



Warmer, Colder

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Description: Stasi

Becca Murphy was always meant to be mine. She betrayed me and buried her love for me deep within her deceptive heart, but she never anticipated me digging myself out of that grave with a singular desire: her. Now that I'm back, I'm determined to drag her demons into the light. I might be dead, but I'm not letting Becca go. This time, she'll see the truth: it's always been me.

Becca

One drunken night shattered my carefully crafted facade, leaving me suffocating beneath the wreckage of my so-called perfect life. I thought death would grant me peace, but instead, I'm haunted by the woman who knows my deepest secret. As I cling to the crumbling illusion of perfection, Stasi sees me for what I truly am—a goddamn mess. Do I cling to my web of lies, or do I dare to free fall into her tempting embrace?

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Prologue

Sometimes one version of you has to die so that you can become who you were always supposed to be.

Part I

Chapter 1

Stasi

149 Days till Death

There she is, everything I've ever wanted. Through the window, I watch the love of my life get ready to celebrate another birthday. Always the outsider looking in. I've missed ten of them, forgotten and left in her past like a dirty little secret, but I'm here to make this a memorable night. Because that's what best friends do.

The woman of the hour stands in the center of the room, the only one that matters. Framed by sheer curtains billowing in the summer breeze, she's on display—for herself, for her friends, and unknowingly, for me—as she tries on her dress for the night. The other women flutter around her, trading laughs and sharing drinks, but they don't see her like I do.

Despite her fallen expression, the insecurity in her turbulent ocean eyes, and the staining blush across her cheeks, they encourage her to wear it, handing her a pair of heels to finish it off. She looks beautiful, but her fingers barely leave the hem of the

short dress, her ankles angled unnaturally, and she keeps tugging at her straps. I could fix it all if she'd just let me.

My girl has a terrible habit of people pleasing, so she doesn't verbalize a single complaint. Her teeth shine white, a smile so bright that people won't look hard enough to see if it's real. But I see everything, I know her better than anyone. And yet, she surrounds herself with these people who only view her through their own picture-perfect lenses. They gather close now, eagerly lavishing attention on her. That used to be her and me—inseparable, the closest of friends. Some would say too close, as if that's possible. They sit on the floor finishing up their makeup and sorting through piles of clothes. We used to huddle together like that. My mind easily superimposes a memory over the scene I'm witnessing.

Two little girls gathered around a candle, hands joined, lips reciting the spell we'd looked up. With smiling mouths, we chant together:

“Open mind, open heart.

Separate in distance, but not apart.

Together now, it's you and me.

Against all odds, our connection will be.

As we will it, so mote it be.”

In tandem, we kiss the halves of the necklace we hold in our hands and exchange them, clipping each around the other's neck. Once they're secured, we bring the two parts together.

“Best friends forever,” we say in unison with smiling faces.

But just like our friendship, everything went up in flames after that. Kids playing with fire is questionable, but we had a dream and a love for The Craft that couldn't be stopped. At least until my mom found out. Then there were no more sleepovers at our house, no more 'carrying on'. She took an accident and made it into a sign, a confirmation that Becca and I were bad for each other, that she was making me act out, that she was changing me.

My mother has been wrong about a lot of things, but she was right about that last part. Becca did change me. She altered the course of my life. Became part of my DNA. Caused a ripple in time that anchored me to those stolen moments over a decade ago, before it all fell apart.

But I've found my way back to her, finally. I'm here to put us back together. After all these years, I'm going to prove to Becca that everyone was wrong, and she never should have let me go. That we belong together.

Allowing myself one more minute to admire her, I back away from the window, retreating into the night. Concealed in the shadows of her yard, I wait for the perfect opportunity to do what I came here for. Groups of people funnel through the front door over the next half hour, the buzz of chaotic activity intensifying by the second. Once the house is sufficiently crowded, I finally slip into her window.

Stepping quietly over the threshold, I'm careful not to knock down the hanging plants. Thankfully, the faint glow of fairy lights strewn throughout her room offers just enough light to easily navigate to the bed. There's a disruption in the symphony of voices that carries through the house, two suddenly becoming distinct, growing closer, louder. Instantly, I drop to the ground and flatten myself against the plush rug, concealing myself with the side of the bed. The seconds drag on as I wait for the door to open, dread building in my stomach. How the hell would I even explain this?

Fuck, fuck, fuck. My heart pounds to the same beat.

Fortunately, the voices veer to the right and a door clicks loudly into place. Moving with greater urgency after the close call, I slip my shoes off and crawl onto her bed. Lavender and eucalyptus greet me, but beneath the diffuser's relaxing scent, there's her. Bringing her pillow to my face, I'm smothered in a peachy sweetness and a hint of hair oil. There's no time to revel in it, so I breathe deeply, holding it in my nose as long as I can. Reluctantly putting it down, I fold it in half and position it between my legs. Tugging my panties to the side, I lower myself, squeeze it between my thighs, then drag my wet center over it. A low groan of pleasure leaves me with my exhale. The pressure isn't nearly enough, that's not what has me worked up, the mere fact that I'm in her room, doing this, is more than enough to have me dripping. My only regret is that it isn't her face I'm sitting on. But that time will come. With the reminder of the purpose behind all this, the erotic haze clears and I refocus.

Gripping the headboard to prevent it from banging against the wall, I grind down harder, faster, thoroughly soaking her pillow as I rush myself toward an orgasm imagining it's her mouth beneath me ravenously eating me out.

One day, one day that'll be us. But for now, evoking her suppressed desire through her sleeping subconscious will have to suffice. When her pretty head lays down here tonight, and any night after, she won't be able to help but dream of me. Like this, in other ways, in lust, in adoration, it will guide her, amplify the old feelings she refuses to acknowledge and the undeniable attraction between us.

Now that's a fucking dream.

It's that promise—that all of these little deceptions and working my magic will eventually be worth it—that has me gritting my teeth as a wave of pleasure rocks through me with one last roll of my hips. Reassuring tingles spread over my skin, ushering out the spell as my cum soaks into her pillow.

“Becca Murphy is dreaming of me,” I whisper three times. “Becca Murphy desires

me,” I follow, again three times. “Becca Murphy belongs to me,” I say another three times, while breathing through a moan.

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With the hushed release, the chaotic energy that's been strumming restlessly inside me finally vacates my body. In the moment of peace, the cozy blankets tempt me. What I wouldn't give to be able to lay here and bask in the serenity of achieving one more step in my plan, but I'm already pushing my luck.

After a few more centering breaths, I waste no time in turning the pillow over, righting my clothes, pulling on my shoes, and slipping back out the window.

The warm summer air clings to me, intensifying the flush of my skin; I welcome it. There's nothing that could ruin this night as long as I stay focused. As long as I capture that kiss I need to compound the spell and strengthen our bond. Aphrodite willing, I'm going to get my girl back at last. Just a little longer Becca, I'm coming for you.

Chapter 2

Becca

June 6th, 2014 – Becca's 23rd Birthday – 187 Days till Death

I stand at the edge of the room like a prop, an accessory to my own party. I'm not the guest of honor, I'm a mannequin dressed up just right for their enjoyment. Whether I'm here or not, it doesn't really matter. The night will go on, they'll have their fun, and they'll remember it all more fondly than I will. It's why I feel both heavy and hollow—the weight of expectations and the emptiness of always fulfilling them no matter what.

That is the Becca Murphy experience.

If there's one thing I've learned to excel at—well, besides everything—it's being who people need me to be. And tonight, that's the excited birthday girl.

As humans, we tend to wax poetic about birthdays. They're sold to us as something that always needs to be celebrated, and each year, it needs to be bigger, better, happier. Birthdays are the start of a new chapter, a new year of growth. They're supposed to be exciting, aren't they? Then why is it that, instead of elation, there's a twenty-pound rock opening a yawning pit in my stomach? The acidity escaping through it is climbing up my esophagus, eating up the laughter and easy conversation I was supposed to be enjoying tonight.

Or maybe it's just that I've had too much to drink. Yes, that's it; I'm already on my third glass of champagne. I should stop after this one, but it's not good form for the host not to partake in the festivities. It's also not good form to actively avoid your guests or worse, break their hearts.

Trying to be a good sport, I take another sip of the champagne from my birth year that my parents gifted me. But, instead of the crisp flavor of refreshing liquid luxury, the sourness of my mood transfers to my tongue. It tastes off; not off like flat, off like the sinking premonition of something terrible. Worse than what's already happened, and everyone knows it, too. Eyes above wide eager grins sit heavy on me with expectancy. Smile, birthday girl. Take another drink. Have fun.

And I had planned to—have fun that is. I'd bought myself this little dress in my favorite color, lavender, to bring out my eyes and compliment my pale skin that's barely seen the sun this summer break since I'm still taking classes and searching for the perfect internship opportunities. I'm even wearing heels; Meg insists I should show off my long legs on any occasion. Meg. Her eyes are the heaviest, watching me over her red cup. You can't ignore me and you certainly can't keep secrets from me.

Her words—her actions—are the reason that my birthday party went from something I was kind of looking forward to something I desperately wanted out of in the span of minutes. “Bec, can I talk to you really quick?” she’d asked. Of course, I said yes. She’s been my best friend for years. I was expecting my gift in private or a sentimental shot. I didn’t expect to have her confess that she’s in love with me, that our friendship isn’t just platonic for her. Not anymore.

Up until that point, I’d never been afraid to tell her anything. Meg had seen me at my worst in high school when I was still taking advantage of the comforts of being on the outskirts of Chleo Bower’s clique. It had been shamefully easy to remain in her good graces and enjoy the perks that her status provided. That is until Chleo had laid into Meg so badly that I simply couldn’t stand by and allow her to act like a tyrant anymore, especially not when my brother was giving me those eyes from across the lunch area. You can’t keep sitting by and allowing her to walk all over everyone. Of course, he was right.

Meg and I had been inseparable ever since. And thankfully, she welcomed me into her friend group with open arms; it was just the four of us against the world for the last four years. But tonight, Meg likely divided us forever and Brittany and Theresa don’t even know it yet.

With a soft voice and empathetic eyes, I’d tried to let her down easily. I just don’t see you like that. I love you, as a friend.

What I got back was anger and a sense of injustice. “Why not? Why not me?”

“I don’t date girls.”

“Jesus, Bec. We’re still doing this?” The tears in her eyes were half a decade’s worth of accusations.

“Doing what?” The ‘don’t make me do this, not after what happened’ was silent, but we both knew it was there, the heavy presence of that truth always threatening to resurface from my past. As my best friend who’s known me for years, you’d think we wouldn’t have to go there.

“You know what. Why are we still playing pretend? I thought we were best friends?”

“We are.”

“So, tell me the truth. Is it girls, or is it me you don’t like?”

“Both. You know that.” You’d think I’d be numb to this absurd conversation. I’ve said it a million times, to her, to Chleo Bower, to all the kids who wrote shitty things in my yearbook in seventh grade, and to every guy I’ve dated.

“I used to think you were so brave. But I’m tired of letting you lie to yourself and to me. You think you’re so perfect, you have your whole life figured out on paper. But you don’t know shit about yourself if you think that’s true. You’re not brave at all, Bec; you’re a fucking coward who’s always going to be running from her past.”

The undeniable finality of the slamming of the door behind her had been a punch to the gut and I’m still reeling from it. From our conversation, her accusations. It’s left me unstable on these uncomfortable heels instead of my usual Converse. I’m acutely aware of just how short my dress is in them, of how much of my legs are showing. I’m so exposed, and it’s her fault.

Fuck. This. Night.

Fuck birthdays, and best friends, and putting on a charade for other people.

I drain my glass of the remaining champagne, the carbonation going down rough and

trying to come back up like the sting of the fracturing of my friendship. I'm on my way back to my room to change when I hear the most obnoxious sound known to man.

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“Beccaaaa!” Nate Peters calls from the open front door where he sizes me up with a cocky smile and lingering eyes.

Who the hell invited him? My brother isn’t even here. I stomp over, not because he called me, but because the neighbors are going to flip if this party gets too loud and I really don’t want to deal with it. I yank at my dress as I make my way across the room.

“What are you doing here?” My brother may have put everything between them in the past, but I’ll never forget how Nate made his life a living hell. “Aiden’s out of town.” Thank god. The idea of them hooking up just a room away from me would truly scar me for life. My stomach rolls at the unwelcome mental image.

Nate shrugs, his muscles rippling effortlessly. “I’m not here for him; I’m here to party.”

“Whatever, just don’t break anything.” I have enough shit to deal with, it’s not even worth arguing about.

How does this night just keep getting worse and worse? I need another drink.

Walking through my own home feels like a landmine. I’m simultaneously dodging the daggers Meg is staring at me, avoiding my other friends so I don’t have to find out whether they’re mad at me too, and trying to make it to the kitchen without having to make any small talk with anyone who’s just here to take advantage of an opportunity to get drunk and socialize.

That's what I should be doing. Liquor spills over my hand with my clumsy, rushed pouring. Sucking in a deep breath, I attempt to plug my nose as I toss the shot back. The sharp scent of ethanol burns my nostrils. Despite how rancid the cheap vodka is, it's easier to swallow than the truth of my best friend's heart.

The kitchen and dining area is sweltering, now packed with buzzing bodies as people gather around tables to play King's Cup and beer pong. They may as well all be invisible because all I can see is Meg's devastated gaze from across the room. It appears we're coping the same way; however, she seems intent on keeping my attention while I'm actively avoiding her. I need time to think. This isn't the time or the place to continue this conversation, fight, whatever it's going to be. Just the thought of it stifles me more than the increasingly ripe smell of sweat, pepperoni, and artificial sweeteners failing to mask all the varieties of alcohol.

Air. I need air.

"Come on, birthday girl, your turn," Nate calls over the thumping music that someone's turned up again. A haughty rejection is on the tip of my tongue, but my annoyance is a welcome distraction. So much so that my feet easily move in his direction.

Taking aim, I hope for some beginner's luck as the ball flies out of my hand. Like the rest of this night, it disappoints, bouncing off the rim and into the crowd. A series of white and orange balls meet the same fate, while my opponents land at least every other throw.

"Next person to miss a cup has to take a shot, dealer's choice," one of Nate's friends, Rob, I think, proclaims as his eyes caress the slight dip of my neckline. Of course, I lose, and before I can object, his moist, calloused hand is tugging on mine.

He picks up bottle after bottle as he concocts some mixed shot; his "specialty". As

long as it's better than the straight rubbing alcohol I had earlier, I guess I can't complain. Resigned to my fate, I wait by his side, taking shallow breaths so I don't suffocate in the toxic cloud of his aggressive cologne that smells far too similar to a teen boy's body spray for me to stomach.

After what feels like an eternity, a shot glass is presented in front of me. But just as I'm leaning into it, I'm thrust against the wall.

"Oh shit!" someone obnoxiously yells while others whistle.

My throat tightens nervously, barring the objections that desperately want to jump out. I never get a chance to voice them because someone is towering over me, their weight holding me in place. Behind me is hard and unforgiving, but in front of me, I'm wedged against the softest body I've ever felt. The way it contours around me is surprisingly pleasant, moving my mind from shock to curiosity. Wispy pink and blond hair tumbles around us as I stare up into an angelic face that sharpens with sinful intent as we make eye contact.

No woman has ever looked at me like this.

Like a rabbit in a snare, my heart thumps wildly as I wait for the threat to close in around me. But the fear doesn't manifest. I'm frozen in awe, so she's met with zero resistance as her gentle fingers frame my jaw in a firm hold and she tilts my head back. My skin tingles at the slide of her pink and black acrylic nails against my heated skin. Squirming, my back arches.

"Open up, birthday girl," she purrs.

Bewitched, I fall under the spell of her sultry voice, my lips parting for the shot glass, my tongue lying in wait for the harsh sting of alcohol. But instead of smooth glass, a gust of cool mint flows from her open mouth and coasts against my own before a

waterfall of liquor cascades from her rosy lips into my waiting throat.

“That’s it, let me in.”

Heat gathers low in my empty stomach and warms me from the inside out, my skin becoming sticky and slick. It’s boiling at the surface under her attentive gaze that sweeps over me.

“Oops. You’ve got a little something...” My confusion is quickly quelled as the tip of her tongue sneaks from the corner of my lip into my mouth when I gasp in surprise.

She presses forward in her exploration. Her palm clasps around my throat, the weight an anchor as my body and mind float outside of me, the burden of this night becoming distant as my world shrinks to just the points where we make contact. The music, the whistling, the murmured judgments all melt into an irrelevant hum, my ears only picking up the sigh of her breath and the quiet meeting of our mouths.

Her thigh slides between my legs. The combination of the friction from her lacy thigh-highs and the sudden pressure of her knee sends a rush through me like the drop of a roller coaster. My gut drops and flips with a punch of adrenaline. I’ve never been touched like this. With graceful intent. The thrill spikes as she leans into me, my dress inching upward. The concern of flashing everyone is fleeting, overridden by her tongue winding around mine. The shock of cold metal in the center elicits a gasp. Her methodical movements coax a whimper from me that I pray is eaten up by the thumping music.

My nipples harden in response to the friction of her own grazing my silky slip.

“Fuck,” she moans, and I choke on the undiluted lust. The overwhelming potency of it breaks the trance I’ve been lost in.

Hands coming between us I shove her away. “What the hell are you doing?” Along with my breath, she’s stolen my voice, the words weaker than they should be. I say it again like I mean it.

A flinch of hurt passes over her mahogany brown eyes, but she recovers quickly. She suppresses her shock and morphs her expression into one of smugness—severely lined eyes and reddened lips pulling into a smirk. I answer with a glare that’s a forceful diversion from staring at the cleavage that spills out of her low-cut black mini-dress. While she was soft and languid against me, everything about her hardens, her edges sharpening with narrowed eyes and the pop of her hip. Grasping for control, I ignore the way the movement shifts her dress up her plump thighs exposing more of her peachy skin. Let it go, I plead silently with furrowed brows. There’s a challenge in the assertive eye contact she returns, and I squirm internally under the assumption that simmers there. But unfortunately, she’s not the only one who sees right through me.

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Following a long whistle, Nate bellows. “Damn, that was hot. Who knew Becca was into that.” His eyes skim over me as if seeing me for the first time. Whatever he sees during his appraisal brings a curling smile to his lips. “Well, I guess I owe Chleo that ten dollars after all. Can’t believe she’s about to win a decade-old bet.” He laughs and like usual, people follow his lead. “Looks like it runs in the family; maybe she’s not such a bore after all.”

“Shut up, Nate. I’m not . . . into that.” Humiliation and fear ripple through me in uncomfortable heat waves that make this tiny slip of a dress feel like clinging wool. I purposely avoid the pointed gaze of my best friend; it’s too much to bear when I’m already crumbling beneath the judgment of my peers.

“No?” Nate steps closer. “So, what is it then? Are you just a slut like your brother?” The hateful words are like glass shards under my skin.

“Shut the hell up,” I hiss defensively. I can tolerate a lot being said about me, but nobody is going to insult Aiden in front of me.

“I bet you would love that.” He takes another step forward and my back bumps against the wall and this time, I seek shelter in its unrelenting surface. “If it was nothing, why don’t we give it another try? I bet I can make it count for something. My birthday gift to you.”

“I’ll pass. Like I said, it was nothing.” My focus is past Nate’s shoulder where I try to summon a defense for myself beyond all the curious eyes watching this disaster play out. I settle on the only reasonable explanation for what’s transpired here. “I’ve just had too much to drink. I’m not into you or her.”

The reason for this entire confrontation is standing closer to me now, her scoff loud and abrasive. “Sure felt like it.” Despite her accusatory words, her smoky voice threatens to rekindle the fire I’ve just put out.

The whispers around us grow louder as more people have stopped what they’re doing to watch this embarrassing interaction. Loyalty overriding her anger, Meg appears at my side. “She said she wasn’t into you.” She shifts slightly in front of me. “You shouldn’t have done that. Clearly, she’s had too much to drink. That last shot certainly didn’t help.”

Like a carnivore who’s spotted prey, her eyes move between me and my angry best friend; the palpable tension between Meg and I is blood in the water and she’s planning to strike. My stomach muscles clench as I brace myself for impact.

“The way she melted into my grasp and moaned into my mouth felt like an open invitation to me.”

“It wasn’t,” Meg and I insist in unison.

The blond leans forward, her eyes sparkling with mischief as they effortlessly read Meg. “Oh, I see,” she pouts mockingly, her hands sliding between her thighs as she squats down to our height. “Sorry, hun. Maybe you should have stepped up first if you wanted her so badly. Better luck next time.” She might as well have snapped Meg’s neck between her jaws and carried her off with that pointed assessment. Jealousy coils tightly in my best friend’s pained grimace and clenched fists.

“There’s not going to be any next time. For anyone,” I clarify. Instead of reaffirming, my mood sinks further.

The mysterious party crasher’s attention shifts from Meg to me, and she shrugs as if what she says next isn’t absolutely damning. “You know what I think.” Her perfect

lips are inches from mine again. I dig my toes into the soles of my shoes holding myself in this exact spot. My neck remains rigid as she tucks a strand of hair behind my ear tickling the sensitive skin with the barely there touch of her nails. “I think...” Anticipation knotting my shoulders, I teeter at the precipice of the cliff she’s threatening to push me off of. “Thou doth protest too much.” Her smile grows wide and wicked as my body sways with uncertainty when she leans around us, grabs a paper towel off the counter, and brings it to her upper thigh. “In fact, it seems like things got a little wet.”

My chest and cheeks are surely tomato-red at this point. How dare she insinuate something so vulgar.

“Get out of my house.” I can’t think clearly with her so close to me. Not when she swipes that wretched tongue—the one that just invaded my mouth and pried those confused reactions from me—over her lush lips.

She snorts a laugh and rolls her eyes. “Sure thing, sweetheart. I’ll see you around.” Her hand snaps around mine before I can move out of her reach, and a wadded-up paper towel is stuffed between my clenched fingers. “In case you need to clean up.” Mercifully, she makes her exit without another word. I attempt to look anywhere but at the sway of her wide hips that draws attention to where the thin black fabric stretches over the round curve of her ass but I’m as helpless as everyone else who watches her walk away. The fact that it’s not just me who’s captivated by her presence quells some of my panic. She’s just one of those beautiful people who effortlessly commands a room.

The front door finally closes with a harsh thud that sets my teeth on edge. “Who the hell is she?” I seethe to no one in particular. “Who even invited her?” Several gazes flick away from me as my breathing becomes uneven and I begin to spiral. I don’t wait for an answer, I need a minute to recover from the pink-haired menace that just flipped my night upside down.

“Wait, Bec.” Meg is on my heels; her pursuit only makes me move faster.

The force with which I slam the slider behind me even makes me jump. Several people who thankfully missed the spectacle inside turn to look at me, including my other two best friends. I keep moving until I’m inside the casita. Thankfully, the sounds of the party are muted behind the thick door. I find myself in a reassuring cocoon of silence that finally allows me to drop my guard. My shoulders shake with the release of tension and corresponding tears. The reprieve is short-lived as the door opens behind me and I catch a glimpse of red curls.

“What the hell was that?” There’s a sharpness in her voice that we never use with each other.

“Fuck if I know?”

“Who is she?” The words are serrated, dripping red with anger. The infection between us irritated anew.

“No one. I have no idea. I’ve never seen her before.” Defensiveness has me stepping closer to her. My hackles rise. “She’s just a stranger who saw an opportunity to get under my skin. Our skin. She just wanted to embarrass me.” Even as I say it, I doubt myself. There was something familiar about the woman and the way her skin felt against mine, but I can’t quite put my finger on it. I don’t tell Meg that though, I need at least one person at this fucking party to believe me. “That was nothing, just a drunken mistake. Obviously, I was in shock. Wouldn’t you be?”

“You just said you weren’t into other women.” The air is heavy with expectation as Meg takes a step toward me.

My own humiliation and hurt is reflected in her eyes. “I’m not.” Even I hear the lilt of uncertainty.

“Sure, Becca,” Meg scoffs. “Whatever you say.” She tips back her red cup and drains its contents before throwing the door open and leaving me exposed to the people who cast questioning looks my way. I can’t hear their whispers over the blaring music. I don’t need to. I’ve been on this merry-go-round before.

She’s gay with that one weird girl.

We should move our desks; it might be contagious.

Cover yourself, she might try to sneak a peek.

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Told you they were too close of friends.

Determined to forget all the repressed memories that'll haunt me if I don't hide from them, I go back inside. Under the weight of it all, each step is a thousand pounds, but I attempt to keep my head held high. Passing the keg, I go right for the hard stuff, tipping the vodka bottle for a heavy pour and add a splash of soda that's just enough to take the edge off the foul taste. I'm not much of a drinker—especially not hard liquor—but if any time warrants it, it's right now.

“That was quite a show birthday girl,” Nate taunts as he takes the bottle from my hand to top off his own drink. “So, tell me, what do I have to do to be next?”

“You're disgusting,” I say with a slight slur. He steps in my way as I try to leave, and my hand meets his chest. “Piss off; I'm not in the mood.” I attempt a glare, but my fuzzy vision probably means I've missed the mark.

“Excuse the fuck out of me, Princess. Didn't realize you couldn't take a joke.” He looks down at me, no warmth in those hazel eyes that so many people swoon over. “Don't let that mouth get you into any more trouble tonight. For once, Aiden isn't here to stand up for you.”

“Yeah, probably because he's avoiding you,” I hiss as I shove around him and make a break for my bedroom, hoping to take a few minutes to pull myself back together so I can try to enjoy some part of my own birthday party.

In the quiet sanctuary, I take a few deep, steadying breaths with each inhale, my heartbeat slows down to something resembling a normal pace. Taking a seat at my

desk vanity, I start to conceal the dewiness that's gathered on my forehead. I'm adding a bit of blush when Brittany and Theresa join me.

"Have you seen Meg?" Brittany asks carefully.

"No. She stormed off. I assumed she went to make another drink."

My friends make eyes in the mirror. "What?" I fight the urge to snap the lip liner pencil in my hand as I try to repair the perfect lip combo that my party crasher messed up.

"It's just...are you two okay? You've been weird since the party started, and she's seemed really upset."

"We're fine. I'm fine. If you're so worried about her, why don't you go ask her yourself?" Lashing out isn't usually my style but I can't seem to hold back the striking words. The events of tonight have sent me reeling. Maybe another sip will dull the edge.

"We looked everywhere for her."

Reluctantly, I open my phone and check Meg's location. My brow creases with worry, but it's replaced with another bout of anger when I see the message she sent me fifteen minutes ago.

I'm tired of playing pretend with you.

I attempt to chase away the shame that ripples through me with a large gulp of the vodka soda.

"She's a couple blocks down, on Spruce and Ivy. It looks like she's walking home.

You should go after her.”

“We should. We’ll come back, though, once we make sure she’s okay,” Theresa promises.

“It’s fine. This birthday is an epic fail. I’m going to tell everyone to leave soon.”

Brittany squeezes my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Bec.”

With a weak smile, I dismiss them, then take a long chug of my revolting drink that nearly comes back up. I drop the lip liner, no longer caring enough to finish it off with the lipstick I was wearing earlier. I just want this night to end but my plans fall apart as my feet sway beneath me. I have to grip the edge of my dresser to keep myself upright, while the room rocks back and forth in front of me. Everything is swimming around me, the bright hallway light spills in sideways as the door creaks open. The distorted tinkling of my chimes is a delayed warning that reaches my ears too late.

A vague muscular shape blocks out some of the light, growing larger as it comes closer. I squint to force focus but instead of clarity, the form triples. I’m plunged into complete darkness before I can make sense of what I’m seeing.

Chapter 3

Stasi

119 Days till Death

Surrounded by incense smoke and bathed in candlelight, I double-check that everything is prepared for my ritual, but first, I need to make my offering. The last month has required a lot of work with Aphrodite to help me get back on track.

Despite putting my plan in motion, the public rejection did reopen some old wounds. But I'm back to myself and more determined than ever to make Becca mine. I've waited all these years, what's a few more weeks or months?

I'm close; I can feel it.

The flames burn bright and warm in reassurance as I light the pink and red candles that are interspersed between the rose quartz towers, tea lights, statues, and unique trinkets I've collected for my goddess over the years from shops along the coast. Carefully, I open the shell trinket I picked up on my most recent trip. The pink and white ombre of the beautifully cut shell will definitely please her, more so as I fill it with the pearls, miniature shells, rosebuds, and rose quartz chips that I set on top of the tiny mirror at the center. Igniting her favored honey and rose incense, I cleanse the offering, then leave it in the middle of the altar as a token of my gratitude for all the ways she's changed my life.

The altar frames my naked body in the mirror as I shrug off my lacy robe and begin my manifestations. "I am magic. I am desired. I am everything she wants and needs," I whisper as I take inventory of myself, appreciating every inch of my body like I want Becca to and willing the sight before me to make its way into her dreams. The way my full cleavage sits low on my chest, my nipples embellished with silver piercings. They're ready and waiting to be taken into her mouth. My gaze moves down, caressing the dreamy moth tattoo that spreads over my wide stomach, hugging the curves and rolling contours. How perfect would it look with her hand splayed across it? With gentle strokes, I rub over my large thighs that press together, dimpling the soft flesh that's adorned with pink garters tattooed across the width of each leg. There's nothing I look forward to more than her kneeling to worship me between them. Turning around, I lift the flowing length of my hair over my shoulder, exposing the gentle folds at my sides that are kissed by the shadows of the flickering candles. My spine tingles with the ghost of her delicate fingers trailing down my back. I step back a few feet, revealing my calves that bear the figures of the beloved

poet, Sappho, and Aphrodite herself. She may have her altar, but together, we've made my body into a temple that I've proudly learned to worship over the years under her love and guidance.

Which brings me to the ritual. Sex magic has played a vital role in my journey from a terrified, angry, and insecure little girl to a confident and empowered woman who's in control of her destiny. Tonight, I'm fortifying the plan I set in motion at the party. Spitting in her mouth should have secured the bond that had gone lax during our separation. She took it so willingly, after all. I'm going to pull that thread between us taut. I won't let it falter again.

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I want her to feel me in her gut when she wakes up.

Crawling into my bed, I'm surrounded by all the items I need to amplify the spell.

It's time to transform a lifelong attraction into a gnawing hunger that she can't ignore.

I begin like any other routine, walking myself through the steps quite matter-of-factly, but the innate sensuality of this ritual quickly takes over my psyche. I apply a coat of lip gloss methodically, but a primal groan unleashes from within as I slowly run my tongue over my lips while concentrating on the subtle signature notes of coconut and strawberry. With each pump of the applicator in the tube, the synthetic, sweet scent of it wafts into my nostrils. If I keep my eyes closed tightly enough—until the shapes and colors behind my lids take on a life of their own—I can pretend it's her. It's Becca's inexperienced finger sliding cautiously into my cunt as it grips at her eagerly, encouraging her to sink deeper into me. It's her teeth tugging at my taut nipple and her tongue flicking out to soothe the sting of it. It's her placing a chaste kiss on my clit like I'm something to revere, someone to be cherished.

It's nothing. The harsh words that have no place in this ritual echo in my head for the thousandth time. But unlike before I found Aphrodite, I'm able to dismiss the words for the cowardly denial they really are instead of the hurtful truth that my old insecurities would have me believe. With a calming breath, I release the unbidden memories and refocus.

Slipping my favorite sparkly blue vibrator inside myself, I move with purpose. A throaty gasp escapes me when I envision the gentle press of her palms as she handles

me with care. My toes curl at the phantom caress of her long brown hair across my bare breasts as she kisses every inch of my skin. With quickening strokes, I guide the toy in and out of me.

“Becca Murphy will see that we belong together.” I reiterate my intentions through a moan as I pleasure myself.

With shaking fingers, I grab the lace tights I usually keep preserved in a zipped plastic bag. I only bring them out for a few minutes at a time; the earthy scent of her grows fainter with each use. Still, I press the fabric to my nose and inhale deeply as I sink the toy as far as it’ll go. Heat blossoms across my thigh at the reminder of how wet she was as I pushed up against her, the thin, damp fabric the only thing between us.

“Becca,” my moan is muffled by the tights. “You’re going to be mine. You know I’m the only one for you.” I speak as clearly as I can through the heady pleasure that consumes me while I’m wrapped up in the manifestation. “It’s always been us.”

Moving the silicone faster and faster I imagine her sitting on my face, spread open and dripping into my mouth as I suck at her pretty glistening pussy. Soft and wet and warm, just for me. I’d give anything to take her clit between my teeth and send her over the edge right along with me. Instead, it’s just me, my hand, and the pieces of her I managed to stow away. But that’ll be rectified soon.

My heart pounds in my chest as I chase something close to satisfaction. I inhale another whiff of her and drag my tongue over the lacey fabric that I can almost pretend is her panties. The idea of her slick and shaking, while she grinds down on my eager mouth, is what does it. As my orgasm rocks through me, I clench my quivering thighs around my hand, trapping the toy inside me for a few more seconds while my toes uncurl, and a wave of short-lived bliss passes through me.

Becca Murphy will be mine, to have, to hold, and to cherish. Soon.

Maybe she's not able to wrap her mind around the idea yet, but there's no denying what her body wants or the chemistry between us. Not when she opens up to me so easily. Kissing her at the party was as natural as it was ten years ago, and I'm not going to let her get away again.

She's been mine. She just needs the final push and I'm happy to use the magic I've learned to wield to provide it.

93 Days till Death

It doesn't count as stalking if you're doing it for love, right?

I'll admit, spying is a bit unbecoming of me, I typically take a much more direct approach, but it's going to take some time to get her to come around to the idea. It's going to take some convincing for her to admit her truth.

Luckily for her, I'm willing to humble myself a bit if that's what's required. It's a bit romantic, even. All the great stories of love illustrate the art of wooing. While my most reliable talents typically lay in the skills I've honed with my tongue and fingers, Becca is different, she deserves more. I'm determined to learn everything about her so that when I make my next move, there will be no doubt in her pretty little head that I'm perfect for her. That she's meant for me.

So, here I am, attempting to be discreet as I stake out the object of my affection in the 'U' through 'Z' aisle of the health science section of the library. Across from me, Becca's none the wiser as she reads her textbook and dutifully takes notes. She's all seriousness but it's anything but boring as I watch her through the narrow view between the tops of the books and the bottom of the shelf. Getting to observe her like this, unguarded and in her element—alone for once—I'm learning too. How she sighs

when she's frustrated by something she doesn't understand. Does she make that sound when she thinks of me? How focus pinches her features, creating a line between her brows and pressing her lips together. Will she look at my body like that when she learns how I like to be touched? How she fusses with the edge of her sleeve when her confidence wavers. Is she going to do that when I make her flustered by telling her all the filthy things I want to do to her? I hope so.

There are many things that have changed about her, but from afar, she looks like the same Becca who befriended me when I was just a meek and shy girl hiding in a baggy black sweatshirt in the middle of summer. Becca's straight brown hair is longer now, brushing her waist. Despite all the sunny California days that have passed, her skin is still ivory, and her pale blue eyes still hide her tempered-curiosity behind a cloud of gray. My gaze snags on her lips that pout like the gravity of the world is dragging them downward. Back then, she was sure and confident, always smiling as she took charge of the situation. There's a nervous energy that clings to her now, a cautiousness that makes every movement careful and all her decisions calculated. From her bland Brandy Melville clothes—the ones that are made to flatter girls with her frame and shame anyone else who's duped by their inclusive pretense—to the way she keeps her belongings piled neatly just beside her and her body tucked in tightly. She's shapeshifted quite well to fit their expectations. But when she tucks her hair behind her ear exposing an eclectic collection of earrings that actually show some personality, a bit of the real Becca pokes through the façade of all-American perfection she's been molded into. The worn-in black Converse are familiar, too. There's my girl.

If I look past the polished presentation, I can still clearly envision her in the faded blue backward baseball cap, shorts, and tank top—her 'summer uniform' her mom would tease. Tomboy the neighborhood kids would call her. Back then, she didn't care, but that was before it was used to fuel the accusations leveled against us.

The tipping point of no return.

The reminders of the real her are evidence of the internal battle she's fighting with this curated imposter. But more than that, they're hope that she's still in there, that the girl I loved hasn't been replaced with some carbon copy of Chleo Bower. I shudder with horror.

I'll bring my girl back. I'll gladly set her free from the cage of conformity they've kept her in while I was away. The blood in my veins thrums with the challenge. I'm closer than ever to having what I've always wanted.

And damn if she isn't a sight to behold. Even in the dull, dreary setting of the university's poorly lit library, she's ethereal. Instead of washing her out, the fluorescent light that pours down on her from above reflects off her skin, bathing her in an angelic white glow.

An ache builds in my legs with the need to drop to my knees beneath that table, shove down those dainty lettuce-trim shorts, and see if she tastes as heavenly as she looks. It'll be made even sweeter when I make her scream and moan with pleasure defying all the 'keep quiet' signs plastered passive-aggressively on every wall. How pretty she'd be with her skin flushed from equal parts satisfaction and humiliation. A bit of humbling, just a little tumble from grace.

Publicly rejecting me not once but twice is unacceptable, after all. That's not how you treat people, especially an old friend. Admittedly, my pride bristled when I realized that there wasn't even a flicker of recognition when she lied to my face, but in truth, I've done a bit of transforming of my own—thank Aphrodite for that. But anonymity might serve me well for the time being, until I know exactly what I'm up against. Until I know how far I'll have to go to break through the walls she's put up around her truth. With a bit of self-restraint and the strength of my goddess, I intend to prove to her and everyone else that she wants me. And then I'll show her just how good it is to be mine.

But first, I need a plan. Getting Becca to confront the rotting skeletons she's kept in her closet will require tact, something I'm not predisposed to. But I can try to be patient. We've been playing the long game, and now victory is within my sight. All that time spent crying in my bedroom looking at old photos of our first day of school, sleepovers, and lemonade stands, stowing away memories of better times, it'll all be worth it when she finally sees we were meant to be. Forever. Just like we always said.

That pretty picture is overshadowed by a swaying blond ponytail that blocks my view.

"Hey, Bec," Ponytail says with reservation.

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“Hey, Theresa.” Becca closes her book with a sigh and looks up at the other woman. “What’s up?”

“Don’t be like that.”

“Like what?” Becca starts packing her books away.

“Distant. Weird.” Her friend leans across the table and places a hand on hers. “You and Meg should talk. I know you two can work it out.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“No. Meg won’t say. But are you really going to throw years of friendship away over your pride?” Theresa pushes.

Becca scoffs, pulling her hand away and resuming her task. “My pride isn’t the problem. It’s not really any of your business, honestly. If Meg wants to talk to me, she can.”

And with that, my recon mission ends on a sour note as Becca makes her way out of the library as quickly as possible. Thanks a lot Theresa.

But I can’t be completely pissed at her; she’s served the important purpose of reminding me about a potential sticking point in my plan, Meg. Becca’s jealous best friend who’s hopelessly in love with her. Too bad for Meg, I held that role first, and I’m not willing to back down. Becca has been and always will be, mine.

I pity anyone who stands in the way of that. While Aphrodite might be best associated with love and beauty, she's also been worshipped as a war goddess, and as they say, all is fair in love and war.

Chapter 4

Stasi

53 Days till Death

After two months of diligent observation—a study in all things Becca Murphy—I'm ready to start on phase two of my seduction of her heart.

Weaving my way through the parking lot, I find her white Jeep. As usual, her windows are cracked allowing me to slip in the first of my gifts, a poem inspired by a Sappho fragment that made me think of her on my homemade, pressed-floral stationery.

-I loved you, Atthis, years ago-

And I love you still.

With every lie that slips through those velveteen lips.

Despite the veil of perfection that you and your truth hide behind.

I'll meet you there beneath the cloak of secrecy,

if it's there that you'll look at me with desire in your eyes.

Despite your words, we both know your body never lies.

I look forward to tasting the honey sweetness of your honesty.

But for now, I wait with patience for the day you're ready to admit that you also want me.

When the breeze picks up, the lingering scent of my special-blend rosewater spray—imbued with three drops of my spit and a bit of cum—clings to the air. I breathe deeply with relief as I peek over the edge of her window and confirm the letter has landed on her seat.

My reverie is cut short by the telltale jingle of her keychain that's weighed down by an eclectic array of charms and keys. Warmth swells within me at the reassurance that she's nearby.

Quickly, I duck behind the hood of a nearby SUV, and watch Becca hoist herself into her seat. When she turns the key in the ignition, her gaze catches on the seat next to her, my love letter. Picking it up, she turns it over in her hands, reading her name in flourishing letters on one side and the lilac seal on the other. Becca looks left and right, as if she can sense my eager eyes, and then breaks the seal. Slowly, her lips turn upward, and she slides the tortoiseshell sunglasses she's wearing up into her hair.

With great restraint, I stay in my hiding spot. With gentle hands, she slides the wildflower-embellished paper out of the matching envelope. The few lines of poetry are read quickly, but her eyes linger, reading it over and over, taking in every detail of the hand-drawn doodles I added. If I were closer, I'd be able to see the blush she hides behind her hand and hear the gasp that falls from her mouth.

My girl is pleased.

Becca's head tilts back against the headrest, allowing me to see the broad smile that spreads across her face. I did that.

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The picture-perfect scene is disrupted by that obnoxious Nate guy who was harassing Becca at her birthday party. I've witnessed a few heated exchanges between them from afar over the last few months, but the familiarity he displays as he slides into her passenger seat has my hackles raised. Did I miss a chapter along the way?

Becca jumps in surprise, pressing her back into the door behind her. Nate shakes his head. Unfortunately, I never picked up the skill of lip reading, so I'm forced to remain ignorant, but I can infer the expectation as he smirks at her and gestures to his lap.

The joy fresh from my victory is completely crushed when he tears the letter from between her hands and throws it into the back seat. "Push him away," I hiss under my breath, but Becca only casts a look left and right. She doesn't fight him.

My stomach is in my throat as several beats pass without movement. But without further objection, she gathers her long hair in her fist, leans across the car, and disappears from view behind the dashboard.

My Mary Janes catch on the uneven pavement, but I don't spare another glance to see if they saw me. I can't risk fortifying that gut-churning image of him inside her. Clambering into my car, I slam the door behind me. My keys fumble between my fingers as I attempt to start the engine.

When the ignition finally roars to life, I speed off, nearly hitting the guy who walks into the street without a second look.

"Watch where the hell you're going, asshole." My words are slurred by the sobs

bursting out of me in choppy spurts.

“No, no, no, no,” I growl through my teeth like I can will away what I just saw.

She wouldn't do that. She can't want him.

Going against every lick of sense I have, I chance a look in my rearview mirror, and sure enough, I catch a glimpse of them. She's still blowing him. Recklessly. In public. For everyone to see. After she acted like kissing me at that party was the most humiliating thing in the world?

That's not right. That's not how this was supposed to go.

52 Days till Death

Despite how hard I try to convince myself that I imagined that scene in the parking lot, my memory remains crystal clear. Every time I close my eyes, all I see is Becca bent over in that car while he slips his undeserving cock inside her throat.

My stomach tightens with nausea, the memory so visceral that I can't do anything but sleep. For the first time since I transferred to her school, I don't wake up in the morning and follow Becca around campus. I don't leave bed at all except when absolutely necessary.

How can I when my girl has given herself to someone else? What's even the point?

51 Days till Death

Another paper crumples in my cramped hand as I scribble across the page.

She needs another letter, that's all. That'll fix things. That'll make sure I'm the only

thing that crosses her mind. A reminder of my love will make her forget the taste of his cock.

Easy.

We'll be back on the right track soon.

I just need to show her.

But instead of poetry, terms of endearment, or flowery confessions of my long-fought love from afar, what I've created is crude, possessive, and demanding. It's no work of art, the page filled with rudimentary hearts that are over-lined with harsh, corrective strokes that failed at perfection, and three rows of three words written nine times.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

At the very bottom, 'You Are Mine.' Is circled and underlined at least a dozen times.

There's a stark difference in the writing of the repeated phrase and the claim, the latter in the much more juvenile block lettering of my adolescence, while my proclamations follow the soft, flowing penmanship I've developed as an adult. I drop the pen and startle to my feet.

My therapist told me this would happen if I stopped going. But she was wrong. She was wrong for so long. Working with Lady Aphrodite has healed me. She's shown me a new path. She's taken my hand and given me the tools I need to pursue my destiny in a way that's safe for me and Becca.

Attachment issues. Obsessive love disorder. Fixations.

Labels I'd rejected attempt to reaffix themselves to me. I shrug them off.

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She was wrong. I'm fine. I won't go back down that road.

There's nothing wrong with me. All I need is love.

Love is the answer to everything.

She'll see. They'll all see. I was right. I was right about it all. I'll show them.

With a practiced stretch, the scrunchie on my wrist snaps against my skin. Once, twice, three times. I bring the bit of fabric to my nose and pull in a deep breath. A hint of her sweet scent seeps into my nasal passage and my shoulders relax just a fraction. With another whiff, my fingers loosen a bit. On the third inhale, I drop the other ruined sheet of stationery from my fist and then gather all the discarded papers in a pile.

Shame perches on my shoulders an unwelcome visitor as I shove the evidence of my episode in my bottom dresser drawer and crawl into bed.

"Everything is fine," I reiterate the affirmation and click off the light.

50 Days till Death

Sleep avoids me like my goddess, her absence leaving my room as devoid of life as the dawn sky that peeks through my curtain. Peeling off the sweaty pajamas that cling to me, I drape a cotton robe over myself and return to my desk. Instead of returning to the letters, I open my laptop, click on my bookmarks, and navigate to my favorite source of news, Becca's profile. There's a new photo.

Without clicking on it, it's difficult to make out the grainy, filtered photo, but the familiar symbol of a sprig of lavender is clear enough. Heart in my throat, I tap on the square. The top half of the letter I left her is the focal point of the photo, the envelope—seal-side up—and a freshly picked California wild rose from her front yard are placed somewhat aesthetically at each side.

Some of the heaviness I've been hoarding in my chest escapes through my gasp of pleasant surprise. Excitedly scrolling down, I quickly read the caption. When life gives you a silver lining, cherish it. But it's not the sickly-sweet caption that holds my attention, it's the comments that unfold below it.

Gag me.

Delete this.

Did you write yourself a love letter? Pathetic.

Desperate for attention much?

Embarrassing.

My throat constricts and sweat beads across my brow as the cruel words take me back to the days when I used to allow people to talk to me like that. The little relief I've found is poisoned with the ignorant judgments of my peers once again.

That neglected little girl inside me tugs at the edge of my consciousness for the smallest bit of comfort. I deny her. I deny myself.

Maybe we're not worthy of love, after all. Maybe I was just a fool to think things could change.

46 Days till Death

On the seventh day of mourning the horrific scene I witnessed between Becca and that shitbag who isn't worthy of breathing the same air as her let alone receiving pleasure from her perfect lips, I remember who the fuck I am. Or better yet, Aphrodite reminds me with her incessant demanding presence. Get back up. This isn't over.

With her annoyed yet affectionate persistence, I finally find the willpower to stop moping and refocus. Our entire lives have been leading up to this. Maybe this is just a test of my love.

Before I can resume my pursuit, I need to deal with the offensive smell of my unwashed body and the ratty tangles that web through my hair.

"Let's get this shit over with," I sigh to myself as I drag my ass to the shower. But as the cool water spills over me, it holds me close and reinvigorates my determination. When I've washed and rinsed away all the jealousy, failure, and self-loathing that clings to me, I step out and fall into the steps of a loyal devotee and caring lover.

With the candles lit, and sliced apples and Belgian chocolate laid out on the golden tea plate, I set to work shuffling my mermaid tarot deck and pulling a singular card.

The chariot upright. That's all the encouragement I need.

39 Days till Death

Ignoring the ache in my wrist, I write out the excerpt from Sappho fragment thirty-one.

For when I look at you even for a short time, it is no longer possible for me to speak.

The famed poet's words followed by mine are surrounded by the tiny pieces of the orange and red petals I used in this batch of paper. Pleased with my work, I spritz the page a few times with the enhanced rose water and shake it gently to dry before the ink runs. It's ready.

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Not quite prepared to return to the scene of the crime, I make the familiar drive to Becca's house. As I exit the freeway and make the series of left and right turns I've memorized, the sun beams down on me warm and bright, reassuring me that this is the right path. I play 'Still Into You' for the third time, screaming the lyrics in the privacy of my car as I drive through the quiet suburb.

Relief and disappointment war within me when I pull up to Becca's house and only her brother's car is in the driveway. My stomach lurches with the jolt of the car door unlocking. I've dressed as discreetly as my wardrobe allows—an all-black ensemble of a simple sweater and leggings—but I still rush across the street after quickly looking both ways, slip the envelope under the corner of the welcome mat, and nearly jog back to my car.

An unsteady laugh leaves me and my skin heats from my toes up as I close the door behind me and slink into my seat taking steadying breaths. Peeking over the ledge of my window, I confirm that he didn't see me. The note is still tucked away, waiting for her. With that reassurance, I turn the key in the ignition and watch her house disappear in my rearview window.

Unfortunately, I can't leave all my stress behind. My playlist is interrupted by the incessant ringing cell phone I attempt to ignore as it rattles in my cup holder. I've never been great at restraint and to my detriment, I neglect to check the caller ID before answering.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Anastasia." Any elation evacuates my body swiftly.

“Mother.” My molars grind together, almost as unpleasant as her voice. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Well, if you’d responded to the invitation, this wouldn’t be necessary,” she replies haughtily. “But since you refuse to utilize the etiquette I painstakingly attempted to instill in you, following up with you like a debt collector is unfortunately necessary.”

“I’m not coming. Does that clear things up?” I bite out. “Sorry to have wasted your time, but no need to worry about factoring me into your plans.”

“It’s Christmas.”

“And?”

“And how do you think it makes your father and I look when you’re absent from our annual party? Do you have any idea how much energy it takes to come up with some thinly veiled excuse for your absence every year? One can only travel for so long,” she complains to me.

“Well, I apologize for the inconvenience. But, hey, on the bright side, you don’t have to worry about me marring the annual family photo or the grueling task of finding a dress in my size to match your theme. What is it this year? Gaudy opulence with a side of Christmas spirit?” I exhale a long sigh, exacerbated by my mother’s failure to care about anything but her image even now. “Look, tell them I’m dead for all I care.”

“Anastasia Eden, we’ll be doing no such thing,” she scoffs. My mother’s frustration thrums through the line; it hammers against my temples from thousands of miles away. “So, you’re declining the invitation?”

“Consider my RSVP a ‘no’.”

“Are you really so intent on separating yourself from this family?”

“You can’t separate yourself from something you’ve never really been a part of.”

“That’s not fair.”

“It never is with you, is it?” I put the car in park. “I guess I’ll talk to you again this time next year. Or we can just never do this again? Balls in your court, Eleanor.” Ending the call, I toss my phone on the seat with more force than I mean to.

In less than five minutes, my good mood is ruined, but there’s too much to do to dwell on the unpleasant reminder of where I come from. I need a bath.

Sinking into the water, I use the net to scrub away the negativity she’s forced to seep from my pores. But even when my skin is red and angry, the inadequacy and longing linger, like a sticky and unsettling residue that dims my glow. I bite into my lip with the vampiric urge to leech out the insecurity, instead of allowing the budding tears to fall from my stinging eyes. I will not cry because of her.

I won’t cry over the absence of a mother’s love. I’m more than a regrettable obligation.

I won’t cry over the unfair standards that were thrust on me with a life I didn’t ask for. I’m perfect as I am. I’m everything that I am meant to be.

I won’t cry over the neglected little girl I used to be. I’m going to ensure she gets the love she deserves.

I won’t cry over my past. I’ve come too far. I’ve come too far. I’ve come too far.

Instead, I pour myself into the only thing that matters.

36 Days till Death

With a fresh stack of paper finally dried, I get back to work. Within hours, I have dozens of letters inspired by the works of Sappho ready to be gifted. I've been slacking but now she'll never wonder whether I'm thinking of her. I won't let her forget about me again.

September 28th, 2014

-Gracious your form and your eyes

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As honey: desire is poured upon your lovely face

Aphrodite has honored you exceedingly.-

The stars are dim compared to the diamonds that sparkle in your eyes.

The sun is unbearably cold without the warmth of your laughter.

Spring and her flowers envy the blossom of your smile between your delightful lips.

In my world, your beauty eclipses all else.

September 29th, 2014

-Know this.

From every care.

You could release me.-

I wake with a hunger for you that cannot be satiated.

My sleep is filled with the restlessness that plagues me like your absence from my bed.

Each breath is labored as I swim against the current to find my way back to you.

In the mess of my mind, my devotion to you is the only thing that's true.

Set me free.

Come back to me.

October 3rd, 2014

-Come to me now: loose me from hard care and all my heart longs to accomplish, accomplish. You be my ally.-

You torture me in ways you can't even fathom.

And yet, I cling to the hope of your love like it's my last shred of humanity.

Please don't let me languish much longer, or there might not be much left of me.

October 6th, 2014

-Sweet Aphrodite has overcome me with longing for a girl.-

The first time I saw you, everything else in the world was cursed to pale in comparison.

Through the years you've only become more beautiful, leaving the world a dark and dismal place.

What do I do, then, if you won't be with me?

Do I carve my own eyes out, or do I watch you hopelessly from here until my final breath?

October 10th, 2014

-Never more damaging O Eirana have I encountered you-

My patience strains, my need yawning wide, tearing me to shreds.

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And I would let it rip me apart at the seams if only for the hope that you would sew me back together.

October 15th, 2014

-Whom should I persuade (now again) to lead you back into my love?-

Time stretches between us, but the treacherous wait can't discourage me.

I would barter away all of my years for just a second of your affection.

October 18th, 2014

-You came and I was crazy for you.

And you cooled my mind that burned with longing.-

If I blink, I can take myself back to the moment when your body pressed into mine.

There I wait for you to find me with a bleeding heart and a smile on my lips.

October 20th, 2014

-Stand to face me, beloved.

And open out the grace of your eyes.-

Soon, we'll be together and then you'll see why I never gave up on you and me.

Chapter 5

Becca

50 Days till Death

The second the lecture slides shut off, I'm cramming my belongings into my messenger bag, but I'm not fast enough to make it out unscathed.

"Where are you off to so fast?" Nate's hand quietly subdues me as he places it on top of the notebook and papers still on my desk.

"I'm not feeling well," I blurt out the first excuse I can think of as I watch the last of the class exit. What if I scream right now? What if I tell everyone who he really is? What he's capable of. The fleeting thoughts cross my mind for the hundredth time, but my lips remain closed.

"You look...fine." He assesses with boredom. "You wouldn't be avoiding me would you?"

"Would it matter if I tried?" I counter and lean forward in an attempt to cover the corner of the letter sticking out from beneath everything else.

"No." His eyes snag on the floral paper that's easy to spot amongst the otherwise bland items. "What's this? Were you writing me a love letter?" His lip furls around the mockery.

"It's nothing." I reach for it, but he swats my hand away with a warning look. Quickly, his eyes scan the lines of poetry, the ones I can't get out of my head, and

dismisses it just as I expected.

“Aren’t we a little old for all that?” He flings it over his shoulder, and I rush after the floating note with a huff.

“It’s for a project, asshole,” I lie easily. The truth doesn’t belong with him. He’ll never have anything honest out of me.

“Such a fucking nerd.” Nate rolls his eyes as his fingers move across the tiny keyboard of his phone. “I’ll see you next Friday, right?” he asks without looking up.

“What’s next Friday?” My gut tightens with the apprehension of whatever terror he’s going to reign down on me.

“Halloween. The party?”

“I’m not much in a party mood, Nate.” I start packing my bag again to avoid the temper in his gaze. Unfortunately for me, my mouth has outweighed the act of submission.

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“Too bad for you, I’m not giving you much of a choice.” Nate’s strong hand tightens around my wrist until perspiration coats my brow with the exertion it takes not to make a sound or let a single tear fall. My teeth grind together so harshly that I fear they’ll crack. Only then do I meet his eyes. “Don’t fucking test me, Becca,” he seethes. “If you don’t watch your mouth, I’m going to bend you over this desk and really give you something to cry about.” When I don’t make another retort, he finally releases me and then shoves a plastic bag into my arms. “This is what you’re wearing. Be there before eleven.” Pointing his finger at me he raises his brow. “If you’re not there, I’m showing everyone the tape.”

“Wait. No. We had a—,” He’s moving toward the door before I’m able to object any further. Not that it would do any good. “Fucking asshole,” I growl under my breath when the door finally closes behind him.

With shaking hands, I clean up my desk, saving the beautiful textured paper for last. Rubbing my finger across the delicate leaves fused with the pulp, I read the words again, ‘stand to face me beloved’ and oh, how I wish I could now more than ever.

What I wouldn’t give to have someone worship me with tender words instead of the hissing insults and belligerent commands I’m trying to become numb to. The problem is, I have no idea who could be sending these letters. Who’d want someone like me?

Chapter 6

Stasi

October 31, 2014 – Halloween – 2 Days till Death

Writing anyone other than Becca's name on my skin is painful, but I'm nothing if not committed to perfectly executing Halloween costumes—it's a sacred art. From the 'Tiff' necklace and mole, to the way I've tucked my hair to appear shorter. The slip I'm substituting for the wedding dress might be a tad shorter, but it works. I did the best I could with such last-minute notice. It was a lucky coincidence that I was sitting outside Becca's window eavesdropping on her conversation with her mom.

The candles flicker on the altar. Thank you, Aphrodite.

I'm not quite ready just yet, so I take a seat at my vanity and pick up my tarot cards. While I shuffle with practiced fingers, I hum along with Melissa Etheridge's iconic voice. The gilded edges reflect the candlelight as I pull three cards. Any remaining unease about going to the frat party tonight slips away when I reveal The Star upright, followed by the Six of Wands upright, and finally, the Two of Cups upright. A tingle of anticipation courses through me at all the signs pointing to good things on the horizon.

Tonight is the night. And just to be sure, I'm bringing a trusted friend for good luck. Reaching out my window into the large planter box that hangs from it, I grab the jars of sex toys that I charged under the moon last night. Brushing away the dirt, I open each jar and pull out an amethyst wand, a strap-on dildo, and my handy fingertip vibrator—thankfully waterproof. The vibe is the only thing coming with me, but there's no harm in being prepared for other activities when Becca could very well be coming home with me.

A rush of adrenaline spikes within me. Is this that Christmas Eve feeling everyone with normal families talks about?

I'm anxious to get to the party, to see my girl, but I don't want to be standing around with nothing to do. The last thing I want is to talk to anyone. Checking the clock, I decide to kill a little more time with a ritual.

I sprawl out on my bed, part my legs, and bring the toy to life. The low buzz of the vibrator drowns out the quiet music as I slip my finger beneath my panties, concentrating the toy on my clit, while my other hand teases my center. With intent focus, I replace my surroundings with the fantasy I invoke into fruition.

I'll walk Becca through it; she hasn't ever been with another woman. She'll need a bit of encouragement, but I know she'll be a natural once she gets over her own hang-ups.

"Becca," I moan. "Touch me right there, baby." My middle finger teases my entrance. "Yeah, just like that, ease yourself on in. I'm ready for you" Her elegant hands will look so lovely exploring my cunt. "That feels amazing, the way you're working my needy pussy." I pump in and out in tandem with my vibrating pointer finger that moves in circles. "Go ahead and add another finger." My right pointer finger slips inside me. "Fuck into me just like that. You're doing so good, Angel."

My hips arch off the bed, and I suck in a breath as I ratchet up the vibration level. "That's it. Faster. Harder. Show me who this pussy belongs to. Make me say your name." My back bows and my toes curl. "Yes, yes, yes..." I'm so close. I add more pressure against my clit as I move my fingers faster. "Oh, fuck, shit, Becca," I yelp as words fail me, and I'm only able to moan out my orgasm.

Once I've collected myself and cleaned the toy, I lace up my black combat boots and pull on the leather jacket that completes the look from the movie, then give a spin in the mirror. It's perfect.

Now, to confront my fear of going to a frat party. The things I do for love.

Chapter 7

Becca

October 31st, 2014 – Halloween – 40 Days till Death

It's now or never.

My pulse pounds against my skin in a frantic drum beat that scatters all coherent thoughts as I act on pure instinct. As soon as Nate's attention is diverted, I make a break for it and slip through the crowd of costumed partygoers grinding on each other. Just a few more feet to go, then I'll be hidden away behind a door and a lock.

I know it's not enough to stop Nate if he wants to get to me, but I'm hoping his reputation will be more important to him than causing a scene that'll have too many people asking questions. He's already belligerent and I just got here. It's bad enough on one of his 'good nights' when he's at least got some sense to show some restraint. I don't want to find out what it'll be like with him out of control. All of them out of control. Hiding in here is the best chance of protecting myself.

Planting my palms on the bathroom counter that's miraculously clean for a fraternity, I suck in uneven breaths. The cool stone grounds me and gives me something stable to lean on, while I try my best not to unravel in public.

With my breathing under control, I chance a look at my reflection and resist the urge to flinch away from what I see there. Almost every inch of my body is on display in the tiny outfit—more like lingerie—Nate insisted I wear.

His satisfied words stick with me like eager maggots burrowed into my skin. There's my princess.

I'm not sure what the worst part is... the obnoxious crown pinned to the top of my head, or the sad excuse for a dress. The pink ruffle-y skirt skims the very top of my thighs, barely covering my panties—the full-coverage pair I picked out, not the G-string it came with—and the white bodice is so thin that it's virtually see-through.

The entire ensemble, or lack thereof, is only held up by skinny straps that would tear with one hard yank. Will I walk out of here in anything tonight? My threadbare ego hopes so.

The glass bottle I've carried in here tinkles sharply as I twist it to reveal the alcohol content. The high percentage makes my insides squirm. I'm the definition of a lightweight, but it's my only hope. My saving grace. Or it's supposed to be. If I drink this, at least there's a better chance I won't remember all the ways they defile my body. At least there's some chance I can hold my sanity together a little longer until I figure out how to get myself out of this situation for good.

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While I'm distracted having a standoff with the bottle, the lock starts to move from vertical to horizontal. Lunging forward at the last second, I grip the handle and take the twisting mechanism between my clammy fingers. But they're no match for whatever tool they're using on the other side.

As the door swings open, I flatten myself against the wall behind it, hoping beyond all reason that I can go undetected. It's a silly attempt, but desperate times call for desperate measures. A gust of cool air brushes across my front as they shove the door closed. Squeezing my eyes closed tightly, I brace myself for aggressive unwanted hands and sloppy lips.

"There you are," a faintly familiar voice coos. "You're trembling, Angel. Are you that excited to see me?" The words drip in honey, but they're sprinkled with spice, a combination that reaches right into the pit of my gut.

Taking a steadying breath, I force my lashes to part. Two luminous brown eyes stare intently at me through a rim of intense black eyeliner and a face covered in blood spatter. But my gaze is drawn to the name 'Chucky' written over a heart on her breast. I don't get the chance to assess the rest of her costume that's concealed from me as she presses our hips together. Once again, my feet are glued to the floor as I slip into her trance.

"Did you miss me?" She pushes for a reaction, her lips curving wickedly. Maybe she'll go away on her own if I don't give her the attention she's looking for.

"Do I know you?" I stumble over the absurd words. Of course, there's no mistaking her. Despite how hard I've tried to forget her, the spiced scent of her perfume, and the

taste of mint on her tongue, she's plagued my nightmares on and off for months now.

Her cocky laugh punctuates what she and I both know... I couldn't forget her if I tried. Her body. Her lips. Her words. Her very essence is deeply ingrained in my mind—both conscious and unconscious—the reminder of her sneaking around the edges of my awareness whenever I let my guard down. I can't let her know that, though. Nobody can know that.

"I'd be happy to jog your memory, if necessary." Those vixen eyes flash with challenge as she looks down at me.

Instead of answering, I attempt to feign disinterest by inspecting her necklace, but she smoothly intercepts me, wrapping her fingers around my wrist and pinning it to the wall above my head. My other hand freezes uselessly on her chest as her cinnamon and rose scent infiltrates my space. "What, what are you doing?" I manage to stammer around the saliva flooding my mouth.

"What I should have done the last time I had the chance." She leans in and I tilt my head back in an attempt to evade the kiss I was anticipating, but I play right into her hands as I open my body to her, and she seizes the opportunity to drag her dominating tongue over my nipple. The dampness immediately soaks through the nearly sheer fabric of my party-store bodice.

In the mirror, I'm watching the nightmare that's been tormenting me come to fruition. It's torturously pleasurable.

My wrist flexes against her chest, failing to put space between us. The cold metal of her dermal piercings is distinctly intimate against my palm; I fight the urge to dig my nails in as she pushes defiantly against me. "And what's that?" I ask, the words forcefully sucked out of me in a rasping shudder as she latches her lips around the tip sending crackling pleasure traveling through my body. It's like experiencing my first

buzz all over again—head light, body heavy, everything moving slowly. I've never been much of a drinker, but it's easy to see why people chase the feeling now.

“Making sure you'll crave me to the point of madness...until you can't help but seek me out. Until you're pleading for just a drop of me on your tongue to quench the unending thirst that is your need for me,” she finally answers far too easily as she pulls her mouth off of my breast. “Tell me, do you think of me every time you close your eyes?” Her confident laugh skates across my skin sultry and tempting. “Are you ready to admit that I'm your dream girl?” The taunt nudges at something hidden within my subconscious. Before I can follow that train of thought, she repeats the same intoxicating movements on my neck followed by nips at my collarbone. My natural response to the threat of teeth on skin is to shrink away, but I lean into it. Instead of protesting, only a squeak escapes me when the sharp ridge of her front teeth meets my collarbone right over the bruising I've kept carefully hidden all night with my long hair and layers of makeup.

Shame blossoms across my skin, and I begin to squirm as she simply hovers there, mouth open, breath pulsing and wetness gathering from her saliva like she might be able to taste my humiliation. A dozen explanations cross my mind, but I don't have a good one that wouldn't make my already precarious situation worse. The last thing I need is someone like her involved in my personal life, so I channel that defensiveness. “What's wrong?”

“Just thinking about how satisfying it will be when you beg me to mark you someday.”

“That's not going to happen.” The confidence with which I say that wavers—the words without substance, crumbling—as her nose skims along my jaw.

“What is this to you then?” Her tongue flicks out, toying with the hoop that dangles from my ear, and I fight a shiver as the pleasant heat of her mouth teases the sensitive

flesh.

“A distraction.” I take a breath buying time to focus my thoughts. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

“You’re so cute when you’re flustered,” she purrs into my ear. “Trust me, there will come a day when you proudly proclaim yourself as mine.”

“I’m not flustered,” I insist. “And I’m not yours.”

“Not yet. But I’ll remember you said that.” Her teeth graze the delicate skin along my neck. “Don’t worry I won’t hold it against you.” She leans back to look at me, her hand coming up and latching around my throat. “Well, not too much.” Her bubbly laugh raises the hair on the back of my neck. “I mean, I might make you beg a little.” The pressure increases a fraction and my body tenses as I remember the possessive grip that’s usually used to hold me still. I catch my wide eyes in the mirror. My skin has blanched with reflexive fear that’s become my most natural reaction to any touch. This isn’t feeling like so much of an escape anymore.

Her eyes track the movement in my shoulders and the tightening of my throat. “What’s wrong, Babygirl?” Her thick brows dip with genuine concern. “Do you want me to stop?” The words are uncertain. Coming from her it’s sobering. She takes a step back so she can see all of me and I can see all of her. “Use your words. Becca. If you want me to stop, tell me.” Playing with the bar through her tongue, she fidgets while she waits for my answer.

A flare of panic rolls down my spine as my muscles spasm with the urge to close the distance between us. My throat’s as dry as Death Valley, making it nearly impossible to vocalize my answer. The hesitation has nothing to do with the warring thoughts of curiosity and survival. Between my fingers, I swirl two pieces of the ruffled skirt together trying to find some sense in the repetitive motion.

Making out with her is thrilling, even if it's nothing more than a kiss. Which it's not. Tons of women hook up with each other when they're drunk, it's no big deal. Some would even say it's an essential part of the college experience. Since I'm getting ready to graduate soon, isn't it kind of a rite of passage that I partake? I swallow roughly and my gaze slides to the bottle of vodka that sits on the bathroom counter.

"Mmm, mmm, mmm" the blond shakes her head. "I'm not letting you off that easy." She wags a perfectly manicured finger at me. "Yes, or no?" She kneels before me.

For several seconds all I can do is shake my head back and forth in panic as I realize what she intends. "No." I jerk forward and press my thighs together. "We can't. I'm, umm, I'm on my period."

That tantalizing tongue strokes her lips as she stares up at me. I shake my head again, insistent. "Okay." She stands. "But for the record, I don't mind." When I make a face of disgust she just laughs. "So, is that a yes?" She unzips her purse and holds up something small and pink. "Or no?" It slips on her finger. "Let me make it easy for you. Do you want to feel good, or do you want to go back out there and have some incompetent jackass use you?"

Despite all of the alarms sounding in the back of my head, I nod. Holding my gaze for several seconds, she waits for what she deems long enough for an objection, then her lips crash into mine. Claiming. Certain. Ravenous. The way she treats me like I belong to her emboldens me to open up willingly.

I hold on tight, grabbing at her exposed hips. She's soft and supple beneath my hands, nothing like the hard muscle I'm used to being crushed under. Her weight presses into me, pinning me to the wall, but it's reassuring instead of suffocating. I grip her, needing her closer. There's no resistance; our bodies move together in synchronicity, her leg slipping between mine as she lifts my left leg up and around her hip. To hold myself steady, I plant the front of my shoe against the counter, which tilts my hips

just so. A gasp leaves me when she rubs a finger over my center, driving me upward onto my toes.

“You okay, Sweetheart?” The teasing words tickle against my tongue. She doesn’t wait for me to answer, a light vibration coming to life between my legs as she slides her finger back and forth. My responding moan falls from my mouth into hers and she swallows it with a groan. “That’s right, Angel. I told you I’m going to make you feel good.” Further proving her point, she moves the toy in circles over my clit and my body jolts forward at the unfamiliar sensation. “Oh baby, nobody’s ever worked your clit like this, have they?” She lets out a mischievous chuckle that would make me self-conscious if she wasn’t distracting me with increasing pressure and little movements that are too perfectly mapped to my body. “That’s just cruel. But more fun for me. I’m going to show you a whole new fucking world when you let me. I’m going to blow that pretty little mind every chance I get.” With a click, the vibrations intensify. “For my first trick, I’m going to make you come.”

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“I don’t even know your name,” I manage to string the sentence together between chattering teeth and a liquid mind.

“So prim and proper, aren’t you, my girl.” She laughs at me again. “When I tell you, I want it to be somewhere I can hear you properly scream it.” She brushes the fingers of her free hand across my cheek. “I suppose baby could suffice in the meantime?”

I scoff. “I’m not calling you that.”

“How about, my god?”

I don’t get a chance to object because the air is sucked out of my lungs when she switches the device onto what I can only hope is the most powerful vibration. My feet ache with impending cramps as I flex and writhe under her attention.

“Say it.” She tugs at my tampon string, yanking it out of me as her finger dips inside me at the same time. Ignoring my yelp of disapproval, she adds more pressure to my clit. “Shh, shh, shh. Don’t worry about that. Just think about how good it feels.” She proves her point, my embarrassment fading to the back of my mind as her fingers pump inside me. “Doesn’t that feel nice? Come on, say it, Angel,” she coos. “Tell everyone at this party that I’m your god. Thank me for the gift I’m about to bestow on you.”

“I can’t,” I whimper quietly, trying to contain my impending unraveling to just this room.

“Are you sure?” she asks while applying another bout of pressure.

“I can’t,” I repeat as my body threatens to explode from the contradicting emotions pounding through me. “This isn’t me.”

“This isn’t you shaking around my fingertips?”

I shake my head, unable to speak dishonestly when every inch of my body is quivering with desire.

“That’s too bad, my pretty little liar.” The room falls silent as she cuts off the toy’s power and steps back, dropping my leg from around her hip. I barely catch myself on my hands when my knees give out.

“What the—”

“One way or another, you’re going to worship me.” I watch with revulsion as she slips the toy into a plastic baggie and zips it without washing away the sticky redness coating it, but she speaks before I can protest. “Now that you’ve had a taste of just how good it can be, you’re going to crave me.”

It’s a challenge; it’s a curse. My ragged breaths are my only protest as I search her gaze for any sign of a bluff. Deciphering what I read there is nearly impossible with my clit pulsing as violently as my erratic heartbeat.

“Don’t look so glum, Babygirl. We both got what we wanted.” She smirks up at me in the mirror as she washes my blood from her hands with unfathomable casualness. “You got your distraction, and I proved my point.” With a wink, she shuts off the sink.

She’s halfway out the door when she turns back to me. “Maybe next time you won’t be so stubborn?” Blowing a kiss, she slips back into the party like she was never here. Like she didn’t just turn my world upside down.

Scrambling for the lock, I secure my space once again so I can panic in private. What the fuck did we just do? Despite the lack of a chaser, I take two long swigs from the bottle, letting the warm alcohol worm its way through me with a naive hope that it'll dull my humiliation and frustration and help me pretend this never happened.

A sharp knock on the bathroom door reverberates against the back of my skull managing to shake loose whatever insanity has come over me. Fear sweeps through me, tensing every muscle and pumping adrenaline into my veins.

The rattling intensifies, forcing me to quickly check that I'm presentable—I brush my fingers through my hair, fix the part of my skirt that flipped up, and wipe the feel of her from my lips—then emerge into the hallway like nothing more than an upset stomach happened even though I feel like a town torn through by a tornado on the inside.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Nate slurs. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you.” I avoid the heavy gaze of Rob from over his shoulder.

“I wasn’t feeling well.” That’s exactly it. The lie I’ll sell myself, too. Nothing more than some nausea. That didn’t happen. Couldn’t have. My tender lips throb in protest.

“Whatever. Get your ass upstairs; we’ll be right up,” he growls.

Instead of answering, I do as he says. With each step I ascend, my heart races faster; the alarm bells in my mind like a severe storm siren. Danger. Danger. Danger.

I consider putting in another tampon but choose not to as a small act of rebellion. Casting a look over my shoulder to see if anyone is watching me go into Nate’s room. I pause at the threshold for several seconds. Nobody cares.

Stumbling in the dark, I find my way to the window and twist open the blinds. A

group of people stand on the lawn, red cups in hand, smiles on their faces. Oblivious. Blissful. I watch them for a bit. Terrified. Resentful.

The alcohol burns my throat as it threatens to come back up when the music pours in behind me. Nobody needs to say anything; we all know what we're here for.

Forcing my muscles to relax, I become pliable. Not for their benefit, but for the soreness.

"That's it. Just relax," Richard slurs at me. While he closes in at my front, Nate comes up behind me, and with a harsh tug, he tears down my straps. With practiced hands, I peel down the rest of the dress and step out of it, my gaze fixed on one of the trippy posters past Richard's head. Bass thumps through the walls. Laughter and upbeat music are the sickening soundtrack to another piece of me dying.

"Get on the bed," Nate orders. Mechanically, I get onto my knees, shifting my focus to the photos of his family on the wall. His dad is tall and well-kept, wearing a suit that costs more than most people's monthly rent. His mom wears a tight smile to match her perfectly tailored dress.

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I bite my lip, so I don't gag when Nate's thighs touch the back of mine.

The picture next to that one is of Nate and his dad standing in an office in front of the logo for Peters Group, Attorneys at Law. The older man has a hand on his son's shoulder, the grip authoritative, his straight mouth cold.

Nate's hand clamps around the back of my neck like I'm squirrely prey. A chill creeps down my spine reminding me that it's time to go.

I'm eleven again. It smells like freshly mowed grass and sunblock. The sun shines in a blue sky and the breeze is refreshing on my skin. I separate paper cups while Ana, my best friend, fills them each three-quarters of the way with our homemade pink lemonade.

The scene glitches, a pair of thighs are pressing into my face and my throat is so full it hurts.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I find the lemonade stand again. Ana's smashing strawberries that will be poured into the cups after each person pays. Her dark blond hair tangles around her while she attempts to remain focused, having to pause every few seconds to get it out of her eyes. After the fourth time, I move behind her and gather the flyaways in my hands. On autopilot, I divide her hair into two parts, then each part into three strands, crossing the pieces over one another until they've been wrangled into tidy braids. The style suits her round face; it's my favorite. But I love the smile and the pink of her cheeks more.

The squeaking mattress and the claps of skin on skin interrupt the peaceful day.

Don't listen, don't listen, don't listen. I remind myself. I keep repeating it in my head until I'm with her again.

Ana pokes her finger through the plates of the braid. "Bex," her voice is hesitant.

"Yeah?" I stop messing with the sign we have tied with twine to the front of the table.

"We'll be friends forever, right?" She worries her lip between her teeth. Doesn't she know they're too pretty for that?

"Yes, forever." I throw my arms around her shoulders. Hers wrap around my stomach, and I've never felt safer. "Best friends forever."

"Becca," Nate's voice booms from behind me, shattering the memory. "Becca, get the hell up."

Sitting back on my knees, I press my hands to my thighs, ignoring the wetness that transfers from my ass cheek to my calf. "S-sorry." On autopilot, I quickly yank my underwear up, then grab my dress off the floor and pull it on over my heels. Without looking back, I exit the room and fly down the stairs, nearly twisting my ankle in the process. Going into the kitchen, I open the cabinet under the sink and snatch up the flannel I wore over to cover myself up on the way. I button the top, middle, and bottom buttons.

Flinging the front door open, I take a deep inhale. Two of the guys in the group just to the right of me look over, their eyes quickly losing interest. I don't recognize anyone with them, so I keep moving, wiping at my face and combing my fingers through my hair hastily as I search for someone who might be able to give me a ride out of here. Now.

Thankfully, I recognize Brittany walking to her car and even though we've hardly

spoken since my birthday, I dart after her. “I know things have been weird lately, but can you drop me off at home? Please.” I’m not above begging.

Her eyes flare wide. “Yeah, of course. Is everything okay?”

“No. Y-yes.” I need to get my shit together. “Yes. I just drank too much.”

Brittany’s brow furrows as she studies me. In our four years of friendship, she’s probably seen me drunk twice, but she doesn’t call my bluff. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

Sliding into the passenger seat, I hug my arms around myself and point my knees toward the passenger door. My mind is a jittery mess, but I don’t want to raise an alarm. Brittany turns on the heater and my leg stops bouncing.

“Becca, you know I still care about you, right?” She scans my outfit. “If you’re going through something, we can talk.”

“I’m fine.” I’m not, but I’m not going to confess to her when we’ve barely said a handful of words to each other over the last few months. She was Meg’s friend first. It’s fine. I turn up the dial on her radio. The music becomes distant as I follow the lines on the road with my eyes.

That didn’t happen.

That didn’t happen.

That didn’t happen.

I shove the memories of tonight in a box of secrets and shame just like the other relics of my past that I refuse to take a harder look at. I toss it in a coffin and bury it six feet

below the solidground I need to stand on. It's a system that hasn't failed me yet; I just hope that nobody ever goes digging it up because once those skeletons get out, there's no going back.

Chapter 8

Stasi

2 Days till Death

Bad things happen when you don't listen to your intuition.

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Things like watching the woman you've loved for twelve years go into the bedroom of a man who doesn't deserve her. Things like listening to the repulsive grunts of two unworthy pieces of shit getting off on what must surely be the most lackluster sex of her life—she didn't make a single sound. Not like the whimpers that spill from her mouth when I touch her.

The dagger of betrayal twists deeply in my gut. Was she so desperate to erase the feel of my touch? Did it make her so disgusted to experience pleasure at my hand? The sweetness of tonight's small victory turns sour with the slow leak of blood that's contaminating it.

That's what I get for sticking around somewhere I don't belong. If I hadn't snuck into the upstairs bathroom to extract her menstrual blood from the toy, I wouldn't have had to bear witness to such treachery. My fist tightens around the concoction I've made with moon water, mica, and jasmine oil, tinged pink with her blood. My arm shakes with the restraint I have to exert not to crush it in my bare hand or smash it against the wall.

But instead of doing either, I find a sliver of composure and force myself to put one foot in front of the other until I'm out the front door. In seething silence, I drive home taking turns almost too quickly and paying little attention to the suggestions of the signage. Their greedy, satisfied grunts are a loop, intent on driving me insane with jealousy and frustration even as I lay in my bed.

Hour after hour it plagues me. I toss and turn, trying desperately to escape the ugly truth that attempts to confront me. I pace the length of my room, fruitlessly losing the race against the devastating conclusions my mind jumps to. I go out on the balcony,

sucking in the fresh air that's free of the pollutants of my resentment. No matter what I do, nothing chases away the sounds of them inside her.

Is that what it's like being with straight men? Dispassionate mediocrity? I thank the goddess that I've never had to experience that firsthand. Part of me feels sorry for myself and what I had the misfortune of overhearing—haven't I been devoted in my love, haven't I followed the path set before me—but mostly I want to chop off every finger they laid on her...among other things.

Instead of turning to homicide, I do the mature thing and decide to lean on Aphrodite in my time of need. It's a big ask, but I have just the offering—I've been waiting to gift it for when I request something this generous. I can't think of a better occasion.

Pulling out the black velvet box, I open it and present the gold chainmail necklace on her altar. Dainty pearls and diamonds dangle from the jewelry and at the center hangs a gold heart. The candles flicker higher.

"Please, hear what I ask of you. Don't beseech me. I beg of you." I attempt to steady my breath so I can explain myself clearly. "I need her all to myself. I can't live like this anymore. I can't live without her." I'm on my knees, head pressed into the wooden ledge of the small table where the altar sits, my eyes glued to the steady flames of the candles, waiting for some kind of acknowledgment, for some sign that my plea has been heard. "I've been patient. There must be a way to get Nate, to get them out of the way. There has to be a way for us to be together once and for all. Please help me." Minutes pass and my eyes begin to sting with the forcefulness with which I hold them open and how much I resist each blink. I just need a sign.

One. Little. Sign.

When an hour passes, I can't interpret the answer as anything but no. But I don't accept it. I won't. I can't.

“Are you going to abandon me in my time of need like everyone else?” There’s no stopping the exhumation of my insecurities that insult everything we’ve built. “I thought you were the one who was going to love me unconditionally. You were supposed to be different,” I blow out the candles with tear-drenched lips, leaving me in a void of my darkest thoughts.

And there in the pitch black, lost in the bleakness of my melancholy, I’m surrounded by the childish laughter of my cruel peers. Voices layered over one another creep closer and closer, surrounding me in a ring of torment, but above all the noise, one stands out above them all.

Starting out barely above a whisper, Becca’s last words to me before our friendship imploded, worm their way into my ear. “I just don’t feel that way about you.” With each repetition, the mimicry of Becca’s twelve-year-old voice grows louder and louder, until the screaming makes my eardrums quake. Folding my pillow over my head, I attempt to drown it out, but it remains persistent throughout the entire night.

The second the sun rises, I’m out the door. Despondent and exhausted, I barely register the cars that zoom past me or the lights that dictate my movements on my way to deliver my message. And by deliver, I mean chuck the envelope holding the devastated words of Sappho into her yard as I drive by sobbing.

But me you have forgotten.

Or you love some man more than me.

November 2nd, 2014 – Death Day

Cut off from Becca and Aphrodite, I find myself adrift and easy prey to the parts of the past that are insistent on haunting me.

“Poor Ana Eden.” A disembodied voice travels from the left corner of my ceiling. “Nobody wants you.” The cutting words of my middle school bully are resurrected. “Nobody likes you.” It’s coming from right above me. “And even more pathetic, nobody loves you.” Coldness descends on me, heavy and persistent as it hovers over my body.

With a quickness, I flip on the light.

But there’s no demonic figure perching on my chest. There’s no intruder standing in the corner. It’s just me and my memories, crawling up the walls together. As maddening as it might be, maybe they’re right. Everyone has let me down. My goddess. My love. My best friend. My father. My mother. Over and over, everyone I put my faith in abandons me.

I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve this. All I want is to be loved as I am. Is that such a horrible thing to expect? Is it too much to ask?

The negative thoughts grow hands, cranking my emotions higher and higher, until they explode like a jack-in-the-box, all of the pain expelling outward in an outburst that shocks even me. The air around me pulses upon impact, and it’s all thrown back at me.

Nobody, nobody, nobody

Loves, loves, loves

You, you, you

The taunting words echo from every corner, dripping with malice. I cross the room, attempting to escape, but the voice follows, provoking me with each step.

Sad

Alone

Unwanted

Each tacked-on sentiment is a jab into an open lesion, the pain causing me to lash out.

“It’s not fair!” I scream as my head makes impact with the edge of the table. “It’s not fair.” Another smack. “It’s not fair.” My anger dissolves into a sob as my forehead makes violent contact with the wood again. And again, and again, and again, but the voice remains close and persistent. “I’m enough. I’m enough. I’m enough,” I whimper the affirmation I desperately want to believe. Instead of conviction, all I get is the first rumblings of a pulsing headache.

Beyond the throbbing, my mother’s unsympathetic advice haunts me for the hundredth time. “The sooner you accept your lot in life, the better, Anastasia. It’s time to stop playing pretend; for god’s sake, you’re too old for these childish fantasies. It’s getting embarrassing.” Fourteen or twenty-three, the words crush me beneath their steel-toed boot all the same.

Drawing uneven breaths into my lungs, dense air clogs my lungs, thick and burning like the fumes of freshly poured asphalt. As I find a rhythm between inhales and exhales, spots in my vision begin to clear, but one lingers too long. I turn to the left quickly, hoping to catch the earlier-suspected intruder by surprise, but there’s nothing. No one.

The snap of skin on skin reverberates around the room as I throw a sharp slap across my cheek. Instead of clearing my mind, it forces me to come face-to-face with my pathetic reflection. The muscles in my forearm ache as I teeter on the edge of ramping up for another stinging slap. Reconsidering, I retreat, tiptoeing off the

precipice of a breakdown and making the healthier choice.

Jagged breaths work in and out of me as I search for my discarded phone. Holding it in my shaking hands, I stare at the contact on my screen: Dr. Daniels. It's been two years since I've dialed this number. Two years of progress. Two years of healing. Two years free of narrow-minded clinical judgment. All gone down the drain so quickly.

With one last look at my red-rimmed eyes and swollen forehead, I summon the willpower and initiate the call.

"Anastasia, it's been a while," Dr. Daniels says hesitantly.

"Yeah, well, like you said, these things tend to be a vicious cycle." Admitting this is fucking excruciating as the muttered words tear at the seams of my tight lips.

"Do we need to make an appointment? You know I'm always happy to fit you in," she says in that reassuring voice I loathe.

"I—" Movement at the edge of my vision catches my attention, a ripple of chills left in the breeze of its wake. "Doctor—" My thoughts slow and stumble over one another as I catch a glimpse of it in the reflection, lingering in a corner behind me—dark and lithe, and gossamer. The phone clatters to the ground, as I turn to it, but by the time I've swiveled around, it's gone. Wordlessly, I flounder trying to find my device without taking my eyes off my surroundings. Finally, it's in my grasp and I stand, checking every corner for something or someone who might be lurking, but there's nothing.

"Are you still there? Is everything okay?" Great, she's really going to be worried now.

“I- I need to talk to you. I’m not feeling like myself.” I slowly spin in a circle, searching for shadows that don’t belong. “I need your help.”

“Are you safe, Anastasia?” Her voice heightens fractionally.

My throat works as I taste the different ways I can phrase this. The last thing I want is for her to raise a red alert on me. I’m doing so much better.

“Anastasia?” There’s muffled talking on the other end of the line. “You haven’t hurt...yourself, have you?”

Uncertainty holds my tongue for a little too long, terrified to lure it back out. “I’m safe.”

“And what about...have you hurt someone else?” There’s an edge to the question.

“No.”

“Were you thinking about it?” She finally gets to her point, the subject of many, many of our sessions—the potential of my so-called obsession escalating to violence.

“I would never hurt Becca.” I clarify what’s important, maintaining the truth I’ve always insisted on.

“Where are you now?” The words clutter together with urgency.

Out of habit, I shift some of the jewelry around in my catch-all dish. In the glass, a vague, inky shape darkens the surface. I turn my attention to the ceiling, but there’s nothing there. The lack of sleep must be getting to me. That’s all this is.

“Hello? Anastasia?”

“Home. I’m at home.” Closing my eyes, I do my best to focus on our conversation.

“Are you going to remain there?”

My gaze flicks to my keys. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have called you. This was a waste of time; everything’s fine. I just had a bad night.”

“Anastasia, I’m here for you. Let me get you the help you need.”

“I don’t need help,” I growl out. “Thank you for answering but this was a mistake. Forget I called.”

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“An—” I disconnect the line before she can finish her appeal.

Forget whatever I thought I just saw. Forget sleep. I know what needs to be done.

Rain batters the windshield, scattering the streetlights that become starbursts exploding before me, like dozens of north stars guiding me to her.

Becca, Becca, Becca.

Every minute for the last four-plus months has been consumed by her—her scent, her taste, her pussy hot and slick against my thigh. Those are the thoughts that I can handle, the ones I can manage. But then there are the ones that shatter all semblance of control and send me into destructive rage.

Becca’s lips on Nate’s.

Becca’s hands in his hair.

Becca’s body under his.

My nails tap a furious rhythm on the steering wheel as I wait at the light. Silently, I plead with my mind to morph the distressing thoughts into something better.

Becca’s lips on mine.

Becca’s fingers clutching my waist.

Becca's whimpers of pleasure warm on my skin.

The reverie is broken by the obnoxious revving of an engine to my left. Doing a double-take, I size up the grey muscle car that's pulled up next to me. I recognize the platinum hair that peeks out above the cracked window. What are the fucking odds?

My leg jostles erratically against the pink floor mat. I need to keep going. I need to get to her before he does. Side-by-side, we travel down the slick streets. The next red light mocks me as his car just makes it through the intersection while it's still yellow.

"Come the fuck on!" I slam my fist on the wheel and pain flares through the side of my hand. It's nothing compared to the knife sticking out of my heart. I slam my hand again just to distract myself from the searing wound in my chest. The tears clouding my vision make the stoplight bleed. I allow a few to fall—just a little exorcism of all the emotions building within me—as I wait for it to turn green, then take a deep inhale when it's time to go. My foot is leaden on the pedal.

The road is an oily black as I speed down the residential streets. Luckily, there aren't many people out. Three more lights, four more stop signs then I'll be there. I could still catch up to him. Unlike me, he's in no rush, driving leisurely, driving safely. But then I see it, a void of black clinging to the ceiling. With the distraction, the third red light catches me off guard; one moment I'm in control, then the next, the car jerks and the wheel becomes light in my hands.

"Oh, fuck," I hiss. My mind goes blank for several seconds as I wait for the tires to catch against the street surface once again, and luckily, they do just a few feet into the intersection. I focus on the annoying ticking of my turn signal while I survey my surroundings. That could have been so much worse.

With shaking hands, I regain control of the car as the light turns green and complete my left turn without any interference from other cars in either direction. Maybe I do

love how quiet the suburbs are. As I weave through the twists and turns of Becca's neighborhood I drive slow and steady. After two more minutes, I finally pull up across from her house. Only Becca's car is in the driveway, Nate had the same idea as me, parking discreetly in front of the neighbor's house.

As I watch her let him in the front door, my plan slips from my precarious grip.

"Come on! Are you kidding me?" I scream into the steering wheel as my nails dig into the supple leather. I throw myself back against the seat trying to stifle the tears that hadn't retreated as far as I thought. They were waiting on standby, as if to mock me for getting my hopes up. "Oh Stasi, did you really think you were finally going to get your chance with her?" They taunt.

"Shit, shit, shit." I pound my steering wheel, my hand throbbing at the reminder of the familiar abuse. "What am I doing?" The words are as berating as they are questioning. As I suck in air, trying to even my breathing, I catch my distressed brown eyes in the mirror. My pupils are wide with hysteria, the whites a concerning red, my eyelids pink and puffy. I look away in disgust, revolted by who I see staring back at me—someone too close to that weak, disheveled, little girl who spent an entire summer beside herself checking her AIM messages incessantly and waiting until 9pm to sneak a phone call to an increasingly distant best friend. Pathetic.

I bring the headband to my nose once again, I inhale deeply. One, two, three; exhale. I repeat the process two more times, huffing the heady mix of peach and hair oils.

"Get a fucking grip, Anastasia." I exhale the words to myself in a hiss. "This is your chance." I point a warning finger at my reflection.

Taking the rearview mirror in my hand, I tilt it down and wipe the tear tracks from under my eyes and cheeks. With purpose, I unlatch the glove compartment and grab my emergency makeup bag. Thankfully, I have enough sense to invest in waterproof

mascara, so the cleanup is minimal as I dab and blend my foundation.

The pattering rain is soothing while I go through the motions.

As I conceal the splotching on my cheeks and restore my makeup to its former perfection, I feel the grip on my control of my emotions tighten and my sense of self rebuild.

“Much better,” I compliment myself as I touch up my eyeliner wing. With a swipe of pink gloss—the one that tastes like her mouth—a smile returns to my face, and I pull my freshly blown-out hair forward. Perfect, perfect, perfect.

Now that everything’s as it should be, I restore the mirror to its original position. Taking a long, centering inhale, I shift in my seat and turn my attention to Becca’s window, the one on the side of the house, toward the back, past her brother’s room. She’s right there.

I crack the front windows, stop the wipers, and turn the key in the ignition, killing the engine. Closing my eyes, I allow the steadiness of the heavy drops of rain to center me as I try to pull together a plan.

When he leaves, I’m going to go over there and I’m going to tell her everything. Starting with who I am. Once she realizes that I’m her long-lost Ana, she’ll see that I’ve been right this whole time. We’re meant to be together. I know she’s afraid, but what’s safer than your childhood best friend?

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And I do intend to protect her, starting with Nate.

With my switchblade, I get out and go to the passenger's side, discreetly making my way to his car. I only have to wait a few minutes.

Tracking his steps, I listen as blades of grass cry out beneath his careless gait, his sneakers scuff against the asphalt, and then they stop just feet away from me. After a moment of fumbling with his keys, he gets into the car.

While he's distracted, I slip into the back seat, lying on the floor. I'm so close. Anticipation thrums through my veins, replacing the nerves and irritation that plagued me on the way over. It's time. Even the rain has stopped; a sign. This is the right moment.

Nate messes with the radio and checks his phone, completely oblivious to me lying in wait in the back seat. I close my eyes, count to three, then lunge forward, fisting his hair in my left hand and bringing the blade to his neck with my right.

"Put the phone down and your hands on the dash."

"Holy shit. What the fuck is going on?" Nate's hazel eyes go wide with shock as he meets my gaze in the rearview mirror.

I tighten my grip in his hair, arching his neck back. "Here's the thing, Nathaniel. You've put your hands on something that belongs to me." I admire the unsteady movements of his working throat. "And unfortunately for you, I don't like to share what's mine."

“Look bitch,” he laughs but it’s not one of humor or confidence, it’s one of unfamiliar nerves. Nate is a man who doesn’t find himself backed into a corner often. “You’re lucky I’m tired and hungover. I don’t know who you think you are, but I’m giving you thirty seconds to get that goddamned knife away from me and get the fuck out of my car.”

It’s my turn to laugh. “Or what?” I press the knife closer and a bead of scarlet drips down his neck.

“Wait!” He squirms in his seat, but his hands remain on the dash. Our eyes meet, his bulging with panic, mine sharpening with challenge. As we size one another up, his gaping mouth shifts into a sinister smile. “Wait...aren’t you that desperate chick who crashed Becca’s party and threw yourself all over her.” His eyes shine with clarity. “Holy shit, guess that kiss really did mean something. Becca’s done a really good job at keeping this dirty little secret.” His laugh gets bolder. “Trust me, she’s not worth doing all this. Let me just show you this video and you’ll see—”

“Don’t move your hands.” The tip of the knife against his chin sobers him a bit. “Shut the fuck up. You don’t talk about her like that.” I yank his head back sharply, nicking him by accident. “She’s worth everything.”

“Are you really going to go to jail over some used-up pussy? Let me just send you the video. You can see for yourself.”

“What part of shut the fuck up don’t you understand?” My heartbeat drums in my ears as I get a better grip on the knife.

Nate just shakes his head at me, mistaking my hesitation for backing down. “My dad’s a fucking lawyer, one of the best. You’re out of your league.” Letting out a long sigh, his tone shifts, a warning undercutting the words. “This was a terrible idea, fucking pathetic really. I’m giving you one more chance. Are you going to get out?”

“Fuck. You.”

In the span of half a second, gone is the cocky and aloof Nate I’ve been speaking with. His eyes are cold and definitive; a dangerous person of a whole other caliber sits in front of me. The realization is too late, punctuated by the sickening snap of my wrist.

“You stupid fucking bitch.” Spit flies into my face with the words as he wraps my long hair around his fist, pulls me forward between the front seats, and slams my head into the dash.

“What did you really think you were doing here? Hmm?” Each splitting hair that tears from my scalp is distinct as he tightens his grip further. I swing to hit him in the dick, but he has me held firm. His free hand doesn’t let go of my wrist as he twists it painfully. “You’re obsessed with her. It’s fucking pathetic. Creepy even. I should warn her about you. Or better yet, I’ll just remove the threat myself.”

Nate makes the mistake of leaning closer to my face and I seize the opportunity, sinking my teeth into his cheek as hard as I can.

“Goddammit.” A shaking hand wraps around my neck, covering the tattoo there. He’s found my greatest weakness and he’s going to use it to destroy me like he knows all about broken pinky promises, years of unrequited love, and the bliss of her lips on mine.

The irony is he thinks we’re the same kind of predator but he’s a poacher hunting for sport and I’m a lioness pursuing prey to feed myself. I need her. I can’t live without her. He’s playing with her, another mount for his wall of ruined lives. Another way for him to prove to others how much of a man he is. But I see him for what he really is: a fucking coward. Determined to see this through, he lets go of my wrist and collars my neck with both hands. It dawns on me that I’m the perfect murder victim.

There's no one to notice that I'm gone. No friends. No family. Not Becca. Even Aphrodite has grown tired of me.

My fists land ineffectively on his arms and legs while he throttles my throat. As I choke and gasp for dwindling oxygen, the hardened features of Nate's rage soften and blur, and when I squint through the pain, all I see is her.

If this is hell, at least Becca will be there waiting for me.

Chapter 9

Becca

38 Days till Death

Come outside.

I consider ignoring Nate's text, but I don't want to give him a reason to come back in here.

What for? It's freezing.

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Now. This is not the time to test me. Get the hell outside, Murphy.

Tossing my phone on my bed I reluctantly comply with Nate's request. I know that nothing he'd ask of me could be painless, but I hold onto the hope that it's quick.

With a monumental effort—my mind sluggishly stitching itself back together with my body—I pull on my purple university sweatshirt and a pair of striped pajama shorts before slipping on some sneakers. Wiping my hands up and down my face, I force myself to mentally come back to the present, leaving behind the comforting memory with my mom that I'd escaped to. The house isn't huge, but the walk to the front door is a trek, my used body stiff and revolting. My knees creak on rusty hinges with each step across the street.

“What?” A plume of breathy air races ahead of me as I approach.

“Be fucking quiet,” Nate hisses, latching his hand around my wrist and tugging me closer so that I'm right up against his car. I twist my head to glare at him and my stomach drops when I see the cut on his neck and then the reddened indent of teeth in his cheek.

“What happened to you?” The question is barely out of my mouth before his other hand smothers it. It takes great restraint to resist the urge to bite down and give him a matching wound; that will only make things worse. “I mean it, Becca. Don't make a fucking sound. Do you hear me?” He waits for me to nod. “You're going to be calm, cool, and collected, and you're going to help me deal with this.” There's no other option but to nod again. His hand doesn't move as he turns us toward the car.

There's another woman in his car. Has she been waiting here the whole time? Does she know why he came? One second, I'm fighting the urge to yell at her to stay far the hell away from him and the next I'm second-guessing everything, silently trying to make sense of what I'm seeing. Her posture's slumped and awkward and her hair's covering her face in a messy nest. My gut twists. My eyes dart between her and Nate, then back again to study the woman more carefully, tracing her slightly upturned nose, the blush tint of her hair, and the familiar tattoos on her thighs. Piece by piece I see the horrific picture come together.

"Nate," I catch my breath, "Tell me she's sleeping."

He's silent at my side, his fingers shifting tighter against my face.

Icy panic seizes me. "Nate, no!" It would be a shrill scream, but it's muffled by his firm grip.

"Shut the fuck up," Nate growls against my ear, each word punctuated by his fingers digging into my cheeks. "Keep it the fuck together unless you want to end up just like her."

Her, as in I don't know her name. Her, as in the siren in the night who came to tempt me away from the safe route I've mapped for an easy life. Her, as in the livewire who came into my life and rebooted a long-lost part of myself.

The more time that passes as we stand here, the more I hope that this is some sick prank. Another round of psychological warfare. But she remains unconscious, and Nate doesn't laugh or loosen his hold.

Tears spill over my lashes, dripping down his hand, then my chin. "You have ten seconds to cut that shit out, then I'm going to remove my hand and we're going to deal with this."

Refuse. Scream. Do something. The truest part of me protests.

My teeth chatter with how hard I'm shivering, my body revolting against my complacency. "She can't be—" I fight to speak against the short breaths that tear through me. "We can't just—" I suck in another gasp of air and tug at the handle frantically, but it's locked. My wrist is pinned beneath me as he crushes my body against the driver's side door. I squirm, but my muscles go rigid at the first prick of the knife to my side.

"It's not my fault your little girlfriend decided to come over and play hero."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"Well, she definitely isn't anymore."

I scoff in disgust at his sick joke.

"Look Murphy, this is getting done one way or another. Either you're going to get your act together and be helpful or you're going to get a new scar for every time you resist me."

My sob of 'okay' is swallowed up by his hand, but he can see me nodding.

"Atta girl." He guides me around the car, with his fingers laced through my limp ones, then opens the door like the chivalrous gentleman he'll never be. He looks left, then right, scanning the area to make sure no neighbors are out and about—an extra step of precaution, nobody is ever out after nine unless it's me or Aiden. Too bad he's out of town this weekend. "Okay. You'll grab her legs. I'll carry her top half."

My limbs buzz with the need to run, but I force my body to cooperate; it's the only way to survive. "Where are we taking her?" I whisper.

“We’re going to bury her in your backyard.” My grip slackens with shock and her legs slip several inches in my grip.

“We can’t do that.” Despite my objections I keep moving; standing in the middle of the street with her isn’t an alternative.

“Yes. We. Can.” He slows so I can step back onto the curb. “That wasn’t a request. Your parents are out of town; no one will ever know if we cover it up well.”

“What about her car? Who knows who’s seen her?” The words are fast and harsh as they battle for space between my rapid breaths.

“I’m going to deal with her car. Your neighborhood is quiet as fuck; you and I both know all these people have been safely tucked in their beds for hours by now.” He drones on, but my attention catches on the ends of her gorgeous hair dragging through the dirty street. My fingers twitch with the need to sweep it over her shoulder, but I don’t dare ask him to stop. My wrists scream with tension and my legs are on fire as we waddle awkwardly through the grass. The entire time, both our heads are whipping around checking for any sign of being watched—a light flicking on, the scuffle of feet, even a gasp—but somehow, we make it behind the house and into the privacy of the backyard without incident. I buckle with relief, but Nate isn’t ready for it, and her body hits the ground with a resounding thud that immediately sends the little food I’m able to get down these days right back up.

“Get it the fuck together. You’re disgusting.” Turning away from me, Nate covers his nose with his sleeve. The irony of him getting squeamish over me puking but not when carrying a dead body is astounding.

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“What are we doing?” I ask through my panting breaths. “There’s no way we’re going to get away with this. You murdered someone, Nate.” My gaze flicks to her limp body; a mistake that sends the contents of my stomach tumbling again.

“Keep your goddamn voice down.” His shadow darkens the space around me. “Yes. We. Will.” He looms over me as I wipe my face with the bottom of my oversized sweatshirt. “I already told you, there’s nothing to worry about as long as you keep your fucking mouth shut.”

My stomach twists, but this time it isn’t undigested food and stomach acid, it’s a threat that comes up. “And if I don’t?”

With the gracefulness of the elite athlete that he is, Nate strikes out and catches me by the front of my hoodie. “Look who’s finally found a backbone.” His smile is razor sharp, cutting through any flimsy scrap of bravery I’d managed to scrape together. “It would be so fun to break it.” He leans closer, our noses practically touching, and peers straight into my soul. “You’re going to keep this fucking quiet because if you say a single word, if you so much as look in the direction of where we bury her after tonight, I’ll make every day of your freedom a living fucking hell and then I’ll make sure you go down with me.” Pain shoots from the center of my face as his hold tightens, forcing tears to spring from my eyes and my lip to wobble. “Not another fucking peep out of you or I swear to god, Becca, I’ll ruin your fucking life. It would only take me a few seconds to upload the video to the right sites. And poof, your grand plan goes up in flames.” He slyly reminds me of the threat he holds over me, the one that could not only ruin my reputation and humiliate me but jeopardize the opportunity for professional success that I’ve made a lifetime of sacrifices for. “If you think you’ve had it bad up until this point, you have no idea what I’m capable of.

What happens from here on out is on you.”

I grip his forearm, trying to prevent the cry of agony that’s trying to escape my trembling lips. “Okay. Okay.” I whisper my surrender so, so quietly that not even the dead can hear me.

“Don’t try me again or it’ll be my mission to make all of your worst fears come true before they take me away, and then we’ll both spend the rest of our lives rotting behind bars.” He finally releases me and stands to his full height. “Don’t throw everything away for some whore. Especially one you’re not even into.” He makes air quotes around the last four words, and I grit my teeth to hold back my defense.

Nate’s threats are never empty. Each syllable drips with violence and hatred that keeps me tethered to him, fulfilling his every whim. There’s no doubt in my mind that I’ll end up just like her if I don’t follow his exact instructions to the letter.

Contented by my submission, Nate continues dragging her. When he stops again, I watch in disbelief as he drops her body to the ground like she’s just a bag of garbage. There was never a day when I doubted whether Nate was a bad person or not—harassing and humiliating others has always been his specialty. My own rape and blackmail have even become routine at this point—but each new level of cruelty he shows truly shocks me. His movements are smooth, his hands steady as he rifles through the storage box we keep all the gardening tools in. His expression is flat, like he’s just going through the motions of some monotonous chore. He’s completely unmoved by the fact that he just killed some—wait...

“Wait!” I stumble to my feet, scrambling after him as I catch the brief flutter of her curled lashes. “Nate, wait. I think she’s alive. We don’t have to do this.” My voice elevates in pitch, deliriously giddy, foreign even to my own ears when it’s been so somber for the last few months. “Look!” My eyes dry as I study her for any signs of movement.

“Is that your attempt at a joke? Because it’s not funny. Stick to what you’re good at, keeping your mouth shut and opening your legs,” he snaps. “Now get the fuck over here so we can get this done. Make me ask again, and I’ll fuck you in the dirt right next to her.”

Her lips twitch and a brittle croak emerges from her.

“No. Look!” It’s an effort to force words up my throat past the rising bile his words evoke, but I’m certain of what I saw.

Unamused, he looks down at her and then he drops the shovel he just pulled out. “Oh, shit. Ohshit, ohshit, ohshit,” he hisses frantically. He shoves his hand into his pocket and he whips it out with a flash of pink glitter under the glowing solar lights that line the yard.

Our eyes meet, mine going wide with horror. “Wait, don’t do—” My train of thought disconnects and melts into a puddle of pure fear as I watch blood pour from the slash he draws across her throat. My breaths come in short, disjointed pants that rattle uncomfortably through my chest. Blinking furiously, I try to right my vision, because surely, I can’t have just witnessed a murder. But no matter how much I wish this was some kind of hallucination, there she is bleeding out right in front of me. The need to comfort her in her final moments has me jolting forward, but I don’t get far before Nate’s fist snatches the hood of my sweatshirt and jerks me backward. Heat erupts at the base of my neck, pain racing down my spine, but I remain contorted at the awkward angle when the bloodied knife is placed against my throat.

Nate towers over me radiating fury. “Do not touch her.” His spit splatters across my face. “Grab a shovel and start digging, or I swear to god I’ll throw you down there with her. I have all weekend, I can easily get rid of you, too.”

My legs are the wooden ones of a marionette as I stand and take a shovel from him. I

follow his lead and impale the ground. It doesn't take long for the cramping to start. Soon after, the soft skin on my fingers begins to burn and peel. I don't even think about stopping, not when my arms begin protesting, and not when my knees begin to wobble. Not even when my eyes start to droop. I dig and dig in silence next to my rapist, a murderer, a fucking monster if I ever met one. What does that make me, though? If he's a monster and I'm dutifully helping him, does that make me one, too?

I'm shaken by my thoughts when Nate's phone camera shutters as loud as gunfire in the silent night.

"What the hell are you doing?" Panic flares within me.

"Consider it insurance, Princess. Wouldn't want that moral compass to kick in while I'm gone." He drops his shovel, then aims his camera at me again, catching me in yet another vulnerable moment to add to his collection, right along with the one that got me under his thumb in the first place. The footage of me whimpering and moaning as multiple faceless men take their turns with me replays in my mind for the thousandth time. The humiliating video prevents me from fighting back and his violent hands hold me prisoner. I might not be in the ground, but I'm still trapped.

"You can't just leave me with this." The layered anger at my compounding circumstances is clear in my voice.

Nate raises his brow in a warning that sends a chill down my spine. I shut my mouth and resume my digging. Pleased with the effect he has on me, he continues. "I need to get rid of her car."

"How are you even going to get back after you get rid of her car?"

"Aww, don't worry that pretty little head. I have a plan." He taps his temple. "I'll be back before you know it." He begins to leave, but turns back unexpectedly, his hand

gripping the back of my neck painfully, “Oh, and Becca, don’t do anything rash. M’kay?” His hold tightens further. “Just keep your head down and keep digging.” He gives me a hard shove that sends me crashing to my knees. Instead of shooting a glare at him, I keep my eyes pinned to the puddle of red that stains the grass in front of me. I’ll need to hose this whole area down. I make a callous mental note.

When I hear the engine humming to life, I crawl over to her body. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I’m so, so sorry...” Without a name to attach to it, my apology falls weak and empty. The least I can do is restore some fragment of her dignity. With a shaking hand, I brush the tangles of hair away from her face. Next, I take the hem of her skirt and tug at the edges, straightening it so she’s no longer exposed. In the process, my knuckle grazes her skin, the coolness catching me by surprise and causing me to flinch away. Shame burns me at the lack of humanity.

I should say a few words for her, but what do you say to someone when you don’t know anything about them but the precise weight of their eyes on you...and the taste of their lips, the melodic rhythm of their pulse, and the soft lingering scent of rose that clings to the shitty princess dress I still haven’t thrown away like I swore to myself I would. I’ve tried so hard to forget about her and yet, now I’m certain that she’ll live on in my memory. She wasn’t the kind of woman to be erased so easily.

“You deserved better. If there’s an afterlife, I hope you find some peace.” It’s all I’ve got and it’s pathetic. I want to vomit again, but there’s nothing left in me besides my self-loathing.

Returning to the hole and picking up my shovel, I defy the urge to run. There’s nowhere to run; he owns me. I’m absolutely fucked by those pictures he snapped of me. With each scoop of dirt, time loses its grip on me. It’s just the sinking of the shovel and the ever-growing hole. When Nate returns, we fall in sync, maintaining a morbid rhythm until we finally create something big enough to fit a body and then some.

“Stop. Okay, now help me grab her,” Nate commands between heavy breaths. He’s in amazing shape, but even someone with a lifetime athletic career would feel the wear of the work we just put in.

Hesitantly, I grip a cold, lifeless ankle in each hand and help him lower her into the makeshift grave. We can’t reach the bottom, so we have to drop her the rest of the way. I wince at the thump, looking anywhere but at her beautiful face that Nate’s already starting to cover with dirt. As her body is covered inch by inch, I keep my eyes on the thorny rose tattoo that wraps around her arm. It’s beautiful like she is—was. Bile rises in my throat as I remember the way her soft body felt against mine, the way her tongue provoked me, the way she seemed eager to light a fire inside me. I wish I’d let her, maybe it would have saved us both. Maybe we never would have ended up here.

I turn my frustration on Nate. “They’re going to notice a huge pile of disturbed dirt in the yard.”

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“Obviously. That’s why you’re going to figure out a way to cover it up.”

“How the hell am I supposed to do that?”

“You garden, don’t you?” he jerks his head in the direction of the flower beds. I hate that he’s learned so much about me through my social media that he has way too much fun tearing apart.

“I don’t think a couple of flowers are going to cover this up,” I argue.

“Then I guess you better be creative and make a nice little surprise for mommy and daddy that they’re never going to want to tear up. I don’t give a shit what it is, but it better be done quickly.”

It’s an absurd plan, but the only one we’ve got. We. The fact that I’ve already accepted the fate that we’re in this together makes me want to toss myself in there with her. I might as well be dead if this is the level I’ve allowed myself to stoop to. I’m nearly as guilty as he is.

“Move.” Nate shoves me back and I stumble, falling onto my ass. The impact knocks the wind out of me temporarily, but he doesn’t even notice. He’s too busy smoothing over the dirt and taking a picture. I’m not ready for it when he snatches me by the hair and drags me on my hands and knees over to the grave.

“Say cheese.” His pearly white smile is rotten as he snaps several incriminating photos. “Make sure you take care of this today. I want you to send me a picture when you’re done. I’ll let you know if it’s good enough.”

Without waiting for a response from me—which would be irrelevant to him anyways—he disappears into the night, leaving my world turned completely upside down once again.

37 Days till Death

Planting roses on no sleep is almost as hard as digging the grave that sits beneath my bare feet, even for a seasoned gardener like me. Before the store even opened, I was out there waiting. There wasn't a second to waste. In my urgent, exhausted state, I hit a few curbs on my way, but I just wanted to get it over with. I need to put the paranoia to rest that she's going to waltz out of this hole at any moment and seek her revenge.

I might not have really known her, but I feel connected to her through the intimacy we shared—that I wasn't as successful at burying. It's as if I can feel her rage pulsing up through the dirt, reaching for me as I attempt to create a space for new life to somehow balance out the death that's now touched this house.

"I think you like roses. Well, I hope so, since you had them tattooed on you. I got the red ones to match and some pink since that seems like your favorite color," I mumble to myself and the dead body beneath me. "It's the least I could do, but I didn't want your grave to be completely unmarked. And I—" My breath catches as I fight to suppress the tears that want to release. "I just figured it might be a nice homage. Might make things a little less morbid, you know."

Of course, there's no response, but I can imagine her disdain at my weak attempt at comfort. It was absurd, seeking some kind of solace, even an ounce of redemption from this small act of—I guess I can't exactly call it kindness—but maybe thoughtfulness. I don't know what else to do, though, I was backed into a corner where I had to choose me or her. And since she was already dead, it didn't make sense to end up down there with her. Despite how I try to rationalize my way out

from under it, the guilt of my actions sits heavily on my shoulders. My body is wracked with tension as I work, just waiting for a hand to shoot out of the dirt and latch onto me. If anyone was going to become a vengeful spirit, I could see it being her, so I continue trying to appease her.

“This is going to be beautiful, just like you. Not just like you, you were prettier, obviously, but it’ll keep a small part of you alive, at least.”

My arms are shaking by the time all the stones are laid, further disguising the rectangular hole in our otherwise undisturbed yard, but I still have so much more to go. Putting together the trellis is definitely supposed to be a two-person job, but I’d rather struggle all day than ask Nate for help, so I suffer through it. Next, I fill the bird bath that will sit on one side. The final touch is the bench that will sit under the vine-covered arch.

When I finally stand back to admire my handy work, it’s impossible to deny that it’s a little twisted to have it set up like a place of enjoyment, but having random rose bushes with nothing else around them looks way too suspicious. The only silver lining in all of this is that by some cosmic coincidence, it’s my parents’ anniversary weekend, and I’m going to play this off as an elaborately planned gift. They’ll never suspect a thing.

With everything finally in place, it’s like all of the energy and adrenaline that has been driving me simply evaporates from my body like the remaining water did hours ago. Instead of hydrating and going into the air conditioning, I lay down on the hard bench and close my eyes.

Wouldn’t it be nice if some vultures would come by and pluck my eyes out right now? Unfortunately, despite the random heatwave that seems to be summoned by spite, I’m nowhere near any starving avian creatures who would tear me apart like I deserve. With that lovely thought, I feel my consciousness slip away.

“Becca,” a little girl’s voice whispers in my ear, startling me awake. I sit up quickly, scanning the area around me, but there’s no one here.

“Hello?” I call out, but nobody answers. Straining my ears, I listen for the clumsy steps of small feet or mischievous laughter, but all I hear is the rustling of the trees in the breeze.

The temperature has dropped quite a bit, the cool air clinging to the sunburnt patches on my skin. Shuddering, I attempt to shake off the chill that’s seeping into my bones. I should really get inside. Moving as quickly as my sore muscles will allow, I go inside and close the sliding door behind me. My cramping fingers fumble to click the lock in place and I can’t help how my eyes dart around the yard. I don’t feel so alone here anymore, and I find myself hoping that my parents will return early from their trip.

Dirt and sweat cling to me just as heavy as the guilt, as I stand under the spray in an attempt to wash away my sins. Going through the motions, I lather up my soap, but when I look down, red seeps between my fingers, congealing and dripping like the blood did from her tattooed throat. With frenzied motions, I scrub my hands together desperate to get it off, but when I blink through the tears, there’s just foamy bubbles coating them.

No. I cannot afford to lose it. Finals are just a few weeks away. My teeth start to chatter, the perfectly aligned enamel clacking together at the same pace as my frantic heartbeat, despite the steaming water pounding down on me.

“Get your shit together,” I scold myself.

Black spots start to crowd around the edges of my vision, so I sink to the floor on unsteady legs and lie down. The last thing I need is to fall and crack my head while home alone.

I blink in and out of consciousness for what feels like hours, but there's no amount of time that could cleanse the blood from my hands or the stains on my soul after everything I've done in the last twenty-four hours.

Regret drowns out all my other thoughts as I go through the motions—dragging the towel back and forth over my skin harshly, grinding the bristles of my toothbrush until blood turns the toothpaste pink, and tearing through the knots in my hair in a way that jerks my head to the side. The discomfort is hardly a distraction, my mind continuously turning back to the slash of Nate's knife and the splitting of skin.

Opening the medicine cabinet, I search for something. My eyes stick on the orange prescription bottle for a few seconds too long before I grab the Benadryl, pouring two pink pills into my hand; this might just do the trick.

It doesn't take long for darkness to close in, cool and comforting, around me. My thoughts finally slow, the serrated edge of all the stress dulling until I can completely ignore it. I roll over, getting cozy on my preferred side and I feel the familiar softness of my bed drift away into that liminal space between wakefulness and sleep—my only escape these days. But instead of floating in an abyss, packed earth presses against my hip and the stench of death is pungent in the air. When I try to launch myself from the impending nightmare, dirt falls into my mouth and over my eyes, rapidly weighing down my limbs. Bugs clamber up my legs, but the worst of it is the silky hands that grip my wrists, pinning me down.

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“I told you that you’d be mine,” the voice above me whispers before everything goes black.

Part II

Chapter 10

Stasi

1 Day Dead

They say love makes us do terrible things. But what about obsession?

According to Dr. Daniels, love fills you; obsession takes everything you have.

Love brings you to life; obsession has you running head-on into the tunnels of madness.

Before I’d been able to find my way back to the surface; I was equipped with the tools I needed—my goddess, my coping mechanisms. Seeing Becca give in to him, like that, has tipped me over the edge. I’ve descended without food, a light, or any sense of direction. I’ve disappeared into the complex chambers of the cave system that is our past. At the heart of it is complete darkness. There are only my thoughts of her. The bitterness of tainted memories on my tongue. She stole my sanity with the very first hello, sucked it right down inside her, and now everything is dark.

I wake much like my last living memory—cold and heartbroken.

I thought my death would be peaceful. Drifting away in the bed I'd shared with my wife over a lifetime of love and happy memories. But it was nothing like that picture-perfect dream of the hopeless romantic I'd been. It was bloody and worse, the woman I thought would hold my hand as I took my last breath stood by and did nothing.

It's true that I'm partly at fault; my miscalculation, my underestimation, led to my death. But that's where my portion of the blame ends; it's only the beginning of the nightmare. Even the cut of the blade opening me up, violating the ink that I'd carefully chosen to decorate my throat, is hardly worth mentioning at this point. Because the worst of it, the real violence against me, was watching through hazy, tear-clouded eyes, as she resigned herself to his actions, and allowed herself to be complacent in my death.

That'll fucking undo me if I let it. But I won't make the mistake of allowing myself to be vulnerable around her again.

This whole time I've been viewing the picture of our relationship all wrong. Painted by children's fingers, I interpreted the ambiguous shapes as love that needed a second chance. Viewing it through the other side of the blood-spattered looking glass of the afterlife, I see now the messy splatter of heartbreak and broken promises that should have been left in the past. The whole thing is like some fucked up Rorschach test. I'd truly believed that Becca's betrayal all those years ago was a mistake. The choice of a terrified child. Now I see it for what it really is; the decision of someone whose self-preservation is what matters above all else. The indicator of a selfish fucking bitch.

As much as I hate myself for being so goddamned naïve, there's something I hate more, Becca.

I get to my knees ready to make her regret what she's done, but there's a magnet tugging at my spine, begging me to turn around, to come closer. Slowly, so slowly, like a rusted wheel with worn-down rubber, I turn and see the freshly planted rose

bushes. The markers of my grave. I don't know what's worse, the trellis-covered bench that insinuates this space will be used for leisure or the fucking bird bath in its unassuming innocence.

The scene is quite possibly the most macabre sight I've ever beheld. This is the shit people would write darkly romantic poetry about. The girl buried beneath the rose bushes. That kind of eternal infamy would be better than this half-assed gesture to show some semblance of respect for me. Unfortunately for her, she's not getting off that easy. Not after I was ready to get Nate out of the way for her, not after I made the ultimate sacrifice for her.

If you'd told me all those years ago that the girl with rainy-day eyes and a smile better than sunshine would be my downfall, I wouldn't have believed you. She was the best thing that'd ever walked into my life. She loved me . . . at one point, at least. Until loving me became dangerous. Until loving me became a sacrifice.

She has something in common with my mother.

Some people just aren't cut out for it. Maybe I'm not either. Because I'm starting to think that maybe this thing I called love all these years isn't, not really. It's not a thing of writing sweet letters or wishing the best for someone even though it didn't work out with you.

No; it's not that tender thing at all. It's an affliction of hunger that's left me starved and stealing. I've gorged myself on her, but nothing is enough.

Just one more refresh of her feed.

Just one last drive past her house.

Just one more time falling apart with her name on my lips.

Then I'll let her go. Then I'll set myself free.

But I didn't keep that promise to myself or Dr. Daniels—not that I really give a shit what she thinks. One more time turned into three more times and then ten. After the first day I lost count.

Maybe it's because all I got was scraps of her. Not from her. Of her.

She never looked for me long enough to realize I was down there beneath her table. Lurking, begging an unknowing hand to drop something that would satiate this empty, growling heart of mine.

The problem is, the scraps didn't nourish me; they turned mealy in my mouth, were bitter on my tongue, and were rotten through and through.

With her toxic love, she's poisoned me and turned me into something I don't even recognize. The only thing I do know is that I'm done with her bullshit. I rise from the dead like a demonic entity ready to make Becca's life a living hell.

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Navigating through the Murphy house is like riding a bike. It's been many years since I've been here, the pictures on the walls are different, and the furniture is updated, but I could walk these halls with my eyes closed. Within a minute, I'm standing outside Becca's cracked bedroom door.

I'm about to shove it open when my eyes catch on the strand of butterfly charms that hang from the handle. The little bells might be a bit rusty, and the beads have faded over the years, but there's no mistaking the gift I'd bought her on one of my family trips over a decade ago. Before I can think better of it, I reach for it, the metallic tinkling ruins the element of surprise.

"What the hell was that?" A man's voice grunts from inside.

Becca lets out a long sigh that covers her footsteps, so when she pulls the door open, I let out a gasp of surprise. But she doesn't notice, she looks through me, down the hall searching for the source of the sound.

I guess being dead isn't all that different—I'm still invisible to her. Using that to my advantage, I slip past her before she shuts the door behind her. In my haste, I don't chance a look around and find myself running right through Nate who's hovering around the door.

A full-body shiver courses through both of us for very different reasons. There isn't time to fully process the fear and loathing that seeing him stirs up, because he's crowding her, forcing her back up against the door, and despite everything that's transpired, my instincts are rioting within me to keep him away from her. My first thought is to protect her of all things.

I reject the impulse and remain where I am. This isn't my problem anymore; they made sure of that when they put me in the ground.

"I promise; I didn't do anything," Becca resumes their conversation. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Nate." She tugs at the jewelry that adorns her left ear.

"You're telling me that you didn't send all that shit to the dean? You really expect me to believe that you're not the one trying to get the fraternity disbanded." He towers over her. "Who'd have a better reason than you?"

I bark a laugh. Could this be some tiny taste of justice? He thought killing me would save his ass, but maybe my goddess didn't abandon me after all. If she's turned her vengeance on him on my behalf, his life is falling into chaos. Aphrodite doesn't take kindly to people mistreating her devotees, and nobody is more deserving than him.

"It wasn't me." Her words are jittery with the nervousness that's vibrating through her. You have to believe me," she insists. Her fists ball into his shirt and my stomach turns with the potency of her desperation. "You have far more incriminating evidence on me. Why would I risk pissing you off?"

Everything is silent and still for several seconds, all the swirling emotions cloying the air.

A bitter laugh breaks the eerie quietness, but it only puts her more on edge. "You've got to be fucking kidding me. It was your little fucking girlfriend wasn't it?"

"My—" realization flashes across Becca's face and she pales even further. "She wasn't my girlfriend. I barely even knew her. Why would she do this?"

"Wouldn't she?" Nate finally gives her some space to breathe, turning his back to her as he paces. "You can't really be that fucking oblivious, can you?" He casts a

withering look over his shoulder.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Haven’t you wondered at all why she was here in the first place?” He takes a step back in her direction. “She was in my back seat waiting for me when I left.”

Becca’s brows tense with confusion. He takes another step forward.

“That bitch held a knife to my throat; she was ready to spill my blood for you.”

Her mouth opens and closes, words evading her completely.

“She was here for you under the pretense of protecting you, but make no mistake, she was intent on having you to herself.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Nothing was going on between us.” She pleads her case.

Nate doesn’t respond right away; he peers down at her daring her to lie. “For your sake, you better be telling the fucking truth.”

“You have to believe me. Whatever she did or didn’t do has nothing to do with me.”

“I guess we’ll see.” With one more look at her, he storms out.

He might be done with her for now, but I’m not done with him. I want that motherfucker to pay. Being dead limits my options, but if the movies taught me anything, it’s that you shouldn’t underestimate a vengeful ghost.

Taking off after him, I chase him through the yard. He doesn’t even suspect me

coming as I gain ground on him. Just a few more feet to go, and then his ass is mine. I can almost taste the satisfaction of a bit of revenge when I reach the curb, but as I go to step off, he's ripped out of my line of sight.

In a disorienting flurry of confusion, I find myself reeling in Becca's backyard.

What the actual fuck was that?

I race back to the front yard, but as soon as I round the corner of the house, I can tell his car's gone. Still, I'm determined to pursue him down the street. I won't go quietly into the silent night of death.

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Avoiding that section of the curb, I cut across the driveway. He's just a few houses down, I'm still hopeful I can catch up to him. That little bit of optimism is cast into the wind when I'm once again tumbling through time and space, ending up right back where I started.

I let out a shriek of fury at the realization. Being bound to this property for an eternity is a special kind of sentence. What had I ever done to deserve this shit?

So what if I did some light stalking? Maybe I fucked a dozen or so more people than was socially acceptable? Maybe I'd been envious and obsessive, and sometimes even ruthless in my pursuit of love, but I'd never really done anything that bad. I mean, sure, I might have toyed with the idea of murdering Nate. That might not have been my best moment, but I certainly don't regret it. And most importantly, I wasn't successful.

The punishment doesn't fit the crime. That's one of those universal truths about life though, isn't it? Things rarely work out fairly.

It's definitely not fucking fair that I'm going to be forced to watch the woman I loved move on with her life while I'm stuck here rotting.

Fuck her.

I tried to help her, I knowingly put myself at risk, and all she could do for me was plant some rose bushes. Rose bushes that, of course, serve her.

I should dig those motherfuckers up. I should expose her for what she really is. I

should show everyone what she's done.

I should.

My fingers claw beneath stones, sink into dirt, tear it up, make a mess just for the chaos of it. Gathering up as much dirt as I can possibly carry, I get back to my feet. Through the red haze of anger that surrounds me, tinges of guilt sting me as I realize dirt is dropping all over the clean floors, but I continue to Becca's room anyway. Kicking her door open, I stomp over to her bed and drop the heap right in the middle.

In my eagerness to punish her, I hadn't considered that she might be here to witness my destruction, but the room is empty. The whole house is empty. Instead of being disappointed, it inspires me further. I don't stop until her perfectly made bed—with its comforter pulled tight and the decorative pillows piled just so—is covered in dirt. As I wait for her to return, the mess I made seeps into the fabric, moisture spreading into a large damp spot that's a beautiful sight that turns her comforter an ugly brown.

As I sit here, I take in just how much Becca's room has changed since the last sleepover I had here. Gone is the pink and white decor of her pre-teen years; it's been upgraded to the more elevated green and white palette with touches of purple. Soft, earthy, and feminine. Plants and vines hang from the ceiling, butterfly knick-knacks hide amongst shelves, and fairy lights drape from her curtains and headboard, creating a whimsical escape. It feels like the Becca I knew, but seeing her through this new lens, it's a little too wholesome for a woman who's willing to cover up a murder.

The room is cast in the orange glow of sunset when she finally returns, the horror on her face illuminated in red and orange shadows. Her distressed gasp is the cherry on top of my antagonistic sundae. I take a long sip of the furrow of her brows, the fear in her eyes, and the shaking of her willowy limbs.

“What. The. Fuck.” She drops her bag and runs to the backyard. I follow her at a

leisurely stroll, knowing she'll be out there for a bit if she hopes to get it all nice and tidy before her family returns. Hoisting myself up on the kitchen island, I have a great view of the backyard and the rest of the kitchen and dining room where most of the dirt dropped.

"God dammit. What the hell happened?" I can hear Becca grumbling to herself as she works diligently to restore her little cover-up job. Sighs and grunts of frustration punctuate sniffles and whimpers of fear to make a lovely melody that I thoroughly enjoy while she frets over the mess I've made.

"If Mom and Dad ask what happened, I'll just tell them a possum got into it or something. It's fine," Becca mumbles to herself. "Everything's fine," she says with more finality like she's trying to convince herself.

Too bad for her, if it's up to me, she won't get away with what she's done. But I'm going to play with her a bit first. I might be the one in hell, but I'm happy to bring purgatory to her.

Chapter 11

Becca

33 Days till Death

The raucous buzzing ushers the next wave of bone-gnawing anxiety. Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to drown it out. Nothing good ever comes from checking my phone these days, especially in the middle of the night. It's a vessel for the emotional warfare they've waged. Whether it's them or the call from the cops that I go to bed and wake up expecting, it's only going to make my life worse. It'll only make my anxiety spiral.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.It taunts me.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.It screams at me to pick up.

Buzz. Buzz. Bu—My hand crushes the device in an iron grip silencing the grating noise, which is only traded out for an obnoxious pulsing against my palm.Unknown caller.I stare at the screen with no number. Only the unknown reaching out to me. I want to pull the blankets over my head and ignore it, but the itching that ensues—both on my skin and in my mind—drives me to slam a finger against the tempting green button.

Bringing the phone to my ear, dread pools in my stomach, the waters rising while I wait for the threats to start. Instead, I'm met with a weighted silence. All I can hear is utter stillness, the absence of sound echoing back at me. I sit up, straining to hear the flutter of a breath.

“Who is this?” The shakiness of my words reveals how unsettled I am.

Finally, a faint static fizzles across the line. If I wasn't so still, so on alert, I would have easily missed it.

“Hello?” My own breathing is ragged as worry builds within me. Several beats pass and they still don't react. I pull the phone away from my face, confirming they're still on the line. “Nate, if this is you, this isn't funny. I'm tired. This shit can wait until tomorrow.” My lip tucks behind my teeth as I wait for the threat that usually comes. But still, there's nothing. Nate is many things but never quiet.

“Fuck you,” I shout into the microphone. Finally, I get a reaction. They hang up. While the wait is over, the knot in my stomach only tightens. As if mocking me the ominous drag of nails comes from the other side of the door.There's no escape.

Peace and safety are foreign concepts to me. My life has become a house of horrors that I can't escape morning, noon, or night. The monsters hide around every corner. They're in the walls, under my bed, in my phone, but mostly in my head, I fear—everywhere and nowhere all at once.

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During the day I can partially distract myself, once darkness falls and the world slows, I'm left alone with my thoughts. With shadows moving unnaturally and the constant feeling of eyes on me, I turn into a bunny in a trap. With my sprinting heart nearly exploding out of my chest and my tense muscles frozen, I wait for something to come devour me. Whenever I let my guard down, the things that go bump in the night come by and take little bites out of me—a pile of dirt, scratching on my door, and things falling, moving, and breaking, without explanation.

Even in the moments where it's calm and quiet, I can't escape the stream of comments reminding me how worthless I am, or the texts demanding I come over, now—some draw blood, others don't, but they always leave my sanity a little less intact.

Without a reprieve, it's only a matter of time before it shatters for good.

Everything is a threat. The soft blowing of my curtains makes me flinch. Is one of them going to reach through and bend my body to their will or is the dead woman buried in my backyard going to come drag me back to the dirt with her? Entombing us together, finally claiming me asherslike she promised.

Fear has spread from my mind and nestled its way under my skin. It's parasitic, sucking me dry of any sense of control. Ever since the night of my birthday party, my body has remained on high alert. The weary tissue and muscle doing its best to recover before the next time it's violated.

I wonder at what point they will simply split me open and leave me in a heap to bleed out all alone? Used and discarded. "Just like you allowed her to be," my guilty

conscience reminds me. And yet, I do nothing. The way Nate and his friends hold my leash is one that comes with years of mastery; their ability to force me to heel has been honed from years of training. And like any abused animal, I don't run for fear that things will only get worse when they catch me.

So, I cower and wait, finding a little comfort however I can.

From beneath my covers, I mumble the words from *Once Upon a December*—the way I have in times of stress since I was eleven—on an endless loop. I used to be embarrassed by the childish habit, but now I cling to it like a lifeline. The rope is tattered, tearing further in the ripping current by the minute, but it's all I have, a fraying thread of hope that I'll make it back to safety one day.

But I've been hard-pressed to find any kind of hope mentally, physically, or otherwise.

When I look in the mirror, I'm not myself, I'm a collection of body parts with their names written all over them. My wrists are encircled with Richard. He loves to hold them behind my back while he fucks me. My lower back is branded with Rob. My stomach belongs to Nate; the sticky mess he leaves behind a film that clings to me. No matter how many showers I take, it'll never be enough.

I feel another episode coming on as my lungs struggle to shift up and down in any semblance of a healthy pattern. The air's run out; there's nowhere I can turn to catch my breath. The poison's spread. My safe spaces are compromised. It's seeped into my clothes, my lungs, and my mind.

The memories.

The harassment.

The paranoia.

Too much, too much, too much. It's all too much.

Numbly, I pick at one of the few fingers still perfected with powder-blue gel, watching as polish tears away from the nail. The uncomfortable tugging reminds me that I'm here. That it's right now. That I'm notthere. That it's notthen.

I'm sitting on my bed, bathed in the glow of the fairy lights strewn throughout my room—around my mirror, along the curtains, the new ones above my bed; anything to chase away the darkness that creeps closer and closer. I'm being boxed in by repressed memories and the unrelenting voices in my head. Things only get worse when the lights go out—fingers prying, teeth nipping, hands gripping—so I don't let them.

Fear and insecurity didn't always rule my life. It's mostly been peace and contentment. But the last few months make me question whether that was even the same lifetime.

The truth is, I don't know that girl who used to let things roll off her back. The one who smiled through the bad days and always got straight A's. The perfect daughter. The reliable friend. The good girl. Pretty and soft and sweet.

My life had been majorly uneventful except for one other brief period. But I'd tucked away that part of my past in a little box atthe top of my closet, where it belongs; I've gone to great lengths to keep everything neat and tidy just like everyone expects. I've always been described as the calm, put-together twin. Now, I'm unraveling. There's part of me that's begging for help, but the problem is that when you've spent your whole life making sure everything is perfect, you don't know what to do when it isn't. Sometimes the confession is at the tip of my tongue, but even if I wanted to tell them, how do I tell the people that I love most—the ones who picture me as their

sweet little girl—that I’ve allowed myself to be treated like this—how could I admit my greatest shame? Because then I’d have to own my biggest failure, and that’s just not something I’m capable of.

Instead, I suffer in silence, doing what I must to keep up the charade of stability for my family. I must be doing a good job because nobody asks me what’s wrong; my dad doesn’t sit me down for one of his talks, my mom doesn’t find extra reasons to knock on my door, and Aiden’s hardly around these days.

I’ve skipped my classes every day this week. All I can manage is hauling myself out of bed to go sit in my car for hours at a time or sleep on a blanket in the park in one of the other residential neighborhoods nearby—can’t risk my parents seeing me. After a long day of hiding the rapid deterioration of the life I’ve fought so hard for, I come back home and continue to rot.

But today, I chose something different. Something for me.

Pulling up to the shop, I hesitate. I’ve never gotten a tattoo alone. Rubbing a hand over the vine that winds around my thigh to my ankle, I stall for a few minutes, searching for inspirational photos and hyping myself up. If Aiden can do this like it’s nothing, so can I.

And apparently, fate agrees, because there’s nobody in the shop and they’re itching for a walk-in.

“Can I have your ID?” I hand it over and the brunette woman with olive skin covered in traditional tattoos passes me a clipboard with an intake form. “Do you know what you’re looking to get?”

“Yes,” I answer quickly.

“Can you show me an example so I can figure out which artist will be the best match for the style?”

I show her the images I hastily looked up. When I turn the screen toward her, she looks at the art, then at me, her look meaningful and comforting. Standing a little straighter, I’m emboldened in my decision. “I want it on my lower stomach. I want...I want it to be impossible to ignore if I’m naked.

She nods in understanding. “Give me just a few minutes to chat with the artists who are in today, then we’ll get you all set. Do you want some water while you wait?”

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“No thanks.”

A few minutes later, she returns and introduces me to Lacy. Her calm energy makes it easy to trust her with such an important task. And once we get the design and placement just right, I’m falling into the most relaxed state I’ve been in while she works despite how painful it is. Unlike everything else that’s been forced upon me these last few months, I’m choosing this. This isn’t like the bruises and scars they’ve left on me. Theirs will fade, eventually. This will stay with me forever and I couldn’t be happier about it.

“It’s perfect,” I compliment the tattoo while I twist and turn admiring the immaculate linework and dotwork shading that create a formidable yet breathtaking head of Medusa. I see myself there in the open-mouthed scream and withering stare. There’s a newfound comfort in the way the snakes wind up and around my midsection, guarding my body, from those who intend to harm it.

30 Days till Death

My bedroom crashes into view as I tumble through the window, my knees hitting the floor with a thud. Throbbing aftershocks shoot pain up my shins, but I freeze and bite my tongue against the grunt of agony that wants to break free. My phone lights up, illuminating the otherwise dark space around me. I squint down at the screen, attempting to force the blob of text into something legible.

Aiden: You okay?

Two little words. They could remain insignificant, casual, or they could become two of

the most important ones of my life. Only partially functioning, my intoxicated mind latches onto the lure, dragging the dulled rational part along behind it.

Aiden's opened a door, offered me a way out. I could step through it, into the safety of his arms, into the support of my family, the warm light flickering from down there is so welcoming. But what's beyond that? If I allow myself to go down that path, I know what comes next—humiliation, pity, failure, and then, worst of all, the truth. And of course, prison. Even if my parents got a great lawyer, one that cost way more than they could afford, one that would cost them this house, I'd still end up losing everything. They'd lose everything.

If I step back, let the door close for good—block all possibility of entry—then I just lose a little bit more of myself. Just one more piece. And then another and another as I ride this endless merry-go-round of blackmail and misery.

It's the illusion of choice, I remind myself; there isn't one to be made. The reasoning cuts me free from the dangerous detour.

Aiden:????

Aiden:If you don't answer in three seconds I'm coming in there.

Me:I'm fine

Me:Just tripped sorry

Aiden:Yeah that window ledge can be a bit tricky in the dark

Teasing and laughter are the farthest fear from my mind with all this pain echoing through my body and churning of the poison in my gut. But I play along because I don't want Aiden coming in here and trying to play the valiant brother. If he had the

slightest idea that I was on the verge of vomiting and begging for a blackout so I could forget all about tonight—and the night before and the last five months—he'd be in here taking care of me in an instant. That's the last thing I want, so I text back. Or, at least, I attempt to. My pulse pounds in my ears making it difficult to hear my own thoughts, let alone make sense of the blurry keyboard.

Me:Ha. Ha.Fuhv pff.

Aiden:Becca Marie, are you drunk?

Me:None of ur busnesd

Aiden:Hope you got into some trouble for once

Aiden:Let me know if you need anything

Me:Yup

My eyes sting as I drop the phone, getting the bright screen as far away from me as possible. Limp and unsteady, my legs are like Jello as I try to get some traction on the ground so I can stand. As my body sways, so does the contents of my stomach. Scrambling, I manage to make it to the trash can just in time. The violent retching loosens a hazy memory. Through blurry vision, I caught Meg's eye at the worst time, just as Nate was whispering in my ear, his hand sliding down my back. Confusion was plain on her face, but it quickly shifted to accusation. So, even he's better than me?

It hurt more than Nate's fingers digging into my skin. The insinuation. The judgment. But I don't have the energy to right things between us. There's no sense, anyways. With more people close to me, the higher the risk of my secret getting out. It's better this way, for both of us. My secrets will only worsen the digs my rejection has made

to her self-esteem. As for mine? It's already destroyed beyond recovery. He's made sure of that.

My stomach rolls again with the mental image of fingers holding my shoulders down, while another set of hands pressed my wrists into the dirty sheets. Acid burns my nostrils, it's even more unpleasant coming up, but that clear liquid in those tiny glasses had been the only thing keeping me from running. It didn't hold the tears back, though.

It was the first time in months that I'd cried during. I'd endured so much, gritted my teeth through it, managed to send myself somewhere in the past. This time, though, I couldn't do it. Not with Meg's dangerous curiosity picking at my resolve, a hundred potentially disastrous scenarios running through my mind.

Dirt on my palms grates against the trash can as I clutch it tightly. A flash of me stumbling down the dirt road. Clumsy fingers fumble with the clasp of my short heels that are caked in mud. Frustration mounts as I struggle, and they morph from straps to fingers using a bruising grip to keep me from kicking. I struggle harder until the closure breaks off. Another piece of me chipped away. The other opens without a fuss and I allow myself a deep breath. The itch of sweat and dirt and who knows what else grates on my skin beneath the scraps of clothing.

The shower calls to me with the promise of relief—offering the hope of erasing the last traces of the night so it's like it never happened—but when I catch a glimpse of myself, it's clear that no amount of scrubbing or scorching my skin could restore my sense of self. Makeup streaks down my face, forced from my eyes as my body rejects the liquor I tried to drown it in. My straight hair gathers around my face in tangles, the knot at the back of my neck is going to be particularly difficult to deal with. Spilled drinks and who knows what else stains the front of my skirt. Worthless and disgusting. Before the words felt hollow and spiteful coming from people who hated me, but tonight they ring true.

There is no erasing the remnants of tonight, or anything that's happened since June. My outside finally matches my insides.

"Becca," a young girl's voice whispers in my ear as I reach for the shower handle. Taken by surprise, I miss the nob and nearly fall on my face. Dread stiffens my neck as I look over my shoulder, but there's no one there. There is, however, a gravitational pull that draws me toward the medicine cabinet. Something I can't quite hear coaxing me forward.

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A command that sounds like “open” in that too-familiar voice has my fingers wrapping around the edge and pulling at the glass. Drawn upward, my eyes land on an orange bottle filled with white pills. Cautiously, I fit my fingers around it. A resounding “yes” echoes down to my bones. Cupping water in my palm, I take a few sips, wetting my raw throat, so they’re easier going down. A courtesy that hasn’t been extended by others.

Dumping a handful of the capsules into my palm, I take a deep breath, briefly pausing to watch as the coating turns milky in my hand, stripping the pills of their people-pleasing veneer. Something we have in common.

I hesitate, a flicker of sobriety that’s quickly overpowered.

“Swallow,” the girl’s voice in my ear eggs me on.

Tipping my head back, I swallow the meds. Peaceful assurance smooths over my shoulders, tender and calm. Beneath the alcohol, somewhere reason still resides, there’s a kick of dissent. But I remain steady.

Minutes trickle on as my reflection and I watch each other, waiting for signs of the booze and drugs coming to a head, but my eyes don’t bulge, and I don’t dramatically convulse then fall to the ground.

Great, I’ve fucked this up like everything else. Taking the lone pill that remains in the bottle, disappointment sits sour in the pit of my stomach. Another failure.

Sweat slicks my skin and my feet cross over one another as I slowly make my return

to my bedroom with my hands pressed to either side of the wall. Once the safety of my closed bedroom door is behind me, I allow myself to sink to my knees. Right palm, left leg. Left palm right leg. Back and forth, back and forth, until I pull myself onto the bed.

In the far corner by my door is a black shape that I can't quite make out; its edges ebbing and flowing with volatility.

If my heart was pounding before, it's playing a drum solo now. Tangled hair clings to my forehead. The tips of my fingers are cold and tingling. There's a war unfolding inside my chill-covered body; it shakes with effort. A thousand thoughts are vying for my attention, buzzing building in my skull like a swarm of flying insects, individually too quiet to hear but together, far too loud to ignore.

That's probably why I don't hear the door open. In waltzes the busty blond I buried in my backyard. A dreamlike haze clouds my vision as I blink through my disbelief.

Maybe I'm already dead. If I'm not, I'm sure I'll be hoping I am if she gets her hands on me. This is quite literally my worst nightmare come true, but she looks like a dream. Platinum and pink hair falls around her, perfectly framing her gorgeous face and the swell of her breasts that spill out of her corset top.

Instead of recoiling and screaming in terror at the reanimated dead woman in my bedroom, my uncoordinated fingers stretch to caress the smooth expanse of her neck, which is notably missing the deep wound Nate left. "Is this hell?" I slur, my lips and tongue swollen.

She cocks her head at me, eyes searching my face with curiosity instead of fury. "You can see me?" Her voice is crystal clear. Even though I've been plagued by paranoia for months, I'm struggling to completely dismiss this as some kind of hallucination.

“Yeah, but you’re—” I pant, trying to swallow back the foul taste that creeps up my throat. “You’re not real,” I whimper and weakly wrap my arms around my spasming stomach. “It’s just, it’s just a nightmare.” I slap my cheek with a shaking hand, trying to clear the vision. What should be a jarring reality check is the tickle of a feather. “Wake. Up,” I instruct myself as I squeeze my eyes shut in an attempt to dispel the vivid apparition that’s been conjured up by the combination of substances currently swimming through my system.

“I can assure you that I’m very much real. You can close your eyes all you want, but I’ll be here. You made sure of that, didn’t you?”

“Stop it.” My breathing is rapid. “You’re just a figment of my imagination.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice? Unfortunately, that’s not the case.”

“You’re dead.”

“Warmer.” Her brow arches, face beaming with satisfaction.

“Are you a fucking zombie or something? A disorienting cramp riots within me.

“Mmm mmm, colder.” She clasps her hands behind her back, studying me.

“A—a ghost?”

Her smile widens. “Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner.” Her enthusiasm is nauseating.

I pull my knees to my chest and begin rocking. “No this can’t be real.” I squeeze my eyes shut as she comes closer and closer. My stomach spasms again. “Go away.” It’s a struggle to speak, the words breaking apart in short gasps in my arid mouth. “Please.

It wasn't my fault. I didn't have a choice," I explain. There's no response, so I continue, hoping I can force the vision away and replace it with something better if I appease the guilt-laden part of my brain that's trying to make me face this.

"Liar, liar," she hisses back.

"Am I dead, too?" The absurd phrase is gummy in my mouth. Groaning, I clutch at myself. "Oh god, the pills, I—" Vomit rises hard and fast, splashing over the edge of my bed.

"Becca, what pills?" I flinch at her goading tone turned stern and the grip of her hand on my chin. Shock flashes through her eyes, but she pulls it away just in time for me to throw up again. "Becca, what fucking pills."

"I thought they'd help. I thought it would be easy to just—" Vomit.

This time when she grips my chin, I don't have a chance to flinch because she's shoving her fingers down my throat. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," she chants as she shoves them farther until I'm retching and making a mess on both of us. "Did you really just try to k—" Instead of finishing that question, she grunts in frustration. "This is why you need me. This is why you shouldn't have fucking killed me."

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Unrelenting, she shoves her fingertips back into my throat. What should be a jarring force is a mere tickle. It still proves effective. My heartbeat is a sudden kick to my chest that's impossible to ignore. The power of it makes me choke up a gasping sob, rabid breaths shredding through my tight chest. With each drag of air, the room sharpens in clarity to the point that I have to clench my eyes shut against all the stimuli. It doesn't stop the vicious onslaught of a headache.

Fighting against the acidic aftermath of my burnt throat, I force out the question I need answered. "Why?" The only response is silence. My room is empty. That should settle me, reassure that animalistic fear that's risen up in me. But it does the opposite. I've been shoved back from the brink of death, and I don't believe it was a kindness.

Chapter 12

Stasi

8 Days Dead

What. The.Fuck.Was. That.

Fear and anger clash dangerously within me, sparking and thrashing, two opposing forces competing for territory.

The audacity to try to off herself, to try to take away what's mine, it's incomprehensible. Simply unacceptable. Her fate belongs to me. I've been the one carefully shaping our paths so that they could cross again, I've been the one putting in the time and energy to show her that we belong together. And then she just...

She just tried to leave me.

And it's that near abandonment that gives ground to the fear, my rage being overtaken by the horror of that unbearable outcome. The lack of control loosens the grip I've had on this situation. Becca could snip the threads that bind us at any minute. With her still alive, the tether of magic still connects me to her. But if she were to die, everything would become void, and then what? Then I never see her beautiful, treacherous face again? Then I never get to inhale the sickeningly sweet scent of her?

If she goes, then what becomes of me? I don't belong in a world that doesn't include her.

My lungs burn with the need to scream my discontent at the constant unfairness I bump up against. "What in the hell were you thinking?" My yell goes unnoticed even though I'm screaming right in her face. "You don't get to choose to leave me. You're not going to escape me that easily." I won't allow it.

Up until this, I've come and gone without notice. But tonight, she saw me. She talked to me. She felt me, choked around my fingers, left her life in my hands.

And unlike her, I chose to save her. Of course I did.

Carefully climbing onto the edge of her bed, I wrap my arms tightly around my legs and stare unblinkingly at her shivering form, never taking my eyes off of her, even when she falls asleep. The uneven push and pull of her breathing is music to my straining ears as I search for any sign of seizing or a delayed death rattle. Instead, she whimpers, clutching at her stomach and groaning as she curls into herself more. But the worst of it is over. She's going to have a hell of a fucking hangover for the next few days, but it's not time for her to join me on the other side just yet.

My plans for revenge unravel—just a pause, I tell myself—as my world shrinks to the slow fall and rise of her chest, the quiver of her lips, her mere existence. Confident I’m not going to wake her, I settle in beside her, my head relaxing into the pillow, which envelopes me in a faint peach scent. It’s a small slice of the heaven I’ve been chasing for so long, just a few days ago this would have been everything, and despite my righteous fear and anger, a small part of me melts into gratitude and worship. After so many years of praying for exactly this, it’s almost impossible not to be completely disarmed.

The craving is dizzying with her so close. Cautiously, I grab a piece of her hair. It’s barely more than a whisper on my fingertips but holding onto this little piece of her is centering, soothing. With each gentle stroke, the raging beast within me is quieted for the first time since her birthday party. Her proximity is a lyre that lulls the anger and hurt to sleep.

Lying beside her in the dark with the few remaining little plastic stars glowing dimly above us is familiar, and comforting. This had always been my safe space. I fall into old habits, filling the silence like I used to while I hum the melody of *Once Upon a December*. As I wade through the somber chorus, one of the last times I slept here comes back to me.

“Don’t listen to her, okay, Ana.”

“Why not? She’s right.” Tears run down my face accompanied by poorly concealed sniffles.

“She’s not. Chleo just makes that stuff up because she’s jealous that I hang out with you instead of her.”

“I don’t get why; she’s so much cooler than me.”

“Because you’re my favorite person.” Ocean eyes meet mine and I see the whole world in them.

“Really?”

“Really.” With her arm around my waist, I was wanted. I was home.

Something crumples beneath the pillow, interrupting my trip down memory lane. Sliding my hand beneath her head, I find the culprit and pull it out from under her.

-I loved you, Atthis, years ago.-

And I love you still.

With every lie that slips through those velveteen lips.

Despite the veil of perfection that you and your truth hide behind.

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I'll meet you there beneath the cloak of secrecy,

if it's there that you'll look at me with desire in your eyes.

Despite your words, we both know your body never lies.

I look forward to tasting the honey sweetness of your honesty.

But for now, I wait with patience for the day you're ready to admit that you also want me.

Despite her best efforts to push me away, she's unconsciously held me close. And for the first time in so long, I know peace and a sense of belonging in a world that constantly rejects the kind of love I have to offer.

I wish it didn't take me dying to experience this.

Chapter 13

Becca

30 Days till Death

Knock. Knock. Knock. The rap of knuckles against the door is as obnoxious as beating pans.

Everything aches—my throat, my head, my stomach—but I force myself to sit up and

tear the blankets off. “Just a second.” Tugging on a shirt and pajama shorts I hobble over to the door and open it. My best friend stares back at me, eyes wide with shock at the state of me. It makes me thankful I at least showered when I woke up to puke again in the middle of the night. “Come in.”

“You look like shit.” She closes the door behind her, then leans against it with her arms crossed. “How much did you drink last night?” She looks like she hardly had any, fresh-faced with her hair piled on her head in tangled curls. Her leggings, half-zipped hoodie, and sports bra say comfortable confidence, but her ram-rod straight back, grimace, and fidgeting fingers prove that’s a lie. How could there have ever been any honesty in a friendship like this?

“Wow, thanks.” I somehow find the strength to roll my eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Look, Bec. I came because I’m worried about you. We’re worried about you.”

I scoff. “The lack of effort and an apology says different.”

It’s Meg’s turn to take offense. “You think I owe you an apology?” She leans her head back against the door, her gaze tracing the remnants of glowing stars on the ceiling. “I’m not here to argue. I’m here to make sure you’re okay. Seeing you with Nate last night, it...what the hell is up with that?”

“Nothing. It’s not what it looked like, okay?” Heaving a heavy sigh, I turn toward the window to make it easier to tell the lie. “We were just hanging out. He needed someone to talk to about Aiden, that’s all.”

“Cut the shit.” Meg pushes off the door, coming to stand beside me. “I’ve been your best friend for years. Do you think you can lie to me so easily?”

“I said I’m fine.” I whirl around to face her, irritation flaring. “You need to leave this alone.” It’s a struggle not to soften at the flash of hurt in her eyes. “What I do isn’t your business. Not anymore.”

“I don’t think you are. We’ve barely seen you around in months, you’re hardly ever in lecture, and then last night, you were at the party with Nate. I saw you go upstairs with him.”

“And?” Panic seizes me. She can’t know the truth.

“What do you mean ‘and’? I don’t know what’s going on with you, but I know something is up.” Meg puts a hand on my shoulder, heavy and judgmental. “The Becca I knew wouldn’t go near Nate with a ten-foot pole. I know things have been...strained, but I know you despite whatever you’ve tried to convince yourself.”

“What do you even care?” I hold her gaze in a challenge. “It’s not like we’re friends.” My shoulders square, pent-up anger spurring me on. “Were we ever friends? Or were you just trying to get close to me for your own purposes? How do I know you didn’t seek me out based on a rumor?” The rational part of me regrets the hurtful insinuation instantly, but the wounded part of me is intent on pushing her away whatever the cost.

Meg sucks in a sharp breath and levels me with a look that says, ‘You can’t bullshit me’. “Fuck that, Bec. Don’t even try that with me. You and I both know our friendship was real.”

“Maybe, but it’s not anymore.” Like a living chess piece, I move myself out of Meg’s orbit. She’s getting too close. “Whatever we once were doesn’t matter anymore. Mind your business and I’ll mind mine.” Turning the handle, I crack the door, then point to the opening. “He’s just bored, looking for something to entertain himself. It’ll blow over. I’ve got it handled.”

Meg acts like she's going to accept the dismissal, but then turns back to me at the last second, bringing our faces close together. It hurts to be this close when we've fallen so far apart. "I've seen the comments."

"The what?"

"The comments, Bec. Don't pretend like you don't know what I mean. I've seen the comments Nate and those assholes are leaving on your pictures. Whatever's going on, it's not just going to go away on its own." With a deep breath, I close the door again, trying to contain the mess. "You can tell me anything. I don't care about what happened at the party. I under—I accept that you don't feel the same way for me. I can live with that. I just want to be here for you."

"That's not an option," I say with the finality of a gavel.

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“Is it because of Aiden? You should tell him.” Meg rushes toward me, ignoring or maybe not noticing how I shuffle back, and takes my hand. The familiarity between us doesn’t fit right anymore.

“No.No.Leave Aiden out of this.” I tear my hand away and turn my back, busying myself with the papers on my desk. “I really don’t have time for this. This semester is kicking my ass.” A half-truth. “You know how important it is for me to keep up my GPA. I need to be studying.”

With those attentive eyes that now read so differently, she watches me carefully. “You’re not going to get rid of me that easily. What did you even do to get on their bad side like this? I just... I just don’t understand, why are you letting them treat you like this? You were one of them, don’t you know how to handle them?”

“I wasn’t one of them.”

“Okay, but I mean, you hung out with them for years.” Meg holds her hands up. “You might not have been mean to people the way they were, but you were there.”

“I haven’t been that person in a long time.”

“I know, Bec, I know. And you know how much I love to have been the catalyst for your change of heart, but I’m just saying.”

“It’s different.” I keep my gaze fixed on the floor.

Meg asks the question I’m trying desperately to evade “But why?” Frustration laces

her tone as she cradles my hands and brings them to her chest. “What aren’t you telling me?”

The harsh swallow that breaks the silence says ‘a lot’ but what comes out of my mouth is very different. “Like I said, there’s nothing for you to worry about. I’ll be fine. I am fine.” A heavy sigh leaves me as I attempt to expel the negativity that’s attached itself to me.

Liar. You’re anything but fine. The old Becca inside me screams. You just tried to kill yourself. That distant part of me is desperate to confess to my friend. The wiser part of myself, broken as she may be, knows better. This is the only safe course.

Worry creases Meg’s forehead but there’s something else hiding behind her conflicted gaze. “You don’t have to pretend you’re okay, you’re obviously not.” Her eyes soften and her lips part as she rubs a hand up my arm, the affection dangerous to my resolve.

Abruptly, I step back forcing distance between us, reducing the boiling over emotions to a simmer. “You should go.”

“Bec, please.”

I can’t acknowledge the yearning in my best friend’s eyes, not after everything.

“I’m not doing this. I want you to leave.”

“Fine. But you have to promise me that you’ll tell Aiden. He’ll make it stop. You don’t deserve to be harassed.”

“Yeah, okay; I’ll tell him. Will you go now?” The agreement is empty and meaningless to me.

She steps closer, holding my gaze with a look of deep care that threatens to lull me into a confession. “I know you’re going through some things right now. I’ll be here for you when you’re ready.”

Silent tension pulls taut between us, but I cut it with dismissal as I pull the door open and step into the hall. Reluctantly, Meg follows me out.

Chapter 14

Stasi

9 Days Dead

My mind spins in a dizzying rage as I search for anything to latch onto for some semblance of control. Jealousy spills black ink, concealing any rational line of thought. The only thing that remains clear is that Meg has tried to take what’s mine.

Her friendship with Becca. The closeness they share. And most unforgivably, the entitlement she feels to Becca’s heart. The thought that anyone else could hold it is the biggest offense of them all. One that needs to be righted immediately.

Springing off her bed, I look for something to take out my anger on. My eyes catch on the pictures rimming her vanity mirror. There in the collage of Polaroids are dozens of photos of them together. In far too many, Meg is discreetly positioning herself close to Becca. Well, discreetly to the straight eye. To the queer eye, she might as well be throwing herself at her. My blood boils, my temper spilling over. One by one, I tear the photos away from where they’re carefully tucked. Removing them from their shrines isn’t enough. Pinching and shredding, rip after rip, I shrink the photos until they’re barely recognizable slivers of paper and film. The mess litters the ground like confetti. A celebration of me snapping.

Scattered beneath my feet, I've turned memories into ashes. I banish the guilt that lurks around the edges of my conscience. This is a small penance for all the pain she's caused me. But more than a taste of revenge, it's a reminder. She was always supposed to be mine and I won't give that up now.

To really drive my message home, I crank open a pink lipstick that's been left on the vanity and write *Nobody Touches My Girl* with a little heart over the "i". The weight of my conviction crushes the tip leaving it misshapen just like my mangled heart.

With a long inhale, followed by a measured exhale, I admire my masterpiece. The destructive itch has been scratched.

After what feels like an eternity—doesn't every hour and every day now—Becca comes back. Immediately, she notices the mess of memories destroyed on the floor. "What the hell?" she gasps as she drops to her knees and grabs one piece then another, squinting slightly to try to make out what she's looking at. None of them are salvageable unless she wants to meticulously glue the tiny pieces back together. A tingle of satisfaction trails up my spine.

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Her hand closes tightly around the photos, crumpling them further. There's no acceptance in her eyes as her head snaps toward the mirror, toward the window, and then back again. "Why?" she mumbles. "Why can't you just leave me alone?" Her voice is hoarse like she's worn it out with how many times she's asked the question. She cups her face, attempting to snuff out her emotional outburst. The destroyed photos fall through her fingers like dead petals. A snuffle escapes her followed by the tears. "Why me?" The tears rush faster as the desperation in her tone mounts. "Why me? Why me? Whymewhymewhymeeeee—". With careful fingers, she moves the distorted mementos around on the floor, seemingly trying to reunite them with one another, but it's not long before her shoulders slump with acceptance.

Scooping them up, she sifts the pieces through her shaking hands. A nervous swallow struggles down her throat in an audible gulp as she searches her room for any other signs of destruction or danger. Of course, she misses the presence that's sitting just across from her.

That reminder of my loneliness makes my heart throb. Only once, only slightly.

Dejectedly, she pulls a small trash can over and deposits the torn pictures into the bin. Right where they belong. The satisfaction is dampened by another twinge of regret that creeps in when I catch the mix of sadness and frustration in her eyes.

It strikes me that I can't remember the last time I saw anything but misery on her face. I shouldn't care. I don't. Not after what she did. Not after she betrayed me again, and again, and again.

I don't care. I don't care. I don't care.

But what if I just pushed her over the edge? What if she tries to hurt herself again?

She won't. She won't. She won't. She might.

She can't. I won't let her.

Once Becca drifts off to sleep—more like gets dragged kicking and screaming, I put my plan in motion. Better her behind bars than in the ground.

Just like last time, I dig my fingers into the ground and remove a clot of dirt. But as my fingers sink into the cold ground, I stall, confronted with a fear that I hadn't expected. In order to incriminate Becca, I'll have to face my rotting corpse.

I don't know much about dead bodies, but I know the decomposition process is gruesome. Can I bear to see myself like that? I've worked so hard to be beautiful, being able to pretend I'm enshrined that way is one of the few things keeping me together. It may seem vapid, but I've lost everything else.

I run a hand over the packed dirt waiting to feel some echo of myself through the earth. Nothing. I tear at the leaves of the rose bushes that surround it as I contemplate a hundred possibilities; a hundred different versions of myself I know I'd never want to meet. It's a cruel mind game, wondering what I might looklike now. Has my hair faded? Stark and ashen, no longer the synthetic pink-platinum? Have the worms eaten my face? Has my body shrunken? Am I skinny now, just like my mom always wanted? Has my skin peeled back exposing my teeth in a permanent grimace? Am I unrecognizable yet? Silent. Subdued. Shriveling. They finally got it, the submission so many people wanted from me.

What I thought was going to be a triumph fizzles out in defeat.

I promised myself I'd never let anyone make me feel this way again, and yet, here I

am, allowing Becca to strip away everything that makes me, me. She took my life. I won't let her have this too. It's time to let her go. Not because I forgive her because I don't and never could. But because I've lost sight of loving myself in favor of her. That's where everything's gone wrong.

Resolve hardening my heart, I do what I should have done a week ago.

The door to their guest house opens easily. Stagnant air invades my nostrils, but it's fairly clean and cozy looking. Everything is kept pristine other than a bit of dust. Mrs. Murphy was always that way—tidy, organized, and presentable. That's where Becca must get it. The small space has a bed, a two-person couch, and a workspace. There's a bunch of organizers set up, filled with all types of crafting supplies and a sewing machine sits on the desk. A thick layer of dust has gathered there, but I'd bet it still works. I'll have to test it later. Eager to keep up the distraction, I walk over to the closet and pull it open. It's like opening a time capsule to my childhood—ourchildhood.

The dam breaks as a flood of memories pours over me from the shelves piled high with games, boxes of toys, and keepsakes, from collectors' items to things that hold sentimental value. An ache opens in my chest as I pull out the dolls that Becca had declared we were too old to play with since we were preteens. Embarrassment swims inside me when I remember how thrilled I'd be when our dolls kissed; her attention would be on the game, while mine would search her eyes for that same feeling reflected back at me, but my prying curiosity only made her play harder or change the game completely. All of it is so distant, those girls are a far cry from who we are today, but I can still see those moments so clearly.

Pulling down another bin, I root around in it and I can't help but chuckle when I come across one of my personal favorites, the Magic 8 Ball. I give it a shake and slip through time. It's easy to become that little girl with dirty blond hair in a sweatshirt that strained against my growing chest but covered up the body I was so afraid of.

Back then when all my hopes hinged on the acceptance I desperately craved from all of my peers, this silly little ball held so much promise as I asked it question after question.

Will someone ask me to the winter formal? Ask again later.

Does anyone have a crush on me? Outlook not so good.

Am I ever going to stop being awkward? It is decidedly so.

Will I ever be like Becca? Very doubtful.

I set the bin down on the floor and sit next to it with my legs crossed, ball in hand. This little toy crushed my hopes so many times and yet, I still wanted to play with it every time I came over. My mom wouldn't let me have one; she said it was "too witchy". If she only knew that her objections only pushed me further down that path. A rare laugh escapes me as I imagine how horrified she'd be if she knew how involved with witchcraft I'd become. She might have pushed me toward it out of spite, but my practice evolved far beyond childish attempts at spells and whimsical toys; it had become my solace. It made me powerful.

There's a deep chasm between me and Aphrodite's favor—or any other magic, for that matter—now that I reside on the other side of the veil. But here's old reliable. It's absurd but, I can't resist the instinctual draw I've always felt toward it. Casting the cynicism of adulthood from my mind, I reach out to my inner child for once and play along.

"Will being dead ever get easier?" Outlook good. I certainly fucking hope so.

"Is there any part of Becca that regrets what she did?" Concentrate and ask again.

“Does Becca regret letting Nate hide my murder? Yes.

“Does she ever think about me? I mean, does she think about then, when we were kids?” Yes.

I keep the other questions locked away inside, afraid to give the words air to breathe.

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Will I ever get the apology I need to move on?

Is it possible for me to forgive her?

Could things ever go back to the way they used to be?

Not even an hour into my resolution to leave her behind and I'm already betraying my own best interests. I never learned how to say no to Becca. Not when it came to following her through heavily wooded areas that would scrape and tear my clothes. Not when it came to her asking if she could practice kissing on me. And not when it came to risking my life for her.

But that's not the Becca that I'm dealing with anymore. She's hollow; a Russian nesting doll of unsettling imposters.

I've been watching a reverse metamorphosis. A brilliant butterfly shoving herself into a too-tight cocoon that can't even contain her properly, hiding beneath layers that she's Frankenstein'd together to conceal herself from the world. Instead of shorts and crop tops that show off her long, slender body, she wears loose shirts and full-length pants in dark hues—even going so far as to raid her brother's neglected closet. Whereas before I used to relish every inch of ivory skin she'd put on display, I'm lucky to get a glimpse of her neck or fingertips.

It goes beyond her appearance. She's always been little miss perfect, in school, her friendships, with her family. Maintaining the illusion of normalcy around her family has become precarious; the second that door clicks shut and locks firmly behind her, the facade falls, and I'm left with this warped version of her that shrinks before my

eyes. Beneath the baggy clothes she hides under, her skin is starting to hug her ribs, her collar bones are just a bit sharper, and her cheeks are a little more pronounced.

I need to remember the real her. The Becca who turned on me when the accusations reared their ugly heads. The one that had stabbed me in the back with her denial. The one that shunned me like a dirty little secret that had become more of an inconvenience. That version of Becca is the one that I saw revived the night of my death.

Those eyes that watched the blade slash across my throat are the same ones that would drop to the floor or conveniently flit away from me as our paths crossed. The ears that allowed my gurgling protests to fall away into silence are the same ones that couldn't hear me as I would call out her name and ask her if we could talk. The hands that buried me are the same ones that would decline my late-night phone calls and delete the texts I'd paid for out of my meager allowance.

The woman who condemned me to this purgatory is the same one who shunned me for that entire summer. The way she treated me was unforgivable. Should have been. I can't love this version of her.

I don't love her. I don't love her. I don't love her.

She doesn't deserve my love, let alone my forgiveness. She needs to be held accountable.

I don't love her. I hate her.

I hate her. I hate her. I hate her.

I hate the way I can't bear to see her in pain. I hate that I allowed her to become everything and myself to be reduced to nothing once again.

I was doing so well. I was doing so well. I was doing so well.

“It’s not fair.” I vocalize the sentiment that’s been the running theme in my life. Things are never fair for girls like me. The ones who are just scraping by, offering up ounces of our blood to tip the scales in our favor every once in a while. “Every time I search for respite, it’s your heartbeat that draws me back down the path of destruction. You have me all tangled up, making a mess of myself over you. It wasn’t supposed to be this way this time. You were supposed to heal me, but you’ve destroyed me.” I’m so fucking sick of not being enough, I can’t bear it another second.

Even though I know my anger won’t be heard, I open the door and scream out into the yard, into the ether, into all of existence. “I fucking hate you, Becca Murphy. I hope my death haunts you every minute of every day. I hope you lie awake with guilt gnawing away at your sanity. I hope the suffering you’ve allowed crawls beneath your skin and wraps itself around your bones. I—” Whatever I was saying is swallowed by a gasp as a swath of black crosses my vision. The sight unearthing dread that is thick and tar-like in the pit of my gut. But within a blink, it’s gone. Unease nips at my heels as I step back into the guest house and lock the door. But I don’t feel much safer; the place that felt like a cozy reprieve now feels like a lonely island.

Chapter 15

Becca

December 10th, 2014 – Death Day

Ignoring the big pop-up for 988, I scroll down and open the thread again that details how to do it just right. None of the crying for attention shit. I don’t want that. I want to go into the abyss discreetly. I crave a quiet exit. Everything’s been too loud for too

long. Ever since that night. The night when my luck soured, when the cards turned against me.

Just a few months ago, everything held so much promise. Twenty-three meant getting ready to graduate. Twenty-three meant getting my own place with my friends. Twenty-three meant the start of the rest of my life.

And why should I have expected anything different? The last twenty-two years have gone pretty well. I've never wanted for anything. I have a happy family. It's never been difficult for me to make friends. I've always been conventionally attractive. School came easily to me. I didn't get into trouble. I was on the path to a successful future. Some would go so far as to call me a golden girl.

That was before. Before that night. Before Nate. Before them.

As we all know, moisture tarnishes gold. The salt of their sweat and other fluids coating me, rubbing me raw in more ways than one. All that forced friction dulling my shine. I'm mottled with metallic abrasion. It's a morbid mosaic of black and green discolorations, this body of mine. That's why the skirts and tops that put me on display are resigned to the back of the closet. There they can't attract perverse attention. There they're not inviting unwanted touches.

Death looms close, its breath on my neck. A shiver rolls over me as I remove the sweaty clothes I've been wearing for the last few days. My sweatpants follow, then hesitantly, my underwear. What used to be a mundane act feels too exposing despite being in the privacy of my own bedroom. Even without other hands snatching them down.

Distant thumping of bass drifts into one ear and out the other. With it, I sway between this moment and another. In the other, heavy breathing heats my chest just over the spot where my heart is shattering. Instead of song lyrics, it's the placations of a

fragile ego.

You like that, Murphy?

Not so hard to get now, are you?

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Guess I can cross twins off the list.

That last one is punctuated with a sadistic symphony of laughter. A trio of blurry faces taunt me as my drooping lids struggle to remain open.

Don't touch me. Don't touch me. Don't touch me. An offbeat chant in my head. Something even I can't quite understand comes out between numb lips, coated in thick saliva that clings to every syllable.

But searing pain in my mouth disrupts the mirage of suffering that's been a loop in my mind for months. My throbbing cheek roots me in reality as I put distance between myself and those things I don't want to remember. The problem is, they're ravenous and they've caught my scent, they feel the lure of my fear. They'll find me again; that's why I need to go where they can't find me. That's why I need to stay focused.

With great effort, I drag my gaze from the floor where it's been anchored for months—I nearly pant with the exertion to reel it upward—and meet my reflection. When my eyes meet in the mirror, all my muscles go taut, on alert. A looming blackness creeps into view at the corner of my vision. Blinking, I try to dispel the gauzy presence that brings a familiar heaviness with it. But it remains persistently at my back. I don't dare stare. Instead, I shift my attention to the shallows of my gaze, where I see a familiar figure drowning. I might be able to save her; she's still flailing. I watch as waves come in, rolling, stacking, growing. It's now or never. But then three sets of strong hands slither over her—clawing up her legs, latching around her wrists, choking around her throat—so I back away. I'm no match for them. I wasn't in June and couldn't be now in the bitter cold of December. Still, my feet stick in the

dark, sucking sand. She parts her lips on a scream but it's just a gaping void of emptiness; I see myself there, in her sore, hollowed throat. Even still, I don't move to help her, and the opportunity is lost as a hand claps over her mouth, stifling her calls for help for good. We stare at one another wide-eyed and filled with bone-deep sorrow for several seconds as she sinks down, down, down into the murky waters.

With a shuddering sigh, I turn away. I'm already too cold; no sense in getting myself wet when it won't do any good. Instead, I do her a different kindness; I prepare the body for its final rest.

I reach for comfort as I prepare for the end with death's eyes heavy on my back. I slip on a pair of denim shorts that close easily over my hips where the bones are sharper than they were the last time I wore these. Next, I pull a white tank over my head, running my fingertips over it, smoothing down my torso where I can feel my ribs if I put too much pressure. I finish the outfit with Aiden's black and white flannel; it's always been a bit oversized but it's much airier than before. Regardless, in its embrace, I'm safer than I have been in months.

Focusing on my task, I pick up the black brush on my desk—not bothering to clean out the dead strands that clog the bristles—and run it through long, tangled hair. My teeth grind as I rip through knot after neglected knot, but I persist until it's smooth once more. I go for the straightener next, forcing the strands into the sleek silkiness that appears naturally effortless. When I'm finished, chestnut brown hair gleams. Perfect; just like the mane of a prized mare.

Next, I sit sideways at my desk and unzip my makeup bag, the contents are foreign to me after all these months. The brushes fit awkwardly in my fingers at first, but thankfully, muscle memory takes over.

As I proceed with the practiced motions, I'm careful not to look into the intent milky gaze of the drowning girl. Instead, I focus on the individual parts starting with the

eyelids, carefully blending the varying shades of nude to create a soft, neutral look. The brush sweeps on foundation, and then a subtle blush to the cheeks; forcing a smile to apply it is uncomfortable, the awakened muscles groaning as they stretch. Down-turned lips are lined in nude and topped with a light, low-stick gloss. The girl next door never wears too much makeup.

Walking over to my jewelry box, I lift the lid and assess all the beautiful pieces collected over the years. My fingers hover over my favorite pair of earrings, the ones with the dangling butterflies, but I pass over them—those are too special to tarnish with my touch now. Instead, I select mismatched sun and moon huggies—the ones that remind me of my brother and me; two of a kind but so vastly different. Absentmindedly, I stroke the many other studs and tiny hoops that adorn my ears at all times as I look for the ring my parents gave me for my sixteenth birthday. I haven't worn it forever but I don't want to leave it behind. I slip it on my middle finger, admiring the smoky quartz heart on its braided gold band. To finish it off, I layer a set of thin gold necklaces around my slender neck.

Disgust is sticky in my throat as I stand in front of the mirror.

There she is, their little doll once again; all bright and shiny, just like new.

“Don't look so sad, Becca. You're going to feel so much better. Come on, we have to go.” The sweet voice that tickles something at the back of my mind encourages.

With a deep breath, I prepare myself to leave. On quiet feet, I begin picking things up, putting them in their place; my mother shouldn't have to deal with it, not on top of everything else. Sheets and blankets are pulled tight and smoothed over. Pillows are stacked just so. My book is set at the foot opened to the page I left off on. With straining arms, I collect the mountain of laundry I've long neglected and shove the heaping pile into the now-overflowing basket in my closet. And finally, I line up my notebooks, stick my pens and highlighters in their holder, and stack my dusty

textbooks so my desk is tidy just like I used to keep it.

Everything is as it should be. With a click of the remote, I turn off my sprawling fairy lights, plunging the room into darkness.

There we have it, a lifetime made into a museum. Becca Murphy forever enshrined.

On my way out, I trail my fingers over the surfaces of my nightstand, my bedspread, my desk, letting the memories that have settled in the dust coat my palms. It clings to me like everything I need to forget.

Carefully, I open my bedroom door, the string of butterfly charms that hangs from the knob tinkling quietly. I freeze, my worn heart in my throat. The maddening thumping makes it difficult to hear movement in the house as I peer through the crack. My eyes dry as I watch vigilantly. When sixty seconds pass with only the blackness at the end of the hall watching me in eager anticipation, I close my door behind me, diligently maintaining my focus on the bathroom as the heartbreaking melancholic cries of young girls emanate from it. Every instinct within me urges me to get as far away as possible. But my mind and my heart are on different pages.

Magnetized by some greater force—the one that circumvents my careful planning and any regard for self-preservation—I find myself resting against the door to my brother's room. There's no telling if he's actually in there or in the bed of his latest hookup, but I can smell two-plus decades of him sealed into the wood—a playful mixture of paint and that warm, citrusy gender-neutral perfume he loves.

If I could be enveloped in the safety of that scent now, maybe I would feel a little less lost. Hovering around the knob, my hand quivers. There's a tug on the string of fate knotted around my heart; that bond urging me to stay.

But this isn't a thing love or family can fix, even a twin. There's nothing left to

salvage. I'm not a sister, or a daughter, or a friend, or anyone—I'm a ghost of my former self and she haunts me relentlessly night after night. I get glimpses of the girl I used to be, but there's nothing real, nothing tangible. I've become detached, floating untethered, roaming further and further from that golden girl. I don't even recognize her anymore; I question whether she ever existed. I'm hollowed, shallow, void. Nothing but echoes of threats between teeth, the friction of dirty sheets against my back, and the weight of bodies baring down on mine. I long for something else, anything else.

It's like they say, nothing gold can ever stay.

I need to be melted down, the essence of me to be made into something new. There's only one way to do that.

In a silent goodbye, I apologize for not making more time for him. He was a good brother, but I had my reasons. Musclememory moves my fingers across the door making the shape of one of the few words I remember from our childhood secret language. The one we both understood before our paths diverged at the crossroads of adolescence. Before he was Aiden said on a sigh and I was Becca said with reverence.

None of that matters anymore. My path has ended in a cliff and there's nowhere to go but forward. Off. To the other side.

Goodbye. It's a whisper on the wind; I hope the sincerity holds when the echo reaches him.

"Becca," that reassuring little girl's voice calls to me, leading me onward.

With a heavy sigh, I take the final steps to the bathroom. Once inside, I catch my breath, savoring these remaining moments with me and my lungs and the way they

work to defy me.

“Hurry, Becca. You have to do this before they catch you. They won’t understand.” That sentient void looms ever-close behind me, creating shadows where there shouldn’t be any.

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With determined hands, I keep moving through each step of my plan. I start by closing the drain and releasing the water, not bothering to turn it to the left. The icy hold of death will have me in her grasp soon enough. The tub fills, pummeling water rivaling the pounding in my chest, my ears, and my wrists. As my nerves ratchet higher, so do all my senses. The water is rushing like the blood boiling in my veins, loud and relentless. My rapid breaths are swirling winds that rush around my face. I press forward through the onslaught.

Slipping one foot beneath the water, I brace myself for the chill that stings across my skin. It takes some convincing, but the other follows. As the water rises, I peer down into the shallow basin and I think I see her there, the drowning girl. She's come to collect. I've avoided her as long as I can. My knees crack as I lower myself into the water, no longer limber from so many days spent clutching them to my chest in a pathetic effort to keep myself together. Absorbing water, the oversized flannel clings to my body, a burial shroud. Shivering I lean back and gather my hair at the top of my head that I lay against the hard tile wall. My fingers quiver as they close around the razor. It gleams like the North Star in my hand. "You're almost home," the void leaning close soothes in a child's voice that rings familiar but quickly slips from my mind as I drag the blade through my pale skin.

And it does feel right and warm and peaceful as I draw the final line in the sand. I've had enough, I'm done.

Blood blossoms in my mouth as it does from my veins, nourishing me one last time.

With heavy limbs, I give my final bow; I watch the curtains close through tired eyes, relieved when everything falls away.

Death feels familiar, like an old friend. I sink into the warmth of its dark embrace where I'm free of poisonous words and pursuit of perfection. But like anything good, it doesn't last. With a jarring crash of the open door, I'm ripped back into the cold reality of my circumstances set to the soundtrack of my twin's hushed devastation.

My eyes bounce from the gruesome state of my lifeless body finally reflecting the way I've felt the last few months to his crumpling features.

"Becca!" My name is a bullet tearing flesh as it launches from his throat. "Becca, stay with me." Aiden's quickening breaths crowd his words. "What have you done?" The last ounce of color drains from his naturally pale face as he rushes to the side of the tub and drops to his knees. The thudding blow to his bones makes me flinch but he doesn't even register the impact. His hands hover over me as his eyes stare into my vacant ones. "Becca?"

"Aiden," I gasp on a sob, but of course, he can't hear.

"No, no, no, no..." His slender fingers wrap around one sliced wrist, and he presses them into the mangled skin, searching for a pulse. I watch helplessly as hope dies in his eyes. A fleeting shooting star in a dark night sky.

"Aiden, it's okay—" I choke. The empty apology I'm tempted to offer like ashes on the wind.

My mom's concerned voice carries down the hall. "Aiden, are you okay? What's wrong?" The slap of slippers on wood flooring grows closer.

"No." He kicks out a long leg, slamming the door shut, just moments before it would have crushed my mom's fingers. He strains, pushing his weight into the door like it'll save her. Maybe just this one horrific memory. Sorry you weren't spared, Aiden.

“Mom, you can’t come in here. Not yet.” He quickly positions me, so I won’t slump back into the water and then leaps up to lock the door.

I turn away from the door, from what I know is unfolding on the other side. I can feel the panic pulsing through the air like a living thing. A mother’s love is tangible, but her fear, that’s suffocating.

I focus on my body, grimacing at the way my soggy hair clings to me like an insect caught in a web. All that effort for nothing.

“Becca, fuck; no this can’t be real. Wake up,” Aiden sobs.

“Aiden,” my mother says breathlessly, and the metallic shaking of the knob stops. “Aiden, what’s wrong with your sister?” It begins to move again. “Open this door right now.”

“Mom,” Aiden sobs into the crack of the frame, turning away from my lifeless body. “Please...” His raspy voice that’s always been steady and sure, snaps and crackles, lightning splitting an old oak. “Just trust me; there’s nothing you can do. You need to call an ambulance.”

Death snuffs out all sound, all movement. A mother’s greatest fear settles into place. Our little house goes cold, the loss echoing through their hearts and into its foundation.

The shrill dial tone throws everything back into motion. Aiden’s uneven breaths fill the bathroom, and I choke on his panic. Pale blue eyes search mine, finding them empty and wandering. A piece of himself gone. Shaking fingers lace with mine—my body’s—we’re not connected anymore but through memory. Aiden must feel it, too. When he tightens his grip, blood trickles down his bare forearm and he crumbles. Our blood on the outside doesn’t sit right. He looks so small as he pulls his legs into

himself, forgetting his hold on the door as grief finally overrides his protective instincts.

“Aiden,” I whisper as I crouch to stroke his hair. “I—” Shock jolts through me when I realize I can’t feel the feathery softness of the unstyled strands or the heat of his scalp. My mom walks through me at the same moment and looks through me too as I gaze up at her from the floor of that bathroom that’s turned into a sarcophagus.

“My baby!” Her curdling scream is a powerful agony that could cave in the roof, shatter the walls, and bring it all down around us. “No, Becca. Please, no.”

The horror compounds as my dad sprints into the bathroom; his features contort with loss when he takes in the scene. “What—” A crackled wail leaves his throat that will haunt me for eternity if I’m forced to remain here like this.

Their pain is thousands of bullets piercing what’s left of my mangled heart.

What.

Have.

I.

Done.

“Mommy,” I cry out, begging her to fix my mistakes just one more time. She can’t hear me over layered sobs that surely sound like the pits of Hell sinking into my ears and clawing their way inward until they shred whatever’s left of my sanity. “Mom!” I claw at her clothing. “Mommy?” My throat burns from the screams that tear through it. “Please, see me. Don’t you feel me? I’m right here.” My frail hands wrap around her wrist in a vice grip and it’s like holding onto air. She slips through my fingers as

she holds Aiden close, burying him into her chest, trying to shield him. They huddle around one another, their grief a tight circle that somehow revolves around me yet doesn't include me. The reality of that distance between me and the people I love breaks something in me too. I cave in on myself beside them.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:27 pm

I did this. I imploded my family with one decision, one that I can never take back. If I'd known I'd be here to see the fallout or my detonation, would I have done it?

I let the truth of it anchor me in this moment, in the solidity of my regret. There's nothing else to do but play the role of corpse just like I'd hoped.

Chapter 16

Stasi

38 Days Dead

For the first time since I died, I feel like I can breathe. I hadn't realized how toxic the atmosphere had become, all those pollutants—my hunger for justice I'll never receive and her self-destruction—building up in my lungs. This distance between us has given me a much-needed reprieve from Becca's suffocating presence. In the days since, I've focused on letting go of all that anger, employing the lessons I learned from Aphrodite even if I don't have access to her anymore. It's hard work, but I'm determined to regain my sense of self bit by bit. With every day that I avoid sneaking into her room, I become more hopeful that maybe even if I never get the closure I want, I can exist separately from her. And maybe I can heal just enough to not spend eternity chasing the things that caused me to run right off a cliff.

Unfortunately, that illusion of peace is shattered with a bloodcurdling scream that travels through the walls of the main house and straight down my spine. Before I can process what I'm hearing, I'm barging through the back door, the hook that's sunken into my gut reeling me toward the bathroom. The symphony of distress grows louder

with each step I take. Beneath all their voices, I distinctly hear Becca's desperation. Fear grips me, cold fingers forcing me to look. It takes a minute, but then I find her. Limbs limp, mouth gaping open, eyes unfocused—helpless to the thing that looms over her in the tub. That haunting mass of black swells a bit larger than I've seen before, its shape shifting ever so slightly. While it has no distinct features, I would bet money that it's staring right back at me. But there's something even more terrifying than that sight, the blood trickling over Becca's slashed wrists.

She's dead.

Her eyes meet mine. Pits of agony that threaten to swallow me, but it's there in her self-centered sorrow that I finally see that I was so, so wrong.

There's no relief in her eyes, no registering how or why I'm here, only the need for someone else to witness her pain. Her dismissiveness stings like a slap to the face. Becca never cared about me; not the way I deserved. She's never looked out for anyone but herself. It's clear as day in the tears she cries for herself, not for me. No, never for me. They're for her and the guilt my presence is making her feel. They're for her and the cracked image of perfection that this stain on her soul has created. The thing that's changed is that I don't want to care about her anymore either. I'm done worrying about her, fawning over her, chasing after her, for real this time. My heart can't bear it anymore.

The reminder of her pain is an obnoxious mosquito trying to feed on my empathy. Even though I swat it away, it keeps popping up any time I let my guard down.

I need to do something. Rifling through storage bin after storage bin, I hunt for the diaries Becca used to keep. If they've kept all this other useless junk, she definitely held onto those. Daily diary entries were Becca's ritual once upon a time. Somewhere she could confess those thoughts that she was too afraid to share with anyone else.

If it were anyone else, I'd consider it a betrayal of trust, but given our history, I feel entitled to know what's on these pages, especially the ones labeled 2003 and 2004 in Becca's proper cursive writing.

The notorious floral notes of Curious waft off the front page. Despite myself, a small laugh escapes me as I rub my finger over the splotch on the page from spraying too close. Thumbing through the pages, it's mostly pretty bland—complaining about her day or humbly bragging about how she aced her last test—but I'm surprised to see it wasn't all a walk in the park for her.

Today, Frankie M. stuck a note on my back that said, "I like girls". Why are boys literally the worst? Thankfully, Chleo was there and ripped him a new one, but she was pissed at me after. I don't know how she can blame me. She's the one who got us both into this mess. She promised she'd make it go away as quickly as it started. Unfortunately for me, gossip is easy to start and way harder to squash. It's been almost a year, can't people let it go? I have. I've moved on. And obviously. I don't like girls. I mean I don't even have any girl friends anymore—Chleo and them don't count; I only eat lunch with them to avoid being harassed. And I definitely don't like any of them like THAT. I only get crushes on boys. I can't help who has a crush on me. That's why Ana and I couldn't be friends anymore. I had to cut her off. She made things weird. She ruined everything. It's not my fault that she was like obsessed with me or something.

Humiliation and then rage snakes through me in a violent torrent that sizzles and burns inside me; a storm that needs to be unleashed. That little bitch. She can lie to them, she can even lie to herself, but she won't lie to me. It's time she was held accountable for all the shit I let her get away with.

Standing in front of her door, my foot twitches with the need to drive into the inch-and-a-half thick piece of wood again and again until I break down the final barrier between us. And yet, I hesitate, the sniffles and sobs triggering that dormant lover

we've both played our part to bury. And for her part, I can finally do something about it. But I stand on the precipice, experiencing her grief like being caught in a blazing fire. Mourning blossoms in thick plumes, filling their home from one end to the other. Misery heats the door handles, keeping us apart. The fumes of regret irritate my eyes, and coat my throat and nose, making me retreat instead of going further into the burning house of loss.

"Are you going to leave your best friend to fend for herself?" A whisper the consistency of smoke curls around my ear, but when I turn, no one is there. No one could be there, because the voice belonged to twelve-year-old Becca. Doubt taps its nails at the back of my mind. The sensation of air on my cheek was unmistakable. Driven by curiosity and the unfortunate need to always be right, I peer down the hallway, eyes diving deep into the pitch black beyond where I stand. I don't quite see it as much as I feel that void staring back at me. My throat itches with the need to call out to Becca crying behind the door, but I can't find my words.

"We can't be best friends anymore." Young Becca's voice is coming from down the hall, just a few feet ahead of me.

"You should go." It insists, the inky depths of my unwanted companion slinking closer.

My calf muscles burn with the need to get away, but I don't run. Slowly, so, so slowly, I walk past it with my head down back to the guest house. As soon as the door is behind my back, I make for her window and get as far away as I'm capable. Fighting the urge to flick on all the lights in the guest house, I focus on everything clearly illuminated by the white light of the moon, taking stock of all the furniture and décor until I'm positive nothing is lurking in the corners. The snick of the lock behind me is obnoxiously loud in the lonely space.

My pacing resumes as my thoughts fire off a million miles a minute. Working with

deities, I've only dedicated a little bit of my time to learning about the other side of things—the things that try to lure you to the darkness. Entities, demons, the devil. The things that will answer your call if you're not careful. Isrug off that last one; I've never been religious. But what I do need to consider is, have I been careful? And more importantly, are the dead susceptible to other entities?

Can ghosts be haunted?

59 Days Dead

Becca's passing and mine couldn't have been more different. No expense was spared to ensure that Becca was enshrined in something as beautiful as she was. No cold, empty grave and certainly no mouth full of dirt for her; the golden girl was put away in a shiny case. I'm sure she made for quite the display at the wake—not that I would know.

If their rehearsals were anything to go by, Becca was laid to rest to the sound of carefully prepared speeches about how loved she was. I have no doubt that her memory will be perfectly preserved.

I should have dug up my body when I had the chance. When it still mattered.

Kept busy by all the arrangements, the holidays came and went with little notice; instead of all things merry and bright, darkness has consumed this home, and I need to get to the bottom of it. But first, Becca owes me, justice, an apology, fucking something. And until I get it, I'm going to make sure she doesn't get the chance to rest in peace. I don't care if it's New Year's Eve. Fuck that “new year, new me” bullshit.

Chapter 17

Becca

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:27 pm

December 31st, 2014 – New Year’s Eve - 21 Days Dead

“Beeeecccccaaaaaa.” My name slithers under my door. I hear voices in my head all the time, but this is different.

They say never answer back when something calls your name in the dark—but this voice is familiar. It’s one that I’ve been hoping I wouldn’t hear again. Denial is so much easier to contend with than dread. But I should have known she wouldn’t leave me to grieve for long.

“Beeeecccccaaaaaa,” she calls again, prompting me to crawl out of bed. The springs creak with objection. “Nothing good can come from this”, they whine.

I pause at the threshold of my door, hand frozen mid-air as I heed the phantom throb in my chest on instinct. Searching for something, I press my ear against the door. I’m not sure what I expect to hear. Maybe the rattle of a weapon. Maybe the creak of the floorboards. I wait, but all I hear is that empty whooshing of stillness. And then a piece of paper with the words ‘Find me’ slips under the door.

Twisting the handle slowly, I crack my door open a fraction to find another note, all that’s on it is ‘Warmer’ in purple ink. When nothing barrels in, I open it all the way and stare down the long dark hall. Blackness stretches in front of me; the emptiness of it leaving room for those unwanted memories to creep back in. They crawl at the peripherals of my thoughts like an army of ants. Retreat or go forward; there’s a decision to make and it feels like an important one. Behind me waits restless tossing and turning; ahead, something productive.

“It’s your choice, Becca. What’ll it be?” a taunting girlish voice whispers from around the corner.

Tingles spread from my chest down into my stomach and fingers as I run down the hallway and into the living room. Another note waits for me, but this time, it reads ‘Colder’. Carefully assessing the dark corners, it’s clear I’ve hit a dead end.

My search continues in the kitchen, where a piece of paper is propped up like a tent on the floor in front of the sliding glass door. ‘Warmer ‘ is written in all caps.

I need to know once and for all that she’s really here. Am I going out of my mind with grief chasing down a figment of my imagination, or is the ghost of the woman I helped Nate hide haunting me?

My chest is tight with anticipation as I race outside and into the backyard. I check down the side but am disappointed to find the word ‘Colder’ staring back at me. Going back the way I came from, I spot a small patch of white sitting on the grass outside of the guest house. To my relief, the paper says ‘Warmer’.

Confidence and apprehension clash in my chest as I stand there weighing my options. I have no doubt now that there’s something waiting for me behind that door.

“The choice is yours, Becca. What’ll it be?” That youthful voice repeats, a bell ringing in too-distant memories that I can’t place. When I turn to confront it, there’s no one behind me, just the emptiness of the night and the backyard stretching out in front of me.

Stepping forward, I force my hand to grip the knob and push onward as the door creaks quietly on its hinges, the slow groan heightening my nerves as I enter.

“Hello?” I whisper. I’m met with silence, so I turn to close the door—wouldn’t want

to alarm anyone if they happen to wake up.

As I enclose myself in the darkness, a presence looms in its inky depths. I miss the pounding of the terrified heartbeat that should be violently assaulting my chest. The stillness of my internal organs rings as hollow as my existence has become.

Unexpectedly, the spine-chilling silence is finally broken. “Boo bitch!”

The slow-drip of fear gives way to a flood that shocks my system. Emotions heightened, an embarrassingly shrill shriek escapes me. My irritated glare falls uselessly as I come face to face with my greatest mistake.

She’s not weak and lifeless like I left her. Death becomes her. Platinum and pink hair falls around her, following the curves of her breasts and waist, surrounding her like a halo. But she’s anything but angelic as she watches me with dark brown eyes intensified by darker eyeliner. They’re not doe eyes; they’re appraising and feline, simmering with interest. I’m the mouse in the claws of a cat. My hackles rise, but I tread carefully.

“You’re really here?” It’s not relief, but something settles within me. “Have you been here the whole time?”

“You didn’t think you could get rid of me that easily, did you?” One side of her plum-red lips tilts upward as she studies me. Chills trail behind her dangerously astute gaze that tracks over me from head to toe.

Refusing to squirm, I simply shake my head as I lean back against the door, putting more distance between us. But the longer she holds my gaze, the harder it is to keep the images of her dead body at bay. Those unseeing eyes judging my every movement as I dug and dug. Working the distressed hem of my jeans shorts between my fingers, I take comfort in the friction as I attempt to chase away those unwelcome

memories. “Sorry.” Running a hand over my face, I refocus.

“You should be.” The demand in her eyes pins me in place, like a butterfly on velvet. Waiting for the next pin to pierce me, I hold my breath. “I thought you were going to come visit me after you saw me the other day. But you didn’t,” she pouts but there’s an edge to her voice, a blade wrapped in silk.

“I—” The expectation takes me off guard. I’ve been so consumed by my family and my own grief that she hadn’t crossed my mind since I saw her in the bathroom right after I died. “I didn’t expect you to still be here. I wasn’t even sure if what I saw was real.” My confusion is genuine. “Shouldn’t you be at your own house? Or passed on, or whatever’s supposed to happen to us?” I push off the door standing to my full height. Still, she has several inches on me in her Mary Janes

“Wouldn’t that be nice?” she sighs. “I really wish I could, Becca. But unfortunately, some assholes buried me in your backyard.” She juts a finger at the window in the direction of the rose bushes.

Shock interrupts my train of thought. I’m not the kind of person who gets called an asshole to her face. My rebuttal fails me, but she doesn’t let that derail the conversation.

Once again, her expression shifts, lids rising and eyes rounding, features softening in a closed-mouth smile that hints at a single dimple. “I suppose it’s too late to request a headstone, but you can call me Stasi.” I hear her, but all of my attention has zeroed in on the pink heart glinting at the center of her tongue, so shiny and wet. A lure drawing in a helpless fish.

“Earth to Becca.” The snap of her fingers is too close. Intrigue bleeds into panic as she leans forward and presses a palm against the door frame just to the left of my head, caging me in. Too close.

I cross my arms over my chest, a quickly foiled attempt to reclaim my space when my forearm caresses her breasts. Don't look down. Maybe it's gravity or reverse psychology, but my eyes immediately home in on the dusting of delicate freckles on her peachy skin, tracing over the silver dermal piercings that trail between her cleavage, and landing on the little bars that press against the velvety fabric that barely covers her overflowing breasts.

"My eyes are up here, Becca." A manicured finger curls under my chin, and I flinch at the contact. The tiny area she touched tingles and all my other muscles clench preparing for the rattlesnake I've overlooked on my path to strike. Apprehension winds tightly in my stomach, a coiling spring that could break at any moment.

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Her hands drop away and the only thing her lips do is press into an unflattering flat line—she doesn't kiss me or lick me or touch me at all.

“How about we start over? I mean we're both dead, I guess the scales are even, don't you think?”

“Sure, yeah. I guess that makes sense.” Does it? How can any of this be real?

“Stasi.” She holds out her hand, gripping mine firmly. “Nice to meet you.” The words themselves are pleasant enough but her smile doesn't soften her eyes.

“Becca.” Reluctantly, I return the bizarrely formal handshake, fingers twitching with the need to be free. “Nice to officially meet you, too.”

“I mean it would be, I guess. . .” Fire stokes in her eyes, the viper within them turning back to me, reconsidering the threat I pose. “If you weren't the reason we're both here.” There it is, the strike. The attack leaves me reeling for a minute as the venom hits my blood stream.

“That's not fair,” I retort defensively. Echoes of old instincts encourage me to get out of this situation, but I can't pull myself from the magnetizing draw of her. Instead, the marionette strings of my awkwardness bring my hand to my ear where I fiddle with the piercings that line the entire shell and avoid eye contact.

“So interesting that you bring that up. What is fair? Hmm?” Stasi paces in front of me. “Is it having your throat slit and your murder covered up?” The mocking tone keeps me quiet. “No. No, I don't think that's fair at all. But me, calling you out on

your bullshit. I'd say that is, actually." Facing me with a mocking smile, Stasi points one of those eternally perfect pink and black nails right at me. "But you're not the type to take accountability, are you?"

"How can you be so quick to blame me?" Her insinuation digs its way under my skin, immediately irritating and uncomfortable. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Why don't you enlighten me?" Her fingers steeple, inviting me to plead my case. "Please, I'd love to have heard you try to talk your way out of this when I saw you. When I felt your hands on me as you carried my body." Her cutting laugh causes me to jump. "You know, I never thought that the first time you really touched me would be to drop me in a grave. I knew you were going to be a selfish lover at the start, but that really takes the fucking cake."

Spine straightening, I take a step toward her. "I'm not going to just stand here and be shamed by someone who looks like a bimbo-goth Barbie. You don't even know me."

"Wow. Nice insult," she scoffs. "But unfortunately for you, I do know you. So much better than you could ever guess. So how about this, why don't you grow the fuck up and be honest with yourself for once."

I allow a long silence to drag out in defiance. I'm not going to bend to her bullshit. I didn't survive years in the miserable company of Chleo and her friends just to be bullied by someone I've known for five minutes.

"So, we're still playing pretend then? Are you really going to keep up the sad charade that you're little miss perfect?" Mutual vexation is a catching flame between us, stifling heat rising in the too-small space for our stubbornly inflating egos. "I thought dying would have at least made you a little more interesting but you're so fucking predictable."

“And you’re a self-important bitch. No wonder no one came looking for you. I bet—” I stop myself before going too far.

“Ah.” She claps. “There she is.” Stasi points that annoyingly accusatory finger at me again and smiles knowingly. “Don’t stop yourself on my account; things are finally getting interesting.” We’re practically nose to nose, our rage a powerful magnet. “Go ahead, finish that thought.” The brush of her lips is a taunt that I refuse to acknowledge. I grind my teeth, holding back the words despite her goading.

Her sigh caresses my skin like her smooth words. “You can keep up the charade for as long as you want, but I see right through you.” Fingers walk up my sternum, tickling over my throat, then tap my nose. “I wish you’d give it a rest already. I’m tired of this. Aren’t you? Aren’t you tired of being the perfect little victim?” The well-aimed arrow finds its mark, and I stagger back.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Reeling, my filter becomes faulty. “Who are you to talk? You’re so fucking arrogant. I’ve met you twice and you think you know everything.”

“Your needy little body told me more than enough. I know what that sweet tongue tastes like. I know how your lips molded to mine so, so easily. I know how wet you got with my thighbetween your legs.” A coy smile plays on her lips. “You know what all of that told me?”

“Whatever illusions of grandeur you’re building up in that fucked-up mind of yours are wrong.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. If I’m needy, so are you. I wasn’t the one sending love poems, after all.” Satisfaction surges in me at that smile being wiped from her face. “Talk about

desperate.”

“Took you long enough to notice. But are you going to pretend like you didn’t feel the connection between us too? For someone who ‘doesn’t like women’, you sure seemed to like it when I worked that sweet little cunt.” She runs her tongue along her teeth. “Is that why you were so easily convinced to help get rid of me? Were you afraid that people were going to find out just how much you liked every second of my attention?”

I’m shaking with anger, but my tongue is stuck to the top of my mouth.

“I saw the way your face lit up when you got my letters, even found one beneath your pillow. So, don’t even try to tell me that it meant nothing. It could have been something.”

“I didn’t know they were from you.” It’s true, or it was until I put two and two together when Nate told me about their confrontation. “If I had, I wouldn’t have kept them. I guess that’s the unfortunate part of remaining a secret admirer. You’re bound to get your feelings hurt.”

The laugh that earns is barbed and sharp. “It’s impressive, you know...how easily lying comes to you. Doesn’t really fit that wholesome image you like to keep up, does it?” Leaning against the back of the couch, she mimics deep thought, while I tell myself that I don’t need to inventory the tattoos on her legs that are on full display. “How about we try some honesty on for size? Tell me, Becca.” She’s too observant, dragging her hands up her thighs and hitching the hem up further. “Did you touch yourself that night when you got home? How long did you obsess over all the things we could have done if we’d left together?” Her thighs part, giving me a glimpse of her pink panties. “I bet it kept you up at night, the idea of my tongue between your legs, my fingers deep in your pussy. I think you’ve spent so many nights dreaming of me even while I lay dead in your backyard.”

“No, I didn’t,” I insist, pushing away the memories that I’ve been running from of that night. But with her in my face, it proves more difficult than I’d hoped.

“How many times were you knuckles deep inside yourself wishing that you didn’t help Nate get rid of me just so you could feel some kind of pleasure for once in your life?”

“You’re sick.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:27 pm

“Don’t call me that.” The defensive threat swipes at my resolve.

I want to shrink away, but I find my backbone. “Get fucked.”

“You offering?”

“Not in a million years.” My own fury is bubbling beneath the surface making me belligerent and immature. It spills over my lower lashes like I’ve always hated.

“You’re a terrible fucking liar. But even worse, you’re a fucking coward.” Her eyes home in on the tears that track down my cheek and before I can recoil, her tongue snakes out and devours them. “Wouldn’t want that saccharine self-pity to go to waste. Go ahead and feel sorry for yourself, I’ll gladly make a meal of your misery.” Even though I fight to hold them back, they defy me. “Poor, innocent Becca. It must be so hard to actually face the consequences of your actions for once.” Dismissing me, Stasi turns away. “This game isn’t fun anymore. Why don’t you go back to your room and keep hiding from the world, Crybaby.”

The word launches at me like spit, coating me in something unpleasant and belittling. The way the insult from this stranger sticks to me is infuriating. So much so that my words are lodged in my throat, suffocating me instead of flying like the daggers I need them to be to hurt her back. Hurt her back. The thought is so unlike me that the words are knocked back into my stomach with such force that it makes me ill. Instead, desperation spills from my lips. “Why does it have to be like this? I just died. Can’t you show some goddamned empathy?”

“Empathy?”

It would seem I got even with a triggering word of my own. But instead of feeling vindicated, I'm shrinking against the approaching tornado that's about to tear through me.

Chapter 18

Stasi

December 31st, 2014 – New Year's Eve - 59 Days Dead

"Empathy?" I seethe. "Are you fucking kidding me, right now? You want me to have empathy, for you?"

"Yes," she says without any conviction, the doubt and guilt swallowing up the power of that word.

"You know, if you hadn't physically helped him carry me, if you hadn't kept your mouth shut for over a month, then maybe I would be able to show you some empathy. But every chance you had to do the right thing has passed you by. So, excuse me for being a little short on my condolences." I turn away from the window that has a direct view of that place where I was dumped. Not laid to rest, dumped. Like an inconvenience. Like trash. Like nothing. Just like I'd become nothing to her. Meanwhile, she was everything to me. So. Fucking. Foolish. So fucking unfair. "He took everything from me, and you let him get away with it. So, if we're going to be stuck here together, then there's one thing we should get straight now. You won't find me coddling you like everyone else in your life." I look her right in the eyes, ignoring the water that still puddles there. "In fact, I want your guilt. I want you to hurt. I want to be under your nails, eating away at the tissue until you have no choice but to rip them off just to see what horrible mess is growing there. And by the time you do, I'll have moved on to devouring another piece of you. And guess what, I won't stop until I've swallowed you whole."

“Why are you so intent on being so cruel?”

“Because, Becca. It’s what you fucking deserve.” Gone were the days of soft hugs and warm laughs. Everything between us has turned to sharp tongues and fingers pressing bruises. “You already live in the pit of my stomach, acidic and endlessly upsetting. I might as well get full off it. I may as well be satisfied with your misery so I’m not just choking on mine.”

“I never set out to hurt you. You’re the one who sought me out.” Her chin wobbles. “You don’t understand the position I was in.” The pitch of her voice rises, whiny like a petulant child, like a girl who’s used to getting what she wants and never finding herself on the wrong side of ‘no’. The ease of her unspoken demand—that I simply have to see her side, that she couldn’t possibly be in the wrong—makes me want to make good on my promise right here, right now.

“If I’m so off base, why don’t you tell me what I’ve got wrong?” Spit flies from my mouth. “You didn’t help him hide my body? You didn’t make sure no one found it? You didn’t keep it a secret?” The damning questions grow louder and louder while my self-control frays.

“I never wanted this to happen.” Tears brim her eyes, seeping out of her like some repulsive infection.

“You have to be kidding me. Don’t you dare fucking cry right now. You can’t manipulate your way out of this.” I fucking hate her for what she did to me. But more than that, I hate that there’s a contaminated part of my heart that still longs for her love. “You were the only one who could have given me the closure I deserved. And you just let him—” The words stick in my throat, the molten liquid solidifying in large, rough rocks that are difficult to navigate without tripping. “You just let him get rid of me. Like I never existed. Like I never mattered to anyone.” Like I never mattered to you. Unlike the other truths I’m willing to lodge at her, that one is far too

vulnerable. That's the kind of honesty you share with a lover or friend in hopes of repairing something broken. But we aren't broken. We aren't two long-lost friends like I once thought. We aren't lovers who got dealt a bad hand and just needed to find each other again. I was so wrong.

And in the cruelest turn of events, now all I have is her. But she's not what I thought. She's not the girl I fell in love with. She's not someone worth obsessing over. She's a lying fucking bitch, one I want to drag through the mud right along with me. She should be face down in the dirt too. "You're just as guilty as he is."

Her conventionally beautiful face contorts as if I've struck her. "That's not fair. I didn't have a choice." Her fists ball at her side. There's that entitlement, her feeling like she has any right to be frustrated with me. It was cute as children, how she'd make it so she was impossible to stay mad at—not with those smoky blue eyes and rose petal lips—now it's irritating.

"Stop saying that!" The threadbare leash on my temper snaps. "You know what's not fucking fair, Becca?" I spit her name like the disrespect she showed my dead body. "What's not fucking fair is that nobody will ever have any idea what happened to me. What's not fucking fair is that my corpse decomposes unceremoniously in the goddamn dirt. Alone. Ugly. Abandoned." The truth of that last word rips up that scab that seems to never heal. A forever-aching wound that hasn't had the chance to fully scar over. The scraping nails of my trauma pick at it every time the inflammation recedes just enough for me to think it'll finally get better.

"I'm sorry!" she screams like she means it, but the words are hollow. Instead of the weight of a true apology, they're too light, stuffed with the flimsy fibers of her need to be forgiven, to return to her perfect state. But we're not in her fantasy land where she's the golden girl who can do no wrong. We're in a hell of her making where all the pretenses are stripped away—her disguise and my armor. A reality where we're both dead, both trapped here together, both haunted by our interwoven pasts. Our

loop is the inevitability of her hurting me over and over and over. Her choosing herself over me, over and over and over. Me choosing her over me, over and over and over, even when I swear to myself I won't. My only purpose now is figuring out how to put a stop to it, to find a way to finally set myself free.

"You're not. All that you're sorry about is that you're having to face the consequences of your actions for the first time ever."

"I didn't mean for us to end up like this." Gazing up at me, Becca transforms into that little girl who held my hand at night because I was afraid of the dark; the one who invited me to sit with her at lunch one day and changed my circumstances completely. The red rim around her eyes really brings out the blue undertones that flash at me like reminders of distant sunny skies on the horizon, but it's just a mirage. One I've fallen for too many times.

"I don't care what your intentions were. You made a ghost of me long before I died." Unleashing some of this anger is better than an orgasm; I've earned it the way she's fucked me, trapping me here with her. "I hope I haunt you for the rest of eternity. Every time you look at me, I want you to see the lifeless eyes of my corpse. Every time you bite your fingernails, I want you to taste my dried blood and that cursed dirt you left me to rot in."

The shocked inhale is all she has to say because there are no words she can use to possibly defend herself. A sniffle and whimper escape her, and then the floodgates open as she releases the tears she was barely holding back.

The sound of her self-pity is nails on a chalkboard. She can drown in them for all I care. I'll hold her head under if she pushes me too far.

Finally, she manages to find her voice, a mere whisper. "I'm sorry." It's worse than if she said nothing at all.

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“Don’t say things you don’t mean.” I slam my fist into the wall just centimeters to the right of her head. Her flinch almost makes me lose my momentum, but it feels too good to get this off my chest. “I don’t want your empty words, and I sure as hell don’t want your tears.”

“Then what do you want?” Her words break on a sob.

“I want you to get out of my face. I’ve wasted enough time on you.”

It’s not until the door clicks shut that I notice the looming dark presence hovering in the corner of the ceiling. Radiating a silent satisfaction, the sinister energy almost makes me regret sending her away, but the fear it inspires is quickly overpowered by the anger I hold onto. Besides, she’s long gone without so much as a look over her shoulder, eager to put me out of sight and out of mind as always.

Too bad for her, I’m not going to let her off that easy. It’s time for a new type of torment, a level of emotional warfare I never would have considered waging on someone. But she deserves to feel the betrayal I did; she deserves to have her heart broken so irreparably that she’ll never be able to move on from me. But unlike me, it won’t kill her. She’ll be forced to endure it for eternity. It’s so fucking poetic I’m already buzzing from the high of satisfaction I know I’ll get out of this.

Chapter 19

Stasi

66 Days Dead

Over the last few days, we've both kept to our respective spaces. I'm a bit surprised Becca hasn't come looking for me. People like her, the ones who need praise and adoration to thrive, don't know what to do with themselves when left to their own devices. As the days pass, she becomes restless. The desperation is getting to her, the hearty filling of life giving way to the spongy emptiness of rot and mold.

Ironically, she excels at being a ghost, wandering the halls by night, moping around as a silent voyeur observing her family by day. Without the waterfall of affection, she's become a wilted flower that droops and dries in the corner alone. It's only a matter of time before she turns toward the sun in a last-ditch effort to revive herself.

I'll be happy to shine a light on the parts of her that've been kept in the dark.

If there's one thing I know how to do, it's seduce someone. Sure, Becca is a bit of a difficult case since she's been holding that closet door closed for dear life, but I'm up for the challenge. It's not like I have anything better to do.

Plus, it's not exactly torturous work; I'm sure it'll be a bit fun even. Honestly, it's a win-win. I get to prove once and for all that she's wanted me all this time and I get to have my revenge.

I'll admit she's been a little bit more self-sufficient than I'd hoped, but she can't avoid me forever. I'll make sure she isn't able to; she just needs a little nudge.

Stripping off my skirt and top, I toss them on the bed and head out to the yard, plopping down in one of the lounge chairs they have set out—the same ones we spent entire afternoons in during the summer of sixth grade. In the familiar setting, it's impossible not to go back in time.

Coconut-tinged tanning oil we snuck from her mom's bathroom coats our bodies that glisten under the sun. The ruffling of magazine pages catching on the breeze is only a

little annoying. Copies of Cosmo, Girl, Seventeen, and Teen People that we'd snagged at the 7-Eleven pass between us in a steady rotation. Every time our hands brush, heat creeps down my neck, and my heart races. Sneaking a sideways glance, I'm disappointed to find that Becca remains unphased, while it takes every ounce of my self-control not to stare at her lips hoping she'll ask me to help her practice kissing again.

The memory is stolen from me when my attention catches on blades of grass snapping beneath someone's weight. It could be her parents, but I know it's Becca. Can feel it in the way my center of gravity completely shifts. Still, I feign unawareness and play with the ends of my hair, staring pointedly at my lap.

"What do you think you're doing?" Her irritation is my amusement.

I lift my head with an annoyed sigh. "Getting some sun. Is that a problem?" I look up at her through my lashes and roll my eyes. She is so uptight, goddamn. My fingers flex around the arms of the chair with the desire to work out all the knots she must have.

"When you're basically naked in my family's backyard, yes."

Confidence surges through me under the attention of her wandering gaze. "Nobody else can see me, and there's nothing going on here," my nonchalant fingers flick between us, "so I don't see what the problem is."

Weakly, she clears her throat. "It's just inappropriate." Her eyes dart around as she tries to find anything to look at but my nearly naked body.

"We're dead, Becca. Who gives a single fuck about what is and isn't appropriate anymore?" I laugh openly at her. "I promise you'll feel a lot better without that stick up your ass." Truly wicked temptation slithers through me. As I lean forward eager to

provoke her, I shift my arms to not-so-subtly push out my bare breasts. “Of course, if you like having something fill that beautiful ass, I’m sure we could figure something out.”

“You’re disgusting,” she scoffs.

“And you’re a fucking bore.” The yawned insult is lazy on my tongue. “A gorgeous, self-centered bore, just like all the others.” Slashing at her ego is the quickest way to get under a perfectionist’s skin.

“Are you such a smug asshole with everyone?” Asshole. She’s still mad about that? It’s too easy.

“No. I reserve it for spineless bitches who help hide bodies.”

“I told you I didn’t have a choice. I wouldn’t do something like that.” Becca has the audacity to sound offended as if anything I’ve said is some slanderous lie.

“But you did.”

“Why are you so insistent on blaming me? Don’t you want to know my side of things?” If we weren’t dead, the rising pitch of her voice would attract a nosy neighbor or two.

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“Because, Crybaby, there’s nothing you could say that would change the facts. Your perspective doesn’t matter to me.” I lean back in the chair holding her gaze as I infuse my words with moral superiority. “You’ll do mental gymnastics to maintain the illusion that you did what you had to do, but that’s all it is, a performance that benefits you.”

Instead of responding, Becca exaggeratedly angles her body away as she sits in the lounge next to me. She has the audacity to act like she’s disgusted by the mere thought of being near me. While hypocritical, her insistent denial only makes this more fun. I will snatch away that security blanket, but for now, I’ll have some fun tugging on it until she’s ready to explode with frustration.

“Tell me something. If you’re so innocent, why are you wandering the house all night? Could it be that you’re growing desperate for any kind of distraction because if you’re alone with your thoughts for too long, all those pitiful excuses you’ve made for your mistakes will unravel themselves?” I tap one of my perpetually perfect nails against my chin. “Or is it because when you’re left to your own devices, I’m all you can think about?” While I wait for her answer, I toy with the thin string of my underwear that digs into my full hip. Her eyes follow. Too easy.

Rather than admit I’m right, a weak defense falls from her lips. “I can only spend so many hours occupying myself. Obviously, you can relate if you’re just lurking at the window like a goddamned stalker all night.”

If only she knew how much lurking I’d really done when we were alive. When I was still under the illusion that Becca was the one who got away. Lurking has turned into observing. Know thine enemy, and all that. “Like you said, there’s nothing better to

do.”

“Exactly and unfortunately, you’re all I’ve got to keep myself busy.”

“Lucky me,” I sigh and stretch my arms over my head. “If you’re as bored as I am of arguing, there are other things that we could do to keep busy.” I antagonize her further. Usually a girl like Becca—lost, insecure, curious—would be so much fun to mold into my perfect little fucktoy. The ones who resist the most give in so beautifully. All that pent-up need makes them so malleable. It’s too bad she had to go and ruin everything. The plans I had for us. All I want to mold her into now is a tangle of emotions and a destroyed little mess so that she’ll never be able to get me out of her head once I’m done with her. I’ll only be satisfied when I know she lies awake at night roaming those halls wondering how she ever let herself fall for me.

“Only in your dreams.” We have a ways to go I guess, but right now I’m thankful for all the disdain I hold for her because the hissed rejection only faintly stings.

I shrug. “Whatever you say, Crybaby.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Maybe when you stop acting like one, I will.”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“Mhmm. The absolute worst.” She stands and flips me off, encouraging me to yell after her. “Don’t forget to call me that when you’re begging me to touch you; it kind of turns me on.”

Chapter 20

Becca

28 Days Dead

My argument with Stasi that's been replaying in my head all day is interrupted by the clattering of silverware. "I can't live in this tomb anymore or I'll die right along with her," my brother says abruptly interrupting my parents' silent dinner as he carries a box to the entryway. The statement reaches across the veil and throttles me. As if I haven't had enough devastating changes lately. The tiny island of stability I've found rocks beneath me at the realization that he's willing to leave everything he knows, including the parents who have always supported him despite his antics and nurtured his interests, even when other kids tried to beat the different out of him. My gaze turns to the chair across from me that's perfectly worn to his body from countless family dinners and endless hours playing games—cards, dominoes, and board classics—as a family. Will I ever find him sitting there first thing in the morning, with messy hair and a smile on his face while mom bakes his favorite blueberry muffins again?

He's leaving a lifetime behind. I did that. Ripped out the rug of our lives from beneath our feet. His knees are bruised, but far worse, something in his soul shattered. The priceless vase that got knocked over in the final struggle of my life.

Of course he doesn't want to be here where there's a constant reminder of the worst day of his life—and I do hope it remainsthat way, and that nothing worse ever happens to him. Even though it'll break me further, I hope it gives him the chance to start putting himself back together. It'll do him good to put some space between us, or the memory of me. He's become a shell of the lively, lovable person he used to be. Aiden deserves to find his way to himself. But the undeniable fact that he's leaving me behind, running from my presence, makes me realize how empty I am without him. Who am I without my twin when I've already lost everything else? It's selfish and unfair to think of him as my only source of comfort, but having him to watch

after, seeing him miss me, is soothing.

I follow Aiden out as he loads two large boxes into his car with a grunt.

“I’m dropping these at the post office, then I’ll be back, but I leave on the first flight out Friday.” Knives sink into the tender meat of my heart. He’ll be gone so soon. Determined to spend the little time he has left here together in whatever way I can, I sneak into the passenger’s seat as he closes the trunk.

My plans are quickly scattered to the wind when we pull out of the driveway. As soon as the tires roll onto the street my head and stomach pulse with agony that sends my thoughts spinning and nausea whirling in my empty gut. I steady myself against the walls of the shower as I find myself transported to our bathroom. Bewildered, I run to the front window and catch sight of the back of the car as he turns left and continues on his way without the slightest idea of what just happened. Blissfully unaware.

Didn’t I want that for him?

Shame and longing ache in equal measure. I have to let him go.

As I stand, I can feel the chasm opening inside me. My feet spur me forward but my mind is stuck back in Aiden’s car. I’m forcing a door open, unseeing, but everything abruptly comes into focus with a single moan.

Instead of turning away, I find myself rooted in the most blatant display of pleasure I’ve ever seen. Not that that’s saying much—of the sex I’ve had, most of it’s been fine, some of it painful and cruel. But this, this is something different altogether. The strumming of fingers and the rolling of lush hips makes masturbation look like a goddamn art form. I’m hypnotized by quaking thighs spread on top of the counter, sharpness carving into softness.

“Fuck, yes.” Stasi’s groaned words are a powerful spell that pulls me forward.

I’m transfixed by the show unfolding before me. The way she’s losing herself in her own touch is a spectacle. But what really captures my attention is the silver that catches the light. She has her clit pierced. I never even considered someone might do that . . . there. My stomach doesn’t turn in disgust, it flips with a nervous energy. My eyes gravitate to the full breasts I did my best not to ogle at the other day. Those tempting silver bars press against the tight black shirt as if to say ‘touch me here’. The clasps down the center of her top strain as she arches into her own palm.

Look away. I urge myself. Instead, I’m engrossed by the flashes of ecstasy that cross Stasi’s face, the glistening wetness between her thighs, and the quivering of her legs when she inserts a finger—all of it.

“Are you going to participate, or are you just going to watch?”

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Humiliation heats my cheeks, and I turn around so abruptly that a sharp twinge sparks in my knee. “I was just leaving.”

“Don’t leave on my account,” she says through panting breaths. “Having you here is making me so wet. Fuck it’s pouring down my thighs.”

God she is. “Aren’t you going to stop?” A restless energy builds inside me.

“Why would I? After all, I was thinking of you.”

“Excuse me?” I choke out. Surely, I couldn’t have heard that correctly.

“I said—” she inhales quickly, “I was thinking about you and how good it’d feel to have that reluctant tongue licking my pussy.” She pulls a finger from between her legs and traces her lips. “The way your lips would look coated in my wetness. How delicious we’d taste together when I lick it off.” Stasi’s hips jerk off the counter suddenly. “Oh, fuck. I could come from just imagining my clit kissing yours while you lay below me trying so hard not to show just how much you love it too.” Stasi slips two fingers into herself, pumping quickly. Her thighs spread just a bit wider, enough room for me to stand between them, but I force my feet to remain firmly in place.

This isn’t me. What happened between us before was just because I was drinking. I don’t want her.

I definitely don’t want to taste the wetness that’s dripping down her ass and onto the counter. I attempt to swallow, but my throat is burning and dry. I definitely don’t

want to kiss those glistening thighs as Stasi works hard for her orgasm. I definitely don't want to sink my fingers in and out of her to pull those moans from her lips.

Stasi grinds her hips upward into her own hand. "Look at you, stunned into silence. I know you want me. Why don't you just come have a taste?" She pulls her fingers from inside herself and holds them out toward me. "Just admit how thirsty you are, and I'll be more than happy to let you have a drink from my dripping pussy."

Shaking my head from left to right, I'm at a loss for words.

"Suit yourself. It's your loss," she taunts through a smug smile.

I can't move or look away, completely entranced by the squelching that punctuates the rhythm of her fast-working fingers moving in and out, in and out, despite how her body tenses around them.

"I'm, oh fuck, yes, yes, yes—" she struggles to get out coherent thoughts as her body convulses, hips jerking eyes rolling back, toes curling. Every masterful painting, every breathtaking song, every poem pales in comparison to the way Stasi looks right now. Divine.

But that doesn't mean I want her. I'm just appreciating another woman's love of her body. Perfectly acceptable thoughts anyone would have in my position. It's like watching porn or a movie, I can appreciate the eroticism of it, but I don't want to be part of it. Especially not with her.

With that settled, I clear my throat. "I didn't mean to . . . you know. You just caught me off guard. I was in shock." I gesture toward her as she flattens her skirt over her thighs.

She snorts a laugh. Bullshit. "I like to watch, too. There's something so hot about

women touching themselves, empowering themselves to get off just how they like it. Don't you think?" She slips her finger into her mouth and sucks it with a loud pop.

"I didn't like watching. It's just, I've never," I clear my throat again, unable to keep ahold of my voice that wavers up and down. "I haven't ever seen another woman masturbate. Not in real life at least."

"You're welcome to watch any time you want, but I can promise it's so much more fun when you participate." A mischievous smile curls her lips. "It's okay if you don't know what to do, I'm always happy to teach." Stasi slides down from the countertop and saunters toward me.

"Can we please stop talking about this?" The words are rushed, frustration making them more of a plea than the demand I'd hoped.

"Sure, Crybaby." I scoff in objection, but she ignores me and brushes my hair over my shoulder, with the same fingers that were just inside her. "So, what did you want? I hope it's something a hell of a lot more interesting than the fuck-all I have going on around here. Being dead is such a fucking drag."

"Just forget it. It's nothing." I'm reeling from the shocking distraction Stasi unknowingly provided, not quite sure how to voice my despair after that. I'm not sure why I thought she was a person to lean on in the first place. She quite literally bragged about how miserable she wanted me to be. This was a terrible idea, I scold my subconscious.

I turn on my heel to leave, but the sudden grip on my elbow stops me in my tracks. "Don't do that." My voice is an unfamiliar growl as I jerk my arm out of her reach.

"I'm sorry. Are you okay?" The somber tone she uses makes me want to believe she actually gives a shit.

I don't want to be vulnerable in front of her, but it's too late; she's cracked the thinly veiled composure I was holding together. Of course I'm not okay. I don't even know what that means anymore.

Okay with being dead?

Okay with losing everything?

Okay with my brother abandoning me?

Okay with the riptide of confusing emotions that rises up within me every time I'm in her vicinity?

What kind of question is that? When was the last time someone thought to ask me that?

Where I expect to see hardened indifference, there's a reassuring warmth that's enough to surrender the walls I've been holding up around me. My weary bones going soft as I sink to the floor. "He's leaving."

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“Who’s leaving?” Stasi moves closer, an arm outstretched that makes me scoot closer to the door, and thankfully it’s enough to make her think better of it.

“Aiden,” I say between too-quick breaths. The panic swirling inside me doesn’t care that I don’t actually need to breathe, it’s just leaning into muscle memory. My airway constricts; my lungs are tight. These drowning sensations have become far too familiar. I’ve spent so much of these last few months underwater.

With careful movements, she comes closer. My breathing shallows further, the chaotic rasping is ear-shattering. Preparing for her to grab at me, my shoulders tense, but she surprises me again by sitting on the floor. Slowly I drag my gaze over my shoulder, watching her as she folds her hands in her lap.

“What—”

“Turn around.” Her voice is low and steady, all of the usual sharpness filed down. “You’re having a panic attack. You need to find your center.” Something about the uncharacteristic tranquility she’s radiating has me following her instructions, one leg folding under another as I sit across from her.

“Put your arms across your chest like this.”

I lean back instinctively, but Stasi doesn’t reach for me. Instead, she demonstrates on herself and I copy her.

“Good. Now, inhale deeply; try to get to five. If you can’t, it’s okay; we’ll work up to it.”

One. Two. Three. I fail my first attempt as the sucking rasp starts again.

“One,” she says, encouraging me to try again. This time I get to four before my lungs clench tightly. It takes two more times, but I finally get there. The old familiarity of achievement soothes something deep inside me; it’s enough to help me get a grip on my breathing.

“Good.” She smiles and this time, it isn’t that knowing Cheshire cat grin, it’s soft and warm, filled with relief. “Repeat after me, ‘I’m safe. Everything is going to be okay.’”

“I’m safe.” I take five more breaths. “Everything is going to be okay.” With each breath, calm spreads through my body. For a few minutes we simply mimic each other.

But it’s not long before shame overshadows that peace, a warm summer’s day ruined by the humidity. “I’m sorry.” Knees pulled up to my chest, I fold in on myself, attempting to disappear.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

I expect a condescending remark, but mercifully, she lets it go.

Exhaustion descends on me as my body attempts to regulate. “Can I sit here for a little bit?”

“Sure.” Stasi stands and walks to the other side of the room. “If you don’t want to be alone tonight, you can stay here.”

That's...unexpected. "Why are you being nice to me?"

"I know you desperately want to paint me as some heartless monster, but I hate to break it to you, I'm not. I'm not one to turn my back on someone when they need me most." There's an edge in her words that takes me by surprise.

"Right. Well, there's only one bed . . ."

"Wow, what an astute observation. No wonder you were on the Dean's List." She beams with sarcasm.

"How did you—"

"Anyway, what about it?"

"Shouldn't one of us take the couch?" I eye it uncertainly. I haven't slept out here since high school, but I could barely stretch out on it back then.

"I mean, you are welcome to it. I'll be sleeping up here."

I eye her skeptically.

"You're worried I'm going to what? Touch you?" She scoffs. "You're safe, Crybaby. Grieving isn't really a turn-on for me. If you're really that worried about it, we can put pillows between us. Your mom certainly has enough on that mountain."

With a harsh swallow, I look from her to the bed, then back again.

"Scout's honor I won't even think about laying a finger on you." She holds three fingers up, and I can't help but squirm as I remember where they were when I first came in here. It feels like hours ago but that tingling feeling in my stomach comes

back. I hurry over to the bed and busy my mind as I pull back the comforter and rearrange the pillows to create a clear divide.

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Stasi shrugs, then starts to undo the clasps on the front of her top.

“What the hell are you doing?” It comes out as a shout that’s embarrassingly shrill.

“You can’t seriously expect me to sleep in this? I always sleep naked. Besides, it’s not like you haven’t already seen it all.”

“It’s not like we actually need sleep now. Can’t you just be uncomfortable for one night?” I plead with her.

“Whether I need the sleep or not, I don’t want to spend the whole night tossing and turning. Being dead is already boring enough. I don’t need eight more miserable hours in my day.” Stasi unclasps the first hook. “Sorry to inconvenience you, but not all of us had the forethought to wear something comfortable before we died. One of us didn’t choose to die.”

The air pulls taut like a noose between us at the mention of my suicide. “Do whatever you want.” The reminder of my death makes her being naked a non-issue because all I can think about is the sight of my unconscious body and my family falling apart around it.

“Fuck,” Stasi sighs under her breath as she slides under the covers quickly. “I’m sorry. That was too far. I know it’s still a sore subject for you.”

“Uh, yeah. I literally just fucking died. Of course it’s still a sore subject. Whatever you think you know about my death, you’re wrong,” I hiss in disbelief. I attempt to settle my irritation by closing my eyes and taking a few deep breaths. I don’t want to

accept her apology but I'm not in the mood to argue. I just want this day to be over. "I'll find you something more comfortable to wear tomorrow," I offer.

"Don't bother. You won't have my size," she mumbles and somehow that makes me feel even worse for being so oblivious.

Is this how my eternity will be? Stilted conversations and arguments, forever at odds with the only person who can see or hear me. This fucking sucks. I just want to escape it all, I want the peace I thought I was rushing toward. In an attempt to slow my thoughts, I begin counting sheep. After the third round of one hundred, that fuzzy lucidity of dreaming begins to settle in. As I drift and ease into the embrace of sleep, I can distantly hear the familiar melody of Once Upon a December. My surprise quickly melts away as I lose consciousness.

Unfortunately, that serenity is fleeting, my dreams veering into completely different territory, specifically, to Stasi kneeling between my legs. Shocked by what I've conjured up, I awake abruptly to my hips rocking creating an intense pulsing between my legs.

A snicker sounds from beside me, and I nearly jump out of my body. My eyes meet Stasi's, which are much too close to my own for comfort. But when I go to lean away, I shift again accidentally grinding down on something between my legs. Instead of finding a pillow, skin meets skin. Horror clutches me as I realize it's Stasi's thigh.

"I can explain. This isn't what it looks like." A reasonable explanation evades me as I attempt to pull away, but her hand clutches my ass.

I shoot her a glare, but the cocky grin spreads wider across her face. "Oh?" she says expectantly.

“Don’t look at me like that. Sex dreams are completely normal.” With a heave, she shifts me up and down her leg.

“Shh. You don’t need to be embarrassed.”

“I’m not. But you have the wrong idea.” I push her hand off my ass. “It wasn’t about you.”

Her raspy laugh only adds to the pleasure I’m fighting between my thighs. “Aww, don’t be mad at me because you weren’t able to sleep beside me for one night without touching me. There’s no need to lie.” She lifts my leg, spreading me open. “Look at that. There’s no denying that your pussy is wet for me.” Stasi shrugs smugly. “I tend to have that effect on women.”

Insecurity bubbles within me at the accuracy of her words. The last thread of my pride hinges on me not looking down at my soaked shorts. I fail when she strokes a lone finger down the seam, applying just enough pressure to make my hips lift. The reaction is instinctual like my body desperately wants to obey her. Instead, I sit up and slam my legs shut, guarding myself against any further provocation.

My tired body’s reaction doesn’t mean anything. It’s still trying to purge the mental image of her touching herself; this is just a residual side effect. It did something to my brain chemistry. It made me want her.

No.No. No. Not want her. I wanted that elusive freeing feeling she embodies. It’s been so long since I felt anything remotely close to pleasure. Not since you had her fingers rubbing you. My disloyal subconscious supplies.

I shake the disconcerting thoughts away only to find Stasi watching me closely. Too closely. Huntress eyes too keen. “You don’t have an effect on me.” I use air quotes around the last five words. “You’ll never have that effect on me.”

“Is that a challenge?” She has the audacity to perk up.

“No,” I hiss as I untangle my feet from the blankets and get out of the bed. Her spicy floral perfume is clouding my judgment as I try to find my words. “No, it is not a challenge.” I pull my flannel tightly around me. “The only reason anything ever happened between us was because I was drunk, okay. And asleep.” I tack on. “I’m not like you.”

Her jaw ticks and that flame of lust in her eyes takes on an icy chill. “Not like me?” She crawls across the bed toward me and instead of retreating, my traitorous eyes rove over her naked body. “Liar.” Her breath across my cheeks is a jarring return to reality, immediately bringing my attention back to her face.

“Fuck you.” The words arch from my lips and land a deep cut.

Stasi eases off the bed so she’s standing in front of me; looking down her nose at me despite the fact that she’s completely exposed. “Not even if you begged.” Each syllable is weighted with promise.

Instead of the acidic disgust I expect to invade my throat at the insinuation, rejection punches me in the gut, and something like desperation tugs at my core. It’s disorienting, the start of a carnival ride when you’re not ready. I hate her fucking games. “Not even if you were the last person on Earth . . . oh wait.” I retort, but the smart comment is weak, just like the threads of my sanity around this woman.

“Get. Out,” Stasi bites out, her eyes focused above my head.

Without another word, I gather what’s left of my pride and race toward the door, only slowing momentarily to check that no one is in the backyard.

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As I shut the door, bitter words follow me out. “And don’t come back until you’re done being a fucking coward.”

I cast a glare at the hidden grave she was buried in. It shouldn’t be possible for someone I helped put in the ground to become the bane of my existence.

Chapter 21

Becca

29 Days Dead

This day just keeps getting worse and it’s not even six a.m.

I’m caught in grief’s tightening grip as my brother slips into my room with the first rays of sun. We’re both still as death as he traces my room with an artist’s eyes, memorizing every detail, and appreciating the small things. But of course, his eyes skip right over me, and that heavy hand squeezes all the air out of my lungs, leaving me hollow and weak.

We might not have always understood each other, but he loved me and that was worth more than I ever let him know. Emotion clogs my throat as I stroke the butterfly tattoos he drew for me.

Sitting on the bed, he’s incredibly close yet so far away. “We said I could go first. Like the overachiever you are, you just couldn’t be second, could you?” A snotty laugh escapes him. “This is so fucked up. I don’t know how to do this.” He rubs his

eyes and attempts to suck in a controlled breath, but it devolves into a quiet sob. Witnessing the pain I've caused is my burden to bear, so I take this last opportunity to look at him, really look at him. Instead of the similarities that always tied us together, I'm stuck on the stark difference of his chest rising and falling, the pumping of his heart, the way he takes up space—he always has, but this hurts more than ever.

“I'm sorry I left you.” The ache to comfort him feels like it could shatter me, but what's the point when it gets lost in the silent pit that separates us? There's nothing I can do to fix the devastating domino effect my actions have had on him or my parents. Aiden is alive and yet he looks hollowed out by the loss of me. Bright, determined eyes are darkened with grief, just like the bags beneath his eyes. His pale pallor is sickly, near translucent instead of porcelain.

“I failed you, Sis. I'll never forgive myself, but I can't stay here. This house has become your tomb, one I'm trapped in just staring down at your dead body. Everywhere I look, it's empty eyes and your blood smeared on the walls, the floors, my hands.”

“I hate that I've become the thing that haunts you.” Regret swells inside me the longer I'm near him.

“I know it wasn't enough, but just know I loved you and I always will.”

“God, I'm going to miss you, but I hope leaving sets you free from the memories of this place.”

Aiden lets out a long sigh. “No matter how many miles are between us, even separated by time and space, you'll always be with me.” Bracing himself, he gets off the bed and takes one last look at my room, his gaze snagging on my jewelry box, which he proceeds to open and sift through. Silver catches the rising sun as he slips on a few rings. That's something isn't it? That a little piece of me will be with him?

That some part of me will get to see who he becomes without my ghost breathing down his neck? Even if it's a silly fantasy, I'm enshrining it as one of the fundamental truths of this new world I find myself in.

"I hope you find new reasons to smile—you always had the best fucking smile." I laugh like he made a typical smug remark. "I love you, Aiden." I squeeze my eyes shut, I don't want the last memory to be of him leaving me, a courtesy he wasn't afforded.

The house heaves a sigh when Aiden shuts the front door, like the air has become lighter—one less person's grief to hold. But to me, it's notably emptier. Another piece is carved out of me. Who knew a razor blade could do so much more than slice?

Those wounds that have started to heal over bleed anew. Returning to the scene of the crime, I sink down into the empty tub and really let myself stew in it. This time, instead of cold bath water, it's my tears that carry me under; I let them wash me out to sea. Wave after wave of devastation washes over me, pummeling me. As I wade further and further out, a new kind of hunger I've never experienced grows in the void of my gut.

But in the endless sea of nothing, there's Stasi standing in the doorway. With seasick eyes, I can't tell if she's a shark looking for blood in the water or if maybe she's something to hold onto, just for right now, just until I can hold my head above the sloshing waves on my own.

She sits on the edge of the tub hovering uncomfortably close to me. The pads of her fingers press beneath my chin to tilt my head up. I freeze at the contact, my body confused by how gentle it is. I sway unsteadily between the instinct to recoil and the unfamiliar urge to lean into it. Something about her grounding hold and velvety skin on mine is like crawling into the safety of my bed after a bad day. But of course, the peace doesn't last.

After several seconds of assessing my tear-stained face, she shakes her head, replacing the care in her eyes with annoyance. “What do we have here, Crybaby? Another pity party, what a surprise.”

This snaps me out of the false sense of security she lulled me into. “What do you want?”

“So many things you could never give me.” A deep sigh of disappointment heaves her chest up and down. “But I’ll settle for conversation, dull as it may be.”

Like a rogue piece of wood, Stasi’s sharp and uncomfortable, but she’s there. She can give me a reprieve from the struggle, for a few minutes at least. Even if it’s just taking my focus off treading water and on to the splinters that dig into my arm. “Fine. It’s not like I have anything better going on. What should we talk about?”

“Why are you moping this time?” Stasi’s curled fingers still press into the underside of my jaw. The way she holds me like it’s the most natural thing makes this the first time I’ve felt steady in so long.

“Aiden’s gone.” I swallow thickly. “For good, I think.” The last part is said with trembling lips.

“That’s—” She looks away and drops her hand. “I’m sorry.”

The sudden absence of her fingers leaves me floundering. “You are?” I huff with disbelief, my brow raising in challenge.

“I am.”

Two little words, the smallest bit of comfort, stir something in me, and before I know what I’m doing, my body is in motion. With a hand laced behind Stasi’s neck, I pull

her into me, our lips pressing together. In sync, she climbs into the tub, straddling me. But when her tongue enters my mouth, it does so cautiously, moving in lazy circles; it's nothing like the claiming she pursued when we kissed at the party. That's what I need right now. That's what will make me forget everything that's so much worse than letting her think she was right about me. I deserve to fall into whatever this is for just a little bit.

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Attempting to provoke that fervor from her, I tangle my tongue with hers, rubbing along that pink and silver piercing that teases me every time she speaks her stinging words. Still, she barely reacts.

“Is something wrong?” I don’t bother hiding my frustration.

“What do you think you’re doing exactly?”

“I—” Confusion swims through me as I look into her deep brown eyes that are flat and cold, there’s none of that simmering heat beneath the surface. She’s been tempting me with her words and body during nearly every interaction we’ve had. “Isn’t this what you wanted?”

“You can’t just use me,” she bites out.

“I’m not.”

“I won’t let you enjoy this and then deny anything happened tomorrow.” With feather-light fingers, she pulls up my flannel that’s fallen down my shoulder. “What is it that you want, Becca?”

“I want to do this.” I gesture between us.

“Do what, exactly?” Her prodding words poke at the monster of grief that’s lingering just beneath my skin.

“Why won’t you just make this easy? This doesn’t have to mean anything. It doesn’t

have to change anything.” I slap my hand on the edge of the tub. “I just need to forget about everything. I just need a distraction.”

A flash of betrayal sharpens her features, making her previous disdain for me feel like child’s play. “Is that what I am? A pretty distraction?” Her glare could incinerate me. “Are you still trying to deny that you want this? Want me?” The words are a snapping bite against my lips. “Are you saying that if I was literally anyone in the world, it wouldn’t matter because you just need someone to make you forget about how you fucked up your life?”

I have to look away to hold back the tears that are on the precipice of springing free.

“Answer. Me.” Her fingers dig into the side of my chin, and my hand snaps around her wrist at the discomfort.

“Yes.” My nervous swallow is absurdly loud in the silence between us. “I told you; I’m not interested in women like that. I was just drunk. I was just...experimenting.”

“Oh, okay. I see. So you’re not interested in women, but one will do for a quick, desperate fuck?” Her eyes are wide with furious disbelief. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?” Lips that are still wet with my saliva brush across my cheek as she brings them to my ear. “You know what I think?” I don’t but I can’t find my words, so she continues. “I think that you’re a dirty little liar. I would bet everything that your panties are drenched.” She shifts her weight in my lap, her own wetness apparent against my stomach. “I think that every inch of your body is telling you to touch me, and not because of that bullshit about a distraction.” She laughs viciously. “You want to kiss me, want to touch me, want me to touch you because you know that it’ll feel better than anything else you’ve ever experienced in your entire life. Having me get you off would be the greatest fucking escape.” A yelp escapes me as she takes my ear between her teeth and tugs one of my piercings. I shove her back. “Next time you want to play a game that’s way out of your league, you should know that if I ever

fucked you, it would change everything.”

Her cockiness pours gasoline on the warring emotions within me. Everything I’ve been holding back is burning up in my veins. The cruel smile that twists her lips sets fire to my self-control. I’m scrambling to catch it before it douses the heat that rises within me. Her hand sliding up my thigh seeking that damning evidence triggers the explosive that detonates. “Don’t touch me.” My nails dig into the top of her hand, halting its ascent. “You want the truth? Fine. The only reason I kissed you is because I thought a slut like you would be an easy distraction. As you said, who even cares anymore whether I like women or not, we’re dead.” Confidence builds behind my voice as I watch her control of the situation slipping away. “You were right. Happy? I was just using you. Nothing more, nothing less. I’m sure a girl like you is used to that, right?”

Challenge sparks in Stasi’s eyes as she shoves the hurt that was just there down somewhere I can’t reach. “You’re cute when you try to be mean. You know that, right?” Her hands burn as they press into my shoulders. “It’s going to be such a sweet victory when you finally give in. I can’t wait to squeeze around those elegant fingers when you can no longer resist the urge to touch me. I might even reward you by moaning your name while you fuck me with a lifetime of denial catching up to you.”

“That’s not going to happen.” My fingers tighten around her wrist. Whatever foolish notion I’d walked into this with, I’d long since come to my senses.

“Oh, Becca.” Stasi pouts mockingly. “You’ve gotten too comfy in that closet. But now that I’ve turned on the light, you’re going to realize how tiny and suffocating it really is in there.” Stasi twists her hands so she’s mirroring my hold on her. “When you’re ready to finally come out, let me know if you need a helping hand.” Her nails dig into my skin. “I’ll take my payment in the form of you coming with my name trapped behind those gritted teeth.”

“I hate to disappoint you, but this was a mistake that won’t happen again.” I snap, but the words hold no weight as she shoves me back and crawls over me. I catch a glimpse of her round ass exposed in the mirror before I force my eyes back to her face.

“Fine by me. Unlike you, I know how to keep a fantasy in check. Yours are going to drive you off a goddamned cliff.”

Her words are sharp. Every inch of her presses into me, pinning me down. The familiar position flips my reality on its head and once again I’m fighting for control of my body. Reflexes in overdrive, I begin thrashing, arms flailing and pushing, legs scrambling so my heels can find purchase. Like last time, I can’t free myself. “Get off. Get off, getoff, getoff, getoff.” Panic seizes me, like a hand around my throat that makes it hard to breathe and impossible to think clearly. There’s just a steady stream of fear pumping through me. I can’t hear anything but my own cries and ragged breath. I can’t see anything but the shadow moving above me. When my head slams against the tiled wall, it knocks me back into the moment. The one where it’s just me and Stasi. The one where I’m relatively safe, aren’t I?

Stasi reaches forward but when I shrink back, she stops. “Shit! I’m sorry. Can I—are you—what happened?”

“Get away from me.”

“I’m just trying to make sure you’re okay.” Steady eyes try to hold mine but I’m desperate to look at anything but her.

“I’m not. Get. Out!” The shout surprises even me. I rarely ever allow myself to express anger, let alone raise my voice at people. But there’s too much warring for my attention, like the black mass hovering over us on the ceiling that I’ve been pointedly ignoring. I’m unable to make out the whispers it rains down on us as all my

focus pours into Stasi. I know I should be more concerned with how it grows larger every time I see it, but right now, I just don't have it in me to care about anything but disappearing into my grief.

Chapter 22

Becca

31 Days Dead

Days easily melt into each other as I relive the nightmare that was the last few months of my life. Our bodies remember even when we don't want to. Even when we put up our shields and lock the memories behind a steel door, we can't erase the violence that's reshaped our bones or the trauma that's scarred our skin. The best defenses come unraveled with the slightest touch in just the right spot. All that hard work has gone to waste. All the mental fortitude, a failed effort. When the gates fall the onslaught of memories come charging in, a legion of horrors from the greatest depths of my soul. With every foot they gain in their breach, I remember.

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My entire life I'd been praised for my intelligence, deemed by everyone a 'smart girl'. Turns out I was a fool. A fool for throwing that party. A fool for withdrawing from the people who loved me—of whom there were many. A fool for ending my own life too early.

They say hindsight is twenty-twenty and they're right. At that time, all I could see was the deep-seated shame that burned away my self-respect and will to live. Instead of doing the right thing, instead of seeing that there was an entire life left to live, all I saw was the comments every time I closed my eyes. Slut. Whore. Why would you even bother posting this? Nobody fucking cares about you.

All I heard were Nate's grunted threats punctuated by the harsh slapping of skin. "If you tell anyone, you're going down with me. I'll make sure of that. I wonder if your family would come to visit you if they knew their perfect daughter helped hide a body. I wonder if they could look you in the face if they saw that video. When they saw you taking—"

"No. No. No. No," I chant as I chase away the things I've worked so hard to forget. Just like now, it was coming from every direction. It was too much to endure. With each passing day that I had to live with the guilt, logic frayed and fell apart in my hands.

It could only last so long. False. These men had spent their whole lives making everyone else's miserable.

They'd get bored of me. False. My silence was the only thing that promised their freedom.

It wasn't so much what they said, it was that it never ended. I never got a break from the cruelty. Even simple joys like posting my breakfast on my story were met with comments like 'Should you really be eating that?' or 'Of course you're eating alone again'. Even worse than the public warfare were the whispers that caught me off guard while walking to class. You can cover up as much as you want, I still know what that ass looks like naked.

They stripped away any semblance of peace I had. They flayed the parts of my identity that I treasured most, leaving me stripped and raw, unable to protect the most vulnerable pieces of myself.

And with the jarring shock of Stasi's body on mine, those memories were unlocked.

The unanswered cries were swallowed by the bass of the music and too many voices speaking in too small a space. I remember.

The tension in my knees, my hips, my thighs as I tried to fight back that first time. I remember.

The weight that kept me still, kept me down, kept me helpless. I remember.

The putrid smell of harsh chemicals and salty sweat that coated my own strawberry-scented skin. I remember.

I remember. I remember. I remember.

I remember and there's no going back. There's no fixing me. The doors hang off the hinges, my security gone. The fragments of my sense of self shatter like broken windows and cracked mirrors. My confidence was torn and tattered, drapes and fine silks cut through with a swift blade. I was forced into the mud, made into their whore.

Down there in the dirt, beneath his boot, becoming his to use, I lost sight of myself. Maybe Stasi was right. Hadn't I had a choice? I didn't have to let her get swallowed up in the dirt of it with me.

When I think of her now, I don't see that sexy, commanding woman who pushes me to the brink of my sanity. I see her lifeless body that I can still feel beneath my fingertips. Platinum locks dark with wet soil. A pretty smile with lips gone blue. Her lush body once so full of life lying limp and vulnerable.

I let that happen to her. I let her sink down below so that I could keep my precarious place just above ground.

Jokes on me; we're two drowned girls, she and I. Stasi's anger is understandable, warranted, even. But I'm entitled to my grief. Aren't I? We're both victims of the same man, of the same world. The one that constantly seeks to destroy women who find a path for themselves and follow it. Some of us make sacrifices and bury the things that hurt the most just to ease the suffering a bit. It never goes away though, it's the beating heart beneath the floorboards that drives us to madness—with the guilt of it, with the injustice of it, with the cruelty of it all.

Victims are forced into silence. But we pay the ultimate price for it. The silence is never the peace or safety it should be; it's a quiet destruction that eats away at us minute by minute or year by year. Infecting. Eroding. Eating us alive. Secrets kept against our will are parasites that become predators. And if you're like me, one day they become too much to bear. The slow consumption is so excruciating that it's better to get it over with in one fell swoop. Ripping the Band-Aid off. Or, in my case, slitting your wrists.

Somehow my ghostly form is unmarred by the final decision I made, but even though the scars are missing, I can still see it in all its gore. I hate what I've done to myself.

I need to exorcise all of this pent-up agony.

I crush my face into my pillow letting out a guttural scream that tears me up from the inside out. I keep screaming, and all those words I should have told Nate, purge themselves into the soft fabric.

It's not enough.

My fists pound into the feathers. An ounce of tension leaves me. I repeat the motion again. Over and over, I punch, beat, and pound my hands until my lungs ache from the screaming that accompanies them.

I slip my arms under and bring the pillow tightly against my face; I scream some more. My teeth clamp down on the pillowcase, I bite down until my jaw hurts. The urge to rip it to shreds is there. I'd hate to make a mess, but then again, everything is already a mess. I'm a mess. My life is a mess. My heart is a mess. What's a bit more? Indulging myself, I bite into it again and this time I thrash my head from side to side as I pull at each side with all the strength I can muster.

Rriiiipppp.

The sound cuts through the air and I freeze. A wave of guilt and panic rushes through me, but as the feathers dance around me and descend through the air, a laugh escapes me. A genuine laugh that sounds like someone else. Where has she been?

Like a kid watching fireworks, my gaze is fixed upward, taking in the wonder above me. It's absurd, it's juvenile, it's mesmerizing. White and brown feathers drift around me, landing in my hair, across my lap, and all over the floor. It's everywhere except for where it belongs.

I laugh and I laugh, there's no stopping now that I've started. A small spark of joy

has erupted into all-out hysterics. Again, I indulge it. Gathering up some of the feathers, I throw them up in the air. They rain down on me, but the novelty has worn off.

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My laughter catches on the sharp edges of my brokenness and shatters into a dozen wracking sobs that layer one over the other. The loss of Aiden, the loss of my family, the loss of my future, the loss of my friends, the loss of my dignity, the loss of myself. Back to back to back to back, grief after grief with no time to recover in between.

And now I've pushed her away. I don't want to count her with them because that would mean she's come to mean something, which means she's something that can be taken away. And if she's that, then I'm further in over my head than I had even realized. Between the insults and taunting, when had she had time to slip in between my defenses? She's found an opening in the chain-link fence around my heart and created room for herself when I wasn't looking. I thought she was background noise that helped drown out the screams of my internal torment, but maybe it's more than that, or she could be if I just let her in.

Instead, I've chosen to be pathetic and weak, standing alone on a precipice staring out at the vastness of a life lived in fear. What makes it unbearable is that I'm letting it rule me just as much in death.

It's like the admonishment triggers my mom's instincts. Peeking into the room, she slowly enters, strangling the doorhandle like she might fall over without the support. Her eyes widen as she surveys the mess I've made.

"Chris," she squeaks as she takes another step into the room. "Chris!" There's volume to the command now.

"What's wrong?" My dad runs into the room, gripping her shoulders protectively. It's

retorical as both their gazes rove over the floor taking inventory of the countless feathers that blanket the fluffy rug.

“The feathers, do you see them, too?”

“Yes.” My dad’s voice is shallow with disbelief.

“Do you think—”

“Don’t.”

“Chris,” my mom pleads with him. “What if it’s her?”

“Don’t do this, Erin.” He sucks in a ragged breath. “Don’t go chasing ghosts. I can’t afford to lose you too.” My dad grabs her wrists and pulls her against his chest. My mom’s sobs are as unbearable as nails on a chalkboard even though they’re muffled in his shirt.

“It could be,” she insists, growing more adamant. “It could be her. Who else would have done it?” She pulls away from him. “Aiden isn’t here, and it wasn’t me. So was it you? Did you come in here on a whim and destroy our daughter’s pillows? Hmm?” She turns back to the scene of the crime. “It’s her. I know it. I can feel it, Chris. I can feel her.” My mom’s hands find his shoulders as they stare intensely at one another. “I’m sure this time.”

“I miss her just as much as you do, but I can’t do this. I can’t bear it. Please don’t let yourself go down this path. There has to be a reasonable—”

“Don’t finish that sentence. You can’t deny it this time,” she says through cracking control. “Don’t make me feel like I’m blowing this out of proportion.”

“There has to be some other explanation. Maybe a neighbor came in and—”

“Oh, don’t give me that. We’ve lived here for years, and we’ve never had a break-in. No one would do something so cruel.”

“I just have a hard time believing she’s trying to communicate with you through littered feathers and torn bedding.” He attempts to embrace her, but she pulls away. “Sweetheart, let’s go to the other room. I’ll come clean this up later.”

“No. No. I’ll clean it up now.” She shakes her head definitively. “I want to be alone.” They stand there motionlessly waiting for her to change her mind. But she doesn’t. So my dad finally gives in and leaves her to it.

Relief leaves me in a long exhale as the tension follows him out.

When the door shuts behind him, she sinks to the floor. Despite the heaviness of her sorrow, there’s something soothing about having her nearby. I can finally take a deep breath. The silence is unsteady with her tears, but having her attention, even in this indirect way is reassuring.

For a while, I just cry with her.

“Mom,” I say shakily, “I’m so glad you’re here. I need you,” I confess as she starts to collect the feathers one by one. “I messed up, again. So many times. But you already know that.” A small laugh escapes me. “This is a big one though—a decade-long mistake.” Admitting that is a massive weight off my shoulders, so I continue. “I think I’ve been lying to myself—to everyone, actually—and I don’t know what possessed me to do it.” She’s crawling around gathering stray feathers, but I pretend she’s listening because she’s still here and that’s good enough.

“Well, maybe it wasn’t lying, more like confusion. Yeah, I was confused. It’s just, I

didn't understand why I was feeling what I was feeling or why it was bad. So, I just buried it, I guess." Just like her. "But I buried it too far away, too deep, and at some point, along the way, I forgot it existed. It became a bad dream. Something that happened to some other version of me that was long gone." I pull my knees to my chest, wanting to disappear from my own embarrassment. "But that part of me wasn't gone at all, she was being suffocated."

She drops the last of the feathers in the trash can under my desk and stands. Well, this is it. Now or never. "Mom, I don't think I'm straight. I never have been. I met someone, on my birthday, and I've messed it all up. I ruined it in the most permanent way. I did something really bad. Unforgivable. I'm not your perfect girl anymore." My words rush out faster and faster. "I'm so glad you can't see me now. You'd be so disappointed." Those last words sneak out in a whisper.

Absentmindedly, her hand passes over my duvet as she heads for the door, flattening the wrinkles I'd caused earlier. Her brow furrows, her hand moving more thoughtfully over the area as she surveys the room again. She pauses, then takes a seat on the edge of my bed.

"Becca." She clears her throat. "Becca, honey, are you here with me?"

"Yes, mom. It's me. I'm right here," I say excitedly as I crowd the space in front of her.

"Honey?" This time her voice is weaker.

"Yes, mom. I'm here. I'm right here." I wave my hands in front of her face. When that gets me nowhere, I lunge forward and wrap my arms around her. But, instead of the warm embrace I've always felt safe in, she shudders and shrinks inward. It's heartbreaking. It's understandable. It's human.

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Despite her body's instinctual reaction. She doesn't say anything else. She simply curls up on her side in resignation. One by one, I watch her tears fall into my pillow, staining the same fabric that's absorbed my own so many times over the last year.

I hate seeing my mom broken. I hate more that I did this to her. To them. Another mess I've made. But there's nothing I can do to fix it. The only thing I can do is stay out of their way and let them heal. It's what I should do. What I will do. But for right now, I choose selfishness because I still need my mom.

Walking around to the other side of the bed, I lay down as gently as I possibly can so as not to disturb her, then curl up behind her. I don't wrap my body around hers, but I pretend that the few inches between us aren't there and that she's holding me close.

As if she can sense me, she grabs the remote and puts on *Pride and Prejudice*. And for the first time in months, we fall into our old bad-day routine. For one hundred and twenty-seven minutes, I try my hardest to let myself enjoy this rare comfort, but there's one thing that remains constant on my mind: Stasi. I can't help but draw the parallels between our constant head-butting and Elizabeth and Darcy. Maybe if I'm willing to admit that I was wrong and she can let go of her grudge, things could be different.

I know I dragged her down with me, damned her to this deep well. At the bottom looking up, surrounded by darkness on all sides, we've been trying to find our own way out, but maybe we can find our way back to the surface together. Could we find freedom in each other? There has to be some kind of peace to be found. I have to try, don't I?

Chapter 23

Stasi

70 Days Dead

“I don’t want to be alone anymore.” Becca declares, head held high with entitlement, as she crosses the room and stands at the side of the bed next to me. No ‘can I come in’. No ‘hey, Stasi’. She’s been ignoring me for days after the abrupt end to our last confrontation. Now she sits here expectantly, the weight of her eyes is an irritating itch.

Avoiding her gaze, I let out a long sigh and roll onto my back. I burn holes in the ceiling, so she doesn’t see the relief swelling within me along with my self-disgust at the way I already feel lighter with her presence. “Well, that’s too bad, isn’t it? I don’t want to do this anymore, Becca. I’m tired of this hot and cold.” I meant what I said about being used. As much as I want her to see the error of her ways, maintaining the power balance is crucial or I’m going to get destroyed in the process.

“So am I.”

Warmer. That genuine need in her voice causes my restraint to quiver like an exhausted muscle.

Her feet shuffle as she comes closer. “I don’t want to fight anymore. I—I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

Warmer. God, she’s giving me exactly what I want. Exactly what I’ve yearned for. Still, I don’t give in, holding steady to the spiteful dismissal she deserves. The minutes stretch on and on—me ignoring her, her standing there awkwardly—but eventually, she breaks her silence. “C’mon, Stasi. Are you really going to make me

beg?"

Fucking inferno. That gets my attention. Of course, I want to hear her beg. "Try me."

"I want you to help me. Ineedyou to help me." It's a start. "You're going to make me work for this aren't you?" The heavy silence answers for her. "You're right, okay. I am a liar. But I don't want those barriers between us." This gets my attention, and I watch transfixed as her shaking hands throw her flannel to the floor and then tug her top over her head. "It's what I do best, play pretend." I keep my eyes on hers, even when her shorts hit the floor, leaving her in just her panties that I've been dying to see. "At some point, I let my fear of other people's judgments force me into a box, and then I helped them close the lid. I never even tried to get out, never even thought about it." Becca clears her throat, trying to dislodge the sticky words that are hard for her to get out. "I told myself the box was comfortable, that I wanted to be in there. That I was safe." She scoffs at herself. "I never was . . . safe . . . though."

Stockholm syndrome is a common side effect of comp-het. I don't say it out loud because we're not interpreting this the same way. She thinks her individuality and sexuality has been repressed, but it's so much more than that. She's missing an entire aspect of her identity. It's stuffed into a forgotten, dark corner of that box. They cut that piece out of her like a problematic fucking growth. With their razor-sharp taunts cast from sweetly pink lips. Treatinglesbian, gay, and queerlike dirty, forbidden things. I'll admit it even took me a few years to grow comfortable in that aspect of my identity, until the loathing lilt they'd said those words with faded away and was replaced with enthusiastic pride. I told people I was lesbian without hesitation, it had become a crucial part of who I was.

She continues, "I don't know how to be anything different. But I want to try. I can't keep living like—I can't keep doing this. I can't spend eternity lost and afraid."

Finally, I turn to her. "What makes you think I can help with that?" It's an effort to

keep my voice neutral because all I want is to be needed—wanted—by her, for anything, for everything.

“Because I want to try. And, like you said, our chemistry doesn’t lie.” Becca’s cheeks blush like she’s just as shocked by her brazenness as I am.

Something like hope rattles awake within my chest and I know I should crush it, her confidence in me and that seed of desperation that’s blossoming inside me as a result, but I can’t seem to get the biting words out. That deep longing to be hers, in whatever way, peeks its head out of that hole it’s been hiding in. Slithering amongst my resolve, I know I only have a brief window to shut this down before it sinks its teeth into me and the need for her infects me again.

“I’m not some sex toy you can pull out and play with.” Instead of words lashing at her, there’s a pleading undertone that I hate. Please don’t use me like all the others.

“That’s not what I’m doing.” The conviction drains from her voice.

“What changed? What happened to you not being into women? I thought I was just a drunken mistake...”

“Maybe it was a lie.” She steps closer to me.

“Maybe?” My hands fit around her narrow hips, thumbs caressing the sides of her Medusa tattoo that guards her possessively. The snakes writhe with her unease at the touch. Slow and steady, Stasi. You’re so close.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this? Just a few days ago...” I search for the right words, skirting around the distressed reaction she had to my touch. “Just a few days ago, you made it clear that you didn’t want my hands on you.”

“I’m confused, isn’t this what you wanted?” A protective arm wraps around her chest.

“This isn’t just about me. Do I want to fuck you? Yes. God, yes, I do. But good sex is about communication.” I let go of her. “If you can’t even bear to be naked around me, then I don’t think now is the right time to do this.”

Becca’s hands capture my wrists, and she places my palms on her small breasts, our gasps mirroring each other—mine of surprise, hers of what sounds like need.

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I try not to react further, but keeping my eyes on hers is a monumental challenge. “What’s changed? It’s hard to believe that you’ve suddenly decided you want this.”

“It’s not sudden. We both know you make me feel good. Well, the way you touch me, at least.” She bites her lip as I stroke my thumbs tentatively over her nipples. “I’m trying to get out of my own way. I need this.”

“Why?” I press.

“I can’t—”, her voice breaks, “I can’t even touch myself anymore. For months, seeking pleasure, giving pleasure, has become repulsive to me. Frightening even. My body doesn’t feel like my own anymore. I’m not the woman I used to be. My self-worth, my identity, my sexuality, all of it was taken from me.” She looks down at her feet as she speaks. “But when you touch me, it’s like I’m finally present in my body again. You know how to make me feel. I’m so tired of being numb.” Finally, Becca meets my eyes. “I want to feel feminine and powerful and desired.” A desperate sigh leaves her as she draws my arms around her waist.

“Trust me, there’s never been a day that you haven’t been desired.” It’s vexing that someone as gorgeous as Becca has ever felt lacking.

“I mean desired for me. Not what people think I am. I mean being desired in my raw sexuality, the one that I own. Not the kind where other people use me as a means to an end, to fulfill their own desires without any regard for mine.”

I empathize with her to an extent. It’s what she’ll do to you. My subconscious chimes in, stirring up those ugly, spiteful feelings that had receded for a bit. The chokehold

her speech has had on me is broken. I'm not going to be anyone else's experiment, especially not hers. I've waited for this day for so long, but now, it feels wrong for both of us. I have too much to lose, like my self-respect. Releasing her, I lean back. "I'm not going to fuck you."

The defiance that flashes across her eyes surprises me. "So, what? All that taunting was for nothing?" She steps closer. "Who's the coward now?"

That pulls a barking laugh from me. After putting herself out there like that, she falls back on provoking me? Okay. Two can play that game. "You had me going there for a minute, but you're out of your fucking league. If you think I'm going to bend to your will just because you throw yourself at me, you've sorely underestimated me."

"This was a waste of time. Just forget it."

"Aww, Crybaby, don't be embarrassed. Be better. Earn. It." I step flush to her, forcing her bare breasts to graze my shirt. "I told you before, if you want to touch me, if you want me to moan with your name on my lips," I breathe the words heavily against her ear, "if you ever want me to touch your pretty little cunt, you're going to have to beg for it." I trace the row of delicate ear piercings with my tongue. "And you can be sure that I'm going to make you suffer so beautifully for it."

The shuddering breath that leaves her is heavy with arousal. A wicked smile curls my lips. Now this is what I'm talking about. Could even be worth the inevitable letdown. "Do you enjoy being put in your place?" I pinch her nipple, and she gasps, shoulders caving, mouth falling open. I don't let go, but instead, I use it as leverage to pull her closer. "C'mon Crybaby," I said, "beg for it." My fingers release briefly then pinch down again, eliciting the makings of a reluctant moan.

"Ah-okay!" Becca's fingers latch onto mine, attempting to pry my nails away from the sensitive bud.

I raise a brow, staring down at her as I hold my ground.

“Stasi,” she attempts to warn me.

“Becca?” I say through a devious laugh as I roll her nipple between my fingertips, my other hand sliding up her thigh and stopping just shy of her pussy. “Do you have something you’d like to say?”

Her stance widens, the heat of her inviting, tempting even. But I’m determined to see this through. I’ve waited this long. A whimper escapes her, but my fingers only tighten on her thigh.

“Fine,” she hisses through gritted teeth. “You want me to beg? I can beg.” There’s a crackling current of desperation I’ve never heard in her voice before, it catches along my spine, shocking me into an alert need.

“Let me taste you.” Before me, Becca sinks to her knees. My own nearly buckle at the sight. How many times have I imagined her feasting on my pussy? But I can’t give in that easily.

“I don’t know,” I sigh.

“Please.” She places a kiss almost mockingly on the knee tattooed with *Be Thou My Ally*. I watch her unyieldingly, and she repeats the motion on the other knee where the script reads *Crush Not My Spirit*. Her satisfied smirk nearly has them buckling, but I can’t let her get too cocky. I need more from her.

“Do you have any idea how many women have been in your place?” I caress the side of her face in a parody of intimacy. “The tongues on some of them, I mean...I’ll spare you the details, but fuck they knew what they were doing.” Tilting my head, I look down on her, sizing her up. A vicious hunger curls inside my belly at the way

she hangs on my every word, parched for permission. “Do you really think you could hold a candle to them? It would be a shame to end up disappointed by a lackluster performance. I hate to be left wanting.”

Becca’s eyes brighten with defiance, her pride bruised, her need to please activated in a whole new way. And fuck if I don’t want her to please me, seek my validation, lose herself to her need for this.

I’m so elated that I’ve struck a nerve, that I don’t expect her spiteful retaliation until her teeth sink into my inner thigh as she tries to take a piece of me like the dig I just took at her. I’m not really one for pain, but the honest anger behind that bite turns me on. Behind that gauzy film of disdain is pure lust flaring bright.

I tsk. “Oh, come on, now. You can’t be the best at everything, Becca. We all have to start somewhere.” The synthetic sympathy mixes with the sourness of my taunting, sweet and tart like the strawberry lemonade we used to sell from her lawn. It’s refreshing on my tongue.

Ever insistent on being a teacher’s pet, she moves with purpose. Soft, slender fingers run up my legs—the delicious friction against my fishnets leaves tingles across my skin—and grip the back of my thighs, massaging there as she kisses her way up the sensitive skin above my knees carefully placing her lips in between the crisscross pattern of my tights. Up and up her fingers trace until she reaches the bands that hold them around my thighs. My gut tightens as she rolls them, then my panties down until they tangle around my ankles. I don’t step out, too transfixed by the show her lips are putting on. But when she plants a kiss on one of the tattooed bows—the ones that are a reminder of her—the spell is broken. This isn’t what I asked for. I’ve gotten distracted, but I can’t let her off so easily. We might want the same thing for once, but I’m determined to take the hardest route; she’s too used to taking perfectly paved roads. We’re crawling on sharp gravel to get to our destination.

My nails dig into her sculpted cheekbones. “I said beg, not seduce. If you want me to play with you, you need to follow the rules.” I loosen my hold. “You think you can convince me that this is a good idea? You’re going to have to work a lot harder for my approval than that. Go on, plead for my pussy on your mouth.” Her muscles tense with a harsh swallow. Those ocean eyes swim with uncertainty, so I coax her on. “I want outright devotion; I’m not caving for anything less. I want you to cry with need as I drip down your chin. I want to see you suffocate in my pleasure, then ask me to do it again.” I push her with dirty words and erotic imagery. One half of me hoping to prove her a fraud, the other yearning for her to surprise me.

On the battlefield of her beautiful features, lust and fury collide. The effort of their dueling is obvious in her heavy breathing, in the reddening of her cheeks. But finally, there’s a victor. She nods once and I release her face.

“Well, what’ll it be? Can you pass this test?” I demand even though she’s already passed with flying colors. She doesn’t even need to try, the simple act of her existing in my proximity has me unreasonably wet.

“Yes.” Her jaw is clenched so tightly that her lips barely move.

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“I think you can do better than that.” I lean forward, meeting her eye to eye.

“Please,” her gaze falls to the floor, “let me taste you.”

The lack of conviction simply won’t do. “Better, but not good enough.” I take one step back and she launches forward, hands clinging to my legs. When she looks up, the desperation consuming her irises is dangerous . . . for both of us.

“I want to,” her voice dips low, “fuck you with my tongue.”

“What else?” I bring a finger to my clit and move it in gentle circles.

“Umm...” she stutters while her attention fixes on what I’m doing.

“Spit. It. Out,” I command as I slide a finger briefly inside myself. “Or I’m going to finish myself off while I make you watch.

Becca swallows harshly and rolls her shoulders back. “I want you to soak my taste buds, so I know every subtlety of the taste of you. I want you to fill my mouth with your release.” She clears her throat, but her gaze never strays from the movements I’m making. “I want it lingering there, between my teeth when I lay awake in bed tonight.”

“And I want to give that to you. But the thing is, watching you humble yourself kind of turns me on. You can see why I’m so tempted to draw it out.”

“Please,” Becca whimpers.

“Give me just a little more and I’ll put you out of your misery.”

“Please, please, please,” she gasps, burying her face into my thigh, inhaling deeply, like the mental exertion has impacted her as physically as it did me. Her shoulders sag as she leans into the peaceful embrace of honesty, the weight of her stubbornness finally disappearing.

“They say good things come to those who wait, why should I give you what you want just because you beg for it?”

“Because I need this.”

I don’t reward her with comfort or rest. “Was that so hard?” My vindictive fingers sink into Becca’s hair, scraping against her scalp, forcing her head back. “Go ahead, then. Claim your reward.” Parting my thighs and hiking my skirt up around my waist, I position myself over my Crybaby’s reddened lips. “Fuck me with your tongue; prove to me it’ll be worth all this trouble.” My fingers tighten a fraction, holding her just a breath shy of my cunt for just a few more torturous seconds. “Then maybe I’ll think about touching you the way you want.”

The first lick is feather-light, tickling, a tease of her own that drives me upward on my toes. I laugh; she won’t get the reactions she wants from me. I know how to play this game. “Surely that’s not all you have to give after all that?”

Her brow furrows and her fingers dig into the dips of my hips, dimpling them further. This time, the flat surface of her tongue drags across my center purposefully.

“Good girl, look at you take direction. Keep going, just like that.” For once, I don’t get any pushback from her. Instead, she repeats it and then begins to explore my clit with disjointed circles. Despite the jerky movements, or maybe because I know it means it’s the first time she’s ever done this, I can’t hold back.

Giving in to her is like taking that breath under water, I know I shouldn't, but I need the release. It'll probably be the end of me. But I'm burning up from the inside, my lungs too full, I need to let some of this desire out. I flatten my feet and grind down on her face, the long roll of my hips momentarily covering her only airways with my pussy.

Becca's fingers dig into my ass, but she doesn't pull away. Instead, she plays with different motions of her tongue—flicking, licking, pressing, and teasing. She could be doing anything, and it would be driving me toward the edge. Just fucking her face like this feels like vindication for all the times I've yearned to have her. Now she's sloppily licking me up like she's never tasted anything quite this good.

“Right there. Yes, B—” I clip the word. I'm not ready to give her that. She needs to do so much more before I'm willing to moan her name. I'll admit it requires more effort than I'd like to keep it in when she's licking me like this. When she's on her knees letting me ride and use her face. With my fist in her hair, I tug harshly, forcing her to look at me. “Suck my clit and make me come. Can you do that? Or do you need me to show you?” I use my fingers to spread myself, revealing my pierced clit.

Challenge sparks in her eyes and she nips at it.

“Ah fuck,” I gasp, sharp pleasure momentarily dismantling my control.

Becca does it again, this time holding it between her teeth for just a second longer. A convulsion nearly buckles my knees, but I regain control with my hand in her hair.

“Suck.” Cradling the back of her head, I resume grinding on her face, while she dutifully suctions her mouth against my clit. “Yes, right fucking there, right fucking—” No one is more surprised than me when she pulls the orgasm from me that feels like it's been building for months. It locks every part of my body into a state of temporary shock before I sag against her, trapping her between my thighs—good

thing we don't need to breathe anymore.

Becca's jaw moves as she attempts to go in for another lick, but I pull away and capture her face in my shaking grip. She's breathtaking with the evidence of my orgasm on her face, her upper lip and chin gleaming in the moonlight, but it's not quite perfect. With gentle fingers, I stroke my center gathering the lingering wetness, and drag it over her lips tenderly, like friends doing each other's makeup. "Rub your lips together, like this." I roll my own together as if spreading around lipstick. Without hesitation, Becca does as I say. Pleased, I tuck my fingers beneath her chin and bring our lips together. As my tongue traces the curve of her lips, she shudders and leans in—putty in my hands.

With her looking up like this, seeking approval, desperate to know she's done a good job, I could almost do anything she asks. I don't even care that this is nothing more than a daydream that'll undoubtedly end when she realizes what this all means. But I'm not going to be the one to wake us from it. "Come on," I help her to her feet then tug her toward me as I sit on the bed.

"I thought you said you wouldn't—"

I cut her off. "I'm not. You're going to use me to get off." I pat my thigh.

Becca looks from my leg to my face then back again. With my hands on her hips, I make her straddle one thigh.

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“Ride it.” I tuck her hair behind her ear. “Grind down,” I apply pressure that forces her body against me, and she gasps, “it’ll stimulate your clit.”

Becca remains stiff with hesitation, but I’m not giving up so easily.

“You’re going to make yourself come. I want my leg soaking wet when you’re done.”

Shyness creeps back in as she rests her palms on my shoulder. The weight of her hands makes me remember mine and I tug them from her waist, placing them behind me and leaning back. I want to watch the show, but I refuse to touch her, really touch her, until I know she won’t regret it. Until she needs it so much, she’ll never think of the way it felt when anyone else touched her, especially nothim.

When she rolls her hips, we both let out a gasp. Her at the pleasure, me at the evidence of how wet I’ve made her. How wet she’s made herself. She can deny her attraction to me all she wants, but her body tells me everything I need to know.

The silence is thick as she grinds down on me experimentally.

“That’s not all you want, is it? A little friction to take the edge off?”

“N-no.” She stutters, still resisting the temptation to really take what she wants.

“Then ride me, Becca. Take your pleasure. You said you wanted to own your sexuality, so own it. Show me what you like. Make. Yourself. Come. I won’t tell you again.”

Using my shoulders as leverage, she grinds down on me again and again. My leg becomes slippery as that sweet pussy drips onto me.

“How does it feel, Crybaby?” My nails are sure to tear holes through the comforter with how tightly I’m gripping the fabric.

She doesn’t even object to the nickname, so caught up in the movement of her body against mine. “It feels so good. Oh, god.”

“Your pussy is fucking dripping. Are you having fun making a mess all over me?”

“Ye-yes.” Her words are clipped and breathy.

“You’re getting close. Are you going to come on me? Hmm, Crybaby Girl?”

Her cheeks redden and she shakes her head back and forth.

“Yes you are.”

“I can’t. Not while you’re watching me.” She attempts to back off my knee, but I grab her around her waist.

“Fine, but I’m not done playing with you yet. Can we try something else?” Becca nods. “Stand up.” She does and I kneel on the ground and then lay flat on my stomach, pulling my skirt up to expose my ass cheeks.

“What are you doing?”

“Don’t pretend like you don’t sneak a look at my ass every chance you get.” I tap it, and hunger enters her eyes. “Sit down.” I spread my legs just slightly, giving her space to put one leg on each side of my thigh.

“Umm, what do you expect me to do exactly?”

Propping myself up on my elbows, I look over my shoulder at her as she gets down on her knees and straddles me. Her hands hover awkwardly, fingers spread as they gravitate towards my cheeks, but her nervousness is holding her back from doing exactly what she wants.

“We’re going to pick up right where we left off. Just like you were riding my thigh, you’re going to use my body to get you off.”

“I can’t do this.” Her words and her body language don’t match as her pretty pink nipples harden once again.

“You can. You will. You’re not giving up? Are you Becca?”

Her punishing grip takes hold of each of my sides, and she lowers herself against me.

I suppress a groan as her wet pussy makes contact with my bare skin. “See, Crybaby. There’s no denying how badly you want me anymore, so just take it.” A moan escapes me with the first roll of her hips. Her slick cunt drags across my upper thigh and the curve of my ass. My toes curl as she picks up her pace. Carefully, I sneak a peek at her as she grinds against me, her eyes purposely focused anywhere but my face. I’m tempted to touch myself, but it would probably ruin the moment if I did attempt it. The last thing I want to do is distract her from the beautiful show she’s putting on for me.

The whimper she releases, as she speeds up her movements, sends a flood of arousal between my legs. Watching her get satisfaction from my body is something I’d only dreamed of experiencing. “Come on, Becca, you’re almost there.” Each thrust of her slender hips brings her closer and closer.

“Oh, ah—” The smooth-riding she’s been doing turns to jerky movements. “I think, I think I’m going—” Fear has that last word in a vice grip like she might try to stop it.

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Arching my back, I press forcefully against her, putting more pressure on her clit that she's stimulating so perfectly.

"Mmm, yes, that feels so good." Her voice is a heady purr that sends pride and lust coursing through me in equal measure.

"Yeah, it does. Give yourself over to it. Let your body enjoy this. Don't overthink it; you can do it." All the fight has left me; my desperation to make her feel good has won out.

Short fingernails dig into me, pinching the fat at my sides; the demanding possessiveness of it makes my toes curl. For the briefest moment, my own fixation is reflected in her, but then it slips away, replaced with insecurity I don't understand.

She attempts to retreat, but I grab her hand and turn onto my back. "Come here." The urge to pull her against me gnaws at my restraint, but I've learned my lesson about forcing affection on her. Becca needs slow and steady, so that's what I'll give her, even if it goes against my very nature.

My patience is rewarded as she scoots forward, positioning herself more comfortably on my hips and allowing me to wrap her in my arms. She's rigid against my chest at first, but with each stroke down her back, she relaxes.

"Something's wrong with me." The statement is as jarring as the cool touch of water that trickles down my chest. "I don't think I can come anymore." She trembles against me, and I tighten my hold just enough to reassure her that I'm not going anywhere.

“That’s nothing to feel ashamed about.” I trace the distinct outline of her spine with my thumb. “You don’t need to put pressure on yourself to make it happen. It’s okay.”

“Is it? How could you still want me now that you see how broken I am?” Her hands curl around my shoulders like she’s bracing herself for what I might say next.

“You’re not broken, you’re traumatized.” I swallow back the guilt and focus on putting her at ease. “And sex isn’t about having an orgasm. There’s no need to be ashamed about what your body needs. There are all different types of satisfaction you can experience.”

“Will you teach me?”

Chapter 24

Becca

32 Days Dead

“Becca, what do you want from me?” Stasi asks through ragged breaths.

As I shift to straddle her, the rampant desire shining back at me takes me off guard. That look used to terrify me, but I’m emboldened. “I want you to show me all the ways sex can be satisfying.” Lust curls in my belly as I take the time to really look at her. Everything about her is pure seduction. Not just in the blatantly sexual way in which she carries herself, but how she projects the confidence of who she is, how she knows what she wants, and she refuses to apologize for it. That right there is the most beautiful thing anyone could be. I want that. For the first time, I’m one hundred percent confident in my desire for her. “I want you to show me how good it can be.”

“Say it again.” The attempted command comes out strained. “Ask me again.” She

runs the back of her fingers down my arm, leaving tingles that chase away the lingering ache of months of rough, clenching hands.

“Stasi, I need this.” And I do. I need more of the sweet escape she promises with every touch. I need her on me, inside of me. I breathe in the tension brewing between us, a heady mix of need and restraint. It’s sweet and smoky like a nice tequila, and I want to drink it down. “Will you please teach me how to fuck the way my body needs?”

“Fuck,” she groans while those sultry brown eyes search mine, then drop lower, her hands following as they cup the undersides of my modest breasts. “Do you even know what you’re asking? You have no idea how badly I want to explore every neglected inch of you.” Her gaze devours my naked body, licking over my skin with a palpable heat as her craving builds. “How can I say no when I’m the only person who understands what you need? That would just be unnecessarily cruel, wouldn’t it?” Finally, she stops warring with herself and decides to take what she wants. “But if I’m going to do this, we’re going to have a safe word.”

“Safe word?”

“Something you can say if you need me to stop.” Her thumbs roll over my nipples, making it hard to focus on the words coming out of her mouth.

“Is that really necessary?”

“Yeah, Crybaby. It’s necessary because if I’m going to teach you how to fuck my way, I’m going to take a wrecking ball to your preconceptions of what sex is. When I’m finished with you, you’re going to be a shaking little mess. No thoughts, just ecstasy.” Unexpectedly, she pinches my nipples, summoning a well of tears and a flood of arousal. “That’s right, baby girl. I’m going to make that pussy sob for me.”

“Show me,” I plead, shivering with anticipation.

“Are you sure?” She twists the sensitive peeks between her fingers.

“I’m ready. I want this.” My teeth click together with how vigorously I nod.

“Do you remember when I promised to make you my fucktoy?”

“Yes,” I force out as my body gushes more arousal.

“Yes, what?” Another pinch, but she soothes my tender flesh with spit-coated thumbs. The new sensation makes my thighsclench. “I’m only into enthusiastic consent. Use your words and tell me what I want to hear.”

On edge like this, I don’t even remember why I tried to fight this. “Make me your fucktoy.”

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“Now give me that safe word,” Stasi demands.

But she’s already made good on one of her threats—no thoughts, just ecstasy—speaking let alone coming up with an idea is impossible, so I blurt the first thing that breaks through the haze of my lust-addled brain. “Violets.”

“Okay, violets it is.” She chuckles. “Don’t worry I’m going to take it slow.” Her hands move to the back of my thighs, easing me closer. “Is it okay if I kiss you?” she asks in a striking contrast to the way she usually demands everything. All the traces of uncertainty have fallen away, and I find myself stumbling over the sincerity of my answer.

“Fucking finally, yes.”

Acrylics scrape deliciously at the back of my scalp as she urges me forward to meet her lips. The cage of my arms around her helps reaffirm the sense of control. When our lips meet, I sink into her soft body and open up without resistance. Her mouth and tongue are stroking velvet as they dance with mine. It’s a little jarring how slow and careful her movements are, like she hasn’t gutted me before. Patiently she guides me, coaxing me into the rhythm she likes, that I now like. Soon I’m lost in the series of caresses and nips she teases me with. But my eyes shoot open when she places my hands over her breasts. “Consider this lesson one.”

My bravery from just a few minutes ago wavers. My hesitant fingers twitch against the rigid fabric, accidentally caressing her nipples that harden into peaks beneath my touch. A barely audible hiss leaves her lips and it’s the revving of an engine before my foot punches the gas and sends me from zero to sixty. Gripping the top of her

corset, I tug her against me, forcing her mouth on mine once again. One clasp then another gives way until the fabric parts easily. It's like opening Pandora's Box as I cup her full breasts. The catch of her breath is the warning whisper of a curse being unleashed. There's no going back now.

My confidence builds as she squirms beneath me. Leaning over her like this, she's so much less intimidating, her features are softened, rounded, and more delicate. Rolling the pad of my finger over her nipple makes her arch her back. Kissing across her chest just above her cleavage makes her shudder. Her muscles tighten beneath me the more I toy with her. I'd never had much interest in being on top, but experiencing every slight movement—the writhing that I'm causing—it's intoxicating. It's empowering. She's giving me exactly what I asked for. Maybe my nightmare is actually a goddess. From this vantage point, she's celestial with her pink-tinted platinum hair pooling around her like silk and framing her perfect breasts. That tempting silver through her nipples gleaming, just begging for my mouth.

“Are you just going to keep staring at me or are you going to do something, Cry—”

I snatch that taunt and swallow it with my lips on hers. My tongue directs hers, not the other way around. “I've been looking forward to this for so long.” I sigh with relief as I suck a pierced nipple into my mouth, my tongue reveling in the novelty of this—the cold bar foreign to the heat of my mouth, the textured ridges of her areola against my slick tongue.

“Warmer,” she moans as he rocks her hips upward.

Taking the hint, I lick at the sensitive peak again, earning me a satisfied gasp.

“My turn.”

I will myself not to jerk away when she slides her hands up my thighs to my hips

where her thumbs press into the sensitive flesh in front of my pelvis. They grind down at the provocation of her intentional touch. With sure hands, she continues her ascent. Tenderly, she swipes her thumbs over my taut nipples that ache for more.

Stilling her hands, she withholds it from me. “Are you ready for more?”

“Yes. You can do whatever you want with me. Just don’t stop.” The throbbing between my legs echoes the sentiment.

“Is that so?” She sucks a nipple into her mouth, noisily suctioning her lips around the sensitive peak. The powerful vibration of her sultry hum drives me to my knees, but her hand on my shoulder holds me steady as she switches her attention to the other. “You like your achingly neglected nipples touched, don’t you?” She releases me from her mouth only to flick her tongue across it.

What can only be described as a whimper leaves me as my inner thighs slip and slide against each other.

“Oh, Becca,” she tuts. “You’re dripping wet for me, aren’t you?” The back of her hand caresses my cheek. “Do you need to be touched down there too?” I nod eagerly. “Oh yeah, my needy girl. I bet you do.” My legs shake beneath her palms as she grips my upper thighs, her thumbs applying pressure that makes the strained muscles twitch. “Go on then, show me how wet that pussy is.”

Like I’ve seen her do before, I form a ‘v’ with my fingers and spread myself open.

Air sucks harshly between her teeth. “That’s such a good girl.” She leans forward slightly, supporting herself on her elbows. “Fuck,” she drags the word out in a groan that gives me chills. I’m teetering on the edge as she looks her fill. “Has anyone told you how perfect you are?”

“No.” I clamp my eyes shut, suddenly unable to handle the intensity of her gaze as insecurities creep in. It’s embarrassing just how desperately I need this reassurance.

“Look at me, Becca,” Stasi commands. When my eyes reluctantly meet hers, she smiles and nods knowingly. “That’s exactly what you needed, isn’t it? I told you I would fuck you like no one else can.” Her grip tightens on my thighs as she spreads them farther apart. “Look at you drip for me.” She rubs a finger through my center. “I bet I could easily slip my whole hand inside you right now with how wet you are.” Stasi’s eyes are hooded, heavy with desire as she teases the ball of her piercing across her lip. “Have you ever been fisted?”

I shake my head, nerves tightening in my gut for the first time since we started.

But Stasi calmly kneads my thigh and soothes my anxiety with her words. “It’s okay, we’re not going to try it today.” Her finger resumes the slow tease. “But one of these days we’re going to see just how much this body can take as I stretch and fill this pretty pussy.” She slides her other hand down her stomach to where a small puddle is gathering and drags her fingers through it. “Taste how much you love it.” Stasi presses two fingers into my mouth briefly, leaving behind the faintest hint of my arousal. It tastes like freedom.

It’s a revelation—how my body responds to her. How it gives in to her with breathy moans, shaking limbs, and undeniable responsiveness. Never in my life have I been this eager for someone’s touch, so present, so desperate to be fucked; something about that is terrifying.

“Violets.” It takes a monumental effort to get the word out. But if I go any further, I fear there’s no turning back.

Stasi immediately stops touching me, hands folding against her chest. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. That’s what safe words are for.”

I nod but roll onto my side quickly to hide my face, and more importantly, the tears that threaten to spill. Cautiously, Stasi presses into my back but doesn’t wrap herself around me. In the closeness of her body, I feel her acceptance rather than hear it. I never thought I’d find safety in Stasi’s arms, but despite her anger with me, justified as it is, she meets me where I am.

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I've never experienced anything like what we just shared, something so sensual and selfless, a few minutes where the only thing that mattered was my pleasure. And not even as a means to fuel someone else's ego, but to show me that I can find it on my own. The way she let me use her body—that body that moves like it was meant to press against mine as if the hands of fate shaped her just for me—it was so perfect.

And yet, part of me is holding back.

“I know this is hard for you, but you opening up at your own pace is enough.” It's an attempt at reassurance, an unusual kindness.

But instead of putting me at ease, the statement lands uncomfortably on my skin. The unspoken “for now” pricking my insecurities. The progress that I made tonight suddenly doesn't seem so monumental. I'm dead and damaged. I don't even know why I'm trying to fix this part of myself or why I'm trying to move on. It's too late for me to become the person I never allowed myself to be. I missed that train. I spent twenty-something years running in the wrong direction.

When I look up at her, I expect to see the sharp smile that's all teeth and tongue ready to devour me with wicked words, but in its place, I only find serenity. “It's okay that we stopped. You did so well trying something new. You have all the time you need.” This is the mouth that coaxed me through it, not the one that picks at the tender places that have been exposed to her.

That's what makes it so hard to do what comes next. Icy dread reaches inside me and turns my stomach. “This was a mistake.”

Chapter 25

Stasi

70 Days Dead

It's not the first time I've been called a mistake, far from it. Countless people have left me behind in the bed of their regret. Sometimes I even wanted it that way because it was easier. But I forgot the most important rule, Becca is different. Those encounters never could have gutted me like this. There's something insidious about the way neglect and emptiness cling to me with each step she takes in the opposite direction. The slimy sensation of rejection oozes from my pores. Old insecurities follow right along with it.

Always good enough to fuck. Never enough for anything more. Not even after everything I've sacrificed for her.

The hurt of her dismissal spills out of the floodgates and begins to taint everything good we just started building. The pride of helping her feel good in her body and the security of being the person she turned to ruined within seconds.

I follow her as she picks up her clothing off the floor and slips into the bathroom maneuvering carefully to avoid her reflection. But it's not going to be so easy for her to brush me off. I can't believe I gave her another piece of me. It wasn't part of the plan. Even disguised as a game, the intimacy we just shared was real. That's just how it's always been with us. She can't keep denying it.

"What?" Her brows furrow.

"That didn't take long. I thought we'd gotten past this." I search for that open, eager woman who'd peeked through. She's gone; I'm left with this imposter once again.

“But I guess I never see things clearly when it comes to you.” My pointer and thumb find opposite sides of her mouth and draw them upward as she trembles beneath my touch. “There she is, my pretty little liar.”

Jerking away, Becca shoots a glare at me. But she can’t hide the hurt that twists her features. Not from me. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I thought you were done running from all this.” God I just want to go back to when she was on top of me. The temptation of all that cotton candy skin on display sidetracks me. “Can you please put your damn clothes on?” Retreating to the doorway, I escape the deceptively sweet scent of her that clouds my judgment with the perfection of what we just shared. “I should have known better instead of wanting to believe that you were finally being honest about opening up and accepting yourself.”

“I’m trying. Or I was at least. But come on, think about it. What does it even matter?” Exasperation paints her speech as she struggles with the buttons on her shorts.

“That’s bullshit.”

“It’s the truth.”

“You wouldn’t know the truth if it slapped you across the face.” Shaking my head, I try to untangle the sticky web of emotions tied to our past and present. Ten years later, that fear of abandonment still clings strong. “You promised you weren’t going to use me.”

“I didn’t.”

“Certainly feels that way.” I hastily close the clasps of my own shirt. “You’re hot then you’re cold, drawing close when it suits you and shoving me away when it

doesn't, like you just did. I'm afucking person, Becca. I'm just as much a part of this equation as you are. I'm not like everyone else; I won't cater to your whims anymore." Her endless entitlement sets my irritation aflame. The dormant torches of resentment light, guiding the harsh words out of me and burning the progress we've made to the ground behind me.

"I don't understand what the problem is. You seemed more than happy with this arrangement just an hour ago." Frustration strains her delicate features. "You're the one who started all this. You're the one who sought me out." What can only be described as a shriek escapes her, that iron fist she usually has on her polite composure slipping. "If it wasn't for you meddling in my life, neither of us would even fucking be here."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Are you insinuating that it's my fault that I'm dead? Are you under some misguided impression that I wanted to be murdered, confined to this property, and then stuck here with a selfish, entitled, whiny little bitch?" My voice rises with each insult.

She stops pacing and marches toward me. "Trust me, I fucking regret it. If I could go back, I would rather have turned myself in than be frozen in time with nothing and no one but you. Every single day I wish I could go back and stop myself from slitting my wrists." Her voice breaks. "I just wanted it all to stop. I would never have chosen to be here with someone who hates me when I could be with people who love me."

This is the perfect opportunity to make her feel the sharp sting of rejection like I have. "I do hate you. I hate who you've turned me into. I hate what you've taken from me." But as much as her actions have hurt me, there's no denying how much I need her. "And most of all, I hate that part of me will always want you no matter how fucking terrible you treat me." I want to swallow back the acidic vulnerability of that admission.

“What do you mean you want me? How can you want me?” Fingers tangling in her hair, she pulls at her roots. “Because you could have fucking fooled me, with how much of the blame you’re willing to force me to carry,” she hisses. Her anger flares and it lights her up. The spark ignites the trail of gasoline I’ve been pouring down the path and the blaze of it consumes her. She’s spectacular. The blue undertone of her eyes becomes brilliant like shooting stars, her body thrums with everything she’s not saying, and the energy she embodies is a live wire. She’s absolutely breathtaking.

In the cracks of the shattered mirror, I see little pieces of the real us tucked away. Not the imposters we’ve been playing, smiling at one another, trusting one another. Along the jagged edges of broken glass, we’re sharp eyes and bared teeth and digging nails. The unbridled chaos thriving there is dangerous, it always has been. The repressed part of me yearns to pry it open further until my fingertips bleed and we’re both painted in crimson, the color of our terrible truth—love, betrayal, death. But she’ll never allow it. Everything needs to be gold for her. I can see her squirming when she realizes how clearly I see her; her hands are eager to solder the exposed imperfections. The metallic substance is foaming from her mouth and bleeding from her eyes as she silently pleads with me not to go there.

But I’ve always been a hopeless romantic. I can’t help but wonder what would happen if we could look past the fractures, allowing ourselves to remain focused on how good we look together in the pieces that remain unbroken. Is it selfish if I allow myself to play pretend just a little bit longer?

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“Well, I do. I want you, Becca.” Four little words that are so hard to say out loud because they’re dangerous with a woman like this, with what she’s capable of doing to me—destroying me. “But I won’t settle for being at your beck and call. I won’t let myself get burned by you again.”

“As if you’re any better with all your little mind games,” she shouts.

“It never had to be like this.” My throat works, tight and uncomfortable as I choke on the unnecessary suffering I’ve endured simply because I’ve loved her.

“I can’t give you what you want.”

“Can’t, or won’t?” I reject her easy out.

“Can’t. I don’t even know who I am anymore. Haven’t for a long time.” She sniffs back the tears that glitter on her lashes. “I did everything I was supposed to—I was docile, sweet, and studious—I did my best to be perfect, and what did it get me? Nothing. The last few months of my life were pain and misery, and now...now I’m dead before I even have a developed pre-frontal cortex for fuck’s sake.” Taking a deep inhale, Becca balls her fists against her forehead. “I have nothing to give you. Without my family, without college, without my plan, I don’t even know what to do with myself. So just give me a goddamn break, okay? I can’t just slip into whatever role you want me to play.”

“I don’t need you to be anything. I want you to be yourself. The real you. She’s in there, I know it.” I lean forward, capturing her cold gray eyes.

“Oh, that’s rich,” she says sarcastically. “Who’s the liar now? You don’t like therealme. We both know you want me to fit into your perfect little fantasy of who you expected me to be.” She throws her arms outward. “Well, this is all I’ve got. I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing I know what it’s like to want something I can’t have.” A bitter laugh slips through my teeth, but I manage to catch the secret I want to throw at her feet. I want her to know she can’t hide from me, that I see the scared little girl she really is, still running from a truth that’s clear as day and undeniable as the letters they carved into the top of her desk—Becca Murphy loves Anastasia Eden. And god did I want her to accept it after all these years, but she’s still too much of a coward. My heart leapt into my throat when she gave me so much trust tonight—fluttering violently with hope when she opened up so much to herself—but then we were just thrown back into this cursed cycle all over again. The moment she shifted away from my touch, I knew it was over, just like that day she shook her head vehemently with denial when they accused her of loving me. So many years ago, the wings of hope were brutally clipped. They were never bandaged up right, never properly healed, breaking them again was far too easy. Every time she gives me a little glimpse of how good things could be, I’m so quick to risk crashing down again.

I can trace all the fucked-up decisions I’ve made back to that my first heartbreak. When I knew the way I loved Becca Murphy was cursed. An uneven scale, a romantic injustice that I would serve a lifetime for. It’s coming to a head now. But I’ve learned my lesson, I’m not going to give her another opportunity to reject me. “At least I’m brave enough to go after what I want. But thank you so much for your ‘honesty’. I’m so glad you showed me that you aren’t worth the risk.”

“You say I’m the risk, but god, you’re so toxic I can hardly breathe around you!”

I laugh, something unstable like a chemical reaction to her destructive words. “I’m toxic. Oh, sweetheart. You need to take a better look in that mirror. Nobody has ever

been more toxic than you. Should we talk about all the relationships you've poisoned? What about Meg?" What about me? But I leave that part left unsaid. "And poor Aiden?"

"Don't you dare."

But I do. There's no stopping what I've started. "He loved you so unconditionally, but there was always that voice in your head wasn't there? The one where you wished he didn't get everything he wanted. The one that wished that he had to hide away parts of himself and suffer like you."

Becca's teeth click together as she holds back the lie she can't bring herself to say.

"I'm right, aren't I?" A triumphant laugh escapes me. "It must have been so hard seeing him live his truth while you cowered behind a carefully devised facade. I hate to be the one to break it to you but you're so right. You have no idea who you are at all because you're so caught up in being the perfect, fake, plastic doll that keeps you safe from dealing with any of the really hard stuff life throws at you. Turns out that foundation was laid pretty haphazardly. Those walls you built up around yourself aren't very sound." I rap my knuckles on the wall behind me for dramatic effect. "One big quake in your perfect little world and it all comes crumbling down leaving you exposed. And guess what, I see you for what you really are."

"Stop. Fucking. Talking." Becca's voice is cutting; I lean into it, not afraid to nick myself.

"What's wrong, Crybaby? Are you afraid of how ugly you can be when someone peels back the paint?"

As her features contort, something inside me grows anxious to soothe her, but I resist the urge. Instead, I drive a nail into the coffin, ready to kick her down into the dirt

just like me. “I hope playing it safe was worth it because I’m done trying to help you. I’m done caring.”

Chapter 26

Stasi

77 Days Dead

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Fuck that, I have enough bitterness inside me to blame both of us.

Yes, I should have known better that, even after all this time, it wouldn’t be so easy for her to accept that she wants this. Becca isn’t one to jump feet first into the unknown. All of her risks are measured, and her decisions careful. It’s easy to forget the hesitance with which she’s always done everything, even choices that should be simple or automatic. Becca’s mind is always seeking that comforting caress of approval. And without it, change will be hard for her to accept.

But I’m also to blame. If her problem is the inability to throw caution to the wind, then I lack the self-control to stop myself from jumping off the cliff with my knees tucked against my chest and a victorious scream drifting behind me. I go after what I want. Once you realize nobody will give you anything unless it serves them, there’s really no other choice.

Still, I should have resisted more. We needed more time. I should have told her no. My own desires clouded my mind like a few puffs of a good joint. But god, with all that beautiful begging. The sight of her on her knees. Stronger women would have caved.

Like any bad habit, the craving for her rages on spitefully despite my painfully

diligent abstinence. But I refuse to cave in. I can find more interesting things to do than pine after Becca. I need to find something else to do with my life. In my desperation, I turn to the next best thing to stave off the withdrawal a bit longer.

Her old fuzzy diary is heavy in my hand as I crack it open. My hope is that what I find inside will be a reminder of how easily she moved on without me like it never even happened. Like we hadn't been inseparable. I want to see the parts of her that she tries so hard to hide.

I flip through the pages until I find an entry that catches my eye:

August 15th, 2005

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Today's the first day of ninth grade. Exciting, right? WRONG! I'm so nervous. Okay, terrified. What if everything's changed with the new school? It'll mostly be all the same people, but it's not like we're actually friends. I don't want to start all over. What if I have to sit by myself? That would be total social suicide. Chleo better let me sit with her. She has to...right? We had a deal. I hate having to follow Chleo around like one of her little minions but it's better than being a loner. Aiden might be okay with it, but I'm not about to get tossed into a dumpster or hide out in a classroom during lunch. SO EMBARRASSING.

The last year has sucked, I can't let it get any worse. I wouldn't even be in this situation if it weren't for HER. I don't understand why she didn't just tell everyone that they were wrong. It was just a rumor that got out of hand. We were JUST FRIENDS. Why did she have to let everything get messed up? I promised myself I wouldn't talk about Ana again, but since I'm technically writing this, that's not cheating right? It's just not fair that I'm here without a best friend. I miss the way things used to be before Chleo ruined it with her big mouth. But nobody cares if rumors are true or not if they have something to talk about.

Fingers crossed that's all behind me now. We're in high school now. We're too mature for that. I hope so at least. Wish me luck.

Classic Becca, always the victim. Her words sink into my gums like annoying little popcorn kernel hulls. Now that I've had a taste, I need more, but each bite adds to my irritation. Naturally, I keep reading.

August 26th, 2005

Apparently, we're not more mature. Why are people so annoying!! In biology today Emma Hall and Jordan Steele were whispering about me. Emma said she's going to have her locker moved away from mine, so I don't try to sneak a peek. I would be embarrassed but that doesn't make sense. I don't even like girls. Especially not conceited ones who spread lies. I was going to invite them to my birthday but now they're off the list.

I NEED to kill this rumor once and for all. But how???

August 30th, 2005

Tracy says I need to pick a boy to date or lose my virginity. They both sound scary. There aren't even any cute boys in our grade. Plus, I haven't even kissed a boy before. I've only kissed Ana and that was just for practice, not even the real thing. I'm not ready. I told her that there are bases for a reason. She laughed at me. Tracy has no respect for the order of things.

September 12th, 2005

I'm going to the homecoming game tonight and I'm going to find a boy to kiss. How hard can it be? I know plenty of boys. One kiss and it'll all be over. Easy. I CAN DO THIS. And then Tracy will see that doing it the right way was for the best.

September 17th, 2005

OMG Diary! I did it! I kissed a boy. It was weird and kind of gross. His lips weren't soft like Ana's, and he hardly moved them. I don't think that's how kissing is supposed to be. But maybe it's different when it's with a boy and it's for real. Practicing with Ana didn't count, we both agreed. Another reason why those rumors were so ridiculous. We were just friends.

Whatever. At least it's over with. I have proof that I clearly like boys. I can go back to school on Monday and never have to hear somebody lie about me being ... you know... again.

My stomach turns at how badly these pages reek of desperation, but I keep reading.

September 30th, 2005

Hardly anyone seemed relieved about my kiss like I was. Tracy says kissing isn't that big of a deal. THEN WHY WOULD IT BE A BIG DEAL IF I DID KISS A GIRL!!

Now she says I have to find a boyfriend that can help people forget I was gay. I told her I'm not and I never was. She just laughed at me. Note to self: stop asking Tracy for advice. She doesn't even have a boyfriend either. What does she know? Maybe she's the gay one.

October 10th, 2005

It's official, all the boys in my grade are the WORST. I still don't have a boyfriend, and I hate kissing. I kissed Michael H. when we all went to the movies last weekend and it was so slobbery. It was like kissing a dog. SO GROSS. I give up. I just want to focus on school and cheer. I can't let my grades slip like they did last year.

November 20th, 2005

Danny Meyers says we're going to the Winter Formal together. He's a tenth grader and everyone says we make a cute couple with our matching blue eyes. GAG ME. Blue eyes aren't even my thing. I don't want to go to Winter Formal with Danny. But maybe this is my chance to have a boyfriend. Plus, there's no way I'm going to upset Chleo's plans now and risk getting kicked out of the group. So I guess I'll ask Mom to take me to the mall this weekend and look for a dress. Aiden is going to make so

much fun of me when he finds out who I'm going with. Maybe I don't have to tell him.

I didn't get to go to any of my winter formals. Not that I wanted to. But nobody asked. Maybe it would have been nice to be asked. But I was never one of those girls like Becca who always had people lined up for a chance with her—at least not publicly.

December 5th, 2005

I went all the way. I lost my virginity. Danny knew I was trying to get to fourth base and said he would be happy to help me out since he knew what he was doing. I don't know if he did, though. Is it supposed to hurt? And it was so fast. I really don't get what all the excitement is about. It wasn't like in the movies at all. I hope that settles it once and for all because I don't ever want to do that again.

Instead of victorious, my chest aches. Her chasing approval from these losers is just sad to witness. She wouldn't have had to fight for a place to belong if she hadn't pushed me away. Maybe I wouldn't have either.

And therein lies our deepest betrayal—she never gave us a chance.

84 Days Dead

Objectively, I know I shouldn't want Becca. But there's a faulty wire in my system that misfires every time I come to another crossroads where I have to resist her, like right now.

Rain is pouring down, but all I can hear are Becca's cries. Over the thunder and the lightning, the only thing that reaches my ears is her screaming—I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Distorted by the sharp claws of grief, her voice is gritty and torn up.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:28 pm

It should be so easy to draw the curtains and ignore her. It should be so easy to hate her. It should. I've given her opportunity after opportunity to revive my long-dead heart, only to be disappointed when it's another false start. And, yet, here I am, my hand cramping with how tight I clutch the doorknob, warring with myself to try to resist just one more time.

When will you ever learn, Stasi?

Apparently not today. I tug the door open and cross the yard to where she sits on the bench beneath my trellis. On top of my grave.

Hands on her eyes, she's oblivious to my presence. She hasn't realized that I'm bearing witness to her sitting here making a spectacle of herself, making a mockery of my unacknowledged pain. She wants our tragedies intertwined? I'm happy to deliver.

"If you're so sorry, show me."

Becca's hands slide down her face, revealing that she has the audacity to act surprised to see me here. Like she wasn't desperately trying to draw me out. Unimpressed, I stand there silently while she chokes on her sobs, trying to rein them in. "A bit dramatic, don't you think?"

"Stasi, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I—"

"I, I, I...is it literally impossible for you not to make yourself the center of everything?" I tear a petal off one of the red roses that surround us. "What about me?"

Hmm?” Stepping closer, I plant my hands on the arm and back of the bench, caging her in. “Do you think what I need is your tears?” I drag my tongue up her cheek, flattening it to gather every last drop. Delicious but empty of any real meaning.

“What do you want then?” Becca’s brow furrows as she stares up at me looking so confused and pathetic.

“I want you to make an offering.” After all the sacrifices I made for her, don’t I deserve to be worshipped like a goddess?

“A—a what?”

“An offering. A tribute. Something more than your guilt-motivated sorries,” I clarify.

“Like what?” The current of fear in her voice is soothing.

“Eating my pussy is a good start.” Feeling good about my decision, I take a seat on the bench next to her and spread my legs.

Her mouth pops open in shock. “Eat? Your? Pussy? That’s what you want from me?” There’s a mix of disbelief and humor in her breathy laughs.

“To start, yes.”

Becca shakes her head and starts to lean over, but I put my hands over my lap. Her quizzical and slightly annoyed gaze makes my next statement even more satisfying.

“On your knees.” I point to the ground in front of me.

“In the mud?”

I nod. Pleased when she does it without further complaint. While she's otherwise untouched by the downpour around us, it's gratifying to see her knees sinking into the mess.

"Ouch," she whimpers, then grabs something from under her leg. In the moonlight, it's revealed to be a thorn. "I'm not doing this."

"After all we've been through, you're going to let a little thorn that feels like nothing more than a pinprick stand between you and your precious forgiveness?" Throwing down the challenge, I wait for her to take the bait.

With rushed, flustered hands, she pushes up my skirt until it's bunched around my hips. When she hesitates, I slowly part my legs, my thighs sticking together, building anticipation as her eyes remain glued to my center. Reactively, she wets her lips. Using my knees as leverage, she presses up, fitting her body in the space I've created for her. Fuck she fits so perfectly.

A soft exhale coasts across my cunt as she sticks her tongue out, ready to lick me.

"Wait," I smile as her eyes meet mine. "I told you to make an offering. I want you to worship me."

Becca grits her teeth. "And how do I do that?"

Her embarrassment spurs me on. "Why don't you give it a kiss? You hurt my feelings; you know? Maybe this will make it better. It's worth a try, isn't it? If you're really that sorry," I egg her on.

Palms pressed against my thighs, she shifts them wider, then plants a chaste kiss against my pussy. My nails dig into the wood of the bench as I fight myself not to grab the back of her head and bury her face against me.

“That’s it. Just like that. Now try it with some tongue.”

Her closed lips land on my skin again and again along my center before she applies pressure with her tongue and opens me up. Flattening it, she drags it up to my clit and draws a shaky circle.

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Even the slight pressure is driving my hips up out of the seat and into her face. “Harder,” I gasp. She listens, eager for me to uphold my end of the bargain. Clawing at my top, I free my breasts and play with my nipples. With each moan she pulls from, she grows bolder, working her tongue harder, faster, sucking at my clit.

“Fuck, it’s so nice to see you down in the mud for me, getting your hands dirty, finally earning something from me.” Grinding up my hips, I partially ride her face as she brings me closer and closer. But just as I reach that precipice, I shove her back onto her ass.

“What the hell?” she hisses. Despite her irritation, she looks hot as fuck with her mouth and chin wet like that. Covered in me.

“Take your clothes off.” I ignore the way my legs vibrate in protest of my detour.

“What? Why?”

“Consider it part of your tribute.”

She scoffs but does as I ask, stripping herself nude. With her blue eyes glowing and her dark hair, I’d swear she was the witch come to seduce me in the night.

“Now touch yourself.”

Becca crosses her arms over her chest. “Why is this necessary?”

“Because watching you tease those perfect tits will make me come harder.”

Eager for her to shut up and stop overthinking, I take her hand and pinch her fingers around her nipple. As she follows my lead, I reach for my clit, applying pressure on the aching bud of need. A groan of relief echoes into the night when I sink a finger inside myself. It's a fight to keep my eyes open as the pleasure builds quickly, but I'm not missing a second of Becca's hands exploring her body. "Look at you, being so inappropriate," I poke fun at her previous objections to nudity outdoors.

She flips me off with her free hand, but her glazed eyes and parted lips prove I know what she needs. Her shoulders cave forward as she concentrates her touch on her clit, not even bothering to fight me.

"That's it, baby, water my grave with your pussy." Two more pumps of my fingers take me past the brink and shove me headfirst into an orgasm. Now this is sex magic. Getting off under the full moon, getting what I want for once. It's a high that I never want to end. "This is just the beginning; I'm going to turn you into my dirty girl. When I'm done with you, you won't be golden, or plastic, or any of the other things you've tried to be for everyone else. All you'll be is my dirty, ruined girl. My precious little fucktoy who's grateful for everything I let you do to me."

I'm so lost in the ecstasy, I don't have time to prepare as Becca throws herself onto my lap, spearing her tongue in my mouth with a determination that feels like she's trying to take something back. Our tongues tangle, wrestling for the upper hand, as her nails dig into my wrists that she has pinned against the backrest. But then her teeth tear into my lip and she yanks away, a brief flash of blood before she swallows it. The feral challenge of it sends me lunging forward, forcing us to tumble forward onto the ground.

"What the hell are you doing to me?" She's sobbing again, beating her restrained fists against me, while I remain stunned and trying to figure out how we got from point A to point B.

A yelp escapes me as she fists the hair at the nape of my neck. “I hate you, Stasi. I hate you for causing all of this. I hate that you’re making me like this.”

Enraged by her words, I grab at the mud and plaster a handful on her face, shoving some of it in her mouth, washing the curse from it. “Don’t you dare try to pretend like you aren’t playing an equal part in this.”

Freeing myself from her clutches, I stumble to my feet and stand over her, but not quickly enough to avoid the mouthful of dirt she spits back at me, splattering my face and hair. From up here, I can see all the little slices in her skin from where the fallen thorns cut her up. My mouth waters to know what herblood tastes like, but I refuse to indulge the urge when she’s on her high horse.

There’s a hesitation, where we simply stare at one another. Her tear-stained cheeks are a confession better than any sentence she could string together.

I relish the challenge that lights her eyes when she pushes up to her elbows, but I’m not letting her get off that easy. I hold her down with my heel to her sternum. “For so many years I’ve dreamed of hearing you scream my name, but god, hearing you sob it through gritted teeth? Watching you choke on it? Seeing the truth of that lust uncontrollably roll down your cheeks?” I lean down and brush my thumb across her soft skin, gathering the tears that glisten there, then roll it over my clit mixing her pain with my pleasure. “Mhmmm, yeah. That is the validation I’ve been waiting for. Even if you won’t say it yet, knowing without a shadow of a doubt feels so goddamn good.”

With determined hands, she shoves my heel off of her and scrambles to her feet. “Fuck you.”

“If only you wouldn’t make it so difficult.” I sigh. “You want this, Becca. I don’t know what little masochistic game you’re trying to play, but you and I both know it.”

We trade matching glares. “If you want to spend eternity in your cramped little closet, with all your fears and limitations and lies, so fucking be it. But I’m not joining you, so stop trying to pull me back in there.” I bite my lip, punishing myself for the tears that are gathering just behind my eyes. “I won’t go back, and if that means I have to let you go, then so be it.”

Chapter 27

Becca

47 Days Dead

Degraded. Desperate. Depraved.

These are all the things Stasi’s made me. Just some of the reasons she’s bad for me...why we absolutely, under no circumstances, can be together.

This should go on the list. Pulling out the journal that is definitely not a diary, I revisit the list I made to help me remember why I need to stay away from her.

THINGS I HATE ABOUT STASI

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She's a stalker?

She's arrogant.

She ALWAYS has to be right.

She's mean. She's a LITERAL bully.

She thinks she knows me, but she doesn't. It's annoying.

She walks around like she owns the place in a skirt that is way too short to be practical.

She makes me act like someone I don't recognize.

So it's not a very long list...yet. And maybe it's a bit immature. But this is what I've devolved into at her hands. At least I don't pretend to know all about her, not like she does me. I bet if she had a list, it would be filled out with all the lies she tells herself about me. She says I'm hot and cold but it's not just me. We're both responsible for making things messier than they need to be.

Warmer, colder. Warmer, colder.

Closer, farther. Closer, farther.

Around and around each other we go.

Up until the last few weeks at least. The first few days after our fight were easy, all the fresh wounds of her malicious words and baseless accusations still tender and raw. But as the days have gone on—and on, and on, and on, and despite the quietude, her absence is loud.

The days are long, no matter how many abandoned hobbies I try to pick up—that old calligraphy set finally got some use—or meaningless challenges I set for myself—apparently, I’ll just never be skilled at makeup—there’s nothing that fills the void she’s left. Being dead gives us nothing but time—time to regret, time to mourn, time to yearn, but also time to face my past.

I guess there’s no more running from it; it’s time to go dig up the part of my life that I stuck beneath the floorboards—where nobody would find it, where I’d be able to forget about it. Years have passed since I’ve allowed myself to look back on everything that happened at the end of seventh grade. My memories are foggy covered by the sheets I’ve draped over them in hopes of moving on. But if I want to get out of this cycle, I need to clean out my attic.

Like a child sneaking around, I peer under my bedroom door, trying to see if there’s anyone in the hallway or approaching from either direction. No shadows creep closer and the silence remains steady, so I quickly travel from mine to Aiden’s room.

I’m greeted by iconic images of Queen, Def Leppard, and ACDC, all his posters and vinyls still lining the wall. The wrinkles from where he sat on the edge of his bed to lace up his combat boots still crease his charcoal comforter. Aesthetically, it’s like he never left, but without his energy buzzing within it, the room is distinctly empty. Luckily for me, he didn’t take much, which makes my work easy when it comes to finding what I’m looking for. At the top of his closet is my seventh-grade yearbook, the one he took after it was ruined by our classmates.

It weighs twenty pounds now that it’s in my grasp; the heft of the shame makes my

bones ache with the effort it takes to hold it. My plan is to take it back to my room, but the edge of the yearbook swipes some of Aiden's sketchbooks that sit on his desk. The subsequent thump is enough to make me drop the book in surprise. I don't dare grab it, though, as my dad enters the room wide-eyed and defensive.

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He flicks on the light to see more clearly, but it also illuminates the rapid aging he's suffered over the last few months. Being this close to him it's easy to see that his typically slim runner's build now appears sunken. The wrinkles around his eyes are grim reminders of his loss instead of just signs of someone who's spent a lot of days out in the sun. And the frown lines that bracket his mouth have made themselves at home.

The vast majority of the time I avoid looking too closely at their faces, afraid of what horrors I'll see there, but in this proximity, there's no other option but to accept the impact my death has on them still. It would be naive of me to think that the loss of their only daughter wouldn't destroy them, but I'd hoped it would get easier with time, as it has been for me. Apparently, I was wrong.

My guilt urges my hand forward, desperate to feel the warmth of him, needing to console him in some way. But instead of comfort, chills of unease cover his skin, and his shoulders nearly touch his ears.

I'm not his little girl anymore. I've become a parasite, clinging to my parents, sucking them dry.

I wish they'd leave like Aiden did, the urge to scare them out of here is strong, but I also know how much this house means. It's not my place to choose what's best for them, just like there wasn't anything they could have done to stop me from killing myself. We all make choices for our own reasons.

I remain resolved to stay out of their way, to continue to go unnoticed. I won't risk hurting them more. That's why I stay completely still as my dad reaches down to pick

up the spilled books that are mere inches from my feet.

An exhausted sigh leaves his lips as he straightens the stack on the desk, but he hesitates, rubbing a thumb over the cover of the yearbook. Pulling out the desk chair, he sits and opens it up, flipping to the page where mine and Aiden's photos sit side by side. At that age, we still looked quite similar. Before I was allowed to start wearing makeup to school and Aiden's striking features really hollowed out. A small laugh escapes me as I stare at the picture longer, remembering how Aiden convinced me to go along with his plan. Knowing we'd be next to each other, him first, me second, we'd purposely cast a sideways glance no matter how much the photographer tried to correct us. In the photos it looks like we're scheming—I guess we were. Those were the good days.

My dad laughs too; he must remember how mad my mom was at us. It's not a full laugh like the ones that used to boom around the dinner table, but it's something. It's warmth I haven't felt in so long. Even when he's gone, Aiden's charm is impossible to ignore.

The splash on the waxy paper is jarring, breaking me from my revelry. While I've been walking down memory lane, my dad has too, thumbing through the pages, stumbling across what I'd come looking for but had successfully kept hidden from my parents until now.

"Oh, Becca." He shakes his head as he touches the words on the page like he can soothe that sad little girl who cried over the things that had been written there.

Becca Murphy loves Ana Eden.

H.A.G.S. (making out with Ana)

2 Good 2 Be 4 Forgotten (as the gayest girl in school)

Becca and Ana sitting in a tree.

Looking at the comments now, it seems almost silly that I allowed them to have such an impact on me, but I was twelve. Then there were the ones that did more than embarrass me. My dad turns the page. These were the ones that made the cold sweat of shame coat me before I entered any room.

Girls like you shouldn't be allowed in the locker room.

If you're reading this, you're finding out you're uninvited to Tracy's party.

Call me, let's hang out! With the number next to it desperately scribbled out.

My stomach sinks further as my dad covers his mouth and another tear hits the page. I wish more than ever that Aiden was here. He was so good at comforting people the way they needed and at fixing things, like how he'd replaced my yearbook with his when he saw me crying over it. It was empty except for the letter he'd written to me.

He deserved so much better than how I traumatized him. They all did.

Deflated with the onslaught of negative memories, I sink to the floor and watch helplessly as my dad mourns his daughter once again.

"Becccaaaa," my name comes from the darkness behind me. I shoot to my feet, knocking into some of the empty hangers. My first instinct is to look for my dad's reaction, but he's long gone.

"Stasi?" I whisper despite knowing better.

"Becccaaaa," now the voice is Aiden's. The icy chill of dread freezes my muscles as I search the closet for the source. Parting the clothes, I peer into the back of the closet.

“What are you so afraid of?” it says now in Stasi’s voice.

Fear tugs me backward as I back out of the closet, nearly tripping on sneakers as I search the walls for whatever is in here with me.

“Becca, stay with me.” Aiden’s voice pleads with me from above and I stop moving. My neck tilts reluctantly, rusty hinges screaming as I look up, up, up.

I clutch my hands around my mouth, suffocating the shriek that wants to leave me as I stare into the black mass that hovers there.

“You’re such a fucking coward,” it laughs, mirroring Stasi’s antagonistic sneer.

Before I can second guess my decision, I take off in a sprint, terror nipping at my heels as I shove open the sliding door. I slide to a halt outside the guest house.

“I don’t need her,” I scold myself, but when I turn back, the dark figure is looming on the other side of the glass door. In a decision that I’ll surely regret, I swallow my pride and crack the door open, slipping inside the quiet room.

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To my surprise, Stasi is curled up in the bed, sleeping soundly with the blankets tucked under her chin. She looks so peaceful that I hesitate for a moment. But a shadow passing over me spurs me to action.

“For fuck’s sake, you nearly gave me a heart attack,” Stasi hisses when I clutch onto her arm. “What the hell are you doing here?” She sits up quickly, the blanket falling away and puddling in her lap.

“I...I, umm,” my words fail me as I glance up at the inky depths gathering above us.

“What are you—” she stops mid-sentence as she follows my gaze, then jumps out the bed, tucking the sheet around her haphazardly.

“That’s what.” I point at it, emboldened by her standing beside me.

“Dammit, it’s so big now.”

“You’ve seen it before?” Grabbing her arm, I look at her for answers.

“Yes. Before I died...and after.” She dresses quickly as she gathers her thoughts. “I think it’s an entity that feeds off negative emotions—despair, loneliness, anger.”

“Are you saying there’s something haunting us?” I thought death was supposed to be peaceful, but it just keeps getting worse and worse. “How is that even possible?”

Stasi sighs, frustration furrowing her brow as she looks up at it. “To be honest, I’m not well versed in this side of things.”

“What side of things? What are we even talking about?” I shift myself slightly behind her and she glares at me.

“The occult, the paranormal, witchcraft, all of it.” There’s no teasing in her voice. She’s as matter-of-fact as if she was lecturing me on history.

“And your side of things, what’s that?” If I hadn’t seen this thing with my own eyes, I’d be a bit more skeptical, but this all feels very real.

“I guess I’d consider myself an eclectic witch, but I don’t really like to put a label on it. It’s kind of personal.”

I have so many questions, none of which matter right now. “Fine. So what do we do about it?” Anticipation is heavy in my gut as it pulses and contracts silently above us.

Stasi clears her throat, working her hands against one another. “You’re not going to like this, but I’m going to need you to remain very calm. Do you understand?”

Fear grips me, tangling my tongue. All I can do is nod.

“You can’t let it intimidate you.”

“I think that’s easier said than done.”

“I know, but it only grows stronger when you give it power. Your fear, your desperation, that gives it strength. Our grief has helped it grow. We have to stop feeding it.”

“Five, four, three, two, one.” I count down in my head, trying to settle my nerves. “Okay.”

“Come here.” Without hesitation, I meet her where she stands in the middle of the floor. Her fingers lace through mine, confident and secure in their hold. “You’re going to repeat after me.”

“Shadows of the past fade into the night,

In your place, I welcome the light

Banish all harm

Banish all fear

With these words, I make it clear

No longer welcome

You must depart

From my life

From my home

From my heart

Negativity leave us be

With this chant, we set you free.”

“You have to say it like you mean it,” Stasi insists, squeezing my hand tighter. Clearing my throat, I do as I’m told, desperate for this to be over as the air above me feels increasingly heavy.

Whispers crawl over my shoulders, trailing up and down my neck like ants.

Coward. Coward. Coward.

Needy. Needy. Needy.

Failure. Failure. Failure.

I grit my teeth, pushing down the urge to scream out as the high-pitched recitation of some of my greatest insecurities pelt against me relentlessly.

“Ignore whatever it’s telling you. It’s pushing back, but that’s a good sign. It’s threatened.” She squeezes my hand, insistent on gaining back my attention. “Banishing requires determination. Stay focused.”

Trusting her, I keep chanting, and each time we reach the end again, we start over, and over.

The voice that circles me is just as persistent.

My arms shake and my voice wobbles, but I refuse to break, I won't fail at this. I can't let her down. I can't let myself down. I'm tired of letting others have so much influence over my emotions. Holding onto her and planting my feet, I say the words again. Weary and raw, my throat protests, but I follow Stasi's lead, continuing the chant. I'm on the verge of crying out with exhaustion when there's a ripple in the atmosphere around us and the whispers dissipate. Between deep breaths, I find the courage to finally crack my eye open. Relief unknots my tight muscles.

"Stasi." She continues chanting. "Stasi, it's gone." I try to tug my hands out of her hold, but she keeps a firm grip as she opens her eyes and assesses the room for herself. After completing the chant a final time, she releases me.

Her shoulders are slumped, and her lids hang low over her eyes.

"Are you okay?" It's a struggle to tame the concern that's sprung to life inside me.

"I'm fine. Banishing can be draining, especially with how much energy it has amassed. It was much stronger than the last time I saw it." She runs a hand through her hair. "I'll be fine. Honestly, I'm just relieved it worked. I've been very disconnected from all my practices since I've died."

I keep the interrogation barred behind my teeth. Our last conversation sits awkwardly between us, taking the idea off the table. In fact, she knocks it over the edge like a cat with a glass.

"Well, as fun as that was, I'm still not interested in doing this." She walks over to the

door, holding it open.

“Thank—” The door closing in my face cuts me off. The rejection sings hot on my skin. So that’s how it’s going to be? Fine by me. I don’t need her. I never did.

Chapter 28

Becca

48 Days Dead

Every time I close my eyes, it’s her I see—hair tousled, sheet pooled around her waist. The silver of the moon reflecting off her platinum hair. I’m sick to my stomach with the way I crave her—her touch, her kiss, her body. That rabid need overpowers all rational thought.

I know that I shouldn’t want her to touch me between my legs or harshly tug at my nipples.

I know that I shouldn’t want to slip my tongue inside her and pluck needy moans from that filthy mouth of hers.

I know that I shouldn’t want to ask her to hold me and listen while I let her see all the scars life has left on me.

But I Can’t. Stop. Thinking. About. Her. It’s what drives my hips forward over and over as I hold this pillow between my legs hoping that at any moment, I’ll actually be able to get anything resembling friction. The more I try, the more frustrated I get. There’s nothing in this world that makes me feel. Nothing but her.

“Stasi.” The name slips from my lips as I pinch my nipple, trying to replicate that

savory pain that she's so good at eliciting. "Oh, yes, right there. Stasi—"

“I’ve been summoned?”

Hoping she didn’t see anything; throw the pillow across the room like a guilty child and attempt to act natural...without any clothes on and the taste of her name still on my lips. Shame is the closest thing to warmth I’ve felt in a while as I pull the blanket hastily over my naked body. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I was just coming to make sure everything was okay. That our little ritual worked.” She smirks down at me. “I see mine have.”

“It’s not what it looks like,” I blurt out.

Her laugh is mocking. “Oh? Because what it looked like was you humping a pillow wishing it was my leg.”

I shake my head, my impending humiliation rendering me speechless.

But Stasi pays me no mind as she snatches up the pillow from where it was abandoned on the floor and brings it to her nose. Her inhale is almost a snarl. “Fuck, you have been a dirty girl.” Holding eye contact, she’s a lion watching the injured gazelle across the pond as she drags her tongue across the fabric, lapping up the blood that’s been left behind by her prey. “Mmmmm,” she groans, the primitive bass of it sending an echoing throb to my clit. “Such a sweet little cunt to keep all to yourself.” She drops the pillow to the floor and comes closer. “So wet and needy, crying out for my touch.” She takes another step closer. “Now that’s not very nice, is it?” She leans down and clasps the back of my neck tightly as she reaches the bed. Tongue invading my mouth, I’m forced to taste myself, the heady mixture of her saliva and my essence

is like a shot of high-proof alcohol into my bloodstream. It's intoxicating and dangerous, and I immediately need another just to feel something.

My hands slip into her messy pink and blond hair, as if I could have any control over what she's not willing to yield. The illusion sends another flood of arousal between my legs. My ego bends like putty in her hands. "Touch me, please." All pretense of pride falls away like the blanket that drops from my chest. I can meet her halfway. I can do this.

"So eager," she taunts with a laugh. "Be careful, I might start to think you've missed me." She talks over me before I can spit out a lie. "But don't worry, I have no intention of pushing you into doing anything you don't want to do." Three fingers punctuate her sentence. "Scout's honor."

An embarrassing whimper escapes me at her promise.

"Why don't you show me all the horrible things that I make you do to yourself? I want to see what I do to you." Hand on my chest, she encourages me to lay back, then grabs the pillow off the floor, and walks over to the desk chair, resting her head on the back like this is the most normal thing in the world.

Sitting up on my elbows, I shoot her a glare. "You're serious?"

"I interrupted you, it's only fair that you get to finish. Wouldn't want to take anything else from you, after all." There's that Cheshire cat smile. "What's wrong, Crybaby? Do you need me to talk you through it?" Her tongue swipes over her lip. "Open your legs."

My self-control cracking, I cave and part my knees, revealing myself to her.

"I'll never get tired of that sight," she sighs longingly. "Look at you, swollen and

ready for a good fuck, a thing of beauty like that can't go to waste, just wouldn't be fair. And we know what a proponent of fairness you are."

In protest, my legs start to shake as the desperation building inside me becomes unbearable. "Do you have to stare at me like that?"

"You'll be lucky if I even let myself blink." Stasi runs a hand through her hair, her eyes intent on my exposed pussy that throbs anxiously for her touch. "Now put that pillow back between your legs and finish what you started."

A sigh of relief leaves me as I straddle the pillow and grind my hips. The pressure is insignificant, barely more than a slight brush of the fabric, but her eyes on me caress me in all the ways I yearn for. The pillow is simply a prop at this point, her presence the thing that's pushing my pleasure higher and higher.

"How does that feel? Is it enough for that lonely little cunt of yours?"

Despite myself, I shake my head.

"That's what I thought." She stands and the adrenaline rush I get from her proximity is dizzying. "Turn over." I don't have much of a choice as she rips it from between my legs. Once I'm on my back, her hands curve around my knees and push them up gently. "Do me a favor and put one of your fingers inside." Overcoming my self-consciousness, I do as she says.

As I slide in, she rolls my hips outward, eliciting a surprise gasp from me.

"You're doing so well." Her nails dig into my skin as her gaze remains fixed between my legs. "Do you hear that?"

"What?" I groan.

“Your pussy begging for more?” Stasi’s hands slide down my inner thighs, holding them open. “Add another.”

In and out, in and out, I drive my fingers inside me, mostly focused on taking in her facial expressions as she watches me.

“One more, sweetheart,” she coaxes. “Just one more, trust me. But let me help you first.” Leaning forward, she allows spit to spill from her mouth and onto my clit, where it drips slowly down my center. “There you go, that’ll make it easier.” I want to be disgusted but I can’t find an objection when it feels so damn good. “One day I’m going to wear you like a bracelet, when your body has decided it’s ready to be stretched and used by me. Would you like me to fill you up and call you my pretty little thing?”

Dragging my finger through the trail of spit, I insert it inside myself, writhing at the delectable fullness of it. “Oh—” I gasp. “Oh, shit, yes.” My hips rock chasing the sensation.

“How does that feel with those lithe little fingers creating such a nice stretch in that tight, neglected pussy?”

“It’s perfect,” I groan.

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“Play with your clit and don’t let up.” My fingers circle it viciously, eager to show how badly I want her. The combined stimulation has my legs shaking. But just like every other time, the climax I feel myself approaching recedes, just as fast as it built. Once again, my orgasm falls away into the abyss.

“Fuck,” I groan and remove my fingers.

“It’s okay, Becca. You need to learn to trust your body again.” Stasi stays leaning over me, her long hair falling around our faces, making it impossible to think about anything but her as I rapidly come down from the high I was chasing. “We just need to be patient. But I’m not worried, we’ll get you there.”

I only have the energy to nod and wave Stasi off when she extends a hand. I’m still trying to wrap my mind around everything that just did and didn’t happen.

I need distance from her if I have any hopes of having a conversation with any substance, so I sit on my desk chair that I haven’t used in months. I sit facing her with my head resting on the high back of the chair, arms folded beneath my head. “Can I ask you something?”

“Why not?”

“How did you become so,” I search for words that won’t seem judgmental, “comfortable with your body? With sex?”

“Well, the alternative was hating it, I guess.” Her eyes flick up to the ceiling as she lays on her back. “I learned very early on that if I didn’t define myself, other people

would, and they'd do it in a much harsher way. So, I took ownership of all the parts of my identity that could either be turned into weapons or shields. If I shaped my sexuality, my womanhood, my fatness, then nobody else could make them into things that would hurt me."

"Who made you feel like you had to do that in the first place?"

Stasi's knuckles turn white as she grips my comforter, but she doesn't speak for what feels like forever. "People like me, fat, queer girls, we learn very early on that the world wants us to be anything but what we are. A lot of people tried to mold me to their liking. The thing about me, though, is I didn't melt under their torches. I hardened into something stronger—something they couldn't destroy with all the different tools in their arsenal." She clears her throat. "And they did try. With chisels that tried to shape my body into something slender and toned. And then with saws that attempted to cut away the parts that they didn't like. They did their best to nail me down and keep me in my place." Her black and pink acrylics trace the matching bow on one of her thighs. "The thing they didn't know is that heartbreak, the kind that I suffered, the kind that requires you to cut that bloody organ out, it'll turn you into the walking dead. It turned me into a fucking zombie for years. I didn't feel anything, they couldn't hurt me."

"That sounds brutal." My weak words hang limply between us, but I don't know what else to say in the face of such honesty. I've never been that truthful with anyone in my life, not even myself.

"She was."

My heart aches for her. With all those arrows she's shot at me—her insults and the constant whiplash of her shifting from lust and disdain, creating so many little holes—she somehow opened up a space in my heart that is just big enough to feel sorry that she's been forced to live life on the defense. Where there's sympathy,

there's also envy. While the world made me weak—afraid, conforming, and submissive—it made her strong and commanding. Stasi is brave and forward, and most importantly, herself. She's a woman who knows her mind, something I'll apparently never learn to be.

“Anyway,” she sighs. “Your turn.”

I snort a laugh. She says it like we're trading cards or pogs, not fundamental pieces of ourselves.

My throat grows tight, like truthfulness is vomit instead of a deep breath that could settle something inside me. I push through it, the acid burning my throat. “I've always had a complicated relationship with my sexuality. I think part of it is my need to be accepted. I saw what my brother went through, always been different, being—” I swallow thickly, “queer. I didn't want that. I wanted to be liked. I wanted life to be easy.”

“Living with everything locked up inside was easy?” The question isn't accusatory, but it's challenging.

“Well, that's the thing, I didn't really know I was suppressing anything. I didn't realize that I was forcing myself to fit into any kind of mold until it was too late. It didn't click until I became aware that I was being smothered. I panicked once I realized that I might be suffocating, but that only seemed to bring it on quicker, the end. I didn't have the opportunity to sort through it all.”

“Sounds isolating.” There's something like understanding in the melancholy of her voice.

“It was, I guess. For so long I didn't mind conforming though. I saw the expectations modeled for me, and I fell in line pretty easily. When I was a kid, it was easy for me

to fit in. Other people always liked me. I've always been pretty amiable. I tried to be kind; there were a few times I failed, big. I wasn't too opinionated. I was always willing to go with the flow. I kept good grades, excellent grades even. I performed well at everything I put my mind to. But the last few months, I'm realizing that maybe that's all it was, one long performance."

"Isn't that what we all do? Create versions of ourselves that help us retain the love of others?"

"Isn't that sad that we're expected to?"

"Unfortunately, that's just how the world works." Stasi runs a hand through her long hair that partially dangles off the bed. "I don't know whether I pity or envy you that you're just recently coming to terms with it."

"Well, what I do know is that I don't want to do it anymore. You were right. I'm tired of trying so hard to be everything to everyone. I'm tired of hiding from myself."

Chapter 29

Stasi

86 Days Dead

This is my chance to get closer to her, while she has her guard down. It's an opportunity to show her that I can be there for her, to slip my way into her heart. Grabbing her hand, I tug her in front of the floor-length mirror. "Tell me; what do you see when you look at yourself?"

Becca meets her own gray-blue gaze in the reflection and her brow furrows. "Do you mean literally or figuratively?"

“Stop trying to figure out how to pass the test and just tell me the first thing that comes to mind. I promise, Becca, there’s no way to fail or pass this.”

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For several moments she bites at her lips, the uncertainty tearing her up. “I see someone who’s made a lot of mistakes.” Her voice is shaky as she scans herself. “I see someone who refused to love herself.” Tears break like rogue waves over her lashes, and she tries to turn away.

I sidestep her, careful not to touch her, but also firm in my barrier. “Don’t give up that easy.” Her nervousness is contagious, and I hate it. The hair along my neck prickles, hackles raising. I didn’t leave room for insecurity in my life and yet she seems to bring it out in me in death. It’s unsettling but I try to bury it deep with all the other secrets between us. I have to push through it. For her. For me. For us. “Loving yourself takes work and I can’t do it for you. Everything we’re taught beats down that natural instinct to embrace ourselves, our bodies, our sexuality. Loving every inch of yourself takes practice. You have to push through the discomfort.”

Becca closes her eyes and nods slowly. When she opens her reddened eyes again, I see a glint of determination. The spark of an ember.

“Alright, let’s go again, tell me what else you see.”

“I see someone who never allowed herself to embrace her sexuality.” She takes a deep breath and shakes out her hands, like she is shrugging off the discomfort. “I see a little girl who allowed herself to be swallowed up in her brother’s shadow instead of stepping into the sun beside him.” Her eyes dart away with the admission, guilt curving her shoulders and dipping her head.

The more I get to know her, the more her insecurities and her loving jealousy of her brother make sense. He had a freedom and ownership of self that she never achieved.

I nod in understanding. To be a woman is to have someone—almost everyone—take pleasure in your body without your consent, without your knowledge even sometimes. “It’s okay, Becca.”

“No, it’s not. Who thinks those things about their family? Who says those things about the sibling who loved them?” She swings toward me, her eyes pleading with me to stop the hurt.

“It doesn’t make you a bad person. Our relationships with ourselves, with the people we love are complicated.” I sweep her hair off her shoulder, careful not to touch her skin while she’s in this unstable headspace. The last thing I want is for her to shut down, she’s opening up so beautifully, a budding flower that I can help bloom.

When I speak again, my voice is soft and even, reassuring and coaxing. “Do you want to know what I see?” I twirl her silkychestnut hair around my fingers as we stare into each other’s eyes.

“I see a beautiful, smart woman who’s gone through more than she lets on.” My lips hover along the curve of her neck, tracing it like I would if I were covering it in kisses. But instead of my lips, it’s compliments and nurturing words that pepper her skin with the intent of sinking deeper. “I see someone who denied themselves so many things they wanted in an effort to be everything to everyone.” My hands float over her shoulders, her arms, her waist, quivering with the need to touch her, to reassure her in the physical language I speak so much more fluently. “I see a woman who deserves someone who loves her exactly as she is.”

Becca turns away from me, pressing herself into the wall. I halt, my arms frozen mid-air about to circle her waist. Ragged breathing leaves her—her body’s instinctual coping mechanism going into overdrive—but she surprises me with steady words. “Go ahead.”

So, so gently, I bring my hands around her waist, settling them on her hips. “Is this okay?” She nods. We’re both rigid, but when she doesn’t flinch or push me away, I continue sliding them over her clothes until I’m encircling her narrow body. “Still, okay?”

Her palms flatten against the wall on either side of the slim, rectangular mirror, bracing herself, but she nods.

With hardly any pressure, I press my front to her back and hold my palms against her stomach. I’m not crushing into her, just bringing us together. The need to ask her if she’s okay again hammers against my closed lips but I force myself to remain silent and still. Time stretches between us, somehow feeling both too long and like it could never be enough. The knot in my stomach untangles as Becca begins to soften, tension releasing from her muscles.

Sinking into her, I greedily draw in the mouthwateringly sweet scent of her perfume that is enshrined in her skin. Dragging my nose up her neck, I bury it in her hair and revel in the notes of strawberry, peach, and vanilla. I ache to devour her, swallow her whole, she’s so close to being mine. Yet the shaking of her fingers that cover mine is a reminder to take it slow. What’s a bit longer when we have nothing but time? This is what she needs.

My patience pays off when Becca leans her head back, resting it in the crook of my neck. Her fingers curl into a fist against the wall, but she doesn’t pull away. Our eyes lock in the reflection as I tilt my head down and nod. Not breaking eye contact, she begins to guide my hands across her stomach, then her hips, then her pelvis. The fabric beneath my fingers is a barrier, and yet this is one of the most intimate ways I’ve ever touched someone. Thank god I don’t need to breathe because there’s no air in my lungs as I wait to see what she’ll do next.

“How many women have you been with?” Her voice shakes, a mix of awkwardness

and dread.

“A lot,” I respond as honestly as I can.

Our hands stop moving. “Ten? Twenty? Thirty?” Her gaze fixates on the wall as she pries.

“Definitely more than twenty.” My tongue moves clumsily in my mouth as I fight the urge to deny or lie. Will she think less of me?

But Becca nods. “Makes sense.”

I snort, not sure whether to be offended or proud. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean look at you. Who wouldn’t want to sleep with you?”

“It was everything but sleeping.” I shake my head at my past self.

“Meaning?”

“It means that I never sleep next to people—never let anyone sleep next to me.”

“But—” I absorb every detail of her ever-shifting expression as her dark brows furrow, framing the confusion in her stormy eyes. “But you’ve let me sleep with you.”

“Right. You’re different.”

“Why?” The word is a wisp on the wind, but I cling to it. The truth is on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t bear to part with it when I’m finally making headway with

her. What if it ruins everything?

So I lie. “Because I feel safe with you.” A half-truth. And yet, what should be a sweet sentiment tastes like the sourness of dishonesty.

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My hand palms her thigh, slipping up, up, up, and then the next thing I know I'm brushing against the smooth fabric that stands between me and her perfect cunt. Lightly, I tease my finger against the front of her panties. She leans back into me as I trace the outline of her labia and slip them across her center. The positive response of her mouth dropping open and her ass digging into me spurs me onward, but when I slide one nail under the edge of the elastic, her demeanor entirely changes.

"Stop." Like a domino effect, each of her muscles stiffens. "Wait," she breathes out through clenched teeth as she battles memories she's been trying so hard to escape.

"Okay. Why don't we sit down?" We both sink to the floor while I hold my hands up and nod, assuring her that I understand. "Becca, you're safe." My hands itch with the need to pull her against me, but that will only make things worse. I'm helpless to do anything but watch.

"I'm sorry," she cries, and it tugs at something deep inside me. "I thought I was getting better, but I'm still so messed up." She tucks her hair behind her ears with unsteady fingers, then begins to rock herself back and forth, self-soothing.

"There's nothing wrong with you, Becca," I insist.

"There is," she gasps with frustration. "Affection shouldn't be anxiety-inducing. Touching me shouldn't be like walking on eggshells, just waiting for me to shatter."

"Everyone is different; there is no normal when it comes to being intimate with people." I tuck her hair behind her ear and catch her gaze. "You need to go slow? No problem. You want me to avoid touching you in certain ways? Okay. Pleasure comes

in all different forms, Becca. And I intend to learn all the ways I can make you feel good.”

“Every time I think I’m making progress, I end up right back here. I’m just broken.” She shuts me down, and I allow her to think she’s won the argument for now. This isn’t the state to be pushing her in—when she’s raw and reeling. But if there’s one thing about me, it’s that I’m a determined son of a bitch and I’m not willing to give up on this. Not when I know that she wants it.

There’s a way forward for us. I just need to figure out how to be what she needs.

Part III

Chapter 30

Becca

50 Days Dead

“Come on. I want to show you something.” Stasi drags me out the window and leads me up the ivy-laden ladder that’s attached to the side of the house. The view from the roof is beautiful; even though it’s one story off the ground, it feels like you’re so much closer to the sky here. The small distance from everything else in the world makes this space feel sacred—always has.

That awe is obvious in my voice as I turn in a circle taking in the view. “I haven’t been up here since I was little. Probably like eighth grade.” Not since I was a kid. Not since that sunset I didn’t know would be my last with her, my childhood best friend, the one I tried so hard to forget. I never came back up here, never shared an ice cream cone with someone again, never accidentally let my fingers tangle with another girl’s while they lay between us. “Do you come up here a lot?” I redirect the conversation.

“It’s one of my favorite places.” Stasi sits down with her legs crossed and leans back on her splayed hands like she’s completely at ease on the hard shingles.

Joining her, I’m reminded that everything feels different now. Edges are dulled, surfaces are softer, and there’s cushioning between us and the rest of the world. “I forgot how pretty the sky is when you’re a little bit closer.”

“Yeah, I love to come up here and think.”

“About?” She’s piqued my interest.

“Everything. Life, death, what I would have done differently. What I’ll do for the rest of forever.”

“You think we really have forever?” I haven’t allowed myself to put much thought into it. The concept of forever is terrifying, something I never had to consider before. It’s such a vague amount of time that I can’t even wrap my mind around it and honestly, I don’t really want to. I spent my entire life planning and preparing. The future was the vast majority of what I put my energy into and look how that turned out. Near the end there, it became a matter of just getting through every minute, every hour, every day.

“Who fucking knows?” Stasi lies back gazing up at the stars and I follow suit.

“Who cares.” Something about her relaxed demeanor is infectious. Everything about her is addicting. She’s opened my mind, my world to so much in such a short period. What could eternity be like with her? The thought chases off that momentary peacefulness I achieved. Where did that come from?

“Stop overthinking and just be here with me.” Stasi interrupts my thoughts, forcing them to halt and redirect. Giving me a mischievous smirk, she stands and cups her

hands around her mouth, then screams at the top of her lungs. “Hello!” It echoes into the night around us, not a soul stirring at what would ordinarily be a bizarre disruption in such a quiet neighborhood. “Nobody can hear us. Nobody can see us. Nobody even knows we exist.” She sinks back down beside me on her knees, taking my hands cautiously in hers. I don’t even tense. “We’re completely alone in this world. Don’t you get how freeing that is?”

“I don’t think it’s something I can conceptualize. I’ve never felt free a day in my life.” I laugh because if I don’t, I’ll cry, again. I’m so goddamn tired of crying.

“Let’s change that. Put your hands like this.” She cups her mouth again.

“Fine.” I bracket my mouth with my hands.

“On the count of three.” Her laugh confirms this is ridiculous but at least we’ll embarrass ourselves together. “One. Two. Three.”

“Hello!”

“Hello!”

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Our voices echo in synchronicity and disappear in the distance. Not a soul acknowledges us; nobody judges us.

“I’m dead,” Stasi yells. “I’m dead and I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.” This time, she shouts up at the sky.

“I’m dead,” I yell, too, the lightheartedness draining from my voice. “I’m dead and I wish I wasn’t.”

I ignore the pull of Stasi’s stare.

“I’m dead and I wish I hadn’t killed myself.” I drop my hands, instead whispering into the void around us. “But I’m done regretting it.” I turn toward Stasi. “I’m done punishing myself.” Some of the heaviness that’s bared down on me every day finally dissipates. “I’m sorry, Stasi. I’m sorry that I helped Nate hide your body. I’m sorry that I didn’t do the right thing. I’m sorry that it took me so long to genuinely apologize.” I fight the emotion that’s rising at the back of my throat and behind my eyes. She needs to be able to read the sincerity in the shape of the words and the weight of my eyes on hers. “I’m sorry that you’re dead, too.”

For once she’s speechless. Her brow furrows and her lip tucks behind her teeth. My anxiety and her uncharacteristic silence create an unbearable atmosphere of uncertainty, but I sit with the discomfort.

“You know . . .” Stasi bites at the tip of her nail. “I don’t think anyone has ever apologized for hurting me.” She stares at me for several more seconds, then clears her throat. “Thank you. I forgive you...for helping hide my body.” The small smile she

gives me is genuine, but there's something at war with it in her eyes, a distinct sadness that I don't think I've ever seen there. I hate it. I hate wondering if I'm the one who put it there. I hate how it dilutes the brilliant brown that usually burns through me like the expensive whisky my dad used to bring out on Christmas.

At a loss for what else to say, I sit back down. The easy energy that was flowing between us is stifled by whatever I just stirred up. But when Stasi joins me and lays back, I follow suit.

"Are you any good at spotting the constellations? I honestly don't know much about them." She points upward and I follow the direction of her finger. "That's the Little Dipper, right?"

Her casual air throws me off for a moment, so I have to search for my words. "No, that's the Big Dipper." Reaching across the small distance between us, I shift her finger over until the constellation she was looking for is clearly in her sights. "That's the Little Dipper."

"Oh, yeah. I guess that makes sense." Her laugh isn't brimming with confidence like usual; this time, it's shy, uncertain. It doesn't sit quite right with me.

"You were close. They're easy to mix up." Folding my hands over my stomach, I shift my hips a couple of inches closer to where she lays. "Not everyone's a nerd who cares too much about being right like I used to be."

"You're not anymore?" She sends me a doubtful look from the corner of her eye that makes me roll mine. But that haughty laugh is back, and it warms me from within.

"You sound like my brother." My light laughter dies as quickly as it starts. All of my attention shifts to closing the floodgates that just broke open. The rusty metal around my heart that I keep neglecting reminds me it needs attention.

“Aiden, really?” Either Stasi is ignoring the shift in my mood, or she knows what I need better than I do because she doesn’t miss a beat.

“Yeah.” I suck in a deep breath, an unnecessary but comforting habit. “I forget that you’ve . . . been around.” How was there ever a time when I was completely unaware of her?

“I imagine you miss him. He’s quite a character.”

When I turn to her, I expect to see the typical interest or lust for my brother—something I learned to guard myself against early on—but her expression is thoughtful.

“Of course I miss him. He wasn’t just my brother and my twin, we had a friendship. Maybe not a conventional one—I mean, we weren’t as close as we could be—but I loved him, and I know without a doubt that he loved me fiercely. We had our own way of being there for each other.” Afternoons spent in silence while Aiden would paint and I’d do homework come to mind. I wish I hadn’t taken them for granted. The thing is, when you’ve had your sibling around, and they’re there through the ups and downs, monotonous and eventful, it’s easy to act as if they’ll always be there. You never expect to find out that they won’t.

“Yeah, you two seemed to get along pretty well. Honestly, I was kind of jealous of your relationship.”

I roll over on my side, giving her my undivided attention.

“Being an only child was kind of lonely at times. Especially when I was short on friends.”

“You don’t seem like the kind of person who would have a hard time finding

friends.”

Stasi’s gaze leaves mine, fixating on something in the distance. “The thing with friends is that it’s not so much hard to find them as it is to keep them. I mean, I didn’t do much of either, but I did have a best friend once.”

“What were they like?”

“She was my other half.” Toying with a piece of her hair, she grows more serious.

“She made me feel like I was someone special, like someone who was wanted.”

“You don’t talk to her anymore?” This conversation makes me miss my own friends. Not how everything was distant and fucked up at the end, but when we were inseparable. I think of how Meg and my first close friendship were so similar. How both of them thought the same thing about me. How I made them both feel invalidated. The way I hurt both of them. Shame clings to the back of my neck like humidity. Can I even consider myself to have been a good friend?

“No.”

I nod solemnly. “Friendships are hard.”

“They are.”

“Do you think we could be friends?”

Stasi props herself up, giving herself a better view as she scrutinizes every detail of my face. “Is that what you want to be? Friends?” In a quick movement, she’s seated atop me, hovering just over my hips, stopping just short of trapping me beneath her. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t usually let my friends fuck my face.” Her hand latches around my throat and pulls me up to meet her lips. Claiming my mouth, her tongue presses between my teeth and strokes mine. While our tongues tangle, her possessive grip on my throat grows slightly tighter, forcing out a whimper.

“Is this okay? Do you like it when I hold you like this, Crybaby?”

I nod, chasing her lips.

“Tell me,” she demands. “Or better yet, I won’t even make you say the words. I’ll just check for myself.” The backs of her knuckles tickle my stomach as she undoes the series of buttons and pulls my shorts open as much as she can with the denim resisting. But she manages to slip two fingers down the front, dragging them up my center. Even over my panties, the movement has my hips jerking forward. “Oh yeah Babygirl, you’re so wet for me.” She scoots back onto the roof. “Take these off, I want to see for myself.”

Clumsily, I pull off my shorts, but when I go to remove my underwear, she swats my hand away.

“I said I wanted to see.” Grabbing my hand, she guides me back down. “Spread your legs for me. Show me how needy I make that pretty little cunt.”

Another gush of arousal seeps into the fabric between my legs as I open them for her.

“Oh sweetheart, look at you.” Her hands grip my knees as she stares down at the growing wet spot, speaking softly. “Just a few words have you soaking your panties?” She rubs her cheek against my knee. “I’m so glad you stopped lying to yourself because to deny this, well that would just be silly.” The brush of her thumb over the damp fabric has my legs twitching. “This pussy deserves better than that. It’s been neglected for so long, just waiting for someone to come along and fuck you the way you need.”

My panties just keep getting wetter and wetter, there’s no resisting it. My body yearns for her and that approving smirk. “Touch me. Please, I want you to make me come.”

“Oh, sweet girl, if you think you’re going to get me to rush through this, you don’t know me at all. I’m going to take my time with you, working you up, bringing you down, making you moan and sigh and gasp until you’re not sure where you end and I begin.” My hips jump when Stasi shifts my underwear to the side and slides a finger through my center. “I’ve been more than patient, and so will you.”

Biting my lip to prevent the objection that wants to slip free, I nod and try to relax as one finger enters me.

“Right here, this is where I belong, buried deep inside you.” I’m helpless but to let her drive another finger into me. The obscene squelching and my gasps are the only sounds between us as she keeps up a steady rhythm. “I love the way your pussy talks to me.” She hooks her fingers and drags them, making my hips jerk off the roof and a plea spill from my lips. “There we go, give me more. Yeah baby, so good to me, giving me every last drop.”

“Ah, god,” I yelp as she begins to pump into me faster and leans down to take my lip between her teeth. The smooth ball of her piercing tickles the tender skin.

“There’s no god here. Not in this dead world we find ourselves in. All you have is me.” Her tongue flicks against the open cut, soothing and inflicting discomfort at the same time. “You can pray to me if you want, though. If you ask real nice, I might even bless you with a chance to make me come.”

Wetness leaks down my thighs, between my ass cheeks, her words making it flood from me. I don’t even have time to worry whether that’s normal because she sends another shockwave of pleasure through me when she presses her thumb to my clit.

A gasping breath leaves me, and she inhales it greedily. “Does that feel good?”

“Y-yes. It feels s-so good,” I whine, growing more desperate for her by the second. My fingers ache with the need to feel her to the point that it becomes distracting, so I sit up and grab at her until she’s back in my lap.

“What do you want, Dirty Girl?” Her tongue gathers the remnants of me that coat her fingers. “Tell me and I might just give it to you.”

“I need to touch you.” I run my hands up her thick thighs that straddle me and slide them beneath her skirt, grabbing fistfuls of her round ass, trying to find something to tether me as I float outside my body and into some other realm of eroticism I haven’t experienced before.

“Do you want to feel what you do to me?” She takes my hand, folding all of my fingers but the middle and pointer, and then inserts them in her mouth. Her tongue ring tickles as she twists it around the digits. I’m confused until she slips it beneath her skirt and under the elastic band of her panties. My fingers twitch with the urge to sink deep inside of her. “That’s it, play with my pussy.”

She grips around me as I begin to pulse in and out of her. With her in my lap I can viscerally experience every flex and contraction in her thigh muscles, the press of her

plush ass against my legs as she shifts up and down, and the friction of her cleavage rubbing against my chest. With her tits bouncing right in front of me, those three dermal piercings sparkling in the moonlight, my mouth waters uncontrollably. Unable to resist, I trace the outline of her nipple piercing over the fabric of her top while my left hand fumbles with the silver clasps. I admit defeat, realizing there are far too many to contend with while I'm still trying to keep up a rhythm with my right hand. "Take this off," I plead.

She makes quick work of it like she's done it a million times in far darker places. My stomach sinks for a moment at the reminder of just how much more experienced she is than me. But I don't have time to dwell, as she captures all of my attention with her hand in my hair, pressing my lips to her breast. When I flick my tongue over her hard nipple, her satisfied groan encourages me to explore. Alternating between sucking, licking, and playing with the metal bar, I take my time learning what makes her squirm on my lap.

"Don't stop." Her words are a validating caress.

I squeeze her supple breast to keep it in my mouth as she begins to ride my fingers faster and harder. I love the way her body yields to me like I'm soothing an ache she's been dying for. It's the only surrender a woman like this will ever make, and I'm just grateful to witness it.

"Put another finger in. Fill me up." I suck hard at the same time, which makes her whimper—a sound that could never get old. That girlish plea is quite possibly the best thing I've ever heard. I did that to her. Cold, sharp-tongued Stasi just whimpered for me.

"Stroke your fingers li—" I drag them down the front inner wall, guessing at what she meant. I must have been right because her thighs shake. "Yes, ah, right there. That's my girl." She picks up her pace, riding me faster. I continue the motion and her free

hand dives down to her clit. “Oh fuck, oh yes. Mhmm, that’s it. That’s—” Her words break off into a cry as she comes. The sensation of her pussy pulsing around me along with her teeth sinking into my shoulder pulls a moan from me in harmony with her own.

Stasi’s arms tighten around my shoulders as the aftershocks of her orgasm roll through her. “Fuck me, Dean’s List, you are a good student.” She laughs into my hair and my own follows.

Gently I slide my fingers out of her and cup my hands around her breasts, placing a kiss on each nipple.

“Nope, no more of that. It’s my turn.” She presses a manicured finger to my forehead and forces my lips away. The rosy buds taunt me as they harden under my attention. I would lick and suck them all night if she’d let me. I just want them in my mouth, so soft and sensitive. The way she squirms—

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“Earth to Becca.” Stasi shakes her head at me. “Lay down, with your head that way.” She points to the edge of the roof, and I give her a wide-eyed look. “Just do it. Trust me.” She ignores the shake of my head and presses her palm to my chest, guiding me onto my back. What’s the worst that could happen? You’re already dead.”

Letting the argument go, I position myself like she says, my head hanging just slightly off the roof. A slow buzz begins to build at the same time she starts touching me.

Stasi trails her fingers along my inner thighs, brushes over my clit, and traces my center. My cunt tightens, seeking her touch, but she just keeps her finger moving in those teasing circles around my opening. “Please,” I whisper against her skin.

“What’s that, Sweetheart? You’re going to have to speak up if you want something from me.”

“Please try to make me come.” I attempt to find my voice.

“If you keep being so quiet I’m going to tease you to the brink of losing your mind and you’re ready to scream from this rooftop again. But this time, it’ll be my name.”

Never in my life would I have thought threats of humiliation would be erotic, but there’s nothing expected about her. I crave the way she pushes my expectations, and how she draws me past my limits with the promise of pleasure. “I want you to make me come,” I say with more confidence, earning a victorious smile from her.

“There we go, Angel. That’s a good start.” Stasi kisses me hard. As if she’s trying to

summon the exact words she yearns to hear. “One of these days, I’m going to pull the filthiest words from your lips. I’m going to mold you into such a nasty girl who can give it as good as she takes it.” Her unrelenting strokes push me further into the fantasy she’s built up for us. Instead of a flood of dark thoughts, my head is light and empty of anything but the jolts of electric heat she sends through me with every swirl of her thumb and pump of her fingers. The faster she goes, the more my legs shake. The deeper she reaches, the louder my cries become.

“That’s it. Give yourself over to it. Let all that shit go, Becca.” She doesn’t let up on me. “You’re dead; who you were doesn’t matter anymore. Whoever you felt like you had to be doesn’t matter anymore. It’s just you and I at the end of the world. You’re mine and I won’t stop till you say my name. Until you tell everyone in this cookie-cutter little neighborhood who you belong to.”

Whether it’s the conviction in her voice or the reassurance that she won’t give up on me, a switch flips in my mind and nearly a year’s worth of tension and repression floods forward. I jump off the proverbial ledge without any hesitation. “Oh god, Stasi, ah—” Instead of fear, there’s only excitement and relief. An out-of-body experience is the only way to describe the way it feels falling apart on her fingers. There’s some kind of safety in her firm grip, in the selfless determination of her fingers and lips, in the need in her eyes. Her need for me, not want, need, is why my body, my mind, and my soul are drawn to her. The electric magnetism between us transcends the transactional nature of so many relationships—even the most important ones—that I had in my life. There is nothing but me and her, and when her hands, her lips, her teeth are on me, I know that it is everything.

“You’re so fucking beautiful when you come,” Stasi says as places a kiss on my head and lays back.

On this high of what she’s given back to me, I want to give something to her—a truth.

Forcing the words out is like jumping out of a plane from thousands of miles above ground, but I'm betting on Stasi being my parachute. I have to believe she'll be there to catch me. Cleaning my throat, I get it out before I lose my courage. "I'm . . . I'm queer."

When Stasi turns to me with a smile and doesn't say anything, I continue "That much I can accept, that much feels good to own. But, whether I'm bi, pan, lesbian, or anything else that's something I can't figure out. What if I don't know what I am?"

She links her hand with mine and pulls me into a sitting position so we're face to face and knee to knee as we sit cross-legged. "Well, the good thing is you don't have to. You never did. Labels and shit like that are only as important as you make them. They have their purpose and can make us feel seen or safe, but you don't have to have one if you don't want to. As long as you're living authentically to yourself, that's all that matters."

"Is it bad that I'm sad I didn't get the chance to figure out that answer when I was alive?"

"It's okay to feel sad that you didn't get to live your truth and explore your identity more while you were alive. But that life is behind you. Don't let regret take this step in your self-discovery from you. Here and now, it's just me and you. And if you can accept that you're queer, that you're attracted to me, that you want me, then that's all that matters."

Stasi holds my gaze until I nod my agreement then we fall into a comfortable silence. I let myself observe her with fewer judgments and less fear. She's breathtakingly beautiful. The stars behind her are dull compared to the vibrancy of all that she is.

She's always commanded my attention, but before I saw her lure as a threatening presence. Now I see that she's glitter, making me shine in all the ways I never

imagined possible. The more time I spend with her, the more I learn about myself. The more I become myself.

How is it that the woman I helped condemn to a muddy grave has helped me claw my way out of my own hole? It seems impossible to know so little about someone but need them so badly. She stomped into my life at quite literally, the worst possible time, and we've been thrown together under the worst possible circumstances, but I can't help but feel like she was always meant to be in my life. Maybe she was my fate all along.

Chapter 31

Stasi

95 Days Dead

Since that night, we've been inseparable. Becca and I have made a little nest for just the two of us. It's been easier to get distance from the baggage of our past selves with her staying with me instead of us spending time in the house. It's a honeymoon period where we can pretend that we're new people and that we've been set free from the burdens of our lives.

And it's kind of easy to do when you're dead. There are none of the usual things that make time fly by—no job to clock in at, no weekends to look forward to, and no deadlines to dread. We've lost time playing old games, finishing those huge puzzles that should take the average person months, and getting into her mom's crafts.

But that ease is absent tonight. The energy has shifted in the confines of the guest house. The weight of guilt is oppressive. My ghosts are catching up with me. As if now that I've forgiven her for hiding my body and she's given me hers, the scales are out of balance.

The paper snaps with her facial movements as Becca opens and closes the paper fortune teller until she gets to eight. “Truth.” Becca’s voice pulls me from the maze of indecision that my mind has wandered into. Despite the strides she’s made, that we’ve made, I feel like we can never fully move forward if she doesn’t know the truth. She needs to know who I am—who I really am. This is the perfect opportunity to tell her, yet my tongue is tied in knots like a cherry stem. Unfortunately, the lie of omission that I remain committed to is anything but sweet.

“What do you want to know?” My stomach tenses as I wait to be cornered into another deception. I don’t let on, though, I just keep folding the paper in my hands.

Her rainy-day eyes are almost apologetic, but she asks her question anyway. “How did you know you were . . . not straight?” She refocuses on the notebook in front of her as she doodles.

Buying myself time to reshape the story without her in it, I walk around to the couch, sitting at the far end. It’ll hopefully put enough space between us that she can’t see the guilt in my eyes or taste the dishonesty on my breath. I lay the book my work in progress is taped to against my knees and continue. “It’s like I’ve always known. Not necessarily that I had the language or awareness to actually define it, but I always knew that boys weren’t what held my attention.”

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It wasn't boys, but it wasn't just anyone else either.

It was her, always her, only her.

Summoned from the past are the innocent brushing of hands, late-night whispers from beneath the covers, and bursting laughter that grabbed my attention like popped bubblegum. Part of me—the realest version of me, will always be stuck there—in the times before everything became so complicated. Before the world tried to force us and all of our too-big feelings into some narrow lane they'd designated for our friendship.

“It took me until I was in middle school to fully recognize that I liked girls—a girl. It was simultaneously one of the best and worst things that ever happened to me. Best because my world started to make more sense, like why I was never excited about the new boy in class, why I didn't swoon over everyone with a heartthrob haircut, and why I never accepted their flirtation that was simply manhandling. It dawned on me that I 'wasn't like other girls'. Not in the sense that I was better, but in the way that I was distracted by lush lips coated in candy-flavored lip gloss. Luckily, I also wasn't like other girls my age in that I became very comfortable very quickly with my sexual orientation. Liking girls and other women, was never embarrassing to me. Even when kids made fun of me. Once I knew it, I gladly accepted the clear answer that the label of lesbian gave me.” I spread out the paper on the table, opening the folded triangles so I can write beneath them.

“It sounds like a hard thing, to be queer at such a young age, in a time like that.”

I snort. “Yeah, the early two-thousands were not the best years of my life. I mean it

was technically a crime to be gay in a lot of places up until 2003. Shit, same-sex marriage isn't even legal in all fifty states yet." I abandon my project and pull my knees to my chest trying to stifle the ache that still blossoms there when I think about the years I spent trying to stop the hemorrhaging of my heart. The summer after everything happened was the worst of my life. The transfer to a new school was hard at that age, leaving everything I knew—looking back, it was a rare mercy from my mom that I should have been more grateful for. Starting over wasn't the problem; the thing that had devastated me was losing her. My only friend. The girl I loved—as much as anyone can really understand the concept at the time. But maybe that's what makes first loves hurt so soul-crushing. The fact that you don't fully understand the magnitude of such an emotion. What people get wrong is that they don't think a child can feel love, that they can't understand it, and maybe that second part is accurate, but when you're so young those feelings eclipse everything else, they swallow your world whole. Unfortunately for me, the eclipse never passed. The sun never shone quite the same again. My obsessive love for Becca cast a shadow over me for the rest of my short life. "You know you were always one of us. Queer, I mean." I know I shouldn't go down this road, shouldn't push us closer to the hidden path that leads to my secret, but I can't help myself. I want to hear in her own words what she thinks happened. "Did anyone ever suspect it?"

"Umm . . ." Becca's eyes dart away, guarding her past. At least she has some shame around the whole situation. At least she remembers. Sometimes—with the way she acted around her friends, her refusal to accept this part of her—I feared that I'd somehow imagined it, made it up, created some traumatic past that didn't exist between us. But the memories eat at her now, and she turns that uncomfortable hunger on her nail beds. "Yeah, they did." She takes a seat at the other end of the couch, her notebook forgotten, and mirrors my posture. "There were some girls who accused me of liking—" she coughs, like the rest of her sentence itches on the way up, "a friend in seventh grade." Her brow furrows, features tightening as she searches for the right words. "But I denied it then and I denied it every time anyone insinuated it from that point on. It didn't happen often. I did my best to dispel the rumors."

Even though I already know this from her diaries, the snake of jealousy winds its way around my stomach and throat as a swell of nausea takes hold of me. I don't want to hear this, but I have to. I need answers, I need clarity, I need something to act as a balm over the burns left behind by the implosion of our friendship.

"I did a lot of things, actually." She laughs, but there's no humor present, only bitterness. I wonder, do all the lies she's told herself leave a foul taste in her mouth, too? "One of my biggest regrets is having sex before all my friends. I was so desperate to prove that I was like them, that I liked boys—and I did sometimes—that I was willing to offer up my body as the ultimate evidence." Her teeth briefly sink into the knuckle she's got against her lips. "I thought that if I did it, it would stop the accusations completely. It did for a while, but they always cropped back up. The rumors always waited for me behind thinly veiled smiles of new friends and sneers of those who were eager to put me in my place. You know, I—" She shakes her head at the foolishness of her younger self. "I even told other guys that they could say that they'd slept with me." She heaves a long sigh. "Just so it would look like I was actively pursuing them. It was a good distraction for a bit, but it fell apart quickly when my many short-term boyfriends would get frustrated with my inexperience or unwillingness to sleep with them. Then I became a tease. A challenge. A target." Her arms wrap impossibly tighter around her slender frame, and she lays her head against her knees turning it away from me. "Sometimes when I lay awake at night, I wonder if those choices were the catalyst for everything that led to my death. Was that why Nate sought me out? Were those deceptions and games I played in a desperate attempt to hide the truth, to hide from it, what inevitably made me the perfect victim?" The words are a shaky mess, much like Becca's shivering limbs. "Was it my fault that Nate found me to be easy prey?"

I crawl across the couch without a second thought, knowing nothing but the need to hold her against me. "Nothing you could have done would justify what he did to you." I grip her chin firmly, ensuring she hears me when I say these next five words. "It. Was. Not. Your. Fault."

For several moments, she just shakes her head back and forth over and over. Her lips tucked tight against her teeth, refuting me in a silent damnation of herself. But then it all becomes too much, everything she's been holding in comes pouring out.

"Yes it is. It's all my fault." Her face is sopping wet, her eyes shut against the world as if she can't possibly take in anything more. Her mouth falls open, downturned and devastated on a wail that sends a chill to my bone. And for the first time, it truly pains me to see her crying. I'm finally seeing the depth of the well of sorrow she's been trying to get out of. She's been begging me to see it and I'd snuffed at the deceptively shallow surface.

"No, Becca," I insist forcefully.

"It's my fault that I allowed him to force himself on me. If I hadn't been drinking. If I hadn't isolated myself in that room. I let them do it to me over and over and over again. I was easily kept under their thumb. I helped him bury you in my yard for fuck's sake. I dug that hole for hours. I helped him fill it with dirt. I kept my mouth shut." Becca's voice pitches higher and higher with each condemnation of herself. "It's my fault. It's my fault. It's my fault." Her nails dig into the back of her scalp, chestnut hair gathered between her knuckles.

"Stop, Becca."

She sinks them in further.

"Becca," I warn.

Her fingers shake with the pressure she's applying. "It's my fault." The words are a sickening chant.

"Stop it," I grit through my clenched teeth as my hands snap out, latch around her

wrists, and halt the abuse. “Don’t you fucking dare say that shit again.” With the exhale of the command, I inhale fear that I may push her too far, touching her like this. But I can’t sit here and do nothing. Everything halts. Her sobbing, her devastation, her words. Something about the contact brings our world to a standstill. Our eye contact is soul-deep, like we’re seeing each other for the first time.

With each wrist caged within my fingers, her frailty that I’d overlooked becomes undeniable. While holding these fragile bones that are actually the only parts left of us anywhere but here, I realize how gone both of us really are. The missing beat of our pulses that should be hammering against one another, reminds me that we’re all we have now. There’s no one else to feel our despair, our anger, or our love. There’s no one else to make us scream, or cry, or laugh, or moan. There’s no one left but her and I.

And I will not let her drown in her grief.

“Listen. To. Me.” I bring her balled-up fists against my lips, placing a kiss on each. “You are a survivor.”

She shakes her head vehemently, silent tears falling.

“You didn’t deserve what happened to you. No one does.” I pry her fingers open and kiss her palm, stroking it with my thumb gently as I continue. “You can’t blame yourself for what happened to you. I won’t let you.”

The first rays of defiance break through the cloud of melancholy.

“You are a survivor, Becca. I won’t allow him to take what’s left of you.”

“He’s already taken everything,” she sobs. “I let him take everything. I didn’t die on December 10th. I began dying the moment I started seeing his face in the place my

hopes used to be. When I closed my eyes all I could see were hungry eyes feasting on my skin. When I covered my ears, all I could hear was the ragged breathing of a man chasing a pleasure that didn't belong to him to the haunting beat of flesh on flesh. There was nothing but him, nothing but what they did. I ceased to exist." Becca's hands press against her forehead. "I didn't have a choice but to find a way out. There was nothing else to do. Nowhere else to go. I just needed out of my body." Ragged breathing tears up her words that have become more of the growl of a cornered animal. "I needed out. I needed a new place to call home."

A sob wracks her chest, and I watch as the shell of everything that she's ever been to me caves in. Inside she's hollowed out, her insides scraped clean by those that would devour her.

As if summoned, another leech, our eager entity, looms over us. Its dark form welling, eating up her sorrow. The sight turns my stomach, but I don't have the heart to alarm her. I force it out of my mind, focusing on the only thing that matters right now.

All this time I'd preserved her in my heart as one thing, not seeing the wear and tear that a lifetime took on her. Becca's life was set on fire, and she stayed in that burning house in silent resignation, curtains drawn, detectors disarmed, just her and the toxic fumes and scorching flames. Nobody noticed until the remnants of her too-short life stood in a heap of ash.

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And yet, here she is, so very alive in this place of death. My little ember, still glowing amongst all this darkness. If I have to give her every last breath to rekindle her fire, I'll gladly spend the rest of my eternity doing just that. I can't let her suffer like this anymore, not when I'm right here. Not when I love her in a way that defies space and time. Not when I have forever to heal all the invisible wounds we carry between us.

Tugging her wrists from my grasp, Becca wraps her arms around my neck, crawls into my lap, and presses herself against my chest like she means to crawl inside my skin and hide there. If I could tear myself open and give her a safe place there, I would. If she asked it, I would. Being needed by her, it feels like home. I've resented her throughout the journey, but being with her again, it feels so right, that nothing before matters.

The lingering restlessness that's been clawing at my insides is finally sated, the beast settling into a slumber in a blanket of carnage. But I wouldn't change a thing if it meant we got here.

I cradle one hand behind her head, waiting to wrap my arm around her waist until the brief flare of tension leaves her muscles. "Is this okay?"

Becca nods and tightens her hold on me. I'm prepared to sit here for hours, days, a century if she asks it. This is peace. This is heaven. She's made a believer of me.

"Thank you," she mumbles, avoiding eye contact.

"For what?"

“Listening.”

I duck my head, catching her gaze. “All I want is to know everything about you.”

“I can’t even remember the last time someone asked me how I was. If I was okay.” She laughs shallowly. “Everyone assumes you’re fine if you have good grades, keep up your routines, and slap a smile on your face when they’re looking. I haven’t been okay in a very long time.” A few tears escape, despite her attempt to blink them away. When she goes to wipe them, I interlace our fingers and bring them down to her sides, catching them with my tongue instead. A groan releases from deep within me at the nourishment of her vulnerability and trust. For the first time in my life, I feel satisfied.

97 Days Dead

Contentment fits awkwardly on me, but I think I could get used to it. Especially if Becca continues to look at me like that. Leaning on her elbow, she stares down at me like I’m some renowned painting that she only has one chance to study. With squinted eyes, she surveys the canvas of my body, while her body presses into my side.

“What does the moth represent?” Lithe fingers trace the intricate design that sits high on my stomach just under my breasts.

A heavy sigh, something like relief, leaves me because, for the first time, I’m going to tell someone what it actually represents instead of saying some shit like, “it just looks cool” or “moths are pretty”. I’ll tell her that one truth, it’s the least I can do. Maybe chipping away at the lies that have built a shell around my heart will help me get to a point where I can be honest with her about everything.

I clear my throat. “It’s the antithesis of a butterfly. Butterflies are pretty and likable.”

My eyes flick to the butterflies tattooed on her arm.

“You are pr—”

I cut her off. I know I’m beautiful, I’m not fishing for compliments. There’s a point to all this I want her to hear. “They’re accepted as universally beautiful, I mean. They’re associated with sunny days, bright flowers, and lightness. But the moth, the moth is often overlooked. I wanted to be a butterfly so badly when I was younger, like all the other girls, but I realized eventually that I was more like a moth—their proclivity for the ethereal solitude of night and the way people often seem repulsed by them. Everything changed for me once I accepted that I’d never be a butterfly, but I could be beautiful in my own way. By accepting my body the way it was, and by finding my own way in the solace of my own little world. So, I got the tattoo for my eighteenth birthday.”

Becca hovers over me, the ends of her hair tickling my bare skin. “I’ve never seen you as anything but gorgeous. Kind of intimidating, but never anything less than beautiful.” She smiles and it’s the light I’ve been searching for.

I gravitate toward her, winding her hair around my fingers to pull her even closer.

“Ever since the first time I saw you, I compared you to one of those old paintings—lush, sensual, confident. Stasi, your beauty is one that transcends trends and narrow-minded bullshit.” She caresses the side of my face with the back of her fingers.

The tightness in my throat is uncomfortable. I’m used to people telling me how sexy, voluptuous, and desirable I am, but people rarely use gentle, refined words to describe me. It catches me off guard and sits awkwardly on my tattoo-covered skin. The skin I claimed for myself, made my own so nobody else could define it for me. But as Becca trails kiss after kiss across my collarbones, my chest, and my stomach, I

love that she leaves her mark burning hot at every point of contact.

“And what about this?” Her fingers trail over the script that says “All The Things She Said” across my throat. The scar isn’t there, but I can still sense where Nate cut it. The violent memory sends a shiver through me.

“A reminder,” I say simply.

“Of?”

“That being queer is okay. That just because other people feel the need to hide and be ashamed doesn’t mean I have to. I’m a lesbian; I wanted everyone to know that.” I stroke my fingers through her dark hair. “When I heard the song as a kid and then saw the music video, it utterly captivated me. It transcended me beyond the reality of school bullies and what my parents would think. I just had a visceral reaction to it, like I saw myself there on the screen, and heard myself through my headphones. It was a big part of me accepting who I was. So I enshrined it on my skin. I want that same, in-your-face queerness that that video projected, even if it was all a lie, even if it was a gimmick, it meant something to me.”

“I wish I was as brave as you.” She sighs.

“We all have our own journey,” I assure her, pulling her lips against mine.

Becca’s fingers undo the clasps of my top with ease; she’s getting good at taking what she wants. I brim with pride.

“I’m so glad you’re part of mine,” she says against my lips and I deepen our kiss. “These . . .” Her voice dips lower as she circles one nipple with her fingertip and the other with her tongue. “I think these might be my favorites.”

The nipple piercings were mostly aesthetic, but they were also another way to claim this body of mine. I felt like boys and men always focused so much on my large breasts—they'd sexualized me against my will. Adorning my breasts in a way that made me feel like a work of art was a way to de-center the male gaze while further individualizing myself. "I do too. But I love when they're covered with your mouth even better."

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Instead of ecstasy, I feel panic as her hand skates down my thighs, heading for those bows I don't want to explain right now. Not in this moment when everything feels so right and like our stars have finally aligned. I use my considerably heavier weight to my advantage and flip us so I'm on top. Raising one arm above her head, I lean down for a kiss, capturing her sweet lips in mine and teasing her with my tongue. I love how she seeks out the piercing—one of the lasting reminders of my devotion to Aphrodite. I can't help but wonder if she'd be proud.

But I don't let myself get lost in the moment. Pulling back, I disentangle our fingers and allow mine to caress her leg, following the winding vine, and eventually stopping at the top of her thigh. "Your turn. What does this tattoo mean?"

Becca laughs nervously. "Nothing. It's just pretty."

"Fair." I kiss her skin, attempting to chase away the embarrassment that has her pulling back into herself. I stroke my thumb over the four butterflies she has tattooed just above her inner elbow. "What about these?"

"We got them for my last birthday—my friends and me. The butterflies represent the four of us. We used to call ourselves the 'core four'. I know it's silly," she laughs, embarrassed. "It was supposed to be symbolic of our enduring friendship. Butterflies have always been my favorite, and since it was my birthday, we thought it was fitting." She sighs and looks away. "That was before our relationships became more complicated."

Stroking the tattoo again, I resist the urge to refute her. Friendship isn't something I really understand. It's something I never got the chance to further explore after she

was done with me. I couldn't allow it. That kind of hurt is something you only need to experience once. I've heard from others that friendship breakups are some of the most life-changing, but what about when you're in love with that friend? I'd never been willing to risk finding out whether it would be a pattern I would fall into. Although, I'd never felt anything remotely similar to the draw I have to Becca. Nothing has ever compared, not even close. She's been my one and only. Maybe I'm not even capable of loving anyone else; I certainly never gave myself or another person the chance to find out. Doesn't matter now.

I've only ever had eyes for Becca.

I've only ever had space in my heart for her.

There was always only one outcome—Becca was always going to be mine. But I can't deny that there's a spark of jealousy about Meg being permanently inked into her skin, while I'm not.

"Did you love her? Meg?" The resentful words escape me before I have the chance to bite them back or reshape them into something less sharp.

"As a friend, yes. As something more? No." Becca rubs a hand over the cluster of tattoos. "She's an amazing person. I just never thought of her that way. Never even crossed my mind until... until she confessed everything to me. I hated that I had to disappoint her." Running a hand through her hair, she attempts to dispel the uncertainty that clings to her around the situation. "Does it even matter, now?"

Yes. "No." I press my thumb between her lips, rolling it around her seeking tongue that winds around it, then bring it to my clit. "From now on, you're mine." The words trail off in a moan as she slides her hands up my thighs and pushes up my skirt, giving herself a better view. I want her to claim me as hers, too. But seeing her become more comfortable with touching me is a big step. "I don't care if there was

ever anyone else.” I suck the last syllables between my teeth with a hiss. “From here on out, you’re mine.” A groan escapes me with her responding squeeze. The craving for her to mimic the words turns my stomach, but my appetite for commitment is too big for where she’s at right now. Knowing that she wants me. That she’s willing to admit she wants me has to be enough.

And yet, instinctively, my tattooed hand collars her slender throat, the thorns and roses perfectly encapsulating our dynamic. The look of surprise on her face is almost as satisfying as the way her hips press up into mine. Her body and mind always seem to be at war. I wonder if she has a preference. Would she accept my rougher tendencies? My grip firms, the metal of her necklaces digging into my skin. Her brows furrow over questioning eyes and she wraps her fingers around my wrist, stroking the side of it.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No,” she says slowly, like she’s surprised by it.

“Good; I can’t give you soft. I don’t know soft.”

“Why not?” The question is light with curiosity as she continues to brush her thumb over my wrist.

“Nobody treats fat girls with softness.” My words become shallow. My chest scraped out hollow with unexpected vulnerability. “Softness meant digs and cuts and bruises.” She returns her hands to my legs, gliding them upward and moving in slow circles. The tender touch makes the words flow from my lips without thought. “Instead of getting ripped apart, I became hard, untouchable. Perfect hair, pretty makeup, the right clothing—my armor. Sharp tongue, intimidating persona, casual sex—my weapon. I was unfuckingbreakable.” I suck in a breath when she grips my love handles, her hands fitting just so. “But I was fake. At least until I found

Aphrodite. She helped me find the real me.”

The truth of those words doesn't register until sympathy rises in her eyes. Her gaze moves over me like a cold sweat and regretswells in my throat. I search for a way to retract that statement. To make myself seem just a bit less pathetic. But when Becca's hands begin to rove over me, it's a touch of feathers and silk that lulls me into stillness as I feel, soothing, worshipping, smooth palms and appreciative fingers exploring me. She works her way over every inch within reach—my shoulders, my arms, my sides, my ass—everywhere except the parts of me that most people would fixate on. I feel like a luxury being sipped slowly as she takes her sweet time kissing, sucking, licking, and tasting her way over my skin that's becoming increasingly sensitive. Even without any purposely sexual stimulation, I'm dripping.

It's impossible to know how much time has passed, but it's been a while judging by the way my thighs burn as I hover over her lap. Everything she does drives my need higher and higher. The moment she touches my pussy, I'm going to come.

Her tongue is like velvet as it flicks lightly against my nipple, coaxing it to harden. Cashmere lips kiss the arching tip causing my back to strain and brush it across her mouth. When she refuses to take the bait, I slip a hand in her hair and thrust them forward. “Suck,” I demand as I cradle her head, but she's rigid beneath my touch. My stomach is in my throat and chills skate down my spine as she remains silent and presses her fingers to the birthmark on my side, the one that's usually tucked beneath my rolls in most positions.

“What is that?” The flat tone of Becca's voice scares me. I didn't know I could be afraid anymore; what's worse than death?

“Becca—”

She jumps up, forcing me from her lap, and staggers back. Anger brackets her

willowy body but she's silent, her mouth covered with her fist.

Oh fuck. She knows. I was going to tell her just not like this.

Chapter 32

Becca

59 Days Dead

"Becca, listen to me." Stasi stands slowly, moving quietly as if I might sprint away like a terrified rabbit. But I have no intention of running, I intend to get the answers I'm owed—as soon as I put my thoughts back together. I need a second to pick up the pieces of the shattered facade of safety she'd lulled me into—that we'd just instilled in each other.

"This whole time," my voice cracks, "this whole time I thought that familiar feeling I had with you was telling me that this is right, that this is what I always needed, that we belonged together." I scoff. I see now that that was a completely absurd notion. "But no, it's just that you're a liar. You tricked me, Anastasia." I bite out her name, teeth tipped with poison that I hope attacks her sanity. Some of those comments Nate and his friends used to leave interrupt my train of thought. Such a naive little girl. Just a useless slut, only worth what's between your legs. I clap my hands over my ears trying to shut out the voices that insist on playing on a loop.

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“I didn’t.” Another step forward and I take another step back.

“I should have known that someone like you was incapable of something real. All you are is a web of lies wrapped up in a pretty package, but on the inside, you’re empty and rotten.” The words are meant to burn her, but they blister my throat on the way up.

“That’s not fair. I shouldn’t have lied. I should have been honest with you the first opportunity I had, but things between us, they’re complicated. I wanted to tell you, before all of this. That’s why I was here in the first place, before—” Her eyes glaze with a death shroud, the memories of that night haunting her too. “Before Nate killed me, I’d intended on confessing everything to you. That night I’d come to tell you who I was; to tell you I’d come back for you; to make you see that we belong together.” The desperation in her voice is uncharacteristic and unsettling but I continue building up the walls around myself, making them sturdy and tall.

“No. No, we don’t. I’ve been in denial, so caught up in the honeymoon escape of it all, but things keep happening to push us apart.”

“Please, Becca. Give me a chance to explain.” She reaches out, but I swat her hand away despite the way every inch of me yearns for her.

Once again, my body and mind are at odds, but the roles have reversed.

“You don’t get to touch me.” Will her hands—her velvet-soft, tattoo-covered hands—become repulsive like theirs? Will the memory of her touch become invasive and nausea-inducing, too? “All this time. You had all this time to be honest with me.

How could you pretend we didn't know each other this whole time?"

"I wasn't pretending. We don't know each other, not anymore. I'm not that little girl who let you break her heart. We're not those kids."

"You know what I mean goddammit. We have a history and that history matters. Or it could have." I attempt to contain the sob that rumbles like thunder in my chest. "So, what, you stalked me for how long and you didn't learn a damn thing about me? Are you disappointed in what you've found? Did you think you were going to find that perfect little doll you preserved in that twisted mind of yours? Sorry to break it to you, but I'm not your little plaything, Anastasia." Her full name on my tongue, wrapped in all that venom awakens something deep within me—a grief I thought I'd said goodbye to a long time ago. But that chasm she left behind is deep and dark and full of regrets that I convinced myself were too far in the past to lose sleep over anymore.

But here she is, my deepest secret, my unrelenting conscience, my nightmare. She's the skeleton in my closet, the thing that goes bump in the night, the woman I've been terrified of seeing when I look too long in the mirror.

"I know. I know you're more than that. You're everything to me."

"We're nothing!" I yell, because keeping her away is the only thing that makes sense.

"Don't you dare do that. You can be angry with me. You can lash out at me. But you can't lie to me. If that makes me a fucking hypocrite, then so be it. But I won't have it." Stasi's body crowds mine, forcing me back against the wall. My traitorous hips arch against hers, twitching with the need to be wrapped around her. I already miss the comfort of being held by her, even if it was a false sense of security. Like a treehouse that couldn't survive a rainstorm.

I lean closer to her, wrapping two strands of her platinum and pink hair around my fingers as I bring my lips to her ear. “Everything between us was a lie built on betrayal, manipulation, and death. It never could have been real. It’ll never be anything.”

“Why can’t things be like they used to be?” Stasi whispers against my hair.

“The world changed us. The Anastasia I knew never would have lied to get what she wanted. She never would have hurt me, even if she had reason to. You’re nothing like you once were.”

“You’re right. But I’m not the only one who’s undergone a personality transplant.” Her nails scrape against the wall on either side of my head. “But what if I’m in love with this version of you, despite how much you’ve changed.”

“If you loved me, then you wouldn’t have lied to me.” My voice cracks as I slap my hand against my chest.

Stasi rests her head against the crook of my shoulder. “I want to start over. I want to know all of you, the woman you are now, not the girl you used to be.”

“You’re not listening. You’re so caught up in this goddamned fantasy. You’re so obsessed, that you’ve convinced yourself that you can put the broken pieces of our friendship back together. Maybe there’s a reason those best friend necklaces—the ones like we had—are always broken in half.”

A sardonic laugh leaves her. “Or maybe they were meant to be reshaped, turned into something new over time,” Stasi says cryptically as she takes a few steps back.

“What the hell are you even talking about?”

“This piercing,” she says as her fingers slide over her bare cunt. “Was made from my half of the necklace.”

It takes me a few moments to piece together her meaning. Surely, she can’t mean that she kept it and turned it into the jewelry that adorns the most intimate part of her body. Surely, she’s not that obsessed with me. But when our eyes meet again, hers delirious, mine seeing more clearly, she’s closing the distance between us, and there’s something between her two fingers catching the light. “Stasi, stop.” It’s useless, my back is already against the wall.

“Open up,” she demands as she grabs my cheeks and slips two fingers into my mouth. “Broken or not, Becca, we’re engrained in each other, we’re part of each other.” The sensual taste of her blossoms across my tongue before the sharpness of metal. By then, she’s closed my mouth—her hand caging my lips, her thumb pressing the center of my throat, triggering me to swallow against my will. “There’s no more fucking denying it.”

Whipping my head back and forth, I free myself from her grip, but the deed is already done. Some piece of her, of us, lives inside me now.

“What is wrong with you?” I spit at her. “You’re out of your goddamn mind!” I wave my hand at her lower half. She made me eat a piercing. A piercing.

Stasi has the audacity to smile and shrug. “Maybe I am. Is that such a terrible thing? To be madly in love with you?”

“That’s not okay. That’s not love, that’s not even friendship. Stasi, I’m not good for you. And you certainly aren’t good for me.” I turn away from her, afraid I might break if I have to look at her while everything falls apart.

“That’s just not true.”

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“You say you care about me, but you were still lying to me up until a few minutes ago. You’d still be lying to me if I hadn’t figured it out for myself. I mean, were you ever going to tell me?”

“Yes! Of course.” She approaches me, leaving a few inches between us.

“When? At what point would have been a good time to give me that essential truth about yourself?”

“When the time was right,” she insists loudly like it makes perfect sense.

“See that’s my point. You didn’t plan to.” I chew on my inner cheek. “I gave you all the hidden parts of myself. What else could I have given you that would have made me worthy of that information?”

“You were always worthy.” I can feel the conviction against my neck as she draws closer.

I should be reaffirming that this isn’t how you treat someone you care about, but those words. Those words. They crumble my defense; they’re exactly what I’ve always needed to hear. A tear of relief falls down my cheek. But worse, is the throbbing ache between my legs.

“Maybe I’m obsessed with you, but at least I can look myself in the mirror. At least I know I can admit that. At least I know what I want. You’re a fucking mess. And I’m okay with that. But go ahead. Deny it.” Revulsion and temptation mount as she comes closer. “I know the truth.” Stasi’s hands are confident as they tug my shorts

over my narrow hips.

My tears multiply. No one has ever given me an inch to deviate from the pinnacle of perfection. She's giving me space to mess up, but it's contingent on me allowing the same for her. I don't know if I can accept that. The truth she sees so clearly gnaws at my insides, like a rat caught in a heated bucket. I squirm as I drip between my thighs. Instead of objecting, a whimper escapes me as she runs her finger over my wet panties.

"You're mine, Becca." Leaning over my shoulder, she sweeps her tongue up my cheek, catching my tears and tasting the purest version of me. "A crybaby. A mess. A forgotten ember desperately waiting for someone to come along and spark you into a vibrant flame." That vulnerability snaps something within me and I spin in her arms. "I want nothing more than to burn it all down with you. Let's raze your stifling cage to the ground. Let's leave our past in a blaze behind us."

Closing my eyes against the destructive picture she's painting, I count to three as I fight to find my sensibility. "Anastasia, you need to let me go. This isn't healthy. This isn't how you start a future with someone. This isn't okay and this certainly isn't love. I'm done." When she doesn't move of her own volition, I open up the heated space between us with a hand on her chest. Stunned, she doesn't react. "Do us both a favor and stay away from me. I don't want this. I don't want your lies. I don't want you."

And just like that, the guillotine falls on the peace we'd found, severing the head of our blossoming relationship.

Chapter 33

Stasi

98 Days Dead

Turns out rotting comes naturally when you're dead. The hours and days slip by. Time ceases to hold meaning without someone to share it with.

Done. The finality of it inhabits the air around me. The echoes of it mock me as I remain here in solitary confinement. The only disruption from the isolating torment is when the relentless entity tries to provoke me—the twisting of a door handle, a knock on the window, my name in her voice. Is this my payback for how I terrorized Becca? It effectively unnerves me as it looms over me, gorging itself on my misery.

If I didn't have the energy necessary to banish it before, I certainly don't now. I don't even care. I force myself to look into its depthless void, acclimating myself to the bleakness of my future. With my little ember gone, this world is cold and desolate. More so than I ever could have imagined. It turns out hell isn't fire, heat, and screaming—that's what made me feel so alive. It's actually the void of anything—quiet, empty, and alone. It's the absence of her.

An anxious need urges me to go to her, but the rational part of my brain, the one that understands her on a cellular level, begs me not to push her any further. She's not ready to hear me out, her anger is too fresh, her mind too clouded with uncertainty. Becca is someone who requires stability and level-headedness—I have none of that to offer her right now.

My endless desire for her has forced me to relive everything from the first fuck to the last fight we had, and I take greedy gulps of air that I know have been poisoned by my own poor choices. Like always when it comes to her, there is no healthy boundary for me, no sense of self-preservation.

I slump into the mattress, scraping my long nails against my scalp, tugging at my hair, trying to release some of this mounting hysteria. My scalp tingles, but it's not

enough. The frenzy of need requires a physical release. It exorcizes itself with a scream that tears from my throat. The black mass swells above me, eagerly consuming my misery; I can't help but indulge it.

She was so certain that we can't be together. Those old wounds burst open at the first hit leaving me raw and tender. I tried to stitch them up with my own convictions, but she kept slashing and burying her axe of denial deep within me. Her last words cut so deeply; leaving me flayed and bloody.

Maybe I should just let myself rot, maybe that's the fate that was meant for me. It's what she decided to leave me to once. She probably wouldn't care if that's what happens now. Without her, I don't either.

99 Days Dead

Becca hasn't made a single attempt to see me. I haven't even caught a glimpse of her watching her parents in the kitchen. There haven't even been any longing looks out the window.

I'm trying my best to respect the boundary she's set. It's not easy when every bit of my soul urges me to go to her. But I'm hoping that showing some restraint and giving her time to be upset in private, will increase the likelihood that she'll come back to me. When I go to sit on the roof, I don't take the long way around to pass by her window like I used to. I don't use the yard, no provocative displays this time around. I don't plug in the old, corded phone and harass her with landline calls—not that she'd be able to answer now that she's dead too. She doesn't even have a cell phone.

My old stalking ways aren't even a coping mechanism I can rely on these days. There are no new social media posts for me to continue going back to without ever liking.

For the first time, her presence is truly gone from my life.

It leaves me wondering, who am I without her? Is that something I will have to figure out? Becca was always going to be mine. And now I may have lost her for good.

That thought could send me over the edge, could shatter any semblance of mental stability that I've managed to cling to for this long. I can't let that happen. What if she comes back? What if she decides I'm worth the trouble?

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That will never happen. The defeated voice that's recently taken up lease in my mind chimes in.

What I need is a distraction from this soul-sucking void that's had me in a chokehold for the last few days.

But what do you do with yourself when your heart is broken and you've been left to suffer alone? It's too bad they don't have one of those Handbooks for the Recently Deceased like they did in *Beetlejuice*.

Unfortunately, all I have is a bunch of useless junk at my disposal—toys, games, crafts—that I've looked through a dozen times. But I guess like they say, beggars can't be choosers, so I do the best I can with what I've got.

What I come up with is as pathetic as I expected, possibly more so. I pick up my old friend, the Magic 8 Ball. If I'd ever thought I was a loser before I met Becca, she's made me into something so much more pathetic than I ever could have imagined.

"Is Becca going to forgive me soon?" I give the ball a shake and force myself to turn it over. Outlook not so good.

"Oh, come on." I lay back on the floor and hold it firmly between both hands, then give it a harsh shake. "Will Becca ever forgive me?"

Ask again later. Cryptic. Lovely.

"What do you even know? You're just a mass-manufactured piece of plastic. I roll it

away from me and send it a glare when it hits the mirrored closet with a resounding thwack. I guess I should be glad it didn't crack it. The last thing I need is a bout of bad luck.

Am I really going to let a Magic 8 Ball keep me from trying to fix things with her? No. No, I'm not. But I need to figure out a way to get her to give me a chance.

Chapter 34

Becca

61 Days Dead

Her secret was a slicing blow that I never could have prepared for.

It's bled me out and left me limp. There's nothing without her now that I know how it can be when she's everything.

And just like that, the sliver of sunlight I'd found in the long night of the afterlife has been swallowed up, pitching me into a darkness that I thought I'd escaped. Finding myself back here, in the bleakness of a new loss is terrifying. The brutal betrayal of her lie shatters every bone. It tears open my skin and splatters my insides all over the damn place. She's wrecked me. All the fragile bits she'd started to mend, have gone to pieces.

It's not that I don't understand her anger, it's that I can't comprehend keeping such a vital secret while being so intimate. Just the thought is violating all over again.

I hate her for it. Anastasia. I hate her for the sense of safety she lulled me into. I hate her for unlocking the hardest-to-reach places inside myself that were poisoning me from the inside-out. I hate that she's made herself a comfort. Without her, this bed is

large and empty. Without the heat of her gaze, this world is too damn cold.

I hate her most because I still want her. My skin burns with the need to feel her touch. To settle the way my hair stands on end in a lingering state of fear. To chase away the memories of unwanted touches that still grab and pull at me when my mind is left to its own devices.

Once again, I yearn for the dark and quiet of death that I was robbed of. I can't keep hurting, and hurting, and hurting, and hurting. At what point will I know peace? It continues to evade me no matter what I do, no matter how perfect I try to be.

I've hit low points in my lifetime, been to the depths of hell the night of my birthday, was dragged across the coals with Nate, Rob, and Richard, and fell into an abyss of pain when I had to witness the aftermath of my suicide.

Despite everything I've been through, it's Stasi's betrayal that keeps me up night after night and steals all of my energy day after day. The fact that she kept such a big secret from me, that she lied to my face every single day, should deter me from wanting anything from her. And yet, she's all I think about. Yes, with anger, and sadness. But also with a profound longing.

My entire life, I thought that being the best at everything, having my life together, appearing to be the smartest, and ensuring I was pleasant to be around, someone who is described as easy, reliable, and independent, was what would fulfill me. Like once I was truly all of those things, once I reached some undetermined level of perfection, then I would be happy.

But the happiest I've ever been is lying next to her, having her hand in mine, letting her tongue and fingers inside me. The happiest I've ever been is being anything but easy. Stasi is a lot of things and has done a lot of things, but she never expected or required me to be quiet, small, or docile. If anything, she encouraged me to take up

space, to make my flaws and discontent known. She was the one patiently helping me stitch back together the mangled pieces and tattered parts of me. Her adoration flipped the switch that made me come alive again.

But she also lied to me. Her obsession with us being together clouded her judgment. She didn't stop to think about how her actions would impact anyone else, how they could rip me apart.

I was never whole to begin with though.

I've always been searching for something. You were always worthy. Her proclamation soothes the restless overachiever but provokes the romantic in me. How can she say that when she withheld so much? If she'd just given me half the trust I showed her, she would have realized that I have so many regrets about how things ended between us. I would have jumped at the chance to get my best friend back.

Would you? It's Stasi's—Anastasia's—voice calling me out. She's even inserted herself in my inner monologue.

With nothing but my own misery for company, I find myself facing more and more of those unpleasant childhood experiences. Like how I distanced myself from Ana. It started as a way to mitigate my own hurt and shame but developed into something so much more sinister. I didn't just let our friendship fizzle out, I up and left her. Texts gone unanswered, calls left to ring through voicemail, logging off when she logged on instant messenger—not caring that she'd hear that slamming door—and then ignoring her at school. The worst of it though is something I'd refused to admit to myself for so long.

Aiden had done me another favor by giving me his yearbook, which he thought was a kindness. But while everyone thought I was the sweet one, he was really the twin with the better heart. He'd gifted me a piece of gossip that I was supposed to use as a

bargaining chip to keep the popular girls off my back. It was meant to buy me some peace. Instead, I'd used it as a golden ticket—an escape from the worst of the torment—one that would secure me a spot in their circle while Ana was left to fend for herself. It was rotten, selfish, and an absolute fucking betrayal of everything we had. No wonder she'd wanted me to suffer.

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And therein lies the problem, the rotted floorboards we've tried to build on top of. How is there any fixing it when the very core of our relationship is poisoned? When something's bad from the start, you tear it out, straight from the root. That's what I need to do. Tear Stasi out at the root. Get her out of my system, forget her, move on, start fresh, and figure out a way forward without her.

Without her.

Alone.

A simple word, but one that sinks right into my core and guts me in one fell swoop.

Squeaking hinges interrupt my spiraling and my stomach twists with relief only to drop into a deeper pit of despair. My mom closes the door and grabs my robe from the hook there. Bringing it to her nose, she takes a deep inhale. Her exhale is a tormented sob that rips through me, tearing through the curtain of resolve I've put up between myself and them. She staggers to the bed and collapses against my pillows, right next to me. It's like I can feel the life thrumming off of her in the panting of her breath and her shaking limbs. Watching my mom fall apart stirs up regret and longing that I've been trying so hard to drown out. My body aches with the strain of every atom of my being trying to reach across the veil and clutch onto her.

"Mom," I whisper because I know it doesn't matter if I scream. "Mom, I'm sorry I did this to us." Even though she can't feel it and it makes no difference, I reach out and stroke at the tears that coat her cheeks. "I never would have hurt you like this if I could have seen clearly through my own pain. All there was for miles and miles was what appeared to be an endless sea of monsters lingering in the dark. I wasn't strong

enough to keep fighting. I was so tired, Mama.” I tuck my head against her chest, forcing her to hold me close. I ignore her responding shiver. “I didn’t mean to lead you into the darkness, too. I didn’t think about you at all. I hope one day you can forgive me for that. I can’t bear the thought of you suffering forever.” A snuffle interrupts me. “You were a good mom. You didn’t deserve this kind of pain. I know I was your whole life, but I don’t want to be anymore. I need you to let me go.”

But she doesn’t leave. And I don’t have it in me to be the one to walk out that door just yet, so I close my eyes and simply enjoy the melody of her breathing, steady and slow, as she drifts into sleep. In each even breath, I can hear an echo of those lullabies she used to sing. Letting it transport me to another place, I sink into the comfort of my mother just this one more time.

By the time I open my eyes again, the sun is setting, casting my room in a sherbet glow that only brightens my mom’s smile. In her hand is one of the old photo albums I keep under my bed. This is one of the oldest, filled with pictures of me and Aiden where there are big gaps in our smiles and fewer differences between us. Years of family vacations—road trips to Vegas for the weekend, visits with our grandparents, and days at amusement parks—cover page after page as we travel through elementary and middle school. And that’s where I find Ana looking back at us, her soft round face hard to equate with the severe angles she favors with her makeup now. Instead of platinum and pink, dirty blond waves fall to her shoulders. It’s not easy to reconcile the two people. She’s changed so much, but in her eyes, the warm whiskey brown, I see the truth of it. Her gaze fixed on me in adoration instead of on the camera.

I missed so much.

But I guess that’s easy to do when you don’t want to see. To be fair to myself, I was just a child. But now...now I have a choice to make. Do I look away and shove her out of my life, or do I give us a real chance?

The words tumble from my mouth before I really think much of it, habit and instinct taking over. “It finally happened, Mom. I think I’m experiencing my first love. My last love? My only love? It’s complicated, but it’s just as painful as everyone says. Two times over, actually.” I scoot closer to her. “Do you remember Anastasia?” I laugh at myself. “Of course, you remember Ana. You used to ask me about her so much.” I swallow around the painful memory. “We found each other again. Would you believe it? Well, she found me. It’s actually kind of creepy...but also, romantic?” It’s romantic, isn’t it? I chew at the side of my finger. “Even though I was so lost, she came into that darkness for me. She was trying to protect me from Nate, that’s why he killed her.” Sitting up, I wrap my arms around my knees that I hug to my chest. “She came to set me free.” And suddenly all of the days of those childhood fantasies they try to sell us about the princess and the knight make so much more sense. But mine didn’t just try to save me from a dragon, she was trying to save me from myself. And just as I build up the fantasy in my head, I remind myself that she wanted something from me too. She hurt me, too. She set me free, but when she was breaking down those walls, I became collateral damage. “I think I love her. But she hurt me.” My wet cheek presses into the jutting bone of my knee. “She lied to me. She tricked me. At one point, she used me. That can’t be how you love someone. It’s not right. It doesn’t make sense.” Staring into my mother’s stormy grey eyes, I search for answers. But she can’t give them to me anymore.

I don’t need her to, because in the void of emptiness, there is only one thing that rings true: I love her. I love her for who she was to me, that matters, but for better or worse, I love her for who she is to me. For who she’s helped me become.

I need to tell her.

With purpose, I hop up from the bed, not even thinking about my mother sleeping there. But even though I’ve passed, her motherly instincts didn’t die. She sits up, eyes glued to the spot I was just residing in.

“Becca?” It’s hushed in disbelief, but the next time she says it her voice holds conviction. “Becca, sweetie? Is that you?” Her hand pats frantically across the empty space beside her. “Chris!” Her breaths are short as her eyes scan the area for any other signs. I remain still as stone. The need to call out to her crawls up my throat, sharp and desperate. But I refuse to feed into that hope. I can’t prolong her torment when I don’t know what my future holds. The restraint it takes has me shaking, but thankfully my dad is at her side holding her steady. Being the rock he’s always been for all of us. His arms lock around her waist as he whispers soothing words into her ear.

“No, Chris. No, she’s here. I can feel her. I told you. She was just here.” Her finger juts sharply to the bed repeatedly. “Becca was right there next to me. Becca is here now. Can’t you smell it?”

“Smell what, Erin? The dust. The lingering hint of our daughter’s fruity perfume?”

“No, past that. Can’t you smell the peach?” She turns in his arms, pleading with him to try harder. “Her hair. Can’t you smell it? Sweet. Soft. Her.”

My dad’s mouth opens and closes. He wants to understand, but he’s too in love with her to lie to her. Something I’ve always respected, but it fails to impress my mother, and she tears from his embrace. Bolting through the door, she’s back in seconds with my shampoo bottle in her hand.

“For Christ’s sake, Erin. Why do you still have that? We agreed.” My dad swipes a hand over his face.

“Breathe in deeply.” My mom waves her arm across the room, and her stare doesn’t leave him until he does so. “It’s. Her.” She flips the cap and presses it under my dad’s nose. “But much fainter, right?”

His cheeks hollow as water rises in his eyes. “Honey...” She bats away his hands as they reach for her.

“I know. A mother knows,” she insists, a punch to the gut that tears out my insides. “I know, Becca is here. I’m going to prove it.”

And then it’s just me and my dad as he takes a seat on the edge of my bed and hangs his head in his hands. The moment catches up to him, his breathing losing that even keel he maintained for her. “We miss you sweetie, but I can’t keep doing this.” He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes as he does. “I love you. I hope you’re not still here. For your sake and your mom’s. She’s slipping away from me, but I won’t lose her, too.” His hand covers his mouth but not before I watch his lips quiver with unsteady resolve. “Forgive me, Becca. I hope you’ve found the peace you were looking for.”

It’s another death realizing how badly my parents need me to stop haunting them. My mom and dad were always there when I needed them—at least when I gave them the chance to be. I wish it could have been enough to keep me safe from the rest of the world; I wish it would have been enough to keep me from self-destructing. There was nothing else they could do, but there is something I can still do for them—I can let them go.

Chapter 35

Stasi

99 Days Dead

What’s that proverb? If you love it, let it go. If it comes back, it’s yours and that’s how you know. Unfortunately, that’s just not my style. I could give her more than twenty-four hours to respond, but one day already feels like a week. Restlessness is

my constant companion—that and the darkness that's become parasitic, rarely leaving my side—scaring away rational thoughts and patience.

My hands yearn for productivity, so I grab the box of gel pens tucked into one of the cubbies and a piece of plain printer paper. I don't have a plan when I start but I easily fall into the old habit of folding, licking, and tearing it so it's a square—or close enough to it—then proceed to fold it into a series of triangles. On the outer triangles, I write the numbers and colors. On the inner ones, I use my purple gel pen to write the same thing over and over: Forgive Stasi.

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I'm only giving her one choice.

Immature? Maybe a little. Irresistible? I hope so. I'm relying on the nostalgia of it if nothing else. Despite all the effort she's put into forgetting our past, surely she'd remember that. She has to see that the part of my younger self that was her best friend, who loved her, is still here. We can't go back in time and undo all the damage, but we can give those girls the ending they deserved.

I know that it will require more than a childish tug on her heartstrings to fix things, so with that same gel pen, I'm determined to pour everything that's on my mind into a letter.

Staring down at the blank page, hope and dread fill me in equal measure, so I do what I usually would in these situations.

"Gentle Aphrodite, if you can hear me, I offer this piece of poetry as tribute for my petition." Clearing my throat, I recall the lines I've read dozens of times. "Come to me once again and release me from grueling anxiety. All that my heart longs for, fulfill. And be yourself my ally in love's battle."

-Whom should I persuade (now again) to lead you back into my love-

Becca,

I'm sorry.

I know you don't want to talk to me, but I need you to hear me. I've held onto this

secret and all this pain for too long just to drop it now that it's out there. I know that you're angry and you have every right to be, but please just read this letter. You can tear it up and set it on fire when you're done; I don't care. The truth, all of it, just needs to be out there.

I didn't set off down a path of destruction but that's where the fork in the road brought us. I'm sorry for a lot of things, including lying to you and manipulating you. But I can't be sorry for where it all got us. I refuse to apologize for that. Because if I'd made different choices, I wouldn't be here with you. You'd be all alone. And I can't bear that thought. We've ended up right where we're supposed to be. You'll see.

Until then, I'll give you the truth you've asked for.

I can still remember the moment that pivoted me back into your axis. I was just scrolling and then there you were—older than the last time I'd looked you up, different but still familiar. It started with just looking at your profile, but then I saw you in that university sweatshirt. And it was like a bright, neon sign telling me exactly where I needed to be.

So, I applied, and luckily, I was accepted as a transfer student. It took a few weeks, but finally, I spotted you on campus. With careful observation, I learned your schedule, started sitting in on a few of your classes, listening to conversations with your friends, and sitting outside your house. The more I watched you, the more I needed you. You consumed my every thought. You became everything again. I tried to find a way to organically insert myself into your life. I considered a lot of things, like seducing Meg or becoming friends, but none of that would do.

With the help of Lady Aphrodite, I found my in, your birthday party. It was a perfect opportunity—easy to blend in but it allowed me to get close to you without raising suspicion. I just wanted to be around you again. I just wanted a chance to show you

how I could love you.

I never intended for either of us to end up dead. I thought I could convince you that I was worth taking a risk on once I told you who I was. Once you realized that there was a reason for our undeniable chemistry when we kissed, it would show you that I was worth coming out of the closet for, that I was worth living authentically for.

I was supposed to set us both free. But then Nate got in the way. I wanted to tell you the truth all along. God all I wanted was for you to see me, to recognize me, to accept me in the way you couldn't when we were kids. But that chance was taken from me.

I won't let that happen again. I might have made a mistake, but I'll spend my eternity trying to fix it. I never gave up on you, and I won't now.

I believe in us. Can you?

Circle One:

Warmer, Colder

With the little makeshift fortune teller in hand, I march confidently to Becca's window, only lingering for a minute to admire her before quietly slipping both papers through the open window.

Now all there is to do is wait.

"I was told I have to forgive you," Becca says, holding the fortune teller between her fingers as she sits on the bench next to me.

"Well, it is bad luck to ignore what fate tells you," I say with a relieved laugh. My center of gravity is righted with her closeness, her leg resting against mine and her

head on my shoulder. The immense dread and regret I'd been carrying melts away.

Becca lets out a long sigh, a release of her own. "How can you love me? Her eyes are pleading with me to help her understand. "I need to know how you can be with someone who's been the source of so much pain."

"It isn't a choice, it's part of who I am. There is no can. There is no want. There's only this tether buried deep inside me that's dragged me through life kicking and screaming right behind you."

"That doesn't sound healthy."

"Healthy is subjective."

That earns a laugh from her, but she sobers quickly. "I mean it. You love me so wholly, with so much conviction. What if I can't give you everything you need?" Fidgeting, she toys with the frayed edges of her shorts. "What if I disappoint you?"

"Is that what this is about? Your fear of failure?" I turn to straddle her and grab her chin. "You insist that I don't know who you are, but Becca, I've seen the darkest parts of you, and I still love you. There's never been a moment that I haven't loved you, even when I hated you."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:28 pm

“I love you, too. But what if it isn’t enough?” The real question, ‘what if I’m not enough’, is silent, but I don’t miss it.

“Loving me is enough.” Stroking her cheek with the back of my hand, I lose myself in those vast ocean eyes that promise the world. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted. My entire life I’ve always been too much. Too opinionated. Too loud. Too big. Too myself. Most people don’t have it in themselves to accept me, let alone love me. All I need is for you to choose me.” I kiss her palm. “I need you to choose me, and not because we’re the only two people left in each other’s lives, but because you can’t imagine a single day of existence without me by your side.”

Becca attempts to speak but I continue before I lose the will to be vulnerable. “I need you to choose me because it’s never been a choice for me; it’s always been you. It was you the day you decided you didn’t care that I’d been labeled as the weird girl. It was you every time you called me beautiful and meant it. It was you even when you iced me out of your life. It was still you when you watched Nate slit my throat. It’s you, it’s you, it’s always you.” My thoughts run a mile a minute, all the feelings I’ve had to keep bottled for so long spilling out. “And goddammit, it’ll be you even if you can’t choose me because of all we’ve been through. But I need to know. I can’t keep going back and forth with you.” I tilt my head back trying to force the tears to return to where they came from. “I can live with knowing that I will always love you unconditionally, unrequited, but what I can’t cope with is the hope.”

“I choose you.” A reassuring hand runs down my back. “I choose you, Anastasia Eden.”

Chapter 36

Stasi

100 Days Dead

Despite what we've given over to one another—the vulnerability we've shared, the way we've stripped ourselves bare of our secrets—peace continues to evade us even now as we lie intertwined. Every inch of me protests as we try to find the right words while I stare into the void that's gathered in the corner flickers. The pitch-black watches us right back, mocking the serenity we've found in its absence. But good things never last.

With a heavy sigh, I prepare myself to ruin the moment. "I'm going to need you to trust me." Stroking her arm, I attempt to quell the anxiety I can feel building within her.

"Why does that sound so ominous?" Becca asks hesitantly, her muscles tensing beneath me.

I choose my next words carefully, remaining vague in an effort to build her up to the truth of the situation. "There's another ritual we need to do, and this one...it's a bit more invasive than the banishing we did before."

Silence stretches between us as my words register. Instinctively, Becca looks over her shoulder, sensing its oppressive force. "It's back? Why is it back?"

"I've been feeding it everything it needs—desperation, anguish, sadness—for the last few days." Shame creeps into my voice even though there was no helping it. Becca only nods, like it wasn't just me who brought this on. "If we want it to stay gone, I think we're going to need something more powerful."

With a deep sigh, she steadies herself. “What’s that exactly?”

“Blood.”

As expected she recoils, her fingers tracing the underside of her wrist. “I can’t.” Her voice falters.

“Becca, I need you to trust me.” Taking her face between my palms, I attempt to wrangle the fear that’s pouring from her wide pupils into her veins as we speak. “I promise, I won’t let anything happen to you.” She shakes her head frantically, but I stay firm. “Remember, we can’t die. Nothing can truly harm us.”

“Why can’t we just ignore it? I’m sure we could if we tried?”

“That’s no way to live. And what if it turns its attention to your parents? I know that you don’t want that.” It’s not a dig at her vulnerability, but a real concern I would hate to see come to fruition. I don’t know much about these things, but nature is always seeking balance and what it doesn’t get from us, it’ll surely seek out another source.

Her shoulders heave up and down, but eventually, resolve spreads through her limbs.

“Okay. I’ll do it for their sakes.”

“It’s going to be okay. I promise.”

She nods and I take her hand, discreetly leading us to the bathroom. Once inside, I find a disposable razor that’s tucked away in the extra toiletries at the back of their cabinets. Patting the counter, I instruct Becca to hoist herself up. Her body vibrates with fear, but she does as I say.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” She blows out a shaky breath.

Setting the razor on the counter, I start to undo her buttons.

“What are you doing?” Her hand on my wrist stills my movements.

“Making you more comfortable.” I kiss her forehead and continue. “Just trust me.” Complying, she lifts herself enough for me to pull her shorts down. Stepping between her legs, I take the razor in hand once again. With a deep breath, I bring it to my hand and dig it into my palm. The muted sensation is similar to that of a scratch, for which I’m very thankful. The tension in Becca’s shoulders drops just a bit.

“It’s not going to hurt much,” I reassure her. As if summoned by my blood, our guest of honor joins us. Gripping Becca’s chin, I keep her focused on me. “I need you to repeat after me and don’t stop saying these words.”

“Okay.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:28 pm

“In our forgiveness, in our trust, in our love, we are stronger together. You hold no claim to us anymore. We banish you.”

She repeats after me and I focus on creating a small gash on her inner thigh. Interrupting her just briefly, I hold my hand to her mouth. She makes a face but puts her mouth to it reluctantly. Smearing it across her lips, I turn my attention back to her leg while she works the verbal part of the spell. “Whatever you do, don’t stop.” Pressing my lips to the cut, I suck at the blood, letting the taste of her fill my mouth, the final piece of her that was missing from my possession—I’ve never felt more whole.

The power of it fills me, completeness swelling within me as she confidently chants the words louder and louder in the face of the final challenge we have yet to overcome.

Glancing into the mirror, I watch proudly as light scatters through the void, threatening its form and loosening its hold. The voices it emulates, now barely a breeze on the wind, unable to touch us or play with our minds. Assured that Becca has this handled; I’m determined to amplify the spell in my own way.

Returning my lips to the cut on her leg, I suck and lick at the blood that flows, then work my way up. Pulling her panties to the side, I tease my tongue between her lips. A small gasp escapes her, but she doesn’t falter in her recitation.

“In our forgiveness, in our trust, in our love, we are stronger together. You hold no claim to us anymore. We banish you,” she repeats again and again as her hands sink into my hair.

Tilting her hips forward, she leans back against the mirror, opening herself up to me—trusting me—even in the face of what terrifies her. Rewarding her for her bravery, I slip a finger inside her and lavish my attention on her swollen clit.

“In our forgiveness, in our trust, in our love, we are stronger together.” The last word drags its nails across my back in a moan. The voices coming from above warp and crackle, fizzling out with every roll of her hips.

“You hold no claim to us anymore.” She clutches at me tighter but still manages to remain focused, the air at my back becoming lighter and cooler. “We banish you, ah—” Shaking legs clench around my head as she barrels into an orgasm that has her writhing and gasping and grinding against my open mouth. I greedily collect every drop of her, inhaling like it’s the only thing that can sustain me.

A silent calm falls over us as we both come down from the influx of energy flowing between us.

“You did it, Becca.” I claim her lips with mine, tender and slow. “I’m so proud of you for facing your fears.” Gathering her in my arms, I take her back to her room and tuck us into her bed. She turns to me, curling into my chest, then wraps one of my arms around her. The simplicity of it isn’t lost on me, but her allowing me to hold her with such ease, is monumental and I promise myself to never take one of these moments for granted.

My entire life, I’ve been starved for affection, cursed with an unyielding thirst for devotion. Having Becca’s adoration, her trust, and her heart, it’s like I’ve finally been brought in from the cold and offered a lavish feast. This new dynamic between us—where we’re not both constantly on guard, protecting our secrets—nourishes me to the point of feeling full for the first time. It assures me that there was never any ‘getting her out of my system’ or ‘letting her go’, she was always meant to be mine.

Mine to protect, mine to lean on, mine to possess in every way.

Curling my arm around her, I tug her closer so I can press my lips to her throat, enjoying the way she struggles to swallow.

“Wait, I have something I want to show you first.”

Sighing my protest, I bite at her collarbone like I did on Halloween. “I never did fulfill my promise of claiming you as mine.”

Pushing me off, she rolls out from under me. “I promise it will be worth it.”

“Fine, but it’s going to have to be something big to compete with what I have planned for you.”

I watch with curiosity as Becca’s calves flex as she presses up onto her tiptoes and retrieves something from the top of her closet, freeing it from the weight of the sweaters she had stacked on it. For several moments she remains still, just staring down at it. Restlessness begins to gnaw at my gut, but I force myself to stay where I wait on the floor. Finally, she turns around with glassy eyes. Her long fingers curl around a small rectangular box that’s clutched against her stomach protectively.

When she sets the Sketchers shoebox in front of me, we both stare at it like it might detonate. As someone with an aversion to patience, I have to fold my hands in my lap to avoid tearing the lid off.

“You know,” she mumbles and sets a hand on top of it. “I thought locking up the memories of you and putting them out of sight would make me forget about everything.” She shakes her head and huffs a humorless laugh. “But you were always there, beneath all the layers of protection I’d built against the world. I could never hide from the brand your friendship—your unconditional love—put on my soul. For

long bouts of time, I forgot about it under all that scar tissue, but then, some days, I could still feel the burn of it.” Her hand rubs across her chest like she’s trying to soothe heartburn, and then she grips the edges of the lid, revealing a time capsule trapped inside.

It’s bursting with little notes folded into triangles with colorful writing on them, keychains, and discolored photos of two smiling girls who had no idea what the world had in store for them. With eager hands, I sift through the contents, a pile of ticket stubs catching my eye. Thumbing through them I’m drawn down memory lane—to the time Becca’s mom took us to the Dream Within a Dream tour up in Sac—I was more of a Christina girl but it was still iconic. There’s one of those instant photo strips stuck to the back of it featuring me with pigtails sporting pink pom-poms and Becca in the red track pants and yellow tank she loved.

“We look so cute,” she chimes in, hovering over the box.

“We look happy.”

Beneath the concert tickets is a mood ring—which I discreetly pocket—and movie tickets, most notably Blue Crush, an instant-favorite of mine, for what are now very obvious reasons.

“I mean, the way I obsessed over Michelle Rodriguez . . . I feel like there was really never any question,” I laugh holding up the ticket stub for her to see.

“Is that your type?”

“You’re my type.” Taking the opportunity, I lean in and kiss her. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous of a childhood crush?”

“Of course not,” she dismisses a little too quickly.

“Good. You know you’re my only girl. But if you need me to remind you—” She cuts me off with a stack of CDs that thud against my chest. I don’t need to read the writing on them to know they’re the ones we used to exchange for any and every occasion—birthdays, holidays, trips, whatever. Turning over Slumber Party Mix, the scratches prove it lived a good life.

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“Do you remember when we’d make my mom and dad watch us perform?” Becca tilts her head back in laughter, the sound coming so effortlessly, but it’s a testament to how far we’ve come. It’s the reassurance I need that we’re good for each other.

Stopping to show each other trinkets—butterfly hair clips, stretchy tattoo chokers, those spiky headbands—we revisit our childhood and the simple joys we shared once upon a time. But when glinting silver catches my eye, I become determined to uncover what’s buried in the corner. With a shaking hand, I slip my fingers under the stack of photos we’d begged her dad to print at the drugstore, and tug at the necklace chain tucked beneath them.

She kept it. I’d always assumed she’d thrown it away like she had our friendship, but I guess I was wrong about a lot of things.

I hold it up between us, the half-heart with its jagged inner edges looking lonely without its other half. Just like me. “You kept it?”

“It’s been here since the day I took it off, along with all the memories of us. I couldn’t bear the reminder, but I couldn’t part with it.”

Absentmindedly, I run my finger over the cursive font that’s delicate and sweet, just like our friendship had been. Across the silver are two lines of broken text:

st

ends

Becca holds out her hand and I drop it into her open palm.

“I still remember the day you gave me mine.” I sigh. “The fact that you’d had it made and picked everything out, down to the charms and jewels that hung from the clasp had meant the world to me.”

Her smile is equal parts sad and touching. “I’d chosen the pink jewel for you and the purple for me. Mine had the butterfly charm and yours had the—” she breaks off swallowing thickly.

“The bow.” Her eyes flick to the bows on my thighs that resemble the charm that had once adorned my necklace. I don’t confirm or deny the question in her eyes. “I was devastated when it broke off and disappeared. I tore my room apart looking for it, but it must have fallen off somewhere else.”

“I almost destroyed mine. I’m glad I kept it. I’m glad I was able to keep you close.”

“I can’t believe you really used it to make a piercing. I meant it when I said you were out of your mind,” she gasps between kissing me.

Smirking, I rub a hand across her stomach where my piercing and the last piece of the necklace now live. “I’ve always been out of my mind for you. Consider me proudlyobsessed.”

Becca wraps a hand around the back of my neck and urges me forward so our lips collide and her tongue slides over mine with purpose, worshipping that heart at the center of it. As our kiss intensifies, so does her boldness.

“Can you get up on the bed for me?” A bundle of curiosity and lust, I comply. I’m rewarded as she tugs my skirt over my hips, running her hands down my legs and dragging her lips over my stomach as she rises to remove my top. “What are you

going to do with me, Babygirl?”

“Treat you like the goddess you are.” Without hesitation, she cups my breasts, latching her mouth around one and teasing the bar on the other. Every suck and flick of her tongue has my back arching off the bed.

“We’re off to a good start,” I encourage breathily.

With my interruption, she releases me with a pop. “So glad you approve. Now how about you put your hands against the headboard?”

Becca’s directness renders me speechless as I do as she says.

Climbing off the bed, she stands beside me, reaching up to grab several strands of the dangling fairy lights behind her bed. We’re both silent as she focuses all of her concentration on wrapping them down my arms and around my wrist, before looping them through the opening in the headboard. She repeats the process on my other side.

“Alright, my dirty girl, you’ve got me all tied up, now what?” I taunt as she crosses the room and returns with more lights that are wound up and around my legs, then my torso. When she finishes, she latches her hand around my ankle and brings her lips to the arch of my foot, kissing gently.

“Now I’m going to have my way with you,” she answers with surprising matter-of-factness, while running her fingers under one of the strings that digs into my stomach, not uncomfortably, but enough to create new contours over my body. “You said you’ve always been told you’re too much...we’ll you’re not for me. I love you exactly as you are. Every inch of you.”

“Is that so?” My breath catches as she drops kiss after kiss down my torso until she’s back at the end of the bed.

“Mhmm,” she says sweetly as she makes quick work of her clothes. “And I’m going to show you just how worthy of worship I think you are.” Laying on her stomach, Becca loops her arms under my thighs and brings her face to my center, but she stops just shy of burying her face in my cunt.

“That’s not very nice, getting me all worked up only to play with me.”

“I learned from the best.” She smiles up at me before sticking her tongue out and flicking it gently against my swollen cunt. That sight alone nearly undoes me as my pussy floods with arousal. I love this side of her, the playful one that tests me. A bit of push to my pull. Those blue-grey eyes flash with mischief as she gazes up at me and I clench with need as she skips right over my center to nip at my thigh.

Impatiently, I yank until one hand is free so I can lace my fingers through her soft strands, and I press her mouth against me. “Go on baby, let your tongue show me just how much you adore me. I’ve been waiting for a proper tribute.”

Like the teacher’s pet that she is, Becca sucks and licks with just the right amount of intensity at just the right pace—she’s learned my body so well in such a short time. Pride swells within me, my pussy clenching at the satisfying reminder that I’ve taught her everything she knows, that I’m the only woman she’s been with. I love the assurance that she’ll never devote herself to anyone else’s body like this. “That feels so good. You’re doing such a good job, Baby,” I mumble against her ear. “My perfect girl.”

“Say it again.”

“My perfect girl,” I repeat, and she whimpers helplessly in response. “Look at me.” With my fingers under her chin, I tilt her head up, capturing her full attention. “I want you to hear me when I say this.” She nods. “Even when they thought you were theirs, you were always mine. You were always mine and you were always loved. You were always mine and you were adored. Because to me, you were perfect. Every day, every moment.”

Becca nods, teary-eyed and swollen-lipped.

“Say it.”

“I was always yours,” she says as a tear trails down her cheek. I’m captivated as I watch the crystalline exorcism of all the years she never felt good enough, and make a vow to myself that I will spend my afterlife affirming her in every way she needs.

Instead of stating her appreciation with words, she shows me, doubling her efforts, proving something to both of us. I let her have her way with me, just happy to have that mouth on me. Hungry for me. Greedy for me. Eager to please me.

And she does, sending me headfirst into a mind-blowing orgasm that has me nearly tearing down the lights that she’s wound around me.

A girl could get used to this kind of treatment, and I intend to. We have so many years to make up for.

Chapter 37

Becca

62 Days Dead

Stasi attempts to pull me into her arms, but I lean away. “It’s my turn.”

She smirks. “You’re right. Come sit that pretty pussy on my face.”

Instead of crawling up the bed, I pull out the clear bottle I’d stashed in my dresser—thankfully, it hadn’t expired despite being untouched, shout out to those on-campus safe sex advocates. Squeezing some into my hands, I hover over her and begin rubbing it over her stomach, loving how her softness gives under my fingers and the lights dig into her creating such beautiful shapes, framing every breathtaking detail of her body. When I reach her tits that are framed by glowing lights I wrapped specifically for this purpose, I take my time lubing them up.

Stasi groans deeply as I pay special attention to her nipples, playing with them until they’re hard and arching. Taking her hands in mine, I press them to either side of her chest, forcing her breasts together. “Dirty girl, are you going to ride my tits?”

I line up my cunt with her left breast and sink down onto her. A flood of arousal gushes out of me as my clit makes contact with her erect nipple.

“Does that feel so good? You’re so fucking slick. I think you like using me.” She shifts them up and down beneath me.

Shaking with pleasure, I guide my hips forward and back, gripping the headboard to give me more leverage so I can get more friction. “Fuck, your body was made for this.” Each brush of her hardened nipple over my clit urges me closer and closer to

that sweet release that only she can give me.

“Yeah it was. Just for you, Baby,” she says, quite literally glowing beneath me with the lights bathing her in gold. Sprawled beneath me is my very own goddess of pleasure.

Her skin tastes of florals—pinky promises, and lifelong vows made at sleepovers.

Her kisses taste of citrus—blossoming trust despite past betrayals.

Her cunt tastes of berries—the fruitful reward after so much pain.

I never put much faith in religion, but maybe that was because they all got it wrong. Heaven isn't a place, it's a person. Everything about her is ecstasy, and she's all mine.

“Stasi, oh shit,” I roll my hips forward at a quickening pace, chasing the heat building in my core. As the first shock of my orgasm hits me, I buckle forward, and she seizes the chance to suck at my tender breasts. With each stroke of her tongue, I crest over a new wave, shaking and whimpering and devolving into an absolute mess of spent desire.

“Untie me, Babygirl,” Stasi says with unusual patience.

With shaking hands, I unwrap the lights from around her arms. Once she's free, she scoots me down, revealing the glistening release coating her chest. Before I can offer to wipe her down, she grabs her breast and brings it to her lips, her tongue lapping at the remaining wetness.

“Fuck,” I whimper in shock at the pure eroticism of the act. My pussy clenches, dripping desire onto her stomach as she does the same to the other.

“You taste so good, my dirty girl. You can come on me any time as long as I get to clean up.”

I nod eagerly before she captures my lips with hers. “You never cease to amaze me.” Twisting my hair around her fist, she tilts my head up toward her. “I’m proud of you for taking what you want from me.”

The validation is a tender caress on my anxious mind. “It was okay?”

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“It was perfect. I love watching you take what you need.” Our mouths meet in a soft kiss. “But more than that, it’s everything to me that you understand what I want. Nobody’s ever cared about what I need.” A tear cascades down her cheek as she buries her face in my neck. This is not the undone I’d imagined her becoming when I tied her up, but this is something far more sacred, something I fear nobody else has ever seen. This openness, this realness, this is what I’ve been craving from her. I want to know her. I want her to lay out every guarded feeling she’s ever hid behind that wall of steel and I show her that it’s finally safe to open up those vulnerable parts of herself.

I unclasp the closure of my old necklace and loop it over her neck. These might have symbolized friendship when we were kids, but now this silver broken heart means so much more—a symbol of my undying devotion. “You’re mine, Anastasia Eden. Today. Tomorrow. Forever.”

“I’m yours.”

Unfortunately, one of the most romantic moments of my life is interrupted by my parents.

Chapter 38

Becca

62 Days Dead

Instinctually, we clutch the blankets around us, moving quickly as the door pushes

open and a man I've never seen before follows my parents in.

If it were one of Aiden's friends, I'd remember him. He's young, probably around my age, and handsome with strong cheekbones, rich brown eyes, and a comforting yet commanding energy. But with the white streak in his hair and memorable arm tattoos, I know I'd definitely remember him if it was one of Aiden's friends. I can't imagine what other reason a random man would have to be here.

My parents hang back as he walks to the center of the room, his eyes scanning the space while he inhales deeply. Nerves coil tightly within me, straining my muscles. A good sixty seconds pass and he doesn't say anything, running his hand along my wall until he reaches my dresser, where he takes interest in my half-empty perfume bottles and thumbs through my journal.

"Mr. Addams, what is it? Is she here? Do you see her?" My mother's questions stack on top of each other in a heap of expectations.

"I'll just need a few minutes to get settled, Mrs. Murphy. Is it possible to have the room to myself?"

"Sure, no problem. Take your time." My dad palms my mom's shoulders as he guides her out; his smile is tight as he closes the door behind him.

"Thank you." He remains completely still, gazing out the window until the door shuts all the way. Several seconds pass, and then his eyes find mine. The rich brown lightens with interest just slightly. "Hello."

I remain silent, my mind not quite processing what's happening. Being seen by a living person is jarring after all this time. "Umm...hi?"

"Becca, I presume. And you are?" His attention turns to Stasi but doesn't linger.

“Stasi.”

He cocks his head, his eyes assessing us. “Hawthorne Addams, but you can just call me Hawthorne.” Pulling out my desk chair, he settles in casually, like we’re old friends. “So, what’s the story here?” His tattooed fingers gesture between us.

“It’s a long one,” Stasi answers shortly as she shifts closer to me.

“Fair. I’ll get down to what’s important, then.” He returns his attention to me. “You seem like a fairly well-adjusted spirit. Are you happy?”

Finding Stasi’s hand, I give it a squeeze, attempting to soothe the protective energy exuding from her as she presses closer to me. “Yes. Very.”

“That’s good.” Hawthorne plays with his ring. “It’s rare, you know? For those who have passed on to find something good and true to hold onto in the afterlife.”

“Do you meet a lot of dead people?” I ask, surprised by his comment.

He laughs and shakes his head. “You have no idea. But yes, I’ve been communing with the dead since I was a kid, albeit it used to be against my will. Now, I’ve made a profession of it.”

I nod. “Are you like a ghost hunter or something?”

“Not quite,” he chuckles. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that. I have plenty of associates who are in the field, but I prefer the term medium. I typically help people—living and dead—move on.”

“And how do you do that exactly?” Stasi asks suspiciously.

“Sometimes I facilitate communication that can help people handle unfinished business. Other times I might need to use more forceful methods, depending on the circumstances and the spirit.”

“What’s your plan for us then?”

“I’ll admit this is...very different from the majority of cases I take. It’s a pleasant surprise, actually.” Hawthorne’s smile is warm and genuine, relieved. “What is it that you want? Do you want me to tell them you’re here? Would you prefer they believed you passed on? Usually, most spirits cling to the life they had. But you two seem to have moved on in your own way.”

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“We have.” The truth of that statement hits me. “I’m ready to let go. It’s what’s best for all of us. I don’t want them to know I’m here.”

“Are you sure?” Hawthorne’s voice isn’t judgmental but measured and considerate. “If I tell them you’re not here, it will be devastating, it’ll take them time to process, but it will also help them move on.”

“Are you saying it’s not the right thing to do?”

“I’m not telling you what’s right or wrong. I’m just saying that you should consider whether you truly want them to grieve and let go of the hope that you’re here. It’s a brutal process. But it can be very healing for everyone involved.” He levels his gaze at me. “Are you ready for that? Are you ready to let go?”

My throat tightens, the words hesitating in the middle of my throat, almost choking me. “Yes.” I exhale a long breath that’s not technically necessary but is centering all the same. “Yes, I’m ready to let go. I want you to tell them that I’m not here anymore. I want my parents to get their lives back.”

“The living have a hard time with grief,” Hawthorne counters, not antagonistically, but thoughtfully.

“I know it won’t be easy for them to let me go. But they have each other, they have Aiden. My restless spirit isn’t going to change the fact that I’m beyond their reach.” My fingers tangle with one another. “I’m done, though. I’m done lingering in this in between.”

I turn to Stasi. “I’m done trying to be things that other people wanted me to be, I’m done making everyone else my priority, and what I need, is to move on. To let go of who I was when I was alive. I’m ready to stop being Becca Murphy, and I’m ready to start just being Becca. I want to discover who I am without the expectations and the limitations. I want to dive head-first into a life where I’m loved exactly as I am.”

“And that isn’t what your parents offered?” His tone is clipped. “You know, you’re very lucky to have parents who care about you, who are invested in your happiness.”

“Is that why you do this? To make families happy?” Stasi questions, challenging the shift in conversation.

“No.” He lightens up at her directness. “I’m in this to help people find closure. A restless spirit is prone to misery—for both the hauntee and the haunted. I’m in this because I believe most people deserve closure and rest. The world runs us weary, tests us, and hurts us. But for some, the afterlife can be a release. And for those who want that —on either side of the veil—I’m happy to lend my...talents.”

“And what are your talents?” Stasi cuts in. “More than communing with the dead I’d bet.”

“You’d bet correctly, but thankfully, those services aren’t needed today.” Hawthorne’s attention turns back to me. “Ready?” With my affirmative nod, he stands and puts the chair back to its rightful position. “I can come back to check in on you, in case you need anything. Might be nice to talk to someone else every once in a while.”

Stasi remains silent, her mistrust clear. But there’s something about him that feels safe, like reassurance. “I’d like that.”

“Great.” He claps his hands. “Let’s finish this then.” Quickly, he sets up a few

candles and lets my parents back into the room.

“Becca Murphy, if you’re still here, please come forward. Your parents would like to talk to you.” His voice is powerful and inviting as he speaks his intention. All that’s left for me to do is sit back and see how this unfolds. “Becca, I’m here to help you connect with your family from the other side. If you have anything you’d like to say to them, speak now.”

Scanning every corner, my parents search for some sign that I’m still here. I don’t dare move a muscle, needing this to work. The room collectively holds their breath as they wait and wait, but thankfully, Hawthorne finally puts them out of their misery.

“Is she here with us?” my mom asks eagerly. Matching hope lights in my dad’s eyes, but it’s quickly dulled.

“No, I’m sorry Mr. and Mrs. Murphy, but Becca isn’t here.” Hawthorne turns to them, holding their gazes with the utmost sincerity. “She’s moved on to a better place. I know that’s hard to hear, but you should be happy for her. Becca’s at peace now. And hopefully, you’ll be able to find yours now that you have some closure.”

Hawthorne doesn’t stay for the tears my parents share with one another over the news, but we do. This is part of the grieving process for me, too, and fortunately, Stasi stays by my side through it, her hand holding mine firmly, serving as my anchor. There’s a part of me that wants to run to them, that wishes we could be a happy family again, but that life was cut short by my own hand. That’s a decision I have to make peace with. It’ll take time, but I know I’ll get there.

Chapter 39

Stasi

100 Days Dead

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you about something.” Becca breaks the silence we’ve been sitting in when the door closes behind her crushed parents.

“Hmm?”

“How would you feel about me moving into the guest house with you?” Focusing on biting her nails, she avoids making eye contact with me. Fearing she’ll find rejection there.

“I would love that.” I stroke her hair. “But are you sure?”

“Yes. I meant what I said, it’s time for me to move on.” Leaning up on her elbow, she looks up at me. “This room doesn’t feel like home anymore. It’s just a painful reminder of who I used to be.” I nod encouragingly. “Whether I mean to or not, my presence here haunts my parents; it’s best if I give them the space they need to heal. They deserve to move on too, in whatever way they decide to.”

“If this is what you think is best, I would love nothing more than to have you all to myself all the time.”

“Hopefully you don’t get sick of me.”

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“Not possible.”

February 14th, 2015 – Valentine’s Day – 104 Days Dead

Pulling the blindfold off Becca’s eyes, I unveil my surprise.

“What’s going on?” she asks with a smile.

“Happy Valentine’s Day!”

“How do even know what day it is? It’s so hard to keep track of time.” Plastic crinkles beneath her feet as she explores the various games and toys I’ve pulled out from the closet.

“Your mom still keeps one of those paper calendars on the fridge. I like to check it when I get the chance.” I wrap my arms around her shoulders. “So, what do you want to play with first?”

An excited gasp leaves her as she looks down. “Twister. But I think I’m going to need to stretch out a bit first.” She laughs.

“I’m happy to assist.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary. But you should know, I’m very competitive, so you should bring your A-game.”

“I’ll do my best, but you know how you distract me.” Flicking the spinner, I

determine her first move. “Right hand on blue.”

Becca reaches down, splaying her hand on one of the bright blue circles. I’m rewarded with her ass in the air. I’m going to need to see a bit more of that. I flick the spinner again. And since she’s facing the other way, I scoot it where I want it. “Left hand yellow.” She does as I say, tipping forward just a bit more. Flicking the spinner again, I smirk at the stretch this one will require. “Left foot on green.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be playing this together?”

“Rules are boring. We’re playing my way.” The spinner lands on yellow, but that’s not going to give me the view I’m craving, so I nudge it to where I want it. “Right foot blue.” There we go. Now she’s spread just right.

“Told you I should have stretched,” she laughs. “Are you going to spin again or—” She peeks at me between her legs, shaking her head. “Oh, I should have known.” Her hand starts to lift off the mat.

“Don’t even think about it, Crybaby.” I take a step closer. “This is the perfect angle for me to eat this pussy.” The plastic crinkles beneath me as I kneel behind her. With a gentle touch, I stroke my fingers up her calves. “Would you like that? Is that a good enough reason to break the rules for you?” It would have been easier to take her shorts off before we started, but I’m not a quitter. With a bit of effort, I manage to peel them off.

“We’ll just have to see about that, won’t we?”

Kissing along the back of her leg, I trace the curve of her ass, halting my efforts just short of her inner thigh. “I’m more than capable of rising to the challenge.” I lean forward between her legs and place a gentle kiss on her lips. “Since we have you dangling upside down, this is going to be hard and fast. But if it gets to be too much,

just say the word.”

“Violets.”

“Yeah, Baby, violets.”

“Okay,” she says with a sigh as I creep higher and higher toward her center. To tease her just a bit longer, I start by licking a stripe up the middle of her panties, tasting her through the damp fabric. “Mmm,” I run my nose over the same path, taking in the luxury of her slightly sweet musky scent. “How lucky am I that I can survive off just this for the rest of my days.” My finger sneaks under the elastic against her leg and draws it slowly across her pussy, exposing her to me mid-clench. “Do you need me, Baby?” I kiss her cunt softly, feeling her clench on air again, returning my kiss. “Are you desperate for me to lick you? Are you ready for me to make you feel good?”

“Please, Stasi. Touch me.” Her legs mimic the tremble in her voice as she waits on the precipice. Putting her out of her misery, I suck at her clit at the same time as my finger drags through her lips. She’s so wet already, but I tease her a bit before sliding a finger inside her. I promised this would be hard and fast and I meant it. My mouth moves purposefully, sucking, flicking, licking as my second finger enters her and pumps vigorously before I stroke the walls of her pussy. The mat rustles beneath us as her toes curl into the plastic. When I do the come-hither motion, I have to anchor one arm around her legs to keep her from tipping over as she rocks back into my face. “Come on baby, help me get you there. You’re so close, I want to drown in this sweet pussy.” She rocks again, creating a gentle, steady rhythm that drives up her pleasure without losing her balance. I tighten my hold on her if only to fully feel how her thighs quiver as I continue relentlessly drawing yelps and whimpers from her.

“Oh shit, ah,” Becca cries. “Stasi—” she begs. “Stasi, I’m going to, I’m going to...” And then she breaks, so beautifully on my attentive fingers. With a palm to her back, I help ease her forward so she’s on her hands and knees, giving me access to slurp up

every last drop of her. Even the plastic clinging annoyingly to my forearms can't distract me from the satisfaction of how good she looks on her hands and knees with her pussy peeking through her thighs, the art of her on display just for me. I barely control the urge to crawl after her as she grabs the turquoise and yellow children's toy.

"Where the hell did you find this?"

"With all the other stuff your mom keeps in here. It's like a shrine to your childhood."

Becca laughs fondly. "If you think that's a lot, you should have seen all the stuff we convinced her to get rid of."

"Do you remember when you told me that this was the most annoying toy you'd ever heard and chucked it out the window?"

"You know, sometimes I think you're making this stuff up." She rolls her eyes as she inspects the long toy pushing and pulling the ends. "I think the batteries are dead." Becca shrugs in mock disappointment at the lack of commands booming from its speaker in the center.

"That's not how we're going to play with it anyways."

Becca looks from me to the toy, then back again. "What do you—" Her eyebrows shoot up and she shakes her head. "No way you're putting that inside me."

“Good thing it’s not for you then.”

“What if—”

“There’s nothing to worry about. We’re dead—no infections, no lasting injuries, no worries—besides I’ve played with my fair share of large toys.” I kiss away the worry, smoothing her furrowed brow. “Now where were we? Right, you’re going fuck me with a bop-it.” Laying back, ignoring the noisy surface’s protests, I spread my legs for her. While she wraps her mind around what I’ve asked, I gather the plentiful arousal that’s dripping from me and tease my clit in slow, deliberate circles. “Go on Dirty Girl, it’s time to play. I’m ready whenever you are.”

We both watch in rapt attention as she circles the yellow end around my opening, transfixed by how it slowly widens with the pressure she applies and gradually swallows the oddly shaped toy.

“Fuck,” I gasp.

“Oh my god, are you okay?” Panicked, Becca immediately stops what she’s doing.

My fingers latch around her wrist, preventing her from pulling it out of me. “Keep going,” I say pointedly. I circle my hips, moving the toy inside myself, as Becca follows suit. “Mmhmm, right there baby.”

The reassurance spurs her on as she starts pumping more vigorously.

“Yes, just like that. Don’t stop.” My hands sink into my hair, nails clutching at my

scalp. I'm pleasantly surprised when she takes over, using her other hand to stimulate my abandoned clit for me. "Do you like fucking this pussy?"

Becca nods, moving the toy in and out faster and faster.

"Are you going to make me come?"

She nods again, but I need more.

"Tell me, Babygirl."

"You're going to come for me." She gets to her knees, leveraging the toy at a different angle that hits deeper inside me. "Come for me, Stasi."

"I'm going to come for you baby. I'm going to make this toy drip for you." My hips jerk forward, and I make good on my promise. "Fuccckkkk," I moan as I fall back onto the colorful dots.

"Umm," Becca interjects as I come down. "Do I just like pull it out, or..."

I can't help but laugh. "Yeah, go ahead." Propping myself on my elbows, I can't help but release a satisfied groan as I watch her pull several inches of the toy out of me. Note to self, find more toys to experiment with. I might not have my personal collection, but we can definitely get creative with what we have. Most people assume death is an end, but I just see a world of possibilities opening up before me.

"Should I be nervous about what else you have up your sleeve?" Becca lays down next to me.

"Nervous? No." I kiss her forehead and then get to my feet. "All I want is to make you feel good." I attempt to keep my voice even, withholding any expectation. "But I

would like to keep a promise I made.”

Her eyes fall to her lap as she fidgets. “What’s that?”

Pulling her toward me, I force her to meet my eyes. “I promised I was going to fill that pretty cunt of yours. Stretch you around me and wear you like my most prized possession.” Placing a kiss on her neck, I attempt to soften my statement. “Would you like that?”

With a deep breath, she buys herself time to process what I’ve just said. “Yes. I want to take everything you have to give.”

Smirking, I can’t hide my excitement or pride in my girl for being willing to try this. “Come here, Angel.” Coaxing her forward, I have her lay down beside me, then transition quickly to sitting between her legs. Noticing how her muscles tighten, I take my time rubbing her calves. “We can stop if it becomes too much. I would never make you do anything that you aren’t comfortable with.” I kiss her inner thigh. “But I also want you to experience every bit of pleasure you can. Do you trust me?”

“I do. Trust you.” Becca’s hand covers mine.

“Good.” I give her an encouraging squeeze. “Because I’m going to make you see fucking stars.” Sliding my hands up her thighs, I tease the sensitive skin, then drag my thumb between her lips, gathering the wetness there and bringing it to her clit. “Are you excited for your first fisting?”

Becca nods as her back arches responsively.

“You’re going to take me so well, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to take all five of my fingers and love how they fill this perfect little cunt.”

“Yes,” she breathes.

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“That’s right, Babygirl.” Plunging two fingers inside her, I start working her, stroking her inner walls in the way that has her toes curling. “That’s it, take me so sweetly, like the desperate little fucktoy we both know you are.” Pumping in a steady rhythm, I stay in her comfort level for another minute before I tease a third around her entrance. “Open up for one more. Come on.” Her pussy sucks me in greedily, taking that third finger like it’s a lifeline straight to the pleasure she’s come to crave. “Good girl.” My thumb rolls over her clit as she presses her hips upward and forward, forcing my fingers deeper inside her

“Another.”

“That’s my little overachiever. But where are your manners?” I taunt as I lean forward and suck at her clit.

“Please.”

“Please what?” I need her to be my dirty girl. I want to hear all the filthy words flow from those lips without any shame.

“Please stuff another finger inside me. Fill me and pound into me until I can’t take anymore.”

There’s no reason to deny her, not when we want the same thing. Not when I’ve been dreaming of doing exactly this, feeling her tight, wet heat gripping around my fingers. “Sit up on your elbows, I want you to see how fucking perfect you look stretched out around me.” When she does as I ask, I slide a fourth finger into her.

“Oh, god.” Her hips jerk as she takes in the sight of me entering her.

“That’s my girl, taking me so nicely.” I pay attention to her clit as she adjusts. “See, doesn’t it just look so right? Doesn’t your pussy look like it was meant to be wrapped around me?” Becca’s hips undulate as I stroke my attentive fingers inside her. Her eyes are glued to where we connect. With slow movements, I coax reactions out of her as I push her closer to the edge. I soak up every twitch and whimper. She digs her heels into the sheets, forcing them in deeper.

“Are you ready for more? Can you handle all five?”

Her lip quivers between her teeth.

“Use your words, Crybaby. I want to hear it.” Stilling my hand, I make my point clear.

“Do it. I want to take your fist.” She gasps as I slip it in to the first knuckle. “I want to feel all of you inside me.”

“Well, when you beg so nicely,” I groan as I slowly shift my hand all the way into her. She’s ready for me as she rolls her hips forward to meet me.

“Stasi, oh my god. That feels so damn good. Don’t stop.”

“Fuck. Look at my wrist. Your pussy drips like diamonds, Babygirl.” Capturing one of her taut nipples between my teeth, I play with it with my tongue. I’m rewarded by her hips rising hungrily swallowing more of my wrist. “Yeah, you like that? My Dirty Girl, I’m going to make you come harder than you ever have before.”

“Yes,” Becca moans as her eyes roll back in her head. She doesn’t slow her movements though, her thighs spreading farther apart for me as I slide in and out of

her gripping pussy faster and faster. With her small tits bouncing, limbs trembling, and lips parted to let out those precious uninhibited sounds, I don't know if she's ever looked more beautiful. My perfect girl deserves a reward.

"Can you do that for me? Can you help me make you come"

"Yes," she gasps through an uneven breath as we work together to bring her to orgasm. "Yes, yes, yes yes. Fuck, yes." When she buckles forward, I catch her, pulling her against my chest as I gently withdraw from her.

"Good girl. That's my good, perfect, girl. That was better than I could have imagined."

"Same," she laughs into my hair. "But I think it's going to take me a bit to recover."

"I'll let you have a little intermission. I found something you're going to be very excited about." With the pink little mp3 player in my hand and a set of headphones, I take my place next to her, then slip one of the buds into her ear.

"Is that a...how the hell did you charge that thing?" Becca's excitement is palpable.

"Along with a bunch of random shit and a metric ton of craft supplies, your mom also apparently saves every single cord you've ever had." Scrolling through the list of songs overwhelms me with options, so I just randomly tap on something. It's not the best sound quality, but the nostalgic music makes up for it. That and Becca's wide smile and loud singing.

With a nudge, she guilts me into joining her, our voices intertwining and transporting me back in time to the nights when we used to do just this—playing games, eating pizza, singing along to our favorite songs. Elated, I realize I'm right back where I always wanted to be. By her side. Against all odds, it all worked out.

Chapter 40

Becca

67 Days Dead

Climbing the ladder, Stasi and I set up a cozy little spot on the roof. Crawling onto the quilt, we lay side by side, looking up at the crescent moon and the scatter of stars that are still visible beyond the streetlights.

The afterlife has changed my perspective on the world, the possibilities narrowing down to the confines of this house. And while I still might mourn the loss of my life and my family, I feel pretty lucky to have ended up here with Stasi of all people. I shun the thoughts of what things could be like if I was stuck here by myself, completely isolated, or with someone I didn't trust. Eternity is a long time, and I get to spend it with the woman I love.

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It's a scary thought, that in the parameters of everyday life might seem too much too soon, but the truth is, I've loved her many times over. As children, Ana was my other half. As adults, Stasi has been by my side—albeit, somewhat antagonistically—through a rough transition. If that isn't love, I don't know what is.

“You're cute when you're thinking so hard,” Stasi teases and nips at my shoulder, always quick to steal my attention back when it drifts.

“Do you want to know what I was thinking about?” Propping myself up on my elbow, I look down at her, my nightmare who turned into my happily ever after.

She nods as she slips her fingers under my top and traces my tattoo with the tips of her nails. “You know I'm ravenous for every thought that goes through that pretty little head.”

“I was just thinking about how lucky I am to have you.” I concentrate on the route her fingers take, avoiding the weight of her gaze. “Do you ever think about what it would be like if you were stranded here alone?”

“No.” Her nails dig into my hip possessively. “There's nothing that could keep me from you now that you're mine.”

“How can you be so sure? Neither of us knows anything about why or how we're here, or how long we have. What if one of us crosses over first?”

“Crosses over where?” Stasi's fingers cage my jaw, tilting my head upward until we're making direct eye contact. “Why are we worrying about fictional scenarios?”

Are you so eager to sabotage your own happiness?"

"It's not that. It's just, Hawthorne got me thinking. What if there's something else out there and we don't have a choice but to go?"

"Are you saying like if there's a heaven, a bright light, and an underworld, or whatever it is that some people believe in?" A playful flame sparks in her eyes. "Then I would tear out the eyes of fate so it couldn't find you. I would use the Grim Reaper's scythe against him. I would sell my soul to get back to you." Her lips press against my forehead. "I don't care what might await us; the only thing I've ever been afraid of is losing you. I will never let anything happen to you, Babygirl. There's nothing to worry about, not anymore."

"If you say so," I sigh.

"I do. Besides, Hawthorne didn't mention anything like that. He made it seem like this is it for us unless we actively do something to change those circumstances. Maybe he was a scam artist, maybe he's the real deal, but I'm not going to worry about what-if's. Not after a lifetime of chasing you. I'm going to enjoy every second we have together from here on out." Stasi stands and holds her hand out. "What about you, Crybaby?"

Without hesitation, I wrap my palm around hers. "Okay." She tugs me to her, where she lingers close to the edge.

"That's not very enthusiastic. I need you all in." Her thumb passes over my lips in a tender touch that grounds me.

"Yes. I'm all in."

"That's better. Are you ready to take the leap with me then?"

Glancing down, I look over the edge of the roof. “Do you mean literally or figuratively?”

Stasi laughs and turns to face the edge. “Don’t you trust me? Everything is going to be okay.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” Just like that, I’m twelve years old, tucked into a corner of the neighborhood haunted house, actors dressed as very convincing monsters in the background. Ana holds my hand, convincing me that I’m brave enough to finish the walk-through. Reminding me that she won’t let anyone hurt me. But as we find ourselves on a new terrifying precipice, I realize that I’m not afraid anymore and I do what I was too much of a coward to do all those years ago. Pulling her in for a kiss, I claim her lips and then tug her forward, sending us careening over the side of the house.

We land with a soft thump. Splayed on my back, I wait for the pain to come, muscle memory convincing me that something snapped or bruised. But we’re both fine. Better than fine.

“You were right all along, you know,” I admit.

“And that’s why you should never doubt me.” She sits up. “But I’ll gladly prove myself to you again and again if it means I get to have you like this.”

“Like what?”

“Free...happy.”

She said she couldn’t give me softness, but she’s given me something so much better,

her vulnerability. One of the best things about her is that she loves fully and unapologetically, and I want to give her that too.

Crashing my lips into hers, I push her back into the grass. “I love you, Anastasia Eden. Thank you for not giving up on me.” Hovering over Stasi, I hold her gaze. “I’m sorry it took me so long to see that you’re the only person who ever could have loved me the way I needed.”

“I hate to break it to you, but you never had any other choice.” Flipping us so I’m beneath her, she lavishes my throat, my chest, my breasts. “You were always mine.”

“I am.” I wrestle with my flannel, tugging it off and then following it with my tank top. “Your Crybaby, your Dirty Girl. I’m lucky to be anything you want.”

“Anything? That’s a dangerous promise to make. Are you eager to make a deal with the devil, Angel?”

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“That depends. What will it cost for you to fuck me like it’s the end of the world as we know it?”

“Well, I already own your soul, so I guess I’ll accept a taste of this pretty pussy.”

“Just a taste?” I lift my hips to help her take off my shorts, then start on the clasps of her top that are the bane of my existence.

“You’re a fine wine baby, I intend to savor you.”

“And what if I want to be devoured, right here, right now.”

“I suppose I’ll have to give my greedy girl what she wants. You’re a monster of my own making, after all.” She steps out of her skirt, standing naked over me. I’m incapable of resisting the temptation to worship her body, as I sit up and trail kiss after kiss up her legs before parting her with my tongue.

“Good, because this is how I want to spend my afterlife.”

“Eating me out?”

“Showing you just how precious you are to me. Treating you the way you always deserved to be celebrated, cared for, adored.” I affectionately kiss her clit. “Your vulnerability, your needs, your love, it’s safe with me. There’s no side of you I don’t want to know. There’s no part of you that’s too much for me. Every inch of you—inside and out—belongs to me. I’m ready to take that leap of faith.”

Stasi looks away, but not before I catch the sparkle of unshed tears in her brown eyes.

Rising to my feet, I bring her hands to my lips, and I continue. “To have and to hold, for better or worse, through healing and setback, for as long as we both shall haunt.” I smirk at that last part.

“You think you’re so clever,” she says with a laugh, finally looking down at me.

“I am.”

“You are, my perfect girl.” She reaches into the tiny pocket on her skirt that I would have sworn was fake and pulls out a mood ring.

“Where did you get that? What are you—“

Grabbing my hand, she isolates my ring finger. “As long as we both shall haunt.” As the color-changing ring finds its place at the base of my knuckle, I finally have the assurance I’ve always been looking for. I know without a doubt that everything is going to be okay.

Epilogue

Becca

December 10th, 2065 – Becca’s 51st Deathiversary

Rain pours down on me, drenching my hair, and soaking through my clothes. It weighs me down like the lifetime of guilt I’ve been carrying.

But this isn’t about me, it’s about her. My everything. She deserves closure, she’s not the kind of person who should disappear into a stack of cold cases. Stasi brought me

out of the darkness of the closet I was hiding in, the least I can do is free her from this sad excuse for a grave.

With my parents gone, and Aiden—my heart twinges at the reminder of what he did for me, what he sacrificed for me—it's time to lay this to rest once and for all.

Over and over, I plunge my shovel into the dirt. The motion takes me back to the memories of that night. But they don't destroy me like they used to, they barely touch me at all—just lessons and mistakes, no longer capable of hurting me.

As I get closer to the bottom—or what I think is nearly the bottom—I dig more carefully, trying not to do more harm to her than nature already has. A glimpse of ivory peaks out. Trying to avoid her bones, I toss in a sheet and patio chair I intend to stand on, then follow them into the pit. With cautious fingers, I brush away the layer of earth that clings to the last pieces of her living form, caressing them like I would the velvety skin that I'm used to, and place them at the center of the fabric. When I'm finished, I gather the edges and tie the top, creating a makeshift bag.

Setting the tied-up sheet on the edge of the hole, I climb up, struggling a bit with the rain-slicked ground, but I finally manage to pull myself out. With a deep breath, I carry what's left of her in my trembling arms to the front yard.

I know I can't be taken away from here, but the thought of other people seeing me after all this time, with the remains of a body no less, is anxiety-inducing.

The unease settles in my stomach as I round the house to see Hawthorne leaning against his car across the street. The fact that he looks much younger than he should will never be less bizarre to me despite how many times he's explained it, but I guess I don't have much room to talk. I smile at him in acknowledgement. He only gives me a single nod, confirming that our plan will work if I just trust him; it's the reassurance I need to sit in the grass and wait for someone to spot us.

Luckily for me, Hawthorne is used to dealing with death and hidden bodies. Explaining my idea to him went over fairly well, not that I was asking permission, but I thought he had a right to know what I planned to do and the chaos it would stir up for a little bit—it is his house technically, after all. He's been good to Stasi and me, buying this house so that we could stay here undisturbed. He even promised to make arrangements for his own passing, so we'd never be left in the hands of strangers. We really couldn't have asked for a better set of circumstances. There's just one more loose end to tie up.

Opening the sheet, I let the bones breathe fresh air for the first time in decades. Sitting beside them, I wait, but it doesn't take long. The first porch light comes on across the street, then another and another, the neighbors rushing out to their driveways, to see what the disturbance could be in their perfect little neighborhood—it is the middle of the night after all, or very close to it. I timed this just so.

Just like the cookie-cutter houses, they line up along the sidewalk and stare at the girl who's casually sitting in the front yard with human remains. Their panic is laughable after the real horrors we underwent on this very street, but it's the effect I was hoping for; sirens can be heard in the distance. When tires screech to a halt and voices rise, I let go of all the remorse I've been holding onto until I could finally give Stasi what she deserves.

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Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:28 pm

“Becca?” Stasi stands at the side of the yard, brow furrowed and worry in her eyes.
“What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry. I’m just setting things right.” Despite the serenity in my voice, she rushes to me.

“Is this...” Her lip trembles as she reaches out to rub a finger across her skull that lies in front of us. Tears fall in silence down her face, for once, she’s speechless.

“It is.” The collective gasp confirms it’s after midnight. With my death day past, I can move unseen again. “Come on.” Giving her bones one last glance, I lead Stasi up to the roof, where we watch them collect her skeleton and take her away for a proper burial.

“Thank you,” she says as she plants a kiss on my hand and finally lets herself grieve.

“Of course, My Love, you deserve to rest in peace.”

Read *Come Out, Come Out*, Aiden’s story and find out what happens to Nate.