



The Devil's Reprise (Devils 2)

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Category: Fantasy, Horror

Description: Given a second chance, music journalist Dawn Emerson and guitarist Sage Knightly are reunited, only to have their lives threatened again by a demonic bargain. The sequel to THE DEVIL'S METAL, from USA Today bestselling author Karina Halle.

When Dawn Emerson got the chance to go on tour with her favorite metal band, Hybrid, she thought she landed the writing gig of the century. But what started off as a dream for the budding music journalist quickly turned into a nightmare that she and guitarist Sage Knightly barely escaped alive.

Now, months after they went their separate ways, Sage invites Dawn to accompany him on his first solo tour across Europe and write about it for Creem Magazine. But like the last tour, nothing is as easy as it seems. Sage is a broken man on the path to self-destruction and Dawn isn't sure if she's the right person to save him. And aside from having to pick up the pieces of their burgeoning relationship, they have to negotiate the mysterious new photographer assigned to Dawn's story, as well as vindictive promoters and demonic groupies they thought they'd never see again.

Because this time, it's Dawn who made a deal with the devil and the only thing worse than having to uphold a bargain with the prince of darkness is not remembering how you're supposed to pay it back.

It may be with their souls.

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Prologue

There comes a time in every man's life where he must face his demons.

It sounds cliché, I know.

But I break the mold.

Because I've faced my demons.

In the flesh.

And I've won.

But it's the ones inside your head that don't die.

They keep living.

My personal demons? They've gotten worse since the incident.

They've grown now.

They own me.

When I was fifteen years old, I made a deal with the Devil—or at least one of his spokeswomen—on the muddy red banks of Lake Shasta, California. I wanted talent, fame, and fortune. The demons upheld their end of the bargain. They gave me

everything I ever wanted. I joined a band called Hybrid, made my way to guitarist, and propelled the band into stardom. We gave Led Zeppelin a run for their money. We got pussy galore (no, not Honor Blackman). We had everything.

Including the final thing. My final wish. That Hybrid go down in history.

We did. There was a music journalist brought on by Creem magazine to cover the whole event. Our last tour (unknownst to anyone but me and our manager, Jacob). Her name was Dawn. She was young, beautiful, and our biggest fan.

Dawn saw it all. She recorded it all.

And, somehow, she saved me.

First it giveth, then it taketh away. The band broke up. The unthinkable happened. People died.

I should have died.

This was all supposed to end before I turned twenty-eight.

Yet I lived. Dawn lived.

And I was given another chance at life. To live free of the Devil's shadow. To live my life the way it should be lived.

I really should be the luckiest S.O.B. on the planet. The fates that took away Morrison and Joplin and Hendrix—that wasn't my fate after all.

Somehow, I won.

But victory is as bitter as the Quaaludes on my tongue. How can I really live with myself when my whole life has been loaned? I lost the people closest to me. They died, they suffered, for my selfishness.

How dare I be allowed to go on, to run free, when I brought this upon them and myself.

And so I haven't.

I'm not free.

My name is Sage Knightly. One of the few surviving members of the metal band, Hybrid. I'm about to embark on my first solo tour, to be the rock star I was always meant to be.

But something tells me I'm not coming out of this alive.

And neither is she.

Chapter One

Sage

April, 1975

The pink lips at the end of my dick were some of the nicest I'd ever seen.

But the chick's tits were even better.

I put my palm against her forehead and pushed her head back until my dick bobbed out of her wet mouth.

“Lie down,” I told her. “On your back. Grab your tits and get ready for me.”

I was being commanding and a bit of an ass.

It wasn't like me.

But nothing was like me lately.

And I didn't really care.

She did as I asked. She was a pretty young thing, a few years above jailbait, with long brown hair she probably ironed every day. I didn't remember her name, and I didn't bother asking. I just called her 'Babe.'

I called the other one 'Sugar.' Sugar had Farrah Fawcett hair, blond and teased and frosted like a cake. Sugar was in the same Detroit hotel room as us, currently on the other bed, riding my bassist, Tricky. And by riding, I mean fucking him senseless, reverse cowgirl style. All she needed was a hat in her hand. Tricky was even more fucked up than me, from our nightly cocktail of vodka, beer, and cocaine. Sometimes we'd throw Quaaludes in there, too. Tonight, though, we wanted to make sure our dicks were working.

Two chicks at once: every man's dream and every rock star's prerogative. Sugar and Babe were good friends, or so it seemed, probably raised in some hippie commune, believing in the free love that was still trickling in from the '60s. They weren't shy being naked, and they didn't hold back when they made out with each other, not even hesitating when Tricky told Sugar to get her fingers up in Babe's bush. Naturally, they were fans of Hybrid, before I had basically killed the band. Killed Mickey Brown, Bob our bus driver, and Graham Freed, too. But Graham didn't count. He was the only thing that didn't count. Everything else made me bleed.

The singer, Robbie, my best friend, wouldn't speak to me. Noelle, our bassist, was still mentally ill from what happened.

I didn't need to be reminded of that. Every time Sugar or Babe would open their mouths and wax on about how much they loved Hybrid, it was a knife to my fucking heart. It never stopped hurting. So the next best thing was to fuck the shit out of them—no more talking. Just suck my dick, get each other off, get me off. Give me peace. Make me forget.

I was getting there. I was getting there.

Babe pushed her massive tits together, and I squeezed my dick between them, my eyes rolling back in my head from the friction. Jesus. That's what I was talking about. What I wanted. Just vibes buzzing along, nerves on fire, space travel inside your head.

I was fucked up and fucking. I was going and coming.

I drove myself between her tits, not bothering to look at her face or listen to her overdramatic moaning. How this was fun for her, I didn't know, but maybe it was always her fantasy to have Sage Knightly's king-sized cock between her tits. It was finally coming true. A story to tell her friends.

The fantasy is never as good as the reality, not for me anyway. Not that I really fantasized about anything other than coasting along and feeling nothing. Even my music was slipping away at a time that I needed it the most. Sex and drugs and booze and sleep. This was my new life. The rock and roll played somewhere in the background, a reminder of where I came from. But I didn't even know if it was where I was headed.

When I felt my balls tighten, I pulled away and looked over my shoulder at Tricky

and Sugar. She was coming so loudly that I was certain someone was going to complain. Whatever, man. I could have been Jimmy Page in here with a chick and a Great Dane; would that have been better?

“Hey, Tricky,” I called out to him. “I need her.”

Tricky grunted, his grip tightening on her small waist, his face furrowing as he approached climax. I guess I was being rude, bugging him right then, but damn if I didn’t care. I just needed to get off, and I needed Sugar to do it.

A world of want.

My lips curled at that thought, the title of my song that became a hit and let the world know that I still had “it,” even as a solo artist.

I had wanted so much.

It was given to me.

Then taken away.

Now I just wanted to come all over whoever this chick was.

Rocket ships into the ether. Shoot myself into the abyss.

Tricky got off, and I watched with mild interest and sudden impatience. Tricky didn’t know where he was or what he was doing, I could tell. I wanted that.

“Hey, Sugar,” I said to the girl as she slowly eased herself off his dick. I’d seen Tricky naked in all sorts of positions these days, and I was always too high to even be bothered by it. Maybe this is what it would be like at a hippie whorehouse. Dicks and

balls and pussy everywhere, served with a side of speed and whiskey.

Groovy love, man, taken to the next dimension.

Sugar stumbled over, nearly falling into my back. She was fucked up, too. One big party. Escapism: the new religion.

“Get on the bed and get that ass in the air,” I gestured, absently stroking myself at the same time. I’d already done her in the back door earlier, when Tricky and I tag-teamed her. He in the front, me in the rear. She wasn’t as pretty as Babe, but she was built smaller and her tight ass was a fist.

She gave me an apprehensive smile, like she wasn’t too sure about this. I gave her an expectant look in return, trying to be serious and threatening, but a lazy smile crept up on my lips. I failed. Drugs won.

“Come on,” I said, “you want to be the one to get me off, don’t you?”

I don’t know why she was hesitating, maybe because she was small and I was large and perhaps once was enough for her. But she just nodded while I put one hand on her firm ass and waved at Tricky.

“Tricky,” I said, slurring slightly. “Powder her nose.”

Tricky staggered over to the desk, naked as a jaybird, and then brought over the mirror, the rolled fifty, and the line that was still left. He gave me a look as he came over, like, “you sure you don’t want this?”

I did. But relief was so close. Better to give it to the girl, make her have fun in the last five minutes.

He put the mirror on the bed below her, and she dipped down to snort it up. He walked over to the mini fridge and brought out the half-drunk bottle of champagne and flopped down on the couch, content to watch. If he wanted to stare at my ass, he could go right ahead.

I waited a few seconds, teasing her crack with my tip, before she shook her head and seemed to loosen.

“What should I do?” Babe asked quietly, looking rejected since I gave up on her titty-fucking so soon.

“Lie back down, Babe,” I told her. “Spread those legs. Sugar here will take care of both of us.”

Babe’s eyes widened as she lay back down. I pushed into Sugar, slowly, as gently as I could. The tightness squeezed me. It took hold of my dick, my balls, all the way into the pit of my stomach. It made me dizzy, vibrant, real.

So close.

I kept pushing into her, in and out, her body tense from my movement while she tried to go down on her friend. Tricky watched it all. Girl on girl. Champagne and blow. Rock star life.

Life.

What a waste.

I pumped into her harder until the pressure was too much and I was ready to blow.

I pulled out of her and came in hot, sticky spurts onto her back. I was pretty sure she

was moaning from relief while I moaned just to moan. To get it all out. Everything that was buried inside me.

When my mind rolled back down to planet earth, I looked at the mess I made on her. I tried to hold on to the fragment of feelings as they passed through me.

That feeling of happiness.

Of safety.

Of love.

I thought of Dawn, the last person who tried to give me any of that.

I thought she'd been a fool for trying to fix me.

But sometimes, when the endorphins and the haze wore off, I realized that even fools can be right.

I slept alone that night, sending the girls packing with signed chests and merchandise.

I tried to dream of Dawn, the beautiful face that had pulled me out from so many buses, the sun through so many clouds. Innocence, passion, life...even after everything she'd seen. Faith. In me.

I tried to dream of Dawn, but dreams don't work that way, especially when you fall asleep with an empty bottle of whiskey in your clammy hands.

I dreamed of demons instead, chasing after her in a cavern full of bones. My music played in the background.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” a cockney accent pried itself into my fuzzy head. “What a fucking mess you are, mate.”

I felt rough hands shaking my shoulders and pushing me over onto my back, my legs falling open.

“Sage!” Jacob exclaimed in disgust. “Try sleeping in some Jockeys next time, will ya? I don’t need to see your twig and berries, though I’m sure I’m one of the lucky few.”

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I blinked a few times, afraid to open my eyes. Jacob's big, ugly face was peering down at mine, red brows knit together, lips crinkled. The light hurt my head.

I was going to vomit.

I quickly sat up, pushed him out of the way, and keeled over the opposite side of the bed, puking onto the floor. Mainly liquid. I couldn't remember the last time I really ate.

"Oh, now you're just being a twat," Jacob said, his voice pinched. Jacob hated vomit, but as my manager and Hybrid's ex-manager, he had to be used to it by now.

When I was done, my head spinning like a washing machine, I wiped my lips on the back of my hand and sat back in bed. I needed something strong to pull me out of this hangover because I felt worse than a dirty dishcloth. Cocaine had a funny way of leaving the body, doing a number on your psyche better than any childhood trauma ever could.

Jacob was shaking his head, his big arms crossed against his chest and plaid suit that clashed with his red hair, his fat knuckles cracking and uncracking. He meant business.

"The hell did you do here last night?" He looked around the room before his golden eyes settled back on me, narrowing as they focused.

I shrugged, my eyes pinched shut. I needed something, anything. "I had fun; it's what you do after a show."

“No,” Jacob said. “It’s what other musicians do after a show. You don’t have fun, Sage. I know your arse well enough.”

I snorted, gently enough so it didn’t further damage my brain. “Two chicks, Jacob, and a fuckload of drugs. Sounds like fun to anyone.”

“This isn’t you.” His voice lowered, becoming almost wistful. I opened my eyes and looked at him curiously. His face was riddled with pockmarks and disapproval. And, most jarringly, concern. “This isn’t Sage Knightly.”

We stared at each other for a few moments. Jacob was probably right, but I didn’t feel like giving him anything. He was pretty damn good as far as managers went. Hell, he was Jacob “The Cobb” Edwards, and his knuckles and rings were responsible for scarring many a promoter’s face. He was even immortal at some point, as far-out as that seems. But now he was human, here to die like the rest of us, and he and I had gone through more than anyone should go through. He knew exactly what was wrong with me, that black blanket over my head, because he had lost as much as I had.

But just because he knew didn’t mean I needed to address it.

“I’m fine, Jacob.”

He laughed, a big, belly-shaking one, like a ginger Santa Claus. I thought for a second he actually was amused, but the smile cleared off his face as fast as it came on.

“Sage,” he said sternly, coming closer and stopping at the foot of the bed. He motioned to the tangled, stained sheets. “Cover your bits up and then listen to me.”

I sighed and pulled the sheets over my dick. Somehow my nudity didn’t even surprise me anymore.

He stroked his chin, the sound of his calloused fingers against his stubble terrifyingly loud to my ears. “I’m not your father. Your father is back in California. But when we’re on the road, I feel like your father. So help me God, it’s true and I hate it. Never thought I’d have a full-grown, half-Mexican kid, but there you go. Never thought I’d still be managing you well after I didn’t have to anymore. But I like the job. I like you. And I don’t want to see you get hurt any more than you already have.” He sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed, the mattress dipping with his weight. “You survived your curse, Sage. You survived the deal. And you still came out on top. Don’t do this to yourself. Not now. You have everything you need to be great. You’re just about to go to Europe on tour, where I can promise you people will dig you; they will get you and your voice and your sound. Don’t bugger it all up because you’re feeling sorry for yourself.”

I swallowed hard but managed to say, entirely defensively I might add, “I’m a rock star. It’s the 1970s. Wake up, Jacob, and get with the times.”

He smiled quickly. “You’re a rock star. But this is not you. Now call the girl.”

I raised my brows, ignoring the pounding in my head. “The girl?”

“You know the girl, you trollop.” He rolled his eyes. “Dawn. Call her. You know her number. Call her and invite her on tour with us. You’re going to need her, and she’s going to need you.”

At the mention of her name, my heart started beating faster. Dawn. Rusty. My muse. I rubbed my lips together, eyes blinking fast, trying to think with great effort. “She needs me? I gave her everything.”

He eyed me matter-of-factly. “You didn’t.”

Didn’t I? She was a small-town music journalist from the sticks of Washington State,

thrust into the spotlight after covering the demise of Hybrid. She went on tour with us during our dying days because that was part of the bargain I made—that we go down in history. But ever since we parted ways, even though she was constantly on my mind in some abstract, dreamy way, even though I'd jerked off plenty of times to the memory of me slamming her on the faded tour bus, I hadn't seen her. We hadn't really talked. She was a part of me and a shadow of my past at the same time.

“Oh, she's doing well,” Jacob went on. “But she still needs you, even though she may not know it yet.”

I frowned. “Are you being purposely vague or do you know something?”

He shrugged, suddenly blasé. “I don't know what I know. Call it a residual hunch. Even if I knew something, I'm not her manager. I'm not a guard or a guide. I just know she might need help. Somewhere deep in this dead old chest of mine, I feel like her story is just getting started.”

I could tell there was something else he wanted to say.

“And?” I pressed. I wanted him to leave the room more than anything so I could dig out the rest of the coke and get a little morning lifter going on, but Dawn was front and center.

He straightened up. “Call her. When you've got your brains together. Invite her on the tour. If you want, I can make sure she covers it for Creem, or you can just bring her along for kicks. Tell Rusty I'm the one who misses her if you have to. But just call her. Talk to her. And if you save her, maybe she can save you. And this time, maybe you'll let it stick.”

With that, Jacob left the room, leaving me alone in the darkness brought on by black-out drapes and a raging hole in my heart.

I waited a few moments, then before I got too scared, I picked up the hotel room phone and asked to be connected to her number. Though I rarely used it, I knew it by heart.

“Hello?”

Her voice came through the crackling line with clarity. It did something to my head, shaking out the cobwebs better than a line.

“Dawn?” I asked, just to make sure.

“Sage?” was her response. Unsure, brimming with nerves. So adorable. My whole body immediately melted into the bed. My heart surged with guilt.

“Hey, angel,” I said, trying to hide the fear. “How are you?” I glanced at the clock on the table, trying to figure out her time on the West Coast and failing. “I hope I’m not waking you.”

“It’s ten-thirty in the morning. I’m no longer a lazy college student.”

What fucking month was it? April already?

“I figured that,” I said smoothly. “Congratulations. Welcome to the real world. How does it feel?”

Dude, I was sounding like a complete fucking moron.

“Eh, it’s okay,” she said, trying to sound nonchalant. “I think I might look sexier in this so-called real world, though.”

All I heard was “look sexier.” Suddenly my mind flashed with an image of us tangled

in the sheets at my father's house in Redding, one of the last times I saw her. She was firm and soft all at once, big dark eyes, hair thick and shiny as chili oil. A smile that could power a thousand cities.

"I don't think that's possible," I said, hoping she could feel the lust in my voice. Hoping I still interested her the way I used to. "Listen, what are you doing next month? Is May busy for a retired rodeo queen?"

I had to ask. She was a barrel racer before she became a full-fledged music journalist. The thought of her in rodeo queen gear was a harbored fantasy of mine, and barrel racing, her dismounting a horse all sticky and sweaty and then mounting my horse, was just icing on the cake.

"No, not yet," she responded. Keeping me on my toes, I see. "There's supposed to be a bunch of good albums released that I'll have to review right away, but that's about it."

I gulped down the next question then dug for the strength to ask it. Bite the bullet. Be the rock star.

"How do you feel about flying to Paris and meeting me there? I'm about to go on tour, and I'd love a sexy, talented music journalist to cover it."

And, once again, I sounded like a moron. A desperate, cheesy moron. I should have heeded Jacob's advice and waited until my hangover was gone.

But to my surprise, she enthusiastically replied, "Are you kidding me?" like she'd just won a trip to Disneyland. I guess, in a way, she had. The Disneyland of rock 'n' roll. All rides included.

"Do I ever kid? I'm serious. Tell me when you're free and I'll fly you over here. I'll

take care of you, angel.” I remembered what Jacob said. “I really miss you.”

I fucking meant it. But she’d never know how much. She’d never know that I’d give anything for her to try to fix me again.

We could save each other. Right?

“I really miss you, too,” she said.

Holy fuck. Way too much for my chemical-laden heart to carry this early in the...well, afternoon.

I cleared my throat, trying to sound breezy. “So you’ll come? Tell me the dates and I’ll make the arrangements.”

She paused, thinking, and during that, I wondered if she was rethinking it all. Maybe this was too out of the blue and I was too presumptuous. But then she said, “May fifteenth would be good. I could come for a week or two, depending. Maybe three if I’m lucky.” She lowered her voice. “I don’t like leaving home for too long.”

I could live with that.

She continued, her conscience getting the better of her. “Can you call back later tonight? I need to talk it over with the family.”

“Of course. I’ll talk to you soon.”

I hung up the phone, got out of bed and opened the black-out curtains, peering out at the white-hot spot that was Detroit. We had two more weeks on the East Coast and then it was off to Europe. Sage Knightly and his mediocre solo tour was going overseas, a place Hybrid had never gone.

New ground. New territory.

And, if I was lucky enough, an old flame.

Chapter Two

Dawn

May 1975

“Here’s to Dawn,” Melanie announced, holding her can of Pabst in the air. Despite the Creedence Clearwater Revival pumping through the speakers we had brought into the barn, everyone could hear her. Mel always knew how to be the center of attention.

“To Dawn!” everyone cheersed in drunken unison, raising their drinks as Mel quickly motioned for me to get into the middle of the circle that was haphazardly forming.

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“Get in here, bitch!” she yelled. “Stop being such a wallflower; you’re blending in with the hay.”

I rolled my eyes and shuffled my way through the crowd of people, most of them my friends, some of them just random dudes who had decided there was nothing better to do on a Saturday night in Ellensburg than crash a girl’s going away party. Oh well, there was a reason I was having the party in a barn anyway—less damage could be done by drunks, friends or not. Oh, and I could keep my dad and my brother, Eric, out of it.

I grudgingly walked out into the center of the circle, looking around at the sloppy grins and glazed eyes. Despite me yelling earlier about no smoking in the barn, a huge cloud of pot smoke rose from the back of the crowd, followed by a poorly hidden cough.

I was never very popular—in high school or out of high school. But ever since I came back from going on tour with the now-defunct Hybrid—ever since I recorded their crazy collapse for Creem—I’ve become something of a local celebrity.

Okay, that’s totally stretching the truth. I don’t really have more friends. I don’t get stopped on the street or anything. But I’m no longer boring Dawn Emerson, music freak and rodeo queen. I’m Dawn Emerson, the girl who survived a deal with the Devil. Not that anyone believes what I wrote in the article. They all think I was using metaphors.

I wasn’t.

And it wasn't my deal with the Devil, either. Though sometimes, lately, it feels like it was.

Sometimes things seem a bit too good to be true.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming," I said as Mel nudged me in the boob, hard. I glared at her and pushed my wavy red hair out of my face before smiling at everyone. "I don't really know why we're having a party since I'll only be gone for three weeks, but—"

"Cuz maybe you'll almost die again," someone from the crowd yelled. My money was on the dude smoking pot.

Everyone laughed. I did, too. A fake laugh, but the more I'd tried to tell people how much of the article was true—that guitarist Sage Knightly had made that deal with a demon on the shores of Lake Shasta, that everything he was given was slowly taken away from him before he reached the age of twenty-eight, that people in his band actually died and Sage and I had almost followed that same fate—well, people tend to look at you like you're crazy. The paranormal isn't widely accepted, even though it was the '70s and I thought civilization was coming along in leaps and bounds.

Speaking of.

"Well," I went on, "we're also here to celebrate the end of the Vietnam War!"

Even though we had a few soldiers among us in the barn, my words were met with greater applause. The damn war had just dragged on so long that, in the end, I didn't know many of my friends who actually supported it. We just wanted it over with, and it finally, finally was.

The music went louder, CCR's "Bad Moon Rising" filling up the space from hay to

rafters along with resumed chatter and the crisp clack of beer cans opening. I was glad my horse, Moonglow, was out at pasture; otherwise she would have gone nuts.

“Geez, Dawn,” Mel said, giving me the stink eye. “You could at least act like you’re having fun.”

I looked down at her and patted her afro. Mel was a tiny little thing with a bubble butt and a bubble rack, complimented by her waist-high jean shorts and backless fringe top. As usual, I towered over her. It didn’t help that I was wearing platform shoes.

“I am having fun,” I told her, putting on a smile. “I’m just...” I looked around the barn at the couples making out on the hay bales, the doofuses doing keg stands in Moonglow’s stall. “No, I’m having fun. This is ace.”

She snorted and took a lengthy swig of her drink, the foam spilling onto her cocoa-colored chest. “Wanna lick that off?” she eyed me with a sly grin.

“Don’t tell me you’re getting all experimental on me,” I warned her, giving her a playful shove. “I’m sure you’ll find someone here to lick that off for you.”

“And what about you?” she asked, grabbing up a few strands of hay to wipe off the foam, while her eyes darted around the barn, looking for any eligible bachelors. “You finally gonna get laid or what? Perfect time, just before you go to Europe. No strings attached.”

I hated getting into this conversation with her. I’d been single ever since I came back from the tour last fall. I guess it was kind of weird; I mean, I was twenty-two and technically unattached. But...I was busy. Finishing my studies at the University of Central Washington and working as a part-time music journalist had taken up all of my time until now. I barely had time for a horse, let alone a boyfriend.

Not that I needed a boyfriend for a roll in the hay.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. Then, knowing she wouldn’t be satisfied with that, I added, “Maybe.”

“I think you’re going to change your mind by the end of the night.”

Now I snorted and folded my arms across my B-cups. With my freckles, red hair, and tall build, I wasn’t exactly Morgan Fairchild. Even if I weren’t so picky, it’s not like dudes were throwing themselves at me. “You sound oh-so-sure of yourself. I pretty much know everyone here and, sorry, not shagging anyone in this vicinity. Not tonight. Not ever.”

“Uh-huh,” she said in a strange tone, her eyes focusing on something across the room. I followed them.

And then the barn seemed to roll to a stop.

Ryan Bettman.

My ex-boyfriend.

He was standing in the corner, drinking from a red plastic cup and laughing with some girl I went to high school with. Not the girl I’d caught him cheating on me with a year ago, thank God, but there he was. I hadn’t seen him once since we’d broken up.

And dammit if it still didn’t hurt somewhere deep inside. I was so over him, it wasn’t even funny. My heart was hung up on someone else. And yet, looking at him made me feel weird, torn in two. Part of me wanted to bury the hatchet and let bygones be bygones, but the other part was like, fuck that, you cheated on me, you asshole.

Prepare to die.

“Why is he here?” I seethed under my breath, my eyes stuck on him. He looked good, which was kind of annoying. Tall, lean muscle clothed in fashionable denim bell-bottoms and a paisley shirt. His hair was shaggy but the kind of cut you knew took hours to blow-dry just right. He wasn’t the stoic, all-black-wearing, muss-up-your-hair-and-go type of man.

He wasn’t Sage Knightly.

But who was?

“I don’t know, don’t you dare think I invited him,” she said. “But every young adult in Ellensburg is here right now; it’s Popular City, Dawn. He’s probably visiting his folks and...oh shitballs, he’s seen us.”

She was right. Ryan was now staring at us—staring at me—with a charming grin on his face. I guess the combination of the leggy redhead and the curvy black chick was always noticeable no matter where we were.

“Aaand he’s coming over here,” Mel spoke with her mouth hidden by the beer. “Night, John-Boy!” And with that, she turned on her heel and scooted herself through the crowd, disappearing in seconds flat.

Fuck this. I smiled awkwardly now that I was in Ryan’s tractor beam. He was coming over, closer and closer.

Be strong, Dawn, I told myself. He’s no one. You’re someone. You’re Rusty.

“Hey, Dawn,” Ryan said as he approached, lowering his cup by his side, like he suddenly wanted to hide the fact that he was drinking. Or maybe he was planning on

shaking my hand.

I firmly kept my arms folded across my chest and smiled as breezily as possible. “Ryan. Didn’t think...well, this is a surprise.”

He looked at the ground, kind of sheepish for a moment, and I was suddenly flooded with millions of memories. Most of them good. Ah, shit. Time to put down the beer.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to show up like this. I was visiting the ’rents and Steve, you remember Steve.” He jerked his head toward the back of the barn, where I’m sure Steve was. I didn’t need to look to remember Ryan’s idiotic best friend. “Anyway, Steve heard from someone about your party, and he said we should go check it out, and I figured you wouldn’t mind. Do you mind?”

I sucked at my teeth for a moment, thinking it over. I did mind. But if I minded, he’d think I still cared. So I just shrugged. “It’s cool. Everyone’s here anyway.”

He scratched behind his neck while shooting me a shy glance. “Well, thanks for letting me stay. You know, you and I haven’t really, uh, talked in a long time.”

I swallowed slowly. And whose fault was that?

“No, we haven’t.” I stared him down.

He rubbed his hand along his jaw and looked over my shoulder at the open barn doors.

“Want to go for a walk?”

No. Not really.

But he reached out and touched my elbow with his fingers, pointing me in the right direction, and I found myself walking beside him. Even in my platforms, he was about the same height, and as we passed through the barn, our bell-bottoms swishing against each other, I knew we looked good together. We always we did. Tall, athletic, wholesome—Ryan and Dawn.

But I certainly didn't feel wholesome. And as we walked out of the barn and into the night air, Ryan walked closer and closer beside me with a swagger that suggested brand-new sexual confidence. He certainly wasn't wholesome either.

"I sure do miss this place," he said, nodding at the horizon. The sun had set, leaving purple and periwinkle clouds to settle on the rolling hills that bordered the valley. Moonglow was off in the distance, a hazy figure against the desaturated fields and far-away farmhouses. It was already stinking hot here during the day thanks to Ellensburg's dry, desert-like climate, but the evenings were still cool and fresh, smelling like new hay and night-blooming flowers.

"Yeah, I'd miss this place, too," I said. "I guess Seattle is quite the change."

We walked for a bit, stopping along the fence with its broken boards. My dad had been sober for nearly ten months now, which was great, beyond great, but it didn't mean the repairs around the farm were getting done any faster. Usually it was up to me to take control. But at this point in my life, I was used to it.

"Seattle's nice," Ryan said, leaning on the post and gazing into the distance. A breeze ruffled his hair, and I was struck by how handsome he still was. Sometimes ugly deeds don't make someone ugly. "But it's cold and wet and the chicks are uptight."

I couldn't help but smile and leaned on the railing beside him. "Chicks aren't much different here, you know that."

“You’re not uptight,” he said, bringing his eyes to mine. “You’ve changed. A lot.”

I cleared my throat and looked down at the grass, which was becoming more grey and grainy as the light disappeared from the sky. “How so?”

There was a pause before he said, “You’re more confident. You walk tall.”

“I am tall.”

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“You walk taller. You’re a little bit intimidating, to be honest.”

I snorted and gave him an incredulous look, barely able to make out his face to see if he was being insincere or not. “I’m still Dawn.”

He licked his lips. “You’re better. Everything about you is better.”

He took a step closer and slipped his hand around my waist. I froze, wide-eyed, not sure what the hell was happening. He brought me to him and put his lips to my ear. “I’m better, too. Want to see?”

Ryan pressed his lips to my neck and my eyes fluttered closed at the familiar feeling. Heat was flaring up my face and chest. Christ. Maybe Mel was right; maybe I did need to get laid. This was the closest any man had been to me since I was back in California with Sage.

“Want to feel?” Ryan went on and took my hand, placing it against his erection and pressing it in hard. Geez, I wasn’t far off by saying he had a sexual swagger to him; the old Ryan would have never done something so ballsy. Pun intended.

Still, this was wrong. Wasn’t it?

“Ryan,” I said, even though I hadn’t yet removed my hand. I tried to pull my head away, but his mouth was slowly devouring my neck. “We shouldn’t do this.”

“Why?” he murmured against my skin. “This doesn’t have to be anything, Dawn. I’m leaving soon, you’re leaving soon. You know how to fuck.” He brought his mouth to

mine, and I tried to look into his hooded eyes. “Let’s just fuck.”

He certainly wasn’t winning any points for romance, and I really wanted to ask him if that’s the line he used on the chick that he cheated on me with. But I bit my tongue. Actually, he bit my tongue. And as his tongue soothed mine, tasting like warm beer, and the heat started to flare between my legs, I started to wonder why I cared. Why couldn’t this just be a fuck? And who better to do it with than the guy I lost my virginity to? I was at least a little bit curious to see what had changed between us.

“Let’s just fuck,” he said again, as his hands were slipping under my shirt...and, no, I wasn’t wearing a bra. I eased into his touch like he was stroking me with the warmth of old memories. In reality, he was pawing at me like a hungry bear and I was the pot of honey. Despite his sexual boldness, there was something still a bit immature about him.

Twenty-two wasn’t twenty-eight.

I tried to erase the image of Sage from my mind, tried to get myself to stop comparing Ryan to him, or anyone to him. But I couldn’t. Even as Ryan started undoing my corduroys and slipped his hand into my underwear. Even though I moaned into him, because it felt damn good. Even as he dropped his pants and I could make out the outline of his erect dick in the darkness and my hands immediately went for it, Sage was still at the forefront of my mind.

After absently stroking Ryan for a few moments, and as he lay me back into the soft grass, I knew this wasn’t going to happen. I couldn’t just fuck Ryan and be done with it. I couldn’t fuck anyone but Sage, and I knew how goddamn ridiculous that was.

Sage and I went through a lot together in a short period of time. But for the most part, I was the journalist and the fan, and he was the mysterious rock star. I’m not sure any of that had changed. Sure, we had sex, and after Jacob scooped us out of Lake Shasta,

we spent a few weeks together trying to pick up the pieces and be normal people. But even though I'd fallen in love with the man—it wasn't hard to do—he never told me he loved me. In fact, all I knew for a fact was that he didn't love me. We were just...well, I guess what Ryan and I were supposed to be. A fuck. That was it.

But foolishly, somewhere deep inside, I felt like I still had another shot with Sage. A reason to be loyal to him, even though our contact over the last ten months had been extremely limited. He had still invited me to come to Paris with him, fucking Paris! And I was going in a week. I had to at least see how things were going to go between us before I did anything foolish.

And a fuck was just a fuck until it was foolish.

“Ryan,” I said as he kissed my breasts, the grass tickling my ears.

He groaned in return. He was not going to like this.

“Ryan, we need to stop,” I said, pushing myself back on my elbows.

He finally looked up, though I couldn't make out his face in the darkness. Noise from the barn drifted toward us over the field.

“Stop?” he asked, his voice ragged.

I was afraid this was going to get very ugly.

“Sorry,” I told him. “I don't mean to be a tease, it's just...this isn't a good idea.”

Silence fell between us, and I waited with bated breath to hear his response. The music from the barn had changed to The Who's “Pinball Wizard.” Finally he sighed and moved off of me. “Right.”

I sat up and pulled down my shirt. “Sorry,” I apologized again. “I’d probably regret it.”

“Well, that sounds like the old Dawn,” he remarked.

“What?”

He stood up and pulled up his pants, towering over me. “I don’t know, I thought maybe after you’d fucked all those rock stars, you would have been a bit...easier. You know, looser.”

All the heat from between my legs went to my head instead, flamed by rage. “I didn’t fuck a bunch of rock stars,” I spat out defensively.

I could tell he was giving me a wry look. “Sure, Dawn. You go on tour with a band for a few weeks, a band we were obsessed with, and you didn’t end up blowing all of them.”

I only blew one of them! I thought and decided that wouldn’t help my case.

I struggled to my feet and glared at him. “I didn’t sleep with the band or do anything. I covered it like the music journalist that I am.”

“Everyone knows that,” he said. “I just figured hanging out with Hybrid would have made you...well, anyway. I should have known.”

“Ryan,” I said, trying to control my anger. “You don’t know shit. Maybe I’m not sleeping with you because you’re my ex-boyfriend...who fucking cheated on me with some whore!” And finally it was all coming out.

“Well, maybe I cheated on you because...” he trailed off. “You know what? Forget it.

If you want to be a tease, then be a tease. Let's go back inside."

He turned and started off to the barn, to my party. I didn't move. He turned around. "Aren't you coming?"

Hell no. "I want to be alone," I said. I was too angry and confused by what had just happened. "I'm going to stay out here for a bit."

He paused then shrugged, his silhouette visible against the lights coming from the barn. "Suit yourself. I'll just go drink this boner away." He walked off.

"Boner," I muttered under my breath, shaking my head. And I almost slept with him. What the hell had I been thinking?

I turned around and leaned into the fence post. It was too dark now to see anything but the flashing light from the farmhouse, where I knew my dad was watching television with Eric. Suddenly I wanted nothing more than to ditch my own party and hang out with them. They were the ones I was really going to miss when I was gone.

I sighed and decided to call for Moonglow. Horsey hugs always made me feel better. I put my fingers into my mouth and whistled for her, hoping she could hear it over the noise of the party. She whinnied far off in the distance, and I immediately heard her hoofbeats pounding across the field.

Her hoofbeats became louder as she got closer, one of my most favorite sounds in the whole world. So earthy and wild. I couldn't see anything except the blackness.

And the hoofbeats kept coming.

And coming.

And then I started to get a queer feeling in my chest. Her hooves were rumbling, pounding the grass, but I never saw Moonglow. The sound just grew louder and louder, but the horse never appeared.

What the fuck?

“Moonglow?” I called out into the night.

Suddenly the hoofbeats stopped, at what sounded like just a few yards away. Silence cloaked me and so did the breeze that brought with it a horrible, rotten stench.

The tightness in my chest grew, and I felt a wave of prickles come over my body as I tried not to breathe in through my nose.

“Moonglow?” I said softly. I squinted, urging my night vision to kick in, trying to make out her shape in the darkness but seeing nothing.

I only heard her breathing, slowly. But her exhales were rough and wheezing, coarse like sand. Guttural.

I said her name again, my voice shaking slightly, all my worries about Ryan falling away. I was inexplicably afraid of my own horse and afraid of the night and all the things it hid from me. I’d forgotten what fear was like, forgotten that it could find you anywhere.

I swallowed with effort, my throat thick, and stepped through the fence.

I could feel her, her presence, so close. But I couldn’t see a goddamn thing.

Except...

A pair of red eyes.

I sucked in my breath and blinked hard, confident that I couldn't actually be seeing this.

But I was.

Narrow, unblinking eyes, entirely the color of crimson, were boring into me.

Someone laughed, rich and throaty.

And a puff of hot air went into my ear.

I screamed bloody murder and jumped to the side, looking around wildly.

Moonglow was right beside me, her head raised high in the air, the whites of her eyes showing even in the dark. She snorted, agitated, and I tried to make sense of what had happened.

I turned to where I was looking before but the red eyes were gone.

My horse was here, but she'd come from a different direction than the hoofbeats and red eyes. I looked at her dim shape, and she pawed the grass nervously. I knew just how she felt. I really, really hoped that someone had slipped some acid into my beer because I couldn't handle the alternative.

Be careful what you wish for.

I shook the thought out of my head. No. I couldn't even think about that. My nightmare was over, and I had never wished for anything; at least, I never made any sort of deal with the Devil. I wasn't Sage. This had to be put behind me, no matter

how suspicious I sometimes felt that they weren't done with me yet.

I reached out for Moonglow, hoping her warmth would comfort me, but she spooked and quickly turned away, galloping off into the distance. I was alone. Great.

I hurried back through the fence and speedwalked my way to the barn, to my party, to my friends and ex-boyfriend, to music and life and where nothing scary could get at me. I grabbed the first available drink from someone's hand and proceeded to drink my face off.

It was the middle of the night—well, almost morning—when I felt a booze-laden Mel climb into bed with me. She was spending the night, as were most of the guests who were too drunk to drive, but she got my bed while everyone else was free to find available hay in the barn. The night had gone on in a blur of beer and tunes. I hadn't seen Ryan again, but perhaps he was there and I'd been too drunk to tell.

"I'm surprised you didn't find some guy," I mumbled into my pillow as she lay down beside me.

"I did," she replied. "But he was quick. In and out in the back of his shaggin' wagon."

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“Slut,” I said, half joking.

“Groupie,” she retorted. “Which reminds me, I saw Ryan. He looked really disappointed. And I saw you two walk off together...you were gone for awhile. Long enough for him to poke you. What happened?”

I sighed. “Well, he didn’t poke me. That’s what happened.”

“Girl, I have to say I’m glad. He’s still a douche, and as much as you need to get some action, he’s not the dude to get it with. You need someone new.”

“Do I?”

I turned my head on the pillow to look at her. The room was growing lighter by the second as the planet tilted toward the sun. Her eyes were closed, but she managed to raise an eyebrow in response.

I went on, “I just...I don’t know. I know this is going to sound bonkers and all, but...I feel like what Sage and I had isn’t over yet.”

Mel’s eyes snapped open. “Oh, honey. No.”

I nodded. “He invited me to Paris, Mel. To go on tour with his solo band.”

“Yeah, but you said it’s all official now. That Creem wants you to do it and they’re even making a photographer tag along with you.”

I shut my eyes. “I know, I know. But still, he invited me. Mel, he said he misses me. I could tell he meant it.”

She looked up at the ceiling, chewing on her lip. “Dawn, I’m only saying this because I’m your best friend. We’ve been through a lot...more than a lot. Let’s not forget when I flew down to see you guys in San Antonio.” I cringed, remembering the shit I said to her in order to get her away from me and the band and her imminent doom. “And I totally believe that Sage wants to re-shag you, I really do. I saw you guys together; you had a connection. It was there.” She paused. “I just don’t think you should put off other guys just because of a chance with Sage. He is a rock star, Dawn. And the spotlight is all on him now. He’s free of that...deal...he made. Free to move on with his life. Free to do whatever the fuck he wants. I love you, you know that, but he doesn’t.”

“Ouch,” I muttered, pretending my heart wasn’t being swallowed.

“Sorry,” she said quickly, licking her lips. “But you told me what happened. That the fact that he didn’t love you was what saved you all in the end. So I’m glad he didn’t. But it’s true. And if he didn’t love you then, he definitely doesn’t now, when you’ve been apart for so long.”

“But he could,” I said, somewhat pitifully. Even though I was saying these words to my best friend, I still felt stupid. Hoping it. Thinking it.

“He could,” she said slowly. “You’re a hot fox, Dawn Emerson. Hotter than you know. But you’re still a music journalist from a small town in the Pacific Northwest, and he’s a rock star on his first solo tour, finally getting all the recognition he’s always wanted and deserved. And we both know the man; he does deserve it. Do you really think you’d stand a chance, even if he did come around?”

“Again, ouch,” I said, trying to sound like what she said didn’t shank me in a million

different ways.

“I’m sorry, honey,” she said, patting my hand. “But I just don’t want to see you get hurt. I’d rather it come from me now than come from him later. He may be your Sage Knightly, and you may have literally gone through Hell together, but he is still Sage Fucking Knightly. You dig?”

I exhaled through my nose, feeling all sorts of hope and excitement drain out of me. Deep down I knew Mel was right. That she was being the voice of reason here, as she often was when it came to me.

I had been getting ahead of myself with fantasies about what would happen when he saw me again. I thought maybe he’d be waiting at the airport in Paris, a bunch of flowers in his arms. He’d see me get off the plane and come running toward me. He’d scoop me up, and I’d laugh as the flower petals showered down. We’d twirl around and he’d kiss me with so much passion that I knew no time had passed between us at all. The paparazzi would be there, all of the European press, and maybe the New York Times. They’d all be taking our picture, and the next day the headlines would read, “Sage Knightly reunites with long-lost girlfriend, Dawn Emerson.” There would be speculation about me and what exactly had happened between us when I went on the road with Hybrid. We’d then spend our mornings sightseeing as we made our way across Europe, and in the evenings I would stand proudly at the side of the stage, watching him in action as he prowled with his guitar. All the women in the crowd would cry out for him, throwing their underwear up on stage, but he’d only have eyes for me. Maybe one day he’d even propose to me during a live show.

Yes, this is what I had been thinking of—dreaming of—since Sage had invited me to Europe to join him on tour. I tried not to let my imagination run away with me, but letting it run wild made me feel so damn good inside. Delusional, apparently, but good. What girl didn’t fantasize about having a rock star in love with her? And what girl actually had the scant possibility of her fantasies coming true?

Hope was so dangerous at times.

I nestled into the pillow, my heart waging war with my brain, the dream against the logic, my hopes against Mel's words. I knew, knew, knew the reality but...

I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Three

Sage

“Bonjour, monsieur Knightly.”

I looked up from the baggage carousel to see where the breathy, sex kitten voice had come from. There was a tall blonde standing to the side of me, looking me over with a hint of a smile.

“Hola,” I said, then quickly grimaced. I was hungover from all the drinks on the plane and had been slipping into Spanish the moment I stepped on the ground, my brain on overdrive trying to deal with the French language.

Her lips curled in amusement—red lipstick, matte and dark. They would make a wonderful color for an album cover. “Puedo hablar Español, si desea.”

I shook my head and smiled at her. “No, no, English is fine. Sorry, my French is rusty, and my Spanish isn't much better.” I was glad I was wearing my aviator sunglasses so she couldn't see how red my eyes were. She was quite the looker—long legs she showed off in a short shift dress, her platinum blond hair piled high on top of her head. And she knew Spanish, too.

I stuck out my hand. “Sorry, what I really meant to say is yes, I am Sage Knightly.

And you are?"

"Angeline," she said, taking mine in hers. Her hand was soft as silk, light as feathers. "I've been expecting you."

I raised my eyebrows. "Yeah?" I looked around the baggage carousel. Jacob had gone off to get a luggage cart, even though the bags had been going around for ages and none of them were mine. I didn't know where Tricky was, either. We'd both gotten pretty trashed on the plane, though I at least had the sense to quit a few hours before we landed.

"Bien sûr," she said, putting her fingers to her lips and giggling. "Sorry, my French again. I work for the promoters here in France. I'll be with you in Paris and in Nice as well."

If I'd felt better than total shit, I would have attempted a lame joke at all of that sounding very "Nice" (since it's not pronounced the way it's spelled). Instead I nodded and asked, "And what is your job with the promoters?"

She grinned, observing me closely. "I'm making sure your travels here in France go smoothly."

"Isn't that my job, love?" Jacob's rough voice came from behind me. I turned my head to see him pushing the luggage cart, eyeing Angeline suspiciously.

She didn't seem put off by his brusque attitude. I didn't think the French were put off by a lot of things. Then again, I hadn't been in the country for very long.

"You must be Jacob Edwards," she said, eyeing him back. Her lips twitched up into a pleasant smile, though her dark blue eyes were as cold as anything. She stuck out her hand and he took it hesitantly. But once his hand closed over hers, he gave one

hundred percent, his patent bone-crushing squeeze.

It was enough to make Angeline wince, though she still managed to look polite as she withdrew her hand. I notice her wriggling her fingers out at her side. “Nice you meet you.”

Jacob grunted and eyed me. “Your bags here yet?”

I shook my head, pushed my sunglasses on top of my head, and looked at Angeline. “I wasn’t aware that the promoters cared that much about what we thought about the country.”

She tilted her head. “Well, after Jim Morrison came over and sort of made a mess of things, we’ve been a lot more, how you say, vigilant with our touring American bands. And the British, of course. But the Americans are the ones who seem to go the most, well, wild.” Her gaze intensified. “I’ve heard Hybrid was quite the wild band.”

I swallowed hard. This was not the conversation I wanted to be having the moment I stepped off the plane. A sick feeling swirled in my gut, though perhaps it was the excess vodka at thirty-five thousand feet.

Jacob spoke up quickly. “Sage Knightly is not Hybrid. It would be best if any comparisons stopped from here on out.”

She shrugged, unfazed, her eyes fastening on my crotch. “That’s too bad. I like it when boys are wild.”

Right then I knew she would be the easiest lay ever—if I wanted it, of course.

“And who is this babe?” Tricky’s voice broke through the downward spiral of my thoughts. He was sauntering over from the bathroom, his nose jerking back and forth

and he quickly snorted through it. Naturally he had been doing blow; I just couldn't figure out how he had gotten it through the strict French customs. Actually, I could figure it out...I just didn't want to think about it.

Tricky's real name was Richard. But people called him Dick. And then with Nixon's rise and fall, he became Tricky Dick. It helped that he fucked everything that walked (and some that didn't) and was rumored to do tricks with his penis. Not sure if that started before or after the name, but I didn't ask, and contrary to the threesomes and orgies we took part in together, I had never seen his dick bent into any funny shapes, either.

Tricky was an amazing bassist and a fun guy to be around, but aside from pussy-swapping, we weren't exactly close. He was thin yet muscular and quite dark for a black person, with piercing brown eyes and dreadlocks, and the ladies were drawn to his exotic looks as much as they were drawn to mine. But while Tricky dipped into the same drugs as I did—and then some—he wasn't trying to escape anything. He wasn't trying to hide. He was just Tricky, just a musician and a rock star through and through. This tour meant more to him than it did to me.

It was only sometimes, when we were jamming together and his well-honed stubbornness came into play, insisting he knew my songs better than I did, that I missed the past. I missed Noelle, the old bassist for Hybrid, how easy she was to play with. Maybe it had helped that Noelle had sucked more than a few of our dicks, but she had made the ride in Hybrid smooth. She had talent and soul beneath that prickly veneer, and now my dear Noelle was recovering in a mental hospital somewhere in California while I was jet-setting with her replacement.

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It just wasn't fucking fair. I shouldn't have been the one to walk away.

"Sage," Jacob was trying to get my attention. I blinked a few times and realized that Tricky and Angeline had introduced themselves to each other, his dark hand grasping her pale one firmly, her gazing at him coyly, eyelashes practically batting. There was something so mistrustful in her eyes, but deceit was easy to come by in an industry where you could fuck your way to fame. For all I knew—for all I figured—Angeline had a job to do in more ways than one.

I looked to Jacob and was immediately met with disapproval. He'd been watching me, the way that a heron watches a fish, waiting with infinite impatience for me to realize I'd done something wrong. Maybe in his weird, quasi-supernatural way, Jacob could see where my thoughts were. Or maybe he read the self-loathing on my face. Either way, he didn't approve.

"Yeah?" I replied as Tricky deftly reached down to the carousel and plucked my newfound bag from it like a sack of feathers. Jacob took it from him and placed it in the luggage cart before shooting me a quick look.

"Angeline was wondering if she can take us all out for dinner," Jacob went on. I looked to her, and under the harshness of the airport lights, I had the distinct impression that every expression that came across her pretty face was all precalculated. A queer feeling to have but nothing new for me.

"That's fine," I said, though dinner was the farthest thing from my mind. I just really wanted to crawl into my bed at the hotel, go to sleep, and not wake up until this whole thing was over.

Fucking brilliant frame of mind to be in. First solo tour—in Europe—and I was more interested in sleeping.

“Sage, man,” Tricky said, slapping me hard on the back, “try to show some enthusiasm for the beautiful lady here.”

I turned my head away from them before rolling my eyes. I was sure that Tricky would show her enough enthusiasm for both of us later on.

“Well, now that you have your luggage and your ride, Paris awaits,” Angeline said, flicking her wrist toward the doors leading out of the airport.

We followed her sharp little Marilyn Monroe walk out into the pick-up area, where a ton of funny-looking cabs and giant black Town Cars were all vying for space, honking like their lives depended on it. Even though the sky was a heavy, even grey, I pulled my shades down. I just wanted to protect my eyes and shield off the creeping headache that I could feel coming on, but maybe instinctually I knew shit was about to go down.

I was bombarded with bodies.

Jacob, Tricky, and I were halfway to a white limousine that Angeline was standing triumphantly beside when people surrounded me from all sides and started rushing me. I could barely get a glimpse of the individual faces within the crowd—mostly males in their teens and early twenties with some hardcore females thrown in there—all of them yelling “Sage” in a French accent, along with a bunch of other shit I couldn’t understand. They waved the album cover of Sage Wisdom at me, along with their pens and markers. Some had T-shirts. A few had Hybrid merchandise. I tried not to look at those pieces.

“Everyone step back!” Jacob boomed, pushing me behind him. I was taller than my

manager and in better shape, but Jacob had a way of making people listen to him. Before I learned he used to be immortal, I chalked it up to his fists and a pocketknife. Now I had to wonder if he didn't have trace residues of Hoodoo in him.

The crowd backed up reluctantly, but they didn't shut up and they didn't stop waving their stuff at me. I knew I should have felt flattered by all of this, but I was just overwhelmed and shaken to the core. All these people were here to see me...they met me at the fucking airport. All of them. For me. And why? How? It just didn't make sense. In the States I had my fans, but they hung around after the show by the back door, loitering quietly in the alleyways. But this...I was completely unprepared.

"Sage!" one young girl with a severe haircut squeezed past Jacob and thrust her Hybrid T-shirt into my hands. It was obvious she'd never worn it; it was white and in showroom condition. "Please, Sage, sign it! My friend in America got Robbie and Mickey to sign it, but she never saw you."

I stared down at the shirt. Mickey's signature still looked fresh, and I felt like I had been kicked straight in the gut. He was dead and I was here.

I absently scrawled my name on it with a fat marker, my gaze falling on the crowd around me, and my headache in full force, the pumping blood drowning out their cries. This tour was a mistake. The album was a mistake. Everything was a mistake.

"Come on," Jacob said, taking my arm roughly and yelling at everyone to back off and that I'd see them all at the show in two nights. He led me right over to the limo and thrust me into the backseat, which smelled of stale smoke and whiskey. Tricky, Jacob, and Angeline slid in after me, but I was already reaching for the small bar and pouring myself a glass.

"Easy now," Jacob warned, but there was no stopping me. I downed the burning liquid in one gulp. I know I'd been a rock star before, but I had never felt it like this.

Hybrid's fame had always been...spread out. It was placed on the group as a whole. We dealt with it as it came and we made it work. And when things got really weird, whether with crazy fans or super groupies (the demonic GTFOs, or "Get the Fuck Outs" as we called them, didn't count), it was always Robbie who handled it. He got the fan mail. He handled most of the interview requests, the autographs, the perks, and the downfalls of fame. He shouldered it all and had done it well.

Now I was in Robbie's role. I was the rock star. And everyone wanted piece of me, a taste of these damaged goods.

By the time we reached Paris, I was pleasantly buzzed and no longer wanting sleep. Angeline tried to point out the sites to me, rattling off the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre and the Arc de Triomphe and a whack of other places with frou-frou names, but I wasn't interested. I just wanted to keep the buzz going, to enter the land of "I don't give a shit" and "come back later."

Luckily the mob that greeted me at the airport wasn't here. Apparently our limo driver took a few detours in order to lose any possible paparazzi, and I was checked in at the hotel under the name Mr. Underhill. I let Jacob handle all the paperwork while I took my bag upstairs to my room. We had dinner reservations at the hotel restaurant at eight (they liked to eat late here) and until then I just needed time to myself, time to think, time to plan how I was going to handle all of this.

Because suddenly, as I gazed out of the window with a bottle of the finest French champagne in hand, taking in the sights of the grey streets with meandering tourists and the rows of similar houses and the clouds that hung lower than a fat man's balls, it finally hit me. My psyche had pushed past the feelings of guilt and unworthiness and had found a ripe new fruit to feast on—the fact that I had no fucking idea what I was doing.

None.

The shows I'd played in the States before this—that was nothing. A few appetizers before the main course. Now we were all the way on another continent, just me and Tricky and Jacob. I had a drummer and another guitarist and a keyboardist I had yet to meet and new roadies and sound techs and whoever the fuck else that would be joining us on the tour. I had a voice that was feeling rough and apparently legions of fans who actually gave a fuck. Who actually expected something from me. This wasn't America, where people watched you politely for a few moments while you opened up for The Band. This was the place where I had the chance to fail—to fail—all over again.

I took a long swig from the bottle and plopped backward onto the bed. I could feel the jet lag creeping toward me, extending its fingers, wanting to pull me under. I had to resist. I had the dinner. I had to stay awake.

“Sage,” a voice called out, sweet and clear, like a meadow brook.

I didn't think much of the voice. I often heard voices. Usually they were screams. The sounds of my friends dying, echoing in my mind.

But then I heard it again.

“Sage.”

I let the bottle carefully drop onto the floor and slowly raised my head off the mattress. The door to the bathroom was open just a crack. A tap was dripping.

There was someone in there.

The walls seemed to throb as I slowly eased myself off the bed. The champagne bubbles were a distant memory, and my tongue felt like it was coated with a layer of sand. I walked a few steps, one, two, three, and stopped outside the door, holding my

breath.

I waited a few seconds. Counting. Listening.

Drip. Drip.

Was that the sound of someone breathing? Or was that my own blood rushing through?

I gently pushed the door open with my splayed fingers and prepared for the worst.

The bathroom was empty. There was a porcelain toilet and something I assumed was a bidet, a tiny bathtub, and a mirror over the ornately carved sink.

And on the mirror, written in red, was Be Careful What She Wished For.

I stared at it dumbly for a few moments. My first thought was not of fear or my mind being fucked thoroughly but whether it was written in blood or red lipstick or red nail polish. I leaned forward, still too wary to set foot on the tiles, and peered at it closer. It was lipstick, the thick matte kind that Angeline was sporting earlier, but far lighter, brighter.

All of which was totally unimportant. Because someone had left this message for me...hadn't they?

I exhaled sharply and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, the message was still there.

Be Careful What She Wished For.

There was something about it, the way it registered in me. But I wasn't sure why I

was having a connection to it, other than the fact that it was written on my bathroom mirror.

I made my way over to the champagne bottle, drank half of it in a few fizzy chugs, and picked up the phone, dialing the front desk. I tried to explain what had happened, but it was too complicated for their understanding of English, so I just told them I needed to see the manager. Then I asked to be connected to Jacob's room.

He answered on first ring. "Yellow?"

"You need to come to my room—now," I said, slamming down the phone.

I paced back and forth for a few minutes, eyeing the bathroom, until Jacob arrived, knocking at my door.

I let him in and pointed at the bathroom. "Take a look at that."

Jacob went over and poked his head in, looking from side to side. "Your bathroom is bigger than mine. Wanker."

"The mirror, Jacob," I said, gritting my teeth. I plucked up the bottle and guzzled the rest of it.

He looked back at the mirror, nodded, and said, "Huh. Graffiti."

"Is that it?" I couldn't tell if he didn't care or was being particularly evasive.

He opened his mouth to say something, his crooked bottom teeth showing, just as the hotel manager appeared in the doorway, looking blasé.

I quickly explained to him what had happened and let him see for himself. The

manager looked at us apologetically and pressed his palms together.

“You must excuse me, monsieur Knightly. We, ah, have a housecleaner here who can sometimes be a little...strange. She hasn't done something like this in a while.”

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I studied him, trying to see if he was telling the truth or not. I wasn't sure why he'd lie, but it was hard to know with the French.

"It's in English, though, mate," Jacob said, pointing at it. "Does your loony housecleaner know English, too?"

The manager shrugged. "Perhaps. I will talk to her about this. Like I said, she hasn't done anything like this for a long time."

"Well, what else has she done?" I asked, folding my arms across my chest and trying to look slightly more intimidating than a jet-lagged, scruffy-faced musician.

The manager's eyes were blank as he responded. "Nothing for you to worry about. She won't do anything like this again. My apologies to both of you. I'll have someone else clean it for you and send up a few more bottles of champagne for the inconvenience."

"No bother," Jacob said, grabbing a white washcloth and rubbing it with soap before running the tap over it. He glanced at me over his shoulder. "No bother about the housecleaner. I'll take care of this. You may still send up the free champagne, though."

The manager nodded and left, closing the door behind him. I watched as Jacob smeared the red against the mirror so it looked like a wash of blood. Then he rubbed the wet cloth in harder and the marks faded away.

"You're making too big a deal out of this," Jacob said, almost as an aside. Still, there

was strain apparent on his forehead and a strange depth to his tone. “So someone wrote this on your mirror. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It could mean something,” I said softly.

Jacob turned to face me, tossing the wet cloth into the bathtub. “Dawn will be here tomorrow.”

I swallowed thickly. “I know.”

“You’re worried about her,” he said, angling his chin down.

“I am now,” I said. I sat down on the edge of the bed. “What if that was meant for her? Be careful what she wished for? The whole deal...my whole deal...was because I wished for something. What if Dawn did the same thing?”

He squinted. “What makes you think that?”

“Something the demons said to us at Lake Shasta...” I said, the memories pouring through me like wet concrete. “Alva, as we were pulling away from her, yelled at us, at Dawn, to be careful what she wished for. They were her parting words to us. It had to mean something. You heard it, too, didn’t you?”

His gaze never wavered. “There was a lot going on at the time, boy, but I don’t think the two are related. You heard the manager. Whacky old loon. Likes to write on people’s mirrors.”

“And isn’t that kind of disturbing in and of itself?”

There was a knock at the door, causing me to jump. Shit. I was going to hell in a handbasket.

Jacob quickly opened the door and accepted the bottle of champagne from the bellhop. He shut the door and, once he caught the salivating look on my face, popped the bottle open.

“I suppose you deserve this,” he said, handing me the champagne bottle. “Now take it easy. I know you’re feeling like a bit of a nutter at the moment, but we still have this tour to do and we still have this dinner tonight. I don’t know what Angeline’s angle is, other than that she wants to sleep with rock stars, but she still has a lot of sway with the French promoters, and if we want the tour in this country to go right and for us to get paid on time, we have to play nice. I like it a lot less than you do, but it’s something we just have to do.”

“And after this country?” I asked, feeling the bubbles go straight to my head. My father would beat me over the head for drinking such an expensive and—most importantly—sissy drink, but whatever did the job was fine by me.

“It’s Italy—Rome, of course—then, if our visas come in time, we’re flying to Prague. That’s your biggest show, sold out right away. I think you have a really large fanbase there, so if we can get those visas in time, we’re definitely not going to miss that opportunity. After that, West Germany for Munich and Cologne, rounding off in Dublin and London. I’m still seeing if we can squeeze in Norway, Sweden, and Finland.” My eyes must have looked unfocused because he added, “We’ll go over it at dinner. Just...keep your bloody wits about you, Sage; you’re the unfortunate star of the show here and if you don’t go on, no one does.”

He took the other bottle of champagne for himself and went for the door. He opened it and paused. “If it makes you feel any better, Sage, try and think about the girl. But only if you’re in a good place. I like her, Sage. I know you do, too. Don’t let her trip out here be for nothing. See you downstairs in an hour.”

He closed the door and left. My thoughts wanted to drift to Dawn. I drank the whole

bottle and silenced them.

Dinner was hell. Well, maybe it wasn't that bad; after all, I'd had my own personal glimpse into Hell. But it took a fuckload of effort to keep my eyes open. Tricky, Jacob, and Angeline went on and on about the shows in Paris and Nice (we had a day to ourselves on the French Riviera, which was good, nice even) and about the musicians I'd meet tomorrow, the guys who would form my touring band. I'd approved them all months ago, but had already forgotten their names or who they sounded like. I wasn't worried about that anyway; I was worried about myself and how well I'd perform.

Angeline kept teasing me with her smooth foot under the table, and I went on pretending it wasn't happening as we dined on escargots and filet mignon in red sauce and things that were made with the highest fat percentage possible. I was lucky my diet had mainly been alcohol up to this point because the French cuisine seemed like murder for anyone who had to stay in shape.

I don't know if it was the copious bottles of table wine or the brandy that Jacob ordered for the table after dinner, but pretty soon I was feeling all right. I was flying. It was like the day—and let's say my life—never even happened and I had no cares, no worries, no fears. No guilt. Between Angeline's toes working their way up my inner thigh and Tricky passing me a tiny vial of coke, under the table was where everything was happening.

"I love France," I muttered as I stood and headed to the washrooms. I went in, took a leak, did a line, and tried not to look at myself in the mirror. I was about to leave, my head swimming and my heart pumping, when the door swung open and Angeline stepped in.

She swiftly locked the door behind her and put her fingers to her lips.

“Don’t tell anyone,” she said in that breathy, flirty accent of hers, “but I have quite the crush on you.”

I cocked a brow and grinned lazily as the drugs settled over me like dust. “I think everyone knows.”

“They don’t know anything,” she said. “But you’re about to. Do you want to do it here or in your room? Or I could do both. I can do a lot of things...want me to show you?”

She took a step toward me and started unbuttoning her white silk blouse, her eyes glinting feverishly, a wicked smile on her face. “Unless, of course, you can’t. But I don’t recall Sage Knightly having a girlfriend.”

My smile struggled. I didn’t. That was true. There was Dawn, of course, Dawn who I’d be seeing tomorrow. There were also scores of other chicks, but I remembered barely any of their names. And I wasn’t even with Dawn. I wanted her here because I wanted her, but now she was coming to Europe on official business. We weren’t together; even if I thought it was something I deserved, we weren’t an item. We...I had no idea what we were.

And I didn’t know where Dawn stood in all of this, what I meant to her. Because as I stood there in that black-and-white-tiled bathroom, Angeline displaying her creamy white breasts for me, all I did know was that Dawn had left me. She was with me in Redding, she was with me in the aftermath, and then she left. The only other person on the planet who knew exactly what I had gone through, who went to Hell and back with me and lived to tell about it, went her own way, back to her own state and her own life. She never gave me a second glance.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man so disappointed about seeing a woman’s breasts before,” Angeline pouted. “You are unattached, aren’t you?”

Yes. I was unattached. And the ferocity of those feelings, realizing how badly it affected me that she had left, was hitting me hard. Harder than it should have after drinking a shitload and doing blow.

There was only one way out of this one. More blow. And from Angeline.

I grinned at her. “The only thing I want attached, baby, is your mouth on my dick.”

The words, the lies—they came so easily. I barely felt disgusted.

She smiled and went for my belt buckle, slowly undoing it. I licked and sucked at her breasts, generating a shaky moan, before she dropped to her knees on that bathroom floor and undid my fly. She brought out my dick, thick and strong and dying for release, and proceeded to use her very talented tongue and lips to bring me to a hot climax.

After that, we ditched the dinner party and made our way back to my bedroom, where I fucked her until she couldn’t take it anymore. She let me know by raking her nails painfully down my back and biting my neck until I swore I was bleeding. Luckily I was numb inside.

French chicks—they were a little bit psycho, but they made for good dessert.

The next morning I woke up alone with twitching nerves and a massive hangover.

I also hated myself.

Chapter Four

Dawn

“I hope you come back,” Eric’s voice broke through my thoughts as I stuffed the last remaining Creem magazine inside my messenger bag, which was already full of travel necessities.

I gasped, turned around, and saw him standing awkwardly in my bedroom doorway.

“How long have you been standing there, you creeper?” I asked him. I forced a smile, as if it would temper my racing heart. All morning I’d been jumpy for no real reason and had to chalk it up to pre-departure nerves. My flight was leaving from Seattle this evening, and we had to drive the three hours to the airport.

Eric still stood at the door, his dark eyes stuck to mine. Every day he was looking more and more like my father, more and more handsome, more and more...accepted. Normal. And every day I feared that the Tourette’s would come back for my younger brother and he’d be bullied, alone, and miserable once again.

“Please come back, Dawn,” he went on, still not moving. A hot breeze blew in through my open curtains and made his long white shirt billow around his skinny frame like a sail.

I tucked my hair behind my ears—unruly as always—and crossed my arms across my chest.

“Of course I’m coming back, you dope. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because,” he said slowly, his eyes slowly raking over the room. He took in the stacks of vinyl, the music magazines, the posters on the walls and ceiling—The Who, Led Zeppelin, Bad Company, Hendrix, Rod Stewart, and, yes, Hybrid. Still, always, Hybrid. Immortal. The few living things on this earth that could live forever, even beyond their own ends—bands, groups, music. They were all vampires through art.

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He cleared his throat and his gaze went back to me again, now pitiful. “You’re done with school. What’s left for you here?”

I cocked my head and snorted in disbelief. “Eric? The hell? You’re left for me here. Dad. Mel. There’s plenty.”

“You’re going to fall in love—”

My forehead scrunched, afraid of what he was going to say. Was it that obvious about Sage?

“—with Europe,” he finished, much to my relief. “And you won’t want to come back.”

“I might fall in love with Europe, but I’m definitely coming back.” I smiled at him, but he didn’t return it. In fact, he looked positively morose, his shaggy hair falling into his eyes, mouth permanently downturned. I hadn’t seen him this way in a long time.

It didn’t help that his gaze was almost...fearful.

I ignored the shudder that wanted to run down my spine and walked over to him, slinging my bag over my shoulder. I put my hand on his arm and squeezed it.

“Hey, bro, crazy monkey,” I teased gently as I searched his face for any signs that it would lighten up. “I’ll be back in less than a month. I’ll call you every chance I get. I’ll write you cool postcards. Maybe some nudie ones I’ll pick up from the Moulin

Rouge.”

I thought he'd at least grimace at the idea of his older sister mailing him postcards with nude foreign women on them, but instead his eyes met mine. They'd never looked so dark.

“You feel it, don't you?” he whispered so low that I found myself leaning in to hear him. “You feel...her.”

My throat felt thick and the room turned into a stuffy tomb, despite the breeze blowing in from the hayfields. “Feel who?” I whispered back, trying to hide the tremor in my words. “What are you talking about?”

He stared at me, thinking intently, his eyes narrowing. Then they relaxed. “It doesn't matter. Just...come back. That's all. Just promise you'll come back.” He looked to the floor, to the tops of his scuffed Keds. “I hate it when you leave.”

I wanted to keep questioning him about what I “felt” and who she was. But the sharp horn from my father's new old truck blasted through the house, and I could hear him yelling for me to get a move on.

“I'm coming back,” I assured him and pulled him into a quick hug. Our relationship had been very parent/child since our mom died, but now that his Tourette's had (magically?) subsided and Dad was more of a dad, I was back into the older sister role. Eric had grown more confident, too, and with that came girls and dating, and with that came secrets. Space between us. It was jarring to see him acting like the worried five-year-old who used to run into my room at night when he had nightmares.

“Now come on before Dad has a coronary and I have to drive myself to the airport,” I said, leading him away from the room and down the stairs. We left the house, and as I

saw my dad behind the wheel of the truck, staring at us impatiently, I turned back in the driveway, squinting at the sun, looking the house over. The paint was peeling, blue in some places where the years of summer heat hadn't bleached it, and though my dad had started fixing the house up, the screen door still had a hole at the bottom of it where our old cat, Ratcatcher, had run through it once, and our name on the mailbox still said "merson" instead of "Emerson," because the "e" had rusted away years ago.

I don't know why I was taking it all in like that, smiling softly at the house that held more bad memories than good, but maybe my brother's sober demeanor and that creepy, God-fearing look in his eyes did make me wonder if I would see it again.

Of course I would, though. There was no reason to think otherwise. No reason at all. No matter how many times I wracked my brain over the last ten months to find the source of the guilt I felt, the feeling that my time was running out, that I was in debt to invisible creditors, I hadn't come up with anything yet.

I didn't owe anyone anything and I didn't owe anyone to anything.

"Dawn, sweetie," my dad said, his voice gentle, like he didn't want to disturb me. "We're going to be late, and we still have to pick up Melanie."

I turned and grinned at him and, by doing so, pushed all those dark thoughts and worries deep down. With my suitcase already in the back of the truck, I climbed in the cab, my knees smashed up against the back of Eric's seat, and we took off down the dusty road, the windows rolled down and the air smelling sweet.

I shot the house one last look, willing myself to stay positive—I was going to Europe, I was writing for Creem again, I would see Sage, my rock god Sage—when I saw something that took the breath out of my lungs. There was something on the roof of the house. The shape of a woman, completely in black.

In the one second that I realized what I was seeing, the figure jumped. Disappeared from sight. And in the next second, there was no one there and the house was being covered by the dust clouds behind us. I kept staring and staring, frozen, hoping that I'd get an answer.

But I didn't. I looked to the front seat, at Eric tuning the radio, at my father chewing on a piece of hay as he often did, and the sun was bright, and the future was off in the distance, and I figured I couldn't have seen a woman jump off my roof because that just didn't make sense.

You feel...her.

My mind didn't want my brother to be making up crazy mumbo-jumbo, it didn't want me to think that my brother was turning into my mother and not making sense, so I imagined her, whoever she was.

I chewed on my lip and took deep breaths through my nose until I felt relaxed. It wasn't until we picked up Melanie and then another hour after that, when we all started discussing music and Europe (my dad had been to Spain when he was younger and had apparently been going through a Hemingway phase), that I made peace with what I thought I saw. Demonic horses in the night. Women in black jumping off roofs. My mind made it all up. Manifestations of guilt, plus too many sessions at the bong.

Right?

By the time we pulled into the Seattle airport parking lot, all my trepidation was gone and I was actually excited.

"I'm going to miss you, bitch," Mel said as she squeezed my waist just before I went through the security team that was going through everyone's bags. Eric and my dad

had already said their good-byes; Eric's was surprisingly upbeat, like whatever darkness he had in him earlier was banished, and my father was nervous but proud. I could tell from how tall he was standing and how he kept brushing imaginary dirt and grass off his finest denims.

"It's just three weeks," I told Mel again, prying her arms off of me. "And you know I'll write."

She wiped at her nose. "I know, but I wish I could be there."

I smiled. "Most people wish they could go to Europe to follow around a hot rock star."

"And not just any hot rock star," she said, her tone growing serious. My stance stiffened, prepared for her to bring up the whole "he doesn't love you, you're going to get hurt, be careful" spiel, but instead she put her cocoa hand on my freckled shoulder and said, "Have fun, Dawn. Enjoy every second of it. And don't you dare forget about me."

I told her that would be impossible, and then I waved at them, committing their faces to memory, and went on through to my new world.

The flight from Seattle to New York was pretty uneventful. Since it was only the second time on a plane for me, I was still extremely nervous, convinced that we would all plummet to our deaths. The only thing that saved me was the Bloody Marys I downed—the inebriation combined with the empty middle seat meant that I actually got some sleep on the red-eye.

That said, I knew I was going to meet my assigned photographer looking like a hot mess, and there wasn't much I could do about it. As soon as we unloaded at JFK in the wee hours of the morning, I ran for the nearest restroom and tried to wake up. I

pulled my wild red hair into a ponytail, washed off yesterday's makeup, and put on a thick coat of beauty cream before putting on some foundation and mascara, but even that wasn't enough to make my face catch up to the new time zone. I sighed at my bleary-eyed reflection and ran my toothbrush through my mouth. I didn't know why I was trying to impress some photographer anyway—he wasn't Sage.

In fact, his name was Max, and that's about as much as I knew. At first, the whole me-going-to-Europe thing was just Sage's idea, but then somehow it became an assignment from Creem, and this time they wanted someone else to document the adventure. I guess I couldn't blame them for wanting someone to corroborate this next story, but I did feel slighted. I really thought I proved myself with the story about the fall of Hybrid and all the other concerts I covered and musicians I'd interviewed since then, but I was afraid that Creem still thought of me as some flaky girl who lucked out.

And I mean really lucked out.

I left the restroom, my brain trying to remember what the French word for toilets was (la toilettes? W.C.?), and headed for my gate. The flight to Paris left in an hour, and I had been warned that these international flights boarded really early. By the time I reached the gate, I was sweating up a storm and my shoulder was feeling carved in by the strap on my messenger bag. Served me right for trying to cram too much stuff into it. I definitely didn't need a whole tub of Vaseline on the plane for the dry air.

At the gate, the first class section was already having their tickets taken by trim, well-groomed women in pale blue skirt suits and jaunty hats. Their teeth seemed impossibly white, like something out of a Colgate commercial, and they had this aura of grace about them. Were all French women like this? I looked down at my corduroy bell-bottoms with frayed ends and my polyester tank top I had scooped up at the Salvation Army. I didn't stand a chance if any of these chic French chicks decided to go for Sage.

“Excuse me,” I heard a southern accent drawl. “Are you Dawn Emerson?”

I brought my cloudy head out of my hate bubble for French flight attendants and looked beside me. There was a tall dude—like as tall as Sage, if not taller—standing beside me and looking me over. He was built like a brick house—not fat, but just large...broad shoulders, really wide chest. He was wearing a denim shirt with sharp points and embroidery, the kind that cowboys wear, and jeans with a massive bronze belt buckle. A cigarette hung lazily from his full lips, and his eyes were a bright emerald green and hooded in that way that you couldn’t tell if he was stoned or just naturally relaxed. His hair was an orange brown, and a few freckles were scattered across his nose and grooved forehead. I couldn’t tell how old he was really, maybe my age, maybe late twenties, and I just blinked as I tried to bring everything up to speed.

“I’m Dawn,” I said slowly, instinctively offering the man my hand. He eyed it, smiled to himself, then sandwiched my outstretched hand between both of his and gave it two quick and hard pumps.

“Max,” he said, still grinning. It was a nice smile, though it had a condescending jackass tinge to it. “I’m your photographer. They did tell you about me, didn’t they? Creem, I mean.”

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I nodded, feeling stupid. “Of course. Sorry. I just got off the plane from Seattle, and I’m not sure how I’m dealing with five hours of sleep, let alone the time change.”

“You haven’t traveled to the East Coast before, have you little lamb?”

If he wasn’t so darn cute and if that accent wasn’t so darn infectious, I would have frowned my proud feminist eyebrows at his “little lamb” endearment. “No, first time.”

“Shucks,” he said, scratching at his ginger sideburns and giving me a sly glance. “Looks like we have a novice on our hands. Well, little lamb, I promise I’ll be gentle with you.”

“Too bad I can’t say the same,” I retorted, straightening up. It wasn’t that Max was hitting on me, but I didn’t want him thinking I was some naïve little flower, either. Or a lamb.

He grinned and nodded at the perfectly poised airline crew. “We’ll be boarding next. Got us seats in the smoking section.”

I looked down at my ticket. Back of the plane, he was right. I was too sleep-deprived to notice that before. I didn’t know if I could handle another flight, let alone one with this Max fellow blowing smoke in my face, but I guess I had no choice.

We got on the plane, shuffling past the refined people in first class, and made our way to the very back. The air back here stunk, despite the fact that the whole airplane shared the same air. I felt like the cool kid sitting at the back of the bus, especially as

Max sat down beside me, taking the dreaded middle seat and granting me the window. Not that I hadn't been assigned it anyway, but I could totally have seen Max pulling some kind of ranking or seniority bullshit about it. Instead he was strangely gentlemanly.

And, as the plane filled up with more people and we started talking, I discovered that there was something strangely gentlemanly about him in general. From his "little lamb" to his "shucks" and "I reckon," I felt like the redheaded giant was transplanted straight from the late 50s. His Elvis-like wave at the front of his head didn't help, either.

"So tell me about your job," I said to Max, shoving peanuts into my mouth from the little silver packet that the flight attendant had handed me. I chewed anxiously—even though we were at cruising altitude, I still felt nervous, both because of the whole flying in the air thing, as well as my new company.

He was flipping through a magazine, and the cigarette dangled from his lips as he spoke. "Not really much to say. Loved photography as a kid, used to want to take photos for that National Geographic magazine before I discovered rock and roll. You know, I play bass in a band back in Brooklyn."

Nowadays it seemed any guy who had escaped the Vietnam War was playing in a band somewhere. I raised my brow. "Oh yeah, you guys any good?"

"Sex City," he said. He noted my blank expression and went on, "The name of the band. And no, we suck. Wickedly. So I stick to my day job. Sometimes it has its perks."

"Like going to Europe?"

He shrugged. "I've been a lot. I've been everywhere. I come from the south, but I've

traveled the world. Many times.”

I leaned in closer, examining his eyes. They were such a vivid bright green, almost as nice as Sage’s grey-green ones. He didn’t have any lines around them and his heavy lids suggested youth, but there was something...wise...about them all the same. Like he’d seen a lot.

“How old are you?” I questioned.

He stared back at me and wiggled his brows a bit. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“It’s why I asked.”

“I’m ageless,” he said after a beat and a puff of smoke came out of his mouth, dancing toward my face. He went back to his magazine. “And you’re infamous.”

I gasped and a piece of peanut flew out of my mouth. “I’m infamous?”

He pretended not to notice the flying food and just nodded. “Sure are. After what you experienced with Hybrid...no journalist has ever covered quite that story.”

“The collapse of the band at the start of their stardom?” I asked, my go-to line.

He shook his head slightly and popped up the ashtray on the armrest between us. “Plenty of writers have covered that. I mean the whole thing about the band doing the deal with the Devil and the Devil coming back to take what was his. And by band, I mean Sage. I know it was all Sage’s dealings.”

I studied him for a few moments, unsure if this burly man was pulling my leg or not as he stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. “You know I made that all up, right? It’s a metaphor.”

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. “You’ve got quite the imagination, then.” I wasn’t sure if I saw disappointment on his brow or what, but there was definitely something there, something else he wanted to say.

I bit the bullet. “So tell me if my backwoods instincts are correct or not, but you’re not really here to cover Sage Knightly’s solo tour, are you?”

He smirked appreciatively. “You insulting my photo-taking skills now? Of course I’m here for that. Why else would I be here?” I could have sworn his gaze intensified, like I’d added fuel to a fire.

“Because...I’m a fluke.”

“A what?”

I sighed and started popping more peanuts into my mouth, munching them hard before I spoke. I hadn’t admitted this to anyone yet and wasn’t sure why I was picking Max as the first one. “I’m a fluke. A fraud. I shouldn’t have been picked to go on the road with Hybrid. I had barely written anything, I was still in school—I was a nobody. But it was like my dream came true.”

He cocked his head. “But not quite.”

“No. Not quite. But still. I lived to tell about it—me, Dawn Emerson, ex-rodeo queen and music junkie. And now I’m doing this all over again. Sage...Sage is hot stuff. He’s dynamite right now. I hear his songs all over the radio, I read articles about him written by other people. Any reporter worth her salt would love to cover this story, his first solo tour in fucking Europe, and yet I’m the one doing it.”

“Well, you two have a special connection,” he said almost softly.

I frowned at that, but he quickly continued, “And you’re in good with Jacob Edwards. The Cobb, man. He’s...legendary. It just so happens that both of those men want you around. And I’m sure they believe in your writing, too.”

“But they aren’t Creem,” I said.

“I see,” he said. “So you think I’m your babysitter.”

I nodded and looked down at my hands. “I may have been the only person to cover the end of Hybrid, but I don’t think they appreciated my...um...metaphors. You might be here to keep me on track without even knowing it.”

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. “I reckon you’re worrying over nothing, little lamb. In fact, I reckon you like to worry. And when things are going well, you worry even more. I’m here to take photographs. You’re here to write. Right now that’s the truth, so we might as well enjoy it while we can.” He opened one eye at me and added, “We’ve got a six-hour flight and time change to prepare for. I’ll see you when we land.” Then he closed his eye again and seemed to drift off to sleep, just like that.

I stared at him, dumbfounded and lost for a few moments, before I took out a magazine and started to read it absently, stealing the occasional glimpse at him. What a weird duck. He was hard to read but at the same time seemed to know me. He at least figured out that I loved to worry, especially when everything was going great. Maybe I had worrywart written on my face. That or pessimist.

While Max slept through the whole flight—the lucky bastard—I divided my time between staring at the Atlantic Ocean far below my window, dozing off, and writing in my notebook. It was clean and new and perfect, and I had my favorite pens and pencils on me. Some reporters carry one notebook for everything they cover, but I liked to divide mine up, one for each band. The Hybrid notebook had been full. It was

tucked away in a drawer in my rickety desk back at home. This notebook had Sage's name scrawled on the first page, and the rest was blank.

I treated it like a clean slate and started writing down all my impressions of Sage's music. It was hard for me to separate the music from the man, but once I started, it got easier. Sage had only released one album, *Sage Wisdom* (yeah, a terribly redundant name), so I went through each song in my head, playing each one like my brain was a jukebox on demand, and jotted down my thoughts and impressions, which could shape the basis for the whole article.

I fell in love all over again. It was practically impossible to be objective. But that's what his music had always done to me—I couldn't help that the man was just as enigmatic, just as layered, as his music was.

When Sage Knightly was the key guitarist and songwriter for Hybrid, you could hear parts of his past and personality coming out through the songs. But Hybrid also had the input of Robbie Oliver and the late Mickey Brown and a record label that always expected more. As much as Sage tried to push the envelope, they still remained a slightly edgier, fuzzier version Led Zeppelin. They were a band with chunky swagger.

Sage's solo stuff, on the other hand, really broke away from that. That wasn't to say that it wasn't loud. It was loud. It had a palpable thickness and was steel-cut and hard as concrete and a million other euphemisms for his dick. And there was the distortion and unease that came from pedal effects and layers of riffs upon layers of riffs. But mixed in with the faint horn and string sections that played tribute to his half-Mexican heritage, there was an underlying sadness. This wasn't an album of hope but one of despair and yearning and frustration. Sage opened himself up on the record to the dirty things that hid deep in his soul.

At least, that's what I got out of it. I had to wonder what had gone on in all the

months we were apart—I knew where my head was, but where was his? How was he dealing with the aftermath of the Devil’s contract? Another pang of guilt came up and bit me on the heart. I’d never assumed that Sage had trouble dealing with what happened, but the album was suggesting otherwise.

When we finally landed in Paris, Max waking up to the all-too-friendly touch of the flight attendant, the guilt was still weighing heavily on my shoulders. I suppose Max saw this because he was being upbeat and decided to school me at the last minute on my French. The distraction didn’t work, though; it only made me more anxious. Here I was, landing in motherfucking Paris, on assignment, about to see Sage Knightly for the first time in too long.

“You okay?” Max asked as we stood crammed up against each other in the aisle, waiting for people to get off the plane.

I nodded quickly, running my teeth over my lips and wishing I had lip balm. “Tired,” I said, leaving a ton of other adjectives out of it. “Je suis fatigue.”

“Très bien,” Max said, but I could feel his eyes boring down on me, taking me in and sussing me out. I wished he would stop. I just wanted to get off the plane and get this over with. My pulse couldn’t take it anymore. My nerves were in a blender.

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Each step I took off the plane and through the airport, my senses bombarded with the smell of cigarettes and strong cologne and the sound of rapid-fire French, the more my legs felt like they were made of melting snow. Each step was a step closer to our meeting. Each step meant more sweat trickling down the back of my sore neck.

I felt like I was minutes away from being committed by the time Max and I cleared the overly suspicious French customs and stood waiting for our bags at baggage claim. I had to admit, I was really glad that Max was there with me for that. To them, we were traveling together, and in his perfect French, he had all the right answers for the customs officials. I could only smile and nod and repeat my name. I knew they all spoke English, but it seemed to anger them to do so.

The funny thing was—and I know I was thinking of too many romantic movies—but I really had expected Sage to be there, running toward me, ready for an embrace. Or at least, you know, be there. But he wasn't. There wasn't even anyone with a sign that said "Emerson" or "Creem" or even "Elvis-Wannabe from Sex City." As Max and I trundled our suitcases out of baggage claim, we were met by no one.

"Well, this is a nice welcome," I muttered as I watched people happily greeting one another. Max only nodded and stuck another cigarette in his mouth. I sighed and glanced over at the washrooms. They were called W.C.s here, I was right.

I excused myself and quickly tried to pretty myself up in the washroom in case Sage was still on his way or stuck in traffic or something. I not-so-subtly watched the French travelers lean over the sinks and dot lipstick on their lips and cheeks and smooth flyaways with mists of Evian water. I had so much to learn and fancied I might even go back to Ellensburg with a new sense of chic style.

And I was going back, despite Eric's fears. If my first few moments in Europe were any indicator of what was to come, I was definitely going back.

When I came out of the washroom, groomed but still pretty darn lackluster after two long flights, I nearly stopped in my tracks. Jacob was here and talking to Max with a grim look on his face, my suitcase in his meaty hand. He was waving his other hand in the air, his gold rings glinting, and Max was silent, chewing on his lip and listening attentively.

"Hey," I said, my voice cracking a little, as I continued walking toward them, hoping I wasn't interrupting something important. Jacob shut up and his head whipped my way. A broad smile cracked across his face, his golden eyes vivid and dancing.

"Dawn, love," he said in that irrepressible Cockney accent of his, throwing his arms open and bringing me into a tight embrace, my face smooshed up against his scratchy orange-and-brown wool suit, which smelled like coffee and mothballs. His fashion sense hadn't changed, and that brought me the tiniest bit of ironic comfort.

I finally untangled myself from his vice-like hug and let him look me over with a discerning eye. "You look great, love. Tired as fuck but still great. I trust Max has been a gentleman with you." Jacob's scrutiny turned to Max, who seemed to pale a bit under his gaze.

"Max has been fine," I told him. I couldn't help but smile. "I'm glad you're here; I was beginning to think you'd forgotten about me." I was really beginning to think Sage had forgotten about me, but from the apologetic smile stretched across Jacob's face, I could tell he knew what I was thinking.

"Yes, well, traffic you know, love," he said, leading us toward the doors. "Bit of a crazy thing with all these frogs around us." I quickly glanced around me, expecting to see dirty looks from the Frenchmen, but no one paid us any attention at all. "I was

just here yesterday at the same time, but it seems you can't predict the traffic in the city."

"Just yesterday?"

We stepped out of the airport and into the light drizzle, which was falling steadily from the overcast sky. "Yes, I had to pick up Sage and Tricky. He's back at the hotel, you know. He wanted to come and pick you up himself, but, uh, he's recovering from jet lag."

Funny how I could almost believe that—but as plausible as it was, as I would surely be hit with a debilitating chunk of jet lag later, I knew in my heart that wasn't quite the case for Sage. He either didn't want to see me or he was recovering from something other than jet lag.

As we scurried toward the nearest cab, I noticed Max's eyes on me. We were about to climb into the backseat of a funny-looking car whose driver Jacob was trying to haggle with, when he stopped and said, "I'm here to take photographs, you're here to write, and that's the truth. Now get in."

I had lovesick written across over my forehead, didn't I?

We both scooted into the back of the cab, sliding over greasy old grey leather, while Jacob finally got in the passenger seat. He shot us both a gleaming smile and raised his orange brows. "Not sure how much this cabbie is going to charge us, but I figure if it's too much, we can always get the suitcases and run, right-o?"

I spent the first half of the drive trying to figure out if Max and Jacob and everyone else knew something about Sage that I didn't, and the second half being utterly swept away by the passing landscape. I was in France. I was in Paris. I was in a city that couldn't be more foreign to me. I watched beautiful old houses zoom past us, their

elegant roofs and flower-lined windowsills, the funny little cars parked on the streets out front, the fashionable women strolling past with their cat-eye glasses and their tiny dogs on sparkly leashes. The thing about Paris is that it really did look like all the movies I'd seen—Paris in the Springtime, Charade, Funny Face. Really, anything with Audrey Hepburn.

I was enthralled, no doubt brought on by the time difference and sleep deprivation and present company and crazy circumstances, but it was a good kind of trip—better than the mushrooms Mel would make me eat when we were bored and hanging out in the hayloft. Suddenly, as Mr. Plant might say, I was a traveler of both time and space.

I was here.

And there. There, as the cab drove alongside the taupe stone buildings and pulled up to the narrow, gargoyle-fronted hotel where we were staying, there was Sage Knightly, standing outside.

There was Sage, leaning against an ancient-looking stone sculpture that I was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to be leaning against, sipping from a paper cup. There he was, the man whose music made my blood pump and whose words made my heart ache. There he was, the man I'd made love to, the man I'd loved, the man who had become so much more than I even let myself realize.

And he was smiling at the cab as we came to a stop. He was smiling right at me.

He was also 100 percent, teetering-over, eyes-glazed, not-drinking-coffee-out-of-that-cup drunk.

Chapter Five

Dawn

“Here we are,” Jacob said uneasily from the front seat of the cab. His eyes were locked on Sage, who was now slowly plunking his large frame down the steps and sauntering toward us.

Goddamn it if he didn’t look like a beefier Jim Morrison at that moment, in tight black pants and an open black shirt that looked like it provided no barrier to the cool-ish weather. His swagger was all alcohol-induced, his grin lopsided like he didn’t care enough to straighten it. His black hair was longer now, his curls looser and more disheveled, falling into his eyes which were the dreamy grey-green that I remembered, the color of olive leaves. Those dimples still popped against his thick five o’clock shadow. He was a hot mess but, unlike me when I was a hot mess, he was still hot.

Heat throbbed between my legs, my stomach started to do somersaults, and the rest of me was frozen in that sticky leather seat, afraid to get out of the cab, afraid to find out that the Sage Knightly I’d come all the way to Europe for wasn’t the same one that I had known.

And I was afraid I’d still throw myself at him, regardless. Because fuck, could that man make you forget every single inhibition.

Max patted my knee quickly and said, “Can’t sit in here all day, little lamb. He’s just a music maker. He won’t bite.” He paused. “Unless you know something I don’t. And I reckon you do.”

He got out of the cab and helped the bellhop with our luggage as Jacob walked around and opened the door for me. I wished he would just leave me inside with my panic and my thoughts and my hormones, which threatened to fog up the windows. But the cabbie eyed me in the rearview mirror with impatience, and I forced my legs to move.

I stepped out, Jacob's eyes briefly holding mine with something that looked like an apology in them, and Sage swaggered over to us.

He stopped, legs in a wide stance, and took a sip of his drink, looking us over as we stood beside the cab.

“Well, if it ain't a trifecta of gingers,” he said with a smirk. “I feel like the apocalypse is coming.”

I noticed he wasn't letting his eyes settle on me for very long. I also noticed that they narrowed slightly when they took in Max.

Jacob picked up on this and stretched out his arm toward Max. “Sage, this is Max. He's the photographer assigned to cover the story with Dawn.” He smiled. “And Max, this is Sage. He's the drunk rock star you'll have to take photos of. Aim for his left side; it's his most flattering angle.”

Sage didn't miss a beat. “I hang to the left, too.”

That's also how I knew he was drunk. Sage wasn't normally this, er, forthcoming when meeting people for the first time.

Max nodded at Sage, smiling politely but not offering his hand, and followed Jacob up the steps to the hotel.

“Come on, Max,” Jacob said, “let's get you checked in. Dawn, I'll get you sorted. I'll show you to your room...later.” His eyes darted between the two of us.

He didn't have to spell it out. He was leaving me and Sage together to greet each other properly, with privacy. I wanted to yell after Jacob, for him to come back, or I wanted to run after him and get myself checked in. But now it was too obvious for

that. I felt like Paris was the closet and we were two awkward teens thrust into a game of Seven Minutes in Heaven.

We were about five feet apart from each other, but I could smell the booze on him. I watched Jacob and Max disappear, then watched the cab pull away, and finally there was nothing left to watch except Sage.

I looked at him and smiled shyly.

“Hi,” I said, my voice quieter than I would have liked.

His face softened, the cockiness in his grin fading. “Hey.” He stared at me openly for a couple of beats, and I couldn’t read what the fuck was going on. I felt like I needed to say something, do something, maybe shake his hand? But no, that was too lame for two people who’ve had sex with each other, more than a few times. Too weak for the unexplainable bond between us, a bond that can only come from going through Hell together. It was too cheap for two people who cheated death and watched a borrowed world burn.

“How was your flight?” he finally asked.

I could feel my face scrunching up. He might as well have asked me about the weather. Oh God, this wasn’t how I imagined this going at all. Why did he feel like such a stranger to me?

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Because you've barely spoken since you last saw him, a bitter voice inside my head said. Because you never really had anything to begin with. You were just a journalist covering a story, and he was a rock star, and what happened in the past is staying in the past. You should have fucking listened to Mel.

But before I could berate myself further, Sage suddenly came forward, tossing his paper cup aside, and swooped me up into a big bear hug. My breath was squeezed out of me as his strong muscles held me firmly, and I breathed in his scent of whiskey and seaspray and spice. I closed my eyes and felt every single worry drain out of my limbs and sink into his. I wanted him to hold me forever so I buried my face into his neck (a plus side to being tall) and wrapped my arms around his hard waist.

We stood like that for what felt like no time but was probably a good minute before he broke away from me and eyed me up and down.

"You're looking good, Rusty," he said appreciatively, his lips curling into wicked smile.

That was nice of him to say, and that hungry look in his eyes wasn't going unnoticed, but there was a part of me that balked at the use of my old nickname. You see, when I was with Hybrid, everyone had called me Rusty and Sage was always the only one who called me Dawn. Like I meant more than a nickname to him. But now I was Rusty again.

I was probably reading too much into it and smiled instead, trying to ignore the worry that the hug hadn't quite eradicated like I'd thought.

“Thank you,” I said. “But the name’s Dawn, remember?”

His eyes widened briefly, taken aback by what I had said. “Of course,” he murmured, scratching at his sideburns. “Sorry. I guess I’m a bit of a hypocrite.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

He shrugged. “No matter. Well, anyway, I was about to go for a walk in motherfucking Paris. Did you want to join me? Looked like there was a nice little bar around the corner.”

I looked back at the hotel, at the stately bellhop stationed outside and the well-dressed people coming in and out of the wonderfully ancient-looking building. “Shouldn’t I go see my room and get settled?”

Sage let out a little laugh and started strolling away from me, kicking away at the paper cup he’d littered on the ground. I noticed he wasn’t wearing his signature flip-flops anymore but instead wore combat boots that looked dirty enough to have been taken from a dead soldier’s feet. Those boots combined with that muscular ass of his as he sauntered away were making me sweat a little.

He called over his shoulder, “You’re with me now, Dawn. I don’t think you’ll feel settled for a very long time.” He kept going until he turned to face me, raising his arms to the side slightly. “Don’t tell me it’s all work and no play for you again?”

I stared at him, bewildered. All work and no play? Is that what he thought of me? How could he say something so glibly considering what had happened to us last year?

I took in a shaky breath and straightened my shoulders. I didn’t know what the hell was going on with him, with us, but I was at least determined to find out. I went after him and we walked side by side, our arms sometimes brushing against each other

until other passersby forced us off the sidewalk. It seemed walking in Paris was just as chaotic as driving in it, and there were dog turds littered about, which the locals seemed to avoid without even trying.

Paris. I was in Paris with Sage Knightly, walking down a Paris street and disturbing Parisian pigeons. I should have been happier, but shit—I was with a man I'd loved, who I think I still loved, and it felt like we were having to start all over again.

“Here we go,” Sage said as he nodded to a quaint bar no bigger than my living room at home. There were a few tables inside among the dark mahogany walls and a surly-looking bartender behind the bar, but most of the action was outside on the sidewalk, where oodles of tan-and-black-checkered chairs and glass tables were scattered. It was early evening, prime cocktail hour in Paris, I guess, and people were everywhere, chatting a mile a minute through wine-stained lips, sipping their drinks out of elegant little glasses, and sucking back on long cigarettes.

We managed to snag a tiny two-seater by the door. Sage barely fit in the small chair, his legs splayed open in a decidedly un-Frenchman-like fashion, his arm slung around the back of the chair. Even though the sky was a dull grey, not unlike the black-and-white images of Paris you saw in fancy poster shops, he had pulled a pair of aviator shades out of his pocket and slipped them on. Now, instead of his guarded eyes, I could only see my own face reflected back at me, the shock of wild red hair against a monotone backdrop.

Eventually a waiter came by, in a white apron, black suit, and shiny shoes, and I got to use my terrible French. “Deux bière, s’il vous plaît,” I said clumsily. The waiter rolled his eyes, but at least he understood me.

Sage snorted and I snapped my gaze over to him. “What’s so funny?”

“Your French,” he said.

I glared. “Hey, you should be giving me an A for effort. I haven’t used French since high school.”

“Didn’t you graduate high school, like, yesterday?”

“Very funny. At least I’m not an old man.”

He smiled widely, his dark brows raised to heaven. “Old man?”

Then he leaned back in his chair so hard he nearly fell over. A few patrons shot him an annoyed look, like he was disturbing their peace. Damn, he was a little more drunk than I thought. I wondered if getting a drink with him was a good idea after all.

“I’m fine,” he announced loudly, looking around him. “Je suis bueno.”

The waiter picked that wonderful moment to set down our beers. At least the glasses were fairly small. I raised my glass and looked at where Sage’s eyes were hidden under his shades. “We should toast. To, you know, I’m here and you’re here and...”

And I really missed you, I finished in my head. And I don’t think you feel the same.

“To Paris,” he said, raising his glass in an exaggerated motion. “And to you. Thank you for coming here.”

I smiled faintly, unsure of how sincere he was, and we both drank back. When he had almost finished the whole glass, he placed it down on the table and began to twirl it in his hands. I watched, my breath hitched, afraid he was going to lose control and the glass would smash everywhere.

“You know, I’m not that old,” he said quietly as the beer sloshed around. “I’m only twenty-eight. Remember when we thought I wouldn’t make it to twenty-eight?”

I swallowed my beer down in a hard gulp, my stomach beginning to swirl. “I remember.”

His face fell slightly, the curve of his lips turning into a hard slash. “It’s funny, huh, to think about that. To have gone through it...you know? I don’t know how we’re sitting here right now, to be honest.”

Oh God. He was stirring up so many feelings in my goddamned soul. I could only nod meekly, so afraid to push it, to talk to him, to really talk to him. I craved that connection we had lost.

Suddenly he stopped the twirling glass and slammed the rest back. He wiped his lips with his sleeve and looked around him. “So, Paris, huh? Is it what you thought it would be?”

“No,” I answered truthfully, replaying the fantasy of him greeting me in the airport. “It’s nothing like I’d thought.”

We didn’t end up staying at the bar for more than a few drinks. Sage said he had dinner with his new bandmates, something he sounded a bit nervous about, though he was hiding it well. I started to think he was hiding a lot of things under that drunken grin.

When we were rounding the corner back to the hotel, our conversation turned off of the serious topics and onto the architecture of the city (hey, it was better than talking about the weather), we nearly ran into a sexpot of a girl in impossibly high heels and dark red lipstick. Her hair was a wavy light blond, which complemented her creamy skin. At first she reminded me of Sonja or any of the GTFOs I had been subjected to on the Hybrid tour (demon groupies, every journalist’s dream), but as she turned her smiling face away from Sage to look at me, I could see she was just a normal woman with light blue eyes.

Eyes that nearly rolled at my existence before they went back to batting at my rock star.

“Sage,” she said in her French accent. Oh, of course she was French. She might as well have been wearing a beret. “I was just going to find you. Your musicians are waiting for you in the lobby.” She sounded like she said Ee dee lob-ay, and I was more than a little tempted to mock her.

“Sorry I’m late,” Sage responded, and I kind of liked that he didn’t sound sorry at all. “I was catching up with an old friend here. Angeline, this is Dawn. She’s here covering my tour for Creem magazine. You can’t get a more honest and talented journalist than Dawn Emerson.”

Angeline pursed her lips, giving me the once-over again, before pasting on a fake smile. I added to the false friendliness between us by offering my hand to her.

“Pleased to meet you, Angeline,” I said. Her handshake was surprisingly strong. “And how do you know Sage?”

She gave Sage a dreamy look and addressed him instead of me. “Everyone in France knows Sage Knightly. I am just lucky enough to be hired as...promotional help. I am with the French promoters, making sure everything is going fine. Rock stars like him, they need as much...hands-on help as they can get.” She bit her lip coyly, and I saw a heady look pass between them.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. What the hell was that?

Sage cleared his throat and looked at the hotel, avoiding both my eyes and hers. “I guess I better go meet the makers, huh?”

Angeline leaned forward, grabbing his bicep and kissing him on the cheek, her lips

leaving a wine-colored imprint. “Au revoir, Sage, I am off for the evening. À tout à l’heure.” She waved her dainty fingers at him and sashayed away, her heels clicking on the pavement.

My heart burned as I stared up at him, daring myself to ask if there actually was something going on. But I reined it in. I just got here, and I wasn’t about to spoil everything by acting like a jilted ex-lover when in all reality I was probably just overly paranoid.

He didn’t look down at me but gestured to the front of the hotel and started walking toward it. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to my right-hand man.” I followed behind him, trying to erase the uneasiness that was creeping through my veins again, my brain wanting to dwell on things that weren’t real.

“Sage, you asshole!” A strikingly dark-skinned man came running down the steps in a white vest, his leather pants tight as hell and made out of bright yellow pythons. It was hard not to stare at his package. If Sage hung left, this man hung right. “We’ve been waiting and...” his words faltered when he looked at me with wide eyes. “Who is this babe?”

Sage stiffened a bit at the comment but continued walking up the stairs toward the man. “This is Dawn.”

“The Dawn?” Tricky said. He grinned and held out his arms. “The Dawn, I am The Tricky. I keep your man in shape here, yeah?”

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I was smiling foolishly as Tricky came down the stairs and embraced me in tight hug. For one, I was known as The Dawn, which meant Sage had talked about me before. For two, he had called Sage my man. God, it was stupid how incredible such an offhand comment could make me feel.

“You can let go now,” Sage said, and he reached for Tricky’s shoulder, pulling him off of me. Sage shot me an apologetic smile. “Sorry, this is my bassist, Tricky, and if he’d held on to you any longer, you’d never get him off.”

Tricky grinned at me. “He’s had to use the hose on me before. I go after chicks like a dog in heat.”

“Whether they like it or not,” Sage pointed out.

“Oh, they always like it,” Tricky said. He looked back to me. “I am no Sage Knightly, though. I usually get the chicks who Sage doesn’t want, but hey, Tricky ain’t a bad substitute.” He wiggled his brows. “You should try me sometime.”

I was too focused on what he said about “chicks who Sage doesn’t want” to realize he was hitting on me. I forced a laugh—maybe a bit too loud—to make up for the fact that I was dying inside. Tricky’s words made me go from amazing to shit in two seconds flat. I really needed to get a fucking grip on today.

Sage cleared his throat again, and I could tell he was nervous about our interacting. “The players in the lobby?” he asked Tricky.

“Yup,” he said, nodding sharply. “Only one Frenchman and the rest are Brits. Seem

like they'll be okay. One of them has more badass tattoos than you do."

I had almost—almost—forgotten about Sage's tattoos. They were covered up right now, but I could see the sugar skulls on his arms and shoulder as clear as day in my head. I could see my fingers tracing their outlines as we lay in a sun-drenched California bed.

I blinked quickly and here we were, standing under a grey Paris sky, looking at each other like strangers.

How time had changed us.

Despite the background noise of rolling suitcases, car horns, and flapping pigeons, I could feel the silence between us and pulled myself out of my head to realize that Sage was staring at me intently. His shades were pulled up on top of his head and his eyes were burning into me, startlingly clear. I wondered if he knew what I had been thinking. I wondered what he'd think about all of that.

"Do you guys need a minute?" Tricky asked us. "Because I don't think we have another minute, Sage man."

As if to prove his point, Jacob suddenly appeared, striding toward us out of the foyer.

"Sage, get your arse inside," he barked. "We're all waiting and we have dinner reservations." He then looked at me. "Sorry, Dawn, it's official business and all that. Nothing you'd need to cover. Feel free to order room service though."

He put his hands behind Tricky and Sage's shoulders and pushed them inside. Sage glanced at me over his shoulder but didn't say anything.

"Uh, my room?" I yelled after Jacob.

“Oh, right-o,” he said, annoyed, and fished an ornate-looking key out of his jacket pocket. “Room 616. We’re all on the same floor.” He pressed it hard into my hand and ran off after the boys, the flaps of his ugly jacket waving behind him. He was in full-on stressed-out-manager mode, and I did not want to get on his bad side.

I sighed and watched as Sage shook the hands of three other men—I guessed they were the drummer, other guitarist, and keyboardist—and then I made my way up the narrow staircase with a red velvet runner to the sixth floor. Just like with Hybrid, sometimes you felt you were part of the band, and sometimes it was very clear you weren’t. I was certain even my rock journalist hero, Lester Bangs, felt that way on occasion.

I walked down the hallway, searching the doors for my room number. The hallway was dimly lit and very long and winding, with a low wood ceiling that would graze anyone taller than Sage or Max. The carpet in the hall was an ornate brown tapestry, and when I looked closer at the room numbers, I noticed the garish-looking heads that framed the plaques they were written on. I shuddered a bit at their pinprick eyes and kept walking.

Eventually I found my room and wondered which one was Sage’s. Half of me hoped he was right next door, and the other half feared the proximity. The closer he was sleeping to me, the more likely I’d do something that I now knew would be totally stupid.

Or I’d find him doing something totally stupid.

I opened the door with a few twists from the cranky keyhole and stepped in. It was dark so I flicked on the light. It stuttered, making the room look staticky and jarring for a second before it evened out. My suitcase was already on one of the luggage holders at the foot of the bed, and it took me a few moments to grasp how nice the room was. The bed was a four-poster one, queen-sized, and I had a chaise and coffee

table by the windows, which were large and looked out on the city.

I let out a giddy squeal, quickly closed the door, and pranced my way over to the window. I could see the fucking Eiffel Tower from here! It was like looking out at a painting, but I was living it. Once again it hit me. Paris. I was here. I craned my neck so my face was pressed up against the glass and took in more of the view. We were on the left bank, close to the river, and I could see all of Paris spreading out before me in a sea of neutral-colored buildings and matching grey roofs, the domes and spires of the various churches and cathedrals sprinkled here and there.

I stood like that for quite a bit, pushing up the bottoms of the windows to let the fresh air in. Then the phone rang, making me jump. Despite the peaceful view, I was still a little jittery.

I snapped it up. It was Max.

“Hey, little lamb,” he said.

“Hi, giant red potato.”

He snorted. “Red potato? That’s a new one.”

I sat on the bed and smiled into the phone. “Oh, I have plenty more. That was the most flattering one.”

“Listen,” he drawled. “While the band is out having fun, what say you and I get some dinner? I’d love to chat. Get to know you better.”

I know I should have been swooning at the idea of having dinner in Paris, even though Max wasn’t exactly my type. But just the thought of getting dressed and ready for such an occasion was making me feel tired to the bone. My jet lag was coming in

full force, seeping into every crevice.

“I’d love to,” I told him, “but I think I’m just going to stay in. I’m exhausted.”

“Don’t fall asleep too early,” he warned. “Jet lag will fuck you up, and you’ll end up waking up in the middle of the night.”

“Yeah, yeah. Have a good one, anyway.”

“Sleep tight, little lamb.”

“Baaaa,” I bleated before hanging up.

I lay back on the bed, testing the comfort of the mattress. The duvet was fluffy and silky soft. Even though the hotel was extremely old and seemed dated and a bit creepy in the halls, there was just enough luxury in my room.

I sighed and stared up at the wallpapered ceiling, wondering what time it was back home and if I should call my dad now or in the morning.

Before I could even calculate an answer, the jet lag pulled me under.

I woke up, completely disoriented. I was lying on top of a bed, my clothes on, the overhead light shining in my face. There was a strange droning sound, like my ears were buzzing. I groaned and slowly sat up. I wasn’t in Ellensburg anymore. I ran my hand over the lush bedspread as I blinked hard at the light and looked over to the windows, wondering what time it was. It was black outside, any city lights lost by the glare from inside.

I eyed the clock ticking on the bedside table. Three o’clock in the morning. Despite the weird vibrating sound in my ears, a headache, and a mouth that felt like it was

crammed with cotton balls, I was feeling more awake by the second. I should have listened to Max and not fallen asleep.

I eased myself into a sitting position and rubbed my hands up and down my arms, feeling a chill. There was something very unsettling about waking up in a hotel room in a foreign country in the middle of the night. It was a weighty feeling, the kind that makes you look over your shoulder even though you know there's nothing there. That coupled with the loneliness that only comes to you at three in the morning meant I'd probably be spending the next few hours reading a magazine and praying for daylight. I always felt dawn brought with it safety.

The light above my head flickered for an instant, enough to make my heart skip around with the same erraticism. I got off the bed and headed to the washroom to finally wash the makeup off my face, which had been caked on there since JFK.

I closed the door behind me and, once I figured out I should be using the toilet and not the bidet, peed like hell. Then, deciding I needed it and it would probably help me sleep, I quickly undressed and jumped in the shower. I was in there a long time, using up all the cute little hotel toiletries and relaxing in the hot water. Steam filled the bathroom, and I slowly felt my muscles relaxing and willed all my worries to swirl down the drain.

So what if things were weird between Sage and I? A lot had happened in those months we were apart. I scored some good gigs, I graduated college, my family had never been better, and I felt like a stronger person (when I wasn't worrying). I was strong enough to handle this, to adjust my thinking. Yes, I wanted to be here because I wanted to be with Sage. He was my reason, above his music. I just had to approach things differently, to turn that around. I couldn't control where he was at or what he was thinking, but I could certainly control the way I saw the world. Music and career first, love later.

The internal pep talk made me feel a little bit better about being awake in the middle of the night, though I wasn't sure if it would last or not. I stepped out of the shower and toweled myself off, scrunching my hair so it would maybe air dry properly.

With the towel wrapped around my chest, I opened the bathroom door and...

I stepped out into utter darkness.

My heart thumped in surprise, the light from the bathroom spilling in behind me and creating dark shadows all around. I had left the light in the room on. I knew that for a fact. The curious droning sound from earlier still continued, seemingly louder now, adding to my confusion.

Jet lag was a fucking trip.

Thinking the bulb must have burnt out, I let my eyes drift to the window. I should have been able to see the lights of the city now with the glare eliminated, but it was still black.

And there was something weird about that black, about the windows now in general. Somehow they weren't inanimate...they throbbed. Pulsed.

Breathed.

A sick feeling crept up in my throat and I took a step forward, trying to focus on what was making my skin crawl.

The windows weren't black because the world outside was black. The windows were black because they were covered by something. Something that moved...pulsated. Like a textured black curtain, except it was somehow...alive.

The light in the room suddenly came back on with a flicker. It made me gasp.

With the room illuminated, I got a better look at the windows.

They made me scream.

The windows were covered by hundreds of thick, shiny black flies. They were all crawling all over the glass and each other, coming together like a throbbing blanket from hell. Their tiny wings vibrated against each other, the buzzing sound more horrific now that I knew what it was coming from.

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I hadn't realized how loud my screams were until I heard a knock at the door and a voice calling my name from outside.

I scurried over to the door, keeping my towel tight around my chest, and opened it to see Sage standing on the other side like he was about to kick the door down, and in only a pair of tight black underwear. Had I not been on the verge of puking or fainting from the horrific sight of the flies, I would have ogled his fine body.

He placed his hands on my shoulders, looking me over in panic, his brows expressive and his pupils strangely dilated. "I heard you screaming, I'm sleeping right next door. Are you okay?"

I quickly shook my head and pointed at the window. "No. I don't know. Look at all the flies. I woke up and took a shower and just noticed this."

"Jesus," he swore under his breath. He looked behind him at the door and quickly shut it. "Do the windows open? Better them leaving through there than through the hotel."

I nodded and noticed my hand that was clutching my towel was shaking slightly. I then noticed I was just wearing a towel.

"It'll be okay," he said quickly, his hand moving up to my head, brushing my hair behind my ear in such an intimate gesture that I wanted to swim in it. "It's gross as fuck, but it's just flies. This happens sometimes."

"Oh yeah?" I asked, my voice trembling.

He smiled and took off for the window, taking the warmth of his hand away. “Yup. Back on the farm, sometimes I’d head into the mudroom as a kid and flies would be everywhere. They’d just appear out of the blue, like this. Maybe the housecleaner—” he paused and then shook his head, “maybe there was rotten food or something that wasn’t cleaned up properly.”

Though he was talking quite fast and making a lot of sense, it wasn’t making me feel much better. The flies looked so inhuman, like bloated aliens made of tar and pulsing eyes. They made me feel sick to my core, no matter how Sage spun it. Their buzzing sound seemed to take over my whole head, something that would surely drive me mad if we didn’t do something.

But Sage did do something. He cautiously approached the window, the lazy flies barely moving out of the way, and pushed the windowsill up. That was another thing—I knew I had fallen asleep with the windows open. Although I suppose they could have fallen down if they weren’t secured properly, and I would have been too passed out to even hear it.

Once the window was up, he asked me to hand him a pillow. I did so, and he started swatting at the flies until they rose up in a black cloud and eventually flew out into the night.

I had a good view of his broad shoulders and muscular back as he did this, my eyes focusing on that small pleasure instead of the last flies that were making their way out of the room.

I zeroed in on long, red marks going from the shoulder blades down to midback.

Five marks on each side. There was no mistaking what those were, but I still hoped and prayed I was mistaken.

When all the flies were gone, he shut the window and turned around to face me, a satisfied look on his face. “Well, I think that will take care of that for now. In the morning I’ll speak with the manager. I’ve already had issues with his staff.”

I just stared at him, my mouth wet with a new kind of terror.

He raised his brows. “What is it?”

“Your back,” I croaked then cleared my throat. “Your back has scratch marks down the sides.”

I watched him closely, trying to pick up on every facial expression. His mouth came together firmly and he swallowed. His grey-green eyes flared, caught up in an internal debate.

“What happened?” I asked. My heart was racing so fast now.

“Oh, Dawn,” he said, shaking his head and taking a step toward me.

“No,” I said, stepping back. “You should probably call me Rusty in this instance. It makes more sense now.”

A wash of pain came across his brow and his jaw clenched. He sighed and looked down at his feet, still shaking his head subtly, his loose curls going in his eyes.

Shit. “Who is she? Those looked fresh.”

He exhaled again and said, “It doesn’t matter. It’s done.”

Oh God. Oh God, this hurt.

“I guess there are so many you can’t keep track.” I tried to keep my voice as monotone as possible. It was damn hard.

He looked at me sharply. “No. It’s...it was Angeline.”

Fuck. Fuck this. Fuck me.

“Fuck you,” I sneered, surprised at the ferocity with which the words left my mouth.

His head jerked back, but I could feel my face turning into an angry sneer.

“The girl from earlier, the French promoter,” I went on. “You fucked her? When did this happen?”

“Dawn,” Sage said again. “It’s not what you...I...I don’t know why I did it. I was fucked up. I am fucked up.”

“You sure fucking are!” I said. “When did it happen?”

He licked his lips and his gaze went to the carpet. I was not going to like this answer, no matter what.

“Last night,” he admitted.

I gasped, feeling like my chest was being chewed up from the inside out. I was being shredded to the bone. “You fucked her last night? You knew I was coming today,” I spat out incredulously.

“Hey, I didn’t know what we had,” he said, having the audacity to argue back. “I didn’t know where we stood with each other.”

“Well, you decided that pretty quickly, didn’t you?” I sneered. “My God, you fucked that...that...French...bitch.”

“She’s a promoter,” he said weakly.

“Oh, and that makes it better?” I stared at him, at this man I had put so much stock into and felt nothing but shame and remorse for doing so. “My God,” I said to myself and put my hand to my forehead. “My God, I am such a fucking idiot.”

He came over to me, his eyes blazing in a mix of sadness and fury. “No, you’re not, Dawn, you’re not. I told you I’m fucked. I...I can’t help it...I...” He made a reach for my arm, but I jerked myself out of the way.

“Don’t touch me. Fuck...” I sat down on the bed and had the urge to do some bodily harm to him, perhaps pull a total rock star maneuver and beat him over the head with a chair before tossing it at the mirror. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Jesus. Sage, why did you even invite me here then? What were you thinking?” I raised my hand. “You know what...don’t answer that. It doesn’t matter.”

He was absolutely crestfallen, standing there in front of me in his underwear. If I didn’t feel a million shades of anger, sorrow, and utter humiliation, I might have laughed.

“Dawn, I’m sorry,” he said softly, staring down at me. His apology meant nothing to me. “It was stupid. It didn’t mean a thing. I thought you and I were on a professional level here, or even friends. I just...wanted to see you. But it had been so long since everything happened. We didn’t really keep in touch. I thought about you, all the time, but...life got in the way. And I assumed you were busy. Or didn’t care. I wasn’t going to stay...single and hope I’d see you again.”

“That’s funny,” I seethed. “Because that’s exactly what I did. And now I just learned

you probably fucked half the phone book in every town you were in.”

I said that in an exaggerated way to get a rise out of him, but he only nodded—nodded, the fucking bastard—and said, “I’m sorry. They were meaningless anyway.”

And the knife was driven in deeper.

I stared straight ahead, feeling everything there was to feel and finding it was turning me numb. “Get out,” I spat, angrily.

“What?”

I snapped my head up and pointed to the door. “I said get out. Leave. Just go. Obviously I looked too deeply into things, into what you and I had gone through. I thought we had a bond. I thought I meant something to you.”

“You do!” he cried out.

I pointed again. “Just go.”

To his credit, he didn’t argue anymore. He went for the door, and as he opened it, Jacob appeared on the other side, wearing the ugliest red-and-green pajamas I’d ever seen. He was obviously eavesdropping but didn’t seem to care about what had transpired between us. He did care about Sage, though, and his yellowy eyes bore into him as he slinked away.

“Can I talk to you?” Jacob asked me once I heard the door to Sage’s room close.

I put my face in my hands and sighed painfully. My own door shut, and I felt Jacob walk in. I guess he took that as a yes.

“I’m sorry about Sage,” Jacob said. “He’s seen better days.”

I couldn’t bring my heart to feel sorry for him. Maybe I was overreacting. I mean, Sage was right: we weren’t a couple, and it wasn’t like he had cheated on me, but it still burned. I felt flames licking me all over, wanting to smother me. Ugh, I felt like I’d lost everything when I never had anything to begin with.

“This was a mistake,” I mumbled.

Jacob hovered close by, coming close to the bed and then backing away. I guess the sight of me in a towel made him nervous.

“I don’t know what to say, love,” he said. “But Sage really does care for you.” I snorted, but he went on. “He’s just not well. He’s letting the grief—the guilt—over Hybrid destroy him. He’s drunk half the time, and when he’s not drunk, he’s snorting who-knows-what up his nose. This isn’t the casual fun he had in Hybrid; this is something much worse.”

“I doubt he had any fun in Hybrid,” I said, feeling everything drain out of me. I stared blankly at the cotton loops in the towel.

“You might be right,” he said. “But I’m definitely worried now.” His voice was so oddly melancholic that I had to look at him. He was staring out the window, at the darkness. “To be honest with you, Dawn, I told Sage to invite you. I know he wanted to, but sometimes you need that manager’s touch. You’re good for him, you know that.”

I frowned. “I’m not here to straighten him out. That’s not my job.”

“You’re right.” He sighed. “That’s not why you’re here.”

I swallowed, my throat feeling painfully dry. “I think I should go home.”

Jacob turned his head slightly, looking at me from the corner of his eye. The pockmarks on his cheek seemed deeper in the light. “It’s better if you stay.”

“Better for Sage?”

“Better for you,” he said, an edge to his tone. He looked back at the window and clasped his hands behind his back. “So what happened here?”

With a sorry little sigh, I explained what happened with the flies. He nodded, taking it in, and strolled back to the door like he was taking a walk through the park, not through a half-naked twenty-two-year-old’s Parisian hotel room at three in the morning.

“I’m glad you got it sorted out then,” he said, reaching for the doorknob. “Call me if anything else...like that happens. Or Max. He’s good for that.”

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I eyed him suspiciously. “Do you know something I don’t?”

He squeezed the bridge of his nose, and I was surprised to see he didn’t sleep with his gaudy gold rings on. “Honestly, I don’t know a thing. Good night, love.”

And then he was gone, and I was alone again in my hotel room, nerves shot and heart tenderized.

I didn’t sleep.

Chapter Six

Sage

“Hello, hooray,” I could hear Tricky singing from outside my door. “Let the show begin, I’ve been ready.”

I moaned and buried my head further into the pillow. “Go the fuck away. Can’t you read the Do Not Disturb sign?”

“No,” Tricky said, “it’s in French.”

“You should learn ‘go away’ in French,” I mumbled. I rubbed my hands up and down my face. Scenes of the night before came flooding into my head. Dawn. Oh fucking hell.

“Don’t make me keep singing,” he said. “I have something for you, and we have

breakfast, like, now.”

I sighed, my head spinning as I got out of the bed and pulled on a pair of sweatpants. I felt both like ass and an ass. After the dinner with my new bandmates, we went out to the bars and really got to know each other on a musician’s level. Which always meant women and alcohol and drugs. Rock and roll never even came into the equation.

Even though I only stayed at the strip club for a few hours—clubs that were so mind-blowing compared to the U.S. that I was surprised they were legal—I was still pretty fucked up when I got back to the hotel. When I heard Dawn scream, I didn’t even think to cover up the scratches that Angeline had left on my back. The flies were fucking creepy, but they barely registered compared to seeing Dawn barely covered up in the towel. I just wanted to run my hands up her long legs.

And then I fucked it all up. I was still too high from the evening to even handle myself the way I should have. I told the damn truth and then made it worse by trying to turn it around on her. There was just no way I could explain what the hell was going on in my head. I didn’t even know.

I just knew I wanted it gone.

I opened the door and glared at Tricky. “It’s eight in the morning. I had a rough night if you couldn’t tell.”

Tricky was dressed and ready to go. He grinned, his teeth blindingly white. “I heard about it. I brought this to help you.”

He handed me a vial of coke, and I stared at it in my hand for a few moments, thinking it over. Did I really need this, or was this going to make everything worse?

A lady with a beehive, who reminded me of my third-grade teacher, walked past in the hall, causing me to quickly close my hand over the drugs and make my decision.

I nodded knowingly at Tricky. "I'll see you at breakfast. Be there in a few."

"Groovy."

I shut the door in his face and opened my palm. I didn't know how to deal with Dawn. I didn't know how to deal with the show tonight.

I decided to do just a little bit, just to get me through breakfast, and take it easy with the rest. Afterward, my head already clearing, I pulled on pants and a shirt and made my way downstairs.

Everyone, save Angeline, was in the main dining room. The tables were all done up with white tablecloths and gilded chairs, which wouldn't have looked out of place in one of the bad historical dramas that my mother used to watch. She hadn't understood much English, but she liked her men in white wigs.

As I approached the table, I quickly noted the seating arrangement. I was the last to arrive, and the only empty chair was across from Dawn. I watched her carefully as I came around, pulling out the chair between Tricky and Garth, our touring keyboardist. She didn't look up at me; instead she looked to Max, who was sitting beside her, and asked him to hand her a tin of jam for her croissant.

This was going to be awkward. Even drugs couldn't erase that.

"Glad you're finally gracing us with your presence," Jacob said smoothly from the end of the table. Sometimes, with his accent, he sounded like a masterful James Bond villain. He delicately buttered his croissant with his scarred hands. "Back to the flip-flops, are we?"

Running on autopilot, I'd put my flip-flops on. Jacob had banned me from wearing them in Europe, saying they conflicted with my hardened image, so I'd taken to wearing my combat boots instead.

"Old habits die hard," I said and looked at Dawn. She glanced up, her beautiful brown eyes meeting mine for just a second. That was the most I got from her for the rest of the meal, though my gaze was drawn to her again and again.

Even in the morning, suffering from lack of sleep and jet lag, which had created purple circles under her eyes, she was absolutely stunning. She had never been "hot" in that cheesy supermodel way, and she wasn't a refined beauty like Angeline, but she was gorgeous to me all the same. And to other men, too; I could see it in Tricky's eyes and in the leer of this fucking photographer beside her, whose angle I didn't trust for a minute. I took bitter pride in the fact that I knew her beyond her lush red curls and lightly tanned skin and the freckles that dotted her nose when it was sunny out. I knew what it was like to cup her firm ass in my hands, to bring her curved body hard against mine, to see her moan, throat exposed, when she was coming. I knew what she tasted like.

Before my erection got uncomfortable and I was too swept away in the fantasy of going under the table and discovering she was wearing a skirt and no panties, making her moan again in front of everyone, Tricky was elbowing me in the side.

"What?" I snapped at him, turned on and irritable, and he rolled his eyes toward Jacob. Shit. The Cobb was talking about something important. I tried to bring my attention away from Dawn and focus on what business was being discussed, but my body had different ideas.

"The show tonight," Jacob was saying, "is at the Theatre du Chien. Which I believe means theater of the dog or some frog nonsense like that. I'm telling you this in case you all get lost and separated from me, like I'm the bloody mama duck. But quack,

quack, you all need to smarten up and stay in line today. This is the first show of Sage's tour, and it's going to go off without a blooming hitch, you understand that?"

Everyone nodded, murmuring in agreement.

"This means," he went on, his eyes fastening to me like a laser beam, "that we'll be doing soundcheck early. It's ten o'clock right now, and I want to see you all down here at eleven. You haven't had time to play together yet, so it will be a long soundcheck and we won't be coming back here before the show, which again means get yourselves bloody organized." He looked to Dawn and Max. "You two can take a cab to the venue at two. That will give the guys enough time to sound like an actual band before you start writing them up and taking pictures of their pre-show jitters. Ya got that?"

"Yes, sir," Max answered almost automatically, like a soldier.

Jacob got up and leaned across the table, looking everyone in the eye. "Then you're dismissed." He banged the table with his fist and walked away.

"Christ on a cracker," Garth said under his breath. He watched Jacob go in fear. He was a skinny little dude with eyes too big for his head. He seemed like an all right guy, even though he was young and skittish. His keyboard skills were stellar, which was all I needed from him. "Is he always like that?"

"Jacob runs a tight ship," I explained to him while out of the corner of my eye I caught Dawn and Max getting up together and leaving. I was struck with a burst of incurable jealousy and had to swallow it down.

"I can see that," Garth said. "Guess it was true that Hybrid was a bit of a wild band."

My head snapped toward him, my jaw automatically tensing. "Don't even mention

Hybrid,” I growled, my voice low. “This isn’t Hybrid. It never will be. This is my band, my show. Got it?”

Garth nodded quickly, his eyes even wider than before. He turned his attention back to his food, his shaking hand reaching for his coffee cup. I sat back and ran my fingers through my hair, exhaling slowly. Nice start to the morning. I was all over the damn map and practically scaring my new bandmates.

I grabbed a piece of toast, excused myself from the table before I became even more of an ass, and took off for my room. The rickety open-caged elevator had freaked me out when I rode it the other day, so instead I took the stairs, pausing to catch my breath at the fourth floor. Shit, if going up stairs was making me winded, I didn’t know how I was going to handle the show tonight.

You’re not going to handle it, the voice inside my head said. You’re going to fail because you can’t handle any of this on your own.

I closed my eyes, my arm resting on the railing, and tried to make the voices shut up.

“I have another message for you.”

I opened my eyes at the whispered words and looked for the source. At the end of the hall, just beneath one of the sconce light fixtures, was a very short figure, a woman who couldn’t have been taller than five feet. Her silhouette was heavyset, flabby, and though I couldn’t see her face but for her gleaming eyes, I had a feeling she was ugly as sin.

“Excuse me?” I asked, taking a moment to realize she spoke perfect English, though her accent was still foreign. Russian, maybe.

“I have another message for you,” the woman repeated in her strangely monotone

voice. Then she turned around, and I noticed her wide body had been hiding a maid's cart.

It all clicked. This was the housecleaner who wrote on my mirror.

I walked off after her, more annoyed than anything.

"You wrote on my mirror," I said accusingly as she stopped and slowly looked at me. I came to a halt, put off by her eyes, which were so heavily lidded I could barely see her irises. She was all elephantine jowls and cheeks, hair gathered at the top like a cow took a shit on her head. Ugly as sin was right.

She stared at me—at least I think she was staring at me; it was hard to tell—and then she said, "Oh, yes. You. I have another message for you."

"A message from whom?" The lights flickered in the hall. "What did that mean, 'be careful what she wished for'? Who is 'she'?"

She shook her head sharply, to the left, the right, the skin under her jaw jiggling. "I don't know. I only pass on the messages."

I folded my arms. "Then tell me who told you?"

She smiled, and I tried not to grimace at her missing canines. Jesus, what was the hotel thinking hiring this charity case? "The dark man with the white face. He tells me in my sleep."

Okay. I blinked hard and rubbed my forehead. Too many drugs, not enough sleep.

She went on, "He says to tell you it will all end when she appears."

“I don’t think you know what you’re talking about, but I’d appreciate it if you stayed away from my room,” I said, trying to bury the uneasiness in my voice. “I’ll report you if you try and talk to me again.”

“The dark man won’t care,” she said, turning around to continue to push her cart. “He will find her once she’s been given everything she wants, and it will all start all over again.”

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I had to reach out and grab the edge of her cart. “Is the girl here? Is he talking about Dawn? The redhead? Can you at least tell me that much?”

She watched me for a few agonizing beats before I caught the slightest nod of her head. “There is nothing you can do. Nothing you can do but watch.”

Had this crazy shit happened to me a year or two ago, I wouldn’t have believed a word this woman said. I’d say she’s an obvious mental case who dreams of Satan visiting her in her dreams. But now I knew better.

“Please,” I begged, feeling foolish, helpless. “You have to tell me more. Who are you?”

“I am Tatiana,” she said, her accent thickening. “I work here.”

She began to push her cart away while I heard Tricky call out, “Sage!”

I turned to look at him, wanting to go after Tatiana, the crazy elephant lady, but Tricky was already running down the hallway toward me.

“You almost ready? We have to go,” he said.

I watched Tatiana and her cart rumble around the corner and out of sight.

“Sage,” Tricky repeated. I finally looked over at him. He frowned. “You all right, man? You’re looking kind of pale.”

I wiped a layer of sweat off my forehead and tried to slow my heart rate. The creepy feeling held on to my bones. I had to talk to Dawn. “I’m all right. Is it that time already?”

Tricky nodded. “Yes—well, no, but we have to get our clothes and everything together for tonight. We have to coordinate our outfits, don’t you think?”

I gave him a funny look. Robbie was like that, too, when we played shows. Figures that Tricky would be displaying front-man tendencies. “You know what I wear: black. I go with whatever crazy thing you’re going to squeeze your balls into.”

He grinned. “Bright orange velvet jumpsuit.”

I shook my head. “My God.”

“And platform Alice Cooper boots.”

Tricky put his hand on my shoulder and turned me around, leading us back to our rooms while yammering on about what he was thinking about for the next night. Something tight and terrible. I’d stopped listening as we passed Dawn’s room. I needed to talk to her, even though she didn’t want to talk to me.

“Sage, we don’t have time,” Tricky said seriously as he noted my gaze glued to her door. “This is a big deal for you, whether you want to admit it or not. This is a big deal for your fans. We can’t mess this up, and I don’t want to mess it up for you. You need a clear head, you got it?”

I was surprised at the sincerity in his voice, that he was actually taking this seriously for once.

I nodded reluctantly. “Okay. Let’s get ready.”

I left Dawn's door, thinking I could hear her shuffling around on the other side. Still that barrier between us.

Soundcheck actually went okay. I was a little distracted, my head jutting back to Dawn and back to what the crazy woman had said, and I was tired as the drugs left my body and I began to sober up, but I managed to hold it together. Actually, I managed to not sound half bad. My voice was a little raw when I hit the few higher notes, and I fumbled over a few lyrics that I'd forgotten (yeah, I wrote them, but believe me, it's easier said than done), but the players worked out really well and picked up the groove in no time. It definitely helped that the sound in the venue was excellent and that they'd been listening to Sage Wisdom a lot, knowing each and every crevice of the album.

We were about to take a break for lunch when I caught Dawn and Max slinking into the back of the theater, about to sit down on the plush red seats.

I looked behind me at the band, my band—Tricky, with his infectious grin and bass played up high; Garth at the keyboards, eyeing me fearfully; Pascal, the wiry beatnik on the drums; and the long-bearded Buzz, who wore sunglasses inside and a silk suit. I raised my hand. "Hey guys, let's take an hour for lunch, okay? Meet back here at three."

"Is that allowed?" Garth spoke up. "What if Jacob comes back?"

"I'll handle Jacob," I told him. "He'd agree that it's important that you guys eat."

As for me, well, I had a lot of groveling on my plate. Food could come later.

I laid down my guitar, jumped off the front of the stage, my all-access pass swinging from my neck, and strolled toward Max and Dawn, who were watching the band leave and looking bewildered.

“I thought Jacob wanted us to catch the soundcheck,” Max said, adjusting the camera pack around his shoulder.

I shrugged. “You can when they get back from lunch.” I looked to Dawn, who looked a bit frustrated as she clutched her notebook, her pen already out and ready. “Can I talk with you? Alone? It’s important.”

I knew she didn’t want to say anything to me, but to Max’s credit, he did kind of prod her and say, “You go. I’ll be right here. It will give me time to play with the light apertures anyway.” He took off his camera pack, set it down on a seat, and started pulling out lenses.

“Please,” I added, hoping she could see the sincerity in my eyes.

She sucked in her lip but said, “Fine.”

I started walking down the aisle and she followed. I could feel her taking great pains to not walk directly beside or too close to me. I could tell it was taking everything for her not to tell me to fuck off and run back to Max. I had really upset her—far, far more than I thought I could have. Now that I was sober, it was really hitting me hard.

I really fucked up.

We went up to the stage, and I stopped at the edge of it, just beyond the heavy curtains. On the other side, the sound tech crew was playing with the monitor, and another guy was going around checking the lights, but we had privacy where we were.

“What’s up?” Dawn asked, looking up at me with a detached coldness in her eyes.

I ran my hand through my hair, gathering courage. “First...first I wanted to

apologize.”

She didn’t even blink. “What for?”

“For screwing everything up,” I said. “For ruining things...with you.”

“Oh, well, we discussed it last night. That was enough,” she said, though her tone was dull and her attention was now on the sound tech guy across from us.

I followed her gaze and said, “That’s Arnie. He’s from Norway. Apparently he’s good. I tried to get Chip to do it but...he said he couldn’t. Too many bad memories.” Chip had been Hybrid’s sound tech, a good guy who managed to escape the band’s demise without dying.

She nodded, rubbing her lips together. Sadness tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“It’s weird, you know,” I admitted, feeling the need to open up. She looked at me questioningly. “For me. Not having them here. I didn’t think it would be this hard, but it is. I miss them. I miss them all. Robbie won’t speak to me...I’ve tried calling him, writing him. He’s out there, but he pretends I don’t exist. And Noelle. I’ve seen her.”

“You have?” Dawn asked.

“Yeah, twice. She’s doing okay. Not great but better. She’ll never be the same, though...whatever mental switch got turned off with her just never came back on again. She’s with her parents, and they...I’m pretty sure they blame me for everything.”

Her brows lowered sympathetically. “I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “Me, too. And I mean it. I’m sorry for what I did to them, for the deal I made. If I’d known...I’d never have been that selfish.”

“The thing you said about old habits,” she said slowly, her dark eyes glittering. “You’re still selfish.”

Ouch. But I deserved it. “I know. And I’m sorry, Dawn, I’m so sorry I’ve been acting like a...a...” There were so many ways to describe how low I’d sunken.

“Self-entitled rock star who is drowning in his own self-loathing, handing out favors for the pity party?”

I raised my brow. “You’ve had some time to think about this.”

“Sage, I’ve thought about nothing but you for the last nine months.”

Shit. That got me deep. I let that phrase sink in as far as it could go. I wanted nothing more than to just grab her and pull her to me, to wrap my arms around her waist, to taste her mouth with mine, to let her know how much I’d been thinking about her.

She quickly looked down, suddenly self-conscious, and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. It was so hard to not reach out to her and do the same. Last night, when I felt the silk of her hair in my fingers, the warmth behind her ears, it took everything I had not to take it further.

“I didn’t know,” I managed to say, my eyes glued to her lips.

She exhaled in amusement and gave me a shy smile. “I know you didn’t. But it doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt.”

“Dawn,” I murmured, taking a step toward her. She held her ground, gazing up at me

while I took my hands out of my pockets and placed them on her shoulders. I couldn't help but touch her. Her smooth skin was like a tonic, life fizzing under my hands. "You're the last person I want to hurt. Please know that. Please believe that."

"I believe you'd never intentionally hurt me," she said carefully, and I knew what she was saying. That I was too fucked up to keep any promises.

"Going forward then," I said, trying to keep myself from begging. "I won't hurt you again. You have no idea what you mean to me."

Yes, she does, the voice in my head said. She knows she was the girl you didn't love.

I licked my lips and studied her, her flawless skin that was more tanned on the temples, the way her hair reflected all the colors of autumn, the way her lower lip pouted, begging to be kissed. I fucking missed her. I'd only had her by my side for a month and change, but I missed looking at her every day. I missed just sitting around and drinking beer and talking music. I missed that I could talk to her for hours, that she was smart and ambitious but grounded all the same. I missed that she made me forget the agony I had caused and that she told me once that she'd loved me, and those words sounded better than any song.

She saved me, briefly, from myself. I wasn't sure if I could ever repay the favor.

"I should probably get back to Max," she said, trying to move, but I held her in place.

"No, listen," I told her, leaning in closer. I could hear her suck in her breath as my face came down to meet hers, my eyes imploring hers to stay with me, to hear me out. "There's something else I wanted to talk to you about."

"Okay," she said softly, frowning at my intensity.

I took in a deep breath. “This is going to sound crazy, but...you of all people should know what I’m talking about, what I’m getting at. Dawn...I need to know if you’ve ever made a deal with the Devil.”

Her eyes widened into brown orbs and her mouth dropped open so that I could see the pink of her tongue. “What?”

“I’m serious,” I said. “We know what happened to me. I have...reason to believe that something similar might be happening to you.”

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“What makes you say that?” She was trying to sound calm, but I knew I had gotten to her.

I ran my hands down her arms and loosely grasped her around the wrists, holding on. “The other day here, when I first got into my hotel room, someone had written something on the bathroom mirror with red lipstick. It said ‘be careful what she wished for.’” Her face paled. “I complained to the manager with Jacob, and the manager said it must have been a housekeeper who had apparently done this before, or something like it, once upon a time. It made me remember something...what Alva yelled at us on Lake Shasta as we were escaping. She said—”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Dawn said absently, her eyes quivering. “I remember. I thought I was the only one who’d heard it.”

“There was so much going on that I didn’t think it meant something...not until now.” I squeezed her wrists lightly. “And that wasn’t it. The housekeeper? I saw her today. In the hotel. She had a message for me.”

I told her what had happened in the hall earlier, the hair on my arms standing up as I recalled the woman.

“The man in black with the white face,” Dawn said, shuddering. “I’d know if I met someone like that.”

“And let’s hope you never have to. Is there anything to what she’s saying? Did you ever make a deal?”

“You asked me this once,” she said, shaking her head. “I told you...” she trailed off, her mind going elsewhere, eyes focusing on nothing. “I don’t remember. Once...when I was younger and I couldn’t handle my dad and Eric and was just going crazy, I ran out into the field, wanting to escape it all. I was so low, so lost, so—angry. I started crying, wanting everything to change. I wished...I wished out loud...that my father would stop drinking. I wished for Eric to be normal, to lose his disease.” Tears pooled at the edges of her eyes.

“Was that it?” I asked in barely a whisper. I wanted to pull her into me, to console her, to shelter her from her own pain. I wanted to make her stop reliving it. But we had to know.

She shook her head, and quickly wiped away a tear finding its way down her cheek. She sniffed. “No. I wished I’d see my mother again.”

The woman’s words rang through my head. “And has any of this...been fulfilled?”

She bit her lip and glanced up at me, a look of utter despair. “Yes. I haven’t been able to tell you, but my brother, Eric, he’s totally cured of his Tourette’s now. Like, he’s completely normal, just changed out of the blue. And my dad...my dad hasn’t had a drink in so long.” She burst into a heartbreaking smile. “Since it all happened, he’s been sober.” Her chin trembled. “And I’m so afraid of what that means. I’m so afraid I’ve done something.”

“And what about your mother?” I asked, my tongue feeling thick, my throat too small. “Have you seen her?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “No.”

“Not yet,” I filled in. She shot me a fearful look. “The woman today, the housekeeper...Tatiana said ‘it will all end when she appears.’ Do you think that she

could mean your mother?”

Dawn shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know.”

““He will find her once she’s been given everything she wants, and it will all start all over again,”” I repeated. “What we went through before will start all over again.”

She sniffed harder and threw back her shoulders, putting on a brave face. “Nothing is starting yet. And if it does start...I don’t remember making any deal. Remember how literal the demons are? This couldn’t stand in a court of law.”

I mulled that over. “As ridiculous as this sounds—as I know this all sounds, but shit—if you were drunk and you signed a contract and you didn’t remember it, you’d have a hard time proving in a court of law that you were not yourself or acting on your own will.”

She glared at me. “I wasn’t drunk. I told you, I was young. I just blacked out, I don’t remember shaking on anything or making any deal. And you’re making it worse.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I just want to help.”

“And I don’t think you can.”

We stood there staring at each other, weighing the uncertainty of this supernatural threat. It was funny, but nothing to laugh about, that we both knew how crazy everything sounded yet how real it all was. People died because of me. People could die because of her, because of something she didn’t even remember doing.

“We need to talk to Jacob,” I said. I had a feeling my rogue manager knew more than he let on, but it didn’t mean he could necessarily help us, either.

She nodded just as Tricky came out from around the corner. “Hey, Sage,” he said hesitantly, knowing he was intruding.

Dawn stepped back from me, as if she didn’t want to give him the wrong idea. I felt the coldness come back.

I eyed Tricky carefully, unsure if he heard what we were talking about. He had a different kind of worry on his face. “What?”

“Jacob found us at the café down the street.” He jerked his thumb in the opposite direction. “He told us to come back and continue rehearsing or he’d all have us killed. He really scared the keyboardist.”

I let out a puff of air from my lips and nodded. “Okay, we’ll get back to it.” I looked at Dawn. “Things will be fine. We’ll just get the opening night out of the way, and then we’ll talk to Jacob and learn all we can, okay?”

“All right,” she said. She opened her mouth to say something else but then eyed Tricky and stopped. She gave me a casual wave. “Talk to you after the show. Good luck.”

I watched her leave, her tight ass rocking in those jeans, as Tricky punched me in the shoulder to get my attention.

“You gotta give me the skinny on what that was about,” Tricky said.

“None of your business.”

“Sounded like serious business to me, and everybody knows that Tricky loves the serious.” He looked so earnest I had to laugh. It sounded empty.

“We have...” I tried to think of the right word, “issues at the moment. And for the record, please refrain from telling her what drugs I’ve done or girls I’ve screwed. She already knows about Angeline.”

“Well, that’s no problem, man. I’ve already screwed her, too.”

“Figures,” I muttered.

“You know Tricky don’t mind the seconds, especially when they look like her. How tight was her pussy, right? French pussy—meow, meow. Wait, what sound does a cat make in French?”

I sighed, ignoring him, and walked over to midstage to get my guitar just as my bandmates were picking up their instruments and plugging in. I could see Dawn sitting down beside Max in the empty rows and making small talk. I wondered if she would ever confide in him what she had just confided in me, and I imagined how empty that would make me feel.

We played through three songs before Max finished taking his pictures and Dawn stopped writing. She stared off into space until Max put his damn hand on her and shook her to attention. To his credit, he did look concerned—but I should have been the one taking her outside and trying to make her feel better.

It should have been me.

But it wasn’t.

And the music played on.

Chapter Seven

Dawn

I could only make it through three of Sage's songs before I felt like the walls of the theater were suffocating me. It wasn't that the music was bad—in fact, it was powerful, cutting me to the core. But what Sage sung about, the loss and the guilt, was suddenly thrust into my life.

The fact that he was singing them only made it worse, his raw but deep voice reaching deep into my heart and squeezing it. Seeing this live was everything I'd dreamed of, but suddenly it was too much to handle.

I needed space to breathe, to think, to understand the implications of what he had told me.

How could it be possible that I made a deal and not even remember it?

"You're looking a little green there, little lamb," Max said beside me. I was grateful for his presence. I didn't think he could be someone I'd confide in, but he was tall and seemingly strong, and at the moment, I was very fearful of what could be out there.

I hadn't seen my mother. I never made any deal. Just because I'd felt guilty for the last few months over my family's improvement didn't mean this was happening. Just because I feared it didn't make it true. I was paranoid, delusional—why wouldn't that be it?

"Are you okay?" Max asked. "Dawn?" It was then that I realized he'd been shaking me, his hand on my shoulder.

I slowly brought my eyes to him and tried to speak. My mouth was so dry.

“I think you need some fresh air,” he said, getting to his feet, wrapping his hands around my arms, and pulling me up beside him. The ground felt unsteady.

He led me outside, tucking my notepad and pen into the back pocket of my jeans, a gesture that was more paternal than anything else.

Outside, life was going on as normal. We walked over to a small park and sat on a bench across from a water spigot shaped like a gargoyle head. We sat in silence for a while, watching the cars go by and the vendors across from the theater trying to sell antiques and used books. It was brighter than yesterday and warmer, too, with the sun trying to break through the thick puffs of clouds. It didn’t matter where I was, though—my head was too scary a place, the doom and possibilities threatening my thoughts at every turn.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?” Max asked, leaning forward with elbows on knees, his hands clasped. “Or is that asking too much?”

I rubbed my fingers on my lips and stared into space. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me. I reckon I might.”

I thought back to what he said to me on the airplane about my story, how disappointed he looked when I told him it had all been a metaphor. I looked at him, at his sun-kissed face, ageless and young, and at the heavy application of gel, which made his hair swoop up off his forehead and glint dark red and gold. I wondered if I would trust him and realized I probably could. Whether Max was here to babysit me or not, he certainly meant me no harm.

“Well,” I said carefully. “Remember the story I wrote about Hybrid? Let’s just say there were no metaphors and everything I wrote was true. Everything.”

He blinked and his lips twisted into a lopsided smile. “Everything? You never wrote about you and Sage getting it on.”

“That wasn’t anyone’s business. And I just told you that I think—that I know—that he basically signed a lease with the Devil for his career and his fame, and you’re thinking of the fact that I never disclosed we were having sex?”

“I’m usually more interested in the story not being told,” he said, leaning back on the bench and patting his camera bag. “That’s why I became a photographer.”

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I peered at his camera bag and noted the tag that was sewn into it said the name “Jacob.” He must have borrowed it from him or something.

“So that’s it?” I asked, looking at him squarely. “You just accept what I said, no questions, no telling me that I’m crazy?”

“Do you think you’re crazy, little lamb?”

“I’ll go crazy if you keep calling me that.” I exhaled loudly and put my head in my hands, suddenly exhausted, my hair creating a red waterfall in front of my face. “And yes. Sometimes I do think I’m crazy, Max. But it happened. Jacob can back me up. Sage can back me up. I’m sure poor Noelle, if she ever gets better, could back me up. This shit happened. And...I think...I think it’s happening again.”

I felt Max stiffen beside me. “What do you mean, ‘it’s happening again’?”

I mumbled into my hands, “It’s probably nothing. But Sage had a few occurrences with a crazy maid at the hotel and thinks I may have made a deal with the Devil. I know. It just adds to how insane this all is.”

“And did you?”

The question of the hour. I felt sick just thinking about it. It couldn’t have happened, it couldn’t have happened.

“No. I don’t recall ever doing such a thing.” But even as I said the words, despite that I knew their truth, I didn’t feel any better, any safer.

A great pause hung over us, pressing down with all the questions. I turned my head and eyed him through a rusty wall of hair.

“You do think I’m crazy, don’t you? You think it’s all bunk.”

He seemed to consider that, his eyes watching the cars go past. “Would you think I was crazy if I believed you?”

“Kinda.”

“Let’s just say I’m more open-minded than most people, if you catch my drift.”

“I really need to speak to Jacob,” I said, sitting up. The more I sat there, the more I thought I was being useless. As much as I appreciated how open-minded Max was, I needed to talk to Jacob, someone who would know something, who would maybe even be able to do something. “Do you know where he is?”

He shook his head and brought out a cigarette. He offered me one from his tin, but I waved it away. He shrugged. “Thought maybe you needed one. Even non-smokers gotta smoke sometimes.”

“That’s an interesting philosophy,” I noted, standing up. “How do I hail a cab here, just flag them down? I think I’m going to go back to the hotel and get some rest before tonight. Maybe Jacob’s there.”

He stood up, too. “I’ll go with you,” he said quickly, flinging his spent matchstick onto the road. “We caught enough of soundcheck anyway, and the show doesn’t start until eight tonight.”

“So you really are my chaperone.”

“I like to look out for the ladies,” he said with a grin as he thrust out his arm, instantly stopping the nearest cab. After everything that Sage and I had discussed, I couldn’t argue with that. Especially when I was going back to the hotel where the supposed crazy maid was.

Once back at the hotel, I couldn’t find Jacob, so I ended up taking a much-needed nap. Even with the door locked and Max telling me to call or come to his room at any time, I thought I wouldn’t be able to sleep. But I passed out right away and awoke to Max’s wake-up call, which consisted of him bleating like a sheep. Thank God it was still early enough for the sun to be in the sky, setting low on the horizon. I couldn’t have handled another disorienting wake-up experience in the darkness. Even so, when I got up, I made a point to turn on every single light in the bedroom and look everywhere for flies. There were none. I felt a trace of guilt for having been in Paris for twenty-four hours and not having seen any of the sights, but in the end I had to think of the big picture. And my job.

I got ready for the show, putting my hair up into a ponytail and pulling on boots, a denim skirt, and a thin tank top with Janice Joplin’s face sketched on it that I didn’t have to wear a bra with. For May, it was still quite chilly in Paris, but I knew the venue would be warm. That was one of the things I both loved and hated about concerts—that heat that only hundreds of sweaty, drunk, and adrenaline-fueled bodies can cause. It was just as intoxicating as the vibe.

Once again, I had missed Jacob, but I figured he was knee-deep in managing the band before they went on and making sure everything was going perfectly. With sharp bitterness, I imagined that Angeline was also there doing her job, and I tried to switch off my brain before I thought about Sage doing her. I honestly didn’t know how I was going to get past that. It was one thing to know he’d screwed lots of groupies and chicks over the last eight months; it was another to know what one of them looked like, to know she made her mark on his skin, that I’d have to see her in the flesh. It made everything so terrifyingly real.

I was heading down the stairs to meet Max in the lobby when I caught a peculiar odor on the fourth floor. I looked down the hall, thinking someone had left a bag of rancid garbage outside their door when all the lights on the floor started flickering. At the end of the hallway, a tall figure came around the corner and then stopped.

I stared at the figure, my hand covering my nose to block the stench, feeling like there was something terribly wrong here. The figure came forward, a black coat trailing behind, and I realized it was a man. He came halfway up the hall and then stopped again, in between the lights so he was hidden in shadow. I don't know why I didn't keep walking down the stairs, why I was so drawn to this person coming down the hall like a regular hotel guest.

Maybe because in my heart I knew he wasn't a regular hotel guest.

"Dawn," I heard a faint voice whisper, coming from his direction. "Dawn before the darkness." The voice was ethereal yet menacing, and I started to smell the metallic tang of blood. I took my hand away from my nose and saw blood smeared on my fingers. A nosebleed.

I looked back at the man, but he was gone. The hallway was empty. Cold.

A woman in a tweed suit was coming up the stairs with a lapdog in her arms. She gave me an incorrigible look as she squeezed past me—I was too stunned to move. As she did, her Lhasa Apso started barking like mad down the hallway, toward the place where the man had been. The man who had whispered my name.

"Do you smell that?" I whispered, more to the dog than to the woman.

The woman muttered something in French that was probably "buzz off" and kept going up the stairs, eyeing me suspiciously over the railing as she went.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up, telling me to go and go now. I swiftly ran down the rest of the stairs until I practically slammed into Max in the lobby.

“Whoa, where’s the fire?” he asked.

“Nowhere. Let’s go, I don’t want to be late.”

“Wait, what’s wrong?” He grabbed my hand and peered at it. “You’re bleeding.”

I tried to shrug. “Just a nosebleed. Came out of nowhere.”

He fished out a Kleenex from his pocket and handed it to me.

“Thank you,” I said, embarrassed. I wiped away the last of the blood and threw the Kleenex in the trash.

He tugged at his camera bag and gestured to the exit doors. “After you.” We started walking and were almost outside when he asked, “Don’t you need a sweater?”

“It’ll be hot in the venue,” I managed to say, trying to keep my wits about me and my paranoia under control.

“But you’re shivering.”

He was right.

Since it was a Friday night, it took us some time to hail a cab to the venue. By the time we arrived, the place was absolutely swarming with people. There were men outside with signs, perhaps asking to buy tickets, and a long line up around the block. My heart began to pound in my throat. Sage really was a big deal here—people

everywhere were wearing his Sage Wisdom shirts or Hybrid shirts. My heart swelled with a strange blend of pride and jealousy—all these people were there to see him, just as I was there to see him. Tonight he wasn't just mine. Not that he was ever just mine; obviously he was Angeline's the other night, but even so, I knew I had to share him with the masses.

Max paid the cabbie and ushered me out of the car. I was so strangely starstruck by everything—his name on the glowing marquee, the squeals and cries of the fans trying to get in, and that thick, meaty rumble of the opening band already playing inside. Max brought out our press passes and gently put mine around my neck as he puffed on another cigarette. I barely noticed the smoke going into my face.

“Want to go in here, or do you want to try a little backdoor action?” he asked with a wag of his brows.

I smiled, letting the adrenaline fuzz all over me like radio waves. “Back door. I'm that kind of girl.”

“Good to know,” he said and took my elbow, leading me down the block until we could cut into the alleyway that serviced the back of the venue. I could be highly self-indulgent when it came to music and covering music. I loved my fucking all-access and press passes like nobody's business, and since Hybrid, I hadn't covered a show this big, let alone one that meant this much to me. I wanted to use all of this to my complete advantage, and if this meant going in through the back door, where only the privileged people or crew were allowed, then that's what I was going to do.

We went down the alley, which was filled with alley cats and garbage that tumbled in the chilling breeze. I started shivering and Max took off his leather jacket and placed it over my shoulders. I didn't even protest.

There were a few vans parked outside the door and roadies running stuff in and out. I

recognized one of them from the soundcheck earlier and smiled at him. He grinned back and motioned for us to hurry inside while he carried in a pedal board. After we waved our passes at the theater's bouncer, who scrutinized mine until the roadie had to tell him who I was, we stepped inside to the smoke-filled backstage area.

People were hustling back and forth, and the opening band was playing a wicked cover of Led Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker," which made the ornate lights above us sway and the crowd cry out.

"You think people will ever get sick of hearing Led Zeppelin?" Max asked cynically as we flattened ourselves against a wall to make room for people who were bringing seat rows out of the pit and down the hall.

I shook my head. "I bet thirty years from now, you'll still hear 'Stairway to Heaven' on the radio."

"Mercy, I hope not."

"Well, if it isn't my redheaded brethren," Jacob said as he appeared at the opposite end of the hall. He'd changed into a velvet suit that matched the chair cushions in the theater. He glanced at a pocket watch. "Running a bit late, yeah?"

"Sorry," I said as we approachd him. "Took longer than we thought to get here." I paused. "I was looking for you earlier."

His beady amber eyes fastened on me in curiosity. "Been a bit busy, love. Hope it wasn't too important."

Well, it definitely wasn't something I was going to spring on him here. I shook my head. "No, it was nothing. How are things?"

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“Opening band sucks,” Max put in.

Jacob gave him a dry look before turning to me. “Things are chaotic. Everything is going to shite. If you haven’t noticed, people have started dancing and throwing themselves around in the orchestra pit already, so they’re trying to take away the seats. The venue is at capacity. Tricky’s amp has blown, so we have to see if we can borrow one. Sage has managed to stay sober, but I don’t know how much longer that will last. Oh, and I made the bloody keyboardist cry.”

“Where is Sage?” I asked. “Can I see him?”

“First door down there,” Jacob pointed. “Has a star on it if you can believe it. You can tell him he’s got fifteen minutes before they have to go on. Max will be down in the photography pit for the first three songs. You can watch from the side stage with me, Dawn. It’ll be like old times.” He grinned.

I nodded, clutching my pass anxiously, and scooted off down the hall before someone decided to take up all of Sage’s time.

I quickly knocked, hoping he was alone. In the background, “Heartbreaker” came to a thunderous close, which made the crowd erupt into muffled cheers. God, there was nothing better than live music, even when you couldn’t see it.

“What?” Sage yelled from the other side.

“It’s Dawn.”

I heard shuffling and suddenly the door swung open halfway. He poked his head out and looked into the hallway both ways. Then he put his hand behind my shoulder and scuttled me inside, shutting the door behind me.

The dressing room was small but was obviously used for actors in the theater, with its clothes rack and huge vanity mirror framed by frosted lightbulbs. On the desk was a bottle of Jameson whiskey, half gone, as well as a setlist and an acoustic guitar.

I looked to Sage, who was standing in the middle of the room, running his hand through his thick, black curls. He'd obviously drunk the whiskey, but his eyes were sharp and crystal clear. Maybe that's what Jacob meant by sober.

He also looked amazing. A drop-dead gorgeous rock and roll star. He was wearing his combat boots, tight black jeans, a silver necklace with a wicked-looking cross at the end, and a black leather vest with no shirt underneath, which meant you could see the beauty of his body, his bronzed skin and the tattoos on his upper arms. He wasn't as muscular as he'd been before having lost a bit of weight, but his form was still hard and well-cut. I had to touch my mouth to make sure I wasn't drooling.

This was the last man who'd been inside me.

"You look great," I found myself saying. Stupidly, I might add. "How are you holding up?"

He just shook his head and went straight to the bottle. He poured a full glass, handed the glass to me, and kept the bottle to himself.

"I need you to drink with me," he said.

"You have to go on in fifteen minutes," I said, eyeing the whiskey in my hands. "Jacob said."

“And I won’t go on if I don’t stop freaking the fuck out.”

I looked at him sharply. He seemed so in control when I’d seen him perform earlier. Now, though his eyes were clear, I could see the fear in them and the way he tensed his jaw. I felt myself thaw a little inside, knowing how vulnerable he actually was. The veteran rocker who had been to Hell and back was actually afraid.

I tried to smile reassuringly. “You’re going to be fine, Sage.”

He shook his head and stepped over to me, putting his strong hand on mine and making me raise the glass to my lips. His eyes bore into me like burning stars. “Please don’t make me drink alone. I need you to...just be here with me.”

I felt the air sucked out of me, the tingling feeling swirling in my chest, the feeling of his hand on mine. I wanted that hand everywhere. Despite the setback, the pain over the last day, the creepy shit on the horizon, I still fucking wanted him like I’ve never wanted anyone before.

I nodded and opened my mouth, and he tipped the glass until the liquid burned down my throat. A tiny bit spilled out of my lips and his thumb was there, slowly wiping it away. I was so tempted to take his thumb into my mouth, but he removed it and put it in his mouth instead, slowly sucking the whiskey off. His eyes never left mine. My core tightened in response.

“This is a big show,” he said in a low, gruff voice. He turned my hand over so it was palm-up to his mouth. “And I don’t know how I’m going to please everyone. But most of all, I don’t know how I’m going to please you. Because in the end,” he kissed my open palm, his lips soft, “your opinion is the only one that counts.”

I gulped, my legs starting to shake slightly. This was turning from a pre-show check-in, some observation I’d later add to the article, into something else. Something much

more. I could feel it in the energy around us.

He took another step toward me so that our faces were inches apart and cupped my face with both his hands. I couldn't look away from his gaze, from this man I'd loved; I was trapped in it, and willingly.

"You know what I think," I said in barely a whisper, my lips grazing his as I spoke.

"You've said a lot of things over the last few days," he murmured.

I smiled nervously, so afraid to admit what he already knew. "To these people, you're a golden god, Sage. More than that, you're my golden god. That never, ever changed."

He leaned in and kissed me right below the ear. I closed my eyes, relishing the sparks he created, breathing in his intoxicating scent. "I think you might be the best cure for stage fright this world has ever known." Suddenly he pulled back and went to the door, hand on the lock. "How much time did Jacob say I had?"

"Fifteen minutes," I told him breathlessly. "Maybe ten now."

He grinned, showing off those dimples. "That's enough time to make you come twice."

My eyes widened while a beautiful terror wound itself around my body. My underwear was probably soaked in seconds flat. Before I had time to get really nervous, he locked the door and was at me, my face grasped between his strong hands, his lips on mine. He kissed me like a feverish man, lost and delirious and wanting, always wanting. I tried to catch up, my hands flying to his chest, feeling the coldness of the leather against the warmth of his skin. I clawed at him, clumsy and eager, while he fucked my mouth with his tongue, ran lips down my neck, pulled my

body up against his until I could feel for myself just how hard he was, how badly he wanted me.

I felt like I was reliving a memory I'd abandoned, but this was real; it was happening. Our hands on each other felt like second nature, my body fitting against his like a puzzle piece that clicked into place. This was so easy, so fucking easy, and yet it thrilled me like nothing else, a hit of adrenaline worth a million live shows.

"Dawn," he groaned into my mouth. "I want to fuck you so bad. I won't be able to play my guitar until I play you."

I gripped his head, my fingers lost in his curls, and was overtaken by the passion burning through me. "Then play me. Make me scream your name, and then make that crowd scream your name."

"You've got it," he said. Then he picked me up, his hands under my ass, fumbled forward, and brushed the setlist and guitar off to the side until I was sitting on the desk, my head smashing briefly against the mirror, the lights shaking. I quickly pulled my tank top over my head and tossed it over his shoulder. He covered my nipples with his mouth, smoothing them over with his wide tongue while he reached down and bunched my skirt up around my hips.

I moaned loudly. I hadn't had this feeling, this exquisite, nerve-dazzling feeling in such a long time. I felt like I was being awakened from one hell of a slumber.

He reached around to his back pocket, and I heard the tear of a condom wrapper. While he fiddled with that, I grabbed his belt buckle and brought him right up to me, my legs wrapping around his slender waist, the heels of my boots digging into the dents on his lower back. I unzipped his pants, freeing his cock from them. It was still so fucking beautiful, dangerously beautiful, and once again it was mine. I bit my lip, relishing the weight and length of it in my hands.

He slipped the condom on it with precision then stroked his long fingers against my clit until they slowly entered me, one by one. His skilled fingers that could coax the most amazing sounds from his guitar and make me feel like I was another one of his virile instruments.

“You’re ready for me again,” he said, his eyes staring hard into mine, his breath shaking with lust.

“I never stopped being ready,” I said.

His eyes flashed with fire, his mouth dropped open, and it was on mine again as he grabbed my ponytail with one fist while he guided himself into me with his other hand. I gasped at the intrusion, the stab of pain that only lasted a few seconds before my body relaxed and molded to him, another missing piece of the puzzle.

He pushed into me slowly, each thrust measured and controlled. But as his grip on my hair tightened, pulling my head back against the mirror and exposing my throat to his tongue, mouth, teeth, he pushed into me harder, fuller, all the way to the hilt. His pace became faster, his breath harder, his groans louder, his thumb sliding quicker on my clit until I was coming and couldn’t do anything about it.

I cried out, unable to keep myself from yelling his name, an explosion of warmth that rocked me on sharp waves of pleasure. I felt fizzy and giddy, luxuriating in the feeling, but he was far from done.

He bit down on my neck and groaned. “That was once; you’re coming again.”

He pumped harder and faster into me, rattling the mirror and the lights, the desk thumping against the walls. I heard someone knock at the door and try the door handle, but it felt like that was happening in another world. In this world, it was only me and Sage, the muse and the master, the man who created bliss for me in so many

fucking ways. His talent knew no bounds. I felt like I owed him the world, if not just the little one we were currently in.

“I’m almost there,” he grunted, his breath heavy, sweat gathering on his brow. His glazed green eyes stared at me in a whirl of passion. “I want you to look at me as we come. I want you to make me forget. You’re better than any drug.”

I made sure I kept eye contact with him, no matter how intimate it was, and dug my fingers into his waist, driving him forward into me. His body never lost the rhythm that was so deeply engrained in him—always on beat, always in time. His fingers expertly rubbed me until I was swollen and about to burst, and I could see he was, too.

He came hard and furious, eyes rolling back in his head and groaning loudly in such a baritone, animalistic way that I’m sure I could have come again from just that alone. We both clung to each other, riding out the crescendo together, making sure we were feeling it all as one. One beat. One note. One song.

I slowly came back into the real world, my face buried in his chest, breathing in the smell of his leather vest, my legs untangling themselves from around his waist.

“Wow,” I breathed, unable to think of anything more fitting to say.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice raw and rough. “I think we both needed that.”

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I smiled slyly at him and brushed his hair out of his eyes. “You have no idea.”

“No, you have no idea.” He smiled and kissed me hard on the lips. “I missed you, Dawn.” He put my hand on his chest. “I missed you from in here.”

“Sage, what the fuck are you doing in there?” Jacob suddenly yelled from the hall, the door vibrating from his heavy knocks. “Or who the fuck are you doing is the better question,” I heard him mumble.

Well, that was enough to sober us both up.

Sage shot me a sheepish look as he pulled the condom off, flicking it in the trash, and quickly pulled up his pants. “Guess we went over our time limit.”

I hopped off the desk and smoothed down my skirt. “You still made me come twice; you’re a man of your word.” He bent down and tossed me my tank top, which I quickly put on before he went over to the door and opened it.

Jacob eyed him suspiciously before he saw me and let out a burst of relief. “Oh, thank God it’s you, love.”

Who did you think it would be? I thought but pushed it away and smiled, making sure my shirt and skirt were on properly.

He raised his brow at Sage. “Of course, you do realize you’re going on stage in one minute, right?”

Sage stared down at him. “I didn’t. Lost track of time.”

Jacob’s gaze went to the whiskey bottle, which Sage had put on the ground. “Is that going to be a problem?”

Sage grinned. “No problem, boss.” He smacked Jacob hard on the shoulder. “I’m gonna make those French fuckers scream.” He looked at me and gave me a faint nod before heading out the door and into the hall.

Jacob slowly turned to face me, his brows high on his lined forehead, a shocked smile on his lips. “I could kiss you, love, you know that.”

I scrunched up my face, smoothing back my ponytail. “Please don’t.”

“No promises,” he said. “I didn’t think you could talk sense into Sage like that, but...I guess that wasn’t talking, either.” I opened my mouth to say something, but he raised his hand to stop me. “Your silence is enough; so long as Sage is ready and wanting to play, I have no qualms.” He looked at his pocket watch. “Showtime. Are you ready?”

Was I ever.

He held out his arm for me, and I linked mine around it. We headed for the stage.

Chapter Eight

Dawn

There is nothing like being backstage at a concert. Nothing. And if it’s a band or musician that you love, that you know inside and out, as deep or deeper than your own soul, then it’s a practically otherworldly experience. You can’t even describe it,

though I have tried in my own writing, time and time again.

Jacob and I went to the side stage, among a few family members of the French drummer and a few other journalists covering the show. On the other side of the stage were the sound tech guys and roadies, who'd finished running across the stage and taping down the setlists. Sage and his band were in their places in the middle, Sage at the forefront. The lights were completely off in the theater, and the place was absolutely humming with anticipation and the cries of the fans who were dying for Sage, dying for the lights, dying for the music.

I stood beside Jacob, who was elegantly filing his nails, something I learned he did when he was nervous. We all had our quirks. I hadn't gotten a look at the setlist back in the dressing room—there were more pressing things than that—so I was waiting there in as much anticipation as the crowd. I knew Sage would most likely only be playing songs from his solo album, but there was always a chance a Hybrid song would pop up. He wrote most of them anyway.

I heard someone onstage tap his foot three times, and Jacob muttered "Go" under his breath.

The first few notes of Sage's crystal clear guitar rang out into the crowd. It was the start of his song, "The Tail I Had," and everyone cheered as the drums and bass kicked in and the lights in the house went on, illuminating the stage. It was one of my favorite songs from the album, one of the catchier, more radio-friendly tunes that hit hard with swagger and heavy bass that made your hips swing. Sage's voice was perfect—this low, raspy growl that just screamed sex to everyone else and especially to me since it was the sound I'd heard just moments earlier.

And that's when it hit me, the holy-fuck realization that I'd just had sex with the man onstage, the man that all the women were screaming at, the tall, exotic golden god with the green eyes and the bronze skin who prowled the stage like a broad-

shouldered panther. More than a panther, he was king and we were his subjects. Sage was nothing but one hundred percent confident in himself and his music, and he was enjoying the control he had over everyone as we swayed and sang and attached our souls to his words and his guitar chords.

Tears sprang to my eyes.

I found myself singing out loud, very loud, through this song and the next song and the next song, grinning so hard I thought my face would freeze that way, feeling nothing but love, utter fucking love, for this man and his gift and his music that made me feel alive more than anything else could. And as I looked over the crowd, taking in their enraptured faces as they sung along and stared up at him, I knew everyone was feeling the same way. We were all joined together in this poetic web, maybe all feeling different things and taking away different stories and lessons, but we were all feeling. And sometimes in this world full of war and strife and daily shit that made you numb, that's all you really needed.

When the third song was over and the fourth song, the hard and fast "Sick, Sick" started, Max joined me onstage, leaning over and whispering, "I'm fucking amazed," as he took his camera strap off his neck.

I laughed and nudged him in the side to tell him he was an idiot for even doubting.

"I always thought Hybrid were Led Zeppelin wannabes," he said, trying to be heard over the music, "and since Sage was the king of that, this just proves me wrong."

"At least you can admit it. Get any good shots?" I asked him, unable to take my eyes away from Sage, my mouth automatically mouthing the lyrics, my head bobbing hard to the beat.

"I think so. Won't know until I get them to a lab. Hopefully there's one in Nice. He's

a photogenic man, though. I'll have to give him that, too."

Photogenic, talented, powerful—there were too many adjectives to describe Sage onstage. The best one I could think of was assured. He was owning it. From ballad to bass-driven to full-out drums and distortion, he owned every second of it and he knew it. He sauntered up and down the stage, his fingers making quick work of the guitar strings, and sometimes, when he turned to face the band, playing off of Tricky, he was smiling like a little boy. In his element. This place where nothing could touch him. During even the darkest songs, which I knew were about Hybrid, he was in control, paying his respects instead of succumbing to the darkness like he did when he was offstage.

"You really love this music, don't you?" Max asked, leaning in close. The band had been playing tirelessly for an hour now, and I knew they were close to having their encore.

"What do you think?"

He smiled. "You're a swell chick, Dawn Emerson."

"Thanks, Max..." I trailed off and frowned. "Wait, what's your last name?"

There was a pause after I asked that, and I tore my eyes off of Sage and looked at him.

"Jacobs. It's Jacobs," he said, scratching at his sideburns.

I gave him an odd look and looked at Jacob, who had moved away to talk to one of the roadies. "You're not related to Jacob, are you?"

"That would make him Jacob Jacobs," he said, "and I reckon that just sounds stupid."

I pursed my lips and looked back to the stage just as the drummer hit the top hat, the last note of the last song on their album. My gut wrenched thinking that the show was almost over. I had to remind myself that I was lucky, that I'd get to see this show quite a few more times on the tour. There was nothing so curiously sad as a great concert coming to an end.

Sage and the band exited to the opposite side of the stage, but since the lights in the house stayed off, I knew they were just taking a break before the encore. I tried to catch Sage's eye as he stood to the side, guzzling a bottle of water and talking to Tricky, but it was too dark.

"So did you get a chance to talk with him earlier?" Max asked.

"Sorta."

He snorted. "Gotcha."

I glared at him. "It's not like that."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he answered. I knew that Max knew about Sage and I, but it still made me nervous with all the groupie implications. Not that he was saying that, but I was still always afraid that people were thinking it all the same. That's why I'd never really told anyone about Sage and me, even though, believe me, there were a few times I'd wanted to.

The stage lights went on, but the spotlights were shining on the audience instead of the stage, illuminating clumps of people in circles. I watched, dazzled and concert-high, as the smoke that sat about the audience caught in the lights. I was amused at the grins and cheers from the concertgoers who were being blinded. Most would never have the view of themselves that I had.

But, for one second, I saw something that I never thought I'd see again.

The lights paused at the middle of the crowd, where everyone was jostling back and forth in anticipation, drinks spilling, drunks stumbling—and in the middle of it all was a pale girl with long white hair and violet eyes standing absolutely still. She smiled, her mouth full of razor-blade teeth.

I see you, her voice said in my head.

I froze in horror, ice forming on my limbs, my breath leaking out slowly like a balloon losing air.

“No guesses, huh?” Max said from beside me. The spotlight moved elsewhere and the place I was staring, where the girl in white was, was plunged into darkness. “Dawn?”

“What?” I squeaked out, unable to move.

“I asked if you knew what the encore would be.”

I tried to swallow, but my throat wouldn't allow it. I couldn't have just seen what I thought I'd seen. There was no way, no way that could have been a GTFO. No way it could have been Sonja, head of the demon groupies. I kept my eyes glued to the same spot, and when the spotlight came back again, she was gone.

I brought my eyes to Max, glad it was dark enough to hide my expression. “Uh, I don't know,” I said, fumbling for words. Though I couldn't see his face properly, I could feel his questioning gaze, and I knew he was concerned. Across the way, dark figures moved across the stage, taking their places. Sage's tall form picked up his guitar, Tricky strapped on his bass, the drummer picked up his sticks. The audience went on in its drunken anticipation, but the area around the stage lapsed into a hush,

feeling the weight of the moment, knowing what everyone else didn't.

Even in my fright over what had happened, over what I thought I'd seen, I was still able to appreciate the moment for what it was: Sage hidden in the shadows, plucking a pick off the microphone stand as he hunched over his guitar, hair hanging in his face, fingers poised at the strings.

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The lights came on, and I was blown away by the immediate rush of the song—the vocals, bass, drums, and guitars all coming in at the same time. It was a Hybrid song, “Wet Lips,” always a crowd pleaser, and it brought an explosion of applause from the audience. I’d later look back on that moment when I was writing my review of the show and think that the word “explosion” didn’t quite cut it. It was so much more than that—a visit from a dead loved one, only with Sage at the vocals instead of Robbie Oliver.

I wondered how hard it was for Sage to play something he’d only played with his old bandmates. His face was grave as he sang, his voice low and haunting, and the song had a down-tuned, muddy tone that it hadn’t had before, rising up to a wave of sound that washed over you and sunk into your bones. I was crying again; I couldn’t help it—music, his music, could move me like no other.

When the song was over, the lights went on and the crowd cheered and hollered and demanded more. But from the spent way Sage slinked off the stage, there was nothing more left in him to give. He’d just put his battered heart on a platter, and we all gobbled it up. We couldn’t be sated with anything he could give us; we always wanted more and always would want more, that needy relationship between the consumer and the artist.

He’d given me two mind-blowing orgasms just hours earlier, and I still needed more.

While the rest of the band went off to the side, followed by the rest of the journalists plus Jacob, who was scurrying to get ahead of Sage, I wasn’t sure what to do with myself.

“Should we go back to the hotel?” Max asked. “I think he might be awhile.”

I probably should have, but I wanted to stay and wrap up the exhilaration of the opening night. I shook my head and gave Max my most pleading look. “Will you stay with me?”

“Why, so you can have company until he’s free and then fuck off with him?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I always feel awkward when I’m backstage alone with no band or crew with me.”

“You’re a journalist,” he pointed out.

“I know, but...” Sometimes I got afraid, but I wasn’t about to admit it to him.

As if he could pick up on that last thought, he nodded, knowing there were more than a few things to be afraid of out there. The image of Alva in the crowd haunted me. I wanted to chalk it up to my mind playing tricks on me—considering what was happening, that was the most obvious explanation. But since what was happening wasn’t exactly normal, either, you never knew, and I really didn’t want to underestimate anything.

“Let’s go see if we can get in on the action,” Max said. We followed the crowd into the hallway backstage. We didn’t get very far. At the end of the sea of people was Sage, taller than all the reporters, practically being assaulted by a dozen microphones. I knew Sage hated this part of being a musician, having to deal with people like me, the press, but I still felt a surge of pride for him, that he was getting this now all on his own.

Jacob was at the forefront, trying to dictate which reporter got to ask what question, but the French were unruly and ignored him for the most part. At least they stood

back enough to give Sage a little breathing room and listened when Jacob threatened them if they ever asked a question regarding what happened to Hybrid.

And beside Jacob was Angeline. Her lips were done up in the darkest red, and she was wearing a black leather miniskirt that matched Sage's vest perfectly, some sheer white top with a black bra underneath, and platform shoes that put her closer to his height. Not exactly the professional image I assumed a promoter would have—she looked like a rock tramp. Her focus was all on him, and she smiled her dazzling smile to the reporters every now and then, as if the questions were meant for her.

Maybe it was because I'd just slept with Sage, but just the sight of her, just the fact that she was closer to him at this moment than I was, was making my blood boil.

"I've gotta take some photos of this; this is far-out," Max eventually said. I looked up at him and noticed he was giving Angeline the stinkeye, too, or maybe that was just my imagination. He walked over to the wall, taking out his camera and trying to get in the whole scene of Sage at the height of his fame.

Sage himself noticed Max first and then noticed me. His eyes lit up, and he smiled and looked like was trying to make his way over my way. But Jacob gave me a quick glance and kept Sage in place, gesturing to the reporters who were trying even harder now to get him to answer their questions. Jacob then nudged Angeline and whispered into her ear. She turned her head toward me, looking me up and down and then nodded.

She detached herself from Sage's side and sashayed down the hall toward me, a pert little smile on her face and eyes that were made to be patronizing.

"Dawn," she said (again, the way she said it sounded like "dun"), "Jacob says for you to head back to the hotel."

“Well, how long is Sage going to be?”

She looked back at the reporters who were now asking questions about his next album.

“He will be here for some time,” she said, smiling back at me. “He is very popular, as you can see.”

I could see that. This was one of those moments where, even though it was my job to be asking the questions along with the rest of them, it also wasn’t. I was in a weird limbo state between being a journalist and being more than a journalist.

“Sage!” a woman reporter yelled, making Angeline and I look over in curiosity. “I am with an American news service here, and the people in my office want to know if you have a girlfriend.”

Oh no.

I expected Jacob to butt in and say it was none of their business, next question please, but he merely looked at Sage for his answer, as everyone else was doing. I hadn’t realized I’d been holding my breath.

Sage didn’t even look my way. He just shook his head and said, “No, I’m single.”

I felt like disappearing.

Angeline looked back to me, her smile now smug. She knew. And she was enjoying this, enjoying watching my ego get pummeled. I tried to put on a brave face, but I knew she could see right through it.

She leaned in and I caught her smell—heavy perfume, like cheap vanilla pudding I

ate too much of as a kid. “If it makes you feel better, this is much better for his image here, no? He will be more popular if it looks like he is unattached. Fucking, as we both know, is allowed, bien sûr.”

I sucked in my breath and tried to keep my temper reined in. I was seconds from losing it, tired of this roller coaster of highs and lows all because of him. I didn’t give a fuck what looked better for Sage; the fact was I had meant something to him, I had to have, and even if we were officially together instead of this weird starting-over, in-between stage, he’d still probably lie about it to the press.

I caught Jacob staring at me, willing me with those sharp eyes of his to be understanding, to stay calm. Now I knew why he asked Angeline to make me leave. The more I hovered around this zone, this part of Sage’s job, the more complicated things became for everyone.

“Don’t worry,” I managed to say, my eyes holding hard on Jacob’s. “I’m leaving.”

I turned on my heel and stormed off down the hall. Within seconds I heard Max running up behind me.

“Wait,” he said as he caught up. “You changed your mind?”

“You heard the question,” I muttered as I kicked open the back door leading to the alley. It was raining now, and there were only a few smatterings of die-hard fans under umbrellas, waiting for a glimpse of Sage. They looked disappointed as hell to see me. I knew how they felt.

I hurried through the puddles in the alley, cursing myself and everything else. Max had tucked his camera in his pack just in time, and he lifted his leather jacket high above our heads to shield us from the rain.

“What question?” he finally asked as we got to the street and started looking for a cab.

I eyed him dryly. “The answer to if he had a girlfriend. That he said, no, he was single.”

Max cocked his head to the side, considering it, as water droplets rolled off the tip of his jacket. “Well, I mean you aren’t...he isn’t...”

I narrowed my eyes, lashes clumpy from the rain.

He shrugged. “Sorry, little lamb, but I’m with Sage on this one. Sometimes a rock star’s gotta say what a rock star’s gotta say. You should know that better than anyone.”

I sighed, knowing that Max was probably right, but it didn’t mean I had to like it. I just hated that it happened so soon after we slept together, after I fell in love with him onstage all over again. And I really hated that Angeline had to witness it. Ugh. Fucking, as we both know, is allowed. Why the hell didn’t I punch her for that one?

Because the Metro closest to us wasn’t running anymore, we ended up walking around in the rain for a half hour before we finally got a cab. By the time I got to my room, my clothes were soaking wet and my spirits were equally damp. Everything about the night had been absolutely amazing until the very end. Once we were back at the hotel, I fell asleep trying to erase it from my mind.

I woke up to my phone ringing. It took me a few moments to once again realize where I was. The room was dark, and the rain was pounding hard on the window. I was covered in blankets, but my teeth were chattering, my hair still damp from earlier.

I slowly rolled over and reached for the phone. Calls in the middle of the night were never a good thing, but maybe with the time difference it was Mel or my dad. I only got to speak to him briefly the other morning.

I pulled the covers around me tighter and snatched up the receiver.

“Hello?” I asked, my voice hoarse from singing at the concert earlier.

Static crackled in my ear. It definitely sounded long distance.

“Hello?” I repeated. “Mel?”

“Dawn.”

My entire body was immediately blanketed in in goosebumps, my heart seeming to beat through sludge. This couldn't be who it sounded like because if it was, then it was really long distance.

I swallowed, the sound loud in my head. “This is Dawn,” I whispered, my voice quivering.

It had to be a wrong number, it had to be a wrong number.

“Dawn, sweetie, I'm so glad it's you,” she said.

The voice of my mother.

My mother, who committed suicide when I was sixteen.

My mother, who I discovered dead in the bathroom with bleeding wrists and empty eyes.

“Sweetie,” she went on, her voice suddenly sounding so clear that it was nearly impossible to tell myself that I was dreaming. But I had to be dreaming, I had to be dreaming. “Dawn, you don’t know how good it is to talk to you, to finally talk to you. Oh, honey, I’ve missed you so much.”

The terror was so great that I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t move. I could only hold that phone to my ear, powerless against the fucking horror that was coming through the line. It sounded like my mother, but oh God, it couldn’t be.

My mother was dead. I saw her die. She was dead.

“Who are you?” I found myself croaking out.

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“I’m your mother,” she said, her tone hurt and shocked, but still so her. “You must still remember me. You wanted me to come back. They’ve let me go. They want us to see each other.”

The room went deadly silent, deadly cold. I started shivering uncontrollably.

“You aren’t her.”

There was a pause. This was the time for someone to admit they were playing a sick joke.

But it sounds just like her.

“Let me come see you,” she said. “Will you let me in?”

“You are not my mother.” My voice was cracking now, my heart threatening to leap clear out of my rib cage.

“Dawn...how could you not trust me?”

“Because you’re dead!” I screamed into the phone. “I saw you die. You killed yourself and left me in charge!”

Another pause. This one was heavy and long enough to make me start questioning my sanity. I could hear her breathing over the line, ominous and steady, and even that was familiar.

When I was a young girl, maybe seven years old, before she got depressed and went down the slippery slope of medication and mental illness, she bought me a stuffed horse. This was before I had Moonglow. I loved that fluffy pony to bits, and I carried it with me everywhere I went until Eric got a hold of it one day.

“If you’re her,” I said slowly. “Tell me the name of the plush horse you bought me. When I was young. What did I name the horse?”

The seconds ticked on by. I felt the world slowing down in this blackened, ice-cold room.

Finally she said, quietly, sweetly, too sweetly, “You named the horse Miss Piggy.” I sucked in my breath. She was right. “And you loved that dear horsie. You loved it so much, even though your brother cut the legs off of it and pulled out its guts and plucked out its eyes.” Her voice changed to a horrifically loud, inhuman demonic growl, straight from the depths of Hell. “And that’s just what I’m going to do to you!”

I screamed, dropped the phone, and leapt out of bed. My feet tripped over each other, and I slammed into the ground, biting down on my tongue. In seconds the door opened and the lights flicked on. I was so terrified, so fucking terrified that I’d see my mother standing there or the man in black, but it was Max, wearing a wifebeater and boxers, looking down at me in concern.

“Lordy, Dawn!” He dropped to his knees beside me. “Are you okay?”

I nodded quickly, tears threatening my eyes.

He wrapped his hands under my arms and pulled me up to my feet, and I collapsed against his chest, looking at the phone, the receiver lying on the bed.

“Did someone call you?” he asked. All I could do was keep nodding. He walked over and snatched up the phone, putting it to his ear. “Hello?” He eyed me and said it again. Then he shook his head and hung it up. “No one there. Who was it?”

I couldn’t even speak. I started shaking uncontrollably.

“It’s okay,” Max said in a hush and came over to me. “Want to come stay in my room? I’ll sleep on the floor and stay awake all night if I have to.”

I managed to say “thank you” and quickly grabbed my robe, suddenly conscious of the fact that I was wearing only a Sabbath shirt and cotton underwear. He led me out of my room and down the hall, and I couldn’t help but look behind me at Sage’s door. It was closed. I was grateful for Max being so nice, but it should have been Sage’s room I was going to, Sage’s arms giving me comfort.

He hadn’t even opened the door to check on me.

Chapter Nine

Sage

“Remember, I want to see you in the lobby at ten hundred hours or we are going to Nice without you,” Jacob barked. Every day he was sounding more and more like a drill sergeant.

I winced, head pounding, and put my face in my hands. “Could you please keep it down?”

I could tell he was watching me, probably trying to decide whether to yell in my face or not. We were sitting at the breakfast table, our last meal in Paris before we had to catch the train that would take us to Nice. Our equipment had already left in the van

the night before, so it was just the band and some of the crew.

Everyone except Dawn and Max. It would have worried me a lot more if I hadn't been so blown over by my hangover, but it was literally consuming me. I barely remembered what I did last night. I know that after the small press conference, Jacob had champagne for me and the boys in the dressing room. Tricky brought out the drugs. Then Jacob left us to our devices, and the last image I could recall was vomiting in the rain outside the Louvre, where a surprisingly rowdy Garth thought it would be fun to try and break into the museum. I couldn't tell you if it worked or not, but I definitely didn't come home with any Mona Lisa.

Luckily, the things I could remember clearly were the ones that mattered the most. The show, which went better than I ever could have hoped (save for a few fuckups), and Dawn...fucking the life out of Dawn in my dressing room. Forget the show—that was the highlight of 1975. Being inside her, so close to her, making her come with me, watching her want me...I got hard again just thinking about it, and my heart...my heart was getting soft.

"I'll give you a free pass, Sage," Jacob said slowly. "Only because you put on such a bloody good show. Keep it up. And I do mean it. Whatever you can do to get rid of your...Sage fright."

I heard Tricky groan at that pun, but I just shoved a croissant in my mouth and forced myself to swallow it.

"Oh, and there's the Red Potato now," Jacob said.

My head snapped up (something I instantly regretted), and I saw Max sauntering toward the table with an apologetic grin on his face and an ugly plaid shirt on his chest. What was it with the gingers and dressing so shittily?

“My nicknames spread fast,” Max noted with a raise of his eyebrows, taking a seat in front of Jacob. “Sorry I’m late.”

“Where’s Dawn?” Jacob asked, folding his arms. I could hear the crinkle of his stiff fabric.

Max’s eyes darted briefly to mine, but for the life of me I couldn’t read them. There was something strange about Max, something about him that made it impossible to know what he was thinking. “She’s not feeling well. She had a rough night.”

“Oh?” Jacob said. “What happened?”

Max shot him another one of those loaded looks. “A nightmare, I reckon. I heard her screaming. I’m surprised none of you did.” He was addressing the entire table but looking straight at me.

“Screaming?” I repeated, my heart sinking faster than a lead weight. My God, my poor angel.

“Yeah,” Max said gravely, reaching for a coffee cup. “She’s okay. She slept in my room.” He caught my eye again, and I swear he almost grinned. “Don’t worry, I stayed on the floor. Stayed awake. She was really shaken up. She should be okay, though.”

Oh, Christ. She was screaming last night—fucking screaming—in the room next door to me and I never fucking heard her. I was supposed to help her, to protect her, and I was out in the streets of Paris trying to recreate The Italian Job at the Louvre with a psychotically drunk keyboardist and a bassist who tried to climb the Egyptian Obelisk.

I was supposed to be there for her and I wasn’t. And instead she was turning to the

first warm shoulder to lean on—Max. I leaned forward in my chair, sticking another croissant in my mouth for good measure, and started scrutinizing him even greater now.

I'd never really been the jealous type—I'd never gotten close to anyone after my ex-wife died. I was the rock star here, I was the one everyone wanted, and I handled that just fine. But Dawn, she wasn't like everyone. Dawn had loved me and my music, but she wasn't an idiot. She knew how to separate the music from the man. If I kept fucking up, I would lose what little thing we had left. If I wasn't careful, she'd turn her back on me—and maybe find the next best thing instead. It might even be a tall redheaded lumberjack with a southern accent and peculiar otherworldliness to his eyes.

I felt like I was going to vomit again. I stood up, knocking over my chair, and quickly excused myself, heading to the toilets off the lobby while Jacob called after me, "Ten hundred, Sage!"

I puked my guts up until there was nothing left, but I still didn't feel any better.

On my way back to my room, I stopped by Dawn's door and gently knocked. There was no answer. I had no idea if she was in her room again or still in Max's, and I didn't know what room that was, so I decided to try again later and quickly got myself all packed up. I moved about as fast as molasses, with just a little blow to speed up the process. It made me feel better everywhere except in my heart.

"Let's go!" Jacob yelled while pounding on my door. I flung it open, my suitcase in one hand, shades pulled down on my eyes.

"I'm ready, chill out."

He peered at me. "Let me see your eyes."

“Dude, why? No.”

“Sage,” he warned. “Don’t make me start babysitting you again. You did great last night.” He poked his finger into my chest. “Do not fuck it up.”

“Have you been able to talk to her?” I asked.

“Dawn?” he asked. “Briefly. She says she’s fine. But I have to say, you need to step up your game, boy.”

I debated whether I was going to say the next thing. “Do you think she and Max are, uh…”

Jacob stared at me for a few beats, face completely emotionless, before he let out a snort and shook his head in contempt. “If you think Dawn is going to shag you and then go shag Max, you’ve got her pegged as the wrong woman. She’s not you.”

I licked my lips. “Low blow, man.”

“And you’ve had enough blow, I can see that. Now come on, you blooming twat.” He turned and I followed him downstairs and out into the lobby.

Angeline was standing in the middle of it with a clipboard in her hand, my bandmates and crew gathered around her. Somehow that rubbed me the wrong way, and I could tell Jacob would have none of it.

“What are you doing?” Jacob boomed, marching up to her. I looked past them and to Dawn, who was at the edge of the group. Our eyes met. She didn’t smile. I realized I was still wearing the shades.

“I was just trying to get everyone in line since you weren’t here,” Angeline said to

Jacob, her voice haughty. Or maybe it was her accent that made everything she said seem haughty. Man, she was a royal pain in the ass last night, following me everywhere, saying she wanted to ensure the “Americans” were behaving, trying to get me drunk at the same time. I’d seen her talking to Dawn earlier, when I was dealing with the reporters, and I knew that couldn’t have gone too well, not with the way that smirk never left her face. Angeline may have been a good lay, but there was no denying she was a manipulative bitch. I’d seen her type a lot in the industry.

“Well, you can leave the band to me, thank you, love,” he said to her, unable to hide the annoyance in his voice. I was surprised he didn’t snatch the clipboard out of her hands. He turned to everyone else. “All right, let’s go!”

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I don't think the hotel had ever been so glad to see guests leave.

Everyone started filing out, shuffling along in their hangover blues, but I stayed put, waiting for Dawn to come past. When she did, I quickly shot Max a "fuck off" sneer, which worked, and gently grabbed her by her forearm, pulling her over.

"Hey, are you okay?"

She seemed to stop with a sigh and looked up at me, eyes tired. The fire I saw last night was gone. "I'm okay."

"I'm sorry," I said awkwardly, feeling like a thirteen-year-old all over again. "I heard what happened last night. I never heard anything, otherwise I would have—"

"I know," she said, cutting me off. "I heard you had a big night. You deserved it." She seemed to relax a little. "You were amazing last night."

There was sincerity in that. It hit deep, the warmth spreading. "Thank you." Then I smiled and added, "You were amazing, too."

A blush crept up on the apples of her cheeks, and she looked down at the floor with a grin. "That's not exactly what I meant."

"But it's what I meant." I wanted to grab her—really grab her—and pull her to me. I wanted to kiss her in front of everyone, even though the band and crew were already outside by now.

“I heard you’re officially single,” she said, her voice now flat. That certainly put a damper on my erection.

“Oh no,” I said, hoping she’d understand. “That was just...Jacob said...”

“Monsieur Knightly?” A man called from behind me.

Dawn looked past my shoulder and then back to me. “I should go to the others. I’ll tell them you’re held up.” Then she turned and trotted out of the hotel, her red hair bouncing behind her.

I rolled my eyes. Fucking great timing. I turned around to see the hotel manager looking at me.

“What?” I asked impatiently.

He stepped out from behind the marble front desk and waved a cream-colored envelope at me.

“I have something for you.”

He came up to me and placed it in my hands. I turned it over. It was totally blank except for my initials.

“What is this?” I asked.

“A letter,” the manager said.

I raised a brow. “From who? I’m listed as Mr. Underhill at this hotel.”

He gave me a heady look. “It’s from the housecleaner, Mr. Knightly. It’s an

apology.”

Damn if my chest didn't feel like it was filling with ice water.

“Is it an apology from her or the Prince of Darkness?” I asked him.

He raised a thin brow. “I'm afraid I do not understand.”

I smiled caustically. “No comprende, eh, Hombre?” I patted the man on the shoulder. “Gracias.” I turned and walked through the lobby, sliding the envelope through my hands. I was terrified to read it but knew I had to. I just didn't know if I should do it by myself or with someone else.

I stepped out into the rain and was immediately ushered into a waiting limo. The letter would have to wait for now.

We arrived at the train station in record time, though I was disappointed that Dawn took a cab with Max and the sound guy while we had Angeline in the limo with us, insisting it was part of her job. I caught Jacob's eye a few times, knowing he was noticing her increasing pushiness. I also tried to tell him I got a letter from the crazy housekeeper, but I guess my telepathy skills weren't up to par.

Once we were on the train, we had assigned seats, and Angeline was forced to make do with Tricky while I was with Jacob. Dawn and Max were a few rows behind us.

“So,” I said to Jacob as the grey buildings flew past the train's windows, “that was Paris.”

“That's Paris when you're in a band. At least you got to see the Louvre,” he said, bringing out a magazine.

I looked behind me again at Dawn and Max. He was also reading something while her head was resting against the seat back, her eyes closed. Max noticed my gaze, looked up at me, and smiled, just the corner of his mouth slyly jerking up. I quickly turned around before I did something very Jimmy Page.

“Tell me,” I said to Jacob. “Why is it that Max and Dawn are together every time I look at them. Is this part of your planning?”

He didn’t look at me, just licked his calloused thumb before turning the page. “My doing? No. Max is good for her; you should just leave it alone.”

I didn’t want to leave it alone. “I can be good for her.”

That made him pause for a second. Then he licked his thumb again. “You could be.”

I hated these fucking cryptic answers I got from him sometimes. It’s not that I expected him to play hopscotch with me, but man, the guy used to be immortal. He knew eons of shit I had no idea about and yet ninety-nine percent of the time, he went around pretending he was absolutely normal. That could fly most of the time—most of the time I forgot—but this was not one of those times.

I brought the letter out from the inside of my jacket pocket. “I got a letter.”

“Oh?”

“From the housekeeper.”

That made Jacob stop short, closing his magazine. He looked at me hard, his face drawn, eyes sparking. “What?”

I handed it to him. “I haven’t opened it. The manager gave it to me as I was leaving.”

Jacob inhaled sharply through his nose and looked around him to make sure no one was looking on. He pulled his nail file out of his pocket and poised it at the corner of the envelope.

“May I?”

I nodded. He deftly ripped the file through it. We both paused, waiting with bated breath for smoke or some fucking curse or something to waft out. Nothing.

He lifted it up and peered inside. “A photograph,” he said uneasily.

He shook the envelope until the photo fell out into his hands.

It was a black-and-white amateur photograph of a stuffed animal, a horse or unicorn maybe, with its eyes gouged out, its legs torn off, and the stuffing ripped out of it. It didn’t mean anything to me, but it made shivers run down my back just the same.

“Do you know what this is?” I whispered to Jacob.

He shook his head sharply. “No.” He took it from me, peering at it up close and then turned it over. On the back it said, She won’t doubt me next time.

I automatically looked behind me at Dawn, even though my bones were starting to feel more like lead. She was still sleeping, and Max was gone from his seat.

“Brothers can be so cruel,” Angeline said, and I snapped my head back to see her peering over at us, her eyes fastened on the horse. Jacob quickly covered the photo with a magazine.

“What do you want, Angeline?” Jacob said tersely.

She shrugged lightly and smiled. “Just making sure everything is going according to plan. That’s what I’m getting paid for.” Then she straightened up and walked down the aisle. I followed her every move until she sat down next to Dawn.

“What a fucking nutter,” Jacob said, looking back at the photo and searching the envelope for further clues. It was hard to tell if he meant the housekeeper or Angeline, yet somehow I knew that neither of them could be so easily dismissed as merely crazy.

I kept watching Angeline. She was just sitting in Max’s seat, flipping through his magazine while Dawn was still sleeping, but deep down inside there was something about her that told me to keep watching, to not trust her.

Brothers can be so cruel.

What the fuck did that mean?

I was about to voice this to Jacob when I noticed Angeline leaning across Dawn and whispering something in her ear. Dawn’s eyelids fluttered and she moved slightly, settling in her seat, but she didn’t wake up. Okay, this was pushing the limits of normalcy. This bitch had an angle I just didn’t know about.

I looked up and saw Max approaching the seats. He stopped a few feet away as soon as he recognized Angeline’s head, and a weird fucking look came across his face. Realization and horror, like when you wake up with a hooker you don’t remember paying for.

He quickly walked over to the seat and placed his hand on her shoulder, sneering down at her. Over the trundling wheels and the metallic groan of the train, I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but Max looked pissed off and so did Angeline. Dawn slowly woke up and as soon as she did, Max pulled Angeline up, his nails digging

into her arm. She didn't cry out, she didn't protest—she just smiled like the cat that ate the canary.

I looked back at Jacob, but he was still engrossed by the photo.

I wanted to ask him about her and see what he really thought, but now she was walking away toward the end of the train car and Max was sitting next to Dawn, who was undoubtedly asking him what the hell that was about.

What the hell, indeed.

I got up from my seat, pushing past Jacob, who grunted in surprise, and marched down the aisle after Angeline. I could feel Max's and Dawn's eyes on me as I went. But I needed to know.

I followed her until she disappeared into the crowd in the bar car. It seemed a little too perfect. I sighed, wondering if I was losing my head or if the drugs were fucking with me or what the hell was going on. So I took some time to think. I sauntered up to the bar and ordered a few shots of whiskey in a row. I downed two of them, then four of them, and I stayed in that car for the rest of the seven-hour ride to Nice.

Thank God I had the nerve to pass out after my fifth drink.

I woke up to a glass of cold water being thrown in my face.

"Christ, man," I swore, trying to sit up.

"Watch your language," Max's voice said.

I opened one eye and realized I was sitting on—well, leaning across—a park bench. It was dark, nighttime, and the air was warm and smelled like the sea. Max was

standing in front of me, an empty cup in hand, his back illuminated by a nearby streetlamp.

I slowly eased myself up and looked around me. I was in a courtyard off a quiet street. Palm trees. Cobblestone. Yellow buildings.

“Are we in Nice?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“To you?” Max asked. “Well, I reckon you had enough of being sober for the day—I mean, noon, what an ungodly hour—so you headed to the bar car to fix that malady. Judging by your bill, which I paid by the way, it seems you got quite a few drinks in before you passed out on the table. Lucky for you, brother, that all happened in an hour or two. You slept in your seat for the rest of the train ride.”

“Jesus.”

“I said watch it.”

I gave him a funny look. The fact that I was asleep for so long explained why I didn’t feel as bad as I thought would. “Where’s Dawn?”

“At the hotel. I was lucky enough to be your babysitter tonight. I could only drag you as far as this bench before your pal Tricky feigned a cramp in his leg and took off for the nearest bar. Hotel is just around the corner.”

“Is Dawn okay?” I asked.

Max studied me for a moment, though I still couldn't see his face in the shadows. "She's okay. I do have to say, and I'm not trying to stir shit up by voicing it, but I reckon she was a little bit worried about you running after Angeline like that."

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Angeline. Of course. “It’s not like that,” I said quickly.

He raised his hands and quickly brought out a cigarette. “I never said it was.”

“And I bet you never said it wasn’t,” I said under my breath.

He lit his smoke and puffed on it for a long time before exhaling. I missed smoking. It was something I’d given up when I thought I’d gotten a new lease on life. Seemed kind of pointless now, considering the other shit I was taking.

I held out my hand. “Can I bum a smoke?”

He shrugged and shook another one out of his pack. “Be my guest.” He tossed me the lighter. “And by the way, it’s not my job to make sure you and Dawn are communicating properly.”

“Oh yeah?” I said, leaning back in my seat and taking a deep, long, delicious puff of the cigarette. I coughed. “And what is your job? You know, I saw you last night taking photos from the pit. You didn’t take very many.”

“It’s a long tour.”

“Not that long. And it was opening night. Sometimes I think you’re here just for show, Max.”

He shrugged. “I’m not here for show, I can tell you that.”

“And what else can you tell me?” The nicotine was starting to revive my brain.

I felt his eyes go to me. “Were you running after Angeline to get your pecker serviced, or was there some other reason?”

I started coughing loudly, choking on the smoke. “Excuse me?”

“I’m just asking.”

I glared at him. “I ran after her because she said something that...I don’t know...it bothered me. What’s your deal? What did you say to her? You seemed to be kind of threatening her.”

Max faced to the side and exhaled a large blue cloud. We both watched it rise into the warm night. “I don’t trust her. That’s all.”

Right. I felt like we were dancing this big elaborate number, each footstep so carefully placed. I wanted to trip him.

“Well, you could say I don’t trust her, either.”

He exhaled sharply through his nose and turned to me, his stance rigid. “What did she say to you?”

“Max!” Dawn’s voice rang out.

I eased around on the bench to see Dawn coming down the street, palm trees framing her on both sides, her gait crooked. It wasn’t until she was quite close that she noticed me sitting on the bench. She stopped suddenly, almost falling forward, and Max quickly shot out his arms to stop her.

She giggled, falling into him. She was drunk.

“Careful now, little lamb,” Max said to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. Maybe to hold her up, maybe to hold on, but damn if I was going to sit there and let him do that, say that. His grip around her seemed a little too firm.

I got to my feet, proud that I didn’t sway. “Little lamb?”

He grinned at me. “And I’m the red potato. You mean you don’t have cute little pet names for each other?”

“Man slut,” Dawn said, laughed at her own response. She looked at me, her dark eyes glinting in the streetlights, and I saw nothing but hurt in them. And I knew how destructive that hurt could be.

She tightened her grip around Max and said, “Let’s go, potato. Leave him here. I’m sure Angeline will pop up at any time, like the white rabbit.”

I looked to Max, and I finally saw his face clearly as he was turning to leave with her. He was smiling. The bastard was smiling. Like he’d won something.

“Fuck you,” I said, tossing my cigarette on the ground.

He stopped, and I could see he had a short fuse if I knew where to cut it. Dawn pulled at Max’s sleeve, as if she really wanted him. And fuck, could she really want him? Was this actually a fucking thing? If I let them leave, would they go back to each other’s hotel rooms and...I couldn’t even finish the thought.

Max is good for her, Jacob’s voice rang through my head.

Like fuck this guy was good for her. I was good and I wasn’t even good; I was better.

“You heard me,” I repeated, my fists clenching. Max might have been better built and an inch taller than me, but I still had muscle beyond muscle, and beyond that, I had near-psychotic rock star rage. That was fucking hard to duplicate.

“Sage,” Max said in a low voice, “you don’t want to do this.”

I stepped toward him. “And why is that?”

“This isn’t the issue,” he said carefully. He looked down at Dawn, who was looking at us fearfully. She didn’t want this. But if she was picking Max over me, she was going to get it. I was tired of missing out. I was not backing down. “There is something bigger than this at work. It wants this to happen.”

“I know what I want to happen,” I said, my fist ready. “And I know you won’t want the same thing.”

With an explosion of rage, I clocked Max right in the side of the head. Dawn cried out, letting go of him, and I tried to go for Max again, but suddenly he was to the side of me and a few yards away. I had no idea how he moved that fast, but it was disorienting as hell.

Before I could even go after him again, I was being pulled away by heavy arms wrapped around my stomach, and Jacob’s coffee-and-mothballs breath was at my ear.

“Stop it right now,” Jacob seethed to me in a harsh whisper. “Stop it before you ruin everything.”

Normally I could have fought Jacob off. We’d only been in one fight together, just a few months ago, when I’d taken PCP and a slew of other stuff, and he unleashed a decade of managerial buildup on me. I had won—but barely. Jacob was a fucking bruiser.

Still, there was something in his voice. And beyond that, beyond the alcohol that was still in my system and the drugs from the night before and everything else that liked to take away from the bigger picture, there was Dawn. My beautiful Dawn, who was staring up at me with heartfelt eyes, a blend of fear, and pity. I couldn't stand it.

I relented and let Jacob drag me away. He pushed me back on the bench and pointed at me. "You stay there."

Then he turned to Max. "And you, you stay there. There's no such thing as doing your job and being a bloody prick, and you're being the latter at the moment."

Finally he turned to Dawn. "And Dawn, my love. Get your fucking head on straight, woman." He jerked his head at me. "This guy, Sage, right? He's the one you love." He jerked his head to Max. "And this one, your ginger brethren, he's the one you work with. He's your big brother in all of this." He placed his palms against his own chest. "And me? I'm your manager, whether you need one or not."

He sighed and slid his hands down his face, staring up into the sky. I was only now noticing that it was clear and starry. "All right. There's no point in talking to you two right now. So we'll wait till tomorrow morning to discuss what needs to be discussed. But for the love of God, if you both don't go home together, I'm going to be very upset." He looked to Max and snapped his fingers. "Potato, let's go."

Max grunted something, avoiding both my and Dawn's eyes, and followed Jacob as they went down the road, disappearing into the shadows like ginger ghosts.

Dawn and I stared at each other in a tipsy showdown.

She looked away first, seeming to go after Max and Jacob. I got off the bench and grabbed her hand.

“Don’t go,” I said.

She reluctantly let me pull her closer to me, wobbling on her feet but still managing to keep her distance as much as she could.

“Stay with me.”

“Because Jacob told you to and you do whatever he says,” she said, bite in her voice.

“Dawn.”

She looked at me with a pained expression. “You told the press you were single. Just because it’s a better image for you.”

“That’s not fair.”

She ripped her hand out of mine and walked away, throwing her arms up in the air. “You weren’t even around last night when I needed you; you passed out from being an idiot. Sage, I need you, I need you now, and you’re barely here half the time.”

“Look,” I said, feeling defensive in spite of myself, “I’m sorry, but how the fuck was I supposed to know you were going to have a nightmare? So I went out with the band after my first show in Europe. How is that my fault?”

“It wasn’t a nightmare!” she yelled at me with fury. “My mother called me on the phone!”

I bit my lip and stared at her in confusion, unsure of how to handle this. “What?”

She wrapped her arms around herself, her hair glinting dark red in the streetlights. “She called me. It wasn’t a dream; it happened.”

Shit. Things were really lining up now. I thought about bringing out the photograph I'd received in the envelope, but realized Jacob still had it.

I eyed her sincerely. "I believe you."

"I know you do." She exhaled loudly. "I know you do, and that's why I needed you. Because you do believe me, and you know what I'm going through...you know the fear. And yet you were out. And I know I'm just a journalist to you sometimes, but...I should have been with you last night. I wanted to be with you. Be with the band. I wanted to talk to you about the show. I wanted to experience that aftershow high with you." She gave me a wounded look. "But instead you told everyone that you were single and you went on without me. Like I didn't matter."

I ran my hand through my hair in frustration. "You do matter. You matter a lot."

"But not enough," she said bitterly. "You never loved me. Why start now?"

"Oh, that isn't fair," I said, my voice raising. "That is not fucking fair."

"None of this is fair!" she yelled. "But it's not always about you."

"You left me!" I roared at her. The blood was rushing to my head. I couldn't keep anything down, not now, not when we were laying it all on the table, what we really thought. "You're the one who left me, Dawn. How is that for love?"

She looked like I'd slapped her. Her face went white, her brows coming together. "I...I don't understand."

I took a step closer to her as the resentment took its toll. "You left me. I had to put my whole life back together on my own. Aside from Jacob, you were the only person out there who knew what I had gone through; you were the only one I had left in this

whole fucking world. And yeah, maybe we didn't know each other all that well, but when we were at my father's house in Redding, when we were together, I was actually happy. You actually gave me hope. You actually made me think that I could pull through. I believed you loved me and that we could go from there. That we were living that first step. But then you left. You went back to Washington. You left me. And then you never even bothered to pick up the phone and see how I was. Rock star fucked, article finished, I'm done with you, Sage Knightly."

Silence. She was speechless. I could see the confusion in her eyes, her mouth trying to form words that weren't coming. She blinked, shook her head, rubbed at her face. Finally she said, "I had to leave, Sage. I had to finish school. I had to take care of my family."

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I sighed, knowing this all too well. “I know you did. But you never even thought to ask me. Maybe I could have gone with you. Maybe I could have helped. You know, if you wanted to keep it as a fling, that would have been fine. But then don’t paint me as the bad guy here because I slept with other chicks afterward or I had to tell the press I was single because I am single, Dawn, and so are you. We went our separate ways.”

She swallowed hard. “I didn’t know you felt that way...you said you didn’t love me...”

“And I didn’t,” I said, her face immediately falling at my harsh tone. I tried to soften it. “But it didn’t mean I wouldn’t. Love takes time. For someone like me, who swore he’d never love anyone after my ex, after the bargain, love wasn’t even an option. But I still knew I could get there. Dawn, I wanted to get there with you.”

Damn if I hadn’t been so honest in my whole life. I felt like a manzanita tree with the layers of bark peeling off, leaving the core of me bare.

“And now?”

I licked my lips anxiously and grabbed her hand, cold and small in mine. I gazed at her intently. “Now we’ve started over. And I don’t want to say I’m single. That was my life for years. That’s all it could have been. I’m done with that. I want you. I want you.” I’d never wanted her more.

She stepped up to me, her hand stroking my face, her dark eyes shining. “You have me. I’m not leaving you. I’m here.”

She reached up and kissed me, so fucking softly. I put my hands at the small of her waist, loving that I could hold her there and claim her as mine now.

Though I wouldn't feel—know—she was mine until I was deep inside of her again.

I bit her lip and tugged on it playfully, feeling my body tense up, the need to have her naked and under me growing by the second. “We better do as Jacob said. You're coming to my room.”

She teased the rim of my lip with her tongue. “Do you even know what room you're staying in? Do you even know where the hotel is?” she asked, her voice breathy. I shook my head. “Then you're coming to my room.”

“I love the women's lib movement,” I mumbled before I grabbed her behind the head, making fists in those smooth curls, and kissed her furiously. I could have devoured her right there in that courtyard in Nice. I was seconds away from taking her in my arms and fucking her here on the bench, not giving a shit if it was indecent or if anyone could see.

But as I started unbuttoning her jeans, she swatted my hands away, pulled back, and led me in a frantic rush all the way to the hotel, which was only about a block away.

It was a chic little boutique hotel, but all I cared about was that tight round ass in front of me as Dawn led the way up the stairs. We barely made it inside her room before I pressed her up against the closed door and kissed her until she couldn't breathe, until I couldn't breathe—but who needed air when you had a silken tongue and warm lips and a body that begged to be licked, pinched, stroked.

I bit her neck hard and pulled off her shorts, sliding my fingers into her like I was running out of time. She moaned, neck arching, so fucking sweet, so perfect. She melted into my touch better than my damn guitar, her skin yielding to me, fully and

completely, like the tightest strings that finally give in.

I made her come right away, her cries fluttering down around us like snow. She was the song and I was the composer, and I knew all the right notes to hit, again and again and again until her nails were digging into my arms, begging for me to stop, to let her catch her breath. But we were only getting started.

I scooped her up into my arms and threw her down on the bed, where she cried out in surprise. She quickly rolled over onto her back, her legs wide and body ready again like I knew she would be. I pulled off my shirt and let her eyes trail all over my body in the dim hotel room light, and then I undid my pants. She looked hungry for me, and I knew I looked hungry for her. She went for my dick with fierce determination.

Her lips were hot as her tongue danced up and down my shaft, her hands cupping my balls, until I was at the breaking point. I had a lot of stamina, but even I had my limits. I placed my hand at her forehead and gently pushed her back down on the bed, then I slipped my arm underneath her waist, and flipped her around so she was on her stomach.

I brought her body to the head of the bed and told her to hang on to the headboard while I slipped fingers between the silky slit of her ass. She tensed up, afraid, but I licked her spine from neck down and continued licking, my hands now spreading her cheeks. She melted into me like butter.

“You have no idea, no idea how beautiful you taste to me,” I whispered, my tongue lapping up every crevice. God, she was so damn pure, and this was so damn sinful I could barely keep it together.

I pulled back and realized she was gasping in delight. “Don’t stop,” she moaned.

“Sweetheart, it’s not over yet.”

I straddled her, my knees on either side while I guided my cock in with one hand and pulled her back toward me with the other. I knew I rode her pretty hard last night, and I didn't want to hurt her but...Jesus. I pushed in slowly, and she took my breath away. So tight, so wet, so eager.

"You feel too good," I hissed through my teeth as the pressure built. "Too good for me. An angel."

"Just don't fuck me like one."

I grinned at her suddenly dirty mouth and did as she asked, loving how uninhibited she was being. I thrust my pelvis hard against her ass, my dick driving deep inside her pussy until my balls were banging. She tightened her grip on the headboard, and I just drove in her again, harder, quicker, a stabbing motion that made her inhale sharply.

"Harder?" I asked, my fingers trailing up her stomach until I hit the smooth curve of her breasts. "I can come at you harder. Softer. Slower. I can fuck you senseless." I kissed her neck, feeling her racing pulse under my lips. "Shit, I can do anything you ask, Dawn."

"Give me all of you," she said. And I responded by doing just that. I rammed into her, my fingers melting onto her clit, rubbing her wet, making her breathe harder, making her legs shake. In and out, I kept the rhythm. I made sure we moved in time, in sync, like a metronome. With each thrust, I felt something becoming undone inside of me, a sensation in my chest, that I was falling and falling and falling and I realized I was. I was burning up inside and letting go and giving in.

When we both came, crying for each other, our sweat-slicked bodies linked as one, I knew I'd given her everything. I had given her all of me.

Damn.

I'd fallen in love with her.

Chapter Ten

Dawn

I woke up needing water something fierce. I opened my eyes to see a dimly lit room, the lamp in the corner still turned on, my bra hanging from it. Sage's strong, firm arm was draped around my waist, spooning me, and I could hear him breathing lightly, ruffling the hair on the back of my head.

I grinned stupidly and sank further into the mattress. Sage. Sage was here, with me. I wasn't alone. I had him, his arms offering me protection from the night, protection from the next day and the next.

It's too bad he wouldn't be able to protect me from the oncoming hangover. After I saw him disappear into the bar car earlier with Angeline, I spent the rest of the train ride drinking out of Tricky's flask and stewing over my fear about the phone call with my mother coupled with the frustrating jealousy of Angeline. As soon as we arrived in Nice and I checked into my room, I went straight to the hotel bar and did a few shots with Garth, desperately trying to get out of my own head and let loose. For a moment there, I knew exactly why Sage drank the way he did.

But it didn't matter. Sage had been more honest and open with me last night than he'd ever been. It full-on floored me to hear him say that I'd left him. I had no idea he took my going back to Washington as a sign that I didn't want to be with him. To hear that he'd wanted me—hell, even wanted to come with me—that made me thaw like nothing else. All that time we'd been pining for each other, too damn scared to even pick up the phone.

And the sex. I'd heard the term "mind-blowing sex" thrown around so much, but I

was embracing that cliché because that fuck blew my mind. I'd never felt so dirty before, what he did to me, and yet it had never felt so good. That was raw, primal, emotional sex. Yeah, I could tell I was going to be a bit sore from two nights of his dick in a row after months of celibacy, but it was worth it. Everything about Sage, this man, this rock star in my bed, was worth it.

Even a hangover. I sighed, knowing if I wanted to ward it off, I needed to drink a gallon of water and take some aspirin. When you're on tour with a rock band, you're bound to be getting wild at some point, so I'd learned to carry pain medicine with me. I didn't want to get out of bed, out of his arms, and away from the heat of his beautiful body, but I had to.

I carefully untangled myself out of his embrace, not wanting to wake him, and tiptoed across the room to the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. I opened my toiletry bag, and shook out some pills and downed them. The hotel room glasses were tiny and I couldn't get enough, so I took my time standing at the sink, drinking and refilling.

It was between my third and fourth glass that a chill crept up on my bare arms and legs, and the hairs on my head began to tingle. I cautiously looked up to the mirror above the sink, expecting to see someone standing behind me.

But there was no one.

I finished drinking the glass, my senses going haywire as the crop of goosebumps intensified and my spine felt like it was being stroked with a piece of ice. Sometimes you just know when you're not alone. When there's someone else...here.

A dripping sound caught my attention. Faint and subtle at first, like it had been dripping this whole time and I hadn't noticed. I slowly turned my head and looked over to the bathtub, where the curtain was drawn across it. The curtain was a pale

yellow, which probably evoked feelings of sunshine and the French Riviera at any other time but right now reminded me of bile.

I sucked in my breath as the curtain moved, billowing out just slightly, as if pushed by an imaginary breeze. But I'd been in the room earlier. There was no window behind it, and the air in the room was still. Heavy.

The curtain billowed out again, and the dripping continued erratically. It didn't sound like a leaky faucet. It sounded heavier than water, thick and sticky.

And the more I stared at the curtain, daring it to do something else, the more my eyes picked up on a small movement behind it. A shape, a shadow behind the sunny façade.

The blood pumped noisily through my head; the whole bathroom seemed to vibrate with it. Go get Sage, I told myself. Turn around, get out of the bathroom, and go get Sage. Don't do anything else. Go get Sage.

But though the words in my head made perfect sense—gave me comfort, even, that my big, tall Sage would save the day while I hid behind him—my body didn't listen.

I put down the glass on the counter, wincing at the sound it made.

It can hear me, I thought.

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I stepped toward the bathtub, my shaking hand stretched out to the curtain. I had to see for myself. I had to know.

I took in a deep breath through my nose, steadied my nerves as much as I could, and pulled the curtain back.

A scream froze in my throat.

My mother was standing in the corner of the bathtub, her head slumped over to her shoulder, her eyes closed as if she were asleep on her feet. Blood dripped from her ivory wrists to shiny red puddles in the bottom of the tub, and she was cloaked in a long, black gown, which disappeared in inky tendrils down the drain.

I'd seen her. I'd wished to see my mother again, and now she was standing right in front of me. Something more real than a vision or a ghost. I'd seen her. But she hadn't seen me yet. I could still get away.

Her eyes opened. She looked right at me.

"Dawn," she said, a smile breaking across her face. "I told you I'd come."

I tried to scream, tried to move, tried to run. But it was like one of those nightmares that you hope only happens in your dreams. I was stuck, a prisoner of the scene.

My mother straightened up her head, still smiling. At first, aside from the black gown, she looked as I remembered—high cheekbones and slim nose. Her eyes were the same, her smile, her voice—it looked like her on all accounts. But there was

something else different about her. Something that made the fear so fucking real. Her eyes didn't have any pupils; they were just a blank shade of blue. They were eyes that housed nothing—no emotions, no soul, no humanity.

This wasn't my mother. Not anymore.

I had to get out of there. My mother took a crooked step toward me, walking through the puddles of blood. The blood seemed to stir and come alive at her bare feet. It started climbing up her legs, taking her over in a wash of red. It continued to move up her, like she was being devoured by a crimson tide, until she was completely covered in it.

Her eyes, though. Her eyes remained white and blue. Blank. Empty. Inhuman.

She stopped at the edge of the tub and looked at me. I still couldn't move, even when the blood began to slide down her teeth, covering her once pretty smile.

I still couldn't move when she stepped out of the tub and onto the floor in front of me.

"I missed you, honey," she said, and I closed my eyes to the sight of her, wishing I didn't have to hear her voice, the voice of the woman who used to tuck me in at night, the voice of the woman who lost herself to madness. "Didn't you miss me?"

Foolishly I believed that if I kept my eyes closed, she would go away.

When I finally opened them, she was still there, watching me as only someone with no pupils could. I could see the blood moving on her face, like it was another creature and she was the host.

"Say you missed me, honey," she said, whispering now. I felt tears springing to my

eyes, my heart breaking somewhere inside. I felt the need to hold her, to have her hold me, to bring my real mother back.

“I—I missed you,” I said softly, knowing I was crazy, that this wasn’t her. This wasn’t her.

But what if it was?

She held her hand out to me. I caught a glimpse of the gaping slice in her wrist. “Then come with me. It will be easier this way.”

I swallowed hard, keeping my hands to myself. “Easier?”

She smiled. “I won’t let them hurt you. It won’t be scary, I promise. It will be over quickly.”

I managed to shake my head. “I’m not going anywhere.”

The smile on her bloodied face vanished. The room went ice cold.

Suddenly she lunged for me.

I finally screamed, the sound tearing out of my lungs loud and clear, and turned to run just to see the bathroom door locking on itself.

“Sage!” I shrieked as fire-hot hands grabbed the back of my shirt and started pulling me backward, keeping me from reaching the door handle. I tried to turn and kick but only fell to the floor, which was now filling up with blood. The taps in the sink and in the bathtub kicked on by themselves, blood gushing out of them, the air filling with a copper tang.

My mother pulled me up by my arms, her red, wet hands searing into me, and started dragging me toward the bathtub. I screamed again, trying to get free. I could feel her face changing shape, taking on another form, and I did what I could not to look at her.

“Dawn!” I heard Sage bellow from the other side of the door, the handle jangling back and forth. “Dawn!” The door shook on its frames as Sage threw himself against it.

“Help!” I screamed until a hand went across my mouth, silencing me. Then the hand pulsed and expanded and grew until it was a thick tentacle forcing its way into my mouth, trying to move past my tongue and down into my throat. I was choking, the air being sucked out of me, my mouth feeling like it was being ripped apart.

Just as the world was growing black, Sage kicked the door in, breaking it off its hinges. The tentacle quickly removed itself from my mouth, the hands let go of my back, and I fell forward, limp and lifeless, my head about to crash into the side of the bathtub. Sage caught me just in time and pulled me out, letting me rest on his strong, muscular thighs.

“Shit,” he swore, cradling my head in his hands. I looked up at him, trying to tell him that I was okay. Those beautiful green eyes were tinged with a fear I’d never seen before as he looked from me to the bathtub and back.

I lost consciousness.

People were arguing. The sound of Jacob’s gruff voice and Sage’s panicked one. I remembered what had happened. The bathroom. My mother. I could tell I was in bed, under the covers, and still I was afraid to open my eyes.

“I think she’s waking up,” I heard Max say.

A warm hand went to my cheek, and I had the courage to face the day, to keep going on. I opened my eyes and smiled when I saw Sage's handsome face over mine, his brow wrought with concern. "Dawn. You're going to be all right."

I snorted caustically, even though it hurt. "Right. Sure. Uh-huh."

I tried to sit up, and he helped me until I was leaning back against the pillow. We were in my room, the lights all blazing. Max was sitting on a chair in the corner, watching me intently; Jacob was standing by the broken bathroom door, his arms folded and his eyes in my direction, but his mind elsewhere. In his hand he held something that looked like a photograph.

"What time is it?" I asked, eyeing the window. It was black outside, a nearly full moon hanging low in the distance.

"Four a.m.," said Jacob. "You've been out for an hour."

"Dawn," Sage whispered, his massive body settling on the edge of the bed beside me. "What happened? What was that thing?"

"You saw her?"

Sage exchanged a look with Jacob. "Who?"

"My mother. My mother was in the bathtub. I went to get some water, and I saw her there, behind the curtain. Then she started coming for me..."

"I don't know what you saw, Dawn, but that was not your mother...that was..." Sage trailed off, his mouth curling in utter disgust. He shook his head. "I don't know what the fuck that was. But it wasn't your mother. It wasn't human."

“It was a demon,” Max said absently.

Sage and I both looked to him.

“Tell me again, Jacob, why it’s a good thing that he’s here,” Sage sniped.

“Shut up,” Jacob said calmly, though his tone was tightly wound. “I told you last night that there was more to this. And Max is right. That was a demon.” He gave me a sympathetic look. “Sorry, love, it was once your mother. For maybe a second even, it was her, before the demon took over. You did see her. You did hear her. Just enough to fulfill the final part of the bargain. Now you’ve been granted everything. The housekeeper told Sage that once you saw her, it would all end. This is the beginning of the end.”

Fucking hell, if my whole body didn’t just freeze in fright. I clutched the blanket to my chest, trying to find warmth.

“You’re failing at your bedside manners,” Sage mumbled.

“And I was never very good at it,” Jacob said, walking forward until he was at the foot of the bed. I felt like I’d seen him too often in those ugly pajamas of his. “Luckily I have Max. Well, you have Max. He’s a lot better at this than I am.”

I looked over at Max, who was chewing on his lip in thought, staring dead ahead. I was starting to think he hadn’t even heard Jacob when he suddenly said, “Right then. I reckon it’s about time I come clean.”

“I knew it,” Sage said under his breath.

Max leaned forward in his seat, elbows on his grey tracksuit pants, and clasped his hands together. He looked me dead in the eye.

“Dawn, I am a photographer. I do work for Creem magazine. But I’m not here because of Sage Knightly and his European solo tour. I’m here because of you. For you.” He scratched at his sideburns. “Jacob had a hunch about you—a worry. He asked me to look into it. Because he’s boring and mortal now, there wasn’t much he could do, so I was the next best thing. You know how the Jacobs work, don’t you?”

I swallowed hard. “Refresh my memory.”

He sighed. “This is the part that always sounds the stupidest,” he said to himself. “Okay, here we go. In short, Jacobs are guardians, guides, and managers of this world, the Thin Veil or the barrier world, and the other worlds—Heaven, Hell, and some nooks and crannies in between. We’re all here for one purpose, and when the purpose is fulfilled, we start over again. Anew. No memories of the past we just had. Believe me, if you’ve been around for thousands of years, the erasure of past lives is the only way you can ensure sanity. Our purposes can change, though, with each life. Sometimes we manage, like Jacob did, ensuring everything is going as planned—debts to demons are made all the time. In fact, in this increasingly...volatile world, the debts are growing. Sometimes we guard the world, ensuring the bad things stay where they do and the good ones don’t come visit. Sometimes we guide those who have the ability to see and communicate with the dead. Sometimes those people can even see the demons. Sometimes they can even fight them.”

Even though I’d heard a version of this from Jacob last year, I still had a hard time wrapping my head around it. I guess it made sense in some ways, but even so, it was a lot to take, especially after witnessing my demon mother in the bathroom.

“Am I someone who sees and fights demons?” I asked. If I was, I certainly failed in the bathroom. My throat was still unbearably raw.

“I wish you were, little lamb,” he said. “Would make my job a whole lot easier. But

no. In this role, I'm a manager. I'm here to protect you and the contract you signed and do whatever I can to ensure that it is handled fairly."

"Handled fairly!?" Sage erupted. "She was fucking attacked by a demon in the bathroom while I was sleeping. How is this being handled fairly!?"

Max raised a brow. "Unfortunately, I don't have much control over how the demons will appear to you, Dawn. I just know that now they're getting set to collect on you. They want what you owe them."

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“But I don’t know what I owe them,” I cried out in frustration. “I don’t remember making the deal!”

“I know,” Max said. “And they know it, too. This is why it’s a bit tricky. But they can’t do anything—shouldn’t do anything—right now, not until we talk to them. If you don’t remember the deal, then it shouldn’t be in place. We can get you out of it on a technicality.”

I sat up straighter. “You can? Then do it! Talk to them.” I looked at Sage. “You talked to the woman, the housekeeper, in Paris. Let’s go back there. Pass the message on through her.”

“No,” said Jacob. “Sage has a tour to do.”

Sage’s mouth dropped open. “Fuck the tour! Fuck all of this. I’m not doing anything until we deal with Dawn.” He looked at me with wide eyes. “I am not going to lose you.”

“You can’t do anything for her, Sage,” Jacob said, colder now. “You outsmarted these demons before, and they would love nothing more than to have your new career thrown away. You can’t let them win. You have to go on, and Dawn will go on with you, as will Max. He’s her manager, and he will keep her safe. You keep living your life; it really is the best way to stick it to them. Don’t involve yourself. Just be there for her and trust Max.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. I felt the walls around me closing in, the voices turning to mush. This was it. I’d entered a contract without knowing it, and now they were

coming to collect. All those months of feeling like there was a catch with my brother and my father—I was right. The guilt was right. I brought this on myself.

“What about my family?” I asked quietly. “I should be with them. I can’t let anything happen to them.”

“Your family will be okay for now,” Max said, getting out of the chair. He stood beside Jacob, arms folded across, and I was suddenly—dumbly—struck by how similar they looked. An old Jacob and a new one. “But you need to be here with me, with Jacob, with Sage. If you go home, you risk bringing the problem with you. Your family is safest if they stay in their lives, none the wiser.”

I nodded, knowing that made sense.

“Dawn,” Jacob said, bringing the photograph forward. “Do you recognize this?”

I took the photo into my hands and immediately dropped it. I felt sick to the bone. “Where did you get that?”

“The hotel manager in Paris gave it to me,” Sage said, placing his hand on my arm and giving it a comforting squeeze. “He said it was from the housekeeper. That’s all that was in it. You recognize it, don’t you?”

“It was my stuffed horse. Miss Piggy. From when I was a little girl.” I gingerly picked the photo back up. I had no idea why there would be a photo of this, but I guess it didn’t matter. I flipped over the back. “She won’t doubt me next time,” I read aloud. “No, I certainly didn’t.”

“What happened to the horse?” Sage asked.

I frowned, wondering why his voice trembled. “My brother tore it apart. Had a fit.

Why?”

He swallowed thickly, his Adam’s apple bobbing, and said, “Angeline. She saw the photo. She said—”

“Little brothers can be so cruel,” Jacob filled in quietly. We all looked to him. “I think I need to have a talk with Angeline.”

“I knew she was a fucking GTFO,” I growled.

“I don’t think so,” Max said with a shake of his head. “I’ve suspected her, and I’ve been watching her...but I don’t think she’s a demon. She does, however, have something to do with this.”

He and Jacob started walking for the door. I felt a pang of fear at the idea of Max leaving me, but even though he’d told Sage he could do nothing, I still felt safe with Sage by my side. For being able to do nothing, he had still saved me from the demon in the bathroom.

“We’ll be back soon,” Jacob said. “Don’t open the door for anyone else. And I mean anyone.”

They went out, closing the door behind them. Sage watched me intently for a few moments. “Mind if I get in with you?” he asked.

I smiled despite myself and moved over so he could get in under the covers. He opened up his arms for me, and I carefully nestled in them.

“You’re going to be all right,” he said determinedly, kissing the top of my head.

We both knew he was lying. But I let him lie to me anyway.

Chapter Eleven

Sage

I felt like someone inserted a toothbrush into my brain and royally fucked me with it. Everything I knew or thought I knew was scrubbed clean, and here was this brand-new world that I had to make some fucking sense of.

It wasn't that I hadn't gone through this before—obviously I had. And obviously I knew there was something bogus going around concerning Dawn and the supernatural. But for all the shit I'd seen in my life, for the cryptic messages from a man in black and weird old photos and nearly drowning in Lake Shasta last year, I did not expect to see a seven-foot-tall demon in my bathroom, one bloody tentacle down Dawn's throat. I did not expect to feel the fear in knowing that she was really, truly in debt to the Devil. And I really did not expect for Red Potato to be a motherfucking redheaded notary public of the angelic kind.

But the show must go on, Jacob said. And so I tried to bury this new truth by knocking on Tricky's door and seeing what kind of uppers and downers and drowners he had. I'd been sitting in my room by myself going all sorts of crazy. Dawn was with Max somewhere—apparently safe, yeah I knew that, but it still bothered me. Jacob was still trying to track down Angeline, but I'm assuming that was a lost cause. Early that morning, he and Max had gone to find her and get to the bottom of all of this, her role in everything, but she was nowhere to be found. The hotel staff said she checked out of her room about the same time as all the demon shit went down with Dawn in the bathroom.

Jesus. A shiver rocked through me. The creature's eyes were pure yellow orbs, like gumballs. I'd never be able to get the image out of my head, the look of horror in Dawn's face, the utter stench of evil that rolled off the beast—but I was going to try.

I pounded on Tricky's door even louder until it finally opened and a bleary-eyed Tricky was staring at me in annoyance, one hand covering up his junk.

"Could you have at least put on some pants?" I asked him.

His expression was dry. "What do you want, Sage? It's eight in the morning. You know Tricky doesn't like this hour."

"Yeah, well, neither do I," I said, leaning against the doorframe and trying not to look or sound desperate. "Do you have anything? Anything at all. I need my brain erased, badly."

He looked put off. Maybe I failed at the nonchalant thing. "Yeah, I got stuff, Sage. But it's early, even for you, and we have our show tonight."

I closed my eyes and groaned, not wanting to beg. "I don't need a lecture, Tricky. I just need to get floating. Help a brother out, man."

He sighed. "Okay, okay, come in. I might as well take a ride with you." He opened the door and let me in, and I had to avert my eyes from his package. With Dawn at my side, I'd never have to see Tricky naked again.

If you can keep her at your side, the voice in my head threatened. If you can even keep her alive. You'll lose the one thing you love, Sage. You'll lose her.

I grunted, wanting to smack the thoughts out of my head, and picked up Tricky's pants, which were lying on the floor, and threw them at him.

"Naked days are over for me," I told him, sitting down on a chair and running my hands up and down my thighs anxiously. I eyed his bed, which was empty. "I'm surprised there isn't a naked chick or three."

“Nah,” he said with a shrug as he did up his pants. “Angeline didn’t stay the night.”

My head snapped up, the taste of bile filling my mouth. “Angeline was here?” Of course I hadn’t thought to check Tricky’s room.

He frowned. “Yeah, man. Just for a lay and then she left.”

“What time was this?”

“I don’t know, I was at the bar till it closed and then...maybe one a.m.? Why you sketching out? Where were you last night?”

“I was with Dawn.” There really was no point trying to explain to Tricky what had happened. Anyone worth their salt wouldn’t believe me at this point.

“So are you and Dawn like that now?”

“Yes, me and Dawn are like that.”

“No sharing?”

I narrowed my eyes. “No fucking sharing.”

He fished out a baggie from his duffel bag, grinning to himself. “All right. Well, good for you, man. May you both fuck for a long and happy life.”

There was a sharp pang behind my heart. I didn’t know long and how happy it would be.

Five minutes later, though, I didn’t really care.

I don't know what I did for the rest of the day, not clearly, anyway. The morning was just a pleasure cruise, with me and Tricky walking around the round-pebbled beaches of Nice, spying on topless ladies sunbathing and drinking rosé wine. The afternoon was a sloppy soundcheck at the venue we were playing at, a tiny hole-in-the-wall-type bar that barely had a backstage area. I should have been nervous about that, nervous about the crowd and how close they were to me, but I didn't care. And I liked that.

I knew Jacob disapproved. He always disapproved. That was his thing. He never said anything to me, though, just watched me like a hawk with those golden eyes of his, thinking, calculating. I know he wanted to say something so badly, to put me in my place, but he was really exercising his own discretion. He gave me the freedom to self-destruct, to treat the Nice show like it meant nothing, like it wasn't just the fucking second show of the tour, like it wasn't important.

I knew it was. But it was so hard to care about anything, especially that. When I could think, all I could think about was Dawn. I didn't want to be rehearsing, I didn't want to be figuring out the setlist, I didn't want to get up on the damn stage and sing and play my heart out to the fucking French crowd when my heart belonged to Dawn. She's the one who needed it.

Or did she? I didn't get to see her much during the day and after some time, I got the impression that it was done on purpose. Maybe it's because I was fucked up, I don't know. But it stung. Or it would have had I been able to feel anything.

The show went okay, I guess. I was on autopilot and the crowd ate it up, so at least I had that going for me. I fucked up a few times—sang the wrong lyrics, missed a verse here and there. At one point, a drunk chick wanted to climb onstage, so I helped her up. Got Tricky to play a slow beat and made her strip down to her skivvies before Jacob came storming on stage and pulled her off.

Sorry, Nice, hope you enjoyed it while it lasted.

When the encore was over, the high started to leave my system. Sometimes it was hard to tell if I got high from the crowd—just the exquisite adrenaline rush of playing my soul to an audience, people there for me, to hear me, see me, really get me—or from the drugs and alcohol. I think most of the time, the high from playing live won out. When I was in Hybrid and playing shows, I could be sober as hell on some days and I'd still be walking off the stage absolutely buzzing—dick hard, heart racing, hands shaking, nerves on fire. Such a fucking sweet, organic feeling that not many people would ever get to experience.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:53 am

I was staring at an empty bottle of rum—someone had left three-fourths of it in the dressing room—when Jacob rapped at the door.

“We need to talk,” he said. It was the voice he used when I was in shit and he had to be the manager of the year and change my diapers.

“Go away,” I said. Then I thought better of it. “Actually, can you bring Tricky in here?”

There was a pause. “Tricky gave me something to give to you. I don’t know what it is. It’s wrapped up in tinfoil.”

Bingo. I got up and opened the door, smiling lazily. Jacob leered at me.

“Such a trollop,” he said before he quickly shoved me back inside the room and squeezed in through the door, slamming it shut behind him so hard the walls shook.

I raised my brows, suddenly uneasy. “What the hell is wrong with you? Where’s the tinfoil?” I asked, noticing his hands were empty.

He marched right over to me and grabbed me by the shirt collar then spun me around until the back of my head hit the wall. “Fuck, Jacob,” I grimaced as the room spun.

“Fuck you,” he grunted. “Fuck you for being you.” He shoved into me once more, his face as red as his hair and sweat beading at his temples, before removing his hands and walking to the opposite side of the room, his fists closing and unclosing at his sides.

I watched him pace back and forth like a caged animal. I was sobering up fast, unsure of what he was going to say or what he was going to do next. So I shut my mouth, smoothed out the collar of my shirt, and waited.

Jacob stopped in the middle of the room, gaudy checkered-suit-back to me, and stared at a framed picture on the wall, one of the Nice waterfront.

“Did you know I lived in France a really long time ago?” he asked, voice dry but pleasant. Calm. It was unsettling.

“No,” I said slowly. “You speak shit French for someone who did, though.”

“My French is perfect, you wanker. I just choose not to speak it. I worked in a manor, just north of here, outside the town of Grasse. I was the butler to a wealthy family who owned one of the perfumeries. They grew a lot of lavender. Had a lot of money. They also had a young daughter, Yvette, who was beautiful, smart...they wanted her to marry rich, marry well.”

This was starting to sound like a Jane Austen novel. “Uh, when was this?”

“Last century,” he said matter-of-factly.

I blinked. “Right. But Max said that you don’t remember all your lives.”

He still didn’t turn around to face me but clasped his hands behind his back. “He was oversimplifying. He’s not been around as long as I have. You often do, just not all of them and not all of it. But you remember the important ones. I remembered this job because I failed.” He paused, his head turning slightly so I could see his profile. “I failed Yvette because I thought I was all she needed. I was her guide at the time, you see. She was being plagued by visions, visits from the other realm. Slowly, carefully, I revealed who I was and how I could help her. I taught her how to use the Thin Veil,

how to communicate, and sometimes, how to help the dead who were lost. But in those visits to the Veil, and every time she opened herself up to another realm, there were spirits—and worse, demons—that would come over. They tormented her. They made her feel insane. And I was all she had.”

He sighed and looked to the ground. “Except there was a boy. Her friend. He was lowly, to her family anyway, and worked on the farm picking the flowers for pressing. Jacques. But they were close—she loved him, even though she had to hide it from her family, and he loved her. Still, she never confided in him what she’d been going through. I told her not to. I thought I was protecting her, that Jacques wouldn’t understand, that he wouldn’t be there for her at any rate. I was her Jacob. It was my job to help her through—no one else’s.”

He slowly turned around to face me, and I saw a vulnerability in his hardened, pockmarked face that I hadn’t seen before. “She killed herself one morning. Drowned herself like Ophelia in the creek outside the property. She told me she was going to do it, too, I just didn’t realize how serious she was. She said she was sick of being alone through this. Even though I was there with her, I wasn’t like her. I wasn’t mortal. And most of all, she did not love me. She loved Jacques. And she slowly went mad without him there to shield her from it. The ghosts, the madness, this impossible life she’d been living. Had I just told her to confide in him, to involve him, maybe she wouldn’t have died. Maybe just knowing that she wasn’t suffering alone would have been enough to save her. Her ghost haunted me for a very long time...decades, even, through many lives. Just reminding me of the time I failed.”

Walking over to me, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a flask. He unscrewed the cap and took a long swig before handing it to me. I took it gingerly, afraid to partake. He nodded at it. “It’s one-hundred-year-old scotch,” he said. “Have some.”

I did. Nothing tasted smoother.

He took it back from me and took another shot, wiping his mouth with the edge of his sleeve. “Sage, I don’t want to fail with Dawn. I don’t want her to think she’s alone in this.”

“She has Max...and you. And she has me.”

“No,” he said with a sad shake of his head. “She doesn’t have you. You’re somewhere else, as you always are. You’re trying to take the easy way out again, trying to escape. You did it when you were in Hybrid. You did it in Hybrid A.D. And you’re doing it now. Whenever life throws you a curveball, you run and you hide and—though you may be standing here right now, though you were standing on that bloody stage playing your music that at that moment meant nothing to you—you’re numb to living.”

I didn’t want to hear this. “Curveball? That’s a pretty nice way of putting it. Putting out a shitty album or spilling coffee on your dress shirt, that’s a curveball. I have fucking demons after me, after my bandmates, after my girlfriend!” I tugged at my hair in frustration, turning away from him, feeling the anger rising out of my chest. “My mother was raped and murdered when I was fourteen. That’s not a fucking curveball. That destroyed me. That destroyed my whole life.”

“Sage,” he said delicately. Oh, how I wanted to punch him in the face. “In the grand scheme of things, they are all curveballs. It doesn’t matter what happens to make you want to derail, it’s how you handle it. It’s how you don’t derail. Right now, this is unacceptable. Right now, this is not about you. You and your rock star bullshit ego. This is about Dawn. She needs you now. She saved your life once, remember? You didn’t love her. Now you can and you can use that love to save her.” He took a step toward me, breath like whiskey, and handed me the flask again while his eyes bore into my soul. “I know the thought of losing her is painful. I know you think this is helpless, that you can’t do anything. I know you’re afraid. Well, boy, I’m afraid, too. The joys of being mortal. But you have to be there for her. She needs you. This is

how you'll save her—just by showing up and giving her your all. Don't let her go through this alone. She deserves better than that.”

I slowly swallowed down the alcohol, enjoying the burn. “I thought I wasn't supposed to be around her,” I said quietly. “I thought Max was trying to keep her from me.”

“Well, the fact that you were high and drunk off your blooming tree for the day didn't help you, did it? But that's also Max. This, right now, is coming from me, and believe me, I know more about this sort of thing than he does. Who does he think he is, anyway, with that hair? Ginger Elvis?”

I smirked at that and handed the flask back to Jacob. “So what do you suggest I do?”

“Go be with her,” he said, sticking it back in his pocket. “Listen to her. Talk to her. Make sure she knows she is not alone. Make her your one-man show.”

I smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “Where is she?”

“She should still be with Max, probably in the venue lobby. He wanted to take pictures of the audience afterward, and Dawn said she'd try and interview them, though I don't know how far she'd get. Now her French is terrible.”

I left Jacob backstage and pushed my way past a group of fans who had gathered at the entrance. I tried to ignore their waving pens and album covers, their squeals of joy when they saw me, their hands grabbing my arms, my waist, my legs. They wanted me, all of them, every part of me, but the exchange between us was over. The only person who could have me, all of me, was standing in the distance under the glow of a chandelier, her wild red hair a frame for her warm eyes and guarded smile.

“Dawn,” I called out, stepping out of the mob of people and walking freely over to

her.

She stopped scribbling in her notepad and looked up in shock. The young man she was interviewing, a lanky shit with hair down to his ass, looked in shock, too. Max stood off to the side, not saying anything, not yet.

“Sage,” she said. “I thought you were...”

Fucked up, passed out, on the town. She was thinking any of those things. I had to show her the truth.

“I’m right here,” I said. I reached out for her arm and pulled her toward me. She looked up with wide, curious eyes, beholding me as if I could break her in two. I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her softly on the lips. I heard her pen and notepad fall to the ground beside us.

When I pulled away, I rubbed my thumb over her lips, feeling her smile underneath it.

“What was that for?” she asked, her eyes darting over my shoulder now. The chatter of the fans had grown, and I was sure they were going nuts with what I’d just done. Did Sage Knightly just kiss that woman? Who is she?

She was Dawn Emerson, and she was mine.

“It’s for everything,” I said gently. My eyes flicked to Max as I bent down to pick up her pen and notebook. “Do I have permission to take Ms. Emerson out for a walk on the beach?”

He grimaced and unfolded his arms, his lips pursed. “I don’t know...”

And we three knew it was dangerous. But damned if I wouldn't be there for her like she deserved, especially after Jacob put me in my place. I wouldn't let her feel alone.

"Can I come, too?" the young fan said in broken English.

I smiled at him and reached into my pocket. I brought out a guitar pick and placed it in his hands. "No, but here's a souvenir. Thanks for coming out, man."

I held on to Dawn's hand and led her out into the night, past more fans. I signed a few autographs until I let them know I had a date. With my girlfriend.

Dawn looked up at me wide-eyed as we walked down the street toward the waterfront. "Girlfriend?" she asked.

I raised my brow at her. "Too presumptuous of me?"

She shook her head. "No, I...thank you."

"For what?"

"For coming to get me."

I sucked in my breath. "I'm sorry I wasn't really...with it today. It's been rough. And I mean, it's been rough for you. I'm just not...handling it well. And I should be."

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“Jacob put you straight, huh?” she asked. We stopped at the lights on the street corner. Across the street, the tall Phoenix palms rustled in the ocean breeze and lifted the hair around her face. I tucked the strands behind her ears.

“He put me straight. He made me realize that I can’t run away from this, from you...from the idea of losing you. Dawn,” I bit my lip, my fingers disappearing into her hair, “I won’t lose you.”

“I hope that’s true.” God, she looked so scared and so fucking cute. I was serious putty in her hands.

“I’ll do whatever I can to make it true. Whatever I can.”

But you can’t tell her you love her, said the voice in my head. Because that will make it true.

I swallowed hard and kept my focus on her. Damn that voice. But tonight I wouldn’t silence it the way it wanted me to.

She looked past me, and I caught a subtle rolling of the eyes.

“What?” I asked, looking behind me at the crowd that was still outside the theater. A tall figure was sauntering toward us.

“Max,” she muttered. “I think he aims to follow us.”

“For your own good?”

“I hope so.”

I didn't like the idea of Max following us around, but if he could protect Dawn in a situation that I couldn't, I couldn't afford to be an immature prick about it. Well, not really.

“That's fine,” I said, leading her across the street as the lights turned. “If he wants to watch you at every turn, then that's his problem. Not ours.”

We made our way across the seawall and down the cement stairs to the beach. Now, at night, there were a few torchlights lit in the areas that the hotels and lounges controlled, but the public areas of the beach were completely deserted. I took her across the thick pebbles, our feet sliding over them, until we came to a spot a few feet away from where the surf was breaking. I settled down on the beach then pulled her down into my lap.

She giggled shyly and immediately straddled me.

I rested my hands on her bare thighs. “It sure is lucky you're wearing a skirt.” I slid my fingers up toward her ass and then couldn't help but grin like a cocky fucking bastard when I realized she wasn't wearing any underwear. “Now you're just being extra lucky.”

“Lucky for whom?” she asked coyly, placing her hands on my shoulders and squeezing the rounded muscle there.

“For both of us,” I said. I grabbed her face and kissed her, our mouths in perfect synchronicity, that slow burn that was stoking us white-hot. I could have kissed her all night long, just loving the feel of her in my hands, at my mouth, the sweetness and the passion in her softly exploring tongue. She went for my pants, unbuttoning my waistband and zipping down the fly. I groaned at her touch, wanting it all now and

still wishing it could take forever. Just us on the beach in France, with the waves breaking at our back and the stars in the sky above. In this moment there were no demons, no deals, no deaths. Just her and just me. Just us. Always us. This song.

I'd spent the day numb and now I was feeling everything, open to the world.

"Do you think he's watching?" she whispered, her voice throaty as she guided my cock to her, teasing herself with the tip.

I moaned slightly, not giving a fuck who was watching. "Let him watch. Let him think he's lucky, too."

I quickly pulled out a condom from my pocket and slipped it on before we got too carried away. We made love on that beach for a long time and then slept in each other's arms, the pebbles our bed. We made our way home just as the sun was rising. We managed to keep our demons at bay.

Chapter Twelve

Dawn

Sleeping on a rocky beach may not have been the most comfortable thing in the world, but I was just so grateful that I'd gotten any sleep at all. You'd think that being out in the open like that, with the world watching if it looked through the darkness, would make you more vulnerable. But we were only vulnerable with each other, not to the supernatural.

At least that's what I told myself.

Once back at the hotel in the safety of the morning, we had another romp in the hay. I don't know if it was the constant adrenaline surging through us, the fact that our

lives, or at least mine, were threatened, or that we were finally coming together as one, but we just couldn't get enough of each other. When he was pushed deep inside me, this man of muscle and heart and oh God, the stamina, I felt fearless. Hopeful. Free.

It was only when we were dressed again that I felt reality coming to bite me, to remind me of the very unreal yet real situation I was placed in. And again, I could only blame myself. It was a terrible thing to know something was your fault, even though it was beyond your control or intention. It gave me just a little appreciation for what Sage must have been going through all throughout Hybrid and afterward. No wonder the man was such a mess.

Me, I was barely keeping it together. But somehow I was putting one foot in front of the other. I had Max, I had Jacob, and I had Sage. I knew all of them would do what they could for me, one more out of necessity than anything else. But it was more than enough. It had to be. I had no choice. The only thing I could control was how I dealt with it.

We had a train to board to Italy in the afternoon, an overnigher, which put me at ease slightly because I couldn't imagine anything spooky happening on a train surrounded by all those people. For the last couple of days, though, I'd been so wrapped up with what was happening to me, too wrapped up in Sage and the tour, that I'd forgotten to call Mel or my family.

When I was all packed, and Sage had given me some privacy, I called Mel and was able to talk to her for a few minutes before she had to go out. I nearly cried when I heard her voice and realized I missed her like crazy. She was the only person back at home who knew what I had really gone through with Hybrid, the only one who would listen to the truth. But I couldn't unleash on her my problem. It wasn't fair when she couldn't do anything to help.

With a heavy heart and a knocking on the door from Jacob, telling me I had to go, I hung up the phone. It was only when we got to the Nice train station that I realized we had another hour to kill—Jacob liked us all to be early, just in case. I stole a few moments away, promising to stay in sight of them and the band, and found the nearest payphone on the platform.

I dialed Eric, and he answered on the second ring.

“Hello?”

“Eric?” I cried out through the crackly connection.

“Dawn!” he exclaimed.

“Hey, monkey, how are you?”

“I’m great. Where are you?”

“I’m in France. Nice. We’re heading to Rome in a bit. What time is it there?”

“I dunno,” he said, and I realized how groggy he sounded. “Early. I’m getting ready for school.”

“Okay,” I said, “I won’t keep you. I just wanted to say hello. And that I love you.”

“Aw, geez, Dawn.”

“Well, I do.” My heart felt weighted. “And I just want you to take care of yourself and Dad.”

There was a pause. “Dawn. Are you okay?”

“Yeah...” I wasn’t sure how to phrase this without worrying him. “Listen, Eric, before I left, you said something to me. About...someone. You asked if I could feel her.”

The line crackled.

“Eric?” I prodded.

“I’m here,” came his small voice.

“Well, what was that about? Who was ‘her’?”

He sighed. I knew the minutes were ticking on my calling card, but I couldn’t rush him.

Finally he said, “I was talking about...about Mom. I know it sounds crazy. But...lately...well, until before you left, actually, I’d been having nightmares about her.”

I could barely find my voice. “What kind of nightmares?” I squeaked out.

“Just...weird stuff. Like, when we used to watch The Twilight Zone. Mom out in the field or in the bathroom or...on the ceiling. But it wasn’t Mom. I just thought it was...I...I thought maybe this was her way of communicating.” He paused. “Jeez, it sounds stupid, Dawn.”

“But you said it stopped?” I asked, my heart pounding.

“Yeah, it did. So far, anyway. And I don’t feel weird around the house anymore. It was like...I could feel her. That’s why I asked you that. I think...I think I just miss her. Don’t you?”

I breathed out slowly before responding. “Yeah, Eric. I miss her, too.”

“Well, I better go, Dawn.” I could hear stuff clanking in the background, like he was finishing up breakfast. Suddenly I longed to be in that sunny kitchen with him. I wished I could have gone back in time and never wished for anything to change, to just try and make the most of it and keep going on with my life.

But then Eric would have never found happiness in his cure, and my father wouldn’t have gotten his spirit and health back. My wish, no matter how damaging it was now, had never been a selfish one.

“Bye, Eric. I’ll speak soon. Tell Dad I love him, too.”

“I will.” And after a few beats, “Love you, big sis.”

I hung up the phone and wiped away the tear that had found its way to my chin.

“Play it again, Sam,” I said to Sage as he was about to set his guitar down. We were sitting on a lower bunk in a train car as it trundled its way through the night. Jacob had arranged for him, Sage, Max, and I to all be in the same four-person sleeping car for the journey to Rome, which was fine by me. I actually felt safe knowing we were all sleeping together, though I remembered from the bus tour with Hybrid that Jacob snored something fierce.

Sage smiled—those gorgeous dimples—and jerked his head back and forth. “Woody Allen totally butchered that line, you know. In *Casablanca*, Ingrid Bergman says ‘Play it, play “As Time Goes By.”’”

I hugged my knees to my chin and stroked the bottom of his guitar with my bare foot. “I didn’t know you were such a classic movie buff, Mr. Knightly. Sorry, Monsieur Knightly.”

His eyes flicked to my toes. “Don’t make me suck on them, you tease. And it’s Signor Knightly now that we’ve crossed into Italy. We’ll probably get shot for trying to speak French.” The passport control officials as we crossed the border hadn’t been the most welcoming.

“Then play it. Play...whatever thing you were just playing.”

“It doesn’t have a name,” he said, adjusting the guitar in his lap. “You can name it if you want.”

“Can we call it “Dawn”? I’ve always wanted a song about me.”

His face grew very serious for a moment. Then he smiled softly. “I don’t have any songs about you. But I hope to one day. This song is about finding yourself drunk in a Chicago bar and having no one to go home to as the snow starts to fall.”

“That’s depressing.”

He shrugged. “I’ve never been one to write happy songs; you know this more than most people. This is my therapy.”

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“So then I guess it’s good you’ve never written a song about me,” I said. Though we were just talking and trying to forget the horrors and dangers that lurked just outside of the moment, it kinda hurt that he had never written a song about me. Okay, that was dumb. It didn’t hurt—I was just disappointed. I think that’s one of the things most girls dream about when they dream about being with a rock star. They want to have a gorgeous song written about them, a hit single, and every time the rocker plays it live, they say “This one goes out to the one I love!”

His eyes sparked feverishly as he stared at me. My skin tingled in response. “You will get your song one day. I have plans,” his voice was low and rich. God, I hoped I’d always be a part of his plans.

I reached for the guitar and took it from him. “No matter,” I said breezily. “You forget that I can play guitar, too. Hmmm. How about a song called Sage?”

I started strumming the easiest chords I could play, trying to find a melody. “Sage Knightly,” I sang, my voice weak but clear, “he’s the man, the man with the magic touch...”

He took the guitar out of my hands. “While that’s all true about my magic touch, you’re also ripping off Shirley Bassey in Goldfinger.”

“Are you two ninnies still flirting with each other?” Jacob asked, suddenly appearing in the doorway. He was wearing his ugly pajamas again and fuzzy slippers that looked like AstroTurf, holding a toothbrush and a leather toiletries bag in his hand. “Shouldn’t you be past that stage already?”

“Are we annoying you?” Sage asked as Jacob walked in the compartment and put his bag away in the closet.

“You, annoy me? Never.” He climbed up on to the top bunk across from us, easing himself as he went. Jacob had to be in his late forties, early fifties, though it must have been annoying for him to deal with aches and pains now that he’d gone “rogue” and wasn’t immortal anymore.

He settled in the bunk, clasping his hands over his chest like he was a vampire catching some shut-eye in a coffin. “However, it is getting late and we all need our sleep and if I awaken feeling cranky tomorrow, you’ll both be the ones to suffer for it. Have you ever heard my rendition of Kumbaya on that guitar? I might just have to show you.”

“Where’s Max?” I asked.

Jacob sighed, keeping his eyes closed. “Bar car. With Tricky. Seems he’s taking your spot for tonight, Sage.”

Sage made a grumbling noise while I got up and started gathering my stuff for the night. I scooped up my T-shirt and boxer shorts for sleeping, plus my soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, and a towel.

“Want me to come with you?” Sage asked, resting his guitar on the bed and getting up, careful not to whack his head on the upper bunk.

“Nah,” I told him. “Washroom is pretty much right across the aisle anyway. A girl has to have some privacy.” And as much as I was weary of being without my protectors, I still didn’t feel the train would be that much of a problem. Or maybe I was just trying extra hard to pretend the real dangers didn’t exist. Because when I did have a chance to think about them—the demons, the bargain, everything—I felt

completely paralyzed with fear.

“All right,” he said, watching me carefully as I opened the door and stepped out. I squeezed against the wall just as a man built like a hippo came waddling past and followed him down the aisle toward the washroom. The train swayed gently as it rolled along, and I wished it were daylight so I could see the scenery out the window instead of the unending blackness. So far, Italy was just a limitless void.

I stopped outside the washroom door and tried it, but it was locked. I was only two doors down from our train car, so I waited a bit for the person to get out, but after a few minutes, I decided I couldn’t wait. I was growing more tired by the moment, and it was nearly eleven o’clock. The train had dimmed the lights in the aisles, and I knew that the lights would be going off soon in the passenger cars.

Unfortunately, if I wanted to get ready for the night, I’d have to make my way through one of the passenger cars to get to the other washrooms. At least it would be full of people.

I walked down the aisle, opened the door, and passed through the accordion-like area between the cars, the ribbed bottom of the train moving beneath my feet. I’d never been on a train before coming to Europe—unless you count the crappy Christmas train in Ellensburg—so it was a bit unnerving to be in the locomotive version of no-man’s land. Luckily I could see through the window at the passenger car and the lights were still on, though dim and giving off a greenish glow.

I opened the door and stepped in. The car was about half-full, with most people slumped over in their seats, sleep masks over their eyes. I would have hated to try and sleep on a train like this, especially since people were walking past you all the time. It made me feel exposed just looking at them.

I tried to avert my eyes from the dozing people and made my way down the aisle,

taking careful steps in case the train suddenly jerked around a corner like it had been doing for most of the night. With luck, the bathroom was empty, and I quickly slipped on my sleep gear, glad that most people out there were already asleep so they wouldn't have to see me in the boxers I had bought in the boys section at JC Penney that had Fat Albert and "Hey hey hey!" all over them.

When I was finished doing my business and felt ready for bed, I stepped back out into the passenger car.

Into complete darkness.

I squinted, thinking I'd see at least a few individual lights on or emergency lights along the aisle, but it was black. I couldn't even see through the window into the next car. It was black, black, black.

I swallowed hard, suddenly cursing myself for straying so far from Sage and Jacob. The lights were probably out for the night, but there was something odd about this, unsettling. So...final. It made my chest clamp up, my heart beat faster.

I took a careful step forward, and the train jostled to the left. I blindly thrust my hand out for the nearest chair and luckily I hit one, leaning against it before I toppled over.

"Sorry," I whispered in case I shook anyone awake. I straightened up, though still holding on to the top of the chair, and reached across the aisle for the top of the opposite chair. I walked forward slowly, keeping my balance from chair to chair. Nothing like trying to walk through a moving car of sleeping people in the complete dark.

Suddenly we turned a corner, a large one that threw me into the seat to my right. My knee jammed against the armrest with a burst of pain and I let out an "oof!". Thankfully the seat was empty, otherwise I would have been in some stranger's lap.

I struggled to get up, the train still going around a long bend, and saw the lights up ahead flicker on. They were coming from the accordion-like vestibule, and though I couldn't see straight into it because of the angle of the train's bend and the window, it meant now I had a point of reference to walk toward.

My knee stung, so I rubbed at it for a minute, ready to walk forward again once the train straightened out. I stood up in the middle of the aisle, my grip hard on the top of the seat, and felt the train's curve dissipating. I took two awkward steps forward.

And then stopped.

I almost crushed a seat rest in pure fright.

Now, through the glass window to the other car, I could see the sallow light flickering, and below it was a man facing me, standing absolutely, deathly still.

A man in black with a tall hood around his face, almost obscuring it in shadow.

Almost. When the light stopped flickering here and there, I could see glints of stark white where his jaw was. And then teeth. White teeth. No lips.

No...skin.

Suddenly the man snapped his head up, looking straight at me, and I only saw two large gaping holes for eyes—holes that seemed to steal my soul and lead it straight into the pits of Hell—before the train went black again.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I found myself whimpering out loud, my heart exploding, my legs threatening to collapse, my nails digging into the seat.

Then the lights came back on.

The man was not in the partition anymore.

He was on the other side of the door.

He was in the passenger car with me.

And then we were plunged into darkness once more. Ice-cold darkness.

“Go away!” I screamed, holding on to the seat for dear life, hoping someone would do something. “Someone, please help me!”

The lights came back on, flickering almost like a strobe now.

The man had gotten closer.

Now just a few feet away.

The man in black. A white skull for a face. The rotten stench of death.

And now the train car was completely empty.

Not a sleeping soul in sight.

The lights went out again.

I screamed and screamed, my chest seizing up at the fact that I was alone, that no one was here, that I was going to die at the hands of this demon. I turned and tried to run but bashed myself into a seat. I fumbled to my feet and staggered back the way I came, trying to run to the train car beyond the washroom.

I could hear the man walking behind me, his footsteps, his long robe as it brushed

against the ground, as I tried to find the door handle in the blackness. My hands were clumsy in my panic, numb in my terror.

“Dawn before the darkness,” came the voice behind me, the one that held utter depravity in its raspy, guttural origins. “The darkness is now.”

“No!” I screamed and tried the door again. I finally found the handle and gave it a jerk.

It was stuck.

Oh God, no, no, no, no.

I wasn’t going to die here, not on this train, not with the love of my life waiting for me in our room.

I tried it again.

The creature was right behind me.

I could feel it there, feel the evil, feel its presence.

It could reach out and touch the back of my neck.

Tear out my spine.

Do anything it wanted.

The door was stuck, and there was no escape.

The lights flickered back on in the opposite car, shining through the window.

On the other side of the door stood Max, staring at me in surprise.

Then his eyes went past my shoulder, to where I knew it was.

Max's brows lowered, a malevolence swarming through his green eyes, a focus I'd never seen before.

And I felt the weight behind me leave. The air shifted.

The lights in my car came back on.

And the door handle turned.

Max quickly stepped in, and I grabbed at his shirt with desperate fists. I would have fallen over otherwise.

"Dawn," he growled, his arm coming around me and holding me up. "What are you doing out here?"

I looked up at him, unable to form words, then glanced behind me. The car was full of sleeping people again. One person was reading a book. No one took any notice of me.

But I was screaming, wasn't I? The man was here, wasn't he?

"You saw it," I managed to say.

"I did," he said, lowering his voice. "It's gone now. Don't worry, you're not going crazy. Though you may wish you were. This is between you and the demons now. You're going to see a lot of things that other people won't see."

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“What about Sage? He saw the one in the bathroom.”

He nodded. “Sage’s mind has been opened to this world. I don’t think either of you will ever be able to unsee them, to unsee the things that cross through the Veil. But with a little luck, you won’t ever have to deal with that.”

It was then that I noticed I was trembling. He gave me a light squeeze and said, “Come on, let’s return you to your man.”

We walked down the aisle, me pausing to pick up my toiletries and clothes, which I’d dropped on the empty seat, and back to our car. Jacob was already asleep, and we didn’t say anything to Sage. What would be the point in making him worry? ‘By the way, when I went to use the washroom, I ended up in the train car to The Twilight Zone and some kind of fucked-up Grim Reaper almost dragged me to Hell. Well, I’m okay now. Good night!’

So Max and I kept it to ourselves. But there was no way I was sleeping alone on the top bunk. I climbed in with Sage in the bottom and tried to get some sleep despite Jacob’s vibrating snores. In the morning we’d be in Rome. Another day to face, another day to die.

Chapter Thirteen

Sage

Arriving in Rome was like a goddamn breath of fresh air. Not that the air in the city was exactly fresh. But when we stepped off the train and into the baking heat of the

station, I felt like I could breathe a bit better, despite the hazy brown smog that sat high above the church domes of the city. Apparently we were entering an early heat wave, but after the moodiness of Paris and the neat façade of Nice, I was ready for something different.

I could tell Dawn was, too. She confessed she hadn't slept very well thanks to Jacob's snoring (I was an old pro when it came to drowning that out) and she looked unusually pale, but when she started walking under that Roman sun and we stopped to admire a street performer while Jacob got us a cab, she seemed to perk up a little.

Truth was, I was barely holding it together as it was. I was afraid to let her out of my sight, afraid for each other thing that approached, knowing, always fucking knowing, that something was out there coming for her. Debt collectors were an insistent bunch, and these ones had teeth, horns, and claws.

But I couldn't dwell on it—I wouldn't let myself. Jacob was right: I just had to be there for her, that's all I could do. We had to go on, take that step into each hour, toward the end of each day, and hope that we could handle whatever horrific thing was going to be thrown at us. It wasn't much of a life, but we had to make do. And tonight I had a show to put on in motherfucking Rome. I had a show to make up for the drunken one I played in Nice. I had a show to prove that I was capable of coming back from the brink.

Those fucks didn't have us yet, no matter what deal was made.

Our hotel was the best one on the tour so far, a white-and-gold temple, just steps away from the Trevi fountain and a gelato shop that Jacob called the world's best.

I looked at Dawn as we sat in the backseat of the cab, holding her hand before we stepped out. "Gelato sounds good. It sounds like Rome to me. You ever see Roman Holiday?"

She shook her head, her eyes squinting at the harsh sun coming through the dirty windows.

“You haven’t?” I asked. “Audrey Hepburn? My man, Gregory Peck?”

She gave me a funny look. “Your man?”

“There was no greater hero for me than Gregory Peck when I was growing up. Atticus Finch, man. Almost made me want to be a lawyer.” She still looked confused. “Jeez. Okay, well, let’s live a little. Let’s do fun things today before the show.”

Her brows came together in trepidation. “Are you sure that’s smart?”

I leaned into her and kissed her softly. I pulled away and stared into her eyes. “We have to keep going on. We have to live a little...while we can. Where better than Rome?”

She sucked in her bottom lip but nodded. We got out of the cab and stared at the bustling world around us. Tourists with their knee-high socks and giant cameras around their necks, little boys playing around the edge of the fountain, an old man in a purple suit selling newspapers from a cart. Pigeons everywhere and the scent of coffee beans in the air.

We checked into the hotel and naturally Max had to insist he was staying in our room. The front desk clerk seemed really disturbed at the idea of two men and one woman sharing a room together, especially when she saw the roadies behind us with my acoustic guitars in their arms, but she let it slide. It may have been 1975, but Rome was still a pretty conservative city.

I started thinking about that as we put our bags away in our tiled-floor room. The churches in the city, the Vatican, the Pope, the Holy See. I wasn’t a religious man,

though in hindsight perhaps I should have been, considering what I'd been through. But when I was a boy, when my mother was alive, we went to church in Redding every Sunday. She was a devout Catholic, as most of our family in Mexico had been, although my father had no interest. The church-going stopped after she died, but I still held on to a kernel of my faith throughout the years. I wasn't sure if I was about to rediscover it now, but churches were always a haven for those in trouble, if not a place to seek answers.

However, I didn't want to bring this up around Max. I didn't know how he fit into any of it. He admitted to there being a Heaven and a Hell, but he never described himself as an angel, even though it was the closest thing I had to compare him to. A guardian without the angelic part. Even still, I didn't want him to tell me it was pointless or futile because I would have no choice but to believe him, and the little faith I did have would be gone.

"Let's go explore," I said to Dawn, grabbing her hand and pulling her to me. I looked up at Max, expecting him to say something. He wasn't protesting, but he looked uncomfortable with the idea all the same. "Any objections?"

His eyes narrowed in thought, studying me carefully.

I added, "And I do mean just Dawn and me. I know you probably got off on that little peep show we gave you on the beach, but it's broad daylight outside. I don't think anything is going to happen now with all these people around."

Max and her exchanged a quick but loaded look.

"What?" I asked, feeling like I was missing out on something.

"Nothing," he finally said, rubbing his lips together. "Yep, fine. I reckon that's fine. If I heard Jacob correctly, you only have two hours before your soundcheck anyway,

so...be my guests. Just...be careful. Don't let go of each other. And if you come into any trouble..."

"There isn't some dog whistle we can do?" I asked, feeling like a bit of a jackass as I did so.

He crossed his big arms. He wasn't amused. "Actually, if she knew how to get into the Veil, she could find me there. But that's...nothing for her to worry about. Go have fun."

"Thanks," I mumbled as she grabbed her purse and we left the room.

As we walked down the stairs to the lobby, she smacked my chest with her hand. "You could be nicer to him, you know."

"I am nice. I'm a nice guy. I just don't like him following us around all the livelong day, that's all."

"Well, he's not one of your roadies, you know," she said. "He's a lot more useful than you think."

I pondered that for a moment, wondering if she was getting at something. I decided she wasn't.

"My roadies are useful, by the way."

"For getting drugs and stoking your ego."

"Yeah, well, it all counts."

Our first stop was the gelato, which was pretty damn good but since they didn't really

serve gelato in California, there wasn't much to compare it to. Kinda like watery ice cream with a kick. Perfect in the heat, anyway. Next we went on to the Trevi Fountain, where we wrestled aside the tourists to get a prime spot to flick coins into the fountain. The color was so blindingly blue that I thought it would make a fine album cover. Funny that my head was making all these plans for the future when the future seemed so fucking precarious.

After the fountain, we headed for the Spanish Steps. Since she hadn't seen Roman Holiday, I couldn't run down it and pretend to bump into her. And every time I attempted to explain the film, she looked at me as if I were missing my testicles, so that quickly shut me up.

And renting a Vespa—that was totally out of the question.

After the Spanish Steps, we wandered the winding streets, past the street kids begging for money, the groups of nuns who seemed to float as they walked, and the vendors trying to sell fruit. It was about then that I started to feel uneasy, like people were staring at us funny, that the gargoyles and statues around us had eyes. I was sure it was just my imagination, but it was enough that I pulled Dawn toward the first church I saw, which happened to be around the corner from the awe-inspiring dome of the Pantheon.

“Where are we going?” she asked as we entered the small white building with its thick door of dark wood. “Is this a famous landmark?”

“No,” I whispered, my body already feeling reverence for the place. It was even smaller inside and sparsely decorated compared to the Catholic church I went to as a kid. It was completely empty, save for a woman in black kneeling in prayer at the front pew, and the air inside had a strange kind of hush to it.

I led Dawn to a row of pews halfway to the altar and we sat down. We both looked

around us at the crosses on the walls and the red stained glass designs, which would have looked amazing had the church had any view beyond the windows. For some reason, it was completely closed in on each side by the surrounding buildings, which gave it a claustrophobic feeling, as if we were in a box of reverence.

“Why are we here?” she whispered, leaning close to me, her eyes never leaving the altar and the woman who was at the front.

“I thought we could find...” I started, not realizing how ridiculous it might sound to her, “...solace in here. Safety. Whether you’re religious or not, churches are a haven. I thought maybe this would make you feel better.”

She seemed to take that all in, nodding slowly. She shot me a sly look. “I never pegged you to be a religious man.”

“I’m not, not really. But my mother believed in it. Believed in it a lot. It never did her harm. I just know what we’re dealing with is...” I looked around me uneasily. “...The Devil.”

Though I was talking in an extremely low voice, the woman in black lifted her head. She didn’t turn, but it was obvious she was aware of us in the church with her, and was suddenly paying attention.

I gulped uneasily and continued, lowering my voice so it was a harsh whisper right in Dawn’s ear. “We know that’s who you made the deal with. Who I made the deal with. And if there’s a Devil, there is a God. I figured, Jacobs aside, maybe he owes us a favor. And even if he doesn’t, maybe this is one place you can be without fear.”

She turned her head to me, her nose brushing against mine. “If that’s the case, then why do I feel so damn afraid?”

Her eyes were watering, her forehead lined. She was afraid. In fact, she was trembling.

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“What is it?” I asked, putting my hand behind her head, my fingers melting into her tangled hair.

Her eyes drifted over to the woman at the pew who was slowly getting to her knees, her black robe draping around her, her back still to us.

“She’s not human,” Dawn said quietly, her fear audible with each syllable.

I couldn’t tell if Dawn was being overly paranoid or not, but if she didn’t feel safe here, in the place I thought she would, then I wanted us to leave.

“Let’s go,” I said, assuring her. I got to my feet, my knees hitting the back of the pew with a whack, the church not constructed for someone as tall as me. I pulled her up and we squeezed out into the aisle.

We both stared dumbly at the front. The woman was standing absolutely still in the middle of the aisle, facing the altar.

A huge BANG caused us both to jump and flip around.

The huge wooden door we came in through had slammed shut. The flames in the candles around it danced, and it felt like a shadow came over the whole room, like a cloud going over the sun.

We looked at each other. I could tell the terror inside Dawn wanted to annihilate her. But it was just a closed door. It was just the wind. Nothing could happen in here, in one of these houses of the holy, with Rome going outside the door as normal. If it

could, it would rewrite everything I thought of as a sure thing in this world.

“Come on,” I said, grabbing her hand.

We made it to a few pews outside the door when we heard the rustle. The sound of clothing dragging on the ground. Ragged breathing. Heavy thumps. Behind us.

I squeezed her hand, my way of telling her to keep going, to not turn around. Even though we both knew now that there was something behind us, that there was something very unnatural going on in this goddamned church.

We got to the door and I tried to open it, lifting the heavy iron latch on the handle.

It wouldn't open.

There was a terrible, skeletal crack behind us, followed by more in rapid succession. It sounded like my dad when he cracked his knuckles, but deeper, more succinct, like someone was breaking every bone in their body, over and over again. The sound was so loud, so clear, and so sharp that it echoed loudly around the church.

Dawn started to turn around to look, but I tugged harshly on her arm, my eyes digging into hers. “Do not turn around,” I told her. “Whatever you do, do not turn around.”

I saw her swallow, her eyes bulging wide, her mouth quivering, but she held it together and nodded.

The cracking noise got closer, the rustling, dragging noise continuing. In my mind I saw the woman crawling on her knees, reaching for us with bony arms and long spindly fingers, her black cloak behind her, her joints and bones breaking as she stretched and grew and took on an inhuman form. I was so tempted to turn around

and look, to see if the horror in my mind matched the horror that was right there behind us.

Fucking shit. I was going to lose it.

I took in a deep breath and tried the door again, willing myself not to panic, praying, fucking praying that we would be let out of the church.

The iron latch lifted. I gasped in relief and pulled open the heavy door and, with Dawn's hand in mine, we ran out into the busy Roman street, the sunshine and crowds blowing the terror away from our faces.

We ran all the way back to the hotel. We never once looked back.

Despite what went on the church, despite the way we felt, what we saw or, more specifically, didn't see, the concert in Rome went off without a hitch. Once Dawn and I got back from the church, trying desperately to make sense of what had happened (our theory was that either we were extremely paranoid—with reason—or the demons fed off our fear), we were quickly swept up in the soundcheck and the concert proceedings.

Normally I would have been worried about my performance, the setlist, the way the band was performing together, the fans in Rome, but none of that even crossed my mind. I just cared about Dawn and keeping her safe. When I knew Max would be on the side stage with her during the show and Jacob would be on the other side, I relaxed. I made the night about just going out there and delivering my music the way I wanted to. I conjured up all the dreams I had as a kid, just wanting fame and adulation and respect and the chance to share something I made—something I was—with the people who wanted to receive it.

So yeah, Rome was an awesome show. Thank you, Italy. I played sober, remembered

all my lyrics, tried to give everyone my soul, and they in turn seemed more than satisfied. They sang along, they cheered, they danced, they rocked out. And every now and then, I'd look to the shadows of the side stage and see Dawn watching me, always watching me, like the fucking biggest fan, and that's what I so loved about her. That through and through, she was a fan, a lover, a friend, a girlfriend. She was everything, and at that moment on stage, I had everything. A world at my feet and a woman with my heart.

Things didn't get weird until we finished the encore. I decided on "Wet Lips" again, just because I was feeling respectful, just because I was feeling. Because, God-fucking-dammit, did Hybrid mean the world to me, and though I loved being a solo artist, I loved having the control and going at it on my own, it was lonely. It was lonely in this creative realm. I missed Robbie and Mickey and even Chip, our sound tech. I missed Noelle's smile when you did something that actually made her smile. I missed the way Robbie argued the lyrics, even when he didn't write the song. I missed it all. But now I was alone, the one-man show, and I was making a go of it. This was my tribute.

It was after the solo during "Wet Lips," the one part where I really thought that I gave Mr. James Page a run for his money, where the licks just peeled off of my fingers, that I saw something that reminded me things were not one hundred percent normal and we were not one hundred percent safe.

I looked out into the audience. Half the time you were blinded by stage lights and couldn't really see any individual faces, which usually made it that much easier to perform for someone like me, who didn't get off on it (unlike Robbie, who did get off on it). But with the sporadic way the house had the lights for "Lips," the spotlight was going off on the crowd.

And I saw a familiar face looking back at me.

Long white hair, calculating purple eyes, and a vicious, razor-sharp grin.

The ultimate groupie from Hell: Alva.

The last time I'd seen her was when she dragged me to Lake Shasta in an attempt to kill Dawn and finish me off before my twenty-eighth birthday.

Now she was here in Rome at my solo show.

Now she'd come to collect on Dawn.

I nearly fucked up the last chorus of the song, my eyes trained on the demon in horror. But when the spotlight moved off of her, she was gone, and I managed to soldier through the very end to the applause.

I wasn't imagining shit, though, not this time. I was shown just enough to put the fear back into my soul.

When the house lights went back on, signaling the end of the show, I headed straight to Dawn at the side stage, my Gibson 335 still around my neck.

"Are you okay?" I asked her, wiping the sweat from my brow.

She was smiling though looking concerned now. "Yeah, I'm fine. Sage...that was amazing."

I was buzzing too much from Alva now to be buzzing about the show. I reached over and kissed her hard with salty lips, my guitar pressed between us.

When I pulled away, she was breathless, and I noticed Max staring at me intently. I could tell he knew something was up, but I didn't want to worry Dawn and neither

did he.

“Sage,” Jacob boomed, striding over with a glass of red wine in his hand.

I eyed it. “That for me?”

“No,” he said dryly, taking a sip. “A manager has to have his perks, too.” He jerked his head toward the backstage. “Come on, the Italian press wants to get a hold of you, and I believe they’re even, er, grabbier than the French.” He looked to Dawn. “You can come, too, love, now that your relationship is the talk of the town.”

I squeezed her hand and peered down at her, not wanting her out of my sight. “You’re staying by my side whether you want to or not.”

“I think I can handle myself,” she said with a sly grin, and together we walked off into the zoo backstage. And when I say zoo, I mean zoo. Jacob was right. The Italian journalists were pushy, loud, and passionate. The translators had to work fast to make sure the correct questions came through, though I had to say they were at least a smiling bunch of hacks, which made the whole thing a lot more bearable.

When that was over and done with, Dawn handling herself quite well as the subject instead of the journalist this time, we headed back to the hotel, with Tricky and Garth dragging us out to a bar around the corner. It seems in the short time we’d been Rome, Tricky had fallen in love with waitress who worked there. He was also giving me a hard time about how serious we’d all gotten over the last couple of days.

“Seriously, dude,” he said to me after we slammed back a shot of Sambuca, “you should be grinning like you’ve eaten shit here.” He looked to Dawn, who was sitting beside me at the bar. Smoke sat in a haze above our heads, ‘50s jazz music played over the speakers, and Garth was in the toilets, apparently sick from drinking too much earlier. “And you, too. What’s with all the glum faces lately?”

I exchanged a look with Dawn. Tricky definitely wouldn't understand. His idea of the supernatural was taking a lot of mushrooms and talking to God on the roof of the Philadelphia Public Library. I know because I was there.

"We're just tired," I said.

"Yeah," he said, his eyes drifting over to the waitress behind the bar, "tired from all the sex, I bet."

I smiled and let him think that, even though he knew for a fact that I could go all night long.

After another shot, he went off to check on Garth. I put my arm around Dawn, pulling her into me so she was almost falling off her stool. I was pleasantly buzzed, but it wasn't enough to make me forget. It wasn't enough to make the chills on my back disappear.

"Listen," I said to her, hoping she could pick up on the gravity in my voice. "I know we've got Prague after this; Jacob told me the visas came in to the hotel today. And then West Germany and who-the-hell-knows-where after. I know this tour isn't over yet, but...I'm thinking it should be."

She looked at me in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," I took in a deep breath, somewhat surprised I was about to say this and with no reservations about it. "I mean, I could cancel the tour. I should."

"Sage, no," she said, her curls shaking.

"I'm serious, and I think it would be for the best."

“The best for whom?”

I frowned, my eyes starting to water from the smoke in the bar. “For you, of course. Not for me. It would be a shitty idea for me.”

“I know,” she said, pressing her hand down on my leg, “that’s why I don’t think you know what you’re talking about. Sage, whatever is happening, it’s not going to stop because you’ve stopped the tour. It will keep following me until this is all over.”

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It broke my heart to hear her being so matter-of-fact about it, like she had already resigned herself to her fate. I wanted her to fight. But I suppose she was in her own way.

“But I can be with you, all the time. I can focus on you, just on you, and not the band, not the shows, not my music.”

She pressed her hand into my leg harder. “But you have to. This is your life, Sage.”

“You’re my life,” I blurted out. I hoped to God she couldn’t see me blushing like a fucking girl because what I’d just said was borderline hokey. But it was the truth. “You are, and I will put the rest of my life on hold if it means keeping you safe.”

She reached up for my face, her soft fingertips tracing along the rough stubble on my jaw. “You are an amazing man. An amazing musician. You are my golden god and every day you surprise me. We, what we have, surprises me. As long as you keep...being there for me, I’ll be as safe as I can be. You’ve done so much for me, more than you’ll ever even know. But canceling your tour isn’t the answer here. I already have guilt. I don’t want any more. If anything, watching you play live, being with you in all these foreign places, no matter what is going on at the time, keeps me sane. It keeps me going. And it tells those fuckers that we aren’t giving up. They can throw whatever they want at me, but I’m not breaking.”

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed it. I wanted to do so much more than that for her. We waited until Tricky and a queasy Garth came back, then I took her back to the hotel. Kicked Max out of the room. And gave her three orgasms hot on the heels of each other. It was the least I could do.

The three of us woke up in the middle of the night to the phone ringing. I heard Max roll over in his bed and pick it up. “Hello?”

There was a pause then he said, voice tired and groggy, “Okay, I’ll be right there.”

He leaned over and flicked on the light, blinding me. Dawn raised her head off my chest and blinked at us wearily. “What’s going on?”

Max got out of bed, pulling on his jeans and a flannel shirt before I had to see anything I didn’t want to. “It was Jacob. Said it was really important.”

I looked at the clock. “It’s three-thirty in the morning.”

Max shrugged and let out a sigh. “Yeah. Well, it sounded...urgent. I’ll be right back. You two stay put.” He quickly grabbed his room key and shut the door behind him.

I looked down at Dawn in my arms—she was already sleeping again. I gently placed her on the bed and got up to use the washroom. I was a little on edge as I did so, flashes of the monster in Dawn’s bathroom flashing in the darkened spaces of my brain.

Once I was done, I went over to the window to open it, since the room was getting stuffy with heat of three people sharing the same air. Our window faced a narrow street on the quieter side of the building. A lone cat was walking along it, rubbing up against the opposite building. And beneath the lone streetlight stood a woman. Tall, thin, slender—a complete silhouette. But she was watching me. I could tell she was watching me.

Angeline. It had to be her.

I looked behind me at Dawn, breathing heavily in her deep sleep. I didn’t want to

leave her alone here without Max, but I knew he couldn't be gone for too long. I looked back out the window again, and Angeline was slowly walking away. I needed answers. More than anything, I needed to know what was going on.

I grabbed my keys from the nightstand, slipped on my pants, and ran out into the hall, gently closing the door behind me and locking it. The hotel was quiet this time of night, guests in their rooms trapped in deep slumber, the front desk empty. I walked out into the street, nearly stepping on a rat that was scuttling past, and hurried up the street, turning the corner and going down the next one.

Angeline was walking away from me, her form disappearing in the empty spaces between the streetlamps. I ran soundlessly in my bare feet, the cobblestones cold under them, and caught up to her as she neared the next lamp.

I grabbed her harshly by her shoulder and spun her around so she was facing me and I could make out her features in the light.

"You," I hissed.

It was her. But she sure as hell didn't look very good. Her hair was straggly up close, tangled, and there were gaunt spaces underneath her cheekbones. Thin lines of tears marked her cheeks, and her nose was bleeding.

"Bonne soirée, Sage," she said, trying to sound sly and sophisticated, but her words came out choked.

I didn't know what to say now that I had her. This wasn't what I was expecting.

"Who are you?" I whispered harshly. She didn't say anything, so I shook her harder, my fingers digging into her arm. A drop of blood splattered onto the ground between us.

She eyed it absently then looked at me with watery eyes. “I’m almost done. And when I am done, I will be free.” She then went off into a tangent in French, just words that she spit out that didn’t seem to go together. The only word I recognize was mort. Death.

“Free from what? What do you want with Dawn?”

She gave me a lazy smile and another drop of blood fell from her upper lip. “I don’t care for Dawn. I did care for you, just un peu. But Dawn, she is their business. And I am almost free of their business, too.”

I took in a deep breath, trying to keep myself from flipping out in frustration. “Who are they?”

“You know who they are. Everyone knows who they are.” The blood began to pour more freely from her nose, streaks of red on white, and her eyes went up to the hotel windows. “You can go and ask one of them yourself. It’s with Dawn right now.”

My eyes flew to the windows. I counted up and saw the window to our hotel room. The light was on in the room, and a large form was moving to the curtains. I caught a glint of yellow eyes before it snapped the curtains shut.

I must have screamed or I don’t know what, but I turned and I ran fast as hell away from Angeline, around the corner, almost falling on my face, and back into the hotel. I took the stairs two at a time, praying I wasn’t too late, hoping it was just Max I saw, cursing myself for leaving her alone.

Once at the floor, I sprinted for the room. I didn’t even bother trying the handle to see if it was locked; there was no time. I threw myself against the door shoulder first and used all my strength and fury to bust it down.

I hadn't been prepared for the next sight.

The lights were on, mood lighting almost. Dawn was on the bed, completely naked, her head back in ecstasy, eyes closed, mouth open, legs spread. There was a man between her legs, fucking her hard, fast, violently.

The man was me.

He turned his head to me and grinned. It was me. Everything about me, everything that made me me, he had.

Except his eyes. Those looked like bright yellow pinpricks.

And at the base of his ass was a protrusion flickering like a worm, like a hairless tail.

Oh, fuck it, it was a tail.

A demon disguised as me was essentially raping her.

"Dawn!" I screamed, lunging forward, ready to rip the eyes out of the creature. I'd never been so willing to completely kill something before, just tear it apart with my bare hands. I was lucky the fucker was a demon because if he were a man, I'd be charged for murder.

She opened her eyes, seeing me as I ran for the creature. Then she saw the creature, the creature that was transforming in front of our eyes. The tail grew, bones jutted out of its cheekbones, claws came out of its hands, tentacles burst from its stomach, dripping with blood and matter, like a baby being born.

I launched myself into the air, wishing I had some weapon, but all I had was my brawn and the motherfucking rage that was busting out of me.

The creature moved as quick as lightning and jumped straight out through the window, through the glass that shattered in an explosion of fragments. I ran forward and saw it land three stories below before taking off down the now-empty street, disappearing into the shadows. There were a few cries from awakened guests, wondering what the hell had just happened.

But I wasn't wondering. I knew what had just happened. Angeline had done her duty for whatever payout. She had provided the diversion.

I ran over to Dawn, who was crying, shaking, pulling the covers up around her. I tried to take her into my arms and comfort her, but she screamed and pushed me away.

"What just happened?" Max said, appearing in the doorway with Jacob.

I could barely speak I was so angry. Because I couldn't hold Dawn, I turned around and went for him. I grabbed his shirt and pushed him up against the wall.

"You left us, that's what happened. You let them in! You failed!" I knew that was a bit unfair of me to say, but I didn't care.

Max stared back at me, unflinching, though his eyes wavered at the mention of "failed."

"I thought Jacob had called me," he said weakly.

"Sage, let go of him," Jacob said. "You were both duped."

I heard some extra voices and was suddenly aware that a few hotel guests were gathering in the hall behind Jacob, peeking in at the broken windows and the redheaded girl, who was crying uncontrollably in her bed.

I let go of Max and went out into the hall, screaming at them until I felt the veins in my head bulge. “Get the fuck back to your rooms!”

They all scampered away like rats.

“Sage,” Jacob said solemnly, putting his hand on my shoulder. I shrugged him off and saw Max go into the room, cautiously approaching Dawn. I couldn’t even be mad about that. Someone had to console her. Oh God, my poor fucking love.

I leaned against the wall, hunched over, trying to keep everything inside.

“Sage,” Jacob said again. “Come on, get inside.”

He led me back into the room. Dawn was sitting up, now wearing a shirt and boxer shorts, the blanket draped around her shoulders. Max was rubbing her back while she stared blankly at a spot on the bed.

For one moment, I had let my guard down. Apparently Max had, too. On the phone, “Jacob” had told him to meet him two blocks away, that something happened to Tricky and he needed his help but not to tell me so I wouldn’t worry. When Max got there, he saw nothing but a bunch of pigeons with their heads ripped off. He came straight back, getting the unsuspecting Jacob on the way, knowing it was a ruse just as I had figured out that Angeline was a ruse.

Both of us were duped. We had both underestimated the lengths that the demons would go to, the ways they would torment Dawn.

And if both of us had failed her...who would protect her in the end?

Chapter Fourteen

Dawn

There are some days when you can't even get out of bed, let alone open your eyes. I was having far too many of those days lately.

It was the day we were flying to Prague. The day we were leaving Rome. The day that followed the night where I was attacked by a demon disguised as Sage.

Unlike the days before, on this day I realized how futile everything really was. That I was a pawn in a game I didn't remember signing up for. That the consequences were so much worse than I had imagined.

I didn't want to think about what had happened. All I knew is that it was Sage—for those moments, it was Sage. I woke up to find him in an amorous mood, and I didn't even think about how Max should have been in the room with us, or that I was still half asleep. I just went for it. I just gave myself to him because it was Sage and God, I loved that man.

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I'm sure someone more pure than I would have realized that something was wrong, that something was so very wrong. But I left that purity behind last year. I just wanted Sage between my legs, and I didn't care about anything else.

I didn't even realize it wasn't him until I saw Sage—my Sage—running toward me with the most god-awful look in his eyes. I saw terror, horror, rage. I saw the lengths that this man would go for me. And I saw that he wasn't the one inside me.

The rest was a blur. One minute the demon was Sage, the next minute he was something indescribable. He was worse than my worst nightmare. He'd gotten inside of me. He knew me from the inside. I felt him in more than my body, I felt him in my head.

Thank God, thank him so much, that as physical as it had been, Jacob let me know that most of it wasn't damaging—to my psyche and soul, yes. But physically, I wasn't about to be pregnant with demon spawn, and I didn't suffer any trauma. Not exactly the conversation I wanted to have with Jacob, but at this point there was no point being shy. Apparently some of what had happened was real and some wasn't. I didn't know where to draw the line, but if your brain saw a threat as real, what was the difference if it was real or not?

The damage had been done. I loved Sage, wanted Sage, needed him, but some part of me was still scared, like he was going to turn into a yellow-eyed demon at any turn. And now, with him held at a distance, I felt more alone. And with feeling more alone, I felt hopeless. Utterly fucking hopeless.

I just wanted it all over with. I just wanted to say good-bye. You can take and take

and take so much, but after a while, it was too much. This was too much. This incident, this violation. This was going to ruin me for a long time. I felt the numbness creeping in and the willingness to just give in. Throw up my hands, wave the white flag, and tell them that I fucking surrendered. What else could they do? I didn't want to know and yet they would do it because this wasn't over yet.

Could it ever be over? And what did over feel like?

That morning I told Jacob that I wanted to seek them out, that I wanted it over with, that I wanted the bargain to end. I wanted the unknown to cease—that great big cloud of the unknown that sat over my shoulder. Because what I had just experienced, it would scar me, shape me. It would almost ruin me. And the next things in life that the demons could go after would be the people I loved. Sage, my family. No one was safe.

Jacob, in his very eloquent way, told me that they wanted me to come to them. That they were trying to wear me down, make me weak. Make me give in and agree to whatever they wanted.

And yet I was so fucking tempted. Everyone expected Dawn to be strong and focused and to keep going, but the truth was I wasn't any of those things. I'd just been going along, trying to pretend like everything—somehow—would be okay. And now I knew that nothing would be. The others had to see how pointless this all was, me following around Sage on tour, pretending to write for a magazine, when all I cared about was trying to stay alive.

And Sage, he wanted to cancel his tour for me. His first European solo tour, the land where people actually got him. He wanted to throw that all away for me. I couldn't even fathom the dedication that man had to me, how sincere he actually was, that he would injure the career he spent the last fourteen years building. All of that for me when there was no hope for Dawn Emerson.

And so we trudged on to Prague. We went to the next tour stop, the next destination, the next place where I was sure Sage would be a huge hit. The next place where I was sure I would meet my doom.

The only perk to all of this, something that barely even registered the way it should have, was the fact that we took a private jet to Prague. I wouldn't have to deal with being around strange people. I watched in the plane as Tricky and Garth and everyone else in the band ordered champagne and laughed and sang and acted they were taking the trip of a lifetime. I suppose for them, it was the sure sign that they had made it.

But sitting there next to Sage, feeling so torn up, feeling so desolate, it meant nothing.

I knew Sage was thinking that. He was taking it so easy with me and treating me with kid gloves. He held my hand, squeezing it, letting me know that despite everything I would still be okay. And if I couldn't be okay, then he was there for me through whatever happened next. His strength and devotion poured through my bones. I hoped it would be enough to keep me sane.

Our arrival into Prague was ominous in itself. There was a huge thunderstorm licking at the edges of the city, plunging the sky and the world into early darkness. The jet wasn't handling it all that well—she bucked and jerked as the pilots tried to set her down. Rain lashed the windows and even Tricky shut his drunken mouth, knuckles turning ashen as he gripped the armrest.

I didn't even blink. There's no way demons would let it all end in a plane crash, no matter how dramatic the storm. This was just a welcome mat. This was their way of letting me know that they were here in Prague, in this ageless, dark city and that they were waiting for me.

I knew from the minute I stepped off the plane and onto the slick, wind-whipped

tarmac that this city was where it was all going to go down.

The chances of leaving Prague alive were slim.

We had a day to explore the city and have fun before the show the next night, but after that landing, and when you factored in the stormy weather, no one was really interested. I didn't know what I wanted to do. Sit in my hotel room, paranoid that Sage and Max weren't really Sage and Max, and wait for whatever doom was coming for me? Or go out into a storm, into the wilds of Prague and—as Sage would say—live a little.

I chose the latter, with Sage, Max, and Jacob accompanying me. In some ways, I wished I could go off on my own, have time to breathe, to think, to prepare for what might come. But after the previous night, there was no way they would let that happen. They wanted at least two of them with me at all times. In no way would they desert me; it didn't matter if the Prince of Darkness showed up and wanted a private conversation.

Which he kind of did.

The rain had let up as the storm passed over, though the wind still spun us around in its gusts. We had checked into the hotel—a very opulent building compared to the grey concrete blocks around us—and set out into the streets. Though it was eight at night, there were people about, some of them drunk and leaning into each other as they walked down the street, others somber-faced and wearing drab clothing. A pair of women in plain grey shifts stared at me as we walked past, eyeing me like I was a piece of meat.

“Why is everyone staring?” I whispered to Jacob, though his suit today was composed of forest green and yellow and was attracting a few stares itself.

“Hmmm?” He looked me over. “Probably because you’re wearing jeans and you look very fashionable. Denim is hard to come by here, as are Western clothes in general. You forget this is a communist country, love.”

“I thought they were, uh, getting reformed,” Sage spoke up, and I was impressed by his knowledge of politics.

“Slowly,” Jacob said, his eyes taking in every nook and cranny of the medieval streets. “Change takes time. In fact, just up ahead is Wenceslas Square. In 1969, a student lit himself on fire. It was his way of protesting the regime.”

I shuddered and when we turned the corner and saw the large “square” (it was shaped more like a rectangle), I could almost see the flames, the place where the student burned to death. Such a horrible way to go, and I couldn’t help but wonder with morbid curiosity if that would be my fate.

We stopped at a café near a giant oxidized statue of a man on a horse and went inside to grab a drink. The green leaves on the trees that lined the square were being ripped off, the branches creating a skeletal sound, and bits of garbage danced in the air. It would have been pretty at any other time. At any other time, we would have sat outside on the patio chairs, which were now knocked over, had a beer, and laughed. And I would have stared at Sage, my golden god, and thought about how lucky I was to have found him, or for his music to have found me. I would have thought that he filled up a void I had inside myself all these years, the void that was brought on when my mother died, that feeling that no one would ever take care of me, and yet here was Sage, promising me just that.

What a fucking shame it was to finally find that in someone, find the man who could protect you, not because you needed it but because you deserved it, and then find out that it was useless anyway. Sage couldn’t help me now. So instead of having that moment, the one I should have had, I had a sip of Czech pilsner, grabbed Sage’s hand

under the knotted pine table, and squeezed it, looking deep into those grey-green eyes and trying to tell him thank you.

He squeezed my hand back, his jaw set strong, but his eyes so very soft, so sad. We sat there drinking while Jacob told us tales of when he first started managing Hybrid and the shenanigans that they had gotten up to. I wondered if Sage still felt guilty, if he was still beating himself up. There's no way he could think that he escaped unscathed now. He probably thought that what was happening to me was his own form of punishment for making his deal in the first place. As if he hadn't been punished enough.

When I was done with two beers and a teensy bit tipsy, with only some weird kind of beet soup to tide me over, I excused myself to go to the bathroom.

Max got up with me.

"I can go by myself," I told him.

He raised his brows. "I'm not going in the washroom with you, but I'm at least standing guard outside."

"Fine," I said, grabbing my purse. We walked through the café, with its high ceiling of wooden beams, hardwood floor, and metal beer steins displayed on the walls. The bathroom was a single room with an old-fashioned doorknocker on it and a picture of a girl in a dress, bending over to smell flowers.

Max opened the door and peered inside. It was bare, just a toilet and sink and red walls, which made it seem smaller than it probably was. He nodded, satisfied, then leaned against the wall across from the washroom. I closed the door on him, wondering how long this was going to go on, how long I'd have him as my shadow.

I tried not to think about how the bathroom was like being trapped in a box full of blood, then washed my hands and got myself ready at the sink. I hadn't looked at myself since that morning and let out a tiny gasp at the sight.

My hair was tangled and wild but not in a pretty way. It looked dry and ragged, with split ends and flyaways. Even the color seemed more of a dull rust. My face was pale and sallow, my cheekbones more pronounced than ever. My freckles all but seemed to disappear, and my eyes were puffy with dark purple-blue crescent moons underneath. I looked like hell. I looked exactly how I was feeling.

I sighed, trying to find the passion inside me to care. I pulled out a stick of concealer from my purse and tried dotting it under my eyes, hoping it would make me look more presentable. It wasn't really opaque enough, but I did what I could.

It was then that I heard a drop behind me. Something splattering lightly on the floor.

I sucked in my breath, my shoulders tensing up, the hair on my arms prickling. Looking in the mirror, I could see there was nothing behind me, but that didn't mean anything. I very slowly turned around and looked.

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Nothing. Nothing but a drop of sticky, shiny blood on the floor.

Another spot formed beside it.

I gradually raised my head and looked up at the ceiling.

She was there—my mother—flat against the ceiling, legs and arms splayed, facing me. Her black dress hung off of her like Spanish moss, and her eyes were closed. Blood dripped from her white wrists.

I swallowed hard, not wanting to scream, not wanting to move.

This was not my mother, but she had answers all the same.

But before I could open my mouth to say something, anything, her eyes flew open, completely yellow, like globes of glowing saffron, and fixed themselves on my face.

“Tomorrow,” she said in that dark, depraved voice that rumbled with animalistic origins.

Then she was gone. I blinked and there was nothing on the ceiling anymore except stucco and wood. I looked down at the ground. The drops of blood were still there, a reminder that the things that didn’t seem real still were.

I opened the door and saw Max waiting, brow furrowed in concern.

“What is it?” he asked. “I thought I heard you say something.”

I shook my head and gave him a weak smile. “I think I was just told that I am going to die tomorrow.”

The good news is that I didn’t die at midnight and I didn’t die in my sleep. I woke up in one piece, with Sage at my side and Max on the other bed. The weather outside was still dark and grey, like winter had decided to extend one last bony hand into spring.

I’d told Max about my mother-turned-yellow-eyed-demon in the bathroom and made him promise not to tell Sage. Maybe it was wrong of me to keep another thing from him—after all, he still had no idea about the man in black on the train to Italy—but the show tonight was the biggest one on the tour, and I did not want to screw it up for him. If I couldn’t be all right, I needed to know that he would be.

So, with that in mind, I tried my best to put on a positive face—for Sage. I accompanied him to soundcheck and, as I let the music wash over me and really watched this man, this panther of the stage, give it his all, even in practice, I started writing my article. If anything were to happen to me—and let’s be honest, there was no doubt about it—I wanted something to leave behind that covered not the journey I’d been on but the journey that Sage had been on. How he picked up the pieces following the tragedy of Hybrid and proved to the world, or at least to Europe, that he was a talent and a force to be reckoned with.

After I was done writing, unsurprised by the tears that had come to my eyes given the fact that after today there was a chance I’d never hear his beautiful music again, I went back to the hotel with Max and Jacob and got ready for the show. I decided to go all out. I slipped on the only dress I had brought, a long dark red one with a braided rope belt. I put my hair up into a messy bun and put on a ton of makeup. It still didn’t hide the tiredness that crept up around my heavily mascaraed eyes and bright blue eyeshadow, but it helped.

“You’re looking good,” Max said from behind me as I put on my final touches of rosy pink lipstick. Jacob was sitting in the corner of the room, trying to read an English-language newspaper and periodically checking his pocket watch. It’s funny how used to being around them I was. We really were the ginger trifecta. Would have made an awesome band name.

I turned around from the mirror and smiled. “Thank you. I figured I might as well go out with a bang.”

Max frowned uneasily. “While I reckon its fine and dandy for you to be putting on a happy face, don’t dismiss this threat as final. We don’t know what’s going to happen today. But we do know it’s something, and this doesn’t have to be a bad thing.”

Jacob snorted caustically, crossing his legs so I could see bright green ankle socks peeking through. Without looking up from the paper, he said, “Come off it, Mr. Sunshine. We all know it’s bad. No matter what happens to Dawn, it’s going to be bad.” He shot me an apologetic look. “Sorry, love. No point sugarcoating it. No point even thinking about it. Max and I will do what we can to help you, but as you know, we have no idea what to expect. As Mr. Churchill said, we just have to keep calm and carry on.”

The funny thing was, it wasn’t hard to do. I’d already felt like I was sleepwalking through the whole thing. I finished getting ready and together the three of us went to the show. It was tough for Jacob because he had to be in the bowels of the venue, working with the promoters, talking to the box office, dealing with the band, so I just stuck by his side as if I was a manager myself.

I didn’t see Sage for quite a while—I guessed he was in his dressing room doing some heavy thinking or drinking—but when he finally came out, his jaw dropped in surprise when he saw me. Appreciative surprise.

“Dawn,” he said softly, wrapping his arms around me while Max and Jacob and a promoter looked on. “You look absolutely fucking stunning.”

And so did he. For once he wasn’t wearing all black. His pants were still black, but his shirt was a vibrant green that brought out the color in his eyes. In his usual fashion, he made it more rock and roll by unbuttoning it halfway, the more to show off his pecs and the large cross he wore around his neck.

“God, I wish I had you alone for a minute,” he murmured with his mouth to my ear. I could feel him hard against my thigh and suddenly that’s all I wanted, too. I wanted a place for just him and me, where we could talk, really talk, and make love one last time. The last few days, we hadn’t had a moment to ourselves, and without realizing it, it had worn on me terribly. I wanted to feel his body in my hands—those strong, rounded shoulders, the smooth length of his back, his muscular ass. I wanted more than just his lips on mine. I wanted him inside me, the real him; I wanted him to erase the damage that had been done.

I heard Jacob clear his throat, and we broke apart from our embrace. I could have held onto him and stayed in his arms forever. There was no forever.

“I think it’s time you get ready,” Jacob said to him, looking at least a little sorry for breaking up our moment. There was no opening band for this show, just Sage, and it had still sold out. I could hear the crowd in the audience, the excitement building for them. He turned to me. “Dawn, this time we’re mixing it up. I know you can’t really get the full experience from the side stage, so we’ll be sitting up at the front of the balcony.”

Sage growled, “I don’t think that’s wise.”

Jacob shrugged. “She is still writing the story, isn’t she?” That was beside the point, though. I knew Jacob was afraid of something happening to me during the show and

if it happened on the side stage, the chances of Sage getting involved were high. We really wanted the show to go on as much as it could.

I reached up and touched his cheek, smoothed his black eyebrows, ran my finger down the bridge of his broad nose. “You go play me a good show.”

He stared into my eyes until I could feel him in my soul. Then he kissed me with determination. “I will.”

He disappeared down the side of the stage, going to get his bandmates for their pre-show huddle. I watched him go, committing him to memory. I didn’t want to move, to let go. But Jacob pulled gently at my arm.

“We better go now before the house lights go off.”

I nodded absently and let him and Max take me off the stage and down into the crowd. We had an usher escort us to the balcony. Our seats were at the front and gave an outstanding view of the theater. Like most of Prague, the building was old but opulent, with maroon velvet seats and gold walls with intricate moldings. A large chandelier hung high above. Below us was the orchestra pit, filled with writhing teens, and the empty stage, just waiting for its players.

We took our seats. It seemed the demure side of the crowd, mainly young women, were all up here, where they could watch the rock without being trampled on. Seconds later the lights went off and everyone cheered. A voice came on the loudspeakers, rattling off a bunch of Czech and then pronouncing “Sage Knightly” with a forced American accent.

The lights popped back on with the swagger that only Sage’s guitar and Tricky’s bass could produce. I felt like I was seeing him for the first time all over again, not just as a lover but as a fan. As his biggest fan. The growl of his voice, his fingers as they slid

effortlessly over the guitar, his commanding presence that showed the utter ease he was in his role as a damn fine rock star. He took my breath away and yet breathed life into me. Music, his music, always music, always my lifeblood, always the thing that gave me strength.

We were midway through the second song when a heavysset teenage girl to the side of Jacob cried out. At first I thought she was just really getting into it, having something like a Beatles' fangirl moment. Then I realized she was screaming, screaming bloody murder. I craned my neck around Jacob to see the girl getting out of her seat and yelling something over and over again as she climbed onto the edge of the railing, holding her head.

Holy shit, she was going to jump.

Jacob sprang up and grabbed the girl's arm just as she jumped. She went over, nearly pulling him down with her. "They're in her head," Max mumbled as he pushed me aside and went to help Jacob, trying to grab on to the girl's other arm. The band had stopped playing, and I could see Sage staring up at me, pick dangling from his fingers. His eyes widened in horror.

One second was all it took for Max and Jacob to be preoccupied. One second was all it took for me to be alone and exposed.

"Remember us?" I heard a throaty, cold voice say from behind me. Fiery hands reached for both my arms. On one side of me was Alva; on the other was Sonja, another GTFO. White hair, empty black eyes, mouths full of razor-sharp teeth. They had come for me, to collect me, and now they had me.

I couldn't scream or call attention to myself if I had wanted to. I felt helpless, compelled, just like the girl that Jacob and Max were now hauling to safety. I watched Sage as I was being lead away, mouthing the words "I love you" to him.

I hoped he knew how much I meant it.

Chapter Fifteen

Sage

It all happened so fucking fast. The chunky chick on the balcony was screaming and jumping over the edge, and if it weren't for Jacob's quick thinking, she would have plummeted onto the panicking crowd below. Max then went to lend a hand.

And I saw Dawn, standing there like an angel in red, all alone and unprotected.

The skinny, shimmering shapes of Alva and Sonja came gliding down the aisle like insect-like ghosts. I watched as they grabbed on to Dawn with each hand and said something to her.

Dawn stared right at me in frozen horror and told me she loved me.

And then she gave up. She let them lead her away.

But I wasn't going to give up. No way in hell.

I yelled, "No! Stop them!" hoping someone would see what I was referencing. Then I tossed aside my guitar, took a running start, and leapt right off the stage and into the crowd in the ultimate stage dive.

I plowed right into the fans, most of whom were quick enough to catch me without injuring themselves. They set me down without much fuss, and I ran through them as quickly as I could, sprinting up the stairs to the balcony level.

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People up there were crying out in confusion, and everyone was in a mass panic. Ushers had already reached the girl who had tried to jump, who was holding her head like something was trying to come out of it, thrashing in a seat with Max trying to hold her down. Jacob was nowhere in sight.

I ran over. “They have her!”

Max nodded and in his eyes I saw that same look that was in Jacob’s when he told me the story about Yvette and how he had failed her. Max had failed Dawn. We’d all failed her once again.

When another usher and what looked to be a medic of sorts had reached the girl, Max let go, confident that they would be able to restrain her. I looked around me frantically, my heart breaking piece by piece at the utter helplessness I felt. “Where did they take her? Where’s Jacob?”

He looked at me blankly, overcome by his failure. Like fuck I’d let him feel sorry for himself now. I reached over and punched him hard in the chest. That woke him up. He took a step back and knitted his brows together. Finally he said, “I think I know.”

He ran out of the crowd, and I followed hot on his heels. We escaped into the stormy night. Signposts were swining in the wind and people were huddled under dark coats. Max didn’t slow down once; he just kept running down the slippery stone streets, dodging cars and people until we turned off onto a narrow, curving lane.

“Where are we going?” I called out after him, surprised I wasn’t out of breath yet.

“I’m not sure,” he said over his shoulder.

“That’s fucking great.”

“I can feel where Dawn is,” he said. “She’s been bonded to me.”

Well, that was fucking great, too. I should have been bonded to her. I should have been the one to “feel” her. I had to shake those thoughts out of my head, though, because this was not the time to get jealous. This was the time to get her back. To save her as she once saved me.

We kept going until the adrenaline was wearing off and I was finally feeling the strain in my muscles and lungs. “How much farther?” I asked.

“We’re here,”

He stopped so suddenly that I nearly ran into his back.

It looked like we’d run to the outskirts of town, where the buildings tapered off into bombed-out remains of buildings and overgrown weeds. The river snaked nearby, the water roughed up from the wind. There was a small graveyard in front of us with toppled-over tombstones. Behind it were three white walls standing up and a door half off the hinges. It was the skeleton of a church before it had been blasted from above, probably from World War II.

“Did you purposely pick the creepiest place in all of Prague?” I asked uneasily.

He turned to face me, his face half-covered by shadows. “You haven’t seen anything yet. Come on and be quiet.”

We walked slowly, carefully through the nest of weeds, picking our way toward the

front door. “How are they inside?”

“They’re not,” Max said as he was about to step into the church. “They’re underground. In the crypt.”

Shit.

Inside the crumbling walls of the old church, nature had started to take the building back. There was nothing left, save for a few pews that were covered in layers of grime and mold, which shone dully in the glow of the lights by the river. Max examined the remaining standing walls, peering up at them then at the floor, which was both stone and earth. Having a flashlight would have made things a lot easier.

“Here,” Max whispered. He was standing where the altar would be. Behind him there was no wall, just a straight shot view to the dark and gleaming river. The breeze funneled off the water and messed up his hair.

I walked over and tried to see what he was looking at. There was a square of wood in the earth, part of it moved to the side so you could see a black slit. If I concentrated really hard, I could almost see a light flickering somewhere.

Max knelt down and carefully picked up the wooden slab. He put it to the side, and we both stared down into a black pit. A rotten stench billowed up from it and I was right, I could see a very faint light wavering from deep below.

“We’re going down there?” I grimaced, trying not to breathe in the smell.

“It’s where Dawn is,” he said. “And most likely Jacob.”

I took in a deep breath. Max slowly lowered himself into the pit, finding the rungs of a ladder, and I followed right after him. The ladder was moist and cold to touch, old

rotted wood that I hoped would carry our weight.

I heard Max drop to the ground, the sound echoing around us. I let go after my feet left the last rung and looked around. It was black around us, and I could feel the walls were close. I stuck my hand out and hit something rounded and smooth.

Max walked toward the light and the closer we got, the more I could see we were in a tunnel of sorts. The light was coming from what looked like hundreds of lit candles in an open cavern dead ahead. And with that illumination, I could see the walls more clearly. I had touched bones earlier. The whole tunnel was made out of bones, bodies after bodies of grinning skulls and pelvises and hands and femurs and ribs, sometimes skulls inside of rib cages, and it was all around us.

I stopped, taking it all in, trying to breathe, but Max touched my shoulder and nodded forward to the entrance to the cavern. He put his hand to his ear, motioning for me to listen.

I could hear voices. Whispers at first but growing louder. Finally a laugh, a high-pitched squeal. There was nothing funny about it.

Max and I crept forward until we were at the entrance then dropped to the ground, my head right beside a macabre-looking skull with jewels below its jaw, buried here with a necklace that was probably worth a fortune. I wondered how long this crypt had been here and if anyone else knew about it. You'd think that grave robbers would have already cleaned out the place. Perhaps it didn't even exist on the map...or in the world.

Jacob's voice came loud and clear. "You know this is against the rules. That this not how the world is run."

"She agreed to the deal," said Alva. The sound of her made my brain feel like it was

getting peeled away, layer by layer. “She made the deal. This is only fair.”

“It’s not fair,” Jacob boomed. “This goes against everything that the laws were built on.”

I inhaled long and deep, readying myself, then peered around the corner.

Jacob, Alva, Sonja, and Dawn were standing in the middle of a large, cavernous space made of human skeletons. There were hundreds of candles lit, some on shelves made of skulls, others large figures on the ground, pooling with wax. The shadows danced in the bones, making the skeletons look alive. Perhaps they were alive. Perhaps they were all watching me.

In the middle of the room was an altar made of shedding, bleeding deer antlers. Dawn and Alva were on one side, the side furthest from me, with Alva holding on to her. Dawn stared at the ground right in front of her as if in a daze. I hoped for her sake she was completely out of it.

On the other side of the bleeding altar was Jacob, Sonja’s claws in his arm. I didn’t know how she was able to keep Jacob at bay, but whatever she was doing, it was working.

“Look,” Jacob went on, determination in his brow, the kind he got when he was arguing with a promoter who had stiffed us our pay, “regardless if Dawn made the bloody deal, if she doesn’t remember it, it doesn’t stand. Someone has to consciously be in their right mind. They have to be aware of what they are doing. From the way you describe it and from the way Dawn tells it, she can’t be held responsible. She must have been in a frenzy of sorts, perhaps even sleepwalking. But you can’t act on it. You’ve done enough already.”

“And yet it’s not enough,” came the raspy, almost mechanical voice of pure Evil. I

heard it—felt it—all the way into my marrow, sinking through like maggots in a ripe fruit. A tall, dark figure came out of the shadows. In fact, he might have always been the shadows themselves. It was hard to see him properly from where I was on the ground, with just my eyes peeping around the corner, but he looked to have a cloak, something similar to the Grim Reaper's, but made from squirming black centipedes. And like the Reaper, his face was nothing but a bare skull—except for the tiny yellow gumballs he had for eyes, sitting like feverish suns in his empty sockets.

The candles nearest him went out. The whole room hushed. Even Alva and Sonja seemed quiet and submissive in his presence.

And why not? I knew it in my heart of hearts who this was. Lucifer. The Prince of Darkness. El Diablo.

And he had his putrid little eyes set on Dawn.

“What do you even want with her?” Jacob asked quietly. His face was sweating, shiny in the wavering glow. I wondered if he was becoming physically ill just standing there. I wondered when I could do something. When I had to rush in and save her and what the hell I could actually do. But I had to do something—anything.

As if sensing what I was thinking, Max reached out and grabbed my arm, warning me with his eyes. We looked back.

The man was closer to Dawn now, right behind her. Dawn was still standing, staring at the same spot with vacant eyes, though now she was starting to sway slightly.

“I want what is owed,” he rasped. “I want her soul. She may not remember what she's done, but we do. We decided to...humor her. All she wanted, all she begged me for was for her retarded brother to get better, her lazy father to stop drinking, her whore mother to come back. She also, if you did not already know, wanted the world

to remember her name. She wanted respect. And she wanted true love.” He cackled to himself, a sound that reminded me of cracking bones. “True love was something I wasn’t even going to consider. I thought I’d take her up on some of the deal since it wasn’t completely fair. But the true love came anyway. What an added bonus for me.”

My heart warmed at that. It felt odd in my chest, which had grown so black and cold.

Jacob licked his lips. “If you admit it’s not fair, then just let it go.”

The Devil’s head snapped up, spiders crawling out of the dark slashes in his nose and disappearing into the cloak of centipedes. “I can’t let it go after everything we’ve done for her.”

“Then just let it go. Let her go. Take it all away then, but just spare her life.” Jacob was practically begging now.

If the Devil had a proper face, I would have sworn he was frowning, actually considering it. The weight in my chest dissipated for just that second. Then he growled, “No. This can be a lesson then, for everyone in this rotten little world, that you have to be careful what you wish for. Dawn can go down in history as the example. Besides, I feel like we were a tad screwed over with the Sage contract.” Suddenly the Devil’s attention was on me. His jaw opened like he was smiling. Alva, Sonja, and Jacob all followed his gaze, and I heard Max sigh beside me. They’d all spotted us. There was no use in hiding, but we stayed put, anyway.

He went on, those sickly yellow spheres locked on me. I could feel him in my head. I could feel the fear of billions of souls, all dying over and over again for eternity. This was his way of telling me where Dawn was going. This was his way of showing me true fear. “It feels quite satisfying to finally take the last thing that Sage Knightly loved.”

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He walked over to the wall behind Dawn and ran his fingers along a gruesome display of opened ribcages. “Two birds,” he said. He pulled a rib bone out of the wall. “One bone.”

Suddenly the room reverberated with a low rumble. Bones began to come loose from the walls, falling onto the ground and splintering in half. Dust began to rise, obscuring my view, and the clatter of breaking bones filled the space.

And Dawn, Dawn stood in the middle of it. For one beautiful but terrifying moment she looked up, snapping out of her daze. She saw me. She tried to run but only got a step forward before the bones above her head broke loose and tumbled onto her, bringing her to the ground.

I screamed, trying to get up and run, but Max had me by the throat and was pulling me back, pulling me away from Dawn.

“Let go!” I screamed, trying to fight him off, kicking him in the knees, elbowing him in the stomach, but he was strong here and now. He was so much stronger, and I was wasting my breath and my time.

The last thing I saw before the cavern collapsed entirely was Jacob, looking at me through the dust.

“I won’t fail this time. I’ll take her of her,” he said, raising his hand in sad salutation. “You take care of yourself. I loved ya, boy.”

Then he looked up and the ceiling of skeletons collapsed on him.

I could barely move, think, breathe, but Max could. He hauled me up the ladder just as the walls of the passageway started to give in, too. His feet slipped on the rungs a few times, but somehow we made it out into the church. He pulled me out onto the ground, and my lungs filled themselves with the fresh night air.

Max dragged me out of the church and the ruined graveyard to a grassy patch by the street. We watched in horror as the ground around the church began to jostle and shake and the remainder of the building finally fell, the ground swallowing it whole. The whole area above the crypt sunk in as well, the tombstones sinking further into the earth.

Dawn. Dawn was in there. She was being buried alive.

I got to my feet, not noticing, the sharp pains in my heart, the panic and the terror that had its cold fucking grip on my throat. Max pulled me back. He kept me in place. Soon ambulances had arrived, and rescue workers and throngs of people had gathered around the area, watching the scene, shaking their heads. None of them noticed us off to the side. They probably thought it was some kind of sinkhole.

“They have to know what happened,” I choked out to Max. “We have to tell them she’s down there. That Jacob’s there. They might be still alive.” But I could see in his expression that there was no point. They weren’t alive.

I still waited, though. I wouldn’t give up hope. I wouldn’t just forget that the two most important people in my life were ripped away from me by Lucifer himself. So I waited and I waited, all through the night, until one rescue accidentally fell down through the earth and landed in the cavern, on top of a pile of bones. He saw a female hand sticking out of it.

Dawn was brought out of the rubble at dawn, just as the sun was breaking pink over the river. Her body was lifeless. Her soul somewhere else. Even in death, she was

beautiful.

I'd never wanted anything more than to see her take a breath, to see her eyes open, to see her come to life. But no matter how hard I stared at her, even when they took Jacob's body out of the ground, it never happened.

They were both gone.

Forever.

So much death in my life over the years, and I still couldn't handle how finite it was.

The concept of forever. The concept of never.

Max put his hand on my shoulder. It took all my self-control to not lose it on him, to not scream at him for screwing up and putting her life in danger. I wished he fucking left me in that crypt to be buried with her.

"If I know Jacob," he said gravely as we watched them put the bodies in the back of the emergency vehicle, "he'll try and make her suffer less."

"I wished he'd taken me." I swallowed painfully. "I would have given them my soul for hers."

"We all knew that," Max answered. "But that shouldn't have been your choice to make."

And so it was. Real, terribly real and not real all at the same time. I knew I was numb, in shock, as much as I could be. I knew that the reality would soon sink in. The truth. That they were dead. And when it did, it would take over my life. It would reduce me to grieving until the end of time.

I closed my eyes to the scene. I turned around. Max and I went back to the hotel.

I left my heart somewhere in that crypt.

Chapter Sixteen

Dawn

When I was thirteen years old and really getting into barrel racing, I had a pretty bad accident. I fell off Moonglow just as we were making our final turn during a training session. She lost her footing and pitched to the side. I went flying into the barrel, my shoulder cracking against it, Moonglow falling onto my leg. I felt no pain at the impact, but I wasn't unconscious. I just went to another place. A place of white light and weightlessness and euphoric thoughts. A place where nothing bad could happen, even though it seemed the worse already had. I always looked back on that moment and thought I had a near-death experience, that I went to some sort of heaven or afterworld and that I was sent back because my time wasn't up yet. Apparently it was just my brain, trying to save itself from damage, trying to repair itself and protect me. That place did not exist.

I knew that now, because where I was was not like that place. There was no weightlessness, no white light, no feelings of love. Where I was had grey skies and grey earth and a world devoid of color. It was a place where giant bats with veiny, transparent wings flew overhead, where the ground at your feet had teeth and roaming eyes, where your body felt like it was weighted with a ball and chain.

This was the Thin Veil. I had guessed that much.

And I was dead. I figured that out, too, when the bones came crashing down on me, taking the image of Sage away from my eyes and filling them with dust and bone and blackness.

I looked beside me to see Jacob in grainy black-and-white, like we were in a vintage movie. He looked grim. I'm sure I looked grim, too.

"The Thin Veil?" I asked him.

Yes, he answered, and I wasn't surprised that he didn't have to open his mouth for me to hear him. The infamous veil. Isn't it lovely?

I looked around us. It looked like we were still in Prague, but the streets were completely empty. The gargoyles on the buildings were living creatures, fluttering their wings and sharpening their claws on the stone around them. Like the horrific faces coming out of the ground, the tiny finger that was wriggling up out of the soil near my foot, they all seemed focused on me.

You've been here often, I noted. Does anything actually live here? Is this where I have to be? Forever?

He gave me a loaded look. Some beings do live here. Those who don't move on to where they are supposed to go. You could try to stay here. But I don't think they would let it slide. Other people, who cares. But you? Dawn, they want you more than anything. They want that beautiful life force, that soul of yours. They will drag you to Hell if they can.

Even though I was dead, I still felt fear. Endless fear. The finger at my foot was now becoming a hand of rotting flesh, reaching for me. As calmly as I could, I stepped out of the way. I don't even think I could stay here if I wanted to.

Oh, believe me, love, Jacob said. Hell is much worse.

So where do you go? I asked. I noticed a few of the giant bats had landed on the rooftops nearby, their giant wings folded. They stared at me with shiny button eyes.

Go? He asked. I suppose I'll find out.

You don't have to stay here on account of me, I said.

Dawn, he said with a smirk. As much as I wouldn't leave you, I don't have a choice in this matter. I'm dead.

I jerked my head in shock. Dead?

He nearly rolled his eyes. Well, I'm not bloody immortal, am I? Though now I'm thinking the whole going-rogue thing was a really poor choice for me.

I couldn't have felt worse. I'm sorry.

He shrugged, though I could tell it pained him. It's not your fault, love. You are worth the sacrifice.

Well, I was worth it.

He shot me a look. No, you still are. This isn't over yet.

You're right, it isn't, came the rough and oozing voice of Lucifer from behind us.

Jacob and I slowly turned around until we were facing him. Now he didn't look like the man I saw before on earth. Now he was a naked old man of all lean muscle and no skin. He had sharp spikes coming out of the bottoms of his feet and palms, and it was these spikes that he walked on all fours, his body sinking down so that he carried himself like a spider. Long straggly hair was growing out of his thinning head, and his entrails were hanging out of his rib cage. His glowing neon eyes were still there, now white instead of yellow, and boring into me like a drill.

The spider thing walked toward us, guts swaying like udders, his movements jagged and sporadic.

There was nothing more terrifying. I wondered if this is what he really looked like or if he could just look like whatever would make you afraid. If so, he was winning.

Why are we here? Jacob asked, apparently unfazed by this thing that seemed conjured up from my own nightmares. Why didn't you take her straight to Hell?

Perhaps I wanted to tease her, the spider thing said. Make her think she has a way out.

She's already dead, Jacob said, and I could hear the frustration in his voice. What more can you give her?

I can bring her back, he said. Jacob cocked his head at that, and the spider thing went on, no strings attached. I can give Dawn life again, free from me, free from the contract. If you do something for me, Jacob.

No! I automatically said, but Jacob raised his hand to shush me.

What do you want? Jacob asked calmly.

All this time that you've been around, Jacob, you've been a real thorn in my side. All of you Jacobs have been, since the dawn of time. But you? You're persistent. You've put me to shame more times than I care to recall.

Because I'm a damn good manager, Jacob said.

That you are. I'm not so small as to not admit that. But, really, my job, my role in this world is a lot easier without you around.

Well, as you can see, I'm dead, you bloody twat. I'm not really around, am I?

Any other time I would have taken some joy, whatever joy remained in my life, at the fact that Jacob just called the Prince of Darkness a bloody twat.

Suddenly the building in front of us erupted into orange flames, and in the middle of the flames, a black swirling hole slowly formed. The bats flew up from the roofs and flew into the flames, disappearing. It looked to be a whole other world in there, an infinite one of death and darkness.

You may be dead, he said, words sounding like scuttling insects, but your soul is not coming with me. However, I'm open to an exchange. You come with me to Hell and I'll let Dawn go. She'll wake up back in Prague in fine form. And so as long as she doesn't call on me again, she won't see me again.

No, no, no, no.

I didn't even have time to voice this. Jacob was already taking my hand in his and squeezing it. This is what I wanted, love, he said. And if it hadn't been me there first, it would have been Sage giving himself for you. No one should have to give their life for you, but if it's going to be anyone, it's going to be me. I had a good run. I had many good runs. I have had a lot to...make up for. This time I won't fail.

No! I cried out.

Dawn, you've got so much to live for. You've gone through too much to deserve this kind of ending. You didn't remember the deal, even though it was made. This is what is fair. You need to go in your life. Get married. Live where there's sunshine. Have children. Keep listening to music.

Tears spilled from my eyes. Though the idea of life, the idea of being saved from eternal damnation was more than I could have hoped for, I did not want Jacob to sacrifice his soul for mine.

Please, I pleaded, there has to be another way.

This is the only way, the spider thing said. It smiled, wriggling teeth like tiny worms. And I don't need your permission, either. Never forget that there are forces in this world more powerful than you. If you do, I'll be right back there to remind you.

I clutched Jacob's hand hard, wanting to hold him. He couldn't do this for me. I couldn't let him.

But he kissed me softly on the forehead and wrestled his hand out of mine.

Take care of Sage, he said. And if you ever want to do me a favor, play me some Hybrid some day. That band, my Sage...they were my crown jewel. And so were you. A tremor of fear flashed across his eyes, but Jacob—wonderfully crass, bossy, brave Jacob—walked away, straight toward the flames, toward the swirling black ink in the middle. The spider thing walked after him, a tk-tk-tk sound of spikes on stone.

It threw one last look back at me. It smiled again, in pure satisfaction.

I screamed and ran after Jacob, unable to just let it go. But my cries didn't get very far, and neither did I. He and the spider thing disappeared into nothing, and I was suddenly sucked back, flying through the air until everything around me blurred in a tunnel of light and sound.

I thought I heard Jacob one last time. He was crying.

Chapter Seventeen

Sage

I hadn't slept for three days, so when I saw the woman standing outside the hotel room window, lit up by the street lamp, I immediately thought of Angeline. I thought of the ways I was going to murder her. I thought of the ways that I'd get caught and thrown into a Czech prison and how the death that would surely follow would be preferable to the pain I was going through now.

The pain. It was all coming back to me with each hour upon each hour. The loss of my mother, the loss of Hybrid, the loss of Dawn, of Jacob.

I'd lost everything.

Even the me inside.

I was just an empty shell.

And we were stuck in fucking Prague because of the weather, none of us able to get a flight out, which meant we were all stuck in the hotel, dying inside of grief and anger and just fucking everything. I know it wasn't just me, either—I know Tricky was

being eaten up and I know Max was taking everything especially hard. But I couldn't even feel for them because there was nothing left in me to feel. When Dawn died, I was left with nothing but pain in my chest and empty dreams that would never, ever be fulfilled.

So the sight of Angeline made my fists curl, my blood boil. It made me want to leave the hotel for the first time in days. It made me feel something, and I guess I had to be grateful for that.

I slipped on my shoes and ran out of the hotel and into the wind and rain, my legs weak and shaking from not really being used for days.

There she was, just standing across the street in the rain. Her hair frizzing wildly from the rain, glowing red under the light.

Wait.

She turned around as my pace slowed to approach her.

It was Dawn, a bewildered look on her face, her hair waving around her head like an auburn halo, a soaked, blue hospital gown on her frame.

I cried out and fell to my knees.

Oh, God, please let this be real.

"Sage," she said quietly, hand to her chest, looking down at me like she couldn't believe her eyes.

I could only stare up at her, my knees drowning in a puddle as the rain fell down on me, matting my hair to my forehead.

“Angel?” I cried.

She smiled as if she had been hit with sunshine. “Sage!” She ran to me and went to her knees, too, joining me on the cold, hard ground. I reached for her, feeling her face, trailing my finger over her nose, her brows, her cheekbones, her lips. This was her, wasn’t it? This was her, back from the dead?

She clung to me with greedy fists, and I wrapped my arms around her, and we cried into each other as the rain fell. I couldn’t even be mad if this wasn’t real—this was heaven on earth. This was a second chance, a second look at love, at life.

We held each other like that—tight, needy, insatiable, just trying to steal comfort in the night—until Max was at our side, trying to help us to our feet. I’d never seen the fucker smile so wide. He helped us both inside the hotel and up to my room. I’d left it as a tomb of death and sorrow, but now the dawn was breaking in.

Once we got Dawn out of her wet gown and into her pajamas, piling her with heavy blankets and pillows and warm cider and brandy, she told us what had happened, from the beginning. How she felt compelled to leave with Sonja and Alva, that she felt like giving up. But Jacob was there in no time, following them all the way to the crypt, which was apparently a portal, a place where the walls to the other worlds were thin and it would be easiest to take her. She explained what she saw in the Veil, how Jacob was with her, and how, in the end, he sacrificed his life for hers.

I’m not ashamed to admit a few tears leaked out over that. Yeah, men cry sometimes. Men cry when their lives are ripped away and then given back to them. Men cry when the person that was more like a father than their own father is gone. They cry when they know the incredible, unimaginable horrors that their loved one is facing for all eternity. And they cry when they get the love of their life back.

I kept Dawn’s soft hand in mine as she told us how she woke up in the hospital, in the

morgue. How she banged on the cold, metal door until they let her out. How they wanted to run tests on her, study her, report on her. How no one spoke English and no one could connect her to a “Sage Knightly” because only Mr. Underhill was registered at hotels. How she escaped from her room, dazed and disoriented from the drugs, and found her way back here, found her way back to me.

I kissed her hand, still not believing it, still afraid to. She had my heart again and again and again.

“What can we do for Jacob?” Dawn asked quietly, her voice hoarse from talking so much. “Is there anything?”

Max ran his hand along his jaw, thinking. Finally he said, “There might be. I’m a free agent now. I served the contract. I managed. And Jacob saved you. I could maybe start over on a new life, a new task...to get him back.”

“Is that possible?” I asked.

He nodded. “I can surely try. It won’t bring him back alive, but I reckon I can save his soul. In fact, I know I can. Jacob must have known what he was doing.”

That was little comfort for my tour manager, but we would have to survive on that. On the hope that his sacrifice wasn’t the end.

Because it wasn’t the end for us. It was the beginning.

When Max finally left the room, I got under the covers with Dawn, relishing the feeling of her skin beneath my hands, this gorgeous second chance.

I took in a deep breath, gazing intently into her eyes. “Dawn, when I thought I lost you...what really got me the most, what really killed me deep inside, was what else

I'd lost. I'd lost time with you. I'd lost moments I'd never used. Moments to tell the truth." My heart swelled, my pulse quickening as I leaned in and kissed her softly, sweetly, slowly. Here it went. "Dawn Emerson. I fucking love you. I. Love. You. You are my reprise, my encore, my finale. You're every single note wrapped up in the world's most beautiful package. My love for you sings, and it's a song that will never stop playing. It will play through our deaths and beyond that. And this I know."

Her eyes welled with tears, and they spilled over her freckled cheeks in rivers. I kissed through their salt, kissed the life back into her. I kissed away the sadness and the loss.

I kissed her until we both began to thaw. I let my hands roam all over her body like she was a fragile ghost, something I couldn't believe was in my hands, something that felt like a waking dream. I slowly took off her clothes, peeling them away until I could see her softness exposed underneath. I let my mouth savor her, to completely take her in. She warmed my heart, filled the places inside where I'd grown so lost and cold over the last few days.

I entered her slowly, both of us not caring about a condom this time, embracing the idea of life, love, soul.

We came together, hearts and bodies and souls joined as one.

And we were saved.

Chapter Eighteen

Dawn

"Are you sure it's a good idea to leave that here?" Max asked.

It had been a few weeks since we left Prague. Though the tour was obviously canceled (though Tricky insisted it was just postponed), it took some time for us to claim the body of Jacob from the hospital. They all wanted to speak to me, the girl who wouldn't die, though through some of Max's smooth talking via a translator, we were able to convince the hospital that it was actually their fault. People don't just come back from the dead; it would have been their faulty physicians who claimed me dead when I wasn't. After that, they pretty much let it go.

We weren't sure where to take Jacob—Sage was the closest thing he had to a family. I guess being a Jacob was a pretty lonely life. But because he was from England and often talked about his home in the quiet district of Rotherhithe in London, we found the nicest cemetery and had him buried there. We weren't the only ones at the funeral—this was The Cobb, and his mysterious death attracted music lovers from all over. But it didn't matter because we were the ones who loved him the most. We were the ones who knew the real him.

In keeping with Jacob's wishes—that I play him Hybrid one day—I brought out a portable record player. It was sunny out and fairly hot for late May. I placed it on his grave the day after he was buried, amid the flowers and wreaths we had bought him. We made sure they were in the gaudiest colors imaginable.

Sage leaned down and picked up the needle, placing it on "Wet Lips." The three of us rocked out in that graveyard, me softly singing along, Sage playing air guitar, and Max nodding to the beat. We did that for the whole song. And the next song. And the next. We did it until we were told to leave for being too disruptive where people needed eternal peace.

"You want to wake the dead?" a groundskeeper asked.

The truth is, we kind of did. We hoped the music would reach him, wherever he was, and there was some hope that things weren't as gloomy as we had believed. Max had

been out and about the last few days around the burial. When we asked him where he'd gone, he'd always said "out exploring." He meant us to think London, but both Sage and I knew he meant the Thin Veil. He was out there, trying to put things in place in order to get Jacob back. He said he'd tried to track down Angeline too, after the whole incident, thinking she might have some information, but she had vanished without a trace. Whatever Angeline had bartered for, it probably didn't favor her in the end.

I packed up the record player after we'd been chastised and kissed the top of Jacob's gravestone ("Here lies a rogue and a bloody great manager"). I noticed Max staring at us awkwardly, green eyes and a twisted grin.

“What’s hanging?” I asked him.

He stuck his hands in his pockets and popped back his knees. “I’m afraid this is good-bye.”

“Good-bye?” Sage asked.

He nodded. “I’m afraid that for this next part, I’m going to need to disappear. For a long time. For as long as it takes to get the job done. I don’t know when I’m coming back, and I don’t know if I’ll know you when I’m back. So this is where we part ways. Eh, little lamb?”

I smiled sadly. “Okay, red potato.” Though Max had been aggravating at times, he did produce some fantastic pictures that would accompany my Creem magazine article on Sage Knightly’s first solo tour in Europe. And beyond that, he’d been my protector, my confidant, and my friend. I hated to admit it, but I was going to miss him. Well, I wasn’t going to miss him stationing himself outside the bathroom when I was using it, but I’d miss him otherwise.

I went up to him and threw my arms around him, and he embraced me back in a big bear hug. When we broke apart, he went up to Sage and stuck out his hand. “Thanks, man.”

And Sage took his hand, pulling him in for a quick slap on the back. He grinned. “Thanks, man.”

Max chewed on his lip, sent us both a bashful “aw shucks” look, and then turned

around. We watched as he left the graveyard and kept walking into the trees. Eventually he just faded from sight.

Sage put his arm around me and kissed the top of my head. “Think I should call you little lamb in his honor?”

“Don’t you dare,” I hissed, smacking his chest.

“What about golden goddess?” he asked, his dimples showing.

I returned the smile. “Yes, that’s good enough, my golden god.”

I leaned into his chest, and we left the graveyard behind, stepping out into the sunny streets of London. I had “Wet Lips” stuck in my head.

Epilogue

1976

In the year 1976, Peter Frampton released an album called Frampton Comes Alive. Sage Knightly put out his second solo album, Bloody Twat, which was banned in some stores because of the title (despite how many times he said it was a tribute to the late Jacob Edwards, a man he’d never heard from again but felt deep inside was okay wherever he was). Despite the title, the album still went platinum and Sage became a worldwide hit.

In 1976, the TV show Laverne and Shirley premiered. It became the show that Sage, Dawn, Eric, and their father would sit down to on Friday nights, now that Sage and Dawn were living in a small farmhouse on the outskirts of Ellensburg. Dawn’s family were all doing well, despite the bargains she’d made, and she made a vow to always keep them in her life, no matter what she had going on. Sage continued to make music, of course, but kept the sunny relaxed town of Ellensburg as his home base.

In 1976, a peanut farmer became the thirty-ninth president of the United States. That same summer, Dawn and Sage got married on her father's farm. Ex-Hybrid singer Robbie Oliver and bassist Noelle were there – Sage had gotten in touch with both of them and made amends, reigniting their friendship. Dawn wore her cowboy boots under her dress and went down the aisle on her horse, Moonglow. Instead of reciting his vows, Sage picked up a guitar and sang them for her. It was the song he'd written for her; he'd just taken a long time to finally play it.

Tricky and Mel got drunk at the reception and slept together in Dawn's barn. They're still together to this day.