



Bloody Valentine (St. Valentines #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: St. Valentine's University holds a dark secret...

Vivian Valentine:

Chasing the truth has always been Vivian's passion, and when she's offered a coveted spot at St. Valentine's University's elite journalism program, she doesn't hesitate. But this school is more than just a stepping stone to her dream—it's in her blood. Its history is stitched together within the bones of fourteen women, sacrificed to the men who built it. A legend... or so she thought. Until a seemingly innocent Valentine's Day charity auction places her in the hands of her past and future—The occults leader.

Maddox Valentine:

As the King of the Divine, Maddox is bound to a legacy of sin and sacrifice. Every year, the descendants of St. Valentine's founders offer up a soul to appease the hunger of those who came before them. This year, fate delivers him something far more tempting than he ever expected—a virgin of his own powerful bloodline; A Valentine. Her purity begs for his corruption. She would be the perfect offering. Luring her in should be easy. She's soft, curious... and completely unaware of the danger she's stepped into. But the more he watches her, the more he wants to unravel her in ways that have nothing to do with preparing her for the ritual.

Will Vivian become just another chapter in St. Valentine's dark history, or will her creative narrative be enough to seduce the King into breaking his own rules?

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The hooded figures surrounding me were silent, their faces obscured by the eerie darkness. Lanterns were set in the corners of the area, lighting up the room and creating shadows that danced along the walls, but the only light in front of us was a crackling fire.

I hissed between my teeth when the knife hit my skin, more blood sliding down my back and splashing onto the rocky texture of the ground underneath me. Watching the reflection of the scene ripple in the red pool made this torture too real. I'd run from this moment more times than I could count, kidnapped so many in preparation, and killed even more.

I knew my father was the man in front of me. Our family crest prominently adorning his head told me that. It was a copy of the brand deeply embedded into my skin. Now, it was something I could never escape, no matter how fast I ran or where I tried to hide.

My little brother, Hayes, fidgeted in the sea of black cloaks. He never was one to sit still, and after succumbing to my fate in this fucked up family of ours, he would no longer be able to rely on me to be there to cover up his dumb fucking messes.

Sometimes, those duties entailed killing girls that were stalking him or picking him up from parties without his drunk ass even noticing he went from point A to point B. My brother was a nuisance above all, but I loved the asshole. My sacrifice had to be enough for him.

This inauguration felt like a betrayal to us both.

I couldn't keep running from the 'duty of my bloodline,' and there would come a point when he wouldn't be able to do so either. It was only a matter of time until he would understand that acting like a fuckboy would only get him so far. I just hoped he would realize that sooner rather than later.

My body still bore the scars of Valentine's Divine 'reminders' of my place in this fucked up society. The university hid its secrets beneath it. They were the Divine's channels of torture. So many tunnels led to another area of pain and anguish. The school, the chapel, and the mausoleum were all on a different level of hell.

Tonight was my twenty-first birthday. I was supposed to get legally wasted and enjoy passing out drunk as fuck. But no, not me. My party consisted of me being carved up like a Christmas ham by thirteen old fucks that played golf with my pops.

Hearing the rip of the flesh on my back was making me ill. Another slice began because each one of these assholes was 'required' to carve their name into my skin.

The blood felt weirdly cold as it continued to slide down my back. I kept my face as absent of emotion as I could. I didn't want to be seen as weak, and I'd lost too much to get here. These men were now under my rule. Tonight's ritual made me the king to all the descendants of St. Valentine and all his men.

The robed figure behind me whispered the line we all repeated during these fucking rituals, and of course, it was in Latin.

"Sanguis meus et tuus, frater meus. Dorsum habes nostrum, et nos habemus tuum."

My blood is your blood, Brother, mine. You have our back, and we have yours.

This line created the true definition of brotherhood in this society.

Each new slice burned worse than the last, but being held still by my father's strong grip somehow burned the most. I couldn't disappoint the monster. Our mother was long gone, our sister too...everyone was but Hayes and me.

Trying to understand why I knew I couldn't fail him was confounding.

We were the two people in this world that our father hated the most but had to mold into his perfect puppets.

If I was being honest, I stopped running from this fate to save Hayes.

It would have been easier to die, but I wasn't willing to let Hayes pay for my sins.

Besides, if there were ever a chance to change history, my brother would be the one to do it.

Why did there have to be so many goddamn names?

Fourteen.

Fourteen long-ass ancestral names spoken aloud, carved in jagged lines as they each stepped up and dug them into my flesh: Viktor, Charlise, Bradford, Arthur, Ambrose, Vincent, Nikolause, Amos, Henry, August, Enoch, Leopold, Matthias and finally Valentine. My last name cut the deepest.

My father's hand was strong and sure as it felt damn near deep enough to etch into my fucking bones. He enjoyed this. His smirk was almost radiant, so I had no choice but to suck it up. Baring my teeth, I swallowed the pain of the next slice.

I felt faint, my back on fire, the blood spilling down my skin like rain, creating a shallow pool around my feet.

‘Please, don’t pass out. Just fucking get this done,’ I begged to whatever asshole god decided to listen.

My father held the bloody knife in one hand and the mask of a ram skull in the other.

“Maddox Nathanael Valentinus. Tu unus ex nobis es. S. Valentini, filij mei, Fráter inter nos omnes. Nunc arcum tibi...”

Maddox Nathanael Valentine. You are one of us—a descendant of St. Valentine, Son of mine, Brother among us all. We now bow to you...

I waited to hear him say it, to utter the words that the bitch never wanted to say. Hearing my father say, ‘I was king,’ was one of the few reasons I’d accepted this fate for my life.

Placing that skeletal mask on my face, I waited.

“Divinus Valentini nostri Dux. Vivat Maddox Valentinus.”

Our...Leader of Valentine’s Divine. Long live Maddox Valentine.

Despite the pain, I raised my head, looking at all the men before me, bowing on the ground at my feet while their cloaks pooled together like a sea of oil. The Elders were the closest to me, the line of their crests adorning their heads as they lowered their bodies to the cavern floor one by one.

I stared at the blood pooled around my feet, feeling like a fucking god. I owned all these men. Yes, they had carved their ancestors’ names into my flesh, but I owned every drop of blood that ran in their veins.

I smiled wide, not even realizing it, until my father lifted his head slightly, refusing to

bow as low as the others. I took a step forward, the pain and burning a distant memory with the power coursing through my body from the adrenaline.

Taking my bare, bloodied foot and planting my sole onto his cloaked flesh, I stepped onto my father's back and pressed down as hard as I could until his legs gave free. Finally, he smashed into the ground as low as the others.

“Ego Maddox Nathanael Valentini Leon Rued filius Valentini, frater Hayes Aston Valentini, magni sancti Valentini proles, omnes vos recipio, fratres mei. deducam te usque ad extremum spiritum meum. Sanguis meus sanguis tuus est.” I spoke with a booming presence, making sure I was loud enough for the entire cavern-like arena to hear my words.

I, Maddox Nathanael Valentine, son of Leon Rued Valentine, brother of Hayes Ashton Valentine, the descendant of the great St. Valentine, accept you all—Brothers mine. I will lead you until my last breath. My blood is your blood.

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Chapter one

“O h, fuck yes, Professor Valentine. I will accept this ‘D’ any day.”

I rolled my eyes at the idiotic pun I had heard over the years of my life as a professor but continued to plow into the bitch in front of me. She was knocking everything off the shelf in front of her. We only had a few more minutes before the classes would switch, and the hallways would be filled with students.

I quickened my pace, reaching my hand over to rub circles on her clit. Her stockings were yanked down, and her red and black skirt was thrown above her ass. I ripped her panties to the side to make more room for my dick.

She wasn't tight at all, honestly, it felt like fucking a plastic bag, but I hadn't had a good orgasm in a few weeks, and beggars couldn't be choosers. This particular bitch had been frothing over my desk for months.

Her drawings in my class always had a strong likeness to my bright blue eyes and light brown hair. It didn't take a dumbfuck to make the connection, much less someone of my caliber.

“You like that, Bethany? Of course you do, you fucking slut. Keep panting, just like this. My Little Bitch drooling like a goddamn dog for my cock.”

She whimpered and I realized I must have guessed her name right. My orgasm was rising to the surface as I continued pounding into her. I didn't give a shit about pulling out because I couldn't get anyone pregnant.

That was a decision I made for myself a long time ago. I would never feed the disease of my bloodline, never shackle my own child to the life given to those that carried my fucking name.

“Oh, Professor Valentine! Holy fuck, yes. Right there!”

My name on her tongue felt dirty enough to get off, but as I figured, it was empty and meaningless. Besides, I was procrastinating. Fucking a dumb woman in a supply closet wasn't helping with my true task.

It was nearing Valentine's Day, and I had to secure my sacrifice for the ritual.

The only problem was...she wasn't fucking here yet.

I didn't know how much longer I would be forced to wait. Vivian Valentine was my chosen, and I would have her if it meant going to that piece of shit apartment and dragging her by the hair into the gates of St. Valentine's myself.

Fourteen virgin women were to be bled dry into the grounds of the university. The very floor I stood on held a dark secret. Beneath our feet were the caverns of the Divine Valentine, where a huge ceramic bowl was waiting to suck up the blood of the chosen sacrifice. Women born of those sacrificed before them were destined to meet the same fate—Death.

My ancestor, St. Valentine, and his thirteen friends sacrificed their wives on February fourteenth all those years ago. Their pact and offering set in motion the future, which now created the wealth and prosperity of the structure they would build over the bones of their partners. Every year since the Bloody Valentine rituals continued.

Children born of those men would kill the women born of their departed wives. They saw this as a true offering of their own blood.

So many of their own children were fated to meet the stone altar year after year.

A magnitude of infidelity and a constant uptick of bastardized babies had created this path. Their only way out was to be hunted down until they were forced to stop running one way or another.

Unfortunately for them, I was that hunter. My hands had ended too many lives, some for the rituals and others in preparation for the required perfection. I gave up on family, kids, all the bullshit dreams that most had.

That was never in the cards for me. I figured that Hayes would eventually knock up some dumb broad and have little babies to continue this fucked up lineage we carried. Would it matter to the victims if they knew we were slaves to the Divine? Would it matter if I shared with them the scars that adorned my body from the punishments I received from running?

It had to happen.

There had to be a ‘balance in the universe.’ That had been beaten into me for thirty-nine years—my entire lifetime.

After they threatened to take the one moron who actually mattered to me, I realized I had no choice but to accept who I was always meant to be...a killer, a leader—a Valentine.

“Get out of here,” I said to the overly satisfied moron yanking her stockings back over her knees.

“Okay...” She hesitated like they all do, and I prepared my default answer and waited for her to finish. “But can we maybe do this again sometime, sexy?”

“No, darling.” I smiled sympathetically, gripping her arm in an awkward squeeze. “I do not double dip. You feel me once if you’re fortunate, and the gods seem to have deemed you lucky enough. Don’t squander that.”

Her mouth was open wide, and I debated sticking my cock inside that gaping hole to clean it off, but her neediness was already too much for my taste. Slowly, her mouth closed, and she pouted, her lower lip quivering.

A sense of unease washed through me as I reached for the door, not wanting to be here for her waterworks show.

When I gripped the metal knob, I realized it wasn’t budging. Clearing my throat, I tried again. It was fucking locked. I was locked in a damn supply closet with a crying student. I kept my back turned to her as I finished adjusting my button-up and fixing my blazer.

“This is not ideal,” I mumbled to myself.

My cell phone dinged in the quiet space, a reminder that classes were over and I was officially fucked.

Why couldn’t I just fuck an adjunct like everyone else?

I was already hearing the doors opening outside and students chattering as the rush of the fucking mob started.

“Oh no. I will never live this down if anyone finds out! They already bully me because of Professor Vega.” the twat-head wailed. I shook off the gross feeling of sharing a woman with Gunner Vega.

Her volume increased, and I grated my teeth, my irritation rising. She was going to

alert someone to us because she was worried about her reputation...

I snaked my arm around her body, trying to calm her incessant idiocy. She shook me off, and panic rose when she started sobbing louder.

“What was that? Did you hear something?” she yelped, all but trying to claw in my shirt.

I leaned forward. There was a muffled sound. It was likely some kid that was close to the closet door.

Cursing, I wrapped my arm around the student’s neck, squeezing before she’d even realized I had moved behind her.

Snap.

Her sobbing suddenly stopped.

I looked at the limp woman in my arms. “Oh fucking hell.”

Maybe this is why I got the nickname ‘Mads.’

I dropped her body in the corner and covered her with cleaning equipment, spreading out the cloth of the mop onto her chest and legs. The stirring was slowing outside, and I waited to hear the tell-tale chime on my phone again. The noise died down, and I tested the knob one more time, pushing my shoulder against the door.

“Open sesame, asshole,” I said, smashing my shoulder harder this time.

Before I knew what was happening, the door swung open, and the blinding light outside was causing me to blink.

It was just my fucking luck that a kid was standing there. I recognized him as the quiet man in one of my classes. He'd kept to himself, and I hadn't heard a word from him since the day he started my course.

His bright eyes sparked with confusion and curiosity at my disheveled appearance. I cleared my throat, rising to my full height and trying to show my authority. His eyes roved over to the stupid bitch in the corner I'd have to clean up later tonight.

"Oh, she's fine," I said in a forced laugh. "She took a nap, you see. I heard...um...snoring? Yeah, I heard snoring and opened this door to investigate, only to find the student in the corner. Let's let her sleep, shall we?"

The kid stared a moment longer and ran a shaky hand through his shaggy blond hair.

"It really is impolite to wake someone."

The student snorted, dropping his hand with a shrug.

"Good boy, now let's head to class." I didn't give him a chance to speak, if he even could.

Instead, I wrapped my arm across his chest to spin him around, moving him forward. The door shut back on its own with a click.

The hallway was silent, and with the mute boy by my side, that quiet stretched uncomfortably. I knew I smelled like fucking sex, but to the young man's merit, he didn't so much as look at me. He kept his head forward and continued to walk at my pace.

I wracked my brain for his name. Kyle? No, that wasn't it.

“So, having...a good day today?” I said, the silence getting under my skin.

He looked over and nodded.

I stopped and turned to face him. “There’s a power in one’s voice, son. Sometimes, it is all you have for yourself.”

He looked at me, an expression of understanding and something else swirling in those eyes.

“What is your name?”

“Kieran,” he said quickly and quietly.

I smiled, happy to hear the man could speak.

Since he had chosen to keep his words close, I felt honored that he had let me listen to them. I saw a lot of my younger sister in him. She always chose her words, carefully picking the ones she felt were necessary and avoiding others. She was long gone before ever learning how to use her voice. Though, maybe there was hope for this kid.

“My name is Maddox. Maddox Valentine,” I said to him, extending my hand in a gesture meant for respect.

Of course, he already knew my name, but it was the principal of formalities. He stared at my gesture like it was an alien claw before eventually reaching out to accept it.

It wasn’t long after that we arrived back at my classroom, and I continued walking him to my office. This individual stared at my work with more than the typical awe

and adoration. When he viewed the beaten, broken women of my collection, there was lust in his eyes.

I found the portrait I was searching for while he stood awkwardly in the door frame.

“Here, tell me what it is you see,” I demanded, pushing the artwork into his hands.

He paled, and his cheeks flushed. This art piece was one of my favorite sacrifices. The woman’s name was Katheryn. She was a true virgin, and when I was blessed with her as my chosen, I took great liberty in keeping her intact but skirting those lines as dangerously as I could.

Her skin was as white as snow, her eyes wide, and her mouth so beautifully open. This image was right before her body was given to the Divine. She was stripped bare, and her open mouth held a glistening apple.

I had always felt as though Valentine gifted me these women on a platter, and so this artwork reflected that. The metal plate below her was gold, and she was on her stomach with her arms tied to her feet.

“A...woman, sir?” Kieran whispered quietly.

“Of course, it’s a woman, silly boy,” I said, rolling my eyes. “But what do you see ?”

This man could see what I could. I knew it. He needed to say it out loud.

“Pain...seduction...and...”

He hesitated for a moment but then said, “Peace...”

I smiled like a Cheshire cat. “Indeed.”

This kid would make a fine addition to the Divine when he was ready, but I had more pressing matters to attend to for now. “Now, why don’t you run along. I will see you tomorrow for class.”

The man spun around but paused. “But. Your painting?”

“Consider it a gift.”

His eyes widened, and he scurried off.

This kid had strength in him that he didn’t realize. I was going to tap into that and either help him rise or destroy him in the process.

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Chapter two

“ Ghost stories? Don’t be ridiculous.” I snorted at the student in front of me.

I may be weirdly connected to the history of these creepy gothic grounds, but I sure as hell wasn’t believing my dead, great-great-great-something grandmother roamed the halls as a spirit. I loved a haunting story as much as the next girl, but it was too cliché. Ghosts of the women murdered on the grounds of the university?

No. Just no.

“But your name is Vivian Valentine!” the nerd in front of me said before we were shushed. Libraries were not exactly known for chatting, but apparently, writing my name on an assignment was enough to disrupt some unseen balance within the nerd society.

Four people were now standing around, staring at me with bug eyes as I sat in my seat. I wanted to use my book as a shield.

“Vivianna Valentine was the St. Valentine’s wife!” another said again, followed by a crescendo of hushing. “Legend says he murdered her on Valentine’s Day all those years ago, and his friends followed in his footsteps, stabbing their wives, too. It is said that their bones are under the university itself.”

I grimaced. “Ew. That’s dark. But look, dude...I didn’t ask to be related to a freak who supposedly murdered everyone or a poor wife who just loved the wrong man!”

Those shushers glared at me now, and I lowered my voice. “I just want to get the free tuition and learn how to become the best journalist I can be. Is that too much to ask?”

“Do you think you deserve special privilege?” another student spoke up.

“Tu es sanguis meus,” a whispered voice in the air murmured.

Freaked out by the sudden chill in the air, I looked around.

Were these morons trying to scare me?

This prank wasn’t funny. I stood up and grabbed my bag from the chair, turning to quickly get the fuck away from them.

Before I realized anyone was in my path, I walked forward, smashing into a hard-rigged body. I fell onto the ground so fast my head spun. Disoriented, I looked up to see a man with blue eyes, light brown hair, and a smug ass look on his face.

He was dressed differently than a lot of the guys I had seen here. He had a button-up the same as everyone else and slacks on but no blazer. He looked older than the boys I had come across. Mature even, but not grandpa state.

His arms were practically breaking through the seams of his damn shirt, and I cursed myself for wishing that some of those buttons would pop off.

“Mind watching where you’re going, dickhead? Who the fuck do you think you are?” I said from the ground.

He stopped and looked down at me with a smirk, curiosity painting his beautiful features. It was dead silent now, no hushing students at my outburst. I felt a weird sense of foreboding at that, even more than the intrigue in the man’s eyes.

I waited for him to help me up from the floor, but he just stared at me with amusement before walking right over my legs and leaving the library. With his exit, all the people in the space erupted into whispers, and one of the nerds rushed over to help me up.

“Are you crazy?” she hissed, her look of pure panic evident.

She twirled her fingers in her pigtails and looked over to the doorway as if to ensure the man did not return before she spoke.

“That is Maddox Valentine ,” she said. “He is a direct descendant of St. Valentine, like you! And he pretty much owns this school.”

I looked after the man, understanding the arrogance oozing off every gorgeous pore now.

So that asshole owned the murder castle, huh?

“Did his parents forget to teach him manners when they showered him with money and power?”

Gasps sounded around me, and I rolled my eyes. Geez-us...everyone at this school was brainwashed. Maybe free tuition wasn't worth it after all. St. Valentine's University had one, if not the, most prestigious journalism program in the country.

I had to try and make it through this school, at least.

Rich, rude asshole, be damned. They said he worked here, but that didn't mean I had to be near him. He probably did some hoity-toity shit that matched his perfect lapels. I was sure I wouldn't so much as cross paths with him.

My watch alerted me to my class time approaching, and I dusted off my stupid required plaid skirt and itchy tights before saluting the nerds.

“Well, as lovely as this uh...history lesson has been, I have class.”

The dorks glanced my way and exchanged a look with one another.

“What class do you have now?” one of them said.

I looked at my phone, scrolling to the time frame listed and sliding my finger over to the title: “The Innovations of Art and Illustrations.”

Some in the group snickered, while others looked even more sympathetic than when I told them my name. “Uh, okay... Well, see ya later, losers.”

I followed the map of the winding paths of the castle-like university, trying to navigate to my stupid lecture. Hopefully, whoever this eccentric human was, the art professor would take some pity on the new kid being late.

I was already halfway through the semester and would need to retake all these courses because I transferred so late, but I figured that getting acquainted with extra classes and information was a win-win for me.

I was only a sophomore, and my mother wanted me to get acquainted with the sorority.

Technically, I was a legacy, but I didn’t want anything to do with it despite sharing housing. I planned on tricking my mom when she came to visit.

That life was her dream, and she already lived it. I was tired of living in her world. I actually had a shot at being my own person here.

The nerds' gasps and spazzing came to my mind, and I sighed.

Maybe not my own person, after all. Now, I'd be living in Vivianna Valentine's shadow.

The door to the art room was at the very fucking back of one of the hallways, and I was out of breath from the number of stairs I had climbed to reach the stupid place. I took a deep breath, peeking into the door and seeing easels and students with smocks diligently working on their art.

I couldn't see any professor-looking people, so I quickly and quietly snuck into the room.

There was an empty space toward the very front, and I snatched a smock from someone's chair and put it on.

"Snooze, you lose," I mumbled as I walked by.

I reached the easel and stood there, looking at the blank canvas and having absolutely zero idea what the fuck to do with it. I picked up a paintbrush and started scribbling red on the paper.

The students in the room were watching me, being careful to busy themselves with their own art. A few kept staring at me in shock, and I glared at them.

"What are you looking at? Do your doodles, douche."

The students' eyes widened, and I smiled, but it was short-lived. The red splotches of my canvas became shadowed. I turned to look and saw the man from the library standing behind me.

“No fucking way,” I said out loud, disbelief making me groan as I rolled my eyes.

The man walked up to me and looked at the red splotches all over the white paper with that stupid, intrigued look in his bright blue eyes.

“Do you always hide in the shadows, waiting to claim someone’s title as your own?” he said, and I fucking lost it.

Screw this asshat for insinuating that just because I was a Valentine, that meant I was somehow trying to use that as a way to overshadow someone else. I wasn’t.

“Listen, fuckface,” I said, getting those stupid gasps again. “I don’t care what my name is. I am proud to be Vivian Valentine. I don’t know my ancestors, nor do I give a flying fuck about them or their history, so just leave me alone.”

It was so quiet that I could hear hearts rapidly beating in the chests of those around me.

“Why are you bothering me? Where is the professor?” I said, turning my head to look around the room.

One of the girls in the back pointed to my side, where the arrogant prick stood.

I paled.

This is my Professor? Just my fucking luck.

“You have my title now, but I am most intrigued by yours.” Professor Dickweed looked at me in surprise.

Like he wasn’t aware of my name, or that, I guess it made us related in some freaky

sort of way. Well, whatever, he was still an asshole.

“Are you truly Vivian Valentine?” He took a vial of some type of liquid out of his smock and moved closer to my paper.

“Yes...why?” I said hesitantly, watching what he was doing.

“How could I have missed this? Hmm. Mouthier than Vivianna ever dared to be, but...”

The vial of liquid was raised above the painting, and he tilted his hand. An unseen mixture was poured onto the parchment, and I gasped as an image of a woman appeared underneath my red smudges.

She was naked, a beautiful illustration appearing before my eyes. The woman looked...like me. She had long dark brown hair, curvy hips, and a formed figure eerily similar to mine. I swallowed and realized my drawing in red looked like blood on the hidden image. A woman that resembled me, now smeared in crimson.

“How-what? I...”

The professor smiled and leaned down for only me to hear.

“Vivian Valentine, you certainly know how to make an entrance. Perhaps it is fate to show the blood on your very own ancestor’s body. A message to us all to know our place.”

I let that sink in—a feeling of dread creeping into my veins like a disease.

Did my ancestor truly resemble me that much? Everything about her, from her breasts to her hips, even the fucking birthmark on her ass cheek.

This was too real.

“Such a sweet, innocent view of the world. Like a little virgin. Vivianna Valentini is translated from Latin. In English, it translates to something quite familiar.”

I shivered and realized I had way more in common than I ever wanted from my very dead ancestor.

“Do you fear the past, Little Virgin?” he whispered, leaning closer to my ear. “Or do you fear knowing that history in one’s blood is fated to repeat itself...Vivian. Valentine?”

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Chapter three

The woman before me looked like stone. Her delicate, freckled face was frozen with both hatred and fear. God, she looked delicious. Her body mirrored the image before her so intricately that it was like the piece was created as if she'd been the model.

I did everything to absolute perfection. And seeing photographs, though they were black and white, of the naked form of my ancestor Vivian Valentine, I was able to recreate those curves and intricate lines of her body.

This woman had too many similarities to the corpse beneath the university. Her bone structure and cheeks were high set, freckled, and blushed with rosy pink, which were almost identical. Her eyes were that familiar blue of my very own, a trait we seemed to all carry. Even her hair looked like wound silk, so dark it was one shade away from being completely black.

"Who the fuck is this?" the woman demanded, pointing to the portrait she covered in crude red slash marks.

It looked like blood. Was this an omen for the beautiful woman in front of me? Doomed to repeat the life written in the blood of the past? How tragically ironic.

"Quite a naughty mouth on you. This is the second time we have met, and yet you've had your words filled with curses both times. It's so flattering to see you have such a passion for seeing me, Pet."

"My name is Vivian. I go by Vivvy sometimes, but I'm certainly not your damn

pet...Again, who is the woman in this portrait?"

I looked at the irritation painting her features, unable to prevent myself from grinning.

"I think you know exactly who she is, Vivian."

She scoffed and tried to back away from me. "I think you drew me naked, you pervert."

I laughed, knowing she couldn't possibly know my secret.

"Well, perhaps you should be our nude model for us today so that we can decipher differences and similarities. What do you say?"

Now she laughed, completely exasperated.

"How would you even know what a dead woman from so long ago would look like naked? Isn't that your ancestor? That's just gross, dude."

"Nakedness is nothing to be ashamed of, dude," I said, parroting her uneducated terminology so she could hear how dumb it sounded. "It is perfectly normal, Little Virgin."

"How about you just fuck off?" Her flushed cheeks flamed bright red.

I smiled wider, backing away from her and raising my hands in surrender. "Fucking off."

The smug grin I got in return made my cock swell.

“Oh, such a good boy.” Disdain dripped from her tone.

This woman was clearly used to dominating her pathetic toys, and the thought of putting her in her place was more than intoxicating.

Vivian was going to be my little virgin sacrifice for this Valentine’s year. She was my Chosen. It was my turn to give an offering to the council, and then the fourteen would repeat the cycle again. Castien told me that Vivian Valentine was arriving at the university late, but she certainly took her sweet time to arrive.

I suppose enticing her with the riches and amenities that St. Valentine’s offered proved more difficult than with others. She would have free tuition. That much alone would be enough to entice any poor, lowly student to the high ranks, but she seemed unmotivated by something so trivial. It made me wonder.

What was the enticing factor that finally brought her to my humble abode?

I walked away from Vivian and made my way to the back room where my office was held. The children immediately started bickering and speaking in hushed tones, but I couldn’t care less to direct them.

Tapping a few buttons on my phone, I stared as the pairing function began. I’d paid the tech students a lot of money to be able to do this, and it was worth every penny.

Within moments, an exact replica of Vivian’s display on her cell’s screen popped up on mine.

Now, I could follow everything that my Little Virgin had—all her transcripts, text messages, delicious photos, and my personal favorite—access to her security camera app.

It showed that she had a dormitory with that annoying sorority here on campus, but she also had her little house.

Either way, her pictures were the perfect way to portray her body so precisely. I'd spent hours using the charcoal to replicate every single inch of her exquisite curves. Her photographs were so timeless that her innocence was shown in the way she posed against the wall.

She didn't have videos of using any sex toys, so nothing remotely scandalous. For the mouth that she had, there was purity in her body and anything related to sexuality. I couldn't wait to break my Little Virgin.

I wouldn't let her die without experiencing every single thing I could offer her in the way of destroying her cunt and spirit.

The Valentine's charity event was a perfect opportunity. One could buy a professor for the weekend to be their 'Valentine.' Vivian seemed harmless. I knew she would be on her knees praying to whatever god she believed in when I had her in my grasp.

Scrolling through her calendar, I found her course schedule. Her classes were all over the place, not making sense in any regard, but one, journalism. Ah, this woman wanted to be up everyone's ass. Maybe she would appreciate knowing that I'd been the one snooping in her life. Slowly unraveling it bit by bit so I could recreate it from scratch.

Putting down my phone, I turned on the camera on my desk to spy on the classroom. Zooming in on the face of the feisty Little Virgin, I listened as another girl comforted her.

"He can be a bit much...but that's Maddox Valentine for you. You're new here, right? I'm Teagan."

Seeing my prey sniffing like she was offended at the truth being presented to her was intriguing. Perhaps I needed to have a more subtle approach. I was not good at subtlety. This woman seemed strong in some ways but so incredibly weak in others.

When my hands are wrapped around her throat, would she be so breakable? Or would she fight me, like the bad girl she portrayed?

I hummed with need at the thought. I couldn't wait to have this woman underneath me. The charity was just a day away. I needed to play nice so I could get her attention. If she didn't bid on my name, I would need to kill whatever moron did.

Her body responded to me already. I knew that. It was evident in the way the flush of her cheeks spread down to where no eyes could see. I needed to lick that flush on her skin, taste the salt of her sweat, and feel the shakes of her fear.

"Vivvy Valentine. Though, admittedly, I have never hated my name so much until arriving here."

Her classmate looked sympathetic to her cause, coddling 'Vivvy' like an infant. How could she take such a classic and beautiful name and sully it by making it equivalent to something some intelligible child called a stuffed animal?

I cracked my neck, unbuttoning the top of my shirt to try to cool off the visceral response my body was experiencing from this girl.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I must be excited for the kill and to deflower this pretty virgin.

The Divine sacrificed so many 'virgins' before, but not a real one, not in a long time. We had to resort to those who only used toys or sucked a dick or two. Everyone was

such a whore nowadays, and purity of the body was less common than white deer in the forests.

But just like the finest hunters, I would claim the ultimate prey as my own. This pure white deer would bleed so beautifully for me. By the time she made it to the altar, she would already be begging for death.

Quickly, I made a call to the priest at the chapel. I gave him exclusive orders to keep everyone out.

“Tell them it is a mold issue,” I said, my tone clear that there was no other option.

And I knew he would follow my command. I wanted to make sure I would have time to play with her, break her body, and torment her spirit. She would be ready to give us her life on Valentine’s Day.

On that night, the clock would chime at the stroke of midnight, and my Little Virgin would be gone. I rubbed a hollow spot on my chest. It was so rare to have a true challenge, and I didn’t want to waste any more time.

Standing from my desk chair, I straightened my clothing, left my office, and returned to the classroom.

“Class.” The students all turned to me when I emerged. “The assignment for today is to tell me a story within your art. Speak to me about your life. Let me see the demons you’ve faced in your past.”

I walked back over to Vivian, parting her new friend from her side by placing myself between them. To the credit of the woman beside her, she stayed close. Maybe this woman would be next on my list, surely a fighter all the same.

With one hand, I pulled the paintbrush dripping in red out of Vivian's grip and drew a curved line on my palm. The female looked at me with caution in her bright eyes. She didn't back away, but there was fear there. I waited for a moment, staring at my mark, and then went back to Vivian.

"For now, Little Virgin, you have to forget the past and simply learn one thing."

She narrowed her eyes, waiting for me to continue.

"Don't forget—" I leaned down to her eye level and pressed my marked hand against my mouth. "To smile ."

I pulled my hand from my lips slowly. That fear increased in her eyes as she swallowed. The classroom was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. There was a whiteboard nailed to the back wall of my class, which was never used but kept for the aesthetic of a classroom vibe against the feel of the old castle we worked in.

Right now, I could see my reflection, a large, bloody red smile coating my lips, the red paint dripping down the corners of my mouth and onto the white of my shirt.

My prey didn't realize what stood before her—I was her past...present, and what she had left of her future.

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Chapter four

“ W ho does he fucking think he is? I swear to every god of all religions that I will make him pay for being a creep to me! I need to drop his class. Geez-us, I can’t do this.”

My new friend Teagan sympathetically smiled as we walked to the next class together. That seemed to be her go-to reaction, which, admittedly, in her situation, I would do the same.

How else are you supposed to react when you become friends with a woman who randomly popped up at your university that has this weird, secretive fucking vibe and then gets eye fucked and harassed by the hot art professor...

“I honestly don’t know. He is usually quiet. He just does his paintings in the back or hides out in his office. That class was just drawing dick pics in a blob of random portraits before today.” Teagan stated so calmly as we took our seats, waiting for the professor to show.

I scoffed at that news, trying to focus on the one class I wanted to learn so badly. This was my fucking chance to become what I desired the most. I could be a journalist. I could be the one to find out others’ stories and tell the world exactly how they wanted it to be told.

I wouldn’t be one of the assholes that warped someone’s lives for their own narrative. That wasn’t me. I needed to do this...for my fucking ancestor that lost her life for this damn fucked up university.

Your future is written in the history, Little Vivvy.

I blinked and looked at Teagan, my head jolting up like she electrocuted me.

“What did you say?” I said tentatively, holding my bag to my chest as if it could protect me from the words spoken.

“I said he’s not usually like that—”

“No, after that,” I quickly cut her off.

Teagan looked at me, her beautiful features now resembling that I must look like a loon from Crazy Town.

“Something about my past and future?” I said to her again, praying she would know and repeat those whispered words I heard.

“Huh? I didn’t...Are you okay, Vivvy?”

I shook my head and plastered a smile on my face. After the image of that creep, with his crimson smile smeared on his hand, popped into my mind, I dropped the subject, shaking my head again.

“Yeah. Yeah, I am good. I am just excited about the future, you know? Journalism.”

Teagan still looked unsure and, at this point, probably concerned for my mental health.

“Journalism...yaaay...” I brought my hands up in a mock celebration. Apparently, it didn’t work.

My half-enthusiastic cheer made me feel even more insane than I probably looked, but Teagan left it alone. Instead, she handed me her notes from the previous classes I'd missed so I could do a crash course to catch up.

I looked at the red handwriting, trying to get an idea of the material, but all I kept seeing was that stupid fucking painted smile. This man was messing up the one thing that mattered the most to me.

I groaned and adjusted in my seat, trying my best to listen to the professor as he began to drone on about something I didn't know shit about. This was hopeless. I sighed and squeezed Teagan's hand.

"I can't follow this. I need to catch up with the notes first. Is it okay if I give these back in a bit?" I loudly whispered to her.

She nodded. "Yeah, I live at the dormitory across the creepy ass bridge, so just bring them by when you're done."

I raised my brows in surprise but also was happy to know that at least my new and only friend lived in the dorms, too. I had an apartment outside of this place, but to feel normal, I had paid for the dorm room, too. I didn't want people to know I was a weirdo with two places, but a girl needed her space.

Especially a girl that had some creepy lady's voice in her head...

Who was it that I was hearing?

A strange knowing hummed in my blood, and I knew the answer—Vivianna Valentini—my grandmother.

"What building?" I said, hopeful that we were at least close.

“XI Phi Delta sorority house,” she said with a smile.

My mouth dropped open, and I covered it to contain my squeal. “Me too! My mom was a legacy in XI Phi Delta!” I practically lunged at her for a hug.

She returned my embrace with a laugh and joined my semi-silent mini-dance party. The professor paused and gave us stern looks before continuing the lecture. Ignoring Professor Fun sucker, I pulled up my map with the information of the dorm number, and we both squeaked louder.

“We are roommates, and you’re a legacy? Damn girl, it was meant to be. Call it fate.”

One good thing happened today. I may have made an enemy, but I also made a friend.

The study was quiet, not like the library. At this place, you could hear the consistent clacking of keyboards as students wrote papers, scrolled socials, and did whatever else their laptop amenities offered them.

I couldn’t focus.

Every time I looked at the notes, I just kept flashing back to that smile.

Why was I so fucking bothered over a stupid creep professor?

What I really needed to do was walk my ass over to the admin office and get a drop form for his class.

I sighed, putting the neatly written notes down and setting up my computer. As soon as I got it all ready to go, instead of looking up all the journalism terminology I didn’t know or pulling up the administrative drop forms, I was cyber-stalking my professor

like an absolute dumbass.

Maddox Valentine was as arrogant and annoying on his socials as he was in person. His pages were filled with images of dangerously delicious gym selfies, group pics with hot guys—likely his friends or maybe relatives—and, of course, there was a photo of a big ass dog drooling on his face while he gave it a belly rub.

I dove deep into his life.

Finding out that he not only worked here but did, in fact, practically own the fucking school. His father, and a big group of other stuffy-looking, hot rich assholes, were ‘beneficiaries’ of this place.

I didn’t have to guess that meant his yacht pictures and travel videos were all real.

This man was everywhere, and I felt so jealous that I had only been in my backyard and at this stupid school.

I lived in the shadow of my mother before this place, and now my apparent history plagued me as sure as that blood coating the drawing of what could have been my own body. I kept scrolling.

There was a separate page for his art, thousands of pictures and videos of all these absolutely breathtaking portraits and body illustrations of women. They were so real. Drawn in ways that looked tortured yet seductive.

There were women bound and gagged, strung up, and tied in all contorted angles. Some of the artwork made me wonder how it was legal to portray. I guess that was only one thing that a rich professor dickhole could get away with.

One question still remained, though. All these women had one thing in common.

Despite their tortured appearance, their expressions were euphoric.

How could someone be in bliss when they were fucking sliced, bound, and bloody like the photos represented?

“I can’t focus!”

All the heads in the room swiveled toward my direction, and I realized I said that out loud. Apparently, I was making a name for myself as the fucking crazy woman who spoke to herself. I groaned and slammed my laptop shut.

This stupid asshole had blown up my life in one damn day. This was not how things were supposed to be going.

When did I go all scared little doe in front of an ass nugget? He may be my professor, but he sure as hell will not be for long.

Seeing red, I smashed my fingers on the keys, sending that drop form to the admin email so fast I barely tracked it with my eyes. When I finished that, I smiled wider than I had since entering the damn gates of this hell.

I reached into my backpack and grabbed my black lipstick. I didn’t know what badass demon entered my blood, but I was going to ride that bitch all the way to the top of the academy and to the back room where his classroom was.

I was on a whole other level right now, and nothing was going to stop me from giving him a piece of my damn mind. I peeked through the door, afraid I would lose this adrenaline and anger before I opened it.

Strength is the tone of your very bloodline, child.

Agreeing with the whispered tones of my dead grandparent, I sighed and walked into the classroom. More like threw open the door and marched my way to the back where he was intently creating one of those ‘masterpieces.’

Annoyingly, we were the only ones in here.

He must not have classes at this hour, and that pissed me off more because I wanted an audience to see him cower to me and apologize for being a creepy asshole.

“Well, isn’t this an interesting surprise,” he said, barely lifting his head to acknowledge my existence.

“Did you return to be that nude model by chance?”

I flushed bright red and shook my head in anger.

“No, actually. I came to tell you that you are a fucking prick, and I will make you pay for that little show earlier. You think you’re some hot shit professor and probably get whatever you want with all your stupid money.

But hear me when I say that I don’t give a fuck what luxury yachts you own or places in the world you’ve weasled your way into. You are a dick. Pure and simple.”

Now, his attention was fully on me, and I suddenly regretted this grand idea. The lights above us were no longer bright, like when class was in session. Now, they were dimmed, and a red light for the kiln in the back of the space was all you could really see.

The professor smiled with a downright predatory grin. He approached me, taking slow steps forward as I resisted the urge to move back.

“I heard you,” he said, his movements reminding me of a snake—beautiful, slow, dangerous.

“What I also heard is you have been stalking me. How cute.”

I blushed harder.

Shit.

Rule number one of journalism was not to let your fucking opponent know what you knew. Never reveal the cards in your hand so that you could play your hand against them.

I held the lipstick in my grip, shaking slightly at his scrutiny. He was walking around me now, eyeing me up and down like he was memorizing every inch of my body. Before I knew what was happening, the snake struck.

One minute, I was standing in the center of the room by the easel. The next, I was pinned against the wall by the tall, cruel man in front of me.

He grabbed the lipstick from my hand, pulling it free and staring at it with intrigue.

“What did you intend to do with this, Little Virgin?” he said as he moved my hair away from my shoulder and toyed with my tie.

“I-I...This was a mistake. Let me go.”

“No, no.” The professor tsked. “I asked a question, and I expect an answer.”

“You are not my fucking professor anymore!” I growled, yanking away from his grip.

“Let me go.”

He raised his brows.

“Oh? Why? You didn’t like my drawing? How sad,” he mocked.

I scoffed. “You are a real fucking creep.”

Professor Valentine laughed, and my body vibrated deeply with his vibrato.

“So,” he said, a dangerous look entering his eyes. “You mean to tell me that you are just another ordinary female inside my classroom?”

I stiffened, unsure how that should matter.

“I...” I didn’t know what to say.

He pulled my tie from my neck, and the action caused me to fly forward into his arms. The fabric ripped, and my sound of surprise was cut off when he stuffed my lips with the material.

“Shh, Little Virgin. You have such a filthy mouth. It is so much better when you’re silent.”

I struggled against him, but his grip on my body was like iron. His other hand pushed my blazer off, leaving me in my button-down. Genuine fear coursed through me. He couldn’t be about to...

“Please...” I mumbled through the tie.

He snickered. “Oh, hush child. I am just checking my work. Be still.”

His work? There is no way he could have drawn me naked. How would he know so

much about my body? No one knew because no one besides myself had ever witnessed it.

This man shoved me hard toward his office, and a feeling of dread spread through me. He pushed me through the door and grabbed a yardstick from the long desk inside.

The space had kilns and featured art hung on the walls. It was his own little world, and he just threw me in here to be what? A part of his fucked up collection?

I struggled again.

“I said be still, woman. If I need to, I will tie you down. But we wouldn’t want that pretty pale skin of yours to have marks, now would we?”

I froze, and he slowly let me go. Spitting out the gag, the freedom to breathe rushed into my lungs, and I worked fast, dodging him and aiming for the door. He caught me in one swift motion, and I was thrown back so hard into the wall that I felt dizzy.

“Ow...” I said in a daze. I saw his cruel face three times as the images warbled in front of me as I was dragged to...

“You son of a—”

“Now you have gone and messed up my vision. Do you enjoy being punished, Little Virgin?”

The three professors continued to dance in my view, and I swatted my hands at them, but I only felt air. He moved quickly, bending me over his desk before I knew what was even happening.

“Oh, so feisty. I do love your spirit, and I will take that as a resounding yes .”

I couldn't track his hands, but when I felt the stinging lash across my ass, I squeaked. The tie was shoved back in my mouth as I opened wide to scream. My hands were pulled behind me.

Tears fell from my eyes from the sting. I was humiliated. He just...spanked me.

“Such a naughty girl needs to be taught a lesson in obedience.”

Another whap cracked across my flesh, and I hissed. He pulled my arms harder with one hand while using the plaid red and black uniform to restrain my wrists.

I pushed at the tie with my tongue, but it was only shoved deeper when he noticed. Trying this method was tedious and made me choke.

“Let me hear you count, Little Virgin,” he demanded. “If you obey, I will remove the gag.”

I laughed without humor and pulled my head away from him. I did count. In my head. Each thrash of that damn wood as it stung against my body.

One.

Crack.

Two.

Crack.

Three.

Crack.

Four.

Crack.

Five.

Five times, he used that thing to hit me.

Five fucking times.

I gritted my teeth, anger and...something else overcoming me.

Was I...wet?

To my horror, I realized my panties felt cold, and I was dripping down my thighs. How could I like this? Shame and fury overtook me. I wanted him to stop, but I needed more at the same time. I didn't move.

"Oh, Little Virgin. Now, This is interesting," he said, using that stupid yardstick to lift up my skirt.

My panties were white and soaked through. I gritted my teeth, drool escaping my lips and falling onto the desk in front of me. My arms hurt at the angle he'd bent them, and the fabric chaffed the skin around my wrists.

"Leave me alone!" I tried to scream through the gag, but he used the yardstick to pop the buttons of my skirt before he shoved the zipper down.

I could only watch my reflection in the mirror on the desk. I had a front-row view of

the humiliation happening behind me.

My skirt fell to my feet, my stockings and drenched panties the last thing covering my bruised ass. I still had my button-up on.

If I could get him to lift me up, it would be long enough to drape down and hide my body.

I pushed at his chest with my back, trying to sit up. He flipped me over so hard that I fell backward. My hands were still restrained when he threw me onto his desk and stared down at me with pure sadistic humor in his blue eyes.

“You asked for this, Little Virgin. You’d do well to remember that.”

I fought to free my hands, his grip finally letting go of my blazer so I could move my arms through the sleeves before I froze...

Just like that, my underwear was ripped off my body. Not slow and torturous like the rest of my clothes, nope, just yanked to where it cut my thighs as he completely tore the fabric off.

I stared at my professor in disbelief, my naked pussy dripping and bare for his eyes to devour. He looked mesmerized, and I took advantage. I finally pulled my arms out of the jacket, spit out the gag, and scrambled down to grab my skirt.

He caught me around the waist, spinning me around before pressing his body in between my thighs and twirling the lipstick in my face that he’d taken from me.

I was breathing so heavy. He had me against the desk and slowly unbuttoned my shirt while all I could do was watch in disgust. I wanted to fight. I wanted to humiliate him like this. Bare his body for my own satisfaction.

But he had me right where he wanted.

“Oh, Little Virgin,” he said in a dreamlike state, using his teeth to bite off the top and spit it on the ground. “You will be my greatest work of art when I am through with you—my very own rare white stag in a forest of black. There is one word to describe you now.”

The lipstick felt cold on my skin, oily, and hard. He pushed it onto my chest, gliding down to my stomach and finally wrapping it near my hips—an image, a word, a message.

I was in shock. My entire being was shaking

I couldn't move.

I couldn't simply look down to see what was written on my skin with my makeup.

He smiled at me, picking up my blazer from the floor and draping it over my legs before grabbing a portrait on the ground and walking out of the office entirely. At the doorway, he paused, and his shadow swallowed my entire form.

“Until we meet again, Ms. Valentine.”

I lay there, unable to think for a minute, not daring to move until I was sure he was really gone. I stared at the mirror in front of me, lifting up from the desk. The word was so blatantly written in script on my body. One word that felt so strange, especially after the events that had just happened.

DIVINE.

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Chapter five

Walking away from the woman without completely defiling her body, mind, and spirit was a criminal offense to my very bloodline...but there would be time.

My plan was put into action, and based on the seething, stomping, and angered ranting in my office, it was clear that she would definitely take advantage of my little gift to her.

Pulling out the crumpled charity note from the cafeteria and dropping it by the door, I gave my Little Virgin one last look before walking away.

I needed to find my moronic little brother.

We were going hunting tonight, and I wasn't about to miss the cloak of the darkness because the fucker was holed up drunk or with some random woman again.

I punched his number in my phone and waited. It was at the second to last ring that he finally picked up.

“Sup, Buzzkill?”

Rolling my eyes, I ignored his greeting. I gave up partying like a moron a long time ago. I had a business and the Divine to run. I couldn't be caught with my pants down around the members in this society.

We were everywhere—staff and students alike—the entire castle of St. Valentine's

was a pool of the Divine Valentine...and I ruled them all. How would people feel if they found their king passed out drunk in a custodial closet like my darling brother had been so many times?

If that man wasn't drinking, he was fucking. I started to wonder if he ever ate to replenish his strength, at least. He must because he ruled the ice hockey team, and among his lackeys there, they had to have thrown bread at him occasionally.

I didn't have chats with my brother about what the fuck he was eating. Anytime we talked, it was business. He would never know just how much I checked up on him to make sure the dumbass was alive.

"Are you prepared for the hunting trip, Hayes?" I said, arriving back at my apartment just shy of the campus. I was actually the one late from my time with Vivian, but I certainly wasn't going to inform Hayes about that. He blew off anything regarding The Society.

It was a hassle just to get him to attend the rituals and meetings. When it came to business, I kept my mouth shut. He would learn on his own that he can't escape our bloodline. If the scars on my body didn't tell him enough already, he would learn the hard way.

"You are the one who's late. What's got your panties all riled up?"

Again, I ignored him, grabbing my rifle, knife, and hunting bag from my bedroom.

"Meet me at the bridge at the university. And for the love of god, keep your damn hood on, and don't forget your mask. We don't need your groupies fucking up our hunt."

My brother laughed without humor. "Is there a reason you constantly make me kill

people I fuck, Mads?”

Now, I snorted. “Well, Hayes, perhaps if you hadn’t fucked more than half of the women on campus, then you wouldn’t be shaken up about practicing for the rituals with their deaths.”

My body count for sex wasn’t much lower than my kills, but at least I was discreet about it. I couldn’t keep track of the number of times when I was warned that some female was plotting the demise of my brother. I was the one to have to clean up after his stupid messes. It had been that way since our sister died...

That night was still the one that haunted me the most.

Tonight was the night that I had to switch from killing deer to ending a human life. I felt sick at the thought as I grabbed my rifle, knife, and hunting bag. The skeletal mask felt the heaviest in my hands. Humans were so much larger than deer.

Any game I had caught, struggled, and I enjoyed that fight, but a human...they spoke. How was I going to feel when the cries of pain were spoken in English?

Liberty walked to the door and blocked my exit. “Maddox. This is wrong. You know it. Why do you always listen to your father? Why can’t you just make a decision for yourself? If you do this, you will never be the same person again.”

I sighed and patted my sister’s shoulder. “Libby, I don’t have a choice. We both know this.”

Libby frowned, tears falling down her rosy cheeks as she stretched her arms wider to block me.

“You always have a choice, Mads. This is wrong. You are not dad. You aren’t St.

Valentine. You are Maddox. But if you do this, you are no better than any of them.”

I gritted my teeth together, trying to think of what I could show Liberty. I had no choice any more than all those before me. The mask felt heavier in my grip as my hands shook.

The Divine had owned me since the second I was born.

My bloodline was a brand of my fate, and if I didn’t kill, I would be killed. Simple as that. Survival was too important. Running would only keep me safe for so long.

“Maddox...please...” I pulled my little sister into a hug.

She and Hayes were all I ever wanted in this fucked up life of ours. If I had it my way, I would run away with them, hold them close, and never let the Divine touch them.

My father walked out of the bedroom, a black cloak in his hand. I swallowed. I was twenty years old. Just a few more days and I would be in that damn cloak before all of the Divine while they carved their name into my skin.

Run...

The thought was so constant it made me sick, but like all of those who ran from me...it was useless.

My father placed a picture in my hand. It was a small square image of a beautiful woman. She looked so much like my little sister, which was unsettling.

“This is your target, Maddox. Aim strong and aim true. You have one chance to prove you are ready to accept your birthright to the council, or you are no good to any

of us. That weak heart of yours will be the death of you. Tonight, your hands are with the Divine. You present the sacrifice. Wear our symbol as you make the kill, and do not fail me, or I will gut you myself.”

I knew this woman. Her name was Abigail. I didn’t know much else, but her entire life was written on the back of the photograph.

My sister didn’t move when our father turned to her. “Move, you ignorant child.”

Liberty was seventeen. She wasn’t a child, but our father never treated her anything more than a maid left in mother’s stead. She looked over at me, her deep brown eyes pleading.

“I said move!” The strike of father’s hand landed on her cheek, and her body went flying to the side. I went to reach her, but his arm blocked me, yanking the mask out of my hand and jabbing it into my chest.

“Maddox. Go. You have a job to do. Leave your sister where she lies. She knew what would come of defying me.”

Tears fell down my cheeks, and my sister was lying unconscious on the ground, blood on her face and dress. I forced my feet to move. I couldn’t fail. I may as well put the rifle to my head and pull the trigger myself...

A knock on the door jolted me from my memories, and I shook my head, walking to answer it. It was Phoenix.

“Brother. Do you have the details I asked about for the charity event? What is the gossip surrounding the Divine right now? I am about to take Hayes on another hunting trip. I need him to understand that he can’t fucking run. Look what happened to me. If the council does that to him...I will kill them all.”

Phoenix nodded his head, his lips in a fine line. “Yeah, Mads, The Divine is talking about Vivian. They are getting anxious that Valentine’s Day is coming up soon. There are some people saying they wish your dad were still in charge.”

I laughed without humor. “Interesting. I had been in charge for fourteen years, yet still, some members of the council wanted the barbaric, useless old ways. I have had continuous victories with each reaping. There has never been a better success rate of sacrifices since I picked up that dagger.”

Phoenix nodded again. “I agree, my brother. I hate your old man. You know that. He’s the reason all these fucking ghost stories surround the university. When your dad was in charge, he was so blasé. He didn’t care about keeping The Society a secret when it came to getting his perfect sacrifice. You brought some form of order to the Divine.”

I sighed. Old fucking men would never see a reason for change. The cognitive dissonance was too strong for them to see success. The other founders’ descendants were angry at me, too, but I wondered how much of that was lack of power. I could erase their positions as fast as they received them.

Some of these members were practically babies.

It was a fucking shit show to try to teach these people all over again. Every year, I was losing brain cells with every hunt I had to show. And worst of all, my brother should be the next leader, but if he didn’t get into the program, he would ruin it, and it would be a complete loss.

Another line would take power...or worse—my father.

“Thank you, my friend. What of the preparations for the ceremony? Is everything ready, minus Vivian?”

Phoenix made a sound through his teeth. “Well, not exactly, but it will be. Just need to remind some people of their place. Won’t take long.”

I smiled, and I expressed my sympathies to whoever needed an adjustment from Phoenix. I knew firsthand from our sparring that the man could hold his own. He was one of the few men in this world I actually considered a friend. He knew as well as I that you couldn’t escape your fate. Ours was written in our blood.

It always would be...

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Chapter six

It was way too late at night to sneak around in the library, but here I was, using the computers in the darkness. The librarians had all left, and the lights were shut off for the night. I was only able to sneak in here through an open window, but I needed to know what was up with this place. Was it always a shit show?

The paper in my pocket burned with my thoughts of revenge. The asshole treated me like cattle. Well, the joke was on him. Tomorrow, I was going to buy his stupid ass at the auction and lead him to social slaughter.

Your anger will set the path of your fate. Run child...while you still can.

I jolted from the whispered words in the air, swiveling my head from side to side to see who was there.

Nobody but me...

“Who are you? Are you really my grandmother?” I said, my hands shaking as I peered into the dark areas of the room. The only light I had was the moon from outside and the glow of the laptop screens.

Apparently, this was a one-sided conversation with a ghost. They didn’t want to respond when I talked to them. It was exclusive to spoken omens only.

“Okay then,” I mumbled.

I typed another search in the browser, waiting for the screen to load and show me the old-school black-and-white images of news articles.

Vivian Valentine and fourteen other women have gone missing.

Vivian Valentine and fourteen other women are thought to have been murdered. Ongoing investigations by local police show no traces of any of them leaving the premises alone from Valentum Drive.

Saint Valentine and the other husbands of the missing wives said they were unsure where the women were, and their alibis were each other.

Fourteen women were murdered in a ritualistic manner on Valentum Drive. Husbands are not commenting on the evidence found of their wives' bones on the grounds.

St. Valentine and his fourteen companions have commissioned the building of a university on the old burial ground of the slain fourteen.

St. Valentine and his late wife, Vivian, leave their fortune to their fourteen sons.

Our dear St. Valentine's legacy will continue through his bloodline. His dearest of friends have all had hands in this school. We only hope it doesn't crumble like the bones beneath it.

St. Valentine University is said to be one of the country's most prestigious and sought-after universities!

St. Valentine has perished. He had one request in his will, later to be scrawled on his tombstone at the mausoleum built to house the fourteen founders.

“Sepulcrum meum ubi vita mea coepit. Sanguis meus est sanguis tuus. Ego sum Divinus.”

“Bury me where my life began. My blood is your blood. I am Divine.”

An offhand site led me to a personal blog of some podcaster where I listened to the news report.

“Every year since that old dead dude built the school, there have been multiple missing females. They are all about the same age range, and they all recently arrived at the school. Get this! They all go missing on the same day. Yep, you guessed it—Valentine’s Day. I may not be a cop, but that, to me, reads suspicious. Maybe if St. Valentine’s University didn’t have so much money pulling in every brick of the fucking castle that it is, there would be some more time put into finding out where all these girls magically disappeared to. If you ask me, I think it’s a cult...”

My eyes widened as I read the words. ‘A cult...’

I knew of the darkness that seemed to surround this place. It was hard not to see, but was it a cult? That seemed a bit much. I needed to do some more research into this. One thing I now knew for sure was that my ancestor was definitely murdered right here...so I guess those rumors were more than just ghost stories.

Did they build this school on the bones of their dead wives?

Something wasn’t adding up. I searched for my last name.

I saw a line of people from all walks of life. My lineage was filled with bastards galore because none of my ancestors could keep it in their damn pants. I couldn’t tell how far apart our history was, but that douche-hole Maddox and I were somehow distantly related.

Isn't he my fourth cousin, according to this information?

That made what he did to me even more fucked up. Who humiliates their own distant relative?

Run child...The hunt approaches.

I jumped in my seat, knocking off the papers of notes I had written since my investigation had begun.

"Dammit! Listen, if you really are my dead great, great, great, great grandmother, can you please stop scaring me? I don't respond to riddles! Just be more direct, for fuck's sake!"

The window across from me rattled, and the blinds flew up. I screamed as the moonlight poured in from outside.

The wind stopped, and the air became silent. Apparently, my ancestor was pissed and now throwing a tantrum. I squinted my eyes and saw figures outside the window. They were cloaked in black hoodies, bags on their shoulders, and conversing on the creepy bridge that led to the dorms.

I hid under the window, peering through from the safety at the bottom. I couldn't see shit about them, but there was a menacing air to the way they stood.

Those stupid hoodies blocked their faces, and I tried to see if they would face me, allowing themselves to be seen in the streetlamp above them.

The college was surrounded by them. It was all a creepy gothic castle. St. Valentine's was beautiful but definitely belonged in a horror film.

I lifted the window slightly and craned my neck to hear the rushed words from outside.

“Why are you late? You always bitch at me about being punctual, but then you stroll up thirty minutes after our set time?”

The other figure smacked the talking one upside the head and sighed. “I was—you know what? Shut the fuck up. I am here now.”

A woman from the dorms across the way walked outside. I recognized her from the art class. She was not my biggest fan and glared at me for existing. Her name was Charli. The two figures scrambled away from the light and into the shadows.

Well, if that isn’t sketchy as fuck.

I got the absolute worst feeling, sinking deep into my gut.

The hunt begins...

I ignored my ghost ancestor and instead made my way to the library doors, being careful to sneak out and stay out of sight.

I could barely see the two figures in the dark, but they were walking up toward Charli. She was completely unaware of anything, and like the typical generational norm, her face was shoved in her phone. I sighed, fear and irritation swirling in my blood. I had to get her attention.

Taking a deep breath, I took off running. Right as the shadows started to emerge in the light, their hands were outstretched toward my classmate as they came up behind her.

Then they saw me.

“Hey! There you are!” I yelled loudly, earning a glare from the ungrateful woman. The two dark figures receded back into the shadows with a growl.

“Uh... do I know you?” she said.

I forced a laugh and looked over to where the figures had been. The light overhead was so bright that it made everything fuzzy in the dark. I cursed and continued my ruse. “Yes. I uh...you borrowed my sweater.”

The woman raised a brow, and I scratched my head, trying to think of anything to get her back in the dorm. “Yeah, at a party sometime. Anyway, we should head back because it’s cold out. I will tell you more inside.”

She backed away from me when I tried to lead her back toward the dorms.

“No way, weirdo. I am waiting for someone. And you can’t fuck this up.”

Two fucking creepy people that looked like they were about to kidnap you? I wanted to ask, but instead, I said, “Yeah, but I...really need my sweater back tonight. Like right now.”

I feigned coughing to prove a point. It was freezing, and flurries of snow were falling around my head.

Charli sighed. “Chick, I don’t even know what I supposedly borrowed from you.”

I smiled. “No worries, we can find it together in the dorm.”

She checked her phone and sighed. “Whatever. It looks like I got stood up. So, sure.

Let's go."

I realized I had held my breath until that moment. I followed her as she walked to the Delta Phi housing building. When I dared to turn my back, I could see the faintest of silhouettes against the bridge and felt the intensity of their eyes as they glared at me while we walked away.

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Chapter seven

“What the fuck was that? What a cunt.” Hayes was seething, and I was still trying to comprehend how Vivian would end up precisely where she shouldn’t be.

That woman was going to be a real fucking problem. Our target was surrounded by so many people now, and worst of all, my Little Virgin. It was too risky to push the matter. Hayes needed to let her believe he stood her up.

We needed to regroup and figure out a different target.

“Hayes, this is an easy solution. You have enough desperate bitches in your phone that would jump on the opportunity to get a text out of the blue. Where is that prowess you’re always flaunting?”

Hayes shook his head. “I am going to get a reputation as a freak. Not that you care.”

I laughed, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Oh dear brother, I am sure that your magical dick will have stories told about it through the ages.”

My brother threw me off him as I cracked up with full belly laughter that made my sides hurt.

“Hardee-har, asshole. Remind me again why I haven’t shoved my hockey stick up your ass?”

I winked at him. “Keep your kinks to yourself, Haysie boy.”

Truth be told, I loved using random shit as toys, but that was not for my asshole.

“C’mon, enough foreplay. Do eeny, meeny, miny, moe or something. We need to get hunting. I am on edge.”

Hayes shook his head.

“And you say I am the drama queen.”

“You are,” I amended, adjusting my hoodie and watching through the cloud of darkness.

I had a view inside the windows up on the second-story floor of my Little Virgin. She was talking to the one we were supposed to be hunting and peering around outside.

Did she see us? And more importantly, had she recognized me?

“Do you know my chosen?” I said out loud.

Hayes followed my gaze and shook his head. “Nah. She’s hot, though, but clearly a fucking nutball.”

“I like ‘em crazy and broken,” I said, with a low growl in my throat.

Hayes continued to stare at the window with me until Vivian roughly dropped the blinds of the room.

“Yeah, good luck with that.”

The fact that Vivian was such a challenge and not like these meek, mousey women was honestly such a relief.

Ding.

Hayes looked down at his phone and smirked. “Well, looks like we have a bite.”

I rolled my shoulders and looked up one last time at the woman in the dormitory. My Little Virgin may have saved that student from me...but she would never save herself.

“Damn! This bitch can run.”

The adrenaline was thrumming inside my brother’s veins and mine as we ran. We were electrified, deep in the hunt. The first-year lab tech was nearing the end line of the woods. She would soon realize that there was nothing but a cliff to greet her.

She could choose to take her own life by jumping into the dark water below, or she could turn around and face us.

It was always my favorite part to see what choice someone would make, how desperation and hope made people do the stupidest things. There was no other option...jump or turn around.

We could see the female’s pigtailed silhouette running to the end of the tree line toward the cliff. We needed to hurry. It was nearing daybreak. It was much later than I wanted to be out here.

The sun was cracking through the clouds. Hayes was lagging behind, and I turned my body, continuing to run while backward. Adjusting my horned mask onto my face, I hollered back to Hayes.

“Lazy Haysie! Where’s that hockey athleticism?”

Hayes growled and picked up his pace.

“I run on skates, asshole,” he grumbled.

I was taller than my brother, but not by much. He was catching up to me in so many ways, though. His time was nearing to take over me entirely.

He needed to learn.

I wouldn't be here forever to teach him how things worked. He had to appease the Elders and excel overall, including myself. Thinking of the scars riddling my back and shoulders, I flinched.

His own skin depended on it.

“Go away! What is wrong with you?” the female was shrieking.

She must be close enough to see the cliff. The school sat on this type of peninsula. There was a large cliff surrounding all sides but one, and unlucky for her, we were blocking her only means of true escape.

“It's nothing personal, baby,” Hayes drawled, lifting his gun and checking the bullets in the magazine.

I rolled my eyes while my brother flirted with the prey. When would he learn that playing with his food was never a good idea? He approached her while I stayed back a few paces.

Such an insolent fool does not belong in my Divine. It is he that I shall strike.

I growled, shaking my head at the whispered tone around me. The voices did not yet

plague Hayes, but he didn't have much longer to keep peace in his own mind. Everyone was already threatening my brother. When would they realize it would have to be over my dead, cold, lifeless body?

"I really am sorry, Hailey. You would have been a nice little fuck." He stepped up closer, running his hand down her cheek and across her jaw, smirking behind that damn mask.

"Ow! She fucking bit me!" Hayes pulled his hand back, flapping it in the air and looking to see if she had broken skin. The last thing we needed was our DNA connected to a crime scene.

I sighed in exasperation, shaking my head and watching the woman take off back toward my location, dodging my immediate area and trying to swerve around me.

"Hayes—"

He cut me off, sprinting after her with more speed than before.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't start bro."

I lifted my gun, adjusting the silencer and viewing through the scope at the frantic woman as she continued to run. For a lab tech nerd, she was faster than some athletes we had hunted in the past.

Good for her.

She can take that victory to the grave. Unfortunately, no matter how fast she could run, a bullet was faster.

Hayes was still a ways from her, and I calculated my trajectory. I didn't want to hit

any major artery or end her simply from the bullet.

The ritual had to continue.

She needed to be alive.

Closing my eyes for a second and taking a deep breath, I refocused through the scope.

There!

That slight lapse of slowing down, and I had the perfect shot.

The muffled whizz of the bullet soared through the air and made its mark right into her side. There was a soft cry of pain, and then she was down. Hayes got to the sacrifice's location quickly, grabbing her arms and dragging her body along the ground.

The blood trail left on the snow would be seen as nothing more than a deer unlucky enough to meet a hunter. I already had a doe strung up in the back of the university outside near the chapel.

As usual, I would be reprimanded later, but the blood trail was a much-needed distraction to the one we created out here.

"I changed my mind. You would be a shitty lay," Hayes spat.

I rolled my eyes as I got closer to my brother and the downed female. The large oak tree was not far from our location, and I dug into the bag on my back to find the rope.

With one end of the frayed, scratchy material, I looped the binds around the woman's legs, intricate in how I overlapped and created the knots repeatedly. The pressure cut

into her skin, and her dazed whimpering became more audible.

“Let’s continue. Hayes, bring her to the oak.”

The woman fought uselessly as she was dragged along the snow-covered ground, spitting pleas and insults over and over.

“Let me fucking go, you freaks! They will follow the blood, they’ll find me! You won’t get away with this!”

I smiled sympathetically at the woman, pulling out my phone to review the earlier video. It was of the hunt and bloody chase of the white doe now hanging from the tree in the university’s yard. The fact that I had found such a rare breed only made me think of my Little Virgin.

Boom.

The sound on the screen resembled the one just moments before. The cries of the animal as it took its last breaths were a foreshadowing of her upcoming death.

“As you can see, you are no more than a deer’s demise. People will not only be ignorant of your disappearance but also cheer for the meat.”

Hayes laughed. “Yeah, you heard him. You’re about to be fed to your classmates.”

The girl paled and started to whimper, leaning up to rip at the binds around her ankles to no avail.

We arrived at the pine tree, and I grabbed the other end of the rope, threw it over the branch, and pulled the weight of the woman up until she was swinging like the doe back at the chapel.

Her hands were angrily slashing through the air, and her blood soaked the ground below her in a beautiful shade of crimson. Her wound was angry, and she was nearly dead before I could even finish the ritual.

“Hayes, pay attention. Strip her.”

Hayes winked at her glazed face before pulling her clothing apart. She shivered and just cried.

It was always different for people in the end. Sometimes, they succumbed like this to their fate. Others would fight to the very end. On the rare occasion, some would beg to ‘just end it quickly.’

“Sanguis tuus nunc noster est,” I said, grabbing the dagger from my bag and stabbing directly into her lower abdomen.

She convulsed for a few moments, wheezing and staring up at the jutting jeweled weapon protruding from her body. Her eyes were still open, still watching, as I yanked down hard, her body opening and spilling free all the entrails and any remaining blood.

Hayes grimaced like he always did. Evisceration was not his idea of fun, but it was how things must be done. “Collect the body. Good job, brother.”

I walked away, using a cloth to clean the red from the blade. It practically hummed beneath my fingers.

“Sanguis meus fratribus meis pertinet. Ego ad Divinum pertineo.”

“My blood belongs to my brothers. I belong to the Divine.”

The slight sting in my hand as I ran the metal over my flesh was always the worst part for me. Those scars opened again and again with each life we took. I bore the brunt for them all. Hayes would have his time, but for every second of my heartbeat, I would take the pain.

After all, it was called a sacrifice for a reason.

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Chapter eight

I couldn't sleep.

My dreams were filled with those two creepy shadows haunting me, chasing me. I stayed in my dorm, never leaving, fearing those creeps being out there somewhere.

Teagan, my roommate, was worried. I could tell she wanted to help but didn't know how.

I wanted to tell her about last night. I needed to tell someone. I just couldn't shake their cold, unblinking eyes and how they stalked that woman. I needed to keep an eye on her today. I had to keep her away from those shadows.

"Uh... earth to Vivvy?"

I shook my head, looking at the cereal in the bowl. My spoon hovered near my mouth, and I tried to reboot my brain. "Yeah?"

Teagan looked at me with caring eyes. "I said, 'Are you excited about the auction today? I know there's a particular professor you wanted to buy for the weekend.'"

She giggled, but rage began to infuse into my veins. I couldn't fucking wait to buy that asshole. I was going to make him feel the humiliation he inflicted on me. I intended to make him endure every ounce of what he made me feel.

I was playing with a fire that didn't simply extinguish. It continued to burn until there

was nothing left to destroy. I knew this, yet I still felt so much excitement about going into this charity auction today.

“You bet your fine ass I do. He will pay for what he did.”

Teagan kept trying to get me to tell her, but I couldn’t admit that I was left half naked, soaking wet, and mortified in his fucking office. I just couldn’t. The auction was happening at the chapel outside the university. You had to go through that ridiculous maze that was used for drunken parties and speak with the creepy priest that everyone said was a schmuck.

“Listen, Teagan, don’t go anywhere at night, okay?”

Teagan shook her head. “Not you, too. You are already buying into the bullshit legends of this place, and you’ve only been here a few days. There are no scary monster-eating students in the middle of the night.”

I forced a laugh, taking a bite of my soggy cereal. “No, not monsters, but people. Something weird is happening at this school. I don’t trust it.”

Teagan looked curious and shook her head. “Okayyy...You seem really spooked. Are you sure you’re okay?”

I thought about telling her...about the shadows, the stalking, and Charli. Everything...but she would just think I was crazier than I probably was.

“I gotta get ready for the auction. It’s weird going to church. I haven’t been since I was forced to as a kid.”

Teagan laughed, and it sounded musical. “Yeah, well, you may not want to say that out loud. This is a religious school, after all, dork.”

“Right.” I snorted. “I mean, I love Sky Daddy. He and I are on absolutely loving terms.”

Teagan rolled her eyes, smiling, and continued cleaning the kitchen.

I took a sobering shower and tried again to scrub that fucking lipstick off my body. The black smudges were still there. Though not seen, I felt the oily texture on my skin. It was like a brand—‘Divine.’

“What’s the story about Professor Valentine?” I said through the open door of the bathroom.

I had a towel wrapped around me and was using the mirror to put on my makeup.

Teagan was in the living room, but she could hear me easily. Our individual areas were super close to each other. Our other dorm mates were out, so it was just us.

“Besides the fact he’s deliciously hot and broody?” she said.

That was obvious. “Yep. Besides that.”

Teagan looked thoughtful in the reflection of the fogged-up mirror.

“I don’t know. He has a younger brother. He’s hot, too. An asshole jock type, not at all like Maddox.”

A brother...

The image of the two shadows swarmed my mind again, and I coughed, choking on my own tongue.

“You okay?”

I cleared my throat and took a deep breath. “Yeah...I think so.”

I finished getting dressed, making sure my uniform looked extra for tonight. My button-up was definitely not standard for the school. The white top was all but sheer, a corset that showed my lace black bra under it, and I pulled my skirt up a little higher than my thighs today, using a belt to keep it there. I walked out to the living area, and Teagan wolf-whistled.

“You maneater, you.”

I waggled my eyebrows at her, letting out a corny growl. “Yeah, baby. Now let’s go before I chicken out on my hoe-fit and run away.”

Teagan laughed, grabbing her purse and gesturing to the door. “What do you plan on doing to Professor Valentine? Lock him naked in the foretold tunnels under the school and make him do dirty things to you?”

I blushed at the imagery, and she laughed harder.

“I want to strip him naked, all right,” I said, seething from my memories. “But I don’t want him touching me. I want him to freeze his dick off in the cold while students laugh at him, then I want to walk away and take pictures of his sorry ass to print out and replace all that creepy torture art he has in his office.”

My friend became silent for a minute, and I realized that I’d fucked up. “His office? You’ve been there?”

I cleared my throat. “I mean, You’ve seen his socials. Where do you think he keeps all those naked women portraits?”

“I assumed a kinky sex dungeon where his inspo for those poses were created, but I suppose his office makes sense too.”

I shivered. The artwork he was known for was fucked up. Naked women contorted in painful angles, some strung up by their ankles on a tree, others laying on the ground, bleeding from their eyes and mouth. It all scared me.

“He is such a creep. He needs to be taught a lesson he will never forget. The asshole spouts about fate all the time. Well, I intend to make sure he is hated.”

Teagan smiled and shook her head. “The man isn’t winning any kindness awards, sure, but he is too powerful for anyone to hate him, Vivvy. All the people of St. Valentine bow to that man on his good looks alone. When you add in the piles of money and the delicious leering glares, you have the trifecta of a toxic walking red flag. In other words, a complete god.”

I growled. She was right. If I stripped that man naked, people would stare all right, but not in hatred.

“Sorry, girl. You have to admit, though, even you are affected by his dangerous bad-boy charm.”

I made a face, and Teagan cackled.

“I don’t have to admit shit.”

Our phones chimed in unison, and my stomach fluttered. However, I couldn’t say if it was in disgust...or anticipation.

After barely figuring out that stupid maze, we made it to the school chapel. As predicted, the priest was like a character from a bad mobster movie. He reached his

hand out, expecting me to respond.

“Uh...Hi, father?” I said, hesitantly reaching one arm out.

The old gross ass made out with the top of my fingers, and Teagan cracked up beside me while I paled.

“Never give the priest your hand,” she said between bouts of laughter. I looked at the wet spot left on my skin.

“Yep...noted,” I said as I cringed.

We found our seats in the pews of the chapel. This place was beautiful. It followed the same gothic haunting beauty of the university. It was clear they were connected. There was a buffet table where people were taking plates of meat and potatoes, but I felt too nauseous with my restless sleep.

Instead, I watched the students mill in, and at the front, the professors of the school started lining up...all but my professor.

I looked at the people around me. The nerds I knew from before were congregated in a corner of one of the pews. They looked upset, and one of them was missing—the pig-tailed woman.

I tried to shove away the thoughts of the shadows from my mind, but the feeling was so strong that it took my breath away. I stood up from the pews, my ability to breathe escaping me.

Teagan was talking, but I couldn't respond.

I walked toward the back of the chapel, finding an exit away from the creepy priest.

The cold air was sobering, and I took handfuls of breaths, trying to collect myself.

It was quiet back here, with no chattering of students or awful organ music playing in the background.

I leaned against the chapel, noticing the back of the maze led out here. The church was directly in the center of it, and I wondered what was at the end of this massive green wall.

Was it just a trick to lead you on a wild goose chase back to the beginning...or was there something else behind it all?

Walking along the edge of the green shrubbery, I ran my hand on the snow-covered brush. I gasped when, in the snow, I saw...red.

There were speckles of crimson leading deep within the maze. I tried to steady my breathing, walking along the route, following the droplets. It was blood. I could smell the iron even in the cold snow.

Someone was hurt.

Running through this maze?

I continued to follow the blood trail, noticing that the farther into the labyrinth I traveled, the darker and thicker the blood droplets became.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god,” I chanted, that smell of iron getting so strong that it breached the air’s chill.

I arrived at a large opening. The trail turned into larger pools of blood, leading to a massive oak tree. I followed the lake of red, a sinister feeling creeping up my spine. I

shivered, annoyed at myself for my hoe-style of clothing in the freezing weather.

“Hello?” I said stupidly. Like whatever had bled out would answer me.

I couldn’t see anything. The tree was so dark. The higher I looked, the darker it became. The blood trail ended here. No other blood speckles were leading anywhere else.

Confused and thoroughly freaked out, I walked around the thick bark, using my boot to dig into the snow. There was nothing. Nothing at all.

Was I imagining the blood? Was this some fucked up delusion like my grandmother’s voice in my mind?

I blinked a few times, trying to will the blood away.

It didn’t work.

It was still there.

That overpowering metal scent was fresh in my cold nose.

Another sacrifice...Run child...

I started to walk back around and then I saw it, a huge form crashing down from high in the tree. It sprayed me with blood when it connected to the earth. I screamed, horrified at the sight in front of me.

The dead carcass of a white deer was lying contorted on the ground. It was half-skinned and had meat missing from its body. The head was still attached. The eyes glazed and stared at nothing. My stomach roiled with unease, and I ran to the edge of

the maze to vomit.

“Why am I not surprised that you would wander away from the rest of your flock, Little Virgin?”

I jumped a mile high. The voice behind me scared me worse than the unfortunate animal.

It was Maddox Valentine.

I spun around. He was staring at my blood-splattered body with intrigue, licking his lips and eyeing me up and down. I pulled my blazer over my shoulders tighter, trying to block my see-through shirt from his eyes.

“I saw a blood trail. I followed it to...that,” I said, pointing to that poor deer in the snow.

He followed my gaze and shrugged.

“Fair enough. Do you always involve yourself in someone’s hunt?”

That wording made me shiver worse than the chill of the air.

“When someone needs help, I will be there,” I said, raising my chin.

Maddox chuckled, shaking his head.

“Do you think others would share that courtesy? What if it were you running from the hunter?”

Unease smacked into my gut with such force that I had to fight to stay upright.

“But really, how noble of you, Little Virgin. Don’t you know that you can’t fight fate? This magnificent creature was always meant to die. By my own hand. Your interfering wouldn’t have changed that course.”

I shook my head vehemently. “I was too late. I would have stopped it.”

Now, his eyes filled with intrigue, and he began walking closer to me.

I could feel his body heat even in the freezing, frigid air.

“Do you really think that?”

I swallowed hard, unwilling to look him in the eyes, and instead turned back around to stare at the poor doe. “Yes.”

“You aren’t in control of these things, Little Virgin. You may as well save your energy.”

He was right behind me now. That warmth of his body grew to an inferno.

“Yeah, like what?” I challenged, falling right into his trap.

He chuckled and reached his hand around my waist, anchoring my back to his chest.

“Like how your body responds to me, for one,” he all but purred in my ear.

Fear took hold of me, even though I was so stupidly angry at him because...damn him, he was right. I was turned on, but I couldn’t move.

“Just like when I had you bare for me in my office. You were soaking wet. Do you deny that, Vivian? Do you deny your reaction to me?”

I stiffened, his hand toying with the belt holding the band of my skirt. I could see his shadow in front of me. The large black form swallowed my own.

“No,” I admitted.

He moaned, and I could feel his dick press into my lower back.

My mind wouldn't work.

“That's a good girl. It makes things so much easier when you don't try to deny fate, doesn't it?”

I laughed without humor. “That's not fate. That's just biology. Do you need me to draw you a picture?”

He snickered, and I heard the metal clinking of my belt. He unfastened the leather, and his slow, teasing hands were on my skirt, his fingers carefully tracing the hemline.

Whump.

Now, they were pressed against my core. One second later, I was very aware that my skirt had fallen to the snow-covered ground. I gasped at the chill of his hands against my panties.

I didn't dare move.

“I much prefer live demonstrations, Little Virgin,” he growled. “Biology. Fate. Control. It's all the same, really. Either way, you can't stop it.”

He pressed those cold fingers harder onto my pussy, and the friction and chill made

me hiss. I started to move, but he pulled me more firmly against him while using his other hand to make circles onto my sensitive flesh through the fabric of my underwear.

The pressure and pain of the action made me bite my lip. The frigid cold air around us made me shake. I couldn't help but keep my body pressed against him.

"You wanna know something?" he whispered in my ear, slipping those damn fingers inside my underwear and into my core.

"Wh-what?" I said, panting, his hand so foreign, the feeling near painful as he stretched my skin with his thick digits.

I had never felt this before, and I was barely able to breathe through the overwhelming pleasure and pain. Fuck, I'd never even masturbated. This man's hands were the only thing to ever do this to me. And...I loved it.

"I know your secret, Little Virgin." he continued, thrusting his fingers deeper inside me, using his thumb to continue that motion on my clit.

I felt like I was going to pee on him, and I started to squirm out of his hands, but he held me down harder. Every time I moved, he made it more and more difficult.

"You don't really want this to stop. You don't want me to stop. You want this. You need this. For so long, you've resisted any type of pleasure, and your starved body is desperate to feel what I can give you."

I groaned, unable to stop myself from grinding against his palm. He chuckled and sunk his other hand inside my panties...the motion of his thumb rubbing those circles while continuing to pound his fingers into me was...was...

Oh, fuck....

The sloshing of his hands grew louder, the pleasure peaking. My cheeks grew warmer until I was sure they were bright red. I was losing this battle. I was succumbing to my body and his fucking will.

“Admit it, Little Virgin, or I will stop just to prove to you the truth.”

He dug his ridiculously hard cock into my back, hissing in my ear and bending me forward. The amount of stimulation around me was overwhelming. That smell of iron from the deer carcass, the distant sounds of the chattering and organ music in the chapel...it was all too much. I couldn't think straight.

“No. No, I hate this. I hate you. Stop it.”

He laughed harder, but his fingers didn't stop. He turned his hand and was hitting something inside me that felt so good I couldn't do anything but whimper in response.

“Remember this, Little Virgin. You can claim your denial all you want, but your body doesn't lie.”

I wanted to scream at him because this was just biology. This was normal, but it didn't matter. My body felt like it was going to explode. I was going to—

“Come for me. That's it. Let's hear how my Little Virgin screams .”

I did scream, turning my head to bite into his shoulder. I wanted him to feel pain while I felt pleasure. I needed to make him hurt for doing this to me.

My orgasm took over my entire body. It kept going on and on. I never imagined it

would feel like this, and I cursed myself for wasting so many years without feeling these sensations.

I couldn't stop.

I didn't want to stop.

My boots were wet, my stockings, my panties. Everything was like a water balloon bursting inside my core.

I stared down at the huge puddle below me that was melting the snow at our feet. The spell of this moment broke, and I jerked away, turning around to stare at him.

He was sucking his fingers into his mouth, smiling and moaning. I could see his dick jutting out from his pants, and I swallowed hard, trying to stop myself from looking down there.

"I..." I didn't know what to say.

I couldn't say anything. I just stood there for a moment, frozen. I couldn't help but notice the looming dark silhouette of his shadow, his earlier words echoing in my ears.

You will be my greatest work of art when I am through with you—my very own rare white stag in a forest of black. There is one word to describe you now...

I swallowed and turned back to stare at those unblinking eyes of the doe. I couldn't shake the fact that he was a hunter, and hunters were always searching for prey.

Chapter nine

Getting the first taste of my Little Virgin next to such a beautiful kill of mine was such an enticing tease. I watched her run back to the chapel, her squeaks and heavy breathing letting me know exactly where she was.

I resisted the urge to hunt her here and now. My blood was vibrating along with my cock. Every beat of my heart had me pulsating harder. She needed to be on her knees, taking my come down her fucking throat. She was going to pay for leaving me to teeter on the edge of soiling my pants.

“I can hear you so easily, Little Virgin. You need to learn to quiet your footsteps and control your breathing,” I taunted in a dangerous whisper, my fingertips gliding along the maze wall on the opposite side of where she ran.

The squeaks and curses calmed, and I followed her trail in the snow through the maze, keeping one path away from her at all times. She was nearly back to the chapel. I detoured around the hedge, making my way to the exit near the church, but just far enough outside of it that she would run right into me.

I waited, unzipping my pants and preparing to feel her mouth, my cock in hand. I couldn't hear her footsteps anymore. She was heeding my warning and took it to heart.

I listened to the air around me, trying to follow her breathing. She was quiet. Intrigue filled me, and I let go of my dick long enough to cut around the corner and search for her.

A damn woman was leading her out of the maze, back to the church. It was the other girl from my class. I growled, watching the women walk back into the place of 'worship.'

"Fuck," I barked, jerking my dick with angry pulls.

I envisioned her fearful eyes and open mouth.

"Are you ready, Little Virgin?" I panted to the still air around me, the image of her pouty lips so potent I groaned again. My illusion of her was that she was on her knees before me, and I stared down at her pretty face.

"I should make you beg like a whore to taste me," I said, smashing my hand down repeatedly. "You naughty brat."

Continuing to stroke my cock from tip to base, I had to use my other hand to steady myself against the shrubbery. Perhaps she would come back, and I could claim her then.

Her perfect bare pussy flashed in my mind. The images of her on my phone were as tangible as they were in reality. Her innocence begged for my corruption. I was all too happy to give her every single drop of the darkness inside me when she stopped fucking running.

That tease of her heat burned on my hand, and I could still smell her on my fingers. I spit on my cock, and closed my eyes, letting my head fall back against the wall of the maze.

"Soon, my Little Virgin," I grunted, opening my eyes to stare in the direction she fled. "Soon, I will own you in every fucking way. You are mine. And before you succumb to your fate, I will show you the true meaning of divinity."

The snow was coated in my come, and I watched for a second as it dripped down my hands and blended into the light trails of blood from before.

To have to degrade myself like this was ridiculous. It had my blood boiling. I walked back to the building, keeping away from windows and letting the cold air sober me. I arrived at the back door and made a silent entry.

I was near the stage area, the lifted platform used for sermons and the like. There was holy water toward the back, and I dipped my hands inside the bowl, using the sacred crap to clean my body of the blood from the deer and her.

I knew deep down that I could not simply scrub away the infuriating addictive quality, but I dared to fucking try.

“There you are, Maddox! Lord in heaven, I need you in line for the auction. Why are you hiding back here? I swear, boy, you are nothing like your father.”

I finished wiping off my face. “Thank fuck for that.”

The priest held his heart and gasped while I pushed past him and made my way to the front, stepping in line with the other professors.

Father Demarco walked out of the back, adjusting his collar and clearing his throat.

“Very well. The auction will commence. Thank you to our charitable sponsors, the Valentines, and the Benefactor founding families. They have brought this conclusion today for us. May we bow our heads in thanks.”

While everyone dropped their heads in silent prayer, I searched the room for my Little Virgin. She had changed from that delicious outfit. Now, she had simple clothing covering her, and her hair was wet. She’d probably washed off the blood in

the bathroom.

Her friend was still beside her, and I refrained from growling at the bitch. She would be next on my list for interfering.

I couldn't take the chance to hunt again so soon after last night.

News had spread this morning of the missing student, and everyone feasted on the meat that was set up in the buffet area of the church, effectively eliminating any evidence that remained.

I had cleared the body to be certain. Setting up the doe in the tree was a distraction that none other than my nosy Little Virgin had found. She was an anomaly. Scared as she was, she constantly faced her fear when it came to saving another.

Will you be so brave when it is you that I chase?

I chuckled to myself, and her eyes sprung up to meet my own. She knew I was dangerous, yet her stubborn nature would still have her 'buying' me today. I waited for the auction mumbo to shut up and continue with the heart of the charity.

We were being 'sold' to the highest bidder—to be their 'Valentine' for an entire weekend.

The strike of midnight ended the arrangement on Valentine's Day. Too bad for Vivian. Her soul would be owned at that time by the Divine.

"And so we are onto one of our most popular buys..." The priest touted all the past auctions of the thousands spent on me alone.

I wondered if Vivian could afford me.

I set everything up for the Divine to distract the usual buyers. They were not in attendance, and I hoped that this allowed my Little Virgin to succumb to her desires...so I could divulge my own.

“Starting the bid at one hundred dollars, who bids this fine specimen, Maddox Valentine?”

The auction started, and random numbers were shouted while I was spun around like some prized horse.

“That’s three hundred! Can I hear four?”

“Four!”

Over and over, the money rose to nearly one thousand. I looked at my Little Virgin. She kept her head down, not even looking at me.

Did I push her too far?

“Ten thousand.” Everyone gasped and looked around the room for the bidder. It wasn’t my Little Virgin, but her friend beside her.

The priest balked, stuttering and clearing his throat.

“I-I have ten thousand! Ten thousand, going once...twice...”

No...

“Sold for ten thousand dollars! Maddox Valentine goes to...what’s your name dear?”

The female looked at my Little Virgin with a smile. “Vivian Valentine.”

Vivian gasped as the crowd applauded. I was silently relieved that I wasn't forced to kill her friend and waste time I could spend on my chase with my own little white deer.

I was a gift?

Demarco gripped my arm and held me in the front of the stage, waiting for Vivian to walk up and 'claim' me.

"What a turn of events. Enjoy your prize, dearie." Vivian cringed when he winked at her but tentatively reached forward to accept my hand.

I smiled at her, being a good boy. The female, Teagan, was stifling her laughter when we sat beside her.

"What are you going to do for my girl? You were quite expensive, so I expect you to wine and dine her."

I thought about that.

Should I give Vivian a good show of gentlemanly kindness before destroying her?

"But of course," I said with a smile. "I have a lot in store for her."

Vivian didn't look at me. She made a habit of keeping her gaze on anything else. That was irritating. I wanted to see her eyes. I gripped her face in my hands, pulling her forward and laying a soft kiss on her lips. She froze in my grip, and fuck me if her turning to stone didn't make me rock hard all over again.

Teagan looked between us and coughed before walking elsewhere. After a second, Vivian blinked and pulled her face away from me. Her cheeks flamed when she

realized everyone was looking at us.

“Well, master,” I said teasingly. “What do you require of me first? Carry your books when you return home? Open doors for you when one arrives?” My voice lowered to a seductive growl. “Or do you prefer I make you come so hard you soak my hands again?”

Vivian gasped and smacked my chest, hopping off the pews and fucking running away yet again. I chuckled and stood to follow her, but I got caught by a group of salty professors who wanted to ‘congratulate’ me.

“I mean, really. Isn’t ten thousand a bit excessive, even for you, Mads?”

I laughed at the photography professor. “Oh, it’s for charity, Bradford. Calm down. Don’t be so worked up. I am sure the ten dollars spent on you will be used wisely. Perhaps purchasing tape for my banners.”

The professor stiffened, and I took that chance to pull away from the crowd and search for where my Little Virgin scurried off.

How is she always getting away?

I was constantly perfecting my hunting skills, yet still, she was the one to elude me.

I walked out of the chapel using the front door this time. I heard a lot of chatter from students as they stumbled through the maze and found their exits. I tried to hone my hearing in for her husky voice. Her lovely rasp was not so distant...there she was. She was chastising her friend, who was laughing in turn.

“Why did you do that?” she said exasperatedly.

“Oh, c’mon. You talked about him so often! I thought I was doing you a favor. What’s wrong? How do you expect to strip him naked and have that sweet revenge, babe?”

She wants me naked? Interesting. Yes, Little Virgin, what is wrong?

“That was before...” her voice faded out, and I continued forward, trying to place it again.

“Before what?” her friend said.

“He...we—I...Never mind.”

I chuckled, finally close enough to see my Little Virgin, that oversized shirt, falling past her wrists that she hid behind while trying to cover her mouth.

“Vivian Valentine,” I said casually. “Where ever do you think you’re going?”

Vivian looked at me, fear sparking in her bright eyes. “I—Why are you following me?”

I chuckled, walking up to her and her friend, letting my hand trail their cheeks. “I can be a good boy and make good on my promises.”

Vivian blushed and pulled away. Her friend laughed.

“Come now, Little Virgin. I have made preparations for us tonight.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she stood a little straighter. “Why? Why would you assume I was going to buy you?”

I shrugged. "Call it fate."

Vivian shook her head, running a frustrated hand through her dark hair. "You and your stupid fate. Sorry to disappoint you 'Mads,' but I am not interested. Go fuck yourself with a pinecone."

She turned her back to me, walking away. I grabbed her shoulder and swung her around, spinning her right back to my chest.

In her ear, I whispered, making sure only she could hear. "Your little friend may have bought me, Little Virgin...but you will soon find out that you are my slave."

She gasped, and I let her spin out of my grip this time. My point was made. In her panicked movements, I grabbed the phone out of her shirt pocket. She would be looking for this.

"Oh, Little Virgin, before you go, here is the address where I will be this evening. In case you need me, of course."

She glared at me, irritation and that heated flush covering her freckled cheeks. Staring at my outstretched hand, she narrowed her eyes at me before snatching the paper from between my fingers. It left a paper cut. The red of my blood dripped into the snow.

When she saw the droplets, she looked directly into my eyes and smiled. I couldn't help but watch her leave with a grin of my own. This woman loved to watch me bleed, but she didn't know how much I would revel in each droplet I would soon spill from her.

Chapter ten

Even as I walked away from Maddox, I could still feel his eyes on me. I swear, ever since I arrived here, my entire existence had seemed to revolve around this fucking man. My ancestors, my history, and...my body.

“Is he still looking at me?” I asked Teagan, who was walking by my side.

“Yep.” She giggled, finding everything hilarious about this situation.

I wasn’t going to turn around. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. His face was smug enough without adding to his ego.

I sighed. “Take a picture and send it to me because I am not looking at him.”

Teagan continued to laugh at me but finally got her phone out and snapped the picture. I waited to feel my pocket vibrate, but it didn’t. “Uh...Vivvy?”

I ignored her, trying to feel for my phone in the oversized shirt pocket.

“Vivvy,” she said again, and I sighed, finally looking at her. “What?”

She turned her phone toward me, and on her screen was a picture of my number. It was Maddox. The picture was an elicited pose of him leaning against the shrub, his shirt was open, revealing his plastered-on abs, and the fingers he used inside of me were pressed against his lips, breaking them apart just a bit to see the tease of his fucking tongue.

Below the picture was a message.

Is this what my Little Virgin wants? If you prefer less clothing, darling, I am afraid you will have to meet me in person.

I gasped when I saw the three dots pop up again as he actively typed.

That asshole has my phone!

I growled and snatched Teagan's cell when the dots disappeared, and a message replaced it.

Xo See you tonight, Little Virgin Xo

I was seething, nearly breaking it in my grip.

"Don't take it out on my technology, babe."

Sighing, I handed it back to her and glared over at Maddox, who was already talking to others as if nothing had happened. I wanted to walk over and smack the shit out of him. Refraining from violence so openly, I pulled out the stupid paper he had handed me.

It was still coated in his blood.

The words were confusing.

Some hoity-toity-looking diner, most likely. I handed the page to Teagan, who whistled low in her throat. "Damn. Well, that's certainly an honor."

Intrigued, I waited for her to continue.

“This is St. Valentine’s place, Vivvy. Your ancestor. It’s the burial grounds. They are off-limits to everyone. I don’t even know how he would get this privilege. Maybe he’s trying to show you your history?”

Our history.

I reminded myself. Realizing that our secret time in the maze was so much worse than the whole professor/student thing...we were related.

I felt absolutely dirty.

“That is a testament to how weird he is. Luring me to a graveyard while holding my phone hostage?”

Teagan snickered. “I mean, you have to appreciate the effort, right?”

I shook my head. “No. I want to hurt him.”

Teagan handed me back the paper. “Well, what better way to hurt a man than to break his plans? You need your phone back. You should go there and show him you own him, not the other way around.”

I thought about that. What could it hurt to go to this creepy date of his? If nothing else, I would get my phone back and maybe learn about my grandmother.

“Think there are any pinecones lying around?” I said with a laugh.

Your desires will be your doom, child...

I sighed, ignoring her warning and nodding my head.

Probably. I thought to myself. But all the same, I have to see this through .

It took some time to get ready. I borrowed a beautiful, gothic black, full-length dress from Teagan. She worked my hair into a spun-up ball of twists on the top of my head. I looked at myself in the dorm mirror, feeling beautiful for once.

“Well...I’m ready, I guess.” It was dark, and I hated going around at night.

I didn’t want to bump into those damn stalking shadows. Some part of me knew that I was heading to so much darker than that.

I hugged Teagan bye and grabbed my coat, hat, and gloves. The weather was generally harsh, but it got so much colder at night. It ripped through my clothing and made my teeth chatter.

I had to walk away from the school. I was so far out now, behind the chapel, past the maze, beyond even the cemetery that lined the church. This was a labyrinth of its own.

A maze of graves...

I found Maddox. His back was turned to me. He was standing beside a building, a large crest adorning the door. It was a doe with multiple horns jutting out of the head. It looked as if it were warped.

Demonic even.

The images of the dead doe and mangled body filtered through my mind like a slideshow, and I cleared my throat.

He lifted my phone above his head.

“Come for this?” he said without even turning.

He knew I was here. This man could hear everything. Tracked me so easily. He was a predator...yet here I was, walking right into the lion's den.

“Or are you the least bit curious in this?” he gestured to the door.

“This is our crest, Vivian. The Valentini .”

I looked at the doe again. The symbol made me feel extremely uncomfortable. It left a weird hum in my blood. I couldn't help it. I was curious about my history. I wanted to know what happened. Those news articles. Were they true?

“Fourteen women were murdered. My great-something grandmother was one of those taken that night. Someone killed all the wives.”

Maddox turned to face me now. He had a knife in his hand. It looked ceremonial-old but taken care of. The jewels glittered on the end, and there were inscriptions on the blade.

“Our blood is written in history,” he said, almost as if he were chanting a spell.

Behind the building in front of us were pillar-like gravestones erected around the mausoleum. I pointed to the strange line of marble. “What is that?”

Maddox followed my gaze and turned to smile at me. “Our grandmother.”

I didn't know why, but I felt so much fear at that moment. The woman in my head, spouting about her riddles and warnings, was lying dead under one of these masts.

I felt incredibly sad.

She was murdered if the rumors were true. We looked so much alike from the images I found on her. I was a recreation of every aspect of her corporeal form. Maybe that was why I heard her in my mind. However, I can't decipher her messages.

"I want to see Vivianna's grave," I said, my words increasing the strange hum inside my blood. We were connected.

Maddox turned to me and smiled. "You know where it is, Little Virgin. Let your body guide you. She's always been waiting."

I didn't know how I felt about that, but he was right. There was an unseen pull on my soul, a gentle nudge in the direction of the largest marble pillar directly in the center. I followed the sensations and stood across from the name written on the tomb.

"Vivianna Valentini," Maddox whispered. He was standing behind me. I had heard his footfalls, but he respected my space. I didn't know what I was meant to find here.

Why did my blood call to this grave?

I didn't know my ancestor, and my only information was hearsay and rumors. Her picture was carved into the rock, and it was eerie as if I were seeing a photograph of myself from that time. A man stood beside her, looking like his descendant behind me.

"I told you our fate has always been written in our blood. We were born to the present so that we can recreate the past. *Aequilibrium in Mundo.*"

His words didn't make sense, and besides the fact that he apparently spoke Latin, the past, according to legend, was St. Valentine killing his beloved wife.

"What could that have to do with us?" I thought aloud, but Maddox was already

walking away, heading back to the crest on the stone of the building.

I sighed and followed him. The dagger was in his hand, the blade resting on his palm. Before I could speak, the weapon sliced through his skin, and his blood spilled out onto the snow-covered ground. My eyes widened in horror.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Shhh. Watch.” he brought his hand up to the symbol, his blood coating the doe with many horns.

A mechanical sound whirred behind the door, and the doe spun around to flip completely upside down, revealing a new image. A monster faced me. Spindly legs stretched out where there used to be horns, and the head was a warped...heart.

Maddox looked at me, wrapping his injured hand with a cloth from his coat.

The bloody door clicked and began to open. The stone moved forward, allowing entrance.

Maddox gestured me forward, and my curiosity was too much to deny. I questioned who I was and where I came from so often. This was my chance to find those answers.

I walked through the slab, and Maddox followed. It was dark while I followed the path of a tunnel, but then the room lit up.

Old school cavern lanterns illuminated the way, and one by one, I could see...tombs. The bodies were covered in a glass display, stood upright, and preserved all these years. Their names were carved into the bottom of the coffins.

I gasped, backing up into Maddox. He smiled and continued to walk me forward. The graves were all circling a large table with names written into the stone. We moved around to the center of it all.

A man frozen in time was entombed.

He looked so much like Maddox that I lost my breath, turning to look at his features. His bright blue eyes were the only difference between him and his ancestor. Those eyes in the tomb looked old, cold, and dead. There was no sinister light in them...at least not anymore.

I counted each glass box with a man inside...

Fourteen.

I stared at Maddox in fear. He just smiled in return.

“You are as brilliant as you are beautiful,” he said, running his hand over my jaw and letting his thumb catch on my bottom lip.

“You had it mostly right, Vivian.” he continued while staring at his thumb on my open lips. “There were fourteen women killed that night...but you didn’t know that there have been fourteen more every year since.”

I stayed silent, hoping he would explain. I didn’t realize I was holding my breath for his words. He waited for me to answer my own question. My eyes widened again, looking at each dead, cruel face of the fourteen men.

“It was them that killed their wives,” I whispered in disbelief. “The Elders. The founders...Their husbands.”

“Yes. Good girl, Little Virgin. I knew you would not fall prey to the many stories told. You continued to search until you got your truth. Are you satisfied with your answer?”

I shook my head.

“But...why?”

Maddox came up from behind me, pulling off his coat and unbuttoning his shirt. I blinked, backing up against the cool glass of the tomb in front of me.

“I told you. No matter how many times you ask, the answer will always remain the same. Fate.”

I narrowed my eyes. “No. It was a choice. Murdering the one you loved is a choice.”

His shirt was off his body, and his abs were half-shadowed by the flickering lantern light.

“You say choice, but do you really believe that?”

I frowned, confusion lacing my addled brain as he pulled off my hat and gloves. I couldn't concentrate with his body so close to mine. He was shirtless and beautiful.

“Of course I...do,” I said again, but it sounded like a question.

“You can see how destiny has worked, Little Virgin. Just open your eyes.”

I blinked over and over, trying to understand, but he was pulling off my jacket from my body, and I couldn't think of anything.

“A female virgin, descendant of the very women who lost their lives all those years ago, returns to the resting place of where she was killed? You look exactly like Vivianna, and I look exactly like Saint.”

I shook my head. I couldn't believe this. “There's no such thing as fate!”

Maddox chuckled as he slipped my dress off my shoulders and leaned down to place kisses on my neck and collarbone. I couldn't comprehend anything but his mouth. This was wrong.

“Says the woman who followed me to her own history.”

I shook my head, letting my hands trail down his abs on their own accord.

“I can't believe in fate,” I said, shaking my head and biting my lip.

“This is fate, Vivian Valentine. This moment.”

I watched his lips as he spoke, the flickering light flashing on his body. I gasped when my hands ran over rough, raised scars on his skin.

“What's wrong with your back? Why is it scarred?”

He laughed in a menacing growl. “They are names, Parva Virgo . Our history brands my skin the same as our blood. I was always their slave.”

I couldn't comprehend that at all.

He would mark his back with the names of our family. Why?

“Fate has always been the leading factor in everything in my life—the driver to my

hands. I want to take this time to be in control. I want to create this moment for myself.”

My lips parted with his meaning. He wanted to...

My dress was yanked down my torso, my breasts bouncing out of the fabric. I scrambled, trying to pull it back up, but Maddox gripped my wrists and pushed me against that cold glass of the tombs, jerking my head back and taking my mouth in his own.

I had never been kissed, but how his mouth warred with mine made it feel so right. I panted, trying to catch my breath, but he wouldn't let me. He was overwhelming my system, making me short-circuit.

“No. Maddox, stop,” I said, trying to pull free of this haze.

“Let this happen, Little Virgin. Take me. Like you have always been destined to.”

His pants fell down his legs and his boxers with it. I gasped and stared at the terrifyingly large dick poking at my chest.

“Bend over, Vivian Valentine.”

I whimpered, terrified and so damn hot I couldn't help but listen with shaky movements. I didn't get a warm-up or a warning. He moved behind me so fast I could barely register the feeling of him as he lined up his cock and slammed into my entrance.

I screamed.

The pain engulfed me, the feeling of being ripped apart overwhelming. This wasn't

like his fingers. No, this was painful, and it made me sweat instantly. I struggled to get away from him, feeling the warm blood coat my thighs.

“Be still. I can barely control myself as it is.”

His warning felt dark. There was no sweetness to it.

I stared up at the glass containing his doppelganger, those dead eyes staring back at me as Maddox thrust in and out of my core.

I cried, tears streaming down my face. Maddox was so big. His hand reached down to my clit, and the agonizing burn started to turn into something warmer. I was still on fire, but now, with each stroke and pump, I felt this need fill my belly.

“Holy fuck, you are so tight. You will bring me to my grave, Vivian Valentine. You feel like heaven, but surely you are nothing but pure sin.”

I panted, taking the brunt of his thrusts. My body was being smashed against the glass of the tomb, my tears smearing the clear material as I held onto that smooth surface for balance as best as I could. I could see my reflection. I could see him. He looked possessed as he marked my body in bloody handprints.

I was going to come. Somehow, some way, my body was gearing up to explode on his member. I couldn't help myself. I turned my head to stare at his face. He linked his tattooed hands into my hair, angling me more. I could feel him inside my stomach.

“I-I...I can't stop myself,” I said, mindlessly grinding onto him. I could see and smell the blood. I couldn't tell what was from him or myself.

It coated his pelvis and my legs. I felt my insides ripping to accept him. His thickness

was way more than his fingers, and I had two seconds to adjust to him before he fucked me so hard I couldn't even see straight.

“Vivian! Holy fuck-My Little Virgin. Fuck, you're gonna feel my come. I am going to fucking fill you up for days to come where you can only think of me when it drips down these silky thighs.”

I screamed, and his own growl joined mine. We came together. The slippery liquid of his semen truly did fill me to the brim. It spurted out from where we connected, leaking down the sides of his cock, and the dam bursting from my own orgasm created a sticky pool below us.

I couldn't look at him.

I just couldn't.

All I could do was stare at the blood and my ancestors in front of me...wondering how much this truly was fate.

Chapter eleven

I never imagined I would feel so...bad. The woman I wanted to break in every way—her soul, body, and mind—was shaking half-naked, just staring at the glass tombs in front of us.

“Vivian?” I said, grabbing my shirt to drape around her body.

It was common for pure women to bleed. It just meant she really was a virgin. She hadn’t lied. Was she in shock?

“Little Virgin?” I said again, reaching for her and rubbing her arms.

Maybe she was cold. It was warmer in here than outside, for sure, but it still held a chill even with the lanterns surrounding us.

“I’m not a virgin anymore...” she hung her head.

I laughed and turned her body. Her tear-streaked face was flushed. “No, you are right. You’re not.”

“Do you really believe that Maddox? All that crap about destiny? Have you ever tried to go against it? Or are you too intent on deciding everyone’s fate but your own?”

Her words held a different meaning to me than she even realized. Had I ever gone against fate? Yes, and my broken, beaten body was the punishment.

“Yes,” I said in a monotone voice. I didn’t extend on that. And she sighed.

“Well, I doubt that, but you should. You can’t let fate choose for you all the time. If you don’t make your own decisions, you are no better than a puppet.”

Her words made me blink, anger and realization clouding my judgment.

“I am no fucking puppet. I am the one to decide what is to happen.”

She righted her dress, wincing when she went to walk away from me letting my shirt fall to the cold wet ground.

“It doesn’t seem like you have made a decision for yourself in a long time. Am I just part of the orders of fate? Was taking my virginity part of that?”

I shook my head. Taking her virginity was actually forbidden, especially in front of the Elders like this. This was one decision I had made for myself, saying ‘fuck you’ to a Divine order.

I wanted her.

I needed her.

I had to enjoy her for the time I had left. The time I had before...before the Divine took her from me. Like they always did.

“I chose to take you,” I said, anger and bitterness lacing my tone. “Claimed you like my Little Whore.”

She flinched at my wording, and tears slipped over her cheeks as she stared at me.

“The men in this fucked up crypt are just dead guys, Maddox. They shouldn’t control your future. They certainly don’t control mine. I am free of your fate. And I’m making the choice now. Don’t come near me ever again. That is fate. My choice. That you’ll cease to exist in my world.”

I stared at her, unable to comprehend her words.

Reaching down I gripped my shirt in my hands, squeezing the material tightly before throwing it back over my body. She was dismissing me.

Discarding me like fucking trash after I just made her come so hard her eyes rolled in the back of her head? How did she think she could choose that?

She couldn’t escape the Elders any more than I could.

I laughed, a hysterical sound escaping my lips as I watched her continue to walk out of the mausoleum of our history.

Don’t come near me again. That is fate. My choice. That you’ll cease to exist in my world.

I was Maddox fucking Valentine. I would not be dismissed! I ran after her. She was already making her way toward the maze. I felt unhinged, anger and disbelief filling my veins. My cock was spent, but now I ached for her in a different way.

I needed to fuck her again. This time, showing the wrongness in her statement. She would feel my control and choke on her words.

I ducked inside the maze, listening for her little huffs of pain and frustration as she fled.

“Oh, Little Virgin, you couldn’t really dismiss me and expect me to lay down like a good little dog, could you? Don’t forget, darling, that you are the bitch in this scenario, and I am going to fucking muzzle you with my cock for your naughty mouth.”

Her breathing picked up, and now the sound of her footsteps was more audible. I followed her through the maze.

“Now, now, Little Vivvy. For something you apparently hate so much, you are falling right into the hands of your own fate.”

Her breathing was faster. She was really pushing herself now, and I smiled. The hunter in me loved it when my prey became so scared they made stupid mistakes, just leading me right to them.

She dodged out of the maze, heading toward the wooded area where all my other prey met their end. I couldn’t kill Vivian. Not yet, but I could certainly enjoy this.

“Vivviannn...” I sang, picking up my pace and bolting out of the maze just a few paces behind her.

I tracked her all the way to the end of the woods, the cliff being her only means of escape. She wouldn’t be so stupid as to jump, and so I simply waited for her to resurface, knowing she would only have one means to flee if she didn’t want to die. This was all too predictable, and I was already bored.

At least when I caught her, I could break her all over again. Some time went by, and I stared out at the woods. She hadn’t resurfaced.

“Hmmm...” I said aloud, walking toward the shrouds of trees. “Where did you go, Little Virgin?”

Silence.

There was no longer heavy breathing or running feet.

Would she have jumped after all?

“Fuck!” I hollered, running toward the cliff.

I looked over the edge but didn’t see a body. It was the same rocky craig as before. There were dead deer carcasses, and those animals were unfortunate to get too close, but Vivian was not there.

So where had she gone?

I walked back toward the trees, listening for any sounds. Still, there was only silence. My blood pumped as the thrill of this hunt became so much more than I had ever experienced. My prey couldn’t have gotten past me without my noticing.

So that meant—

“I know you are hiding, Little Vivian! Come out, come out wherever you are! I just want to play, darling.”

More silence.

I walked around the forest, looking under the tree roots and behind rocks big enough to hide her small form. As the time dragged on, I was more and more perplexed.

“Vivian dear. This is futile. You are going to get tired.”

I didn’t know if that was true. She definitely had resilience, and I could see her

staying up all night just to spite me. I only had the weekend to find her. If I didn't bring her to the arena below the university on the eve of Valentine's Day, I would fail.

Frustration clouded my judgment, drowning my lust and replacing it with...fear.

Where could she be?

The woods were vast, but they were easily navigated. I knew them like the back of my hand, and it didn't matter how long she hid. Eventually, I would find her.

I tried to think of the places she could be obscured. Walking over to the area where a broken door was leaning over a rock, I searched underneath it.

No Vivian.

Another snowed-over spot had a discarded boat near the water surrounding the school.

Still no Vivian.

Growling, I started walking back toward the university, accepting that she must have gotten past me somehow when I was searching for her.

Just as I walked underneath the very pine I used for sacrificing, I found my mask. I had left it here, not being able to bring it back with me in the daylight hours from the last hunt.

I smirked and picked it up from the snowy ground. After dusting it off, I settled it over my face, and I heard a scream from above me in the tree.

“Accept your own fate, Maddox Valentine!”

Looking up, I saw Vivian hanging on to a branch high in the tree. Of course. She was smart. Never before had my prey outwitted me. No one had dared to hide above.

I beamed at her, truly amazed at her brilliance. Then, a large rock came hurtling down toward my head with pinecones. She fell, and I was smashed in the face. The mask only took half of the impact. Her body fell on top of mine, and I growled, gripping her curvy hips in my hands and rolling to flip her over.

She screamed and batted at my arms.

I hummed, feeling blinded by the blood running down into my eye. Pinecones were still falling around us, and an idea popped into my mind.

“Oh, Little Virgin. Wasn’t your request to fuck oneself with this?”

Vivian’s face paled as I held her wrists down with one hand and grabbed one of the spiky seeds with the other.

“If memory serves, I do recall you wanting me to shove one of these up my ass, yes?”

My Little Virgin whimpered, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Tell me how euphoric your little fantasy is now. I must admit this is a rather odd form of punishment but effective nonetheless.”

“No! Get the fuck off me, Maddox! I will gut you.” The irony of her words was not lost on me.

I let go of her wrists to grip her hair in my hand, leaning her over the elongated tree

spawn.

“Open wide, Little Virgin, and get this nice and wet for your sake.”

She fought to no avail until finally, she opened her mouth, letting her tongue hang out while her tears and saliva dripped down to coat the object.

“Good girl. Get ready.”

Her body was trembling, and I enjoyed watching her shake. She had escaped my grasp for the last time, and this would serve as her punishment for her defiance.

I locked her legs down to the ground, turning my body to sit on her chest. She breathed heavily and battered my back. It did not phase me. The abuse I could withstand was far more than her small, useless hands could ever inflict.

I spread her legs apart and pushed up my mask to spit on her cunt, shoving the earth-made toy deep into her pussy.

She stilled, her body going completely rigid.

I could still see the blood dried on her thighs, and I leaned forward to lick it off. Her little pussy was so close to my face. I moaned, my breath teasing her small clit, and making her whimper underneath me.

Her wetness increased, and I was able to thrust the pinecone deeper inside her. The sound of the suction breaking over and over was music to my ears.

In spite of her outcry and rage, she was already close. Her body remained open, conformed to fit my cock like a glove. This was nothing for her. I should have found a bigger one, made her work for her orgasm, and felt the pain of her dismissal.

When I felt her get close, I leaned down lower, latching her clit in my teeth and biting down enough to hear her scream. The pinecone was pushed out of her body with the force of her orgasm, and I drank every drop I could, not daring to let any go to waste.

Vivian screamed with more force, the sound of an angry war cry. I turned to look at her, trying to adjust my body off her midsection, but she had an object of her own in her hands. Another fucking rock.

With the treat of her cunt, I was too enraptured in her taste to use logical sense. Instead, I watched the rock as its appearance grew bigger until it connected with my head.

Chapter twelve

I was shaking so badly. Maddox had just chased me into the woods and searched for me for hours. I couldn't comprehend that I had to climb the tree to get away from him. He had already violated me by stealing my virginity, but that wasn't enough.

In his own sense of fucked up metered justice, he fucked me with a pinecone! And worse than that...I still orgasmed again for him like the pathetic slut I was. It had to have been him that night.

His shadow was hunting those women. I knew it in my heart. And now I was the one being hunted. The mask on his face was terrifying. It was some kind of skull of a dead goat.

I looked at his form on the ground. His head was bleeding from the rock, and that soaked pinecone was still in his grip. I growled, wanting to rip it out of his hand and shove it up his ass, but I didn't know how long he would be out.

I reached down, tracing that ethereal mask on his face. He moaned, and I gulped, taking off at a sprint back toward the university.

I stopped to catch my breath when I was close to the stupid maze. At this point, I should know this damn thing by heart.

I went to walk into the green shrubbery, and like a nightmare, Maddox was there. He was nearly shirtless in the damn winter. The blood from his head both congealed in his hair and spilled down the mask. He looked...deranged.

His eyes were dilated through the bone slits, likely concussed as he lunged at me. I screamed, dodging his arms and running as fast as I could.

“Stay away!” I shrieked. “Help! Please help!” I screamed as loud as I could.

Hopefully, someone will hear my calls.

Maddox was staggering, smashing into the sides of the hedge as he chased me. I screamed again, dodging him as best as I could. The chapel was within my view. If I could just run fast enough, I could make it there.

When I turned around to see Maddox, he saw where I was headed. He just stopped in the maze before walking backward into the shadows of the maze with a cruel smile on his face.

Taking a deep breath, I kept pushing my feet forward to the church. Once I finally reached the doors, I continuously smashed my fists over it. “Please! Open up! Help me!”

Within a few minutes, the priest opened the door, looking at me with surprise.

“Thank god. You have to help. Please. Maddox Valentine is insane! I am being hunted!”

The priest looked past my head, likely not seeing anything but the shadows.

“You must believe me. Please.”

After a minute of silence, taking a look at my ripped dress and disheveled appearance, he gestured forward. “Of course, child. Come in, come in.”

Beware the false shepherd...

The voice in my head gave me chills, but I tried to shake it off, wrapping my dress tighter around my bottom with the broken pieces. We entered the warmth of the chapel. Thank fucking god. I had escaped the madman and the freeze of the air.

“You said Maddox Valentine is hunting you?” the priest said. “Where is he now?”

“I don’t know.” I tried to catch my breath. “I hurt him, and I ran. He stopped chasing me when he realized I was coming here. He is probably still in the maze.”

The priest tilted his head, and a strange feeling crept up my spine. I knew this guy was a bit of a creep, but...

“Um...thanks for letting me warm up. I should be going back to my dorm now...my roommates are looking for me.”

The priest blocked the exit, shaking his head. “Nonsense child. You must stay here and rest. We have a spare room upstairs you can sleep in for the night. I will inform your advisor of tonight’s events.”

“No, really, my dorm isn’t far...” I eyed the exit.

I wish so much I had my phone. I could warn Teagan and ask that she call the police.

“It’s so cold, child. You could catch a chill. I insist you stay here for the night.”

I ground my teeth together, trying to figure out how to get free of this man. “Listen. I appreciate your offer. But I really think I’m better off getting out of here.”

The priest chuckled and walked forward to lock the chapel doors.

“It was not an offer, silly girl. Our leader is finally doing his job the right way, and I’ll be damned if you mess that up. Get upstairs. Now.”

I paled, realization dawning in my bones...leader...

Maddox was the leader of...what?

The priest pulled something from his robes, and the click sounded in the quiet space of the candles flickering.

A gun.

My eyes widened, and I held up my hands, backing up to the staircase

“No, please. You can’t do this. Please!” I was on the bottom step, and the barrel of the gun was pushing into my chest. “Please,” I continued to cry.

“I take no pleasure in this. It is simply the way it has to be. You were unfortunate to be born of his blood. Now, you have to give it back. It is called a sacrifice for a reason. We must have balance.”

I balked at him.

“S-Sacrifice?” I tripped as I was shoved up the staircase. “What d-do you mean sacrifice!”

He shook his balding head again and clicked the safety off the gun, pointing it directly at my face.

“Move. Go to the attic and wait for him. You should be honored. I thank you, Vivianna, for you are the chosen. Our bloody valentine.”

My mind was reeling.

Bloody Valentine...leader...Sacrifice...

This couldn't be real. I sat in the attic. The barren walls felt like my heart, empty and cold.

I knew there were rumors. I heard about the secret cult beneath the university...but it was all just stupid ghost stories. It wasn't real...was it?

The hunt begins...History repeats itself.

I swallowed, the dots connecting in my mind...the riddles and omens of my ancestor. She was warning me about Maddox. She tried to tell me that I was next. I was...their sacrifice.

I ripped open my dress, pulling it to the side and looking at the blemish still on my flesh—that word.

“Divine.”

Did Maddox mark me that night? Was he claiming me for his fucking cult? Was fucking me preparation for the ceremony?

Little Virgin...sacrifice.

It all made sense now, and I felt sick at everything clicking into place.

“No. No. No,” I said, backing away from the walls.

I couldn't be sacrificed to some fucking God. Was this for St. Valentine? Was all this

about that man entombed forever in a glass coffin? Was I meant to die for those assholes?

Why?

Fate...

The word felt bitter on my tongue. But now I knew what Maddox meant all those times. It was fate that we met, fate that he was assigned to kill me. The doppelganger of St. Valentine set out to kill his lover Vivianna...

History will repeat itself...and my blood wasn't just tainted. It was doomed.

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Chapter thirteen

I made my way to the church. My head was throbbing in tune with my heartbeat as Demarco gave me a look when he opened the door to the chapel.

“Do you often let your hunts get the best of you, boy?” he scolded. “Why is that woman not bound and prepped for the ritual?”

I ignored him, accepting the cloth in his hand and downing some medication for my head.

“Where is she?” I said, removing the mask and blinking to try to see properly. My vision danced. She clocked me a fucking good one. I was still seeing stars in my view.

“She waits upstairs for you,” he said. I looked at the sawed-off rifle in his grip and laughed.

“I’m guessing she didn’t do that willingly.”

His lips hardened in a fine line as an answer. I laughed again and saluted the dumbass, making my way upstairs. Before I opened the door, I slid the mask back on.

The man she knew was gone. She would learn what this symbol represented. Vivian was in the attic, sitting in the corner, crying.

“Oh, c’mon, you can’t have lost your fight that easily.”

She ignored me, unwilling to put her head up. She must have put two and two together.

“You know now, don’t you? You can’t escape your fate any more than I was able to.”

Vivian looked up and pointed an accusatory finger at me. Her words brought me back to a time so long ago.

“You are the one who is supposed to choose your fate! Not them!”

I blinked, stunned, my hand reaching my heart. Those words...

“You are the one who is supposed to choose your fate! Not them!”

My sister had followed me out to these woods. She was seething, staring at me, huffing and angry. The woman was just a few paces ahead, but I stopped to face her.

“Libby, I can’t fight this! Don’t you understand? It’s them or myself. If I don’t follow the orders of the Elders, they will come after me, or worse, you and Hayes.”

Liberty walked up to me, her tears nearly frozen on her freckled cheeks. “Then let them Maddox. Don’t do this. Please. You have to choose yourself. You can’t let them control you like some kind of puppet. We can find them—you, me, and Hayes. We can run away and be free of the Divine and St. Valentine's for good! You only need to make that choice. Please.”

I shook my head. She always did this. For so many years, she acted like I had a fucking decision in my life. I gripped my gun in anger, looking through the scope, trying to find the girl who continued to run.

“It’s too late for me, Libby. You run if you want to. This woman saw my face. I have

chased her through the woods for hours. I have to end it. If I don't..."

Libby shook her head. "No, Maddox! You do not have to kill her. We can get her passage out of here. We can pay her to keep quiet. This isn't set in stone."

I was becoming angrier, my grip on my gun near the point of cracking my fingers.

"I don't have a fucking choice!" I roared, slamming my gun down, and shots rang off into the night. A bullet hit a tree in the distance.

"Fucking hell, Libby, you're making me lose my mind!"

My sister's face was a blank slate, her eyes wide. I stared at her, unable to understand why she looked so pale. Her white jacket began to pool with blood, and she placed her hands over her stomach.

My eyes widened, and I realized the gun...one of the stray bullets had hit her.

"Noooo!" I ran to my sister and held her bleeding body in my arms.

"Liberty, what have you done?"

She forced a shaky laugh as blood seeped through her lips.

"I guess you're right, Maddox...You can't...escape your fate...as a Valentine."

I let the tears fall, my body shaking as hers stilled. I shot my sister. She was dying, and it was my fucking fault.

"No!" I roared to the air around me. I could see the woman far away now. She was nearing the cliff. My sister faded in my arms. A haunting smile on her face as she

took her last breath.

I was a killer...

I knew for so many years that I would be a murderer. But I never dreamed it would take the life of those who mattered most to me.

“Libby...I am so sorry.”

I laid her down in the snow, wiping my tears and grabbing my gun. I had to catch that fucking woman. I couldn't ruin this. Libby's death would be for nothing if I failed.

I ran toward the cliff. The woman was breathing heavily, her back against the cold air with me in front of her.

She whimpered, backing up as far as she could.

“Stop,” I said, my entire torso and arms covered in blood. “I am sorry it has to be this way. I really am, Abigail.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Maddox!” She screamed at me.

“It's not my choice. I have to do this. For the Elders. For my sister. For the Divine...I am truly sorry.”

She shook her head, sniffing and looking behind her at the windy cliff's edge.

“If I'm meant to die...” she said, with dead defeated eyes. “Then it will be on my own terms!”

Before I could even respond, she turned her body and jumped off the cliff. I ran, but it

was too late. She was gone, disappeared into the oblivion of the mist and darkness below.

“Fuck!” I fell to my knees beside the rocks.

“All of this was for nothing? My sister died in vain!” I screamed to the sky. My target was gone. The woman who resembled my sister was gone...

Wait.

The woman looked like Liberty.

I felt sick, staring at a pile of large rocks beside the craig. My hands shook, holding my midsection and jerking forward to vomit into the abyss. I cried out angrily, snatching one of the larger rocks from the ground and heading back to Liberty’s body.

“No!” I screamed, disgusted at myself and what I had become.

Libby looked so much like the woman who jumped...there were just a few features that were different. I couldn’t let her death be in vain. Two souls were taken tonight by that fucking man. St. Valentine.

I cried, audibly letting out my anger and grief as I smashed the rock down onto the face of my dead sister. I contorted her flesh until she was unrecognizable.

“Fuck you, St. Valentine! Is this what you want of your precious Divine? Broken, mindless soldiers existing only to kill those you deem fit?”

I couldn’t look at Liberty’s face. My cell phone chimed, and I scrolled my blood-covered fingers to see it was my father. He demanded my presence at the ritual. The

Divine order called to me. It was time to present them with my chosen sacrifice.

“My blood is your blood,” I cried, agonizing at my own hand. “You have my back...and I have yours.”

Throwing her dead mangled corpse over my shoulder and placing the mask over my face, something clicked inside me. You couldn’t escape your fate, could you? You could only accept it or lose more of what you loved.

“I am Maddox Nathanael Valentine...” I said weakly, walking toward the tombs beneath the university with my sister in tow.

“I belong to the Divine...” I continued the mantra, arriving in a blur at the arena where everyone waited in black cloaks. The elders stood at the front, their crests adorning their heads with skulls, masking their features.

I threw Liberty onto the slab, stripping her clothes from her body, picking up the dagger, and stabbing it into her heart. I stared at her broken body one last time, a sob escaping my throat as I roughly dragged the weapon down.

Her blood spilled, following the channels of the stone, draining down to meet in the center pool of the ceramic bowl.

Barely able to see through my tears, I fell to my knees before the altar.

Covered in my sister’s blood, I looked through the crowd at my brother. Our father held his shoulder, and I wondered if he would be able to tell who this was.

I wiped my face, reaching an unsteady hand to rest on Liberty’s. These words would brand my soul eternally, awakening the spirit of my powerful ancestor.

“And you Chosen One...feel the power within the Divine...”

I choked back a sob and forced myself to continue. To utter the words I had dreaded my entire life.

“You are...my bloody...valentine.”

“Have you always been such a monster that can’t make his own decisions?”

I blinked, coming back to the present. The answer to her question was no... I hadn’t. But all that changed the night I found out firsthand what happened when I denied my fate. There was still death. Still pain. It wasn’t a matter of choice but whose pain and suffering it would be.

“We can’t escape the fate we are given. When will you realize that?” I sat opposite her, watching as her tears fell down her pale cheeks.

The door opened, and the priest brought in the crucifix and binding rope. Vivian turned her back to me, crying harder. I sighed and stood up.

“I can make this painful or pleasurable, Little Virgin. But either way, this will happen.”

The fact that I offered a kind option showed the cracks in my foundation. She earned it with her wit. She didn’t need to be in pain for the time left before the ritual. She could enjoy this last night together.

I never cared about my sacrifices, never got to know them or who they were. I didn’t want to...their life was only created to serve the purpose of the Divine...

Why did it have to be Vivian?

“Fuck you,” she said, and I smiled.

I would actually miss her when she was gone. She brought a game that I would likely never have again. I mourned that as much as I would grieve her.

I gripped her hands and began wrapping the silk around her wrists. The loops on the cross allowed the silk to be linked to the metal. She watched me, angry tears streaming down her face as I adjusted her on the rod tree and followed the path of the silk with the rope.

Her feet were bound to the bottom. I preserved her skin as best I could by using the silk straps before using the rope. Partly for the ritual and partly for me. I wanted her whole.

When I finished, I lifted her head up to look at me. “You are beautiful,” I said.

She truly was exquisite. Her black dress flowed down past her feet, resting at the base of the cross. Her arms were raised above her head, hooked with the metal loop to anchor to the top.

“I hate you,” she said sadly before yanking her chin out of my grip and letting her head hang again.

“I expected more fight from you, Vivian.” I challenged, spinning her around on the mechanism to be upside down. Her pouty lips were right where my cock was, and I vibrated at the anticipation of her mouth on me.

“Why bother? My fate is set in stone, remember?” she seethed and turned her face away from me. Her hair fell like a dark waterfall, and I watched it in awe.

“I want to enjoy your last night. I don’t need you sulking,” I said, unzipping my pants

and letting them fall down my legs. My cock was right in her face, bobbing before her and lightly touching her cheek. She gasped, looking up at me.

“Don’t you fucking dare? I will bite it off.”

I let my dagger from my pocket slam into the area directly next to her face, reveling at her little squeak. Leaning down, I moved her falling hair with my hand, whispering in her ear, “I don’t recommend that, Little Virgin. Be a good girl and open wide.”

She growled at me, hesitantly opening her mouth. I thrust into her throat, enjoying how she gagged instantly on the head. I didn’t give her time to breathe. I kept thrusting my hips forward, pulling free just for her to inhale rapidly for a second before plunging back inside where I fucking belonged.

I could see the outline of my cock in her throat, and I fucked her harder.

“Oh fuck, Vivian. You take my cock like a fucking whore. It looks as though you can be a good girl after all.”

She moaned, and the vibration was enough to make my balls tighten. I yanked the knife out of the wood and gripped her dress, watching her tits fall out of the bodice as the blade sliced through the fabric like butter. I continued to pull at the seams until her pussy was visible in those silky panties.

The cross was elevated on the base and flipped upside down like this. She was in the perfect spot for my mouth. I stood up, leaning forward, and pushed up my mask.

She whimpered around my shaft as I began biting her clit through her panties. Her sound grew louder when I used my tongue and teeth to move the cloth out of my way.

She sucked my cock harder, her own pleasure causing mine to amp to the max. She

tasted like honey, and I took long savoring licks of her cunt.

I wanted to memorize her pussy. Be able to envision this moment for years to come. If I couldn't keep her, I could at least keep this mental image of her so wanton for me in my mind forever.

"I fucking hate you," she said around my cock, and I fucked her throat harder, bringing my hands up to rip off her panties and slap her pussy.

"What is your fascination with fucking hitting me?" She growled.

I ignored her and instead slapped her soaked cunt again, harder this time. "Be a good girl if you don't want to be punished. Wider, Little Virgin. Open wider and show me how well you can suck my thick cock."

She choked again, and I pulled my dick out of her mouth long enough to grab her head and let my saliva drip down my tongue into her mouth. Her eyes widened, those pretty lips parting further.

I brought my hands back up to her delicious cunt, slipping a single finger into her tight little hole. Her body bucked off the board, and I pushed deeper fucking her soaking pussy while returning my dick to the warmth of her throat.

Her clit was begging for my tongue, and when I sucked it into my mouth, I didn't want to leave. I kept toying with her, groaning when her sounds turned to panting.

"Hate...Oh fuck...hate..." She moaned, and I smiled, continuing my movements, going a little deeper every few thrusts, sucking a little harder.

She was close. She was shaking on the cross, and I was vibrating because of my own needs. I could feel my come begging to be released.

I slammed my fingers into her cunt harder, faster, using circles with my tongue just like she loved. Sure enough, she convulsed, her lips freezing on my cock as she came all over my chin, her orgasm dripping down to run over her face, leaving a shallow pool on the ground.

I pulled out of her throat long enough to watch her wide-eyed expression be absolutely painted in my come.

“Fuck, you are the best work of art I have ever created. I wish I could capture this moment on a canvas to keep it forever, but for time’s sake, this will do.”

Taking my phone out of my pants pocket, I snapped a photo. She was breathtakingly broken. Once I put the device back in my pocket, I spun her around to be right-side up. I watched her cheeks return to that ivory color while using some of the extra silk cloth to wipe her off from the mess.

“I don’t understand you,” she said quietly after a moment. “You can be so cruel, but there’s more to you. You have some light in you. You used to be a good person. I don’t know what changed you, but you weren’t always a monster. It was them, wasn’t it? The Divine. They made you into the monster you are.”

I thought about her words. She wasn’t wrong. The night I killed my sister, I ran. I didn’t want to be what the Divine forced me to be. I ran as far as I could, not turning back to accept what I had done. But just as fate always does...They caught me.

“Maybe,” I admitted as I finished cleaning her from the mess. “I suppose my humanity died along with the ones I love.”

Vivian forced me to look at her and wouldn’t take those blue eyes from mine. It was like staring into a reflection of myself. Broken, defeated, and yet still trying to find some way to survive. I sighed and leaned forward to place a soft kiss on her lips. She

didn't fight me. She tasted faintly of my come and salty from her tears.

"What do you know about love, Maddox," she said accusingly. "You have taken so many loved ones from others. They didn't get a choice. My mom would miss me if I were gone, you know. I am loved, and you know what?"

I waited for her to continue, not realizing why I felt such a need to hear her words.

"I think you would miss me too."

Was my intrigue for her so obvious? That was dangerous. If the Divine knew...

"I don't care about you, Little Virgin. I only care what you can do for me."

The hurt flashed in her eyes, and I tried to ignore it, the look reminding me so damn much of that betrayal of Liberty's. The haunting stare that demanded I fight my destiny.

"You're lying," she said softly. "You can lie to your little underlings all you want, but you can't lie to me. You plan on sacrificing me anyway, right? What's the harm in letting me in? Make me understand where all this cruelty comes from."

I sighed and turned my back to her, not wanting to feel this vulnerability latch onto my insides. Being gutted like a fish is the only way I knew how to 'open up' to someone, but with my Little Virgin, I felt like, if nothing else, I owed her this.

"Very well," I said, letting out the breath I didn't realize I was holding. "I will skip my dead mother and abusive father controlling my upbringing and start with something more...impactful."

She waited for me to continue.

“My first kill was my sister.” Saying that out loud after nineteen years felt strange. I hid this secret of my first sacrifice close to my heart, Hayes never knowing of my indiscretion. “It was an accident. I loved her. She wanted me to betray our family, to run away and never look back.”

“What happened?” Vivian asked, encouraging me to speak.

“I was stupid. I didn’t know how to use the weapons thrown into my hands, and I made a mistake. I hit the trigger when we were arguing, and the stray bullet struck her.”

My cheeks felt cold, and I saw water droplets after running my hand over them.

“I’m sorry,” Vivian said, bringing my attention back to her. I hated the fate of my sister. I hated that she chased me on that futile task to save my soul.

She knew that there was no soul to save. Our father sold it to the devil on my very first breath. Yet still, she tried. Her hope was a lot like Vivian’s—that glimmer of light in the vast black sea around them.

I scrubbed my face, angered at the memories plaguing my mind. “After her death, I ran.”

“So they caught you,” she said, putting two and two together. I laughed without humor, pulling my shirt over my head and baring my back for her eyes. She gasped out loud, and I knew she was frightened and disgusted by the scars adorning my back and shoulders.

“Beneath the mausoleum,” I continued. “The Divine Order meters the justice of the council.”

She was silent, soft sobs the only thing I could hear.

“I was there nearly a year. Everyone believed I was traveling, and St. Valentine University had me on leave. I was whipped daily for my betrayal. Cracks of that leather became my only constant in the dark tombs. I couldn’t even hear my own voice after a while. The sacrifice was complete. I belonged to the Divine. My mind was plagued with the commands of my ancestors. Our ancestors.”

Vivian gasped again, and I turned to look at her.

“St Valentine was...in your thoughts?”

As if on cue, the bastard surfaced in my mind. His regal tone was a sinister, cold hiss.

You play with your prey, Maddox. Aim true with your responsibility. Never forget Your soul belongs to me. I am Divinity.

I shook my head, squeezing my eyes shut to block out his words. This, too, was secret. I never told anyone that the moment the knife entered the heart of my sister, the angry soul of our founder entered mine.

Vivian’s expression was unreadable, and she refused to meet my gaze.

“Take me there,” she said at last, and I looked at her in confusion. “My last wish is to see the final place where the real Maddox existed.”

Chapter fourteen

Carrying my Little Virgin back to the mausoleum, I ignored Father Demarco's scornful look as I walked through the doors. I wanted to focus solely on granting this odd request. How could I deny her this if it was to be her last?

The mausoleum was still open, my blood fresh enough to maintain the seal of entry. Vivian curled into my arms, and I inhaled her sweet scent, walking forward and following the scripture written on the walls.

The torture chamber was below, and the hair on my neck stood at attention from simply being on these stone steps again. I had fallen in line after the year I spent here, and the other members of the Divine followed my example to avoid the same fate. If the order could deem a punishment so severe for their king, what would they do to those beneath him?

We arrived at the dank, cold cavern. The large board of wood was still erect despite the years it had been left abandoned. The dimly lit torches along the walls illuminated the contraption in the center of the space.

It was closed, seemingly sealed shut by my blood, creating a sort of glue. My screams flashed in my mind. My voice had been raw at times, and at others, my ears rang until I couldn't hear myself.

My father's punishments were the worst. His hand never missed, and the crack of the leather strap felt like it had seared its pain into my bones. I steadied my breathing, trying to ignore the faint echo of those words long ago.

“ You cannot escape your bloodline, you fool! You are their king, and if we must nail your feet into the ground where you stand, you will lead the Divine to carry our legacy and order! You have challenged me long enough. I am done being lenient, Maddox.”

“Fuck you.” I hissed as another lash burned my flesh, striking in the same place as the last one.

My blood splashed on my face from the puddle below me and continued to drip down my severed back. The Order would clean my wounds with alcohol and seal them with salt, only for the torture to continue the next day. The scarification would be permanent, marking me for all to see as the traitor they claimed me to be.

My father laughed from behind my broken body. “Oh, son, you poor ignorant man. When will you learn? You cannot escape who you are. The only way you release your binds from being a Valentine is in death.”

His words sunk into my core.

Death.

It was always death, and my only choice was to kill those given to me or die in their stead.

“It is the balance needed in the universe,” he continued to yammer on. “When I was the leader, I maintained that order and knew that my hand was not my own. It is the will of the great St. Valentine. Through us, he selects the chosen, and we are blessed to...”

His words didn’t stop, but the pain made me feel dizzy. My vision blurred, and my father’s boasts became hazy in my ears. As soon as I was close to passing out, he

would attack again. His timing kept me on a razor's edge. He knew when it had been long enough for the adrenaline to flow through my body again, keeping me awake.

He was the most skilled in true torture. The flagellations were scheduled to keep me from achieving more than thirty minutes of rest. However, on the days my father took over, he lessened those precious minutes to an interval of ten.

“Death would be better than listening to your stupid ass speeches about yourself. You will never be St. Valentine. You'll die one day knowing you only lived to be in his shadow. No matter how hard you try, the Divine is his, not yours,” I spat, weakly trying to adjust my body inside the pillory.

In the reflection of my blood on the ground, I looked like a broken soldier.

Was there any muscle on my body anymore?

Bread was shoved in my mouth twice a day, but it wasn't enough. Phoenix would try to sneak me proper food when he could, but even my dear friend refused to look at me.

We'd used to spar so many times, and now I felt he only had to blow in my direction to knock me off my feet.

How long did I have left until my body would refuse to continue?

My father growled.

Another lash cut so deep I cried out in pain. My vow to not allow him to relish in my pain broke. I was unable to bite my tongue hard enough to refrain from letting him collect my agony. My legs buckled beneath me, and the weight of my body made me pant.

I scrambled, trying to readjust my position, desperate to keep my feet on the ground.

“Perhaps I am looking at this all wrong,” he said, a dangerous air to his tone. “You’d rather the rats continue to pick off your flesh little by little before you submit to me. That much has been made clear. Maybe to ensure a leader does his duty, you can’t simply force his hand by spilling his blood.”

I wanted to vomit.

I did not like his tone.

He was too excited.

The last time he had that particular joy lacing his words, they brought those damn vermin in here to feast on my ankles. Stomping and kicking, I finally managed to kill enough of them—their horrid bodies littered around the area where my feet landed.

Not long after, I couldn’t smell their dead carcasses any longer, and the rest of their friends thought better than to use me as a meal.

“Phoenix!” my father snapped, and my friend walked through the archway.

He didn’t look at me because he couldn’t. I kept my gaze on the ground, my hair falling into my face.

“Yes, my Lord?” Phoenix said.

“Bring me my son.”

Phoenix walked forward, untying my binds and opening the wooden pillory. I had been in that contraption for so long now that being out of it felt foreign.

My back had flesh hanging off it—I could feel the odd movement of the pieces slither and slide across me. Glancing down, I saw other pieces of my dead skin curled up and dried lying on the ground.

Phoenix linked his shoulder under my arm and started to walk to my father, but then the monster held up his hand, and my friend stopped.

“Not him.”

All the strength I had left in me faded away. My legs finally collapsed, unable to be held up any longer.

“No,” I said weakly, leaning forward and bowing at my father’s feet. “Please. Not Hayes. Please. I will do as you wish. Just...Leave my brother alone.”

His smile was crueler than I had ever witnessed, and I knew at that moment that I had sold my soul. I could only pray that it was enough to save my brothers.

“Is that thing the place where you were whipped?”

I blinked, staring down at Vivian in my arms. She waited for the memories to leave, allowing me a moment to collect myself and set her down on her feet. Her dress acted as a robe, the two sides split open, revealing her beautiful body. I tried to focus on her curves and the swell of her breasts, not letting my past overtake me again.

Vivian walked to the pillory, grimacing when she looked down on the cavern ground to see dried marks of blood. Her small hands trailed over the wood, and she was quiet as she studied the torture device.

“Oh, Maddox...” she said, looking over at me, but I let my head fall. Appearing weak in front of my prey was not...just no. I loathed this feeling, and I despised reliving

old wounds. But mostly, I detested that look of pity on her face.

“Don’t,” I demanded, ready to turn around and go back to the chapel.

“I’m sorry. I just can’t imagine what you went through. The Divine are truly monsters to do that to their own king. I...I just...”

I walked over to her, pushing back my feelings of unease the closer I got to that damn board. My breath hitched, and I pushed Vivian to lean against what had brought me an overabundance of pain.

I took her mouth in mine, demanding that she feel pleasure in this hell. If only for tonight...I could give her this. I could offer her solace and safety.

I could allow peace for... myself .

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw what was hanging on the back of the rock wall. It was the scourge. The damn thing sat abandoned in the metal hook all these years.

With shaking hands, I broke apart from the kiss, leaving her breathless. I swallowed hard and forced myself to pick it up. It felt heavy in my hands, and I gripped the damn leather so tightly I could feel the burn as it cut into my palms.

Vivian eyed me cautiously as I approached her with the long, wispy weapon.

“Bend over, Little Virgin.”

She blinked and scoffed at me.

However, I spun her around quickly and bent her over the wood. Throwing her dress over her back, I lashed her ass in a loud crack that echoed on the walls before she

could scream at me.

One time.

I needed this.

I needed to remember her cries instead of my own. Unlike the yardstick, I immediately kissed and licked the welt mark I had made. Her body froze under my tongue, and I leaned up to do it again.

Crack.

Another lashing across Vivian's ass, and again, I massaged the mark and licked the swollen red area. My cock was hard as stone, but I ignored it.

It wasn't about me.

It was about her.

The Valentines endured the punishments of their bloodline.

I moaned and slipped my fingers down over her slit, feeling the wetness there. She was enjoying this. For the first time, she wasn't fighting me.

"Such a good girl taking your punishment, Little Virgin. I love it when you behave for me."

She mewled and arched her back like a cat in heat. The urge to fuck her right here and now was challenging to ignore. Instead, I let the whip slash into her skin.

"Count," I demanded, hitting her a little harder than the last.

She panted and tried to catch her breath. “Five.”

“Yes. That’s my good girl. My fucking Valentine. Keep going.”

Again the leather cracked down onto her ass, and she cried out a number.

This happened over and over until she was drenched for me, her little pussy glistening in the dim light of the lanterns around us. I pulled her up, needing that visual confirmation, while wrapping her wrists in the long black strings of leather.

She spoke to me with her gaze. Lust and desire walloped me as she bit her lip.

Growling with need, I picked her up using my foot to open the pillory.

I sat her down carefully, her legs resting in the notches my arms were in so long ago. I smiled at her beauty and tilted her body toward my pelvis. My pants were down in seconds, and I slammed into her cunt.

She rode my thrusts this time.

Her body rocked with me, her nails digging deep into my arms.

I loved staring at her body, loved the sweat coating her face from how well she was keeping pace with my thrusts.

She is absolutely...divine.

“Oh fuuuck Vivian. The way you bounce on my cock, I...I...won’t make it. I can’t control myself when I am with you. God, you are my undoing.”

She screamed, her pussy clamping down on my dick, and the walls inside her

contracted over and over again. I was leaking like a geyser, my body so consumed by this woman that I felt like there was no end to her.

She was a part of me in so many ways.

My come spilled out onto my dick from the sides of her pussy, and I smiled like a fucking idiot. Vivian allowed me to help her off the torture device, accepting me when I pulled her in for a kiss. I bit and sucked her lips, getting myself all worked up.

Pulling away, she laughed, and I loved that fucking husky tone of hers. “We're not done yet, Little Virgin. There is one more thing to do.”

Now Vivian looked puzzled.

She watched me pull up my pants and undo the whips' binds, tying them around my wrists and using my mouth to pull them tighter. I turned to her and slowly kneeled at her feet, letting my knees hit the hard, unforgiving ground.

“I may not be able to change my fate, Little Virgin.” I said, “Or yours. But I want to remember you forever. I realized all too late that I...do not belong to the Divine...I belong to you .”

Vivian's eyes widened, but I reached my bound hands into my pants pocket, pulling the knife free. I lifted it up to her, bowing my head to the ground, and waited.

“Please, Little Virgin. Mark me. Cover their names and the scars. I want to bear only your brand for the rest of my life.”

Vivian's breath caught, and she hesitated. I wondered if she would simply stab me in the back with it or plunge the metal into my temple and end all of this. I was risking a lot in this position, and every part of my words and actions were damning us both.

Finally, I saw her shadow as it moved along the ground.

She came up behind me and pressed her soft hands into my flesh. This was nothing like the punishments of the Divine or the Elders when they carved their names into me as their king. This was something else that I couldn't describe. I didn't feel pain when the knife entered my skin. I felt pride.

When she was done, she walked back in front of me, crouching down to hand me the bloody knife.

I smiled at her, feeling only immense happiness in the place that had truly tortured me for so long.

She changed that.

She changed my hell into a sanctuary.

Chapter fifteen

I couldn't stop looking at Maddox. He had never smiled so brightly. I just branded my name onto his back with the fourteen others, yet he looked as though I had given him a spa treatment. Maybe he was a masochist and not just a sadist.

I reached my hands down to help him rise, but he didn't take my help. Instead, he kissed my fingers. This moment was light in this awful place. The ember that sparked since arriving in the dark halls of St. Valentine. But just like every flame, something was always there to snuff it out.

The hallway lit from afar, and that horrid priest came down the corridor. He was holding an unconscious man in his arms that I didn't recognize at all. It was like a switch went down. That warm, bright smile on Maddox's face fell, and the cold, cruel mask was firmly back into place.

He twisted his wrists, and the binding snapped off of him like a rubber band. He was never truly restrained. The way he got out of the leather in seconds showed me that. No other looks were spared as he stood up and left me alone on the ground.

"Why is my brother here?" he demanded, storming over to the man.

The priest had a sly grin on his ugly face and stroked the man's head like a dog. "Your father felt as though you may need a reminder, son. I am on my way to lay dear Hayes to bed, but I can change that direction if needed."

Maddox cleared his throat and shook his head curtly. "No. Everything is going

according to plan. The chosen will be prepared for the sacrifice within a few hours. Bring my brother back to his room. Now.”

The priest snickered and hefted Maddox’s brother higher on his arm. “Of course. I shall see you at the ritual, my King.”

Maddox had his back toward me, but I knew that wasn’t why I suddenly felt so cold. The priest left with the man, and Maddox stared long after their exit. He didn’t turn around when he spoke. His voice was a whisper.

“It doesn’t matter anyway, Vivian. You should be glad you’re dying soon. That is really the only freedom from our bloodline.”

The ember in my heart and the hope with it no longer smolder. It was completely extinguished.

I couldn’t feel my arms. I had been suspended in this fucked up crucifix for so long. I felt so defeated. I didn’t know how I could free myself from this. I was stuck. Maddox was gone after stringing me back up wordlessly.

He left me here to stare at nothing.

My ears were ringing from the deafening silence.

Dying would be a fucking mercy at this point. His words bounced around my head. I couldn’t shake them. The only freedom from our bloodline is to die. Otherwise, you were just a fucking puppet of fate.

I didn’t accept that. I chose my damn fate. I wasn’t going to allow some old fucking group of murderers to choose how I would die.

Maddox suddenly came back into the room with someone draped over his arm and halted my thoughts.

Was this some other sacrifice?

It was that man.

He held him with care and put him on the ground, being sure to watch his head. The man was passed out and smelled like a brewery. There was vomit on the guy's clothes and stuck to the side of his mouth. Maddox had a wet cloth, dabbing his lips and wiping at his shirt.

“Hayes, you fucking idiot. When will you learn to pace yourself? You always are the reason my hands are tied. Why would I try to believe differently?”

The two silhouette shadows clouded my mind, and another puzzle piece slid into place. It was Maddox and this guy. All along, I was right. I likely saved that bitch that night, but something told me it didn't matter.

“Who is he?” I said, not expecting an answer.

“Hayes Valentine. He's my little brother.”

My eyes widened. “The Divine allow their monsters to have a family?”

Maddox sighed. “Hayes is meant to take my place one day. I have tried to teach him the way of the Divine, but he's young and stupid.”

I realized that this was Maddox's version of love. He seemed...afraid of the Divine. That made sense after torturing him, but there was more he wasn't telling me.

“Did they threaten you, Maddox?”

Maddox was silent, continuing to care for his brother, cleaning and changing his clothing to fresh ones before pushing some form of medication into his mouth.

Threats wouldn't matter to him unless they were about someone he loved. The Divine had threatened Hayes.

“You can't run from fate, Vivian.” was all he said before he picked up his brother and walked out of the door again.

My head was spinning, partly from the horrible angle that my arms had been for so long, but also because I was feeling...bad? For a monster. A monster who intended to kill me. I was fucked up.

The door opened again sometime later, but it wasn't Maddox.

“So beautiful, strung up and helpless, aren't you, you mouthy girl?”

I kept my head down, trying to feign sleep as best I could. The priest walked up to me, grabbing my face and turning it side to side. He stuck some kind of herb in my mouth, and I hid it under my tongue, trying to keep from reacting to the bitter taste it left.

“That ought to keep you still. This herb makes you practically dead. I don't need you fighting me during this, even if it only lasts for ten or so minutes. Let's enjoy this, shall we?”

Dread entered my stomach, and I almost opened my eyes, prepared to spit in this creep's face, but then an idea hatched in my brain. My last hope.

For ten minutes, I would appear dead?

I bit down, keeping the herb under my tongue. This bitter plant could be what saves my life...and ends Maddox.

The thought made me surprisingly sad.

He truly did seem to be a mindless soldier in all this. Maybe this would be a mercy for us both. The priest fondled my half-naked body, and I had to resist the bile forming in my throat. It had been a while since Maddox left with his brother. He had to come back soon.

Would it matter? Would he care?

I felt his old fingers penetrate me, and I kept biting my tongue so hard I felt the blood begin to pool into my mouth. I could hear his ragged pants, and I thought of Maddox instead, remembering his moans and his voice as he whispered in my ear and over my body, trying to make this hell into a memory of heaven.

It went on for what felt like hours, but finally, just as the priest grunted in what I surely felt would coat my body in his sin, the door slammed open, and the priest ran from my side.

“What the fuck!” Maddox screamed from the door.

His roar practically shook the small attic, and my ears rang as he bellowed a growl.

“Ma-Maddox! My king, I-I thought you were tending to your brother!”

I opened my eyes the slightest bit, using the blanket of my hair to look past where Maddox stood.

“You do not sully what it is mine! How fucking dare you.”

It all happened so fast. Maddox practically lunged forward toward the man, grabbing his dick in his hands and snapping upright with a sickening crack.

The priest screamed, his penis going completely flaccid as it laid down in a contorted angle. “You...you broke...

His face paled, and he fell to the ground.

I continued to feign sleep, knowing that despite my feelings, I needed to live this out...if I wanted to live at all.

Maddox lifted my head and patted my cheeks. I didn’t respond, letting my face fall back down painfully.

“Vivian? Are you okay?”

Maddox walked forward and kicked the priest in the ribcage. “What did you do to her?”

The priest groaned, curled in on himself, and held his sides. “I gave her a sedative herb! I am sorry, my king.”

Maddox walked back to me, assessing my body and covering my naked form with the blanket he had brought for his brother. My trembling stopped slightly when he tucked it around my shoulders and covered my waist.

“Her body is for my eyes only, you understand? Get out and consider each breath you take a mercy from your king. The last I shall ever give you.”

His voice was menacing and more powerful than I had ever heard. I gulped, being careful not to swallow the herb in my mouth.

“Oh, my Little Virgin. For the first time in a long time, I am sorry. So truly sorry. I can’t escape this. It is time.”

I pondered his words, but then he lifted me up out of the bindings and cradled me in his arms. My heart was pounding in my chest at what was about to happen, and I couldn’t hold back the tears behind my closed eyes.

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Chapter sixteen

I thought about Hayes as I carried Vivian in my arms down to the arena beneath the tombs. It hadn't felt this way since Liberty was on that slab. I wanted to...spare Vivian.

It was ludicrous, and even thinking about it felt blasphemous.

History must repeat itself, child.

I sighed. "I fucking know asshole. I am your slave 'till the day I die.'?"

Valentine had been in my head the moment my sister's eyes closed. The killer entered me when my hand did his bidding. I was a slave ever since.

Maybe I always would be.

I was done.

There was no saving Vivian, but I wouldn't let her death be for nothing. After laying Vivian to rest, I was going to take Hayes and run. I didn't know when they would find me, but I would be prepared to kill them all when they did. I was not a fucking puppet, and I wouldn't allow them to use me any longer.

I had left a note for Kieran. The quiet kid in my class. The one who looked at bodies the same as myself. The intricate way that he saw the world, maybe he could lead change to the fucked up society of the Divines members.

The ceremony was all set up, with candles and thousands of cloaked figures surrounding the large ceramic pool at the base in the center. I couldn't look at it, knowing soon it would fill up with Vivian's blood.

I didn't even get to say goodbye.

I didn't get to tell her that I was taking her advice, that I was going to run and be the deciding factor for my own fate.

I laid her on the altar, acknowledging each Elder with their name in Latin and bowing my head to each member. I moved the blanket away from Vivian, making sure to block her nakedness from the Divine.

I didn't want them to see what's mine.

She was my Little Virgin. So pure and beautiful.

I was happy that she wouldn't feel this. My hands were shaking.

It was a sort of peace in my mind to simply fall asleep and not wake up. I didn't want her pain anymore.

I just wanted peace, hers and my own.

"I am sorry, Little Virgin. May you find your own fate in the finality of your slumbers," I whispered to only her, kissing her beautiful lips one last time.

My hands shook as the ceremonial dagger was brought to me and revealed within the cloth and mask.

I waved the artifacts over Vivian's body, pausing for a second over her face before

placing it over my own. It felt better this way, like it would be someone else to end her life. The last band of chains that bound me would break with her final breath.

“My king,” the underling said as I grabbed the dagger.

I made a slice, very shallow, on Vivian’s thigh. She moaned softly in her sleep, though I tried to be gentle. The cut next was much deeper. I punished myself with that cut, hitting the bones in my palm. I joined my nearly severed hand to her thigh, feeling the thrum of our blood joining one another.

It was so powerful.

So right.

It solidified that running from my fate was truly the best thing I could do.

I looked at her beautiful face one last time, tears streaming down my cheeks behind the mask as I raised the dagger high above her heart.

“I love you...my Little Virgin. With this dagger, I claim your soul and shatter my own in turn.”

Chapter seventeen

I opened my eyes, Maddox's final words making my heart break. Spitting out the herb, I moved quickly. Maddox looked at me, his eyes wide in shock behind his mask. His raised hand came down to land on the stone in a hard strike right where my body had been seconds before.

"I'm so sorry, Maddox. I told you, you always have a choice. I choose my own fate. And you've chosen yours."

He still looked bewildered as I bolted from the altar, his body slamming forward with the force of the blade. He spun around, his mask falling from his face. He was looking up at me while now on his back on the slab.

"And what's your choice, Little Virgin? What fate has my love chosen?" he whispered.

With tears in my eyes, I grabbed the dagger from his grip, screaming my anger and pain as I slammed it down as hard as I could into his chest.

"I choose to live!" I sobbed, his blood soaking through his shirt to my hands. "I loved you too. You could have chosen me, you idiot! You could have chosen us, and we would have created our own fate together."

I felt his ribs crack, and blood seeped out from his mouth as he smiled and coughed.

"Run...my chosen...or your fate...is...sealed."

I looked up at all the cloaked figures around me. They were bowing, unphased at what just happened. I tried to pull the dagger out to protect myself, but the blood was flowing out so fast, running down the sides of the stone into a huge ceramic bowl below me.

I panted, continuing my best to free the weapon out of Maddox's chest. He said to run. I needed to listen. I looked at his unblinking blue eyes, letting the tears fall for his death before turning to run.

There was so much blood, all of it falling into the channels to collect at the bottom. I was blinded by my tears.

What had I done?

I slipped on the liquid, falling over the stone and smashing face-first directly into the ceramic bowl.

I choked on Maddox's blood as I lifted up to grip the side of the tub, throwing my hair back and splashing the front center of cloaked figures.

These men had crests on their heads. One of them was the multiple-horned deer.

A valentine.

These men were above the rest, perhaps the order that slain so many.

Maddox was right...I sealed my fate.

With a frustrated cry of desperation and defeat, I threw handfuls of the blood of their leader onto the rest of the figures surrounding me.

"You wanted this! You sick freaks! You demanded a sacrifice! Well, here it is! Bathe

in your fate! Your bloody Valentine!”

The End