

Chapter 2

IVY

One thing we know is that Mrs. Daley likes to show off her handiwork, which is bound to make us look worse when the Alpha arrives. Abbie tugs her white blouse from her skirt, shrugging it off, leaving her in just her thin bra before grabbing the top bunk with her hands. Her nails bite into the wood, turning white under the pressure of her grip. I turn my gaze away before hearing the swish of the cane through the air. I flinch each time it comes down on her back, but Abbie knows better than to make a sound; it would only earn her extra if she did.

When Abbie's punishment is over, Mrs. Daley turns to me and points her cane in my face.

"You! You will get two for each room," says Mrs. Daley with a cruel smile on her face.

I swallow the bile that rises in my throat. Abbie starts to say something, but I shake my head. I know she is going to say half of them are hers, but there's no point in both of us being unable to stand properly, and we only have to endure it briefly anyway. We'll be dead soon enough.

"Hurry up, I haven't got all day; the King will be here soon. You better pray he leaves a good donation because if, by some miracle, the Alpha

lets you live, I will kill you myself," she seethes, waving her cane in my face.

Abbie's eyes glisten with tears as I pull my blouse off, taking the same position as she did. I focus on the blue swirl pattern of the comforter on the bottom bunk. Only when she tosses her cane on the mattress in front of me do I blink back the tears. The thin chainlike whip that is usually wrapped around the cane's handle is gone. Abbie makes a strangled noise behind me and yelps when Mrs. Daley hits the wooden bunk beside my hand, making me flinch.

"Quiet, rogue, or I will double hers," she sneers at Abbie.

I stare at the indent beside my hand, a piece of wood splintered off, the whip having sliced it through. Why does she hate me so much? That's one thing I never understood. I didn't kill her mate. He died when my parents were captured, but she's blamed me ever since, so I know I'm about to really get it. I grit my teeth as the first blow streaks across my shoulders, making my back arch. I fight the urge to cry out. As fiery pain slashes through my skin, my mouth opens in a silent scream at the terrible pain.

"Stay still, or I will triple it," she seethes. I clutch the frame of the bunk and clench my jaw, focusing back on the patterns on the comforter and trying to block out the agony. She doesn't hold back. I feel each slice; feel the intense burning; feel the flesh splitting further open where it was hit more than once; feel the trickles of blood running down my back and sides; see my blood spraying on the comforter on the backswing as my skin is carved to Mrs. Daley's liking.

Tears stream down my face and fall off my chin onto the black flats on my feet and the black floorboards beneath, yet not a sound leaves my lips. Abbie whimpers behind me—I know it's at the sight of my back. Yet I make no noise, fearing a worse punishment if I so much as utter a peep.

Mrs. Daley takes a deep breath, like she's exhausted from dishing out the punishment. I shudder, my back burning violently like someone doused it in fuel and set it alight.

"Now, clean yourselves up. I am being lenient today. I had Katrina prepare the lunches. You girls may take your leave now. You can help her clean up before you see the Alpha," Mrs. Daley orders, turning her attention to Abbie.

"Thank you, Mrs. Daley," Abbie and I whisper, and I cringe as I turn to face her. I hear how my voice trembles as I try to stand straighter. Mrs. Daley flicks back the hair that escaped her bun and pushes her round glasses up her nose. Then, she snatches her cane off the bed and re-wraps her whip around the handle.

"Well, you girls have made me all frazzled; I better clean myself up," she says, like we've personally wronged her in some way. I watch as she leaves the room before collapsing onto the bottom bunk. The sudden movement causes me to wince. Abbie comes rushing over, examining my back, careful not to touch the angry red lines that are split open and now forever branded into my flesh.

"Wait here. I will be back. I will clean it up," she says. Her teary eyes look down at me, and she smiles sadly, sniffing and wiping her nose on her skirt.

My lip quivers as I take a quick glance at the clock on the wall. "We haven't got time."

I am about to pull my blouse on but she ignores me, rushing from the room and returning with some wet cloth and a bandage.

"Abbie, we really haven't got time," I remind her, grabbing her hands as she steps closer. Her green eyes hold mine and she smiles sadly.

"We are as good as dead anyway; what does it matter if we are late to our own funeral?" she says, and I feel a lump forming in my throat.

I try to swallow it down, but I know she's right. It's rare for the Alpha to let any of the rogues live once they hit adulthood. Those that did wish for death. I nod. She's right; we are going to die, anyway. What does it matter?

I let her shaking hands go, sliding over so she can sit beside me. I turn slightly so she has better access to my back. Every dab of the cloth makes me flinch, and I hiss when she drapes the cloth doused in herbs on my back. She leaves it there while unrolling the bandage. I hold on to the corners covering my shoulders as she wraps the bandage around my torso as gently as she can.

The dressing is not long enough to do the top half of my back, but the cloth sticks to it anyway, keeping it covered as my blood seeps into it and holds it in place. She ties it off when she is done, and I let my arms fall. The bandages shove my breasts up my chest and lift my bra higher, which is now a little uncomfortable. At least it helps hold the bandages in place.

Abbie grabs my blouse, helping me slide my arms in. The wet cloth feels cold on my back but soothes the burning sensation from the cuts that now litter my back with the rest of my scars. I dab Abbie's wounds with a wet cloth to clean them, but hers have only puckered the skin. They look angry and raw, but thankfully she is not bleeding. She pulls her blouse on before turning to face me. A somber look takes over her face. She goes to say something but decides against it, closing her mouth.

Instead, Abbie grabs my hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. I squeeze hers back but don't let go as we walk out of the bedroom. We walk up the long corridors, passing each room. This will be the last time we walk these halls, the last time we see the little faces, we helped clean and the little hands we held. The corridors are silent, and Abbie stops at the door of one room. I know she's wondering if Tyson will be okay. Abbie raised the boy and I know she loves him as if he were her own. I give her a nudge toward the exit before we descend the spiral staircase to the floor below.

The slate floors are always cold, and I can feel the cold seeping through the thin soles of my shoes; soles we had to make from bits of cardboard to fill the holes in the bottom of our flats. Not that it does much to

protect our feet. Mrs. Daley said she wouldn't waste money on girls on death row.

As we walk out and into the corridor leading to the front door, Abbie looks at me.

"Let's go home," she whispers. She doesn't mean our real home; she means freedom: freedom from this life, the sort of freedom that comes with death and setting one's tortured soul free.

I press my hand on the double doors and see the kids playing out the front on the run-down play equipment through the glass before we even walk out. Abbie and I step into the bite of the fresh air. It feels cold and overcast today. The clouds hide the sun, making it gloomy, echoing how I feel inside.

The kids stop what they're doing and rush over, grabbing and reaching for us, wanting us to play. We linger a bit, enjoying seeing them one last time and saying goodbye to them. A sleek black car pulls up and parks on the curb. The windows are tinted so dark that I can't see who is inside.

Not that I care anyway.