

It's Tandy.

But that's... not possible. Tandy's down in the infirmary with the others. She's resting; they all are. They couldn't go home because the healers were worried it would be too much of a strain on their systems to move them. They're all still fragile and in an almost comatose state, and Tandy's down there, not up here.

"What. The. Fuck?" Dmitri says hoarsely, and for once, he sounds anxious.

Yeah, I concur.

More of them start to climb over the nest. Tom and the other students who were attacked, and—

And Cam.

They're all naked, which would normally be a bit off-putting, but their bodies aren't quite human. A weird slime covers them from head to toe, probably residual goo from the eggs. There's also a strange orange light in their eyes. And where the, well, dangly bits and stuff would normally be, there's just more smooth skin.

Alarm bells ring in my brain, my senses screaming that something is off, something isn't right here. Something is very, *very* wrong. The six figures are even moving oddly, like they're not quite sure how humans walk so they're just doing their best imitation.

It makes bile rise up in my throat. Especially staring at the Cam doppelgänger. He looks just like the sunny blond mage, but... not. It's creepy and disconcerting, and I want it to stop—I want to cover my eyes and burst into tears for some reason, but I can't.

It's pretty damn clear we're going to have to fight these... these *others*, these doppelgängers.

The bird-thing lets out another piercing cry. I crane my neck to look up at it, and for a moment, I see a weird glimpse of something. As if there's a veil between what's right in front of me and what's going on somewhere else, somewhere far away, on the other side of the world for all I know. They say on Halloween Night and Midsummer's Night, you can see through the veil into the spirit world, or the world of faerie, but this isn't either of those days.

So what the hell am I seeing?

I blink and scrub at my eyes like I'm trying to dislodge sleep particles from them.

The bird bobs its head down and glares at me—yeah, it's a *glare*, there's no other word for it—and I stare back as I hear Roman shout something from beside me. Magic glows around his hands, and Dmitri drops into a battle stance. My gaze is still locked on the bird, and for one brief second, the image behind its face solidifies. For just a moment, I'm not looking at a bird at all, but...

A man.

He's there and gone in a second, just long enough for me to register that it *is* a man, not a woman or some kind of magical creature. I get a glimpse of a male face wearing an expression of hatred so pure that it makes the air in my lungs go ice-cold.

What is he doing? He must be controlling the bird somehow, inside its head—the bird’s and the man’s minds acting as one, his will directing its movements.

Fuck. I remember Raul had some kind of mentor, someone he was magically prevented from talking to us about after we subdued him and turned him in to the Circuit. Could this be the same guy? He attacked the school once before, through Raul...

But now isn’t the time to ponder any of that. We have six demon-people and an evil bird coming at us, ready to tear us limb from limb.

It’s time to see what my mirror powers are really made of.

I don’t know if the doppelgängers have any of the memories or personalities of their originals. I’m not sure whether it’s some kind of perverted affection, or if some of the horror I felt earlier showed on my face and that’s why he’s after me—but the Cam doppelgänger is gunning right for me.

I take a deep breath. There’s no time for panic, and I’m not going to leave Dmitri and Roman in the lurch because I couldn’t handle this.

“They’re demons!” Roman shouts. “Be careful!”

Uh, okay. I’m going to be as careful as I can, but playing it safe isn’t really an option when it’s fight or die. I launch myself at the Cam doppelgänger and try to force down my instinct to hold back.

This isn’t Cam, I chant in my head. *This isn’t Cam, this isn’t Cam, this isn’t Cam.*

But it’s so hard not to freak out when this thing looks like him, moves a lot like him, is so close to *being* him—except for the fact that it doesn’t talk, is covered in weird slime, and has that creepy orange glow to its eyes.

I don’t understand how these doppelgängers are made. Are they created with the magic that was stolen? Is that the bird’s power?

I dodge as the Cam-demon flings magic at me. It’s raw magic, not a properly cast spell like the actual man would use, and I can feel it singeing the air around me. I throw my sonic boom, sending him flying backward into the nest.

My sonic boom is so powerful it once broke through the concrete wall of a nightclub. If I unleash my full force on someone—which I rarely do—then it could very likely kill the person.

Not this demon creature.

The Cam doppelgänger hits the wall of the nest hard. His head snaps back—

But then it snaps forward again with an audible *crack*, and his eyes glow. He clammers to his feet and lurches toward me, ready to resume the fight.

I swallow hard, my stomach roiling.

Holy *shit*.

We are so very screwed.

CHAPTER 25

Here's the thing: Dmitri is the toughest guy I know, and Roman is an expert in demonology and necromancy.

If you'd told me a day ago that one stupid bird-demon with its ridiculous fetus doppelgänger children was going to defeat the two of them, I would've said *yeah, sure, if you chloroformed both men first and blindfolded them.*

But now we've got six of these motherfuckers on us, plus the bird, and whoever's controlling this creature is doing a damn good job of it. I can't help but wonder if the man I saw through the veil planned for this, if he suspected that someone would find the bird and prepared accordingly.

All the doppelgängers appear to have the same magic their originals did, although it seems to have taken them a few moments to figure out how to use the powers. Cam's no longer throwing raw magic—instead, he's teleporting around the roof, popping out of the ether to land a cheap shot before blipping away again. Tandy's levitating, the demon copy of a student named Preston is hurling fireballs, and I'm trying to mirror them all as best I can. But it's hard when there are six of them, and they're coming at us all at once.

Images of when my classmates attacked me in Combat class keep flashing through my mind, and I can't help the bubble of panic that rises up in my throat.

This isn't anything like that though.

It's worse.

There's an active malevolence to these demons, like they're starving for us, like they'd eat our souls if they could—and I know nobody's going to

swoop in and save me with one threatening gesture the way Roman did.

My tall, imposing professor is actually nearly back-to-back with me now, gritting his teeth as he shouts out spells, trying to control the demons. Dmitri's more of a physical fighter, not as accomplished in his magic, but his power works well in conjunction with his combat skills. He phases his fists into the doppelgängers' chests as he punches, dealing even more damage.

Both guys are doing as much as they can, and normally, they'd be wiping the floor with these asshats... but not tonight. These demons are insanely strong and seem almost impervious.

I have to do something. We have to stop them.

How though?

I can't leave to get help—what if Roman and Dmitri die while I'm gone? I can't risk that happening. And I know neither of them will leave me or each other either. None of us are the most touchy-feely people in the world, but we're all fiercely protective of the people we care about. Plus, we're all stubborn as hell.

But we're being backed into a corner at this point, and even though I keep lobbing magic at the Cam doppelgänger and the others—shit that would kill a normal person; I'm way past holding back—they keep coming. They're so much more resilient than humans, and I want to scream in frustration. Well, frustration and fear, if I'm being honest. How are we supposed to hold up against these guys? It's three against six here, and that's not even counting the damn bi—

Wait.

The bird.

I dodge as the giant bird tries to strike at us with its razor-sharp beak—it keeps doing that, the fucker, although mostly it's just letting its children have at us.

The children *it* created. Children that are made up of stolen magic.

As crazy as it sounds, this bird must have stolen the magic from each of the affected students to make each doppelgänger. So that's its ability.

It's not a person with magic, it's a magical creature, but surely my power can still work in this situation. I mean, it still has a magical ability, right?

The bird lets out another cry, and the Cam doppelgänger teleports from across the roof, popping into existence just feet from me. I desperately hurl

a sonic boom to blast him—*it*—away, my heart pounding. I hate that this stupid thing looks like my boyfriend, my *real* boyfriend who's still downstairs passed out from pain.

“Guys!” I scream as an insane idea takes shape in my mind. God, I wish Asher were here; his mind reading would come in very handy right now. “Get me more to the left!”

I don't want to say anything more out loud. I don't know how smart this bird or its creepy demon babies are, but the guy controlling the creature has to be smart enough to figure out what I'm planning—unless he doesn't know about my mirror abilities.

Maybe he doesn't though. They're brand new. How much has he been able to spy on me? On the school? How much does he know?

I've been trying to use my mirror abilities in the fight, but they're coming on in bursts. Still, he's probably noticed my attempts by now if he can see through the bird's eyes.

Tandy's doppelgänger comes after me as Cam's copy hauls himself to his feet on a lower section of the roof. I levitate instinctively, mirroring her power, neutralizing her before she can gun for Dmitri like she was planning to.

We're running out of time and strength. How much longer can the three of us last against all of these demons? How much longer before one of us slips up, or we just collapse from exhaustion? Nobody but Asher knows we're up here, and he's taking care of Cam in the infirmary. He'll come looking for us eventually, but by then, it'll likely be too late.

I grit my teeth. “Get me a clear shot at the bird,” I whisper to Dmitri.

He trusts me enough—or maybe he's just desperate enough—not to question me. Instead, he nods and hockey checks the Preston doppelgänger out of the way, shoving him and taking the brunt of the fight from me so I can rush forward.

The bird strikes at me again with its beak, but I just manage to dodge, feeling the air ripple past my shoulder where it would've stabbed me. I grab onto its tail feathers, crying out in pain at the sharp edges. But I have to be close; I can't let it get away.

I feel the mirroring power in my chest, like a string tugging at me, as I reach out my other hand toward the doppelgängers all spread out around the rooftop. The bird is trying to shake me off, its sharp-edged feathers cutting into my hands like knives, but I hold on and concentrate. I can feel the new

power inside me like I'm drawing water from a well, familiar and strange all at once.

Concentrate, Elliot. Concentrate.

I clench my fist toward the Cam doppelgänger just as he launches himself at Dmitri.

It's like a vacuum sucking. Only *I'm* the vacuum, I'm a starving black hole, and wind rushes in my ears even though there's no wind around us. Suddenly, I feel power flooding me—power that's not my own.

It sits in my chest, burning like an ember that's just waiting to be sparked and set alight. I stumble, the sharp feathers gouging deeper into my palms, and the bird twists around to lunge at me with its beak, trying to get me to let go.

I don't though. I *can't*. This is working.

Doing my best to avoid the bird's strikes, I focus my power again.

"Reckless, what are you doing?" Roman yells, clearly worried.

"I have to steal their magic!" I shout back. As long as I'm near the bird, I have the ability to steal magic just like it does, and I can take all the powers back from the doppelgängers.

"You're not a demon!" His voice is strained, and out of the corner of my eye, I see him shaking his head vehemently. "That is literally its power, its function; it steals magic from people and uses the magic to create its children. You can't hold all that power inside of you!"

"Not... forever," I admit as I suck the power from the Tandy doppelgänger. "But for long enough."

Long enough to give it back.

That has to be what the mysterious man wanted—to use the demon-bird to steal magic from the students. Possibly from all of us in time, or maybe just until it got the school shut down. Does this guy hate Unpredictables? Is he working in cahoots with Johnson or something, with those anti-Unpredictable groups that seem to be popping up in the wake of the Trials and Johnson's outburst?

Well, I'm not letting him get away with this shit. *Fuck that*. I've stopped assholes from taking over my school and ruining it before, and I'll stop them again.

"I have Cam and Tandy's magic! Take their copies down!" I yell at the guys, pulling more magic into me even as I speak.

Stealing the magic back from the demon doppelgängers is hard to do, and it fucking hurts. Their power settles in my chest like a ball of fire. It feels like I'm carrying a huge weight, but instead of it being on my shoulders, it's inside me, actively *burning*. I'm made of fire, and I can't hold it for long before it will consume me entirely.

Just... keep... going.

The doppelgängers don't die when I take their magic from them, which was what I was hoping for, seeing as they seem to be made of magic. But they do seem much weaker without it, unable to fight back with any stolen powers as Dmitri and Roman blast them. And I can't kill the bird yet. Not until I've got all six of the stolen powers inside me.

I concentrate, getting better at it as I go on. The magic flows into me like an invisible, sparking river, something only I can feel and see, until I'm burning up and filled to the brim.

Now that their powers are gone, the doppelgängers are finally getting their asses beat the way they deserve to by Roman and Dmitri. Which is good, because I can't help the guys out at all.

I'm still clinging to the demon bird's tail and dodging its claws and beak. It nips me a couple of times, and searing pain rips through me where its dagger-like beak slices my skin. I'm not sure if there's anything special about this demonic creature other than the whole magic stealing thing, but I sure hope it doesn't have poison-tipped talons or anything on top of it.

I grit my teeth, trying to think of a way to get rid of this damn bird. There has to be something I can do to damage it.

It's strong and nearly impervious, just like its freaky offspring were before I sucked up all their magic. Roman and Dmitri are blasting the doppelgängers to pieces now, and the bird is getting angrier and angrier as each one of its children goes down. It swings its tail back and forth, making it harder for me to hang on, but I can't let go until I bring the monster down somehow.

Then I remember.

I have the magic of six other students burning up inside of me.

One of the students who had her magic taken—Erin, a third-year—had the power to send disintegration blasts. I remember hearing about it because apparently, she disintegrated her boyfriend's arm when he tried to assault her. Kudos to her, I say, although I'm sure it was a pretty damn traumatizing way for her to realize she had Unpredictable magic.

The point is, she's got disintegration powers.

Which means, for the moment at least, *I* have disintegration powers.

I've never really consciously used another person's magic like this before. Already it's hurting—and I mean *really* hurting, even more than the bird's claws and beak coming at me.

But I have to try. I have to end this.

I feel the power in my hands, surging through me. If I do this wrong I could probably disintegrate myself, but what choice do I have?

“Reckless!” Roman roars. “Be careful!”

“I could say... the same... to you!” I force out through gritted teeth.

Then, before I can lose my nerve or my tenuous grasp on the powers inside me, I dart forward and grab onto the bird with both hands right by the base of its wing. As it shrieks and claws at me, I push the power through my hands into its torso.

It explodes out of me like a grenade going off, and I'm hurled backward, not prepared for the kickback as the magic fires through the bird. I've blasted a large hole through it, and it shrieks in agony, a horrifying death cry.

The sound echoes in the night air as time seems to slow.

I'm flying backward through the air as the bird sways. It falls, toppling over like a felled tree as the evil, demonic glow inside of it fades away.

Then time speeds back up in a rush.

And now *I'm* falling.

CHAPTER 26

Roman catches me before I can slam into the roof and roll over the side. His solid arms wrap around me as our bodies collide, and then he sets me on my feet, cradling me against his chest.

I'm burning up. So hot...

“What the fuck was that thing?” Dmitri demands. He grabs at my hands, checks my forehead, pushes my hair back out of my face, and even though I can barely get my eyes to focus, I can make out the worry in his expression. “You said it was some kind of demon?”

“It lays an egg every time it steals someone’s magic,” Roman tells him. “It’s one of the rarest forms of demon. Most cultures call it some variation of ‘magic eater’. I thought it was a myth, or that they went extinct; none have been seen in centuries.”

“I have to... get to...” It’s hard to speak. My mouth hurts—*everything* hurts. Light pounds behind my eyelids. It’s way too much magic, it feels like it’s going to start seeping out of me.

“She needs the infirmary.” Dmitri’s hand tightens around mine.

Yeah, I do, but not for the reasons he expects. With the bird dead, I’m not sure how much longer I’ll be able to reverse the magic stealing power, how much longer I’ll have the ability to give the magic back—if I even can. But I have to try, right?

If I fail... I have a feeling all this magic churning inside me is going to kill me.

I try to walk, but my legs wobble dangerously. Roman picks me up bridal-style and insists on carrying me back down the tower. How he’s going to do that with his hands full and us having to get off the roof and

crawl through a window, I don't know, but God knows I'm not in any shape to do it myself. It feels like my limbs are filled with liquid fire, like the heat is consuming my muscles.

"Am I... gonna lay an egg?" I manage to ask. *I really do not want to do that. Please don't make me lay creepy doppelgänger eggs, ew ew ew.*

"You're not going to lay an egg," Dmitri says gruffly. He pauses. "Is she?"

"She shouldn't."

"Thank fuck. Here, let me get her legs."

He helps Roman carry me as the world swims. I can't let myself pass out though. I have to hang on, I have to try to give this magic back to Cam and the others. But it hurts so much, and it's making me so dizzy...

I'm not quite conscious of getting to the infirmary. I pick up a few flashes, but mostly all I'm aware of is the heavy weight inside my chest, feeling like it's dragging me down. I'm hot all over, and it's not like having a sunburn or sitting in front of a roaring fire. It's as if I *am* the sun, and the blazing heat is coming from inside me, making me shine and burn.

Once we step through the infirmary doors, the world snaps back into focus. The healers look alarmed when they see me, and several rush over to meet us.

"What happened?" a tall man demands.

"There was a demon on the roof. A magic eater," Roman says quickly. "Elliot has a mirroring power. She was able to retrieve the students' stolen magic, but it's all inside her now. Six people's worth."

"I can—give it back," I manage.

"Are you sure?" Dmitri asks, his voice hoarse.

"She has to be drained of the magic." Another healer looks at me with concern in her face. "If she isn't, she'll die. Her body can't handle so much power inside it; nobody's can. It's an overload to the system."

"No! I want to try," I insist, drawing the strength up from—from somewhere.

"I'm getting Hardwick." A younger looking woman nods decisively then runs out.

"This is... unprecedented," the first healer says. "But—but it's worth the chance, I suppose."

Roman, still holding me in his arms, takes me into the room where all the students are lying in beds, doped up on pain-suppressing potions.

Asher shoots to his feet when he sees me. “Elle!”

I give him a weak smile. “Miss me?”

The two of them help get me seated in front of Tom, the first person in the school to have his magic stolen. Already, I can feel the power churning in me, like it wants to go home to the right body but doesn’t know how.

God, this is making me sick. I want to vomit, but I’m scared of what will come up if I do.

“You can do this, Reckless,” Roman promises me, his voice low in my ear. “It’s okay. I’m right here. Asher’s right here. We’ve got you.”

I can hear the rough, ragged edge to his voice, and I know he’s scared, even if he’s trying his damndest to hide it from me.

Outside, I can hear Dmitri demanding that the others not crowd around me, that they get me the best care, that they figure out what’s going on—he sounds snobbier than I’ve ever heard him, and I realize this must be what his parents do. They seemed like the type of rich, pretentious people who’d stride into a room and demand that they receive nothing but the best, and Dmitri’s using that to his advantage now, putting on a spoiled, rich attitude to make sure I’m being looked after.

I think at one point I even hear something like “well, if my father were to hear of this...”

Good God, Dmitri hates his dad. I’m gonna owe him so big for this later.

“What do I do?” I ask Roman in a whisper. I can hear my voice trembling, feel my body shaking, and I know I sound terrified.

Probably because I am.

It seems like there’s a very good chance this will go horribly wrong. Like I won’t survive it.

He takes my hand and gently presses my palm to Tom’s chest. My classmate is breathing steadily, his chest rising up and down, and if he’s still in pain, whatever potions they gave him seem to be nullifying it enough to help him rest.

“Just follow your instincts,” Roman tells me. “It’s worked for you so far. You’ve got good magical impulses. Use them.”

I take a deep breath and press my palm harder into Tom’s chest, feeling the magic rising up inside me. It’s like—like trying to undo a bunch of really tangled up necklaces, the pendants catching, the metal links looped

around and around. But I can't cheat by undoing a clasp and sliding it right through.

I try to grasp the magic that belongs to Tom, to separate it from the others. All the air leaves my lungs in a pained hiss. It feels like I'm holding onto a snake of lava, and it burns me both inside and out as I push and push.

Roman holds onto one of my shoulders and Asher to the other, their grips tight and grounding. Hot tears slide down my face, and a small cry of pain escapes me, but the magic finally starts moving, passing from me back into Tom. I can see his body absorbing it, and it's like my body is vibrating with it as I push hard. It sinks in, inch by inch.

As I work, I'm dimly aware of others arriving in the large room, of people whispering and moving around me. I think I hear Hardwick's voice, as well as Tamlin's and others. I definitely hear Asher and Dmitri—the latter man fills Asher in on what happened out on the roof, and I can hear the strain of worry in both their voices.

Tom doesn't wake up as I push the magic into him. I'm not surprised, even if I am a little disappointed. I want him to wake up, to feel that his magic is back. But if the healers put him into a magically or medically induced sleep, then I understand. It's better than him having been lying around here in pain all this time.

There's no time for me to rest on my laurels, either. The healers quickly check on Tom to make sure his magic is back, but I know it is. I can feel that it's gone from my body—one less hot twisting lava snake inside of me.

Now it's time for the others.

The pain's growing, and I'm losing control of the magic inside of me, and I know I don't have a lot of time. I have to move on to the next person.

Roman has to physically carry me to the next bed. It takes forever for the magic to flow from me to them—it only took me a few seconds to steal the power from the doppelgängers, but magic was all they were, really. And I suppose it makes sense that putting something back is harder than taking it out.

Just like gluing a vase back together is harder than smashing it.

But it still exhausts me, and the longer I hold the magic inside of me, the harder it becomes to keep it from tearing me apart. It feels like I'm being ripped apart seam by seam, and I'm doing my best just to hold it all together... but my strength is failing me. Roman's right by me, stroking my

back, assuring me that I'm strong and am doing my best, and that I'll be fine.

I'm not sure I believe him.

Over and over, I repeat the process, shoving magic back inside its original host. I'm breathing harshly in great gulps, my body is drenched in sweat, and I don't even have to look in the mirror to know my skin's probably an unnatural shade. Pale or red or sickly green, I don't know, but the alarmed looks everyone is shooting me speak volumes.

It becomes easier the fewer magical abilities I have in me, I realize. Each time I return the powers to a student, it goes faster, even if it doesn't hurt any less. In fact, it hurts *more* as each time drains me further, takes more out of me.

I reach Cam last.

He was the last one to have his magic stolen, and his is the only foreign power left inside me.

Taking a deep breath, I place my palm on his chest like I did to all the others and push with all my might.

Just like the others, Cam doesn't stir—and damn it, I really wish he would. I wish so badly that he'd just open his eyes, let me see that he's okay.

Everyone's watching me. Roman's hands are at my back to keep me from falling, the healers are muttering to one another behind me, and the room is crowded with onlookers.

But I don't care. I don't care who's gathered here or who's watching. Right now, I just care about fixing Cam. About helping the man I'm falling in love with.

I bend over and press my lips to his, kissing him softly.

Then I pour the magic back into him.

I can feel it tingling in my hand, in my lips where I'm touching him, the magic reuniting with him. It settles into his skin like it belongs there. And of course it does, in a way that it could never belong to me. It's Cam's magic, not mine.

When the glow finally fades, I pull back, and I can see him breathing more slowly, deeply, evenly. The lines on his face have smoothed out.

Thank fuck.

I want to stand up and cheer. I want to take a victory lap. I want to make sure the rest of my guys are okay.

But instead, the world swims around me, and I pass the hell out.

CHAPTER 27

I end up sleeping for a day and a half, which is extremely alarming to the guys, seeing as how the last time something like this happened to me, I didn't wake up for three months. But while I wake up feeling scrubbed raw inside of myself, empty and slightly hollow... I do wake up.

Just in time for a few more weeks of classes and then some back-breaking finals. *Yay.*

Please note the sarcasm.

The rest of the students and professors return after the Thanksgiving holiday, and the six people who had their magic taken are feeling right as rain now that they have their powers back. Cam's got energy to spare like always, and by the time classes start up again on Monday, he's bounding around with renewed vigor. Roman's drowning in grading and finals prep, Dmitri's cranky, and Asher's quiet but relaxed.

It all goes back to normal so quickly.

Well, not *quite* normal for me.

I have to build up my strength—again—because I guess it's just my school tradition to get my ass kicked every semester by someone who wants to attack us. You'd think the universe would give me a break at some point, but I'm starting to think I should stop expecting that. Maybe I really *do* have a neon sign over my head, flashing like a beacon for trouble.

The school admins are still trying to figure out who did this and why. Clearly, the man behind this was targeting Griffin Academy specifically, but why he would want to do that—simple hatred for Unpredictables or something else—we don't know. I'm not expecting a ton of answers, but it would be nice to have some idea, seeing as this has happened before and

anti-Unpredictable sentiment seems to be growing in certain segments of the population.

One thing is absolutely clear: that bird didn't just show up out of nowhere. Someone was controlling it.

Someone strong enough in their magic to control demons from afar.

Hardwick calls me into his office a few days after classes start back up. I enter, not sure what to expect but pretty sure I'm not in too much trouble. As the door closes behind me, a familiar blonde woman stands up from her chair and turns to greet me.

It's Aurora.

"Miss Sinclair," she says in her cool, calm voice.

I swallow. Aurora doesn't seem to dislike me, and I know she doesn't mean me any harm, but I always feel a little on edge around her. Like I'm about to get busted for something.

"Er, hey, Aurora. Long time no see."

She gives me a small, tight-lipped smile. "I wanted to thank you in person for what you did. You undoubtedly saved the lives of the students who had their magic taken."

My brow wrinkles. "I mean, not to toot my own horn, but I saved everyone's lives, right? Those demon things were going to attack us."

Aurora and Hardwick exchange a look.

"Not quite," the Circuit representative says, smoothing a hand over her light blonde hair. "The students who had their magic stolen would most likely have been murdered so the doppelgängers could take their places, spying on the school and causing chaos."

And probably making Unpredictables look insane in the process.

Holy shit.

"Well, I'm—I'm glad I was able to stop that from happening," I say, stammering a little.

Aurora nods, looking grave. "You've got a bright future ahead of you, I think. Just don't push yourself too hard. Be careful, Miss Sinclair."

Yeah. Believe me, lady, I'm trying.

It's almost surreal to go back to regular classes after that deadly fight on the roof and my struggle to return the stolen magic to its original owners. But I make it through the last few weeks of school in an uneventful blur. In early December, finals rear their ugly heads, but we all manage to pull through. I even get an A in Tamlin's class, which I can admit I was a little

worried about. Not that I think she's vindictive or anything but... well, you never know.

For once, I pull excellent grades in all my classes. Maybe I'm finally getting the hang of this whole thing. I'd been out of high school for four years by the time I started at Griffin Academy, so the whole taking tests and writing papers thing had basically started to feel like ancient history—something I was unlikely to ever revisit again. Adding magic into the mix only made things harder.

The guys cram intensely during the entire week before exams and then sleep for pretty much two days straight once their finals are finished. I video chat with Maddy about her finals and tell her about the bird—I don't want to, because I don't want to worry her, but she has a right to know. I want to be honest with her and not keep her in the dark, although I downplay some of the more terrifying details.

It's decided that Mads and I will go back to Roman's massive family home for winter break. Last winter, I went and stayed with her in her dorm at Neptune Academy, but this is way better. It's an actual home.

Asher can't stay the whole time with us—his family is close, and they'll all be gathering together for the holiday—but he wants to be there for at least part of it. Cam and Dmitri immediately declare that they're coming too.

“Is that okay?” I ask Roman on the last day of finals, a little worried I might've extended an invitation that wasn't mine to give.

“A few more people to do the dishes?” He glances toward the closed door of his classroom before tugging me into his arms and pressing a kiss to my lips. “And *you* in my home? I can't think of a single thing wrong with that.”



Going back to Roman's house proves to be relaxing in a way I didn't expect. I get to lounge around and goof off like I haven't done in years. I had to become the adult after Mom died; and even before she passed away, I stepped up to take care of things as she got sicker and sicker.

But here—I'm not the only grownup. Roman's in charge of the house, but the other guys help out too. It's not all on my shoulders, and it's such a

relief.

Maddy seems to really like it here too, which makes me glad. She gets along well with the guys. Asher makes jokes about how he's always wanted to be the older sibling for once, and Cam makes Maddy laugh so hard milk comes out her nose. Dmitri teaches her how to fight and talks very seriously with her about her school's social politics, and Roman talks to her about her plans post-academy and recommends jobs.

I know I'm probably going to be fine, but if something were to happen to me... I've always worried, you know? What if I got jumped on the way home from the bar or got hit by a bus or something, and Maddy was left alone? And these days, my life only seems to be getting more and more dangerous.

But I'm starting to feel like Mads wouldn't be truly alone—like there are others who care about her and would take care of her if I was gone.

After about a week in the house, I decide it's probably time to cut the crap and have an official talk with the guys about what we all are together, to each other. Asher will be heading to San Francisco to see his family soon, and I want to do this while they're all here.

Maddy's upstairs on the phone with some friends, gossiping about which couples broke up over break and the latest TV shows and stuff, so it's the perfect opportunity. The guys are all in the kitchen, and I pass through the living room... and pause.

I haven't really spent a lot of time exploring the house. We were all too busy getting settled in the first week, and besides, I don't like to pry. But on the mantelpiece sits a small photo in a frame, and my gaze catches on it.

I pick it up. It's of a young Roman, I think. It must be. He's a small kid though, about five years old, and he's standing with an older girl who has dark hair and blue eyes, a brighter blue than Roman's. The girl looks like she might be ten or so. Standing behind them are two adults, also with dark hair, one with brown eyes and one with blue. The woman has Roman's face shape, but neither of them have his nose—which makes sense, seeing as I'm ninety percent sure his nose was broken at some point.

Is this Roman's family? It sure looks like it.

But if so, why does he never talk about them? And why is this the only photo of them I've seen in the whole house? I mention my mom pretty often, even though she's been gone for five years.

“I considered taking that picture down while you all were here, like I did over the summer,” a soft voice says from behind me.

I turn around to find Roman standing in the arched doorway leading to the hall.

“This is you with your family?” My gaze moves from him back to the photo.

Roman nods, taking the picture from me. “They were very powerful magic users; very respected in the community. It was a great loss when they died.”

His voice is even, but I can hear a darkness, a layer of grief underneath his words. It makes my own heart twinge with pain.

“I never took you for a younger sibling. You’re so bossy.”

A smile teases the corner of his mouth, and he traces a line over his sister’s face. “Her name was Octavia.”

“Your parents had a sense of humor, I take it.” I pause, unsure if I should ask but wanting to know. Tamlin’s words echo in the back of my mind, and they’re the push I need to ask, “What... what happened to them?”

Roman puts the picture back on the mantel with a sigh. “I’ll tell you, Elliot, I promise. Someday. But not... not right now. I don’t want to think about that right now. This is a time to be happy.”

I nod. That makes sense. I can see a haunted look in his eyes, and whatever happened to his family, it’s clearly worse than what happened to my mom. I remember looking in the mirror a week after she passed and barely recognizing the girl who gazed back at me. But the sadness I found in my face then is nothing like what I’m seeing in Roman’s now.

I rise up onto my tiptoes and kiss him softly, my hands resting on his chest. “It’s okay, prof. Don’t even worry about it.”

Roman’s hands drop to my waist, squeezing gently. “Are you sure? I—”

“I trust you. And I know you’re a good person. You’ve never...” I shake my head. “I’m shit at saying it, I know, and I’m sorry. But you’ve never been anything but good to me. You’ve been patient, kind, and understanding. And you’ve always trusted me. Even when I probably didn’t deserve it.”

Sneaking around campus, getting myself into trouble, becoming notorious among the entire student body, and then being wishy-washy on the whole boyfriend thing... yeah. After putting up with all that from me,

Roman's definitely earned my being patient with him. And with something so raw and painful... it takes time to open up about that kind of stuff. He clearly never opened up to Tamlin, or at least not all the way.

Honestly, I'm a little scared I'll end up like her. That he won't ever tell me everything. But I have to trust him, the way he's trusted me. I have to try and find that faith in another person again.

He kisses me, palming the back of my head and moving his lips slowly against mine, stoking a fire in my lower belly. I kiss him back, matching the sweeps of his tongue, letting myself drown in his touch for a moment. Letting myself just... be.

For the first time in as long as I can remember, I give up trying to protect my heart, stop worry about keeping my defenses up. And the crazy thing is, I've never felt safer.

We finally pull away as the other guys come in with snacks, Asher and Cam teasing Dmitri about something as he rolls his eyes so hard it looks like he's going to strain a muscle. They all configure themselves on the L-shaped couch as, above us, I hear Maddy shriek something about *but that contradicts season five where—*

I sit down on an easy chair near the TV so all the guys can see me without craning their necks, and then I clear my throat. "Hey, uh, guys?"

Normally, I'd want to do this individually, but communication is going to be really important in this situation. I swallow hard, take a deep breath, and continue.

"I know this might seem like sort of a moot point to you all by now, considering everything that's happened between us. But I learned something important this past semester about not assuming or guessing what another person is thinking. What they're feeling."

My gaze flicks to Dmitri, and the corner of his mouth tilts up just the slightest bit. Warmth and heat flash side by side in his eyes.

A blush starts to rise in my cheeks as I lace my fingers together, twining my hands around each other as I go on. "So anyway, I thought—well, I wanted to officially ask you all if... if you would be my boyfriends. The four of you. I have feelings for all of you, equally, and I care about all of you a lot. I know you three"—I gesture to Cam, Asher, and Dmitri—"agreed you were comfortable with sharing me a long time ago. And I know you told me you are too," I add, looking at Roman. "So I guess I just wanted to make sure you all know I want that too. I want to be shared."

Oh geez. This is not coming out anywhere near as eloquently as I was hoping for. Certainly not as well as it did when I practiced the speech alone in my room earlier. I'm no good with mushy stuff, and baring my heart like this is painfully uncomfortable. I want to squirm, or run and hide. But I have to finish this.

It's time for me to take a risk. Time for me to be the one to reach out.

"I know I've been kind of a pain about the whole 'putting up walls and not talking about this' thing, and I'm sorry. It's not always easy for me to talk about how I feel. But I care about you all, and not just when it comes to making out and having sex—although you're all extremely good at that."

That earns me some chuckles.

"I'd like to be your girlfriend. To each of you. Together. If you want that."

"I thought you'd never ask, Sin," Cam says with a wink. "Of course my answer is yes, but maybe bring me some roses next time?"

Dmitri elbows him.

"Of course," Asher says solemnly, clearly knowing how hard it was for me to say this. He gives me a soft smile.

"If I say something along the lines of 'about damn time', are you going to hit me with a pillow?" Roman asks, a smirk dancing in his eyes.

I settle for flipping him off.

Dmitri clears his throat quietly and then looks me dead in the eyes. "Yes," he says, his voice rough and low.

My heart flips.

God, I can't believe how happy I am. I knew, or I thought I knew, how they all felt by this point—but hearing it out loud, confirming it, just makes it all so much better. I can't hold back from launching myself at them, kissing them all in turn, as they give me and each other shit for it, roasting me because, hey, they're officially my boyfriends now, so I guess they're allowed to do that now.

Not like it ever stopped them before anyway.

I grin giddily, settling onto the couch cushions surrounded by the four men. Four stunningly handsome specimens of male beauty.

My boyfriends.

...my boyfriends, three of whom will be leaving after next semester.

I have no clue what I'm going to do without them once they graduate. A whole year on campus without them? How am I going to make it?

Ah well, I guess that's the developing theme of my life. As soon as one challenge goes down, a new one pops up.

But for right now, I have them. They have me. I've stopped dancing around my feelings or letting fear hold me back. I finally asked for what I want, put my heart on the line, and even though it's all slightly terrifying, I can't stop grinning like an idiot.

I have no doubt that we'll face some crazy challenges in the future, but at least now I know what I'm fighting for.

And it's *worth* the fight.



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