







# Beyond (Tory's School for the Troubled)

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Dark, Horror

**Description:** There's one place scarier than hell.

And we're in it.

There's a series of tunnels beneath the school that we must travel through in order to escape Tory's School for the Troubled.

But the world on the other side? It's a land of nightmares and monsters. A place where your worst fears come to life. A world of darkness and pain and suffering.

In order to return home, I must confront and conquer my demons. And with the help of five arresting men, that might be possible.

Beau, my childhood best friend. He may not say much, but I know he'll always have my back...even if he does break my heart.

Aiden, the cruel and vindictive ruler of the school who once blamed me for his sister's disappearance. Now, he can't decide if he wants to kiss me or choke me. The feeling's mutual.

Tanner, the flirty, passionate man who sets my skin ablaze, despite cutting me down with acerbic quips.

Kace, the man who has two sides to him I yearn to uncover. Stoic and intense one second, and exuberant the next.

And finally Heath, the psychopathic class president with cold eyes and a fake smile. He knows more about where we are than anyone else, but can I handle uncovering all of his secrets?

Death admitted us to Tory's School for the Troubled. Life might just be our only way out.

And for me and the psychotic men who now own my heart? It's into hell's depths we go.

**Total Pages (Source):** 85

# Page 1

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1

Bianaca

“Purgatory?” I stared into Heath’s arresting face as he continued offering me that pretty boy, manic smile.

A semi-hysterical laugh escaped me, entirely unbidden, as something twisted inside my stomach. It felt cold and slimy, coiling around my organs until even breathing was a chore. My heart hammered in tandem to my racing thoughts.

What the fuck did Heath mean?

Did he truly believe that we were in Purgatory?

I knew something strange was happening, felt it in every fiber of my being, but this?

No. I couldn’t believe it.

Wouldn’t believe it.

“It’s different than what you believe,” Heath continued, gently brushing back a strand of his immaculately straight brown hair. He was so beautiful, so handsome, that it physically hurt me to stare directly at him. I imagined it would be similar to staring at the sun—you had to shield your eyes against the blistering rays or risk going blind.

We sat facing each other on the comfortable couch in Heath’s dorm room. I won one

secret from him in a game of poker, so I used the opportunity to ask him about the mysteries surrounding this school. Since Heath was the student body president appointed by the professors, Aiden and the others had assumed he would know something, anything, that would help aid us with our escape.

And as they'd hoped, Heath sang like a canary, but with the stipulation that we take him with us when we left.

Though...

I couldn't help but wonder if he had a few screws loose.

"Don't look at me like that, doll." He flashed another disarming grin, one that didn't quite reach his icy eyes. I couldn't help but think they were the eyes of a sociopath, though it did the exact opposite of scare me away.

Heat unfurled in my lower stomach as I held his stare.

"Look at you like what?" I whispered.

"Like I'm crazy." He shrugged his broad shoulders, the movement drawing attention to the way his golden skin bulged beneath his thin gray T-shirt. "Because I'm not. I'm actually the only sane one here."

"Heath..." I scratched at my wrist absently, not even caring when my nails dug in hard enough to break skin. "What you're saying..."

"Is insane, I know." Another smile. Another sweep of hair that had fallen into his eyes. Another wave of heat in my stomach. "But I'm telling you the truth." The smile faded as quickly as it appeared, leaving me feeling oddly bereft, as if I were empty without his signature grin directed my way. "As I said before, Purgatory isn't what

you think. Time stops here. A student could be here for years, but in real life, it's mere seconds. Purgatory also doesn't mean you're dead. Actually, you're still alive, hanging on to a tiny sliver of life. I know—"

"Stop." I shook my head from side to side rapidly, unsure if I should believe the words spewing from his mouth. He spoke matter-of-factly, like he was telling me the sky was blue and the grass was green, but his words were ludicrous. Absolutely insane.

"Bianaca." He gave me a look I would almost describe as...disapproving? What the hell?

"Heath, you have to know that this is completely insane," I reiterated. My nails dug into another section of skin on my wrist, and more blood welled. His eyes traveled to my butchered wrist, and something akin to fascination entered his eyes. He stared at my blood as if he'd never seen anything like that before, as if he didn't know what to do with it or me.

"You don't believe me. I understand that, and I'm not going to force you to listen." He reclined back on the couch, the posture somehow abating the tension thrumming through the air. It felt like I could finally breathe, finally swallow mouthfuls of air. "But if you ever want the truth..." He trailed off with a pointed look in my direction, and a part of me wanted to beg him to tell me everything he knew.

Another part wanted to run as fast and as far as my legs could take me.

But most of all, I wanted to scream and cry, because his words resonated within me with a sort of finality that had my head reeling.

Purgatory.

Purgatory.

Purgatory.

I met his eyes, so empty and lifeless, and tightened my hand into a fist on my thigh.  
Determination coursed through me.

## Page 2

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He could be completely insane, but if that were the case, I would want to know that too.

I wanted to know everything.

The facts of the case were simple—we'd all arrived at a mysterious boarding school that never had class, the teachers wore masks and didn't speak, students were being sacrificed to a monster in the basement, and there were tunnels beneath the school that we believed led to an exit.

But fuck, saying that in my head made me think I was insane.

I was probably going to need at least five therapists, at the minimum, once this was all over.

Clenching my jaw tight enough to break, I ground out, "Tell me."

"Everything?" He quirked a manicured brow, and something entered his eyes, something besides the usual impassiveness I was so used to seeing from him. Excitement. Maybe even amusement.

"Everything," I agreed...praying that I didn't come to regret that decision.

He steepled his hands together on top of his chest and leaned forward, a contemplative expression on his artfully handsome face.

"Very well." He tilted his head to the side. "I don't know why I'm telling you all of



this, doll. I've met thousands and thousands of students, and a handful of them have asked me to divulge my secrets. I always tell them no, but now..." Another curious gaze speared me. "For some reason, I want to tell you everything. Maybe I believe you actually have a chance of escaping."

His eyes twinkled as if he was reining in laughter, but I kept my lips compressed in a straight line.

"So...?"

"So." He tapped his long fingers against his thigh before abruptly standing up, his sudden movement startling me so much, I fell further into the couch. "Come. Let me make you dinner"

"Dinner?" I asked, my tone betraying my incredulity.

He smirked at me, the smile not quite reaching his eyes, and gestured towards the table we'd just played poker at. "You do like to eat, don't you?" He bent forward to rummage through his minifridge—the only student in this school who had one—and I wasn't going to lie. My eyes totally remained glued to his firm, muscular ass until he straightened up.

Sue me. He might have been batshit crazy, but he was also fine as hell.

His grin widened, and this time, I was pretty sure it was genuine. The man knew how attractive I found him and reveled in the knowledge.

When he slammed the fridge door shut, he had a loaf of bread in one hand and packages of turkey and cheese in the other.

"Sandwiches okay?" He didn't wait for me to respond as he traveled to a tiny counter

just to the left of his fridge and began to toss meat and cheese onto the bread slices. I stood from the couch and moved to stand in front of him, watching each of his movements carefully. Cautiously. Heath was a cobra I was terrified would strike at the slightest provocation.

“I’m not really hungry,” I responded, but the look he gave me told me that wasn’t an option.

When I continued to eye the food as if it were poison—which wasn’t out of the realm of possibility, knowing what I did about this school—he sighed, forking his fingers through his brown hair. His icy eyes speared me in place as he held his own sandwich to his lips and took a bite. “It doesn’t have the drug in it,” he told me, easily able to read the expression on my face. “You won’t forget.”

The food in the cafeteria all contained a strange, unidentifiable drug that made the students completely oblivious to the horrors directly under their noses. As such, the guys and I had chosen to only eat food from sealed containers. If we were forced to eat any of the cafeteria food, Aiden had a second drug that was supposed to reverse the effects of whatever the professors gave us.

Sighing, I accepted the sandwich Heath handed me and took a tentative bite. The bread was slightly stale, but at least the meat and cheese were fresh.

And better than that, my mind remained sharp and coherent, not at all clouded over by the drugs I had when I first arrived.

“Sit. Sit.” He moved back towards the poker table and held his sandwich in one hand. With his other, he pulled back one of the seats and nodded for me to sit. I practically rolled my eyes at his chivalrous display. I had a feeling that Heath was anything and everything but gentlemanly.

When he finally sat opposite me, his sandwich already three-quarters of the way done, I worked to get the conversation back on track.

“So...you claim we’re in Purgatory.” I couldn’t even begin to wrap my head around this. On one hand, his words sounded ludicrous, absolutely insane. But on the other...

They felt right. It was a stain on my soul that I couldn’t remove, no matter how hard I scrubbed. Nothing I did, no amount of soap, could eradicate it.

Purgatory.

The word tasted bitter and caustic on my tongue, almost acidic in nature, and I desperately wanted to spit the word onto the ground.

## Page 3

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Purgatory.

Purgatory.

“And you said we’re not...” I didn’t allow myself to say that final word. Couldn’t say it.

Heath flashed that uncanny smile, the one that sent goosebumps skittering across my skin like an army of angry fire ants.

“Dead, doll? No. You’re not dead. At least not yet. But you could be...if you let the reapers get you.”

“Reapers?” My voice raised in pitch as Heath looked even more amused.

“The professors, silly girl,” he replied with a roll of his eyes. “They either feed you to Death himself...or you escape them. But escape...” He trailed off again, once more bringing a hand up to ruffle his immaculately pushed back hair as he seemed to weigh his next words. “Sometimes death is a better option,” he decided on at last, casting me a firm, unreadable stare.

I shook my head vehemently. “No. I refuse to believe that. I refuse to fucking die here.”

He held his hands up in a ‘what can you do’ gesture. “So you choose to escape.” It wasn’t a question, and amusement danced like balls of flames in his dark eyes. I didn’t understand what he found so fucking amusing in me, but I hated it. I half

wanted to reach across the table and punch his smug ass face, but the rest of me knew to remain seated. My sandwich fell to the table, only one bite taken out, and I leveled him with a penetrating stare. I wanted to see his soul, his heart, every facet inside that psychopathic head of his. I wanted to know what made him tick and what set him off. There was something inside of him, something that entered and rushed through me like the breath of winter itself...

“I choose not to die,” I countered.

He reclined back in his seat, his sandwich now entirely eaten, and settled his hands on his chest. He wasn't as muscular as Beau or even Tanner, but every inch of him was slender, masculine perfection. I could clearly see the lines of his chest through his gray shirt.

“Good.” He gave me a nod that had radioactive butterflies taking flight in my stomach.

What the hell?

Where did those fuckers come from?

“Good?”

“Because you're not dead, doll. At least not yet. You're in a place that's halfway between the land of the dead and the land of the living. You—”

“Between,” I whispered, a bolt of ice shooting through my bloodstream. Shock splayed itself across his face before he licked his upper lip and nodded.

“Yes, between. Between life and death.”

Oh. My. God.

The sheer rightness of his words had my heart pounding and my head spinning. I was seconds away from toppling over and hitting the ground. How could this be...? How could this—

My thoughts cut off as snippets of memories bombarded me.

The car.

The alcohol.

The pain...

So. Much. Pain.

Finally, my world had been shrouded in darkness, and then I'd found myself here, with only vague memories of my mother pushing me into a taxi and waving goodbye.

Was that car accident...?

Was that when I died? Or almost died?

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

My head spun, and try as I might, I couldn't get it to stop. Fear and panic consumed me as I stared into Heath's dark, dark eyes—so dark, they reminded me of staring up at a night sky devoid of any stars or moon.

## Page 4

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“And the monster is...Death?” I clarified, and something about what I’d said amused him. His smile grew, still not reaching his eyes, as his fingers began to tap, tap, tap against his muscular chest.

“Now you’re catching on, dove. Now you’re catching on.”

“And the students who are taken by the professors—I mean, reapers, are brought to the monster and...killed?” My heart hurt, remembering the woman, Ali, who was devoured by that beast.

Josie.

Oh, Josie.

What would Aiden do when he discovered the truth about his beloved little sister?

Heath bit down on his lower lip and gave me a look I would almost describe as salacious. It made no sense in relation to the topic of conversation, but I didn’t dare call him out on it. Even if he was telling the truth about where we were, he still was batshit crazy. Icy. Cold. A psychopath with dead eyes.

“And to leave...?”

“The tools have been available to every student,” Heath explained with a nonchalance I didn’t understand. “That’s the thing about Death, doll—he always gives you a chance to escape.” He winked at me, even as my mind reeled at information being thrown at me.

“So the tunnels were put there...on purpose?” My tone betrayed my incredulity.

He snapped his fingers together. “Bingo.” Once more, his tongue poked at his upper lip as he moved his gaze to the ceiling, seemingly lost in thought. I let him be for a moment, my own mind struggling to play catch up, before he lowered his gaze and pinned me in place. “Most of the students who arrive here never choose to leave. Either fear stops them, the professors do, or Death himself. But the ones that do... Well, leaving the school is only one of many problems.”

“What the fuck do you mean by that?” I demanded, an angry flush erupting on my chest and cheeks.

“You have to get through Dante’s Nine Circles of Hell in order to return to the land of the living. They’re designed to destroy you. Break you. Ruin you.” A wicked glint appeared in his eyes, and he cocked his head to the side. “But I need to know one thing, doll, before I can tell you anymore.” He paused for dramatic effect, that asshole, before continuing. “What are you willing to give up in order to survive?”

My heart hammered, raced, scattered in the wind in pieces so small, no one could ever hope to tape them back together again.

What would I give up to survive?

I didn’t know how to answer that. A normal person would scream, “Everything!” but I didn’t know if that applied to me. Would I give up Beau?

No, I didn’t think I would, despite how devastated I felt about him right then.

Confessing your love to a man who had a girl in his bedroom would do that to a person.



Heath clasped his hands together, adopting a position of careful indifference and impassivity. His shrewd, cold eyes remained fixed on me as he flashed me another blinding smile.

“There are nine circles you have to travel through in order to find your way home,” he continued, not waiting for me to respond to his macabre question. “All of the circles will change themselves to reflect the people entering their territories.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” I slowly shook my head from side to side as Heath sighed, as if I was severely disappointing him with my comments. He stood, moved to his desk, and returned with a piece of paper and a pen. He began to draw on the paper, starting with a small circle in the direct center and then branching outwards, with a slightly larger circle around the initial one and an even larger one around that. He ended with nine circles. Using the back end of the marker, he pointed to the very farthest one.

“This is where we are. The school is the First Circle of Hell...otherwise known as Limbo.”

“Limbo,” I repeated dumbly.

“Limbo.” He nodded his assent before moving his marker to the next circle. “Once we leave the academy through the tunnels, we’ll be in the Second Circle of Hell, Lust.”

“Lust.” God, why was I such an idiot? All I seemed capable of doing was repeating his words back to him like some kind of broken record.

His lips twitched in the beginnings of a smile before he forced it away, once again turning serious.

“Following Lust is Gluttony, Greed, Wrath, and—”

“Basically the seven deadly sins,” I said, interrupting his explanation, and he sighed heavily.

“Can you let me finish, doll? Or are you going to interrupt me again with your questions?” Feeling properly chastised, I clamped my mouth closed and nodded for him to continue. Smirking, he pointed to the sixth circle. “After Wrath, we have Heresy, then Violence, then Fraud, and finally, Treachery. Once we complete all nine circles, we’ll be able to travel to the land of the living.”

My body shook as my eyes flickered from him to the drawing and then back to his face. A splitting headache threatened to tear my skull in two, and I swore my right eye began to twitch.

“And these circles—”

“No one knows what to expect from them,” Heath said, cutting me off. “They change from person to person, group to group. What one person experiences may be completely different from someone else.” He once again tapped his pen against the piece of paper. “So I have to ask you once again, my perfect, beautiful doll, what you’ll be willing to give up to escape this place and return to the land of the living. The secrets that will be uncovered, the horrors and monsters that you’ll face... Is it worth it?” His eyes ensnared my own, reminding me eerily of a trap laid out beneath leaves and long grass, waiting for the unsuspecting prey to land smack dab in the middle. Captured. He made me feel captured. Suffocated.

“I don’t...” I swallowed, moving my gaze to the tiny minifridge. “I don’t know how to answer that question,” I responded honestly. Out of my periphery, I noted his curt nod.

“I understand. But I have to warn you, Bianaca...” His use of my real name had my eyes snapping back in his direction. “You and your men don’t have a lot of time. If you don’t leave by tomorrow night, you won’t get another chance.”

My mouth dropped open as curiosity, fear, and suspicion rampaged through me. My eyes narrowed, tightening. “How do you know all of this?”

“Because, doll” —he flashed another one of those disarming smiles, one that both unnerved me and piqued my curiosity— “people trust a man who has nothing and no one to live for.”

## Page 5

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2

Bianaca

I moved in a daze to my bedroom, room 232.

Heath's words...

The innate sense of truth in them...

The implications...

I slipped inside my room and shut the door behind me, pressing my forehead against the wood.

What the fuck did I do now? What did I tell everyone? Did I even dare, or would they think I was insane? Was it—

“Took you long enough, princess.”

I jumped, a scream getting lodged in my throat as I spun towards my bed. My hand fumbled with the light switch a second before warm, artificial lighting spilled across my room.

And the handsome man perched on my bed.

Aiden was rifling through my photobook, making himself right at home in my dorm

room. My eyes took in his toned and muscular physique and that dark hair, which almost appeared blue in certain lights. The numerous piercings in his face glinted in the harsh lighting, drawing attention to his thick, plush lips. As usual, he wore a skin-tight, black T-shirt and black jeans. His leather and pine scent surrounded me as I stepped closer, willing my heart rate to return to a normal rhythm.

“What are you doing in here?” I demanded, though I didn’t know why I was even surprised. Aiden always found ways to sneak into my dorm room unannounced and definitely uninvited. He was darkness and sin personified, wrath and violence twined together, and I was suddenly reminded of the nine circles Heath had mentioned.

Oh god.

What did I tell him?

Aiden’s dark eyes narrowed, his pierced eyebrow furrowing.

“Tell me the truth, B. Don’t you dare fucking lie to me.”

I rolled my eyes so hard, I was surprised they didn’t get stuck in the back of my head.

Who would dream of ever lying to the esteemed Aiden, the king of the school and one of the self-proclaimed Four Horsemen?

I said that all sarcastically, of course.

But...he was right.

If I planned to escape with him and the others, I needed there to be trust between us. It couldn’t only go one way. I had to give him what I hoped to receive for myself.

I moved towards my closet, my body feeling unbearably heavy, and began to unbutton my shirt. I didn't care that he was directly behind me, his eyes intense on my shoulder blades. I didn't care about anything except for the desperate desire to get this damn uniform off of me. I'd burn it if I could.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Aiden's voice spewed vitriol, but there was a slight hitch to his tone that hadn't been there prior. Ignoring him, I unbuttoned my shirt the rest of the way and tossed it on the ground. My bra quickly followed, though I kept my back to Aiden.

Grabbing a pajama shirt from the pile of clothes in my wardrobe, I tossed it on and then shoved down my school skirt. Dressed in only an oversized T-shirt and panties, I turned to face Aiden once more.

His eyes... They were molten, laced with fire. Intense and ravenous. They burned a slow and torturous pathway down to the inside of my thighs.

"I asked you a question, princess. What the fuck are you doing?" His voice was rougher than I'd ever heard it before. Raspy, almost.

"Trying to forget this shitty day ever happened," I responded, crawling into bed, despite him still being perched on the end of it. If it were even possible, his eyes narrowed further until I couldn't even make out the irises.

"Did you talk to Heath?" he demanded, his hands clenching into fists on his thighs.

I cuddled beneath the covers and brought them up to my chin, my eyelids squeezing shut. "If you're asking if I fucked him for information, then the answer is yes," I lied, the retort escaping unbidden. "And let me tell you. The things that man can do with his—"

## Page 6

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The blanket was pulled off of me so fast, I squeaked, blinking wildly in surprise.

Aiden hovered on his knees above me, the darkness radiating from his gaze so pronounced and thick that it burned my airways.

“We never wanted you to fuck him.” He spat the word as if it left a sour, pungent taste in his mouth.

A grin unfurled on my lips, dry and sarcastic. “No? I thought that was all I was good for—fucking men for information.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth, princess.” He bared his teeth. “You won’t like what happens.”

“Tell me, Aiden. What will you do?” Harsh laughter escaped me. “What will any of us do? We’re going to die down here.”

At my words, his growl faded, a crease materializing between his eyes. Those dark, dark eyes...

“What did you learn?” He leaned even closer until I swore I could see specks of gold swirling in the twin abysses. But when I blinked, they dissipated, the darkness swallowing the brief glimpse of color once more.

“What didn’t I learn?” I mumbled, trying to tug the blankets back around me.

Aiden growled, the noise low and primitive, and captured my wrists, holding them

above my head. His strong body hovered just above mine, his chest brushing against my pebbled nipples. His eyes flickered to my lips briefly, stark hunger etched across his features, before he met my gaze.

“What did you learn, princess?” For the first time since I’d met him, the endearment “princess” didn’t sound like an insult, but something sweeter. Softer. More intimate. It brushed across my skin like the softest feather imaginable, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake.

Whatever Aiden saw in my expression had his own darkening.

“Is it bad?” he demanded.

“I didn’t want to believe it at first,” I whispered, trembling. “But fuck, Aiden, I can’t deny the truth in his words.”

“What. Did. You. Learn?” He placed his mouth directly beside my ear, growling each word until I felt myself squirming with need. Need for him—for a man I hated and desired at the same fucking time. Ignoring the toxic cocktail of emotion, I sought the best words to explain to him what Heath had told me.

And then I decided...

Rip off the metaphorical bandage. He’d bleed—how could he not?—but hopefully, the pain wouldn’t be as prolonged.

So I told him everything. Purgatory. The Nine Circles of Hell. The reapers. The monster.

Everything.



Aiden listened without interrupting, without a single change of emotion, except for the tightening around his eyes. His grip around my wrists gradually loosened until I knew I could pull free if I desired to.

I didn't.

When I finished speaking, he stared at me for a long, long time, not speaking a single word. I watched in rapt fascination as a myriad of emotions flashed across his face, one after the other in rapid-fire succession. I wasn't even sure he realized that his mask had broken, that he was baring himself to me.

Disbelief. Confusion. Horror. Begrudging acceptance. And then...

Sorrow. So much fucking sorrow, I feared I would drown in it.

"Aiden..." He rolled off of me, collapsing onto his back. He brought one of his arms over his head, covering his eyes. He was so still, I actually feared something had happened to him, until I saw the rise and fall of his chest, barely perceptible.

He didn't speak, and I didn't dare either.

Finally, he whispered, "My sister's dead."

I wanted to offer him false promises, things like "Don't think that." Or "It's not true."

But I couldn't. Not when I knew in my heart that Josie and her girlfriend had left this world once and for all. Tears burned my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. This wasn't my time to grieve—it was his.

Thousands of condolences jumped to the forefront of my mind, but I knew how pointless and shallow they could be. Grieving people didn't want to hear you say

sorry. I didn't know the girl, so my pain was a mere sliver compared to his. I told him as much.

## Page 7

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“I wish I’d gotten to meet her.”

A harsh bark of laughter fell from his lips as he finally dropped his arm, twisting his head to stare at me. His eyes were bright, shiny, glimmering with tears I wasn’t sure he would let fall. Maybe he would later, away from me, but not now. Not then. He held himself to this unattainable standard that seemed to place an emphasis on guarding his emotions. I wanted to tell him it was okay to fall apart, to grieve, to cry, but knew it wasn’t my place.

“She would’ve loved you, you know.” Aiden placed his finger on my bottom lip. “You remind me a lot of her—spunky, too smart for your own good, outspoken. She was...she was too good for this fucking world.”

“If she’s as awesome as you say she is, how did she end up with a brother like you?” I teased, and another surprised noise escaped him. It could’ve been laughter. It could’ve even been a sob.

“My sister...” His body shook. “My sister’s dead.”

“Aiden...”

And then I got exactly what I’d wanted—he fell apart. Sobs racked his body as I held him to me, held the broken pieces together so he could crumble without repercussions. I didn’t speak as I stroked his pitch-black hair, but no words needed to be said. He clung to me desperately, fiercely, his tears wetting the skin of my neck, and all I could do was hold him through the worst of the storm.

I hated him, he hated me, but right then and there, we were as connected as two people could possibly be.

I didn't know how long we lay in bed, our bodies tangled together, before his sobbing tapered off and his breathing became even in sleep. His arms were wrapped around my waist, our legs crossed together, and his head rested in the hollow of my throat. Sleep didn't immediately claim me as I gently stroked his back and shoulders, my mind working overtime to understand everything that'd just transpired.

Heath's words.

Aiden's breakdown.

Purgatory.

Between.

And worse than that...beyond.

What lay beyond these tunnels and gated walls?

And would we dare find out?

3

Bianaca

Aiden was gone when I woke up the next morning. I didn't know why that surprised me, why that hurt me, but it did.

But what the fuck did I expect from the man hewn from solid ice? He'd fallen apart last night, allowing me to glimpse the face of a man I doubted very many people had ever seen, but I knew that closeness couldn't last. Wouldn't last. He was too rough, too jagged, and he'd been nothing but an ass to me since I first arrived.

Some people in this world were executed, while others were executioners. Aiden fell firmly into the latter category, and his weapon of choice was that caustic tongue of his, spewing proverbial bullets at my face before I could say a single word in my defense.

Still, his absence left me feeling hollow and bereft, as if he took more than just his body when he snuck out of bed this morning.

Morning sunlight streamed through the open window, as gray and dreary as it usually was in this hellhole. The sun never seemed to penetrate the canopy of dark clouds, no matter what time of day it was. It was there, a tiny silhouette of subdued yellow and white light, but never prominent. Never warm. It was almost as if the sun were an afterthought, as if the creator of Purgatory, Limbo, wherever the fuck we were, thought that it would add to the atmosphere and decided to hastily place one in the sky. Its tepid heat permeated the room but did very little to chase away the cold

completely.

Stretching like a lazy house cat, I rolled out of bed and moved towards my closet. I ignored the hideous school uniform and instead put on a teal leotard. I brushed through my long blonde hair before placing it in a tight bun. I threw on a pair of sweatpants to complete the outfit and then stepped out of my dorm room, locking it behind me.

Just as I was leaving my dorm, I saw a familiar shock of blond hair on the opposite end of the hall. Beau's back was towards me, a towel slung over his shoulder as he made his way to the shared bathrooms. As of now, he didn't see me, but I knew the second he did...

Memories of my last interaction with him played out in my head.

My confession of love.

His wide, shocked eyes.

And then Maria appearing behind him, her hair disheveled and her buttons undone. She'd admitted during the poker game that Beau had rejected her, but had that been the truth? Why had she been in his room in the first place? How far did they get before he changed his mind? Did he push her away because of me and my confession? Did he initially have every intention of fucking her? That distinction might not have seemed like a big deal to others, but it mattered to me. A lot.

I took a moment to survey my best friend uninterrupted, my eyes feasting on his broad shoulders and that mop of blond hair, longer on the top than the sides. I knew that if he were to turn and stare at me, his eyes would be a bright, unnerving blue—so blue, it felt like staring into the core of a blistering hot flame.

At first glance, his gait appeared casual, almost nonchalant, but the closer I looked, the more I noticed miniscule things. His shoulders seemed to droop, for one, and his head was lowered. He moved slower than usual, almost as if it hurt him to take each step.

I wanted to run to him, to ask him if he was okay, but I didn't. Couldn't. Not with the pain of his silence, and consequently his rejection, still at the forefront of my mind.

Instead of giving in to my ridiculous desire to wrap my arms around his waist, I turned on my heel and marched down the staircase and out of the school.

Cold air greeted me, whipping a few strands of hair that'd escaped my bun around my face. The wind was ice-cold this morning, and each slap of it felt like keen daggers being thrust into my arms. I suddenly wished I'd remembered a jacket.

Moving quickly to get out of the morning air, I headed towards the gymnasium where I knew there to be a boxing ring. It wasn't a perfect place to practice gymnastics, but it worked.

I didn't know why I even bothered with my daily exercises. After everything Heath had told me, I should've been curled up in a ball in my room crying, but I needed this. I needed something familiar to hold on to, even when my world had fallen to shambles around me, each shard slicing at my skin.

The gym was empty at this time of day, except for a few men I could see through the window leading to a different section, working out on the treadmills. None of them paid me any mind as I moved to the center of the mat and began to stretch out my taut muscles.

Heath.

Purgatory.

Between.

Aiden.

Nine circles.

Heath.

Purgatory.

Between.

Aiden.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

Nine circles.

Heath.

Purgat—

“I thought I would find you here, little gymnast,” a familiar voice purred, and I lifted my head to see Tanner leaning against a stone pillar, his arms crossed over his muscular chest and a wicked grin unfurling on his lips.

Tanner was, for lack of a better word, hot. Hot as hell. And by the smug smile always pulling up his lips, he knew it too. His strong jawline had the lightest covering of blond scruff, the exact same color of his almost golden hair. His aqua eyes, always reminding me of the Caribbean Sea, twinkled as if he knew a secret no one else did. He had the slightest accent that made me believe he was Australian, though it was never overly present. The tattoos on his chest gave him a dangerous aura—one that warned good girls to stay far, far away.

But I’d never been a good girl.

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a silver lighter, his features distorting in the shadows made from the orange and red flame he conjured. His eyes stared intently at the small flame, a furrow appearing between his brows, before he sighed and closed the lid once more, placing it back into his pocket.

“Have you been looking for me?” I queried as I lowered my body into the middle splits and bent over my right leg. His eyes flared with heat, though he didn’t take a

step closer.

I didn't know if I was relieved or disappointed by that.

"Always," he said with forced cheer, though there was a strain around his eyes that I'd never seen before. I wondered if Aiden had told him about the poker game, though I didn't know when he would've had the time. When he left this morning?

But if Tanner knew, he didn't mention it as he finally pushed himself off the pillar and crossed to the ring. He placed both of his huge, calloused hands on the rope, his plush lower lip disappearing into his mouth as he nibbled on the flesh.

"What?" I asked, placing my legs together in a pike and bending forward to touch my toes.

"Can't a man just watch his girl look sexy as fuck?" Though he tried for a joking tone, it came off forced.

"I'm not your girl," I retorted, lifting my head and narrowing my eyes. My anger dissipated, replaced by confusion, when I finally noted the darkness shrouding his handsome features. "What's wrong? Did Aiden...?"

"Did he tell us about what Heath told you?" His jaw clenched, even as he nodded. "Yeah. He did."

"And...?" I finally stopped my stretches to give him my complete attention. Those blue orbs pierced me, pierced my soul, until I wondered if I was quite literally drowning in the sea of his gaze.

"And..." He forked his fingers through his golden hair. "We need to have a meeting. Now. Grab your shit and come with me."

I followed Tanner towards the shed at the edge of the property. The rickety building appeared to have seen better days, half of the walls constructed of nothing but distressed, steadily deteriorating wood. A single table rested in the center of the room, where an assortment of supplies was positioned, including a lantern that Tanner grabbed and lit with that damn lighter he always carried around.

He led me past all of that, though, towards a steep staircase hidden near the back of the shed. My heart beat heavily with trepidation and fear as I hesitated at the top step, staring down into the black abyss below.

Tanner paused too, turning back to meet my gaze with an unreadable expression in his eyes. His grip on the lantern tightened, even as his other hand extended towards me. Waiting. Allowing me to place my trust in him.

“Are you coming, little gymnast?”

That one question settled on my chest like a two-ton weight, pressing down until my rib cage cracked in protest. But it didn’t kill me.

Taking another deep breath, my shoulders touching my ears before falling, I placed my hand in his and allowed him to lead me down the steep, rickety staircase.

The shadows made from his lantern seemed to dance on the walls, a macabre show of writhing shapes and silhouettes. I could’ve sworn that some of the shadows resembled monsters with clawed hands and long, serrated teeth.

Finally, we reached the bottom of the staircase, where I caught sight of the mysterious tunnel for the first time since I’d arrived at the school.

It was easily wide enough to fit two people standing side by side and smelled vaguely of mildew and mold. The walls were constructed from numerous rocks, each varying

in size and shape and resting haphazardly on top of one another.

The first person I saw was Aiden, his arms folded over his chest as he rested against the nearest stone wall. His pierced eyebrows raised when he saw me, but other than that miniscule tick of expression, he gave no outward reaction to my appearance.

Beside him, sitting on the dirt, was Kace.

My heart gave a strange pitter-patter when I stared into the man's arresting face. I couldn't help but remember the last time I'd seen him, when I accidentally hurt myself and he freaked out on me. He looked the same as he had then, his face hollow and ashen and riddled with guilt. His auburn hair was streaked with gold and bright red, the colors heightened by the flame of the lantern resting on the ground beside him. His hazel eyes were shrouded in darkness, making them appear almost black, and his long fingers thrummed against his jeans.

He didn't glance up when I entered. Didn't even acknowledge me.

## Page 10

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Aiden cleared his throat to capture my attention. “You’re here.” It wasn’t a question, yet I couldn’t help but think Aiden’s tone sounded almost accusatory.

“Didn’t you send for me, Your Highness?” I asked with a sarcastic bow and flippant eye roll. His own gaze hardened, turning to granite, but he simply turned away from me in lieu of a response.

Addressing the group as a whole, he said, “We need to discuss what Bianaca told me.”

Somebody placed their hand on my upper arm, their touch feather-soft.

I knew that touch. Loved it once. But now, it only made my insides sizzle and boil, searing my flesh.

I turned in his direction, and my mouth hardened into a thin line when I met Beau’s pleading gaze.

I was right in my assessment earlier—he did look like shit.

Dark shadows marred the skin beneath each of his eyes, and he looked as if he hadn’t slept in days. Fatigue had wreaked havoc on his beautiful features, creating lines that hadn’t been there before.

His finger automatically began to write on my arm, caressing the sensitive skin, but I wrenched it away before he could write out whatever he was going to.

Beau had been diagnosed with selective mutism after his step-father murdered his mom. As the sole witness to the crime, he'd been forced to testify at the trial and recall all that he'd seen.

The murder...

His mom's death...

The trial...

It broke something in my best friend. Something fundamental. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had an actual conversation with him.

But apparently, he didn't hesitate to talk to my tormentors.

Betrayal flayed me open when I thought about what I'd overheard—namely, him. He hadn't talked to me in years, but he was perfectly capable of conversing with the men who bullied me? Destroyed my clothes? Threatened me? But that pain had nothing on the agony I'd felt when I saw Maria in his room. We weren't together, but I'd thought...

Well, it was stupid of me to assume he felt the same way for me as I did for him.

Once more, Beau grabbed my arm and shakily wrote across my skin.

P-L-E—

I pulled away once more, crossing my arms over my chest and shifting so I stood directly beside Tanner.

Tanner's bright blue eyes gleamed with amusement, and he didn't hesitate to shift his

body so it was directly behind mine. One of his strong, bronzed arms came to rest on my shoulders, pulling me even closer to him, until I could feel every hard, prominent ridge of his body against mine.

Beau's eyes widened, pain flashing in their depths, before he lowered his head and focused once more on Aiden's monologue.

"...need a plan. Now."

"We need to leave by tonight," I interjected, remembering Heath's ominous warning. At their confused looks, I batted Tanner's hands away from me and stepped forward. Clearing my throat, I continued before I lost my nerve. "It was something Heath told me."

I swore one of Aiden's eyes began to twitch in agitation. "And it was something you kept from me?" His tone was caustic, bitter even, but I knew most of his ire still had to do with his sister. A part of him must've known that his sister was gone, but having it confirmed...

My heart ached for the man, even while my brain instructed my fist to punch him in the nose. My body was the epitome of contradictions, and I had no one to blame but him.

"Not on purpose, asshole," I seethed, glaring. "There was a lot to process."

"What is it?" Kace murmured, still staring at his thighs. His messy red hair fell forward, obscuring his features even more. "God, we're fucked, aren't we? So fucking fucked."

Aiden gave his friend a concerned look before focusing on me. He raised one pierced eyebrow, waiting.

Always waiting.

He was such a fucking prick sometimes, I wanted to take his piercing and rip it from his face.

“We need to leave tonight,” I repeated, swallowing heavily. “Because if we don’t...Heath said it will be too late.”



4

Aiden

The plan was going to shit. No, not just shit. It was going to the bottom of the goddamn toilet, where it was festering like some insidious mold.

“Leave tonight? Leave tonight? Leave tonight, my fucking ass,” I murmured to myself as I stormed into my dorm room a short while later. I kicked at the leg of my bed, releasing curse after curse as my anger and frustration at the world bombarded me. I roared, pulling at my black hair, before moving to the bedside table and throwing it over. The lamp shattered into hundreds of pieces, though I barely paid it any mind.

Kace, who’d followed me into our shared room, moved despondently to his own bed and sat down, his back against the wall. He brought his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, his expression wary and drawn.

“Aiden...” Kace said, a hint of warning in his tone.

I spun towards my best friend, baring my teeth at him. He barely glanced up from where he was staring intently at the top of his knees.

“What? What the fuck am I supposed to do?” I demanded, moving to the closet, wrenching it open, and tossing all of the uniforms onto the ground. It was childish, sure, but I wanted to break something. I wanted the world to bleed. “If what Bianaca said is the truth, we’re in motherfucking Purgatory! And...” The words got caught in

my throat as pain bombarded me, branding my flesh for all the world to see. “And Josie...” My legs wobbled, threatening to give out on me, but I channeled the pain into white-hot rage and moved to my bed, bending down to upheave it.

Kace watched me with a deadened expression.

“What’s the point of escaping?” he asked after a moment of silence. He twisted his head so his cheek was now resting on his knee. From this position, his eyes were trained on the door, making it impossible to tell what he was thinking.

Kace never admitted to me out loud that he suffered from bipolar disorder, but I knew. I’d suspected as much whenever he would disappear for days at a time or lie in bed, unmoving, but I only had my suspicions confirmed when I found a bottle of his medication. I didn’t understand what exactly my best friend was going through, but I knew a battle was being waged inside of his own mind. Demons fighting demons. Monsters slaying monsters. I wanted to help him, but I didn’t know how. Words somehow seemed inadequate when I knew he was struggling.

“You doing okay, man?” I asked with feigned lightness.

This was the part I hated about being the leader. If you were a good one—no, not just a good one, but a great one, you learned to compartmentalize your own feelings, your own emotions, for the good of the group. People called it autopilot, but I referred to it as survival.

You couldn’t lead the masses when you struggled to control your own thoughts.

Though...

I wanted to fall apart again.

I wanted to break and scream and cry, giving the world my middle finger while simultaneously destroying it.

My sister, the light of my life, was dead. Gone. Eaten by some fucking monster while I remained oblivious. What type of brother was I to allow that to happen? Oh god. Josie...

I shoved all thoughts of my sister in a steel barricaded box, locking it up tight and then throwing away the key. This wasn't healthy, I knew, but I had no other choice. If I allowed myself to think about her, think about what happened, I'd fall apart.

But this box wasn't a foolproof option. It was riddled with explosives, and at any moment, it would ignite, burn, then explode. I knew when that happened, a barrage of hidden feelings and emotions would wash over me. Drown me. Fucking kill me.

I couldn't allow that box to break. Not until I knew for sure my friends were safe.

So I did what I did best, what a lifetime of pain and suffering had taught me—I emptied myself, so I felt nothing at all.

“Kace,” I said again, pleased when my voice remained strident. Firm. “Are you okay?”

“Just leave without me,” he whispered in a broken whisper. “Just go.”

“Afraid I can't do that.” I moved towards his drawer, where I knew he kept his pill bottle. I had no idea if it fucking worked where we were, but it was worth a try.

Where we were.

In Purgatory.

In Limbo, to be exact.

Hanging on to life.

Dying.

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A hysterical laugh threatened to bubble up, scalding me like boiling water, but I contained it.

Do not fall apart, Aiden. You can't afford to fucking fall apart. Not now.

"Kace, have you been taking your medication?" I asked, attempting to sound gentle. Considering the fact that nine times out of ten, I came across as an asshole no matter what I did or said, my attempt at adopting a soothing voice failed epically.

Kace's head snapped up, his eyes shooting more venom than I ever remembered seeing from my best friend. "Fuck off, Aiden."

"No can do," I retorted, tossing the pill bottle in his direction. It bounced off his head, landing firmly on his bed. He didn't make a move to grab it. To be candid, he didn't make a move at all, simply glaring at me as if he was imagining ripping me apart limb from limb.

"This doesn't fucking concern you," he seethed, and I released a heavy sigh, suddenly feeling unbearably tired.

"You're my best friend, man, and I'm not fucking leaving without you," I said simply. He opened his mouth to protest, but I continued before he could. "And if both of us don't leave, you can bet your ass that Bianaca won't leave either."

It was a low blow, using the name of the girl I knew he had strong feelings for, but it was the only thing I could think to do. I could tell it worked when he flinched, his face draining of all color.

“And if she did go, do you really think she’d survive by herself?” I continued, twisting the knife. “I know you don’t give a damn about your life...” My throat closed with emotion, thinking about all I’d already lost. Josie... “And you may not care about my life either, but I know you care about hers. I can’t tell you what to do, but...” I moved forward until I could reach him, clamping my hand down on his shoulder and giving it a squeeze. “We need you, man. Take your pills, pack up, and get your shit together. Don’t fall apart on us right now.” I finally moved away to grab my backpack from where I’d thrown it on the floor. Kace watched me with vacant eyes as I emptied it of all school supplies, sliding it onto my shoulders.

“Where are you going?” he whispered, finally lifting his head. His red hair fell over his eyes, but he didn’t lift a hand to brush the strands away.

“Grabbing food for the road,” I responded, already walking towards the door. “I don’t know where the hell we are or how we got here, but apparently, we still have to fucking eat. Who would’ve thought that death made you so hungry?”

Bianaca was waiting for me near the entrance of the cafeteria, her foot tapping against the white tiles and her arms crossed over her chest. Despite the irritation splayed across her face, her eyes were wary, flickering from hall to hall as if she expected a teacher to rush around the corner and yell, “Boo!”

Not a teacher, I reminded myself.

A reaper, come to claim our souls and drag them to Death itself.

Just like Jo—

I shut that shit down fast.

“We need to be fast and quiet,” Bianaca hissed as soon as I was within earshot. I

gripped her arm, pulling her with me until we were past the cafeteria and heading towards the backdoor of the kitchen. She glared at me, attempting to yank her arm out of my grip, but I simply smirked at her.

“What’s wrong, princess?” I taunted. “Trying to break free?”

“Yes, you asshole,” she hissed, turning her vitriol filled eyes onto me. “Why do you have to be such a dick?”

A witty retort jumped to my lips, but surprisingly, that wasn’t what left my mouth. It was something softer, more vulnerable, and I instantly wanted to slap myself. “Because I need to make sure nothing happens to you. I refuse to lose anyone else I care about.”

Fuck.

Her eyes widened, lips parting, before she seemed to regain her bearings.

Huffing, she allowed me to drag her along, no longer struggling. If anything, she leaned further against me, allowing me to catch a whiff of her vanilla and honeysuckle scent. When I was going through her shit last night, I noted that she had honeysuckle body wash and vanilla perfume. Two of my favorite fucking scents. I’d need to make sure she brought both of them with her when we left. Hell, if she didn’t want to carry them around, I would. I didn’t even care if that made me a pathetic, lovesick sap.

I loved her smell.

We were silent as we made our way towards the kitchen. I released her when we reached our destination and held up a hand to get her to stay put. I stealthily moved towards the tiny window on the door and peeked through.

Empty.

Good.

Nodding that it was safe, I pushed open the door, wincing as it gave a slight creak, and then hurried inside, Bianaca on my heels. Only when the door was shut, blocking us off from the hallway, did I release a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"Okay, grab what you can and put it in the bags." I nodded towards her duffle bag and my backpack. "Remember, only grab canned goods or things with seals." Because all the rest was fucking poisoned to make us compliant, to make us forget who and where we were.

We worked in relative silence for the first few minutes. I moved to the cupboard, grabbing cans at random, while B found a selection of capped water bottles.



## Page 13

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She was right. Well, Heath was right.

Everything we needed to leave this place was in our grasp. Why would they have edible food and drinks if they weren't giving us a chance to escape?

God, this entire situation was so fucked up.

"How..." Bianaca's quiet voice reached my ears, and I tensed automatically. "How are you doing?"

"Are you asking because of my breakdown last night?" I asked roughly, my hand clenching around the can I was holding. The numerous silver rings adorning my fingers appeared almost black in the darkness of the kitchen. "Don't act like you fucking care."

"I do care," she responded automatically, and out of the corner of my eye, I watched her straighten, piercing me with a look that went straight to my heart.

I licked my upper lip and forced myself to keep working, keep moving.

Autopilot.

I needed to remain on autopilot. Because the second I stopped, the second I actually thought about all that had happened...

It wouldn't be good for any of us.

“Why would you fucking care?” I asked, barely able to keep the bitterness out of my voice. “I was awful to you.”

When she first arrived at the school, claiming a room that had belonged to Josie, my fear for my sister distorted into anger towards a woman I knew in my soul was innocent. But that didn’t stop me from pushing and destroying her, wanting her to bleed the same way I was.

So why was she looking at me with such kindness? Such empathy?

I didn’t deserve that. At all. I deserved a lot of things, most of which involved hard objects and my nuts, but not the softness on her face now.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I muttered gruffly, shoving the can into my bag.

“Like what?” She rolled her eyes but finally, finally turned away.

“Like you give a damn about what happens to me.”

“I told you,” she harshly shoved a water bottle into her bag, “I do.”

“You shouldn’t.” My tongue fiddled with my lip piercing as the words left me. “I’m bad news. Everything I touch turns to dust. That’s not even a fucking cliché. Look at Jo—” I snapped my mouth shut.

“You can say her name, you know.” Bianaca’s voice was light, airy, but with a guarded undertone. “It’s okay to—”

“To what?” I spun towards her, my muscles flexing with the need to destroy, destroy, destroy. That was all I was good for, after all. Destroying things. Demolishing anything that was remotely beautiful with my anger and hate.

It was what I did to Josie, after all.

And it was what I was going to inevitably do to Bianaca if I didn't push her away while I had the chance.

It was who I was. It was in my blood, coursing through me, alive and vibrant.

Anger, destruction, pain.

They were all I was good for.

"Don't pretend that you understand what I'm going through," I hissed, wanting her to hurt the way I was. I knew I would regret my actions later, but right then and there, I wasn't thinking clearly. I wanted her to hate me, to despise me, the same way I hated and despised myself.

"I'm sorry if I made you think that—"

"Why don't you just fuck out of my business and my life. Can you do that? I don't need you pitying me."

"I wasn't trying to—"

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:03 am*

I interrupted her yet again. “The second we escape this place, I’ll go my way and you can go yours. Just stay the fuck away from me.” I glared at her with all of the anger I could muster, all of the misdirected hatred and agony that had been percolating inside of me.

I could see the exact moment my words had the desired effect. The exact fucking second when they cut deeper than any blade could, twisting at her organs until she was dripping blood, the same way I was.

It didn’t feel as good as I’d thought it was going to.

It fucking ached.

“Fine,” Bianaca said stiffly, her shoulders bunching. She grabbed her duffle bag off the steel counter and moved towards the kitchen door. “Enjoy being alone, Aiden, because I guarantee you, after all of this is over, that’s how it’s going to be for you.”

When she stormed out the door, I didn’t feel an ounce of satisfaction, only a crippling loneliness and pain that sent me falling to my knees.

For the second time in two days, I fell apart.

5

Bianaca

Why did Aiden have to be such an...such an asshole?

I was fuming when I left the kitchen, the heavy duffle bag full of water bottles hitting my leg with every step I took. It was sure to leave a nasty bruise on the outside of my thigh, but the pain barely registered.

I was still muttering to myself, most of my curse words incoherent, when I ran face-first into a familiar female with jet-black hair and too pale skin.

Kelly.

Her wide, guileless eyes turned to saucers when she saw me, her gaze dropping briefly to my duffle bag before she refocused on my face. She trembled, tiny convulsions that made me fear for my friend, before she whispered, "Between."

She'd been saying that same word for weeks, and I'd never thought anything of it. I'd assumed they were the ramblings of a slightly unhinged woman, but now...

Between.

As in...

Between life and death.

My heart hammered against my rib cage as I stared intently into her skittish, light blue eyes.

Did Kelly...did Kelly know the truth about this place?

She'd been the one to show me the monster, after all. And why would she repeat "between" if she weren't aware of where we were? It couldn't be a coincidence. No, not something like this.

"Kelly," I whispered, my breaths sawing in and out. The noise was deafeningly loud in the silence of the halls. "Do you...do you know the truth about where we are?"

Her eyes shifted from side to side nervously, searching the emptied hallways, before she repeated, "Between."

"You know." It wasn't a question, yet I found myself needing some sort of confirmation.

She licked her upper lip, her frail body still shaking erratically, before she dipped her chin in a nod.

She knew.

She knew.

And this entire time, she'd been trying to warn me. How did she know? What did she know? Was it different from what Heath had told me?

Indecision warred within me, a fierce battle of sharp swords and iron shields, before I came to a decision.

Aiden was going to fucking kill me.

Grabbing her arm before she could hurry away, I moved both of us towards the far end of the hall, away from any prying eyes or way too curious ears. She blinked at me, her blue eyes appearing white in the vivid lighting.

Without giving myself a chance to overthink this, to regret my decision, I placed my hands on her shoulders and spoke in a low, terse voice. “Okay, listen. We don’t have a lot of time. I don’t know what you know exactly about this school and why we’re here, but I’m assuming it’s the same as me. We’re leaving, Kelly. Tonight.”

Not an ounce of expression crossed her elfin face as she stared, just stared, at me.

“Leave your room at exactly eleven forty-two PM and meet me at the shed. Not a minute earlier or later. Got it?” Again, not a single facial tick formed as she stared up at me with that unnerving intensity of hers. Unease skittered up my spine before I shoved it down, reminding myself she was my friend. “We can’t stay here a second longer. It’s not safe. Do you understand, Kelly?”

Slowly, she nodded, a single dip of her chin. My breath wooshed out of me as I gave her shoulders one last squeeze before releasing her.

“Good. That’s good.”

Aiden was going to be furious at me, but I couldn’t leave her behind. Not after she’d tried to warn me, tried to save me. If we were getting out of here, I’d be damned if she didn’t come with us.

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Kelly gave me one last unreadable expression before hurrying down the hall, her black pigtails flying behind her. It was only as she turned the corner did I glimpse a shock of white-blond hair. But when I looked closer, the head of hair was gone, and I wondered if my nerves were playing tricks on me.

Because if they weren't...

It meant that someone had overheard what I'd told Kelly.

Someone knew we were planning to escape.

I didn't sleep. Didn't do anything, really, but pace and think and pace some more. My nails had been chewed down to stubs as I glanced at the gray sky outside my window, the sun still hidden behind bloated rain clouds.

It was only three in the afternoon, meaning we had hours until we put our plan into effect, but I didn't dare do anything else. Not rest my eyes, not go to the cafeteria, not leave my room.

Numerous what-ifs played on repeat in my mind.

What if the reapers got wind of what we had planned?

What if Kelly told someone about the escape?

What if that person I may or may not have seen tattled?



What if...

What if...

What if...

A knock on my door shook me out of my reverie, but it did very little to slow down my racing heart. If anything, my heartbeat increased as I stared intently at the wooden door.

Was it a group of reapers coming to feed my soul to a monster?

Or maybe it was a camera crew and Ashton Kutcher hiding behind the corner, waiting to jump out and scream, “You’ve been punk’d!”

I really, really hoped it was option number two.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Little gymnast, I hear you pacing in there.” Tanner’s voice was laced with amusement. “And your heavy breathing. You’re not as stealthy as you think.”

“I’m totally as stealthy as I think,” I retorted, my anxiety dissipating as quickly as it had arrived. It was actually kind of funny, the instant relief I felt at knowing Tanner was on the other side of that door. At one point, I’d hated him, maybe even feared him, and though those feelings hadn’t completely dissolved, they were no longer as prominent.

I moved to the door and pulled it open, biting on my lip to contain my smile when I saw Tanner leaning against the door frame, a cocky grin on his face. As usual, he wore a leather jacket that clung to his muscular frame. An unlit cigarette hung from

his lush lips as his Caribbean blue eyes twinkled.

“So you think about how stealthy you are a lot?” His tone was teasing as he pushed past me and made his way into my room, removing his cancer stick from his mouth and placing it inside his jacket pocket.

“I didn’t say you could come in,” I deadpanned, shutting the door behind him.

He smirked as he all but threw himself onto the bed, folding his hands behind his head and hooking his ankles together.

“You wound me, little gymnast. I thought our sexual chemistry was off the charts. I totally thought it was deserving of unannounced bedroom visits.”

I snorted, moving to perch on the edge of my bed and flicking a distasteful look at his shoes.

“Not enough to allow you to put your dirty shoes on my bed.”

“One, my shoes aren’t dirty.” He held up a single finger before adding a second one to it. “And two, you’re not sleeping in this bed ever again if everything goes as planned. And even if it doesn’t...” He trailed off, deep lines pulling at the skin around his eyes, and I filled in what he didn’t say.

“And if it doesn’t go as planned, we’re probably dead. Goodie.” My voice was just as empty as his had been, though I tried to hide my growing unease with humor. “But that doesn’t give you the right to put your big feet up on my bed.” I pushed at said feet in annoyance, and his smirk widened. “Seriously, those feet belong to a giant. That can’t be normal. Have you had a doctor look at them? Are you sure they’re not two big tumors?”

“Ha. Ha. Ha. Very funny,” he quipped, rolling his sea-blue eyes. His tongue rolled across his teeth as his smile widened. “Though you know what they say about big feet...”

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“Ew!” I gave him a look of complete and utter disgust. “Don’t say it.”

“What?” He stared at me innocently. “I was simply going to say—”

“La! La! La! La! La! La!” I sang, bringing my hands to my ears and covering them. He sat up in bed, gripped my wrists, and forced my hands back down to my sides. When I stuck my tongue out at him, he bent down and captured it with his teeth.

My heart thundered, fire racing through my veins, when he released me with another dangerous chuckle. Heat flooded my veins, a molten trail of lava.

“I was actually going to say that big feet means big socks and big shoes. Naughty, naughty girl. Where did your dirty mind go?”

I reached around him to grab my pillow and whack him across the face.

“Shut up,” I drawled, and he laughed.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” he protested, holding his hands up like he was completely innocent. “You’re the one putting dirty words in my mouth.”

“You were thinking said dirty words.” I hit him with the pillow again while he cried out in exaggerated pain. “Don’t lie to me.”

He laughed maniacally and rubbed his hands together like a stereotypical cartoon villain. “You’ll never get the answers out of me!”

Before I could stop him, he jumped to his feet and did a somersault across the room, stopping in mid spin to cry out, “My back! Fuck, my back! I think I broke my back!” He toppled sideways, sprawling across the floor with his arms and legs extended. His tongue lolled out of his mouth. “I’m dead,” he said, though his words were garbled with his tongue halfway out.

“Well if you’re dead...” I dropped to the floor and crawled towards him, positioning my body until I straddled his. “It’d be weird if I did this.” I ducked my head and planted a tentative kiss to the corner of his mouth, opposite his extended tongue.

I had to give him credit—his tongue didn’t recoil back into his mouth and his eyes remained closed, though his hands did move to rest on my hips.

“You can’t move if you’re dead,” I whispered against his lips, then I moved my mouth to the column of his throat, peppering kisses across the sensitive skin there. His hands tightened almost imperceptibly.

“Muscle reflex.” His garbled voice made me smile as I continued to move farther and farther down his body, planting kisses on his stomach before I reached the waistband of his pants. Before I could go any further, his hand snaked out and captured my chin, his eyes burning a hole into me.

“What are you doing?” he whispered roughly, his cock straining against the denim of his jeans. With his messy blond hair falling around him and his crystal-clear blue eyes resembling the freshest water I’d ever seen, he could’ve been an angel—a fallen angel seeking to lead me to sin, but an angel all the same. He was so beautiful, so perfect, that he took my breath away. It was the sort of elusive, ethereal beauty you read about in romance novels. Something so unattainable, you didn’t think you would ever see it for yourself.

It occurred to me that while I was feasting my eyes on him, he was doing the same to

me. His eyes were as tender as I'd ever seen them, full of warmth and a heat that made my core clench and skin crawl.

"I asked you a question, little gymnast." He lifted a hand to brush a strand of my golden hair behind my ear, and I felt my entire body tremble with need, with want, with desire. With emotions I didn't dare look too closely at. "What are you doing?"

I touched the skin just above his waistband, where his shirt had risen up, and whispered, "Feeling alive."

Keeping my eyes locked on his, I unbuttoned his pants, unsurprised that he hadn't worn any underwear. I was beginning to think that the man didn't own a single pair.

Not that I was complaining.

His long, thick cock sprang free, the tip already beaded with pre-cum.

"Bianaca." His voice was a growl, a command, and I paused to meet his fire filled eyes. "What are we doing?" There was more to his question than I cared to answer.

What are we?

Does this mean more?

Do we want it to mean more?

He wanted to define our relationship, and I was unsure how I felt about that. On one hand, liquid heat cascaded through my veins as desire inflated my lungs, and on the other, I was terrified. Terrified of him and the way he made me feel. Terrified that this would change everything in a way that was confusing and irrevocable.

And I couldn't ignore my feelings for Beau and even Kace. If I was with Tanner, did that mean I couldn't be with them too? Did I even want to be, after the way they'd both ran out on me?

"Do you want me, Tanner?" A hint of vulnerability crept into my words, but when his eyes darkened with lust, I knew that his need for me had never been an issue. He definitely wanted me...but I also was beginning to believe he wanted more.

How much was I willing to give him?

How much did he already have of me?

“Yes,” he gritted out. “More than anything. But—”

“I don’t want to think about what this means,” I whispered, moving to pull my shirt over my head. I was happy I’d changed out of my leotard and into comfortable clothes when I arrived back at my room. It was impossible to be sexy peeling off a skin-tight bodysuit.

His eyes turned hooded, half-mast with lust, as my breasts sprang free, my nipples already beaded. I swore I saw his tongue sneak out to lick his lips, as if he was hungry for a taste of them, hungry for a taste of me.

“I don’t...” He trailed off, squeezing his eyes shut. When he reopened them, he speared me with an unreadable look. “I can’t just have sex with you, B,” he confessed. “Because to me, it’s something more. I don’t know what it is yet—”

“I don’t either,” I confessed, my heart thundering against my rib cage like a jackhammer.

As if he couldn’t help himself, one of his hands came upwards to caress my aching breast, his fingers grazing my nipple. Just as quickly, he dropped it back to his side.

“B...” My name was a prayer on his lips, and that reverence spurred me on.

He didn’t stop me as I wrapped my hand around the base of his thick cock, silky smooth skin over iron steel. A breathy moan escaped him as his back arched.



I'd watched him pleasure himself before, and he'd fingered me to orgasm, but I'd never touched him. Not like this.

Though his dick had starred in more than one of my nighttime fantasies.

My blonde hair brushed against his stomach as I lowered my head to his throbbing cock, wrapping my lips around the tip. His pre-cum assaulted my tastebuds, a flavor that was both salty and musky. I'd never particularly enjoyed the taste of cum, but I found the act of swallowing too erotic to ignore. It was a way of having complete control over a man, of taking his pleasure into your own hands. I saw the cum as my reward for such endeavors, as twisted as that might have been.

I took him as deep into my throat as I could, my hand wrapping around the base where I couldn't quite reach, traveling up his cock in a corkscrew motion. And then my mouth and hand were working in tandem, stroking and sucking and licking until his eyes were closed and his hips were jerking.

My breasts brushed against the top of his hairy thighs, the texture somehow stimulating the peaked buds and adding to my own arousal.

I released his cock from my mouth and ran my tongue from the base to the mushroom tip. When he groaned, my name leaving his lips on a breathy exhale, I repeated the ministration, keeping my eyes locked on his face.

His own eyes were shut, his golden hair splayed on the floor around him. A slight sheen of sweat coated his tan skin as he twisted his head from side to side, trying to both escape and accept the pleasure I was offering him.

His eyes snapped open when I began to run my tongue in a circle around the tip of his cock. Those blue orbs captured me, drawing me forward like a moth to a flame. I honestly feared that if I got too close, he'd burn me to ash.

He reached forward to push my blonde hair behind my ears, his eyes never leaving mine.

I brought him back into my mouth, wanting to control him and his pleasure. Wanting him to fall apart for me.

Tanner and I... Our relationship was complicated. He'd been cruel to me when I first arrived, but never on the level Aiden had been. He was honest in his initial animosity for me, but more than that, he was truthful about his attraction towards me. He never hesitated to let me know that he desired me.

I knew what I felt for him wasn't love—how could it be, when we barely knew each other?—but I also knew it could easily change. Falling in love with Tanner would be as easy as breathing. I could lose myself in his bad boy ways, in his cocky, mischievous smile and those fathomless blue eyes. In his sharp wit and sarcastic drawl. In his tattoos and broken soul.

He wrapped my hair around his fist, guiding my movements.

Giving a man a blow job was one of the most intense forms of intimacy someone could experience. Watching him wither and lose himself to the pleasure you evoked within him...

It was impossible to describe in words.

“My turn.” Before I could protest, Tanner used his grip on my hair to force my lips off his cock. In the next second, my back was on the floor, a pillow brought down to cushion my head, and my pants and panties were discarded on the floor beside me, as well as the rest of his own clothes. Tanner removed the garments with an ease that made me both jealous and grateful of his experience.

I didn't care about his past...as long as I was his only future.

He nestled himself between my thighs, and I brought both legs as far apart as I comfortably could in the splits. His grin was wicked, sinful, as he glanced from my dripping pussy to my spread legs.

"Perks of dating a gymnast," he murmured, and I lifted a brow, even as my chest turned warm and butterflies took flight in my stomach.

"Dating?" I tried for teasing, but the breathless quality of my voice gave away how much I liked that idea.

"I told you." He gave my pussy a slow, languid lick. "This isn't just sex for me."

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And then he was eating my pussy like a man starved. His tongue made delicious figure eights in my slick folds before he moved to my clit, pulling it between his teeth.

I brought my hand to my inner thighs, holding my legs apart, as he alternated between tongue fucking my pussy and sucking on my clit. Whenever he paused, it was only to add light kisses to my throbbing core that had heat shooting through my veins like errant fireworks on Fourth of July. Fuck, that was what his touch reminded me of—a fireworks show in the dead of night, vivid colors penetrating the darkness until the world was on fire.

“Tanner,” I gasped, rolling my head back in pleasure. “I need...”

“What do you need, little gymnast? I’ll give you the fucking world.”

And from the conviction in his tone, I knew he meant it.

“You,” I responded, and I didn’t need to open my eyes to know his smile turned dark and predatory—a lion feasting on a defenseless gazelle caught wandering in his territory.

He crawled up my body, something I felt rather than saw, and his lips met mine in a featherlight kiss.

“Open your eyes, baby,” he whispered. “Open your eyes and watch me take you.”

His words had me panting with desire, and my eyes flew open, clashing with his blue

ones. In the dim lighting of my room, golden flecks seemed to swirl in his irises, somehow accentuating his golden hair and skin. My eyes greedily lapped up his elegant, angular visage, as his did the same to me.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured as he grabbed my thighs, forcing them upwards until they crushed my breasts. His cock prodded the entrance to my pussy, not quite entering but sending licks of heat cascading through me anyway.

“So are you,” I gasped out, claiming his lips once more in a possessive, claiming kiss. His tongue tangled with my own, and I knew right then and there that there was no falling with this man...I’d already fallen. I didn’t know how or when or even fucking why, but I had fallen anyway.

Finally, his cock slid inside of me, and we both paused as he allowed me to adjust to his size. I broke the kiss, twisting my head to the side, and he took the opportunity to pepper kisses down my cheek and neck.

And then he began to move.

Pleasure coursed through me, setting my blood aflame, as he thrust in and out of my pussy, his balls slapping against my skin and providing a soundtrack to our lovemaking. His eyes left mine only once to stare at where we connected, where his cock stretched my channel, filling me to the brim.

His spicy, leather scent surrounded me as I brought my hands to his shoulders, my nails digging into his sweat slick skin.

“Tanner, my god,” I praised as he rutted into me faster. With my thighs on my chest and my ass slightly raised, his cock went even deeper inside of me. I couldn’t remember ever feeling so full, so completed.

“So beautiful. So perfect,” he whispered repeatedly, and I brought one hand to his chiseled cheek, holding him hostage. His lips devoured mine once more, but the kiss was sweeter than before. Softer. There was a lifetime of unspoken words in that one press of his lips against mine. “Ride me, baby. I want you to ride me.”

When his cock slid out of me, I wanted to cry out, but Tanner quickly rectified the situation by falling to his back. I landed on top of him, his cock brushing my ass cheeks, and I didn’t hesitate to guide him inside of me once more.

His hands moved to my breasts, holding onto them as I placed my feet on either side of his hips and began to push myself up and down. He didn’t caress them or pinch them or play with them, he just gripped them like they were damn handles or something.

I wanted to tease him, but the words got lost in my throat when this new position made his cock go so far inside of me, I saw metaphorical stars.

Or maybe they were actually stars. I was pretty sure my soul left my body, made a few circuits around the galaxy, then flew into the sun and turned to ash.

His hips thrust upwards in tandem to my movements, and I soon couldn’t tell if I was fucking him or if he was fucking me. I could feel his cock pistoning in and out of my pussy as his hands finally left my breasts to touch my ass cheeks. When he slapped first one and then the other, it was enough to send me hurtling over the edge. The intensity of my orgasm scoured all thoughts except the pleasure that washed over me in a blistering hot wave.

He pulled out of me before he came with a roar of pleasure, his cum hitting his stomach and creating a sticky trail I yearned to lick clean with my tongue. I didn’t believe we had to worry about pregnancies or STDs while we were in this place, but I appreciated his foresight.

“Fuck!” he cursed, putting pressure on my back until I was lying on top of him.  
“Fucking hell.”

“Your cum is sticking to my tits,” I whispered like the classy bitch I was, shifting in his arms until my head was on his chest and my leg was crossed over his. I couldn’t help but note it was a very similar position to the one I was in with Aiden just the night before.

Tanner released a breath of laughter. “Fuck. Are you trying to turn me on again? If I could, I’d fucking paint you in my cum.”

“How romantic,” I teased, tracing patterns on his gorgeous tan skin. “What is up with men wanting to possess and claim women?”

His hands lowered to my ass and gave it a squeeze. “Because we want the world to know she’s ours,” he whispered, and a second later, his teeth bit down on my earlobe.

I squealed, but I didn’t leave his embrace. I couldn’t, not when he felt so warm, his body molding to my own as if it were made for me.

For a moment, we were silent, and I listened to his heart race beneath my ear. His hand stroked soothing circles on my bare skin, though I could tell he was a million miles away.

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“B, about tonight—”

“Don’t,” I interrupted as drowsiness bombarded me. “I don’t want to think about it.”

“But I want you to know...” His chest heaved with his next exhale. “I’ll protect you. You know that, right? No matter what.”

My heart migrated in my throat, choking me, as I took in his confession. Devoured it.

“I’m scared,” I confessed after a long moment of silence, the words tumbling from my lips before I could consider the ramifications of saying them.

For a long moment, Tanner didn’t speak, and I would’ve believed he’d fallen asleep if his finger hadn’t repeatedly been drawing patterns on my skin.

“I am too,” he whispered at last. He pressed a kiss to the crown of my head. “Go to sleep, my little gymnast. I’ll stay with you tonight.” His arms tightened around me, the move both possessive and protective. “No monsters will get you as long as I have breath in my lungs.”

And that was exactly what I was afraid of.

Because now that I had feelings for Tanner...

The thought of losing him was inconceivable.

Somehow, I had the strangest sense that we both wouldn’t make it out of this mess



alive.

It terrified the shit out of me.

6

Bianaca

The silence was unnaturally tense when we convened in the shed a few hours later, the moonlight splicing through the cracked window and bathing the distressed wood in shades of yellow and white.

Aiden chewed on his lip ring, pacing the small expanse of flooring, while Tanner stood beside me, a silent and protective sentry. A part of me wanted to lean into his embrace, seek comfort from his strong arms, but I didn't. I couldn't. I needed to remain levelheaded, and being with Tanner made me anything but.

Still, that didn't stop me from inhaling his unique, spicy scent and tilting my body so that my hip brushed his. His hand lowered, his pinkie touching mine before he pulled it away and crossed his arms over his chest. Ripples of fire danced along my body as my mind replayed our lovemaking from a few hours earlier. The way his sweat soaked skin brushed against mine. His cock filling me so completely. His bruising kisses.

Fuck. This was not the time to get horny.

"Where the fuck are they?" Aiden murmured, his eyes flashing to the closed door of the shed.

"They'll be here," I replied immediately, though I didn't know if that was true or not.

So far, only the three of us had arrived at the shed.

No Kace. No Beau. No Heath.

No Kelly.

I chewed down on my nail as worry warred with fear inside of me. What the hell was taking them so long? Did they get caught?

I had the sudden, vivid image of the reapers feeding them to the monster in the basement—the monster that, according to Heath, symbolized death. An icy chill that had nothing to do with the weather crept down my spine, chasing away the heat from before, and I took a step even closer to Tanner until my arm was able to brush his.

“They’ll be here,” I repeated. They had to.

Aiden spun towards me, his eyes wild, before cursing and brushing a hand through his tangled black hair. “Fuck, I’m not so sure.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Tanner asked suspiciously.

“Kace has been...” Aiden trailed off when the sound of approaching footsteps reached our ears. Immediately, both men moved to stand in front of me, their large bodies blocking me from view. As one, they relaxed, the stiff muscles in their backs and shoulders loosening.

Kace and Beau appeared at the entrance of the shed, backpacks over each of their shoulders.

“Sorry,” Kace murmured, dropping his gaze to his shoes in a subservient way. His normal ebullience was nowhere to be seen. “We had to take the long way around.”

“It’s fine.” Aiden dismissed his words with a wave of his hand, but I could see the relief in his eyes. I had no idea what Aiden had been about to say concerning Kace, but I could assume it had something to do with the way the redheaded man had been behaving. “But we need to get going.”

“Heath was behind us—” Kace began.

“Heath is right here,” the man in question declared, pushing past them to enter the tiny shed. For the first time since I’d met him, his hair wasn’t immaculately groomed but disheveled instead, and he wore a pair of gray sweatpants that did wonders to my overactive libido. He flashed a bright smile, his glacial eyes sweeping over the men present, before his gaze settled on me. “And I see you invited more than just your harem.”

“Harem?” Aiden scoffed at the same time Tanner asked me, “Who did you invite?”

I barely got a chance to open my mouth before the shed door opened once more and Kelly stepped inside.

Along with four somewhat familiar guys.

Guys I’d never thought I would see in this context.

Guys I’d last seen tormenting her while she cowered.

Her bullies.

“What the fuck?” Aiden hissed as Kelly stepped inside, the men surrounding her. It made the tiny shed seem even more cramped than ever before. He spun his glare around to fix on me, his eyes spewing vitriol like a caustic acid. “What the fuck did you do, Bianaca?”

I straightened my spine, owning my decision, even as my stomach muscles tightened into thousands of intricate knots. I refused to cower beneath his pitch-black stare, refused to show how much he affected me. He both scared and entranced me, though I would never let him see either.

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“I wasn’t going to leave her here,” I snapped angrily.

“And the others?” He nodded his head towards the four men—boys—surrounding her.

“I couldn’t leave them,” Kelly whispered, her voice hoarse.

“What the fuck is going on, freak?” demanded the ringleader, whose name I still didn’t know. He was the tallest of the bunch, with dark brown hair that curled across his forehead. His emerald green eyes were speckled with tiny streaks of brown and gold, giving him an innocent, guileless look. He appeared to be a year or two younger than me, though he emanated a hardness that far surpassed his age. As I watched, he turned towards his friends. “Let’s go, guys.”

“Wait, Caleb,” the largest of the group said. He was shorter than the ringleader, Caleb, in height, but easily eclipsed him in muscle mass. Despite being only fifteen or sixteen, his entire body was covered in thick, ropy muscle. His arms rippled as he unintentionally flexed, his black shirt straining against his biceps. He was also the scariest of the group, with a permanent glower plastered on his face that made fingertips of ice brush down my neck.

“Wait for what, Brett?” Caleb threw his hands up in the air before turning towards the other two. “Don’t you guys think this is kinda creepy? I mean, she comes to our room, tells us we’re going to die, and then demands we follow her.”

“And yet you all came,” Tanner pointed out, a smirk evident in his voice. “Obviously, you trust the creepy human a little bit.”

Caleb's eyes narrowed into thin slits when Tanner referred to Kelly as creepy. The large man, Brett, took a step forward until the smallest one with glasses and messy brown hair pulled him back.

The fourth one stood there in silence, his shrewd eyes surveying all of us present without a single word leaving his lips. I could've been mistaken, but it almost appeared as if his eyes were violet, the shade looking hauntingly beautiful in his stone-cold face. His blond hair was buzzed close to his scalp, giving him a severe visage, and his elegant eyebrows were currently arched in suspicion.

"These are my..." Kelly began, trailing off. She tilted her head to the side as she thought up a suitable word. I remembered her wistful ramblings from the other day, how she claimed they were her harem. I'd wanted to roll my eyes at her ridiculousness, especially since it seemed as if they hated her.

But at the same time...

They stared at her with lovestruck eyes, as if the world revolved around her smile.

Oh my god. Maybe Kelly truly did have a harem.

A harem I doubted any of the men knew they were a part of.

"Friends," she decided on at last with a decisive head bob, and Caleb scoffed.

"Apparently she's delusional," he seethed, but she ignored him.

"That's Caleb and Brett." She pointed to the ringleader and the muscled man respectively before turning to the man in glasses. "Travis." Finally, she pointed to the gorgeous, blond-haired man. "Sev."

“And why the fuck are they here?” Aiden demanded. I could tell he was trying really, really hard not to lose his absolute shit. When he thought I wasn’t looking, he would hurl daggers at the side of my head with his eyes.

I wondered what he would do to me if I decided to flip him off.

Kelly’s lips pursed into a stubborn line. “I’m not leaving without them.”

“You don’t get to just fucking choose who comes with—”

“All right. All right.” Heath held his hands up and moved to stand in the center of the group. “As much as I enjoy the discord currently transpiring” —he flashed a blinding smile— “we should get moving. Now.”

“Fuck.” Aiden tossed his head back, glaring up at the ceiling as if searching for patience. When he lowered it, he speared me with another unreadable glare that had every hair on my body standing on end. “All right. Let’s go. All of you—Who the fuck invited her?”

I wrinkled my brows together, turning towards the doorway where a familiar female stood, her expression decidedly uncomfortable. Her blonde tresses were pulled back into a low ponytail, and her cherry red lips were pursed. Despite wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt, she looked almost ethereal in beauty, the type of person every boy wanted and every girl wanted to be.

The last time I saw her, she’d been giggling in Beau’s bedroom, her hair mussed and shirt unbuttoned.

Maria.

Betrayal filled my veins, caustic and slimy. It crawled through my body like a slow-



moving sludge.

I tried my hardest to keep my expression passive and unaffected, to not shoot accusatory eyes in Beau's direction.

I didn't have to, thank God, because Tanner did that for me.

"Did you invite her?" Tanner demanded, and Beau held both of his hands up placatingly, shaking his head from side to side.

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I couldn't help but note that Maria's expression fell, devastation sparking to life in her eyes, before she cleared it away.

"I came on my own," she said with an imperious set to her chin. Her eyes gleamed with defiance. "I overheard—"

"You overheard?" Aiden pinched the bridge of his nose. "Which fucking idiots were talking about it where you were able to 'overhear' it?"

Oh...

Oh fuck.

I remembered the glimpse of blonde hair in the corridor during my conversation with Kelly. I suddenly wished I could disappear in the floorboards, becoming nothing more than a puddle of goo that everyone overlooked and ignored.

Nothing to see here, folks. Just a disgusting goo puddle. Move right along, thank you very much.

The glare Aiden threw me? I had a feeling he knew exactly who to blame for this fiasco.

"Guys..." Heath warned in a singsong voice. "We don't have a lot of time."

"Fuck. Okay! Fuck!" Aiden ripped at a lock of his hair once again. At this stage, he wouldn't have any hair left by the time we got to...wherever we were going to go.

Turning to address the group at large, he said, “I know a lot of you don’t know what’s going on, but I have to warn you...it’ll be dangerous. Extremely fucking dangerous, so if that bothers you, then stay behind. I won’t be coddling any of you.” At the last statement, he turned towards me to stare directly into my eyes.

I flipped him off.

Kelly took a step forward, her expression one of determination, and the four men she’d brought with her stepped forward as well. I didn’t even think they realized they were flanking her in a protective formation—one in the front, one at the back, and two on either side—but they were. Caleb’s hand twitched as if he wanted to grab her and pull her against him. Or maybe he just wanted to spank her for getting him and his friends into this mess.

“Oh my fucking god!” Aiden threw both of his hands up into the air before leveling us with an incandescent glare capable of burning the hair off of our arms. Heaving out a sigh, he turned towards the hidden staircase. “Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?” Maria asked anxiously, inching a step closer to Beau. He immediately glanced in my direction, his blue eyes pained, before hurrying away from her and towards me. His hand went to the small of my back, guiding me towards the staircase, but I shrugged him off and hurried down before he could catch up.

Behind me, I heard Tanner release a bark of laughter, though I didn’t dare look behind me to see Beau’s reaction to that.

We ventured down the steep, rickety staircase in relative silence. All I could hear was the deafening sound of my heart pounding in my ears.

“What the fuck...?” Brett, the muscleman, murmured from behind me when we reached the bottom of the stairs. Kelly gasped.

“We found the tunnel months ago,” Aiden told them, and I would’ve almost described his tone as casual if I hadn’t known him as well as I did. There was an edge to it that hinted at the anxiety he wanted to keep hidden. The fear that this entire plan would go to shit because of what I did, who I trusted. “We believe others were attempting an escape before a cave-in blocked the entrance. Kace, Tanner, Beau, and I were able to break through the rocks to get to the other side. From what we gathered, these tunnels will lead to...um...it will lead to a way out of here.”

Heath chuckled drolly from behind me, and when I turned to stare at him, he rolled his eyes, almost as if he found Aiden’s antics both hilarious and exasperating. I wanted to glare at him, but I understood where his amusement was coming from.

We weren’t telling the newcomers the truth. How could we, when we believed that the tunnel would only lead to the next circle of Hell...or the next circle of Purgatory, as the case might be?

Lust.

Who would believe us when we said we were traveling to the realm of Lust?

“We’ll stick together, at least until it’s safe to separate,” Aiden continued, once again stepping into his role as the unofficial leader. He had a way of innately commanding respect from anyone who listened to him. No one would dare question his decisions, at least not to his face. “We don’t know what we’ll face—”

“What we’ll face?” The man Kelly introduced as Travis broke into harsh, nervous laughter. “What the fuck are you guys talking about? We’re at school. There’s nothing nefarious going on—”

“Then turn around and go back to your dorm,” Aiden retorted, glancing at his watch. “But I recommend waiting twenty minutes, when the monster is away.”

“Monster?” Maria’s voice shook.

“This is your last chance.” Aiden twisted his head to meet everyone’s eyes, including mine. I held his stare defiantly, not allowing myself to be cowed, and I swore I saw his lips twitch into the beginnings of a smile. “Turn back now.”

Travis nervously glanced down at Kelly, nearly a head shorter despite him being the smallest of all the males, before swallowing and straightening his spine. The poor kid looked absolutely petrified, but he kept his chin raised like a real trooper.

Maria once again moved to stand beside Beau, who in turn, moved to stand on the other side of Kace.

“I always had a feeling that there was something weird going on,” Maria admitted, glancing from face to face anxiously. “But I don’t... I mean...” She shook her head slowly, a strand of blonde hair escaping her ponytail. “I want answers.”

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“And we don’t have time to give you those answers, Miss Maria.” Heath flashed her a sharp smile before tilting his face upwards. His eyes fluttered shut, and his head cocked to the side. He held up a single finger as if to say, ‘wait for it.’

A second later, a loud, ear-shattering scream reverberated through the night. My heart battered my ribs with a frightening speed as I twisted my head to stare up the staircase.

“What the fuck is that?” Kace’s eyes were wide in his face, all of the blood seeming to drain from his cheeks. Before I could stop myself, I moved so I stood directly beside him, interlocking my fingers with his. His head snapped down to our joined hands, shock splaying across his face, before he gave it a tight squeeze and pulled me closer to him.

My blood sluiced in my veins as fear and anxiety wrought havoc on my thoughts.

What was that noise?

Or maybe the better question was...

What creature makes such a wretched sound?

The scream was quickly joined by another and another, until above us, the air was alive with a cacophony of noise. The sound... It was unlike anything I’d ever heard before. It scratched at my soul, reminding me distinctly of nails on a chalkboard and making my entire body tremble with fear. There was something so predatory about it, so innately lethal, that ice-cold fear encased my heart in an impenetrable vise.

“The reapers.” Aiden’s face lost all of its color as he ripped his gaze off of the staircase and focused on the caves. Tunnels branched in all directions, a labyrinth of rocky walls and pitch-black darkness we would have to venture through in order to escape. “We need to go. Now.”

“Reapers?” Maria whispered.

Aiden began distributing lanterns to Beau, Kace, and Tanner, keeping one for himself. He surprised the shit out of me by handing me a flashlight.

“Stay within my sight at all fucking times,” he hissed as the warm glow from the flashlight illuminated the craggy rock walls and the water dripping from an unknown source. The air was muggy and tepid, but it did little to stop the goosebumps from pebbling on my arms.

I tried to shut my emotions down, tried to make myself impassive in order to block out the fear and helplessness that gnawed at me, but it was impossible. Both of them sank their teeth in me, tightening my muscles and refusing to be shut out.

“I thought you wanted us to separate,” I retorted, and Aiden’s eyes flared, chips of obsidian in the scarce lighting.

“Now is not the time for your sarcasm, Bianaca.” Spinning on his heel, he took a step inside the cage. “Let’s move.”

Kace gripped my hand even tighter, dragging me along, as Tanner and Beau moved to stand at my back. Beau’s pomegranate scent combined with Tanner’s leather one overwhelmed me, giving me a sense of safety and security, which overrode the fear that threatened to suffocate me.

I was fucking terrified. I could only remember one time when I felt such fear, the day

Dylan, my step-brother, had—

Shaking my head from side to side, I took a step into the tunnel.

Behind me, the screams of the reapers got even louder, the noise stabbing at my ears. Pain exploded in my skull, but I pushed the feeling aside as I focused on putting one foot in front of the other. One step. Another step. And then another.

My light bounced off the walls as I walked, trusting Aiden to lead the way.

Directly in front of us, the path broke into two separate tunnels, each one leading in a different direction. Tanner cursed from behind me, and Kace's grip in mine turned to iron.

But then Heath moved forward, his gait decidedly cocky and nonchalant, and headed down the right pathway, whistling beneath his breath.

“Where the fuck do you think you're going?” Aiden hissed, and though I couldn't see his face from where he stood in front of me, I detected the slightest hitch to his voice I'd never heard before.

He was absolutely terrified.

“Did you ever read the poem concerning the Nine Circles of Hell?” Heath asked, his tone almost casual. “They had to cross the River Acheron on a boat to reach Limbo.”

“What the fuck does that have to do with anything?” Tanner demanded.

I could practically hear Heath's answering smile. “Because it tells us where we need to go.”



“How does that...?” I trailed off as the answer came to me, my eyes darting to the water dripping from the walls. “Oh. The water.”

“According to the poem, Limbo is full of people who were never baptized. People who didn’t have enough faith to enter Heaven.” Heath paused, allowing us to catch up. I swore with every step we took, our lights became more and more unreliable. My flashlight went from a dull golden glow to a nearly non-existent stream of white, barely able to penetrate the darkness a few steps in front of me. Tanner’s lantern constantly burnt out, despite his repeated attempts to light it.

What the fuck was happening?

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“But the poem isn’t true,” Heath continued, just as my flashlight sputtered once before turning off completely. Panic infiltrated my lungs as I banged my flashlight repeatedly against my leg, willing it to turn back on. Only Kace’s hand in mine and the thin glow of his flame allowed me any peace of mind whatsoever. “Limbo is actually where the souls rest while they’re waiting for Judgment Day. Where they are either devoured by Death...or returned to the land of the living. But if you choose the latter option, you need to fight. You can’t stand idly by. You need to—”

“What the fuck was that?” Tanner interrupted, his voice unnaturally shrill. I spun towards him, keeping my hand locked with Kace’s, to see his head turned in the direction of one of the passageways we didn’t take. Beau held his lantern up as well, trying to see what had captured Tanner’s attention, but the tunnel was empty, nothing but darkness and stones as far as the eye could see.

“I don’t see anything,” I whispered. Somehow, I found that I couldn’t raise my voice above a breathy exhale. I couldn’t explain it in words, but the silence felt...fragile. I feared what would happen if I spoke above a soft murmur.

“No! Right there!” Maria screeched, and we all whipped our heads towards where she stood in the back of the group, pointing. Her entire body shook as she slowly began to back up. “Is this some kind of joke? I want to go home! Now!”

“I don’t see anything,” Caleb told her gruffly, though I noticed he took a step closer to Kelly, as if he planned to physically shield her with his body if it came to that.

“I don’t—” My flashlight flicked back on, the soft golden glow illuminating the passageway directly to the right of me.

Terror expelled all coherent thoughts from my mind.

A...a creature lurked at the very end of the tunnel. I didn't know how else to describe it, except that it was a monster, something plucked straight from my nightmares.

It had no face.

It was nothing but a slab of gray skin, as if someone had used sandpaper to rid it of all distinguishing features, including eyes, nose, and mouth. Its body seemed to be made entirely of shadows, dark tendrils coiling around a form that was twice the size of me, with a reptilian-like tail and tiny claws for hands. As I watched, horrified, the creature darted away.

"What the fuck?" My voice was nothing but a whimper.

"As long as we stay on the pathway, we should be fine," Heath whispered. "Walking the path of the righteous."

"How the fuck do you know that?" Brett demanded, but Heath didn't answer, continuing to follow the trail of water trickling down the stone walls.

Another creature raced through the darkness directly to the left of me, its featureless face twisted in my direction. But when I turned to stare directly at it, there was no one there. Nothing but unrelenting, oppressive darkness.

Maria began to cry behind me, and both Beau and Tanner put their hands on my shoulders. I let them, mainly because I needed their comfort now more than ever.

A growl echoed through the tunnel, and we all jumped, pausing in our movements.

"What was that?" Kelly whispered, her tiny voice trembling.

“Just keep walking,” Heath told her, already picking up the pace.

“What are those...those things?” Maria demanded.

I didn’t think Heath was going to answer, so it surprised the shit out of me when he did. “Souls,” he responded, just as in front of us, brilliant white light exploded from the end of the tunnel. “Souls who have tried to escape and wandered off the path. Souls who have become lost in the darkness, becoming nothing more than monsters wanting to feast on the flesh of the righteous.”

Silence reigned after his announcement, broken only when Tanner exclaimed, “Holy fuck.”

The light in front of us seemed to beckon me forward, and I found myself practically sprinting to reach it. I needed to get out of here, needed to get away from these shadowy, faceless monsters lurking in every direction.

We took another right, closer towards the mysterious tunnel, and the only sound we could hear was the stomping of our shoes on the compacted dirt.

Just before we entered the bright tunnel, Heath paused, turning towards us. His expression was uncharacteristically grave, his lips curved downwards.

“The next circle we’ll be entering is Lust,” he explained. “You guys need to be prepared for that.”

“Circle?” A slightly hysterical laugh escaped Maria. “Where the fuck are we? Can someone please explain what is happening?”

“Lust?” That was from the blond man who’d arrived with Kelly. His expression remained utterly impassive as he fixed his glacial eyes on Heath. “We really are in

the Nine Circles of Hell, aren't we?"

"Purgatory, technically," Tanner murmured, but we ignored him.

"What should we expect?" Kace interjected, his hand tightening around mine. "All of us to begin pawing at each other and removing clothes?"

I tried to give his hand a reassuring squeeze, tried to remind him that I was there, but I knew his mind was too far away to focus on that.

Amusement and sadness flared in Heath's eyes, a corrosive mix I couldn't even begin to understand.

"I guess we'll know in a second, now won't we?" And with that, he turned back towards the tunnel of light, took a deep breath, and stepped through.

7

Bianaca

Stepping through the tunnel was like diving into a deep pool of blistering hot water. Immediately, the light stabbed at my arms, the pain intense and sudden, and I scratched at my skin with a groan of pain. My hand slipped from Kace's as pure white light replaced the darkness I'd almost grown accustomed to. It blinded me, my eyes stinging as if I'd stared into the sun too long, and more and more pain radiated down my arms.

A strangled gasp escaped me as I finally exited the tunnel of light, landing on my knees on a surface that was most definitely not rocky dirt.

No, it was white, the tiles polished so meticulously, I could see my reflection in them—my disheveled blonde hair, my too pale face, and my sunken cheekbones.

The room was also familiar.

I blinked, attempting to allow my eyes to adjust to the dim waiting room I'd fallen into. Kace landed with a grunt beside me, his red hair falling haphazardly into his face. Only Heath remained on his feet, his eyes shrewd and calculating as he surveyed the room we'd landed in.

Plastic chairs sat in the center of the room, two rows of five. A drinking fountain sat behind the chairs on a slightly raised dais, its steel siding beginning to rust with age. Directly adjacent to the fountain was a makeshift locker room—nothing but cubbies

to hold the girls' belongings and a single bench. Bathrooms were visible to the left.

On the other side of the small waiting area was a door that I knew led to offices. The tiles transitioned into wooden boards, and a single desk blocked the way to the cubicles resting inside. There was also a tiny store that sold everything from stylish leotards to shorts and scrunchies.

In front of the chairs were glass windows that looked into a gymnasium. The corrugated walls were painted a hideous brown-yellow and had only a few windows looking into the parking lot. The ceiling curved steeply upwards, resembling that of a warehouse instead of a gym, and was covered in multiple fans, all swirling rapidly to provide the stuffy room with circulation. Blue mats littered the ground, along with six balance beams—three only a couple inches off the ground—and bars with a foam pit beneath them.

Victory Gymnastics, the gym I'd been going to since I was a little girl. The gym I sold my soul to train at, forgoing a car in order to pay for my lessons.

"What are we doing here?" My voice trembled ever so slightly, especially when Heath whipped his head in my direction, one eyebrow raised.

"You recognize this place?" His nose wrinkled with distaste at the familiar, sweaty smell.

I swallowed down the lump in my throat. "It's where I train," I explained, turning to address the room at large. Maria hugged her arms around her chest, her green eyes wide in her face, while Kelly and her men simply blinked at me wordlessly. Beau took a step closer, as if he meant to comfort me, but I immediately backed away.

Instinctively, I reached towards the hand nearest to mine, clasping it tightly and giving it a squeeze. His hand tightened around mine almost imperceptibly, his rings

brushing against my skin.

Aiden.

“Why are we here?” he demanded, his tone acerbic. He threw accusatory eyes at Heath, as if the brown-haired class president held all the answers. I was beginning to believe he did.

My distrust for him grew exponentially by the second, until I feared I would explode from the sensation. Still, I didn’t focus on him—or anyone, really—as I stared intently through the windows at the gymnasium I knew would be stifling hot and humid.

“What does this have to do with lust?” I whispered, my voice shaking. Aiden’s hand tightened around mine once before he gave it a squeeze and released it. I wanted to cry out, to beg him to take it back, but he was already stalking towards Heath, stabbing one finger into his chest and glaring at the other man with so much anger, I feared Heath would incinerate.

Instead, the crazy man just continued flashing that same disarming smile, only this time, there was the slightest tightening of skin around the corners of his mouth.

“Why do you think I have all the answers?” Heath questioned, cocking an eyebrow.

Aiden growled. “Don’t you?”

“I mean, I think Bianaca in a leotard is hot as fuck,” Tanner piped in, ignoring the livid glare Beau threw his way. “But I’m pretty sure Kelly isn’t imagining our girl in a leotard at night while she gets herself off.”

Caleb looked seconds away from strangling him. “Don’t fucking talk about her like



that.”

“Awww. How adorable.” Tanner offered him a sharp-toothed grin before turning towards Kace, who was nearest to him. “He’s standing up for his girlfriend. I think my heart just threw up a teeny tiny bit.”

“She’s not my—”

“These circles,” Heath interrupted, forcing all eyes back on him, “often show the aspects of ourselves we choose not to look at too closely. Or in this case, the side of lust that is dangerous and wicked. The side that drives people to do despicable acts.” He turned those dark eyes onto me, though for once, he wasn’t smiling. “You need to face your monsters, doll, or we’ll all be stuck here.”

“No.” I was shaking my head before he’d even finished speaking. “No. I won’t.”

I couldn’t.

Not when the pain was too raw, too real, too prominent. It stabbed at something deep inside of me, something already gushing blood, until my hands were covered in the thick, red liquid. My heart shattered, every piece cutting up my insides like glass.

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In my peripheral, I noticed Beau had gone deathly still, his face draining of all color. A tiny crease appeared between his eyes as if he was sifting through his memories, remembering...

“No!” I pushed past Heath and stormed into the gymnasium. The door slammed shut behind me.

Through the glass separating the lobby from the gym, I watched Aiden storm towards the door and pull at the handle.

But the door didn’t budge.

“B, let us in,” he growled out. “Stop fucking around.”

“I didn’t lock the door, asshole.” I felt ridiculous, like a petulant child throwing a temper tantrum. But what Heath wanted me to face...

I couldn’t do it.

I wasn’t strong enough, brave enough, drunk enough. I couldn’t bare myself to all of these people, all of these strangers. Not yet.

Beau placed one hand against the glass, his face a mask of agony, and I resisted the urge to cross to him and place my hand over his. Instead, I moved towards the door, tugging at the handle.

Locked.

“What the hell...?” I murmured, pulling it again.

“Bianaca...” There was a warning in Aiden’s voice, telling me he would spank the shit out of me if I didn’t get the door opened.

“It’s locked on your side,” I called to him, and I heard the distinct sound of him pulling at the handle repeatedly. And then the sound of him throwing his body against the wood.

“What the fuck is going on?” I knew his question wasn’t directed at me.

Ice cold fear gripped my heart, squeezing until I felt all of it rush to my toes and fingers. I swayed slightly, dizziness threatening to overtake me, as terror stilled my lungs. I could barely breathe, barely think straight.

“Heath?” My voice was scarcely a whisper.

“You need to face this yourself, doll.” There was no humor in his words, no wicked amusement. His solemn tone had the hairs on my arms standing at attention. “If you can face this, we can leave.”

“And if I don’t?” I asked, trembling like a leaf in the wind.

Heath didn’t answer, but then again, he didn’t have to.

If I didn’t face this, then we were as good as dead.

Would I be forced to relive that dreadful moment? Replay it on a continuous loop? Would everyone see what Dylan did to me? The way he forced me down and—

“Little sssister...” The voice resembled a snake hissing, and I couldn’t help but

visualize a forked tongue slithering out of the reptile's mouth.

Fear held me immobile, threatening to consume me completely.

On the other side of the glass, I could hear the others banging on the door, throwing chairs against the impenetrable glass, and screaming my name. Their words and actions barely penetrated the hazy terror clouding my mind.

Briefly, a memory bombarded me.

A car.

Alcohol.

Pain.

Fear.

Crash.

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Before I could be swept away in the vaguely forming memory, the voice spoke again, “Little sssister, I wassss waiting for you.” I heard what sounded like a body slithering across the ground and the disgusting slap of flesh, but I didn’t dare move, didn’t dare turn around.

“D-dylan.” I squeezed my eyelids shut as a single tear cascaded down my cheek, resting on my lips.

“Little sssister.”

“Bianaca!” That was Kace, his voice laced with terror. And it was that hitch in his tone, the fear emanating from that one single word, that finally had me twisting towards my step-brother.

Or the monster posing as my step-brother.

A slimy white slug, easily five times the size of me, slithered behind a wall of folded up mats.

My breathing was shallow, huffing in and out, as flecks of light danced in my vision.

“Dylan?” I repeated, unable to peel my eyes away from where the creature disappeared to.

“I’ve been waiting for you, little sssister,” he hissed, and those words...

They were the same words he said the day he—

“Leave me alone!” I screamed, my voice catching. “Leave me the fuck alone!”

The Dylan-creature left its hiding space, sliding towards me.

Disgust filled me, as did a horror so strong and potent that I threatened to lose consciousness.

It had a large, slug-like body, its color reminding me distinctly of cracked eggshells with marks of jaundiced yellow scattered throughout. Slime oozed from its pores as it crawled across the floor, its arms nothing but two tiny stubs that made wet, slapping noises against the gymnasium mats. And its face...

It had the distinct features of my step-brother, with its blue eyes and crooked nose, but everything about it was distorted. One of its eyes was larger than the other, while thick wrinkles circled its face, giving him a narrow-eyed appearance. Where his mouth should've been was nothing but a gaping maw, easily the size of my head, with two sharp rows of teeth layered into a circle.

When it spoke again, its lips didn't move. The sound seemed to reverberate from the creature's body, echoing off the walls of the gym.

“Little sssister.”

“Leave me alone!”

It continued to trudge towards me, leaving behind a wet trail of slime. Its deformed head cocked curiously to the side, its larger blue eye fixated on me with an unnerving focus, while the smaller one rolled back into its head.

I took a step backwards, my hands searching for something, anything, I could use as a weapon. My eyes latched on a weight rack a few feet away, in the corner of the gym.

“Take off your clothes, little sssssister.”

The memory of that night bombarded me.

Those threatening words.

His hands on my skin.

My hoarse screams...

“No!” I ran as fast as my legs could carry me in the direction of the weights. Behind me, I could hear my men screaming and the Dylan-creature’s deranged laughter, ending on a hiss.

Its wrinkly body took up nearly an entire floor mat as it continued its slow crawl towards me.

My hand closed around the nearest weight, though I knew a weapon as small as this would do nothing against a beast of that size.

Oh god.

My death flashed before my eyes so vividly, I wondered if it had actually happened before. If I was in a continuous loop in Purgatory where I would die a million times, all because of Dylan.

No!

I refused to cower.

I refused to die because of this sadistic motherfucker.

“Little ssssssister.” Its voice came from directly behind me, and I spun, the weight raised.

Its disgusting mouth was mere inches from my face. When it exhaled, its putrid smelling breath assaulted my senses, and I wanted to gag.

This close, I could see that each of its teeth were carved into triangles. It had no tongue, and nothing but darkness stared back at me from the inside of its mouth. If it ate me...

I would become one with the darkness.

I couldn't allow that to happen. Not again. Dylan had already taken so much from me, and I refused to allow his monster to steal my life as well.

Tears streamed down my face as I roared in rage, ramming the weight against the creature's face. Its body toppled slightly, bursts of goo erupting from its head and raining down on me.

Still, I didn't stop hitting. And hitting. And hitting.



The body beneath me changed and contorted until instead of a monster, Dylan himself stared back at me. His face was mottled with dark bruises, and his eyes were almost completely swollen shut. Blood pooled from his lips as he cried, beseeching me with his eyes to show leniency and compassion.

Anger thrummed through my veins, as strong as a sparking wire, and more tears made salty tracks down my face.

“Please.” His voice was a whimper.

“You raped me!” I screamed into his face, bringing the weight back down onto his head. “Over.”Hit. “Over.”Hit. “And over.”Hit. “Again!” I spat at his disfigured face. “You don’t deserve my mercy.” Blood dripped down his cheek, staining the collar of his shirt, and a part of me fixated on that tiny droplet, utterly riveted.

I remembered that night vividly. The way he cornered me after gymnastics, hours after Eric Lang, the owner, had left. The way he held me down and forced himself on me, ignoring my pleas for him to stop.

And then the way he did it again and again, stopping only when...

Only when Beau found out.

That final memory took me by surprise, something I’d apparently forgotten when I arrived in Purgatory. I didn’t focus on that for too long, though, not with the rage scrambling my brain until all coherent thoughts fled.

“I should’ve done this to you the first night you held me down,” I hissed in his face. “I should’ve destroyed you before I allowed you to destroy me.”

More and more tears rushed down my face, cracking my heart open, as I stared at the

man who'd abused me for years. His pain filled eyes turned dull and lifeless, and his body hardened beneath mine as he turned to stone. Then he crumbled, becoming nothing but thousands of particles of dust that one gust of wind could remove.

Irrelevant.

Dylan was irrelevant. Nothing. A rapist who didn't deserve a second more of my time or attention. He would get what was coming to him, and maybe, just maybe, I would be able to heal from all he did to me. All of the abuse that my mother overlooked. All of the pain. All of the fear.

Memory after memory stabbed at my skull. Locked doors at night. Hiding under my blankets. His hand on my thigh, my breast, my pussy. His lips forcing mine open. The fear that if I told someone, no one would believe me.

And then the one person who did believe me. My best friend. The man I'd love fiercely for my entire life.

"You're okay. Bianaca, drop the weight. You're okay. You're okay." Strong arms banded around me as that familiar voice repeated my name, his hand stroking my hair. But that didn't make any sense. It was Beau's voice, and Beau didn't talk. Not after he witnessed his own step-father murdering his mother. I hadn't heard him talk in years. "I have you, B. I have you. I'm never letting you go."

I turned in Beau's arms, inhaling his familiar pomegranate scent, and sobbed into his shirt.

For the first time since I learned about Purgatory, I fell apart.

And I wasn't sure there would be enough pieces for anyone to put back together again.

Maybe I was just as irrelevant as Dylan—nothing but dust that would blow away in the wind.

Nothing.

I was nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

8

Beau

I held her to me as she cried, peppering kisses across the crown of her head. Her tears stained my shirt, but I didn't release her. Couldn't release her. After what I'd witnessed...

Pure terror froze my muscles when I replayed the moment that monster had slithered towards Bianaca. I'd screamed, using a voice that had barely been used in years, and pounded my fists against the glass. My knuckles were painted in blood from how hard I'd whacked at the glass and door, willing it to bend beneath my brute force. Heath had told us repeatedly that we had to let her fight this alone, but fuck that. I'd been in love with Bianaca. Steal my entire life, and I couldn't allow her to face this battle on her own.

Her tiny fists dug into my shirt as I rocked her back and forth. The disgusting goo that had sprayed across her body had dissipated like smoke the second "Dylan" had died. I didn't know if it was an illusion or a sadistic game, but either way, I was glad she no longer bore proof of what she'd just endured.

"Shhh. Shhh," I cooed, stroking her tangled hair.

Dylan...

White-hot rage cascaded through me at the thought of that little fucker. And with the rage came the beginnings of a memory.

I'd known about what he did to her, hadn't I?

My mind vaguely recalled pummeling his face in with my fist. And then blistering pain in my side as a knife stabbed at me...

I tried to grasp at those memories, tried to bring them to the forefront of my mind, but they trickled away like water from a wrung out, overused sponge.

"Beau," Bianaca whimpered, holding me tighter. Over her head, I noticed Aiden, Kace, and Tanner staring down at her with varying degrees of sadness, anger, and horror in their eyes. Even Heath's mask had dropped, revealing a rage so predatory, I genuinely feared for Dylan's life if he ever showed his face.

None of them went to her, though, understanding that she didn't need their comfort. Not right then.

Bianaca always maintained an image of toughness and superiority. She acted as if nothing hurt her, as if she were above all of this shit. But I knew she hurt and bled, that she wore her pain tattooed on her heart for everyone to see. Her beauty was juxtaposed by a fragility I doubted she let many people see.

All I wanted was to hold her in my arms and take away the pain I could see plaguing her mind like a life-threatening virus. I wanted to breathe in her vanilla and honeysuckle scent. See the dimples in her cheeks when she flashed that radiant, toe-curling smile. Joke and smile with her until all of that sadness, pain, and fear diminished from her eyes.

Kelly, her men, and Maria all gave us space, though I could tell they were getting impatient. Maria kept casting furtive glances in our direction, her eyes laced with pain and something akin to betrayal.

Nothing had happened between us, and nothing would've happened, even if Bianaca hadn't come to my room. Maria had knocked on my door only a few minutes earlier, and like an idiot, I'd let her inside. She'd been utterly wasted, spewing incoherent ramblings with her hair mussed and eyes glazed. She'd then begun unbuttoning her shirt, though she only got the first few undone before I stopped her. I couldn't speak with words, so instead, I wrote on a notepad that we couldn't do this.

And that was when Bianaca had arrived.

Bianaca, who I'd loved since I was a child.

Bianaca, whose inner light somehow chased away the shadows in my life.

Bianaca, who slayed me with one look, one flutter of her lashes.

She'd told me she loved me, and in return, I broke her heart.

Why couldn't I have just said those words back to her? Why did I have to be such a damn coward?

My therapist had assured me time and time again that there was nothing wrong with me, that just because I chose not to speak did not make me less of a man. But fuck, I should've done something. Instead, my own fear nearly lost me the woman I loved more than life itself.

"Beau." Bianaca sniffled and finally pulled her face out of my shirt, staring up at me with wide eyes. "Y-you spoke?" She phrased it as a question, though I detected a corrosive mixture of awe and suspicion in her voice. I couldn't even blame her. I hadn't spoken in years until only very recently, when I talked to the guys about our escape plan. Bianaca had overheard and rightfully felt betrayed. And then there was the whole incident with Maria...

Keeping my eyes locked on her, I brushed my thumb over her plush lower lip. Her tongue instinctively poked out, almost as if she wanted to lick me, before it disappeared back into her tempting mouth.

Aiden cleared his throat. “We’ll give you guys a moment.” He nodded towards Tanner and Kace, who both looked as if they wanted to argue, Tanner especially. He gave Bianaca one last unreadable look before reluctantly following the other two a short distance away, where Kelly, her men, and Maria were waiting.

“Bianaca.” My voice was raspy from disuse. To be completely honest, my throat ached fiercely, the pain reminiscent of hot coals being rubbed over my skin. I brought one hand up to my throat, while my other one remained on Bianaca’s back, holding her to me.

I didn’t know what to say to her. An apology felt so damn inconsequential, considering what she’d been through. She’d had to fight that...that monster alone.

Just like she’d had to face Dylan alone time and time again.

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Anger momentarily blinded me, stealing away my vision and replacing it with a red sheen, before I worked to regulate my breathing. In and out. In and out.

“Beau.” Her tiny hand cupped my cheek, and I squeezed my eyelids shut, twisting my head slightly to press a kiss against her palm. “I don’t...I don’t...” Tears trickled down her cheek as she struggled to formulate words.

I pressed my forehead against hers and began to rock us. “Shh. You don’t need to say anything.” My voice broke from disuse on that final word.

“You’re speaking,” she pointed out once again, but this time, her tone only held wonderment. Joy. Surprise. When she pulled back, her eyes were alight with something radiant and bright, something that had my heart hammering in a way that was almost painful.

“I’ve been silent too long.” I felt something travel down my own cheek, but I didn’t lift a hand to brush the tear away. I wanted her to see me, all of me, and know that I was hers. Irrevocably and completely. “I’m so sorry about everything. You never should’ve gone through that with Dylan. If I’d known sooner...”

“Hey.” She captured my cheeks once more, pulling my attention down to her gorgeous face. “Don’t blame yourself, okay? This isn’t your fault.” She hesitated, her tongue snaking out to lick her bottom lip, before she forged on. “I meant what I said the other day. I don’t expect you to say it back, especially if you’re with Mar—”

I pressed my lips to hers.



Immediately, fireworks burst to life behind my eyes and fire ran through my veins. The innate sense of safety and completion engulfed me in a warm embrace. I never wanted to escape it.

This woman...

Her arms...

It was where I belonged.

She released a breathy moan, her arms reaching upwards to wrap around my neck. I could feel her fingers in my hair, pulling at the blond strands, and I deepened the kiss, tilting my head to the side. Her tongue prodded the seam of my lips, demanding more, and I obliged eagerly.

Anything she wanted, I would give her.

But there was something she needed to know first.

I pulled back, ignoring her tiny gasp of surprise, and once again pressed my forehead against hers. “Maria...” I coughed, my frail voice wobbling slightly. “Nothing happened between us. I promise you.”

“Beau, you don’t have to—”

“I love you too,” I blurted out before I could lose my nerve. “I love you more than life itself. Bianaca, you’re my everything. You have been for quite a damn long time. I never wanted to say anything for fear of ruining our friendship, but as I said before, I’m done with being silent. Not when it concerns you. I almost lost you today, and I—”

She molded her lips to mine, the force of her kiss sending me to the ground, her perfect body on top of mine. The curves of her breasts brushed against my shirt, and if there weren't an audience watching us, I would memorize every piece of her as I'd yearned to do for years. I would kiss down her neck, across each breast, and—

“Tanner,” she said abruptly, sitting upright. Her eyes were wild and frantic, her chest heaving.

Another man's name leaving her lips had me freezing, my muscles coiling tighter than an angry snake. I didn't speak—so used to silence, I was able to communicate without any words—and her flushed face twisted behind us, towards where the others were watching.

“Beau, I love you. You know I do. But...” She lowered her gaze to the ground, staring intently at her thighs.

Over her shoulder, Heath, Aiden, Kace, and Tanner were all staring at us.

Heath had an amused smirk pulling up his lips, even as his eyes danced with lust. Aiden appeared almost intrigued, as if he were attempting to solve a difficult math equation in his head. Kace refused to meet my eyes, immediately dropping his head with flames rising to his cheeks.

And Tanner?

He looked fucking devastated.

It was only then that I realized...

I wasn't the only one who'd fallen for the striking girl with a heart way too big for her own good and darkness tainting her past.

But now wasn't the time to think about our romantic entanglements, or lack thereof.

"Hey." I pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I understand."

"Beau, I don't—"

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“I understand,” I repeated, cutting her off. My eyes dipped to her lips, wanting nothing more than to claim them in a bruising, possessive kiss that told all of the other males present she was mine and mine alone. But...she wasn’t. At least I didn’t think she was. “But now isn’t the time to talk about it.”

Her face scrunched together in confusion before she glanced at the watching crowd and nodded, blushing. She scrambled off of me, her body still trembling from her fight with the monster, before extending a hand for me to take. I accepted it, allowing her to help me to my feet, and pulled her into my arms.

“It’s okay, B. It’s okay. I promise you it’ll be okay. We’ll get out of here. I promise you, we’ll make it out of here alive. All of us.”

I should have been exalted at the thought of coming home, knowing that all of these horrors would be nothing but distant memories, knowing that we would be safe. Instead, inexplicable trepidation and dread unfurled in my stomach.

What more would we have to face before we found our way back to the living?

As I stared over Bianaca’s shoulder at the four guys watching us intently, my mind lit up with a new epiphany. If I had to protect her on my own, I didn’t know if I would be able to keep my promise to her. But with the five of us, we would get her through this. Or die trying.

I didn’t know how I felt about the others, except for the fact that Aiden was an asshole and I didn’t trust Heath, but if they helped me protect her, then I’d get along with them. Surprisingly, I felt no jealousy as I stared at their faces over her head, all

of them regarding her with the same reverence and wistfulness I imagine I did.

I was almost positive they weren't all in love with her the way I was, at least not yet, but that was okay.

As long as they protected her with their lives, we wouldn't have a problem. But the second one of them betrayed us...

My eyes narrowed on Heath.

...I wouldn't hesitate to do what needed to be done.

I'd killed once before, at least I suspected I did, and I would kill again in order to keep Bianaca Steal safe.

Bianaca

Isniffed, pulling away from Beau and wiping at my eyes. I needed to be strong, to not fall apart. There were cracks in my armor I doubted I'd ever be able to fill up, but I was determined not to let that weakness show. I would hold my chin up high, despite my eyes being rimmed in red and puffy from crying.

Dylan would not break me. Not his memory nor his monster. Not the demons that plagued my sleep. Not the disgusting feeling of his hands on my body, holding me down as I writhed and wept.

The first time he raped me happened when I was sixteen, right at this gym.

Eric Lang, the owner and a longtime friend of mine, had left for the day. I was the only gymnast he'd given the key to, with the stipulation that I lock up after myself.

I always thought the old man knew more about my situation than he'd let on, though I didn't know if that made him a savior or another monster. If he knew about the abuse and malicious touches, then why didn't he put a stop to them? Maybe the world was made up of nothing but cowards, all of them seeing the injustice in the world but too scared to act on it. It was that mentality that made society evil. It was a different type of evil than what I associated with Dylan, mainly because it was culpability disguised as ignorance. You couldn't be innocent if your self-interest and self-preservation prohibited you from helping others. It was insidious because it was intentionally negligent, not because you held wicked aspirations.

The day Dylan raped me, I'd assumed I was alone when I began practicing my floor routine.

I wasn't.

Dylan was there, a disgusting mold I could only dream of eradicating from my life. He'd watched me through the glass windows, probably jerking himself off, before he crept inside my sanctuary and tarnished it with sin. He'd ripped my leotard down the middle and did things no child should have to endure, especially not by the hands of someone who, for all intents and purposes, was supposed to love and protect her.

I burned that leotard the very next day.

I'd lived in fear of Dylan since then. Every night, he would sneak into my bedroom. He was never quiet, but nobody stopped him. Not my step-father, with his bulging belly and receding hairline. Not my elfin mother, who'd appeared paler and paler as the days dragged on, as if she were the one getting destroyed every damn day.

Nobody, that was, until I ran into Beau—

Once again, the memory slipped through my fingers like ice-cold water. I knew with unwavering certainty that the second I captured it, I would have the final piece of this macabre puzzle. I would finally understand how I ended up here, in Purgatory. How Beau and Dylan ended up here with me. Until then, I was left with nothing but blurry images that no amount of rearranging could make clear.

On shaky legs, feeling oddly like the Little Mermaid learning to walk for the first time, I moved towards the others. I kept my head down, my blonde hair falling in front of my face, and refused to make eye contact. Despite that, I could feel their gazes penetrating my scalp, demanding my attention.

Aiden cleared his throat first. “B...”

“Don’t,” I said, cutting him off. A giant knot of nerves got caught in my throat, and I coughed to alleviate some of the tension. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You did it, Bianaca.” Heath’s voice was devoid of its usual mirth and levity. He sounded uncharacteristically somber as he rested a hand on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “We can move on to the next circle.”

I struggled to form words, but they failed me. I couldn’t even lift my head to meet the dark gaze I could feel aimed my way. The only thing keeping me grounded was Beau’s presence at my back, his heat migrating into my own body. I wanted to turn around and throw myself into his arms once again, but I didn’t. Couldn’t.

I repeated my new mantra in my head.

Dylan did not break me. I’m still here, still alive, still fighting.

He won’t ruin me.

“How do we get to the next...circle?” a tiny voice questioned. Kelly. I wanted to reassure her that everything was okay, that I was okay, but I couldn’t find my voice.

Instead of answering in words, Heath moved away from me. I lifted my head just enough to see him stroll out of the gym and back into the lobby. He paused, waiting to see if we were following him, and his dark eyes locked on mine.

His expression...

I couldn’t quite read it.



There were a thousand words emanating from his eyes, some of them screaming louder than others. It was a myriad of pain and shock and a blinding rage that had my mouth popping open in shock. Heath was the last person I expected to be indignant on my behalf. Sometimes, I thought he hated me, while other times, I could see the lust sparking in his dark gaze.

But just because he lusted for me did not mean he was on my side. On anyone's side, really, except his own.

"Come on." His brown loafers squeaked against the clean tiling as he exited the gym. Kelly, her men, and Maria followed him, but Kace, Aiden, Tanner, and Beau remained behind.

Staring at me.

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“Are you sure you’re okay?” Tanner murmured out of the corner of his mouth.

I physically forced my shoulders back and tilted my chin upwards. Tears burned my eyes, but I didn’t let them fall. I fucking refused to. I’d shed enough tears because of Dylan Holebroke today.

“I will be,” I answered honestly.

Taking a deep breath, I hurried out of the gym and into the brisk night air.

I stopped the second my feet hit the asphalt, shock forcing my mouth open as I blinked rapidly.

“What the...?”

A single street light illuminated the parking lot outside of the gym, its golden glow unable to reach the farthest corner.

And besides that? Darkness. Nothing but darkness spread as far as the eye could see.

It was an unnatural type of darkness. When you went outside at night, there was usually a star or two in the sky, illuminating your surroundings in a pasty white glow. Or maybe there was a sliver of moon. And even when the sky was devoid of a moon or stars, there was always some sort of light. Light from a nearby building or a window. Light from a town. Light from a candle.

But here? There was nothing. Blankets of pitch spread in all directions, not a single

light breaking apart the monotony of darkness.

“What the fuck?” Tanner cursed from behind me.

Heath pointed towards something in the distance. My eyes strained to see the object, but I could only distinguish a tiny speck of white.

“The next circle,” he explained, dropping his arm to his side and removing his backpack. Before any of us could comment, he dropped to the ground with an audible “oomf.”

“We have to cross through all of this darkness to get there?” Maria’s voice trembled, and she wrapped her arms around her stomach. An unhealthy green tint had taken over her face, making her cheeks look even more sallow and gaunt than before.

“Which is why we’ll settle here for a bit. Rest, eat, and recharge.” He used his backpack as a makeshift pillow and reclined against it, his legs spread out in front of him.

Aiden gave him a disbelieving look. “Shouldn’t we keep moving?” As if in answer to his question, something squawked in the darkness, followed immediately by a roar that had goosebumps pebbling on my skin. Terror cascaded over me in an ice-cold tsunami, though Heath appeared relatively unperturbed.

“Once we’re in the darkness, we won’t be able to stop and rest.” His frosty gaze shifted to include everyone, not just Aiden. “Bianaca just endured something so fucking traumatic, I’m surprised she hasn’t fallen over. She needs a damn minute before we continue on. Especially since the other circles will only get worse.”

I opened my mouth to protest, to tell him that I didn’t need to be coddled, before immediately snapping it shut. Because the truth was...I did. Maybe not coddled

necessarily, but I needed a damn break.

Seeing that creature had terrified me, and right then, I was running on nothing but adrenaline. The second the adrenaline faded, I would be useless to them all.

“He’s right,” I whispered. “I need... I just need a second.”

Caleb looked as if he wanted to argue, but Travis, the short one with glasses, shook his head. With a growl, the tall man grabbed Kelly’s wrist and pulled her away from us. The other three followed.

Maria glanced in their direction helplessly, turned towards Beau, and then finally settled her gaze on me. With a heavy sigh, she moved to sit beneath the street light, pulling open her backpack to nibble on an apple.

“Don’t go into the darkness!” Heath called, his tone decidedly lackadaisical. “Unless you want to be eaten by twisted souls!” He ended his warning with a wink in my direction before folding his hands over his chest and closing his eyes. Less than a minute later, soft snores escaped his parted lips.

Beau grabbed my wrist and gently pulled me away from Heath, towards where Kace, Tanner, and Aiden were huddled together. I moved to join their group, my shoulders brushing against Kace’s and Aiden’s.

“I don’t trust him,” Aiden growled out, and I didn’t need eyes to know he was glaring intently at a sleeping Heath.

“I don’t either,” I confessed. My body felt sluggish, unbearably heavy, and before anyone could stop me, I collapsed on the ground. The men stared at me in concern before immediately sitting as well. Kace reached into his backpack and handed me a granola bar and a bottle of water. I took the offerings gratefully, my hand shaking as I

attempted to open the wrapper. After my third attempt to peel back the plastic, Aiden hissed, leaned forward, and ripped it open. “Thank you,” I said softly. He nodded in response.

“So what do we want to do about Heath?” Kace whispered, nodding in his direction.

“What can we do?” I shrugged my shoulders helplessly. “Everything he’s said has been the truth so far, right? We need him if we’re going to make it out of this shithole alive.”

“Alive.” Tanner scoffed and reached into his jacket pocket, procuring his favorite lighter. He unclasped it, and a bright red flame lit up the parking lot. “Isn’t that subjective.” It wasn’t a question, though I still felt the need to answer as if it were one.

“We’re still alive.” I placed my hand over his, and he startled, his bright blue gaze lowering to where we connected, my pale skin a contrast to his tan coloring. “If what Heath said is true, which I believe it is, then we’re all still alive.”

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“But only barely.” Kace’s voice was nothing but a breathy exhale. A whisper, one that could be lost to the darkness. In the distance, another monster released an ear-shattering roar before immediately cutting off.

A deafening silence permeated the air like a thick storm cloud hovering over us all.

“What will we come back to?” Tanner whispered, swallowing. “I mean, if we make it out of this mess alive...what will we even come back to? Lives where no one cares about us? Pain and suffering? Bodies that we’re trapped in?”

“Fuck, man,” Aiden murmured, shaking his head from side to side.

“I’m serious.” Tanner turned his pained eyes my way. “I have these...these dreams that I’m beginning to think are actually memories.”

“What are they about?” I asked, though a part of me didn’t want to know.

He squeezed his eyes shut, his long lashes pressed tight against his high cheekbones, before reopening them and piercing me with his ocean-blue stare. “Burning,” he whispered hoarsely. “I have memories of myself being burned alive. And...and I don’t know if I want to go back to that. If I want to go back to a body that’s—”

“Hey.” Before I could stop myself, I crawled across the circle and captured his cheeks with both of my palms. “You will get back, and you will survive whatever this fucked-up world has thrown at you.”

“What if it’s not worth it?” he whispered, a single tear sliding down his cheek. “What

if all of this is not worth it?”

“It will be,” I promised, though I wasn’t quite sure if I believed it myself.

“What if we don’t remember each other?” Kace piped up, a forlorn expression pulling down his lips. “I mean, I don’t remember you guys in my memories, so I’m beginning to believe that—”

“We will,” I interrupted. “I’ll make sure of that.”

I had no idea how I would, but I was more determined than ever. If I had to drag these men out of here by their hair, then so help me God, that was what I would do. I refused to be alive in a world that didn’t have them in it. We’d come so far together, and trauma like this only brought people closer together. They were a part of me—all of them, even Maria, Kelly, Travis, Brett, Caleb, and Sev. They saw my monster take flesh and supported me while I fought it off. And I imagined we would grow even closer with every circle we completed, every beast we fought, every soul we lost.

“My sister won’t be alive.” I barely heard Aiden, his voice so quiet, I wasn’t sure he meant for anyone to hear.

I glanced over my shoulder, and our shared grief was a tangible thing, shrouding us all in a darkness so pronounced, it rivaled the one surrounding us.

“Aiden...”

“I’m not saying I’m giving up.” His tone was caustic, almost bitter, and his eyes were thin slits. “But...”

“But it begs the question... What are we coming home to?” Kace finished for him.

Silence descended as we all stared at one another, all of us at a loss for words. In the short time I'd known them, these men had come to mean something to me. Even Aiden, with his acerbic wit and narrow-eyed glares.

But Kace was right. What were we coming home to?

And was this entire journey even worth it?



10

Bianaca

Somehow, I found myself on the ground beside Kace, the rest of our party in various positions across the parking lot. I didn't believe anyone but Heath was actually sleeping, all of us too terrified to shut our eyes, but it was nice to pretend. I could dimly hear Tanner, Aiden, and Beau talking a short distance away, keeping watch over us while we rested.

I twisted and turned, but no matter what I did, I couldn't get comfortable on the hard asphalt. The terror electrifying my veins morphed into panic when, in the unrelenting darkness, a monster cawed.

As I shifted on the ground once more, I found myself trapped by bright hazel orbs.

I blinked wearily at Kace, sleep clinging to my body, and offered a tired smile.

“Hey.” My voice was groggy, a yawn threatening to crack my jaw apart.

A tiny smirk pulled up Kace's lips—the first smile I'd seen since this whole shit storm began.

“Hey.” His voice was just as soft as mine, though instead of being laced with sleep, he sounded wide awake. A strand of auburn hair laced with streaks of darker red and gold fell into his eyes. There was something about Kace that embodied a childlike innocence with something far more...damaged. I didn't want to say broken, because I

truly didn't believe Kace was beyond repair, but something that spoke of horrors I couldn't even begin to comprehend. When his eyes locked on mine, there was a strange cocktail of pain, horror, and amusement all dancing in their green and brown depths. I wanted to unmask the man lying beside me and see his true face.

Kace's smile faltered as suddenly as it appeared. "How are you doing, B? I know we keep asking you that—"

"No," I interrupted, sensing an apology coming on. "I like hearing it, believe it or not."

At that, his brows shot upwards. "You do?"

I smiled softly. "I actually do. It gives me a second to check in on myself, see how I'm doing, but it also reminds me that there are people in this world who still give a damn about me."

"There are," he interjected immediately, clearing his throat. "I mean, I do. Errr, we all do. I just..." He blew out a breath and shifted so he was lying on his back, staring up at the canvas of darkness above us. "I can't say I know what you've been through, because I don't. And I don't believe in comparing traumas and deciding which one is more severe. But I just wanted to say...I'm sorry." For a brief moment, unbridled rage marred his handsome face, his eyes turning darker than the sky above us. He squeezed his eyelids shut, and when he reopened them, he'd gained some semblance of control, though I could tell it was tenuous. "I want to kill that Dylan fuck for what he did to you."

I snorted before I could stop myself. "Apparently, someone already did."

Brief memories assaulted me—snot and tears running down my face as I threw myself into Beau's arm, his livid blue eyes, Dylan's smug smile...

What the hell?

Did Beau attack Dylan? Was that why they were both here?

Oh god.

Vomit churned in my stomach, crawling up my throat, but I forced it down with steely determination. Until I knew for sure what had happened, I couldn't jump to conclusions, despite my brain desperate to piece it together. I had the distinct feeling, however, that the final image would shake the foundations of my very existence.

The silence that followed my ominous words felt pregnant, filling the air like a cloying smoke. Kace didn't speak immediately, and I didn't either, content to listen to his breathing saw in and out as he stared up into the darkness.

When a roar reverberated in the distance, sending goosebumps radiating up and down my arms, I turned onto my side and rested my head on my palm. "How are you doing?"

Surprise colored his features. "Me? I'm not the one who—"

"Kace, don't bullshit me," I interrupted, leveling him with a no-nonsense glare. "I care about you too."

The slightest hint of color entered his cheeks as he twisted his head to stare at me. He hadn't used his backpack or jacket for a pillow, so a few loose pebbles got caught in his red locks. Before I could consider my actions too deeply, I reached forward and brushed one of them out of his hair.

His eyes followed the movement of my hand, something indecipherable manifesting in his hazel gaze. He shuddered when the back of my fingers accidentally grazed his

cheek.

“I’m...I’m surviving,” he answered at last. Before I could drop my hand back to my side, he caught it in his own, and I froze, feeling his warmth blaze through me. “I’m sorry for the way I’ve been acting late—”

“Don’t apologize,” I said, rushing to reassure him. “You have absolutely nothing to be sorry about.”

“I know that my...” he paused, seeming to consider his words, before gritting out, “mood swings can be too much for some people to handle.” His entire face twisted and distorted, his lopsided smile transforming into a grimace. “But I promise you, I’m fine now.”

“You know you don’t have to hide with me, right?” Our eyes met, and a bolt of ice slashed through my chest. He really was beautiful, though I couldn’t pretend even for a second that this man was an angel. He was too wicked, too hard, too jaded to ever be misconstrued as an angelic entity. Right then, he was staring intently into my eyes as if they held the answers to all of his problems. Only a few days earlier, he’d destroyed the clothes in my room on impulse. I couldn’t forget for a second that his soft smile belied a much darker side to him.

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Another silence descended, but this one didn't feel uncomfortable or even tense. With our eyes locked together, the rest of the world faded away until it was just him and me.

"Did I ever tell you," he began, keeping his voice low so as to not disturb the others, "about what I wanted to be when I grew up?"

I smiled brightly, shifting even closer until our noses were a hair's breadth away. "Oh, juicy. Tell me. What did little Kacey want to be when he grew up? Let me guess—a firefighter. An astronaut. Oh! A police officer. A Disney princess."

He released a shocked bark of laughter, his eyes widening as if he'd surprised even himself with that noise. He addressed each of my guesses individually, ticking them off on his fingers. "No, no, no, and actually, yes. But we don't need to talk about my princess phase."

He moved closer to me as well, twisting onto his side and placing his head on his palm, the same as me.

"Did you wear dresses and tiaras?" I teased. "Were you a Belle or a Cinderella?"

"An Ariel, actually, but that's not important." He released my hand to boop my nose, and I stared at him, stunned.

"Did you just boop me?" I asked in feigned horror.

His white teeth gleamed in the soft glow of the streetlight. "Isn't that your on-off

switch?”

This close, I couldn't help but note that the skin under his eyes was violet with exhaustion. When did he last sleep? Or eat? Now that I thought about it, I couldn't remember him eating any of the food that we'd packed.

But instead of saying any of that, instead of pushing him too far, I kept my smile in place and quipped, “They haven't updated my programming yet. As of now, I'm going rogue.”

He laughed again, and this time, I didn't detect any shock or disbelief in that sound. It was simply a laugh, as jovial and content as one was allowed to feel in a place such as this.

“A rogue Bianaca. That sounds terrifying.”

“Hey!” I exclaimed with a pout. “Don't be rude. A rogue Bianaca is freaking wonderful.”

“I don't even think you know what you're talking about anymore,” he pointed out, still grinning. He was beautiful most of the time, but when he smiled, he was positively radiant. That smile hit me like a block of ice, freezing my muscles. When he noticed my expression, his lips dipped into a frown. “What?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head to clear my rapidly spinning thoughts. “But you were going to tell me about your wet dream...?”

“My dream for the future,” he corrected with another boop on my nose. “Hush, you.”

“You hush,” I retorted immediately and then instantly sobered. “But seriously, tell me! What did you want to be when you grew up?”

Indecision flared to life in his eyes, almost as if he was worried about my reaction, before he took a deep breath and relaxed. He didn't speak for a long moment, his eyes intent on my shoulder. Finally, he pulled his gaze up and met my own. "A nurse."

"A nurse?"

"A nurse." He nodded his head—well, attempted to nod, since he was still lying sideways—and bit down on his lower lip. "Is that...weird?"

"Kace, no. That's...that's amazing! You would make an incredible nurse."

"I just..." He heaved out another breath before flopping onto his back, one arm over his eyes and the other on his stomach. "I just want to help people."

"Hey." I rested my hand on his forearm, watching his muscles ripple and flex beneath my touch. "Can I tell you a secret too?"

He removed his arm from his eyes and twisted his head once more to look at me. He didn't speak, but the quirk of his eyebrow told me he was waiting.

"I wanted to be a nurse too," I confessed.

"Wanted?" Trust Kace to pick up on the past tense.

Hesitating, I brought my pointer finger to my mouth and began to chew on the nail. "I just..."

"You just?" he pressed.

"After what happened with Dylan..." I trailed off, unable to articulate the thoughts in my head without sounding like an idiot.

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Still, I knew Kace understood when the familiar darkness I'd seen before clouded his eyes and his expression turned somber.

"If you give up on your dreams because of what Dylan did, then you let him win." He placed one hand on my waist, his thumb rubbing circles into my skin where my shirt had ridden up. "And, B? You can't let that monster win. You're so much better than him, so much better than anyone here. I understand that you're scared—"

"I hate my reflection." My lower lip trembled with each word that left my mouth, each confession that settled between us like an acrid smog. "I can't stand to look at myself. I wonder...I wonder if what happened was my fault, somehow. If I did something wrong or I—"

"It is not your fault," Kace broke in vehemently. His eyes burned hot with emotion. "I can't make you believe me, not yet, but I'll be damned if I let you think even for a second that you had any control over that monster's actions."

A single tear branded my cheek, feeling like fire on my sensitive skin. "I know I spoke tough when I was with Aiden and the others," I began, my voice shaking, "but I'm terrified of what's going to be waiting for me back home."

He didn't offer me false promises the way I might've. He didn't coddle me or assure me everything would be okay. Instead, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to my forehead, and warmth unfurled in my belly from that chaste kiss.

"I am too," he replied. "But whatever's facing us out there can't be worse than what's in here."



“I know you’re right, but—”

“It’s time to move on!” Heath hollered from the center of the parking lot. I bolted upright just in time to see him swing his backpack over his shoulders, offering all of us that ineffably calm stare of his.

I felt my breath being siphoned from my body, my heart racing as if my blood had been spiked with fear.

Time to move on...

I stared into the distance, at the blob of light penetrating the darkness, and worked to regulate my breathing.

“What’s the...um...next circle?” one of Kelly’s men, Travis, questioned, pushing up his glasses with his middle finger.

Heath’s smile was like a knife, and it cut right through me.

“Gluttony. Let’s go see what other sins you guys have partaken in, shall we?”

11

Bianaca

Gluttony.

My mind raced, struggling to assemble what I knew of that word.

It meant...excess, right? A form of greed?

My heart raced in trepidation as I stood at the edge of the parking lot and stared into the abyss before me. It was so dark, I couldn't see my hands in front of my face. I couldn't remember a time I'd ever experienced such intense, absolute darkness, where not even a sliver of light could be seen.

The sloshing of blood in my head was so loud and deafening that I nearly missed Heath's next words. "Hold hands, everyone. We need to stay together." He moved to stand in front of me and extended a hand, but before he could make contact, Aiden moved between us. He cast Heath an almost incandescent glare before placing his hand in mine.

Heath, appearing relatively unperturbed, flashed that disarming grin of his.

"Did you want to hold my hand, Aiden?" he taunted, and for a brief moment, I saw something in his eyes I didn't think he wanted us to see. Something dark and malevolent that had every hair on my body standing at attention.

Anger.

“No,” Aiden bit out, thrusting his hand forward for the stoic class president to take. “I just didn’t want you holding hers.”

“Careful.” Despite the smile still crafted on his face, I could hear the words for what they were—a warning. “Your jealousy is showing.”

“Fuck off,” Aiden hissed.

Kace held my other hand, and Beau gripped his. Behind him, Tanner stood with Maria, Kelly, Caleb, Brett, Travis, and Sev. I noted with grim amusement that Kelly was in between Sev and Caleb, as if the men didn’t trust any of us with her wellbeing.

“Remember!” Heath called back to us from where he stood at the front of the line. “Don’t travel off the trail. Go straight into the light, you hear me? And whatever you do, don’t release anyone’s hands.”

“We’re not fucking kindergarteners being led to the lunchroom,” Aiden seethed. “Can we just go?” Despite his strident words, his hand was bruising and tight in my own, his palm slick with sweat.

He was terrified, but he would never let anyone see it.

I gave his hand a reassuring squeeze, one he didn’t return, and took a deep, calming breath.

“Don’t let go no matter what you hear or what you see, understand?” Heath repeated, unleashing the hurricane force of his stare on me. Somehow, that one eloquent look was able to bolster my resolve more than a thousand speeches would’ve. I gave him a nod to tell him I understood, that I wouldn’t be stupid, and he nodded back, his

expression grave.

And then, he stepped forward.

There were no words capable of describing the darkness I ventured through, my hands captured between Kace's and Aiden's. Each step I took led me farther and farther away from the parking lot, until the streetlight appeared like a distant star on the horizon. A darkness as black as pitch closed in on me like one of those rooms that steadily shrunk the longer you were in there until it eventually crushed you. Terror inflated my lungs like helium in a balloon until my breathing turned erratic and out of sync with the rapid pounding of my heart.

Still, I forged on, one foot after the other, as all around us, growls, cries, and screams echoed through the barren wasteland.

The floor beneath my feet was relatively smooth, though when I glanced down, I saw nothing but darkness. It made me wonder if I was actually walking on something or if instead, I was floating in midair.

Panic percolated in my stomach, threatening to expel the granola bar I ate earlier, as my heart migrated into my throat.

Oh god.

The light in front of us guided us forward like a beacon—a lighthouse leading sailors home in the midst of a fierce storm.

When we finally set eyes upon the building, I released a sigh of relief, my muscles loosening.

“Where are we?” Kelly's voice was a mere whisper, though I couldn't help but want

to echo her question.

It appeared to be a convenience store, with a black and lime-green roof that curved out over seven thin pillars. The parking lot was empty, not a single streetlight to be seen, but the inside was bright and almost cheerful. I could just make out the stark white tiling and shelves as artificial lights flooded the street from the windows.

“It’s a convenience store,” Aiden said, rather unhelpfully. Despite us being out of the darkness, neither Kace nor Aiden released my hands. “I have a feeling there’d be gas pumps here normally.” He nodded behind us, where the darkness swallowed up the majority of the parking lot.

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“Thank you, captain obvious,” Caleb grumbled. “But why are we here?”

“Because of me.” Maria’s voice was frail and shaky. She took a tentative step forward from where she stood at the back of the group, all of the color drained from her face. “I-I-I recognize this place.”

“You do?” Tanner’s blond brows rose to his hairline as he stepped aside, allowing Maria to walk forward as if in a trance. Her face was twisted in concentration, and her hands shook by her sides.

“I think...” A green hue lit up her cheeks as she swayed. “I think I died here.”

Her statement had the desired effect—everyone immediately froze, staring at her with varying expressions of disbelief. Surprisingly, it was Sev who broke the silence first, his voice slicing it apart like the slash of a whip.

“What?”

She swallowed, shoving her hands into her pockets, as she stared up at the insignificant building looming ahead of us.

“I had...um...”

“Maria,” Aiden broke in, his tone caustic. “If we’re going to help you, you need to be honest with us. No bullshitting. Tell us what happened.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, a single tear falling down her cheek.

“I had a little problem with...um...shoplifting.”

Aiden and Tanner exchanged uneasy glances, while Heath’s mouth popped open in a silent O.

“Shoplifting,” Heath repeated, and I could tell he was trying to piece something together.

“I had these dreams...” Her eyes glazed over before she shook her head and waved a hand in the air dismissively. “It doesn’t matter, but I—”

“What were these dreams?” Aiden demanded, stalking forward. “Maria, you need to tell us everything.”

“I...um...”

“Hey, Aiden.” I moved to stand beside the trembling female and placed a hand on her shoulder. “You need to back up.” He looked as if he wanted to argue, pure rage sparking in his eyes, before, with a growl, he turned on his heel and stormed back towards the others. Only when he was gone did I turn Maria in my arms to stare directly into her elfin, heart-shaped face.

“Maria, you need to tell us the truth. We can’t help you if we don’t know exactly what happened. You recognize this place, correct?”

She sniffed, wrapping her arms around her stomach. “I...I remember being... At least I think I remember... I thought they were just dreams, but now...I...”

“Maria,” I said urgently. “Please.”

Her baby-blue eyes met my own, hers glossy with unshed tears. “I was just having

some fun,” she whimpered. “I didn’t think it would go so far. The gun wasn’t even loaded...”

“What did you do?” Unlike the others, Heath’s voice wasn’t accusatory. Instead, he sounded almost curious as he tilted his head to the side and moved to stand directly behind me.

She squeezed her eyes shut, her entire body shaking, and whispered, “I think I robbed him at gunpoint. And I think...I think he shot me.”

“Holy fuck,” Aiden breathed, raking his fingers through his obsidian hair. “Fucking dammit.”

“Gluttony,” Kelly whispered, her face stark white.

“Maria stole just for the hell of it,” Caleb added, assembling the clues together. “That’s why this circle of Purgatory is hers to face.”

Heath, who’d moved away from us and was peering through the windows of the store, gestured us forward. “I think we need to cross through here and exit out the back.” He pointed towards a bright red neon sign in the very back of the store. The door there was slightly open, though beyond that, I could see nothing but darkness.

“Are you sure?” I ventured cautiously.

Heath sighed. “Of course not. But do you see anywhere else to go? Remember, Purgatory leaves you hints about how to escape. And I think a big exit sign qualifies as a hint.”

“It’s...what? A thirty- or forty-foot walk from here to there?” Tanner scoffed. “Easy-peasy.”



“I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” Heath murmured darkly.

While the others were talking, Beau sidled up to my side and rested a hand on my upper arm. His finger began writing into my skin—his usual way of communicating with me—before he paused and dropped his hand to his side.

“Are you okay?” The dark, husky sound of his voice curled around me like smoke. It had a slight rasp to it from years of disuse but was as familiar to me as breathing. It was Beau’s voice—a sound I never thought I would hear again.

“I just want all this to be over,” I whispered back, twisting my head to meet his bright blue eyes. Endless warmth emanated from his gaze as he took my hand and gave it a squeeze.

“It will, B. Soon.”

Before I could respond, Aiden moved through the crowd and thrust something into my hands. I glanced down in surprise, my eyes widening at the sight of a pocket knife he must’ve stolen from the kitchen. The others were still arguing amongst themselves, completely oblivious to the weapon Aiden had handed me.

Beau’s eyebrows disappeared into his hairline as he stared at the knife.

“Aiden,” I whispered, “how many of these do you have?”

“They don’t usually keep knives in the kitchen,” he replied, his voice just as low as mine. He moved even closer until his lips were directly next to my ear. To anyone

looking in, they would think we were lovers embracing and exchanging sweet words with one another. “I had to steal it off a professor who came into the kitchen.”

“Shouldn’t someone else have it?” I protested immediately. “If it’s the only one—”

“No,” Beau and Aiden both said at the same time. The latter pulled away and gave my shoulder a quick squeeze.

“Don’t let anyone know you have it, okay?” Aiden whispered, and Beau nodded his agreement.

“You don’t really think—”

“We should get going,” Heath, once again, interrupted. I quickly shoved the knife into my back pocket, though I knew this conversation wouldn’t be over.

“Is there, like, some time limit we don’t know about?” Tanner demanded with a scowl.

Heath didn’t answer, but for some reason, I took his silence as a yes.

The others must’ve thought the same because ripples of apprehension traveled through the group. Caleb, Brett, Sev, and Travis moved to stand closer to Kelly, creating a protective circle around her frail form.

When no one made a move to enter the bright, welcoming store first, I released a haggard sigh and took a step forward. Immediately, all five of my guys—including Heath—stepped in front of me.

“No way in hell,” Aiden growled out, his back straightening as he turned away from me to face the store. “I’ll go first.”

“Aiden...”

Before I could make a move to stop him, Tanner interlocked our fingers together and dragged me to his side. His strong arms banded around my waist as he rested his chin on my head. Beau glanced at us, but instead of the hurt or jealousy I expected, he appeared almost...relieved. He gave Tanner a nod over my head and then moved to stand in front of me, effectively caging me between them.

Kace positioned himself directly beside me, his eyes alert as he bounced on the balls of his feet. His red hair stood in all directions as if he'd repeatedly run his fingers through the strands. His eyes flitted from face to face, never stopping on one person in particular.

“Are you okay?” I whispered, reaching out to take his hand in mine. He gave it a slight squeeze.

“I’m good. I promise.” He offered me a reassuring smile, but I wasn’t quite sure I believed it or him.

Aiden, near the front of the line, pushed open the door. A twinkling bell announced his arrival as he stepped inside, the rest of us following.

I stood on my tiptoes to see over Beau’s shoulder at the normal-looking store spread out before me. A counter to my right held a cash register, lottery tickets, and numerous stacks of candy bars. Shelves of miscellaneous merchandise stood erected to my left. The fridges against the back wall, emitting a soft humming noise, showed beer bottles and other drinks. Freezers sat adjacent to the main entrance, and when I peeked inside, I noted gallons of ice cream and a few popsicles.

Normal.

Everything looked normal.

Icy terror skated down my spine, and I shivered.

Why did it look normal? What was waiting for us? The door was less than thirty feet away, yet it had never felt farther. I wanted to run to it, but for some reason, it felt as if I were walking through quicksand. My heart thumped erratically as terror threatened to consume me.

“Guys...” I whispered, unsure what I wanted to say.

Something didn’t feel right?

This felt like a trap?

I wanted to run?

Any option would suffice.

We moved slowly towards the exit sign, Kace’s hand an iron vise around my own. I was honestly afraid he was going to cut off my circulation with how tight he gripped me.

“We’re almost there,” Aiden said from the front of the group. And then louder, “You okay back there, Maria?”

“Yes,” her small voice piped in from the back of the line. “I don’t think—”

The lights to the store flickered once before plunging us all into darkness. We froze, and the only sound we could hear was our ragged breathing, before a generator kicked on and the room was once again flooded in artificial, pale white light.

Only this time, we weren’t alone.

“Motherfucker,” Caleb cursed from behind me. Kace went ramrod straight beside me, his eyes fixated on the figures surrounding us.

Mannequins.

At least fifteen that I could see, all in various positions around the shop. Some were bent forward, almost as if they were pursuing the shelves of food, while others stood in clusters. One white mannequin stood behind the counter. All of them were naked, their featureless bodies giving no indication if they were males or females, and their faces were blank slates.

“Guys, we need to move!” Heath hollered from the back of the line. “Go! Go! Go!”

The lights shut off, and darkness once again settled over the store like a cloying smoke. Less than a second later, it flickered back on, but this time, the mannequins had moved. All of them were twisted in our direction, their sightless faces somehow spouting out accusations despite no discernible features.

No, I corrected mentally. They aren't staring at us.

They're staring at Maria.

“GO!” Heath roared, and Aiden broke into a run towards the exit, the rest of us behind him.

The second his hand would've clamped down on the handle, the lights turned off once again. When it flicked back on, the mannequins had moved a third time, surrounding a pale-faced, crying Maria.

Heath, who was directly in front of her, turned back in alarm and lunged forward, attempting to grab her. The lights turned off before he could make contact.

And this time, they didn't immediately flick back on.

“Guys?” I whimpered, my hand clasped tightly in Kace’s. Wait...

When did Kace’s hand turn so...cold? Almost as if it was made of plastic?

With a scream, I yanked my hand free of the mannequin’s embrace and began to fumble blindly in the direction I last saw the others.

“Guys!”

“Bianaca!” Aiden’s voice seemed to be coming from the end of a long tunnel, which shouldn’t have been possible. The store had been small, so why did he sound like he was screaming from the end of a football field?

“Aiden?”

“B?” That was Tanner, his voice coming from the opposite direction Aiden’s had.

“Tanner? Beau? Kace?”

More and more voices screamed at me, some closer than others, but I ignored them all and trudged towards where I suspected the exit to be. It almost felt as if sharp, talon-like hands were clawing at my skin, though when I glanced down, I saw nothing. My pulse skittered wildly, but still, I forged on, trying to ignore the terror that siphoned oxygen from my lungs.

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My fumbling hand touched something hard and wooden—the door. I lowered it until it clasped around the knob, and I pulled—

Light flooded the store once more.

Everyone stood around me, their hands touching the door in some capacity, terror evident to see in all of their faces.

“B, you’re okay,” Beau breathed.

I heard Caleb say something to Kelly, too low for me to hear, but his words went in one ear and out the other.

“Maria!” I screamed in alarm, noticing the girl hadn’t left her prison within the confines of the faceless mannequins. Stark fear etched itself across her face as she glanced at me over their shoulders, tears making trails of mascara on her cheeks.

“Help me!” she sobbed as the one to her right lifted a shotgun.

“Maria!”

“Help me!” she screamed again, extending an arm. Before anyone could make a move towards her, the gun fired.

And then the entire store exploded in a kaleidoscope of red, yellow, and orange.



12

Maria

My hand was steady on the gun in my sweatshirt pocket as I bounced from foot to foot.

The moon was high in the sky, bathing the store in a pastel gold glow and somehow contributing to the eerie atmosphere. My heart beat rapidly with nerves as I once again caressed the grip of my unloaded gun.

You can do this, Maria. You can do this.

Adrenaline combined with my nerves and created a toxic cocktail of emotions.

You can do this.

In the window, I caught a sight of my reflection. My blonde hair was slicked back in a low ponytail, currently hidden beneath my hood. The gray sweatshirt I wore was unflattering as hell, stopping just above my knees. It was way too hot to wear such clothes, but I didn't want to risk anyone recognizing me. Or worse, telling the cops what I looked like.

Stealing...

It was a high I couldn't describe with words. It was bright lights flashing intermittently as music blared in your ears. It was laughter and mirth and errant

firecrackers that sparked around you. It reminded me of a rollercoaster—your stomach tightening as you climbed the steep first hill, before it immediately bottomed out as you descended, the wind whipping at your hair and face. A part of you was utterly terrified, while the rest of you relished the sensation of freefalling. Of every twist and turn and upside-down loop you went through at record speed. And when the ride finally stopped, all you wanted to do was go again and again and again.

I smirked at my reflection, puckering my lips and reaching into my pocket to reapply my bright red lipstick. It never hurt to look your best on a job.

And this wasn't just any job. No, this was the job of all jobs.

I wasn't merely going to steal a few bottles of beers from the fridge or lip balm from the shelves. Not this time.

I'd been watching Check's for weeks, and I estimated that he collected at least a few thousand dollars in cash at the end of every night. He was an older man with thinning white hair, a potbelly that barely fit in his red uniform shirt, and sagging jeans. To be quite frank, he was easy prey.

In and out.

Take the money and run.

I made sure the store was empty as I hurried inside, the tinkling bell above my head announcing my arrival.

The owner—Check himself—sat behind the counter, flipping through the pages of a magazine. He glanced up when I entered, nodded once, and then went back to his reading.

I pretended to pursue the shelf in front of me, though I wouldn't have been able to tell you what it contained. My body felt numb, almost detached from my mind, and everything took on a hazy quality.

My hand tightened once more around the gun as I turned towards the register.

The bell chimed a second time, indicating that more people had entered the store. I bit down on my lip to contain my curse as I watched a group of teenage girls, a year or two younger than me, hurry inside, giggling amongst themselves. They all wore tiny jean shorts that barely covered their asses and crop tops. The makeup on their faces made them look like hookers instead of high school students, and their hair had been teased. They glanced in my direction, whispering amongst themselves, and I resisted the urge to give them the middle finger.

I was Maria Turner, for fuck's sake. Head cheerleader. Prom queen. The girl every guy at Roosevelt High School wanted to fuck.

Though...

Maybe I should be grateful that the little twits didn't recognize me.

I could already hear my father's disapproving lecture if I were ever caught. I wouldn't get jail time, not with my dad being the chief of police, but he would send me to therapy no doubt. He would accuse me of acting out since my mother died from cancer a year earlier. Since my boyfriend, Garret, broke up with me because he couldn't deal with my "mood swings," as he so eloquently liked to put it. Since my grades plummeted and I nearly got kicked off the cheerleading team because my GPA wasn't up to par with the school's regulations.

It was amazing what you could get away with when you had a dead mommy and a daddy who didn't give you the time of day.

He was always busy with work and cases and everything that didn't have to do with me. I wasn't being a bitch—we both knew it was true. His first love was work, his second love was his dead wife, and his third was me. Maybe. Our dog, Pop, might've been above me on the list.

But I would get his attention, someday and somehow.

The young girls clustered together, laughing and talking, as the bell rang again. This time, it was an older couple who entered, the wife making a beeline towards the bathroom while the husband bent over one of the shelves.

Fuck.

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*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:04 am*

I didn't have a lot of time. In less than five minutes, another employee would arrive and relieve Check for the night. Check would take all of the cash and head straight to the bank.

I debated trying to rob Check on his way to the car but quickly decided against it. For one, I would've been out in the open, the streetlights illuminating everything clearly, and for two, there were always a dozen or so trucks and cars parked there. It would be too easy to be spotted.

I had to do it inside the shop. And now.

Before I could rethink my actions, I stormed towards the counter, watching Check lazily drop his magazine and amble to his feet. His eyes widened in his pudgy face as he set eyes upon the gun in my hand.

“What the—”

Keeping my voice low, a hushed murmur, I hissed, “Give me all your money and I won't shoot you.” I made sure to lower my voice a few octaves, though I doubted it did anything to help disguise me. Maybe...maybe I wanted to get caught. Maybe I wanted my father to see the monster he'd created with his neglect.

He may have lost the love of his life, but I'd lost my mother. And now, I had no one.

“You don't want to do this,” the man warned, not bothering to lower his voice. Behind me, I heard one of the girls release a strangled gasp and the husband curse.

Fuck it.

Lifting my gun in the air, I spun around and leveled it on each person individually before focusing back on Check.

“Give me your money, or I’ll shoot you all!” I bellowed, shrugging off my backpack and throwing it on the table. “Fill it!”

There were no bullets in the gun, but he didn’t have to know that. And I was more grateful than ever for the ruse when he hastily opened the register and began to shove wads of cash inside of it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the girls drop to their knees, hugging each other and crying. The man had been inching forward, but when my green gaze locked on his brown one, he paused, holding his hands up in the air to show he didn’t mean me any harm. I waited until he backed up a few paces before turning back to Check.

“Is that all of it?” I demanded, though to be honest, I didn’t really care. I had enough money at home to live comfortably. It wasn’t about the money. Not for me.

Trembling, Check thrust the bag into my outstretched hand, and I clumsily threw it over my shoulder, making sure to keep my gun fixed on him.

The bell to the store rang again, and I turned just in time to see a large, bulky man enter the store. He took one look at me and the gun, then my backpack, and I watched the color drain from his face.

“What the—?”

That distraction cost me.

I'd mistakenly lifted the gun from Check to fix it on the stranger, who I perceived as the bigger threat.

I was wrong.

"Wait!" the new man hollered, but he wasn't talking to me. He was staring over my shoulder, in the direction of the counter. "She's just a child—"

His words were overpowered by the shot of a gun.

Pain exploded in my side and stomach as I turned wide eyes onto the store owner. He hadn't moved from where he stood behind the desk, only this time, he had a shotgun in his hands. His eyes were blurry with tears as he gaped at me.

I brought my hands to my stomach, red with blood.

"What...?" I murmured groggily. I felt myself fall, fall, fall, barely aware when my head careened off the bright white tiles. Stars danced in my vision as I stared up at the flickering lights above. I remembered thinking that they desperately needed to change their light bulbs.

The pain was fading, replaced by something much scarier.

Numbness.

"Daddy..." I whimpered. Someone pressed their hands to my stomach, attempting to staunch the flow of blood, and darkness pooled at the corners of my vision.

"Stay with me, child," the stranger demanded, peering down at me.

"What the fuck did I just do?" Check asked, his voice sounding millions of miles

away. “What did I do?”



“Stay with me,” the stranger repeated.

“I want my dad,” I sobbed. That encroaching darkness threatened to consume me, but I struggled against it. Struggled to hold on.

For a brief, brief moment, flashes of memories hit me. I saw a drab gray school, tunnels, monsters, mannequins...but they faded as soon as they arrived. Though a part of me...

A part of me remembered.

I had gone there, hadn't I? It had felt like months, but now...now I knew it had been less than a second.

As soon as that thought occurred to me, it vanished, obliterated beneath the icy numbness frosting over my body. I just wanted to sleep. To rest my eyes for a thousand years.

“Sleep,” the voice above me instructed, laced with compassion and sadness. My eyes opened one last time, pausing on the familiar face. How...? How did...?

“You,” I whimpered.

For a brief moment, I could've sworn the figure was sheathed in a black cloak with the hood pushed up. A glowing scythe rested in the familiar person's hand.

“Sleep.” The voice reverberated in my head as, in the distance, sirens blared.

My eyelashes fluttered shut, and then I became aware of nothing.

13

Bianaca

Blood sluiced in my head as Fourth of July fireworks burst to life behind my closed eyelids. The darkness carried with it a familiar sense of warmth and tranquility, though trepidation quickly eclipsed it.

The store.

The mannequins.

The explosion.

Maria.

My eyes snapped open, the darkness fading away like a shadow chased away by sunlight. I caught a brief glimpse of my surroundings, unsurprised to find I was once again in another parking lot, darkness pressing in on me from all sides, before I scrambled to my knees.

Oh god.

Everybody else lay scattered across the asphalt, groaning and struggling to regain consciousness. All of them, that was, except for Heath.

He stood near the edge of the parking lot, darkness at his back, as he watched us with

cold, clinical eyes. When those dark orbs met mine, I was surprised to see a world of pain in those fathomless depths.

But even that pain couldn't diminish the rage I felt for him.

"You!" I seethed, struggling to my feet. My legs wobbled, threatening to give out completely, but I ignored the dizziness and stalked forward, stabbing him in the chest with my finger. "You did this! You killed Maria!"

He appeared honestly affronted by my words, a sliver of hurt snaking into eyes that were normally cold and impassive. "You think I killed her?" His voice was laced with disbelief.

"I know you've been lying to us this entire fucking time!" I raged, spit flying from my mouth as I got into his face. "And now Maria's gone!"

"I haven't been lying to—"

"You know exactly what we're supposed to do! How do you know that if you're not involved? How do you know about all of this if you're not a part of it?" I interrupted, still screaming. I was dimly aware of someone moving to stand directly behind me, but I didn't look over my shoulder to see who it was. "I don't trust you!"

Something hardened in Heath's eyes, though I couldn't quite put my finger on what, not with so much blind rage coursing through me. "Maria couldn't face her demons," he said tersely. "I had nothing to do—"

"Don't you fucking lie to me again," I hissed through heavily gritted teeth. "Just...just stay the fuck away from me."

"Doll—" He reached for me helplessly, and I took a step backwards, unintentionally

putting myself directly into Aiden's arms. His leather and pine scent surrounded me, but I didn't want to deal with his antagonistic behavior. Not again. Not today.

I shoved away from him and moved towards the opposite corner of the parking lot.

Maria...

Dead.

That word stabbed at my brain like a flaming sword.

I didn't know how I knew that unsettling truth, only that I did. She was dead because she couldn't face her fear. We'd survived the circle of Gluttony, but at what price? I hadn't known the woman well, but I knew that she didn't deserve this. None of us did.

I slid to the ground and brought my knees up to my chest, burying my face inside of them. My shoulders shook with tears I wouldn't let fall as I thought through my last interactions with the petite, blonde-haired girl. Or lack thereof. I hadn't been the kindest to her, too driven with jealousy and possessiveness to know that she needed help. She'd died alone and scared, and I couldn't help but think that it was my fault.

My fault.

My fault.

My fault.

"It's not your fault, you know," a soft voice whispered from beside me. Surprise had my head snapping in Kelly's direction, my eyes widening.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:04 am*

She sat beside me on the cold asphalt, her white dress covered in dirt, though she otherwise looked unharmed. Her pitch-black hair had fallen free of her braids, loose curls tumbling around her frail shoulders. Her light blue eyes fixated on something in the distance, something I couldn't see, as she reached a hand out and placed it over mine.

“What happened to Maria...” She pushed out a heavy breath, her chest heaving. “It wasn't anyone's fault. It was her time.”

“It wasn't her fucking time,” I snapped vehemently. “We had a chance to survive. All of us. We just had to complete the nine circles—”

“And her demons caught up with her before she could,” Kelly interrupted evenly. She still didn't glance in my direction, and somehow, I found that even more eerie than if she were staring directly at me.

Silence descended as, around us, the rest of the guys began to talk in murmured, stilted tones to one another. All of them except for Heath, who still stood on the outskirts, his expression unreadable.

From what I could see, the parking lot spread about forty feet in all directions, creating a perfect circle of sharp white lines that made up each individual parking space. The single streetlight provided sparse lighting, the shadows growing more pronounced and ominous the farther you got from it. I didn't know where we were or what we had to do, but that familiar sensation of unease made a slow, cold pathway up my spine. I shivered.

“Cold?” Kelly finally glanced over at me, her expression utterly unreadable. It could’ve been hewn from stone with how expressive it was.

“Scared,” I answered honestly, releasing a bark of dry laughter. Scared was the understatement of the century. I was terrified, yes, but I was also angry and sad. Maria’s death rested heavily on my shoulders, a burden I knew I shouldn’t carry, yet did anyway. I hadn’t been close to her back at the academy, but that didn’t change the fact that she was my responsibility. She’d followed us here because she had overheard a conversation between Kelly and me. And now, she was dead.

Dead.

Dead.

Dead.

Kelly gave my hand a soft, reassuring squeeze.

“It’s not your fault,” she repeated.

“It’s hard for me to believe that,” I replied. Instead of trying to convince me again, she simply nodded, ripping her gaze off of me to focus on something in the distance. No, not something. Someone. Multiple someones.

While Beau, Tanner, Aiden, and Kace talked in a semicircle a short distance away, their eyes constantly flickering in my direction as if to ensure I was okay, Kelly’s men did the same to her.

“What’s the deal with you and them anyway?” I asked, nodding towards Caleb and the others. I was desperate to change the subject, to get my mind off of the horrors I’d just witnessed.

Maria.

Dead.

Bile rushed up my throat, but I clamped my mouth shut before it could escape. My guilt was on the verge of slashing me to ribbons.

“They’re my harem,” Kelly said simply. When I glanced at her with a quirked eyebrow, demanding more, she sighed and relented. “I think...I think they were my harem before we arrived here,” she confessed. “I mean, I had dreams back at the academy of them. And me. And us.” A delicate blush materialized in her cheeks.

“You think they were your boyfriends before you arrived at...um...Purgatory?” God, that felt weird to say.

Purgatory.

Dead.

Maria.

Oh god.

I cut off my thoughts before they could escalate, before they could send me into a downward spiral where I regretted all of my life decisions and where they’d led me.

Maria.

Maria.

Maria.



“Yes.” Kelly’s soft, elfin voice effectively pulled me back to the present, back to the here and now. “But I don’t think they remember.” Sadness pulled at her features as she glanced wistfully in their direction. All four of them were staring at her intently, but when they made eye contact, they glanced away as if they weren’t. I would’ve smiled if my mood hadn’t been so dour, so...explosive.

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“I’m sorry,” I told her sincerely, bumping my shoulder with hers. “I can’t even imagine.”

“I know.” Another heavy sigh laden with fear and uncertainty shook her body. “I just wanted to say...” She blew out a breath. “Thank you. I mean, for thinking of me. For taking me with you. Most people would’ve just left me behind, but not you.”

My throat closed up with emotion, so instead of answering, I placed my hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. She licked her upper lip, glanced in the direction of all the guys, and then scrambled to her feet, extending a hand for me to take.

“Come on. We should go check in with the others before they come over here and throw us over their shoulders.” She tried for a smile, but in her gaunt face, it looked strange. Awkward, almost.

I nodded and accepted her hand, allowing her to pull me to my feet. She didn’t release me right away, and I couldn’t help but feel the strangest sense of kinship with the tiny girl. Familiarity. The moment lasted only a second before she turned towards the others, towing me along after her.

Kelly only released me when we reached the others, moving to stand next to her men. They surrounded her instantly, Caleb barking at her for leaving them, while Travis checked her for injuries. Sev and Brett stood silent, their arms folded over their chests in almost identical poses. I would’ve smiled if my guys didn’t do the same to me.

Beau and Kace both glanced over me for injuries, the former placing his hands on my shoulders and staring deeply into my eyes.

“Are you okay?” Aiden barked.

“I’m fine,” I replied, rushing to assure him. “And you guys...?”

“We’re fine,” Tanner told me curtly, but he didn’t look fine. He looked anything but fine. There was a thunderous rage in his eyes that I’d never seen before, and I realized, somewhat vaguely, that Maria had been his friend. She’d been friends with all of them.

“I’m sorry about—”

“Don’t,” Aiden interrupted. He pushed Beau’s hands off my shoulders and replaced them with his own. “Don’t fucking apologize. This isn’t your fault. At all.” He moved his narrow-eyed stare in Heath’s direction, as if he knew exactly who to put the blame with. Heath, for his part, regarded us all with a face so pinched, you’d think he’d just swallowed a lemon whole.

“I have done nothing but help you guys. I don’t appreciate all of these accusations,” Heath said calmly...too calmly. I had a feeling he was a ticking time bomb just waiting to be lit and detonated. There was something almost manic beneath his even tone.

“Shut up.” Tanner glared at him. “Where the fuck are we now?”

“You don’t see it?” His brows scrunched together as he nodded over our heads.

“Don’t see...?” We all turned at the same time, and my mouth dropped open at the sight before us. The sight that had most definitely not been there mere seconds earlier. “What the fuck?”

My words were echoed by Caleb, Tanner, and Aiden.

Where there was once nothing but darkness now sat the entrance to a theme park shrouded in a dusky red glow. Two plastic clowns stood on either side of the opening, their white faces covered in soot and dirt and their red-painted lips stretched into matching, macabre smiles. They looked so lifelike, I almost believed they were real. Almost.

But they weren't, were they?

They couldn't be.

Horror squeezed my heart in an iron vise, and I took an automatic step closer to...well...anyone I could find.

“The fourth circle.” Heath gestured tiredly in the direction of the theme park before us. “Welcome to Greed.”

14

Bianaca

Greed.

That word replayed in my mind as my heart leapt into my throat.

Craning my neck, I peered past the clowns and into the amusement park beyond. From this distance, I couldn't see much, but I noted that a Ferris wheel was spinning, its bright lights twinkling in the darkness. I heard the distinct rattle of a roller coaster, as well as music from one of the game stalls. The hauntingly beautiful noise penetrated the silence, though it did very little to smother the pounding in my ears.

"Nope. No way in hell am I going in there," Caleb hissed, jabbing his thumb in the direction of the abandoned amusement park. I couldn't help but agree with him.

Heath flashed him a droll look. "So you're going to stay out here for the rest of your short life?"

"I...um..." He glanced down at Kelly's ashen face, his teeth gritting together. He didn't respond, but I could see the resolve in his gaze.

"Does anyone recognize this place?" Aiden piped in. The only answer was the whimsical music emitting from the nearest game stall. "Come on. Fess up."

Silence.

Tanner moved to stand beside me, his face uncharacteristically grave as he stared around at the clowns.

“I think we have to travel to the other side.”

Aiden whirled on him. “Do you recognize this place, Tanner?” There was an accusation in his tone, along with a hint of pain. Because if this hell belonged to Tanner...

No one wanted a repeat of what happened to Maria.

The mere thought of her had my heart battering my ribcage with frightening speed. My stomach spasmed, wanting desperately to empty itself onto the asphalt. I forced it, and all thoughts of Maria, down. So far down that not even a necromancer would be able to raise them.

Tanner’s jaw clenched so tightly, I was surprised it didn’t break. For a long moment, he didn’t answer, choosing instead to stare ahead at the park awash in shades of garnet red and white. Finally, he nodded his head, the barest dip of his chin, and gritted out, “My dad used to take me here.”

“Your...dad?” Aiden’s eyebrows crawled up his forehead as something indecipherable flashed in his gaze. “Didn’t he...?” He trailed off, though I was suddenly desperate to know what he was going to say. Did Tanner’s dad do something to him? Was that why he was here?

“Tanner—” I began, but he cut me off with a wave of his hand. His eyes blackened before flashing with fury.

“I’ll be careful,” he interrupted. “But we should go in.”

Anxiety wrinkled Aiden's brow, but he nodded, turning to once again face the macabre amusement park before us.

Everything seemed to be covered in a dark red sheen, almost as if the lights had a filter over them that distorted the color until it was bloody. It gave the overall atmosphere an eerie, malevolent feel.

Tanner stood ramrod straight beside me. Fear poured off of him in a palpable wave, so hot and sizzling that it almost burned me. I yearned to reach out and comfort him, but by the tightness of his jaw, I knew that he would not welcome that.

Whatever this amusement park represented, he needed to face it by himself.

Still, I found my hand slipping into his, and I was grateful when he didn't pull away. Tanner was usually all rough edges and sharp knives, but just then, he was vulnerable, the pain in his eyes visible for us all to see.

Aiden glanced at his friend in concern. "Tanner, are you sure there's nothing you need to tell us—"

"Let's just go," Tanner bit out scathingly.

"I'll go first!" Kace interjected, racing towards the front of the group. His eyes were wide and feverish, and he bounced on the balls of his feet as if he had an excess amount of energy he needed to dispel. I exchanged a concerned look with Aiden, whose lips were compressed into a solemn line.

"Kace, I don't think—" he began, but once again, he was ignored. Kace rubbed his hands together and broke into a run, hurrying towards the entrance until he was face-to-face with one of the clowns.

“Shit!” I cursed, tugging on Tanner’s hand to get him to follow me. His heels dug into the ground, almost as if he was resisting me, before he released a ragged breath and began to move. Aiden remained one step in front of me, and Heath and Beau closed in on either side. Kelly and her men moved in a cluster, slightly to the right of us.

Just before we reached the entrance to the park, I paused, forcing the other men to stop with me.



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“Aiden, give me your belt,” I instructed when the tattooed man turned back to stare at me. His pierced brow arched in both concern and annoyance. Over his shoulder, I could see Kace still bouncing in place, staring intently into the eyes of the nearest clown.

“What the fuck, B?” he hissed. “This isn’t the goddamn time—”

“What do you think I’m going to do?” I rolled my eyes. “Aiden, you’re the last man in this entire world I would touch. I’ll even put Heath above you.” I jabbed my thumb in Heath’s direction, who grinned as if he’d won the lottery.

Aiden’s eyes flared. “Then what—?”

“Belt. Now.” I held out my hand until, with a disgruntled hiss, Aiden removed it from his waist and placed it in my hand. I then turned towards Heath.

“Oh. Sexy games. I love sexy—” I grabbed his shoulders, spun him around, and then forced his hands behind his back. “Kinky. I like it.” I wrapped the belt around his wrists, tightening the leather until he let out a hiss of pain.

“I don’t trust you.” When I released him, he turned to face me, that damn grin still in place though his eyes were impassive orbs. “At all. So until you can give me a reason to, you’ll be—”

“Your prisoner,” Heath finished, looking as cool and unruffled as always. “I think I get the gist.”

I moved until I was toe-to-toe with him, the knife burning a hole in my pocket. “You move when I tell you to move. You speak when I tell you to speak. You—”

“I get it.” Something dark flashed in Heath’s eyes, there and gone too quickly for me to decipher the meaning of. I didn’t know if I necessarily feared him, but there was something innately lethal and dangerous about the meticulously groomed man standing before me. “I haven’t given you many reasons to trust me—”

“You haven’t given me any reason to trust you,” I interrupted vehemently. Grabbing his upper arm, I moved towards where Kace and the others stood.

Aiden whistled under his breath, and I heard Tanner mutter, “Hot damn,” to the others.

A tiny smirk pulled up my lips, though that smile fell when I stepped through the main entrance and into the theme park.

If I’d thought the exterior was terrifying, the inside proved to be worse. Everything was decorated with hideous, distorted clowns—pasty faces, disheveled red afros, and vibrant paint on their cheeks and around their eyes.

A shudder worked its way through me as I spun in a circle, my eyes devouring every macabre sight.

We appeared to be in a section that consisted of kiddie rides and games you could play to win prizes. Immediately to my right were numerous stalls, each one depicting a different clown in various degrees of decay. The first one showed red-painted lips lifted upwards into a wide smile, beady, pinprick black eyes, and crazy red hair. The very last one had blood gushing from the clown’s mouth and empty eye sockets, numerous wounds decorating its pastel face. Its yellow, billowy suit was in tatters, and bruises decorated its neck and left eye.

“My god. That’s horrifying,” I whispered.

“Tell me about it,” Aiden murmured.

But he wasn’t looking in the same direction as me. Instead, he was staring at a merry-go-round, though instead of animals, clowns in various positions were connected to golden poles that moved up and down as the ride spun. Some were bent over slightly, as if their backs were made to be sat on, while others were on their hands and knees. Each clown wore a different color, though the majority of them had the same painted white face and red, bushy hair.

“Tanner, you okay, man?” Beau rasped. We all spun to see Tanner’s face had drained of all color, sweat dotting his forehead. His hands trembled by his sides as he stared at the various clowns with abject horror etched across his face.

“Tanner?” I whispered, taking a step closer to him.

He rubbed a hand down his face. “I’m all right,” he said unconvincingly. “I’m just...um... I just don’t like clowns.” From the way his voice trembled, I could tell it went beyond simply not liking them. The man was positively terrified.

“It’s okay, Tanner. It’s going to be okay.” My words sounded false, even to my own ears, bursting with promises I wasn’t sure I could keep. Still, I hated seeing him so distressed, his shoulders bunched to his ears and his face devoid of any color. He normally had healthy, tan skin with a slight golden hue, but just then, he could’ve been a ghost.

Though maybe a ghost wasn’t a completely inaccurate comparison, considering where we were.

“Let’s move quickly and get through here as fast as we can,” Aiden told us. He

peered into the distance, where I could dimly see a wooden coaster and a towering Ferris wheel. “I’m assuming there’s an exit near the back of the park.”

Tanner nodded. “There is. Next to the Ferris wheel.”

“Okay.” Aiden nodded, his jaw clenching. “Okay. Okay.” He tightened his hands around the straps of his backpack. “We should get moving.”

I gave Tanner’s hand a quick squeeze. “You okay?” I kept my voice low so the others wouldn’t overhear.

With his free hand, he ran his fingers through his golden blond hair. Lines of stress marred his handsome face, though I could tell he was trying to put on a brave face. For my benefit? Or his own?

“I’m fine. It’s just...”

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“It’s just...?” I pressed, and he sighed as we began to walk. The pathway cut between the game stalls, where I swore the clowns’ eyes followed us with every step we took. Unease slithered up my spine, and I forced myself to look anywhere but at them.

“The last time I was here, I was ten, maybe eleven,” Tanner confessed. “My mom was still alive at that time, but she’d moved back to Australia to be with her own father, who was struggling with cancer. It was just me and Dad and my dad’s mom. Nana.” A pensive expression flitted across his face, there and gone in less than a second. I gave his hand another squeeze, encouraging him to continue if he wanted to. We walked in silence for a few minutes, the twinkling carnival music imbuing the night air.

“You know, I’ve never been to a theme park before,” I began conversationally as we moved through the congested pathway. I swore the number of clowns lining the pathway increased exponentially every few feet, their faces covered in a fine layer of dirt and grime. The grass around them was overrun by mangled weeds that reached their knees, and more than one statute had a body part missing.

They’re not real, I told myself firmly. They’re plastic.

That didn’t stop icy tendrils of terror from caressing the back of my neck. It was almost as if the temperature had dropped drastically. My body broke out into shivers that I wasn’t positive had anything to do with the cold air.

“And I’m sure after this, you’re never going to want to,” Heath noted casually from where he walked in front of me, his hands still tied behind his back. He glanced at me over his shoulder.

“Shut up, Heath,” Tanner and I both snapped at the same time.

The crazy man’s grin only widened, revealing tempting dimples in both cheeks. “Believe it or not, doll, I care about you. Do you really think I would do anything to harm you?”

“I don’t know what you would or wouldn’t do anymore, Heath, which is exactly the problem. But the facts are...you know more about this place than anyone, yet you claim not to be a part of it. How can that be, unless you’re somehow involved?” I cocked an eyebrow at him, and he winked before focusing ahead once more.

“Maybe I am a part of this.” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “But maybe I broke every single one of the rules by helping you guys escape. Maybe I’m not the bad guy you so desperately want me to be.”

“Why would I want you to be the bad guy?” I snapped as we turned at a fork in the pathway. To the left, darkness hung over the park like a cloying cloud of smoke, almost as if the lights of the park couldn’t quite reach that corner. One of the metal roller coasters cut off abruptly, half of its track disappearing into that pressing, malevolent darkness. Something growled menacingly, forcing me to pick up my pace, practically running face first into Heath’s hard back.

“Because,” he began casually, seemingly oblivious to my mounting panic. Or maybe he truly didn’t care about the monster lurking in the darkness behind us.

“Because?” My voice shook, and I couldn’t help but glance behind me like a stupid idiot in a horror movie. I could’ve sworn I saw a pair of glowing red eyes before wisps of smoke obscured it from view.

“Because you’re attracted to me,” Heath said nonchalantly, ignoring my disbelieving look. “You don’t want to be, so you’re secretly hoping I’m the enemy.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.” I snorted before I could stop myself. Beside me, Tanner scoffed, rolling his eyes.

Heath shrugged once again. “It’s the truth. We both know you find me... What’s the word I’m looking for? Oh, irresistible. Yes, we both know you find me irresistible.”

“I do not find you irresistible.” My eyes rolled so far back in my head, I saw gooey brain matter. Who the hell did Heath think he was? He had the most inflated ego I’d ever seen in a man.

“You do too,” Heath pointed out, winking. “But it’s nothing to be embarrassed about, doll. We both know I find you irresistible as well.”

“Oh for the love of...” I trailed off, pinching the bridge of my nose. Tanner snorted beside me, but when I cast him a scathing glare, he pretended to be extremely interested in his shoes instead.

Our group once again descended into silence. I was fuming over Heath’s comments, while the infuriatingly smug man cackled to himself.

And then... “My dad left me here when I was ten.”

Tanner’s voice was a soft whisper, so I almost didn’t hear it at first. My feet stumbled at his unexpected confession, and I forced my shock not to visibly show on my face.

“Oh?” I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, but his face was cast in shadows, his expression utterly unreadable.

“I hated this park, but Dad thought I loved it. I’d always been terrified of clowns, but I didn’t dare tell him that. It was the one place I felt...well... It was the one place I felt loved, you know? My dad barely gave me the time of day, so the few trips we

took here were blessings in disguise.

“I remember that we were playing one of the games—I desperately wanted to win a stuffed giraffe—when Dad received a phone call. When thirty minutes passed and he didn’t come back, I got worried. I looked everywhere for him, but I didn’t dare tell the staff. The last thing I wanted was for Dad to get in trouble and stop taking me on these trips.” Pain and anger flared in his eyes, a corrosive mix. Fury radiated off of him, so potent that it scratched at my skin like dozens of rusty nails.

“Tanner...that’s horrible.” I wanted to take away his pain, as ridiculous as that notion was. The agony in his eyes spoke to a part of me I didn’t want to look at too closely. A part of me that yearned for family and love.

“I found him an hour later talking to a shady-looking guy in the parking lot right outside the park. They were arguing about money and shit. It was then that I realized...my dad wasn’t a good man. At all. My mom didn’t leave us because she wanted to be with her parents. She left us to escape him and all he represented.” He bit down on his lower lip as something flashed in his blue gaze. His brows pressed together as if he was struggling to recall a specific memory. “Even though leaving didn’t save her life.”

“Your mother... She died?” I gasped, my heart breaking for him.

“I...I think so.” He scratched at his neck. “I have vague memories of...something.”

“You know,” I began slowly, my mind reeling with the onslaught of information, “I noticed that we usually struggle to retain certain memories when they concern our deaths. Or almost deaths, as the case may be. Do you think that what happened to your mom has something to do with how you got here?”

He scrunched his eyes together. “I think—”



“Guys!” Aiden barked, forcing our eyes towards the front of the group.

“What is it?” Caleb asked before I could.

Aiden pointed towards the Ferris wheel in the distance.

My blood turned to ice as horror clogged my airways, making breathing impossible.

The Ferris wheel was on fire, and that fire was rushing towards us rapidly.

15

Tanner

My dad gave me the lighter when I was thirteen.

I didn't believe it was actually supposed to be a gift. More than likely, Dear Old Dad had forgotten my birthday and grabbed the first thing he could find, which happened to be a silver lighter with his name engraved on the side. Still, it was my prized possession, my favorite belonging, because it reminded me that even when he ignored me, he still loved me. The love was twisted and sick, broken and jaded, but it was the only love I knew. Especially after my mother...

I shoved the thought away, shoved the lighter back into my jacket pocket, and dropped my cigarette onto the ground, stomping it out with my shoe.

The pizzeria I worked at already had the lights out, the owner having closed up for the night. He would be pissed I spent the last half hour smoking, but he would get over it. After all, I was the reason the local cheerleading team ate here almost every day.

A grim smile curved up my lips when I thought about all of the girls I'd fucked. Some alone. Some together. All meaningless, mindless, emotionless fucks.

The alleyway I was in held a pungent, acrid scent. Garbage bins rested against the brick walls, currently overflowing with days old food and wrappers. The ground was littered with trash as well. In the distance, I could see the downtown street bustling

with late-night shoppers.

I would have to walk home today, since my father had needed my car for traveling. I had no idea where he was going, but it was important enough to rattle him. He'd left with barely a word to me, his eyes crazed and almost feverish.

Thoughts of my father had me pulling out my phone, checking my text messages. I half expected to see a new one from my father, explaining where he'd disappeared to.

Nothing.

I pursed my lips, hating how much I relied on the bitter old man, before shoving my phone back into my pocket with a growl. I didn't want to think of him or his strange, eccentric behavior. I didn't want to think of anything, really, except for...

Except for her.

The girl who'd been ordering from Mario's Pizzeria almost every week. My mind conjured up images of the last time I'd seen her, a few days earlier. Her golden hair had been thrown into a haphazard ponytail, a few strands hanging loose and framing her angelic face. She wore a leotard and pair of sweatpants, the material clinging to her considerable bust and emphasizing her glorious curves.

I hadn't been able to get her out of my head since she'd first arrived a few weeks earlier, smirking and flirting with me behind the counter.

Bianca.

I told myself I'd gather the nerve to ask her out, but for now, I'd simply act like a complete fucking fool.

Thoughts of her made my cock so incredibly hard, it rubbed against my jeans. All I wanted to do was bury myself in her hot heat, devouring her mouth as she moaned my name in ecstasy.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, if she came to the restaurant, I would ask her out, damn the consequences.

My mind made up, I grabbed my backpack from where I'd dropped it on the street, shrugged it over my shoulders, and turned towards the mouth of the alleyway. Before I could take a single step, a figure materialized at the very end of the alley, his face shrouded in darkness.

“What the fuck?” I murmured, taking an automatic step backwards. Before I could reach for the knife in my backpack pocket—something that was always necessary, considering the part of town I lived in—a heavy object hit the side of my head.

The whole world disappeared, and my breathing became nothing but a distant sound, barely audible over the thrumming in my ears.

And then...darkness.

I woke up groggily, struggling to remember where I was and how I'd gotten there. Snippets of my dream replayed in my head—Bianaca, her mouth opened as she orgasmed, her gorgeous, tan body spread out before me.

And then I realized where I was.

On all sides of me, I saw nothing but gray cement, making me suspect I was in some type of warehouse. There was nothing that I could see—no shelves, no tables, and no chairs, except for the one I was sitting on. My hands were tied behind my back, and my head ached fiercely, almost as if I'd been tackled by a charging bull.

What the fuck?

My brain seemed to have been jammed, apparently, because that one statement played on repeat. Questions raced through my mind—where was I? How did I get there? What was happening? They tripped over one another, demanding to be asked.

“You’re awake,” a thick, accented voice mused. I struggled in the ropes as my head twisted, desperate to see the newcomer’s face.

“Why the fuck am I here? What do you want with me?” I demanded as panic tightened my stomach into dozens of knots.

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Footsteps pounded against the cement, and a second later, an unfamiliar man stood in front of me. Wait...

Familiar.

His dark hair was cropped close to his scalp, shorter than I remembered it being, and his once muscular, athletic body was turning pudgy with age. His goatee gave him an almost unassuming look, though the coldness in his eyes juxtaposed that softness. When he smiled, he revealed two rows of yellow teeth, the front one chipped.

“You...” I struggled to recall where I remembered him from before it came to me—the amusement park. Seven or eight years ago, I’d lost track of my father before stumbling upon him in the parking lot with this man. He’d been beating him, demanding...something. What that something was, I wouldn’t have been able to tell you, but I’d hidden behind the nearest trash can like a coward.

“Where’s your papa, kid?” the man queried now, kneeling down and clasping his hands together between his thighs.

“My dad? What the fuck do you want with him?”

The punch connected with my cheek before I could stop it. Pain exploded in my skull, white-hot and blistering.

“I don’t want to hurt you, kid,” he murmured, straightening from his crouch and pacing in front of me. His hands were clasped behind his back, his posture reminiscent of a nineteenth century aristocrat. He moved with an elegance and grace

that belied the tension tightening his shoulder muscles. He was a predator just waiting to pounce and kill, just waiting to stick his teeth into the throat of his unsuspecting prey.

I had the distinct feeling I was his prey.

“What the fuck do you want with my dad?” I repeated as a tiny bit of blood cascaded from my mouth.

The man laughed, and the sound sent ripples of unease down my spine. Goosebumps pebbled on my skin as the full realization of my situation washed over me like a tidal wave. A part of me had believed at first that this was all some sort of misunderstanding, that the man would release me and the two of us would laugh over it.

But now...

There was something dangerous in his eyes, something dark and deadly that made trepidation circulate in my stomach. He wanted my blood, and I didn't even know why.

“Your father... He stole money from me,” he said at last, resuming his pacing. “I want my money back.”

Stole...money?

I'd suspected for years that my dad had gotten himself into some bad shit. I'd assumed it was drugs, but now, things were finally starting to make sense. Why we moved from city to city. Why my dad constantly changed our last name. The lies and deceit that were continually piling up on me like five tons of cement.

And why he'd left just this morning, without a word of where he was going and when he would be back. I was beginning to believe...

I was beginning to believe that he had no intention of returning home, that he left me here to rot and die. That he would force his only son to pay for the sins he'd committed.

Hatred, acerbic and bitter, roared up inside of me when I thought of my father. I'd looked up to him, respected him, even loved him, and now, I was in this chair on his behalf.

"I don't know where my dad is," I told the man at last. "I swear."

Another punch. Another kick. Another slap.

I endured it all with a bloody smile painted on my lips.

"You're telling me that your dad left you with no way to get ahold of him? No contact information?" The man gave me a look of disbelief as his fist connected with my cheek again, the force nearly sending me to the ground, my chair toppling precariously before righting itself. "His apartment is completely cleared out—no clothes, no money, nothing. You're telling me he planned to leave you alone?"

Yes, I thought but didn't say. Pain exploded inside of me at his words, more prominent than any physical torture he could put me through.

He'd really planned to leave me. My own father had planned to leave me behind.

"I have no loyalty to that man!" I screamed honestly. "I swear to you, I don't know. But I can try to get you the money he owes. I promise. I'll try."



My words fell on deaf ears.

The next hour consisted of more pain than I knew how to deal with. More pain than anyone should ever have to endure. But I didn't cry, didn't scream, even as he sliced at me with a knife, punched my face, jabbed the butt of his cigarette into my arms.

And then I thought of my mother the last time I saw her. She'd come back to the states to visit, and we'd been attacked on the streets. My father, the bastard, had run, leaving us to die. I'd tried to fight them off, I did, but there was only so much one man could do against a dozen gunmen. At the time, I'd honestly believed it was a random act of gang violence.

But now...

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Now the twisted, mangled pieces of this puzzle were coming together, and the final image was even more horrible than I'd initially imagined it to be.

My father had cost my mother her life.

And now, he would cost me mine.

Wasn't it funny how the people who were supposed to protect and love you were often the ones who caused you the most pain? Maybe it was because only they knew you well enough to break you. Only they held enough of your heart to shatter it into thousands of pieces.

I was going to die here tonight, and it suddenly occurred to me that no one would mourn me. Would anyone even notice I was gone? Would anyone care?

A part of me accepted my fate, even while the rest of me rebelled.

I didn't cry when the man doused me with gasoline, all the while grinning manically, a wicked glint in his dark eyes. I didn't cry when he grabbed my favorite silver lighter and flicked the switch.

But I did cry when the flames ate at my skin, burning me alive.

And then...

A stone academy.

Masked professors.

Reapers.

Purgatory.

Her.

And then I became aware of nothing at all.

16

Bianaca

The fire ate at the tents and stalls in vibrant shades of red and orange. Cloying smoke permeated the air as I tilted my face downwards, into the collar of my shirt.

“We need to move!” Heath bellowed, coughing madly. He tried to bring his arm up to cover his mouth and nose before remembering his hands were still tied together. A low growl of irritation left his throat. Thinking quickly, I grabbed the knife from my back pocket and sliced at the belt. It fell to the ground, baring his slightly chaffed pale skin. He turned towards me gratefully and immediately brought his shirt up to cover the lower half of his face.

“Move!” Aiden hollered, gesticulating wildly towards the Ferris wheel. More and more flames licked at the amusement park, until everything in the immediate vicinity was awash in red, orange, and bright yellow. No matter where I looked, all I could see were flames. The clowns’ faces were melting like candle wax as their heads all twisted in unison to stare at us.

Panic washed over me in a torrent, painful in its intensity, before I forced it away. I couldn’t fall apart right now, not when we were in the midst of a crisis.

Gripping Tanner’s hand in mine—and ignoring how unnaturally still he had become—I began to jog down the pathway, the only part of the park that wasn’t up in flames. Tanner’s feet stumbled behind me, almost as if he’d forgotten how to walk, though he didn’t complain as I dragged him in the direction of the Ferris wheel and,

hopefully, the exit.

Malicious laughter reverberated through the flaming park, one after another, until the air was alive with a cacophony of sound. The eerie noise, growing louder and louder the closer to the exit we got, clawed at my insides. Out of my periphery, I swore I saw the plastic clowns open their charred mouths, almost as if they were the ones laughing maniacally.

Tanner's chest gave a rattling heave as he coughed madly, tripping over his own two feet. I grabbed his arm and all but slung it over my shoulder.

"We need to keep moving! Go! Go!" I didn't know if I was talking to him or myself.

My limbs felt as if they weighed a ton each, especially when Tanner rested his full weight on me, almost as if he was having difficulty keeping himself upright. My skin prickled from the heat that seemed to grow hotter and hotter with every step I took.

Still, the laughter continued, the distorted noise grating on my nerves and imbuing me with terror like I'd never experienced before.

More flames burst to life mere inches from my arms, and the pain was immediate and intense. It felt like the devil himself had crawled out of hell and was licking at my skin. I hissed, instinct trying to push me away from the heat, though all I could do was trudge forward. The flames closed in on us from all sides, impenetrable walls that corralled us forward. Forward. Forward.

It felt like I was standing in a kiln they used to make pottery. It took every ounce of willpower and strength not to scream as one flame got particularly close, burning off the tiny hairs on my arm.

The others were ahead of us, already at the exit, but my own pace was hindered by

Tanner's immense weight.

Aiden, Heath, Beau, and Kace glanced back in alarm, as if they'd only just realized we weren't directly behind them. All four of them broke into a run in our direction.

"Help us!" I screamed, though my words came out stilted and ragged. A cough got lodged in my throat as a wooden beam from one of the rides dropped in front of us, barring the way to the others. There was just enough space for me to crawl underneath the heavy piece of timber...but there was no way Tanner's considerable bulk would be able to.

"Bianaca! Tanner!" Aiden's voice was high and panicky from the other side of the beam.

"B! Are you okay?" Beau demanded.

"Get out of here!" I screamed, though my words tapered off into coughs as I inhaled smoke. "Go! We'll be right behind you!"

Though that was a lie. There was no way Tanner could fit underneath the flaming beam. And there was no way in hell I would ever consider leaving him.

"Go!" Tanner rasped out, shoving at my shoulder. "Go!"

"I'm not leaving you!" I hissed fiercely, turning around in an attempt to find another way to escape. Directly in front of me, there was a place the flames didn't reach. A place I'd noted earlier.

The darkness.

If we made it to the darkness...

“Bianaca, you need to go!” He shoved at me again, the force of his push nearly sending me onto my ass. He toppled backwards, seconds from falling into the flames, but I lunged forward and grabbed his shirt before he could. I held the fabric tightly in my grasp, meeting his gaze with a steely one of my own.

“I’m. Not. Leaving. You.” I emphasized each word to show him how serious I was. If he was going to burn in the flames, then I would burn with him. There was no way I was leaving him behind.

His eyes searched mine, and he opened his mouth as if he was going to say something. Before he could, the fire hissed and sparked, gradually closing in on us. He cursed, glancing over my shoulder at the blockade prohibiting us from exiting the park. He then swiveled his head to stare over his shoulder, his eyes narrowing at the completely flame free abyss of darkness.

“Bianaca...” No doubt, he was remembering everything Heath had told us about the darkness. About the monsters who lurked there. About the impossibility of escape. About your inevitable death if you became lost there.

But we both knew there was no other option.

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“Together.” I took his hand in mine, sweat dripping down my cheeks from the sweltering flames. He cursed once again and turned imploring eyes towards the warded off exit, almost as if he could convince me to go, to leave him. Before he could even open his mouth to beseech me, I hurried in the opposite direction of the exit, towards the darkness.

The flames were growing in height, reminiscent of a tsunami of fire towering over our heads. Fear strangled my heart, but I didn’t allow it to stop me.

I’m going to get us out of here. I’m going to get us out of here. I’m going to get us out of here.

I repeated that in my head as we raced towards the darkness.

Just before we could step foot into it, one of the clowns moved in front of us. He was nothing but charred, smoky plastic, his distorted face dripping like ice cream on a hot summer day. His hair had been reduced to clumps of crispy red strands, and his body was covered in patches of black.

“Tanner.” The clown’s face twisted to stare at the stricken man beside me. “You need to come with us.” It didn’t appear to be just one voice leaving the clown’s mouth. It sounded like hundreds, if nothing thousands of voices superimposed over each other. Young, old. Male, female. They all reverberated through my head like a pinball. “Come with me.”

“No!” I moved to stand protectively in front of Tanner. “You can’t have him!”



“B...” Tanner’s voice shook with fear.

“No!” I screamed again, tugging on Tanner’s hand. “He’s coming back with me.”

The clown lurched forward, as if he was going to grab him, and I did the only thing I could think of—I pushed Tanner into the darkness and then dived on the clown before it could follow him.

A few things happened very quickly. First, the clown began to buck underneath me, his red-painted lips stretching into a macabre, half burnt smile. I rolled off of him before his plastic fist could make contact with my cheek, lying sprawled on my back. Above me, the fire blazed, a canvas of vibrant colors. The heat licked at my skin, skittering across my arms and legs like a kingdom of angry ants.

I’m going to die.

The thought slipped into my head unbidden, but I couldn’t ignore the truth of such a statement. It settled in my stomach like a heavy, weighted rock. My skin skittered and sparked.

I’m going to die here.

I thought of my mother just then. I wouldn’t have been able to tell you why. The woman hated me. At least, she hated me enough to allow me to get raped and abused repeatedly under her watch. Somehow, though, my mind flashed back to the good moments we’d shared before she began dating Steve the Asshole. Images of her dancing around the kitchen, brownie batter on her cheeks. Her vibrant smile and twinkling eyes. The way she kissed my cheek and told me she loved me.

And then I thought of Beau, my best friend since I was a child. The man I’d secretly loved with no hope that he would ever reciprocate my feelings. When I told him I

loved him, a part of me thought he would never say those words back. How could he love someone as broken as me? My heart had been forged into glass and shattered repeatedly, thousands of tiny pieces stabbing at my insides.

I thought of Kace, Tanner, and Aiden, all three so very different from each other, but each conjuring up different emotions I couldn't quite name. Tanner brought to the surface my passion, my lust for life, while Kace was comfort and security. And Aiden... Aiden was fire. He burned me every damn time we came into contact, tinder and a match, yet I couldn't stay away. Then there was Heath, an enigma I couldn't quite understand. He was as cold as ice and as expressive as ice too, but there was something about him...

Above me, one of the wooden beams began to tilt downwards precariously. My eyes widened in alarm as I stared upwards at the flaming wood rapidly descending. It was going to crush me if I didn't move.

A dark figure materialized in front of me, grabbing my ankle and yanking me out of the incoming object's pathway.

"What the...?" I blinked groggily as the figure gripped my wrist and dragged me out of the burning amusement park and into the darkness.

Pure, unrelenting darkness.

"I think the words you are looking for are 'thank you,'" a familiar voice cooed. A flashlight switched on, and I twisted my head to escape the blinding light. Still, I didn't need to see his face to know who was speaking to me. I would know that voice anywhere. That cantankerous, combative voice that pried apart a piece of my soul.

"No..." I blinked again.

Dylan's smile was sharp and cutting, slicing me to ribbons. "Hello, little sister. Fancy running into you here."

17

Bianaca

“Dylan,” I gasped, staring up at the man—no, the monster who’d tormented me for years. He didn’t look like the slug-like creature who’d attacked me in the gym. Instead, he appeared relatively...normal. Well, as normal as a beast like him could ever be. His blue eyes were as dark as onyx in the dim glow emitting from his flashlight. Standing at six feet and four inches, he towered over me, a looming, malevolent presence that I couldn’t hope to escape.

My first thought was that he was a part of Purgatory. Another challenge I had to conquer, perhaps? But the longer I stared, the more I began to realize...he was truly here. He wasn’t just some hideous, gruesome monster I had to fight in order to survive. He wasn’t a figment of my imagination or a nightmare I would wake up from. Somehow, someway, Dylan Holebroke had found me.

“Surprised to see me?” He smiled cruelly, flashing blindingly white teeth, as, just on the outskirts of his flashlight’s beam, a monster roared. All around me, darkness pressed in, thick and cloying. I couldn’t even see my hand where it hovered just at the edges of the pale, golden light.

And I definitely couldn’t see Tanner.

My heart nosedived into my stomach as I worked to moderate my breathing.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

“How did you...?” I trailed off as my heart beat rapidly inside of my chest.

Ba-boom. Ba-boom. Ba-boom.

“Did you really think you could leave without me?” When he took a step closer, appearing ten feet tall from where I still lay on the ground, I noted that his face was different than usual. It was still artfully handsome and chiseled, with angelic features that belied the wicked soul resting just underneath the surface, but there was a paleness to his cheeks I’d never seen before. A thinness to his body that hinted at his weariness. The whites of his eyes appeared jaundiced, as if he was sick.

But that smile...

That smile was still the same damn smile, cutting me up like a knife.

“You followed us,” I mused, and I couldn’t help but recall the times I’d felt like I was being watched. I’d believed it was merely a product of being in a place so terrifying, but now...now, I wasn’t so sure.

Was it Dylan this entire time? His penetrating glare stabbing at my scalp, flaying me open and grinning wickedly while I bled?

“I knew there was something suspicious going on.” His voice was accusatory. “You were actually going to leave me behind.” Something akin to wonder flashed in his blue eyes, as if he was honestly shocked that I’d ever considered leaving him.

Was he completely delusional? Did that pea-sized brain of his forget about all of the

awful things he did to me? The way he'd tortured me? Raped me? Broken me?

Another monster cawed menacingly, the noise sounding from directly beside my head, and my chest constricted.

"How long have you been following us?" I whispered.

His grin sharpened, and his tongue snaked out to lick his upper lip. "I've always been there, little sister." He lowered to a crouch, clasping his hands together between his legs. "In the gym. In the store. Here. You can't get rid of me." Before I could move, could run, could scream, his hand clasped down on my thigh. Tightening. Bruising. Demanding.

"No!" I screamed, twisting and wiggling as his entire body fell on top of mine, the flashlight rolling to the side. Tears burned where they touched my cheeks as he planted his lips on mine, his tongue plundering my mouth. His other hand moved to cup my breast, squeezing to the point of pain. I twisted my head to the side, wrenching my lips free of his, but that only made him laugh.

"Now, now, little sister. That's not nice." He fumbled with the buttons of my pants, and I kicked at him, my foot landing squarely in his shin. He hissed out in pain, his teeth gritting together, but did not stop his attempt to remove my pants.

"I HATE YOU!" I screamed in his face, my heart thrashing wildly.

He paused in his movements, lifting his head up to meet my gaze. His soulless blue eyes, momentarily appearing black, fixed on my own, his expression indecipherable. After a moment, he smiled, all sharp edges and keen blades. His hands left the buttons on my pants to push up my shirt, resting on the bare skin of my stomach. My entire body trembled in revulsion and fear—so much fucking fear, I thought I would drown in it. I wanted to retreat into a place where these emotions couldn't consume

me, where they wouldn't wash over me in an angry torrent of water, but my brain refused to cooperate.

It chose to remain present, even when everything inside of me wanted to run.

"You don't mean that." He shook his head once in denial, his hands turning into claws on my stomach.

"You're fucking insane!" I seethed.

His palm connected with my cheek, and pain exploded. I bit down on my lip hard enough to taste blood as a tiny whimper threatened to escape.

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Dylan was positively delusional. Insane. I'd always suspected that he was a ticking time bomb just seconds from detonating, but I never thought I would bear witness to that inevitability. I'd assumed I would be long gone by then, but fate was a fickle bitch. It liked to stab you in the back when you weren't looking and then smile to your face, promising that everything would be okay.

"Just admit that you love me, Bianaca," he pleaded, his fingernails digging into my skin.

"Fuck you."

Another slap.

"JUST ADMIT IT!" Spit flew from his mouth and landed on my face, but I couldn't raise a hand to wipe it away. His knees pressed down on both of my wrists with enough pressure, I feared he'd break them.

"Dylan, please. Just let me go."

I turned towards where the flashlight had fallen moments before, the thin beam aimed in our direction, a macabre spotlight.

"I can't do that, little sister." His hands slowly slid down my stomach until they once again rested on the waistband of my jeans. "I can't do that. I can't do that."

He flicked open the button, revealing my panties.



“Dylan!” I sobbed.

Hunger manifested in his gaze as he stared at the top of my white thong, his tongue once again darting out to lick his lips. His body shifted, freeing my hands, and I didn’t hesitate to reach forward and jab both of my thumbs into his eyes.

The scream he released was music to my ears, and he sat up abruptly, blood cascading down his cheeks.

I used his momentary lapse of concentration to kick him off of me, and his head careened off the ground. With renewed vigor, I jumped on top of him, planting blow after blow into his normally smug, grinning face.

“I.”Punch. “Hate.”Punch. “You.” A tooth flew from his mouth, disappearing into the darkness. Just like in the gymnasium, his face was mottled with hideous bruises, blood dripping down his cheeks like bright red tears. I’d thought it was therapeutic to take my rage out on that monster wearing his face, but it paled in comparison to this moment. I was vengeance personified, rage and pain and anger, and for the first time in years, I had a suitable outlet.

Dylan had destroyed me. Made me believe I wasn’t deserving of love. He’d made me a victim, and as such, I’d considered myself one. But I had been reforged in the flames of hell, no longer held by shackles of civility. My rage had transformed me into a better version of myself, a new and improved Bianaca.

I wasn’t broken.

I was a survivor, and I was stronger than ever before.

Dylan began to laugh, the noise raspy and guttural, as I stared down into his distorted, nearly unrecognizable face.

“I hate you,” I whispered to him. I felt as if they were fitting final words. There was an entire monologue I yearned to say to him, but he didn’t deserve a second more of my time. He didn’t need to know about the tears I’d shed at night because of him and his actions. He didn’t need to hear about all I’d endured mentally and physically. He didn’t deserve to bear witness to my pain.

My hand closed around the flashlight as I moved to my feet.

“Are you going to kill me, little sister?” he taunted from where he lay on the ground, his voice rife with pain.

“No.” Numbness cocooned me, along with the realization that...he didn’t matter. He hadn’t mattered in the gym when the monster inside of him became flesh, and he didn’t matter now. If I gave him another ounce of my attention, that meant he won.

And I refused to let him win.

The flashlight shook as I turned away from him, intending on searching for Tanner, when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“You should’ve killed me when you had the chance,” Dylan whispered in my ear. His hands moved to my neck, and oh my god. He was going to snap it. I scratched at his hands as his fingers dug into my skin, twisting—

And then was thrown off of me into the darkness beyond.

Fear gripped my heart in an iron vise, refusing to release it, as I spun around, staring at the figure sheathed in darkness. A cloak obscured their features from view, but I noticed that they carried a scythe in their right hand.

I scrambled back a step, my tears feeling scalding hot on my cheeks, and worked to

push down my shirt and rebutton my pants.

Somewhere in the distance, Dylan screamed in terror, the noise immediately followed by a growl. And then a second growl. And then a third.

And then...

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Dylan's screaming reached a crescendo as I heard the distinct sound of flesh being ripped apart. The growling grew louder in its intensity, a gurgling roar joining the fray, before Dylan's screams tapered off. Silence descended, so sickeningly pronounced that I wanted to vomit.

Oh god.

The figure continued to stand before me, their gaze fixed in the direction Dylan had just been eaten.

Was he going to kill me?

Oh god.

He was going to kill me, wasn't he?

My stomach spasmed, trying desperately to empty itself on the pitch-black flooring, as I took another tentative step backwards, trembling erratically.

Slowly, the figure turned to face me, the hood sliding away from his face.

The whole world disappeared, and my breathing became a ragged sound, the noise almost distant through the thrumming of blood in my ears. A large stone settled in my stomach, crushing me, as I stared into the familiar dark eyes before me.

His expression was stoic, though that damn, infuriating grin still pulled up his plush lips.

“Heath,” I whispered, my gaze dropping to the scythe in his hand. And then to his eyes. And then back to the scythe.

He reached forward and took my wrist in his hand before I could even think to move.

The dark world fell away like grains of sand in an hourglass as we fell, fell, fell.

Me and Heath.

Me and...

A reaper.

18

Bianaca

When we landed, we were no longer in the infinite darkness.

Instead, we appeared to be in my living room, of all places, directly in front of the glass coffee table.

The room was exactly how I remembered it, with a floral sofa resting side by side with a gray armchair, a glass coffee table, and a flatscreen television mounted to the wall. The armchair had a Steve-sized hole in the cushion, since the asshole did nothing except drink alcohol and watch football. Over a dozen clocks hung on the peach-colored walls, each a different size. Some were large and bright red, while others were small and wooden. Mom used to collect clocks back when my dad was still alive, but his death crushed her spirit. She still possessed her collection, but she no longer added to it, content to live her life as an empty shell.

“What the...” I trailed off as my gaze latched on to Heath. He stood against the far wall, his arms crossed over his muscular chest as above us, a cuckoo clock chimed. He no longer wore the robe from before and the scythe was nowhere to be seen, but the memory of what I’d seen had been indelibly tattooed onto the backs of my eyelids.

“You...!” My voice shook with betrayal and accusation.

Unlike me, Heath appeared almost nonchalant, his expression decidedly placid, but I

couldn't help but believe it was almost too modulated, as if he was consciously remembering to breathe in and out. He wore his stoicism like armor, but right now, that armor was crumbling, one piece at a time.

"You have questions."

"You're damn right I do!" I screamed. "Where's Tanner? Oh god. We need to go back. We need to—"

"Relax." Heath took a step forward, and I automatically took one backwards. His shrewd gaze dropped to my feet, his brows furrowing, before he sighed heavily and returned to his position against the wall. "I got Tanner out of there before I was able to find you."

Hope wormed its way into my heart, inflating it until I thought it would burst. "Tanner...Tanner's all right?" I whispered, not daring to even breathe.

Heath wets his parted lips with his tongue before nodding once. It was a curt nod, the barest dip of his chin, but warmth blossomed in my stomach like a butterfly escaping its cocoon.

"And the others?"

"They're here," he answered simply. "You just can't see them yet."

I swallowed as the nerves I'd felt earlier came back full force. "Because of you." It wasn't a question, yet my voice still trembled. "You did something, didn't you?" I wrapped my arms around my waist, almost as if I could ward off the chill I knew his answer would bring.

"I did." His chin dipped once more in a semblance of a nod, though his eyes were

flinty chips of stone in his handsome face.

“Because you’re a reaper.” The words hung between us, stagnant and heavy. When he didn’t immediately refute the claim, I knew in my heart that what I’d said was the truth.

Heath had been a reaper this entire time.

I didn’t know why I was so surprised. It wasn’t like this was some massive plot twist. A part of me had always distrusted the striking, smiling man standing before me. Our trip through Purgatory had inexorably connected us, but that connection didn’t equate to trust. Heath wore his secrets the way Aiden wore his anger. I had to wonder if he ever grew tired of all the lies and deceit, of all the secrets piling on top of him.

Heath glanced up at me through his fringe of dark lashes. “It’s not what it seems.”

“It seems...” My lips curled away from my teeth in a snarl. “It seems as if you lied to us this entire fucking time.”

“I saved your life.” Heath pushed himself off the wall but didn’t take a step closer.

His words were like a cold slime coursing down my arms and legs, tickling the back of my neck. I knew he wasn’t just talking about Dylan, but...

I shoved all thoughts of my step-brother aside, even as my body continued to tremble and shake. My breathing turned uneven, sawing in and out, and I struggled to get it under control.

He’s gone for good now, Bianaca.

He won’t hurt you again.



Heath waited until I got my emotions under control, not saying a single word. I couldn't quite read the expression on his face, and that terrified me. Heath was an enigma, and just then, I couldn't tell what team he was on.

"Why did you help me?" My voice was nothing but a whisper, though it broke through the silence as if I'd been screaming.

If what Heath had said about reapers was true, they worked for Death himself, guiding poor souls to their ultimate demise. All of the professors at Tory's School for Troubled were reapers, choosing to wear masks so they didn't become attached to the students.

Except for Heath.

Heath, with his customary smile that did little to thaw his ice-cold eyes.

Heath, with his acerbic wit that made me want to run into his arms and in the opposite direction in equal measure.

Heath, who'd told us exactly how to escape and then helped us every step of the journey.

"I wasn't supposed to." His voice was just as low as mine, a breathy murmur. "But then I saw you with Kelly, with the others, and I...I wanted to help. We're allowed to give clues, allowed to push people in the right direction, but..." For the first time since I'd met him, he appeared lost and forlorn. A strand of brown hair fell into his eyes, but he didn't lift a finger to push it away and slick it back into its normal, immaculate style. It was the only sign he was distressed.

"You didn't answer the question," I accused.

His lips curled downwards. "I don't know what you want me to—"

"I just want some honest answers!" I threw my hands up into the air as tears burned my eyes, distorting my vision. "Maria's dead! Dylan's dead! And—" A sob exploded out of me, the noise as broken and shredded as my heart felt.

Through the glossy sheen of tears, I could've sworn Heath was crying as well, but I half wondered if I was imagining it. Heath didn't strike me as the type of guy who

broke down often, if at all. There was a harshness to him that not even his stunning, angelic features could contradict.

“I tried to save Maria—”

“You’re a damn reaper!” I whirled on him, pointing a finger at his chest. He took a step back as if I’d physically touched him, as if my finger had more strength than a fifty-pound weight.

“Not always.” His gaze turned distant, focusing on something over my shoulder. Everything about him screamed defeat, from his slumped posture to that wayward strand of hair in his eyes to the frown marring his handsome face. “I was actually a student at Tory’s School for the Troubled before I was chosen.”

His words stabbed at my brain like a flaming sword.

“What?”

“I was a student,” he repeated, lowering his gaze to the tops of his polished loafers. “Just like you and the others. And just like you and the others, I discovered something was...amiss.”

“Amiss.” My brain appeared to be broken. All I could do was mechanically repeat his own words back to him, praying that I made at least some sense.

“My friends and I...” He scratched absently at the back of his neck. “We planned to escape.”

Bits and pieces were beginning to penetrate the fog in my brain.

“That tunnel we found in the shed...” I instinctively took a step closer, my arms

extended towards him before I realized what I was doing. I dropped them to my sides, though I didn't stop my forward progression. "That was you and your friends?"

He nodded once, his jaw clenching so tightly, I was surprised he didn't break a tooth. "My friends didn't make it." Sadness unfurled in his eyes at whatever memory his words conjured before his expression shattered and closed over. "And I was caught by the reapers."

"No..."

His fingers tapped against his jeans, the abnormal movement drawing my attention. I couldn't look away.

"I was a good student. I followed the rules, never caused any problems, and gained a following amongst the students. They offered me a choice." Heath finally lifted his head and pierced me with a look that flayed me open. His pain was almost tangible, radiating through the air like waves of electricity. "I could either join my friends in the darkness..." A shiver rolled through both of our bodies. "Or I could join them as a reaper."

"And you chose to become a reaper," I noted.

"Not at first." He shook his head slowly, a tiny crease surfacing between his eyes. "But I didn't really have a choice, you know? I didn't want to die." He forked his fingers through his hair and moved to sit down heavily on the couch. He dropped his head into his hands, his entire body shaking with tiny tremors. "To become a reaper, I had to forget about my life before death. Fuck, doll." His head snapped up abruptly, his eyes rife with pain and frustration. "I can't remember anything about my life before I arrived here."

"How long...?" I trailed off, unsure of what I even wanted to ask.

Fortunately, Heath picked up on what I couldn't say out loud. A ragged, tired laugh escaped him, one devoid of any humor or mirth. "How long have I been here?" His gaze focused on the television, though I had the strangest sense he was seeing right past it. "Over twenty years, it feels like. I have no idea how long I've been dead. It could be only a few minutes. It could be days, months, or even years."

"Heath..." Helplessness sank its teeth in me, even as betrayal filled my veins, caustic and bitter.

"I was supposed to keep an eye on the students. Befriend them. Discover their secrets." He laughed once more. The smile carved into his mouth was weary and grim, the crack in his apathetic expression as visible as it'd ever been. He was an astute and wise monster, one whose harshness was juxtaposed by the fragility he was currently displaying.

"Heath, I need to know." I took another step closer. "Why are you helping us? Why did you help me?"

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“I...” His mouth opened, shut, and then opened again. He appeared to be at a loss for words, his eyes bright. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Do you think we know each other? I mean, knew each other? In the real world?”

He stared at me with an inscrutable expression, but instead of answering me, he asked, “Do you want to hurt me?”

“What?” I gasped. His words took me off guard, and for a moment, all I could do was blink at him repeatedly, all coherent thoughts fleeing from my mind.

“For lying to you. For putting you guys in danger.” His eyes were shadowed as he stared up at me from his perch on my sofa. “Do you want to hurt me?”

I didn’t answer him right away, mainly because I wanted to be truthful.

My heart was racing a mile a minute, and my blood was spiked with fear. But I honestly didn’t know if that fear was directed at him and his confession or a byproduct of everything that’d just occurred with Dylan. A part of me knew my anger was rising to the surface like bubbles in boiling water. Betrayal and pain mixed together as well, a dangerous mixture liable to burn.

His words were like a garrote, digging into my neck so deep, blood welled.

But...

But he’d saved me. Saved us.

He'd led us out of Limbo and helped us conquer the next three circles of Purgatory. We'd lost Maria, but was that Heath's fault? I remembered the way he'd lunged for her, the way his face had twisted with pain and horror.

And he'd saved me from Dylan. He claimed to have saved Tanner.

Was Heath the bad guy in this story? Or was he just a misunderstood hero?

"I..." I bit down on my lower lip. "I don't know what to think anymore, Heath. This is all...this is all a lot to process."

He nodded as if he'd expected that answer, his entire body bracing as if waiting for a blow I knew I wouldn't—couldn't—deliver.

"If you want me to go—"

"I don't want you to go," I interrupted. "We need you if we're going to make it out of here alive." Hope momentarily flashed in his gaze, but it dimmed with my next words. "It doesn't change the fact that you lied to me, to all of us, and I can't trust you. But if you're willing to help us escape here—"

"I am." He leaned forward to beseech me with his gaze.

"Then I want you to stay with us. And...and I won't tell the others about what you told me." Something tightened in my stomach. I knew the guys would be pissed that I kept this from them, but I also knew they would never allow Heath to remain with us if they knew the truth.

I didn't trust him, but I needed him. We needed him. He was the only one who knew about this horrific wasteland we'd found ourselves in. We had five more circles we needed to conquer in order to return home, five more nightmares we had to survive.

“I promise you, I’ll do everything in my power to free you guys from this place,” Heath vowed solemnly. He paused, his gaze going distant, before adding, “No matter the cost.” His ominous words sent a prickle of unease skating down my spine. Why did they feel like a premonition? “Come. The others are waiting.” With that, he raised his hand into the air and flicked his fingers.



19

Aiden

Where the fuck was she?

I fisted my black hair once more as I paced just outside the house. That shady fucker, Heath, had promised us he would find her. I had no idea how he intended to do that, and to be completely honest, I didn't care. So help me God, if he was playing with me...

I allowed that thought to taper off as I glanced down at Tanner, who sat on the driveway, his arms wrapped around his knees. We'd only been separated from him and Bianaca for less than ten minutes before he materialized in front of us. Besides a claw mark on his right arm, he appeared relatively unscathed.

His eyes were hardened, darkened, the blue nearly black. Whatever he'd experienced before he arrived here was enough to rattle him, though that could also be an aftereffect of his time in that fucked-up theme park.

Fucked up.

I couldn't help but snort at how...tame those two words seemed in comparison to everything we had endured.

When we exited the theme park, we'd found ourselves once again in infinite blackness. I wanted to claw and tear at the darkness until it shattered, until light

flooded the world once more. I was pretty sure when I returned home, I would sleep with a damn nightlight on like some simpering, whiny child.

In the distance, a speck of gold had beckoned us forward, and we hadn't hesitated to follow it.

Beau had recognized the house immediately.

Bianaca's home.

Which meant...

Which meant that another layer of Purgatory was meant for her.

I wanted to scream at the injustice of the world, at the unfairness of it all, but I knew I needed to remain levelheaded.

Even though every molecule inside of my body wanted to find Bianaca, drag her back to us, and spank that pert ass until she screamed my name.

The house was small, only two levels, and had a gray roof with black patches, almost as if whoever owned it chose not to pay for the necessary maintenance. I half feared that it would cave in on our heads if we were to enter the building. The siding was constructed out of light blue beams, though more than one was freckled with holes and dirt. The long, gray driveway curved steeply down, disappearing into the unrelenting darkness surrounding us. A single porchlight, almost orange in appearance, illuminated the entire front yard. A swinging chair rested amidst the overgrown weeds and decaying flowers and hung precariously from a stand, appearing seconds from breaking completely. The darkness pressed in on either side of the house, allowing us access to only the front yard, half of the driveway, and the house itself.

“We need to go after her!” Kace exclaimed suddenly, jumping to his feet. He began to bounce on the balls of them, his gaze intent on the darkness. As if some invisible beast had heard his words, a roar reverberated through the blackness, and every hair on my arms stood at attention.

Beau placed a calming hand on his shoulder, but Kace shrugged him away.

“Kace...” Tanner slowly lifted his head and pierced the auburn-haired boy with an indecipherable look. “You don’t want to go in there.” Violet circles lined the skin beneath both of his eyes, another indication that he’d been shaken by everything that had happened.

Kace’s eyes flared with banked fire. “If B is down there—”

“Heath said he’ll handle it,” I interrupted.

He whirled on me. “And you believe him?”

Worry for my friend consumed me. I didn’t know a lot about bipolar disorder, but I knew his lows were often accompanied by unspeakable highs. It was why he disappeared for days at a time. Sometimes, he would lie in bed, not moving, eating, or speaking, until I feared he would waste away. And other times...

Other times he was eccentric, unpredictable, his mind unable to focus on one thing in particular. He grasped at life with a zeal that honestly made me afraid. The risks he took were deadlier, his decisions were often based on impulse, and he never gave a second thought to his own health and safety.

Before Bianaca, before she came into his life, his highs would often involve some combination of drugs, booze, girls, and stupid dares. But now...now they revolved around her.

“You’re no help to her if you’re dead,” I drawled, and his eyes narrowed into slits.

“Fuck you, Aiden,” he hissed, baring his teeth like a rabid animal. “Just because I’m the only one who seems to care about her—”

“Watch it,” Tanner interjected, his tone low and full of warning. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You guys are content to let her get eaten by fucking monsters—”

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Whatever ridiculous claim he was about to make was interrupted by the front door of the house opening. Tanner jumped to his feet, his eyes wild, while Beau all but raced up the front steps, his eyes devouring Bianaca as he checked her over for injuries. I remained where I was, my jaw locked tight and my hands curled into fists.

Why the fuck did I want to be the one taking her into my arms? I hated her...didn't I?

Fuck, it was getting harder and harder each day to pick apart my own feelings.

"Where the fuck were you?" I bit out, even as my eyes took her in from head to toe. Heath stood at her shoulder, that cocky grin plastered on his face, though I barely gave him a second's notice. Was that...was that a tear in her sleeve? What the fuck had happened? Had Heath done something to her?

"I'm fine." Bianaca waved a hand in the air dismissively, almost as if she could wipe away our concerns. "I got...lost in the darkness. But Heath found me." She shot him a look I couldn't quite understand, one that made my hackles raise in defense.

The two of them were keeping something from me. Fromus.

I didn't fucking like that one bit. We were supposed to be a motherfucking team, goddammit.

"You're okay?" Kelly whispered from the opposite side of the driveway, where she stood surrounded by her...harem. Or whatever the fuck they were.

I'd completely forgotten they were with us.

Fuck, did that make me an asshole?

I'd told myself that when I traveled through the tunnels, I would only protect Kace and Tanner, my two best friends. The rest of these fuckers could fend for themselves.

Somehow, someway, that protection extended to Bianaca and Beau, though I didn't want to look too closely as to why that was. But Kelly and her merry gang of broody assholes? I'd watch out for them, the way I'd hope they'd do for me, but they weren't my priority. If that made me a sack of shit, then so be it.

"I promise you. I'm fine." Bianaca's eyes glimmered with sincerity—the first honest statement she'd said since she stepped out of the house—and tension leaked from me like water out of a wrung out sponge.

"Are you sure?" Kace barreled his way up the stairs, shouldering past Beau to stand directly in front of her. His eyes snagged on the same tear I'd noted earlier, his brows drawing together in concern. "What happened there?"

"That's just from the amusement park." She once again waved her hand in the air. "Don't worry about it."

"Why the fuck did you do that?" Tanner snapped, jerking forward as well. He hovered over her, though she didn't appear cowed by his intimidating height and bulk. His large frame cast her in shadows, though she simply lifted her chin imperiously and met his gaze with a defiant one of her own.

That's my girl.

"Do what?" I interrupted. I felt as if I was missing something crucial, as if I wasn't given all of the words needed to complete this story. They were on the final chapter, while I was still on chapter three.

Tanner gritted his teeth together and balled his hands into fists. “She sacrificed herself for me,” he bit out, sounding as if he wanted to both kiss and strangle her in equal measure. “At the amusement park. She tried to play the fucking hero.”

A strange myriad of emotions flickered through me at his words. First, I felt anger that she would try to risk her life, though that anger quickly transformed into relief. Tanner was my best friend, and I would be devastated if anything happened to him. But Bianaca was...

What was she to me?

Everything, a tinny, almost mechanical voice whispered in my head. I shushed it.

We were strangers, in a sense. I wouldn't have been able to tell you her favorite color, but I knew exactly what that sick fuck Dylan had done to her. Did that type of shared trauma bring people even closer together or rip them apart? What would happen when we returned home? Even if we did remember everything that had occurred inside of this place, would we have anything in common? Would we even want to be together—

I shoved that thought down so fast, it made me lightheaded.

There was no “we.” There was her and me. The Four Horsemen and the girl we would destroy the world for.

But that didn't mean we were anywhere near relationship level.

Though try telling that to the others, who all stared at her with lovestruck, dewy eyes. It was sickening, maddening, and I couldn't help but feel an irrational pang of jealousy that she returned their affection with gusto while completely ignoring me.

What the fuck was she doing to me? To my men?

“You did what now?” Kace sounded terrified, and when he gripped her arm, she actually winced in pain.

“Kace,” I barked, knowing that he’d never intentionally hurt her but fearing what he’d do in his panicked state. His eyes flashed to my face in surprise before they lowered to where his hand curled around her frail arm. Horror splayed itself across his face as he released her immediately, stumbling backwards a few steps.



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“I’m sorry,” he rasped out. He looked as if he was going to be sick.

I just knew he was going to flee. That was what he always did in times like this. But if he fled while we were—

Bianaca’s hand snapped out and captured his, squeezing once. His eyes widened with shock as he stared at where they connected, almost as if he’d assumed she would now be wary of him. But I knew our girl—

Wait. Not our girl, I mentally corrected, acidic bitterness coursing through my bloodstream. A girl.

“I just don’t like the thought of you in danger.” Kace’s voice was soft, meant only for her ears. “Of you sacrificing yourself for us.”

“You would do the same for me,” she whispered back, and he smiled at her adoringly. Was that love I saw in his eyes? Nah. It couldn’t be. It was too soon to feel such an emotion. Besides, she hated us, and rightfully so. We’d been nothing but assholes to her when she first arrived at the academy. I’d thought she had something to do with Josie’s—

I shut that shit down, locking it up tight.

“Why are we here, asshole?” I asked Heath, leveling him with a sharp, narrow-eyed glare. “You probably know exactly what’s going to happen next, don’t you?”

“Do you have to be so fucking antagonistic?” Bianaca snapped.

I flashed her a saccharine sweet smile, one capable of turning most girls into puddles of mindless goo—goo I could mold and conform to fit my needs.

But not Bianaca. Never Bianaca.

“You love it, sweetheart,” I taunted, flicking my tongue out. The piercing on the tip clanked against the one on my lower lip, and I watched her eyes drop to them, becoming hooded.

“You’re ornery, stubborn, combative—”

“Quit complimenting me, baby. You’re making me blush.”

“—cantankerous—”

“That’s a big word. Did you look it up in the dictionary in preparation?”

“—infuriating, and the biggest asshole I ever met,” she finished, seemingly pleased with her string of insults.

“Don’t be rude, princess,” I chastised, loving the way red splotches erupted on her cheeks in anger. Before she could open her mouth to insult me yet again, I turned my glare to Heath, though my words were still meant for her. “You can’t tell me you trust this asshole.” I twisted to see her expression, gauging it carefully.

“I...don’t,” she managed to get out, fumbling over those two words. My gaze sharpened, honing in on her like a heat-seeking missile.

“What aren’t you telling us?”

“Nothing, asshole,” she sniped, turning her attention to the others. For some reason,

that infuriated me more than anything else that had happened in the last minute. I wanted her attention on me, dammit. And when her eyes fixed on Heath, I swore I saw red. A blazing, fiery wall of it that licked at my veins. “The house is secure?” she queried.

“For now,” he said, though he sounded cautious. He scanned the horizon with shrewd, slightly narrowed eyes. I’d never admit this to anyone, but perverse pleasure filled me that the great and powerful Heath didn’t appear to be completely all-knowing. That pleasure was quickly eclipsed by terror.

What was he so afraid of? What more did we have to face?

“Then let’s stay here for a bit. Recharge and refuel,” Bianaca suggested, though her tone sounded odd, and when she glanced back at the house, her eyes were pained. I couldn’t help but wonder how many times Dylan—

How many times he—

My jaw clenched.

How could we ask her to stay in the same house her step-brother attacked her in?

“That’s probably a good idea,” Heath mused, though I didn’t give a fuck if he thought it was the best idea to ever exist. His opinion was irrelevant.

“Let me just make sure it’s secure.” I pushed past Heath on my way into the house, ignoring Bianaca’s eye roll at my antics. I checked every room on the first floor, while Tanner, Kace, and Beau checked the top one and basement.

Bianaca remained on my heels, her lips pursed into a scowl.

“Why do you have to be so...?”

“Handsome?” I scoffed as I checked the final bedroom. The pink bedspread made me believe that the room was hers. Unbidden, my eyes latched on to one of the pictures pinned to the wall above her bed. It showed Bianaca and Beau with their arms around each other, standing in front of a stereotypical Italian restaurant. Both of them wore matching grins on their faces.

The familiar claws of jealousy stabbed at me as I glared at the tiny square photo.

“Is that where he took you on a date?” I asked, pointing to the brick restaurant behind them.

She snorted. “We never dated, Aiden. We were just friends when this picture was taken.”

I didn’t miss the past tense way she described their friendship. A demented part of me, a part I wanted to cut out of my body and kill, wanted to know if they were still friends or if their relationship had progressed to something other, something more. But I had the distinct feeling that it would open up an entire can of worms I wasn’t ready to deal with yet. Yet there were hundreds and hundreds of questions I yearned to ask. What was going on between her and Tanner? Her and Kace?

Yeah. Not today, Satan. Not to-fucking-day.

“Where would you take me on a date?” she inquired casually, and my heart jolted, speeding up before stuttering to an abrupt halt.

“Why do you want to know?” I asked, quirking a pierced brow. “Do you really think I would ever date you?”

“Humor me, asshole.” She moved to sit on her bed, tugging a pillow into her arms and resting her chin on top of it.

While I got my thoughts in order, I gave the room another once-over. All and all, it appeared to be a normal teenage girl’s room. The bedspread was a bright pink with black stripes, and the carpeting was an eggshell white. The closet door was slightly ajar, revealing numerous dresses and shirts of all colors. A desk rested against the far wall, consisting of nothing but a few textbooks and framed photos of her and a woman I could only assume was her mom. I saw none of her dad or her step-family.

“Where’s your dad?” my big mouth blurted out before I could think better of it.

“Died. Before I was born.” She spoke those words without any inflection, as if she were reciting a fact from one of those anatomy textbooks. I wondered if she knew how callous she was being, though I suspected she didn’t give a damn. After all, she didn’t know the man who’d donated his sperm.

“Sorry,” I responded gruffly.

She waved away my words. “It’s okay. Now, you never answered my question.”

“About?”

“About our date. Where would you take me?”

I threw my head back in dry laughter before I could stop myself. This girl was fucking ridiculous sometimes, and I kind of loved it.

“Are you being serious?”

“Deadly.” She patted the mattress until I reluctantly moved to sit beside her, making sure to keep my feet off the comforter. I held myself rigidly, a marionette controlled by taut strings, until she shoved at my shoulders. “Don’t look so fucking terrified, Aiden. It’s not a good look on you.”

I whirled my head around to glare at her. “I’m not fucking terrified.”

She simply shrugged, seemingly unconvinced. “Sure seems like you are to me.”

My hands curled in my lap with the effort it took to restrain myself from forcing her over my knee and spanking her. Fuck, she drove me wild.

“You want to know where I would take you on this anti-date?”

“Yes, please.” She flashed me a coy smile, one that instantly made my dick harden in my pants.

“You would fucking hate it,” I warned her. “I would make sure you did.”

“Oh would you?” Her eyes sparkled at our banter, and I had to bite down on my lip to stop my own answering smile from unfurling on my lips.

Fuck, retreat, Aiden. Fuck!

I needed to get out of here as fast as humanly possible, yet I couldn’t make myself move. It was as if she had her own magnetic force field that I was helpless to resist, one that repeatedly drew me into her orbit.

“First, I would insist you wear the most hideous dress I could find.”

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“Done!” she said immediately, pointing towards the closet. A fluffy blue number peeked out, with so much frill, it reminded me of a princess dress a young child would wear. “Asshole Steve forced me to wear that hideous thing to his sister’s wedding. So I’ll wear that...monstrosity on our date. What would you be wearing?”

“This.” I nodded towards my normal ensemble of dark skinny jeans and black T-shirt. Her lips twitched.

“Oh.”

“I wouldn’t dress up for you or anything,” I said with a huff.

“Okay, continue. What’s next?”

“Then I would pick you up in my shitty ass car. It hasn’t been cleaned in maybe...oh...two to three years?” I smiled when her eyes widened, her lips parting ever so slightly.

“You’re really spoiling me, aren’t you?”

“Anything for you, princess,” I drawled. Tapping a finger underneath my chin in contemplation, I continued, “And then I would drive you to the south side of town—that’s the bad part, if you haven’t picked up on that—and we would go to a shady-looking van that sells sushi.”

“Oh, yummy. I haven’t had sushi in way too long. Then what?”

“Then,” I continued, “we’ll go golfing. Well technically, I’ll go golfing. You can hold my clubs.”

“You can golf?” Her brows arched in surprise, and I laughed before I could stop myself.

“Not at all. Which would make it even more fun.” I met her grin with one of my own.

“And then?”

“And then...I’ll maybe let you blow me. Maybe not. Depends on my mood.”

“Such a gentleman.”

Then I did something really fucking stupid. Something I knew would irrevocably alter my entire life, until I couldn’t decipher up from down, left from right. The thing was...

The world kept spinning. Death happened daily, yet it never stopped. You grieved, but then you moved on. Life didn’t stop just because you wanted it to. The only way to ensure you made the most out of it was by grabbing life by the balls, squeezing, and making it your fucking bitch.

So in the depths of Purgatory, in the circle of Wrath, I kissed Bianaca Steal as if my life depended on it.

And maybe...

Maybe it did.



20

Bianaca

Aiden pried my lips apart, and his tongue darted in before I was even aware of what was happening. Tasting me. Claiming me. Owning me. I couldn't even deny to myself how possessive his kiss was, how searing and all-consuming.

As abruptly as the kiss began, it ended, Aiden ripping his lips away from mine with a growl.

“What the fuck are you doing to me?” he hissed in my face, but I couldn't answer. Heat had unfurled in my belly, and my panties were already drenched. I didn't know what was happening between him and me—the others and me—but I knew I wanted him.

Needed him.

I could sooner give up breathing than stop what was inevitable.

He must've seen it on my face, for his eyes hardened, appearing almost molten in the dim lighting of my childhood bedroom. Another animalistic growl escaped him as he all but grabbed my hips and jerked me onto his lap. He reached behind me, grabbed my knife, and tossed it onto the ground.

“I'm so fucking furious at you,” he snapped as he claimed my lips once more, his hands roaming over my back and pushing my shirt up in the process. I pulled away

only long enough to toss the shirt over my head. His shirt quickly followed, baring his muscular, tattooed torso to my greedy eyes. Both of his nipples were pierced, and my tongue watered with the need to taste them.

But then his words penetrated the lusty haze in my mind.

“What the fuck did I do, asshole?” I demanded.

Instead of answering, he kissed me once more, fierce and demanding, as his hands moved to cup my ass. He squeezed tightly before giving the right cheek a sharp slap, though the material of my jeans softened the blow. “For putting your life in danger.” Slap. “For acting as if we wouldn’t be fucking devastated if anything happened to you.” Slap. “For making stupid decisions with no regards to your own life.” Slap. Slap. Slap.

His lips moved to my breasts, biting at my nipple through the cotton material of my bra. I arched my back, my pleasure mounting, as his eyes flared with the fires of hell. Just then, he was a devil in human flesh.

A beast that had been unleashed on the world. On me.

“You hate me,” I panted.

“So fucking much,” he agreed, fisting his hand in my blonde curls. He tugged until I was forced to arch my neck for him...and then he tugged even harder until my breasts were in his face. A heady mixture of pleasure and pain exploded inside of me as his tongue snaked out to lick a pathway between my breasts, up the column of my throat, and then back down.

He released my hair, forcing me upright, and didn’t waste a second ripping down the cups of my bra, my nipple grazing his cheek.

“My god, woman. You’re so fucking infuriating,” he hissed as he brought my left breast to his lips, sucking hard. When he bit down, I cried out, my muscles spasming. His eyes smiled enigmatically, almost as if my reaction amused him. “You wanted me, baby,” he pointed out. “Now you got me.”

“You’re a fucking asshole,” I whispered, gripping his jaw to force his lips back to mine. He squeezed both of my breasts, once again evoking that strange pleasure-pain sensation, as his tongue plundered my mouth.

I didn’t understand what was happening between us. A part of me hated him, while another part of me...

Well, that kinky bitch wanted him.

He pushed me onto the bed, my curved legs still wrapped around his waist, and hovered over me. The cold piercing in his tongue was a direct contrast to my suddenly overheated skin, and I jerked upwards when he rubbed it over my nipple once more.

This tension... It had been brewing between us from the very first meeting. Every quip and jibe. Every hurtful word and narrow-eyed glare. It’d somehow translated to this exact moment. Emotions clawed at me, sinking their talons deep into my skin. Jagged scratches were left in their wake, and I feared they would never heal properly, always remaining as hideous scars.

My hands tangled in his messy black hair as he removed my bra completely, his lips repeatedly traveling from my breast to my neck to my jaw and then back again.

When he kissed down my stomach, I didn’t stop him.

And when he placed his hands into the waistband of my jeans, pushing them down

alongside my white thong, I didn't stop him.

Though I did tense, my muscles going rigid as if I'd been shocked.

He froze, my pants halfway to my knees, and pierced me with a look I couldn't quite read.

For a brief moment, anger blazed to life in his eyes, and though he didn't know all the details, I had the distinct feeling he knew exactly who was behind my trepidation.

Dylan.

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The monster who was still haunting me.

“Don’t stop,” I hissed, pulling my knees up to my chest to encourage him. He hesitated, only briefly, before removing my shoes and socks.

With a carefulness that belied the tension radiating from his taut muscles, he took off my jeans, panties, shirt, and bra, setting them on the ground beside my discarded shoes.

He looked...different.

His features appeared almost serene, and without that ornery, combative glint in his eyes, he looked like a completely different person. I didn’t know if I loved or hated that.

His fingernails scratched at the inside of my thighs, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Obsidian eyes stared down at me, as impassive as Heath’s. “I’m not a good guy, baby. I break and break and break. I’ll break you.”

I gripped his neck, forcing him down on top of me. “Maybe we’ll break each other,” I whispered, forging my lips to his. With my knees on either side of his chest, this position put his cock directly against my wet core. I could feel how hard he was through the fabric of his dark jeans.

“What the fuck are you doing to me?” he demanded between kisses.

What the fuck are you doing to me?

I didn't even want to think about how Beau would react to this, how Tanner and Kace would. But somehow...this felt right. Just as right as my time with Tanner had been, as my kiss with Beau had been. The feeling was hard to describe, but I could've sworn that all of the trials in Purgatory had led to this moment.

I rubbed at his cock through the denim of his jeans as one of his hands went to my core, circling my clit. His other hand continued to tease my heavy breasts, squeezing and then releasing them.

"Fuck, Aiden!" I cried as his hand moved even faster, his fingers scissoring in my slick channel. Reaching forward, I all but ripped his buttons off, pushing down his pants enough so his hard cock could spring free. Fuck, was that a piercing at the tip? Desire unfurled in my stomach as I stared hungrily at the man before me. The tip dripped with pre-cum, and I didn't hesitate to use it as lube.

"We need to be fast," Aiden growled out. "Before the others search for us."

"I'm pretty sure they all know what we're up to," I panted, knowing that the few minutes we were away was more than enough time for them to freak out and check in on us. And surprisingly...the thought excited me. A lot. I could feel myself growing wetter at the mere prospect of one of them watching.

"You like that?" His tone was low with wonderment as he slapped at my pussy. "You like the thought of the others watching us?"

"Fuck, yes." I moaned and writhed, feeling mindless with pleasure, with need.

He removed his pants the rest of the way, kicked off his shoes, and then grabbed my hips and flipped me around. One of his hands went to my back, holding me down,

while his pierced cock lined up with my entrance.

“You ready, baby girl?” he growled in my ear, falling on top of me. His chiseled chest brushed against my back as he reached for my chin, tilting my face to the side to kiss him. Our tongues mated, his piercing providing an additional sensation that amplified my desire.

“Fuck me, Aiden,” I panted. There was no point in wasting time with sweet whispers and romantic words. That wasn’t us—we were crude and crass and combative.

And when he slid into my slick channel, we were combustion personified. Fire danced along my skin as he began to fuck me from behind, his hand closing over my own on the bed. He rained down kisses on my neck, hair, and cheek.

I curled my legs upwards at the knees and arched my back, allowing him to enter me even deeper. His piercing dragged against the sensitive skin inside my pussy, eliciting sensations like I’d never experienced before.

He grabbed at my hair, pulling it into a tight ponytail, and forced my entire upper torso off the bed.

His other hand rested on the curve of my ass, pushing down, and then—

Smack.

He spanked my ass cheek as his grip on my hair tightened to almost painful levels.

“Do you know what I do to girls who piss me off?” His raspy voice sounded directly beside my ear.

I couldn’t answer, my mind blown to smithereens by the pleasure coursing through

my veins, but he wasn't expecting one.

He slapped my ass again, hard enough to evoke a whimper from me, before continuing. "I deny bad girls orgasms."

I practically cried at those words, my core throbbing.



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“You wouldn’t,” I breathed, twisting my head around to narrow my eyes at him.

His charcoal eyes glinted with amusement. It almost seemed to be rolling off of him with a malevolent energy, that sadistic bastard.

“You almost died today, Bianaca,” he snapped, his hips moving slowly, languidly, against me. His cock brushed against my walls deliciously, and my pussy clenched around him.

I had to admire his self-control. Despite a single hiss of air through clenched teeth, he didn’t show any sign that he was falling apart. His pace never increased. He seemed content to piston in and out of me in a slow, lazy fashion.

“Why do you even fucking care?” I didn’t know why I was provoking him, only that I was. “You hate me.”

He didn’t answer. Not that I expected him to.

Instead, he grabbed my hips once more, forcing me onto my hands and knees, and began to fuck me ruthlessly. My tits bounced madly with every punishing thrust, my nipples begging for his hands on them.

“You stupid”—thrust—“idiotic”—thrust—“perfect fucking woman.”

He reached around my body to strum my clit, his fingers spreading around my wetness. When he removed them, he brought them to my lips, forcing them into my mouth until I tasted myself. I licked at his fingers the way I wanted to do to his cock,

swirling the tip with my tongue and licking up and down the sides.

“Fuck!” he growled, removing his fingers from my mouth. Instead of returning them to my clit, he brought his hand to my throat, applying just enough pressure to say that he owned me. Possessed me. Used me.

My eyes must’ve closed with bliss, because when he pressed down on my airways, I opened them in alarm.

Only to have them meet a familiar pair of hazel orbs.

I didn’t know what the fuck possessed me, but the word left my mouth before I could stop it.

“Kace.”

21

Bianaca

If I'd thought Aiden would stop at the arrival of his best friend, I was sorely mistaken.

Hadn't I heard a rumor that they liked to share women? That they—my pussy clenched around Aiden's hard cock—liked to also play with each other?

Kace hesitantly moved towards the bed, but the trepidation and wariness in his movements couldn't hide the lust emanating from his forest-colored eyes. They created a physical pathway of heat and desire, setting my skin ablaze with need.

Slowly, he removed his shirt, unveiling his golden, freckled skin to my greedy eyes. As Aiden's pace slowed, his hands digging into my hips, Kace kept his eyes on me.

Watching.

Making sure I wanted this.

I licked my lips, my eyes dropping to the front of his pants. His breathing was as ragged as mine as he slowly pushed them down, his cock springing free. It was thinner than Aiden's but longer, with a curved tip.

“Are you just going to stand there, or are you fucking joining?” Aiden growled out, his entire body shaking with the effort it took to remain still. I whimpered, rocking

my hips against him, and he smacked his palm down on my ass. The noise reverberated through the room, and Kace's cock twitched.

"Come here," I all but begged. I was insatiable, desperate for a taste of him. He kicked off his pants and shoes the rest of the way and then moved until he was in front of me, his cock level with my lips. I wrapped my hand around the base and slowly guided it into my eager mouth.

Bobbing my head up and down, I focused on the sensation of having him in my mouth, of his musky taste and the groans that left his lips in pure ecstasy.

And when Aiden began to move, all coherent thoughts fled from my mind.

"Fuck, look at that ass," Aiden cursed, cupping both cheeks. "Isn't it the best fucking ass you've ever seen?"

I gasped around Kace's cock at Aiden's crude words, forcing it even deeper into my mouth. I hollowed my cheeks, trying to tamp down my natural reaction to gag, as he pistoned in and out of me in tandem to Aiden's thrusts. When he grabbed my hair, his touch was exceedingly gentle, almost a caress. It was a direct contrast to the savage way Aiden pulled at and used me.

Night and day.

Maybe that was why they shared girls together. Kace was the tenderness to Aiden's harshness. I imagined not a lot of girls could handle only one at a time—Aiden seemed like the type who required complete control and submission the entire time, the type who used physical force to get his way. Kace, on the other hand, was content to go with the flow, allowing me to be in control of his pleasure.

Allowing Aiden to be in control of his pleasure.

My pussy dampened at how incredibly hot I found that.

I moaned around Kace's cock when Aiden's speed increased, his hips slapping against my ass with every punishing thrust. Just before I could topple over into the blissful land of orgasms, Aiden pulled out of me with a grunt.

"What...?" I all but whimpered. Without giving me a chance to say more, he gripped my hair and forced my mouth off of Kace's cock. When he kissed me, I took great pleasure in knowing he tasted Kace on my lips.

"You're so fucking sexy, baby girl," Aiden murmured as he moved his lips to my neck, biting down hard enough to leave a mark. He gripped my hair tightly, forcing my head back in a way that felt submissive. "Do you want Kace to fuck you?" He moved his lips to my ear, his tongue snaking out to lick the shell of it. "Do you want his big, hard cock inside your tight little pussy?" As he spoke, he reached around me to grip Kace's cock, stroking it from base to tip. The other man's eyes rolled into the back of his head at the contact.

I was panting, salivating, desperate for the morsel Aiden was dangling enticingly in front of me.

"Or would you rather we do something different?" As abruptly as Aiden grabbed me, he released me, jumping to his feet and moving to stand behind Kace. I pushed myself onto my elbows to watch them, my pussy throbbing and my nipples unbearably hard.

"Fuck," I whimpered, bringing one hand to my breast to tease the tight nub as I lifted my upper body slightly to see better, the movement pushing out my breasts.

Aiden fisted his hand in Kace's garnet hair and slowly guided the red-haired man's lips to his own. Their tongues tangled almost immediately in a dance I wasn't

surprised to know they were familiar with. And though they were kissing each other, I knew their sole focus was on me.

Kace slowly moved his hand down Aiden's taut, chiseled abs until he reached his cock. He rubbed his finger over the slit at the end and then around the piercing.

I gasped, one of my hands leaving my heavy breasts and trailing between my legs. If I could just—

“No touching yourself,” Aiden snapped as Kace fell to his knees before him, his eyes demure and slightly lowered. The perfect submissive. “This is your punishment.”

Without breaking eye contact with me, Aiden gripped his own cock and slapped it against Kace's cheek before slowly guiding it into his mouth. Kace immediately hollowed his cheeks, ready for him, and Aiden's eyes rolled backwards as he began to slowly fuck Kace's face.

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A part of me wanted to defy Aiden and touch myself anyway, but the rest of me...

The rest of me knew the reward for obeying would be significantly better than anything I could do with my fingers.

Just as Kace was beginning to find a rhythm, his head bobbing and saliva dripping from his chin, Aiden pulled out of him and moved until he was positioned directly in front of me. He slowly bent at the waist and placed his hands on the bed directly on either side of my thighs.

I watched with wide eyes as Kace leaned around our two bodies and shoved his fingers into my tight pussy. At first, I thought he was disobeying Aiden's orders and offering me pleasure, but he quickly removed his hand and resumed his position behind Aiden.

And when he inserted one finger into Aiden's tight hole, I swore I was going to spontaneously combust, fingers in my pussy be damned.

"Surprised, baby?" Aiden whispered as he peppered kisses along the inside of my thighs.

"That you like it in the ass?" I murmured, just as breathless. "I always assumed you had a stick up there."

He chuckled darkly, leaning forward to nip at my clit.

"Naughty girl." He looked over his shoulder at Kace. "Kace, grab a condom. I'm

assuming our naughty girl keeps them in her nightstand.”

I didn’t even deny it.

As Kace grabbed a condom and rolled it over his hard length, Aiden turned towards me once more, providing slow and languid licks to my center.

“You like this, baby?” he whispered against my pussy. “You like my tongue on you?”

His words ended in a groan as Kace slowly sheathed himself inside the tight ring of muscle, using my own arousal as lube. And though his cock was in Aiden’s ass, he was staring at me as if he was imagining it buried in my pussy.

“You’re so beautiful,” Kace rumbled out, his eyes full of reverence.

“Our girl is pretty damn perfect, isn’t she?” Aiden lowered his mouth to my cunt and began to suckle on it as Kace fucked him.

I wanted to retort at being called their “girl,” but to be completely honest...I liked that term. A lot. I liked being their girl. Theirs...Kace, Aiden, Beau, Tanner, and even—

For a moment, the only sounds I could hear were our grunts, cries, and praises. Aiden didn’t remove his lips from my pussy, even when Kace increased his speed, his hands clenching Aiden’s muscular ass cheeks.

I was climbing, climbing, climbing, and any second, I was going to fall. I was going to fucking shatter, and I imagined nothing would be sweeter.

But once again, the asshole deprived me of an orgasm.



He removed his lips from my core, and as if he'd been telepathically instructed to, Kace pulled out of his ass. Aiden reached for both of our necks and pulled us into a messy, three-way kiss. It was nothing but tongues and lips and that piercing of Aiden's. I honestly couldn't tell who I was kissing, and it was fucking perfect.

Kace broke our three-way kiss first to dispose of the condom and clean himself up, while Aiden tangled his fingers in my hair, arching my head back to deepen the kiss.

I didn't know how long we were kissing for, but the next thing I knew, Kace was lined up with my entrance and Aiden was using his saliva to lube up the auburn-haired man's ass.

But...Kace hesitated, staring down at me with an indecipherable expression. His hazel eyes, resembling autumn flecked with spring, peered down at me.

"Are you sure, pretty lady?"

"Kace..." I lifted my arms to wrap them around his neck, pulling him on top of me. The position put his cock directly against my pussy lips, and we both groaned. "I care about you."

"I'm so, so sorry for everything I did when you first arrived at school," he whispered brokenly. "I'm so, so sorry for being such a fuck up and—"

"Hey!" I gripped his face, forcing his eyes on my own. "Don't talk about yourself that way." Before he could try to get away, I craned my neck and captured his lips.

The whole world disappeared, and I ascended into nothingness.

I'd always thought Kace was an enigma, more so than the others. He took the blame for me that day in the office, when I accidentally spilled coffee on the school's

computer. He got slapped because of me. But at the same time, he destroyed all of my clothes for some petty need for revenge. I never knew how I felt about him...

Until now.

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Kace pried my lips apart with his, his tongue darting in to taste me.

Our lips still fused together, Kace slowly entered me, not once breaking our kiss. And when Aiden entered him, I'd never felt so connected to these men. We were inexorably twined together—all of us. Tanner, Beau, Kace, Aiden, Heath, and even Kelly and her men.

The force of Aiden's thrusts had him drooping himself over Kace's body, which in turn, had Kace falling onto me. I reveled in the delicious pressure, the graze of his chest hair against my peaked nipples as Kace expertly brought me to orgasm, his fingers sneaking between our bodies to rub at my clit.

It was just us, the three of us connected in a way I never would have imagined when we first met. Our bodies moving in sync. Our lips fused together. Our souls intertwined.

I screamed, throwing my head back and writhing madly, as Aiden reached beneath Kace to twist my nipple.

My orgasm set off a chain reaction, my pussy clenching around Kace's cock. He came with a yell, jerking his hips three more times before falling on top of me.

Aiden roared his release as well, though instead of dropping on top of us, he twisted to the side, threading his fingers with mine.

My orgasm scoured all thoughts, until all I could focus on was the mind-numbing pleasure.

“That was...um...”

“Amazing?” Kace chuckled against my neck, lapping at the skin there with the pad of his tongue.

“Yes,” I breathed mindlessly. “Do you guys often...?”

Aiden smirked at me, looking uncharacteristically disheveled and relaxed. His charcoal hair was mussed, a few strands falling in front of his face, and his eyes looked nearly black.

“Sometimes. I mean, I wouldn’t go having sex with any guy, but I like doing it with Kace.” He shrugged his naked, tattooed shoulders. “Especially if the girl is into it.” His smile turned devious, and where I had once found it infuriating, I now found myself growing turned on once again.

“This girl definitely is, though...” I twisted my head until my lips connected with his. “Next time, I want you to come inside of me.”

He smiled against my lips as, above me, I felt Kace begin to grow hard once more.

“Your wish is my command, baby,” Aiden purred.

I knew where this was leading to—a round two, three, four, and potentially five. I wasn’t sure if my body could handle anymore pleasure. But...

I was totally game to try.

Somehow, some way, these men had replaced a dark moment in my life with something beautiful. I never thought I’d be able to enter my room and not feel a heavy sense of trepidation and fear. But now, all I felt was love. The room evoked

wonderful memories instead of chilling ones, memories where I was worshipped and adored instead of used and discarded.

Aiden reclaimed my lips once more, and Kace positioned himself with my entrance—

Just as something shattered downstairs and a hoarse, masculine scream infiltrated our moment of safety.

22

Bianaca

We raced out of the room as if the hounds of hell themselves were chasing us. I didn't bother putting my bra and panties back on, instead choosing to grab my shirt and pants and throw them on. I thrust the knife back into my waistband as well. Aiden and Kace fumbled with their own clothes before they eventually shoved on a pair of shorts, forgoing shirts.

"What the fuck is happening?" I yelled, turning my head to see the men right behind me.

Aiden grabbed my wrist, pulling me to a stop, and then yanked me completely behind him.

"I don't know. But you need to stay behind us," he barked urgently. Kace nodded in agreement and moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with his best friend.

"Are you guys gonna be super overprotective now that we've had sex?" I snapped caustically, attempting to shove my way past him to get to the others.

Did something happen to Beau and Tanner? Kelly and her men? Heath? What the fuck was going on downstairs?

Aiden twisted to stare at me, his obsidian eyebrow raised. "We're going to be overprotective because you're ours."

Radioactive butterflies erupted in my stomach at his possessive words, though on the outside, my face remained cool and impassive.

“I never agreed to that,” I sniped, though my stomach churned deliciously.

Aiden scoffed, and Kace rolled his hazel eyes. “I think thou protests too much.” He reached behind him to take my hand—

But the moment he would’ve made contact with my skin, he vanished before my eyes.

One second, he was standing in front of me, an impish smile on his face and his auburn, sex-mussed hair falling into his eyes, and the next, he was gone. My mouth dropped open, horror filling me, as I turned towards Aiden beside him.

Only to see that he was gone too.

“What the fuck?” I whimpered, spinning in a wide circle in the hallway. The peach-colored walls and landscape portraits had never felt more ominous. A cube of ice made a slow, languid trail down my neck and spine.

Everything looked exactly the same... The three doors on the right of the hall and two on the left.

The crack on the wall, directly beside one of the many art pieces hanging at attention.

The mahogany table pressed snugly between two of the doors, a house phone resting on top of it.

My body remained alert, poised. Every muscle was coiled tighter than a nest of angry snakes as I waited with bated breath for...something. What that something was, I

didn't know. My heart pulsed inside of my chest, and my breaths sawed in and out, the noise rattling in the quiet of the hall.

Anxiety began to poke through the numb barrier I'd attempted to resurrect around myself. It clawed at me, sinking its talons in deep until long, jagged scratches were left behind on my soul. I wondered if they would ever heal or if they'd always remain, a reminder of what I'd endured.

The shrill ringing of the phone penetrated my thoughts.

My chest constricted as I forced my feet forward, forced myself to walk to the phone and answer it.

What was this circle of Purgatory again? Wrath?

You can do this, Bianaca. You can do this.

My breathing was a ragged sound, distant through the thrumming in my ears.

One step.

Two steps.

Three steps.

Four steps.



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I rested my hand on the cold, plastic receiver and slowly brought it to my ear.

“Hello?” It took conscious effort to keep my voice soft when everything inside of me wanted to scream and cry. Still, my chest gave a rattling heave as I waited for the person on the other end of the line to respond.

“Beau?” a tinny voice screamed.

I recognized the high-pitched, terrified voice. I recognized it intimately. It was...mine.

I tried to remember a time when I’d sounded so scared, but the fog in my mind refused to dissipate. Instead, I got partial images, flickers that I couldn’t even begin to comprehend.

“Beau...” my trembling voice said again on the phone before the line went dead, static filling the retriever. I stared at it for a long moment, my heart hammering, before slamming it down and squeezing my eyelids shut.

Memories clawed at me, demanding my attention, but when I tried to reach and hold on to them, they scurried away. I released a frustrated growl, resisting the urge to slam my fist against the wall.

I had the distinct feeling that this moment was monumental. That I was supposed to remember. That the second I did, the rest of the pieces would fall into place.

Think, Bianaca. Think!

My body shook in an effort to regain control of my tenuous emotions. I was on a tightrope, and one wrong move would send me barreling over the edge into an abyss of unknown horrors. I snapped my eyes open and peered around the dark hallway.

Think. Think. Think. Thin—

My eyes snagged on a picture resting opposite me. A cold chill that had nothing to do with the air washed over me. I was nearly positive I'd never seen that picture before in my life. Steve the Asshole preferred landscape pictures, almost as if by having a dozen of them, it made him a classy man.

You could never make a drug dealer like him “classy.”

The picture showed two figures in the midst of a fight. All I could see was a fist thrown back as if he'd intended to throw it into the other man's face.

Wait...

The blond hair, the broad shoulders, those soulful blue eyes. That was Beau!

And the man underneath him...

Dylan.

What the fuck...?

As soon as I had that final, damning thought, the world fell away from underneath me. And then I was falling, falling, falling, pinwheeling through the air, my stomach somersaulting rapidly. I didn't even have the chance to scream before I was thrust in a vision.

Bruises covered my face and arms as I forced myself to take another step.

Just one more...

I repeated that in my head as a sob ripped its way free. Everything hurt, though I knew no number of painkillers could abate the hurt in my very soul.

One more step.

And another.

My body seemed to be constructed of lead, heavier than a thousand bowling balls. It almost felt as if I had weights tied around each ankle and wrist.

One more step.

One more.

One more.

I'd had plans to meet Beau tonight, but he couldn't see me like this. No, he would freak out. Demand answers.

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And I didn't have the stomach to give them to him.

The second I got home, I would need to text him and tell him that he didn't need to come over. I didn't know how long I could keep him away, but I knew he couldn't see me like this. Broken. Defeated. Abused. Discarded.

Trash.

Angry tears spilled down my cheeks, intermingling with the blood already present.

One more step.

One more.

One more.

I finally reached the front steps of my house, and I forced my abused, tired body to work, to carry me up the stairs. A cry of agony left me and my muscles protested, but soon, I was up the stairs, through the door, and inside the living room.

I'd meant to head to my bedroom, throw myself beneath the covers, and sleep for eternity, but that never came to fruition. I barely made one step before someone released a horrified, distressed noise from directly beside me.

I spun towards the living room, my heart playing leapfrog at the sight of Beau standing before me. His eyes were wild as they traveled over my abused form, stopping on where my shirt had been ripped down the middle, baring my breasts.

Dylan had destroyed my bra.

Beau then lowered his gaze to my ripped pants.

A thousand emotions flashed in his eyes—horror, agony, disgust, and then...anger. Vengeance.

Wrath.

They all twisted together, creating a virulent cocktail that had my throat closing and tightening with emotions.

“Beau...” I all but begged, wanting him near and away from me in equal measure. I wanted his arms around me, solid bands of steel I could lose myself in, and I wanted him as far from me as humanly possible. I didn’t want him to see me like this.

No words needed to be said, but fire burst to life behind his eyes. Anger like I’d never experienced before radiated from him in tangible waves. It blasted my face and arms, singeing the hairs present there.

“Beau—” I began, but he was already barreling past me, out the door and down the front steps. His entire body seemed to shake as if someone had tased him, as if electricity was coursing through his veins with every step. His fisted hands shook by his sides as his body pulsated with pure, unbridled rage. “Beau!” I cried again, struggling to keep pace with him, to stop him.

My body screamed at me, demanding I slow down, but I couldn’t. I knew that the second I did, Beau would make a decision that we couldn’t come back from. Thathecouldn’t come back from.

As if the universe had a sick, twisted sense of humor, Dylan’s shitty red Mustang

pulled up into the driveway. By the way the car swerved back and forth before parking, I could tell he was plastered. No surprise. He'd been drinking an hour before, when he'd—

This wasn't the first time he'd done it, but it was one of the worst.

Beau wrenched the car door open before Dylan could even get out.

“What the fuck—” my step-brother slurred as Beau yanked him to his feet, his hands clenched around the collar of his shirt. Dylan's eyes were glazed over with intoxication, and he swayed from side to side like a willow in an empty field.

And then he dropped like a bag of bricks when Beau punched him square in the jaw.

The next few minutes were some of the worst of my life.

A sick, twisted part of me wanted Dylan to pay. To die. It reveled in the violence, in the vindictive sort of justice Beau was enacting. It wanted to see him bleed.

But the other, more logical part of me warned that he was going too far, that Beau had to stop before he made a decision he'd come to regret. Already, Dylan's face was nearly unrecognizable, his eyes already swelling shut. Blood dribbled from his parted lips as he murmured something too low for me to hear. Whatever it was only seemed to enrage Beau more. With a bellow the entire neighborhood could no doubt hear, Beau laid into him with renewed gusto, the lines in his back rippling with every punch.

The setting sun illuminated this macabre, violent scene in shades of pastel and orange. It provided just enough light for me to make out the object twinkling in Dylan's hand.

A scream ripped itself from my mouth as I struggled to run forward, to stop him, but I was too late.

Before my very eyes, Dylan brought the knife up into Beau's chest, starting at his navel and forcing it upwards to his chest. Gutting him.

Dylan had just gutted my best friend.

"Beau!" I sobbed, collapsing to my knees.

My scream echoed around me, filling the silence.

Who would've thought that that was one of the last sounds the land of the living ever heard me make?

23

Beau

The light in the gymnasium was barely enough to see by. A single hanging bulb emitted a soft, golden glow, unable to completely disperse the shadows directly in front of me.

The corrugated building was not one I remembered ever visiting before. It definitely wasn't the gym at my high school. The pale gray walls gave the room an uncomfortable, almost sterile sensation, too clean for comfort, and the golden floor was polished and scrubbed in such a way that I could actually see my reflection in it. There were no windows that I could see, no door. There weren't any bleachers either, making it seem even larger and sparser than it truly was.

Where the fuck was I?

One second, I was in the living room with the others, trying to ignore my raging hard-on as Bianaca's breathy moans reached me, and the next, I was...here. Wherever "here" was.

But just before that...

I couldn't explain it with words, but it almost felt like a tsunami of memories washed over me. Dylan. Bianaca. The knife.

My heart raced with panic as I brought my hands to my chest, checking to see if I



could feel any wound. I even pulled up my shirt and ran my palm over my smooth, unblemished skin, searching for any mark that wasn't supposed to be there.

Nothing.

I was stabbed.

The words slipped into my mind with a finality that made me nauseous. I was stabbed, and apparently, that stabbing had put me inches away from death. What the fuck happened after that? I didn't beat up Dylan hard enough to kill him, so how did he end up here? And what happened to Bianaca? When I last saw her, she was beaten and broken, mottled and disfigured. Did Dylan do something to her?

I needed to find her. I needed to wrap her in my arms and know with unwavering certainty that she was okay.

So how the fuck did I get out of here?

It made sense that it was my past that constructed the circle for Wrath. All of my actions had been driven by that defining emotion. When I saw Bianaca like that, I'd wanted nothing more than to destroy Dylan, rip him apart until he couldn't even walk. Vindictive anger had coursed through me, hotter than fire and just as scalding.

Was that why I was here? Because of the rage in my heart directed at Dylan fucking Holebroke? Did I have to kill his monster, the same way Bianaca had?

My hands clenched into fists by my sides, and I couldn't help but bare my teeth.

"Where the fuck are you, you little shit?" My raspy voice filled the room, but I refused to be silent, not when my world had been characterized by it for years. Every squeak of my sneakers against the hardwood floors echoed through the spacious

room. I didn't know where I was going, only that I couldn't stay here. The silence felt almost...unnerving, as if this particular circle of Purgatory was mocking me. All I could hear was the sound of blood sluicing between my ears and the rapid-fire thumping of my heart. The air felt electrically charged, a current that coursed beneath my skin, and it made the fine, blond hairs on my arms stand on end.

There was something lurking in the darkness, in the quietness that permeated the room. Of that, I had no doubt.

"Dylan, is that you?" I growled, a cough tumbling from my lips. "Dylan?"

I spun in a circle, searching the darkness, but the asshole never made an appearance.

"Don't be shy. Let's finish this, you fucker!" I bellowed, spit flying from my mouth.

I remembered the way Bianaca had looked after Dylan raped her. The tears hanging suspended from her eyelashes. The hazy sheen in her bright blue orbs. Horror and pain emphasizing the lines of stress on her face.

And then I remembered my fists pounding into Dylan's smug, smiling face. The way he laughed and whispered to me about how tight she was, how she screamed and cried. I...I had lost it. Any semblance of control I'd had dissipated when I heard from his own mouth about what he did to her. I'd wanted to kill him, but I knew if I did, I would spend my life behind bars.

And I wouldn't—couldn't—leave Bianaca behind.

But then...

But then Dylan had killed me, gutting me and then laughing while I bled out. While Bianaca's sweet voice reached my ears, promising that I would be okay, that she

would never leave me. Her face had been the last thing I saw before my eyelids fluttered shut and darkness surrounded me.

That fucker had killed me!

An enraged growl rumbled out of me as I spun in another circle, my heart pounding madly. The second I found him, I would tear him to pieces. I would—

A figure to my right moved, stepping into the thin beam of light.

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Something akin to horror filled me at the sight, though I knew “horror” was too insignificant a term. It wasn’t necessarily disgust, though I felt that too, but an emotion words failed to encapsulate. There wasn’t a single definition in the English dictionary that described what I felt as I stared up, up, up into the eyes of the figure.

It appeared to be a...gymnast. At least, I assumed it was, based on the teal leotard and blonde hair slicked into a bun.

It was tall, having to lower its head in order to move through the gym, with gangly arms and legs. Red blotches of color on her legs mixed with pink and white skin, almost as if someone had sewn the body parts of numerous humans together to create this distorted figure. I could distinctly make out what appeared to be a hand sewed into the skin of its left leg. Its face consisted of nothing but empty eye sockets, pure abysses I couldn’t help but stare into, and pink lips sewed together. Though it appeared as if a child had done the sewing, blood dripping from the jagged lines.

And its arms...

At the end of each arm, two puppets dangled, though they could’ve been corpses with how realistic they looked. The right one featured a figure that might’ve been Bianaca, though her skin was gray and her eyes were lifeless. Her arms appeared to be fused together with the creature’s palm, so I couldn’t tell where she ended and the monster began. On the other side, flapping lifelessly across the ground like a dying fish, was...me. Same gray skin, same lifeless eyes, same fused hands.

The creature twisted its head in my direction, locking me in its sight, and then slowly began to move towards me. It almost seemed to prance, though I hated using such a

cutesy adjective to describe this horrible creature. Its legs were so long, nearly four times the size of its torso, that it had to curl its legs at the knee in order to move. I heard the thud of bodies hitting the wooden floor as our “bodies” were dragged along with it.

“Oh. Shit!” I cursed, turning on my heel and breaking into a run in the opposite direction of this creature. I had no idea where the fuck I was going, but I had to get away from it.

Before it consumed me completely.

The light became more unreliable the farther away I got from it and the gym, but I didn’t dare slow down, not even when I was consumed by a darkness as black as pitch.

All I could hear was the thump-thump-thump of the two bodies rolling across the ground. Other than that, the creature was silent.

Mute.

A demented part of me wanted to laugh at what I was being put through. Of course a silent monster would hunt me down.

Of course.

But any amusement I felt was eclipsed by rage. So much rage, my entire body began to shake with it.

After all I had survived, all we had survived, I refused to be brought down by some fucking monster. This creature may be my wrath personified, but it wouldn’t beat me.

Light up ahead called to me, and I picked up my pace, my heart racing a mile a minute. The darkness was absolute, oppressive, and I almost feared I would trip over something and face-plant. But if Heath was right, Purgatory wanted to give us a chance to escape.

Which meant I had to trust that the darkness wasn't hiding any malicious traps.

As I approached the first pocket of light, my pace slowed down, trepidation squeezing my internal organs like a giant, slithering python. Because the scene...

It was familiar.

In the midst of endless darkness was a sandbox, illuminated as if by a giant spotlight. And in that sandbox, I sat beside Bianaca. Her blonde hair was in two pigtails, and her dress was covered in dirt and stains from our time playing. Still, her smile was radiant, even at the age of six, and her eyes glimmered with mirth as she attempted to show me how to build a proper sandcastle.

I remembered this moment.

Some boys at school had bullied me, pushing me to the ground, and Bianaca had moved to stand between us, a fierce scowl distorting her cute face. She'd placed both hands on her hips and laid into them. Once they had been properly chastised, she took my hand in hers and led me to the sandbox, insisting she knew how to build the best sandcastle ever.

It was that moment I'd known I was a goner. Bianaca Steal was going to be my best friend, even if I had to force my friendship on her.

Who would've thought I would fall helplessly in love with her less than ten years later? That she would consume every waking moment and every night of sleep?

Certainly not that little boy staring at her with hearts in his eyes. He would've never suspected that she was his soulmate, the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

And that little boy never would've believed that he'd be "dead" before he turned twenty.

I didn't dare stop walking completely though, even when the silence behind me became almost deafening. I couldn't even hear the distinctive clunk of two flaccid bodies hitting the wooden floor. My skin began to crawl as if I'd fallen into a hill of angry fire ants as I broke into a jog once more, leaving the scene from my childhood behind and hurrying towards the next splash of light dwarfed by distance.

My lungs protested my brisk pace, though I didn't let up. Not even when I arrived at a familiar scene from my high school years.

The moment I realized I was desperately and hopelessly in love with Bianaca.

It was the night of our junior prom, and I'd been asked by Miranda Jenkins. Bianaca had chosen to go with Brett Highwater, a popular and friendly jock. He was the perfect man, and most guys would've been thrilled that their best friend had found someone like that, someone who seemed to adore her.

I'd been livid.

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The scene displayed in the makeshift spotlight took place an hour before prom officially began, when we'd all met at my house to take group photos and have dinner. Miranda had been pretty in a long, pink dress, but Bianaca's beauty eclipsed her. My girl had been absolutely stunning, and I'd found I couldn't look away. I'd known I shouldn't stare, I'd known it was wrong, but I hadn't cared. She was my best friend, but watching her smile at fucking Brett Highwater, I'd realized that I wanted us to be...more. Everything.

Her golden hair was brushed away from her face, the top half twisted into an elaborate updo, while the rest fell in soft curls around her shoulders. She wore a slender, sleek blue number that clung to her figure, emphasizing her natural bust and slender arms. Her years of gymnastics had made her fit in a way that looked natural and riveting. I loved seeing the muscles flex in her arms, the curve of her perfect ass. She wore silver high heels that accentuated her bronze, slender legs—legs I yearned to feel wrapped around my shoulders as I ate her out.

I'd had one kiss with Bianaca, but that one kiss would never be enough.

In the scene before me, Bianaca laughed at something Brett said, her entire face coming alive, and I watched as my younger self scowled in their direction. I'd been insanely jealous that Brett had been able to get her to laugh like that. I wanted her to smile up at me. I wanted her to laugh at my jokes.

Instead, I'd been forced to stand on the sidelines, smiling at a girl I did not care for while the love of my life remained oblivious.

Thump. Thump. Thump.



My heart raced at the familiar, rhythmic sound of the bodies hitting the floor. Before the monster could catch up with me, I broke into a run, leaving behind my past.

The next circle of light appeared even farther away than the others, and my breaths sawed in and out as weariness swept over me.

I didn't hear the monster, allowing me to believe for a second that I'd gotten far enough ahead of it, but I didn't dare slow down until I was directly in front of the final scene.

I'd assumed I would see Dylan once more, when he stabbed me.

Instead, I saw something far, far worse.

The day my step-father murdered my mother, rendering me silent for years to come.

The vision before me depicted a little boy with a mop of blond hair and bright blue eyes glistening with tears. He cried over his mother's fallen form as her sightless eyes gazed back at him.

I remembered that moment all too well, the image permanently etched into the skin of my closed eyelids.

Richard Bricks had taken everything from me the day he stabbed my mom. The day I witnessed him stab my mom, her screams permeating the air.

"Mom?" I hollered, rushing down the staircase. My tiny hand was slick with sweat as her screams rushed to greet me, heady with pain and terror. "Mom!" I ran even faster, pushing my legs to carry me to her. To save her. Besides my best friend, Bianaca, my mother was the only person I loved.

Did something happen? Had she fallen?

I skirted around the corner of the hall, my mouth popping open in preparation to scream her name again.

And then I saw them. Saw her.

The world around me turned fuzzy and indistinct, and all I could do was stare at the scene before me, praying it wasn't what I thought it was. Praying that I was dreaming or being pranked or anything else that could explain this atrocious situation.

My mother sprawled on the ground, blood pooling around her in an ocean of burgundy red. Her eyes were wide in her too pale face, vacant and empty as they stared up at the ceiling.

And above her...

My step-father didn't hesitate to stab my mother one more time, directly in the heart, a sadistic grin morphing his face into something that was unrecognizable. His dark hair was matted with sweat, and his eyes were wild from whatever drug he'd taken.

"Mom?" The word tumbled out unbidden, and when Richard's head snapped in my direction, I knew I'd screwed up. The man appeared positively deranged.

My eyes flitted to my mom's still form before rising to meet Richard's gaze. Fear and anger twisted up my insides, and I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to scream and yell and curse, but when I opened my mouth, the words didn't come out.

Only silence.

He took a step closer, that bloody knife raised, and I stepped away instinctively.

Accusations rested on the tip of my tongue like a vitriolic poison.

How could you do this to someone you claimed to love? How could you kill her?  
How could you kill my mom?

“Lying, traitorous, cheating bitch,” Richard hissed, spitting in my mother’s direction.

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He moved towards me once more, but this time, I couldn't move backwards, couldn't escape. My legs were frozen stiff, my feet glued to the ground.

His shrewd eyes narrowed at me, emanating a potent hatred that infiltrated my veins, before he placed the knife on the table beside me and left.

Left.

Just left, as if he hadn't altered my life irrevocably and took away the person I loved most in the world. As if he hadn't just shaken the foundations of my entire world.

I shook erratically as I stared down at my mother, barely daring to breathe.

Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead.

My mother was dead.

Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead.

I heard the sound of my nanny entering the room, her scream of terror, and then the blare of sirens a few minutes later. Someone tried to talk to me, tried to demand answers, but all I could do was point to a picture of my step-dad, trapped in a prison I could never escape from.

Dead. Dead. Dead.

And my world became shrouded in two things—darkness and silence.

I was jerked out of the memory by the feel of hot breath on my neck. I spun around, my heart racing, to see the monster's face inches from my own. Its rancid breath brushed across my cheek as its distorted body took another step towards me. Up close, I was able to confirm that the creature truly was made out of body parts. Both of its long, spindly legs were constructed almost entirely out of hands of all different shapes, sizes, and colors, the skin red and mottled as if they were constructed of mostly muscle tissue.

Have you ever felt absolute terror before? The type of terror that rendered you immobile, stole the breath from your lungs, and made you shake with fear? Where you knew that you were going to die, yet was helpless to stop it? I felt all of that and more as I stared into the monster's disgusting, grotesque face. Into the endless abysses that were supposed to be its eyes. Into its red and bloody, sewed up mouth. Into the lifeless faces of Bianaca and myself, hanging gray and limp like macabre puppets, our hands still fused to either palm of the creature.

"Go away!" I screamed in its face. "GO AWAY!"

My final scream seemed to shake the foundations of this entire world. The light illuminating the scene beside me trembled, almost as if we were in the midst of an earthquake. I screamed and screamed and screamed, my hoarse voice reverberating through the nothingness.

Slowly, the thread sewing the creature's lips began to unravel, one stitch at a time, until I was greeted by the sight of jaundiced yellow teeth, each one sharper than that of a shark's. The monster fell backwards, stumbling over its abnormally long and gangly legs, and the momentum forced the Bianaca and Beau puppets backwards, flopping like two fishes.

And then the world shattered like thousands of fine particles of glass, and I fell through the darkness.

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Kace

I'd never considered myself to be particularly afraid of the dark.

I was like most kids in that respect—I didn't hate it necessarily, but I also didn't seek it out. I was never the type to cower when my parents turned off my lamp at night, but I also didn't protest when they left it on.

But this darkness?

This unending pit of angry howls, growls, and hisses?

My body became consumed by a terror I'd never felt or experienced before. A terror so absolute and damning that it made me lightheaded.

One second, I'd been reaching for Bianaca's hand, and then the next...darkness.

There was no light to break up the monotony of blackness spreading out as far as the eye could see, thrumming with a malevolent energy. Even when I put my hands directly in front of my face, I couldn't make them out.

The darkness seemed to cling to me like a second skin, seeping into my pores like a sickly, vitriolic poison.

My only companions in the darkness were my own thoughts, swirling rapidly like a

wave pool.

I thought of Bianaca from only a few minutes earlier, her naked body spread out on the bed like a feast for my eyes. The way her lips felt against my own. The way her pussy squeezed my cock like a vise, milking me for all I was worth. The way her body writhed and shook beneath my own as I brought her to the precipice of pleasure.

And then I thought of my kiss with Aiden and the way his tongue piercing had felt, providing stimulation I'd never experienced before. His hard ass as I rammed into him, my hand pressing down on his neck to hold him still. And then his cock inside of my ass, as he controlled the pace for both Bianaca and me. That hadn't been the first time I'd gotten sexual with Aiden, but it was the only time it had ever felt like...more. I didn't know how to describe it. It was almost as if the three of us were meant to be like this, inextricably connected and entangled.

I hadn't suddenly fallen in love with him or anything, and my feelings for him were minor compared to what was growing inside of me for Bianaca, but I couldn't say I would be too upset if we had a repeat performance.

But any goodwill I felt over my moment with Bianaca and Aiden dissipated when a monster growled in the distance, the noise seeming to reverberate from every direction. I squeezed my eyelids shut, hoping against all hope that I would wake up from this horrible nightmare, but when I reopened my eyes, I was still in the darkness.

What had happened to Bianaca? Was she in a similar darkness to my own? Was she scared as well?

Terror for her clawed at me, sinking its talons into my sides until blood welled.

Almost as if my thoughts had called to her, I heard a feminine voice in the distance

scream, “Aiden?”

“Bianaca,” I breathed, venturing a tentative step closer. My legs shook, threatening to give out from underneath me, as adrenaline and weariness battled for dominance inside of me. “Bianaca!” My voice rose to a scream as I began to move even faster, searching the darkness desperately for her.

She needed to be all right.

For so long, I’d lived my life as a shell of a man. I knew my illness changed something fundamental inside of me, something I couldn’t articulate into words. I knew that some people considered me “lesser” because of my quirks.

But Bianaca had never stared at me as if I were a mistake or a failure. She held my hand when I was spiraling and reeled me back in when my impulsivity threatened to take over. I didn’t think I was in love with her yet, but I was definitely crushing. Hard. I wanted to see that sparkle in her eyes, hear her tinkling laugh, listen to her talk about everything and nothing all at once. But more than any of that, I just wanted to be with her. I didn’t care if we went to the Eiffel Tower in Paris or just the grocery store. As long as I was with her, the location didn’t matter.

She’ll never love you, a bitter voice sneered in my brain. She’ll never care about you the way you care about her. The way she cares about Tanner, Beau, and maybe even Aiden. You’re a fuckup, a failure, and she knows that.

“Bianaca!” I screamed once more, attempting to drown out the voice inside of my head. The same damning voice that always reprimanded me, that always put me down.

You’re a mistake, the voice continued as I screamed Bianaca’s name again. I didn’t care about the monsters lurking in the darkness. I didn’t care about anything except



for finding her and keeping her safe. You're fine now, but what are you going to do when you reach another low? Or another high? What if your bad decisions cost Bianaca her life? What if she gets tired of how...sad you always are? What if she thinks you're a burden?

SHUT UP! I screamed at the voice. I knew these thoughts were normal for any person with a mental illness, but I hated them. I hated the niggles of doubt that always slipped past my defenses, oozing through the cracks until all I could focus on was them. My doubts always made me think that I wasn't good enough, that I'd never be good enough, and because of that, I couldn't be happy. I wasn't allowed to be happy, because in my mind, I didn't deserve to be.

I didn't deserve anything, really, except a lifetime of emptiness and loneliness.

But I'd be damned if I gave up Bianaca now. Not after I'd tasted her, felt her, seen the compassion in her eyes.

I screamed her name another time as I continued to forge onwards, consciously placing one foot in front of the other.

"Kace?" Confusion tinged her voice, sounding from directly in front of me.

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“Bianaca!” I picked up my pace as I stumbled through the darkness, my hands outstretched as I reached for her.

“Kace?”

My hands touched her hair as relief filled me. Fumbling slightly, I gave her shoulders a quick squeeze and tried to pull her into my chest. She remained rigid in my embrace, though I knew it was probably from the fear.

Before I could assure her everything would be okay, the ground fell out from underneath me. I released a harsh exhale of air, my hands struggling to remain holding her, as I fell backwards for what felt like minutes, pinwheeling through darkness.

I landed on the ground with an audible “oomf” as Bianaca fell on top of me and then rolled over. The force of her collision blew the air out of my lungs, and I wheezed, struggling to inhale and exhale at a normal pace. My body ached fiercely from the fall, my lashes fluttering shut.

“Fuck,” I moaned, before forcing myself onto my elbows and searching desperately for Bianaca. “Are you okay?”

There was a moan from in front of me, though all I could see were two legs sticking out from where they were hidden behind a couch. We must’ve fallen straight into the next circle of Purgatory, though I had no idea which one we were supposed to be in. Bianaca moaned again, though she didn’t immediately get up.

“B?” I scrambled to my feet in concern.

“Kace?” Bianaca’s shaky voice sounded from directly behind me, and I spun towards her. She was leaning heavily against Beau, her features shrouded in darkness and pain. I couldn’t tell if he was comforting her or the other way around. Though her eyes were impossibly wide in her face, she appeared relatively unharmed. And Beau...

Beau’s face was ashen, not a speck of color to be seen, and he kept glancing down at Bianaca as if seeing her for the first time.

“Where are we?” a gruff voice inquired. My relief felt almost palpable as Tanner and Aiden stepped out of what appeared to be a kitchen, both of them clutching at their heads as if they were fighting off migraines.

“The next circle of Purgatory,” Heath answered from where he’d materialized on the other side of Bianaca, his tone rough with emotion. He cast a furtive glance in her direction, but when she turned to stare at him, he quickly looked away.

What the hell was that about?

A muscle ticked in his jaw, but otherwise, his face remained impassive and unreadable.

“Which is?” Aiden barked.

“Heresy.” It was Kelly who answered, stepping out of a long hallway directly to the right of the living room. Her harem of men followed behind her, all of them regarding the room with a wariness that belied their inscrutable expressions.

“Heresy?” I asked, walking backwards so I could grab Bianaca’s hand. She startled at

the contact, her eyes flicking in my direction as a delicate blush stained her cheeks, before lowering her eyes. “So we passed Wrath?”

“Yes.” Beau’s voice was so soft, I barely heard it. But there was no mistaking the darkness permeating his tone, the shadows taking up residence in his blue gaze. What the fuck had happened to him while I was traveling through the darkness? To all of them?

“So we need to—”

A low, feminine moan broke off whatever Aiden had been about to say. His eyebrows jumped up so high, they reached his hairline.

“What the fuck?” Tanner snapped, turning towards the noise.

Towards the feet still sticking out from behind the back of the couch.

During the chaos of everyone’s arrival, I’d forgotten that the girl who fell on top of me hadn’t been Bianaca. It just hadn’t seemed to register in my brain that the girl I’d stumbled into in the darkness hadn’t been the girl now clutching my hand.

So if that wasn’t Bianaca...

Then who the fuck was she?

And how did she know my name?

Tanner moved to place his hands on Bianaca’s shoulders, holding her still, as Aiden stomped forward, Beau directly behind him. My muscles tensed, an instinctive fight or flight reaction to what my body perceived as danger.

“Who the hell is that?” Tanner demanded as Aiden went very, very still. He wasn’t even breathing as his mouth parted, not a single sound escaping him.

“Is it Maria?” Bianaca queried, her voice wobbling.

Beau glanced helplessly in our direction, shrugged, and then stared back at the unknown female.

Aiden’s face had drained of all color as he collapsed to his knees. It was the strangest sight to see. For as long as I’d known him, nothing could ruffle Aiden. He had the regal demeanor of a king but without the arrogance.

Bianaca struggled towards him, practically elbowing Tanner in the gut, but he didn’t release her shoulders and I didn’t let go of her hand. Not until I knew what the threat was.

“Aiden?” I asked my best friend cautiously.

But he didn’t turn to look at me.

His voice was subdued, almost a whisper, but I heard it as if he’d been screaming. It broke through the silence like the hiss and boom of fireworks on the Fourth of July.

“Josie?”

Epilogue

Heath

I’d never seen true joy on Aiden’s face until that exact moment, his eyes emanating an exuberance that was almost unfamiliar in its intensity.

Bianaca gasped softly, placing a hand over her mouth as she moved to stand behind him. Without removing his eyes from Josie, Aiden placed his palm over Bianaca’s other hand, where it now rested on his shoulder.

I didn’t even think the two of them realized what they’d done, how natural their interactions had become, how easily they comforted each other.

A pang of jealousy coursed through me as I narrowed my eyes at the back of Bianaca’s head.

Didn’t the girl realize how goddamn obsessed with her I was? How it’d gotten to the point where I’d normalized my stalker tendencies concerning her because they took up so much of my time? If she knew half of the things I’d done, she’d run screaming. I couldn’t even imagine what she’d do if she discovered the extent of my obsession.

As I watched Aiden and Bianaca interact, a niggle of loneliness embedded itself in my soul like a damn sliver of wood. Nothing I did could remove it.

I opened my mouth, prepared to interject myself into the conversation, when the world disappeared around me.

Darkness.

An endless pit of darkness.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Heath.” The voice echoed from all directions, both masculine and feminine, young and old. Numerous dialects and accents superimposed themselves over each other, creating something new and intense.

My pulse picked up speed as I turned in the direction I thought the voice was coming from. When I looked, all I saw was a canvas of inky darkness, almost velvety in appearance.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

“The other reapers will come for you,” the voice continued. “You disobeyed.”

Fear threatened to penetrate the walls I’d erected around myself in an attempt to remain numb and indifferent. Even my customary cocky smile—my mask—felt forced, a crack in my armor that the entire world saw.

“Are you going to...?” I didn’t finish my sentence, but I didn’t need to.

“Turn you in?” Amusement laced the person’s tone a split second before disapproval seeped in. “Heath...”

“Just give me more time to figure this out,” I all but begged.

“I’ve given you time,” the voice whispered. “But you’re running out of it.” There was

a pause, shockingly pronounced, before, “You broke the rules.”

“I did it to protect them!”

My heart battered my ribcage ferociously as I whirled in a circle, searching desperately for the owner of the strange, disembodied voice.

“You lied to her. To the girl.”

It wasn’t a question, but I felt the need to answer as if it were one.

“I told Bianaca I didn’t remember anything from my human life,” I agreed, the words tasting sour on my tongue. Acidic even. “She can’t know the truth. She doesn’t remember anything, and it needs to stay that way.”

“The other reapers will come for you all,” the voice pointed out.

My jaw ground together, and I felt my hands curl into fists, despite not being able to see them.

“Let them come,” I growled out. “I’ll be ready.”

I heard what sounded like a heavy sigh a second before the darkness winked out of existence and light returned. I blinked my eyes rapidly, attempting to adjust them to the near blinding light of the house we’d found ourselves in, before focusing on Aiden, Bianaca, and an unconscious Josie once more. Everyone appeared oblivious to what had just transpired, none of them the wiser.



*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:04 am*

I couldn't help but glance over my shoulder almost imperceptibly, wondering if the intruder remained, but all I saw was a darkened hallway. No sign of the intruder who'd visited me.

Death.

If Death had come for me, then that meant the reapers weren't far behind. And if the reapers caught up to us...

Then that meant no amount of running, hiding, and fighting would save us.

Bianaca and her friends would be forced into graves alongside my own.

After all, if you weren't above ground, you werebeneathit. And I had the distinct, uncanny sensation that that was how our story would end.

Between.

Beyond.

Beneath.

Till death do us part.