



# Savages (Badlands 1)

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Horror

**Description:** Calista

"I am the monster they created. I'm the whore they're ashamed of."

When life tried to break me I grabbed that b\*tch by the throat and squeezed.

I thought I could overcome anything. I swore I could handle him, but after being forced to play at the Devil's playground I ended up craving his touch.

One taste of his poison made my loyalties begin to waiver.

Romero

"I'm a living nightmare, I'm everything they fear."

I've been called the Devil, deranged, and a savage. I lived by a code created by rebel souls. We were sinners and thieves that made no apologies for taking whatever the f\*ck we wanted. Saving a girl in the woods was never part of my plans, but when I saw the crazy in her eyes I knew it was a match made in hell.

Now secrets are piling up, the bodies are rotting, and time is running out to finish what I started.

Forewarning, our story is more than a little f\*cked up.

**Authors Note :** 18+

I am not going to put a long 'warning' on this book. I will say that Savages is a VERY cautionary tale that has no regard for hard limits. Reader discretion IS highly advised.

**Total Pages (Source):** 61

# Page 1

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## PROLOGUE

There are no heroes to be found here, only monsters.

I am not an exception.

I am the devil's confidante.

I am guilty of unimaginable sins.

I was better off without him, and he was better off alone, but the red string of fate tied us together. No matter how much it tangled or stretched, it would never break.

In him, I found my absolution.

He saved me from the light by showing me the beautiful depravity that could be found in the dark.

My beloved devil made every withering parcel of my being bloom and thrive by nurturing it with his sinister mind. He tattooed himself across my heart and took up permanent residence inside my head.

Ours is not a story full of sickly sweet nothings, nor is it a fairytale built on illusions. The world we lived in had long ago turned cold, and our hearts turned with it. Love was a four-letter word neither of us had ever learned, and trust was a foreign concept we didn't know the meaning of. The odds were stacked against us on all sides of the spectrum.

Our dark paradise could only be reached by paving the way with blood and corpses.

Some might find it hard to understand how mere human beings could do all that we did: kill without mercy. Lie through our teeth. Take what we wanted just because we could.

It came to down to nothing other than DNA, the genes that made us who we were. The blood pumping through our veins carried a beautiful madness only we understood.

He was born sick.

I was fucked in the head.

Together, we were Savages.

## CHAPTER ONE

Past-Four years ago

He set her on fire, but it was me he watched burn.

Within seconds, her body was drowning in an inferno. The blaze glowed red, bathing the night sky in blood. A sheet of flames danced across her naked skin, shrinking and splitting open flesh, leaving body fluid to expel. They reached for her dark strands of hair and singed them to the scalp.

Her mouth had been sewn shut after she was forced to repent for her sins, silencing her shrills of agony and fear. The familiar aroma of charred flesh permeated the air, filling my aching lungs with every ragged breath I took.

The Order stood by, watching with bored expressions on their faces as the faux nuns held hands and whispered their synthetic prayers.

I wished it were a dream, but I was wide-awake. I wished nothing more than to take her place. I wished someone would have saved us from the hate, but not one person stepped forward.

I had tried so hard to warn her away. I'd begged her not to come back for me. Why didn't she listen?

My body shook with silent sobs, constricting my heart in my chest. I couldn't move. It hurt to breathe. I felt like I were burning with her.

I was forced to watch on as the life vacated her body, leaving her limbs dangling limply above the flames. The bones that had been exposed were slick with the greasy residue of melted flesh.

As two men moved forward to begin extinguishing the fire, still no one said a word.

I tried not to picture what would happen to what remained of her blackened body, knowing she was to be discarded for crows and wild animals to feast on.

"It's unfortunate it had to come to this," my father sighed, removing his heavy foot from my spine. "You let me down, Calista."

He stepped over my body and knelt down, lifting my battered face from the dirt. His skewed logic made him believe that if my pain wasn't visible, then I wasn't hurting—when he was the one who'd taught me to handle abuse.

I looked into his cold, grey eyes and hoped he saw the hatred I no longer bothered to mask. If I had the strength, I would have torn out his jugular with my teeth.

I had done everything he'd asked of me, even when I didn't want to, when the aftermath always killed me a little more each time.

I suppressed parts of me to appease him, but no matter how hard I tried, it was never good enough.

Once upon a time, all I wanted was for him to remember I was his baby girl. No

w, I wanted him dead. I wanted to feel his blood between my fingers and keep his head as a trophy.

"Feel better...now?" I wheezed out, choking on phlegm.

"You've learned nothing from any of this; you are truly hopeless." He squeezed my cheeks and then shoved my face back in the dirt, a look of disgust twisting his features. "Your sins will eat you alive." With one last shake of his head, he chuckled and regarded me with unfeeling eyes before standing up and strolling away.

"Take her past the border and leave her," he demanded over his shoulder to my brothers, who had been standing by watching the events unfold.

"If you don't kill me...I will kill you," I called out to him.

He continued walking away, not bothering to give me so much as a backward glance. My hope that he would turn around and end it all was gone just as quickly as it had arrived.

My brothers rushed to obey his command. They each grabbed an upper arm and began dragging me face down across the ground. I gritted my teeth as my hands were secured behind my back with strips of twine.

“Let’s get this over with; I haven’t eaten supper yet,” my eldest brother grumbled, lifting me up and tossing me in the bed of his truck with an irritated sigh. I let out a soft grunt as my side impacted with the plastic floor.

A second later, the engine revved, and I was flying forward as the truck sped off into the night.

Much quicker than I expected, signs warning that we were about to leave a safe zone began to appear on the trees.

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I remained on my stomach, trying to come up with a quick plan of action. I knew once we reached our destination that the inevitable would be moments away from happening.

And I was right.

Seconds after the truck came to a full stop, one of my brothers dropped the tailgate and grabbed hold of my habit to pull me out.

“We could fuck her now,” my younger brother, Noah, whispered, pressing his elbow into my back to keep me pinned down.

“No, Judy is enough for me. Besides, look at her, she’s filthy.”

At their words, my stomach twisted into a knot, acidic bile rising in my throat. Judy was our thirteen-year-old cousin.

How did I not know this was going on? When did my brothers start feeding on the bullshit our father spewed like every other brainwashed acolyte? This shouldn’t have surprised me as much as it did.

The entire Order was made up of one, giant incestuous family exchanging body fluids.

“Suit yourself; I don’t care what she looks like. I only want what’s between her legs.” Noah laughed. He gripped the dark fabric around my waist and started sliding it up.

“Make it quick; I’ll wait in the truck.”

The sound of retreating footsteps had one of my worst fears quickly becoming a reality. I was really being left alone to be violated, which was normal under usual circumstances, but never by my brothers.

“Don’t,” I choked out, struggling to move away.

“Shhh,” he blew in my ear, pressing the side of my face into the bed of the truck.

Grabbing my cloth underwear with one hand, he easily tore it away. His heavy cross amulet pressed into my back as he crushed me with his weight.

I heard the telltale sound of his belt being undone and my stomach turned to stone.

“Stop,” I pleaded a little louder, my voice chock-full of emotion.

He cleared his throat and spat into the palm of his hand, rubbing the DNA we shared between my ass cheeks. I swallowed repeatedly to hold down vomit but when his disgusting, hard cock pressed against my sensitive hole, it erupted from my mouth and dribbled down my chin, leaving an acidic taste on my tongue.

I thrashed from side to side, trying my damndest to dislodge him, failing miserably. My haggard body protested at the movement, radiating with pain. Louis Armstrong began to croon out the words to What A Wonderful World from the truck’s cassette player, overshadowing my pleas and sobs.

“Hold still,” Noah growled, flipping me over so I was on my back, forcing my head to lie in my own vomit.

My shoulders screamed in their sockets, and twine cut into my wrists.



“Please don’t do this,” I begged as he settled between my legs. He covered my mouth with his hand and managed to shove half his length inside me.

Vigorously shaking my head back and forth, I freed my mouth and sucked in a breath, releasing it on a broken scream as he pulled out and pushed back in. Friction coupled with dryness tore the delicate tissue, making me bleed. My mind blanked, unable to believe that this was happening, that my sweet little brother wasn’t moving inside me, moaning his pleasure in my ear.

Nausea tossed my stomach. I couldn’t get out from beneath him and I was wasting all my energy trying, but I had to do something. No one was going to save me.

Adrenaline had my pulse racing at a hazardous speed. I could hear my heartbeat thundering in my ears. With a single-minded focus, I lurched up and brought us nearly mouth to mouth, catching him by surprise.

I snagged his lower lip between my teeth and bit down as hard as I could.

“Ah, fuck!” he garbled, immediately pulling out of me.

His fist and pain simultaneously hit the right side of my face. The impact forced me to let go, but not without tearing a soft piece of flesh from the inside of his mouth. I spat it out, along with the blood I tasted on my tongue.

He jumped up and swiped his face with the back of his arm. With nothing to balance me, I fell off the gate of the truck. Before I could get my bearings, his boot kicked me square in the stomach.

Gasping, I managed to roll onto my side, receiving another kick to my back. I bent my spine, pulled my shoulders in, and tucked my chin to my chest to form a protective ball.

“Fucking bitch, you’re not even worth it.” A glob of spit landed on my cheek, and his hand came down and attempted to tear the necklace from around my neck.

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When he failed to remove it, he kicked me one last time in the back of my head. Pain exploded in my skull, and I saw stars.

A door slammed, and then they were gone. As the taillights faded, darkness eagerly swallowed me up.

### CHAPTER TWO

When the sun rose, the heat rose with it.

Sawdust and little bits of grass clung to my sweaty, swollen face. I was still on the side of the road, battling with myself not to give up.

My father would never expect me to survive and that had me realizing for the first time in nineteen years that I was free. This was not where my story would end—not when it hadn't even begun yet.

I was so goddamn tired, though. The thought of moving almost gave me anxiety, but I couldn't continue to idle on the side of the road. If someone out here found me in such a pathetic condition, I stood no chance against them.

I tugged at the twine around my wrists for the hundredth time to no avail. Gritting my teeth against an onslaught of pain radiating from my ass, I used my core muscles and legs to push off the ground, hissing as my ribs protested.

Once on my feet, I swayed and fought to stay upright. Glancing around through one good eye, I took in the scenery surrounding me.

I'd never been to the Badlands before. I'd never been allowed to venture away from The Order. I had no idea where to go. Left and right were both long stretches of road surrounded by fields of...nothing.

Taking a gamble, I chose right. I avoided the smoking blacktop by walking along the edge of the street. I didn't know what the hell I was going to do, but at least I was moving—albeit slowly. I walked and walked and walked.

My chest heaved with every strangled breath I took as I attempted to get some saliva in my mouth. Sweat rolled from my brow to my cracked lips.

How long would it take for my heart to give out? Every pump of blood it pushed through my veins was like a solid rasp on a bass drum reverberating in my brain. All the aches and pains from the day before were now stiff and sore. My left eye had swollen to the size of a golf ball, limiting visibility. My habit only added to my struggles,

the heavy black garment weighing me down and serving as a beacon for the sun.

Eventually, I stopped to rest against a tree that offered some semblance of shade, telling myself it was just for a few seconds. My vision was fuzzy and my legs could barely hold me up. The view looked the same as when I started, making me feel like I hadn't really gone anywhere.

I knew that I could survive this. I just needed to keep walking for as long as I could without falling down. I willed myself to believe that everything would be all right; no negative thinking, no analyzing or processing anything that had happened.

When I began to doze in and out of consciousness, my inner voice failed to get me moving again. It wasn't until a cool rag was placed over my face that I woke enough to realize I was in a moving vehicle and my hands were free.

“Is that her?” a man whispered. I think my head was on his lap.

“I’m not sure. Is she doing anything yet?” another man answered, sounding a little farther away.

“Well, she’s breathin, isn’t she?”

“Smartass,” the distant voice grumbled.

“Why do they make them dress like nuns? This holy shit fries my brain.”

“You know they’re a bunch of freaks, bro. I just hope they don’t have Tilly.”

Tilly! He knew Tilly?

She’s dead! I tried to tell him, but my mouth wouldn’t work.

Hearing her name broke open the floodgates I was trying to keep closed. The memory of her body burning to a crisp was all too fresh. It was an ugly festering wound I didn’t know how to begin fixing.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to give myself a minute to fall apart and mourn the first person I had found friendship with, but I was too mentally and physically exhausted.

As I began to slip away again, I felt grubby fingers back on my skin, finding their way to the cross around my neck. I must have made some sort of sound because the gentle touch disappeared when my head lolled.

“Can you hear me? Can you tell me who you are?”

I could hear him, but I couldn’t tell him who I was because I didn’t know. I could tell

him what I was supposed to be and what I was made to do; that ever since I was a little girl, my daddy used me as a pawn to further his agenda, passing me around to men three times my age since I was a ripe eleven to perform sexual favors. I was a living, breathing sex doll for a colony of men and women. I was condemned and convicted for being different and misunderstood.

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If I could have spoken, I would have told him the only thing that mattered anymore.

I am the monster they created. I'm the whore they're ashamed of.

They took my heaven away.

Now, I would bring them hell.

### CHAPTER THREE

Present

It was another sleepless night beneath burning sheets. The large electrical fan rotating back and forth wasn't doing shit to cool down the room. I restlessly toyed with the inverted cross I wore around my neck before finally giving up with a frustrated huff. Insomnia was such a clingy little cunt. While normal people slept soundly, my demons decided to strike up a conversation.

Kicking the sheet from my legs, I glanced over at Jinx, making sure I didn't wake her. When she didn't move or speak, I slowly slipped out of bed. Spotting my clothes bundled up on the floor, I scooped them up and tiptoed into the small bathroom.

After I had my shorts and tank back on, I went over to the basin attached to the wall and drank some cold water from the faucet, sighing as the cool liquid alleviated my throat's dryness.

Twisting my lips around, I cocked my head and stared at my ghostly, pale reflection

in the shattered mirror. Dull blue eyes surrounded by smudged black makeup stared back at me. White-blond locks framed my face. I looked alive, my body breathed, and my heart still beat—but inside, I was dead. Most days it felt like I barely existed.

Placing my fingers on the glass, I began tracing over the lines. No matter which way I went, I always wound up right back where I had begun. My life was nothing but a hamster wheel spinning in place, making no progress, going nowhere.

I pressed my index finger down on a protruding shard, smiling when blood began to spill from the tip.

I watched it try to retrace my path in the twisted cracks, just for it to simply break free and make a crimson trail of its own.

Was it really so easy? I couldn't seem to find my way out. No matter how hard I tried to break away and venture out on my own, I always ended up right back in a twisted maze, trapped.

I wanted to know where I went wrong. There was a black hole growing in my mind. I hated what I'd become, this empty shell of a girl who had spent so much time hiding who she was that she now had no idea who the fuck she was supposed to be.

I had no issue remembering the things I wanted to forget. The mental prison I was stuck in kept all the memories from my past trapped with me in a cold and lonely cell.

I fucking hated it.

No, that's an understatement.

I was sick of being sick of it.



Sucking my bloody finger into my mouth, I turned away from the mirror and walked out of the bathroom.

Tiptoeing back through the room, I slipped out into the dimly lit hall and pulled the door shut behind me.

Expecting everyone else in the compound to be asleep at such a late hour, I immediately headed in the direction of whispering voices. The closer I got, the clearer they became. Rounding a corner, I came to a stop in the doorway of the lounge room.

Tito and Grady stood over a table with their heads bowed together. I watched them for a few minutes, wondering if they would notice me standing there, waiting to be acknowledged. There was a mass of papers between them that I couldn't see clearly from my vantage point. It was glaringly obvious they were up to something, just like they had been every other night for the past few months. Their stealth level was shit.

"We have to do this on the low. No one else can know," Tito whispered.

"No one else can know what?" I asked, strolling into the room.

They jumped apart, both spinning around to face me. Tito's brown eyes met mine, and as always, I was reminded of Tilly, his twin. They had the same Polynesian features: shoulder-length curls and flawless brown skin. The only difference between them was that one was alive and the other was dead.

"How long have you been standing there?" Grady asked.

"Long enough." Forcing myself to look away from Tito, I focused on the table they seemed a little too determined to block from me.

“What the hell are you two doing in here?”

They stood rigid and silent, prompting me to walk around them to see whatever they were trying to hide for myself. “What is this?”

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“Research,” Tito answered, turning back around to watch me.

“Research, huh?” I looked down at the tabletop that was littered with notes, article clippings, and polaroid pictures.

“You’re full of shit, and you’re lying to my face. Why would you be researching them?”

I snatched up one of the many sheets of paper that had ‘Savages’ scrawled across it.

“I told you we shouldn’t have done this here,” Grady spat at Tito before turning his attention to me. “Cali, this isn’t what it looks like.”

“So, I’m just dreaming that you two assholes are meeting in secret to plan something that involves them?” I grabbed another sheet of paper, letting it flutter to the floor when I couldn’t decipher the sloppy handwriting scribbled all over it.

One picture in particular caught my attention. It wasn’t like any of my others.

I reached for it at the same time as Tito, slapping his hand away before he could pick it up. He wasn’t in color, the man in the photo. Whoever took the shot snapped it without his knowledge.

There was a scowl on his face as he looked at something not visible to the lens. Tattoos covered every visible inch of skin. ‘Savages’ was inked over his right temple, and directly beneath the corner of his eye was a tiny but noticeable inverted cross. I absentmindedly stroked my necklace, unable to look away from him.

“He might know where David is,” Tito eventually said.

“Might?” Suddenly, he had my full attention.

He sighed. “They’ve been abnormally quiet for the last few weeks. They could be working together. I think they might be about to do something big.

“My paranoia needs to know what the fuck is going on so I can be prepared if a shit storm is coming, and we don’t get caught in the middle.

“I need someone on the inside. It was either Simon or Grady, so I’m sending him.” He hitched a thumb in Grady’s direction.

“I get why you would keep this from everyone else, but why me? Why would you hide this from me?”

I was pissed and he knew it. I had been searching for David—my sperm donor—for years. It was damn near impossible to find him because he never stayed in one spot for longer than a few months. I’d heard through the grapevine that The Order was growing and his mindless followers seemed to be increasing with it.

“The fewer people who knew, the better. This isn’t a personal conspiracy against you.”

“This could all be a bunch of bullshit; like he said, it’s just paranoia,” Grady added, backing him up.

“I don’t care if it’s paranoia. If you so much as thought there was a minuscule chance of finding him, why wouldn’t you tell me?”

“Maybe because you aren’t the only one in this room who lost someone because of

that piece of shit,” Tito snapped.

“Lost someone? I lost everything, but that’s beside the point. It’s not a competition. Why would you send Grady in, of all people? And why was Simon ever an option? He wouldn’t be able to find his dick if it wasn’t attached to him.”

“Well, I can’t trust many people with this. I don’t want anyone getting killed or falling into that lifestyle. Whom do you suggest I send? You?”

I shrugged. That’s exactly what I was suggesting. He started to laugh, stopping short when he saw how serious I was.

“Absolutely fuckin not. No. Are you out of your goddamn mind?” He picked up a recent article clipping and held it up for me to see. “Do you see what they do to women? Look at this!”

Huffing out a breath, I carefully studied the news photo. The breasts were the only thing left to confirm the person’s gender. Everything else was mutilated or gone.

A large inverted cross had been carved

right down the center of her naked torso. He clearly didn’t see what I did.

I saw someone trying to make a statement.

They were sending a personal message.

Whoever had taken the shot did so long after post-mortem. The body had begun to decay, but pointing out that anything or anyone could have taken her apart was a moot point with him.

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I wasn't sure how he expected me to react but this didn't deter me. My mind was already made up. I had nothing to lose and nothing to fear, which made me the best candidate.

I looked up from the picture with another shrug. "This doesn't change anything. I'm not this woman."

"This doesn't bother you at all?"

He looked at me in disbelief, glancing at Grady as if he needed confirmation from another person that I didn't care.

"What's going on with you?"

I didn't bother voicing a response; he wouldn't like my answer. At one point in time, the horrific image would have had some effect on me. Maybe the kick to the back of my head had knocked something loose. I couldn't pinpoint when I'd changed, or really describe how I knew I wasn't the same. Something just shifted, and I had made zero effort to shift it back.

They had no idea who they let live under their roof. There was a secret side of me I never let them see, keeping her hidden under lock and key. The strange creature that lurked just beneath my skin was caged and waiting to be let out.

I usually took better care hiding my harsher nature, but as of late, I was struggling with being good. My angels and my demons kept crossing signals.

“Actually, Cali is perfect for this,” Grady hesitantly said.

“What the fuck?” Tito voiced my exact sentiments, whipping his head around so fast his neck cracked.

“Hear me out on this,” Grady continued, holding up a hand to silence any protest.

“She may be a smartass, but she is smart. And stubborn. And she doesn’t trust anyone. Oh, and she’s a she, which works about a thousand times more in our favor—you know, cause the whole ‘helpless woman’ thing.” He ticked off each point on his fingers.

When neither of us immediately spoke, his hazel eyes bounced between us, a smug grin spreading across his cherub face. I had half-expected him to repeat what everyone else in the compound whispered about me when I walked by. I should have known better than that, though.

Ever since the day he and Tito had found me, they’d done their best to look out for my wellbeing. They were the only people aside from Jinx who never spoke ill of me. They had never judged me for my obscurity or religiously told me I didn’t belong with them because of my ties to David.

Everyone else needed somewhere to direct their hatred and misery, and I happened to be the perfect target. I was a villain they could blame; they were afraid of me. Sometimes, I didn’t blame them. I knew that there was a flaw in my code. The simple truth was that I didn’t give a fuck.

“Those sound like reasons not to send her,” Tito finally said.

“No, those are the reasons you do send her. Plus, she doesn’t like dick,” Grady slipped in. They stared at one another, some silent battle of wills taking place

between them.

I felt like I was missing something but with these two, that was not unusual. I didn't bother adding my two cents, mostly because what Grady said was true—except for me not liking dick. I didn't particularly care for anything anymore. I had slept with too many men in an effort to prove to myself that I wasn't broken. It never worked.

I got nothing from the experiences but a free three minutes and twenty seconds of wasted time. I was left feeling empty and used, just as I had years ago, and it wasn't worth it anymore; not when I knew what I really needed.

Jinx was strictly a friend—the only real friend I'd ever had. She was a gorgeous, but despite what Grady refused to believe, I harbored no secret desire for her.

I stood watching them discuss my pros and cons as if I wasn't in the room, shutting them both down when I couldn't take it anymore.

“It doesn't matter what either of you thinks she should or shouldn't do, because she is going to do whatever the fuck she wants.”

They stopped going back and forth and stared at me with slightly open mouths.

“The Savages isn't a gang of gentlemen trying to do the world a favor. They live by their own code. This isn't the goddamn boy scouts we're talking about!” Tito preached, throwing his hands up in frustration. “They're outcasts. They're undesirables. They're sick in the fucking head.”

He wasn't saying anything I'd never heard before. Quite honestly, it sounded like he was describing me.

“No one wants to do this world favors, T, and I don't blame them. It's a real fucked



up place to live.”

He opened his mouth to respond, promptly snapping it shut, unable to refute what I had just said. We lived in a world where the human race had no humanity, were merely animals who hadn’t been taught how to behave.

There was a place referred to as The Kingdom. Supposedly, the grass was a vibrant green, it was always sunny, and love conquered all—a real fucking utopia that had no use for bad batches like us.

Outside those towering walls was the Badlands, and in the Badlands, the weak struggled against the strong.

Anarchy reigned.

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The world had been like this long before I was born. If The Order and the Savages really did have some diabolical plan for the rest of us, there wasn't shit me or Tito could do to stop it.

"You're not going to let this go, are you?" he asked me outright.

"Highly unlikely."

"You should probably grab a seat, then. We have a lot of shit to talk about."

He turned around and shut the door, letting out a deep breath before facing me again.

"Let's start with his name."

### CHAPTER FOUR

His name was Romero.

That was the first time I had ever heard someone say it. People were too superstitious to speak it, as if he were some demonic entity that would appear and slit their tender throats before dragging their fragile souls straight to hell.

We'd spent hours discussing risks and potential outcomes. With time being sensitive, we had to do the best we could, converting their months' worth of information into a last-minute plan.

Sighing, I looked out the Touareg's window and watched all the empty fields, vast

open wasteland passing us by.

We were getting farther and farther away from anything remotely civilized.

Into the wild. That's how I thought of it—away from petty moral barriers and society's fragile sensitivities.

"This could all be nothing," Tito told me for what had to be the tenth time in less than two hours.

"Or it could be everything." I pursed my lips and narrowed my eyes. I wished we could play the quiet game until I was no longer stuck in a car with him. Our eyes stayed locked in the rearview mirror until he was forced to look away or risk veering off the road.

"I just don't want you to end up like his last girl."

His last girl? That instantly piqued my interest and further irritated me. I didn't know about any girl.

"Why? What happened to her?"

"That isn't relevant to your situation. He's just trying to change your mind," Grady interjected.

"Trying to chit-chat me out of this is a waste of your precious breath. This is the best lead I've had in four years."

The only response he gave to that was a shake of his head. I knew the only reason he caved on this was because he knew I'd just take their information and do it anyway. I didn't particularly like being told I couldn't do something because my balls were on

my chest and not between my legs.

For the first hour of our drive, he had told me every horror story about Romero that he could think of, not realizing what he was doing. The brutality didn't scare me; it intrigued me. Truthfully, I wanted to see who these people were and the way

they lived. Every scrap of information, no matter how disturbing, only made me want to meet him more.

I needed to get away, needed something to pull me out of the murky cesspool of the thing I called life.

Every day I felt like I lost another part of the woman I shunned in order to assimilate. I needed to do this. It was everything I'd been waiting for.

I couldn't tell them any of that, though. They would never understand the parts of me I hid. Jinx was the only person who had ever tried, and I'd just had to leave without telling her goodbye. I sincerely hoped she would understand why.

"This is it." Grady pointed in the direction of a treeline looming in the near distance.

Squinting, I peered through the front windshield, trying to spot what he was referring to. Tito drove a half mile further before pulling over. We sat in silence for a few moments. I couldn't say for sure what they were thinking, but it was more than likely about how crazy this whole thing was.

I was going to solicit the lions that ruled over a land of sheep. They would either sink their teeth into me or let me in their pride.

When Tito's brown eyes met mine again, I knew on some level that he did understand, and I knew he wanted to find David just as badly as I did.

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“Alright, let’s do this,” he said, climbing out of the SUV.

I put one hand on the door to follow him. Before I could even push it open, Grady reached back and snagged my wrist.

“If things start to go south, you get away, Cali. Run like hell, and I promise I’ll find you.”

I could only nod my head. Vocalizing emotions had always been one of my weak points. He nodded back before letting me go and turning around, allowing me to get out. Shielding my eyes from the sun, I walked to where Tito stood.

“You better not get yourself killed,” he teased, attempting to break the tension between us. He rolled his shoulders and looked upwards at the clear sky. “Sometimes I forget how sheltered you’ve been. I’m going to give you one last bit of advice.”

I readied myself for another rant and received something much simpler—also, a tad confusing.

“They don’t do anything for free. They don’t give without receiving. The worst thing you could do is make a deal with one of them that you can’t retract.”

What? “You’ve been telling me for the past how many hours that I should move as quickly as possible to figure out what’s going on. Wouldn’t making a deal be doing just that?”

I rolled my eyes when he pinched the bridge of his nose dramatically before

answering the question.

“Romero isn’t called the devil for shits and giggles. He’ll eat your soul and then shit it out.”

Frowning, I studied his body language and for the first time noticed how distressed he was.

“Why are you so afraid of him?”

“I know you’re not afraid of anything, Cali, but in this case, I really wish you were.” He paused for a few seconds before continuing. “I’ll find a way to contact you after a week or two. If I can’t, I’ll assume you’re dead. If shit goes bad, try and get back to the compound. Never let your guard down and don’t let them get in your head.”

“And if I can’t find them?”

“That’s not probable. You just go straight. You see that?”

I turned ever so slightly in the direction he was pointing, never seeing his other arm move. It happened so fast all I felt was the blade piercing through my skin and an odd tingling sensation, followed by an intense, searing heat.

“Why did you do that?” I instinctively wrapped my arms around my middle and backed away, glaring up at him.

“I’m sorry; it had to be done. You’re the perfect picture of health. They’d never believe you were out here on your own. I have to get back, and you need to go. We don’t know who could be out here.” He rushed past me, getting back in the car with the bloody knife in his hand and peeling off before I could fully process what had just happened.

“Shit,” I muttered, pressing a hand to my side. Blood seeped through the small hole in my shirt, running down my stomach and staining my fingers crimson.

Knowing my only option at this point was to get out of the open, I looked towards the treeline and began to move towards it.

Five minutes into my foray, I deeply regretted wearing jeans. It was so damn hot my thighs began to sweat.

I made it to a small creek and rested my sticky hand on the nearest tree, pausing to catch my breath and evaluate my situation.

Tito didn’t even tell me exactly where to go. How the fuck was I supposed to walk straight when there wasn’t a straight path? “Damn,” I hissed, pulling up my shirt so I could get a better look at the stab-wound that was starting to hurt real fucking bad.

I pressed around the tender area, trying to determine just how deep it was. If he hit something vital, I would have already bled out.

I had no damn clue if that were true or not, but I was going with it.

There was too much blood for me to see anything. Wading into the shallow water, I slowly crouched down and scooped some into my hand. I did my best to clean the area off.

So focused on myself and how unsanitary the water was, I ignored nature’s blaring warning that something was wrong.

There was no sound. No birds, no bugs, and no tiny creatures scurrying through the undergrowth. Not even the wind carried. It was utterly silent.

I was still examining myself when I heard the rapid sound of footsteps, as if someone were running. Not a millisecond later, a solid body was barreling into me from behind. The abrupt impact gave me no time to brace myself and sent us both to the ground.

“Fuck!” I screamed, getting a mouthful of murky water. I ignored the pain shooting through my side and focused on the man damn near straddling my back.



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“I been watchin ya fer a good minute now,” he confessed with a thick accent.

When his weight lifted away, I attempted to move but he quickly grabbed hold of my ankles and flipped me onto my back with a little splash. Swallowing a yelp, I blinked up at a bear of a man with a head of unruly brown hair.

“What do you want?”

“Got what I want.” He flashed me a smile of stained black and yellow teeth before turning around. He started walking in a different direction than I had been going, dragging me along behind him.

“Let me go!” I yelled at his back, twisting and turning in every direction, clawing at the ground in an effort to break free.

“Calm down, darlin. We’ll be home soon,” he laughed.

Home? Where the fuck was home?

## CHAPTER FIVE

Most people had a morning routine.

The fortunate ones got to sit down and read the paper in a comfy, cozy house and enjoy a cup of espresso. They sat in some plush ass chair in the fleece robe or plaid pajamas they had slept in. Maybe they propped their slipper-clad feet up in the process.

Thank fuck that wasn't me. Espresso tasted like pig shit, and I slept naked.

The unfortunate ones had to figure out if they were going to be able to drink a glass of water or eat that day. Then they had to double check that the boogeyman hadn't snatched up a family member in the middle of the night.

They couldn't even piss in safety.

Gotta say I'm real fucking glad not to be one of them, either. Having to worry about my life while my dick was in my hand would really fuck up my day.

Then, there was me.

Every morning, I looked out at a world that had rotted and gone cold. A world responsible for taking away the parts of me that ever dared to care. I had nothing left anymore but a cyclone of endless rage constantly churning thorns and venom through my veins.

I didn't give a shit if someone's family member went missing in the middle of the night. I had my own people to take care of.

If I wasn't so deranged, I might have pretended I wanted to change. I was better off like this, and I refused to hide from what was inside me. In my anarchy, only the strong survived. I had the scars beneath my ink to prove it. The bodies buried all around my domain only solidified it.

The weeping that burst through my monitor and had me turning away from the window, putting an end to my daily morning reflections, sealed the deal.

Without bothering to look, I bypassed the screen and left the room. The warehouse was silent now that I was away from the monitors; not even the woman's cries could

be heard.

I made my way down to the lower level of the building, reminding myself I still needed to get rid of the dead redhead on my bedroom floor.

Beyond a metal door that sat alone at the end of a short hall was my unhappy new friend. The door groaned and squeaked when I pushed against it, slamming shut with a loud bang after I stepped through.

I glanced around the barren room, noting that the pliers had been moved from their resting place on the wall. That meant Cobra had come in after I left the night before.

Looking towards the woman restrained in the center of the room, I began to approach her with slow, measured steps.

Her husband's naked body was directly across from her. His arms were still tied to the poles that had pulled them from their sockets, his tibia stuck clean through his right leg, and dried blood coated the back of his thighs and ass. He'd bled out sometime the previous day after he was fucked for a solid hour and then had his wrists cut open.

The woman stopped wailing and started trying to swing her suspended body in my direction. I had purposely secured the ropes around her so there was no give in them, making sure she couldn't find a way to ease her discomfort or look away from her husband's brutalized asshole.

A fresh line of drool hung from the side of her busted lip. On the floor beneath her head lay Cobra's handiwork—a small pile of blood

y, broken teeth.

She looked up at me with swollen green eyes I wanted to carve out of their sockets. The blind would see a helpless woman made to dress like an old-style nun, hanging from the ceiling. I saw a lamb waiting to be slaughtered.

“Do you remember where David is now?” I interrogated.

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“I’ll never tell you.” She tried to sound strong, but with spittle flying from her mouth and her voice almost gone, I was severely unimpressed.

“That’s funny. I swear a few hours ago you said you couldn’t remember.”

I grabbed her cheeks and squeezed, applying pressure on her tender gums. Her pained bleat was a fucking delightful sound. I knew she would never tell me where her precious prophet was. None of them ever did. I’d lost count of how many people I had killed trying to get a solid answer. The motherfucker had his followers brainwashed.

These people’s weak, corruptible minds believed his interests and theirs were the same. The Order wasn’t a religious group; it was a widespread cult with a made up doctrine that revered David like a god. They had their own convenient definitions of sin that matched their bullshit religion, which made the fact that David used a fucking cross of all things as his insignia comical.

I used the symbol in a much more appropriate way. It was my endearing way of saying fuck him. I could never embrace that shit. The only god I believed in was myself and death, and she had always been on my side.

As I watched blood begin to pool between the woman’s lips. I wondered how many children she had helped steal. How many men and women were killed in front of her. It wasn’t that I cared—I was just curious.

I was still squeezing when Cobra and Grimm walked in, carrying sandwiches.

“Get rid of her. We have a problem,” Cobra announced around a mouthful of food.

“Lena still hasn’t come back,” Grimm clarified.

“Well, that doesn’t fucking surprise me.” I let go of the woman’s face to retrieve the Browning knife I kept in my back pocket. With one fluid motion, I flipped it open and inserted the seven-inch blade into the side of her neck, then just as smoothly pulled it out.

She gurgled, choking on own her blood. Her body swayed, twitching involuntarily as it died. I placed the palm of my hand over her heart and shut my eyes. It was beating in an erratic tempo, fighting so desperately to cling to a life that was already lost.

I expelled a quiet breath and opened my eyes to watch the blood run down her face, turning her honey brown hair a vivid maroon before dripping in a steady pattern onto the concrete floor.

Death was such a beautiful thing. She could take everything in the blink of an eye, or draw the suffering out for as long as she desired.

I wiped my knife clean on the woman’s habit and then turned to face my brothers. “I guess we need to go find Lena, then. I’ll get her down later.”

“I’ll drive, you eat,” Grimm replied, tossing me a sandwich on our way out of the room.

We searched the only place someone could get lost—the woods that sat twelve miles down the road. The longer we were out playing find the needle, the more our irritation grew.

I could admit that for the most part, society had kept its shit together. We weren’t

considered part of that society. We didn't live in the fancy fucking houses that had twenty-four seven patrols and a fence to keep people like us out. You know the ones who tie up Daddy, terrorize the kiddos, and then fuck Mommy to ramp up the despair? We are those people.

It was dumb to go anywhere alone if you weren't someone people knew not to fuck with. I wanted to believe Lena didn't come across someone that fucking stupid, but the evidence was not in her favor.

"I don't think she's out here," Grimm said, breaking our companionable silence.

"Do you think that's human?" Cobra pointed to a flattened plant with a small amount of fresh blood on its leaves. Looking beyond the plant, it was obvious someone or something was recently dragged through the dirt.

Guess we were about to find out which one it was.

## CHAPTER SIX

He secured a chain around my neck and knocked me on my ass before walking away.

I immediately wrapped my hands around the thick metal and pulled to no avail, agitating the raw skin on my palms.

"This can't be happening to me." I gritted my teeth and tried again, yanking with all the strength I had.

"It's not going to give. Trust me, I've tried."

I stopped and looked across the barn in the direction the voice had come from.

A girl who looked to be a few years younger than me was chained to the adjacent wall. The sun filtering in from outside bounced off a long, chocolate brown hair and illuminated a pair of cognac colored eyes.

Various flower and henna tattoos were inked on her bronze skin.

“How long have you been here?” I asked, taking a good look around.



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“Two days, maybe three. She was here before me.” She gestured to a dead girl strapped down on an old table near the back of the barn.

The rancid smell emanating from a quad of rusted oil drums lining the front wall was self-explanatory, as was the rotting torso lying in front of them. Only the head was left; the rest of whoever it had once been was either in one of the barrels or someone’s stomach.

“He’s coming back,” she warned quietly.

I pressed my back against the wall to give myself a full view of what was going on, wincing from the sharp pain in my side. The lumberjack entered the barn with a hacksaw in one hand and a little boy’s in the other.

We watched in silence as they walked right by us to the table in the back.

“Grab the buckets, Dex.”

The little boy did as he was told, taking off and returning with two round, bloodstained pails. He sat them down by the edge of the table before climbing up on a stool so that he could watch the man I assumed was his dad work.

“Remember to keep your hands off,” the man warned the kid as he began sawing into the dead woman’s arm.

You could hear the blade sliding back and forth, cutting through bone and muscle.

“I saw that man stab you,” he said after a minute. “Shame. If I wasn’t a married man, I might keep yer for myself.”

What a goddamn nightmare that would be.

“I acquired Arlen over there when her uncle was kind enough to stop and offer me a ride. That’s him.”

He gestured towards the decapitated torso lying by the oil drums. I glanced at Arlen; she was now staring down at the ground.

Generally, I didn’t feel bad for people, but I hoped for her sanity’s sake she didn’t have to watch that happen.

The man resumed his sawing, occasionally saying something to the kid as he stripped the body down and tossed random bits into the buckets.

“Now, yer never wanna eat the brain. It ain’t good fer nothing but C-J-D. That’s Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease,” he explained, loud enough for us all to hear. “Ribbs, well, who doesn’t like a good barbeque?” he joked.

“The forearms are tough meat. My wife likes to use those chunks for soup. The shoulders need some work to make tender but once yer do then yer get a nice blade steak. Oh, and anything on the back is gonna give yer some good choice cuts. Now, can either of yer pretty ladies guess what my favorite part is?”

He glanced between me and Arlen with a disgusting toothy smile as he flipped the body onto its stomach.

The arm he’d been working on dangled by a small band of tendons that slowly pulled apart.

“It’s the buttocks!” He laughed and slapped the dead girl’s ass. “Put it in a slow cooker for a few hours, and it reminds me of my momma’s Sunday roast.”

Neither of us said a word. I had no idea why he felt the need to share all of this, but it was information I never needed nor cared to know.

I’d heard all about cannibals before. They refused to be simple outliers, and no one else would accept them. The Savages didn’t exactly have an open-door policy, and there was no way in

hell they could live in Centriole—the megalopolis.

Like everyone else though, they usually cliqued up in groups; safety in numbers and all that jazz.

They were unable to get food through connections or other means, so animals and people were their only options.

Nevertheless, hearing about something and seeing it were two entirely different things.

I listened to his heavy breaths as he grew tired and began to sweat. I turned away when he started to strip down individual bone, using the claw of a hammer to pull and pry.

After another stretch of silence, he began to whistle as he worked. Tuning out the noise around me, I leaned my head back and stared up at the ceiling.

A giant cockroach darting down my arm woke me up.

I smacked it off and watched it take off across the dirt floor. The chain around my

neck clinked at the sudden movement, instantly reminding me of where I was.

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Looking out the open barn door, I saw it had begun to drizzle. The hazy blue-gray sky signaled it was early dawn.

I'd lost a full day thanks to a cannibal.

I took my first real breath and had never been more grateful for having a strong stomach. The smell of decaying flesh was so potent it burned my nose hairs.

Just for the hell of it, I tugged on the chain again, knowing it wasn't going to magically unlock itself or come off the wall.

"He keeps the keys on a belt loop," Arlen flatly commented.

She seemed resigned to the fact that we would be sautéed like fillets and then eaten with a side of flesh rolls. I was determined that wasn't going to happen. This was just a minor setback I should have foreseen.

Every time I thought I was finally getting somewhere, this bitch called life decided she would try and break me down again.

I thought she would have fucked off by now and realized it would never happen.

I had already been to hell and back and now it was a part of me. There wasn't much she could throw my way that I wouldn't overcome. I think she forgot all the cards I'd already been dealt.

"Okay, Cali, you got this." Looking around, I studied what was left of the woman on

the table. Damn near all the flesh had been stripped from her bones, except for her face, which was untouched.

Not only did this make a plan begin to form in my head, but it made the inverted cross tattooed beneath her eye stand out like a beacon in the night. If she were part of Romero's group, that meant they had to be around this area, just as Tito had said.

"You look like you might have a plan," Arlen said, suddenly sounding much more alert.

I looked back at her and smiled.

I didn't know shit about this girl but I wasn't going to leave her here to become someone's midnight snack.

Glancing out the door to make sure Lumberjack wasn't coming, I began to explain.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

I bit down on my lip and pushed two dirt-clad fingers into my stab wound.

"Fuck, this hurts." Breathing through my mouth, I blinked to clear away gathering tears.

Arlen made a sound in her throat, watching me with a frown. Blood quickly seeped through my already stained shirt. I pulled my fingers out and pushed down on the inflamed skin, leaning over so blood would drip down on the ground, stopping when my head grew fuzzy and it felt like I would throw up.

I'm not sure how long we sat before Lumberjack showed up, reacting just like I thought he would.

“Oh, no, yer don’t!” He rushed towards me, grabbing for his key. “If yer dying I gotta skin yer now or the meat will go bad.”

I didn’t move from where I’d purposely slouched on the ground. I let him unlock the padlock, remove the chain, and drag me towards his table.

As I played half-dead, I couldn’t help but wonder how many people had been alive and fully aware of what was going on as they were dismembered limb by limb. Not that I cared; I was just curious.

His mistake was underestimating my will to survive. He lifted me up and dropped me down right on top of the bare torso. Bones shifted and collapsed beneath my weight, pressing into my back. I swallowed repeatedly in an effort not to throw up from the smell.

As soon as he turned to grab one of his buckets, I reached for the hacksaw he’d left near the edge of the table.

There were still pieces of tissue and flesh embedded between the ribbed blades.

I gripped the blood-crusting handle and swung without hesitation.

He screamed and bowed forward as the blade made contact with the back of his upper thigh. Before he could get up, I swung again, sucking in a breath as pain shot up the entire left side of my body.

This time, the blade hit the back part of his neck. Instead of pulling it out, I pushed in, making a seesaw motion to wedge it in place.

“You cannibalistic fucker!” Arlen yelled triumphantly.

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I swung down off the table and pushed him over. He reached for his neck and I went for the key, ripping it right through his worn belt-loop.

Key in hand, I ran to Arlen, letting out a quick breath of relief when it easily fit into the padlock holding her chain on.

“Bill?” someone called from outside of the barn just as her chain hit the floor.

We froze and looked at one another. The person called out again, sounding a little closer. Bill stood up and stumbled forward, making an attempt to yell for help.

With the saw no longer wedged in his neck, blood flowed freely, spurting around meaty fingers.

“We need to go,” Arlen rushed out.

She grabbed my hand and pulled us closer to the wall, using shadows to cover us.

“Bill!” a woman screamed from just outside the barn’s doorway.

She barreled right past us and we wasted no time slipping out. I still heard her screaming as we took off through a field to the right of the depleted building. A screen door slammed shut shortly after.

“They went that way,” were the only clear words I understood over the loud commotion.



“Shit! How many of them are there?” I asked as we zigzagged our way through the tall grass.

“Five...four...” Arlen responded, before gasping out, “Woods!”

We made a break for it, hearing multiple male voices calling out behind us. My heart felt as if it were going to beat out of my damn chest. Adrenaline had my brain so focused on getting away I almost forgot about the bloody hole leaking down my side.

The drizzle had turned into a light rain and the ground was wet. I saw the steep embankment but Arlen didn't. I managed to slide into a stop; she fell forward and grabbed for me, taking us down together.

A list of expletives flew from my mouth as my body rolled over hers and we tumbled like logs. Leaves and mud clung to me like Velcro. The pain in my side suddenly hit me like a hammer to a nail, slightly blurring my vision.

“Come on girl, we gotta move.” Arlen recovered first and grabbed my upper arm, practically dragging me until I was running beside her again—barely.

She was in pretty good shape for having not eaten the past two or three days. The ground was uneven and neither of us seemed to have a clue where we were—not that it mattered, because we sure as shit didn't make it very far.

They had to have seen us long before we saw them. This time, there was no stopping. I slammed right into him, and it was as if he'd been waiting for me to do just that. His hands gripped my forearms to steady me, not push me away.

From my peripheral, I saw Arlen apprehended by a redhead and another dark-haired man with a beard. I attempted to turn my head to make sure she was okay, but I was stuck. I had never stepped in quicksand before, but I imagined the sensation was

similar to this.

He had the darkest eyes I'd ever seen. I blinked, thinking the pain was affecting how I saw what was right in front of me.

Nope, I was still staring into two black holes with endless depth. I saw sorrow, pain, and so much anger sunken within them that it was almost like looking in a mirror—a shattered mirror with jagged edges.

I smiled. I was a bloody, muddy mess, but I smiled, and he smiled back. That alone would have knocked me right back on my ass if he wasn't holding me up. It was like *déjà vu*; he felt so familiar to me.

Before I could open my mouth to speak, he had a hand tightly wrapped around my throat. He spun me around and pressed his brick chest against my back. I reached up to remove his damn hand when two men came sliding down the embankment much more gracefully than we just had.

“Those lags belong to us,” one of the men said as they approached, unmistakably kin to cannibal Bill.

“Do they?” Romero challenged lazily.

The deep timbre of his voice sent a chill straight down my spine.

“If she belongs to you, why is my hand wrapped around her throat?”

The other man opened his mouth to respond but was swiftly cut off.

“We don't belong to no bottom feeders!” Arlen yelled, struggling to break away from the dark haired man that was now holding her in a chokehold.

“We don’t want any trouble, Romero. We just want the girls,” the more intelligible one conceded. There was a nervous hitch in his voice that reminded me of how well known the Savages were and how people purposely avoided them at all costs.

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“There was a girl with yawl’s tattoo. They ate her. They ate your friend,” Arlen rushed out.

None of the men reacted. Her confession was met with resounding silence from both sides.

“So she’s yours?” Romero asked again, cupping a tattooed hand over my mouth when I tried to speak.

“They both are.”

“Alright then, take her.” He pushed me forward and stepped back. “And her.” He nodded to Arlen.

She barely righted herself from being shoved forward when the man’s companion grabbed her by the hair and started dragging her along as if she were a ragdoll.

“No, wait!” I shouted as I was partially lifted over the man’s shoulder. I hit the back of his head with a closed fist and he let me go. I stumbled backwards, tripping over myself as I tried to

get away, landing right at Romero’s feet. The air whooshed out of my lungs and I reflexively grabbed for my side.

With an angry growl he reached for me again, this time going for my ankles. The situation flipped in a matter of seconds.

I stared in confusion as he jerked away and blood began to spill down the front of him. Romero stepped around me and I watched as he pulled a knife out of the man's chest, shoving him to the ground in the process.

"Go get the other one," he said to his friends, placing his black boot on the man's stomach to prevent him from getting up.

Without a word, his comrades walked off after Arlen. Romero looked at the cannibal and began pressing down. The man's pained scream echoed across the treetops as Romero dug his steel toe into the chest wound. I watched him suffer with a deep feeling of self-satisfaction. The fucker deserved it.

"Stop, ple—"

Romero lunged down and drove the silver blade straight through the center of the man's forehead, cutting his plea short. His muscles flexed beneath his shirt from the force it took to penetrate the man's skull.

My lips parted as I stared at them both in fascinated awe. A silent crimson river made its way to the forest ground. The knife made a faint squelching sound and then a 'pop' as he removed it.

With a flick of his wrist, something chunky and pinkish-red flew off the blade and landed on a nearby plant. He looked at me then, his onyx hues drilling into mine—dark meeting light—and gave me a beautifully devious smile.

"I changed my mind." He shrugged. "Finders keepers."

His words had the breath evaporating from my chest. As I stared into his eyes, I saw myself falling right into the void.

I was so fucked.

An angry scream in the near distance broke me from my tunnel vision. I blinked and looked away, glancing around in hope I would catch a glimpse of Arlen. Remembering my objective, Tito's voice resounded as a warning bell inside my head.

“They can't know you found them willingly. They'll know something's up and won't hesitate to kill you.”

Well, fuck. Realizing I'd almost completely screwed everything up, I began to half scoot/half crab-walk backward.

Our eyes locked once more and he grinned, flashing a set of perfect white teeth. Somehow, this smile was darker than the last one because now he seemed to be amused.

“Where are you going?” His tone was mocking—childlike. He tilted his head to the side, making no effort to come after me. He simply tracked my every move with his coal-black eyes.

My back hit a tree and I used it as leverage to pull myself up, keeping one hand over my injury. We were only a few feet apart. My ragged breathing filled the silence that grew between us.

Arlen's yells grew louder.

Male laughter signified his friends had caught her and were bringing her back against her will. I tried to spot what direction they were coming from but I still couldn't see anyone.

Is he getting closer?

I glanced back at Romero and swore he'd moved from where he'd just been standing.  
His face gave nothing away.

“Why are you still here?”

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“Why am I still here?” he repeated.

“That’s what I said, isn’t it? I don’t know what you want. I have nothing to give. So why are you still standing there?”

“The odds must be in your favor then, babe, cause I don’t want anything from you yet. You don’t even have to thank me for saving your pixie ass, but you’re coming with me.”

His friends came up behind him, and the redhead smiled at me. The one with darker hair carried an unconscious Arlen in his arms.

“What did you do to her?”

‘I shut her up,’ he replied, a little too happily.

Fucker.

I fixed my face with a glare and looked back at Romero.

“I’m not going anywhere with you, and neither is she, so you can just put her down and be on your merry way.”

He flashed me another dark smile before sharing a look with his friends.

“Not only is she a fucking idiot, but she’s mouthy, too? Huh. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised, though. I mean, look at her.” He turned away from his friends, letting his



eyes slowly travel up and down my body, landing back on my face. “All beauty and no brain,” he sneered.

Did this shithead just call me an idiot? I was filthy, hurt, and aggravated, and a million different variations of the word asshole were flying around in my head. He had just insulted me multiple times in the span of five minutes.

“Hypothetically speaking, say I leave you out here with your little friend. What’s your next move? You’re hurt. She’s unconscious, and you’re in the middle of the woods. Where are you going to go?” His tone was way too smug.

I mentally attempted to count to ten, only making it to three. Tito and Grady had laid out a plan and a strict set of rules, making me swear I’d follow both before agreeing to send me out here. I was supposed to pretend I was scared and helpless. In other words, do not poke the beast. They should have known that wasn’t going to last long.

Screw the plan and screw the rules. I had never been any good at abiding by them anyway. I was going to do this my way. Besides, their plan should have gone right down the drain the second Tito stabbed me. Somehow, he had left that important detail out of our discussion.

“Look, asshole, I’m not some poor damsel in distress. Thanks for your help; greatly appreciate it, but I don’t need you—”

I suddenly found myself pressed into the tree with his hand back around my throat.

“You don’t need me? Prove it. Break free,” he taunted, starting to squeeze.

I covered his clean hand with my filthy one but I didn’t try to pull it away. Maybe it was from my lack of oxygen and the warm feeling spreading through my brain, but I swear something happened between the two of us.

Something shifted, something clicked. It wasn't love. No, it was the same familiarity I'd felt just moments ago, like I was reuniting with an old friend. Our eyes met and there was an inexplicable understanding between us. One dark damaged soul fully recognized another, reaching out and beckoning to play with the other.

His mouth moved and I counted three words but I didn't hear what was said. Spots began to dance before my eyes.

He let me go and stepped back. I spluttered and braced myself as I plunged forward.

The ground rushed towards me but I never made impact. He caught me before I completely fell and supported my weight with ease.

"You're coming with me," he repeated, taking hold of my left wrist and guiding me towards his friends.

One day, I would look back on this memory from some far away vantage point and realize how significant it was. I would recall that this precise moment was when it really all began. My story did not start until I met him.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

I was exactly where I intended to be, albeit utterly exhausted and craving something to take the edge off my pain.

I couldn't say the same for Arlen, who had woken up mad as hell. She stayed close to me, not looking any direction but straight.

We were surrounded. The redhead was to our left and Romero was on my right. The third man walked close behind us. I indiscreetly studied them whenever I got the chance.

They looked like they were around the same age, all covered in various ink with the same inverted cross tattooed below one of their eyes. They were all dressed in black: black shirts, dark jeans, and black boots—like a small army of shadows.

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For the most part, we walked in silence; I put all my focus on placing one foot in front of the other. My brain was churning at a mile a minute, but I couldn't analyze anything yet.

By the time we cleared the woods, I was even more of a mess. My shirt was clinging to certain areas near my open wound, the mud coating my skin had dried and was starting to itch, and I was about to perspire into a puddle.

We emerged from the trees and approached a matte bl

ack jeep that looked like it had been customized to drive through anything.

“Wait.” Romero held an arm up, stopping us in our tracks just outside of it. “Sack em.”

“What does—? What are you doing?” I yelled as something black was placed over my eyes.

“Safety first,” the redhead joked, making sure I couldn't take the damn thing off.

“This is bullshit; just let us go!” Arlen snapped, blindly bumping into me.

We were both ignored and roughly placed inside the jeep. Neither of us knew where they were taking us or what they planned to do when they got us there.

It didn't take long to get to wherever they went. We were removed from the vehicle after approximately twenty minutes. A door—a large one, from the loud groan it

made—opened and then slammed shut behind me. I breathed through my mouth, trying to listen for any kind of sound, but there was none aside from our footsteps. Another door opened and I was hit with a cool draft, led a few steps forward and then stopped.

“Down you go,” the redhead said, pushing on my shoulders.

I blindly felt out around me, encountering something smooth and metal. Before I could guess what it was, someone shoved me all the way down to my back.

“What are you doing?” I asked in alarm, choking as something was pushed beneath the sack and shoved in my mouth. “No,” I protested, realizing it was some type of pill.

“Swallow it,” Romero demanded, covering my mouth with one hand and rubbing my throat with his other. “Cobra, grab me some liquor.”

With no other choice, I swallowed the round, dry pill and his hand disappeared. I began turning my head from side to side to try and get the cover off it. When I attempted to sit up, I was instantly shoved back down.

“You do that again, I’ll tie you up,” Romero warned.

“Here,” the redhead—Cobra—said from above me a moment later.

What the fuck are they doing?

“Stop it!” I shoved someone’s hands off just to have mine stretched and pinned above my head.

“Ugh,” I growled, finally managing to get the stupid cover off my head.

The first thing I noticed was the metal beams running across the high ceiling and Cobra being the one holding me down. Then, I turned my head and saw two bodies.

I recognized the habit immediately as one given by The Order, but I didn't know the woman wearing it. Someone had slit her throat open in a ridiculously tidy fashion and done some damage to her mouth. She hung upside down from thick pieces of rope wrapped around her arms and legs. The dead man across from her looked like he'd received the worse end of the bargain.

Finally looking towards the end of the table, I was greeted with the sight of Romero holding the knife he had just stabbed through a man's skull in one hand and a bottle of liquor in the other.

"Shit," I gasped when his soulless eyes met mine and he began approaching me with purposely slow, even steps. I had pictured my death in a million different scenarios. Being gutted or cut up had never crossed my mind. I hoped this wasn't karma catching up to me.

"Easy," Cobra warned as I wriggled around, tightening his grip so I couldn't go anywhere.

Without a word, Romero grabbed the hem of my ruined shirt and sliced it right up the middle, easily pulling it off. I was left in nothing but a dirty bra. I hissed when he tore the leftover pieces of fabric off me, detaching them from my skin.

Shit. Following his stare, now aimed at my stomach, I saw the puncture wound was surrounded by inflamed purple skin, and slowly leaking pus.

"This is gonna hurt," he warned, flashing his eyes to mine.

"What's going to hurt? What the hell do you think you're—"

He didn't let me finish before he leaned down and dumped liquor right onto the wound, using it as irrigation.

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It. Was. Excruciating. Firewater was raining down on my flesh.

“Sonofabitch!” I sucked in a breath and swallowed a scream, unknowingly squeezing the circulation out of Cobra’s forearms.

I could hear the area sizzle and managed to catch a glimpse of blood, pus, and clear liquid running together. When he did it again, I planned his death in my head. The smell was horrible. I couldn’t tell if it was coming from me or the dead nun across the room.

“Take a sip,” he demanded, a little more gently, pressing the bottle to my lips.

I didn’t have to be told twice. I eagerly welcomed the burning sensation in my throat over the one on my torso.

He wordlessly pulled the bottle away after a few seconds and disappeared from view.

Leaning my head back, I swallowed, staring straight into Cobra’s smoky-grey eyes.

“I think he likes you.” He smirked down at me.

I attempted to furrow my brows to say, “Are you shitting me?”, but whatever I had just been made to swallow was starting to kick in.

Unfortunately for me, it wasn’t fast enough. When I looked down again, Romero was heating what looked like a large fishing hook with a lighter.



“Don’t even—” I began to protest, just as Cobra covered my mouth with the palm of his hand and dropped his elbows on my shoulders, essentially blocking my view with his upper body.

I felt Romero’s fingers near the wound a second before the pressure began. He pushed until the end of the hook popped through my skin, tugging something on the end of it and then pushing it through the other side.

I don’t know if it was from the pain of having a hook shoved through my flesh over and over again, the pills, or both. Either way, I closed my eyes to hide my tears and didn’t open them again.

## CHAPTER NINE

Where the fuck did she come from?

Her screams were on a repeating soundtrack inside my head. I still had her blood on my hands. And when was the last time my dick was this hard?

I took another swig from the bottle and then passed it to Grimm. It was almost dawn, and none of us had slept. I couldn’t sleep because, well, I rarely slept, and because I couldn’t stop thinking about the potential problem I had placed in my bed.

It was a problem that had long blonde hair, skin as white as snow, and a cesspool of rage and pain that mirrored my own behind a pair of cornflower blue eyes.

She reminded me of an angel that had been stripped of its wings. It was a fitting description when I thought about the circumstances surrounding her, and I’d been doing that a fuck of a lot.

“You were right about her,” Grimm acknowledged. His neck was bent forward, and

he was staring at the liquor bottle as if it held all the answers to his questions. A strand of his dark hair hung partially over his forehead.

“Where did she come from?” He looked at me for an answer he knew I would eventually have. I suspected this would be the most emotion he showed on the topic until he was ready to talk about it, which could be never, and that was more than fine by me.

The first time we saw Cali, we were ten, and she was five. She had been wearing a pink nightgown, and her hair was in two long pigtails. The kid was so fucking pale she looked like a ghost.

I didn’t know where she’d been for the past few years, but it made a lot of shit make sense now.

“So, are we keeping both of them?” Cobra asked, as if we were talking about a pair of puppies.

“Do we really want the loud one?” Grimm asked, referring to the brunette currently sleeping in the dog pen.

“She might be leverage.”

He grunted in response.

I already knew what I was going to do, but I never wanted them to feel like their opinions didn’t mean shit to me, so I always heard them out and then laid it all out for em. Rarely did they disagree.

“I think it could be good for a while. We could use a woman’s presence around here now Lena’s gone.” Cobra added.

Ah, Lena. The stupid bitch more than likely ran off having a temper tantrum and got herself killed.

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We had yet to discuss what we were going to do about her death, but we would be doing something in due time.

Leaning forward, I rested my elbows on my knees and made sure I had their attention. “Until I know the who, what, when, and why, I’m keeping Cali close to me.”

Grimm shot me a skeptical look while Cobra’s expression turned smug. They knew what happened the last time I kept a woman close to me and it didn’t end well between us. They each played a role in her eventual downfall. That was years ago though, and I got what I wanted out of that situation. This was different.

I had selfish ulterior motives. I hadn’t been this intrigued in a very long fucking time—not by a woman who was supposed to be dead.

We had come across bitches before who would beg to be let in without actually knowing what it was they were asking for, swearing they were like us at heart, but it was all bullshit. After they were used a few times, they eventually buckled and had to be killed. It was pure entertainment, watching them all try to be something they weren’t.

I never made it easy for anyone to get in; I never accepted anyone at face value. I had too much shit at stake to ever be stupid and careless. Too many people relied on me.

This girl, though? She was different, so fucking different to what I had imagined. When she looked up at me and smiled, I saw insanity dancing behind hypnotic blue irises. It was the kind that made people scared shitless. I saw her look the devil in the

eyes and accept what everyone else feared.

The immediate pull between us almost felt magnetic. It sure as shit wasn't love, but definitely lust, and maybe something else. I couldn't fully wrap my head around it and I honestly wasn't sure I wanted to.

"Cali lived with The Order for nineteen years. She knows something that can help us." Cobra spoke up first, handing the bottle back to me.

"Yeah...well, The Order also said she was dead. We don't know what happened in the last however many years. They could have sent her themselves," Grimm pointed out. Bitterness we were all familiar with laced his tone.

The fucking Order was a major pain in my ass. I had so much shit th

at needed to be handled and David was fifty percent of it. We all had our reasons for wanting to find the motherfucker, and we were close, so damn close.

"We can use this to our advantage. Just let me think for a minute." Because all I had was a minute. We were running out of time, the clock was ticking faster each day, and this was something I hadn't prepared to handle.

I meticulously planned my shit. I knew exactly when every bump, twist, and turn was coming my way, but I never saw this one.

I didn't know a dove was going to land amongst the crows, and while her white feathers represented purity, her jet black heart gave life to a beautifully insidious soul.

He was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes. For a few seconds, I thought I was having one of my rare good dreams again. He was facing away from me, getting a shirt from a dresser. His body was...incredible.

The patterned ink and his well-defined physique made him look like a living, breathing piece of art.

His hair was perfectly styled, undercut and combed back on the top with tattoos running around the trim line. I was still appraising him when he turned around, giving me a quick view of his solid abs that were also covered with tattoos, one being of a nearly obscured Sabbatic goat head, accompanied by a quote that read Flesh Of Blood Of Bone.

His fitted black T fell into place and slowly brought things back into perspective. I tried to swallow and nearly choked on dry air. My mouth felt like it had been stuffed with a handful of cotton-balls. In the midst of my coughing episode, my bladder made sure to let me know it was seconds away from busting wide open.

“Bathroom?” he asked, plucking the thought right from my head.

I looked at him and nodded.

“It’s through there. Do your thing and clean yourself up. There’s shit in the box.”

He pointed to a semi-open door to my left before heading out of the room, barely paying me any attention. I heard the telling sound of a lock clicking into place and then his boots carrying him away.

Shoving the comforter away with my legs, I slowly sat up and looked down to see I was wearing an oversized black t-shirt, much like the one Romero had just put on. My bra was still on—not that I would have cared if it wasn’t; Daddy dearest made sure I was comfortable being naked around strangers. I just wondered who’d taken the liberty of starting to scrub the dirt from my body.

Scurrying off the (surprisingly comfortable) bed as quick as I could, I tested the

waters with how I felt pain-wise, relieved that though I was sore, it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been.

I still took my time walking to the bathroom, glancing around the room as I went.

There was no real character to it. The gray walls were bare and the bed linens were all black, as were the few scarce pieces of furniture. The bathroom was just as dull with the same cold, sterile feel to it. Nothing about either room gave away anything about the man they belonged to, except the smell.

It was his smell. I'd inhaled it the second he stopped me from falling on my face—twice. It wasn't synthetic, but all natural. It was exotic, a little indulging, and after sleeping in his bed, intoxicating.

My bare feet carried me across a cool slate floor. I plopped down on a steel seat and shut my eyes. Warm sunlight filtered down on my face from an oval window above the toilet.

"Shit, I got in." My eyes popped open as if I were just now coming awake. I did my business and then rushed over to the sink. The flare-up in my side barely registered.

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I was too focused on the fact that I had gotten inside whatever the hell this place was.

My excitement slightly waned as I reminded myself that getting inside was supposed to be the easy part. Nothing about what I just went through was a cakewalk. The hidden obstacles before me were slowly but surely making themselves visible.

I studied my reflection in the mirror above the sink, frowning at the woman staring back at me. My blonde locks were a tangled, bed-headed mess, and I had a few colorful bruises from my recent escapade that harshly stood out against my skin. I didn't like this mirror very much. There weren't any cracks in it.

Skimming my fingers along the hem of the t-shirt, I lifted it up and examined my puncture wound. Romero had done a surprisingly good job of stitching me up. Bits of crusted blood and scab still clung to me, but that was to be expected. The area was still tender to the touch, on top of being an ugly reddish color.

Letting the t-shirt fall back into place just above my knees, I turned the faucet on and finally peered inside the cardboard box on the counter. It contained various sizes of men and women's clothes, and a few pairs of shoes. Unless Romero and his buddies were gathering clothing up for a rainy day, I could only assume it all belonged to some poor, dead, unfortunate souls.

I pulled out a long-sleeved plaid shirt that was about two sizes too big and set it to the side. After a few more seconds of digging, I had a pair of black boots and someone's lacy bralet. I held the peach number up and shrugged. It would be a little snug on the girls but it looked clean and it wasn't like the original owner could object.



After pulling Romero's shirt off, I quickly washed my face the best I could with the corner of a balled-up bandana, sparing a few seconds to drink from the tap.

The end result was far from perfect, but I wasn't trying to win any beauty competitions.

Tiptoeing toward the door, I tried to see if I could hear anything. Only the silence remained. With every second counting and a clock ticking, I tried to get my thoughts back in order.

David would not be in the same spot for long. If Romero knew where he was, he would have to make some kind of move soon. That is, if they weren't working together. This had the potential to get all kinds of messy. I took a good look around and asked myself the game changing question: What the fuck now?

Heading back towards the toilet, I shut the lid and used it as a stepping-stone to the upper tank. Gripping the barely-existent window rim, I stood on my tiptoes and stretched up as far as my side allowed me, squinting from the sunlight. "What the hell?"

Narrowing my eyes, stretching a tad bit more, I tried to pinpoint where I was, but all I could see was wasteland.

Looking as far left as I could, slightly leaning in the process, I saw little black specs floating in the air above a circular pit full of visible corpses.

To the right was nothing but a view of the building I was in: some kind of refurbished warehouse. Old boxcars were stacked on top of one another and served as a fence that connected to a large pair of chain-link gates. They were secured together by what I was guessing was a manual lock. Clearly, they had two objectives: keep people out, and keep people in.

So much for running if things went south.

Dammit.

“Tryna find an escape route?”

Yes. “No, I’m trying to figure out where the hell I am.” Not letting on to the fact that he had just caught me completely off guard and that my side now hurt like a sonofabitch, I slowly lowered my booted heels and climbed off the toilet.

I turned around and crossed my arms, openly perusing him from head to toe. He was enigmatic and sinewy, leaning against the door jam with an unreadable expression on his pretty face.

The skull ring on his index finger looked familiar but I couldn’t place it. When my eyes drifted back up to his face, there was a cocky little smirk waiting for me.

“I’ve found many women outside those gates before, and none of them have been anything like you.”

“You didn’t find me, I found you, and I’d appreciate it if you let me leave now.” I tossed out a partial lie, readying my arsenal of false pretenses.

“Leave? Why would you want to leave when you just got here?” He pushed away from the door and took two steps towards me. “Do you think I saved you out of the kindness of my heart?” His voice turned serious. If possible, his eyes got a little darker.

It didn’t take me long to conclude that it was best to tread carefully with this man, but where was the fun in t

hat?

It also didn't take me long to conclude that I'd made the right decision earlier. Tito and Grady's plan was shit. I could not pretend to be weak or helpless in front of these people; they would eat me alive. Yet being too headstrong, being myself, could get me killed. It was a crossroad I really didn't want to be at, so I chose the most logical path to take.

"Didn't we already go over this? I never needed your help. You didn't have to save me." Boldly mimicking his actions, I took two steps forward.

"See, that thing you just did has me wondering if you were really lost in the first place." His eyes traveled up and down me in a way that had goose flesh spreading across my skin.

"You think I purposely went off into the woods so I could meet a cannibal?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe. Why don't we find out?"

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He stepped forward, bringing us chest to chest, forcing me to tilt my head back so I could look up at him. In one swift motion, he had his thumb over my trachea, gently applying pressure.

“What were you doing in the woods?”

“You saw what I was doing.”

“Come on now, Cali, I know you’re smarter than this.” He shook his head and tsked at me.

Once again, I had to keep my face impassive. How did he know my name? He leaned in so close I could smell traces of menthol on his breath. His proximity had my discomfort levels off the charts for reasons I wasn’t accustomed to.

I wrapped a hand around his wrist and placed the other against his firm chest, keeping my eyes locked with his, letting him know I wasn’t intimidated.

“Is this making you feel better about yourself? Interrogating a helpless woman?”

“Now, we both know you’re far from helpless. But yes, it is kind of making my dick hard.”

I coughed to cover the laugh that almost slipped out. His raised brows told me he heard it anyway. Thankfully, he didn’t comment on it.

“I’m still waiting on an answer, Cali.” He said my name like it was something

decadent.

He began to run his thumb up and down my throat. The feel of his skin against mine gave me a feeling I couldn't describe. His touch didn't make my heart race with anxiety, my limbs didn't shake from nervous energy, and my knees didn't grow so weak that I fell at his feet. His touch made me feel unexplainably calm and warm at the same time, like at any second my skin would burst into flame, but it was okay as long as his hand stayed wrapped around my throat.

"Such a fragile thing, you," he murmured. When he leaned in again, I thought he was going to try to put his mouth on mine. I was well prepared to high-kick his balls into his stomach for calling me fragile.

Instead, he spoke directly in my ear. "What were you doing in my woods?" His warm breath trickled across my skin, his voice low and menacing. He pulled back but kept his thumb in place, studying my face. His dark stare penetrated right through me, daring my lips to spill the lie that sat on the tip of my tongue. For a second, I forgot how to breathe.

"I got lost. I..."

With the slightest tilt of his head, I knew he didn't believe me.

"I was with a guy. He dumped me off on the side of the road after doing this." I pointed to my stab wound. "All I was trying to do was get away from the main road."

He looked at me a few seconds before saying, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, now let's try this again, and this time don't fucking lie, or I'll snap your pretty

little neck.”

## CHAPTER TEN

I used my body to back her against the bathroom wall, pinning her wrists down on either side of her.

“You have a super original method for handling women,” she quipped.

I couldn’t stop myself from laughing in her face. What the fuck was wrong with this girl? Either the people we killed were Academy Award winning actors who willingly pissed their pants in fear, or she was a little more off than I thought. No one had the balls to be this brazen.

Maybe she was psychotic. I liked that.

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed.

The tip of her tongue darted out and she licked her lips. I tracked the movement like a goddamn wolf stalking a deer.

Using my knee, I nudged her legs apart and moved her wrists upward, forcing her to make a T, inadvertently lifting the shirt she chose to wear. A dead man’s shirt—she turned a dead man’s shirt into a dress.

I had to look down to see it because of how much smaller than me she was. Everything about her was tiny, exactly like a fucking pixie. And she wasn’t wearing any fuckin underwear.

Her bare pussy was right on top of my denim clad knee. As if realizing the same thing, the faintest little gasp slipped through her lips and sent blood rushing to the tip

of my cock. I studied her pinched features and grinned.

“You like that, don’t you? Cause if you like that, you’re going to love the way I fuck.”

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“You know, men who lack balls and need to compensate for their tiny dicks always have the biggest egos.”

“Is that a challenge? Do you want to find out what I can do to you? Because I’m happy to oblige but I promise, baby, you’ll never be the same after I’m done.” I gave her a devilish grin and made sure she felt my dick against her lower stomach.

“I’ll fuck you hard enough to rip you apart and I’ll keep fucking you until the base of my dick is covered in your blood.”

Her pretty pink lips parted and she tried to twist away. I pressed into her a little more.

“I’ll fuck you so hard Jesus Christ will make his second coming before I make my first.”

She immediately responded to my words. Her knees fell farther apart and she licked her bitable lips again, making a sexy growling sound in her throat as I brought my mouth just close enough to skim over hers.

She nipped at my bottom lip, making me chuckle.

Switching her wrists to one hand, I brought the other up and roughly cupped her jaw, forcing her mouth open and slipping my tongue inside. Our eyes remained wide open and locked together.

She gave me a stormy, heated glare that went straight to my dick and began to kiss me back, shocking the shit out of me. Smiling against her mouth, I recovered and



amped up the intensity, watching her work to match it as if she'd never done this before.

The sensual groan that spilled from her mouth had common sense trying to evade me. This crazy fucking bitch had a taste that overwhelmed me. She tasted like every immoral thought I'd ever had.

When I felt her tense up against me, I had to force myself to let go and step back. Her chest rose and fell but she kept her breathing quiet, rolling her lips together.

For a second, she looked up at me with confusion before her expression changed to one that was equally terrified and aroused.

I knew that if I placed my hand between her legs, I would find her pussy wet. Being a gentleman wasn't my forte. Part of me wanted to wrap her legs around my waist and force my dick inside her just to feel her tremble in fear from the inside out, to hear her beg, to scream at me to stop.

As I looked at her face, I knew. I knew someone had done something to her, just as I knew she would be mine. The beast inside me reared his fucking head and set a claim on her without my permission.

I wanted to know the name and location of every motherfucker who had hurt her so I could take him or her apart piece by slow, agonizing piece.

I only kept my composure because this wasn't the time to fuck her against the wall and make her tell me everything I wanted to know.

Turns out that wasn't mutual.

The little minx launched herself at me. One second she was staring at me with hatred,

and the next, her hands were on my face and her mouth was back on mine.

I had my tongue shoved down her throat before I knew what the fuck was happening. She was stretching up to reach me and I knew it had to hurt. Grabbing two handfuls of ass, I wrapped her legs around my waist and she clung to my neck like it was a lifeline.

She pulled away and looked me dead in the eye, and said the two words I knew all too well. “Fuck me.”

Maybe I should have warned her about what she was asking for. It would have been kinder to mention what my true intentions were, but that would have been the right thing to do, and I wasn’t a do-the-right thing kind of person.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

He didn’t hesitate to oblige.

He said he’d tear me apart and make me bleed. I’d heard those words in my head so many times it was like a trigger being pulled, a switch being flipped as a curtain was yanked open.

He made my body come alive with a plethora of foreign feelings I didn’t think were possible anymore. I’d be damned if I let that slip away from me.

He carried me back into his room and dropped me onto the bed.

“Don’t fucking talk. Just strip.” His voice was iron, his eyes cold.

I bit my lip to stifle a giggle and did as I was told. I knew he’d be like this; just this once, I didn’t mind.

I never willingly gave up control, but this was different. I wanted him to dominate me and take everything I didn't willingly give, just like I imagined in my head. I wanted his shameful hands around my throat and his dick buried inside me.

His eyes traveled over every inch of my skin. When the word beautiful fell from his mouth, I looked down, trying to see what he did.

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I would have thought my pale bruised skin, thin body, and overall disheveled look would have had the opposite effect. I was almost at my ugliest point and he called me beautiful. By the look on his face, it wasn't a word he used often. I shifted uncomfortably, unsure how to feel about it.

He didn't look away once as he peeled off his shirt and dropped down his pants and drawers, not completely removing them.

Mmm, this man was gorgeous. I scanned over his perfectly muscled arms, down his stomach, and stopped at his cock. I bit my bottom lip, seeing how thick and long it was. The metal bar going through the head had me fixated.

Something dipped in my lower stomach; the ache he elicited between my thighs had my arousal at an unbearable high.

He made a sound in his chest and grabbed my ankles, pulling me to the edge of the bed. My legs were hooked over his forearms and his dick was pushing into me by time I'd exhaled a single breath.

A quiet grunt left my mouth at the stretch and slow burn of his intrusion. I reached down and used two fingers to spread myself further.

He pushed all the w

ay in and the air dispersed from my lungs on a scream. There was a temporary disconnect between my mind and body, coming back with an overwhelming hysteria of emotions.

I hadn't done this in so long, and I'd never been with a man like him before. My body worked to accommodate his size, stretching around him. That didn't stop him from setting a grueling pace. He cursed beneath his breath and dug his fingers into my flesh.

I shut my eyes and struggled to hold back the moans building on top of one another in my chest. It wasn't until I truly focused on his face that a wisp of clarity trickled through my lusty haze. His midnight hues were zeroed in on my face. He was moving inside me but it barely looked like he was breathing.

With each passing second of his eyes boring down at me, a heady feeling had my gut telling me to stop this, even if I didn't want to. The way he was looking at me made it seem as if he could see everything inside me, like he was analyzing me for something.

"Stop," I breathed, trying to push myself up with my elbows.

"There we go. I was waiting on that." His face split into a sinister smile. "Why would we stop? We haven't even started."

I swallowed, sucking in a breath as he pulled me further down the mattress until my ass was left hanging between him and the air.

His words were loaded with a double-meaning, I was smart enough to know that, but he didn't give me time to think about what it was. He placed my legs on his shoulders and bent my knees towards my chest, folding me in half. A soft whimper left my mouth as my side protested.

"Stop."

"Shut the fuck up." He shoved my upper half down and pinned me by the neck. "Stop

sounds a lot like no. I don't know the meaning of that word and now, neither do you.” He thrust his hips, planting himself so deep his balls rested against the groove of my ass.

“I can't,” I half moaned, half pleaded.

I arched my back in an attempt to lessen the intense pressure and fullness of him inside me, making it worse and adding more strain on my side.

“You wanted to be fucked, remember?”

He cruelly laughed at me.

The man who starred in all my dirty, degrading nightmarish fantasies finally made his appearance.

He drilled into me. The louder I moaned, the harder he fucked me. The mattress creaked beneath me, skin smacked against skin, and his grip grew tighter around my neck. It felt like I was being ripped apart, straight down the middle, from the inside out.

Something pulled and snapped. I cried out in pain, feeling something wet run down my stomach. I couldn't do anything but lie still and let him have his way with me.

I'd been here before but never like this. My body burned with pain and pleasure.

I clenched the sheets between my fists like they were a lifeline as he made good on his promise of fucking me hard enough to tear me apart. The metal bar began stroking something inside me I didn't even know was there.

My pussy flooded with arousal, growing wetter than it already was. I felt his muscles

tense and knew he was holding back for my benefit.

“Come for me, Cali,” he ordered in a low voice, tightening his grip even more, restricting my airflow. I grabbed for his hand, unable to pull it away. My chest heaved with strangled breaths and choked moans. I tried to do what he said but I didn’t know how. I’d never gotten off with a cock inside me.

“Fucking come and I’ll let you breathe again,” he snapped, cutting off my air supply completely.

He shifted his hips and dropped one of my legs, angling himself as deep as he could.

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Something rapidly built in my core, pervading through me like liquid lightning as he hit that sweet spot with brutal thrusts over and over again.

Oh my god.

He let my throat go and leaned down to catch my barrage of moans in his mouth as I came apart around him. I couldn't see. A black curtain drew across my vision. I stopped breathing completely. I never knew I could feel pleasure in every part of my body strong enough to leave me shuddering and pulling him into me to go deeper, clawing at his back.

Fuzzy specs of white danced before my eyes as he continued to fuck me into the mattress. When his dick swelled, he immediately pulled out with a low groan, spurting warm come all over my breasts. With a swirl of his fingers, he massaged it into my skin.

“Fuck,” he softly cursed.

Still trying to breathe again, I lifted my head and looked between us, seeing his come mixed with the blood between my thighs and trickling from my wound.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

He pushed my hands away so he could examine where his handiwork had come undone.

“I’ve got a first aid kit—”



“You don’t need one, it’s not that bad,” I lied.

His hands landed on my shoulders to prevent me from hopping off the sink where he had sat me. “I’m gonna ignore the fact that you just spoke over me. You’re gonna sit your ass on this counter until I get back with the kit.” He stepped away, giving me a warning glare before exiting the bathroom.

As soon as I heard his bedroom door shut, I stood up, steadying myself on trembling legs.

Holding my head in my hands, I tried to make myself regret what had transpired between us but the feeling wouldn’t come. So many men had used me and none of them had ever made me feel like he just did.

I should have foreseen this coming. The powerful frequency between us had our souls fucking before we ever touched. No, I could never regret the painfully sweet ache he created between my thighs.

Ever since I’d discovered who he was two years ago, he’d done the impossible. He intrigued me like no man had ever done before. He was beautiful and sick, like me—the star of all my obscene fantasies.

The throbbing in my side steadily reminded me he was real. He was more than pictures and the erotic nightmares I craved late at night.

This lust though, my secret obsession, was dangerous. I had yet to see just what he was capable of, but I knew he was merciless, ruthless. He had an aura around him that was so dark it could blot out the sun. It seeped into everything around him. I knew I wouldn’t be the exception but that didn’t bother me; I harbored my own demons inside me.

Through the white noise inside my head, I distinctly remembered Tito warning me, “You don’t want to end up like his last girl.”

Now that I thought about some of the things he’d said, it was alarmingly obvious Tito had known more than he’d let on. Some of the things he’d told me could never be learned from a sheet of paper or in-depth research. They were too personal. The Savages were notorious, but they were also highly secure and private.

Of all the things I’d found out about him, no woman had ever come up. So how did Tito know there ever was one? I mean, she clearly wasn’t around anymore. That’s if she ever existed in the first place. He could have easily made it up in his failed attempt to ward me off.

I was inclined to believe she was either no longer breathing or their relationship had ended on an unpleasant note.

A chain of truth tried to form in my mind, but there were too many goddamn links missing. I couldn’t ask, either, not without giving up information on the other and risking being lied to. Right then, I barely even trusted myself.

“Didn’t I tell you not to move?”

“I didn’t like the way you asked.” Lifting my head, I clenched the shirt covering my waist a little tighter and took a quick inventory of the things in Romero’s hands as he re-entered the room.

“I didn’t fucking ask you anything. You know what? We need to get a few things clear.” He brushed past me and sat everything in the sink. Then, he scooped me up as if I were a ragdoll and deposited me right back on the counter, parking his muscular body between my legs.

“You gorgeous girl,” he murmured, brushing strands of hair out of my face.

“I don’t want to hurt you...wait. That’s not how I want to start.” He gave me a skewed grin and shook his head. “I do want to hurt you. There are so many...

things I want to do you. And I will. You’ll love every torturous second of it...eventually.” He smoothed the pad of his thumb across my bottom lip.

“I don’t want to hurt you for pissing me off, Cali, not this early in our relationship.”

Early in our...

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“We don’t have a relationship,” I objected.

“We have whatever I want us to have.”

“You can’t do that. You can’t just make decisions for me.”

“I can do whatever the fuck I want. It’s you who no longer has choices.”

My eyes floated to the slated floor and then back up to his. Not yet up for a battle of words, I asked him the question that was still swimming around in my head.

“How do you know my name?”

Should I have asked how he knew my name before demanding he fuck me like a needy whore? Probably.

He smirked. “I was wondering how you knew my name, seeing as you just repeated it like a well-versed prayer.”

Shit, did I really do that? I pressed my lips into a straight line and looked up at him, refusing to give myself up. “You need to work on your art of seduction.”

He reached out and pinched my chin. “Do you want me to seduce you, Cali?”

I choked on a swallow and knocked his hand away. Since he was still shirtless, I chose to intently focus on his sabbatic goat head.

Yes, yes, yes! I excitedly repeated in my head. He could be mine and I could be his. I couldn't give up the plot so fast, though. I may not be able to follow Tito's plan, but I could never be disloyal to him.

Okay, deep breaths. Fake it till you make it, Cali. I hated rejecting him, but I couldn't so freely give in. Letting out a little sigh, I smiled and placed a hand on his broad shoulder.

"I want you to stop doing...whatever it is you're doing. I don't know you well enough for you to be my...boyfriend. I've never even had a boyfriend. What makes you special enough to be my first?"

He threw his head back and laughed. "You knew me well enough to let me inside your tight little pussy and come all over my cock. You'd be amazed at what you can learn about a woman when you're balls deep inside her.

"And where in there did you hear I wanted to be your boyfriend? That's fucking juvenile. Boyfriends are temporary; I'm not."

Keep going, I thought, secretly thrilled by his words. The hair lifted on the back of my neck. I brought my free hand up to his other shoulder and slightly leaned back. "I don't understand what you're trying to say."

"You let the devil inside you, baby. And he isn't leaving anytime soon."

I blinked up at him, hearing his words but not fully processing them. It couldn't be this easy-peasy. Romero Deville was not rumored to be a nice man. Like Tito said, the Savages didn't give without receiving, so what was it he wanted from me, and why wasn't he saying something?

Taking my silence as his cue to continue, he gripped the back of my neck, ensuring

he had my full attention.

“I don’t know what the fuck this connection is but I’m not letting it die before we give it a chance to live. Don’t focus on me being your first when I’m going to be your last. I have your whole life to tear you apart and then put you back together again.”

Well, the first part sounded a bit romantic, but the ending could use a tad more work. I needed a minute to reflect, needed to retreat somewhere quiet so I could think.

There were a few parts of his proclamation that stood out, but what did it even matter when we both seemed to be on a similar track?

“You have no intention of letting me leave here, do you?”

He looked to the ceiling with a sigh. When his eyes met mine again, I saw the answer before he repeated the two simple words that had damned me from the beginning.

“Finders keepers.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Something was about to happen; I could feel it. My mind kept going to worst-case scenarios.

Romero cleaned my wound and covered it with gauze before leading me from the room. We walked down to the lower level in silence.

I immediately spotted Arlen sitting at a long farmhouse table. She was still filthy and it looked like she had yet to fall asleep. A teeny trickle of guilt ciphared into my psyche. How had I forgotten her so fast?

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Grimm and Cobra calmly stood on either side of her, as if they'd been instructed to do so. I licked my lips and shot a quick glance at Romero. Something just wasn't right—not that it ever was.

Grimm slowly approached us, holding something in his hand. He passed it to Romero and then whispered something I couldn't hear in his ear. Whatever he said had Romero's gaze turning stony and his jaw clenching.

“What's going on?”

“I think we need to discuss a few more things in detail.” His voice housed no emotion, giving away nothing. He'd had a swift change in demeanor in the span of ten seconds.

As he walked me towards the table, we bypassed a large circular sectional. Painted on the floor directly in front of it was an inverted pentacle. The five-pointed star had a single downward spoke, turning something once righteous wicked.

Before I could question what the deal was, I spotted the large skull of a ram with the same pentagram painted on its forehead in red, serving as a centerpiece.

Were they Satanists?

“Have a seat.” Romero pulled out a chair for me at the end of the table and I cautiously sat. Arlen was at the opposite end, staring at me with a warning in her cognac eyes and maybe...fear.

“You’ve been a busy girl, Calista.”

He stood behind my chair and laid my necklace on the table in front of me. I hadn’t even realized it was missing.

The black inverted cross starkly contrasted with the brown tabletop. I heard him move away but I didn’t turn to see what he was doing.

“You haven’t told me what you were doing in my woods yet, but we can get to that later. What I really want to know is how long you’ve been a fan.”

I stared down at each picture he slowly placed in front of me. Four detailed pictures of four mutilated bodies with a cross carved straight through their centers.

“Was that question too hard? Do you need a few minutes to come up with a reasonable explanation?”

“You have an excellent photographer.”

He knotted a hand in my hair and pulled my head back, forcing me to look up at him.

“Do not fuck with me, Cali. I am exactly the kind of person you don’t fuck with. You wanted my attention, and now you’ve got it. Why. Are. You. Here?” He pulled my hair a little more with each word, making pain ripple down my scalp. My eyes burned with unshed tears from how far he had the skin around them stretched back.

“How did you know I liked my hair pulled?”

There was laughter from the opposite end of the table. He didn’t find it nearly as amusing. He kicked the chair out from underneath me,



lifted me by the head, and slammed me down onto the table.

Strands of hair tore in his hold. When my jaw hit the wooden surface, I bit my tongue so hard I tasted blood. His body covered mine, making sure I couldn't go anywhere.

“Girls like you don't wander around in the woods, and you sure as fuck don't get dumped off. I'm going to ask you one last time. Why are you here? I know you didn't do all of this just to get a sample fuck, though you wouldn't be the first—definitely the craziest.”

What a cocky fuckin asshole.

I tried to knee him in the balls but I couldn't lift my leg high enough. “You haven't ever met a girl like me, cause if you had you wouldn't have just made that dumbass statement. I only wanted your help!”

“That is definitely a new answer,” Cobra commented from the other end of the table.

“It's an honest answer,” I growled.

“You did all that in hopes that I'd help you because I'm a good guy?” Romero sneered.

“No. I thought you'd help me because it's fucking David and you're the only one with balls big enough to go after him.”

He stared down at me with an unreadable expression.

“I'm telling you the truth,” I snapped.

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And I was. I had snuck out at night for months to kill those women in hope I would come across one of the Savages, always sticking to the same area. I always chose women who were followers of David.

It took me hours to take them apart and make sure they were in places journalists would find. Having to sneak in and out of the compound, ditch my bloody clothes, and hide a murder weapon got old—fast.

Tito and Grady were my lucky break. I had stumbled upon their secret meetings entirely by accident. I'd been trying to make it back to my room before Jinx woke up and saw the bloodstains on my hands.

Romero looked at his friends and did some sort of silent communication bullshit before taking a step back, letting me go. I sat up, just to be pulled off the table and spun around. My palms hit the wooden surface as he gripped me from behind.

The scene at the other end of the table had me clenching my jaw and balling up my fists.

Grimm had a machete resting on top of Arlen's head. She had her eyes trained on me, looking rightfully terrified.

“What do you have to offer that would benefit me in any way?” Romero asked.

“I know where my uncle meets with his delegates.”

At my words, a pregnant silence ensued.

“Okay, now we’re getting somewhere. I’m going to make you a deal, Pixie. Listen to me very closely. You’re going to take me to this supposed meeting place.” He pressed himself into me and slightly lifted me up by the throat. “And you’re going to give me something I want...”

When he didn’t immediately finish his sentence,

my thoughts ran wild. If he asked for where I’d been or where I came from, I couldn’t tell him—I wouldn’t.

Outside of that, I had no idea what he was playing at. I didn’t have anything. I had no home, no money, and no resources. Come to think of it, I was a bit pathetic. I truly had nothing and I felt the need to apologize for it.

“I’m sorry, but—”

“I want you.”

My brain froze, hitting an embankment of confusion. I was quickly becoming irritated with his blunt responses. The manhandling didn’t bother me much. I actually kinda liked it, though I preferred it to be under different circumstances. “You already—what do you mean, you want me? We just did that whole thing...upstairs.”

“I did that whole thing upstairs. You just sat there. Why wait to make it official? We even have three attentive witnesses.”

“Witnesses...you want me to marry you?”

“This goes deeper than marriage.”

His tone was so serious I fell off my train of thought. No one laughed or commented

at his statement.

What could be deeper than a marriage?

If vowing to honor, forsake, and cherish till death wasn't enough for this man, then he was a little too high maintenance.

I was so damn confused, and it was hard to think clearly when his hard dick was pressing into me through his jeans and Arlen's life was a blink away from ending. I tried to articulate my uncertainty in a way that wouldn't offend him and get me potentially killed along with her.

"You want all my knowledge and you want me in a way you're being purposely vague about? That doesn't seem like a very fair deal to me."

"I'm not a fair person."

"Oh, you don't say? I hadn't noticed."

"Cali, let me tell you what's about to happen if you don't agree."

He forced me to arch my back, making me feel every bit how hard he was.

"I'm going to make you watch my brothers destroy every hole on your friend's body before they take off her head while I fuck your sweet little ass."

"And after all that, I'm still going to get what I want. I'd just treat you like all the other bitches that come here and beg to be a part of my world, a world they wouldn't last sixty seconds in. Do you know what we do to them, pretty girl?"

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“We use them. We break them down until they have nothing left to offer. We take what was once whole and break it into a million unfixable pieces. Half the time, our dicks are still inside them when we snap their fucking necks.”

Holy shit. By the time he was done, his words had me soaked, damn near ready to ask him to fuck me again.

I didn’t want to be broken. The thought of breaking someone else with him, though...that sounded like my kind of party. But if I went down that road, I knew how it would end, which was precisely why I could never let him know just what it was he did to me, the way he made me feel.

Not to mention Arlen’s life was in my hands. If I thought for one second he was bluffing, I would call him out on it, but I knew he would act on his threat in a heartbeat. I could only hope she was strong enough to survive the ride of insanity we were about to climb on. After all, I would be fucking the conductor to ensure we survived.

I knew a deal was the equivalent of handing over my soul, but I didn’t have any soul to give anyway.

“I’ll do it.”

“Cali, it’s not worth it. Don’t you dare take that deal!”

I took it—and everyone in the room seemed to know something I didn’t.

## Part Two

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

He let me up but didn't let me go.

I was still between him and the table when he told his friends to take Arlen to get cleaned up after assuring me she might be hurt, but not killed, which wasn't really that reassuring at all.

"There's something I need you to do before we discuss a course of action, but first, turn around."

I turned to face him, rubbing my jaw, wondering what he was going to do next. Peering up at him, I was once more in awe of him. His beauty was the best illusion I had ever seen. Whoever taught him how to mask his true nature had done a phenomenal job.

He was flawlessly gorgeous on the outside, vile and revolting on the inside.

He was perfection.

I didn't need anybody to tell me that he was a bad idea that would more than likely end with me being killed. I knew that—it was part of the allure. I knew he would hurt me but that's what I wanted. It would make up for all the other men who did it without my permission.

I was willing to give myself to a merciless killer, knowing full well what the ramifications could be. I was a grown woman making her own decisions and no one could take that right from me ever again.

I'd followed the rules long enough. I just wanted to find myself. This was too new to know if it would last forever, and it would never be considered normal, but it was my present and I wanted to indulge in it. He was a hazardous risk and a mystery; I'd never been more certain about anything in my life. Whatever this connection was between us, I fucking needed it.

He stepped forward and raised my chin with his knuckle, gently brushing his lips down either side of my face before hovering them over mine. "Sit on the table and spread your legs."

Keeping my eyes on him, I backed up until the rim of the wooden table was at my ass and hopped up. Still watching him, I parted my legs. With no underwear on, my arousal was put on display.

"Cali," he tsked at me, gnawing his bottom lip and closing the small distance between us. "Which part made your pussy this wet?"

He braced his hands on my bruised knees and skimmed his lips down my neck. I sucked in a shaky breath, curling my fingers into my palms, fighting the urge to touch him.

"Was it the visual of me fucking you in the ass, watching my friends fuck yours, or the idea of me tearing another woman apart?"

"All of it," I breathed, turning my head to catch his mouth. I ran my tongue over his lips, seeking entrance, intertwining it with his when he granted it. His large hands gripped either side of my face and he slightly pulled away. "I'm going to push you straight into madness," he whispered in my ear before dropping to his knees.

"This is mine," he growled, burying his face between my thighs. He took his time sliding his tongue up and down my slit. "I love the way you taste," he soughed

against me.

I jerked at the feel of him pushing two of his digits inside me and then slowly pulling back out, still freshly sore from the way he'd taken me less than an hour ago.

He latched onto my clit and held it between his teeth, massaging it with the tip of his tongue.

I bit down on my lip to stifle my moans, starting to move my hips against his mouth in rhythm with his languid strokes.

The sound of him feasting on my wet pussy and my untamable whimpers reverberated in the air.



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His tongue was just as magical as his dick, making me see colors I didn't even know existed. I panted as I felt a familiar heat coiling inside me, spreading up my spine.

"Rome," I groaned, and grabbed the back of his neck, grinding myself against his face. He responded by pulling his fingers out and burying his tongue so deep inside me I felt myself clench around it. He looked up at me with the same intense expression he had when he fucked me on the edge of his bed, and bit down on my clit.

"Oh, Rome," I repeated on a low moan, falling back to my elbows as the second strongest orgasm of my life washed over me.

He continued, lapping up my come as I writhed against him.

He used his thumb to toy with my swollen nub, pushing me into another orbit of pleasure.

When he stood up and wiped my juices from his face, I was still trembling. He gave me a skewed smirk as I pushed myself into a sitting position and unhurriedly squeezed my legs back together.

His gaze floated to the floor where my necklace had fallen. He scooped it up and secured it back around my neck. I sat still, closing my

eyes as he moved my hair and buckled the clasp, smelling myself on his breath.

I opened my eyes when he stepped away, and instantly missed the warmth of his

body. “What about you?” I gestured to the visible bulge in his jeans. I admittedly wasn’t a fan of blowjobs, but I wanted him to feel good, too.

He smirked and held out a hand. “You’ll make it up to me later. Come with me.”

I grinned at the obvious double entendre.

After helping me down, he led me back through the refurbished warehouse towards a short hall with a large metal door at the end of it.

I could still feel him between my thighs as I walked, making me want him even more. This mercurial man had the sole ability to turn me into a crazed nymphomaniac.

He’d taken a sex drive that needed a hard kick to sputter at best and smashed it straight to full-throttle. Glancing at him from the corner of my eye, I felt a bit foolish for where my thoughts were drifting. I’d just met him, felt like I’d known him forever, and was already craving more than the lust and attraction.

“Where are you taking me?”

I already had a pretty good idea but I needed something else to focus on besides the way he made me feel, the deal I’d just made, and how totally fucked everything was.

He waited until we reached the end of the hall to answer me.

“I want to show you where I play.” He flashed me a devilish smile and pushed open the door.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Expelling a steady breath, I shoved all my bullshit into a corner of my mind until I

had time to sort through my confusing, chaotic feelings.

The door slammed behind us, shutting me in the same room he had stitched me up in. The draft from the air conditioner was stronger in this part of the building. It made the tiny hairs on my arms rise. An ambient glow illuminated the large space.

Both the dead bodies had been removed, replaced with a man who was tied to a steel chair in the center of the room. He had a familiar black sack over his head and was dressed in the white robes of David's followers.

Seeing him was like being doused with a bucket of cold water.

It affirmed one of the answers I was sent here to find and replaced it with another. The Savages would not be kidnapping and killing off The Order members and working with them.

"Why are you killing them off?"

"Same reason you were. Figured I could get answers and get David's attention. Two birds, one stone."

I nodded and took a good look around the room. One wall held an array of tools. All the others, with the exception of one, were plain. On the back wall directly ahead of us was a Leviathan cross, smeared in bold red paint, inside another inverted pentacle. There was an eye drawn above the infinity symbol and bottom bar of the cross.

This room had a sole purpose. People were brought in here to suffer and die before a symbol that destroyed the pipedream of heaven.

"Is there a reason you have the official symbol of Satan all over your house...and your body?"

He was quiet for so long I almost thought he was ignoring me.

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“I thought you knew,” he eventually answered, turning his entire body towards me and giving me a look I couldn’t decipher.

His stare was so intense I took a step away from him. On a scale of small to big, it was minuscule, but he saw it. When it came to me, the man saw everything. The smile that graced his face was so sinister I had to stop myself from flinching. My breath caught, and I felt the prickling of my skin.

“You have no idea what you’re in for.”

I hadn’t the faintest idea what he meant, and he didn’t seem inclined to offer me an explanation.

I knew the inverted cross was the Savages’ symbol, but I’d always thought of it as more of a logo. I mean, I wore the same cross around my neck. I knew Romero was referred to as the devil, but I thought that was because he was a cruel and heartless asshole.

He couldn’t be the actual entity—this was fucking reality. So what was I missing? What did it have to do with the markings?

“Oh, you’re a Satanic.” I snapped my fingers and pointed at him.

Without a word, he sniggered and walked past me towards the man in the center of the room.

“Are you going to explain?” I called to his back.

He spun around and started walking backward.

“If I told you how to pass all the trials and tribulations and gave you all the answers, I’d ruin half the fun. Just stay curious and keep a smile on that pretty face.”

I crossed my arms and huffed out a breath. “So you’re spinning riddles, now? Seriously?”

He winked and turned back around.

“Come here, baby, we need to properly send off our friend.”

Hiding how much I loved hearing him call me that—how much it warmed me—I rolled my eyes to the ceiling and made my way over to the chair.

Romero pulled the sack off the man’s head and tapped his cheeks a few times to wake him up. He jolted awake, turning his head every which way. The moment he saw my face, his eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

“Calista! What have they done to you?” he gasped.

Even tied to a chair, the guy had the nerve to sound appalled when he was just as bruised as me, if not worse. I tried to find a hint of recognition somewhere in my memory, but I simply had no idea who this man was. However, he certainly knew me, which further screwed with my mental because I had been out of The Order for years.

I looked at Romero and saw him watching me in all his intensity again. Was this one of those trials or tribulations he’d just mentioned? Finding out if I was secretly working with David?

My eyes fell to the shiny black amulet around the man's neck.

I snorted at the sight of it. "I see David's still preaching his made up gospel."

Just like that, he shut down, and a tick appeared in his jaw. A tiny click brought my attention back to the gorgeous man beside me. In his hand was a smaller version of the knife he'd used the day before, outstretched in my direction.

"Take this and slit his throat."

"Um, okay." That was easy enough. Shrugging, I took the knife from him and slashed at the bishop's neck. He closed his eyes and braced himself but was spared at the last second.

Confused, I looked down to where Romero gripped my wrist. "That's not what you wanted?"

"You're moving too fast."

He let me go and circled behind me, gently resting his hands on my shoulders.

"I have a gun, but I rarely use it.

It hinders the creativity I would normally have with my knife. I like to kill slowly. Draw it out and watch them break, look them in the eyes as they suffer and their life fades away."

Using one hand, he gripped my waist. The other moved my hair to one side so he could speak into my ear, using his breath to caress my skin.

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“I want you to relax. Lean into me and look at him. Look at him real fucking good and then tell me what you feel.” His voice was soft and soothing, he nipped at my lower lobe.

Letting out a shaky breath, I stared down at the man in front of me. A bead of sweat rolled from his graying temple to his chin. He did his best to keep a blank face, but the look in his brown eyes conveyed the panic he was trying to hide.

It took me a minute to block out everything but the safe embrace of the man behind me and solely focus on the one in front of me.

As I looked at him—really looked at him—my cold prison cell of memories began to bustle with activity. His robes, his transparent loyalty, and the way my stomach began to turn with every passing second of him being in my sight brought everything back to the forefront of my mind.

I never intentionally faced my past. I’d always looked to the future for the day I could make them suffer like I did. This, though, made me realize how unprepared I was. This was the closest to it I’d ever been.

When I snuck into the church where my uncle preached his bullshit to his delegates, he was always in the front. I hid as far away from him as I possibly could, waiting for the perfect opportunity to drag one of his mindless bitches off to dismember. His voice alone was enough to make my skin break out in a cold sweat.

I started to see them all again—smell them and taste them, their voices in my ear, their breath on my neck, the way they took turns fucking me in both holes until I



bled.

Shaking my head back and forth, I clutched at the arm wrapped around my waist, suddenly feeling as if my chest was going to cave in.

“Uhn-uh, no.” My voice quaked, and I loathed myself for showing a sign of weakness.

Ignoring the way I was clawing at his arm, Romero brought a hand up and gently clasped it around my throat. He kissed my temple and started speaking softly in my ear. “Easy breaths. I got you, babe. I’m right here. He can’t fucking touch you.”

He gripped my waist tighter, purposely squeezing my wound. Whimpering, I pushed back against him, taking comfort in his security and drawing it from my pain.

“Look at him, Pixie. How do you feel?”

Focusing back on the bishop, I leveled him with a fevered stare. With a heaving chest, I could only muster up one emotion to feel.

Hatred.

I hated him.

I didn’t know him from a hole in the wall, but I truly fucking hated him. I hated what he represented, I hated the way he made my blood freeze over, and I hated what they did, hated that they’d siphoned every bit of my innocence with their pedophile cocks.

I hated him for everything they took away from me and the irreversible damage they caused. I wasn’t sure how he got caught, and I didn’t care—he was a parasite that needed to be terminated.

“I...I hate him.” I spat in a scathing tone.

“Good girl.” Romero breathed his praise in my ear. “Hold onto that hatred, baby. Make him bleed.”

It was like being put in a trance. Stepping forward, I zeroed in on the bishop in the chair and turned the knife’s handle in my hands, tightening my grip.

I reached down and roug

hly grabbed him by the hair, making sure he couldn’t turn his head as I plunged the thin silver knife into his left ear.

He started to scream, but it wasn’t loud enough. I ground my teeth together and continued to push in, passing the pinna, twisting through the canal, and rupturing his eardrum.

The knife was like a bottle opener. The instant I pulled it out, blood spurted as if a cork had been popped off, hitting my shirt, running down his earlobe, and landing on his white garment. His skin turned a dark cherry red as he began to weep. He was in obvious pain, but he wasn’t close to dying...yet.

I ran my bloody fingertips down his face and used his tears to clean them off. He choked and gagged from the intensity of his sobs, rocking so hard the chair almost tipped over.

I loved seeing this man helpless, bawling his eyes out as blood dripped freely. The only thing that could make this moment more perfect was if he was begging for forgiveness at my feet.

With the palm of my hand, I pushed his head back until he was staring up at the

ceiling. “You’re looking mighty pathetic, Mr. Bishop.” Straddling his lap, I glanced back at Romero and gave him a shy smile. “Will you hold him still for me, please?”

Without a sound of protest, he circled back around the chair and took a firm hold of the bishop by his graying hair.

I placed the tip of the knife at the base of his throat and slowly twisted it in. The bishop let out a low wail between his sobs.

“Aw, does it hurt really bad?” I cooed, poking out my lower lip.

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With a forceful shove, I broke through the skin, inserting the blade directly where his trachea was.

His brown eyes widened as he was forced to gargle his own blood. Removing the knife, I squeezed the slippery handle and began blindly driving it home anywhere I could penetrate, finally getting a reaction that was worthwhile.

His dying, garbled screams echoed inside the room and urged me on. The serrated blade sliced into his flesh with minimal ease. I didn't stop until my chest was heaving and his neck looked like a crimson dipped honeycomb.

I felt his blood on my face, in my hair, and saw it all over my hands up to my elbows. There wasn't a mirror in the room so I could only imagine what I looked like. The bishop's hair was no longer gray, and his head hung at an odd angle. Licking my lips, my tongue swiped up the sweet metallic taste of a sufferer's blood.

I blinked and looked away from him, realizing Romero was no longer behind the chair. He had taken a few steps back to watch me.

That seemed to be a habit of his—watching everything I did like he was analyzing me for something.

Peering up at him through lowered lashes, I offered him another shy smile, feeling a bit self-conscious.

“Whoops, sorry. I got a little carried away.”

“Come here.” There was no change in his vocal inflection; I couldn’t read his mood. Wiping my bloody palms on my ruined shirt, I went to him without hesitation.

The second I was within reaching distance, he had a hand knotted in my hair, slightly tilting my head back so that I was looking up at him.

“Tell me how you feel.”

“I feel...better.”

“Beautiful.” He gave me the smile I was quickly coming to adore and dropped his mouth to mine, slipping his hand from my hair to the back of my neck.

He kissed me hard and deep, speaking to me without saying a word. I felt like I’d known him for a thousand lifetimes.

Walking us backward, we got all the way to the other side of the room without detaching from one another. Without warning, he spun me around and I found myself bent over the metal table he’d stitched me up on.

His leg came between mine and spread them apart. The unmistakable sound of his zipper going down had my body elated with anticipation. I hummed my approval when he slid the smooth head of his cock up and down my lips, gathering my arousal.

“You’re a dirty little bitch. Fuck, Cali your pussy is drooling all over my dick.”

“I’m only dirty for you, Rome.” I moaned and pushed myself at him, trying to slide him inside me on my own.

It was apparently the right thing to say. With a growl, he grabbed a handful of my hair and drove his dick into me.

My pussy gripped his thick length like a vise. I spread my legs a little further and gripped the edge of the table to keep me grounded as he hammered into me.

“Your pussy feels so fucking good,” he ground out. “Put your hands between your legs, baby. Touch yourself.”

I eagerly responded to his command. Snaking one hand between my thighs, I fondled my already sensitive clit, no longer recognizing myself. Dirty talk had never made me wet before; killing someone had never given me such a lust-filled rush. As the blood sprayed, my arousal spiked. I needed to be fucked—hard—and Romero gave me exactly what I wanted.

He fisted my hair with one hand and brought the other one to my waist, pushing down on my wound. My legs almost buckled from underneath me.

“You like that?”

“Yes! Don’t stop!” I pleaded, bucking against him.

“Tell me what you need.” His demand was rhetorical. This man knew what I needed before I did but I was so delirious I would have recited the alphabet if he asked me to.

“I need you, Rome. Fuck me—hurt me.”

With another growl that sounded much more beast than man, he gave me exactly what I asked for.

He wrenched my head back to the point I could barely swallow, pressed his palm down, and bit my shoulder just hard enough for my endorphins to go crazy from the pain. The table tilted and fell from the force of our bodies repeatedly thrusting against it, hitting the floor with a loud bang.

“Rome!” His name spilled from my lungs and echoed around the room. I came on a soundless scream, clenching around him as my eyes rolled to the back of my head.

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He cursed and pulled out before I could fully come down.

“Knees,” he rasped, spinning me around by the hair. Immediately dropping down, I let out a soft hiss as my knees hit the concrete.

“Mouth.”

As soon as my lips parted, his slippery dick was hitting the back of my throat. Gagging, I gripped his thighs and let him fuck my mouth, taking him as deep as I could, sucking my juices and come off him.

His cock jerked twice. He let out an almost inaudible groan as I hungrily swallowed every drop of come that shot into my mouth, swirling my tongue around the tip to make sure I got all of the salty fluid off.

When he pulled away I rolled my lips together. Clasping my hands together in my lap, I gazed up at him as he tucked himself away, all the while looking down at me. Both of us fought to keep our chests of heaving breaths quiet.

Holding my hands out in front of me, I stared at the blood coating them and thought how terribly wrong Tito was when he said I wasn’t afraid of anything. I remembered my father saying I would be eaten alive by my sins.

I hated that one was wrong and one was right.

This—whatever this feeling was between us—was terrifying. It was growing at a disturbingly rapid rate. Was it possible to fall this fast? Could I stop it? Did I even



want to?

It felt instinctive, like breathing. It was completely unexpected and unexplainable. He made me feel so much inside my chest, feel things that were indefinable.

I was hurtling head over heels—obsessively, addictively, stupidly, over-emotionally hurtling. This would be about the time it was smart to run away from him as fast as I could, but like a suicidal moth to an eternal flame, I moved closer.

His clean hands covered my filthy ones and he helped me up. When he touched his forehead to mine, I knew I was doomed.

Romero was an inferno of tantalizing sin, and I wanted him branded on every inch of my skin.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It took a lot to impress me but Cali had been doing just that from the moment we met.

She reminded me of a lioness, stunning and fierce as fuck. Now I understood why her skin was white as snow: it was a canvas meant to be cove

red in red. She looked like a goddess covered in blood, a homicidal angel with devil horns.

She surpassed my expectations and passed her first test. I had to be sure she wasn't with The Order, and now I knew. Her hatred was a beautiful tool. Her pain was power.

There was no way to fake her kind of madness. I could see it boiling beneath her surface, eager to emanate. I didn't need to push her into it; it already swam in her

veins.

“So the madness got her, too,” Grimm mused, staring across the room to where Arlen was sleeping on the sofa.

“If she wasn’t with The Order, she was with another group,” Cobra theorized, blowing out a ring of smoke. “A group that either isn’t up to par on this century or they were keeping shit from her—specifically, shit about us. We all know she didn’t end up in those woods by accident.”

I crossed my arms and nodded. I wanted to know who kept her so sheltered that she didn’t know the one thing about me the entire world seemed to know. Unless she was as skilled in the department of duplicity as I was, then she truly was clueless. It was both a blessing and a curse for her to be so naïve. The blessing was, of course, in my favor. I was going to take everything she had to offer until I possessed her mind, body, and soul.

The feeling she invoked in me was primal.

If I was a shark, she was the blood in the water. I was the wolf and she was the rabbit. I wanted her so immersed in me that when she was faced with truth of my world, she would be immobilized.

“She’s...” Cobra trailed off, stubbing out his joint.

“Childishly maniacal,” I finished for him, opening a cabinet.

“Yeah, that.”

Handing him a bowl, I rolled my shoulders. “I don’t think that’s intentional.” I leveled him with a look that warned him to choose his next words carefully.

“I’m not judging; I was just pointing out your girl might be crazier than you.”

“David had her cut out of her mother’s stomach and raised her on his own. Who the fuck knows what went on during that time? She wasn’t fucked up when we saw her; maybe it’s her head’s safe place,” Grimm said. “Are we sure we want to deal with this?”

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“Damn, Grimm, I feel your emotions so strongly,” Cobra joked.

I knew why he was really asking us that question, and didn’t bother answering it. Cali was not Tiffany. I didn’t need to use her to that extreme, and I sure as fuck would never share her. The thought of another motherfucker touching her was enough to make me see red.

A soft ping had us all looking towards the stairs, watching Cali make her way down them. She was freshly showered and dressed in an over-sized white tank and black lacy knee highs she tied together with a fitted leather jacket and the same pair of black boots from earlier.

She definitely had a certain way she liked to dress; pulling it off with a box of dead people’s clothing was impressive but I’d rather she have whatever she wanted at easy disposal.

With a smile and wave, she made her way into the kitchenette where the three of us were, giving Arlen a quick once over.

She impaled me with her blue gems and smiled a little bigger. I felt that shit in my gut.

I did a lot of sick shit. I killed without remorse and ruthlessly took whatever I wanted. I didn’t believe in any of that love at first sight bullshit—I didn’t even know what the fuck love was—but I was fucking positive Cali was my soul mate.

“Hey ya’ll.” She greeted all of us but came straight to me.

If any other chick tried this with me, she would have been drop kicked to the other side of the room. I didn't do clingy, emotional, or needy. I did Cali.

Pushing a few stray strands of blonde hair out of her face, I gripped the back of her neck and pulled her into me, sealing my mouth over hers. She placed her dainty hands on my chest and sighed, parting her soft lips and twining her tongue around mine.

I loved the way she smelled because she smelled like me—like she was mine.

I felt like a goddamn Neanderthal as much as I kept repeating that word in my head.

My dick was constantly engorged since I'd met her. Fucking had never been a must on my to-do list and now it was at the top of it. Cali was a pain slut and I was more than happy to give her what she needed. Everything about this woman made me feel more insane than I already was.

“When you two finish mouth fucking, the chili is done,” Cobra drawled.

“I'll wake the brat up,” Grimm volunteered, giving Cali an appraising look as he turned away.

“You need to eat.” Breaking away from her, I took the bowl from Cobra's hands and nudged her towards the table. She eyed the ram-head centerpiece but didn't comment on it.

“You could have done that a lot gentler, you shithead,” Arlen snapped as she took a seat beside Cali and glared at Grimm, who was holding her shoulder.

He gave her a rare smile and placed another bowl in front of her.

“This is really, really good,” Cali enthused, licking her spoon and giving me all kinds of visuals.

“Compliments to the chef, who also happens to be a pretty badass redheaded dude.” Cobra grinned and Cali beamed back at him.

I reached into my back pocket and pulled out a weathered picture that was creased and wrinkled from how many times I had folded and unfolded it.

While it would be ideal to stay buried in Cali’s pussy all day and eat chili all night, that wasn’t realistic. I still had shit to do and the clock hadn’t stopped ticking.

As soon as she took her last bite, I placed the picture in front of her. “How many of these people do you remember?”

Her reaction was instant. An onslaught of emotions flashed across her face and I knew every one of them intimately, starting with anger, shame, and disgust before the pain was masked with indifference.

“All of them,” she answered in a flat tone.

“Which one hurt you?” Grimm interjected, asking the question I had never planned to ask but was going to.

Her blue hues darted around the room. Before she could have another episode like she did in my playroom, I brought her focus solely to me.

I gripped her jaw and turned her face towards me, blocking everyone else from view.

“Who was it?”

“All of them,” she whispered.

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I refused to make eye contact with him after I answered. Grimm making a sound in his throat gave me the perfect excuse to look away.

No wonder he knew my name; he had to know I was David's daughter, too.

The last thing I expected him to do was pull out a photo of David and his most trusted followers—me being amongst them.

I'm sure we looked every bit like a happy father and daughter from an outside perspective with the smile he had painted on his face and arm wrapped around my waist. No one but him and a few of his friends knew he was forced to hold me up so the picture could be taken because I had been ass-fucked the entire night before.

"Even the women?" Cobra asked. "Never mind; don't answer that," he backpedaled when Romero and Grimm both glared at him.

"It's...okay." I shrugged, trying not to think about it as I answered him. "The woman who raised me taught me how to give blow jobs and eat pussy."

"All those fuckers deserve death," Arlen spat. Her angry response was the only sound in the room for a good five minutes.

My face flushed and I looked down, using my hair as a curtain.

"She's right." Romero stroked the top of my head and expelled a deep breath. "How did you watch your uncle's meets without getting caught?" he asked, steering the conversation in a better direction.



“They keep extra habits in one of the old confessional booths. I just wore one of those and hid inside it until he was done, and waited for one of the sisters to walk past alone.”

“That was really fucking stupid of you. If he’d known you were right under his nose, what do you think he would’ve done?”

“Stop calling me stupid!”

“Then don’t do stupid shit. What time does he do his meets and how far is it from here?”

“He meets every night at eleven, and I don’t know how far the church is from here because I don’t know where I am.”

“He meets in a church?” Grimm laughed darkly. “Does it have a lake behind it?”

I furrowed my brows, eyeing him suspiciously. “Yeah...how did you—”

“We can make it there if we head out now. There are robes and habits in the storage room.”

I let out an annoyed breath. They kept cutting me off. “Alright, so we’re going to church. Let’s hope it doesn’t burst into flames the second we all walk through the door.”

“Do I have to go?” Arlen piped up, drawing everyone’s attention to her.

“Fuck yes, you have to go. You’re not Cali; you don’t get a deal. You need to ask yourself, do you really want to be in? Because this is how you start earning that right.

“And be careful how you answer, cause if you say no, then we have a problem we need to immediately rectify,” Cobra stated.

“I’m not leaving Cali and you sure as hell ain’t killin me so yes, I want to be in,” she snapped back at him. “And before we go runnin off to some church, where is everyone else?”

“We are everyone,” Romero swiftly responded, pulling out my chair.

“There’s only...three of you?” she asked, her voice full of skepticism.

“Strength is in unity, brat, not numbers,” Grimm answered.

“Only five people live in this house,” Romero cut in with a hard tone, ending the discussion.

Arlen and I glanced at each other with the same knowing expression—he had just majorly deflected the question.

He was hiding something.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The ride was uneventful.

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Arlen and Cali sat in the back on either side of Grimm, and I drove with Cobra riding shotgun. Every time I looked in the rearview mirror, Cali's eyes met mine.

She had on a habit and hood with her cross necklace tucked in. She looked pure as ever, tempting the strongest man to wanna sin.

I parked the Jeep hillside, parti

ally obscured and still able to see the lone church that sat center field.

"You got this?" I asked Cali and Arlen at ten till eleven.

"I can do this," Cali answered with heady determination.

"That's my fuckin girl."

She beamed at me and climbed out of the car, blowing a kiss before shutting the door.

"What about you?"

"I got her back," Arlen retorted, climbing out and circling around to walk in step with Cali. We watched them fall in line with the rest of the nuns rushing towards the church in the mirrors. The bright light made them all look like scurrying black dots.

"Did you bring it?"

"It's right here," Cobra said, pulling a utility bag from beneath his seat with an

excited grin.

“You’re such a child, Bow-bow,” Grimm taunted from the backseat, using the nickname we’d given him when we were kids.

Cobra dramatically gasped and turned in his seat. “Is that a compliment from the reaper? Thanks man. I got love for you too.”

Ignoring their banter, I kept my eyes trained on the rearview mirror.

Patience was never my strongest virtue to begin with but where Cali was concerned, the shit didn’t exist at all. I knew she could do this—she’d done it multiple times before I entered the picture—but that didn’t make me feel any better about her safety.

Exactly on time, a figure dressed in all black appeared at the back of the church. I was more relieved than I was willing to admit.

“Let’s go.”

I was out the car before the last word finished coming out of my mouth, jogging towards the door. Cobra and Grimm fell in step beside me.

As people began filing out the front of the church, thanks to Arlen we were able to slip in the back. She held a finger to her lips to silence us and took the lead back the way she came.

The building went peacefully silent after the large doors slammed shut.

The moon shone through the stained glass windows and served as the only light in the hall.

“You look cute, brat, like a school girl.” She glanced over her shoulder and shook her head, flipping Grimm the bird as she walked.

At the end of the hall, she paused and put an arm out to stop us, pointing around a corner.

Peering around her, I searched the pews for Cali, spotting her kneeling in front of the altar. Father Azel—her uncle—was making his way towards her.

We filed into the room just as he reached her and touched the back of her head. Like a jack-in-the-box, she sprang up and turned around with a shit eating grin on her face.

“Hello, Father. Did you miss me?”

Her sweet voice echoed across the room. Azel faltered, visibly surprised. Cali stepped forward and shoved him so hard he fell back and tripped, landing on a pew.

“Lock the doors,” I directed Arlen as we moved past her.

Hearing my voice, Azel whipped his head around. His wide eyes took us all in and he blanched, hopping up and attempting to run.

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“Hey!” Cali yelled, sticking a foot out to trip him. He fell into the aisle, landing at Grimm’s feet.

“You’re aging like shit,” Grimm told him, bending down and lifting him up by the head with one hand covering his mouth.

Cobra bypassed all of us, giving Cali a high-five. He went to the altar and began unloading his utility bag.

“Come here, baby.” I held my hand out. She took it and linked our fingers together as I draped my arm over her shoulder.

“Doors are locked; coast is clear,” Arlen announced, pulling her hood off.

“Where do you want him?”

“You’re letting me choose?”

“This is your show. We’re just the muscle.” Her eyes lit up like saucers and she did an excited shimmy.

Slipping out from beneath my arm, she spun around like a ringmaster and pointed to a large silver cross leaning against the wall.

“Can you use that to cross him up?” She looked at me and laughed at her own joke.

“With those,” she clarified, pointing to the long metal chain Cobra had placed on the altar.

“We can make that work.” Grimm answered before I could, dragging a struggling Azel towards the altar.

I went and retrieved the cross. I carried it to the altar and I propped it up.

“Lift, strip, tie.” I pointed to each of us and grabbed the chain. Cobra cut Azel’s robes off and partially assisted Grimm holding him up as I secured his left and then his right arm on the bars of the cross.

“God, we’re all going straight to hell,” Arlen groaned.

Cobra paused and looked at her with a mischievous grin.

“Take a good look around you, sweetheart, cause you’re already there. This world is hell and that psychopathic asshole is the devil.” He pointed to me with the tip of his knife.

“So what does that make the rest of us?” she scoffed.

“Well, I’m clearly his most trusted, loyal, advisor,” he hyped, tearing the last piece of robe from the now constrained Azel.

“Grimm is self explanatory. He kills shit without discrimination, takes no bribes, and never fails to get the job done.”

“That’s actually pretty accurate,” Grimm approved, pulling Azel’s drawers down to his ankles.

“Cali is his beautifully insane, dark, maleficent queen.” He sighed dramatically and looked to the ceiling. “Even the devil needs love.”

I shook my head and looked at Cali. She stared back at me with an unreadable expression on her angelic face.

His spot-on definition did crazy shit to my head.

She just didn't know how serious he was.

"That's sickeningly sweet, but ya'll aren't that bad."

"Of course, you would say that, Arlen, because you don't know us...yet. But you're more than likely dead anyway so tough shit for you."

"Ya'll don't know us—"

"I know Cali." I cut her off and put an end to the discussion. No one said anything; Grimm and Cobra didn't even attempt to act surprised by my words.

Did I know what her favorite color or her favorite food was? Fuck no. Did I know every sordid detail of her past? Also fuck no. Did I give a shit about any of that? Again: fuck no.

I knew she was so broken she didn't even realize it. I knew what she saw when she looked in the mirror was nothing but confusion.



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I knew she was drowning inside herself and struggling to figure out who she was while the demons screamed at her to let them out.

I knew all of that because once upon a very shitty, unfortunate time, that was me.

I was her.

I knew her.

We reflected off one another.

She was my beautifully dark motherfucking queen.

She was mine. I wasn't letting her go even when it was all said and done and she hated my fucking guts—because she would. That was inevitable. I destroyed everything good that I touched. She'd just have to hate me with her pussy sitting on my face.

“Why...did you tie him that way?” she asked, breaking the silence and staring at Azel's shabby, pale ass.

“We're going to make him suffer until we get some answers.”

She nodded and approached me, holding on to Arlen's arm to move forward.

“Calista, sweet girl—”

I was behind him, slamming his face into the cross before he could finish. “You don’t get to address her! The only time you get to open your mouth is to answer questions or fucking scream.”

“He’s pissin on himself.” Cobra pointed to the stream of urine running down Azel’s pale leg.

“Typical.” I stepped away from him with a look of disgust. “Pick a tool, Pixie.”

Without a word, she studied the altar and hummed beneath her breath, selecting the yellow drill. She clicked the button and smiled at me when it whirred.

A shocked cry had all of us turning our heads to see a nun had come around the corner. She screamed and took off for the door.

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“Fuck, I got it,” Grimm grumbled.

He hopped down the small step and took off after her.

Just before she reached the door, he lifted her up by the waist and flung her through the air. She bounced off a pew with a resounding boom and cried out when her body smacked the marble floor.

Grimm being Grimm wasted no time picking her up by the neck and squeezing the life from her body. She wildly swung her arms at him, gasping and kicking her legs. It took thirteen seconds for her to pass out and another two to kill her. She died so fast, if it wasn’t for him carelessly tossing her body over the back of a pew, it would be easy to believe it never happened.

“You have three strikes to tell me where David is, starting now.” My impatience was starting to kick in and I was tired of being inside the church.

“I don’t know—”

“Strike one—just because I know you’re about to bullshit me.”

Cali stepped up beside me with the drill in her hand and looked to me for instruction.

“Make it hurt.”

“Make it hurt,” she repeated. Her eyes travelled over every inch of him, landing on his hands. She stepped closer and raised the drill to the back of his left one and held the button down.

The drill bit spun around, only twisting his skin at first, gradually drilling into his flesh.

“Stop! Please just stop!” he screamed in agony.

I gently pulled Cali’s hand away, revealing the tiny hole she had started to make on the back of his hand.

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“Stop crying and pull your shit together. We haven’t even hurt you yet.” I sighed and patted the top of his head. “What kind of man pisses himself and cries because of a little good old-fashioned torture?”

“Same question, Azel—where is David?”

“I haven’t seen him in months,” he whined.

“But you’ve talked to him. You always talk to each other on the phone. You know where he is; I know you do!” Cali interjected, yelling in his face.

“I’m telling you truth. Why would I lie?”

“Because you’re a sorry sack of shit.”

“Because you’re at strike two,” I added behind her.

She sighed and raised the drill again, pulling back with a shake of her head.

“Why are we even wasting our time on this sicko when he keeps a ledger of addresses in his office? He’s not gonna talk. They never talk. We might as well just make him scream, make him bleed, and then kill as many of them as possible. David will show himself if you start killing off his most important members. With the ledger, we’ll know exactly where to find them.”

“She has an excellent point,” Cobra agreed, smacking a hand over Azel’s mouth to muffle his screams.

“What do you think?” I asked Grimm.

“I think it’s rhetorical. And why did it take her so long to get lost in the woods?”

“Do your thing.” I gave her the green-light, curiously watching for what she would do now.

I fucking loved watching her mind work, figuring out exactly how badly she wanted to make a motherfucker scream. That pretty little head of hers was full of a festering sickness. When she finally broke free of her chrysalis, she would be fucking incredible.

She smiled at me and grabbed for Azel’s flaccid cock. The tip was still wet from his piss.

With no forewarning, she jammed the drill bit into his urethra. He was screaming before she even held the button down. My own cock couldn’t decide if it wanted to shrivel itself inside out in fear or stay rock solid while Cali drilled a hole into another man’s dick.

Cobra looked at me and I nodded.

Within a second, he had his own cock out and was spreading Azel’s ass cheeks apart, lining himself up.

“Let’s see how you like being on the receiving end for once.” He shoved himself in dry—just like they used to.

Cali immediately stopped and dropped his bloody member, peering around with large eyes as Cobra pounded into Azel’s ass.

“Holy shit,” Arlen sputtered.

“Don’t think his shit is gonna be too holy anymore,” Grimm joked.

Azel twisted in his restraints, crying out for mercy and not receiving any. Cobra’s dick became tinged with blood as he drove in and out of his ass.

Cali’s mouth opened and shut. She licked her lips and stepped back. Feeling my stare, she wiped her bloody hand on her habit and set the drill down.

“I’m going to get the ledger.” She excused herself and took off quicker than a mouse.

I watched Cobra for a few minutes but quickly grew bored. Azel had turned into a whimpering broken record. “Let’s wrap this up.”

“Thank fuck, finally. My dick was getting chaffed.” Cobra pulled out and jumped back as Azel defecated all over the floor.

“God, that is disgusting,” Arlen shrieked, darting towards the back hall, shielding her eyes.

I yanked the cross amulet from around his neck and stood in front of him. Grimm placed one hand on the top and the other on bottom, pulling his mouth wide open, breaking his jaw apart.

I shoved the amulet in Azel’s mouth and Grimm slammed it back together, pushing the cross straight through the roof of his gums, blood dripped down onto the silver pendant and leaked over his lips.

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Glancing down, I laughed at the sight of his bloody dick. We'd done this same routine so many times it was nice to have it shaken up a little bit.

“Bleed him out and then find Arlen.”

I left them to it and walked off in the direction Cali had gone.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

If I was his, did that mean he was mine?

Why was I even asking myself that when I couldn't get a firm grasp on my emotions?

I'd just brutalized someone's genitals and all I could think about was sex. Something was wrong with me—outside of me already knowing I was a tad fucked up.

My sigh skirted over the church's vaulted ceiling. Clutching the black ledger in my hands, I bypassed the wooden confessional booths, noting that Azel wasn't crying so loudly anymore. Maybe Cobra was done—and good for him.

I could see myself befriending him, and maybe even Grimm one day, if it wasn't for the fact that Tito was still out and about somewhere and I just couldn't bring myself to snub him.

“What the hell am I even doing this for?” I mumbled to myself, turning the corner and running right into Romero.

“What are you doing what for?” He grabbed my upper arm and turned me around, all but dragging me into one of the dark, dusty confessional booths.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“Is that the book?”

He reached for it and I twisted away. “Why do you want David so badly?”

“Cali, if I don’t tell you something, it’s because I don’t think you should know.”

What could I say to that?

I couldn’t demand he give me one hundred percent transparency when I wouldn’t do the same, and if we couldn’t trust one another, then where did that leave us?

He reached for the book again, this time snatching it out of my hands.

“Was that your pathetic attempt at blackmailing information out of me?”

“I’m smarter than that.”

“Are you?”

“You’re such an asshole,” I breathed, squeezing past him to push the thin wooden door open.

“Uhn-uh.” He pulled me away from the door and caged me between him and the wooden bench.

“What do you want?” I growled. The box was stuffy and I could barely see his eyes



from the lack of light.

“What if I told you to confess your deepest, darkest sin?”

“You are my deepest darkest sin.”

“Maybe I should fuck you in here, then. I’ve never been given the honor of defiling a nun.”

“I’m not a real nun.”

“Don’t ruin the fantasy, baby. Just spread your legs for me.”

He knelt to set the ledger down on the floor, lifting my habit when he stood back up.

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Gliding his fingers along the skin of my left thigh, he gripped it tightly and hitched it over his hip.

I wound one arm around his neck and dropped the other to the zipper on his jeans, working it down until I could reach in enough to free his cock. He abruptly spun us so he was sitting down on the bench and I was straddling his lap.

“Put my dick inside you and ride it. Hard.”

“I don’t—”

“Do it.”

I hovered above him, my heart beating at an uneven tempo. Exhaling a shaky breath, I curled my fingers in the confessional’s divider and slowly sank down, easing him into me.

“Like this.” He gripped my hips and thrust up, burying himself to the hilt, filling me with him entirely.

I choked on a scream that quickly morphed into a moan as he controlled me below, setting a rapid pace for me to keep up with. “Goddamn, Cali, your pussy’s so fucking wet; so fucking tight. So fucking mine.” He slid his hands to my ass, grabbing a globe in each hand, and began drilling into me from underneath.

When he urged me to take over, it took me a minute to find a rhythm. I kept my grip on the divider and rolled my hips, bouncing up and down on his cock. My uninhibited

moans echoed inside the church and filled the small confessional booth.

My leg muscles began to burn. Sweat beaded between my heaving breasts. My breaths started coming loud and ragged, intermingling with my pleasure-filled gasps.

“I can’t do—”

“Don’t tell me you can’t. Just fuck me,” he growled.

Dropping my hands to his shoulders, I adjusted my position and began rocking into him, taking him deeper, harder.

“Rome,” I whimpered, dropping my forehead to use.

“That’s it, baby. Use me, make yourself come.” He pressed the pad of his thumb down on my clit and slowly massaged it in a circular motion.

My lower stomach began to tighten and warmth rifled up my spine. He leaned in and swiped his tongue up the side of my neck and bit me. He pushed up into me with one solid thrust. I came so hard I forgot to breathe.

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“Fuck!” I could no longer move. My muscles tensed and I shut my eyes, reveling in the sensation only he could draw out of me. He pulled out a few pumps later, staining the center part of my habit with his come.

“Now seems like a good time to discuss contraception,” I stated, smearing his semen into the black fabric.

“You just fucked me raw inside a confessional. That’s what makes you think of birth

control?”

“Rome,” I stressed.

“Why are you worrying about this when all our kids have either gone down your throat or landed somewhere on you? When I want to get you pregnant, I will.”

“Ugh, you’re so poetic,” I deadpanned. I tried to stand up and his hands clamped down on my hips to hold me in place. The wooden bench creaked beneath our shifting weight.

“I don’t need to see you clearly to know you’re pissed off. I can sense it. Don’t be a girl, Cali. Tell me what the problem is.”

“How many girls have you said that to? Are you even—”

“Clean?” he interjected. “If this is you being jealous, you can shut that shit down now. I don’t just stick my dick in anything with a hole. I’m actually pretty picky. And I don’t make a habit of going in raw.

“You’re mine, I want nothing between us. I’d never let any dirty shit touch you. And there is only you, Cali.”

His words were the balm to my irritation. I swallowed and nodded. “Okay,” I whispered in case he couldn’t see my head moving.

He gripped the sides of my face and placed his forehead against mine. “The shit you do to me makes no fucking sense.”

The strain in his voice wasn’t surprising enough to catch me off guard. I felt the same way. Maybe that was the way relationships were meant to be, indefinable with

unbreakable bonds. No words were needed to convey what our warped hearts already knew.

I was his, and he was mine.

I was curled up in a corner of the sectional when he handed me the mason jar.

“What exactly are we celebrating?”

“The ledger you gave us, and Romero not being such a dickhead,” Cobra said.

I laughed and brought the jar to my mouth, regretting the decision to partake in this activity as soon as the moonshine hit my tongue.

“This is disgusting,” I sputtered, pushing the jar at Romero. “It burns.” I wiggled my tongue around, tasting nothing but rubbing alcohol.

“You can do better than that,” Romero challenged, nudging the jar back in my direction.

“Hold it for three seconds,” Grimm looked up from the ledger and advised.

“Ugh, fine.” I took the glass jar back and held my breath as I tilted it back and counted to three. “Ah, how do you drink this?” I coughed, shaking my head and squeezing my eyes shut.

“You get used to it,” Romero said, taking the jar from me and passing it to Arlen.

“You didn’t drink any.”

“I don’t drink.”

“Then why did you tell me to?” I glared, wiping my mouth with the back of my arm.

“Maybe I want to see what drunken truths you’ll tell.”

Arlen snorted. “Not everyone has something to hide.”

“Everyone in this room does,” Grimm countered.

That was a sad goddamn truth and nothing good would come of it. Everyone knew that lies hurt, but secrets killed.

Sighing, I snuggled deeper into the leather couch cushion. Romero shifted beside me and lifted me onto his lap, placing my head on his shoulder.

“I can’t believe ya’ll left that man strung up,” Arlen mused from the opposite end of the couch, knocking her sip back like a seasoned pro. “What?” She shrugged when she realized everyone was staring at her.

“What else can you do?” Cobra inquired, leaning towards her.

“I’ll share mine if you share yours,” she teased.

“I’m almost positive you’re not old enough to drink,” Grimm scolded.

“I’m old enough to watch ya’ll turn the holy house into a snuff film but not take a drink of alcohol?”

“And what happens after ya’ll take out David, anyway? Is this a revolution or somethin?”

“Don’t you have to give a shit about the people to start a revolution?” Cobra retaliated, stretching himself out and placing his sock-clad feet on her lap, taking the moonshine back.

“It’s the beginning of paradise.” Romero responded in his usual way of deflecting a question with an answer that wasn’t really an answer.

I frowned and stared down at the pentacle on the floor, asking myself once more what I was doing this for. I wanted Romero. I wanted to know him but he didn’t seem inclined to let me in, and if Tito ever popped up on his radar, I was certain he would kill him.

Everything was such a jumbled mess inside my head. When I got the jar back, I didn’t hesitate to drink that time. It tasted horrible, but misery loved drunken company.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

I carried her upstairs and laid her on the bed.



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I thought she was asleep until she reached for my hand.

“I was trying to get away.” The fuck?

“In the woods, I was trying to get away,” she whispered.

“Away from what?” When she didn’t say anything or open her eyes, I realized how fucking dumb it was to converse with a woman drunk off her ass.

“The man who looks like her, my past, myself.”

“Go to bed.” I walked to the door and got as far as one step into the hallway.

“Don’t leave me in here alone.”

The needy tone in her voice had me glancing over my shoulder. Her blue eyes were wide open, staring at my back.

“It’s lonely in here. Stay with me.”

I was almost one hundred percent fucking positive this was her crazy ass mind talking for her, but she patted the empty space beside her and that was that.

I kicked the door back shut with my boot, pulled my shirt off, and stretched out beside her. She immediately rolled over and threw her leg over mine.

I waited until I was certain she was asleep before climbing back off the bed, pausing

at the door to double check. I scanned over her tiny body and was struck with how surreal it was that she was materialized in the flesh—the ghost I’d thought about off and on over the years.

Slipping out of the room, I made my way downstairs and found Cobra and Grimm at the table.

“She’s down for the count.” Grimm answered my silent question about Arlen, who was no longer sleeping on the couch.

“So, are we on for tomorrow night?” Cobra asked me.

Thinking it over, I nodded my head. “Yeah, that gives us an extra day to set up for everything else.”

“Okay, now that all that’s out the way, does anyone wanna discuss the elephant in the room?” He looked between us and waited, but neither of us spoke.

“You haven’t seen your sister since you two were kids, and you don’t have anything to say?” Cobra questioned him.

“My sister,” Grimm repeated, adding extra enunciation. “You two are more my family than she is. I don’t know her and she doesn’t even know I exist. She has zero recollection of me and I don’t feel the need to let her know because I don’t know if I can trust her.”

He gave him a flat look, which was him saying he no longer wanted to discuss it.

“And what about you?” he asked me next.

“I agree with him. I don’t know if I can trust her, but she’s mine regardless.”

“Yeah, I know what that means. Means you two fucksticks have your heads up your asses,” he grumbled.

“Maybe you should go take a shower.” I was more telling than suggesting. He was half drunk so I was going to give him a small pass instead of wiping the floor with his ass.

“Don’t fuck shit up.” He stood up and fixed us with a pubescent glare before stumbling off.

“That shit is exactly why we don’t let him drink,” Grimm said as he stood up. “I’m going to shower and pretend

to sleep.” He clasped my shoulder on his way past.

I knew he was irritated because Grimm was like me, whereas Cobra still had a bit of good left in him.

If someone were on fire, he’d be more inclined to put it out while we would use their burning body to light up a smoke.

This was the unplanned part of bullshit I didn’t have the patience to deal with. I didn’t need the two of them at odds over something we had no control over.

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Cali was the last thing I needed to deal with right now. She was an unstable hurricane threatening to destroy everything in her path. Any sane man would have run for cover, but I had never fucking been sane and I'd always had a thing for storms.

I sat at the table half-assed, reading the ledger, thinking about how many things had changed so drastically and how fast they were going to continue changing in the extremely near future.

Shit was about to hit the fan.

### CHAPTER TWENTY

I woke up with a raging headache and Romero in my face.

“Do you always fucking sleep this heavy? I was about to drown your ass in the shower.”

“Stop yelling at me. Jesus.” I threw an arm over my eyes in hopes he'd go away.

“Babe, I don't think Jesus would appreciate being confused with me. I dragged his sister with my Jeep for about ten miles last summer.”

I peered at him through one eye from beneath my arm. “You have severe psychological issues.”

“I also have an extremely hard dick so unless you want a headache and a sore pussy I suggest you get the fuck up.”

I definitely wasn't up for getting destroyed. With a groan, I rolled across the mattress and reluctantly got up. When I couldn't sleep, I was stuck awake; when I could sleep, I was stuck awake. A girl just couldn't win.

Smothering a yawn, I began combing my fingers through my hair. "How late is it?"

"Super late. It's almost six."

I gave him a dirty look. Six in the morning was not my definition of late. "Is there a particular reason you're waking me?"

"There is. You're gonna help me with the body pit, and like I said, my dick's hard and there was this sexy fucking blonde lying in my bed, begging to be violated."

I just couldn't even deal with him. Shaking my head, and then regretting it, I pulled my boots on and headed for the door.

The sooner I helped him, the sooner I could go back to sleep. "Next time, use your hand, Romeo."

"Next time, I'll just stick it in between your lips. I get off and you stop snoring. Two birds, one stone."

I paused on the staircase and glared back at him. "I don't snore."

"Yeah you do." He grabbed my hand and took the lead, walking us towards the front of the warehouse. As we passed through the door, he snagged a metal slugger leaning against the wall.

The humidity wasn't so bad yet due to it being so early, which I guess made it make sense why he was waking me then. Heat or no heat, the smell was horrible.

I peered down into the hole without really needing to and got a nice whiff of death. Pulling my shirt over my nose, I backed up and tried not to gag, swallowing hard. “It smells like swamp ass!”

“Interesting description.” He twirled the end of the bat a few times and then used it to start smashing corpses down like one would a composite pile. Things mashed I didn’t know could mash and the smell of fly larvae overwhelmed me.

“What did you need my help with?”

“Nothing, this job is filthy and you’re not to get filthy doing something I’m fully capable of. I just wanted you with me.”

Then why did...ugh. Could I even be mad at the guy for that? He woke me up to spend time with me. It’s not his fault I sipped on moonshine.

“Wow, that’s actually really sweet.”

“All we do is fuck or fight. I figured I could take a day off. So after dinner, that sweet pussy of yours is mine.”

Rolling my eyes to the sky, I moved a breathable distance back and watched him work.

“So who’s the guy who broke your heart?”

I gave him a blank look. “Guy?”

“Last night you said some things,” he clarified.

“Have no idea what you’re talking about because it wasn’t a guy—it was a girl.”

He froze and gave me his full attention. “You like women?”

His tone didn’t convey whether this bothered him or not—not that I would give a shit either way, but I didn’t want to start a 101 about my sexuality either.

“The only thing I like is you.”

My answer seemed to placate him for the time being because he went back to smashing bodies. It didn’t dawn on me that there were at least twelve people in the large ditch and majority weren’t from The Order until a redhead’s body shifted into corpse oblivion.

“Who are these people?”

“Not sure, to be honest. Some are from The Order, obviously; some are from our beds.” He didn’t look at me once when he answered.

“So you mess with a woman and then put her in your pit of bodies after you’re done with her?”

“You mean when I actually touch a woman, yes, but that isn’t always the case. The

redhead all the way to the right tried to climb in my bed after leaving Grimm's. I snapped her neck."

"Okay, that's understandable, but what about the others? Why wouldn't you just let them go?"

"Once someone has been touched by me and gotten to experience the tumultuous life-altering experience that is my dick, there is no letting them go."

"Did you really just call your cock life changing?"

"I called it life-altering. You know it's true because I can see you changing too, and you've only had the sample edition."

The intensity of his gaze had me looking back down at the body pit and rubbing the back of my neck.

Was I changing? I didn't feel any different, but maybe he could see things I couldn't. He did call me beautiful when I didn't even consider myself pretty.

Aware he was watching me in the annoying testy way he always did, I crossed my arms to keep them from making any nervous movements. Meeting his eye, I swallowed and adjusted my stance.

"Are you going to kill me?"

"Didn't you hear what I just said? For that to happen, I'd have to let you go. So no, baby, I'm not going to kill you. I'm just going to make you wish I had. I'm going to hurt you real fucking bad."

He didn't say another word to me. He poured a canister of gasoline on the bodies and



we watched them burn.

I didn't have artillery strong enough to win a fight against a man who was severely unhinged.

His vast mood swings made me feel as insane as he was.

I decided to give everyone around me a large berth so I could reflect and think for once. I needed to reestablish order in my madhouse of thoughts. My chosen method of self-therapy was taking a hot shower and letting my mind wander.

I'd gone from a life of dull repetition to one of resonant uncertainty in the blink of an eye. Looking forward, I saw nothing, had no idea where my life was going. Looking backward, I saw routine, knowing exactly what to expect every day I woke up.

I had to remind myself why I was here. I had come here for answers and I had them. I had come here because I was struggling to find myself and, in the midst of my struggles, I found Romero.

I started adding what if questions to certain scenarios. Cool air rushed into the cubicle, replaced by the heat of Romero's naked body as he stepped inside behind me. Surprising myself, I calmly turned around to face him.

His perfectly styled hair came undone and curled up at the ends. He palmed it back and looked over every inch of my body. "You're fucking exquisite."

"Is it dinner time already?"

"It's noon—close enough."

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Placing the palms of my hands on his slick chest, I peered up at him through wet lashes. “What are we doing?”

He looked at me for a few silent beats as if he needed to carefully pick and choose his words. “You have this truly shitty inability to just let things be. I can see the thoughts churning inside that pretty little head of yours. You’re a victim of your own mind. Stop over thinking, stop over analyzing; just let shit be. Live in our present before you fuck it up worrying about the future.”

“I have to over think when it comes to you, Rome—I have to avoid certain situations if I want to live at all.”

A dark smile slowly spread across his face.

“Situations? You gave yourself to me. You’re already in a situation that’s permanent. You’re going to live for me. As far as you’re concerned, you don’t even get to breathe without my permission.”

“Why are you being a bigger asshole than usual?”

He answered me by dropping his mouth down to mine, biting my bottom lip hard enough to draw blood when I didn’t let him in.

Pushing against his face, I pulled away and soothed the pain with my tongue, glaring up at him with mounting frustration. “What if I don’t want to belong to anyone else?”

“Too fucking bad, cause your ass is mine and I’m not going to pretend I care how you

feel about it. I know you're going to hate me, baby, but I guarantee you'll love me more and fuck me harder."

He gripped my jaw so hard something popped. When he brought his mouth within the proximity of mine a second time, I grabbed a handful of his hair and bit him back. He laughed and wrapped a hand around my throat, slamming my head into the slated wall.

I swallowed a hiss of pain, expelling it on a scream when he lifted one leg over his forearm and buried himself inside my pussy. He didn't give me any time to adjust, driving into me over and over again, fucking me into the wall.

I grabbed at his hand, unable to pull it away. My chest began to burn as my lungs were deprived of the air they desperately needed. He watched me choke and fight to breathe with a serene expression on his face.

"You know what you have to do."

He sounded far away. I couldn't respond. I swore there was no way in hell I was coming, not when my brain started to go fuzzy. I thought he was going to kill me but at the last second, he forced what he wanted out of m

e.

His hand fell away at the exact same time my body went numb. I sucked in air as pressure burst in my core. I had no recourse, forced to let the orgasm sweep over me as his cock bottomed out. Without a sound, he buried himself to the hilt and froze. I felt him jerk twice, releasing his come as far inside me as he could.

He stepped back, slowly easing out his flaccid dick. I looked down and rubbed at my neck. My mouth went dry as I watched excess semen drip down my thigh. He

couldn't have changed his mind so quickly from our discussion in the confessional.

“Why would you do that?”

“Why would I not do that?”

He reached out and swirled his fingers in the seedy liquid and then brought them up to my mouth. I mechanically sucked off every drop the shower didn't wash away, barely tasting it. His soulless eyes tracked every flick of my tongue.

“We have somewhere to be.” Without another word, he reached for his body wash and began lathering it on my skin.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

At some point, I must have dozed off because when I opened my eyes again we were no longer moving, and it took me a few seconds to remember where I was.

“There's my girl.” Romero's voice broke through my disoriented haze. I turned my head and was greeted by his perfect smile. I reached up and touched the side of his face, as if I needed reassurance he was real.

Was he going to pretend the last few hours never happened? Apparently so. He kissed my open palm before pulling my hand away from his cheek, waking me all the way up.

Unsticking my cheek from the leather seat, I peered through the windshield.

Once my eyes adjusted to the darkness around us, I saw a single light on up ahead and instantly knew where we were.

“What are we doing here?” I asked as soon as I was out on solid ground.

He looked down at me with a sinister smile and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, turning me in the direction of the old farmhouse. “They took one of mine, so I’m going to take all of theirs.”

“Let’s get this done,” Cobra hype-manned, coming around the back of the Jeep with the bloody pillowcase he had stashed in the hatch before we left. He turned it upside down and a severed goat head hit the ground with a soft thud.

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I wrinkled my nose and frowned. “That is fucking sick.”

“Sick like rad? Or sick like ew?” he asked, picking it up by its tiny horns.

“Definitely the latter. Where did you even get that? And where is the rest of it?” Arlen asked, curling her lip up.

“I don’t remember,” he shrugged.

“Come on.” Romero dropped his arm from my shoulders and grabbed my hand, setting off at a rapid pace.

As we neared the wraparound porch, the only sound that could be heard was faint sobs coming from inside the barn.

“Are you going to break in?”

Grimm walked up the stairs and turned the door knob. He strolled into the house like he lived there and spun around to face us. “We don’t need to break in; they never lock their door.” He smirked and disappeared out of sight.

If life were a movie, this was the part that would be paused as a wise narrator explained just how fucked I was about to find myself. This is the part where they would say I should have turned and ran as if hellhounds were on my heels.

It was the part where I would understand why they called my lover the devil. It was his kind way of giving me the pamphlet version of an introduction to the world he

talked about that normal people couldn't survive in.

Going into this house was the beginning of my end, the catalyst for everything that was yet to come.

Romero kept his hand clasped around mine as we walked forward with Arlen and Cobra. The tip of my boot was barely over the threshold when a woman screamed and a man landed at an awkward angle on the hardwood floor a few feet ahead of us.

"That's one!" Grimm called down from the upper level.

Blood began to pool around the man's head. He wasn't wearing anything but a pair of drawers. His lifeless, wide-eyed stare was locked on us.

Cobra walked around him, goat head in hand, and entered the kitchen. Doors slammed from upstairs and footsteps thundered across the floor, making the ceiling fixtures rattle.

Romero looked towards the staircase and let me go, giving me a little nudge forward. "You two, go set the table."

"What the hell do we need to do that for?" Arlen asked from beside me when we could no longer see him.

"Romero's methods only make sense to himself."

"And him." She gestured to the kitchen where Cobra was dumping cooking oil into a saucepan.

I walked forward, chalking my jitteriness up to bad nerves and Romero's precarious mood. The kitchen and dining room were side by side. Spotting a china cabinet in the

back corner, I steered Arlen with my shoulder and made a beeline for it.

“This place is filthy.”

“That’s an understatement,” Arlen muttered.

Clutter and dirty laundry were everywhere. There was a thick residual stench of cooked flesh in the air.

Searching the dining room for a light switch, I swept my gaze past the kitchen and saw it was even worse.

Dishes were piled a mile high in the sink, chunks of black grime were smeared on faded yellow tile, and a plastic pitcher with questionable content was tipped over on the counter.

Finding a light switch, I flicked it up with the tip of my finger, having zero desire to touch anything around me.

“Table’s already set,” Arlen pointed out.

“Good, we can get started then,” Romero responded, walking into the room half-dragging a woman by the back of the neck. I instantly recognized her from the day we escaped.

“It was Bill. You know I know the rules! I would never be so stupid, Romero.” She clutched at his arm but he simply shook her off.

“Martha, we had a deal and you violated our terms. You had no business being in my woods in the first place. Did I not provide your family with enough to eat?”



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I crossed my arms, watching their interaction with furrowed brows.

These people were cannibals. The only way he was giving them food was by giving them other people. Why the fuck would he do that?

He sat her down in a chair and reached in his back pocket, retrieving the Browning knife he always carried. "Place your hands on the table, Martha."

She looked up at him with tears rolling down her face and shook her head. Chewing my bottom lip, I glanced back into the kitchen to check on Cobra. He was rifling through the drawers, placing things I assumed he intended on taking with him in a pile.

"I need your help, Cali."

Bringing my focus back to Romero, I uncrossed my arms and made my way around the table, stopping beside the woman.

"Place her left hand on the table."

Wondering where he was going with this, I pried the woman's stiff hand away from where she clutched it to her chest and held it down as he instructed.

"I'm going to count to three."

At his words, the woman began to struggle and push at me with her other arm. Arlen grabbed it and held it identical to the way I was.

“Three,” Romero said calmly, driving his knife through the side of her left hand, removing it and plunging it straight through the back of her right. I winced and turned my head away as she screeched in my ear. Her blood quickly made its way across the table, some making it onto my skin.

“Pin em down,” Romero instructed in the same level tone.

Searching for something that could do what he wanted, I swiped up the steak knife from the now bloody table setting beside me, and pushed it through the hole he had just made, sticking it into the wooden table with a twist.

Arlen didn’t hesitate to do the same.

The woman dropped her chin to her chest and moaned, more than likely slipping into shock. I wiped my blood hand on the back of her shirt and stepped back.

“Look what I got.” Grimm

m came from the opposite direction with an unconscious man in a choke-hold and the little boy from the barn like he was a sack of potatoes.

“Give me the kid.” Romero held out his arms, taking the crying little boy from Grimm.

As Grimm situated the man across from the woman who had yet to stop groaning, I gave Romero a questioning look.

“What are you doing?” I asked with a calmness I didn’t feel.

“What do you think I’m doing?” he shifted the kid around so that his back was pressed into his chest and his feet dangled off the floor.

“Grease is ready!” Cobra called out over the sound of the oven door slamming.

“Let him go.” I kept my eyes locked with his, my voice low but demanding.

“Why would I let him go?”

“He’s just a kid, you fucker!” Arlen lunged forward in a stance meant to snatch the kid away but Grimm moved quicker. He let the man fall out of his chair and snaked an arm around Arlen’s waist, hauling her backward.

Not so much as batting an eyelid, Romero lifted the boy higher and gave a sharp twist to his neck, strong enough to sever the connection between brain and nervous system, before dragging his knife across the boy’s throat. He dropped the body right beside his mother’s chair, and then proceeded to torture her further by removing two of her fingers.

I was cemented to the floor, watching everything happen as if through a periscope. Arlen’s screams were muffled as Grimm smothered her mouth with his hand.

Cobra walked in, carrying the saucepan of oil, and placed it down in the center of the table. Romero dropped the severed fingers in and they immediately began to pop and sizzle.

I watched the man on the floor wake slowly at first, startling awake when the scene before him fully settled into his brain. Grimm swapped Arlen for him, letting her break away from him.

She wasted no time taking off out of the room. I heard her footsteps hit the porch and knew she was making a run for it.

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I looked at Romero and he already had a knowing smile on his face, two steps ahead of my thought process. With a slight, almost unnoticeable nod of his head, he dared me to run.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I spun in a circle, thin branches grabbing at my skin as I pushed through them, trying to find my way in the dark.

The screaming from the farmhouse stopped and then started again, making me believe I had more time to get wherever it was I was going, but I heard someone moving in close proximity.

“Arlen?” I whispered, peering around trees and foliage.

“Cali, it’s me.”

I paused and searched for the voice’s owner, jumping back when he emerged on my right.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Simon?” I hissed, listening for any other sound.

“Tito sent me to watch out for you. I set up camp in the woods by the warehouse trying to see you, but I never did until now. I overheard where you were going.”

He answered all the questions I hadn’t asked but it was ridiculously foolish to send him so close, which is probably why Tito sent a guy he didn’t care for. If he died, no

biggie. Tito was a pain in my ass. He meant well but his ideas were never foolproof.

“He wants you to come back.”

“I can’t do that...yet,” I tacked on for good measure, noting that the screaming had stopped.

“What? Why would you...holy shit, you crazy cunt, you switched sides? You’ve no idea what that prick has planned, do ya? Ask him about—”

Too much chit-chat.

He ended his sentence on a scream as I jumped on him, wrapped my legs around his waist, and bit down as hard as I could.

He pulled at my hair and swung his fists into my side, trying to get me off. It fucking hurt but I persisted nonetheless. There was no chance in hell he was making it out of the woods without being caught, and he would sing like a bird with the blues from the slightest bit of torture.

I didn’t need to see Romero to know he was in the woods somewhere; I could sense him, and I would never be able to explain why a stranger was talking to me in the middle of the woods.

Biting through someone’s neck looked much easier in movies. The skin was rough and firm; I couldn’t bite it open like a vampire.

He started spinning in circles, slamming me into a tree and dislodging me. I hit the solid ground with an “Oomph”.

Rolling away, I barely missed his shoe connecting with my face. I scrambled to my

feet and he landed in the exact spot I had just been.

“No, no, no!” His scream cut through the air as bone made a loud pop and Romero broke the leg he’d just kicked at me. His fist connected with his face, breaking his bottle cap glasses and knocking him out.

“You don’t touch her.” The calmness in which he delivered the words was completely contradictory to the way his muscles were bunched in anger.

Grimm came trampling through the trees a minute later and quickly surveyed the scene. His gaze paused on me and he shook his head.

“Take him to the Jeep,” Romero bit out.

“You and that lil brat are a real fuckin handful,” Grimm muttered, grabbing Simon by the shirt. He turned back the way he came and dragged him off.

Shit! If they took him back to the warehouse, Tito would be a lot more screwed than I was.

“Did he hurt you?”

“No...” I brought my hands together in front me and stared at his back.

“Are you going to tell me why?”

I knew what he was asking me and I had an answer...sort of. I wasn’t ready to explain it to him, though.

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It didn't matter how far I ran or if I ran using every ounce last ounce of my energy. I could run from my past. I could run from the things I had and had yet to do. I could run from the illusion of the woman I'd try to portray to everyone. I could not run from him or the sick bitch inside of me I was finally getting acquainted with.

One went harmoniously with the other.

I didn't voice any of that, though. I allowed him to believe whatever conclusion he wanted, let him think I ran because I was unable to handle this side of him.

He made a humming sound in his throat and walked off without looking at me once. "Bring your ass on."

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I stared up at the starless sky and expelled a deep breath before following him.

When I caught up to him again he had the passenger side door open and helped me climb into the jeep, still not looking at me.

Arlen gave me a weak smile from the back seat. My eyes floated over her shoulder to where a blonde sat with her head on her knees. I didn't bother asking what they were doing with her; I didn't care.

"Your friend's riding in the back," Romero said once he was back in the driver's seat.

"That girl is not my friend."

He started the Jeep and pulled off, driving around a stick in the middle of the lane that had the goat head staked on top of it.

It wasn't until I heard the screams five minutes in that I understood what he meant. Simon was riding in the back. Romero was dragging him behind the Jeep.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

He pushed the speedometer to seventy and kept his dark gaze trained straight ahead.

I could partially see Simon in the rearview mirror trying to keep his head up, being brutalized by the asphalt.

"Who is he?" he asked me, speaking just loud enough I could hear him over Simon's screams.

"I don't know, but you're going to make a mess," I replied flippantly, twirling a strand of hair around my finger.

"You fuck him?"

"What?" I started to laugh. "Are you for real?"

"You think this is funny?"

"You're jealous because I may or may not have fucked that guy, but I've fucked lots of guys. I've fucked my dad, my uncles, and I was kinda-sorta fucked by my baby brother. I'm a real bonafide whore."

"Cali," Arlen choked from behind me.



“Don’t feel pity for me. I’ve had as many cocks between my legs as I’ve had in my mouth. Oh, and a few women got the VIP treatment too, so no one was left out.” I forced another laugh and looked down at my lap, clasping my hands together.

Romero sharply swerved after a minute, sending Simon’s body to the far right. The chain around his ankles snagged as his head hit a culvert and detached from his body.

Quietness settled over the jeep.

I had no desire to see what was left of Simon’s body. As soon as we were back at the warehouse, I was out of the Jeep and darting inside.

“Don’t ever fuckin call yourself a whore again.”

I paused on my way to the kitchenette.

“And here I was, thinking I was your special whore now.” With a sigh, I resumed walking, adding a little skip.

He came up behind me and spun me around. “What the fuck did I just say?”

“I think I forgot already. Will you repeat it?”

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Slipping out from between him and the counter, I put space between us by circling to the opposite end of the table.

He looked at me for a minute before scrubbing a hand over his face.

“I’m waiting.” He crossed his arms and gave me a leveled stare.

“Why did you kill that little boy? He was just a kid, Rome.”

“So she does have some morality left in there.” He sneered at me. “That wasn’t a kid; that was an animal. He would’ve eaten your fuckin face off in your sleep. I’ve seen dozens of kids just like em.”

“You’re an animal, too! You’re a...”

“Savage. I know. I make no excuses, and I have no regrets. This is who I choose to be and I don’t care if you don’t like it. You’re either with me or against me.”

“And what if I’m against?” I asked quietly.

I wasn’t, of course. I was with him through and through, but I could already picture Tito in my rearview mirror.

If I knew with complete certainty that there would be no issue between them, I would put it all out in the open. My gut told me that wasn’t the case, though.

“If you’re not with me, then I guess you would be a

whore.” He spat the word at me like it tasted vile in his mouth. “Get your ass upstairs, the fuck out of my sight.” He walked away, back towards the front of the warehouse.

“Shit,” Cobra muttered, taking off after him, leaving the clueless blonde beside Arlen.

Sucking in a breath, I stared after him, looking down when I felt a tug on my wrist. “Come on,” Grimm coaxed.

I let him lead me up the stairs, surprised when he followed me into Romero’s room.

“I’m not looking for a pity fuck,” I clarified right off the bat.

“I don’t want to...I would never.” He looked mortified at the very idea of it, the most emotion I’d ever seen from him written all over his face. He shook his head, stroking his beard.

“I would never fuck you because you belong to my best friend, and he would do things to me not even I could imagine—and I’m real imaginative, just for some clarification. I would never fuck you because nothing you said in that car was true.

“You’re not a whore, Cali. You were just a little girl and no one was there to protect you. I promise you there are a lot of people in this world who regret that.”

The sincerity laced in his words knocked against my stone exterior. Dropping my gaze to the floor, I sat on the edge of the bed and let out a dry laugh.

“That’s real sweet of you, Grimmy, but no one in this world has ever apologized for what happened to me, and I no longer expect them to. I just want to find a place where I fit in.”

“You already did. I don’t have any issues with you staying, as long as you’re in it for

the long haul. We haven't got to the good parts yet."

Toying with my hair, I gave him a small smile. "Thank you."

His regular inexpressive face was back but I could swear by it the man almost smiled. He nodded and headed for the door, pausing after he pulled it open.

"You're crazy and a pain in the ass. He's insane and always fuckin moody but the connection is undeniable. Everyone sees it. You fit—you're a fucked up pair of star-crossed lovers."

With that, he walked out of the room and shut the door, leaving me to wallow in my thoughts.

Falling back onto the bed, I looked up at the ceiling, blowing out my cheeks.

Me and Rome.

Rome and I.

We were unhealthy, dysfunctional, toxic.

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I could flip through both an encyclopedia and a dictionary and still wouldn't find words to describe us.

Beyond the excitement, beyond the lust, he gave my aching heart a place of comfort that I'd never known. This thing between us was certain death, all smoke and darkened skies with no sign of a sunrise, but I wanted what I wanted, and that was him.

Her moans grew louder and louder, and the headboard hit the wall in a steady rhythm, echoing down the darkened hall.

I glanced over at Arlen and snickered.

"It ain't funny."

"Either the sound of fucking makes you irritated, or who's doing the fucking has you irritated. I'll take a wild guess and say it's the latter."

"I don't need you to play couch therapist, and Cobra fucked her too so that trumps your theory."

She tossed the blanket off and sat up, crossing her inked arms over her chest.

"What's your story?" I already knew it. I just wanted to hear her answer.

"Don't got one. I was tryna find my sister and got taken by them cannibals."

Huh, that was almost true.

“Shouldn’t you be kissin ass right now?”

“I could be bending you over—”

“You got bout three seconds to fix that sentence. Don’t give me any reasons to take Cali your balls in the form of a necklace.”

I laughed for what felt like the first time all day.

“I was fucking with you, baby girl. I don’t juggle women.”

I was actually making sure her loyalty was in the right place. If it wasn’t, I was going to kill her quick and tell Cali she ran off.

Fucking Cali.

I needed a drink, and I didn’t drink.

This was the part about giving shit that bit me in the ass. I had a track replaying in my goddamn head of every person she named, and I was gunning for their asses.

My beautiful girl thought she was a whore. Those motherfuckers created thorns on a flower that never had any.

I could see the real her, feel her trapped inside a dark fucking sinkhole that they shoved her in.

Cali knew exactly who she was. She was ashamed of it. She lashed out the only way she knew how because of it. Her head was irreparable because of it. Why had no one

told her she was fucking perfect?

I'd never seen damaged look so good. Never seen bruised knees look so pretty. She was so perfect I didn't deserve her. A better man would've let her go but that wasn't me.

Arlen's drowsy voice pulled me out of my head.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You just did."

She gave me a flat look.

"Shoot your shot."

She got so damn quiet I thought she'd fallen back asleep. Her back was to me and the blanket was almost over her head. Her question almost through me off guard—almost.

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I wondered if she asked because she wanted to know or asked because she wanted a man nicknamed after the personification of death.

“What kind of evil are you?”

“The kind no one can save you from. If there’s a god, not even he could help you.”

“Okay, you can go fix your screw up now.” She adjusted her head on the arm of the couch and sighed. “You two, you’re like fire and gasoline. You’re perfect for one another so quit being a dumbass and go strike the match.”

I smirked at her back. If my sister were still alive, I could see her being a lot like Arlen. Standing up, I gave her the only advice I could offer.

“If you’re going to run, run now, because after tomorrow, everything’s going to change.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

He had deep scars beneath his tattoos. I’d never seen anything sadder than that. I’d never been so upset since watching Tilly burn.

If I had a heart left to break, it would have broken right then. Who hurt this man and where could I find them?

“Don’t fucking look at me like that.” He rolled from his stomach to his back, giving me something much better to stare at.



“You know, I could never sleep until I came here. It could be your bed but I think it’s you.”

“I’m going to assume you’re talking to me, even though you just said that to my dick.”

Flashing my eyes to his, I offered him a timid smile.

“I failed your second test. I’m sorry, and I’m sorry for being a mess...I’m not sorry about the kid, though.”

“Is that why you stopped running?”

Chewing my lip, I began tracing imaginary patterns into the blanket. “I was never running from you, Rome. I was running from...myself.”

When he didn’t say anything, I quietly continued. “Before I ever met you, I had a box of pictures and articles—all of you—and I...used you.”

“You used me.”

“You’re my muse. I have dirty...sick fantasies, and they all feature you.”

“Keep going,” he encouraged, wrapping a hand around the base of his hardening cock.

“I like hearing them scream, making them bleed, and watching the life leave their bodies...torture though, even psychological, it makes me so wet.

And you’re always beside me, touching me, fucking me in the bloody mess we made.”

The bed creaked as he fisted himself, keeping his eyes locked on me. I reached out and cupped his balls, gently rolling them in the palm of my hand.

“My daddy always told me I was sick and full of sin. The last day I saw him, he said those same sins would eat me alive. I never got the chance to tell him I’m a natural born sinner and the devil lives inside me.”

I shifted onto my knees and stop

ped his hand. Before I could start, he grabbed me by the leg and pulled my lower half towards him.

He sat my pussy on his face and I sucked his cock into my mouth.

We face fucked one another. His cock hit the back of my throat, bringing tears to my eyes as I struggled taking all of him. His tongue explored me everywhere, delving in and out and toying with my clit.

Leaning lower, I used my hand to stroke him hard and fast and my tongue to toy with his balls, lifting them individually and gently suckling them into my mouth.

When I felt pre-come run onto my hand, I sat up straight and licked it off. He flipped me over onto my back, locked me down with a hand across my waist and buried his face between my thighs.

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He plunged two fingers inside me to work alongside his mouth. It took me a good few minutes to realize he was apologizing. He wrote he was sorry on my clit with the tip of his tongue.

He kept repeating the motion and then backing off just before I came. Clenching his sheets, I lifted off the bed as far as I could and pushed against his mouth.

“I forgive you,” I moaned. He bit down as soon as those words left my mouth and I repeated them like a chant, coming all over his tongue.

I was still shaking when he rose above me and pushed his dick in. I clenched around it, immediately coming again.

He grabbed me by the top of the hair and clenched his teeth.

“Fuuck, Cali,” he growled in my ear.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I dug my fingers into his shoulders and licked my juices off his face as he rocked into me, taking me to a place only he could.

I finally wandered out of the room an hour after he left.

He wouldn’t tell me where he was going, only that he would be back soon. Grimm left with him and Cobra was playing mechanic.

The blonde had not so mysteriously vanished. My guess would be straight into the body pit. That left me and Arlen to our own devices, which was admittedly not much

despite how large the warehouse was.

“Let’s go this way.” With her arm linked through mine, we went down the only hall we hadn’t ventured yet, passing a bathroom and an open broom closet full of cleaning supplies.

At the end of the hall was a large shutter that was lifted up, revealing a chain link gate. On the other side of the gate was a room full of neatly organized crap. To the far left was a wall and tables lined with boxes like the one I had gotten my first shirt from, and straight ahead were shelves of canned goods, boxed foods, and condiments.

Two deep freezers were running in the back, and to our right was another gate that led to what appeared to be a garage.

“Where did they get all of this from?” Arlen asked in awe.

The feeling was mutual. I hadn’t seen anything like this...ever, not even when I lived with The Order. Romero had a connection, a good one from the looks of it. Tito had a connection too, but the most overstocked item we had were tampons; everything else was the bare minimum basics needed to live semi comfortably.

“Well we were clearly meant to find this room so we could go through em,” Arlen commented, nudging me in the direction of the boxes. She took one side and I took another.

“I never got a chance to thank you for taking up for me.” I spoke softly in an effort to keep our conversation as quiet as possible.

“Are you serious? You saved my ass when someone else would have only worried about themselves.”

She had a point there. I could have made a run for it as soon as cannibal Bill hit the ground. Finding a pair of denim shorts that would fit me, I kicked my boots off and pulled them on beneath my long shirt.

“I was looking for my sister,” she added after a beat, turning around and beginning to dig in the boxes behind her.

Slipping back into my shoes, I rose and continued searching through another box. I started to respond but glanced around, and for the first time, I noticed the suitcases piled beneath the table and some of the more expensive clothing in certain boxes.

Finding a wallet in a pair of jeans, I flipped it open and stared at the identification card still inside. James Wallace. He was an official from Centriole.

“That’s not good,” Arlen whispered.

“Understatement of the year.”

There was only one possible explanation I could come up with. Romero was not finding random people to torture; he was making people disappear—many people, by the looks of it. Whole families, if the few diaper bags meant anything.

The wallet had to have been left by mistake. None of the other boxes contained belongings that were indicative of where they came from or who they belonged to.

I was struck with the cold reality that though we were connected on a level only we understood, that connection didn’t give me the magical ability to read his mind and know all his secrets.

What the hell was this man up to?

“So you never told me...is he good in bed?” she suddenly asked me, a wide grin on her face.

I was about to respond but saw the warning in her eyes and dropped the wallet. She quickly kicked it beneath the table.

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“She never told me either,” Romero said from behind me, sliding his arms around my waist.

Locking the newfound information in my head, I spun around and wrapped my arms around his neck, accepting his hungry kiss. His skin was warm; wherever he’d gone, it was outside.

“Are you ready?” he asked, pulling away.

“Am I ready for what?”

“We’re going to play.”

This was insane. Period.

I looked at the large church and shook my head for the hundredth time.

“So, do we have a plan?”

“Yeah, kill everyone, make sure they’re dead, and go home,” Grimm tossed out.

“Gabe isn’t a loner like Azel; there’s going to be lots of other people in there.”

“I called in some friends,” Romero finally said.

I looked at him for an explanation but he didn’t give one.

“Do your friends wear creepy hooded robes and walk like cult members?” Arlen asked in a dry tone. “Cause they’re here.”

Turning in my seat, my jaw slackened as a surge of people in black robes washed through the parking lot and headed straight for Gabe’s abode.

“Let’s go.”

With no other choice, I climbed out and barely missed getting plowed over by a group of four...people.

“So creepy,” Arlen mumbled, coming to stand beside me.

It was majorly creepy. Everyone in a black robe had a white mask on and a large leviathan cross hanging around their neck. The inverted cross tattooed beneath Romero and his friends’ eyes was painted in the corners on either side of the odd masks.

My mind was screaming something at me but I couldn’t hear it or I didn’t understand. Where had all these people come from?

“Come on,” Cobra said, jogging ahead of us.

We were almost at the doors when a group of people in the black robes rushed through them, and they all began stampeding in. Glass shattered from others breaking in through the windows. A symphony of screams filled the air soon after.

By time I was able to walk in, complete pandemonium had erupted. Bodies lay on the floor, in the aisles, and over the backs of pews. The cross that hung on the back wall had been knocked down, tearing a chunk of drywall down with it.



Spotting Father Gabe in the back of the church trying to sneak away, I zeroed in on him and took off after him. I hopped over a woman who had had her neck gouged open, and a man whose nose was half-gone. Blood coated the marble floor, making me slip more than a few times.

I was a little surprised to find Gabe in his office alone, pacing back and forth. It wasn't until I slipped in and shut the door that I saw he had a silver gun in his hand. Shock, recognition and anger played out on his features as he immediately recognized who I was.

“You’ve got to be shitting me. Calista.” He gave me the same smile he used to give right before sticking his dick in me.

I stepped forward and he raised the gun. I stepped forward again, and he narrowed his eyes. “So, this is what you’ve been doing?” He laughed a brittle laugh and shook his head.

“Where are your friends, Father? I was hoping we could all play.” I used the same line David had taught me, and the same innocent voice; he slightly wavered.

Smiling, I persisted.

“Would you like me on my knees, Father, or do you want me bent over the desk?”

“I know what you’re doing, Calista. I wasn’t born yesterday. Don’t take another step unless you want a bullet in your skull.”

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“I promise I’m harmless.” I held my hands up in a defensive gesture, slowly turning in a complete circle, facing him again with a smile. “See, I’m still your sweet candy girl.”

His beady eyes roamed up and down my body. I could guarantee if he touched his dick it would be hard—but then, he’d have to find it first.

“Where the fuck have you been?” He slackened his grip on the gun, quickly tightening it again when I moved forward.

“I’m just gonna have a seat, okay? My legs are sore. I’ve started this really intense exercise regimen. It involves my legs being around someone’s neck while they shove their cock inside me so far and so hard I can barely breathe.”

I hopped up on the desk and crossed a leg, propping my chin in my hand.

“Sounds fun, right? You should try it sometime. It almost sounds as good as all your delegates being brutally slaughtered right now.”

He snarled at me and flew across the office. Grabbing a fistful of hair, he pointed the gun right at my temple. “You always were a homicidal slut.”

“Aw, thank you.”

I winced as he shook me a few times back and forth, hitting me in the side of the head with his gun.

“Ouch. That really hurt.” I scowled at him, blinking away tears of pain, feeling a trickle of blood rolling down the side of my face.

“If this church is going down, so are you and I. Open your legs.” He glanced at the door, keeping the gun trained on me.

I stiffly spread my legs apart, reminding myself of what I was doing there.

“Do

you wanna hear a secret?”

He moved forward until he was in between my legs. “Tell me your secret, Cali.”

Eager to oblige, I wrapped one arm around his neck and leaned towards him.

“I found a lover, Father. I found a lover in the devil and any second now he’s going to come through that door and fucking tear you apart.”

He immediately stepped back. I grinned up at him. On perfect cue, his office door flew open with such force it left a hole in the drywall.

I watched his facial expression and stature go from smug and confident to shocked and terrified. His fear was tangible. Using his distraction against him, I kicked him in the balls and snatched the gun from his hand.

“I guess I’m right on time.” Romero stepped into the room and shut the door with his foot. He had bloodstains on his face and his clothes.

Gabe breathed something under his breath that I couldn’t make out clearly. He was looking at Romero as if the reckoning had arrived and this was his judgment day.

Well, I suppose it kinda was.

Romero's eyes dropped between my legs, bouncing back up to study my face. I offered him a smile and the gun.

"Get in the corner," he directed Gabe, who scrambled to comply.

He came to stand in front of me and gently skimmed his knuckles near the area I'd been hit with the gun, taking it from my hand.

Beyond the office, I could hear the remaining windows shattering, the echoing boom of pews being overturned, and the occasional scream of someone new being discovered by the robed figures.

I reached up and touched the side of Romero's face, feeling his rage building in his veins.

"There's two left in the chamber."

"You hear that, Gabriel? I'm gonna give you that many more chances to live." He brought the barrel of the gun to my mouth. I closed my lips around it and ran my tongue up and down the cool metal. Pulling it out, he mimicked my action before lowering it between my open thighs. He grinned at me when he saw I had no underwear on.

I placed my hands behind me and gripped the edge of the desk as the hard metal was eased inside me. Gabriel's breath audibly hitched when I groaned.

"You're beautiful," Romero mused, pulling the gun out and pushing it back in. My inner muscles stretched and clamped around it, a little gush of arousal lubing the barrel.

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“Rome,” I sighed, bringing one hand to my clit as he slowly fucked me with the pistol.

The first empty click seemed louder than the carnage outside the door. My breath stitched, my arousal heightened.

“That’s one,” Romero counted. He twisted the solid metal inside me, going a little deeper. I increased the speed of my fingers, rolling my hard nub faster. The second click sounded. I whimpered and propped myself up on my elbows.

“Two,” he counted again, his voice a little deeper.

“You’re both fucking insane...mad in the blood,” Gabriel spat from his corner, not daring to move.

“We know,” Romero said just before the third click.

I felt a tightening in my lower stomach but I fought the feeling. There was hard metal inside me when I wanted him.

“Kill him and fuck me, please,” I begged. The gun immediately disappeared, covered in my juices.

I reached for his pants and fought to free his erection.

“Please, Deville, we can—” The gun went off twice, sending his blood and brain matter spraying up the wall. Romero tossed it to the side and entered me with one

solid thrust before the priest's body hit the floor.

"Fucking beautiful," he murmured, kissing on my neck before wrapping a hand around it. I gripped his perfect toned ass and pulled him deeper, wrapping my legs around his waist. His cock filled me up, creating a deep suctioning sound every time he moved in and out.

"Harder," I demanded, and immediately received.

I stared at the fresh blood running down the gray wall and felt the same tightening in my lower belly.

"I need you to come, baby." He lifted me by the neck, bringing me to the edge of the desk so he could go deeper. His mouth hit mine hard, and animal instinct took over.

We bit and sucked at one another, having the same carnal need to devour one another. I rolled my hips, meeting him thrust for thrust.

Things poured from my mouth I thought I would never say. The smell, sighs and moans suffocated us until the pressure inside me unexpectedly burst, sending electric shocks up and down my spine and my come soaked his dick, running down the crevice of my ass.

He followed after, coming with me when his cock jerked and triggered another rush of pleasure.

We stayed pressed together; body to body, soul-to-soul, breathing each other in.

He pulled back and gripped both sides of my face, planting one last lingering kiss on my lips.

“We’re gonna be legends.”

I pecked his cheek, feeling warmth in my chest from his words. He helped me off the desk, steadying me on my trembling legs. We walked back through what remained of the church, passing hooded figures that stopped what they were doing when they saw us.

I was blissfully unaware of what was really happening.

When the church went up in flames, we stood and watched, and I loved the way the fire warmed my face.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I think I was starting to befriend the strange girl who dwelled within one part of me.

The devil on my shoulder reached out a hand to my fallen angel and they formed a truce.

Over the next two weeks, things were relatively peaceful. Every day, I fell a little more for my beloved monster. Our demons played at our feet while we got lost in one another over and over again.

I chose to live in my bubble of bliss for just a while longer before summoning the courage to bring up Tito. I hadn’t heard from him, but I figured if Tito knew anything about Simon’s death, his common sense had kicked in and he was playing it safe.

It wasn’t until the third week things got strange.

I was woken up by the noise.

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 7:50 am*

It sounded like the biggest block party of the century was taking place inside the warehouse. Swinging my feet out of bed, I walked across the floor, feeling the bass vibrate through my soles.

Flipping on the bathroom light, I frowned at Arlen's cosmetology job in the mirror, lifting my temporarily dyed strands of hair. She'd been struck with the idea after hearing Romero tell me I brought color to his world. His exact words: "It's always so fucking dark in my head. You make me see color again, vivid colors: pink and blue, green and purple."

He said this while we were in bed so I wasn't sure if I'd fucked him so hard he saw a rainbow when he came or he was being sweet.

I splashed some water on my face, swirled some mouthwash, pulled my shoes on, and left the room.

People were everywhere.

Some wore the hooded robes from the night we burned down the church; others barely wore anything. They all had the inverted cross tattooed beneath their eye, or somewhere else visible on their bodies.

Five Finger Death Punch's Cradle to the Grave blasted through the air at a deafening decibel.

I shoved my way through dancing, writhing bodies, from people openly fucking and rude assholes who wouldn't move when I said excuse me.



Glancing over the banister, I saw Arlen's usual resting spot on the couch occupied by Cobra and a busty brunette. Hanging down from the ceiling was a large flag with the official symbol of Satan printed on it.

By the time I made it to the lower level and headed towards the back of the warehouse where the doors were wide open, Cut the Cord had begun to play and I'd tripped over two dead bodies—both nuns.

I reached the doors and took a minute to gather my composure, not wanting to believe what was obviously right in front of me.

There was a large crowd gathered around the man sitting like a king on a throne in the middle of a clearing. Someone had painted a pentacle in the dirt. There were four wooden stakes hammered into th

e ground at different points of the star.

"Here's the woman of the night," a soft voice said, almost right in my ear.

I sidestepped and did a quick onceover of the redhead who had come up behind me, noting her tattoo was located on her neck.

"Oh, he got you good," she laughed, staring at Romero a little too intently for my liking.

"Can you speak like a regular human?" I cut off her view and leveled her with an unimpressed stare.

"Calm down and look around you. Everyone looks at him the way I do.

That's what happens when you start sleeping with a man with power."

I blinked at her, not saying a word.

“You had to know you were consorting with the devil,” she scoffed.

“I...” I let the sentence die, looking back out at Romero. She was completely serious. I’d already established that the Savages were a fucking gang of cult worshippers of all things, worshippers of Romero to be more exact.

Having knowledge of something and physically seeing it, though, were two entirely different things. The man I adored was revered as the actual devil. It wasn’t just a nickname. I felt like I’d taken acid and was still on a trip.

“He has you now, sweetheart. I can already see the web he’s woven around your poor little soul. One minute he adores you, the next you’re scared shitless he’s going to kill you for blinking wrong.” She tossed her cigarette down and snuffed it with the heel of her shoe.

“Whose fucking idea was it to give him something so pure? Your corruption was unquestionably going to happen.”

“I was never pure.”

“You have a heart, darling. That’s good enough.” She brushed past me and walked into the crowd.

“Goddamn it.” I dropped my head and closed my eyes, pressing my hands to my temples. I didn’t fully yet understand what did any of this meant.

Lifting my head, I locked eyes with his and like a tethered ball and chain he pulled me to him. People openly stared at me as I walked by, eyeing me with curiosity.

“What the hell is this?” I wasted no time asking as he turned me around and sat me on his lap, pressing my back to his chest.

“It’s a celebration.”

“Of yourself? When did you have time to do all this?”

“I told you, I have connections. This celebration is for you...us.”

“Why would we celebrate with your cult? What are we even celebrating?”

I tried to stand up but he locked his arms around my waist.

“I thought you’d be happy about this. I’m letting you in.”

“I am...I think. I need a minute.” I kissed his cheek as a reassurance that I wasn’t all the way freaked out—yet. I went to stand again and this time he let me, only to motion two robed men over to take hold of me.

My heart lurched into my throat as I found myself on the ground, my arms and legs each secured to a wooden stake in the pentacle.

“What are you doing?”

I tugged at the rope around my wrists but couldn’t break free of it. “Rome?”

I wriggled around in the dirt as hooded figures surrounded me, all wearing the silver leviathan cross around their necks.

I looked all around me but could no longer see him. A man stepped forward, holding

a wriggling baby ram in his hands.

He held it above me so another man could slit its throat.

“No!” I protested, turning my head as blood rained down on me from above, coating my chest and neck, some inevitably landing on my face.

The circle parted the smallest bit, and I lifted my head up to see a shirtless Romero back in front of me, wearing a mask a little different from everyone else’s.

“What are you doing to me?” I screamed at him, furiously tugging at my restraints. He covered my body with his, pressing me into the dirt. I felt a sharp pinch, then a sting, followed by something wet running down my legs.

I sucked in a sharp breath when the same thing was done on the other side, and then repeated twice more.

Dropping my head back I closed my eyes and focused only on breathing, trying to ignore the way my body was reacting and the endorphins swimming through my brain.

I still had my eyes closed when he shoved my underwear to the side and pushed into me. I was so wet he slid in with ease. I had no choice but to take every inch of him as blood ran down my legs.

The men around us begin to quietly chant ave satanas as he fucked me harder, making me break my silent pact not to make a sound.

The music pouring from her mouth emanated pleasure and pain, her muscles flexing every time I touched her with the tip of the knife.

I loved seeing her like this, coming apart; it was beautiful. Ever since we'd met, she'd fed the beast in me, teased him and damn near begged him to come out.

I wonder what she would think of all this when she woke up, when she wasn't so high off pain and my dick making her come that she could think straight.

What we did was animalistic. It was dirty. It had to be done; I had to shove her headfirst over the edge and straight into my world. They needed to know she would be my side—forever. This was deeper than marriage. It never ended until we were both buried twelve feet under.

This thing between was still begging to be explored. She had no idea what the near future had in store for her. She wasn't done being molded just yet.

All that aside, she was it for me.

She wasn't classically gorgeous, wasn't what anyone would think of when they thought of centerfolds.

She was a sick bitch.

Maniac.

Homicidal harlot.

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And that's what made her so fucking beautiful—a motherfucking queen. Her devious, filthy fucking soul stole the air from my lungs.

I wanted her forever under my compulsion.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Maybe it was all a dream.

And then I sat up and realized how badly I wished it was.

My legs were on fire. My vagina lips were so swollen I wasn't sure my clit was even attached to my body. There was an inverted cross tattooed on my inner thigh.

The entire night before was a blur in the background of a raging headache. I wanted to lie back down but knew I needed to get up.

Stumbling out of the bed I didn't remember being put in, I made it to Romero's dresser and tugged open the upper drawer.

Propping my head up with one hand, I lazily dug through, looking for a shirt that would cover all my bruised assets.

My fingers slid over something metal and broken. Shoving clothes out of the way, I picked up the frame and flipped it around to see what was inside. Popping the back off, I removed the photo and studied it.

There was a tightening in my chest, and my throat constricted when I tried to swallow. Suddenly, the clarity of where I'd seen the skeleton ring before came rushing back to me.

Tilly had it on when this picture was taken, and she'd had it on when I first met her through the border fence. All of them were pictured together: Cobra, Grimm, Romero, Tilly, and a brunette.

“What are you doing?”

I turned, still holding the picture in my hand. I opened my mouth to say something, unable to find words.

His dead eyes looked at the picture, then back at my face with an understanding so clear I almost believed he was a mind reader, forgetting that fast how well he knew me.

“That's the girl.”

“Tilly. She has—had—a name,” I bit out.

His brows raised and he laughed. “Her name sure as fuck wasn't Tilly. Her name was Tiffany and she was one of the most fucked up bitches I've ever met.”

Tiffany?

“She wasn't, she was good,” I refuted.

“No, she was an unstable and untrustworthy narcissist who happened to be obsessed with me. The problem was her thinking she was better at mind games than I was. She ended up being the perfect puppet. She was not anything remotely good.”



I knew in my gut he wasn't lying, which meant she had, like everyone always did. I let the picture flutter down and tried to move past him.

"Shit, Cali, I didn't know, baby." He wrapped his arms around me and smothered me into his chest.

I didn't want to find comfort in his embrace, not when there was an ocean between us and so much that hadn't been said. I shoved away, almost falling on my ass.

"What the hell is this? Last night, us, and now this? Who the fuck are you?"

My brain felt like it was going to split in two. I never wanted to unravel, never wanted him to see I was weak, never wanted any of the bad shit that happened to me. I wanted to live. I wanted the yesterdays full of happiness back.

I angrily swiped at my face, feeling the first tears spill over.

"Who are you?"

"Yours."

That made it worse.

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“Tito wanted me to find you,” I blurted out. “Is this why? Because you fucked his sister? What did you do to her?”

“Everyone fucked her, Cali. If you want to know what a real whore was, it was Tiffany. I didn’t do anything but give her enough rope to hang herself, and she did.” He paused and looked me over with an inexpressive look on his face. “This isn’t the time to tell you about this. I promise I didn’t know, Cali. It wasn’t a fucking secret; I just didn’t think it was relevant for you to know about.”

“Tito is the one who sent me into the woods.” I said it in a way meant to lash out. My gut instinct about bad blood between them had been right and was the only thing I had to throw back at him. I regretted it the second I said it because I knew Rome wasn’t trying to hurt me.

When his facial expression didn’t change, I repeated myself, fully accepting he might hate me and think I was using him.

“Did you hear me?”

He looked at me another minute and then finally came forward. He scooped me up like I was a doll and carried me into the bathroom.

“I’m going to take care of you now.” He kissed my forehead and turned the water on.

I didn’t bother trying to stop his hands from cleaning and massaging every inch of my skin.

I didn't bother pointi

ng out that with every touch, he made me more his than I wanted to be. I was too busy going round and round with the madness in my head.

When he was done, he took me back to his bed and sat with me in silence, staring at one another, neither of us bringing up anything that needed to be discussed. I was okay with that right then; talking would make it all worse before it got better.

The longer we stared, the harder my heartbeat started kicking. I reached for him at the same time he reached for me.

It was the right thing to do at the wrong time. I indulged in the taste of him. His hands were everywhere, gently teasing my skin, leaving me no choice but to focus on him and nothing else.

When he finally brought our bodies together, he made it hurt in a different way.

It wasn't brutal or cold. He fucked me lovingly, and the pain went deeper than anything I'd ever felt before. It was beautiful agony. He was tearing me open and digging out the soul I didn't know I had, taking it for himself, permanently tying us together.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

He was gone when I woke up again.

I dressed, trying to stuff my thoughts in a cell of their own and keep a positive outlook.

Shit would be okay; I always found a way to make things okay—that's what I did,

fixed my shit with duct-tape and super glue. It was never perfect or pretty but it was together.

Leaving the room, I listened for sound, hearing nothing. The building was eerily silent.

Half-way down the metal grated stairs, Arlen and Cobra came around a corner.

“Sleeping Beauty lives!” Cobra exclaimed.

“Are you okay?”

I ignored him and focused on Arlen, who had a bruise that looked like it went down the whole right side of her body.

“I should be askin you that, but we should go.”

“Grimm and Romero already went ahead so we don’t lose em, but turns out David isn’t happy about his buddy Gabe and all his delegates kicking the bucket. He’s trying to move again; we’re playing interception,” Cobra explained.

I sucked in everything he said with rapid thought process.

“Why didn’t he wake me up?” I asked, already walking towards the door before either of them could answer.

“You look like you need as much sleep as you can get.”

“Shut up, idiot,” Arlen snapped at him.

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“It’s fine. When do we leave?”

“Are you sure you feel up to this after the—”

“I wanna go,” I cut him off.

“Okay, you’re the boss.”

When derelict buildings began to appear, I had a good idea where we were heading.

“Is this really a good place to meet?” I glanced in the rearview mirror at the trail of cars Cobra had met up with a few miles back.

Narcoosee Bridge only had two different directions you could go, and stone barriers on either side to prevent someone from driving into the water.

I leaned forward when I spotted a few black Jeeps up ahead, and a few pickups on the other side of the low stone divider.

Cobra stopped his Pontiac behind a few other cars and cut the engine.

“Where are they?” I asked, searching for him.

“He’s right there.” Cobra pointed and I followed.

“Why...what is he doing?”

I stared across the bridge to where Romero and Grimm stood with three robed figures behind them, and a brunette between them.

Wasn't she in that picture?

"That's my fuckin sister," Arlen choked out from the backseat.

My brain was screaming at me to get out, that something wasn't right. David appeared from behind a pickup with Noah and a man I'd never seen before, slowly walking towards Romero.

I watched the scene play out in slow motion, wanting to scream but unable to open my mouth.

When they were finally right in front of each other, they embraced, hugging like the best of friends.

"What the fuck is goin on?" Arlen yelled, opening the back door of the car.

I twisted to tell her get down, but I wasn't fast enough to beat the gunfire that erupted up and down both ends of the bridge, both sides shooting at their own people. I glimpsed David and Romero calmly walking away as if none of it was happening.

"Ah, fuck!" I dropped down to the floor as bullets peppered the windows, covering my ears with my hands.

When I got back up, blood was smeared on the seat where Cobra had just been sitting, and he was gone. Taking a deep breath, I climbed across the front seat and through the open driver side door.

Who the fuck was the enemy of who?

People with the cross tattoos were shooting at both each other and David's followers, and vice versa.

As I crawled on my hands and knees, using cars as shields, I couldn't spot Arlen anywhere.

My stomach turned to stone as I heard the arrival of more vehicles and round two transpired.

Bodies were dropping left and right; glass and blood were everywhere. Deciding to take my chances, I rushed to the barrier and pulled myself up, barely missing a stray bullet.

Looking down at the navy blue water, my stomach fluttered, and I started counting to three. I made it to two before someone shoved me from behind and came over with me.