



Smoke the Enemy

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Category: Romance, Crime And Mafia, Action

Description: Soren

I am the broken son.

The soulless brother.

I live in a world of power and twisted corruption that toys with life and death. I fear nothing except losing My Little Mouse. She's my obsession.

She likes to run, and I enjoy the chase. But now there's a serial killer chasing what's mine. If they touch her, I'll make sure they suffer. They have no idea the destruction I'll unleash.

I'll rip their soul from their body, and then feed their corpse to Allison.

Mors tua vita mea est. Your death, my life.

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Blue Rose, Alabama

Grounds of the Delta Pi Theta Fraternity Mansion

Taylor

I break through the swampy forest. There's mud and grass between my toes, and they've finally become numb to the pain, which I'm grateful for as my feet hit pavement. After seeing Alex with the brothers, I want to put as much distance between me and the fraternity house as possible. Those physical defense skills that Soren taught me came in handy. They probably didn't expect me to apply those skills against them, though. But there's no way I was going to wait around to find out what Alex planned to do with me. He stood up to the two men whom I thought were invisible and outright told them I was his.

Soren and Steffan simply stood there. They didn't argue. I'd just let both of them have their dicks inside of me — basically have their way with me — and they let Alex, the church choir boy, walk up to their house and have me.

I've finally reached a highway. My skin feels clammy as my hair sticks to my neck and the sides of my face. The air burns my lungs and throat, but I keep pushing forward. The pain is suffocating me, but I remind myself:

Alex is back.

I slept with both brothers only for them to discard me.

Alex is here!

He supposedly “claimed” me and is some kind of heir or royalty of a secret society. It’s hard to imagine the preacher’s son in the same league as the Carmichael twins. Nothing makes sense. At this point I’m ready to fall down and roll off this highway into a ditch and remain there until some shred of my life makes sense. Don’t fall apart now. Do not lose it.

The sound of an engine purring and a single headlight approaches me. I want to cry for help, but fear has my throat tightening. It could be one of the guys coming after me. It could be someone worse than them. Or it could be a nice passerby. Who am I kidding? What kind of person is out in the middle of nowhere at this hour? It’s the middle of the night.

My chest and sides burn from running, my body is exhausted, and the adrenaline I felt before is waning fast, but I try to get my legs moving. My current situation is that I look more like a zombie trying to run. Maybe I should just throw myself in the ditch, pretend like a tornado is coming—but the tornado in this instance is someone out to get me—and save myself that way.

The sleek motorbike stops before me, the rider is covered from head to toe in black, and we both stare at each other—or I stare at my wide-eyed reflection.

“Get on,” a muffled voice commands.

“Remove your helmet first,” I huff out.

“We don’t have time for this. Get. On. Taylor.” A black-gloved hand comes up and touches the side of the helmet. The tinted glass of the helmet retracts back and it’s...Kali.

“What are you doing here?” I cry in relief.

“There was another murder and I got worried about you.” Another murder. The guys were with me. Hope begins to rise in me that they’re innocent, but I push it back. They’re still part of some creepy organization that’s somehow connected to my psycho ex. Also, I don’t want to think too hard about how I still slept with them when I did have doubts about their innocence in these campus killings. What in the hell has college done to me?

“What happened? Who?”

“Let’s talk about it when we get away from here.”

Something is off. My mind might be hazy, and I know I’m still processing a lot, but she still didn’t answer my question. “How did you find me?”

“You’re dating the most notorious guy on campus who lives in the most well-known frat house.” She states this as if it should be obvious to me. Maybe now isn’t the time to tell her it was plural on the ‘guys’. Then again, I’m not dating both, am I? I need to declutter my mind and unload all of this. Too much has happened tonight, yesterday, this whole semester. Kali continues, “I had a bad feeling,” she looks me up and down, “turns out I was right. Your feet look like you’ve been dancing on shards of glass.”

“I’m glad you did. Thank you for going with your gut.” The sound of cars in the distance has me jumping on the back of her bike. “When did you get a bike?” Do I even really know Kali? Probably not. I mean, the guy I was sleeping with was a twin and I didn’t know that, why would I know my roommate? I’m obviously not a good judge of character when it comes to thinking I know everything about a person.

Instead of answering my question about her bike, she tells me, “Just hold on. We’ve got to get you out of here.”

The engine roars as the tires spin, sending rocks flying off behind us.

Kali takes me back to our house. As we climb off the bike, she asks me, “What have you gotten mixed up in? Be honest. Why were you on the highway, in the middle of the night, bare foot with nothing but the clothes on your back?”

“It’s my ex. Al—” The name gets caught in my throat. I swallow my nerves and try again. “Alex.” I force out. “He’s back and part of...” I trail off. What can I say? If I reveal more information, could I be in more danger, and worse, put Kali in danger? Then again, she is the one who told me about the Brotherhood. “He’s somehow connected to Soren and Steffan. The fraternity. I don’t know. It’s all a mess. Seeing him again freaked me out, so I ran.”

“That’s messed up, Tay.”

“I know,” I groan as I cover my face. I rub my face and then drop my hands in defeat. “Turns out the name I’ve known him as all this time isn’t his real name. He has the same last name as the guy Lois — you remember, she’s the lady I work with at the library — always went on about. Dupree. It’s weird how everyone at this university seems connected to that one fraternity.”

Kali takes me by the elbow and rushes me up the porch steps. “Shit. Okay, you have to pack a bag. You need to leave. Go home for a while. Classes are virtual and Thanksgiving break is coming up anyway so it’s the perfect time for you to get far away from this place for a while.”

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I jerk my arm free as we step onto the porch. “Why are you scared? Kali, what more do you know?”

“Enough to know the name Dupree is one of the oldest family names in Blue Rose, and holds the largest scholarship fund offered by this university. Guess what the requirements are to apply: male recipients must rush Delta Pi Theta. Females are to rush the sister sorority, Tau Psi Theta.” Kali stops speaking. Her eyebrows pinch together as she chews on her long, manicured black-painted nail.

“Kali?”

“I heard all the Duprees were gone... That must be why Alex went under an alias.”

“Yeah... I always knew him as Alex Myers, the preacher’s son. Not freaking Walter Alexander Dupree.”

“He must’ve been under protection, but he came out of hiding... for you...”

Kali seems to know so much about this fraternity, the families, and their history. But how? I’m starting to feel extremely naïve since I’ve been in the thick of all of it, but not any closer to discovering their secrets or gaining any information. “You heard? You sure have heard an awful lot. Is there more you’re not telling me? How do you know so much for this to be a secret society?”

She laughs. “I told you, I dated one of them. Then I got curious...and maybe a little nosy.” Kali crosses her arms and studies me for a moment. “How do you know so little? You’ve been attending the university and living in Blue Rose. You’re sleeping

with the main brother — literally the head of the frat — and you're clueless. Better yet, you were dating their version of royalty."

"Their who? Who is this their?"

"The Illicit. How can you be so unaware?"

Before I can answer, another motorbike pulls into the driveway. It's Soren. He's not wearing a helmet, which is unsafe, but that's beside the point. I mean, he's obviously living his life on the edge as it is, so why would I have even expected him to be wearing a helmet? What is he doing here? As if I don't already know the answer.

"Fuck off." Kali is quick to stand between Soren and me.

Soren ignores her, keeping his eyes focused on me. "Get over here. We have to talk." Reading my mind before I can comment, he emphasizes, "In private."

Kali takes a step toward him. "Look at her. She's bleeding and scared. You think I'm going to let you—"

Soren narrows his eyes and his jaw hardens as he gets off his bike. Not bothering to speak another word, he takes one, two, three long strides until he is standing before me. He looks down at my feet and then back to my eyes. I yelp as he swoops me up.

Kali yells and pulls out her phone. "Hey! Jackass! Stop right there! I'm calling the police!"

"Call 'em," Soren grumbles to her, clearly unfazed by her threat.

I'm too exhausted to put up a fight. Do I want to go with him? I can't deny I feel a sense of comfort being held in his arms and against his strong, warm body... A sick

part of me is relieved he came for me. Did he come because he cares, or was he sent for me? I need help. I'm obviously attracted to having a clearly toxic relationship with an unhinged individual. Maybe Kali should call someone to take me away for observation and intervention. And speaking of Kali, she keeps revealing little secrets about this fraternity. I know she said she dated a member, but it feels like there's more. Honestly, I don't know if I have any right to be, but I'm kind of mad at her for not telling all of it. Deep down I am convinced there's more she's keeping from me.

Soren continues to ignore Kali as he places me on the back of his bike. Kali yells, "Taylor!" I finally snap out of my thoughts and wave my hand at her.

"It's fine, Kali. I'm okay. If I don't come back within an hour, call for help."

Kali shakes her head with a mixture of pity and disgust on her face. "Clearly you have a type, Tay."

That was a low blow, but she's not wrong. Alex. Steffan. Soren. None of them are exactly boy next door material. These are not the guys every mother dreams of their daughters falling for. They're the ultimate worst nightmare. I guess I only have to decide will I choose the lesser of the evils, and who is that exactly? Because we've already established I'm not mentally sane enough to walk away from the darkness. Maybe I am sane... I'm just not as moral and pure-hearted as I thought...

Soren climbs onto the bike, and within seconds we're flying down the highway. We're not heading back toward the Brotherhood mansion, thank goodness, but out of town. I'm not sure I could face that place again considering it was only an hour ago I tortured my feet to get away from there...and him. I might've given in to see him had I stayed, and now here I am, hopping on the back of a motorcycle with him, but I draw the line at returning back to the house where I last saw my overbearing ex.

I squeeze Soren tightly as he pushes the bike to go faster and as my cheek falls

against his back as I stare out over the swamp trees as we continue to pick up speed. I've lived in Blue Rose for two years now, and I've never traveled this way. The wind whips my hair as the machine vibrates beneath me. And all I have left to do is think, to try to figure out how I got in this situation.

People are being murdered in the most gruesome way. Am I now holding the killer in my arms? Soren must feel my body stiffen because he takes his hand and rubs it soothingly along my leg. No. We were together when a murder was committed tonight. Before I was so sure it was Steffan, then Soren became a suspect, but they were with me. Unless he did it beforehand.

The most terrifying incident of all is seeing my ex-boyfriend, Alex Myers, standing outside the house in the dark. What if... Alex is the one who's committing these crimes? He showed up tonight, but he could've been around all along, lurking in the shadows. And now he is looking for me.

Alex may not realize it yet, but I'm not the girl he knew back home. Goodness, I've slept with two women. Two. Men. And instead of cowering to Alex, I fought him off. I ran away — I escaped his grasp.

Suddenly, everything hits me all at once. I feel weak from lack of sleep and stress. I press myself more into Soren and hold him tighter to keep from completely falling off the bike. In turn, his hand grips my arm, a reassurance that he has me now.

I've been repressing my feelings for so long, and walking through life in a dream-like state, but I can't anymore. I can't continue to ignore all the horrors. People are dead. They're dead. Friends are dead. My life could be in danger — no — my life is in danger. I've been living as though this isn't happening around me, but it is. All of it is really happening. Who am I anymore? I don't know. All I know is right now it feels freeing to be straddled on the back of Soren's bike, flying down this dark highway and allowing my tears to fall. Nobody can see or hear me. Soren must feel my body

vibrating against his as the sobs wreck me because his hand begins to rub mine. I cry for everyone I've lost, I cry over my feelings for Steffan and Soren, I cry that Alex scares the shit out of me, and I cry that I have no clue what to do with any of this.

It feels good to finally release all these emotions. I'm beyond emotionally drained when Soren drives us up to the beach. The water is pitch black, and it feels eerie how the only sound is that of the waves and the wind. Before I can hop off, Soren swings his leg over the bike and stands before me. He wraps his arms around me and lifts me to him.

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With my ankles locked around his back and my arms wrapped around his neck, he places his hands on my bottom and carries me as he makes his way across the sandy beach to the shore.

“What are we doing here?” My voice breaks and sounds hoarse from my crying fit on the back of the bike. He doesn’t answer, just continues balancing us through the uneven sand. “Have you come to drown me and let my body drift out to sea?” I’m only partly joking. Sort of. A small part of me is also scared. He gives me no answer. His face gives nothing away either. Great. My first time at the beach will actually be my last time. He continues walking straight for the water. When I feel the waves splash against us, panic begins to set in. I try to claw away from him like a cat. “Let go of me! Let me go!”

But he doesn’t. He only tightens his grip. The salty air and crash of the waves in the darkness only heightens my fears. Nobody is around. Who will hear my screams? Soren takes my legs and roughly pushes them off of him. My feet land in the cold ocean and I hiss as the saltwater stings my open wounds. Instead of removing my arms next, he gently places his hands on my hips and holds me to him as the waves push and pull against our bodies. The water level is to my knees, but it still has enough force to cause me to lose my balance a little. However, Soren’s hands are there to ensure I remain upright. His lock is solid as the waves maintain a steady rhythm against us.

“The salt will help heal you...in more ways than one.”

Soren takes my chin and I stare up at him. The moonlight reflecting off his eyes, which look almost black out here. We’re standing upright, our chests pressed together.

So much has happened in a mere few hours, yet now it's as if time has slowed down. The waves seem to move in slow motion, and I can barely hear them over my own heartbeat in my ears.

“What?” I lick the saltwater from my lips and sniffle. “What are you talking about? Why are we out here? You're holding me so gently now, which is a stark contrast from jerking my legs off of you a second ago.” I'm so, so very tired. I want all of this to just be over.

“Your feet. The saltwater will clean and help them heal.”

A hysterical laugh escapes me. “We're out here to clean my feet? Have you heard of Neosporin and bandages?” I cackle like a maniac. Tears begin to fall, but I continue to laugh. Because why not? This is beyond insane. “I thought you were bringing me out here to drown me! But we're just here to clean my feet!”

Soren gently places my head against his shoulder and shushes me while stroking my hair. The gesture is so out of character for him, this tenderness. He reminds me of the boy wearing the mask I talked to in the bedroom on that fateful Halloween night. A part of me wonders what triggers his drastic change in moods. Either way I accept the comfort. I'm an emotional wreck. I'd been strong for so long, trying to protect myself by not fully acknowledging what all was happening — but seeing Alex, it broke my façade. Finding my roommate dead in our dorm room was traumatic, but seeing the ghost from my past that I've been running from... it triggered me.

Waves crash against our bodies. I shiver against the cold water as he continues to keep us upright. “What's going on, Soren? Give me straight answers. It's just us out here.”

“I can't.”

“Yes, you can!” I push away from him and scream. “I want answers. I’m going insane. Can’t you see that? Literally every facet of my life is in chaos. I’m losing it, Soren.” I curse as tears start bubbling over. “Is that the plan? To drive me completely mentally insane because mission accomplished. You’ve achieved the ultimate mind fuck.” A hard wave lands against me, dousing me in water from the waist down, and I almost fall.

Soren grabs me by the back of the neck and brings my face closer to his. “I’ve never heard you use such language, Little Mouse. I didn’t think you were capable of such vulgar words.”

I press my lips in a thin line and speak through clenched teeth. “You’d be surprised.”

“I like it.” His other arm snakes around my body and presses me into him. His chest rises and falls against me. “Beg me to fuck you.” Even in the dim moonlight I can see his eyes sparkle with lust.

After everything that’s been going on, he’s ready to physically get it on. W-o-w. “You’re insane. You are fucking delusional.”

He groans. “There’s my little church mouse using bad words again. God, it’s hot when you say fuck.”

“You’re absolutely psychotic.”

His hold on my neck tightens. “You bet your pretty little ass I am. Now, beg me to fuck you.”

“No. You’re trying to drive me right to the edge of insanity with you. How about you go fuck yourself?”

He smiles and it should be terrifying, but I find myself panting at the sight of his tongue running along his teeth. I'm out here in the middle of the night, on the beach, physically trapped in his hold, yet I'm not feeling terror. I think my brain has finally broken. I've snapped. What else could it be? My stalker ex has returned, there was another murder tonight, and the man holding me as his captive right now just admitted to being a psycho.

Soren's eyes are focused on mine as he speaks. "I'll answer one question. Any question you want, if you just speak those little words to me." My mouth opens, but I close it when his grip becomes painful and he gives my head a tiny shake. "But say the words I want to hear with how badly you want to know the answer to your question."

He wants me to be convincing. He wants me to actually beg for him to fuck me. I hate how my stomach tightens. A year ago I would've been disgusted, outraged by such a request. The vulgar language alone would've offended me. I'm blushing, but this time it's not from embarrassment, but desire. I'm wet from the heat building inside of me that also has nothing to do with the saltwater. A bigger wave crashes against my back, and the cold water trails down, sending shivers along the way. Between Soren's words, his grip, and the cold water, my nipples are painfully hard. I swallow and with the next wave, I allow it to push me against Soren's solid chest. I've gone from being a meek quiet mouse, church and school were my life, to this person I almost don't recognize any longer. The most I'd ever done before the Carmichaels came into my life was kiss — maybe a little heavy petting. Now I'm here about to beg a man to fuck me right here on the beach. A person can change a lot in a year, apparently.

Another change in me is that I won't continue to be a bystander. I want answers. I want to be included and filled in on what's happening.

"You answer my question first."

“Ask.” His jaw tics and he looks almost angry. But I’ve come to learn Soren, he isn’t angry... he’s hungry. He’s ready to eat me alive. I stare into his beautiful face. Now that I know both brothers, there’s no mistaking the two. Steffan is charming and classically handsome. His twin, Soren, is dangerously gorgeous. Both equally as addicting. Darkness rolls off of him. If I’m not careful, I could drown in him, which would be far more deadly than being crushed under the weight of these black waters. But I want to. I want to get lost in the abyss. Like a small child who wants to play in the water but doesn’t know how to swim. That’s exactly how I feel with Soren. I’m diving into the deep end with no life jacket.

“Is Alex part of... whatever organization you’re in? Was he telling the truth?”

“That’s two questions.”

I huff. “Is Alex a part of your Brotherhood?”

“Yes.” Soren’s nostrils flare but he doesn’t speak anymore. I still don’t know what this means for us. But it’s Soren who is holding me now, steady and firm as the unforgiving ocean tosses us about. He did chase after me, so I have hope that this means he’s on my side, and not on Alex’s.

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Leaning forward, I lick a droplet of saltwater from his chiseled jaw. Then I stare into his eyes. My lips only a breath away from his, I tell him in a voice firm and sure, “Fuck me, Soren. Fuck your Little Mouse. Make sure there’s no misunderstanding to whom I belong.”

His hand still gripping the back of my head, he brings our lips together. I can’t breathe. I am drowning in him now. My lungs protest, but the rest of my body hungers for more of him. He moves his lips to the side of my mouth and growls against my skin, “Say it again.”

“Fuck me...” Cold, salty water splashes over my shoulders, but all I can feel is the heat of him. Pain shoots through my bottom lip only to be followed by the sensation of him sucking on it. “Soren,” I gasp as my body is lifted with the water, but he is my anchor, keeping me from drifting to sea.

His mouth fully claims mine again. One arm is wrapped securely around me while his other hand slides my bottoms down. I barely registered that he’s leading us back toward the shore. He guides me down onto the sand at the shoreline. The ocean almost seems to try and pull me back in as its waves crash against my feet and water rushes up toward my shoulders before retreating. Then I feel him. Soren rocks into me just as the waves had, in one smooth motion, and then he retreats as the moonlight provides the only light. Water cascades around us. I lick and nibble along his neck, tasting the salt from his skin. His shirt is clinging to his body, and I fight against it to touch his skin. I manage to remove it. My tongue and teeth run along his muscled shoulder, lapping at the water droplets. He hisses when I sink my teeth into him, not enough to break the skin, but I definitely mark him. And why does that send a thrill through me?

“Stop thinking so hard.” Soren is ever the watchful one. He misses nothing, even me tensing up. “Do whatever feels right, Little Mouse.”

“I’m afraid of what I like...”

Soren suddenly slows down. His eyes connect with mine as he thrusts into me slowly. The sudden change of tempo and the look in his eyes shocks me. I stare back at him, wanting desperately to know what he’s thinking. The answer isn’t there, or maybe it is, and I just don’t understand it.

“What?” I ask in a whisper.

“Never be afraid. Not with me.” A few strands of his hair have fallen in front of his glistening eyes, and I watch water droplets fall from the tips. I gently tuck the stray hairs behind his ears. He catches my wrist and brings it to his lips to place a tender kiss against the inside. “I like everything you do.” He nips the skin and then places an open-mouth kiss on it. “And I know your wanton desires, and there’s no need to fear the darkness... the illicit... Listen to your body. Embrace it. Don’t hold back or overthink it. Relish it as I worship your body.”

“And I want to worship your body,” I pant as I run my hands along his.

“Mine is for you to do with as you please. Use it for your darkest desires.” He leans down and I can hear the smile in his voice as he whispers, “Seek pleasure in this flesh, my little sinful harlot. Let’s see how many sins I can get the lustful church mouse to commit.”

“You really are immoral, Soren Carmichael.”

His voice lowers, “You love it.” The way he says it, it sounds more like you love me.

He pulls back and our eyes connect again. Something stirs inside of me that goes beyond lust, but that's ridiculous. We barely know each other — wrong, I don't really know him at all. Everything with him has been masks and secrets. It's fitting that we're sharing this moment under the veil of night. We've always been this way. I wish the waves would wash away all the lies and deceit that we're wrapped up in together. Maybe what we hope for is that the water cleans and baptizes us so that we could start fresh. Unfortunately, Soren Carmichael is destined to remain in the darkness — honestly, I don't know that there's any other way for him. I just wish I could walk away, but in this moment, I can't. Does he know what he's doing to me?

I dig my fingers into his flesh, desperate to hold on to him. I don't know what I'm doing, or what we are. Doubt. Fear. Lust. It's all meshed together, and I don't see that there's any way we can have a future. Alex is back and in my life, and now there's some babble about a stupid navy tie he had and a teddy bear that he gave me. Apparently, all the brothers have a tie and it's extremely symbolic if they give it to a woman. Now I'm this. I feel that Steffan has already claimed me, and Soren is definitely claiming me right now.

“Soren?”

“Yes?” He moans into my neck as he deepens his thrust.

“What are you thinking?”

That gets me a dark chuckle. “Right now? That I fucking love your tight little pussy. I can't bury myself deep enough.”

Meanwhile, I'm falling in love with this man and his brother and worried about our future. There's also a killer on the loose and it could be very well be my ex. His brother and their secret society. What does it all mean? And I don't know how, but I do know there's some connection between us, as in the brotherhood, me, and the

murders.

His nose nudges mine, and the gesture is so tender and out of character from how he's been with me up until this point. It's tender and sweet. His hands roam my body slow yet possessive. Even the waters have calmed down to where it's only gentle waves, swaying our bodies. My breasts press against his chest as his soft lips press against mine. I want to cry because my mind has been reeling, and the exhaustion of everything suddenly calms with his caress. He pulls back, and then presses his lips more firmly, but not aggressively. My lips part and he deepens the slow, sensual kiss. He told me to beg him to fuck me. This isn't fucking. It started out that way, but this is something else. My heart beats faster at the realization. I can't catch my breath. "Soren," I moan against his lips.

"Sshh. We both need this."

"This isn't what I begged for," I remind him.

"It's what you need. I'll take care of you, Little Mouse. You're scared, but you don't need to be." He has my body tightening with pleasure with each slow and deliberate move. The water and Soren are everywhere, worshiping my body. I've already accepted that I can't walk away now, so I throw myself into Soren's kiss. I fully give myself over to him. Something primal inside of me completely takes over. I'm needy for him, this stranger whom I've only known as a man behind a mask, forever hiding in the shadows. It's crazy. All of it. My head is spinning with the realization that I don't even care because I want Soren. I always have, and probably always will. Pure, carnal pleasure takes over as I roll us over and climb on top of Soren. He balances his legs and helps support me as I move against him.

"There's my Little Mouse." Soren moans in pleasure and nips my chin as the water splashes against us from my movements. "Take it, baby. Show me what you want." My head falls back, but Soren wraps his hand around my throat and forces my eyes to

fall back to his. “Take what you want,” he whispers against me in a jagged voice.

That does it. I come violently against him. With his hand on my throat, Soren crashes his mouth against mine and swallows my scream of pleasure. He pounds into me hard and fast. “Now, it’s my turn...and I’ll take what I want.”

Yes. Take it. I can only think the words because there’s no way I can speak. Soren rolls us back over, and then flips me onto my stomach and begins fucking me from behind. He’s giving me what I begged for. His thrusts are almost brutal, but I can feel another orgasm building. I suck in my lips and dig my fingers into the sand as he ruthlessly penetrates me, and the cold waves slap my skin. Goosebumps coat my skin, but I’m not sure if they’re from the ocean or Soren. Possibly both?

“Say it,” he hisses. “Say it, again.”

“Fuck me.”

“Again.”

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“Fuck me, Soren,” I scream because I can barely manage to get the words out. My clit has to be swollen by this point. But God, it all feels so incredible.

“Tell me to take it. To take all your pleasure.” Soren demands.

“Ta-Take it. Take it all. All that you wa-want.”

“Never.” He thrusts into me deeper as if to punctuate the word. “Ever.” Again, hard and deep. “Leave me again.”

“Yes, Soren.”

“Don’t run from me, Little Mouse. I will catch you. I will always catch you.”

“I won’t.”

He grabs my hair and tilts my neck so he can kiss me. His kiss is deep and hard. Strong fingers dig into the skin on my hips as he ruthlessly fucks me. His hips circle to where he still manages to stimulate my clit, and my eyes roll back. Soren then trails open-mouth kisses down my back, and when he reaches my hip he sucks on the tender skin. His right hand moves to my back and down between my cheeks. His finger massaging the tender skin. Without warning, he bites my hip, rams his finger against my delicate skin, almost penetrating the forbidden hole, and thrusts into me deep and hard. The orgasm wrecks through my body as my mouth opens in a silent scream of pleasure. He squeezes me tight as his body vibrates against mine and inside of me.

He then lies down next to me and rolls me to his side. We cling to each other, breathless and sated. The waves washing away any evidence of Soren's orgasm.

"Can I ask another question?" All too soon, Soren pulls away. He runs his hand over his face and smooths his wet hair back.

"So...what's your question," he asks.

A chill breaks out over my skin and the water is freezing without the warmth from his body. Even his eyes appear darker and colder. What in the hell just happened? We connected. I felt it and I know he did too. I guess I could ask that, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime moment. One that I'll probably never have the opportunity to ask him again. One question and he'll answer honestly. Is he the killer? Does he know who the killer is? What is The Illicit Brotherhood? What is the significance of the tie? Does he love me?

"Do I have to ask now? It's cold and my head isn't in the right space." In fact, it's too cold and I begin backing away from him through the shallow water and back to the sandy shore thinking I'll somehow be warmer. But my bottoms are nowhere in sight. The wind blows against my back as I blindly make my way to land. When we emerge from the water, me bottomless and Soren topless, I force myself to stand tall and not cover myself.

Soren doesn't answer. His face gives nothing away. He doesn't even appear to be cold. Soren is so ruggedly handsome and terrifying. I should probably be scared of him, yet all I want to do is climb him and wrap my arms around him and repeat what we just did a few moments ago. To hell with how unhinged he is.

I release an exasperated sigh at how ludicrous I am and that instead of giving me an answer he only stares down at me. I widen my eyes and raise my eyebrows at another attempt for a response. The cords in his neck tighten, but he remains stoic, waiting on

what I have to say.

“Fine.” I bite out, and in a rush I say the first thing that comes to mind. “Who do you suspect is the killer?”

“Bryce Van Doren.” With that, he stalks back to his bike and waits for me.

Soren

I committed a serious offense by having sex with Taylor just now. But nobody has to know. And if they find out, fuck them, I'll deal with it then. Taylor is so delicious, and a temptation I cannot resist. I'm aware of how cold my demeanor is coming off to her right now. But it's for her own safety. I have to put some distance between us now until I can figure out a way to make her completely mine. Or ours. I don't mind sharing her with Steffan. He's my twin, so I've always considered what's mine as his and vice versa. That dickhead Alex Dupree is a problem, though. One that needs solving immediately. Who is he to return to claim not only leadership of the Brotherhood, but my Little Mouse as well? Taylor is mine. She came apart under my touch, she submits to my will, and she comes alive through all of it. Look at how much she's grown, how much more she's in tune with her own body since last year. This isn't the same timid mouse at the Halloween party a year ago. I'll be damned if I'll let Alex have her. The thought has me wanting to burn the entire campus, and whole damn town, to the ground until I find him. Especially with the taste of Taylor still on my tongue.

The fearful look on her face when she first saw Alex fueled a new anger within me. I didn't think I could hold anymore rage inside myself. I was sure my father had filled me with enough anger that there wasn't possibly room for anymore. Then here comes Taylor's sex taking his claim to what's mine. When I saw the terror in her eyes while my brother kept me at bay while Dupree's filthy hands touched her, I wanted to kill Alex Dupree right then and there.

Then the sight of her running. I've always gotten a thrill stalking her, the hunt of it all. But seeing her run in fear of someone else — hell fucking no. Worse, she didn't run to me for protection. I was right there. Instead, she took off, and ran away from me like I was as much of a monster as her ex. I am the monster my father created, but not to her. Not to my sweet little church mouse. When I came for her, she didn't run to greet me. I'm seeing red again at the thought. The fucking reminder.

I can see in her eyes now that she's still suspicious. She's worried I'll turn on her and hand her over to Alex. Maybe she's still worried I might be the killer, even though I told her I suspect it's Van Doren. I am a killer, but not the one who's been terrorizing campus. College students are not on my radar. Until recently, anyway. Dupree and Van Doren are going to be the exceptions. No doubt she probably also thinks her ex, Alex, is behind all this. Possibly. I hadn't looked into it, but I will. I was telling the truth when I said Bryce. That's who the Brotherhood suspects, and who we've been ordered from The Illicit to wipe out.

"I need pants." I hate the detached tone in her voice. She better not be fucking regretting this.

"It's dark. Nobody will see."

She releases a humorless laugh. "I'm also cold, so pants would be nice. Forget it. Just take me home. Please."

I want to take her back to the mansion, but I know I can't. Alex will be waiting. And how would I explain her showing up soaking wet and naked from the waist down? Silently, I help her onto the back of my bike, and then I drive her home.

The entire drive I felt her pulling away from me and back into her shell. She didn't hold me as tight. She didn't lean on me for support, and though I hated her tears of agony, I relished the fact that it was my body she used as her anchor. Now Taylor is

stiff and barely making physical contact. She climbs off the back of my bike and begins to hurry off, most likely out of fear of someone seeing her. At least she doesn't live on campus anymore. Where her house is located, she doesn't have many neighbors, so running around half-dressed won't be an issue. I reach out to grip her elbow and spin her back to me.

"You made a promise." I don't have to clarify that she promised not to run from me again. I narrow my eyes and pin her with my stare. "I told you I will catch you, Little Mouse."

I hate the silence. Usually it's me giving everyone the silent treatment or not allowing them to be privy to my thoughts. Taylor has no clue that I communicate with her more than anyone, other than Steffan. Instead of answering me, she jerks her arm free and walks to the door.

"Taylor!" I call out. She turns around and I bend down at my bike seat. Leaning down, I take a long inhale in the spot where she'd been sitting. I close my eyes and sigh. "I don't plan on cleaning this seat for a long time."

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Taylor's eyes widen and she pulls at the hem of her shirt. Her roommate Kali appears in the doorway. She gasps at Taylor's lack of clothing, and then flips me off before slamming the door shut.

A chuckle escapes me as I rev my bike. Kali would kill me given the chance. I know that look in her eyes, and she has the guts to do it. I also know my Little Mouse. I've stalked and watched her for so long. She's going to run.

That's okay. Run, run, Little Mouse. I like to hunt.

"She's gone," Steffan informs me as he enters my room the next morning.

Let the hunt begin.

"She left this morning to go back to Mississippi. And I promised Mom for Thanksgiving break we'd go with her to North Carolina." Of course, he did. A part of me doesn't trust leaving Alex and Taylor unsupervised.

When I don't answer he crosses his arms and huffs out, "What are you going to do? Follow her to Mississippi?" Steffan questions me as if he doesn't already know the answer. Of course, I would. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours and I'm already itching to taste Little Mouse again. My brother's head drops between his shoulders. "You're delusional."

Huh. Little Mouse suggested the same thing.

"No. You are, brother," I tell him calmly. Much more calm than I feel inside.

In an obvious effort to change the subject, he says, “We still haven’t handled Van Doren. We have a meeting with the Fallen MC tonight. I know you’re ready to haul ass to Mississippi, but we have business. Father is expecting us to get our shit together.”

Fuck Bryce, the MC, and our father. I’m more concerned about the newest menace who’s crossed us. Van Doren has no power. Dupree — that’s a name that can influence The Illicit. That’s a name that can claim Taylor and fuck us over royally. Van Doren might be Steffan’s priority because of our father, but Dupree is mine, and it’s personal. His great-grandfather might’ve started The Illicit Brotherhood, but unfortunately that doesn’t hold shit in my book. Somewhere along the way, the DNA must’ve gotten too diluted. While Walter Dupree was a major badass, his descendant is... lacking. He’s more of a spineless, worthless dickhead. Just goes to show you can’t judge people by their family. Look at my father, also a spineless, worthless dickhead.

Steffan places a hand on my shoulder as I sit with my elbows propped on my knees. “You haven’t been home in a long time.” For good reason. “Mom misses you.” I’m right here if she wants to visit. “Let’s go home and regroup.” Let’s not. I can regroup here and not have our father breathing down my neck. “Mom wants to celebrate having you back. Hell, we haven’t had a chance to celebrate.” Whose fault is it that I was gone?

There’s no point in saying anything or arguing. Why argue with the past when we both see it so differently? It’s not Steffan’s fault. It’s our father’s, and just because I won’t argue about it doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten it. My eyes are focused on the future. What Steffan doesn’t know yet is that I plan for us to rule The Illicit. He can be the face. Their leader and handle all those pesky social situations that I loathe. Meanwhile, I’ll have my influence and control without the politics and necessities that go with it. Because fuck that. I don’t have the patience to deal with the bullshit and red tape. I prefer to rule in the shadows from behind the throne.

I peek up to find my brother still studying me. He won't be satisfied until I agree to go home. "Fine. Then send me your most trustworthy scab." I thought that was the whole purpose of pledges.

"For what?"

"They're getting a paid vacation to Mississippi."

"Soren."

"What? I hear it's lovely this time of year."

"This is your compromise, isn't it?" He sighs as he swipes his phone screen.

I stand up and walk over to the mini bar. I pour the amber liquid into my tumbler as I wait for my brother to finish texting.

"He'll be here shortly. I'll message our pilot that we're good to leave for Thanksgiving."

I nod, and then I empty the glass in one swallow. Honestly, this trip home is the perfect trifecta. I'll return home to see my mother, appease my brother, and set the foundation to destroy my father.

"Let's go down. Lee is waiting with some of the scabs to drive us to meet with the MC."

Lee. Steffan's little golden retriever. Ready to do whatever he asks, fetch, or attack on command. "I'm ready." I slam my glass down. "By the way, what treat do you give Lee when he's been a good boy?"

“Fuck you. He just cares about The Brotherhood. He knows how important business is. He respects me as the leader of Delta Pi Theta,unlikeyou.”

“Oh, he obeys his master, that’s for sure. Does he have a collar, or does the tie work well enough. Do you lead him around by it? What’s his safe word?”

Instead of answering, he flips me off and exits the room. I follow along snickering. It’s too easy to get under my brother’s skin.

And I enjoy every freaking minute of it.

Secret Location in Alabama

Fallen MC Compound

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Soren

After a couple of hours trapped in the car with my brother, Lee, and their favorite little scab Succo, I'm ready to drink...or hurt somebody. I was silent for the ride, no surprise there, but the other three were good little soldiers. They discussed strategy, where can they take the club from here, blah, blah, blah. It's like none of them could just be. Worse, Steffan wouldn't let me smoke in his car. I'm not a big smoker, but after that trip, Ineeda fucking cigarette.

My door is open before the wheels even come to complete stop. I'm lighting my cigarette when Lee comes up to my side. He leans toward me with his hands braced on his hips. "If you hate Illicit Brotherhood work so much, why didn't you fucking stay gone?"

I take a deep inhale and then blow the smoke in his pretty face. "Not sure. There's a lot of things I haven't figured out yet. Tell me, is it weird for you to see my face when you suck my brother's dick?"

Lee raises his fist, but I duck. Steffan, of course, comes up and grabs Lee by the arms, locking them behind his back. I chuckle and take a step into Lee's space, egging him on further. "Is this your ultimate fantasy? To be in a Carmichael brother sandwich?"

"I can't fucking stand you, Soren. You're a piece of shit and nothing but trouble."

"Ah. But you can't deny having Steffan on your back is getting you hard. So you're welcome for that." I take another deep drag and then discard my ashes on his shoulder. "Watch yourself, Conrad. You might be Steffan's little bitch and trained

dog—”

“I’m the vice president,” Lee informs me.

“Only because I don’t want that position. Because at the end of the day, no matter how hard you suck his dick, I’m still his brother. I am a Carmichael.”

I walk away as my twin whispers soothing words to his pet. I’m pleased with how pissed off all of them look now when they catch up to me. That made it all worth the trip here.

We enter the compound as a unit, of course. I mean, I might fuck with these assholes, but I won’t let anyone else. I am still loyal to The Brotherhood... somewhat, anyway.

I recognize the Fallen MC President Zeus immediately. He has a face I won’t ever forget. He’s older now, but before he was president of this powerful and profitable motorcycle gang, he worked for none other than Rhett Carmichael. He was a bodyguard, and one of our father’s most trusted men. He was also there when we’d have to execute and dispose of bodies to Allison. That man got a lot of laughs out of watching me squirm. What I wouldn’t give to make him squirm a little.

The six-foot-tall beast of a man walks toward us. His black boots heavy, footfalls echoing off the concrete walls. “Steffan.” His voice is deep and rough. Dark eyes cut to me, and a cruel smile creeps its way onto his face. “The other twin has returned. Heard you tried to feed a Van Doren to the alligator...alive.”

I shrug. I don’t give a fuck what he heard. Steffan stiffens, but his tone leaves no room for argument. “We’re here about setting up a drop-off. Not to gossip.”

“Let’s go into my office. My VP already has your money ready.” As we follow him back, he asks over his shoulder, “Wanna beer?”

“Sure.” Steffan accepts. I decline and keep a watchful eye on every member as we pass by. Some are organizing drugs. Some are cleaning guns. A few are drinking and playing pool. I hear moans off in the distance, so I can guess what they’re doing.

A door slams and I spin around. Alex Dupree walks through like he fucking owns the place. “Sorry I’m late.”

“What the fuck is he doing here?” I snarl.

Zeus laughs and comes up to pat me on the shoulder. “He’s here for the meeting. Didn’t they tell you?”

I stare daggers at Steffan. “No.”

Steffan appears to be as shocked as I am, but he does a better job of hiding it. “Alex. Good of you to join.”

“Of course. Your father said it would be good for me to shadow you, Steffan. So here I am.” After a pause he extends his hand to Zeus. “Seems these boys have forgotten their manners. I’m Alex Dupree.”

Zeus raises his eyebrows and tilts his head. “Dupree, eh? I thought there weren’t any more Duprees around. My-my.” As he shakes his hand, his eyes turn to me. “Well, this just got a lot more interesting.”

“What does that mean?” Steffan asks.

“Well. I’ve already had a Van Doren pop up, wanting to strike up a new deal, and now here’s a Dupree. Almost makes me wonder what other skeletons are going to appear.”

“Bryce Van Doren? When was he here?” I go to stand next to my brother.

Zeus looks around, and smirks. “Let’s discuss over a beer. Sounds like you boys need a drink.”

Through the entire meeting I was seething. Van Doren is trying to do business behind our backs. Dupree is weaseling his way in. As soon as we were back on the road, I laid into Steffan. “What the fuck was Dupree doing there?”

Turns out, my brother is just as pissed. “I don’t know. I’m going to find out, that’s for damn sure. Why in the hell would father send him?”

“You gonna mention Van Doren?” I roll an unlit cigarette between my lips.

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“No. We don’t need him on our ass any more than he already is.”

“If the old man is so damn worried, why don’t he go chasing after Van Doren. Does he think he can’t handle a college adolescent?” I snark.

“Not now, Soren.”

Steffan calls our father while Succo drives. After he ends the call, he tells us our father said it’s because he wants to keep an eye on Alex. If he’s around us, we can watch him better. I don’t buy that line of shit for a minute. Rhett Carmichael is only king and leader of The Illicit Brotherhood if there aren’t any Duprees. His sons can only reign after him if there isn’t a Dupree because the founding families will always vote for a Dupree.

Goddamn. I don’t want to have to deal with Alex for even one minute. But the next two weeks went the same way. Alex was everywhere we were. The plus side of that was I knew he wasn’t pining over Taylor or trying to win her back. However, Thanksgiving break was quickly approaching. So I made sure the scab remained in Mississippi when I boarded the plane to visit my family so he could keep an eye on things for me because I knew Alex would go visit his own family... who just so happened to be in the same town as my little mouse.

My family owns a large ski resort in Carmichael, North Carolina, that’s very profitable, but it’s mostly used as a way to launder our real money. Our ancestors were one of the founding families, and we basically own the town. We also have several homes in other locations, but mother likes to spend the winter holidays here.

The Hummer pulls up to our large luxury cabin. Steffan and I climb out in sync. The large, double-arched doors burst open and my mother, Judith Carmichael, comes running toward me with outstretched arms. She embraces me and then I feel her newly plumped lips against my skin as she peppers kisses all over my face. I've always thought my mother such a beautiful woman, yet she's never been satisfied with her appearance so she's constantly trying to upgrade herself with chemicals and surgeries. I think of Taylor's natural beauty and my heart tightens.

"My gorgeous baby boy. I've missed you so much." I know she has. My mother never would've agreed to what my father did with sending me away. Her answer was to wipe out the Van Doren's the night The Illicit discovered their betrayal. She wasn't satisfied with executing only the two heads of the house, she wanted to end the family line completely. Both Van Doren children, the son and daughter, would've lost their lives that night. She has a bit of a temper. Which is why I know she thought nothing of me being the reason Bryce lost his leg to Allison.

"Me too, Ma."

She turns her affections to Steffan. "Thank you for getting him home."

Steffan, ever the peacekeeper. But now that I see my mother's glistening eyes, I'm glad I came. Our father walks out next to hug us. The mighty Rhett Carmichael. I only accept his touch for my mother's sake. As we walk into the house, he grabs me and Steffan by our shoulders and mumbles, "We have much to discuss."

I inwardly groan. Of course, we do. Hell, I haven't even made it through the door yet.

Fucking home sweet home.

North Carolina

Carmichael Ski Resort

Soren

I'm furious as I leave the meeting with Steffan and my father. I didn't speak during the entire thing. He doesn't deserve my words. Besides, they'd only fall on his old, deaf ears. That man never listens to anyone. He hears what he wants, and does what he wants. Rhett Carmichael didn't become the leader of The Illicit Brotherhood by asking and playing nice. He's an overbearing son-of-a-bitch. While everyone else finds being in the same room with him nerve wracking, I remain collected and meet his gaze head-on every single fucking time. Because he's already put me through the worst. I don't fear my father's hand or his power. When it comes to him, I'm completely devoid of any emotions — including fear. Steffan, his golden child, still strives for his respect. He and I both know that any regard I held for him is long gone, which is why Steffan is now being groomed to rule. Fine by me. I'm not foolish enough to leave the Brotherhood because of my father. I still hunger for power, and by birth, I'm still owed that much. However, if — no, when — the opportunity presents itself to ruin my old man, I'm taking it.

“Soren!” My father's voice booms, and I keep walking. Apparently, he didn't get the notification that our meeting was over. “Soren Carmichael...” He takes a few more steps and then yells. “You do realize, son, that I'll make you pay for disobeying me.”

What could he possibly do to me that hasn't been done already...over and over again?

“I know about your ‘Little Mouse.’”

My feet stop mid-step before my mind even processes his threat. I turn around and march back toward him.

“Women have always been your weakness. You really need to work on that, son.” Liquid hot rage runs through my veins, but I refuse to react. The men continue walking past us. Security staff for the ski resort. Business managers. The whole meeting was about upping our personal security. Steffan and I are not to leave or travel unattended. We need fucking babysitters, as absurd as that is. Which is why a part of me wonders if he still doesn’t trust me. He shipped me off for a year, now I’m stripped of all privacy while in my own home. When I continue to blankly stare at him, he gives me a cold smirk.

“Step back inside my office, son.” I hold his stare a few seconds longer before finally doing as he asks. I lean against the wall and cross my arms, watching him as he walks back to sit behind his desk. “What’s the deal with this girl?” He already knows the answer to that question if he knows my nickname for her. He doesn’t bring up anything unless he is well prepared and thoroughly informed. I narrow my eyes as I try to tame my anger, not wanting to give him the satisfaction.

My father chuckles. “You and your brother sharing her? Was that some kind of arrangement so you could get a piece of ass? You sure as hell didn’t charm her. Have you even spoken to the girl, seeing as you’re a fucking mute, or does Steffan prep her with sweet words first so you can move right on in? Did he smooth talk both of your way into her pants?” I could share that I had Taylor first, but fuck him. Instead, I watch him. He’s trying too hard to get under my skin...he’s showing all his cards and the asshole is scared. A bully will poke and try to humiliate their opponent. My father isn’t a stupid man, and one doesn’t get as far in life — especially in *The Illicit* — by being naïve. He knows I’m not his ally, therefore I am a threat. We’re both realize that we’re playing mind games on the other. Neither one of us buying into the illusion we’re on the same team.

“I need to know if she’s going to be a distraction? A problem between you and your brother...and our business.”

He's worried she could cause a rift between Steffan and me. I smirk at that and push myself off the wall. "No worse than you are."

"Dammit, Soren! We were only protecting you. I've only ever done what you needed." I wait for him to finish, holding his stare the entire time. "Just go," he finally clips.

I casually walk out of his office, but once I'm in the hallway I hurry to Steffan's room. If father is concerned about Taylor, that means she could have a target on her head. Nothing gets in Rhett Carmichael's way. Threats and problems are immediately eliminated. Also, we need to figure out what we're going to do with these bodyguards. I stop walking and listen, sure enough, the footsteps that had been following me stop. Looking over my shoulder, I glare at the two men in suits, standing there waiting for my next move.

After Thanksgiving dinner I retreat to my room, but I don't get any solitude. I barely lie down on my bed when I hear a knock. No doubt it's my brother, so I don't bother voicing permission.

"Dinner was delicious." Steffan casually says as he strolls toward my bed.

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I throw my arm over my eyes and groan. “If you mention the weather next, I’ll throw you out that window. Just get on with it. We both know you’ve come to play peacemaker.”

“Listen, Soren, you’re going to have to meet Dad halfway. Maybe things would be easier. You forgave me, so maybe you can find it in yourself not to forgive him per se, but find a way to co-exist,” Steffan pleads with me.

“Have I forgiven you?”

“I hope you have. Just try and maybe we can get him to drop the security guards.”

That gets my attention. I drop my arm and sit up in the bed. “Or we drop them ourselves... with Allison.” It’s been a few days since our sweet little alligator has gotten a delivery. It would be a challenge transporting the bodies to Alabama, but I’d do it for my girl. I raise my eyebrows and hold out my hands, but my brother isn’t as amused with the idea. Steffan shakes his head and walks over to the bedroom window that stretches from the ceiling to floor. The snow is steadily falling. We could go skiing, lose them that way and then disappear. I don’t like feeling trapped in my own home. This whole situation is making me antsy.

Steffan turns around and crosses his arms. “Have you heard anything about Taylor?”

“She’s fine. Back home. Attends church every Sunday. So far no sign of Alex. But he’s bound to show up.”

“Are you planning to be there when he does?”

Splat. A snowball hits the glass of the window...we both glance over but wait, it's red... Steffan rushes over to look out the window. I stand from the bed, and hurry over to my brother's side. Down below there's a body lying in the snow, arms spread out. To an innocent bystander, it would appear like the person was in the process of making a snow angel, but they've been scalped, so it mimics a bloody halo, instead. Their arms have been fileted where the skin hangs off of them representing wings. On both sides of the body there is actually the imprint of a snow angel with red splattered in the snow for their halos. Above the body there's a wooden sign, and above each snow angel's bloody halo are signs. They're too far away for me to read, though, but I'm pretty damn sure they don't say Happy Turkey Day.

A low growl rumbles through me. I take off charging toward the door. Steffan rushes to step in front of me, blocking my path. "Where are you going?"

"Down there to see what those signs say," I grit through clenched teeth.

"Wait." Steffan walks over to my desk and grabs my camera. When he is back at my side, he hands it to me. "Use the camera lens and try zooming in."

We both look back down the window and I read out loud. "Steffan Carmichael," is above the right angel. "Angel of Death," is above the body. "Soren Carmichael," is above the left angel.

"Is that a threat?" Steffan asks.

"It looks more like a promise." I zoom in and see the faces of the body. "But at least they got rid of one of my bodyguards."

"Soren! Be fucking serious. That means they were on our damn property. How'd they get him away from the other two and down there? Nobody saw? Heard? Fuck."

“Unless... the killer lured him out. The body is on the edge of the property close to the forest.” I look back through my camera lens. “Guess it was too cold here for him to use snakes.”

“You think it’s the same killer?”

“You don’t? My guess is they had to adapt. Too much trouble to travel with snakes. See the snake drawn on the Angel of Death sign. Zoom in.”

Shit.

“Who the hell is this fucker?”

“I don’t know. But we’re going to go with the process of elimination and get them both. We’ll start with Bryce...”

Mississippi

Thanksgiving Break

Taylor

His fingers are firmly wrapping around my neck forming a collar on my throat that he keeps tightening and then loosening with each movement of his hands. “Is this what you crave, Little Mouse? Is it?” His lips brush against the curve of my ear. His voice lowers and demands, “I want to hear your words.”

“Let me hear your pretty little voice beg for me,” his brother Soren appears before me now. He is only wearing dark denim jeans, no shirt or shoes. I look up higher and see one more article of clothing is left on him. A blue tie.

Steffan smirks and then tightens his grip. “Soren has come to play. Should we let him?” He releases me, and I hate how I miss the feel of his grip already. Steffan moves to stand behind me and runs his fingers from my scalp through my hair. “You should feel special. My brother is usually so dismissive of everyone. But not you. He gives you his body and all of his words.”

Soren cradles my cheeks between his palms. “Are you going to play nice this time?”

Steffan gives my hair a little tug, sending tingles through me, “No running off.”

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“Mmmm. I don’t know,” Soren’s husky voice, combined with Steffan’s fingers, sends a thrill through me, “I personally enjoy the chase.”

They both release a dark chuckle as their hands roam my body. I close my eyes and sigh. Giving myself completely over to the pleasure they’re offering. Then I feel more hands. Startled, I open my eyes and look down.

Lee.

“What are you doing,” I breathe out.

“Whatever you want me to,” Lee gives me a full smile that showcases his gorgeous, perfectly white teeth. I don’t know why Lee Conrad is here. He’s Steffan’s best friend. Then I stare in fascination as he keeps those green eyes on me and sinks his teeth into my thigh. Not enough to break the skin, but enough pain to excite me. But why is he here?

“This is so wrong.” I’m speaking more to myself than anyone else. I’m with Steffan’s brother and best friend. “You’re...you’re Steffan’s—”

“I’m Steffan’s brother, too.” Lee tells me and fans the end of his tie at me. The Brotherhood. “You belong to The Illicit, don’t you?”

Soren licks from my jaw to ear and then nips the lobe. “Give in to your darkest desires, Little Mouse. Don’t be afraid.”

A hand rubs along my collar bone, and it’s Steffan, again. “We plan to worship, use,

and protect you.”

Panting, I cry out, “I want it. I want it all, and all of you. But I shouldn’t.”

“Maybe you should beg for forgiveness.” My blood turns cold, and my eyes fly open at the sound of his voice. I thought we were safe. I thought I was safe. What’s he doing here?

“Sssshhh, Little Mouse,” Soren whispers into my ear. He lifts me up and then carries my nude body through an area that’s pitch black. We emerge from the darkness in what appears to be the inside of an old cathedral, but instead of an altar, there’s a giant four-post bed. More shirtless men in denim jeans wearing blue ties appear. They’re all wearing masks, but I know they’re part of the Brotherhood. “You’re ours,” low voices speak in unison.

Soren gently places me onto the bed that’s replacing the altar. My skin is so sensitive, and I can’t help but sink into the silk sheets. A hand grabs my wrist and I roll my head over to the side to watch Steffan remove his blue tie. His deep-sea blue eyes watch me the entire time he uses his tie to restrain my wrist to the bedpost.

“What are you doing?” My words are drawn out in a husky voice that I don’t even recognize as my own. This is beyond... When did I become this person? Is this what they mean when they keep saying I’m theirs? I belong to the entire fraternity — The Illicit Brotherhood.

“Helping you relax, Little Mouse.” Soren reappears at my other side. He takes my wrist and begins to repeat the actions of his twin. I jerk my arm against his hold and against the other that binds my other arm. Soren bites his bottom lip and shakes his head, like he thinks I’m adorable. His hand is quick as he jerks it out and wraps the tie around it. He pulls the material tighter.

Mysterious, golden-brown eyes darken behind a mask as they peer down at me. The stranger speaks in a very menacing tone, “By taking control.”

Another masked face comes into my vision. This one slowly lifts his mask, and I can’t recall his name but he’s familiar. I’ve seen him around the mansion before. His exotic good looks isn’t one that could easily be forgotten. “Now...relax,” he whispers in a soft husky voice before he slowly lowers his head. My body quivers as I feel his hot tongue snake along my skin.

I stop fighting the restraints. Lee crawls between my legs and whispers against my thigh, “Good girl.” He removes his tie from his neck and dangles the fabric a hair above my skin. I feel only the faintest touches, and each time my body jerks. The soft material is dropped between my breasts. Ever so slowly, he drags the material down to my navel, spreading goosebumps all over my body. I shiver when I feel the tip of the tie brush against my pussy and then onto the bed. A whimper exits my lips as I shiver from the simple, yet erotic, act.

I stare up to the ceiling as I feel hands take my left ankle and tie it to the bottom bedpost. My right ankle is roughly brought to the side of the bed, forcing me to be spread wide, putting my most private of places on full display. I turn my neck to find Alex holding me in an almost painfully tight grip. His eyebrows are pulled together, and his lips are pressed into a thin line. I hate that my stomach is tightening and doing flips at the sight of him removing his tie single-handedly. The top half of my body recognizes that he is a total psychopath, but the lower half apparently thinks that only adds to his appeal. Alex gives my leg another tug despite it being already stretched out as far as it can physically go. He begins tying my ankle to the post.

“You’ve always been my greatest temptation. My most precious desire. I worshiped you...from afar...” He bends down and places an open-mouth kiss against my calf. “Tonight, I’m going to worship at your altar.”

He stands back to his full height to unbuckle his belt.No.Alex is my ex. I've spent the last two years running from him. I look away only to find Lee at the center of the foot of the bed doing the same thing. I turn my head to the side, Steffan is removing his pants. I turn to the opposite side, and yup, Soren is standing before me fully nude. The handsome nameless Delta Pi Theta brother is also undressing. I wonder what the other masked brothers will do to me...

I'm going to have a heart attack. My heart is beating too fast, and my chest keeps tightening. But my body feels so alive. I don't think I've ever been so aroused. All four of these men are terrifying in their own way. Behind them are more dangerous men. They're beautiful predators and they've successfully trapped their prey.

Alex settles between my thighs. My body jolts at the feel of his tongue. "The forbidden fruit." His voice has taken on a guttural edge.

"Still so cheesy and dramatic," I whimper. I want to be sarcastic and jab at him, but what he's doing with his tongue is beyond... "Oh my!"

Lee trails his fingers up the side of my leg. He flattens his palm over my stomach and then up my left breast. "Mind if I have a taste?" When I don't answer, I feel a sharp sting on my nipple.

I turn my head to see Steffan with a faint smirk. "Don't be rude. He asked you a question." I nod. Steffan smiles in approval and turns to Lee. "She's given you her consent, brother." He pinches my nipple again, but before I can protest, I feel the heat of Lee's warm tongue circling the tender skin.

When did I turn into this woman who has more than one man at once? For a second time at that. A familiar hand grips my throat.

"If it wasn't for you looking like you're in fucking ecstasy, I'd kill both of them for

touching you. You're supposed to be only mine and Steffan's." Soren places his lips a breath away from my ear and I can hear the smile in his voice as he says, "But I love watching you fall apart. My dick is so painfully hard." I gasp and Soren's dark chuckle fills my ear. "You like being watched, don't you? You're a naughty little church mouse. Do you like having all of my brothers watch you? Do you want all of them to taste you, too?"

Oh God... do I? Before I can shamefully answer that, Steffan speaks.

"I'm getting tired of watching. It's time to have her falling apart from my lips." He grabs my chin and turns my head to face him. He slams his lips to mine and forces his tongue between my lips. The kiss is rough and demanding. Soren's lips land on my now stretched and exposed neck.

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I didn't think I'd ever be grateful to be bound, but thank God I'm bound to this bed because I need an anchor. The pleasure. The sensations. It's all too much, yet I don't want them to stop.

Steffan trails kisses down along my jawline. "Are you good and ready for us? Hhhmmm?"

I feel two fingers ease inside of me. The one whose name I don't know chuckles against me and answers, "She's ready."

"Little Mouse," Soren speaks my nickname almost as if it's a melody. "Remember what I said the snake does to a mouse. You have five snakes circling you." He nips my ear and I hate that I actually squeak. How could I forget the Halloween party last year when I came dressed as a mouse? He made the comparison of me as the mouse, and him as the snake. That's also the night Soren took my virginity. He mentioned five snakes...so does that mean the other guests are here to observe? To bear witness to my carnal and lustful sins? He must read my mind because there's definitely more than five of them. "The others are here for..." kiss "entertainment..." kiss "unless we're not enough for you..." kiss.

Is that a joke? I can barely handle the twins. I lick my lips and swallow. "You already are...devouring me." I'm struggling to speak in complete sentences.

"This isn't us devouring you. Consider it more like meal prep," Lee states matter-of-factly.

"Let me feel how ready she is," Alex's voice takes on a desperate edge. Hands and

wet kisses dance along my body.

“Alex is dangerous. I thought y’all would protect me from him, not offer me up like a sacrificial lamb,” I say accusingly to the twins.

Steffan walks around the bed. He unties my ankles. “He’s part of us now. He’s a brother. And you’re property of The Illicit Brotherhood. You’ll have all our ties, and be bonded to all of us.”

All of them? Oh my God.

Alex wiggles his fingers one more time, causing me to moan before he removes them. I watch as Alex slowly slides his fingers between his lips and sucks them while he slides off the bed. “I knew you’d taste like Heaven.”

The bed dips and then Soren is above me. He pulls out a knife. The blade slices the ties easily. I yelp when without warning he flips me to lie on my stomach. Then he hoists my ass in the air.

A sting comes from my right. Another one from my left. I can’t tell which two are spanking me, but I know it’s not Soren because his hands are still on my hips. Next I feel a sharp bite on my ass and hear one of them growl. The teeth are no longer on my skin, but a tongue slides over the stinging marks.

Then I feel Soren align himself with me, he pauses to let me know he’s there. How could I not? My body is so hyperaware of all four of them around me. “Tonight, Little Mouse, we’re going to feast...on you.”

Then in one deep thrust...

Ring. Ring. Ring. RRRRing.

I gasp as I rise up in bed. I look around my dark room and see my cell screen glowing. I reach over and stare at the unknown number. Before I answer, I stare around my room again. It was a dream. Oh my God. It was a fucking dream. What's wrong with me? Freakin' Lee? Kali is interested in him, I could never... But I sort of did in my dream. And the guy I don't even know his name. The whole fraternity! Worse... Alex. Why would I dream something like that? Because I'm terrified that's what will happen... Being with the Steffan or Soren means I become property of the entire Brotherhood. The whole tie thing freaks me out. Being claimed. And then I think a part of me likes the idea. A part of me craves to be claimed and bound to someone both physically and emotionally. I also think, on a subconsciousness level, I'm worried this will lead me back to Alex.

Ring. Ring. My phone, I'd forgotten all about that. I quickly swipe the screen, worried that maybe it's Kali. An emergency of some kind because who would have my number and be calling me at four in the morning.

"Hello?"

"Little Mouse. I wanted to wish you a Happy Thanksgiving. You look very pretty, all flushed, like you were excited. I hope the excitement was... worthwhile."

Click. Call Ended.

I quickly go to messages and click Soren's name.

Me: Were you watching me?

Soren: ;)

Me: How? Are you here?

Soren: Not physically.

Me: HOW?

Soren: Always keep your laptop open... Good night, Little Mouse.

I look over at my laptop that's open, but the screen isn't on. I tilt my head and study it. Keep your laptop open... The camera! He must've hacked into my computer. That sneaky bastard.

Blue Rose, Alabama

Taylor

Classes have resumed on campus after the Thanksgiving break and students have the option to do virtual or attend in person. A lot of students and staff are struggling and there's counseling options available for those who need help in dealing with the murders. It seems now the killer, or if this is a new murderer, is focused on people connected to the school somehow, but now taken it off campus. Being onnected to the Delta Pi Theta fraternity is their connection to the school...and more importantly, The Illicit Brotherhood.

Will they be here waiting for me? This thought has plagued my mind ever since I returned. I only thought I knew fear, I had no clue what true terror was until I saw all three of them standing there together that night. Now, each time I open my door, I brace myself to find them there waiting for me again. But they haven't. Not yet. Whoever is involved with this secret society is more powerful than I realized. So much tragedy and chaos, yet the media has yet to acknowledge the fraternity or any association to the killer. They're trying to sweep it all away. I've never been one for conspiracy theories, but I'm starting to buy into it. Everything has shifted to issues that aren't important, and some of the murders haven't been so much as mentioned. So it's just business as usual. Campus is open and we're all supposed to continue about our day... like nothing happened before break. Easier said than done.

Before break was terrifying. I regret having sex with Soren on the beach before I left. It wasn't the right time. I was just so confused with everything. Then that damn dream freaked me out even more. There is no way I'd ever let Alex touch me again. Not when I suspect how evil he truly might be. And Lee? I've only seen him as one of the brothers in the fraternity. He's hot, I'll give him that, but I've never wanted

him. Even now my cheeks heat just remembering him between my legs in the dream. The whole thing was incredible, even if it both excites and scares me. I know in my heart that I just need to escape all of them. I'm falling in love with the wrongmen. Multiple! Heaven help me. Maybe it's time to transfer schools?

When I walk into class I see Kali and wave. Sitting in the seat next to mine is Steffan. I don't know why I expected him to be absent. It's sort of funny to think that a crime lord has time for a psych class. Then again, what better tool to have in your back pocket than understanding the mind of your opponents. Actually, that's something I need to remember as well.

I tilt my chin up as I take my seat. Without looking at him, I open my notebook and say without making eye contact, "I haven't heard from you in a while."

"There's been... uh..."

"Fraternity business," I finish for him.

He releases a relieved yet humorless chuckle. "Yup," and he pops the p. He leans closer and whispers, "I've missed you. Don't think I haven't thought about you or kept tabs on things with you."

I turn my head and our noses are a breath apart. "I'm flattered. Too bad this is the first time I actually thought of you."

"Ouch." He leans back in his chair. "I deserve that. Can I get you a coffee after class?"

"You can, but I won't accept it. You ghosted me, Steffan. You could've texted. It takes a minute of your precious time."

Steffan nods but doesn't say anymore. Then class begins and I try to ignore the warmth radiating from him, the intoxicating smell of his cologne, and that his foot has managed to slide over next to mine. Damn him.

When class is over, I hightail it out of there and Kali catches up to me on the sidewalk. She giggles and looks over her shoulder. "What was that about?"

"Me standing up for myself. Not being a doormat. He can't ignore me and then sit down like it's business as usual," I vent to her.

"Did you reach out to him?"

I stop and stare at her. Whose side is she on? Also, I hate that she has a point. "You bring up a valid point, but I'm not going to apologize. I have to start setting some boundaries. Demanding respect."

Kali wraps her arms around me in a warm hug. "Good for you, bitch. I'm proud of you. Can I buy you a coffee...and you accept it?"

I burst out laughing and cover my face. "You heard that?"

"Oh yeah. I fucking loved it. I wanted to throw my fist in the air and shout 'Yeah, bitch. That's my girl.' But instead, I remained a quiet bystander. Like a good friend would do."

"So I should offer to get you coffee." I fall in step with Kali and I bump her shoulder, laughing.

"Should I be this flattered that you turned down Steffan Carmichael for me?"

"I didn't turn him down for—"

“Tut-tut. Let me have this.”

We cross the road, and when I turn back, I see Steffan watching us. I give him a little wave. Kali sees me and does the same, clearly mocking and enjoying every second of it.

Before bed my cell chimes. It's from Steffan.

Steffan: I'm thinking about you...

Me: Funny. I just thought about you.

Steffan: Really??

Me: Yeah. I saw a discarded condom on campus.

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Steffan: You must really be missing me. Anything to do with sex makes you think of me.

Me: Wishful thinking on your part, Steffan.

Steffan: Don't worry, Little Mouse. Soon.

The next morning as I'm walking to class, Steffan catches up to me. "You didn't respond to my text."

"Is that a question?" I keep looking straight ahead.

"Guess not."

The wind has a little bite, but nothing too chilly. He remains in step with me, until finally he gently takes my elbow and stops me. "I do have one question. Have you seen Bryce Van Doren anywhere?"

I haven't seen or spoken to Bryce since I began to suspect him as the murderer and learned his family betrayed the Carmichaels. "No. Why?" When he doesn't answer me, I jerk my arm free. "Either you tell me, or I'll find Bryce myself and askhimwhat's going on."

Steffan scoffs. "This doesn't concern you."

"Apparently, it does, Steffan!" I shout. "I wish it didn't, though. You. Soren. Alex. And even Bryce have crossed my path. Why? People around me keep dying."

Steffan runs a finger along my cheek. “That I don’t know. Seems you attract danger.”

“I have to get to class.”

“If you see Bryce, you call us immediately. I’m serious. Don’t hesitate.”

“Will do,” I promise. Steffan leans down and places a lingering kiss on my forehead before walking away. When I turn around to continue walking, I stop when I notice a figure by a tree in the distance. I can’t stop myself from smirking as I pull out my cell and send Soren several eye ‘looking’ emojis.

Sure enough, a few seconds after I hit send, he walks toward me. An unlit cigarette dangling from his lips.

“You don’t light most of your cigarettes,” I tell him in confusion.

“True.”

“Why?”

“Honestly, I don’t care as much for the smoke as I do playing with the bud in my mouth. It’s a nervous tic, I guess. Helps ease my anxiety.” He doesn’t stop in front of me, but instead circles me. “Enjoy your chat with Steffan?”

“You’re giving off serious stalker vibes.”

“I’ve been stalking you for months now. Don’t act like now it bothers you.”

I narrow my eyes and squeeze my backpack straps. “Maybe I’m getting tired of it.”

“Fine.” With that, Soren begins walking away. “Like my brother said, call me if that

prick Van Doren shows his face around you.”

Luckily, there’s only a few weeks left before Winter Break. I see Soren and Steffan around campus, but they maintain a safe distance. I work in the library with Lois, and then go home to veg out and watch shows with Kali. It all becomes very routine.

I’m busy restocking books one night in the library when I hear feet approaching. Assuming it’s Steffan or Soren, I say in a snarky voice, “The juvenile section is downstairs.”

“I’m more interested in what’s on this aisle.”

Alex.

I spin around, clutching two books to my chest. The brothers are so worried about Bryce, but here I am more concerned with Alex. One is a rich douchebag, while the other one is a full-on deranged master manipulator. “What are you doing here?”

I’m all alone in this aisle with him. He appears so harmless and sweet. I know better. Most monsters don’t look like the things we imagine them to be, the ones who go bump in the night. They can actually appear in the form of the sweet boy from a small wholesome time.

“It’s a campus library. I’m a student here now.” Alex’s eyes roam over me. Am I blushing? I hope not. I feel like my dream is plastered over my face — like the dirty little fantasy of sleeping with my worst enemy is written in neon letters across my forehead. My shorts are suddenly feeling too short, and my top is clinging to the curves of my breasts. I never dressed this way back home, but college life and these people are making me do things I’d never have even thought of before.

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“Well, I can’t help you with anything other than telling you where the self-help aisle is and where you can fuck right off.” I turn my back on him and stomp off. His laughter follows me.

“I guess we can reconnect over winter break back in Mississippi.”

Not if I can help it. I jump when I turn to get away from him and almost run into Lois. “Bless me. What’s wrong, child?”

Before I can answer, Alex walks past us. He tips his head and gives me a panty-dropping smile. He continues walking past us and down the stairs. When he is completely out of sight, Lois turns to me with wide eyes.

“Where do you keep finding these gorgeous young men?”

“I—I didn’t find him.”

Lois barks with laughter. Her sixty-seven-year-old frail body shaking as she practically doubles over. “Right. I’m not dead yet, girl. My eyes are bad, but I saw the look in his eyes. Now I don’t know what happened on the back row, but I’m no fool.” Her little feet shuffle along, but she stops. “There was something familiar about him, though. But I’ve seen and met so many students so it’s probably this old mind of mine playing tricks on me.”

Her thin lips part to say more, but she stops. I want to ask her if he reminds her of someone from her past, but somehow it seems almost cruel to bring that up. I don’t want her to know that her one true love, Walter, lived and went on to marry. He had

children, and grandchildren. Even great grandchildren. And she had no idea.

It's hard to imagine Alex being a descendant of Lois's version of Walter Dupree, though. So I let Lois go ahead and I focus on getting back to work.

Mississippi

Winter Break

Taylor

The semester is over and we have a month off for winter break. I'm back in my hometown again, but what about when break is over, and class resumes to in-person? Every time I've gone to church since being home, I expect Alex will be standing at the altar waiting for me. Like in my dream... That stupid dream still haunts me. Sometimes I wonder if I still have this toxic and lingering attraction to Alex because he was my first love. He was the first guy I was crazy over, whom I couldn't stop thinking about. I'd even dream about us getting married. Does a person ever fully recover from their first love? Or what they thought was love...

Why won't Alex leave me alone? Coming home might have been a mistake since he lives here too. I needed my home though. I need a place that feels familiar. A place that is different from Blue Rose. My family is here, and even though they anger me at times, I'd take helping my mom grocery shop any day over sitting in class next to Steffan, or running into Soren in the hallways. Home is simple. Thorn University is...complicated.

My parents are thrilled to have me home for the holidays, and I'm sure Alex will be at the Christmas Eve ceremony at church since his father is the pastor. Or adoptive father. Brother Myers, whom I now know is his adopted father, and his real family lineage is tied to The Illicit Brotherhood, has already reached out to my parents about

me singing this year.

No wonder Alex's childhood was traumatic with Brother Myer's obsession over his blood being tainted by coming from bad blood. Ironically, Walter Dupree pushed his children away in hopes of them leading a safe and comfortable life, only to send them directly into a different kind of chaos. If Walter is his great-grandfather, and Brother Myers is his adoptive father, then who is Alex's biological father? Where is he?

All of this assaults my mind again as I think back to when I packed and left Blue Rose.

"Are you all packed?" Kali enters the room holding a little black gift bag.

"I'd rather stay here with you, but I've put off going home long enough."

She sits next to me on the bed and throws an arm around my shoulders. "Don't let those pricks scare you. And if that psycho bothers you at home, shove your foot up his ass."

"I wish I could."

"Didn't Thing Two teach you how to fight?"

"His name is Soren. And yes, he did."

"Good, you can defend yourself then. Here." She places the light bag in my lap. "I got you something. Merry Early Christmas."

I smile, "Kali! Thanks, roomie. Hold on." Keeping a grip on the bag with one hand, I lean over and grab the pink bag I have by my bed.

“It’s pink. My favorite color.” Kali smirks at me.

“Shut up.” I give her the bag and joke, “Sorry it’s not black like your soul.”

“No, it’s pink like my—”

“Stop.”

“I was going to say heart. But we know where your mind is.”

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“We both know you have a black heart that matches your soul.” I remove the dark tissue paper from the black bag that Kali gifted me. I reach in and pull out a cylinder tube that’s no bigger than my palm. “Is this...lipstick—”

“Whoa! Don’t push that!” She laughs as she takes the object from me. “This is Mace pepper spray. It’s disguised as a tube of lipstick, but it has a ten-foot range and will burn a fucker’s eyes out.”

“You think I need this in case...” I don’t even want to finish that thought. This gift is thoughtful and practical. And a dark reminder of how dangerous life has become as of late. If I would ever face reality, I’d acknowledge my life has become dangerous and scary. Murders are happening all around me. I’ve simply been pushing all of it out of sight behind me. Burying my fears down. Turning a blind eye. Pretending that none of this is really happening. The mind has a way of protecting us and shielding us from the horrors and trauma around us. And mine is operating at its full potential.

“Of course, you need this! Don’t ever hesitate to use it. Shoot and ask questions later. It’s not like this will kill anyone.”

“Just temporarily blind them.”

“Exactly. Hurt like a bitch, too.”

We laugh as I give her a hug. I tell Kali to go ahead and open my gift. “It’s not as thoughtful or useful.”

She rips the tape that I’d fastened to hold the bag closed. Then screams with delight

when she pulls out the box. “I can’t believe you!” Kali jumps off the bed and holds the box out in front of her and shakes it at me. “Of all the things I would’ve thought you’d gotten me, this was the last thing I would’ve expected. Oh my gosh!” She hugs the box to her chest. “I love it! You bitch, I love it!”

“Now maybe you’ll quit sneaking off with your electric toothbrush.”

“Fuck that. I’m still going to use it, but now he’ll have a friend. It’ll really be a party.” She wiggles her eyebrows and shimmies her shoulders. I fall onto my back laughing at her joke.

Kali leaps onto the bed and narrows her eyes. “But when did you go into a sex store to buy a vibrator?”

“I didn’t. It was a simple one-click purchase. Then delivered within two to three business days.”

“How did you not think this gift was as thoughtful or useful? I plan to make very good use out of this. And the best part, I can think about you every time I orgasm.”

“Shut up! Please don’t think about me while you’re doing that. You’re making it weird.”

“You’re the one who bought your roommate a vibrator for Christmas. Little miss good Christian.”

“I am a good Christian. Christmas is about giving and sharing good cheer. That’s what I did. I figured you needed one since you were using something intended for dental hygiene. And then placing it next to my toothbrush.”

“Did you buy anything for yourself on that one-click purchase?”

“No. I got a little overwhelmed when I saw a kit to clone someone’s penis. I had to stop looking.”

“Ooh. Maybe you should’ve purchased two of those so you could clone those Carmichael brothers’ dicks. Wait a minute...they’re twins, so were their dicks identical? I’ve always wondered that about twins. We could’ve compared them in length and the veins, took notes.”

“I don’t remember.”

“I call bullshit. You probably sit in here and masturbate to dreams of them every night.”

I laugh, if she only knew about my dream. Flopping back down on my bed, I pick up my phone and call Kali.

“Hey, you!” Kali answers on the second ring.

“You sound breathless. Is this a bad time?”

“No, it’s perfect. I was just using your Christmas present and thinking about you. Now you can talk to me while I—”

“I’m hanging up.”

“I’m kidding. I was doing a little cardio but not anything that fun. What about you?”

“Actually...that’s why I’m calling.”

“This conversation is going in a completely different direction than I expected and I’m here for it.”

I laugh and stare at my ceiling. “Listen, I had this dream...”

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“Wet? You had a wet dream! Did you flick your bean?”

“I did! The problem is I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“It was about Satan’s twins, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” I groan.

“Knew it.”

“But it wasn’t just them. It included Lee.” With that admission, Kali goes silent. “But I don’t like Lee in that way.”

“Doesn’t matter if you do. So, three guys? Wow.”

“Kali. Do you like Lee? Because I don’t. I don’t know why he was in the dream. But he wasn’t the only one.”

“Were you swimming in dicks? How many were in your little kinky harem?”

“Alex was there.”

Kali is silent again. I can imagine her mouth falling open and closing several times. “Psycho Alex? Your ex whom you’ve spent over a year hiding from? Now you had a dream where you slept with him plus Thing One and Two, and for whatever reason, that cute, adorable sex on a stick Lee?”

I nod even though she can't see me. Shame fills me because it sounds so much worse saying it out loud. The dream was incredible. I'd never gotten so wet in my life. But why? I'm telling Kali the truth that I've never looked at Lee that way. Yes, he's gorgeous, but I've only ever wanted the twins. That's bad enough, isn't it? And Alex! I used to think he was the most gorgeous and wonderful guy in the world until I learned how unhinged he is. He terrifies me. Nothing about any of that dream makes sense.

My internal freak out must be loud enough for Kali to hear. "Hey, I'm joking. It was only a dream. Don't be ashamed. You can't control what you dream about. Besides, you can dream and masturbate to whatever gets your rocks off."

I release a sound that's somewhere between a cry and a laugh. "You're the weirdest person."

"Oh, I wouldn't say too much about anybody else being weird. You've got some serious kinks there, roomie. I think you have some issues you need to get worked out."

I laugh, and at the same time want to cry because I miss my friend. "Are you kink-shaming me?"

"Honestly, I'm a little proud. You're not nearly as boring a roommate as I thought you'd be. Try not to worry about it so much, Tay. Dreams happen for many different reasons. Think about it, ever since you arrived at Thorn University, all you've been surrounded by is Steffan, Soren, and the Brotherhood, so Lee makes sense. Then Alex shows up again after you purposefully fled home to get away from him. Maybe you have some unresolved attachment issues. Oh! Maybe it's your southern hospitality? The more the merrier, and everyone, come on in."

"That was a horrendous southern accent. But I guess you're right." I shake my head

and laugh. “Not about the hospitality thing, but about the attachment and unresolved issues. I’m so happy we’re friends. I miss you. I can’t wait until the break is over and I get to see you.”

“Same...but until then, your Christmas present promises that I’ll be thinking about you a lot over winter break.” And my twisted roommate ends the call laughing in the background. God blessed me with that one, He sure did.

Later that day, I’m wandering through the grocery store when my phone buzzes and I look down to read the messages popping up.

Steffan: Thinking about you. I’m always thinking about you.

Soren: I’m thinking about you more.

Steffan: Fuck Soren. He only texted you because he read mine over my shoulder.

I burst out laughing. I have to bite my fist because I’m completely giddy. These two badass guys texting and fighting — well, like brothers. Before I can respond, I jump at the sound of the voice next to me.

“I love your laugh.”

I spin around. “Alex. You scared me.”

“Why? Why do I scare you so much?” He takes another step into my personal space.

“Ummm, let me see, you used to cut yourself in front of me when I was only a teenager. It freaked me out,” I whisper.

The hurt in his eyes is unmistakable as he glances around before saying, “You knew

what I was going through. My father — or who I thought was my father — told me my blood was tainted. I wanted to rid myself of it. Make myself clean. Especially while in the presence of such a precious angel.”

I tilt my head and plead with him to understand me. “You realize that have put me on a pedestal. What happens when you realize I’m not so pure.”

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A dark smile tugs at his lips and slowly spreads into place. “I know you’re not pure in that aspect. But your heart is. My precious, precious Taylor. A little lamb surrounded by wolves.” He licks his lips, and I hate how it’s disturbingly seductive. “Is that the worst of my sins? That I scared you with my disorder?”

“No! Don’t twist this around to make me sound heartless and insensitive.”

“What do you mean? I do nothing but compliment you.”

I press my lips together and release a noise of frustration. “You became obsessive. Controlling. The cutting. The need for us both to be pure and perfect. You even went as far as to make it feel like it was my fault you were aroused. Which is crazy because we were both hormonal teenagers, of course we wanted to have sex.”

Alex presses into me, causing my back to bump into my cart and send it rolling away. “Do you still want to have sex? Do I still ignite something inside of you?”

I don’t step back. I allow him to invade my space and stare him directly in the eyes. “No.”

“Liar,” he whispers in almost a hiss. “I can feel your nipples hardening against my chest.” He takes a step back and clears his throat. “What do you want me to say? I’m sorry. I was an idiot. I was brainwashed. We both were.”

“No. I never was. I still held onto my beliefs. You took it too far. But it’s not only that. Your obsessiveness is alarming.”

“Have you met Soren? Funny that you don’t seem to mind his stalker dick.”

“Stay away from me. We’re done. It’s time for you to move on.”

“Like you have.”

“Yes.” With that I end the conversation by turning around and walking away. Thankfully, he doesn’t follow me. However, I don’t breathe a sigh of relief until I’m safely home with the door locked.

Mississippi

Taylor

There’s only a few days left until Christmas, which means it’s time for last-minute church choir practice. Mom and Dad went into town earlier so Mom could stop at the bakery to pick up cookies, and my dad had to help hang up the tree lights in the town square. I told them I would be fine on my own, but truthfully, I’m still wracked with nerves each time I leave my house. Nothing has happened yet, but I still feel uneasy each time I step away from the safety of my home. Sitting behind the wheel of my car, I take a few calming breaths, and then I pull out onto the street and drive toward the side of town where the church is.

My mind begins to wander back to the very things I’ve been trying to forget all this time.

It’s been days since I’ve heard from the brothers, and the worry is getting to be too much. I had left all of them, the university, and I’m finally alone with my thoughts, trying to heal and trying to find a way to move on but it’s not far enough. The past few months keeps hitting me in waves. I discovered my roommate’s dead body. Then I stood outside and witnessed another person’s death. Snakes were left in my bathtub.

The guy at college I lost my virginity to has been stalking me, and then I slept with him and his twin brother. Alex is back. He keeps messing with my head with apologies, but he's still showing up randomly... I'm still struggling to process everything.

How had I survived the semester? How had I been so calm through it all? My mind must've been trying to protect me because only now am I registering the horror that unfolded during my time on campus. I feel like it was all straight out of a 90's horror flick, yet it was my reality.

And with that realization, my hands begin violently shaking and my vision blurs as I'm driving into town. Heart palpitations have my chest hurting. Sweat gathers at my temples and then drops slide down the sides of my face. The loud thumping of my pulse in my ears muffles the sound of car horns. I'm having a full-on panic attack and there's not a thing I can do to stop it.

That is, until the smooth road turns rough and the car bounces before I feel the impact of the airbag. It all really happened. They're all dead. I was part of it all and running away got me nowhere. Are they coming for me? Am I next?

I wake up shivering. The windshield of my car is shattered, somehow some of it remains together, and cold air bleeds through the cracks. I raise my head from the airbag and blink rapidly trying to clear the haze from my eyes. Snow flurries fall to the ground all around me. It hadn't been snowing when I lost control of the car. At least the sun hasn't set yet, so I haven't been out of it for too long. Pain radiates through my neck and shoulders, and I try to move. My entire body is stiff and feels bruised.

The short hairs on my arm stand up when I hear a noise from behind. I push against the door, but it won't budge. That's when I notice the plastic has popped around the trim and the metal is bent. A vehicle door slams and then I hear running. A shadowy figure slides on the light dusting of snow as it reaches my door.

“Taylor! Precious!” Precious... Oh God, no! I’m pinned between the seat and the airbag, my seatbelt is locked in place, and my door won’t open. I close my eyes as a river of silent tears stream down my cheeks. Of all people, Alex is the one to find me. Of course, he did. He’s found me everywhere else, why wouldn’t he find me trapped in this cage... like a mouse. Soren’s nickname for me is so very fitting.

“Are you hurt? I’m going to get you out!” He sounds like my Alex. The sweet boy from church I used to know and love, and I hate it. I should yell for help, but I can’t get my voice to work. Everything about him being here sends warning bells straight to my brain. I feel the car jerk as he pulls on the door handle. “Can you move? Can you crawl through to the other door?”

I don’t answer him. I’m too busy trying to focus on my breathing and how in the hell will I escape him. We’re out here in the middle of nowhere. In a wrecked car, no less, and the church is another ten-minute drive, but on foot, and injured, I don’t stand a chance against him.

Kali’s gift. I can’t see over the inflated airbag, but I feel with my right hand for my purse in the passenger seat. When my fingers touch leather, I curl them around it and... The door flies open. The purse is knocked from my hand as Alex places his knee on the passenger seat. I’m engulfed by the smell of mint, soap, and spice. I can’t help but find familiar comfort and pain in that scent. Light reflects off a blade that appears before my face, and I find my voice as a scream rips from my throat.

Alex’s big hand covers my mouth as he shushes me. “I have to cut the seatbelt. Sshhh, it’s okay, precious. It’s okay.” He removes his hand from my lips to gently touch each cheek with the back of his hand. “You’re freezing.” Alex begins frantically cutting through the material. With quick and precise movement, he slashes the airbag, and then retracts the blade and places it back in his pocket. “I’ve got you, precious,” he keeps whispering in my ear as he helps me slide across the armrest of my car. His voice is deep and soothing. Alex always had a hypnotizing voice. The

kind that could easily lead its victims into a death trap, and that's how I'm feeling right now.

I stand on wobbly legs next to my car with Alex's strong hands still supporting me. "Call 911. Or hand me my phone so I can."

He's looking me over carefully. "What happened?"

"I don't know. Please, let's call 911. Or I need to call my dad. Where's my phone."

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“Hey, hey. I’m here.” He cups my cheeks. I’m barely keeping it together. I don’t know. I don’t know. I can’t take anymore. What’s happening in my life? I woke up to a wrecked car out in the middle of nowhere, and now here’s Alex.

I snivel and my bottom lip trembles as I speak. “Can you call someone? Please?”

“Of course.” He rubs his thumbs along my cheek. Despite myself, I lean into it. It’s soothing. He seems so solid right now. While everything is crumbling around me, Alex is standing here offering me comfort, and I don’t seem to mind it at all.

“I’m going to call, okay? But I need you tell me what happened. I need to know what message to relay. Tell me, Taylor. I’m here for you. Lean on me.”

“Alex,” I cry and gasp.

“I know.” He brings me into his arms, and God help me, I let him. “Ssh. Tell me, baby. My precious girl, tell me.”

“Mental breakdown? I had a moment... started crying... then lost control...” I hate how weak I sound. I’d survived all semester keeping it together only to crash my car while having a crying fit slash panic attack? God. What’s wrong with me?

Alex tightens his arms around me and cradles me to his chest. I cry into his shirt and find comfort in the fact that he doesn’t let me go. “It’s okay. You’ve gone through a lot, and it’s finally caught up with you. Let it out. I’ve got you, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Wait, what's happening? I'm surprised with the strength I gather to shove Alex from me. "Stop it! You don't get to terrorize me, and then come play hero."

He bursts out a shocked and disbelieving laugh. "Excuse me, but who got you out of that car? It was me, Taylor, I showed up."

"I don't want you showing up for anything having to do with me."

"Why?"

"Because you scare me, Alex. I've told you this. I don't like what you do to yourself or how you started behaving toward the end of our relationship. You won't back off."

Alex takes a single step toward me, but stops when I retreat a step. "I was in a bad place. You'll never know how sorry I am for scaring you. But I've learned, explored, and accepted some things. It's so freeing when you are finally able to accept yourself. Will you accept me now?"

My heart can't handle this. I look at him, and a part of me still loves him. He was my first real boyfriend. How does he go from singing in the church choir and being a youth leader at vacation bible school to mutilating himself and practically hissing in rage over his urges. The gentle nature he would possess in front of everyone else, and then the obsessive control around me were like two ends of the same spectrum. Good and evil personified and it scared me to death.

"To be fair," Alex continues, "I also didn't know why I wanted to do the things I did back then. Hormones? Didn't you suggest that? I'm not sure what it was, but I have it under control now. It's been so long. Why can't you give me another chance?"

"Because you scared me! Because you followed me to another state! Because you're here now!" I scream and then fall to my knees crying. I'm tired. I'm so, so tired. I

can't do this. Make it all stop. God, please make it all stop. I jerk when I suddenly feel his hand at my face again.

“You’ve got a cut here. Just let me check it. Okay? I’m going to check your injury.”

At first I feel a light sting at the contact of him touching my cut, but then his warmth against my temple. He’s actually licking me... The warmth I feel spreads from there, and then throughout my body, turning into heated desire. It feels nice. I open my eyes to find Alex’s face against mine. He’s still licking me and now he’s kissing me while also sucking on the cut from the wreck.

I should stop him...but I don’t. I’m paralyzed with fear, confusion, and a weird yearning stirs in my lower abdomen. I shouldn’t be attracted to this. I must have really hit my head hard. Why am I not repulsed by what he’s doing to me? Then the dream comes to the forefront of my mind. I inhale a deep breath. There’s his scent again. Only this time, I imagine him taking out the knife and cutting me, just small cuts, nothing life-threatening...instead, just the opposite...it’s arousing, and then he begins licking me like he is doing now.

“Alex,” I say his name, hoping to snap him out of the trance he’s in. I need to be snapped out of the trance he has me in.

My hair is becoming damp from the snow, while my panties are drenched from my ex-psycho boyfriend rolling his tongue along my face. His body then presses against mine, urging me onto my back. My stupid body betrays me and moves how he wants it to.

His tongue slowly trails down the side of my cheek and then he nips my ear. “I’m not ashamed anymore, precious. I won’t turn down anything you offer me, or make you feel dirty. If you won’t judge me, I won’t judge thee.”

Definitely hit my head too hard. Maybe I'm dreaming again. Maybe I'm dead and I've gone to hell. Why else would I be on my back, bleeding, after being in a car wreck no less, with my ex-boyfriend on top of me? To hell with it, this can't get any crazier.

"I've learned the knife can enhance pleasure. But I don't want to scare you again."

"Alex?" He makes a noise of acknowledgement as his fingers comb through my hair and he presses soft kisses to the back of my ear. "You used to cut yourself and make me watch you remove tainted blood, remember?"

"Yes. But I won't lie to you, I still like to play with knives. Only now it's solely for pleasure."

Pleasure...My dream keeps gnawing at me. "What if I asked you to remove some of the tainted blood...from me?"

Alex doesn't move. I don't even think he's breathing anymore. The only indication he heard me is his cock growing against me.

But then it all comes back. "Oh my gosh. No. I'm not thinking straight. Get off of me."

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This is dangerous. I'm playing with fire. Alex hasn't changed, he's only better at manipulating the situation. The overly possessiveness. The coldness I'd sometime see in his eyes. The times he would make me feel ashamed for his desires. I ran away from him for a reason. I can't be lured back by his gorgeous face and charm.

"No. Forget I said anything."

"How could I possibly forget that?" His voice is filled with lust.

"Please leave me alone," I whimper. I hate that I'm cowering and begging right now, but I'm exhausted and in pain. His weight suddenly feels too heavy and confining.

The sound of a loud diesel motor and tires crunching has Alex jumping off of me and helping me up. He squeezes my hand tightly as if he's struggling to let go. My father jumps out of his truck and comes running up to us. I glance in the cab of the truck and see my mom sitting with her hand covering her lips. My cheeks flush imagining what they might have seen. My stomach roils with what I almost let happen.

"Taylor? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Daddy. I slid off the road and hit a tree. Luckily, Alex pulled up a few minutes later and helped me out of the car." Alex gives me two gentle squeezes, the sick bastard.

My father looks me over and then narrows his eyes on Alex. Finally, he says, "I didn't expect snow so soon, or for the roads to already be slick. I'm just glad you're not hurt too badly. We'll go get that cut looked at." My father takes a moment to study

Alex again, and then says, “We’ll have to be more careful.”

The way he’s looking between us, I don’t think he means from the wreck. I swallow the lump of shame and nod. If my parents hadn’t shown up, how far would things have gone? The part that scares me the most is could he have persuaded me to consent?

With that horrifying thought, I run to my mother and cling to her. When I peek over at Alex, he slowly raises a finger to reveal a red smudge. He slowly sticks his finger between his lips and closes his eyes with a look of ecstasy. And me, foolishly, I watch in fascination. I don’t understand the world around me or myself.

“I don’t think I can make it to practice,” I mumble against my mother. She pats my back and assures me nobody is expecting me to go now. My father tells me he’ll take me home and come back for my car. However, Alex speaks up.

“No worries, sir. I’ll get her car towed to the shop. You folks just make sure our girl is alright.”

“Such a good boy,” my mother beams.

I climb into my father’s truck and look out that window. Alex meets my eyes and winks as he takes his phone out. He got me. He knows he did. I allowed myself to fall victim to his charm. Sure, I was woozy from the wreck. But he’s been easing toward me and chipping away at my defense the entire time. Here or in Blue Rose, predators are lurking. Standing up to them isn’t enough. What I’m doing now isn’t going to work. I need to start acting more like a predator than the scared little prey who is always being hunted.

Carmichael, North Carolina

Winter Break

Soren

Steffan and I returned to Carmichael, North Carolina, for Winter Break. The Conrad family came to visit, and while our fathers are left to deal with the latest threats and business deals, Lee, Steffan, and I decide to go deer hunting.

“Have you ever held a still-beating heart in your hand? The blood is so warm and the muscles spasm against your palm.” I smile at Lee as I hold the deer’s heart before him.

Lee wrinkles his nose. “You’re so off.”

“I appreciate the hunt, and the kill.” I rip my bow from the deer.

“Come on,” Steffan huffs, “Let’s just get the deer home so we can gut it and feed Allison. She deserves a good Christmas dinner.”

I hoist the animal over my shoulders to carry it back to the truck. I plan to skin it and then make deer jerky. All the other parts I don’t use will go to Allison. Steffan does have a point. It might surprise most, but I don’t enjoy killing animals. I only said I appreciate the hunt and the kill. He can take that however he wants. Sometimes I enjoy saying things I know he’ll take the wrong way just to fuck with Lee’s head.

The warm blood drips down my back, causing shivers to ripple down my spine. Some of the blood drips off into the snow, thick over the glistening flakes. My steps falter.

“Listen here, bitch. Where is he?”

“Dad...I don’t want to be here.” I wanted to be brave for my father and go out on his

errands with him, but I can't do it. I'm not brave. Seeing this woman cry while my father squeezes her face has me sick to my stomach.

He turns his glacier-blue eyes on me. With a heavy jerk, he releases her. He bends at the waist so his eyes are level with mine. "Soren. My son. I was younger than you when my father showed me our world. It takes a strong man to lead. Yet here you are about to piss yourself." When I don't respond, he slaps me. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I-I'm sorry."

"Y-you're sorry? Sorry for what? For being a disgrace? For being a pussy? For interrupting me while I work for our family?"

"I'm sorry for interrupting you, sir."

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I flinch when he raises his palm again, but this time, he only lightly pats my cheek. “It’s okay, son. You’re forgiven. And to prove I still have faith in you, you’re going to slit her throat if she doesn’t tell us where her husband is.”

No. That’s murder. I can’t kill this woman. I can’t. What will Mom say? Does she know Dad does this?

“Go on. Don’t be shy,” he says in a taunting voice.

I walk over to stand before the woman. She’s tied to a wooden chair with zip ties. We’re in a hot, abandoned warehouse. Most of the glass is broken and flies are buzzing everywhere. Sweat drips down my face, neck, and back. My heart is pounding in my chest, and all I want is for my mom to walk in and hold me. She would stop this entire thing and then free this woman before she carries me back home to safety. Why did I think it would be fun to go with Dad? He wears a suite and rides in a fancy car. I wanted to sit in the cushioned leather seat and eat candy while watching a movie in the car.

“Hold out your hand.” I do as he demands. He places a knife with a gleaming long blade in my palm.

My eyes widen in horror. He honestly expects me to use this. My chest rises and falls as I struggle to breathe. It’s becoming difficult to swallow. The surrounding heat coupled with the pressure from my father are both suffocating.

“Ask her to tell you where her husband is.”

The woman with the tear-stained face and reddened eyes watches me as she whimpers, “Please.”

“Where is your husband, ma’am?”

Smack! I flinch at the pain from my father’s hand on the back of my neck. Smack! “This isn’t a dinner party, you dumb little shit! And if you flinch again...” He doesn’t finish his thought. The threat is left unspoken, but the promise is there.

“Where’s your husband?” I speak through gritted teeth. Mostly to hide my pain rather than scare her. I don’t want her to be afraid of me, for what my father wants me to do.

“I don’t know! Please! I don’t know,” she breaks down into sobs.

I look to my father but he only nods. What in the hell does that mean? I nod back because I’m ten and I don’t know what else to do. I point the knife at her and try to keep my hand from shaking, but that’s a complete fail. “Tell me!” I turn my body where my father cannot see my face and mouth the word ‘please’ to her.

She shakes her head with defeat written all over her face. “He left me. He didn’t even leave a message.”

Dad sighs loudly. “Looks like we’ll have to leave him a message.”

The woman cries harder. She turns her face up to the sky and screams, “Help me! Somebody!”

Two of my father’s men step forward, but he stops them. Hope rises in my chest. That is until he stares me in the eyes and nods his head toward the woman. “Do it,” he whispers so only I can hear. “Do it now.”

I gulp and lick my lips. Maybe I can run away. I'm really fast. He won't catch me. I'll make it home and tell Mom everything. Then I'll never go anywhere with Dad again. Steffan won't either.

As if he knows what I'm thinking, he chuckles. Placing his hands in his slacks, he casually walks up to me. He towers above me, so he has to look down in order to say the words, "Your mother knows, son. And she approves. You know why? Money. She likes her life. She loves the power. And she gets to give her baby boys anything their little hearts desire. Speaking of..." He squats down to be level with me. "Steffan didn't come. I knew he wasn't ready. He may never be ready...I have my doubts. I'm really disappointed to say I'm starting to have doubts about you. I thought this was going to be a proud dad moment for me. For us."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"You don't have to be sorry, yet. There's still time. Go on and do it for your old man, your family...for yourself. Show us you're ready to be part of the Brotherhood. The next head of the Carmichael family."

I grip the handle of the knife in my hand. I notice the woman has a gold necklace with a pendant on it. On it a cursive 'D.' She's dressed like how my mother dresses, very elegant and pretty. "What's your name?"

"Allison."

"Then why does your necklace have a D?"

"My last name is Dupree."

"Mrs. Allison Dupree, will you please tell my dad where your husband is? I don't want to hurt you."

“I know you don’t. But you must.” She raises her eyebrows up and lightly lifts her chin. I lean forward and she whispers, “My husband is taking my son someplace safe. He’s about your age. I’m so happy to know...that he got away from this life.”

My father jerks me back. “What did she say?”

“She’s happy to get away from this life.”

Allison nods in agreement as tears stream down her face. She mouths the words, ‘do it’, to me and lifts her head, exposing her neck. I’ve hunted before. I know the most humane way to do this so she doesn’t suffer is to go for the heart. With as fast as my hands can go, I stab her in the heart and then slit her throat.

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Her warm blood coats my hand and wrist. The men cheer and clap. Large palms pat me on the back. My father brags to his buddies about how ruthless my kill was, but little does he know it was the opposite. I gave her as much mercy as I could in this situation.

They wrap her body in a black tarp and load it into the back of the truck. I stare out the window as her blood dries on my skin. When the truck bounces on uneven ground, I notice we're approaching water. The truck stops and everyone shouts to get out. I hop out and swat at mosquitos. One of the guy's yells for me to get over there.

"Time to complete your initiation, little Carmichael."

The men laugh at his taunting. My father walks over and nods. Again, with that fucking nod. I typically don't say bad words, but after an afternoon with my father and his buddies...it's rubbing off on me. They lower the truck bed door, and then drag her body to the edge.

"She can't keep the plastic on. Might upset the gator's belly."

Gator? As in, alligator? Fear must be evident on my face because they all howl with laughter. "Don't worry. It'll have something else to eat rather than your scrawny ass." The man tells me.

"Think he can carry her? She's bigger than him."

My father steps in. "You underestimate my son, Zeus."

So the big one's name is Zeus. I would've had an easier time slitting his throat than that nice lady's.

My father continues, "Soren is young, but tall for his age. And he's stronger than he looks. Carry her to the water, son."

I take poor Allison's body over my shoulders, and my knees buckle under the weight. The feel of my father's disapproving eyes on me pushes me to stand. She's heavy. She's a tiny woman, but heavy for my ten-year-old body. But like my father said, I am tall and bigger than most for my age. Still. With each step I feel my body giving out under the weight. But thankfully, the water isn't far.

Two yellow eyes appear just below the surface. They break through, but I don't feel fear. I feel relieved. It's almost over. The longest and hardest walk of my life is almost coming to an end. The alligator barely breaks the surface of the water. Almost there. My eyes are focused on it.

My sweat mixed with Allison's blood drip down my back. Despite the heat, it causes shivers down my spine. All my muscles are screaming in protest, but I push forward. Finally, I reach the water's edge. I bend over and push Allison's body off of me and then hear the satisfying splash.

The gator's large jaws snatch her lifeless body, and then pull her under the water to properly store her body until she starts to decompose.

"Goodbye, Allison."

Laughter sounds from behind me. Zeus points at me. "Did you name the fucking gator?"

For some reason, I don't want to share the moment I had with Allison Dupree. I'm

sure my father knows her name. Maybe. Maybe he's already forgotten it because her life was meaningless to him. Her life will always mean something to me, though, because hers was the first one I took.

"Yes. I named the alligator...Allison."

As I walk back to the truck, my father rambles on about going to get me cleaned up before he lets me back into his sedan that's still parked at the warehouse. Plus, he doesn't want my mother to see me covered in blood. It's her one rule apparently, we always clean up before we go home.

All I can think about is how lucky Allison's son must be to have gotten away from this life. Wherever he is, I hope he never returns because my father will be waiting.

After that trip, after dear ol' Dad, made me kill a woman, I didn't speak for years. Yes. I named the alligator... Allison, were the last words my father heard from me for the longest time. The name Allison stuck. I never told anyone the true meaning behind the name, and most people don't even know that I'm the one who named her. Now, in a strange twist of fate, Allison's son has returned. I made a promise to myself that I couldn't save Allison from my father, but I could her son. But I also promised myself I would kill the son-of-a-bitch who hurt and scared Taylor.

Wouldn't it be my luck that it's the same person?

Carmichael, North Carolina

Christmas Eve

Soren

My father is furious we still haven't eliminated Bryce Van Doren. When I suggested he go find him himself... Well, let's just say mother's favorite vase is broken, and I now have a nasty cut on the back of my head. Before I could put to use one of those thick shards of porcelain, Steffan the peacekeeper intervened. I can hear my parents arguing now while I lie in bed with my arms behind my head. Mom is afraid dear ol' dad is going to chase me away again. I guess they forgot that I never ran away from home. I was sent away. There's a big difference. This time I'm not going anywhere, so she needn't worry.

I plan to have a busy upcoming year. There are four items on my to-do list: kill Bryce Van Doren, kill Rhett Carmichael, eliminate Alex Dupree from our lives, and claim Taylor Mae Lake. Oh, and if Van Doren isn't the one going around killing everyone and fucking with our Brotherhood, I need to figure out who that is and kill them.

The first two items are in the works, obviousl. But I'd prefer not to kill Alex Dupree. For one, I promised his mother I wouldn't. The second reason being I know deep down it would bother Taylor if I was the one who did it. If I could ship him off somewhere, that would be a fantastic solution. My gut tells me, though, that before everything is over, I will end up having to snuff the life out of him to find peace.

Claiming Taylor. My Little Mouse. She's consumed my thoughts since I first saw her at that Halloween party last year. Dressed as a naughty little mouse — yet the way she fidgeted and tugged at the costume, it was evident she typically didn't do revealing outfits or parties. She reeked of innocence. A sexy college girl on Halloween is easy pickings. But a good girl on the prowl for a night of wickedness. Fuck me. My dick's getting hard again.

I'd planned to fully give her a night she'd never forget. What I hadn't planned on was her giving me one that would haunt my dreams for an entire year. We talked. I don't do fucking small talk, much less whole conversations. I did that night though... with her. She got to know me. I found myself getting lost in her words and hungry for more

of them. I gave her something I never give lightly, my voice. We shared something far more intimate than sex that night. She probably thought nothing of it. I'm sure plenty of other guys have shared words with her. For me, however, it meant everything.

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Then me taking her virginity that night felt like the first time for both of us. I gave her a part of me that I'd never shared with a woman, just as she gave me a part of herself that hadn't been shared before. There was no doubt after that I planned to claim her as mine. Until The Brotherhood called me away. Fucking Bryce Van Doren pulling his shit instead of walking away. They spared his life, and instead of leaving with dignity, he had to attack my twin.

I saved Soren. Bryce lost his leg, sure, but Allison gained a little snack. My father didn't appreciate my efforts because he was too worried what The Illicit would say. For a man who talks a big game, he sure does worry about the opinions of others. Unless... he sent me away because he knows what I'm capable of. I'm not some little soldier who follows his every order. Or one of his well-trained puppies waiting for his every command.

I'm Soren Carmichael. The monster he molded me into at a young age. Instead of grooming me into his dangerous weapon, I became his greatest threat. Unfortunately, he knows that while he squeezed out any compassion until I was left a soulless shell, I still have two weaknesses: Steffan and Taylor.

I send a text to check in with the scab who is monitoring Taylor's house. He assures me everything has been good. Well, other than her being in a wreck and left helpless and at the mercy of Dupree. It's been too long since I checked on my little mouse personally, and it sounds like I need to make a quick trip to see her for myself. I miss the way her cheeks flare pink and how she looks so shocked at everything I do. I can't wait to tell her all the depraved things I have in mind once she's ours again. Every day during winter break that ticks by is tedious. I'm ready to end both the Van Doren and Dupree line, and of course, my brother dearest is taking his time,

following the rules and looking for the loophole in our tradition with the ties. We both know Alex had to trick my little mouse in order to get her to accept the tie. I'm getting tired of listening to my brother and Lee go over all the details and plans. I'm ready for action. It's Christmas Eve and soon winter break will be over, which I'm grateful for. I'm ready to get back to Blue Rose and away from my father, and hopefully closer to Taylor.

Lee has been able to gather information that Alex is indeed back in their hometown. Any time he spends around Taylor is too much. I remember everything she told me about him and how terrified she was around him. The only moments of terror I want her having are the ones I like to give her, but she likes those. She knows my intentions in the end are to give her pleasure, not to keep her scared and timid.

"She obviously didn't know about the significance of the blue tie, which means she didn't know about The Illicit before," Stephan argues.

"So we tell her our little family secret," I drawl, my gaze turning to my brother where he is pacing in front of the fireplace.

"You know you can't just tell her everything. There would have to be an agreement, and if Alex fights it," Lee adds his two cents from the leather armchair he reclines in across from me.

"Then we kill him," I shrug, and take a deep pull from the whiskey in my glass.

"We're trying notto bring more accelerant to this fire," Steffan interjects, and I take another drink.

"If there was ever a perfect time, it's now. A killer has been running around the campus all semester."

“Delta Pi Theta has already been implicated in that mess, this would only bring more questions, especially if he plans to attend Thorn University as a Dupree,” Lee interjects again, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Between the two of them, how have they ever made any decisions?

“There’s always our girl, Allison,” I remind him.

Steffan side-eyes me, “Are you actually here to be helpful?”

“I am being helpful. There are many options, but you two keep going around in circles. In the meantime, Taylor is just sitting there and Alex Dupree is circling her, looking for an opening. He is setting the tone with her about The Illicit, about us, and all the shit that happened to her on campus. Plus, she was in a fucking car accident and he was there to save her,” I remind them.

My brother’s head drops and he cradles it in his hands. Neither of us were happy to learn that information. If it hadn’t been for our secret scout, we never would have known. “He reported she was banged up, but nothing was broken. Just a superficial cut on her forehead. I know waiting isn’t your strong suit—”

“Wrong,” I interrupt him. “Waiting a year to come back home. Waiting and watching from the shadows to—”

Lee snorts. “Fucking creep.”

I charge at him, ready to mess up his pretty boy face. Steffan steps in between us and continues speaking, “But you do understand that right now she not only fears Alex, but The Brotherhood as well. We haven’t proven The Brotherhood is innocent in all the murders. If we keep trying to come at her too hard, she could get scared off completely. Taylor is smart. She has seen past his bullshit before, and she can again. Right now she wants time, and the least we can do is give her that,” Steffan argues

back, and I hate that I can see his point. He won't say it out loud in case our father can hear, and know he has a weakness, but I know he misses her. He checks in with the scout more than I do, and that's saying something.

I remember Taylor's expression when she told me about Alex. I also remember the little glint in her eye when I saw her last. She wasn't sure she was doing the right thing leaving us. True, she was scared and confused, but I saw it. There was a hint of questioning herself, and knowing our girl, I'm sure she thought she needed to psychoanalyze every part of her subconscious because of it. I call her our girl in my mind because as much as Steffan may not like to believe it, I know he thinks he had her first, she is ours. She wants us both. And the sooner my brother gets on board with sharing her, the happier we'll all be.

"How long?" I manage to growl out, my eyes shooting to Steffan's.

"Until break is over." He nods and I see his lips pull in a grimace, "Unless she makes the move to come to us first."

The three of us fall into silence, each of us reflecting on the decision that was made. I for one do not intend to pretend that I like it. I want her here and I want her willing. Steffan wants the same, but he won't admit it. The rules of The Illicit have been beat into him by our father from an early age, and if our father ever doubts Steffan, there is no way he'll let him take over one day. A loud vibrating noise cuts through the silence, and my brow raises.

"It's Bailee," Lee says as he pulls his phone out of his pocket. Red-hot jealousy flares in my stomach. Bailee is the girl Lee is obsessed over. The angel to his devil. She calls him daily to check in, but I've yet to meet her. I just hate that he gets to talk to her, see her over the holiday, and I've overheard them having phone sex. With every action between the two of them, I'm reminded of what I'm missing out on right now.

“When are we going to meetBailee?” I ask him.

His phone continues to ring as his gaze hardens at my question. “I’m not bringing her anywhere near your psycho ass.”

I snort and nod.Fair enough.

“Have I met her? What’s her last name?” Steffan runs his finger along his bottom lip in thought.

Lee fidgets in his seat and presses the End button to stop the ringing. He rubs his hands together, and I narrow my eyes to study him.Is it the lighting, or is this motherfucker turning all kinds of shades of green?

“Get him a bag, Steff. Your boy is about to hurl his lunch all over the place.”

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“I’m fine.” Lee growls. Yeah. Sure, you are.

Steffan tilts his head and holds his hands out. “What’s the matter? Who is she?”

“Van Doren. She’s Bailee Van Doren, for fuck’s sake.”

Three. Two. One. Steffan goes off. “As in fucking Bryce Van Doren’s little sister. When we told the brothers to keep an eye on her, it was to catch Bryce.”

My dark laughter echoes off the walls. “He’s keeping more than an eye on her.”

“Hey, fu—”

I hold up a finger. “Don’t you dare finish that sentence.”

Steffan kicks a chair. “What are you thinking, Lee? Her family has been banished from The Illicit. My father killed hers for betraying us. We’re after her fucking brother. Are you fucking mental, dude?”

Lee stands up. “But she’s not like them. She’s innocent. I didn’t mean for anything to happen between us. I was trying to be friendly to get information and...”

“She can’t be trusted,” Steffan says more to himself than to us. “But this could work. Maybe it will lure Bryce to us.”

“Or he’s already using her to get to us,” I counter.

“We have to be smart. And careful. Use this to our advantage.”

Lee opens his mouth, clearly wanting to argue, but he wisely shuts it. He's smitten. How precious. His phone rings again. Steffan waves his hand and Lee answers the phone before walking out of the room. My eyes follow him out.

“Let me make sure I'm understanding this. He can fuck a Van Doren, but I'm supposed to stay away from Taylor? Wow. I wonder what it's like being the favorite little minion. Maybe then I'd get to sleep with who I wanted to.”

“This is different.”

“How? Rules are that once a family is banished, we don't have anything to do with him. Lee's dick inside a Van Doren falls under the ‘definitely having something to do with them’ category, don't you think?”

“I get it,” Steffan sighs and finally sits down in the leather chair that Lee just vacated. “I want her, too.” He's talking about Taylor. “It's messy and complicated with a Dupree in the mix. We have to be smart. The original families will still hold loyalty to traditions and the fact his grandfather started all this. Despite what a piece of shit he is.”

“What if I don't care about all that?”

“You will.” Steffan lowers his voice to a hushed whisper. “We will become the new leaders. There's no reason we should throw what our families have worked for away and hand it over to these other assholes. Control your temper. Harness it.”

“Then why are we sitting around,” I bite back.

“You know why. We just discussed this, and we agreed to give her some time. Let

fucking Dupree show his colors, and then we can tell her our intentions. We can't let Father know either." His eyes find mine again. At least he's saying oursthis time.

"He already holds resentment toward the Duprees," I remind him.

"I don't want Taylor to become collateral to The Illicit. We give her some space to remember why Alex isn't for her, and when we get back on campus we can convince her further." He drums his fingers on the arm of the chair.

"Well, it shouldn't take too long at least. That fucker already scares her. I just hope she's safe. No more accidents," my fingers curl around the glass in my hand. I taught Taylor a few self-defense moves back on campus, but something tells me a guy like Alex might be more cunning. It feels too convenient that her was in a car accident and he was the one to save her.

"I'm sure you already have a way to watch her in realtime." Steffan takes a drink and I can't hide the smirk on my lips.

I would never leave our little mouse to dangle at the claws of a lion.

Taylor's dark hair spills over her bare shoulder as she wraps a towel around her body, hiding all that beautiful skin from my eyes. My lips twist in a smile. I wonder if she can feel me watching, even though I'm not there. My plan to activate the camera on her laptop remotely was genius. She hasn't discovered it yet, and if I'm lucky she never will. If I can't be with Taylor, at least I can check to make sure she's safe.

I watch her pour lotion on her skin, and even though her shower should have made her relaxed, I can still see the little V on her forehead, indicating she's thinking too hard. Her hands move over her arms repeatedly as if she's lost in thought. Her dewy skin turns pink where she rubs, and soon she's sitting on her bed, the towel moves up, exposing more of her legs.

“That’s it, Little Mouse,” I praise her even though she can’t hear me. Her hands work over her legs, sliding higher and higher. I groan in the silence of my room, wanting to see all of her while also enjoying the little tease she is giving me. I’m thankful she never shuts her laptop. My camera is always on, ready to capture beautiful moments like this. I have zero regrets over invading her privacy either. She’s mine, after all.

Taylor pauses rubbing her lotion in, her head tilting to the side like she’s listening for something. I sit up in my chair, keeping my eyes focused on the screen. After a few seconds Taylor gets off her bed and crosses the room to her bedroom door. She flicks the lock and turns off the light, plunging the room into darkness. I sit and wait, my heart hammering in my chest. Right as my fingertips touch the edge of my phone, the light on her desk flares to life. There is a soft glow of light now instead of the glaring brightness from her ceiling fan lights. Taylor walks over to her bed and stands still, looking at the covers. I run my fingertip over my lips, contemplating.

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What are you doing, Little Mouse?

Her towel drops. My eyes widen and I lean back again as she moves to lie down on her bed. I feel my cock twitch, stirring to life at the beauty on the screen. Taylor's hands run down over her naked front, and back up again, before squeezing her breasts.

"Fuck," I breathe out, totally captivated by what I'm watching. Reaching down, I lower the zipper on my jeans and stroke myself to the image of Taylor's hand sliding between her legs and her back arches. I manage to squeeze and move my hand down my length in time to her thrusting her fingers deep inside her pussy.

Taylor's mouth opens and closes, and I wish to God I could hear all of her delicate noises and pants as she works herself up. The fact that she is hiding nothing in the emptiness of her room makes my blood heat more. She bites down on her bottom lip, and I sense that she might be getting closer. Fuck...I wish this camera had sound. I pump my cock faster, keeping my eyes on the screen. Pre-cum beads over, and soon it's helping guide my hand. My eyes trace every curve of Taylor's body, watching heat bloom on her skin in red patches while her legs tremble. I want to know what she's fantasizing about. I want to know whose face she sees when her eyes flutter close. Me? My brother? Or all of us together...

Our last time at the fraternity house was hot, and like nothing I'd ever experienced before. Sex with Taylor alone had been mind-blowing, I hadn't lied when I told her I was planning to find her again. Sharing her with my brother was like watching the event unfold in front of a mirror. Maybe that makes me twisted, but if our girl likes it, I'm all about giving her what she wants. Just thinking about it again sets me on edge

and I feel ready to explode. I don't want to come before she does though.

My eyes skate back up to the screen right as Taylor's strokes are becoming more intense, her fingers hold inside her body longer. Her bottom lip is still pinned down between her teeth, and I wish I could feel them grazing across my skin. Her pelvis tips forward and her back arches over and over again. My hand pumps my cock harder and faster while I imagine being inside her. The way her pussy would clutch at me and pull me deeper inside her. Her skin sliding against mine, slick from her shower and the lotion and the way she's all worked up. I'd make her scream my name before flipping her over and diving back inside her soaked pussy. Taylor throws her head back and grabs her pillow with her free hand to pull down over her face. Her body shudders, and soon her legs fall open and her hand lays at her side. One more pump from my hand, and I catch the ropes of my cum against my shirt, completely spent. My chest rises and falls, and I try to calm the heat in my blood. I don't know how long Taylor lays there or how long I stay slumped in my seat. All I want is to reach through the screen and pull her to me.

Eventually Taylor gets up and slides a long t-shirt over her body before approaching her desk again. She smirks as she writes something down, like she's holding in a secret that she can't wait to tell me. Then she holds up a notebook with Merry Christmas written in a cute and whimsical style. Fuck me, she knew I was watching... The room plunges back into darkness, so I click the camera off, satisfied for the night and filled with amusement at her bravado.

"It's only a matter of time, Little Mouse. You'll be back with us soon."

Mississippi

Christmas Day

Taylor

Last night was fun. No. That's not the right word. It was exhilarating. When I saw the light come on on my laptop... I knew Soren was watching. Ever since that conversation and I realized he'd been watching me through my laptop camera, I had kept watching with anticipation for when I'd see the light come on. The best part was giving him a show without him being the one to know until the very end.

There's something about knowing he was not only watching me, but wanting me. I felt a power I hadn't known before. I only wish I could've seen the look on his face when I showed him the Merry Christmas sign. I expected him to text me or something, but even though he didn't acknowledge it, I still know he was watching.

Now it's time for me to be a good little Christian girl and go sing in the Christmas program, which I am extremely excited for. Christmas has always been my favorite holiday. Something about the way the snow falls silently while making the world seem eerily quiet is so peaceful to me. The lights and the smell of our freshly cut tree. The music and the feeling that everything was perfect in the world. I needed that holiday magic today. I wanted the music flowing through the church to fill my wounded spirit. I sang out like a call for help. As my eyes scan the congregation, they keep coming back to the one person who hasn't stopped looking at me since I arrived. Alex. Ever since the accident I went back to avoiding him, but with the entire town gathered for the service, there is no escaping him today.

Alex's eyes trail down my white choir gown, leaving me feeling hot and icky at the same time. I don't want his eyes on me. I also want answers, and for some reason I can't help but think that I could learn some things from Alex. Maybe get him to confess or share some information. Soren and Steffan are hiding things. Despite our moments of passion, if they won't be completely open and honest with me, then I can't trust them. I gave them the opportunity to tell me, to talk to me, but they only let me know when they're stalking me or horny. While that makes a girl feel all warm and cozy that he's thinking of me, it doesn't resolve our bigger issues. I probably sound like a psycho for even being excited at the prospect he's watching me. It's a

thought that's been in my mind and in the storyline of all my latest fantasies. I shouldn't want them the way I do when they keep important information from me — especially about the Illicit Brotherhood.

I feel like that girl floating in a boat and the water seems all calm and she feels safe, only for the monster to jump up out of nowhere and attack. Being home was supposed to make me feel safe. I was scared and I couldn't help but feel that somehow all the tragedy of the past few months was my fault. I just feel stranded. I can only hope that my favorite holiday isn't about to be ruined.

My eyes flutter close, and I try to block out the oily feeling of Alex's intense gaze. I sing all the carols from memory and try to focus. I need a plan. Mentally I'm face palming myself for declining Kali's offer to visit over break. My parents had never been helpful in keeping Alex away from me in the past, and I was delusional to think now would be any different. If anything, they supported the two of us spending time together. They believed he was a good, wholesome man, especially after he rescued me.

Right as the chorus picked up, a new feeling swept over me. Fire raced over my skin and a tingle pulsed low in my abdomen. I recognized this feeling. My eyes snap open and I'm careful to avoid them landing on Alex while I scan the crowd. Mrs. Lyle is singing loudly, wishing she was part of the choir, the Moliter twins are sleeping in their pew behind their parents, and I see that grumpy Mr. Tanner is trying to be discreet while picking his nose. I fight the urge to laugh out loud. I wonder what Lois would think of Mr. Tanner? The thought makes my lips twitch. I can just imagine her sassiness if she were to see him.

The tingles grow stronger until it feels like they're racing in my veins. I don't see him. I can almost imagine his presence, and it's driving me crazy. Soren must know it, too, because the gleam in his eye when he peeks out from the shadows is anything but innocent. His gaze burns into mine, filling me with heat and making my cheeks

flush. My heart beats wildly in my ribcage. He's here. I want to go to him, run down the aisle at the church and launch myself into the shadows with him. That must say a lot about me, that I'm willing to look past all the lies and secrets in the house of the Lord and do vile things with the congregation singing holy songs in the background. But when he smirks and raises his camera to take my picture without anyone realizing it...my panties are instantly soaked. Soren gives me a knowing look, presses his fingers to his lips, and sends a kiss my way. That's the last I see before he melts back into the shadows. I smile, and that is the second mistake I made tonight. As soon as I do, the chill in Alex's eyes drops below freezing. Dread replaces the warmth I was feeling a minute ago. I'm instantly sober after being under Soren's brief spell. The song finishes and the pastor speaks.

"Go in peace." Our pastor excuses the congregation.

My feet move fast, carrying me over to the safety of my parents' presence. It doesn't stop him though.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Lake," Alex's silky-smooth voice crashes the little sense of security I was feeling. Of course, my parents turn to him and are absolutely delighted to see him.

While my dad questions Alex about his classes for next semester and his progress on his law degree, I'm planning and plotting how to get out of here. I don't trust Alex. Every word out of his mouth while he chats up my parents sickens me. Once upon a time I thought he was charming, and I liked the way my parents talked with him effortlessly, but now I know better. I've seen the evil that lurks behind the mask he wears to fool everyone.

"I'm sure she'd love to," my mom's sweet voice pulls me out of my thoughts and I realize they're all staring at me.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Alex chuckles, “I asked if you want to go skating with me at the rink tonight.”

“Sorry, I have plans,” I answer automatically.

My mom frowns, “I don’t remember you saying you had plans, honey-bee.”

“I do,” I look at her, “Kali. My best friend from college is visiting.”

My dad frowns, “It’s Christmas evening, she’s traveling today?”

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“Yup,” I glance at him, already working out my lie for when she doesn’t arrive tonight. Long layover. Canceled flights. Lying to my parents while standing in the Lord’s house. This is a new low. “Sorry, Alex. It just doesn’t work.” I plaster a smile on my face as I look at him. Alex doesn’t look phased. If anything, he looks impressed that I’m blowing him off.

“It’s okay,” He gives me a fake, charming smile, “I’m sure we’ll see each other plenty when we return to campus.”

“You two should try and get a coffee or something before then,” my mom keeps pushing.

I shoot her a look, but she only smiles at me, “I’m sure Alex is busy. Plus, I promised Kali I’d show her around town.” I drop my roommate’s name again, hoping that everyone gets the hint.

“It’s okay, sweetheart.” He smiles and shivers run up my spine, “After everything that happened on campus, I’d want to be with friends too.”

The way his eyes glitter with amusement makes me want to gag. Thinking about the gruesome murders and lives lost makes me want to scream and cry at the same time. Alex talks about it so nonchalantly that I can’t help but wonder all over again...did he have something to do with the evil on campus? Right as I go to ask, he walks away. My phone vibrates in my pocket at the same time.

Kali: CALL ME!

I ease away from my parents who are now talking to some of the neighbors. Glancing around I hit call and bring the phone to my ear.

“Hey,” I say when I hear Kali answer.

“Oh my God, Taylor, are you okay?” Her voice sounds panicked.

“Yeah, Kali, what’s wrong?” I ask, my feet shuffling as far away from the crowd as I can go.

“Didn’t you hear the news?”

“No,” I answer, my body starting to shake.

“There was a murder. It was off campus, at the nursing home, but they’re saying it was gruesome. Just like on campus,” Kali’s voice is low, as if she’s trying to keep her voice down, and I wonder if she’s in public. I feel like my heart just stopped.

“Who was it?” Lois and I volunteered at the nursing home. There are so many people I knew there.

“A nurse. I don’t remember the name. I’m sorry. She wasn’t a full-time nurse there. One of those head nurses who went to the hospitals, campus health center, and other places.”

Nobody I was close to was that high up, so most likely I didn’t know her, but still it’s tragic. My heart breaks. Kali is still in Blue Rose and it’s making me antsy. I already told my parents she was coming, so I ask, “How do you feel about a trip to my hometown?”

Kali exhales, “I thought you’d never ask.”

I end the call with Kali and quickly call Lois. I have to know she's well. Lois and I grew close while working in the library and during my volunteer work. I know she doesn't have much family, and there's really no one to check on her.

The phone rings and then, "Hello. This is Lois."

"Lois! Merry Christmas!" I cry in relief. She sounds good. She's okay. She's alive.

"Well, heavens to Betsy! Taylor Mae! Oh, my sweet girl. Hearing your voice is a blessing to these old ears. This is the best Christmas present." My chest tightens at hearing the excitement in her voice.

"You're too kind. But I'm so relieved. I was so worried about you."

Lois scoffs. "Don't worry about these old bones. Although, being skinned like a fish isn't exactly how I'd like to leave this world. Honestly, the way my skin is hanging loose and dragging, they wouldn't even need to flay me."

I groan at her inappropriate and morbid humor. "Lois."

"Enjoy your youth. My lady bits are as shriveled as a raisin and drier than the Mojave Desert. It all goes downhill before you know it. But enough about me, you. Tell me about you. Still got those handsome devils after you?"

Handsome devils. If she only knew. "I haven't heard much from them."

"Pity. Your parents?"

"They're well. We just sang in the Christmas service."

"Oh lovely! Did anyone record it? If so, send it to me, will you?"

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I tell her I will and want to ask her what her plans are for the holidays, or if she did anything already, but I'm worried it'll only bring attention to how alone she is. She's never mentioned family or having anyone in her life — other than Walter Dupree.

“I wish you were here. You could come. You're welcome to join us for New Year's.”

There's a pause and then she sighs. “I appreciate that. More than you know. But I can't travel. It's too hard on me these days. I prefer to be here in the library, or hanging out at the nursery home. Oh, but don't worry about me. Every day I'm reminded how grateful and blessed I am. I still have my independence, and I've got a young, beautiful lady who cares enough to call and check on an old bird like me. If God decides to bless me with a handsome man with a giant trunk, I'll be able to die a happy woman.”

“Is that what you asked Santa for?”

“I did, actually! While I was sitting on his lap, I did a little shimmy and asked if he'd be the man for the job. Then the elf asked me to leave. She was a rude little tart. I guess she was worried I'd steal her job as Santa's little helper.”

I want to believe she's joking, but I know she's not. Lois goes on to tell me the campus has been quiet, but she's not scared to go there. School resumes in January and she's praying it all goes back to normal. Can we ever go back to normal? I don't even know what that is anymore.

Carmichael, North Carolina

Christmas Night

Soren

“Did you get your fix?” Steffan asks the minute I get in the door of our house. I speed past the lounge and dining room where our mother is ready to entertain guests for a nine-course holiday dinner, with my brother right by my side. I wish I could’ve stayed, but it was a quick trip. I also knew if I’d gotten my lips on her sweet skin, I wouldn’t have been satisfied with a quickie.

“What’s the point of having a private jet if we’re not going to use it,” I drawl while we continue walking through the house.

“Obviously you didn’t ask Father.” Steffan rubs his hands over his face, “Let me guess, you thought you’d be back before he noticed?”

“I made it in time for dinner, didn’t I?”

“Luckily we’re eating late.”

“And they’re preoccupied with the Conrads,” I growl in frustration. “Alex’s obsession with Taylor is making his moves erratic. He didn’t even notice me. She did... but he didn’t.”

“And our obsession isn’t?” Steffan turns to me, a brow raised. “It was only a few hours ago you flew to Mississippi and watchd Taylor from the shadows of her little church.”

While she sang so beautifully on the stage.I had been close to blowing everything out of the water when she found me in the crowd. I could see her longing written all over her face, and I wanted nothing more than to take her with me.

Steffan lowers his voice and his words are laced with concern. “Did she look okay?”

I nod, not really wanting to share the information. On one hand I see what my brother is doing. How he is keeping the peace between The Illicit by waiting and not openly displaying his affection for Taylor. On the other hand, I don’t see how he can be so calm with leaving her with a viper like Dupree. Stupid tie. She doesn’t even wear it, or knows what it means, so I don’t think it counts.

Was it over-the-top and probably a giant red flag that I flew all the way to Mississippi to see her? I never tried denying my obsession for her. The relief in finding Taylor unscathed was my Christmas gift to myself. I was about to go insane, especially after watching her make herself come. I simply had to see her and had the means to make it happen.

She’s smart, and I trust her — it’s Alex I worry about. The way his eyes followed her every movement and watched her lips as she sang. Her own self-preservation knows that on some level she can’t trust him. But when she looked at me, I could see the flash in her eyes. She was happy I was there. Even though she thinks she can’t trust us, she already does, and she probably hates it that she wants both of us. Taylor hasn’t exactly had an easy time of things since she arrived at Thorn University. The whole campus has been more of a nightmare than usual. That was another situation that was weighing on our brotherhood.

“Where’s Lee?” I ask, to change the subject. Interesting that Steffan’s little puppy isn’t nipping at his heels.

Steffan sits on the edge of the desk and crosses his arms. “He had brunch with Bailee and her aunt and uncle.” That’s awkward. Bailee lives with her mom’s sister and her husband since it was The Brotherhood who made her an orphan. “He should be arriving any minute. He and Bailee are coming here for dinner.”

“He’s bringing her?” I frown. Nobody else thinks that might be a little uncomfortable for her? Shit. She’s not even my girl, and I still think it’s a little fucked up. Then I chuckle, remembering my last conversation about her with Lee. “What happened to not bringing her near my ‘psycho ass?’”

“He’s pretty serious about her,” Steffan tells me, his eyes getting a faraway look in them, “Maybe he thinks since it’s the holidays and you’ll behave?” He gives me a knowing smile. Highly unlikely. In all the years I’ve known Lee, he’s never had a serious girlfriend. The guy has always found a different girl every week, and never dipped back twice. The fact that he’s been with Bailee for a few months speaks volumes.

Steffan gets serious. “She’ll probably get his tie.”

We both fall into silence with his words weighing between us. Never have I thought about giving my tie away. I knew what bringing someone else into our world would be like. I knew the level of crazy I was. Taylor was a game changer. Even if Alex did give her his tie, it didn’t matter to me. She was already ours.

Steffan and I fall into silence, both of us lost in our own musings when the door flies open. Lee storms in with rage in his eyes. Guess dinner got cut short? A smile tugs at my lips at the thought Lee might’ve gotten dumped on Christmas. I think there’s a sad country song about that.

“There’s been another fucking murder!”

“Calm down, man.” Steffan is now standing, his arm hovers over Lee’s in an attempt to rein him in.

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Everything inside me shuts down. Lee isn't a bad guy, but I have never had the unwavering trust in him or his family that my brother and my dad seem to. The glare in his eyes shows he is still suspicious of me, but I did nothing wrong. I have nothing to defend. In fact, I have an alibi. I used the plane to stalk Taylor.

"What's going on, Steff? Your brother showing back up, Van Doren, murders surrounding us, Taylor, and a Dupree has sprouted from out of nowhere." Lee grits through his teeth, clearly hating how screwed up our lives have gotten, and if the side eye is any indicator, that also includes my presence. "Do you know?"

"Do I know what?"

"The body!" Lee rages and Steffan steps back.

"You know better than anyone I own up to the things I do. If I'm not owning it, then I obviously have no idea what you mean by a body." I shrug my shoulders and his hands tighten into fists.

Lee steps away and runs his hands through his pretty-boy hair. He glances between Steffan and me, "I'm sorry, Soren. I freaked out. We have a huge problem."

"Who was it?" Steffan asks, his arms crossing over his chest. His brain is already going into planning mode.

"The university counselor," Lee sighs. "Mrs. Amanda Jefferson."

"Why are you so worked up?" I narrow my eyes at Lee. There's more to his reaction

than this being another simple casualty.

“I might’ve had a few hookups with her before Bailee.”

“Why are we just learning about it now?” Steffan practically growls.

“I don’t question all your lays, man.” Lee’s shoulders fall, “I only found out because Bailee’s friend told her.”

“I’m going to have a word with our guy in the police department. We should’ve already been alerted. Not have to find out on some kind of gossip line.”

“How did they find her and connect her to the same person killing people here?” I ask, my brow lifting.

“She was hanging from a tree in the back. The sick fuck even strung lights around her insides like a fucking sick Christmas present,” Lee grimaces, “Whoever is doing this has to have a strong stomach. Bailee said her cousin told her even the local police couldn’t be at the scene without puking.”

“Why go after a counselor?” I ask out loud.

“She obviously knew something she shouldn’t have.” Steffan glances at me and I’m already a step ahead, taking my phone from my pocket.

“You rattle off anything during your little pillow talks, Lee?”

“No. Where did you go today, Soren? I heard you left in the plane, and now there’s been another death. Coincidence?”

“Another woman you fucked is dead, coincidence?” I fire back. Last year it was the

Homecoming Queen he was screwing, and her football boyfriend. And who the fuck is he to be questioning me?

“We could easily have any information about her and the case pulled from the investigation,” Steffan rattles off, although I know he already has his preferred person on speed dial and is about to press that button.

“This is the last thing we need right now.” Lee sounds about as agitated as we feel.

“The shipment to the Fallen MC is coming up due. Lee,” Steffan points at him, “That’s your first priority. Soren and I are going to look more into the individual victims of these murders. Whoever it is has a personal connection.”

My phone dings and I glance down at a news notification message. Ice runs in my veins, “Turn the news on.”

Steffan grabs the remote to the television and turns on the news.

“And in other news tonight, there is a story out of Blue Rose, Alabama, where the name of the murderer is quickly being dubbed the Christmas Angel Maker. Our investigators are in the field to bring you the latest. Tom...”

“Merry Christmas, Josephine. If only it was a happy holiday for everyone down here in Blue Rose. Early this morning a gruesome scene was discovered at the town’s private nursing home. One of the staff arrived to find that the occupants of the home had been murdered, all injected with what officials are calling poison. One of the night nurses on staff, forty-seven-year-old Mary Anne Thomas was brutally murdered.”

“Our inside source says that the nurse’s skin was flayed open to represent wings like an angel. Her scalp was removed and placed lopsided to represent a halo. That’s

where the nickname is coming from,” I read the message out loud.

“So two killings in two separate places, but equally as gruesome.” Lee’s eyes are still on the television while cameras show the nursing home and police officers as they go inside the building and carry out a body bag.

“We need to find out if there is any connection between the university staff member, the nurse at the nursing home, and the past murders.” Steffan sighs. “Just as important, though, the Fallen MC is obviously still on. Just be careful and take extra precautions.” He gives the order to Lee who nods.

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“I can tell you the connection right now.” I tilt my head toward my brother and he glances at me. “It’s our nursing home. Every resident who lives there is a relative or part of The Illicit. The nurse, Mary Anne, is also the school counselor’s sister,” I tell them. I start to ask Lee if he fucked both of them. “Their parents are part of The Illicit. Not founding families like us, but they’re still members.”

Steffan twirls his phone in his hand, his eyes narrowed, thinking, “We need information from Dad about this nurse then. I’ll let Dad know that this seems more personal than we had thought. We all need to be on high alert.”

Everyone goes silent, each of us concentrating on our own tasks. I missed this while I was gone last year. Murder, carnage, and mystery.

“Boys. Dinner is ready.” Mom knocks on our door wearing her expensive designer dress and an apron. “I made cobbler.” Just another day in the life of The Illicit.

I turn to Lee with a smirk on my lips. “So I hope Bailee likes cherry cobbler.”

Mississippi

Taylor

I cannot even look at food right now. All I can envision is the descriptive way the news has been talking about the Angel Maker murders. My stomach has been in knots, and I have shivers that won’t go away. How can someone be so evil? What would anyone gain from senselessly murdering a nurse from a nursing home? I chose to dedicate a lot of time to volunteering at the nursing home in Blue Rose, so this hits

me hard.

If it hadn't been for Kali arriving the day after and spending a few days with us, I wouldn't have left my room for the rest of winter break. Everything I hear about the nursing home case just hits too close to home. My parents found out and they're questioning if I should even return to campus for the spring semester. Honestly, I'm wondering the same thing. I guess if the psycho is traveling to different parts of Alabama, then maybe they're off campus for good?

Glancing at my open suitcase gives me no motivation to make any changes. I'm not ready for the break to be over, then at the same time I am. Being back at home is suffocating, and avoiding Alex has been a constant struggle. For the few days that Kali was here, he kept a distance, but once she left he's been after me like a dog in heat. I don't know how many more times I can say no when he asks me to have coffee with him before the mother hens in the parish decide I'm not a good Christian. My own mother has already turned against me. She just thinks he's the most precious boy...if only she knew about his penchant for knives and blood. My parents would never believe me. Alex has made it certain no one would ever question him.

I haven't seen or heard from Soren or Steffan since Christmas. If Soren hadn't snuck into the back of the church that day, I might have thought he was the Angel Maker. Sometimes I go crazy thinking if I really did see him or not. Maybe I wanted him there so bad that I manifested his image on my own. I told this to Kali and she laughed and told me all the right things. He was probably there. He's always been sort of stalkerish that way. And he has, so why does it feel so wrong that he was here? What business did he have in my hometown that warranted a visit? Surely, it's not just for me.

"Taylor! It's time for dinner!" My mom calls again for me and my stomach pitches. Ugh, she made lasagna.

I throw a pile of clothes in the suitcase and raise my brow as if I expect the luggage to talk back to me and call my bluff. Am I going back? Am I staying here? Blonde hair and two sets of blue eyes flash in my mind. Those damn boys. I want to not care. I gave so much of myself already, and I still feel foolish for not knowing all their secrets. Alex has hinted many times that I don't know them, and I hate that he is right. Steffan and Soren may know my body, but I know nothing about their souls. Do they even have hearts?

"How can you trust them when you just met them?" Alex asks, his lip ticking slightly. He's trying to keep a calm façade in front of everyone. It feels like being around him used to.

"I don't trust them," I tell him truthfully, "That doesn't mean I trust you again either."

Alex smirks, his finger runs over my cheek and down my neck, leaving a heated trail in its wake. "You can trust me. You can also trust that I'll wait for you always, precious."

"I don't want you to wait for me, Alex," I plead with him, "You need to let me go and we both need to move on."

"So you admit you're still not over me."

I release a defeated sigh. "You were my first crush, boyfriend, and serious relationship. As much as I want to, I don't think I'll ever be able to forget you, but I am moving forward. You should as well." Despite everything, I still find him ridiculously handsome and charming. Alex has always had charisma, but that's how he traps you. I can't fall for it. Not again.

"I'll wait for you as long as it takes."

“Is this why you’re joining the Brotherhood? All of this for a high school relationship? Do you hear how crazy that sounds?”

Alex scoffs. “We’re more than a high school fling. I’ll do more than join. It’s my birthright to rule the Brotherhood — and they’re more than a college frat. Everything is a façade. What’s crazy is how you’ve been so preoccupied with those two identical heathens you don’t see all this. It’s a miracle you haven’t been hurt.” He releases a dark chuckle. “This person is going around killing everyone around you. I’m sure he or she has been watching you closely. And I know how your mind works...” He leans closer to me and whispers, “it’s not me.”

I still struggle to believe he’s innocent. Either way, I try one more time to ask him to let me go. He scares me more than anyone else because at one time I did love him, and I know there’s still a chance he could lure me back. Against all reasoning and sanity, he has that much power over me. Walking away from him is like walking away from my parents, hometown, and all that is familiar and attached to me. Alex’s greatest weapon is his charm. He could smooth talk Satan into sainthood.

“Alex, please leave me and everyone around me alone.”

“You’re my other half, Taylor, I’ll never be able to leave you alone. You have my tie.”

“I’ll burn the damn thing then,” I snap.

My tone shocks him enough that his boy-next-door mask slips. The real Alex surfaces. The one full of anger with a desperate need to inflict pain. “Do it. But you’re still mine. Burn it, chop it up, wipe your ass with it, you can do whatever you please because it’s yours now and... You. Are. Mine.”

And with that, he stalks off.

I shudder against the memory of his words. The smoldering in his eyes and the possessive tone of his words make my stomach swirl. I think the worst part of this is that I'm attracted to all of them. I've given myself to Soren and Steffan, and I have a history with Alex. While that history terrifies me, it wasn't all bad, and it's when I think of those times that I truly get confused. Why am I attracted to insane? Probably something I need to unpack with a therapist present.

When I return to my room after dinner, I find a small, square black box, sitting on my bed. I look around like the answer to where this box came from will pop out at me. "Mom?" I call out into the hallway.

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“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Has anyone left anything for me?” Could this be a gift from Alex? One of the church ladies? She and Dad?

“No. Were you expecting someone? I left earlier to go to the store, but I’ve been home the rest of the day.”

Should I tell her someone was in our house then? If she gets freaked out too much, she might not let me return to campus despite the real danger being here already. I hate lying to my mother, but I’ll hate more being locked away at home. “Kali was going to mail me something. Never mind.”

My hands lift the box and I’m surprised by how light it is. Slowly, I open it and find there’s only a single folded piece of cream paper inside. With one hand, I unfold the thick paper.

For his heart.

His... My chest rises and falls as I try to comprehend what my eyes are looking at. I need to make sure I’m reading this correctly or determine if I’ve lost my ability to read. That’s when I see the little snake drawn around it...

The killer. The killer found me here and was in my house. This box is... for someone’s heart. Literally? As in, they mean to physically place a heart in here? Surely not. This must be symbolic of breaking up or ripping someone’s heart out. My breathing is choppy as I try to cope with what I know this truly means. It’s a promise

of what's to come. The room feels too hot, while at the same time my teeth are chattering. The box clatters to the floor as I rush to the bathroom to vomit. Who was in my house? Who is doing this? And whose heart are they planning to put in that box?

Once I empty all the contents in my stomach, I collapse, my back hitting the floor. They were in my house. They found me here. People aren't just dying on campus anymore. The killer is now finding us at the places we thought were safe.

One thing is clear, no one and nowhere is safe.

I go find my mother to tell her that I'm returning to campus. She's not going to like it, but I can't risk staying here. They were here because of me. My parents are good people. They're naïve to the point of being blind about Alex, but that's a reflection of their innocence to this dangerous world circling us.

"Hey, Mom," I greet her as I enter the kitchen to find her cracking an egg into a mixing bowl. She's wearing her floral apron, and her long hair is piled on top of her head.

"Hey, honey! I'm baking your favorite," she tells me in a sing-song voice. "Gingerbread muffins with lemon glaze."

It feels as though an anchor was just dropped on my heart. She's smiling so brightly, and her eyes are alight with joy. I'm going to be the one to destroy that.

"Thanks."

Her lips turn downward. "I thought you'd be more excited. Do you not like these anymore? I can bake something else. There's still time to change the flavoring—"

“No, Mom. I love those. Listen, I need to get back to campus.”

Her hands immediately still. “The new semester hasn’t even begun. It’s not even New Year’s, Taylor Mae.”

Oh shit. She used Taylor Mae. “Kali—”

“Kali was here over the holidays to visit. I’m happy you have a new friend, but she doesn’t need to consume all your time. Your family would like to see you too. You know if you devoted as much time to your studies, the Lord, and family, as you do this Kali girl—”

“Mom!”

“Don’t interrupt me, young lady. This hurts, Taylor. You’re wanting to leave... again.” She’s right. I did run away to Alabama. I hardly ever returned home; even skipped some holidays. I won’t do that anymore. I won’t let my fear keep me from my family. But at the same time, I do need to escape every now and then. “What am I doing wrong? Tell me. Talk to me. Why do you want to keep running away from home.”

Guilt gnaws at me. I can see her point, and her pain is evident in her glassy eyes. My mother is breaking apart in front of me, and I did that. “I’m trying to figure some things out. Didn’t almost everyone of God’s chosen people or Jesus’s disciples have to make journeys alone before they became who they needed to be?” I’m literally grasping at straws here. I can’t think of any names, but I’m sure there’s somebody in the good book who had to leave to find themselves.

My desperate words seem to have registered. After a brief pause, she says, “I’m worried about you, baby. Are you sure this Kali is a good girl?”

“It’s not just her. I need this, too. I’m just trying to figure out who I am.”

She wipes her hands and then walks around the counter to me. “Don’t run off and let a bunch of strangers tell you who to be either.” The warmth of my mother’s embrace almost has me in tears. I didn’t realize how badly I needed a hug, or for someone to hold me. She kisses my hair and then sighs. “Help me bake these muffins so you can at least take some with you. We’ll put a few aside for Kali as well. But you’re not leaving until after supper with us. Your daddy isn’t going to be happy either.”

I smile into her neck, wanting so much to explain that me running away this time is for their own safety, nothing more, but I can’t tell her that. She’ll only worry more.

She then continues, “But you know how to handle him.”

She laughs and then takes the kitchen towel to smack my bottom with it. “Yeah, I’ll have to make meatloaf now. Or no, we’ll make it. If you’re planning to run off early on me, then you’re at least going to help cook.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal, Mom.”

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Blue Rose, Alabama

Taylor

I arrive back in Blue Rose after lunch. I decided to go ahead and spend the night at home instead of driving through the night, and left bright and early this morning. Mom slept in my room with me. She came in there to chat, and ended up falling asleep holding me. I didn't have the heart to wake her. Plus, I think she needed it. She's been more affectionate since the campus murders. And I heard her sniffles and hiccups as I climbed into my car this morning.

Kali hasn't returned to Alabama, so I have the place to myself. By the time I unpack, I'm starving, and of course, there's no food in the house since nobody's been living here the past couple of weeks. I'm too exhausted and tired of driving, so I place an online order for delivery.

My soul practically sings when I hear the doorbell. Except when I open it there's the delivery guy with my food...and Soren. How did he know I was home? Does he live in a tree outside my house year-round?

The delivery guy tells me the total, but before I can pay Soren tosses him a fifty and takes the bag from him. Instead of accepting his change, he pushes his way into the house and then slams the door in the guy's face.

"That was rude," I tell him.

"Most people say you're welcome."

I cross my arms. “Thank you for getting my food, but you didn’t have to treat him that way. It was rude.”

Soren stalks toward me. “He received a thirty-dollar tip. I think he’ll forgive me.”

“You’re an asshole, you know that.”

“I’m a miserable piece of shit, but maybe if I spend some time with you...” He trails a finger along my neck “that sweetness will rub off on me. At the very least, rub me.” He winks and I can’t stop myself from rolling my eyes. I snatch my bag of food from him and take it to the kitchen.

“If you came to get laid, the answer is no. I’m physically and emotionally exhausted.” I’m too drained to even question him about the weirdness going on back home, and him now showing up on my doorstep.

His scoff follows me into the kitchen. “That makes two of us. Let’s eat. I’m starving.”

I guess I should offer him something to eat, even though I didn’t ask for him to pay for it, so technically, I don’t owe him anything. But my good nature gets the better of me, so I offer him some of my food.

After we eat, Soren and I go sit on the couch together and watch television. My eyes are so heavy, and he’s so warm next to me. Combined with the restless sleep from the night before, the drive, the stress, and now I’m warm with a full belly, it’s no surprise that my eyes become too heavy for me to keep them open.

When I wake up, I’m under a blanket in bed. Soren is gone. There’s actually no trace he was ever here. For a moment, I have to wonder if it was all another vivid dream, like in church back home. Either way it was nice to sit and just be there. Just be us.

It felt almost normal.

But nothing about any of this is normal.

I call Lois and let her know I'm back in town. She immediately asked if I could help at the library, and I can't turn her down. I already feel bad for the poor woman. She's lost so many of her friends from the nursing home. I still haven't told her that the love of her life, Walter Dupree, has a long-lost grandson, and while she spent years pining for him, he went out and started some legacy. Instead, I'll keep my mouth shut and just be there for her.

The campus is covered in a fine layer of snow on my walk to the library. It never gets truly cold down here in Alabama, but once in a blue moon we get snow. My eyes wander over the landscape. Everything is so peaceful and quiet right now. In direct contrast to the chaos that just lurks around every corner.

My feet crunch against the icy grass, as I make my way across the quad. I could have taken the sidewalks, but less time in the shadow of the building is probably best. Since Kali isn't back, no one besides Lois knows I was coming in to work today. Unless Soren is still creeping around.

I walk faster, trying to keep my heart under control. I have to remember that there's still a killer on the loose. The police believe the killer is now focusing on areas outside of our university and the town of Blue Rose, but I still feel on edge. I'm terrified the events from the beginning of the year will always haunt me. I probably need therapy, but I'm too stubborn to go because I'm not ready to face all my baggage. The therapist would probably argue that I shouldn't return to campus, and my twin lovers are a toxic relationship, and she won't even comment on Alex. Any therapist would probably lock me up, and some thoughts are just better kept to myself anyway. Like my Illicit Brotherhood orgy dream.

I hear a soft crunch behind me, and I twirl around, ready to confront whoever it is, but no one is there. The hair on the back of my neck tingles. Someone is watching me, I know it, but I don't see them. My eyes scan over the trees and between the buildings. There are plenty of shadows, but no evidence that a person is lurking in them.

"It's all in your head," I chant under my breath, to myself and walk a little faster to the library. I'm not sticking around to be snuck up on, and like hell will I become the dumb character in a movie who goes to investigate.

The library is surprisingly warm when I get inside. Lois has been in here over the winter break, and she wrote in an email that she left me a few carts with old books that still need to be reshelfed, and two new carts of books that need to be added to the computers. Lois figured it would take me all day, but I seriously think I only need a few hours. I flip on the lights and take my time wiping down the tables and counters. A light film of dust has gathered on the tops. I frown at how quiet it's gotten. I mean, I know it's a library, but something feels off. Unease settles in my chest. I glance around the library, that tingling sensation is back.

"Hello?" I ask the empty space and listen to my voice echo. Nothing moves. The heater kicks on and I jump where I'm standing, my hand laying over my heart. "Get a grip, Tay."

Laughing to myself, I grab the cart of old books and head to the elevator, preparing to go to the basement. Of course, this cart goes in the basement. I could shake Lois for this. The steel doors close around me, and the elevator moves. As the doors open, the basement is dark, which is unusual because there are automatic lights down here. Much to my dismay, coupled with the darkness, there is a decaying smell wafting in.

Using one hand to cover my nose, the other reaches on the wall looking for the light switch. "Shit," I mutter to myself, my fingers unable to reach it. I take a hesitant step farther into the darkness and stop when my shoe taps against something solid on the

ground.

I hold my breath and reach into my pocket, grabbing my cell phone. I hit the light button and aim it at the floor. “Seriously?” I chuckle lightly and bend down to retrieve the book. One must have fallen off the cart. I stack the book on the pile and find the light switch. After a few rapid blinks and a humming noise, the lights kick on, illuminating the rows of books. I drag the cart behind me, down the aisles. No matter where I go, though, I can’t escape the smell. It’s worse than musty. I type out a quick email to Lois asking if she noticed it before continuing down the aisles with the book cart.

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Eventually, I get into a rhythm, and the load on my cart has decreased. The feeling of my fingers brushing over book covers is almost therapeutic, and the constant matching of numbers on the correct shelves keeps my thoughts from wandering. When my phone vibrates an hour later, the sound startles me out of my zone. Without thinking, I open my texts.

Steffan: What is it about you, me, and libraries?

My gaze shoots up, my heart beating erratically in my chest. I step out of the row of stacks and glance around, listening for his footsteps. He isn't anywhere. I glance at my phone again and see the three little dots bouncing.

Steffan: Behind you.

My eyes widen, but I'm too slow to move. Steffan's hands land on my waist, and I'm turned in his hold. My adrenaline spikes, my eyes blur, and I'm breathing heavily. He looks good. His smell engulfs me, and I hate that his touch makes my knees weak. My hands land on his shoulders, to push him away or pull him closer, I don't know. My head tells me to run, but my body wants to wrap itself around him. They're at war with each other, and my traitorous heart just beats madly in my chest, mocking them both.

"Don't—" I start to say, but my words die when his lips land on my neck. My hands fist the material of his shirt, and a small moan escapes my lips. "Steffan."

His eyes jump to mine, "I love that you know who I am."

I roll my eyes, “Oh, now you believe me?”

“I’ve never not believed you, but it seemed too good to be true. I’m used to people getting close to me and my brother for the wrong reasons,” he explains. His eyes soften, but his grip on my waist becomes tighter. The material on my jeans is going to leave marks on my skin.

“I’m not trying to get close to you,” I tell him, my lips pursed, “I’m trying to stay away from you. Both of you.”

“I know you’re mad.” He angles his head, bringing his body into mine, “I want to tell you everything, but we need to fix things with Alex first.”

I huff, “So you want me to just wait at your beck and call? You haven’t talked to me in over a month. At least Soren came to see me.”

“My brother has never had much self-control, but even he can’t speak to you. Right now I’m breaking every rule we have, searching you out, touching you, wanting you like I do.” Steffan’s eyes burn blue, the heat scorching my skin until I feel flushed.

Soren must not have told his brother he came over last night. We didn’t do anything wrong, though. It was completely innocent. He didn’t even kiss me. “I don’t know what that means. Why can’t you talk to me? Will you die for touching me?” It’s spoken in sarcasm, but Steffan’s face shows no sign of humor.

“If he found out, yes.” Steffan brings his face down to mine, “The fact that you don’t already know this means he hasn’t really made you his. We’re close to breaking his hold on you. Wait for me.” Alex doesn’t have any hold on me. Why can’t the brothers understand that?

I shake my head not understanding a word he is saying. My thoughts drift back to the

night I ran, feeling like my world was ending. I remember when we were still dating back in high school, he gave me a stuffed bear wearing a blue tie, but I don't know what it means. "Alex brought up the tie again." Steffan's nostrils flare, but nobody is giving me direct answers. It's all riddles.

"He can keep bringing it up all he wants. You're mine," he tells me. "I've already claimed you another way." He presses his erection into me.

"How do I know you aren't the real danger?" I ask him coyly.

Steffan smirks, "Oh, I am dangerous, sweetheart, but not to you."

"That doesn't make me feel better, Steffan." I push against him, but his solid body doesn't budge. He's stronger than I am. I try to step around him, but his hands lock down, tighter. "How do I know I can trust you? You say you're dangerous, but not to me. What does that even mean? And what about Soren? Where is he and why was he in my hometown on Christmas, but then disappeared? It's too much."

Steffan's hands move to cradle my face and I bite my lip, willing myself to be strong and hold my own against him. Get answers. "Soren has his own ways of checking in on you."

Don't I know it. I blush, thinking about him hacking into my computer's camera.

"Any more murders?" My eyes flash, and I can tell Steffan almost feels sorry for what he's going to tell me.

"The university counselor is dead," he tells me. "The campus hasn't released any information yet."

"Oh my God, students will be back next week," I remind him, and he nods.

“There’s an assembly scheduled,” he assures me, like that will make it better.

“I can’t do this again,” I manage to choke out the words. It might have been a mistake to come back here. Hell, I’m not safe anywhere though.

Steffan’s eyes flare. I barely manage to finish my thought before he uses his lips to attack mine, instead of using his words. My body bends to his will. My arms wrap around his waist keeping him close, while he manages to slip his tongue past my lips, to duel in time with my own.

All thoughts leave my body with his touch. A part of me hates it. I’m so weak for him, but another part of me cherishes his touch. He is able to clear my head of all the fear, stress, and anxiety-ridden thoughts. So I let him chase it all away with the touch of his lips.

He kisses me like he’s desperate, dragging my lip in between his teeth, his hands fisting in my hair, and our chests heave against one another. The small space of the stacks becomes hot, and sweat eventually builds on our skin. Steffan trails hot, open-mouth kisses over my jaw and down my neck. My hands fist into his hair, gripping, as he moves his way down my body. His hands wrap around the bottom of my sweatshirt before he lifts the material away from my body and over my head. I gasp slightly at the sudden air on my breasts as he pulls the cups of my bra down. Steffan’s eyes rise to mine, and lust is heavy in his gaze. “You are so fucking beautiful.”

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I groan from the way his words affect me, not even bothering to try and stop him while his fingers work the button and zipper on my jeans. Soon my clothes are in a pile on the floor around us. “You have too many clothes on,” I warn before pulling his head back up to mine and attacking his lips once again. My hands turn greedy, and soon I’m shoving his shirt open and off.

“Are you sure?” he asks me, pulling back slightly. I see what he’s doing. Getting me all worked up so that he can say I wanted it too. Only I really, really do. Instead of answering, I grab his pants and shove them down.

There are no other barriers between my hand and the smooth skin of his cock. I raise my brow and bite my lip. It’s hot finding him this way. Hard with pre-cum on the tip, he’s already ready for me. My stomach clenches, and I’m left breathless when his hands grab the backs of my legs and lifts me up. My knees wrap easily around his narrow waist.

“Last time I’m asking...” Steffan catches my gaze. A million things pass between us in those few moments. I know in my heart I won’t walk away. No matter where we go from here, I want him, so I give a silent nod.

His lips crash into mine again, tasting and needy. My arms wrap around his neck, holding on for life, while he removes the last few barriers between our bodies. I hear a foil package rip before his cock is there, lining up at my entrance. I’m soaked for him, and something about watching as he pushes in makes my skin heat up all over.

“How do you feel this good?” he groans against my lips, and I use my heels to push him in farther, until my hips rest against his and my clit slides against his six-pack.

Steffan pulls out and pushes back in until I'm practically crawling up his body, trying to get closer, to pull him in deeper. Steffan walks us over to one of the chairs and sits down, keeping my body on top of his. His hands find my waist and he begins lifting and lowering my body. My body stretches to find the perfect rhythm, and soon I'm moving with him. My hands find his shoulders and I use them as leverage. I feel so full of him, completely engulfed. His arms band around my waist, the smell of our lovemaking fills the room, his hair brushes against the sensitive skin under my chin, while his lips are taking turns feasting on my nipples. He's everywhere. I don't know where I begin or where he ends. All I know is that if he stops, I might die. I don't think about the lies or the danger that surrounds us. There isn't an ounce of fear inside me if we get caught because I'm pretty sure I'm so far gone for him already that I would chance anything to be his. To be theirs.

Eventually the spiraling heat sends me over the edge, and I cry out in the quiet space of the library. Steffan's name pours from my lips, and his body bucks up into mine before he's groaning with his own release. His arms tighten around me. A silent answer. He's not letting me go either.

Which is the acknowledgement that I needed because I realize I can't let either one of them go.

Blue Rose, Alabama

Soren

Steffan has the nerve to greet me with a smile when he enters the Delta Pi Theta house. But that's fine, I simply exchange my own frown for his smile by punching him in the fucking face. Except he still smiles. At least now it's a bloody one, so I did gain some satisfaction.

"Were you lurking in the shadows?" He asks me.

“I wasn’t, but you obviously were.” My smile spreads wider as Steffan’s finally falls. “Not grinning now, huh? Fuck.”

I lunge at Steffan. How dare he tell me we need to respect the code, and he went and slept with Taylor in public! Lee and Jose come into the room and pull us apart. It’s a struggle, but they manage to separate us with only a few hits shared between us. Both of them are angry, as well. Once we’re separated and we all take a step back to look at one another. Lee and Jose both stand with their legs spread and their arms are crossed over their chests.

Lee shakes his head. “This doesn’t just affect you, ya selfish prick.”

Steffan’s eyes widen in shock. It’s almost comical. Did he think his loyal lap dog wouldn’t turn on him? My brother can be so naïve. If I wasn’t concerned it’d get his ass killed, I’d find humor in this moment. Steffan voices his disbelief. “You’re on his side now?”

Lee’s eyes burn with rage. “I’m on the Brotherhood’s side. Something you seem to have forgotten.”

My eyes turn to slits as I stare at the fucker who has some balls to speak to my brother in that tone. Since when did a younger member think they could speak to, not only their senior, but the fucking president, like that? Another concerning question I have is, when did a Conrad think they could address a Carmichael with such disrespect? It’s a laugh that this joker thinks that Steffan, the golden child, could possibly be loyal to anyone, or anything, other than The Illicit. He’s been groomed and trained since he was a toddler to be the next leader.

“We made an oath to The Illicit. We pledged our loyalty,” Lee continues. “Where’s your loyalty?”

Jose's eyes narrow on my brother. "You went against—"

Steffan steps into Jose's personal space and hisses, "Mind your manners, Pledge Succo. You're not an official brother."

"Yet..." Succo tacks on.

"But you're not now. How dare you lecture me?" Steffan lands two hard punches in Jose's stomach. Then he turns and punches Lee in the mouth. Lee spits out blood, but he doesn't strike back. I watch with narrowed eyes. I may be pissed at Steffan, as well, but I will back him on this. Those two were out of line. Steffan is still our leader. Sure, I fuck with him, but he's my brother. I'm not equal to these dickheads.

Steffan spreads his arms and stares each one of us in the eye, one by one. "So I fell for her. And I took pleasure in my fucked-up life for once." His face turns a violent red as he raises his voice and it echoes off the marble within the house, "For fucking once! I did something for me!" His chest rises and falls. "I've sold my soul to the devil. I've sacrificed my life, a year of my brother's life, and possibly even Taylor's life, to this world. Don't fucking talk to me about loyalty. The codes of The Illicit. The decrees of the Brotherhood. You're still a fucking pledge. And all of you — each and every one of you assholes — haven't gone through half the shit I have. The pressure. Being the middleman between our fathers, the heads of The Illicit, the pledges, and the other contacts for our businesses. Don't. Just fucking don't." My brother shakes his head in disgust. "You're going to worry about Alex, some dickhead you don't even know? This piece of shit who didn't follow any of the codes or decrees when he bestowed his tie and hasn't shown any of you an ounce of loyalty. I guess we really are a couple of illicit bastards, then."

A chuckle escapes me. I can barely get my cigarette lit because I can't help but laugh. Once I finally suck on my cancer stick and inhale the delicious poison, I let everyone know what's so damn funny. "Never did I think that what would finally get Steffan to

crack was some librarian pussy.”

My brother’s blue eyes turn wild with rage. If anyone else spoke that way about Taylor, I would also be wanting to rip their tongue out. Of course, I don’t mean it. I’d never disrespect my little mouse and he knows it. Quite frankly, I have a sudden hunger for knowledge, and have the strongest desire to take a trip to the library myself.

“Temper, temper. You’re supposed to be the levelheaded one, remember? If anyone should be pissed, it’s me. Here I thought you were being selfless and putting honor before everything else. Instead, you were feeding me that bullshit so you could go wet your own cock. I don’t think I’ve ever respected your self-righteous ass more than I do in this moment.” I pull out my knife and take three long steps, putting me nose to nose with my own reflection. “As that may be, lucky for you, I’ve always been good at sharing...brother.”

I give Steffan a tiny nick with the knife, causing a tiny bead of blood. Then I turn back to Lee and Jose. “As for you two fuckers, speak to your leader like that again and I’ll carve the word cunt into your backs in letters so big you can see them from space since that’s how you’re behaving.”

Especially Lee Conrad. For some reason, my brother allows him to get away with more. He’s too soft. I get that they are besties, but there can be no room for weakness within The Illicit Christ. I sound like our father. I hate it when I do that. Years of brainwashing has that effect, though. Every day I have to try and find new ways to scrub him from my mind. My little mouse being my favorite form of cleansing.

“Why not just cut out their tongues?” My brother interrupts my thoughts. “Why waste the time to carve a word?” Steffan asks bemused.

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“Because they need their tongues to lick your asshole.”

Steffan snorts. “You’re so fucked in the head.”

“Don’t knock it until you try it.” I wink.

“Maybe I’ll lick Taylor’s tonight.” Steffan is baiting me. Dangerous game, brother.

Keeping my eyes on him, I say to Lee and Jose, “Alert everyone to continue to keep an eye on Taylor.” I tilt my head at my brother. “It’s for her own safety.”

Once they exit the room, Steffan growls through clenched teeth. “They don’t have to when I’m around.”

“Oh, on the contrary. She definitely needs it when you’re around.” I lean toward him and whisper, “However, that’s not when she needs it the most.”

“I suppose when you’re around, even though that’s who she needs protected from the most, there won’t be any watchful eyes.”

A slow smile spreads as dark, sinful thoughts and visions dance through my mind. “Oh, but I enjoy an audience. Let them all watch.”

Steffan shakes his head. “What are we doing, brother? I don’t want anything or anyone else to come between us. I’m addicted to her.”

“We need some ground rules then. She’s mine, but I’m willing to share as long as I

get to be there. Like I said, I'm okay with being watched...and I love to watch."

"Christ." Steffan groans. "This is really fucked up."

"Not really. New Year's Eve is coming up. You know that I plan on ringing in the new year with my dick buried deep inside her."

"What if that was my plan?"

"Sounds like great minds think alike...and now it's both of our plans."

Blue Rose, Alabama

New Year's Eve

Taylor

What does any typical college girl do on New Year's Eve? String popcorn, duh. Kali still hasn't come back. According to her last text, she doesn't plan to be on campus until classes resume, and I don't have any other friends to hang with tonight, or any night. Partying isn't really my scene anyway. Last time I went to a college party I lost my virginity to a stranger in a mask, so yeah, not some place I see myself going because I'm only interested in two guys. My body tightens at the thought of Soren. He and Steffan are probably out doing Brotherhood stuff, or maybe at a party. A tinge of jealousy courses through me. The thought of them responding to other women flirting with them has me jabbing the needle harder through the popcorn as I string it. A piece breaks off and I pop it into my mouth.

The doorbell rings, interrupting my jealousy pity party for one, so I place all my stuff on my blanket and climb up from my spot on the floor. I peek through the window to find two identical, gorgeous men standing outside my door. Steffan turns and waggles

his fingers at me when he catches me staring at them.

I swing open the door and stare wide-eyed at them. “What are y’all doing here?”

“We came to ring in the New Year with our favorite person,” Steffan tells me as he slides past me into my house.

“You may regret that...there’s nothing exciting happening here.”

“Yet,” Soren leans over and whispers the promises in my ear.

I shut and lock the door. When I turn around they’re standing over my blanket and staring down at the popcorn strings. Steffan looks up at me with furrowed brows. “I thought stringing popcorn was a Christmas thing?”

“Well, it is but it’s calming. I didn’t have anything else to do...” I sound so lame. But I refuse to be embarrassed about it. I enjoy stringing popcorn. “Besides it’s fun and tasty.”

Soren gets a mischievous look in his dark blue eyes. “Sounds like it could be a lot of fun. Pop us some if you don’t mind.”

“Um...sure.” I never imagined I’d be stringing popcorn with these two, but alright.

I pop up three more bags of popcorn. Soren and Steffan occasionally try to throw popcorn and catch it with their mouths, but at least with them here my night is a lot more engaging. Together we watch the musical performances in Times Square as we wait for the ball to drop and the countdown to begin. All the while we run needle and thread through our own strings of popcorn.

“How long are you going to make that?” I laugh at Soren’s ever-growing popcorn

string.

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He doesn't answer. Only gives me a hint of a smile and wink.

Steffan nudges me with his foot. "You sing at church?"

"Yeah."

"I'm tired of the garbage on the TV. Why don't you sing for us?"

Panic and embarrassment shoots through me. "What? No, no, no."

"Come on," Steffan encourages, but I'm not having it.

Soren speaks up. "Little Mouse, truth or dare."

"Truth," I answer quickly since I already know what the dare might be.

Soren's knowing smirk has me wondering if I should've sang like a canary instead.

"Remember, you have to tell the truth."

I nod.

"Whose dick do you enjoy more?"

My jaw drops. "That's not fair."

"Be honest or suffer the consequences," Soren reminds me.

“Depends on my mood...”

“What?” Steffan sounds baffled.

“If I want passion and heat...Steffan. If I want possessive yet tender, then Soren.”

“Tender and Soren do not belong in the same sentence,” Steffan announces.

“You’d be surprised. There’s a tenderness... and...” I have to pause and catch my breath. When I cut my eyes to Soren, his are burning with desire. He knows what I’m trying to say. “I don’t have to explain it. It depends on my mood. Okay, Steffan, truth or dare?”

Steffan leans forward and meets my eyes. “Dare.”

I look down and focus on my needle and thread. “I dare you to sing.”

Both the brothers practically fall over with laughter. Soren shakes his head. “You can do better.”

“Fine. You give him a dare,” I huff out.

“I will.” Soren immediately gets serious. “Steffan, our little church mouse wants you to sing. So sing her a hymn, but strip as you do it.”

“I only know two. ‘I’ve Got the Joy Joy Joy Down in My Heart’ or ‘In the Garden’.” He stands up, and his height makes the room feel smaller.

“Oh, I love ‘In the Garden’,” I say, but Soren speaks up. “But it has to be the Joy Joy one.”

“That’s messed up, Sor. It’s a children’s song.”

“Either way we do this, it’s going to be some weird kinky Christian shit...and it’s going to be great seeing you strip down to your birthday suit while singing a kids’ song.” Soren’s smile spreads as he says, “Show us where you keep all your joy, Steffan.”

Steffan begins pulling his tucked shirt out of his pants. I’m shocked to find he has a beautiful singing voice, even if it is odd to hear him singing about his joy. He loses his composure, however, when Soren shouts, “Where is that joy, you say?”

“Down in my heart, asshole.” Steffan throws his shirt at him.

“This is so wrong.” I giggle. But I don’t want Steffan to stop. I love seeing this playful side of him and Soren. I also enjoy seeing those delicious ab muscles tightening as he moves and sings. But when he goes to unbutton his pants and I catch a glimpse of his happy trail, I’m no longer listening to the lyrics. Only the seductive way his voice has deepened. He isn’t dancing any longer, but his moves are so calculated with the tempo as he unbuttons and lowers the zipper to his slacks that I’m transfixed. When he is left in only his boxers, he bends down until he is on all fours. Then he crawls toward me. His hand lands on my heart as he sings, and then lowers as he sings, “down in my heart,” and Soren asks again, but in a lower taunting voice, “Where?” Steffan answers by sliding his hand lower, “down...down...down” he kisses me and whispers against my lips, “to stay...” He ends the song by kissing me deeper this time and cupping me.

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“How was that?” he asks against my lips.

Soren calls out. “Praise be. That was beautiful, Brother Steffan.”

“We’re going to hell.” I groan, ashamed of how wet I just got over that little performance.

“Nonsense,” Steffan assures me. “Just a couple of youngsters singing about our joy while stringing popcorn.” He slides over to my side and throws his arm on the couch behind me.

“That was no how I remember singing the song.”

“Music is meant to be expressed differently...we just choose our own way,” Soren tells me.

“God doesn’t care how you sing it as long as you do it with passion.” Steffan can barely hide his amusement. “Soren. Truth or dare?”

“Dare.”

“I dare you to admit something that nobody knows. Like what’s your greatest fear?”

“Fuck you,” Soren growls.

“That’s an easy one.” I try to comfort him. “I’ll do it. I feel dirty and kind of selfish for wanting two brothers. I was actually getting jealous that y’all might’ve went to a

party with other girls. And... I want to be stronger as a person, in my faith, and in my heart. I don't want to cower behind any aspects of life."

Soren stares at me for a long moment. His chest rises and falls as his eyes study me. "You and Steffan are all I care about. Sometimes it scares me to think about who I would become if I were to lose either one of you. I like sharing your body, but..." He reaches out and twists a strand of my hair around his finger. "I want your heart and mind for myself. I don't want anyone to have the most intimate parts of you — and I don't mean your pussy. The parts only someone who really knows and owns you would have privilege to. I want your fears, thoughts, laughs, joys, I want your soul, Taylor." Without releasing my hair or taking his eyes off me, Soren speaks to Steffan. "Truth or dare, Steff."

"Dare."

Still not breaking eye contact, he holds up his string of popcorn. "I dare you to string Taylor up with popcorn. Naked. Both of you."

My cheeks flame with heat. "Okay." I pause briefly, a small amount of anxiety rippling through me. "Before we do this, I just want you both to know that I'm clean and I'm on the pill." I glance at Soren and see him pause. "You took my virginity," my eyes flick to Steffan, "And I've only been with both of you. It seems late having this conversation but I just had to get that out into the universe."

Soren tugs on my hair so I'm facing him. "I'm clean. Steffan is clean. And from now on, Little Mouse, we'll be the only ones you ever let into your body again. If you weren't on birth control, we'd have gotten you on it. I don't plan on spreading my cum anywhere but in you or on you."

Soren releases my hair and stands up with me. He begins stripping. This might be a dare, but the game is effectively over. Steffan only has to remove his boxers, so he

comes over to help me undress. He takes his time leisurely gliding his hands over my body.

Once I'm stripped, they both begin taking the salty and buttery popcorn strings and weaving them around my body and between my legs. Soren loops it several times gently around my neck. While Steffan makes sure to place it between my thighs.

"Spread those pretty lips," Soren commands.

"Both of them," Steffan chuckles.

They both wind it between my lips. "I'm feeling hungry." Steffan runs his nose along my thigh.

"How are you going to get out of this? Are you trapped, Little Mouse?" Soren nips at a piece of popcorn laying across on my cheek.

My knees buckle at the sensation of having both of them here, both of them obviously wanting me, but Steffan is there to catch me. He guides me to lie down on the blanket. Slowly they lick and nip along my skin. Steffan begins eating the popcorn from between my legs, while Soren focuses solely around my neck and breasts. The popcorn near my mouth begins to soften from my saliva so I chew it away.

Soren begins to become impatient. He grabs me by the throat and crushes the popcorn, then licks all the salt left behind off my skin. He slides his hand behind my back and pulls on the string between my ass cheeks. I moan as I feel the popcorn tickle and slide along my most forbidden hole. Steffan continues to suck on my clit and eat popcorn from around the front. Without warning, Steffan smacks my ass and growls between my lips. "Don't close your legs. Remain wide open for us."

Soren laughs darkly and tugs on the string again. I can't help it. It's a knee-jerk

reaction. This time Steffan nips my clit and I whimper. His large hands force my thighs back open, and this time he takes my legs and hooks them over his shoulders. My legs quiver with anticipation of what all they're going to do to me. I don't have to wonder long as Steffan sticks two fingers inside me.

"She's absolutely gushing." Then he rubs his fingers coated in my juices along my back hole. "So naughty. You like to listen to your little church songs before you get fucked, don't you?"

"Steffan..." I gasp. "Please don't bring that up."

Soren takes his big dick and rubs his pre-cum along my breasts. "Sshh, it's okay. You don't have to pretend around us. Tell us. Tell us all the sinful things you want us to do. If you beg and worship our dicks, we might just reward you."

"Sing our praises, Little Mouse. Your whimpers and moans are music to my ears," Steffan tells me before flattening his tongue and going from one end of me to the other.

Pleasure ripples through me and I cry out so loud both brothers laugh. Assholes. Soren twists my nipple and tells Soren. "I think she found the joy, brother."

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“She has the joy down here. Way down in here. I feel her second heartbeat throbbing on my tongue.”

Jesus. They are killing me. Soren and Steffan switch places. Soren takes his fingers and smears my arousal along my center and between my ass cheeks. He jerks and rips any remaining string out of his way. His hands take me by the waist and raises me up for Steffan to place a pillow beneath me.

“Are you ready?” His fingers are biting into my hips. He looks on the verge of completely losing control. And I want him to.

“Ready for what?” I quirk a brow and it earns me his hand cracking against my bottom.

“You’re so bad. If you want me to spank you, just ask for it,” Soren tells me.

“Like how you communicate your needs?” I quip.

Steffan makes a noise of approval, but instead of answering me, Soren plows himself deep inside of me. He pounds into me hard, and I can hear the sound of our skin slapping against each other. If he thinks he’s teaching me a lesson, all I’m learning is that if I want incredible sex, I just need to piss him off beforehand

Steffan covers my mouth with his to swallow my cries of pleasure. These two are changing me. I don’t think I can ever be the girl I was before them. The more of their layers that I pull back whether through games or sex, the more I want to know. However, I don’t know if I’m strong enough to survive them and their world.

Steffan pulls away and then places his penis in front of my lips. My tongue darts out to lick the pre-cum before I suck half of him in my mouth. With each deep suck, I draw a low moan from him, and Soren grinds into me at the same time. I caress Steffan around his width before opening my mouth wider. His hand digs into my scalp as his hips begin to take over. I begin to writhe beneath both of them in desperation. The building sensation has me clawing at Steffan's thighs, I have to anchor myself to something.

"Move. I have to look at her," Soren demands.

Steffan pulls out as a mix of my saliva and his juices run down my chin. Soren wipes it away with his thumb and I twist around until I'm facing him. Unable to resist, he bends down to devour my mouth. Moaning helplessly, I hold on to his shoulders and he takes long, powerful thrusts into me. His laughter is dark as he growls into my neck, "Tell me who you belong to."

"You."

"That's fucking right. Mine." I gasp as he is relentless as he fucks me. He slows down and stares into my eyes. "But tonight I'm sharing you with Steffan, so you're ours. I had this pussy first, don't forget it. You gave it to me."

"Yes, Soren. Yes!"

He pulls out and steps back. Steffan flips me onto my stomach and hoists my ass in the air. He smacks his hand hard across the back. "Oh, Soren. You always were a fucking dick when it came to sharing."

Steffan powers into me to the hilt. He leans in my ear and whispers, "Don't worry. I already know you're mine. You don't have to stroke my ego." He gives me a quick peck on the cheek before he wraps my hair around one hand and holds me by the

neck with the other one.

“Good girl. Take it. Let me hear you.” He squeezes my shoulder tighter, and I cry out a broken moan. “Do you need to come?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want both us to make you come?”

“Yes!”

Steffan pulls out and turns me around to face him. “I need you to coat my dick good. Lube me up. It’s going in your ass, so you determine how much lube you need. How raw do you want it?”

I bend down to spit, but Steffan pushes himself between my lips. I taste myself mixed with his own juices. God, I’m so fucking turned on I could die right now. I pull away and then spit on his dick for good measure. Soren wraps his arms around me and turns me to face him.

His eyes bore into mine with so much intensity I feel overcome with emotion. He doesn’t so much as blink as he slides himself inside of me. His large hands cup the back of my head as he brings his lips down to mine. I tilt my head to give him better access. As his tongue massages mine, I feel Steffan behind me as he begins to ease his cock between my ass cheeks. It stings, but I try to remain relaxed. Everything is just so much right now, both of them here, both of them pleasuring me, both of them wanting whatever I have to give.

For the first time I register the television is still on. They begin the countdown for the New Year. Soren and Steffan both pump into me almost in time to the countdown, and all I can do is try to hold on and let them help support my weight.

Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

Horns blare. Music plays. Soren kisses me passionately before letting his brother tilt my head back to kiss him. Soren reaches down and pinches my clit while Steffan devours my mouth. My orgasm is borderline violent and both of the guys cry out as I milk their dicks. My body almost feels ripped in two when they pump final, hard thrusts at the same time.

Steffan pulls out first and immediately goes to take care of me as I'm completely spent. "Let me go get you some tissue."

Soren guides me back to the blanket and places me on my back. His dick slides out of me and then takes his two fingers and shoves his cum back inside of me and along my thighs. I don't ask what he's doing or why. I just feel empty now without them and I'm too exhausted. All I have the energy for at this point is to say, "Happy New Year."

Blue Rose, Alabama

Soren

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It didn't take long into the New Year for our father to find us and ruin the good amazing high we were riding on. As hard as we try to keep things under wraps and away from his ears, I'm always uneasy when he shows up, eyeing my brother as if his favorite pet just bit him.

"You both look too happy about something," Father's eyes bounce back and forth between us. "Please tell me it's because you finally took care of that traitor and it's not because of some low-grade college pussy."

I want to flick my knife between his eyes. My hand twitches at my side, but I sense Steffan ready to take him on at his own game. "Actually, we were just getting ready to head to the water now to take care of business. You can join us if you want." He shrugs, and I almost choke on my laughter when our father's face turns red. He really keeps expecting to catch us messing up. I know that's why he comes here unannounced. Steffan just doesn't want to admit it.

"By all means..." Our father ushers us to the front door, his face pinched tight. "I've been wanting to see how you handle business lately, son. If you think you can step into my shoes without a steady hand, you'll be sadly mistaken."

Steffan's back is rigid. I can't tell if it's because our father doubts him still, or because he knows our father says these things to rile him up on purpose. I just want to get away from him. The minute we put enough space between us and our father, who will follow behind us, we walk over to Steffan's SUV where I lean in closer. "When did we have time to find this traitor?"

"Do you ever pay attention in our morning meetings?" Steffan's brow lifts and I can

feel the slight animosity.

My shoulders lift. “Someone has to keep tabs on our girl. You deal with the Brotherhood things and the politics, and my job is to make sure Taylor’s heart is beating twenty-four-seven.”

He sighs and shakes his head. I know I’ve won, and besides I don’t really care. The fact that our deal with the largest mafia family in the state went bad isn’t really on my radar. It’s on Steffan’s, so why muddy up both of our brains with that? Our father has been on our case since we were home for Christmas, and not much has changed. Despite all the shit we’re already in, he apparently had Succo and another pledge find the guy who shorted us on the deal with fake, laundered money. The dude has been chilling in our basement for almost two days now, and now his ass is in the trunk. Who knew?

“His family finally came back to us with a deal today,” Steffan tosses out and I turn to face him while he starts the vehicle. I hear a thud from the trunk and assume it’s the mafia guy.

“I guess it wasn’t going to make us a deal for anything?” I glance at the trunk and to my brother.

“They didn’t offer for him. They only offered that if we dispose of the body they’ll run a larger amount for us next time at our usual price.” Steffan grins almost maniacally.

“That’s cold.” I smirk and pull out my knife, twisting it in my hand. “Who made the shot?”

“Succo,” Steffan answers. I twist my knife. Succo is moving fast up the ladder as a pledge. Soon he’ll be right here with us making all the important decisions. As an

Illicit founding member, it's his right to do so.

"Think he'll be a problem?"

Steffan is quiet, his eyes moving from the road to his rearview mirror where our father is trailing behind us. He doesn't answer me. He doesn't have to. We're both interested to see what will happen once Succo is a full member.

"Have you ever thought—"

"No." Steffan shakes his head. "It isn't him."

"You sound like you've checked." I smirk, my brow raised, "So you thought it."

Steffan sighs. "At one point last year he was missing an hour of time when a murder happened, but I dug into it and found his alibi."

We both fall into more silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts. Steffan drives until we reach the abandoned property where we can quietly dispose of mafia dude. His injection must be wearing off because I can hear him starting to move around more. "Just in time," I breathe out as we come to a stop. Father parks nearby and gets out of his car. He leans against the hood while Steffan pops his trunk, and we both grab the guy under his arms. The guy's left leg gives out immediately, blood dripping from the torn flesh from the gunshot wound.

"Ooo, Allison probably smells him already." Steffan's gaze slants at me and I shrug. It's true, though. She's bloodthirsty. The guy struggles between us until we throw him onto the ground, a few feet away from the edge of the water. Steffan pulls his knife from his jacket.

"Show me how you handle The Illicit's business, son," our father's voice rings in the

silence. Steffan's hand stills. I wish more than anything I could push our father into the water instead. Maybe one day soon.

The man on the ground is pissing himself. His clothes had already been removed to make Allison's job easier, making his skin dirty and red from his time in the basement. His eyes are bloodshot. He looks like he needs a fix of something, and that's probably exactly how he found himself in this mess.

"He had pictures of underage girls on his phone," I remind my brother, under my breath, so that our father can't hear. Steffan barely moves his head, but I see him acknowledging what I said. The man before us has crimes far worse than laundering fake money to us. There is no need to feel bad that a piece of trash like him will end up as gator bait. He was warned from the beginning, and he still chose to steal from us.

A ripple in the water catches my attention, and my gaze zeros in on the movement. Our other girl is here. I smirk and step back from Steffan, indicating he needs to hurry. Before the man can utter a noise around his gag, Steffan swipes the knife across his throat. Blood sprays like a fountain, and the man's eyes roll back. Steffan shoves him to the ground right as Allison makes her appearance. Her massive, green, scaly body crawls over the edge of the water, a complete predator, and completely loyal to us. We watch, completely transfixed, as she takes her snack between her jaw and drags him back into the murky water. Right before they both disappear...before she goes completely under, I swear I see her yellow eye wink at me.

Blue Rose, Alabama

Taylor

Since New Year's Eve I haven't spent much time with the boys. They have been busy dealing with the fallout the murders have brought on. They also have fraternity issues

that I choose not to ask much about. I've been helping them keep up in class, not that they need it. Still, it feels nice to help them shoulder some of the responsibility as much as I can.

"Hey, beautiful." Steffan plops down into the seat next to me. I glance around, not sure if we're supposed to be hiding anymore or what. I'm still confused by how to act everyday, especially with Steffan. He's always the most distant until we're alone.

"Are you sure you can talk to me?" I quirk my brow and his smile falters.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 8:59 am

“I’m sorry, Taylor,” he murmurs, and glances around just as I did. “I shouldn’t have stayed away, but there were so many things going on. My dad, things with Bryce Van Doren, Alex, the code we live by...I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

I run my eyes over him, my protector, the one who shoulders everything even when it’s not on him to do so. Steffan is not as free spirited or wild as Soren. I know he didn’t come to me sooner, not because he doesn’t care, but because he cares too much. He’s more cautious out of the three of us, but I can still sense the danger he wears like armor.

“I know,” I tell him, wanting him to feel how much I care about him because he protects me, he makes me feel safe, and I know I can trust him with my life. He may be deadly, they both might be, but not to me. I slide my hand into his under the desk and he glances down. His jaw twitches, and when he glances up again, the smile on his lips makes my heartbeat jump. I want to do this for him. I need him to know I care about him just as much as I do Soren. We spend the rest of class that way, our hands joined under the desk, while taking notes one-handed. It’s a start, but I know what it means to him. I can feel it in the way he sneaks glances at me. Steffan will always pull back until he is sure things are safe for me. He just needs to know I won’t bail when things get tough for any of us. And knowing these two, we haven’t even scraped the surface yet.

The chill in the air is enough to bite. I’m wrapped tightly in my jacket as I hurry to my car, the plastic bag bouncing off my leg as my legs move quickly to get to warmth. I hate having to go to the store late at night, but of course, I forgot about a project tomorrow, and we’re out of printer paper. I do not want to fall behind in class, my scholarship depends on it. Kali got a new bartending job, so it’ll be two in the

morning before she gets off work, otherwise I would've begged her to go for me.

The lights blink as I unlock my mother's car that I'm borrowing until I can get a new one. I open the driver's door enough to climb in, and then quickly close and lock the door. Tossing my bag and purse into the passenger seat, I start the car. When I look into the rearview mirror my heart slams against my ribcage and my throat closes. I can't even force a scream out.

"Hello, Taylor..." Bryce Van Doren greets me from the backseat. "Congratulations, you're going to be my ticket out of here."

"How do you figure that?"

"You're going to drive me out of town, you're going to get your boys to send money, and once I'm safe and settled, I'll leave you for them to find."

"Will I be left alive...or do you mean just my body?"

"That depends completely on you." He leans back in the seat, and I can hear the amusement and bewilderment in his voice. "Man, I don't get it. You're hot and pleasant enough, but three of the major players have a bad hard-on for you. What do you have between your legs, huh? Think if I touch it, or taste it, I'll be addicted to that pussy like they are?"

My skin crawls at his crass words. Hot, raging anger courses through my veins. My cell phone rings and instantly there's a knife is at my throat. "I have to answer. It's probably Kali, and she'll be worried if I don't answer."

"Answer it. But know this, you'll still be of use to me with a few missing parts."

"Understood. But you're going to have to lower the knife so I can reach inside my

bag.” My phone is under my bag, but he doesn’t need to know that. Once he’s lowered the knife, I reach inside my bag and wrap my fingers around the pepper spray. I inhale and exhale. I can do this. I unlock the safety on the can and whip the can out ready to spray. Using my other hand, I grab my purse and cell phone, all the while blasting him in his eyes and holding my breath so I don’t inhale any of it. I grab my keys from the ignition and jump out of my car and slam the door behind me. I repeatedly press the lock button behind me and keep pressing the lock button as I run toward the store, hoping to slow him down. Once inside the store, I pull out my cell phone.

I call the one person who I am absolutely certain will not let me down. Soren.

“Little Mouse.”

“Help me! Please! Bryce Van Doren just tried to abduct me, and I’m pretty sure he’s still after me. I tried to trap him in the backseat of my car after I pepper sprayed him.”

“Where are you,” his voice sounds menacing, and I love it. I tell him where I am, and the location of my car in the parking lot. I wander the aisles of the store when I spot a worker restocking cans.

“Somebody is following me. Can I please wait somewhere safe? In the back, perhaps, until my boyfriend arrives?” Soren isn’t exactly my boyfriend, but I don’t know how else to describe him.

The nice worker leads me through two large, swinging double doors, and through a warehouse of storage and into a small room. There’s a table and a few scattered chairs, and a refrigerator and television in the corner.

“You should be okay here in the breakroom.”

I nod and smile in appreciation. We sit down, and I take out my phone, ready to call Kali, when the lights go out. I hear screams and murmurs of concern from the store customers. The intercom static sounds through the speaker.

“Taylor... Taylor... Taylor... I know you’ve probably called your little snakes to come slithering in here and strike me down. But you forget, I’m from the Brotherhood as well. Or... maybe you didn’t know. Have you underestimated me, little one?”

“What in the hell is going on?” the employee who walked me back here frantically asks.

“I’m so sorry. It’s him, the guy who was coming after me. I figured he would just go away. I’m sorry.”

“Come out... come out...” Bryce coaxes through the speaker. “I’ll spill blood if you don’t. Have you ever heard the phrase, ‘Mors tua vita mea,’ Taylor? It means your death is my life. I’ll do whatever is necessary for survival.”

So will I, asshole. I turn on my phone flashlight and look at the employee. “Where is he? Where would he have access to the speaker system?”

“The front of the store. Customer Service.”

I ease out of the door, but before I close it, I say, “Lock this behind me. Thank you for trying to help me.”

“Taylor Lake. Pssh. Taylor Lake. Please come to the front of the store, your party is waiting for you. Pssh. Taylor Lake. Paging Taylor Lake.” And just like that, the psychopath has a sense of humor.

Customers are huddled together in groups. I'm sure some might blame me, but I didn't bring this on them. I didn't ask for Bryce to pull a knife on me in my car, or to follow me into this store. This is him, all his doing.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 8:59 am

Suddenly, the lights come on. The brightness temporarily blinding me. The static sounds, and a soothing voice announces, "Sorry for the interruption, folks, go about your shopping and enjoy the rest of your night." What the hell? That sounded like Lee.

I hurry to the front of the store. They're here. But did they get him? People begin moving, and I weave my way around so many people trying to find them. It didn't seem like that many customers before, but now that I'm in a hurry everyone is here.

When I reach the customer service desk nobody is there. I walk behind it, and through a door. Papers are thrown about, a frame has been knocked off the wall and sits broken on the floor, and then I see the intercom with a sticky note on it.

You owe us, Little Mouse.

Soren

Little Mouse actually did us a favor, but she doesn't need to know that. Call me a sick asshole, but I plan to use her calling me for help as a way to have a moment with her. It's a win-win.

"It's not right," Steffan scolds me.

"Really? And since when are you concerned about morals and ethics?"

Steffan rolls his eyes. "We live by a code and do maintain some semblance of honor."

I laugh at him. The bleeding heart criminal, ladies and gentlemen, Steffan Carmichael.

An honorable man among the depraved heathens.

We drive to the swamp behind the mansion. The other side of the bank connects to our backyard, but when it's time to feed Allison, we come to this side. Three large black SUVs all pull up. I'm surprised Alex didn't hang around the store to appear like he was Taylor's savior. Instead, he's here to help conduct Brotherhood business. He knows the order to eliminate the final Van Doren male. And Bryce has got to go. Steffan and I grabbed him from the store and were able to subdue him and get him into our vehicle. Steffan let our father know we finally had Van Doren, and his orders were the same. Van Doren must die.

Crickets and frogs all blend with the cool breeze that's blowing in the night. Bryce struggles against Lee and Steffan, and it only adds to the pleasing night melody. "We've come full circle, Van Doren. You're right back to Allison."

I cut my eyes to Alex. Does he know how Allison got her name? Does he know that it was me who killed his mother and fed her to the gator? I had wanted to protect the offspring she spoke of back then, but now her son may follow her and suffer the same fate.

"What do you think of the name?" I give Alex a lopsided smirk.

"Allison? Fitting for an alligator," Alex responds coolly. He doesn't seem affected by the name at all. Maybe I'll share the significance with him right before I kill him.

We remove the duct tape and black tie shoved in Bryce's mouth. Steffan stands before him. "Have you been the one committing the murders?"

"No. God, no. That's been your unhinged twin."

Somehow I know he's telling the truth. It's not him. It's not me either, but he's being

honest that he isn't the murderer. I've studied everything about Bryce, just as I do with all the brothers. Their tells, the slightest rise in voice or widening of eyes. Bryce's neck veins always bulge when he lies, and caves in when he's being truthful. Right now I can see every vein and tendon in his cherry red neck. Bryce isn't the murderer. Then who the fuck is? My eyes drift back over to Alex.

"Let me go. I promise I'll go away this time. Please. I have a sister who needs me."

Lee snarls at him. "Nobody needs you." Then spits at his feet.

Alex whips out a knife. I stare fascinated by the grooves and craftsmanship. He cocks his head to me. "Do you want to see it?" Wordlessly, I extend my hand. It has several blood drip cuts, and the blade is exquisite. Alex leans toward me and whispers in my ear, "I keep it extremely sharp, and all the grooves keep the handle from getting bloody and becoming slippery."

My cock grows hard. I could have a lot of fun with this knife. I lick my lips, and Alex is there in my ear again. "I haven't had the chance to carve my initials in another's skin yet... but I plan to."

"You better stay the fuck away from Taylor."

He smiles. The fucker smiles while he's staring death in the face. "She asked me to cut her. Begged me to."

"Liar."

"Call her. Right now. Ask her yourself. I didn't get to, unfortunately, we were interrupted. She wanted my dick...and my knife."

"When?"

His smile widens, “Same day I found her after the car accident.”

I see red. Stomping away, I pull out my phone and call her. No way. No fucking way. A part of me is so hard at the thought of Taylor being into that, and another part of me is past the point of rational thought. I’m so pissed thinking she would want that with Alex.

“Soren!” Steffan yells, but I can’t think straight. I have to know. “Soren!”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:00 am

Ring. Ring. “Soren! Are you okay?”

“Did. You. Ask. Him. To. Cut. You?” I’m vibrating with rage and my voice is shaking with each clipped word.

“Soren...”

“Yes or no.”

“I don’t...”

“Yes...or...no.”

“Yes.”

I end the call. My vision turns red. Anger grips my chest thinking she would want that with anyone but me. I stomp back over, and when my eyes meet Alex’s smug expression, I lose it. I swing at him, but he ducks. He punches me in the stomach, and then I tackle him to the ground. We’re both getting hits on each other and taking turns being on top of the other one. The guys are yelling for us to stop. It feels too good to release all of this anger. I taste blood, mud, and vengeance. My eyes burn from the sweat dripping into them.

I finally have Alex flat on his stomach, and I’m leaning over him about to have him in a choke hold when he rubs his ass against me. I immediately stop moving. He rubs against me again, and then his hand comes up with the knife. He extends the blade, and the satisfyingpopsound it makes has me growing harder. I stare at the shiny

silver.

“Go ahead. Cut me.” His voice is gruff and breathless.

I swallow, and can’t stop myself from rocking into him slightly. He groans and presses back into me.

“Soren!”

Shit! I jump up, but when I turn around I see that Bryce is running. One of the guys is on the ground hurt. “How’d he get loose?”

Steffan punches me. “You and Alex distracted everyone on his behalf! We promised Father that Taylor wouldn’t be a distraction! Worse, you’ve put her in more danger now! Both Van Doren and Father are going to be after her now.”

“I’ll fix this,” I say through clenched teeth.

“No, you won’t. I will. I always do.” Steffan’s voice has dropped lower, filled with barely controlled rage. He turns to the other brothers. “After him. Spread out. We don’t rest tonight until we have captured him.”

I decide it’s best if Steffan and I don’t ride together right now. As I’m walking toward one of the other vehicles, Alex grabs my arm.

“Soren.” I pause but remain staring straight ahead. “You can be there... when I cut her. And then help me lick her wounds. I’ll let you play with my knife, my girl, and anything else you want.”

“She’s not your girl.” I jerk my arm free and pull out a much-needed cigarette. He’s more messed in the head than I am if he thinks I’d share her with him.

“I’m going to go check on her. Want to go with me?”

A pull a long drag from my nicotine stick and spin around and blow a breath in Alex’s face. He smiles, the sick prick. I step into his space, and before he can blink, I reach out and grab his throat. I press the lit end of my cigarette into his eye.

“Go near her, and I’ll make sure you’re never able to look at her again.” A single trail of smoke disappears into the night air as Alex screams, and I hear the delicate flesh of his eyelid sizzle. I twist and press harder against him as I tighten my grip on his throat. “I may not be able to kill you, yet, but I’ll still smoke your ass, Dupree.”

Blue Rose, Alabama

Taylor

Maybe if I keep pacing back and forth I’ll be able to forget everything that happened. Maybe the fear won’t continue to choke me until I can’t breathe. I want to forget the deranged look in Bryce’s eyes, or the way he spoke to me like he was angry, like I somehow destroyed his life. I’ve known for a while that this Brotherhood they belong to is more than just a chapter or fraternity. They are everything that is terrifying. The reasons for nightmares. Too many things connect that weren’t there before, and even though I know in my gut I should stay away, I still can’t resist them. Soren and Steffan have become more to me than guys I’ve messed round with. They give me comfort, they wake a part of me that feels alive, and they make me feel special. They need me, and it’s becoming more apparent that I need them too. Even with the danger constantly lurking around us, I feel safe when I’m with them. I called Soren. I begged him to help me. He came...actually, they all apparently did. It was Lee’s voice over the intercom, and I recognize Steffan’s handwriting from class on that note. They all showed up to protect me from Bryce.

But what does that say about me? Why am I so willing to jump into their arms, when

not that long ago I wasn't sure I could trust them? There is still someone out there murdering people, and here I am practically getting butterflies because Soren showed up to save me. And Steffan. My cheeks heat from my inner monologue. I let Steffan fuck me in the library the day he returned, without an explanation for why he put distance between us over break, and now here I am getting all hot and bothered over Soren acting possessive. They've made it seem like they don't care if they share me. And selfishly I want them both. "Ugh...focus," I mentally berate myself as I hug myself around my waist. I wish Kali was back from work so I could talk with her. My phone dings and I race to grab it.

Alex: Your lovers let Van Doren go.

My breath hitches in my lungs. I feel my hands start to shake. Glancing around the tiny house, suddenly every shadow seems darker and every creak of the house sets me on edge. My phone pings again.

Alex: Do you want me to come over and keep you company?

My mind whirls. I instantly want to put a stop to his contacting me, except a small sliver of hesitancy slithers through me. I also don't want to be alone, and as crazy as Alex is, Bryce would stay away if Alex was here. They may all be in the Brotherhood, but Soren and Steffan both act as if they have to listen to Alex. But I do the right thing in this situation and turn him down.

Me: Thanks, but I'm fine.

I type back, feeling my heart hammer in my chest. I might be making a mistake turning him down. No, I need to remember all the negatives about Alex. Even if he was my first love, I broke up with him for a reason. Soren and Steffan may make me feel twisted inside. They are morally in the gray area, but I know that they won't hurt me. Alex, however, wants to hurt me. I remember the angry way Soren had called and asked if I wanted Alex to cut me. The truth was I didn't know. I thought I loved him and thought I wanted the same things he did. Even the day of the car crash I knew I didn't want Alex, but I couldn't help the little part inside of me that was excited thinking about him using his knife. I knew Alex didn't let things go. The darkness in his eyes felt menacing, almost as if I were a possession to him, as if he really didn't care if I lived or died. He was not the same as Soren and Steffan.

I stare at my phone waiting for Alex to argue with me over text. He doesn't, and the longer I stand in my empty kitchen waiting, I'm more aware of how dark it is getting outside. The winter hours bringing daylight to an end faster is the worst part of this season. The stairs groan from the cold, and I'm about jump out of my skin. All my past decisions haunt me. Knowing that Bryce Van Doren is loose and knows where I live is making my adrenaline pound in my veins. One of these days I really should take Kali up on her offer to get me an actual weapon besides the Mace she got me for Christmas. A small-handle knife or a gun she suggested, and maybe she is right. It appears no matter how hard I try to be normal, danger and death keep chasing me. Ava. Now Bryce. There was so much blood.

Taking a deep breath, I run through the main level, making sure the windows are locked and checking the front door. The back door's handle is wobbly, so I take the

time to move a coffee table in front of it. The small barricade might not hold, but it will at least make noise if someone were to try and get in. Satisfied with my little trap, I run up the stairs to where my room is and lock the door behind me. I quickly check my windows, under the bed, and in the closet to make sure I'm alone. I open my laptop and pull up the news articles again about the Angel Maker murders. Call me a glutton for punishment, but I can't let it go how eerily similar this serial killing is to what was happening on the campus last year. I watch the news clips and start reading through everyone's conspiracy theories, my paper that's due for class now on the back burner. A part of me feels like there are answers in this story. I'm obsessed with knowing more.

I'm not sure how much time passes, but soon the door downstairs opens and I freeze, my hand hovering over my laptop's volume. The stairs creak under shuffling feet. The blood in my veins whooshes in my ears just as there's a knock on my door.

"Tay, are you awake?" Kali's voice calls from outside the door. I breathe easily for a minute before realization sets in.

Jumping to my feet, I race to my door and throw it open, "Hey, did you lock the front door?"

"What? Of course, I did." Her face scrunches. I take off down the stairs, gripping the banister so I don't slip on the wood steps in my fuzzy socks. I sprint to the door and twist the handle, satisfied that it is locked. Now that Kali is back, I feel braver and check that the back door is still barricaded with how I left it earlier, and that all of the windows appear untouched.

"Are you, okay? What the hell happened?" Kali stops in the living room behind me.

I exhale and drop to the couch, not realizing until now how exhausted I truly am. "Bryce attacked me at the supermarket."

“Bryce Van Doren?” Kali’s perfectly painted brows arch, and something like protection flashes in her eye.

I nod. “He was in my car. I managed to escape, but I think he really wanted to hurt me, Kali,” I tell her, the reality of everything coming back to me once again. His eyes. The harsh words he spoke. The fear that crept along my spine thinking that I might actually die this time.

“How did you get away?” she asks, her voice low and strained.

“I ran and hid.” I blow out another breath feeling my cheeks heat, “And I called Soren.”

“You called your stalker?”

I actually laugh out loud this time thinking back to last year, “Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

Kali shakes her head, her eyes holding a hint of humor now. “Only you, Taylor Lake. So, then what happened?”

I shrug, “I don’t know. I hid in the back room, then the next thing I know I hear Lee’s voice over the speaker saying things were fine. Steffan left me a note, but they were all gone.”

“Then why are you acting all shaken and checking all the doors?” She walks toward the kitchen before glancing back. “And why is the back door locked down like we’re in battle?”

I follow her into the kitchen. “Alex sent me a text when I got home. The guys had Bryce with them, but he escaped.”

Kali blows out a breath and looks to the ceiling, “Morons. Never let a man do a woman’s job, right?”

I laugh with her, figuring she’s probably right. If I caught Bryce, there is no way in hell I’d let him escape. “Ohmygod!” I grab my phone and quickly text Soren. There’s no way they would intentionally let him go like Alex said. Something must have happened.

Me: Alex said Bryce got away. Are you okay? Did he hurt you?

Kali comes to stand over my shoulder, her arms sliding into mine. “I’m sure they’re fine.”

We watch as the little bubble and dots jump and stop about three times before the screen goes blank again. I frown at my phone. A nervousness in my belly creeps up again.

“Maybe they’re just busy trying to track him down again.” Kali gives me a side squeeze, “Or maybe he was thinking too hard, exhausted himself, and fell asleep. I fall asleep all the time if I’m texting this late.”

She giggles a little and I realize she may be right. I was wide awake researching a mass murderer only moments ago, but normal people were probably sleeping. “You’re right.”

With one last glance at the doors, Kali and I head back upstairs. She tells me all about her night, and some of the crazy antics of the patrons at the bar. I laugh with her, and some of the uneasiness I had been feeling starts to fall away. I flop on my bed while she stands in my doorway, her hands animated while we go over the events of my night again.

“You really need to get a weapon or a Taser or something.” She gives me side eyes and walks over to sit on the edge of my bed.

“Yes, Mom.” I smirk at her, then laugh. “My luck, one of these fuckers would probably like me using a Taser on them.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:00 am

Kali busts out laughing with me. “They seem to like their kinks.”

“Kali!” I giggle harder because she isn’t lying. If she only knew exactly how close to the truth she was. My mind flashes again to Alex and his knife, of Soren taking a picture of me after our first time, the silent way he stalks me now, and lastly, of Steffan and the dirty way he made me watch him jackoff in the stacks when we first met. I blush thinking of our latest tryst in the basement while he whispered dirty things in my ear just yesterday. Or the way Soren and Steffan pinned me between them and fed into my own dark fantasies and kink. Good Lord, I have my own set of kinks.

“I’m so screwed,” I whisper, “I don’t think I can pray hard enough for the Lord to forgive me.”

Kali snorts, “You like sex, Tay. That doesn’t make you a bad person. Or else all of us would be burning in hell.”

“Sex with brothers? Twins? At the same time?” I cock my head looking at her, my cheeks slightly blushing when I realize this is the first time I’ve divulged to her the truth of the situation I’m in with them.

Kali’s eyes widen in surprise, but she smiles and shrugs, “If they’re into it, too how is it bad? It’s sex. As long as it’s consensual and they give you the big O, I see no issues.”

I scoff, but can’t help the giggle that also escapes. “I’m scared what others will think if they find out.” Kali is the exception. She’s been cheering me on from the start.

Never have I felt judged by her when we discuss my love life.

“Again,” Kali throws her arms out, “Fuck them. Two smoking hot, slightly crazed, alpha males want you. This is what every romance book reading junkie dreams about. You’re living the dream, girl!”

I roll onto my back so we’re both lying next to each other. “I wish I could let myself be freer.”

Kali remains quiet with me this time. She allows me to ponder and worry and come back to the same conclusion as always. I still want them both. Right when I think those words, my phone pings.

Soren: Did Alex tell you that? Don’t trust him, Little Mouse. He’s part of the reason Van Doren got away. You’re safe now. Go to sleep. We’ll see you tomorrow.

“Well, see, your little stalker probably already checked the house,” Kali’s voice singsongs, which only sends us both into another fit of laughter.

I also realize that I don’t hate it. Last semester I wasn’t sure what was going on, but now if it means I’m safe, Soren can creep around my house all he wants. Everything has changed, including me.

Blue Rose, Alabama

Soren

“Van Doren has been hiding out at the football house again,” Steffan alerts me the second my feet hit the kitchen floor. We both had zero sleep last night. Not that I need much, but Steff is looking a little grouchy this morning. His usually messy hair looking like he ran his fingers through it all night.

“When will those idiots learn that protecting him only makes things worse for him?” I scoff and reach for the stack of pancakes on the island counter. Going against us is not doing any favors for them. We’re the most influential fraternity on this campus, and surely they know that.

“They need another lesson. Their place on this campus is expendable.” My brother sets his phone on the table harder than he probably means to. I like that he’s already thinking violently this morning. It makes my job easier.

“So when are we heading over there?”

Steffan shakes his head. “We have to finish Brotherhood shit first. Dad is already jumping down my throat that we fucked up yesterday, and he learned that we pushed back our deal with the Fallen MC in order to go after Bryce. And in case you forgot, finding and dealing with the Angel Maker is also on our list.”

It takes everything inside of me not to roll my eyes. Like I’d forget the dead body and the threat painted in the snow with blood. Of course, the goodson is more worried about what Father thinks. “What about Taylor? If she’s alone all day and we’re out of town, what’s stopping Van Doren from attacking her again?”

“You checked on her last night, right?” He tilts his head, studying me. Of course, I did. I needed to make sure her house was locked down. Then I checked in on her with my camera. I glare at him for thinking I wouldn’t have. “Right.” He scrubs his hands over his face, “I sent Dupree the info. He’s taking care of it.”

“You brought Dupree into our business?” I grit my jaw. That smug bastard was playing a dangerous game yesterday.

“We had to move quick. You know things are rocky between the elders. If we’re eliminating a member, it has to be quick. Dupree will wait until we get back,” Steffan

explains, and even though I absolutely hate it, I get it.

“If Dupree is watching Van Doren, both problems are far away from our Little Mouse while he handles the other shit.” I mull over the carefully crafted plan.

“We handle the Fallen MC, Father gets off our backs, and we can go back to keeping Taylor safe by eliminating Van Doren.” He stands from the table and glances at his watch.

“We’re eliminating Dupree,” I warn him. Steffan’s eyes, identical to mine, flash when he looks at me. My twin doesn’t need to speak the words, as long as we’re on the same page.

“Lee will be here soon,” he says next, placing his coffee cup in the sink.

“Of course, your lapdog is joining us too.”

“You really need to get over hating Lee. Plus, he has the information for us about the Angel Maker.” Steffan shrugs off my comment and goes to move around me. I don’t hate Lee. He just makes me really want a cigarette. I don’t know what it is, but I can’t get over the feeling he’s fucking up somehow. That, and the fact that he moved into my spot when I was forced out.

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“You don’t see it,” I call to Steffan’s back. My twin turns to give me his attention, the first clue that he isn’t completely oblivious. “There’s something there. I can feel it in my bones that he’s fucking up somehow. Like this new chick? How is she even close to Lee’s type, but he’s practically panting after her?”

“So he actually likes quiet girls like Bailee,” Steffan shrugs, “You, Lee, and I have all done a background check on her.”

“Something is still off. He could have anyone,” I say, grabbing for my pack of smokes and lighter. “Like Taylor’s roommate. Have you seen how she looks at Lee?”

Steffan grunts. “I don’t really care. Whoever Lee wants to dip his dick into is up to him. We crossed our Ts. It’s his tie, his decision. If you actually find something tangible, we’ll discuss later. Until then, Lee’s coming with us.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I wave him off, and head to the patio door to relieve the tension in my shoulders. Spending half the night propped against a tree is no way to sleep. I had to make sure Taylor was safe, though. I don’t trust Van Doren. I definitely don’t trust Dupree, and if I’m really honest, I \don’t fucking trust my father.

Being away for almost a year really helped me put things in perspective. Steffan didn’t have that. He’s a true soldier of the Illicit to his core. The only way I can see him changing is when he has evidence. Or if anything were to happen to our little mouse. My fingers crack just thinking about someone or something hurting her. There’s too many variables at play, too many players still on the board. And some sick fuck who wants to threaten us is still running around. I’m ready to start eliminating everyone in our way, and I need Steffan to get on that track with me real

fast. I tilt my head to the side, my neck cracking in relief. I'm ready to go. The faster we get the Brotherhood shit taken care of, the faster we can take care of Van Doren. We'll keep getting rid of everyone until there are no threats to Taylor left.

The ride to the Fallen MC house takes longer than I would like. I forget that most motorcycle clubs choose the most vacant areas so they do their business in peace. Personally, I've never been fond of the Fallen. I think they're more annoying than anything. Unfortunately, The Illicit has been doing business with this particular chapter since the beginning. The Brotherhood even has a hand in selecting their President, which is unheard of in any other club. I guess we can thank Alex Dupree's grandfather for that too. Fucking Duprees. By the time we even arrive at the clubhouse, it's almost dusk, the whole day is just about gone. I'm twitchy and I think I've looked in on Taylor more than a dozen times from my phone. Thankfully she likes reading and hasn't left her room most of the day.

"Are you sure they said to meet them here?" Lee opens his window and Steffan slows the car down. The whole street is unusually quiet, the gate is closed and locked up. There is no music, no smell of gasoline and smoke, the usual Prospects aren't walking the corners.

Steffan pulls out his cell phone, "Yeah, Zeus said tonight at five." He flashes the phone at me.

"Call him." I shrug, but not taking my eyes off the dark building towering over us. Steffan hits the call button, and we listen in the silence of the car as the phone continues to ring. I glance out of Lee's window and look everywhere from the floor to the gates, when something dark like a spot oil catches my eye. "Wait."

I get out of the backseat and jog across to the gates. Steffan and Lee are at my heels. I crouch down, completely focused on the little spatter. Without thinking, I reach out with my fingers and touch the liquid. I rub my thumb against my fingers and watch as

the dark pigment shifts to bright red. “It’s blood.”

“What?” Steffan drops down to look, while Lee reaches for his gun holstered at his back. Steffan repeats my actions and glances at me. I raise my brow and his jaw hardens. “We have to go in.”

“What? You aren’t going to call father first?” I pry and he glares.

“Shut the fuck up. We’re going in.” Steffan also grabs his gun from his shoulder holster, and I pull out my knife. I use the pointed end to pry the gate open. Between me and Steffan pushing, we’re able to open it enough to squeeze through.

Inside the compound is even more haunting than the outside. No one is around. A thin sheen of dust hangs in the air. Rows of bikes sit vacant. It doesn’t make sense. Bikers are notorious for not leaving the bikes unattended. There are no lights on inside either. The windows are darkened. I step up to the main door, ready to knock but think better of it. With my jacket sleeve I twist the door handle, not wanting to leave fingerprints at this obvious crime scene, and it gives. This is not good.

The minute the door cracks, the scent of copper and death hits my nose. I hold my breath and glance at Steffan, who already has a pinched look to his face. We grab for our skull bandanas and wrap them around our faces. Lee holds his shirt over his nose and mouth. Signaling with my hands, I motion for us to go in, and I prepare my mind for what we’re going to find. I may not be fond of the Fallen, but there are often women and children here too.

I tap the door with my shoe, and it swings open with a groan. The bodies are piled up. Some against the bar, some on the pool table, and some just leaning against the wall. Men and women. I shine my flashlight and scan the bodies, thankful not to see any children. Blood coats the walls, the floors, and the ceiling. “What do we do?” I murmur.

Steffan steps around me and walks over to a few of the bodies. “Gunshot wounds.”

“Of course,” I scoff, “Who would come in here single-handedly and knife a bunch of bikers? They had to have the element of surprise.”

“Did you hear that?” Lee asks and moves farther into the room. I want to call out to him about tracking footprints, but Steffan follows him. In the back of the clubhouse a lone body lies on the ground. It’s a man, big and burly and someone we recognize.

“Zeus?” Steffan leans down right as Zeus’s eyes pop open. The man is clinging to life, trying to form words, but all that does is cause blood to squirt from his neck. His eyes bulge.

“Don’t try to talk,” I tell him, my eyes taking in every detail. Red angel wings, painted in blood, fan out from his shoulders. A bloody circle is drawn over his head, supposedly representing a halo. Zeus’ skin is laying in strips against the drawn design. All of it enough to hurt and immobilize him, along with the gunshots, but only a little bit to not completely kill him. He was meant to be alive for us.

“Heeeee,” he keeps trying. “Rrreee.”

“I can’t hear what he’s saying.” Steffan bends closer.

My head tilts, watching Zeus’s lips, “dddd.”

“Red?” I say and glancing around. It sure as fuck is red in here.

Zeus struggles before a faraway look turns his eyes glossy. Eventually his breathing staggers and shudders in his chest before he stops moving completely. Lee and Steffan share a look, but we all know what it means. He’s dead. Someone killed the entire Alabama Fallen MC chapter, and left their President as a signal for us. “Angel

Maker.”

“This is fucked,” Lee whispers.

“Whoever this is might not be related to the Campus Killer,” Steffan reminds us while he looks for a way out. We follow him out the back doors and into the night air. I take down my mask and take in deep breaths not tinged by death and close my eyes.

“Whoever did this meant for us to find him,” I tell my twin, “He was kept alive, but we were almost too late. Just like the bodyguard in the snow, the nurse...it’s the same person.”

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“What about the school counselor?” Lee asks.

“There can’t be three serial killers running around,” Steffan scoffs. We all walk fast to the car and jump in. We need to get out of here. And fast.

“Are we telling Father?”

“After we get rid of Van Doren,” Steffan grits through his clenched teeth. Lee goes silent in the front seat, his body locked up.

“Dupree was supposedly keeping an eye on Van Doren all night once we found out he’s at the football house. So whoever did this wasn’t him,” I point out, hating the semantics. Plus, I believed him when he said he wasn’t responsible for the killings.

“This was done within a twenty-four-hour time span. Van Doren could have been here, then back to campus to go after your girl,” Lee adds quietly.

“Dupree had opportunity as well,” I fire back.

“Regardless, Father does not find out about the Fallen MC until after we take care of Van Doren,” Steffan argues and I shrug my shoulders. I don’t fucking care. I want Van Doren gone. I want Dupree gone, too, whether he’s the Angel Maker or not. “Text Dupree and tell him the drop took longer. We’ll be back tomorrow to help with Van Doren.”

My brow raises, “Why are we putting that off?”

“We need more time. If it’s Van Doren, let him sweat it, thinking of what we’re finding. We need to come up with a plan before we confront him,” Steffan explains while I send the text message.

Something still plagues me, though. There are pieces still not adding up. “What if the counselor was just at the wrong place, wrong time? Killer was looking for something and she just showed up unexpectedly. The killer had no choice,” I voice my opinion, it makes more sense than there being three killers.

“Why stuff her body with Christmas lights, though?” Lee asks.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes, “Why stuff their bodies with snakes? Clearly there’s a message, and this person is psychotic,” I respond, my voice filled with snark.

“Snakes and angels...” Steffan’s voice trails off. “This sounds religious in the irony of the murders.”

“And who has a pastor in the family?” I ask, keeping my stare strained on my brother. “Who was running around town for days and was able to somehow catch Van Doren last night. But how? We also scoured the woods and found no one. Van Doren attacks Taylor, but who doesn’t show up until late when we have Van Doren.”

“Dupree.”

Right. Fuck. The only person who really had the time to get in and out of town.

That settles it. The killer is Alex Dupree.

Blue Rose, Alabama

Taylor

My nerves were on edge. I hadn't heard back from Soren, and my message to Steffan had been left on unread. I had no idea what they were doing or if Bryce was free. I couldn't stay at home forever, and neither could Kali. I had a life to live, and I refused to be a shrinking wallflower who hid from everything. So I went to the library. Lois finally returned from her vacation, and she needed help today, which worked out perfectly for me. Stacking books kept my mind busy. Working with Lois also kept my spirits from sinking into worry.

"I'm so glad you're back," I tell her again for the fifth time in the few hours I've been there.

Lois looks at me with a big smile. "I'm happy to be back. Although my vacation was extraordinary too. You simply have to take the time to travel to the Caribbean."

"I will someday," I tell her in agreement.

"Anyway, dear, tell me about your blue-eyed, golden-haired hunk?" Lois leans across the cart, her chin resting in her hand.

"Soren?" I ask, placing another book on the shelf.

"Soren? I thought his name was Steffan?" Lois's eyes widen.

"Ah..." My cheeks flush, "They're twins."

"Well, Taylor Lake, I didn't think you had it in you! A little ménage à trois on campus! I love it," Lois gushes, her eyes glittering in excitement.

"I don't think that's what they call it these days." I laugh with her, shaking my head.

"I actually don't know what we are or what is going on. They're very secretive."

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“Oh, honey, sometimes it’s exciting getting to know someone with secrets. It takes the fun out of it if you know everything about the person right away.” Lois’s advice really hits home on this one. I study the elderly lady, my appreciation for her growing tenfold.

“Did Walter keep secrets?” I ask, my voice low.

Lois’ smile thins out, but she still has that dreamy look in her eyes, “Some of those secrets he probably took with him to the grave. Powerful men can’t always share everything, and sometimes I truly believe it is a saving grace not to know.”

Her words affect me more than she probably realizes. It’s already hard to know about The Illicit Brotherhood. I don’t know the extent of what they do or the people who may have been hurt along the way. Maybe Lois is right, would I want to know? Would it change how I feel about them? There are still obviously secrets at play, and they don’t seem to mind keeping things from me. But I’m safe when I’m with them. Even in our most depraved and intimate moments I can feel they don’t want to hurt me. Falling in love with one person is hard enough, but falling for two and when they want me just the same...the fates certainly had to align for us.

Lois eventually goes back to her work at the computer, and I finish emptying all thirteen carts of books before my shift is done. Before I leave I grab my bag and check that my new can of Mace is in there. I have two messages waiting for me on my phone.

Kali: I got called in to work for a few hours. Be home late :(

Soren: Come to the Delta house when you are done, Little Mouse.

I reply to Kali that I'll see her later before closing that message out and opening Soren's. I'm relieved to finally hear from him, thankful that it means he's alive. His words jump at me and my pulse races. Nothing good has ever happened anytime I've been in that home. My skin flames hot thinking of the last time, the memory squashed by the fact that Alex turned up afterwards and everything went to shit. Still...maybe it wouldn't be bad to be within their walls for protection since Bryce is still running around.

Soren: Don't make me chase you again...

Me: Okay. I'll be there.

It takes me twenty minutes to go home, change, then drive over to the Delta Pi Theta mansion. The large building with grand columns looks haunting against the bare trees and sunset. Even with butterflies in my stomach, and my knees feeling jittery, I somehow I manage to get out of my car and walk up the stairs to the front door. Before I can even lift my hand to knock, the door is opened and Soren stands in front of me. I don't think, I just leap. My arms wrap around his neck and he catches me, holding my body against his.

"Let go upstairs, Little Mouse," he whispers into my hair and I nod quietly, hating that my eyes are filled with tears. All the drama, being scared to death, and feeling so alone chokes me. Soren keeps me wrapped in his arms and takes me up to his room. The contrast is noticeable between his and Steffan's room, reminding me once again that although they share the same face, they are two very different people. Once his door closes, Soren glances at me. As if sensing my thoughts, he looks around his room. "Are you looking for him?"

I whip around so fast my hair almost smacks his face. "I'm not."

Soren slides his finger over his lips, “If he was here, would you like it?”

My throat goes dry, swallowing down my nerves feels like swallowing sandpaper. “I want you both.” I tell him confidently.

“Do you want Alex as well?”

The question takes me by surprise, so much so that I don’t answer immediately, which causes Soren’s glare to harden. “Why would you ask me that?”

“Why would you ask him to cut you?” he asks through clenched teeth. “I thought you were scared of him? I thought he repulsed you? Yet you want to give him a fucking weapon? Do you want him to lick your blood and fuck you? To use your own fucking blood as lube? Is that what the sweet little church mouse wants?”

I walk over to him and slap him. “Don’t you dare try to make me feel ashamed!” I cry out. “That’s what he did...and that’s why he’s no longer a part of my life.” My whisper comes out broken and hoarse.

“Make me understand.” He grips my neck and brings our foreheads together. “You’re my first relationship. As fucked up as ours is, this is all I know. You have to explain this because right now — I can’t make sense of this. If you want to get off and knife play, then I want to be the one to give you that. Not him. Not. Fucking. Him.”

I nod vehemently. “I want you. I want you and Steffan. He— he— I don’t know!” I pull away and pace his room. “It’s like he has this way to lure me in. It was right after my wreck. I was so confused and shaken, Soren.” My voice turns pleading. “He was there for me, and he knows how to smooth talk me. I’m scared. I’m so scared of him, how he makes me feel, and how easily I can be manipulated by his charm.”

Soren scoffs. “Yeah, he has some kind of fucked-up mojo.” He walks over to his desk

and grabs a cigarette. I wait patiently as he lights it and takes a few drags. He's in his own thoughts, and I need to give him that space to process our conversation. After a few minutes, he puts it out and turns to face me. "So, you wish Steffan was here?"

I give him my honest answer. "I don't wish he was here. But I wouldn't mind it if he was."

"Hmmm." Soren studies me, his eyes darkening and growing hooded, "Maybe we can show him what he's missing first."

I don't get to answer before Soren is gripping my face, his lips crashing down on mine brutally, like he's starved for me and I'm his favorite meal. I move my mouth with his, but it isn't enough. He bites and sucks at my lips until they part for him, and his tongue can slide in to dual with mine. My hands grasp Soren's shoulders, fighting desperately for balance. His grip on my sides is punishing and needy. Soren walks us backward until my knees hit the edge of the bed. With a hand on my chest he shoves me onto the bed, my body bouncing as my eyes fly open. Soren is wearing a devilish smirk, daring me to admit it hurt a little. Only I want it to hurt. I think I'll like it when they hurt me.

Soren's hands reach for my leggings, and he tugs them down. My scrap of underwear soon follows. I'm bare from the waist down and he's still completely dressed. Heat turns my skin pink from embarrassment.

"Don't be shy, Little Mouse. I love to see you at my mercy before I devour you," Soren's voice rasps, and something about the tone he uses makes my insides quiver. He reaches into his drawer and pulls out a navy-blue tie. My eyes widen. I watch in fascination as he lifts my shirt off so I'm completely naked before binding my hands together with the silky material.

"Arms up, Taylor." I lift my hands above my head, and he secures the tie to the

bedpost. I'm completely stretched out for his eyes to see, my skin growing slick.

"I don't get to touch you?"

"Not right now," Soren teases while unbuttoning his white dress shirt and letting it fall to the floor. His pants follow, and I watch in fascination at all his bare skin, and at his perfect, Adonis-cut abdomen that is bared. Soren uses my shock to his advantage. He climbs over me, settling between my legs, his calloused hands running over my body. His hand cups my jaw and he leans down to kiss me again while I arch into him, wanting more, needing more of his heated skin against mine. Everywhere he touches makes my skin feel alive. He grins down at me before kissing me slow and deep. Soren grabs my hips and twists my body so we're lying on our sides, my leg draped over his hip now. His hand moves between our bodies, over my stomach until finally he reaches between my legs, cupping, before sliding two fingers through my arousal into me and rubbing at my G spot. I moan into our kiss while he continues playing with me, dragging his fingers out, running them through my dripping pussy, spreading my arousal around, gliding back until he slips a finger into my ass. I jolt at the contact. It still burns slightly, but Soren works to keep me occupied, kissing and licking at my lips. His free hand coming up to play with my breasts, pinching my nipples between his fingers. My arms strain against the material of the tie as I feel it rubbing on my skin.

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Soren pumps his finger in and out of my ass, the intrusion began as a slight burn, but then my body starts chasing after the orgasm it knows I'll find in his arms. He smirks at me, and I try not to blush while I rock against him. "You like this, don't you, Tay? You like having my fingers in your ass, filling you up. I bet you'd like it more if my brother's cock was in your perfect, wet pussy."

I gasp into his mouth, while his dirty words only make me wetter. Yes, I do wish Steffan was inside me, both of them taking me apart. I can't think straight from the magic he's working with his hands. The door to his room opens, but I'm so lost in Soren that I barely notice. Right now I'm past the point of caring, my body is stretching and working toward something just out of reach.

"Fuck, Little Mouse," Steffan drawls, my eyes snapping open to meet his. He's watching with such hunger in his eyes that I shiver.

"I was going to call you," Soren grunts, taking one of my nipples in his mouth and biting it softly. "Hurry and get the fuck over here."

Soren kisses me again, his hand sliding up to my jaw, cupping it and tilting my head so I can watch as Steffan drops his clothes to floor, his hooded eyes on my body the entire time. Once he's naked he slides in behind me, his muscled torso pressing into my back. Steffan leans down, biting my shoulder, and I jump a little from the sting right before he soothes it with his tongue. One of his hands runs down my spine to my ass where Soren is still playing with me. "You ready for us, Taylor?"

"I want more," I confirm, my body shuddering between them.

“Turn over, baby.” Steffan guides my body to face him. Once my back is to Soren, Steffan kisses me, putting all his longing and heat into that kiss. His lips trail over my jaw and down my neck. He slides down my body, continuing to pepper kisses all over my sensitive skin until he reaches my pussy. His strong hand grabs my leg and pushes it back over his brother’s, spreading me wide open. My eyes close when I feel Steffan’s tongue slide into my folds, licking around my clit and biting on it lightly. I groan, wishing my fingers were free to grab his hair. My pelvis tips toward him, rubbing against his face.

“That’s it, Tay,” Soren praises me, kissing along my shoulders, sweeping my hair away from my neck, giving him better access. “It will be easier for you to take us both if you come first.”

They both use their hands, their mouths, and their words to send me over the cliff, my orgasm spiraling out, Steffan’s name ripped from my throat. He slides back up, smirking and looking cocky as fuck.

“She’ll call my name too,” Soren practically guarantees as he unties my wrists. Steffan rolls so he’s under me, pulling my body onto his chest. I use my free hands on his chest as leverage before I slide myself down his cock. Steffan groans when I take him deep in one go. I rock my hips, and lean down to kiss him, not caring that his lips taste like me.

I feel Soren kneel on the bed behind me, his hand running over the globes of my ass as he slicks his cock with lube. I let out a small whine when the cool gel hits my backside, and his finger starts spreading the wetness around the puckered hole. Shivers dance across my skin, and heat explodes in my chest when he lines up, and the head of dick starts to push past the barrier. My fingers dig into Steffan’s chest, leaving crescent marks against his tan skin.

“You are so tight, Tay,” Soren breathes against my back, and I flush this time from

his praise.

“You should see the look on her face, brother,” Steffan growls, “She’s blissed out, aren’t you, Taylor, baby? I can feel you dripping all over me.”

Soren gives me no more time to think before he pushes all the way in, and his hips grind against my ass cheeks. I do feel blissed out to the point I think I almost black out from the pleasure. I’m too full, too sensitive, I can’t think. Steffan reaches up and guides my head down so he can kiss me, his other hand gripping my waist so he can grind me down on his dick. They move my body together in perfect unison until my eyes roll in the back of my head and sweat coats my skin. Soren pumps away until I’m gasping and clenching down on both of them as I come again, and this time it is Soren’s name torn from my lips. Soren’s hips stutter, and he grinds into me a few more times before he pulls out and comes all over my ass, marking me as his.

The minute Soren steps off the bed breathing hard, Steffan flips me onto my back, wrapping my legs over his shoulders and pounding into me until the bed is slamming against the wall. I can’t even bring myself to care as I’m pushed into yet another orgasm, screaming my release into the room. Steffan groans and bites my lip as he comes right after me, coating my insides.

Steffan collapses on top of me. Soren is right there to clean me up. They both leave, and I roll onto my side, waiting while they each take their time in the bathroom before I can finally walk. In the bathroom I splash water on my face and try to control the messy state of my hair. I hardly recognize the naked girl in the mirror. Her eyes are bright and her cheeks are flushed, a devilish smirk on her lips. They do this to me. They make me feel alive. Once I’ve taken care of myself, I go back into the room, only to find them both facing me. Dressed. The blue tie that was just around my hands now lays loose around Soren’s neck and unbuttoned shirt. My brow raises.

“I prefer the tie around my wrists,” I snark at him, even though there is no heat in my

words. Soren smirks. I finally gulp back some humility. We just all fucked in the Delta Pi Theta house. I'm probably supposed to leave now, and suddenly everything we just did feels dirty and wrong, even though I don't want it to be. They have been worried since Alex returned about not being able to be with me, and how this would affect their Brotherhood. A few pledges and Brothers saw me walk into the house tonight. If anyone had walked past the door, they would have heard what we were doing. Tonight feels like a dangerous line was crossed, and they don't seem to care. I don't either. I want them. I need them. I think I fucking love them. Steffan is watching me, his head cocked to the side.

"I'll just get dressed..." My voice trails off, but Soren doesn't give me a chance to react. He lifts me until I'm held in his arms, my legs wrapped around his hips.

"Don't be stupid, Taylor. I know you're not seriously thinking we'd let you leave tonight," Steffan admonishes. I duck my face into Soren's shoulder, both relieved and now feeling slightly shy.

Soren carries me across the hall, Steffan right behind us, glaring at all the closed doors as if daring them to open and catch sight of my naked form in his twin's arms. Steffan opens the door to his room, and Soren walks over to the bed before lying me down gently. I scoot up to the pillow and under the covers, my nakedness suddenly making me feel embarrassed. Soren drops his clothes again before he climbs in behind me, his arm draped across my waist. The lights click off, and soon Steffan is at my front. I can feel he is also back to wearing only his boxers as his heated skin brushes mine. His eyes sparkle in the dark. I have so many questions right now, so many things to ask and to say, but I'm so tired. They took my body to hell and back, my energy is spent. Tears prick my eyes because I'm equally as overwhelmed as I am content with them. This feels right. I want to talk to tell them about all these emotions swelling and consuming me, but I hesitate. Like he knows my brain won't quit, Steffan leans forward and places a soft kiss on my lips.

“Shhh, Little Mouse. You’re ours.”

Blue Rose, Alabama

Soren

The last thing I want to do is leave the bed, let alone the house, when Taylor’s tempting body is still tangled in Steffan’s sheets. She still smells like us, still bares all our marks against her skin. I could care less right now about Van Doren or Dupree. We couldn’t even tell her why we left. Taylor still thinks Bryce is missing, and until Allison has him between her jaws, I won’t give her false hope again.

“I know.” Steffan glances at me, clearly just as frustrated. I swipe a cigarette from my back pocket and light it the moment we step outside into the chilled winter air.

“All I’m saying is that we get there, we end Van Doren, bring him as a nice little snack to Allison, then we come home,” I drawl.

“Well, we better fucking hurry up then.” Steffan walks faster to the car and gets behind the wheel. I slide into the passenger seat and soon we’re off. He stops along the way and picks up Lee from Bailee’s home, and he looks just as pissy as we are.

I grin at him, “Have you tried using your tie as bondage yet?”

“Shut up, Soren,” Lee groans and tilts his head back.

“Guess she gave you shit for having to leave then?”

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Lee grits his teeth. “All the secrecy is getting to her. She thinks I’m cheating on her.”

Steffan looks at his friend in the rearview mirror, his lips setting in a line. “If you’re going to give her the tie, then you can tell her about us.”

Lee goes quiet, and suddenly the car feels too full. I glance from him to Steffan and back again. “So, are you not giving her your tie now?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “Can we not talk about our feelings in a little friendship circle right now? Let’s plan how we’re gutting this Van Doren fuck and then how we’re going to prepare to tell our fathers about the Angel Maker at Fallen. I’m getting twitchy the longer this takes.”

“Guess Bailee isn’t blowing you right then,” I snark and he flips me off. I shrug. “I’m just saying a good release does wonders for your anxiety.”

“Fuck off, Sor.” Lee closes his eyes and I look to Steffan, who just shakes his head at me.

My brother won’t say it out loud, even though he knows I’m right. Instead, he acts like the big brother of all of us and remains diplomatic. Fuck them both. I enjoy not having the stress they do. I get to sit the rest of the car ride and imagine all the delicious things I’ll do to Taylor once we get back and this mess is behind us.

We’re all quiet on our way to where Alex has been keeping Bryce after he managed to grab him from the football house. The road eventually curves off from the main drag, and we’re soon on a dirt path. Out of habit I remove my knife from my pocket

and start flicking it open and shut. It's too secluded back here. It makes me weary just thinking about Alex spending all his spare time so far away from campus. A few minutes later a stone building comes into view. Just like the Fallen compound, everything seems dark and shut down.

"What the hell?" Steffan mutters and glances at me.

No, no freaking way. This can't be happening again. Steffan breaks and looks back at Lee. "Stay with the car. If we're not back in twenty minutes, call for reinforcements."

Lee nods while I hop out of the car to join my brother. I approach the front door first and knock on it. No one answers. Not a thing stirs in the house.

"I don't like this," I whisper, my gaze clashing with Steffan's identical one.

He reaches for the doorknob and twists. The door creaks open. Dishes and glass are scattered over the floor. Furniture is upturned and ripped in places. There was obviously a struggle, but the bodies I was expecting aren't here. This home doesn't carry the scent of death like the Fallen MC compound had upon entering.

"Basement," Steffan mouths silently and I follow him. We make our way down two sets of stairs before reaching another door. Blood is streaked across the door and wall. Someone was bleeding and must have escaped.

I rush into the room, Steffan on my heels. The chair in the middle of the floor is overturned, but a body is heaped on the floor. Steffan turns the person over, and I look into Alex's eyes. He glances between us, his mouth working to spit out the gag. Steffan rips it out for him and I slide behind him and slice my knife through the binds on his hands.

"What the hell happened?" I grit out the words, my tone harsh and deadly.

“He had backup. Guys with masks came into my house, took him and tied me up,” Alex growls his response, his fingers dabbing at the blood by his eye. His whole cheekbone is black and blue.

“Did you get anything from him before they took him?” Steffan asks.

Alex shakes his head. “We kept him in solitude until you could be here. No food, water, only silence.”

“So now Van Doren has what, hired guns at his beck and call?” Steffan stands, his eyes flicking around the room. Alex stands as well, rubbing his wrists together.

“We’re pretty far off the main road from town,” I point out, “How did they find you?”

Alex turns his black stare on me. “They either followed us, or if they’re higher up, it’s possible they had tracking devices on him.”

“Higher up? Well, it’s not Illicit. They were okay with us killing him.” I glance at the other two and notice neither seem to be in a discussion mood. Neither am I, really.

“Let’s get going.” Steffan lifts his chin to me, and once again, I’m thankful for the twin radar we have. Taylor is waiting for us, and since we aren’t bleeding out Van Doren, I just want to be home.

“Will you report in?” Alex turns to my brother, leveling him with a cryptic stare.

“Fuck no,” Steffan grunts. “He was in your care when this happened. You can let The Illicit know you were the one who fucked up.”

Steffan charges past me and I follow. Well shit, I’ve never seen him so worked up.

We get back to the car and Lee looks relieved when we both slide in.

“What happened?” he asks.

“Dupree got bested by some thugs Van Doren hired. He got away again,” I explain, my hands playing with my knife again. Lee raises his brow.

“Is he working alone now?”

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“Something isn’t right.” I shake my head, unease swimming under my skin. “That seemed too perfectly executed.”

“Make sure Taylor is still at the house,” Steffan instructs, and for the first time I don’t mind. I’m already wanting to know the same. I pull up the camera feed, and sure enough, she’s still in the same position she was in when we left. Our girl was exhausted. The constant worry she’s been living in has only added to the extra weight she was already carrying. Taylor has been hunted, she’s been threatened, and she has to put up with us Carmichael twins. It hasn’t been easy, and I take pride in seeing her fight her way through it all. She’s strong, beautiful, and ours. My chest squeezes painfully. It’s a feeling I’m not used to, and I can only guess what it means, even if I’m not ready to admit it yet. I know that once the words leave my mouth, there is no taking them back. I need Taylor to know that.

After all, she deserves one last chance at survival before we corrupt her completely.

Blue Rose, Alabama

Taylor

I woke up alone and was ready to grab my things and leave when the guys rushed into the room and said they wanted to take me as their date to a family event. In under thirty minutes they packed and drove me home to get a bag, as well, before we headed to the airport. Steffan seemed to sense my anxiousness about the situation, and even offered to let Kali come with. They promised we would get dresses there when I started to use that as an excuse. The whole trip felt rushed and chaotic. I had never heard of the party we were attending either. Until Soren told me the name,

Illicit Lovers Gala, a type of event they use to prepare for the bigger party on Valentine's Day. I had been so wrapped up in the Bryce situation and trying to outrun Alex that it hadn't even dawned on me the next big holiday was Valentine's Day.

We're guided to a private plane. Soren and Steffan are tense the entire flight, and they sit on either side of me. Lee and Kali sit across from us with the exotically handsome guy I don't know very well, but now know is named Jose, but whom they call Succo. My cheeks heat as I look at both Lee and Jose, my dream coming to the forefront of my mind. We're in such close proximity, I can smell their expensive cologne and feel their body heat. I sit quietly with my legs crossed, no one the wiser that I've fantasied about having all four of them and here they are within arm's reach.

Nobody but Kali speaks. She asks more questions about the gala, all the while smirking at Lee.

"Steffan and Soren already told Taylor before I showed up." Lee patiently explains there will be dresses there for us, and not to ask any more questions. But she continues as though there were no veiled threats.

Steffan watches Kali closely with calculating eyes. I nudge him and whisper, "What's wrong?"

"Your friend seems very interested in Lee."

Lee hears and scoffs. "She's wasting her time."

The whole situation has me on edge. I don't want them arguing. Kali continues, completely unaffected by the exchange. She even continues to poke at Lee by calling him a different name.

"Liam," Kali says sweetly, "will your girlfriend be there? Or will you need someone

to stand in for you.” I wonder how much he’s going to put up with her purposely saying the wrong name.

“I’m going for her later,” Lee growls and cuts his eyes to Kali. “Since our plane is full,” he grumbles.

“I hope I didn’t take her seat.” Kali pretends to study her nails. “Then again, you might want to keep me in her seat. Who knows.”

Lee opens his mouth, but Steffan lifts his fingers slightly. Slowly Lee’s fingers curl into fists as he’s been silenced.

The plane can’t land soon enough, and when it does, we’re escorted to another SUV. I catch sight of our new location, and almost stumble when I see the word Minnesota.

“Our families like to take turns hosting events at different locations. The cabin we’re at tonight belongs to Lee’s side of the family,” Soren explains.

On the ride to the cabin, Steffan explains they won’t see us until tonight at the gala. It’s tradition for masks to be used. Each person in attendance chooses a token, and the night plays out much like a chase. At the end of the night, whoever you are with is your date to the Valentine’s dance hosted by a member of The Illicit. “And don’t worry, we’ll always find you, Little Mouse. Nobody is going to have you tonight. Nobody but us.”

God, I hope he’s right.

This is not a cabin. This is a log mansion plucked right out of a fairytale. A house servant leads me and Kali to our resting quarters. A coldness settles over Kali, and I take her hand. “Hey, you okay?”

She walks around the room hugging herself. “Doesn’t this make you sick? All this indulgence and over-the-top-type luxury. It’s not necessary.”

“I agree, but if they can afford it, who are we to judge?” I sit on the softest mattress.

Kali rushes over to sit next to me. “Where do you think they gained their wealth? Look at their crest. Snake, fox, wolf, alligator...all predators. You’d do well to remember these aren’t good people.”

The urge to defend them is strong, but how easily I forget the monsters I sleep with. I’m in love with the villains. That’s why I’m here. They’re letting me know I will have to choose, and if I choose them, I’ll have to look the other way despite my morals.

“But we can still have some fun this weekend, right?” Kali’s voice is back to normal.

“What if what happens here determines more than just this weekend?”

“Let’s survive the weekend and then go from there. Now, let’s put on these hot as fuck dresses and make these dangerous billionaires putty in our hands.”

“You got it, roomie.” There’s a soft knock on the door. Kali and I frown at each other before I go to open the door. An adorable redhead is standing there, and she looks painfully shy. “Hi...” She waves awkwardly. “I’m Bailee.”

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“Hey! You’re Lee’s Bailee!”

She blushes and nods. “That’s me. But everyone here hates my guts. His parents are really mad he brought me.”

I frown. “Why?”

“Because...” She swallows and squeezes her hands together. “My name is Bailee Van Doren.”

Kali appears and sticks her head out the door, “As in Bryce Van Doren’s sister?”

She looks around as if someone might’ve heard us and nods. Kali bursts out laughing. “And you came here? Into the lion’s den? Do you have a death wish?”

“I can’t help what he did or who my family is. I love Lee. He sees past it, so why can’t everyone else?”

I take her fidgeting hands and pull her into the room, wanting to make her feel more welcome than anyone else here has. “You know what, Bailee, you can get ready with us.”

Journal Entry

Unknown Author

The Illicit Lover’s Gala.

My mother attended years ago. And this year, I'll be there.

The elite Concord family hosts this spectacular event. This will be their most memorable year yet, only they won't live to remember it. They'll pay for what they've done.

They call me the Angel Maker. I'm the angel of vengeance. The angel of death. And I'm coming to visit...

Rochester, Minnesota

Taylor

Kali and I are guided down a grand staircase as classical music plays overhead. Kali mumbles next to me, "What kind of cabin has a staircase like the fucking Titanic, as well as a ballroom?"

Her eyes sparkle behind the black and red bejeweled mask she's wearing. She looks so elegant as she glides down the staircase in her fitted black gown with the back cut out, showing off her creamy white skin. There's a hint of black ink peeking out from her side, but I can't tell what it is. There's no telling with Kali. I'm holding a Venetian-style mask that looks like a porcelain face with gold accents, gold lips, and elaborate feathers and jewels that covers half the side of my face. My dress is fitted and heavy with all the beading and lace in gold and antique white.

My heart pounds against my chest as I scan the room for Soren and Steffan. But I don't recognize anyone. The ballroom is full of elaborately masked faces. Everyone is dressed in formal attire. The men have their hair smoothed and slicked back. The women all have updos. Is Alex among the ones attending? Steffan told me all the families, fraternity brothers, and sister sorority members are invited. The only rule is they must be of legal age to consent and are sworn to secrecy.

It's not until we come to the base of the stairs that I realize the room is divided in half. A male figure in an elaborate white mask with red hearts and a white tux greets me, just as Steffan explained would happen. "Key or lock?"

I turn to Kali and her red lips turn up. "Key. I'm not about to sit and wait." She turns to me. "You? Predator or prey?"

I pick up a lock from the basket. "I like to be chased. Besides, why should I do the work? Let them hunt for me."

Kali's mouth drops open. "I'm so fucking proud of you right now." She hugs me and I giggle. "Should we make sure I didn't get the key to your lock now? No offense, but I'm planning to hunt down Lee."

"So you do know his name," I tease. We check her key and my lock...thankfully "Cupid" looked the other way. Guilt gnaws at me. I know this is supposed to be kind of a swinger and free-for-all type of thing, but Bailee had been nothing but nice to us while we were getting ready, and I'd hate to see animosity between her and Kali over him.

"Lee's with Bailee," I gently remind her. "I feel slightly sorry for her even though her brother is deranged. She's nice, and Lee seems besotted with her."

"If she finds him first." Kali shrugs. "Who said I'm planning to play by the rules tonight?"

"Kali!" I hiss.

"Oh stop. If we happen to bump into one another while on our little hunt... Maybe he'll need a snack."

I drop my mask and stare at her. “You’re so bad,” I tease.

Before she can say anything, the stand-in Cupid wearing a tux urges us to our respective sides. I walk over to the groups of locks. There’s a map that shows the available ‘locations’. It’s first-come, first-serve, so I study my options. Oh my. Some of these are out in the open, in the foyer, in the hot tub, on the kitchen table — that’s not sanitary. I need to try and get the spa room, bedroom, dungeon —dungeon?!

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The classical music stops and is replaced with a woman's voice. "Welcome to the 45th Illicit Lovers Gala." Everyone cheers until another voice cuts through. "Locks." The male voice announces. "You'll have ten minutes to claim a pre-approved location. Use the lock to secure your place, and you won't be freed until a key arrives. Then you'll be theirs until dawn. Keys. The rules are simple. When we tell you, you'll have one hour to claim a lock. If you fail to use your key, you're out."

I wonder what they mean by you're out. Why does it sound so final? A chill creeps along my skin as I think about Soren, Steffan, and Kali. This sounded like some rich swingers' party, but is it actually dangerous?

"Keys can be taken by any means necessary other than death. Although accidents have happened, know that you will face trial. If you somehow gain multiple keys, you can claim each lock."

A loud beep sounds. "Locks." Beep. "Five." Beep. "Four." Beep. "Three." Beep. "Two." Beep. My breathing stops as my heart hammers, and I feel sweat gather at my temples and on my upper lip.

"One."

Chaos erupts. People on the Lock side begin scattering, laughing as they hurry about. For a moment I'm paralyzed. What am I doing here? Why did I ever agree to this madness? Yet, a thrill of excitement courses through me. They're watching. I know they are. Probably waiting for the opportunity to come after me, to chase me, to claim me.

“We only have ten minutes,” a woman tells her friend. I have to hurry. My first choice, the bedroom, already has a woman there. I notice there’s a stand with a lock on it. That must be what they meant about staking your claim to a location. I try the spa area. My heart leaps into my throat with excitement when I don’t find anyone in the room. However, the wind is knocked out of me when someone shoves me aside. A tall, lean man in a court jester-style mask and black tux goes to fasten his lock on the stand. If I don’t get this room, that leaves only one more private location. I grab a stone and hold it up, prepared to use it as a weapon. “Don’t move. I’ve already claimed this spot.”

“No. I have.” His lock is hooked but not fastened.

“Latch that and I’ll rip it off. Then we’ll find out what happens when a lock is left unclaimed.”

He chuckles. “You little bitch. Don’t threaten me.”

“How about a promise then?” I ease over to the massage oils. I reach behind my back and grab a bottle, then I continue my approach toward him. “I promise that if you walk away now, I won’t tell my boyfriend how you shoved me and called me a bitch.”

This gets me a full belly laugh. “Do you even know where you are? I don’t give a shit. You must be new here.”

“You’re right. I am new here, and you know what, I don’t need them to fight my battles. I was just buying time.” I throw the oil into his eyes. He stumbles back, and quickly I replace his lock with mine and feel relief when I hear it click. When he growls and his red eyes burn with rage, I throw his lock out the door.

A loud beep sounds, followed by heavy feet running. “Better hurry,” I tell him, so

pleased with myself.

“I’m going to find out who you are. You will suffer for this.”

“Oh, that’s not a problem. I’m Taylor.” I could throw out Soren and Steffan’s name, but I’m feeling proud of myself for winning this all on my own. Loud voices from outside ends our standoff. He takes off running out the door. I hear him stop, probably to pick up his lock, and then pounding feet again.

Now I wait and I’m left to wonder if I’d completed the hard or easy part. I guess that’ll depend on who walks through that door tonight.

Rochester, Minnesota

Soren

“The first one to find Taylor gets the first couple of hours to himself,” I tell my twin.
“Then you can come join us.”

“Very confident of yourself.”

“You forget, brother. You’re used to having your prey delivered, I’m used to stalking and hunting.”

“Perhaps.” Men and women rush past us. Everyone in a frenzy to try and find their target for the night. “You’re obviously not going to follow the rules, and we can’t abandon two locks.” He should just admit he knows daddy dearest is here and doesn’t want to fuck up in front of him. He smirks at me and winks. “Get her good and ready for me.”

With that, Steffan takes off to join the mob heading in the opposite direction. He’s

letting me have her. No doubt my brother will join us, but he's giving me some time with her. My heart tightens and I hate it. Steffan always has to be so self-sacrificing. Well, I won't let it be in vain. I need to hurry up and locate her before some asshole tries to play with what's mine. After all, I only share with my brother.

Taylor would've tried to claim a private location, this much I know. I start at the bedroom, then the library, and finally the spa. The likelihood that I have a matching key is none. However, I'll wait until the person does come along and take it from them. She belongs to me.

I open the spa door and see red. Somebody is standing before her, and she looks frightened. His hand reaches up toward the lock, but I'm there. "There's my key," I whisper in his ear.

A man in a leather wolf mask turns around to look at me. "You know the rules. She's mine for the night."

"I do know the rules. She's with whomever has the key for the night."

"This isn't how it's supposed to work."

I tilt my head and study this dipshit. "Are you accusing me of breaking the rules? Cheating? I, a member of The Illicit Brotherhood."

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He jerks his arm free from my hand. “We’re all members, moron.”

My hand latches onto his throat. “Then you should know none of us can ever truly be trusted. We’re a group of criminals, and you expect me to follow some fucked-up rule that was created so everyone could have a free pass to whore around and fuck without judgment. Not have their desires and kinks shared. Or have to admit they liked getting fucked by their significant other’s best friend?”

“Are you not loyal to this society? Are you disgusted by our ways?”

“Ha. On the contrary, I crave the depravity of it all.” I squeeze tighter and his hands claw at mine. I reach up and jerk the key from his hand, but I don’t let go. His mask is blocking my view from seeing if he’s turning blue. All I can see are his bulging watery eyes.

“Are you going to kill him?” Taylor asks.

“Do you want me to?” I ask her calmly.

“No!”

“Then I won’t.” I drag him to the door and shove him out. He gasps for air, and I watch as he removes his mask, probably to breathe easier. It’s one of my dad’s friends. He’s part of The Illicit, but not of the elite families, so fuck him.

“You little fucker!” He wheezes at me. “You’ll pay for this.”

“I was going to give you my key, but now you’ve pissed me off.”

“Give me that damn key!”

I smirk. “No.” I remember when he was a lower-ranking member of The Illicit. His family gained a little wealth, and now he must really think he’s something. Funny how life works out. “Enjoy hell.” I slam the door shut and lock it. Hearing him scream and pounding on the door has just made my victory of claiming Taylor for the night that much sweeter.

“What will happen to him?” she asks.

Instead of the grim knowledge dampening the mood, it only hardens my dick. “If he can claim another key, or survive until dawn without anyone discovering he is keyless, he’ll live. But if he doesn’t, then he dies. Think of it like love and war. That’s the risk in playing this game. It’s the consequences for trying to be an alpha in this game when you’re not.”

“I guess you proved you’re an alpha? A... predator?”

I shrug and begin walking toward her. “I’m always going to be the hunter. And make no mistake, I am the ultimate predator.”

“Am I to always to be your prey?”

“What do you think, Little Mouse?”

She has no idea my obsession for her. Ever since her virgin blood coated my dick and I tasted her. I have photos decorating my walls of her that I still jerk off to. And now she’s mine for the entire night.

“I think... you are a little unhinged, Soren.”

I chuckle, a real genuine laugh. “You have no idea.”

I worry she’s scared, but then she speaks, “And I think I like it.”

“I would’ve killed that motherfucker for you.”

“Such a romantic,” she teases.

“I can be. I’d rip his spine from his body and use his blood to write you a sonnet on these very walls.”

Her eyes widen and her mouth drops open. “Jeez, Soren. Or you could simply carve our initials in a tree.”

“How cliché.” I tower over her as I circle the table she’s sitting on. Circling my prey.

“Did you just make a joke?” She laughs and stares up at the ceiling. “Nothing about us is cliché.”

I pounce on her from behind. My chest pressed against her back as I grip her delicate neck. “Not even the sweet little church mouse falling for the corrupt monster? An angel falling for the sinner?”

“You’re not a monster—”

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I tighten my grip on her neck and lower my voice as I whisper in her ear. “Never defend me. Did I not corrupt that sweet virgin pussy? And I loved it. I’ve stalked and hunted you because I’ll never let you go.”

“If you’re so possessive, then why share me with your brother?”

An evil chuckle escapes me. I kiss the soft skin between her shoulder and neck. “Because...” my lips graze the skin on her ear. “It’s like getting to watch myself fucking you and it’s such a turn on.”

“What about when he has me and you’re not there?” she whispers as her body trembles beneath my touch.

“Are you trying to drive me insane right now? I’m barely maintaining any control. I’ve agreed to share you with Steffan, but I don’t have to hear about it.” I slowly drag the zipper of her dress down as my chest rises and falls. I want to rip the fucking thing off, but I need to go slow. Taylor is brave, but she hasn’t seen what a complete savage I can be.

She looks over her bare shoulder as she stands and allows the dress to pool at her feet. “You don’t want to know how Steffan tenderly kisses me between my thighs?”

My jaw clenches. “Careful, Little Mouse.”

She walks toward me in nothing but gold lace panties. Her full breasts hanging with perked nipples begging for my teeth. “He does, and I love it. But I love it more when I know you’re watching me.” I about double over when she cups me between my

legs. “Don’t make empty threats to me.”

“What threat?” I grip her wrist that’s got my balls in a vise grip.

“That you’ll lose control.”

“That wasn’t empty.”

“I’m calling your bluff. Prove it. Or should we inv—”

I lift her body up and slam it on the massage table. I’m snarling as I rip the delicate lace off her. When I walk to the end of the massage table, I take each of her ankles and roughly jerk her down until her ass is about to fall off. She gasps when my tongue licks between her folds. Then for toying with me I take her clit between my teeth. I eat her out like a damn savage while my fingers dig into her flesh, holding her in place.

“Soren,” she cries.

When I feel her orgasm coating my chin, I raise up to unbutton my dress shirt. “You have no idea how much I love you, Little Mouse. And how dangerous that love is. I’m a man obsessed. Every single day I want you. I need to watch you always, because you belong to me, and I know with that comes life-threatening risks. You can’t even imagine the world you’ve entered — that my brother and I selfishly brought you into.”

I can read the shocked expression in her eyes before they cloud back over with lust, “I came willingly. You’ve never done anything I haven’t begged for.”

“Begged for?Mmmmm.” I close my eyes and roll my neck as my tongue wets my lips. She slides off the table and falls to her knees at my feet. “Are you going to beg

for this cock?”

When she bats those long lashes at me while looking up with hungry eyes, I know I might not survive the night.

Taylor

Soren's body is vibrating with need as I hold his throbbing cock in my hand. He says he claimed me, yet my touch is what he craves and falls apart under. I own him. At one time I would've been terrified of someone like him. I would've ran away from him, but now I want to run to him and stay there. I love him too. His confession hits me hard. I can't think, and now doesn't feel like the right time to be in love when there is danger lurking in every corner.

“You can do anything you want to me, Soren. I'm yours as long you remember you're mine.” With that, I take him into my mouth and keep going until my eyes water. Soren's face contorts in a mixture of pleasure and pain, but then he looks down at me with eyes blazing and nostrils flaring. His thumb wipes a stray tear from my cheek, and I watch as he brings it to wrap his lips around it.

I fondle his balls as I take him deep and suck on the salty taste of him. His head falls back as I feel his muscles contracting. Suddenly he pulls out and bends over, panting. “Not yet,” his voice sounds raw. “Get on the table. Face down.”

I crawl up and do as he says. A candle flickers, catching my attention. I prop up on my elbows as I watch Soren walk around completely nude lighting candles. Then he takes his phone and connects it to a stereo. A haunting melody flows through the dimly lit room. His silhouette stands before the shelves with all the massage oils. After a minute, he returns to stand next to the table.

Warm droplets of liquid fall onto my back before I feel Soren's strong hands rub it in.

My skin tingles and my body cries out in pleasure. This room definitely worked out in my favor. Soren's hands roam all over my body, kneading the muscles. I yelp in surprise when his breath blows on my clit, which is still really sensitive from earlier. He also blows along my back, which mixed with the oil sends all of my nerves tingling. I'm hyperaware of every touch.

"I'm not sure how much more I can stand," I confess. "This feels... what kind of oil is that?"

"We have all night, and I plan to not waste a single minute." He flips me over and then begins massaging my neck. His large hands move down to my breasts. After massaging the globes for a bit, he stops to lather his hands in a different oil. The scent has a spice to it. My nipples harden even more when he touches them. Using his thumb and finger, he slowly begins a rotating motion, alternating from clockwise to counter-clockwise. My body begins to squirm as he offers tender, feather-like touches to firm, almost painful, and a few times he tugs on them. Then my breast stings from a smack on the side. The skin is already so hyper-sensitive from the oil he massaged in that the firm contact has me about to buck off the table.

When Soren is satisfied with his work on my breast, he moves down to my waist. My abs contract and relax as I feel him traveling farther south. "I don't know how much longer I can resist you. I may have to owe you another massage since this one is going to be cut short."

He makes quick work of massaging my calves, feet, and arms before he flips me over again. Soren's strong fingers dig into my ass. "This gorgeous ass." My mouth drops open as I feel his finger ease between the ribbed skin. I clench around his invading finger, and he groans. "So tight and hot." He curves his finger and massages the walls and I shiver. "That's it. Come for me, Little Mouse."

His dirty words combined with his skilled hands have me falling apart. When he pulls

his finger out, he walks over to the sink to wash up. He brings a cold, damp cloth and begins running it along my skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps. Soren seems at peace pampering me.

“Where’s Steffan?”

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His hands pause. “He’s going to join us shortly. I found you first, so I get to have a few selfish moments.”

“I’m certainly not complaining. I was just curious.” And slightly jealous he might be with another woman. I am not cut out for these games and sharing. I don’t know how the brothers do it.

His lips slowly touch mine so tenderly that I feel hot tears behind my closed eyes. I reach up and place my head at the nape of his neck to pull him closer to me. He pulls away and walks over to a table and shuffles through his bag. He comes back to the table and climbs over me. He holds up his camera and positions it, and there’s a click right before a flash goes off.

“What’s your ultimate fantasy?” I ask him.

“To have black and white photos of you smiling, happy, and seductive. Then to have a few of you bound by my tie. And my newest fantasy is a photo of you with my dick in your mouth as a tear slides down your cheek.”

Instead of telling him to do it, I smile at the camera. The flash goes off.

“Soren, can I ask you another question?”

“Always.”

“You took photos our first time. I noticed in your room you have a lot of film-developed photos. You’re passionate about it. When did it start?”

“You’re the only person I’ve ever taken a photo of. I usually do landscapes of Ali—” he clears his throat, “This alligator that’s around the house.” I think that’s all he’s going to reveal, but then he begins speaking again. I feel the heat from his palms and my skin tingles.

“For a while I didn’t speak at all. My mother enrolled me in different bullshit activities and classes to try and help. One of those was photography for youths. I thought the old camera looked cool, but it ended up showing me a new way to view the world and express myself. It became an outlet for me.”

“Why me?”

“You’re the only person I’ve ever wanted a photo of. There’s an art and process in developing film — and watching your face come to life on a blank piece of paper is the most beautiful thing. I want to capture every memory, smile, and curve of your body. And this is the one area of my life I don’t have to share with anyone.”

I don’t know how to respond. Thank you seems so weak, yet not enough after his confession. He shared another piece of himself with me tonight. “Soren,” his name comes out as a husky plea.

Soren crashes his body against mine. “I’m going to fuck you hard first, and then I’m going to tenderly make love to you until the sun breaks through the clouds. And in between we’ll capture those Kodak moments.”

It wasn’t an empty promise.

But then again, nothing with Soren ever is.

Rochester, Minnesota

Soren

I need food, a shower, and at least two hours of sleep. My body is wrecked, but it was fucking worth it. Steffan did join us later, and Taylor might even need ice after that, but she seems as content and happy as me. When we enter the main house holding hands, we notice everyone is quiet. There's a solemn mood. Only Kali appears to be in a good mood, her smile is aimed at Taylor.

"Looks like you had a great night." She winks at our girl who blushes.

"Where did you disappear to? I was worried."

Kali shrugs, "The one I wanted was already locked down, but I did manage to snag myself a silver fox."

The girls laugh while I fight to roll my eyes. Thankfully, Steffan comes to stand in front of us. He drops a kiss on Taylor's forehead and then taps my shoulder. "We need to talk."

"Go get breakfast. I'll be back in a minute." I place a kiss on her cheek and then follow my twin. Steffan leads me into the library where Lee and Succo are already sitting. "What happened?"

Steffan drops into one of the chairs and I do the same. Lee is the one to answer me. "My brother-in-law was murdered. Angel Maker. Floating in the heated pool, skin peeled — I can't." Lee gags and covers his mouth with the back of his hand. "And my uncle was discovered out in the woods. Same. That's two Concords who were targeted."

"Who is this fucker!" I shout.

“Where was your sister?” Steffan asks.

Lee shrugs. “I don’t know. She was with whoever got her key. The woman he was with woke up and found him. So it had to have been someone in the cabin.”

The door opens and our fathers walk in. Lee’s father announces, “We’re sending everyone home. Everyone is to up their security immediately.”

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Our father turns to me and smirks. “Good job last night. You have food to take back to Allison. Proud of you, son. Did you have fun with that extra key?”

I completely forgot about the guy I fought for Taylor and the extra key. I don’t even know who it was. Looks like he wasn’t able to take another key though. Instead of answering my father, I give him the same bored expression I typically do.

“Right. Go pack and get going.” All pride and humor leaves his voice as he snarls. “Try to get rid of Van Doren before Spring Break.”

As we’re walking out, I nudge Succo. “Are you alright, man?”

“Can I tell you something in private?”

We hold back until everyone leaves. I wait for him to spill it. “Lee’s uncle? I fought with him. He tried to take my key, but I won. If I had, fuck, I don’t know shared...”

I have to remind myself that Succo is still a new member. His family line has been dwindling, and I don’t think he’s been exposed to as much as Steffan, Lee, and I. “He played the game and knew the risk. Who do you think fought gator bait and won? I fought him earlier, too. This doesn’t fall on you. This Angel fucker is going to pay for what he did. He’s to blame.” Even though the guy was going to be dead either way.

I’m impressed that Succo was able to beat an older member. Maybe I underestimated him as one of our soldiers. As we’re walking out, we hear a blood-curdling scream. More shouts and commotion. We get into the open foyer to see Lee being dragged by several men. Taylor comes running into my arms. “It’s Bailee! She was found in

Lee's bed. Stabbed and her skin flayed with a note that read 'traitorous whore'. Lee was screaming he's going to rip Bryce apart."

"How the fuck would Van Doren get into the house?" I fume.

Succo's shoulders rise and fall as he struggles to control his rage as well. "How'd anyone get in?"

"Itishim. Van Doren is the Angel Maker," Steffan grumbles. "But still —how?"

"They have to be close. Lee was just here, and she must've been fine a few moments ago." I start to take off in a run, but Taylor holds on to me.

"I'm scared, Soren. You can't go! What if he gets you too?"

"What if he gets you? Let me end this."

I push her off me and take off. This shit ends now.

Blue Rose, Alabama

Taylor

After we flew back home, they forced Kali and me to stay home and lock the doors. We even have pledges surrounding the house. I'm furious. I assumed, or at least hoped, that when I left with them that I would be a part of everything. Now I'm back to being in the dark. As if Soren can feel my rage from wherever he is, I get a text.

Soren: I know you're mad. This is for your safety.

Me: You have no idea how mad I am. You should be concerned for YOUR safety.

Soren: Little Mouse... are you threatening me.

Me: Are you scared?

Soren: I'm so fucking hard.

Me: Stop. I'm seriously mad.

Soren: Think of all the ways you want to punish me. I want you to unleash all that rage on me. Then let me try to win back your forgiveness with my tongue between your thighs.

Me: As mad as I am, you're going to be there until you're blue in the face.

Soren: Gladly.

I have to place my phone in my lap and take a moment. My body is aching with desire, especially after the night we shared. I never in a million years would've thought I'd be sending naughty text messages to Soren Carmichael, even if he is distracting me from being annoyed for keeping me in the dark. He claims it's for my own protection, but it would be nice to know who or what I need protection from. Other than the obvious, Bryce Van Doren. And Alex. Maybe he has a point.

All I want to do right now is protect Soren from himself. I can't wait to see him again. Our future is so unpredictable, but the more Soren opens himself up to me, the more attached I find myself becoming. He's his own worst enemy with all the darkness he keeps buried, not allowing anyone to get close enough to shed some light into his life. I want to be his beacon of hope that he can have happiness, laughter, and carefree days. I want more nights of cuddling and talking. Maybe we can even have a lazy Sunday together.

This is running deeper than just an innocent attachment. I'm falling more and more in love with Soren. I also enjoy that he likes to watch me with his twin. Both brothers are so different, yet they both are driven and passionate. I want to always be at the center of their focus. These wanton thoughts and emotions are making my head spin. I should feel dirty, especially with how wet I'm getting, but all I want is for the danger that's lurking around every corner to finally be over so I can have the twins to myself.

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My phone rings and I leap for it. It's Steffan.

"Taylor. Soren is missing. We can't find him. They've..." His voice breaks.
"They've taken him."

"No. That can't be. I was just texting him."

"We were able to track his phone. For a while it was working, then it suddenly lost signal. We went to where his last location was five minutes ago, and found his phone broken."

"I'm coming over."

"Wait. I've already sent Succo to come get you."

What could've happened to him? What's going to happen to him? I hate this feeling of helplessness. He just told me he loved me, and I couldn't even say it back. I wanted to wait for the right time. Now I might never get the chance. My heart clenches in my chest, and my eyes sting with unshed tears. Soren. He wanted me to stay home for my safety, and now he's in danger. Whether he wanted me involved or not, I am now.

Blue Rose, Alabama

Soren

My head is heavy between my shoulders. I try to raise it up, but the pain searing through my brain is too much. I'm drenched in sweat, blindfolded, and my hands are

tied behind my back. I try to remember how I got here, but there's only darkness and haze. It feels like cotton balls are in my mouth, and my throat is raw as I try to wheeze out a sound. It feels humid and smells stale wherever I am.

"You're awake," an automated voice says.

"Wha..." I can't get the word out. Did they shove sand down my throat, shit, it's dry.

"Now we can have fun."

Intense pain shoots through my side. I smell the material of my shirt burning from the electric probe. My body violently shakes against the electric volts. When it stops I wheeze as I feel chest palpitations. Before I can catch my breath, a blow from the right has my head ringing and blood filling my mouth.

I gurgle out the words, "Release me and try this."

"You didn't release her," the voice says back.

Release her? Who didn't I release? Taylor? No... I think about my position. The smell. Is this about Allison? Before I can ask if this is Alex Dupree, and he learned that I'm the one who killed his mother, I feel immeasurable pain in my other side.

"Save your words. You'll need every last ounce of strength. I'm only getting started."

Taylor comes through the barn door in a thin white dress. She looks so angelic and sweet, my little church mouse. "Soren," she smiles. "My poor broken Soren. I'm here, love."

The sunlight glows behind her as she approaches me. Her hair hangs loose around her. "We're going to go home now."

The closer she approaches, I see her eyes are watery. When she blinks the tear that drips is dark red. Two rivers of blood trail down her cheeks. “Taylor?” Fear is gripping my throat and making it difficult to speak.

“Sshhh. I’m here.”

She smiles and kneels beside my chair. A black snake head peeks from under her hair. It slithers along her cheek, smearing the blood, and then it travels over her neck and to the other cheek. Blood smears as the snake keeps winding itself around her delicate neck.

“Taylor,” I pant. “Hurry and grab the snake. It’s choking you!”

“I’m here to save you, Soren. I’m going to free you.” The skin on her arms begin to droop and then come loose. “I’m your angel come to rescue you.”

I shake my head as a scream rips through me. She stands up and tilts her head. “Soren? I love you. What’s wrong?” Her eyes widen and her mouth drops open as the blade of a knife appears in the center of her stomach. The bright white of the dress begins to turn a deep red around the blade.

She falls, and a shadowy figure is left standing before me. “She’ll die saving you.”

I wake with a jerk. The automated voice speaks from somewhere in the room. “That must’ve been some dream. You didn’t shed a single tear during our playtime, but now you’re blindfold is damp.”

My body has become so weak, but I refuse defeat. I haven’t had a drink or food in... I don’t know. I’ve stopped soiling myself, so I’m surprised I was hydrated enough to cry tears. If all is lost, I might as well try to see if I can get some answers from this fucker.

“Are you the killer?” I foolishly ask. Maybe they’ll tell me if they’re going to kill me anyway.

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“That’s a vague question. I’ve killed, but so have you.”

“Are you the—”

The voice interrupts me. “But what do titles and names mean? Shouldn’t you be more concerned with why you’re here?”

“Who is the one I wouldn’t let go? Who are you talking about?”

“You’ve had so many that you don’t know who I’m referring to?” I can hear the venom coming through the voice changer.

Instead of allowing me to answer, I feel a blade at my shin. “I’m going to start here. Tiny cuts all the way up your leg. I’m going to enjoy watching the little waterfalls of blood cascade down.”

Blue Rose, Alabama

Taylor

Soren has been missing for two days. God, what’s happened to him. I pray with all I have in me to find Soren and bring him home safely. Don’t take him from me. Please. Don’t take him from Steffan.

I’ve been sleeping in Steffan’s room, and this morning, like the past couple of mornings, I wake to an empty bed. When I enter the main living room of the mansion it’s chaos. Everyone is doing something to locate Soren. My heart breaks when I find

Steffan. He looks like a complete wreck. Lee looks like a zombie. He's lost family members, his girlfriend, and now Soren is missing.

Succo comes to me. Succo reads my thoughts. "Lee is a zombie. He is a shell of who he was. I'm worried about him. If Soren is—" We both turn to look at Steffan. "Steffan is a loose cannon. He is ready to burn the entire world to the ground to find his brother. Son-of-a-bitch still blames himself."

"We're going to find him. We're going to bring him back." I leave no room for argument. I leave Succo to go hug Steffan. He's thin and his body quivers under my touch.

"We're going to your room. You're going to eat and sleep."

Steffan takes a step back as though I slapped him. "Eat? Sleep? How can you be so fucking cold right now? Calm. And thinking about going to my room at a time like this. Do you not get it? He didn't go for a fucking ride or vacation, Taylor. He's fucking missing! Do you have any idea what that means in our world? Do you!"

I grit my teeth and point a finger at him. "How dare you yell at me like this. I know what it could mean. Don't you think it's eating me alive as well?" The room goes deathly quiet, and the tension is thick. "I am trying to help you the best I can."

"Taylor."

Tears burn at the back of my eyes, but I refuse to let any of them see me cry. "Fuck you, Steffan." I charge past him and take the stairs two at a time up to Soren's room. I know Steffan is barely hanging on and stressed beyond belief. I'm running away to give him space and also allow myself a moment to break down.

I lock the door behind me. My heart hurts as I inhale the scent of him. I walk over to

his desk and pick up a black binder. When I open it, my knees buckle. It's all black-and-white photos of me. Some have my cheeks heated. The realization that he's gone and could be gone for good feels like a weight crushing my chest. I collapse on the bed and allow the tears to wrack my body. The pain consumes me, and I cry until there's nothing left. I know I need to get a grip, but my brain can't focus on anything but this sense of loss. I run my finger over the edge of the binder staring at his erotic photos. His camera.

Leaving the binder on the bed, I exit the room and rush back down the stairs. "Did anyone get Soren's camera?"

Steffan clears his throat. "Probably still in his bag. I found it..." He looks up to the ceiling. "It was left with his shattered phone. It's in my room."

"I'd like his camera, please."

"Why?"

"Because I want to develop the film. It'll be a gift for him for when he returns." I meet everyone's eyes full of pity, but I raise my chin.

Steffan hands me the camera. "Do you know how to develop it?"

"No. I thought I'd take it — what? Why are you laughing?"

"Soren would lose his shit if you took his precious film somewhere else to get developed." His smile becomes tight. I imagine the fact that he's still missing is still overwhelming him. "Come on. He has a dark room."

My eyes about pop out of my head. "A dark room? Here?"

“He put a shed out back and turned it into one. He has one at our house, and another one at our vacation home. Come on. I’ll help you.”

When we’re standing in front of the shed, I take Steffan’s arm, stopping him from opening the door. “I’m sorry. For my outburst.”

“Me too. And you’re not. I need to take a breather, which is what I’m doing. My father has his men on it. The entire Brotherhood, The Illicit, and...” He blinks several times, fighting back tears. I wrap my arms around him and hold him tight.

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After a few minutes, Steffan pulls away. “Come on. I’ll show you how to develop film. Let’s see what Soren has on here.”

The night of The Illicit Lovers Gala. My cheeks flush, and Steffan gives me a knowing grin. “Well now I’m really glad I volunteered to be of service.”

I’d never been inside a dark room, and it’s definitely dark. I can’t even see my hands in front of me. Steffan explains we can’t expose the film to light. He goes about explaining the process, but I can’t see anything, so I pretend to understand. I make a few noises of approval so he knows I’m at least listening. After a few minutes, he turns on a red light.

“Now the fun can begin.”

The chemicals he dumps into the containers burn my nose. Then I slowly watch the process and relax. Embracing the slow technique and peacefulness of it all. It’s soothing being in here alone, the quiet. I understand why Soren must love this. My mind begins to wonder as I try to sift through the memories. Who all was at the gala? It had to have been someone there. I don’t recall seeing Alex. But what motive would he have to kill Bailee Van Duren and members of Lee Conrad’s family? This was all people connected to Lee. Would Bryce murder his own sister?

“Well, well, well...” Steffan taunts.

I stare down and watch in fascination. It’s almost like magic how the image slowly appears on the paper floating in the tub. “You two were busy before I got there.” Steffan eases behind me. “While the cat’s away, the mouse will play.”

“You’re so cheesy sometimes.” I giggle as his nose tickles my neck. There’s a knock at the door, so we ease out of the dark room to prevent the light from getting in and damaging Soren’s photos.

“We think we have a lead.” Succo tells us. “Alex got a call. He didn’t say much, just left and took a few of the guys with him. He told everyone you were busy.” He cuts his eyes to me and then back to Steffan.

“He did, did he?” Rage radiates off Steffan.

“Brother, listen to me. I know I’m still new and we don’t share the history you have with Lee, and I’m not blood like Soren, but I have the best intentions. I am loyal to you. Most of the brothers, however, are loyal to whomever is the president. Their loyalty is to the Brotherhood. There are whispers that your attention is divided and you’re losing control.”

Steffan’s face drops. He gives a solemn nod. “And they’re not wrong. I’m spiraling. Fuck. It’s a lot. The expectations. The burden of dealing with frat shit, plus The Illicit breathing down my neck and my prick of a father. Van Doren. My best friend,” he gestures toward the mansion, “found his girlfriend’s body. I don’t even know how to be there for him. I’m a fucking shitty friend and president.”

He begins to pace as he tugs at the root of his hair. “My brother is gone, again. Van Doren is in the wind. Dead bodies dropping left and right, and it’s all people who are members or connected to members of the Brotherhood. I’ve failed The Illicit twice on delivering Van Doren. My Delta Pi Theta brothers don’t trust me as a fit leader.”

“Alex,” I say. “Alex! He is creating chaos to discredit you. Think about it. He couldn’t just show up and demand their loyalty, not after they’ve known you so long. And he’s the one who got the tip on Soren?”

Steffan turns to Succo. “Trace them. Find out where they’re going. We have to get to Soren. Once my brother is safe, I’m going to show that little shit and everyone why a Carmichael is still the leader of them.”

“I want to go,” I tell Steffan. The image of me from the photos in the dark room come to mind. I looked so confident. I straighten my back and stare at them both like the badass I am. “I am going.”

Steffan mumbles and rubs the back of his neck. “I figured.” He turns and levels his eyes on me. “You probably should be with us. Leaving you here might be just as dangerous in case this is a trap to lure us away and leave you vulnerable. But —but —and I fucking mean it, Taylor, you are not to leave Succo’s side.” His eyes soften and his voice takes on a more tender tone. “I can’t lose you. They already took one person...” He pauses and his throat bobs as he swallows, “...one person whom I love. I won’t let them take another one.”

He loves me. Before I can respond, Steffan marches toward the door. He calls over his shoulder, “Don’t leave her side, Succo. Or you’ll be alligator bait.”

He slams the door behind him. Steffan loves me. I love him too. And Soren. I only hope I’ll get a chance to tell them both.

Blue Rose, Alabama

Soren

I’m dreaming again. I hear voices calling my name. My neck rolls along and my body isn’t even supporting itself anymore. The ropes are the only reason I haven’t collapsed to the ground.

“Soren!”

“Fuck off!” I croak.

“Here! Here he is!”

I flinch at the blinding light as the blindfold is ripped off. Rapidly blinking, my vision starts to slowly become clear. My binds are cut loose, but two hands keep me from falling. “I’ve got you,” the familiar voice says. It’s a normal voice. Not automated.

“Where are they?” I whisper.

“Drink.” A bottle is placed against my lips. The refreshing cold water tastes heavenly. “Not too much. Whoa. Whoa. You’re in bad shape, buddy.”

Ya think? I turn my head and register who is holding me. “What kind of sick game is this?” I hiss.

Alex Dupree has the nerve to appear shocked. “I just rescued your ass.”

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“From who? Yourself!”

“Wow. You’re delusional.”

“Tell me who she is. You tortured me but never told me why. Who was it? Is this because Taylor’s with me? Or — because I killed Allison Dupree?”

Alex’s face goes white. He didn’t know. Fuck. I can’t think. My chest hurts and my eyes are feeling heavy. I was convinced he had been the one torturing me, but was it not him? Alex allows my body to fall to the floor. He bends down and whispers, “It wasn’t just me. I couldn’t have pulled this off without some help.”

I force myself to remain conscious. The state of my body is making it so hard to know what’s real and not. He seemed shocked at my admission, but now he’s confessing. His lips graze my ear, “Shush. Don’t think so hard, you’ll hurt yourself. Nobody will believe you anyway. They’ll think you’re crazy and your brother is blind to his love for you and lust for Taylor. It gets my dick hard watching you Carmichaels fall.”

Footsteps sound outside, and Alex quickly moves away from me, clutching his chest.

“Soren...” It’s Taylor’s voice. She’s sideways but it’s her. The sun is shining behind her, and she appears to me like an angel. I scream in agony remembering my nightmares. “Soren, it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” I cry. I feel so weak crying in front of everyone. But how can I not? I love her and I’m going to be the reason she dies. Alex is playing everyone, and

there's not enough creditability to my name to convince anyone otherwise. I'm so fucking tired. Life, the Brotherhood, business, family, all of it. I only want for Taylor to be safe and happy, and she'll never have that with me.

The distinct sound of the click of a gun has me using the last of my strength to cover Taylor's body with mine. Alex's voice is shaking as he commands Taylor to get away from me. "He killed my mother. It was him. Taylor, you know what happened to me because of that."

My back slides down Taylor's front and I mumble, "I didn't want... to. She told me to go ahead and kill her because my father was going to anyway. No point in us both suffering. She — her eyes, they begged me to protect her. I knew she had a son. I wanted to protect you by helping her. But I didn't. I crumbled under the pressure of my father. I hate him."

"Do you have any idea how much I've suffered because you killed the only person who ever loved me? I spent my life being raised like I was the son of the devil. If people keep treating you like you're tainted and evil, eventually you become what they fear. I never stood a chance... because of you." I hear Alex's footsteps approaching me. Let him take me out. I deserve it. I've been my father's soldier, and some of the shit I've done I can't even blame it on him.

Steffan's voice rings out. "Get away from my brother!"

There's a struggle and a gun goes off. Taylor screams but doesn't leave me, she continues to hold me tightly against her. "Here, Succo," I hear her say. She gets under one arm, and Succo gets under the other. They hoist me up and my body screams in protest. The muscles don't seem to remember how to work. I just want to go to sleep. I squint through the brightness and see Alex and Steffan staring at each other.

"Don't I deserve to at least hold a trial? The crime was years ago, but I'm still

suffering the consequences. He should face trial for the murder of one of The Illicit founding families. The fucking founding family,” Alex fumes.

Taylor speaks up. “No. Alex, please.”

Alex’s voice sounds pained. “I know you hate me, but isn’t there a decent shred of you that can see he murdered my mother? Our lives might’ve been different — no, they would’ve.”

Taylor gestures for Steffan to take her place by my side. I watch in horror as she leaves me to go to Alex. “We never would’ve been. You never would’ve ended up in Mississippi. I am so sorry about what happened. I truly am. But Alex, Soren was only following orders. He was a kid who never should’ve been put in that situation. He’s a victim here.”

Alex reaches up and touches her face. “I’ll drop all of this if you’ll wear my tie. If you will agree to leave those two alone and be mine. That’s the only reason I came here. You’re the only reason I took my place with The Illicit Brotherhood. You for Soren.”

“My life for Soren’s.”

Alex releases a humorless chuckle that makes my stomach turn. “Oh, you’re worth more than that. It’s your life for the entire Charmichael family’s life. You’re saving an entire lineage.”

“Done.”

“The hell? No!” Steffan yells. But then he goes quiet, and his face turns pale white. He shakes Soren. “Sor? Soren! Soren!”

Blue Rose, Alabama

Taylor

I've lost most of the feeling in my arms, but I refuse to let go of Steffan, who is silently crying into his hands. We've been waiting in a private area inside the hospital. Not sure how the Brotherhood was able to get Soren in so quickly and quietly in his condition without having the police involved, but they did.

The door bursts open and Rhett Carmichael stands before us. He charges over to his son, and before I can react, his fist connects with Steffan's jaw. "You had one job. One! How hard is it to manage a fucking fraternity? You've embarrassed our name—myname." Steffan doesn't even fight back. He holds his chin up and waits for the next blow as a single tear makes its way down his reddened cheek. "Sniveling little bitch. I put everything on the line for you."

His eyes turn to me. "Go wait in my car. I need to find out what it is that's made your cunt so addictive to my boys. Hell, a Dupree came out of hiding for it."

Steffan lurches from his chair and shoves his father against the wall. His hands form a vise-like grip around the man's neck. Mr. Carmichael begins to turn blue. I fear Steffan might actually kill him, but his father kicks his foot out causing Steffan to drop and loosen his grip. Two men wearing all black hurry in and pull Steffan away.

"Good to see you haven't completely lost your balls. I'll deal with both of you later. Your mother is on her way, and I need to go clean up your fucking mess."

They keep Soren in the hospital overnight for observation since he was mostly dehydrated. Alex doesn't push me on our deal. In fact, he allows me to help the brothers tend to Soren when he gets to return to the mansion.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:00 am

I'm mostly needed at night to hold Soren through some pretty terrible nightmares. They've scheduled a special therapist through The Illicit to come and visit with him. For the most part, they've kept Soren on drugs to force him to remain in bed and get some rest. Steffan is extremely angry about it, and says it's his father's way to try and control him.

My heart breaks for Steffan. He is in and out of his brother's room every spare minute between hunting Bryce Van Doren, dealing with Brotherhood business, and now his father is staying in the mansion — whom I've noticed hasn't stepped foot in Soren's room. But he has the nurse to stand guard and see to it Soren gets his "proper treatment," and "medication."

I've made a little spread on the floor with all the photos Steffan and I developed, and am working on putting them in a new binder for Soren when I hear him stir. I climb to my feet and rush to his bedside. "Hey, easy there."

Right on cue, the nurse pops up with a cup.

"No medicine," Soren croaks out.

"What?"

He blinks a few times before those blue eyes look into mine. "Don't let them give me anymore medicine."

I look at the nurse and then back to Soren. She's a medical professional. Surely she wouldn't be giving him anything that could hurt him. "It's to help you."

“It’s to keep me out of it. Please.”

It’s the please that guts me. His father won’t be happy. I would say he can go kick rocks, but if I’ve learned anything this year, it’s those men are deadly and have no morals. I walk up to the nurse and whisper, “Give it to me and give us a moment. I’ll get him to take it.”

“I know you are trying to help, but I could lose my job.” Or worse. She doesn’t say it, but I can read it from her expression.

“I promise. Mr. Carmichael won’t find out. It’s just us in here. I’m certainly not going to tell him.”

Her eyes are full of pity as she takes in Soren on the bed. “Fine. I need to go to the restroom.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. I go back to Soren’s side.

“I need to tell you something. Are we alone?”

I look around to make certain, even though I know we are. “Yes.”

“I remembered some stuff.”

“You’ve been having a lot of night terrors. The doctor said that’s normal after what you’ve been through.”

“Not terrors. Memories, Little Mouse. Where’s Alex?”

I shake my head. “I’m not sure. He hasn’t reached out to me. Maybe he has changed and—”

Soren reaches over and grabs my wrist. “The fuck he has. I remember now. HeknewI’d killed his mother. I don’t know how, but he did. Then it was all an act. Finding me.Rescuing me.Being shocked by my confession. He was one of the ones torturing me...and he has a partner.”

My throat is closing up. I knew better than to trust Alex. I keep falling for his games. He played me, and now I have made a deal with the devil. I can’t tell Soren...it’s the only way to keep him safe. Steffan can’t find out either. Maybe it will be easier this way. I can convince them I want Alex, but ugh! I feel so stupid for believing him. How can anyone be this good of an actor? A more concerning issue is who is helping him? Bryce? That’s the only logical explanation. I’m stuck now. I have to save them both. I will do anything to protect the men I love.

“Van Doren?”

Soren shakes his head. “I think he has helped Van Doren. But I think it’s all part of his mind games. It’s someone else. I don’t know who, but I’ll find out. First, I have to get away from these drugs. This is no doubt my father’s doing. To keep me sedated while he puts out the flames.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I was too injured and weak to send off. Plus, I guess it’s easier just to lock me away and dope me up.” His head rolls over to the side and his eyes zero in on my little project in the floor. “Whatcha got going on there?”

“Allow me to show you.”

Blue Rose, Alabama

Taylor

It's been two weeks and Alex has only pushed me for kisses and dates. He's been respectful for the most part, but I know there's a resentful monster lurking underneath that gorgeous skin. He's extremely jealous of the Carmichael twins, and now I know this has been more about them than me all along. Staying away from Soren and Steffan is killing me. I took off from their fraternity house and have been hiding at my own again. I've declined texts and calls. I've gone out of my way and upended my whole schedule to not run into them on campus. Not that they were there frequently. After everything, they have had to be at their fraternity more. It's better this way. I knew they wouldn't understand, and their reaction is exactly what Alex wanted. He wants them to hurt, to make them pay, and now I'm a pawn in his game to destroy them.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:00 am

Soren killed Alex's mother, which resulted in him being sent to live with overly religious fanatics who punished him for his parents' sins. The Carmichaels took over his family's empire. His motive and rage against The Illicit makes sense.

But who is the other person? Who is helping him commit all these murders? And why did they change their methods? Van Doren has motive, but enough to do all this? Alex's was revenge fueled by years spent harboring hate.

In a way, I get it. I understand him more now. He's sick and twisted, but he was right, if Rhett Carmichael hadn't started all this, he might've had a chance at a happy healthy life. The real villain is Rhett Carmichael and his insatiable need for money and power.

Tonight I requested we have a picnic since the weather is nice. I left Alex a note in his room at the Brotherhood house to meet me by the swamp under the willow tree. I need to try and convince him that Steffan and Soren are victims as much as him. They're not his enemy.

"What have we here?" I can hear the smile in his voice.

"All your favorites."

His eyes sparkle in the moonlight. "You can say that again. My absolute favorite dessert is sitting there looking pretty in that white dress. My precious angel."

I pat the blanket and he obliges. Alex doesn't waste any time claiming my lips. I hate how good of a kisser he is. My treacherous body still responds to him. But then like a

bucket of cold water, Ava's dead body comes to the forefront of my mind. Did he...

What would have been the reason to murder my roommate? She had nothing to do with Delta Pi Theta and The Illicit. That you know of... a little voice whispers.

"What's wrong?" Alex studies my face. He cups my cheek so tenderly.

"Have you ever thought that maybe you and Steffan are a lot alike. And Soren. I think y'all could work together—"

"Shut up." I gasp when he grips my jaw. "Why would you do this? We were having a nice time." He lets my chin go with a jerk. "Is this your way of seducing me to team up with your lovers? Were you planning to share all of us in your bed?"

"No. But I think your anger is misplaced."

"Misplaced?" He stands up and stomps around. "He murdered my mother. She was innocent. My grandfather and father, I could see that's the way this world works. But women and children were supposed to be safe — even among The Illicit."

"You're right. But you have to understand that Soren was a child himself. He had no choice."

Alex nods and gives me a sad smile. He comes back to sit with me. "My precious angel. You have such a pure heart." He takes my chin between his two fingers. "Don't worry anymore. Let's enjoy the sunset."

"Do you promise to think about it?"

"If you give me a kiss." Our lips touch. It's so gentle and I can taste peppermint. This time I allow him to guide me to my back. The bulge between his pants presses against

my clit, and I moan into his lips.

“Taylor,” he sighs against my lips. “Please.” He trails kisses along my neck. “I wish you could see what I have envisioned for us.” He moves to the other side of neck. “But you will. I promise you’ll be happy. We’ll be happy.”

“Alex, would you kill for me?”

“How do you know I haven’t already?”

I squeeze my eyes shut. It’s not like Steffan and Soren have clean hands either. “If I asked you to stop, would you?”

“Of course. I don’t take pleasure in it.” His hands slide under my shirt and his whole body shivers. “I only have a few loose ends, and then this will be over, my precious.” He grinds against me and then begs, “Please, Taylor. Let me finally have you. All of you.”

I moan. “Yes. Alex, take me. All of me.”

He pulls back. “Are you serious? Are you sure?” I nod with a full smile. “Oh, baby. I love you.” He kisses me hard and then pulls back again. “I love you so much it makes me crazy. Say it again. Say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours.”

His body presses against mine and his lips suck my bottom lip in. Our tongues massage each other’s. Then I bring my right hand to his side, and he goes completely still. His eyes are wide as he raises up off my body. A shiver of delight runs through me at the shocked look on his face.

“Your death, my life,” I tell him.

He flops to the side, and I stand. “Why?”

I pull my knife from his side. “I begged you to listen. But you haven’t changed. You won’t listen. You were never going to let me live my life. I can’t stand by and allow you to kill anyone else I love.”

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“What about me?” Alex asks in disbelief. “Do you not love me?”

“I’ve already pledged my loyalty.”

I shove the knife into the picnic basket. The dark spot on Alex’s side quickly begins to spread. He is gasping for air as his hand is painted in red liquid, clutching his side.

“Don’t leave me... I need help. Help me!”

What have I done? No. I did what needed to be done. I can’t do this on my own, though. Taking the basket, I hurry to find Steffan for help. I never told them my plan because I knew they wouldn’t have let me go through with it, and honestly, I wasn’t sure I could go through with it. I’m sweating by the time I reach the mansion.

Steffan is inside Soren’s room. My poor Soren looks so peaceful asleep. You’re okay now. Alex can’t hurt you.

“Steffan,” I whisper. “I need your help. I need to hide a body.”

“What the fuck?” He jumps up from the bed and towers over me. I explain everything in a rush.

“Fuck!”

I chase after Steffan as he runs through the frat house and out the door. Only when we get there, the body is missing. I see a faint trail of blood drops.

Steffan slowly turns his head from the ground to me. “Was he dead when you left him, or just injured?”

“I stabbed him. Hard. Hence the blood.”

“He wouldn’t die immediately from a stab wound, Taylor.” Steffan pulls out his cell phone. “Let me make some calls. He’s injured so he couldn’t have gotten far.”

I go wait with Soren in his room. My body is trembling. How could I have been so foolish? I might’ve killed a man. And if I didn’t, I angered a monster more than he already was. I’ve gone past poking or provoking the beast. I’ve just made everything a hundred times worse. Either way, I’ve damned my soul.

“I should’ve slit his throat,” I mumble.

“I really hope it’s not me you’re talking about,” Soren’s sleepy voice jokes.

“I stabbed someone.”

“Damn. You’re really blossoming, my Little Mouse. I’m beginning to think we might be a bad influence.”

“I’m serious.”

“Who?”

“Alex.”

Soren raises up and is fully alert. “Tell me everything. And if he hurt you, I’ll finish the job.”

By the time I finish the story, Soren's eyes are glacial. Steffan gets back shortly after that with no news. There is no trace of Alex anywhere. "Tell Steffan what you told me, Little Mouse. Tell him about your plan and that you let that sick fuck think you wanted him."

Steffan's eyes snap to mine, his jaw clicks. "What? I think you missed that part, Taylor. You glossed over it on your way to the stabbing portion."

I swallow and lift my chin in defiance. "It was the only way. I made a deal to help Soren"

"So that's why you've been dodgy this week?" Steffan glowers.

"It had to be believable. I didn't think I would for sure stab him, but he wouldn't let it go how much he wants to destroy you both. I couldn't let that happen. I love you." I glance from Steffan to Soren, my eyes softening, "I love both of you."

Soren's eyes blaze with fire, and Steffan starts to move to grab me when Kali comes to find me still in Soren's room. "Hey, I need to head back to the house to rotate some of my clothes." Her eyes bounce between us, "Wanna come with?"

The room suddenly feels too warm, too full of emotion, and I don't know how to process it all. "Ooh, yes. I need to."

Steffan's fingers tap along his cell phone. I can tell he doesn't want to let me go right now, not with my confession hanging between us, but now Kali is here. "Lee is going to take you."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:00 am

Kali waggles her eyebrows, causing me to roll my eyes. At least someone is excited about our escort. I haven't seen much of Lee since he lost Bailee. I would never forget the ghosts in his eyes and feel bad that he's stuck with us.

He arrives shortly afterward and drives us home. He doesn't say a lot on the drive home but insists on walking us into the house. I watch as he checks every room downstairs, even the windows and locks, all the while fielding off Kali's advances. "Your room is upstairs?" he asks and I nod.

"Actually, we both sleep upstairs."

Lee heads for the stairs. I wait patiently by my door while he looks in Kali's room and then the bathroom. I can see in the way his face is void of emotion that he isn't doing well. On a normal day, Lee is handsome. His features strong and dark in comparison to the twins. He's also way more laidback than Steffan, but also more responsible than Soren. On a normal day, though, he's his normal self. Right now he looks lost. The urge to hug him flits through my mind, but I push the thought away. Lee walks toward me and nods his head. I push the door open and flick on my light.

"Oh no!" I gasp and Lee rushes into the room, his hand on my shoulder, pulling my body behind his. There's another black box sitting on my bed.

It looks identical to the same black box I received at Christmas. My fingers are trembling as I step around Lee and walk over to my bed.

"Taylor," Lee warns, moving closer toward me, one hand on my arm and the other eyeing the box.

“Someone was here,” I whisper, completely freaked out even as I reach for the box.

“Careful,” Lee warns. Our eyes meet right as I flip the lid off the box. “Oh shit,” Lee inhales. Inside, lies a bloody heart that’s still warm.

Sitting in the box among black shredded tissue is a letter...

Happy Valentine’s Day, Taylor.