

My mouth salivates when I recall the burn from him stretching me and how he'd have to work himself inside of me. Fuck, it's just like being addicted to the pain of getting a tattoo. Every bite of the needle you want to run away, but you stay because the outcome is pure fucking bliss.

Giving me a loaded look, he walks to the dresser and digs something out of the drawer. Jesus, his backside is almost as mouth-watering as the front. My lungs close, and I'm no longer breathing.

The sound of metal is what finally pulls my attention away from his body. He's advancing toward me, holding black handcuffs, and the sight sends my heart skipping like a rock across the surface of a lake.

I take a big step back. Most men would pause when they see hesitation, but Zade doesn't falter as he approaches me.

"What are you doing with those?" I ask, alarm building in my chest.

"Don't worry, baby, these are for me."

Meeting his stare, I'm instantly soothed. A range of emotions swirl in his black and white pools. Desire, love, and wicked intent. But he's so damn calm, and that's what makes me feel calm.

Furrowing my brow, I watch him hold out the handcuffs and key to me, but I don't take them yet.

"What are you planning?" I ask, looking up at him.

"Didn't I tell you before that you don't need a cop to get me in handcuffs? I said I'd let you do anything you want to me, and that's what I'm doing."

I'm not sure why I'm so surprised to hear that. He's made it clear I hold the power but seeing him physically hand it to me is still jarring.

Licking my lips, I hesitantly grab them and place the key on the nightstand. The second I do, he turns around once more, showing me the massive octopus tattooed across his back, the tentacles unfurling up to his shoulders and neck.

Some nights, I trace each line while he sleeps, familiarizing myself with the feel of his skin when he's not demanding it of me.

Just like those late nights, I brush my fingers over the fine details in the octopus, marveling over the talent that went into this piece.

The muscles in his back ripple from my touch, and I can't help but feel invigorated by the effect I have on him.

Enjoying his reaction, I tease him. Trailing the pads of my fingers lightly down his back, his arms, and to his hands. Goosebumps rise on his skin, and I bite back a smile. I don't think I've ever seen this man get something as trivial as *goosebumps*. It's a normal human reaction, but when has Zade ever acted like anything less than a deity?

I tighten the handcuffs around his wrists, inhaling sharply when he turns again and stands before me. Persephone imprisoning Hades—it's too sweet not to salivate over.

"You'll let me do anything I want to you?" I reiterate, hesitant to believe it. Seeing him so... defenseless—my brain can't quite process it.

His eyes darken, and his grin slips. "You've always been an atheist to my word. You're incapable of believing in something you can't see and lack faith because you're blind to what's right in front of you. I'm yours to command—I always have been. You just need to see it to finally believe it."

Clearing my throat, I whisper, "Sit on the bed."

Without hesitation, he steps back and slowly sits down, keeping his legs spread. My eyes gravitate between them again, and my heart flutters like a hummingbird's wings, equally transfixed and intimidated.

Forcing myself to focus, I grip the bottom of my nightie and pull it over my head, keeping my pace slow and torturous. Zade hums his approval deep in his chest, and it gives me a boost of courage. Enough to slip my panties down my thighs and step out of them.

There's never a sexy way to do it, but the way Zade's eyes hungrily eat up my body, it feels like I just performed a highly skilled trick on a stripper pole. In reality, I'd break my neck attempting that.

"Get on the bed and kneel," I tell him, tipping my chin up to direct him. He grins but does as I say, climbing on the bed with a panther's grace. He sits back on his heels with his knees spread, and more than anything, I want to take a picture of him so I can look back at it when we're old and gray and neither of us are even capable of sex anymore.

Strips of moonlight and the soft glow from the sconces accentuate the hard planes of his chest and abs, highlighting each muscle straining against his skin.

Only the devil can wield the shadows around his body with such divinity. A devil and a God—two opposing forces that make up one contradicting being.

Licking my lips with anticipation, I crawl onto the bed and then onto his lap, keeping my pussy suspended over the tip of his cock.

His lips whisper up the column of my neck, and I put my hands on his shoulders to not only balance myself but to keep him controlled.

My core throbs when a deep rumble vibrates throughout my hands, building as I deliberately brush my hardened nipples against his face. Right when he goes to bite down, I pull away, increasing the tremors shaking his body.

His head tips back until our eyes clash. I shiver from the uncaged lust spearing from his gaze. He looks at me like he's only biding his time. Doing my bidding for now until the second I unlock those handcuffs.

In the blink of an eye, he'll snap, striking like a viper. My throat in his hands and my heart between his teeth.

I feel the fear pulsating in my clit, heightening my heart rate to dangerous levels.

"You think you're broken now, Adeline? Wait until you free me from these confines," he threatens, the deep timbre of his voice lined with sharp glass. "I'll fuck you until every single one of your bones breaks beneath me. Helpless little mouse, for me to mold and manipulate."

He's deliberately trying to scare me, knowing how much my body sings for the terror he instills in me.

Instinctively, I want to run from his terrifying promises and the creeping trepidation that he's going to do just that. I also want to challenge him so he can make good on them.

My heart thrashes against my rib cage, but I don't break his stare. Biting my lip, I reach between us and grab ahold of his length, delighting in the way his top lip curls into a snarl.

And then, ever so slowly, I slide the tip along my slit, wetting him before lowering myself increment by minuscule increment, until there's no discerning which of us is trembling.

I lean forward and wrap my arms around his neck, molding my soft curves into his harsh lines, and slowly work him inside me. It feels just as I remembered—the burning as he stretched me wide, but the insatiable bliss that accompanies it.

My demons are tickling the back of my brain, begging to be let in to wreak havoc on my sanity. Drag me from this precious moment where I

reclaim something that was stolen from me. So, I focus every ounce of my attention on the man beneath me.

His thinning breath, the building earthquake racking his body, and the veins pulsing in his neck as he fights to keep still.

I nudge my lips against the shell of his ear, that heady sense of power arising up through my throat and off my tongue.

“Do you want to see how easily I can break you?” I murmur coyly.

He grunts as I drop lower again, more than half of his cock buried inside me. It feels like too much and not enough. It’s never enough. Even when I’m filled to the brim, I want more.

I don’t wait for him to answer, nerves eating me alive even though this feels right. So fucking right.

“I love you, Zade. Sometimes I can’t fucking stand it,” I say, my voice raspy and uneven. “But it was the only thing that kept me alive. You saved me. Even when we were apart, you saved me. And I hope to God you never stop hunting me.”

His head rolls back, eyes to the ceiling, and he stills beneath me, as solid as the stone walls in Parsons Manor.

“Let me go, Adeline,” he says tightly. I hardly recognize his voice.

I sink the rest of the way down, seating myself completely on his length. The stone cracks, and his chest ripples with a sharp inhale.

“Let me fucking go,” he bites out again. I shake my head, though he’s not looking at me. His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows.

I know what he’s asking. Release the handcuffs. He could get out of them if he wanted to. And the fact that he’s waiting until I do it myself speaks volumes.

I have a strong feeling that despite what Zade thinks, he’s had more control than he gives himself credit for. But the second the metal falls from his wrists, it will dissipate. Now that I’ve given him everything, I will experience Zade truly at his most unhinged.

There was never a question that he would strike the moment they were off, but now he’s a starved animal with fresh meat right outside its cage.

“I’m not going to do that.”

Fuck it, I might as well take advantage while I’m still in one piece.

My mouth parts as I rock against him, allowing my eyes to drift and my head to tip back as euphoria builds where we’re connected.

Low, uneven moans fill the air, so lost in riding his cock and how good it feels to use his body for my own pleasure that when his hot breath fans across my neck, it feels like waking up from a fever dream and not remembering where I am.

“I hope you enjoy this, baby,” he rumbles into my ear. “I hope you revel in the feeling of your pretty cunt intact and your skin pristine.”

My breath hitches, his tone darker than a black hole swallowing up the stars in the sky. No light escapes—not in them, nor in Zade.

I grind against him harder, gritting my teeth as his biting words eat at my bravery. Sweat coats both of our bodies for entirely different reasons. It takes effort to contain his beast, while mine is loose and out of control.

“You don’t scare me,” I lie, shivering when I roll my hips just right, the tip of his cock hitting that perfect spot.

“Shame,” he murmurs, nipping at the sensitive flesh in the juncture of my collarbone, making my body quake once more. “I love it when you’re a scared little mouse, thrashing beneath my paw and desperate to get away.”

“Does it make you feel powerful?” I ask through gritted teeth, repeating a question he asked me not too long ago. An orgasm is building low in my belly, shredding my control as my movements become choppy.

“Of course, it does,” he murmurs, his deep voice dark and wicked, our moans entwining when I roll my hips. “When you’re in the palm of my hands, it’s the only time I feel like this world is worth saving.”

Panting, I rock faster, chasing the orgasm just within my reach.

“You like to use my cock to make you come, don’t you, baby? Remember that whenever you think you don’t need me. Nothing will make your little pussy feel better than I can. And look, I don’t even have to fucking try.”

My vision blurs, and I reach down between us, thrumming my clit while slamming down on his cock just right until I finally reach that pinnacle.

It feels like my soul is ripped to shreds in a matter of seconds. A scream tears from my throat, even though I can’t hear it. Not when different pieces of my being are scattered in hundreds of thousands of different dimensions.

There’s no sense of time or space, just colors and a feeling of completion. Like I was put together wrong before, and now that I’ve shattered, those pieces were stitched back together the correct way.

It's fucking addicting, and by the time I come down, Parsons Manor reappearing, I want to go back. Wherever I went, I want to go back.

Zade's chin is tucked low, seeming defeated in a way. It unnerves me so much that I twist at the hips and grab the key lying on the nightstand. Right when I go to lift off of him, he lifts his head just an inch.

"Don't," he warns.

Unsure of where his head is at, I listen and reach around him, fumbling to find the keyhole. Finally, the key slips in, but I hesitate to turn it.

There's a looming sense of foreboding. I know he's going to attack, but... it's not knowing exactly what he's going to do that unnerves me.

"Zade..."

"What's wrong, Adeline?" he taunts darkly, eyes still cast downward. "Turn the key," he whispers.

Fuck, that's terrifying.

"I don't know if I want to," I admit.

"Would you rather I break free myself? You either choose this, or I make the decision for you."

So, what he's saying is I only have the illusion of a choice. What a fucking gentleman.

Working to swallow, I hold my breath and twist the key. The metal clicks, and the next second, his hand is wrapped around the underside of my jaw, lifting me up off his dick and into the air.

I cry out when I'm slammed onto the bed, stiff fingers digging into my neck as he fits himself between my legs and hikes one high on his hip. Without further warning, he drives himself inside of me until there's nothing left of him to give.

"Say it again," he demands. "I want you to look me in my fucking eyes and say it again."

He slams into me once more, wringing a sob from my throat.

My throat dries, the words coming up like dry bread. But I stare into his wild eyes, finding an entire universe within, and say, "I love you. And you've taken everything from me."

His head drops low between his shoulders, gliding his stare down my body all the way to where he stretches me, contemplating my words. And then he looks up at me beneath thick brows, a wicked glint in his stare. As if taking everything from me is all he's ever wanted.

He looks... God, he looks fucking terrifying. Like a man starved for revenge, and he's finally getting it.

A shuddering breath trickles from my throat as he plunges deep inside me again, a direct threat to destroy all that's left of me.

"You've taken my entire heart and soul and my ability to love another. Sometimes I hate you for that," I tell him, my voice quaking. He tips his chin up, now staring down his nose at me, a grin stretching across his face, crinkling the scar on his cheek.

I forge on, heart pounding as he grinds against me, enjoying watching me struggle to get the words out. "Sometimes, I wish I'd never met you. Because now that I have, now that I'm in love with you, I'll never be able to carve you out. You said I'd bleed out before that'd ever happen, and you were right. And I hate you for that."

Zade hums, licking his lips as if he ate something delicious. His hand drifts up to my cheek, swiping my bottom lip with his thumb.

"I'll never get tired of hearing you say you love me, and if you ever stop, I'll put strings in your fucking lips and make you say it."

Then, he leans down closer until his breath fans across my cheeks, and whispers, "But I don't believe you."

My mouth drops, and my brows furrow. "Are you fuck—"

He shuts me up with his cock, driving into me again with one thrust of his hips. "I've lost sight of my faith. I need to see it."

I thin my eyes, contemplating what more he could possibly want from me.

He rubs my lip harder. "You say so many things you don't mean, baby. The truth lies in your fingertips and in the soft curves of your body. In the tears you cry so pretty for me, and how hard you come for me. Show me the truth."

For several beats, I'm at a loss of how to do that. Then, it dawns on me, and he must see the realization in my eyes because he grins again, staring down at me with amusement.

The look angers me as if he thinks I'm going to merely get on my knees for him and recite poetry or some shit. The challenge burns in my chest as my eyes drift over to my nightstand.

Following my stare, he cocks a brow and turns back to me, picking up on my thoughts without having to say anything.

I've bled for Zade, but only to replace the marks of another man.

Soon after I was taken, he carved a rose over his heart. And now... I want him to do the same to me.

He leans over and grabs the knife from the nightstand.

"This what you want?" he asks, twirling the knife until the light glints off of it.

"Yes," I say, though I don't sound the least bit confident.

"And what do you want me to do with this? Slice you open again?"

I shake my head, reaching up to brush the pads of my fingers across the jagged rose on his chest.

"I want this," I admit. Grabbing his wrist, I guide his hand, holding the knife right above my breast. The previous amusement shutters from his eyes, replaced by something dark and treacherous.

"I want one just like yours," I say, rolling my hips to remind him that this is real.

He tenses, the veins roping up his arm and neck pulsating. He's studying me closely, and I'm beginning to lose my nerve.

"Please, Zade," I plead quietly.

Closing his eyes, he takes a deep breath, and by the time he's opening them, his beast has taken over.

"Rub your clit, baby," he directs. I do as he says, reaching between us and finding the sensitive little bud and start circling it lightly. My lids flutter, acute pleasure rising and stealing my breath. I feel my pussy clench around him, throbbing with desire as my touch grows firmer.

He growls, rolling his hips so I can feel how full I am of him.

One of his hands slides beneath me, cupping the back of my neck firmly while he leans in close, poisoning the tip of the knife right above my heart.

He's looking up at me beneath his lashes, waiting for my reaction. I only give him a husky moan as a response, grinding against him. I've been at the mercy of Zade's pain before, and it was one of the most euphoric experiences in my life.

"I'm not going to stop," he warns me.

"I'm not scared of you," I bite, moaning again as an orgasm builds.

"So many lies," he whispers, right before he presses the blade in and starts to cut.

I suck in a sharp breath, burning pain flaring in my chest. Slowly and methodically, he begins to thrust in and out of me, keeping his movements gentle so he can slice cleanly.

This isn't short little cuts like last time, but one long, continuous drag. It's nearly blinding, so I rub my clit harder, moaning from the cornucopia of pleasure and agony ravaging my body.

It feels as if a gasoline-lined rose is seeping into my skin, and it's steadily catching fire beneath his touch.

"I will carve a garden of scars into your flesh, little mouse. Only my pain will bring them to life." I tip my head back, groaning from the sharp bite of his knife. "They'll only ever grow beneath my touch."

I squeeze my eyes shut, and his voice cuts in sharply. "Look at me, Adeline. I want you to watch me brand you as mine."

Though it's a struggle, I force my eyes open, trading between the macabre rose being engraved into my skin, and his glimmering mismatched eyes.

"You're doing such a good job, baby," he whispers, sparing me a quick glance. Sweat forms along my hairline as the two different sensations battle in my nerve endings.

"You take it so fucking good," he groans, biting his lip as blood bubbles and pours from the wound, pooling in the divot in my throat and the sheets beneath me.

My breath hitches as his cock hits that spot inside of me, sending my eyes rolling to the back of my head. I arch into the knife and twirl my fingers faster, uncaring how grotesque the rose will look.

Nothing about our love is pretty. It's full of jagged lines, chipped pieces, and sharp edges. It hurts like fucking hell, but it's not a masterpiece if it didn't make you bleed for it.

He curses, the blade slicing through my skin faster.

"Don't you dare fucking come yet, Adeline. Not until I tell you to."

I don't listen, continuing to chase after it despite his warning. Nothing else matters right now except coming all over his cock with his knife in my chest.

He growls, the hand around the back of my neck sliding up and fisting my hair so tightly, I cry out. After a few more moments, he pulls the knife away, the agony still lancing throughout the bloodied rose.

I'm so close. Right on the precipice.

But then he jerks my head back farther, forcing me to bow off the bed. Seconds later, the sharp edge of the knife is pressing into my jugular, and Zade's dangerously soft voice is filling my ear.

"I can slit your throat so fucking easy. And the harder you come, the faster your blood will drain from your body," he drawls.

My fingers still, a different type of agony stealing my breath as I force the orgasm back down.

"You don't fucking come until I tell you to," he repeats, his voice biting and as rough as sandpaper. Despite his threat, he fucks me harder, pressing his chest into mine and earning a pained cry in response.

His breathing escalates, the sharp edge biting into the sensitive flesh on my neck. With every thrust, he jerks my body and causes it to scrape against my skin.

"Zade, please," I cry. "You feel so fucking good. I need it so bad."

He inhales sharply, and then he's flinging the knife across the room, the sound of it cracking against my vanity mirror swallowed by my sharp cries.

His hand comes around my throat, mouth still pressed into my ear.

"Say it again," he demands, quickening his pace.

I bite my lip until I taste copper, struggling to hold on—to keep from exploding around him. I'm in a losing battle, and I *am* a fucking liar. I'm terrified of what Zade will do—enough to keep grappling at that control. Yet I know if I let go, I'll welcome his punishment as chaotically as I did the tip of his knife.

"I love you," I choke out, the words scarcely leaving my tongue before his hand is clamping down, arresting the oxygen in my lungs.

"Such a good girl. I want you to soak these sheets with your cum as deeply as your blood, do you understand me?"

My mouth opens, but no sound escapes. He's gripping my throat too tightly to allow a single decibel to slip through.

Blackness licks at the edges of my vision, taunting me as it creeps in slowly. The pressure in my head heightens, and I feel how bright red my face is. Panic unfurls in my stomach, into the whirlpool of bliss and agony. It's a battle of needing him to stop and preferring he snap my neck if he does.

I'm clawing at his arm, and when my eyes begin to roll, he releases my throat right as a tidal wave crashes through me.

The combination of the blood draining from my head at a dizzying speed and the earth-shattering orgasm reduces me to delirium. My pussy clenches around him so tightly, I feel him strain to sink into me.

"Zade!" I scream through a ravaged throat, hoarse and cracked, my arms looping around his neck, desperate to hold on to something, and needing it to ground me as I'm shredded into pieces.

My ears ring as my body bows completely off the bed, the euphoria clawing at my insides too intense for me to process.

He refuses to stop, fucking me harder even as I thrash in his hold. His hands clutch my hips with a bruising force, and if I could see past the image of God staring in my eyes, asking me if I'm ready to come home, I'd find an unhinged man on his knees asking if he can come, too.

Tears spring to my eyes, and my face contorts with a helpless cry as my body is ravaged. All of the sensations—it's too much.

"Oh my God, please, I can't anymore!"

I feel his fist slam into the mattress beside my head with a guttural growl, and his tongue slides along my cheekbone, lapping up the teardrops.

"Eyes on me when you're praying to me," he snaps. I shake my head, more tears spilling over. "Fuck, you're so beautiful when you cry for me. Do you think I'll ever stop now? I want to drink your fucking tears like they're the blood of Christ."

I shake my head again, a silent plea for him to stop. But he refuses, and I wonder how much longer I can take it before I black out.

"Am I your salvation, too?" I choke out, barely getting the words out before a sob breaks free.

"You were always going to be the one that saved me, little mouse." He shudders, and I feel his body tightening as he nears his end. It's coming for me, too, and I'm scared what will become of me once it hits.

He fucks me faster, slipping his hand between our bodies and sliding his fingers against my clit, and this time, I don't see anything at all. My mouth opens on a near-silent scream, and he roars, supplying the sound of us breaking apart, adrift in our own decimation.

He stills, but my hips have a mind of their own, rolling against him as we're both reduced to ash.

You are dust, and unto dust you shall return.

Time ceases to exist, and by the time we both regain clarity, we're panting and trembling with aftershocks. My cheeks are wet with tears, still leaking from my eyes as I attempt to catch my breath. But I can't. Not with the sobs racking my bruised throat.

Zade loops his arm around my neck, holding me to him tightly as we both try to come back down from... whatever the fuck that was.

"I love you, too," he rasps.

Every day, we come a little closer to death—our bodies deteriorating just a little more. And if this is what dying feels like, then I never want to feel anything else.

Chapter 38

The Hunter

It's quiet.

Too quiet.

The clock ticks in the background, and a methodic pair of footsteps creaks above me. Back and forth.

Tick, tick, tick, tick.

Yet, it's silent. *Claire* is silent.

She took precautions after my television appearance four days ago and crashed all her devices the same night.

I knew it was a possibility that Claire would take my threat to that level—it was a variable I would be stupid not to consider. But if it meant keeping Addie from being charged with murder, which could've led to another kidnapping attempt once in police custody, it was a risk I was willing to take. I could've taken her somewhere no one would find her, but that would be ripping her away from any semblance of a normal life. Not that she has much of one now, but at least we have a chance at getting it back once Claire is taken care of.

I had hoped the red-headed bitch would be too prideful to consider disposing of her devices, but I suppose Claire wouldn't be where she is if she was an idiot.

We tripled down on security around Parsons, ensuring not a goddamn bird gets past the perimeters without me knowing about it. In the meantime, we're working on getting a signal back on Claire. Now that we know exactly where she is, I can have one of my men get as close to her island as possible. Then, we'll fly out a drone that can send a viral EMP to her location. That'll send a virus to any technology within her area, and then we can decipher which devices are valuable from there. It will take a couple of days to get someone out there and within range, and there's plenty she can cook up in the time that she's off-grid.

Tick, tick, tick, tick.

I roll my neck, the muscles popping and groaning.

She hasn't made any moves yet. But that's not fucking right. The bitch is reactive. Her head is the size of this manor, and just as dark as the inside of it.

The footsteps halt, as if hearing my thoughts and offended by the notion. I take a sip of my whiskey, daring the asshole to try me. I'm on edge enough to fight air, and I'll fucking win, too.

After a few moments, the footsteps resume, and I huff out a humorless laugh.

Whichever ghost it is, it's as restless as the bones in my body. Maybe it's a direct reflection of how I feel. A manifestation or some shit. Parsons Manor is full of energy, and I wouldn't be surprised if it could be so easily manipulated.

I gulp down the rest of the contents in my glass, hissing at the burn. The clock continues to tick, drawing near the three AM mark.

I got home a few hours ago from taking down a ring. This one has victims as young as newborns, and I haven't been able to sleep yet. I'm too full of rage and with the knowledge that Claire has something planned.

Phantom fingers of dread are inching up my spine like a spider, tightening my shoulders with each jab. Whatever it is, it's going to piss me the hell off. Call me fucking psychic, I guess.

Tick, tick, tick, tick.

Pulling out my phone, I dial Jay, bouncing my leg as it rings.

"You hate me," is his groggy answer.

"Something is wrong," I say, digging in my pocket to pull out my cigarettes.

"What happened?" he asks, sounding more alert. I shake my head, struggling to put it into words.

"I don't know yet. It's quiet around Parsons. No sign of anyone. But that's too obvious."

Jay's silent for a moment. "I assume this is about Claire. What could she possibly do?"

"Who fucking knows," I grumble, irritated with myself, and angrily sticking the tip between my lips. "The cunt will think of something creative, I'm sure."

He yawns. "Did you talk to Addie about it? You couldn't have woken her to talk about your feelings and then call me when you know something

is actually wrong?”

Shithead.

“She’s sleeping.”

“I was sleeping.”

“She also went to bed angry because she got in an argument with her mom about getting on medication or some shit. I didn’t want to disturb her.”

I’m pretty sure her mom was trying to convince Addie to get *me* on medication. Antipsychotics, to be exact. I laughed, and Addie then promptly agreed with her mother.

In response, I rolled her onto my face and ate her pussy until she was riding my tongue into oblivion. The little liar loves me just the way I am.

He sighs. “You’re lucky I understand the wrath of a scorned woman.” He pauses. “And a man, if I’m being totally transparent.”

I roll my eyes. Idiot. He understands it so well because his booty calls are just that, and they don’t like it. But does he stop fucking them? Of course not.

“I’m sure they’ll both get over it,” Jay placates. “From what I’ve heard, they love each other. They just have a funky way of showing it. Or acknowledging it.”

I flick the lighter, about to light my damn cigarette, and just as the flame ignites, so does the proverbial light bulb in my head. My heart drops.

“Shit, Jay, check Addie’s parents’ house,” I clip, finally singeing the tip and inhaling deeply.

He pauses. “You don’t think Claire would try something with them, do you?”

“Who else would she go after? I have no family, but Addie does, and it wouldn’t be hard to find out that her mother has been visiting frequently.”

I hear bed sheets rustling and then the whir of his computer turning on. That dread now has me in a chokehold, and I feel with every fiber of my being that something will be amiss.

Where’s my fucking laptop?

Not anywhere close to me.

“Jay,” I prompt, growing impatient as I take another drag, my knee bouncing restlessly.

“I’m looking,” he mumbles. A few seconds later, he curses, “Shit, they have a Nest camera. Someone busted in about thirty minutes ago.”

Fuck. I fly off the stool, nearly sending it toppling to the checkered floor.

“Her parents don’t have cameras inside the house, so I can’t see what’s happening,” he says, voice tight.

I’ve already stubbed out my cigarette in the sink, and am rushing toward the stairs, mouthing a few choice words on the way.

“Send a drone out to keep an eye on the outside. I’m on my way there,” I direct, swinging around the railing and taking the steps two at a time.

“Sending one now.”

“Thank you,” I say, clicking off the call as I fly down the hallway and through Addie’s bedroom door. She’s facing away, curled in a ball, and sleeping soundly. The balcony doors are cracked open, allowing in a cool breeze. She tends to get overheated from her nightmares, so those doors are always open.

I rush to her, not bothering to stay silent.

“Addie,” I call, nudging her softly. I hate to wake her when she seems to be getting a moment’s peace while sleeping—but she’d murder me if she discovered something was wrong with her parents, and I left to handle it without telling her.

Her eyes crack open, brows knitting as she comes to.

“What?” she croaks, gearing up to throw the sheets over her head. I grab her wrist, squeezing tightly so she understands the severity.

She freezes, her eyes now flying open to stare up at me.

“What happened?” she asks, panicked as she sits up.

Fuck. She’s completely naked, and the fact that it hardly distracts me is how strongly my inner alarm bells are blaring.

“Get dressed. We’re going to your parents’,” I order, stepping away from her and heading toward her dresser.

“What? Why? What’s going on?”

I shake my head. “I had a bad feeling Claire was up to something, so I had Jay check their house. Someone broke in about a half-hour ago.”

She’s scrambling from the bed and beside me in seconds, slapping away my hands and grabbing the clothes she needs.

“Why would she go after my parents?” she asks, frantically pulling on clothes.

“Because outside of myself and Daya, it’s the only other way to get to you. There’s been no communication, which means they might not have

done anything drastic yet.”

She shakes her head, panic pulling her brows into a tight knot. “I don’t get it. I don’t understand why she’s after me like this.”

I grab one of my guns from her dresser, check the clip, and tuck it into the back of my jeans. The knife I gave her for her birthday is downstairs, but I’ll be grabbing extra guns for her.

“At this point, it’s just personal, baby. I’m the biggest threat to her organization, and you’re the biggest payday she’ll ever see in her lifetime. You will simultaneously make her richer than any human has a right to be and bring me to my knees.”

“Xavier already paid for me, and now he’s dead. So she’s trying to make double the money on me,” she snipes.

She rushes over to her sneakers lying haphazardly at the foot of her bed. “She can’t possibly think this will work. Does she think I’m that fucking stupid to run into the same situation twice?”

“It’s not about how smart you are, it’s about how desperate you are. And if she gets ahold of your parents and uses them as collateral, you will be desperate enough to do anything.”

Addie huffs, stomping her foot to get the shoe past her heel.

“I’ll be damned if I become like Rio,” she mutters under her breath.

I’ll sooner make it into heaven before that happens.

“What the hell is she going to do anyway?” she asks aloud, though it sounds rhetorical. She turns to me, her light brown eyes sharp. “The stupid bitch is going to try to get me to trade my life for theirs, am I right?”

“Most likely,” I concede, following her out of her bedroom door. The moment we step out, it feels as if the walls open their eyes, watching us rush through the dark hallway. Addie cuts through the shadow figures creeping across the floor, paying them no mind.

“Should we wake Sibby?”

I open my mouth, but then as if conjured straight out of a Rob Zombie film, she steps out of her bedroom door near the staircase, covering her mouth as she yawns. Her pigtails are skewed, and her purple nightgown hangs off one shoulder.

She squints her eyes, staring at us with confusion. Addie stops short, gives Sibby one look, and then clips, “Get dressed quickly. You may get to have some fun tonight.”

Whatever fatigue was clinging onto her wisps away in a matter of seconds. Her eyes widen with excitement.

“Can my henchmen come, too?”

I sigh. “Only two can fit, and only if they don’t get in the way.” They’re imaginary, yet the assholes somehow still cause problems. She takes off back into the room, squealing.

“Give us two seconds!” she shouts from the depths, but Addie is already tapping her little feet down the stairs like a roadrunner on crack.

“Don’t forget your knives and guns, mouse,” I call after her. “And, Sibby... limit your knives and guns.”

I hear a dramatic sigh from the room, but I ignore her, sticking my Bluetooth in my ear.

Within two minutes, we’re piled into my car and taking off towards her parents’ house. It’s an hour away, but I’m determined to get there in half the time.



Ten minutes into the drive, the men were dragging Addie’s parents out of the house. Jay made a split-second decision and gunned down their truck. The drone he’s using is special grade, equipped with bullets, and highly illegal.

The men took her parents right back inside and will be waiting for our arrival. There’s a slight risk that they’ll kill her parents before we get there, but that would be entirely stupid.

If her parents are dead, there’s no leverage. And if they tried to escape, Jay would shoot them down. Either way, they lose.

“They know we’re here,” I remind Addie as I pull into the driveway.

Despite Serena’s disapproval of Parsons Manor, living in a secluded house is in her blood. She doesn’t live in the burbs like I’d imagine, but a beautiful home behind a thicket of trees, and far from the road. It isn’t removed from civilization like the manor is, but it’s not easy to find, either.

“You don’t think they killed them, do you?”

“No, baby,” I tell her truthfully. “If they did, they know that if I don’t kill them, Claire sure as hell would. She’d lose her leverage.”

Addie rolls her bottom lip between her teeth as I come to a stop. The house is dark, and the surrounding trees sway in the wind, the branches casting crooked shadows across the home, exuding an ominous feel. It’s a large white three-story house with a massive window on the top center, showcasing the silhouette of a chandelier.

I call Jay, and he answers immediately.

“Keep an eye on the house and make sure no one else comes in,” I order.

“Already on it, boss man,” he says, the tapping of his keyboard following his confirmation.

I turn to Addie and ask, “You ready?”

She spares me a single glance before opening the door and stepping out, silently answering my question. Sibby scrambles out after her while I shut the car off and follow after them.

Addie’s hips sway angrily as she half-runs toward the front door.

I eat up the distance in a few long strides, grabbing her arm and hauling her back. Her neck nearly cracks from how hard she whips her head to glare at me.

“Don’t go charging in mindlessly.”

Ripping her arm from my grip, she scoffs at me.

“I’m not an idiot,” she snaps. I smirk and raise my hands in surrender. If this weren’t her mother in danger, I’d bend her over and fuck her until she does go stupid.

“Sorry, baby. Proceed.”

Leaving me behind, she charges up to the entrance, then as if hitting slow motion on a movie, her movements become gradual and smooth as she reaches for the front door.

Turning the knob, she quietly opens the door, the darkness bleeding out from the depths of the foyer while her other hand grips the knife strapped to her thigh, readying for someone to jump out and attack. No one does, the silence deafening. Stepping farther inside, her eyes scan every direction. When it’s deemed clear, she nods Sibby and me in after her.

I bite my lip, fucking relishing the sight of her in charge. My girl is strong and capable, and I’ll gladly follow her lead.

The blackness swallows us whole as I soundlessly shut the door behind me. It's so quiet, you could hear a mouse fart. Addie disappears into the darkness as she moves deeper into the house. I can't see much, but I can feel everything.

The chill coercing the goosebumps across my flesh to rise, the heat moving throughout the pipes, and the eyes watching my every move. They come from all directions and nowhere at all. Yet, they're as real as the ghostly fingers I feel brushing across my skin in Parsons Manor.

Thankfully, Sibby understands the situation perfectly and contains her giddiness. She's used to creeping through houses, but she always had the protection of the walls. In *Satan's Affair*, *she* was the creeping eyes.

Maybe now she'll understand that gut feeling of knowing someone is watching you that wants to cause you harm but never knowing where they are until they're right in your face.

We travel down a long hallway, passing portraits of Addie gradually aging until she was a teenager. Normally, I'd stop and stare at her childhood pictures, fantasizing about the kid versions of myself falling in love with her had I seen her then. Something tells me that I'd be enraptured by her no matter how young we were.

Now, it's so eerie in here that those smiling eyes in the pictures appear sinister. As if the different versions of Addie are laughing at us because they know the danger awaiting us. I want to laugh right back because *I* was the danger awaiting her.

We emerge into a kitchen, finding the expansive area clear. She starts to head to the left, but a slight shuffling sound arises from our right. She freezes and glances back at me. I nod towards the noise. As much as she wants to find her mom, we can't leave dangerous men behind.

Nodding, she turns and veers toward the noise.

"Watch your step," Addie whispers a moment later. Keeping an eye on Sibby's feet, I see her step down, her boots sinking into the soft carpet.

It's a large living room, with a massive TV screen mounted on the wall to our right and plush couches surrounding it, along with a recliner. I imagine that's where her dad sits, yelling at whatever football team plays on the screen.

His image fades as a different person replaces it, a body emerging from the darkness like a demon called forth by its master.

Addie and Sibby spot him the same time I do, their bodies briefly bristling from the creepiness before we all spring into action. Addie rushes toward the dude, but I feel another person creeping behind me, and I glimpse metal right before I grab Sibby by one of her pigtails and yank, jerking her out of the way of a flying knife that was centimeters from impaling her in the head.

A breath of hot air fans across the back of my neck a mere second before I turn around, sliding my gun from the back of my jeans and taking aim at the culprit who threw the knife. I fire off a shot, hitting the person in the throat and scarcely dodging another knife to the face, catching his wrist right before it could connect. My scars get Addie hot and bothered, so I wouldn't have minded if he succeeded.

The silencer attachment produces the smallest of sounds, quieter than the man now convulsing on the floor, choking on his own blood. Whipping back around, I find Addie scuffling with the first person. Just as I step in to help, she uppercuts the guy, her blade plunging up through his mouth and into his brain.

After she rips the knife from his head, he flops to the ground, dead before he hits the ruined carpet.

Fuck, that's my good girl.

Sibby peers around, and from what I can see, she's pouting. Her lips are pursed, disappointed she didn't get to partake in the action.

"There will be more," I assure quietly, my heart pounding from the adrenaline in my system. It's like morphine pumping through my veins, giving me a high that drugs could never emulate.

Addie faces me with rounded eyes and her hand dripping with blood. Her chest heaves, and from here, I can smell her excitement.

An animalistic urge is beginning to take over. I want to take her to the ground and fuck her in the pool of blood. But her mother is somewhere in this house, most likely hurt and being held hostage.

Stepping back, I dip my chin in approval, feeling just how feral my stare is. She works to swallow, turning and scanning the room to distract herself from the energy thickening between us.

Pulling myself away from my murderous little mouse, I walk ahead and check every corner of the room, finding a small staircase in the back corner. I peer up the steps, seeing nothing but endless black.

“That’s my room,” she whispers from behind me. Turning my head, I peek at her over my shoulder.

“I think I’ll stay out of it for now,” I answer, my voice hoarse. “Go check to make sure no one is up there. Quickly.”

“We need to find—”

“Addie,” I growl. “If we don’t clear the house, they could be lying in wait until you’re distracted and kill you. So please just check the fucking room, baby.”

Snapping her mouth shut, she does as I say, keeping a wide berth as she walks past me. It takes her only a minute before she’s making her way back down the stairs.

“Clear,” she breathes. “Let’s check their room now, please. It’s on the other side of the kitchen.”

“After you,” I drawl. She rushes past me, leading us back through the bloody living room, then towards the stairs on the backside of the kitchen, right before the dining room.

Light on her feet, she quickly climbs the steps, Sibby and I close behind. They’re all aware of our presence but stomping around like elephants will only help conceal where they’re hiding.

The upper floor is a large circle surrounding the stairs, the monstrous chandelier hanging directly above. The diamonds hanging from the gaudy fixture glint in the moonlight spearing through the massive window.

The air is thicker up here, weighing heavily on my shoulders like God himself is trying to hold me down.

Someone is up here, but they’re not visible. Not yet, at least. An ominous feeling races through my bones, enough for me to step forward and push Addie behind me. I’ll slap duct tape over her mouth if she tries to argue. I don’t care how capable she is, I’ll always protect her.

But she doesn’t argue, indicating she feels it, too. My chest tightens as I look around, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It only takes a few more seconds. A bright red laser spears through the window, landing directly on my chest.

“Zade, get down!” Jay shouts through my earpiece.

“Shit,” I curse before I dive directly into Addie and Sibby, tackling them both to the ground and nearly sending us right back down the stairs. The

window shatters, and I feel the heat of the bullet slide past my arm, taking a chunk out of my bicep with it.

Sharp glass rains down on us, little slices stinging my cheeks and hands. Addie and Sibby cover their heads, attempting to protect themselves from the barrage of tiny knives.

“Fuck, is everyone okay?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“All’s good,” Addie groans, followed by Sibby’s irate confirmation.

“The motherfucker was shielding his body with something, wasn’t picking up on the infrared sensors in the drone until he repositioned,” Jay explains hurriedly, then muttering under his breath, “Probably used fucking Styrofoam.”

Before I can tell him to, a blast of fire lights up the sky, then quickly fizzles out.

Sniper dude just got sniped.

“He’s dead,” he announces in my ear, breathing out a sigh, but then immediately starts panicking again, “Please tell me everyone is alive. You’re all alive, right?” he asks repeatedly.

“We’re all good. But there could be more,” I say. “We’ll stay away from windows as best as we can. Keep me updated on any more movement.”

Another sigh of relief. “Will do.”

Sibby growls, wiggling beneath Addie, who is gripping my injured arm and looking over it, her fingers coated in my blood. I quickly check it over. It’s superficial.

“You okay, baby?” she asks quietly, her voice shaky. It’d take nothing short of an incinerator to melt me, except when it comes to Addie. Then I’m fucking slush.

I place a kiss on her forehead. “I’m fine, mouse. Let’s get moving,” I say.

“I really want to stab someone right now,” Sibby snips, finally sliding out from beneath Addie. Glass has to be cutting into her, but she doesn’t seem to notice when she’s too busy yelling at herself.

“Mortis, *move!* Quit clinging to me like a leech, I’m fine. Zade’s the one that took the bullet, stupid.” In her attempt to detach herself from her imaginary friend, she ends up kicking me in the head.

See? The assholes always cause problems.

“Sibby,” I hiss through gritted teeth.

“What? It’s not my fault,” she sasses, not the least bit sorry.

Groaning, I roll off of Addie and sit up.

“Get up. We need to get away from the window.” I stand and help the girls up, one of them now in a seriously foul mood. Her temper is only going to continue to rise until she stabs someone, and my headache is only going to worsen until that happens.

They gently brush the glass from their bodies, and with the moonlight spilling into the room, I note tiny cuts all over their faces.

“Which one is your mom’s room?” I ask, keeping my voice low and swiping a few shards from Addie’s backside that she missed. Sibby is sticking out her ass and wiping her butt off, but in her head, one of her henchmen is helping her.

“First door on the left,” she responds.

“Sibby, I want you to go and check the other rooms,” I tell her. Surprisingly, she doesn’t complain and takes off, probably praying for someone to try her. *I’m* praying for someone to try her.

Glass crunches beneath my boots as I hug the wall, sliding along it until I reach the door with Addie following my lead.

I crack open the door, tucking myself back around the corner in case more bullets come flying.

“Stay here for now,” I order, not giving her time to argue. Holding my gun up, I slip into the room. It’s pitch-black in here, and I wish I had thought to bring my night vision goggles.

Straining my ears, I listen for any noise, but I don’t hear anything. Not even the sound of breathing.

As my eyes adjust, the bed becomes clearer. Empty, save for the rumpled bed sheets and skewed pillows. A lamp is knocked off the end table, upside down with the cord ripped from the wall. There must’ve been a struggle getting them out of bed.

I let out a slow breath, continuing to scan my eyes over every inch of the room, trying to pick out any figures standing in the shadows or lying on the ground.

“They’re not in here,” I call out quietly.

Addie sneaks into the room behind me, her footfalls light and her body poised for threat. She’s come so far from the girl who ran headfirst into

situations without properly thinking it through. She's a trained killer now, and fuck if it doesn't make my chest tight with pride.

I never wanted to change Addie. Despite how dangerous her impulsiveness and stupidly brave tendencies were, it's what made her so fascinating. But her circumstances took that out of my hands, and while I still needed my brave girl, there wasn't any room for thoughtless actions anymore.

There's nothing thoughtless about how Addie moves now, and my fascination with her has only amplified. All those idle threats she used to make about killing or hurting me—she could make those come true now.

Fuck. Yes.

"Where do you think they could be?" she whispers, bringing me back to the situation at hand. I'd berate myself for getting distracted by her if I knew it would change anything, but it won't. Dying with Addie on my mind is the only way I want to go out anyway.

I shake my head. "I don't know. But if there are people in the house, that means they're most likely still in the house, too."

Addie walks to the bed, pressing her hand into the sheets. "It's cold, so they've been gone for a minute." Turning to me, she decides with resignation and dread, "I think we need to check the basement." Her body is stiff, and her shoulders tense.

"What's wrong with the basement?"

She shrugs a shoulder. "It's creepy down there?" she says, though it sounds like a question.

"You like creepy."

She seems to pause on that thought, and then relaxes, nodding her head. "Yeah, you're right. I do like creepy. Let's go."

Sibby emerges from one of the rooms just as we exit her parents' bedroom, appearing more frustrated.

"No one is up here. I busted in every room," she says with disappointment.

"Basement," I clip. "They might be down there."

Addie leads us back down the stairs and towards the basement door in the dining room.

"If they are down there, they'll hear our footsteps and know we're coming," I murmur, once more pushing Addie behind me. It's better if I'm

the one getting shot at so she can handle her parents.

The door creaks open, and it's like looking into a massive black hole in the ground.

"How big is the basement?"

"Pretty big. It's not finished," she answers on a whisper. "There are rooms down there, too."

Slowly, I descend the stairs, and my sight is completely robbed. There's a cold chill and another heavy weight of dread down here, like an evil goddess beckoning me into her lair. Such a warm fucking welcome.

In the far back corner of the basement, a tiny sliver of light shines from the depths of what looks to be a hallway.

That pit of dread yawns, consuming my insides until all I feel is doom.

Addie and Sibby flank either side of me, and though I can't see their faces, I can feel their restlessness.

"We're in the family room, down that hallway is the unfinished side," Addie informs me, her voice barely above a whisper.

Just as I take a step, the glow extinguishes as if they cut the lights out. I freeze, my eyes beginning to adjust.

They didn't cut the lights out. Someone is standing at the entrance of the hallway. They're unmoving, but I feel their eyes boring into where we stand. My hand tightens around my gun, and I slowly raise it, preparing for them to attack. Then, they slowly step back and disappear down the hallway again, the glow taking their place once more.

My heart pumps wildly in my chest. Shit, that's freaky. Even I can admit that.

Sibby scoffs. "I spent too much time in haunted houses—no one is creepier than me. Let me go first."

I shrug, deciding Sibby fucking with them wouldn't hurt.

"Have fun," I mumble, dropping my weapon an inch, though I refuse to relax. There could be more lurking around down here.

She giggles loudly, the sound sinister, before she softly sings a lullaby as she heads for the hallway. I can't be sure, but if I know Sibby, then I'm positive she's skipping there.

I grab Addie's hand, leading her to where the little doll now stands in the entrance, her tiny body highlighted by the light.

Her pink knife is in her hand, and she stabs the tip into the wall beside her. Then, with her lullaby growing louder, she slowly walks down the hallway, dragging her knife as she goes.

Addie cringes, but I can't tell if it's because Serena is going to be pissed about that or if it's because Sibby is just as creepy as she promised.

Both are daunting.

Voices arise from the room they're in, sounding nervous and slightly angry.

"Don't come any closer," a deep voice barks. Sibby pauses, abruptly cutting off her lullaby, and cocks her head.

"That's not very nice," she whispers, her childlike tone sending chills down my spine. "I just want to play."

"I will blow your fucking head off, bitch," he spits. A large man fills the doorway at the end of the hallway, and I quickly usher Addie out of sight before he spots us at the mouth. I flatten myself against the wall and peek around the corner.

If he tries anything, I'll be the one blowing heads off.

He's burly and tall, with a bald head, black tattoos covering his pale skin, and a bushy beard surrounding his thinned lips. A gun is in his hand, aimed directly at Sibby. But she doesn't seem the least bit frightened.

Muffled whimpers emit from the room, both masculine and feminine, and the sounds relax me a bit. They may be hurt, and definitely scared, but they're also alive. That's all that matters right now.

"My henchmen won't let that happen," she says. I've no idea where she imagines her harem to be, but the only one intimidating the armed man right now is her.

Which is admirable when she's five foot nothing.

"Drop the knife," he orders her. Sighing, Sibby listens, her knife clanging down the wall.

"You might as well tell me to undress next if you're going to strip me of things," she pouts. Gripping the bottom of her shirt, she starts to pull it up, doing just that.

The man's eyes widen, and his gun drops as he watches Sibby take off her shirt. Thank fuck she's wearing a bra.

I shake my head. Her methods are really fucking weird but still effective. She throws her shirt at the man, causing him to flinch back. Within that

small increment of time, she grabs another knife strapped to her thigh and whips it at the man, the tip of the knife lodging in his eye straight through.

The whimpers rise to full-fledged screams of horror as the man tips face first, dropping like a bag of sand. His weight lands on the knife, driving it completely through his skull.

Quickly grabbing her knife and shirt from the floor, she pulls it on and skips the rest of the way into the room, stepping over her convulsing victim.

“Let’s go,” I say, grabbing Addie’s hand and rushing into the room behind Sibby, attempting to avoid the mess.

Serena and her husband, William, are bound to two chairs in the center of the room, duct tape slapped over their mouths. A single light bulb dangles above them, illuminating the two men on either side, each holding a gun to their head.

The intruders are tense, on edge now that Sibby flung a knife into their very dead partner’s eye.

“Mom... Dad...,” Addie breathes, and I feel her body bristling with the need to run to them.

Serena’s eyes are wet and bloodshot, smudged with black mascara. Her blonde hair is mussed, and her silk pajamas are torn at the collar. William squirms beside her, profusely sweating. His graying hair is matted to his head, and his white t-shirt is soaked. A cut mars his cheekbone, and a bruise is already beginning to form around his eye.

“You got here quicker than I expected after your friend fucked with our truck,” the intruder to my left says, his gun digging into Serena’s temple. He has deep black hair that hangs down around his ears, tangled and greasy, and a massive, hooked nose with a scar cutting across it. The other is a short, blond man with a baby face, who appears to be way out of his element.

“I was looking forward to having fun with them just a little bit longer. Maybe see if Mommy has a golden pussy too.” His finger curls around a strand of Serena’s hair, and she jerks away with a muffled scream.

“Don’t fucking touch her,” Addie snaps. The man only smiles.

“I wanted to turn them into a nice display for you, too,” he continues, ignoring her. He shrugs a shoulder, attempting to appear nonchalant. “I suppose you’d make a better exhibit. Z hanging out of that big window in

the front of the house, just like you did with the doctor. How poetic that'd be."

"I'd love to play arts and crafts with you," I murmur, drawing my switchblade from my hoodie and opening it, the zip of metal lost in Serena's suppressed cries.

The man cocks the gun in response, his threat clear.

"You kill her, you kill the only thing keeping my bullet out of your brain," I warn.

"Oh, Mommy's the favorite, I see. Well, then we can do without the father, can't we?"

His gun pivots to Addie's father, who now has two guns pressed against his head. The man's intentions are clear: killing one will only cement Addie's need to trade herself to save the only living parent she has left.

"You do that, then there will be no diamond at all." My gaze snaps to Addie, my heart coming to a screeching halt when I see her holding her knife to her own throat.

Oh, hell no.

Chapter 39

The Diamond

I dig the blade into my skin until I feel a sharp pinch, blood slowly trailing from the wound. Zade's eyes track it, his eyes alight with fury.

The greasy-haired man returns his gun to my mother, a smart-ass grin on his face.

"Touché, diamond." He tips his chin up to his partner, who's still holding his weapon to my father. "Grab her."

Then, he addresses Zade and Sibby, "Both of you drop all those weapons, and kick them away."

The guy with the baby face approaches me, and I take a big step back. "You don't get to touch me. Not until I know you won't hurt any of them."

His eyes narrow, but then they flit over my shoulder, and a moment later, I feel the danger behind me.

"Fuck, Addie, move!" Zade barks, but it's too late.

A gun presses into the back of my head, distracting me long enough for his arm to come around and grab ahold of my knife, flinging it to the side.

Concrete fills my bones, my body turning to stone as he wraps his arm around my neck and pulls me back into him, moving his gun to my temple.

"You forgot to check the attic," the new intruder whispers in my ear. He drops his arm from around my throat and slides his hand across my tailbone and down my thighs, checking for any weapons, and then throwing them to the floor when he locates them. He squeezes my ass for extra measure, and I can't contain the snarl from slipping free.

Oh, yeah. He's going to die.

Tension radiates from Zade, his murderous gaze tracking the man's wandering hand. I bet he's imagining all the ways he could remove it from his body, just like he did Arch's. Sibby is still, her eyes bouncing in every direction, probably calculating how quickly she can kill one of them before their gun goes off.

"Better be careful," Zade murmurs, his eyes boring into the man holding me. "That diamond has sharp edges."

Baby face turns his weapon on Zade, “Shut the hell up. Both of you get against the wall.”

Zade smirks, raising his hands in mock surrender, but the look in his eyes is deadly.

Sibby refuses to budge, though, so the man storms toward her and grabs her by the arm, attempting to haul her there himself. She goes wild, scratching at him and causing a massive scuffle.

Hooked on the inside of my sleeve is a pen gun—a handy little weapon Zade got me. I put it there for a situation exactly like this, deliberately keeping it out of any apparent spots to hide a weapon. It only has a single bullet, but it’ll be enough.

The chaos distracts all the men enough to slide out the pen gun from my sleeve without any of them noticing.

Sweat beads across my hairline, and though adrenaline is running rampant in my system, calmness overtakes me.

Hurriedly, I take aim on the greasy-haired man and click the button on the pen, the bullet ripping from the small weapon and through the man’s brain, killing him immediately.

The utter surprise is enough time for me to knock away the gun from my head, my captor’s reflexes delayed as he fires off a shot at my feet, scarcely missing my toes. The bullet ricochets, and I think I hear someone gasp, but I’ve already turned around and am sending my fist flying into his face.

My father is shouting through the tape on his mouth, but I can’t look now. My opponent slides a knife from his pocket and swings it at my face.

Rearing back just in time, the blade slices through the air within an inch of my nose. Grabbing ahold of his hand wrapped around the handle, I snap it back, his wrist breaking from the force.

He cries out, dropping the knife. Before I can land another punch, this one to his throat, his head kicks back, a hole now in the center of his forehead.

I turn with wide eyes, finding Zade tucking away his weapon.

“Sorry, baby. He touched your ass, therefore, I needed to kill him.”

A piercing scream distracts me, drawing my eyes to Sibby happily stabbing away at the man beneath her, while my dad squirms like a worm on a hook. His stare pinballs back and forth from the psychotic girl at his feet to his wife.

My eyes widen when I get a good look at my mother. Her head is drooping, chin tucked into her chest and blood soaking through her shirt.

“Oh my God,” I cry, rushing over to her. Zade reaches her first, pressing his fingers against her throat to feel for a pulse.

“She’s alive,” he breathes. “But her pulse is faint. She needs a doctor now.”

Tears immediately well in my eyes, and panic turns my brain to mush. I open my mouth, limbs frozen, and wide eyes locked onto my dying mother.

“Adeline,” Zade barks, and my eyes snap to him. “Focus, baby. I need you to come here and put pressure on the wound.”

Finally unlocking my muscles, I do as he says and press both hands against her chest. Crimson bubbles through my fingers, coating my skin within seconds.

Distinctly, I see Zade untying her bonds and then my dad’s. There’s a sharp command telling Sibby to stop grinding on the dead man beneath her, then Zade talking to Jay through his earpiece, but everything is drowned out after that.

There’s too much blood rushing in my ears. Too much anxiety eating me alive from the inside out.

“Mom,” I say shakily. Dad’s arms come around her, gently lifting her head and calling out her name. Tears are streaming down his ruddy cheeks, and it’s then I realize my own face is wet.

“Serena, hey honey, look at me,” Dad coaxes, but her eyes stay firmly closed.

“I need to lift her,” Zade says.

“Don’t you touch her!” Dad shouts, going to slap Zade’s arms away. “We need to call an ambulance.”

“Dad!” I exclaim, pulling a hand away to stop him. “Stop, he’s trying to help.”

“I will be faster than an ambulance, I promise you,” Zade assures, staring firmly in my father’s eyes. Dad is a rule follower. He goes by the book. And even in his mania, he understands that Zade isn’t taking her to the hospital only because he’s faster, but because we’ve all committed a crime, and he doesn’t want them to know.

Which means we’re not going to a real hospital, either.

Gritting his teeth, Dad releases Zade and lets him pick up my mom, her head flopping onto his chest as he stands.

“Everyone get in the car. Let’s go, *now*, Sibby.”

We climb the basement steps, tear through the house, and pile into Zade’s car—all of it a blur. I let Dad sit in the passenger seat while my mom is draped across mine and Sibby’s lap. I continue to put pressure on her chest, whispering to her softly to stay alive.

Zade must still have Jay on the line because he says, “Call Teddy and let him know we’re on our way. Gunshot wound to the chest.”

“Let me guess, there’s some made-up story you have, huh?” Dad snaps from the front seat while Zade tears out of the driveway and onto the road. He handles the car with ease, despite the unnerving speed we’re traveling.

“Well, no, not really,” Zade answers, not the least bit perturbed by my dad’s anger. “We’re not going to the police. And we’re going to a surgeon, with real experience—”

“We’re not going to the hospital?!” my father booms, his voice deafening. I flinch, heart pounding. I’ve told Zade before that my dad wasn’t an integral part of my life. He always lingered in the background, there but not really—kind of like Gigi’s ghost in Parsons Manor.

But there were a few times in my childhood where he raised his voice, and each time, it sent birds scattering off their branches and my back hunching in attempt to make myself smaller.

He’s a simple man, but he can also be scary.

“No, sir,” Zade responds casually. Nothing intimidates him, and if I haven’t had a close look, I’d think he has balls of fucking steel hanging between his legs.

“I don’t care who the fuck you are, you better turn this car around and take us to the GODDAMN HOSPITAL!” he yells, his face growing increasingly red, even in the dark of the car.

“Raise your voice to me one more fucking time,” Zade threatens, his voice deepening. “I guarantee you that I can knock your ass out without even swerving this car.” My dad rears back, eyes bugging with shock

“Dad,” I cut in before my other parent ends up getting shot, my voice soft but stern. “I would never let her die, and you know that. Please just trust us.”

His glare sears through me, but I don't look away, my entire body beginning to shake from the mix of adrenaline, shock, and panic.

Scoffing, he turns away, muttering under his breath, "I can't fucking believe this shit. Adeline, what the fuck have you gotten involved in?"

I frown. "I didn't even do anything, Dad."

He turns back to me with incredulity. "You think I didn't see the three of you kill those men in cold blood? The little crazy one—"

"Don't call me crazy!" Sibby screeches from beside me, causing me to flinch, the pitch hurting my ears. I pause, noting how manic she looks right now. Her chest is pumping, and her brown eyes are wild, like she's a tiger cornered in a small cage.

Dad must see it, too, because he trains his glare onto me. "Don't sit here and act like you're the daughter I raised," he barks. "You just murdered someone."

"He was going to kill Mom," I defend, in disbelief he's lecturing me right now. He's in shock and angry, and taking it out on me.

He clenches his teeth, baring them at me as he spits, "If she dies, this will be all your fault. That bullet hit her because of you!"

His words feel like a bullet of their own, hitting me right in the chest and punching the air out of my lungs.

"What?" I choke out.

"When you were fighting with that guy, and the gun went off," he barks, his face reddening. He stares at me like... like I'm a monster. "The bullet ricocheted and hit your mother."

My mouth opens, speechless. I remember it ricocheting but never saw where it hit, distracted by the man I was fighting with.

Wave after wave of guilt slams into me, and fuck... this *is* my fault. I blink, my vision blurring with a fresh wave of tears. It feels as if my chest is cracking wide open, my heart spilling out right alongside my mother's.

"She's not the one that pulled the trigger," Zade barks, defending me.

Huffing, he turns around and stares out his window, vibrating with fury.

"This is your fault, too," he accuses snidely, directing it toward Zade. "The both of you. None of this would've happened if it wasn't for your criminal boyfriend, Adeline."

Zade turns his head to my father, the leather steering wheel groaning beneath his tightened fists, and for a moment, I'm convinced he's going to

completely snap it in half.

“I think it’s best you shut your fucking mouth from now on, or else I will do it for you. As you’ve made clear, I’m not a good man, and I care very much about how you talk to Addie. That man was holding a goddamn gun to *your* daughter’s head. This is nobody’s fault but the people who broke into your home.”

Dad meets his stare, words on the tip of his tongue. In the end, he shakes his head and turns to look out the window again, content with where his fingers are pointing.

The car falls into a weighted silence, the four of us conflicted for different reasons.

I look down at my mom, a sob working up my throat as I stare down at her pale face. My tears drip onto her cheeks, but I don’t dare remove my hands from the wound to wipe them away.

“I’m so sorry, Mom. I don’t want to do this life without you, so stay with me, okay?”



Try as I might, my PTSD is beginning to resurface as Zade whips us into a driveway within twenty minutes, driving up to a wooden cabin with a warm yellow glow emitting from the windows. I recognize this cabin—barely.

Zade brought me here right after he found me, and I hardly remember a thing about this place or Teddy, just that both the house and the doctor were warm and inviting. Opposite to the memories of a different doctor that are currently sending my blood pressure through the roof.

“This is Teddy’s house?” I ask, my hands numb.

Flashbacks of waking up in a make-shift hospital, an old man with pale blue eyes and a deranged smile beneath his bushy mustache leaning over me, asking me to come with him. My heart pumps wildly, and it feels like it’s cracking my rib cage from the force.

The second the car comes to a stop, Sibby is scrambling out of the car as if she was stuck underwater with no air. She storms off somewhere,

muttering about having to leave her henchmen behind. None of us have the mental capacity to worry about her in this second.

“Yes. I know you might not remember much, but his name is Teddy Angler, and his son is Tanner. They’re good friends of mine,” he answers, shutting the car off and hurrying to the back door.

“Keep the pressure on her chest,” Zade instructs. Quickly and carefully, he slides Mom out of my lap, cradling her against his chest while I keep my hands firmly planted on the wound. Together, we rush up to the front door just as it opens.

Two men usher us in, Dad close behind. The warmth and comfort of the house are familiar, yet still shocking to my system.

I recognize both men. The elder one is Teddy, and the younger one—though still in his forties at least—is Tanner.

They lead us down the hallway straight ahead and into a room with a hospital bed, IV pole, and several other machines.

Panic resurfaces, and I’m no longer standing in Teddy Angler’s hospital room but Dr. Garrison’s. He’s standing before me, pleading with me to come with him, a crazed look in his milky blue eyes. Half of his head is gone, blown off from Rio’s bullet, and his shredded brains exposed.

No, no, *no*. I don’t want to go. I don’t want to—

“*Adeline*,” Zade calls roughly, shaking me until Dr. Garrison fades, replaced by concerned yin-yang eyes. “You’re here with me, little mouse. No one is going to take you from me.”

I blink, vision blurred, and chest tight with panic.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, frustration beginning to filter in alongside the million other fucking emotions I can hardly contain.

“Don’t be, baby. Come sit down, and let them operate. Your mom is going to make it, okay?”

“Is that what Teddy said?” I ask, peeking around Zade’s shoulder, but I can’t see much behind Teddy’s larger stature and Tanner on the other side. Dad sits in the corner of the room, staring at Mom with a pinched expression.

“He hasn’t said much, which is a good thing. If he’s operating, then there’s a chance.”

Nodding my head, I let him lead me back out into a small living room filled with green and navy blue plaid couches, a bearskin rug, and a deer

head mounted above the brown fireplace, a fire raging within. The floor, walls, and furniture are made up of burnished wood, giving the house a homey, relaxed feel.

I collapse onto the couch and start to drop my head in my hands but immediately jerk away, reminded that they're covered in dried blood. I glance around, hoping that I'm not ruining Teddy's couch, and sit on the floor instead.

Then, I remember Sibby is still absent, and my head is swiveling all around.

"Where did Sibby go?" I question, wiping the snot leaking from my nose. Honestly, of all things, embarrassment is low on the list of things I should be feeling. And something tells me Zade has seen me in far more ridiculous situations while stalking me, so snot bubbles are the least of my concern.

Zade sits next to me, pulling me into his chest and cocooning me in his arms. As nice as it feels, I'm incapable of relaxing. Thousands of bugs are crawling beneath the surface of my skin, filling my skull with the buzz of their wings.

"I'll check on her in a bit. There wasn't room in the car for her henchmen, and they stayed behind. I think it's freaking her out. They weren't there when she was taken to the mental facility, and she probably has some sort of separation anxiety now."

I nod my head. Her henchmen are as real to her as Zade is sitting next to me. It's not as easy as just making them go *poof* or conjuring them before her whenever she wants. She sees them as real people, so she has to make sense of it when they do appear.

Eventually, they'll come back to her, and she'll probably see two men dressed as monsters walking up the driveway toward her.

"He was right," I whisper. "It was my fault she was shot."

"You didn't fire off the gun, nor did you personally aim that bullet at your mother. It was not your fault."

I remove myself from his arms, feeling uncomfortable in my own skin. It doesn't matter that I didn't pull the trigger, I still caused it when I pushed his arm down.

Sensing my inner turmoil, Zade rolls his neck, cracking the muscles. Sitting forward, he rests his elbows on his spread knees and links his hands

together.

My eyes lock onto them, tracing the veins running through them. Those hands have killed so many and have protected many, too. How does he compartmentalize his sins from his good deeds?

“If you were me, would you feel guilty?” I question, my voice hoarse from the tears.

He casts his stare down, contemplating that. “You’ve seen me shoulder responsibility for a death I didn’t cause. When I took down a ring, and that little girl was shot and killed right before I got into the building. Or when you were kidnapped when I was supposed to be protecting you... it’s hard not to take it fucking personally. Feeling that weight is what makes you human. But there’s a difference between feeling another’s pain and blaming yourself because someone else hurt them.”

He lifts his gaze, the intensity burning his eyes searing me from the inside out.

“The rose carved into my chest is proof that it’s never that simple. Sometimes I cling to that guilt because I don’t feel so far gone. But that doesn’t mean I won’t remind you every day that the blame you shoulder isn’t worthy of you.”

I close my eyes, a weak attempt to hold back another wave of tears. A sob works its way out of my throat, and I cover my mouth to contain it, but that’s not any more effective.

“She was trying to build a relationship with me,” I blither. “And I... I was being difficult about it.”

Zade grabs my hand and pulls me into him, and though I feel undeserving of the comfort, I take it anyway, allowing it to soak into my bones while I cry into his chest.

I’ve taken pleasure in killing before, but that doesn’t mean I live without a heart. And all I can think right now is how peaceful it must feel to be empty.



“Addie, wake up.”

A hand softly jerks my arm, tugging me out of a restless sleep. I crack open my bleary eyes, dry and irritated from the tears.

“Is she okay?” I ask instantly, not even fully awake yet, looking around to see my tired father sitting on the other couch, his face set in a frown.

Zade, Teddy, and Tanner stand before me, and I feel a tad like they’re evaluating a patient with the way they’re staring at me.

Teddy and his son look nearly identical. Both with soft green eyes, laugh lines, and square jawlines. The only difference is that Teddy has significantly grayer hair, and more wrinkles. Unlike Dr. Garrison, his presence is soothing, despite the words coming from his mouth.

“She’s not out of the woods yet,” Teddy answers gently. “The bullet just barely missed her heart, but thankfully, it went clean through and missed vital organs. She lost a lot of blood, and she’s still in danger of infection. She’s going to be out for some time, but I want you all to know you’re more than welcome to stay here,” he explains, casting a look at Dad.

I nod, though I find little relief. She’s alive, but that could easily change.

“Do I need to give her blood or something?” I rasp, my throat just as dry as my eyes.

“That’s okay, sweetheart. Your father is a match and kindly provided some, and I also have some bags of O negative stored if I should need it.”

Nodding again, I stand. “Can I see her?”

“Of course,” he acquiesces softly, lifting his arm to direct me forward.

“I’m going to check on Sibby,” Zade says, pointing over his shoulder.

Frowning, I ask, “How long has it been?” I don’t remember how long I cried for until I eventually fell asleep in Zade’s arms.

“Only about three hours. She’s still sitting outside on the doorstep waiting for her henchmen.”

Nodding, I turn and head for the room, heart in my throat. And when I open the door and see her lying there so still and pale, I nearly choke on it.

The machine next to her beeps, her heart rate steady for now. There’s a chair beside her already, assumingly where my dad was sitting. He stayed in the room with her the entire time, and I feel a little guilty for that, too. I should’ve stayed with them.

But even now, being in here is threatening to send me back into that place with Dr. Garrison. I slide my hands through my hair, gripping the strands tightly in an effort to ground me. To keep me present.

I'm safe. Zade is right outside. And there isn't an evil doctor trying to kidnap me.

Blowing out a breath, I sit in the recliner, and grab my mother's hand. It's cool to the touch, but she feels... alive. Not cold and stiff like a corpse, which brings me a small amount of comfort.

"You want to know what really fucking sucks?" I begin softly. "When I came home, there were a few times you had asked me to talk about what I went through, and I could never find the words to describe the terror of waking up to men holding you hostage, threatening to kill you. The unknown if you're going to live or die. I told you that you wouldn't understand. But I suppose you know what that feels like now, huh?"

"And then, you'd try to explain to me the terror *you* felt when I was gone and not knowing whether I would live or die. And you said I'd never understand that, either... But that's also not true anymore, is it?"

My eyes begin to burn again, and I release her hand to rub at them with the heels of my palms, silently threatening myself to keep it together. I'm tired of crying. It's fucking exhausting.

Once I feel like I have it somewhat together, I drop them and grab her hand again.

"I'm holding your hand, but you're still gone. And I don't know whether you're ever going to wake up. So I feel it now. And that... that just really fucking sucks."

I sniff, rubbing the pad of my thumb against her hand, not sure if I'm comforting her or myself at this point.

"Dad hates me now, too. So there's that," I whisper. "I've shacked up with a criminal."

I sputter out a weak laugh. "*I'm* a criminal. And I suppose that might be the one thing Zade is responsible for. Turning me into a trained killer. But you know what? I like it. I like being able to protect myself now. And I like that I don't feel so weak anymore. Does that make me a bad person?"

I pause, frowning. "Don't answer that. You're going to ask me to stop. And you're going to tell me you want the old Addie back. But she's gone, Mom. And I know Dad disapproves of the new version of me, but I hope one day, you both will relearn to love who I've become."

A single tear breaks free, and I curse the drop for betraying me. I quickly wipe it away, sniffing again.

“I’ll understand if you can’t. Sometimes I struggle with loving myself, too. But you know the one person who will? Who will always love me unconditionally? It’s my criminal boyfriend. And don’t you think that’s just fucking admirable?”

I smile without humor. “I think it’s only fair if we try, though. You decided that when I came home, I was worth loving as a broken shell of a person. I think you can learn to love me as someone who is fierce and strong, right? So now, I want you to come home, and whatever version of yourself you wake up to be, and whatever version you grow into—I’ll love you, too.”

June 28th, 2022

I've always been pretty indifferent toward my dad. Growing up, he didn't play with me, or even really talk to me. My mom made all the decisions when it came to how to parent me. He never really seemed bothered by me, but not interested either.

I think I stopped giving a shit by the time I was five or so.

The last thing I feel now is indifference. If I'm being honest, I think I kind of hate him. Zade had teased me before about having daddy issues, and I never really felt that applied to me. But I suppose it does now. Because I fucking hate him right now.

He won't let me see Mom.

He gave **ZERO** shits about me my entire life, but now he suddenly cares what I'm doing with my life. Now, he cares that I'm not on the straight and narrow, and has the nerve to act like *he* didn't raise me that way. He didn't fucking raise me AT ALL

Calling wasn't working so I went to their house today, and was promptly locked out.

It was also the first time I drove since my car accident, and I cried the entire way home. I'm surprised I didn't get in another. That would've sucked considering I stole Zade's car.

I wasn't ready to get in mine yet and see that ketchup stain missing,



Chapter 40

The Diamond

“Let me talk to her,” I demand through the phone, plunging my trembling hand through my hair.

“Addie, I’m tired of having this conversation. It’s best you give your mother some space for now,” Dad answers, sounding exhausted.

“Then let’s stop having it!” I shout.

We’ve only been talking for one fucking minute, and it’s his own fault when he won’t give the phone to my mother. I’ve tried every day since she’s been home, and he won’t give in. I even went as far as driving there, but he wouldn’t let me in.

Teddy kept her for over a week, monitoring her and slowly nursing her back to health.

She was out cold nearly the entire time. And the few times she did wake, I don’t think she has much recollection of. She was mainly confused and disoriented, and in a lot of pain.

Dad, Zade, and I stayed by her side the entire week, while Sibby went home with her henchmen. It took them four hours to reappear, and the second they did, she was back to her old self. I’m sure they had lots of orgies while we were gone.

Once Teddy felt Mom was stable and could recover at home, Zade drove us back to their house. His team took care of the bodies and even went as far as restoring the house to its former state. I think Dad was shaken when he walked in, and it looked as if nothing ever happened.

He let Zade and I help get Mom settled in their bed and then promptly kicked us out. That was five days ago, and he still won’t let me see or talk to her.

My only reprieve is he’ll let Daya in, thinking she’s removed from my felon life or something. But now I’m unsure if he’ll even allow that anymore.

“Why? Did she say that herself, or is that a decision *you’re* making?”

“I know what’s best for my fucking wife,” he snaps, his anger rising. But I don’t shrink away like I normally would’ve. I told Mom that version of myself was gone, and it was the truth.

“So, what you’re saying is that I’m not good for her,” I conclude, my voice shaking with anger. My fist curls, and the urge to send it flying into the wall nearly overcomes me.

“You and that boyfriend of yours,” Dad corrects. “I’ve agreed not to go to the police about this entire situation. But that doesn’t mean I will allow you both to be in her life if this is what will happen. If you want to fuck off and become a criminal, fine, but don’t involve us in it.”

The phone clicks off a second later, and I erupt. Letting out a frustrated scream, I send my phone flying across the room, right as Zade steps through the door.

He stills, eyes tracking the phone as it crashes into the stone wall and crumples to the floor in pieces.

“Do you want me to go kidnap her?” he offers.

I snap my head to him, my rage deepening.

“He’s not letting me see her because we’re criminals. And your solution is to... commit another crime?”

“Well, when you put it like that.”

Growling, I whip away from him and storm towards the balcony, needing to get away.

The warm wind whips through my hair the second I step out, sending the strands flying around my face. It only embodies how I feel, like Medusa with a crown of angry snakes.

It’s not fair, but it’s becoming harder and harder to look at Zade and not blame him, too. I’m beginning to revert back to that bitter, hateful part of myself that was convinced my life wouldn’t be such a goddamn shitshow if Zade didn’t come barreling into it.

And like Medusa, because I’m wrongly being punished, I want to punish everyone else in retaliation.

I feel Zade behind me before I hear him. Always so silent—always sneaking up on me.

“Your dad is being an asshole, Addie, but she’s going to recover, and he won’t be able to keep her from you,” Zade assures quietly.

What if he gets into her head by then? Convinces her I'm bad for her, and then she decides that I'm not worth loving after all.

And they will always feel that way while I'm with Zade. They will always see him as a bad choice, and as long as I'm with him, they won't allow me into their lives.

Just when I get the chance to have a real relationship with my mom, it's ripped away from me. It kind of feels like condensing my entire childhood into one day and making me relive it.

"Maybe you should leave," I mutter.

A beat passes before he drawls, "You want to repeat that for me, little mouse?"

Clenching my teeth, I bark, "You need to leave."

I told my mother that Zade would always love me unconditionally, but that love is what almost got her killed. He said it himself—Claire wants me so goddamn badly because of him. Because of how much I mean to him.

Accepting his love was hard, but I learned to be okay with it when I was the only one in danger. Now, I don't know if that's the case anymore. My parents may be assholes, but are their lives worth sacrificing for this shit?

I keep my eyes pinned to the water sparkling in the afternoon glow, but his silence is so powerful, it invades all five of my senses. All six of them, if I'm being honest. Because I can feel how enraged he is.

"You think that's going to solve all your problems, don't you?" he chuckles.

I whip around. "Maybe it would. You can kill Claire and all her minions, and I will finally be able to live in peace."

He cocks a brow, and his eyes have never suited him better until this moment. One so ice-cold, and the other so full of darkness—two dangerous parts of him reflecting onto me.

"This is getting old, Adeline."

I rear back. "Why, are you mad that you can't make me obsess over you to the point where I need you by my side every fucking second of the day? Or because you can't—"

"What, baby? I can't what? Make you love me? Care about me? Or is it that I make you feel all those things when you don't want to?"

He gets in my face, anger tightening his scars and amplifying the icy darkness in those yin-yang eyes.

Have you ever come face-to-face with a pissed off bear? Looked into the eyes of the beast as it seethes? Most don't live to talk about it.

"You think I'm going to believe your little lies? As if I possess an ounce of insecurity." He ends that last statement with a laugh, and it grinds against my nerves. I feel my face brighten while my eyes darken.

He's laughing at me, and I want to hurt him. Not with my fists, but with my words. I want him to hate me so he will understand what it feels like to hate someone so much, yet still crave them.

For once, I want him to feel what *I* fucking felt when he forced his way into my life.

"No, but it will bother you when you find that all your efforts have been wasted." His smile slips, and I feel my first dose of victory. I take a step into him, enjoying the way he stiffens. "All that time spent, using my body against me in the name of love, only to never make me love you at all."

This time when he smiles, there isn't an ounce of amusement. It's fierce and speaks of a man held with a rope around his neck, faced with the decision to hang himself and save his loved one from the same fate or throw her to the gallows instead.

Is he going to hurt me back in order to protect himself? Or is he going to stand here and take it?

"Oh?" he challenges. "Professing your love and begging me to carve a rose in your chest was for fun?"

He bares his teeth, and my lungs constrict. "Did you get so good at writing books that you don't know the difference between reality and your imagination anymore?"

I narrow my eyes. "Stockholm syndrome is real. A human reaction to someone constantly threatened. It makes sense to trick our brains into thinking we love the person. If only it makes it easier to tolerate them."

He cocks a brow, unimpressed. And that act is still just as heart-stopping as it's always been.

"Does this feel good? Does it feel good to punish me for something your father is doing?" he asks, his deep voice merely a whisper. That small dose of victory turns into a pool, and then a flood as pain lances across his eyes.

Does he hate me yet? Does he feel what real love feels like?

You can't truly love someone if you've never hated them. Two sides to a double-edged sword, and they both cut fucking deep.

“It feels like I’m finally setting myself free,” I spit.

He nods slowly, his piercing gaze assessing.

“And you said you didn’t have daddy issues,” he muses, stepping away from me. It makes my heart skip, seeing him pull away.

The flood of victory has made its wave through my body, and now the tide is pulling it back, and I’m beginning to feel the ramifications.

He takes another step away and angles his body towards the doors. A crater has formed, filling with an ocean that divides us. It’s funny how this is the furthest I’ve felt from him, even when hundreds of miles separated us.

A seed of panic sprouts, but maybe that’s just adrenaline. Because the way Zade peers at me now, it looks as if he’s going to choose himself. He’s going to lash out, and I will be the one left hanging.

“Please, baby, run free then. Show me how far you get before you realize you’re only running from yourself. How long will you last when I possess everything that gives you life?”

My chest tightens, but I laugh, mocking him as he mocks me. “You possess nothing but a demon in your body.”

He ignores me. “Your heart, your soul, and your very breath. Run, little mouse. This time, no one will be chasing you.”

His last words choke me, and then he walks through my room and out of the door, softly closing it behind him.

Shit. I suck in a breath but only wheeze when my lungs refuse to work. *Shit, shit, shit.*

I turn, and work to keep breathing but it feels as if I’m tightening my lungs further, reducing them to tiny metal wires that slice through my insides with every inhale.

Stop it, Addie. This is the right decision.

Is it, though?

You’re protecting your family.

Then why does it feel like I’ve alienated my very soul from my body? Pushed it out as if it didn’t belong there.

You don’t need him to survive, Addie.

No, I don’t. I’ve proven that to be true during the months where I was forced to do nothing *but* survive. I can live without Zade.

But that doesn’t mean it won’t fucking hurt. That doesn’t mean I won’t live without a large piece of myself missing. Like losing a limb, I’d always

feel him even when he's no longer a part of me. Does that make me weak? Dependent?

Or just someone madly in love.

Shit.

I pace the balcony, panic forcing my body into a malfunctioning state. Back and forth, screaming at myself to run after him, and fear turning my body right back around.

He could reject me. I was callous, and a complete asshole when he's shredded the world apart to get back to me. And what do I do? Push him away.

Fuck. I went from blaming myself, to blaming the one person who's done everything for me.

I freeze for a beat, and then drop into a crouch, feeling like a bulldozer just ran through me.

"Addie, you fucking *idiot*," I growl to myself.

My parents would've been kidnapped and possibly tortured if it wasn't for him. He knew Claire was going to pull something, checked on them to make sure they were safe, and got us up and over there before they could take them. Who knows what Claire would've done to them? I don't believe for a second that they wouldn't have been left unharmed.

Fuck, he saved them, just like he's done for me, and for hundreds of others.

Such an idiot.

Finally, my gears shift into autopilot, and I race towards the door. It'll be like those cheesy romance movies, I assure myself. I'll swing open the door, and he'll be standing on the other side, waiting for me because he knew damn well that I was bluffing.

But when I open the door, heart on my sleeve and an apology on my tongue, I find that he's not waiting for me at all. He's gone.

I deflate, and my hope fizzles like helium out of a tired balloon.

No, fuck this. The last thing Zade and I are in is a Hallmark movie.

I storm out of the room, down the hallway, and head towards the steps. My feet carry me down too quickly, and in my rush, I nearly face-plant the checkered tiling, the handrail scarcely saving me. I came two inches from having to confront Zade with my front teeth chipped, and that would have been entirely embarrassing.

Like instant karma shit that only God would hex me with.

The front door obnoxiously bangs against the stopper, and before I can get wiped out by rebounding wood that probably weighs more than I do, I take off down the porch.

There. Just a hint of Zade's back remains before he completely disappears in the thicket of trees.

"Hey!" I shout, hurrying after him. I get close enough to see his chin tip over his shoulder, only a moment before he takes off into a sprint.

I gasp, affronted by the pure audacity of this man. "Oh, you *asshole*." *You deserved that.*

"Shut up," I mutter to myself. I take off after him, and I just know he's getting a sick enjoyment out of reversing the roles and making me chase after him.

He's giving me a spoonful of my own medicine, and it tastes like ass.

I've gotten faster with all the running I've done in the past several months, and my endurance has strengthened. But I'm still no match for Zade. His long legs eat up the dirt ground faster than mine, and I become frustrated as the distance between us grows.

Soon, he disappears altogether, and I slow to a stop, panting heavily and on the verge of tears.

I spin in circles but quickly put a stop to that when I only serve to make myself dizzy. For several minutes, I wallow in my misery while I catch my breath. Tears line the edges of my eyes, and the only person I have to blame is myself.

I may be a little broken right now, but that doesn't excuse my behavior toward Zade.

Just as I turn to find my way back to Parsons Manor, a twig cracks from behind me.

An ominous feeling rises the hairs on the back of my neck, and my stomach drops. Whirling around, a startled yelp rips from my throat when Zade is right there.

Shock paralyzes me, and before I can muster a word, he's gripping me by the throat, lifting me, and slamming me into a tree right beside me.

I cry out, disoriented and now breathless as he leeches the oxygen from my lungs, squeezing until I'm sure he's going to snap my neck. Despite my nails clawing at his hand, he doesn't relent. Instead, he lifts me higher, and

out of desperation, I kick up my legs and curl them around his waist, bowing my back to alleviate some of the pressure.

My body nearly goes through the movements to dislodge his hand from my throat, but I stop myself. Whatever he has to say, whatever he plans to do—I deserve it.

Frankly, I don't *want* to escape him.

He's breathing heavily, and even in the throes of panic, I know it's purely from excitement. His mouth strays only an inch from mine, his minty toothpaste mingling with leather, spice, and a hint of smoke, the intoxicating aromas clouding my senses. Gradually, his hand tightens, and instinct begins to take over. I thrash against him, but he only presses deeper into me.

"What's wrong, baby? Didn't get enough the first time and came back for more?"

I slap at him, my vision beginning to blacken, and I don't need a mirror to see that my face is tomato red and seconds away from turning purple. Finally, his grip loosens, and I greedily suck in air, though he doesn't remove his hand.

"Fucking *dickhead*," I choke out, and *yes*, I see the hypocrisy, but fuck him anyway.

He scarcely gives me a moment to breathe, then he's threatening to rob me of air once more. His grip isn't as tight, leaving a kernel of space in my windpipe that allows me to inhale.

"Come on, little mouse, you know I only answer to two names," he taunts. "Let me hear you say my name. It sounds so much sweeter when you can't breathe."

"Zade," I growl, but he shakes his head.

"Uh-uh," he tsks, voice dipped in sweet venom. "I want you to call me by my other name, Adeline."

Tears of frustration pool in my eyes, one breaking free and slipping past my lashes. He tracks the droplet, a savage grin ghosting across his lips before the tip of his tongue darts out and licks the salty water from my face.

I clench my teeth, pride rising, fueled by anger for this insufferable man. When Zade and I are happy, it's easy to forget how much he enjoys seeing me suffer. And I wonder if this is why I lash out thoughtlessly. Maybe a part of me likes the way he makes me suffer, too.

He drifts the tip of his tongue over the side of my cheek and to my ear, leaving a wet trail in his wake before dark whispers warm my skin instead.

“If you make me tell you again, I will strap you to this tree until the birds are ready to eat.”

“*God*,” I bite out, my voice hoarse from the strain. “Are you happy now?”

He bares his teeth, and I realize that the fear he instills in me will likely eat me alive before the birds ever could.

“Not even fucking close,” he hisses. “I think I quite like the idea of tying you to this tree—the birds feasting on the helpless little mouse.”

Terror glides down my constricted throat and low into my stomach, morphing into an inebriating feeling that burns and burns until my eyes droop into a half-lidded state.

“Punish me then. I deserve it,” I hiss.

I *want* him to.

As long as he’s here, touching me, hurting me—it’s better than him being another ghost haunting Parsons Manor.

“Or is the kitty cat too scared of the mouse?”

He tips his head back, a laugh working its way from his throat and sending chills down my spine. Evil. It was an evil laugh, and my excitement ramps up.

He suddenly drops me, and steps away, barely giving me time to catch myself. Just as I straighten, he tips up his chin.

“Have you come here to ask for forgiveness?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “I’m—”

“Undress,” he orders, cutting off my apology.

Biting back a retort, I listen, and tear the articles of clothing from my body until I’m naked. It’s hot outside, yet I shiver beneath his blazing eyes.

My nipples harden beneath his wandering gaze, causing his nostrils to flare. Suppressing the urge to cover myself, I lean back against the tree, another shiver racking my body from the rough bark.

Licking his lips, he gazes at me like a hawk would a mouse. Predatory and full of intention. Slowly, his long fingers undo the buckle on his belt, before jerking it out from the loops of his black jeans.

A rock forms in my throat, but I don’t bother swallowing it down because I know it’ll come right back up. Especially as he strides towards

me, and then behind the tree. The trunk isn't large by any means, so just as I go to turn my head, his hand comes up from behind me and grips my jaw, forcing it straight.

"Face forward, Adeline," he orders, his deep voice full of warning.

His hand retreats, and my heart pounds erratically, causing my breathing to hiccup. The weight of anticipation is suffocating, and when I finally see his belt come into view, I can't help but flinch away.

It loops across my throat and around the trunk before it tightens, the leather groaning from the force. My eyes bulge, my precious air supply cutting off for the third time as he refastens the buckle. The fucker used his belt to pin me to the tree.

He comes out from behind me and faces me once more, his devilish gaze taking in his masterpiece.

"You're fucked in the head," I tell him, and then cough as the leather digs into my skin.

He hums at me. "You use pretty words as sharp knives, and I think you've become attached to seeing me scarred. Do they make your pussy wet, baby?"

I raise my chin, deciding to take a different route and go with the truth for once.

"Yes," I admit, as firmly as I can manage.

He stares at me, his mismatched pools as intense as the cold wind ravaging my body. The pale scar cutting through his white eye stands out proudly amongst the otherwise smooth flesh.

It hurts to look at him.

His gaze thins, and he approaches me until I can feel the blissful heat radiating from his body.

"I didn't mean what I said," I whisper before he can say whatever words are resting on his tongue. "I'm sorry."

He pauses, and my discomfort grows as his gaze intensifies.

"I've given you nothing but honesty, and you continue to give me lies. Is this another attempt to bring me back in just to kick me out again?"

I swallow, my throat drier than the bark digging into my back.

"No," I rasp, and my lip trembles from the shame burning the backs of my eyes. "You're right. I... There's no excuse for what I said. I don't want you to leave. And I do love you."

“So you’ve said,” he murmurs. He cocks his head and muses aloud, “Yet you tried to take it back. You gave me something precious and then tried to rip it away.”

I shake my head, desperation clogging my throat.

“I won’t do that ever again,” I swear, another tear burning a trail down my cold cheek. It snags his attention, and I watch his eyes zero in on it, tracking it until it drips from my chin.

When he looks at me once more, it hits me that this isn’t just a punishment. This will be a test to prove my love. To prove that I mean it when I say it.

“You cut me because you know I’ll gladly bleed for you. So now I want to see you bleed for me.”

I open my mouth, prepared to tell him that I already have, but before I can, he bends and grabs a long, gnarled twig off the ground, fisting it in his hand. Whatever I was going to say somersaults right back down my throat, and my heart stalls in my chest.

“What are you going to do?” I ask hesitantly, eyeing the branch like he’s holding a gun.

Scratch that, give me the gun. I’ve survived that before.

He responds to my question by rearing his arm back and slapping me across the thigh with it. For a blissful second, I’m too shocked to feel anything, but then the sharp, piercing pain comes racing in, and all I can do is let out a strangled scream. I look down at my thigh in disbelief, an angry red welt already protruding from my skin.

My chest heaves, watching a line of blood bead from the wound before trailing down my thigh.

I look up at him, mouth parted, eyes wide, and utter bewilderment on my face.

“You fucking whipped me,” I gasp, incapable of saying anything other than the obvious.

He crouches down, looking closely at the tiny trickles of blood staining my thigh. Lifting his hand, his fingers feather across the wound, and I hiss in response.

He looks up at me through thick, black lashes, and if I weren’t strapped to a tree, I’d collapse from the raw intensity on his face. “Are you not willing to bleed for me?”

I bite my trembling lip. I cut him deep, an invisible wound that will scar him as permanently as the marks on his body. Some days, when I'm lost in my own head, I forget how intensely Zade loves.

"Giving my heart to you was something I prayed I'd never do," I whisper. "But you've always been a God, and I didn't realize my pleas were going straight into your hands. Yet they always went unanswered."

Seeing him now, kneeling before me, I understand why. The day I handed over my love to him was the first time a God fell to his knees, bowed his head, and prayed. He prayed because I gave him the one thing he could never control, and he never wanted to lose it.

My vision blurs, and I struggle to keep the tears at bay. "I'll bleed for you, Zade. I'll always bleed for you."

His eyes shutter, and he drops his gaze before I can decipher the emotion in them.

Slowly, he stands, and by the time he raises his lids, I see nothing but my own reflection. I brace myself, but it does little to prepare for the lightning searing across my flesh when the twig lands on my stomach.

Breathing through the pain, I plead, "Let me see your scars."

Surprisingly, he grants me that small favor and removes his hoodie from his head.

I soak in his naked torso and release a shaky exhale. Where he hit me is almost precisely the same place as the scar on his stomach. Through blurred vision, I watch him whip out his arm, landing another strike to mirror his chest wound, reopening the unhealed rose over my heart.

I told him to carve that rose into my skin because I wanted to bear the pain we endured together. When he lashes out again, replicating yet another mark, I realize he's giving his pain to me—sharing it with me.

Steadily, the burn from each wound transcends until I feel every beat of agony in the apex of my thighs. Blood covers my body, painting my flesh in a mosaic of pain and pleasure. With each strike, my clit throbs, and I grow wetter and hotter. I'm panting by the time he drops the twig, my legs trembling and threatening to give beneath me.

His own chest heaves and his low-slung jeans only define how hard he is.

A deep, rumble sounds from his throat as his gaze eats up the art piece he's created on my body. My skin is the canvas to release his pain on, and

I'm happy to accept each angry stroke.

"I've only ever wanted to love you. But I think hating you tastes just as bittersweet."

"Please," I whisper, incapable of uttering anything else.

I'm in his arms a moment later, the belt around my throat seizing my breath. But I don't care—hardly notice—when all I can feel is the slide of his skin against mine. He grabs the belt and lifts me higher in his arms, raising the leather strap with me to accommodate my new position. My legs wrap tightly around his waist, and I roll my hips, shuddering from the feel of his hard length sliding against my pussy, the roughness of his jeans only heightening the pleasure.

His hands skate over the marks, eliciting a sharp hiss. A sound quickly swallowed by his lips. My back arches, bliss racing up my spine as he devours me, his tongue tracing the seam of my lips before plunging through, exploring my mouth as his hands do my body.

Every touch aches, though it feeds the growing wildfire raging beneath my skin. Desperately, I tear at his jeans, the zipper barely releasing before his cock tears from the confines.

My hand wraps around his length, drawing a shudder from him that has nothing to do with the wind still ravaging Seattle. He's hot to the touch and so fucking hard that I feel a pinch of uneasiness.

But the dark God doesn't care if I falter. He grabs the backs of my knees and forces my legs apart, freeing him from my hold. Kneeling before me, he slings each of my legs over his shoulders and drags his mouth against my inner thigh.

I suck in a breath when his lips skate close to a welt, the pain flaring brightly as his teeth sink into my flesh. Blood drops down between his teeth, and I cry out as the agony begins to overwhelm me.

Finally, he releases me, a perfect bite mark imprinted next to the welt, dotted with saliva.

"I think I could eat you alive, Adeline. Consume every bit of you while you scream beneath me. And even in death, you would still torture me. I would die of starvation because nothing else would compare to you."

"You will never be able to live without me, Zade," I breathe. "If you're my death, then I'm your fucking lifeline."

He grins humorously, the tilt of his lips dangerous as he drags them up my thigh and towards my aching pussy. I'm drenched, and the slightest touch of his tongue will send me soaring.

"You are," he agrees. "You're the only thing I need to survive. I will follow you into the afterlife, little mouse. And then how will you escape me? There's nowhere to run after you've been dragged to Hell."

His mouth closes over my clit before I can think to respond. My head kicks back from the explosive pleasure that erupts beneath his skilled tongue.

I cry out, my eyes rolling as he works me with such precision; it's as if I'm nothing more than a violin that sings for him when he strokes me just like that.

The way I scream for him could be nothing short of art.

Just as he promised, he devours me. Biting and sucking until I'm pleading for mercy, then licking me until no other words exist but his name on my tongue.

My thighs clench around his head while I mindlessly buck against him. I'm climbing a mountain, and the higher I get, the harder it is to breathe. What a dirty little trick—to fool me into danger. By the time I reach the peak, there will be no air left, and that climb will have only been for heaven.

His hands brush against my battered thighs, smearing crimson into my skin and reawakening the sharp pain.

It slams into me, sending my body plummeting off that mountain and my soul into paradise. A scream tears through my constricted throat, hoarse and strained as I grind against him, trapping him between my thighs and robbing him of oxygen.

Prying my legs apart, he grips me under my knees and lifts me a little higher as he stands, relieving some of the pressure on my throat. I place my hands on his broad shoulders, balancing myself.

My arousal glosses his wide lips, chin, and down the column of his neck. Slowly, he swipes out his tongue, collecting it like a poor man tasting a delicacy for the first time.

He hums, pleased by the taste of me. My stomach tightens in response to the near-crazed look in his eyes.

Molding his warm body against me, I shudder from the feel of his skin pressed into mine. I could never deny how good Zade feels, even when I was desperate to.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he orders roughly, his tone hushed. He removes his arms from beneath my thighs and I circle them tightly around his waist.

One hand glides up the outside of my thigh, while he anchors the other on the tree beside my head, supporting our weight. His head is bent down, nose gliding along the column of my neck.

“I’m too addicted to you to ever let you go,” he murmurs. My eyes flutter closed, another dose of relief hitting me straight in the heart.

“But I don’t know how to make you stay,” he continues, his tone darkening. My brows pinch, feeling a sense of looming danger on the horizon.

“I will—”

His chin tips up until his mouth is right by my ear. “I don’t believe you,” he whispers, cutting me off.

He said the same thing to me only a couple of weeks ago, and I had asked him to carve a rose into my chest to prove my love. But then I tried to take it away, and I don’t know how I’m going to prove myself again.

My heart pounds, and I scramble for a way to convince him. I don’t exactly have a great track record—I know that. Pushing Zade away and running from him has always come so easy to me.

Too easy, if I’m being honest. But letting him slip through my fingers—that’s something I’ve never been able to accomplish.

“I knew you were going to do this to me, little mouse. I’ve always known it was going to come to this,” he says softly.

I’m a mass of confusion and heart-pounding dread.

“What are you—”

Before I can finish, he tilts my hips up just enough to slam me down on his cock, driving himself inside me at the same moment. Despite how turned on I am, it’s never enough to prepare for his size.

My back bows, the leather belt holding my throat hostage just as a strangled cry releases, quickly carried away with the wind.

Zade tips his head back, a deep growl building in his chest. He presses me deep into the tree, grasping my hip in a bruising hold, steadily sinking

his cock deeper and deeper until I'm unable to take any more of him.

I let out another choked cry, sensations unfurling from where we connect and throughout my entire being. The rough bark digs into my skin, but I hardly notice when he's invading my body so thoroughly.

The hand holding my hip slides up to my stomach, his fingers digging into my skin.

"Would this being swollen with my child make you stay?" he asks darkly, then groaning as if overcome with bliss from the thought.

My mouth parts, my attention split between his almost threatening words and the way he's moving inside of me.

"Uhh." Somewhat of a response but it sounded more like a moan. "Maybe one day?" I squeak out, almost coughing when the belt constricts against my windpipe.

He withdraws to the tip, then seats himself completely inside me, his pelvis grinding into mine. I choke, and my eyes nearly roll from how full I am.

Hot breath fans across my ear, and it feels like a warning. "I wasn't asking permission, baby. Would you stay, or would you run off with my child?"

I'm so disoriented by his line of questioning; it takes me a moment to catch up. My heart drops, and I gasp both from his implication and from him grinding against me again, his pelvis stimulating my clit just the right way.

"You... I have the IUD," I say. It would be difficult to tamper with that. Not unless he physically pulled it from my body.

"Do you?" he murmurs, his deep voice low and challenging. He poses the question in a way that suggests he knows the answer to that question better than I do.

My nails dig into his shoulders, and when realization begins to set in, I push at him. Of course, he resists against me, a steel fortress that even a nuclear bomb couldn't crumble.

"You didn't," I snap.

"You sleep so heavily sometimes," he responds, pressing deeper into me as I try to shove him back. He slides out again before slamming into me once more, drawing a mix between a moan and an enraged gasp.

"Zade," I warn, voice shaking.

He groans against me, now steadily fucking me.

“Will it make you stay?” he questions again. I turn my head toward him, training my glare on him, despite the cyclone of pleasure swirling deep in my stomach. Taking in my expression, the fucker has the audacity to smile.

“You’re not asking if a baby will make me stay. You’re asking if I’d stay if you forced a pregnancy on me,” I bite out.

The hand supporting our weight against the tree slides down until it’s leaning on the belt strap, causing it to tighten and cut off my air supply.

I choke, but he doesn’t let up. His eyes are wild, and it’s now, I wonder how my words could affect him so deeply.

He does the worst things sometimes, and yet here I am, wrapped around him even as he threatens me.

“Am I still worth loving, little mouse?” he asks through gritted teeth.

I attempt to swallow, but it gets stuck in my throat.

Fuck, the asshole really brings out the worst in himself. And he does it without any remorse, baring all those dark parts on a silver platter, challenging me on if I’m going to accept it or not.

Darkness licks at the edges of my vision, but I give him the truth. I nod my head, answering both of his questions. He is worth loving. And I would stay.

He relents on the belt, and I cough, sucking in air desperately, though it’s useless. Any oxygen I collected in my lungs is punched out of me when he increases his pace, the hand on my stomach gliding down until his thumb reaches my clit, circling the bud until my eyes roll.

I’m not ready to have children. I’ve never been ready for anything Zade throws my way. Yet, it doesn’t stop me from meeting his thrusts, an orgasm forming low in my belly.

“You’ll never escape me, little mouse. Do you think anyone could ever make your pussy cry the way I do?”

He angles his hips, hitting that spot inside of me that has me clenching around him. I shake my head, incapable of speech. The only thing I can do is claw at him, scraping my nails across his back and gouging deep, red cuts into his skin as he has done mine.

Growling deep in his chest, he gnashes his teeth,

“I dare you, Adeline. Deny that my name isn’t carved into every star you see when I make you come, and I will show you that a God can create them

just as easily as he can destroy them.”

The knot in my stomach tightens to its breaking point, and my moans turn into hoarse screams as he brutally fucks me against the tree, continuing to circle my clit with his thumb. The belt around my throat digs into my skin, confining my windpipe just enough to send blood rushing to my face.

“Only you,” I mumble, the words lost inside the sounds of pleasure tearing past my lips.

“That’s it, Adeline. Now take my cum like a good little girl.”

My back bows, and I erupt, crying out from the sheer force of the orgasm tearing through me. I feel myself clench around him, his cock spearing through my tightening pussy with a force that rivals the pleasure consuming me.

My vision snuffs out like the sun behind a moon during a solar eclipse. His darkness devours my light, and I decide I’m content living in the shadows.

His palm slams next to my head, and with one final thrust, he explodes with a deep growl. Grinding his hips against mine, he empties himself inside me, cursing beneath his breath until the last drop is wrung out of him.

Several minutes pass, and both of us slowly come back down and catch our breaths. Well, *he’s* catching his breath. I’m still struggling for mine due to the belt around my throat.

He grins when he notes how red my face is—I can feel it burning beneath his stare. Reaching around, he unclasps the buckle, and the belt drops a second later.

My rib cage protrudes from how deeply I inhale, feeling like I’m taking the first breath after drowning for so long.

That was how I once described what Zade’s love felt like, and it’s never felt truer until now.

As I’m still drinking in the precious oxygen, he grips my jaw between his fingers and forces my gaze to his.

“Never again, Adeline. I could take you pushing me away when you were still discovering how you felt for me. But not anymore. That was your last time. Understand?”

I nod, shame reigniting. “Yes, never again. I’m sorry,” I croak, wrapping my arms tightly around his neck. “But I hope you know I’m always going to run from you. I like the way you chase me.”

He bites his lip, the heat in his eyes flaring. Leaning forward, I kiss him softly, praying he can feel just how much I mean it.

His hand dives into my hair, amplifying the sweetness to something more savage. But too soon, he's pulling away. I chase after him, stealing one more before he sets me down, supporting me while my legs grow accustomed to holding my weight again. They shake fiercely, and I just know the dickhead's ego is ballooning again.

"Need a wheelchair, baby?"

I sniff and mutter, "No," affronted by his big-ass head. "They're just tired from you making me run."

He chuckles, knowing damn well how untrue that is. But I smile back, and I realize that I like the way Zade laughs as much as I like the way he punishes me.

"How are they going to feel when you're nine months pregnant and I'm chasing after you?"

I tighten my lips, but then smile with victory when I realize I'm not even ovulating. When I tell him so, he only smirks.

"I didn't take out your IUD," he says, bending to gather our clothes.

My mouth drops open. "Then what the fuck was all that?"

He shrugs, still grinning as he pulls on his jeans and glances at his phone before tucking it away again.

"I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm fucking relieved. But what the shit, Zade?"

"I needed to be sure you're one hundred percent in this with me. A baby is the only thing that could permanently tie your life to mine. Legally, at least. Ethically... well, I will always be in your life, whether you know I am or not."

Shaking my head, I tug my jeans up my body, the coarse fabric rubbing painfully against the welts on my legs. My shirt doesn't feel much better.

"Yeah, whatever," I mumble. "You're a dick."

He laughs again, accepting that statement without even a hint of shame. He pivots to walk back toward Parsons Manor, but I grab his hand, turning him back to me.

"No more lies," I say. "From either of us."

"Baby, I never lied. I never actually said that I took out your IUD."

"You still made me believe that you did," I argue.

He grins wickedly at me, one side of his lips tipping up.

“When I do get you pregnant, you will know about it,” he promises, though it sounds like another threat. “You will watch me pull the IUD from your body myself.”

That... oddly makes me feel better.

And I need therapy.

I sigh, “You’re always going to be a creep, aren’t you?”

“And my being a creep is always going to make your pussy wet. Let’s get back. Jay tried calling and it might have something to do with Claire.”

Chapter 41

The Hunter

I'm surprised to find Jay sitting on the couch next to Daya, both tapping away on their computers. He jumped about ten feet when we walked in, still clearly spooked by the manor.

"Which ghost fucked with you?" I ask, smirking.

"Dude, I swear to God, I was taking a piss, and something *breathed* down my *neck*. I was just waiting for it to try to give me a reach-around."

Daya looks at me, a droll expression on her face. "I told him to come talk to me when he goes in the attic. I'm still mad at Addie for that one."

Addie's eyes widen. "It was *one time!*" she defends. "And nothing happened to you," she finishes on a mutter, plopping down on the couch across from her. I take a seat next to Addie while Sibby growls and slams a drawer in the kitchen, mad about something. Again.

"I lost my peace of mind. That's what happened to me," Daya retorts. "That demon could've gotten attached to me, and then I would've brought it home and lived in torment for the rest of my life."

"Could you blame it? You're the whole package," Addie says, grinning when Daya narrows her eyes.

"Flattering me only works sometimes."

"Is it working now?"

"A little."

"Have you guys seen my pink knife?" Sibby screeches from the kitchen, frantically opening and closing drawers and cupboards.

I've grown to care for Sibby deeply, like an irritating, psychotic kid sister. But fuck, I'm going to have to find a home and job for her. Give her a purpose in life outside of annoying the ever-loving fuck out of me.

"Did you ask Jackal?" I ask, arching a brow when she looks at me with narrowed eyes. She knows damn well I'm referring to the time she felt the need to share with the class that Jackal fucked her ass with her knife. As if anyone wanted to know that.

“He only used it on me that *one* time, and I think I’d remember getting a knife shoved up my—”

“Maybe you dropped it somewhere in your room,” Addie cuts in urgently.

She huffs. “I already checked there, but I’ll look again,” she mutters, trudging towards the stairs with a frown. The only other thing capable of sending her into a tailspin outside of losing her henchmen is losing that knife.

Jay clears his throat, cheeks red as his gaze flickers to Sibby, partially intrigued and partially disturbed.

“I think I know who Claire’s partners are now, finally,” Jay announces, bringing the topic away from ghosts and getting fucked with knives by imaginary people.

My brows jump in surprise. “Yeah?”

We’ve concluded that if we can get to her partners, it’ll be much easier to draw Claire off her comfy little island.

I’m ready to say fuck it and bomb it. I could get ahold of the resources, but it’d take too long. And as tempted as I am to gather as many people as I can in the Z organization and invade her island, she has a small army there, and I’m not willing to sacrifice so many valuable lives for the bitch.

Not when I can sacrifice the lives of her partners instead.

“As you know, she’s been communicating with two sources, but their IP addresses were untraceable, and the identities hidden. But sending the drone out was successful, and I just got intel that she booked a flight for those same two people to visit her. Their names were on the flight log,” he tells me, pulling up the information and twirling his laptop to show me.

Gary Lawson and Jeffrey Shelton.

“They’re both lobbyists,” Daya chips in.

“Fitting,” I murmur, looking over the pictures of the two men on Jay’s screen.

Typical, creepy-looking old men who get hard-ons for little children and making Americans as miserable as possible while living lavishly.

“When are the flights?”

Jay grins, his hazel eyes blazing with excitement.

“Tomorrow. They’re departing from a private airport in Los Angeles.”

I turn to Addie and notice a tiny twig sticking from her hair, along with pieces of bark, dirt, and a small leaf. There are also small blood spots that are beginning to soak through her blue t-shirt, though she's trying her best to conceal them. Worst of all, there's already a deep bruise forming around her throat, and I'd be a goddamn liar if I said that didn't make my dick hard all over again.

It takes effort to bite back my smile. She looks thoroughly ravaged, and she's attempting to appear as if she hadn't been.

Glancing at me, she shoots me a look that says, *shut up, or else*. The grin begins to slip through.

Such a scary little mouse.

But just this once, I'll listen.

Which is really hard to do when Daya is staring at her, too, brows raised. Addie just thins her lips, and I have a feeling they'll be discussing in detail just how intimate she became with what nature has to offer.

"That gives us just enough time to intercept their flight."

Addie cocks her head to the side, curious. "What are you planning on doing exactly?"

Now, I let the grin loose, the savagery bleeding through.

"I know exactly how we're going to make her come to us."

Her brows knit in curiosity. "Which is how exactly?"

I train my gaze on Jay, and though he looks just as curious, he also looks wary. Shithead never approves of my plans. Which is stupid. They're awesome.

"Gary Lawson and Jeffrey Shelton are going to get in a confrontation with Z. And guess who loses?"

"Them," Addie guesses confidently.

"No, baby. *Me*."



Addie bounces on her toes, nervous energy radiating from her in waves. She's been restless since we had arrived at the airport a couple of hours ago.

We flew to L.A. as quickly as we could, just to give us time to plan and prepare. Now, we're waiting in the private jet on the airstrip, and she's started morphing into the Tasmanian Devil from Looney Tunes.

"Why don't you take a seat? They're comfortable as fuck," I suggest.

To emphasize my point, I kick my feet up on the little brown wooden table in front of me and recline back.

"How can you be so relaxed right now?" she asks, but she's looking at the seat like maybe it wouldn't hurt if her ass sat in it for just a second.

"This is the least exciting thing I've ever done while on the job."

She arches a brow, and if I didn't know any better, I'd think she was offended.

"Well, that's fucking rude," she says dryly. Definitely offended. I grin.

"Would you like to go up to the front seat and fuck next to the dead pilot?" I query, very interested in what her answer will be.

She always surprises me.

Right as she opens her mouth, distant voices arise, distracting her like a dog spotting a cat.

Damn. I'll have to pull that answer out of her later.

The voices draw nearer, and she instantly stands, rolling her shoulders to release the tension lining them. She hasn't gotten accustomed to going on missions yet, and her anxiety persists, despite her being able to fight. There are some days she gets through my defenses even and knocks me on my ass. But the way she looks right now, it's as if she's about to appear before a judge and get sentenced to life or some shit.

"Don't underestimate yourself, Adeline," I draw lazily, my muscles languid and relaxed. They usually are when blood is about to spill all over my hands.

"I'm not," she defends. "They're old, saggy men. Their security guards —"

"Are my men," I finish. Addie's mouth forms an O.

"You sneaky dog," she whispers, a smile tipping up her plump lips. Those caramel orbs stare at me with an amused glint.

We both quiet as the two men and their respective guards approach the steps and start climbing, the metal ringing beneath their weight.

"She's going to have to come back to the states eventually," one of them mutters, sounding irritated.

The first person that breaches the entryway is Michael, and I almost laugh when he slides his gun from his holster and points it at me.

Jeff and Gary follow behind, with another one of my men, Baron, taking up the back.

“What is going on here?” Gary exclaims, the two old men pausing and backing up the moment they spot us.

I lift a hand in a hello gesture. “I’ve come to turn myself in, Gary. Why else would I be here?”

“Turn yours—what on earth are you talking about? Who are you?”

“Ah, terribly sorry,” I say, grinning. I reach over to the seat beside me, grab my mask, and hold it over my face. “How about now?”

It’s comical how quickly they pale, and their eyes widen, recognizing my mask from my television appearance.

Tossing it to the side, I tease, “Did you like my presentation? I was really nervous.”

Gary sputters, unsure how to respond. I stand, and they immediately back away, two bumbling idiots that bump into Baron in an attempt to create distance, but the mercenary is like a brick wall.

Jeff turns to Michael, his face now beginning to redden. “Why aren’t you shooting him? Shoot him!”

Michael just stares at him blankly, causing his face to purple. Then, he drops his gun, smiling when Jeff begins to sputter incoherently.

“I see you’ve gotten comfortable behind the smokescreen,” I observe. “Content in shouting demands, and secure with no one ever knowing who you are.”

“Laziness,” Addie tacks on. Her body is relaxed now, and in place of her anxiety-ridden stance, she’s a suave feline, her claws extended and ready to slice some throats open.

The prey becomes the predator.

She’s the most beautiful creature I ever did see.

Gary trains his glare on her, lasers shooting from his eyes, but if he expects that to intimidate her, he’s sadly mistaken.

“And who the hell are you?”

She turns to me, a silly smile on her face. “I really wanted to say something cheesy right there. Your worst nightmare,” she mocks, eyes widened comically as she faces Gary again.

He snarls at her, clearly unamused. I, on the other hand, am smiling like an idiot.

She waves a hand casually. “No, really, I’m the diamond you all are so fond of. I’m kind of offended that you don’t recognize me. Especially because you guys are on my ass so damn much.”

Jeff’s face drops, clarity surfacing now that he realizes who she is.

“Obviously it was Claire’s brilliant idea to go after my parents, but did either of you have anything to do with that, too?” Addie asks, a darkness slithering over her features. Gone is the lighthearted humor.

Gary can’t even hide the sick triumph on his face. Addie catches the look immediately, and without saying anything further, she raises her gun and shoots him directly in the kneecap, face blank.

The old man’s eyes pop, and he instantly collapses in a fit of screams and blood. Jeff bumps into Baron again, sweat gleaming from his receding hairline as he stares down at his partner with an ashen complexion.

“You fucking bitch!” Gary exclaims. Anger licks at my nerves, so I shoot his other knee, eliciting another pained scream from his throat. Michael and Baron shake their heads, staring at the pair like they’re the dumbest people alive.

I’d have to agree.

“Now we’re going to have to carry you out, Gary. You’re such an inconvenience. So, here’s how it’s going to go. You’re going to come with us, and we’re going back to Seattle and to a nice, secluded location where I am going to be tied up and gagged. Maybe I’ll let my girl get a few punches in on me, too. Addie here will be tied up as well, but no one is touching her.”

Even in his state, Gary looks up at me with incredulity.

“Then, you’re going to call Claire and let her know that you’ve captured Z and the diamond. Tell her to come to you instead now that we’ve been apprehended.”

“Why on earth would we do that?” Jeff asks, his face twitching from a mix of emotions.

“I think it’s time Claire comes out to play, don’t you? She’s been hiding long enough.”

Jeff and Gary glance at each other, the latter sweating rivers down his flaming red face from the agony.

“I don’t want any part of your scheme,” Jeff starts, but I raise a hand, cutting off whatever useless shit was about to pour from his mouth.

“That’s the thing, Jeffrey. You don’t have a fucking choice.”



Jeffrey still thinks he has a choice.

The entire flight and drive to the location in Seattle, he pleads his case. It was all Claire’s idea. They just endorse her business ventures and help her with logistics and money.

Blah, blah, blah.

It isn’t until Addie crawls from the passenger seat to the back and presses her gun into his knee that he finally shuts the fuck up, clicking his dentures so tightly together, they just might become permanent.

Michael drives us to an abandoned wine distillery corroded from nature. It reminds me of Parsons Manor, almost. Scrawling with overgrown vines, threading up the side of the gray stone walls. And a lone building in a field of grapes and tall green grass.

The van jostles from the uneven dirt path, nearly swallowed by the plant life surrounding it. Gary is on the floor, cradling his bloody knees, growing paler with each bump. Baron wrapped them up to stem the bleeding, but he looks on the verge of passing out. Once that happens, he won’t live much longer.

If he dies, he dies. We only need one of them anyway.

Michael parks the van outside the building and jumps out, going ahead of us to break down the boarded doors, while Baron helps me carry Gary’s useless body out of the van.

The inside of the distillery is just as haunting as the outside. The vines have infected the interior walls as well. Weeds poke through the cracked foundation, their own stems stretching across the floor.

It’s a massive open space, some of the machinery left over, rusted and pockmarked. Exposed pipes are threaded through the ceiling, and a few of them are beginning to break and droop.

I drag Gary off to the side and position him directly under a hanging pipe, letting Jesus decide if he wants to send that heavy piece of metal crashing down on his head. If he pisses me off enough, I might even shoot it down myself. I drop him unkindly, ignoring his curses while Baron escorts Jeff inside, having him stand beside his crippled partner.

Addie's carrying three metal chairs in with several ropes wrapped around her arms. I'd offer to help, but she'd have my balls for it. I'd gladly hand them over anyway.

She's grown into her strength and independence so much since she survived trafficking, and there are times my chest physically aches from both pride and the need to fuck her.

She glances at me, a carnal smile on her face as she sets the chairs down and opens them up. I stalk toward her, delighting in the way her little body tightens with need. A black and blue ring stains her throat, and every time I see it, the beast trapped in my rib cage thrashes.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you're excited to hurt me," I murmur, desire flaring as I watch her round hips sway.

"You'll be the helpless little kitty cat," she coos, grinning wider when I give her a dark look.

"Will you still think so when you're trapped between my teeth?" I grab her by the throat and bring her in close, her caramel eyes dilating with lust. I brush my lips across the side of her mouth, drawing out a shuddered exhale.

"I was only ever helpless when I fell in love with you. And you may hold all the power over me, little mouse, but I've never been defenseless. Don't mistake my lack of control for weakness. All the ways I've hurt you have always been intentional."

She bites back a smile right before her fist rears back and lands directly in the side of my cheek. My vision blackens for a brief moment, and then my equilibrium teeters as she spins me around and pushes me back into the metal chair.

My weight nearly sends it crashing backward, but her foot catches on the chair between my legs, stopping me from falling but coming *very* fucking close to crushing my dick.

It feels like my bones are cracking from the monster inside me, fighting to get out, and a growl works past my lips. Just as I go to charge back at her,

she's grabbing me by the throat, pushing me back down, and climbing on top of me, straddling my waist with her thick thighs.

My hands land on her hips and squeeze while she leans forward.

"Don't mistake my submission for weakness, baby," she breathes into my ear, voice husky with desire. "All the ways I'm going to hurt you will be intentional."

Before I can begin to form the threats rising up my throat, her lips are crashing into mine, not only silencing my dark promises, but completely ripping them to pieces.

Her mouth moves over mine savagely, and I'm lost to the way she commands me. I could flip her so effortlessly, but I fucking love bowing to the dark little goddess.

Grabbing my hands, she forces them behind the chair, clamping them together.

A sharp pain pierces my bottom lip, her teeth sinking into the tender flesh and drawing blood. Before I can snap back, she pulls away and looks over my face with pride.

It's only then I notice the rope is tightly secured around my wrists. If I wasn't seconds away from ripping her throat out and fucking her blind, I'd be impressed.

"Black eye and a bloody lip. I think that's enough kicking your ass for now." She firmly slaps my cheek in a *good job, sport* type of way before lifting off of me and settling in the chair beside me.

All I can do is stare at her and fantasize about the ways I'm going to punish her for that later. But just as well, my cock is harder than granite because that was probably one of the hottest things I've ever experienced in my life. Every time I think I've never been harder, she goes and proves me wrong.

Sensing my insidious thoughts, she rolls her shoulders, feigning boredom.

Addie has always been a runner—especially from the truth.

"If you're done with your foreplay, let's finish this, yeah?" Michael says, standing next to a red-faced Jeff with his arms crossed and a bored look on his face as well. The punk is also a liar and probably adjusted himself while I was distracted.

Gary is still groaning on the floor, and Jeff shifts uncomfortably next to him, eyes bouncing everywhere else, avoiding my stare.

Taking a deep breath, I try to focus back on the situation. “Doesn’t look like we hit the femoral arteries, so he’s going to have a very slow death. We’ll let him suffer there in the corner for now.”

Michael nods and grabs Jeff by the arm and hauls him in front of us.

“Tie me up, Baron,” Addie says to my mercenary, who’s been leaning against the wall to my right. She’s smirking because she knows damn well how suggestive that sounded.

“Are you trying to get me killed?” Baron asks, his deep baritone voice pitching higher.

Addie rolls her eyes. “I won’t let him kill you.”

She shouldn’t be so sure about that. But I keep my mouth shut and my stare sharp when he gives in, knowing that him or Michael are the only options to tie her up, considering she already bound my hands.

Baron makes quick work of the rope, stepping away before I can find a reason to cut his hands off. Who am I kidding? I don’t need a reason.

Michael turns to Jeff. “Give me your phone,” he demands, then rudely snatches the device from the old man’s hand the second he pulls it from his pocket.

“All right, kids, look like your asses just got kicked by two old men that throw their backs out just from lifting their small dicks to piss.”

He could’ve just said, *say cheese* and had the same outcome.

I glare at him, and Addie turns her head away, squeezing her eyes shut like she’s too ashamed to have her picture taken.

“Make it a little shaky with a shitty angle, and voila, a typical picture taken by a degenerate,” Michael says, smiling in victory after he snaps the photo. Then he turns the phone to Jeff.

“What would you typically say if you took a picture like that?”

Jeff glances at the image. “That we wasted money on all the other stupid fucks and should’ve done it ourselves from the start,” he spits. Once he realizes that he helped Michael’s message appear authentic by literally taking the words out of his mouth, his eyes darken with rage.

Michael’s fingers fly over the keyboard, mouthing the words aloud as he types them just to piss Jeff off. Then he pauses and looks to the old man with a shit-eating grin.

“Hey, how do you spell ‘stupid’?”

A vein pulses on Jeff’s forehead, giving Michael an, *are you fucking kidding me?* look. Michael just stares, intent on making him spell the word. Snarling, he spits each letter through gritted teeth.

When finished typing, Michael slaps him on the back of the shoulder roughly and says, “Thanks, man. Would be lost without you.”

Addie snickers, and now I’m going to have to cut Michael, too, just for making my girl laugh.

“Z has officially been captured,” he announces, clicking the Send button with triumph. “And now... we wait.”

“I hope you’re not stupid enough to tell Claire they kicked our asses,” I tell Michael, nodding towards Jeff.

He waves a hand. “Don’t worry, princess, she’ll know it took the entire military to bring down the big bad wolf. Your reputation won’t be tarnished.”

“I’m not worried about my rep. It’s simply just not *believable*.”

Chapter 42

The Diamond

My equilibrium teeters as my feet dangle over the cliff. I'm sitting on the very edge and I'm just waiting for the earth to give beneath me and send me crashing into the rocks below.

I'm balancing on the edge of life and death, and the thrill it gives me is undeniable. My heart is in my stomach, and even though it'd take putting my head between my legs for me to fall over the ledge, it feels like one inch forward, and my life is done for.

I love it.

The sun begins to dip in the cotton candy sky, a beautiful array of colors stretching toward me. I'm not sure if it's the beauty before me or my precarious game with death that makes me feel alive.

Though both have the power to make me feel insignificant.

"So I see today is the day we both die," Zade announces from behind me, causing me to jump.

"Why would we both die?"

Stupid question. I know what he's going to say the moment the last word leaves my mouth.

"Because if you fall, I'll follow after you."

"Claire would be happy about that," I say, kicking my feet against the rock. "Your death would be the best thing to ever happen to her."

To no one's surprise, she asked a million questions before she believed that Jeff and Gary actually captured Zade and me. He had to explain how he found Z. On their way to L.A., they received intel that Zade would come after an auction house in Washington, so they quickly set up a coup and captured him. Of course, I came running when I found out he was being held hostage, and voila. Z and the diamond have been captured.

When she wanted to do a FaceTime call, we could see the intent in Jeff's eyes from a mile away. The second she got on the call with him, he planned to expose us. But Zade had already anticipated that. It's not hard to assume

the old fart would try to pull one over on us. He's as predictable as he is stupid.

Everyone has a weakness. A soft spot like on the back of a baby's head. Hit that spot hard enough, and they're done for.

Of all people—his wife, kids, and mistress—his mother was the catalyst. Funny that he's a momma's boy when women are the number one thing he doesn't respect.

Bernadette Shelton is nearly on her deathbed anyway, but after one of Zade's mercenaries took a heart-warming picture of her lying in bed on oxygen, and his gun poised on the tank, Jeff decided to act right. He doesn't know that Zade nearly kicked his employee's ass for it and forced him to leave her an edible arrangement for the scare, but the threat worked regardless.

Zade coached Jeff on the story, he then answered Claire's questions, and she decided it was legitimate enough to come off her cozy island.

Mission accomplished.

Her flight is sixteen hours, so we went back to Parsons to catch up on sleep while Zade is having a team watch over Jeff at the distillery. Gary... well, he died. He was useless with his blown-out kneecaps, so Michael finally put him out of his misery.

"Baby, if you want me dead, I'll hand you the knife to stick in my chest. Sending us both over the cliff would be a little overkill."

"And I thought my mom was the dramatic one," I mutter.

My back is still to him, but I swear I can hear the fucker grinning. "You're right, *you're* the sensible one."

Shithead.

"You want to tell me why you're out here?"

"Couldn't sleep. Was hearing the footsteps again," I admit.

"Seems like they're manifesting your fears," he says. His presence closes in on me, and I feel him crouch down beside me. If the ground beneath me wasn't being tested before, it definitely is with his weight.

"What do the footsteps remind you of?" he questions softly, his voice whispering across the shell of my ear.

"My lack of freedom," I say, staring out at the Bay. "They remind me of how trapped I was. Every time I'd hear her heels coming toward me, something terrible always followed, and there was never any escaping it."

There was one time I heard them, and I tried prying all the nails out of the window so I could throw myself out of it. Didn't even care if it killed me. All I accomplished was breaking *my* nails instead."

His hands land on my hips, and he's pulling me back, pressing me into his hard chest.

"So sitting on the edge of this cliff makes you feel free?"

"Yes," I say, turning my head to look up at him. His eyes glitter in the sunlight, and I can't tell which is more dangerous: the edge of this cliff or the way Zade looks at me. "And it makes me feel alive."

His hand comes up around my throat, tilting my chin further back. His full lips brush across mine, eliciting sharp tingles throughout my body.

"Is it the promise of death that makes you feel alive, little mouse?"

"Yes," I whisper, electricity dancing between our mouths.

"Then we will both taste heaven together," he murmurs.

He kisses me softly and slowly, and I feel every second of it in my soul.

Pulling away, he directs, "Face me, baby."

Biting my lip, I spin and lean back on my hands, bending my knees and spreading them apart.

His eyes drop, traveling across the curves of my body, sending chills down my spine. He looks at me as if he wants to rip me apart with his teeth, and I don't think I would stop him if he tried.

My breath hitches as his hand slips beneath my t-shirt, and I shiver from the feel of his skin on mine. Slowly, he lifts the fabric up until I'm forced to lean forward so he can remove it altogether.

I shiver again, the breeze whispering across my heated flesh.

"Do you trust me?" he asks.

"Yes," I answer without hesitation.

He plants a hand on my chest and roughly pushes me. I gasp, convinced that I'm about to fall off the cliff, but he catches me. I'm flat on my back, and only my head dangles clear over the edge, but it doesn't calm the absolute panic circulating throughout my system.

I lift my head, staring at him with wide eyes, my heart racing.

"Jesus," I breathe. He smirks, reaches beneath me, and unclasps my bra, my nipples hardening immediately beneath the cool breeze.

Then, he hovers over me, his warmth seeping into my flesh as he trails his lips over my jaw and down my neck.

“He’s not the one you should be praying to,” he murmurs darkly, sending shivers rolling down my spine. “Only I will be your salvation.”

His fingers grab the waistband of my leggings and tug them down, removing my panties with them. It’s warm and muggy outside, but a whole week of rain has put a cool mist in the air, causing my skin to break out in goosebumps.

“Head back,” he orders.

Swallowing nervously, I do as he says, and I’m overwhelmed by both vertigo and fear. The adrenaline in my system becomes more potent, and my heart pounds erratically.

His lips whisper across my chest, over the swells of my breasts, and to my nipples. His tongue darts out, flicking one of the hardened peaks before his warm mouth closes over it and sucks harshly.

I moan and arch into him, the movement causing my head to slide farther down, and I nearly jump out of my skin. He chuckles darkly, releasing my nipple then traveling down my body.

My heart is nearly coming out of my throat, yet I can feel my thighs growing slick from the thrill. Especially as he slowly parts them, nipping at my sensitive skin as he descends toward my center.

By the time his hot breath fans across my pussy, my legs are trembling and smarting from the bite of his sharp teeth.

He places a soft kiss on my clit, and I jump again when his fingers swipe up my slit, collecting my arousal on his fingers.

“Come here,” he orders. I lift my head, dizzy from seeing the world right-side up again. He pries my mouth open and places his fingers on my tongue. Instinctively, I suck, and Zade’s nostrils flare.

“That’s what freedom tastes like. I want you to have that on your tongue while you watch night fall, and I show you how absolute your life is.”

His fingers retreat, and he bumps my chin, indicating for me to drop my head again. I do, my vision blurring.

Emotion clogs my throat, trapping the flavor in my mouth as he returns to my pussy. I tremble as his tongue slowly slides up my slit, licking me thoroughly and groaning as he does.

“Fucking nirvana,” he purrs, dipping his tongue inside me before ascending to my clit.

I gasp when he sucks hard, the sunset blurring and my eyelids fluttering as he begins to stroke the sensitive bud. My back arches again, though this time, I'm prepared for the small drop and the way it steals my breath.

My hands curl, grasping at the grass and pulling roughly when he hits a spot that has a sharp moan exploding from my throat.

"Zade," I plead.

His fingers rejoin his mouth, two of them plunging inside me and curling, and I roll my hips into his face so roughly, I feel my body inch down the edge of the cliff further. Another sound bursts from my throat, crowing at the sharp thrill that makes my heart feel like it's going to combust.

His free hand lands on my hip, holding me in place while he devours my pussy, lapping up everything I have to offer like he's a prisoner on death row, and this is his final taste of liberation.

There's a smile pulling at the corners of my lips, tears in my eyes, and moans falling off the tip of my tongue while I stare at the sunset, finding what I've been searching for. An orgasm settles low in my stomach, sharpening from the feel of my perilous existence hanging by a thread.

His tongue flicks at my clit skillfully, and it takes little effort to send me barreling over. My eyes roll, and a scream ricochets down the jagged rocks and into the water. It feels like I'm close behind, tumbling over the sharp points and into the depths of an ocean I'd gladly drown in.

It seems like hours before my body comes down, and right as I do, he's dragging me toward him and flipping me onto my stomach. Disoriented, I'm unable to resist when he pulls me up by my hips, settling me on my knees with my head still lowered and peeking over the cliff.

Gasping, I clutch tightly onto the edge, my fingers digging into dirt and rock as he comes down on me, pushing my chin clear past it. My thighs strain from the effort to keep from pitching forward.

His bare cock slides between the crevice of my ass, yet it feels like he's taunting me with a candy-coated bullet. Beneath the delicious illusion is a threatening vow capable of destroying me.

Fisting my hair, he tilts my head back the slightest bit, giving me a full view of the scenery, "Have you found absolution yet, baby? Or do you need my cock to give it to you?"

His dark words send a chill down my spine, and I shiver from how exquisite it feels.

“Life could never be complete without you,” I moan.

A deep, rumbling growl reaches my ears before he pulls his hips back and sinks himself inside me, only getting a few inches in before it becomes too much. I yelp, the burn from his size causing me to screw my eyes shut.

Fucking hell, he needs goddamn dick reduction surgery.

I feel his answering grin as if hearing my thoughts, and I’m seconds away from throwing us both over the cliff just to spite him.

“You take it so fucking good, Adeline,” he purrs in my ear, his tone devilish. “I will never get tired of the feel of your pussy succumbing to me, and how you cry so fucking pretty when it does.”

On cue, a sharp moan releases from my throat as he inches himself in farther, my body succumbing to him just as he said.

“Keep watching,” he says sinfully. Forcing my eyes open, I watch as the sun begins to crest the water, casting the world in a deep red glow.

He works himself inside me, pumping in and out slowly until he’s seated completely to the hilt, confirming my own words.

I’m so full of him, and I’ve never felt more complete.

“You’re searching for life inside that sunset, yet I seek death between your thighs,” he rasps, his deep voice husky with desire.

Withdrawing to the tip, he thrusts inside me forcefully, and I cry out both from the bliss and the terror of being pushed over the edge.

But he doesn’t relent and continues to fuck me, testing the strength of the earth beneath us with every stroke. He keeps his hand tightly curled in my hair, bringing me back every time his hips push me forward.

I trade between staring out at the water and looking down into the unforgiving rocks that seem to come closer and closer.

My vision blackens from the acute pleasure radiating between my thighs, and the sounds that release from my throat are uncontrollable.

“Oh my God,” I sob, and he drives inside me so hard, my teeth clack from the force.

“You won’t find God in the sun when he’s already inside you,” he growls, reaching beneath me to find my clit and strum it expertly while hitting that perfect spot inside me, abusing it relentlessly until I erupt, my body going limp from how powerfully I come for him.

“Zade!” I scream, and I no longer care if I live, as long as this feeling never dies.

He gnashes his teeth, savagely fucking me until he meets the demise he sought after. A roar tears from his throat and he drives inside me so deeply, the both of us nearly meet our end at the bottom of the cliff.

We’d haunt Parsons Manor together, and it’s undeniable how much I love the sound of that.



“You have a spectacular forehead, my friend,” Zade says, a cloud of smoke swirling from the depths of his mouth. Jeff is strapped to a metal chair, and Zade is sitting across from him, puffing on a cigarette with one hand, and bouncing a little bouncy ball off his forehead with the other.

“Where the hell did you even get the ball from?” I ask, shaking my head as it rebounds off Jeff’s very red face again and back into Zade’s awaiting hand.

Our captive is not a happy camper. He’s seething at Zade, his entire body shaking from how heated he is.

He shrugs noncommittally. “I found it.”

Okay. Whatever.

The sound of tires crunching through dirt and blades of grass distracts me, and my heart drops with both adrenaline and anticipation.

“Claire’s here,” I announce. Zade only bounces the ball again in response, his posture relaxed as always.

There are at least fifty men surrounding the area, all hidden from sight. If shit goes awry, we have plenty of backup.

“Jay, she got a battalion with her?” Zade asks him, the Bluetooth chip in his ear as always. He’ll probably die with it in there. “...Three? Someone’s a nervous Nelly,” he murmurs.

“Three cars?” I clarify, my anxiety worsening. Sweat forms on my hairline, and I can’t tell if I’m nervous there’s going to be a full-blown shoot-out or if I’m nervous to see Claire.

The lead-up to the confrontation is what sends my nerves into a tailspin. The anticipation of what's going to happen. Who's going to get hurt or die. Yet, in the midst of the chaos, I find peace, as if I'm standing in the eye of a hurricane.

I just hate the calm before the storm.

"Did you think she'd come alone?" Jeff snips, staring at me like I'm stupid. I narrow my eyes, tempted to rip that ball from Zade's hands and bounce it off his forehead myself. Then who'd look stupid?

Sensing my train of thought, Zade vaults the ball off his face without looking away from me, landing back into his hand perfectly, his grin deepening.

"Thank you." I look at Jeff. "Next time, it'll be a bullet."

Smartly, he keeps his mouth shut. I was so hoping he wouldn't.

Zade and I stand when car doors slam shut, the green ball dropping from his hand and rolling off into the distance, replaced by a gun. My own weapon is in my hand, my heart pounding heavily as we wait for Claire to enter.

Several nerve-racking moments later, the huge doors open, an entourage entering first, guns raised. Of course, when they spot us, they freeze, awaiting orders from the red-headed devil in the back, slowly breaking through her guards.

"Just as expected, Jeffrey. Did you really think you were convincing?" Claire's musical voice rings out, finally making her way out of the group. They crowd around her, uncomfortable with her being exposed in any capacity.

Just like she apparently wasn't stupid enough to believe Jeff actually captured us, she also wouldn't believe that we don't have the place surrounded by our own men.

It'll be a battle of whose bullet flies the quickest. Or whose aim is the truest.

My shoulders are tight with tension as I look over the evil bitch who's responsible for so many lost and broken souls. Her bright red hair is perfectly curled around her head, with matching lipstick and black liner smeared over her lids. She dons an all-white pantsuit, which is a message in itself. She expects to walk out of this building with her clothing just as pristine as when she walked in. No blood to be shed—at least not hers.

As fucking if.

A murderous rage arises—not because she had me kidnapped and nearly sold off to a wicked man, but because she went after my mother.

I guess I should thank her for the free therapy for my mommy issues. I'm not sure where we stand right now, but what I do know is there is a desire to fix our relationship that wasn't there before Claire turned my world over and fucked it sideways.

“Lovely to see you both again,” she remarks, her tone posh, as if we're going on a stroll in a garden, holding our little teacups and biscuits.

Pious bitch. There's nothing classy about her nor the way she does business.

“Why did you come if you knew it was a trap?” I ask.

“This isn't going to end in bloodshed, my dear. I think it's time we settle this. Z has proven to be resourceful, as have I. Instead of... fighting each other, I think we can come to an agreement instead.”

I train my gaze on Zade, who has his brow arched, but an otherwise blank expression.

Facing Claire again, I wonder if this is an attempt to get a target from one of the world's most dangerous men off her back. She's right—she *is* resourceful. The hag has an entire government at her disposal. But she is as weak as the shield she hides behind. Forced to use others to protect herself because she's incapable of doing it herself.

She only has the brains behind the operation, but not the strength. Whereas Zade... Zade has both brawn *and* brains.

Claire knows she can't hide on that island forever, not any longer than she can evade Zade's wrath. She's backed into a corner and knows that Zade would be hard to kill. She's met her match, and the only way out is with a bargain.

“Let's sit, shall we?”

“Let's,” Zade murmurs, turning his back to grab the back of the chair Jeff is sitting in, literally dump him out of it, and motion for me to sit in it as if he's pulling out my seat in a fine-dining restaurant. Claire takes the one across from me, Jeffrey's bound body between us.

His face has turned a concerning shade of purple from both anger and embarrassment. Claire hardly glances his way, flicking her eyes to one of her men and ordering, “Dispose of him.”

Seconds later, a bullet is sluicing through Jeff's brain and out the other side. He's dead before his head hits the floor.

Mine and Zade's gazes clash, an amused glint in his mismatched eyes as he grabs the third chair, twists it, and straddles it backwards, turning his intense gaze to Claire.

Her pulse thrums in her neck, and she works to swallow. I snort softly. If I didn't know any better, it seems that her lady bits are no more impervious to Zade than any other red-blooded woman. Given the chance, she would gladly fuck Zade before she put a knife in his throat.

"Before we start, how about we establish a mutual trust? All of my men are tucked away out of sight, not a single barrel down your throat, so how about you send your cronies to the door? They can stay if they must and will have a perfect shot at me, but they need to back the fuck off, yeah?"

Thinning her gaze, she considers Zade's request for a moment before acquiescing. Reluctantly, her guards spread out across the front entrance, ensuring they all have a perfect view of us.

"Lay it on me, Claire. What's your proposition?" Zade asks but then holds up a hand to stop her when she opens her mouth. "Make sure it's good, too. You had my girl kidnapped, raped, and tortured, and her mother nearly killed."

Her red-stained lips tighten into a firm line, seeming not to appreciate the reminder of all her wrong-doings. Makes me wonder how the fuck she sleeps at night. Or maybe she's secretly a reptile and doesn't need to. That's honestly more believable at this point.

"I will help you eliminate trafficking," Claire says. When Zade and I stay silent, processing her offer, she continues, "While the skin trade is vastly profitable, there is something more that I desire."

"And what is that?" Zade prompts, voice deep and low.

"Absolute control over the human population, of course. Right now, people are too self-aware of their useless existence. I want full power—us *both* to have full power."

My brow pinches, a nasty look on my face.

"To do what with?" he asks. "What exactly do you intend to do with this power?"

"Create a whole new era, of course. We can do anything we want. We could make their lives useful, give them a real purpose."

“And what would that purpose be?” I cut in. “To be mindless robots that would serve you?”

“Suffering would end,” she snaps, turning her glacial green eyes to me. There really is no soul in there. “And this planet would thrive. If humans had real law and order, we could do so many things. End world hunger, close the gap between the poor and the rich, and lessen poverty and homelessness.”

I shake my head. “You’re trying to make taking away people’s free will sound virtuous.”

“It is,” she retorts.

I blink, absolutely confounded. “Are we in a movie? There’s no way you’re serious.” Turning to Zade, I find him staring at Claire, absently rubbing his fingers together, his brain churning. “She’s serious, isn’t she?”

He cocks a brow. “It would appear so.”

More than anything, I’d love to know what he’s thinking. This is something you only see in theaters or books. Some new world order shit that seems so far outside the realm of possibility, people turn it into fiction for entertainment. I’ve literally written books like this myself.

“You’re exchanging one form of slavery for another,” he says finally.

“I’m exchanging human suffering for a new, better world,” she argues. “The technology you could create would advance us into an entirely new era.” She turns her attention to me, and I realize she *is* a fucking reptile. She’s a goddamn snake. “No one would ever suffer through what you have ever again. No more children sacrificed. No more women sold. I would dismantle it all.”

“What’s stopping you from doing this now?” I argue. “What’s stopping you from trying to take over?”

“Zade,” she answers simply, turning to address him. “You’ve been a thorn in my side since you created your organization and have set out to destroy everything I’ve worked hard for. And I’ll admit, you’re quite good at it, which is why I want to form an alliance where we’re working together, not against each other. I will give you what you want so badly, and in return, you help me with what I want.”

“Talk to me like I’m stupid, Claire,” Zade says dryly. “You want me to stop exposing the government? No, you want more than that. You want me

to create some type of technology to implant in people's brains and make them actual robots? Make it to where they have no fight?"

She raises her brows, a smile forming. "Now there's an idea. I can create a new world with laws and consequences for breaking them. Your technology could advance us and make it easier to enforce these laws. We could force people to walk in a straight line, wherever we draw it. But taking away their ability to think for themselves? My God, that'd be wonderful."

Her eyes alight with excitement. "Could you do that?"

I can only gape at her, utterly speechless. Does ending human trafficking sound like a dream? Absolutely. But in exchange for some fantastical idea to rip away people's free will and turn them into zombies.

I'm not even sure what exactly she'd do with them all, but I don't care to know. I want the same thing Zade has always wanted. To eradicate the skin trade. But that desire has never come with unrealistic expectations.

"Technology can do anything. Its only limitation is its creator," Zade says.

She grins, and I see something twinkle in her eye that she's stolen from so many. From me.

Hope.

But it doesn't belong to *her*—it belongs to the souls she's responsible for breaking.

"You see? We can do anything," she breathes. "I believe you have no limitations."

Zade's stare darkens, and the tightness in my chest eases.

"You're right, Claire. I don't."

She completely misinterprets his meaning because her smile only widens, too blinded by the possibilities to see what's lying in wait.

"You already have power," I remind her. "You're a shadow government that controls the entire country. More so now with your partners dead. That's not enough for you? Now you want world domination?"

She leans forward, baring her teeth as she hisses, "Maybe your puny brain isn—"

"You know what your problem is?" Zade cuts in. "You don't know the first fucking thing about forming an alliance. Do you really think insulting her is going to get you anywhere?" Zade stands, and though I can see Claire

fighting with herself, she forces her spine straight. Her bodyguards take aim, but Zade moves as if he's encased in bulletproof armor.

My heart picks up speed, adrenaline surfacing because the bozo does *not*, in fact, have on bulletproof armor, and if one bullet comes anywhere near him, I'm going to fucking lose it.

"Belittling those who support you isn't smart. Haven't you read the history books? Using fear to demand respect is a fragile construct. It doesn't last because no one can trust you, and the first opportunity they have to betray you, they take. Z isn't built on fear, Claire. It's built on the mutual desire to kill people like you. And you know what? My organization trusts me to do that."

Her eyes widen, sensing the incoming doom before it happens. A line of bombs is planted along the front of the distillery, right below where Claire's men are standing. In seconds, the explosives detonate, creating a deafening blast.

The force of the explosion sends us back a step or two, and I cover my face as debris flies around us. We made sure the bomb wasn't so powerful that it'd send the building crashing down around us, but enough to blow someone—or *someones*—to pieces.

A few of her guards who were standing on the outskirts wriggle, missing limbs but still alive and set on going out in a blaze of glory. They're shot dead before they can lift their guns towards Zade and me, his team behind us and hiding in the depths of the distillery.

Zade seizes Claire by the throat and lifts her in the air, a snarl overtaking his face. Her eyes bulge as fire rages behind her, washing her in the very glow her soul will forever be consumed in.

"You sent my world crashing down around me just like this, remember? Setting off bombs and then taking Addie from me. How does it feel, Claire? To have come so close to succeeding, only for your soul to be ripped away instead?"

She kicks her legs desperately, trying and failing to gain some type of footing to relieve the chokehold Zade has her in. Clawing his skin, she leaves trails as red as the paint on her nails.

"Would you like to do the honors, baby?" he asks, looking over his shoulder at me with eyes as bright as the fire before us. Something deep and

carnal flickers in my stomach, and I can't deny the excitement thrumming in my bloodstream any more than Zade can.

"Yes," I smile, approaching the pair. He readjusts, gripping Claire by the nape and holding her in place, despite her desperate efforts to get away. Clutching my black and purple knife tightly, I lift it to her throat, pressing until blood sprouts beneath the blade.

This woman is responsible for every one of my demons. I was fairly normal before the Society laid eyes on me. And while fear and adrenaline always did something inexplicable to me, the thought of murdering someone was repulsive. It was something I rallied against when Zade came into my life, and even when I fell in love with him, it was something that I hadn't fully accepted yet.

And now look—she's faced with her own creation, an angel of death with a knife to her throat and intoxicated by the sight of her blood.

"Please!" she begs shrilly. "We can work something out!"

"You reap what you sow, Claire," I say, then slowly slice the knife across her throat, cutting through sinew and muscle. Blood splatters across my face, but I rejoice in the feel of it. I stop right before the jugular, wanting her death to be a slow and painful one.

Will it be her own life flashing before her eyes or all the ones that she stole?

I hope they come down from paradise and personally drag her to fucking Hell.

Slowly suffocating on her blood, Zade drags her over to the raging fire in the front of the distillery, her men's dead bodies scattered.

Claire's fight increases, and even amid death, she can feel when it's only going to get worse. Pausing before a fire, Zade grips her bloody throat in his fist and lifts her, staring into her wide, desperate eyes.

"Fucking burn, bitch," he growls, then vaults her into it, her body instantly consumed in flames.

Choked screaming arises, but the sounds can hardly make it through. Her form convulses and thrashes, and I wrinkle my nose at the rancid stench that follows.

She walked into this place firmly believing she could conquer the world if only she gave Zade the one thing he's been working so hard for.

Doesn't she know?

Zade is a God.

And the only one who will conquer this world is him.

Chapter 43

The Diamond

Sibby dances in the living room, her polka-dot covered feet swirling across the checkered tile, rejoicing in our long-awaited success, while Zade is on the television, interrupting another broadcast.

He exposed the shadow government and their control over human trafficking, stealing children and women, and selling them off for sick people. In the ten minutes he's been speaking, he gave the world hope that the sex trade will slowly begin to die.

“Claire Seinburg is not the first to contribute to the sickness that infects our world, nor is she the last. One by one, I will disinfect the pests from society, and only then will we find peace. I am Z, and I am watching.”

He cuts out, once more replaced by a wide-eyed reporter, a nervous laugh tinkling from her throat.

“Who’s going to take over Claire’s spot?” Daya asks from beside me, shoving a handful of popcorn into her mouth.

I arch a brow. “You think there should still be a shadow government?” I ask curiously, grabbing my own handful and stuffing it in my face.

Daya shrugs, swallowing before answering. “Sure. I think the government should definitely be controlled by somebody, just not a person that is only interested in fixing things in this world for their own gain. We need someone who cares about the environment and advancing science and medicine without inhumane experimentation and quite literally using us as slaves. I think we’ve had enough of that shit in our history. This planet needs to be cleansed badly, and the people in charge right now? They’re not going to be the ones to do it.”

I purse my lips. “I think you’re right. I just don’t know who would do it.”

“You don’t think Zade would?”

Shaking my head, I chew on a few half-popped kernels. They’re my favorite part of eating popcorn.

“It’s hard to say for sure, but I think Zade enjoys what he does now too much. Regardless of who’s in power, it’s going to take a very long time for human trafficking to actually end. I can’t see him being content sitting behind a desk making decisions rather than being on the field and physically taking them down.”

Daya nods, her sage green eyes drifting back to the screen, the reporters still attempting to regain their footing after Zade’s interruption. Media is controlled by the government, which means everything they spew to the public is sanctioned by the very people Zade is threatening to destroy. It’s no wonder they’re uncomfortable when they’re quite literally the mouths that feed us the government’s brainwashing bullshit.

“I’ll do it,” Sibby chirps, topping off her announcement with a ballerina spin.

Daya and I glance at each other.

“You would want to rule the government? You’re mentally unstable, Sibby,” I say bluntly.

She stops spinning and narrows her eyes at me. I’ve sparred with her far too much to legitimately be scared of her anymore.

“I care about the world and cleansing it of demons. Can you imagine?” A wide, dreamy smile spreads across her face. “Living in a world of flowers? One big garden, just like the planet should be.”

“See? Unstable.”

She growls at me and stomps her foot. “I could do it, Addie. I know I have a temper, and that I’d need help. But I could fix this world,” she tells me vehemently.

Cocking my head, I actually consider what she’s saying. Sibby’s methods would need to be controlled, but... she’s admittedly the most fanatical person I’ve ever met when it comes to ridding the world of evil. Is that actually possible? Of course not. But maybe having someone who believes it is, wouldn’t be so bad. And with her knack for smelling the ones who are rotten, she could have a team of people helping her who have good intentions.

“What would you do?” I wonder.

“Wait, you actually think she could do it?” Daya cuts in incredulously, her eyes bouncing between Sibby and me.

Grinning, I shrug a shoulder. “She would be better than Claire. And she wouldn’t do it alone. Her entire purpose in life is to better this world, is it not?”

Daya’s lips part, floundering for an objection but coming up with none. Really, anyone put in that position of power could be argued against. There’s no perfect person out there. Sibby isn’t without sin, but her intentions are pure.

Oddly, she’d be the least likely to go on a power trip or be negatively influenced.

She’s too... passionate.



A light knock on the door pulls my attention away from training with Sibby. Of course, her fist is powering into my cheek a second later, nearly sending me toppling over.

Ears ringing, I grab the side of my face and glare at her. She smiles wildly at me, and she doesn’t even need to open her stupid mouth for me to know what she’s going to say.

Never look away from your opponent.

I point at her. “Never sleep with two eyes closed, how about that?”

She giggles, and heads towards the steps while I make my way to the front door, sweating profusely and my head now pounding. It pisses me off enough that I whip open the door without bothering to look who’s outside first.

My eyes widen when I find a strange man I’ve never seen before standing next to my mother.

I gape at them, too blindsided to do much else. As always, her blonde hair is perfectly coifed with a layer of light pink lipstick brightening her lips. And she’s staring at me, waiting for me to speak, but I’m incapable.

“Hey, honey,” Mom says, smiling weakly at me.

Finally shaking myself out of the stupor, my body moves on autopilot.

Leaning forward, I wrap her in the world’s most gentle hug, wary of her wound but so fucking glad to see her. Tears spring to my eyes, blurring my

vision as my sinuses burn from the effort to keep them at bay.

She pats my back. “Sweetheart, you stink.”

“Sorry,” I say, but I’m not the least bit sorry at all. Blinking back the tears, I step away.

Normally, she’d turn her nose up at me, but it stays firmly in its place. It’s relieving when I haven’t seen or talked to her since the day we brought her home over a month ago. I’ve stopped calling my father, deciding that hearing his insults wouldn’t be healing for any of us.

“Why are you here? Where’s Dad? And who are you?” I question, directing the last one towards the stranger standing next to her.

Now that I’m looking at him, I’m even more confused. Light brown hair, the top messy and unruly, pretty blue eyes, and a killer smile. Almost as killer as his body. He can’t be any older than I am, yet he carries himself with refined confidence—something most men my age don’t possess.

An odd feeling prickles at my senses, though I can’t discern exactly what.

All I know is he’s fucking hot. What the hell is my mother doing with him?

“Kraven,” he answers with a smirk.

“Oh my God, is this your boyfriend?” I ask, eyes wide.

“Adeline Reilly, don’t be inappropriate. Of course, he isn’t. He’s been helping take care of me while I recover. Now let me in, I have ten seconds before I fall at your doorstep and don’t get up again.”

Dramatic as ever, I see.

Kraven smiles, dimples appearing as he grabs my mother’s arm and helps her into the house and toward the red leather couch. Dumbly, I watch them pass by, wondering how the hell she convinced my father to let someone else nurse her back to health. Especially someone who looks like... that.

And that may not be her boyfriend, but with the way her cheeks redden, she’s definitely not unaffected by him. In all honesty, if my mother ended up with a younger man... good for her.

I’d be proud.

Snapping myself out of it, I close the front door and take a seat across from her. Sibby is probably upstairs showering, and Zade is currently

tracking down a dark web user who has a knack for torturing children on a live video feed.

When I'm not training with Sibby, I'm working on my new story. I've missed writing, and it's served as an excellent escape now that Claire is finally dead. Pretty soon, I'll be done with my first book since being home again, and I wholeheartedly believe it's my best writing to date.

"How are you feeling?" I ask her, glancing at Kraven.

"Irritated," she huffs. "Your father is driving me nuts."

I tighten my lips, a stabbing pain in my chest with the reminder of him, but also oddly comforted that she finds him just as ridiculous as I do.

"Does he know you're here?" I ask.

"Would it change a damn thing if he did?" she retorts. There goes her nose—hiking up in the air with superiority. It brings a smile to my face.

"I tried to see you," I murmur.

She visibly softens. "I know you did, honey. I was too weak to do much, but I didn't agree with your father. Regardless of your horrible taste in men, you're my daughter and always will be."

I give her a droll look. "Clearly, I'm not the only one with horrible taste in men," I say pointedly.

She pauses, and then surprises me by chuckling. Now it feels like I'm the one with the gunshot wound. I mean, I'm funny, I know this. But my mother has never thought so.

"I suppose not," she concedes. "Where is your boyfriend, by the way? I'd like to thank him."

My brows jump in surprise, and now I wonder if Sibby hit me so hard that it sent me into an alternate universe.

"Don't you give me that look," she sasses. "He may be a bad influence, but he saved my life. So did that nice doctor of his."

"He's not here right now, but I'll let him know."

She nods stiffly, glancing at the ceiling when the floorboards above creak.

That may have been Sibby, but it also may not have been. Maybe it was Gigi—I haven't seen her in a while. But that's the fun in Parsons Manor. You just never really know.

Shifting uncomfortably, I open my mouth, readying for another apology, but she holds up a hand, silencing me.

“I know what you’re going to say. Another thing your atrocious father was wrong about. It wasn’t your fault I was shot, Adeline. I don’t remember much about what happened, and I’m grateful for it. But what I do know is that man was holding a gun to your head. And if taking a bullet in the chest means that my daughter doesn’t have one through her skull and is six feet under... then it was worth it.”

My lip trembles, fresh tears lining my eyelids. I dip my chin, working to gather my composure before I’m reduced to a blubbering mess.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my voice tight and raspy.

When I meet her gaze, it’s soft and almost sad. It only makes my chest ache more.

Clearing my throat, I wipe beneath my tears, preparing to change the subject.

“So uh, Kraven, why’d your parents name you that?”

Mom sighs, shaking her head at my rudeness. Whatever.

It’s a valid question.

He grins. “It’s my father’s name,” he answers shortly. Vaguely.

“Okay, Kraven Jr., what company do you work for?”

“Addie,” Mom snaps, but I ignore her. Also, a valid question.

“My mother is a traveling home health nurse, and with the patients’ permission, I tag along to help sometimes.” He shrugs a shoulder, glancing at my mother. “We all got along great, so when Serena needs assistance running errands or getting around, I give her a hand.”

Mom smiles warmly. “His mother is an absolute angel, and Kraven has been a gem, too. Your dad has been working a lot again, so the extra hand has been a big help.”

Relaxing, I nod my head, relieved that she’s been taken care of so well.

I’m typically not a suspicious person, but my fighting skills haven’t been the only thing I’ve fine-tuned over the months. My instincts are sharp, and though I don’t necessarily get a bad vibe from Kraven, I do feel like he’s not all he makes himself out to be.

Before I can get another word out, Sibby comes storming down the steps, hair wet from the shower, fresh-faced, and dressed in a royal blue t-shirt dress and big, pink bunny slippers on her feet.

Right when she goes to say something, she freezes, her entire body locking. As if in slow motion, her eyes slide to Kraven, widening when

their gazes clash.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she snaps.

Goddammit. I knew there was something off about him.

Brows hiked, I turn to Mom’s caretaker, finding him just as surprised as Sibby.

“I could ask you the same thing, Sibel.”

Epilogue

The Hunter

Three Months Later

“Still can’t find her?” I ask Daya, glancing up at her as I pick at my salad. I knock my fork into a crouton, watching it tumble off my plate.

She twists her lips, a flash of guilt in her green eyes.

“No,” she admits. “No wonder she got away with murder for so long. She really knows how to fucking disappear.”

I nod my head, fighting to keep the frustration at bay. It’s not Daya’s, or Jay’s, or even my fault that we can’t find her. The little demon-slayer knows how to hide—she’s been doing it for too long to make the mistake of getting caught a second time.

Three months ago, Sibby disappeared. We don’t know where she is, but we do know that Kraven is with her.

Addie said that when Kraven came with Serena to visit, she knew something was different about him. And then, when Sibby saw him, it was like watching a ghost materialize right before her eyes.

They didn’t say much, most likely because Addie and Serena were watching, but apparently, they said all they needed to silently.

That night, she left while Addie and I were asleep. And we haven’t seen either of them since. Kraven disappeared without a word as well, and both his and Addie’s mother have been worried sick.

“She’s going to give me gray hair,” I mutter, stabbing my fork into a leafy green.

Daya plays with the gold hoop in her nose, the corners of her eyes tight as she and Addie exchange a look.

While Sibby is good at hiding, the fact that my facial recognition program hasn’t spotted her on a single fucking camera across the entire. Fucking. World for *three months*—the girls presume she’s dead.

But I refuse to fucking believe that. Fuck that.

I know she's out there; I just wish I knew what the hell she's up to.

"She'll turn up," Addie chips in, though she doesn't sound confident. She picks at her salad and murmurs, "She always knows how to surprise us."

Tightening my lips, her words remind me of the little secret I have burning a hole in my back pocket. If I hide this from her, not only will I not be able to live with it, but she would also be hurt if she ever found out. And as much as I like to cause Addie pain, it's only pleasurable when it ends in her coming all over my face or cock.

Groaning internally, I bite the bullet and say, "Speaking of surprises."

Her caramel eyes lift with confusion, and I reach into my pocket, pull out the note and toss it to her. Brow furrowing, she picks it up and quickly reads it over, her eyes gradually widening as she registers what it says.

Slowly, her round stare drifts to me, and I arch a brow.

"It was in the mail. But I think I still need convincing, if you ask me," I tell her, referring to the note. Her mouth quirks up, and the surprise slowly fades into relief.

And I guess I can live with her being happy, even if it's a fucking dickhead that's causing it.



Addie thrashes violently, her hand coming within scant inches of my face as an agonized scream releases from her tongue, followed by what sounds like Xavier's name. My vision blackens, and I'm furious that the monsters polluting her nightmares aren't *me*.

I'm the only monster allowed to haunt her fucking dreams.

Gritting my teeth, I grab her flailing arm and roll her to her side, facing away from me. Tucking her arm into her chest, I pull her tightly against me.

Her naked flesh slides against mine, eliciting a carnal desire deep in my chest. It goes beyond claiming her. I want to possess her. Mark her. Embed myself so deeply inside her that there is no Adeline Reilly outside of me anymore.

I prop myself up on my elbow and release her arm to spit on my fingers and rub the wetness across my cock. Breathing in deep, I sink myself inside her, pinching my eyes shut from both the burn from the friction and how fucking good she feels.

She wakes with a startled yelp, her pulse thrumming in her neck and pussy clenching around my length. I bite back a groan, too enraptured by the panicked look in her eyes and her visible shaking.

“Zade?” she whispers, voice hoarse from her screaming.

I thrust my hips once, eliciting a sharp gasp from her plump lips. She tenses, then relaxes, molding the curve of her ass deeper into me.

“Do you feel me, baby?” I whisper, gliding my hand up her stomach, through the valley between her breasts, and to her delicate throat. Her pulse thrashes against her flesh, and I can feel every heartbeat through the column of her neck.

Still heavily panting, she wets her lips before breathing out, “Yes. I feel you.”

I hum. “Who owns this pussy, Adeline?” I ask darkly.

“You,” she whispers, the answer automatic.

“Good girl,” I murmur. “The man in your head isn’t the monster, little mouse. I am. Every time you scream out another’s name, I will replace it with my own. And I don’t care how much it fucking hurts.”

I roll my hips into her, and she shudders against me, whimpers falling from her lips.

The moonlight spears through the balcony doors, painting our bodies in a soft aura only heaven can create. My eyes trace the curves of our bodies, soft lines that separate her soul from mine.

Two beings, scarred and desecrated, yet we look like fucking art. A masterpiece even da Vinci couldn’t do justice. I want to pin her to the wall and show her what art looks like when it’s fueled by passion.

“When you’re scared and can hardly breathe, this is where I’ll be. Deep inside of you. Whether I’m with you physically, or in your heart, I’m always going to be there.”

She shivers, and I withdraw my hips before driving deep inside her, pulling out a husky moan from her throat.

My control slips, and I let myself break for a moment, my head falling back, eyes rolling, and a groan escaping from the feel of her perfect cunt

wrapped around me.

Goddamn nirvana.

Dropping my chin, I trace the curve of her thrumming neck with my lips, then bite down right over her pulse like a man possessed. Her fear tastes so much better than I imagined.

She inhales sharply, and I slide my mouth up to her ear, enamored by the way she shivers beneath me.

“I will chase away your demons, Adeline, and they will run and hide because I’m fucking scarier.”

I thrust inside of her deeply to emphasize my point, earning a sharp gasp. Her hand slaps down on my hip, sliding back until her claws dig into my ass.

“Zade,” she whispers, arching her back and grinding into me.

Biting back another groan, I lift her leg and hook my arm beneath her knee, keeping my thrusts short and hard and hitting that sweet spot inside of her that makes her pussy weep. Addie’s eyes roll, sleep-addled moans filling the room and inside my chest, spurring me to fuck her harder and faster.

I anchor her leg higher by sliding my hand up to her throat and squeezing tightly, eliciting higher-pitched moans with the new angle. I clench my teeth, overcome with a rainfall of emotions. Rage. Love. Need. *Obsession.*

As they swell and magnify, my hand ascends up her neck and to the underside of her jaw.

“Look at me while I ruin you, Adeline.”

Grip harsh, I jerk her face towards mine, capturing her wide caramel pools with my own.

“You will always be mine,” I growl. “Even in your fucking nightmares.”

A cry rolls past her lips, but she doesn’t shy away. No, she meets each and every one of my thrusts with a force of her own.

Pleasure races down my spine, gathering at the base and nearly blinding me with ecstasy.

“Oh my God, Zade, please,” she pleads breathlessly.

Releasing her jaw, I slide my hand down the planes of her stomach to her drenched pussy, the tips of my fingers teasing her clit.

“You pray so pretty, little mouse,” I murmur. “But I want to hear you screaming for mercy.”

I pull out of her, my dick protesting loudly, and it’s almost painful to roll away from her to dig through the nightstand.

“What are you doing?” she groans, and I just know her pussy is clenching, searching for me.

Grabbing what I need, I tuck her back into my arms. Her chin rests on her shoulder as she tries to figure out what I’m up to. She looks fucking divine slathered in the moonlight, and it almost distracts me.

Uncapping the lube, I soak my dick in the liquid, gritting my teeth as I spread it down my length. Still reeling from the loss of her pussy, my hips thrust into my hand involuntarily like a savage with no restraint.

It’s like I’ve always told her—I have no fucking control with her.

“Zade,” she draws out, alarm bells ringing in the tone of her voice.

Before tossing the bottle over my shoulder, I squirt a generous dollop of lube onto my fingers, then slide them down through the crevice of her ass. She inhales sharply as I coat her backside, and whimpers as I plunge a finger inside, then another, stretching her and preparing her for what’s to come. She shudders, and whether it’s from surprise or fear, she’s incapable of doing anything else but gasp for breath.

I take my time stretching her, nipping along her shoulders, and leaving love bites while wringing little mewls from her throat. By the time I withdraw, she’s panting, and her muscles are loose. I slide my hand beneath her thigh and lift it up once more.

“Wait,” she breathes. “You are way too big. I don’t know if I can handle it.”

“Your body was fucking made for me. So you’re going to be a good girl and fucking take it.”

I just know fear is trickling through her bloodstream now, and her pussy is fucking soaked in response. She’s nervous, yet she keeps those little white teeth glued shut.

Smart girl.

“Do you trust me?” I ask, amused when her eyes snap to mine, sharp knives shooting from them.

“I trust you with my life. But do I trust you not to rip me in half? Absolutely not.”

I grin, baring my teeth in a savage smile. “You get off on my pain, don’t you, Addie?”

Before she can protest, I position the head of my cock at her tight entrance and gently push in. Her eyes pop open, the pain registering as I slowly stretch her. My fingers are working her clit immediately, balancing the agony with pleasure.

“Zade,” she breathes, a war raging within her. Her nails are digging into my outer thigh again as I breach past the tight ring and slowly sink myself inside her.

Groaning, I bite her shoulder, nearly vibrating with the need to both draw blood and fuck her ass until she’s sobbing.

Somehow, I refrain from both. As much as I love to hurt her, I have no desire to do so without bringing her pleasure, too.

Methodically, I work myself inside her until there’s nothing more of me to give.

“Fuck, baby, you take it so fucking good,” I praise. “That’s it, good girl, open up for me.”

She fists the sheets, and like a flower blooming beneath the sunlight, her entire body relaxes, accepting me inside her as if it’s the only thing that gives her life.

We’re both trembling, on the precipice of shattering from how tightly we’re fitted together. I give her thirty seconds—a small increment of time to adjust. It’s all the control I possess.

Releasing a deep breath right when I hit that mark in my head, I withdraw to the tip before driving back inside of her. She yelps, and I circle her clit harder, earning a sexy little whimper that has me tensing with need.

“I own every part of you, Adeline. And I will make you feel me for fucking days when I’m done with you.” I set a steady pace, her body like soft clay beneath my insistent hands, and I mold her into me until the two of us become one.

“God,” she moans, her voice choked with pleasure.

“That’s it, keep moaning my name. I’ll take us home to paradise if you pray hard enough,” I taunt, fucking her harder.

“Oh, God, like that,” she gasps, her head kicking back. “Right there, Zade.”

I growl, pleasure pooling in the base of my spine, the sounds of our flesh smacking arising.

“Look at you, taking my cock like a good little whore,” I rasp. “You’re squeezing me so tight, it’s like you can’t stand to lose me.”

“Yes,” she mewls, her voice husky and cracking with desire.

“Yeah? You want it deeper?”

She pants, nodding her head eagerly, and it’s all I can do to not spill inside of her.

I flip her onto her stomach and roll on top of her, then lift her hips until she’s on her knees. Her gasp turns sharp when I slide back inside her tight ass, the angle allowing me to fuck her deeper.

“Oh, fuck,” she breathes, ending it in a high-pitched cry. She jerks forward, almost as if to pull away, but I tighten my hold on her hips, refusing to let her escape.

“Can you take it, little mouse?” I challenge. “I know how much you love to run, but I want to see what it looks like when you stay.”

Panting, she slams back into me, causing my head to kickback from the utter bliss. It takes a few seconds to gather my wits, on the precipice of losing it altogether.

“There’s my good little whore,” I murmur, then I begin to move, gradually quickening my pace, making sure to not injure her.

“Zade...” she moans, long and loud while I fuck her faster, spurred on by the way she arches her back, nearly begging for more.

Soon, she’s meeting my thrusts again, and the pleasure that settled in the base of my spine swells. I crowd over her, one hand fisting cinnamon strands and bending her head back until our mouths touch, while my other slips beneath her and finds her swollen clit again, delighting in the way she begins to sob.

Sweat coats our skin, and the vulgar sounds deriving from where I fuck her battle with the sharp noises from flesh hitting flesh. Yet, her screams rise above it all, filling the room and entwining with my own moans, a crescendo of pleasure echoing throughout Parsons Manor.

I trade between kissing and nipping her lips and hovering above them, swallowing every fucking syllable she produces.

She tenses, and her tight ass clenches around my cock as she nears her climax. I rub her clit faster, desperately chasing her toward it so I can send

us both flying.

Her eyes roll, and she shudders as if a demon is being exorcised from her body. And then she breaks. A scream releases from her throat, the tortured sound bleeding into my name.

“Fuck, Addie!”

My head kicks back, and an orgasm rocks through me, stealing my breath and vision. I’m blind from how deeply it crashes through me, ropes of cum filling her so thoroughly, it leaks past her entrance and pools beneath us.

The sounds that burst from my throat are unrestrained, my voice hoarse with all-consuming ecstasy.

It takes several minutes for my sight to return, and when it does, I find Addie on her stomach, heaving for breath and appearing on the verge of blacking out.

Struggling to catch my own breath, I gently pull out of her and flop onto my back, my head still swimming.

But I refuse to leave her like that, so I force myself up and into the bathroom where I grab a small cloth and wet it with warm water.

When I return to her, I gently clean her up, making sure there’s no blood from any tearing. I’ll have to get some ointment for her anyway since she’ll be sore.

“Next time,” she mumbles into the bed. *“I’m running from you.”*

I grin, reaching over to grab a rose from the nightstand and then tuck it in her ear, whispering, *“You know how much I love to chase you, baby.”*

“You’re a menace,” she grumbles, grabbing the rose from her hair and twirling the smooth stem in her fingers. She gasps when a ring falls from it and rolls onto the bed.

As if it’s a spider, she hesitantly picks it up, spinning it to get a good look. It’s a white gold band shaped in a vine with tiny white jewels encrusted into it. The band forms into a rose made up of bright red rubies.

“There aren’t any diamonds in it,” I murmur.

She swallows, and croaks, *“Are you proposing because you’re in love with me or because I gave you anal?”*

I tip my head back, a laugh working from my throat. And when I drop my head down again, a smile still on my face, she’s sliding the ring onto her finger.

“Don’t answer that. You’ll make me change my mind if you say it’s because you’re in love with me. I want to be rewarded for the anal.”

My grin widens, and I roll her over to me, kissing her bare shoulder. “I do love you, you know?”

“I know,” she whispers. “And I’ll marry you anyway because I love you, too.”

I’ll never get tired of hearing her say that.

“Hey, Zade?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Thank you for bringing me the happy vapors.”

I bite my lip, feeling my chest crack from how fucking addicted I am to this girl.

I was wrong.

Heaven isn’t a place you go to when you die, it’s inside the person that’s worth dying for.

“Addie?”

“Yeah?”

I bring my mouth close to her ear, delighting in the way she shivers. I’m already hard for her again, my obsession limitless.

“Run, little mouse.”

I don't know what you did to convince
him and I don't really want to know.

Thank you for saving Katerina and keeping
her safe. But fuck you for sparing my life.
Especially cause I think you did it to fucking
spite me, and I can't even blame you for that.

Stay safe, princesa

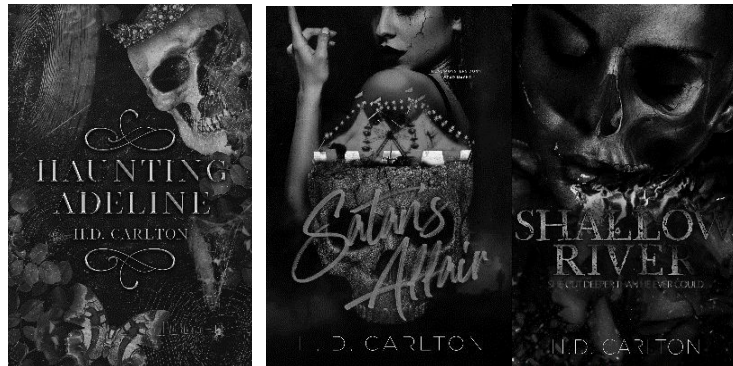
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

H. D. Carlton grew up in a small town in Ohio, and suffered for years by the hands of Mother Nature cursing the area with all four seasons in the span of a week. By day, she does boring adult stuff, by night, she's putting her imagination into words as her cat climbs all over her. She published a few poems back in her days, but now she is devoted to turning poetry into a story. A story that preferably features wicked worlds with the worst kind of villains that *don't* talk about themselves in third person.

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