



The Wayward Sons & the Seattle Sirens

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Category: Romance, Action

Description: To save one...

After a desperate plea for help from his sister, Ryder Collins and Grayson Harper hit the road. With Seattle looming in their sights, both men are aware of the dangers that lurk in the shadows—and not just the siren they're hunting. To keep Ryder safe, Gray must take this demon on alone.

When the hunt takes an unexpected turn, Gray goes missing. Ryder finds himself in a race against the clock to save the man he loves. In the heart of the siren's den, he'll do whatever it takes, even if it costs him his life.

... the other is willing to give up everything

Total Pages (Source): 44

CHAPTER 01

My hand locked around her throat, and I dragged her against me. Her head tipped back against my shoulder as she let out a breathy little whine. The way her pulse fluttered under my fingers was a fucking high—for both me and her, considering how her hips rolled over Ryder’s dick eagerly. His grip tightened on her hips to hold her in place.

“You like that, darlin’?” I asked. My lips brushed against her ear, and she whimpered. God, I fucking loved a woman who liked to play a little rough. “Now, listen here, darlin’. I told you I’d give you a choice, and I am. You can have him then me, or we can both fuck you. Tell us, darlin’, what’ll you have?”

I squeezed her throat affectionately before letting go. As she pulled in several deep breaths, I swept my hands over her naked tits and pinched her nipples lightly. She gasped and groaned, wiggling.

“Jesus fuck,” Ryder let out, and I chuckled at the tightness in his voice.

“Havin’ a problem, baby?” I teased. Those baby blues settled on mine. Fuck, he was handsome.

“She’s got my dick in a vice grip, honey,” he snapped. “Make a goddamn choice already.”

My grin widened. I loved impatient Ryder. It was fun to watch him ride the line and fall apart. Probably why I kept drawing out the little things I was doing with... what

the fuck did she say her name was?

Maybe I was a few too many beers in because I remembered the bachelorette party sash—fuck, was she the bride? And what the fuck was her name?

‘What’s her name?’ I mouthed to him as I locked my hand around her throat once more to keep her occupied. Her sexy moans filled the room while Ryder scowled at me.

“Make a choice, Olivia,” Ryder said. Olivia, right. She wasn’t the bride. Thank fuck.

“Both,” she rasped around my hand. “Please, both.”

“Good girl,” I replied and kissed her neck. “Lean forward, darlin’”. Let Ryder take care of you.”

When I released her, she fell forward. Her mouth crashed into Ryder’s aggressively. I sank back on my heels between his knees to watch as the tiny little blonde thing enthusiastically rode his dick. I fucking loved seeing him let go in the moment. His hand slipped between their bodies, finding her clit. Her volume damn near doubled when he did.

I grabbed the lube from where I’d tossed it at the end of the bed—I’d planned ahead. For once. I coated the condom while she came with a sound that could only be described as a fucking siren. Shit, what the hell did I bring back for us? No wonder she was so goddamn desperate to get laid.

Noisy? Yes, please.

Sounding like a goddamn banshee? No, thank you.

“Hold still for me, darlin’,” I ordered, running a hand down her spine. Ryder’s grip on her tightened as she tried to continue moving—impatient and lost in her own pleasure.

“Please,” Olivia practically begged. Fuck, I wanted to go easy on the girl, but she made it so difficult when she was so damn desperate. My fingers laced through his as I took hold of her hip. I lined my dick up and pressed the crown against the tight muscles of her ass. My moan echoed hers as I slowly inched into her, giving her body time to adjust. “Fuck. So full.”

I took my time. In a little and then right back out, letting her body get used to both of us. But fuck if I didn’t want to ruin her sweet little Southern self alongside Ryder.

“Are you two going to fuck me like you promised? Or are we still playing games?” she demanded with a hint of playfulness in her voice as she glanced over her shoulder at me. Well, fuck trying to go easy.

“Brace yourself on his chest, darlin’,” I said. “And let the neighbors hear you scream.”

Because why the fuck not?

Finding a rhythm with Ryder was flawless as always. It didn’t matter who the fuck was between us. We were in tune as we both gave her exactly what she wanted. My hold on her hips was bruising as we fucked her hard. The bed shook and the headboard banged against the wall.

Grunting. Groaning. Screaming. Skin on skin.

My heart hammered in my chest as heat coiled the base of my spine mercilessly, and the pressure in my balls built. I was so fucking close. From the way, Ryder’s hand

gripped mine, he was too.

“Yes, yes, yes!” she shrieked. Her ass clenched around me, and I fucking lost it. Sinking my teeth into her shoulder, I used her delighted gasp to ground myself as I came.

“Come on, darlin’,” I said in her ear. Pulling her back against my chest by her throat, I supported her weight while I found her clit. “Come for us one more time, sweet thing.”

The pace of my fingers was fast, matching the one Ryder set as he thrust upwards and chased his own release. I tightened my hold on her neck to silence her. All I wanted to hear were the groans my baby made as he came. The sounds he made did more for me than anything she could.

“Come on, baby,” I coaxed, talking solely to Ryder. “Make yourself come.”

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Olivia's body tensed in my arms, and her quiet moan vibrated against my palm around her throat as she came. One thrust. Two. Three. And one more did him in. He dragged her down hard on his dick as he came with a deep groan. Fuck, I loved that sound.

"Breathe, darlin'," I whispered, letting go of her neck. She was putty in my arms, sucking in air quickly. The tiny giggle she let out was fucking adorable. A shudder passed through her when I ran my hands up and down her arms—overstimulated and thoroughly fucked.

"Come here," Ryder said. His hands slid up her sides, and he guided her down onto the bed next to him. She wiggled on the pillow with a breathy sigh.

"Best birthday ever," she replied. Birthday? Right. Not a bachelorette party. Did it really fucking matter? Probably not. When Ryder and I slid out of bed, she stretched out, her eyes fluttering shut. "Give me ten, and we'll go again."

"We ain't machines, sweet thing," I told her. I needed like... twenty minutes minimum to make that work. Ryder snorted as he shook his head. There was no way he'd go a second round. He'd say sleep and water and all that shit were required.

"We need sleep," he stated. See? Always responsible. "Stay there. I'll get you taken care of."

I followed him into the bathroom, where we took turns cleaning up. I took more time than I needed to, but I needed away from the feral thing looking for round two in our bed.

“Next time, don’t pick one that turns into a fucking siren,” Ryder whispered.

“I’m takin’ it as a compliment. We did a damn good job,” I told him. When he cocked an eyebrow at me in the mirror, I laughed. “How the fuck was I supposed to know that, baby?”

He didn’t answer. Exactly. He didn’t have a good answer either. He stuck around as I splashed my face with warm water and ran my wet hands through my hair. My reflection looked as tired as I fucking felt. It’d been one demon hunt right after another for weeks on end—thirteen weeks to be exact. We’d traveled so many fucking places that I couldn’t keep up. We were long overdue for a few days of decent sleep and food.

And that started with kicking out the birthday girl—a task I was happy to do. Until I realized she’d fallen asleep. In our bed. Dead to the fucking world with all the lights on.

“She’s asleep in our bed,” I grumbled.

“There’s two beds, honey,” Ryder said. Touché.

“She ain’t supposed to stay, baby,” I retorted. “I never said the fuckin’ breakfast line.”

Because I didn’t want overnight guests.

“Good luck waking her up.” He kissed my temple as he slipped past me, turning out lights as he went. “Or you can come to bed with me and kick her out in the morning.”

“Fine.” I sighed rather dramatically, making him chuckle. I followed him to bed, determined to cuddle the shit out of him, even if we were stuck with the birthday girl.

CHAPTER 02

The sound of my phone ringing incessantly was enough to drag me out of a deep sleep. Fuck, I was exhausted. Beyond exhausted. This constant travel thing was slowly killing me.

“lo?” I mumbled into the phone, eyes sliding shut all over again.

“Ryder?” That voice. I sat upright, and the world spun a little with my hangover.

“Tess?” I whispered. Running a hand over my face, I tried to wipe away the fog.

“Yeah, it’s me,” she said. “I’m sorry. I know it’s been a while.”

Fuck if that wasn’t an understatement. I hadn’t heard from my sister in... what? Four years now? Five maybe?

“Shit.” I groaned as I slipped out of bed. Gray was nowhere to be seen, the alarm clock read ten-thirty, and Olivia snored softly in the other bed. I took the phone to the bathroom with me. If Tessa was calling me, it wasn’t good. When the door shut, I asked, “What do you need, Tess?”

“No hi? Hello, Tess. How are you?” There was no humor in her voice.

“You haven’t called in almost five years at this point,” I told her. My voice sounded like shit, and my tongue was uncomfortable. I needed water. “I can only assume this isn’t a social call.”

“You’re right.” She sighed. “I’m sorry. It’s just been... there’s a lot going on, and Dad’s been a little harder to handle since the incident.”

The incident in question was the last time I'd heard from my sister. Gray and I were set to meet up with her outside of Seattle. Until our dad caught wind and damn near caught me.

“What do you need help with, Tess?” I asked again.

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“Mal is missing. And so is my husband.” Her... what? I said nothing as my dehydrated, hungover brain tried to comprehend that last part of her sentence. Tess had a husband? Tess was married? “Ryder?”

“You’re married?” I demanded. “To who?”

“That’s what matters?”

“Yes!” I snapped. “When? How? What the fuck happened?”

“It was a quick romance,” Tessa said.

“How quick?” I growled. “Don’t you dare tell me that fucker knocked you up. I’ll kill him.”

“Christ, you sound like Mal,” she replied. “It was six weeks.”

“Tess! You can’t marry a guy you just fucking met! What the hell were you thinking?”

“Jake’s a good guy!”

“Jake?” I scoffed. “I doubt that considering he asked you to marry him after six weeks!”

“Not everyone takes ten years to decide maybe they like someone, Ryder,” Tessa shot back. Okay, I deserved that one. But I loved Gray. It wasn’t the same thing. “Sorry,

that was mean. We've been married for three years."

Three years? Okay, maybe that made a difference.

"Fuck." I blew out a breath of air as I scrubbed a hand over my face. "Are you happy?"

"In general, yes," she told me. "Right now, no. My husband and my brother are missing, and my other brother is being an asshole."

"Sorry," I muttered. "Fuck, I'm sorry. What happened?"

"I don't know. There have been a string of disappearances in Seattle. All men. Mal and Jake were looking into it when they went missing."

"How long?"

"Two days."

"And you're sure they're missing too?" I asked. Maybe it was a stupid thing to ask, but I had to be sure. Mal had no strings attached to him—ever. He was free-spirited. I had no clue if Jake was the same.

"I know what you're thinking," Tessa said. "No, Jake wouldn't leave us like that."

"Us?"

"We have a daughter, Ryder." My heart sank. "She's one, and he loves our little girl more than life itself. He wouldn't leave her. He wouldn't leave us. Please, I need help finding him, and I don't know who else to ask."

“Text me the address,” I replied, getting to my feet. “We’ll be on the road within the hour.”

CHAPTER 03

Why was I the first one awake?

Better question: why was Ryder still asleep at ten-thirty in the morning? In the nine years we’d been together, the man never slept past seven. It was disturbing really.

I took another long drag from my cigarette. Sprawled on the hood of our car, I stared up at the clouded sky. My body vibrated with anxious energy. We’d been so busy for fucking weeks that it didn’t feel right to just relax and do nothing. What was I supposed to do with myself?

Shouting made me sit upright just in time to watch Ryder drag Olivia out of the motel room and deposit her on the sidewalk. Her dress was backwards, her shoes were in her hand, and her hair was a mess. Ryder, on the other hand, looked sexy as hell with ruffled bedhead and his jeans sitting low on his hips. I approved.

But watching Ryder point at the disheveled, angry blonde thing and tell her to stay might’ve been the funniest shit I’d seen in a while. So much so that my tired ass folded over damn near giggling. Fuck, I needed more sleep.

Sliding off the car, I went back to our room.

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“Bartender dropped off your car, darlin’,” I told her as I passed. “Your girlfriends made a hell of a fuss about you goin’ home with two strangers.”

That’d been a hell of a wake-up call when I’d passed out on the hood of the car. The bartender was easily twice my size and well-rested whereas I was hungover and not in the mood for small-town protective nonsense.

“I’d hardly call this home,” she snapped. We’d call her attitude a consequence of Ryder throwing her pretty little ass out.

“Works just fine for us,” I retorted and went inside, closing the door. She’d be good on her own.

Ryder... that was another fucking story. He hurried around the room, stuffing shit in bags. He never stuffed shit in bags. Everything was always neatly folded to make it less work for us later on or some shit. His mood was shit, his shoulders were rigid, and his jaw was clenched tight.

“What the fuck did she do?” I asked, flopping down on the bed. I had a hard time believing the angry blonde thing had anything to do with his mood.

“Mal is missing,” he said. “And so is Tess’s husband.”

“Tessa got a what now?” I replied. My eyes widened at that sentence. Granted, it wasn’t that hard to believe. Ryder and her hadn’t talked in fucking years.

“Tess got married. Three years ago. And has a kid.” He zipped a bag while I let out a

whistle.

“So, you mad because your brother is missin’ or because your sister got married without tellin’ you?”

“Yes.”

“Got it.”

“I’m going to Seattle.” Ryder stopped what he was doing to stare at me as he waited for the backlash.

“The hell you are,” I said. “Remember the last time?”

The last time his dad almost caught him. Yeah, that dickhead was still hellbent on putting Ryder back in that makeshift backyard prison. Over my dead body—well, over his dead body. There was no way I was letting Ryder go.

“Why the hell you lookin’ at me like you want to fight me, baby?” I demanded when he crossed his arms.

“Because I know what you’re going to say.”

“Good. You know I’m right.”

“You can come with me and help,” he began, his tone dark, “or I’m going alone. You make the fucking choice, Gray. I’m not fucking around right now.”

He had me. He knew it, I knew it, he knew I knew it. If shit hit the fan in Seattle and I wasn’t there to protect him, I’d never forgive myself.

“Fine,” I said with a sigh. “But you do what the fuck I say, you hear me? I ain’t fuckin’ around, Ryder. One wrong move. That’s all it fuckin’ takes for him to find you. You agree to that, we go. You fight me and I’ll drag your sorry ass halfway underground and keep you there until you listen.”

His gaze narrowed while he scrutinized me, trying to judge just how fucking serious I was. The answer was dead serious. If he wanted to fuck around, he’d find out just how I felt about the whole situation.

“Deal,” he replied quietly. “But if I think you’re holding back, I’ll intervene. I’m not losing my brother to a demon, and I’m not letting my sister’s kid lose her dad.”

“And I ain’t losin’ you.” I didn’t give a fuck who was missing or why. If I had to pick, I’d pick Ryder every single fucking time.

CHAPTER 04

When we hit the Seattle city limits, my chest tightened painfully. I didn’t want to be back here, and I really didn’t want Ryder to be either. I wanted to drag his ass back across the city limits and flee across the country. I wasn’t one to run from a fight, but this was one I wanted to. The potential for shit hitting the fan was too high.

From the sounds of it, Tessa had been out of touch with their dad for years. So had Mal. It put us in a dark area, where we didn’t have a clue what the fuck Daddy Hartford was up to.

Ryder wouldn’t hesitate to use his power if it meant helping Tessa. But what would the cost be? What if the spell was altered? What if it killed him instead of locking him away? How the hell did we know their dad wasn’t already onto Ryder’s presence in the city?

What if I was just hand-delivering him into trouble?

Fuck, I was stressed.

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The what-ifs had taken over my brain. I couldn't stop them if I tried. I just wanted to keep him safe. Here? Here I couldn't see what was coming until it was too fucking late. It scared the shit out of me.

Probably feeling everything I was, Ryder reached across the console and took my hand. His fingers laced through mine, and he squeezed tightly.

"It'll be fine," he said quietly. I didn't have a damn thing to say, so I nodded, lips pressed together tightly. I knew he was trying to comfort me, but it didn't work.

My gut told me otherwise.

I glanced at him. The small smile he gave me did wicked things to my heart. Fuck, I didn't want to lose him.

CHAPTER 05

The woman standing outside our motel door didn't look like my sister. Not really. She was softer somehow—happier. Whatever the hell she was doing with her life, it suited her. Her auburn hair was shorter than I'd ever seen it, tossed up in a clip with wild flyaways everywhere. Those pale blue eyes that matched mine sported a few extra laugh and worry lines. She dressed more comfortably than before, wearing a hockey sweatshirt and leggings. But that smile? That same big smile lit up her face when I answered.

"I've missed you," Tessa said tearfully as I pulled her in for a hug. The intense emotions rolling off her were overwhelming. That was new. She'd always been

reserved and organized with her feelings.

“I’ve missed you too,” I replied. “You look good.”

“You look better.”

“I look best,” Gray chimed in as he exited the bathroom. I shook my head, but Tessa laughed and crossed the room to hug him. “How you doin’, darlin’? Holdin’ up okay?”

“That depends on your definition of okay,” she admitted. “I just... keep going through things.”

Her voice cracked as she faltered, eyes watering all over again. I frowned. Tessa wasn’t a crier—even as a kid. The last time I’d seen her cry was at Zeke’s funeral.

“They don’t tell you just how much having a baby will fuck up your feelings.” She gestured to her face before rubbing her eyes with the edges of her sleeves. “I cry at everything. Everything! I cried at a dryer sheet commercial. Don’t you laugh at me, Grayson Charles Harper.”

His smirk vanished under her menacing glare. Oh, having a kid really fucked with my sister’s emotions. And I’m sure her power wasn’t helping any.

“Okay,” I interjected. Taking my sister by the shoulders, I led her to a chair. “Let’s just sit and talk this out, okay? We need a plan, but we need to know everything you know.”

“Crap!” She popped right back out of the chair. “I forgot everything in the car.”

“I’ve got it,” Gray said and waved her back into her seat. “I’ve got it.”

“I’m sorry,” Tessa whispered when he was gone. “I’m not usually so much of a mess. It’s just...”

“You’re fine, Tess,” I told her, taking her hand. The wild emotions rolling off her were intense, and I wanted nothing more than to soothe away some of it. I couldn’t begin to imagine the thoughts going through her head. “We’ll get them back.”

“What if we can’t?” Tears gathered on her bottom lashes. “What if it’s too late? What if—”

“No, what-ifs,” I interrupted. “They won’t help us. Let’s just start with the facts, and we’ll go from there. If we treat it just like any other hunt—”

“But it’s not any other hunt!”

“It is. There’s a demon, it’s hurting people, and it needs to be killed.” Maybe I sounded cold, considering it was Mal and her husband on the line, but it was a fact. Making it too personal would cloud our judgment. “We’ll get Mal and Jake out of whatever hellhole those two have found themselves stuck in.”

“Promise?” She chewed on her lower lip. Fuck, the sadness in her expression killed me. I always was a sucker for my baby sister. There was a reason she got away with literally everything as a child.

“I promise I’ll do whatever I can,” I said. “We both will. Do you have any pictures of Jake? I’m pretty sure I remember what Mal looks like.”

That earned me a wet laugh. I’d take it. Anything to distract her. She pulled her phone out from her bra of all places—I wasn’t about to ask how the hell she hid it in there.

“Here.” She scooted the chair closer so I could see the picture on her phone. I took it from her, studying the man my sister decided to marry without so much as calling me once. Okay, I fucking judged him. He had unruly blond hair, blue-green eyes, a clean-shaven face, and a smile too wide for his face. The man wore casual firefighter gear as he held Tess tight to his side, beaming like he’d won the lottery. The expression on my sister’s face in the picture matched. I couldn’t remember ever seeing my sister so happy.

And then it dawned on me.

“Do not tell me the man is a descendant of Uriel,” I muttered and glanced up at her, watching her nod. Of course. The man could control fire like Gray could control the earth and the air. It made him a prime fucking firefighter. “Fire and what?”

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“Air.”

Of course. Two elements that'd make for great tools in fighting fires.

“He doesn't hunt much, does he?” I guessed. “This was Mal's hunt, wasn't it?”

“Yeah,” Tessa said. “Jake hasn't hunted in years. He doesn't like hunting. His job is stressful enough, you know?”

“I do. And Mal? How long has he been in town?”

“Maybe a year? A little longer,” she replied. “He failed out of a few colleges. He's struggling, Ryder. He was okay for a while, but... I think he just doesn't know where he fits in. He's been hunting a lot in the general area. But he's not always smart about it.”

“Mal never was.” I sighed and handed the phone back to her. Mal had always been reckless. A real hot head. The world was fun and games to him. That plus demons was a dangerous combination. As I got comfortable in my seat, she kept talking.

“He's made a lot of mistakes, almost gotten hurt a few times, and just... I don't know. I don't think he knows what he's doing.”

“That sounds like Mal,” I murmured. And I planned to hand him his ass after I rescued said ass.

“He's just a little lost, Ryder,” she explained. “It's not that we've been out of touch

with Dad. Dad can't prove it but knows that we helped you. He cut us both off completely, hired someone to take over the house from him, and some... really ugly things were said. I think Mal feels like he has to prove himself."

"But you two are safe?" I asked. Dad's warped sense of what-the-fuck after Zeke's death had only grown worse over the years. I wasn't sure what he had to prove to who, but as someone who'd been on the receiving end of his twisted thoughts, I didn't want to think about what would happen to my siblings if he turned it on them. "Present circumstances aside, of course."

"Yeah, yeah," Tessa assured me with a nod. "I mean, honestly... we have our inheritance. There's nothing he can do about that. Neither of us wanted to take over the house, so it's a relief anyway. I hate not knowing what's going on with you—"

"You don't need to worry about me, Tess," I cut in gently. "Gray and I are just fine."

"I know." She smiled. "I'm glad you two stuck together."

"Don't you start that shit."

"What? I didn't say anything!"

"Go back to the situation with Dad," I ordered, knowing full well my sister would grill me about my relationship with Gray until the sun set if I let her.

"We're fine," she promised. "I mean that. Jake may have suggested we both get spelled to know if we're being stalked, but it's never been an issue."

"You don't actually think Dad's watching you to get to me?"

"Dad's not in his right mind, Ryder. I have no idea what he'll do. Truly," Tessa said.

Pressing my lips together tightly, I nodded and glanced out the motel window. That didn't bode well for anything. Admittedly, there was a small part of me that had hoped for good news in that department. This wasn't good news. It'd also make this job more difficult. I couldn't afford to be caught. Paranoid? Maybe. But it was smart. It meant I had to rely on Gray to handle the brunt of this case. I was about to get real damn comfortable with this fucking motel room. "I locked the car. He can't get into it to get the stuff I brought."

"I'm sure he knows that by now. But if I know Gray—and I do—he's giving us a few minutes before he comes barging in with some smart-ass remark." I chuckled. "Or he breaks into your car..."

"He wouldn't."

"He still holds a grudge over the ew comment."

"That was nine years ago!" she exclaimed while I smiled. Oh, she had no idea the limits of Gray's ability to hold a grudge. "God, I'm going to pay for this forever, aren't I?"

The door opened, and Gray hurried inside. His clothes were wet, his hair stuck to his forehead, and he had a Twizzler jammed between his teeth. And shoved under his t-shirt was a tablet and some kind of folder.

"Fuckin' Seattle and all its rain," he commented. "But I saved the file. And the tablet."

"How?" Tessa exclaimed. "It was locked!"

"I broke into your car." He shrugged.

“Grayson Charles Harper!” she snapped. “You did not!”

“You ain’t got a clue how easy it is to break into a minivan,” he told her. The waves of anger rolling off her had me scooting back the chair. There was no stopping Tessa when she was riled up. And there was no way in hell I was stepping in to save him from her either.

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CHAPTER 06

Spear demon?”

“Nah...”

“Spike-tailed demon?”

“Doubt it.”

“Heat-based demon?” I swiped another screen on the tablet, staring at what had to be my hundredth fucking demon.

“No,” Gray droned on, barely aware of what he was saying.

“Cold-based demon?”

“No.”

“Vampire?”

“No.”

“Wendigo?”

“No.”

“Skin-shifting demon?”

“No.”

“Oompa Loompa?”

“No—what?” Gray’s gaze shot to me, brows knitting together in confusion. “Oompas ain’t real, baby!”

“Just making sure you’re paying attention.” I chuckled and went back to flipping screens on the tablet. There were so many fucking demons.

The problem was we had very little to go on. Nine men between twenty-one and forty had disappeared—including Mal and Jake. There was no particular pattern between them. They all had different skin colors, social classes, job types, and familial backgrounds.

Mal and Jake had gone as far as to map out each of their lives and nothing. No similarities. No crossover. Nothing.

The only commonality was they’d all gone to a place called The Cove. What was The Cove? We didn’t have a clue. There was nothing anywhere on what kind of place it was, which meant it was probably shady as fuck.

All the men were presumed dead. Which made sense if a demon was involved. It was the only thing that made sense about this whole damn thing.

“Why ain’t she at home?” Gray asked softly.

“I imagine she doesn’t sleep much there with a baby,” I replied, glancing at Tessa. She was burrowed under a pile of blankets, dead to the world despite the lights and

TV going. “Just leave her.”

“Uncle Ry’s goin’ to be the straight and narrow uncle.” He laughed.

“No, I’ll be the absent uncle,” I told him. When he frowned, I added, “There’s no way we can be actively involved in her life while we’re on the road.”

“Yeah,” he murmured. “I’m goin’ to be the fun uncle though.”

“No, you’ll be the uncle who teaches her how to swear.”

“I’ll be teachin’ her creative language.”

“Same thing.”

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“What if they ain’t dead?” Gray said suddenly. Fuck, sometimes talking to him gave me whiplash. He sat up fast and grabbed a handful of papers.

“What?” I demanded.

“We’re assumin’ whatever’s doin’ this is killin’ them. What if we’re wrong? What if they ain’t dead?” he repeated.

“So... what? It’s saving them?” I asked.

“We keep runnin’ circles around the idea of a lower-level demon. What if we’re dealin’ with—”

“—an upper-level demon,” I finished for him. Fuck. “That means, we’d be dealing with—”

“—a siren,” Gray cut in.

“Shit,” I whispered. Sirens were nasty business.

“Fuck.” He shoved a hand through his dark hair. “This just got a hell of a lot more complicated.”

“Siren,” Tessa whispered unexpectedly. “Got it.”

“How long have you been awake?” I asked.

“Woke up around the time Gray threatened to teach Jo how to swear,” she muttered.

“I already know how to swear.” I frowned.

“Beautifully,” Gray chimed in. “You should’ve heard him the day some dick called me a human banjo. Accent and all.”

“He was out of line!” I exclaimed, but Gray only made banjo noises with that wide grin on his face.

“Not Ryder. Jo. My daughter,” she corrected.

“Don’t you dare fuckin’ tell me you named your daughter Josiah,” Gray retorted.

“No.” Tessa yawned and stretched. “Her name is Josie though.”

My heart did something unexpected in my chest. She named her daughter after me?

“We’ll circle back around to that one later,” I mumbled. When I could process that piece of information.

“You teach my daughter to swear, Grayson Charles Harper, and I’ll make it so you never have kids,” my sister threatened, changing the subject thankfully.

“Joke’s on you, darlin’,” he gestured between me and him with one finger, “we’re snipped.”

Oh, good Lord.

“What?” Tessa demanded, sitting upright. “Why would you do that?”

“We’re lookin’ to fuck our way across the country, not make demon spawn across the country,” Gray said.

“I thought you wanted kids.” She completely ignored Gray. Thank fuck. Didn’t need him bringing out the map to prove his point.

“I never wanted kids. I just want to hunt,” I replied. And other things. The longer Gray and I did this, the less appealing hunting became. I found myself wanting things that didn’t fit this lifestyle.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked. Her head tilted to the side as she tried to read me. Fuck. “You’re... conflicted.”

“Do you want kids?” Gray cut in.

“What? No! And stop reading my emotions,” I snapped.

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“Stop throwing your emotions around!”

“Stop telling everyone my feelings!”

“Bless your hearts, you fight like siblin’s.” Gray laughed.

“We are siblings,” Tessa and I said in unison. We stared at one another for a brief moment before she laughed. I just smiled. Apparently, some things never changed.

“Do you think they were hunting a siren?”

“That’s the workin’ theory,” Gray replied. “I ain’t goin’ to know for sure til I visit The Cove tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night?” She frowned, unhappy with the idea.

“I ain’t goin’ now, darlin’,” he told her. “I know you’re worried about them, but I ain’t goin’ in half-cocked with a fuckin’ siren. They’re nasty bitches. I need sleep, and I need to do some readin’. Fuckin’ hell. Do you hear me? I’m soundin’ like you, baby. What the hell have you done to me?”

“Taught you how to be a more efficient hunter and taught you the importance of taking care of your health,” I said dryly. Those honey-chocolate eyes leveled on me, unimpressed with my response. I just shrugged. I was right. We both knew it.

“So, what’s our plan?” Tessa asked. Crossing my arms and sitting back in my chair, I studied my baby sister. I scrutinized every detail in her disgruntled appearance. She was barely awake with heavy bags under her eyes. I had to imagine even before Jake

went missing that she wasn't sleeping well—babies being fussy-as-fuck sleepers. God bless her but I never understood the appeal of that.

“You're going home,” I told her. When she started to protest, I said over her, “And you're going to get some sleep. You're no good to anyone if you're barely holding your own, Tess. Gray and I will keep you updated every step of the way. If we need you, I'll let you know.”

“But—”

“And when we find Mal and Jake, you'll be the first to know,” I promised. Her face scrunched up with frustration, but I didn't give a fuck. I wasn't about to let something happen to her because she couldn't function.

“I don't like it,” she replied. “I should help.”

“Do you need to read my emotions to know it comes from a place of love?” I asked the question she'd asked me a lot during some of my hardest years. It was hard to say one thing when you felt another in our family.

“No.” She sighed. I watched her visibly give in, her exhaustion getting the better of her.

“We got this, darlin’,” Gray agreed. “Tonight we're doin' a little recon. I want to know what this place looks like on the outside before I go in. It's goin' to be a good ol' fashion stake out.”

I groaned as he grinned happily at me. That was code for: we were about to spend a fuck ton of money on stake-out snacks. Two minutes or two hours, Gray always bought the same amount of obscene snacks.

CHAPTER 07

It's a strip club," I said. "I'd bet my left nut on it."

"I like your nuts exactly where they are," Ryder muttered under his breath, making me laugh.

The Cove was a giant ass black building with three floors and no windows. It sat in an industrial-sized parking lot with no fucking neighbors and nothing around for a good mile. Talking about one hell of a hunting ground.

Dozens of cars lined the lot, making it easy for Ryder and I to sit at the far end for a stake-out. I chewed on a Twizzler and leaned forward in my seat as I stared at the entrance. Men went in. Only men went in. Two bouncers that made Ryder look short stood at the door, checking IDs and ushering people in.

"I mean," I clicked my tongue, "ain't no better place for a siren to hunt down lonely men."

"Horny men," Ryder corrected. "Most of them aren't lonely. They're just fucking horny."

I bit back a smart-ass remark at his words. The frustration in his voice was intense. There was only so much he could tune out in a crowd as big as what the building held. From the way he shifted uncomfortably in his seat, the poor fucking man had an involuntary hard-on thanks to a bunch of men looking to get off at the sight of a few strippers.

"Sirens have magic, right?" I asked to distract him. I had a pretty damn good idea about what I had to deal with. Sirens were upper-level demons, meaning they were smart and could pass for humans. Most of the demons we hunters dealt with were

lower-level—mindless fucking monsters. They required less tact and more brawn. My specialty.

But a siren? She'd look human. Walk the walk, talk the talk. Normal men wouldn't know the difference. All I had to look for was the way they fucking flocked to her. The draw of a siren was irresistible—or so I'd read.

Ryder may have said horny men but everything I'd read talked about lonely men. Easy to fucking resist when I wasn't lonely. I had everything I needed in my passenger seat wearing green flannel and looking goddamn edible. I'd have no problem not falling for a siren's trick.

"The magic helps them look human," he said and leaned back in his seat. He crossed his arms, never looking at me. "But you knew that."

"I knew that. Just lookin' to distract you."

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“You can’t do this alone, Gray.”

“The hell I can’t.”

“Gray—”

“I can handle one siren,” I told him. Those baby blue eyes found mine. The fight in them would’ve been a fucking turn-on if I wasn’t so damn determined to protect him.

“Do I need to remind you what the fuck I’ll do if you don’t do this my way, baby?”

Fight me. I was ready for it.

“No,” Ryder whispered.

“Good. It fuckin’ sucks, and I get it, but I ain’t a fan of you even bein’ in this goddamn town. There’s no way in hell I’m lettin’ you be seen.” Fuck, I worried about him being in the car with me on the drive over. I’d never driven the speed limit so perfectly in my life. “Besides... you? In a club like that? Tell me you could handle bein’ around all them people with no issues.”

I wasn’t trying to be mean—I wasn’t. But The Cove wasn’t some shady, hole-in-the-wall place. The car lot alone gave an inkling of just how many people were in there. And that was just guests. Ryder would’ve been swept away by the intensity of it all.

“Still don’t like it,” he grumped, and I smiled.

“You don’t have to,” I assured him, the roughness fading from my tone. “I just need

you safe until I find your brother and Tessa's husband, kill a fuckin' siren, and we can get the fuck out of dodge."

"How the fuck do you plan to find a siren?" Ryder asked.

"Baby, I'm charmin'." My grin widened, and he shook his head.

The real answer: I planned to fucking wing it.

CHAPTER 08

"I drown a siren, right?" I teased as I stripped out of my shirt. Stabby McGee that was me—or about to be. Best and easiest way to kill a siren was with a silver knife. There were other ways—messier ways—but I couldn't indulge in the middle of a full club.

Killing one wasn't the hard part. Getting the drop on one was.

A deep growl of frustration ripped from Ryder's throat, and I turned to him. His tall and broad frame looked oversized on the crappy motel bed as he sprawled out, staring at the ceiling. Ryder didn't mope, but I'd classify him as mopey. Okay, maybe not mopey, but he was wound up tight like a fucking coil.

I climbed on top of him, legs straddling his waist and palms braced on either side of his head. That handsome face scowled at me while I just smiled.

"Not funny, Gray," Ryder snapped.

"Baby, I know I can't drown a fuckin' siren," I retorted. "They're damn near mermaids!"

"Mermaids aren't real."

“They ain’t? I call bullshit. You can’t tell me sirens are real—a little off on the fictional lore and all that—but say mermaids ain’t.”

“You’re losing focus.”

“Am I? Or am I just distractin’ you until the bear in the fuckin’ room goes away?” I asked.

“I don’t sound like a bear.” He sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. Leaning down, I ran my tongue up the line of his neck.

“That ain’t even your sexy growl, baby.” Yeah, I needed to get ready, but I wouldn’t leave him like this.

“Fuck me,” he groaned as my teeth scraped lightly against the delicate skin over his pulse. His fingers kneaded into my hips.

“I’d damn sure like to,” I told him.

“Other way around today,” he murmured as his head tipped to the side. Not like I cared what way we did it. I wanted him naked and forgetting the world for just a tiny bit.

“Whatever you want, baby.” I kissed my way down his neck and over his shoulder, paying special mind to the individual dandelion seeds scattered in black ink over the curve of his shoulder and down his arm. It swirled down his bicep and right down to the second tattoo he had that reminded him of me—some geometric symbols for earth and air he’d found on the internet and liked. There was something incredibly sexy about the way the man wanted to brand pieces of me into his very skin.

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My lips drifted across his hard-earned muscles. I hated working out, but fuck, I loved the body Ryder carved for himself because he did. My tongue dipped in the fine lines of his abs. That little moan he let out was perfection. I could feel how he relaxed under me—which was exactly what I wanted.

In a rush, we stripped off our pants. As my teeth grazed his inner thigh, his fingers weaved through my hair. I ran the flat of my tongue over his balls and along the length of his dick, enjoying the sigh of relief he let out.

I may not have been the best with words and emotions, but I was damn good at pulling Ryder out of his head in other ways.

Settling between his legs, I took all of him in my mouth. He let out a sharp hiss, and his fist tightened in my hair. That way his head tilted back and his lips parted spurred me on. I bobbed up and down on his dick, sucking hard and pushing him past the back of my throat each time. Salty pre-cum coated my tongue as I devoured him. I took every moan, groan, and thrust he gave me.

“Stop,” Ryder gasped, tugging me off as his body tensed. “Off, Gray. I’m not coming until I’m buried in that sexy ass of yours.”

Yes, please. He didn’t have to tell me twice. As he swiped the lube out of the nightstand, I straddled him. Impatiently, I waited for him to coat his dick before lining up. All I wanted was him inside me.

“Slow,” he ordered, his fingers digging into my hip bones as the crown of his dick pressed past that tight ring of muscles. God, my body was fucking ready for him.

Slow wasn't what I wanted. Still, I lowered onto him with a groan. The inch-by-inch pace was agonizing, and his hold on me was bruising. I may have been on top, but he was in full control—a fact I had no problem with. When he bottomed out, he rasped, “Fuck, you feel so goddamn good, honey.”

I said something. Sort of. The angle and the way he stretched me was dizzying—the kind of rush I wanted to dive into. And just sitting there? Without moving? It was pure torture. My body buzzed, desperate to feel him moving inside me. My cock throbbed with a need to be touched.

“Fuck, baby,” I let out. “I need to move.”

“No,” he replied. “Hold still, Gray.”

Jesus fucking Christ, the man tested me. His hand wrapped around my dick, stroking meticulously. I moaned and braced on his chest as I felt the simple movement from head to toe. His fist worked me base-to-tip, grazing that bundle of nerves under my crown with every pull.

Liquid heat melted down my spine as the pressure in my balls built. Fuck, I wouldn't last if he kept doing that.

“Ride my cock, honey,” Ryder said.

“Yes, Sir,” I murmured, not needing to be told twice. I moved up and down his length, my moans growing louder. One hand gripped my ass as he guided me over his dick in controlled movements. The other kept stroking me. Up and down. Faster and faster. My fingers curled against his shoulders, seeking something to ground myself to as every nerve in my body fired in overdrive.

Fuck, I saw stars.

I was right fucking there.

And then he stopped. He sat upright, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me down on him until his cock filled me completely. His teeth scraped my ear. I shuddered and moaned, my whole body alive in a myriad of sensations. Everywhere his hands roamed set my skin on fire.

“Fuck me,” I whispered in a mixture of frustration and a plea.

“Not yet.” His lips brushed along my jawline, and my head tipped back automatically for him. “Not until you’re desperate to come and beg like a good boy for me.”

Fuck me. Words like that got me every time.

Ryder took his time as the intensity of everything began to wane. His mouth drifted down my neck in a pattern of light bites and kisses. I was a panting mess when I dragged his lips to mine, my tongue seeking out his. When I did, one hand grasped my ass and urged me to move again.

“Keep going, honey... just like that,” he whispered as I followed his lead and settled into a slow but steady pace. “You take my cock so well, Gray.”

The moments when Ryder’s dirty mouth really came out were some of my favorites. That combined with the praise fucking did me in. I struggled to keep the pace he set, desperate for more.

His hand moved between us, and he fisted my dick once more. He skated up and down my throbbing length while my fingers dug into his shoulders. Every nerve fired in excess, especially as he leaned back enough to change the angle. His cock stroked my prostate with every pass. I was a hot mess—on fire head-to-toe and needy as fuck.

Tangling my fingers in his hair, my mouth crashed into his. Tongues battling. Moaning. Teeth scraping skin. I was fucking flying—lost in everything that he gave me. I was right there, my dick weeping in his hand and my balls drawing up tight.

“Stop,” he ordered once more. One strong arm wrapped tight around my waist to pin me down on him.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I muttered. Breathing hard, my forehead tipped to his shoulder as he let go of my dick. “You’re killin’ me, baby.”

“You like it.” The confidence in his words wasn’t lost on me. And I fucking did. The build-up was a rush I couldn’t get anywhere else in my life. No one could do to my body what Ryder could.

“Still killin’ me.”

“I like you desperate for me.” His tongue ran over my Adam’s apple and up my neck. His teeth tugged on my ear, and I groaned loudly, my dick twitching against his stomach. “How badly do you want to come, Gray?”

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“I’m ready to fuckin’ explode, baby.”

“I’m not convinced, honey,” he replied. Fuck me. I had a love-hate relationship with the way he edged me. “Look at me, Gray.”

I did.

“Good boy,” he praised, and I fucking shuddered. I was a needy fucking mess wanting every little thing he gave me. “Let me hear you say it.”

“Please, baby,” my lips brushed against his, “you’re drivin’ me fuckin’ crazy. I just want to come already.”

That arm around my waist tightened as he flipped me fast, pulling out in the process. As my head fell back on the pillow, his mouth wrapped around my dick.

“Oh, fuck me,” I rasped. He was relentless as he annihilated every ounce of control and restraint I had. His tongue, his fist, the vibrations of every moan. It was a cataclysmic combination that fucking ruined me. My heart galloped against my ribs and my breath stuck in my lungs as I came impossibly hard. He milked my dick for all it was worth until I was spent.

“Do you know how incredible you taste, Gray?” Ryder whispered against my skin as he licked and kissed his way up my body. I made an incomprehensible sound, making him chuckle. “Satisfied, honey?”

“Not until you come in me like you fuckin’ promised you would,” I said. “Fuck me,

baby. Use me to make yourself come.”

“That’s my good boy. Always so eager to please,” he replied while making himself comfortable between my thighs. My legs wrapped around his hips as he slid back inside me, my body welcoming him all over again. He groaned against my mouth as he picked right up where he left off, thrusting into me with even strokes.

“Lose control for me, baby,” I urged.

“Fuck, you feel so goddamn good, honey.” His forehead tipped against mine as he shifted his weight. His pace picked up, turning brutal as he let go and lost himself. My moans became his, his breath became mine, our sweat-slicked bodies slid against one another. The smell of his skin—that fancy-ass soap of his—consumed me, clouding my head. My dick never went down, and my body sparked with every thrust of his hips.

His fingers bruised my hip as he clung on for dear life, chasing that last bit of his release. I kissed every inch of his skin I could and licked my way up his neck. I felt how his body tensed and his movements grew frantic in those last moments. My legs tightened, dragging him closer. My muscles clenched around him in anticipation, and he lost it. Burying his cock deep inside me, he came with a guttural sexy sound.

“Jesus fuck,” Ryder let out, the words blending together. His body trembled over mine. I kissed his jaw, and my teeth scraped against his beard.

“I fuckin’ love you,” I told him softly and enjoyed the smile it pulled from him. He kissed me once, twice, three times.

“I love you too.”

CHAPTER 09

I'd been to enough strip clubs to know what they were like—weren't my thing but I still got them. The Cove was anything but a fucking strip club.

First off, I'd never worked so hard to get into a goddamn strip club in my life. The first guy checked my license without a word. The second guy made me walk through a metal detector. The third checked in my fucking phone and keys. That's right. They had a coat check for phones and keys. If something happened to my girl, I'd fucking tear the place apart from the inside out just because I could. Tact be damned.

All this took place in a black room with blue lighting and no sound. Weird as fuck. It was more than enough to set me on edge. I didn't like losing touch with Ryder.

But The Cove? Fuck me, The Cove was a goddamn experience. The three-story building had been hollowed out in the middle, giving way to several roof-to-first-floor waterfalls that spilled into pools around several smaller dance stages. There were tables, couches, and chairs everywhere. The bar stretched one fucking wall with three bartenders while music played from somewhere.

From what I could see, the second floor was all private rooms—for dances I assumed. The third floor was closed off with one door in and one door out. Probably for the owner and staff to use.

Girls in itty-bitty clothing sauntered everywhere. Blondes, brunettes, and redheads with pretty faces and curvy bodies moved like perfect storms throughout the place. They smiled at everyone, touched shoulders, and whispered in their ears as they passed. Every fucking man in the place was completely enthralled with them.

The atmosphere was electric, vibrating along my skin. A comfortable haze fogged my head as I weaved through the crowd, taking my time to absorb everything. There was a sort of reverence—a respect—in the air that made no goddamn sense as it smelted over me. I'd walked into a strip club, but the guys around here treated it like we'd

walked into a fancy fucking theatre. Whatever fucking worked.

The bar was surprisingly empty and seemed like a smart fucking place to put my feet up. Though the pull to find a girl and settle somewhere else was fucking strong. I shook my head and forced myself to focus.

Siren. Siren. Siren.

I was hunting a goddamn siren.

I refused to get distracted by tits... no matter how goddamn tempting they were. My gaze tracked a pretty redhead as she passed, giving me a million-dollar smile. Okay, I barely caught the smile. My eyes were stuck elsewhere.

“Fuck me,” I grumbled, scrubbing a hand over my face. I had to get it together. Jesus fuck. What was wrong with me?

“We don’t do that here,” the bartender said. And then she winked, which told me they did do that shit here. They just didn’t advertise it. No wonder this place was so fucking popular. “What can I get you?”

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“Beer is fine,” I replied. I just needed something to calm whatever weird energy was surging through my body. “Beer is good.”

“Name for the tab?” she asked.

“Gray works just fine, darlin’.” I flashed her a charming smile. She rolled her eyes, but the small smile that turned her lips wasn’t lost on me.

“First one’s on me, handsome.” She set the chilled glass in front of me and leaned on the bar, getting closer. “But if you want more, I expect a big tip.”

The innuendo wasn’t lost on me as those gorgeous blues waited for me to say something. I inched closer.

“Would a... slightly above-average tip work for you?” I retorted, completely poking fun at myself to make her laugh. It worked, and the sound was heavenly.

“God,” she scoffed. “You’re a terrible flirt.”

“I’m charmin’ as fuck, darlin’. I’m also damn good at making all the pretty girls laugh.”

“You think I’m pretty?”

“I think you’re fuckin’ gorgeous,” I said. “But then I always did have a thing for redheads.”

Was she always a redhead? The thought was fleeting.

“You’re a smooth one, Gray,” she told me. “I go back on the floor in half an hour. Maybe you’ll buy a dance?”

“I don’t take no lap dances from pretty ladies until I know their names.” Was I laying it on thick? Yeah, I was. But fuck me if this woman wasn’t utterly fascinating. She beckoned me closer with one finger, and I listened like a goddamn simp, ready for whatever she was going to say.

“Name’s Journey.” Her lips hovered over mine. I should’ve received a medal for the restraint I showed by not closing the distance. Her exotic floral perfume was intoxicating, making the room sway.

“Like the band?” I asked.

“Exactly like the band, handsome. I even have a tattoo.”

“That’s hot,” I commented. How bad did I want to see that tattoo?

“Maybe if you’re a good boy, I’ll take you upstairs later and show you it.” Ah fuck me, I was a goddamn goner. That little way she bit her bottom lip drew my gaze down. What I wouldn’t do to sink my teeth into it.

“I’m holdin’ you to that, darlin’,” I whispered. I acted without a single thought and closed the distance between us. My lips brushed against her briefly. She didn’t pull away, but her fingers curled into my shirt.

“Watch yourself, baby boy,” Journey warned. “You might just end up in a game you can’t win.”

“Try me.” I was always one to rise to the challenge—and from the way my dick was rock hard behind my zipper, rising wouldn’t be the issue. My sanity might just be. I hadn’t had a single fucking sip, and I was drunk out of my mind on the pretty redhead with a band name.

CHAPTER 10

To say I was in love with a stripper named Journey was a fucking understatement. I was so goddamn enthralled with the woman. I would’ve dropped anyone and anything to keep her. The pull I felt toward her was intoxicating. I couldn’t remember why or how I ended up at The Cove, but I was grateful.

So fucking grateful.

When Journey told me to wait while she went back to get ready, I waited like a goddamn puppy dog for her to return. It felt like forever.

When she showed back up wearing nothing but a skimpy little number in leather and lace, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven. Or maybe hell considering how dangerous those goddamn curves of hers were. Maybe it was the pink body glitter that covered every inch of her, making her sparkle like a goddamn diamond.

When she pushed me into a chair so she could dance for me, I was a willing captive for her.

When she showed me the ‘Don’t Stop Believing’ tattoo curling over her lower spine, I traced the lines like they were gospel and I was a sinner needing redemption.

When she asked if I wanted to buy a private dance, I couldn’t hand off my card fast enough. Thank the fucking Lord they took debit cards.

I was fucking dying as I followed her to the second floor like a lost puppy. My dick was so goddamn hard it hurt. I needed her in a way I hadn't known possible.

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“Sit for me, handsome,” she ordered when we entered the private room. I listened, settling quickly in the only leather armchair. “Such a good boy, Gray. You listen so well.”

I fucking loved listening to her. If she said jump, I’d ask her how high.

Her hands slipped behind her back, and I watched in complete awe as she undid the barely there top she wore. Strips of fabric dropped to the ground, leaving me with a view of the most perfect tits I’d ever fucking seen.

“Do you think I’m pretty, Gray?” Journey asked. As she slid onto my lap, I palmed her thighs, reveling in her softness and warmth. Her hips rolled forward, grinding against my dick. I moaned, biting my lip as I damn near came right there.

“I think you’re fuckin’ gorgeous, baby,” I told her and meant every word.

“I’m supposed to make you wait,” she whispered. Her teeth scraped against my ear, making me groan. My fingers dug tighter into her hips, pulling her tighter against me.

“Fuck, there’s so many clothes between us, baby,” I muttered. I wanted her.

I wanted all of her so badly that I was fucking delirious. She consumed me. The feel of her body against mine, that exotic perfume of hers, the little sounds she made. I couldn’t get enough.

“You’ll be a good boy for me and keep our secret, won’t you, Gray?” Leaning back, she hit me with the full force of her sexy pout. Her hands skimmed down my torso

until she reached my pants.

“I’ll do whatever the hell you want me to, baby,” I said. I would. I really fucking would. If she wanted me to kill a man, I’d rip him apart in a heartbeat.

Journey could have whatever the hell she wanted.

“Kiss me, Gray. Don’t make me wait any longer,” she begged. My fingers curled around the back of her neck. I dragged her closer, taking that sinful mouth of hers with mine. I ate up the sigh she let out and took the chance to stroke my tongue against hers.

Fuck me, did she taste sweet. She was goddamn candy-wrapped up in a gorgeous little body. Her kiss touched my goddamn soul. I felt it with every nerve in my body—everything firing all at once and ruining me instantly.

My lips drifted across her jaw and down her neck. Her head tilted back, exposing her fluttering pulse. I licked and sucked the spot, leaving my mark. I’d be damned if anyone else had her.

When her hand wrapped around my dick, I saw stars. I hadn’t even come yet, and the woman had my world upside down.

“Fuck,” I rasped, “I want you, baby.”

“Next time,” Journey promised. Her hand skated up and down my length rapidly. My breath hitched in my throat as the heat and pressure in my spine multiplied tenfold. “You’ll come back and see me, won’t you, Gray?”

“Every fuckin’ night, baby,” I promised. My teeth sunk into her delicate shoulder as I attempted to ground myself. I held on for dear fucking life.

“Tell me you’re mine, honey. Tell me you belong to me, Gray. Tell me you’ll always come back to me.”

“It’s just you and me, baby,” I said. “Always and forever. Just you and me.”

My reward was those sweet lips claiming mine. It was the last thing I needed to push me over the edge. I came in her hand, the room pitching sideways with the intensity. I lost sight of everything and didn’t care because I still had Journey.

CHAPTER 11

Gray never came home, and I was about to lose my fucking mind. I paced that tiny motel room like a caged animal. Every hour ticked by at a torturous rate while I waited for some kind of something from him. Anything. A call, a text, his handsome ass walking through the door. I would’ve taken any of it.

I waited until precisely five in the morning before I went running. I didn’t give a fuck who saw me—not if something happened to Gray. I’d burn the fucking world down if something happened to him.

The run was horrible for my anxiety. My thoughts were rampant with all the things that could’ve gone wrong. And the actual anger I felt when I found him passed out in the car was intense. It gave way quickly to relief. The front seat was reclined, and he used his leather jacket like a blanket. In true Gray fashion, his mouth hung open and his chin tucked to his shoulder.

At least my idiot had passed out in the fucking car instead of something bad happening to him.

That thought made me falter.

He was just passed out, right?

I banged on the driver's side window for good measure. Gray flew upright in a fit, battling his jacket as he went for his knife. I would've laughed if I hadn't been so worried about him.

"What the fuck?" he snapped and stumbled out of the car. He threw his jacket on the ground as he glared at me. "What the fuck are you doin', baby?"

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“Do you know what time it is?” I demanded.

“I...” Gray sighed and ran a hand through his hair. His expression was unsteady while he glanced around the empty parking lot. “I’m guessin’ early.”

“Yeah,” I said. “What the fuck happened?”

“I don’t... I just...” He scrubbed his face, sagging against the car for support. He looked worse for wear and... was he shimmering? Oh, Jesus fuck, the man had pink glitter stuck in his hair.

“How much did you drink, Gray?” I asked because him blacking out drunk was the only reasonable explanation.

“I don’t think I drank anythin’!” he exclaimed. “I remember buyin’ a fuckin’ drink, but I can’t remember fuckin’ drinkin’ it.”

That was a red flag.

“What do you remember?”

“I remember them makin’ me hand over my phone like a goddamn coat check,” Gray told me. His words ignited a frenzy as he searched for his phone—patting down his pants, his jacket, and even digging through the seat before finding it on the floor. “Fuckin’ hell. I don’t... I don’t know why that’s there.”

“Jesus Christ, Gray.” I sighed heavily. “Think hard. How much did you have to

drink?”

“I don’t... remember.”

“Fuck! You can’t drink until you blackout while you’re hunting! What if something happened? You got fucking lucky!”

“Don’t you fuckin’ give me that look,” Gray snapped. He tossed his jacket angrily into the car and slammed the door. “I’m a damn good hunter! You know that! You know I ain’t fuckin’ stupid enough to get drunk while huntin’.”

The problem was I did know that. Gray liked to have fun, but he was smart about it. And I may have said the words, but I had a hard time believing that he’d drink that much—especially around a demon.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “What else do you remember?”

“I remember checkin’ in my shit and feelin’ real fuckin’ weird about it,” he replied. Understandable. I didn’t like that thought at all. It left him vulnerable. His confusion bled over my skin as his brows knit together tightly. “I don’t fuckin’ know, baby. I went in, and it was... fuck, the place is goddamn huge. I remember that. I remember goin’ to the bar to get a drink. It was fuckin’ empty compared to the rest of the place. I had no intention of fuckin’ drinkin’, you know? Just keep it close and blend in, right? And then there’s... I don’t... I think there was... Journey?”

“The band?” I frowned.

“I don’t... maybe. Fuck.” The distress that vibrated through his body made my chest tighten. “I don’t fuckin’ know, Ryder. I don’t... I can’t remember a goddamn thing that happened. I don’t... fuck. I don’t got a clue what happened, baby.”

He really didn't have a fucking clue. Which didn't bode well for hunting this damn siren. But one thing at a time. His building frustration and anxiety was too much for me to overlook. I needed to get him back to the motel.

"It's okay," I said quietly. I went to guide him around the side of the car, but he leaned forward and buried his face in the curve of my neck. Instantly, I hugged him, holding on tight.

"I fucked up, baby," Gray muttered. "Don't know how, but I fucked up."

"You didn't," I assured him. "But I think we underestimated the siren."

"You bet your sexy fuckin' ass we did."

"Let's just get you back to the motel," I whispered. Very rarely were the roles reversed between us. "Let me take care of you, Gray."

CHAPTER 12

There's glitter on my fuckin' dick!" I exclaimed, my voice rising a notch. I stared down at myself in the shower. Pink glitter stuck to my dick—really stuck to every fucking part of me. "Why the fuck is there glitter on my dick?"

In the other room, I heard Ryder laugh. An honest-to-God, deep, and real laugh. The fucker. While I loved his real laugh and rarely got to hear it, him laughing at my expense did nothing for my fucking mood. Throwing open the shower curtain, I stormed out of the bathroom to glare at him.

"There's fuckin' glitter on my dick, baby!" I raged. I gestured to my dick. "Glitter! The fuckin' herpes of goddamn craft supplies! I ain't ever gettin' rid of it! I look like that sparkly fuckin' vampire!"

“Who?” Ryder asked.

“The fuckin’ vampire!” I reiterated, losing my steam as he shrugged again. “You know... the sparkly teenage creepy one?”

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“I don’t have a fucking clue what you’re talking about.”

“It was a book!”

“You don’t read,” he pointed out.

“Long weekend when you were in that coma,” I said. “There was some girl there with her mom. She gave me the book. I ain’t got a clue, baby. It was some teenage fad.”

“Did you read a young adult romance novel, Gray?” The fucking shit-eating grin on his face. I scowled.

“There’s glitter on my fuckin’ dick, baby!” I practically yelled once more. We were way off-topic. I waved wildly to my dick once more. “Glitter! Dick! It’s in my pubes, Ryder! I’m a-walkin’, talkin’ craft store!”

“You could always shave—”

“That was one fuckin’ time!” I interrupted. “One time! Never again! Why is there fuckin’ glitter on my dick, baby?”

“Do you want the honest answer?” Ryder asked, sobering.

“Yes!”

“You probably had sex with a stripper,” he told me. I knew that was probably the case, but I didn’t want to know that.

“I don’t remember a fuckin’ thing.” I fucking hated it. I felt... wrong. Was violated the right word? I wasn’t sure. It just felt wrong. I didn’t like knowing something had happened to my body, and I couldn’t remember a fucking thing. “I don’t like it.”

“I know,” he whispered. Standing, he stripped his shirt off and tossed it aside. As he crossed the room, he said, “You’re dripping all over the carpet. Let’s get you back in the shower.”

“I hate this.” I kept on saying it like it changed anything. It didn’t. It just made me a grumpy asshole.

“I know.” And he kept on saying that. Why wasn’t he madder? He should’ve been.

“Be madder,” I snapped. He said nothing as he followed me into the shower and grabbed the shampoo.

“Head under the water,” Ryder ordered. I listened only because I didn’t have it in me to fight him. My eyes drifted shut as he washed my hair, fingers massaging my scalp until I was putty in his hands. I let him lather me up head-to-toe in soap and did my best to focus on the moment—on relaxing—but I couldn’t. I was so far inside my own fucking head it wasn’t even funny. No matter how good letting him take care of me felt it didn’t take away the situation.

“You mad?” I asked when he was done. Instead of responding, he wrapped his arms around my shoulders and pulled my back to his chest.

“I’m not mad.”

“Be mad.”

“No.”

“Why ain’t you mad?” I demanded. “I fucked up.”

“We fucked up,” he corrected. “Honey, we underestimated the siren—”

“Don’t you dare tell me I fucked a demon,” I cut in. Stripper? Fine. I was unhappy about that shit, but I could live with it. But a demon? Nope. No. No way in fucking hell.

“I’m not saying anything,” Ryder continued without entertaining my interruption. “But sirens deal with energy. I think we underestimated how. We start back at the drawing board. I’m getting you food, and then you’re going to bed.”

“I ain’t goin’ to sleep,” I snapped.

“You are.” There was no room for argument in his tone. To be fair, I felt fucking worn. The shower and his gentleness were the last bit to push me over the edge. Whatever the fuck had happened to me, it left me in some kind of way. Exhausted. Achy. And miserable. So fucking miserable. “I’ll call Tess while you do. She and I will figure out the next steps, got it?”

“Yes, Sir,” I muttered, unhappy but I’d do it.

“Good boy.” His lips brushed along the spot under my ear briefly. “And, Gray?”

“Yeah?”

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“You didn’t fuck up,” he said. “You made it back alive to me. That’s all that matters.”

How I fucking wished that was true.

CHAPTER 13

Ryder wanted me to sleep, but I couldn’t sleep. I was a fucking livewire—charged and buzzing. My skin crawled while my mind raced. I paced the room frantically after he left, unable to settle down. Every time I closed my eyes, her voice drifted through my mind—soft and sweet like a little glimpse of heaven.

It drove me crazy.

It left me starved and desperate for something I couldn’t quite reach.

Come to me, Gray...

“No, no,” I muttered. I couldn’t... I couldn’t give in.

You promised you wouldn’t leave me, Gray...

“I did, I did, I did.” I nodded frantically. Had I? Had I made that promise? My fucking soul seemed to agree violently. Every minute away had me dying a little more. I was a fucking mess.

Please, come back to me, Gray... you can’t leave me...

I escaped the motel and ran straight to The Cove.

Straight to her.

Straight to the gorgeous redhead with pretty blue eyes. She greeted me with open arms and a million-dollar smile that took me out by the knees.

“I knew you wouldn’t leave me,” Journey said as I swept her up in a fierce hug. The feel of her body against mine was a goddamn drug and I was a desperate addict. I craved her. Her fingers scraped against my scalp when she ran her hand through my hair. Her breath warmed my ear as she whispered, “Such a good boy, Gray. I knew you’d listen so well.”

It felt like coming home. She felt like home. I couldn’t explain it, and I couldn’t fight it. I didn’t want to. I wouldn’t, even if I could.

I tangled my fingers in her hair and dragged her mouth to mine, needing a taste of her. My tongue battled hers while she grabbed hold of my belt and pulled me closer. My dick was hard as stone against my zipper. Needy and aching.

“Easy, Gray,” she whispered with a laugh against my lips. “So eager, my good boy.”

“Fuck, I need you,” I murmured and kissed her again—hard. Her little giggles and sighs were euphoric. Intoxicating perfection. God, this fucking woman was everything.

By the belt, she pulled me into a dark alcove. Just me and her and a tiny place where her body pressed against mine. No one could see us as we disappeared into our own space. I touched every inch of her I could, and it still wasn’t enough. Pushing her against the wall, I rolled my hips against hers with a moan.

“Please, Journey.” I wasn’t above begging for just a sliver of something from her. My hands traveled under her torn band shirt. She was soft and warm and fuck, I loved the feel of her. “I’ll do fuckin’ anythin’, baby. Please.”

“Would you really do anything for me, Gray?” she asked quietly. Those pretty blue eyes held mine as she waited for an answer. Heavy emotions I couldn’t verbalize clogged my throat, so I nodded. It was the best I could do. Planting a hand on my chest, she pushed my back against the opposite wall. “You’re so good to me, Gray. You’re such a good boy, aren’t you?”

She stroked my hard length through my jeans, and I damn near came undone right there. Fuck, no one should feel so goddamn good without doing a damn thing. My head tipped back against the wall with a strangled groan as she repeated the action.

“Answer me, Gray,” Journey ordered, giving my throbbing cock a light squeeze.

“Yes, ma’am,” I managed to get out. I was at her complete mercy as she unbuckled my belt and undid my pants. My mind was empty as fuck, and my body was a coiled ball of heat ready to explode. “Fuckin’ hell...”

“Good boys deserve to be rewarded,” she said. Her hand curled around my dick. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to think of every fucking thing I could to avoid losing it right there. “Don’t let go yet, Gray. I want to taste you.”

“Fuck, baby,” I replied. “You keep talkin’ like that, and I ain’t goin’ to make it that long.”

“You can hold out for me.” She lowered down onto her knees in front of me. I resisted the urge to thread my fingers in her hair. She was in control, not me. Her tongue flicked over the head of my dick, and she moaned as she lapped up the pre-cum beading there. The sound was the definition of erotic.

She ran her tongue along the entire length of my cock before taking just the tip in her mouth. Fuck me. Was it supposed to feel this goddamn good? I was flying high. She took all of me without hesitation, and I hit the back of her throat. When she swallowed and her muscles tightened briefly around me, I moaned in competition with the club music. My hips rocked forward of their own accord.

“That’s it, Gray,” she coaxed as she popped off for just a moment. “Let me feel you lose control for me.”

“I can’t—”

“You can,” she insisted. Before I could say a fucking word otherwise, her mouth was back on my dick. Hot, wet, and commanding. My heart pounded erratically in my chest as my breathing turned ragged. I wrung my fingers in her hair and let myself fall into the wild sensations she sent off in every molecule of my body.

Thrusting into her mouth, I chased my release. Her nails dug into my thighs as she took every inch that I gave her. My muscles were wracked with tension while the heat and pressure in my spine were damn near painful.

I was right there, dangling between torture and bliss. I opened my mouth to say something but not a sound came out. Instead, I exploded. My fists tightened in her hair as my dick jerked in her mouth, shooting cum down her throat. She swallowed every drop with a greedy moan that vibrated all the way to my balls and nearly took me out by the knees.

When I had nothing left in me, I sagged against the wall. Exhaustion and euphoria clouded my head. I let go of her, running the pad of my thumb down the side of her gorgeous face. She leaned back on her heels and fluttered her lashes at me. In the dim glow of the club lights, her blue eyes practically glowed. Fuck, she looked like an angel.

An angel with the mouth of a sinner, but it still counted.

“Do you want more, Gray?” Journey asked, her voice barely a purr as she stared at me.

“I want all of it, baby,” I admitted. “Whatever you’ll let me have.”

“Then I’ve got something real special for you, honey. I promise.”

CHAPTER 14

Ifollowed her up the two flights of stairs like a goddamn puppy dog. I would’ve gone anywhere with Journey. But when my feet hit that top step on the third floor, an unexplained dread weaseled its way through my core. I stopped, and so did she.

“Somethin’...” I shook my head. Words stuck in my throat, and my tongue was too thick to talk. I tried to take my hand from hers, but her fingers laced through mine and held on tighter.

“It’s okay, Gray.” Journey’s voice swam in my ears, barely penetrating the haze in my mind.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. What the hell was wrong with me?

Her lips touched mine. Every bit of anxiety I had vanished into nothingness. I leaned into her with a moan. Fingers wrung in my shirt and held me close.

“Good boy, Gray,” she whispered. “Stay with me. Okay?”

I just nodded, unable to form a damn thought to save my life. Hand-in-hand, I let her pull me forward. My legs were lead as I followed blindly.

Right, left... right, left... one in front of the other...

“Sit down, sweet boy.” Her hands trailed down my sides and gently pushed me back. My ass hit a soft surface. The weight of everything carried me until I hit a pillow. I

groaned, sinking further into it.

No... no...

Did I say that out loud?

My mouth was so... weird. Words felt weird.

“Relax, Gray,” she said. I shook my head and tried to sit up. Did I try to sit up? Was I even moving?

“He’s strong,” someone cut in. Who? What was...

“Stop fighting me, Gray,” Journey ordered. “It’s okay. Just breathe. Think happy thoughts.”

Happy...

“Happy place...” I muttered, my head rolling to the side. A flash of a face ebbed into the darkness of my mind—handsome and familiar. “Happy place...”

Something pricked my arm, and I couldn’t flinch.

“Happy place, Ryder...” I whispered. A comforting warmth spread under my skin. My body relaxed, melting. That face sharpened. I knew that face. I adored that face. “Cardigans... baby, we need cardigans...”

Ocean waves echoed in my ears, soothing and welcoming.

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Oceans and cardigans...

Happy place...

Happy place with Ryder...

CHAPTER 15

We can take the food to go,” Tessa said for the fourth time when I checked my phone. I glanced at her. My sister looked better like somehow she’d managed to get some sleep. It wasn’t lost on me that she was dressed to hunt rather than dressed to nap.

“We’ll stay here,” I told her without reason. Still, I kept my phone out. Trying to be casual, I propped it up against a glass. I didn’t need her to see the screen because the minute my sister found out what I was up to, all hell would break loose.

“You’re hiding your emotions.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being carefully composed.”

“Unless you’re hiding something.”

“Do you think I’m hiding something?”

“You’re acting suspiciously,” Tessa accused. I stopped staring at the screen to look at her. Her eyes narrowed as she continued to try to read me. “Damn it, Ryder! You

were always too damn good at hiding.”

“Stop reading my emotions, Tess,” I snapped. “When I have something you need to know, I’ll tell you.”

And I would. As soon as I confirmed my theory. Admittedly, I hated leaving Gray at the motel, but it had to happen.

“Is it about Jake and Mal?” she asked quietly. The worry that ebbed through me wasn’t mine, making me sigh. Fuck. “It is, isn’t it? Did something happen to Gray that happened to them?”

Double fuck.

“Do not panic on me, understand?” I said. The last thing I needed was Tessa panicking while I tried to deal with everything all at once. Only when she nodded did I continue. “Let me ask you two questions. How many times did Mal and Jake go to The Cove?”

“It was only twice. But I don’t think they went in the first time.” They’d definitely gone in the first time. “Why do you ask?”

“Second question: where were you the night they disappeared? And were they planning on going out that night?”

“That’s three questions.”

“Answer mine and I’ll answer yours.”

“I took Jo over to see my in-laws. They’re really wonderful—maybe a little over-involved at times, but they’re nice. Jake was supposed to come with us, but he didn’t

feel good.” Her words trailed off with the last sentence, her brows knitting together. “Why does that matter?”

“Were Mal and Jake supposed to go out that night?” I repeated.

“No,” she whispered. “They were planning to wait and get more information. I just figured... Mal can be impulsive. What do you know, Ryder?”

“After finding Gray outside the club this morning, I scoured the Demon Web for anything else I could find on sirens,” I explained. “Most of it was everything we already knew. But there was one story I came across—a personal account—that I can’t get out of my head.”

”What happened?”

“Three hunters went after a siren outside of Boston.” I knew this story by heart. I’d read it so many fucking times that I could recite it in my sleep at this point. “During the first encounter, one of the hunters ended up trapped with the siren. It was no more than a few minutes before the other two got to him. The siren got away, and they went home.”

“I mean,” she shrugged, “that happens. There’s nothing out of the ordinary about that.”

“The hunter that had been trapped with the siren couldn’t remember anything about his encounter with it,” I continued. Like Gray. “He could remember how he ended up in the room with it but not what came after. The following day, he was irritable and frustrated—understandable, considering the day before. However, that night, shit hit the fan. He became erratic, hearing voices that weren’t there. And when he went to leave, nothing and no one could stop him. He ended up going right back to the siren. Whatever had happened between him and the siren when they were alone, it left its

mark on him and called him right back.”

“What does this have to do with Jake and Mal?” From the look on her face, she knew exactly where I was going with this.

“I think Jake and Mal ran into the siren on their first night inside The Cove. And I think they initially weren’t going to go back, but it already had its hold on them. There’s nothing you could’ve done to stop them from going back,” I said when she opened her mouth, knowing exactly what she’d say. “And I know that Gray encountered the siren last night.”

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“And you left him alone?” she exclaimed, her hand slamming on the table. I beckoned her closer with a sharp gesture. I didn’t need the whole damn diner to hear me. “You used him as bait, Ryder.”

“Listen close, Tess,” I began, my tone dark, “if what I read is right, nothing on God’s green earth will fucking stop him right now. I may be military-trained and a damn good hunter, but Gray is an unstoppable killing machine. If I tried to stop him, he’d kill me before I could get a single fucking word out. The best option is to be out of the motel room when he leaves and then rescue his ass once he’s there safely.”

“Safe is subjective,” she retorted. “You have no idea what the you-know-what will do to him. You’re risking a lot. You’re risking Gray.”

I knew exactly what I was risking.

“I know it won’t kill him right away, and I know that I’ll do whatever it fucking takes to save him. Nothing else matters.”

“You can’t be certain that’ll happen.”

“It already has,” I said. Grabbing my phone, I turned around the video feed I had playing on it. Yeah, I’d put a dash cam on the car to keep an eye on the motel door. I rewound it and showed her the moment I’d been watching out for: Gray hurrying out of the motel so damn fast he left the door open.

She took it from me, rewatching it several times. I could feel the distress rolling off her in waves. Reaching across the table, I covered the screen and forced her to stop

watching it.

“I’m going to get them back, Tess.” I made the promise, but I didn’t have a clue how. I just knew that I’d figure out where Gray, Jake, and Mal were, and I’d do whatever the hell it took to get them back.

CHAPTER 16

Hands on my hips, I studied the wide assortment of weapons scattered on the bed. Knives, guns, studded knuckles, and more. All of them were magicked for concealment thanks to a witch Gray picked up in Disney World—she’d magicked our weapons in exchange for park tickets, which somehow turned into an entire vacation endeavor for the three of us. It was one of the weirdest weeks of my life, but May was cool in her dance-naked-in-the-moonlight kind of way.

I couldn’t bring everything with me. The thought of doing so was ridiculous. But what was the best combination? I wanted to steer clear of guns. That was the best course of action, even if I was most comfortable with one in my hand and on my hip. In a club full of people, the last thing I needed was widespread panic from gunfire.

“Okay, look,” Tessa began as she let herself into the motel room, “I need you to know that I got pulled over trying to get this thing.”

My gaze flicked her direction, watching her throw a green duffel bag on the bed for me. My Army bag. Shit, how long had it been since I’d seen that thing. Or even thought about it?

“I didn’t ask you to speed,” I reminded her. “I just asked you to grab my duffel—”

“Jesus Christ, Ryder!” she exclaimed when she looked up. “Put on some pants.”

“I have pants on.”

“At least button your pants.”

“It’s not my fault you don’t know how to knock,” I said but buttoned them anyway.

“What happened with the cop?”

“I may have used my power to get his sympathy for the poor mom rushing home to bring her baby formula,” she told me. She did what now?

“Tess!”

“What? I didn’t have time for a speeding ticket.”

“Jesus fuck.” I shook my head. Only Tessa. “Tell me you don’t do shit like that often.”

“I don’t. I promise.” Well, at least there was that. “Why did you need your bag?”

That was a loaded question. Crossing the room, I grabbed my bag and set it on the dresser. The bag was full of shit I didn’t need anymore—memories I wanted nothing to do with. I planned to burn it all as soon as I had the chance. Or maybe I’d have Tessa and Jake do it for me.

However, I couldn’t deny that one thing inside the bag would be useful. My dog tags.

“There’s a pattern,” I said as I took them out. Despite how light I knew the tags were, they were heavy as fuck in my hand. And even heavier around my neck.

“We didn’t find a pattern.”

“Look again,” I said. “All the victims are men under forty. They’re young. They’re virile—”

“God, no.” She visibly shuddered, and her disgust rolled over my skin.

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“What is wrong with you?” I demanded.

“I don’t want to ever think about Mal or Gray in that way,” Tessa replied. “Or you for that matter.”

“Jesus fuck,” I muttered and ran a hand over my face. Only my sister. “Tess, it means they’d be good targets for harvesting life energy from.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense. But why do you need your dog tags?” she asked. Quietly, she added, “I honestly never thought I’d see you wear those again.”

That made two of us.

“It’s an easily identifiable way to explain vigilant behavior,” I explained while pulling a t-shirt on. The tight spread across my shoulders left an outline of my tags on my chest. The sight was odd in the mirror. “A civilian who keeps an eye on everything is questionable. That’s usually identified as criminally suspicious behavior. But when someone in the military does so... it’s observant. I need them to think I’m just a hyper-aware soldier. The last thing I need is the focus on me while I try to stalk a siren—which is to say, I’m about to go into a strip club to stalk a fucking stripper.”

It wasn’t lost on me just how fucked up that would look like from the outside. The less attention I drew to myself, the better. At least my behavior had an explanation this way.

“Ryder,” Tessa began softly, and I glanced at her. “Can you handle this? Honestly?”

“I can kill a siren,” I said, but I wasn’t an idiot. I knew what she meant.

“The club will be full of people,” she elaborated. “That’s a lot of… variables for you. What if—”

“Don’t say it.”

“It needs to be said!”

“No, it fucking doesn’t,” I snapped. “I’m not going to lose control. I can do this.”

The words were more for me than for her.

CHAPTER 17

Whose fuckin’ idea was it to go on this goddamn walk again?” I yelled as we sprinted up the beach. Icy rain pelted my skin while sand made running a fucking feat. Our walk turned into a race down the beach when a sudden downpour decided to kick our asses. “I hate cardio!”

“I know,” Ryder said.

“Fuck cardio, baby,” I snapped, breathing fast. I pushed harder to keep up with him. Damn man with his damn exercise routine—though his ass looked great as I chased him. “I hate runnin’ so goddamn much!”

“Run faster!” He laughed as if this was nothing. God, I loved that sound.

“That ain’t the answer!” But fuck if I didn’t pick up my pace to try and catch him.

Our house was settled back on a section of beach where rock mixed with sand and

beach grass grew like weeds. Maybe they were weeds. Who the fuck knew? We rushed over the wooden plank pathway toward the little cottage. Sure, it was small, but we didn't need more.

Ryder beat me onto the porch and stood there, hands on his hips and that gorgeous fucking smile on his face as he watched me. I loved him like this—happy and free. Stopping on the top step, I huffed out a frustrated breath.

“Fuckin’ rain.” I shook out my hair, water flying everywhere. Not like the porch wasn’t already puddling a little. “I ain’t ever goin’ for another damn walk—”

Catching me around the waist, Ryder dragged me close and pushed me against the door. His body pinned mine against the wood.

“Shut up, honey,” Ryder ordered a second before his mouth found mine. I groaned, and his tongue swept through the seam of my lips. My hand curled around the back of his neck to hold him close. That familiar flame surged to life. The cold around us didn’t matter as every nerve in my body warmed under his attention. I needed more of him. From the way his dick pressed hard against my hip, he was just as needy.

His mouth drifted along my jaw as I struggled to open the goddamn door. Of course, we had to buy a fucking house that had a stupid fucking keypad lock instead of a regular lock like normal people. How the fuck was I supposed to focus on a number code when all my thoughts went straight to my dick?

“Open the door, Gray,” he whispered against my neck. His teeth grazed over my pulse, making me groan. Fuck me.

“I’m fuckin’ tryin’,” I grumbled. “This is why buyin’ a house with a keypad thing was a bad idea!”

“Impatient?” He chuckled, the sound spilling over my skin. I vibrated from head to toe. Yeah, I was fucking impatient. I wanted all his clothes and mine gone. I wanted to taste every goddamn inch of the man.

“I’m always impatient for you,” I reminded him. Ryder’s hand swatted mine away from the lock. He punched in the numbers without ever looking—show off.

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We stumbled through the door in a wet frenzy, our boots slipping on the hardwood. I laughed as he tried to keep me from falling over and I damn near took him out with me.

“We probably need one of those damn welcome mat things,” I told him as I stepped back.

“Hold up.” Grabbing the bottom of my shirt, he yanked me back toward him. “There’s no way in hell you’re ruining our carpet by walking around like that.”

“Like what?”

“Wet and sandy.”

“If you wanted me naked, baby, all you had to do was ask.” I smirked as I slid off my boots. The hunger in his eyes kicked up as I took my time stripping—not that I had much choice. I was soaked to the bone and everything clung to me. But damn if I didn’t love the way his gaze roamed over my body.

“I could stare at you all day,” he admitted quietly.

“I really fuckin’ hope you’re goin’ to do more than just stare,” I said.

“Stroke yourself, honey,” he replied while peeling off his flannel. With a cocky grin, I fisted my aching dick, the silver of my wedding ring cold against my skin. I stroked my length from root to tip. Ryder’s stare never left me as he undressed. Fuck, he was sexy as hell.

When he was naked, he closed the distance between us and planted a hand on my chest. I went with him willingly until my back was pressed against the wall. He nuzzled the side of my neck as his hands skimmed down my stomach and gripped my hips.

“Fuck,” I groaned when his teeth scraped my ear.

“Head back and relax for me, Gray,” he said softly. I didn’t need to be told twice as he kissed his way down my body until he was on his knees in front of me. His tongue trailed over the dip of my hip bone. Strong hands ran up my thighs, and he gave my balls a light squeeze, damn near taking me out by the knees.

“Jesus fuck, baby,” I let out, my head tipping back against the wall with a soft thud. “You’re killin’ me.”

“I haven’t even started with you yet.” His tongue flicked across the head of my cock, tracing my slit. Fuck me. “Do you know how good you taste, honey?”

I didn’t have the fucking words to reply as his tongue circled the crown of my dick, and he took me in his mouth. My eyes rolled back as his head bobbed up and down my length, pushing me past the back of his throat each time.

Up and down. Fast and slow. His mouth was sweet fucking torture. My fingers balled in his hair tightly as I clung on for dear life.

“That’s it, honey,” Ryder praised when he pulled off, his deep voice thick with his desire. “Let go for me, Gray.”

Except I didn’t want to let go. I wanted more of him.

I pushed him away and dragged him to his feet. My hand curled around the back of

his neck, and my mouth crashed against his. Hungry and desperate.

“Ain’t goin’ to happen, baby,” I said gruffly. With my hands on any inch of his body that I could touch, we made our way down the small hallway and tumbled into bed. I licked up his neck as I straddled his waist. I rolled my hips forward, my dick sliding along his and making him moan. “I don’t want to come until you’re inside me.”

His mouth found mine, and his teeth tugged on my lower lip. As his fingers dug into my skin, his hips thrust against mine. My dick throbbed. I needed him inside me so goddamn badly.

“Fuck me,” I practically begged.

“Ask me again nicely,” Ryder ordered.

“Please, fuck me, baby.”

“Good boy.”

CHAPTER 18

The parking lot to The Cove was packed. I swallowed hard as I neared the line outside the building. Anticipation. Need. List. Frustration. The list of emotions droned on and on. My stomach rolled with nausea, but I swallowed it. I had to fucking do this.

I focused on slow, deep breaths while I took my place at the back of the line.

Inhale. Think happy thoughts. Exhale.

Wash, rinse, repeat. I knew the drill. I may have hated being around large crowds, but

I knew how to survive if I had to—I wasn't great at it but still. I just had to get in there, find the siren, find out where Gray was, and kill it.

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Sounded simple enough.

Some guy tried to talk to me, but I tugged Gray's hat lower over my face and hoped to hell he caught a fucking clue. He didn't. He kept on chatting up a storm about some chick inside or some shit. I barely registered a word he said.

At the door, I showed my license to the security guard. He barely gave me the time of day as he glanced at it. I expected something like annoyance or frustration from him, but the man had no emotions. None at all. Odd but I couldn't focus on that.

In the blue light lobby, I checked in my phone and keys just like Gray had said he had to. There were four of us in the room, each in a different corner with a security guard helping us. The same question about weapons echoed around the room.

I squinted at the guy as I answered. He felt... cold. Just hollow and cold. But that deadpan expression on his face didn't match. It was off-putting. It didn't feel... human. He didn't feel human.

I shook that thought off. I didn't have the time to entertain that. I was looking for a siren. That was it. I didn't have the time to focus on anything else. Not with Gray's life in danger.

"Turn it around or take it off," the guy said gruffly and gestured to my hat.

"Right," I muttered as I flipped it around. "Sorry about that."

"It stays that way the whole time or it'll be confiscated, got it?" he continued. Like

hell was anyone taking Gray's hat from me.

I was last to leave the room. As I passed under the first archway, it began beeping at me. All four guards converged on me. Shit, they took security seriously.

"Backup." One gestured for me to move toward them. "Slow steps."

"Sorry about that," I said loudly, digging deep and plastering on the charm. Playing it off, I put my hands up. "I'm going to reach into my shirt. Don't come at me now, guys. Promise it's all good. I didn't take off my tags. I didn't even think about them."

Not a single damn emotional inclination from any of them. They weren't human, but they weren't sirens either. They weren't complex enough. I'd deal with them later—maybe.

"See?" Sticking to the casual attitude, I dipped a hand in my shirt and pulled out my tags. "I'm harmless, promise."

"I doubt that," one of them grunted.

"Tonight I'm harmless," I corrected with a forced grin and hoped to hell I looked it to them. I waited patiently as they gave me a thorough once-over with a metal detector. The three knives on me went completely undetected—thank you magic. It only sounded off when the metal detector came close to my tags. I smiled wider. "See? Harmless."

"All right," he replied and handed the metal detector off. "We have to be careful. You understand."

"Of course," I said, tucking away my tags. "No harm, no foul, man. You're just doing your job."

“You’d be surprised with some of the guys we get in here.” He motioned me through the door, following closely. Oh, small talk. I fucking hated small talk. “We just want the best for our girls.”

The transition to sudden darkness was unnerving—short but unnerving. When the club door opened, the blast of music was damn near enough to take me out by the knees. That combined with the intense emotions made me want to turn around and high-tail it out of there. These kinds of places were my worst nightmare.

For Gray. I was doing this to find Gray. I just had to keep that at the forefront of my mind.

“Ladies,” the security guard began as he ushered several strippers toward us, “make sure Private—”

“Sergeant,” I corrected.

“Make sure the Sergeant here is well taken care of,” he continued before leaving me to be surrounded by three women. Fuck.

One said something, but I didn’t hear her. Instead, I focused on that feeling as her hand drifted down my arm. Something warm trickled down my skin. I glanced to the other side as another put her hand on my shoulder.

My skin prickled uncomfortably at the energy that rolled over me. I clamped down harder on my personal defenses, letting it wash across my skin rather than take me over as it tried.

I recognized that feeling.

Holy fuck. There wasn’t one siren. My gaze drifted over the open room.

It was a den of sirens.

Every goddamn stripper in the room was a siren.

Gray never stood a chance.

No one did.

CHAPTER 19

I stuck to the bar. Gray was right. It had the best vantage point. I didn't like it considering I was staring out into a room full of upper-level demons, but it was the best I had. I nursed the fuck out of my drink, barely touching it more than letting the alcohol brush against my lips. Thanks to the Not-So-Human security guard, I had a standing VIP invitation that I did my best to avoid. I played it off as being particular—needing my time to warm up and get comfortable. While every single one of them fucking pouted playfully about it, they gave me the space I needed. Thank fuck.

The Cove had three floors. The first floor was the hunting ground and the floor I gave the least fucks about. Stripper sirens made their rounds, entertaining unsuspecting men with lap dances. I could feel the transference of energy from where I stood. They were small and inconspicuous as the sirens fed off the enthusiasm and lust.

I didn't give a fuck what happened on the first floor. Most of the men were safe. They'd go home tired and sleep it off.

The second floor was harder to get access to—probably hidden behind the guise of VIP cost. From what I could tell it was invite-only from one of the sirens walking the floor. Private rooms protected by pink curtains were hidden from view. Very few men went to the second floor. I counted two in the two hours I'd been there. All of

them fit the same criteria as previous victims. They were the ones that would come back.

How many men had been taken to those rooms? And what would happen to them after I figured out how to kill a den of sirens? Those were questions I didn't have the time to figure out.

The third floor was the one I wanted access to. There was a single door, locked and protected. I could almost guarantee that was where they took the men they were kidnapping—hopefully, to keep them alive. There was one way in and one way out. I had no fucking clue what I'd be walking into, but I needed a siren to walk my ass in there.

After that, I had no clue what the hell I would do. And I hated it. The unknown variables set me on edge.

“So, you're the Sergeant all the girls are excited about,” the bartender said, pulling me from my observations. Dark hair, golden brown eyes, and one hell of a dazzling smile greeted me when I faced her. I felt her energy brush against my skin. Fuck, even the goddamn bartender.

“Guilty as charged,” I replied with a grin.

“And yet you're here at my bar instead of with them. I'm a lucky girl.” She held out a hand. “I'm Journey.”

Something about a band...

The bartender had targeted Gray.

“Nice to meet you, Journey.” I shook her hand.

“You know, this is the part where you tell me your name.”

“You can call me Sarge,” I told her. Instead of letting go, I turned her hand slightly and ran my fingers over her knuckles. “It strokes my ego.”

“Oh, does it?” She laughed and leaned closer. That energy she gave off increased with the sound. I didn’t dare push back, but I sure as hell kept myself protected. Though, I wasn’t an idiot either. I had to make her believe it was working.

Fuck, I had to flirt with a goddamn demon.

The resemblance to Gray wasn’t lost on me—right down to her sunshine personality. It had to be a siren tactic to draw me in. The fact that she could read me enough to know that bothered me. But I could play into it.

“Are you the kind of guy who likes to be called Sir too?” Journey teased.

“Only good girls can call me Sir,” I replied quietly enough to make her inch closer. Her cheeks flushed slightly. Mission accomplished—though, I wasn’t too sure I should be proud of that. Still, I brought her knuckles to my lips. “Considering you’re a bartender and not a dancer, I’m going to guess I don’t get to pick you as my personal entertainment for the night, do I?”

“I do both. Maybe if you ask me nicely...”

“Not how this game works, sweetheart.” I clicked my tongue at her. “How long until you can leave your spot at the bar?”

“I can leave whenever,” she told me.

“Here’s what I want you to do for me,” I said and kissed the back of her hand, never

breaking eye contact. That energy surged off her once more, and I blocked it out. “You’re going to go change for me, sweetheart. Put on your favorite outfit. I don’t care what it is. But you’re going to do so quickly and then come back here. To me. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“That’s my girl. And then you and me, we’re going upstairs to a private room. I want you to dance for me, sweetheart, and only me. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Sir.” Her voice was barely a whisper as she answered me, utterly enamored. This game was ridiculous. I wanted to bleach my mouth as the words came out.

“Good girl.”

CHAPTER 20

How long was the appropriate amount of time to let a siren grind against my dick while thinking about my boyfriend before I could try the next step in my plan? Not soon enough. Jesus fuck.

I wanted to bleach this part of my memory. It would’ve been so much easier to just shoot my way through, but the risk of casualties was too high.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Journey whispered in my ear. No, I really didn’t want her calling me that. “You seem... tense. Distracted. Am I not enough?”

Play nice. Suck it up. Be a love-sick puppy.

“That’s not it at all,” I said. Grabbing her hips, I pulled her tighter against me. “Work has me tense.”

That was the understatement of the year.

“Oh, I bet.” She ran her fingers through my hair, nails scraping against my scalp. “Tell me what I can do to make you feel better, baby. Let me take care of you.”

The way she was inside my head enough to pick up on some of Gray’s nuances was alarming. It was as if she was cultivating an identity meant just for me. I didn’t like it. Still, I smiled. I had no idea how much she could glean from me, but I needed to keep

up the facade as completely as I could.

“How far are you willing to go?” I asked. Curling my fingers around the back of her neck, I pulled her close and kissed the spot under her ear. She sighed and leaned into me, smoothing her palm down my chest.

Fuck, I needed to just bleach... everything when I was done here. Why'd it have to be sexy strippers? Why couldn't it be angry construction workers with a vendetta? That would've been so much easier to deal with.

Seducing strippers to get access to secret rooms? No, thank you.

Punching people to get my way? Absolutely.

Fuck, I sounded like Gray. I was irritated as fuck, even as I tried to pretend I wasn't.

Journey said nothing as my lips skimmed down the line of her neck. I gripped her hips firmly to keep her snug against me before letting my hands wander.

“Are you feeling feisty tonight, Sarge?” she said with a small giggle. On any other occasion, I probably would've enjoyed this.

“Let me be real clear, sweetheart, about what I want.” Was I about to push my luck? Probably. But every minute stuck in here was a waste of time. I pulled back to make sure she could see my face in the dim room. I caught the faint glow in her eyes and knew it had nothing to do with the lighting. “You and I both can feel what you're doing to me every time you rub that sexy little body of yours over my cock.”

It most certainly wasn't her. I was working real damn hard to keep Gray naked at the forefront of my mind to keep this goddamn facade up. This whole hunt was a fucking disaster I wanted to scrub from my brain.

“All I want,” I said as I trailed my fingers up her arm, “is to sit back and watch a gorgeous woman ride my cock all night long.”

“You think that’ll happen?”

“In a place like this, I know what VIP means. So, what’s a guy have to do to get some alone time with your gorgeous self upstairs?”

“Oh, that’s more for the customers who come back,” Journey told me quickly.

“Come on, sweetheart,” I began as I pulled her a little closer. I didn’t need to get close—she could hear me just fine—but I did. My lips brushed against her ear as I said, “It’s my last night in town. Don’t make me spend it alone.”

Yeah, I was propositioning a demon. I needed fucking church after this.

CHAPTER 21

Standing by the rail, I watched the main floor despite being told to stay in my privacy booth. I tracked Journey’s movements in an attempt to figure out the hierarchy. Apparently, she needed permission to bring me upstairs. Unfortunately, I lost sight of her when she disappeared through the back door.

A million and one questions burned in my mind as I waited impatiently for her to return. Who was she asking for permission? How the fuck did an entire den of sirens coexist together? Everything we knew about sirens told us they were solitary hunters. Upper-level demons often were.

It did tell me one thing though: even demons evolved.

And fuck, I hated that.

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My skin vibrated with the sheer amount of energy in the room. I itched to do something with myself—desperately needed to. I was in over my head with this hunt.

It was too late to back out. Not with Gray missing too. And I didn't have the resources to call in more hunters. Fuck, I didn't know any hunters. My window to save them was closing, and I was terrified I wouldn't make it through.

But as I watched Journey reappear on the floor and hurry up the stairs, I put aside those thoughts. One thing at a time. I had to keep her convinced of my infatuation long enough to get her to take me up to the third floor.

"I thought I told you to stay inside." Journey poked me as she rejoined me.

"You can't blame me for being impatient." I gave her my best smile. I could be charming. When I wanted to be. "My favorite girl left me."

"I didn't leave you." She laughed and stepped closer. Bracing her hands on my chest, she stood on her tiptoes. Her lips brushed against mine. Play into it. I had to be convincing. When she tried to pull away, I dragged her mouth right back to mine and forced myself to think of Gray as I kissed her hard. "Now, look, Sarge, you are new."

"Well, it's not my fault no one ever told me about this place," I said. "Wish they would've. I could've spent more time with you."

Lay it on thick, keep up the facade.

"You're lucky that you're cute and I'm stubborn," she replied. Her lips brushed

against mine. “Come upstairs with me, baby. Let me take care of you tonight.”

Finally.

“Lead the way, sweetheart,” I whispered as I laced my fingers through hers. The extra sway in her hips wasn’t lost on me as she pulled me toward the stairs. I felt how her energy increased, rolling off my skin in waves. If I was anyone else, I would’ve been putty in her hands, unable to fight back.

Was that what she’d done to Gray?

There was no hesitation as the guard let us through. And when the door shut behind us, my back stiffened. The dark hall was just that: a dark hall lined with closed doors. Some doors had a tag while others didn’t. Odd.

“What’s with the tagged doors, sweetheart?” I asked, more curious of the excuse than expecting a real answer.

“Oh, don’t mind that,” she replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. “That’s for the renovation crew coming in next week. Can’t have them working on the wrong rooms.”

“Smart.”

“Come here.” Journey hooked a finger in my belt loop as she stopped. I braced on the door behind her as she pulled me against her. The nearness made her energy spike, and in the darkness, that faint glow of pink in her eyes was impossible to miss. Shit, how the hell did they explain that? They probably didn’t.

“Are you going to open the door?” I whispered, leaning in close enough to feel her breath as it fanned over my face.

“So impatient.” She laughed. “Don’t you worry, baby. I’ll make you feel real good.”

Reaching between us, her hand slid down the front of my body until she cupped my dick. I grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand away.

“I’m not one for games, sweetheart,” I told her softly. “Open the door like a good girl, and I’ll let you have my cock.”

Rather a knife to the chest.

She did what I asked and let us into the room, turning while she did. As she sauntered through the door, I silently withdrew my knife from the horizontal sheath at the small of my back. It wasn’t a big blade, but it’d get the job done.

The door had barely shut before I had a fistful of her hair to drag her back to me. My hand clamped over her mouth while I pressed the tip of my blade to her neck.

The great thing about sirens: energy was their only weapon. With her petite frame, subduing her was easy. The frantic clawing at my arms was a nuisance at most. A pink glow washed over her entire skin as she tried to influence me. I clamped down hard on my defenses, feeling it crash over me uncomfortably.

“You never should’ve touched him,” I growled. The rapid words she spewed were muffled by my hand, but I didn’t bother letting her finish. I drove the blade of my knife up through her jaw at an angle until it was buried to the hilt. Blood poured down my hand as she bucked against me.

Her body sparked, skin pulsing with light almost in sync with the failing beat of her heart. When she died, I felt it. That snap of energy broke with her death. All around the club, more energy flared back.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

That was how they worked together with such a large space. The sirens had connected their energy to maximize their impact.

Which meant they knew I was here.

CHAPTER 22

The tags were dated and named—probably pulled from stolen driver’s licenses. It made finding Gray easy, which I fucking needed considering every goddamn siren knew I’d killed one of their own. I had minutes at best.

As soon as I found him, I let myself inside. The simple room had a bed in it, which Gray was passed out on. He looked oddly peaceful despite the IV stuck in his arm—no doubt to keep him sedated. The faint pink glow to his skin was unnerving, but every expansion of his chest was a fucking relief.

“I’ve got you,” I whispered, not even sure he could hear me. I was as gentle as I could be when I took out the needle. How long would he be out? Hopefully not too long.

But I couldn’t stay. No matter how badly I wanted to. I didn’t need Gray unconscious in a corner when I got into it with whatever sirens showed up. Leaning down, I brushed my lips against his in a brief kiss and rested my forehead on his.

“I love you,” I said and willed him to hear the words wherever the hell he was in his dreams. I shut the door as I left and made sure the tag looked undisturbed. Didn’t need the sirens checking on him because of me.

I found Mal next. Somehow, my little brother managed to look derpy as fuck in his Star Wars shirt and flannel with drool on his beard. But he seemed good all things considered. I hadn’t seen him in over a decade, and he hadn’t changed. Kid probably never would.

Moving quickly, I unhooked his IV and left his room undisturbed. I found Jake in the same way and made fast work of unhooking him. I wasn't the praying type, but fuck, I prayed with everything I had that the three of them woke up sooner rather than later. I couldn't take out a den of sirens alone.

As I left Jake undisturbed, the energy in the air changed. It thickened and pushed against my skin. My breath stuttered in my chest, and my grip tightened on my knife. That was definitely not just one siren.

Dark hallway in one direction.

Sirens coming through the door at the other end.

It was a fucked up situation no matter what. At least I could funnel them and take out as many as possible. Could sirens fight? Or was I just about to start stabbing strippers?

God, this whole thing was fucked up.

The pink glow of their skin filled the hall in a pink glow. These ones... they were different. More monster and less human with razor teeth and ashy skin. Were those gills under their jaws? I couldn't quite tell.

A shrill cry echoed around me. The energy that pulsed against my skin tripled in intensity, making my stomach roll. Even my well-practiced defenses had their limits.

The first siren rushed me and proved real fast that they knew how to fight.

Block.

Twist.

Hit.

Another hit.

When the opening came, I buried my knife to the hilt in the first siren's heart. The screech it let out was all-consuming. It vibrated against my bones.

It didn't stop anything. Another one replaced the other as its body crumpled to the ground.

It rushed me, I lashed out.

Block, hit, stab, repeat.

My heart pounded in my chest as a second body dropped to the floor with a violent scream. That sound. Fuck, it was grating. I felt how my defenses fractured—could feel the energy getting to me.

Fear.

Stress.

They seeped into my veins, sending adrenaline coursing through me.

I fought harder but sloppier.

One more fight, one more kill.

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Block, hit, stab, repeat.

Progress was null and void. Every piercing scream with every death was a little slice of torture. It wrecked me more and more.

Each fight grew harder.

A hit to the stomach.

The face.

The ribs.

The blows left bruises I knew I'd feel for days if I survived. My muscles screamed for relief, and my heart damn near galloped in my chest.

Block, hit, stab—

Something thin and cold closed tight around my neck. My breath caught in my throat. I lost my knife while I tried to grapple the thin wire. The harder I struggled, the more it tightened.

A sharp blow to the back of my knee knocked me down.

I couldn't get my footing.

One strong tug yanked me back.

My vision pulsed with dark shadows.

My chest burned.

Desperation settled in.

I wasn't getting out.

CHAPTER 23

Nah, what the hell you doin'?" I laughed and nudged Ryder out of the way with my hip. "Always fuckin' up the steaks."

"Not everyone wants to eat raw meat," he scoffed.

"It ain't raw—"

"It's still bleeding!"

"Did you know that ain't blood? It's a thing called myoglobin or some shit," I told him, proud as fuck that I knew that shit. His brows came together as he frowned, making me laugh. "What? I know things about things. Sometimes."

"You looked that shit up on the internet, didn't you?" he asked.

"Where else do you look shit up?" I teased and kissed him briefly. "That, and I found this kid out in... fuckin' Washington or somethin'... I don't know where. He makes all these cookin' videos. Educational shit but he makes it fun. Kid has an OnlyFans too. Cooks with his dick out."

"You did not subscribe."

“Nah.” I laughed. “I get the best dick for free.”

Glancing at him, I caught the slight blush creeping on his cheeks. The man was so damn awkwardly cute about being complimented. I fucking loved that about him. He crossed his arms, standing a little taller with his discomfort.

“Just make sure to cook my steak,” Ryder muttered.

“I got you, baby,” I promised. “Even if you are a heathen who likes—”

The house shook violently, the windows rattling hard enough to shatter. I stumbled and grabbed onto the counter for support. Across the kitchen, Ryder did the same.

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“When the fuck did we start gettin’ goddamn earthquakes?” I demanded as it stopped.

“I don’t know.”

A loud buzz echoed through the house, and every light went out.

“Ah, fuck, there goes my steak.” I sighed.

“That’s what you’re worried about?” I could hear him but couldn’t see him.

“It’s just the fuckin’ power,” I said. “Ain’t the end of the world, baby.”

Silence.

“Ryder?”

Still nothing. My heart rate kicked up. Had he been hurt and didn’t say a fucking thing?

“Ryder?” I called out louder but still nothing. I took several steps, muscle memory guiding me across the room. When I reached for the fridge, it wasn’t there.

What the fuck?

“Ryder!” I damn near shouted and tried to use the counter as a guide. Again, it wasn’t there. “Ryder!”

Panic ebbed its way into my chest.

The fridge was gone.

The counter was gone.

Ryder was gone.

CHAPTER 24

My fingers tingled. The ropes tying me to the fucking chair were too tight— who the hell kept ropes just lying around? Especially in a fucking strip club.

It was a stupid thing to think about, considering my predicament, but it was all my hazy brain could focus on as I regained consciousness.

That and the fact that I was surrounded by sirens.

I blinked slowly, doing my best to clear the fog. The energy in the air was suffocating—thick and pressing against every inch of my skin. Dipping into the barest amount of my power, I touched it. I let my power drift along the connection, flitting around the room and under the door.

I frowned, feeling how my power zigzagged through the club—pinging off every siren spread throughout The Cove.

They were connected—intricately tied together.

No... their energies were identical.

Which meant if I could kill the leader, I could kill them all.

I reined back in the rampant pulses of my power before the pull was too great. It weaved through every inch of the club as I tracked its movements—desperate to know where the leader was.

“Wake up,” someone snarled. Something kicked my shin hard, and I groaned. Opening my eyes, I blinked lazily to give myself time to think.

“About time,” another woman snapped.

“Enough!” The voice that echoed through the room was rough and final. I stared at the woman. She was oddly beautiful with raven black hair and midnight eyes that stood out against her pale skin. The lack of emotion in her expression was unnerving. She grinned, revealing two rows of sharpened fangs. “Hello, hunter.”

I didn’t reply. There was no point. Instead, I studied them with the tiniest of dips into my power—enough to not give me away. The room was a clusterfuck of metaphorical strings. All the energy coiled around each siren in the room, wrapping around their necks like proverbial chains. Each and every one led back to the woman who had greeted me.

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Studying her, I did my best to figure out what she was. Unlike the sirens, there were real emotions buried under her skin. No matter how well she hid them, I could feel them.

And yet... still not quite human.

“You.” I gave her my entire attention. She mattered. The others didn’t. “You’re not a siren.”

“My father was a siren, and my mother was a witch,” she explained. The child of a demon and a witch? There was no way. Demons crawled their asses out of Hell. Her head tilted to the side as she watched my reaction closely. “Most people have that reaction. Born demons aren’t as uncommon as you hunters want to think. We blend in, and you never find us.”

“That’s how you have so many sirens in one place,” I said. The magical chains holding them together. “You’re controlling them with magic.”

“Smart little cookie, aren’t you?” she replied. “Too bad you’ll be too dead to do anything with that information.”

Except by tying all of them to her, she’d made it real fucking easy for me to kill all of them.

“You know the thing people forget about emotion,” I whispered, “is how intricately it’s tied to energy. You have no idea how fucking easy it is to manipulate one if you can manipulate the other.”

I dipped into my power, opening myself to the energy the siren-witch gave off. She was a straight shot to every siren in the entire club. There was no easy way to do it. My power expanded rapidly, doubling in intensity.

Tripling.

It spilled out of me in waves—powerful and violent as it latched onto her. She gasped while I poured my power into her. I connected with every drop of energy inside her and ripped it clean from her body.

Draining her.

Killing her at an agonizing rate.

But it cost me. The surge in my power became too much. It left me open to every fucking person inside the club. The pain. The anguish. The sadness. The anger.

I felt every single fucking thing as if it was my own. It slammed into me all at once, making me shudder.

My control wavered, frayed, and sawed apart as it was amplified by everyone inside the club.

I scrambled to rein it in, but I couldn't.

Overwhelmed and so fucking tired.

My eyes rolled back as my body seized.

I could do this...

I could do...

I couldn't...

CHAPTER 25

I lurched to the side as my stomach heaved, scrambling to gain my bearings. There wasn't a damn thing in me to throw up but fuck, my body sure as hell tried. I coughed and wheezed, hating every inch of me in that goddamn moment. Everything was sluggish and achy. I felt off-center.

A hand touched my back, and I flew to my feet. One fast dip of my power had the air in the room collecting around me. Rapid swirls of air weaved between my fingers as I readied myself to attack.

"Hold up!" a man shouted. Blond-haired and disheveled with wide eyes, he waved frantically. "We won't hurt you!"

The man next to him frowned.

"Gray?" Fuck, it was like looking at a carbon copy of Ryder—except less sexy. That nerd shirt thing didn't do a thing for me, but it wasn't hard to recognize Mal Hartford.

"Guilty as fuckin' charged," I muttered. "Nice to meet you. Fuck, you look like your brother."

"I don't see it," Mal retorted.

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“Jake,” the first guy interjected. “We need to get out of here.”

Understatement of the fucking century. I glanced around the room. Bed. IV. No windows. Dark walls. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

How long had I been here?

Was Ryder looking for me?

Fuck, he was probably losing his goddamn mind.

“Where’s Ryder?” I demanded, storming right past them for the door.

“I don’t know—”

Anything else he said was fucking lost when I pulled open the door and the wave of wailing shrieks hit us. I cringed, doubling over with the blinding intensity. Behind me, Jake and Mal were in the same position.

“We need to get the fuck out of here,” I told them through grit teeth. The fucking pain. It cut through my very core and threatened to take me out where I stood.

Shit. Whatever this was... it wasn’t good.

Steeling myself, I stepped into the hallway. An unimaginable power brushed against my skin, making me nauseous. I’d never felt anything like this. The narrow hallway was void of light, and I could barely see my own damn feet. The door at the end of

the hall pulsed with power. I knew well enough to leave it the fuck alone. We had enough shit to deal with. Didn't need to open that can of fucking worms.

Opening the door down to the club was horrifying. The screaming only increased. Black smoke rose and fell everywhere, twisting and turning as it latched onto sirens throughout the club. I'd never seen anything like it, and I sure as hell didn't want to know what was causing it.

The mass confusion on the main floor could only be described as chaos. Humans with no understanding of demons lost their shit as they tried to figure out what was happening. The only good fucking thing was the black smoke seemed to avoid them—at least, I thought so. It was a little hard to figure out what was what.

“We need to get them the fuck out of here,” I said, but Jake was on it before me. He hurried down the first flight of stairs and went straight for the fire alarm. Not a bad idea.

The initial blare of the alarm only added to the mess, but humans were easily organized. While they hurried out of the building, the sirens didn't move.

Or couldn't...

My head cocked to the side as I rushed down the stairs with them. The sirens seemed frozen in their space—glowing eyes wide in panic, skin taut and ashy. It was a fucking sight.

“What do we do?” Jake asked in awe.

“Get the fuck out now,” Mal snapped. The guy wasn't fucking around. He grabbed Jake's arm as he ushered both of us out an available side door.

The blast of cool wind was a godsend. It bled across my skin, easing the ache and suffocation from the air in the club. Hands on my knees, I gulped down deep breaths while my head spun a little with the rush of relief.

“Fuck me,” Mal muttered, sagging against the brick wall. “I’m so goddamn tired.”

A-fucking-men. I felt like I could sleep for a week.

“We have to do something about this,” Jake replied. He took long steps back as his neck craned to better study the building. “We have to—”

“Oh!” Tessa exclaimed, her loud gasp cutting him off. The distressed woman caught sight of us from her spot near the front of the building. She barreled straight into Jake’s arms, damn near taking the man out. As he hugged her back, I glanced around. The parking lot was a mess of cars stuck, people yelling, and no one having a fucking clue about what was happening.

But nowhere in the middle of it all did I see Ryder.

“Where’s Ryder?” I demanded breathlessly.

“He was inside,” Tessa said carefully. I didn’t need their damn power to know their fear—I saw it on her and Mal’s faces.

This was Ryder’s power.

I faced the building, watching the darkness gather. It spilled through the open doors and crept along the parking lot.

This was Ryder losing control.

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“You can’t go back for him.” Mal grabbed my arm as if reading my mind. “You’ll kill yourself going in.”

“Dad’s spell will already be working to pull him back to the greenhouse,” she whispered. “We got him out once...”

I wasn’t banking shit on trying to free him again.

“Yeah, well, I don’t do real damn well with people tellin’ me what to do,” I said and yanked free my arm. Before any of them could stop me, I ran straight back into the building.

CHAPTER 26

Of all the stupid things I’ve ever done, running right into the heart of a strip club full of sirens was up there on that fucking list. But I didn’t care. Ryder was inside fighting a losing battle. There was no way in hell I’d leave him to fight alone.

There was no way I’d let him go back to the greenhouse or whatever other hell Daddy Hartford had planned for him.

And there was no way in hell I’d leave Ryder behind. Ever.

The pain hit first, damn near bringing me to my knees. It bled from the fucking walls. Every breath stung like a million razors in my lungs. My skin burned underneath my clothes. I wanted nothing more than to fall where I stood and claw my fucking skin off.

I couldn't.

I wouldn't.

It was in my head.

All of it was in my head.

I had to keep telling myself that. I refused to be brought down by Ryder's power. It was all in my head. I wasn't in danger. I wasn't dying like it felt.

Taking steps two at a time, I fumbled as I rushed up the stairs. Every fucking step hurt and my breath stuck in my lungs by the time I hit the top landing. Digging into my power, I sent a gust of air through the room with hopes it'd help.

It didn't.

Down that stupid hallway all over again, ignoring the few men who had stumbled out of rooms and onto the floor.

That door at the end of the hall damn near vibrated with power. Tendrils of black smoke curled out from every crack in the frame. I kicked and shoved on the fucking door with no luck. It didn't even budge.

"Please, don't be on the other side of the fuckin' door," I muttered. The last thing I needed was to hit Ryder with the fucking door.

Still, I used my power to send it careening across the room.

The blast of power that burst from the room was more intense than anything I'd ever experienced. It stole the fucking breath from me.

In the middle of the room—and narrowly missed by the fucking door—was Ryder tied to a chair. Decrepit bodies crumpled on the ground around the chair. Dead sirens. Everywhere.

Ryder's head tipped forward against his chest, eyes shut and body limp. His powers billowed out of him, spilling onto the floor in rapid waves. Jesus fuck. His skin glowed white with some kind of fucking magic. Maybe that was the spell from Daddy fucking Hartford.

Whatever the hell I was going to do, I had to do it fast. Rushing across the room, I dropped to my knees in front of him. I cradled his face in my hands and gave him a slight shake.

“Come on, baby,” I said. “Open your fuckin’ eyes, please.”

Nothing.

“Ryder.” My hand drifted down the side of his neck to feel for his pulse—a morbid fucking thing I didn’t want to do. I wasn’t sure what the hell I would do if I couldn’t find one. Fast and fluttering but there. “Oh, thank fuck.”

I tried shaking him once more. Nothing changed.

“Don’t you leave me,” I whispered, my voice cracking. “Come on, baby. Don’t you fuckin’ leave me.”

I smacked his chest, hoping it’d help. Nothing. The glow of his skin continued to increase. My hands ached from the heat he radiated, but I wouldn’t stop.

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I couldn't.

If I did, I'd lose him.

"Damn it!" I exclaimed. "You don't get to leave me, you hear? It's you and me, Ryder. Just you and me... it's supposed to be you and me. Please, don't fuckin' leave me. I need you..."

I pressed my forehead to his and desperately willed him to hear me.

CHAPTER 27

The pain...

The fucking pain...

It seared through every inch of my body inside and out. I was bleeding. Raw. Broken.

I wanted to scream. Cry. Beg.

Something to get it all to stop.

I had no control over my power. No hope of making it go away.

Curling over myself, I clung to the ground, wringing my fingers in the grass. Grass? Gasping hard, I forced my eyes open. Blades of grass cut between my fingers.

Cut through where my fingers should've been.

No... no, no, no.

I glanced around me. Long grass, overgrown trees, scuffed-up glass. That inevitable nothing settled in my chest as I sank back on my heels.

Fuck. The greenhouse.

My head tipped back, and I sighed. I stared up at the domed ceiling, catching glimpses of sunlight.

I could feel the spell working its magic. It pulled more and more of me into the greenhouse. It was only a matter of time before I was stuck there for good.

The pain subsided with every passing moment, replaced by nothingness.

Fuck, I didn't want to be here. I'd known the risks.

"Come back to me..."

I turned as Gray's voice filled the greenhouse.

"You don't get to leave me, you hear..."

I didn't want to leave him.

"It's you and me, Ryder..."

I closed my eyes with another hopeless sigh.

”Just you and me... it’s supposed to be you and me...”

Warmth spread through my chest, comforting.

“Please, don’t fuckin’ leave me. I need you...”

I needed him too.

CHAPTER 28

Please, don't fuckin' leave me." Gray's desperate pleading cut through the silence in the room. His forehead pressed against mine, and the heat of his breath fanned across my skin. Fingers curled into my hair as he held me close. "I need you..."

I need you too.

"Untie me?" I rasped, my throat raw and burning. Fuck, that wire around my neck had done a number on my vocal cords. I could barely get the words out.

"Oh, Jesus fuck." He let out a sigh of relief as his lips crashed into mine. "You're okay... you're okay..."

I wasn't okay.

"I thought I fuckin' lost you," Gray continued. Me too.

"How?" I managed to ask. God, it hurt to fucking talk. Those honey-chocolate eyes searched mine. I'd never been so grateful to see his face in my life.

"Don't talk," he ordered. He removed the knife from my boot. "I got you, baby. I got you. We need to get you the hell out of here."

As he rushed through cutting me out of the ropes, my gaze drifted over the room while I tried to get my bearings. Black walls, wooden floors, no windows, bodies crumpled on the floor.

Sirens, not humans.

And not a single sign of my power. I felt it nestled deep inside me, slumbering and quiet. Thank fuck. I was numb head-to-toe and shaking as the ropes fell away. I couldn't feel a damn thing—not even Gray.

It'd come back. That much I knew.

“Come on,” Gray whispered. His hands hovered close as I stood and wavered. When he tried to wrap an arm around me, I stepped back. I didn't want help. I just wanted out of there. Taking the cue, he led the way. “Keep fuckin' goin', baby. You got this.”

I didn't fucking have anything. My legs were jelly, and my whole body shook violently. I had pains in places I couldn't remember being hit.

And under it all, the numbness of my power began to fade. I did my best to rebuild my walls, but fuck, I was too tired. Fear. Anger. Confusion. Apprehension. The list went on and on, each one slamming into me the closer we got to the side exit. I wanted to crawl into a fucking hole and stay there.

Every body we passed was a siren. No humans. Thank fuck there were no humans. I hadn't killed anyone.

I hoped I hadn't killed anyone.

The screeching of emergency vehicles greeted us when Gray shoved open the door. The twinge of panic I felt came from him. If cops were on their way and we had to talk to them, there was a good chance my father would figure out where I was. There was no way he didn't know about my short and questionable appearance in the greenhouse.

How the fuck had Gray pulled me back?

“Ryder!” Tessa exclaimed as we rounded the building outside. I groaned when she flung her arms around me. Mal and Jake were right behind her. I gave my brother a tight smile, unable to give anything more.

The parking lot was packed with civilians standing around—confused and out of sorts. I caught tidbits of conversations from where we stood. Black smoke. Dead strippers. Prisoners. It was a fucking mess.

I’d made a fucking mess.

“You two need to get out of here,” she said, her tone distressed. “You can’t get caught, Ryder.”

“I know,” I tried to say but couldn’t get the words out of my aching throat. “I—”

“Go, go, go!” Mal interrupted. Before I could move, my little brother grabbed me and pulled me in for a tight hug. “Boise. There’s a diner. I’ll text you. Now, get the fuck out of here!”

“Come on.” Gray took my hand and gave it a small tug. I followed him, getting the hell out of there because what else was I supposed to do?

CHAPTER 29

The drive to Boise was supposed to be a nine-hour drive. I did it in a fuming eight. We made no stops, and Ryder slept the entire way, passed out like no other in the front seat. It was for the fucking best because I was rearing to fight. I was so fucking mad. At him.

If he woke the fuck up before we got to Boise, I was pulling over to the side of the road and having it out with him. The fucking moron tried to sacrifice himself and for what? To kill a few fucking sirens? There was no way we could've gotten him the medical help he needed if he'd been trapped in that goddamn greenhouse. He would've died.

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Just the fucking thought of that was devastating. And he was ready for it. I thought we were fucking past this shit. Nine years together and I thought we were past this fucking shit.

Apparently, we weren't.

I left him in the car as I checked us into the first fucking motel I found on the outskirts of Boise. It was shady as fuck and questionably run, but I didn't care. I just needed somewhere to stash Ryder while I walked off the anger.

Which was exactly what I planned to do.

"Take a fuckin' shower and go to bed," I ordered while I tossed our bags on the crappy floor, not caring where they landed. "I'll be back."

"Where are you—"

"Save your fuckin' voice," I snapped, cutting him off. That goddamn rasp in his voice scraped against my heart every time he spoke. His neck was colored in violent shades of red and purple. It sounded somewhat better if I was being honest, but I still hated it. "Get in the damn shower and go to bed. I'll be back."

His hands fell to his hips as he considered me. I knew he was being careful with his response. I wasn't fucking stupid. I knew he could feel just how pissed off I was. Ryder and I didn't have real fights—not really. The handful we'd had over the years always ended in one of us leaving for a while.

This time I wasn't fucking leaving, and there was no way in hell I'd let him leave. I just needed to cool my fucking head for a while.

"When?" Ryder asked quietly.

"A few hours maybe," I said and stormed out before I changed my fucking mind. The part of me that wanted to fight... it wanted to go to war. Just to reiterate my point, I waved wildly to the bathroom. "Get your ass in there and fuckin' shower. You look like shit, and you need some fuckin' sleep."

"Okay," he whispered. Whether or not he'd do any of those things, I didn't know. I just stormed out of the motel without a fucking word.

I walked.

And walked.

And walked some fucking more.

The light breeze on my face was a godsend. With every pass over my skin, my bad mood slipped away. Worry and fear replaced it as the realization of how fucking close I'd gotten to losing Ryder.

What the hell did my life look like without him in it? My stomach rolled as that thought and a million different scenarios tumbled through my head. I didn't want to even fucking think about that.

Maybe that notion was why I ended up in some dinky pawn shop staring at wedding rings. Why the fuck was I looking at rings? I didn't have a clue. Not really. I wasn't sure marriage and the whole real domestic shit would be an option in our future but that dream? Fuck, the idea of it was nice.

“Looking for anything in particular?” The pawn shop owner barely gave me the time of day as I leaned against the glass case. Not that I blamed him, considering the number of cameras he had hooked up in the place.

“Rings,” I told him. Obviously. I glanced down at my left hand, running my thumb over my finger. What size was Ryder anyway? We sort of had the same size hands. His was bigger by maybe a little. “I ain’t got a clue what size though.”

The owner made a sound and didn’t move.

“You serious about buying?” he demanded. Yeah, the guy didn’t want to waste his time with some no one who didn’t want to buy. I couldn’t fault him for that one.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Yeah, I am.”

The fucking guy sighed like I was the biggest inconvenience to him. Maybe I was. Again, I didn’t care.

“Let’s see what we can find you.” He flipped through his keys until he found the right one to open the case and began laying out rings in front of me. “Try these on. Once you know a size, we’ll figure out a ring.”

I did as he asked—was this how this shit worked? How did people figure out fucking ring sizes without taking the person in? Six rings later I had a maybe size—a probably too fucking big size but whatever. It’d have to do.

The owner laid out every fucking ring he had in that size. There were so many damn rings to pick from. The stupid shit people inscribed on their rings was a damn good sorting method. Dumb as fuck shit.

One ring literally fucking read, Never To Fart. Why? Who thought that was a good

idea to put on a wedding ring?

I kept plucking up rings, reading, and giving them back because no fucking way would I ever give Ryder some of the stupid things written on them—even if they'd make him laugh.

I picked up a scuffed-up silver ring. It wasn't anything special with its wear and tear. I turned it between my fingers while I squinted at the worn-down inscription.

Forever My Always.

That was something I could see myself giving Ryder.

“Yeah, that’s perfect.” I smiled slightly. “I’ll take it.”

CHAPTER 30

I tried to sleep. I really fucking did. Maybe I dozed in and out of it over the hours that I lay there in bed. Every part of me hurt and damn near begged for sleep, but my mind was a fucking hamster stuck on a wheel.

Gray and I may have had our disagreements, but when he stormed out, it meant he was trying to avoid a fight. Yet we never avoided fights. One way or another they always happened. And one of us always left after a blowout—days, weeks, or however long it took for us to get our shit situated. But I didn’t want him to leave. Not this time.

Hours passed and a part of me began to wonder if he bailed before we ever got to the fighting part. I couldn’t blame him if he did. I’d pulled one hell of a fucking stunt this time—one that could’ve had fatal consequences. I would’ve been equally pissed if the roles were reversed.

Somewhere around midnight, the motel door opened. I peeked out from under my arm. He was carefully composed on the surface, but I could feel the conflict of emotion underneath. That was my fault.

“You’re supposed to be sleepin’,” Gray said gruffly when I sat up.

“We need to talk—”

“You need to stop talkin’ and fuckin’ rest,” he interrupted. “You sound like shit.”

He wasn’t wrong. My throat was raw and hoarse after being choked out.

“I don’t care. You’re angry,” I told him. He made a frustrated sound but didn’t dismiss me. I took that as a sign to keep going. Since he wouldn’t move from his spot by the door, I stood. If he left, I planned to go after him. “You have every right to be angry—”

“You’re damn right I have every fuckin’ right to be,” he snapped over me. His anger flared. Every instinct in me wanted to run, but I swallowed it. “What the fuck were you thinkin’?”

“I—”

“Were you even fuckin’ thinking?” he demanded, continuing as if I hadn’t said a word. “Because I sure as fuck don’t think you were. There was no fuckin’ way you could do what you did and not trip that goddamn spell. I know that, you know that, and I know you know I fuckin’ know that!”

“I couldn’t sit around and do nothing,” I told him. Fuck, it was hard trying to be the calm one. Especially with his anger bleeding everywhere. “They had you. What the hell was I supposed to do? Let them kill you?”

“Yes!” Gray exclaimed. “No! I don’t fuckin’ know! Call in the fuckin’ cavalry. Call the fuckin’ kid from Chicago for help. Somethin’! Anythin’! Anythin’ that don’t mean you end up fuckin’ dead!”

“There wasn’t time!” I replied, my voice rising a notch and cracking as it did. “And I didn’t know! I didn’t know it was a whole fucking group of them led by a fucking sire-witch hybrid thing!”

“A fuckin’ what?”

“That’s not the fucking point. The point is I didn’t know until I was already inside trying to find you,” I said. “And then I didn’t have a fucking choice.”

“You walk the fuck out!” he practically shouted. “I don’t want you dyin’ for me! Or ever! You ain’t allowed to fuckin’ leave me!”

I deflated. I didn’t know how to keep fighting him on this.

“I’m sorry.” Sighing, I scrubbed a hand over my face. “But what the hell was I supposed to do, Gray? You don’t want me to die, but I sure as fuck don’t want you to either. This is what we do! Dying is the fucking risk we take! I can’t change that. So, what are we supposed to do?”

“You don’t take the risk!”

“We take the risk! That’s our job—”

“No, you don’t take the risk,” Gray corrected.

“I don’t?” I balked. “What the fuck does that mean? Just because you’re the fucking powerhouse doesn’t mean I’m fucking useless! I’m not going to stand by and let shit happen because there are risks involved.”

“Sometimes you have to,” he replied.

“No, I don’t,” I said. “I don’t know how. And if that’s what you want, I can’t give you that. If it is, maybe this... maybe this has run its course. Maybe I need to leave.”

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Fuck, I hated the words as I said them. From the look on his face, he did too. His mouth opened but promptly shut, anger fusing with a multitude of emotions.

He crossed the room in quick strides and dragged my mouth to his in a desperate kiss that left me breathless. His fingers anchored in my hair, and I grabbed him around the waist to hold him close.

“You don’t get to fuckin’ leave me, baby,” Gray murmured against my lips. “Not unless you really fuckin’ want to, and even then I’m chasin’ after you.”

His determination solidified in every cell of my being. The man meant it. I kissed him again because I didn’t know what the hell else to say. My body fucking hurt and I was exhausted, but I let myself get lost in him.

“I don’t want to lose you.”

“I know.”

“I don’t like you takin’ risks,” he continued, diffusing with every kiss. “We ain’t ever goin’ to agree on that, baby.”

“I know.” My temper waned with his despite knowing this was one fucking fight neither of us would ever win. We were too stubborn for that shit.

I kissed him harder, my tongue sliding against his. Desire and love slipped right past the anger and frustration. My head clouded with the intensity of his emotions. I grabbed the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head, groaning as my muscles

protested.

“Easy, baby,” he crooned. His lips drifted down my neck, hitting every spot guaranteed to make my dick stand at attention. “Let me take care of you.”

“You don’t—”

“I know I don’t got to do a damn thing,” Gray interrupted. His fingers teased the waistline of my jeans as he nudged me back toward the bed. “All I’m askin’ is for you to sit back and relax.”

It was hard to say no to a request like that.

“Fuck.” I drew in a sharp breath as his hand massaged my thickening cock through my pants. My head tipped back as he ran his tongue up the line of my neck.

“Hands up, baby,” he ordered. That curve in his smirk was devious as he stared at me. Damn man was toying with me over giving me instructions. On any other day, I would’ve pushed back and drawn it out, but I didn’t have it in me. When I did as he asked, he said, “Good boy.”

Jesus fuck, that was a big fucking no.

“No.” I shook my head the minute it was off. “That doesn’t work for me.”

“Well, that’s a damn shame,” he teased. His fingers curled around the back of my neck as his lips gently brushed against the bruising across my throat. The softness of his kiss sparked against my skin, making me shudder. “I got you.”

I gave in and let him take the lead. His boots, my pants, everything else he wore. All of it ended up on the motel floor as we climbed into bed—my head on a pillow,

Gray's body covering mine.

"Tell me where it hurts, baby," he said against my collarbone. Where didn't it fucking hurt? That was the better question. Hell, even my ego and my confidence were busted up after taking that beating.

"Lower," I muttered.

His mouth skated down my sternum. I moaned as his fingers lightly brushed over the bruises on my ribs.

"Lower..."

His lips drifted over the bruises, following the path his fingers paved.

"Keep going," I said softly. My eyes shut as his tongue trailed over my abs, setting my already sensitive nerves on fire. When his fist wrapped around my cock, I tensed. "Fuck."

Yeah, I was hurting, but I was a glutton for the pain when my dick got involved.

"Lower," I let out. I flexed while his tongue followed the dip in my hip bone. So damn close but not quite.

"If you want me to suck your dick, you just got to say somethin', baby." Gray chuckled, his hand running over my length in a single pump. Fucking torture.

"I'd prefer you to ride my dick."

"I ain't goin' to break you."

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“If a den of sirens couldn’t, you sure as hell can’t,” I retorted. I instantly regretted it at the glare he gave me. “Too soon?”

“Yeah,” he snapped. “Too fuckin’ soon.”

“So, no chance of getting you on my dick?” I asked. He shook his head. “Then turn around and bring your dick up here.”

“Needy, are you?”

“I wasn’t asking, Gray,” I retorted. Despite the rasp in my voice, the tone was still enough to make him pause on his way to my cock. One eyebrow arched with curiosity. “Turn around like a good boy and let me suck your dick, honey.”

“You know, you look like you went at it with a fishin’ wire, right?” he replied. Damn it. We didn’t need to focus on that shit. “Shovin’ my dick down your throat ain’t goin’ to help that.”

“You teasing the fuck out of me isn’t helping anything either,” I grumped. “I can take it.”

And more if I really wanted.

“I know you can, but I ain’t givin’ it to you.” He laughed as I let out a sigh of frustration. As if to ease the tension, he ran the flat of his tongue along the length of my dick and around the crown. “I said I was takin’ care of you.”

“That’s just mean.” Did I sound a little childish complaining? Maybe. But I wanted to make it up to him and sucking his dick seemed to be a good place to start.

“Stop fuckin’ talkin’, baby,” Gray ordered. “I’m not givin’ you my dick.”

Before I could argue more, he turned his attention completely to my cock. The tip of his tongue ran over my slit, lapping up the pre-cum beading there. I moaned and threaded my fingers through his hair.

He was slow and meticulous as he took just the head of my dick in his mouth. His tongue swirled around my crown, and he sucked hard enough to make me gasp. The sound caught in my chest.

I spiraled with the simple way he worked my body—nerves misfiring and pain mixing with pleasure. I felt everything everywhere all at once. His mouth moved up and down my aching dick with expertise. Every time I hit the back of his throat, he pushed further, swallowed, and damn near wrecked me.

There was no way in hell I’d last like this.

His hand stroked my length in tandem with his mouth. My heart hammered in my ears while I drew in ragged breaths, each one making my lungs burn.

“Fuck. Don’t stop.” Not that he would. Every lick, every suck, every push back into his throat carried me higher until I was clinging to him for dear life.

“Let go for me, baby,” he said, pulling off long enough to make sure I heard him. It wasn’t like I had a choice anyway—I was too far gone. His head bobbed faster as I kept a death grip on his hair.

I came hard enough to feel it in every inch of my body, moaning as he swallowed

every drop. He licked and sucked until I had nothing left to give.

“Easy, baby,” Gray whispered, hand squeezing my thigh. I focused on my breathing as I melted into the crappy mattress. He kissed his way up my body, paying extra attention to the bruises all over again.

He whispered something against my shoulder as he settled next to me, but the post-orgasm euphoria was exactly what I needed to push my exhaustion over the edge. Between battling sirens and fighting with Gray, I was spent. I had nothing left to give as I passed out.

CHAPTER 31

Four days of damn near solid sleep did a hunter good. I barely crawled my ass out of bed, the exhaustion and healing tanking my ability to do anything. But for the most part, I was healed. Everything left was mostly cosmetic—bruises looking weeks old and fading fast.

Gray kept in contact with my family. He knew the gritty details about the aftermath with my father, but I didn’t want to know. He and Mal went back and forth about whether Boise was safe for us to stay and meet up. I kept out of the conversation. I trusted Gray to make the best decision while I took care of myself.

Which was how we ended up in a fifties-themed diner after four days to meet my family for lunch.

We were having a fucking family lunch.

That sentence was surreal to me. And nauseating. And fucking stressful.

Fuck, I was a wreck.

“Nervous, baby?” Gray asked, grinning as he watched the cheap silverware bounce around the table. My leg bounced with endless anxious energy no matter how hard I tried to stop it. He reached across the table and took my hand. His thumb traced the ridges of my knuckles—simple and soothing.

“Ask me the last time we did a family... anything,” I said under my breath.

The day Zeke died. That was when.

“It ain’t goin’ to be like that,” he replied. “You got me. And fuck, baby, you’re gettin’ better at this control thing too when you think about it. You know I’m right.”

“It’s not enough,” I muttered. The door jingled, and I tensed, watching as a family of five walked in, laughing and having a great time. We weren’t like that. We never had been. “This was a mistake. We shouldn’t—”

“Take a deep breath for me, baby,” he cut me off. Those honey-chocolate eyes glared at me until I did as he asked. News flash: it didn’t help. “This ain’t goin’ to be like last time. They’re goin’ to come hang out, we’re goin’ to eat some fuckin’ epic bacon cheeseburgers, and you’re goin’ to have fun because you ain’t had any real time with them in almost a fuckin’ decade. You deserve to spend some time with your family.”

“But what if it’s not safe?” I replied.

“It ain’t safe.” He shrugged. “Baby, we live in a world of fuckin’ superpowers and demons. And that ain’t includin’ all the stupid humans and the stupid shit they do. I watch the news. Humans are fuckin’ morons. No one is safe.”

“That’s not helping.”

“My point is... I spent the last forty-eight hours arguin’ with a man I ain’t even datin’ about stupid lunch plans. If it wasn’t safe, we wouldn’t be here. I ain’t riskin’ you. Mal and Tessa ain’t either. Okay?”

Grayson Harper, the voice of reason. Sometimes. I gave his hand an appreciative squeeze.

“Okay.” I needed something to distract myself. For four days, Gray had been wearing my dog tags, but I couldn’t bring myself to ask. Until now. “Why are you still wearing my dog tags?”

“Without Sergeant Josiah Hartford I wouldn’t have Ryder Collins. And I’m real damn happy I have you, baby.” He said it so simply—like I should’ve known he’d cling to whatever parts of me I gave him.

We fell silent as we waited for my family to show up. I wanted to say my nerves went away, but they didn’t. If anything, they got worse as the time passed. Thankfully, Gray didn’t say a word. All he did was grab the silverware and put it on the window ledge so it’d stop bouncing around the table. When the waitress brought glasses of water, he promptly put those on the ledge as well.

“They’re late,” I said quietly after almost half an hour passed.

“They’re travelin’ with a child,” Gray retorted. He smirked, adding, “And Jo.”

“You’re making fun of my brother, aren’t you?”

“He makes it so damn easy.”

As if summoned, the door jingled, and my brother walked in—big ass smile, Star Wars shirt, flannel, and all. That smile only got bigger as we made eye contact.

“Fuck, is it good to see you!” Mal exclaimed for everyone in the diner to hear as he approached. I was on my feet all of half a second before he hauled me in for a hug. No amount of walls or defenses could keep out the happiness that melted into my

skin. “I’ve missed you.”

“Yeah,” I whispered. Okay, as a family of empaths, we weren’t always great at expressing ourselves, but the feelings were there. “Where’s Tess?”

“I don’t have children,” he announced as he let me go. “Which means I can get out of the car without three hundred tasks first. Gray! You look alive!”

Gray chuckled as he got to his feet to greet my brother. Mal bypassed the hand he offered and hugged him.

“We’re a hugging family,” Mal said.

“Since when?” I demanded.

“Since I had a baby, and I get emotional over everything,” Tessa cut in. I smiled as she joined us with Jo propped on her hip. I smiled because damn it, my niece was adorable. Big blue eyes, little auburn pigtails, and chubby cheeks in a pair of pink overalls. It was like looking at old pictures of Tessa all over again right down to the two fingers she sucked on.

“She definitely takes after you,” I told her. I didn’t have a clue what to do with a one-year-old. Did I talk to her? Wave at her?

Demons, sure. Hunt them, stab them, kill them. That shit was easy. Toddlers, no fucking clue. My only experience with small children came from being a kid once. As an adult pushing forty... this was a whole different experience. Shit, I felt awkward as I gave her a little wave. Her happy face broke into a giant, one-tooth smile, and she waved, sending saliva flying.

I was in with the toddler. Why did that shit make me happy?

Ah, fuck it. Who cared?

I reached for her, going for some uncoordinated attempt to take her from my sister. Jo was more than happy to abandon Tessa in favor of some stranger—a fact I wasn't thrilled with.

Note to self: talk to Tessa about stranger danger conversations. It was never too early for that shit. People sucked.

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“Be careful,” Tessa said as she steadied Jo with a hand on her back. “She likes to bite.”

“So, she’s like her mama was,” I commented as I held Jo close. Those big blue eyes glared at me as if offended by my comment—yeah, that look was all Tessa. “You know, your mama used to bite everyone.”

“Used to?” Jake teased with a grin.

“Still my baby sister, Jake,” I retorted gruffly. Was just filing that under shit I didn’t need to know about my sister. “We’re sticking with used to and that’s that.”

“Why the fuck is she so small?” Gray demanded, changing the conversation. His hand touched the small of my back as he poked Jo in the cheek. Was it bad form to poke babies? She didn’t seem to mind at all as she giggled. When he did it again to the other cheek, she giggled harder and practically tumbled back out of my arms as she wiggled. I scrambled to keep her upright and tightened my arms around her. He chastised, “Don’t drop the baby, Ryder.”

Poking babies was apparently a good thing. Dropping babies definitely was not.

“I’m not trying to,” I muttered. “Stop poking the baby, and she won’t try to throw herself around.”

“Nah, I’m the cool uncle, remember?” He laughed. Jo laughed. It was a dangerous friendship in the making. “I’m goin’ to teach her all the best shit.”

And then he fucking poked her all over again. At least I was ready for the flopping giggles this time.

“Stop taking pictures, Tess.” I glanced to where she shamelessly had her phone out taking pictures.

“Can’t and won’t,” she replied. Even still, I smiled—not at her. I wouldn’t give her that satisfaction. No, it was everything else. My siblings, my niece, Gray. It was lunch in a stupid fifties-themed diner.

It all felt so normal.

And I liked it.

“All right, I hear this place has the best bacon cheeseburger around,” Jake said as he joined us, a diaper bag over his shoulder and a big grin on his face. I glanced down at Jo, watching while she continued to giggle at Gray’s antics. Okay, the smile was all Jake.

“See!” Gray exclaimed happily. “I ain’t the only one lookin’ forward to a damn good burger.”

“Oh, we don’t swear in front of Jo,” Jake told him. I scoffed, turning away to hide my quiet laughter. Good luck getting Gray not to swear.

“No can do,” he replied. “The cool uncle gets to teach her all the good swears.”

“I’m the cool uncle,” Mal cut in.

“I’ll fight you,” Gray said. Good Lord.

“Here.” She held her arms out to take Jo as Mal slid to the corner of their bench. “Let me take her.”

“No,” I said. Instead, I nodded for Gray to get in before me. I propped Jo on the table in front of me, sliding one arm around her. “She’s mine.”

“Ours,” Gray corrected. “For lunch and anythin’ not related to her diaper.”

“Why do they get out of diaper duty and I don’t?” Mal cut in.

“Because you live with us and don’t pay rent. You two sure you don’t want kids?” Jake asked. I frowned, but he merely shrugged. “Sorry, Tess told me.”

“We like this crotch goblin,” Gray retorted.

“Don’t you call my daughter a crotch goblin!” Tessa snapped.

“At least she’s a cute one,” he said. He held out a hand to Jo, and she promptly put his finger in her mouth, chewing on him. For as much as he didn’t like kids, Gray was damn good with them. “Feisty fucker. At least she ain’t like some of those ugly babies you see out there.”

“Please, tell me those hands are clean.” Tessa cringed as Jo blubbered around Gray’s finger.

“Darlin’, I do all sorts of dirty things with these hands,” he teased. “Ask your brother.”

“Gray!” I exclaimed at the same time as Tessa. Her expression was horrified.

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“Don’t worry.” Gray laughed. “My hands are clean.”

I shook my head because only Gray. As banter and food discussions cycled around the table, I made faces at Jo. The steady swell and sway of good emotions seeped through my skin, and I let myself lean into it.

CHAPTER 32

Okay, Grayson Charles Harper,” Tessa began, and I groaned. No good came out of this fucking woman using my middle name. Ever. “We need to talk.”

Or that. No good ever came out of anyone saying that sentence.

“Fuck, Tee.” Mal chuckled. “Sound more ominous, will you? Shit, I’d run the other way if you said that shit to me.”

It was just the three of us at the table. Jake had taken Jo outside for a breather, and Ryder had gone to the bathroom. The second the two of them were gone, Tessa had honed in on me.

“At least she waited ‘til I ate somethin’ before decidin’ to rail me,” I teased, making her scowl.

“I’m not going to rail you,” she retorted with a little too much emphasis on the word. “But I’d really like to know what’s going on between you and my brother.”

“Pardon me?” She wanted to know what now? My relationship was none of her damn

business.

“Yeah, like how temporary is temporary at this point?” Mal asked with a stupid ass grin. Jesus fuck. “Is it like ten years temporary? Is that the cutoff?”

“You think you’re real damn cute, don’t you?” I retorted. Grabbing a toothpick, I chewed on it to give me time to figure out what the fuck to say. How the hell did I explain Ryder and me? Fuck, most days I didn’t know what we were. We just... were. And that worked for us. I shrugged. “I don’t know. We just are.”

“Are what though?” Tessa pressed. Good Lord, this woman. I just shrugged again. “I don’t have to tell you that Ryder’s been through a lot—”

“They’re practically ten years in at this fucking point, Tee,” Mal interjected. “I think he knows what the fuck Ry’s been through. I think what she’s trying to say is that she wants to know what the fuck you two are to each other. Is it permanent? Are you two just fucking around until something better comes along? Are you just playing him?”

I fucking grinned at the kid’s tone with that last question.

“Are you aimin’ to threaten me, Mal?” I demanded. “It won’t end real good for you if you do.”

“Why are you being so difficult?” Tessa retorted.

“Because you ain’t sayin’ what you mean.”

“Do you love my brother?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” I nodded slowly. I sure as fuck did and then some.

“The last Ryder said to us, this whole thing was just you two hunting and other things until you separated,” she continued. “Temporary.”

“We ain’t temporary.” I chuckled. Sure, we’d been temporary. Once. But nine fucking years wasn’t temporary. “If it helps any, I got a ring.”

“You got a ring?” Tessa squealed so damn loud the whole goddamn restaurant could hear her. I scowled while Mal broke down laughing.

“Fuck, Tee!” he exclaimed. “You’re so damn loud. He’s going to hear you!”

“You got a ring?” she hissed, hands slamming on the table as she leaned closer. This goddamn woman. “When? Have you asked? Tell me!”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ,” I muttered. “I ain’t asked him yet, I ain’t got a clue when I’m goin’ to ask him, I ain’t even sure if I’m goin’ to ask him.”

There was some information I shouldn’t have given her and clearly, this was it. I didn’t grow up with siblings, so I didn’t know much about having an overly involved family. There wasn’t a damn person in the world besides Marta who gave a fuck about what happened to me. But fuck me, that look on Tessa’s face was damn near deadly.

“Grayson Charles Harper,” she scolded in true mom fashion. “You can’t buy my brother a ring and then not fucking ask him!”

“I don’t do real well with people tellin’ me what to do. You know this shit,” I reminded her. Glancing across the restaurant, I checked the bathroom door to make sure Ryder wasn’t about to waltz into the middle of this conversation. I wasn’t ready to have a conversation that I didn’t know the answers to. “I don’t know what the fuck I’m doin’, darlin’. Right now, I just hunt things and drive around the fuckin’ country

with your brother.”

“Can you make sure he tells me when you do?” Tessa whispered.

“Us,” Mal corrected.

“Oh, I ain’t in charge of that. No, ma’am.” I shook my head adamantly. There was no way in hell I was stepping in the middle of their relationship. That shit was complicated enough. “If you want a whole relationship with your brother, you need to do the fuckin’ work.”

“I’ve done the work,” she faltered even as she said it.

“Don’t you try lyin’ to me too,” I warned Mal when he opened his mouth to say something. “I sure as fuck know both of you ain’t had a damn thing to do with him for fuckin’ years. Life and all that, I get that. But if you want him in your life, you got to fuckin’ try. That man fuckin’ dropped every goddamn thing to come rescue your ass and help you rescue your husband’s ass. He damn near killed himself tryin’ to help y’all. And no, before you say shit, I ain’t on your side. I’m on his side every fuckin’ time. If you want Ryder in your life then fuckin’ try. You want him to tell you shit then fuckin’ tell him shit.”

I sounded like a fucking dad scolding his goddamn kids. But I stuck by what I said. I knew Ryder wasn’t good at keeping in touch with them, but they needed to keep in touch with him too. Shit, this kind of drama made me glad I didn’t have siblings. This shit was complicated.

“You give that man an inch, I promise he’ll go the fuckin’ mile,” I continued. A trait I both loved and hated about Ryder. “Just pick up the goddamn phone and send him pictures of Jo or a text message or some shit. It ain’t that complicated. Text him Star Wars shit for Christ’s sake.”

Mal laughed because we both knew Ryder would absolutely entertain stupid conversations about that damn series with Mal if he texted about it. That was just Ryder.

“Okay,” Tessa said. From the way that woman stared at me, she had about half a million other things she wanted to say to me. I sighed and popped a fry in my mouth as I waited for her to continue speaking. If she and Ryder fixed their shit, that meant I was stuck with her. I was stuck with all their dumbasses as family.

And that single thought made me fucking smile.

CHAPTER 33

Gray! We can’t keep the baby!” I yelled after Gray. Things I never thought I’d say.

“That man better give back my baby,” Tessa grumbled.

“Oh, I ain’t keepin’ her,” he told us as he wandered across the parking lot with Jo half over his shoulder. She giggled and babbled the whole way. “But I am teachin’ her about the good music.”

“That man is about to play Taylor Swift for her,” she said.

“That man is about to play Taylor Swift for her,” I agreed with a stupid smile. God, I loved him. I shoved my hands in my pockets as I watched Gray turn on our car and sit in the front seat with our niece. As soon as the engine turned on, he had his song playing and danced in the front seat with Jo.

And while all of that was funny, the entertainment only increased as Jake joined them. What ensued was nothing short of a literal dance party when Gray stepped back out of the vehicle to make it a whole thing. The two passed Jo around, dancing and

making a scene.

“Why... why is my husband joining them?” Tessa asked.

“I don’t know, but that little girl has two grown men dancing in a fucking parking lot to teenage pop songs,” Mal commented.

“I like him.” Her shoulder bumped into mine.

“Me too,” he chimed in. “You should keep him. Unless the whole temporary thing is still in play. Is there a cutoff for when it stops being temporary?”

“Mal!” she exclaimed.

“What? It’s a legitimate question!”

“I bought a ring,” I told them quietly.

“You what?” Their response was in unison as they faced me. I shrugged.

“I bought a ring,” I repeated.

“Oh, my fucking God—ow!” Mal’s rant was cut short as Tessa smacked him hard on the shoulder.

“How long ago?” Tessa asked.

“I bought it... four years ago? Something like that. I don’t know,” I said. I kept my gaze on Gray, loving every moment of his simple antics. “I don’t even know if he’d say yes, or if it’s even worth asking, but I have it in my wallet.”

“You two are so fucking clueless,” Mal replied. What the hell did that mean?

“Don’t you say a word,” she snapped.

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“What the fuck is wrong with you two?” I crossed my arms and faced them. I glared at them, waiting for one of them to crack. To their credit, they didn’t, but they sure as hell looked like they weren’t telling me something. “What the hell do you two know?”

“Nothing!” they exclaimed together. Bullshit.

“Mhmm, I believe that as much as I did any other time you two lied to me.”

“It’s just we happen to think that if... you wanted to make it less temporary—”

“Who the fuck said this is temporary?”

“You did,” Tessa said.

“That was nine years ago!” My eyes widened in disbelief. There was no way in hell they thought my relationship was temporary.

“But that’s what you said!” Mal replied.

“My relationship has lasted three times longer than your marriage,” I told Tessa before my gaze snapped to Mal. “And you. I don’t think you can fathom nine years with anything.”

“So, when are you going to ask him?” she whispered. “I need to know when to plan a wedding for.”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged and rotated enough to watch Gray dancing across the parking lot to make Jo laugh. The truth was I had no good way to describe Gray and me. We just were, and that was enough. Maybe I’d give him a ring or maybe not. We didn’t need it. Not really. We’d always fallen outside of the norm. And while I had doubts, I knew it really wouldn’t change a damn thing for us.

We were exactly what we were and nothing could change that.

“I don’t know,” I repeated quietly.

“Yeah, temporary,” Mal teased.

“I will beat your ass,” I warned.

“You can try,” he said. He made a playful lunge in my direction, but I had him in a headlock before he could think about fighting back. “Okay, okay, okay!”

He tapped my arm furiously so I’d let him go. The grumping as he fixed his clothes made me laugh—something I’d done a lot of today and it felt damn good.

“Shit, you win,” he conceded. “Fuck.”

“Remember that next time,” I said before I realized what I was saying. Would there even be a next time? Would it be over a decade before we did shit like this?

“Can we call you?” Tessa asked as if reading my thoughts. “Or text you?”

“Yeah. You know I’ll be there anytime you two need help.”

“No, I mean just because,” she corrected. “Maybe pictures of Jo or how we’re doing?”

I faltered. That sounded like a very normal fucking relationship between siblings. We hadn't had that since I joined the military.

"Or updates on Star Wars," Mal added, making me chuckle.

"Yeah, I'd like that," I whispered. I would. I missed them, even if we lived in very different worlds.

"And maybe you could tell us how you're doing? You and Gray?" Tessa suggested.

"It'd be nice to know where you're at and if you're okay."

"I can do that."

"Thank you." She wrapped her arms around my waist, and I hugged her back. "Can I get some family pictures?"

"Fuck." I groaned. Tessa and her goddamn pictures. This woman took more pictures than anyone should. I knew it came down to how broken our family was and wanting to preserve what we were but still. "Do you even print the pictures you take?"

"She has a picture room." Mal laughed. "Has three fucking bookshelves full of photo albums going all the way back to when we were kids."

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“Do you look at them? Ever?” I demanded and glanced down at my baby sister. She gave me a cheeky smile.

“I like having them thank you very much. They’re important,” she retorted. She grabbed mine and Mal’s hands, dragging us across the parking lot while Mal dramatically groaned. “Please. It’s been forever since we had a family photo! Just one!”

There was no fucking way it’d be one photo.

CHAPTER 34

Ten miles outside of Boise, we had the sun at our backs and a full stretch of road ahead of us. The windows were rolled down, and music played quietly in the car—a hell of a lot quieter than usual. Sitting next to me with his hand in mine, Ryder was as inside his head as I was. He flipped through pictures on his phone. Tessa’s whole one-family photo nonsense turned into over thirty minutes of fucking nonsense. I may have been the dick flipping her off in every picture I could sneak into just to fuck with her.

“I like that one,” I said when Ryder landed on one of us—full-on piggyback ride bullshit. It was the smile on his face that I loved. Unburdened and happy. That smile was my fucking favorite thing ever.

“It’s a good one,” he agreed. He put the phone away, falling silent. The silence wasn’t uncomfortable, but it was thick with a list of unspoken things. I didn’t need his power to know that the whole afternoon with his family weighed heavy on him.

“You know,” I began as I cleared my throat, “I was doin’ some thinkin’?”

“Oh? What kind of trouble are we getting into now?”

“Why you got to ask it like that?”

“Do I need to remind you what happened in Tennessee? Or Virginia? North Dakota?”
Ryder asked, his eyebrow cocking when I glanced at him. God, that sassy fucking expression did things to my dick.

“For the record, they were damn good ideas,” I retorted. “At the time. Maybe lookin’ back I can concede they weren’t my best thoughts.”

No, my best thought was sticking with him. I didn’t say that shit out though.

“All right.” He sighed. “Where are we going and what are we fucking up this time? I’m assuming you found a demon.”

“Well, you’d be assumin’ wrong,” I told him. “I was talkin’ to Tessa. Washington has a shit ton of small fuckin’ towns along the coast. Little towns that people don’t give a fuck about and just sort of exist doin’ their own thing.”

“Okay.” He drew the word out as he tried to follow where I was going with this.

“I was thinkin’ maybe we could visit a few of them. I bet some of them have a house on the beach we could rent for a weekend or somethin’. You know, a place a few hours outside Seattle and shit. Tessa said if we could give them a heads-up and all, they could swing a few days away here and there. A few times a year maybe.”

“You want to go on vacation with my family?” he asked slowly. His confusion was fucking adorable, making me smile.

“I was just thinkin’ that there ain’t no reason we can’t make it a point to come back out this way, baby,” I said. I glanced at Ryder, taking in his unreadable expression as he stared back. “We ain’t got to if you don’t want—”

“I want to,” he interrupted. “It’s just... we’ve never made plans to stick in one place at all. You hate sticking around anywhere.”

But the idea of staying put was starting to sound real damn nice. Maybe some part of me was stuck on that fucking dreamworld the sirens had created in my head. I knew it was fake, but fuck, it felt damn real. I missed it. Way more than I wanted to admit, even to myself.

“I just want to properly corrupt Jo.” I made a joke of it because I was who I was. “Make sure she learns all the right fuckin’ words and shit.”

“Right.” Yeah, he wasn’t having my bullshit.

“Look, I figure we get a few good hunts in, fuck up some shit, and then we go take a weekend off,” I continued. “I ain’t gettin’ any younger, and I know you’re fuckin’ feelin’ it too.”

Our healing and fast recovery as hunters slowed the older we got. With Ryder pushing forty, I knew he was starting to feel it. I caught it in how he paused as he woke up, the new ways he stretched, and more. We could only take so many beatings before they all caught up with us.

“Yeah,” Ryder murmured. “Maybe it’d do us some good.”

“Probably,” I agreed, letting my gaze settle on the stretch of asphalt ahead of us. I didn’t have a clue where the fuck we were going, but my mind wandered to the what-ifs of a little house on the beach. Maybe one day.

But for now, it was just us and the open road. Demons and cheap motels. Us doing the right thing no matter what it fucking cost us.