



Thorned Vengeance

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Category: Romance, Action

Description: There isn't a person in the world who hasn't committed a sin. Some sins are worse than others, but seven of them are deadly. But those seven worst of the worst? They're what drive Saints Purgatory MC to keep fighting.

Thorn...

I joined the military to escape the demons that haunted me and the repeating nightmare I had every time I closed my eyes. After I was discharged, I had no purpose. I was lost. But salvation came in the form of two familiar faces and motorcycles. Becoming the Sergeant at Arms for Saints Purgatory MC has given me an outlet for all the rage I've kept buried deep for years.

People don't realize that behind my jokester veneer is a ticking bomb ready to detonate. My brothers think they know my story, but some parts are too painful to divulge... until I cross paths with her. We're two battered souls who find solidarity in tragedy and vengeance. But she's too stubborn for her own good.

When she refuses the club's help, she finds herself in extreme danger, and I vow that the sinner plaguing her will have the beast inside me to deal with.

Delaney...

My life was perfect... until it wasn't. That night was supposed to be a celebration, a party, but it became a nightmare that's forever etched on my brain. What happened to my sister will never happen again because I've made it my life's mission to see that it doesn't.

There isn't a person or thing that can stop me from getting the vengeance I crave because my nemesis will never see me coming. I've made sure of this over the years, but then a man foils my plans. We have the same agenda, but I refuse to give him my kill.

My life might be in jeopardy, but death would at least put an end to my pain. But now that I've met him, can I put aside my bloodthirst and accept the connection he offers?

He is Saints Purgatory, and he's a sinner who takes out the sinful.

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PROLOGUE

ARIZONA, 2014...

“Watch where you’re going.”

I stumble after colliding with Kyle, and beer sloshes over the rim of my red Solo cup and onto my shirt.

“Sorry,” I mutter under my breath.

He doesn’t hear me because the music is so loud, but it doesn’t matter. After this graduation party, I’ll never have to see his smug face again.

I don’t know why I accepted the invitation to the party in the first place. Well, I wasn’t invited so much as I was listed on the class roster which means I was informed by default.

Taking a long gulp of my warm beer, I make my way toward the corner of the living room where I can watch everyone else having the time of their lives.

Fucking idiots.

For the last four years, I’ve bided my time and gone through the motions to appear normal. But I’m not normal. Far from it, actually. I’m the only one who knows it, though.

“Ready to go?”

I slowly turn toward my left and smirk at Jared, the one person who didn't treat me like a pariah in high school.

“What do you think?”

He shrugs. “I'm guessing you're bored out of your mind, but you haven't had a chance to talk to Tamara yet, so you're staying.”

It took me the entire summer before senior year, but I managed to lose weight and gain muscle. My acne cleared up, and my voice dropped. Everything fell into place during those months, but it didn't change a damn thing.

Tamara still hasn't given me the time of day. She's too focused on Kyle Gruber.

Altering my physical appearance also didn't do me any good in the social skills department. I'm still awkward as hell with girls.

“I'm not bored,” I insist before chugging the last of my beer and pushing off the wall.

Jared follows me into the kitchen where there are several kegs and numerous bottles of liquor on the island. I toss my cup in the overflowing trash before grabbing the half-empty bottle of tequila.

“Whatever you say, dude.”

Jared fills his Solo cup and heads into the dining room where Kyle's playing beer pong against one of the jocks. Tamara is standing next to the table, her eyes focused on Kyle, and she's cheering him on.

If only she were in her cheerleading uniform.

I don't know how much time passes, but light starts to filter through the windows, and there are only a handful of us left.

Jared went home a while ago, but I remained because I still haven't worked up the courage to talk to Tamara.

"You can't be serious!"

I turn toward her high-pitched voice and spot her and Kyle arguing at the front door. She's very animated, and it's clear by her tone and glare that she's pissed.

"I've gotta get home, babe," Kyle says, trying to grab her hand. "You know I work tonight and need to get some sleep."

"And my parents will be home in a few hours," she counters. "How the hell am I supposed to clean this place up in time without your help?"

As they continue to argue, more of the partygoers leave, keeping their gazes averted as they walk by the couple. I, however, remain where I am, a plan formulating in my mind.

After several more minutes of fighting, Kyle storms out the front door, and Tamara slams it shut behind him. She turns to survey the house before leaning against the door and sliding down to the floor.

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It's now or never.

I close the distance between us, and the tears running down Tamara's face make my dick twitch.

"I can stay and help you clean up," I say, my voice calmer than the nerves swimming inside of me.

She lifts her head and narrows her eyes. "And you are?"

I stiffen at the question but mask my anger. I've only been this chick's classmate since kindergarten. How the hell does she not know who I am?

Her eyes widen, and she scrambles to her feet. "Wait a sec... You're that kid who the football team used to pick on our junior year."

One and the same.

"My name is?—"

"It doesn't matter," she bites out. "If you can help me clean, that's all I care about."

I bite my tongue so hard that blood pools in my mouth. After swallowing it down, I force a smile. "I can help."

Tamara rushes to the kitchen and returns with several trash bags in her hand. "Here," she says, shoving them into my chest. "You start down here, and I'll take upstairs."

With that, she races up the steps while I start picking up empty plastic cups and beer cans. We're alone in the house, and I want nothing more than to go upstairs and fuck her but helping her first seems like the right thing to do.

An hour passes, and I've managed to fill up three trash bags although that barely makes a dent in the mess my fellow graduates made. Knowing that time is running short, I retrace my steps to the staircase and make my way to the second floor.

"Tamara," I call out when I reach the last step.

Annoyance washes over me at the trash still scattered on the floor. I've been downstairs busting my ass, and she's been... what?

I don't get a response, so I start poking my head in each room, and when I spot her sleeping in a bedroom decorated in the ugliest pale pink, my anger flares. Stomping toward her, I take a deep breath to calm down, but it does no good.

"Tamara," I snap as I shake her by the shoulder. "Wake the hell up!"

She mutters in her sleep but doesn't wake up. As I stare at her, I let my gaze travel from her peaceful face to the way her tits flow over the top hem of her low-cut, skin-tight shirt. Then my eyes drift to her short denim skirt, and my dick hardens at how the material has inched up her thighs to expose the black lace of her thong resting on her hip.

"Tamara," I say, a little more softly as I shake her shoulder again.

When she still doesn't stir, an idea pops into my head.

I know how to wake her up.

I quickly, but quietly, tear off my clothes and drop them to the floor. Resting one knee on the mattress, I throw the other leg over Tamara so I'm straddling her, and then I drag my finger up the inside of her leg.

She's so soft.

"Mmm," she murmurs. "Kyle, you came back."

Rage burns through my veins, and I reach out to wrap my hand around her throat. Leaning forward, I snarl in her ear. "Wake up, bitch."

Her eyes fly open, and terror shines in the blue depths. Tamara grabs my wrist, struggling to break free of my hold, but I'm stronger than she realizes.

"This could've been so special," I say matter-of-factly. "Why'd you have to ruin it with his name?"

She violently shakes her head, and I squeeze harder, cutting off more oxygen. As she kicks and claws at any part of my body she can reach, I smirk.

"At least I'll be the last face you'll ever see."

It takes longer for the life to drain from her body than I thought it would, and when she finally exhales for the last time, I drop back on my haunches and sigh.

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I didn't come to the party, or even upstairs, with the intention of killing Tamara. All I wanted was for her to notice me, to see that I'm a better catch than Kyle.

But that's not what happened.

I arrived a recent high school graduate, and I'm leaving a murderer.

Alabama, 2019

"Last call!"

I lift my empty beer bottle, and when the bartender notices, he makes his way to my end of the bar.

"Another or do you wanna settle up your tab?" he asks as he tosses the bottle into the trash.

"One more."

I've been sitting here at Blarney's Bar, a little hole-in-the-wall joint on the outskirts of town, for several hours, watching, hunting. Five years have passed since my first kill, and it's been five months since my most recent... It's time.

"Here ya go," the bartender quips when he slides a cold beer across the bar toward me.

I tip the bottle to my lips and spin on the stool to continue surveying the room. It's

almost two in the morning, and the crowd has thinned a little but not so much that I worry I'll be easy to remember when a body is found.

When I strangled Tamara five years ago, I never thought I'd end up where I am today. You see, I'm a serial killer. And I fucking love it.

A woman steps up to the bar, and I stare at her out of the corner of my eye.

She's the one.

"Hey, Joe," she calls out. "Can I get two more shots of tequila?"

"Coming right up, D," he replies with a smile.

D? That could be so many things... Diane, Debbie, Devin, Darla, Demi, Danielle, Daisy?—

"Daphne," she says with a smirk. "I swear, you only use my initial because you can never tell me and my sister apart."

"Not many people can, Daphne," Joe replies with a chuckle.

"Yeah, yeah," she grumbles. "Hey, I'm gonna run to the bathroom. I'll be right back."

It's now or never.

As soon as Daphne rounds the corner, disappearing down the hall toward the restrooms, I slide off the stool and casually stroll after her. No one pays me any attention which is perfect.

I reach into my pocket and wrap my hand around the foil packet, assuring myself that I'm prepared. After Tamara, I spent time honing my craft, perfecting my skills. My first kill was unintended and sloppy. But as soon as I walked out of that house, I knew I'd be taking lives for as long as I was lucky to breathe. I found my purpose that night, the darkness within me that begged to be set free every once in a while.

I've had quite a bit of practice since Tamara, and I'm sure my victims were happy to donate themselves to my... studies.

"Someone's in here," Daphne snaps when I open the door to the women's bathroom.

She's standing at the sink, reapplying her lipstick like some whore who's planning on getting some when she leaves here for the night.

"I know," I say as I turn the lock.

"Hey, man, this is the wom?—"

Crack!

The back of my hand connects with her cheek, and her head whips to the side. Daphne's eyes widen with fear, and my cock springs to life.

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Without warning, I lunge toward her and shove her against the wall. She's not wearing a skirt, and for a moment, I debate on whether or not to skip fucking her. That thought quickly fades as I grind my crotch against hers.

I need this, and she's going to give it to me.

Pushing my forearm across her neck, I hold her in place while I use my free hand to trail my fingertips up her inner thigh. Most men in my position would worry about shit like fingerprints, but not me.

I paid a hefty price for my silicone fingertips, but not having prints to be identified with is necessary in my line of... work.

"Get away from me," Daphne pleads as she struggles to break free.

"Not yet," I breathe against her ear. "Not quite yet."

It takes me less than a second to push my pants down over my hips, tear open the rubber with my teeth, and roll the condom on.

Daphne tries to scream, but my arm is cutting off her oxygen, and no sound escapes past her pretty lips as I roughly yank her jeans and panties down and enter her. A lone tear slides down her cheek which sends a jolt of electricity straight to my dick.

"It'll be over soon," I harshly whisper.

And it is... my pleasure and her death come quickly. I'm a man of my word, after all.

Before I can pull out, I'm startled by a bang.

"Daphne! Hurry up," a female voice calls before giggling. "Our ride's ready to take us home." Obviously, there's no response, and the woman sighs dramatically. "I'll wait for you by the bar."

As soon as I'm satisfied that her footsteps have disappeared, I pull out and stuff myself into my pants, making sure the condom remains in place. I unlock the door and peer around the doorframe, ensuring there is no one in sight, and then I pick up Daphne's limp body and carry her out the back door of Blarney's.

I've honed my craft so much that it takes me less than three minutes to pose her body next to the dumpster and take my trophy. I wait at the tree line behind the building, concealed by the pine branches, for the one thing that tells me it's time to go.

"Aahhhhhhhhhh!"

The shrill scream enters my ears, and my blood simmers with ecstasy. I bend my knees so I can see through the branches, and if I hadn't noticed that Daphne was with an identical woman, I'd swear I was staring at a ghost.

Knowing the place will be swarming with cops within minutes, I turn around and stroll through the woods, whistling as I walk. I might have to lay low for a while, which is to be expected, but the anticipation of next time swirls in my brain.

Daphne was number sixteen, and her twin will be number seventeen.

CHAPTER 1

THORN

PRESENT DAY...

“Stand down.”

I keep my gun trained on the child molester sniveling on the floor and glare at Soul. When Jez gave us the intel on our latest sinner, I didn't want to wait to purge him, but Saints Purgatory MC has a way of doing things, and running into a situation half-crazy isn't it.

“Pres,” I snarl. “Let me finish him.”

“I will, but not until we're back at the clubhouse,” he reminds me. “Jez thinks he's got information on a trafficking ring, and I wanna make sure we get everything we can before he's purged.”

I bend down and lean into the sinner's face. “It's your lucky day, friend. You've been spared... for now.”

The man opens his mouth, no doubt to plead for his life, and I palm his face to slam his head into the floor, knocking him unconscious.

“Feel better?” Soul asks.

Straightening to my full height, I turn toward the back of the sinner's house and stalk through the large room. “Not even a little bit,” I bite out as I push through the door to step outside.

Once I'm at the edge of the property, I walk down the alley and zigzag through some yards until I'm three blocks away where my Harley is parked. The van that our sinner will be transported in is parked in his driveway, but it's painted to look like pest control so it's not suspicious. But motorcycles in the upscale neighborhood lining the

street? That would draw attention.

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When I woke up this morning, the weight of the day slammed into me like a fucking freight train on steroids. Fortunately, the planets aligned, and there was a job to do. Most years, purging takes my mind off the date but not this year.

Because this year marks ten years since I found the nude body of my high school girlfriend dumped in the creek behind my house.

An image of Tamara the last time I saw her alive flashes through my mind, but it's quickly replaced by the scene that unfolded when I snuck out of my house to smoke a joint the next night.

“Where are you going?”

I pause by the sliding glass door, my hand wrapped around the lighter and blunt in my pocket, and glance over my shoulder at my dad.

“Outside.”

“The police are on their way from Tamara's house to talk to you,” he reminds me.

Which is exactly why I need to smoke away some of my nerves.

My stomach clenches as I think about the reason the po-po are coming... my girlfriend is missing, and I was the last person to see her.

When I left her house this morning, she was fine. Pissed off at me, but fine. But apparently, when her parents got home from their latest trip abroad, Tamara was

nowhere to be found.

“I’ll watch for them and come inside when they get here,” I tell my dad before yanking the door to the side and slamming it shut behind me.

We live on several acres, and the back of our property butts up against woods, and there’s a creek that runs between the two. Tamara likes to stick her feet in the water when it’s warm enough, and it always amazes me how something so simple can make her so happy.

As I get closer to the creek, my nostrils flare at the intrusion of an odd smell. It’s uncommonly hot, so I chalk it up to fertilizer from neighboring farms. I stick my joint in my mouth and light it, inhaling deeply and waiting for the skunky aroma to take over my senses.

But when I reach the edge of the water and glance to my left, my knees go weak and my jaw drops. The joint falls into the creek and is slowly carried away, but I couldn’t care less because right in front of me is the entire reason I’m out here to begin with: Tamara.

“Oh, fuck,” I mutter as I reach for her naked body and haul her out of the shallow water. “Tamara, baby, wake up!” I cry.

“Earth to Thorn!”

I shake my head to clear it and see Spike, our Road Captain, snapping his fingers in front of my face. Taking in my surroundings and realizing I’m in the garage above the clubhouse is scary as fuck because I don’t remember any of the ride.

“What?” I snap.

“You coming to the Confessional or not?” he asks.

“Damn straight I am.”

“Then get your head outta the clouds and let’s go.”

Spike turns on his heel and heads toward the elevator. I take a deep breath and shove the memories from my brain so I can focus on the matter at hand.

Tamara’s been dead for ten years. Where the time went, I have no fucking clue, but it doesn’t seem to matter because this feeling of complete helplessness never leaves.

I may have been cleared pretty quickly for her murder, but the case is still unsolved. Silently vowing to the universe that I’ll find her killer, I force my focus to today’s purge.

Getting justice for Tamara has remained outside of my grasp for so long, but the child molester in the Confessional is within reach, and I intend to make him suffer...

Not just for his sins but for the entire world’s.

CHAPTER 2

DELANEY

“Hey, Sis. Happy birthday,” I say as I plop down in front of my twin’s headstone. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around in a while.”

It’s been five years since Daphne was horrifically murdered. What should’ve been a celebration on our twenty-first birthday ended in tragedy. We were at Blarney’s, a local dive bar in our area, with some friends. At last call, Daphne went to the bar to

get some shots, and while Joe was setting them up, she went to the bathroom. That was the last time anyone saw her alive.

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I'll never forgive myself for not following her, but we thought our town was safe. We were wrong... dead wrong. When Joe and I found Daphne, she was naked and propped against a dumpster in the alley behind the bar. One of her hands was jammed between her legs in an obscene manner, and there were bruises around her neck.

I knew before I reached her, Daphne was gone.

I didn't realize Daphne's locket was missing until my parents went to the morgue to officially identify the body. My mom asked for her necklace to be returned so they could make sure she was laid to rest with it, but the coroner said that no jewelry was recovered. The same locket we'd both worn since our parents gave them to us on our thirteenth birthday was gone. The sick bastard not only raped and murdered my sister, but he also took a piece of her with him.

A part of me died right along with Daphne that night. Depression set in, and I withdrew into myself, pushing anyone and everyone away, including my parents.

A tear slides down my cheek, but I don't bother wiping it away as I think about that night.

"Daph, I swear I'll find the mother fucker and make him pay," I whisper.

I stay at the cemetery for an hour, talking to Daphne and telling her what's been going on lately, which isn't much. When I've said everything there is to say, I stand and brush the grass off my ass.

"I miss you so much. I'll try not to stay away so long next time. Love you." I turn on

my heel and head back to my car.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and I turn in a circle to check my surroundings. One of the things I love about this cemetery is that there aren't a lot of trees. It's flat, and you can see all around. Nothing out of the ordinary catches my attention, but I can't shake the feeling that someone is watching me. I glance around once more before opening the car door and sliding into the driver's seat.

As I turn the key in the ignition, I release a shaky breath. For the last five years, paranoia has been a constant in my life. Every face I see, I can't help but wonder if that's the face Daphne saw as she took her last breath.

I'm vibrating with nervous energy so instead of turning toward home, I go left and head to the gym. The smell of sweat hits me in the face as I open the door. It might make some people cringe, but it calms my rage as I make my way to the locker room. I change into a pair of gym shorts and a sports bra.

TJ, the owner of the gym and my trainer, is leaning against the wall waiting for me.

"You okay?" he asks, knowing what today is.

"Yeah." I shrug. "Got time to spar?"

"I already cleared the ring."

"Let's go."

"I won't spar with you if you're distracted."

"Damn it, TJ!" I spit out. "If anyone ever tries to attack me, it's going to be when I'm distracted. Quit babying me."

TJ runs his hands through his hair. “I know. Look, you’re like a sis?—”

I raise my hand. “Stop, please don’t,” I plead. “Not today.”

“Fine.”

“No, I’m sorry for being a bitch.”

“No, I’m sorry.” He hauls me to his chest in a bone-crushing hug. “I know this is a hard day for you.” TJ releases me and grins. “I might even let you kick my ass because of it.”

For the first time today, I laugh. “Whatever big guy. You know I can drop your ass.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

TJ found me drunk off my ass at a bar on the one-year anniversary. I wasn’t being careful or paying attention to my surroundings when some frat boy tried to roofie my drink. All I wanted was to forget but not like that. Luckily TJ saw what was going on, intervened, and handed the guy his ass. Then he handed me his business card for the gym, and I’ve been coming here ever since.

He grabs the kick shields first, and we start warming up. I practice my punches and low groin kicks before I straighten my stance.

“I’m rea?—”

TJ drops the pads and charges me. His hands wrap around my throat, and for a brief second, blackness swirls around my vision.

TJ is a foot taller than me, but we’ve practiced this move a million times, and I’ve

perfected it. It's harder when you're not expecting it which is why he charged me without warning.

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I grab his wrist with my right hand while I use my left to grab his middle finger and yank it back. This move could easily break his finger, but I know when to stop. My knee, however, has a mind of its own and makes contact with TJ's dick.

"Mother fucker," TJ screeches as he drops to the mat to catch his breath.

"I'm so sorry, TJ," I say. "I don't know what happened."

"You defended yourself," he wheezes out. "But, next time I'm wearing more padding."

I smirk. "Told ya I could take you down."

"Brat."

I hold out my hand to help him to his feet. "Again?"

"Fuck no!" he says, cupping his balls. "I think you've done enough damage."

"Fair enough."

"Wanna grab some dinner?"

I shake my head. "No thanks. I'm tired. I'm gonna go home and get some sleep."

"You did good." TJ smiles at me. "I'm proud of you."

I wave goodbye and head home. After a nice, hot shower to loosen up my stiff muscles, I reheat some Chinese food from the night before and turn on the television. The scent of garlic and soy sauce penetrates my nose, and my stomach grumbles for a bite. The fork is halfway to my mouth when the latest news story catches my attention.

“... body of a female was found early this morning by joggers in a wooded area in Georgia. The unidentified victim was reportedly sexually assaulted, strangled, and then posed in a manner that’s consistent...”

I strain to hear the rest of the story, but my hearing is muffled. The fork falls from my hand, and goosebumps erupt all over my body. Bile rises up my throat, and I barely make it to the kitchen sink before I start heaving. It takes a few minutes to regain control and rinse out my mouth with some water before grabbing my laptop off the kitchen island.

It’s him.

CHAPTER 3

THORN

“... body of a female was found early this morning by joggers in a wooded area in Georgia. The unidentified victim was reportedly sexually assaulted, strangled, and then posed in a manner that’s consistent with the Phantom Strangler, who has been active in the United States since mid-twenty-fourteen. Police all across the nation have been thwarted by the serial killer, and despite the FBI’s special task force following up on every lead, no arrests have ever been made or suspects identified.”

The reporter’s solemn expression fills the screen as police work the crime scene in the background. I don’t need to watch the rest of the newscast to know what other

details will be reported because every single detail will match all the others: no fingerprints, piece of jewelry taken, ligature marks around the neck, evidence of rape but no semen, and the body is posed against a solid surface with their right hand resting between their legs as if they're masturbating.

Sick fuck.

I turn the volume on my TV down and toss the remote onto the mattress before crawling out of bed. Watching the morning news has become a ritual for me ever since I realized that Tamara's murder was linked to all the others perpetrated by this guy. The police haven't figured it out yet, but I know in my gut that she was his first. Everything lines up other than the fact that she wasn't posed.

So, any and everything to do with the Phantom Strangler has become my obsession. I'm like some sort of twisted collector when it comes to information about the man.

As I walk toward the bathroom to take a leak, my cell rings. I ignore it in favor of relief, but as soon as the ringing stops, it starts back up within seconds and doesn't stop until I return to answer it.

"What?" I bark without looking at the screen to see who's calling.

"Damn, dude," Jez comments.

I shove a hand through my hair and sigh. "Sorry, rough morning."

"I take it you saw the news."

"Of course, I saw it. You know I?—"

"Watch it every fucking day," she finishes for me. "I'm aware."

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“It’s him, Jez,” I say. “This one hasn’t been officially linked to him, but it’s him.”

“I know. And I’ve tapped into the Georgia Bureau of Investigations system to monitor the reports on this murder, but you’re right. There’s nothing official yet.”

“There will be. It’s clear as fucking crystal that it’s the Phantom Strangler.”

“Agreed.” She takes a deep breath. “Thorn, there’s one detail that the news didn’t report on. I’m guessing it’s because the police are keeping it to themselves, but they can’t keep it from me.”

Hope flares for the first time since I stumbled upon Tamara’s body. “You could’ve led with that, ya know?”

“Eh, what fun would that be?” she snarks.

“Dammit, Jez,” I snarl.

“Fine, fine.” Another deep breath. “A map was found a few feet from the body with red dots indicating each location a victim has ever been discovered.”

“And that helps us how?”

“There were also six green dots on locations that can’t be linked to any unsolved murder.”

“Again, how does that help us?” I demand, unable to reach whatever conclusion she

clearly has.

“Thorn, I think the green dots are locations of future murders,” she says quietly, like it’s a closely guarded secret.

“Why would he do that?” I ask, trying to make sense of it. “He’s been so damn careful, and now he’s giving the cops a literal road map to his crimes? It makes no fucking sense.” A thought occurs to me as all the information continues to sink in. “Wait a sec, Jez. Was there a red dot for Tamara’s murder?”

“Yes.”

“So, she’ll be officially linked to him soon,” I surmise. “Which means the police will probably wanna talk to me again.”

“Probably, but you have nothing to hide,” she reminds me. “Well, other than your entire existence. You might not be the Phantom Strangler, but you have?—”

“Taken many lives,” I gripe. “Yes, I’m aware.”

“Thorn, I think it might be time to read the club in on all of this,” Jez suggests.

“Soul knows about Tamara,” I say.

“But does he know that she was killed by an active serial killer?” she asks. “Or that you and I are still trying to track said psycho?”

“No,” I admit.

No one but Jez knows because it’s not the club’s problem. It’s mine and mine alone. Shit, Jez only knows because she’s got skills that I could only dream about.

“It’s time, dude.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“If the police are gonna be an issue, there’s no maybe about it. You can’t keep this to yourself anymore.”

She’s right, of course. I have to protect the club and our mission at all costs. Even if that means opening up my world of pain and rage for my brothers to see.

“I’ll ask Soul to call church and fill them all in.”

“Good. Want me to be there?”

“You know you’re not allowed in church.”

“Since when has that ever stopped me?” she counters, a smirk in her tone.

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I chuckle. “If your brother says you can be there then yeah, I’d like you to be there.”

“Oh, Thorn. Your lack of confidence in my ability to bend my twin to my will is offensive. I thought you knew me better than that.”

“Jez, you are one of a kind, ya know it?”

“I know.” Beeping sounds in the background. “Well, that’s my cue. Gotta go.”

The call is disconnected before I can ask her any questions about her ‘cue’, and not for the first time I wonder what Jez does when she’s not helping Saints Purgatory. Scratch that... it’s probably better that I don’t know.

Knowing that I can’t keep my secrets to myself any longer, I quickly shower and get dressed before heading out to the common area in search of Pres. He’s leaning against the bar, holding Harper, his daughter, and she’s giggling at something he’s saying.

I close the distance between us, and he must sense the seriousness of the situation because he passes Harper to Cece, his ol’ lady, and nods for her to give us some privacy.

“What’s up, brother?” he asks as soon as I reach him.

“We need to talk.”

CHAPTER 4

DELANEY

“Can you move the logo to the lower right corner and enlarge it?”

I hover the cursor over the image before dragging it down to the corner where Mr. Barker asked me to move it. Then I click on the corner of the picture and increase the size without compromising everything else on the page.

“How does that look?” I ask while he looks it over.

One good thing about being a freelance graphic designer is that I can work from anywhere and on any project I want. And the best part is that, with the technology available today, I’m able to share with my clients what I’m doing in real-time and then offer suggestions instead of relentlessly emailing back and forth.

Currently, I’m working on designing a new website for a small bookstore owner by sharing my computer screen with him while we’re on opposite sides of the country.

Mr. Barker rubs his chin as he takes in the recent change on his screen. “Something feels off. What do you think?”

I stare at the website page we’ve been working on for the past week. “Give me a minute.” I move some things around to make the design less one-dimensional and angle the logo.

“That’s it!” Mr. Barker yells. “I don’t know how you do it, Delaney, but that’s my vision.”

“Glad I can help.” I save the new file and make the website active. “I double-checked all the links before we hopped on our call, and they’re all working, but if you want to test them out while I’m still on, go for it.”

He nods. “I gave your contact information to a couple of friends of mine who are looking to do some advertising and breathe some new life into their businesses,” he says as he starts clicking around on his computer.

I smile. “I appreciate that.”

“Hey, De!” Mrs. Barker waves as she steps into Mr. Barker’s office. “Are you ever going to come and visit us in our little corner of the world?”

“Hopefully one day.” I wink, and I mean it. “Best thing about my job is that I can take it anywhere, and I’d love to come to Seattle at some point. You better believe if I do, I’ll be stopping by your bookstore.”

Mr. Barker wags his finger at me. “You better, young lady. We’d be honored if you’d stop by.”

“Promise.” My phone vibrates next to me. Glancing down, I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “If you need anything else or something isn’t working right, let me know. I hate to run, but I have another engagement I need to get to.”

“Of course.” Mr. Barker nods. “Thank you again. We’ll be in touch.”

I end the video call and put my laptop into my backpack, along with everything else I’ll need for work for the next couple of weeks. After researching the homicide in Georgia, I decided it’s time to take another trip.

After Daphne was murdered and I was able to function again, I buckled down, finished my last semester of school, and started following any leads I could to track down her killer. Having a bachelor’s degree in graphic design and a minor in computer science helps. It gives me the freedom to come and go without causing my parents to worry. They knew it was our dream to travel once we finished school, so to

them, I'm simply fulfilling a promise my twin and I made to each other.

After tossing my toiletries into a bag, I change into a pair of jeans, pull a t-shirt over my head, and throw everything into my car. I promised my parents I'd have dinner with them before leaving town tonight since I haven't been over to the house in a couple of weeks.

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The drive to their house is short, and Dad tugs me into his arms as soon as I open the car door. “How ya doing, honey?”

“I’m good.” I stand on my toes and kiss his cheek. “What’s for dinner?”

“Your mom made your favorite.”

“Pot roast and potatoes?”

“And peach cobbler.”

“Let’s go, old man. I’m starving.”

Dad tucks my hand into his elbow and leads me into his house. When we enter the kitchen, Mom’s whipping the mashed potatoes. I close my eyes and let the savory aroma invade my senses.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Mom greets.

“Hey, Mom.” I walk around the island and grab her around the waist. “Need any help?”

“Set the table?”

“Sure. Drinks?”

“I made sweet tea.”

“You’re the best.”

Mom winks. “I know.”

Ten minutes later, she passes the pot roast around the dinner table, and we all dig in.

Dad lasts a whole two minutes before he starts his interrogation. “So, whatcha been up to?”

I roll my eyes. “Working. I just finished a website for a bookstore out west. I’ve got a few more projects to finish up.” I take a deep breath, knowing what I say next isn’t going to bode well. “I’m heading to Georgia after dinner for a week.” My body tenses as I wait. I don’t have to wait long.

Dad’s fork stops halfway to his mouth, and his lips set in a firm line. “You’re going to Georgia?”

“Yep,” I say, popping the ‘p’.

“What’s in Georgia?” Mom asks.

I smirk. “Atlanta.”

“Funny,” Dad deadpans and drops his fork. “When are you gonna stop?—”

“Stop what?”

“Damn it, Delaney!” Dad shouts. “When are you gonna stop running away from the pain? You’re not the only one who lost Daphne.”

“Nate, enough!” Mom slams her hands on the table.

“I’m not running,” I mutter. “Me and Daph were always going to travel. This is me, honoring her memory.”

“We know, honey.” Mom narrows her eyes at Dad. “We worry about you. You’re all we have left, and we don’t want to lose you too.”

Dad clears his throat. “I’m sorry, De.”

“It’s okay.”

“You still have your pepper spray?” he asks.

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I grin. “Never leave home without it.”

And a bunch of other stuff I won’t be mentioning.

I’ve never told them about training at the gym. I don’t know why I kept it a secret, but I never felt compelled to share. Fuck, if they knew the real reason I’m heading to Georgia, they’d have me committed.

Dinner is stagnant after that, but Mom tries to keep the conversation going. I know they both worry, and I hate that I can’t reassure him, but I never know what I’ll be walking into. Until the asshole is caught or killed, I can’t and won’t rest.

After dessert, I help Mom clean up the dishes. “How’s the kickboxing going?”

“Krav Maga,” I mumble, and then it hits me. “Fuck, how did you know?”

“Language,” she admonishes. “I saw you go into TJ’s a couple of weeks ago and watched you through the window. Gotta say, I’m pretty proud of the way you knocked those men around.”

“You didn’t tell dad, did you?”

“No, but why hide it?”

I shrug. “I’m not hiding it per se.” Mom raises her brow. “I’m not. It helps me relieve stress.”

“I’m proud of you.” She pulls me to her chest. “We both are. He’s worried about you. He doesn’t want to lose you too.”

“I know.” I squeeze her back.

“It does make me feel better knowing you can protect yourself when you go on these trips of yours. Though I do wish you would tell your father and set his mind at ease.”

“Please, if anything, he’d be even more worried thinking my smart mouth was looking for a fight.”

Mom laughs. “You’re probably right.”

“I better get going if I want to put some miles behind me before it gets too late.”

“Nate!” Mom hollers. “De is heading out.”

Dad’s heavy steps thump on the staircase. “I’m coming.”

Mom kisses my cheek. “Text me when you stop, and check in daily. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Dad follows me to the car and traps me in a bone-crushing hug. “I’m sorry about earlier. I worry.”

“I know, Dad,” I wheeze.

“Oops,” he says, releasing me. “Here.” Dad thrusts a taser into my hand.

“Um... thanks.”

“It’ll make me feel better knowing you have something for protection.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“You call and text us daily.”

“I will.”

“Promise?”

“Well, maybe not daily, but I will check in and let you know where I am.”

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“Be careful.”

I nod before sliding into the driver’s seat and wave to my parents as they watch me leave. Now, I have to clear my head and come up with a game plan. I hate lying to them, but there’s no other way.

I’m coming for you, asshole.

CHAPTER 5

THORN

“Mornin’, sunshine.”

I groan at Abyss’s chipper demeanor. It’s too fucking early to be anything but tired and grumpy. The kitchen is full, and my brothers are all chowing down on breakfast. I cross the room to the counter, where there’s still some bacon, sausage, and eggs left. I’m sure they’re cold by now, but I don’t give a damn.

“Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed,” Spike comments with his mouth full.

“Leave him alone,” Soul orders, and I cut my gaze to my pres and nod gratefully.

Ever since church the other day, when my brothers learned about my full past, Soul has been cutting me some slack for my attitude. I hate that he feels the need to, but I appreciate it, nonetheless.

“Wanna come to the gym later?” Knuckles asks as he leans back in his chair. “I’ve got a couple of potentials coming in, and I could use someone to spar with them.”

For the first time since I woke up, I grin. “I could use the practice so sure, why not?”

Malice throws his head back and laughs. “Bullshit. You could use a target, not practice.”

I shrug. “Same thing.”

Conversation ceases as we finish off the food. Just as I’m rising to my feet, Grim strides in with Violet, his ol’ lady, on his heels. Knowing the rules, I grin and lift my hands.

“Looks like you’re on cleanup, brother,” I sign.

Grim scowls, and if I didn’t know him like I do, I’d think he was about to charge me and slit my throat. But his current expression is that of mild irritation, not malicious murder.

“This place will be as clean as you’ve ever seen it,” he signs.

Violet taps him on the arm, and he glances down at her. “I’m not cleaning it for you,” she tells him.

Grim rolls his eyes and refocuses on me and my smirk. “Shut the fuck up.”

I brush by him and laugh when he shoves me with his shoulder. Aside from Soul and Malice, I’ve known Grim the longest, and underneath the prickly demeanor is a giant teddy bear.

A teddy bear on copious amounts of steroids maybe.

As I walk through the clubhouse to return to my room and shower, my mind wanders to my first meeting with Soul and Malice.

“Welcome to the team.”

My eyes drift from one new teammate to the next. I didn’t ask for this reassignment, but it happens when an entire unit is decimated by a landmine. Well, all but lucky me.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

“I’m Matt.” The man thrusts his hand forward and nods to a soldier next to him. “And that’s Paul.”

I shake his hand. “Kyle.”

“Sorry about your team, man,” Paul says, his tone gruff.

I shrug like it’s no big deal, but on the inside, I’m dying. I’ve had too much loss in my life, more than any one person should have to face.

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“Casualties of war,” I reply.

“I’m sorry you lost them,” Matt says. “But I need to know your head is in the game, Kyle. This is my family,” he continues while making a circle in the air with his hand to indicate the rest of his team. “And you’re one of us now. Can I count on you to protect your family?”

“Yes, sir.”

Little did I know that those two simple words would change the course of my life forever. Matt and Paul, now Soul and Malice, became people I didn’t even realize I needed. I’d have given my life for them then, and I’ll take as many lives as necessary to protect them now.

“You coming to the gym or not?”

I stop outside my door and turn to face Knuckles. “Maybe.”

“Look, brother, I know you’ve got a lot on your mind,” he says. “What better way to sort through it than to pound on a few people?”

I arch a brow and respond without thinking. “A purge.”

Knuckles shakes his head and chuckles. “Yeah, well, a purge is always the best way, but short of that...”

“I’ve got a few things to take care of,” I tell him. “I’ll head to Fists after.”

He slaps me on the back and grins. “Awesome. See ya there.”

Knuckles disappears down the hall and into the common area, and I press my hand to the wall to activate the fingerprint scanner, so my door opens. As soon as I’m alone, I strip out of my clothes and head to the shower.

Something tells me it’s going to be a long fucking day.

CHAPTER 6

DELANEY

“I’m sorry. I can’t give you any more information than has already been released.”

I stare at the detective across the counter and give him my best doe-eyes impression.

“Please.” I bat my eyelashes in an attempt at flirting.

“Look, I don’t know what people’s fascination with serial killers is, but I’m telling you, lady, this guy is dangerous.” The officer runs his hand over his face. “This isn’t a fucking game, this is real life. Go home and let us do our job.”

I lean forward. “I’ve let you do your jobs. For five fucking years, I’ve sat around, waiting for you to do your job.”

Detective Jeffers steps back as if I slapped him. “What are you talking about?”

“My sister was one of the Phantom’s victims. That fucking real enough for you?” My chest heaves.

“What was her name?” he asks.

“Oh, now you want to play show and tell?” I sass.

The noisy precinct has gone deafeningly silent at my outburst, but I’m beyond caring. Sure enough, I glance around and notice everyone has stopped and is watching the show.

Great, now I’m gonna be locked up for disorderly conduct.

Detective Jeffers’ eyes soften, and his voice lowers. “I’m sorry for your loss, but I still can’t tell you anything. I wish I could, but it’s an ongoing investigation.”

“Thanks for nothing,” I grumble.

I stomp out of the station and down the steps to my car. My anger is misdirected, and I know that. It isn’t the detective’s fault that he can’t give me any information. I knew it was a long shot, but damn if I wasn’t hoping that for once, just once, something would lead me in the right direction.

“Hey!”

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I jump and whirl around toward the voice. “Holy shit, you scared me.”

A female officer holds her hand out for me to shake. “I’m sorry I scared you. I’m Officer Kerry Moore.”

“Delaney.”

“You really should be more aware of your surroundings in light of what happened recently.”

“Normally, I am, but I have a lot on my mind.”

“I heard.”

“Figures. I shou?—”

Kerry shakes her head. “Don’t worry about it. I’d be pissed, too, if I was in your shoes.”

“Still, I don’t normally lose my cool like that.”

“Detective Jeffers is a good man. I promise he’s doing his best to find the sick son of a bitch.”

“That’s what they all say,” I huff. “Yet the asshole is still on the loose.”

“I probably shouldn’t be doing this. I could lose my job.”

My brows furrow. “Doing what?”

“I’m off at six,” she explains. “Can you meet me at the diner on the corner of Grand and Fifth? Betty’s Cafe.”

“Why?”

Kerry leans closer. “Could be nothing, but there was something at the crime scene they didn’t release to the press. I’ll bring a copy of it.”

Blood pumps in my ears. I dig my nails into my palms to keep focus and take several deep breaths.

This could be the break I’ve been waiting for.

“I’ll be there.”

I spend the afternoon at a local gym burning off some excess energy while I wait for time to slowly tick by. My mind wanders as to what the information could be. I don’t want to get my hopes up, but it’s hard not to get excited to have a lead for the first time in years.

At ten till six, I slide into a booth at the back of the diner, and I’m facing the front door so Kerry can easily spot me. I’m glad she suggested a public place because there’s no way I’d meet a stranger anywhere else, cop or not. The place seems pretty popular; within ten minutes, only a couple of tables are left near the front.

I wave to Kerry when she pushes through the door. She scoots into the seat across from me, and the waitress rushes over. I fidget with my hands as I wait for Kerry to finish ordering.

“Well?” I ask impatiently after the waitress finally leaves.

Kerry slides a piece of paper toward me. “Here. You didn’t get this from me. In fact, you never saw this.”

I grip the paper tightly and try to decipher what I’m looking at. “It’s a map of the United States.”

“Yep.”

“What do the red and green dots represent?”

“I don’t know, but it must be something significant because they aren’t releasing this information to the press. This was found near the victim.”

“Can I keep this?”

“Sure, but remember, you didn’t get it from me.”

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The waitress returns with our burgers and fries. We eat silently for a few minutes before I ask the question that's been bothering me ever since Kerry approached me in the police parking lot.

"Why are you helping me?"

She takes a deep breath. "Because I have a sister, and like you, I'd want to find the fucker if, God forbid, anything like that ever happened to her."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

I smirk. "I won't."

We part ways after exchanging information. I doubt we'll keep in contact, but it'll be nice knowing someone in the police department.

After a nice hot shower to work the knots out of my back, I grab my laptop and get comfortable on the hotel bed. I glance over at the map that's lying on the nightstand, right where I dropped it when I got back from dinner. My eyes shift from one colored dot to the next, and pieces start to fall into place.

"Son of a bitch." I grab the paper. "It can't be... There's no fucking way."

Instead of using the hotel WIFI, I turn on the hotspot on my phone and connect my computer to it. I search Google for the Phantom Strangler and the sites of his victims

until my suspicion is confirmed: The red dots are every Phantom Strangler crime scene where a body was found.

There are green dots on Nashville, Seattle, Green Bay, Philadelphia, Las Vegas, and San Diego. If the red dots are the murder sites, the green dots have to be...

Fuck.

They're possible future kill sites. It's the only thing that makes sense.

Looks like I'm heading to Nashville.

CHAPTER 7

THORN

"I don't like it any more than you do!"

Malice is pacing the length of the conference room and has been since Apple's upcoming concert was mentioned.

"Calm down, brother," Soul encourages.

I inhale a deep breath as I watch Malice become even more unglued.

"Calm down?!" he shouts. "My ol' lady is insisting on performing regardless of what I say, and she swears she'll go with or without the club's protection."

"And we're gonna protect her," I snap and scrub my hands over my face. "Apple will be safe. You have my word."

“Like your girlfriend was?” he counters.

My brain short circuits, and I lunge across the table and tackle Malice to the floor. Strong hands grab me by the arms to haul me off my VP, but my adrenaline is pumping so hard that I can’t be stopped.

“Thorn!”

Abyss’s voice cuts through the fog just as Malice frees one of his arms and launches his fist at my face. I barely register the pain in my jaw as I struggle against the hold my other brothers have on me.

“That’s enough!” Soul roars, and all movement stops.

I yank away from Abyss and Grim while Spike and Rogue haul Malice to his feet. Blood drips from Malice’s nose, and he wipes it on his sleeve.

Soul moves to stand between us, his gaze focused on our VP. “Mal, that was uncalled for,” he seethes. “Even for a ruthless son of a bitch like you.”

“We’re talking about my wi?—”

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“I know who we’re talking about!” Soul shouts. “But ol’ lady or not, you don’t get to use your fear to tear down a brother.”

Malice’s chest heaves as he stares at me, and then his shoulders slump. “Thorn, I...”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I can’t lose Apple, especially not to some serial killer fuck.”

“And you won’t,” I assure him. “I wasn’t there to protect Tamara, and that’s my burden to bear, but I’ll be damned if the Phantom Strangler takes anyone else away from me and my family.”

“Okay.” He nods. “Okay. Then how are we gonna make Apple’s concert the safest place on the goddamn planet?”

Grim pounds the table, and all eyes turn to him. He lifts his hands and smirks.

“That’s fifty bucks for all of you.”

“You can’t hold us to that when we’re in the heat of the moment,” I argue.

“And you just tacked on another fifty,” he signs, grinning.

“Dammit, Grim,” I snarl.

“Up to one fifty, brother,” Soul says as his hands move fluidly before he faces Grim.

“We’ll all pay up to Rogue before dismissal.”

Grim nods, and I roll my eyes. “Can we get back on track?”

Grim’s grin widens. “You’re learning.”

Over the next three hours, we talk through all potential security issues and come up with plans to overcome them. By the time church is over, Malice is less tense, and I’m as hopeful as I’ve ever been that this guy will no longer be a threat to society.

As I slap three fifties into Rogue’s palm, a hand lands on my shoulder. I glance back and stifle a groan at Malice.

“Gimme a minute?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

Once we’re alone in the room, he moves back to the table and sits. He nods to the chair across from him, and I stride over to sit as well.

“I didn’t mean anything earlier,” he begins. I clench my jaw, and he continues. “When you find yourself a lifer, you’ll understand.”

I throw my head back and laugh. “That ain’t happenin’.”

He smirks at me. “I said that once. Fuck, I said that hundreds of times, and look at me now.”

I heave a sigh. “What’s your point?”

“No point.” Malice leans forward and pushes to his feet. “But mark my words...

What happened to Tamara will not happen to Apple. You, along with the rest of us, will make sure of it. I need you to believe that, Thorn.”

“I do,” I insist.

He shakes his head. “No, you don’t. And as long as you’re not confident about it, something can go wrong. And I’m telling you, nothing can go wrong in Nashville.”

With that, he turns on his heel and storms out of the room. I lower my head into my hands and quietly review all the security plans discussed in church. I’ve already let enough people down in my life. Malice and Apple are not going to be added to the list.

CHAPTER 8

DELANEY

“What’ll ya have?”

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This is the third bar I've been to in as many hours. It's getting late, and I need to determine if I'm staying or moving on soon. I haven't noticed anything suspicious, but the bastard waited until last call before he ambushed my sister. Unfortunately, there is only one of me and a shit ton of nightclubs here.

The victims always disappear from populated areas. According to the news, it's always places like bars, malls, and big venues. I'm not an expert, but I'm guessing he likes to blend in so as not to draw suspicion, which makes my job of finding him harder.

It could literally be anyone.

"Coke, please," I order.

"Anything else?"

I shake my head and toss a five on the bar when she pushes a glass toward me. "Keep the change."

I swivel around on the stool and listen to the live band playing while my eyes sweep the room for anything or anyone out of place.

"I can't believe you scored tickets," a woman next to me yells over the music. She's talking to a man, who I assume is her boyfriend based on the way she's rubbing all over him.

"Friday night, baby," he yells back. "You and me, tenth row."

They grab their drinks and head to the dance floor before I can ask them which concert they're talking about. I flag the server down again to get some information.

"Something big going on this weekend, or is it always this busy?" I ask.

She smiles. "Not from here, are you?"

"Passing through. Never been to Nashville and thought I'd stop for a couple of days."

"It's always busy around here on weekends. But Apple Caldwell also has a sold-out show this Friday."

My lips curve. "No fucking way! I absolutely love her music."

Hearing Apple is performing gives me renewed hope that I'm in the right city. My gut swirls with anticipation knowing without a shadow of a doubt that this is where the Phantom will strike: Apple's concert. It'll be extremely crowded which means there'll be a lot of victims for him to choose from. Casing out Nashville's nightlife is no longer at the top of my list.

First things first, I need to find a place to stay. With a show that size, it'll be hard to find accommodations this late. I pull my phone out of my pocket and tap on my hotel app, praying for a miracle. Normally, I book my room in advance, but how the hell was I supposed to know for sure if this is where I should be or if I should go to another location from the map? After an hour, I finally find a king-bed suite a few blocks away from the stadium.

"Do you know if anyone is selling their tickets to the concert?" I ask the bartender.

She smirks. "Actually, they're giving awa?—"

“Hey, sexy. Wanna dance?” a huge man says as he stands next to me.

I shake my head. “Not interested.”

“Oh, c’mon, sweetheart,” he slurs and grabs my wrist. “Don’t be like that. I’m Adam.”

“Well, Adam,” I counter. “You have two seconds to let me go before I drop your ass to the floor.”

“I just want to dance, bitch,” he growls, his drunken state seeming to diminish.

“Adam, let her go before I call security and have your ass thrown out again,” the bartender bites out.

“Stay out of this, Abby.”

If Abby knows him, he’s a regular and definitely not who I’m looking for. Still, I can have a little fun. Fucker needs to learn that no means no.

I glance up at Abby. “It’s okay, Abby. Adam here is going to let me go right now, aren’t ya?”

Adam tugs me off the stool, and I stumble slightly before finding my balance. “I said I wanted to dance.”

“Security!”

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“I warned you.”

Abby and I speak simultaneously.

Before security can make their way through the crowd, I twist out of Adam’s grip and kick him in the nuts. He bends over wailing and grabbing his junk. I grip his neck and yank his head down and bring my knee up to connect with his nose.

Blood spurts from his face as he falls to the floor. Security finally reaches us, and the first guy grabs me.

“Don’t touch her.” Abby pushes between us. “Adam accosted her. She defen?—”

“Delaney,” I state.

Abby nods. “Delaney was minding her own business. Adam asked her to dance, she declined, and he grabbed her. She told Adam to let her go, he refused. This is the result.”

“You okay?” security guy number one asks while the other hauls Adam off the floor and leads him down a hallway toward the back of the building. Abby follows.

“I’m fine,” I huff.

“We were on our way. Abby called for us.”

“Never hurts for a woman to know how to defend herself either,” I say defensively.

He holds up his hands. “I know. I wish my sister would learn.”

I drop my chin. “Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” He rubs the back of his neck. “Well, as long as you’re okay, I need to return to the floor.”

“All good, thanks.”

Abby reappears at my side as the guard leaves. She thrusts a piece of paper into my hand. “Here.”

“What’s this?” I turn it over. “No fucking way! How? What?”

“They’re giving away four tonight,” Abby explains as I admire the Apple concert ticket in my hand. “I told the manager what happened and explained this was a better trade than having the cops in here tonight. He agreed.”

“I was gonna try to buy scalp tickets,” I mumble. “Thank you.”

“After that bullshit, it’s the least I can do.”

Adrenaline courses through my veins, and I know from experience that I’ll crash soon. I thank Abby again for having my back and for the concert ticket. I walk to the parking garage where I left my car and plug the hotel’s address into my GPS.

This is it, Daphne. This is the week I take that asshole down.

CHAPTER 9

I pace the length of the living room in the condo I rented in Nashville for the week

leading up to Apple Caldwell's concert. I've covered my tracks so that I can't be linked to the area and am eager for my next kill.

The last ten years have been a thrill, but the next few months are shaping up to be the culmination of all my hard work. I've kept tabs on Kyle Gruber and Delaney Jefferson since I eliminated their favorite people in the world. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that Kyle has ties to the famous Apple.

As for Delaney... Well, that bitch has been tracking me since the night I stole her twin from her. I left that stupid map at the last scene for a reason. Delaney's smart. If she can get her hands on the evidence, she'll know where to go.

The smart thing to do would be to take both of them out while I can, but I never claimed to be a smart man. I want them to suffer through more of my fun. Their time will come soon enough.

My cell rings, startling me out of my murder-fueled fantasies, and I pick it up from the coffee table. Smiling at the name on the screen, I press the green button to answer.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hi, honey," she greets. "How's the research going?"

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I roll my eyes at the lie my parents have so easily believed over the years. They think I travel so much in order to write a travel blog. Of course, I don't write the blog I talk to them about. I do, however, write a true crime blog under a pseudonym, and the blog focuses on, you guessed it... The Phantom Strangler and similar crimes.

"Pretty good," I tell her. "I don't know that I'll make it home this month, but I'm trying."

"Well, your father's birthday is next week, so if you could manage a day or two, I know he'd love to see you."

I sigh. "I'll see what I can do."

"Oh, wonderful."

"I'm gonna be off the grid for the rest of the week though, so I won't be able to let you know until Sunday," I tell her.

"That's fine, honey."

"Okay. Well, I gotta go. Love you, Mom."

"Love you too."

CHAPTER 10

THORN

“T-minus five hours!”

Apple’s voice carries through the air as she shouts her hourly reminder. We arrived in Nashville last night, and it’s been balls to the wall since the moment we killed the engines on our Harleys. We barely had time to get settled into the hotel before Apple was barking orders.

“Thank fuck she’s not this bossy back home,” Malice mutters.

“If she were, I’d be worried about your...” I let the words trail off as I dip my head to indicate his crotch.

Malice shoves me, and I stumble as I laugh.

“You’re a dick,” he accuses.

“And you love me.”

He groans as he stalks closer to the stage. Apple is about to do her last rehearsal, and when she’s out in the open, Malice isn’t far away.

Lock, Fort, and Rogue are working with the stadium’s security team to ensure all the cameras are functioning. We added almost a hundred to the existing setup to ensure there were no blind spots. Fortunately, Apple is very good at laying on the charm when she has to so the staff didn’t balk too much.

“Thorn, I need you to come with me.”

I turn toward Soul and nod. We head through the stadium and out to the parking lot where he stops near the VIP parking section.

“What’s up, Pres?”

Soul inhales deeply as he runs a hand through his hair. “I need you to stay at the hotel tonight.”

Rage boils my blood. “No fucking way! I’ve been after this sonofabitch for?—”

“Remember who you’re talking to,” he snarls, and my shoulders fall. “Look, I know you want in on this, but I need someone to stay with the women at the hotel.”

“If you were gonna have me babysit, why the hell did they come?”

Soul hauls me toward him by my cut. “Watch your tone, or I’ll send your ass back to Nevada.”

Yanking out of his hold, I throw my hands in the air. “I’m not sitting this one out, Pres. You can take my patch for disobeying if that’s what you have to do, but I’m not going to be anywhere but right fucking here tonight.”

“You’re proving my point,” he snaps.

“What point?”

“You’re too damn close to this one,” he explains. “If I let you stay, we’re gonna end up with a stack of dead bodies because you’re gonna see the Phantom in everyone. I can’t have that.”

“I’m not the serial killer here!” I shout, annoyed that he doesn’t seem to trust me.

“I know, but?—”

“But nothing, Matt.”

My president jerks back at my use of his given name, and the crease in his forehead becomes more pronounced. Jez, his twin, has dubbed it the worry crease, and she gets the same one.

Soul stares at me, and I can practically see the wheels turning in his head. I’ve been around the man enough to know when he’s caving. He might not like it. Hell, he fucking hates it. But he’s gonna cave.

“You’d really give up your patch for this bastard?” he finally asks.

“What do you think?”

He smirks. “I think you’re just crazy enough and determined enough to do it.”

“Then don’t send me packin’, Pres.” I take a deep breath. “Please.”

“Fine. But you’re on lot duty.”

I nod. “Okay. I can handle that.”

The parking lot is the perfect breeding ground for a serial killer, so I’ve got no problem being banished there. I’m more likely to catch the freak in the act than my brothers on the inside.

“I’ll give you Knuckles, Zippy, Possum, and Mark,” he says. “Do you think the five of you can handle the entire lot, or do you want more?”

“Can you spare Frenzy and Animal?”

“I can make that happen.”

“Then yeah, we’ll be good.”

Soul stabs a finger in my chest. “Don’t make me regret this, Thorn.”

“I won’t.”

“Yo, Soul!”

We both turn toward the stadium’s main entrance where Spike and Grim are standing. Grim lifts his hands.

“We need to run through each security checkpoint one last time. It’s gonna take a few hours since there’s so many so we need to get started.”

Soul signs his response. “Be there in a minute.”

Grim nods, and Spike says, “We’ll meet you by the bathrooms on the second level.”

Once they’re gone, Soul levels his gaze on me. “I mean it, Thorn. Don’t fuck this up.”

“I won’t,” I repeat and shrug. “I’m gonna say the same to you.”

Soul chuckles. “We won’t fuck shit up, brother. I promise you that.”

CHAPTER 11

DELANEY

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“Oops, sorry.”

That’s the fourth time the chick next to me has elbowed me in the boob, but I’m not gonna complain. Apple came out on the stage twenty minutes ago, and it’s been pandemonium since. The stadium is huge, and there isn’t an empty seat in the house. The energy is electric, causing the hairs on my arms to stand up.

“No problem,” I yell back.

I brought a pair of mini binoculars with me, and being this far back from the stage, I’m grateful for having them in my arsenal. The giant screens hanging on either side of the stage provide a clear view of Apple moving around, but the spyware allows me to peak into the crowd. My hips sway to the music, my head bops to Apple’s latest release, and my mind wanders back to when I entered the stadium.

Clutching my clear bag, which I bought from Dollar General earlier today, I step in line. I watch the security guards, who are more interested in looking at tits and ass than paying attention to what women have in their bags.

I had a feeling security was going to be tight, so I only brought the essentials. My comb knife, binoculars, a taser disguised as lipstick, and the monkey fist that hangs off my keychain are buried under my wallet. I also shoved a mini umbrella in the bag because there’s a slight chance of rain, and bonus, it also acts as a baton if I need it to be.

“Next!”

I sashay up to the rent-a-cop and drop my bag on the table for inspection. His eyes quickly glance at the contents within and then slowly roam over my body. My thirty-four Cs are pushed up together, giving me the perfect cleavage in my low-cut V-neck black satin shirt. My red bra strap peeks out, giving a hint as to what is hiding underneath.

He sucks in a breath. "Here you go," he says as he thrusts my bag back into my hands.

"Keep it moving," a man shouts from just past the entry gates.

It's clear the man is a biker based on the cut he's wearing, and he's watching the lines with an intense focus. What's not clear is why he's here.

"Enjoy the show," the rent-a-cop says, pulling my attention back to him.

I wink. "Thanks."

I smile as I surface back to the present when Apple switches to a new song. The bass thumps through the speakers, and everyone sings along with her, including me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a couple of people shuffling through an aisle, but everyone looks like ants so it's hard to tell from this far away. The show has only been going for thirty minutes, but that doesn't mean anything. Concertgoers like to drink which means people are constantly walking around whether to go to the bathroom or get a refill.

Sweat drips down my back as I keep an eye on the couple and pull out my binoculars. The man has a grip on the woman's neck, and it appears he's leading her. They're a few sections over, and with the dark lighting, it's hard to determine if the woman is scared or perfectly fine. My stomach twists into knots.

Calm down... a lot of men put their hands on their woman's neck. It doesn't make him a killer.

I try to shake off the nagging feeling and enjoy the concert. The feeling doesn't subside, so I pick up my bag and edge toward the stairs that lead to the enclave where the concessions stands are.

"... concert is really good. Do you really want to leave? We can hook up after."

The woman leans against the wall, but the man pulls her toward him. Luckily, there are a lot of people milling around, so they don't notice when I creep closer. The female is gorgeous with short dark brown hair, and he's tall and masculine. He's not bad looking but not gorgeous either.

Still, something feels off. He looks familiar, but I can't place him.

I must've seen him at one of the bars in town.

"Baby, I can't wait to be with you. I leave to go out of town tomorrow," he whines. "I wanna be able to take my time worshiping you tonight."

The woman blushes, grabs his hand, and leads him to the escalator. At the bottom of the escalator are the doors to exit the building. I wait until they're almost to the bottom before I step on behind them. He grabs her ass and buries his face in her neck. I can't put my finger on it, but something about his profile urges me forward. I shuffle along and stop at the vendors' tables when a security guy stops the couple from leaving the building.

"If you leave, you won't be allowed back in," he states, eyeing the couple up and down. "No matter what the circumstances are."

“Maybe we should sta?—”

“We know the rules,” the guy says, tugging the woman under his arm. “C’mon baby, I have a promise to keep.”

They push through the doors, and I wait a minute before I follow. The rent-a-cop steps up to give his spiel to me, but I hold up my hand.

“I heard.”

I rush out the door, whipping my head back and forth to try and see which direction the couple headed in. I take off to my right when I hear a giggle. Glancing over my shoulder, I spot the two I’ve been stalking heading in the opposite direction. I follow them from a distance until we reach the main parking lot.

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It's easy for me to go unnoticed because they're clearly into each other. Once we reach section F, I'm ready to admit defeat and head back to the arena to wait for the concert to end.

But then I hear a scuffle and freeze.

"You fucking want this!"

"No... no, please."

"Fucking slut, practically begging for it all night."

Without thinking, I run in the direction of the couple. I skid to a stop as I come around the corner. The man has one hand wrapped around her throat, and her face is bright red. She's clawing at him, trying to escape, but he's too strong. As he's strangling her, he's pulling at his pants with his free hand.

I see red.

I kick in the back of his leg, and his knee buckles, which effectively releases his grip on his victim.

"Run!" I yell.

The man twists his body to lean up against the car, sneering at me. "I've been waiting for you."

My breath hitches. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

But I don’t need him to respond as my brain finally registers what my gut has been trying to tell me since I started following him tonight.

It’s him. He’s the asshole who stole my sister from me.

The Phantom stares at me. There’s nothing impressive about him. At least, nothing that stands out. He’s a normal-looking man around six feet tall, and he’s got brown hair. He’s muscular but not the bodybuilder type. He has no distinguishing features that I can see.

No wonder no one has any idea who this guy is. He blends in well. I focus on his eyes and realize that he does have one feature that is unforgettable. His eyes are soulless. It’s like looking into a black hole. There’s nothing, absolutely nothing, in their dark depths.

“It’s you,” I growl.

His mouth curves into a twisted, sinister smile. “I’ve been pat?—”

I haul my arm back and thrust it forward. My fist connects with his jaw, causing his face to jerk to the side forcefully.

He slowly turns back to face me, his eyes burning with the promise of retribution and blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. “You’re gonna re?—”

“What the fuck is going on here?”

I glance over my shoulder to see a hulk of a man coming toward us, but then I’m violently shoved by the Phantom. I wait for my head to connect with the pavement,

but a pair of strong arms keep me from making contact as thunderous footsteps take off in the opposite direction.

Fuck!

CHAPTER 12

THORN

FIVE MINUTES EARLIER...

“Maybe we were wrong.”

I glare at Frenzy and shake my head. “Night’s not over yet,” I mutter with frustration.

We’ve been patrolling the lot for hours, and there’s only about thirty minutes left in the concert. I’m starting to think that Frenzy is right: The Phantom might not be striking tonight. There’s been zero activity in the lot, and I haven’t heard shit from the guys on the inside.

“I’m gonna do another loop,” my brother says as he turns and walks in the opposite direction.

After checking in with the others on the coms, I start my last lap before the lot is flooded with people when the concert ends. I’m about to give up and head to the stadium entrance when a shout catches my attention.

“Run!”

The voice is coming from my right, and I take off in that direction. When I reach the commotion, I see a woman scrambling away to hide behind a vehicle as another female stands in front of a man leaning against a car. They’re staring at each other intensely, murder in both their expressions.

“It’s you,” the woman growls.

“You’re gonna re?—”

“What the fuck is going on here?” I demand, unable to stay silent at the way the man is leering at her.

She glances over her shoulder, her eyes narrowing as I stride closer, and then she’s shoved by the man. I lunge forward and thrust my arms out to catch her before her body connects with the ground. Unfortunately, the man uses my distraction to take off running.

“Are you okay?” I ask the woman.

Rather than reply, she narrows her eyes and yanks away from me. “What the hell are you doing?” she screeches. “You let him get away!”

“I let him...” I shake my head. “Lady, I just saved your ass.”

She huffs out a breath. “You didn’t save shit,” she sneers. “And my name’s not Lady,

it's Delaney."

"I'm Thorn."

"Whatever." Delaney turns away from me and glances around the lot. "Honey, are you still around?" she calls. "You can come out if you are."

The other woman steps out from behind a car, and the parking lot lights gleam off the tears on her cheeks.

"What happened?" I demand.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Delaney says, glaring over her shoulder. "Who died and made you God?"

I snort. "I'm not God, sweetheart. More li?—"

"Um, I really wanna go home."

Delaney and I turn to face the other woman. She's still crying, and her arms are wrapped around her midsection.

"I need you to tell me what happened," I tell her, forcing a small smile.

"I don't even know," she admits. "One minute, things are fine, and the next..."

"Do you have anyone who can come and get you?" Delaney asks.

The woman nods. "I can call my sister."

"Do that," I tell her. "We'll stay here with you until she gets here."

A look of confusion comes over her face. “Shouldn’t we call the cops?”

“No.”

“Nope.”

Delaney and I speak simultaneously.

“Um... okay.”

Thirty minutes later, the girl’s sister picks her up, and the concert is about over. Delaney begins to walk away from me as soon as the sister’s car is out of the lot, but I grab her arm to stop her.

Delaney’s fist connects with my jaw, and the pain is far worse than I’d expect from someone as tiny as her.

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“Don’t ever touch me again,” she snarls.

I lift my hands in surrender. “Got it. But you can’t leave.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Because you very well may be the only person who’s laid eyes on the man I’m hunting.”

“Hate to break it to you,” she begins. “But that was the Phantom Strangler, and I’ve been after him for years. I’m not about to let you get him first.”

“Whaddya know about the Phantom?” I ask.

She chuckles, but there’s no humor in it. “I know he’s a dead man walking. As soon as I get my hands on?—”

I grab her arm again, only this time, I hold on a bit tighter. “You’re coming with me.”

Delaney digs in her heels. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

I turn and lean into her face. “You are,” I growl. “The Phantom is mine, and I need whatever info you have on him to help me get him.”

“I work alone,” she says.

Smirking, I start walking again and practically drag her toward the stadium.

“We’ll see about that, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER 13

“You made it!”

I return my mom’s hug, and when she steps back to look at my face, I force a smile.

“I did.”

“How long can you stay?”

Considering that I almost didn’t make it out of Nashville, I decide I need a break. Not only will it give me a chance to regroup, but it should be enough to fuck with Kyle and Delaney’s heads.

“A while,” I tell her. “At least a week.”

Mom’s smile widens, and her eyes light up. “Oh, good. It’ll be so nice to spend some quality time with you.”

“You too, Mom.”

It takes a lot of effort not to laugh at the insanity of the moment. Most people would expect my parents to be crazy or addicts or abusive, but Mom and Dad are the quintessential June and Ward Cleaver.

Growing up, my parents were very involved in my life. We ate dinner at the table as a family almost every night, and they told me they loved me every single day. I wasn’t beaten or berated or ignored. I was... cherished.

I'm sure you're wondering where it all went wrong for me, and honestly, I don't think I can answer that question. If I had to guess, I'd say nothing went wrong so much as I was wrong from the moment I was born.

“Son, you're here.”

My father's voice pulls me from my thoughts, and I look toward the stairs to see him walking down them.

“Hey, Dad.”

He strides closer and pulls me in for a hug.

See... loved.

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“Your mother didn’t tell me you were coming,” he says after stepping back.

I shrug. “I wasn’t sure I’d be able to make it.”

“Well, we’re very glad you did.”

And that’s how it goes for the rest of the visit. They shower me with love and affection, and I eat it up. When I’m home, I might not be able to let the real me show, but it’s the only time I can pretend I’m a normal part of society.

CHAPTER 14

DELANEY

“Who’s this?”

I don’t know what the hell I was thinking following a strange man, who’s in a motorcycle gang, back to his hotel room. My only consolation is knowing I can defend myself; however, I’m starting to really question my decision. As soon as the door closes behind me, I survey the room and realize the odds are no longer in my favor. Several large men vacate their seats and stand next to each other with their arms crossed and matching scowls on their faces. It’s creepy how in sync they are.

“Club, not a gang.”

I whirl around to see a beautiful redhead carrying a babbling baby in her arms. Annoyance at myself creeps in because I’m normally more in tune with my

surroundings, but this whole night has my equilibrium off.

“Um... what?”

“They’re a club, not a gang,” she explains before she smirks. “I’m guessing you didn’t realize you were thinking out loud. So, who are you?”

“Delaney.” I hold out my hand.

She shifts the baby to her other hip and shakes my hand. “I’m Cece. This little mini-me is Harper.”

“Aren’t you just a little cutie,” I coo at Harper. She hides her face under her mom’s hair but peeks out at me with a smile on her cute chubby face. “She’s absolutely adorable.”

I love kids. Always have. But chasing down a serial killer doesn’t exactly give me many opportunities to be around children.

“Thanks.”

Thorn ruffles Harper's hair, and for a single endearing moment, it throws my ovaries into a tailspin. I just met this man... under less-than-optimal circumstances, I might add. He’s causing my emotions to get sidetracked. My sole focus needs to be on finding the Phantom and ending his sorry existence, not jumping the bones of a hot-as-sin biker, no matter how much my libido wants me to.

Doesn’t hurt to look though.

“What’re you doing up, Ce?” Thorn asks as Harper reaches for him.

He takes her willingly and blows raspberries into her neck. Her giggles fill the air, and the tension in the room drops slightly.

“I think Harper is getting another tooth.” Cece sighs. “Grim’s the only one who can calm her down when she’s acting like this.”

Grim? What the hell kind of a name is that?

The door flies open, and more men come stomping in. The man leading the charge stops when he sees me standing close to Cece, and it’s like a domino effect. The first one halts, and the others slam into each other’s back.

“What the fuck, Soul?” one of them hollers.

The leader, who I assume is Soul since he caused the traffic jam, raises his finger in my direction. “Who the fuck are you?” he demands. “And why are you standing close to my ‘ol lady and baby girl?”

So, Thorn isn’t Harper’s daddy. Good to know.

I stare at Soul for a moment, taking him in. The patch on his vest says President, so he’s definitely the club’s leader. He’s also good-looking and obviously devoted to his ol’ lady, as he put it. He might have been talking to me, but his eyes haven’t left Cece and Harper.

Cece rushes forward and smacks Soul’s chest. “Don’t be a caveman,” she admonishes. “This is Delaney, and before you rudely interrupted, we were getting to know each other.”

Soul lifts Cece into his arms effortlessly, and her legs wrap around his waist. He pulls her head down until their lips connect in a toe-curling kiss. Once they come up for

air, Cece rests her forehead on Soul's.

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“Woman, I’ll question any stranger in our hotel room,” Soul grumbles.

Cece gives him another quick peck on the lips. “Fine, but don’t be such a dick about it. It’s not like you didn’t see Thorn standing right there.”

Everyone in the room watches Soul and Cece, and no one is paying attention to Harper. But the child clearly doesn’t like that because she promptly lets out an ear-piercing scream.

Soul gently places Cece back on her feet and stomps toward Thorn. “Give me my daughter, asshole.”

Thorn hands her over, but she wiggles and squirms uncomfortably. I must be overwhelmed with everything that’s happening because, once again, I’m unaware of my surroundings. A behemoth of a man marches forward, closing in on me. I step back and awkwardly place myself halfway behind Thorn.

Behemoth’s patch says Grim. I can see how he got his name... He’s huge, and the permanent scowl on his face would have Death himself turning tail and running.

When Grim steps forward, Soul twists out of his reach and shakes his head. Grim chuckles as Harper reaches for him.

“You can’t keep taking my daughter, fucker,” Soul says with a scowl.

Grim’s hands move with fluidity, and Thorn translates. “She obviously wants me more. Hand her over.” Thorn glances over his shoulder at me. “Grim’s deaf.”

I know a little ASL but not enough to have a full-blown conversation with someone.

Cece saunters between the both of them. “Babe, I think you have other things to deal with right now.” She nods in my direction.

While Soul is distracted, Grim uses the opportunity to snatch Harper from his arms. She immediately settles which pisses Soul off even more.

“Go find Violet and make your own fucking kid,” he scoffs.

Grim laughs, carries Harper over to the couch, and sits down. Everyone watches with fascination as she falls asleep within minutes.

“And this is why we call him the Baby Whisperer”, Cece whispers to me as she walks over to Grim and signs something to him.

He nods and follows her and Soul to one of the bedrooms. Both men return a few minutes later.

Thorn takes my elbow and gently leads me to the sofa. “Sit before you fall over,” he commands.

I hate taking orders from people, but in this instance, I do what I’m told because my adrenaline is crashing. One of the prospects hands me a can of Coke which I open and take a big gulp. I need the caffeine to get me through whatever the hell this is. My brain isn’t firing on all cylinders, and hopefully, this will help.

“Thorn, start talking,” Soul demands.

“This is Delaney,” Thorn starts and then explains what happened in the parking lot. Soul listens carefully, never interrupting. His forehead creases, and I can see the

tension in his face.

Grim smirks as he signs, but it's Soul who speaks. "Fifty bucks, asshole."

What the hell? Fifty bucks for what? For me? Oh, hell no!

"What the fuck?"

"What the fuck?"

Thorn and I both yell simultaneously.

"If you wake up Harper, I'll gut you both," Soul whisper yells as he looks toward the closed bedroom door.

"I'm not a fucking whore or for sale," I grit through my teeth and hop to my feet. Grim's smirk falls, and he jerks back as if I slapped him across the face. Thorn grabs my arm, but I yank out of his hold. "Don't touch me, or I'll scream this place down after I kick your sorry ass."

"Whoa." Thorn holds his hands up in surrender. "I'm sorry. That's not what fifty bucks meant, sweetheart."

"I'm not your sweetheart."

Grim approaches slowly and hands me a cell phone. I glance at the screen and read the words he typed.

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Sorry. It's a club thing. Thorn owes the club fifty bucks because he wasn't signing.

Everyone knows the rule. Didn't mean to offend you.

I hang my head and take a deep breath before lifting it. "Can you read lips?" Grim nods so I continue. "No, I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions."

I hand him back his phone and take my seat on the couch. "I apologize for my outburst. It's been a long night."

Soul grabs a bottle of Jack and begins handing out glasses. When he gets to me, I shake my head. "No offense, but I don't drink with men I don't know."

"Smart," he replies. "So, you say the guy in the parking lot was the Phantom Strangler. How do you know that?"

"He told me he's been waiting for me."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"Seeing how my twin sister was one of his victims, I'd say it means a lot." I take another swig of my Coke.

A collective gasp fills the room, but it's Thorn who speaks. "What did you say?"

"I can't say it any clearer," I huff. "Five years ago, when we were out celebrating our twenty-first birthday, he killed my twin. And tonight, he said he's been waiting on

me. I would've had him, too, if you hadn't spooked him."

"I was saving your ass," Thorn argues.

"I had it handled." I rub my temples in frustration. "How do you know about the Phantom?"

Thorn hesitates and glances over at Soul who nods slightly. "My girlfriend was his first victim when I was a senior in high school."

My jaw drops. "His f-f-first victim was your high school girlfriend?" I stutter.

Thorn nods. "Tamara had a party at her house while her parents were out of town. I bailed on her when she asked me to stay and help her clean up. I had to work later that day and needed to crash and sleep off some of the alcohol," he explains. "Her parents came back, and Tamara was gone so her parents reported her missing. They found her naked and strangled to death in a creek behind my house."

"How long ago was that?" I ask.

Thorn doesn't answer. He just hangs his head and begins pacing back and forth.

Soul pours another round for everyone, and this time, I take the glass when he offers.

"Twenty-fourteen," Soul replies for Thorn.

"Holy shit," I mumble. "That's five years before he killed Daphne. How many women has this asshole murdered? I've only been searching for four years."

Thorn stops and whips around to face me. "You've been actively searching for him? Alone?"

“Of course, he killed my sister.”

“That’s the dum?—”

“I know you don’t know us,” Soul interrupts. “Would you be willing to come with us to our clubhouse? Maybe we can work together to finally bring this psycho down.”

“Where’s your clubhouse?”

“Boulder City, Nevada,” Thorn grits through his teeth.

“Will I be safe from all of you?”

All the men nod, but it’s Soul who responds. “You have my word that no one in our club will harm you.”

“And I can leave whenever I want?”

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Soul raises a brow at Thorn before answering, and Thorn nods.

“Yes, you can leave whenever you want.”

I stare into the tumbler of brown liquid and weigh my options. These men could be delusional killers themselves; however, Thorn could’ve easily tried to drag me into an alley to murder me, and he didn’t. It’d be nice to finally have help finding the Phantom. I’ve been chasing this guy for four years, and it’s time to put his ass in the ground.

“Fuck it, I’m in. When do we leave?”

Hopefully, I won’t live to regret this decision.

CHAPTER 15

THORN

“What the hell is she doing?”

I put down the kickstand on my Harley and look over my shoulder, following Spike’s gaze. Delaney remains in her dark blue Land Rover Discovery Sport, and she’s not pulling into the garage. Shaking my head, I cross the large space and come to a stop next to her window which she has open.

“Problem?” I ask.

“I’m not going in there,” she snaps, nodding forward.

I roll my eyes. “Why?”

“Because...” Delaney swallows, and my eyes shift to her slender throat. My cock twitches, but as soon as she opens her mouth again, all lust disappears. “You could be worse than the Phantom for all I know.”

Anger surges through me. “Sweetheart, I’m not a fucking saint, but I’m nothing like that waste of flesh.”

She stares at me for a long moment and shifts in her seat. “Promise you’re not a serial killer?”

“Do you really think I’d tell you if I were?”

Delaney blows out a breath. “No.”

“Look,” I say, bracing my hands on the door. “You’ve been chasing a monster for years, so obviously, you trust your gut. What’s it telling you about me?”

“That you’re trouble,” she replies without hesitation.

I chuckle. “I might be trouble, but are you in any danger from me?”

Again, she stares. Finally, she shakes her head. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Good.” I push to my full height. “Then drive this fancy car into the garage so we can get to work.”

Without bothering to wait for her, I head back inside. Seconds later, she follows in

her Land Rover. I point to one of the visitor spots, and she parks.

“What is this place?” Delaney asks after stepping out of her SUV and crossing the garage toward me.

“Saints Purgatory MC clubhouse.”

“I’m sorry, but I just drove into the side of a mountain,” she quips. “I don’t see a damn clubhouse.”

“You will.”

Two minutes later, we step off the elevator into the common area. Almost instantly, all the tension from the trip disappears.

I’m home.

“Hey, Delaney,” Soul says as he walks toward us. “Glad you agreed to come. Make yourself at home.”

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“Thanks.”

Pres looks at me. “Why don’t you show her around, help her get settled, and then you can both grab something to eat?”

“If it’s all the same to you,” Delaney begins. “I’d rather get right to work. The Phantom doesn’t rest, and neither should we.”

“It’s getting late, and we’re coming off a long trip,” Soul says. “Work can wait til tomorrow.”

“And if the Phantom strikes in the meantime?”

“It’s not his MO to strike so quickly,” I remind her. “Relax, sweetheart.”

Delaney’s shoulders stiffen. “I already told you, I’m not your sweetheart.”

Soul grins. “I was right.”

“Right about what?” Delaney demands.

Soul’s eyes dart from her to me and back again. “This is gonna be fun.” With that, he walks away.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Delaney snaps.

I’ve got a pretty good guess, but I’m not about to tell her. “Nothing.” I rest my hand

on her shoulder and urge her toward the bar. “Let’s grab a drink, and then I’ll show you around.”

Delaney huffs out a breath and nods. “I could really go for a Jack and Coke.”

While I get us both a drink, Fort approaches her with his scanner to get her set up so she’s able to move about the clubhouse while she’s here. She must accept his explanation as to why he needs her prints because she doesn’t give him a hard time, and I can’t help but wonder why she so easily trusts him but not me.

“Here,” I grunt as I thrust a full tumbler at her. She finishes it in one long gulp before slamming the glass onto the bar. Arching a brow, I ask, “Better?”

“Much. So, can we skip the tour? If we’re not gonna get to work, I’d really rather just get my stuff and be alone.”

“Pres wants you to get the tour, you’re gonna get the damn tour. And you have to eat something. Don’t want you starving on my watch.”

“Fine.”

As I walk through the clubhouse with Delaney on my heels, I show her the kitchen, medical wing, and gym while informing her which rooms are off-limits.

“Why can’t I go in there?” she asks when we stop outside the room where church is held.

“Club business happens in there,” I admit.

Delaney crosses her arms over her chest and taps her foot. Her petite stature, and the indignation in her expression are equal parts annoying and fucking adorable.

“In case you’ve forgotten, you need my help, not the other way around,” she quips. “I tracked the Phantom once on my own, and I can do it again.”

“What’s your point?”

She rolls her eyes. “My point, asshole, is that my help isn’t free. Either there are no secrets between us, or I walk.”

I level my gaze on her and stare, trying to determine if she’s as tough on the inside as she presents on the outside. Her eyes give away nothing but a glint of determination. Reminding myself that she was chasing a serial killer all on her own, and managed to almost get him, I make a snap decision.

“You really wanna know what we do here?” I ask. “Because once you know, you can’t forget.”

She hesitates for a split second before nodding. “Tell me everything.”

“Follow me.”

I lead Delaney to the back elevator, and when we step on and the doors close, the car begins to descend.

“Where are we going?”

“You want all the information, and I’m giving it to you.”

The doors slide open, and I practically drag her down the corridor to the Confessional. It occurs to me that I probably should’ve gotten Soul’s approval to do this, but I’d rather ask forgiveness than permission.

I press my hand against the scanner when we reach the steel door, and it opens. Delaney steps inside, and I follow behind her. The slamming of the door startles her, and she whirls around to face me.

“Wh-what is this place?” she asks before moving to the wall of weapons.

“We call it the Confessional.”

“I’m guessing with that kind of persuasion...” she says, nodding at the wall. “... you wring all sorts of dirty secrets out of people.”

“You could say that.”

When she faces me again, the determination in her eyes is gone, but in its place is something I wasn’t expecting... excitement.

“So, who are the lucky victims?” she asks casually.

“I wouldn’t exactly call them victims,” I snap. “We only bring the worst of the worst

sinner down here.”

“And do what with them?” Delaney lifts a pair of nun chucks off their hook and expertly swings them around. “Torture?”

“We purge them. And yes, most of the time, that includes torture.”

“Why?” She returns the nun chucks to their proper place and slowly walks around the room, taking in every square inch. “What does your club get out of this?”

“We make the world a safer place.”

“By killing?”

“By removing the scum.”

When she stops walking, her eyes land on a blood stain in the corner. “Is this where we’ll bring the Phantom when we catch him?”

“It’s where I’ll bring the Phantom.”

Her head whips up, and she glares at me. “All or nothing, Thorn. No secrets, no lies, and certainly no leaving me out of the fun.”

I arch a brow. “Fun?”

“Killing the sick fuck who raped and murdered my twin sounds like a helluva good time to me.”

My lips curve into a grin. “Where have you been all my life?”

“Same place as you.”

“Meaning?”

Delaney shrugs with a smirk. “Trying to make the world a safer place.”

CHAPTER 16

DELANEY

“This’ll be your room while you’re here. And no one but you will have access unless there’s an emergency.”

The door in front of us slides open. Thorn waves me through and follows me a moment later with my bags. When Fort took the scan of my hand earlier, he explained that it was necessary for me to gain access to my room and other parts of the clubhouse. He also told me that if I attempted to go into a room that was off-limits, the door won’t open, and the screen will blink red.

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“Thanks.” I step to the side to allow Thorn room to pass me and toss my bags on the bed.

“Bathroom is on the right and closet is on the left.” He picks up the TV remote lying on the side table by the bed. “Thanks to Jez, we have every damn channel you can think of, so you shouldn’t have any issues finding something to watch.”

I shift my weight from one foot to the other and fidget with my hands. When you spend your life hiding behind a computer screen, and the only interactions you have with men are kicking their asses in a boxing ring, it leaves you a socially awkward mess.

Sure, I can talk to clients, no problem, but this is different. It’s more intimate being in someone else’s environment. While I was able to get to know everyone a little bit during our travel from Nashville to Boulder City, I still kept my interactions somewhat limited. That’s going to be damn near impossible now that I’m in their space, on their home turf.

Time to come out of my shell. That was easy when we were just two people walking through an underground bunker and torture chamber. This is more... personal. I need to utilize whatever resources Saints Purgatory has, and the only way that’s gonna happen is if I start hanging out with them and getting fucking personal.

If I can remember how to do that.

“You’ve got quite the clubhouse. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“We take our security and privacy very seriously.”

“I can see that.”

“Well... I’ll let you get settled.” He moves toward the door but stops and turns on his heel to face me. “Want to come hang out in the common room with all of us?” Thorn’s megawatt smile lights up his face, and at that moment, I don’t want to deny him anything.

I’m losing my mind.

“Sure, can I have a few minutes to clean up?”

It’s been a long few days, and I need some time to gather my thoughts about my next steps for hunting the Phantom.

“Yeah. Thirty minutes long enough?”

“Perfect.”

“I’ll come back then.”

Without another word, Thorn walks out of the room, and the door closes behind him. I take a deep breath as I carry my toiletries into the bathroom to unpack them. After brushing my teeth and touching up my makeup, I slip on a pair of tight jeans and an off-the-shoulder t-shirt. Then I pick up my favorite bottle of perfume and spray a small amount over my wrists, but I almost drop it when a knock at the door startles me.

“Stupid. You knew Thorn was coming back,” I mutter. “Coming!”

I open the door, and it takes everything in me not to whistle in appreciation. Thorn's dark-fitted jeans and charcoal Henley show off the definition of his arms and chest. I drag my eyes up his body, and for a brief moment, I catch a glimpse of the same longing in his eyes, but as quick as it's there, it's gone.

You're imagining things. You're here to work with them, not to get laid.

"Ready, m'lady?" He smirks, holding out his arm like he's escorting me on a date.

I let the corner of my mouth curve up. "Absolutely." I link my arm with his, and together we make our way to the common room.

When we first arrived, I wasn't too concerned about paying attention to details, but now I can take my time and really appreciate how big the area is. There are a couple of prospects behind the bar, filling orders. Some of the brothers play pool, others watch MMA fights on the big screen, and a few women I haven't met yet stare at me with curiosity.

"Want another drink?" Thorn asks.

"Yeah, that sounds good."

Why is this so fucking awkward? I've been on dates... granted, not many, but still.

It's not a date.

We're hanging out with the entire club and working together to find a killer.

Perspective Delaney!!

"You okay?"

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Shaking myself out of my stupor, I realize we're already at the bar. I smile up at him.
"Yep."

"I asked what you wanted to drink."

"Oh, sorry, there's a lot to take in," I lie. "I'll have another Jack and Coke."

"Mark," Thorn calls. "Get Delaney a Jack and Coke."

"Sure thing," Mark answers and begins making my drink. He hands me a full glass and Thorn a beer. "How ya doing, Delaney?"

"I'm good. You?"

"Glad to be home," he says with a sigh. "I don't mind touring with Apple, but she is a grade-A ballbuster."

"I heard that!" Apple yells from behind us. "Wait until the next tour date."

"Fuck," Mark mumbles. "Love ya, Apple Jacks."

"Delaney!" Cece hollers. "Get your cute little ass over here."

Cece and some of the other ladies are hanging out at the high-top tables by the billiards area. Two women give me dirty looks as I make my way over to the ol' ladies.

“Who are they?” I nod toward the two who are currently hanging all over Knuckles and Spike.

Jez looks up from her phone and sneers. “That’s Glitter and Paula. Paula, the brunette, has the personality of a rock. Glitter is the bleach blonde with a bad dye job and purple highlights. Then there’s Nikki behind the bar with the prospects.”

“Why didn’t they come to Nashville?” I wonder aloud. “Who’s Nikki with?”

“They’re with no one and almost everyone.” Carmella snorts. “They’re bunnies.”

“Bunnies?”

“Thorn didn’t warn you?” Violet asks quietly.

“Warn me about what?”

All the women groan in unison, but Heather speaks first.

“Bunnies are the live-in entertainment for the men. They’re not family, only fuck buddies.”

“They live here?!” I shriek, gaining the attention of the mini orgy on the couch. “And you’re all okay with them sleeping with your men whenever they want?”

I’m not well-versed in the MC lifestyle, but I’ve seen shows and read books. I’ve never heard the term ‘bunnies’ before. Club whores and hang arounds, sure. I guess bunnies is a nicer way of describing them.

“Oh, fuck no,” Cece immediately denies. “They know better than to touch any of our men. The ones who are in committed relationships are off-limits, hence the ‘almost

everyone'. A couple of them have tried in the past, but they're no longer around."

Violet snickers. "With a broken face."

I chuckle. "I'm assuming there's a story there."

Violet blushes, and Heather dives in, telling the story about how Violet handed a former bunny her ass when she tried to make a claim on Grim. Needless to say, that bunny is no longer a part of the crew at the clubhouse.

I raise my brow. "It's always the quiet ones."

Laughter erupts around the tables, and all the men stop and stare at us. I wipe the tears from my eyes from laughing so hard and try to remember the last time I felt so carefree. I've kept myself shut away from the world for so long that I forgot what it's like to get out and live. When you spend every waking moment hunting for a killer, it impacts your social life. Sitting here, surrounded by other females my age, is comforting and reminds me of what I'm missing in my life.

Zach slides a tray of shots is between Heather and Skye, who promptly begins passing them out to everyone. A large arm drapes across my shoulders. I tilt my head up and see Spike. I have no idea how he got away from Glitter, but based on the scowl on her face, she isn't happy about it. I throw my shot back and let the alcohol soothe my nerves.

Spike grins down at me but doesn't remove his arm. "You all settled in, Munchkin?"

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“Munchkin?”

“You’re so tiny,” Spike says matter-of-factly.

I roll my eyes. “I’m not that tiny.”

Spike bops me on the nose. “You are short. What are ya? Four feet, two, three?”

“I’m four-eleven,” I snip. “What are you, Gargantua?”

“I’m only six-one,” he counters. “Grim’s the Gargantua in the group. He’s six-five.”

“For the love of all that’s unholy,” Jez sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. “You’re all freakishly large. Leave her alone.”

Grim, Malice, and Abyss saunter toward us, and each of them stand beside their woman.

“He’s jealous because I have the biggest dick, and you need a microscope to find his,” Violet says, and instantly, her cheeks turn crimson. “Damn it, Grim!”

Violet elbows Grim in the stomach, causing him to grunt, and I watch him carefully for any sign that he’s going to retaliate. As I ball my fists up under the table, my leg bounces with nervous energy. I might be tiny, but I can pack a mean punch and stun a bigger opponent.

Grim surprises the hell out of me when he pulls Violet’s head back and kisses her

with so much passion I have to look away.

“When are you gonna learn to wait until he’s done signing to translate?” Skye snickers. “He gets you all the time with that shit.”

“When he apologizes like that, it’s worth it,” Violet says breathlessly.

I instantly relax. These men certainly don’t act like stereotypical bikers.

“So, Delaney, ever been with a biker?” Spike bobs his brows suggestively.

“That’s a negative, Ghost Rider.” I bat my lashes.

Zach steps up to my other side with another round of drinks. “Did you just quote Top Gun?”

“It’s a classic!” I shout.

He drops to one knee. “Will you marry me?”

“Oh, do it, honey,” Heather encourages while fanning her face. “He’s learning to be an MMA fighter, and those muscles.”

“I’m standing right here,” Frenzy scowls.

Heather pats his chest. “Only have eyes for you, babe, but I’m not dead.”

Now, it’s my turn to be embarrassed. Heat creeps up my neck, and before I have a chance to make an ass out of myself, Thorn stomps over and tugs Zach to his feet. “Back to work, prospect,” he orders.

Before I can ask Thorn what his problem is, Cece yells across the room. “Mark! Come hook up the karaoke machine.”

“Fuck,” all the men groan in unison.

Carmella jumps out of her chair and puts her hands on her hips. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Abyss pulls her to him. “It means, you’re all about to get a lot more shitfaced than you already are.”

She runs her fingers up his chest. “Yeah, but that means hot wall sex later.”

Abyss yells over his shoulder. “You heard her prospect, hook up the karaoke machine.”

Apple grabs my hand, tugs me out of my chair, and pulls me over to the microphone. “Guest’s first.”

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“I can’t sing,” I say nervously.

“Neither can Cece, but we let her have the mic,” Jez calls out.

“Hey! I resent that.” Cece pouts. “I do a damn good job.”

“Technically, Ice Ice Baby is rapping and not singing,” Skye interjects.

“Exactly... wait, what?” Cece glares at Skye, who just laughs.

Apple holds out her phone. “Pick one.”

I scroll through until I find the one song that me and Daphne would sing at bars together. The music starts, and I let myself get lost in the music.

“Big wheels keep on turnin'. Carry me home to see my kin. Singin' songs about the Southland. I miss Alabamy once again, and I think it's a sin,” I belt out.

When I reach the chorus, all the girls are gathered around me, signing Sweet Home Alabama. Tears well up in my eyes, and for the first time in a long time, my soul feels lighter.

CHAPTER 17

THORN

“Soul was right.”

I look to my left and scowl at the smirk on Malice's face. The caterwauling coming from the singing ladies continues to fill the room as my brothers and I watch and do our best to tune out the noise.

"About?"

My VP darts his gaze from me to the women and back again. "You can't keep your eyes off Delaney."

"I'm watching all of them, same as everyone else," I scoff, doing my best to pretend I don't know what he's talking about.

"Bullshit," he taunts. "You haven't been able to keep your eyes off the chick since Nashville."

"Kept my eyes off her while riding home."

Malice throws his head back and laughs. "Yeah, this is gonna be fun."

He walks away to join Grim, Soul, and Mark at the bar, leaving me to return to doing exactly what he accused me of: staring at Delaney.

From the moment I saw her in that damn parking lot, my soul's been... twitchy. She looks so much like an older version of Tamara, and no amount of trying to ignore it will make it less true.

The ladies' fifth song ends, and most of them stumble back to the high-top tables. Jez breaks away and strides toward me.

"You okay?" she asks when she stops in front of me.

“Great,” I reply, never taking my eyes off Delaney.

“Uh-huh.” Jez reaches up to grab my chin and force me to look at her. “She’s not Tamara.”

Every muscle in my body tenses. “Don’t you think I know that?”

“You tell me.”

I shove a hand through my hair. “Jez, back off,” I snarl.

“You know me better than that.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do,” I huff out.

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Jez shifts her gaze to the opposite side of the room, and I follow it. Zach has his arm around Delaney's shoulders, and he's leading her back to the mic.

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I count to ten in my head. Every cell in my body itches to demand the prospect get his hands off my woman, but I can't because she's not mine.

Not yet.

I shake my head as the music starts, knowing I have no business thinking like that. Not only do I barely know Delaney, but I'm also not at all looking for love.

"I'm thinking 'bout how people fall in love in mysterious ways..."

An image of Tamara and I dancing at prom to the same Ed Sheeran song surfaces, and my gut twists. Zach is way off-key as he sings, but Delaney is eating it up like they're star-crossed lovers. And when he grabs her hand and pulls her into his body to slow dance as he sings, my control snaps.

I stride across the room and yank Zach away from Delaney. "You don't get to touch her," I snarl.

Bone crunches when my fist connects with his nose, and the sound fuels my anger. Zach barely fights back, and before I know it, I'm pulled off of him and slammed to the floor.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Grim signs as he pins me down with his knee in my

chest.

I glare at him and struggle to break free, but my brother is a helluva lot bigger than me.

“Get off me,” I counter.

“Fifty bucks. Answer the question.”

Soul comes into my line of sight and tugs on Grim’s cut, forcing him to stand. I scramble to my feet, and my chest is heaving.

“Answer his question,” Soul demands as he gets in my face. “What the fuck were you doing?”

I shove a hand through my hair and take a deep breath. “I... He...”

“Zach didn’t do shit wrong,” Soul barks. “Delaney’s a free agent.”

“What?!” Delaney screeches, stomping into the mix.

Soul sighs. “All I mean is Thorn hasn’t laid claim to you, so you’re free to flirt with any man you want.”

“I wasn’t flirting,” she insists. “We were just having fun.”

Zach approaches me slowly, holding a rag to his nose. “You broke my fucking nose,” he accuses, his tone nasally.

“Because you touched my fucking woman,” I seethe.

Delaney whips her head around to stare at me. “Excuse me?”

“Sorry, brother,” Zach says.

“We’re not brothers,” I remind him. “You’re a prospect. Keep it up, you’ll go from that to a nobody real fast.”

“Wait a second,” Delaney demands. “You don’t get to decide who I can and can’t flirt with.”

Cece quickly joins our group and rests her hand on Delaney’s shoulder. “Why don’t you come with me,” she says, urging her out of the common room.

Delaney continues to glare at me over her shoulder, but as soon as she disappears from sight, I’m spun around.

“You’re laying claim?” Soul asks.

“No, I...” I press my lips together and lock eyes with my president. “I don’t know.”

“Either you are or not,” Grim signs.

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“Fine,” I huff. “I am.”

I turn on my heel and storm away from the crowd, desperately needing to be alone.

What the hell have I done?

I’m in my room for less than two minutes before the doors slide open, and Jez walks in.

“You can’t do that,” I snap.

“Oh, stuff it,” she quips. “I was worried about you, so I came in uninvited. For all I know, you were trying to kill yourself in here.” She shrugs. “It was an emergency.”

I groan. “You’re insane.”

“And you’d be lost without me.” Jez moves to sit at my desk. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Do you really need to ask?”

“She looks like Tamara... Yeah, I know. But that doesn’t mean you have to claim her.”

“I didn’t.”

“Uh, Thorn, did you hit your head on the floor when Grim took you down? Because

what you just did,” she says, pointing toward the common room. “You claimed her.”

“Fuck,” I mutter hotly. “I saw Zach put his hands on her and lost it. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Oh, you were thinking,” she returns. “Just not sure which head was taking the lead.”

“Did you need something from me?” I bark, annoyed with her assessment.

“No,” she admits. “Just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I stare at her without responding. She lifts her hands in mock surrender.

“Fine, Thorn. Be a dick. But when shit starts blowing up in your face, don’t come crying to me.”

With that parting shot, Jez walks out of my room, and only when the door slides closed do I relax.

Motherfucker!

CHAPTER 18

DELANEY

“Take a seat next to Thorn.”

Soul points to his left, and Thorn pulls out my chair. I promptly sit, waiting to see what happens next, but I have to bite my tongue before I say something stupid because I’m still pissed over Thorn’s outburst last night.

When Soul told me I'd be permitted in church, I had no idea what that meant until Thorn explained to me how big a deal it is. Only club members are allowed in this room, except on the rarest of occasions.

I guess hunting a serial killer is a rare occasion.

The room embodies Saints Purgatory. It's painted in the club colors, black and purple, from the ceiling to the floor. A beautiful skull with roses and curlicues covers the expanse of one wall with the motto See evil, Hear evil, Become evil, Purge evil done in large blocky letters on the opposite wall. The detail in the skull and the words take my breath away, and I feel them to the depths of my soul. When Thorn took me down to the Confessional, it was easy to tell he expected fear from me, but that's not what seeped into my bones... excitement did. The painted phrase resonates deep inside me, and, like the club, I need to rid the world of evil. And not just the Phantom Strangler.

As I'm taking in my surroundings, Jez waltzes in behind Grim like she owns the joint. The knots in my stomach loosen when she glances over at me and winks.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" Soul bellows.

Jez tosses her hair over her shoulders and sets her laptop down on the dark table.

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“I’m not leaving Delaney alone with you Neanderthals.” She plops down in the seat on the other side of me. “We’re still strangers, and after what happened to her sister, how can any of you think that she’s remotely comfortable sitting in a room by herself with a bunch of overgrown giants?”

“Thanks,” I whisper.

Jez scoots closer to me while Soul rubs the back of his neck, watching our interaction with concern. It’s not that I don’t trust them, per se, but Jez is right. It’s a little intimidating being surrounded by all this testosterone in the middle of nowhere.

Probably not a good time to mention all the weapons I have hidden on me.

“Fuck,” Soul mumbles. “I didn’t thi?—”

Grim thumps the tabletop. “Fifty bucks.”

Everyone laughs, breaking the tension in the room, and Soul flips him off.

“All right, assholes, enough!” The room quiets down, and Soul continues. “All of you have had a chance to meet Delaney, and you know her sister is one of the Phantom’s victims. Delaney’s gonna give us a little bit more background.” He motions for me to stand. “You have the floor.”

My legs wobble when I push away from the table. I don’t mind speaking in front of others, but talking about my dead sister is rough. Thorn nods in encouragement, and I tell the club all about Daphne. All the gory details fly from my mouth, and the more I

Speak, the more nauseous I become.

“He also took her locket.” I pull mine out from under the front of my shirt. “Our parents bought us matching lockets when we turned thirteen. We’d never taken them off, and she was wearing it that night. When my parents identified her body, her locket was missing.”

“Did the coroner lose it?” Rogue asks.

I shake my head. “No, the coroner swore there was no jewelry recovered at the scene or on the body.”

“Son of bitch,” Abyss hisses. “The fucker likes to take a trophy.”

Thorn clears his throat. “Tamara wore my class ring around her neck. It’s never been found since she was killed.”

I stare into Thorn’s eyes and see the same devastation that I see in mine every day when I look in the mirror. I place my hand on his shoulder to comfort him before I tear my gaze away and focus back on the room.

“I’ve been tracking the Phantom for the last four years. Thankfully, my job allows me to move around freely, but I’ve never gotten close to him until Nashville.”

“How’d you find out he’d be in Nashville?” Jez inquires.

“I saw the news story about the latest murder in Georgia and went to the PD. Of course, they wouldn’t tell me anything, but another cop overheard me talking about my sister and felt bad for me.”

“The cops in Georgia know your sister was killed by the Phantom?” Malice growls

and shares a look with Soul.

“I didn’t tell them my name or her name,” I say defensively. “I also didn’t tell the cop who gave me the map. I’m just another nameless family member they couldn’t be bothered by.”

Malice’s face goes red. “You could be bringing trou?—”

Soul slams his fist on the table. “Malice! Enough. We always have shit knocking on our door.”

“Don’t mind him,” Jez sing songs. “He’s always grouchy.”

“Unless he’s balls deep in Apple,” Abyss teases.

Malice flips them both off but keeps his mouth shut. Jez turns on her computer, and the screen on the wall lights up with the same map I have a copy of in my suitcase.

“How’d you get that?” I ask, surprised.

Jez grins. “I’m very good at what I do.”

“What else you got?”

“Everything,” Jez says conspiratorially.

Multiple documents fill the screen, and we spend the next couple of hours going over the previous murders to see if we can find any other patterns. We comb over all the evidence Jez found and the details of each location.

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Now, more than ever, I'm grateful for making the decision to come to Nevada. Never in my wildest dreams could I imagine they'd have the resources they do.

The Phantom can't stay hidden forever, and when we find him, he's gonna wish he was already dead.

CHAPTER 19

THORN

"I don't know how much longer I can sit here and stare at this shit."

Glancing at Delaney, I watch as she scrubs her hands over her face. She and I, along with Fort, Lock, and Jez have been locked in the damn meeting room for the last two hours. The rest of the club left when church ended, but the five of us wanted to get working on trying to determine where the Phantom will strike next.

"Why don't we take a break?" Jez suggests, looking at Delaney with concern.

"I'm all for it," Fort says. "I'm hungry, and rumor has it Abyss is making his special Purgatory Pizza."

Delaney narrows her ice-blue eyes. "What the hell is Purgatory Pizza?"

"It's the one food that makes us all gluttonous sinners," Lock snickers. "Purgatory Pizza is a delicious combination of pepperoni, four cheeses, sausage, ham, bacon, onion, olives, ground beef, nacho cheese Doritos, grilled chick?—"

“Okay, okay,” Delaney mumbles, holding her hands up. “I get the picture. Gotta say, it sounds disgusting.”

“Bite your tongue,” Jez quips. “It’s incredible.”

“But if you don’t like all that shit,” I begin, watching Delaney’s face pale at the thought of what Lock described. “Abyss will happily make you something else.”

“Orrrr,” Jez says. “Thorn could take you out to eat.”

“And that’s my cue,” Fort says, rising from his chair. “I think it’s time to call it for now. We’ll pick back up on locating the Phantom later.”

Lock follows him out of the room, both of them snickering. I stare at Jez, silently ordering her to leave, but she doesn’t get the memo. Instead, she leans her elbows on the table and rests her chin in her hands.

Delaney clears her throat. “I’ll just head into town and grab something.”

“Well, that’s just stup?—”

“Jez,” I snarl.

My Pres’s twin huffs out a breath and slams her laptop closed. “I can see when I’m not wanted.”

She stands and leaves me alone with Delaney, who’s trying to hide her laugh by covering her mouth.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

Delaney frantically shakes her head, but she can no longer contain herself. She bursts out laughing. “She’s a bit of a drama queen, isn’t she?”

“Jez?” She nods. “Don’t let her hear you say that,” I warn and then smirk. “But, yeah, a bit.”

She sobers and looks at me thoughtfully. “You love her, though.”

I shrug. “Of course, I do. She’s as much a sister to me as she is to Soul. Hell, we all love her.”

“It’s sweet.”

“It’s annoying,” I joke.

Delaney gets to her feet and starts to pace. “Don’t do that,” she snaps, her easygoing demeanor shifting into something... darker. “Don’t pretend like the people that matter to you don’t. You never know when they won’t be around anymore.”

Anger slams into me. “Pretty sure I’m aware of that.”

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She whirls around, and her face falls. “I’m... shit, I didn’t mean...”

“It’s fine,” I tell her, sensing her guilt. “But know this... I’m intimately familiar with what it’s like to lose people I give a damn about. Not only did that sonofabitch take Tamara from me, but I served in the military, and I’m a patched member of a one-percenter MC. Death is a normal part of my existence.”

“I-I’m sorry,” she stutters. “I didn’t mean to be so snippy.”

“Look, it’s been a long few days. Why don’t we take the night off?”

Her eyes widen. “What are you suggesting?”

“Well, we both have to eat. And I’m not in the mood for pizza.” When she hesitates, I continue. “When was the last time you took a break from the Phantom?”

She snorts. “I haven’t. I can’t because who else will fight for Daphne if I do?”

“Me,” I say simply, and her expression softens. “The club and Jez, too. You’re not alone in this anymore.”

“And if he strikes while we’re taking a break?”

“I can’t answer that, Delaney,” I reply honestly. “But I really don’t think anything is gonna happen tonight.”

“And if it does?”

“Then we’ll have another crime scene and victim to evaluate and gain info from.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I, but there’s nothing more we can do tonight.”

“Yeah.” She sighs. “Yeah, okay.”

When she shoves her hands in her pockets, I grin. “Let’s get outta here for a while. We’ll eat, talk, ride my Harley, and forget the rest of the world for a while.”

Delaney nods. “O-okay.”

Two hours later, I park my bike at a local diner and help her off. She hands me the helmet, and I hang it on the handlebar.

“This is your idea of a night out?” she asks, nodding at the run-down exterior of the building.

“Trust me, you’re gonna love it.”

Without thinking, I take her hand and lead her inside. I guide her toward a booth in the back where I can see every window and exit. Delaney slides in across from me and grabs a menu.

“What do you recommend?” she asks while looking over the laminated pages.

“They’ve got a little of everything.”

“But what’s your favorite?”

“It’s a toss-up between the bacon cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate shake and a medium ribeye, loaded baked potato, and a Dr. Pepper.”

Delaney groans. “They both sound good.”

“Then we’ll order both.”

And that’s exactly what I do when the waitress returns. I’m aware of Delaney’s confused stare when I instruct the waitress to bring us both meals and two extra plates.

“This way we can each get the best of both worlds,” I tell her when we’re alone again.

“Anyone ever told you that you’re a control freak?”

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I don't take offense. Delaney's grinning like a fool, and it's the best sight I've seen in a long fucking time.

"Maybe once or twice. I'm guessing you've been told the same thing."

She shakes her head. "No. But to be fair, I haven't let anyone close enough to feel like I had to maintain control in a long time."

"Because of the Phantom?" I ask, praying I'm not gonna set her off again.

Her eyes darken, and her smile falls, but she looks more sad than angry. "Haven't really had time for anything else but hunting him."

"We're gonna get him," I assure her.

"I know. But how many more will die before we do?"

When the food arrives, we eat in silence, each digging into both meals. As soon as the food is gone, Delaney leans back and rubs her stomach.

"You weren't kidding," she says. "I loved every bite."

"Told ya."

"Now what?"

"You tell me."

She doesn't respond because the waitress comes to take the empty plates.

"Can I get y'all anything else?"

"No, I'm stuffed," Delaney replies.

"Just the check," I say.

"Comin' right up."

After paying, I settle my hand on the small of Delaney's back and ease her out to my bike. My dick jerks to attention as she swings her leg over the seat, and I don't bother hiding it. But she doesn't seem to notice.

Huh.

The ride back to the clubhouse is intense. My focus is split between the road and how her arms feel around my waist. I ignore the guilt that slithers through me each time I speed up just so I can feel her thighs tighten against me.

But the guilt isn't enough to make me stop. Not when she feels so damn good.

The sky glitters with stars above us, and when we leave the road to cross the desert, it's as if we're flying through the Milky Way. Ten minutes later, I'm pulling into the garage, and her grip loosens.

"That was fun," Delaney says after I park. "We should..."

"Should what, sweetheart?" I push when she presses her lips into a thin line.

"No-nothing."

She starts toward the elevator, and I follow on her heels. Grabbing her arm, I spin her around to face me and end up pulling her into my chest. Her breath hitches as she slowly lifts her eyes to mine.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“Should what?” I repeat.

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

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Delaney sighs. “I was gonna say, we should do this again sometime.” She pushes away from me but doesn’t turn away. “But that’s crazy because it wasn’t a date, and we don’t even know each other, and as soon as we catch the Phantom, we’ll go our separate ways, and?—”

I fuse my lips with hers to stop her rambling, and Delaney whimpers into my mouth. Settling my hands on her hips, I tug her close, letting her feel what she’s doing to me.

“We should definitely do this again sometime,” she breathes when we pull apart.

“Who says we’re done for the night?”

CHAPTER 20

DELANEY

“Tell me you want this.”

My brain short circuits as Thorn nibbles on the soft flesh between my shoulder and neck. My legs tighten around his waist, and I grind down, seeking relief, but our clothes are in the way. His mouth moves up my neck, leaving a trail of scorched skin behind.

When he kissed me in the garage, I think it was more a silencing tactic than sexual, but I’m not complaining. Lust very quickly entered the picture the moment our lips met, and he threw me over his shoulder to carry me to his room immediately following his statement that the night wasn’t over.

Again, not complaining.

My head thumps against the wall, and I moan. “I want this.”

“Thank fuck,” Thorn growls and spins us toward his bed.

He lifts one arm over his head and pulls his shirt off like the male models you see on videos. I lick my lips in anticipation and admire the view before me. Thorn’s body is muscular and toned. It reminds me of one of those Olympian high divers with his six-pack. However, it’s the muscles in his arms that make me swoon. Thorn moves to the end of the bed, and I scoot back so he can turn and sit down to take off his boots.

I trace my fingers over the tattoo of the club’s insignia on his back up to the heart with thorns piercing out on his neck. He shudders in response.

“You’re beautiful,” I whisper.

“Beautiful?” he asks playfully, standing up.

Thorn unbuckles his belt, and with his right hand, he grips the left side and yanks it all the way through the loops on his jeans until it’s free.

My jaw drops. “I’ve always wanted to see a guy do that in person.”

Thorn smirks. “Most women do.”

I shift to my knees and tug my shirt over my head, revealing a lacy black bra. As I drag my finger down between the valley of my breasts, Thorn’s gaze heats up. I unhook the front clasp, and they spill out of their confinement.

That’s all it takes.

Thorn's control snaps, and he pushes me back before crawling on the mattress to hover over my body. He brutally attacks my mouth as our tongues battle and teeth bang together fiercely. Thorn rolls my nipple between his thumb and finger, so I arch my back, shoving myself into his touch.

Reaching down, I rub his rock-hard shaft. He groans against my lips and pulls away. Thorn stands at the edge of the bed and yanks my jeans off, along with my thong. I pant as he slides his jeans and boxers over his hips and kicks his legs free.

He drops to his knees, and pulls me to the end of the mattress, leaving my legs dangling. Thorn spreads my knees apart, lowers his head, and inhales deeply. I attempt to close my legs, but his shoulders are wedged in between, and I can't move. I squirm, but he lays one of his forearms over my waist to hold me in place.

"Stop moving." Thorn lightly smacks my stomach.

"What are you doing?" I gasp.

"I want to eat this sweet little pussy."

No man has ever given me oral. I've done a couple blow jobs in the past, but they aren't my favorite.

I thrash. "Get up here and fuck me."

Thorn stills and lifts his head to look me in the eyes. "Has anyone ever feasted on you before?"

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“No,” I grit through my teeth. “Now, can we quit talking and do this?”

Thorn chuckles. “Sorry, sweetheart, you just gave me a helluva lot to prove.”

“I’m not your sweetheart,” I protest, even though my heart soars. “Wait... prove?”

Thorn doesn’t answer as he disappears from my line of sight again, and his tongue dashes out and flicks my clit. My muscles tense, but he continues his assault. He rotates from gently blowing to licking to softly biting my most intimate flesh. He feasts on me like a starving man.

Sweat coats my skin, and I reach out to grip his hair. I don’t know if I want to pull him closer or push him away. What I do know is that I feel like I’m about to detonate from the inside out.

Thorn takes the decision out of my control. He thrusts a finger inside me and curves it, finding that little bundle of nerves I’ve only ever found with my vibrator. I stiffen, my toes curl, and he adds another digit, his movements becoming frenzied.

“Come for me, Delaney,” Thorn orders. “Come, now.”

He pumps his fingers a couple more times and sucks hard on my clit. I explode around him, and he lazily laps up my release, causing short aftershocks to rock my body.

I lay on the bed, trying to catch my breath as the sound of foil tearing stirs me from my post-orgasmic haze.

Thorn flips me over on my stomach and smacks my ass. “Hands and knees.”

I’m not used to being dominated, but my body shivers in response. “Don’t get used to ordering me around,” I say as I peek over my shoulder.

Thorn rolls his eyes. “Wouldn’t dream of it. Now up.”

I do as he says which is another first for me. My sexual experiences are somewhat limited, and giving up control was never a part of them. Granted, I’m not a virgin, but it’s always been wham, bam, thank you, ma’am. That’s clearly not the case with Thorn.

He impales me in one smooth thrust. He’s big, so much bigger than I’ve ever experienced before.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” he groans.

“And you’re too fucking big.”

“You were made to take me.” He rubs his hand up and down my back, then around to my chest, and tweaks my nipples before shifting his touch to my pussy to rub my clit again. “Relax, baby.”

I take a few deep breaths and let the sensations of his touch overwhelm me. “Are you gonna move?”

“Bossy.”

He slowly glides in and out which prolongs the torture. The small bite of pain from being stretched more than I ever have slowly turns into a building pressure deep within my abdomen. His movements increase, and my body tightens.

“Thorn... I’m gon—” All of a sudden, he slows down, and immediately my irritation grows. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Delayed gratification.”

“I swear, I will fuc?—”

Thorn weaves his fingers through my hair and tugs. He rams into me from behind, over and over again. I scream out my second release as he slowly fucks me through it.

I collapse, but before I can recover, Thorn flips me onto my back.

How the fuck is he still hard, and I’ve already had two orgasms? I’ve never had one that I didn’t give myself.

Thorn lifts one of my legs so it rests on his shoulder, and he pushes into my core once again.

I close my eyes, and Thorn snaps, “I wanna see your eyes when you explode all over my cock.”

“Who says I’m gonna?” I sass. “That’s pretty presumptuous.”

Thorn’s eyes gleam, and his mouth curves up in a wicked smirk. He drops my leg, he moves his hand in between our bodies and rubs my clit frantically. My body coils with pleasure, and I drag my nails down his sides. Thorn snakes one arm under my back and shifts our positions so I’m on top of him with my legs straddling his hips.

“Ride me.”

My jaw drops, and I stare at him. He grips my waist and guides my movements. Eventually, I find my rhythm and grind down, rocking back and forth. That sweet sensation of pure bliss starts to build again.

“Oh, God, Thorn.” I close my eyes.

“Eyes on me,” he growls. “Are you close?”

I stare at him, unable to speak, and nod. Thorn takes over and lifts his hips, pounding into me relentlessly, and I see stars. His cock swells as he roars with one last thrust, and I come again.

I float back to Earth and sprawl across his chest. We’re both silent as he rubs circles between my shoulder blades.

Next thing I know, Thorn is gently shaking me awake.

“Babe, I need to take care of the condom.”

I roll off of him and curl up in the blanket. A moment later, Thorn returns and begins to untangle me.

“Can’t... too tired.”

He snorts. “Oh, we’re definitely doing that again, but not tonight.”

“What are you doing?” I ask when something wet is pressed between my legs.

“Cleaning you up.”

My eyes fly open. “The hell you are.”

I reach for the washrag, and he swats my hands away.

“Stop it,” he admonishes. “Let someone take care of you for once.”

I blush as he wipes my most intimate area. I don’t know why his actions are unsettling because he just fucked me seven different ways to Sunday, but this feels like something more.

“Thank you.”

Thorn throws the rag into his hamper and pulls me into his arms. He lifts my chin and covers my mouth with his until we’re both panting again.

“Go to sleep,” he purrs after ending the kiss. “I’ve got you.”

The next morning, I stretch out over Thorn’s bed, but when I reach for him, all I find is empty space. I listen for sounds and hear water running in the bathroom, so I swing my legs over the mattress, tiptoe across the room, and peek inside.

Thorn’s in the shower, bracing himself against the wall and grasping his cock, stroking hard. With his back to me, I’m able to really take in the tattoo on his back. I admire it for a moment before shifting my gaze to the thorned heart ink on his neck and watch with fascination as the muscles in his neck strain. My mouth waters wondering what he tastes like.

Quit wondering and go find out.

My inner Goddess screams at me, begging to be unleashed. Thorn's turned me into a hussy. Last night, every one of my dreams were of us fucking anywhere and everywhere and in every position imaginable. It was a nice change from my nightmares about finding Daphne's body, but then I immediately felt guilty for not dreaming about her.

I deserve to have a little fun, right?

After taking another look at Thorn's gorgeous frame, I steel my spine. I walk into the shower behind him, and he spins around.

He flattens his hand over his heart. "Shit, Delaney, you scared me."

I nod at his hand still gripping his cock. "Starting without me this morning."

"I figured you'd be sore." He smirks. "I was rough last night."

"Doesn't mean I can't do something else." I drop to my knees.

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to.”

He releases himself, and I wrap my fingers around his silkiness. I lean forward, my tongue darts out, and I lick the opening on his head. His cock jumps, and Thorn groans. Swirling my tongue around, I lick the underside before engulfing him in my mouth. I bob my head up and down on his shaft, sucking him in deeper and deeper until he hits the back of my throat.

Thorn twists my hair in his fists and pistons in and out of my mouth. I dig my nails into the back of his thighs, loving how he’s using me for his pleasure.

“Oh, fuck, Delaney,” he moans. “I’m gonna come. Want me to pull out?”

I don’t answer. Instead, I hum and pull him closer. He shoots his load down my throat, and I swallow it down greedily. I take my time licking him clean as he sags against the shower wall. Then Thorn helps me to my feet and attacks my mouth, not caring that he can taste himself.

Thorn pinches my nipple, and I groan as his other hand glides down to my pussy. His fingers work expertly, and I come hard and fast.

We finish showering, and I realize I don’t have any clothes since I spent the night in Thorn’s room. “Can I borrow something to wear?” I ask, not wanting to wear dirty clothes.

Thorn hands me a t-shirt and a pair of boxers. They're huge on me, but they'll work until I get to my room. Once I'm dressed, the smell of coffee hits my nose, and my mouth salivates. I didn't notice the coffee machine last night, but I'm glad I don't have to go to the kitchen just to get a cup of caffeine.

"I love how you look in my clothes," he says, handing me a cup of coffee.

I grin and inhale the sweet aroma before taking a sip. An idea has been forming since church, but I've put off bringing it up... until now.

"I have an idea on how to catch the Phantom," I blurt out.

Thorn raises his brow. "Okay."

"Use me for bait."

"No."

"Hear me out."

"No," he snipes.

"You're not the fucking boss of me," I snarl, not giving a damn that I sound childish.

Thorn's chest heaves. "Do you know how fucking dangerous he is, how many fucking people he's killed? It's not safe."

I set my mug on the table, stomp over to him, and poke my finger in his chest. "I might not know his exact number of victims, but he killed my twin. You have no fucking clue what it's like losing the other half of yourself."

Thorn stumbles back as if I slapped him. “This again? I lost my fucking girlfriend.” He shakes his head frantically. “It’s too fucking dangerous. I can’t go through that again.”

“I know how to take care of myself.” I cross my arms over my chest. “I’ve been taking self-defense classes for four years and know several different fighting techniques. I know what I’m doing.”

Thorn matches my stance, and the scowl on his face is replaced by a smirk. “Prove it,” he taunts.

“How?” I throw my hands up in frustration.

“Come on.” Thorn grabs his cut, slips it on, and walks toward the door.

“Where are we going?”

“To find Knuckles.”

“Why?”

“You want to prove you can take care of yourself?”

I hesitate. “Yes.”

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“Then we’ll go to Fists of Fury, and you can show us what you got.”

“Fists of Fury?”

Thorn nods. “It’s the MMA gym owned by the club.”

I smirk. “Let’s go.”

Thorn’s gonna wish he never doubted me. I’m gonna put him on his ass.

CHAPTER 21

THORN

“She’s got brass balls, I’ll give her that.”

Smirking at Soul’s assessment, I don’t take my eyes off Delaney, who’s in the ring with Mark. She’s already taken on Knuckles, Abyss, and Spike, and she’s still going. Oh, and let’s not forget the two minutes she spent in the ring with Grim. Sure, she ended up on her ass, but she’s over a foot shorter and a hundred pounds lighter than the big man, and she got right back up. I’m impressed but not ready to cave on using her as bait.

“I can assure you, she’s got no balls betwe?—”

“Gonna stop you right there, brother,” Soul says with a chuckle.

“You know what she’s trying to do, right?” I ask, shifting the conversation.

“Doesn’t take a genius to figure it out.” Soul smacks my back. “And you made it very clear when you demanded we all come to the gym.”

I dart my gaze to my president and scowl. “We’re not using her as bait for a serial killer.”

“Seems like she can handle herself.”

“Yeah, here, in a controlled setting,” I snap. “Out there in the real world, it’s different.”

Soul narrows his eyes and tilts his head thoughtfully. “Is this about Delaney or Tamara?”

My body tenses. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just wondering if you’re trying to make up for the past when the future is right in front of you.”

Before I can formulate a response, my name is shouted from the ring, and I look at Delaney.

“Your turn,” she says with a grin.

“You wanna fight me?” I ask incredulously.

“Chick doesn’t fight fair, Thorn,” Mark mutters as he strides past me and Soul toward the showers, his hands cupping his junk. “Watch your back with that one.”

“I fight to win, prospect,” Delaney says proudly. “Not to be fair.”

Pride swells at the way she easily and effortlessly puts Mark in his place. I try to remind myself that I don’t have the right to be proud of her, but no part of me gets the memo.

I walk to the ring and roll under the bottom rope. Hopping to my feet, I move closer to her.

“You sure about this?” I ask.

Delaney arches a brow. “Are you?”

“Bring it on, sweetheart.”

To start, I throw a left hook, knowing she’ll quickly deflect it based on how I’ve seen her fight all morning. What I don’t count on is the commotion coming from the entrance when the ol’ ladies come barreling through the door. Delaney spins around with a roundhouse kick, which she lands on my chest, and I stumble back more than I care to admit.

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“Fuck,” I grit, rubbing my pecs.

“Damn, she got you good,” Jez calls.

I turn to glare at the women. “Only because you distract?—”

My legs go out from under me as Delaney sweeps her leg around to knock me down. My ass hits the mat, and I bounce a little.

“What the hell?” I demand, glaring up at her.

“I’m not gonna take it easy on you just because we fucked,” she sasses, but then her cheeks turn a bright pink, and I can’t stop my laughter.

“Well, I guess Delaney’s officially family,” Cece says matter-of-factly.

Delaney covers her face with her hands and drops to her knees in the ring. I move closer to her and lower her hands.

“If you’re gonna be hangin’ around all of us, you’re gonna have to get used to people knowing your business.”

Delaney levels her gaze on mine as she takes a deep breath. “I can’t believe I blurted that out for all of them to hear.”

“Honey, forget about it,” Skye calls. “We sure as shit don’t care who you’re banging.”

“Oh, God,” Delaney mumbles.

“Why don’t we get back to the show?” Mel says, stepping up to the ring. “I, for one, would really like to see Delaney kick some ass.”

I stand and turn in a circle to take in everyone. “Any takers?”

“You’re done already, Thorn?” Jacob asks with a laugh.

“Watch it, prospect,” I snap. “‘Cause you’re next.”

“Aw, hell,” Jacob mutters as he enters the ring.

Delaney rises to her feet. “Wait a sec,” she says. “That’s it? Y’all are just gonna forget what I said?”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Cece asks.

“Well... no.”

“Then let us watch you take Jacob down,” Apple says with a hint of pleading in her tone.

“What did I ever do to you?” Jacob asks, spinning around to face Apple.

Malice’s ol’ lady shrugs. “Nothing.”

I glance at Delaney. “You ready, sweetheart?”

She stiffens her shoulders and shakes her arms as if to rid herself of the past few minutes of embarrassment. “Always.”

Two minutes later, I'm standing outside the ring, and the two of them are squaring off. Jacob bounces on the balls of his feet, and Delaney watches his every move. When Jacob throws a right hook, she dodges the contact before throwing several punches of her own, none of them landing.

"C'mon, you can do better than that," Jacob taunts.

"Pretty sure you can't handle a better version of me," Delaney counters.

"Give him all you got," Skye yells, and the rest of the women cheer her on.

"Kick him in the nutsack!" Violet shouts.

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Delaney turns to look at Violet at the same time Jacob throws a right hook, hitting his distracted target.

CHAPTER 22

DELANEY

“What the fuck was that?”

“Delaney, are you okay?”

Voices surround me, but I can’t tell who’s talking so I shake my head to clear the fog. My vision is blurry, and I blink rapidly to bring my world back into focus faster. Once the room stops spinning, I realize I’m lying on my back.

Sparring... proving myself... Jacob.

“Oomph.” I sit up as Violet and Abyss crouch beside me. Abyss shines a light in my eyes, and I push his hand away from my face. “I’m fine.”

“What the hell were you thinking?” Skye yells, and Rogue wraps his arms around her waist to keep her from charging.

“That was a fucking cheap shot, Jacob, and you know it,” Cece adds.

Jacob puts his arms up in the air. “I swear it was an acc?—”

Crunch.

Blood sprays all over the mat from the punch that Thorn delivers to Jacob's nose.

"I'll fucking kill you!" Thorn threatens, but Soul pulls him back before he can land another blow.

Thorn breaks from Soul's hold, and I scramble to my feet. Malice tries to grab me as I push between Thorn and Jacob, but I dodge him.

"STOP!" I holler. "It wasn't his fault."

Everyone gets eerily quiet and stares at me. I can feel the bruises forming from the hits I've taken today. I'm not going to complain, though. I've had a lot of pent-up energy, and my sexcapades with Thorn helped, but fighting is more cathartic.

"He fucking hit you without warning," Thorn argues. "You weren't paying attention."

"It was an accident, Thorn." I shrug. "I knew he was there. We were sparring, for Christ's sake. I let myself get distracted when Violet said 'nutsack'."

"I am so sorry," Violet says softly. "I was translating for Grim, and?—"

"It's fine," I assure her as I squeeze her hand and shake my head. "Really, it was my fault. If TJ were here, he'd kick my ass for letting Jacob get the jump on me. I know better, but shit happens."

"Who the fuck is TJ?"

"My trainer and pseudo-brother, I guess."

“Oh, great, another one of those relationships,” Malice mumbles, and Apple elbows him in the gut.

I lift my brow in question, and Mark stands behind Malice with a conspiratory smile on his face.

Oh, Mark and Apple. No wonder Malice is always cranky.

“He could’ve seriously hurt you, De, and it would’ve been my fault,” Violet reiterates.

Carmella narrows her eyes and points at all the men. “They never should’ve let things go this far. I understand you all wanted her to prove she could handle herself, but was this really necessary?” The men have enough sense to look down sheepishly. “And I heard you had her go up against Grim, for fuck’s sake.”

All the ladies nod, except Jez and Skye. They both look at me with shock and respect. I stood against their Enforcer. Yeah, he might have won, but I held my own and showed them all that it doesn’t matter how small I am, I can defend myself. Besides my parents and Daphne, I’ve never had anyone in my corner. All these women are angry on my behalf, but I can’t let them fight with their men over this. I asked for this... No one forced me into the ring.

“Delaney, I’m really sorry.” Jacob winces as Abyss finishes packing his nose.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:45 am

“We’re good.” I hold out my hand. “It was an accident.”

Jacob shakes my hand, and Thorn stomps over to me.

“I should’ve never gone along with this crazy-ass plan of yours. We’re gonna talk about this.”

“Hey, girls!” Heather bounces between us before I can tell him where to shove it.

“Let’s take Delaney to Purgatory for celebratory drinks for kicking Grim’s ass.”

“She didn’t kick my ass, but she’s a worthy opponent,” Violet translates for her husband.

I close the distance between me and Grim and throw my arms around him. He stiffens for a moment, and I tilt my head up so he can see my lips.

“Thank you.”

He wraps one arm around me to return my hug and then quickly spins me toward the women.

Thorn intercepts me. “I’m sorry.” He leans his forehead on mine. “I saw you go down...”

I stand on my toes and place a soft kiss on his lips. His hand weaves through my hair and pulls my head closer. His kiss turns hungry, and his tongue demands entry, which I gladly allow. When the catcalls start, we pull apart, both of us breathing heavily.

“We’ll bring her back in one piece.” Carmella grabs my elbow and pulls me toward the edge of the ring.

Rogue reaches for Skye before she can follow me. “Behave.”

Skye winks. “We’ll see, Sir.”

Rogue growls and scoops her up, squeezing her ass. “Keep talking like that, and you won’t sit down for a week.”

She giggles. “Promises, promises.”

I squeeze between the ropes and head to the lockers where Cece waits with my bag so I can shower and change. I’m glad I grabbed that as we were leaving the clubhouse because I hate being sweaty when I leave the gym. You never know when you’ll have to run an errand or go somewhere unexpectedly. Always be prepared... That’s my dad’s motto.

An hour later, we’re sitting in the VIP section at Purgatory. It isn’t too busy since it’s a Sunday night, but Mark and Zach are diligently keeping watch from the bar. There’s a pitcher of margaritas and a bottle of tequila with shot glasses sitting on the table, and we’re about to dive in when a man in a bright purple sequined tank top that says, ‘I am that Bitch’, black leather pants, and black high-heeled boots saunters up.

“Hi, ladies!” he hollers, and when his eyes reach me, he shifts back. “Honey, what the hell happened to you?”

“RaRa, this is Delaney,” Skye introduces. “Delaney, this is RaRa. He’s the cook of our lovely establishment.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” I greet.

“Pleasure is all mine, Mon Chéri.” He picks up my hand and places a chaste kiss on it. “What happened to your beautiful face, and where are we burying the body?”

A deep purple bruise was visible when I stepped out of the shower at the gym. No amount of make-up was gonna cover it up, so I didn’t even try.

“Jacob sucker punched her,” Cece hisses.

“I thought Thorn was gonna kill him,” Carmella adds. “Our men are extremely protective.”

“Wait... You’re Thorn’s woman?” RaRa asks, perplexed. “And Jacob is still breathing?”

Violet snorts. “His nose is most likely broken, so breathing could be problematic.”

“I’m not Thorn’s woman,” I dispute. “We’re curr?—”

“Fucking?” Heather helps.

My face flames with embarrassment. “Well, yes... I mean, no,” I protest. “I was gonna say hel?—”

“Yeah, helping each other right into an orgasmic coma.” Jez grins.

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“What the hell is happening?” I groan and bang my forehead on the table.

Apple rubs my back. “We’re just teasing you.”

“RaRa, do you have any orders?” Skye asks, taking the focus off me, and RaRa shakes his head. “Pull up a chair and let us tell you all about how Delaney here took on the men of Saints Purgatory.”

“Gossip!” RaRa squeals as he pours our drinks. Then he slides a chair between Skye and me as she begins relaying all the details I told them on the way here.

“I wish we’d have been there to see it all,” Violet complains. “The guys’ jaws were on the floor when we arrived, and I’m pretty sure some are still there. She’s tiny, like me, but she put each one of them on their asses.”

“Until Jacob took a cheap shot,” Apple snarls. “I hope they kick his as?—.”

“Guys, I really appreciate it,” I interrupt. “But we’ve been over this. It was an accident. I’ve been in the ring a lot with guys who are bigger than Jacob. I let myself get distracted. It wasn’t his fault. Cut him some slack.”

Cece picks up her shot glass. “To Delaney, one badass bitch!”

We all clink our glasses and toss back our shots. I wrinkle my nose as the liquor burns my throat on its way down. Tequila isn’t my favorite because it leaves me sappy or horny, and I never know which personality will appear until it’s too late.

Three shots and two margaritas later, the room slightly sways from side to side. It's not full-blown spinning yet, but it's close.

These women are my best friends in the whole world.

Oh good! It's sappy Delaney. I've missed her.

"Can I tell you girls a secret?" I whisper yell. "RaRa, you can hear too because, well, you're one of us, right?"

"Hell yeah, I am!" He high-fives me.

"Thorn punched Jacob for me... in the face. No one's ever stood up for me today like you all did," I confess. "Sure, I've had my parents, but ever since Daph died, I've pushed everyone away. Thank you for being there for me. It means a lot."

Oh no, too many emotions, Delaney. Pull back, pull back. You'll scare them away.

Violet stands and stumbles around the table to wrap me in a hug. "You're one of us," she cries. "We take care of our own."

"It's hard to let people in. I'm scared that if I do, something bad will happen, and all the good will be taken away."

"Don't do that anymore, Delaney," RaRa admonishes. "How are you gonna hang out with cool bitches like us and fuck sexy men like Thorn if you hide from the world?"

"Thorn single-handedly ruined all other men out there for me," I blurt.

Apple leans forward on her elbows. "Oooh, do tell."

“Yeah, Delaney, do tell.”

I twist in my chair and see Thorn standing behind me.

Fuck me.

CHAPTER 23

THORN

“Ima be sick.”

Scooping Delaney into my arms, I hightail it to my room. As soon as I get her to the bathroom, I drop to my knees, and she scrambles to the toilet. The sound of her vomiting cuts through me like a knife, and I quickly get to my feet to get a washcloth out of the cabinet.

“You really tied one on, sweetheart,” I say when I lower myself to her side and pull her hair away from her face.

“Fuck you,” she says between bouts of puking.

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I chuckle, happy that she's maintaining her attitude despite her obvious discomfort. After several more minutes of her heaving, Delaney shifts to sit between my legs.

"Feel better?" I ask.

"Sure. I was jus' makin' room for more," she quips.

"Very funny."

She drops her head back against my chest and shivers. "I feel... gross."

"Wanna shower before I tuck you into bed?"

Delaney moans. "Sounds wonderful."

I help her to stand and strip out of her clothes. Once I've got her under the hot spray, I strip myself and join her. She remains still, allowing me to wash her body and hair, and I make quick work of it.

"C'mere," I instruct after stepping out of the shower and securing a towel around my waist.

Delaney slowly steps forward, and I engulf her in another towel.

"So tired," she mumbles as I rub the terrycloth up and down to dry her off.

I ease her out of the bathroom and to the bed where I gently push her down and cover

her with the comforter. I'm about to climb in next to her when my cell pings from the pocket of my jeans which I left on the bathroom floor. It pings again before I get to it, and I snag it to glance at the screen.

Soul: Come to the meeting room

Soul: Don't bring D

After putting on a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, I quietly leave my room and make my way to the meeting room. My stomach twists into knots as I walk because meeting at this time of night never means something good.

"How's she feeling?" Soul asks when I enter the room.

"Okay, now that she's puked her guts up."

"Hopefully she gets some sleep because you're both heading out in the morning."

I narrow my eyes. "What? Why?"

Before Soul can answer, Malice, Spike, Abyss, and Fort stride into the room.

"I was balls deep in Mel," Abyss grumbles. "This better be good."

"As soon as the others arrive, I'll dive in," Soul says. "Fort, get everything set up."

Fort moves to his seat and sets his laptop on the table. While he's pecking at the keyboard, the rest of the patched brothers enter the room.

"I left my wife naked in our bed," Grim sighs, his movements agitated. "Someone please tell me why."

“Sit down everyone,” Soul instructs, his expression darkening. “You know I wouldn’t have called you here at this time of night without a good fucking reason.”

“Pres, what’s going on?” I ask.

“Fort, go ahead,” Soul says, nodding at him.

“Jesus,” I snap. “Would someone please tell me what the fuc?—”

“He struck again,” Fort says. “The Phantom Strangler struck again.”

My blood runs cold. I told Delaney that she could take a break, that we’d be fine if we stopped hunting for a night.

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“Where?” I snarl, dreading the conversation I’m gonna have to have when she wakes up.

“Louisville.”

“That wasn’t marked on the map,” I remind Fort.

“But Delaney and you stopped him in Nashville,” Malice says. “I’m guessing he had to kill to make up for it.”

“And you’re sure it’s him?” I ask.

Images appear on the large screen, and my question is answered.

A dead woman is propped up against a tree, and she’s naked. Dried blood smears her inner thighs, and there’s a rope around her neck. It’s secured on a branch above her, which is different, but not so much so that I think it’s anyone but the Phantom.

“She was found earlier in Cherokee Park by a family,” Fort begins. “I’ve got a trap set on the web to alert me to any similar cases as they’re entered into the system. For once, the cops are doing their job because this was entered much faster than his other murders.”

“And Jez missed this?” I demand, whirling to glare at Soul. “I’ve had her on this for years, and she misses this?”

“Don’t,” Soul snarls. “This isn’t on her.”

I heave a sigh. “Sorry, it’s just...”

“We get it,” Grim signs. “We’ve all been where you are.”

He’s right, they have. At least, my married brothers have. All of their women have been in danger at one point or another. And each of us has stepped up and done our part to keep them safe.

I take a deep breath. “If he was in Louisville, I’m guessing he’s on his way to Philly. That’s the closest point that he marked on that damn map.”

“Which is why you and Delaney are leaving first thing in the morning,” Soul says.

“Excuse me?”

“We’re gonna take a vote, but I think it’s best if we let Delaney have her way with this one,” Soul explains. “She’s proven that she can ha?—”

“No fucking way!” I shout. “We’re not using her as?—”

“Take a breath, brother,” Malice bites out. “It’s not like we’re saying we should let her go out there on her own. You’ll be there.”

“And I can get the Phantom without her,” I insist. “She’s been hurt enough by this freak.”

“So have you,” Grim signs.

I don’t have time for Grim’s words to sink in before Soul’s calling for a vote, and all thoughts of stopping my club from using my girl as bait fly out the window. When I try to argue, I’m reminded that the vote stands and am ushered out of the room,

ordered to fill Delaney in, and be ready to ride at eight.

Slapping my hand against the sensor, I wait for the door to my room to slide open before trudging inside. Delaney is still out cold on my bed, and the last thing I want to do is wake her up, so I don't. Instead, I strip and crawl in beside her, gathering her in my arms and pretending that morning won't come.

"You're stalling."

I tug on my boots and pull my pant legs over them once they're tied. We're not taking my Harley on our cross-country trip, and to say I'm unhappy about it is an understatement. Shit, I'm unhappy about the whole thing.

"Don't know what you're talking about," I snipe.

Delaney crosses my room to stand in front of me. I had the foresight to set my alarm before falling asleep, and as soon as it went off an hour ago, I woke her up with my tongue.

Might as well get my rocks off before driving straight to Hell.

Of course, Delaney was more than thrilled to head to Philly, and she read me the riot act for 'making' her take a break. I tried to talk her out of this, knowing full well that if I was able, I'd pay a steep price with the club for defying a vote, but she wasn't having it.

"Thorn," Delaney says as she cups my cheeks and forces me to look at her. "It's gonna be okay. I can take care of myself."

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I shove her arms away and jump to my feet. “So, you keep telling me.”

“Dammit, Thorn,” she snaps. “You can let me in on this and have my back or not. Either way, I’m going after the Phantom. How it all goes down is up to you.”

“You’d really go without me?” I demand.

“I’ve been hunting on my own for years, and I’m not about to stop just because some man feels the need to be all protective and shit.”

“Some man?” I seethe, closing the distance between us.

“You know what I meant.”

“Do I?”

“Thorn, please.”

“Please what, sweetheart?”

“Why does it have to be your way or no way?”

“Because I can’t lose you too!” The words are out of my mouth before my brain has a chance to catch up.

Delaney’s eyes widen, and she wraps her arms around my waist. “You’re not gonna lose me. We’re gonna take the Phantom out together.”

“You’re making me crazy, Delaney,” I admit. “From the moment I laid eyes on you...”

“Let’s just get this fucker, and then we can talk about how crazy I make you.” She tightens her hold. “Or better yet, you can show me any time we have to stop driving for the night.”

“Aw, hell.”

She steps back and levels her gaze on mine. “What?”

“I forgot to tell you...”

“Tell me what?”

“This trip is straight through with no overnight stops, and Mark’s coming with us.”

“Oh, well... Shit.”

CHAPTER 24

DELANEY

“I miss my bike.”

We’ve been on the road for a couple of days and only have a few more hours to go until we reach Philadelphia. Mark is currently driving, and Thorn is taking a nap in the backseat. Thorn wasn’t kidding about no overnight stops until we reach our destination, so it’s been nice having three drivers. We’ve only had to take breaks to stretch our legs, grab food or gas, and use the bathrooms. We took one of the club’s SUVs so we could stretch out in the back and have room to return with the Phantom.

“Hopefully, we’ll find this asshole in Philly, and you can get back to your precious Harley,” I snap.

“Fuck, De.” Mark glances over at me before turning back to watch the road. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

I blow out a breath. He’s right. I’m being a complete bitch, but I’m getting restless. After riding on the back of Thorn’s motorcycle, I understand the feeling of flying down the open road and wish that’s how we were taking this little trip. However, I had the Phantom in my grasp, and he got away. I can’t afford to let anything distract me again.

“Sorry.” I fidget with the monkey fist on my keychain. “I need to catch this guy. He can’t get away again.”

“He won’t.” Mark reaches over and pats my arm.

I dig my phone out of my purse, scroll through my messages, and start responding.

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Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:45 am

Mom: Where are you?

Me: Almost to Pennsylvania.

Mom: What are you doing there? I thought you were in Vegas.

Me: I was. A marketing firm wants to talk to me about working exclusively with them.

Mom: I thought you liked being a freelancer.

Me: I do, but getting wined and dined for once is nice.

Mom: Have fun, please be careful.

Me: Always. Love you

Mom: Love you

I could lie to her and let her believe I'm still in Nevada, but I don't see the point. Just because she knows where I'm gonna be, doesn't necessarily mean she needs to know the truth about why I'm going there.

Me: We're almost to the hotel.

Jez: Reservations are under Kyle Gruber.

Me: Who's that??

“Me,” Thorn says over my shoulder.

“Ah!” Startled, I jump, and I lose my grip on the phone. It slips through my fingers and lands with a thud on the floor of the vehicle. “Fucking shit, you scared me. What are you doing reading my messages?”

“You were reading your messages out loud.”

“No, I wasn't.”

“Yes, you were.”

Both Mark and Thorn reply simultaneously.

I lean over and grab my cell just as another message from Jez pops up.

Jez: Thorn. Thought you knew that.

Me: I do now.

“Why didn't you tell me your name was Kyle?” I ask, my brows narrowing. “I hate liars.”

“Whoa.” Thorn holds his hands up. “I never lied. Yes, the name my parents gave me is Kyle, but I haven't gone by that since I joined the club. I'm not Kyle anymore.”

“Oh.”

What else can I say? Based on his explanation, it makes sense, and I, more than most,

understand. I'm not the carefree, happy-go-lucky Delaney I was before my twenty-first birthday. She died the night her twin did, and in her place, a cold bitter female emerged.

People change. Life forces them to.

Check-in is a breeze because it's all done on an app. Thorn and I have an adjoining room with Mark so we have some privacy but are able to get to each other fast if we need to. We keep the door between the rooms open while we get settled so we can talk.

"What should we do tonight?" Mark asks.

Thorn throws his bag on the bed. "I asked the concierge about the nightlife while you unloaded the car. He said there's a couple bars down the block."

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“Sounds like a good place to start.” I scroll through the names of the bars he mentions on my phone. “The closest one serves a full menu. It’s still early, so we can eat first and then split up.”

Thorn shakes his head. “We can eat first, but we’re not splitting up.” I start to protest, but he covers my mouth. “I know you can handle yourself, but we told Soul we’d stick together, and I don’t make a habit of lying to my President.”

“Fine.”

Thorn gathers me in his arms and crushes his mouth to mine. I want to deny him, but when he runs his tongue along the seam of my lips, I cave. His tongue dances in my mouth, and I grasp his neck to pull him closer. Thorn lifts me easily, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

A throat clears behind us.

We both pause, and Thorn glowers over my shoulder at Mark. My skin flushes because I forgot the door was still open when we started our make-out session.

“Get the fuck out, prospect,” Thorn growls.

I slide down Thorn’s body while he’s distracted and bury my face in his chest.

“Dinner, bars, remember?” Mark mocks.

“We’re coming. I’m gonna go freshen up.” I hurry into the bathroom.

“You fucking cockblocker,” Thorn says, and Mark’s laughter filters into the room as I close the door.

We stay out until two in the morning, hopping from bar to bar. Mark does prevent a couple of women from being taken advantage of, but none of the men he stops are the man we’re after.

When we get back to the hotel, Mark retreats to his room, and Thorn and I rush to take a quick shower and wash off the last few days of travel. While I brush my teeth, Thorn texts Jez to let her know that our first night wasn’t successful, and that we’re going to move further into the city tomorrow.

Standing in the doorway of the bathroom, I watch him finish his messaging before he looks up from his phone and crooks his finger at me.

“C’mere.”

I sashay over to the bed. Thorn reaches out to yank me onto his lap, and then he rolls us both so he’s on top of me. He smashes his lips to mine, and I greedily take what he’s offering.

“You taste delicious,” he says when he finally lets us come up for air.

“So do you.”

“I think we need to finish what we started before we were rudely interrupted by Mark earlier.”

Thorn slides on a condom and slams into my pussy like a madman. He doesn’t give me time to adjust, but I don’t care. I need this. I need the pain to appreciate the pleasure he wrings from my body. And somehow, he knows it.

I rake my nails down his back, and he groans. Thorn pushes my tank over my breasts and sucks on my nipple. A familiar sensation flutters inside as he pounds away, hitting my G-spot with each thrust. I moan, and his movements become more frantic.

“Come with me,” he commands.

I’m close, but not quite there yet. He must see that in my expression because he reaches between our bodies and feverishly rubs my clit. My breath hitches as my back arches. I’m so close.

Thorn buries his face in my neck and sinks his teeth into my flesh. My whole body convulses with an earth-shattering orgasm. Thorn’s cock swells inside of me, and he shouts my name as he comes.

We must drift off because the next thing I know, sunlight is peaking through the curtains of the hotel room. I rub my eyes and attempt to roll over, but I can’t because Thorn has his body wrapped around me. I don’t even remember falling asleep, but I do remember the orgasms, phenomenal as they were.

“Hey,” Thorn mutters into my hair.

“Hey, yourself.”

He loosens his hold so I can flip around and face him. With his arms wrapped around me, he kisses me senseless, and his morning wood digs into my thigh.

“Before we sta?—”

Knock, knock, knock.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:45 am

“Wake up!” Mark’s voice is muffled by the adjoining door.

Thorn jumps out of bed and tosses me a t-shirt before pulling on a pair of gym shorts for himself. As he’s striding toward the door, Mark shoves his way into the room.

“What the fu?—”

“Turn on the television,” Mark demands.

I pick up the remote. “What channel?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

My heart pounds as I fumble with the buttons. There’s only one reason Mark would be this frantic.

The fucking Phantom.

“... body was discovered during a ghost tour by one of the guides and some tourists who were out on the town for a night that should’ve ended in fun, not death,” a reporter states.

“We thought it was a prop, but the guide said it was a ghost tour, and no props are used,” one tourist comments when a microphone is shoved in her face. “When he went to take a closer look, he freaked out and ran away screaming.”

“Although it hasn’t been confirmed yet, the PPD and the FBI will likely be linking

this murder to the Phantom Strangler based on how the body was found,” the reporter says.

The room spins, black dots dance in my vision, and my breathing speeds up. Someone grabs my arms, but I can’t focus.

“Breathe, Delaney!”

I am breathing... aren’t I?

Fingers dig into my arms, bringing me back to the present. The room slowly comes back into focus, and Thorn’s face is pale and panicked.

“Breathe in and out,” he instructs. “That’s it, nice and easy.”

I follow his instructions until my vision is no longer hazy. “What the fuck happened?” I ask, even though I have a pretty good idea.

“You had a panic attack,” Mark confirms.

“Fucking great.”

Thorn scoops me up and walks over to the bed where he sits down with me on his lap. “Do you get panic attacks a lot?”

“I haven’t had one in years,” I admit. “It must’ve been the news story.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Mark asks, returning his attention to the TV to give us a small amount of privacy.

“I don’t know,” Thorn answers.

“It has to be him. We need to go, now.” I push off Thorn’s lap.

“We don’t know it’s him for sure, De,” Mark chastises.

“I know it’s him. The Phantom is taunting us,” I say confidently. “He’s moving to his next target.”

“Where do we go?”

I reach into my purse and pull out the map. I lay it flat on the bed and point. “We head west. That is where the rest of the green dots are.”

“Which state?”

I hang my head in defeat. “I don’t know.”

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Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:45 am

“Mark, get packed up and let Jez know we’re moving on,” Thorn orders. “We’re leaving in thirty. Tell her to dig deep and see if she can find out which state we need to head to. For now, we can head in that direction. We have time to pick a route once we get on the road.”

“Got it.” Mark rushes back into his room.

Thorn stares at me for a minute. “You okay?”

“No.”

“We will catch him,” Thorn promises.

I nod solemnly. “I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again... How many more people have to die before we do?”

CHAPTER 25

“Wow, thanks.”

I watch the teenage girl shove the fifty in her pocket, spin on her heel, and walk out of the hotel. Since I had to meet her in the lobby, I can’t do what I want to do which is grab her and shove her against the wall to have my way with her.

Carrying the box of pizza to my hotel room, I grin at the image of the delivery girl’s innocence. She couldn’t have been more than seventeen which means she likely has no clue about the evil she was in the presence of.

While I eat, I recount the events that took place in Philadelphia. The murder wasn't my normal MO, but that didn't make it any less satisfying. In fact, it was a nice change of pace.

Once I'm full, I set the remaining food on the table and move to the bed with my laptop. I have a blog to write, and I need to do it while certain details remain fresh in my mind.

It takes me an hour to complete the post, and I hit submit so it's published online. Then I navigate to Delaney Jefferson's website and click on the 'contact me' button. It's one thing to publish my blog for the world to see but sending it to an intended victim is another.

It has to be perfect.

I reread my typed words to make sure it's exactly that.

When Eloise Davenport purchased her ticket for the Spirit Spying Ghost Tour: Nightmare Row, she had no idea she was about to walk into her own living nightmare. She no doubt thought that in the city of brotherly love, she'd be safe, but her killer had other plans.

While the details I'm about to outline for you have not been made public, yours truly was able to procure information from a very reliable source. Here is what I know...

Officials have not conclusively linked the Phantom Strangler to Davenport's horrific murder, but all signs point to him. The victim was found naked, and she was propped up against the gated entrance of a cemetery. The bruising around her neck indicated that she'd been strangled, but the item used was not located. Based on the ligature pattern, a belt was used.

Blood was smeared across Davenport's breasts, and dried blood caked her thighs.

My cock hardens as I read the details of my crime. I wrap my fingers around my length and jerk off as I relive my time with Eloise Davenport. Once I'm finished, I hit the submit button on Delaney's website contact form.

Happy reading, Miss Jefferson.

CHAPTER 26

DELANEY

"I think we should head to San Diego."

I scroll through the emails on my phone while Mark and Thorn argue about where we should head next. They've been fighting since we got in the car this morning. Hell, they've been at each other's throats since we left Philadelphia two days ago. Mark wants to go to San Diego, and Thorn thinks the Phantom will strike in Nevada. They asked me for my opinion, but at this point, I have no clue which location is next. I don't want another dead body on my conscience, and there's absolutely nothing to go on.

"I gotta stop and get gas," Thorn announces. "Anyone hungry?"

"Are we driving all night?" Mark asks.

I shrug. "Until we hear from Jez, we don't know what direction to go."

Thorn pulls off the exit. "Let's get gas and food. We can regroup, check in with the club, and devise a plan for the night."

After pulling into the gas station, Thorn fills the tank while Mark and I use the restroom. As we're coming back, my phone chimes with an email notification. I climb into the front passenger seat and open my email app.

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The sender information is blank, but the subject line reads The Phantom Strangler Strikes Again! My hand shakes as I open it to see a link is the only context.

Who would send this through my business website? Do I open it or forward it to Jez?

My curiosity gets the best of me, and before common sense kicks in, I click on the link. For a brief second, I wish I'd sent it to Jez. My eyes scan the article outlining the murder from Philly in perfect detail.

... the ligature pattern, a belt was used.

Blood was smeared across Davenport's breasts, and dried blood caked her thighs. In her mouth, a rolled-up piece of paper was found with the words: Soon my set will be complete.

The police have no suspects and no leads at this point. It seems the Phantom Strangler is one serial killer who will never be found.

"Holy shit," I mumble as the blood drains from my face.

Thorn grabs my arm, startling me. I was so engrossed in reading the blog that I didn't realize he got in the SUV. When he pulls me across the console, I settle on his lap, and he cups my cheeks. "What happened, De? Talk to me."

I thrust my phone in his face. "How the fuck does he know all this?"

Thorn skims the article, his brows furrowing the more he reads. "I don't know." He

pushes a button on the steering wheel. “Call Jez.”

I try to move back to the passenger seat as the car fills with the sound of a ringing phone, but Thorn grips my hips, keeping me in place. “Stay.”

I roll my eyes but do as he says because I need his touch right now. He rubs his hands up and down my arms.

“Are you gu?—”

“Jez, we gotta problem,” Thorn growls, cutting out the bullshit greetings.

Jez whistles. “You’re on speaker.”

“What’s going on, brother?” Soul inquires. “Everyone okay?”

“Delaney got an email from someone with a link to a blog,” Thorn starts. “The blog spells out the Philly murder in detail. How the hell did this asshole know to email De? Who is this fucker?”

“Someone fucking emailed her?” Soul asks incredulously.

The familiar sounds of someone clicking on a keyboard come through the speakers, as well as boots shuffling across a floor.

“De, don’t be mad,” Jez begins. “I just hacked into your email.”

“I don’t give a shit,” I reply. “What I want to know is, is this true? The details I mean?”

When we left Philadelphia, not much information had been released to the public. We

could've stayed, but we decided to head west while we waited for Jez to hack into the police reports and a new location could be identified.

"I'm comparing the article to the police reports, and so far, the details match. It's almost like this Morgan Ralph Stent, the author of the blog, has extensive knowledge of criminology. He, or she, sounds like they're enthralled by the Phantom."

"How can we find the person who sent it?"

"Every computer has a tracking feature on it just in case it's ever stolen. You can disable it, but a lot of people forget to do that. The computer the email came from is currently in Seattle."

"Soul, we're heading to Seattle," Thorn states

"Do you want me to send more brothers to meet you?" Soul asks.

"Between the three of us, I think we'll be fine."

"Keep me updated."

Thorn disconnects the calls, and after a brief kiss, I climb back over to my seat.

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A day and a half later, we coast into Seattle. We're exhausted, but we have a murder to stop, and that fuels us to keep going.

Mark's phone pings. "Jez booked us a hotel," he says as he plugs the location into the GPS.

A half-hour later, we're checked into our hotel, and it feels like déjà vu.

Thorn wraps his arms around my waist. "Are you tired?" he mumbles into my hair.

"No, but it's early." I turn to face him. "One of my clients owns a bookstore with his wife. Can we go see him? Maybe he can tell us where some hot spots are to check out."

"Do you know where it is?"

I wave my cell. "Already pulled it up. Good news, it's within walking distance. We don't have to get back in the car."

Mark knocks on the open adjoining door, and he's covering his eyes. "You guys aren't fucking are you?"

Thorn releases his hold on me, marches over to Mark, and smacks him in the back of his head. "Would the fucking door be unlocked if we were, dumbass?"

Mark drops his hand and rubs the back of his head. "I didn't know."

“How about waiting for an answer next time before barging in then?” My mouth curves up. “Unless you were hoping for a show.”

Thorn balls his fists, and Mark’s face pales. “Oh shit, no, no...that’s not...no way...are you trying to get me killed?”

I fling myself in front of Mark before Thorn can make a move. “I was teasing. Calm down.”

Thorn’s chest heaves. “Not funny.”

“It was kinda funny,” Mark adds.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Mark, you’re not helping.”

Mark dodges out of Thorn’s reach. “What’s the plan?”

I tell Mark that we’re going to the bookstore to see what information we can get before hitting the Seattle nightlife. I don’t express how excited I am to meet Mr. and Mrs. Barker, because at the end of the day, we’re here to catch a killer.

Twenty minutes later, we round the corner to walk down the block to the store. A huge crowd is gathered on the sidewalk, the sign to the bookstore is visible, but there are so many people that we can’t push through.

I stand on my toes. “What’s going on?”

Thorn frowns and pushes forward, holding my hand to drag me through the throng of spectators. “I don’t know.”

“Fuck,” Mark grumbles when he finally gets through and stops next to Thorn.

The entrance is blocked off by yellow police tape, but the glass storefront allows us to see inside. One body is already covered, and another is currently being tarped a few feet away. Blood is splattered everywhere, covering books, shelves, and the floor. I stumble backward, and Thorn spins me around quickly, pressing my head into his chest.

“I got you.”

Sobs wrack my body. Tears streak my face, but I make no attempt to wipe them away. I never want to show weakness, but at this moment, all I feel is sorrow. Thorn rubs my back in soothing circular motions as he holds me close.

It takes a few minutes for me to gather my bearings, but eventually, I hiccup and wipe my tear-streaked face with the back of my hands.

Mark flags down an officer who’s trying to keep the public behind the police line.

“What happened?” he asks the officer.

“Robbery.”

“Anything taken?” Thorn inquires.

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“Why do you want to know?” The officer raises his brow, his mouth set in a firm line.

I push forward. “I know the victims.”

The officer’s eyes soften. “I’m sorry, honey. They were shot execution style. Dead by the time we got here.” He takes a deep breath. “Cash drawer was open but doesn’t look like anything was taken. The robber must’ve gotten spooked.”

“Thank you, Officer.” I link my fingers with Thorn’s, and grab Mark’s elbow. “Hotel, now.”

It’s too much of a coincidence.

My mind races as we rush back to the hotel. I keep my mouth shut until the door shuts softly behind me once we reach our room. I didn’t want to worry about someone overhearing me on the street.

Facing Thorn and Mark, I blurt, “It’s him.”

Thorn’s brows furrow, and he frowns. “De, we do?—”

“It’s the Phantom!” I shout.

Mark steps forward. “Why do you think that?”

I brush my hair out of my face. “Think about it. The Phantom is changing his game.

The body that was discovered in Louisville—a location not on his map—and the victim in Philly who wasn't targeted at his usual hunting ground, and now this... a fake robbery. You heard the cop, nothing was taken. He's making a statement."

Thorn rubs his temples. "Fuck, you're right," he concedes.

"I know I am. And here's a question that scares the hell out of me. How the fuck did he know these two were my clients?"

CHAPTER 27

THORN

"This guy's good."

I scowl at Mark before glancing in the rearview mirror to make sure Delaney is still sleeping. She's been a wreck since her clients were slaughtered in Seattle.

"We're better," I snap.

"Thorn, he's been ten steps ahead this whole time," Mark insists. "What if we can't catch him?"

"Failure isn't an option," Delaney grumbles from the backseat.

Mark twists in the passenger seat to look at her. "Sorry. I thought you were out."

"Well, I wasn't."

"She's right, though," I say. "The Phantom Strangler will be caught because there is no other acceptable outcome."

“And if you think otherwise, we’ll drop you at the clubhouse before we search Vegas,” Delaney says, popping her head in between us.

“Oh, hell no.” Mark shakes his head. “I’m in this with you.”

“Then keep your negativity to yourself,” Delaney gripes.

Silence fills the SUV as we continue southeast. I’m about to break it when my cell rings.

“Hello,” I say after pressing the answer button on the steering wheel.

“Thorn, it’s Jez. Am I on speaker?”

“Yep.”

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“Good. I think I’ve got something.”

“You think?” Delaney asks, excitement in her tone.

“I know I’ve got something,” Jez corrects. “I know how the Phantom knew about your clients, De. Once I was hacked into your computer, I found a virus. I didn’t say anything at first because I wanted to be sure it wasn’t just a coincidence and something you picked up from clicking on some innocuous email.”

“And it wasn’t?” I ask.

“No. I was able to trace the virus back to the Phantom’s laptop.”

“Then you’ve got a name, right?” I demand.

“I wish.” Jez clears her throat. “The laptop he uses was registered under the name of a man who died eighty-six years ago.”

“Couldn’t they just have the same name?” Delaney questions.

“That’s what I thought so I dug a little deeper. The credit card used to purchase the laptop was obtained using the deceased guy’s social security number. I have hacked into every database that I can think of, checked all records I can tie to the same person, and it’s all hinky.”

“Like I said, the guy’s good,” Mark repeats his earlier sentiment.

“And I’m better,” Jez quips.

“Goddammit, Jez,” I snap. “If you’ve got more, spit it the fuck out.”

“Now that I’ve gained access to the freak’s laptop via the backtrace, I’m in,” she says proudly. “I can see everything he’s doing digitally, as well as follow his movements.”

“And?” Delaney prods.

“He’s almost to Vegas,” Jez informs us.

“You’re sure that’s where he’s hitting next?” I ask.

“His internet history was full of searches about male stripper shows in Vegas,” she explains. “Think about it... He wants to be where he’ll have his pick of victims. What better place to do that than where drunk women congregate?”

“Then the city of sin, here we come.”

“Be safe.”

I disconnect the call as I stomp on the gas. We’ve still got several hours before we reach our destination, and the sooner we get there, the better.

“What if we’re too late?” Delaney asks, fear in her voice.

“We won’t be,” I growl.

Thankfully, I didn’t promise because when we reach the last known location of the Phantom’s laptop, there’s the all-too-familiar yellow crime scene tape blocking off the area.

Motherfucker.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” Delaney stares out the window as we drive past the scene to an area where we might find parking. “How are we still so far behind him?”

“He’s been doing this for a long time,” Mark states.

“And you’d think that’d be his downfall,” I hiss. “We’ve got so much information to work with, and?—”

“There!” Delaney yells, pointing to an empty spot in a nearby parking lot.

The three of us walk back toward the scene, and unlike Seattle, there’s no pushing through the crowd. Thousands of people are gathered on the sidewalks, and police are standing guard. All we can do is wait until things clear up a bit.

It takes hours, but eventually, we’re able to get close enough to start asking questions.

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“What happened here, officer?” I ask.

“Female tourist was found strangled.”

“Any idea who did it?”

The cop stares at me intently as if trying to decipher my reason for wanting information. “If you ask me, it’s the Phantom Strangler.” He shrugs. “But there’s no official statement about that yet.”

“Officer Park!” a man in a suit shouts as he approaches, an evidence bag in his hand. “How many times do I have to tell you to stop speculating about the perpetrator to looky-loos?” He shifts his eyes to me. “I’m Detective Simmons. Do you have information to add to this investigation?”

As he speaks, his hands are moving, and he drops the evidence bag on the ground. I bend to pick it up, and when I see what’s inside, my blood runs cold.

“Something wrong, sir?” the detective asks.

I shove the bag in his face. “Where’d you get this?”

He narrows his eyes. “It was found in the victim’s mouth.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” I mutter.

“What?”

I'm screwed.

"It's, uh, my class ring," I admit quietly. "It was stolen from my high school girlfriend when she was killed by the Phantom in twenty-fourteen."

"It's yours?" Detective Simmons asks. "You're sure?"

I nod.

Before I realize what's happening, I'm spun around forcefully, shoved to the ground, and my arms are yanked behind my back.

"You're under arrest for the murder of Brittney Cragen."

CHAPTER 28

DELANEY

"...will be used against you in a court of law."

The sound around me fades away as I watch the detective slap the cuffs on Thorn's wrists and yank him off the ground. I ball my hands into fists, and a red haze clouds my vision as I step forward. A pair of strong arms pull me back into a solid chest.

"No, Delaney," Mark whispers in my ear. "You don't want to end up in a cell, too. We'll get him out."

"They have the wrong man," I point out. "Thorn's been with us the whole time."

"I know." Mark rubs his hands up and down my arms. "They won't get away with this, I promise."

I sag against Mark, letting him keep me from sinking to the ground. Thorn is led away, and the detective smirks as he puts his hand on Thorn's head to guide him into the squad car.

“We got him.” Simmons' words reach my ears, and I cringe.

“Call Soul!” Thorn hollers before the door slams. Behind the glass, I see his lips move. “I'm sorry.”

He's sorry? What is he sorry about? I know Thorn is innocent.

I fumble with my phone, trying to pull up Soul's contact information. The cell shakes in my hand as I hit the call button.

Soul answers on the first ring. “Hey, Dela?—”

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“Thorn’s been arrested,” I blurt.

“What the fuck do you mean he’s been arrested?” Soul shouts.

I can hear scuffling in the background. “We have to get him out.”

“You’re on speaker,” Soul informs me. “Slow down, tell me what happened.”

“We’re in Vegas. Another body was found,” I explain. “We showed up to the crime scene to see if we could talk to some of the cops, but before Thorn could get any information, he was thrown on the ground and read his Miranda Rights,” I say, my voice wobbly.

There’s nothing I can do but watch as the car disappears down the street. I haven’t felt this helpless since Daphne died.

“Did they say why he was being arrested?” Carmella’s voice filters through the speaker.

“Murder,” Mark answers. “I got the impression they think he’s the Phantom Strangler.”

“The fuck he is,” Soul growls. “Carmella, can yo?—”

“Abyss is already packing our stuff,” Carmella states. “We’re leaving soon. Do you have a hotel room yet?”

“No.” I can’t focus on trivial shit right now, I just want Thorn back.

“Yes, you do,” Apple replies. “Mark, go to the Blue Rose. I sent a text to Amelia, and she’s got three rooms waiting for you.”

Damn, this club and their women move fast. They’re a well-oiled machine.

“Got it,” Mark replies.

“Prospect, don’t let Delaney out of your sight,” Soul orders. “Last thing our brother needs to worry about while he’s in jail is his woman.”

“I’ll protect her with my life,” Mark promises.

“I’m standing right fucking here!” I shout, frustrated that they’re talking about me like I’m invisible.

“That’s better,” Jez encourages from the other end of the call. “Thorn needs you to be strong, not flaking out on him.”

Jez’s words resonate with something deep inside of me. She’s right. This isn’t the time to fall apart. There’s a reason why Thorn was arrested for this murder and why the cops seem to think he’s the serial killer.

“We’re gonna head to the Blue Rose,” Mark says, ushering me to the SUV. “We’ll see you when you get here.”

Once we’re settled in my room, Mark waits with me. I rub my temples to ease the pounding as I pace around the suite. The bile in my stomach is inching its way toward the back of my throat with every lap.

I spin around to yell at Mark about what could be taking so long when someone pounds on the door. I yank open the door and see Carmella and Abyss at the threshold, so I wave them in.

“Where have you been?” I demand.

“We stopped at the police station to talk to Thorn. As his lawyer, I needed to confer with my client.” Carmella tosses her hair over her shoulder. “It’s not good. But I have a plan.”

“Why was he arrested? They didn’t even have a warrant.”

“I met with the prosecutor, who was able to obtain the arrest warrant as soon as he was presented with Detective Simmons’ account of what happened. So far, they’re doing things by the book,” Carmella explains. “Turns out that a couple pieces of evidence turned up on this victim.”

My jaw drops. “What evidence?”

“Thorn’s class ring was found in the victim’s mouth.”

“The ring he gave to Tamara?” I whisper.

“That’s what they’re saying. Unfortunately, Thorn admitted it was his at the scene.” Carmella shrugs. “They also found DNA, and they had the lab put a rush on it to determine if it’s a match for Thorn.”

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“Thorn wasn’t fucking there!” I shout. “He’s been with me and Mark the entire time. He never left our side.”

“We know.”

“Then we bail him out.” I move toward the door when a strong hand grips my shoulder, halting my footsteps. “Take your hand off me,” I growl, spinning around, ready to punch whoever dared to stop me.

Mark holds up his hands and steps back.

“You can’t go out there half-cocked,” Abyss says calmly. “None of us like that Thorn’s in jail.”

“Get him out,” I grit through my teeth.

Why are they still standing here?

“He’s being charged with murder. It’s not that easy. Thorn’s arraignment hearing is scheduled for three days from now.” Carmella hands me the court assignment. “Jez and I are gathering everything I need to file a motion to dismiss. You need to trust me.”

I drop my chin. “I’m going to enjoy squeezing the life out of that son of bitch, Phantom, once I get my hands on him.”

Abyss grins. “You’re gonna have to get in line.”

After three long agonizing days, the four of us gather outside the courtroom to wait for the bailiff to announce Thorn's case number. Jez and Carmella worked tirelessly to gather everything Carmella needs for the hearing. The knots in my stomach tighten as I think about everything that could possibly go wrong.

Carmella smiles at me sympathetically as if she knows I need a moment to gather myself. I refuse to let Thorn see how worried I am. Eventually, the bailiff opens the door, calls the case number, and allows everyone inside.

"I'm gonna go use the restroom." I nod toward the bathroom across the hall.

"We'll be inside." Carmella picks up her briefcase and winks. "Hurry, I'd hate for you to miss all the fun."

What in the hell could be fun about this?

CHAPTER 29

THORN

"The defense motion to dismiss the charges is granted. Mr. Gruber, you're free to go."

Grinning, I throw my arms around Carmella as the judge bangs the gavel. For three days, I've done nothing but pace my cell and hope that she and the club could get me out. The prosecutor requested that I be remanded into custody until the trial, but Carmella was able to pull enough together before arraignment to prove I was nowhere in the vicinity of Brittany Cragen at the time of her death.

"Thank you," I say sincerely. "When you told me that the DNA found on the body was a match to mine, I was worried."

“I had your back,” Carmella says, smiling.

I nod as I step back and scan the courtroom. Abyss and Mark are in the first row behind the defense table, but I don’t see Delaney. My insides twist with panic.

“Where is she?” I ask Abyss. “I thought she’d be here.”

“Relax, brother. She went to the restroom just as your case was called. I’m sure she’s in the hallway, waiting.”

Relief washes over me. We trickle out of the courtroom, and when I step through the door, I sweep my gaze from side to side. Still, Delaney is nowhere in sight.

“I hope she’s okay,” I mutter. “She’s been in the bathroom for a while.”

Carmella rests a hand on my arm. “I’ll go check on her.”

She walks to the women’s bathroom and enters. Not two seconds later, she rushes back out, her expression full of concern.

“What is it?” I demand. “Where is she?”

Carmella shakes her head frantically. “I don’t... She’s not... There’s blood, Thorn.”

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I push her out of my way and rush inside the restroom, intent on proving Mel wrong. Unfortunately, the bathroom is empty except for drops of blood on the floor and sink, as well as Delaney's locket, which is draped over a faucet.

As I grab the necklace, I spin around to race outside and run into Abyss, who's taking in the scene. His expression is dark and dangerous, mimicking the thoughts in my head.

"Where the fuck is she?" I snarl. "You were supposed to keep her safe!"

I shove past my brother and storm into the hall. Racing toward the exit, I don't bother to see if the others are following. It doesn't matter. My only thought is to find Delaney, and if I'm doing that on my own, so be it.

"Thorn, slow down," Mark calls after me.

Ignoring him, I push open the door and step outside. The sun is bright, and it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. I turn in a circle to take in my surroundings and look for Delaney. Again, I don't spot her.

This can't be happening.

"Try her cell," Carmella suggests from behind me. "I'm sure she's around somewhere."

"Mine was taken from me when I was arrested," I remind them. "We still have to pick up my stuff at the jail."

Abyss removes his phone from his cut and dials before thrusting the device at me. “Use mine.”

I put it to my ear as it rings. She doesn’t pick up, but I can hear the ringtone she programmed in for my brothers. I hit redial to follow the sound when her voicemail picks up, and I do that until I reach a garbage can at the bottom of the steps in front of the courthouse.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Mark grumbles when he reaches inside the can and pulls out Delaney’s purse, her phone ringing from inside.

“He got her,” I seethe. “The Phantom got Delaney.”

“I’m calling Jez,” Carmella says, her cell tucked between her ear and shoulder while she snatches the purse from Mark to dig inside. “Hey, girl. Phantom’s got De.” She nods several times, responds in the affirmative at least twice, and then continues. “Yeah, thanks. Have your brother call us.” She disconnects the call and levels her gaze on me. “She’s on it, and Soul wi?—”

“There he is,” Abyss says when his phone rings. He answers and puts the call on speaker. “Yo, Pres, we’ve got a situation.”

“I heard.”

“Great,” I snap. “You heard. Now what?”

“Breathe, Thorn,” Soul encourages. “We’re gonna get your girl.”

“How?”

“Jez is working on tracking the Phantom, but she thinks his laptop is off right now.

He'll have to turn it on sometimes, and we'll get him then."

"And while we twiddle our fucking thumbs, what is he gonna do to Delaney?" I ask, my fear tasting like acid in my mouth.

"All of you get to the clubhouse, and we'll put our heads together," Soul instructs. "We'll get her, Thorn. I promise."

I hear his words, and a sharp retort is on the tip of my tongue, but I keep it to myself.

Don't make promises you can't fucking keep.

CHAPTER 30

DELANEY

"Ugh."

Groaning, I slowly pry my eyes open. There isn't anything to see though, because wherever I am, it's pitch black. Movement underneath me intensifies the stabbing pain in my forehead. The faint sound of tires screeching reaches my ears before my body is thrown against something hard.

A trunk? How the hell did I end up in a trunk?

I inhale deeply through my nose and exhale through my mouth, trying to avoid retching all over. The hard hit did nothing to help the pounding in my head. Something gooey causes my hair to stick to my face, and I lift my hand to brush the strands behind my ear only to find my wrists bound with a zip tie. My feet are also bound. The smell of copper hits my nose, and once again, I fight back the bile. I hiss when my fingers brush across a knot on the base of my hairline.

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Memories begin to surface as I try to piece together how I got here. I remember being at the courthouse and waiting with the others for Thorn's case to be called, but specifics are still fuzzy. I squint as more images flash in my mind... The bailiff opening the door, me saying I was going to the bathroom, and Carmella's words as I pushed open the restroom door.

"Hurry, I'd hate for you to miss all the fun."

The door closes behind me, and I cross to the sink to gather myself before the arraignment begins. Splashing water on my face, I give myself a pep talk about being strong for Thorn and trusting his friends.

Knock, knock.

"Maintenance," a deep voice hollers. "Anyone in there?"

"Be out in a minute." I glance around, noting all the stalls are empty. "I'm the last one."

I take one more deep breath when someone rushes toward me. Pain erupts in my face then... nothing.

I slowly twist onto my side being, extra cautious of my injuries. My muscles don't want to cooperate because stiffness has settled in, and it takes a moment to get the feeling back in my arms.

For once in my life, it pays to be tiny. I lift my legs as high as I can, which is limited

since I'm in a trunk, and then my arms to get the blood circulating again. I don't know what I'll be facing once whoever has me lets me out, but I can't fight them and paresthesia at the same time.

Every little jerk leaves me withering in pain, but I muster through somehow. Carefully, I feel around the edge of the trunk to try to find my purse or a weapon of some kind. It's just my luck that the trunk is empty except for my bruised body. Whoever took me must've left my bag behind. This sucks because I could really use my comb knife right now.

It seems like we've been driving forever when the car begins to slow down, and the road becomes more uneven. My little frame feels every bump and dip. I grit my teeth as we hit one last pothole before the vehicle comes to a complete stop.

I squint when the trunk is opened, and I blink rapidly to adjust to the sudden change in light. The sun is fading over the horizon, but I raise my hands to shield my watering eyes anyway. Compared to the darkness I was immersed in, this is a blazing inferno. A shadow steps in front of me, blocking the offending sphere.

"We meet again, Delaney," a deep voice sneers.

Everything clicks together as soon as my vision clears: Daphne's murder, the woman being attacked in Nashville, and the memory of a tall dark-haired man shoving my face into the bathroom mirror.

"You!" I scream.

The Phantom laughs menacingly. "It's time to play, Delaney."

He wrenches my arms forward, pulling me through the opening. The Phantom bends over and yanks me out of the vehicle before tossing me over his shoulder. He rounds

the car, and a farmhouse comes into view. Twisting, I try to take in my surroundings, but I recognize nothing. And I have no way for Thorn or the club to track me. Hell, I don't even know if Thorn got out of jail.

It's up to me to save myself.

Game on mother fucker!

CHAPTER 31

"Gimme a minute."

I force a smile as Mrs. Gruber turns and walks deeper into the house. Coming here is a stroke of genius if I do say so myself. Granted, leaving Delaney at the other location was risky, but I couldn't take the chance that she'd ruin this for me. I made sure she was secure before I left so it should be fine.

Voices reach me, and I listen closely as Kyle's father tells his mother not to give out their son's contact info. There's some quiet arguing, and then Mrs. Gruber returns to the door.

"Here you go," she says as she hands me a piece of paper. "This is Kyle's cell number."

"Thank you very much," I reply, shoving the paper in my pocket. "I haven't talked to him in a long time, and I'll be up in his neck of the woods soon so I wanted to see if we can meet for a drink."

She nods. "Glad I could help."

Ten minutes later, I'm pushing through the back door of the abandoned house.

“Honey, I’m home,” I call out, taunting my captive.

“Fuck you!” she shouts from the bedroom upstairs.

“Oh, we’re getting to that,” I mutter under my breath.

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Before I go upstairs, I move through the kitchen to the living room. The only piece of furniture that remains on the first floor is a couch, and I recognize it as being the same one that was in the house all those years ago. I pull Kyle's contact info out of my pocket and dial his number. Barely one ring registers before he answers.

"Hello."

"Kyle?"

"Who is this?" he demands.

"We're getting to that," I assure him calmly. "I believe I have something that belongs to you."

A string of curses comes through the line, and I grin.

Good. He's rattled.

"If you hurt her, I swe?—"

"I'm gonna hurt her," I assure him. "Unless, of course, you can get to her in time."

"Tell me where you are, and I will," he snarls.

"What fun would that be, Kyle?"

"How do you know my name?"

“Don’t worry about that. All that matters is that I do.”

“I wanna talk to Delaney,” he barks. “Put her on the phone.”

“You’re not in a position to be making demands!” I shout.

“Okay, okay.” He takes a deep breath. “At least tell me your name.”

“I believe the masses call me the Phantom Strangler.”

CHAPTER 32

THORN

“Dammit!”

I spin around toward Jez and Fort. As soon as I returned to the clubhouse, they put a trap and trace on my phone just in case.

“You didn’t get him?” I bark.

“Not his precise location,” Fort admits. “But he’s in Glendale, Arizona.”

“That’s my hometown.”

“Any idea why he’d take Delaney there?” Soul asks.

“To fuck with me,” I reply sardonically. “Shit, Pres, I don’t—” My phone rings, and I glance at the screen. Groaning, I answer. “Mom, this isn’t a good time.”

“Sorry, honey, but I wanted to let you know that a friend of yours stopped by the

house earlier.”

My blood runs cold. “Who, Mom?”

“Shawn something,” she says. “Shawn, Shawn... Williams. Shawn Williams.”

I search my brain for the name, and when it registers, rage slithers through me like a Black Mamba ready to burst from a basket.

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“Thanks, Mom,” I say before disconnecting the call. I turn to Fort and Jez. “Shawn Williams was a kid in my high school. Real loser but harmless.”

“I’m searching property records now,” Jez says as she taps away at her keyboard.

“And I’m searching records with any anagrammed version of the Phantom Strangler in case he decided to get cute,” Fort sneers.

“I’m hitting the road,” I state, striding toward the door. “Text me an address when you have it.”

“Thorn, stop,” Soul orders, and I slowly turn to face him. “I know you wanna get to her as quickly as you can, but we need to be smart about this.”

“Smart?” I snarl. “My woman is being held by a goddamn serial killer, and you’re worried about how I approach the situation?”

“Is that what you think?” he retorts.

“It’s what you said.”

“I’ve got something,” Fort interjects. “And you’re not gonna like it.”

“What is it?” Malice asks, moving from Soul’s side to stand behind Fort.

“A name popped,” Fort explains, his expression solemn. “Morgan Ralph Stent, the writer of the blog that was sent to Delaney, is an anagram of The Phantom Strangler.”

“Son of a bitch,” I mutter.

“I’m using that pseudonym on property records now,” Fort adds.

“Already ahead of you,” Jez states. “And I got an address for a house he purchased back in twenty-sixteen.”

She rattles off a street number and name, and I freeze.

“That’s where Tamara lived,” I say numbly.

All eyes turn to me.

“You’re sure?” Grim signs.

“Of course. I spent a lot of time there when we were dating, and it was the last place I saw her alive. Not likely to forget that.”

“It looks like her parents moved out a year and a half after her murder, and Morgan Ralph Stent purchased it.”

“So, Shawn Williams, the Phantom Strangler, and this Stent guy are the same person?” Spike asks.

“Looks like it,” Abyss confirms.

I level my gaze on Soul. “Can I go now, Pres?”

“Yeah.” He nods. “Yeah, you can. But I’m sending Mark, Grim, Spike, and Abyss with you.”

I frantically shake my head. “No. I need to go alone. I won’t put anyone else I love at risk.”

“This isn’t up for debate, Thorn,” Soul snaps. “They either go with you, or you don’t go.”

I heave a sigh. “Fine, I’ll take Mark and Abyss. Delaney’s comfortable with Mark, and that’s important because we don’t know what he’s putting her through. And Abyss can take care of any medical issues.”

Soul exchanges a look with Malice who gives a curt nod.

“Okay, go. But I want you to check in the moment you get to the house, before you go in.”

“I’ll make sure we do,” Abyss states.

“Be safe,” Soul says. “Bring your girl home, Thorn.”

“That’s exactly what I intend to do.”

CHAPTER 33

DELANEY

“I’ve waited five long years to have you.”

The Phantom has been silently pacing back and forth in front of the bed I was haphazardly thrown on when we arrived hours ago. My only reprieve was when he left for about an hour. I’ve been lucky so far that he hasn’t touched me or made a move to kill me yet. I’ve been waiting for it, though, since rape and strangling are the highlights of his MO. I’m propped up against the wall at the head of the bed, and I keep my eyes trained on his movements.

Keep him talking, Delaney.

“Where the hell are we?”

“Oh, do you like it?” He waves his hand around. “This house holds my secrets and one of my fondest memories.”

The room is faded and gaudy. It’s as if a pink fairy threw up all over everything. Definitely not my color. Maybe it belonged to a little girl once upon a time. You can tell that nothing’s been done to fix up the place. The only furniture in the room is the

bed and a chair in the corner which is facing me. The chair looks ominous though. There are chains secured to the wall with steel square pad plates. On the other side of the chains are iron manacles.

“What’s so special about it?” I twist my hands in the zip ties but can’t get any traction to break them free. “Did you kill your kid sister in here or something?”

“Or something.” He shrugs. “Keep struggling, it makes me hard,” The Phantom encourages. “Let me tell you a little story.” I roll my eyes like I’m bored, but it doesn’t deter him. “Once upon a time, a geeky scrawny boy in high school grew up. He was no longer sporting the acne, he built muscle, and he had a man’s face. He became every girl’s fantasy.”

“Let me take a stab at this,” I say with a snicker. “You’re talking about yourself?”

He knits his brows. “Of course, it was fucking me. Now shut the fuck up and let me continue.” The Phantom takes a few deep ragged breaths. “Tamara wanted me, but she was afraid of her feelings because she was dating Kyle. I tried reasoning with her. But ultimately, she made her choice, and I made mine.”

“Tamara never wanted you,” I taunt. “She was Thorn’s girlfriend.”

“She wanted me!” he yells. “Me, Shawn Williams, not Kyle Gruber. Tamara was too afraid to break up with him.”

I shake my head. “Nah, sounds to me like she was satisfied being with Thorn.”

Shawn stomps up to the side of the bed, whips his arm out, and backhands me. My head bounces off the wall. My lip splits, but I don’t react.

That’s what he wants... a reaction.

I lick my bottom lip, tasting the familiar copper tang. “I’ve been with Thorn. I can tell you...” My eyes roam over his body. “You aren’t half the man he is.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he snarls. “I fucked Tamara on the very bed you’re lying on. She screamed for me as she came all over my cock.”

“Screamed for you? Or screamed at you while you were strangling her to death?” I ask snidely. “Seems to me, you can’t get your limp dick up unless you’re killing some helpless woman who doesn’t want your sorry ass.”

Shawn’s mouth curves up into a wicked smile. “Your whore of a sister didn’t have any trouble coming with my dick inside her.”

My heart pounds erratically, and the blood drains from my face. “Don’t fucking talk about my sister, you sick son of a bitch.”

“Sweet, sweet Delaney,” he coos. “Daphne wanted it. Don’t kid yourself into thinking she didn’t. Watching her body convulse around me as she took her last breath is as close to heaven I think I’ll ever get.”

“You’re right,” I say coolly. “Because I’m gonna enjoy sending your ass straight to Hell.”

“Tsk, ts, ts.” He wags his finger. “We still have the main event.”

Shawn kneels on the end of the mattress and yanks my legs toward him. I slide down the wall and wiggle to get free. I roll over to my stomach to crawl away, but he snakes his hand out and pulls my hair, tearing a chunk of it out at the scalp.

Shawn flips me back over and hovers above me. “Now where were we?” He smiles sardonically before snapping his fingers. “Oh yes, the main event. When Kyle finally

pieces together where you are, I'll be ready. See that chair over there?" He nods toward the chair and chains. "He's gonna have a front-row seat to your demise, my love. I want to take my time with you, so we're gonna start without him."

I struggle beneath him, but it's a futile attempt since I'm tied up. I snap my teeth at him in an effort to bite him anywhere I can reach. Shawn grabs my wrists, stretches them above my head, and holds them down. He rips open my shirt, his eyes flaring with desire as he takes in my black lace bra. His mouth descends as I wildly buck my hips to dislodge him. Shawn smirks right before he sinks his teeth into my nipple.

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I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming. He stops his assault on my breast, scoots up my body, and smashes his mouth against mine. Before I can tear a piece of his lips off his face, he shifts to my neck, painfully biting and sucking.

Shawn's moans fill the room, and I close my eyes, waiting for my opening. I straighten my fingers and press my wrists closer together. A faint rumbling distracts him momentarily, and he lifts his head, straining to listen. The rumbling is getting closer along with the sound of loose gravel being kicked up.

Shawn hauls himself off me, and heads toward the bedroom door. "It's showtime."

I quietly scooch to the edge of the bed and kick off my shoes. It seems like minutes pass by, but in reality, it's only seconds before I wiggle my ankles free from their bindings. I raise my knee and swing my arms down in one violent swoop, breaking the zip ties around my wrists. Shawn spins around to face me, and I stand up, ready to fight.

"You're right."

CHAPTER 34

THORN

"I'll call Soul."

I nod at Mark before racing to the front porch of Tamara's old house. Knots form in my stomach as the familiarity of the place mixes with my fear of what I'm going to

find when I get inside.

“I’ll go around back,” Abyss says.

“Fine, but I’m not waiting to go in.”

“Wouldn’t ask you to.”

When I reach the front door, I find it unlocked. I twist the knob and shove it open. My nose fills with the scent of musty air, but that’s not what gains my focus.

The sound of a struggle comes from upstairs, and with each thud, my need for vengeance increases exponentially. I race up the steps, and the noise intensifies.

“You fucking bitch!”

Following the shout, I reach Tamara’s old bedroom. Without hesitation, I lift my leg and kick the door in. Delaney blocks a blow from Shawn and bends to sweep her leg to take him to his ass.

I whistle, pride swelling at her ability to take a monster down.

Delaney twists to look at me, and that’s when I notice her torn shirt, the teeth marks on his flesh, and bruises covering her face.

“You’re late,” she says calmly. “I had to start without you.”

Using her distraction, Shawn rolls to his stomach and pushes to his knees. I lunge forward and stomp on his head, knocking him unconscious and pinning him to the floor.

“Don’t remember telling you to move,” I snarl before returning my attention back to Delaney. “Are you okay?”

“Perfectly.”

I narrow my eyes. “Bullshit.”

“Do you really wanna do this now?” she counters, hands on her hips.

“No, but don’t think for a second that I’m gonna let you get by without having Abyss check you over.”

“Fine,” she quips. “Once we’re done with him.”

“Damn, brother.”

Delaney and I turn to see Abyss standing in the open doorway.

“Welcome to the party,” Delaney says matter-of-factly.

“Welcome, and goodbye,” I snap. “We’ve got this.”

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Abyss stares at me for a moment before nodding. "I'll be outside with Mark."

He leaves, and Shawn starts to moan as he comes to. He thrashes beneath my booted foot, and rather than kick him again, I bend to haul him to his feet. Yanking him close to my face, I grin.

"Who's the victim now, bitch?"

"And it only took you ten years to catch me," he sneers.

Delaney moves to stand next to me and reaches up to wrap her fingers around his throat. "But it only took me five."

"Doesn't say much about you, Kyle, does it?" Shawn taunts. "Your little slut is better than you."

My fist connects with his jaw, and the sound of crunching bone is intoxicating. I drag him to the chair in the corner, and Delaney begins securing the manacles around his wrists.

"What're ya gonna do?" he slurs, his face swelling.

I shrug. "For now, we're just gonna talk."

"Talk?"

Shawn and Delaney speak simultaneously.

“Yeah,” I confirm. “I want some goddamn answers.”

“And when we’re done talking?” Delaney asks.

I smile at her. “We purge.”

She stares at me for a long moment before her lips curve into a matching smile. “Works for me.”

Shawn kicks his feet out like he’s getting comfortable. Idiot doesn’t even have the sense to be scared.

“Why Tamara?” I ask, deciding to start at the beginning.

He tilts his head. “Why not?”

I grip his chin, and he inhales sharply. “Answer our fucking questions, and maybe we’ll go easy on you.”

“I think it’s fitting that this all happens here, don’t you agree?” he counters. “I mean, this is where I became a man, and based on the rumors in high school, it’s also where you became a man.”

“What the fuck happened to you?” I snarl. “You were a nobody.”

“That’s what happened!” he shouts, spit flying from his lips. “Everyone treated me like I didn’t exist, so I had to make myself known.”

“And Tamara? What did she do to deserve your wrath?”

“You seriously don’t know?” When I shake my head, he chuckles. “Her sin was

loving you. It's your fault that I did what I did."

I rear back as if slapped. It shouldn't surprise me that this deranged monster is laying blame at others' feet, but I've blamed myself enough over the years for Tamara, and I don't need him to rub it in.

"Hmm, hit a nerve, did I?" he taunts. "Now you know how I felt every time someone walked by me like I was invisible!"

"And Daphne?" Delaney asks. "What was her sin?"

"Wrong place, wrong time."

Delaney thrusts her palm into his nose, and blood spurts. "So, what? She was just there, and you thought that meant she was fair game?"

"That's sorta how it works." Shawn levels his gaze on me, dismissing her. "Maybe if Tamara hadn't been so devoted to you and responded to my advances, all those women would still be alive."

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“You can’t keep it in your pants, so they had to die?” I grit.

“I know what you think of me, what society thinks of people like me,” he begins.

“But I didn’t show up to that party with the intention of killing. I ju?—”

“And raping,” I seethe.

“Yeah, yeah,” Shawn grumbles. “The point is, I didn’t set out to hurt Tamara. But she didn’t respond to my lustful advances, and that pissed me off.” Delaney begins to pace, but I remain focused on Shawn. “Ya know, I’m not a bad guy. Hell, you and I are exactly alike.”

Delaney stops in her tracks in front of him before kicking him in the balls. “You’re nothing like Thorn.”

“Really?” he asks. “Because I’ve been keeping an eye on your fuck buddy since that night, and what he does isn’t all that different from what I do. We both screw, we both kill, and we both get off on it.”

“I take out people like you,” I snarl. “Not innocent women.”

“They weren’t all women,” he corrects. “Don’t forget about Mr. Barker at the bookstore.” Shawn slides his stare to Delaney. “He begged me to stop while I was banging his wife.”

She gasps and slowly turns to face me. “Please tell me you brought my purse with you. I could really use some of my weapons right now.”

I shake my head. “Sorry. But...” Bending, I grab my knife from my boot. “Here. Use this.”

With lightning-quick movements, she grabs the knife and thrusts it into Shawn’s crotch. He wails in pain, and his screams get louder as she twists the blade before yanking it back out.

“You bitch!”

“That’s gonna be hard to cover up,” I say, pride in my tone.

Delaney shrugs. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize, sweetheart,” I tell her. “Do whatever you have to. We’re damn good at making things appear like something they’re not.”

“B-before you do your worst,” Shawn starts. “Don’t you wanna know about the others?”

“We know all about them,” she says.

“Sure about that?”

I stiffen. “If you’ve got something to say, spit it out,” I demand.

“Ten years is a long time, and I had to get through it somehow.”

“But the map...” Delaney narrows her eyes, her hand going to her mouth.

“Haven’t you figured it out by now? You only know what I wanted you to know.”

“How many more?” I bark.

“Victims?” I nod, and he continues. “I lost count.”

“You’re pure evil,” Delaney hisses.

“I’m human,” he snaps. “There’s evil in all of us. Take your boy, Kyle.” He nods at me. “He killed that girl in Vegas. Doesn’t that make him evil?”

“I had nothing to do with that, and you know it!” I shout.

“That’s not what the evidence at the crime scene says.”

“Yet here I am, not in jail,” I remind him. “If you were gonna set me up, you should’ve done a better job.”

“So it wasn’t exactly the coup de grâce I was going for. Everyone makes mistakes.”

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“Are we done here?” Delaney asks impatiently. “Nothing he says is going to make sins go away, it’s not gonna bring Tamara, Daphne, and the others back.”

I stare at the man who tainted my life for so long, the prick who sent me down a dark path. I wouldn’t change the last ten years for anything because it all led me to Delaney, but if I could, I’d go back and stay to help Tamara clean up after the party.

“Thorn?” Delaney prods.

Ignoring the sinner in the chair, I yank Delaney toward me, careful of the knife she’s still holding, and fuse my lips to hers. The kiss is passionate, heated, and full of promise.

“I love you,” I say when I break contact. “I’m so sorry about your sister, but I can’t be sorry that it brought us together. Does that make you hate me?”

“Hate you?” She shakes her head. “I could never hate you.”

“Isn’t that sweet?” Shawn teases, far too happy for a man in his position.

“Please let me purge him,” Delaney begs.

I’ve wanted a piece of the Phantom for years, and I’m finally in a position to get what I want. Problem is, I can’t get the words out of my mouth to deny Delaney a damn thing.

“Go for it.”

She grins before spinning on her heel and moving closer to the chair. “Any last words? Deathbed confessions?”

“And give you the satisfaction of not having to always wonder what, or who, you may have missed?” Shawn snorts. “No.”

I fully expect Delaney to thrust the knife into his chest, but she surprises me when she tosses the weapon to the floor and takes a step forward. Rage rolls off her in waves, adrenaline fueling her every move. Shawn kicks at her, but she endures every blow as she lifts him with one arm and wraps the chain around his neck with the other.

Damn, she’s impressive.

Delaney takes a step back, admiring her work. Shawn struggles, but it only tightens the chain. The life drains from his body slowly, and I savor every second.

“Sweetheart, there’s one last thing,” I tell Delaney, grabbing her hand and threading my fingers through hers.

“Okay.”

“Repeat after me,” I instruct, and she nods. “Go forth sinners’ souls, from this world.”

“Go forth sinners’ souls, from this world.”

“May you suffer in darkness.”

“May you suffer in darkness.”

“May your home be in Hell.”

“May your home be in Hell.

“And may the Devil fuck you with his horns.”

“And may the Devil fuck you with his horns.”

Shawn takes his last breath as we finish the purge prayer, and Delaney releases a loud sigh.

“It’s over, right?” she asks.

“It’s over, sweetheart.”

She turns in my arms and presses her cheek to my chest. “Thorn?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you, too.”

EPILOGUE

THORN

One month later...

“Where have you been?”

I shove the small box into my pocket and stride toward Soul. He’s sitting at the bar with a few other brothers, and they’re all nursing beers.

“Isn’t it a bit early for booze?” I ask, pretending I didn’t hear his question.

“It’s five o’clock somewhere,” Spike quips. “Or so they say.”

“Did you see the news this morning?” Malice asks, his expression guarded.

I nod. It was hard to miss. The FBI finally released an official statement about The Phantom Strangler. My mind replays the coverage.

“After a month-long investigation, the serial killer known as the Phantom Strangler has been identified as Shawn Miller from Glendale, Arizona. He also went by the name Morgan Ralph Stent for his true crime blog,” the reporter states. “Miller was found in the home of his first victim, Tamara White, in what has been ruled a suicide. There were injuries to his genitals, and the FBI reports that they believe someone

identified Miller as the Phantom and attacked him. They further report that evidence suggests that, once he was identified, Miller took his own life so he wouldn't face a long prison sentence." The reporter clears her throat, her expression dismayed. "Law enforcement across the globe have been able to link thirty-two murders to Miller, and they span seven countries. In the house where Miller died, a box of jewelry was found, and each item was identified as belonging to his victims."

"Mark, Abyss, Jacob, and Rogue did a damn good job at the crime scene," Soul says with a grin. "They left no trace of you or De."

"It's the club's best cleanup job yet," I concur. Scanning the room, I frown when I don't see Delaney. "Speaking of De, where is she?"

"She said you knew," Spike comments.

I narrow my eyes. "I wouldn't ask if I did."

"She and the girls went to Fists of Fury, and then they're going to Persuasion Ink."

"Shit, that's right," I mutter. "Totally forgot."

"You've been distracted lately," Grim signs. "Everything okay?"

I'm not distracted. I'm fucking nervous.

"Yeah, it's all good." I start toward the member's wing, calling over my shoulder, "Don't drink too much, brothers."

Their laughter follows me down the hall. When I reach my room, I flatten my palm against the sensor, and the door slides open. Stepping across the threshold, I smile.

Delaney's belongings are strewn all over the room. She moved in shortly after we purged the Phantom, and I can't imagine my life without her. Bound by tragedy and vengeance, we're two sides to the same fucked-up coin.

Since we're both aware of how fragile life is, we make a point to enjoy every second of every day. To that end, we made a pact to have date night once a week, just the two of us. I never want to take her for granted, and with what Saints Purgatory does, it's too easy to get lost in the dark.

Tonight is date night, and I have every intention of leading her to the light.

Delaney

"He's dead, Delaney," Mom cries. "It's finally over."

The conversation with my parents plays over and over again in my brain. I'm thankful to the club for setting it up so all the families could get closure for their loved ones, especially my parents. I couldn't have lived knowing Shawn Williams was dead and not telling my parents that they no longer have to worry about him. Every city that lost someone to the Phantom Strangler held a vigil for the victims and their families, and it was a beautiful way to honor those he killed.

Thorn went with me to Alabama for our town's celebration of Daphne's life. My parents absolutely adore him. They think he balances me out. Thorn doesn't put up with my shit, but he also encourages me which is a huge plus to them. He helped me dig a hole at her gravesite to bury her locket while my parents stood nearby with tears streaming down their faces. At first, they wanted to keep the necklace with them, but I reminded them how much she loved that piece of jewelry, and how much her family meant to her. In the end, they agreed and accompanied us. It'll take time for all of us to heal, but we're getting there.

“We should think about adding another class,” Knuckles says as he bounds onto the mat. “I didn’t realize how popular these would be.”

After Daphne’s vigil, I decided Alabama was no longer home. I packed everything and moved into the clubhouse to be with Thorn. I approached Knuckles with the idea to provide self-defense classes for women and children. He went to the club, who unanimously agreed, providing that I teach the classes. The club felt the clientele would feel more at ease with a woman than with a hulking male. It’d also show that no matter your size, you can defend yourself. The classes filled up quickly, and we now have a waiting list.

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I nod. "I agree. I cut back my graphic design clients so we can add more if you want to add more."

"Fuck, De." Knuckles rubs the back of his neck. "We never wanted you to quit doing what you're passionate about. The club knows how much you love traveling and graphic design."

I gesture to the women gathering their water bottles after the hard lesson. "They're my passion. If I can give just one person the strength to fight back, then we did our job." I lower my voice. "Besides, I did love what I was doing, but now my reason for needing to travel is dead and buried, so I'm fine right here."

Knuckles winks.

"If you're sure, I'll add some more classes to the schedule." He pauses. "Shit, I need to talk to Thorn first."

"About what?"

Knuckles shifts to his other foot. "Well... he uh... might not want you working so much."

I narrow my eyes, placing my hands on my hips. "You might want to rethink that statement before you need to eat through a straw."

"I'd listen to her," Carmella says, sauntering up beside me, glaring at him. "She's part of the Badass Bitches Club, and after she's done with you, we'll all take a turn. As

President of the Badass Bitches, I'm not afraid to stand up for one of my own."

I spin around to see all the ol' ladies closing in on Knuckles.

Knuckles holds his hands up in surrender. "I don't want any trouble ladies. You know how your men get when you work too much."

"That sounds like their problem, not ours," Cece sasses.

"Grab your shit, girl," Jez orders. "It's time to go."

"Shit, is it already one?" I glance at the clock on the wall.

"Yep," Apple says, popping the 'p'. "Hurry up. Your appointment is at one-thirty."

We all pile into the Escalade while Mark and Zach follow closely behind on their Harleys. Jez and the ladies surprised me last week with my introduction to the Badass Bitches Club. They showed me their tattoos, and I immediately fell in love.

Possum is waiting when we all file into Persuasion Ink. "Ready?" he asks.

I shrug. "Nervous. This is my first tattoo."

Possum looks over at Skye and raises his brows. "You brought me another virgin?"

"I'm not a virgin," I blurt.

My face heats up while everyone chuckles at my expense.

Kill me now!

Skye smacks Possum on the back of the head. “Moron,” she chastises. “He means you’re a tattoo virgin.”

“Oh.”

Possum rubs the back of his head. “Sorry, De. I thought everyone knew what that meant in a tattoo shop.”

“Obviously not,” Violet mumbles.

“Follow me.” He leads me back to his chair. “Where do you want it?”

I thought long and hard about where I would put my phoenix. There’s only one place that makes sense. I tug my shirt over my head and toss it to Apple, who catches it with ease. The ladies start hollering and screaming ‘Take it off, baby’ while Possum covers his face and groans.

“I swear you all are trying to get me killed,” he mumbles. “What color?”

“Yellow, for Daphne. It was her favorite color.” I point to a place over my heart. “Can you put it here?”

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“Absolutely.” He fires up the tattoo gun.

A couple hours later, we head back to the clubhouse. Thorn is taking me out tonight so I’m in a hurry to return home. After we pull into the garage, I thank the girls for a lovely afternoon and rush to our room.

I pull on tight dark wash jeans and a deep V-neck black cami. I slip a black lace see-through cover over the camisole, and then I remove the bandage so the bright yellow phoenix on my chest is visible. I told Thorn I’d meet him in the common room, so I grab my purse and slip on my stilettos.

The common room is bursting with activity. When I spot Thorn, the noise around me fades because he’s all that matters. As if he can sense me, he swivels on his bar stool where he’s sitting next to Spike.

Thorn’s smile spreads across his face as he hops to his feet. He reaches me in three long strides and captures me in his arms, pressing his mouth to mine. I open up to him, and he pushes his tongue inside. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I tug him closer to my body.

“Get a fucking room,” Malice shouts over the music.

Thorn breaks the kiss first. “At least I’m getting some, grouchy bastard.”

I chuckle, and step back. Thorn’s eyes seductively run over my body, stopping when he reaches my chest.

“What the fu?—?”

“Thorn,” I huff. “You knew I was getting the tattoo. You don’t get to be pissed off. You have tattoos.”

“Babe, I love the tattoo.” He pulls me close. “But you just signed Possum’s death warrant.”

“I freaking told you this would happen,” Possum yells. “Fuck my life.”

I smile at Possum before refocusing on Thorn. “Why?”

“Why? Because I bet you had to take your shirt off, which means he saw your boobs.”

“So?”

“So?”

“Are you practicing for Halloween or something?” I ask sarcastically.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’re acting like a parrot, so I assume that’s what you’re going as this year.” I smirk. “Besides, I’m sure there are plenty of women here who’ve seen more th?—”

His hand covers my mouth. “You done yet?”

“Maybe, are you?”

“With you, never.” Thorn drops to one knee, pulling something out of his pocket and he does. In his hand is a black box with a beautiful diamond ring. “Delaney, you are

everything I need and want in my life. Without you, my life has no meaning. I've loved you since the first time I saw you and fell in love with you even more when you opened that smart mouth of yours and told me off. Will you do me the honor of being my ol' lady and wife, forever?"

Tears prick my eyes. "Yes, a thousand times yes."