



Faith Among Monsters

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Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: She's his. The end of the world doesn't change that.

Faith:

When I stepped off the ferry onto Ironclad Island, I thought it was just another job. I wasn't expecting to walk straight into a nightmare. The island is worse than the rumors—a graveyard of lost men with nothing left to lose. And Dax Stryker? He's the most dangerous of them all.

I should be afraid. I should run.

But when the world goes to hell, he's the only one standing between me and the monsters—both the living and the dead.

Dax:

The moment I saw her, I knew she didn't belong here. Too soft. Too smart. Too damn tempting. I told myself to stay away. Then the island burned, and survival became the only thing that mattered. Now, she's mine.

And I'll kill anyone—or anything—that tries to take her from me.

This is the first book in a reverse harem series.

Good news—if RH isn't your thing and you just want a high-stakes, zombie apocalypse romance with a touch-her-and-die vibe, you're safe here. This book ends with a solid HFN for Dax and Faith.

But if RH is your jam? Hold tight. The slow build harem starts to grow in book two.

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Chapter One

Faith

It's more than the rough waves rocking the boat that's making my stomach churn.

I've worked with violent offenders for years, advocating for inmates, listening to their horrors, helping them claw their way back to something resembling humanity. But the idea of being dropped off at Ironclad Island, better known as the Warden's Graveyard, for an entire month? It doesn't sit right.

More than that, it's horrifying.

The ferry jolts over another wave, and I shift my weight against the crate beside me. The salt-slick deck underfoot feels too narrow, the air too clean for where I'm headed. Ahead, the island rises out of the water like the jawbone of some massive predator.

From this distance, the dark wall of concrete that rings the shoreline is already visible. A chain-link fence curls along the top of it, crowned with razor wire that glints in the sunlight. Past that, squat gray buildings huddle together under the blinding sky. No movement. No life. Just cold stone and metal waiting to swallow me whole.

I clutch my bag tighter and force down the knot in my throat. This is about them, not me.

The biohazard symbol stamped on the crate beside me practically screams for attention, its bright yellow impossible to ignore. Supplies, they'd said. Nothing dangerous. But I know better than to take things at face value. I've read the reports. Officially, nothing is out of the ordinary, no misconduct, no experiments, nothing worth raising alarms over.

Unofficially? That's why I'm here.

More than bruises or broken spirits, I'm looking for proof that these men, forgotten by society and locked away to rot, are being used as lab rats.

The ferry jolts as the island looms larger, the jagged wall of concrete sharpening into focus. My pulse picks up when I realize we're already close enough to dock. No slow approach, no second thoughts. Just full speed ahead into the shadows of Ironclad.

The ferry lurches as it docks, the engines grinding to a slow, sputtering stop. The hull scrapes against the rubber bumpers lining the pier, a groan of metal and tension that sends a jolt up my spine.

I scan the dock, expecting to see Warden Sinclair or at least a guard. Nothing.

The ferry captain, grizzled and silent for the entire trip, stomps past me without so much as a glance. He doesn't even wait for me to follow, striding down the gangway like he can't get off this rock fast enough. I grab my bag and hurry after him, my heels clicking awkwardly on the weathered wood.

The breeze off the ocean is cool, almost pleasant, but sweat clings to the nape of my neck, prickling with each step. The heat is relentless now that we've stopped, and I regret my suit coat as I shift my bag from one hand to the other.

Still, there's no one waiting for me. No formal welcome. No warden.

A faint creak pulls my attention to the far side of the dock. A man descends the weather-beaten steps that lead from the main compound, his pace unhurried. Like he hadn't been told to expect me, or worse, like he doesn't care.

I stiffen, brushing my jacket straight and setting my bag at my feet. My fingers itch to check my hair, but I stop myself. Professional. Neutral. That's how I need to look.

Sinclair is supposed to be sharp, no-nonsense. I've read the files. A man of quick judgments.

I narrow my eyes against the blinding sun as the figure approaches. He's tall, taller than I'd expected, and broad in a way that feels like a threat all on its own, broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist. He's not in a uniform. Not in a suit.

Jeans. A plain black T-shirt that clings to him just enough to show the strength underneath.

The sun ducks behind a cloud, and for the first time, I can make out his face. Strong jawline, dark stubble that only sharpens the already harsh angles of his face. His hair is dark, messy but not unkempt. There's a tattoo, yes, that's definitely ink, creeping up the side of his neck, curling along his jaw like it's daring you to look closer.

God, he's... no.

I shake my head sharply.

I remind myself who I'm looking at.

Warden Sinclair. A man known for his cruelty. His leadership is responsible for turning Ironclad into the Warden's Graveyard. Inmates dead, guards dead, rumors of experiments. The reports are endless.

And here I am, ogling him like a fool.

Shit.

He stops to speak with the ferry captain, his voice low and gravelly. I can't make out the words, but the tone is commanding, like he's used to getting what he wants, no questions asked.

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My gaze lingers too long, caught on the ripple of his muscles under that damn T-shirt. On the way he stands, as if the world itself should make room for him.

He glances up from the clipboard the ferryman hands him, his sharp gaze cutting through the humid air straight to me.

Double shit.

The air feels heavier, the sun pressing harder against my back. His eyes linger a moment too long before his mouth twitches, barely a flicker, but it sends heat rushing to my cheeks. I look away.

Professional. Neutral. I repeat it to myself like a mantra.

But it's impossible to ignore the sinking realization that this isn't Warden Sinclair.

This man is something else entirely.

The captain strides past me without a word, brushing so close I nearly stumble. To him, I'm no more than another crate to unload.

The other man steps closer, and my throat dries.

He moves with a quiet confidence that makes it hard to look away. His arms are inked from wrist to bicep, a sleeve of black tattoos that seem to ripple with every shift of his muscles.

Maintenance, maybe?

But there's no badge clipped to his shirt, no utility belt, no gun strapped to his hip.

They sent a maintenance man to greet me. An insult. Bastards.

I clench my jaw, steadying the flicker of indignation rising in my chest. Dare I give them the reaction they want?

Not a chance. Keeping my expression neutral, I lean down to grab my bag.

"Warden Sinclair is expecting me," I say, my tone clipped. "If you can have the rest of my bags brought up with the supplies, please."

The man's gaze slides over me, slow and deliberate, and it feels like a touch. Rough. Like I've been pinned under calloused hands and manhandled.

"Miss..." His deep voice scrapes across my nerves as he glances down at the clipboard in his hands like I'm no different than the crates of canned food or dried beans stacked nearby.

"Doctor," I snap, harsher than I intend. "Doctor Faith Wilson."

His mouth quirks into a slow, devastating smile, and for a second, I forget the heat clinging to my skin. That smile shouldn't belong to a man who fixes pipes or sweeps floors. It's a weapon, sensual and disarming all at once.

"Faith," he says, his voice dropping lower, softer, like he's letting me in on a secret. "You shouldn't be here."

The words hit like a bucket of ice water. "Excuse me?"

“Get back on the ferry,” he says, the command sharp enough to make me take a half step back.

“The warden is expecting me,” I manage, squaring my shoulders.

He doesn’t budge. “The ferry.” His gaze flicks past me, toward the gangway, and one dark brow arches as if daring me to argue.

I dig my heels in. “I’ll speak with the warden myself.”

His jaw tightens, the muscles flexing beneath that perfect stubble. “This is no place for a woman,” he says, each word laced with irritation. “If you’re dead set on carrying out this ‘evaluation,’ send a man.”

What year is this?

“Who are you?” I demand, my pulse ticking faster, the heat of frustration rising in my chest.

“Dax Stryker,” he says simply, his name a challenge more than an introduction.

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Before I can respond, a voice cuts through the air behind him.

“Dax!” A second man saunters to the edge of the dock, this one in jeans and a T-shirt too, tattoos sprawling haphazardly across his forearms and creeping up his neck. His presence is different, louder, rougher. There’s a sharper edge to the way he moves, like he thrives on chaos. “Need a hand?”

His gaze sweeps over me, lingering far too long. “What the hell did you order, and where’s mine?”

Unease prickles up my spine, but Dax doesn’t look back. His expression shifts instantly, his sharp, assessing stare turning cold as a blade.

“Mind your manners, Grip, or I’ll mind them for you,” Dax says, his tone as low and sharp as a growl.

The sudden edge in his voice sends a shiver racing across my skin, and I inhale sharply. Grip takes a step back, raising his hands in mock surrender with a crooked grin, but there’s a flicker of respect, or maybe fear, in his eyes.

This is no maintenance man.

The realization settles heavy in my stomach. Dax Stryker isn’t here to greet me. He’s an inmate.

I thought I understood what kind of place this was. What kind of people I’d be dealing with. But the sharp look in Dax Stryker’s eyes tells me I’ve got it all wrong.

Chapter Two

Dax

As I head back for the last crate, I tell myself the woman's still standing on the dock because she's got the good sense to get back on the ferry.

But then I catch the defiant set of her lips. Those full, sexy lips pressed together like she's daring the whole damn island to take a shot at her.

My gaze snags on her bags, still sitting at her feet. Fucking Grip dumped them there and left her to fend for herself. Asshole.

She's watching me now, her blazing sapphire eyes locked on mine like she's sizing me up. The sun glints off her light brown hair, pulling out strands of gold that don't belong in a place like this.

"Mr. Stryker," she says, her voice calm, smooth, like a promise I haven't heard in far too long.

I stop a few steps away and tip my head toward the ferry. "You need help getting those back on the boat?"

She blinks, slow, like she's about two seconds away from losing her shit.

"Grip says you can escort me to the warden," she says, her tone sharp enough to cut.

I rub my hand over my mouth, half to keep from laughing at her nerve and half to grind down the frustration building in my chest. She needs to leave. Now. I'm not the only one here who's going to notice the way her suit hugs her curves. And I sure as hell won't be the only one thinking about what's under it.

Why the hell would anyone send a woman to this place? Tous?

Because they don't care. That's why. They don't give a shit what happens to her. They sent her here to stir the pot, knowing damn well she wouldn't last a week. Maybe not even a day.

She shifts her weight, and her scent, something clean and soft, catches on the salty breeze. I grind my teeth harder.

"Will you help with my bags?" she asks, her voice a little tighter now. She gestures at the two smaller bags by her feet. "I can carry these."

I step closer, her words barely registering because the truth hits me like a punch to the gut.

They want her to get hurt.

They want her here, on this island, where she's nothing but a walking target. So that when something happens to her, and it will, it looks exactly how they want it to. A sweet little doctor sent to save the big bad monsters, raped and killed for her trouble.

They're setting her up to fail. To die.

Shit.

I grab her bags, slinging the heavier one over my shoulder without a word.

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“Yeah,” I say finally, my voice tight. “If there’s no reasoning with you.”

“There’s not,” she says, her chin tilting up. Her tone is steady, but there’s a flicker in her eyes, just for a second, that makes me pause.

“I’m here to do a job,” she adds, like it’s the simplest thing in the world.

I shake my head. Stubborn. Determined. The kind of woman who’s going to get herself killed.

“I hope you’ll help me with that as well,” she says, her voice softer now.

I meet her gaze, and for a second, I see something I don’t expect. Not pity. Not fear. Just quiet strength.

And that’s when I know I’m fucked.

“I’ll see you stay alive,” I say, the words coming out like a promise. A vow. To her, to myself, to whoever the hell sent her here to die.

Because if they want her dead, they’re going to have to get through me first.

“Is there anything I need to know before we go inside?” she asks.

Her voice is calm, measured, but there’s something underneath it. I hear it, see it in the way her gaze lingers on me like she’s searching for cracks. She already knows this place is corrupt.

I want to haul her over my shoulder, march her back to the dock, and throw her on the ferry myself. If she's on our side, Sinclair will have a target on her too. Hell, the guards will be as much of a danger to her as the inmates.

"Sinclair isn't a man to fuck with," I say. My voice comes out harsher than I intend, but it's the truth.

If she's shocked, she doesn't show it. Her expression stays steady, her gaze sharp enough to cut. "What makes you say that?"

I laugh, short and bitter. She's using her best you can trust me tone, like I'm some kid she's trying to coax into admitting his parents hit him. It's too soft, too sweet, too good for this place. For me.

"The ferry only comes once a month," I say, locking my gaze on hers. "By the time you realize how stupid this is, you'll still have to survive another thirty days."

Her shoulders stiffen, and she turns fully toward me. The fire in her eyes burns hot enough to make me want to take a step back. Goddamn, this woman.

"Will you tell me what's going on here?" she asks, her voice firm now, cutting through the salty breeze. "What's really going on?"

"You ask the wrong person that," I say, my tone dropping lower. "You'll find out."

I mean it. This place has a way of chewing people up and spitting out what's left, and she's just walked straight into its jaws.

The ferry engine sputters to life behind us, a low rumble that drowns out the crash of the waves for a moment. I glance over my shoulder, jaw grinding. She still has time. A second, maybe two, to make the right call.

“Doctor,” I say, softer this time. “Please.”

Her gaze flicks to the boat, hesitation flashing in her eyes like a warning light. Just for a second. Then she squares her shoulders and looks back at me. “Mr. Stryker, Dax.”

Fuck. The way my name sounds on her lips hits me harder than I expect, like she’s testing it out, trying to figure me out. I exhale through my nose, trying to rein in the frustration twisting in my chest.

“Do I need to carry you?” I ask, deadpan.

She smirks, smirks, and shakes her head. “I’m not leaving,” she says, her voice firm. Then she brushes past me, heading for the steps.

That ass sways like a goddamn invitation, and before I can stop myself, I inhale. Her scent hits me again, soft, clean, warm. Something faintly sweet, like sugar dusted over fresh skin. She smells like dessert.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Chapter Three

Faith

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“You’ll need to leave them here,” the guard at the main gate says, his tone clipped and dismissive as he gestures to my bags.

“All of them?” I ask, though it comes out sounding more like a frustrated objection than an actual question.

The guard doesn’t answer, his harsh, cynical gaze sliding over me like I’m just another nuisance he has to deal with.

At my side, Dax shifts, his shoulders tight as he sets my bags down on the cracked asphalt. “Give me your purse,” he says, his voice low.

I turn to him, startled. There’s something in his eyes, though, something steady, almost grounding. It’s the same look he gave me at the docks, the same unspoken warning in the way he stood between me and Grip.

Somewhere deep down, I know I should be afraid of him. But right now, with the guard’s eyes still on me like he’s waiting for me to screw up, Dax feels more like an ally than he has any right to be.

Without a word, I hand Dax my purse.

He unzips it without hesitation, dumping the contents onto the rickety metal table in front of us. My cheeks flush with anger, and when his rough, calloused hands start rummaging through my things, the flush turns into full-blown heat.

He unzips the inner pockets, tugging out everything: lipstick, breath mints, a travel-

size packet of tissues, a box of painkillers, a single, crumpled sock I'd forgotten about, and, God help me, birth control pills.

I stare straight ahead, my jaw tightening as the guard lets out a low chuckle. I meet his gaze, and the cruelty in his eyes is enough to send a cold shiver racing down my spine. He's enjoying this.

Dax's hands pause for half a second, his body going still when he pulls out the pills. His jaw ticks once before he shoves everything back into the bag. If he's embarrassed for me, he doesn't show it.

He thrusts my purse back into my hands, his voice even. "Do I need to go through them all?"

The guard's grin spreads slow and wide, like a wolf baring its teeth. "Yeah. Can't be too careful." He steps closer, the smell of cigarettes and stale coffee rolling off him like a fog. "I'll frisk her."

Dax stiffens beside me. The air between us changes, sharp and heavy, like the quiet just before a storm. "Why don't I?" Dax says, his voice deceptively calm. "You can thoroughly search her bags instead."

The guard shakes his head, clearly enjoying the way I tense at his suggestion. "Dump them out," he says, his attention never leaving me.

I step back, my hand tightening around the strap of my purse. My eyes flick down to his uniform, searching for a name. O'Connor. He'll go in my report. Every single thing about this will go in my report.

Dax drops to a crouch, already unpacking the first bag with methodical efficiency. He doesn't look at me, but I feel the fury radiating off him in waves. His shoulders are

tight, his jaw locked, and his hands work faster than they should, the tension in him coiled tight as barbed wire.

O'Connor steps closer. He unbuttons my coat with deliberate slowness, his fingers brushing my collarbone. I flinch at the unwanted contact, jerking my gaze away from him. When I do, I accidentally lock eyes with Dax.

The storm I'd sensed brewing in him is written across his face now. His jaw is so tight I wouldn't be surprised if he cracked a tooth.

O'Connor's hands slip beneath my coat, rough fingers pressing along my ribs. My pulse pounds in my ears, and I force myself to stay still, my breath coming faster despite my best efforts.

His hands slide lower, moving down my waist and toward my hips. His touch lingers too long, and when he dips lower, brushing against my thighs, the air freezes in my lungs.

The scent of him, coffee, sweat, cigarettes, turns my stomach.

I flick my gaze to Dax again, desperate for something to focus on. His hands have stopped moving. He's crouched over my bag, his head down, but there's no mistaking the tension in his shoulders or the way his fists clench, knuckles white.

O'Connor doesn't notice. He doesn't even care. His hands glide higher, grazing my inner thigh, and I jerk back a step, my breath hitching.

"That's enough," Dax says, his voice low and deadly.

O'Connor glances over, arching a brow. "Relax, Stryker. Just doing my job."

“No.” Dax rises slowly, his full height towering over the other man. His voice is quieter now, more controlled, but no less dangerous. “You’re pushing your luck.”

The two men lock eyes, and I can feel the tension in the air, sharp as broken glass. Dax doesn’t move, but there’s something about the way he stands, his fists loose at his sides, his shoulders squared, that makes O’Connor hesitate.

“Whatever,” O’Connor mutters, stepping back like it was his idea. “She’s clear.”

Dax doesn’t respond. He just keeps his gaze locked on O’Connor, his jaw tight, until O’Connor finally turns away.

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I tug my coat closed, my cheeks burning as I take a shaky breath.

“Let’s go,” Dax says, his voice clipped as he picks up the last of my bags. He doesn’t look at me, but I catch the tension still etched into his features.

I fall into step behind him, my heart pounding harder than it should.

The gates clang shut behind us, locking me into a world that feels far too open and far too confined all at once.

Inside the compound, the outer yard stretches out in uneven patches of cracked asphalt and trampled dirt. Inmates move in clusters, some working to unload crates of supplies, others sitting idle in the shade of the buildings. A few toss a basketball toward a rusted hoop with more missing pieces than intact ones.

The air is thick with salt and sweat, and every pair of eyes turns toward me as we walk past.

The first group we pass is standing near a set of barrels, their conversation dropping to a murmur as I approach. One man leans against the barrel, tattoos disappearing under his shirt sleeves, his grin sharp and predatory as he looks me up and down.

Dax doesn’t stop, doesn’t say a word, but his stride slows just enough for the man to notice. That small movement alone is enough to erase the grin from his face.

The man straightens, nudging the guy next to him. They both turn their attention elsewhere.

My stomach tightens as I realize how quiet the yard is getting. Conversations drift off wherever we go, replaced by watchful, sidelong glances.

Ahead, a group of guards leans against the wall of a low building, rifles slung lazily over their shoulders. They don't look like they're paying much attention, but one of them, his uniform wrinkled, his belt unbuckled, tips his chin at Dax in greeting.

"Busy day, Stryker?" he asks, the words casual but edged with something sharper.

Dax doesn't bother answering, and the guard smirks before turning his gaze to me. His eyes linger, dropping from my face to my legs, and I fight the urge to button my coat all the way up.

"She's not your type, Henderson," Dax says, his tone flat.

Henderson flinches at the use of his name, his smirk faltering.

The farther we walk, the harder it is to shake the feeling of being surrounded. Inmates lean against railings, stare from open windows, and stand half-hidden in the shadows of the buildings. Their attention isn't loud, no catcalls, no whistles. Just the weight of too many eyes, the kind of watching that presses against your skin and makes your pulse pick up.

I force myself to keep my head high, even when my legs feel unsteady.

"You shouldn't stare back," Dax says under his breath, his voice quiet enough that only I can hear.

I bristle but don't reply, my gaze darting to the set of steps ahead that lead into a larger building.

When we reach the entrance, an argument breaks out behind us. Two inmates square off near the edge of the yard, shoving each other, their voices rising.

Dax stops, turning just enough to glance back. He doesn't shout, doesn't take a step closer. He just looks.

Whatever the fight is about, it fizzles in seconds. One of the men raises his hands, muttering something I can't hear, and walks off. The other turns his back on us, spitting curses under his breath.

Dax keeps moving.

By the time we reach the administrative building, the tension hasn't left my chest. If anything, it has only gotten worse.

The guards at the door nod at Dax and step aside, their movements sharp and efficient.

As we pass, one of them mutters under his breath, loud enough for us both to hear. "That's a sweet piece."

I feel the heat rise in my cheeks, but I keep walking, refusing to let the words stick.

Inside, the air shifts. The salty breeze is gone, replaced by something heavier, dust and stale smoke. The fluorescent lights overhead flicker faintly, casting a cold glow over the narrow hallway.

The halls are mostly empty. The faint hum of machinery echoes in the distance, but the only people we pass are a few guards and a single inmate. He's older, frail-looking, and hunched over as he sweeps the floor. The broom handle is worn smooth, like it's been gripped for decades.

Dax brushes his hand against my arm, catching my attention. The touch is brief, but it pulls my focus sharply to him. His voice is low when he speaks, but the warning in it is clear. “Don’t challenge him.”

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I know immediately who he means.

I swallow hard and nod, my mouth suddenly dry.

At the end of the hall, a door stands open.

The tension I've felt since stepping off the ferry tightens into something sharper, heavier. My stomach twists as I realize this is it, my first impression on the man I've been sent to take down.

The warden.

Sinclair's office is everything I expect and nothing like it at the same time. The space is large but feels cramped, like it's suffocating under its own weight. The massive desk dominates the room, its surface cluttered with neatly stacked papers, ledgers, and folders. A phone sits at the edge, cord twisted and knotted, while an ashtray on the corner holds a smoldering cigar. The thick, acrid scent hangs in the air, clinging to my lungs with every breath.

But it's the man behind the desk who holds my attention.

Sinclair rises as we step in, his presence filling the room as easily as Dax's had on the dock. He's clean-cut and clean-shaven, his salt-and-pepper buzz cut giving him an air of precision and control. Steel-gray eyes bore into me, cool and assessing, as if he's already cataloged every weakness I have in the span of a single glance.

"Take her things to the staff wing," Sinclair says to Dax, his tone brisk and

commanding. “She’ll find her way there when we’re done.”

The staff wing. There’s something off about the way the words linger in the air.

I clutch the strap of my purse tighter, unsure why the gesture feels necessary. My fingers dig into the leather as I turn to Dax, handing him the small bag that’s still in my grasp.

He takes it without a word, the muscles in his arm flexing briefly as he adjusts the weight of the other bags he’s already carrying. His gaze flicks to mine, brief, unreadable, and then he steps back, leaving me with Sinclair.

The door shuts behind him, and the silence that follows is suffocating.

For a moment, Sinclair doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t move, doesn’t blink, just watches me like a predator waiting to see how its prey will react.

I lift my chin, forcing myself to hold his gaze. I’ve faced worse than this. I’ve stared murderers in the eye and walked away untouched.

But there’s something about Sinclair.

His calm. His precision. His complete lack of emotion.

I came here to find the monster in charge of this place. I think I just did.

Chapter Four

Faith

“Sit,” he says, his tone clipped.

I do, lowering myself into the chair across from him. The leather creaks faintly under my weight. He remains standing for a moment, the silence stretching between us as he studies me. His gaze is sharp, clinical, like he's dissecting me piece by piece.

Finally, he eases into his chair, leaning back as his hands tent in front of him on the desk.

Does he not realize I'm a therapist? I know exactly what he's doing. Letting the silence hang, waiting for me to fill it. It's a power move.

I hold his gaze, my spine straight, ignoring the urge to fidget. As I do, Dax's low warning echoes in my mind. Don't challenge him.

But I'm not here to cower. I'm here to evaluate the program's recidivism rates, nothing more, nothing less. At least, that's all Sinclair needs to know.

He picks up his cigar, rolling it between his fingers before taking a slow, deliberate draw.

Or does he know I'm more than a threat to his funding?

The smoke curls lazily in the air between us, the acrid scent clinging to the back of my throat. He exhales slowly, his lips twisting into a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "Faith," he says, stripping me of my title.

Games.

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“I’ll do my best to make you comfortable while you’re with us,” he says, his voice smooth, polished, like each word has been rehearsed. “The staff wing has everything you’ll need. Your room, a chow hall, showers.”

The last word lingers in the air, hanging heavy with the smoke.

I don’t react, though my fingers tighten on the strap of my purse where it rests in my lap.

“Will the computers...” I begin.

“I’ve already pulled the necessary documents for the inmates you’ll have access to,” he cuts in, his tone brisk.

Files? Paper copies? I press my lips together, forcing myself to stay calm. For now. “It was my understanding that I would have unfettered access to speak with the inmates.”

His smile sharpens, turning predatory. “With the exception of those in solitary, they’re free to speak with you. If they choose.”

He flicks his cigar, the ash dropping neatly into the tray beside him.

My jaw tightens. He’s not just playing games. He’s already trying to control the limits of my investigation.

“Did you pull the incident reports for...” I begin, keeping my tone measured.

“I’ve pulled the documents you need to conduct your work,” Sinclair interrupts smoothly, not bothering to look up from the cigar he’s rolling between his fingers.

Speak when spoken to. Got it, asshole. I keep my expression neutral, refusing to let him see the irritation creeping up my spine. “For Peter Cranston,” I press.

This time, his gaze flicks up briefly, but his face remains unreadable. I watch for any reaction and add, “And Graham Lancaster.”

Nothing. Not even a blink.

“Lancaster was one of mine,” he says finally, his voice flat.

“I’m aware,” I reply, my words careful but firm. “I’m terribly sorry for your loss. It’s relevant since it reflects on the behavior of your inmates in this setting.”

There’s a flicker of something in his steel-gray eyes, so brief I almost miss it. Amusement? Annoyance? I can’t tell.

“There is always a danger with violent criminals,” he says, exhaling a slow stream of smoke that curls toward the ceiling. “Lancaster was aware of the risks, as is anyone who voluntarily steps off that ferry.”

My pulse stutters. Is that a warning?

“I’d like to review the incident reports at any rate,” I say, keeping my voice steady. “And speak with the guards and inmates who were present at both incidents.”

Sinclair leans forward slightly, just enough to crowd the air between us. “I’ll pull those reports.” His tone is smooth, like he’s granting a favor rather than complying with a professional request.

I tighten my grip on the strap of my purse, forcing myself to meet his gaze.

“In the meantime,” he continues. “I’ve included several files for you to review. They’ll explain our rewards programs and detail how these men have built a functioning community.” His lips curl into a small, tight smile. “Self-sustaining.”

And a profitable endeavor for you, I think but don’t say.

“That will be helpful,” I reply instead, my tone flat.

Sinclair doesn’t react. He simply picks up his cigar again, taking another slow draw, his gaze drifting back to his desk like I’ve already been dismissed.

The silence stretches for a beat too long, and the weight of his presence presses down on me, heavy and suffocating.

“The files?” I ask, keeping my voice even.

He gestures to a neat stack on the edge of his desk. “I’m sure you can manage.”

I suppress the urge to bristle as I lean forward to pick them up. The stack isn’t light, but it’s far too small to represent even a fraction of the inmates here, much less the programs I’m supposed to evaluate.

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“And the staff wing?” I ask, standing straight, adjusting the files and my purse.

Sinclair’s sharp gaze flicks over me, like he’s assessing me all over again, or perhaps for the first time. Whatever he’s looking for, he doesn’t seem impressed. “Out the way you came. Left. Third building.”

He doesn’t bother to watch me leave. His attention shifts back to the papers spread across his desk, like I’m already an afterthought.

I hesitate for the briefest moment, letting his dismissal settle. I’m no threat to him. Or so he thinks.

Shifting the files in my arms, I reach for the door and step into the hallway.

The change in the air is immediate. The heavy smell of smoke fades, but the tension it left behind lingers, coiled tight around my chest. For the first time since stepping into Sinclair’s office, I take a breath that feels like mine.

It’s going to be a long night. I’ll read every word he’s granted me access to. And tomorrow, I’ll start talking to the inmates. Starting with Dax.

My heels click against the floor, the sound sharp as I make my way down the hallway. The echo carries farther than it should, and with every step, I feel the weight of eyes following me.

The guards I pass don’t speak, but they don’t need to. Their attention clings to me, heavy and sharp, assessing and unkind.

The fluorescent lights overhead buzz faintly, flickering in places. I keep my head high, my grip on the files tightening as I pass another pair of guards leaning against the wall. One of them straightens, his gaze raking over me like he's daring me to look back.

I don't.

I've been in a lot of prisons. I've dealt with all kinds of people, killers, liars, manipulators. But the guards here have an edge sharper than most.

They'd have to, I suppose, to survive this place.

My heart beats faster as I reach the entrance, the sunlight glaring through the glass doors ahead. I step through the door, the files still clutched in my arms, a flicker of resolve growing in the pit of my stomach.

Whatever Sinclair's hiding, I'll find it.

One of the guards at the doors steps into my path. He's tall, broad-shouldered, with a lazy grin that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Carry your books, princess?" he drawls, nodding toward the files in my arms.

I tighten my grip on them, forcing myself to stay calm. "I can manage," I say evenly, stepping to the side to move around him.

He shifts with me, blocking my path again.

Are we really doing this on day one?

I square my shoulders, meeting his eyes. They're sharp, glinting with amusement, but there's something else there, too. A challenge. He's testing me.

“That’ll be enough,” a deep voice rumbles behind me.

The relief that floods through me is instant and alarming, and I don’t need to turn to know who it is.

Dax.

The guard’s grin falters, his posture stiffening as he looks over my shoulder. For a moment, he doesn’t move, as if debating whether to push his luck further.

He doesn’t. With a slight shrug and a muttered, “Just being polite,” he steps aside, clearing the way.

I exhale quietly, adjusting the files in my arms as I step forward without another word.

But the weight of Dax’s presence lingers, and the relief that flickered through me is replaced by something else.

Frustration.

Because in this place, power is measured by violence and, while I shouldn’t need someone like Dax to have my back.

Here I do.

Chapter Five

Dax

That son of a bitch sent her out alone.

If I had any doubt Sinclair wanted her hurt, or worse, it's gone now. He didn't even try to pretend. He might as well have slapped a target on her back.

"Thank you," she says softly, looking up at me.

There's no suspicion in her eyes, no fear or loathing. Just something quiet and genuine. Jesus, that's new.

"Listen," I say as we move toward the staff wing, my voice lower than I intend. "There are a few more things you need to understand about how things work around here."

She looks ahead, her gaze sweeping the grounds, and I'm glad for it. She needs to stay aware, though it won't do much good if someone's decided to make her a problem.

"What do I need to know?" she asks, her tone calm. No panic, no hesitation. That's good. Better than I expected. "I gather you're someone they look up to."

I snort softly, shaking my head. Look up to isn't the right phrase. "Yeah," I say. "If they believe I've decided you belong here, that'll help."

“Help?” She turns her eyes on me again, those piercing blues catching the faint glow of the overhead lights as we pass beneath them.

I hesitate, knowing the next words out of my mouth are going to sound worse than I mean them. But she needs to understand. “It’ll help more if they think I’m claiming first dibs.”

Her step falters slightly, and I bite back a curse. It sounds as shitty as I thought it would.

But it’s the truth. She’s not just a new face. She’s a woman. There’s no chance the rest of them are just going to ignore her.

A soft blush creeps across her cheeks, and she looks away. “What sort of staff are in the staff wing?” she asks, her brows pulling together in thought. “I was under the impression the inmates were the staff. Guards aside, I mean.”

I let her steer the conversation. I don’t blame her for wanting to move past the idea of being claimed by anyone. That kind of talk would put her off. She’s a world away from us. Hell, even before I was convicted, she would’ve been out of reach.

“Yeah,” I say, keeping my voice neutral. “The staff wing’s mostly empty except for the guards and whatever contractors Sinclair cycles through. Civilians don’t stick around long. Anyone else working here? That’s us.”

We pass a group of inmates lingering by the fence near the yard. One of them glances our way, mutters something I don’t catch, and another snickers. I shoot them a sharp look, and the laughter dies instantly.

Faith doesn’t seem to notice, or maybe she does, and she’s just smart enough not to react. Her shoulders stay squared, her head held high, and something about the way

she keeps her pace steady makes my chest tighten. She's got grit. I'll give her that.

"Look," I say as we near the staff wing, slowing my pace so she's forced to look at me. "You need to know this place runs on one thing, power. You don't have to swing a fist to show it, but you damn well better be ready to back yourself up."

Her gaze flicks up to mine, steady and sharp. "I can handle myself."

A muscle ticks in my jaw, but I let it go. Maybe she believes that. Hell, maybe it's even true in most places. But not here. Not where survival depends on knowing the rules they don't put in the damn handbook. She hasn't been here long enough to understand what "handling yourself" really means.

"I've left your bags in the safest room," I say.

Her breath catches slightly, just enough for me to know she hears the weight in that word. Safest. Not safe.

"Will you show me around the building?" she asks, her voice careful.

Shit. I would've offered if she hadn't asked. "Yeah."

We head through the building toward the staff wing entrance, the hallway dimly lit and smelling faintly of bleach and stale air. The floors are scuffed to hell, worn from boots and dragged chairs, and the occasional muffled shout filters through the walls, reminding me we're never more than a few steps away from trouble.

And of course, trouble is exactly what's waiting at the door.

Quince.

That smug bastard leans against the frame like he owns the place, his uniform wrinkled, his boots scuffed, and his belt hanging loose like he can't even be bothered to tighten it. His eyes light up when he sees us, but they don't land on me.

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“What are you bringing me, Stryker?” he drawls, his gaze dragging over her in a way that makes my blood boil. Not her face. He doesn’t even pretend to start there.

“She’s not for you,” I say, stepping closer to her. My hand goes to her back, steadying her before she has a chance to move.

Her fingers tighten on the folders in her arms, but she doesn’t step away. That scent of hers, soft, sweet, and completely out of place here, is going to drive me insane.

Quince snorts, the sound sharp and grating. “Just don’t knock it out of shape,” he says, his grin widening into something nastier. “I’ll take a hit on it later.”

Fucking hell. It’s all I can do not to snap his neck right here. My hand flexes against her back, and for a second, I swear I feel her shift closer to me.

“She isn’t for you,” I repeat, my voice colder this time.

Quince raises a brow, pushing himself off the doorframe like he’s considering testing me. I step forward just enough to make it clear he shouldn’t.

His grin falters slightly, but he covers it with a shrug. “Relax, Stryker. Just joking.”

Bullshit. Quince doesn’t joke. He says what he means and hides it behind that greasy grin of his.

I guide her through the entrance, keeping my hand on her back as the door swings shut behind us.

The wing is quiet, too quiet. The hall smells faintly of damp concrete and cleaning chemicals, but the silence presses in, heavy and unnatural. Most of the lights overhead are flickering, buzzing faintly, casting uneven patches of yellow-white light down the corridor.

“How am I supposed to drop you off with Quince at the door?” I mutter, more to myself than to her.

She glances up at me, those sharp blue eyes studying me like she’s trying to figure me out. “What was that?”

“Nothing,” I say, brushing it off. No point in making her more nervous than she already is.

As we walk, I point out the rooms she might need. “That’s chow, though you’d do better to eat with us.”

She nods, her gaze steady on me, and something about the way she holds me there almost undoes me. Trust. Is that what it is? I hope not. She can’t trust me. She can’t trust any of us.

“Have I missed dinner?” she asks.

“I’ll see you haven’t,” I say, my voice coming out rougher than I intend. I nod toward another door. “Showers are there. This is an all-male facility.” I hesitate, jaw tightening before I add, “I’ll stand guard.”

“I appreciate that,” she says, glancing over her shoulder.

Probably remembering Quince. Precisely why I’ll stand guard every damn time she needs a shower. I just hope I’m not the bastard she ends up needing protection from.

After one more turn, we reach the hall with the rooms. I stop outside hers, nudging the door open with my shoulder. It's nothing fancy. None of them are. A twin bed, a cheap wooden dresser, a plastic chair at a table that doubles as a desk. No window. That last part was deliberate. My choice.

She steps inside and sets her files down on the table, then turns back to me. Her eyes sweep over me again, calm and unflinching. She's not afraid. Alone with me, the last guard we passed several turns ago. She should be.

Foolish, foolish woman.

I step inside. I need to linger. Quince needs to see this and get it through his thick skull that she's off limits. Mine.

"You got questions for me?" I ask, keeping my tone flat. "For your evaluation." I reach back and pull the door closed, just in case Quince is strolling by.

She doesn't flinch. Doesn't move to open it. Doesn't look the least bit nervous.

What the hell is wrong with her?

I scan the room, then glance back at her. I'm going to have to stay on top of her. There isn't a single man here, inmate or otherwise, who wouldn't have tossed her onto that bed already. If they were even that kind about it.

"I do. A lot of questions," she says, her tone steady. "We can do it later, if you still need to eat as well."

So considerate. Like she thinks I'm still human.

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“I got time,” I say. “I’ll eat with you after.” Maybe public will be better. Our first date. Drive away any doubts about whose she is.

She turns her back on me and starts digging in her bag, pulling out a notepad. Her gaze flicks to the plastic chair, and she frowns. Then she looks at the bed. “I’m afraid I don’t have a very inviting room. The warden said there were meeting rooms I could use.”

Not inviting. Shit. She’s got no idea. I exhale hard through my nose, fighting the tension coiling in my chest. This room is too small. Too close. I need to get us the hell out before I do something stupid.

I step back and open the door.

Before I can say anything, Grip comes barreling down the hall, loud enough to rattle the damn walls. “Dax! It’s that fuckwit Pauly.”

I close my eyes, grinding my teeth. “What’s he done?”

“Sick as shit,” Grip says, throwing his hands up. “Don’t know what he got in, but it’s bad. Chucked all over the table. Started a brawl in chow.”

“Brawl?” I bark, already moving. My fists clench as the familiar frustration and rage rise up.

But as I glance back at her, it hits me like a brick. I can’t leave her here. Not with Quince. Not anywhere. She’s not safe in this room. She’s not safe anywhere.

Her eyes meet mine, and I see it. She knows. She understands.

“I’ll come with you,” she says, her voice calm. “Observe. This is why I’m here. I’ll stay back.”

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

“You’ll stay the hell back, but not out of my sight. Clear?” My voice comes out harsher than I mean, but I don’t care. I turn to Grip. “She’s mine. Got it?”

Grip raises his hands, his grin fading. “Got it.”

Her lips press together, but she doesn’t argue. Just nods.

I exhale sharply and step into the hall, already bracing for whatever fresh hell Pauly’s gotten himself into.

Chapter Six

Faith

I grab only my notebook and pull the door shut, hurrying to keep pace with Dax and Grip as they barrel down the hall.

Quince is still at the door when we pass, leaning against the frame like he hasn’t got a single responsibility in the world. He snorts when he sees us. “Hope it’s a good show!” he calls after us, his laugh echoing down the corridor.

I grit my teeth. A brawl, and he’s amused. Why the hell are inmates rushing to break it up while guards lean back and watch?

As we weave through the halls, I try to take in the layout, though everything blurs with the urgency of Dax's long strides and Grip's muttering about 'goddamn Pauly.' The corridor widens as we approach the chow hall, the stink of sweat and old food hitting me like a wall. A few guards stand off to the side, arms crossed, grinning like they're watching a schoolyard scuffle.

I can't process it, how they just stand there. There's no urgency, no authority. None of the professionalism I've seen in every other facility I've evaluated. They're useless.

The noise is deafening as we reach the chow hall.

Dax doesn't hesitate. He storms inside, shoving past a group of inmates huddled near the door, and throws himself into the chaos without a single look back at me.

I stop just inside the threshold, my chest tightening as the scene unfolds in front of me. The place is carnage. Tables are flipped, their legs splintered and sticking out like jagged bones. Food smears the floor, mixed with puddles of something darker, blood, I realize, as my stomach turns. The air is thick with the scent of sweat, metal, and whatever they were serving for dinner.

The shouting is a wall of sound, voices crashing into each other, curses flying as fists do. Every man in the room is fighting, save for the guard leaning lazily against the wall next to me. He doesn't so much as flinch, arms crossed as he watches with casual indifference. Certainly not worried about my evaluation of his reaction to the situation.

The inmates are brutal. A man goes down near the center of the room, clutching his stomach as another kicks him hard in the ribs. A tray flies across the room and crashes into the wall, the sound sharp enough to make me jump.

And then I see Grip.

He's not hesitating either, his bulk moving fast as he grabs one of the men by the shoulder and swings him around. His fist cracks against the inmate's jaw, hard enough that the man's head snaps back, and I almost hear the thud over the noise as his body hits the floor.

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But it's Dax who grabs my attention and doesn't let it go.

He's not savage or thoughtless. Every move is deliberate, his focus unnervingly sharp as he grabs one man by the throat and lifts him clean off the ground. The inmate claws at Dax's arm, gasping, until Dax shoves him back and tosses him aside like a rag doll.

Another man comes at him from the side, but Dax is faster. He pulls the guy off his feet with one arm and flings him into the overturned table, the wood groaning under the impact.

He's pulling a third man away from a pile on the floor when his voice cuts through the room like a whip.

"Enough!"

It's not just a shout, it's a command. A warning. And it works.

The noise dies almost instantly, like someone hit a switch. The chaos freezes, every man in the room pausing mid-motion, fists clenched and breathing hard. All eyes turn to Dax, who stands in the center of the carnage, his shoulders heaving, a bloodied man dangling from his grip.

"Where's the fucking doc?" Dax demands, his voice sharp enough to make even the guard stiffen.

"Med hall, I'd reckon," the guard beside me drawls, still leaning against the wall like

nothing's happened.

Dax's jaw tightens, and his gaze cuts to Grip. "This better be cleaned up by the time I get back," he growls, jerking the bloodied man upright and dragging him toward the door.

I swallow hard, realizing I haven't taken a single note. And even if I had, I wouldn't know where to start. They didn't give me a chance to get to know their names before they tried to kill each other. Recidivism rates? My head swims.

As I follow Dax and Pauly toward the exit, I flick my gaze to the guard's uniform, catching his name. Hogan.

Useless. Every single one of them. Not a single guard here is worth the uniform they wear.

"What'd you take?" Dax demands, his tone sharp as he drags Pauly down the hall.

Pauly stumbles, his breathing uneven. "I didn't. The program. This morning." He coughs, and dark red specks hit the floor.

"Right, zip it," Dax growls, cutting him off.

I make a mental note of that. The program.

The air shifts as we enter what I assume is the med wing. The smell here is different. Not as stale as the rest of the prison, but not quite clean either. There's a faint chemical tang beneath the surface, like disinfectant that's fighting a losing battle.

The floors aren't any better than the other wings, scuffed linoleum worn to a dull sheen, marked by years of heavy boots and neglect. The lighting overhead buzzes

faintly, casting a dim yellow glow that falls short of the sterile brightness you'd expect in a medical facility.

"Doc?" Dax calls, his voice echoing down the hall.

A man steps out of a room at the far end, his casual attire at odds with the supposed purpose of this wing. His buzz cut is the same severe, military style as Sinclair's, and his sharp eyes scan us quickly, his expression hard and unreadable.

"Pauly. Stryker," the doctor acknowledges, his tone flat.

Dax shifts slightly, glancing at me, and the look he gives feels like a silent order for me to vanish. I'm not going anywhere.

The doctor's gaze slides to me, his frown deepening before he waves toward a door halfway down the hall. "Room 3."

I follow Dax inside.

Room 3 is as uninspired as the rest of the med wing. A standard exam table sits in the center, its thin, worn padding cracked along the edges. A counter to the side holds a tray of supplies, gauze, alcohol pads, syringes, and a blood pressure cuff hangs on the wall. Everything looks decades out of date, functional but far from welcoming.

Dax helps Pauly onto the table, keeping his hand on the man's shoulder until he's settled. Then he moves to stand next to me, his tension radiating like a storm about to break.

"I been feeling sick since that shot this morning, Doc," Pauly mutters, his voice weak.

"You got this?" Dax asks, his tone clipped, his eyes locked on the doctor.

The doctor waves him off dismissively. “I’ll handle it.”

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I step forward instinctively, wanting to stay, to observe, but Dax's hand brushes my arm, firm, steady, and the way he guides me out of the room leaves me no choice.

Once we're far enough down the hall, I stop abruptly, turning to face him. "What the hell was that all about? Which program did you want him to zip it about?"

Dax exhales sharply, raking his hand through his hair. "Not here," he says, his voice low but loaded. His gaze darts to the hallway, scanning for anyone within earshot. "It's already dangerous enough for you as it is."

This is it, whatever Sinclair is hiding.

Before I can push further, Dax shifts, his tone softening just slightly. "Let's get some damn food and chat under the stars."

I blink at him, caught off guard by the shift. There's something almost charming about the way he says it, like the chaos of the evening hasn't even fazed him. Like this was just another night in the Warden's Graveyard and I was his best girl.

The thought rattles me, but not in the way I expect.

Something tells me I'm not going to get much reading done tonight, and for the first time since arriving, I don't mind. I have the feeling Dax will tell me more over dinner than anything I'll find in those files.

Chapter Seven

Dax

I set the tray between us, a barrier, for her or me, I'm not sure which. Maybe both.

The food on it is about as appealing as the tray itself. Overcooked rice clumps together next to something grayish that might have been chicken once, covered in congealing gravy. A few limp green beans round out the masterpiece. She takes a bite without hesitation, though, chewing thoughtfully like it's filet mignon.

I watch her, waiting for the inevitable grimace, but it doesn't come. She doesn't wrinkle her nose or shove it aside. She just eats. She hasn't looked down on any of us since she stepped off that ferry. Not yet, anyway. The only people she seems to hold in contempt are the guards.

When she turns to me, there's a smile on her face, small but real. It's beautiful, and it knocks me back for half a second.

"What will I find in Dax Stryker's file?" she asks.

Shit.

I keep my face neutral and blow out a slow breath, taking a bite of the gray chicken. The taste is as bad as it looks, but I chew anyway, letting the question hang. She doesn't push, just waits, and every second stretches longer as my thoughts claw their way to the surface.

All my sins. All the bodies.

I've killed more people than I can count. Every single one of them deserved it. I'd do it again in a heartbeat. What does that make me?

“Dax?” Her voice is calm, soft, but it cuts through my thoughts like a blade. She’s watching me like I’m some kind of puzzle, turning the pieces over in her head, trying to fit them together.

It should piss me off, most people don’t bother looking past the surface. They see what I want them to see. But there’s something about the way she looks at me that makes me want to say more than I should.

“Why are you asking about me?” I say finally, keeping my tone neutral. “Aren’t you here to evaluate the program?”

She leans forward slightly, her fingers curling around the edge of the table. “Maybe learning about you is part of that.”

Her answer isn’t sharp, sarcastic, or baiting. It’s honest, and it catches me off guard. For the first time in a long while, I feel like someone’s actually seeing me. Not the enforcer. Not the monster. Just me.

It’s unsettling as hell.

“You’ll see several murder convictions,” I say finally. No point in sugarcoating it. She’s going to read it all anyway.

Her smile doesn’t waver.

“You’ll see I rode with the Ravens,” I add, testing her. “As their enforcer.”

Her expression doesn’t change. Not a flicker of judgment, no tightening of her lips or raising of her brows. Nothing. The woman has no sense of self-preservation.

I try to picture her on the back of my bike, her legs wrapped around me, her arms

tight against my chest. Her hair would catch the wind, and I'd smell that soft, sweet scent of hers. Something warm and clean and totally out of place here. Damn it. She doesn't belong on a bike. Not with me. Not with the man I am.

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And yet, I'd give anything to take her on a ride.

"How did you end up here?" she presses, her tone still calm.

"Plea deal," I answer honestly, leaning back slightly. "My state had the death penalty. I was fucked otherwise."

She nods, her pen poised above the notepad she's barely touched. "You got life, then."

"Life, plus a couple hundred years," I say, my lips twisting into something that's not quite a smile. "Figured I wouldn't outlast it."

She leans back now, her eyes still on me, and I can't tell if she's studying me or just waiting for me to say more.

"So," I say, turning it back on her. "What will I find in your file?"

She laughs, soft and clear, and it hits me like a sucker punch.

That sound shouldn't belong here. It shouldn't belong to me.

But as it rings out, echoing off the cold walls of this godforsaken place, I know she's mine. No way around it. Doesn't matter how wrong it is, or how much I tell myself I'll be bad for her. She's already claimed a spot in my head I don't let anyone near.

"Well, there won't be any murder convictions," she says, her lips quirking up into a

small smile.

Christ almighty, she's joking with me. She doesn't flinch, doesn't back away. She's teasing me like I'm just some guy sitting across from her. Like I'm not exactly what her parents probably warned her to stay the hell away from.

I watch her lips move as she talks, and all I can think about is bending her over this table. The sweet sound of her laughter replaced by gasps, her nails digging into my arms as I show her exactly what I'd do to her.

"You'll see someone who wants to make sure you're not taken advantage of just because you have a past," she continues, her voice growing steadier. "You'll see I've worked hard with other facilities to make real change. I'm an advocate for..." She pauses, sighing softly, and that little sound unravels me further. "There's no reason to ever treat anyone..." She pauses again, like she's trying to find the words.

I sit back, tearing my eyes away from her mouth, though it doesn't help much.

"I see that," I say finally. "But don't go thinking any of us are worth saving. We're not worth you being here."

"But you are," she says, like it's the simplest thing in the world.

That shouldn't hit me the way it does. She says it without hesitation, no trace of doubt, and it burrows under my skin, wedging itself in a place I've locked down for years.

Me? I'm not worth the shit on her shoes.

"You should've left when I said," I mutter, my voice coming out sharper than I mean.

“Why?” she demands, her gaze locking on mine.

“It’s not safe here. In case you haven’t noticed, the inmates are running the joint,” I say. “The guards should be locked up, and you... you’re—” a tragic headline in the making. I don’t finish the thought, but I know she hears it anyway.

“Not getting on the next ferry if I haven’t finished my work here,” she says, cutting me off.

She’s so mine.

I grip the edge of the table, grounding myself before I do something stupid. “I’m going to lose a lot of sleep making sure you survive to the next ferry.”

She laughs again, and damn it, that sound does something to me.

“What’s the program?” she asks, her tone softening.

That’s a splash of cold water if I’ve ever felt one.

I exhale slowly, leaning back. “That’s something you only talk to me about,” I say, my voice low, even. “Until you get off this rock. Even then, sweetheart, people kill to keep those kinds of secrets.”

Her smile falters slightly, and I can see the question forming in her eyes. She doesn’t ask it. Smart woman.

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“Not killers like me,” I add. “You’d see me coming. It’s the dirty bastards who kill innocent women you need to worry about.”

Her expression shifts then, something I can’t quite name flickering across her face. Not fear. Not disgust. It’s something deeper, something that makes me want to grab her hand, pull her out of here, and lock her away somewhere safe where no one, not even me, can touch her.

“Fine, it’s just us,” she says, like I’m not already painfully aware of how alone we are right now.

My gaze flicks away from her briefly, scanning the yard. A couple of guards linger near the far wall, chatting like this is just another quiet night. A few inmates meander nearby, smoking or leaning against the fence. None of them would dare screw with me. Not openly.

“What is the program?” she presses, her voice steady but softer now.

I drop my tone, lowering my voice so it barely carries. I shouldn’t tell her. Hell, I shouldn’t even be entertaining this conversation. But something about her makes it impossible to stop. “Research,” I say finally. “Testing. Rats and beagles just don’t give the same results.”

Her face freezes, her lips parting slightly as she stares at me, horrified.

The look makes me want to kill someone. “It’s not so bad,” I lie, my voice rough. “Someone has to make sure that delicious scent you wear doesn’t make your skin

peel off.”

Her hand flies to her mouth, and for a second, I think she’s going to recoil, finally see me the way most people do. But then, to my absolute shock, she reaches out and touches my arm.

Her fingers graze me lightly, just above the elbow, her touch achingly gentle. “You’re not kidding?” she asks, her brows drawing together as she studies me.

I glance at her hand, my skin burning under the contact. Woman. You have no idea what you’re doing.

“They’re testing things on you?” she continues, her voice dropping, as if someone else might overhear. Her hand stays on me, and it takes everything in me not to close the distance between us. “That’s illegal.”

I laugh, sharp and bitter. “No one gives a shit what they do to us. There’s big money in this. Medical trials are slow and expensive when they’re legal,” I say.

Her eyes widen, and I see the pieces click together in her head. “Medical...” she murmurs. “Pauly. A shot. What did they give him?” She starts to rise, her movements quick, like she’s ready to storm off and demand answers.

“Sit,” I say firmly, my tone brooking no argument.

She freezes, then slowly lowers herself back down, her gaze locked on mine.

“What did we agree on?” I ask.

“Between us,” she admits, her voice soft but full of frustration. “But, Dax, what are they giving you?”

I exhale, running my tongue across my teeth. “This week? Who knows. We don’t get to ask questions.” Her eyes stay on me, those pretty blues cutting through every defense I have. Shit, I’m running my mouth now. “Look, those of us who toe the line don’t get the nasty stuff. Pauly’s fresh out of solitary. A real pain in the ass.” I shake my head. “But he doesn’t deserve to be a test monkey any more than me. He just doesn’t have the damn sense to...”

“None of you,” she interrupts, her voice sharp and fierce. “You can’t think you deserve to be treated like animals.”

I am an animal.

Her words hit something deep, something I don’t have the tools to deal with. Before I can respond, I spot a guard edging closer, his beady eyes flicking between us like he’s looking for a reason to interfere.

I lower my voice to a whisper. “Come here.”

She hesitates for half a second before sliding closer.

I pull her into my lap, my hand gripping her hip, and lean close to her ear. “Play along,” I murmur.

Her breath catches, and for a split second, she stiffens, like she’s deciding whether to trust me. Then she exhales, slow and shaky, and melts against me.

She’s soft in all the places I’m hard. Warm where I run cold. And for a moment, I forget why I did this in the first place.

“Yes, Dax,” she says softly, purring my name.

The sound goes straight through me, hot and sharp, and the second it leaves her lips, the whole damn game shifts. The act doesn't feel like an act anymore.

My fingers tangle in her hair, the soft strands slipping between them like silk. I tug gently, tilting her head back, and my mouth brushes the line of her jaw. Her breath hitches, and that tiny sound ignites something dark and possessive in me.

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This was supposed to be for show. But as her body presses into mine, as I feel the heat of her through her clothes, something dangerous takes root. I should push her away. End this before I forget that it's just a game.

But I don't.

Not yet.

Not until I have no other fucking choice.

The guard chuckles behind us, his boots scuffing the pavement as he moves on.

I force myself to loosen my grip, to pull back just enough to break the moment. My hand falls from her hair, but the tension in my chest doesn't ease.

"Dax..." she whispers, her voice soft but uncertain.

I exhale, slow and steady, and brush my thumb over her hip before letting go completely.

"Not here," I say, my voice low.

She doesn't move right away, her body still pressed against mine. And when she finally does pull back, it feels like a part of me goes with her.

Chapter Eight

Faith

Dax dumps the tray at the edge of the yard and takes my hand, his grip firm and unrelenting as he pulls me across the field.

My mind races faster than my feet. What the hell just happened? And why did it disappoint me when it stopped?

The warmth of his hand burns through my skin, his fingers curling around mine like he's afraid I'll disappear if he lets go.

I open my mouth to say something, but the words catch in my throat. Never, not in all my years working with inmates, have I felt drawn to any of them. Not like this. Not enough to even think about acting on it.

And yet, here I am.

"Dax," I start, my voice soft, unsteady. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..."

"Yes, you should have," he says simply, cutting me off.

His tone is calm, matter-of-fact, but there's a weight to it that makes my pulse stutter.

He's trying to protect me. I know that. He's only acting like this because he thinks I need saving, and I'm enjoying it. That's taking advantage of him, isn't it?

"I took it too far," I say, my voice almost a whisper.

"Not yet, you haven't." His words are low and rough, and they spark something I have no business feeling.

Is this more than wanting to keep me from getting hurt?

When he glances back at me, his dark eyes locking on mine, I feel like I have my answer. Or maybe I'm just seeing what I want to see.

Want.

The word echoes in my mind like a confession I'm not ready to say out loud. Want?
Dax.

We near the staff wing, and I force myself to look away, trying to steady my breathing. But then Quince steps into view.

His gaze sweeps over us, his lips curling into a smirk that makes my stomach churn.

Dax moves instantly, stepping between us in one fluid motion, his hand releasing mine.

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Before I can process what's happening, he slams the butt of his palm into Quince's chest with enough force to make the guard stumble back a step.

Quince sucks in a sharp breath, his face twisting in anger. "Filthy..."

Dax's hand snaps out, drawing the pistol from Quince's waistband in one smooth motion, and presses the barrel hard against his jaw.

"I shouldn't have to remind you what happens when you fuck with my things," Dax growls, his voice low and deadly. "You starting to remember now, boy?"

Quince's bravado crumbles, his eyes flicking down as he nods quickly. "Yeah."

Dax leans in closer, his grip on the pistol tightening. "Get your shit together," he says, his voice ice-cold, "And don't let me catch your eyes on my woman again, or I'll rip them out and choke you with them."

The words are calm. Almost casual. But the weight behind them makes my legs go numb.

Quince swallows hard, his face pale, and nods again.

Dax shoves the gun roughly back into Quince's waistband, his jaw clenched tight.

Quince stumbles backward, his gaze glued to the ground, and doesn't dare look up again as we step past him and through the door.

My legs feel like they might give out beneath me, but Dax's hand finds my waist the moment we're inside, steadying me.

It feels right there. Still. Good. Safe.

And that's the problem, isn't it? Dax is here for a reason. He's a killer. And yet, nothing about his touch makes me feel afraid.

We reach my room, and he steps in first, his body tense, his gaze sweeping over the small space like he's expecting someone to be waiting in the shadows.

It's not until he checks the corners, his shoulders relaxing slightly, that he turns back to me. He pulls me inside and closes the door firmly behind us.

The click of the lock echoes in the small space, and I can feel my pulse in my throat.

"Thank you, I'll be okay," I say, trying to steady my voice.

His eyes don't leave mine. Hungry, intense, devouring.

I know that look. I feel that hunger. Shit.

"You can go. I'm sure you have things to do," I add quickly, the words rushing out before I can stop them. Rambling. I'm rambling. Me, the therapist, unnerved.

I square my shoulders, trying to pull myself together. Dax would approve of that, wouldn't he?

The faint twitch at the corner of his lips tells me I'm right. He approves of something.

"I'm not leaving you alone in here," he says, his voice low and firm. "Quince is

handled. But he's a minor nuisance compared to the others."

"You can't sit on me for a month," I argue, forcing myself to hold his gaze. "The men will never open up to me with you standing at my side."

He looks amused at first, but that fades quickly. His jaw tightens, and there's something else there now, something darker. He's fighting for control. I can see it in the way his hands flex at his sides.

"I'll give you space to work, Faith," he says, his voice dropping lower, rougher. "But understand me, you are not to be out of my line of sight."

"Yes," I say quickly. Too quickly.

His gaze sharpens, locking on me.

"About what happened," I start, my voice faltering.

He wets his lips, and the simple motion makes my stomach flip. "You were frightened? Is that it?"

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I can't believe I shake my head. But I do. "No."

"Be careful with what you say," he warns, stepping just a little closer. "You want to finish what we started?"

Shit. Don't say yes.

But the word dances on the tip of my tongue as I meet his eyes. My lips part, and I wet them nervously. It's been way too long. And I've never had a man like Dax. All man.

"That's really inappropriate," I whisper.

His laugh is gasoline on the fire I'm barely controlling. Low, rough, and hot. "That's not what I asked."

I swallow hard. With Dax, it won't stop at a kiss. That much I know.

I take a step closer, and I see his muscles tense, his shoulders tight like a predator ready to pounce.

"Say it," he says, his voice commanding, daring me.

No. No. He's going to wreck me. That thought sends my pulse racing, my body heating in ways I can't stop. "Yes," I whisper.

His eyes flash with something dangerous, and he moves into my space, erasing the

distance between us.

“Yes, what?” he presses, his tone demanding, almost feral.

I hesitate, but only for a moment. Then I lift my hand and place it on his waist, my fingers curling into his shirt. The heat of his body seeps into my palm, grounding me and setting me alight all at once.

“I want you,” I breathe, the words barely audible. Then I lean in, rolling up onto my toes, and let my nose brush against the rough skin of his neck. “Dax, I want you.”

The sound he makes is low and primal, vibrating through me like a shockwave.

Before I can think, his hands are on me, lifting me like I weigh nothing.

My legs wrap around his waist instinctively, locking tight as he carries me to the bed.

Every step feels deliberate, his grip firm but controlled, and the tension in his body tells me just how close he is to losing that control.

He stops just at the edge of the bed, his dark eyes blazing as they meet mine. “Undress,” he says, his voice rough with command. “Slowly.”

My fingers tremble slightly as I reach for the hem of my shirt, peeling it off with deliberate slowness. The cool air kisses my bare skin, but it’s nothing compared to the heat of his stare.

His hands move to the hem of his shirt, and he pulls it over his head in one smooth motion.

I swallow hard. His chest, like his arms and neck, is covered in tattoos. Thick black

designs snake over his muscles, sharp and purposeful, each one drawing my eye to the unrelenting strength beneath them. His body is all solid muscle, scarred and powerful. I have the sudden, irrational urge to trace every line with my tongue.

He sees it. “Keep going,” he rasps.

My throat dries as I lift my own shirt over my head, the cool air brushing over my skin.

His gaze locks on my bra, and the heat in his eyes is enough to make my knees weak.

It’s nothing special, just white lace, but the way he looks at me makes it feel like I’m wearing the most seductive thing he’s ever seen. His jaw tightens, and the tension in his body winds tighter, his restraint a visible strain.

His expression says he’s seconds from tearing it off with his teeth. God help me, I wish he would.

My fingers tremble slightly as I reach behind me and unclasp the hooks. The straps slide from my shoulders, and the lace rolls off, falling forgotten to the floor.

For a moment, he doesn’t move, doesn’t breathe. His eyes drag over me, dark and intense, like he’s memorizing every inch of skin, every curve.

“The time to say no is passing,” he warns, his voice rough and low, vibrating through the air between us.

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“Take off your pants,” I say, my voice surprisingly steady despite the fire roaring inside me. “Slowly.”

His lips curve into the barest hint of a smile, a dangerous promise in his eyes. He bites his bottom lip, drawing my attention, and then his fingers move to the button of his jeans.

He unfastens it with deliberate slowness, his gaze never leaving mine. The sound of the zipper sliding down fills the room, achingly slow and torturous, and my breath catches as his jeans hang low on his hips.

For a moment, I forget my own task, completely frozen as I watch him.

Then, as his jeans slide down his thighs, my fingers remember their purpose. I work at the button of my pants, tugging them down as his jeans hit the floor.

He stands before me, bare and ready, the hunger in his eyes matched by the strength of his body. My breath stutters. I may not be ready for him, but there's no part of me that's willing to stop now.

I let my pants fall, pooling at my feet, and roll my panties down my legs without even looking at them. The heat in his gaze doesn't falter for a second.

He steps into my space, and my heart pounds as his scent wraps around me. He smells like leather, skin, and something darker, something dangerous in the best possible way.

“You want me?” he asks, his voice a deep growl.

This is it. My last chance to be reasonable.

“Get in the bed, Dax.”

His lips twitch into a small, satisfied smile, but he obeys, moving to the bed. He lowers himself onto the mattress, laying back on the sheet, his muscles flexing as he rests against it. Even like this, stretched out beneath me, he looks like a predator waiting for the right moment to strike.

I climb onto the bed, crawling over him, bracketing him between my thighs. The tension in his jaw is visible, his restraint fraying at the edges, and the knowledge that I am the one unraveling him sends a thrill through me.

His hands stay at his sides, his fists clenched, his control nothing short of impressive.

I take his hands, placing one at my hip and the other on my breast. His fingers twitch against my skin, and I lean into him, letting my body fit against his. “Touch me,” I whisper, my voice low and breathless.

Something snaps in him.

His hands grip me hard, rough and possessive, his control breaking as he pulls me against him. The heat of his palms on my skin sets me on fire, and I gasp as his mouth finds my neck, his stubble scraping along my jaw before his lips cover my throat.

My hands splay across his chest, tracing the tattoos and the hard lines of muscle beneath them as I move against him. He growls low in his throat, the sound vibrating through both of us, and his fingers tighten on my hips, guiding me as I find my

rhythm.

Every movement, every touch, is electric, the tension between us snapping like a live wire.

“Faith,” he murmurs, his voice raw, guttural, and when I look into his eyes, I see nothing but possession.

I am his now.

Chapter Nine

Dax

When she throws her head back and my name falls from her lips, there’s nothing left. No past. No prison. No sins. Just her.

I feel her tighten, her whole body trembling beneath me, and fuck, I need more. I grip her hips, my hands firm, holding her in place as I drive deeper, chasing the way she shudders and falls apart in my hands.

Her cry is sharp, breathless, mine.

I lean in, capturing her lips, stealing the last of her breath as she melts into me. She’s soft and warm and so fucking perfect it makes my chest ache.

But I don’t slow down. Not yet.

I roll, pressing her beneath me, pinning her to the mattress as I kiss along her throat, down to the delicate curve of her collarbone. She’s so damn fragile under my mouth. For a second, I almost lose it.

I don't make love to her. Not this time. This is something else. This is possession.

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This is me marking her, claiming her, making sure there's no doubt who she belongs to.

She gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders, and fuck, that does something to me. Her heels press into my back, her body arching, taking me deeper, rawer, wetter. I pull back just enough to watch her, watch the way her lips part, the way her lashes flutter, the way her body reacts to every single thing I do. I've never seen anything more fucking beautiful.

She feels it. I know she does. She knows this isn't just sex. It's a goddamn war, and I'm never letting her go.

I grip her chin, tilting her head so she has no choice but to meet my eyes.

"Who do you belong to," I growl, voice rough.

"You," she whispers, her breath shaky, her body trembling beneath me.

That's it.

I flip her onto her stomach in one smooth motion, my hands rough, unrelenting, dragging her back against me. She gasps, her fingers fisting in the sheets.

I grab a fistful of her hair, tilting her head back just enough so my lips graze her ear.

"Mine," I murmur.

She whimpers. That fucking sound.

I tighten my grip, guiding her, controlling her, my other hand sliding over the curve of her waist, gripping her hip.

She pushes back against me, needy, desperate, perfect.

“Mine,” I growl, slamming into her, my fingers bruising into her skin.

Her cry is wrecked, breathless, and when her whole body tightens, her back arching, I fucking lose it.

My release crashes through me hard, brutal, fucking annihilating, and I empty myself into her with a sharp groan, my body locking tight before shuddering apart.

For a long moment, I don’t move, my hands still gripping her hips, my chest heaving against her back.

Jesus Christ.

I ease her down, softer now, my lips brushing the back of her neck before I collapse beside her.

She curls against me instantly, her head resting on my chest, her fingers trailing over my skin. Her touch is soft, almost absentminded, and it hits me in a way I’m not prepared for.

I wrap an arm around her, holding her close, trying to imprint this moment in my mind.

Seconds later, hours later, fuck if I know, a knock at the door.

Too soon.

“Fuck off,” I snap, my voice rough with frustration.

Then there’s a pop.

I sit straight up, the sound cutting through the haze of satisfaction still lingering in my chest.

Gunfire.

My gut locks.

“Get dressed,” I say, already untangling from her and reaching for my jeans. Two emergencies in one day? Not a record, but far from normal.

Her movements are quick but shaky as she tugs her pants on, her fingers fumbling briefly with the buttons.

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My feet hit the floor, my focus shifting to the door.

“Dax!” The voice is strained. Panicked.

Quince.

Another pop echoes, louder this time. Then a knock, hard and rapid.

“On the way,” I bark, yanking my shirt over my head.

She’s pulling her shirt on as I fling the door open.

Quince is there, wide-eyed and breathing hard, sweat dripping down his temples.

“Talk,” I order, grabbing my boots and slipping them on as fast as my hands will move.

Behind me, I feel Faith’s eyes on us, her presence pressing at the edges of my focus like a live wire.

“Pauly,” Quince starts, his voice trembling. “He went nuts. In the yard. Bit Felix and Mutt. Turned on Henderson.”

“Bit them?” I demand, narrowing my eyes. Pauly’s unstable, sure, but what the hell?
“He was sick...”

“Didn’t just bite them, Dax,” Quince cuts me off, his voice sharper, his panic

bleeding through. He glances at Faith and hesitates, then shifts uncomfortably before adding, “He gnawed Mutt’s throat, ripped out his guts, man. Like an animal. It was...”

I’m stunned for half a second, my mind spinning. That’s not sick. That’s something else.

“Give me your knife,” I snap, holding out my hand.

Quince doesn’t argue. He pulls the blade from his belt and slaps it into my palm.

I turn to Faith, holding the knife out to her. “You know how to work one of these?”

She nods, but her face is pale, her eyes wide and unblinking.

Another pop, closer this time, the sharp crack of gunfire splitting the air.

“Give me your pistol,” I say.

Quince hesitates for the briefest moment before handing it over. His hands are shaking now, but he slings his rifle back up, readying himself.

I grip the pistol, my mind spinning through the possibilities. Leave her? Take her? Another volley of gunfire echoes down the hall, and that option’s gone. Shit.

I grab her shoulder, forcing her to meet my eyes. “Wait here,” I say, my voice low and commanding. “Don’t open this door for anyone but me. If anyone comes in, stab them. I don’t give a shit if they’re in uniform or not.”

She swallows hard, her throat bobbing, but she nods. Her hand grips the knife, her knuckles white.

“Faith,” I add, softening my tone just slightly, “I mean it. Don’t hesitate. You stab them, you gut them, whatever it takes. Do you understand me?”

Her lips press into a thin line, and she nods again, more firmly this time.

I brush past Quince, stepping into the hallway. The air feels heavier now, thick with tension, every muscle in my body coiled as I prepare for what’s coming. Whatever’s out there, whatever the hell Pauly’s gotten into, it’s not getting anywhere near her.

The yard is a hellish blend of chaos and unsettling calm. The silent breeze off the sea clashes with the grunts, snarls, and rapid bursts of gunfire echoing off the concrete walls. It doesn’t make sense, none of it. My pulse pounds as I flip the safety off my pistol, moving low and fast through the shadows, trying to gauge what the fuck is happening.

Quince hangs back near the exit, his rifle slung low and his knuckles white around the grip. He’s frozen, no use to anyone. Typical.

A shot rings out. I jerk toward the sound in time to see Victor stagger back, blood blossoming from his shoulder. He barely flinches, his head snapping toward one of the few guards I trust, Wilkes, like the bullet was nothing more than a mosquito bite.

Wilkes fires again, and the shot slams into Victor’s chest, a direct hit, center mass. A kill shot.

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Except Victor doesn't stop.

He keeps moving, his gait jerky and unnatural, like something's short-circuited in his brain.

"What the fuck did Doc give them this week?" I mutter under my breath. I've seen tweakers power through gunshots before, but this? A chest wound should drop anyone.

"Head shots!" I shout, my voice booming across the yard.

Wilkes hesitates, his expression tight with confusion, but he obeys. He takes aim, his hands steady, and fires.

Victor's head jerks back, and he crumples to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

No one moves through a head shot.

I step into the yard, my boots crunching over gravel and spilled food trays. The chaos sharpens as I take it in. Seven bodies lie scattered across the ground, most of them guards or inmates I know personally. Blood pools beneath them, dark and spreading.

All of them look chewed on. Torn apart.

Except Pauly. His head's a mess, brains scattered across the concrete from a bullet that did what it needed to.

My jaw tightens. Whatever Doc pumped into them this time, it's turned them into fucking animals.

I whistle, sharp and loud. Heads jerk toward me, and the gunfire slows as guards and inmates alike look my way.

"Talk to me!" I bark, scanning the yard.

"We got some fucking injured over here!" Wilkes shouts, his voice cracking as he gestures to a group huddled near the far wall.

"Get 'em to Doc!" I yell back. My focus shifts to the struggling figures still flailing and grappling on the ground. The fight isn't over yet.

"Enough!" I shout, the word cutting through the air like a whip.

Most of the chaos halts, but not all of it.

"Get him off me!" Clarkson screams, his voice high and panicked.

I pivot, sprinting toward the sound. Clarkson's on his back, his face twisted in terror as Rog, an inmate I've shared meals with, snarls and snaps at him like a feral dog. Blood drips from Rog's chin, his teeth red as he lunges for Clarkson's throat.

My stomach twists, but I don't hesitate. I grab Rog by the back of his shirt and yank him off, tossing him to the ground like dead weight.

He scrambles to his feet, but he doesn't come at me like a man. He's all wild eyes and jerky movements, his lips peeled back in a snarl that doesn't belong on a human face. His bloodshot eyes lock on mine, and he lunges.

I don't think. I fire.

The shot cracks through the yard, and Rog drops instantly, the hole between his eyes dark and final.

Clarkson rolls onto his side, clutching his neck. His breathing is ragged, panicked, but he's alive.

"What the fuck was in the gruel tonight?" he wheezes, spitting blood onto the concrete. "That fucker bit me!"

My grip on the pistol tightens as I glance at Rog's still body, the snarl frozen on his face.

"Get to Doc," I say sharply, my voice low but firm. I can't let this spiral in my head, not yet. "That's where I'm headed next, soon as this yard is secure."

Clarkson nods weakly and starts to crawl toward the exit.

I turn, scanning the yard one last time. The gunfire has stopped, but the damage is done. Bodies litter the ground, some still twitching, others already gone. Blood soaks the dirt and gravel, and the metallic tang of it hangs thick in the air.

My gaze lands on Quince, still frozen by the exit, his rifle loose in his hands.

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“Quince!” I shout, snapping him out of whatever daze he’s in. “Get your shit together and sweep the yard. Make sure none of these assholes are getting back up.”

He jerks a nod, his face pale, and moves toward Wilkes.

I don’t stick around to watch.

Faith.

She’s the only thought in my head as I move toward the staff wing. My boots are heavy against the concrete, my heart pounding harder than it has any right to. She has a knife. A knife against these animals. What was I thinking.

She’ll be fine, I tell myself.

Shebetterbe fine.

Chapter Ten

Faith

Gunfire rattles through the air outside, loud and unrelenting. My heart pounds with every shot.

What the hell is happening out there?

All I can think about is Dax, armed, in the middle of it, a perfect target. The guards

wouldn't hesitate to take him out. This could be a setup.

I tuck the knife into my waistband, the handle pressing hard against my hip as I move toward the door. My hand hovers over the knob, my breath catching in my throat.

I won't just sit here while those monsters execute inmates.

My fingers touch the cool metal, and something slams into the door so hard it rattles the frame.

"Dax?" I ask, my voice small and tentative.

Another slam. The wood groans under the impact.

Then I hear it, a growl, low and guttural.

I freeze, my stomach twisting.

Maybe this wasn't a setup. Could Quince have been serious? Feral inmates?

Another slam, harder this time, and the whole door shudders violently.

I step back, my pulse racing as I yank the knife free. My fingers tighten around the handle, slick with sweat.

The pounding grows more frantic, shaking the frame with each hit. The door isn't going to hold.

I scan the room, my eyes darting over the small space. No windows. No other exit. My gaze snaps upward. A vent.

I'm light enough.

But the door groans again, the hinges creaking under the strain, and I know I need to buy time.

I grab the table, throwing my weight against it as I drag it across the floor. It screeches loudly in the confined space, the sound like nails on a chalkboard, but I keep pulling. My muscles burn as I wedge it against the door, pressing it into place.

The pounding doesn't stop. If anything, it gets harder. Louder. Each blow sends a jolt through my chest, vibrating in my bones.

The vent. I need to move.

I shove the bed across the room, the legs scraping against the floor, leaving deep gouges in the cheap linoleum. The table rattles behind me as the thing outside slams into the door again and again.

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I clamber onto the bed, my movements jerky and rushed, and pull the knife free again. My hands shake as I work at the screws on the vent cover. They're tight, and my fingers slip against the slick metal. Another pound on the door.

The wood splinters.

I bite back a curse, my breath coming faster as I twist the last screw free. The vent cover drops to the bed with a dull clatter.

I grab the edges of the vent, testing it with a pull-up. My arms tremble with the effort, and my grip slips slightly. I'm Not strong enough to pull myself up completely.

"Shit," I hiss.

The door gives a loud crack, splitting down the center.

I jump off the bed, grabbing the chair and hauling it onto the mattress.

This is insane.

The chair wobbles under me as I climb up, the legs sinking unevenly into the soft mattress. My balance shifts dangerously, but I don't have time to adjust. I stretch, gripping the edges of the vent, and haul myself up with every ounce of strength I have left. My arms burn, screaming in protest as I wiggle backward into the tight space.

The vent creaks under my weight, the thin metal groaning as I inch farther inside.

Then the door splinters completely, a loud crash splitting the air.

I freeze, peering down through the opening.

The top half of a man leans into the room, his body jerking and twitching as he claws his way through the broken frame.

My stomach drops. He's snarling, blood and drool foaming from his mouth, his lips pulled back over jagged teeth. His skin is pale and waxy, his eyes wild and bloodshot.

What the hell is he on?

I swallow hard, watching in horror as he drags himself farther into the room, his hands scrabbling against the bedframe.

"Stop!" I shout, my voice breaking. My therapist training kicks in, even though every instinct screams that this isn't a man I can reason with. "You don't have to do this!"

The thing jerks its head up, its wild eyes locking on me. For a moment, it seems to hesitate, its bloody fingers curling around the mattress.

"Stop," I say again, my voice softer this time. "Just stop."

But it doesn't stop. It snarls, lunging for the bed with unnatural strength, its hands slamming against the vent opening.

I let out a cry, scrambling back as fast as I can. The tight space presses in around me, the edges of the vent cutting into my arms and legs as I shove myself farther inside.

The vent creaks again, louder this time, and I glance back, panic clawing at my chest.

He's still there, clawing at the opening, his bloodied hands reaching for me.

I crawl faster, my breath coming in short, sharp bursts. Keep moving. Don't stop. Just keep moving.

Every inch I manage to move forward, my anger burns hotter.

This has to be linked to the program. Whatever they're testing on these men, this is the result. How could anyone think this was acceptable? My jaw tightens as I crawl, the confined space amplifying the sound of my breathing.

The vent vibrates beneath me, the thing still pounding below. I can feel every impact rattling through the thin metal. Whatever he's on has turned him into a relentless killing machine.

Ahead, I spot a vent cover above me.

Small miracles.

I roll onto my back in the cramped space, my shoulders pressing into the narrow sides as I lift my legs. The position is awkward, and my chest tightens as the vent seems to close in around me.

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I kick hard at the vent cover, my boot slamming into the metal with a dull thud. It doesn't give.

"Come on," I mutter through clenched teeth, my frustration boiling over.

I kick again. The metal warps slightly, groaning under the force.

Another kick. This time, a louder whine echoes through the vent. The sound of it feels almost personal, like the vent is fighting back.

I growl under my breath, the sound feral and unrecognizable, and thrust with all my might.

The cover buckles, one side snapping free with a metallic shriek.

Of course.

I shift, planting both feet against the warped metal, and push with everything I have left. My muscles tremble with the effort, and the edge of the vent digs into my shoulder blades. Finally, it bends, leaving just enough space.

I wiggle through the opening, my arms straining as I pull myself up. The sharp edge of the metal scrapes my side, slicing through my shirt and dragging against my skin. Pain flares along my ribs, but I grit my teeth and push through.

The moment I'm free, I roll onto the flat surface of the roof, gravel biting into my palms and knees. The cool wind hits me, chilling the sweat on my skin, and for a

second, I just lie there, breathing hard.

Now what?

I sit up slowly, wincing as the gravel grinds against my scraped palms. The roof stretches out around me, plain, flat, and unforgiving. The edge is close, but there's no railing, just a sheer drop into the chaos below.

I glance toward the distant yard, my heart hammering as I strain to hear anything.

The wind whips past me, cool and relentless, but there's no more gunfire. No shouts. Just an eerie, unsettling silence.

I push to my feet, my legs trembling slightly, and scan the roof. My gaze locks on a small structure near the center, a metal door at the top of a stairwell, sticking up like a boxy little room.

I move toward it, my boots crunching softly over the gravel. The sound feels deafening in the quiet, each step an echo of my fraying nerves.

When I reach the door, I grab the handle and twist.

It's locked.

Of course it is.

I clench my jaw, pressing my forehead against the cool metal for a moment as I weigh my options. My breathing slows, the adrenaline still thrumming in my veins.

To the side, something catches my eye, a narrow catwalk connecting this roof to the next building.

It doesn't look much safer over there, but the height might give me a better view of the yard. Maybe I can see what's happening.

I step closer to the edge, peering down. The catwalk sways slightly in the wind, the metal grates weathered with rust. My stomach flips at the thought of crossing it, but I know I can't stay here.

It's not safe anywhere right now.

My gaze shifts back to the yard in the distance. The silence feels heavier now, thick and oppressive.

The catwalk creaks beneath me as I step onto it, the metal groaning in protest. It shifts slightly, swaying just enough to make my stomach lurch. I don't look down.

One step at a time.

My fingers grip the rusted metal rail tightly as I move forward, each step slow and carefully placed. The salty air bites at my skin, the wind teasing strands of hair into my face. I glance up as I near the next roof, exhaling in relief as solid ground comes into view.

Carefully, I step off the catwalk, testing the new roof with my weight. It feels steady underfoot, the gravel crunching softly as I take another step.

This should be...I pull up my hazy memories of the too-brief tour Dax gave me.

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An inmate dorm? Or something for maintenance? Either way, this isn't a stop I need to make.

Even so, I approach the access door and jiggle the handle. Locked. Of course.

From here, I can see parts of the yard better. The moonlight stretches over the chaos below, shadows darting between scattered bodies.

I squint, straining to pick out details. There are faint voices in the distance, just far enough away that I can't make out what's being said. Not that I'd recognize many voices here. Only one.

I step closer to the roof's edge, my pulse quickening. I just need to see him.

I scan the yard, hoping for some sign of him. Swaggering across the space, unhurt and in control, exactly the way I expect him to be.

Movement catches my eye.

Several figures heading toward the building.

They aren't fighting each other, so I reason quickly that they must not have taken whatever that other poor man was forced to take. My mind flashes back to Pauly. I hope he's sleeping it off somewhere. Not in solitary, unless he's still unstable.

I shake the thought away and glance toward the fire escape, or whatever these narrow, salt-rusted stairs bolted to the wall are supposed to be.

As I approach, the wind shifts, and the sharp tang of metal fills my nose. The stairs cling to the side of the building like an afterthought, their edges pitted with rust where the salty air has done its work. They creak as I step onto the first rung, a metal-on-metal groan that vibrates through my feet.

It doesn't surprise me. Nothing here has been cared for properly.

The stairs feel as unsteady as everything else in this place, but I keep moving, one cautious step at a time. My fingers skim the cold, rough railing, the rust flaking off beneath my touch.

Sinclair will pay for this.

My resolve hardens with every step I take. The suffering he's caused. The lives lost on his watch. The men he's reduced to... this. Someone has to make him answer for it.

The yard grows closer with every careful descent, and my thoughts flicker to the next steps.

Photos of records. Evidence of the program.

The only way to bring this to light is to find proof. There's no doubt in my mind they've buried it under layers of secrecy. Hidden it from the world.

And then Dax's words slip into my mind, unbidden and heavy.

"People kill to keep those kinds of secrets... It's the dirty bastards who kill innocent women you need to worry about."

I push the memory away, focusing on the task ahead.

The next step gives beneath my foot.

The rusted metal snaps like paper, a loud, sharp crack echoing in the stillness.

I slip, my stomach dropping as I instinctively grab for the sides. The jagged railing bites into my palms, slicing deep. The sting is sharp, immediate. My hands jerk away on reflex, wrong move.

My fingers slip completely.

Time slows as my body pitches backward, the building falling away from me in a blur of shadow and moonlight.

I close my eyes, sucking in a sharp breath.

You're not that high, I tell myself, trying to force the panic back. My heart slams against my ribs as the wind rushes past me. You're not that high.

The ground races toward me, the cold, hard reality of it tightening around my chest.

Chapter Eleven

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Dax

I'm halfway to the building, my mind already on Faith, when I hear Wilkes shout.

"Dax!" There's something strange in his tone. Not just urgency, he's shaken.

I turn, already bracing for whatever fresh hell this place is throwing at me, and freeze.

One of the bodies is sitting up.

One of the fucking bodies we just made sure was dead.

I stop cold. My gun is up, aimed at the thing. I don't blink. I don't breathe.

Its throat is torn to shreds, the flesh hanging loose, and its guts are smeared across the dirt like someone spilled a bucket of slop.

I didn't touch it, but I know what dead looks like. This? This isn't supposed to happen.

"Dax!" Wilkes shouts again, his voice cracking.

Another body starts to shift, then sits up too, its jerky, unnatural movements setting my teeth on edge.

I swallow hard, my brain scrambling for something that makes sense. This can't be real. It can't.

But it is.

The sitting corpse, fuck it, zombie, turns its dead, cloudy eyes toward me. Its mouth opens, a low, guttural growl scraping from its throat like it's chewing on gravel.

I don't let myself think about who it was. Don't let myself remember. I pull the trigger, and the shot cracks through the air, loud and final.

The bullet rips through its forehead, the back of its skull bursting open as it drops like a stone.

Wilkes fires a second later, taking out the other one.

"Shit," I mutter, scanning the ground. My pulse pounds in my ears, but I force myself to focus. My mind runs the numbers, fast and sharp. How many of these corpses were DOA and didn't take a headshot? How many bullets do I have left?

"You got rounds left?" I bark at Wilkes.

The corpse closest to me twitches, its fingers curling against the dirt as it struggles to push itself up.

Wilkes doesn't answer right away, too busy putting another bullet into a twitching body.

"Wilkes!" I shout again, louder.

"Yeah!" he yells, his voice shaking.

I don't wait. I race forward, taking no chances as I put bullets into the heads of the corpses still sprawled across the yard. One by one, I make sure they're down for

good.

Wilkes follows close behind, doing the same. The gunfire echoes off the walls, sharp and deafening in the night.

When it's over, we're standing amid the dead. For now, they're still. Blood and bits of brain soak the dirt, and the metallic stench of it all sticks in my nose like it's burned there.

I glare at Wilkes, my chest heaving. "How many of those things did Doc make?" My voice comes out harsh, rougher than I mean, but I don't care.

Wilkes shakes his head, his rifle still clutched tight in his hands. "I don't ask questions," he says, his tone bitter. "You know that'd get you killed, no matter what side of this little experiment you're on."

My teeth grind. I don't have time for this. My mind snaps to the only thing that matters right now.

Faith.

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“I gotta get to her,” I say, already turning toward the building. “Tell the rest of the guards, head shots only. Don’t waste a bullet on anything else. You hear me?”

Wilkes nods, but he doesn’t move right away.

“Enforce curfew,” I add, though my tone makes it clear it’s not a request. “Until we get a grip on what the hell we’re looking at, nobody moves.”

I barely wait for his nod before turning back toward the building, my feet already moving. My mind churns through worst-case scenarios, my chest tightening with every step.

Then I hear it.

A scream.

High-pitched, desperate, and unmistakably female.

It cuts through me like a goddamn blade, curling around my reason and twisting it to pieces.

I break into a run, my boots pounding against the dirt.

“Faith!” I shout, my voice raw and frantic. If one of those things, if one of those things...

“Faith!”

My heart slams against my ribs as the scream echoes again.

A group of inmates moves toward the sound, their movements sharp and quick. Too quick.

I skid to a halt, my gun snapping up, my finger hovering over the trigger. My vision narrows as I aim, but I can't pull the trigger. Not yet. I can't see where she is.

"Faith!" I shout again, louder this time. "Wilkes! Make some noise with me!"

He's at my side instantly, his voice joining mine in a desperate shout.

"Faith!"

The inmates hesitate, their heads turning toward us, but I'm already moving, my eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of her.

"Don't fire unless you can hit your target!" I snap at Wilkes, my voice sharp and controlled even as chaos swirls around us.

The zombies change direction, their movements erratic and jerky. My pulse pounds as time seems to slow. I measure the distance, calculating how close I can let them get without risking her being in the line of fire.

Her next scream orients me, sharpens my focus.

I pop off a round, the crack of the shot barely registering in my ears. One of the zombies jerks back, then another darts toward the sound of her voice.

Shit.

My attention splits as they move closer to her scream. One lunges toward her.

Wilkes fires. I fire.

Two bodies hit the ground, crumpling in awkward heaps.

Then there's another. Shit. Three.

I take aim again, steadying my hand as I fire. The last one drops, the echo of my shot cutting through the madness.

I push forward, closing the gap between us and the thrashing, wrestling bodies.

And then they go still. All of them.

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My heart fucking stops.

“Faith,” I shout, my voice raw. “Faith! Fuck.”

I shove my gun into my waistband and drop to my knees, yanking a creature off her with one rough pull and tossing it aside like garbage.

Wilkes has his gun trained on it, his eyes sharp, but it doesn’t move. A knife juts from its mouth, the hilt glinting in the low light.

“Dax,” she says, her soft voice a balm.

It almost brings tears to my eyes.

She’s here, on the ground, bloodied but alive. A zombie, dead, lies beside her, its face frozen in a snarl.

I can’t think straight. I snatch her off the ground, pulling her tight against my chest as if I could shield her from all of this. “Inside,” I bark at Wilkes, my voice like gravel.

Faith clings to me, her breath warm against my neck. “What the hell are they on?” she whispers, her voice shaking.

I grit my teeth, the relief of having her alive clashing with my fury. “Isaidstay in that fucking room, didn’t I?” My voice is harsher than I mean it to be, but I can’t stop it. The fear clawing at me comes out like anger.

Inside, I set her down, my eyes immediately scanning her for injuries. “Do you hear me? Stay in the goddamn room.”

“One of them busted the door down!” she fires back, her voice just as sharp, her eyes blazing with defiance. “What the hell was I supposed to do? Wait to die?”

If I wasn’t so angry, if the fucking zombies weren’t still out there, I’d throw her against the wall and—focus, Dax.

Then I see it. Blood.

“Shit.” My hand goes to her side, where her shirt is torn. Blood streaks her skin. “Did it, did it scratch you? Bite you?” My voice drops, hoarse and desperate. “Faith, answer me.”

Her face twists in anger, and suddenly her hands slam against my chest.

“Don’t you ever talk to me like that!” she shouts, her voice rising, raw with fury. She pounds her fists against me, the blows light but relentless. “Don’t you dare stand there and tell me how to behave when you left me! You left me!”

My chest tightens as she shoves at me again, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Do you know how hard it is to fight a goddamn maniac with a knife? Or to climb into a fucking air vent from a bed while the door is being bashed in?” Her voice breaks, but she keeps going, her words hitting like punches. “Or to fall from a rusted fire escape straight into this mess?”

She’s trembling now, tears spilling over as she pounds my chest one last time.

“And,” she bites out, her voice cracking, “What the hell are they on?”

Wilkes lets out a low chuckle from the corner, shaking his head. “She’s yours, all right,” he mutters under his breath.

I ignore him, my focus locked on her as I pull her against me. She resists for a moment, but I hold her tighter, pressing my hand to the back of her head.

“We’re going to see the doc,” I say, my voice low but firm. “To answer all those questions. But first, are you sure? Did it get its teeth in you?”

She pulls back just enough to meet my eyes, her face pale but steady.

“No bites,” she says softly. “Just scratches from the vent and stairs and falling.”

I exhale, the weight on my chest easing just slightly.

Zombies. The word sounds insane, but what the hell else do you call it? Dead people eating not-dead people. And if they bite you, you’re done.

As crazy as it sounds, I know what this means.

And I know one thing for sure. If they’d gotten their teeth in her, I wouldn’t be standing here right now. I’d have burned the world to the fucking ground.

Chapter Twelve

Faith

Dax tucks me against his side as we cautiously make our way to the med wing. His arm is solid and warm around me, his grip firm. I fit there like we were made for each other. A thought that should be ridiculous in the middle of all this, but it lingers anyway.

The hallway stretches ahead of us, dim and silent except for the faint echo of our boots against the floor.

As we move, Dax recounts what he and Wilkes saw in the yard, his voice low and gruff, each word heavy with disbelief.

Wilkes is quiet, his face pale. Processing, probably.

Me too.

“What about the one that was in my room?” I ask, my voice steady despite the unease curling in my chest. “It, he, could be spreading whatever this is.”

Dax’s jaw tightens, his eyes flicking toward me. “I need to get names and numbers from Doc. We’ve got to put a lid on this before it gets worse.”

I glance at Wilkes, who walks just a step behind us, his rifle at the ready.

“I’m going to need a minute alone with Doc,” Dax adds, his tone hardening. “To get the numbers.”

The way he says it makes his meaning clear. Dax isn’t asking for cooperation. He’ll get what he needs, one way or another.

Wilkes nods, his expression unreadable, but there’s something different in his voice when he says, “I’ll keep an eye on Faith.”

Sincerity? From Wilkes? A guard.

“You’ll do more than keep an eye on her,” Dax snaps, his voice sharp.

Wilkes gives a faint, almost grudging smile. “She’ll be safe.”

I know better than to remind Dax that I just managed to kill two of those things with nothing but a knife. This isn’t the time to argue, and I understand the dynamics here. They have a hierarchy, one that needs to be maintained.

The air changes as we approach the med wing. My nose wrinkles at the sharp, acrid scent of bleach failing to mask the stench of blood and sweat.

I stumble, my foot slipping slightly on something slick. I glance down.

Blood streaks the floor, smeared like someone was dragged across it.

Dax’s grip on me tightens, steadying me.

The sounds hit me next.

Shouts.

Raised voices echoing down the halls.

The sharp, guttural scream of someone in pain.

My heart clenches.

“You got a spare?” Dax asks Wilkes, his voice tense.

Wilkes nods, but his jaw sets stubbornly. “I can’t arm her.”

“Youbetterarm her if shit’s like it was in the yard,” Dax snaps, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Wilkes hesitates, then hands over a knife instead of a gun. He glances at me. “If.”

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I take the knife without a word, my fingers curling around the handle. It's heavier than the one Dax gave me earlier, the grip rough against my palm.

Dax grinds his teeth. "If," he mutters, clearly unimpressed.

The voices ahead grow louder as we approach. These aren't growls or the guttural snarls from earlier. This is something else.

This is pain.

Men shouting, screaming. The sound cuts through me, sharp and raw, and I tighten my grip on the knife. My fingers ache against the handle, but I don't let go.

The tension in the air is suffocating now.

"We're almost there," Dax says, his voice steady but low.

I nod, but my mind is racing.

Someone in the hallway looks up as we approach, their expression shifting to relief despite the hardened lines of their face. "Where the hell have you been?" they ask, their voice edged with exhaustion. Their eyes flick to me, dropping to Dax's hand firm at my hip, and then back up to Dax.

"Cleaning up the yard," Dax answers flatly. "I need to speak with Doc. Unless you've got something to tell me."

The man doesn't respond immediately, his jaw tightening as another wail cuts through the air. It echoes from one of the rooms ahead, sharp and raw, followed by muffled cursing.

"Come with me," the man says, jerking his head toward the chaos.

I catch a glimpse of his uniform, though most of it is blotched with blood. The letters GR are the only part of his name tag not smeared.

Dax looks down at me, his eyes narrowing with a sharpness that cuts through the noise.

"Stay with Wilkes," he says, his voice low. "Do what he says."

Before I can respond, his hand slides behind my head, tangling gently in my hair, and he pulls me into a kiss.

It's brief but full of everything he doesn't have time to say. His lips are warm and firm, his breath a mix of adrenaline and heat. I don't hesitate, I kiss him back, my hand curling against his chest. It's over too soon, leaving the taste of him on my lips and a heat that lingers in my veins.

As he pulls back, his forehead brushes mine for the briefest second, like he can't quite bring himself to let go.

Wilkes shifts awkwardly beside us, wiping a hand over his face like he's not sure how to deal with this.

When Dax finally steps away, it's like a piece of me goes with him. I watch as he disappears around the corner with the man.

The moment doesn't have time to get uncomfortable before another scream rips through the air, high-pitched and filled with agony.

It's followed by a string of cussing, loud and vicious.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" someone shouts, their voice carrying down the hall.

My grip tightens on the knife, the cool metal pressing into my palm.

Wilkes exhales sharply through his nose. "Fuck me," he mutters, his hand going to the spare gun at his side. He slides it free, holding it out to me. "You know how to use this?"

"Yes," I say simply, handing him back his knife and taking the gun. It's heavier than I expected, the cold metal biting into my palm.

"Head shot," he instructs, his voice curt. "And make sure it's one of them."

I nod, flipping the safety off with a quick motion.

He pauses, looking me over for a beat before adding, "Anyone asks, you found that gun on the floor."

"Understood," I say, my voice steady despite the tightness in my chest.

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Wilkes doesn't waste time. He steps forward, glancing into the first room, his posture tense and wary.

I shift slightly, keeping my back to the wall as I scan the hallway. The air feels thick, heavy with the coppery tang of blood and the sharper, bitter edge of antiseptic. The fluorescent lights overhead buzz faintly, the hum adding to the oppressive atmosphere.

Another muffled scream echoes, followed by a crash that makes the floor vibrate beneath my boots. My pulse quickens, but I keep my hands steady, my fingers curling tighter around the grip of the gun.

"Stay sharp," Wilkes says over his shoulder, his voice firm.

I nod, my heart thudding as I take a careful step forward.

In the second room, an inmate lies on the bed, utterly still. His clothes are drenched with sweat, dark patches spreading across his chest and armpits. Splotches of dried blood crust his neck and arms.

Wilkes signals me with a quick tilt of his head to follow him inside.

I keep my eyes on the man, every nerve in my body buzzing. Dax's words echo in my head. "The dead ones get back up."

Zombies.

Wilkes approaches the bed cautiously, his gun up, his steps slow and deliberate.

My hand tightens around the pistol grip, the cold weight grounding me as I trail a few steps behind him.

The man doesn't move.

Wilkes draws his knife, the metal glinting faintly in the dim fluorescent light, and nudges the man with the blade.

Nothing.

I hold my breath, my lungs burning as I wait.

A scream echoes down the hall, sharp and full of pain. The sound rattles through me, shaking my already frayed nerves.

Wilkes doesn't flinch. In one smooth motion, he plants the blade into the man's temple.

The sickening crunch of blade against bone fills the room, and my stomach churns.

Wilkes pulls the knife free, wiping it on the edge of the bed before slipping it back into its sheath.

"Move," he mutters, already heading for the door.

Before we can step into the hall, something rounds the corner. A zombie, foam dripping from its bloodied mouth, its shirt torn and dangling from one shoulder. A chunk of flesh is missing from its face, exposing jagged teeth and glistening muscle.

I react on instinct. I aim and pull the trigger.

The gunshot punches through the air, impossibly loud in the small room. The force of it makes my ears ring.

The zombie drops instantly, a hole through its head.

“Good,” Wilkes says sharply, stepping in front of me. His tone isn’t warm, but there’s a flicker of approval in his eyes as he leans into the hallway, his gun at the ready.

Another scream cuts through the ringing in my ears.

“Get the fuck off me!” someone shouts.

Wilkes steps into the hall. I follow close, so close my arm brushes against him with every step. My pulse pounds, and the coppery tang of blood fills my nose, sharper than before.

The hallway is chaos.

A guard wrestles with a zombie, its teeth snapping inches from his face as they grapple. Blood stains the floor in long, smeared streaks.

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Two more zombies shamble toward us from farther down the hall. One drags a destroyed leg behind it, the limb twisted at an impossible angle. The other looks like it's been through a shredder, its arm hanging by a strip of flesh, flopping grotesquely with every jerky step.

Wilkes doesn't hesitate. He fires twice in quick succession.

Both zombies drop, their heads snapping back as blood sprays against the walls.

I open my mouth to say something, but the words are lost in the muffled ringing in my ears.

Wilkes turns to me, his lips moving. I catch the faint edges of his voice. "Stay back." But I don't think he really expects me to listen.

He races forward, kicking the zombie off the guard with a brutal stomp before firing a shot into its head. The body jerks once, then goes still.

The guard groans beneath him, clutching at his arm.

Wilkes's sharp gaze lands on a bite wound, deep, messy, and still bleeding. "Shit," he mutters under his breath. His jaw tightens as he raises the gun.

The guard freezes, his eyes wide with terror. "Wait..."

The shot cracks through the air before he can finish.

The man's body slumps, lifeless.

I gasp, stumbling back a step as bile rises in my throat.

Wilkes glances at me, his expression softening ever so slightly. "You did good," he says, his voice rough. He clears his throat awkwardly, like he's not sure how to say more. "I mean it."

The words are meant to comfort me, but they don't settle right. My hands tremble slightly as I grip the pistol, my finger hovering just outside the trigger guard.

More gunfire echoes from farther down the hall.

"Anyone alive?" Wilkes shouts, his voice booming over the noise.

"In here!" a voice answers, sharp and urgent.

Wilkes starts toward the sound, his boots crunching over shards of glass scattered across the floor. I follow close behind, scanning every room we pass.

The rooms blur together, beds soaked in blood, bodies lying motionless in unnatural poses. I force myself to keep moving, but my fingers tighten around the gun as unease claws at my chest.

Any one of them could get back up.

More gunfire echoes ahead, but it feels distant, like I'm moving through a nightmare.

"Where the hell is Dax?" I whisper under my breath, the thought slipping out before I can stop it.

Wilkes glances at me but says nothing, his focus already on the next door.

The screaming down the hall grows louder, sharp and desperate.

Chapter Thirteen

Dax

I release my grip on Doc, watching him sag to the floor like the limp sack of shit he is. My knuckles sting, the tension still buzzing in my veins.

I can't believe what I'm hearing. Half the fucking inmates. He injected half.

"We're so screwed," I say, my voice low and sharp. "What the hell were you thinking?"

I don't expect an answer that'll make a difference. There's no undoing this. No way to fix what he's done.

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Doc coughs, clutching his throat as he leans against the wall. “You think it’s just me? Just Sinclair?” He shakes his head, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. “It’s bigger than us. Bigger than this shit hole. We’re not the only test site.”

My blood goes cold.

“Let’s hope we’re the only one this fucking reckless,” I grind out.

Before I can think better of it, I grab him by the head and twist.

The snap of his neck is quick, clean. His body crumples to the floor in a heap, lifeless.

I should’ve let one of those monsters take him. Let him feel what he’s done to the rest of us. But that’d be one more for us to deal with, and we’re already drowning.

I stare down at his body for a long moment, fury and disgust rolling through me.

Bioweapons. Fucking bioweapons.

A sharp crack breaks through the haze in my head. Gunfire.

Of course.

I whip around, drawing my gun and heading straight for the hallway where I left Faith. My pulse hammers as I move, my boots thudding hard against the blood-slick floor.

I know Wilkes. For all his rough edges, he's steady. Decent as any of us, uniform or not. But he can't protect her from what's coming. Not alone.

Half the inmates. The thought burns through me like a damn wildfire. Half the population on this rock is infected, either already dead and walking or just waiting to turn.

Faith's face flashes in my mind. Her sharp eyes, her soft hands gripping that knife, her scent clinging to me after I carried her through hell.

She can't be here when this place goes under.

She's mine to protect.

Another gunshot echoes, followed by shouting.

We're going to need every goddamn gun, guard, and inmate not already dead or infected to hold the line.

I don't take chances as I make my way to Faith.

I shoot anything that moves wrong, looks wrong, and doesn't talk to me.

Doesn't matter if they had my back this morning. Doesn't matter if they were the ones who split their rations with me or helped me keep the peace in the yard. They're not coming back from this.

They'll get back up, sure. But not if I put a bullet in their heads first.

The only mission now is getting Faith off this rock.

That, and killing Sinclair.

The sound of gunfire echoes down the hall, sharp and relentless. My boots skid across the blood-slicked floor as I move, every sense on high alert. My plan forms as I go: survive first, then consolidate. Weapons, survivors, and a lockdown to get some fucking control.

I kill my way to the sound of the shots, my movements quick, mechanical. Bullet to the head. Move on.

When I round the corner, my gun snaps up automatically, locking onto the figures ahead.

Wilkes.

Faith.

Her back is pressed to him, her arms raised defensively as she covers their rear. Her face is smeared with dirt and sweat, her hair a mess, but her grip on the gun is steady.

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Wilkes nods toward a door, barely sparing me a glance. “We’ve got survivors gathered in there. But we’ve gotta watch these doors, injured and dead are coming back faster than we can put them down.”

A door creaks open down the hall, and I spin, raising my gun. But it’s Faith who fires first.

Her shot is spot-on, the zombie crumpling to the ground with a wet thud.

I stare at her for half a second longer than I should, the adrenaline coursing through me making it impossible to tear my eyes away. She doesn’t hesitate. Doesn’t flinch.

I step closer, lowering my gun. “How many?”

“Nine,” Wilkes answers, his tone clipped. “They say no bites. Haven’t had time to check ‘em myself.”

“You alone?” he adds, his eyes narrowing.

“No survivors,” I say flatly, wiping blood off my hand onto my jeans.

“Doc?” Wilkes asks.

“Did this,” I reply, my voice like steel.

The look Wilkes gives me says he understands. He doesn’t argue. There’s no point. Not now.

Another groan echoes down the hallway, but it's faint, coming from farther away. For the moment, we have a sliver of calm, and I use it.

"Here's what we're doing," I start, my tone sharp and clear. "Who's on solitary tonight? Anyone on the low-security blocks?"

Wilkes glances at the door where the survivors are gathered, then back at me. "Trip's still in solitary," he says.

Of course he is. Trip practically lives in solitary. He probably pisses off the guards on purpose just to avoid dealing with the rest of us.

"Zachs is watching solitary," Wilkes continues. "No one else is on the block."

"Good."

As I speak, I step closer to Faith. My hand finds her shoulder, the need to touch her outweighing anything else. I don't even think about it. I just need to feel her alive, warm, unhurt.

Her eyes meet mine, and for a second, the chaos around us doesn't exist. The way she looks at me could melt steel. Relief pours out of her, unguarded and raw, and I know exactly how she feels.

I grip her shoulder tighter, steadying both of us.

"Take this group to solitary," I tell Wilkes, my voice snapping back into command mode. "It's the most secure spot we've got. Grab anyone else you see on the way."

"Right," Wilkes says, already moving to check the hallway.

“You seen Grip?” I ask.

Wilkes shakes his head. “Haven’t seen him.”

“Give me the block keys,” I say.

Wilkes pulls his key ring and slides the block key off, tossing it to me. “What are you doing there?”

“That’ll be our base,” I say firmly. “I’ll put her in there. Once you drop them off, have Zachs lock everyone in. Then you meet me back at the block, and we’ll go from there.”

“Go from there,” Wilkes echoes, his lips pulling into a grim line. He knows what that means. Weapons, rounding up survivors, and putting down everything, zombies and assholes, that moves.

Faith hasn’t said a word, but I feel her watching me. When I look at her again, her lips part like she wants to say something, but she holds it back.

“It’s going to be fine,” I say, my voice low but steady. It’s a lie. Nothing about this is fine. But I’ll kill everyone on this island before I let anything happen to her.

Chapter Fourteen

Faith

Fine? I don't question him out loud, but the word echoes in my head. None of this is fine, and we both know it.

"Should we be separating from the others?" I ask once we're alone, keeping my voice low as we move through the halls.

Dax's hand stays firmly on me, his touch grounding, protective. His eyes dart to every open door, every shadowed corner, scanning with the sharp efficiency of someone who's survived too much. "We don't have time to move everyone as a group," he says, his tone clipped but calm.

He's not telling me everything.

Before I can press him, movement flashes ahead. Someone, or something, steps into the hall.

Dax reacts instantly, pulling his knife with a swift, practiced motion. He races forward, stabbing it in the head with brutal precision. The sound of the blade cracking through bone sends a shiver down my spine.

He wipes the blade on his jeans as he strides back to me, barely missing a beat. I can't tell if he doesn't want to waste bullets or if he's just trying to keep the noise down. Probably both.

“Stay close,” he says, his voice low as he takes my hand and urges me forward.

It feels like an eternity before we reach the block. Dax pulls out the key, the faint jingle of metal echoing through the empty halls. He unlocks the door and guides me inside, one hand still on me as his eyes sweep the space.

It’s empty, just like Wilkes said. Dark too. The fluorescent lights overhead flicker once, then hold steady, casting the room in a harsh, sterile glow.

Even empty, the place feels suffocating.

The cells loom like shadows, their thick metal bars gleaming dully in the dim light. They’re cages, cages for humans.

I hate them.

“You can’t just leave me here,” I start, the words rushing out before I can stop them.

Dax doesn’t answer, not with words. Instead, he leans in and kisses me, hard and fast. There’s something raw in the way his lips crush against mine, something desperate in the way his hands cup my face like he’s afraid I’ll vanish if he lets go.

When he pulls back, his gaze is so exposed it takes my breath away.

“I’d lock you in one of these cells if it’s what it took to keep you safe,” he says, his voice hoarse.

“Dax,” My voice wavers, and I hate the way it sounds, but I can’t stop. “What do you expect me to do? Just sit here on my hands and imagine you out there getting chewed on?”

He exhales sharply, his forehead pressing against mine. His hands stay on my face, firm but gentle, as if holding me in place. “Sweetheart, I know this isn’t what you want. But that madman injected half the inmates with this shit. Half. We’re about to be in for a long fight to take this island back, and I can’t do what I need to do if I’m always looking over my shoulder for you.”

His words hit me hard, but I push back anyway. “I fought with Wilkes. Held my own. I’m not useless with a gun.”

He shakes his head, his thumb brushing against my cheek. “I know you’re not useless. You two held off a spattering, same as I did. But this isn’t a fair fight. Those things outnumber us, and it’s getting worse with every bite, every kill.”

The weight of his words settles over me, heavy and suffocating.

“I’m not running out there like a fuckwit with a death wish,” he continues, his voice steady but firm. “We’re going to get weapons, find more hands, and do this sensibly. From the catwalks. The towers.”

I nod reluctantly, swallowing the knot in my throat. “What can we do now, while we wait for Wilkes?”

His answer isn’t what I expect.

He backs me into the wall, his hands bracketing my face, his body pressing against mine in one fluid motion. The breath leaves my lungs as his lips brush against my ear.

“You make me reckless,” he murmurs, his voice rough and thick with restraint.

The heat of his breath on my skin sends a shiver racing down my spine. His teeth graze my earlobe, a teasing nip that sets my nerves alight.

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“Dax,” I breathe, my hands sliding up his chest. Solid muscle shifts under my palms, the heat of him burning through his shirt.

“You’ve got no idea what you do to me,” he growls, his mouth moving to the curve of my neck. His teeth scrape lightly against my skin, followed by the heat of his tongue.

My body responds before my brain can catch up, arching into him as my fingers curl into the fabric of his shirt. The adrenaline pumping through me blurs the lines between fear, need, and something far more dangerous.

I tilt my head, giving him better access as his mouth continues its slow, devastating assault on my neck.

“Dax, when this is over...” I start, my voice trembling.

He pulls back just enough to meet my eyes. His gaze burns into me, a mix of intensity and something deeper, something raw.

“When this is over, you’re mine,” he says, the words more a declaration than a promise.

My heart skips a beat, the weight of his words hitting me harder than I expect.

And the truth is, I don’t even know what “over” looks like anymore.

“I am... yours,” I say, the words spilling out, heated and desperate. My hands cling to

him, my nails digging into his shoulders. “Every time you step away from me, it could be the last.”

The truth slips out, raw and undeniable, and the heavy sigh he lets out seems to echo it.

Wilkes will be here any second to take him away. Back into danger.

“Outside, zombies are eating inmates, making more zombies.” My voice trembles, but my resolve doesn’t. My whole body is vibrating, adrenaline mixing with something darker, hotter, desperate. “Here, now, is all we have.” I swallow hard, my pulse pounding. “Now. Fast,” I beg, the words ripping out of me like I’ve lost my goddamn mind.

But if I’m insane, then so is he.

Because he doesn’t hesitate.

Dax’s hands move fast, rough, unrelenting, as he rips his zipper down. The sharp, electric sound of it echoes between us.

I don’t wait. I can’t. My fingers fumble at the waistband of my pants, yanking them down so fast my boots tangle in the fabric. I curse, stumbling, but he’s already on me.

His jeans slide down his thighs, not all the way. Just enough.

It’s all we need.

His hands grip my thighs, tight, bruising, and then I’m airborne. He lifts me like I weigh nothing, his strength effortless, the raw power of him making my breath catch.

My back slams against the wall, the cold concrete biting into my skin, grounding me in the chaos.

Then he's inside me.

Hard. Deep. No teasing. No patience. Just raw, brutal need.

A sharp gasp leaves my lips, but it's swallowed by his mouth as he devours me. His stubble scrapes my jaw, his teeth graze my throat, and fuck, he's everywhere.

My nails dig into his back, dragging, holding on for dear life.

Each thrust is a command, a claim, driven by something fierce and possessive. The heat of him, the power behind him, makes my mind go blank.

He growls my name, low and dangerous, sending a shiver straight down my spine. His hands tighten on my hips, fingers digging in so hard it'll leave bruises, evidence.

Proof I was his before the whole fucking world collapsed.

I grind against him, chasing the friction, pushing myself over the edge, fast and reckless. I shatter, my cry swallowed by his mouth as I come hard, body clenching tight around him.

The sound he makes is primal. A rough, guttural groan as he drives into me one last time and follows me over the edge.

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For a second, we don't move.

Just panting, wrecked, still tangled together in the dark.

The tension in his shoulders, the way his fingers twitch against my skin, he's still there, still hard, still ready to keep going if I wanted it.

But we can't.

We don't have time to fall apart.

The urgency slams back into us.

He lowers me to the ground, slow, hands lingering on my waist like he's reluctant to let go. I wobble on shaky legs, my hands fumbling with my pants, and he steadies me.

His grip is firm. Grounding.

Dax's eyes burn into me, wild and possessive, his chest still heaving. "You are so fucking perfect," he growls, voice wrecked, rough, hungry.

I tug my shirt back into place, heart still slamming against my ribs. "You come back to me." My voice trembles, not from fear, but from something deeper.

Something unbreakable.

His lips twitch, but his eyes are serious as sin as he zips his jeans. "Always."

The vow isn't soft. It's not whispered.

It's steel. It's unyielding. It's Dax.

The knock comes almost immediately. "Dax!" Wilkes' voice is sharp and impatient.

Dax doesn't move. He looks at me. Sees me. Gives me one last, slow once-over, like he's memorizing me, locking me in before stepping away.

Then he turns to unlock the door.

Wilkes pushes inside, closing the door behind him with a sharp shove. His chest rises and falls with quick, shallow breaths, and his face is pale under the blood streaks on his skin. "They're in every fucking shadow," he says, shaking his head like he's trying to dislodge the memory. "Found a group of about twenty huddled in the game room. Got 'em all safe with Zachs. Figure we're all of thirty-ish strong now. Ten guards."

He pauses, his lips pulling into a grim line. "Grip was with the game group."

I glance at Dax, watching as he processes the information. His jaw tightens, his shoulders tensing like they're bracing for the weight of a hundred decisions.

Wilkes glances at me briefly, and I suddenly become hyperaware of myself, the heat in my cheeks, the way my shirt clings to my skin. I should blush. I should be embarrassed. The room must smell like a damn sex shop, and Wilkes has been out dodging zombies while I've been in here fucking Dax.

I swallow hard and straighten my shoulders. There's no time for that now.

"Seen Sinclair?" Dax asks, his tone cold and sharp.

Wilkes snorts. “Didn’t go by the brass’s wing. Figure they started this shit, they can fuck right off.”

The words hit me like a punch. A guard,a guard, choosing inmates over his own leadership?

Dax doesn’t look surprised. If anything, there’s the faintest flicker of approval in his eyes. “Much as we need hands, I agree. Fuck ‘em.” His voice is low and rough, but then he pauses, glancing toward the door like he’s already planning the next move. “But we need to get to the armory.”

“Right under the vipers’ nest,” Wilkes says. He pulls out his key ring and jingles it faintly. “I got keys if you got balls. The ten guards we got have your back.”

The casual way he says it makes my stomach drop.

I grab Dax’s arm, turning him toward me. “Wait,” I say firmly. “It’s one thing to pick off mindless zombies from a catwalk, but you’re talking about taking on armed guards. Not only is that murder, but it’s also a coup. It’s suicide. And you promised me you’d be back here with me.”

Dax looks at me, his face a mask of stone, but his silence cuts deeper than any words.

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I flick my gaze to Wilkes, my mind racing. “How many are in the building over the armory?” I demand.

Wilkes shrugs, his lips twisting wryly. “Assuming they haven’t been eaten by their own monsters?”

“Yeah, assume a full staff,” I say.

“Maybe ten,” Wilkes guesses.

“Bullshit,” Dax cuts in. “Fifteen easy.”

“With the chaos, the last thing they’ll expect is us,” Wilkes says, his voice calm and steady, like this is all just another shitty day on the job.

I shake my head, holding up a hand. “If the chaos has even reached them,” I counter. “No. Zombies first. Coup if we survive. Use the bastards to help us.” I step closer to Dax, holding his gaze. “Think about it. They’re extra men on the catwalks. Extra eyes in the shadows. They can help us clear this island. Self-preservation.”

Dax’s jaw clenches, the muscle ticking as he stares down at me.

“She makes a point,” Wilkes says, his voice careful, almost tentative. “I could go in solo. Play frantic. No one heard us talking about leaving them for dead but us three.”

Dax doesn’t take his eyes off me.

I reach for his hands, pulling him closer. The heat of his skin steadies me even as my heart pounds. “Dax,” I say softly. “It makes sense. I know these men hurt you. And I promise you, I want them to pay for that. I wanted it before I even laid eyes on you. It’s why I’m here.”

His hands tighten around mine, the tension radiating off him like a storm about to break.

“You have to survive to help me punish them,” I whisper. “Please.”

For a moment, he doesn’t move. His breathing is steady but deep, his grip firm, his gaze locked on mine like he’s searching for something.

Finally, he nods, just once.

“Wilkes,” he says, his voice sharp and controlled. “Take her with you to solitary. Lock her in with the group. Then go to Sinclair’s wing and play it cool. See if you can pull any of those bastards onto the catwalks. Don’t trust a damn word they say, but if they’ll fight, let ‘em fight.”

Wilkes nods. “You?”

Dax’s eyes flick to the door. “I’ll meet you in here after I check the towers. I want to see if any of the guards up there are still breathing. Then we regroup in private, plan the next steps.”

I tighten my grip on his hands. “You come back to me,” I say, my voice trembling despite my best effort to stay calm.

His gaze softens, just barely, and his thumb brushes over my knuckles. “Always,” he says.

The vow wraps around me like armor, even as the chaos outside presses closer.

Chapter Fifteen

Faith

Dax stays with us until we near solitary, only vanishing once we're close enough that he's sure it's safe. His goodbye is quick, just a kiss pressed to the space between my eyes, and then he's gone, swallowed by the shadows.

I hate it. But I understand.

He has things to do, and I'd only be in his way.

As we near the heavy steel door leading into solitary, I hand Wilkes his gun back.

"Just for a little while," he says, slipping it into his holster. His voice is low, almost conspiratorial as we linger just outside. "If the shit hits it, Zachs knows he can arm you. Just Zachs. You don't want to lean too heavily on the other guards. They've all got Dax's back... until they think it's not safe to anymore, if you follow."

I nod, even though my chest tightens at the implication.

"And the inmates?" I whisper. "Is Grip okay? Who, out of all of them, can I trust?"

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Wilkes looks at me like I just asked if zombies can join a prayer group. “Trust?” He shakes his head, the ghost of a smile tugging at his lips. “You can’t trust a con. Or a guard. But you can count on us for certain things.”

“Okay,” I say, lowering my voice even more. “Which inmate can I lean on if the shit hits the fan?”

Wilkes scratches his stubbled chin, looking thoughtful. “Trip,” he says after a pause. “And Dax.”

I almost laugh, stopping myself just in time. “Dax? Well, that’s a given.”

“Yeah, you can trust Dax for certain things,” Wilkes says with a faint grin, guiding me closer to the thick, reinforced door. “And you can count on Zachs in here. He’s solid. For Dax and me.”

“And you? Can I trust you?” I ask.

He has the nerve to grin. Not wide or charming like Dax’s, Wilkes isn’t the type for that. His is a little sheepish, a little wry, like he already knows the answer. “I already told you. You can’t trust any of us. I just said that. But you can count on me now. We’re going to get through this.”

I study him for a long moment. Could I trust him? Did I really want to be locked in a confined space with thirty dangerous men, only two of whom he’d deemed safe-ish?

“Trip and Zachs,” I say slowly. “How will I know Trip?”

Wilkes snorts. “He’ll be the crotchety old bastard sitting on his own.” He jangles his keys and unlocks the door.

Before he can push it open, it swings outward with a faint groan of hinges.

A man fills the doorway, tall and lean, his uniform looking like it’s been through hell. His shaggy blond hair gives him the kind of laid-back surfer vibe that screams beach bum more than corrections officer. But his sharp green eyes? Those tell a different story. They flick over me, not lingering long enough to make me uncomfortable, before turning to Wilkes.

“Where’s Dax?” the man, Zachs, I assume, asks.

“Went to check the towers,” Wilkes says, slipping through the door and nodding for me to follow. “See who’s left to save.”

Zachs barks a short laugh, stepping aside to let us in. “Those chicken shits are probably pissing themselves,” he says. His voice is light, almost cheerful, but his too-wide smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

The room beyond the door is cold, the air thick with a metallic tang. The dim lighting casts long shadows along the walls, making the empty cells look more imposing than they have any right to. I rub my arms against the chill as Zachs shuts the door behind us with a metallic clang.

“I got her,” Zachs says, glancing at me again. His easy smile softens just a fraction, something steadier settling in his expression. “Keep your shit together and get your asses back here.”

There’s something about him, solid, unshaken, like a man who’s seen hell and learned how to laugh at it. The brightness in his voice doesn’t quite match the

situation, but somehow, I don't mind. I like him already.

I reach out, catching Wilkes's arm before he can leave. "Listen to the man," I say, keeping my voice low. "Pay attention out there. The living monsters are far more vicious."

"Pretty and smart," Wilkes says, winking.

He slips out the door before I can respond, leaving me with Zachs.

I draw in a breath, steadying myself as I turn to face him.

I've seen his kind before. Not usually in a prison, though. The type who never meets a stranger, who makes everything seem easy. Too easy. Normally, that would calm me, and it had a moment ago. But with Dax and Wilkes out there in the chaos, my nerves are frayed raw.

"Have you made sure none of the people in here were bitten? Or took that shot?" I ask, my voice sharper than I intend.

Zachs's steps slow. He turns to me with a crooked smile, the kind that looks deliberately disarming. "I didn't strip search 'em, if that's what you're asking," he says, his tone teasing. "But no one's limping around with chunks taken out of 'em, if that helps."

"Maybe we should," I press. "Did Wilkes tell you about them?"

His head tilts, still grinning. "You wanna strip search my prisoners and my men?" His green eyes glint, playful and unreadable. "Hell, come right on in. I'll hold 'em down for you."

His laughter is so light, so casual, it almost feels like the world isn't collapsing outside.

I stare at him, trying to decide if he's being an ass or if this is just how he keeps his cool. "I'm serious," I say.

He gives me a lopsided grin that makes him look younger than he is, like some surfer caught on the wrong side of a prison wall. "What, you think they'd tell me if they got bit? I don't see anyone gnawing on the walls."

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“That’s not...” I start, but then he cuts me off with something even more ridiculous.

“Hell, I might’ve been bitten. You wanna practice your methods on me first?”

The words hit like a slap. Not because they’re absurd, but because my response comes too fast, too sharp.

“I belong to Dax.” I’m not expecting to say it. Not like that. Not so instinctively.

Zachs doesn’t miss a beat. His laughter doesn’t falter. If anything, it deepens, warm and unhurried, like this is the funniest damn thing he’s heard all week.

“Relax, Doc. It’s tense enough through the next door without you making it worse.”

I narrow my eyes, studying him. Trying to get him. But I can’t. His easygoing demeanor isn’t something I’m used to. It feels off in a place like this, like a mask that fits a little too well. A little too smooth.

Not unlike those charming psychopaths, the Ted Bundys of the world, grinning at you right before they strike.

A chill runs down my spine.

“Don’t overthink it,” Zachs says, voice pulling me from the thought. His grin stays, flashing quick and sharp. Then he stops at a barred door, keys jingling as he unlocks it. The sound is sharp in the oppressive quiet.

The solitary wing is colder than the halls leading to it. The air smells faintly of sweat, something metallic, and the low hum of the fluorescent lights overhead makes it feel more sterile, less human.

“It’s best if you linger by me,” Zachs says, his tone light, like we’re walking into a casual meeting instead of a room full of killers.

The second we step inside, the conversations die.

Every pair of eyes in the room turns to us, expressions shifting between suspicion, curiosity, and exhaustion. The air thickens, weighted by unspoken tension.

The men, both inmates and guards, look like they’ve been through hell. Their clothes are stained, ripped, and smeared with grime, and their faces tell the same story. A few have dark stains on their shirts that I don’t want to examine too closely. None of them are gnawing on the walls, or each other, but some look like they might be tempted if the opportunity arose.

I scan the room, taking in the dynamics. There’s a clear divide. The guards have staked out their own corner, lounging on overturned crates and a couple of chairs dragged from who-knows-where. The inmates occupy the cells, though none of the doors are closed. It gives the illusion that the guards are in control, but the truth is obvious. The inmates outnumber them two to one.

Of course, the guards have the guns. That should level the odds.

The thought sits heavy in my chest. I don’t have a gun anymore. The weight of it is gone from my hands, and all I have left is my knife tucked into my waistband.

I recognize a few faces.

Grip leans against the wall of a cell, arms crossed, a smirk plastered on his face. He catches my eye and gives me a mock salute, but I don't react.

Most of the men are talking in low voices or sitting in tense silence, their postures stiff and wary. But one man sits apart from the rest, occupying a cell toward the front.

Trip.

I know it's him without needing confirmation.

He's older, maybe in his fifties or sixties, though prison ages everyone differently. Some faster than others. His build is solid, his frame broad and unyielding, like he was carved out of stone. His tattoos are faded and blurred with age, but they still mark him as someone you don't screw with. His hair is silver, cropped short, and his cool blue eyes lock on me the second I step into the room.

Unlike the others, who size me up with varying degrees of curiosity, Trip's gaze is calculating, assessing. He doesn't move, doesn't flinch, doesn't even blink. The silence around him feels deliberate, like it's not just the room that gives him space, but everyone in it.

I force myself to hold his gaze for a second longer than is comfortable before looking away.

"Don't stare," Zachs murmurs, leaning close enough for his breath to brush my ear. "Trip might bite you just for shits and giggles. He's due to get out soon, and I guarantee he's looking for an excuse to stick around." The humor in his tone doesn't quite mask the edge of warning beneath it.

I flick my gaze back to Trip for a brief moment, careful not to linger. His expression doesn't change, but there's something faintly amused in the quirk of his brow, like he

overheard Zachs and didn't entirely disagree.

"Are all the inmates here this... welcoming?" I whisper.

Zachs' grin widens. "Only the ones you haven't pissed off yet."

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“I pissed off?” I turn to him, my voice just above a whisper.

Before he can answer, the door rattles.

The sound is sharp. Metallic. Deliberate.

Zachs’ expression shifts instantly. The easygoing humor vanishes, replaced by something tight and unreadable. He moves to a monitor, the glow of the screen casting harsh shadows across his face. “Well,” he mutters. “That changes things.”

I step closer, my stomach twisting. The grainy feed shows someone unlocking the door from the outside. A guard. Not Wilkes.

My pulse spikes. “Who?”

“Lock ‘em up,” Zachs orders.

“What?” My voice comes out too sharp, too panicked. “I don’t understand.”

Zachs doesn’t answer. He just presses a finger to his lips.

The guards move fast. Too fast. Heavy cell doors slam shut in a rapid, well-rehearsed sequence.

And just like that, the divide in the room becomes absolute.

I’m on the outside. With the guards.

Is that a good thing?

The main door swings open, and a guard strolls in like it's just another routine patrol. Like the world outside isn't crumbling. Like men aren't being eaten alive in the yard.

Zachs straightens, his posture snapping into something sharp and professional. "Sir." His voice is crisp. Neutral. "Did Wilkes inform you of the situation? The inmates have lost their collective shit. We managed to detain the ones we didn't have to put down."

Damn. He lies like a car salesman. Smooth. Easy. If I weren't drowning in panic, I might be impressed.

The new guard, tall, broad, the kind of man who looks like he enjoys his job a little too much, sweeps his gaze over the room. His eyes land on me.

My stomach drops.

Some people, you just know.

He's a monster.

"Saw some on the way over," he says, voice casual, like he's commenting on the weather. "You missed a few." His lips twist, like he's disappointed in Zachs.

Zachs stays quiet. Smart.

The guard exhales, shaking his head like we're all just inconveniencing him. "Dax is MIA. Presumed armed and dangerous. Shoot on sight orders."

The room shifts under my feet.

Shoot on sight.

I feel lightheaded.

“And any inmates who don’t come willingly to lockup,” the guard continues, voice smooth, practiced, unbothered, “Are to be shot as well.”

My breath catches. They know.

They know exactly what they unleashed, and they’re going to pin it on a prison riot.

Led by Dax.

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It's calculated. Sinister. A neat, bloody cover-up.

"I'll take her with me." The guard's voice is almost lazy as he waves a hand toward me.

Every muscle in my body locks.

I flick my gaze to Zachs. This is it. This is shit hitting the fan. Where's my backup?

Zachs hesitates. It's so small, so quick, but I catch it. His mind is working. He knows exactly what's happening.

"The inmates are still on the rampage," Zachs says smoothly. "I can lock her in here. Safe and sound. Out of the way."

The guard scoffs. "I can manage a walk across the yard." He lets out a low laugh, shaking his head like Zachs is being ridiculous. His eyes flick over me again, slow, assessing. Lingering. "She'll be here all month." He smirks. "You'll get your turn."

A cold, sick dread settles deep in my gut.

No. No, no, no.

My eyes dart toward Trip.

Locked in. Expression unreadable. Unmoving.

No help.

I'm alone.

And I amsofucking screwed.

Chapter Sixteen

Faith

I walk with him, having little choice.

Zachs meets my eyes just before I go, and there's something in his expression, something that says, stay calm, I'll figure this out. But it does nothing to comfort me. Not when the doors close behind us, sealing me off from whatever chance I had at safety. Not when the only direction left to go is forward.

The guard doesn't rush. He watches me, blinks slowly. Then he reaches out, dragging a finger over my lips. The touch is light, but it turns my stomach.

"You want to keep those pretty lips shut out there," he murmurs. "I'll give you something to do with them once we get where we're going."

Shit. Shit.

I nod, keeping my face blank.

He smiles like he's pleased with my reaction, like he enjoys this game. His grip tightens around my wrist as he unlocks the door. "You try to run," he says, casual, like it doesn't matter to him one way or the other, "And I'll put a bullet in your head."

I nod again. I believe him.

The air outside is thick with salt and gunpowder and something heavier, something that clings to my skin and settles in my lungs. The brass have their own building, separate from the rest of the facility, positioned on a slight incline. Each step toward it feels heavier than the last. I don't let myself slow down.

I scan the shadows as we move. Looking for monsters. Looking for heroes. Not sure there's much distinction anymore.

Something moves ahead, jerky and unnatural. A figure stumbles into the path, dragging one leg behind it.

The thing is barely recognizable as human, its jaw slack, its head tilted too far to one side, like its neck isn't working anymore. Blood stains its uniform.

The guard at my side doesn't hesitate.

A soft pop cracks through the air, and the thing drops like a stone.

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I recognize the attachment on his pistol. A silencer.

Did they know this would happen?

We keep walking. Five more times, he raises his gun. Five more times, the bodies hit the ground.

Not a single living guard or inmate in sight.

No Dax. No Wilkes.

Just me and him.

At the entrance, he pulls a keycard. Slides it through a reader. The beep feels louder than it should, like the sound of a cell door slamming shut.

The lock disengages with a soft click.

I step inside and know, instantly, that I've left Dax's reach.

It'll be up to Zachs, Wilkes... or me.

The door seals behind us, muffling the outside world.

Gunfire still echoes somewhere outside.

But here?

Here, I hear voices. Laughter. They're laughing.

Outside, the island is overrun with the dead. Inmates and guards are being ripped apart.

And these men?

They're celebrating.

I glance at the guard beside me.

He smiles.

It's horrifying.

I smile back. My voice is smooth, steady. Fake. "Sounds like a good time."

The bastard chuckles and presses his palm against my back, steering me forward.

We walk down a short hall, the laughter growing louder, the smell of sweat, alcohol, and cigars thickening in the air.

I brace myself.

I don't have to wonder what's behind that door.

I already know.

When we reach it, he doesn't hesitate. He shoves me inside. "I brought the entertainment."

I make a fast assessment of just how fucked I am.

Head count: sixteen. Scattered across the room, most with a pistol visible at their hip. Likely more hidden.

The back wall is lined with monitors, flickering with security feeds from across the island. Some show hallways, empty cells, the blood-streaked mess hall. Others show the yard, where bodies, some moving, some not, lay sprawled across the pavement.

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At the center of it all, Sinclair watches me.

He's seated at a long table, surrounded by five men who look just as relaxed, just as amused as he does. Cigar smoke coils in the air above them, mixing with the heavy scent of whiskey, sweat, and something more rotten underneath.

The table is a mess, stacks of cash, ashtrays overflowing with half-burned cigars, whiskey glasses smeared with fingerprints. A deck of cards sits in front of Sinclair, a hand already fanned out on the table.

It's a fucking party.

It doesn't stop when I walk in.

The only reaction is from the men nearest the monitors, one of them lets out a sharp laugh, tossing a folded wad of cash to the man beside him.

"You nailed it," he says, grinning. "Finley's down. Taking bets on who's next."

"Got a thousand says it's that traitor Wilkes."

My stomach clenches, but I don't react.

They knew.

They knew Wilkes was helping Dax, and they let him walk out there anyway. Not because they didn't care, because they wanted to watch him die.

A hand on my back presses me forward.

Priorities.

I can't worry about Wilkes or Dax right now.

I need to worry about me.

Sinclair exhales a slow, satisfied breath and flicks his gaze toward my escort.

“Who's dealing?” He waves a lazy hand, gesturing to the chair beside him. “Let's up the ante. Bring her.”

I move without resisting, calculating. The guns, the exits, the way some of these men barely glance at me while others can't stop staring. The ones watching aren't the problem. It's the ones who act like I'm just another chip in the pot.

That's what I am to them. A game piece.

I step closer. Eyes on Sinclair.

When I'm within reach, his hand closes around my wrist, yanking me off balance.

He pulls me into his lap.

“Tell me, princess, you play jacks or better?” He grins, his teeth bared like a fucking predator. He doesn't wait for an answer, just lets out a low chuckle, shaking his head. “Doesn't matter. I'm taking her first. Second go is up for grabs.”

He shifts, his hands heavy on my waist, anchoring me in place. “A thousand just to sweeten the deal.”

“I’ll see your thousand,” the man across from him says. He takes a slow drag from his cigar, eyes crawling over me like he’s already deciding what he’ll do. “Two hours with her?”

“Two, sure,” Sinclair says easily. He leans back against his chair, completely at ease. “I win, that’s four hours for me.”

The room doesn’t stop. No one hesitates.

The men around the table toss in their cash like they’re betting on a fucking horse race.

The ones not playing glance over occasionally, but none of them look surprised. None of them look like this is out of the ordinary.

It isn’t.

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This is how things work here.

My pulse is steady, my breathing controlled, but my mind is running. Options. Exits. Who might turn on who.

Sinclair's fingers press against my hip, a reminder of just how outnumbered I am.

I have one shot at this.

I just need to figure out when to take it.

Sinclair glances at his cards and tosses down two. Once he's dealt the next two, he sets them down. His hand slides to my waist. Slow. Deliberate.

Then he draws my knife from its sheath and sets it on the table.

Shit.

One less option.

His hands return, and this time, he doesn't hesitate.

He grips the hem of my shirt and drags it upward, over my ribs, over my shoulders.

I don't resist.

They want that.

They'd enjoy it. They're waiting for it. Just one excuse to take this from a game to something worse.

The fabric drops to the floor, and I force myself to breathe.

Someone across the room lets out a low whistle.

"Those look even better in person."

Laughter. Low, cruel.

"Zachs looked at her like he'd pay to nail it," another guard says, amused.

"Shit, I'd pay to watch what that psycho did with a woman," the man across from Sinclair adds, tossing a card onto the table.

A voice from the monitors laughs. Unbothered. Distracted.

"He'd probably chop her up into little bits and make stew," he says, shaking his head. "Fucking nut job." Then, like it's an afterthought, he turns back to the screens. "Wilkes is still kicking. Dodson is down. Who had Dodson?"

A round of groans and cursing follows, but the man who bet on Wilkes' head is the loudest.

"Fucking Wilkes," he snarls. "I'll pay one of you to go take him out. Double if you get Dax."

The room doesn't stop.

No one flinches at the casual offer of assassination.

It's just another wager.

Another man, one of the quieter ones, turns his focus to me. Steady. Intense.

"You saw what she did with Dax in the block," he murmurs, low enough that it's meant to dig under my skin. "She'd like it if Zachs pulled out his psycho on her."

I meet his stare and don't blink.

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I know what this is. A reminder.

They were watching. All of them. Even before this.

I wasn't winning this fight. Not against sixteen armed men.

New plan.

"Any extra wagers?" Sinclair asks, collecting bets as if this is just another hand of cards. "I've got an extra five hundred worth."

They toss in their bets without hesitation.

Two of the guards fold.

Sinclair flips his hand.

Full house.

No one cares.

There's no frustration, no disappointment. Because this was never about the game.

The quiet man doesn't even glance at the cards. He's still staring at me.

I turn to Sinclair, settling into my decision.

“Does that mean I get you all night?” I ask.

His fingers tighten at my hip. “You boys keep an eye on things,” Sinclair says.

I rise, steady and slow.

This is it. One on one.

That gun at his waist is mine.

We’re halfway to the door when Zachs steps inside.

His easy, lopsided smile is the first thing I see. That same quirky smirk. That disarming charm. Like he just wandered into a poker game and not this nightmare. For half a second, something like relief stirs in my chest. Then he speaks.

“Damn,” he says, dragging out the word, “I got here as soon as I could. Did I miss the bets?”

The room doesn’t react.

No one hesitates.

The relief dies fast and ugly.

Bile rises, hot and sharp.

Wilkes and Dax trusted him. For some reason his betrayal of them pisses me off worse than his betrayal of me.

Sinclair just laughs, still guiding me toward the door with easy confidence, like we’re

on a fucking date.

“Safe to assume you won’t take an offer?” Zachs asks, cocking his head.

I blink. Trying to make sense of it.

Okay. He’s trying to buy me. That has to be it.

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He's playing along. It's a way to get me out of this. A move. A tactic.

"I've got her for the night," Sinclair says, chuckling, pleased with himself. "You're two rounds behind on who's next. Haven't won yet. You want to roll your bets over before you get back to solitary?"

Zachs rolls his eyes, as if this is all just an inconvenience to him. Like he's mildly annoyed at missing out. "That weak-ass Hogan still walking?"

Sinclair nods, steering me past him.

I force myself to move, but it takes everything not to turn and spit in Zachs' grinning face.

His eyes flick to mine, still bright, still too damn friendly. But now I see what's behind them. Nothing. They are cold. Empty.

Like this is all just a game to him.

I'm on my own.

After I put down Sinclair, Zachs will be next.

Chapter Seventeen

Faith

I follow Sinclair through the halls, forcing myself to memorize every turn. Right, then two lefts.

The layout isn't like the rest of the prison. It's cleaner, quieter. A different world from the filth and blood outside. The walls here aren't lined with peeling paint or rusted bars. Instead, the floors are polished, the lighting softer, like I've stepped into an upscale office building instead of the last place I want to be.

I try to guess the time. It has to be near morning. Would the light make it easier for Dax and the others to fight the zombies? Or would it just make them easier to see?

Sinclair stops at a door and pushes it open, shoving me inside.

I don't know what I expected. Maybe something cold and utilitarian, like the rest of the prison. Something stark and emotionless. But this?

This is luxury.

The furniture is dark leather, deep wood, expensive. A full bar lines the wall, bottles of whiskey and rum gleaming under soft lighting. There's a plush rug underfoot, thick enough that it muffles sound, a large bed against the far wall that looks like it belongs in a penthouse, not a prison.

It's too refined for such a hard man.

It makes my skin crawl.

Sinclair leaves the door open behind him, like he doesn't care who walks by. Like he wouldn't mind the audience.

His eyes sweep over me, reminding me what I already know. I'm standing in front of

him in nothing but my bra.

“This is why you came here, isn’t it?” he muses, toying with me. “You spread your legs for Dax the first chance you got.”

I bristle but keep my face composed.

He’s looking for a reaction. I won’t give him one.

His smirk deepens when I don’t respond. “Do you prefer to be treated like an animal? Is that why you work with the inmates? You like it rough?”

I force myself to breathe. To take him in like I’m considering his words when I’m really cataloging his weapons. Holster at his hip, not buckled in. Knife secured only with a snap.

I let my eyes drag over him slowly. Lecherously. I meet his gaze and let my lips part, just enough to be suggestive.

“Let me treat you like you deserve,” I murmur. I step forward.

His reaction is measured, controlled. He’s not stupid. He’s not the kind of man who makes mistakes.

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He lets me get close.

I lower to my knees, keeping my breathing steady as I work his belt.

His expression doesn't shift to lust. This isn't desire. It's something colder. Crueler.

He's going to let me take this as far as I will, knowing, thinking, he's in control.

His pants slide down. The holster is within reach. The knife, closer.

One shot.

I just need to take it.

His eyes are on me. Too sharp.

Will I make it to the gun?

I tilt my gaze up at him, moving slow, measured, the picture of submission. It gives me a better look at the other piece, a slight bulge under his uniform top. Shoulder holster. Shit.

A backup weapon. I can't risk him going for it.

I will myself to do what's needed. A touch. A distraction. My fingers skim up his thigh, featherlight, coaxing. Close your fucking eyes. Let your guard down. Make this easy for me.

He doesn't even react. No smug grin, no shift of his weight, no indication that he's relaxing into my touch.

Fine. Animal.

Rough it is.

I strike fast, wrapping my fingers around his crotch and squeezing hard.

The reaction is instant. A choked grunt rips from his throat, his whole body locking up as pure pain paralyzes him. His hands twitch toward me, but I already have my stolen second.

I snatch the gun from his waistband, flick the safety off, and fire.

The shot explodes through the room. His head jerks back, body staggering before it crumples to the floor.

The silence that follows isn't really silence.

My ears are ringing, a high-pitched whine cutting through everything. I know I should move, but for a second, I just stare at him.

I killed him.

No time to think. No time to feel.

Everyone would have heard that.

I push forward, my body moving before my brain can catch up. I kneel, my hands only slightly trembling as I strip him of his shoulder holster, yank the second gun

free. I shove it into my waistband, grab the knife next.

Take everything. Leave him with nothing.

The gun I killed him with is still in my hand. My knuckles are white from gripping it too hard. I take a deep breath and force myself to move.

Clothes. I need a shirt.

I run to the closet and yank out the first thing I touch, pulling it over my head. Like modesty matters after what I just did.

I just crushed his balls and then blew his brains out.

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A laugh bubbles up in my throat. It's sharp, ugly. Almost unhinged.

Not the blowjob he had in mind.

Shots echo in the distance.

For a second, I think they're ghosts, an aftershock of what I've just done. The crack of the gun, the way Sinclair's body jerked, the scent of blood and burned gunpowder still thick in my nose.

Then I hear another round, closer. Real. Immediate.

I've got to get out of here. Shit. The doors are locked.

I shove the gun in my waistband, drop to my knees beside Sinclair, and start stripping him down like a vulture. His pockets, his belt, anything clipped to him, I take it all.

A key. A pass card. A second knife tucked near his boot. Anything that might be useful to Dax.

When I stand, I turn—

And my heart stops.

Zachs.

He's leaning in the doorway, casual as hell, eyes flicking from Sinclair's corpse,

pants around his ankles, brains painting the ceiling, back to me.

His smile doesn't falter. If anything, it deepens. "Come on," he says, voice smooth as silk.

My hand moves toward my waist.

His brows pinch in something like disappointment. "Doc, seriously? Let's get the fuck out of here before anyone else stumbles in."

My brain stalls.

I should move. Run. Follow. Shoot. Something. But I don't know what the hell he is to me yet. I grip the gun tighter and point it at his chest. "You..."

"Came to save the day." His tone is light. Too light. He nods at Sinclair. "Sorry I was late. Wilkes and Dax are in the armory. There are still loyal guards on the island. Let's go."

I don't move.

My pulse is roaring in my ears, drowning out everything but the moment hanging between us. Trust him or kill him.

"Touch me," I say, "And I'll blow your brains out."

His lips twitch. Then, a dimple.

A fucking dimple. Who the hell is this guy?

He gestures to the hall like this is just another Tuesday. "After you."

I should kill him.

I should.

Instead, I step past him into the hall, keeping my eyes on him the whole time. “What happened to the other guards?” I ask.

“I shot them.” His tone is matter-of-fact. Like he’s listing groceries.

I don’t react fast enough before he adds, “Stabbed two. Shot the rest.”

“Oh.” Oh. I try to sound casual, unaffected. I fail. “How did you shoot a whole room of armed guards?”

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“They had it coming,” he says.

“That... doesn’t answer my question.”

We reach the stairwell. He pushes the door open like he already knows I’m going to follow.

I hesitate. Basement? Armory? The depths of hell?

I flick my eyes to him.

The guards called him a psycho.

He watches me, waiting. That smile still easy. That dimple still visible.

The kind of face that could lead you anywhere.

I glance down the stairs. Do I follow?

A sound rumbles through the stairwell, deep, familiar, grounding.

Dax.

He’s safe.

I forget Zachs entirely. I take the steps two at a time, then three, nearly stumbling in my rush to get to him.

Zachs' laughter chases me from below, but I don't care.

I shove through the door, and my brain registers gunmetal, racks, crates, the scent of oil and steel, but none of it matters.

The room is full, Wilkes, a few other guards, Trip, Grip, but I don't see them.

I see Dax.

And then I'm moving, weightless, breathless.

His hands are on me before I can reach him, gripping, lifting, pulling me in. I wrap my legs around his waist, arms around his neck, clinging to him like he's the only solid thing in the world.

Because right now, he is.

He kisses me like he needs it. Like he hasn't drawn a full breath since we were separated. His hands flex at my back, holding me tight, his lips fierce, unrelenting, real.

For a moment, there's nothing else. No guards, no zombies, no fucking apocalypse.

Just Dax.

When he finally pulls back, his forehead rests against mine, his breath hot and uneven. His grip on me doesn't loosen.

"I told you to stay in solitary, woman," he mutters, voice rough, accusing, but too damn relieved to sound angry.

My feet find the ground, but his hands linger.

“You’re not the boss of me,” I say, shoving lightly at his chest. Then, more serious, quieter, “Zachs is sketchy as hell.”

Laughter erupts around us, Wilkes, Grip, even Trip gives a knowing grunt.

Zachs strolls in behind me, dimple flashing, completely unbothered. “She shot him.”

Dax’s grip on me tightens. The look he gives me is like he wants to pin me against the nearest gun rack and lose his goddamn mind.

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“Sinclair’s dead,” I confirm, watching the sharp, satisfied tilt of Dax’s mouth.

His voice is dark, approving. “That’s my girl.”

My breath hitches, but I don’t have time to unravel over that because I need answers.

“Zombies? Survivors?” I ask, scanning the room, already bracing for whatever comes next.

Chapter Eighteen

Dax

I stare at the monitors, flicking from one screen to the next. Things have gone from bad to fucking dire in a matter of hours.

The sun is rising. And now we can see it. The island isn’t ours anymore.

It belongs to the dead.

Faith stands at my side, where she’s staying.

Every time I walk away from her, shit goes sideways. Ain’t happening again.

Trip taps a finger against one of the screens, his mouth twisting. “Small group in the chow hall, holed up in the pantry. Looks like inmates.”

“That’s five groups,” Wilkes mutters, running a hand through his hair. “Counting the ones still in solitary.”

Four groups we need to get to.

I scan the faces in the room. We don’t have enough hands. We all know it. No one says it.

I look back at the screens. Zombies lumber across every camera feed, but they aren’t mindless. They gather near people, move toward them.

They’re hunting.

“Faith, Wilkes, Trip, Zachs,” I say, weighing our odds. They are the only people in the room, hell, on the whole island I half trust. “We’re down to about thirty. Split into groups of five or six, all armed to the teeth.” Against hundreds. Maybe more. “Silencers only. We take out as many as we can, get to the survivors, and fall back to either solitary or the block.”

Zachs tosses a box of walkies onto the table. “Got about ten.”

I nod. “Us five first. The rest, I don’t give a shit who.”

The remaining guards scramble for the spares. It won’t be enough.

I weigh our options.

Group One – The big one. Nearly twenty people. No way to move them quietly. Already attracting a horde. Getting them out will be a full-scale battle. Group Two – The pinned inmates. Trapped in close quarters. Surrounded. A bloodbath just to reach them. Group Three – The guards. Stranded on top of the cabana in the yard. Armed,

but completely fucking useless. Group Four – The ones on the dock. More guards. Made a run for the warden's boat. If they get it working, they'll abandon the island. If they can't, they're sitting ducks.

I don't like any of these options.

Then Faith slips her hand into mine.

Grounding.

I should lock her in a cell. Safe. Done. No question.

But not with guards I don't trust still having keys on their belts. Not after Sinclair.

My jaw flexes as I study the screens, balancing survival against the one thing I won't lose.

I exhale. "We're taking the fucking dock."

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Wilkes frowns. “Dax, those assholes ran. You think they’ll fight with us?”

“Not once we get them out of the shit.” I think they’ll turn on us.

Wilkes catches the look in my eye and mutters, “Shit.”

Zachs grins, already liking where this is going. “Well. That’ll be fun.”

Faith squeezes my hand, her pulse quick against my palm. “They’re going to screw us over, aren’t they?”

I smirk, a sharp, humorless thing. “They’ll regret it.”

The path ahead looks like the best bet, clear enough, no major clusters of the dead in sight. But that’s not the deciding factor.

This isn’t about me. It’s about that fucking boat. And it’s about Faith.

Those cowards at the dock don’t get to ride away and leave her here to die.

We only linger in the armory long enough to make sure the other groups understand the plan. Do I expect to see them all again? Hell no.

I’ll be shocked if we end up with a dozen left standing.

The dead outnumber us. And most of the survivors are dead weight. Doc gave the shots to the most ruthless which is going to work against us now. The zombies might

just win.

I grind my teeth.

That can't fucking happen.

I'm getting Faith out of here, even if it means locking ourselves in a cell and waiting for the next ferry.

As we move toward the exit, it hits me differently this time.

I've walked into firefights, riots, ambushes. Never once hesitated. But now? I want to take her and go.

If something happens to me, who keeps her safe? I exhale sharply. Not the time for that.

"All three of you," I say, voice low. "When shit gets sticky, and it will, priorities are..." I flick my gaze to Faith.

I don't need to finish the sentence.

Wilkes nods once. Trip grunts. Zachs smirks, but doesn't argue.

"Then the boat." My jaw tightens. "Those bastards don't leave with that boat."

I push the door open. The daylight is sharp and angry.

But so the fuck am I.

Trip, Zachs, and Wilkes file out, keeping Faith sandwiched between us.

If she notices we're boxing her in, she doesn't complain.

We don't get twenty feet before the first of them spots us.

It's not a real threat, legs mangled, dragging itself toward us. Pathetic.

I let Zachs handle it. He enjoys killing.

He slips out of formation, twirling his knife between his fingers like this is just another day. The blade flashes, then buries deep in the thing's skull. A sharp jerk, and it crumples.

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Easy. Too easy.

The sound draws more.

Two. Three. More heads snap in our direction.

Wilkes sighs, checking his silencer. “Here we fucking go.”

Faith pulls her gun. Good girl.

Zachs grins. “Well, boys and girl... let’s get our hands dirty.”

Soft pops fill the air. Shots are true.

And then, just like that, the clear path turns into a nightmare.

I zero in on the closest group, gun steady, aim clean. Gravel crunches behind us. More coming from the rear.

Pops. Another grunt.

My focus splinters.

Zombies. Faith.

Faith is in control, her movements sharp, practiced. Her gun tracks her target, her hands don’t shake. She’s handling herself.

Good.

I snap my attention back to the horde.

Something feels wrong. They aren't just lurching toward us. They're... "Fucking boxing us in."

They're thinking. A cold weight settles in my chest. What the fuck were they making?

I fire. One. Another. Drop two fast.

Bioweapons. Doc fucking told me. I just didn't want to believe it.

Thinking zombies.

Trip snarls, taking down two with clean headshots. "They're cutting the angles."

We're getting surrounded.

"Move, roof side!" I snap, snatching Faith's arm.

We stay tight, backing toward the nearest escape ladder. It's the only high ground.

Zachs whirls behind us, pivoting fast, gun in one hand, blade in the other. He's not running. He's clearing the path.

I hear pops, a grunt, then the wet crunch of a skull caving in.

Fearless bastard.

“Cover us!” Zachs shouts, then moves.

Before I can stop him, he grabs Faith and pulls her away.

She goes with him.

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I fire, spraying the encroaching zombies, keeping them off her as she runs at his side.

Zachs moves fast, ruthless. No hesitation. “Up, darlin’,” I hear him say.

She goes first.

Trip and Wilkes close in beside me.

We hold the line.

Metal grinds.

I glance back. Faith is climbing. The stairs groan under her weight, looking as unreliable as the guards who built them.

Fuck, she fell from stairs to a zombie last night.

Brave. So fucking brave.

“Let her get all the way up. They won’t hold you both,” I bark.

“The fuck you think I’m doin’?” Zachs mutters, plunging his knife into a zombie’s skull.

The four of us are pinned at the base of the stairs. Zombies keep coming. We’re running out of ground.

“Wilkes next,” I decide. He’s lightest. Fastest.

“Up!” Faith shouts from above.

I flick my gaze up for a split second. She’s already kneeling, gun aimed past us.

She’s fucking breathtaking.

“Stop pissin’ around, Wilkes,” Zachs says.

Not that Wilkes needs to be told. He’s already halfway up the stairs like he’s got suction cups for hands.

“Trip, you’re next,” I say.

Trip doesn’t move. Just reloads. He gives me a slow, steady shake of his head. Not happening. Not a debate.

“Zachs, go,” I snap.

Faith’s cover from above is helping, picking off zombies before they get too close. Doesn’t mean we aren’t still drowning.

“Doc said they’re bioweapons,” I say to Trip. He’s the least likely to panic. He’ll process it for exactly what it is, a problem to be solved.

The second I say it, I see the understanding click behind his eyes.

I exhale. “They boxed us in. They’re...”

“What? Learning?” Trip grunts.

I don't answer. We may be totally fucked.

Trip nods like I just told him the weather report. "We'll be fine. Get up the ladder."

We may be fine. The ladder isn't fine. It's hanging at a brutal angle as Zachs pulls himself onto the roof.

"Son of a bitch," Zachs shouts down. "Y'all wanna hurry the fuck up."

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I glance at Trip, whatever's up there has Faith looking horrified. And Zachs' tone feels more like a warning.

"Up, son," Trip says, giving me the kind of no-bullshit look a man gives when he knows he's about to do something reckless.

I grab the railing. Start to climb.

That's when the metal wails, echoing through the yard loud enough to call every dead thing on this fucking island.

Shit.

Zachs and Wilkes lunge forward, grabbing the stairs.

I move, fast, hard, climbing like a beast.

Trip turns, eyes locked on the building behind us. The doors. The open fucking doors.

We're at an unrestricted building. Nothing keeping them out. Them or us.

He glances at me, casual as hell. "Meet you up there?"

I'm half up, half down. "Fuck this." I'm not falling to my death and leaving Faith alone with these... I snarl, and jump down.

Chapter Nineteen

Faith

“Dax!” I scream, but he’s gone from sight so fast it’s like he was never there.

“Stand up,” the guard behind us says, gun still aimed at my head.

“Easy, Sampson,” Zachs says, too damn relaxed. “She’s a shit shot and gives a hell of a blowjob.”

Sampson swings his gun toward him, finger tightening on the trigger.

There’s a loud crack.

A bullet whizzes past my ear. Not from Sampson. From below.

Another guard levels his weapon at Wilkes. “Dax was shoot-on-sight. You not get the memo?”

Wilkes shakes his head. “You miss the memo that we need every damn hand we can get?”

Another shot rings out. Closer this time.

Zachs yanks me against him like I belong there. “That why it’s just you two up here?”

Sampson sneers. “There’s more inside. We’re clearing the...”

A loud moan drags all our heads toward the open stairwell door.

A half-destroyed zombie stumbles through. Its body is shredded, blackened like it

walked through hell itself. A grenade? A fire? It drags a melted arm, exposed ribs gleaming slick in the sun.

The guard aiming at Wilkes pivots.

Wilkes doesn't give him the chance. He fires.

Blood splatters across the gravel. The man drops before he can react.

Sampson jerks toward him, but Zachs is already moving.

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He snatches Sampson by the collar and drags him straight to the ledge.

I don't have time to scream before he throws him over.

The impact is sickening. A wet, bone-snapping crunch.

Sampson tries to push up on one arm. A shadow falls over him.

Then another.

Then five.

The zombies descend.

"You still alive, Sampson?" Zachs leans over the edge, voice mocking, easy.

Sampson screams.

Then the shots come.

Not from below. From the next rooftop. A sniper.

The bullet whizzes past us, so close my hair moves.

"Fuck!" Wilkes knocks me down hard.

Zachs drops too, crawling low toward the edge.

“They shouldn’t have given you a gun,” Sampson chokes out below, voice wet, broken.

Another shot.

Wilkes presses me flat, shielding me with his body. “Stay low.”

Zachs peeks again, then yanks his head back. “He’s fucking gone.”

Sampson’s screams cut off, drowned out by the wet, brutal sounds of tearing flesh.

Wilkes pulls out his walkie and switches channels. “Hold fire,” he says.

The reply is immediate, staticky and sharp. “Fuck you, traitor.”

That voice is too close. The sniper is hearing us, tracking us.

Wilkes sighs. “You heard me try, right?” He switches back to our channel. “We’ve got hostile fire on the roof. Possible inside with you.”

Silence.

My stomach twists. Dax should have answered.

Maybe he’s just busy. Maybe he’s in a fight. Maybe he’s dead.

No. No. I shove that thought aside.

“What’s the plan?” I whisper, wiggling under Wilkes’ weight.

“Don’t get shot. Kill the asshole shooting at us.” He nods toward the door. “And

don't let the snail over there gnaw our faces off.”

The zombie, slow but determined, drags itself toward us.

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“Not a very detailed plan.”

Wilkes shrugs. “Easy to follow.”

Zachs frog-crawls toward us, too damn casual for someone being shot at. “Looks like only one over there. You give me cover fire, I’ll run across the catwalk and handle them.”

I stare at him. “That’s an even worse plan than Wilkes has.”

Another zombie lurches out from the stairwell. Faster.

Zachs tilts his head toward me. “Got a plan, doll?”

“Yes,” I say. “We crawl to the door, get to Dax and Trip, then get the hell out of here.”

“That’s a shit plan.” Zachs doesn’t even hesitate. “We need the roof. The ground’s crawling with them things.”

He’s right. The horde is spreading. We don’t have time.

“You’ll get shot if you try to cross the catwalk,” I say.

“Not if you two give me cover, I won’t,” Zachs says.

My brain races. Zachs will get picked off the second he runs. Wilkes might too. But

me?

They won't kill me. They want me alive. They'll hesitate.

I feel Wilkes shift beside me.

Two more zombies stagger through the door.

Shit. We're out of time.

Zachs raises his gun.

"I'll go," I say.

Both men freeze.

"The hell you will," Wilkes growls.

"I'm not the traitor. They won't shoot me." My mouth goes dry. "They want me alive. For..." I can't finish that sentence. I don't have to.

Zachs' entire body stiffens. His hand twitches toward his knife.

The zombies are too close.

Wilkes fires.

Shit. Shooting will make them think we're engaging, that we're trying to fight back.

My breath snaps in my chest. I don't give myself time to think. I shove Wilkes off me. Then I run.

“Help me! Please help me!” My own voice sounds foreign. High. Frightened. I make myself sound like prey.

The gamble pays off. For now.

No bullets fly at me. No sudden, sharp crack of gunfire. But I don't dare look back. I can't. If I do, I might hesitate, and hesitation will get me killed. I have to trust that Zachs and Wilkes can handle themselves. The scuffle behind me, the shuffle of boots and the wet, meaty sounds of blades meeting flesh, it's all background noise.

“Get back here, you fucking bitch!” The shout is vicious, jagged with rage.

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I almost stumble, my body jolting at the sheer venom in the tone, but I catch myself, using the slip to make my act more convincing. Wilkes? He's helping cover my reckless ass the best way he can, playing into my act.

"Please!" I cry, voice high and desperate. "Zachs is insane!"

I know the other guards think that. Hell, they've said it enough times. It's my best bet. Let them believe I'm a terrified woman, running straight into the arms of someone safer, someone like them.

I step onto the catwalk without slowing, ignoring the groan of rusted metal beneath my boots. The sniper is there, crouched just beyond the door, rifle tucked close to his chest. His position is strong, cover, high ground, but he's alone.

I slow now, inching forward. Hands raised. Open. Weak.

"Please," I beg, voice shaking. "Don't hurt me. They're savages."

"Faith!" Zachs' voice cuts through the air. "When I get my hands on you—"

I shudder, playing right into it. "Please," I whisper. "They'll do worse than kill me."

The sniper watches me. His gaze flickers with something, not sympathy, but calculation.

He buys it.

“Quick, back here with me.” He jerks his head toward the doorway, motioning me closer.

I hear muffled shots behind me. Someone’s still fighting. Good.

I hurry forward. He’s cleaner than most, well-groomed, uniform crisp. One of Sinclair’s men, no doubt. He reeks of power, of a man used to being in control.

I hate him instantly.

But I keep my mask in place, eyes wide with gratitude. “Thank God you were here.”

He grabs my arm, steadying me, and inhales deeply.

He smells me.

Fucking smells me.

The revulsion that rises is instant, white-hot, but I let it twist into something else, submission. My shoulders drop. I let him pull me further inside, let him shift me to the side as he peeks out.

That’s his mistake.

I don’t hesitate.

My knife is in my hand before he even registers the movement. The blade slices across his throat, deep, sharp.

He jerks, eyes flaring wide, hands flying to his neck as wet, bubbling gasps burst from his lips. His body convulses, thick, dark blood spilling through his fingers,

splattering across his pristine uniform. The scent of iron floods my nose, hot and sickly.

I don't let go.

I drive the blade deeper, twisting, feeling the cartilage give way, feeling his pulse shudder beneath my grip.

He tries to speak.

Nothing comes out but a choked, gurgling rattle.

His knees buckle, dragging both of us down. I wrench my knife free and shove him off me. He hits the ground hard, body twitching, blood pooling fast.

I stare down at him.

That's one less asshole.

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Dax would be proud.

Or pissed.

Either way, there's no time to think about it.

I wipe the blade on his sleeve and turn back to the fight.

Before I step out, I grab the rifle. It's heavier than I expect, its weight solid against my shoulder as I sling the strap across my chest. My fingers are sticky with blood, warm, thick, and drying too fast. I wipe them on my pants, but it only smears, the scent of iron clinging to me.

Footsteps.

Fast.

I whip around, pistol raised. "Say something or I'll shoot you."

"Faith, Jesus," Wilkes' voice, sharp but this again. Less cold, more grounded. Still edged in something raw. He skids into the doorway, breathing hard, eyes cutting straight to me.

His expression changes in an instant. "Are you hit?" He crosses the space fast, hands skimming over me, searching. His touch is brisk, clinical, over my arms, my side, my stomach, checking every place I'm smeared in blood.

I shrug back before he can go further. “It’s not mine. That’s his.” I nod toward the body, my voice flat. “I’m fine. Crazy, apparently, but I cleared the roof.”

Wilkes lets out a short, breathless laugh. “Leave the crazy to Zachs, he’s more practiced.”

Then—he hugs me.

It’s so fast, sounexpected,I freeze.

For one stupid, disorienting second, I feel the solid weight of him, the sheer relief in it, then I shove him back,hard.

“Hands off,” I snap, breath sharp. “And don’t you ever,ever, call me a bitch again and sound like you mean it.”

Wilkes blinks, taken aback, then grins. Not a smirk, not mockery, just that rare, easy grin like he’s impressed as hell.

Before he can answer, Zachs strides in, all casual swagger, eyes already on the body. He gives a low whistle. “Nice work.”

I shoot him a glare. “Did Dax answer yet? Trip?”

“Let’s just skate right past the fact that you sliced and diced ol’ fuckwit here.” He gestures to the dead sniper, shaking his head like he’s truly impressed. Then he flashes that unsettling, too-wide grin. “You’re gonna fit right in, doll.”

I don’t have time to unpack that, because Wilkes straightens, rolling his shoulders.

“Let’s go get Dax and Trip. Heard gunfire inside.”

I nod, throat tightening.

No time to celebrate.

No time to think about what I just did.

I holster my pistol, adjust the rifle strap across my chest, and follow them back out into the warzone.

Chapter Twenty

Dax

I can't see straight as Trip and I push through the open doors. My head is too full of Faith, of Zachs' weird-ass tone. He doesn't rattle. If he couldn't say outright that the roof was secure, it wasn't fucking zombies he was worried about.

Inside, the lights flicker, stuttering against the blood-slick floor. Bodies are piled up, twisted wrong, some still twitching, some not. The stink of death is thick.

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I shove the doors shut behind us, and slide the bolt into place, the soft click too damn loud in the silence. “Locking us in.”

Trip doesn’t question it. He knows. We’re sitting ducks if too many of those things swarm in behind us. Best to take the fight to the ones already inside. Neither of us wants to find out if these things can think enough to unlock doors.

We move fast, clearing the space as we go. If it doesn’t have a hole in its head, it gets one. Knife, boot, bullet, whatever it takes. No hesitation. No second chances. Trip works like I do, quiet, efficient. No wasted movement.

Gunfire snaps through the air, deeper in the building.

I freeze, blood like ice. That wasn’t outside. That was here.

Trip’s head tilts, listening.

Not Faith.

If it had been the roof, we’d already have heard Zachs running his mouth over the radio.

Another shot. Then another.

There are men here. Armed ones. No telling who’s shooting, or what the hell they’re aiming at.

“Trip.” I say it low, just enough to pull his attention.

He exhales, a short, quiet sound of acknowledgment.

We don’t separate. We’re not idiots.

Still, my gut is clawing at me. Faith is waiting. Faith is up there.

I shove it down.

“Let’s check it out.”

Trip nods once.

We turn from the stairs and move toward the gunfire.

As we move through the halls, everything is eerily still. Too still. Every step feels like we’re walking deeper into something we won’t come back from. I tighten my grip on my gun, moving on instinct, and take out anything that twitches. The last thing we need is one of these fuckers getting back up behind us while we’re busy dealing with whatever fresh hell is waiting ahead.

The gunfire grows louder, echoing through the corridors, drawing us forward. Then we see it, a bottleneck of zombies swarming a door.

Shit.

Whoever’s inside better have the damn sense to back up when they hear the shots. I lift a hand, signaling to Trip. We’re close enough. The gunfire inside isn’t stopping, but we don’t have time to wait. I draw my pistol, glancing at Trip.

His jaw clenches. He nods.

We fire. Silent. Precise. Headshots only.

The silenced rounds cut through them, but the horde doesn't turn toward us. Whatever is inside that room is holding their attention, and that works to our advantage. We move fast, taking them down one by one. The bodies pile up, forming a blockade of the dead. When the numbers dwindle, I take the chance.

"Who we got?" I shout.

One of the remaining zombies turns toward the sound of my voice. A shot rings out, and it drops.

"That you, Dax?" A familiar, gravel-rough voice carries from the other side of the door.

"Yeah," I answer, eyes still scanning for movement. "Who we got?"

Trip fires at a straggler lumbering toward us.

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“Jinx,” the voice says.

Shit. Jinx of all fucking people.

I eye the stacked bodies. Some are still twitching, others leaking out the last of whatever made them human. I don’t particularly want to dig him out.

“You alone?” I ask, even though I already know the answer.

Jinx coughs, rough and wet. “Yeah. Sampson and his goon left me.”

Trip and I exchange a look.

We don’t have time for this.

Sampson’s with Faith.

Fuck.

Sampson isn’t someone to fuck with. He’d kill her just to piss me off.

“Sampson’s with Faith,” I say, already moving. I don’t have the patience for Jinx’s usual bullshit. “Trip—”

Trip doesn’t hesitate. He yanks a body aside and tosses it.

I join him, working just as fast. Once we’ve moved enough of them, Jinx crawls his

lanky ass over the pile. He looks more strung-out than usual, eyes darting, fingers twitching.

“I was almost out of ammo,” he says. “Found this on a dead one.”

He holds up a gun.

I don't trust him. No fucking way.

I take it from him without a word and slip it in my waistband. “You're not taking that.”

His mouth opens like he wants to argue, but he doesn't.

“We're going after Sampson,” I say. “Once we clear the roof, you stay put.”

Jinx nods. He won't fight me on that, not when he knows it means he doesn't have to be out here with whatever the fuck the doc turned these things into.

Faith is up there. And Sampson is with her.

I roll my shoulders, grip tightening around my gun.

I don't give a fuck how many things I have to kill. I'm getting to her.

We move fast, retracing our steps through the halls we cleared. Nothing stirs. Anything that had twitched on our way in has long since gone still. Trip and I made sure of that.

Jinx stays too close, his breathing ragged, footsteps uneven, making more noise than a fucking motorcycle engine. He's jittery, nerves shot to hell. I don't know if it's the

situation or whatever he's been riding in his bloodstream for the last decade, but I don't care.

The moment we reach a corridor we hadn't passed through before, I tense. The air is thick with rot, the chemical stink of gunpowder, and the sharp, metallic tang of blood. It's darker here, the overhead fluorescents flickering like dying fireflies. If anything is still hungry and lurking, Jinx is practically ringing the dinner bell.

"Move fast," I say, but it's meant for Trip, not Jinx. Trip gets it. We don't have time for slow and careful, not with this fucker fumbling behind us like he's never moved in a straight line before.

Faith. Sampson. That's all that matters.

We race through the corridor. No moving bodies. Good. Probably means anything mobile already ran for the noise at Jinx's door. I stab a corpse on the floor, just to be sure. Quick. Efficient. Move on.

Trip works the same way, our knives slicing down without hesitation. We're at the stairs in no time.

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The door to the stairwell is open.

“We’ve got hostile fire on the roof. Possible inside with you,” Wilkes’ voice crackles over the walkie.

I barely get mine out before movement in the stairwell catches my attention.

Then, bang. The front doors burst open.

Three guards come barreling in, wild-eyed, covered in sweat. Two more stumble behind them, the useless cowards we sent a team to pull off the cabana. Rescuers and rescues. All for nothing. I figured as much.

“Close the door, dipshit!” I snap.

One of them slams it, but it doesn’t latch.

Trip and I are already on it, shoving our weight against the steel. The others catch on, pressing in. A second later, something hits the other side, hard. The impact rattles up my arms.

Then another hit. Another.

The snarls are inhuman. They know we’re in here now.

The door bows, groaning under the pressure. This isn’t going to hold.

“We’re going up and out,” I say, my voice sharp, leaving no room for debate. My gaze flicks over the guards, cataloging which ones are worth a damn. None of them.

Not surprising. They didn’t even follow the shoot-on-sight order on me. Useless. All of them.

Then my eyes land on Quince.

Of course, that bastard is still breathing. The universe has a sick fucking sense of humor.

But I don’t have time to deal with him. Not now.

The second we start up the stairs, I hear it, movement above us. Shifting. Rushing. The sound of bodies scrambling, a scuffle. Faith.

I push harder, taking the stairs two, three at a time, heart hammering. Then, silenced shots.

“Shit,” I growl. “Hey! Over here!”

I want the things turning for me. I’d rather fight them in this narrow stairwell than let them reach Faith on the roof.

More shots. Fewer sounds.

I move faster. My legs burn, but I don’t stop. Trip is right behind me, steady as ever. The others struggle to keep up, but they don’t matter. Not to me.

We hit the last landing. The door is cracked open, the metal vibrating like something heavy slammed against it. It took too fucking long to get here.

Bodies.

Too many bodies.

I scan them, frantic. No Faith. No Wilkes. No Zachs. No fucking Sampson.

I step over a fresh corpse, eyes locking on the guard's uniform. Still warm. Not Faith.
Not her.

Movement.

I snap my gun up, ready to fire.

Then I see her.

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Other roof. Standing. Alive.

Blood.

The whole world tilts.

She's covered in it.

I can't think. My pulse slams through me like a war drum. Is it hers? Is she hurt?

I don't remember moving, but suddenly I'm running.

Trip is still on my ass.

"Faith!" My voice is raw, half-relief, half-rage.

The catwalk sways under me as I take it in long, ground-eating strides.

She's running toward me now. "Dax!"

The second I make it to the roof, I grab her, pulling her against me like I need to feel her breathing to believe she's still standing. She's so fucking small, but she's solid. Warm. Whole.

Then I see it up close.

Blood. Too much fucking blood.

I grip her tighter, my hands moving over her arms, her waist, searching. If she's hit, if she's hiding it from me, I'll fucking lose it. "You're bleeding."

"I'm not." Her voice is steady, like she's reassuring a wounded animal. "It's not my blood."

I stare at her, at the red streaked across her skin, her clothes. I feel it, tacky and warm, smearing under my fingertips.

Not hers.

Fuck.

I tip my forehead against hers, dragging in air like I can pull her into me. "Every time I leave you." I can't even finish. I turn to Zachs and Wilkes. My pulse is still hammering. They let her get bloody. "You let her get bloody."

Faith exhales, exasperated. "It's not my blood."

Zachs grins, easy and sharp, like this is all some big fucking joke. "She's savage." But as the guards behind us finally start closing in, something shifts. He smooths a hand over his jaw and laughs. "I call seconds, when you've had your fill of her."

I go rigid.

I know what he's doing. Playing his part, keeping the guards from getting suspicious. Doesn't mean I like hearing that shit. I pull Faith closer, tight enough to remind everyone watching who the fuck she belongs to. "Fuck around and find out." My voice is low, dangerous.

Zachs smirks but doesn't push it. Wilkes doesn't say a damn thing, but there's a

flicker of something in his eyes.

I don't like this. We're outnumbered.

Trip and I stand alone with only Jinx, a tweaked-out wildcard, as backup.

Not great odds.

I turn to Quince. "We're going to pull some fuckwits off the back dock," I tell him, voice flat. "Take everyone to solitary. It's already locked down. Stay to the roofs, clear as much as you can along the way. You won't have to fight your way in when you hit the ground."

He doesn't argue.

The others? They hesitate. Tension tightens the air like a tripwire. No one speaks up, but I catch it, the flick of eyes, the way shoulders stiffen, the way fingers tighten around weapons. They don't trust this arrangement. Don't trust me.

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They're right not to.

The inmates still outnumber the guards. For now. But if we start losing men, if the scales tip back in their favor, we're fucked. They're not stupid. They know it, too.

We split up.

As soon as it's just us, my people, my circle, my problem children, Zachs gives me the full fucking rundown of what happened on the roof.

In detail.

"Threw Sampson off the edge," Zachs says, grinning like it's his favorite memory. "Figured he deserved to get chewed on slow. If he's still shambling when we come back, I'll finish the job."

I exhale, slow and sharp. "I told you to keep her safe."

Wilkes lets out a long, exhausted breath like he's been holding it in.

Faith doesn't even blink.

"She tossed Wilkes off her like he was a fuckin' housefly," Zachs continues, his smirk widening. "Didn't need us. Lured the sniper in, slit his throat, real pretty. Messy, though. That's why she's covered in blood."

I look at her. She's watching me. Calm. Challenging.

She knows.

Knows what I'm thinking. Knows exactly how close I am to bending her over my knee and teaching her what reckless gets her.

Later.

She cocks her head like she knows that too. Like she doesn't give a shit how angry I am.

And just like that, it fucking melts.

I'd never lay a hand on her. Not unless she begged me to.

We move, leaping from roof to roof, clearing our path, securing doors, taking shots when needed. Every movement is calculated. Every second counts.

Faith is at my side. Where she's staying.

No more leaving her behind.

No more fucking close calls.

Chapter Twenty-One

Faith

Gravel crunches underfoot as we move from rooftop to rooftop, each step echoing the silence that's fallen over us. No more joking from Zachs, no more sharp orders from Dax, just the distant crash of waves and the occasional muffled pop of a silencer as we clear the way. The weight of what we're walking into settles deep in my bones.

I exhale slowly and squeeze the trigger. A zombie lurching along the ground below jerks back, its skull rupturing as it drops.

Dax is close. Too close. His heat presses against me, steady and unyielding, and I can't decide if it soothes or unsettles me. The way he looked at me back there, like he wanted to shake some goddamn sense into me and kiss the hell out of me in the same breath, I felt that deep. My chest still aches from the moment I thought he might be gone, buried in that fucking building, lost in the madness.

Trip is glued to my other side, silent as ever. I don't think I've heard him speak more than a handful of words since I met him. Maybe he just doesn't waste breath on conversation when there are more important things to focus on, like clearing zombies with unnerving precision. He's not just a good shot. He's efficient. Clinical. There's something unsettling about his calm, but hell, I'll take cold calculation over reckless bravado any day.

Wilkes lingers at my back, quiet but there. I still don't know exactly where I stand with him, but he didn't hesitate to throw his body over mine like a damn bulletproof vest on the roof. Maybe it's foolish, but I feel safer with him at my six.

The air shifts. The ever-present salt in the air thickens, turning sharp and wet. The ocean. We're close.

Up ahead, the dock juts out into the churning water. From here, I can just barely make out the warden's boat, still tethered in place. A handful of figures move near the vessel, their silhouettes jerky and restless. They're not zombies. They're alive.

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Dax's arm shoots out in front of me, bringing me to a sudden stop. "Low," he orders.

Everyone drops.

Zachs, who'd been at point, flattens and crawls forward on his elbows, his usual smirk nowhere to be found.

It's not the zombies we're worried about.

It's the people.

That realization chills me to my core.

Because if the monsters aren't the biggest threat right now, then what the fuck are we about to walk into?

Zachs crawls back, his grin a little too easy for someone who just scouted a death trap. "This is gonna be a real dance," he says, dusting off his hands. "Brass tacks are heavy on the ground."

Dax shifts closer, his body heat steady against my side.

Zachs wipes a smear of dirt across his cheek. "Looks like we got three pure brass. Real skeezy. Klaus and Preston are down there."

Wilkes exhales, sharp and pissed. "Fucking Klaus. He'll kill Dax if we stroll up, even if we help him clear zombies and pack his boat." He lets out a humorless chuckle.

“Preston’s there too. He’ll kill Dax first chance he gets. Then Trip. Then probably,” He flicks his gaze to Zachs. “Hell, maybe you first, considering you dumped his coffee all over his desk.”

Zachs shrugs. “It spilled.”

Dax’s fingers flex against his knee like he’s already preparing for the worst. “How many total?”

“Three brass, plus a few lapdog guards and some real boot-licker inmates,” Zachs says, stretching his neck like he’s getting ready for a morning jog. “Should be able to pop the brass first. The rest’ll either scatter or fall in line.”

“Everyone get behind the fucking door,” Dax orders.

We all crawl, gravel biting into my palms and knees as we move. All of us, except Zachs.

My heart stutters.

I whip my head toward Dax, my stomach in knots. “What if they have a rifle and scope?” My voice is barely above a whisper, but I want to shout for Zachs to drag his crazy ass back here so we can make a plan that isn’t total shit. “They’ll shoot him.”

Dax grabs my wrist and pulls me into his lap, positioning me between his legs with my back against the door. His arms cage me in, protective, steady. “Zachs is the luckiest bastard to ever step foot on this rock.”

I want to believe him, but luck isn’t bulletproof.

Then—

A soft pop.

Another.

Another.

Another.

Faster than any bolt-action rifle should be able to fire. If I didn't know better, I'd swear he had an automatic, but no, he's just that fast.

Silence.

I can't breathe.

I don't hear gravel shifting, no sign of Zachs retreating. My pulse is hammering, panic clawing its way up my throat. I turn to Dax, begging for reassurance.

His smile melts me. Slow. Confident. Proudful.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:13 pm

“He’s a damn good shot,” Dax murmurs.

Another shot cracks through the air, not from Zachs. From the ground.

They’re firing back.

I tense, but I don’t hear Zachs move. Instead, I hear him laugh. Laugh.

And then, low and taunting, his voice carries just enough for us to hear. “Coward.”

Another shot.

More laughter, then the crunch of gravel as Zachs crawls toward us. His dimple is on full display, like he’s just come back from a fucking vacation, not from picking off men like a sniper in a damn horror movie.

I want to smack his crazy ass.

“Nailed Klaus between his beady little eyes,” Zachs announces, sounding like he just won a round of cards, not executed a man. “Coward-ass Preston used an inmate as a shield. We’re down to three. Preston, a lapdog, and some poor bastard too stupid to know who the real monsters are.”

Dax doesn’t get a chance to respond before a shout cuts through the air.

Wilkes exhales sharply. “Morons are calling to us?”

“They’re gonna attract every damn thing we didn’t kill,” I mutter. It’s obvious. Too obvious.

Dax doesn’t even blink. “Let ‘em.” His voice is cold. “They can’t fight them off if it’s just three of them.”

He’s right, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.

Wilkes tilts his head toward Zachs. “I can’t believe you missed Preston.”

Zachs snorts. “Yeah, well, Klaus was the better shot. Most likely to put a bullet in one of us.”

“Not you,” Trip says.

The words come out of nowhere. Everyone turns. Trip doesn’t talk unless it matters.

Zachs flicks his gaze to him, something unreadable behind that damn grin of his. Trip just called out what no one else had. Zachs didn’t prioritize his own survival. He took out the biggest threats to the group. Even if it meant leaving his worst enemy alive.

For a second, I think Zachs might actually acknowledge it. Might say something that’s not a joke.

Instead, he just shakes his head, slings the rifle over his back, and crawls away.

His laughter is low, rich, and completely unhinged.

When he comes back, his grin is feral. “Three. Signaling surrender from cover.”

“You buy it?” Wilkes asks.

“No fucking way,” Dax mutters. His jaw tightens. “But if they think we do, we can get closer.”

Wilkes shifts beside me.

Something in Dax’s expression changes. A flicker of something deeper. “They get that boat started, we’re fucked.”

Not just stranded. Fucked.

My gut knots. What isn’t Dax telling me?

I look at him, searching his face.

He frowns.

And I read him loud and clear.

The ferry isn't coming.

This isn't just here.

My blood runs cold.

The island isn't the only place burning.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Dax

The ladder vibrates under my grip as I descend, my mind running at a speed I can't fucking match. That boat is everything.

It was our ticket off this island before. Now? Now it's a lifeline. The moment Zachs told me other sites had been compromised, that the mainland was already fucked, everything changed.

We aren't just surviving this island anymore. We're surviving whatever's left beyond it.

Faith drops down first. Lands steady. Hands flexing around the gun like she's been

holding one her whole damn life. She's pulled together, too pulled together. Her control is a sharp edge I want to smooth down, but there's no time.

Wilkes follows, then Zachs, then Trip.

As far as I can see, nothing is moving. No silhouettes in the distance. No dragging feet. No snapping jaws.

And still, the fuckers on the boat are shouting.

"Box her," I say.

Zachs moves out first, slipping into point. Trip and I take the sides, Wilkes holds the rear. Same setup. Same plan that's kept her alive this long.

Then we round the corner.

Fuck me sideways.

The dock was clear when we started down. Now? It's a goddamn bloodbath waiting to happen.

The three left on the boat are fucked. Good.

Trip flicks a look my way, a silent Wait it out? Let the dead handle it?

Then the gunfire starts. The fuckers on the boat start picking them off.

Shit.

Trip exhales like that was expected and raises his gun. I do the same.

Zombies drop. We move in.

We're halfway to the dock when we get fucking ambushed. From the side.

The smart ones.

I'll give those lab-coat bastards credit, the bioweapon freaks they pumped full of this shit? They know how to fucking hunt.

The first one crashes into me. The weight of it slams me sideways, claws tearing at my shirt. I brace, swing my gun up, and put a bullet through its fucking eye.

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“Close,” Zachs singsongs, already cutting through two more with his knife.

Wilkes fires behind me. Trip drops another.

Faith, my fucking Faith, spins toward one lunging at her, gun raised. Shoots. Perfect. Clean. Right through the forehead.

We tighten around her. Form the wall. We are not losing her.

“Got your ass!” someone shouts.

Preston.

Son of a bitch.

The last of the zombies drop. The air still feels wrong.

Then Preston and the other two, the lapdog and the inmate, step in, their weapons pointed but not raised. Covering our backs.

A shiver crawls up my spine.

“There’s a problem with the getaway?” Wilkes asks, casual as hell.

“Yeah, some dipshit tried to hotwire it and fucked it up,” Preston says.

“Zachs, you go this?” Wilkes asks.

Zachs barely spares him a glance. “Boats?” He huffs. “Not me, boss.” His eyes flick to Faith, checking her. Then back to Wilkes.

Trip steps forward. “I’ll fix it.”

I don’t know if he can, but I like the confidence in his voice.

More importantly, so does Preston.

Trip moves toward the ignition like he knows what the hell he’s doing. Maybe he does. Maybe it doesn’t matter.

Because I see it.

Preston’s eyes. The promise there.

The second that engine roars to life, we’re fucking dead.

I scan the dock. The direction we came from. No monsters. Not the dead kind.

No, all the monsters are right fucking here. In arms’ reach of my Faith.

Zachs’ gaze is ricocheting again. That flickering madness, like he’s calculating something completely insane.

I narrow my eyes at him. Not yet.

Wilkes shifts, subtly maneuvering the lapdog away from the rest of us. Creating space.

Then Preston’s attention snaps to Faith.

My trigger finger twitches.

Preston is the only one who needs to die. The other two? They'll fold like cheap fucking chairs.

The second he realizes it, that we all know how this ends, his expression changes. He knows. He's an asshole, not an idiot.

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The lapdog moves fast. His gun swings up, barrel locking on me. “Don’t get any funny ideas, Dax.”

The inmate, his gun is on Faith.

Fucking Faith.

“Lower your weapon,” Trip says, his voice calm. Controlled. Like we aren’t a breath away from absolute war.

And then...

Everything happens at once.

Fast-forward. Slow-motion.

Gunfire.

Preston lunges.

I fire.

Faith moves.

Trip yanks at the ignition.

A scream.

Then pain.

White-hot. Burning. My shoulder yanks back.

I'm hit.

But it doesn't register, not until I feel air.

Not until the dock vanishes.

Not until the sky is in front of me instead of above me.

Not until I realize I'm falling.

Fuck.

Cold.

The ocean swallows me whole.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Faith

Preston lunges.

I see it, but not fast enough.

The inmate's gun swings toward Dax.

No.

I throw myself at him, ramming my shoulder into his ribs. We hit the deck hard, his skull cracking against the metal. His arm jerks, finger tightening on the trigger.

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A shot fires.

I turn, pulse hammering.

Dax's body whips back. The impact sends him over the railing, his arms flung wide.

I hear the splash before I can process what just happened.

No. No, no, no.

Something inside me snaps.

I shove the barrel of my gun beneath the inmate's chin and pull the trigger.

The shot is deafening. Blood and bone spray across the deck. His body twitches once before going still.

I push to my feet, my balance swaying, my mind locking onto one thing. The water.

Dax isn't there.

I lurch forward, but Zachs moves past me. He doesn't hesitate, doesn't stop, just dives over the edge in a blur of motion.

Wilkes follows.

I can't breathe.

Trip grabs me before I can throw myself after them, his arm locking around my waist.
“With me.”

I fight him, but he holds firm. I know he’s right. I have to trust them.

Gunfire erupts from the dock.

I turn.

More zombies.

More than before. Too many.

Trip’s grip tightens. “Shit. I’m low on ammo.”

I force myself to focus. Dax isn’t my fight right now.

This is.

I scan the deck. The corpses. “We need more rounds,” I say.

Trip follows my gaze. “On it.”

We move fast, yanking weapons free, checking chambers.

A few rounds in each. Not enough.

I glance back toward the dock, my stomach twisting.

Zachs breaks the surface.

He has Dax. Wilkes is there. They're dragging him toward the edge.

He's not moving.

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Zachs' voice is sharp, cutting through the chaos. "Stay with us, asshole."

I swallow down the fear clawing at my throat and turn back to the swarm.

We can't get to him if we don't survive this first.

I scan the swarm, my pulse thudding in my ears. Something flickers in my chest, something dangerous. Hope.

The zombies in the back are dropping.

"Trip," I whisper, barely daring to say it out loud. "Are those people... ours?"

It feels absurd. Ours. Like we have a real side in this hell.

But Trip understands. His gun stays steady, eyes sharp. "Yeah."

A breath I didn't realize I was holding shudders out of me. "Thank god."

I steel myself and take aim, focusing on precision. Every shot has to count. The closer we get, the clearer the fight becomes. Trip stays tight at my side, our rhythm seamless as we push forward.

Then we reach the edge of the dock.

And my legs nearly give out.

Zachs and Wilkes are dragging Dax from the water, their movements frantic but sure. As soon as they haul him up, I see the blood. It's still flowing. Too much. Way too much.

"Pressure on it!" I shout, my voice sharp, cracking with something I can't let in.

A rush of footsteps behind us, more survivors. The pounding of boots on the dock.

Shirts come flying toward Dax, hands scrambling, reaching.

Zachs is the fastest, snatching them up and pressing down hard on the wound.

Dax doesn't even flinch. His eyes stay shut.

No.

"We've got to get him to the med wing. Now," Zachs barks, his usual humor gone.

My head snaps toward the group, my eyes locking onto a familiar face. Quince.

I swallow the instant wave of distrust. Later. That's for later.

"Can we get there?" I ask.

Wilkes doesn't hesitate. "We'll get there."

Trip shifts, positioning himself under Dax. "Move."

He hoists him up like dead weight, and suddenly I'm running. Following. Eyes locked on the rise and fall of Dax's chest, the blood soaking into the makeshift bandages, the too-pale cast to his skin.

He's not talking.

Not cursing. Not barking orders.

The silence is wrong.

Gunshots crack behind us, but I don't turn. Someone's handling the stragglers.
Doesn't matter who. Nothing matters but getting to the med wing.

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The shirts pressed to Dax's wound are soaked through now, dark and dripping.

Too much blood.

Way too much.

I don't remember getting to the med wing. I don't remember running through the halls or shoving open doors.

I just remember Dax. His body, too still. His skin, too pale.

The operating room is a blur of motion, but my focus locks on Wilkes.

Wilkes is hunched over Dax, hands slick with blood, digging for the bullet with the kind of focus that says he's in too deep to second-guess himself.

Dax should be moving. He should be thrashing, fighting, screaming, anything but this.

The silence is suffocating.

Zachs moves fast, tearing through cabinets, tossing anything remotely useful onto the bed, gauze, sutures, needles, tubing. It lands on Dax's chest like he's already a corpse.

Trip pulls a chair to the bedside and sits, solid as a goddamn mountain, watching, unmoving.

Then it clicks.

They're treating him, but none of them have a fucking clue what they're doing.

Zachs fumbles with an IV line, hands steady but uncertain. His usual cocky confidence is gone, replaced with something raw.

They're guessing. Winging it.

Dax doesn't have time for this.

"Unless you know what the hell you're doing, get out," I snap, my voice cutting through the stale air. "And keep those things out of this building."

No one argues. No hesitation, no sarcasm. They listen. Because this is Dax.

The others clear out, leaving us with nothing but the sound of Wilkes working and the wet drag of Dax's breath.

Zachs curses, trying to push a needle into Trip's arm. It slips. "Fuck," he mutters.

Trip doesn't even react.

I push forward, shoving Zachs aside. "Move."

I grab Trip's arm, pressing my fingers against his skin, feeling for the strongest vein. Good flow. He'll make a good donor.

"Alcohol," I say, already reaching for the wipes.

Trip barely glances at me. "No need."

Zachs tosses an entire bucket of alcohol wipes onto the bed.

I rip one open and swipe Trip's arm anyway. "There's always a need."

I take the needle, inhale, steady my hands.

This, I can do.

I get the needle in on the first try, the sharp snap of punctured skin drowned out by my pounding heart. Trip barely flinches.

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Good. That part's ready.

"Got it," Wilkes grunts before I can connect the line or think about putting a line in Dax.

I flick my eyes up just as he pulls the misshapen, bloody bullet from Dax's shoulder. He tosses it onto a metal tray with a sickening clatter.

That's not the worst of it.

Dax isn't moving.

Zachs presses harder on the wound, gauze soaked through in seconds. "You know how to stitch this up?"

I nod, already reaching for the suture kit. "We have to slow the bleeding first."

Zachs applies more pressure, but even through the gauze, too much blood seeps out. Too fast.

Shit.

I grab another wad of gauze and press down. "Hold this."

Zachs doesn't hesitate.

Wilkes moves to Dax's head, checking his pulse, his breathing. Still too shallow.

“Faith,” Wilkes warns.

“I know,” I snap. I push Zachs’ hand away, exposing the raw, gaping wound.

Dax needs blood, but if I don’t close this, it won’t matter.

I push the needle through.

Dax doesn’t flinch.

The room tilts for a second, but I don’t let myself think about what that means.

I just keep stitching.

Because Dax isn’t dying today.

The last stitch pulls tight, and I cut the thread with shaking hands.

Done.

I take a breath. One deep inhale, another slow exhale, trying to steady myself. Dax is stitched up, but he’s far from safe. His pulse is weak, barely there. Too slow, too unsteady.

I turn my attention back to the transfusion, forcing my hands to stay steady as I search for a vein. I won’t fail him.

The needle slides in smoothly, too smoothly, as if the universe is giving me this one small mercy. I tape it down and connect the line, watching as Trip’s blood begins to flow into Dax’s arm.

It's not enough to slow the panic clawing at my chest.

He's lost so much. Too much. And I don't even know if they're a match.

Trip shifts beside me. When I look up, he's watching me, quiet and steady, like he already knows the storm in my head. "It'll be fine," he says, low and certain.

The simple confidence in his voice makes something in me loosen.

I nod, just once, and sit on the edge of the bed, gripping Dax's hand. His skin is cold, too cold. I press closer, trying to share my warmth, trying to will heat back into him.

"Wilkes?" My voice is quieter than I mean it to be.

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“Yeah,” he answers immediately.

“Is there food here?” I ask.

His brow furrows. “You hungry?”

“No. For Trip.” I don’t look away from Dax as I speak. “Dax is going to need a lot of blood. I don’t want to mix donors until I can check your records.”

Trip shifts again. “I’m good,” he says.

I shake my head. “You will be. But not if you pass out. Get him food. Juice. Something with sugar.”

Zachs lets out a quiet laugh, lighter than it should be given the situation, but laced with tension. “Sure, Doc.”

As he walks out, I let myself exhale for what feels like the first time in hours. Then, carefully, I crawl onto the bed beside Dax, curling against his side.

His chest barely moves.

But he’s breathing.

And for now, that’s enough.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Faith

Dax walks into the office, drawing my attention like a magnet. His gait is better today, his color stronger. He looks... alive.

“You can come out now,” he says.

I don’t move.

I want to stay mad.

Did it piss me off that he locked me away while they finished the final zombie sweep? Yes.

Did it really fucking annoy me that he ordered me to stay here while everyone else tossed bodies into the ocean? Absolutely.

Did it burn my ass that he left Zachs to babysit me because he didn’t think I’d listen? More than anything.

But it’s hard to glare at a man who nearly died.

I settle for crossing my arms, leaning back against the desk like I’m not still holding on to the adrenaline, the exhaustion, the everything of the last forty-eight hours.

Dax smirks. “You gonna pout?”

“You should be in bed,” I say, ignoring the way his voice slides under my skin, smooth as whiskey.

His smirk deepens. “Only if you’re feeling frisky.”

“You’re an asshole.”

He nods like it’s a fact. “And yet, I’m still in charge.”

That shouldn’t make me want to kiss him.

He crosses the room, stopping just close enough that I have to tilt my head to keep his gaze. “We’ve got an inventory and newbuilding assignments.” His voice is all business now, but his eyes are still on me. Only me.

“You’re with me, Wilkes, Zachs, and Trip in the brass wing.”

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He's back to running things. Just like the day I arrived.

But I'm not the same woman I was when I stepped onto this island. And Dax isn't just some inmate anymore.

"Not in Sinclair's room," I say.

"No, sweetheart." His voice drops, low and steady, a promise wrapped in rough edges. A vow. "Not in Sinclair's room."

The tension coiled in my chest unwinds just a little. I nod, shifting my weight. "The boat?"

"Trip's on it. It's fucked, but he'll fix it," he says.

I should feel relief. The island is secure. The dead are dead. We have food, weapons, and a plan. And yet...

The room suddenly feels too small. Too charged.

I glance up at him, at the sharp cut of his jaw, the heat in his eyes.

He's watching me.

I don't know who moves first.

Maybe it's him, closing the space between us, caging me in with his presence, his

heat, his need. Or maybe it's me, grabbing the front of his shirt, fisting the fabric, yanking him forward, needing to feel every hard inch of him against me.

His mouth crashes into mine, and everything disappears.

The exhaustion. The blood. The bodies.

There's only Dax.

His hands are rough, demanding, owning every inch of me like I was made to fit beneath them. He grips my hips, lifting me like I weigh nothing, like I'm exactly where I belong, pinned beneath him, against him, against this desk.

The edge digs into my thighs, but I don't care. I spread my legs wider, pulling him closer, harder, grinding against him.

He groans, low and guttural, pressing against me, his cockstraining against his jeans, thick and ready.

"Still think I should be in bed?" he rasps against my lips.

I nip his bottom lip, dragging my nails down his back. I want him to lose control. I need him to. "I think you should shut up."

His dark chuckle vibrates against my throat. "Make me."

I kiss him hard, messy, breathless, biting at his lips like I want to devour him. His grip tightens, fingers bruising into my hips as he rocks against me, pushing his cock right where I need him most.

The ache turns sharp. Desperate.

He snaps.

Dax tears at my shirt, yanking it over my head. My bra follows, and his mouth is on me before the lace hits the floor. He bites at my breast, tongue soothing the sting before his lips close around my nipple, sucking deep and slow.

I arch into him, gasping. “Fuck, Dax.”

“Say it.” His voice is a gravelly command, dark and raw. His hand slides down my stomach, fingers teasing the waistband of my pants, slipping beneath just enough to make me whimper. “Tell me you need this as bad as I do.”

I whimper again, back arching as he teases, just barely grazing where I’m dripping for him. “Dax,” I breathe, rolling my hips, chasing his fingers. “I need you.”

His sharp inhale is followed by a growl of approval.

He rips my pants down my legs. Not slow. Not careful.

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I'm bare for him, skin burning under the intensity of his stare.

"You're gonna be the death of me," he mutters, shaking his head.

I hook my legs around his waist, pulling him between my thighs, grinding against the thick ridge of his cock.

His control shatters.

His jeans hit the floor, and then he's on me. Over me. Inside me.

The first thrust steals my breath. The second sets me on fire.

His hands pin my wrists above my head, his body pressed deep into mine. Every thrust claims. Every snap of his hips tells me I'm his.

I don't hold back. I take it. I meet him.

My nails rake down his back.

His teeth scrape my throat.

The desk shudders beneath us, papers scattering, falling like fucking ashes.

His pace is relentless. His fingers find my clit, rub tight circles, pushing me higher, harder, until I shatter.

The orgasm blindsides me, rips me apart, drags him down with me.

He groans into my skin, hips driving deep one last time as he comes with a shudder that wrecks us both.

For a long moment, nothing moves. Nothing exists.

Only our ragged breaths, tangled limbs, and the world spinning back into place.

He pulls back just enough to look at me, his eyes dark, burning with something more than just sex.

Something dangerous. Something permanent.

I cup his face, brushing my thumb over the rough stubble at his jaw.

He leans into it. Just for a second.

Then...

A knock.

“Dax!” Wilkes’ voice is sharp. “You’re gonna wanna get the fuck out here.”

Dax’s whole body tenses. The shift is instant.

The world crashes back in.

I groan, flopping back against the desk. “Of course.”

He smirks, breath still uneven. “Didn’t take long.”

We untangle, reaching for our clothes.

Before I can button my shirt, he catches my wrist.

The intensity in his gaze stops my breath.

His voice drops, low and firm. “You’re mine.”

No hesitation. No question. Just fact.

I don’t blink. Don’t even breathe.

Then I smirk. “Damn straight.”