



Hollow

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia, Dark

Description: No body, no crime.

That's what they say on Heathens Hollow, where the line between desire and obsession blurs with each tide.

I return to my family's isolated island estate to recover, to heal. To escape the prison my life has become.

The maze calls to me with its twisting pathways and secrets buried beneath the soil.

And so do they.

Two men, tangled in a storm of their own making.

Damiano, the groundskeeper who knows every hidden path through the maze.

Flint, the bartender whose eyes hold truths about the island I'm not ready to face.

Former lovers. Current enemies. Both now inexplicably tied to me.

As The Hunt approaches, Heathens Hollow's most dangerous ritual begins.

Masked pursuers. Willing prey. Ancient traditions that care nothing for outsiders.

Some things should stay buried in Heathens Hollow.

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Chapter 1

Briar

The island has been waiting for me to die here.

Okay, that sounds super dramatic, but it's true. I feel it in the chill that cuts through my cashmere sweater, in the mist that sticks to my skin like it's never going to dry. Heathens Hollow remembers me, even after all these years.

The pale girl from the big house—the one who never quite fit in.

My father's driver doesn't speak as we wind along the narrow coastal road from the private dock. His silence seems deliberate, perfected over years of ferrying the wealthy to their island retreats. The Waters family car, a sleek black Rover reserved exclusively for island use, cuts through the fog with precision, headlights barely penetrating the dense white curtain around us.

"You can stop here," I say when the silhouette of Windward Estate emerges through the mist. My voice sounds foreign in the quiet car. Way too soft. I clear my throat. "I'll walk the rest of the way."

The driver glances at me in the rearview mirror, evaluating my thin frame, the pallor of my skin. "Ms. Waters, your father instructed?—"

"My father isn't here." I reach for the door handle. "I haven't felt solid ground beneath my feet in hours. Please."

He hesitates, then pulls over where the paved driveway meets gravel. I step out, instantly wrapping my scarf tighter as the island air hits me. So damp, so cold, practically dripping with salt and pine. My body's thermostat went haywire years ago. Another system my immune system declared war on. But here, at least I have a reason for all the layers I wear. I'm not the weird girl bundled up in Seattle's seventy-degree "heat wave." Here, everyone would be cold.

"Your luggage—" the driver begins.

"Would you mind bringing it to the house," I say. "I need a moment."

He nods once, understanding the language of the wealthy—privacy paid for with generous tips, the currency Dad taught me to throw around like confetti. The car pulls away, leaving me alone on the path I used to run down as a child, when my body still obeyed basic commands without protest.

With each crunch of gravel under my feet, the memories hit me. My mother's laugh bouncing across the garden. Her perfume, always citrusy, mixing with the sea air. The way she'd grab my hands and twirl me around the great room during storms, old jazz records skipping on that vintage player she refused to replace. And then... nothing, her gone-ness filling the house more than she ever did. Empty rooms. Dad disappearing into work calls and late nights at the office. And fourteen-year-old me, learning that grief is something you do alone.

Now, at twenty-seven, I'm back for the first time since I was nineteen. Before the diagnosis. Before the endless parade of treatments. Before I became a full-time patient instead of a person.

Windward Estate emerges fully as I crest the hill, a sprawling Victorian mansion that belongs on a horror movie poster—all dark wood and sharp angles weathered by years of storms. The house stands three stories tall with a widow's walk atop the

central tower, where my grandmother used to scan the horizon with her brass telescope. Windows stare out at the churning Salish Sea as if searching for answers, demanding to know why I've been AWOL so long.

The house remains immaculate, of course. Dad would settle for nothing less, even for a property he visits perhaps once every few years. Status symbols require upkeep, especially ones with historical significance like the Waters family summer home.

I pause at the front steps, my lungs tight from the walk and the damp air. The pain is familiar, my constant buddy these days, but I breathe through it, counting slowly the way my last physical therapist taught me.

One, two, three in.

One, two, three out.

My camera bag weighs heavy against my hip, the only luggage I've insisted on carrying myself. Inside, three camera bodies and five lenses nestle in padded compartments, the tools of the career I haven't quite abandoned, despite my father's insistence that my "hobby" is too strenuous.

Mrs. Fletcher, the housekeeper who's maintained Windward for decades, opens the massive oak door before I can reach for the handle. Her lined face breaks into a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. Pity camps there instead.

"Miss Briar!" She moves aside. "Good to have you back. It's been too long."

Home.

The word feels wrong, yet I have nowhere else to claim. My Seattle apartment sits sterile and empty, more hospital room than living space after years of accommodating

my illness. This place, at least, holds memories from before.

“The house looks the same,” I say, stepping into the foyer. The familiar scent hits me, lemon polish, old wood, and that weird Windward smell I’ve never found anywhere else.

“Just how your father likes it. Your room’s all set, and I’ve stocked the kitchen with everything on that list Dr. Winters sent.”

Of course Dad had my doctor send dietary restrictions. Peak Maxwell Waters behavior. CEO of Waters Biotechnology, approaching his daughter’s illness like some business problem he can fix with proper management. He probably has a color-coded spreadsheet tracking my “projected recovery timeline” on the island. Checks it every morning with his coffee like a stock portfolio.

“Thank you.” I move toward the grand staircase, trailing my fingers along the polished banister. “I’d like to rest before dinner.”

“Of course.” Her eyes linger on my face, cataloging the new hollows in my cheeks, the shadows under my eyes that even my expensive concealer can’t hide. “The garden’s looking nice, too. I remember how much you loved it.”

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The maze. My grandmother's pride, my mother's joy, my childhood playground.
"Who tends it now?"

"Damiano Ricci. Remember him? His mom used to cook for the summer parties. Italian family. He's been taking care of the grounds solely for about five years now. Mostly keeps to himself. Lives out of the old greenhouse. Fixed it up to stay warm." She pauses. "Bit of an odd duck... unusual... but he sure knows his plants."

I nod, filing away the information. "I'll look forward to seeing it tomorrow."

"He's usually in the greenhouse around now. Makes all kinds of potions with his herbs." Her tone suggests disapproval mixed with reluctant respect. "Some folks around here swear by his remedies."

My interest perks up despite feeling like I've been hit by a truck. After years as a human guinea pig—endless clinical trials and experimental treatments, each one supposedly "the miracle" that would fix my broken immune system—I've developed a thing for alternative stuff. Not because I'm hopeful—gave that up ages ago—but hey, at this point, why not? Maybe it's the scientist in me. Or maybe Western medicine has just put me through enough hell.

"Huh," I smile faintly. "Maybe I should pay him a visit."

"Rest first," Mrs. Fletcher says firmly. "Plenty of time for that. You're here all season. No need to push yourself."

The whole season. Three months of island time. Dad's recovery prescription: clean

air, family property, distance from “stressful Seattle.” More like, keeping me away from his upcoming wedding to Melissa, his executive assistant. She’s three years younger than me with perfect health and—shocker—never disagrees with anything he says. Pretty convenient how I got shipped off right before all the wedding festivities. Can’t have the sick daughter killing the vibe, right?

Upstairs, my childhood bedroom awaits, transformed from the teenager’s retreat I left behind to a sophisticated guest suite. The walls, once covered in band posters and photographic prints, now wear a tasteful sage green. The twin bed has been replaced with a queen, draped in crisp white linens and a pale blue cashmere throw.

My luggage has already been delivered and unpacked because god forbid I do it myself and waste precious energy. My clothes hang in the cedar-scented closet, organized with military precision: casual wear, sleepwear, and those ridiculous formal outfits Dad insisted I bring “for dinner parties.” Right. Like I’m planning to host fancy gatherings during my island exile. Like anyone would show up if I did.

I open the French doors to the small private balcony overlooking the rear gardens. The maze spreads below, a geometric puzzle of precisely trimmed hedges, the pattern more complex than I remember. At the center, barely visible from this angle, stands a stone gazebo where my mother used to read while I explored the green pathways. Beyond the cultivated grounds, the wild forest begins, dense and dark even in daylight.

Something catches my eye among the hedges. A figure in black, moving through the maze like he owns every inch of it. Even from up here, I can tell there’s something different about him.

The way he moves. Confident.

Knowing exactly where he’s going. Tall, lean, but strong. Not gym-bro strong, but

the kind that comes from actual work. It's almost like the fog gets out of his way as he stalks through it.

He stops at a junction, kneels to examine something at the base of a hedge, then stands with a cutting tool glinting in his hand. His hair, dark as wet earth and falling past his shoulders, is pulled back in a loose knot, revealing his profile as he turns slightly. A pronounced jawline frames his face, severe beneath prominent cheekbones that catch what little light filters through the mist. The sleeves of his black shirt are pushed up, revealing forearms covered in intricate tattoos, dark patterns that from this distance look like twisted vines and ancient symbols against his suntanned skin.

He moves again, his hands quick and precise as they trim a branch, then trace along the hedge with a gentleness that seems... I don't know, almost intimate? Like he's talking to them without speaking. His whole body moves with this weird awareness of the plants around him, like he instinctively knows what they need.

I can't stop staring at him work, totally unaware he's being watched from above. Just this lone figure, completely in his element in the maze's controlled chaos.

So that's Damiano Ricci. The "unusual" groundskeeper who has a way with plants.

Unusual is putting it mildly.

A wave of fatigue slams into me without warning. My body's favorite party trick. The journey from Seattle has wiped out what little energy I had left. I drag myself from the balcony, shutting the doors against the endless chill. The bed looks so good right now that I don't even bother changing out of my travel clothes. I kick off my shoes, pull the cashmere throw over me, and surrender to exhaustion.

Again.

As I drift toward sleep, I swear I can hear my mother's voice on the wind, whispering to me like she used to: "Be careful, my Briar."

She always said this island had a way of breaking fragile things. And if there's one thing I am now, it's fragile.

Chapter 2

Briar

I wake up completely confused, the light all wrong compared to my apartment back in Seattle. For a second, I have no idea where I am, and my heart starts pounding until I recognize the room. The light's different now. Evening. The fog outside my window casting a weird pink glow from the sunset.

My body feels heavy, limbs leaden with the particular exhaustion that follows travel. I check my phone. 5:47 PM. I've slept for nearly four hours. A text from my father waits on the screen:

Arrived safely? Call when you can.

No "how are you feeling" or "I miss you." Just checking that his recovery investment made it to the destination without complications. Typical Maxwell Waters tracking his assets. I toss the phone aside without answering. He can wait till tomorrow to confirm his damaged daughter didn't collapse somewhere between Seattle and his magical healing island.

The house is quiet save for the distant kitchen sounds—Mrs. Fletcher most likely preparing dinner.

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I force myself to sit up, then stand, ignoring the dizziness that follows. My reflection in the antique vanity mirror shows a ghost—brown hair limp around a too-pale face, collarbones sharp beneath my sweater. I look away quickly. There's nothing sexy about how I catalog myself these days—just a clinical inventory of what's falling apart this week.

I splash cold water on my face in the ensuite bathroom, reapply tinted lip balm more for the moisturizing properties than the color, and pull my hair into a loose knot. Better. Not good, but better.

Downstairs, Mrs. Fletcher is setting a single place at the small breakfast table in the kitchen rather than the formal dining room.

"I thought you might prefer something cozy tonight," she explains, setting down a bowl of what smells like fish chowder. "Local catch, fresh this morning."

"Thank you." I slide into the chair, wrapping my hands around the warm ceramic bowl. The heat feels wonderful against my perpetually cold fingers. "This is perfect."

It's wild how the kitchen hasn't changed in eight years, a time capsule while my life's been a hurricane. The copper pots still hang from the ceiling rack, polished until they gleam. The stone countertops have the same faint purple stains near the sink where Mom used to crush blackberries for Sunday pancakes. That massive hearth with its iron hooks dominates one wall, with those oak cabinets that have grown darker with age. Even the knife marks on the butcher block island are still there, evidence of seven-year-old me "helping" with dinner.

It's fucked up how stuff stays the same while people disappear. Mom's hands used to move through this exact space, touching these same things, but she's been reduced to a memory while these stupid copper pots are still here, unchanged. Sometimes I wonder if that's really why Dad keeps this place so perfect. Not because he's sentimental, but because he's terrified, as if keeping all the physical things exactly the same might prevent him from losing anything else.

I trace my finger along the wood grain in the table. God, when did I become so dark? Before I got sick, people used to say I was funny, the life of every party, not this morbid chick obsessing over mortality. Add it to the list of things my illness stole. Goodbye to my sense of humor replaced by too much time thinking about impermanence. My college friends would be like, "Who are you and what happened to Briar?"

Sometimes I ask myself the same thing.

Mrs. Fletcher busies herself at the counter, affording me the dignity of eating without scrutiny. I manage several spoonfuls before my appetite wanes, but the warm broth soothes my throat and settles in my stomach. Small win for today.

"The island hasn't changed much," she says conversationally. "A few new shops in town. The Godwins built that members' club everyone whispers about."

"The Vault," I say, recalling the briefing my father's assistant provided. Because of course Maxwell Waters believes in thorough preparation, even for shipping his daughter off to recovery island. "Apparently, quite exclusive."

Mrs. Fletcher's lips thin with disapproval. "Not the sort of place the Waters family would frequent."

I bite back a laugh. If she only knew about my collection of fetish photography from

my short time at NYU, before my immune system staged its coup. The pristine Waters princess with her very not-pristine collection of kink and BDSM shots. Dad nearly had a stroke when he found my portfolio during one of my hospital stays. The entire collection mysteriously vanished afterward—another casualty of illness and Daddy’s damage control.

“Right.” I try to keep a straight face. “But isn’t it where everyone goes now?”

“For a certain element.” She sighs, relenting slightly. “Though some respectable families attend their events, too. The old boundaries aren’t what they were. It’s a shame.”

I nod, even though I don’t agree. Always the people pleaser. “The soup is really good.”

After dinner, I get too restless to stay inside, despite the cold evening air. I layer up even more than usual, grab my phone, and slip out the kitchen door into the garden.

The night has transformed the landscape into something out of a gothic fairy tale. The moonlight barely breaks through the fog, casting everything in a silver haze. The maze hedges look taller in the darkness, their shadows stretching across the wet grass. The air tastes different at night. Heavier. Saltier. Electric with the ocean that surrounds us on all sides.

Gravel crunches beneath my boots as I follow the winding path. Dew has already formed on the ornamental grasses that line the walkway, tiny droplets reflecting what little light manages to penetrate the mist. In the distance, an owl calls, the sound both mournful and warning.

Night shift clocking in, day shift clocking out.

No sign of the gardener—Damiano—on the main grounds, but there are lights on in the greenhouse at the far edge of the property.

Curiosity wins over caution. I head down the gravel path past the maze entrance, my boots making too much noise on the loose stones. The greenhouse windows glow amber against the darkening sky, warm light spilling out between plants pressed against the glass.

As I get closer, I'm hit with a rush of earth and growing things—the opposite of the antiseptic hospital smell that's become my second skin. I stop at the door, suddenly unsure. Am I trespassing? Technically, my father owns this building and pays whoever works inside, but that doesn't mean I should barge in.

Before I can decide, the door swings open. The man from the maze fills the doorway like he was carved to fit it perfectly. He's taller than he looked from my balcony, with a presence that instantly makes the space feel smaller. His dark hair hangs loose now around a face that belongs on the cover of some "Hot Gardeners of Italy" calendar: sharp cheekbones, straight nose, and eyes that fix on me with an intensity that makes my skin tingle. The tattoos I glimpsed earlier cover his forearms completely, intricate botanical illustrations intertwined with what looks like ancient symbols. The dark ink disappears beneath his white tank top, hinting at more artwork mapped across his body.

"Ms. Waters." His voice carries just enough of an accent to make my name sound exotic. "You've come back to Heathens Hollow."

"I have." I stand a little straighter, refusing to be intimidated, even though he towers over me. "You're Damiano Ricci, right? The groundskeeper."

Something like amusement flickers in his eyes. "Yes. Among other things." He doesn't move from the doorway. "Did you need something?"

The question doesn't sound like something an employee should ask, but then, he doesn't look like anyone's employee either. He talks to me like we're equals. Like I'm the visitor on his territory, not the other way around.

"I saw the maze from my window," I say. "It's more elaborate than I remember."

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“Your grandmother’s design was basic. I’ve expanded it over the years.” A pause. “With your father’s approval, of course.”

“Of course.” I stuff my hands into my cardigan pockets, suddenly aware of how my fingers feel like ice cubes. “Mrs. Fletcher mentioned you work with medicinal plants.”

He narrows his eyes slightly, assessing. “You’re ill.”

Not a question and not delivered with that awkward pity everyone gives me. Merely a straight observation, like he’s commenting on the weather. I appreciate it more than I should.

“What gave it away? My ghost-girl complexion or the fact that I’m dressed for the Arctic in June?” The sarcasm just comes out. It feels like forever since I’ve talked to someone who wasn’t treating me like a specimen or a sob story.

Unexpectedly, his mouth curves into something that’s not quite a smile but definitely not a frown. “Neither. It’s in your eyes. That look people get when they’ve been hurting for a long time.” He steps back from the doorway. “Come in if you want. It’s warmer inside.”

I hesitate. A little warning bell goes off in my head. Strange man, isolated greenhouse, all the horror movie red flags. Dad would lose his shit if he knew I was here, but I’m so cold, and the promise of warmth is too tempting.

I stumble slightly over the raised door frame and instinctively shoot out my hand to

steady myself, accidentally brushing against his arm. Holy shit, he's warm. Like human furnace warm. I pull back quickly, mumbling an apology. He doesn't acknowledge it, simply moves farther into the greenhouse, giving me space to enter on my own terms.

What am I doing here? I barely know this guy, but something about his bluntness, the way he doesn't tiptoe around me like I'm made of spun glass, pulls me in more than any fake kindness ever could.

The greenhouse envelops me in humid warmth, like walking into a living, breathing thing. The air feels thick and alive, full of soil and green things and other smells—sharp, herbal scents I can't name. Rows of plants grow in what looks like organized mayhem, some I recognize, others completely foreign.

One corner has been turned into a simple living space. A narrow cot with messy blankets sits against the glass wall. A small wooden table holds a camping stove, a French press, and a stack of books with dog-eared pages. Clothes—mostly black and gray—hang from hooks on a metal rack. A guitar leans against a trunk that probably holds the rest of his stuff. The space is minimal but intentional. Not a homeless aesthetic, more like someone who's figured out exactly what he needs and nothing more.

"This is impressive." I try to sound casual. "What are you growing in here?"

"Whatever the island offers, plus things I've brought from other places." He goes past me to a workbench cluttered with tools and equipment. A stone bowl sits next to small jars filled with dried leaves and powders. "Some for looks, some for healing. Most serve both purposes."

"And these medicines... Do they work?"

He gives me a measuring look, like he's deciding how honest to be. "Depends on who you ask."

"I stopped believing in miracle cures somewhere around my third clinical trial."

Something shifts in his expression. Respect, maybe. Like I've passed a test I didn't know I was taking. "Good. We're on the same page then. I don't do miracle cures."

"I'm Briar, by the way," I say, realizing he's only called me Ms. Waters. "Since we're already discussing my medical history."

His laugh catches me off guard. It's low and genuine, transforming his whole face. "Briar." My name sounds different in his mouth, like it's something more interesting than it is. "It's a good name for someone so resilient."

"That's one way to put it." I look around, wanting to change the subject. I step closer to examine a plant with delicate purple flowers. "What's this one?"

"Monkshood. Pretty, right?" He moves beside me, close enough that I can feel heat radiating off him. "Don't touch it, though. Toxic as hell. People used to use tiny amounts for heart problems back in the day. Too much, and you're dead."

"You're growing deadly plants in a greenhouse you sleep in?"

His smile turns wicked. "I keep knowledge in a greenhouse I sleep in. The difference between medicine and poison is often just dosage." He plucks a leaf from a different plant, crushes it between his fingers, and holds it out. "Smell."

I lean forward cautiously, inhaling the sharp, clean scent. "Mint?"

"Corsican mint. Good for digestive issues, headaches." His eyes track over me, not in

a creepy way, more like he's reading something. "You're shivering even in here. Poor circulation comes with autoimmune issues, doesn't it?"

Self-conscious, I shove my hands deeper into my pockets. "A symptom of my condition."

"I could make you something for that. Not a cure," he adds, seeing my expression. "Just something to help with symptoms."

"Why would you do that?"

He shrugs one shoulder, the movement fluid and casual. "Why not? This place takes enough from people." He turns away, moving to a shelf of glass bottles. "Your grandmother got it. That's why she made the maze. So even in all this fog, you could always find your way back."

"You knew my grandmother?"

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“I was just a kid when she died. My mom worked summers in your kitchen. I’d hide in the maze while she cooked.” He holds up a bottle to check it in the light. “Your grandmother caught me there once. Instead of getting mad, she taught me how to navigate it. Said kids should know escape routes since adults are the ones who build the traps.”

The image forms instantly: a serious-eyed boy learning secrets from my grandmother, the family matriarch whose stern portrait still dominates the dining room. Something tightens in my chest.

“I don’t remember you,” I say. I should, but I don’t.

“Of course not. We didn’t exactly run in the same circles. Yours was the house on visits. Mine was the grounds, year-round. Different worlds.”

“I guess...” A familiar twinge of guilt hits me. Spoiled rich girl syndrome. Too wrapped up in my own drama to notice anyone outside my bubble. I hate that about myself. Hate it even more when I live up to the stereotype. “I should get back to the house,” I say, suddenly feeling like an intruder in his space. “It’s getting late, but it was nice meeting you.”

Damiano nods, setting down the bottle. “Yeah.” He reaches into a drawer and pulls out something wrapped in brown paper. “Here. Put a spoonful in hot water before bed. Might help you sleep.”

I accept the package, our fingers brushing briefly. His skin burns against my ice-cold hand. “Is it poison?” I ask, only half-joking.

His eyes lock with mine, dark and unreadable. “I guess you’re just going to have to trust me.” He moves to open the door. “The maze looks better in the morning when the fog lifts a bit. I’m usually there early if you want a tour of all the changes I made.”

Outside, the cold hits me like a slap, the fog so thick I could reach out and grab handfuls. I clutch the little paper package, stupidly grateful for his strange gift.

“Thank you,” I say, simply.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he says, his tall figure filling the greenhouse doorway, backlit and imposing. “See if it works first. I hope it helps.”

I return to the house, feeling his eyes tracking me until I turn at the hedge that marks the maze entrance. In my pocket, I curl my freezing fingers around the package of herbs, my mind racing with questions about this strange man who talks about poisons and secret paths like they’re casual conversation topics.

Maybe island exile won’t be so boring after all.

Chapter 3

Briar

Morning hits me like a truck, yanking me out of the deepest sleep I’ve had since forever. Sunlight streams through the lace curtains—not the blackout ones I need in Seattle. The herbal stuff from Damiano sits half-empty on my nightstand. Whatever was in that cup knocked me out better than anything my doctors have prescribed in years.

I grab my phone, checking the time. 9:17 AM. Late, by my father’s standards. Three

missed calls from him and a text:

Call me immediately. Need update on your condition.

Once again, notHow did you sleep?orHow are you feeling today?Just demanding his status report like I'm one of his business deals. I toss aside the phone without responding. Let him wait.

Downstairs, Mrs. Fletcher bustles around thekitchen, already preparing lunch. The aroma of fresh bread fills the air, comforting in its normality.

“Good morning.” She eyes me with approval. “You have color in your cheeks today. Did you sleep well?”

“Better than I have in months,” I admit, pouring myself coffee from the carafe. “Something about island air, I guess.”

She nods, but her gaze flicks toward the small brown paper package I've brought down with me. Damiano's herbs. I've wrapped the remainder carefully, intending to ask him what exactly was in that mixture. Not that I don't trust him—which is weird, considering I just met the guy—but my scientist brain wants details.

“I should have mentioned this yesterday, but I leave tomorrow for the weekend,” Mrs. Fletcher says, wiping her hands on her apron. “My sister in Anacortes is having her fiftieth wedding anniversary. I already told your father I'd be away for it.”

“That's fine,” I say, sipping my coffee. It's strong and perfect.

“I've left some meals for you in the fridge, all labeled with heating instructions.” She pauses, looking worried. “If you don't want to be alone, I could ask Marjorie from town to stop by?—”

“I’ll be fine,” I cut in, maybe too quickly. “Seriously. I’m not dying.” I take another sip of my coffee. “I know my father may have painted a different picture, but I really can take care of myself.”

Her face says she’s not buying it, but she nods anyway. “Well, I’ve put emergency numbers on the fridge, including the island clinic.”

“Thank you.” I drum my fingers against the ceramic mug, suddenly realizing something. “Wait... tomorrow’s the seventeenth?”

“Yes, it is.”

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My birthday.

Twenty-eight years of existence, and not a single soul on this island cares or knows. Not even my father remembered in his morning text. Pretty on-brand, honestly.

And pretty fucking sad.

“Everything all right, Miss Briar?”

I force a smile. “Perfect. I just realized I need to... make some plans.”

Plans. Weird how foreign that word feels after years of having doctors and my dad run my entire life. When was the last time I decided to do something fun? I can’t even remember the last time I celebrated anything.

A dangerous idea starts forming—ridiculous, impulsive, exactly what Maxwell Waters would disapprove of. Which makes it instantly appealing.

“Mrs. Fletcher, are those party boxes still in the basement? The stuff Mom used for her summer parties?”

She looks confused by my random question. “I think so. In the storage behind the wine cellar. Your father hasn’t touched them since?—”

“Since Mom died. Yeah, I know.” I stand up, suddenly pumped with energy. “I think I’ll have some people over tomorrow night. Nothing crazy.”

The lie comes out super easily. I don't have a single friend on this island. I barely have friends anywhere, unless you count my physical therapist who sends me cat memes after sessions.

Her forehead creases with worry. "Miss Briar, are you sure that's a good idea? With your health?—"

"My health is exactly why I need this." I sound snippy, so I soften my tone. "I'll keep it small. Just a few people."

She doesn't look convinced but nods reluctantly. "I'll make sure the main rooms are prepared before I leave this evening, then."

After breakfast, I grab my camera and head out, pretending I want to take photos of the grounds when I'm actually looking for Damiano. Disappointingly, the greenhouse is empty. No sign of the mysterious groundskeeper among his collection of plants.

I check the maze next, but there's no sign of him there either. The guy clearly doesn't stick to any kind of schedule. Figures, for someone who seems to appear out of thin air.

After an hour of wandering the grounds with nothing to show for it except a few decent photos of fog-covered trees, I head back to the house. Maybe I'll have better luck finding him later. Right now, I've got a party to plan, and that means venturing into town to spread the word.

I shower and change into actual clothes instead of my usual loungewear—black jeans, a soft gray sweater, and boots. I even put on makeup—enough to not look like death warmed over. Looking in the mirror, I almost recognize the girl from before I got sick.

“Mrs. Fletcher,” I call, finding her dusting in the library. “I’m heading into town for a bit.”

Her eyebrows shoot up like I’ve announced I’m joining the circus. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? The walk is?—”

“I found the keys to the old Jeep in Dad’s desk. It still works, right?”

She nods reluctantly. “Mr. Waters has it serviced regularly, though it’s rarely used. The tank should be full.”

“Perfect.” I’m already heading toward the door, a strange excitement bubbling in my chest. Freedom. Even temporary, it tastes sweet.

The Jeep starts on the first try, the engine rumbling to life like an awakening beast. I haven’t driven in months. It’s another thing my father deemed “too taxing” for someone in my condition. The giddy thrill of rebellion propels me down the winding road toward town.

Heathens Hollow’s main street looks exactly like I remember—that practical strip of weathered buildings housing the grocery, pharmacy, hardwarestore, and a few bars. The fishing boats must be out for the day because the docks I pass are mostly empty, though people are unloading crates from the few vessels that remain. The air smells like salt and fish, so different from the antiseptic bubble I’ve been living in.

I park near what’s always been the center of activity and start walking, my camera around my neck. The locals—men in work clothes with weathered faces, women carrying supplies or hurrying between errands—give me curious glances. The Waters daughter, out among the commoners. What a spectacle.

As I pass Mooncrow Artifacts, the display of The Hunt masks in the window catches

my eye. Bone-white stag skulls, modified with extra antler points and adorned with black feathers. They've put out the full display, which means the season must be approaching.

I've always been fascinated by The Hunt—the red lights appearing on porches across the island, the whistles in the night, the masked men slipping through the trees pursuing women in white. As kids, we'd dare each other to stay up and watch from our windows. We knew the basics: women put out red lights if they wanted to participate, men wore stag masks and hunted them down. The grown-ups never explained the rest, but we figured it out eventually. The chase, the capture, what happened after. It was like this secret island language everyone pretended we didn't understand.

I keep walking until I reach The Vault. The old bank building with its blackened windows has been the island's not-so-secret hotspot since it opened years ago. Dad freaked when he heard some "sex dungeon" had opened on "his" island. I remember thinking it sounded way more interesting than another summer of yacht parties with his boring business associates.

I try the door on a whim. Locked, obviously. It's not even noon yet.

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“We don’t open until nine,” says someone behind me.

I turn to find this guy who looks like he walked straight out of some underground rock show—tall, with angular features, jet-black hair boasting a white streak at his temple. Multiple piercings, a silver lip ring, and these gray eyes that are almost silver. He’s sizing me up like he’s trying to decide if I’m worth the trouble.

“Yeah, figured that,” I say, not backing down from his stare. “Just scoping the place out.”

“The Vault isn’t big on walk-ins.” He crosses his arms. “Members only. Though exceptions get made.”

“Let me guess... if you’re rich enough or hot enough?” I raise an eyebrow.

One corner of his mouth twitches. “Pretty much. Helps if you’re both.”

“Good to know some things never change on this island.”

“You’ve been here before, then?” He’s studying me more carefully now.

“I am Briar Waters.” I don’t offer my hand. “The big house on the north shore.”

“Ah, Waters.” Recognition flashes in his eyes, but he doesn’t look impressed.

“Thought you guys only haunted the island in July and August but years ago.”

“Usually. I’m on extended sick leave this year.”

“Lucky us,” he says dryly. “Flint Bishop. I run the bar here.”

“So you’re the person to know if I want to have some fun around here?”

“Depends on your definition of fun.” He studies my face. “What’s the Waters definition these days?”

I make a split-second decision. “I’m throwing a party tomorrow night. At Windward Estate.”

That gets his attention. His eyebrow shoots up, the piercing above it catching the light. “A party? At the Waters fortress? That’s different.”

“It’s my birthday.” I shrug, trying to come across casual. “Though nobody knows that. Or cares.”

“Including your father?”

“Especially my father.”

He gives me a look that suggests I’ve just become slightly more interesting to him. “Bold move, but why tell me? We just met, and I’m hardly on the Waters guest list.”

Something clicks in my brain as I glance back at Mooncrow’s window display. “I want to throw a Hunt-themed party.”

His posture shifts slightly—more alert, more wary. “Hunt-themed? What do you mean?”

“You know... inspired by The Hunt. Not the actual thing, obviously,” I clarify quickly. “But the aesthetic. Red lights everywhere, guys in masks, girls in white,

tribal drums playing. Something primal. Wild. The opposite of the stuffy parties my father throws.”

“So not an actual Hunt, just dressing up like one.” He seems relieved but also slightly amused. “Still pretty daring for a Waters party.”

“I know what The Hunt is,” I reply, thinking of all those nights watching from my window. “That’s exactly why I want it as my theme.”

He studies me for a moment, then a slow smile spreads across his face. “A Waters girl hosting a Hunt-themed party. That’s one for the island history books.”

“So will you help? I need people to show up. People who get the theme and will really commit to it.”

“What’s in it for me?” he asks, though I can tell he’s already interested.

“Open bar. Plus the satisfaction of corrupting a Waters. Isn’t that enough?”

He laughs. “You’re not what I expected.”

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“Yeah, I get that a lot.” I start walking backward, away from him. “Nine o’clock tomorrow. Telleveryone you know. Especially the people who know how to have a good time.”

“If you’re serious about this,” he calls after me, “you’re gonna need proper decorations. Not that tourist crap in the window.”

“Any suggestions?”

“You need actual Hunt masks. Edith at Mooncrow keeps the real ones in the back.”

“Perfect.” I turn to go, then spin back. “Oh, have you seen Damiano Ricci today? The groundskeeper at my place?”

The shift is immediate. His entire body tenses, his expression shutters. “Why wouldIknow where your gardener is?”

Interesting reaction. There’s definitely history there.

“No reason. He made me something that helped me sleep. Thought he might be in town.”

“Yeah, he’s good at mixing things that mess with your head.” Flint’s voice turns cold. “Free advice, be careful around Ricci. He doesn’t exactly have a history of leaving people better than he found them.”

“Noted.” I start heading away, then call back over my shoulder. “See you tomorrow

night, Flint Bishop.”

I can feel his eyes following me as I head down the street. There’s something about him that gets under my skin. Not in a bad way, necessarily, just... unsettling. Like he sees right through the Waters heiress facade to the mess underneath. But at least now I’ve got one potential guest for my impromptu party. Time to see if I can drum up a few more.

I head straight to Mooncrow Artifacts. The shop is exactly as I remember it from past summers—dim lighting, that weird mix of tourist crap and actual mystical stuff, the smell of incense and old books. Edith, the ancient owner who seems like she’s been running this place since the island formed, looks up from behind the counter.

“Briar Waters,” she says, recognition in her eyes. “Been a while.”

“I’m having a party tomorrow. Hunt-themed.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “At the Waters place? Your father hasn’t thrown a party?”

“My father’s not here.” I meet her gaze directly. “And what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” I draw a calming breath. “I saw the masks and thought they’d be perfect for decorations.”

“Okay.” She nods slowly. “But the authentic masks are in the back. Follow me.”

She leads me to a storage room where she shows me a collection of masks far more elaborate than the ones in the window. Genuine bone, hand-carved with intricate symbols, adorned with feathers and small bells that make a haunting sound when they move.

“These are the real deal,” she says. “Handmade by island craftsmen, not the mass-

produced ones we sell to tourists.”

“They’re perfect,” I say, already picturing them displayed around the great room. “I’ll take five... no, wait... ten. And I need red bulbs, too. Lots of them.”

She nods, pulling out a wooden crate filled with various sizes of red lightbulbs. “You should know that just displaying Hunt items sends a message on this island.”

“That’s exactly what I want.” I hand over my credit card. “To send a message.”

She starts wrapping the masks carefully in brown paper. “And what message is that, exactly?”

“That I’m not my father’s daughter. Not anymore.”

She makes a noncommittal sound. “Just be careful what you’re inviting, girl.”

“That’s the point,” I say with more confidence than I feel. “I’m done being careful.”

I spend the afternoon exploring town, stopping at the small grocery to pick up additional party supplies. The cashier—Meredith, according to her nametag—almost drops the bottle of tonic water when I tell her there’s a party at Windward tomorrow.

“The Waters place? For real?” Her eyes are huge. “Nobody ever gets to go in there!”

“Well, now’s your chance. Nine o’clock. Hunt theme. It’s gonna be wild.”

“The Hunt? At your house?” She leans across the counter. “No way.”

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“Yep. Tomorrow night. Tell your friends.”

“Oh my god, this is gonna be insane.” She grins. “Everyone’s gonna lose their minds.”

“That’s the plan,” I say, grabbing my bags. “See you there.”

Back at Windward, I throw myself into preparations with an energy I haven’t felt in months. The basement is full of treasures—strings of garden lights, paper lanterns, even an ancient sound system that still works when dusted off. Mrs. Fletcher watches my whirlwind activity with obvious concern but says nothing beyond reminding me not to overexert myself. She also mentions she has numbers for caterers and event planners, but I ignore her because I’m enjoying doing this myself.

By evening, I’ve set up the great room and terrace for tomorrow’s party. I’m completely wiped out, but it’s a good kind of tired—from doing something productive instead of being sick. But looking around, I realize my decorations look too... nice. Too pretty. Paper lanterns and fairy lights aren’t exactly screaming “The Hunt” theme.

The bag from Mooncrow sits unopened on the couch. I pull out one of the masks, feeling its weight in my hands. The bone is cool and surprisingly heavy, the antlers curving up in sharp points. I place it on the mantel above the fireplace, and immediately the room feels different—darker, more dangerous.

“This isn’t working,” I mutter to myself. The space still looks too prim, too Waters. I need redlights everywhere. I need tribal drums playing instead of classical music. I

need drinks that make people forget their inhibitions.

I need to transform this place into something animalistic.

I need this party to be unforgettable.

“Mrs. Fletcher!” I call out. “Can I get those numbers you mentioned earlier, please? For the caterers and DJ? And... what do you know about The Hunt?”

She freezes, her expression shifting from helpful to horrified. “Where did you hear about that?”

“I’ve always known about it,” I say with a shrug. “Everyone does.”

“That’s not a suitable topic for a young lady,” she says firmly. “Especially not a Waters. Those... activities... are for a different sort of island resident.”

“It was just a question,” I lie. “I was curious.”

“Well, curiosity about such things isn’t appropriate,” she says primly. “Your father would never approve of even discussing it.”

Perfect. Exactly the reaction I was hoping for. But I decide to drop the subject because I don’t want to stroke out the poor woman by making her talk about it more.

After dinner, I text Dad some BS about “feeling stronger” and “enjoying the island air.” No mention of my birthday or the party I’m planning. He responds with his typical clinical checklist of questions about my symptoms and a reminder to take my meds on schedule.

In bed, I stare at the ceiling, my mind racing with thoughts about tomorrow. For

years, I've been going through the motions, my entire existence reduced to treatment schedules and test results. But here, away from Seattle and all the medical crap, something feels different. Freedom, maybe. But definitely alive.

Tomorrow, I turn twenty-eight—a birthday nobody bothered to remember. Instead of feeling sorry for myself, I'm doing something totally reckless. Inviting strangers into my family's house. Turning my father's pristine home into a scene from some pagan ritual-inspired bacchanal. Potentially trashing the place Dad keeps in museum-perfect condition.

Mom would have considered this hilarious. Dad will have a coronary. Maybe that's exactly why it feels so right.

I'm playing with fire, and I know it, but I feel the heat of it on my skin, and I can't bring myself to pull away.

I fall asleep wondering if Flint will show up, if Damiano might appear from nowhere, and what happens when people from opposite sides of this island end up in the same room. For the first time in forever, I'm actually excited about tomorrow.

Chapter 4

Damiano

I watch her from the treeline as she carries boxes from the house to the terrace. Third trip now. She's pushing herself too hard, her breath forming small clouds in the morning air. Her hair catches the weak sunlight as she pauses, hand pressed against the stone balustrade, taking a moment before she heads back inside.

She really shouldn't be lifting stuff. Not with how her body constantly rebels against her.

The greenhouse gives me cover, a legit excuse to be here, taking care of the grounds, watching the big house. But let's be real, I'd be watching anyway. Something about Briar Waters draws me. Maybe it's her defiance, the way she pushes against her limitations. Or maybe it's simpler, the way her hair looks like it's holding moonlight, how her skin has that translucent quality like some rare orchid I've been trying to grow for years.

Shit. I sound like one of my dad's angsty poems. This is exactly why I keep to myself.

I clip a branch with more force than necessary, adding it to my collection. Echinacea root, yarrow leaves, angelica. Each goes into separate pockets of my work vest. Later, I'll dry them, grind them, mix them with other things from deeper in the forest—things that don't exactly grow in gardens where just anyone can see them.

She appears again, this time with strings of lights tangled in her hands. A party. Mrs. Fletcher mentioned it when she left this morning, worry practically carved into her face as she asked me to "keep an eye on things" while she was gone. Like I wouldn't do that anyway.

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I know all about keeping watch. Been doing it since I was ten, when I learned the hard way how fast people can vanish on this island.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I ignore it. Probably Flint, and I'm so not in the mood for his crap today. Last night at The Vault was enough. His hands on me, angry and demanding, his mouth tasting like whiskey and lies. Same old pattern. We crash into each other like wrecking balls, leave each other in pieces, then pretend we're total strangers until next time.

Through the windows, I can see Briar moving around the great room, pushing furniture to create open space. Whatever she's planning, it's definitely bigger than "just a few friends." The house has been closed to visitors for years. Maxwell Waters doesn't bring his business buddies here anymore. Not since his wife died.

I could go up there. Offer to help. Tell her she should rest between trips, that her lips are turning blue from the cold. But then she'd ask questions I don't want to deal with. Like how I know so much about her condition. Or why I even care.

So I stick to the cypress shadows, moving when I need to keep her in view. Not stalking. Just watching over. There's a difference.

The afternoon stretches on as the sky darkens slightly with gathering clouds. Cars begin arriving, first a trickle and then a steady flow. The delivery vans come first, caterers from the mainland hauling food and supplies that practically scream "Waters money." Then the rental people with extra chairs, portable heaters for the terrace, speakers for music. All arranged through phone calls Briar made yesterday after visiting town.

I move closer to the house as the sun starts to drop. The fog is rolling in early tonight, thick with moisture, swallowing the lower garden. Perfect cover for me.

From behind a stone statue, Neptune with his trident I've deliberately covered in moss, I watch the catering staff arrange platters of food inside. Through the French doors, I can see Briar directing them. She's wearing white, a flowing dress that reminds me of The Hunt, women in their ghostly nightgowns before they sprint barefoot through the darkness. Her dark hair pulled half-up shows the delicate curve of her neck, making her look like the perfect target. Whether she realizes the significance of her outfit, it will send a message to certain guests who've yet to arrive. She seems stronger today. The herbs I left for her must be working.

That's something at least.

She catches sight of me through the window as she turns. Our eyes lock for a moment before I step back into the shadows. Let her wonder. Better than explaining why I'm lurking outside like some creeper. Though that's exactly what I'm doing.

My phone buzzes again. This time I check it.

Heard about the Waters girl's party. Looks like unofficial Hunt season is starting early this year. You playing security guard tonight? Or are you actually invited?

Flint. Always knowing exactly which buttons to push.

I don't respond. But the message confirms what I suspected, this isn't going to be "just a few friends." If Flint knows about it, half the island does—including people who have no business getting anywhere near Briar Waters.

The twilight deepens as the first guests begin to arrive. By seven thirty, the driveway starts filling with cars. The early birds, island locals dying to see the mansion they've

only glimpsed from a distance. I recognize the grocery store cashier, the pharmacist's daughter, a few waitresses from the harbor restaurant. They clutch wine bottles and wear clothes that try way too hard. Their voices carry as they exclaim over the grandeur of Windward Estate.

I move to the greenhouse to change. If I'm playing watchdog tonight, I need to blend in. Dark jeans, a black button-down with sleeves rolled to show my tattoos, hair tied back. I glance in the mirror above my sink, looking more like my old man than I care to admit. Wonder what he'd think if he could see me now.

In my trunk, beneath jars of dried herbs and bags of soil amendments, I keep a wooden box. Inside: a knife with a bone handle, a small glass vial of powder that looks like sugar but isn't, and a black leather cord with a silver charm, protection from the old country, or so my father claimed. Beside these, tucked in the corner, is my Hunt mask, bone-white with black accents, worn enough seasons that the edges are smooth from use. I've played both hunter and hunted more times than I like to remember. I grab the mask, along with the cord, tying it around my wrist, and after a moment's hesitation, I take the bone-handled knife, too. Something feels off tonight. Like watching prey wander into a predator's den without knowing the rules. Better safe than sorry.

The party is in full swing by the time I make my way back to the main house. The driveway is nearly full. New arrivals park along the road leading to the estate. I recognize most of the vehicles, local business owners, middle-class families with kids Briar's age, a few harbor guys who've cleaned up for the night. But there are others who make my jaw tighten. A matte black Range Rover with tinted windows belongs to Xavier Reed, a rich regular at The Vault with too much money and zero morals. A sleek Mercedes that Asher Brook drives when he's slumming it with the locals. And worst of all, the chrome-heavy motorcycles belonging to the Bastian brothers, who handle security at The Vault and get off way too much on their job.

I'm surprised the Bastian brothers showed up. They don't usually attend social events unless they're planning something. I catch sight of them talking near their bikes, heads close together, expressions too intense for a simple birthday party. Fucking great. I should've known the Hunt theme would attract these types. From what I can see through the windows, this isn't going to be the casual celebration Briar imagined. Not with these people.

I approach from the side of the house, avoiding the main entrance where two hired guys in black check names against a non-existent list. Security theater, they're not stopping anyone.

Music pulses from inside, heavy tribal drumbeats that vibrate through the stone steps and straight into my bones. The bass is primal, hungry, making my pulse quicken despite myself. Smoke machines pump mist across the floor inside, creating the effect of ground fog that curls around dancers' ankles. Someone's brought actual torches that throw wild, dancing shadows everywhere. Lights have been strung across the terrace, giving everything a golden glow that combats the fog. Heat lamps create islands of warmth where people cluster with drinks. Inside, through windows now completely uncovered, I can see bodies already moving, dancing, the great room morphed into something between a nightclub and a fever dream.

The smell hits me as I slip past security, sweat and expensive perfume mixing with something wilder that makes the hair on my neck stand up. Anticipation. Desire. Danger.

I slip past the security guys with a nod they return without question. They know me. Or at least they know not to mess with the guy who supplies certain plants to their bosses at The Vault.

The full impact of the party slams into me as I enter. Women in white glide through the crowd like spirits, their dresses reflecting the firelight in hypnotic patterns. Men

in black with silver-and-bone-white masks stalk behind them, eyes fixed on chosen targets through the thickening haze. This goes way beyond costumes and decoration. Everyone's embraced the Hunt theme with unsettling commitment. The air vibrates with something primal and raw. Bodies pulse to the rhythm, swaying in what feels less like a birthday celebration and more like an ancient ritual, like the island's oldest traditions have woken inside these people.

The entry hall is packed with strangers, voices overlapping as they shout over the music. Crystal decanters from the Waters family collection have been arranged on a table, filled with various liquors, alongside buckets of ice and mixers. Self-serve, like Briar couldn't afford actual bartenders. Or maybe she wanted it casual, more like the college parties she probably missed during all those years of treatments.

I grab a bottle of water, ignoring the alcohol. Got to stay sharp tonight.

The great room has been completely transformed, with furniture pushed against walls, artwork covered with dark fabric to protect it from the growing crowd. The antique Persian rug her grandmother loved has been rolled up and replaced with something cheaper, meant to soak up spilled drinks and survive the night. Smart move.

The bar grows more crowded with each passing minute, alcohol dissolving boundaries. The room temperature spikes from too many bodies in too small a space, turning the atmosphere thick and charged with unspoken intentions. Already, the island's social layers are forming, with rich summer people by the fireplace, local business owners near the windows, harbor workers and service staff hanging near the food tables. Invisible lines everyone just knows not to cross.

Except for Briar. She moves between groups, introducing people with the ease of someone who doesn't understand or doesn't care about the island's social boundaries. Her face is flushed, eyes bright. She looks alive in a way I haven't seen since she got

here. Something tugs in my chest.

“Didn’t expect to see you here.”

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I turn to find Flint beside me, holding a glass of something amber. A bone-white mask hangs loosely around his neck, the strap twisted carelessly like he couldn't be bothered to wear it right. His white streak stands out even more against his black clothing, like he's trying to channel some comic book villain. Always so damn dramatic.

"Someone needs to keep an eye on things." I keep my voice flat.

His laugh is dry and bitter. "Right. Playing bodyguard to the rich girl already? That was fast." His gaze shifts to Briar, who's talking animatedly with a group of locals. "She's not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"Another trust fund princess slumming it for kicks." He shrugs. "She seems... genuine."

"She's sick." The words come out harder than intended. "Don't get any ideas."

He raises his eyebrow, silver piercing catching the light. "Jealous already? That was fast, even for you."

I turn away, not giving him the satisfaction of a response. This conversation is heading nowhere good, and I need to focus.

Across the room, Liam Bastian has cornered Briar by the drink table. Even from here, I can see her body language change, shoulders tensing, smile going rigid. Liam leans

in closer than necessary, brushing her arm with his hand as he talks, playing Mr. Charming when everyone on this island knows what he's really about. The contrast between his dark clothes and Briar's white dress makes them look like predator and prey already playing their roles.

"Looks like someone's getting an early start on The Hunt," Flint mutters, following my gaze. "Bastian's been talking big at The Vault about adding a Waters to his collection. Said white would look real good on her, especially when she's running barefoot through the maze."

I clench my jaw, tracking the movement across the room. Liam Bastian has his hand lower on Briar's back than it has any right to go.

"Better go save your princess." Flint tips his glass toward the scene. "Before Bastian gets ideas."

"She's not my—" No point playing this game with Flint. "Why are you even here?"

He smirks, finishing his drink in one smooth motion. "Free booze, good music, chance to see how the rich half lives." His eyes lock with mine. "Plus, I figured you'd be lurking around, guarding your territory."

"She's not territory."

"Could've fooled me." He steps closer, his voice dropping. "That's your thing, isn't it? Finding brokenstuff to fix? Like those plants you're always fussing over."

I keep my eyes on Briar, who's extracting herself from Liam's conversation. "You didn't seem to mind my 'thing' last night."

"Last night was different." His voice has an edge now. "Last night didn't involve you

playing hero to Maxwell Waters' little girl."

Something in his tone pulls my attention away from Briar. Flint's eyes are hard, glittering with something that looks like genuine anger.

"You're jealous," I say, the realization hitting me. "That's what this is about?"

He scoffs. "Of her? Please. I just hate watching you fall into the same toxic patterns."

"That's rich, coming from you."

"At least I know what I am." He steps closer, just shy of touching me, his voice low enough that no one else could hear. "I don't pretend to be something I'm not."

The scent of him, whiskey and that cedar cologne he's worn forever, hits me with a wave of memories from last night. His back against the wall of The Vault's storage room. My hands pinning his wrists above his head. His breathless laugh when I told him I hated him.

I push away the images. "I'm not pretending anything."

"Sure you are. Playing garden boy during the day, dealing your special herbs by night." He smiles, all teeth and venom. "Then there's what you do during Hunt season. The stuff you don't want anyone to know about. Especially not your new pet project up at the big house."

I move my hand before I can stop myself, grabbing his wrist hard enough to make him wince. "Don't."

Instead of pulling away, he leans in, his mouth almost touching my ear. "What? You don't want me telling your new project about last night? About what you do with that

tongue when you think no one's watching?"

I release him like touching him burns. "This isn't the place."

"Never is with you." He rubs his wrist where my fingers left marks. "But we always end up in the same place anyway, don't we?"

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Across the room, I catch sight of Briar again. She's looking our way, her expression curious. Concerned, maybe. At the same time, I notice Liam Bastian watching her from the hallway that leads to the library. Something in his stance makes my skin crawl, predatory, calculating. Like he's already picturing her in white, running through the maze, waiting for his whistle in the dark.

Jesus, this is all too much. I fucking hate parties. Hate people. Hate all of this.

"I need to check the grounds," I say, turning away from Flint.

"Running away again? Typical." His laugh follows me. "Tell you what, I'll keep an eye on your girl while you're gone. Make sure Liam doesn't get any ideas about starting Hunt season early."

I pause, looking back at him.

He gestures toward the door. "Go brood in your garden or whatever you need to do."

The party feels claustrophobic, too many bodies, too much noise. I slip through the crowd, ignoring the few people who try to stop me for conversation. Outside, the fog has grown even thicker, muffling the sounds from the house. The terrace lights create hazy halos in the mist.

I breathe deeply, letting the damp air clear my head. This thing with Flint, it's like a disease. Has been for years. We crash into each other, tear each other apart, then walk away until we inevitably collide again.

Never healing. Never changing.

The maze calls to me, a perfect symbol of my life. Complicated. Designed to confuse. Only navigable if you know the secret paths, the real ways through. The Waters maze has been a favorite hunting ground for generations. I've lost count of how many women I've seen fleeing through its hedges during The Hunt, their white nightgowns glowing in the darkness, their pursuers' whistles echoing off stone.

I follow the gravel path, the noise from the party fading with each step. The high hedges part before me, welcoming me into their shadowed embrace. Even in near-darkness, I know every turn, every junction. This place feels more like home than the greenhouse ever has.

At the first intersection, I pause. The mist swirls around my ankles, clinging to the fabric of my jeans. Somewhere nearby, an owl calls, once, twice, then silence. Waiting for an answer that never comes. The sound reminds me too much of The Hunt's whistle pattern. Maybe that's why it puts me on edge.

I should check the center, make sure everything is secure for tomorrow's work. This section needs trimming before the fog causes too much moisture damage. These are the excuses I give myself, but the truth is simpler: I needed to get away from Flint before I did something stupid.

Again.

"You always did love this fucking maze."

His voice comes from behind me, startling in the stillness. I don't turn around.

"Go back to the party, Flint."

“And leave you out here sulking? What kind of friend would that make me?”

“We’re not friends.” The words come out automatically, a script we’ve been following for years.

He moves closer. I can feel his presence, the heat of him in the cold mist. “No, we’re not.”

Chapter 5

Damiano

I turn to face him. The fog has dampened his hair, making the white streak more pronounced against the black. His eyes reflect the distant lights from the house, giving them this eerie glow that pisses me off even more.

“What do you want?” I ask, like I don’t already fucking know.

“Same thing I always want.” He steps closer, dropping his gaze to my mouth before raising it again. “Same thing you always want.”

“I told you last night?—”

“That it was the last time. Yeah.” He laughs, harsh and empty. “You’ve been saying that for what, three years now? Three fucking years of ‘never again’ bullshit. And yet here we are.”

“I’m serious this time.”

“Sure you are.” Another step forward eliminates the space between us. “Especially now you’ve got your shiny new project. Poor little rich girl who needs your magic

garden fixes.”

I snap, grab the front of his shirt, and slam him back a step. “Don’t talk about her like that.”

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Instead of pulling away, he smiles. “There’s the real Damiano. Wondered how long it’d take to crack that Zen plant-whisperer bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit.”

“It’s all bullshit.” He brings his hands up to grip my wrists, not to remove them but to hold me there. “Just like my cool bartender act. We’re both fake as hell. Difference is, I own it.”

Rage surges through me, familiar and almost welcome. “I’m not doing this again.”

“Doing what? This?” He moves quickly, pressing his body against mine, his mouth hovering just shy of contact. “Or this?” He slides around one hand to grip the back of my neck, fingers tangling in my hair.

I should shove him away. Walk out of this maze, back to people who aren’t toxic waste in human form. Instead, I tighten my grip on his shirt until I hear threads tear.

“I fucking hate you.” The lie is bitter on my tongue.

His smile turns nasty. “Yeah, you said that last night, too. Right before you were on your knees begging for it.”

The memory hits like a physical blow—the storage room at The Vault, bottles of expensive liquor surrounding us, the taste of him, his hands in my hair. The addiction I can’t kick.

“Go to hell,” I mutter, but we both know I’m losing this fight with myself.

“Only if you’re coming with me.” He pulls me closer, his breath hot against my face.

I release his shirt and step back. “This is a mistake.”

“Probably. Not like we’re strangers to bad decisions.”

“This needs to stop,” I say, betrayed by my own hands as I grab his waist.

“It will.” He traces the line of my jaw with his fingers. “Tomorrow, or the next day, when one of us says something unforgivable again. But tonight we’ll pretend we don’t hate each other.”

The inevitable truth of it crashes over me. We’re trapped in this loop, knowing exactly how much damage we do to each other but unable to break free.

“I should be keeping an eye on the party,” I say, a pathetic last stand.

Flint laughs, his mouth hovering near mine. “Always Mr. Responsible. Princess Waters will survive without her guard dog for an hour. Those security meatheads are good for something, at least.”

Somewhere in the distance, music from the party carries through the fog, reminding me I have actual responsibilities. But as Flint moves his hands with that infuriating familiarity over my body, those concerns fade like they never mattered. Nothing matters but this destructive attraction between us.

Tomorrow, I’ll hate myself for this. Tomorrow, I’ll remember all the reasons we’re fucking poison. But tonight, in the center of the maze where no one can find us unless they know the way, none of that matters.

Tonight, we'll pretend this sickness is something worth keeping, something worth the inevitable bloodshed that follows. And tomorrow, when the fog lifts, we'll go back to pretending we're strangers who just happen to share an island and too many secrets.

It's a sick pattern, predictable as the maze itself. Every turn leads back to the same center, no matter how hard I try to find another way out.

I fucking hate that he's here in my space, acting like he owns it. It's always like this with Flint, invading places that don't belong to him, including the parts of me I try to keep locked away.

I slap away his hand hard enough to leave a mark. Anger flashes on his face but morphs into something worse, something hungry that drags me in even as I fight it.

"You think you can show up, and I'll just roll over for you?"

"Yes," he says. Zero hesitation. Zero doubt.

I want to break his jaw for that certainty, for how he never backs down. I want to break it even more because he's right. The air between us crackles with violence and want, and it is dragging me toward him.

He reaches for me again, and this time I don't stop him. He grips my arm, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise. It's like a spark hitting gasoline, and we're on each other, all violence and teeth and ragged breath.

I slam him against the hedge wall, branches scratching my skin and catching in my clothes. He laughs, that rough sound that makes me want to hurt him. It's a fight and a dance, and neither of us knows the steps. Or maybe we know them too well to admit it.

His mouth finds mine, hard and demanding, and I bite his lip until I taste copper. He doesn't pull away, just presses closer, like he's trying to crawl inside me and tear me apart from within. His hands are everywhere, tearing at my clothes, and I don't stop him.

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I can't. I never could.

We crash to the ground, gravel biting into my back. He's on top of me, pinning me down, and it should feel like defeat, but it doesn't. It feels like the inevitable crash after a free fall.

I fight him, shoving and clawing, leaving welts on his skin, but it's no use. He knows me too well, knows exactly how to dismantle me piece by piece.

"Is this what you want?" he growls, his breath scalding against my neck.

I don't answer with words. I answer by yanking him closer, feeling his weight crushing me, his heatburning through me. It's too much and nowhere near enough.

He lets go of me to tear at his own clothes, and I seize my chance, flipping him onto his back with enough force to knock the breath from him. His eyes flash with surprise, then something darker, and he pulls me down into his gravity.

We roll through dirt and leaves, fighting for dominance then surrendering it in turns. My hands bruise his skin, and he marks me just as savagely. I want to break him, make him feel the same wreckage he leaves in me, but I never can. I'm the one left in pieces, every time, and the bastard knows it.

His cock is hard against me, and I grind down viciously, wanting to drive him as crazy as he's driving me. There's nothing sane about this, nothing healthy. It's desperate and raw, and I hate that it's exactly what I crave.

I need it like a drug.

He grips my hips hard enough to leave finger-shaped bruises, digging in like he thinks I might disappear. I want to tell him that's my plan, that I'll vanish and leave him hollow, but we both know I'll crawl back eventually.

I shove him down harder, and his breath hisses through clenched teeth. He's offering me that shit-eating grin that makes me want to split his lip and devour his mouth in the same breath.

"Damiano." He makes my name sound like a prayer and a curse.

His need is plastered across his face, raw and real and matching the hunger tearing through me. It always has. The fight's just foreplay, always was.

He licks his hand and pumps his cock.

He wants inside me, and as I position myself above him, I snarl, "Fuck you," the words breaking between harsh breaths.

He's grinning again, that wild look that feels like being gutted. "Yeah," he breathes. "That's the plan."

Without warning, he thrusts up brutally hard. There's no gentleness, no mercy, just the violent connecting of bodies. It feels like being punched and kissed simultaneously, and I gasp, choking on dirt and oxygen. He thrusts again, slick heat between us, and I feel myself coming undone.

"Faster," I demand, knowing he wants it too badly to refuse. He picks up speed, drilling into me with single-minded focus, not stopping until he gets what he wants and forces me to take what I need.

I slam my hips against him mindlessly, desperate for more, for everything. It's pure chaos. The gravel cutting into my knees should hurt, but it doesn't. Pain transforms into something sweeter.

"Is this it?" he taunts, lips grazing my ear, words sharp as knives. "This what you need?"

"Shut the fuck up," I hiss, nearly choking because I'm right on the edge.

Heat builds, impossibly tight, then detonates through me. I grab my cock, coming violently over the dirt beneath us.

Orgasm tears through me like lightning, leaving me shattered. I'm spinning out, unable to hold onto anything, especially not him. He rams into me once more, vicious and deep, cursing as he comes, fingers tangled painfully in my hair.

For a moment, it's just breath and heartbeats. Then his low, mocking laughter scrapes down my spine, and I know I've lost again.

"Fucking bastard," I say, rolling away from him as my voice breaks between gasps. Leaves and dirt cling to my sweaty back.

He props himself on one elbow. "But you can't stay away."

I don't answer, not with words. I don't need to.

He knows exactly how his smirk infects me like a disease. Maybe that's why I can't quit this toxic cycle, can't quit him. It's all teeth and hunger and need, and we're both starving.

Chapter 6

Briar

The party was a mistake.

I can feel it deep in my lungs, this heavy weight spreading through my body like quicksand. Too many people, too much noise, the air thick with perfume and alcohol and whatever sketchy stuff people smuggled into my house. My body's sending all the warning signals I've learned to recognize over the years, the telltale tremor in my fingers, cold sweat beading along my hairline despite being surrounded by sweaty bodies.

But I keep smiling anyway, nodding at whatever this woman from the harbor is saying about her son who's studying marine biology. Can't remember her name, even though she told me twice. My brain's going fuzzy, that familiar pre-crash fog rolling in.

"I need to check on something," I say, cutting her off mid-sentence. Rude, but whatever. "Excuse me."

I weave through the crowd, dodging grabbyhands and people calling my name. The great room looks nothing like the elegant, empty space it was this morning. Now it's bodies and spilled drinks everywhere, air thick with smoke that is not just tobacco. The antique furniture I spent hours covering is already uncovered in places, glasses leaving rings on wood that's survived a century without a scratch.

The party seemed like such a badass idea when I planned it, a big "fuck you" to Dad, to this stupid illness, to being locked away from the world. But now I want everyone gone.

I scan the room for either Damiano or that bartender with the white streak in his hair, Flint.

They were by the wall earlier, having what looked like an intense conversation—the kind where you stand way too close while pretending you hate the other person’s guts. I recognize that energy, saw enough of it at art school before I had to drop out.

Neither of them is anywhere. They disappeared around the same time, which seems... yeah, definitely not a coincidence.

I need air—real air, not this recycled party funk. And space. And quiet.

Sneaking out through the kitchen is way easier than trying to navigate the main hall. A few catering staff glance up as I pass, but nobody stops me. Outside, the night wraps around me like a cool washcloth on a fever. The fog’s grown thicker since sunset, muffling the sounds from the house, turning the garden lights into soft, glowing spheres that don’t quite illuminate anything.

I breathe in as deeply as my lungs will allow, the moisture in the air coating my throat.

Better. Not good, but better.

The path to the maze gleams pale gray in the darkness. I don’t need to go far—only far enough that I can’t hear the bass from whatever music is playing now.

My mind keeps circling back to Damiano and Flint, the way they looked at each other, having entire conversations without speaking. The tension in Damiano’s shoulders when Flint leaned in to whisper something.

They’re definitely fucking.

Or they have.

Or they want to.

Or all of the above.

Not surprising, honestly. They're both so intense in their own ways. Both so... much.

Like they're somehow larger than life. I try to imagine them together and feel heat rise to my face. It's not hard to picture, Damiano's tattooed hands on Flint's pale skin, those two completely different but equally magnetic forces colliding. Their bodies connecting...

Okay, stop. Just stop. It's none of my business who the groundskeeper hooks up with. Even if he did give me those herbs that worked better than any prescription my doctors have thrown at me over the years. Even if he gives off this hot, brooding vibe that I'm stupidly attracted to.

The entrance to the maze appears ahead, fog swirling between the high hedges like it's being sucked in and trapped. I hesitate at the threshold. I've never been good at navigating this place, even in daylight. At night, in this fog? I'll get lost in seconds.

But something draws me forward anyway. Curiosity. Or maybe just needing to be somewhere that doesn't feel like the walls are closing in.

The hedge walls rise on either side as I step into the first corridor, immediately muffling the distant sounds of the party even further. The air feels different in here, cooler and damper, with that green smell that reminds me of Damiano's greenhouse. I run my fingers along the leaves as I walk, feeling their waxy texture, the precision of the cuts—,maintained with an almost obsessive level of care.

Damiano definitely seems the obsessive type.

I take a left, then a right, letting instinct guide me. It's not like I need to find my way to the center. I only need a few minutes of quiet before I return to playing hostess to people I barely know.

But after a few more turns, I realize I'm completely lost. The paths are all identical in the dark, the fog making it impossible to figure out which way is which. I should turn back, retrace my steps, but I have no clue how many turns I've taken or in what order.

Shit.

I pull out my phone to use as a flashlight, but the battery's nearly dead, down to 3%. Of freaking course. Because tonight needed one more disaster.

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The weak light illuminates maybe three feet in front of me before dissolving into the fog. Useless. I'll save the last bit of battery in case I need to call someone.

I keep moving, hoping I'll stumble across a landmark I recognize or find my way back to the entrance. The distant thump of music helps orient me somewhat, at least I know which direction the house is in.

Then I hear it. A low whistle, melodic and haunting, coming from somewhere in the maze. It rises and falls in a pattern that makes the hair on my arms stand up.

The Hunt. That's the whistle from The Hunt.

Behind me, gravel crunches. Not my steps.

Someone else is in the maze. Someone whistling a Hunt call.

"Hello?" I call out, then immediately regret it. If it's someone from the party who followed me out here, the last thing I want to do is make it easier for them to find me. But if it's Damiano, he can help me find my way back.

No answer. Just more crunching gravel, closer now. The whistle comes again, closer this time.

"Damiano? Is that you?"

Still nothing. But whoever it is, they're not trying to hide their approach. The footsteps are steady, unhurried, like a hunter who knows their prey is cornered.

My heart starts hammering against my ribs. I turn and start walking faster, taking turns at random, no longer caring if I get more lost. Distance from whoever's following me seems more important.

I round a corner and find myself in a small circular clearing I don't recognize. Multiple paths branch off from it like spokes on a wheel. I pick one without hesitation, moving as quickly as I can without running.

The footsteps speed up, too. The whistle sounds again, almost playful.

Oh fuck this.

I start running, no longer caring about the noise I'm making. My lungs burn almost immediately, my crappy body reminding me it's not built for running anymore. Fear is a powerful motivator.

I take another turn, and another. The fog gets thicker with each step, or maybe that's my vision going dark as my lungs fail to get enough oxygen.

Something moves through the hedge to my right, someone taking a shortcut through the plants themselves, branches snapping as they force their way through.

I must stop, for a second. Just to catch my breath. I lean against the hedge wall, trying to be quiet despite the desperate heaving of my chest.

The footsteps and breaking branches stop, too.

Then a figure steps out of the fog ahead of me. The bone-white mask of a stag skull covers his face, antlers rising above his head like a crown. The Hunt mask. I freeze, terror washing through me.

The whistle comes again, this time from the masked figure. He tilts his head, studying me.

I try to run, but he's too fast. He closes his hand around my arm, above the elbow, yanking me back.

Chapter 7

Briar

"Whoa, hey, relax." The mask muffles his voice, and he pulls it off with his free hand to reveal Liam Bastian's face. His smile looks almost friendly. "Sorry if I scared you. Just having a little fun with the whole Hunt theme."

"What do you want?" I try to sound confident, but I sound breathless and weak.

"Nothing bad," he says, releasing my arm but staying close. "Just saw you slip away from the party. Thought you might need company." His tone is casual now, like we're just two people who ran into each other. "I brought this for the party," he adds, gesturing at the mask. "Pretty authentic, right?"

"I'm fine." I straighten, trying to look stronger than I feel. "I just needed some air."

"In the maze? At night?" He takes another step closer. I can smell alcohol on him. Way too strong, meaning he's been doing more than only drinking. "That seems dangerous for someone in your... condition."

The way he says "condition" makes my skin crawl. Like I'm dirty somehow because of it. I also hate that clearly the people of the island are talking about me. Everyone seems to know of my "condition".

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“I’m heading back now.” I try to move past him, but he shifts, blocking my path completely. “Excuse me.”

He shoots his hand out and grabs my arm just above the elbow. “Don’t be in such a hurry. The party’s not going anywhere.”

I try to pull away, but his grip tightens. “Let go of me.”

“Or what?” His smile widens, showing too many teeth like a predator. “You’ll run? We both know you can’t get very far. Not with those fucked-up lungs of yours.”

Fear turns my blood to ice. This isn’t merely some drunk guy being creepy. This is deliberate. Planned.

“People know I’m out here. They’ll come looking for me.”

He laughs. “No, they won’t. Everyone’s too wasted to notice you’re gone. And I saw how Damiano and Flint were watching you. But your two guard dogs are busy fucking each other somewhere else in this maze. I saw them go in earlier.”

So I was right about Damiano and Flint, but that doesn’t help me now.

I try again to wrench my arm free. This time, he releases me, but only to slam me hard against the hedge wall. The branches stab into my back through my thin dress. Before I can recover, he’s pressed against me, one hand gripping my throat, the other fumbling with the hem of my dress.

“I wanted to play a little Hunt game since I first saw you at the dock,” he growls, his breath hot and sour against my face. “All fragile and breakable looking. The whistle, the chase, the catch. That’s why I brought the mask. You’d make perfect prey.”

Panic floods my system, and I struggle against him, but he’s too strong, too solid. His hand tightens around my throat, enough to make spots dance at the edges of my vision.

“Stop fighting,” he says, managing to get my button undone. “Prey always says no at first. But we both know girls like you don’t get a lot of action.”

He slides his hand under my dress, rough and invasive. I try to scream, but his grip on my throat tightens, cutting it off. Tears spring to my eyes, partly from lack of oxygen, partly from rage and helplessness.

No. Not helpless. Not ever again.

I bring my knee up hard between his legs. It doesn’t connect as solidly as I’d hoped, but it’s enough to make him loosen his grip and curse.

“Fucking cunt!”

I try to run, but he recovers quickly, grabbing my hair and yanking me back so hard strands rip from my scalp. The pain explodes through my head, disorienting me. Before I can react, he slams me face-first into the hedge.

Something cracks in my nose, and hot blood gushes down my face, filling my mouth with copper. He spins me around again, and this time when he pins me, he holds my wrists above my head with one of his hands.

“Now you’ll get it rough,” he spits, using his free hand to push my dress up over my

hips. “Could’ve been fun if you’d played along.”

I twist my body, trying to knee him again, to find some leverage, but he’s got me completely immobilized. His weight crushes me against the hedge, branches scratching my exposed skin, drawing blood in dozens of tiny cuts.

He moves his hand between my legs again, fingers bruising, invasive, cruel. I feel something vile inside me, a sharp pain that makes me scream out despite the hand now clamped over my mouth.

“Shut your mouth,” he hisses. “No one’s coming to save you.”

I bite down on his hand as hard as I can and take the moment to scream again. He jerks back with a yell, and I use the moment to slam my forehead against his nose. It’s a move my dad’s security guy taught me years ago. Never thought I’d actually have to use it.

Blood sprays from Liam’s nose, but the blow costs me, too. My vision swims, darkness creeping in from the edges. But the pain in his face has loosened his grip enough for me to squirm partway free.

He recovers faster than I can escape, grabbing me by the shoulders and throwing me to the ground. The impact knocks every bit of air from my shitty lungs. I try to crawl away, but he’s on top of me in an instant, flipping me onto my back, his weight pinning me to the cold gravel.

“I’m gonna fucking kill you,” he snarls, blood dripping from his nose onto my face. “But not before I get what I came for.”

His hands are at his belt now, unfastening it with quick, practiced movements. I thrash beneath him, but each movement costs me oxygen I don’t have. Black spots

float across my vision. My strength is fading fast.

Using my hand, I desperately search the gravel around me for anything I can use. My fingers close around something solid, a decorative garden stake that's come loose from the path. About eight inches long, metal, with a sharp point for planting.

Liam doesn't notice, too focused on getting his pants open. "Stop fighting," he says with a grunt. "You'll like it once I'm inside you."

"Fuck you," I gasp, gathering the last of my strength.

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When he leans down, positioning himself between my legs, I bring the stake up with everyounce of force I can muster, aiming for his shoulder to disable him.

But he shifts at the last second, and the stake plunges into his neck instead.

There's a moment of perfect stillness. His eyes widen, shock replacing the lust and anger. Then the blood comes, so much fucking blood, pulsing out in rhythmic spurts that coat my hands, my chest, my face.

So. Much. Blood.

It's hot against my cold skin, almost burning, and the metallic smell fills my nose instantly, making me gag.

The stake must have hit a major blood vessel in his neck. Each heartbeat forces a fresh jet of crimson through the wound, spraying in an arc that catches the dim light. His white shirt turns dark in seconds, saturated and clinging to his chest.

He makes this wet, choking sound, hands grabbing at his neck, trying to pull out the stake. But the movement only seems to make it worse. Blood bubbles from his mouth now too, seeping between his teeth and dribbling down his chin. His eyes lock with mine, filled with disbelief and rage and then, slowly, fear.

He knows he's dying.

Dying...

I push him off me, scrambling backward until my spine hits the hedge wall. My hands slip in his blood, leaving smeared red handprints on the gravel. He collapses face-first, then rolls onto his back, body convulsing violently. His heels drum against the ground, sending gravel flying. A terrible gurgling comes from his throat as he tries to breathe through the blood. His hands still clutch uselessly at his neck, fingers slippery and failing to get purchase on the stake, leaving streaks across his skin with each attempt. Piss soaks through his pants as his body loses control. The convulsions grow more frantic, then gradually weaker, his back arching one final time before he goes limp.

One last wet, rattling breath escapes his lungs.

I should do something. Call someone. Try to help him. But I can't move. Can't look away. Can't even catch my breath.

The convulsions slow, then stop. His eyes stare at nothing, reflecting the faint, distant lights from the house.

He's dead. I killed him.

The thought hits me like a physical blow to the chest, making me double over. I retch, bringing up nothing but bile. My whole body shakes uncontrollably. I pull my dress down with numb, blood-slicked fingers.

What the fuck do I do now? Call the police? My father? Run?

Before I can decide, voices reach me through the fog. Familiar voices.

"...swear I heard something this way."

"Probably just drunk party people getting lost."

“It was definitely a scream. I’m sure of it.”

Damiano and Flint. Coming closer.

I should call out to them. Ask for help. But my voice won’t work. All that comes out is this broken noise, half sob and half moan.

It’s enough. The footsteps quicken then they’re there, appearing around the corner like they’ve materialized from the fog itself.

They both freeze when they see me, covered in blood, shaking against the hedge. Then their eyes move to Liam’s body, the stake still protruding from his neck, the blood pooling beneath him, almost black in the dim light.

“Holy fuck,” Flint breathes. He takes a step back, running his hand through his hair. “Is that... shit, that’s Liam Bastian.”

Damiano’s face goes dangerously still. “Viktor’s brother.”

The name hangs in the air between them. Even in my shocked state, I can see the color drain from Flint’s face.

“This is bad,” Flint says. “This is really fucking bad.”

Damiano moves first, kneeling beside me, careful not to touch me. “Briar. Are you hurt? Is any of this blood yours?”

I try to answer, but all that comes out is a strangled laugh that turns into tears. Words tumble out between sobs.

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“He followed me... he tried to... I couldn’t breathe... he was going to...”

“Shh.” Damiano’s presence is steady, calming. “You don’t have to explain. We can see what happened.”

Flint paces back and forth, then stops abruptly. “We need to call someone. Your father or?—”

“Her father?” Damiano snaps. “Maxwell Waters with all his money and mainland connections? You think that’ll help here?”

“Jesus.” Flint crouches next to Liam’s body, checking for a pulse he won’t find. His hands come away slick with blood. “He’s definitely dead.” He wipes his hands on his jeans, looking up at Damiano. “Viktor will tear this island apart looking for whoever did this. You know that, right?”

“I know.” Damiano says, nearly a whisper. “We’re all dead if he finds out.”

“Finds out what?” My voice cracks. “That his brother tried to rape someone and got killed in self-defense? That’s not a crime!”

Flint gives a bitter laugh. “You don’t know Viktor Bastian. He doesn’t care about right or wrong. His brother is dead. Someone’s going to pay.” He looks at Damiano. “And he already hates both of us.”

“Why?” I ask, my teeth chattering from shock.

“History,” Damiano says tersely. “Bad history.”

Flint turns back to Damiano. “We should get her out of here. Take her to the mainland. Tonight. Herfather can hide her somewhere until this blows over.”

“It won’t blow over,” Damiano says, still looking at me. “Viktor will find her. And when he does...”

“What then?” Flint gestures wildly at the body. “We can’t just leave him here!”

Damiano rubs his face, leaving a smear of blood across his cheek. “No, we can’t.”

He looks around the maze, then back at Liam’s body, as if calculating something. I can practically see his mind working, formulating a plan even as dread settles in his eyes.

“We need to clean this up. All of it.”

“What?” Now my voice works properly. “No, I need to... we should tell someone...”

“Tell who exactly?” Flint’s laugh is harsh. “No one on this island will take your side over a Bastian. Viktor rules people on this island by fear. Everyone’s either in his pocket or scared of him.”

“But it was self-defense! Look at me!” I gesture to my torn dress, the blood, his and mine, the bruises already forming on my throat. “He was wearing a Hunt mask. He chased me!”

“With the costume party theme back at the house? They’ll say you were both playing along,” Flint says bitterly. “Anyone can be convinced to see things Viktor’s way on this island.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Damiano says quietly. “Not on this island. Not with who his brother is.”

“My dad can fix this,” I say, grasping at anything. “He has money, lawyers...”

“This isn’t Seattle,” Flint says. “You can’t throw money at island justice. Viktor doesn’t follow normal rules.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

Damiano and Flint exchange a look that makes my stomach drop.

“It means Viktor handles things his own way,” Damiano says carefully. “People who cross the Bastians don’t end up in jail. They end up missing. Or worse.”

Damiano is looking around, like he’s formulating a plan. “Flint’s right. The people here... his brother and their connections... Briar, we need to hide this. Your dad can’t help us with this.”

“Us?” I squeak. “You’re both involved now, too?”

“Fuck me,” Flint says like that’s his way of saying yes. “Moment we stepped into this clearing, we were involved. Accessories after the fact, if anyone asks.”

“I didn’t ask you to help me,” I whisper.

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“Doesn’t matter now,” Damiano says. “We’re in this. All three of us.”

I stare at them both, the reality of my situation sinking in. They’re right. Even if I could prove what happened, even if people believed me, there would be a trial. Publicity. My father’s name dragged through the mud. My medical history exposed, picked apart by lawyers trying to paint me as unstable, dangerous.

And that’s assuming we made it to trial. The look Damiano and Flint share suggests Viktor’s revenge would come long before any legal proceedings.

“What do we do?” I whisper.

Damiano and Flint exchange another long look, some silent communication passing between them.

“We could burn the body,” Flint suggests quietly. “Take it deep into the forest...”

“Too risky,” Damiano counters. “Fire would draw attention. And moving him off the property leaves a trail.”

Flint gestures helplessly at the body. “We can’t leave him here.”

“No.” Damiano’s gaze moves around the clearing, calculating. “But we don’t have to move him far.”

This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening. My mind is spiraling into a dark pit of despair. Jesus Christ, this can’t be happening.

“We bury him,” Damiano says finally. “Here in the maze. No one will find him.”

“How can you be so sure?” My question sounds strange in my own ears, too calm now.

“Because I know every inch of this place,” he says. “And I know which plants grow fastest over disturbed soil. Which ones hide the smell of decomposition.”

“If anyone asks,” Flint adds, “Liam Bastian got wasted and wandered off from the party. Who the hell knows where.”

“Why would you help me?” I ask, looking between them. “You don’t even know me.”

Flint’s smile is grim. “Let’s just say Liam Bastian won’t be missed. Not by us, anyway.” He scans my body. “And if he did to you what I think he did...”

“He tried... Only tried,” I correct.

Damiano stands, offering me his hand. “We need to get you cleaned up before anyone sees you like this. Then we’ll come back for him.”

I take his hand, but I don’t have the strength to stand quite yet. “I killed someone.”

“No,” Damiano says, his eyes meeting mine, steady and certain. “You survived someone who was trying to take what wasn’t his, and who would’ve killed you to keep it quiet. Big difference.”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak again. I killed someone. No matter how they try to spin it, that’s the truth.

Chapter 8

Flint

One second you're having hate-sex with your ex in a foggy maze, and the next you're staring at a dead body and a blood-soaked girl who's shaking so hard her teeth are chattering. Life on this fucked-up island never gets boring.

"We need to move," I say, trying to remain calm. Panic's contagious, and right now, one panicking person is already one too many.

Damiano's kneeling next to Briar, careful not to touch her. Smart. After what just happened, unexpected contact would send her spiraling.

"Can you walk?" he asks her.

She nods, but when she tries to stand, her legs fold beneath her. Instinctively, I reach out to catch her, but Damiano moves faster, slipping his arm around her waist.

"I've got you," he says, gentler than I've everheard from him. It stirs something in my chest I don't want to examine too closely.

Liam's body sprawls on the gravel, blood still seeping from the wound in his neck, though the spurting has stopped. The stake glints in the dim light filtering through the fog. That's evidence we can't leave behind.

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“We need to get her out of here,” I say to Damiano. “Not through the house. Too many people.”

He nods, understanding immediately. “The eastern path through the forest. It connects to the harbor road.”

“My place is closest,” I say. “The shipping container.” I turn to Briar, who’s staring blankly at Liam’s body. “Hey.” I step into her line of sight, blocking her view. “Look at me, not him.”

Her eyes are glassy, unfocused. Shock. I’ve seen it before on the fishing boats after accidents. “We’re going to my place. It’s safe. No one will look for you there.”

She blinks, trying to process. “But the party...”

“Damiano will handle it,” I say, looking at him. “Right?”

He hesitates, glancing between Briar and me, then at the body. “I’ll tell everyone she got a migraine and went to bed. Send them home. Then come back for... this.”

“Can you manage alone?” I ask.

A shadow crosses his face. “I know what I’m doing.” His voice is flat, emotionless—professional almost, like this isn’t his first cleanup job.

It’s not reassuring, exactly, but it’s what we need right now.

“Take this.” I slip off my leather jacket and hand it to Damiano. “Cover her with it. Hide the blood.”

He wraps it around Briar’s shoulders, and it swallows her small frame, making her look even more fragile.

“The eastern fence has a loose section,” I tell him. “Behind the old elm that got hit by lightning last year. You can get through there without being seen from the house.”

He raises an eyebrow. “How do you know that?”

“I’ve been checking the perimeter of these fancy estates for years,” I admit. “Old habits. Rich people always have the best shit to steal, and I like knowing all the entry points.”

“Of course you do.” He shakes his head, but without real judgment.

“Meet us at my place when you’re done here,” I say. “You remember where it is?”

He narrows his eyes and clenches his jaw. “I remember.”

Right. The last time he was there, things didn’t end well between us. Another memory best left buried for now.

“Go,” he says. “I’ll handle this.”

I turn to Briar, who’s leaning heavily against him. “I’m going to take your other side, okay? We need to move fast.”

She nods, still dazed but at least responsive. I slip my arm around her waist, opposite Damiano’s, and she flinches before forcing herself to relax.

“Ready?” I ask.

She takes a shuddering breath. “Ready.”

We guide her through the maze, Damiano leading with the confidence of someone who helped build the damn thing. Every turn looks the same to me, but he never hesitates. The moonlight occasionally breaks through the fog, illuminating the path ahead in brief, silver flashes.

Briar stumbles more than once, her strength clearly fading. The next time she nearly goes down, I decide.

“This isn’t working,” I say, stopping. “I’m going to carry you.”

She stiffens. “I can walk.”

“Maybe, but not fast enough.” I meet her eyes directly. “I’m not him. I’m not going to hurt you. But we need to move, and you’re about to collapse.”

She holds my gaze for a long moment, then gives a small nod.

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“I’ll lift you on three,” I say. “One, two, three.”

I scoop her up as gently as I can, one arm under her knees, the other supporting her back. She weighs almost nothing, light as driftwood. Her body is rigid at first, but as we start moving again, she gradually relaxes, her head eventually resting against my shoulder.

She’s ice cold. Even through my jacket and her clothes, I can feel it. Her skin has that bluish tint around the edges, like someone who’s been in the water too long.

“Is she always this cold?” I ask Damiano quietly.

“I can hear you,” Briar says, muffled against my shoulder. “And yes, I’m always this cold. Poor circulation. Part of the autoimmune package deal.”

I glance down, surprised to hear her speak with strength. There’s a touch of irritation in her tone despite her obvious exhaustion.

“Sorry,” I say. “Didn’t think you were still with us.”

“Just because I’m not talking doesn’t mean I’m not here.” She shifts slightly in my arms. “And I don’t need you two discussing me like I’m some fragile damsel who needs rescuing. I can handle myself.”

Damiano catches my eye, the corner of his mouth quirking up slightly. Good. She still has some fight in her.

When we reach the edge of the property, Damiano guides us to the section of fence I told him about. Sure enough, several planks are loose, creating a gap just wide enough to slip through.

“I’ll go back now,” he says, his eyes lingering on Briar. “Make sure everyone leaves. Then deal with... the rest.”

“Be careful,” I say, surprising myself with how much I mean it.

He gives me a look, somewhere between annoyance and something softer. “Yeah.”

Before going, he reaches out, briefly touching Briar’s shoulder. “You’re going to be okay,” he tells her. “We won’t let anything happen to you.”

She doesn’t respond, but her eyes follow him as he turns and disappears back into the fog.

The forest path is narrow and dark, barely visible in the misty moonlight. I’ve walked it a hundred times, though, even drunk out of my mind, so my feet know the way. Briar shivers continuously in my arms, small tremors that seem to start deep inside her.

“Almost there,” I tell her, though my place is still a good ten minutes away. “Just hang on.”

She nods against my shoulder. “I killed him,” she whispers, the first words she’s spoken since we left the maze.

“Yeah, you did.” No point in sugarcoating it. “And he had it coming.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“I know.” I adjust my grip, pulling her closer to share what warmth I can. “But if you hadn’t, he would have killed you. Or worse.”

“There’s something worse than death?” Her question is distant, almost dreamy.

“Living with what he would have done to you,” I say. “Trust me, you made the right choice.”

We walk in silence for a while, the only sounds our breathing and the occasional snap of twigs beneath my boots. The fog thins as we get closer to the eastern cliffs, where my container home sits overlooking the water.

“Why are you helping me?” she asks. “You don’t even know me.”

I could give her some bullshit answer about basic human decency, but she deserves better than that. “I knew Liam Bastian. He was a piece of shit who hurt people for fun. Got away with it because his brother protects him.” I pause. “Protected him.”

“His brother?”

“Viktor Bastian. Head of security at The Vault. Mean motherfucker with connections all over the island.” I step over a fallen log, careful not to jostle her. “When he finds out Liam’s missing, there’ll be questions.”

“Will he come after me?”

“Not if he can’t connect you to it.” I glance down at her. “That’s why we’re cleaning this up. Making it disappear.”

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

I snort. “You didn’t drag me anywhere. I stepped in willingly. So did Damiano.”

My place comes into view as we round the last bend in the path. It’s not much—an old shipping container I bought for next to nothing and converted into a living space. Painted black with a corrugated metal roof I added to keep out the constant rain. Solar panels provide enough power for the basics. It’s perched right at the edge of the cliff, giving me the best view on the island and ensuring no neighbors.

“Home sweet home,” I say, shifting her weight to get my key from my pocket.

Inside, it’s sparse but clean. One big room with different areas for sleeping, eating, and living. The back wall is all windows, salvaged from a demolition site in Seattle, looking out over the cliff to the water below. A wood stove in the corner provides heat, and a small kitchenette with a propane stove occupies one end.

I set Briar down carefully on the couch—a massive leather thing I found abandoned by the side of the road and restored. She sinks into it, still shivering, clutching my jacket around her.

“First things first,” I say, moving to the wood stove. “We need to get you warm.”

I stack kindling and logs inside, lighting them with a long match. The fire catches quickly, crackling to life. Next, I fill a kettle and set it on the propane stove.

“I’m going to get you something clean to wear,” I tell her. “Those clothes need to be

burned.”

She looks down at herself, as if just now noticing the blood that covers her. It’s everywhere—soaked through her clothes, crusted in her hair, dried in flaking patterns across her neck and jawline. Even her fingernails are rimmed with dark crescents of Liam’s blood.

“Oh,” she says, the single syllable heavy with realization.

I’m not much better off. Carrying her has transferred a good portion of the blood to my clothes and skin. Rust-colored smears across my arms, damp patches on my shirt where her body pressed against mine.

“We both need to clean up,” I say, grabbing the cleanest things I can find from my dresser—a black thermal shirt and a pair of sweatpants with a drawstring she can tighten to fit her much smaller frame.

“Bathroom’s through there,” I say, pointing to the only interior door. “There should be towels and hot water if you want to clean up first. Probably best to rinse your hair, too.” I place the clothes on the small table in front of her. “Take your time. I’ll burn these clothes once you’re done.”

She stares at her red-stained hands, turning them over as if seeing them for the first time. “It’s... everywhere.”

“Arterial spray does that,” I say, then immediately regret my bluntness when she flinches. “Sorry. Just... yeah. Go get cleaned up.”

She stares at the clothes, then at me, still not fully present. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

When she doesn't move, I crouch in front of her, maintaining enough distance not to crowd her. "Hey. Briar. You need to get cleaned up before Damiano gets here. We need to talk about what happens next, and you'll think clearer once you're warm and not covered in... that."

She nods slowly, then stands, gathering the clothes against her chest. "How long do you think before he gets here?"

"Depends how many drunk assholes he has to kick out of your house." I offer a small smile. "The hot water tank's small, so don't take too long."

When she disappears into the bathroom, I let out a long breath. Fuck. What a night.

I move to the kitchenette, pulling out mugs and tea bags. The cheap herbal shit tastes like grass clippings, but it's better than nothing. I add honey to both mugs, then a generous splash of whiskey. Medicinal purposes.

The bathroom door opens, and Briar emerges, swimming in my clothes. She's washed the blood from her face and hands, but a few dried flecks remain in her hairline. Her wet hair hangs in dark ropes around her face. The bruises on her neck are darkening already, forming the distinct pattern of fingertips.

"Better?" I ask.

She nods, folding her arms across her chest.

"Tea's almost ready. Sit by the fire."

She does, perching on the edge of the couch nearest the wood stove. The light from the flames makes her look even more ghostly, highlighting the dark circles under her eyes and the pallor of her skin.

I bring the mugs over, handing her one. “Careful, it’s hot. And there’s whiskey in it.”

She accepts it with both hands, letting the warmth seep into her fingers. “Thanks.”

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“I need to clean up, too.” I gesture to the bloodstains on my arms and clothes. “Give me two minutes.”

I grab a change of clothes and head to the bathroom, leaving the door cracked so I can hear if she needs anything. The mirror confirms what I already knew. I’m a mess. Blood has dried on my forearms and neck, and my shirt is ruined. I strip it off and use a washcloth to quickly scrub away the evidence, watching pink-tinged water swirl down the drain.

When I return, Briar has sipped about half her tea. Some color has returned to her face as the warmth and whiskey hit her system.

“Better?” I settle across from her.

She nods. “Better.”

We sit in silence for a while, the crackling of the fire the only sound. The silence should be awkward, but somehow it’s not. Maybe because we’ve both seen too much tonight for small talk to matter.

“You have a nice place,” she says, looking around. “It’s not what I expected.”

“What did you expect? A cardboard box under a bridge?”

She winces. “I didn’t mean?—”

“I’m messing with you,” I say, softening my tone. “Most people are surprised. They

hear ‘shipping container on the cliffs’ and picture something a lot worse.”

“I like it,” she says. “It feels... real.”

I look around, seeing my space through her eyes. The salvaged furniture. The collected bits of beach glass and driftwood arranged on shelves. The guitar in the corner I’m still teaching myself to play. The sketches tacked to the walls—my attempts at capturing the island’s coastline.

“It’s home,” I say.

She pulls her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. The shivering has subsided, but she still looks like she might shatter if touched.

“My clothes,” she says suddenly. “Where are they?”

“In the bathroom still?”

“You’re right. We need to burn them,” she says. “And I need to check my phone. And what about security cameras? Does the maze have cameras?”

“Whoa, slow down.” I hold up a hand. “One thing at a time. Your clothes—yes, we’ll burn them. The phone—it’s probably best to leave it off for now. Cameras—not in the maze itself, I’d bet, but maybe at the entrance. Damiano will know.”

She takes a deep breath, then another. “Right. Yes. Damiano will know.”

The way she says his name catches my attention. Like she’s already placing a certain level of trust in him. I’m not sure how I feel about that.

“He’ll be here soon,” I assure her, though I have no idea how long it will take him to

clear the party and deal with Liam's body. "In the meantime, try to rest. You're safe here."

She looks at me—really looks at me for the first time since we arrived. "Have you lived on the island your whole life?"

"Born and raised," I say. "Eastside kid. Where the non-rich people live."

"But you don't live there now."

"No. I got out. Sort of." I take a sip of my tea. "Found this place, fixed it up. It's far enough out that I don't have to deal with anyone unless I want to."

"And The Vault? You work there?"

"Head bartender." I can't help the hint of pride that creeps into my voice. "Started as a bouncer, worked my way up."

She nods, processing this. "And you and Damiano..."

Here we go. "What about us?"

"You have history."

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My laugh sounds harsher than I intended. “That’s one way to put it.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” she says quickly. “It’s none of my business.”

“You’re right, it’s not.” I stand, putting some distance between us. “But considering we’re all now bound together by a dead body, I guess some honesty is in order.” I turn to face her. “We were together. Now we’re not. Except sometimes we are, when we both get stupid enough to forget why we shouldn’t be.”

“Like tonight,” she says softly.

“Like tonight,” I agree. “Look, it’s complicated. This island is small. Everyone has history with everyone else. Especially when you grow up on the wrong side of it.”

“Were you both...? I mean, did you grow up together?”

I shake my head. “Not exactly. I’m island-born. From the Eastside. Damiano’s mom was from here, but his dad was Italian. Seasonal chef for the summer people. They lived half the year here, half in Italy, until his dad left. Then it was just him and his mom in Cottage Row.”

“And you met...”

“Working. I was delivering fish to the big houses. He was gardening.” I shrug. “Started talking. Found out we both hated the same people.”

She smiles faintly. “Bonding over mutual hatred.”

“Something like that.” I don’t tell her about the other things we discovered we had in common. The darkness that recognized itself in each other. The way we both learned to survive on an island that eats its young.

A knock at the door makes us both jump. Three quick taps, then two slow ones. I recognize the pattern—Damiano’s, from years ago when we used to meet in secret.

“It’s him,” I say, moving to the door.

When I open it, Damiano stands there, looking exhausted. His clothes are dirty, with dark stains.

“It’s done,” he says simply, stepping inside.

I close the door behind him, throw the deadbolt. “Everyone gone?”

He nods. “Told them Briar wasn’t feeling well. That her condition was acting up. Most people were drunk enough not to question it.” He looks past me to where Briar sits by the fire. “You okay?”

Her nod is unconvincing.

“The body?” I ask quietly.

“Buried in the center of the maze. Under the west corner of the gazebo.” He runs a hand through his hair, which has come partly loose from its tie. “It’s shallow for now. I had to work fast. We’ll need to go back tomorrow and do it right, dig deeper when there aren’t so many people around. I’ll plant specific things over it, too—things that grow quickly and help with... decomposition.”

The matter-of-fact way he says it should be disturbing, but instead I find it reassuring.

Damiano has always been thorough.

“His phone?” I ask.

“Destroyed. Buried separately.”

He nods, then moves toward Briar, crouching in front of her like I did earlier. “I brought something for you.” He withdraws a small paper package from his pocket. “Herbs. For shock and pain. It will help you sleep.”

She takes it, her fingers brushing his. “Thank you.”

Looking at them both—Damiano with his dirt-smudged clothes and Briar with her bruised neck and borrowed clothes—I’m struck by how surreal this all is. Twenty-four hours ago, we were strangers. Now we’re bound together by blood and secrets.

Damiano glances down at himself, grimacing at the dark stains on his clothes and the dirt caked under his fingernails. “I need to clean up.”

“You know where everything is,” I say, my tone neutral despite the memories my words evoke. “There should be enough hot water left for a quick rinse. I’ll grab you some clothes.”

He nods gratefully, the exhaustion evident in the slump of his shoulders. “Thanks.”

“It’s late.” I glance at the clock on the wall. Nearly 3 AM. “We all need sleep if we’re going to pull this off tomorrow.”

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Damiano nods. “I should get back after I clean up. Make sure everything at the estate is secure.”

“You can stay,” I offer, surprising myself. “The couch is comfortable enough.” I nod toward Briar. “She shouldn’t be alone tonight anyway.”

“I can make my own decisions,” Briar says with strength. She sits up straighter, pulling the blanket around her shoulders like armor. “And I’d prefer you both stay. I get a say in this.”

She flicks her gaze between us, the shock from earlier replaced by something steadier, more resolute. The fragile girl I carried through the forest is finding her backbone again, piece by piece.

“Of course.” Damiano’s words are gentler than I’ve heard in years. It’s his tone with her. Soft. Different than how he’s ever spoken to me. “Whatever you want.”

“What I want is for us to figure out what happens next,” she says. “And not to be alone with... with what I did.”

“Fair enough,” I say. “Briar, you take the bed. Damiano, you’ve got the couch.”

I glance toward my bed—a simple platform frame with a decent mattress pushed against the far wall of the container. It looks suddenly small and exposed in the open-plan space.

Damiano starts to argue, but I hold up a hand. “This isn’t a debate. I’ve slept in worse

places than my own floor.” To emphasize the point, I grab the sleeping bag from the storage trunk at the foot of my bed and unroll it near the wood stove.

Briar looks like she might protest, too, but fatigue wins out. She nods weakly and moves toward the bed, sinking onto the edge of the mattress.

“There’s extra blankets in that trunk,” I tell Damiano, pointing. “Help yourself.”

He nods, his expression softening for a moment. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, well.” I shrug, uncomfortable with the gratitude. “Just don’t hog all the blankets.”

That gets me a small smile from Briar, which feels like a victory.

I pour the rest of the hot water from the kettle into a mug and hand it to Briar.

“For the herbs,” I explain. “Something tells me you don’t swallow them dry.”

She adds the powder from Damiano’s paper package to the tea. The earthy smell fills the small space.

“Drink it all,” Damiano tells her. “It will help with the pain and help you sleep.”

She does, grimacing slightly at the taste but finishing it anyway. Within minutes, her eyelids are drooping where she sits on the edge of the bed. She’s barely conscious as she curls onto her side, pulling the comforter around her.

Chapter 9

Flint

I watch Briar fall asleep, her breathing getting deeper as Damiano's herbs kick in. For the first time since we found her in the maze, she looks almost peaceful. The bruises on her neck stand out against her pale skin, a fucked-up reminder of how close this night came to ending way worse.

"She'll sleep through till morning," Damiano says quietly. "Maybe longer."

He heads to the bathroom with the clothes I left out for him. When the door closes, I exhale slowly and roll my shoulders.

I add more wood to the stove and adjust the damper to keep it burning slowly all night. Outside, the fog's pressed up against the windows like it's trying to get in. All I can hear is the waves crashing against the cliffs below.

When Damiano emerges from the bathroom, I almost drop the mug I'm washing. He's only wearing the gray sweatpants I gave him, hanging low on his hips. No shirt. His hair's loose and wet, dripping down onto his shoulders and chest.

I forget sometimes how much ink he's got. The tattoos I saw earlier when his sleeves were rolled up are nothing compared to the full canvas. His entire upper body's covered in black botanical designs with bits of dark green and purple mixed in.

A huge nightshade plant stretches from his right shoulder blade around to his collarbone. The berries are done in a deep purple that looks almost black in the dim light. Vines wrap around his ribs, and old symbols—Norse and Celtic stuff—cover his chest and upper arms. I used to know the story behind every one, used to trace them with my fingers. My tongue.

But it's not only the tattoos that get me. It's everything else, too. The lean muscle from years of digging and hauling shit around gardens. His right side's always been a bit bigger than his left from all the one-sided work. The scars that criss-cross his

forearms—some from thorns and tools, others from fights I remember all too well.

I look away and focus on drying the mugs. “There’s coffee for tomorrow,” I say, for the sake of saying something. “And bread if you’re hungry now.”

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“I’m fine.” His voice is rough, like he needs sleep. “Got anything stronger than tea?”

I grab the whiskey bottle from the cabinet and pour him a glass. “Here.”

He takes it, our fingers brushing for a second. That old familiar jolt. He downs it in one go, grimacing as it hits.

“Liam Bastian going missing is gonna be a problem.” He puts down the glass. “A big fucking problem.”

“No shit.” I pour myself a drink, too. My nerves need it. “Viktor’s gonna tear this island apart looking for his brother.”

“And when he doesn’t find him?” Damiano’s eyes look almost black with worry. “We’re fucked, Flint. All of us.”

“We stick to the story, and we’ll be fine.” I lean against the counter, trying to look more chill about this than I feel. “Liam got wasted at the party, hit on some chicks, then bounced. Nobody knows where he went. End of story.”

“Viktor won’t buy that. He knows his brother too well.”

“That’s exactly why it works.” I take a swig of whiskey, letting it burn all the way down. “Everyone knows Liam’s a creep who preys on women. Him disappearing after a party full of drunk girls? Makes perfect sense. Maybe he found some tourist to harass. Maybe he fell off the dock. Maybe he’s sleeping it off in someone’s bed.”

Damiano runs his hand through his wet hair and pushes it back from his face. I catch sight of that constellation tattoo on his wrist—tiny dots that map out the stars from the night we first met. I watched him get that one.

“Viktor has connections with the worst people on this island,” he says, pacing around my small space. “The kind that make prison look like a fucking vacation. If he even thinks for a second we had something to do with his brother going missing...”

“He doesn’t know about Briar,” I point out. “He’s got no reason to connect her to any of this.”

“Unless someone saw her leave the party. Or saw us in the maze.” He stops pacing and looks right at me. “We weren’t exactly being discreet before all this went down.”

My face heats up remembering Damiano pinning me against the hedge wall, his hand over my mouth to keep me quiet, his body hard against mine. That mix of anger and want that’s always been our thing.

“Nobody saw us,” I say, more confident than I actually am. “And even if they did, so what? Us hooking up in the maze isn’t exactly breaking news on this island.”

“It connects us to where his brother disappeared,” Damiano says, clearly frustrated. “Use your fucking head, Flint.”

“I am using my head,” I snap back. “And I’m saying we stick to the story. Liam left the party. Nobody knows where he went. Period.”

Damiano moves right into my space, close enough that I can smell my own soap on his skin. It’s messing with my head. “And what about Briar? She killed a man tonight. Self-defense or not, that changes a person.”

I glance over at her curled up on my bed, looking so small. “She’s tougher than she looks.”

“Maybe,” he admits, “but she’s also sick. And now she’s dealing with trauma on top of whatever’s already wrong with her.” His eyes catch mine, serious as hell. “We need to protect her, Flint. From Viktor, from this island, from herself, if we have to.”

“I know,” I say quietly. “I will. We will.”

Just like that, we’re on the same team again. Whatever shit’s gone down between us, we’re both all in on keeping Briar safe.

Damiano nods and backs up, giving me room to breathe again. He rolls his shoulders, making all the tattoos shift with the muscles underneath. That’s when I notice a new one on his lower back—an intricate maze pattern done in black ink.

“When’d you get that one?” I nod toward it.

He glances back, knowing exactly which tattoo I mean. “Last year. Seemed fitting.”

“The Waters maze?”

He nods. “I redesigned it. Made it mine.”

Damiano’s always been possessive about the gardens he works in, but this feels different. More personal.

“You’ve always been good at making shit grow,” I say. “Even on this fucked-up island.”

A ghost of a smile crosses his lips. “Not everything. Some things I’ve been

particularly good at destroying.”

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The words hang between us, heavy with all our baggage.

I clear my throat. “We should crash. Tomorrow’s gonna be a long day.” I nod toward the couch.

He heads there. The way the sweatpants hang on his hips, it’s obvious he’s not wearing anything underneath. I look away and focus on banking the fire.

“Flint?” He’s softer now.

I look up, keeping my face neutral. “Yeah?”

“Thanks. For letting us stay. For helping her.” He pauses. “For still having my back after everything.”

The honesty catches me off guard. We don’t do this. This straight-up communication thing. We fight, we fuck, we bail. Repeat. This is new territory, and it’s throwing me off.

“Don’t mention it,” I say, rougher than I intend to. “Just get some sleep.”

I turn away and get my bed situation sorted. Unroll the sleeping bag by the stove, grab a pillow from the trunk, and try to get comfortable on the floor. Across the room, I hear Damiano settling on the couch, the leather creaking under his weight.

For a while, all I hear is the fire crackling and waves hitting the cliffs. I stare at the ceiling, too wired to sleep despite being exhausted. My mind keeps replaying

everything—Briar covered in blood, the stake in Liam's neck, Damiano's hands all dirty from burying a body.

"I used to miss this place, you know," Damiano says, so quiet I almost don't hear him.

I know exactly what he means. This space. Us. The weird peace we sometimes find between all the mayhem.

"Yeah." I keep my voice just as low. "Me, too."

In the dim light from the dying fire, with Briar's steady breathing between us, I can almost believe we could find that peace again.

Almost.

But as I drift off, one thought stays with me: nothing binds people together like blood.

And now all three of us are covered in it.

Chapter 10

Briar

The body doesn't look real under the pale morning light.

I stand between Flint and Damiano at the edge of the shallow grave, staring at what's left of Liam. His face is partially covered with loose soil, one arm bent at an unnatural angle. The stake is gone. Damiano must have removed it. In the daylight, everything seems both more brutal and more ordinary. Just a dead man in a hole in

the ground.

“It needs to be deeper,” Damiano says. “At least three more feet.”

“And it needs to be fast,” Flint adds, scanning the perimeter of the maze. “Someone might notice if we’re out here too long.”

Despite the morning chill, sweat trickles down my back. I slept for maybe four hours at Flint’s place before the nightmares started. Dead eyes. Blood spray. That moment when the stake slid into Liam’s throat and I felt the resistance, then the give. I woke up gasping, and within minutes we were walking through the fog back to my family’s estate.

I swallow hard, throat dry. “What do we do?”

Damiano hands me a shovel. “We dig.”

Flint gives him a look. “She doesn’t need to?—”

“I can dig,” I cut in, gripping the shovel tightly. My knuckles turn white against the wooden handle. He obviously believes I’m too fragile for this. Too sick. Too privileged. Too whatever. “This is my mess. I did this.”

Damiano nods, something like respect flickering across his face. He starts digging at one end of the grave, his movements methodical and practiced. Flint takes the other end, working with quick, forceful thrusts of his shovel. I position myself at the middle, between them.

The first shovelful is the hardest. My arms protest immediately, muscles reminding me that they’re accustomed to lifting cameras, not digging graves. But I keep going, ignoring the burn spreading through my shoulders and back. The repetitive motion is

almost hypnotic.

Dig, lift, toss. Dig, lift, toss.

Don't look at the body.

Don't think about what you're doing.

I dig for a few minutes in silence, the only sounds our labored breathing and the shovels cutting into earth. My mind keeps racing, jumping between panic and an eerie calm.

"At least with Mrs. Fletcher gone for the weekend, we don't have to worry about explaining this," I say, needing to cut through the silence.

"That's one lucky break," Flint says, wiping sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. "But we still need to move quickly. People from town might come looking for Liam soon."

"His brother will tear this place apart," Damiano says, digging faster.

"Right," Flint scoffs. "Because Viktor's so fucking thorough."

"More thorough than you ever were," Damiano shoots back.

"Guys," I interrupt, feeling tension building between them like an electrical storm. "Not now."

They fall silent, but the air crackles with unspoken history. I focus on digging, even

as my arms start to shake with fatigue. The hole gets deeper, our piles of dirt growing alongside it.

Twenty minutes in, my breathing gets ragged. I try to hide it, but of course Damiano notices.

“Take a break,” he says, stopping to look at me. His dark hair is tied back, a few strands escaping to frame his face. “You’re pushing too hard.”

“I’m fine,” I say. The response is practically programmed into me after years of illness.

“No, you’re not,” Flint says, also pausing. “Your lips are turning blue.”

I touch my mouth self-consciously. “That happens sometimes. Poor circulation.”

“Sit.” Damiano points to a nearby stone bench. “Five minutes.”

“We don’t have five minutes.” I jab my shovel into the dirt. “Viktor could already be looking for Liam. We need to finish this and get the hell out.”

“And what good is it if you collapse?” Damiano snaps. “You want to deal with a medical emergency in the middle of all this? Or explain to anyone why you passed out in the maze with a body?”

I try to keep digging, but my vision starts to swim. I stumble slightly, grabbing the edge of the grave to steady myself.

Flint notices and swears under his breath. “Now. Take a minute,” he adds, still digging but glancing at me with reluctant concern. “Sit before you fall.”

I want to argue more, but my body makes the decision for me. I sink onto the stone bench, watching them work. The sun momentarily breaks through the fog, illuminating the scene in stark detail. Two men digging a grave, dirt-streaked and intense, while a corpse waits patiently for its final resting place.

“So what’s the deal with you two anyway?” I ask, partly to distract myself, partly because I genuinely want to know. “What happened?”

They exchange a glance, a whole wordless conversation passing between them.

“Nothing worth talking about.” Flint returns to his digging with even more aggression.

Damiano merely shakes his head and keeps working, his expression unreadable.

“Right,” I say dryly. “Nothing. That’s why you can barely look at each other without either wanting to punch or kiss each other.”

Flint chokes on a laugh, caught off guard by my bluntness. Damiano’s eyes widen slightly before his face settles back into its controlled mask.

“You should rest, not analyze us,” Damiano says, but there’s less edge to his statement now.

“I’m sitting. I’m resting. And I’m curious,” I say, feeling steadier as I catch my breath. “We’re literally burying a body together. I think that earns me at least the cliff notes version.”

“It’s complicated,” Flint says.

“No shit,” I reply. “I got that much.”

Damiano sighs. “We were together for two years. It ended badly. Now we’re stuck on the same island, trying to avoid each other and failing spectacularly.” He thrusts his shovel into the dirt with more force than necessary. “End of story.”

“That’s the sanitized version,” Flint mutters. “Missing a few key details.”

“Like what?” I push, oddly emboldened by the absurdity of our situation.

“Like how he disappeared for three months with no explanation,” Flint says, glaring at Damiano. “Or how he came back like nothing happened and expected everything to be normal.”

“I told you why I left,” Damiano says quietly, dangerously.

“No, you gave me some bullshit about ‘finding yourself’ in Italy,” Flint snaps. “While I was here thinking you were dead in a ditch somewhere.”

“I needed space.”

“You needed an excuse,” Flint snarls, stepping closer to Damiano. “You fucking ran when things got real. Just like you always do.”

Damiano throws down his shovel, closing the distance between them. “You want to

do this now? Really?” His voice drops to a menacing whisper. “You want to talk about who ran? How about when you were screwing that tourist behind my back and then acted like it meant nothing?”

“That’s not what happened, and you know it,” Flint hisses, his hands balling into fists. “But sure, twist it around. Make yourself the victim. Again.”

Damiano’s eyes darken as he steps even closer, their faces inches apart. “Fuck you.”

“You already did. Multiple times,” Flint says with a vicious smile. “Last night, in fact. Right before we found her with a dead body.”

Damiano shoves Flint hard, making him stumble back a step. “You self-righteous piece of?—”

“Enough!” I shout, standing despite my dizziness. “Are you two serious right now? Save your toxic bullshit for when we’re not standing over a murder scene!”

They both look chastened, like kids caughtfighting on the playground. The tension hangs in the air for a moment before Damiano picks up his shovel and returns to digging, deliberately putting distance between himself and Flint.

“Well, I’ll definitely remember not to ask about your past anymore. Jesus...” I mutter, grabbing my shovel. “Okay, let’s get back to work. We’re wasting time.”

I steady myself against the lightheadedness. The break helped somewhat, and while I’m still exhausted, I can’t sit and watch them do all the work. Not when I’m the reason we’re here.

We fall into a rhythm, the three of us working together in tense silence. The hole gets deeper, Liam’s body waiting to disappear beneath layers of dirt and rocks. I try not to

dwell on the fact that I'm helping bury a man I killed less than twelve hours ago. I try not to think about how easily I've slipped into this criminal conspiracy.

But my mind keeps circling back to one thought: these two men, both obviously still so tangled up in each other, are now tangled up with me, too. Whatever history they share, I'm now part of their story. And they're part of mine.

"This is deep enough," Damiano says eventually, standing in a hole that now reaches his chest. He looks up at me, his expression softening. "Briar, you should step away for this part."

He means covering the body completely. Watching Liam disappear forever.

"I need to see it," I say, surprising myself with how calm I sound. "I need to know it's done."

Flint nods, understanding. "I get that."

"Fine," Damiano concedes, "but stand back. The soil's loose at the edge."

They climb out of the hole, both covered in sweat and dirt despite the cool morning air. Damiano reaches into a bag he brought and pulls out several small packets of seeds and a glass bottle filled with dark liquid.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Accelerant," he explains, uncapping the bottle. "Natural compounds that speed up decomposition. And these—" he holds up the seed packets, "—are fast-growing plants with deep root systems. They'll stabilize the soil and make the ground look undisturbed faster."

“And they’ll feed off what’s underneath,” Flint adds, unnervingly matter of fact.
“Circle of life and all that.”

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I should be disturbed by how practical they're being, but instead I find it reassuring. They know what they're doing. Somehow, these two men who can barely be in the same space without sparking are completely in sync when it comes to covering up a murder.

Damiano pours the liquid over the body, being methodical in his application. The smell is pungent but not unpleasant—something herbal and earthy. He then adds more dirt almost robotically. Then he takes a handful of dark soil mixed with seeds and sprinkles it over Liam.

“Your turn,” he says, offering the mixture to me.

I hesitate, then take a handful. The soil is cool and damp against my palm. I let it fall onto Liam's chest, watching as tiny seeds bounce and settle across his torso. It feels ceremonial, almost reverent, despite the horror of what we're doing.

Flint takes his handful next, completing our macabre ritual. Then we all pick up shovels and begin filling in the grave.

“So I'm stuck here now, right?” I ask as we work. “I can't just go back to Seattle until we're sure no one suspects anything?”

“Exactly,” Flint confirms. “Leaving suddenly would raise questions. You stick to your original plan. Recovery time on the island. Act normal.”

“But stay away from The Vault,” Damiano adds. “That's Viktor's territory. If he starts asking questions about his brother, you don't want to be anywhere near it.”

“And stay away from the maze for a while,” Flint says, gesturing around us. “At least until these plants start growing and everything looks natural again.”

“So I’m basically under house arrest,” I say, trying not to sound bitter. “Stuck in my own personal luxury prison.”

“It’s not forever,” Damiano says quietly. “Just until the initial search dies down. People go missing on Heathens Hollow. Eventually they’ll assume Liam left or had an accident somewhere.”

We fall silent again, focusing on the task. The grave fills quickly with three of us working, and soon there’s only a slight mound to indicate anything’s different about this spot. Damiano spends extra time arranging the soil, making it look natural, then sprinkles more seeds across the surface.

“We should get back,” Flint says, glancing at his watch. “It’s been almost two hours.”

Damiano nods. “I’ll handle the tools. Say I’ve been doing early morning maintenance.”

“And what about me?” Flint asks. “How do I explain being here?”

A flash of irritation crosses Damiano’s face. “Figure it out. You always do.”

“Fuck you,” Flint says, but there’s less heat in it than before.

“Seriously?” I cut in, exasperated. “Can you two go five minutes without this?”

They both look at me, then at each other, and something shifts in the air between them.

“He came to see me,” I say, the solution suddenly obvious. “We met at my party; he wanted to check how I was feeling after my migraine. You let him in, Damiano, because you know I’ve been lonely and could use a friend.”

Damiano raises an eyebrow, impressed despite himself. “That works.”

“Nice,” Flint agrees. “Simple, plausible.”

“And based in truth,” I add. “I could use a friend. Or two.”

Something passes between us then, some unspoken acknowledgment that we’re in this together now, whether we like it or not. Three strangers bound by blood and secrets.

“Let’s go,” Damiano says, gathering the tools. “And remember... act normal.”

As we walk away from the grave, I can’t help looking back one last time. There’s nothing to see now. Just freshly turned earth that will soon sprout new life. In a few weeks, no one will know what lies beneath the green growth.

No one except us three.

Flint falls into step beside me, his shoulder occasionally brushing mine. Damiano walks slightly ahead, leading us through the maze with the confidence of someone who knows every turn by heart. I find myself studying them both—the tension in Damiano’s shoulders, the careful distance Flint maintains, the weird energy between them despite how much they claim to hate each other.

And somehow, I’m being drawn into their gravity. Both of them so different, yet equally magnetic in their own ways. Damiano with his quiet intensity and hidden depths. Flint with his sharp edges and unexpected kindness.

“You okay?” Flint asks quietly, having noticed my scrutiny.

“No,” I answer, “but I will be.”

He nods, accepting this. “We’ve got your back. Both of us.”

I glance ahead at Damiano, who’s paused to wait for us at the next turn. His eyes meet mine, dark and unreadable, but there’s a steadiness in his gaze that feels like a promise.

“I know,” I say, and I’m surprised to find that I believe it.

Chapter 11

Flint

Working a shift at The Vault after burying a body is a special kind of fucked up.

My hands are raw from digging, muscles aching in places I forgot existed, but here I am polishing glasses like it’s just another night, like I didn’t help bury a body this morning.

The Vault’s still quiet. It’s only 8 PM, too early for the real action, with only a handful of the usual suspects nursing overpriced drinks at the bar—rich assholes in designer clothes pretending they’re edgy because they hang out in a converted bank that hosts kink parties on weekends. Pathetic.

Mari leans against the bar next to me, her blue hair catching the light. “You look like shit,” she says cheerfully. “Wild night with the gardener?”

I nearly drop the glass I'm polishing. "What?"

"Oh, come on. The whole island knows you two hook up every few months when you get drunk enough to forget why you hate each other." She nudges my shoulder. "And you definitely left the Waters party together last night."

Fuck. "We didn't leave together."

"Whatever you say, boss." She grins, clearly not believing me. "But maybe wash the dirt from under your fingernails next time you want to be convincing."

I glance down. She's right. Despite me scrubbing my hands raw in the shower, I still have dirt embedded around my cuticles and under my nails.

Grave dirt.

I shove my hands into my pockets.

"I was helping him with something this morning," I mutter. "Landscaping shit."

"Uh-huh." Mari smirks. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?"

I'm saved from answering by the front door swinging open. The temperature in the room drops about ten degrees.

Viktor Bastian fills the doorway, his massive frame blocking the light from outside—six-feet-four of pure muscle and bad attitude, dressed all in black with a security earpiece permanently attached to his head. His face is set in stone, but there's something in his eyes I've never seen before. Worry.

Shit.

Mari whispers, “Looks like someone woke up on the wrong side of hell today.”

“Go check inventory,” I tell her, staying casual. “I’ll deal with this.”

She raises an eyebrow but doesn’t argue. Smart girl.

Viktor makes a beeline for the bar, ignoring the other patrons who instinctively move out of his way. The guy has that effect on people. Even the stupid rich think twice about messing with him.

“Bishop,” he says in that gravelly voice that’s sent more than a few troublemakers running. “We need to talk.”

“Always a pleasure, Viktor,” I say, setting down the glass and grabbing a bottle of the expensive bourbon he likes. “Drink?”

He shakes his head. “Liam’s missing.”

I pour myself a shot instead, focusing on keeping my hand steady. “Missing how? Like, went home with someone and didn’t call home, or actually missing?”

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“He didn’t come home last night. Phone’s going straight to voicemail.” Viktor scans the room as he talks, like Liam might be hiding in a corner. “Last anyone saw him, he was at that Waters party. His motorcycle was still there this morning. I sent someone over to get it, thinking he was too shit faced to drive last night but...”

I throw back the shot, grateful for the burn that gives me a second to compose my face. “Yeah, I saw him there. Early on. Rich girl’s birthday bash, right? He was hitting on everything that moved, typical Liam. And yeah, he appeared pretty shit faced.”

“What time did you leave?”

The question sounds casual, but there’s nothing casual about Viktor’s eyes. They’re fixed on me, searching for any hint I’m lying.

“Around one, I think?” I shrug, leaning against the bar. “Had to work today. Can’t all be trust fund babies like your brother.”

“You left alone?”

My stomach tightens. “Why?”

“Just gathering information.” Viktor’s massive hands rest on the bar, fingers drumming against the wood. “Someone said they saw you with the Waters girl’s gardener. The Italian.”

Fuck. That can’t be good.

“Yeah, we talked for a bit,” I admit, figuring a partial truth is better than a complete lie. “Had some business to discuss.”

“Business.” Viktor repeats the word like he’s testing it for poison. “What kind of business does a bartender have with a gardener at 1 AM?”

I force a smirk. “The kind that’s none of your business, Bastian.”

A flicker of something dangerous crosses his face before settling back into that professional mask. Security guy through and through.

“Look,” I say, pouring another shot, “your brother’s probably sleeping it off somewhere. Or he found a tourist to harass. You know how he gets.”

“He’s my brother,” Viktor says quietly. “I always know where he is.”

There’s an intensity to his words that catches me off guard. I sometimes forget these two are actually blood. They’re nothing alike. Viktor’s all business and control while Liam’s a chaos machine with impulse control issues. But right now, I’m seeing something I’ve never seen in Viktor before. Genuine concern.

It’d be touching if I hadn’t helped bury the guy he’s looking for.

“Sorry, man.” I’m surprised to find I mean it. Not sorry Liam’s dead—that asshole had it coming—but sorry Viktor’s worried. “I’m sure he’ll turn up.”

Viktor stares at me for a long moment, then nods once. “If you hear anything, anything at all, you call me. Immediately.”

“Of course.”

He turns to leave, then stops. “One more thing. You seen Damiano Ricci today?”

My pulse kicks up. “No.”

“He was at the Waters place all night. Might’ve seen something.”

Viktor’s fishing, but he doesn’t seem to know exactly what happened. Unless he’s playing me.

“We left around the same time,” I correct.

He studies me for a beat too long. “Right. Well, if you see him, tell him I’m looking for him, too.”

“Will do.”

Viktor heads for the door, his back straight as a rod. He stops to talk to a group of local guys—fishermen from the docks, judging by their weathered faces and rough clothes—Island boys like me, but a decade older, the kind who know every hidden cove and secret path.

He’s organizing a search party.

This just got real.

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I pull out my phone and text Damiano:VIKTOR'S LOOKING FOR LIAM. ASKING QUESTIONS. STAY AWAY FROM THE VAULT.

Then, after a moment's hesitation, I add:AND ME.

The reply comes almost instantly:WHAT DID YOU TELL HIM?

NOTHING. BUT HE KNOWS WE WERE AT THE PARTY. SOMEONE SAW US.

The three dots appear, disappear, then appear again.BRIAR?

SAFE FOR NOW. HE DIDN'T MENTION HER.

I watch Viktor talk to the fishermen, gesturing with those massive hands of his. They're nodding, faces serious. Shit's escalating faster than I expected.

My phone buzzes again:BE CAREFUL. HE'S DANGEROUS.

I KNOW WHAT HE IS.

And I do. I've seen Viktor "handle" problems before. People who start fights at The Vault don't just get thrown out. They get lessons they never forget. Broken fingers. Dislocated shoulders. The lucky ones only need stitches. The rumor is he did worse stuffbefore coming to Heathens Hollow, though nobody knows exactly what. Some say military. Some say mob. I never cared enough to find out.

Now I wish I had.

The fishermen disperse, heading out the door with purpose. Viktor follows them, pausing at the threshold to look back at me. Our eyes lock across the room, and for a second, I see something that makes my blood run cold. He doesn't believe me.

The door closes behind him, and I exhale slowly. I need to warn Briar. If Viktor connects her to Liam's disappearance...

"So," Mari says, reappearing from the back room. "What was that about?"

"Liam's missing." I keep my voice neutral. "Viktor's worried."

She snorts. "Liam's probably face-down in some tourist's bed. Or in some ditch drunk. Wouldn't be the first time."

"Yeah, probably."

"You okay? You look pale."

"Fine," I lie. "Just tired and hungover."

The door swings open again, and my heart stops before I realize it's only Locke Hartwell, one of The Vault's owners. He strides in like he owns the place—which, technically, he does—dressed in his usual all-black designer suit, silver rings glinting on his fingers.

"Bishop," he says, nodding at me. "Interesting night ahead."

"How so?"

He leans against the bar, lowering his voice. "Viktor's offering ten thousand to anyone with information about his brother. Cash. No questions asked."

Fuck.

“That’ll bring out every liar and con artist on the island.” I try to sound casual.

“Exactly.” Locke smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Which means we’ll be busy tonight. People will be coming in to gossip, hoping to overhear something worth ten grand. I need you on your game.”

“Always am.”

Locke glances around the bar, then leans in closer. “Also, the partners had a meeting this morning. We’re hosting another Hunt on the summer equinox.”

I keep my face neutral even as my stomach drops. “Bit early in the season, isn’t it? Thought you guys usually waited until the Harvest Moon.”

“We’re making an exception.” His fingers tap against the polished wood. “Demand’s high this year. Lots of new money from Seattle wanting to experience island traditions.”

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“Right. Traditions.” I reach for another glass to polish. “You need me to handle prep?”

“Yes. Same as usual—medical screenings, contracts, security protocols. And we’re adding something new this time.” Locke’s voice drops even lower. “Soren wants to extend invitations to non-members. People who’ve expressed interest in joining The Vault.”

“Non-members?” I can’t keep the edge from my question. “That’s not how The Hunt works.”

“It’s how it works now.” His tone makes it clear this isn’t up for debate. “We’re recruiting. Growing our membership.”

“These ‘outsiders’ understand the rules? The boundaries?”

“That’s your job.” Locke straightens up. “Make sure they do. We need this to go smoothly. No incidents. No complications.”

I nod, mind already running through the implications. The Hunt. Hunters and prey running all over the island. Including abandoned properties. Including the Waters estate. Including the maze where we just buried a body.

Fuck.

“Good.” He straightens his already perfect tie. “And Bishop? Viktor’s a valued member of our security team. If you hear anything, you bring it directly to me.

Understood?”

The threat is subtle but clear. The Vault protects its own.

“Understood.”

As Locke walks away, I grab my phone and send another text to Damiano:VIKTOR OFFERING 10K FOR INFO ON LIAM.

His reply is immediate:SHIT.

Yeah. That about sums it up.

And then I add:THE HUNT IS HAPPENING EARLY THIS YEAR. SUMMER EQUINOX. PEOPLE WILL BE ALL OVER THE PROPERTY. THE MAZE.

Three dots appear, then:SHIT. NEED TO SECURE IT BETTER.

I type quickly:CAN YOU? HUNTERS DON'T CARE ABOUT TRESPASSING.

His response takes longer this time:HOW DO WE KEEP THEM AWAY FROM THE GRAVE?

I close my eyes briefly. Fuck:NEED A PLAN. MEET TONIGHT AFTER MY SHIFT. WARN BRIAR.

I glance at the clock—seven more hours of my shift. Seven hours of pretending I don't know exactly where Liam Bastian is. Seven hours of watching people speculate, watching Viktor question everyone who walks through that door, watching this whole situation spiral further out of control.

I pour myself another shot and down it quickly. The liquor burns all the way down, but it's not enough to wash away the taste of grave dirt that seems permanently stuck in the back of my throat.

The door opens again, bringing a group of loud weekenders from Seattle. Friday night crowd starting to trickle in. I plaster on my professional bartender face and get back to work. One drink at a time. One hour at a time. Just get through tonight.

But as I mix an overpriced Manhattan for some tech bro, I can't shake the feeling that we're already screwed. Money talks on this island. Ten thousand dollars is more than most locals see in six months. Someone will talk, whether they know something or not.

And Viktor won't stop until he finds his brother.

Or what's left of him.

Chapter 12

Damiano

The yarrow isn't growing right.

I've checked the soil pH three times, adjusted the water, moved it to a different part of the greenhouse, but something's still off. The stems are weak, the leaves pale. I could force it, add chemicals, but that defeats the whole point. Medicinal plants need to be strong on their own, or they're useless.

My phone buzzes again. Fourth time in an hour. I already know it's Flint with another update about Viktor's search. The first text was bad enough—VIKTOR OFFERING 10K FOR INFO ON LIAM—but the follow-ups have gotten worse. Search parties

combing the eastern shore. Viktor personally questioning everyone at the Waters party.

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I should be more worried. Instead, I'm obsessing over yarrow because plants make sense. Plants don't lie or hide bodies or organize search parties.

I check the text anyway.

VIKTOR ASKING ABOUT YOU SPECIFICALLY. STAY LOW.

Great. Just what I need.

I dump the struggling yarrow into my compost bin and grab my pruning shears. Might as well keep busy while waiting for this whole thing to explode in our faces. The herbs for tomorrow's tinctures need harvesting anyway.

The greenhouse door creaks open behind me. I spin around, shears ready, before I realize it's Briar. She's standing in the doorway, backlit by the security lights that just came on outside, looking like she hasn't slept in days.

"Sorry," she says, stepping inside and closing the door. "I didn't mean to sneak up on you."

I set down the shears, trying to keep my face neutral. "You didn't. I'm just jumpy."

"Join the club." She wraps her cardigan tighter around her thin frame. "Have you heard anything? Have you heard from Flint?"

"Yeah." I move to the workbench, giving her space to come further inside if she wants. "It's not good."

She takes a few steps closer, glancing around like she's not sure where to settle. She seems different here than she did at the party or even during the burial—less confident. The greenhouse has that effect on people. It's my space. My rules.

"I couldn't stay in the house anymore," she says. "Every noise, every shadow. I kept thinking someone was watching me."

"They might be." No point sugarcoating it. "Viktor's got half the island looking for his brother."

"I figured as much. That's why I came through the back way. Used the path behind the hedge."

Smart. I nod, feeling a weird sense of approval. "Good. Better if no one sees us together right now."

She moves closer to my workbench, studying the herbs I've been sorting—lavender, valerian, chamomile. Sleep aids. The irony isn't lost on me.

"Will these help?" She touches the lavender sprigs with careful fingers.

"With what?"

"Nightmares."

I observe her face—the dark circles under her eyes, the tightness around her mouth. "Some. Not enough."

She nods like she expected that answer. "Worth a shot."

"I can make you something stronger," I hear myself offer. "Not a cure, but it'll knock

you out for a few hours. No dreams.”

“I’d like that,” she says, still trailing her fingers through the lavender. “I haven’t slept more than an hour at a time since...”

Since we buried a body. She doesn’t need to finish the sentence.

“Here,” I say, motioning her closer. “I’ll show you how to make it yourself. For next time.”

She moves to my side, and I get a whiff of something clean and vaguely citrusy. Not perfume—soap, maybe shampoo. It’s distracting.

I pull out my mortar and pestle, then grab jars of dried herbs from the shelf behind me. “Pay attention,” I tell her, falling into teaching mode. “Valerian root is the base. Powerful sedative, tastes like shit.”

She almost smiles. “Noted.”

“Add passionflower for the anxiety. That’s this one with the purple bits. Then chamomile to smooth the edges.”

I measure each herb, dropping them into the mortar, then hand her the pestle. “You grind.”

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She takes it, her fingers brushing mine. They're cold as ice, as usual.

"Like this?" she asks, making tentative circles with the pestle.

"Harder," I say. "You need to break down the cell walls to release the compounds. Put your weight into it."

She tries again, pressing down with more force, her thin wrist flexing with the effort. It's still not enough, but I don't push. She's trying.

"The secret's in how you blend them," I explain, measuring a dropper of alcohol tincture. "Too much valerian and you'll be groggy all day tomorrow. Too little and it won't touch the nightmares."

"How did you learn all this?" she asks, stillgrinding. "Doesn't seem like the kind of thing they teach you in gardening school."

"There's no gardening school." It isn't really an answer. "My father taught me the basics. The rest I figured out myself. Trial and error."

"On who?"

"Mostly me."

She stops grinding, looks up at me. "You have trouble sleeping, too?"

There's something in her expression—not pity, more like recognition. I don't like it.

“Sometimes.” I take the mortar from her, check the consistency. “This needs more work.”

I place my hand over hers on the pestle, guiding her movements. Her skin is cool against mine, but there’s warmth underneath. Blood still pumping despite everything her body throws at her. It’s impressive, in a way.

“Like this,” I say, pressing down with her, showing her the right motion. “Circular but with pressure on the downstroke.”

We work together for a minute, the crisp smell of herbs rising between us. I’m standing too close, and I can feel the slight heat from her body, see the pulse fluttering in her neck. I should step back, but I don’t.

When the herbs are properly ground, I remove my hand and reach for a small pot.

“Now we heat water,” I say, filling the pot from a jug. “Not boiling. Just hot enough to open the compounds.”

I set the pot on my camp stove, turn on the flame. Briar watches, her arms wrapped around herself again.

“Cold?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

“Always.”

I grab an extra flannel shirt from the hook by my cot and hand it to her. “Here.”

She looks at it, then at me. “You don’t need to?—”

“I’ve got others. Take it.”

She puts it on over her cardigan. The sleeves hang past her fingertips. She pushes them up, revealing her bony wrists with their tracery of blue veins.

“Thanks.” For a second, she looks almost normal, merely a girl borrowing a guy’s shirt on a chilly evening. Not someone who killed a man last night.

The water’s heating, sending up wisps of steam. I add the herb mixture, stir it with a wooden spoon.

“So,” she says after a moment. “Viktor’s looking for you specifically?”

“According to Flint.”

“What will you do?”

I shrug. “Nothing. I’m the gardener. I work here. Nothing unusual about me being around. I’ll just avoid town for a bit.”

“And me?”

“You’re recovering from your illness. Staying out of sight makes sense.”

“And Flint?”

Something catches in my chest at the way she says his name. Like they’ve formed some connection I don’t fully understand.

“Flint can handle himself,” I say, more sharply than I intend to. “He always does.”

She studies me with those pale blue eyes. “You’re worried about him.”

“I’m worried about all of us.” I check the herb mixture, avoiding her gaze. “This is ready. Let it steep for five minutes, then drink it.”

I pour the mixture into a mug and hand it to her. She wraps her fingers around it, soaking up the warmth.

“Thanks,” she says. “For this and... everything else.”

“Don’t thank me for helping bury a body. It’s weird.”

That gets a real smile from her, small but genuine. It changes her whole face, makes her look younger. Reminds me she’s just a person caught in a fucked-up situation. Not some abstract concept of “the rich girl” I’ve built up in my head.

“Fair enough,” she says, “but I’m still grateful.” She sips the tea, grimaces. “You weren’t kidding about the taste.”

“Effective medicine usually tastes like shit.”

“Is that another bit of your father’s wisdom?”

“No, that’s all me.”

She laughs—a short, surprised sound that seems to catch her off guard. Her face goes serious again almost immediately. “Do you think Viktor will find anything? At the maze?”

I consider lying, then decide against it. “Maybe. Eventually. But by then decomposition will be advanced. Plants will have grown. Animals will have done their work. Even if they find something, connecting it to you will be nearly impossible.”

She nods but doesn’t look convinced. “Unless someone talks.”

“Who would talk? Only three people know, and we’re all equally guilty.”

“Are we?” She looks at me over the rim of her mug. “I’m the one who drove a stake through his throat.”

“And I buried him. And Flint helped. We’re accomplices at minimum. No one’s talking.”

The greenhouse is getting colder as the night deepens, the glass walls turning from transparent to reflective. Our distorted images are mirrored back—her small form, my larger one. Two people having a casual chat about murder and decomposition.

I switch on another lamp, casting everything in a warm yellow glow.

“You should drink all of that.” I nod at her half-empty mug. “It won’t work otherwise.”

She raises an eyebrow. “You just want me unconscious so you can get rid of me.”

“If I wanted to get rid of you, I’d have let Liam finish what he started.”

The moment the words leave my mouth, I regret them. Her face goes blank, shuttered.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” I say quickly. “That was—I shouldn’t have said that. I was trying to be witty and sarcastic, and it came out— Fuck.”

She sets down the mug, her hands trembling slightly. “No, you’re right. You could have walked away. Both of you. Left me to deal with it alone.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

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“Isn’t it?” She looks straight at me, challenging now. “I’m the complication here. The outsider. You and Flint have a past. You understand each other. I’m just the sick rich girl who dragged you both into her mess.”

“That’s not how I see you.”

“No? How do you see me then?”

The question hangs between us. How do I see her? As a responsibility? A burden? Something else?

“I see someone who survived,” I say, after a beat. “Someone stronger than they look.”

She blinks, clearly not expecting that answer. “I’m not strong. I’m just stubborn.”

“Same thing, most days.”

She picks up the mug, takes another sip. “This is really disgusting.”

“Told you.”

“But I do feel... something. Lighter, maybe.”

“It hits fast.”

She nods, suppressing a yawn. “I should go back to the house before I can’t walk straight.”

“You can stay here,” I offer, surprising myself. “It’s safer than walking back through the grounds.”

“Here? Where would I sleep? That?” She points to my narrow cot.

“I’ll find somewhere else.”

She studies me for a long moment, then shakes her head. “No. I’ll be fine. The house isn’t far.”

“I’ll walk you.”

“Not necessary.”

“Wasn’t asking.”

She sighs but doesn’t argue further. Smart. The herbs are definitely kicking in now. Her eyelids are getting heavy, her movements slower.

“Finish that first.” I nod at the mug. “Then we’ll go.”

She drains the rest of the liquid, grimacing. “There. Happy?”

“Ecstatic.”

I take the empty mug, rinse it in the sink, trying to give the herbs more time to work. When I turn back, she’s swaying slightly on her feet.

“Whoa,” she says, reaching for the workbench to steady herself. “That’s... strong.”

“Told you.” I move closer, ready to catch her if needed.

She leans against the workbench, her fingers curled around the edge. In the yellow lamp light, her skin looks almost normal, flushed with warmth instead of its usual pallor. The sleeves of my flannel shirt have fallen down again, covering her hands, making her seem younger, vulnerable.

“Thanks,” she says softly. “For the tea. And not treating me like I’m made of glass.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Most people do that when they find out I’m sick. Walk on eggshells. Or talk about me behind my back. I know everyone at my party knew about me and why I came back to Heathens Hollow already. Or think they know about me. It gets old.” She sighs. “I even heard someone say they were told I had cancer. And someone else said I had less than a month to live. And if it’s not pity, then it’s people saying I’m faking it to get attention. Some doctors have said as much. It’s all in my head.” She pauses, glances down at her feet. “The rumors... I guess it’s better than the truth. That the doctors don’t have a fucking clue what I have. Everyone has a different opinion. Chronic. That’s what I call it. Chronically fucked up.”

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Something twists in my gut at the implication that she's been dealing with this for a long time. That this broken girl in my greenhouse isn't only about what happened with Liam.

"People can be idiots about illness," I say. "They don't know what to say, so they treat you differently."

"Exactly." She nods, then yawns. "You don't, though."

"No point. You've already proven you're tougher than you look."

She nods like this makes perfect sense. The herbs are really hitting her system now—her eyes are half-closed, her body swaying.

"I should really sit down," she murmurs.

"Here." I guide her to my cot. "Just for a minute."

She sits heavily, then lets herself fall sideways until she's lying down. "Just for a minute," she echoes, her words drowsy.

She won't be getting back up tonight. The mixture I made is powerful. Even in someone without her health issues, it would induce heavy sleep within minutes. For her, with her compromised system, it's working even faster.

"The house..." she murmurs, fighting to keep her eyes open.

“It’s fine,” I say. “No one’s there to miss you.”

“Mmm.”

Her eyes close fully, her breathing deepening. She’s still wearing my flannel shirt, curled on her side with her hands tucked under her cheek. She looks younger asleep, the worry lines around her mouth softening.

I grab a blanket from the foot of my cot and drape it over her. She doesn’t stir.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. Another text from Flint.

SEARCH PARTY HEADING TOWARD WATERS PROPERTY. WARN BRIAR.

Too late for that. I glance at her sleeping form, then type back:

SHE’S WITH ME. ASLEEP. SAFE.

The reply comes instantly:

THE GREENHOUSE?

YES.

STAY THERE. I’LL COME WHEN SHIFT ENDS.

I frown at the screen. It’s not his call to make.

NOT NECESSARY.

WASN’T ASKING.

I almost smile at the echo of my earlier words to Briar. Typical Flint, using my own lines against me.

I put away my phone and look around the greenhouse. If search parties are coming this way, I need to make sure everything looks normal. I grab my pruning shears and get back to the evening's work, harvesting herbs for tomorrow's tinctures. Lavender stems fall under my blade, filling the air with their calming scent.

Behind me, Briar sleeps deeply on my cot, occasionally making small sounds but never fully waking. I find myself listening for those sounds, tracking her presence even with my back turned.

Through the glass walls, I can see lights moving in the far distance—flashlights, probably. The search party making their way across the island. Soon they'll reach the Waters property, combing through the grounds, looking for any sign of Liam. They won't find anything. Not in the dark, not with the work I've done hiding the grave.

But they'll be close. Too close.

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I set down the shears, move to the cot, and watch Briar sleep. Her breathing is steady, her face relaxed in a way I've never seen it before. Some of her hair has fallen across her cheek. Without thinking, I reach out and brush it back behind her ear.

The gesture feels strangely intimate, more so than guiding her hands with the pestle or steadying her when she swayed. This is something else, something I probably shouldn't be doing.

I pull back my hand quickly, but the damage has been done. I'm aware of her now in a way I wasn't before. Not just as a responsibility or a shared secret, but as a person. A woman.

Shit.

I turn away, move back to my workbench. Focus on the plants, on what makes sense. Not on the sleeping woman in my bed or the way her hair felt against my fingers or how the search lights are getting closer, cutting through the fog outside.

Not on how complicated everything has suddenly become.

Chapter 13

Damiano

I've been working for about an hour when I hear her stir, a small sound at first, then shifting on the cot. I glance over, thinking she's just adjusting in her sleep, but her eyes are open, and she's watching me.

“Hey,” I say, setting down my clippers. “Thought you’d be out till morning.”

“What time is it?” Her question is thick with sleep, slurred around the edges.

“Almost midnight.”

She blinks slowly, still half under the influence of the herbs. “Did anyone come looking for me at the house?”

“Not yet, but they will.” I sit on the edge of the cot. “They’ll come through the grounds tonight, probably. Viktor doesn’t waste time.”

She struggles to sit up, the herbs making her movements clumsy. “What do we do?”

“Nothing. We stay calm.” I steady her with a hand on her shoulder. “Listen to me. This is important. They’ll come and look around without permission. It’s how things work here.”

“But they can’t just?—”

“They can. They will. But they won’t find anything.” I rest my hand on her arm, steadying her. “They don’t know the maze like I do. The heart of it, where we put him, is nearly impossible to find if you don’t know the path.”

She nods, absorbing this. “The police?”

“Not yet. Maybe never.” I run a hand through my hair, pushing it back from my face. “Heathens Hollow likes to handle shit themselves. Always has.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that before they call the mainland police, they’ll exhaust every option here. Search parties. Questioning. Bribes for information.” I watch her face carefully. “Tomorrow, expect people to come asking questions. Viktor, maybe others.”

“What do I tell them?” The fog of the herbs is clearing from her eyes, replaced by fear.

“Nothing useful. You had a party. There were tons of people you didn’t know. The party got bigger than you expected. You were tired, went to bed early.” I squeeze her arm gently. “You’ve never even met Liam Bastian. Not that you remember, anyway.”

“Right.” She nods firmly. “If they ask about him specifically, I was tired. There were so many people. I wouldn’t remember one face in the crowd.”

“Exactly. And you don’t know anything about him going missing.”

“I don’t know it,” she echoes, nodding slowly. “I had a party. It got out of hand. I went to bed early. I don’t know everyone who was there.”

“Good.” I check my watch. “It’s too late for them to disturb you tonight. The main house is off-limits still. But tomorrow, be ready.”

She nods, pulling the blanket tighter around her shoulders. “Good.”

I move closer, checking to see if she needs anything. Water, maybe. “How do you feel?”

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“Floaty.” She smiles, a drowsy, unguarded expression I’ve never seen on her before.
“But cold. Always cold.”

“I’ll turn up the heater.”

“No.” She reaches out to catch my wrist before I can move away. Her fingers are ice against my skin. “Can you... would you just...”

She trails off, suddenly uncertain.

“What?”

“Hold me? Just for a little bit.” She looks embarrassed even asking. “I’m so tired of being cold.”

I should say no, should make some excuse about keeping watch or needing to finish my work. But I don’t.

“Move over,” I say, and she shifts on the narrow cot to make space.

I lie down beside her, awkwardly at first, trying to keep some distance despite the limited space. But she immediately turns toward me, seeking warmth, and I curl my arm around her almost by instinct. She tucks her head against my chest, her cold hands finding their way between us.

“Better?” I ask, sounding strange to my own ears.

“Mmm.” She nods against my shirt. “You’re like a furnace.”

“So I’ve been told.”

We lie there in silence for a while, just breathing. I can feel her gradually warming, her body relaxing against mine. Her hair smells like citrus and something sweeter. It’s not unpleasant.

“Sorry,” she murmurs after a bit. “This is probably weird for you.”

“It’s fine.” And strangely, it is.

“The herbs make me say things I normally wouldn’t.” She sounds more alert now, more herself. “Do things I wouldn’t.”

“Like ask strange men to hold you?”

She laughs softly. “You’re not that strange.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I know enough.”

Her hand moves slightly against my chest, not quite a caress but no longer just seeking warmth either. I should stop this now. Should get up and go back to my pruning. But I don’t move.

“What do you know?” I ask.

“I know you could have left me to deal with Liam alone, but you didn’t.” Her voice is quiet in the dim greenhouse. “I know you’re careful with your plants. Patient. I know

you and Flint have a story... a toxic one but you still have a pull to him.”

“That’s not much.”

“It’s enough for now.”

She shifts again, tilting her face up to look at me. In the low light, her eyes are darker, not their usual pale blue. This close, I can see a small scar near her temple, usually hidden by her hair.

“What happened there?” I ask, barely touching the mark with my fingertip.

“IV stand. Fell over once during a treatment. Cut me.”

Her candor surprises me. “Does it hurt? Your condition, I mean.”

“Sometimes. Mostly it’s just... exhausting. Being tired all the time. Being cold.” She studies my face. “What about you? What hurts you?”

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The question catches me off guard. No one asks me that kind of thing. Especially not people like her.

“Nothing important,” I say, looking away.

She brings her hand to my jaw and guides my face back to hers. Her fingers are warmer now, almost normal temperature. “Liar.”

Her eyes search mine, questioning. A moment of silence stretches out between us, only our breathing in the quiet greenhouse. I could pull away. Should pull away. This is complicated enough without adding... whatever this is.

She leans forward slightly, then stops, her eyes still on mine like she’s waiting for permission. Or maybe for me to stop her. When I don’t, she closes the distance between us slowly, giving me every chance to back away.

And then she’s kissing me. Softly at first, barely a brush of her lips against mine, so light I could almost pretend it didn’t happen. She pulls back slightly, gauging my reaction, her breath warm against my face.

“Is this okay?” she whispers.

I should say no. Should get up and put some distance between us. Instead, I nod.

She kisses me again, more certain this time but still hesitant, like she’s not sure she remembers how. Maybe she doesn’t. Maybe the illness has taken this from her, too, like it’s taken so many other normal experiences.

Instead, I slide my hand into her hair, holding her closer as I kiss her back. She makes a small sound against my mouth, something between relief and want. Her body presses against mine, seeking more contact, more warmth.

This is a bad idea. She's still under the influence of the herbs. She's vulnerable. She killed someone last night. None of this is a good foundation for whatever is happening. But knowing doesn't stop me from deepening the kiss, from letting my hand slide down her back to pull her closer.

Her hands wander, too, slipping under the edge of my T-shirt, her cool fingers exploring the skin of my stomach, my ribs. When she touches the tattoo that curves around my side, she pauses, tracing the outline.

"What is it?" she asks against my lips.

"Nightshade."

"Poisonous?"

"Very."

She smiles. "Show me more."

I sit up enough to pull my shirt over my head, feeling strangely exposed in a way that has nothing to do with being shirtless. She studies the artwork covering my chest and arms, her fingers following the lines of vines and symbols across my skin.

"They're beautiful," she says, genuinely interested. "Each one means something?"

"Yes."

“Tell me.”

“Another time.” I catch her hand, pressing my lips to her palm. “Too many stories for tonight.”

She nods, accepting this, and then she’s kissing me again, more urgently this time. Her flannel shirt—my flannel shirt—is too big on her, slipping off one shoulder. I push it aside further, my mouth finding the curve of her neck, the delicate line of her collarbone. Her skin is warming under my touch, flushing with color.

“Damiano,” she breathes, and hearing my name on her lips does something to me I wasn’t expecting.

I slide my hand under the hem of her shirt, finding the smooth skin of her waist, her ribs. She’s so thin, but there’s strength in her, too, the kind that comes from fighting battles most people never see.

She pulls back enough to look at me, her eyes clearer now despite the herbs. “Is this a bad idea?”

“Probably.”

Fuck yes it is. She just killed a guy, is no doubt still in shock. I shouldn’t be thinking with my cock right now, and yet...

“Do you want to stop?” she asks.

I consider lying but can’t. I don’t think it’s possible to ever lie to this girl. “No.”

“Good.” She smiles. “Me neither.”

She sits up, straddling me on the narrow cot, and pulls off my flannel shirt. Underneath, she’s still wearing her cardigan and a simple camisole. She hesitates for a moment, then slips off the cardigan, too, leaving only the thin camisole. The blue tracery of her veins is visible beneath the pale fabric, the delicate structure of her shoulders.

“You’re still sure?” I ask, giving her one last chance to reconsider.

In answer, she takes my hands and places them on her waist. “I’m sure.”

I slide my hands up her sides, feeling her shiver, but not from cold this time. When I reach the edge of her camisole, I pause, looking up at her. She nods, lifting her arms so I can pull it over her head.

In the low light of the greenhouse, surrounded by plants and the smell of herbs, we learn each other slowly. Her body is both stronger and more fragile than I expected, responding eagerly to my touch despite her illness. My tattoos fascinate her. She traces each one with her fingers, then her lips, like she’s trying to memorize them all.

My cock twitches. Demanding to be inside her.

Every inch of me wants to give in to that demand, but I force myself to go slowly. She deserves more than a rushed fucking on a greenhouse cot. Especially now. Especially with me.

She must sense my restraint because she rocks against me, the friction making us both gasp. Her eyes lock with mine, pupils wide in the dim light.

“You don’t have to be gentle,” she whispers.

“Maybe I want to be.”

I kiss my way down her body, lingering at the places that make her breath catch—the hollow of her throat, the curve under her breast, the jut of her hipbone. Her hands tangle in my hair, not guiding, just holding on as if she needs an anchor.

When I reach the waistband of her pants, I look up. She’s watching me, lips parted, cheeks flushed.

“Yes,” she says, before I can ask.

I ease them down her legs, taking her panties with them. She kicks them away impatiently, and then she’s naked beneath me, all pale skin and perfection. My hands tremble slightly as I touch her, and I can’t remember the last time that happened.

She reaches for my belt, fumbling with the buckle. “Too many clothes,” she complains.

I help her, yanking off my remaining clothes until there’s nothing between us. Her eyes widen slightly as she takes me in, and she swallows.

I can’t take it anymore. I pin her beneath me on the narrow cot. She gasps, but there’s no fear in her eyes—only anticipation, desire. I capture her mouth with mine as I slide my hand between her legs, finding her pussy wet and ready. She arches against my touch, a small, needy sound escaping her throat.

“Protection,” I mutter against her skin, somehow managing one last rational thought.

“I’m on the pill,” she pants. “And I’m—I tested?—”

“Me too,” I say, understanding what she’s trying to tell me. “I mean, I’m clean.” Thanks to The Hunt, The Vault and all the extracurricular activities of the island, testing is a norm around here.

She nods, relief in her eyes.

“Then don’t make me wait anymore,” she whispers, wrapping her legs around my hips.

I position myself at her entrance, watching her face as I push forward slowly. Her eyes flutter closed, lips parting on a silent gasp as I fill her. The sensation is almost overwhelming—tight, wet heat enveloping me inch by inch. When I’m fully seated inside her, we both pause, breathing hard.

“Okay?” I manage to ask, strained with the effort of holding still.

She opens her eyes, and the look in them nearly undoes me. “More than okay.”

Chapter 14

Briar

I feel every inch of him with every part of me.

I don’t know why I’m fucking a man I barely know.

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Maybe it's because he was there when I needed him—a distraction, a focus—before the terror and loneliness of this thing inside me could swallow me whole. Or maybe it's just because I want him, simple as that.

He pulls back and thrusts forward again, harder this time. He's holding back.

“I'm already broken,” I say. “Don't worry about breaking me more.”

I'm not sure if I mean the words as a challenge or a plea, but they have the desired effect. He groans and shifts his weight, driving into me with a force that makes me gasp.

His mouth finds mine, swallowing my cries as he moves inside me. I rake my nails down his back, over the tattoos that have already become familiar, pulling him deeper with my legs locked around his waist. I want to keep every part of him there, to capture this night like a photograph in my mind.

My body is both too fragile and too strong for this. I can feel it straining at the seams, but I don't care. Not now and maybe not ever.

His cock is big. He stretches me, fills me, leaves no room for anything else, not even thinking.

It's what I need. It's everything I need.

He starts to grunt with every thrust, like he's finally forgetting to be careful, and his pace quickens until I know he's close.

“Briar.” My name comes out between labored breaths and sounds almost like a warning.

He shifts one hand between us, thumb finding my clit and circling it roughly in time with each thrust. Pleasure zips through me as I cry out his name.

His name. Damiano. It sounds so different saying it while his dick is inside me.

“You buried a man for me,” I say, not sure why the need is so strong to do so.

He hesitates, just for a moment, eyes searching mine, almost like he’s trying to see past the words and into my soul.

“I’d do it again.” He thrusts deeper, harder, possessing me completely. My heart slams against my ribs, and I reach for something—anything—that feels more real than the chaos we’re both running from.

I bite his shoulder to keep myself from falling apart.

“Harder,” I say. “Fuck me harder.” I need more. I need to burn this night into me, to feel it later when everything else turns cold and dark.

He answers with another low grunt, like he’s trying to fuck me and talk to me all at once. Like he knows it’s pointless either way. His hips swing into mine until I’m choking on pleasure—weightless, thoughtless, everything I want.

Will I regret this tomorrow?

Maybe.

But I killed a man yesterday. What more could I regret?

He presses his thumb against my clit with punishing intensity, and the pressure coils tight in my core. A sound unravels from deep inside me, a crescendo of need and want and yes that ricochets off the walls of this tiny, earthy room.

“Fuck, Briar,” Damiano grits out, head dropping to the crook of my neck as he slams into me. “I’m?—”

He doesn’t finish. He just drives forward with everything he has, splitting me apart in the best possible way until I can’t hold it any longer. I come hard, body arching beneath him like I’m going to fly apart and spin in a million directions. But he’s right there, holding me together with his touch, his weight pinning me to this moment.

I’m so fucking high. High from his tea, and high from the sex that is changing everything between us.

The world bursts white before settling into focus again just in time for me to hear him groan through his own release. He empties into me with a force that seems to rock him to pieces even as he gives them all to me.

I’m not sure who he collapses for—him or me—but it doesn’t matter. We lie tangled together, chests heaving as we try to catch our breath. It should feel awkward now; maybe it will later. But right now it’s perfect and terrifying in the same instant.

He rolls to his side, brushes sweat-damp hair from my forehead with surprising gentleness.

“Are you okay?” There’s hesitation in his question now that wasn’t there when he was fucking me senseless.

I nod, staring up at the cracked ceiling. “Yeah.”

“Are you sure?”

I turn my head to meet his gaze, close enough that I can see the gold flecks in his dark eyes. He’s watching me too closely, like he’s trying to figure out how many pieces of myself I’m still in.

“What about you?” I ask instead of answering, my voice hoarse and almost accusatory.

It makes him smile—an actual smile that isn’t weighed down by anything but exhaustion. I kiss it from his lips before he can use them to say something stupid and reassuring about how everything will be fine.

Because we both know there’s a very real chance it might not be.

He strokes a hand down my arm and pulls me tighter against him until our breathing syncs again.

“I want to fuck you until the sun comes up,” he says as he kisses my collarbone.

Hungry. We’re both hungry.

I pull him over me, refusing to think of anything but his skin against mine. His eyes darken with want, and it heats my blood all over again. I tug at his lower lip with my teeth, reminding us that this is everything now—tangled limbs and the messy, desperate way we keep crashing together.

He moves like he understands the urgency in my bones, and soon he's inside me again, fast and deep.

"All fucking night," he repeats.

His words are a promise and a challenge all at once, vibrating through me as I grasp at his back.

His hands are everywhere, reconnecting us in the same chaotic rhythm that burned through us the first time. And just like before, I'm powerless to stop it from taking over.

I can barely think past the flood of want inside me, but I don't want to think.

I want to forget.

I curl my fingers into his hair, pulling him harder against me as if I can chase the shadows away forever.

Chapter 15

Flint

The island's even quieter than usual at 4 AM. Every step cracks like a gunshot on the stone pathway as I head toward the greenhouse. The main house stands dark and empty. No one there to notice Briar's absence until morning. If we're lucky, the search parties won't think to check if she's sleeping in her own bed.

My shift at The Vault was pure hell. Viktor came back three times, each visit more intense than the previous. By midnight, he'd doubled the reward to twenty thousand. By closing, half the island was out looking for his brother.

A flashlight beam cuts through the trees to my right.

Another fucking search party. It's the fourth one I've seen since leaving my car at the bottom of the driveway. They're getting desperate, combing the same areas twice.

Ducking behind a hedge until they pass, I then continue toward the greenhouse. Its amber glow stands out in the fog like a beacon. On any normal night, it wouldn't matter, since Damiano's always up late working. But tonight, with search parties everywhere, that light might as well be a spotlight.

I need to warn him about Viktor's latest move. That psycho's calling in some mainland connection guys with military training and tracking dogs. They'll be here by morning. We're rapidly running out of options.

As I approach the greenhouse, I slow down. Something's off. The usual night sounds are gone. Damiano's radio, the hum of the heaters... all silent. Instead, there's a different rhythm. Movement. Breathing.

I ease around to the far side where the foliage inside is thickest so I'm less likely to be spotted. Through a gap in the climbing plants, I can see inside.

Holy shit.

Damiano's on that narrow cot with Briar Waters. Both of them naked, her pale skin almost glowing against his darker tone. She's on top, moving slowly, her back arched as he grips her hips. Her head is thrown back, chocolate hair spilling down to the curve of her ass.

I should leave. Should turn around and come back later. But I don't move.

It's not like this is the first time I've seen Damiano with someone before. We've had

our share of encounters with others around. But this is different. The way he's touching her so carefully, like she might break. The way she's responding so desperate, like she's been cold her whole life, and he's the first warmth she's found.

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I watch her hands trace the tattoos on his chest, following the patterns I know by heart. His breathing gets faster, shallower. She leans down to kiss him, her hair creating a curtain around their faces.

When she sits back up, Damiano's eyes shift and lock directly with mine through the glass.

No surprise. No guilt. Just that dark, knowing look that's always been able to cut right through me. He holds my gaze while he continues to guide her movements, his expression challenging yet inviting all at once.

Ten seconds pass. Maybe fifteen. Neither of us looks away.

Then Briar notices. Her rhythm falters as she follows his line of sight and sees me standing there in the darkness. Instead of the shock or embarrassment I expect, her expression shifts to something more curious. She doesn't stop moving.

Damiano whispers in her ear, and she nods, her eyes still on me, and she turns slightly to give me a better view of them both. Her naked body is all pale curves in the amber greenhouse light with delicate collarbones, small tits with pink nipples hardened from arousal, the gentle slope of her stomach... Despite her illness, there's an unexpected strength to her frame.

There's nothing fragile about the way she controls her movements.

The contrast of her fair skin against Damiano's darker complexion and intricate tattoos—almost like the good meets evil—sends a surge of heat through me. I clench

my jaw, trying to keep my expression neutral.

She reaches back to brace against his thigh as she arches her back more, making a deliberate show of it. The curve of her spine, the way her dark hair cascades down her back almost to her waist makes it impossible not to stare. My mouth goes dry. I've seen plenty at The Vault, but this is different. This is Damiano with Waters' daughter, two people who shouldn't make sense together but somehow do.

Damiano's eyes stay locked with mine as he guides her hips, slowing their pace like they've got all night now. He slides one of his hands up her side to cup her breast, circling his thumb around the nipple in a way I recognize from experience. My body responds right away, a rush of blood southward that leaves me light-headed for a second.

It's a performance meant for me—an invitation or a challenge, and with Damiano, those are usually the same thing. I should walk away, but my feet stay planted. Watching them through the fogged glass feels like something from our past, when boundaries between us were merely suggestions.

The corner of Damiano's mouth lifts in that half-smile I know too well. He says something else to Briar, and she reaches up, gathering her hair and pulling it to one side, exposing the curve of her neck where his mouth now travels. Her eyes flutter closed, but she turns her face toward the window. Toward me.

This is seriously fucked up.

We've got a body in the ground not fifty yards from here, search parties combing the island, and they're putting on a fuck show like we're at The Vault on a Saturday night.

Screw it.

I move to the door and let myself in. The air inside hits me immediately humid, warm, smelling like sex and plants.

“You’re early,” Damiano says. They’ve stopped, but they haven’t separated or covered up. Briar’s still straddling him, her back to me, her skin flushed with color.

“Shift ended.” I clear my throat. “Figured the news couldn’t wait.”

Briar quickly pulls a blanket around herself, color flooding her cheeks as the moment breaks. Damiano seems less concerned, but he reaches for his jeans on the floor beside the cot.

“Must be important,” Damiano says.

“Viktor’s called in reinforcements. They’ll be here by morning.” I move deeper into the greenhouse, keeping my eyes on my backpack as I set it on the workbench. “Also, you should cover these windows better. Half the search parties on the island could see what you’re doing in here.”

Damiano’s lips twitch, almost a smile as he stands. “Yet you’re the only one who showed up.”

“That won’t last.” I turn my back, giving them a moment to get dressed. “We need to talk.”

I busy myself checking the window for any movement outside while they finish getting themselves together. No awkward apologies or embarrassed fumbling. Just the rustle of clothing and quiet murmurs. When I turn back, Briar’s wearing one of Damiano’s flannels and a pair of leggings. Damiano’s pulled on jeans but hasn’t bothered with a shirt.

“What kind of reinforcements?” he asks, pouring water from a jug into the ancient kettle he keeps for tea.

“The kind with military training and tracking dogs.” I drop onto the only chair in the place. “Viktor’s not fucking around. Twenty thousand dollar reward now, and he’s calling in people who make a living finding things that don’t want to be found.”

Briar sits on the edge of the cot, tucking her legs underneath her. “Dogs can’t track through the maze. Too many competing scents from the plants.”

Damiano and I both look at her.

“What?” she says. “My dad hunts. I know how tracking dogs work.”

“She’s not wrong,” Damiano says, lighting the small camping stove. “The maze has too many overwhelming plant oils. Confusion scents. Poisonous plants for dogs that they’ll stay away from.”

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“Great, so the center’s safe,” I say, “but they’ll still tear apart everything else looking for him. Including this greenhouse.”

“They won’t find anything here,” Damiano says like it’s a fact.

“You’re sure?” I scan the space, looking for anything out of place. “Nothing that might connect either of you to Liam?”

Briar looks to Damiano, a flicker of worry crossing her face.

“It’s handled,” he says firmly. “Burned the clothes, cleaned the area. Even got rid of the gardening tools we used.”

The kettle whistles, and he makes tea in silence, handing us each a mug before leaning against the workbench. The three of us form a triangle in the small space, steam rising from our cups, nobody speaking for a long moment.

“So what now?” Briar asks.

“Now you stick to the story,” Damiano directs. “Party got out of hand. You went to bed early. Never met Liam Bastian.”

“And if these ex-military guys want to search my house?”

“Let them,” Damiano says. “Nothing to find there.”

“What about you two?” Her eyes move between us. “They’re going to question

everyone who was at the party.”

“We were all at the party,” I say, “but after that, I had an early shift at The Vault and plenty of people saw me there today, hungover but working.”

“And I came back to the greenhouse after helping clean up,” Damiano adds. “Normal routine.”

Briar nods, absorbing this. “So we just... wait it out?”

“For now.” I take a drink of the tea and grimace at the bitter herbal taste. “But Viktor’s not going to stop. Even when the trail goes cold.”

“He will eventually,” Damiano says. “Even Viktor can’t search forever. We know this.”

I’m not so sure about that. I’ve seen the look in Viktor’s eyes when he talked about his brother. That wasn’t just concern. That was obsession. He’s already lost one brother. He’s not going to let this island claim another.

“Someone needs to keep an eye on the search parties,” I say. “Make sure they don’t get too close to the center of the maze. I’ll stay here tonight.”

“I can help,” Briar offers.

“No,” Damiano and I say at the same time.

“You need to be in the main house,” I continue. “Present. Visible. Normal rich girl recovering from throwing a wild party.”

“I’m not just going to sit there while you two risk?—”

“Yes, you are,” Damiano says. “The more you involve yourself now, the more suspicious it looks.”

She doesn’t like it but doesn’t argue further.

“Fine,” she says eventually, setting down her tea. “You’re right. I should be at the house if anyone comes looking.” She stands reluctantly. “But I want updates. I need to know what’s happening.”

Damiano reaches for his shirt. “I’ll walk you.”

“No.” I stand up. “I’ll take her. You stay here and keep an eye out for any search parties getting too close to the maze. I don’t want you to accidentally meet up with Viktor alone.”

Something passes between Damiano and me—an old tension, a new understanding. He nods once.

Briar looks between us, clearly sensing something’s up but not quite understanding it. “I can find my way back alone.”

“With search parties all over the grounds? Not a chance.” I grab a flashlight from Damiano’s workbench. “Let’s go.”

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Outside, the fog has gotten thicker, coating everything in a layer of damp. We walk in silence for the first minute, Briar hugging herself against the cold despite the flannel shirt.

“About what you saw...” she finally says, her voice uncertain. “Damiano and I... that wasn’t planned.”

“You don’t need to explain anything to me.” I keep my eyes on the path ahead.

“I just don’t want things to be weird between us.”

I almost laugh. Like burying a body together wasn’t weird enough.

“It’s not weird,” I lie. “You’re both adults.”

“Right.” She steps over a fallen branch, still not looking at me. “I just thought, given your history with him...”

“Ancient history.” Another lie.

“It felt like more than that, the way you two looked at each other.”

I shrug, trying to play it cool. “We’ve known each other a long time. That’s all.”

“And I’m complicating things.”

“Everything about this situation is complicated. You and Damiano is the least of my

concerns right now.”

She nods slowly, clearly not believing me. Smart girl.

We’ve reached the back patio of the main house. All the windows are still dark.

“You should go in through the kitchen,” I tell her. “In case anyone’s watching the front.”

“Right.” She hesitates, then adds, “Be careful out there tonight.”

“Always am.”

“Lock the doors behind you,” I remind her. “And don’t answer if anyone comes knocking before morning.”

Once she’s safely inside, I stand in the shadows for a few minutes, watching for any movement around the property. Nothing but fog and darkness. The search parties must have moved to a different area.

I head back toward the greenhouse, my mind racing with everything at once. The search. Viktor. The body in the maze. Damiano and Briar together on that narrow cot...

Yeah, complicated doesn’t even fucking begin to cover it.

Chapter 16

Briar

“I had a party. It got bigger than I expected. I went to bed early. I don’t know

everyone who was there.”

I repeat the lines in my head for the twentieth time, trying not to sound too rehearsed while Viktor Bastian stares me down from across the kitchen table. His eyes haven’t left my face since he sat down ten minutes ago.

“And what time would that have been, Ms. Waters? When you went to bed?”

“Around midnight, I think.” I fidget with my teacup. “I was tired. My condition?”

“Yes, your condition.” He glances at the medication bottles lined up on the counter. “Must be difficult.”

Something about the way he says it makes my skin crawl. Like he doesn’t quite believe me.

Two other men stand near the back door—ex-military types with hard eyes and crew cuts. One of them keeps checking his watch. They brought dogs, currently sniffing around the perimeter of the house with handlers. I’m trying not to think about what would happen if they decided to explore the maze.

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“Liam was here, at your party.” Viktor leans forward slightly.

“I invited a lot of people. I honestly don’t remember everyone who came.” I take a sip of tea to hide my face. “The party got bigger than expected. Word spread.”

“As you keep saying. That happens with parties.” His statement is too calm. “People you don’t know showing up. Causing trouble sometimes.”

I’m saved from answering by the sound of the front door opening and bags dropping in the hall.

“Miss Briar? I’m back early. The ferry schedule was—” Mrs. Fletcher stops in the kitchen doorway, narrowing her eyes at the sight of Viktor. “What’s going on here?”

“Mrs. Fletcher.” I try to mask my relief. “This is Viktor Bastian. He’s looking for his brother, who unfortunately turned up missing the other night.”

Mrs. Fletcher takes in the scene—three strangers in her kitchen, me looking uncomfortable, the men by the door. Her expression hardens.

“In Miss Waters’s kitchen? Without calling ahead?” She moves into the room like she owns it, which in many ways, she does. “I wasn’t aware we were entertaining visitors today.”

“We’re not staying long.” Viktor’s tone remains pleasant but his eyes are cold. “Just asking a few questions about Ms. Waters’s party.”

“And that requires three men?” Mrs. Fletcher sniffs. She turns to me. “Have you offered these gentlemen tea, Miss Briar? Or were they just leaving?”

Her meaning is clear. I hide a smile behind my cup.

“Actually, Mrs. Fletcher, they were wondering if they could search the grounds.”

“Search for what?” She raises an eyebrow. “You think he’s here?”

“Last seen at Ms. Waters’s party,” Viktor says. “We’re checking everywhere he might have been.”

Mrs. Fletcher sighs like this is all a terrible inconvenience. “Well, you can look around outside, I suppose, but I’ll need to accompany anyone entering the house proper. The Waters family values their privacy, as I’m sure you understand.”

Viktor stands, nodding slightly. “We’ll continue our search of the grounds, then. With your permission, Ms. Waters?”

Like he’s giving me a choice.

“That’s fine,” I say.

After they leave, Mrs. Fletcher immediately starts making a fresh pot of tea, the clink of china more aggressive than necessary.

“The nerve of those men,” she mutters. “Your father would have a fit if he knew.”

“Thank you for stepping in.” I wrap my sweatertighter around me, suddenly cold despite the kitchen’s warmth. “I wasn’t sure how much longer I could answer questions.”

“Vultures, the lot of them.” She sets a steaming cup in front of me. “Now, tell me about this party. I leave for one weekend and come back to search parties and interrogations.”

I recite the story again, this version slightly more candid since she wasn’t here. The party, the crowd getting out of hand, me going to bed early—all technically true, just minus the part about killing someone.

Through the kitchen window, I can see men with dogs moving methodically across the lawn toward the garden. Toward the maze. My heart rate picks up.

“Don’t worry about them trampling the flowers,” Mrs. Fletcher says, mistaking my concern. “That Ricci boy will fix whatever they destroy. Though heaven knows that maze is more trouble than it’s worth.”

I turn to her, grateful for the distraction. “What do you mean?”

“That maze has been nothing but a headache for years. Your grandmother’s pride and joy, but the upkeep is ridiculous.” She starts unpacking groceries with sharp movements. “And during certain... events, it becomes a nuisance.”

“Events?”

“The Hunt.” She practically spits the word. “Every year, all those strangers and heathens running through the property like animals. No respect for privacy or decent behavior.”

I sit up straighter.

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“A disgraceful tradition. Started with the original settlers, they say.” Mrs. Fletcher’s mouth tightens. “They sign contracts beforehand. It’s all arranged through that club. The women consent to be... pursued. The men wear these bone masks, like stags. They whistle when they’re coming—this eerie melody you can hear through the trees.” Her voice drops. “Once it starts, there’s no stopping. When the man catches the woman...” Mrs. Fletcher scoffs. “The next morning, these elaborate baskets appear on their porches. Expensive jewelry, cash, wine. The wealthy men try to outdo each other with their generosity. As if that makes it civilized.” She slams a cabinet door. “Some claim it’s all consensual fun, island tradition dating back generations. Others say it’s just an excuse for debauchery.”

My mouth goes dry. “And this happens in our maze?” I don’t remember ever seeing it happen on our property when I was young. I can’t imagine my mother, and most definitely not my father allowing it to happen.

“Yeah well... this house is vacant most of the time minus the bare staff. So... it’s become a perfect playground. After the Harvest Moon, usually, but I’ve heard rumors they’re starting early this year. Summer equinox.” She resumes unpacking groceries. “Your father should sell this place. It’s not good for your health, all this damp and that ridiculous club they opened in town. Trading on the island’s worst impulses, calling it ‘tradition’ or ‘culture’.” She slams a can of soup onto the counter. “As if running half-naked through the night is culture.”

I nod, not trusting myself to respond without revealing I already know all about The Hunt, The Vault, or the fact that now I’m scared even more about the bloody body being found by some masked man and his white-gowned prey. If this is true, people will be everywhere, potentially disturbing Liam’s grave.

“I think I need to lie down,” I say, rubbing my temples. “It’s been a long day.”

Mrs. Fletcher’s expression softens immediately. “Of course, dear. I’ll fix something light for dinner. You rest.”

I retreat to my room, where I pace for the next few hours, too anxious to rest. Outside my window, the search parties gradually disperse as dusk approaches. I can bet money they’ll be back tomorrow, probably with more men and equipment.

Mrs. Fletcher calls me down for dinner—a simple soup and fresh bread. She fills the meal with island gossip, carefully avoiding any more talk of The Hunt or Liam’s disappearance. I nod at the right moments, but my mind is elsewhere.

After dinner, I escape to my room again, claiming fatigue. It’s not entirely a lie. The stress of Viktor’s questioning has worn me out. But as soon as I close my door, I pull out my phone.

I text Damiano first: Are the search parties gone?

His reply comes quickly: For now. Stay in the house.

I stare at the screen, unsure what to say next. Last night feels like a dream. The herbs, the greenhouse, Damiano’s hands on me, Flint watching us through the glass. What had gotten into me? I’ve never been that bold, that shameless with anyone before.

It had to be the herbs. Or the shock of killing someone. It couldn’t have been just... him. Though when I close my eyes, I can still see his tattoos under my fingertips, still taste his skin.

I pace my room, thinking. The search parties are a problem, but The Hunt could be worse—people specifically in the maze, possibly discovering Liam’s grave. I need

more information.

Feeling restless and knowing there's no way I can simply go to bed and sleep right now, I make a decision that will surely piss off Damiano. I grab my warmest cardigan and slip my phone into my pocket, then text Mrs. Fletcher that I'm going for a drive to clear my head after the stressful day. Before she can protest, I'm out the back door and heading down the gravel path toward the Jeep.

The Vault is the last place I should be going, but if I want to know about The Hunt, and if there is a way to keep the participants off my property, I need to talk to someone who might be able to make that happen. Someone who is connected to it.

And, if I'm being honest with myself, there's another reason I'm headed there. After what happened in the greenhouse—the three of us locked in that strange moment—I need to talk to Flint. I need to understand what I saw passing between him and Damiano, what I felt when he watched us.

Just curiosity, I tell myself as I follow the coastal road toward town. Just getting information to protect ourselves...

Chapter 17

Briar

The Vault's exterior doesn't live up to its reputation—just an old bank building on Main Street with discreet lighting and a simple sign. No line outside, no bouncers visible—nothing to suggest what happens behind those heavy doors.

I hesitate at the entrance, aware of how stupid this plan is. What am I even doing here? I'm about to turn back when the door opens, and a couple steps out—both in designer clothes that scream money and status. They barely glance at me as they pass.

Before the door can close, I slip inside.

The entryway is a small, dimly lit space with a sleek desk. A woman with impeccable makeup and a black dress sits behind it, typing on a tablet. She looks up, her expression carefully neutral as she takes in my casual clothes.

“Membership card?”

“I don’t have one. I’m Briar Waters.”

Her eyebrows lift slightly at my last name. “Waters? Maxwell Waters’s daughter?”

I nod, trying to project confidence I don’t feel. “I’m looking for Flint Bishop. He works here.”

She studies me for a moment, then taps something on her tablet. “One moment, Ms. Waters.”

While she makes a call, I take in the entrance. Subtle lighting, expensive art on the walls, the scent of something woodsy and expensive in the air. Everything designed to signal exclusivity.

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“Flint’s working tonight,” she eventually says. “You may go in, but I should warn you that The Vault has a dress code. In the future, we’d appreciate appropriate attire.”

She gestures to a heavy door behind her, which unlocks with an audible click.

“Thank you,” I say, moving past her before she can change her mind.

The main room hits all my senses at once. The lighting is even lower here, predominantly red and black with strategic spotlights highlighting certain areas. Music with a heavy bass line thrums through the space. The original bank features have been preserved—high ceilings, marble columns, and even the original vault door standing open at the far end, leading to what looks like private rooms.

What the old bank didn’t have were the plush velvet couches arranged throughout the space, or the people on them engaging in activities that make my cheeks heat. A woman in a corset leads a man on leash past me. In one corner, a man in an expensive suit has a woman bent over his lap, her dress hiked up as he spanks her with what looks like a leather paddle. Neither seems concerned about their audience.

I feel painfully out of place in my cardigan and jeans, surrounded by silk, leather, and skin. Several people glance at me with confusion or amusement before they return to their conversations or partners.

The bar stretches along one wall, black marble with soft lighting underneath. And there’s Flint, mixing a drink with practiced movements, his attention focused on the liquid he’s pouring. He looks different here—still in all black, but more polished. His hair is pulled back, the white streak even more striking against the black. He laughs at

something a customer says, and I'm struck by how rarely I've seen him smile.

I make my way toward him, acutely aware of every step. A couple moves past me, the woman's hand tucked into the back pocket of her partner's leather pants. On a nearby couch, two women kiss deeply while a man watches, his hand resting possessively on one woman's thigh.

By the time I reach the bar, my heart is racing. This was a terrible idea.

Flint sees me before I can speak, his easy smile vanishing into shock, then anger. He finishes serving his customer, then moves down the bar to where I stand.

"What the hell are you doing here?" His question is low but intense.

"I need to talk to you."

"This isn't a coffee shop, Briar. You can't just drop by."

"It seemed important enough to risk it." I glance around at the club. "Besides, my last name got me in the door easily enough."

His jaw tightens. "Wait here. Don't move."

He speaks to a woman with blue hair working further down the bar, who nods and takes over his section. Then he's beside me, his hand firm on my elbow as he guides me away from the main area.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Somewhere we can talk without you getting propositioned every five seconds. You're practically wearing a sign that says 'fresh meat.'"

He leads me through a door marked “Staff Only” into a small office that features a desk with a computer, filing cabinets, and a worn couch against one wall. He closes the door behind us, muffling the music from the main room.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he demands, crossing his arms. “Coming here, tonight of all nights, when Viktor’s men are watching everything.”

“I was careful. No one followed me.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I needed information about The Hunt. Mrs. Fletcher told me people use the maze during it, and that there may be one for the summer equinox.”

“Okay... So because of that you decided to waltz into the island’s most exclusive sex club wearing a grandma cardigan?” He runs a hand through his hair, dislodging some strands from the tie. “You could have called.”

“You don’t exactly seem like a phone conversation kind of guy.” I move further into the room, needing space from his intensity. “And I’m not a child. I can go where I want.”

“No, you’re just the woman who killed someone two days ago.” His voice drops even lower. “The woman whose property is being searched by the victim’s brother. The woman who should be home establishing her innocence by lying low, not wandering into a den of gossips who’d sell their mothers for the right price.”

“I’m also the woman whose property is going to be overrun by people during The Hunt,” I snap back. “People who might find what we buried. I need to know exactly what to expect and when.”

He sighs, some of the anger draining from him. “Fine. What do you want to know?”

“Everything. When it will happen. How many people. How to keep them out of certain areas.”

“You can’t keep them out. That’s the point of The Hunt. No boundaries, no rules once it starts.”

“There have to be some rules.”

“Sure.” He leans against the desk. “The woman consents by putting out the red bulb. She wears white, goes barefoot. The man wears the mask, does the whistle. After that?” He shrugs. “It’s primal. That’s why people do it.”

“And they use the maze?”

“It’s one of the favorite spots. Hidden, complex. The thrill of the chase.”

I try to imagine it—people running through the hedges at night, the masked hunters pursuing. All of them potentially stumbling over a fresh grave.

“We need to move him,” I say.

“Not an option. Too risky.”

“More risky than someone literally tripping over his body?”

“We buried him deep, with plants that mask the scent. The dogs couldn’t find him today. Hunters won’t either.”

“You can’t know that for sure.” I step closer to him, frustration building. “This isn’t just your problem. It’s my property. My party. My hands that—” I’m unable to finish.

His expression shifts, anger giving way to something more complex. “I know, but moving him now, with Viktor watching everything? That’s suicide.”

“So we just hope for the best? Hope no one notices the freshly turned earth or the new plants?”

“The maze has been there for decades. Tourists and locals have been screwing in it for just as long. No one’s going to question one more patch of dirt.”

“That’s not good enough.” I move even closer, challenging him. “I need a better plan than ‘hope no one notices.’”

“Well, that’s all we’ve got right now, princess.” The nickname comes out sharp-edged. “Unless you’ve got some brilliant idea you’re not sharing.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“What? Princess?” He smirks. “Isn’t that what you are? Daddy’s little girl, used to getting her way, thinks she can just walk into anywhere?—”

“You don’t know me at all.”

“No?” He narrows his eyes. “I know you well enough. Rich girl looking for a thrill, slumming it with the hired help. First Damiano, now showing up here.” He steps closer. “Was that your plan? Work your way through the island’s bad boys for a little vacation excitement?”

“That’s not?—”

“You seemed pretty comfortable letting the gardener fuck you last night. Didn’t take you long to come looking for me next, did it?”

The words hit like a physical blow. I see the regret in his eyes immediately, like he knows he’s gone too far, but it doesn’t matter. I slap him. Not hard, more a reflex

than an attack, but the sound seems to echo in the small room.

For a second, we both freeze. Then something shifts in his eyes.

“Feel better?” he asks.

“No.” My hand stings. “I don’t know what I’m doing. Any of this.”

“Join the club.”

We’re standing too close now, close enough that I can smell the faint scent of whiskey on his breath, see the small scar near his jawline. He drops his gaze to my mouth for a second.

“I should go,” I say, not moving.

“Yeah, you should.” He doesn’t move either.

I’m not sure who leans in first. Maybe me. Maybe him. Maybe both of us at the same time, drawn together by the same reckless impulse that’s been pushing me since I returned to this island.

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His mouth is firm against mine, nothing gentle about this kiss. It's all heat and frustration as he brings up his hands to tangle in my hair while I grip the front of his shirt. He tastes like whiskey and bad decisions, and I want more of both.

He backs me against the desk, lifting me onto it in one fluid movement. I part my legs automatically, allowing him to press closer, and he slides his hands under my cardigan, warm against my skin as they trace up my sides.

This is insane. Last night I was with Damiano, and now I'm kissing Flint like I'll die if I stop. But it feels right somehow, part of the same dangerous current pulling all three of us together.

He moves his mouth to my neck, teeth grazing the sensitive skin there. I gasp, letting my head fall back to give him better access. I find the hem of his shirt with my fingers, slipping underneath to feel the warm skin of his back.

"We shouldn't," he murmurs against my throat, even as he slides his hands higher under my sweater.

"Probably not." I make no move to stop him.

He pulls back just enough to look at me, his pupils so dilated his eyes look almost black. "This is a terrible idea."

"I know." I pull him back to me, reclaiming his mouth.

He expertly works at the button and zipper of my pants, pausing only to search my

eyes one last time for hesitation. Finding none, he tugs them down over my hips as I lift myself slightly to help. The cool air hits my bare legs, raising goosebumps that his rough hands immediately smooth away.

“Last chance to walk away,” he breathes against my ear.

I answer by pulling his shirt over his head to reveal the tattoo that spans his left shoulder—intricate lines I can’t quite discern in the dim light. A scar cuts across his ribs, older and faded—evidence of a life I know nothing about.

“You don’t want to get mixed up with me,” he warns, even as he traces the edge of my underwear. “I’m not the good guy here.”

“I’m not looking for a good guy.” The words surprise me with their honesty.

Something like a growl escapes him as he crashes his mouth back to mine. His kisses are nothing like Damiano’s careful exploration.

Flint devours, takes, demands.

And I match him, bite for bite, digging crescents into his shoulders with my nails.

The desk rattles beneath us as he presses forward. Papers scatter to the floor, followed by something that shatters – a mug, maybe. Neither of us stops to check.

This isn’t just heated kisses that we can laugh off tomorrow. This is deliberate. Reckless. Exactly what I need to feel something beyond the numbness that’s been my constant companion.

He slips his hands beneath me, lifting me against him as he carries me from the desk to the small couch against the wall. The leather is cold against my back as he lowers

me, his weight following.

His body covers mine completely, solid and warm. The leather couch creaks beneath us as he settles between my thighs, one hand braced beside my head, the other tracing a path down my side to my hip.

“This what you came here for?” He digs his fingers into my flesh, just shy of painful.

I should be offended by the question, but there’s something raw in his expression that stops me—vulnerability beneath the anger. I reach up to touch his face, and he flinches slightly before allowing it.

“No,” I whisper, “but I’m not sorry.”

Something flashes in his eyes—relief, maybe—before he captures my mouth again. The kiss is slower this time, deeper, as if we’ve moved past the initial fury into something more dangerous.

He slips his hand between us, finding the edge of my underwear again, and I arch against him, wordlessly urging him on. The first touch of his fingers makes me gasp against his mouth. He swallows the sound, watching my face with an intensity that makes me want to look away. But I don’t.

“Flint,” I breathe, not sure if I’m asking for more or for mercy.

He seems to understand either way; his movements becoming more deliberate as he slides his finger into my pussy without warning.

I let my head fall back, a shuddering breath escaping me. His eyes never leave my face, tracking every reaction like he’s memorizing them. Like he’s storing away my vulnerabilities for later.

“Look at me,” he demands, so low I barely hear it over the blood rushing in my ears.

I force my eyes open, meeting his gaze as his thumb finds my clit, circling with deliberate pressure. He adds a second finger, spreading me wider.

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I can't look away from him. His eyes hold me captive as effectively as his body pressing me into the couch. There's something almost punishing in his touch, like he's trying to prove something to both of us.

"This what you want?" He crooks his fingers inside me in a way that makes my breath catch.

He adds a third finger, and it's almost too much.

The stretch burns, delicious and sharp. My hips rise to meet his hand of their own accord. I don't answer his question with words—I don't need to. My body's response is answer enough as I clench around his fingers.

His mouth curves into something not quite a smile. "Thought so."

A knock at the door breaks us apart. Flint steps back, running a hand through his now completely disheveled hair as I scramble to put my clothes back on.

"Boss?" It's the blue-haired bartender cracking the door and peeking in. "Sorry to interrupt, but Viktor Bastian just walked in. Thought you should know."

The heat in Flint's eyes instantly turns to alarm. "Keep him at the bar. Tell him I'm doing inventory."

"Got it."

Flint turns back to me right as I'm pulling my pants over my hips. "You need to

leave. Now. Through the back.”

I button my pants and try to regain reason, trying to process the rapid shift. “Why is he here?”

“Could be coincidence. Could be he followed you.” Flint straightens his shirt. “Either way, you can’t be seen.”

He leads me to another door at the back of the office, opening it to reveal a narrow hallway.

“Follow this to the end. It’ll take you out behind the building. Go straight home, no detours.”

“Why do I need to sneak out? We could just say we’re talking. There’s nothing suspicious about that.”

His expression turns serious. “Viktor’s not an idiot. He’ll see you here, see me talking to you in private, and wonder why the Waters heiress is having secret meetings with the bartender right when he’s investigating his brother’s disappearance.”

“So?”

“So he’s looking for any reason to connect the dots. We can’t give him one.” His expression softens slightly. “Go home, Briar. Please.”

It’s the “please” that does it. That and hearing my name from him without any edge or sarcasm.

I nod, feeling awkward about what just happened between us. Heat rises to my cheeks as I realize I’ve gone from Damiano’s arms to Flint’s in less than twenty-four hours.

What kind of person does that make me?

“Go,” he says, more urgently. “I’ll handle Viktor.”

Chapter 18

Briar

The back door of The Vault slams behind me, cutting off the bass that’s been vibrating through my bones for the past hour. Cold night air hits my face, sobering me up like a splash of ice water.

What the hell just happened in there?

My heart’s still racing from Flint’s hands on me, his mouth on mine, then that abrupt switch when Viktor showed up. I press my back against the brick wall, needing a second to gain my bearings.

The alley behind The Vault is pitch black except for one sad little light bulb above the door through which I just came. The damp air smells like garbage and stale beer. Glamorous.

I pull my cardigan tighter and push off from the wall. I need to get home before someone decides to check who slipped out the back.

My body still feels electric from Flint’s touch, nerves buzzing in places they definitely shouldn’t be. God, what is wrong with me? One day I’m sleeping with Damiano, the next I’m practically begging Flint to take me on an office desk. Maybe my illness has reached my brain.

My face burns at the memory of how easily I’d spread my legs for him. How good it

felt when he touched me. How much I wanted more.

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No. I can't think about that right now. I need to focus on getting back to the estate without being seen.

I start walking, keeping close to the wall, each step taking me further into darkness. My Jeep is parked two blocks away, down an even darker alley off Harbor Street. Seemed like a great idea when I was trying to be sneaky. Now? Not so much.

The island is quiet at this hour. Most of the local businesses close by nine, leaving only The Vault and a few dive bars for nightlife. The fog has thickened since I arrived, turning streetlights into hazy orbs that barely cut through the mist.

Something scrapes behind me—a footstep, maybe, or a can rolling across pavement.

I freeze. Listen. Nothing.

Only my imagination. Too many horror movies as a teenager.

I keep walking, faster now. My breath comes a little shorter, a familiar tightness building in my chest. Great timing for my lungs to remind me they're garbage.

The sound comes again. Definitely footsteps this time, then silence when I stop.

“Hello?” I call out. “Is someone there?”

No response. Just the distant crash of waves against the harbor wall and my own breathing.

I should run, but running isn't really an option with my crappy lungs. Instead, I walk as quickly as I can, pulse hammering in my ears.

There it is again—the quiet shuffle of footsteps on pavement, closer now.

Oh god. What if it's Viktor? What if he followed me from The Vault, figured out I had something to do with Liam?

A movement reflects in a darkened shop window. A shadow, taller than mine, keeping pace about twenty feet behind me.

I dig in my pocket for my phone. Dead. Of course it's dead.

The alley where I parked is just ahead. I pick up speed despite the burn in my lungs, ignoring the way spots dance at the edges of my vision from lack of oxygen.

I turn the corner, plunging into darkness so complete I have to feel my way along the wall. The alley smells like rotting fish and seawater. My Jeep is parked at the far end, a barely visible shape in the gloom.

What was I thinking, parking here? This is literally how every bad horror movie starts.

Keys. Where are my keys? I pat my pockets frantically, eventually encountering the hard metal outline in my right pocket. I pull them out with shaking hands.

A scrape of boot on concrete echoes through the alley. He's here. Whoever's following me has turned the corner.

My trembling hands refuse to cooperate. The keys slip from my fingers, hitting the wet pavement with a metallic clatter that seems impossibly loud.

“Shit!” I whisper, dropping to my knees to feel around for them.

My fingers scrabble across rough concrete, finding nothing but puddles and cigarette butts. The footsteps are getting closer.

There! My hand closes around the keys just as a reflection catches my eye.

A face in my car window, not my own. A man’s face, features blurred by darkness and fog, but unmistakably watching me.

I open my mouth to scream, but my lungs seize up completely, cutting off the sound before it can escape. I stumble backward, keys clutched in my fist like a pathetic weapon.

“Briar.”

The voice is so familiar it takes a second to process through my panic.

“Damiano?”

He steps forward, becoming solid in the darkness. “What the hell are you doing out here alone?”

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Relief floods me, quickly replaced by anger. “What am I doing? What are you doing, skulking around in the dark, scaring me half to death? Were you following me?”

“Yes.”

No excuses, no explanations. Just that one word, delivered in the same tone he might use to comment on the weather.

“What the fuck, Damiano? You can’t just follow people!”

“I followed you from the estate. You shouldn’t be out here at all, especially not alone.” His words are tense, controlled. “Viktor has men watching the grounds, the house. They would’ve reported that you left. Now he knows you’re in town.”

“So you decided to stalk me? That’s your solution?”

“I decided to make sure you didn’t get yourself killed.” He moves closer, and I can finally see his face clearly. He’s furious. “What were you thinking, going to The Vault while Viktor’s looking for his brother? While your face is fresh in everyone’s minds from your party?”

“I needed information about The Hunt.” Even to my own ears, the excuse sounds weak.

“From Flint.” It’s not a question.

Heat crawls up my neck. Does he know? Did he see us? No, he couldn’t have. He

was outside, but something in his tone makes me think he suspects.

“Yes, from Flint. He works at The Vault.” I try to remain steady. “Who better to ask about it and if there is a way to keep the hunters off my land?”

“Be careful with him.” He softens slightly, and I catch something in his expression. Not jealousy exactly, but concern mixed with experience.

But why isn't there jealousy? We haven't even spoken about last night once? It's almost as if I dreamed it. We fucked multiple times, we got interrupted and then... nothing. Nothing at all. Did we even have sex, or have I finally lost my mind and am having fevered dreams?

“Flint isn't... he consumes people. Pulls them into his gravity until there's nothing left,” he adds.

“Sounds like you're speaking from experience.”

He glances at me, then back at the road. “I am. He's not a bad person, but there's something dark in him. Something that needs and takes and doesn't know how to stop.”

“You make him sound dangerous.”

“Not dangerous. Just...” He pauses, searching for the right word. “Intense. Like a riptide. He doesn't mean to pull you under, but that's just how he's built.”

“So your warning is what—stay away from Flint?”

“My warning is that you risked being seen by twenty different people who could connect you to Liam. For what? A conversation that could've happened somewhere

safe.” He clenches his hands at his sides. “The Vault is the last place you should be right now.”

When he puts it that way, it does sound idiotic, but I’m not about to admit that.

“I was careful,” I insist.

“Careful.” His laugh is a short, hard sound. “Is that what you call parking in the darkest alley on the island and walking around alone at night?”

He’s right, but his condescending tone pisses me off. “I don’t need a babysitter, Damiano. Or a bodyguard. Or whatever it is you think you’re doing right now.”

“Apparently, you do.”

I turn away from him, jamming my key into the car door with more force than necessary. My hands are still shaking, partly from the fading adrenaline, partly from anger. Mostly from knowing he’s right.

The lock clicks, but before I can open the door, Damiano’s hand covers mine.

“Don’t,” he says, softer now. “You’re in no state to drive. You can barely breathe.”

He’s right about that, too. My chest is tight, each breath a conscious effort. The combination of fear, exertion, and damp night air has triggered my symptoms.

“I’m fine,” I lie, even as a wave of dizziness hits me.

“You’re not. I’m driving you back.”

I should argue, should tell him to go away, and that I can handle myself. But the thought of driving back alone, of facing those winding coastal roads with my vision blurring at the edges, isn’t appealing.

“Fine.” I hand him the keys.

He opens the passenger door for me, and I slide in without further argument. The small victory seems to soften his anger somewhat.

The Jeep feels like a safe bubble once he’s inside, too, and the dome light briefly illuminates his profile before he starts the engine and darkness returns. The heater kicks on, blowing cool air that will take forever to become warm.

Neither of us speaks as he navigates the narrow town streets. The silence stretches, filled with too many unspoken questions.

Finally, I can’t take it anymore. “So you were watching the house? Waiting for me to leave? That’s not creepy at all.”

He tightens his hands on the steering wheel. “I was checking in. After what happened with Viktor’s men searching the grounds, I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“And when you saw I wasn’t there?”

“I asked Mrs. Fletcher where you went. She said you went for a drive. At night.

Alone.”

“So you just decided to come find me?”

“Yes.”

One word again. Like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

I turn to look out the window, watching fog-draped trees slide by. “You can’t protect me from everything, Damiano.”

“I can try.” The simple admission hangs between us. After a moment, he adds, “Especially when you insist on taking stupid risks. I told you to stay home.”

And we’re back to anger. Great. I’m now flanked by two men who think they can tell me what to do.

“You don’t get to decide what risks I take,” I snap. “You’re not my keeper. You’re not my boyfriend. You’re not anything to me.”

The words come out harsher than I intended. His face remains expressionless, but a muscle in his jaw jumps.

“Last night would suggest otherwise.”

There it is...

Heat floods my face. Last night. When I was in his bed, his hands on my skin, his mouth everywhere. When I felt safe and wanted and alive for the first time in years.

“Last night was... I was upset about Liam. I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“So it was just shock? Convenience? The closest warm body?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Sure sounded like it.”

I close my eyes, suddenly exhausted. “I don’t know what it was, okay? I don’t know what any of this is. I killed someone two days ago. My entire life has turned into some twisted nightmare. I don’t know what I’m doing or feeling or why I’m doing any of it.”

He’s quiet for so long I think he’s not going to respond. When he does, his voice is gentler.

“I get that. More than you know.” He takes a deep breath. “But going to Flint... that was dangerous. For all of us.”

“What’s the deal with you two anyway? And don’t give me that ‘it’s complicated’ bullshit again. You clearly have some dark secret or something. There’s hate there, but also... over protectiveness.” Maybe he’ll tell me more than Flint did.

The Jeep slows as we approach a curve in the road. Damiano takes it carefully before answering.

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“We were together for a long time. It ended badly. Now we can’t decide if we hate each other or not.”

“That’s slightly more informative than ‘it’s complicated,’ but not by much.”

He sighs. “What do you want me to say? That we were in love? That we destroyed each other? That the island’s too small for both of us but neither of us will leave?”

“Yes, actually. That’s exactly what I want you to say. The truth.”

“Fine.” His words harden. “We met when we were nineteen. Both island kids from the wrong side of the tracks. He was delivering fish to the big houses; I was gardening. Started talking. Started fucking. Kept at it for two years.”

The bluntness surprises me. “What happened?”

“What always happens. Life. Mistakes. Betrayal.” His eyes stay fixed on the road. “I left for Italy for a few months after... after some stressful times. Needed space to sort some things out. When I came back, he was with someone else.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.” He takes another curve, the headlights briefly illuminating a deer watching from the treeline. “When I confronted him about it, he said it didn’t mean anything. That he thought I wasn’t coming back. That he was just passing time.”

“And you didn’t believe him?”

“I believed him. That’s the problem. It was so easy for him to replace me that it really didn’t mean anything to him.”

“Is that why you hate each other now?”

“We don’t hate each other. Not really.” His mouth quirks up at one corner. “We just can’t figure out how to be around each other without falling back into old patterns.”

“Like sleeping together even though you’re broken up?”

He glances at me, surprise evident in his expression. “How did you?—”

“I have eyes, Damiano. The way you look at each other. The tension. Plus Flint pretty much confirmed it.”

“Did he.” His voice is flat.

“Does it bother you? That I know?”

“No.” A pause. “Does it bother you?”

The question catches me off guard. “Why would it bother me?”

“Because of last night.”

Right. Last night. When I was in his bed, while less than twenty-four hours later I’d be letting Flint push me against a desk, his fingers inside me, my body responding just as eagerly.

“No,” I say, too quickly. “It doesn’t bother me at all.”

I'm such a liar.

The Jeep falls silent again as we approach the estate. The main house stands dark against the night sky, only a few lights burning in the downstairs windows. Mrs. Fletcher must still be up, waiting for me.

We stop. I should get out immediately, but something keeps me in my seat.

"Thank you," I say softly. "For coming to find me. Even though it pissed me off."

"You're welcome." He stares straight ahead for a moment, then turns to face me. "You were with him, weren't you? With Flint."

It's not an accusation, merely a simple statement of fact. My breath catches, but I don't deny it.

"I know Flint." His voice is quiet, almost resigned. "And I know that look. The one you're wearing now."

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Heat rushes to my face. “I didn’t plan for anything to happen.”

“It rarely is planned with him.” His expression softens slightly. “I’m not judging you, Briar. It’s complicated between all of us now.”

“Because of Liam.”

“Not just because of Liam.”

His tone makes me look at him more closely. There’s no jealousy in his eyes—or at least, not just jealousy. There’s understanding, too.

“What is this?” I ask, barely audible even to myself. “Between all of us?”

Damiano stares at me for a long moment, something shifting behind his eyes.

“I know how it is with him,” he says quietly. “I’ve been there.”

Heat crawls up my neck as his words hit too close to home. He sees it in my face, and his laugh is low and bitter.

“Flint and I have been destroying each other for years.” His fingers find my jaw, tilting my face up to his. The touch is deliberate, claiming. “Now you’re caught in the middle.”

“I’m not caught anywhere,” I say, but even I don’t believe it.

“No?” He brushes his thumb along my bottom lip, and I think of Flint. “Whatever this is between us. It’s not going to end well. For any of us.”

I should pull away, but I don’t.

“You don’t know what I want,” I whisper.

“Maybe not,” he says, dropping his hand, “but I know what I see.”

He shifts back to his side of the Jeep. I’m starting to hate the way he stares at me when I can tell he’s reading me. It’s like he can see every page of my sordid diary meant for my eyes only.

“But one thing is for sure. Viktor’s not going to stop looking for his brother. Both Flint and I know this. The more attention you draw to yourself, the harder this gets for all of us.”

He’s right, but admitting it feels like giving up some essential part of myself—the last bit of control I have in this spiraling situation.

“I’ll be more careful,” I say, reaching for the door handle.

“That’s all I’m asking.” He softens slightly. “The three of us are in this together now, whether we like it or not.”

I step out of the vehicle, needing distance from the intensity building between us. “Goodnight, Damiano.”

“Goodnight, Briar.”

I slip inside through the back door, the warmth of the empty house immediately

enveloping me. The kitchen is dark except for a single light left on over the stove. I lean against the counter, finally letting out the breath I feel like I've been holding all night.

My hands are still shaking. From the cold? From what happened with Flint at The Vault? Or from whatever just happened with Damiano in the Jeep? I'm not sure I can separate it all anymore. Every action, every touch, every word between us feels loaded with something I'm not equipped to handle. Especially not now, with Liam's body still fresh in the ground and Viktor hunting for answers.

God, what am I doing? Two men in fewer than twenty-four hours. Me, who hasn't been with anyone since getting super sick years ago. It's like I've lost all sense, all caution. Like killing someone flipped some switch inside me that's now seeking out more danger, more intensity.

I need to get my head straight. Need to wash off this night.

In my room, I strip off my clothes and step into a hot shower, letting the water sluice away the night's events. But it can't rid me of the memories—Flint's hands on me, Damiano's knowing eyes, the growing web between the three of us.

Chapter 19

Briar

Meet me at the body.

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Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:52 am

I stare at Flint's text, my stomach dropping. Five words that chill me more than the fog pressing against my bedroom window.

Only an hour's passed since I got home from The Vault. I'd just stepped out of the shower, hair still dripping onto my shoulders, when my phone lit up with Flint's message.

My first instinct is to ignore it, pretend I'm asleep, that I never saw it. But the thought of that body in the maze, of what will happen if it's discovered, won't let me.

I pull on jeans and a black sweater, still warm from the dryer, and grab my boots. The clock on my nightstand reads 12:43 AM. The house is silent around me, Mrs. Fletcher having gone to bed hours ago.

The back stairs creak under my weight as I make my way down to the kitchen. Every sound seems amplified in the quiet house, my heartbeat loudest of all. I ease open the back door and slip outside.

The night air hits me like a slap—cold, damp, heavy with salt and mist. Classic Heathens Hollow.

The security lights cast eerie halos in the fog, barely illuminating the path ahead. I keep to the shadows, aware that Viktor's men might still be watching the property.

My boots sink into the soft earth as I follow the narrow garden path that leads to the maze. Every few steps, I stop to listen, but there's nothing except distant waves and the occasional owl.

What is Flint thinking, asking me to meet him there? At the site of a murder? Is this some kind of sick joke? This goes against everything he and Damiano have been lecturing me about. Stay home. Be careful. What were you thinking? Hypocrite.

The entrance to the maze looms ahead, a dark mouth opening into what feels like another world. I hesitate, remembering the last time I stood in this spot—running from Liam, terrified, desperate. I push away the memory and step inside.

The hedges rise on either side, blocking what little moonlight filters through the fog. I take out my phone, using its flashlight to guide my way, careful to keep the beam pointed downward. Even with the light, I make wrong turns, hit dead ends, double back.

“Lost?”

I nearly scream at the voice behind me, spinning around to find Flint standing there, hands in his pockets, expression unreadable in the shadows.

“Jesus Christ,” I hiss, my heart hammering against my ribs. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“A lot of things.” He takes the phone from my hand and switches off the flashlight. “But right now, I’m mostly wondering why you’re using a beacon that anyone watching the property could spot from a mile away.”

He’s right, but I’m too rattled to admit it. “Why did you text me to come here? In the middle of the night?”

“Follow me.”

He turns without waiting for a response, moving through the maze with the

confidence of someone who's walked it a hundred times. I have no choice but to follow, brushing my fingers along the hedge wall to keep my bearings in the near-total darkness.

After what feels like forever, the path opens into the clearing at the center. The gazebo sits in the middle like a ghost, its white paint glowing faintly in the diffused moonlight. Off to one side, barely visible in the darkness, is the patch of freshly turned earth where we buried Liam.

Flint stops at the edge of it, looking down. "Do you have any idea how close we came to this being discovered today?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Viktor had men searching the grounds while you were busy playing detective at The Vault. They were twenty feet from this spot when Mrs. Fletcher intercepted them, feeding them some bullshit about restricted areas of the property your father doesn't allow anyone to access."

A cold feeling spreads through my chest. "They were here? In the maze?"

"Three of them. For over an hour." He gives me a hard look.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I only found out after you left." There's a sharpness to his voice that wasn't there before.

I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly very aware of what happened between us just hours ago. What almost happened.

“You could have texted me sooner.”

“And said what? ‘By the way, while I had my fingers inside you, killers were twenty feet from finding your victim’?”

I flinch at his crudeness. “He wasn’t my victim.”

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“Tell that to Viktor.” Flint kicks at the edge of the disturbed soil. “You think this is all going to go away, don’t you? That Daddy’s money or your family name will protect you.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No? Then why would you risk going to The Vault when you know Viktor’s looking for his brother? When you know people saw you at the party where he was last seen?” He looks at me with daggers in his eyes. “I’m not going to let you fuck over Damiano. He’s not taking the fall for you if that’s your ultimate plan.”

“Wait... what? I would never?—”

“Then why are you not taking this seriously? Because that’s how I feel. Like this isn’t real to you.”

I don’t have a good answer—at least, not one I’m willing to share, that I needed to see him, needed answers about The Hunt, needed something to make me feel alive after being trapped in the sterile safety of my father’s world for so long. I don’t want to feel weak. I don’t want to feel like I need to heroes to swoop in and fix it...

“I want my own fucking agency.”

“Agency?” His laugh is harsh in the quiet night.

“I don’t want to need help. I don’t want to be a damsel in distress. I’ve been that my whole life, and well... I’m trying to take control and make sure I fix this. On my

terms.”

“You walked into the most gossip-filled place on the island, looking like the princess of Windward Estate come to mingle with the commoners. That’s not taking control. That’s fucking stupid.”

The anger in his accusation makes me take a step back. “I don’t need a lecture from you.”

“No? Then let me remind you of something.”

He grabs my arm, pulling me to stand directly over the freshly turned earth.

“Look down,” he says. “There’s a rotting corpse under our feet. Liam Bastian’s body is decomposing six feet below us while his brother tears the island apart looking for him.”

I stare at the ground, suddenly hyperaware of what—who—lies beneath the dirt.

“If Mrs. Fletcher hadn’t intercepted them, they would have found this disturbed soil. Then you’d be explaining to Viktor Bastian why his brother is buried in your garden.”

The reality of how close we came to disaster hits me like a physical blow. “What would hereallydo? If he found out?”

Flint’s eyes meet mine in the darkness. “You really want to know?”

I nod, even though I’m not sure I do.

“Viktor doesn’t go to the police. He handles things himself.” He steps closer. “Last

guy who crossed him disappeared for three days. When he turned up, both his hands were broken so badly they had to be wired back together. And that was for shorting him on a drug deal.”

My throat goes dry. “My intent was never to kill. I only wanted him to stop.”

“You think he cares?” Flint grabs my shoulders, forcing me to look at him. “Viktor won’t see a scared woman defending herself. He’ll see the rich bitch who killed his little brother and tried to hide it. And if he finds out that Damiano or I had anything to do with this... well, let’s just say thing won’t end well.”

I wrench myself from his grip. “I didn’t ask for this. Any of it.”

“No, but here we are. And every time you pull a stunt like tonight, you put all of us at risk.”

“Then why help me?” I demand, anger rising to match his. “Why not just walk away now? Let me deal with this on my own?”

“Because I’m already in too deep.” Something shifts in his expression. “With the body. With Damiano. With you.”

The last part catches me off guard. “What is that supposed to mean?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he closes the distance between us, his hand sliding behind my neck, pulling me toward him. His mouth crashes against mine, nothing gentle about it. Pure frustration, anger, need.

I should push him away. I have every reason to. Instead, I’m kissing him back with equal force, fisting in his jacket, pulling him closer.

It's different than at The Vault. This isn't anger and passion. This is raw, immediate, fueled by fear and adrenaline.

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His hands are rough as he shoves them under my sweater, fingers digging into my skin hard enough to bruise. I hiss at the pain but press closer, some dark part of me wanting it to hurt, needing the sharp edges of this to cut through everything else.

“There’s a dead man by us,” I breathe against his mouth, even as I’m yanking at his jacket.

“Yes.” He bites my lower lip hard enough to draw blood, the metallic taste spreading between us. “Fucking face what you did. Maybe if you do, you’ll stop being so fucking careless.”

“Stop,” I say, testing him, testing myself.

“Make me.” His eyes challenge mine in the darkness, daring me to push him away, knowing I won’t.

I answer by digging my nails into the back of his neck, dragging him closer, turning the kiss violent.

In the back of my mind, I can’t escape the sickness of what we’re doing—rutting like animals on top of Liam’s decomposing corpse, the man I killed, whose blood is probably still crusted under my fingernails despite how hard I scrubbed. His body rotting beneath our feet while we use his grave as a stage for our fucked-up desires.

It’s depraved.

Sacrilegious.

The kind of thing that marks your soul. Yet instead of making me stop, the wrongness of it drives me further, like I'm already damned so why not embrace it? There's something broken in me now, something that craves this destruction, and I can tell by the hunger in Flint's eyes that he's just as damaged.

He pushes me backward until I'm standing directly over the freshly turned earth. Then he forces me down onto my knees, right on top of the grave, before following me down. The damp soil soaks through my jeans immediately. He grips my thighs, fingers digging in hard enough to leave marks as he positions himself between my legs. I should be revolted—we're literally about to fuck on top of a dead man—but all I feel is desperate need.

"This is what you want?" he growls. "Right here on your victim?"

I twist my fingers in his hair, yanking his head back painfully. "Shut up and do it."

The weight of us both presses me deeper into the loose soil covering Liam's body.

What follows is nothing like the careful, almost reverent way Damiano touched me. Flint takes what he wants, and I give just as fiercely. Clothes are pushed aside rather than removed. His fingers find me wet and ready, and I don't even try to muffle my moan when he pushes them inside me.

"You need this," he says in a low growl in my ear. "Need someone who doesn't treat you like you'll break."

I should be insulted. Instead, I'm arching against him, guiding his touch where I want it most.

"Shut up and fuck me."

His eyes darken at my words. In one swift movement, he's unfastening his jeans and positioning himself between my legs.

He takes me in one brutal thrust, knocking the breath from my lungs. I gasp at the force of it, at the delicious intrusion that sends shock waves through my body. Pain and pleasure bleed into each other until I can't tell where one ends and the other begins. He covers my mouth with his hand as I cry out, stifling the sound, but the more he muffles me, the louder I get, until he's the one gritting his teeth and groaning with the effort of it.

He sets a punishing rhythm, driving into me with no regard for anything but his own savage need—and mine. I rake my nails down his back, desperate for him to go harder, deeper, to make me feel every inch of him. The earth beneath us shifts with our movement, the soil caving in as I dig my fingers into it, as if to claw my way down to the corpse below.

I shouldn't want this.

I should be sickened, horrified.

Instead, I'm rising to meet Flint's every brutal stroke, mouth open in something between a moan and a scream. This is punishment, pleasure; this is being claimed, devoured. It's a savage, frenzied act, and we're both lost to it.

The grave and the horror of it surrounds us. It makes me wilder, more frantic, wanting it to hurt so it's real—wanting him to tear me open so the guilt and fear spill out along with everything else.

“Don't stop,” I gasp, my breath coming in ragged pants. “Don't you fucking stop.”

He doesn't slow, doesn't hold back. He moves his hand from my mouth to my throat,

a silent threat that only makes my body respond more urgently. I arch into his grip, daring him to tighten his hold, to take me right to the edge of danger. He squeezes, just enough to send my pulse racing, then releases, sliding his fingers back down to where we're joined. He circles his thumb, pressing against me in time with his thrusts.

It's too much. Not enough.

My vision blurs, the world narrowing to the pressure building inside me, to the raw, violent pleasure that has me thrashing beneath him until it finally shatters, taking me with it.

I come with a cry, every muscle tightening, the darkness around me exploding into brilliant white. He follows an instant later, his mouth crashing against mine in a feral, bruising kiss that tastes like sweat and salt and leftover blood from his bite. Even then, he doesn't stop moving, driving into me again and again until there's nothing left but the ragged sound of our breathing, the dirt streaked across my skin, and the terrible satisfaction of what we've done.

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He collapses beside me, his chest rising and falling like he's been sprinting, and for a long moment, neither of us speaks.

I shiver, chilled now that the heat of our bodies has dissipated. My jeans are soaked through, my sweater streaked with dirt. I feel myself breaking apart, unraveling at the seams.

"Everything about this is fucked." Flint props himself up on one elbow, watching me. "You have no idea who I am. Who Damiano is. Who we are. Thewe... is fucked."

Chapter 20

Flint

Clap. Clap. Clap.

Someone's applause echoes through the clearing, slow and mocking and close enough to make my heart lurch. I bolt upright, fear cutting through the haze of spent adrenaline.

"Well done," the person says. "Encore?"

Damiano steps into view, his silhouette emerging from the dark maze like a grim specter. His expression is one of sardonic amusement, but it's underpinned by hurt, raw and seething.

"What the fuck, man?" I spit the words, scrambling to pull my jeans up, the soil cold

against my skin.

“What can I say? I’m a sucker for good performance art.”

Briar sits up beside me, her eyes wide as she hastily buttons her sweater. “Damiano, I?—”

He cuts her off with a smile that’s more like asneer. “Did I interrupt couples’ night at the cemetery?”

I stand, anger surging. “No one asked you to hang around and watch.”

“No? Looked like your own private revenge porn.” He flicks his gaze to Briar, a wounded animal before turning predatory. “You know, like when you walked in on us the other night. Tit for tat, right Flint?”

His words hit like a punch to the gut. He believes this was my way of getting back at him, making him pay. And why wouldn’t he? It’s exactly the kind of toxic game we’ve played before.

“Jesus, Damiano.” I step toward him, unsteady on my feet. “You think I’d do that?”

He barks a laugh. “You’ve done it before.”

Briar tenses next to me, and guilt cuts through my anger. I did this. I let it go too far.

Damiano stares at her, his expression twisting. “I thought you were different, Briar, but maybe you’re the most fucked out of all of us.”

“I’m not,” she says, though lacks any fight.

“Then what is this? Just another way to feel dangerous, slumming it with two lowlives?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Then enlighten me. Please.”

I step between them, my eyes locked with Damiano’s. “That’s enough.”

He shakes his head, backing away slightly. “I knew you were a mess, Flint. It’s your defining characteristic. But dragging her into this—Jesus. Do you even know who you are?”

“Stop it,” Briar snaps. “Both of you.”

Damiano’s eyes flash. “Tell me, Briar—was that your way of erasing the memory of fucking me? Or are you just in the habit of screwing whichever of us is closest?”

Her face goes white, and I see the moment she decides she’s not going to be the fragile princess of Damiano’s imagination. Her voice is steady, but there’s tremor beneath it. “Fuck off. Last I checked, you and I aren’t exactly courting.” She takes a calming breath. “But... I’d never purposefully try to hurt you.”

His expression softens, just for a moment. “But you did.”

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Something cracks in me, seeing him look that way. “She’s not yours, Damiano. She’s not fucking mine either. Why do you always act like you own the people you fuck?”

Damiano takes a step toward me, his shoulders tense, fists clenching and unclenching. “I act like I own the people I fuck? You act like you own the whole world. Like it’s a game, and you’re the only player.”

“We are not doing this,” Briar interjects.

“Right,” I say. “That’s me. I’m the problem. The only problem.”

“You’re the worst one.”

“This is not the time,” Briar says.

“She’s right. Go home, Damiano. Go home and jack off to the memory of me.”

The anger that’s been building in Damiano turns nuclear. Seeing the shift in his eyes, I brace myself just before his fist connects, hitting with enough force to split my lip and send me sprawling onto the grave.

Briar’s scream gets lost as I scramble to my feet, wiping blood from my mouth. “That all you’ve got?” I taunt, the taste of copper sharp in my teeth.

Damiano lunges again, but this time I’m ready. We crash into each other, a tangle of limbs and rage, fists flying, bodies slamming into the damp earth. I land a blow to his ribs, feeling the satisfying crack before he shoves me off and we both stagger to our

feet, panting, circling.

“You want to do this here?” I snarl. “Fine. But you’re going to lose.”

His eyes are wild, dark with anger. “We’ll see.” He charges at me with a fury that catches me off guard.

I go down hard, the wind knocked out of me as he pins me to the ground, his knee digging into my chest. My vision swims, the suffocating weight of his body pressing me into the loose soil. I swing blindly, landing a hit that sends him reeling. “Get off me,” I gasp, struggling to breathe.

He doesn’t relent. “You used to be better than this, Flint,” he growls, choking on the words. “Now you’re just a piece of?—”

“Stop it!” Briar’s shout cuts through the haze of violence. She throws herself between us, shoving Damiano back, her hands outstretched like a desperate barrier. “This is insane!”

We both freeze, panting, the reality of her standing over the grave hitting like a slap.

“Listen to me,” she says, staring at the grave beneath her feet. “If you should be mad at anyone, it should be me.”

We both just look at her, breathing hard, the night air cold on our skin.

“I’m the one who killed him.” Her eyes fixate on the ground beneath us, like she can see Liam’s decomposed body staring back. “I’m the one who fucked you both, and I don’t even know why or who I am anymore. This isn’t me—this isn’t...” I see it in her eyes, the dark pit she’s teetering on the edge of. She looks so damned fragile it twists a knot in my chest.

There's a silence that stretches, brittle and fragile.

Damiano is the first to break. He runs a hand through his hair, messing it up even more, and something in him softens. The anger dissolves, leaving only a dull, resigned pain. "We did this, and if you think you're to blame for whatever the hell is happening with Flint and me, you're wrong. We've been broken for a long time."

"You fucking broke us!" I shout, sounding unhinged to my own ears. "You, Damiano, you!"

Damiano flinches at the accusation, and I can't tell if I've hurt him or if he knew it was coming. For a second, I think he's going to lunge at me again, but he's staring at Briar with that wounded-animal look.

He turns to me. "You're right. I did break us." He refocuses his attention on Briar. "What you don't know is that Flint and I have been down this road before. We killed...I killed... Viktor's other brother."

"That asshole had it coming," I cut in. "You had no choice."

He raises his hand to silence me. "I killed the man, and Flint helped me cover it up. Same shit, new corpse."

Briar darts her gaze between us, clearly desperate for answers. We look at her, two damaged animals waiting to see if the other will attack first. "And you just now bring this up?"

"We swore to never discuss this again," Flint says. "It was supposed to fucking die. Just like our damn relationship."

"I was protecting myself," Damiano presses on. "An argument. We were both drunk

and high and he wouldn't leave the greenhouse. He wanted more, and I was still with Flint. Anyway... I hit Erik too hard—he went down, didn't get back up.”

“And Viktor?” Briar almost whispers it, like she's afraid of what the answer will be.

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“He never found out. He tried. Trust me, he tried. And deep down I think he knows I had something to do with it. But... Flint and I covered it up.”

I see it in her eyes, the shock and the sick understanding. She steps back, her mouth opening and closing, and I know she’s picturing Erik’s grave just like she pictured Liam’s—what we did to cover it up, how we pulled ourselves down into hell with it.

Damiano’s gaze meets mine, years of fucked-up history passing between us, weighing every word. “And when it got really tough. I left. I went to Italy without a word. I fucking bailed.”

Briar glances at me, realization flashing across her eyes.

“So here we are,” I say. “It’s only a matter of time until Damiano leaves us with this mess to clean up by ourselves again.”

Damiano nudges the fresh earth with his boot, pushing more dirt over the depression our bodies left on the grave. “Not this time.”

I feel Briar’s gaze on us, and I turn to her, wanting to say something, anything that makes this nightmare end, but the words won’t come. I’ve got nothing.

She wraps her arms around herself and draws a deep breath before speaking. “So Viktor...”

“Already lost one brother with unanswered questions,” I finish.

“Which is why you both know exactly how he’d react about Liam.” She’s clearly putting the puzzle pieces together.

“We need to get out of this alive,” she says. There’s a steely determination hiding the fragility I know is there.

The wind shifts, bringing with it the pungent odor of disturbed earth. It’s a sharp reminder that we’re standing on a fucking grave. I glance at Damiano, then at Briar, and something clicks, a dark understanding of where we all stand. She’s right. We won’t survive this unless we face it together.

Briar turns and takes a step away, like she’s leaving us both behind in that dirt.

“Where are you going?” I ask. She stops, looking back over her shoulder with an expression that’s hard but not unkind. “To clean up. And then to figure out what the hell I’m going to do next.” She starts to walk away again. “But we all need a cooling-off period. The three of us are like a bomb about to go off.” She turns and glares at each of us in turn before she steps behind a hedge. “Walk away. Calm down. Break.”

I should take her advice and do just that, but then Damiano and I wouldn’t be as fucked up as we are. So instead I say, “So we just beat the shit out of each other. Want to fuck now?”

“Go to hell.” Damiano spits on the ground between us.

“Yes, I’ve been there with you by my side.”

Damiano doesn’t say anything else before he disappears into the fog.

Chapter 21

Briar

It's been a week since I killed a man. One week and I can still hear them. I can still smell them. I can still feel them. Damiano. Flint.

Damiano's words echo in my head, your way of erasing the memory of fucking me, and Flint's, why do you always act like you own the people you fuck? It's like they're still circling each other, still circling me, not pulling any punches.

When I do sleep, the nightmares find me. I am back at the cemetery, screaming an apology nobody hears. I am at the funeral, listening to Viktor's eulogy for the man I killed. I wake drenched in sweat, the sheets tangled around me.

The days slip by in a blur of deflection and self-loathing. I haven't seen either one of them, and it's better that way.

But I also know he's been watching me. Every day. Every night. I see him in the maze watching.

Stalking.

Damiano keeps his distance, but I know he's here.

Four days pass with no word from either. Every few hours I convince myself I don't care. But I do.

Getting out of bed, knowing sleep is impossible, I see Damiano's form at my window once again, watching. It's early, the light barely gracing the horizon. At first, I assume it's a trick of the dawn, but then he moves, unmistakably him, and my heart slams as memories of that night rush back.

I press my head against the cool glass, watching him as he watches me, a silent tension stretching between the house and the maze. Something inside me unravels, and it feels like bravery or recklessness, like the urge to jump and see if someone is there to catch me.

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I can't stay in my room anymore. I can't keep hiding from him, from Flint, from myself.

I know I said we needed to cool off, but I'm fucking freezing now.

I'm out the door and down the stairs before I realize I'm moving. It's only when my boots sink into the wet ground, when the wind catches in my hair, that I feel the truth of it. I need to see him. To talk about the thing between us, burning silently, threatening to explode.

The morning mist clings to my skin as I make my way across the grounds. Each step feels like a decision I can't take back. Like crossing some invisible line that's been drawn between us since that night in the maze.

He's waiting by the edge of the maze, hands shoved deep in his pockets, shoulders tense as I approach. At first, he doesn't say anything, simply lets his eyes linger on mine, and it feels like standing too close to a fire, dangerous and strangely comforting.

"Hey," I manage to say, breathless from the cold or maybe from him.

"Briar." It's almost a sigh, like he's been holding onto my name for days and can finally release it. "Been wondering if you'd ever come out."

"Yeah, well..." I look away, unsure of how to start. "I can't keep hiding forever."

He nods, like he understands more than I expect him to.

“Walk with me?” he asks.

I follow him through the gardens, the ground squelching under our feet, a mist of rain starting to sink into my coat. There’s a strange solace in the silence, a calm before whatever storm is waiting to hit us next.

“The plants I used... they’re working faster than I expected. Another week, and there’ll be nothing to find.”

I try not to think about what that means—Liam’s body decomposing beneath the soil, eaten away by whatever Damiano planted. The image makes my stomach churn.

“Have you seen Flint?” The question escapes before I can stop it.

Damiano’s jaw tightens. “No.”

“Is he okay?”

“Why wouldn’t he be?” The sharpness in his tone cuts through the mist between us.

“After what happened... after what I?—”

“After you fucked him on top of Liam’s grave?” His words are harsh, but his expression isn’t. There’s hurt there, yes, but something else, too—something that looks strangely like understanding.

I flinch but hold my ground. “Yes. After that.” I draw a deep breath. “I have to say something.”

He keeps his pace beside me. “About what?”

“About Flint.” I bite my lip, forcing the words. “About us.”

He glances at me, and that hurt is in his eyes again, so raw it makes me ache. “Seeing you with him...”

“I don’t regret either of you.”

Damiano stops, catching me off guard. “What does that mean?”

“It means I’m not going to apologize for wanting you both. For needing you.” The words tumble out, unsteady but real. “You make me feel safe, like I’m not completely fucked. Like maybe we’ll survive this. Flint makes me—he makes me feel alive.”

“Alive,” he repeats, like it’s a foreign word, a concept he hasn’t touched in years.

I search his face, desperate to know if any of this makes sense to him.

“But I also know it’s not fair to expect you to be fine with?—”

He kisses me, and this kiss is nothing like before. It’s slow, searching, like he’s trying to find himself in the wreckage of the night at the cemetery. He cradles my face in his hands, and the tenderness in his touch makes everything else feel far away. My heart pounds as I press closer, afraid to break the fragile, perfect moment.

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When he pulls back, there's a vulnerability in his gaze that wasn't there before. I can tell he's fighting against the pain, the uncertainty of what happens next. "You're worth it," he says, barely more than a whisper.

Relief floods through me, and I kiss him again, softer this time, feeling the warmth of his breath, the cold raindrops mingling with the heat between us.

It's like finding a heartbeat in the chaos, something steady to hold onto when everything else spins out of control.

"Briar," he murmurs against my lips. "The two of us seem right. But... The three of us are so fucked up."

I draw back and nod, still catching my breath. "I know. I'm sorry."

"He and I..."

I nod, also understanding.

"Fucked up or not, there is no two in our three."

Silence. Long torturous silence as we both process my words.

He runs a hand through his hair, but there's a small, almost hopeful smile on his face. "I haven't seen you in days. I thought maybe... I thought after... you wouldn't want anything to do with me."

“I couldn’t get you out of my head,” I confess. “Not you. Not Flint. You... you both said some things.”

His expression darkens. “Flint,” he mutters, a shadow passing over his face. “I don’t know if that will ever be... I mean, Briar—it’s always been toxic with him and me. It’s like the more we try to get out, the deeper we go.”

The rain falls harder now, soaking through my sweater, but I don’t care. “I’m not trying to change what you have. I just need to know it doesn’t destroy us.”

His silence is long, and I feel the weight of it.

“I want you,” he says, and he finds my mouth with his again, like he’s trying to swallow everything else.

He wraps his arms around me, pulling me in tighter, as if he can’t stand the space between us, not knowing when one of us might run or break or leave. I kiss him back, feeling the urgency in the way he holds me, the urgency in me. It’s like I can’t get close enough, like no matter how hard I try, there is always too much distance.

“Come with me,” he breathes against my lips.

“Where?” The word is barely out of my mouth before I realize I don’t care. I’d follow him anywhere.

Chapter 22

Damiano

“Let’s take my car,” I say, grabbing her hand. The weight of her palm against mine feels right, even though it probably shouldn’t.

The rain slicks her hair to her face, and her eyes search mine, like she's looking for something I don't have the answers to. All I know is I can't stay here, caught between the ghost in the maze and whatever mess Flint and I have made.

We need neutral ground.

Or maybe ground zero.

We walk in silence, away from the fancy gardens and the weight of Windward Estates. The air smells like salt and rain, the sky changing from dark purple to a pale, suffocating grey. Dawn is awakening over Heathens Hollow, but it feels less like a new beginning and more like everyone's holding their breath, waiting for something to break.

I lead her to the old Range Rover parked down a back road, hidden from the main drive. Inside, it smells like mildew and like no one's cared about it in years.

Like me.

Like Flint.

Like everything we touch.

As I pull away from the curb, heading toward the coast road, I grab my phone. I hover over Flint's contact. This is impulsive. Probably stupid. But burying things hasn't worked. Running hasn't worked. Fighting hasn't worked. Maybe facing it, all of it, is the only way through.

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Lighthouse. Meet us.

I send it before I can second-guess myself. No explanation. He'll know which one. He has to.

Briar looks over, noticing something's up. "Who was that?"

"Flint," I say, focusing on the winding road. My tires hum on the wet road. "He needs to be there."

She doesn't argue, merely nods slowly, looking out the window, toward the rough sea coming into view. Maybe she understands. Or maybe she's just getting ready for whatever comes next. I know I am.

The drive takes twenty minutes, going up along the cliffs. The rain stops, replaced by wind that throws sea spray against the windshield. Below us, the ocean is dark gray, waves crashing against sharp black rocks, shooting white foam high into the air.

It's violent and beautiful, like nothing else matters.

The lighthouse appears through the mist, sitting on the furthest point of the headland. It's old, built from rough stone battered by centuries of salt and storms. Its white paint is peeling, stained with rust where the iron railings have bled onto the stone. It's not pretty; it's stark, defiant, standing alone against the vast, indifferent ocean.

Flint and I used to come here... back when we thought we could handle anything together. We'd climb the spiral stairs, watch storms roll in, feel the foghorn shake our

bones. It was our place, away from the world, until it wasn't. Until we became the storm.

I park the car near the stone wall that keeps people from falling off the cliff edge. The wind pulls at the door as I open it, bringing the cries of gulls and the deep, steady rumble of the waves below.

"Why here?" Briar asks, pulling her coat tighter around her as she steps out, her hair flying around her face.

"Because..." I look up at the tower. "Because some things need the light." Maybe the edge of the island is the only place we can have this conversation.

The first bit of sun breaks through the heavy clouds, making streaks of pale gold across the gray water. The light hits the wet stone of the lighthouse, making it look like it's glowing. It's kind of beautiful in a way that feels like it won't last, like it could be swallowed by the sea at any moment.

I lead her toward the heavy wooden door at the base of the tower. It's unlocked, as always. Inside, it's cold and damp, smelling of salt and dust and old memories. A narrow, spiraling staircase winds upward into the darkness.

"He and I..." I need to say it, need her to understand why Flint has to be here, too. "We used to come here. A long time ago."

Her eyes meet mine, full of questions I don't know how to answer. Everything feels heavy in the confined space. We stand there, listening to crashing waves and everything we're not saying, waiting. Another engine approaches, growing louder as it climbs the cliff road. Flint. He's coming.

The engine cuts off outside. Heavy footsteps crunch on the gravel path. The old

wooden door groans open, slamming back against the stone wall with a force that echoes up the stairwell.

Flint stands silhouetted against the pale morning light flooding in. He locks gazes with me first, then Briar standing beside me, and something dangerous ignites in his stare.

“What the fuck is this, Damiano?” Everything about his question is tight with fury. “Bringing her here?” He stalks toward us, closing the distance in three angry strides. “This was ours.” The words are bitten off, sharp edges aimed right at me.

“Flint—” Briar starts, but he ignores her, his focus locked on me.

“You don’t get to do this,” he snarls. “You don’t get to drag her into... into this place.”

He’s close now, radiating heat and violence. I see the punch coming in the clench of his jaw, the tension in his shoulders. But instead, he shoves me, hard. My back hits the cold, curved stone wall, the impact jarring through me. I brace myself, expecting the next blow, the familiar explosion of fists and fury that always follows.

But I don’t move.

I merely look at him, at the raw anger twisting his features, and feel... nothing.

No fire to meet his. Just a deep, hollow exhaustion.

I don’t raise my hands. I don’t push back. I stare at him, letting the moment hang there.

The fight drains out of Flint as he registers my lack of response. His chest is still

heaving, fists clenched, but the killing intent in his eyes dims, replaced by a glimmer of confusion, then something else.

Hurt.

He sees it—the fight’s gone out of me. We’ve shattered this thing between us maybe one too many times.

“I’m done fighting, Flint.” My declaration is quiet but steady in the enclosed space.
“With you. About this. About any of it.”

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He searches my face, looking for the trick, the angle. Finding none. He looks lost for a second, leaving him looking almost vulnerable.

“Then what are we doing?” he asks

Briar steps forward hesitantly, her gaze moving between us. “Maybe... maybe we’re figuring it out.”

Flint looks at her, really looks at her, seeing her standing here between us, in this place that holds so much of our wreckage. He runs a hand over his face, breathing hard. “Fuck.” It’s not a curse, more like a surrender.

A fragile truce settles over the small space. The tension hasn’t disappeared, but it’s shifted, become something else. Shared history, shared guilt, shared... desire. It hangs in the air, thick and undeniable.

“Upstairs,” I say. It’s not a question. He knows exactly what that means.

Flint jerks his head in a nod, and Briar looks from me to Flint and back again, understanding—or maybe acceptance—in her eyes.

I lead the way, starting up the narrow, spiraling metal staircase. Each step echoes in the confined shaft. Flint follows close behind me, Briar behind him. The air grows colder, damper as we climb, the smell of salt and metal intensifying.

We don’t speak. There’s nothing left to say down here.

Higher and higher we go, the landings small platforms offering glimpses of the churning sea through narrow slit windows. Eventually, we reach the top, pushing through a small hatch into the lantern room.

Glass surrounds us on all sides, offering a dizzying panorama of the cliffs, the turbulent ocean stretching to the horizon, and the vast, indifferent sky. The huge lamp mechanism sits in the center, a complex structure of brass and glass, lenses angled to throw light miles out to sea. The wind rattles the panes, and the cries of gulls are sharp and close.

We stand there for a moment, the three of us, caught in the strange, clear light filtering through the glass.

Flint moves first. He doesn't look at me, but reaches for Briar, his hand finding hers. She doesn't pull away. Then, his eyes meet mine over her head, a question there, dark and complicated.

I close the distance, standing beside them. My hand finds Briar's other hand. We form a triangle, bound by proximity, by shared secrets, by the fucked-up gravity pulling us together.

Briar looks between us, her breath catching. She brings our hands together, linking Flint's and mine with hers in the middle. A circuit closes. Electricity sparks.

Flint leans in, his mouth finding Briar's neck, kissing the pulse point just below her ear. She tilts her head, a soft sound escaping her lips. I bring my hand to her waist, pulling her back against me, feeling the warmth of her through her clothes.

She turns her head slightly, her lips finding mine in a kiss that tastes of salt and desperation. It's hesitant at first, then deepens as Flint circles his arm around her waist, pulling her against him too, pressing her between us.

He slides his hand under her sweater to find skin while I fumble open the buttons of her coat. The wind whips around the glass enclosure, a wild soundtrack to the heat building between us. Hastily, we shed clothes, discard them on the cold metal floor grating. Skin meets skin, cool air raising goosebumps despite the friction.

Flint kisses down Briar's collarbone, his touch proprietary, possessive. I watch them, watch her response, feeling a surge of something dark and possessive myself. I pull her more firmly against me, sliding my hand down her back and pressing her hips into mine.

Chapter 23

Briar

There's a moment when time stretches, the world as fragile and clear as the glass around us. Then everything collapses inward, heat and skin and mouths and need.

Flint trails his hand along my stomach, a line of fire against the cool air. His touch is urgent, claiming. Damiano is behind me, pulling me back, pulling me in, lost breaths and rough restless hands.

I'm pinned between them, the force of it overwhelming. It feels dangerous and reckless, like something that could burn through all three of us, leave nothing but ashes.

I kiss Flint, tasting everything we've broken, everything we still might be. He groans into it, a sound of frustration and surrender. Damiano grips my hips tighter, possessive, matching Flint's fierceness with his own.

We sink to the floor, clothes beneath us, cold metal pressing into my skin. The storm inside us builds, growing stronger, faster, frantic. I gasp as Flint moves his mouth

down my body, leaving marks like declarations. Damiano's lips find my neck, softer, more desperate. I arch against both of them, lost in the tangle of limbs, hands, the sharp clarity of sensation.

It's everything at once, too much and not enough, the lighthouse spinning around us.

I don't know whose name I cry out, maybe both, maybe neither, as the world shatters and we go under together.

Two cocks. But only one of me.

I don't know where to start, but luckily Flint does. He lowers my head to his dick, pressing it past my lips as he leans forward and kisses Damiano.

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“Yes.” Damiano’s growl vibrates through me, their kiss hungry—a duel of dominance and defiance.

I suck harder on Flint, feeling him tense. I feel Damiano’s finger in me, and Flint groans, low and guttural. “Fuck, Briar,” he grits out, watching as I take him deeper. “Just like that.”

“Keep going,” Damiano says, pushing my head back down on Flint’s cock. “You want him? You want to make him come?”

My answer is a muffled noise, Flint pushing harder against my mouth, his breathing harsh. He’s losing control and so am I.

Damiano’s finger in my pussy is relentless, sliding in and out, finding the rhythm with my head, with Flint’s thrusts.

“She’s so fucking tight,” he says, like Flint needs to be reminded. “Come in her mouth so I can have my turn.”

Flint’s laugh is strained. “Want it that bad, D?” He pauses, pulling back, making me desperate for more. “Too fucking bad.”

Damiano shoves him, pushing him off me, sending Flint sprawling against the glass where he stays, spreading himself open in defiance.

Damiano drags me up, pulling me onto him. “You’re mine first.” His voice is raw. I straddle him, his thick cock pressing against me.

Flint watches, but Damiano doesn't care. He thrusts up, filling me, groaning at the depth of it. He holds my hips, holding me down, his expression a wild mix of anger and bliss. I move, riding him, feeling everything, holding on as he pounds up into me, taking what he wants.

"Fuck," he gasps, teeth clenched, eyes shut tight. "Fuck."

Flint's behind me now, lips on my shoulder, hands on my breasts, fingers vicious. His cock presses against Damiano's in me, making me cry out, making Damiano swear. It's too much, too intense, the world slipping away. Then Flint's filling me, too, the three of us wrecked and reckless together.

"It's too much," I cry out, and it is. The stretch of two huge cocks is way too much. "In... the... ass," I pant.

Flint bites down hard on my neck and pulls out, repositioning at my asshole.

Damiano thrusts up hard, taking me deep and fast as Flint rams into my ass, making me scream.

"Fuck, yes!" Damiano gasps, the words clipped and tight. He grabs Flint's neck, pulling him closer, pulling him back into a kiss, all heat and fury.

I'm pinned between them again, and this time it's like drowning and being saved at once. Damiano and Flint in a violent rhythm, rough and raw, Flint's hands like fire on my breasts, my whole body shattering between their thrusts.

It's too much and not enough and everything I've wanted.

Everything I've feared.

I've never been so full before. I've never felt such a stretch and a burn.

It hurts, but the pain is blinding and beautiful, and the longer they fuck, the higher it takes me, until I fall. Until I fly.

They crash into me. I can't tell them apart. I don't know who is who, who is what. I see stars.

Damiano reaches between us and fingers my clit. "You wanted us both. Are you now sure about that?"

I can't answer. My breath escapes in harsh, choked gasps. I'm coming so hard I can't breathe. I can't see. I can't think.

But I don't want it to stop here. I've come, and now it's their turn.

"I want," I gasp. "I want to watch you both fuck each other." The fantasy of watching these two men fuck makes my head spin, makes me scream and clench around them with one last shudder.

Damiano reaches for Flint's hair, pulling him close, his voice hoarse. "Yeah? Want to watch us fuck?"

Flint's eyes meet mine, fierce and bright, desire and challenge. "You want it so bad?" He shoves Damiano back, forcing him against the huge lamp mechanism, a tangle of limbs and sweat and heat. "Watch how it's really done, Briar."

He grabs Damiano's hips, thrusting inside him, fierce and unrelenting. Damiano cries out, his last wall breaking.

"Harder," Damiano gasps, catching my eye. "God, don't stop. Don't fucking stop."

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Flint laughs, ragged, grabbing Damiano's neck, pulling him into a bruising kiss. "Like I would."

I watch, breathless, as my fucked up fantasy unfolds. Two cocks. No me. Just them. Raw, graphic, everything I've imagined and more.

Damiano's moans are sinful and wild. Flint pushes harder into him, the impact lifting Damiano, pressing him back against the metal. "You feel that, D?"

"Yeah," Damiano grits out. He looks as desperate as I feel. "Fuck, yeah."

Flint fucks him harder, the whole lighthouse rocking with the force of it, the wind a scream around us.

"Briar," Flint groans. "Come here. Wrap your hand around his cock."

I crawl to them, my fingers brushing Flint's back, his hips. I find Damiano's chest with my lips, his skin damp with sweat and the sharp tang of sex.

He grips my hair, holding me against him as I grip his dick and begin to pump. "Fuck, Briar," he gasps. "Fuck, Flint. You're going to make me?—"

Flint thrusts harder into his ass, cutting him off. "Do it. Let her see it. Let her see your cum all over."

Damiano shudders, his whole body going rigid, his eyes locked with mine. I watch him explode beneath Flint, feel him lose control inside my palm, his heat and

desperation spilling over.

Flint fucks through Damiano's orgasm, each thrust wild and reckless, until he cries out and comes with a violence that shakes all three of us.

We tumble to the floor, a twisted heap of limbs and breathless chaos, the storm in us finally breaking.

It takes a while, but we're silent for a minute, our breathing chaotic, the lighthouse suddenly still. Seagulls taunt us from outside the glass.

"Fuck," Flint says eventually, like he can't believe it. Like he can't believe us. "Just..." He sounds raw and ruined. He trails off, lost in the aftershock, but I feel him. I feel Damiano, too. The three of us coming down, coming back, unsure of what we'll find.

Chapter 24

Briar

The morning light filters through the kitchen windows, casting long rectangles of gold across the polished wooden floor. I'm sitting at the island counter, watching Mrs. Fletcher stress-bake what must be her third batch of muffins. The smell of cinnamon and nutmeg fills the air, but there's tension underneath the domestic comfort.

"I just don't know what to do," she says, vigorously whisking batter like it personally offended her. "My sister shouldn't be alone right now, but I can't leave you here with no one to?—"

"Mrs. Fletcher," I interrupt gently, "I'm twenty-eight years old. I can manage on my

own for a while.” I take a sip of my coffee, wincing at the heat. “I appreciate your concern, but I’m not an invalid.”

She gives me a look that suggests she very much disagrees. “Your father would never forgive me if something happened while I was away.”

My father. Even when he’s not physically here, his presence lingers in every corner of this house. I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

“My father put me here to recover, and that’s what I’m doing.” I gesture to myself. “Look—I’m eating regularly, I’m sleeping better, I’m even getting some color back.” All true, though none of it has anything to do with the island’s healing properties and everything to do with two men who’ve somehow wormed their way into my life.

Into my body.

Into whatever remains of my heart.

The memory of the previous night in the lighthouse sends heat rushing to my face. I take another sip of coffee to hide it.

“You do have more color in your cheeks,” Mrs. Fletcher says, pouring batter into muffin tins. “But still, I don’t like the idea of leaving you alone in this big house.” She glances out the window with a worried frown. “Especially lately with those men tramping all over the property. It’s not right.”

A chill runs through me. She doesn’t know the half of it. Viktor’s men have been less visible this past week, but they’re still out there, watching, searching. The local police came and went, finding nothing, just as we’d planned, but Viktor isn’t giving up. Damiano spotted two of his guys at the edge of the property only yesterday.

“I’ll be fine,” I insist, remaining steady. “I promise to keep the doors locked and the alarm set. No one’s getting in here without me knowing.”

She slides the muffin tin into the oven with more force than necessary. “At least call your father. He’s been asking about you, and I’m tired of being the go-between.”

I grimace. Maxwell Waters and I have managed to limit our communication to brief text messages since I arrived on the island—enough to assure him I’m still alive, and not enough to actually connect.

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“Fine,” I concede. “I’ll call him today, if it makes you feel better about going to your sister.”

Mrs. Fletcher’s shoulders relax slightly. “Thank you. That would ease my mind, and I could be back in a week or two, depending on how she’s doing.”

“Take as long as you need,” I tell her, meaning it. “I’m not going anywhere.”

We’re interrupted by the grumble of a lawnmower starting up outside. I glance out the window and see Damiano pushing the old mower across the side lawn. He’s wearing a faded black tank top that clings to his frame, and his arms flex with each movement, the tattoos visible from even this distance, dark patterns against his tanned skin.

My mouth goes dry, and I force myself to look away.

“That boy works too hard,” Mrs. Fletcher says, following my gaze. “Always here at dawn, leaves after dark. Never takes a day off.”

I make a noncommittal sound, trying not to think about exactly what kind of “work” Damiano was doing last night.

“I’ve left meals prepared in the freezer,” Mrs. Fletcher continues, evidently oblivious to my wandering thoughts. “Just heat them up when you’re hungry. And there’s a list of emergency numbers on the refrigerator.”

“Perfect,” I say, dragging my attention back to her. “I promise not to burn the house

down or throw any more wild parties.”

She gives me a stern look, but there’s fondness beneath it. “See that you don’t. Your father would have my head.”

My father again. Always looming over everything.

“I’ll call him right now.” I pull out my phone. “Get it over with.”

Mrs. Fletcher nods approvingly and busies herself with cleaning the kitchen while I step outside onto the terrace, phone in hand. I hesitate for a moment before dialing, watching Damiano work his way methodically across the lawn. When he meets my gaze, even from that distance, I feel it like a physical touch.

My father answers on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Hi, Dad.” I lean against the stone balustrade, keeping my eyes on Damiano. “Mrs. Fletcher said you’ve been asking about me.”

“Oh.” There’s a rustling of papers in the background. Always working. “Yes, well. Haven’t heard much from you lately.”

I can hear the distraction in his voice. “I’ve been resting. That was the whole point of sending me here, right?”

He clears his throat. “Of course. I just... worry. Your condition?—”

“Is stable,” I cut him off, watching as Damiano turns off the mower and moves toward the edge of the woods. What’s he doing? “The island air agrees with me. I’m feeling better.”

“Good, good.” He sounds distracted, like his mind is already moving on to his next meeting. I can picture him in his Seattle office, one eye on his computer screen. “Keep up with your medication regimen.”

“Always do,” I say dryly.

“Listen—” A pause as he presumably checks his calendar. “About the wedding plans...”

“How is Melissa?” I ask, more to be polite than out of any real interest in my father’s fiancée.

“She’s fine. Busy with preparations.” He clears his throat again. “The date is set for September. I was hoping you might want to be involved. If you’re feeling up to it.”

Involved in my father’s wedding to a woman barely older than me? Hard pass.

“We’ll see how I’m feeling closer to the date,” I hedge. “I’m taking things one day at a time right now.”

Damiano has disappeared into the treeline, a flash of movement catching my eye as he slips between the pines. Curiosity prickles at me.

“Right, of course.” Dad sounds relieved I haven’t committed. “Just... keep me posted on how you’re doing. More than just those two-word texts.”

“Sure,” I promise, distracted by Damiano’s disappearance. “Dad, I should go. Mrs. Fletcher’s calling me for breakfast.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“Yep.” I end the call before he can drag it out any longer.

I slip my phone into my pocket and head back inside, where Mrs. Fletcher is removing muffins from the oven.

“All good?” she asks, setting the hot tin on a cooling rack.

“All good,” I confirm. “Dad says hi.”

She doesn’t look convinced but nods anyway. “I’m going to pack a few things, then call my sister. I’ll leave after lunch if you’re sure you’ll be all right.”

“Positive,” I assure her.

Once she’s gone upstairs, I grab a muffin despite it being too hot to eat, wrap it in a napkin, and head back outside. The lawnmower sits abandoned near the edge of the property, but there’s no sign of Damiano.

I should leave it alone. Should go back inside, be the good little invalid my father and Mrs. Fletcher expect me to be. But curiosity—or something deeper—pulls me toward the trees where I last saw him.

The forest feels different in daylight, less threatening than the night I ran from Liam. Still, I move cautiously, following a narrow trail winding between the pines. The ground is soft under my feet, covered in pine needles that muffle my steps.

I’m not sure what I’m looking for. Damiano could be anywhere on the sprawling

property, but something tells me to keep going, deeper into the woods, away from the manicured gardens and carefully tended lawn.

The trees grow thicker, the light dimmer as the branches overhead create a natural canopy. I'm about to turn back when I hear it—the sound of a shovel striking earth.

My heart jumps into my throat. Instinctively, I duck behind a wide pine tree, peering around it toward the source of the sound.

In a small clearing ahead, Damiano stands in his tank top, his back to me, digging into the forest floor with methodical precision. Sweat darkens the fabric between his shoulder blades as he works. Beside him is a canvas bag, its contents hidden from my view.

My first panicked thought is of Liam—does Damiano want to move the body?

I step forward, a twig snapping beneath my foot, and Damiano whirls around, shovel raised like a weapon.

“Jesus, Briar,” he exhales when he recognizes me, lowering the shovel. “I could have hurt you.”

“What are you doing out here?” I ask, moving closer, eyes on the freshly turned earth.

He runs a hand through his hair, leaving a streak of dirt across his forehead. “Harvesting,” he says simply, nodding toward the bag. “Some of my more... specialized plants grow better away from the gardens. Where people don't accidentally stumble across them.”

I step closer, peering into the half-dug hole. Sure enough, exposed roots of some kind of plant are visible in the soil. Nothing sinister, nothing dangerous, simply Damiano

doing what he does best—tending to green, growing things.

“Sorry,” I say, embarrassed now. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. I just... saw you come into the woods and wondered where you were going.”

His expression softens, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Stalking me?” There’s no accusation in his tone, only a gentle teasing.

“Maybe,” I admit.

He sets down the shovel and closes the distance between us, hands coming to rest on my waist. “Last night was...” He seems at a loss for words.

“Yeah,” I agree. “It was.”

“No regrets?” He searches my face.

I shake my head. “None.”

Something in his eyes flickers with relief as I say this. “Good. Because I’d like to do it again. All of it.”

Heat rushes through me at his words, at the memory of the three of us tangled together in the lighthouse, boundaries dissolving, something new and undefined taking shape.

“Mrs. Fletcher’s leaving today.” I step closer, pressing against him despite the dirt and sweat. “Going to take care of her sister in Anacortes.”

“Is she?” His eyebrows rise slightly, a slow smile spreading. “For how long?”

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“At least a week. Maybe longer.” I slip my arms around his neck. “The house will be empty. Just me.”

He lowers his head, his mouth hovering just above mine. “That sounds... convenient.”

“I thought so, too,” I whisper against his lips.

When he kisses me, I taste the salt of his skin, the earthiness that clings to him. It’s different from last night’s desperate passion—slower, sweeter, but with the same underlying current of need.

He pulls back, resting his forehead against mine. “I need to go deeper into the woods today. Got to gather some mushrooms.”

“Mushrooms?” I raise an eyebrow.

“For the Heathens party this weekend.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “I’ve got a lot of people asking for my... island magic.”

“Your island magic,” I repeat, understanding dawning. “You mean?—”

“Makes the night more interesting.”

I think about the herbs he gave me that knocked me out for hours. “I bet they do.”

He steps back, sliding his hands from my waist. “Want to help me look? There’s a spot about a half mile in that grows the best ones this time of year.”

“Lead the way,” I say.

We head deeper into the forest, the light filtering through the canopy in dappled patterns. Damiano points out plants as we go, naming each one, explaining their properties—medicinal, poisonous, hallucinogenic. His knowledge is impressive, his passion for them evident in the way he touches each leaf or petal with reverence.

“So this Heathens party,” I say, stepping carefully over a fallen log. “What exactly is it?”

“It’s hosted by The Vault.” He glances back at me. “Kicks off The Hunt season.”

“So they’re really going through with it early this year,” I say.

He kneels, examining the mushrooms before carefully harvesting them, placing each one in a small cloth bag. “The Hunt brings in a lot of money. Rich people pay serious cash to participate. The masks, the contracts, the luxury baskets afterward.”

“And The Vault organizes all of it?”

“Yeah.” He hands me a bag. “Look for ones like this—cap’s got to be this specific color. If it’s any darker, it’s the poisonous variety.”

I kneel beside him, studying the mushroom he shows me. “So the party is what, some kind of pre-game for The Hunt?”

“More like a rite of passage.” His voice lowers, even though we’re alone in the woods. “Everyone wears masks. Tribal drums, bonfires, dancing. The potential hunters and prey size each other up. By midnight, the red bulbs are distributed, and The Hunt soon follows.”

“And you provide the mushrooms to make it all more... intense.”

He nods, not looking up from his work. “For those who want it.”

We work in silence for a while, the forest quiet around us except for the occasional bird call or rustling in the underbrush. “Will you be there?” I ask. “At the party?”

“Have to be. I provide the goods.” His eyes meet mine, serious now. “But you shouldn’t go anywhere near it, Briar. Not with Viktor still looking for Liam.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I say, though part of me wonders what it would be like to see this island ritual up close.

“Good.” He places another mushroom in his bag. “Because The Hunt this year... something feels off about it. They’re changing the rules, opening it up to non-members. It’s unpredictable.”

“And that’s bad?”

“The Hunt needs rules.” He sits back on his heels, pushing hair away from his face with the back of his hand. “Without boundaries...” He focuses on the mushrooms again.

I hold up one I’ve found. “Is this the right kind?”

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His expression lightens as he takes it from me, examining it between his long fingers. “Perfect.” Our hands touch longer than necessary. “You’re a natural.”

“So is this what dating you is like?” I ask, surprising myself with my boldness. “Foraging for psychedelic mushrooms in the woods?”

He laughs at this, a genuine sound that makes me want to hear it again. “Pretty much. I’m a cheap date.”

“And what about Flint?” I try to sound casual as I pick another mushroom. “What’s dating him like?”

“Dive bars and stolen motorcycles,” Damiano says with a half-smile. “Or at least it used to be.”

“So between the two of you, I get mushroom hunting and bar fights? Not exactly the typical romance.”

Damiano tilts his head, studying me. “What would you prefer? Fancy restaurants? Movies?”

“God no,” I say, wrinkling my nose. “I’ve had enough sterile environments to last a lifetime.” I look around at the wild, untamed forest surrounding us. “But maybe something that feels like... I don’t know. An actual date? Something normal people might do.”

“Normal people,” he repeats, amusement in his voice. “I think we lost ‘normal’

somewhere back in the maze.”

“Fair point.” I place another mushroom in his bag. “But still. The three of us should do something together that doesn’t involve dead bodies or lighthouse sex.”

“I’ll talk to Flint,” he says, and there’s something serious there despite his smile. “Maybe we can come up with something suitably abnormal yet date-like.”

“I’d like that.”

Chapter 25

Damiano

The sun’s barely up when I pull into the gravel lot at the bottom of the cliff where Flint lives. My truck rattles against the uneven ground, an old Range Rover that’s seen better decades but refuses to die. Kind of like us, I guess.

I sit for a minute after killing the engine, watching the morning fog drift across the windshield. The waves crash below, a steady rhythm against the rocks. Maybe coming here wasn’t the smartest idea, but after yesterday with Briar in the woods, talking about dates and normal things people do, I figured it was time to have the conversation—the one Flint and I have been avoiding since the lighthouse.

Hell, since forever.

His shipping container perches on the cliff edge like it’s daring the sea to claim it. Black paint peeling in places, the solar panels on the roof catching what little sunlight breaks through the mist. So perfectly Flint—isolated, defiant, somehow beautiful in its brokenness.

I grab the paper bag from the passenger seat and head up the narrow path carved into the rock face. My boots slip slightly on the damp stone, and I wonder, not for the first time, how the hell he manages this climb when he's drunk.

I knock twice, hard enough to be heard over whatever music he's probably blasting inside. Nothing. I knock again, louder.

The door swings open suddenly, and Flint stands there in low-hanging sweatpants, no shirt, hair a mess, eyes still heavy with sleep. The white streak falls across his forehead, stark against his sleep-flushed skin.

"The fuck, Damiano?" His voice is rough, irritated. "It's not even seven."

"Brought breakfast." I hold up the bag as a peace offering.

He stares at me for a long moment, then steps back, leaving the door open. I take it as the closest thing to an invitation I'm going to get.

Inside, the container is surprisingly neat. The bed's unmade, but the rest of the space has that deliberate organization I've always associated with Flint—everything in its place, nothing unnecessary. The huge windows facing the ocean fill the space with gray morning light, turning everything slightly silver.

"Coffee?" he asks, moving to the small kitchen area.

"Yeah."

I set the bag on his counter and pull out muffins I snagged from Mrs. Fletcher's cooling rack before leaving the estate. "Mrs. Fletcher's stress baking again. Cinnamon."

Flint grunts in acknowledgment, spooning coffee into a French press with methodical movements. His back is to me, the muscles shifting under skin scattered with small scars I could map blindfolded. Some of them are from me. From us.

“So,” he says, not turning around, “you gonna tell me why you’re here at the crack of dawn, or are we doing the strong silent thing?”

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I lean against the counter, crossing my arms. “Briar wants a date.”

That gets his attention. He turns, eyebrow raised. “A what?”

“A date. The three of us. Something normal people do.”

He snorts, turning back to the coffee. “We’re not normal people.”

“No shit.” I unwrap one of the muffins and break off a piece. “But she wants something that feels... I don’t know, less fucked up than what we’ve been doing.”

“Less fucked up than fucking on a grave or in alighthouse?” He pours hot water into the press, watching the grounds bloom. “Low bar.”

“Yeah, well.” I shrug, even though he can’t see it. “It’s not a bad idea.”

The silence stretches between us, filled only by the roar of waves outside and the ticking of the cheap clock on his wall. Flint presses the plunger down slowly. He’s always been like this—deliberate when he wants to be, chaotic when he doesn’t.

He pours coffee into two mugs, sliding one across the counter to me. “So we’re really doing this? The three of us?”

“Seems like it.” I wrap my hands around the mug, letting the heat seep into my palms. “Unless you’ve changed your mind.”

“Have you?” He leans against the opposite counter, only now looking at me directly.

“No.” The truth comes easy, surprising me. “I want this.”

Flint takes a sip of his coffee, watching me over the rim. “This isn’t gonna end well. You know that, right?”

“Probably not, but when has anything between us ended well?”

His laugh is short, harsh. “Fair fucking point.”

I break off another piece of muffin, rolling it between my fingers. “We should talk about it.”

“About what?”

“Italy.”

The word drops between us like a stone, heavy with all the things we’ve never said. His face closes off immediately, jaw tightening. “Ancient history.”

“Not to you.” I set down my mug harder than necessary. “Not to me either.”

“What’s there to say?” His shrug is too casual to be genuine. “You left. Didn’t tell me. Came back expecting everything to be the same. It wasn’t.”

“I had to go.”

“You had to run.” His voice turns sharp. “There’s a difference.”

“Erik was dead, Viktor was asking questions, and I... I couldn’t breathe here anymore.” I run a hand through my hair, frustrated. “You were so deep in everyone and everything, trying to forget what happened, and I just?—”

“I was trying to survive.” Anger flashes in his eyes. “You weren’t the only one fucked up by what happened.”

“I know that now.”

“But not then.” He puts down his mug then crosses his arms. “You left me to deal with the aftermath. With Viktor’s questions. With the nightmares.” His words crack slightly. “For three fucking months, Damiano. No word, no call, nothing. I thought you were dead. I thought maybe Viktor had figured it out, taken care of you somewhere and wasn’t telling anyone. Every time a body washed up on the shore, I was terrified it would be you.”

“Every. Damn. Time.” His voice breaks, raw with remembered pain. “I’d get a call about some body the tide brought in, and I’d have to go down to the shore, see if it was you. Do you have any idea what that was like? Looking at bloated corpses, wondering if I’d recognize what was left of your face?”

The fresh pain in his tone hits me like a punch to the gut. I’d never let myself think about what it must have been like for him during those months.

“And the worst part?” His words spill out now that the dam has broken. “I had no one to talk to. No one who knew the truth. You were all I had, Damiano. The only person who felt like... family.”

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I flinch at the word. Family. The one thing he never had. The thing we'd tried to build together, in our own fucked-up way.

"I know," I say quietly. "I knew you had no one else. That everyone else had already abandoned you. And then I did the exact same thing."

I was a fucking asshole.

"I'm sorry." The words feel inadequate, but I mean them. "I should have told you I was leaving. Should have explained."

"Yeah." He looks away, out the window toward the sea. "You should have."

Another long silence falls. I watch him, seeing the tension in his shoulders, the way he holds himself like he's bracing for a blow.

"And when you came back," he continues, still not looking at me, "and found me with Connor..."

"I wanted to kill you both." The admission comes easily. "I was so fucking angry."

"I could tell." His eyes find mine again, a flash of dark humor there. "You broke my nose."

"You deserved it."

"Probably." He picks at a loose thread on his sweatpants. "But Connor didn't. He was

just... there.”

“Like all the others were just there?” I can’t keep the bitterness hidden. “After we broke up, you fucked half the island.”

“And you didn’t?” He raises an eyebrow, challenging. “Don’t act like you were celibate after me, Damiano. I know better.”

He’s right. After we split, I was almost as bad as him. Different body every week, trying to burn away the memory of Flint, trying to prove I didn’t need him. It never worked.

“It was never about them,” I admit quietly. “It was about hurting you.”

“Yeah.” He nods, something softening in his expression. “Same.”

It’s the closest we’ve come to honesty in years. I take a sip of my coffee, buying time to find the right words.

“Briar’s different,” I eventually say.

“She is.” He pushes off from the counter, coming around to sit on one of the stools.

“She’s... fuck, I don’t know. She makes things make sense.”

“Even with everything that happened? With Liam?”

“Maybe because of it.” He breaks off a piece of muffin, rolling it between his fingers like I did. “We’re all carrying the same weight now.”

I nod, understanding what he means. The three of us are bound by blood and secrets, yes, but there’s something else, too. Something deeper, harder to explain.

“So what do we do?” I ask.

“About Briar?”

“About us.” I gesture between us. “This thing between us. It doesn’t just go away because there’s a third person involved now.”

Flint looks at me for a long moment, something complicated moving behind his eyes.

“No,” he says. “It doesn’t.”

“So we figure it out.”

“How? We’ve been trying to figure it out for years, and look where that got us.”

“This time, it’s different.” I move closer to him, aware of the air shifting in the room as I do. “This time, we have someone keeping us honest.”

“Briar.” He says her name like it’s something precious.

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“Yeah.” I reach out, hesitant, my hand hovering near his before finally covering it. “And maybe this time, we don’t try to kill each other when shit gets hard.”

He looks down at our hands, his fingers slowly turning to intertwine with mine. “No promises.”

“Fair enough.” I smile slightly. “But we try.”

He nods, and for a moment, we’re simply two people holding hands, all the history between us still there but somehow lighter.

“So,” he says after a while, “this date.”

“Any ideas?”

“Not the kind she’s looking for.” His mouth quirks up at one corner.

“Flint.”

“What? I’m serious. My date ideas usually involve motorcycles, booze, and bad decisions.”

“Basically your entire lifestyle.”

“Fuck you.” But there’s no heat in it. He’s almost smiling now.

“Maybe the old cemetery,” I suggest. “It’s normal enough but still us.”

“A graveyard? That’s your idea of a normal date?” He laughs, shaking his head.
“Jesus, we really are fucked up.”

I draw a deep breath, feeling lighter now, as if I came and got the answer I was hoping for.

“Okay... So we’re really doing this? All of us together?” he asks, as if reading my mind, which frankly, the man has an uncanny way of doing.

“Looks like it.”

“Without killing each other?”

“We’ll try.” I shrug. “One day at a time, right?”

“One fucked-up day at a time,” he agrees.

I glance at the clock. “I should go. Got deliveries to make for the Heathens party.”

Flint tenses slightly at the mention of the party. “Viktor will be there.”

“I know. I’ll be careful.”

“He’s still looking, Damiano. Still asking questions.”

“Let him.” I stand up, grabbing my jacket from where I tossed it on the couch. “He won’t find anything.”

Chapter 26

Briar

The old cemetery isn't exactly what I expected when I suggested the three of us go on a date. Like a normal couple... or whatever the fuck we are.

Warm light and tourists with selfie sticks make it less the haunted island of forgotten souls and more a quaint village of the dead. Not that it matters. The three of us somehow keep our distance from the crowds, finding narrow paths and tangled trees until it truly feels like we're alone.

I guess we are, in a way.

"He's smiling," I say, watching Flint up ahead, boots crunching against gravel.

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Damiano laughs, squeezing my hand. “I know. It can’t be real.”

Flint turns back, walking backward for a moment, his grin widening. “You two coming, or what?”

Damiano releases my hand and drapes his arm over my shoulder, pulling me closer as we catch up to Flint. The path curves around a series of small mausoleums, ornate and crumbling, moss growing over names and dates long worn away.

“Imagine spending all eternity here.” Flint stops to peer into one through a rusted iron gate.

We pass the mausoleums and head deeper into the graveyard. A canopy of twisted branches and Spanish moss shadows us from the sun. Back at the entrance, some enterprising soul had set up a booth selling snacks and cold drinks. It’s good business, considering the heat.

Now Flint reaches into his jacket to pull out a bottle of lemonade, taking a long drink before handing it to me.

“Some date,” I tease, taking a sip. It’s sticky sweet, and the tartness makes my eyes water. “Lemonade and dead people.”

The three of us sharing a bottle seems like the most intimate thing in the world.

“Best one ever,” Flint says. He’s serious, I think. “Damiano loves graveyards and dead things.”

It's Damiano's turn to take a drink. "You know me so well." Our voices have gone quiet. "But maybe we should have done some fancy dinner and a movie for Briar's sake."

"I told you. No way. I actually prefer this," I admit. "Shh... don't tell anyone."

The crowds are behind us, past the broken walls and hanging vines, just a low hum of energy. We stand in a clearing, surrounded by ancient headstones and marble angels with their faces turned down.

This is what I wanted. This is what I want. I don't know how long it will last, but I don't care. We have this moment—together—and it's everything.

"It's peaceful," I say, listening to the distant cries of gulls on the wind.

Flint leans against the black bark of an oak tree, surveying the headstones like he can't get enough of them.

Damiano sits on a low stone bench, kicking at the loose gravel near his feet. Flint joins him, and they watch me, the two of them side by side in the filtered afternoon light. It makes me smile.

"I can't believe this is what it took to get the two of you relaxing," I tease, sitting on the ground now, at their feet.

Flint strokes the back of my neck with a callused thumb, and Damiano looks at him, then at me, something genuine and vulnerable, something right.

"Guess we're not very good at it," Damiano admits, and I wonder if he's talking about relaxing or if it's something else.

“We’re good at this.” Flint’s words are quiet, and he takes my hand first, then Damiano’s, the three of us linking together.

What will the tourists say if they see us here, like this?

At the mouth of hell, three sinners.

I want to know what happens next, how we end.

It doesn’t really matter.

Like I said, this is what I want.

“You’re cold again,” Damiano says, breaking the comfortable silence. He shrugs off his jacket and places it around my shoulders without waiting for my response.

“Thanks.” I pull it closer, breathing in his scent—earth and herbs and something uniquely him.

Flint produces a small flask from his pocket. “This will warm you up better.”

“Let me guess—the good stuff from behind the bar at The Vault?” I ask, accepting it.

“Only the best for you, princess.” There’s no bite to the nickname anymore, only a gentle teasing that makes me smile.

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I take a small sip, the whiskey burning pleasantly down my throat. “Definitely better than the lemonade.”

Flint’s laughter is lighter than I’ve ever heard from him. “Don’t tell the tourist trap vendor. He’s charging five bucks for that sugar water.”

Damiano’s fingers find mine, tracing patterns on my palm. “This is the oldest cemetery on the island. Some of these graves date back to the 1700s.”

“History nerd.” Flint bumps Damiano’s shoulder with his own.

“Plant nerd.” Damiano points to a patch of wildflowers growing between two weathered tombstones. “See those? They only grow in soil with high calcium content. From the bones.”

“Romantic,” I say, unable to hide my smile.

“Hey, you picked us,” Flint reminds me. “Could’ve had normal boyfriends who take you to candlelit dinners.”

Boyfriends. The word hangs in the air between us, new and unexplored.

“Normal is overrated.” I lean back against Damiano’s legs. “Besides, I’ve had enough hospital food to last a lifetime. I don’t need fancy restaurants.”

Their expressions soften at the mention of my illness. It’s strange how something that’s defined me for so long feels less significant when I’m with them.

“Speaking of food,” Damiano says, reaching into his backpack. “I brought something more substantial than lemonade.”

He pulls out a small bundle wrapped in cloth. Inside are slices of crusty bread, wedges of cheese, and dark purple grapes that glisten in the dappled light.

“A picnic in a graveyard.” I laugh. “You two really know how to show a girl a good time.”

“Only the best for you.” Flint echoes his earlier words, but there’s sincerity beneath the playfulness now.

We eat with our fingers, passing food between us, the simple meal somehow tasting better here among the quiet stones than any five-star restaurant could offer.

“I used to come here as a kid,” Damiano says, breaking a piece of bread. “When things got too loud at home. It was the only place nobody looked for me.”

“I came here to steal,” Flint admits with a half-smile. “Metal from the gates, flowers people left that I could resell. Not my proudest moments.”

“And now?” I ask.

“Now we’re here with you,” Damiano says.

Flint nods, his expression unusually open. “Different circumstances.”

“Better ones,” I say, and they both look at me like I’ve said something profound.

For a moment, I forget what brought us together—the blood, the grave, the secrets we keep. For a moment, we’re simply three people finding comfort in each other’s

company, sharing food and whiskey in the afternoon sun.

Flint lies back on the bench, his head resting in Damiano's lap. It's such a casual intimacy, something I never thought I'd see between them. Damiano automatically starts finger combing Flint's hair, unsnarling the strands, the white streak stark against the black.

I watch them, these two men who have somehow become my entire world in the span of a chaotic week. There's still tension between them—years of history don't disappear overnight—but there's something else, too. Something healing.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer," Flint teases, catching me staring.

"I left my camera at home," I say, wishing I hadn't. This is a moment I want to preserve.

"Next time," Damiano promises, as if reading my mind.

Next time. The promise of a future, however uncertain, makes warmth bloom in my chest.

I stand up, brushing crumbs from my jeans. "Come on," I say, holding out my hands to both of them. "Show me more of this place."

They rise in unison, each taking one of my hands. We go deeper into the cemetery, past stones weathered by time and salt air, our footsteps falling into a rhythm that feels like we've been doing this forever.

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Damiano points out plants growing wild between the graves, explaining their medicinal properties. Flint tells stories about island legends, ghosts that supposedly haunt the older sections. I soak in their voices, their knowledge, their presence.

We stop before a massive oak, its branches creating a natural canopy over a small section of graves.

“This is my favorite spot,” Damiano says. “The tree’s probably older than any of the stones.”

“It’s seen some shit,” Flint agrees, running his hand along the rough bark.

“Like us,” I say softly.

They both look at me, understanding in their eyes.

“Yeah,” Flint says. “Like us.”

Damiano tugs me closer, his arm slipping around my waist. Flint moves to my other side, mirroring the gesture. Standing between them, I feel anchored in a way I never have before.

“So this is what normal feels like,” I muse.

Flint snorts. “Hate to break it to you, but three people making out in a graveyard isn’t most people’s definition of normal.”

“Making out?” I raise an eyebrow. “Getting ahead of yourself, Bishop.”

“Am I?” His eyes darken with challenge and promise.

Damiano’s laugh rumbles through his chest against my back. “He’s always been impatient.”

“Some things are worth rushing for,” Flint counters, his gaze never leaving mine.

I look from one to the other, these beautiful, broken men who’ve somehow become mine. “And some things are worth savoring.”

The sun is starting to sink lower, casting long shadows across the graves. We should head back soon, before darkness makes the uneven ground treacherous, but I’m reluctant to leave this moment, this perfect bubble where nothing exists except the three of us.

“We should come back,” I say. “Make it a tradition.”

“A cemetery date tradition?” Flint asks, but he’s smiling.

“Why not?” I shrug. “Most couples have ‘their restaurant’ or ‘their beach.’ We can have ‘our graveyard.’”

“Most couples aren’t hiding a body either,” Damiano says quietly.

The reminder should chill me, but somehow it doesn’t. It’s just another thread in the tapestry that binds us together—dark, yes, but no less real than the feelings growing between us.

“All the more reason to embrace the unconventional,” I say.

Flint seeks my hand, his fingers lacing through mine. “I’m in.”

“Me, too,” Damiano agrees, his other hand settling on Flint’s shoulder, completing our circle.

As we stand there, connected, I realize that maybe this is what I’ve been searching for all along—not safety or certainty, but this. Belonging. Understanding. Acceptance of all my broken pieces, matched with theirs to create something whole.

The light fades, but we remain, three shadows becoming one in the gathering dusk.

Maybe we’re damned.

Maybe we’re saved.

Maybe we’re just three people finding our way through the darkness together.

Whatever we are, in this moment, it feels like enough.

“Come on,” I say. “Back to reality.”

They both groan, and I feel the same way. Reality fucking sucks. But reality that involves the two of them...

Chapter 27

Flint

The sun has nearly disappeared by the time we leave the cemetery, the sky fading from dusty orange to deep purple. Our shadows stretch long against the gravel path, three silhouettes merging into one twisted shape. Briar walks between us, her fingers linked with mine, her other hand tucked into the crook of Damiano's arm.

It feels wrong to feel this good. This whole fucking day has been a surprise—no arguments, no bullshit drama, merely the three of us existing in the same space without tearing each other apart. Almost like normal people, if normal people shared bloody secrets and complicated feelings.

“That was actually nice,” I admit, breaking the comfortable silence as we approach the cemetery gates. “Minus the tourists with the selfie sticks, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Briar echoes, the smile in her voice warming something in my chest. “I think the cemetery's keepers would be horrified if they knew we were treating it like a dating spot.”

“Trust me, they've seen worse,” I say, thinking of the countless teenagers who've

used this place for even less savory activities over the years.

We reach the wrought iron gates, rusted and massive against the darkening sky. The parking lot is nearly empty, only our cars and a sleek black Lexus that looks way too familiar. My stomach drops.

“Fuck,” I mutter, instinctively pulling Briar closer, my body tensing. “That’s Viktor’s car.”

Damiano sees it, too. His casual stance immediately shifts, shoulders squaring, jaw tightening. “Let’s go around the back.” He’s already turning to guide Briar in the opposite direction.

Too late.

Viktor Bastian emerges from behind a weathered stone angel, his massive frame blocking our path. The security earpiece is gone, replaced by a sleek black baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, but the intimidating presence remains.

“Well, well,” he says, deceptively casual. “Small island.”

Every instinct screams at me to put myself between him and Briar, but that would only make us look guilty. Instead, I force my posture to relax, keeping my grip on Briar’s hand firm but not panicked.

“Viktor,” I acknowledge with a nod. “Cemetery visit? Wouldn’t have pegged you for the sentimental type.”

He studies the three of us, taking in our linked hands, the easy proximity, the intimate bubble we’ve created. Something flickers across his face—curiosity, suspicion, or maybe calculation.

“Visiting old friends,” he says vaguely, then gestures at us. “This is... cozy. Didn’t realize you three were so close.”

Briar’s hand tightens in mine, and I squeeze back, hoping it conveys the message: don’t panic.

“Island’s full of surprises.” Damiano’s tone is neutral but his body is angled slightly in front of Briar.

Viktor’s gaze lingers on Briar, assessing her with cold precision. “Ms. Waters. Recovered from all the excitement, I see.”

“Just enjoying the evening,” she says with remarkable steadiness. “Fresh air does wonders.”

“I’m sure it does.” He flicks his attention back to me. “Don’t forget we need extra security for Heathens tonight. The summer crowd’s getting rowdy.”

“Already handled,” I reply, keeping my tone casual. “Everything’s set for ten.”

He nods, then turns to Damiano. “You’ll be there tonight, right? Locke was asking.”

Damiano shifts his weight, a barely perceptible tension running through him. “Of course,” he answers, carefully neutral. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

Briar glances between us, her expression unreadable.

“Good,” Viktor says, something knowing in his expression. “And Ms. Waters? You coming to check it out?”

Before Briar can answer, both Damiano and I speak at once.

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“No.” “She won’t be there.”

Our synchronized response hangs awkwardly in the air. Viktor’s eyebrows rise slightly, his gaze sharpening as it moves between the three of us.

“Didn’t know you two were making her decisions now,” he says with a smirk. To Briar, he says, “Waters family’s never shown up for the fun stuff. Time to break tradition, maybe?”

Briar straightens, and I recognize the stubborn set of her jaw. Fuck.

“Maybe it is,” she says, her chin lifting slightly in that way I’m learning means trouble.

Viktor’s smile widens, clearly pleased with her response. “Perfect. Figured you’d be more interesting than your old man.” He slides his gaze to me. “Flint can show you the ropes. He’s been running this shit for years.”

“I’ll bet,” Briar says, something challenging in her response that makes my pulse spike.

Damiano is tensing beside her, and my own anxiety ratchets up another notch.

“Anyway,” Viktor says, checking his watch, “gotta bounce. Waters,” he says with a nod to Briar. “Looking forward to seeing you there. I’ll give you the VIP tour, show you what your daddy’s been keeping you from all these years.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Damiano cuts in, sounding cold.

Viktor’s laugh is short and sharp. “Still playing bodyguard, Ricci? Some shit never changes.” He tips his hat slightly. “Later.”

We watch him go to his Lexus, the tension between us building with each step he takes. Only when his taillights disappear down the winding road do I let out the breath I’ve been holding.

“Fuck,” I exhale. “That was?—”

“I’m coming tonight,” Briar states.

“Absolutely not,” Damiano growls, closing his hand around her upper arm. His grip isn’t painful, but it’s firm enough to make his stance clear. “It’s not happening.”

I step closer, boxing her in between us. “For once, I agree with him. No fucking way you’re going anywhere near The Vault tonight.”

Briar narrows her eyes as she looks between us. “Excuse me? Did I miss the part where I signed away my autonomy to you two?”

“This isn’t about autonomy,” I snap, dropping to a harsh whisper. “This is about staying alive. Viktor is fishing, and you’re about to bite the hook like it’s covered in fucking candy.”

Damiano’s expression darkens further. “He’s right. Viktor wants you there for a reason, and it’s not to show you a good time.”

“Let go of my arm,” Briar says quietly, her gaze fixed on Damiano’s hand.

He releases her immediately but doesn't step back. "Briar?—"

"No, you listen to me." She's trembling slightly but gaining strength with each word. "I understand you're trying to protect me. I even appreciate it. But treating me like I'm made of glass or too stupid to make my own decisions? That I don't appreciate."

I clench my jaw. "Nobody said you're stupid?—"

"You didn't have to," she shoots back. "You're both standing there making choices for me like I'm a child. I'm the one who killed Liam. I'm the one who has the most to lose if Viktor figures it out."

Something in her words hits home, and I exchange a glance with Damiano. His expression is still thunderous, but there's a hint of uncertainty now.

"It's not up for debate." She crosses her arms. "Viktor's already seen us together. He's already suspicious. And given how fast gossip spreads on this island, people probably already know the three of us are... whatever we are."

"That's exactly why you shouldn't go," I counter. "He's looking for connections, and we've just handed him one on a silver fucking platter."

"He'll be doing that anyway," she points out. "Atleast at The Vault I can see what we're up against. Know thy enemy and all that."

"This isn't a fucking war strategy game." Damiano rakes a hand through his hair. "These people are dangerous. Viktor is dangerous."

"I know that," Briar says, softening slightly as she places a hand on his chest. "But hiding makes me look guilty. Going makes me look curious."

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The gesture seems to deflate some of Damiano's anger. His hand covers hers, large and protective. "You have no idea what you're walking into."

"These events... they're not like your party," he continues, gentler now but no less intense. "They're darker. More exposed. People lose control."

"I killed a man," she says, dropping to a fierce whisper. "I think I can handle a fancy sex club party."

"It's not just that," I try to explain. "Viktor uses these nights to gather information, to watch people when they're vulnerable. If you show up?—"

"If I show up, it'll look natural," she cuts me off. "Like I'm just checking out the local scene with my... whatever you two are to me. If I avoid it now, after he's seen us together, it looks way more suspicious."

Damiano runs a hand through his hair, frustration evident in every line of his body. "She has a point, Flint."

"Don't tell me you're actually considering this," I hiss at him.

"I'm trying to think clearly," he says, eyes locked on Briar. "If she doesn't show, Viktor will wonder why. Especially after how eager she seemed."

"So we're risking her safety because she couldn't keep her mouth shut?" I argue, instinctively pressing my hand more firmly against her back.

“I’m standing right here,” Briar says, irritation flashing in her eyes. She twists away from my touch. “And I’m going, with or without your approval. I’d prefer with, since you two actually know what to expect.”

“Briar,” Damiano says in that deep register that usually means he’s deadly serious. “If anything happens to you?—”

“Nothing will happen,” she interrupts, her expression softening as she looks between us. “I’ll be careful. I promise. But I need to do this. I can’t just hide and hope this all goes away.”

Something in her vulnerability breaks through my anger. I can see Damiano’s resolve crumbling too.

I want to argue more, but the determined look in her eyes stops me. This isn’t the fragile princess I first imagined her to be. She’s proven that over and over.

“Fine,” I concede with a sigh, “but you stay with one of us at all times. No wandering off, no talking to Viktor alone, and you wear what I tell you to wear.”

“Agreed,” she says, the victory already clear in her smile. “See? Was that so hard? Letting me make my own choices while setting reasonable boundaries?”

“Don’t push it,” I warn, but there’s no real heat in my words. “This whole plan is still fucking stupid.”

“And if either of us says it’s time to go, we go,” Damiano adds. “No arguments.”

“Deal.” She looks between us, a flash of excitement mixing with the apprehension in her eyes. “So... what exactly does one wear to a primal ritual sex party?”

Despite everything, I find myself laughing. “Something that won’t draw too much attention,” I say, knowing it’s probably impossible. Briar Waters will draw attention no matter what she wears. “And for fuck’s sake, stay away from white dresses.”

“Noted.” Her hand finds mine again, squeezing gently. “It’ll be fine. We’ll be fine.”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Her confidence should be reassuring, but all I can think about is Viktor’s calculating gaze, the way he observed her like she was a puzzle to solve.

Chapter 28

Briar

The Vault looks different tonight.

Not just because of the people spilling out onto the street—bodies pressed together, laughter cutting through the night air—but because everything about it has transformed. Gone is the sleek exclusivity of the place I snuck into days ago. Tonight, the old bank building throbs with primal energy, its stone facade adorned with burning torches that cast wild, dancing shadows across the crowd.

“Still sure about this?” Damiano murmurs close to my ear as we approach, his hand firm on the small of my back.

“I’m sure,” I say, despite my racing pulse. After our argument at the cemetery, neither he nor Flint tried to talk me out of coming, but I could feel their worry when we separated—Flint heading straight to work at The Vault hours ago, Damiano taking me back to the estate to get ready.

I’d spent hours overthinking my outfit before settling on something that wouldn’t

scream “notice me”: black jeans, a sheer black top over a simple camisole, boots that lend me an inch of height I don’t really need. My hair is loose, falling around my shoulders in waves that catch the torchlight.

But it’s the mask that completes the look—a delicate thing of black lace that Damiano produced from a box he brought to the estate, fitting it carefully over my eyes before we left.

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“Everyone wears them,” he explained. “Not just for anonymity. It’s tradition.”

Now, as we approach the entrance, I see he wasn’t exaggerating. The crowd is a sea of masks—some elaborate like carnival creations, others simple and stark. But all transforming their wearers into something wilder, more dangerous.

We bypass the line stretching down the block, the bouncers recognizing Damiano and immediately stepping aside. Inside, the transformation is even more dramatic. The main room I glimpsed briefly during my previous visit has been completely redesigned. The velvet couches are pushed against the walls, creating a vast open space in the center where bodies move to a rhythm that feels more ritual than dance. Huge speakers pump out a beat that’s all drums and bass, vibrating through the floor and into my bones.

The lighting is blood-red, casting everyone in shades of crimson and shadow. Smoke machines create a haze that makes the whole scene dreamlike, figures appearing and disappearing through the mist like spirits. Above it all, aerialists in minimal black clothing perform on silks hanging from the ceiling, their bodies twisting into impossible shapes.

“Jesus,” I breathe, overwhelmed by the sensory assault.

Damiano’s arm tightens around my waist. “Still think you can handle it?”

I nod, unable to tear my eyes away from the spectacle. “It’s just... a lot.”

“And this is only the beginning,” Damiano says, scanning the crowd. “Let’s find Flint

first.”

The bar area spans one entire wall of the space, crowded with masked figures clamoring for drinks. And there’s Flint, pouring and mixing behind the counter, never missing a beat despite the chaos. He’s wearing a simple black leather mask, making his eyes appear even more intense against the white streak in his hair.

He spots us approaching and gives a curt nod, then says something to a blue-haired bartender beside him before stepping away for a brief moment.

“You made it,” he says when he reaches us, his voice raised to be heard over the music. “How long have you been here?”

“Just arrived,” Damiano answers.

Flint observes me, taking in the outfit, the mask. “Good choice,” he says. Then, to both of us, he says, “Remember, stay together. I can’t leave the bar much tonight—I’m understaffed, and Viktor’s watching.”

“Speaking of,” Damiano says, “have you seen him?”

“By the stage with Locke,” Flint says, already glancing back at the bar where customers are lining up. “Mari’s handling the other end if you want drinks. Gotta get back.”

“We’ll be careful,” I promise.

“You better be.” He briefly squeezes my hand before he turns and slips back behind the bar.

Damiano guides me toward the area where a bartender with electric blue hair is

serving drinks. “Let’s get something to take the edge off.”

We order whiskeys, and I take the moment to really study Damiano. His mask is similar to Flint’s but with subtle botanical designs etched into the leather. It makes him look dangerous in a way that sends heat pooling inside me.

This is crazy. I came here to play my part, to show that we have nothing to hide, but now all I can think about is how hot they both look in their masks.

I glance back at Flint, now working the bar with focused intensity. Even from here, I can see how different he is in this setting—alert, commanding, exuding that dangerous energy that draws people to him. Several customers lean too far over the bar as they order, trying to get closer.

“Don’t worry,” Damiano says, noting my gaze. “He’s used to it. People always want what they can’t have.”

I take a sip of my whiskey, grateful for something to focus on besides my jealousy. The liquor burns pleasantly, warming me from the inside out.

“Viktor at three o’clock,” Damiano says casually. “By the stage with Locke.”

I resist the urge to turn immediately, instead taking another sip of my drink before glancing casually toward the raised platform at the far end of the room. Sure enough, Viktor stands there, deep in conversation with a sharply dressed man I assume is Locke, one of The Vault’s owners. Viktor’s mask is bone white, a stark contrast to his all-black outfit.

“Has he seen us?” I ask.

Damiano’s hand finds my nape, his touch reassuring. “Not yet. But he will.”

“Good,” I say with more confidence than I feel. “That’s the point, right? Let him see us just enjoying ourselves, not acting suspicious.”

“Enjoying ourselves in this place is a stretch,” Damiano mutters, but there’s a hint of amusement in his tone. “Come on. Let’s mingle. Less conspicuous than huddling in a corner all night.”

We weave through the crowd, Damiano’s hand a constant presence on me—at my waist, my shoulder, the small of my back. His touch keeps me anchored as we push deeper into the heart of the party.

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The scene gets wilder the further in we go. What started as suggestive dancing near the entrance has turned into something much more intense at the center. Bodies twist together in various stages of undress, cast in deep crimson by the blood-red lights. A woman bent over a custom bench takes measured strikes from a man with a leather flogger, her face showing pure bliss even through her ornate mask. Nearby, another couple performs for an eager audience, her body arched perfectly as he guides her with subtle movements of rope binding her arms.

I recognize the technique from my photography days—that's serious suspension bondage that takes real skill. Part of me misses my camera, itching to capture the interplay of light and shadow across their bodies.

"Makes my NYU fetish photography look like child's play," I say to Damiano, my attention fixed on the scene. "They're going all out."

"Heathens night isn't about holding back," Damiano says, close to my ear. "It's about peeling everything away. Shows what The Hunt really means—pure instinct over social rules."

I drift my gaze from scene to scene, my photographer's eye mixing with pure arousal. On a velvet couch, a masked woman straddles a man while another woman kisses her neck. Against a column nearby, a man pins another's wrists above his head, their bodies pressed together in an unmistakable display of dominance and submission.

"Island bigwigs by day, absolute animals by night," I observe, feeling heat spreading under my skin as I watch.

Damiano laughs against my ear. “The masks change everything. Amazing what people do when they think no one knows who they are.”

I lean back against him, my body responding to the charged atmosphere. There’s something about being surrounded by such raw desire, watching proper island residents transform into creatures of pure want.

He tightens his arm around my waist. “Getting to you?” he asks, deeper than before.

“Maybe,” I admit, not bothering to hide how my breathing’s quickened or how I’m pressing back against him—he can feel it all anyway.

His lips brush my ear. “We should keep moving.”

But it’s getting harder to focus on our mission. I keep looking back to the scenes around us. The couple with the flogger has moved on, the woman now writhing as her partner’s hands work between her legs. On stage, performers in elaborate headdresses and nearly nothing else twist around each other in synchronized desire.

I spot Flint behind the bar, his eyes finding us through the crowd. Even from across the room, I can feel the intensity in his gaze as he watches Damiano’s hands on me. My skin flushes hot in response.

“Viktor’s watching,” Damiano says suddenly. “Don’t look now.”

I fight the urge to turn my head. “What’s he doing?”

“Acting like he doesn’t see us while seeing everything.” Damiano slides his hand to my hip, pulling me closer in a move that’s both possessive and protective. “We need to look natural.”

“What counts as ‘natural’ in this madhouse?” I try to keep it light despite the tension coiling inside me.

He flexes his fingers against my hip. “Like we’re here for the same reason as everyone else.”

Our eyes meet and understanding passes between us. We’re supposed to be playing parts—a couple, or whatever we are, simply enjoying the wild atmosphere. But the heat in his eyes suggests this is becoming less of an act by the second.

“Dance with me.” I turn in his arms to face him.

He hesitates. “Briar?—”

“Dance with me,” I repeat, more firmly. “People are watching. We need to blend in.”

His resistance crumbles, and he pulls me into the mass of bodies at the center of the room, where the music hits hardest and the smoke hangs thick. His hands find my hips as I loop my arms around his neck. The beat drives through us, dictating our movements.

I press closer, feeling how tense he is. Around us, the dancing has morphed into something much more intimate. Couples—and sometimes more than couples—move against each other with obvious hunger. I follow their lead, rolling my body against Damiano’s with practiced ease.

He exhales sharply, tension evident in every line of his body, and tightens his hands on my hips, pulling me closer despite himself.

“You know what this is doing to me, right?” he mutters, his eyes darkening.

“That’s kind of the point,” I say, boldly holding his gaze.

Over Damiano’s shoulder, I spot Viktor again, now standing with a clear view of us. Can’t read his expression behind that bone-white mask, but his attention is definitely locked on us.

“He’s watching,” I murmur into Damiano’s ear. “What now?”

Damiano doesn’t hesitate. He backs me against a nearby column, his body shielding mine from the crowd but perfectly positioned for Viktor to see. He cups my face in his hand, tilting it up. “Trust me,” he whispers, and then his mouth is on mine.

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The kiss burns through me, lighting up every nerve. His tongue traces my lips, demanding entry I immediately give. One hand tangles in my hair while the other presses against my lower back, pulling me flush against him.

I kiss him back just as hard, losing myself completely. For a moment, I forget where we are, forget why we came, forget everything except how he feels against me.

When he pulls back, we're both breathing hard. His eyes, visible through his mask, are dark with desire. "We need to go someplace more private," he says roughly. "Now."

Damiano guides me through the crowd, his grip firm on my wrist. The pulsing lights and writhing bodies blur around us as we push deeper into The Vault, past the main floor where we were dancing. My pulse quickens from the desire building between my legs since Damiano's kiss.

"Where are we going?" I ask, barely audible over the thundering bass.

"I can't wait any longer," he answers, pulling me closer. "I need you now."

We turn down a hallway, dimly lit with sconces that cast everyone in amber shadows. Masked figures press against the walls, hands exploring, mouths meeting hungrily. Damiano pulls me past them all, toward a door at the end.

He pushes it open to reveal a small room with plush velvet seating and a privacy curtain. As soon as the door closes behind us, muffling the music to a distant throb, he's on me.

His mouth finds mine, hungry and demanding. There's no hesitation, just pure need as he slides his hands under my shirt, gripping my waist. I press against him, equally desperate, tangling my fingers in his hair.

"I've been thinking about this all night," he growls against my lips. "Watching you dance, feeling you against me. Driving me crazy."

"Then do something about it," I challenge, nipping at his bottom lip.

He doesn't need further invitation and backs me against the wall, his thigh pushing between my legs, creating delicious friction exactly where I need it. I grind against him shamelessly, already wet and aching.

I push my hands under his shirt, feeling the ridges of muscle and ink I've already memorized. His skin burns against my palms as I trace the path of the nightshade tattoo curving around his ribs.

He yanks up my shirt, exposing my stomach to the cool air. His mouth leaves mine to trail down my neck, teeth scraping paths that make me gasp. When he reaches the edge of my camisole, he doesn't hesitate—just pulls it down to expose my breast, his mouth hot and demanding on my nipple.

I arch against him, fingers digging into his shoulders. The party, everything outside this room fades away. All that matters is his mouth on my skin, his hands gripping my hips.

"I want you," I pant, fumbling with his belt. "Please."

He catches my wrists, pinning them above my head with one large hand. "Not yet," he murmurs. He slides his free hand down my body to the waistband of my jeans. "First I want to feel how wet you are for me."

The button pops open under his fingers. The zipper slides down with a sound that seems too loud in the small space. He slips his hand inside, past the thin fabric of my underwear, finding me already slick and swollen.

“Fuck,” he whispers. “You’re soaked.”

“Your fault,” I gasp as he circles his finger around my clit with a maddening caress.

He releases my wrists to pull my jeans down further, giving his hand more room. I cling to his shoulders, legs trembling as he slides a finger inside me, then two, the heel of his palm grinding against my clit with each thrust.

The door to the room opens suddenly. I whip my head toward it, but it’s Flint who stands there, his expression darkening with lust behind his mask.

“Started without me?” he asks, closing the door behind him and leaning against it, arms crossed. He takes us in, his gaze lingering where Damiano’s hand disappears into my jeans.

“Couldn’t wait,” Damiano tells him, not taking his eyes off my face. His fingers curl inside me, making me gasp.

Flint tosses his mask aside and crosses the room in three quick strides. “Clearly.” He grabs the back of Damiano’s neck, pulling him into a rough kiss over my shoulder. “My turn.”

Damiano doesn’t stop his fingers working inside me as Flint claims my mouth next. I moan against his lips, tasting whiskey and mint. His hands replace Damiano’s on my breast, rougher, more impatient. He pinches my nipple between thumb and forefinger, sending jolts of electricity straight to my core.

“Been watching you two all night,” he says against my ear. “Wanted to drag you both out of there an hour ago.”

They work in tandem now, as if they’ve done this a thousand times. Maybe they have. Flint’s mouth on my neck, my breasts, while Damiano’s fingers drive me higher. I buck my hips against his hand, chasing release.

“Please,” I gasp, not sure what I’m asking for, just knowing I need more than fingers.

Flint pulls back just enough to look at Damiano. Something passes between them, an entire conversation in a single glance. Then Flint is moving, pushing the privacy curtain aside to reveal a low couch.

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“Here,” he says, guiding me to it. “I want to watch you take him first.”

I sink onto the couch, my jeans halfway down my thighs, my top pushed up. Exposed. Vulnerable. Neither of them seems to mind. Damiano kneels between my legs, pulling my jeans completely off while Flint sits beside me, his hand replacing Damiano’s between my legs.

“Christ, you’re wet,” Flint murmurs, fingers sliding easily into me. “You want us both tonight?”

“Yes,” I gasp, spreading my legs wider. “God, yes.”

The air changes, thickens with focused intent. They exchange another look then Flint is standing, unfastening his pants while Damiano does the same. There’s no awkwardness between them, just fluid coordination like two parts of the same machine.

Damiano positions himself on the couch, and Flint guides me to straddle him. I hover above him, feeling the blunt pressure of his cock against my entrance. One of Flint’s hands steadies me while the other wraps around Damiano’s length, positioning him perfectly.

“Take him,” Flint says, his breath hot against my ear. “I want to watch you fall apart on his cock.”

I sink down, taking Damiano to the hilt in one smooth motion. We both groan at the sensation, his hands gripping my hips to hold me in place for a moment. “So tight,”

he hisses, head falling back. “So fucking perfect.”

I start to move, lifting and lowering myself on his cock, feeling every inch of him drag against my walls. Flint moves behind me, his hands on my shoulders, my waist, my ass. I feel the press of his cock against my back, hot and hard.

“You want more?” he asks, even though he must know the answer.

“Yes,” I say, not stopping my movements on Damiano. “Everything. Both of you.”

Flint slides his hand down my back, fingers slick with something—lube, probably kept in these rooms for exactly this purpose. Or maybe that there are now three of us... he knows what’s to come.

He circles my asshole, the pressure insistent but careful. I relax into it, grateful for the distraction as his finger breaches me.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, working a second finger in alongside the first, stretching me carefully. “Just like that.”

I continue riding Damiano, who watches me with half-lidded eyes, guiding my hips with his hands into a rhythm that hits perfectly with each stroke. When Flint lines himself up behind me, Damiano stills my movements, holding me flush against him.

“Ready?” Flint asks, his cock pressing against me.

“Yes,” I breathe, and then he’s pushing forward, the pressure intense as he enters me slowly, inch by careful inch.

The sensation is overwhelming—both of them inside me, filling me completely, stretching me to my limits. For a moment, none of us moves, simply adjusting to

being connected so intimately.

This is different than the lighthouse. This lacks pain... in fact it's so fucking good. It feels so fucking right.

Then Flint rocks forward slightly, and I gasp as pleasure shoots through me. That small movement triggers Damiano to move as well, and soon they find a rhythm, one pushing in as the other pulls back, never leaving me empty.

The pressure builds quickly, almost too intense. I'm pinned between them, completely at their mercy, and I love it. I let my head fall back against Flint's shoulder as Damiano's mouth finds my breast, sucking hard enough to mark.

"That's it," Flint says, his pace increasing. "Take us both. Show us how much you need this."

The bass from the club pulses through the walls, matching the rhythm of our bodies. I'm close, so close, trembling on the edge. Damiano reaches between us, circling his thumb over my clit with each thrust.

"Come for us," he says, eyes locked on mine. "I want to feel you squeeze around us both."

That pushes me over. I shatter, my body clenching around them as pleasure crashes through me in waves. They follow quickly, Flint with a curse, Damiano with my name on his lips, both of them holding me tightly as they empty themselves inside me.

For a long moment, we stay joined, sweaty and panting, the reality of what we've done slowly seeping back in. The club beyond these walls. The body buried in the maze.

But right now, in this moment, none of that matters. Only the three of us, tangled together, finding something like peace in the eye of the storm.

“I need to get back to work,” Flint says.

And there’s that reality smacking us in the face again.

“Take her home,” he adds to Damiano. “The night’s only going to get crazier with every hour. The Hunt starts tonight.”

Chapter 29

Briar

The hot water cascades over my shoulders, washing away the sweat, the smoke, and the lingering scent of whiskey from The Vault. But nothing can wash away the memory of being sandwiched between Damiano and Flint, the feeling of them both inside me, claiming me completely.

The drive home was quiet, Damiano's hand resting on my thigh, both of us still reeling from what happened. When he dropped me off at the estate, his kiss was tender—so different from the hungry, desperate ones we shared at The Vault.

“Lock the doors,” he reminded me. “And stay inside. The Hunt starts tonight.”

The Hunt. The island's darkest tradition, about to unfold in the woods surrounding Windward Estate.

I step out of the shower, wrapping a fluffy towel around myself. Through the bathroom window, I can see fog settling over the grounds, thick and ghostly in the moonlight. Perfect Hunt weather, according to island lore.

I pad to my bedroom, towel-drying my hair as I go. The house feels too big, too empty without Mrs. Fletcher's presence. The silence wraps around me like another layer of fog, broken only by the occasional creak of old wood expanding and contracting.

After moisturizing—my skin always dries out painfully in the island air—I slip into silk pajama shorts and a matching camisole. But as I’m about to climb into bed, something catches my eye through the window.

A red glow.

I move closer to the glass, peering out into the darkness. There it is—a red light bulb glowing softly above the front porch.

My heart skips. I didn’t put that there. Didn’t sign up to be “prey” in tonight’s Hunt.

But I know who did.

Damiano. Or Flint.

A smile tugs at my lips despite myself. So they want to play Hunt games, do they? After what we shared at The Vault, this feels like the natural next step in our twisted island romance.

I hesitate for only a moment before moving to my closet. If they’ve gone to the trouble of setting this up, I might as well play along. At the back of the closet, I find what I’m looking for—a white nightgown like the one I wore to my party, the night this all began. The night Liam died.

It’s strangely fitting to wear it again, for this dark island ritual. I slip it over my head, the soft fabric floating around my body like mist. The collar dips low, exposing my collarbones, and the hem falls just below my knees—modest compared to the barely-there gowns I saw on some women at The Vault.

According to tradition, I should be barefoot. I kick off my slippers and glance at myself in the full-length mirror. With my hair loose around my shoulders and the

white gown against my pale skin, I look like a ghost. Beautiful, but spectral. Perfect for The Hunt.

Do I grab a coat? No, that would ruin the aesthetic. Besides, if everything goes according to plan, I won't be cold for long. Either Damiano or Flint—or perhaps both—will catch me, and then...

The thought sends heat rushing through me. After tonight at The Vault, I can only imagine what they have planned.

I make my way downstairs, the hardwood floor cool beneath my bare feet. I unlock the heavy front door and step onto the porch. The red light casts everything in a bloody glow, transforming the familiar entrance into something sinister.

The night air hits me immediately, cold and damp with fog. I wrap my arms around myself, already shivering, but determined to play this game.

The protocol, from what I've gathered, is to wait. The hunter initiates with a whistle, and then the chase begins. So I wait, standing beneath the red light, exposed and vulnerable in my white gown.

Minutes pass. The fog grows thicker, curling around my ankles like ghost hands trying to pull me into the earth. I'm about to give up, to decide this was some kind of mistake, when a low whistle carries on the wind. Three notes, rising in pitch, then falling—the signal.

My pulse quickens. So they really are doing this.

I peer into the darkness, trying to spot my pursuer. There—a figure at the edge of the property, just where the manicured lawn meets the wild forest. I can't discern details through the fog, only a silhouette wearing what appears to be the traditional stag

mask.

The figure whistles again, the same eerie three notes. Then it starts moving toward me.

Something about the way it moves seems off. Not quite like Damiano's fluid grace or Flint's predatory swagger. This gait is different, more mechanical, purposeful.

I take a step back, then another. The figure keeps coming, picking up speed.

This isn't right. This isn't them.

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Fear surges through me as the masked figure breaks into a run, heading straight for the porch where I stand, frozen with indecision.

I don't think, I move, leaping off the porch and running around the side of the house. My bare feet sink into the wet grass, slipping slightly as I sprint toward the garden.

Behind me, heavy footsteps are gaining ground. Whoever this is, they're fast.

The maze. If I can reach the maze, I might lose them in its twisting paths. And the greenhouse is just beyond—if I can reach Damiano...

I change direction, heading for the maze entrance. My nightgown billows around my legs, the fog swirling with each step I take. My lungs burn with the exertion, my condition making itself known at the worst possible moment.

The whistle comes again, closer now. Three notes, but sharper, more urgent.

I reach the maze entrance and plunge into the darkness between the high hedges. Immediately, shadows so dense they feel solid swallow me. No moonlight penetrates here, and I have to run with my hands outstretched, feeling my way forward.

Left turn, right turn, straight ahead. I try to remember the path to the center, to where we buried Liam. From there, I know the way to the greenhouse, but in the darkness, with fear clouding my mind, every path looks the same.

My pursuer crashing through the hedge maze echoes behind me. He's not bothering with the paths, simply pushing straight through the foliage, taking the most direct

route.

I take another turn, then another, panic rising as I realize I've completely lost my bearings. Have I been here before? Are these the same hedges I just passed?

My foot catches on an exposed root, and I go down hard, my knees hitting gravel. Pain shoots up my legs, but I scramble back up, ignoring the sting. I can't stop. Can't let him catch me.

I take another turn and find myself in a small clearing. Moonlight breaks through the fog here, illuminating a stone bench. I've reached the center of the maze.

And buried beneath this peaceful scene lies Liam Bastian's decomposing body.

For a sick moment, I wonder if it's Viktor behind the mask. If he's somehow figured it out, if this is his revenge.

I don't have time to dwell on it. I need to get to the greenhouse, to Damiano.

I scan the clearing, trying to remember which path leads out toward the back of the property. There—that narrow opening between two particularly tall hedges. That's the exit, the one that leads to the greenhouse.

I start toward it, but I'm too slow. The masked figure bursts into the clearing behind me, blocking my escape.

In the dim moonlight, I can finally see him clearly. Black hoodie pulled up over the stag mask, obscuring any identifying features. He stands perfectly still for a moment, breath coming in harsh gasps through the mask.

"Please," I say, backing away slowly. "I didn't put up that light. I'm not part of this."

He tilts his head, studying me. Then he steps forward, reaching for me.

I turn to run, but a hand catches my arm, yanking me back with enough force to make me gasp. His grip is iron, fingers digging into my flesh.

“Let me go!” I thrash, trying to break free, but he only tightens his hold, pulling me against him.

His other hand moves toward my face. I flinch, expecting a blow, but instead, he traces a finger down my cheek, the touch almost gentle.

“Who are you?” I demand as I shake with fear and rage. “What do you want?”

The masked figure leans in close, his breath hot through the mask. And then he speaks, voice muffled but unmistakably familiar.

“You really should have stayed away from The Vault tonight, Briar Waters.”

My blood turns to ice.

This isn't Damiano or Flint.

This isn't a game.

And I've just been caught.

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“Viktor.” The name falls from my lips, a horrified whisper.

He reaches up, pulling the stag mask off to reveal his face, pale and hard in the moonlight. His eyes glitter with something dangerous as he tosses the mask aside.

“The one and only,” he says, his voice eerily calm. “Funny how history repeats itself, isn’t it? You in that white dress, in this maze, just like the night my brother disappeared.”

I try to back away, but his grip on my arm tightens. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t insult me.” His fingers dig deeper, sure to leave bruises. “I watched you tonight at The Vault, looking so cozy with our resident gardener and bartender. Quite the trio you three make.”

My mind races. How much does he know? How much is he guessing?

“Let me go.” I try to sound stronger than I feel. “This isn’t part of The Hunt. I didn’t volunteer for this.”

Viktor’s laugh is sharp and mirthless. “But I put the red light on your porch myself. Special invitation.” He pulls me closer, his breath hot on my face. “I thought we should have a private chat about my brother.”

“I told you before, I barely knew him. He was at my party, that’s all.”

“And then he vanished.” Viktor’s free hand slides to my waist, fingers digging into the thin fabric of my nightgown. “Some of my friends told me they saw him following you that night. Into this maze. And he was never seen again.”

My blood turns to ice. People saw us. Of course they did. A party full of strangers, all of them potential witnesses.

“Maybe he left the island,” I suggest weakly. “Found a tourist to go home with.”

“Liam wouldn’t leave without telling me.” He slides his hand lower, over my hip. “He wouldn’t leave his bike behind. His house. Everything.”

I try to twist away, but he’s too strong, pulling me against him. “What do you want from me?”

“I want to know what happened that night.” His voice drops lower, more threatening. “And I think you’re going to tell me. After we have a little fun first.”

He shoves me backward until I hit the stone bench. I stumble, falling onto the cold surface. Before I can scramble away, he’s on me, pinning me down with his weight.

“No!” I thrash beneath him, but he’s twice my size, easily holding me in place. “Get off me!”

“Feisty,” he says, sliding one hand up my thigh, pushing my nightgown higher. “I can see why they both want you. But I get to have you first.”

Panic surges through me. This is Liam all over again. Same place, same situation, same family. Is this my punishment? Am I doomed to repeat this nightmare?

I claw at his face, my nails catching his cheek, drawing blood. He curses, grabbing

both my wrists and slamming them above my head, held in one of his massive hands.

“You’ll pay for that,” he growls, fumbling at his belt with his free hand.

I can’t breathe, can’t think. My condition makes fighting even harder, my lungs already burning from the run through the maze. But I can’t give up. I can’t let this happen.

“You won’t get away with this.” I gasp, still struggling beneath him. “Damiano will?—”

“Damiano will what?” Viktor sneers. “That gardener who took my brother from me? I’ve been waiting years to make him pay for Erik. And now I’ll take something from him, too.”

His words hit me like ice water. The confirmation that Viktor suspects Damiano’s involvement in Erik’s death sends fear coursing through me.

I feel the cool night air on my thighs as Viktor pushes my nightgown up to my waist. His hand is rough, callused as he slides it along my inner thigh.

“No,” I plead, feeling tears spring to my eyes despite my determination not to show weakness. “Don’t do this.”

“You should have thought of that before you got involved with my brother.” He leans down to bite my neck hard enough to make me cry out.

I close my eyes, turning away my head, trying to retreat into myself as his fingers hook into the elastic of my underwear. This can’t be happening again. I can’t kill another Bastian brother. I can’t.

But suddenly, the weight on top of me is gone.

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I open my eyes to see Viktor being lifted bodily off me, then thrown to the ground with brutal force. Above him stands Damiano, his face a mask of cold fury, fists clenched at his sides.

“Don’t. Touch. Her.” Each word drops like a stone, precise and deadly.

Viktor scrambles to his feet, wiping blood from his mouth where he hit the ground. “Well, well. The gardener to the rescue.” He spits red onto the gravel. “Just like old times.”

I pull down my nightgown, sitting up on the bench, still shaking from what nearly happened.

“Get out,” Damiano says. “Now.”

Viktor laughs, the sound chilling in the night air. “Or what? You’ll kill me, too? Like you did to Erik?”

Damiano stands there, chest heaving, eyes blazing with fury in the moonlight. Before Viktor can recover, Damiano charges, tackling him to the ground with a feral growl.

The two men collide with the sound of meat hitting stone. They roll across the gravel, a tangle of limbs and violence, each fighting for dominance. Damiano gets in the first solid blow, his fist connecting with Viktor’s jaw with a sickening crack.

But Viktor is bigger, stronger, trained in security. He absorbs the hit and counters with a knee to Damiano’s ribs that makes him gasp. They separate momentarily,

circling each other like wolves.

“I’ve waited a long time for this.” Viktor spits blood onto the gravel. “Should have done it years ago when you took Erik from me.”

“He attacked me,” Damiano growls. “Just like Liam attacked Briar.”

Viktor’s eyes darken with rage. “So you admit it. You were involved in Liam’s disappearance.”

Instead of answering, Damiano lunges again. The fight turns brutal, primal. They crash against the stone bench, then against the hedge wall. Fists connect with flesh, grunts of pain fill the air. Blood spatters across the white stone, black in the moonlight.

I scramble to my feet, desperate to help but unsure how. These men are evenly matched in their fury if not their size, and the violence unfolding before me is terrifying in its intensity.

Viktor manages to slam Damiano against the ground, straddling him, hands closing around his throat. Damiano thrashes, his face beginning to turn red as Viktor applies pressure.

I grab a broken branch from the ground and swing it at Viktor’s head with all my strength. It connects with a dull thud, but he barely flinches. Instead, he swings his arm backward without looking, his fist catching me square in the face.

Pain explodes through my skull as I’m knocked to the ground. My vision blurs, the taste of blood filling my mouth. I hear Damiano’s strangled cry as he sees me fall.

That momentary distraction costs him. Viktor tightens his grip on Damiano’s throat,

his massive hands squeezing mercilessly.

“I’m going to finish what I should have done years ago,” Viktor snarls. “Then I’ll deal with your little girlfriend. And finally Flint.”

Damiano’s struggles weaken, his face turning from red to purple. I try to get up, to help him, but my limbs won’t cooperate. The world tilts and spins around me.

“Damiano,” I manage to choke out, reaching toward him uselessly.

His eyes find mine, and I see something there—regret, apology, goodbye.

Then, suddenly, a dark blur bursts into the clearing. Flint appears like a demon summoned from the shadows, a garden statue clutched in his hands. Without hesitation, he brings it down on Viktor’s head with terrible force.

The sound is sickening—a wet crack that echoes through the maze. Viktor’s grip on Damiano loosens immediately. He sways, turning toward Flint with confusion in his eyes, blood already streaming down his face.

Flint doesn’t give him a chance to recover. He swings the statue again, catching Viktor on the temple. This time, Viktor crumples to the ground like a puppet with cut strings.

Damiano rolls away, gasping for air, his hands going to his bruised throat. Flint stands over Viktor’s body, the bloody statue still gripped in his hands, his chest heaving.

“Is he...?” I whisper, my question barely audible.

Flint kneels, pressing his fingers against Viktor’s neck. After a long moment, he

looks up, his expression grim in the moonlight.

“He’s dead.”

The three of us stare at each other across Viktor’s body, the reality of what just happened sinking in. Another Bastian brother dead. Another body to hide.

Chapter 30

Flint

Death has a particular stench. Not just the metallic tang of blood painting the moonlight silver-black, but something deeper. Older. A reminder that we're all just walking meat sacks with expiration dates.

Viktor Bastian's expiration date came about twenty years too late, in my opinion.

I stand over his body, the garden statue still clutched in my hands, its smooth stone surface now slick with blood and matter. My chest heaves as I try to catch my breath, adrenaline making my vision too sharp, too focused.

"Is he..." Briar's voice comes from somewhere to my left, barely more than a whisper.

I force myself to kneel beside Viktor, pressing my fingers against his neck where a pulse should be. Nothing. Just cooling flesh and the unmistakable stillness of death. A moment ago, this man was breathing, thinking, threatening.

Now he's just... meat.

"He's dead." I sound strangely calm to my own ears.

I look up at Damiano, still struggling to breathe after nearly having his windpipe crushed, then at Briar huddled against the stone bench, blood trickling from her split

lip where Viktor struck her. The moonlight makes her nightgown glow unnaturally white, like some kind of fucked-up ghost bride. And between us lies Viktor, a spreading pool of darkness seeping from his shattered skull.

Three dead Bastian brothers. One for each of us to carry.

“We need to move.” I drop the statue with a soft thud on the gravel beside Viktor’s body. “Now.”

Damiano nods, rubbing his bruised throat. “Same place,” he manages to rasp.

“Jesus Christ.” A hysterical laugh bubbles up from somewhere deep inside me. “Why not? It’s already turning into a fucking family plot.”

“Stop.” Briar comes across stronger than I expect. She rises unsteadily to her feet, but there’s something hard in her eyes when she looks at Viktor’s body. “We need to think this through first.”

“What’s there to think about?” I gesture to the corpse between us. “Another Bastian brother, another grave. Tradition at this point.”

“Flint,” Damiano says in a broken whisper, but it stops me cold. “She’s right. This is different.”

“How?” I demand, anger surging through me, hot and welcome after the cold shock of what I’ve done. “This piece of shit was going to rape her. Would have killed you. Probably me next. What’s different?”

“There’s a high chance people know he’s here,” Briar says quietly. “At the party, he was talking to Locke. People saw him put on the mask and leave. We can assume people knew he was coming after me.”

The truth of her words hits me like a second blow. Shit. She's right. Viktor wasn't some random partygoer like Liam, disappearing into the night unnoticed. He's the head of security at The Vault. Everyone saw him tonight.

"Fuck." I exhale, running a blood-streaked hand through my hair. "Fuck!"

"We stick with the truth," Damiano says, his voice still raw. "As much as we can."

"Which is what?" I snap. "That I caved his skull in with a garden statue?"

"Self-defense," Briar says firmly. "He attacked me. You both saved me." She gestures to her torn nightgown, the blood on her face. "It's not a lie."

Damiano and I exchange a look over Viktor's body. She's not wrong. If we'd called the police right now, explained what happened, we might actually get away with it. Self-defense is plausible. The bruises forming on her wrists, the defensive wounds on her arms, the state of her clothes—they tell the story without us having to say a word.

But there's Liam. And Erik before him. Too many bodies for coincidence.

"They'll start digging," I say, voicing what I know Damiano is thinking. "Literally. If we involve the police on a possible murder investigation, they could search these grounds. Find the other graves."

Briar's head snaps up, her eyes widening. "Graves? As in plural?" She looks between us, realization dawning on her face. "You buried Erik here too? In the maze?"

Damiano and I exchange a loaded glance.

"Yes. Near the north corner. It's why I knew this place would work for Liam. The soil composition, the plants that grow best..." Damiano says.

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“This whole maze is basically built on secrets,” I add grimly. “One more layer to it now.”

Briar stares at the ground beneath us, as if she might suddenly see through the soil to the bodies buried below. “So all three Bastian brothers...”

“Ended up at Windward Estate,” I finish for her. “Poetic, in a fucked-up way.”

Briar’s face pales as the full understanding dawns. “We can’t report it. God, we absolutely cannot report it.”

“No, we fucking can’t,” I agree, my mind racing through alternatives, “but we can’t bury him here either. Not with everyone knowing he came after you tonight.”

“So what do we do?” Briar asks, her tone growing desperate.

Damiano kneels beside Viktor’s body, studying it with an eerie detachment that would be disturbing if I didn’t know him so well. “We are going to have to involve them to some degree. No way around it. But we make it look right,” he says finally. “Make the story fit what people would believe.”

“And what story is that?” I ask.

He looks up at me, his eyes dark in the dim light. “Viktor came here for The Hunt, to chase Briar. But he was drunk, high on the mushrooms everyone knows I provide for Heathens. He got lost in the maze, fell, hit his head.”

“An accident,” Briar says slowly, catching on.

“Exactly,” Damiano nods. “People saw him leave The Vault in hunt gear. They’ll believe he came here looking for easy prey, got disoriented, took a bad fall.”

It’s not a terrible plan. But it has flaws.

“The damage to his skull doesn’t match a fall,” I point out. “And what about your throat? Briar’s face? There’s evidence of a fight.”

“We clean up,” Damiano says, rising to his feet with obvious effort. “Wash away our injuries. His, too. And we reshape his wound.”

I stare at him, a cold feeling settling in my gut. “Reshape it how?”

“The stone bench.” He gestures to the ornate marble piece beside Briar. “If he hit it falling from standing height, it would split his skull. We position him right, make it look like he tripped, fell forward onto the corner.”

The clinical way he describes it makes my skin crawl. Damiano’s always been the planner between us, thinking ten steps ahead while I react in the moment. It’s why we complemented each other so well once. Why we were lethal together.

“This is insane,” Briar whispers, but I can tell part of her is considering it. We all are. When the alternative is three murder charges, insanity starts looking pretty reasonable.

“His blood is on that statue.” I point to the makeshift weapon I grabbed in desperation.

“We clean it, put it back,” Damiano says. “Replace it with his blood on the bench. It’s

possible. We just need to work fast.”

I look from Damiano to Briar, weighing our options. In the distance, faint and distorted by fog, I hear whistles—The Hunt in full swing across the island. Other hunters, other prey, oblivious to the real predator lying dead at our feet.

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s do it. But we need to be thorough. No mistakes.”

For the next hour, we work with grim efficiency. I’ve never seen Briar like this—her hands steady as she helps us position Viktor’s body. The fragile, sick girl I originally mistook her for is nowhere to be found. In her place is someone harder, someone who understands survival at any cost.

We stage the scene carefully, making it look like Viktor stumbled in the dark and hit the corner of the bench at just the right angle to cave in his skull. Damiano uses his knowledge of plants to create a mixture of crushed leaves and soil that mimics the scattered pattern of someone falling forward. I clean the stone statue with my shirt, then replace it exactly where I found it.

Briar disappears briefly, returning with a bottle from the main house. “Bourbon,” she explains, pouring some over Viktor’s clothes, splashing his face and hands. “Makes the drunk story more believable.”

Smart. I wouldn’t have thought of that.

Finally, Damiano kneels beside the body, pulling latex gloves from his pocket that he always carries for handling toxic plants. With clinical precision, he begins manipulating the wound on Viktor’s skull. His fingers probe the broken edges where my statue had caved in the bone, carefully reshaping the impact point to match the corner of the marble bench.

“We need to make it look like a single impact,” he murmurs, using his thumb to smooth jagged fragments of bone that would reveal multiple blows. “The bench corner would create a cleaner, more concentrated point of impact.”

I watch as he meticulously works, pressing Viktor’s shattered skull against the bench edge to capture the exact pattern of the marble’s ornate corner. He uses water from a small bottle to wash away blood that doesn’t match the spatter pattern of a forward fall, then deliberately creates new blood spatter by pressing the wound against the bench in the right orientation.

“Head wounds bleed a lot,” he explains, sounding detached as if giving a lecture. “But the pattern matters. A fall forward would send blood in this direction, not that one.”

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It's both fascinating and horrifying to watch him work with such precision, transforming my frenzied attack into what convincingly looks like a tragic accident.

I look away, focusing instead on keeping watch. If another Hunt participant wanders in, we're fucked.

"How do we explain Briar's condition?" I gesture to her bruised face, the blood on her nightgown.

Damiano's hand goes to his own throat, where darkening bruises form a telling pattern. "The Hunt," he says. "We had our own private Hunt tonight. The three of us."

I catch his meaning immediately. "Rough play. Not unexpected from us."

"People at The Vault saw us together," Briar adds, understanding dawning in her eyes. "They saw how we were with each other in that private room. It's not a stretch to think we'd have our own Hunt."

She's right. Half the island knows about my history with Damiano, how we've always liked it rough. The marks on his throat could easily be explained by choking during sex—we've both sported worse marks in public before.

"Your face, though," I say to Briar, reaching out to gently touch her split lip.

"Things got intense," she says with a shrug that's too casual to be real. "First Hunt. We got carried away. I fell during the chase, hit my face on a rock. If anyone asks,

I'll say I loved every minute of it."

There's a darkness in her eyes that tells me part of her hates this story—hates reducing what we have together to something so base, so primitive. But she's right. It's the perfect cover. The island thrives on gossip, and nothing travels faster than news of a sexual scandal involving the Waters family.

"The three of us had our own Hunt while Viktor had his accident elsewhere in the maze," Damiano summarizes. "We never saw him, never heard him. Too caught up in our own... activities."

The plan is solid. Explains our visible injuries. Keeps us far from Viktor's death. And most importantly, it's believable because it's built on what people already think they know about us.

"And let's be honest," I add, thinking ahead. "The island police aren't exactly known for their investigative prowess. They're going to do the bare minimum."

Damiano nods in agreement. "Island business is handled by islanders. Always has been. It's why nobody ever really looked into Erik's disappearance."

"And Viktor? Will anyone really investigate?" Briar searches our faces.

"Viktor was the last of the Bastian brothers," Damiano says. "There's no one left to push for answers."

"Some might suspect," I add, "but no one will say it out loud. That's how this island works."

"Viktor had enemies everywhere," Damiano continues. "He was feared, not loved. I've heard the Vault staff talk—half of them have scars from his 'disciplinary

actions.”

“And the other half were waiting for their turn,” I say bitterly. “Trust me, there will be relief more than grief when the news spreads.”

Briar looks between us. “So even if someone connects the dots...”

“They’ll keep it to themselves,” I finish for her. “No one’s going to be the hero who speaks up for Viktor Bastian.”

Damiano’s lips twist into something between a grimace and a smile. “The island has its own justice system. Always has. Some might even see this as... karmic.”

“It’s perfect. Get back to the house,” I tell Briar. “Clean up, get into bed. Look like you’ve been thoroughly fucked and fell asleep exhausted if anyone checks.” I turn to Damiano. “You go with her, make sure she’s okay. I’ll stay here and make the call once you’re clear.”

Damiano hesitates. “Flint?—”

“Go,” I cut him off. “I’m the one who killed him. I should be the one to see this through.”

He studies me for a moment, then nods. “We need to wash off in the greenhouse first. Can’t risk the house. Too many surfaces, too much evidence.”

I watch as Damiano leads Briar out of the maze to his place, her white nightgown ghostly in the darkness. The two people I care about most in this fucked-up world—yes, I can admit that now, standing over the body of the man I just killed to protect them.

Once they're gone, I kneel beside Viktor one last time. His eyes are open, staring sightlessly at the night sky. I close them with two fingers, not out of respect but because it looks more like an accident that way.

"You would have killed us all," I tell his corpse. "Maybe you still will."

I take one final look around, making sure everything is in place, all evidence of our presence erased. Then I walk out of the maze, taking a different path than Damiano and Briar. I need distance, need to establish myself somewhere public before making the call.

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I head to the road, walking back toward town. My clothes are stained but not obviously with blood. Could be anything. Dirt. Grease. My hands are clean enough now. I scrubbed them in a puddle that had formed at the edge of the property. Not perfect, but it will do until I can get to a proper sink.

About half a mile from Windward estate, I pull out my phone. The one I use for work, not the one with all our texts about covering up Liam. I dial the island police, my voice steady when they answer.

“I want to report something,” I say, disguising my tone slightly. “I was up near Windward Estate, the Waters place? Saw someone in one of those Hunt masks stumbling around the maze during my own Hunt. Looked pretty wasted. Just wanted to let someone know. People shouldn’t be wandering around there drunk. Private property and all.”

I hang up before they can ask questions. The call serves its purpose—draws attention to the maze without mentioning any screams that would contradict our accident story. Let the police find him by “coincidence” while checking the property based on a vague tip about trespassers.

The fog swallows me as I continue walking, heading back to The Vault where I’m supposed to be working. I need to establish my alibi, be seen by others. My mind is already constructing the story—I stepped out for air, the party was too intense tonight, needed a break from the Heathens madness.

Behind me, Windward estate stands dark and silent, its secrets multiplying beneath the moonlight. Another night, another Bastian brother. Will this be the last one? Or

are we caught in some sick cycle that will keep playing out until there's nothing left of any of us?

I don't know. But what I do know is that I'd do it again, kill Viktor all over again, if it meant keeping Damiano and Briar safe. The thought should scare me, but instead, it settles something inside me—a certainty I haven't felt in years.

Chapter 31

Briar

The sun rises over Heathens Hollow, casting long shadows across the maze where Viktor Bastian's body lies, arranged to look like a terrible accident. I watch from my bedroom window as the first police cruiser pulls up the long driveway, its lights flashing but siren silent. An officer I don't recognize steps out, followed by two deputies.

My hands shake as I step away from the window. The bruises on my wrists have darkened overnight, purple black against my pale skin. My split lip throbs with each heartbeat. In the mirror, I barely recognize myself—eyes hollow with exhaustion, hair tangled from the night's events, dried blood still crusted at the corner of my mouth despite my attempts to wash it away.

I didn't sleep. None of us did.

After Flint left to create his alibi at The Vault, Damiano and I cleaned up in the greenhouse. We scrubbed Viktor's blood from under our fingernails, stripped off our stained clothes and burned them in the old drum behind the toolshed. Then we returned to the house separately—me through the front door, him circling around to slip in through the kitchen.

If anyone asks, we spent the night together. Just the two of us while Flint worked his shift.

I hear car doors slam outside. No Mrs. Fletcher to announce the police—she's away in Anacortes, which makes this both easier and harder. No witnesses in the house, but also no buffer between us and the authorities.

I pull myself together and head downstairs to meet them before they can knock. Damiano appears from the kitchen, our eyes meeting in silent communication. His throat bears visible bruises despite the black turtleneck he's thrown on. We've prepared for this moment all night, rehearsing our story until it feels almost like truth.

I open the front door just as an officer raises his hand to knock.

"Can I help you?" I ask, feigning confusion at their presence.

The officer, older with salt-and-pepper hair and a weathered face, looks surprised to see me. "Ms. Waters? I'm Officer Miller with Heathens Hollow Police. I'm afraid there's been an incident on your property."

"An incident?" I step back, allowing them into the foyer. "What kind of incident?"

"We received an anonymous call about someone in your maze last night," he explains as the deputies hang back, eyes scanning the entrance hall. "When we investigated this morning, we found a body."

I let my face show shock, then horror. It's not entirely an act. Even knowing what we did, what we planned, the reality of it—a man dead, police in my home—hits me with fresh force.

"A body? Whose body?" My words shake appropriately.

“Viktor Bastian,” Miller says, watching my reaction closely. “Did you know him?”

“We’d met,” I say carefully. “At The Vault. He worked security there.”

Damiano steps forward, coming to stand beside me. “What happened to him?” He sounds calm, despite the circumstances.

Miller’s eyes flick to Damiano, noting his presence with interest. “It appears Mr. Bastian fell and hit his head on one of the stone benches in your maze. We believe he was participating in The Hunt last night and may have been intoxicated.”

“The Hunt? Here?” I wrap my arms around myself, feigning distress. “I had no idea anyone was on the property.”

One of the deputies, younger with calculating eyes, speaks up. “We found a red light bulb above your front porch, Ms. Waters. That’s the signal for The Hunt participants, isn’t it?”

Damiano’s hand finds the small of my back, steadying me. “We put that up,” he says smoothly. “For our own private Hunt. Just the three of us.”

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The deputy raises an eyebrow. “Three?”

“Myself, Briar, and Flint Bishop,” Damiano explains. “He works at The Vault but joined us during a break from his shift. Went back afterward.”

The deputy’s eyes travel over my split lip, then to the bruises visible on Damiano’s neck despite his turtleneck. “Things got a bit rough, I see.”

I feel heat rise to my face, not entirely feigned. “It was consensual.”

“And you didn’t see or hear Viktor Bastian anywhere on the property?” Miller jots notes in his small book.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “We were... focused on our own activities.”

“I see.” Miller’s tone is professional, but his expression betrays discomfort. “We’ll need formal statements from both of you. And we’ll need to speak with Mr. Bishop as well.”

“Of course,” I say. “Whatever you need.”

The deputy continues to study me, eyes narrowed. “Did you know Viktor Bastian was looking for his brother? Liam disappeared after a party here. Couple weeks back.”

My heart stutters, but my face remains composed. “I heard something about that. I didn’t know Liam well. He was just one of many guests at my birthday party.”

“Interesting coincidence.” The deputy doesn’t look convinced. “Two brothers, both last seen at your estate.”

Damiano’s hand presses more firmly against my back. “Officer, is there something you’re suggesting?”

Miller steps in before his deputy can respond. “We’re just gathering information. Would you mind if we looked around the house? Again, just routine.”

“Not at all.” I gesture toward the hall. “Feel free. I’m still a bit... shocked.”

The officers move deeper into the house, leaving Damiano and me momentarily alone in the foyer.

“You’re doing well,” he whispers, his lips barely moving. “Stay calm.”

“They suspect something,” I whisper back.

“They have suspicions, not evidence,” he reassures me. “Remember that.”

The rest of the day passes in a blur of police questions, formal statements, and barely concealed anxiety. By afternoon, the news has spread across the island—Viktor Bastian found dead in the Waters maze, apparently the victim of a drunken Hunt gone wrong.

Flint arrives as the police are preparing to leave, his timing impeccable. He plays his part perfectly—concern at discovering a death on the property, shock that it’s Viktor, careful answers about his whereabouts the night before, all backed up by witnesses at The Vault who saw him tending the bar.

“We’re done for now,” Miller tells us as his team prepares to leave. “The medical

examiner's initial findings support the accident theory. Too much alcohol, possibly combined with other substances, leading to impaired coordination. A fall, a single impact to the head."

I exhale slowly, relief washing through me. "So that's it?"

"For now." He gives me a long look. "I'm sorry this happened on your property, Ms. Waters. Particularly given your health situation."

"I'm stronger than I look," I say.

"Clearly." His eyes drift to Damiano, then to Flint, who's standing by the fireplace in careful neutrality. "You three take care of each other, you hear? Island gossip is one thing, but trouble has a way of following certain... arrangements."

When the police finally leave, the three of us remain frozen in place, listening to the crunch of tires on gravel fade into the distance. Only then do we move, collapsing together on the sofa, bodies pressed against each other in exhausted relief.

"It worked," Flint murmurs, his hand finding mine. "For now."

"They still suspect something," Damiano says, rubbing his throat where Viktor's hands nearly crushed his windpipe. "That deputy isn't convinced."

"But they don't have proof," I point out. "And they won't find any."

We sit in silence for a long moment, the weight of what we've done—what we've successfully covered up—settling around us like the island fog.

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“What now?” Flint finally asks, looking between us.

Damiano’s hand slides to my shoulder, fingers tracing the bruises hidden beneath my shirt. “Now we decide.”

“Decide what?” I ask, though I already know.

“Whether we stay,” Flint says, his eyes serious, “or whether we run. Because maybe this is the island telling us enough is enough. It’s time to get away before the body count keeps climbing.”

The question hangs in the air between us. I look at these two men—one who’s never truly left the island, one who’s never felt he belonged anywhere. Both now tied to me through something deeper than I could have imagined when I first arrived at Heathens Hollow.

“I don’t want to leave,” I say, surprising myself with the certainty I feel. “Not when I’ve just found something worth staying for.”

Flint’s eyebrows rise slightly. “Even after all this? Three bodies, Briar. Three fucking bodies.”

“I know.” I meet his gaze steadily. “But I’ve never felt more alive than I have with you both. Even with everything that’s happened... maybe because of everything that’s happened.”

Damiano traces lazy patterns on my shoulder, his touch grounding me. “I tried

leaving once,” he says quietly. “It didn’t work.”

“You came back,” I say.

“I always knew I would.” He looks around the room, at the house that’s seen so much darkness and yet somehow still holds light. “This island... it gets in your soul.”

“So what, we’re just stuck here?” Flint asks, but there’s less edge to his question than I expected. “Haunting this place like fucking ghosts?”

“No,” I say slowly, the truth crystallizing as I speak. “Not stuck. Chosen.” I look from one to the other. “I came back to this island to die. I was so sure I was just... wasting away. And then I met you both.”

“And killed someone,” Flint adds dryly.

Despite everything, I laugh. “Yes. And killed someone. And somehow ended up covering for two more. And found... whatever this is between us.” I take a deep breath. “Listen, Windward Estate has always been mine. My mother set up a trust when I was little—it passed to me when I turned twenty-one. It’s why I came back here instead of staying in Seattle.”

Damiano’s hand stills on my shoulder. “You own this place? All of it?”

I nod. “Everything you see. The house, the grounds, the maze... it’s all mine.”

“Jesus,” Flint breathes. “So this whole time...”

“I wasn’t just staying at my father’s vacation home,” I finish for him. “I was coming back to the one place that’s truly mine.”

For a moment, none of us speaks. The weight of the revelation settles over us like the island fog, changing everything and nothing at once.

“I’m not saying we need to figure everything out right now,” I continue, looking from one to the other. “I’m just saying... I don’t want to run. Not from this island, and not from whatever this is between us.”

Damiano’s fingers find mine, intertwining them. “I’m not running either.”

We both look at Flint, who stares back at us with that calculating gaze I’ve come to know so well. Eventually, he lets out a long breath. “I’ve never been able to leave this island. And now... I don’t want to.”

“I’ve never felt more alive than I have these past weeks,” I tell them honestly. “Even with everything that’s happened. Being with you both—it’s like I finally found the pieces I didn’t know were missing.”

Something shifts in Flint’s expression. “You’re serious.”

“Dead serious,” I say, then grimace at my poor word choice. “Poor phrase considering... but yes. I don’t want to leave. Not if it means leaving you two.” I look around the large room. “But... it’s a massive house. A lonely house. And well... you both could move in here... with me.”

Both men look at me with surprise.

“You don’t think this is too fast?” Damiano asks.

“We buried a body together. I’d say we skipped to the front of the line that night,” I tease.

“So you’re saying we could stay here. Together.” Flint sounds skeptical but hopeful.

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“Why not?” I say. “Damiano already takes care of the grounds. You have The Vault. I can resume my photography. We make it work.”

“Simple as that?” Flint asks, but I see the longing in his eyes—the same need for belonging, for home, that I feel myself.

“No,” I admit. “Not simple at all. We’ve got three dead men connected to this property. We’ve got history between us that’s messy as hell. We’ve got complications I can’t even begin to count.” I squeeze their hands. “But we’ve got each other, too.”

Damiano tightens his fingers around mine. “So we stay. Together.”

Flint’s laugh is soft, almost surprised. “The fucked-up three musketeers. Who would’ve thought?”

“It’s not perfect,” I say, leaning into them both, “but it’s ours.”

The air shifts between us, charged with something more than just decision. The weight of what we’ve done—what we’ve chosen—settles around us, not as a burden but as a bond.

“No body, no crime,” I say softly, echoing the island saying I’d heard whispered since I arrived. “That’s what they say on Heathens Hollow.”

Flint’s mouth quirks into that dangerous half-smile. “Except we’ve got three bodies.”

“All safely buried,” Damiano adds, tracing patterns on my knee, “but I needed to

check the plants over Liam. Make sure everything's as it should be."

"And I should get back to The Vault," Flint adds. "Keep an ear out, see what people are saying about Viktor."

I nod, understanding their need to maintain appearances, to move forward as if nothing has changed when everything has.

"Tonight," I say. "Come back tonight. Both of you."

They look at me, questions in their eyes.

"I want us together tonight," I explain. "All of us."

"Just to sleep?" Flint asks, that familiar heat already building behind his eyes.

I shake my head slowly, feeling something wild and reckless building inside me. Something that belongs to this island, to these men, to whatever darkness we've all embraced.

"No," I say. "I want to do The Hunt tonight. For real this time."

They both go still, eyes locked on mine.

"Briar," Damiano begins cautiously, "with everything that just happened?—"

"That's exactly why," I say. "I'm tired of being chased through that maze by someone trying to hurt me. I want to know what it feels like to be hunted by someone who..."

"Who what?" Flint prompts.

“Who loves me,” I finish, the word hanging between us, new and fragile and yet somehow as solid as the island beneath our feet.

Damiano’s breath catches. Flint’s jaw tightens, that muscle jumping in his cheek the way it does when he’s fighting for control.

“You want us to hunt you,” Damiano clarifies.”

Both of you,” I say, my gaze moving between them. “White nightgown. Red light. Whistles in the dark. The whole tradition.” I reach for both their hands. “I want to reclaim it. Make it ours.”

Flint tightens his fingers around mine. “You trying to exorcise some demons, princess?”

“Maybe,” I admit. “Or maybe I just want to feel what it’s like to be prey without the fear of dying. To be caught by the right predators.”

Flint and Damiano exchange a look, some silent communication passing between them that makes my skin prickle with anticipation.

“Get the red light,” Flint says to Damiano, his eyes never leaving mine. “I’ll bring the masks.”

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“Tonight,” I say, the word both question and command.

Damiano brushes his lips against my temple, warm and certain. “Tonight.”

The island fog presses against the windows, surrounding Windward Estate like a protective blanket. Outside, the maze waits, its secrets multiplying with each passing day. But tonight, it will hold one more—not a tragedy this time, but something wilder, darker, and infinitely more alive.

Tonight, I will be the prey. And for once, I can’t wait to be caught.

Chapter 32

Briar

The red bulb casts bloody light across the porch where I stand. My white nightgown flutters around my bare legs, practically translucent in the moonlight. The fabric feels both foreign and familiar against my skin—the same style as the night everything changed, but not the same gown. That one burned in the fire pit behind the greenhouse, along with other evidence.

I curl my toes against the cold wooden boards, remembering the rules of The Hunt. Barefoot. Dressed in white. Prey waiting for predators.

The night wraps around Windward Estate like a cloak, fog curling between trees and slithering across the lawn. Perfect hunting weather. I breathe it in, tasting salt and pine and anticipation.

They're out there somewhere. Watching. Waiting.

A breeze lifts my hair, sending dark strands dancing across my face. I push them back, scanning the darkness for any sign of movement. Nothing yet. Just shadows and silence.

Then I hear it.

The whistle.

Three notes carried on the wind, rising in pitch then falling. The signal. My pulse kicks up instantly, adrenaline flooding my system.

It comes again, closer this time. Not from the direction I expected—not from the forest, but from somewhere to the left, near the hedge maze.

I step off the porch, my bare feet sinking into dew-damp grass. The night air brushes against my skin, raising goosebumps across my arms, my legs, my neck. I pause, listening.

The whistle comes again. From a different direction.

They've split up.

Two hunters, one prey.

A laugh escapes me, something wild and unfamiliar. This is what I wanted. To be hunted by men who want to catch me, not kill me. Men who've seen the darkest parts of me and stayed anyway.

I run.

Not toward the maze—that would be too obvious. Instead, I head for the gardens, darting between sculpted hedges and stone pathways. The dewy grass muffles my footsteps, and the fog swallows my white-clad figure almost immediately.

Behind me, the whistle comes again. Closer. They're tracking me.

Good.

My lungs burn already, my body's weakness making itself known, but I push through it. Tonight isn't about limitations; it's about freedom, about choosing what scares you instead of letting it choose you.

I cut through the rose garden, wincing as thorns snag my nightgown, scratch my legs. Small sacrifices. The path curves ahead, leading toward a decorative fountain. The moonlight catches on the water, creating ghostly patterns that dance and swirl.

I stop, listening again. Nothing. The whistles have gone quiet, which means they're close enough that sound would betray their positions.

My heartbeat seems too loud, my breathing too harsh. I glance around, trying to spot movement in the darkness. The statues scattered throughout the garden look too much like men in the fog, making me jump at shadows.

"Fuck," I whisper as my toe catches on an uneven stone, sending pain shooting up my foot.

That's when I see him.

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A silhouette against the fog, tall and broad-shouldered. The antlers of his mask rise above his head like a crown. Damiano. It has to be—I recognize the way he moves, fluid and deliberate, even in the darkness.

Ibolt, changing direction, heading now toward the maze. If I can reach it, I might be able to lose him in the twisting paths.

He whistles again, the sound sharper, more urgent. Signaling to Flint. Telling him I'm heading for the maze.

The entrance looms ahead, a dark mouth opening into deeper darkness. I plunge in without hesitation, immediately turning left, then right, navigating by memory and instinct.

The hedge walls rise around me, blocking out what little moonlight filters through the fog. I slow down, forced to feel my way forward, hands brushing against the dense foliage on either side. The scent of crushed leaves fills my nostrils as I push deeper into the labyrinth.

Right turn. Left turn. Straight ahead.

The slap of footsteps reaches me—not from behind, but from somewhere to my right. Through the hedge wall. Someone's cutting through the maze, taking shortcuts I didn't anticipate.

Flint. It has to be. Damiano would never damage his precious hedges.

I pick up speed, ignoring the way my lungs scream for more oxygen. Just a little farther. The center of the maze isn't far now. If I can reach it first...

A figure steps out from a side path directly in front of me. The bone mask gleams in a flash of moonlight breaking through the fog. Flint. He stands there for a moment, head tilted, the stance somehow both threatening and enticing.

I skid to a stop, changing direction instantly, doubling back the way I came. But I've only gone a few steps when I hear movement ahead. Damiano, approaching from the direction I just fled.

Trapped.

I glance around frantically, looking for another path, another escape route. There—a narrow gap between two hedge sections, barely visible in the darkness. I squeeze through, branches scratching my arms, tugging at my nightgown, catching in my hair.

I stumble into another path, momentarily disoriented. Which way leads to the center? Which way takes me deeper into the maze?

A twig snaps behind me. I spin around to find Flint emerging from the same gap I just squeezed through, his mask pushed up to reveal his face, those eyes gleaming with predatory intent.

"Running's only making this more fun, princess," he says, tone low and rough with desire.

Behind him, another masked figure appears. Damiano, his mask also lifted, expression hungry.

"Caught you," Flint says, stepping closer.

I press my back against the hedge wall, feeling it give slightly. “Not yet,” I breathe, then throw my weight backward, pushing through the foliage into the adjacent path.

Branches scrape my skin, leaving burning trails across my shoulders, my thighs. My nightgown tears, the sound sharp in the quiet of the maze. I break through to the other side, stumbling but staying upright.

Only to find myself in the center clearing.

The stone bench gleams dully in the moonlight. The ground beneath my feet is soft with fresh growth—Damiano’s special plants covering what lies beneath. I pause for an instant, feeling the weight of the past weeks pressing down on me.

The ghosts of three men haunt this place. The memory of blood and fear and desperate survival.

But not tonight.

Tonight we take back the maze. Make new memories to bury the old ones.

Movement to my left, then my right. They’ve found me. My hunters, closing in from both sides.

I don’t run. Not this time. I stand my ground as they approach, these two men who’ve somehow become everything to me.

Flint reaches me first, his hand closing around my wrist, firm but not painful. “Got you,” he says, pulling me against him, his body radiating heat in the cool night air.

“We both do,” Damiano adds, stepping behind me, caging me between them.

I let my head fall back against Damiano's shoulder, excitement thrumming through me. "So what happens now that you've caught me?"

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:53 am

Flint traces his fingers along my collarbone, dipping beneath the torn neckline of my nightgown. “Now we claim our prize.”

Damiano grips my hips, pulling me back against him, letting me feel his hardness pressing into the small of my back. “You were never meant to be hunted by anyone but us,” he murmurs against my ear.

Damiano’s teeth graze my neck, the bite sharp and claiming. A moan escapes me, primal and raw, and they respond with fierce intensity, hands and mouths and bodies demanding everything I have. Flint shoves the fabric off my shoulders, exposing skin to the cold air, to their burning touch. The nightgown falls away, forgotten, and I stand naked in their grasp, prey already consumed.

They move me, lowering me to the ground, to the soft plants and the memories buried there. Flint finds my breasts with his lips, urgent and insistent, while Damiano kneels behind me, his hands spreading my legs open, his breath hot against my thighs. I should feel vulnerable and exposed, but instead, I feel powerful, defiant. Alive.

Flint crashes his mouth against mine, fierce and demanding. I part my lips, letting his tongue in, tasting want and whiskey and something both of us need. His grip on my wrist loosens, slips down to my waist, pulling me tighter, making me gasp into his mouth.

Flint tears at his own clothes, fumbling with his zipper, freeing himself, and then his fingers are working me open, sliding inside, coaxing slick heat with every thrust.

Damiano’s tongue is there, moving in tandem, lapping greedily, and I come apart

beneath their ruthless touch.

I arch, meeting them, demanding more. More.

A guttural sound vibrates through Flint's chest as he pushes into me, filling me completely, and I cry out, more animal than human.

Damiano's hands are everywhere, his mouth possessive against my skin, marking me as Flint fucks me hard and relentless.

"Your pussy is so fucking tight," Flint praises as he thrusts even harder.

They're wild, untamed, and I match them, taking everything they give, every bruising thrust, every harsh bite.

Flint's breath comes ragged, mimicking mine, exhaling each moan as he pounds into me.

Damiano shifts, moving to straddle my face, and I taste his hard cock with greedy hunger, feel the weight and heat of him against my lips, as Flint moves faster, deeper, losing control and taking me with him.

Damiano growls, low and approving, tangling a hand in my hair, pushing and pulling and setting the rhythm, and I meet him as Flint's pace turns desperate.

A cock in my mouth, and a cock in my pussy. Nothing has ever felt so right.

The soft earth shifts beneath me, all of us feral and consuming and alive. Pleasure builds, spiraling, everything blurring into a fevered haze.

Flint drives into me harder, faster, his taut body a reflection of my own undoing. He grabs my hips, pounding recklessly now, relentless, and my moans grow frantic,

matching Damiano's guttural sounds as he fucks my mouth, as he watches Flint take me.

I'm dizzy and breathless and so fucking close. Flint's thrusts turn wild, like he's breaking me apart and putting me back together, pushing us both over the edge.

"Come for us," Damiano orders, voice tight, and I do, spiraling into oblivion as pleasure hits, raw and consuming.

A shaking groan tears through me, through Flint, and I feel him all the way inside as we go over together, body and mind and soul, as Damiano thrusts deep and I swallow him down, his fingers clenching in my hair. Damiano growls, hot and primal, and I feel the jolt as he comes, the musky taste of him coating my tongue as Flint empties himself into me with a shuddering curse.

I am wrecked and wanted and consumed. Claimed a thousand ways.

They collapse against me, their bodies damp with sweat and fog. My pulse thunders in my ears, their harsh breathing mixing with mine. We lie tangled like that for long minutes, the night aircooling us, our hearts slowly finding their rhythm again.

Flint is the first to move, pulling out of me and rolling onto his back with a groan. He drags me over, a possessive arm slinging across my middle. "Damn," he murmurs, full of awe and satisfaction.

Damiano chuckles low in his throat, shifting to my other side to claim the space there. His lips brush my temple, lingering and tender now. "Our girl," he says, and there's something like reverence in his tone.

I curl against them, surrounded by warmth and strength and everything I've ever wanted.

I'm finally warm. So fucking warm.

The dead bodies are beneath us... far away and forever covered.

There's no fear here anymore. No scars we can't heal. Just us, tangled together in a maze of our own making.