



They Call Me Teddy

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Description: I've seen too much death and pain for the short twenty-one years I've been alive. Any memories of my early years have been snuffed out by the depravity of the last almost two decades, and here I stand at the end of it all with nothing left.

Coming to hell was an accident, at least in my case. Most people who end up here are brought here for Her. Then again, most people who end up here didn't last nearly as long as I have.

Here I am, though, at the end of it all, and honestly? I envy the dead, for they remember nothing.

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Chapter One

Branson - Six years old

When I woke up it was dark, and Mommy wasn't with me anymore. I don't like the dark, and I miss my nightlight. It's shaped like Eeyore. I like Eeyore. Everything smells funny here, and it's cold. At least my teddy is still here. There's a red mark on him, though, and I don't know why.

I miss Mommy.

I woke up to Her watching me. My first reaction was to cry, but she told me to 'shh' and that it was alright. She said some bad words, said that I was too young and not supposed to be there. I don't know what that means but I ask for my mommy. She tells me Mommy's gone. That she isn't coming back. I cry some more, and she shushes me again and tells me she'll be my mama now. Then she tells me her name is Jane.

Branson - Eight years old

"Like this?" I ask excitedly, holding the pieces like she showed me.

"Yes, precious, just stay still," Jane replies as she hurries to tie it together.

"There we go!"

I wait, wanting to make sure she is really done before I move my hand. When I help

Jane and do a good job, she's happy. I always want to make Jane happy. When she's happy, she smiles and gives me treats. Jane scares me when she's mad.

"You can let go now," she tells me after stepping back to survey her work. I slowly take my hand away and step beside her, taking in the now finished project.

"What's it called?" I ask her, knowing she loves when I take an interest in her art.

"I think this one will be only 'Portrait'."

I nod as though I know what that word means. Jane has been teaching me to read and giving me lots of homework. I bet I could spell it, but I don't know what it means. I critically eye the piece in front of me. The stretched-out face is skinned perfectly and tied neatly to the edges where I helped hold it in place. It doesn't look the same as the person before. The small bones—fingers I think—frame it nicely.

The blood and stuff used to make me feel icky, but Jane says it's all nonsense. I'm doing better now and only get sick sometimes. Today, I didn't get sick.

"I like it," I tell her with a grin. She smiles at me and pats my head.

"Good boy. Now, let's get this cleaned up."

I start picking up small pieces and placing them into the trash bin, ignoring the slow sense of ickiness building in my tummy as I do. It's all nonsense, I tell myself.

"What's this part called?" I ask when I peer into the trash. Jane leans over and picks up the part, squinting at it.

"I think that's the liver," she says before dropping it into the pile.

“Oh,” I reply, looking at the flabby discolored flesh. “How can you tell? How do you know so many things?”

Jane chuckles lightly. “Many, many years ago I learned all of it—how the human body works. I was going to be a doctor.”

“What’s that? I thought doctors made sick people feel better?”

She nods. “That is one way to put it.”

“And why didn’t you become a doctor? Why didn’t you make sick people feel better?”

Jane’s face hardens, and I regret asking the question. She leans down so our faces are level as she holds my shoulders.

“These people that you see here,” she tells me, her dark eyes boring into my own, “Every one of them is sick, you see. What I learned was that doctors only heal a certain kind of sickness. Me? I draw every last inch of it out.”

I swallow, not understanding but nodding anyway. Her face changes once more into a smile and she pats my head again.

“Good boy.”

Branson - Fifteen years old

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I watch through gritted teeth as Jane puts the finishing touches on her latest project. I learned a long time ago that if I stay quiet, she usually forgets I'm there and doesn't ask for my help. Sometimes, she'll still take me out of my cage to hold something in place for her. I'd rather be in the cage than have to see any of her 'art' up close anymore. It isn't the blood that bothers me. At least not really, not anymore. In fact, the biology of it all, how sudden death is when blood is removed, fascinates me. It's Jane that I don't want to get close to.

Not that she's a repulsive monster—at least, not to look at. The monster that lives in Jane is subtle; though, if you look into her eyes, you'll see it. Her hair is usually pulled back into a knot on her head, revealing the sharp lines of her face, the black pits of her eyes. I'm about as tall as her now, but she's still bigger than me. I suppose she eats a bit better than I do.

My shoulders press hard against the rails, leaving deep indents in my back. I do my best to keep my breath even, but it's hard to breathe naturally when the air is saturated with the thick smell of blood and organs.

It's a funny thing, the smell of inside someone. Not funny like ha-ha, but interesting in that it's unique. Unless they've experienced it, you couldn't describe it to someone else. I've had my fair share of experience in the last almost ten years since I was taken by accident along with my mother, who Jane tells me was a worthless whore. Every so often, when Jane walks me through the gallery, I wonder which pieces are of her. But I've never asked. I don't actually want to know.

It has been two days since she started this one and I am grateful that it's almost over. My body is aching and cold from being in the cage, and I can feel a dull ache

pounding behind my eyes. Nothing I'm not used to.

I tried to kill myself once a couple of years ago, but with how closely I'm watched, it's hard to find the time or tools to do it properly. When I was caught, I can honestly say that Jane taught me that I can in fact feel pain still. I haven't tried it since. The scars on the soles of my feet will forever be testament to my failure to even end my own life.

"Well, precious, I think we're almost done here!" Jane sings as she moves away from the table. "Would you like to see Mama's wonderful new creation?"

"Yes," I respond quietly through my teeth, as though there were ever a choice. Another thing I learned a long time ago was this question is not rhetorical and that saying no has dire consequences.

Jane claps her hands happily as though surprised. "Oh goody! I think you'll really like this one!"

I open my eyes at the sound of the lock opening and stand, taking a moment to orient myself after the days of sitting cramped in the four-by-four box. I haven't grown all that much, but enough that it's a lot more cramped in there than when I was younger.

I stand on weak and shaky legs, pausing a moment while the blackness dots my vision. I only ever get water when I'm in the cage, no food. It's probably a good thing there's nothing in my stomach to vomit by the time I'm forced to see the end results. It's not so much the gore that makes me sick as much as seeing the before and after of the person that was brought in. They never look the same when Jane is done with them.

Ignoring my obvious discomfort, Jane ushers me towards her finished project. I look and see this isn't as bad as some, although the fact that I think so is probably a

testament to how fucked up I am.

On a platter sits two severed arms. Barbed wire wraps around them, holding them in place. A heart sits inside the hands which are brought together. The overall effect makes it look as though they are offering the organ. My nose tickles with the smell of the stuff she uses for preservation. I've learned about a lot of different chemicals that can do it, but I've never been able to figure out which ones Jane uses.

"Isn't it amazing!" Jane squeals beside me. "I call this one, 'Offer to God'."

I do my best not to grimace and nod politely.

"Well, I'd best get you back now," she chirps, leading me out of the workroom. This next part is one of my least favorites: walking through the gallery. As always, I do my best to keep my head down and not focus on the varying older projects. The air is thick with the smell of old blood. A rotten coppery smell that you can taste in the back of your throat and on your tongue.

A few hours later, I'm back in my 'room' with a bowl of slop sitting in front of me. Jane claims it's porridge, but I've always been doubtful. At least she waits a few hours between the unveiling and offering me food. I couldn't stomach this crap immediately after seeing people's bodies twisted and morphed into her insane art projects. It took me a long time to realize that what she does isn't normal.

I've been spending less and less time here, it seems. It used to be that she would do a project and then there would be weeks between. Now, I am barely in my room for a few days before being pulled out again and put into the cage. I probably spend about fifty percent of my time starving in the cage now.

When I'm in my room, I either sit and do nothing or I read.

Fortunately, Jane taught me to read before she began to resent me, and even as a child, I was reading far above my age. A few years ago, Jane gave me some books on anatomy and biology she said she didn't need any more and since then I've almost memorized most of them. A few of them have Jane's name written inside and I assume they were from when she was going to be a doctor. My favorite is a medical encyclopedia. I have the letter T. I know a lot of things that start with T.

T. Tuberculosis. Transverse myelitis. Tendon. Tibia.

On the bad days, this is what runs through my mind.

For ten years I have lived like this. Well, that isn't true. The first few years I was treated as her child or perhaps a beloved pet, but as I've gotten older, Jane's treatment of me has changed drastically. The only way I can really tell how long I've been here is by the amount of times I've heard Christmas songs drifting from upstairs. Nine times. Not once have I seen a tree, presents, turkey... Things which I have only vague memories from my youth. Even when I was a kid, I don't remember doing that stuff with Jane. I wonder if I ever got Christmas with my real mom?

My time is split between a basement room—a closet really—and the cage. I haven't seen outside or smelled fresh air since I've been here, and the only people I see, who don't die within days of me meeting them, are Jane and Bud. Bud helps Jane with getting all of her victims and helps her run some kind of antique shop, but they don't tell me much about that.

I don't know if I will ever really know why she spared me all those years ago. I can't find it in myself to be grateful.

As a child I did what I could to try to please her. I guess I'm fifteen or sixteen now, and I don't consider myself a child any longer. Not after the things I've seen and done since I've been here. Whenever I'm in my room, I'm grateful to be away from

the workshop, but at the same time, being alone for so long makes me think too much. I sleep as much as possible, though the nightmares don't let me stay that way for long.

Temporal lobe. Tendonitis. Tertoid.

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Chapter Two

Branson

It's a few days later when Bud comes to remove me from my room and brings me back to Jane's workshop. A large hulking man, he has a bulbous nose and tiny, spaced-apart eyes, resulting in a face not even a mother would love. His touch revolts me, and even when Jane still wanted me around, I hated Bud. Now that Jane doesn't 'like' me anymore, he revels in my misery as often as he completely ignores me.

"Come on, time to go," he mutters as he grabs a hold of my bicep and leads me quickly through the gallery. As we walk into the workroom, I notice something new. A second cage across from mine.

Frowning, I ask, "What's that for?"

Bud smacks me in the back of my head and pushes me toward my own small prison.

"Don't ask questions," is all he says. The familiar sound of the lock follows.

I sit back against my cage and eye the other one critically. New in this place is never a good thing

A few hours later, Jane enters the room with Bud dragging the body of a young man behind him. The guy is probably close to my age and I grimace when I notice he is still breathing. Oh god, I think, more live ones. Sometimes I'm lucky, and we go a long time with only sedated or dead bodies, but lately there have been more bodies

and way more live ones. I hate having to hear them beg and cry. Makes my headaches worse.

Sighing quietly, I watch as the two bring the body up to the metal slab Jane uses to prepare the bodies. Thick straps are in place to hold down flailing limbs and dollar sized holes line the entire bottom allowing blood to seep into the bins below. I think there is a word for this type of table, but it isn't in the books I have. Most of my knowledge of the outside world is from my own skewed memories and listening to the chatter of the TV I haven't been allowed to watch in years. A moment later, the boy is strapped down and they leave us alone.

A while later Jane still hasn't returned, which isn't unusual in itself. Once she gets the subjects, she typically prepares them like this and then leaves to 'inspire herself', as she puts it. I don't know what she is doing during these times, but I always dread when the subjects wake up before she gets back.

A thick coughing and sputtering noise comes from the boy on the table, much to my dismay. Rattling metal, the telltale sign of struggles, quickly follow.

"What the fuck!" the boy exclaims as he thrashes about on the cold table. "What the fuck is this! Help!" He starts to shout and cry.

I sigh but don't respond, my head hanging between my knees.

"Who's there! I heard you. Who is that? What are you doing to me!"

I hate this.

"I didn't do this to you," I respond simply, "You've been taken by a woman named Jane."

The boy stops thrashing long enough to listen. As he hears where my voice is coming from, he lifts his head slightly and down to the left towards my cage. His eyes widen as he takes in my prison and realizes I, too, am trapped. While he probably thinks he has the short end of this deal being on the table, I can't deny having felt jealousy at some of the people who come through here. At least their pain is almost over. My hell continues day by day, no end in sight.

“What the hell is going on, man,” the boy asks frantically, “What the hell is this place?”

“Like I said, you've been taken for a woman named Jane. She is an artist.”

“What the fuck kind of artist is she! Where are we? What's going to happen?”

I look him in the eyes. “Hell, my friend. We are in hell.”

The boy stops asking questions and continues to struggle against the bonds. I've seen all kinds of escape attempts and know just how futile it is, but long ago discovered that telling them that only makes this in-between time that much worse. When I hear the faint sounds of footsteps down the gallery, I know the time has come.

The door opens, and immediately the boy's thrashing increases as Jane walks in. While her face could be mistaken for sweet and pretty, the darkness in her eyes always gives her away. That and the blood-spattered butcher's apron she prefers to don.

I can't see his face from this angle but can imagine the terror written there. I have the power to look away, to close my eyes, but I can't shut my ears.

I listen because I have no choice.

I listen to the boy plead and beg.

I listen to Jane laugh and tease the boy.

I listen as she picks up a bone saw.

And for what seems like forever, I listen to the boy scream.

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The next day, the boy's struggles are over, and Jane's work has only just begun. He spent the last twenty-four hours being tortured for Jane's art.

Once, Jane spoke to me about her logic behind her projects.

“Fear and pain, Branson. That is what my beautiful artwork requires to be truly complete, truly amazing.”

She continued on to tell me how the aura of pain stays with the pieces of the people left behind. That always stuck with me. ‘Aura of Pain’.

I didn't comment but wondered what type of aura I would leave behind, if my pain would leave a blackened stain, my only footprint on this miserable earth.

The familiar smell of blood, organs, and shit washes over me but I ignore them, still staring at the second cage. When Jane takes a break to remove the unneeded body parts, I decide to risk it and ask.

“What's the other cage for, Jane?” She turns to me, obviously surprised that I would dare ask a question.

“You'll see,” she replies in the singsong voice I hate so much. Her smile chills me to my core. Whatever it is, it won't be good. I lean back and close my eyes.

A piercing noise startles me awake and I open my eyes to see a familiar metal bin that

Jane uses for 'garbage' being dragged across the floor by Bud. I know there is some kind of furnace somewhere on the property, but I've never seen it.

Groaning, I sit up and try to work some of the kinks out of my neck. This is a sign she is almost done. A sign I will be out of here soon. I hold back my sigh of relief as I watch Bud leave, turning my attention back to Jane.

Jane has her back to me as she puts what must be the finishing touches on her project. It's taken about three days this time and, as crappy as it is, I look forward to going back to my room where I can at least stand properly and lay my body out mostly flat.

Thalassemia. Thiamine Deficiency. Thoracic Outlet Syndrome. Thigh. Throat.

"Perfect!" Jane finally exclaims, causing me to lean forward in anticipation of being shown the latest grotesque statue before being led down the gallery. Jane removes her apron and hangs it in its usual spot before turning towards the door. Bud or I typically place finished pieces for her in a pre-designated spot, as they are often too heavy for her to lift on her own.

Jane walks towards the door, and a small cry escapes my lips. Did she forget about me? She always lets me out to see before she leaves.

"Hey, Jane," I croak, "Can I see your piece?"

Hope fills me that she has just forgotten and my request will inspire her to show it off and let me out.

She smirks at me and winks before turning off the lights and closing the door. The blackness is complete, no window or hint of light from anywhere. This has never happened before.

New is never good in this place.

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Time seems to be crawling, and it's hard to tell the passing of it, but I think it's been at least a day since she left me here. The change in routine has me anxious. Fear is something I've long since grown numb to in this place, so feeling it now is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. I wonder if I'm being punished and think back to the last few days to see if I can think of anything that might warrant it, in Jane's mind, anyway. My mind comes up blank, though, and I'm left wondering.

It's probably been four days since I've eaten and almost twenty-four hours since I've been given any water, and my body is screaming for sustenance. There is an aluminum bucket in the corner of my cage, but I haven't gotten that desperate yet. I am pretty used to going without, after all.

Finally, the door opens, and I am blinded by the lights as they flick on. Bud walks in and grabs the project. I catch a glimpse through watering eyes and bile lifts in my throat. Are those his balls? I shake my head, eager to erase the image from my mind.

"Hey, Bud, what's going on?" I rasp, "Why am I still in here?"

Ignoring me, Bud leaves the room with the project in tow. The lights are left on this time and I'm not sure if the view of the morbid workshop is better or worse than the blackness. A second later Bud returns and, much to my delight, goes to open the cage. Before I can get too excited, he tosses a bowl of slop and a water bottle in with me and slams the door closed.

Apparently, this is my new room.

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Chapter Three

Branson

Weeks pass and I'm left in the cage. Bud comes in periodically to throw water and minimal food in with me and I soon stop asking questions. Even when Jane comes to do a new project, leaving me here the entire time, I don't ask. I say nothing. I don't even want to know anymore.

Some days I pray she drags me out and puts me on the table.

After weeks in the cage, I hear Jane's voice down the gallery corridor. Her voice sounds pleasant and light and I frown, wondering who she is talking to. She never talks to Bud that way, much less her subjects, much less me.

A moment later, the light turns on and I look over to see Jane followed by a small girl carrying a teddy bear. The girl's no more than ten or so. My face pales and bile rises up in my throat. Oh god, she's using children again.

The little girl has a plain face with stringy blonde hair framing it. She's honestly a bit homely looking with slightly sunken cheeks and pale skin. Her eyes, though, are bright and green, beautiful and wide. She looks around the room with curiosity, but not fear.

“Here we are, sweetie! This is Mama's workshop!”

Mama?

“But my Mama...” The girl starts to say but is interrupted by Jane violently grabbing her face.

“We talked about this,” Jane says with an edge to her voice, “I am your mama. And you’re my little Teddy.”

Her face transforms again, and she smiles as she kisses the little girl's head. Flashbacks of my own introduction to Jane’s world whirl through my mind.

Before I can react further, Bud enters the room with a box in his arms. Inside are some blankets and a few children’s toys, which he tosses into the second cage. The small girl doesn’t object as she is led over to it and locked inside. Jane coos at the girl and praises her for doing as she was told before leaving us and locking the door behind her.

The little girl sits in a cage the same size as my own. Since she is so small, it almost seems roomy compared to mine, which barely fits my growing body. In the last year I have grown a lot—which always seems to anger Jane. The little girl wraps her tiny hands around the bars and looks over at me, her bright eyes shining.

“Hello,” she says, “I’m Amelia, but you can call me Teddy. Who are you?”

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It takes me a few hours, but I do manage to get most of Amelia’s story from her. It seems like she has a similar tale to my own, though I am fairly sure I was an accidental pick up, whereas it sounds like Amelia was intentional. Who knows what Jane has in mind for this girl? Perhaps a new protege, since I was such a failure to her. I was right, she’s almost eleven, but so small and runty she looks much younger.

“I was begging out front of the subway, like usual, while Mama took care of one of

her friends in the field. She does that a lot,” Amelia tells me proudly, “Mama is so good at taking care of people!”

I don't comment. Hell, I have no place to say anything. My own mother was a whore too.

“Mama Jane came up to me and asked if I was hungry and when I said yes, she took me for ice cream! Have you had ice cream, Branson? It was sooo good. When we were done, we found my mama and then, we were both in her van. Mama slept the whole way though.”

After this, I hold up my hand, indicating for her to stop.

“I get it, Amelia, but did Jane say why you were here?” The small face frowns slightly in thought before brightening.

“Oh, I remember! Jane said she needed help on some art. I like art. When I was still in school, my teacher said I was really good at it....”

My mind wanders as the girl continues talking. Jane needs help. With her art. I groan at the thought of this sweet little girl being made to participate in Jane's projects. Warped and twisted, like I was. What was worse, being screwed up for life or being on the table itself? Then again, I didn't suppose either of us held much promise for life even outside of this place. I know enough to know the children of whores aren't among the fortunate. It's one of the reasons escape has never been very high on my 'to do' list. I may not know much of the outside world, but I don't think there is a place in it for someone like me. Or that's what I tell myself, anyway.

When I look over, I see Amelia scribbling with crayons, humming softly to herself. I swallow hard. I can't remember the last time I saw something so pure. Ever?

For the next few hours, I just sit and watch her. It's been so long since I saw another person doing something so simple. Listening to her and watching her does something to me. I have seen dozens of people of all ages brought through those doors, and if I'm being honest, I didn't truly care. The only thing I didn't like were the live ones, mostly because I had to listen to it. That and the children.

I close my eyes and let the small girl's song wash over me, so different from the screams I usually hear in this room.

Jane killed any bit of empathy I had left. Or so I had thought. It's like Amelia's presence, even from across the room, lightens my very soul. The corner of my mouth twitches, and I wonder if I'm smiling.

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When Jane finally comes back, she coos more encouragement at Amelia but doesn't open her cage right away. Instead, she turns to me.

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“Well, precious, it’s been a long month for you, I’m sure,” she says. I don’t comment, not wanting to anger her by agreeing or disagreeing. After a moment, Jane smiles. When Amelia smiled at me, it made me feel warm inside. Jane’s smile only makes me feel cold.

Jane steps forward and pulls a key from her pocket, twisting the lock to my cage.

“I think it’s time we changed some things around here,” she tells me as she steps away from the cage. “Well, come on then, I don’t have all day!”

I scurry out of the cage as fast as my numb limbs will take me and stand before her, doing my best not to shake.

“O-okay, Jane.”

I’m not about to argue. Anything to get me out of this cage, this room.

She smiles at me again before patting me on the head. I don’t cringe at her touch—as much as I want to—and only let myself shiver when she turns back to Amelia’s cage, opening it as well.

I watch as Amelia steps out of the doors before giving Jane a brilliant smile. Smart girl.

“Hi, Mama!” She exclaims and Jane pats her head too, looking down fondly.

“Okay, Teddy, Precious. Come with Mama.”

Without waiting for either of us, Jane turns to leave, trusting us to follow. I glance over at Amelia again and see her watching me. When she smiles, it touches her eyes and I feel my mouth twitch again. When she holds out her hand, I take it and I feel the warmth spread through my body as we step forward, following Jane hand-in-hand.

As we make our way through the gallery, I watch Amelia's face. Her eyes are even wider than usual, and her breath is quick, but she doesn't seem overly disturbed by the macabre art she sees. I swallow deeply and keep my eyes forward.

We get to the end of the gallery. My room is off another hallway to our left, but Jane surprises me again when she leads us both to the right. To the stairs.

I haven't been upstairs in years.

We follow Jane up and watch as she pulls another key out, unlocking it and holding the door open as we cross into the next level of the house. Amelia looks totally unfazed, I guess she came through here recently, but I am sure my eyes are wide as saucers as I take in the unfamiliar sights.

I know we are in the kitchen; I see a fridge and a sink, but they're dusty and unused. Rather than the smell of blood and bones, I smell dust and mildew. It's wonderful.

I want to ask what is going on but am too afraid that Jane will change her mind and put me back in my room, or worse, the cage.

"Branson," Jane says, and immediately my attention is on her. She never uses my name. "I would like you to begin by cleaning this room. There are supplies in that closet."

I am too surprised to do anything but nod. She wants me to clean? I forget for a

moment that I am still holding Amelia's hand until Jane reaches out and I instinctively flinch. Jane smiles at that before taking Amelia's hand into her own. I swallow as the cold overwhelms me again.

"We won't be far," Jane tells me. "I'll be back to check on your work soon."

For the next while, I am left on my own. My body aches from being in the cage for so long and I still feel weak, but the longer I am moving and standing, the better I feel. I am just scrubbing the last dust mites from the counter when I hear footsteps behind me.

"Well, well, well," Jane says, "What a good little cleaner you are." She steps into the room and takes a moment to inspect some of the cupboards and even the inside of the fridge—which was turned off, but I still cleaned.

"I should have done this years ago," she mutters to herself before turning back to me.

"Are you hungry?" she asks me. I hesitate before nodding. Of course I am, I've barely eaten in what feels like forever. When Jane beckons me to follow her, I do. This time without hesitation.

I follow her through the dark hallways that are only vaguely familiar to me from when I was first brought here. The walls seem to be peeling a bit at the edges and that old, musty smell permeates everything.

We turn a corner to a sight I have definitely never seen in this house. A table is set up and Amelia is sitting there wearing a frilly pink dress. Tantalizing aromas drift up from the covered plates, and my mouth immediately begins to water.

Food. Real, honest-to-god food.

I stand there frozen, not sure what I am supposed to do while I watch Jane walk around to the top of the table and take a seat.

“Where are your manners!” Jane scolds. “Sit!”

I hurry over to take a seat across from Amelia. We both look to Jane who is watching us with a small smile on her face.

“My children,” she begins, and despite my hatred for her, I feel a small flush of warmth at being called her child again, “I know this has been a big day for you both, so we will talk more tomorrow of the changes going forward. Tonight, we eat and celebrate our new family.”

After dinner I am brought back to my room downstairs fuller than I can ever remember being. I drift off to sleep thinking of bright green eyes and a brilliant smile, and for once, the nightmares don't come.

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Chapter Four

Branson

I'm in my room for a few days before Bud comes to get me and bring me back to the cage. I've been let out twice since the first time to go upstairs and clean, but haven't been taken to the workroom. It's the longest I've stayed out of there since I can remember.

I haven't seen Amelia and I can't get her out of my mind. I'm so distracted and excited that I might get to see her soon that I'm not even bothered like I usually would be when Bud locks me in my cage and shuts the door behind me.

It isn't too long before Jane comes in with Amelia following closely behind. She's wearing another girly dress and looks well. Even still, I know better than anyone that much of Jane's torment is not visible to the eye.

"Okay, Teddy, Mama is going to get the next subject with Uncle Bud, so you go back in here like a good girl now." Jane leads Amelia over to her own cage, but the young girl stops and looks over at me.

"Can I go with Branson?" she asks timidly. Jane's face reddens, and I wanted to scream at the girl for drawing attention to me. Through gritted teeth Jane replies, this time with a much sharper tone.

"No. Get in your cage." Amelia doesn't object further and steps in, immediately picking up a toy bear she had arrived with. Jane glares at me before leaving the room.

I wait a few minutes to make sure she isn't coming back right away before leaning forward to grab the bars.

"You can't do that," I tell her. "Don't ask questions, don't argue. Just do what Jane tells ya, okay?"

Amelia's bottom lip quivers. "I just wanted to..."

"No!" I say a bit too sharply. Seeing Amelia wince at my tone, I soften my voice. "Amelia, I know this is all new for you, but please listen to me, okay?"

The girl nods at me.

"Whatever Jane tells you, you do it, okay? Don't matter what it is. Do not argue, don't ask questions. Got it?" For a moment, Amelia says nothing but finally she nods.

I lean back against my cage and close my eyes.

???

A routine forms and about once a week, we are brought into our respective cages for Jane's projects. I'll go back to my room for a few days, go upstairs to clean once or twice, then it all repeats. I'm eating better and Amelia calms me in a way nothing ever has.

The next few subjects are sedated or dead and I'm thankful, both for Amelia's sake and my own. I can always tell when they are sedated and not dead, though, because my books have taught me that the dead don't bleed.

Amelia seems to be fascinated by what she sees, not at all disturbed like I was when young. As much as this small girl exudes innocence, I know there is a darkness

hiding beneath those big eyes. Where darkness was brought into my life, I think Amelia brought it with her.

When we are alone, Amelia talks to me. Tells me about her life before this and things she has seen. I have come to look forward to it and our time together, waiting for Jane and Bud to return with the latest subject. I guess it is easier to keep Amelia down here than risk her trying to leave from upstairs, not that I think Amelia would leave. I'm not totally sure how much of what is happening she understands, and I am not about to suggest something that is sure to get her punished.

I listen to Amelia tell me a story about her favorite foods, one I've heard before but always love to hear. She likes ice cream and pasta and loathes anything with pickles. I don't remember what those things taste like, but seeing how happy and excited she is when she talks about it makes my insides feel warm. Watching her face get all screwed up when she talks about pickles makes me laugh. For the first time I can remember, Amelia is making me feel some semblance of happiness.

Until we hear footsteps come down the corridor and I know our time is ended for today. Jane strolls in, Bud follows behind her with a man he is dragging by his armpits. I hear a small groan and know the man is still alive. Amelia is watching Jane with curiosity when she walks over to open her cage. I watch with trepidation as Jane kneels down to address the small girl.

"Teddy, baby, today is the day!"

The small girl's eyes light up with excitement.

"Really?" She squeals, and Jane smiles at her affectionately.

I think I'm going to be sick. Amelia skips over to the table with Jane and looks down at the man with interest.

“Why is he still sleeping, Mama?”

Jane sighs and puts her hand on Amelia’s head.

“Well, sweetie. This man was very bad before he came here to us to be saved. He did drugs and bad things and poisoned his body. Since it is your first time, he agreed to stay asleep so you can do your art in peace.”

Amelia smiles before turning back to me. “I get to make art!”

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I squeeze my eyes shut and try to keep the bile from my throat. If I thought it would help, I would cover my ears, but there is nothing to keep the sounds from getting to me. I hear everything.

I hear when Jane offers Amelia a scalpel.

I hear the man's skin being pulled apart.

I hear the wet splatter of god-knows-what.

And I hear Amelia giggling.

I remember the first time Jane showed me a person's insides. I cried until she slapped me across the face. I don't think I've cried since then. I do remember that I used to be bothered by the blood, though.

But not Amelia.

Throughout the entire project, Amelia is fascinated. Happy. Whatever darkness is in me now was one born from circumstance. My lack of empathy is one instilled in me by necessity, and by Jane.

But not Amelia. Not Teddy.

Though she appears small and sweet, I am afraid she already has the same darkness that lives in Jane. Only time will tell.

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Chapter Five

Branson

I'm already in my cage, as usual, when Amelia is brought down again a few days later. I haven't been brought upstairs since her first victim, and my eyes follow the girl as she and Jane walk into the room. Neither says anything while Jane opens the cage and lets the girl in. By the time the door shuts, Amelia's hands are already wrapped around the bars of her cage and she's looking at me hopefully.

"Hi, Branson!" she greets, "I read the rest of that story last night, so now I know the ending! So, the prince—"

I shake my head lightly but don't say anything and her words trail off.

"Branson, what's the matter?"

I sigh and look up at her, noticing how big and worried her eyes look.

"Amelia..." I stop, unsure how to say what I need to.

"What's wrong? Did I do something? Are you mad at me?"

I look up at her watching me earnestly and sigh.

"No, I'm not mad at you," I tell her, "I just... What did you think of your project?"

Amelia's face splits into a wide smile. "Oh, Branson, it was so fun! Did you see me? Jane said I did a really good job too, and today, I get to do more."

A headache pounds unforgiving behind my eyes.

"Amelia, you shouldn't—fuck—I mean..."

"What is it?"

I consider what I can possibly say. Does she even understand what she's doing? She must. She's not that young, is she? Should I even tell her? And if I do tell her, what then? She'll either feel bad about what she's doing and that is just doing to get her in trouble with Jane, or she won't. And is that something I am prepared for? Better for her she wants this, that she doesn't end up like me.

Standing there in her pink lace dress—the picture of innocence—she watches me.

"Nothing, Amelia. Just want to make sure you're happy."

In hell, innocence is a curse, not a blessing. And I won't be the reason for her curse.

Chapter Six

Branson

Two Years Later

“Get up, lazy!” A small, shrill voice yells at me. “It’s cleanup time!”

I barely manage to hide the groan as I push myself off the cold floor. My head is pounding, but that is nothing new, and the sound of Mia singing the cleanup song is only making it worse.

I stumble as I stand and make my way over to the doorway where she leans down to unchain my foot. The only time I’m allowed off the ankle chain now is if I have to go to the workroom to clean, and as much as it’s a horrible job, it’s also a sweet relief to get away from the constant chafe of the metal ring. The one on my neck, however, is never removed.

I made the mistake almost a year ago to try to escape with Amelia. At first, it almost seemed like we might succeed until we got part-way through the house and the girl began to panic and scream. Since then, I’ve been in chains.

I lean down and let Amelia click the leash into place and drag my feet down the hall behind her. She is still humming the cleanup song under her breath as she walks me, like a dog, through the gallery and into the workroom. I have to hunch over a bit because she is so small still.

“Ahh, my favorite pet,” Jane says as we enter. “And how are we doing today?”

Jane cackles as though she’s said the wittiest thing, but I say nothing. This last year I’ve learned that it makes no difference if I answer or not, if I’m respectful or rude. The end result is always the same.

“Alright, pet. Chop chop! I want this place spic and span.”

And with that, they leave me to their mess, clicking the door locked behind me.

I sigh and squeeze the bridge of my nose for a moment to try to get rid of the headache before opening my eyes again to see what I’m dealing with today. It doesn’t work, of course, but this also doesn’t surprise me. It smells fresher, at least, so I think this was a shorter kill. Probably one of Mia’s, then. I’ve heard Jane complain the girl has no patience with her kills. As I look down at the mess, I shudder to think of what a long kill would look like.

Without further delay, I make my way over to the cupboard, grab some garbage bags, and start to pick up pieces of bone and flesh.

It takes me a few hours to clean the worst of the mess and now my head is pounding worse from the sickening smell of bleach and blood. I pause for a moment and sit, deciding how to tackle the last of the bloodstains, when Mia walks in.

“Tsk tsk,” she wags a finger at me, “Taking a break? I don’t think Jane would like that much.” Her smile is mischievous, and I narrow my eyes at her. She giggles before her face gets serious and she glances down the hall behind her.

“How are you?” she whispers in a different voice, the real one, not the high-pitched psychotic one that she adopts for Jane. Not the voice of Teddy. I give her a wan smile and nod.

“I’ll be okay, just a headache.”

She nods and looks down the hall again to make sure no one is coming before taking a bottle of water from a pocket in her dress and handing it to me. I grab it and drink it down greedily, ignoring the splashes that rain down on my bare chest.

Mia watches me without judgement and takes the empty bottle when I finish.

“Thank you,” I rasp. She nods before turning and skipping back down the hall. She hums a lullaby as she leaves and I close my eyes for a moment, letting the sounds wash over me, before turning back to my work.

???

It’s a few more days in my room before Bud shows up to bring me to clean the workroom again. As soon as I enter the room, the smell of blood washes over me and I know it’s going to be a long day. My eyes fall over the varying surfaces coated with red. I notice a small shoe print on the floor and know who made this mess.

Swallowing back my judgement, I start to work and let my mind wander to the P encyclopedia I started reading.

Palatine bone. Palm. Palpebral gland.

I hear soft footsteps carry down the corridor and wait to see if another set follows, breathing a sigh of relief when it doesn’t. Mia steps in looking pristine and out of place.

“Sorry about that,” she says, nodding down to the puddle of blood at my feet. “Hit a vein I didn’t mean to. Got all over Jane, though. It was hilarious.”

The corner of my mouth does twitch at the thought, but I don't say anything, turning back to my mop.

“What's wrong?” she asks me quietly. I slow my movements while I consider my words. It's not like I blame 'Teddy' for the things she does with Jane, and making her feel shitty about it hardly helps, but I've never been able to lie to her. I look at her and sigh.

“How can you do it?” I ask her, and without needing to ask, I can tell she knows what I mean.

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“I don’t know how you can’t,” she says with a shrug, “You’d be surprised, Branson, at how good it feels. It’s like nothing else.”

I don’t say anything.

“At least I got her to stop doing kids and stuff, and you know none of them are good people.”

She knows the right things to say because she knows me all too well. A familiar pang of regret at not trying to talk to her sooner stabs me, but really, I know there is nothing I ever could have done.

“It’s not their death that bothers me,” I tell her. “It’s that I’m worried that Jane will twist you too far. That you’ll be like her. You’re too perfect to be anything like her.” I reach a hand out to touch her cheek and she smiles.

“I’ll never be like her,” she promises. I give her a sad smile back but say nothing, and after a few minutes, I hear her footsteps fading back down the hall.

That night I dream of viruses. Infecting darkness wherever they go.

In my dream, the virus’s name was Jane.

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Part 2

Though she be but little, she is fierce.

William Shakespeare

Chapter One

Teddy

Two Years Later

Age Fifteen

“Can I get new bed sheets for my room too?” I ask Jane as we pull up the driveway. It’s been years since we’ve come up this road, but I’ll never forget it. The city isn’t so far behind us, but even still, this seems like our own world out here.

“We’ll see,” Jane replies, and I can tell she isn’t really paying attention to what I just said. My eyes narrow but I say nothing. She’s been in a foul mood all day and I don’t know why; you’d think she would be happy about coming home. I’m fairly sure it has something to do with Branson, though she’d never admit it. A smile curves on my lips when I think of the fun I’m going to have with him.

“Do you think Branson missed me?”

I notice Jane tense up next to me—I’ve gotten good at reading her—but she turns to me,

the smile on my own lips mirrored on her. My eyes peer into hers, an inky black I've always loved. Mine are this ridiculous bright green shade that seem to hide nothing. Jane gives me shit for being so easy to read. She doesn't realize I've gotten excellent at playing all my parts, including hiding things from her when I need to.

Little Teddy is all grown up and can't wait to play with old toys.

"I think he likely did," she answers slowly. "I imagine your reunion will be quite... interesting for him."

We pull up to the driveway and I breathe in through my nose, smiling on the exhale.

"Yes, I think you're right."

The bushes around the property are denser than I remember, the paint on the exterior of the house more chipped away, but otherwise it's exactly the same. The barn around the side, not visible from where we stand. What I know to be black paint covers the inside windows, keeping all that's inside hidden.

"Do you miss your gallery?" I ask Jane as she steps out of the car.

"I do," she replies wistfully. "The country was beautiful, but it's not the same. I'll send Bud up to get some of our works in a few weeks once I've settled."

"We're going to need more space soon."

"If you wouldn't make such big pieces, then we'd have plenty," she snaps, and I laugh. Jane gets solemn as she stands there and looks at the property. I know now that it was her family's when she was a child. Her mother ran the antiques business out of the barn that she still uses. I've tried to probe more about Jane's past, about why she is who she is, but I haven't gotten far.

I'm not an idiot and know Jane's a psycho. Fuck, I'm no better. That doesn't mean I don't want to understand the woman who has mentored me, nurtured my darkness, and let it thrive. My real mom was hardly a mom, but even that junkie whore saw something inside me and tried to tame it.

I've always been fascinated by the macabre, but it's Jane who let it flourish.

She's a controlling madwoman, and I owe her everything.

"You okay, Mama?" I ask her, knowing the endearment always makes her happy. Turning to me, she gives a wan smile and nods.

"Yes, fine. Just the mixed feelings of coming home."

I nod as though I understand, but for me there is no mix. As much as it was fun traveling with Jane, spending time in the city and on the road, I crave the comfort and familiarity of the only home I've ever known.

Still smiling, I skip the rest of the way down the driveway.

Home.

Chapter Two

Branson

My heart is thumping in my chest when I hear the upstairs door open. I've been hearing Bud moving around all day, but I don't think that was him. I've gotten pretty used to his footsteps the past few years. And Jane's steps, well, I've known those almost my whole life. This step is softer and holds a different cadence.

Mia.

Two years it's been since I've seen her. I wonder if she's thought of me as much as I've thought of her. It's been hell, honestly. I hope Jane's treated her better than Bud has me. Fury courses through my veins at the thought of Jane hurting her, but I don't think it's likely.

I've had a lot of time to think about the whole thing and I'm sure it's because of me she took her in the first place. She didn't like us getting close.

I'll never forget the day Jane came to take her away.

I was cleaning, and Mia was sitting around watching me. Pretty usual if Jane didn't have anything for her to do. I can't for the life of me remember what we were talking about, but I do remember laughing a lot.

When Jane's steps came down the hall, we both stopped and Mia began ordering me around. Apparently, we didn't do well enough at hiding our friendship. Jane came in,

took off my chains, and put me in my room. Then she told ‘Teddy’ to say goodbye, we wouldn’t see each other for a while.

If I had known then it would be years, maybe I would have fought back instead of sitting in my room like an asshole and waiting.

And fuck, did I wait.

I put down my book and listen intently, my body vibrating with excitement. I don’t know what changed, or why they’re back, but I don’t care.

Amelia.

After two years, I’ve decided that change, any change, is better than living like this. Other than getting me to help out with a few random chores, I’ve basically been in my room this whole time.

After a few months, I lost it and tried to kill myself again thinking Teddy was dead, never coming back. Bud found me bleeding out downstairs and, unfortunately, saved me. By the time I came to, he’d had enough time to tell me that Jane would hurt Mia if I tried that again. I sat in my room chained up and alone while I healed for the coming weeks. I didn’t try to kill myself again.

After that, though, Bud actually brought me a few more books and a small TV. I spent days and weeks pouring over that little TV, despite its static and the fact it only gets a few channels. For the first time, I got to learn a bit more of the world outside these walls.

The one benefit of living outside of the cage for so long is my body is finally filling out, turning from a young boy into a man. I’m still skinny, a result of so little food, but I’m strong. I’ve made sure of that.

My room is small, but big enough that I can exercise. And I do, every day. I can do over a hundred pushups now without breaking a sweat.

I hear another set of footsteps from above and feel the corner of my mouth twitch. Those are Jane's steps. Which can only mean one thing.

They're home.

???

It's another day before Bud comes to get me. I know better than to bother asking him anything. Instead, I follow him down the gallery I haven't been through in a long time. I want to ask a million things about Amelia—and fuck, even Jane—but I stay silent. I don't even object when he puts me back in the same damn tiny cage from when I was a kid, even though I can barely get my body in. He grunts at this and mutters something about a bigger one before lumbering off.

Despite my discomfort, the familiarity of all of it actually makes me feel at ease.

Even when Bud brings a young man down and places him on the table, I don't care. Even when I realize he's alive.

Nothing can faze me.

Mia's home.

???

It's a few hours later when he wakes on the table with a start and I sigh, waiting for the inevitable freak out. It's been so long since I've been here, but I remember well enough how it all works. I can't see their faces from my cage, but I can always tell

when they lift their head, look around. The shouting comes soon after usually. It's almost clockwork, even after all this time.

I frown when his head drops after a moment and he says nothing. I wait another minute before I can't contain it.

"Why aren't you freaking out?" I ask him bluntly. His head swivels until he twists around enough to lock eyes with mine. Small cuts already cover his face and chest and my brow knits into a frown. Some of them look cauterized already, black instead of red. He looks at my cage for a moment before turning and laying back down on the metal slab.

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"I figure she ain't through with me," he says, his voice flat and resigned.

I let out a small humorless laugh.

"Yeah, you're probably right," I agree because really, what else is there.

We sit in silence for a few minutes. I'm not as comfortable with change as I thought. I'm uneasy with this change of demeanor of Jane's victim and wonder what's changed the last few years.

"How long have you been here?" he asks randomly. I dart my eyes back over to the table for a moment, thinking about if I should answer before deciding there's no harm.

"About fourteen years," I tell him. At that, he snaps his head toward me, abject fear in his eyes. The contrast to a moment ago is startling.

"What did she do to you?" I ask in a whisper. It's the first time someone has acted more scared of being where I am than being on that table. I empathize, but wonder what the fuck Jane did to him if he's already figured that out.

He looks at me a minute longer before turning back around. I get the sense he's thinking of how to answer so I stay quiet.

"I-I woke up in her bed," he says, his voice barely above a whisper. "I was just down at the Subway hanging around with friends and went to take a piss and woke up there. At first when I woke up and saw her, I actually laughed."

“Laughed?”

“Well, I wasn’t afraid when I saw it was a girl.”

A foreboding shiver runs up my spine.

“Girl?”

He ignores me, apparently lost in recollection. “She didn’t like when I laughed. Sh-she cut me and then...”

“And then?” I urge him on, needing to hear it as much as I dread it.

“Fuck, she started dancing and shit and then cutting me. Sh-she got mad when I couldn’t... get h-hard and she... she....”

I interrupt, swallowing deeply. “This girl,” I ask, “Was she young?”

“She was barely more than a child,” he says, though I don’t think he’s answering my question or even listening to me. My heart crashes at his words. Mia did this. No, Teddy.

“She practically fucking raped me!” he cries out suddenly. “I couldn’t help it. She just kept rubbing blood on me. I couldn’t help it! Then when I couldn’t do it anymore, she cut me and sent this crazy fucker to take me away!” He’s frantic by the time he finishes, and I regret asking. I feel myself pale as a wave of nausea rises. The cuts all over his body make infinitely more sense now.

“Did....”

Before I can finish, a voice carries down the gallery corridor. My eyes widen.

“Ring-a-ring-a-rosies,” she sings, “Pocket full of posies!”

The door slams open and Amelia steps in. I can’t breathe, taking her in for the first time in years. She’s so grown up. So... beautiful.

The homeliness of her as a child has fallen away to reveal a beautiful young woman, though she’s still wearing a ridiculous frilly dress, much like when she was younger. Long blonde hair falls around her face and she looks at the boy on the table with a manic grin. My heart beats fast as I watch her, willing her to look at me.

“A-tishoo, a-tishoo we alllll falllll down!” She finishes on a shout, jumping and falling flat like a rag to the ground in front of my cage. Her eyes are closed for a moment before they open wide and the grin reappears.

“Just kidding!” she shouts, jumping up with a ‘ta-da’ motion. “Y’all can’t get rid of me that easy!”

When neither of us respond, she scoffs.

“You guys are boring,” she says. “Let’s have some fun.”

She walks over to the cupboard and starts rifling through, and my voice finally comes back to me.

“Mia?” I manage to croak out, trying to come to terms with this crazy young woman in front of me, so at odds with the girl I knew. Her back straightens and she turns slowly, a scalpel in her hand as she makes her way over to the cage in front of me.

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My hands grip the bars, my body wanting to be as close to her as possible. Her smile is soft as she kneels in front of me, her green eyes staring into mine.

I don't register the way her smile changes from sweet to evil, only the pain as the blade slices across my knuckles. Hissing, I pull my hands back and look up at her as she laughs.

“You can call me Teddy,” she says, winking at me before turning back to the table.

My eyes are wide, jaw dropped, as I watch Ameli—no, Teddy—turn back to the boy at the table. I feel cold inside and my own heart is deafening to my ears. Gone is the sweet girl I knew, twisted by the years Jane kept us apart. My hands are bleeding steadily but I don't notice until Teddy pops back in front of my cage, placing her hand under the blood that's dripping to the floor to catch it.

She watches my face, her big green eyes searching for a reaction. I glance down at her hand, coated in my blood, and swallow deeply. It looks so red against her skin. I can't help but wonder what her blood would look like on me.

Keeping her eyes on me, she slowly lifts her hand until it's just out of reach of her mouth. A slow smile curves her lips and a small pink tongue darts out to lick her fingertip. My eyes practically bug out of my head when she lets out a small hum then giggles, flicking her hand at me and splattering blood everywhere. I don't react when it covers my chest and face.

“Yum,” she says before winking at me and jumping up and back over to the table.

“Well, well, my pretty plaything,” she sings at the boy on the table, the tone reminding me so much of Jane. “How are we doing? Did my pet keep you good company while I was gone?”

The boy doesn't respond and I'm too in shock to even move, much less say anything. Teddy sighs, putting her hands on her hips.

“Well, you're no fun either,” she pouts. “Won't even talk to me anymore. Can't fuck, can't talk. Guess I'll just keep coloring.”

“No!” he shouts, straining against his bonds, “I'll talk to you! I'm sorry, I'll talk.”

With her back to me, I can't see what she's grabbing and can't for the life of me figure out why he wouldn't want her to color. Unease fills me even before she turns around.

“Now I don't want to,” she replies as she turns around holding something I don't recognize in her hand. It looks like a fat pen with cords coming from it.

“Please!” the boy starts crying, the sound of his piss hitting the floor only barely audible over his screams. Teddy grins, moving closer as she clicks a small button and turns the device in her hand, holding it just like a pen. It emits a small buzzing sound.

The boy's cries continue and all I can do is sit and watch as she brings the pen down on his shin. The scream rises in pitch just as the smell of burning fills my nostrils, a combination of meat and burnt hair. She steps back after a moment and the boy's sobs continue. And then I see her creation.

The tool is something that burns deeply, leaving the marks of small flowers with angry red and black. My eyebrows rise, and as morbid as it is, I'm actually a bit impressed with her drawing skills, especially considering the medium.

“Pretty!” she exclaims, leaning forward to continue her drawing.

She keeps going until most of his body is covered in small burnt flowers. Jane never comes, and the screams don't stop. Neither do her laughs. My headache rages on.

I'm not even surprised when she pitches me into darkness and locks the door behind her. My mind is racing, trying to comprehend what I just saw, what she's become. What Jane's turned her into.

A steady drip is the only sound keeping me company.

Chapter Three

Teddy

By the time I'm finished my 'drawing', my boy-toy is no good for bringing upstairs any longer. No matter, though. Jane said now that we're home, we can get Bud to do it for us. No more nights in the alleys getting victims for us or disposing of them in random—and sometimes disgusting—ways. Not that I minded all that much. Those considered to be the scum of the city fascinate me.

I ignore Branson in the cage behind me while I finish up. I haven't quite decided what to do with him yet or how best to fuck with him. I can tell my little show unnerved him earlier, but that's only the beginning. Jane taught me the truth and made me see.

The boy on my table is finally unconscious, his breathing shallow. I could leave him to suffer and die, keep Branson company. The thought is appealing because I know how much Branson would hate it, though he'll be cleaning it up either way.

Sighing, I look down one more time before shrugging and dragging the scalpel across his throat. The boy's eyes open and I stare down smiling, cocking my head as the light rapidly fades from his eyes. Unlike Jane, there is no more appeal to me once they're dead. I make art sometimes for fun or to please her, but it's the pain I want and crave.

“Bye bye, little toy,” I whisper, hopping off the table. I look down at my dress, now covered in blood and small burn marks. “Oh, dear.”

“What the fuck happened to you?” I hear Branson croak and I perk up. I wondered if it might take him longer to accept that ‘Teddy’ is here to stay. The scalpel twists in my finger, stabbing the tip until I feel a sharp prick and I bite my lip in pleasure. Blood drips down. Turning to him, I put my bloody finger to my chin.

“Hmmm,” I say, slowly moving closer as I rub my chin. “I’m not sure what you mean. I’m the same ol’ Teddy!” I spread my arms out, grinning. His eyes look fucking dead as they watch me, and I let out a high-pitched laugh.

“Oh, Branson! I missed you so much! We’re going to have so much fun now that I’m home!”

I do a little twist in front of him, reveling in the look of misery on his face. I anticipated that he’d be expecting his little Mia when I walked in. He doesn’t realize that Amelia has been gone a long time. They all call me Teddy now.

“Now, don’t you go anywhere,” I say with a wink before turning off the light.

I close the door behind me with a giggle.

I’m so glad I’m home.

???

I make my way upstairs to go look for Jane, finding her in the living room talking quietly with Bud who has his back to me. I look at the big man with disgust. We did well enough on the road when I got our victims. I get that she doesn’t want to expose herself, but using such a repulsive man makes no sense to me. At least she could get herself a young, hot one or something.

Still, he handles the shit at the antique shop, from what I can tell, and does all the

grunt bullshit for us outside the house.

My black shoes click against the wooden floor and Bud turns around, his eyes widening as he sees me for the first time in years. I don't fail to notice the familiar reaction to how I look, the one that tells me much about Bud's preferences. Pig.

I narrow my eyes, growling at him before letting off a small bark in his direction. His eyes get even wider before he drops his gaze. From the corner of my eye, I see Jane smirk.

"You need something?" she asks. My gaze burns into Bud a moment longer before I turn to her, delivering my best smile.

"Oh, not much. Just finished up the last one, that soldering pen is fantastic. Nothing to save, all for the garbage."

Jane frowns. "What a waste and much too fast. It'll be another week before I can send Bud to get another one."

I shrug. I know she is all about the art, and while I try to please her to a degree, my time in the workroom is for me, not her.

"Where's Branson?" she asks. I feel her trying to read me, but I merely let a manic smile show through.

"Still in his cage. He didn't seem to like what I did with my toy."

Jane turns to Bud. "Did you get the item I asked?"

He nods, lumbering over to the table and pulling out a bag to give to her. She pulls it out and hands it to me, and my smile grows.

“It’ll be perfect for him.”

Chapter Four

Branson

It's a lot harder to judge the passing of time in the cage in the dark, but I imagine I've been in here for a few hours, otherwise I think it would already be starting to smell more. As it is, the scent of stale blood is almost like an old friend.

I've had the time to think about it, but somehow the puzzle of Amelia—or the girl that was Amelia—is something I haven't cracked. I suppose I shouldn't be all that surprised. She was always a bit strange, and her fascination with death is nothing new. Maybe the difference is before I could almost convince myself she didn't know what she was doing.

Though she's clearly fucking psychotic, it's also clear that 'Teddy' knows exactly what she's doing.

I'm pulled from my thoughts by the sound of familiar heavy footsteps coming toward me. Shifting my neck, I know I'm going to feel like hell when I get out of this stupid cage. My limbs have long since fallen asleep and I don't know if I'll be able to stand.

It's been so long since I've been in here. When I was a child, I spent days in here and while it wasn't comfortable, it wasn't like this. But I was also much smaller then. It really is incredible what a few years not cramped into a tiny cage will do for one's growth.

The light flicks on, effectively blinding me, and sure enough, Bud lumbers in and

heads over to the table. He eyes the corpse critically before grunting and pulling it off the table and into the waiting bin below. I say nothing, knowing that no amount of prompting or asking has ever gotten me out of here faster.

Bud pushes the bin toward the door then stops in front of my cage, bringing his head down.

“Miss your room? Gotten a bit small for ya, eh?” he mocks me, throwing his head back in laughter like he said the funniest thing. I say nothing, more than used to his idiot brand of harassment. There’s only one person who can cut me down with words.

Once Bud sees he isn’t going to get a reaction out of me he scoffs, opening the door to the cage.

“Well, come the fuck on then,” Bud says.

I move as fast as I can, which isn’t fast, to untangle my long limbs from the tiny cage. As predicted, my arms and legs tingle as the blood rushes back into them and my head swims with dizziness for a moment. Bud’s hand grabs my arm and leads me down the gallery and I’m actually thankful, because I’m pretty sure I would fall over otherwise.

We approach my room but instead of shoving me in, Bud pushes me toward the stairs. I hesitate a moment before he pushes me again.

“Come the fuck on then. I haven’t got all day, and the missus wants to see ya,” he grumbles. Swallowing, I make my way up the stairs to Jane for the first time in over two years.

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“Well, well,” Jane says as I enter, clapping her hands and standing from her desk, “Look at how you’ve grown!”

I stand still and silent when she walks over to me, circling around. My skin burns with her eyes on me. I notice that I’m finally taller than her and I have to keep the corner of my mouth from turning up at the thought.

My eyes stay downcast as she continues whatever inspection she thinks she’s doing. I flinch when her hand reaches out to my chin, lifting my eyes to look into hers. I suppress a shiver at the sight of their inky depths, the psychosis just below the surface. She looks older than I remember. Bits of grey line the edges of her face, the lines around her eyes and mouth more pronounced than before.

“Still some fire in you yet,” she says in a whisper before dropping my chin. She turns and grabs something off of her dresser. I see a flash of what looks like a collar and feel myself tense from the phantom weight around my neck. The scars there are a result of the metal yoke I wore for so long before they left. Instinctively, I take a step back, knowing I can’t survive being in chains. Not again.

“Jane, please....”

My foot stops at Bud standing behind me and I push away, trying to get away from his grasp. He grips my arm as Jane turns, holding some kind of black plastic collar with a device on it. I thrash in earnest but even as strong as I’ve gotten, Bud is larger and stronger.

“Jane, please, I’ll listen!” I plead even as Bud wraps his arms around my chest, holding me in place. Screaming, I kick and flail even though I know it’s useless. I’d feel pathetic right now if I wasn’t scared shitless.

But if Jane wants me in a collar, then in a collar I’ll be.

She steps closer and I all but growl at her, even when she gets close enough to click the device around my neck. The second the weight drops, Bud releases me and I fall to the ground, my hand immediately going up to my neck. It's not metal like before. It's smoother with something electronic attached to it. My chest heaves as a type of fury I've never felt before fills me.

Before I can think about what I'm doing, I scramble up with a scream and dive toward Jane. I don't even get to her before pain like nothing I've felt shoots through me, and I drop like a rock. My breath comes out of me in a rush as another jolt hits me and all I can do is convulse on the ground.

By the time Jane releases the button in her hand, black is swimming in my vision. It takes a moment to clear and when it does, I realize I've pissed myself and almost bitten through my tongue. Blood fills my mouth, dripping down my throat.

I hear footsteps approach and manage to peer one eye up at Jane. The look of absolute disgust is written on her face, but she still manages a smirk as she waves the little button in front of me.

“Watch yourself, Branson,” she says in an eerie, quiet voice. “Perhaps you've forgotten what happens when you anger me in the time I've been gone. I promise you will regret that I left you alive far sooner than I will if you cause problems.”

I say nothing, just stare into her pitch-black eyes. She kicks her foot into my rib and I let out a small grunt. Her smirk grows.

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“Clean this mess up. When you’re done, you can do the dusting.”

She walks out, leaving Bud to peel me off the floor and me to realize I already regret her leaving me alive. My hand goes up to the collar, rubbing it absently.

The monotony of chores and cleaning is actually welcome, and I decide I do like the new pen torture toy, if only because it makes cleanup easier. I am a bit surprised that even after so much time has passed, my relative immunity to actually dealing with a mutilated corpse is still high. Having access to TV has meant I do better understand how the world works, and there are very specific names for people like Jane.

And Teddy, I think bitterly.

I watched a show last year about different mental disorders, and I remember being fascinated. I always knew Jane’s proclivities were against the norm, but I don’t think it ever occurred to me quite how much or what that really meant. At least now, I know there is something wrong in Jane’s head.

Before Teddy left, I guessed that she had something dark inside of her too, but I didn’t have a name for it then. I just knew she enjoyed the blood and torture in a way I couldn’t understand. Now, I also know that child or not, Teddy too has something wrong in her head.

I read once that knowledge is power. Considering I have no power in my life, knowledge is about as good as it gets.

Chapter Five

Teddy

Despite that this house is decrepit and awful—and I have some basis for comparison now after our travels—there are a few things I love about it. The best? The giant soaker tub in my own personal bathroom.

It was years ago when Jane did this room for me, and though it still reflects a little girl's bedroom, it makes me strangely happy. The vintage vanity is now filled with makeup and knives. The large canopy bed is still there, though the drapes and sheets are faded with age.

While I wait for the tub to fill, I make my way over to the long mirror beside my vanity. What a funny word for a makeup table. A vanity. It's true, though. The women and girls who sit in front of such things are just that. Vain. I am no exception.

I love the feeling of dressing up, of watching makeup transform my face into something new. Though the girly dresses Jane favors are much too young for me, there's something appealing about my woman's body in little girls' dresses. I recall the way Bud looked at me earlier, and though the thought of him disgusts me, the idea of the power I know my body holds is exhilarating.

I learned a lot on the streets without the rose-colored glasses of youth I held when I was on the streets with my real mom. I will say that Jane was right, and men truly are idiots. And many of them like to look at young girls. Quite a few found themselves on the end of my blades as a result.

Though the room is dark, my pale skin seems to shine in the low lighting. I can't help but admire how smooth it seems, save for the thick black lines running up one arm. My hand trails up the scar, the result of not tying down one of my victims well enough. I feel my teeth clench as I recall that night. How Jane decided since it was my stupidity that caused it, I would wear the scars from it. That evening, she sewed me up with the thickest black string she could find and for the rest of my life, I'll wear the reminder.

The one blemish on my otherwise porcelain skin.

My mind wanders to Branson and the scars on his body, both new and old. Perhaps it's the mindset of the child I was before I left, but he certainly seems different than before. Bigger, certainly, but there's more to it than that. It seems Jane didn't leave Bud much instruction as far as he went, and our pet has been treated better than ever. At the time when we left, I would have been glad to hear it. Now, bitterness fills me at the thought of how good he's had it while I've been gone.

In some ways, that makes this all the sweeter. I saw some small light in his eyes flicker when we had our reunion, but he doesn't know yet how far I'll go or the person I've become. He doesn't know yet that all I want, what I've been waiting for, is to break him. I have all the time in the world, and he is all mine. I've been waiting for this, trained for this, and nothing will keep me from getting what I want.

I smile at my reflection one last time, giving myself a wink before heading to the bath. When I'm done, time for more fun.

Chapter Six

Branson

It takes me days to dust and clean everything upstairs with Teddy following me around harassing me at every turn. I do what I can to not react, knowing that is what she is really looking for. Eventually Jane tells her to leave me be and I hear her tell Teddy she'll send Bud to get her a new 'toy'. I shudder when I think of the boy the other day and what he told me.

Did she really rape him? Is the girl I knew so far gone?

For the first time in years, I let familiar mantras run through my head.

Tachycardia, ventricular, Tachypnea, Tailbone, Tapzol.

What is in my head is the only freedom I have. The thought is strangely comforting. She'll try to bully and torture and tease, but at least I'll always have the respite of my own head.

The familiar sound of Bud's steps leaving the house signal time to make my way upstairs to finish up the living room. I'm eager to finish for the day before he gets back with their new victim. Maybe if I'm lucky, I won't get stuffed in the cage.

I enter the living room and Teddy is sitting on the worn couch with a magazine in her hand. I manage to peak over to see what she's reading and see a man tied up in leather on the cover.

My teeth clench but I don't say anything and continue my work.

One night a few months ago there had been a show on about sex and different fetishes, specifically something called BDSM. I was fascinated by it all. The man on TV spoke about submissives and Doms, how people found pleasure in pain and in humiliation. I imagined myself with the power to grant pleasure or pain. My eyes dart to Teddy and I feel my dick twitch at the thought of telling her what to do, hurting her for pleasure. Hers and mine.

“Maybe we should get you an outfit like this?” she says, breaking me from my wayward thoughts. I look over and see someone in a full body latex suit, even covering their head. I shudder at the thought of being so confined, but say nothing. She laughs and turns the page.

“Why do you rape them?” I finally ask, not stopping my task to turn and look at her. I hear her huff behind me and put down her magazine.

“You can't rape a boy, silly,” she tells me matter-of-factly, “I couldn't do it if they didn't want to!”

I frown, but don't respond immediately. A second later, she steps in front of me and my heart picks up in pace. She's wearing another of her ridiculous dresses, this one with little cherries all over it. Despite the childish attire, she's definitely grown into a woman the last few years. The lanky girl's body has made way for curves and it takes everything in me not to look down the ample space at the top of her dress.

A single finger reaches out, trailing down my bare chest.

“See,” she says softly. “Men only want one thing, only think about one thing.” She hums lightly, dropping her hand down to the bulge in my pants. My eyes bug out and I try to pull away, but she squeezes lightly in warning. “Even you, Branson, dear.

Despite how much you hate me, you know you want me.”

My teeth are clenched so hard I’m afraid they might crack, but I manage to keep my voice even and level, leaning my face forward, just a touch closer to hers.

“I will never, ever want you,” I lie, my voice quiet but firm. Her eyes flash with something and a grin crosses her face.

“We’ll see,” she says, equally softly, before something pricks my neck. I frown, turning in time to see the syringe just a moment before I fall.

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When I wake up, my head is pounding and my mouth feels like it's filled with cotton. I let out a groan before I notice how cold my arms are. My head lolls forward and I jerk as I realize I’m upright and tied. I have to blink a few times, but when my vision clears, I find myself in a room I’ve never been in. It looks like someone took pictures of a little girl’s room and tried to create a poor imitation. Faded floral sheets cover the bed and in one corner, a small aging vanity is covered in stuff I’ve only ever seen in movies—makeup and jars and perfumes. Besides them are a familiar tray of knives and I know whose room this is.

As I come more into awareness, I realize I’m also naked save for the collar. Ropes dig into my wrists as I struggle to get off whatever device I’m strung to.

“Ahh, you’ll not get free of those, pet,” Teddy’s voice says from somewhere behind me, “I have been practicing my knots.”

She pops in front of me, winking as she gives one of the knots a little tug.

“Let me down, Amelia,” I say through gritted teeth, angrier than anything. I hiss

when she darts a hand forward and slashes something across my chest. She comes right up to me, her face only inches from mine.

“You can call me Teddy,” she whispers, before sticking her tongue out to lick up the side of my face. I grimace, pulling back as much as I can, but the board behind my head prevents me. She laughs again, clapping in a gesture that reminds me all too much of Jane.

“Now that we have that clear, we can proceed,” she says before turning to a drawer and pulling out a small, black speaker of some kind. She fiddles with it for a moment before it starts working and music begins to play. I can do nothing but watch as she begins to sway with the beat to a song I don’t recognize. The frilly outer layer of her dress moves with her and my brow knits together, trying to figure out what the hell she is up to.

Turning, she smiles at me.

“Now, pet,” she begins, reaching behind her dress, “I believe we were having some disagreement that I intend to settle.”

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The sound of her zipper fills the room, and, in an instant, the dress drops to her feet. Beneath the girly dress, she's wearing some kind of lingerie, black lace draped strategically over her. She continues to move with the music and I'm ashamed when I feel my dick get hard almost immediately, my nakedness doing nothing to conceal it.

Her eyes dart down, and she grins before giggling, swaying her hips as she walks toward me.

"You see, pet," she says in a whisper, coming right in front of me, turning to press her back and ass against my hard member. "Men are always willing, and you've always wanted me."

I press my eyes shut as though it will block her out, though I can do nothing about her pressed up against me. Her hands come up around my neck softly. The familiar scent of her fills me and for a moment with my eyes closed, I can almost imagine I want to be here. I feel her turn around, but keep my eyes closed until she leans forward. I feel her tongue trailing along the new cut on my chest, stinging each inch.

"Things can be different, you know," she practically purrs at me. "It can be better than it ever was. You just need to let go, be mine."

My eyes shoot open and I push against my bonds, though I know I won't dislodge her. She raises her eyes to mine, but instead of being filled with mirth like previously, anger clouds them.

"Do you not want me, Branson?" she says in a soft voice before reaching out to grab my cock in her hands, squeezing tight. "Because this dick begs to differ."

Gnashing my teeth, I match her gaze and bring my head as far forward as I can.

“I will never be like you, and I will never want you,” I tell her, my voice soft and level. Her eyes widen a fraction and her face transforms as she shrieks.

“You’re lying! You want me!” she shrieks, and I’m actually taken aback for a moment. For the first time, I’m slightly frightened of this person in front of me I once thought I knew.

“What the fuck is—” Jane steps into the room at the commotion, looking at the scene before putting her hands on her hips. “Teddy! What the hell are you doing!”

Teddy turns to Jane and just screams as loudly as she can before pausing for a breath, her chest heaving. She looks practically rabid standing there in nothing but her little black outfit.

“He is mine and I will do what the fuck I want with him,” she spits at Jane with her chest heaving and my eyes widen.

I remember when I was young, maybe eleven or twelve, I did something by accident that messed up one of her projects. Jane beat me within an inch of my life for that, it took me months to recover. After that, I learned what it really was to be on Jane’s bad side. Despite the disgust and hatred I feel for Teddy, I still care. I still fucking want her, and I still fucking love her. I hate myself for it, but I know if I wasn’t tied to this fucking cross, I’d be stepping in front of her right now.

I’m tense as I watch Jane, waiting to see how she’ll react to the hellcat in front of her. My jaw drops when Jane smiles at her, stepping forward to take her hand.

“Teddy, dear,” Jane begins, the sickly sweetness to her voice making me want to gag even more than I already do, “Why don’t we go talk? Leave your broken toy here, he

isn't going anywhere.”

Teddy looks over at me, her eyes raking over my strung up naked body and her body seems to deflate. A slow smile spreads across her face.

“Okay, Mama. Let's go talk.”

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It's hard to tell how much time has passed, but the pain in my back and shoulders is numb now. I don't doubt I'll feel it when, or if, I'm released.

My mind wanders, but I do what I can to keep it from where it keeps returning. To her. Standing there in that outfit.

My body and mind war with each other. The girl who was in a way like a sister to me, but at the same time always so much more. Still so young, so twisted, and so sexual already. The fact that I look at her and feel desire fills me with shame and self-loathing. When I consider that she's a fucking psycho who treats me worse than a dog and keeps me in chains, then it's unbearable.

I'm just so fucking tired. I feel like I've spent my entire life being tired. The years spent trying to please Jane. Of hell, day in, day out. Of watching people tortured and turned into her twisted art. Then Mia coming along and bringing something alive in me again, only to have her twisted and changed worse than Jane.

At least with Jane I expected it.

Knowing Jane, this was all on purpose. Two broken souls she can control, twist, and break. In all these years, despite what I've endured, I've never felt weak, broken. Not like this.

I've seen too much death and pain for the short twenty-one years I've been alive. Any memories of my early years have been snuffed out by the depravity of the last almost two decades, and here I stand at the end of it all with nothing left.

Coming to hell was an accident, at least in my case. Most people who end up here are brought here for Her. Then again, most people who end up here didn't last nearly as long as I have.

Here I am, though, at the end of it all, and honestly? I envy the dead, for they remember nothing.

???

I jerk from a sort of half-sleep when the door opens, twisting my shoulder awkwardly and causing me to let out a grunt. My eyes rise to see Jane and not Teddy. I feel infinitely more naked than before. She moves slowly into the room, her eyes never leaving me, even when she kicks away the dress still lying on the floor.

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“What did I say about causing problems, pet?” She asks as she paces the floor in front of me.

“You think I put myself up here,” I hiss back, not able to contain it. Her eyebrow rises, and she steps forward.

“No,” she replies after a moment, “I suppose you didn’t.”

She stares at me and I want to tell her to hurry up with the nonsense and do whatever she’s going to do, but the dark warning in her eyes keeps me silent. Sighing, she continues to pace the floor. When she begins muttering to herself, I turn my ear toward her but only catch, “...will always be her weakness...” before she trails off.

I watch her closely, this woman who has been mother, mentor, and captor to me. For so many years, all I wanted to do was please her until the time came when it was my very existence that displeased her.

All the things I learned about psychopaths, the reasons people hurt others, they all seem so fragile and weak when faced with true darkness.

“Why? What did I ever do?” I ask, my voice hoarser than I’d like. She stops moving but doesn’t look at me. Rage and fire rise in me unbidden. “Why do you fucking hate me so much!”

I feel my chest heave and realize I’ve never yelled at Jane before. Despite knowing I should be terrified, I feel empowered. Strong.

My eyes narrow at her, and though I know it will cost me, I summon up what last bit of energy I have and spit at her feet. A few barely-there drops land close, but it's a pathetic display. Before I realize what she's doing, a shock runs through me, jarring me enough I bite the inside of my mouth. Blood fills it almost instantly and I lean my head to the right and spit the blood out. Taking a deep breath, I lift my head to look at her again.

Her eyes meet mine for a moment before she laughs. No, cackles. Loudly. And she doesn't stop. I stand there and feel my anger give way to confusion and, slowly, fear as the torturist who raised me continues to laugh and screech.

After several minutes she stops abruptly, and my heart pounds even faster. She makes her way over to the mirror, adjusting her hair before coming back to the cross.

Standing in front of me she smiles, leaning forward just a touch.

“You think you're so much better than us, don't you? Well, let me make one thing very clear for you,” she says in barely more than a whisper, “I despise you. I will always despise you and I will never kill you, because it gives me too much pleasure to hurt you. But if you touch her, try to fucking turn her from me, I promise you anything you've endured so far during your miserable life will be pleasant compared to what I do.”

I don't have time to react or speak before an increasingly familiar prick touches me and everything goes black.

Chapter Seven

Branson

It takes me a moment to figure out I'm even awake. It's so dark that even with my eyes open, there's nothing, but it's the urging of my bladder that finally delivers belief. My head pounds, but as the fog clears, it occurs to me that I'm horizontal. My shoulders ache underneath me, no doubt a result of being strung up so long. Groaning, my arm rises to strike out but is abruptly stopped by a wall and not the familiar bars of my cage. With awareness comes panic.

I flail my arms and legs, blocked on all sides by walls I can't see.

I stop moving, trying to slow my heart and breathing long enough to figure out where I am. Something of Jane's making. Or Teddy's.

With more patience, I move my hands around me, figuring out the size of my newest accommodation. Lifting my leg, I can't bend it fully before it's stopped by the board in front of me. Stretching down, I find the end of it is just past where my toes rest. My arms move along the smooth expanse of this new prison. Despite my efforts, I find my breathing picking up as recognition starts to hit me. I'm in a fucking coffin.

I actually let out a small laugh. My time has finally come, and honestly, I'm not sure if I'm more pissed or relieved. The panic I felt on waking is less just knowing where I am, morbid as it may be.

I always expected my death to be on Jane's table. I figured I'd piss her off one too

many times, or she'd run out of victims. Or maybe she'd just get bored one day and decide to carve me up. I didn't expect the bitch to bury me.

Then again, it could have been Teddy's idea, a dark voice in the back of my mind says.

In reality, this isn't Jane's style. She tortures, yes, but even she doesn't get the joy that Mia—well, Teddy—gets from it. Whatever darkness was in her already bloomed under Jane's tutelage. The last few years has let it grow and now, she's a full-blown fucking psycho.

My bladder presses against me and I know I won't be able to hold it much longer. All I can do and wait and see if this is my death, or just the beginning of the end.

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Time passes and there's nothing for me to track the time. Outside of the coffin all is quiet, and I wonder if I'm underground already. The thought actually makes me smile. There's something so quiet and peaceful-sounding about death.

It occurs to me that while the air is stale and unmoving, I can still breathe. So, probably not buried. Unless I'm just going to start running out of oxygen any minute now. That doesn't sound so bad, really. Better than starving to death. With the meager amounts I eat, my body is practically used to starving and I figure I'll last a long time.

Yes, drifting to sleep sounds infinitely better.

My mind wanders through the various ways I might die until a noise outside the coffin pulls my attention back. My head rises an inch, trying to determine if I did hear something, dropping when a familiar voice triggers new misery.

“Good morning, sunshine!” Teddy’s voice rings out.

Some muffled bangs ring out and I sigh, closing my eyes and readying myself for whatever is next. A few loud cracks and the lid lifts, my hands immediately flying to my face to shield against the brightness above. My eyes immediately begin to water at the light, and I wonder how long I’ve been in there. Giggles ring out above me.

“Come on out, silly,” she says. “Jane says your timeout is over now.”

I can’t see and my eyes water fiercely, but I feel something grab my hand and realize it’s hers. Squinting, I look up at her, the light behind her head making her look like some kind of golden fucking angel here to deliver me from my misery.

“Take it,” she says, shaking her hand at me again. Despite my suspicion, I know I won’t be able to get out of here on my own. I accept the offered hand and let her help me sit up, hating myself for the thrill I feel at even the smallest touch of her skin. Once upright, a wave of dizziness washes over me and I have to drop my head into my hands. A moment later, a water bottle is held out in front of me.

With infinite slowness, I raise my head to look at her rather than take the water. Big green eyes look back at me, and for a moment, I see Amelia. Not the psychotic girl Jane turned her into. She smiles and waves the water bottle at me again. I reach my hand out to take it, still eyeing her suspiciously.

When my fingers touch the condensation on the bottle, I begin to tremble and my mouth suddenly feels parched. I realize it’s probably been over a day since I’ve drunk anything. Without further delay, I bring the bottle up to my mouth and greedily drink it down, heedless of the water falling down my chest.

I gasp as I finish the last drop and look at Teddy who's watching me with hungry eyes. My brow knits in a frown at her expression, pulling down further when she

begins to giggle. My mouth suddenly feels parched again and my vision begins to blur again.

“Wha—”

“I told you, Branson,” she says, leaning forward to whisper even as I feel myself being pulled under by whatever she put in the water, “You are exactly like me, and I can’t wait to prove it.”

Chapter Eight

Branson

Saccharomyces cerevisiae. Saliva. Scopolamine.

My dreams are disjointed and violent. The smell of blood, coppery and rich, fills my senses even in sleep. I feel the smooth drag of a blade across skin, hear the hiss of pleasure as it glides effortlessly. The high-pitched screams of a young girl carries through, only accompanied by a manic male laugh.

I wake with a groan and try to turn over, nausea rising immediately at the movement. Coughing and sputtering I get to my knees, gagging and unable to expel anything in my beyond empty body.

What the fuck happened this time?

As the nausea subsides, I realize I am back in my room. Before I can breathe a sigh of relief, I hear a click and whip around to see my small TV, a VHS player now connected. Static before the tape starts again and that's when I realize that the screams, the laughs, weren't in my head.

I frown as the video plays and I see someone step onto the screen. I start as I realize it's me, the chafe scars from my collar evident and unmistakable. No recollection comes to me and I lean forward, my eyes widening as a young girl is revealed in front of me. She looks disturbingly like Amelia when she was young.

If I couldn't see my own face, the familiar marks on my body, I wouldn't believe what I was seeing. Nausea rises in me again as I watch the video play, listen to the girl's screams and my own laughter. Tears are running down my face, and when I bring my hands up, I notice the dried blood caked around my fingernails. My head drops and I heave as the girl's screams rise to a fever-pitch.

"I don't think she liked that very much," Jane's voice says from somewhere behind me. My chest is heaving, head pounding from the screams that seem to echo in my mind.

"I would never do that," I manage to rasp, unable to pull myself up from the ground. My own laugh echoes around the room, a sound I hardly recognize.

"Scopolamine is a remarkable drug. The smallest amount too much and you'll kill someone, but just the right amount, well. Let's say it makes the subject highly... suggestible."

As soon as she says it, I remember learning about it.

"Scopolamine, also known as Devil's Breath, is derived from the flower of the "borrachero" shrub, common in the South American country of Colombia. While commonly used to treat nausea and motion sickness, it is rumored to be able to, at appropriate doses, render the subject highly suggestible...."

Shame fills me with what I've done, and I feel something crack inside me as the screams on the video are abruptly cut off. I can't claim I've never hurt anyone. As a child, I more than did my part in Jane's twisted projects, but at least then I didn't know what I was doing. I certainly didn't enjoy it, beyond wanting to please Jane.

Jane knows me well, though. She knows that making me do this, making me watch it, is worse than if she had tortured me with knives.

Raising my head, I look up to Jane. She smiles, leaning down to me. I resist the urge to flinch when she reaches out to grab my chin in her hand.

“If you piss me off again, you touch or ruin her, then next time, it’ll be her in that room with you,” Jane says to me, her voice a dark warning. “You know I’d do it, Branson.”

My teeth clench as she stares into my eyes and I know that she has me. She’s figured out my worst fears and managed to make them a reality between the loss of control and the fact she made me murder an innocent little girl. She’s finally found the ultimate power over me and she knows it.

My fists clench against the ground and it takes me a moment to realize that she’s muttering something under her breath. I slowly raise my head again and look at her and, sure enough, she’s frowning and muttering something to herself. She catches me watching her and stops with wide eyes, turning on her heel and leaving abruptly.

Jane’s mood swings aren’t so unusual, but that was a bit odd. Likely the remnants of all the fucking drugs in my system. Her footsteps fade upstairs. The tape clicks to the end and the whir of the rewind begins again.

I crawl over to the screen and frantically bash at the buttons until it stops. The tape ejects and I tear it from the machine, screaming as I hurl it to the wall, but it isn’t enough. A rage I’ve never experienced seems to take over. Everything within reach is torn, wrecked, and broken. I scream until I have no voice and my room resembles nothing more than a wrecked hamster cage. Ribbons of tape flutter around the room as I finally sit back panting.

By the time I’m done, the already meager room is in shambles and the anger seems to deflate out of me, my pants turning to sobs.

I don't know how long I sit there like that for before finally raising my head only to see Teddy standing there just watching me. I feel my face heat up at the thought that she saw me crying, but I don't know why. I'm beyond shame at this point.

“What the fuck do you want?” I ask bitterly, my voice hoarse from shouting.

“I heard the commotion and it sounded like fun,” she replies, kneeling in front of me. She looks into my eyes, searching, never leaving my gaze even as she lifts a finger to take a single tear off my cheek. Still watching me, she brings her finger to her mouth and licks.

“Mmm,” she whispers. “Your tears are almost as good as your blood.”

Chapter Nine

Teddy

In the days following Jane's scopolamine experiment, the entire house seems to take a deep breath, waiting for what's next. I knew Jane would inevitably pull some power trip when we got here with Branson, but I didn't expect it to be so soon or so dramatic. I have to give it to Jane, though. If fucking with and breaking him was what she was wanting, then it is working. He's been quiet and harder to rile up the last few days, but I'll give him a short respite, let him think things are settled, before the fuckery continues.

Jane and I are still getting into the routine of being home and I find myself bored more often than not. Patience has never been a virtue of mine. At least when we were in the city or traveling, I could explore, wander.

I make my way toward Jane's room, frowning when I notice she isn't there. Just as I'm about to step away, I hear a low voice coming from her bathroom. I frown and approach the door, Jane's voice getting clearer as I approach.

"I can fucking do it, can't fucking stop me anymore. Fucking masterpiece," I hear her say. Her voice trails off until I can't hear her, so I knock loudly before taking a step back.

The door opens a split second later and Jane steps out, dressed for going out.

"What is it?"

“Who were you talking to?” I question, and her eyes narrow at me. There was a time only a few years ago when I wouldn’t have dared to ask her anything or question her in any way, much less interrupt her. What other people wouldn’t understand is that Jane simply doesn’t scare me anymore. I understand her, see her.

“No one,” she replies, “Now, what the fuck are you doing in my room?”

I raise a brow slightly at the lie but don’t push her further for now. Crossing my arms, I reply, “I’m bored. There’s nothing to do around here.”

Jane rolls her eyes and makes her way across the room to her dresser.

“You’re not a child anymore. I’m not here to entertain you.”

“Call Bud, then. Get me a new toy,” I demand. Jane whips around and glares at me, pointing a finger.

“You should have made the last one take longer. Go harass Branson or something. I’ve got to go into town to deal with some things.”

“What things? Can I come?”

“No!” she replies, a little too sharply and I hold my hands up in mock surrender. She glares at me a moment longer before turning back to the dresser and grabbing her purse.

“I’ll be home tonight.”

She walks out without another word, leaving me considering her oddness. A smile crosses my face and I look around, realizing I have the house to myself. I’ve never had much interest in Jane’s secrets before, but the boredom is real and some snooping

sounds better than anything else I could do right now. I wait until I hear the distant sound of her car pulling away before I giggle and begin to look around. My eyes land on her desk. The desk that's always been locked.

Taking a look at the lock, I realize it's a simple key lock and head to my room to grab the small lock picking kit Jane got me last year. I was surprised at the time, it didn't make sense to me, until she explained that the best places to take victims in the cities were generally locked.

I smile fondly at the memories of oh-so-many broken into warehouses and buildings. Compared to those, this is nothing.

It takes me less than a minute before the door slides open with ease. Pleased with myself, I sit down and begin to rifle through the papers.

Most of them seem to be pretty boring stuff, accounting and records for the antique business and some old newspapers. When my gaze lands on the deed of the house I twist my head, my interest renewed.

My brows knit together as I read through the papers, the name 'Sharon Ketis' appearing on many of them. Jane Ketis... her mom?

As I read, so much of Jane begins to make sense. All of it. The control, the 'art', the medical textbooks, her treatment of Branson. Shit, even Bud makes sense.

I finish and carefully put it all away, locking it behind me, and sneaking down the hall to my room.

Chapter Ten

Branson

My eyes cross and blur, a result of hours upon hours of staring at a single spider web in the corner of my room. No spider in it, just a long-forgotten web my eyes follow and trace. I marvel and envy at how it endures despite how fragile it truly is.

No one has come for me today to tell me to do anything, and the house upstairs has been quiet for a while now. I make no move to do anything. Normally, I might pick up one of my books, or turn on the little TV that is somehow still here. It all seems so pointless now, though.

I spent over two years thinking about Teddy, dreaming about her coming home and us being able to run away together. I got strong, learned all I could about the world. None of it matters now, though. Even if Teddy wanted me, we could never get away from Jane. And now that she has the scopolamine to hold over me, she knows I'd never try to leave. Not if it would risk Teddy. No, not Teddy. Mia. It's Mia I would never risk.

And despite having raised her, I know Jane wasn't bluffing. Her need for control is so much that she would literally rather sacrifice the girl she raised as her protege than give up an inch.

I've never felt so powerless.

The last few days have felt different. Almost like it all went so far, so fast, that a deep

breath is needed. Even Teddy's abuse has lessened, though not gone completely. Or perhaps I just don't care as much anymore. One thing is for sure, any hope I had of her previous sweetness, of our friendship, is gone.

The distant sound of the front door opening brings my attention back, the slam of it telling me my relative peace is going to be short-lived. I wait until I hear the click of shoes that tells me it's Jane arriving. When the sounds disappear, I assume she must be upstairs.

Closing my eyes, I lean my head against the wall and wait.

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It's a few hours before Bud comes, grunting in the direction of the workroom. Without hesitating, I stand and follow him down the familiar gallery of horrors and into the tiny cage of my youth. It's both funny and sad that there's something almost comforting about being in here, so normal. Or rather, an improvement to waking up in coffins or naked on crosses.

I sit in silence while Bud leaves, coming back with an older woman, placing her on the metal table. She moans lightly when her skin touches the metal and I have to keep a sigh from leaving my lips. Of course, it's a live, awake one. Must be for Teddy.

When Jane steps into the room a moment later, I sit up slightly. She always waits. Her so-called 'Aura of Pain' needs time to set. A knot grows in my belly as I watch her closely, taking in the tense posture and gritted teeth. I swallow deeply. It's been a long time since I've seen Jane this upset. Usually, she's controlled and measured in her anger. The idea that something has her worked up enough to be visibly upset sends a shiver up my spine.

"Anything else?" Bud's gruff voice asks Jane, who has her back to both of us. She's

looking in the direction of the woman on the table who is beginning to move slightly. She'll be awake any minute.

Jane only shakes her head, not moving when Bud leaves the room, closing the door behind him. I keep completely still and silent, grateful it's a skill I learned young. Jane hasn't even acknowledged my presence yet, and I expect this will be bad enough whether she does or not.

The woman on the table twitches, her wrist catching against the straps holding her door.

“Wha—” the woman's voice rasps, “What is this! Wha—”

A sharp crack rings out. I think Jane slapped her. She paces in front of the table, and I can't keep my eyes away. Before I would hate to watch, but it's like I can see Jane's control crumbling and it's fascinating.

“Thought I'd be a failure, didn't you?” Jane whispers, and I feel my brow knit together in a frown. Who is the woman on the table? I've never heard Jane speak to one of her subjects before like it was someone she knew.

“What are you talking about? Who are—”

Slap.

“Don't act like you don't know,” Jane spits, opening the cupboard and grabbing one of her small knives. “You always held me back, even now you can't stop being a stupid bitch, can you? You never saved me then, why should I help you now?”

Jane is at the woman's side in an instant, the blade cutting into the woman's thigh and eliciting a scream. I watch with interest as Jane continues to stab the woman's legs,

her face so screwed up with anger it would be comical if not for what she was doing. The normally measured movements are abrupt and messy, full of emotion. The woman on the table pukes and I wrinkle my nose as the sour smell hits me.

“You can’t fucking stop me,” Jane hisses as she brings the blade up to the woman’s chest. This time I have to turn away.

“I don’t need to be a fucking doctor. Not like him. I’ll never be like him.”

Jane continues to berate the woman and speak to her as though she is someone she knows, but it’s clear this woman doesn’t know her.

The sounds of pleading are so like they’ve always been, but I know something is different. I’ve seen Jane kill literally dozens of people or more, but she was always in control.

I don’t know what prompted this and doubt I ever will, but as I listen, it’s clear Jane is speaking to someone else, answering them.

The thought of Jane losing control is one of the only things that could still scare me. Even as this thought crosses my mind, a slow smile spreads across my face.

Then again, maybe if she loses it on me, I’ll finally be put out of my misery.

Chapter Eleven

Teddy

I frown as I look in the cupboard before going back to the fridge, as though opening it again will elicit different results.

Fucking nothing!

Grumbling, I make my way upstairs, my pink robe trailing up the stairs behind me. Jane's door is closed, but I know she's always awake at dawn. As I approach, I hear her voice through the door and wait, wondering why the fuck she has someone in her room. I didn't check on Branson this morning, but I figured he'd still be cleaning up whatever shit from last night.

I knock, hard, and step back with crossed arms. Jane's voice stops and she opens the door. I frown as I take in her appearance. She's wearing some kind of nightgown, but it's crumpled and there's a stain on the front of it. Instead of her usual neat and tiny hair bun, frizzy bits stick out all over the place and there are bags under her eyes.

"Good morning," I say with a note of hesitation in my voice, abandoning my plan to ream her out about food.

"What?" she snaps, and I turn my head, looking at her quizzically.

"What's going on? Are you okay?" I ask in a low voice and her face softens slightly. She is a psycho, controlling bitch, but I know she cares in her own strange way. After

the revelations I had last week, I understand so much better why she is who she is.

“Of course,” she replies, “Now, I’m busy though. I’ll see you tonight.”

She clicks the door behind her, and I stand there a moment looking at it before making my way back downstairs. By the time I get back to the kitchen, I hear the sound of the metal garbage shoot being closed and know that means Branson is done. I move to the basement door and ring the bell at the top, stepping back with a smirk on my face.

It was such a good idea to do that. I learned it from a dog show and figured it’d be a nice demoralizing touch to have him beckoned by a bell. It only takes a minute before he appears at the top of the stairs and I crinkle my nose at him.

“Ew! You smell,” I tell him, pinching my nose. He looks at me blandly, waiting. I roll my eyes at him.

“Fuck, you’re dull. Go rinse off, you need to make my breakfast.”

He blinks at me.

I narrow my eyes at him while reaching into my pocket until I pull out the small button for his collar. His eyes land on the control and I see him tense slightly. I feel myself smile.

“Any questions?” I mock and feel a small thrill at watching his jaw clench. Blood splatter covers his chest, but there’s only one drop on his cheek and I can’t help but think about how much I want to lick it off him.

I see a flash of something in his eyes before he nods shortly, moving jerkily toward the bathroom. After a few steps, I press the button and he seizes briefly at the shock

but stays upright. He doesn't turn and look at me, just keeps walking.

I roll my eyes again.

Fucking boring.

I need to up my game, otherwise being here is going to get way too dull, way too fast. Jane took a new victim, so I know I'm screwed for at least another week. There's always the forest, but the peaceful solace I go there for isn't what I'm craving these days.

While I wait for Branson to clean up, I head up to my room and grab a notebook and pen, placing myself at the kitchen table. With a smile, I write my heading and start making notes until he comes back a few minutes later, his chest and face now clean.

"I think you looked better with the blood," I tell him with a wink. "Look!" I show him my paper, the words 'Branson Torture List' at the top. He frowns and looks at me.

"Things are getting boring, I thought I might come up with some fun stuff for us to do!"

I watch his face as he scans down the first few items on the list before straightening and looking into my face. His expression is a mask, but I see the hurt behind his eyes. I ignore the smallest knot in my belly.

"Why?" he asks, and I grin, standing and bringing my face as close as I can to him without him leaning down.

"Because I can."

His jaw tenses as he looks down on me, and I see a pleasing morsel of hurt in his eyes.

“Pancakes,” I tell him with a wink before turning back to my paper. He stands there for only a second before moving over to the cupboard to pull out ingredients.

As he pours the last of the mix into the pan, a glob falls to the side, landing on the floor. I look at the stray drop and get an idea, standing and pointing down at it.

“You made a mess,” I say. He goes to grab the cloth off the counter, but I wag a finger at him.

“Lick it up.” I demand. He narrows his eyes at me but doesn’t move. With my hand in my pocket, I hold down the trigger button and watch as he falls to the ground convulsing.

I laugh as he continues to squirm before I finally let go. He lets out a groan, rolling to his side only inches from the floor-dough. Kneeling down beside him, I trail a hand down the side of his face and smile.

“Lick it,” I say again softly. His body trembles slightly but he inches forward until his face is only just above the mess. I bite my lip as he sticks his tongue out, shuddering as he licks it clean before dropping his head back to the ground beside me.

Above us, smoke begins to rise off the pan and I stand smiling, wiping invisible dust from my knees before grabbing a plate of unburnt pancakes.

“Don’t forget to clean up the rest,” I tell him with a wink before skipping to the dining room in significantly better spirits.

Chapter Twelve

Branson

Two Months Later

I can't tell the passage of time anymore, but I imagine it's been weeks or more since I've left the cage. It was maybe the second week when I thanked Bud for the bigger cage. I don't know if I could have lasted in the small one. I could tell he was surprised. He laughed and said I was becoming a little pussy, but I didn't care. There are so few things I can feel grateful for, I need to take what I can get.

I can be grateful for my large cage, for the bits of food that find their way to my belly.

I may be old enough to be considered a man, but they've taken any bit of humanity left in me, much less masculinity. Shame is a concept I've long let go of. There are only good days and bad days, days where I make her happy and days where I don't.

Hanging my head in my hands, my fingers run through what's left of my hair. It's been falling out in clumps for a while now and what remains is long and lanky. I can't smell myself anymore, but my skin is grimy with weeks of caked-on filth. I wish I could be clean, wash away the shame of failure and helplessness.

As always, my headache pounds on. Some days are worse than others. Today is a bad day.

Maybe today she'll come, though...

Since I can't tell the time, it's hard to say how long it's been, but it feels like more time passes between each visit. The loneliness is eating away at me and even a sobbing victim would be preferable to this. I've even come to crave when Teddy visits, even if it's only to abuse or hurt me. At least it's touch. I miss touch. The feel of anything but cold metal bars and concrete floor.

A bitter taste lingers at the back of my mouth at the thought of craving her company after all of this; but there it is. I crack my neck, ignoring the collar that's become familiar. Heavy chafe marks are around my neck from when I was young, deepened and scarred even further.

I go back to old techniques, trying to remember as many words and definitions as possible. Once, long ago, when she was Amelia, she told me she loved learning things from me. If she ever asks me again, I'll have lots of things to teach. But I'll call her Teddy now, because that's what she wants.

I swallow down the bile at the thought of the lengths I'll go to please her, remind myself there is nothing else. I have nothing else.

Thrombocytosis. Thyrocalcitonin. Thyroxine.

I drift off, letting them run through me and don't notice someone coming until the door opens. Teddy steps into the room and despite myself, I feel my heart rate pick up in excitement rather than fear.

"Why, hullo, Pet," she greets me, walking into the room and up to the metal table. She makes a noise of disgust at the corpse sitting there, pinching her nose as she turns to me. "Well, that doesn't smell nice, does it?"

I don't reply, as much as I want to. The last time I answered a rhetorical question she stabbed me and left me without food for days. I didn't mind the food or the blood, but I missed her.

Kneeling down in front of my cage she looks at me critically. I want to cover myself, my nakedness and the grit covering me, but I've learned that lesson too.

"Good," she says after a moment, pulling a key from her pocket, "Come on, then. I suppose you've been good so you can clean this up."

I wait for her to reach into my cage and attach the small red leash. I don't even feel embarrassed anymore when I crawl out behind her, waiting for her direction.

Maybe if I listen, it'll stop.

Maybe if I listen, she'll love me.

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Part 3

Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall.

William Shakespeare

Chapter One

Branson

One year later

I do my best not to move or make a sound, something I'm exceptionally good at. Sweat drips down my back and my shoulders ache from standing here for so long, but bodily discomfort is nothing. My pain tolerance is exceedingly high now. I've tried so hard, but it's not enough anymore.

Teddy says I'm boring now.

I don't try to be boring, I want to make her smile and have fun, but she says that isn't the point. I don't understand, but try harder, anyway. Maybe if I help and show them I can be a part of things, then it can be better.

I shift as subtly as I can, but Jane hisses at me, anyway. I don't like working for Jane, but she'll make me do bad things if I don't.

“Stop moving!”

Ignoring my aching arm, I focus on my breathing and keep the leg held high while Jane attaches it. Before being torn up, the man must have been a giant because his thigh weighs a ton. Jane keeps stopping and leaving. I hear her talking to herself in the hall before she comes back in, so it's taking a long time.

Down the corridor I hear a familiar sound, and my heart thumps loudly until she walks in. I want to greet her, but I know she hates that. She looks at Jane's project with interest. When her eyes land on me with a look of disgust, I feel my heart crack even though it's a familiar ache.

I do everything she wants, always, and she hates me.

Self-loathing fills me, and I drop my head.

"What's taking so fucking long?" Teddy demands, "It's starting to fucking smell in here."

Jane huffs. "No patience, child. Good art takes time."

"I'm almost eighteen, hardly a child anymore. Besides, this looks like shit."

Jane throws the leg we're holding up and the sculpture snaps, fingers flying over the ground. I stay completely still.

"Look what you made me do!" Jane screeches at Teddy, reaching out and slapping her across the face.

Teddy lifts a hand to her face, watching Jane with pure shock written on her face. My own mouth hangs open and I want to reach for her, to make sure she's okay, but I don't move a muscle. Jane's chest heaves for a moment as she watches Teddy, her black eyes narrow slits. My body is frozen, waiting to see what happens. Jane stalks

out of the room, leaving us alone.

I keep my head lowered, watching her through my lashes. Teddy watches after Jane with something akin to suspicion on her face, her cheek flaming red. I'd like to touch her, make her better, but she hasn't asked me for that.

I think back to so long ago when I told her I'd never want her. Well, she proved me wrong and now, I can't have her.

After a moment, Teddy turns back to me, looking over the mess now covering the floor. Her nose turns up in a wrinkle and I feel the corner of my mouth twitch at the gesture she's been doing since she was a child.

"Clean this up," she finally says to me, though her voice is missing its usual touch of anger. I nod and immediately begin picking up the pieces before deciding to take a risk and pausing.

"A-are you okay?" I ask her. She glares at me, saying nothing, before stomping off.

I watch after her, but not for long. Maybe if I clean up really fast and well, she'll love me again.

Chapter Two

Teddy

I grit my teeth as I walk away, leaving Branson to clean up the mess. And I know he'll do a good job too, pitiful fuck. I never should have listened to Jane, did things my own way. All she ever wanted was control, submission. But I've come to the conclusion that isn't what I crave. It's the struggle I crave.

Jane and I are different people, I've come to realize. Though our desires, our proclivities are the same, our reasons are vastly different. Jane is so broken by her past that she needs to break others, to control everything to feel safe. Me? I just like to watch the world burn. I like the challenge, the adrenaline, and thrill of a good kill. Or of torturing my favorite toy.

I spent ages looking up different ways to break him. Learning varying techniques to create a true submissive. He fought me long and hard, too. Those are days I look back on fondly, the give and take between us. Not that I gave much of anything.

I'll never forget the day I woke up and found I had finally broken him.

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I look down at him sleeping after our night of fun, a smile on my face as I take in my hard work. His body is covered in tiny scabs and cuts, and even a stick figure burnt into the flesh on his shoulder. I look at his lips, cracked and bleeding, his naked body filthy.

It's been two weeks since he's been off the chain, two weeks of pain and fun.

"Good morning, Pet!" I exclaim, ready to start again. He immediately scrambles up from his place on the ground and sits at attention. I frown, cocking my head to the side as I make my way over to him. His eyes watch mine, the usual animosity gone.

"Good morning, Teddy," he says, and my eyes widen a fraction. He's never once willingly called me Teddy before. I watch him, not sure what to do with this turn. He's listened well enough, but there's always been that defiance underneath. Until now. After a few minutes, I grab a blade off my side table and hand it to him.

"Cut yourself."

Without hesitation, he takes the knife and looks up to me. "Where?"

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At first, I was ecstatic until I realized how fucking boring it was. Jane loves it, of course. Having her own little fucking slave. For the last six months or so, she's been taking him with her everywhere like a fucking puppy. I know who she really envisions Branson as, though. Like controlling him and turning him into a puppet will make up for what happened to her.

Jane only gets more erratic by the day and I find myself spending more time on my own, away from her and the fucked-up thing she turned Branson into.

After learning so many techniques, I began to recognize Jane's manipulation better. I always figured her for a psychopathic narcissist, but it isn't until more recently I've managed to really see. She thinks she can control me, but she has no idea.

I make my way upstairs, only to hear some thumps coming from Jane's room. When I

get there, she's putting things into a bag, a picture of calm as opposed to only minutes ago.

"What are you doing?" I ask incredulously.

"I need to leave for a few days, a week at most."

Frowning, I step into the room.

"What are you talking about? Where are you going?"

She shakes her head. "Not important, we'll talk about it when I get home."

"Seriously, what the fuck is going on?"

She doesn't answer, and I take a breath in preparation for this gamble.

"Is this to do with your mom? With Robert?" I ask.

She turns quickly, stepping right up to my face, and I hiss instinctively at the sudden approach. Her black eyes stare into mine with warning.

"I don't know what you think you know, child," she says patronizingly, "but stay out of my business. I'll be back next week."

My jaw clenches, and I watch as she finishes packing, my brain rolling over everything.

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“Do you think Jane’s been acting weird?” I ask Branson while I absently pick at the pasta in front of me. The fucker’s gotten good at cooking, so at least there’s one bonus to his new dull self. Jane left already, so it’s just us for the week. Even Bud won’t be around, so no victims either, unless I want to get one myself.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he says, and I groan, tossing my fork down.

“What do you mean, you don’t know what I mean? Fucking hell! Have a fucking opinion or something.”

He looks at me for a moment, seeming to consider my words.

“She talks to herself more,” he says finally, looking at me with hopeful eyes. I sigh and let my mind wander, thinking about how she was years ago when I first arrived compared to now.

“That she does,” I agree with a sigh. I poke at the food on my plate before dropping my fork and looking up at him.

“Did she ever tell you anything about her mom? Her dad?”

Branson shakes his head. “I know they used to own the house and antique business.”

“Clean this up, I’m heading into town for a bit.”

He nods and grabs the plate.

Fuck this place. I need something to play with.

I head upstairs and look down at my outfit, a lavender apron dress I sewed myself. Though I love my dresses, I know from experience they make it hard to blend in. I've seen what the average teenage girl wears, and they dress like women—whores, mostly. I laughed the first time I sat by a high school and watched the girls pass. Clothes that let their bellies and tits hang out, no subtlety or class at all. Men leered at them openly because those women made it easy.

I, on the other hand, enjoy the sneaky watchers. The ones who watch me in my little girl dresses from the corner of their eyes, and I know that they would hurt me if they could. Not that they ever could.

The power of turning a man who thinks he's powerful into a sobbing pile of shit is one that I relish. Jane taught me that. The dresses are just another tool. There are few things better than bringing a man to his knees, except humiliating them while wearing little girls' clothing.

But today, I don't want eyes on me. Not if I am going to bring a new victim back.

Moving quickly, I make my way to my room and throw on my old victim hunting outfit from the city. The dark jeans and top do an excellent job at keeping me hidden at night, but during the day it just looks like a normal outfit.

Excitement courses through me as I make my way to the extra car sitting in the barn, an old station wagon. It took me ages, but I managed to get Bud to teach me to drive last year, and thank fuck I did. Making sure I have everything I need, I head to the city for some fun.

Chapter Three

Branson

I'm almost done cleaning up dinner when I hear Teddy leave, heading down the stairs. I look over to see her dressed all in black and my heart beats faster. I will always tell her she is beautiful whatever she wears, and it's true, but there is something about seeing her clothed in black.

Over the past months I've come to understand her so much more, accept her. I get it now, why she was so bitter at me for so long. Teddy has a darkness to her that can't be tamed, and I never accepted that. Now when I see her in her element, I revel in the beauty of her passion.

I think back to the times she wanted to play, to touch me, before and how I told her I'd never want her. I regret those words more than anything now. I want nothing more than her.

Her eyes meet mine, and she sneers before leaving out the front door. I feel a stab of sadness at the thought of her absence. I wish I could ask her to take me with her. She must know by now I'd never run, never try to leave her, but I know she'd just say no.

Sighing, I continue my chores.

As I clean, I let her question about Jane run through my head and try to think harder about how she's changed since I was young. It's strange for me to think that I've been here, with Jane, for over fifteen years now. I wonder how much better my life

would have been if I had just properly submitted earlier. It feels incredible to not have to think, to worry about things. Just listen, follow the rules, and do as I'm told.

I push the niggling thought of my own weakness aside and let images of Teddy churn through my mind.

Chapter Four

Teddy

By the time I get into the city darkness has fallen, but the streets are alive. It's still strange to me, the bustle and crazy of the city compared to the quiet calm of the country. I grew up in the silence, the solitude, and will always love it. There's something about the dark of night away from the city. The darkness permeates in a way it just doesn't in the never sleeping city.

Even still, the depravity and darkness of a city alley is something else, almost equally as fun.

Dressed in black, a small smile stays on my face as I walk through the streets unnoticed by the crowds passing me by. What dull lives they all must live. Though I watch the faces as I pass, they don't interest me until I see a flash of red ahead. My eyes narrow and I weave ahead, moving until I'm a few feet behind the woman in the stunning dress. She doesn't notice as I slow my step to follow her, cocking my head to the side to take in the details of her outfit.

Unlike me, she is dressed to stand out. The crimson dress, the killer heels, and dark makeup all designed to attract attention. Men's eyes follow her as she walks, and for the moment, I revel in my own invisibility.

In no real rush, I continue to follow her as we make our way to the edge of the downtown district and into the seedier areas. The further we go, the fewer people there are around us and I have to slow down to avoid attracting her attention. I

haven't decided if I'll kill her yet, but the adrenaline and thrill of stalking courses through me, the blade strapped to my back like a sweet caress.

After twenty minutes, the woman turns down an alley and I watch from the top as she knocks on a side door and is let in a moment later. My eyes go to the front of the building and I let out a laugh.

Perfect.

As I step into the Black Rose's Club, the heavy bass pumps through me, setting my body alight. The deep red light of the club creates shadows that dance across the room, whiffs of some kind of smoke or fog adds to the effect. It looks full, but the darkness reveals no faces, only shadows and silhouettes.

"Fifty dollars," a voice says from beside me and I blink before turning to the man at the counter who is staring at me less than impressed. The music starts up again and my attention is brought back to the stage, which has just darkened.

"Fifty? What is this place? Isn't this a strip club?"

The man snorts. "If you want a strip club, honey, you can head down to Baby Doll's down the street. If you want our kind of show, it'll be fifty dollars."

My brows knit into a frown and a familiar urge to stab the rude man strikes me, but my curiosity has been piqued. I absently reach into my pocket and pull out a crumpled bill, tossing it on the counter before stepping in. I close my eyes for a moment and let the smells and sound take me over. Sex, sweat, leather, and alcohol all combine in a heady mix. When I open my eyes, there is a grin on my face and I make my way the rest of the way in, finding a solo table just as the stage lights turn on.

“Please welcome, Cinnamon and Steve!”

I watch as the woman in red steps out and onto the stage at the same moment a slow beat starts. I feel my face heat up, my lips part as she begins to move. I can't keep my eyes off her as her body sways to the beat, the fabric of her dress flowing around her.

“Pretty amazing, isn't she?” a woman's voice says beside me. I turn and see a blonde in a dress that actually looks really similar to one I own, if not a bit more revealing. She's holding a tray with a few shots on it, and I assume she works here.

“She is,” I agree, turning my attention back to the stage where Cinnamon is still moving slowly with the music.

“Can I get you anything?” the girl asks, and I shake my head.

“I'm Lola, let me know if you need anything.”

On the stage, Cinnamon starts to pull the dress down and even my breath catches as the sight of the stunning corset beneath, red and black leather leading down to matching garters, all with small straps attached in seemingly random ways. My heartbeat picks up as the music changes and a man—who proves that men in leather pants is definitely a thing—steps out. Cinnamon turns to him with a grin, pulling out a small crop and slashing it across his chest.

My smile grows and I feel heat build at the apex of my thighs as I watch her circle him, hitting and teasing him to the beat. Even though I know it's all part of a show, I'm completely entranced. The power she holds over such a strong and powerful man, standing there completely submissive to her ministrations. My thighs rub together, eager for friction.

“Hey,” Lola says as she approaches, and I frown.

“I don’t want....”

“On the house,” she says, sliding a drink across the table. I open my mouth to object before a cry from the stage has me whipping my attention back. My jaw drops as I watch Steve grab the crop midair, twisting it around until she’s wrapped in his arms.

“I thought she was the Dom?” I say to her, using the terminology I am pretty sure suits this place.

In a quick and seamless motion, he grabs the straps of her outfit, pushing her from the waist down and clipping them together quickly.

“Just watch,” Lola whispers beside me and I find myself nodding at her words, unable to take my eyes off of Steve and Cinnamon. Her ass is in the air, clipped as she is, as he paces behind her. She struggles against the bonds and I watch her face closely as he moves in, striking her bare ass with the crop. She cries out in pleasure and the sound of the crack makes my clit twitch. I’m glad it’s loud in here because I’m pretty sure I’m panting.

“It’s all about power,” Lola says, reminding me she’s still standing there. “It’s a give and take. She has the control of the room and him, but only as long as he allows.”

“They’re incredible,” I basically whisper as the pair continue their sexual and raw show. “She likes it?”

Lola nods, coming a touch closer to me. “We all do. Like I said, it’s about control.” She pauses a moment before leaning in, breaking my attention. I look to her, noting the dilated pupils and parted lips. “My shift is almost over, I’d love to show you more of what we do.”

My eyes trail up and down her body, the slutty girl’s dress so like my own, the blonde

curls, and sultry expression. A slow smile spreads on my face and I let my teeth peek out to bite my lower lip. I've never had someone like her before, and already my mind races with ideas.

“Yeah, that sounds great.”

Chapter Five

Teddy

“Tell me again,” I encourage, poking her side and eliciting a small squeal.

“Just let me go,” she sobs, and I roll my eyes, pointing a scalpel in her direction rather than repeat myself. Lola’s makeup runs down her face in black rivets, but she chokes in the sound, her lip quivering.

“You know, that really isn’t very attractive,” I tell her, crinkling my nose as a bubble of snot pops from her nose. “I thought you said you liked this stuff?”

“What the fuck’s wrong with you?” she sobs. I dry my hands on the stained towel and look down to see a big red stain on the front of my dress. My mouth widens and I look up to glare at her.

“Look what you did! You ruined my dress!” I poke her and she shrieks again, making me laugh. Leaning down, I pick up her discarded dress, inspecting the lace on the edges.

“This is quite poorly made,” I inform her, “but these, these are great.” I tug on one of the leather garters still around her thigh. Angry red marks puffed up behind it causing her skin to swell against the material. My hand trails down her thigh, enjoying the softness.

“So, are you ready to try this again?” I ask with a raised brow. Lola chokes another

sob but nods even as tears run down her face. I smile, grabbing the chain and attaching it to the collar at her neck before releasing the leg and arm restraints.

Stepping back from the table, I hold the leash and wait, watching as she tries to sit up even while shaking like a leaf. When her feet touch the ground, her legs buckle and she drops. I giggle and poke her with my foot as she rises shakily to her knees.

“Good girl,” I coo at her. “Now, lie down.”

Her bottom lip quivers as she looks up at me, but she obediently lies on her side as I showed her. My smile grows.

“Now, lick my shoe,” I tell her, pushing a foot out toward her. Lifting her head, she sticks her tongue out. When it’s only inches away, I kick my foot forward, relishing the crunch of her nose and the fresh swell of blood.

“You’re right,” I say as I kneel down beside her. “It is about power, isn’t it?”

“You don’t understand any of it,” she sobs, her voice muffled through the snot and blood running down her face. “You’re a psycho bitch. You don’t understand. This isn’t right, it’s about fucking consent, you cunt!”

I lean forward so my face is only inches from hers, enjoying the way her breath hitches as I approach.

“I hate that word,” I whisper. “You can call me Teddy.”

Her screams are all the consent I need.

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A wave of pleasure and relief washes over me as I watch the last of the light leave her eyes. Leaning over, I click play on the small speaker I brought with me and let the song wash over me.

“You don’t have to put on the red light,” I sing along, closing my eyes and letting my body sway and move to the rhythm.

I hear a sound behind me and stop dancing, turning to see Bud standing in the door watching. What the fuck is he doing here? I narrow my eyes and growl at him.

“Fuck off, I’m busy,” I tell him, turning back to the table with a frown, my moment now interrupted. Oh well, guess I’ll get Branson to clean this shit up. I lean over to grab my knives; cleaning those has always been something I enjoyed. A moment later something brushes against my foot and I whip around to see Bud standing right there, grinning down at me.

“Back the fuck off,” I tell him with narrowed eyes, picking up a scalpel and pointing it toward him. His grin only grows as I stand up straight. It's been years since he gave me crap. I’m a bit surprised he’d try now.

When I was no more than thirteen, he tried to come after me, and the memories of Jane’s punishments still make me smile. I’m a bit amazed he’s forgotten that lesson, even if it has been years. One thing that Jane thought important, though fucked if I know why, was my virginity. She let me have all kinds of fun, but when Bud tried to steal my innocence, she almost killed him and spoke to me about it.

“Teddy, you are going to be a beautiful woman. Men, men are idiots and only want one thing. Never give them that one thing. Take your pleasure but promise me you’ll not give that up.”

I open my mouth to say something, to put Bud in his place, but before I can, his hand

whips out and grabs my wrist, making me drop the small blade.

An involuntary sound leaves my lips as he squeezes, and I instinctively kick a foot out. He shifts his body and I miss. My heartbeat picks up in earnest. Something about the look on his face....

“Bud, fuck off and let me go,” I say, doing my best to keep my voice even as I pull at my wrist. I let out a cry as he reaches out and grabs my other, leaning his face into mine. His breath is rotten, and I gag a bit as he gets close.

“Little bitch,” he mutters, “Bet you’ve been laughing for fucking years at how you treat me. Well, Jane ain’t here to help you this time.”

My eyes widen, but I don’t have time to react further before he releases my wrist long enough to smack my head hard enough that blackness dots my vision. Something else hits my head. The dizziness grows and the hits don’t stop. A real stab of fear hits me when he flips me around to my stomach, pushing up my little dress. A groan leaves my lips as I try to turn myself, my eyes clouding from the weight of his punches.

The sound of a buckle behind me brings tears to my eyes.

For all the fun I’ve had with my toys over the years, I heeded Jane’s request. I’m still a virgin.

Not like this.

I hear a choked sound behind me. I try to turn my head, and through fuzzy eyes, I think I see a silhouette in the doorway.

“Branson,” my voice comes out raspy.

Chapter Six

Branson

When I walk into the workroom to see Teddy with her ass up, Bud behind her, I freeze. My entire body feels cold at first. A hot tingle of anger forms from my middle as my chest heaves. Bud doesn't turn around, fumbling with his belt buckle, but Teddy turns her head slightly, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth, tears rushing down her face.

“Branson.”

I see the shape of her mouth form my name, though I can't hear her.

Something inside me cracks. I feel something I never have before.

Desire. To hurt. To be the cause of pain.

White-hot rage builds. Years of fury and anger, of love, bubble over. My fingers twitch, curling up into a fist. The corner of my lip turns up, but it's no smile. The submission all but flows out of me and I turn my head, cracking my neck.

For once, I'm not holding back from what I want.

The sound that leaves my throat as I rush forward is guttural and raw. I don't even realize I've grabbed an iron bar from beside the door until it comes down on Bud. A resounding crack echoes in the room and he falters. I absently note Teddy scrambling

from underneath him, but I have attention only for this.

Bud turns to look up at me, his shock turning to anger when he realizes it's me.

“You little slave piece of sh—”

I bring the iron down again on his arm as he tries to stand. His scream is music to my ears as I feel the bone snap beneath the weight. He cradles his arms to his chest as I pace in front of him. Sweat pours down my back and face, and I feel the corner of my mouth turn up further as tears pour down his face.

“Your tears are even sweeter than your blood,” Teddy once said to me.

My mouth forms a grin as I look down on Bud. She was right.

“Beg for me, Bud,” I say, flicking the iron bar out and smacking it against his side. He squeaks and I laugh.

“P-plea—”

My arm is coming down before he can finish the word.

I feel his bulbous nose crack and relish the gush of blood.

“Beg for me like I begged you for years.”

My arm comes down again and he cries out, his sobs the sweetest sound I've ever heard.

He tries to drag his body, but there's nowhere to go. Teddy is crouched on the table behind me, looking down at us, but I ignore her and bring the iron down again across

his back.

Snap.

Again, and again, and again.

Blood splatters against my face and chest, into my open mouth, but I don't stop. Even when he ceases moving. The sound the iron makes as it strikes is wet and hard as his head is ground into the floor.

I hit one more time before standing and dropping the bloody iron at my side.

My chest heaves, adrenaline coursing through me like I've never felt before. My skin crackles and tingles as though alive for the first time. Is this what I've been missing?

I look towards the metal table and finally notice the dead whore on it and am surprised to feel a pang of regret she's already gone.

A small noise has me snapping my head up. Teddy's big green eyes are wide with shock, her mouth a perfect O as she pants lightly. I make no move, just watch her with a predatory gaze. She licks her lips, and a smile crosses her face.

Her voice is breathless as she gets off the table and moves closer to me. I feel my dick jump and my teeth clench. When she reaches out and her hand touches my chest, I move fast. I grip her wrist tightly, pushing her back until she hits the wall. My other hand comes up and around her neck, squeezing.

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“You,” I growl at her. “You fucking bitch. You turned me into your fucking dog.”

A choked sound comes from her throat, but I don't let up my hold on her. Instead of fear, I see hunger in her eyes even as she struggles to breathe. Shaking my head, I slam her head back to the wall once before releasing her. Crazy bitch. She falls to the floor coughing, a hand to her neck.

I turn back to Bud, his disgusting corpse taking up a big chunk of the floor.

Fuck.

My mind works in overtime trying to solve this riddle, the fog of the past months finally fucking lifting. I turn my gaze back to Teddy and glare. Fucking psycho. I'll deal with her later.

Something touches my bare toe. I look down and see a trail of Bud's blood. Fuck.

Well, not like I haven't cleaned up this room before. My eye twitches as I realize I'm going to have to chop him to move him. Thank fuck for the Sawzall.

I turn to the wall to grab it and am stopped by Teddy, standing in front of me once more.

“You're fucking incredible,” she says breathlessly before throwing herself on me. I start to push her away but when her lips meet mine, I can't. My heart stops and I feel my lips melt into hers. The lips I've waited years and years for, the ones I would have fucking begged for. Like a fucking dog.

I shove her away with a shout.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!”

She laughs, taking another step toward me. “If I had known all I needed to do to get this side of you out was to have someone try to rape me, I would have done it a long time ago.”

“You’re fucking sick. And this,” I point down to Bud's body, “This, means nothing.”

I look at her a moment and an idea comes to me. I nod my head toward the wall of cutting tools and down to Bud.

“Actually, you fucking do it. I’ve cleaned up enough of your goddamn messes.”

I turn to leave and hear Teddy tsk behind me. I stop at the door and turn to see her holding the old collar control button I haven’t seen in months. The weight around my neck that’s become so familiar suddenly seems heavy and oppressive. She waves it with a smile and starts to open her mouth. I’m across the room before she can say anything. I grip her wrist and squeeze until she releases the button. My eyes stare down into hers and I watch her pupils dilate as they take me in.

She’s caused me more pain and suffering than Bud ever did, but the desire to beat her to a bloody pulp isn’t there. Something else is, though, a different kind of desire. To control her. To own her, like she owned me. I feel the corner of my mouth turn up at the thought of her on her knees for me.

“I think the times of you being a little fucking brat are over,” I all but whisper, my face leaning down until it’s only inches from hers. “And things are going to change around here.”

Her breasts heave under the frilly neckline of her dress and I growl, barely resisting ripping it off her.

That's what she wants.

Sick, twisted bitch.

I exhale deeply before leaning over to grab the collar button, turning, and walking out.

Chapter Seven

Teddy

I have never been so fucking turned on than I am right now.

Even as I'm watching him storm out, leaving me with a big pile of dead Bud, as well as that hoe, Lola, to deal with, all I want to do is rip his clothes off. Fuck what Jane and I have been doing. We've been doing it wrong.

The passion I just saw is unlike anything I've seen, and I want more.

In one of my favorite movies, a character talks about 'warrior poets' and that always stuck with me. Watching Branson was like fucking poetry.

Gone is the stupid fucking puppy that Jane and I created, and thank fuck for that. A shiver runs up my spine at the thought of how he looked at me, the heat and rage. It's funny how similar hate and love truly are, and I don't doubt Branson feels both. I'll give him a little bit of time to adjust, to come to terms. But I will get what I want, and I will get my toy back.

No, not my toy.

I'll finally have the boy, no, the man, I've been waiting for since I was twelve years old.

A smile spreads on my face.

Mine.

Chapter Eight

Branson

It isn't until I get to the top of the basement steps that I freeze with realization. Not of what just happened, but what that really means. Jane isn't here. Bud is dead.

I stumble a few more steps to the table, taking a hard seat as I place my head in my hands. My mind races, the adrenaline coursing through me.

Am I... free?

A stab of fear strikes my heart as I consider all this could mean. Leaving. Going outside. Fuck. I haven't been off this property in almost twenty fucking years. I did what I could to plan when Teddy and Jane were gone, but it all seems hopelessly inadequate now. Panic rises, but I shove it down in my chest, standing with enough force that the chair tips back behind me.

I need to think.

My mind is such a blur from the past year, I hardly believe this is real. But I need to focus.

"You can't leave," Teddy's voice says from behind me, and it's only then I realize I'm standing at the front door. I frown, unable to remember how I got here. Despite the fear, I reach my hand out to the doorknob with a shaking hand.

“You can’t leave!” Teddy says again, this time rushing up beside me with wide eyes. With a growl, I turn on her, my hand wrapping around her arm. Green eyes widen at me, but she doesn’t pull back.

“You think you’re going to fucking stop me?” I grit out, squeezing tighter before pushing back as I let go. My hand wraps around the door and I internally curse at how it shakes.

“What about your collar?” she says quickly. “I don’t have the key, Jane does. People will notice it. You have nothing, no clothes, no money. You have no clue what it's like out there.”

I pause, my hand dropping. “I’ll figure it out.”

I hear the click of her stepping closer.

“Let me help you,” she says, her voice barely over a whisper, “Jane isn’t back for a few days. We’ll leave together, like we always wanted.”

I can’t move, my entire body feels suspended by her words, ones I’ve been waiting to hear since I was sixteen. I remember the first time we tried to escape, how she freaked out when we were going through the house, this young girl I wanted so desperately to save.

“Branson, I don’t think we can do this alone! I’m not ready yet. Noooooo!”

The beating I earned for that was legendary, the end result: the collars and chains that still scar my skin. And I learned then she didn’t want to be saved.

As much as I want to walk out this door right fucking now, I know she’s right. I can’t deny I’m terrified and unprepared for this.

Jane isn't back for a while yet. I have a bit of time to prepare.

But that doesn't mean I'll forgive her. Amelia. Mia. Teddy. The best and worst thing that's ever happened to me. I open my eyes, taking a deep breath before turning to see her wide green eyes staring back at me.

"I won't leave yet," I tell her, my voice low, "but I won't leave with you either."

I see her lip quiver slightly, though she raises her head as I walk past and feel a small burst of pride at turning her down. I really do need time to get my head on right. But first, time to get clean. My body itches with weeks of grime I can't wait to wash away.

I start to make my way to the stairs, to the drain in the basement that has been my shower facility for years before a slow smile spreads across my face. Turning, I make my way down to Jane's room, frowning when I notice the door is locked.

"She'd be pissed if she knew you were in there," Teddy's voice says from behind me. I whip around to see her standing in the hall. My eyes narrow at her.

"Why are you following me? I'm taking a real fucking shower. Fuck off," I tell her before rattling the door handle one more time. I turn to head down to the kitchen to see if I can find something to open it with, but Teddy stops me.

"You know, I could pick that lock for you," she says in a saccharine voice. "But it'll cost you."

My teeth clench together. "Fuck you and your games," I practically spit at her.

"Alright, but you'll not get that door open without me. And let me tell you, Jane really does have the best tub."

Sighing, I bring a hand up to my temples. Somehow this reminds me of when we were children and she would tease me. Before things changed and the teasing turned to torture, that is.

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“Fuck, fine. What do you want?”

Teddy’s smile grows brilliant, and she pushes off the wall, coming up to step right in front of me.

“One kiss,” she says, looking up at me with those big green eyes. “One kiss, and I’ll open the door for you and leave you to your bath.”

“Fuck you.”

“Okay,” she replies. My eyes drop to her lips, slightly parted, and I feel myself start to get hard. When I bring my gaze back up to her eyes, I see none of the malice that has marred her features for so long. Instead, hunger and desire blaze through.

Scowling, I start to turn away, but my body won’t let me deny the pull. I turn quickly, grabbing her face in my hands and pressing my lips forward.

Fucking explosions.

Her lips taste sweet and salty, the perfect intoxicating balance that is just as soft as I always imagined. For a moment, it all melts away as our mouths clash together passionately.

I am not Branson, and she is not Teddy. Together, we’re somehow so much more.

I push her away with my chest heaving, my cock straining against my pants. I turn. My arm finds a wall to keep myself upright from the wave of dizziness that her touch

brought. My eyes clench shut as I try to keep back the self-loathing, the feeling of failure for wanting, for loving, my abuser.

Teddy has always been my weakness, but I need to be fucking strong now. I am done with being pushed around.

I hear her footsteps fade down the hall, only to come back a moment later accompanied by a faint jingle. When I look up, Teddy is crouched over, picking at the lock. The door clicks open and she turns, looking up at me.

“Enjoy your bath,” she says, her voice soft. Then she turns and walks back down the hall, closing her bedroom door behind her.

I stare after her for several minutes, my lips still burning from her touch. It takes everything in me not to rush down this hallway and take her now. Closing my eyes, I take a few deep breaths and let myself calm.

When I open my eyes again, it's with steely purpose.

No more mind games, no more captivity.

Time to actually live.

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It takes me a good while to properly wash, and honestly, I don't know if I've ever felt as clean as I do now. My hair has always been long, and the feeling of the close cut—the air on my scalp—is somehow invigorating. I've never been much of one to grow a proper beard, but the scruff that decorated my face is now gone, courtesy of a fantastic little blade I decide to keep with me. When I finally step back and look in the mirror, it's a different person looking back at me.

Scars and marks still decorate my skin, the fucking collar around my neck still mocking me, but it really is me. As I'm looking in the mirror, I realize I have another problem. I haven't had real clothes in, well, ever. My eyes drift over to Jane's dresser, but the thought of touching anything of hers makes my skin crawl even more than the thought of putting on the rags that I wore before.

Looking down at my nakedness, I shrug. I wrap a towel around myself and head down to the kitchen.

Next, real fucking food.

Familiar as I am with the kitchen, it takes me little time to get all the ingredients I need on the counter. I feel somewhat peaceful doing these routine actions, even more so with the knowledge that I am doing it for myself. My mind drifts back to Teddy and I instinctively start to wonder if she's hungry. I immediately shove the thought from my mind.

Fuck her.

Chapter Nine

Teddy

I don't know why, but I find my feet taking me downstairs to begin the cleanup without thinking about it. It isn't until I'm struggling to drag Bud's body into a better position to cut up that I realize I listened to what Branson told me to do. I try to think back and remember the last time I had to clean up my own kill and realize it was before Jane and I ever left.

My motions slow, but I don't stop as I start to remember bits of that time before, things I haven't thought of in years. Even then, it was always Branson's job to clean up, but I would sneak away from Jane and come help him, bringing him treats and telling him stories while we worked. Jane hated him even back then, though it obviously escalated over the years. Despite how she treated him, he was always the same toward me. He taught me biology, telling me about how the human body worked as we chopped up corpses together.

I remember how happy I would feel when I would remember a particularly difficult Latin name, earning one of his rare smiles. Those smiles I've only ever seen him give me.

I slow, then stop what I'm doing as I consider our history. Everything Jane told and taught me, the hate she instilled in me, seems so flimsy as it rolls through my mind.

I think of the expression on his face when I got back, after years of being away, and hurt him. The friendship, years of care, erased like it never happened. And I relished

in it. Then I think of his blank, listless face from the past year. I look down at my hands, covered in blood as they are, and notice they are shaking slightly. A drop of water falls and I frown, looking up to the ceiling before realizing I'm crying.

Jane may have accepted my darkness, but I threw away something much more important without ever realizing it. Branson loved me, he was my best friend, and I fucking ruined and broke him. Now he's becoming the man I always hoped he would, and he fucking hates me.

My mind races with ways to fix this, to get him back to me. For a second, I wonder if it's the old 'want what you can't have' but I push the thought aside. It's so much more than that with us.

What would he want?

I know he wants me, but he clearly hates himself for that. What I need is to find a way for him to get over that shit, get over our past. Give him a way to hate and punish me so he can love me.

I think I know what I have to do, but can I swallow my pride enough to do it, even for him?

My eyes drift to the dead whore's corpse and I consider her earlier words.

"It's a power struggle, a give and take."

I've taken a lot, but maybe, just maybe, I can still give him something too.

Chapter Ten

Branson

I'm sitting at the dining room table with a book I liberated from one of Jane's shelves when I hear Teddy's soft footsteps come in the room. I don't raise my eyes from the page, picking up the glass beside me and taking a sip.

"What did you say?" I ask when I put it down, realizing she said something I didn't hear. I frown as I look up, noticing her slumped and almost contrite posture. I tense up, immediately on edge at the familiar ruse.

"I'm sorry," she says, her voice a whisper and my brows shoot up.

"What bullshit is this, Teddy?" I ask, even as a glimmer—a tiny thread—of hope forms in me.

"It's no bullshit, no joke," she says, looking up briefly. "I am sorry. For all of it. I—"

Her voice catches, and she lifts a hand to her throat as she clears it. "I know words don't mean much, but I am, Branson. I'm so fucking sorry."

The words wash over me, but I can't quite comprehend their meaning and my body seems frozen as she continues.

"I know you can't stay here, and I'll understand if you leave. I won't stop you. I'll still help you."

I look at her, head hung low and blood splattered over her dress. She's much dirtier than before, and I wonder if she actually cleaned up the bodies.

My mind and heart wage war within me, all the anger bubbling up. As if she can fucking apologize and think it'll all go away. She's right that words can't erase it. Not the years of shit she put me through. I want to hurt her, listen to her scream like she did to me. Yet I also want to pick her up in my arms and cradle her like the precious fucking doll she is. A beautiful bloody fucking doll and one I've loved since I was fifteen.

My beautiful bloody doll.

I can't deny how much I want her. It makes me sick, fills me with self-loathing, but it's true.

"Do you even realize—" my throat closes and I choke on the words, unable to express the depth of despair she put me through. I clear my throat and bring my face back up, willing my voice to stay calm.

"Since the first day you walked in those fucking doors, I've loved you. Fuck, do I love you and fuck did I hate myself for it."

I see her swallow deeply, but she doesn't say anything, so I press on. "All of it, all the fucking pain you put me through, I still fucking loved you."

This time I don't hide the crack in my voice. "She fucking turned you, I don't know how, but she did. But I still fucking love you."

Tears fall down her cheeks steadily, but she doesn't make a sound. Placing a hand lightly on her chin, I lift it until she's looking at me. Her big green eyes swim with tears and something I've never seen in her eyes before. Regret, maybe? Remorse? My

jaw clenches.

Good. She needs to feel it, to fucking understand.

Hard resolve forms inside me.

My hands grip her face firmly, forcing her to keep looking at me.

“I’ll never forget the shit you put me through. I’ll make you pay for it every day for the rest of your fucking life, and that’s a promise.” I hear her breath catch and let my thumb snake out to rub her bottom lip. I relish how it parts for me and the faintest touch of her tongue.

“This body that put me through all that, it’s mine now. Your moans, your blood, your pleasure and pain, they’re mine now. That is your penance for what you’ve done to me. You don’t get to leave me, understood?”

With a growl I press forward, taking her lips with no mercy.

With her, I’ll never ask.

She moans lightly in my mouth, her hands coming up to my chest and neck to pull me closer. Pushing back, I take her wrists in mine, walking her slowly backward with my eyes never leaving hers until her back hits a wall. She gasps lightly as I pin her arms above her, my face hovering inches from her.

“You’re mine now, Amelia,” I say, my voice low and ragged. I see a tug at her brow at the name and she opens her mouth, I assume to object, but I stop her with my lips. This is not a kiss. No. This is a claim.

“They can call you Teddy,” I tell her, pulling back, nipping at her ear. “But for me,

you will be Mia, my little doll.”

She shivers, her voice coming out breathless, “Yes.”

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My cock jumps at her agreement, a small flush of power running through me. Leaning into her neck, I bite down hard. She cries out, trying to pull back against my grip. I squeeze her wrists in warning, pulling back to look into her eyes again.

“This body is mine and I’ll do what I want with it. And if I want to fucking bite you and hurt you, you will not pull away. Understood?”

Her eyes are wide, her cheeks flushed, as she nods without taking her eyes off mine.

“I didn’t hear you,” I whisper.

“I won’t pull away,” she says, leaning forward to me. I don’t fail to notice the heated look and realize that she loves this. Good. I slam her back and she cries out again. I grin before frowning as I look again at the blood splattered little girls’ dress. I release her wrists, stepping back and nodding at her outfit. It’s not a fucking child I want.

“Take it off,” I command her, feeling my dick swell when she immediately lifts a hand to unzip the back. I groan when it drops, revealing her pale and sweet body. My gaze trails down to the perfect handful sized breasts and perfect pink nipples, the softness of her stomach, utterly feminine and touchable. My breath catches at the sight of the small black panties, the thigh high socks still remaining. She licks her lips as I pace in front of her, trying so hard not to lose control.

I need to stay in control.

Closing my eyes, I let out a deep breath before stepping up to her, not touching her despite how my body is shaking to do so. She raises a hand to touch me and I shake

my head, enjoying how she immediately pulls back and waits for my direction.

A small bit of understanding falls into place.

Control. Power. Love.

This is how it can be. This is how it should be.

I pace in front of her, unable to keep still yet unsure of how to move forward. All I want to do is toss her on this table and fuck her senseless, but a part of me knows that isn't how I will own her. She wants that. She wants pleasure. If I will truly own her, her pleasure needs to be my choice, not hers.

She bites her lip and I stop pacing, pointing at the floor in front of me.

“On your knees,” I order. She nods, her eyes dropping to the large tent in the towel I'm making no effort to hide. It twitches as she gracefully gets to her knees and I have to bite back a moan at seeing her like this, her blonde hair messy and framing her face as she looks up at me in a way I've dreamed of a thousand times.

Her big doe eyes dart from my face and down to my dick questioningly.

I swallow deeply but nod, not trusting my voice. She smiles, bringing her hands up to remove the flimsy fabric. My dick bounces to attention at her expression and her eyes widen as it bobs in her face. I push the thought out of my mind that she's probably done this before, forcing my hand to go to her head, urging her forward.

When her soft lips wrap around the tip, I have to clench my fists to keep from coming right there. I don't hold back a moan as her mouth envelopes me, warm and inviting. My hand stays on her head as she begins to move, twisting through her hair without thinking.

I've touched myself before, but not in a long time and already I can feel something building inside me. My jaw clenches with the will to keep it in, wanting to savor the feel of her mouth on me.

When her hand comes up and moves along with her mouth, it's too much and I give no warning before releasing, holding my dick deep in her throat. She gags as I empty myself into her throat but doesn't move until I pull her head back. With my hands threaded in her hair, I raise her eyes to mine, noting how dazed they look. A smile plays on her lips that are still coated with me and I let go of her hair, moving my hand down her cheek.

That was like nothing I could have fucking imagined, and I allow myself to feel real hope. I don't know how she knew what I needed, knew that it wasn't about forgiveness as much as power, but I think she does understand. Her willingness to give up her power, even just sexually, speaks volumes.

This is a role I can do. No more fucking slave, but I can sure as fuck be her Master.

"Good girl," I whisper, and she sighs, leaning her head against me.

Chapter Eleven

Teddy

“Good girl,” he says, his hand moving from the top of my head down to my chin, heedless of the mess still covering my mouth. My mouth curves into a smile at his words, a flush of warmth washing over me. I lean forward, lightly pressing my head against his thigh and enjoying the soft pets.

A part of me is shouting, objecting to allowing this to happen. That stubborn girl who's still inside, wanting to burn anything and anyone who thinks they can control me to the ground. This was all supposed to be a game. Say sorry, make him mine again. Somehow, I think I just became his. And what's stranger is even with that realization, I feel utterly satisfied and happy.

When Branson was telling me what to do, I didn't have to think. My body moved as though on autopilot, easily sinking into his commands as a kind of euphoria overtook me.

Jane tried to teach me that being in control was the end all, be all. But I'm starting to realize she was wrong about many things. Sure, having power over someone is special, feels incredible, but this is something else. There's something to giving up your power. Something worth exploring.

I lift my face to look at him and my breath catches in my throat at the look on his face. The small smile, one like I've never seen before. I want to make him smile, I realize.

Putting a hand down, he helps me stand so we're both facing each other, me wearing only panties and socks, him completely naked. My eyes trail over the scars and burns marring his flesh, and I'm surprised to not feel guilt when I look at them.

He looks fucking amazing.

“What now?” I finally ask, not sure where to go from here. We spent years as friends, longer as enemies, and now, here we are. The corner of his mouth turns up a fraction more.

“Now, we go to bed.”

Chapter Twelve

Branson

I step into her room for the first time in months, keeping my eyes straight ahead despite my desire to look around at what's different. She's long since gotten rid of most of the stuff from when she was a kid, but from the corner of my eye I do see the old vanity still in the same place. My jaw clenches as I steel myself for what's next. I turn to see her standing in the doorway, and despite having come only minutes ago, I feel myself start to get hard again.

Focus, Branson, I have to tell myself.

“Close the door and sit on the bed,” I command, keeping my voice low and firm. The corner of her mouth twitches slightly, but she does as she's told and sashays across the room, crossing her legs on the end of the bed. From a few feet away, I point at her legs.

“The rest of it, off. Then lie in the middle of the bed.”

While she obliges, I adjust myself and look around, quickly finding what I was looking for. When I turn back to the bed and see her naked, it takes everything in me not to take her right there. Through gritted teeth, I go to the head of the bed and take her hands, tying them up and lashing them to the bedpost. Her feet I keep spread.

Stepping back from the bed, I survey my work, the spread-eagle goddess bound to her own bed. A smile curves on my lips and I step up to the bed, leaning my head down

toward her. She immediately lifts her own, eager to get to me and I chuckle from a few inches away.

“Goodnight, Amelia,” I whisper, leaning down to kiss her forehead. Her eyes widen.

“Good- Branson, what the f— you can’t leave me here!”

“I told you,” I interrupted. “Penance.”

I give her a wink before walking out of the room. The shouts following behind me are music to my ears as I make my way back downstairs to finish my dinner.

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It’s a few hours before I decide to head to bed, making a stop to see how Mia is doing. When I get there, she’s asleep, her head lolled to the side. I look down at her face, the blonde hair spread all around.

“What the hell have you done to me?” I whisper to her sleeping form, kissing the top of her head. I consider going to another room but shrug and drop a blanket over her, laying down and promptly falling asleep.

Chapter Thirteen

Branson

Strange dreams haunt my sleep, dreams of blood and vengeance, but when I wake it's dawn and she is still asleep beside me. Lifting my head slightly, I look down, noting the small smile on her lips. The corner of my own lip turns up and I let out a small chuckle as I drop my head.

She may have complained yesterday, but I think my little Mia likes being tied up.

Sighing, I sit up with a small groan.

Yesterday's events run through my mind. Even a fraction of the events that happened were enough to elicit more emotion than I've felt in years, much less everything. I'm still in shock, but I do feel an increasingly familiar, bubbling anger. Simmering, but not forgotten. As much as it would be nice to have the time to come to terms with it all, I realize today we have some decisions to make. With Bud dead, there really isn't anything stopping us from leaving.

But as much as it shames me, my stomach twists at the thought. I have no love for this place that's brought me so much misery, but apart from television, I don't know anything about the real world.

She does, a small voice reminds me.

Swallowing deeply, I think again about what happened in the dining room yesterday.

My dick hardens at the thought of her on her knees in front of me. Of her doing exactly as I told her, the rush of dominance I felt.

She wanted to do that, the voice argues. Can you really trust her? Will she listen when it matters? Is she really sorry?

My brow pulls into a frown at the repulsive thought of things going back to how they were. I would rather die than be someone's fucking slave again. I squeeze my fists into the bed, only stopping when I feel a small stir behind me. Her eyes widen as she sees me and my heart beats faster just from her gaze

"Good morning," I say, my voice gruff and hoarse.

She lifts her head a touch to look up at her bindings. "You're a dick, you know that?"

I smile. "Yup. And you deserve it because you're an evil bitch. Ready for breakfast?"

She narrows her eyes at me. "Fuck. You."

"That doesn't seem like the actions of someone who's contrite," I chide her even as I yawn and sit up with a stretch. I hear the creak of her tugging on the rope.

"Fuck, let me out. I have to pee," she whines, and I turn to her and raise a brow

"Then this will be even more suitable penance," I reply before heading over to the bathroom.

"Branson! You—" her voice cuts off as I close the heavy door behind me. I chuckle to myself as I turn on the shower, excited to take as long as I fucking please.

When I finish, I head through the other door and into the hallway rather than pass

Mia again. She can wait a bit longer before I release her. If she pisses herself, even better.

???

It's almost midday by the time I make my way back to the bedroom. When I enter, her eyes are on me immediately, full of fire. I keep my pace slow as I make my way to the bed, sitting down on the end of it. My nostrils flare as the scent of piss hits me.

“Ready to be nice yet?” I ask her. She lets a breath out of her nose, and I can see the wheels in her head turning. When she speaks her voice is low and measured.

“Please, let me out.”

I look at her a moment longer before nodding.

“I told you I'd own you,” I tell her as I begin to untie her feet first, not convinced she won't try to hit me when I untie her hands. “And you said you were willing. Seven years of abuse is a long fucking time, Amelia.”

I don't say anything else, leaving it as a statement rather than a question. When her wrists are untied, she curls up away from the mess. She rubs her wrists but doesn't leave right away.

“Did you enjoy it? Last night?”

She flashes me an accusing look but nods slowly.

“I did, other than the last part, obviously.”

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I smile.

“Good. You weren’t supposed to like that. Now, wash up and meet me downstairs for breakfast.”

I see her tense, but after a beat she nods.

“Good girl.”

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Despite being forced to cook so many years, I have come to genuinely enjoy it. The rush of creation, of making something from scattered and broken pieces and ingredients, it appeals to me. The parallels to our current situation aren’t lost on me.

I decide that before anything else, a proper breakfast for both of us is in order. Leaving Mia to her own morning routine, I make my way down the stairs feeling odd at descending rather than ascending to get to the kitchen.

I stand there thinking of what we can make, noting how poor our food stores really are. I hadn’t really thought of it before. I was so pathetically focused on just doing what I was told, but it’s been like that a lot lately and I wonder what’s been going on with Jane. It’s then I remember Amelia recently asking me about Jane acting odd. At the time I was in a haze, a wall around my mind with no thoughts other than following orders. Now that I’m, well, me again, small things over the last while begin popping into my mind and I resolve to bring it up again later.

“Do you want coffee?” Mia asks as she putters into the kitchen a moment later, immediately walking toward the small press I know she favors.

I start to shake my head but stop. I’ve only had coffee once before and didn’t like it much then. That was the old me, though. A me who couldn’t even pick his own fucking breakfast.

“Sure,” I say, a small thrill running through me at having a choice.

“Milk, sugar?”

“Whatever you think I’d like,” I reply, and she pauses, turning to look at me. Her eyes meet mine and I know she’s realizing the same thing I just did. For her, coming into this kitchen to make coffee is an everyday thing. Without words, her eyes say it all and I nod lightly. Letting out a breath, she turns back and continues to the coffee while I pull out the last ingredients I need.

“I’m making omelets,” I tell her, not bothering to ask what she wants. My eyes wander over the selection of food in front of me, sparking with decision. A steaming coffee mug is slid in front of me. I turn and give a small nod in thanks before lifting the cup and taking a sip. Creamy but bitter, it washes over me, and I decide I do like coffee.

“So,” she says, sliding into the small kitchen table with her own mug. I continue to stir the eggs and wait, but she doesn’t continue.

“So?” I prompt.

She opens her mouth but before she says anything the door to the front of the house opens. We look at one another with wide eyes. My heart is pounding as my mind races with options, but fear and panic threaten to overwhelm me.

“Why, hello, pets,” Jane says.

Chapter Fourteen

Teddy

I'm frozen in shock when Jane enters the room, my mind screaming warnings at me that my body seems unable to listen to. What the fuck is she doing back so early?

Jane's eyes narrow at Branson and it takes me a moment to remember how he would have looked when she left. Now, without the grime covering him, the short hair, cup of coffee in front of him, he looks... well, utterly delicious, but certainly not the mindless slave she left behind. The two of them stare at one another, the tension in the room rising by the second.

"Our pet has been exceedingly good," I say quickly, "earned himself a bath."

Jane doesn't look at me, her gaze still locked on Branson's. My entire body is tense while I wait, seeing if my lies will work.

"Go to your room," she tells him, her voice low with warning. I see his jaw click and shake my head frantically behind Jane. Please, let me deal with her, I silently beg him. After another beat, he puts the pan he's holding down and walks downstairs without a word. Jane turns to look at me as soon as he's gone.

"He's different," she says.

"Just clean," I try to assure her, but Jane shakes her head, looking in the direction he went.

“No,” she says absently, “there’s something else. Now, where’s Bud? I need to speak with him.”

Shit. I forgot about that.

Why did she have to come home early?

“I haven’t seen him all week,” I lie easily, and Jane whips her head toward me.

“What?”

I shrug and try to make light of it, picking up my mug to take a sip.

“I figured you told him to take the week off or something. Where were you, anyway?”

Jane straightens up, easily distracted by the question I know she doesn’t want to answer.

“I’m going to find Bud,” she informs me. “Be ready for a new project tomorrow.”

I nod and wonder what she’s going to do when she realizes he’s gone. She’ll never find him, thanks to the furnace, but he’s been a staple on this property forever. It won’t take her long to figure out that something is going on.

Despite it all, I don’t want to hurt Jane. She’s the closest thing to a mother I remember, the only person to truly accept me and my darkness.

I may not want to stay with her, but I don’t want to kill her either.

I just need to convince Branson we should leave tonight. We just need to get through

one more day. I breathe heavily before grabbing the device and heading downstairs.

Chapter Fifteen

Branson

I feel heavy as I take the familiar steps down the stairs. Though my body easily follows the command, my mind wars with my reason and all I want to do is turn around and wrap my hand around Jane's neck. I imagine squeezing, watching her face turn red then blue, her nails clawing at me until the light fades from her eyes.

It takes everything in me not to turn around and make that a reality. Honestly, I don't know why I'm not, even as I get to the disgusting room Jane calls mine. And what was with Mia shaking her head no? She saw what I wanted in my eyes; I don't doubt it. If there was ever someone who could recognize hate, I know it's her. Does she really think she can keep me from my vengeance? After all Jane fucking did to me?

The fury rises in my blood, and I stand.

Fuck this.

It's so easy to let my body and mind fall into the habit of following commands, but no more.

I turn back to the door to see Mia standing there. She moves into the room, dropping her voice to a whisper.

"She's looking for Bud," she tells me, "I think—"

“I’m going to kill her, and we’re going to leave,” I tell her, starting to push past until she stops me with a hand.

“You can’t!”

“You’d fucking defend her?” I demand, “After all of it, you’ll fucking protect her.”

I see her tense and her jaw tighten.

“You don’t understand her like I do! She’s like a mother to me,” she whispers. I have to take a deep breath before I can continue. I don’t know which one of them I’m more pissed at. Jane for fucking twisting her, making her think she actually fucking cares, or Amelia for fucking falling for it.

“Yeah, she was like a mother for a while to me too. Until she fucking tortured and abused me for a fucking decade,” I spit at her and she flinches. “Then again, I suppose that’s just a good fucking day of your childhood, huh?”

I see a flash of guilt, but not nearly enough. “Just hold on today. I’ll keep her upstairs and we can leave tonight. Together.”

My eyes narrow at her for a second before I laugh, shaking my head. Ridiculously, my first instinct is to do what she wants and not even to follow her orders but because I legitimately don’t want to hurt her. How I can want to hurt her less than I want to hurt Jane is beyond me. Fuck me, I’m fucked up. I shake my head with another laugh.

“Whatever, Teddy,” I bite at her, turning to take a seat and picking up one of my favorite books. “I’ll wait till tonight to leave. Do you know why?”

She shakes her head, misery written on her face.

“Because I actually fucking love you enough that I don’t want to hurt you. Not like that, anyway,” I tell her, not hiding the bitterness in my voice. I rise one more time, moving closer until I’m leaning into her, my face inches from hers. “Now. Go. Away.”

Her jaw ticks. She looks at me a moment longer before turning on a heel and walking back upstairs. When she’s gone, my fist strikes out, hitting the wall beside me and adding another hole to the already decrepit room.

Fuck.

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Despite being pissed at her, I can admit to myself that the time to collect myself is welcome. I’ve spent so much of my life now wishing I was somewhere else, but I never considered where I would go. I kind of wish I could talk through it with Mia, ask her about where we really are, but it doesn’t really matter.

The only things from this place I’ll take with me are the scars on my skin.

Maybe I can convince her to burn it down. I’ll dance around the corpse of this place.

Why should I care about Jane being here, anyway? About not being able to kill her? Sure, it felt fucking great to get rid of Bud, but I’m not like them. I’m not a fucking killer.

I can and will do what I have to, but my life has had so much hate in it that letting go of the remains of it I hold don’t seem so hard.

Sitting in my old place, my mind drifts and I find myself nodding off, dreaming of fire and blood with a smile on my face.

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I suppose it's a sad thing to say that I'm pretty familiar with the sensation of being drugged, but there it is. What does suck is waking from good dreams to Jane's face close to my own. The prick of a needle and the oppressive blackness starts to pull me down quickly. My heart doesn't crack until I notice Teddy standing behind her just as my vision fades completely.

Chapter Fifteen

Branson

Though I've never woken up in this position before, the cold metal on my naked back is familiar and somehow soothing. I know immediately where I am, but it doesn't make me feel panicked. I've dreamed of being on this table since I was a child, always knowing this would be my only escape from this place.

I try to move my hands to see how I'm bound, more out of curiosity than anything, but find I can't move my limbs yet. No matter, I think, it's just the drugs still coursing in my body. Soon, the tingles of feeling will come back, and I'll flex my fingers. Or maybe they'll kill me before then and I won't even have to feel it. I don't expect to be that lucky.

Calm, at peace. This is right. This is where I should be.

Voices ring out from down the corridor, the sound of Jane's voice bringing me back.

My eyes shoot open, all vestibules of calm deflate. How I let myself go back there for even a second is beyond me. It's the same pit of mind bullshit I've caved to for years. I can't go back there.

Rage courses through me, and I let out a loud scream. This table was just never something I feared. Perhaps that is all it is. Because I'm still not scared, I'm pissed.

The door to the workshop opens and Jane comes barging in, Teddy behind her.

"Lying bitch," I snarl, pulling myself off the table toward Teddy. "At least I expected this shit from her." I nod my head toward Jane. Teddy's eyes widen, like my outrage at her fucking betrayal is some huge surprise. Honestly, I'm probably the asshole here. How did I let her fake-ass apology convince me?

Doe eyes and a blowjob, and she almost fucking had me.

Jane laughs, and my glare turns to her.

"Oh, pet, I knew something had changed," Jane comments, staring down at me with inky black eyes, wide and a bit frantic looking. An increasingly familiar expression for her. I don't move or say anything. I know she is waiting for me to beg, but I will never give her that satisfaction.

"I can get into the city easily!" Teddy argues, her arms animated and her eyes darting my way. "Just give me a few hours and I'll get someone."

"I should have done this years ago," Jane mutters, and Teddy exhales deeply.

"Let me get a new victim," Teddy says. "I can—"

Jane turns to Teddy with a scalpel in her hand.

"Go upstairs if you don't want to watch," Jane tells her, nodding her head toward the hall. "I get it, you're young and weak. I'll take care of it, we'll close down the shop, and get out of here for good. It'll be just like before; I've got it all planned. They can't take it away from us."

"Jane, you can't," Teddy says. Jane darts a glare at her and I realize I've never heard Teddy call her Jane. My brows knit together as I watch, still not even sure if it's Teddy or Amelia standing before me.

“You’d protect him,” Jane says calmly. “After all I’ve done for you, you’d protect him over me?”

Teddy takes a step closer to her. “I understand,” she practically whispers, “Jane, I saw the stuff in your desk. Branson isn’t him.”

Jane makes a choked sound, but my eyes are on Teddy. What is she talking about?

“You’d protect him,” Jane says again, this time a statement, not a question.

Teddy:

The same words Branson spoke to me earlier don’t have the same effect coming from her. I feel my jaw tick as I watch Jane, my eyes tracking her every subtle movement. She's between the table and me, and I try to shift to the left to get closer to Branson.

"He doesn't deserve this," I tell her. Jane's face tightens at my words and despite myself, I feel the sting of disappointing her. I dart a glance to Branson who is watching us both, his entire body tense. When our eyes meet, I see the pain inside and realize he does think I betrayed him again. Though I feel a flash of annoyance, I can't blame him.

"Just let him go, and it can all go back like before," I tell Jane, keeping my voice low and soothing. "We can even go into town together, get a new victim just like we used to."

Jane's eyes drift to Branson as she toys with the scalpel in her hand. My heart is pumping loudly in my ears as I wait to see what she'll do.

Don't attack him, I will her in my mind. I don't want to kill you, but I will.

Branson:

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I see the moment of decision in Jane's eyes before she moves, her hand striking out behind her and hitting Teddy's cheek. She cries out and falls to the floor, clearly not expecting it.

"After all I did for you," Jane says with an even voice that's all the more menacing for the lack of emotion behind it. "Ungrateful cunt." A foot comes out toward Teddy, and though I can't see where it hits from this angle, I hear the moan of pain that follows.

Jane turns her attention back to me.

"I should have killed you the day you arrived," she tells me matter-of-factly as she brings the scalpel toward my face. I let a smile curve on my face.

"Finally, something we agree on."

My teeth clench and I breathe heavily out of my nose as I wait for the cut I've been anticipating for fifteen years. Though I try to resist, as her hand hovers above my sternum my eyes clench shut.

I just hope it's fast.

A demonic shriek makes my eyes shoot open, widening further as I watch Jane's mouth open, a trickle of blood flowing out as she drops to her knees. Teddy stands behind her, her hand still on the blade sticking out of Jane's back. Tears run down her red cheeks, even as she pulls the blade free, eliciting a loud squelching noise.

"I fucking hate that word," Teddy states. Jane cries out as Teddy slams the knife

down again and again. The expression on Teddy's face is manic as she stabs over and over.

Splatters of blood hit her cheeks, pink where Jane hit her but otherwise clear porcelain. Her mouth is parted and tears flow down her face, but she looks ecstatic. The passion and mania pouring off her in waves. I couldn't stop myself from getting hard if I wanted to.

She stops with a heaving chest. Jane turns to look at her protege's face and falls to the side.

I wish I could have seen the look on Jane's face.

Teddy looks at the bleeding body at her feet for another moment before her eyes rise to meet mine, their green depths swimming with emotion. Fierce satisfaction is the first thing I see, the darkness I should have learned to accept long ago.

It's only seconds before her lower lip shakes and I watch her swallow deeply, one more tear falling as Jane lets out a final shuddering breath.

Silence.

Teddy:

I move on autopilot, releasing Branson from the familiar bindings. Neither of us say anything. The room is completely silent. Blood and death don't bother me, but I don't look at the ground yet.

Jane was losing it, she needed to die, and I couldn't let her kill Branson. It's not like I've ever felt regret for a kill before. But....

A choked sob falls from my throat and I have to catch myself on a table so I don't fall to the ground. Branson's arm comes up beside me, holding my elbow for support. I breathe out to steady myself before looking up to his face. The expression on his face is a mix of emotion that I can't even begin to read. The only part I recognize is the hint of love still shining through.

I don't stop the instinct to throw myself into his arms, letting the sobs overtake me. He says nothing but opens his arms to wrap me inside, holding me close as I cling to him and cry like I've never cried before.

Branson:

I feel numb as I hold Teddy—no, Amelia—while she cries. I've seen her kill dozens of people over the years and never seen her show remorse. A part of me feels bitter that she should be sad over that psycho bitch's death, but at the same time I can't help but understand, at least a bit.

Both of us were raised in darkness and depravity. She accepted and embraced it, I shut off and recoiled from it. Even still, there is nothing that can take away all of these years. And though Jane was an evil, narcissistic psychopath and serial killer to boot, both of us will forever carry a part of her in us.

Whatever we do next, wherever we go, death will always follow us.

After a while, her sobs slow and eventually stop, though I don't release her from my arms. Blood splatter coats us both and I'm still naked, but I don't want the moment to end yet. I've dreamed of holding her this way for so long.

"I'm sorry," she says, pulling back to wipe her face. Despite the tear tracks and bloodshot eyes, she still looks perfect to me. I don't say anything, not trusting my voice as we stand there awkwardly, both unsure how to move forward.

Mia's eyes finally go down, landing on Jane's still form.

"She's really dead," she says, cocking her head to the side.

"That's pretty fucking dead," I agree.

We stand there for several more minutes.

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I'm still holding her in my arms when a bell I haven't heard in years rings out above us. We both pause, pulling back and looking at one another. It only takes another second before recognition hits and I realize what we're hearing.

"Someone's at the fucking front door!"

"What?" Mia exclaims, her eyes wide.

I step over Jane and grab a pair of pants, pulling them on quickly as I talk. "That bell rings down here too because of some shit Jane set up years ago. It was a warning system in case she was down here and someone showed up."

"Who the hell would show up here?"

"You tell me," I dart a glare. "How has the antiques business been running lately?"

She shakes her head. "It's been months. She said it was just a break, but she was acting strange already. Fuck, I wish I knew where she was for the last few days."

The bell rings again.

"What do we do?" she asks after another beat. Reaching behind her, I pull out a long blade and sheath from the cupboard behind her, strapping them to my waist.

"We see who it is."

PART 4

Lawless are they that make their wills their law.

William Shakespeare

Chapter One

Teddy

We make our way upstairs and despite the seriousness of the situation, I can't help but continue to steal glances at Branson. His face is serious, stern, and I can't help but admire it.

He thought I betrayed him to Jane—we'll have to clear that up at some point—but I want to go back to before she showed up. The new Branson intrigues me, and I crave more. Once we get upstairs, I lock the basement door, a task so routine it's automatic. The bell rings again.

"Someone really wants to talk to Jane," he mutters, his hand clenching around the blade he grabbed. I watch his hands and imagine him holding that knife in one, my throat in the other. My thighs squeeze together involuntarily.

He steps out of the kitchen and toward the foyer and I follow, shaking my head to dispel the ill-timed thoughts. Plenty of time later for that. I wait as he goes up to the eyehole, peaking out before muttering fuck and stepping away.

My forehead knits together as I step up and look out, my eyes widening immediately.

"The fucking police?" I exclaim, more baffled than anything. While being wary of them in the city was something I've grown used to, we're so secluded out here and I've never seen one close. Why the hell are there cops here now?

The man bangs on the other side of the door, making me jump.

"What the hell do we do?" I ask, my voice quiet. Branson just shakes his head.

"I'm thinking."

I look back out the peephole, narrowing my eyes to look around better. I peek around and only see the one man.

"I think he's alone," I whisper.

I pull away and look at Branson, who's watching me with an expression I can't read. I hear a noise from outside and look to see the cop heading down the steps, pausing at the bottom to look back up at the door. Chills run up my spine and I get the uncanny feeling that he knows we're here.

"Stay here and watch him," Branson whispers behind me. "I'm going to get changed quickly and grab the key off Jane. Once he's gone, we should sneak away."

His footsteps fade away and I watch the cop, my eyes narrowing when I realize he isn't heading back to his car. He's walking over to the barn.

I lick my lips and feel a familiar rush as I realize what I get to do next. I pat down my side and realize I have no knives on me. Frowning, I head to the kitchen and grab a chef's knife, letting it run down my finger. A small line of blood wells up and I smile.

"Perfect."

Moving quietly, I head toward the front door, making sure the cop isn't in sight before poking my head out, closing the door behind me. Heavy clouds are building overhead, and a low rumble in the distance makes me grin.

It hasn't been my day, but it looks like it's about to get a lot better.

Stalking along the side of the house, I make my way toward the cop and the barn, knife in hand.

I lick my lips as I peer around the corner of the building, the door to the main room wide open. The cop stands at the front, looking in with a large, black flashlight. His other hand is on his gun, but it isn't drawn. I look down at my outfit, splattered with blood as it is, and smile. Shoving the knife down the back of my pants, I let out a breath before dropping my face and stumbling out into the clearing.

The cop whips around, drawing his gun immediately before his eyes widen.

"Holy fuck! What the hell happened to you, girl?" The man puts the gun away and rushes over to me, one hand going to the radio at his belt. "Officer Green calling—"

My hand darts out, the sharp blade plunging deep into his gut. The man gurgles, dropping his radio as his hands fall to his stomach. He looks down at the knife and then up at me, confusion and pain written on his face.

I giggle, stepping back as he drops to the ground.

"Oops," I say with a hand to my mouth, the giggle turning into a full laugh as he falls to his side, blood dribbling out of his mouth.

"Officer Green, please repeat?"

I frown down at the radio and lean to pick it up.

"Mia! What the fuck did you do!"

Chapter Two

Branson

I have imagined my first time stepping outside in so long a million different ways, but never once did I think it would be frantically looking for Amelia. I definitely didn't expect this, though really, I suppose I should have.

The cop is dead, or almost, and Mia, no Teddy, stands there looking guilty with a fresh smear of blood on her face. Despite how pissed I am at having more shit to deal with, I can't help but stare at her, her expression animated and excited. She truly is in her element.

Thunder booms overhead at the same instant it begins to rain. I look up to the sky and close my eyes, letting it wash over me. The freshness, the coldness, refreshing and invigorating.

"He was poking around," she says, and I open my eyes to look at her. The rain pours steady, and she's already soaked. Her blonde hair clings to her face just as her clothes cling to her body. She looks at me expectantly.

I step over the man, looking down briefly to confirm he's dead. I don't feel as bad as I know I'm supposed to. I also know if we are going to be free, properly free, then she can't be killing cops. My hand reaches down to her chin, forcing her gaze up to mine.

"No more," I tell her, my voice low and firm. Her tongue darts out to lick her full bottom lip and I have to bite back a groan. Water pours down on us, the blood on the

ground washing into the mud.

"You gonna make me?" she taunts, stepping back from my grasp and into the open barn. And despite the seriousness of the situation, I feel the corner of my lip turn up. Fucking brat.

A smile plays out on her face as she walks backward, her eyes never leaving mine. A dare and a challenge. I feel my dick twitch as I take a step forward.

We have two bodies to get rid of. A cop, who may not have been alone, and the woman who basically raised us both. This is the worst fucking time for this, but I also can't help but think possibly the best.

Have we ever really lived in the moment?

Besides, it's time she learns how things are going to be from now on. She takes another step back.

"Stop," I command, and she does, eyeing me with interest rather than wariness. My dick is rock hard, remembering the last time she listened when I told her what to do.

"Make me," she says, her voice a whisper. She giggles and runs off into the barn. My brows practically hit my hairline at her brazenness, but a grin strikes my face.

If she wants to play, then let's play.

Chapter Three

Teddy

My heart is pounding as I run through the familiar aisles of furniture and crap that fills the old barn. The antiques business has long since run dry with Jane ignoring it, and a layer of dust and neglect hangs over everything. The rain pours down heavily, covering any sound of being followed I might hear. My nipples are hard against the fabric of my shirt. Sparks of excitement race through me as I hide behind an old dresser, peeking out to see if he's following.

The thrill of the recent kills still courses through me and the thought of being able to truly have release after.... I peer out again, letting out a small squeal when I see a shadow moving closer.

"Come out, Amelia," he calls out. "It'll be easier on you if you do."

I bite my lip at the promise, pleased he's playing my games with me. With a giggle, I turn to change spots and gasp when I hit a large chest. His hand darts out and grabs my wrist before I can move away. I look up at him and he raises an eyebrow as if to say, 'that it'?

Or maybe that was just me.

Twisting my body to move away, I overestimate how slippery my wet skin is. He easily flips me around so my back is to him, his arms around my body holding my arms to me.

"I know you think you want this," he whispers in my ear, "But you should have fought harder, little doll. You have years and years to pay for, but I think we'll start with this little mess you made."

He spins me around to face him and I open my mouth, but he finds mine before I can speak. I melt into his lips but push back against his chest a moment later. He doesn't move far and his hand reaches out and grips my throat. My hand comes up instinctively, but he grabs it, twisting it around my back.

"Aghg," I let out a strangled cry, and he squeezes tighter on my throat until I can't breathe. My own heartbeat pumps against his hands, slowly, steadily. I feel the top of my thighs heat even as I struggle against his grip. My own grasp loosens as my vision begins to dot and fade. He releases me, catching my limp body easily as I gasp for air.

Not waiting for me to recover, he grabs both my wrists in his and pulls his belt from its loops. The crack of leather makes me gasp, but not in fear. I try to pull my wrists away, despite my clit beginning to throb and how badly I want to see what he does with that belt.

"Little doll..." he says, his voice low with warning. Through my struggles, he quickly pulls the loop tightly over my wrist. I grunt lightly as he tugs on it, tightening it as he pulls me to him.

"That's a bit better," he smirks, and I lean up to nip at his lip, making him chuckle. Keeping his eyes on my face, he fastens the belt and drops my hands so they fall in front of me. He grabs my chin, pulling me to him until we're almost, but not quite, touching. His smell, that base masculine scent that he's always had, fills me. Underneath, the hint of blood and fresh rain all combine in a heady mixture.

Excitement courses through me at the thought of what he'll do to me. Pain doesn't scare me. The only thing that scares me is the thought of living a life of dullness and

boredom.

And Branson? Branson excites me.

"Now, about your punishment," he says, stepping away from me and slowly pulling off his dripping-wet shirt. I let out a small whimper, and he turns to me and winks. Winks!

Even though I've seen him naked a million times, his body still makes mine tingle. The scars on his skin, especially the ones from me, are the most erotic thing I've ever seen. My lips part and I'm aware I'm almost panting as I watch him begin to remove his socks.

"Teddy," he tells me, "has been a very bad girl, and so has Amelia. But it's my Little Doll who is going to take the punishment. Do you understand?"

I find myself nodding without thinking, his words washing over me. He smiles.

"Good."

He steps up to me once more, wearing only pants. I'm acutely aware of how many clothes I'm wearing and wish I had taken the time to undress in my mad dash. I twist my wrists lightly against the tight band and his eyes glance down at them.

"Turn around," he tells me.

I wait only a second before obliging, turning so my back is facing him. My breath is loud in my own ears, the rain drowning out the sound of his approach. I feel rather than hear when he steps up behind me. A hand touches my shoulder, and something presses against my spine. It takes me a moment to realize it's a blade. My breath catches as he pushes down lightly, his hand holding me straight and steady.

After a moment, he releases his hand and reaches up to let the blade slide down the fabric of my top. Cold air hits my back and I shiver but stay still as he rips the rest of the shirt off, leaving my top half bare save for the belt around my hands. The blade trails down my naked flesh and I don't move, waiting as it moves down to the silk belt still holding my poofy skirt in place.

I turn my head to look down, doing a double take when I see him untying the silk length carefully rather than cutting it. When he's done, he places it on a nearby piece of furniture. He turns back to me, taking the skirt in both hands and ripping it. The fabric tugs against my waist and I let out a small gasp as the cool air touches the rest of my flesh.

I close my thighs instinctively as I stand there in only panties and socks once more, my bound wrists the only other thing covering my nakedness. My eyes follow him closely as he walks around me, taking in my body. I stand as tall as I can, letting my hungry eyes show him what I want, what I need.

I've had the chance before to be with men. Shit, I've played around with my fair share. But none of them ever gave me a fraction of what I needed. Passion and desire like I feel right now are something special. Worth waiting for.

For the first time, I'm grateful Jane made me wait.

He's like a predator, sure and fierce, as he stalks in front of me. I'm fucking baffled we ever managed to break this magnificent man, but it occurs to me perhaps that's where his strength comes from. After all, broken people are the best kind.

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"You are fucking amazing," I say, not caring about the breathless tone of my voice. He raises an eyebrow at me before gesturing down to his naked torso. My eyes follow his hands willingly, landing on the hardness in his pants.

"You like this?" he asks, and I bite my lips with a nod. He smirks, reaching over to grab the silk belt before stepping up to me. I almost laugh when he reaches up and loops it around my eyes, tying it tight behind my head so I can't see a thing.

Despite the obvious message, I have a feeling I'm going to like what's next too.

His touch leaves me and I let out a groan, the blindness immediately disorienting me. I sway, unable to steady myself with my hands bound and vision gone. I feel exposed and naked, exactly what he intended, I assume. The sound of furniture moving causes me to jump, my head moving in the direction of it. Shivers course through me as I wait, standing there nearly naked, waiting for his touch.

The sound comes closer until he reaches out and takes me by the arm, pulling me forward gently. I move easily at his direction, hesitating only slightly as he bends me at the waist. My whole body feels like it's vibrating, and I let out a small sound when I touch something. His hands guide my arms forward until my chest is almost flat and I realize I'm laid out over his legs.

"Seven years," he says, and despite how quiet his voice is, I hear him clearly even over the patter of rain. "Seven years you tortured me, abused me."

His hand comes up, caressing my ass lightly over the fabric of my panties. I feel myself clench in anticipation.

"One."

Smack.

"Two."

Smack.

"Three."

His hand comes down, and I bite my lip against the sting.

"Four. Five. Six."

On seven, I let out a hiss at the burn. He pauses, rubbing the cheek lightly for a second before helping me stand. My head swims a bit from bending and my butt is a bit sore. I frown lightly. Before I can open my mouth to let out a smart remark about the lightness of his so-called punishment, he pushes me over again, this time so I'm propped on the stool with my butt out.

"One," he says.

SMACK.

Something heavy and leather comes down on my ass and I let out a yelp, straightening immediately. His hands come to me immediately, holding me still. I struggle for a second before stopping. I wasn't expecting that.

"Seven years," he whispers again. "You can handle it."

I swallow deeply and feel myself nod. He kisses my cheek and I feel him smile.

"Good girl."

I feel a flush of warmth at his words as I lean over, this time braced for it.

"Two."

My teeth are clenched as he works, steady and sure. It isn't until the last one I let out a cry. My ass feels angry and red but my clit pulses with my heartbeat. Once again he comes over, lightly caressing my tender cheeks with his hand.

"Very good girl," he whispers again, a finger reaching into the fabric of my panties. My breath catches as his touch trails down, cupping my warmth in his hands. I let out a hum of pleasure and hear his own intake of breath.

"So wet for me," he mutters, "You liked that, didn't you, little doll?"

"Yes," I moan, pressing my pussy into his hand. One of his fingers snakes out, creeping in until he presses it lightly into my waiting depths. I groan as he pushes in, relishing the sound of his breathing quicken.

"Hardly a punishment if you liked it," he mutters, but doesn't stop.

"I want to see you, touch you," I plead, holding out my wrists in front of me. He continues the slow and steady movements of his finger, enough to feel incredible but not enough to push me over the edge.

"Not yet," he says, leaning down to nip at my ear. I turn my head and twist my body to stand, but his free hand finds the small of my back, pressing me back down. I turn my head to hiss in his direction just as he slips another finger in and the sound changes to a moan. Without my sight, being unable to move, every touch is heightened tenfold and my skin feels alive where he touches it.

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My hips move in time with him, pushing back and aching for more.

“Please,” I beg as I press against him, feeling myself flutter when he hits a certain spot. “Ooooh....”

“Not yet, Little Doll,” he says, his voice quiet but raspy.

When he pulls his hand away a moment later, I let out a whimper. My body is aching for his touch, thighs clenching together, eager for friction. I feel cold without him touching me, and my head moves around searching for him, though I don't move from where he placed me. I imagine I can feel his eyes on me.

It feels like it takes forever, but really is probably only a few seconds, until I feel his hands come to my waist, gently pulling down my underwear.

“Your skin is so warm,” he murmurs, and I feel his breath against my thigh, his hands caressing my ass and down my leg as he pulls down the panties. Lips press down on my thigh and I lean into him, humming lightly in pleasure.

“I shouldn't make this good for you,” he whispers as he shifts behind me. His hot length presses against the crease of my ass and I lean my head back, pushing into him. “I should make this hurt, because you fucking deserve it.”

His rough hands grip my waist and I shift my legs more open, eager to feel him.

“Somehow, though, I can't help myself.” He slides into me without warning and I cry out as a sharp pain strikes deep inside even as I marvel at the fullness.

“Holy shit,” he whispers as he stills inside me to the hilt. The pain fades quickly and slowly he begins to move. I don’t hold back another moan. I feel so full and perfect, every motion rubbing against something delicious that sends sparks through my body.

Without my hands free, all I can do is try to stay upright as he picks up speed, my legs planted in place. I feel myself begin to tense around him, the feeling of him pushing me over that edge.

“Branson!” I cry out as he hits that perfect spot once more and I shatter. I’m vaguely aware of the guttural shout behind me as he thrusts deeply, my own orgasm pushing him over the edge. My entire body feels on fire, my skin sensitive to every moment and touch. Even the feeling of his breath on my back sends shivers down my spine.

I let out a laugh.

Bound and blind with a red bum after killing my mentor and a fucking cop, not to mention losing my virginity... and I’ve never been happier.

Chapter Four

Branson

My heart is thumping so loudly in my chest it drowns out the sound of the heavy rain. My legs feel weak and I have to pull myself up so I don't press down too hard on Amelia. Teddy. Fuck.

Looking down at her, the silk band around her eyes, bent over with her pink bum exposed... Despite having just come, I feel my dick twitch and frown at it.

I had wanted to punish her, deny her the pleasure she craved. I couldn't help myself. Listening to her moan, feeling her wetness coating my fingers, it was all too much. Shaking my head at myself, I lean down to untie her and catch sight of redness between her thighs. Reaching out I touch it lightly and she jumps at the surprise touch.

"Why is there blood?" I ask, rubbing it between my fingers before leaning over and pulling the silk scarf from her eyes. She blinks a few times before I help her stand and she peers down at her legs.

"Hmmm," she says. "Just a bit of blood is all. I've heard it's quite normal."

She holds out her wrists for me, but I ignore them, looking at her quizzically.

"What are you talking about?"

I'm aware that I wanted her pain and I probably shouldn't be concerned about a bit of blood, but at the same time I am so out of my realm here. Sex is something that's been so abstract in my life, I hardly know where that all came from. I don't intend to stay naive for long, though. Not after I've found out how fucking incredible it can be.

She looks at me with a strange expression as the belt falls free and she rubs her wrists, watching me.

"I've heard blood isn't uncommon the first time," she clarifies, looking closely at my face. It takes me a moment before my brows shoot up. Somehow, I don't think she would ever lie to me. Hurt and torture me, perhaps, but not lie.

"But, the... boys, the...." I struggle with the words, unable to articulate the things I saw and heard. How can she have never...

She shrugs but a smile plays on her lips.

"I've had my fun, but some things... well, some things are special." She leans up and kisses the side of my mouth, her eyes twinkling with mirth. "I'm going to go move that cop so he isn't out in the open."

She walks off in her tinted-red panties, mud splattered all over and her ass still red. All I can do is watch after her and shake my head.

"Fucking woman is going to be the death of me," I mutter before following after her.

???

By the time we get to the kitchen again, the storm is in full effect. The wind blows the old shutters around with a clacking noise, and the rain beats relentlessly. We managed to move the cop and his car, but it's only temporary. We need to figure out

what the fuck we are going to do next, and this is all rapidly getting away from me.

I haven't had time to process any of it, and I have a feeling that time won't come soon.

"Here," Teddy says, handing me a towel. I take it gratefully, quickly patting myself dry. I hear a noise and realize she turned the TV on. The news plays in the background, an ambience I'm not used to. My attention is brought back to her standing in front of me expectantly.

"Are we..." she hesitates, "Are we staying?"

I feel the smallest swell of something. Pride, maybe? Some sort of satisfaction that she would turn to me to ask this. The word 'we'.

"I don't know," I reply, putting the towel down slowly. "With Jane gone we could..."

"We're here today at the Black Roses Nightclub where only days ago a vicious scene played out resulting in one body and one missing girl...."

A picture pops up on the screen of a blonde woman. She is vaguely familiar, but considering I don't know anyone, I don't see how that could be. I move toward the TV on autopilot, pressing the volume button as I listen to the news report.

"Police have just recovered video footage from a nearby parking lot, where a blonde woman was seen carrying the missing girl to the wood panel station wagon shown in this video. Anyone with information on the vehicle or woman are encouraged to contact the police immediately. Police Chief Stanson has advised there have been some leads and his officers are currently canvassing the nearby townships."

We both stand there staring at the television as a blown up and slightly fuzzy picture of Teddy pops up on the screen. I turn to her to see her eyes wide.

"What the fuck did you do?" I rasp.

Chapter Five

Teddy

My mouth is open, eyes wide, as I watch the video on the screen of me dragging Lola into the car play out .

The car that the cop was looking at outside.

“That’s how they found us,” I whisper, turning to Branson. He’s watching me rather than the TV, his face harsh and firm.

“What are you talking about?” he asks, his voice gruff and his eyes never leaving my face.

“The car,” I tell him, pointing to the TV, “You can’t see the license plate, I’m better than that, but they must be going around looking for people with that make of car. That’s why the cop was here.”

His jaw ticks.

“The cop you just killed.” A statement, not a question.

I narrow my eyes at him.

“He was snooping around.”

Branson lets a huff of air out his nose, bringing his hand up to the bridge of his nose. My annoyance fades and I reach a hand out to him.

“Headache again?”

“Always,” he mutters, raising his face to mine and pulling back before I can touch him. I feel the cold stab of rejection.

“It seems like they’ve been getting worse?” I comment, not adding that maybe that’s because I’ve been actually paying attention.

"That was really stupid," he tells me, ignoring my concern, "You can't keep fucking doing this shit anymore!"

"Don't fucking judge me," I tell him, pointing a finger at him. "Besides, that was days ago. Not like I just went and killed a hooker to piss you off."

“Sounds like something you’d do,” he spits.

I narrow my eyes at him. “And don't think for a second that just because I let you have your way with sex that you can fucking boss me around the rest of the time. Fuck. You.”

The last word isn't out of my mouth before he grabs my wrist, pulling me harshly toward him. His other hand grips my chin hard enough to bruise, his face only inches from mine.

"Don't push me, Mia. I already told you, I own you," his voice is low. The hand gripping my wrist reaches down to my ass to grab it and squeeze his claim. "This body is mine. Your mind, your life, everything is fucking mine. You fucking owe me."

Despite my automatic instinct to pull back, to reject the authority he thinks he holds over me, I can't help but feel the desire in me rise at seeing him like this. There's a reason I'm more than willing to let him dominate me in the bedroom.

"If I say no more, then no more," he tells me, "Understand?"

I look into his eyes and feel my heart crack at the judgement I see there. I'm not a complete psycho, I know I'm not normal, but of all people I'd want to understand, to accept me....

"I thought you would accept me," I whisper, my voice breaking, "Jane was fucking crazy, but at least she accepted me for me, what I need."

He moves away from me like I lit on fire, a sort of growl coming from his throat as he begins to pace.

"You'd compare me to that fucking psycho!" he yells. "You want me to treat you how Jane treats people? Next time should I whip you, starve you like a fucking dog, instead of making you fucking come?"

I flinch at the accusation and he continues to walk across the floor, muttering to himself slightly in a way that reminds me too much of Jane the past year.

"You realize they'll come looking for that cop, right? We can't fucking stay here now all because you... FUCK!"

The anger and sadness I felt a moment before washes away with my amazement, and I realize I don't think I've heard him yell before. His chest heaves with the exertion of his anger but he doesn't turn to me. Indecision fills me. The fear of being controlled and forced to be someone I'm not wage war with how badly I want this man in front of me.

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"I don't know if I can stop," I tell him, and he stops pacing but still doesn't look at me. I start to open my mouth again but leave it at that.

"Will you try?" he finally asks, his voice quiet and calm. I swallow deeply but don't answer. He steps up, his hand hovering in the air a moment before he lightly turns my chin up to look at him once more. Unlike the other times he's held me like this, this is tender and infinitely more terrifying.

"I don't know if I can," I repeat, my voice hoarse. Just the thought of not being able to find my release in the thrill of a kill scares me to my core.

"Will you try?" he asks again before dropping his hand with a sigh. "Mia... You know where I stand. You know what I've been through, what we've both been through. Will you let this dark place follow you your whole life, or can you put it aside to be with me?"

My entire body is trembling, and I don't know if the thought of not being able to kill or of losing Branson scares me more. It's strange to think that only months ago, hell, days ago, my response to such a question would have been to simply lock him up for a few days without food until he agreed with me. The thought is sobering.

"I don't know if I can," I say for the third time. I shake my head, dispelling the thought of my confusing younger years. I remember once, when I was no more than eight or so, my mom found me playing with a bird with a broken wing in an alley and beat me for it. I later heard her telling another hooker that she had found me torturing a bird, and I never thought anything of it until now. "Even before Jane, I always had these... urges. Thoughts."

He nods as though this makes perfect sense. Then again, he knows me better than anyone. He may not accept or like my urges, my darkness, but he certainly seems to understand it well enough.

"I know you're scared, but if we are going to get out of this place, be together... Please, Mia. For me. For us." His thumb comes up, trailing over my bottom lip and a shiver runs up my spine.

My voice comes out in a shaky whisper, "I'll try."

The corner of his lip turns up, and he leans down to kiss me lightly.

"You know how much I fucking love you?" he rasps. "You realize we can be free now?"

Despite the fear and trepidation still coursing through me, a small smile graces my lips.

"Free," I whisper. "Where should we go? What should we do?"

He tenses up.

"Mia, I don't know what's out there. I don't know what to do about the cops that are almost for sure coming here. You know the world, so you tell me. Where are we going? What should we do?"

I consider this for a moment. I forget so often how little Branson has been in the world. Although much of my last decade has been spent in this house, I still had years in the city and I haven't been forced to stay in the house in years. He hasn't left this property since he was a kid. For the first time, I feel a pang of regret about my recent kill. If I hadn't killed that cop, maybe we could have stayed here for longer, made a

plan.

Then again, I could go back further and say what if I hadn't taken that stripper, Lola?

What if we had killed Jane years ago?

Too many what ifs.

I need to focus. Think about what our problems are, how we can solve them.

If the cops come here and we're gone, they'll eventually search the property even if they don't find that cop. If they find the basement, Jane's gallery, and associate it with my picture, that station wagon, with Lola...

They can't find any of it.

"I have an idea," I say slowly, turning over the idea in my mind. "I don't know where we'll go next, but the city is a big enough place for us to hide for now, especially if I dye my hair. That picture wasn't great, so it'll be a blonde in a station wagon they are looking for. Easy enough. The real problem is this place." I gesture to the house.

"Why?"

"If they find it, they'll never stop looking for me," I tell him simply. "You know, most people don't keep galleries of human body parts in their basement."

The corner of his lip turns up a fraction.

"Yes, I was aware," he replies wryly. "So, what do you propose we do?"

My grin grows.

“We burn this place to the fucking ground.”

Chapter Six

Branson

Adrenaline courses through me as she pulls us out of the long gravel driveway, faint hints of smoke beginning to wisp out from the house. We started the fire in the workroom and basement, covering it in everything flammable we could find. It took some effort, but I managed to drag the cop's body back into the house to burn along with it. There was nothing we could do about his car, so we just drove it around the back of the barn so it'd be out of sight a bit, but really, it doesn't matter.

Once this place goes up, this place will be crawling with cops.

"Here we go," she says in a quiet voice as we turn onto the road. I feel my entire body freeze as I realize this is already the farthest I've gone in fifteen years. I look at Mia beside me as she drives. Her blonde hair whips around her face, green eyes focused on the road ahead. A small smile plays on her lips, I'm pretty sure from the arson she just got to commit.

If there's one thing that's always been true for her, it's how much this woman loves her mischief. I think back to our earlier conversation and her acknowledging her urges. I've known for a long time that Mia has always had a darkness about her. No, not Mia, Teddy.

After years of being confined mentally and physically, it's a strange concept to try to control her. I know what it's like better than anyone how it feels to have someone oppress and push you down. It's maddening to think she was the cause of much of it,

yet I still feel guilt at the thought of reciprocating.

There's a difference between me whipping her ass or ordering her about as my little doll.

Overriding the hint of guilt, though, is logic and sure knowledge. I know the control is what I need to stay sane. After all those years of suffering, of having no power or control, weakness or inability to act is the only thing that could break or kill me now.

I don't want Mia to try to be someone she's not, but I don't think I can take it if, after everything, she's just like Jane, anyway. It's not even guilt or a sense of morals or rightness so much as needing to be as far removed from Jane and the things she did as possible.

A normal life may be something I'll never have, but fuck would it be nice to try.

We stay mostly silent as we drive toward the city and every so often one of us looks back, but we're far enough we can't see the smoke anymore. My headache is growing with every second, though, and the outside light I'm so unused to is making it worse.

Mia reaches over to the radio, turning the dial until some music comes on.

"Can we keep that off?" I ask after a moment, my hand on my temple rubbing. She turns to me with a frown but nods and clicks it off.

"Maybe we should go to a doctor," she says after a moment. "See if we can get you some medication or something to finally help with your headaches."

"I don't need a doctor," I reply even as the migraine grows. "Just get us out of here. I'll be fine."

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I know I should be looking out the windows intently, but the rolling farmland surrounding us holds no real interest for me, and I find myself caught up in my own head. I eventually let her put on quiet music that's easy to tune out. Closing my eyes, I lean against the window, enjoying the cool touch on my forehead.

I know I should probably be thinking about what the hell we are going to do next, but I keep finding myself thinking of our earlier conversation. I always knew that Mia was drawn to killing and death. It's not like I can say her killing that cop was any big surprise. I suppose I just hoped without Jane around, that urge would fade.

Then again, I think of how I felt when I killed Bud. That hit of adrenaline was like nothing I'd ever felt before and even in my limited experiences, I get the sense it's not an easy one to replicate. Beyond that, the sense of rightness in this instance made it easy. Every stab of the blade into his flesh.

I feel my dick twitch at the thought of the knife pressing into skin, at how it felt to wield that sharp edge, and open my eyes with a frown.

Maybe we aren't so different after all.

Looking around, I realize I've had my eyes closed longer than I thought, and the houses are getting closer together. The faint music is still playing, and it takes me a moment to realize that Mia is singing softly along to it. The corner of my mouth turns up as I sit there and watch her, listening to her sing for the first time since we were children.

It isn't until the song ends that she realizes I'm watching her and her cheeks pink lightly, but she smiles.

"Don't stop," I tell her, and her smile grows.

"We're only about twenty minutes out of the city now," she replies through her grin.

"We should get some things, find a place to stay for the night."

"Sure," I tell her, sitting back into my seat feeling more at peace, "but keep singing."

She keeps smiling but obliges me, her voice washing over me. Maybe, just maybe, I'll be enough, and she won't need to kill. And if not? Maybe that isn't as awful as I thought.

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We pull into a parking lot with small businesses. It's about 5 PM and the sky is beginning to dim. I feel my heart pick up at the sight of people walking around. A woman and a young boy walk by hand in hand and I watch them intently until they pass.

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Mia parks and waits a moment before turning to me.

"Are you okay with going in?"

"What do you mean? Why aren't you?" I feel a wash of panic rise in me as I turn to her.

She gives me a sad smile and I get the sense she understands, or at least knows, what I'm feeling.

"My picture is all over the place right now. I can tell you what to get and do, but if they recognize me, then we're fucked."

I swallow and nod. "What is this place?"

"It's called a drugstore, I suppose. It'll have the things I need, like hair dye. Here, I wrote it all down. All the people who work there will be wearing the same uniform. If you can't find something, just ask."

"Won't that be strange?"

She shakes her head. "No, they are there to help. When you have it all, there will be someone at the front working who will ring it all up. You can use this money, it'll be more than enough, so just hand them this bill and they'll give you change."

I look down at the faded bill now in my hand and back up at her and realize what she already has. I have never bought anything before. The expression on her face is

vaguely sad. A choked sort of laugh leaves me as I shake my head.

"Let's get this over with."

Fear threatens to overwhelm me as I approach, the fluorescence of the light reminding me too much of Jane's old workshop. She hadn't maintained the lights for the last few years, but my childhood was filled with lights much like these. Blindingly bright, leaving nothing to the shadows. The irrational fear that they will expose me for the monster I really am grips me for a moment, but I shake it off.

No one looks twice as I enter. I note the baskets other people are carrying, so I grab an empty one for myself and try to act like everyone else. Doing my best to keep my eyes from bugging out, I take in the aisles of just... things! So many random shapes and colors. Things I've never seen before.

Swallowing, I pull the list of items out of my pocket and look around for signs to tell me where to go. Hair. Perfect, I'll start there.

I take a few minutes to inspect the giant wall of boxes of hair dye but have no clue what I'm doing, so I just pick a few random ones and throw them in my basket. The sharp thrill of making a choice runs up my spine.

Beside them are brushes and other accessories. I see some hair clips that remind me of Mia, so I toss them in as well, feeling pleased with myself for thinking of it.

I manage to get most of the things on the list until I get down to one of the last items and see ibuprofen. I frown, recalling the word from my medical texts as being pain relievers and wonder why she didn't tell me she was hurting.

Not sure where they would keep such a thing, I look around until I find someone wearing a blue uniform looking outfit I'd noticed on a few people walking around.

"Um, hello, do you, um, work here?"

The man turns around and I see he's probably close to my age, in his early twenties. His collar is low enough to show his neckline, utterly bare of scars and chafe marks. In another world, another life, this could have been me.

"Yeah, man, what do you need?"

"Ibuprofen?"

"Yeah, aisle nine, just past the condoms and stuff."

I nod, making my way over to the aisle he indicated and moving slowly until I see a section with a bunch of small boxes labeled "Condoms". I stop and pick up one of the boxes, reading the back of it until my eyes get wide and I realize what they are. Fuck. It takes me a minute, but cheesy commercials play through my mind. Making a mental note to bring it up with Mia, I quickly grab the ibuprofen and go to pay.

Chapter Seven

Teddy

Fortunately, I knew of a motel just outside the city that takes cash and asks no questions, perfect for two people essentially on the run. Until I can get some kind of disguise in place, I don't want to be seen around, just in case. The video and images they got were fuzzy, but enough for me to need to be wary.

We pull into the gravel lot and I turn to Branson, who's been quiet since we left the market.

"Do you mind?" I ask him, handing him a few more bills and pointing at the sign that says 'Reception'. He nods.

"What do I do?"

Once we're settled in our room, I go through the bag of stuff, pleased he was able to get it all. Branson takes a seat, closing his eyes and leaning his head back and I know his headache is probably still bothering him. He's always been a bit sickly, but the past few years I haven't obviously been concerned about his comfort. A sliver of guilt hits me and I start digging for the ibuprofen I put on the list. When my eyes land on an item I didn't ask for, I pull them out and hold up the barrettes in question.

"What are these?"

He opens his eyes long enough to look before shrugging and closing them again.

"They reminded me of you."

I look at the small girly things and feel a grin grow on my face. I hop off the bed and into his lap, leaning in to kiss his cheek lightly. He sighs and looks at me and I pout.

"Hardly the reaction a girl wants when she sits in her man's lap," I tease. He tries to give me a small smile, but I see the pain lined in the creases of his brow and let my pout drop.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he replies, "just tired."

I nod and carefully rise off him, reaching into the bag again and handing him the pain killers.

"Take a few of these, I got them for you," I tell him. He looks at me a moment but eventually takes the bottle and swallows a few pills dry.

"That reminds me," he says as I hand him a bottle of water which he pauses to chug half of, "I saw something else in there I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh yeah, what's that?" I ask, rifling through the bag to find the brush so I can start my hair.

"Condoms."

I feel myself pause and turn to him.

"What about them?"

"We had sex."

I look at him questioningly. "Umm, yes?"

"You could get pregnant."

"And?"

His hand darts out and grabs my arm, stopping my motions so I turn to look at him.

"Mia, this is serious. Do you really think either of us are equipped to handle something like that?"

I look into his face, his dark brown eyes staring into mine.

"I-I guess not," I admit, sitting on the side of the bed. "We're really gonna talk about this, huh?"

He nods.

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"I want you, Mia. And now that I've been inside you, I don't think I can ever go without. But I can't deal with that on top of everything right now."

I nod, my head dropping to look at my fingers fiddling together in front of me. "Yeah, you're right. But I don't want to use condoms, I've heard they're gross. There are pills I can get, but you might have to get them for me too."

"I can do that."

I look into his face again, and this time, I feel desire rise inside me. That he wants me.

"You really want me?" I ask shyly and he chuckles lightly, taking my hand and placing it gently on the hardness in his pants. I bite my lip, looking up to him.

"Was that ever really a question?" he replies, pulling me back onto his lap where I nestle in, enjoying the hardness pressing against my ass. I wiggle lightly, bringing my mouth down and leaving a trail of kisses down his face.

"Maybe tomorrow we can get the pills, because tonight, I need you to touch me."

His gaze heats at my words.

"Touch you?"

I think back to the sting of his belt and feel heat rising as I press my legs together, my body leaning to his as I whisper,

“Hurt me, love me, give me everything I deserve.”

Chapter Eight

Branson

Give me everything I deserve.

At her words, my dick hardens to a point of being almost painful. I let out a hiss as her lips trail down my face and neck until they touch the circling scars. Pulling back, her finger comes up, lightly tracing the lines. When she leans down again to kiss the scar before lightly licking up the side of it, I shudder, pushing her off me.

She looks up at me with heated eyes, waiting for my direction, and I feel an increasingly familiar sense of power rise in me. I hope she's ready for me, because what she deserves...

"Take off your shirt and pants, little doll" I tell her, standing back to admire. Her eyes never leave mine as she drags the top over her head, leaning over to push down her jeans until she's standing before me in only her bra and panties. Her pale skin is flawless, even the heavy scar on her arm that I know she hates. It's all her, it's all beautiful.

My mind races with possibilities, all the things I want to do to her. She stands patiently, though I don't fail to notice how she bites her lip, how her legs are pressed together. Making a decision, I go to the table and pick up one of the knives we brought with us, holding it up to my thumb to test its sharpness.

I hear Mia's sharp intake of breath, but I know her better than to think it's fear. My

eyes meet hers as I walk up to her slowly, blade in hand, until I'm standing in front of her. She doesn't move as I let the sharp edge trail from the side of her neck down her chest.

"So perfect," I whisper. "So porcelain. Now, stay still."

Her breath quickens as I press down just a fraction and the blade bites into her cleavage. A small line of blood immediately rises. Still, she doesn't move.

"Good girl," I tell her and her face lights up. The corner of my mouth rises but I don't smile, not now. Turning back to the bed, I take the knife, grabbing the sheet and quickly ripping several strips off it. I nod to the bed and she giggles, jumping up to the middle of it.

This time I do smile.

"Lie down, little doll."

She complies, even holding her arms above her like she already knows what I have in mind. It doesn't take me long to wrap the lengths around her wrists, tying it to the bedpost. I look down at the scratch on her chest and notice it's stopped bleeding. My thumb comes up and harshly rubs the small cut. She moans lightly, making me chuckle. "Such a dirty girl. You love pain, don't you?"

Her green eyes meet mine and she lifts her chin. "Yes," she replies breathlessly. "Hurt me."

I lick my lips as I look down with her, both excited and scared to let this play out. There will always be a part of me that hates her for what she did, that wants to give her true pain and suffering. But the other part of me loves her, wants to worship and cherish her. That she wants this, that she craves the pain, is like a fucking gift.

“Once I start, I don’t know if I can stop,” I admit. Her head rises off the bed as far as she can, her eyes intent on mine.

“Don’t ever stop.”

That’s all the consent I need, and a guttural sound leaves my throat as my mouth finds hers. The kiss is anger, passion, and love all rolled together and I’m sure her lips are the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted.

My mouth finds her throat and I bite down hard, eliciting a cry from her even as her hips rise up to me. When I finally pull away to inspect the bite mark, she whimpers.

“I think it’s time for these to come off,” I whisper as my finger trails down the scratch one more time into the crease of her bra. Reaching over, I grab the knife, sliding it beneath the fabric to tear it off. The sharp blade cuts easily and her breasts tumble out, her perfect pink nipples standing at attention for me.

She watches my movements as I bring the knife up to her breast again, letting it faintly trace over the edge of one nipple. She whimpers again as they pebble further, and I know it's fear she’s feeling. Good.

“You’d deserve it,” I whisper as the knife moves and she swallows. “You’d let me, too, wouldn’t you, little doll? Let me take these, if I asked?”

A deep outtake of breath, but she nods, “Yes.”

I feel myself smile and drop the knife.

“Good girl, but these are too perfect to cut.”

When my mouth finds one of them, she lets out a moan, pushing her chest forward. I

suck, enjoying the way the small nub feels as my tongue traces its outlines until I bite down. Hard. She cries out but still presses toward me. My other hand comes up and finds the other, rolling it between my fingers.

Nipping at her chest one more time, I pull up and look down at her again, frowning when I realize she's still wearing panties.

“This won't do,” I say as I lean down, ripping the side with my hands and tossing the flimsy fabric away. My eyes land on the perfect V at the top of her thighs and it takes everything in me not to take her right here.

She catches where my eyes land and opens her legs to me. I let out a groan before flipping her onto her stomach. She squeals as I pull her hips up so her arms are crossed over, still tied in front of her, and her bare ass in the air waiting for me.

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“Much better,” I say, smacking her ass and getting another small yelp. Staying on the end of the bed where she can’t turn to see me, I start to take off my clothes. The view from here is perfect and my dick pulses as I look at her inviting opening, her perfect little ass.

“Mmm, I like you like this,” I tell her as I come around the side of the bed again, my hand caressing her skin as I walk. She turns her head to me and her eyes land on my cock, bobbing in front of her. She licks her lips, looking up to me briefly.

“Please,” she says, putting her chin over her arm to get closer. I take a step until I’m only millimeters away from her mouth before turning to the side and smacking her face with it. She lets out a tiny grunt and whines as it moves away from her.

“No,” I tell her, letting my hand move down her body once more until it lands on her ass where a perfect handprint already shows. Squeezing, I lean my head down and pull her hair back so I can whisper behind her ear. “Tonight, it’s this I’m claiming.”

She swallows as I drop her head and climb on the bed behind her, rubbing her until her hips move, wiggling back into me. Gripping her waist, I press my hard length against the crease, enjoying every moment of friction.

Soon, I think, as I let my hand move down, relishing the feel of her shiver when my thumb trails over the sensitive hole of her ass. She doesn’t pull back, but I feel the muscles tense when I press lightly. I caress softly until I feel her begin to unclench.

“Good girl,” I whisper to her, bringing my fingers forward into her folds of wetness. She moans lightly as I explore with my fingers, pressing into the warmth of her pussy

a few times before pulling out. She lets out a groan of complaint when I do before I bring my thumb back up to her ass, rubbing light circles until she presses up against me. My other hand rubs her side lovingly until her muscles give way and my thumb slides in easily. Her head flings back and she gasps.

“That’s right, little doll,” I say quietly, moving in and out slowly as her head drops in her arms. “Give me all your pleasure, all your pain.”

Pulling my thumb out I plunge two fingers inside her now soaking wet pussy and pump a few times before bringing them back up, pressing them mercilessly into her ass. Her muscles clench around my fingers again but I don’t stop moving in and out.

Her hips begin to move again. I add a third finger, and she grunts as I stretch her virgin ass for a few more minutes before pulling out. Mia turns to look at me just as my dick presses against her, and her eyes widen. Reaching a hand out to her hair, I tug back so her throat is taught.

“Hold on, little doll.”

That’s all the warning I give her before pressing in. Her cry is pained, and I have to stop, my teeth gritted as I stop myself from coming right there. She's just so tight. After a moment, her body loosens as it adjusts to me inside it. Slowly we both begin to move, and I press in to the hilt.

Her breathing quickens as I move and I know I won’t last long. Recalling how she touched herself, I slide a hand around to her front and use my thumb to rub the little nub I find there. Her moans change, becoming more frantic, as I circle and I feel myself losing control.

“Branson!” Mia cries out and I feel her tense around me. Knowing this, my motions pick up until I explode. I feel her twitch again along with me and it feels never

ending, her orgasm carrying me further than ever before. It seems like a long time before I come down, both of us panting for breath.

I look down at her perfect ass still in the air and notice how red it looks and head to the bathroom. When she sees me exit with a cloth in hand, a small smile plays on her lips and she drops her head onto her arm that's still tied to the bed.

With infinite care, I wipe her clean with the warm fabric, giving a gentle smack before untying her.

Chapter Nine

Teddy

As I lay here and he gently rubs my sore bum, I don't think I've ever felt so cherished.

I'm coming to realize that I truly do trust Branson in so many ways. As I think about it, it occurs to me that he is the only person who has never let me down, never hurt me. No more than I could stand, anyway. I think a part of him really does want to hurt me and doesn't want to admit it. I can't wait to push him that extra bit further, past that guilt I'm sure he feels.

He's fucking incredible, and it's me—and only me—who can pull those last shreds of that broken boy away to reveal the magnificent and bloody man beneath.

Once I'm untied, I quickly crawl up into his arms, feeling satiated.

After a few minutes, I turn to click on the TV, turning on something low and handing him the remote. He smiles lightly and holds his arms out for me again.

"I'm going to go grab us some drinks," I tell him, leaning up to kiss him lightly before standing and throwing one of my loose dresses over my head.

"Where?" he asks, his brow knit together, and I can't help but smirk at his concern.

"Just around the corner. I'll only be a few minutes," I assure him, grabbing my purse

and the room key and heading out the door.

It's late, but there are still a few random people in the shadows of the distance, drug addicts or perhaps a whore and her john. Places like this are strangely comforting to me, though I know the rest of the world would be scared to spend the night in such a place. I chuckle to myself as I think about how boring people are. I may resent Jane for a lot of things, but I'll always be grateful for her teaching me what it is to be myself.

My steps slow as I consider this. Without Jane, without killing, who even am I? Branson's little doll? Despite myself, I feel a flush of warmth at even the thought of the term of endearment, but still, I'm scared it won't be enough.

It's only been a day, I remind myself as I turn the corner of the motel. My ass is pleasantly sore and we're out of Jane's grasp. We've got this. I let myself breathe out a smile.

The light above flickers ominously but I pay it no mind, stepping up to the sad looking vending machine as I hum to myself.

"Underdressed, aren't you?" a male voice says behind me. I pause slightly in my motion of placing money in the machine, but don't turn around immediately.

"Depends on what you think I'm doing," I reply, pressing the button and leaning over to grab the can before turning. The man is probably not much older than me, but his skin and eyes speak of addiction and hardship that make him appear much older. In his hand, pointed at me, is a small pocket blade, and I actually let out a laugh. The man frowns but takes a step forward, pressing me back to the machine with the shitty blade at my chest.

"Don't scream and I won't hurt you," he warns. A rush of excitement flows through

me and I let the smile grow on my face, pressing forward into the blade. It's dull but I can feel it press against my skin. The man looks down in horror. He takes a step back from me, clearly unnerved, and I throw my head back with a laugh.

“Don't scream,” I tell him, taking a step forward. “I wouldn't want to have to make this too fast.”

Chapter Ten

Branson

My eyes are on the TV, but I'm not really watching, every so often darting a glance at the door. I don't pace or move, but it's more instinct to sit still than anything else. It's been almost ten minutes.

"Fuck this."

I throw on my pants and the shirt but don't bother to button it or put on shoes before stepping outside. It's dark and I hear a fake feminine laugh from the parking lot but can tell right away it isn't Mia.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I mutter to myself as I head the other direction around the side of the building. As I walk, I begin to hear a different female voice, this one quieter and much more familiar. Not Mia, Teddy.

Fury and betrayal course through me. My fists clench as I break into a jog and rush around the corner. It takes my eyes a moment to adjust, but sure enough, she's standing over some homeless guy who's on the ground. His head is bleeding slightly, and he has a dazed look on his face as she kneels behind him, tying his hands.

"Mia! What the fuck?" I shout-whisper, rushing up to grab her wrist and make her stand. A single drop of blood is on her cheek, a few more on the front of her dress. The expression on his face is one I know well, and I feel my heart drop.

“It’s okay, my love,” she tells me, a smile still playing on her face despite my obvious anger. “I saved him, just for you.”

She presses herself into me further, ignoring the man at our feet, and looks up into my eyes. The green in hers seems to be brighter than usual.

“What are you talking about? We talked about this, you can’t be doing this shit or—”

“He tried to touch me,” she interrupts, and my entire body tenses, “Tried to hurt me.”

My heart pounds in my chest. I look into her face for truth and see no lies. A sense of calm fury fills me as I kneel down beside the man, cocking my head to the side.

“This true?” I ask. Through the rag shoved in his mouth the man tries to speak, his eyes bugging out of his head, but the guilt is clearly written on his face.

Sighing, I stand.

“I saved him for you,” she says again, licking her lips and holding a hand out toward me. “I was just going to make sure he couldn’t move and come get you.”

My mind races, but really, there’s only one conclusion I can come to.

I remember how it felt to let my knife slide into Bud’s flesh, the beauty of justified pain and vengeance. The corner of my lips turns up as I look down at Teddy, then down at the man.

This is how we can make this work.

“Bring the car around. We’re all going for a drive.”

Chapter Eleven

Teddy

It was easy enough to take the man and drive into the bush once more. It makes me laugh to think that only forty minutes south from us are likely all the police within a hundred miles, pulling corpses and ruins of our childhood home, while we are driving around with a man in our trunk.

Despite the chill to the air, I leave the windows down, and Branson doesn't comment. His eyes are focused on the road ahead. He seems calm and sure, and my blood thrums pleasantly in my veins in anticipation of what's to come.

When that man came at me, I saw the perfect opportunity, the chance to give Branson a guilt-free way to realize the truth. The beauty of death and pain. That he'll see this as just, as right, as what he needs. The corner of my lip turns up at the thought of feeling bad for killing. It's been so long, so many people.

As I got older, I learned that people are shit, the world is shit. Why should I feel bad for culling the herd in such a small way?

“Up here on the left,” Branson says, interrupting me from my thoughts.

“Okay.”

The road is quiet and dark in front of us and the only sound is the quiet thump from the trunk and the air whishing past as we move down the off-road path. Five minutes

later, we pull into a small clearing, just big enough to turn the car around. I pull the key out but don't move, putting my hands in my lap in front of me. I turn to Branson who is sitting completely still, a hand on his chin as he looks out the window into the darkness.

His face is serious, severe, and the hint of moonlight shining through the trees hit his face and make the faint scars covering him seem to glow in the night. My lips part as I watch him, drinking him in.

“Did anyone see you with him?” he asks. My eyebrows pull together and I shake my head.

“No, no one.”

He nods but doesn't reply. Muffled cries are tuned out as the nighttime song picks back up in the forest around us, a chorus of bugs and other critters of the dark. I don't feel in any hurry and somehow understand why we're sitting here. I dart another glance over to Branson and smile, reaching out my hand to grasp his. His gaze falls to our hands for a moment before he sighs, pulling them up to his lips with a kiss.

“You know you're mine, right?” he says, his mouth still pressed against our intertwined hands. “I won't say I'd never hurt you, I have and will. But the thought of someone else, some fucking scumbag, trying to touch you....”

His voice rises as he speaks and I feel excitement course through me at his jealousy, his anger. I shift my body toward him, a fraction closer.

“Never anyone but you,” I tell him, my eyes meeting his straight on. The heat I see in his expression warms me. My other hand reaches up, placing my favorite knife above our hands. His eyes look down at the blade and back up at me, his expression never changing.

“Do it for me, baby,” I tell him and see the corner of his mouth twitch, just a hint. His hand wraps around the handle and he pauses for only an instant before his lips are on mine. I feel myself melt against his kiss, the angry possessiveness enough to take my breath away. When he pulls away, I’m in such a daze it takes me a minute to realize he’s already out of the car.

I scramble out to the trunk where Branson is waiting. I step up, lip in my teeth as I lean forward on the balls of my feet. He looks at me and raises an eyebrow before pointing a few feet back.

I pout but oblige him, stepping back while he opens the trunk. The man's cries immediately get louder, filling the clearing. A night bird screeches at the competing sound and wings flap off into the black.

I watch Branson's back, the shift of muscle as he grabs the man by the wrist and heaves him out of the car onto the forest floor.

I giggle when the man hints with a thump and groans, rolling in my direction. Without moving, I lean my head forward and down at him. His eyes bug out when he looks up at me and I wink, skipping away to give Branson room. I crouch down by the back tire, my eyes darting between Branson and the soon-to-be-dead fucker on the ground. I know most people would think I’m sick because I feel wet, horny, at the sight of all this. But yeah, there it is.

My man is pacing in the night, a fucking glorious beast of vengeance.

I’d be a fucking psycho if I wasn’t turned on right now.

“You’d hurt a helpless woman?” Branson asks, his voice low as he continues the slow pace in front of the man, only pausing to lean forward and pull the rag out of his mouth.

“Heeeelll—”

The man's cry is cut off by a boot in his face and I grin, clapping happily as blood gushes from the man's nose.

“Oooh, you shouldn't do that!” I scold the man, “Look what you got for that! A broken nose!”

I laugh, standing and skipping around them. Branson darts a look at me and I see his mouth twitch, but he keeps his attention on the matter at hand. Watching him all serious like this is incredible. In his element.

“Get up,” Branson says to the man, darting a foot out to get him moving. It takes the man a moment, but he gets to his feet, blood and snot bubbling down his face. He doesn't scream again.

“Move.”

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I follow behind and watch as Branson brings him through the woods until he seems satisfied and has the man sit at the trunk of a tree. The man sits back as Branson steps away, pulling his shirt over his head. His scars glow brighter in the moonlight, and though its cold and his skin pebbles immediately, he only flexes and cracks his neck before turning back to the man.

“P-please, I didn’t mean—”

A fist comes out and stops the man’s lies. It only takes a few hits before the man stops trying to speak, his only sounds turning to gargled sobs. The man’s lies and pleading continue, but we all know I’m hardly the first he has approached. Certainly the last, though.

Branson stands and turns to me. In the darkness his eyes look black. Blood is splattered on his bare chest and face. A single step is all it takes before he’s in front of me, his hand coming out to grasp my chin. I feel wetness at his touch and I’m sure blood is smeared everywhere, but it only turns me on. I lean my face up to his and he moves forward, chuckling, but doesn’t give me what I want.

My breath quickens as I watch Branson lose control, pulling the knife out as he approaches the man. I don’t offer help when the man begins to scramble away—or tries to, anyway. Branson stalks him, like the glorious creature of night he is, and tugs the man back, stabbing his leg to keep him in place.

I don’t think about it when I lean back against a tree to watch, my hand falling between my legs. My eyes stay open as I rub slow circles through the thin fabric of my panties, reveling in watching my man in his glory. A moan leaves my throat and

Branson's head whips around and catches sight of me. His eyes fall to my hand and his own lips part. Biting my lip, I lift up the dress to give him a better view, letting my hand slide inside the thin fabric. This time my eyes close and I let myself get carried away in pleasure, the pained moans echoing through the air only lifting me higher.

I hear a strangled sound followed by the unmistakable sound of a blade sinking into flesh. My eyes open and I watch as Branson finishes it, throwing down the knife and striding straight up to me.

My leg wraps around him as his lips find mine, his hardness pressing into the spot my fingers only just left. I groan and rub against him, savoring the feel of him around me.

He pulls back long enough to reach down and tear my panties in two, the flimsy fabric easily giving way to him. I didn't even see him pull his dick out, but he impales me effortlessly.

"Oooh!" I cry out as he plunges in and I wrap myself around him, my back against the rough bark of the tree. Blood and sweat cover us both, and it's all I can do to hold on as he fucks me without mercy. I can feel my back and ass being scratched raw, pushing me to that perfect point of pain and pleasure with each stroke.

Reaching up, I grab a low branch, trying to hold tight while he grabs my hips and lights explode behind my eyes. We scream out together into the night, wrapped in each other, wrapped in darkness.

Chapter Twelve

Branson

Three Weeks Later

My skin feels like it's crawling as I step into the clinic. The sound of a baby crying from another room makes my heart beat faster, and I think I might be having some type of panic attack. My headache pounds behind my eyes, worse by the day. The doctor who gave me the pills practically forced me to do the tests, but now that I'm back here, I wish I hadn't. Small lump or not, this place is worse than the fucking workroom.

You can do this, I tell myself.

Trimethylaminuria. Trimox. Trinucleotide.

The familiar mantra soothes me and I take a breath before stepping up to the old blonde lady sitting at the counter.

“Hi, I called earlier...”

“Name?”

“Tim Green,” I tell her, using the name on the fake ID Mia got me. One benefit to staying in such a shitty motel.

“Take a seat, we’ll call you shortly.”

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“Mia?”

“In the bathroom,” her voice says through the walls and I feel my shoulders drop in relief. I still half expect to find her missing any time we’re apart, but it never happens. Once we killed that scumbag from the motel things changed between us. She still wants to be taken in the bedroom, but our dynamic elsewhere is different. The divide between us is less with every day, and though part of me is sickened to think that it’s killing that keeps us together, I don’t really care. Not anymore.

My life has mostly been fucking miserable, and I never expected to spend many years on this earth. If I can spend a few more with her, reveling in the power of a righteous kill, then I will. It doesn’t matter to her, or not as much, but the thought of slowly ridding the world of pieces of shit like Jane and Bud makes me as close to happy as anything does other than Mia.

Teddy. Mia.

My little fucking doll.

When she steps out into the room, I feel the buzzing, crawling feeling of my skin dissipate. She’s across the room in a second and in my arms, her lips on mine. She tastes minty with that sweetness that is only her underneath.

“Everything okay?” she asks. I resist the urge to swallow hard and instead nod, grabbing the small bag and pulling out the prescription for birth control I managed to get filled.

“Just take one at the same time every day, she said. There’s a little pamphlet.”

Her smile grows as she takes the bag, leaning forward to kiss me again before hopping onto the couch and starting to read the brochure. The knot in my throat grows as I look at her, and the ominous pounding of my head only serves to make it worse. She didn’t notice that there was still more in the small bag and I quickly push it to the side.

I watch as she pushes back a strand of hair, now dark brown. I told her when she dyed it that I loved it and it’s true. The darkness against her fair skin is fucking stunning and I feel myself getting hard just watching her. Funny how even the sight of her can pull thoughts of death and melancholy from my mind.

“I got you something else too,” I tell her, grabbing the last bag from my adventures. She looks up at me, her eyes smiling with the hint of mischief that always seems to hover just below the surface.

Holding out her hands she says, “Gimme, gimme!”

“Excuse me, little brat, that’s hardly how you ask for things,” I say, crawling onto the couch. Her eyes widen and she starts to scramble away, but I grab her ankle, eliciting a shriek as I pull her toward me until she's underneath. My mouth finds her neck quickly, nipping lightly.

“Quiet, little doll, the whole apartment building will hear you.”

She giggles and presses her lips forward.

“Make me.”

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My hands trail through her tousled hair as we lie in bed, the last light of the day shining through the blinds. Small hands touch my chest and stomach and I sigh contentedly, tugging her a fraction tighter to me. A small, murmured sound of contentment falls from her mouth an instant later.

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“Wait, you said you had something for me!” she says, sitting up and looking at me with bright eyes.

“Well, I suppose you’ve been good,” I tease, groaning as I reach over to grab the bag dropped in my earlier eagerness to get her to bed. I’m thankful we’ve managed to claw together a bit of money from our last few kills because when I saw it, I knew I needed to get it for her.

Her eyes widen as they drop into the bag, her gaze looking up to me as though for confirmation. I smile and nod lightly at the bag and she squeals, pulling out the shirt and holding it up.

Though she still loves to fuck around with her little dresses, she’s been adopting a more adult and darker wardrobe and I knew I had to see her in this.

“It’s amazing!” She exclaims, immediately tugging it over her head. I look at the front, there is a cute but angry little teddy bear adorning the front with the words ‘They Call Me Teddy’ underneath. She looks down at it and laughs again before tossing herself forward into my arms. I wrap myself around her easily, inhaling deeply the beautiful smell of her.

“Okay, this means we need to go out tonight then,” she tells me, and I nod my assent. She lets off another laugh before skipping off to the bathroom in only her t-shirt, her white ass bouncing the whole way.

Once she’s gone, I make my way over to the other forgotten bag, making sure she’s not coming back, before pulling it out. Reaching in, I pull out a few of the pills and

pop them in my mouth, swallowing them dry, before putting them away again.

Resolve rather than guilt fills me, and I let out a deep breath before joining Mia in the bathroom. If my girl wants to go out, out it is.

Chapter Thirteen

Teddy

My arm loops through Branson's as we make our way down the nighttime streets. Though the area is far from high end, it isn't the scum of our usual locale either. Heavy bass thumps from a building up ahead and I smile, squeezing his arm tighter and looking up to him. His brow is pulled into its usual scowl and I see a hint of something else in his eyes, but when he looks at me it's pushed down by love.

"Where are we going, exactly?" I ask as we pass by another club. People don't give us a second glance dressed as we are in black, another gothic couple roaming the streets.

"Just a place I heard about I thought you'd like," he says vaguely, the corner of his lip turning up. I feel my own mouth twist into a wry smile but don't press further, content to let him have his surprise.

When we turn a corner and a red glow comes into view, I know we've reached our destination. The only sign says D&S and a large man stands at the door, nodding to us as we step up.

When the door opens and we step in, a familiar smell washes over me and I'm instantly brought back to the Black Roses Club. The smell of leather, sweat, sex, and alcohol pour over me and I close my eyes, savoring the scent. When I open them, Branson is watching me and I let a brilliant grin show. He smiles, taking my hand and leading me through.

I feel underdressed, but at least he warned me not to wear the t-shirt. The ladies working all curtsy and nod when we pass. The main area is lowered and darkened, deep mahogany leather furniture with glimmers of candlelight dancing off it. A few hallways and a staircase are to my right and my eyes move quickly, greedy to understand what this place is. There are only a few women around. No loud music, no bar.

“Is this a... strip club?” I ask him and his mouth twitches up again.

“Not exactly.”

Before I can ask any more questions, a woman steps up wearing a long black thing that looks like a cross between a dress and lingerie. Her dark eyes remind me of Jane, though her expression is sensual and light.

“Welcome to D&S. Are you needing a room this evening?”

“Yes, please,” he tells her and I narrow my eyes slightly, still not entirely sure what he’s up to. The woman nods and whispers something to another girl before leading us down a long hallway. The first few doors are closed, but as we move through some are open and I have to keep myself from gawking.

We pass one room where a woman, dressed in full latex, is whipping a man on some kind of cross. In another, a woman is rolling around in pleasure while another pours candle wax all over her. My eyes take in kink after kink as we pass through, and by the time we get to the end, I feel wetness between my thighs at the things I’m seeing. The madame unlocks the door and bows before stepping away. Branson turns to me, taking my arms and looking into my face.

“This is good? You like it?”

I look at him quizzically, the smile still playing on my face as I lean forward and kiss him.

“I don’t know what you want to do where, but yes, I like it.”

His smile melts my heart and panties before he steps aside, and I actually gasp. A large four-poster bed is in the center of the room, straps and ropes on the corners. To my left is a large armoire in the same deep wood finish as the rest of the furniture. I feel a small pang of guilt when I see the large cross and remember tying Branson up to one very similar.

It’s like a luxurious gothic playroom and possibly the coolest room I’ve ever seen in my life.

I turn to Branson and I’m sure my eyes are wide with excitement.

“Scratch that, I love it,” I tell him and he chuckles as he closes the door, clicking the lock on it. I notice how there’s a panel like I saw in some of the other rooms, and realize if we wanted, we could be ‘open’ for viewing like they were. The thought gives me a zip of thrill.

“We have this place for the entire night,” he tells me, stepping up until he’s only inches away. My teeth find my lip as I take him in.

“I wish I had known. I would have dressed up more,” I tell him.

“You look amazing,” he says simply before his lips find mine and I melt into his touch easily. His kiss is unhurried and thorough. The depths this man would go to please me, to keep me happy, never cease to amaze.

I step away from him with a grin on my face as I step up to the array of toys laid out

for us.

“Now, what should we play with first?”

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By the time we're done, my ass and back are both raw and red, and I'm pretty sure I came hard enough at one point that I blacked out.

Branson lies above me, his hands slowly moving through my hair.

One of the things I love most about our kinky fun together is the care he shows me after. I'll take all of his pain and punishment, his control and domination, because I know how he really feels at the end of the day.

My fucked up, broken man who loves me beyond belief, who can hurt and demean me so that I only feel love.

Leaning up, I kiss him lightly and take in the peaceful expression on his face.

“This was an awesome surprise, but do you think we could go home tonight?”

Chapter Fourteen

Branson

Though we have the room for the entire night, I'm glad when Mia agrees to go back to the motel. Despite how shitty it is, familiarity is something I need.

Mia is practically humming with contentment and I have to admit, I did have fun. I've been doing more research, trying to figure out more about how to please her. It seems to be working, if her current expression is any indicator.

It's closer to dawn than not by the time we are walking through the city streets once more. This time of night appeals to me, with fewer people and more shadows. It's still intimidating to come during the day, but dealing with crowds is slowly getting easier.

“What do you think about—”

A muffled cry comes from the alley we're passing and Mia stops. We look at each other and wait until the sound is heard again. A slow smile grows on Mia's lips. Despite my tiredness, I let myself smile and nod to her before following her into the alley.

The streets of the city are a dangerous place. I've heard stories of the victims Mia found in alleys much like this one, though at the time, innocence wouldn't have been on her radar. Now, hearing the sounds of struggle is like music, a sign that a righteous kill is to come.

The shadows swallow us immediately, and it doesn't take long for my night vision to improve. As we move, the adrenaline rises in me and I look over to Mia, whose eyes are sparkling with excitement.

Another muffled cry, much closer now.

We turn the bend and I grimace even as the man scrambles to pull up his pants and stand. Beneath him, a woman makes a sound and moves, her skirt pulled up past her waist.

"F'off s'me feckin' privacy," the man says unintelligibly.

He comes toward Mia and I don't move, despite how badly I want to gut this scumbag. I know Mia has it, watching as she readies herself for the drunken man's approach. Behind him, the semi-conscious woman moans again.

"You like little girls, huh," she goads him, pulling her knife from the sheath on her back. The man falters at the sight, his face paling as he stumbles to a stop a few feet away. With wide eyes, he turns to leave. Mia laughs, the light sound of it echoing through the alley.

"Are you going to let him get away?" I ask her teasingly. She winks at me before bringing up the knife between her fingers and aiming, letting loose.

Thud.

"Ahhhhh!!"

The man's screams echo loudly, and I dart a glance back down the alley.

"Make this fast," I tell Mia, keeping my eyes open. She nods, taking a few large steps

before pulling the blade from the man's back with a wet slurp. Blood pours steadily, but it's far from a life-threatening wound. His sobs make my headache amplify and I grit my teeth, subtly pulling a bottle from my pocket and taking a few pills out.

“Awww, did that hurt, precious?” Mia teases as she waves the knife in his face. The man blubbers, snot and tears running down his face as he begs her to not hurt him. She sighs.

“Mia!” I scold.

“Fuck, fine,” she says, rolling her eyes before lashing out and dragging the blade across the man’s throat. His complaints are thankfully silenced and replaced with a gurgling sound. A different type of cry has us both looking up to the woman who is now awake and watching us both.

“P-please don’t hurt me,” the woman says, scrambling further into the pile of garbage she was raped on moments ago. Mia rolls her eyes again and turns her attention back to the man, watching until he slumps over, silent. Mia looks at the woman and then at me and I shake my head. Mia shrugs as though she expected it.

“Alright, I feel even better now,” she says, jumping up with a smile. Stepping over the man's body, she links her arm back with mine and leans up to kiss me.

“I’m hungry. Wanna get some breakfast?”

Chapter Fifteen

Teddy

My stomach is seriously grumbling by the time we actually get to the small diner. That stupid asshole bled all over me, and I had to change and clean up. It's about ten in the morning and we haven't slept, so I'm looking forward to a big meal and a nap.

"Two?" the tired-looking waitress asks before leading us to a booth. There are maybe a dozen other people, most of which are reading newspapers or watching the TV in the corner.

"Do you know what you want?" Branson asks me as he puts down his own menu. I know he still gets a thrill from ordering in restaurants.

"I was thinking..." I trail off as my eyes catch sight of the TV, widening immediately. Branson turns to look just as the woman we saved earlier comes on the screen. It's too quiet to hear from her, but the bottom of the screen says, "Breaking News" and beside it, "Psychotic Couple Kill Man in Alley."

My mouth drops as I see some of the words play out.

"Killer Couple Connected to Unsolved Thirty-Year-Old Case."

A moment later, the screen changes and two fuzzy images of us from last night pop up on the screen. It's clear they're blown up and enhanced, but they're clear enough. My eyes immediately begin to scan the restaurant, but no one seems to be looking at

us.

“We have to leave now,” Branson says, his voice low and light. His skin looks pale, a feat considering how light-toned he is, and I nod before standing quickly. He waits while I put on my sweater. It’s over my head and I’m about to step away when one of the other patrons catches my gaze, his eyes widen as he looks from us to the TV. True recognition hits his eyes only a second before he jumps up.

“It’s them!” he hollers and most of the other people ignore him, but a few look up. Branson’s hand wraps around my arm, tugging me out of the restaurant quickly just as a few more of the guests start talking, pointing to the TV, whilst a few pull out their phones.

“Shit.”

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My stomach is still groaning loudly at me while I watch Branson pace. We managed to catch a bit more of the news on our way and confirmed they have connected us with Jane and the fire a few weeks ago. We couldn’t risk going back to the motel and instead darted into the nearby forest. We could go the other way, too, go hide in the depths of the city. Really, we haven’t gotten that far yet.

“Shit!” Branson says for the dozenth time. He’s run his hand through his hair so many times it’s standing on end, but I don’t point it out.

“It’s okay,” I say again, “We just need to get out of the state for a bit or something.”

“And how the hell do we do that with our pictures plastered everywhere?”

“We’ll figure it out,” I tell him, going over to him and placing a hand on his arm to

stop his pacing. He pauses but breathes deeply out of his nose, his brows pulled into a knot that's been there since he was young, and I know his head is hurting. My hand comes up to trace the side of his face and he lets out a shaky breath, opening his eyes to look into mine.

“They know what I look like now,” he says, and I nod.

“We have to leave.”

I nod again.

“Now that they know we have something to do with Jane, they won't stop.”

He frowns. “What was that about, anyway? The thirty-year-old thing? Do you know?”

I breathe out my nose and nod, this time slowly, but don't reply right away. I consider what I've learned about Jane over the years and how much to tell Branson. Honestly, I'm surprised we haven't had this conversation sooner, but I've been so happy I haven't wanted to think about it.

“What?” he asks impatiently.

“It's just... have you ever heard the name Robert Ketis?”

His brows knit together to a frown and he shakes his head.

“Who is that?”

“How much do you know about Jane's mom?”

“Fuck, Mia, just assume I know nothing and fucking tell me!”

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I hold my hands up in mock surrender.

“Shit, okay. Well, Sharon Ketis is Jane’s mother and the one who owned the antique business. Robert Ketis was Sharon’s husband, but not Jane’s father.” I step away, pacing as I recall the details. “I’m not sure, but I think something happened to Jane’s real dad. Sharon remarried to this guy, Robert, to save the antique business. He was a doctor, seemed alright on paper, but I have a feeling he wasn’t very good to Jane, if you know what I mean. Robert had a son who had the same name, but they didn’t call him that.”

Branson’s eyes widen. “Bud?”

I nod. “Robert and Sharon both died around the same time, around thirty years ago.”

“Do you know what happened?”

I shake my head. “No, but I can guess.”

He nods too, “Fair enough. So, you think she killed them back then and the police are connecting this all now?”

I shrug. “It’s the best I have. The timeline is about right, and I saw newspapers with a missing person notice for Sharon and Robert in Jane’s desk. If they never found them but did now, it might raise some questions.”

I watch Branson’s face as he considers this before I clear my throat.

“There’s one more thing I want to tell you.”

He turns to me, his brown eyes searching deep into mine.

“There... there was a picture in Jane’s desk too. Of Robert Ketis.”

“And?”

“And he looked like you,” I say, watching his face closely. His nostrils flare and I see the wheels turning, the recognition. That he suffered two decades for a dead man’s sins.

“Branson?” I ask after a moment, unable to read the darkness that’s written across his face. His eyes snap back to mine.

“We should wait,” he replies. “Let’s wait until dark and head back to the motel to grab our stuff.”

“Okay,” I reply with a wan smile, which he returns. I told him what I needed to. What he does with it is up to him.

A few bird songs ring out behind us and it's only then I realize how beautiful of a spot this is. There’s a light chill to the air, but the sun is shining through the thick trees, making the dewy forest glisten. I look at Branson and his pale skin and my smile grows.

“Since we have some time to kill, how about a walk?”

He gives me a small smile and a nod, taking my offered hand. I happen to know these forests go for a long time and, as a matter of fact, if we walked long enough, we’d end up back at Jane’s. Branson hasn’t spent much time outdoors, but I’ve spent many

afternoons wandering these woods.

“I don’t suppose either of us ever had much chance of a normal life,” I say conversationally. Branson slows his step beside me, but we keep walking, hand in hand. “I think, if not for, or, you know, all of it, I would have wanted to work and live outside, somewhere like this.”

I let go of his hand long enough to outstretch my arms, spinning in a slow circle before stopping. He smiles as he looks around.

“I could see why you like it. Even the air seems to smell better out here. I always thought that was just a saying, but it isn’t.”

I giggle, “Nope, definitely actually a thing.”

We continue our walk in silence for a few minutes, both lost in our own thoughts.

“I wonder what I would have been like,” he finally says, and though his tone is light, I feel the sadness beneath the words. It’s strange how sad that makes me. How much it makes me want to change that, when I consider that only months ago, I would have reveled in his misery. Or did I?

I can’t help but wonder if it’s always been the same, a back and forth, a power struggle and us finding our dynamic. Would we have had such tumultuous years if not for Jane? Maybe not. But somehow, I think if we met under any circumstances, there always would have been a struggle. And I don’t doubt that no matter what else, we always would have found one another.

After all we’ve been through, I know he’s my soul’s fucked up and twisted counterpart. The only man alive who could take what I gave and come out stronger for it. If that isn’t fucking fate, then I don’t know what is.

“What about a doctor or something?” I reply, thinking back to the medical texts he used to read to me. Even now once in a while, I catch him reciting random terms under his breath and I don’t even know if he realizes he’s doing it.

“Doctor?” he asks with scorn.

“Since when do you have a problem with doctors?”

He doesn’t reply and I get the sense there’s something he doesn’t want to say. Despite my immediate desire to push him, I remember I’m trying to make him happy.

“You are good at memorizing, have steady hands, and want to make people feel good. Plus, you’re calm, or more than me, at least,” I say with a wink and he chuckles.

“True, I guess. I don’t think I like dealing with people, though.”

“People do suck,” I agree.

After that, we walk in silence again.

Chapter Sixteen

Branson

The fresh air doesn't help the pounding in my head but it does make my mind feel clear and certain. We should be a lot more concerned with what is coming next, how we're not only on the run still but now our pictures are out. But somehow the peace here makes it easy to push those thoughts aside.

Death and suffering shouldn't exist in such a beautiful place.

I look over to Mia and feel my heart clench. As much as I want to just enjoy this right now, we do need to think about what is next. I need to protect her. The sky is beginning to darken, and I slow to a stop.

"We should start heading back, figuring out what's next," I tell her, leaving a hint of remorse in my voice. She sighs but nods and we turn around, going the exact way we came.

"Do you think we could go north, to Canada?" she asks randomly.

"Sure," I reply slowly. "I don't care too much where we go. North is as good a direction as any."

"I always wanted to try poutine."

"Poutine?"

“It’s like french fries with gravy and cheese curds,” she replies, licking her lips.

I crinkle my nose. “If you say so.”

She smiles and pushes my arm lightly. “Trust me, it’ll be amazing.”

“All right, little doll, poutine it is.”

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It doesn’t seem to take us very long to get back, but the sky gets dark quickly and by the time we are walking through the main part of the park and playground, dusk has set. The peace of the afternoon seems to melt away and I immediately feel on edge. My headache pounds so badly it actually makes it hard to see for a moment. When I blink a few times it helps and the distant lights of the city are visible in the distance, the red vacancy light of the motel down the street to our right.

“Let’s go.” I keep her hand in mind, my eyes moving as we head toward the motel. A few of the regulars hang out in the parking lot, scum I regret we haven’t had the time to take out. Oh well. I have a feeling wherever we go in the world, there will always be pieces of shit for us to take out together. Dark and selfish avengers.

One of the drug dealers eyes us as we pass, but we move quickly to our room, locking the door behind us. We were only here ten hours ago, but everything has changed since then.

Mia immediately walks over to the TV and flicks it on, flipping it over to a news channel where, sure enough, our faces are in the right corner. I’m already digging through the slit on the side of the mattress, pulling out the two pistols we purchased but haven’t used, as well as the rest of our money. I pause as the news reporter begins to speak.

“Police have not confirmed suspicions that the recent string of murders, including a fire outside of town, are related to these two—names unknown. However, they are currently considered armed and dangerous. In just a few moments we’ll share the clip from this morning where Darlene Lugos speaks about her experience.”

I stop listening after that, slamming my hand down on the table.

“Fuck!”

Mia jumps from her perch on the bed but doesn’t say anything. My hands go up to my temples and squeeze in an attempt to release the pressure. It helps briefly and I open my eyes to go for my bag before realizing my pills are in the car.

“Start packing,” I tell her as I grab the keys. “I’ll be right back.”

The trip to the car is blissfully uneventful and even with my shit driving abilities I manage to move it down the block. We got rid of the station wagon ages ago, but there’s no way to know when or if they connect us with this one. I curse my own ignorance of the world. Maybe if I knew more about how this shit worked, I could have kept us safe, hidden. Then again, maybe people who go around killing other people don’t stay hidden for long, no matter who they are.

With the car re-parked, I grab the small prescription bottle and shake it, noting how there’s only a few pills left. I sit there for a moment staring at the bottle and realize there’s no way I’ll be able to get more. I can’t go back to the doctor and even if I could, we don’t have much money left. The doctor told me what would happen if I stopped taking them. Told me it was amazing I didn’t have worse side effects already, a miracle really. The pills wouldn’t cure me but would buy me time and lessen the pain.

Without them....

The realization of what that really means hits me, and it isn't until I go to try to take out a pill that I realize my hands are shaking. Five pills left. I pop two into my mouth, the bottle with the remainder squeezed tightly in my fist.

I always knew my days with Mia would be limited, but fuck do I wish I had more. I never expected it would be because of something like this. At least I do have enough time to get her somewhere safe, away from this fucking mess and far away from our past.

The pill bottle finds its way back into my pocket along with the car keys. The walk back to the motel seems to take forever, yet no time at all.

“What's wrong?” she asks almost as soon as I walk back in.

I know I don't have a talent for lies or deceit.

In two long steps I'm at her side and my lips are on her, the question, forgotten.

Chapter Seventeen

Teddy

His lips find mine and claim them instantly. I'll never get sick of the way he touches me, possessive, yet with reverence. His hands greedily come up my leg and torso, tugging my shirt over my head.

"I thought we had to pack," I tease even as I help him pull my tight black jeans down. He rips the last leg off and his hand finds my thigh. His eyes find mine.

"We leave before dawn. First, I need you. My way."

Something intense shines in his eyes, a need I've never seen, and I nod on autopilot. He doesn't smile but leans down to plant a light kiss on my belly button. His hands move to my panties, pulling them down carefully and tossing them to the side before he pushes me up so I'm flat on the bed.

I'm so used to being tied when we're together, I somehow feel more exposed lying here naked like this for him. He looks down on me, fully dressed, his hungry eyes moving up and down my body.

I beckon him with a finger and smile.

Pulling off his shirt, he comes down on top of me and covers me with his warmth. My hands move up and down his torso, trailing the scars dotting it. His mouth finds my neck and that sweet spot that makes me shiver. I press my hips up against him,

wishing for more skin on mine.

Nipping one more time, he gets off me only long enough to undo his pants and lie down beside me. I greedily look at him, licking my lips at the sight.

“How can I please you, master?” I ask seductively, trailing a finger down his chest. He smiles lightly but pushes me back down.

“Like this, little doll. Like this.”

He shifts down and comes between my legs, draping one over his shoulder as he spreads me apart.

“Bran—Ahh!”

His tongue rakes up my slit and I can't keep from crying out when his lips find my small nub. I've never had someone's mouth on me, and it's intimate in a way I can't describe. I feel wanton and exposed, cherished and debased. I love it.

My sounds must encourage him because he eats me like a starving man, his tongue exploring every fold. I'm lost in a sea of pleasure when a finger slides into me and I unravel right there, spasming over that one digit. His mouth doesn't leave but gets softer when he hears me whimper at the sensitive area. His finger keeps up its steady motion, only pausing long enough to add another.

“Oh, fuck!”

I'm not sure if I'm coming again or still, but it takes several minutes for me to come down from that cloud. My eyes feel heavy as I feel a light kiss on my thigh before he comes up behind me, pulling me close to him. His hardness presses against my ass and I clumsily try to turn, but he holds me tight.

“Not right now, little doll,” he whispers in my ear, kissing my cheek, “Right now, I just want to hold you and bask in your pleasure.”

Despite wanting to take care of him, I feel the pull of sleep and safety wash over me.

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The sound of a gunshot wakes me.

I’ve generally preferred more sophisticated methods of death, but that is a noise that I would know to my core.

I shoot up from the bed and immediately notice Branson isn’t there at the same instant he comes crashing into the door, blood pouring out of his shoulder. He looks even paler than usual with the red splattered against his skin. He frantically locks the door, peering out the peephole before his frantic eyes land on mine.

“They found us.”

Chapter Eighteen

Branson

Blood pours from the wound in my shoulder but it's mostly numb as Mia frantically wraps fabric around it to slow the flow.

“They were waiting by the car,” I tell her calmly. “I moved it down the block last night and they found it. I ran into the woods and came around back to get here. They’ll figure out where I went soon enough.”

The blood isn’t gushing but is steady when I look down at it. I marvel at the redness and wonder absently if I’m going into shock. I shouldn’t feel this calm, but somehow this just makes sense. My pain has always made sense though, hasn’t it?

“What the fuck are we going to do?” she sobs as she pushes against it.

I look at her face, the few bits of blood splatter somehow the perfect compliment. Her green eyes, though wide with worry and fear, are as beautiful as ever. My heart aches for her, despite her being right here, and I smile as the peace takes hold.

I lift my other arm, reaching out to grab her chin and stop her. Her eyes meet mine, filled with love, and I know it’s the right thing. My life never had any true meaning except for her, anyway.

“If you go now, you can get away,” I tell her and her brow pulls into a frown. “Leave me one of the pistols, I can keep them busy.”

“W-what the fuck are you talking about?” she replies, her voice rising in pitch even as she wipes tears from her eyes. She chokes as she continues, “I can’t believe you’d think I’d actually fucking leave you....”

“Mia—”

“...must think I’m the biggest piece of shit in the world....”

“Mia—”

“...can absolutely get away if we just...”

“Amelia! I’m dying.”

She stops, looking at me with a quivering lip.

“What are you talking about?”

Her voice sounds pitiful and small, so like when she was a child. I take her hand in mine, ignoring my injured shoulder.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you, I couldn’t hurt you like that.”

“Branson, what the fuck are you talking about?” she asks again, pulling away. Her eyes fill with fury and denial. Groaning, I manage to stand, reaching out to touch her face again. I feel the sting of rejection when she pulls back, looking at me angrily. Not that I can blame her.

“I’m sorry, Mia,” I whisper. “The doctor told me last week. Even if we get out of here, I’ll be dead within months.”

“I don’t believe you,” she says, her voice shaky, “You’re just saying that so I’ll go.”

I shake my head slowly, pulling the almost-empty pill bottle from my pocket and handing it to her. She looks down at it blankly. I reach out again and this time she doesn’t stop me.

“No, Mia. I’m not lying.”

She brings her eyes up from the bottle, looking deeply into my eyes, searching for truth.

“The headaches?” she asks, and I nod. She doesn’t ask me more, doesn’t need to. I see the instant she believes, her eyes welling with tears for only a second before she throws herself into my arms with a sob.

My injured arm hangs somewhat limply around her, my other hand lightly petting her hair as I whisper into her ear while she cries. Somehow, I don’t feel sad. If my life was ever to have any meaning, saving her, well, that would be it.

All I’ve ever wanted to do was save her. Now I can.

“Mia, you need to go,” I finally whisper, pulling her away from me. “I’ve been fucked since the day Jane took me, but you still have a chance.”

Tears pour down her face as she looks at me for a long moment before she finally replies, “No,” with a whispered voice.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 2:27 am

“Mia,” I say fiercely, “You have to. You can’t—”

She stops me with a touch.

“I can’t live without you,” she says in a whisper. “I can’t, and I won’t. If you die, I die with you.”

“Mia...”

“Maybe we can still make it,” she says, rubbing her face again. Even with racoon eyes, she’s still so fucking beautiful. “Maybe we can and if not, I’d rather go out in a hail of bullets with you than spend even a minute of my life without you.”

“Mia,” my voice cracks and I pull her harshly to my chest, both of us squeezing like we’ll never let go. And I suppose we won’t.

We move automatically to fill our guns, ignoring the sounds building in the parking lot behind us. The longer we wait, the more the cops have time to get ready, but we don’t hurry or even speak. Mia hasn’t really stopped crying, or rather, she’s not actively crying so much as unable to stop the tears from flowing. I’d try to convince her this is a stupid idea again, but I don’t have the fight in me. It’s probably too late now, and she’d never listen.

For her entire life, Mia’s always done what she wanted. Her mother couldn’t stop her, Jane couldn’t, and neither can I. As much as I’ve tried to dominate, to control her, I know the truth now. She is—always has and will be—Teddy, and from now until my last breath, she will own me, heart and soul.

I pause in my actions and put a hand to her arm. She stops and looks up at me, her expression fierce despite the tears trailing down her face. I can't help it and let out a laugh, a real, honest-to-god laugh.

“What?” she asks, perplexed.

“Just you,” I say through the laughter, reaching out to take her face in my hands and bring it to mine. “You are fucking incredible and I love you.”

She pulls back still confused but doesn't take her head from my hands, instead placing her forehead to mine.

“I love you too,” she says, her voice a hoarse whisper.

“I don't regret any of it.”

She smiles, her hand finally coming up to cover mine. “Me either.”

With my arm tied to my torso and a gun each, we stand and look at each other.

“This is it,” she says, a quiver in her voice.

“You don't have to do this,” I tell her, and she smiles, sad and pure.

“Yes, I do.”

I don't hear the words on the bullhorn as we open the door and step out. From our second-floor vantage we look down at the dozens of police spread over the area, guns all pointed at us. It is all so loud, but none of it registers. I turn to Mia, and in her eyes, I see the apology within. Her smile grows and I know she sees the forgiveness and love echoed back in mine.

She raises her pistol and starts to shoot, and I can't help but stand and watch the passion and chaos play out on her face. She throws her head back and laughs as the cops scramble away and I can't help but laugh too. She catches my eye briefly and any bit of uncertainty I had left drains out of me. This is how it was always supposed to be.

Teddy and me against the world.

I raise my own weapon and grin.

The sounds come back, but only gunshots. They seem distant.

The blackness is welcome.

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