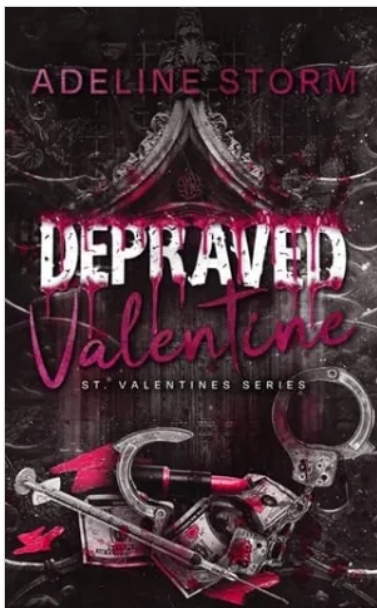




Depraved Valentine (St. Valentines)

Author: *Adeline Storm*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: When life throws you poison...use it on the men who deserve it.

Stay depraved babes!

Total Pages (Source): 16

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Three Years Ago

I remember when things changed for me—when I first began to notice him differently. Rafe is always here, like an unchanging part of the scenery. He's my brother's best friend, a constant fixture in our house, always hanging around with that sly confidence of his. This summer, I turned sixteen, and it's the summer that I started seeing him in a way I shouldn't have.

Standing in the kitchen, grabbing myself a beer from the fridge, I take in the surroundings. My parents are away for the weekend, and my brother decided to throw a party that will ultimately get him grounded for a month.

I can hear them outside, laughing, talking—my brother, JD, and Rafe. I don't know why, but the sound makes my chest tighten. Maybe it's because of the way they are joking around like they share some secret I'd never be let in on. Or maybe it's the fact that Rafe was so... effortless. So at ease in a way I could never be.

I pop the cap off my beer bottle and take a swig before pulling the joint from between my breasts. Before I can remove my hand from my shirt completely, his dangerously beautiful face comes into view.

"You're brother wouldn't be too happy if he saw you with that," he says, leaning against the doorway with that familiar half-smirk on his face.

I roll my eyes and partially turn away before saying, "if JD has a problem with it then he can shove it up his ass." A deep chuckle leaves his lips and my thighs immediately clench. I turn completely away from him in an attempt to hide the odd mixture of

emotions I feel take over my face.

Within seconds, I can feel his presence behind me and it sends goosebumps down my back. His intoxicating scent surrounds me, and I take in the fresh yet woodsy smell. As Rafe reaches around me, I feel his breath down the side of my neck.

“This is a big joint for someone as small as yourself to finish alone. I’ll do you the favor and help you out with it.” I feel the heat on my cheeks as he grabs my hand, pulling me through the party and up the stairs. I can’t help but feel a sense of excitement rush through me as we get to my bedroom door. Everybody here knows not to touch my room... except Rafe.

He lets me in the room and closes the door, locking it. Goosebumps raise on my skin as he turns to look at me with a crooked smile. His dimples are fully noticeable, and his muscles ripple under his shirt as he brings the joint up to his lips. He says nothing, only puts his hand out in front of me, palm facing up.

I grab the lighter from my bra and look at his hand before walking closer and lighting it for him without breaking eye contact. His dark eyes are mesmerizing.

Before my thoughts run rampant, I walk to my window and peer down at the backyard. Almost everyone from our high school is here.

Once again, I feel his presence behind me, then I smell the weed as he blows the smoke out next to my ear.

I feel his back against my chest and his hand on my waist. His grip is firm as he pulls my body into his. His other hand comes around to put the joint in my mouth and I grab it, inhaling and accepting the burn down my throat.

I don't even realize that his hand is inching down my abdomen until the button of my

jeans is undone and he's pulling the zipper down. My breathing picks up as his hand continues moving lower. The feeling of his fingers running across my skin sends electricity through me, and I bite my bottom lip.

“You keep doing that and I might not be able to control myself, Little Poison.” His deep voice next to my ear sends chills through my body. Bringing my hand up, I remove the joint from between my lips and exhale out.

“You couldn’t handle me if you tried, Sinner,” I say, turning my head slightly in his direction and placing the joint back between my lips. Taking a deep drag, I blow it out into his face and remove it from between my lips once more.

Rafe turns me around to face him, placing a hand on my lower back and one on my neck gently. I look up at him through my lashes and bring the joint up to his lips. He inhales before bringing my face close to his, blowing the smoke right over my lips. I take the opportunity to pull him closer and connect our lips.

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Chapter One

CHARLOTTE

Being me isn't as easy as it seems. Everyone always thinks they know me. The perfect daughter of the Masterson family. The kind of girl you see on social media in designer dresses, with flawless skin, a bright white smile, and always comes out on top no matter who she's up against. The perfect sister in the Xi Phi Delta sorority at St Valentines.

But no one sees the real me—not the me that spends her nights in the shadows, not the me who drips with blood instead of perfume. I keep up my facade so nobody looks too deeply and sees past my identity that I've worked so hard to build.

You'd never guess it by looking at me, though. Perfectly maintained hair, perfectly manicured nails, and the designer bags I carry like accessories rather than tools of wealth. I know the game I'm playing and I'm winning.

The rich play by their own rules. I don't just have money. I have power. Power to control people, to manipulate them. And when I find someone I think needs... taking care of, I don't hesitate. I don't regret it. But that's the thing—they all think they know me. They think I'm some sweet, harmless, spoiled little college girl. And that's exactly how I want it. I want them to see me as perfect, pure—because if they did know what I really am, they'd run screaming.

But I guess that's the price of power, beauty, and perfection. The price of being the one and only Charlotte Masterson. I get it, the people that don't understand just

assume that I am a massive cunt and that I take advantage of daddy's money. Which is not entirely wrong, but I do have a brain and I prefer to use it. Not many people understand me or like me and all they see is perfection due to money and power. Except him...

There's one person who doesn't see me as perfect. One person who sees right through the silk and satin adorned with diamonds and luxury. The only man that could truly ever bring me to my knees.

Rafe Thornson.

My brother's best friend. The quiet, but perceptive one. The one that always knows what's going on. The one I can't stop thinking about, even though I'd never, ever admit it. The one I've wanted since I was twelve.

Rafe's tall, with brown curly hair that's always a little messy in the way that makes him look more like a bad boy than he actually is. He has this quiet intensity that drives me crazy. He's not the type of guy I usually go for. He doesn't smile much. He doesn't talk much. But there's something about him that makes my heart beat a little faster every time I'm around him.

Which is why I pretend to hate him.

Because that's what I do. I pretend. I don't let anyone see me for who I really am. And I definitely don't let Rafe know the truth. Not the truth about me—and certainly not the truth about how I feel about him.

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Chapter Two

CHARLI

The club is alive with a pulse that echoes in my chest, a beat that reverberates beneath my skin. My heels click against the floor as I move through the crowd, the thrum of the bass vibrating through my body. My friends are all around me, laughing, chatting, oblivious to what's running through my head. It's always like this. They think I'm just another girl out for a good time, someone who loves to dance, drink, and laugh at men's stupid jokes. But nobody knows what's lurking deep inside my head.

Tonight is no different. Tonight, the mask is firmly in place.

Tomorrow is Friday, and I have no classes in the morning, so I might as well have my fun.

I slip through the crowd, my little white dress skimming over my thighs, the deep side cutouts just daring enough to catch attention without looking desperate. I'm not desperate. My confidence shines brighter than most people's future, honestly. I was raised to love myself, and that's exactly what I do.

I sip my cocktail as I make my way towards the bar, searching for my next target, and I spot him right away.

He's standing near the bar, leaning casually against the counter, one hand wrapped around a drink. His white shirt is open at the collar, showing just enough of his chest to be enticing. Dark hair, sharp jawline—he's handsome in a way that's almost too

easy to notice. But it's his eyes that draw me in. They're sharp. Observant. They're the kind of eyes that see through people. They don't miss a thing.

I smile to myself, making sure it's just the right mix of innocent and inviting. I don't want to be too obvious. Men like him—ones who think they're entitled to everything—don't like to be chased. They like the game. They like to be pursued just enough to feel like they've won.

I move toward him, slow and deliberate. He notices me immediately. His gaze locks onto mine, and I feel that initial flicker of recognition. He knows what he's looking at—a girl who's confident, but not too forward. Someone worth chasing.

He smiles at me first. It's easy, predatory. It sends chills through me but I push back the feelings. "Hello there, gorgeous," he says, voice smooth like velvet, and I can already hear the arrogance behind it.

"Hi," I reply, my voice soft and playful. I lean slightly closer, letting my perfume linger in the space between us. He inhales, just enough to show he's caught the scent. "I haven't seen you around here before."

He grins. "I don't come out much. Only when something...interesting catches my eye." The look he gives me makes me want to cower into myself and run, but it seals the deal enough for me to know that he is the perfect target.

I raise an eyebrow at him. The bait is obvious, but it's enough to make me smile. I can already tell he's the type to think he's above everyone else. That he's got the world in his pocket because of his looks, his charm, his status. And I'm sure he's used to women throwing themselves at him.

But not me.

“I like to be... selective,” I say, letting the words hang in the air between us. My gaze slips to his drink, then back up to his face. “You should be careful about what you put into your body.”

He laughs, clearly amused. “Oh? Are you some kind of health freak or something? I’d assume so with a body like that.”

“No,” I answer, stepping closer. I let my hand brush against his arm—just enough to leave a trace of warmth. “I just know a thing or two about people. About their habits.”

“Oh yeah? Interesting,” he says, but I can tell his interest is piqued. “Maybe we should talk more about this... over another drink?”

I offer him my best smile. “I was thinking the same thing. My name’s Elizabeth by the way, and you are?” I ask him in the sweetest tone I can muster. Elizabeth is my go to fake name for weirdos like him.

“Christian. Christian Reese. You’ve probably heard of me,” the tone in his voice exudes cockiness. I wrack my brain to try and think of how I would know him, but nothing comes to mind. He doesn’t even look familiar, and I’ve met a lot of people in my life.

“Sorry, Christian. Doesn’t ring a bell,” I shrug my shoulders, and his mouth drops open at my words. Sure, I have confidence, but this man is nothing but cocky. He takes a step closer and puts his thumb on my chin, lifting my head up to make direct eye contact with him.

“Well, let’s get out of here, and I promise I will formally acquaint you with the name,” he says in a low tone, tilting his head to the side. I give him my best flirty smile and take his hand in mine, pulling him through the crowded area. My friends

spot me, and I give them a knowing nod toward the sorry bastard behind me, and they immediately assume that means I am leaving with him, which is not entirely wrong.

Once we get outside of the club, Christian stops me in the tracks and pulls out his phone, sending off a quick text. We stand in silence for an awkward couple of seconds before a blacked-out SUV pulls up to the curb in front of us, and we get in. I realize that I haven't given him my address in that my plan won't work if he takes us to his place.

"Why don't we go back to my place? It's right down the road, and I'm feeling a little impatient right now. I could really use that extra drink," I say before running my tongue along my bottom lip and looking up at him through my lashes. The corner of his mouth curls up into a half smile as he nods in agreement. I tell the driver my address and we are at my building in no time.

Making it up to my apartment, I quickly kick my shoes off to get more comfortable. I connect my phone to the bluetooth speaker and shuffle my "Feeling Stabby" playlist. I feel his presence behind me and slowly turn to face him with a smile on my lips.

"Nice place you got here, Elizabeth. Where are the drinks? Let's keep this party going," the creep says as he smiles down at me, wrapping a strand of my hair around his finger.

I look up through my eyelashes, noticing the flecks of yellow in his green eyes.

"Don't you worry, handsome. You go have a seat and I will handle the drinks," I say as I make my way to the alcohol cart, grabbing a bottle of bourbon. Taking it into the kitchen, I grab two glasses from the cabinet and pour three fingers worth of the amber liquid.

Peeking over my shoulder, I see Christian looking out of the window in the opposite

direction. Quickly and quietly, I grab the small syringe of GHB from the drawer in front of me and hold it behind my back, ensuring I don't poke myself with it. The use of poison flooded my mind as I thought of the nickname Rafe used to call me, Little Poison. That nickname is what gave me the idea in the first place and it has become a signature for me ever since.

Making my way over, I make it a point to place the drink down on the glass coffee table hard enough to make sure he hears it. Standing tall, I tilt my head slightly as he turns to face me.

“Drink up so I can grab you another,” I say with a sweet smile. He places his hand on my cheek and gently caresses it. It takes everything I have not to gag at his touch. He throws back the rest of his drink and I take the glass back to the kitchen. Looking over my shoulder, I see him sit on the sofa facing the floor to ceiling windows, showcasing the city at night.

I pour him another drink and make my way back over, placing it on the side table as I straddle his lap. “You’re a naughty little thing, Elizabeth.” Gag. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I grind my ass into him. Christian lays his head back and groans. I use the opportunity to pull the syringe out from behind my back and stick it in his neck. Night night, baby.

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Chapter Three

RAFE

The rink is cold this morning. The kind of cold that makes your teeth tingle when you breathe in too deep, but it feels good. Like a clean slate. The smell of fresh ice cut through the air, mixing with the faint scent of stale sweat from the locker room. I don't mind. It's part of the ritual—gear, sweat, the sharp, metallic edge of the ice, all of it.

I slide my skates on, one after the other, the laces tight enough to make my toes burn just slightly. I like it that way. It's a reminder I'm about to put everything into this, like I always do.

The locker room is half-empty. Just a few of the regulars milling around—Ben, Mark, and Tyler. I don't pay them much attention. It's game face time. I make my way out of the locker room and out to the rink.

We hit the ice ten minutes before practice is supposed to start. The coolness of the rink is a welcome contrast to the stuffy air of the locker room. My skates cut into the ice, carving smooth lines beneath me. The sound of the blades biting the surface echoes in the empty rink. There is something almost meditative about it—the quiet before everything starts.

“Warm up, then we're hitting drills. Let's move it, boys!” Hayes yells from the bench.

I shift into gear, zipping around, getting my legs loose. A few laps, some quick starts and stops, all to get the blood flowing. I can feel the muscles in my legs warming up, the familiar tension building up in my core. I'm ready.

We do the usual routine. Line drills first. I focus on quick passes and quick movement, as well as seeing all that's happening around me. The puck feels perfect on my stick, sliding easily on the ice. The goalie—as usual—is good, but he's just a little too slow for some of the quicker shots. That doesn't matter to me, though. I'm already planning my next move, thinking two steps ahead.

I drop into a better stance, my knees bending, head up, stick ready. I can feel my muscles burning after a few minutes, but that's part of it—burning in the right way, the kind of burn that comes with pushing yourself past the limits. I love it.

After a series of breakout drills, where we have to transition from defense to offense in under ten seconds, Coach moves us into power play scenarios. I take in the magical feeling of the ice gliding underneath my skates.

“Make it count, boys,” Hayes says. The power play has been struggling lately. Our passes have been off, and timing was everything.

We finish out with a few more goals and technique explanations.

After an hour and a half, Coach calls it quits. We skate a few more laps to cool down, then make our way back to the locker room. I pull my helmet off, running my hand through my damp hair, feeling the sting of the cold air on my skin. There's always this weird calm after practice, a moment when the world slows down just enough for you to catch your breath before everything picks up again.

I grab my water bottle, take a long drink, and sit down on the bench, letting the chill air soak into my body. JD tosses a towel at me, and I catch it without looking.

After a hot shower, everybody makes their way out of the building and to their cars.

Despite constantly working our asses off and beating ourselves up over the lack of perfection, I know I'm surrounded by brothers who value the sport and the adrenaline just as much as I do. I couldn't imagine having gone to another school and not had my boys through this with me.

I pat JD on the shoulder, and we head toward my Bronco.

"What's on your mind, brother?" JD's question throws me off. He knows me more than I know myself. He's been by my side for as long as I can remember and has never left.

"Just thinking about heading to the bar to clear my head a bit," I say before hopping in the car and starting it up. We both know I won't be going anywhere but to bed tonight. Especially since we have practice in the morning.

"Go get laid, sweet cheeks. That'll fix your problem real quick," JD says with a smirk before heading to his truck. Fuck.

I throw him the finger before driving off and heading home to spend my night relaxing alone.

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Chapter Four

CHARLI

Drip, drip, drip.

The sound echoes against the floor as the drops of blood fall and the puddle grows rapidly. It takes me a few seconds to realize that I have completely dissociated and need to get this shit cleaned up.

Once the dickhead knocked out, I had some fun with a blender cup and his shrimp dick. Thankfully, I thought it through and gagged him and tied his hands and legs to my table before he woke up and could end my fun games. Once I had enough of him, I put a trash bag over his head and let him asphyxiate.

I send a quick text to the cleanup crew and let them know to get here as soon as they can. I've used the same people for the past two years, and not once have they slipped up. Probably because I tip them so well, and they know what my family's money can do to them.

I take one last look at the body lying on my floor before I turn around and head to my bedroom, closing and locking the door behind me, careful not to drip on anything and make my way over to the bathroom.

I remove the bra and panty set that I adorned for the stranger of the night, step into the oversized walk-in shower, and turn the water to hot. I stand under the stream and watch the streaks of red run down my body and into the drain. That familiar sense of

calm settling within me. One less piece of shit in the world.

Once I'm done with my full shower routine and I'm completely clean, I grab a towel from the automatic warmer next to the shower and wrap myself in it. Walking over to the steamy up mirror, I wipe it with my hand and stare at the face looking back at me. My parents really do make hot kids. As much as my brother annoys me, nobody can deny that we're a good-looking family. Thanks, mom and dad!

Walking out of the bathroom, I head to the large walk in closet and grab my favorite little satin pajama set. I pack it in my bag and grab any other essentials before I throw on a black hoodie and black leggings and head out into the main living area. The body is gone and so is the blood so I pull out my phone and send a message to my driver, Phillip, to be here as soon as possible. He responds, letting me know he'll be here in two minutes. I pocket my phone and pull my hood up to hide my face and walk out of the front door and down the hall to the elevator.

DING

The sound of the elevator snaps me out of my daze. Fuck, I must be tired. I've been completely zoned out all day. I just need a sexual release and a good night of sleep. Maybe some weed, too.

I step out of the elevator and into the lobby before I quickly make my way out of the door at the same time that Phillip is parking. He rushes out to open the car door for me as I quickly get in to avoid being seen. The whole process may seem ridiculous to some, but I love privacy and would prefer that nobody knows when I'm here.

The drive back to the sorority is quick, and once the car comes to a full stop, I jump out and make my way into my building and to the kitchen, where I see Sydney next to the toaster. Weird timing for her to be awake, but okay. She turns around, and I give her a small smile before I climb the stairs and get to my room for the night.

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Chapter Five

RAFE

The memory hit me like a cold slap, the kind that stays with you long after the sting has faded. It was winter—the kind of brutal winter where the air felt like needles piercing your flesh.

I was thirteen, standing in the expensively decorated study of his father's mansion, the place exuded wealth and arrogance. A dark oak desk stood at the center, papers stacked neatly—everything about my father's world screamed order, control. It was the kind of world I was supposed to inherit. The kind of world I had no desire for.

My father sat behind the desk, one hand holding a crystal glass of whiskey, the other flipping through financial reports. His sharp suit matched the sharp edge in his eyes, cold and calculating. To my father, life wasn't a game—it was a strategy, a move, a play. Everything was for a reason and there was always a desired end game whether it was money or power.

“This hockey dream of yours is unrealistic nonsense, son,” my father had said, his voice smooth but firm. “You're wasting your time. You have the mind for business, for something real. A legacy to inherit. I'm offering you a future that's worth something and will continue to be.”

Barely a teenager, I stared at him, heat rushing up my neck. I could feel the weight of disappointment pressing down on me like a thousand-pound anchor. I wasn't some trust fund kid destined to sit behind a desk, making numbers dance for me. I was a

hockey player—a dreamer, a fighter, a kid who knew the ice better than he knew his own reflection.

“But I want to play pro hockey, Dad. I’m good enough. I can make it, I know I can,” I had said, my voice cracking with the first real rebellion I had ever spoken aloud.

My father’s eyes flicked up from the paperwork, studying me like I was some foreign specimen. His lips curled into a slow, condescending smile. “Pro hockey? Come on, Rafe. Don’t be naive. You think some team is going to throw you millions just to skate around on ice? No. I’ve built something real. Something that matters. You’ll take over the company. You’ll learn to think like a leader, not some kid chasing a puck; that’s just ridiculous.”

The words cut deeper than any slap. I wanted to argue, wanted to yell that hockey wasn’t just a game, that it was everything to me—the adrenaline, the rush of the rink, the thrill of the crowd. But it was like talking to a brick wall. My father’s mind was made up. And when it came to my father, nothing was ever negotiable.

I stood there for what felt like an eternity, silence thick between us. I remember the way my father looked at me then, almost like I was a failure for even thinking about defying him. For daring to believe in something other than the life my father had planned out for me.

“I won’t have a son who wastes his potential on fantasy; we don’t have time for this kind of foolery,” my father added, his voice hard, final.

The words stung then and still sting now. Even years later, they haunt me. Because in my heart, I know I was meant for the ice, not for some glass window highrise building in the city. But every game, every training session, I could hear my father’s voice, always there, reminding me that I wasn’t enough—was never going to be enough—without the family name, the family business, the power.

I stopped caring about what my father wanted and pursued what I loved. I continued to play. Every damn game. Every shift. Every goal. For myself. For the dream my father couldn't see.

Even when my father had cut me off—refused to pay for my hockey equipment, my training—I had found a way. I worked extra shifts at the rink, paid for what I could with the little money I had. When I got a scholarship to St Valentines, I took it. When the scouts started to take notice, I put my heart into it even more, not just to prove them wrong but to prove myself right.

But the crack between father and son only widened as the years passed, as my career took off and my father's world continued to revolve around numbers and board meetings. My father's calls, when they came, were always the same: Come home, son. You're wasting your time. The offer's still on the table.

But I couldn't go back. Not now. I was too close. Too damn close to the dream I'd been fighting for. The leagues, the contracts, the trophy I could almost taste—I could almost feel it in my veins, in the fire that burned in my chest every time I laced up my skates.

And maybe—just maybe—I wasn't playing for myself anymore. I was playing for that kid who stood in his father's study, desperate for a chance, desperate for approval. I was playing to prove that the dream, the passion, the heart, was worth more than all the money and power my father had built. That no matter how high the walls of that mansion were, no matter how far apart their worlds seemed, nothing would stop me from skating past them all.

Not even his father.

This sport is my love, my life. It's bettered me as a person and taught me many life lessons that my father never could.

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Chapter Six

CHARLI

Saturday afternoon, and it feels as though the sky is about to open up and pour down on me. It's grey and depressing; it matches my mood perfectly.

Arriving at the gym, my motivation for leg day sky rockets. The gym is a place where I can shut the world out and do something that feels good in the daylight.

I put my bag in a locker and go to the mats to stretch. I should've expected it, but of course, I didn't. He's here, and his muscles are glistening. I wipe my mouth just to make sure I'm not drooling over Rafe.

He's standing by the bench, hands reaching up to readjust his headphones, head tilted down like he's inspecting something. He hasn't changed much, not in the ways that matter. His curly hair still messy in that effortless way, his jaw still that perfect combination of sharp and soft, and the way his shoulders carried the weight of the world—like nothing ever really knocks him down. It makes my heart ache, like I've been holding my breath for the last year without even realizing it.

My pulse jumps in my throat. I freeze.

My first thought is: I look like crap.

I mean, I've been in sweatpants all day, barely remembered to put on makeup, and my hair is a tangled mess from running through the wind. I'm definitely not looking

like the girl he gave his first kiss to. But I can't help it. I can't look away.

I don't even know what to do or how to act, so I stand there for a moment too long, debating whether to turn around and pretend I didn't see him. What if he doesn't even care to see me?

But then he lifts his head, and his eyes meet mine. I freeze, rooted to the spot like some damn tree.

"Charli?" he says, voice low, the way it always was when he said my name. Like it was something soft, something he didn't want to rush.

I nod, unable to say anything at first. A thousand thoughts flood my mind, but nothing makes it past the lump in my throat. My heart's pounding like a drumbeat, and I wonder if he can hear it. He can't, right?

"Wow, it's... it's been a while," he says, almost like he's testing the words, like he's not sure how to say them either. His lips curl up into a small half-smile, and God, I've missed that smile. It's pure perfection.

"Yeah," I manage, my voice a little raspier than I wanted it to be. I clear my throat, suddenly aware of how stupid I must look standing there, staring at him. "A while."

We're both standing there awkwardly, like we're stuck in some space neither of us knows how to navigate anymore. There's hesitation in his eyes, like he's not sure whether he should say something more or just leave it at that. It's been over three years since we last talked, and so much has changed in that time.

But some things never change, right?

"So... How've you been?" He asks, taking a step forward, almost like he's testing the

waters between us. His voice is tentative, unsure, but his eyes—they're warm, familiar. A little bit of the Rafe I used to know.

"Good," I say, finally finding my footing again. I can feel the awkwardness dissipate, just a little. "You?"

"Yeah, you know... busy with classes and hockey," he says with a shrug. "Same old."

I nod, trying to ignore the tension building in my chest. I should be saying something more, something that doesn't make me feel like I'm still holding on to this stupid crush. But all I can think about is how much I miss him, how much it still hurts to see him, to remember what we were. I can't help but wonder if he feels the same way—or if he's moved on completely. He's the only person that can make me lose my self-control, the only person who has enough influence over me to turn me into this monster I've become.

He looks at me like he wants to say something else, but the words don't come. Instead, he glances down at his feet, then back at me. "It's weird, you know? Running into you like this."

"Yeah." My laugh is quiet, almost nervous. "It is."

It's like everything that went unsaid between us that summer is suddenly hanging in the air, thick and heavy. The last time we saw each other—the last time I saw him—I don't think either of us expected it to be the end. We didn't get closure. Hell, I didn't even get to tell him how much I loved him, how much I still do.

I look down at the ground, trying to steady myself, but my thoughts are a jumbled mess. This is stupid. Why is this still affecting me?

But then I hear his voice again, softer this time, almost like a question. “Have you been okay? Your brother says you’ve been quiet with him lately.”

The air feels thicker, like time itself has stopped moving. My heart is pounding, and I wonder if he can hear it now. I glance up at him, catching that same vulnerability in his eyes that I used to see all the time. That boy who I once thought was untouchable, untamed.

And for a moment, I let myself imagine that things could be different. That maybe, we could go back to the way things were. That maybe—just maybe—we could pick up where we left off. But then reality hits, and I realize that time isn’t that kind.

“I’ve been okay,” I whisper, my voice barely audible. “I get by.”

Rafe doesn’t answer right away, but I can see it in the way his gaze softens, how the edges of his mouth tremble as if he’s fighting something inside. And then, without saying another word, he takes another step closer to me, close enough that I can feel the warmth of his presence.

“I never meant to hurt you, Charli,” he says quietly. “I was just... scared. I would never want JD to hate me. He’s been my best friend for as long as I can remember.”

And there it is—the raw honesty I’ve always wanted from him. The thing that I never got when it mattered most.

The words hang between us, unspoken for so long, and I wonder if maybe there’s still a chance for us.

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Chapter Seven

RAFE

Sweat trickled down my back as I finished up my last set on the bench press. My arms were burning, but I couldn't focus on the pain. I was too distracted by the sudden jolt I felt when I saw her.

Charli .

I don't know why it hit me like a freight train—maybe because I hadn't seen her in years—but the moment I caught sight of her walking through the gym doors, it was like the air shifted. Like the space between me and the rest of the world became... irrelevant. All that mattered was her. The way her ponytail swayed when she moved, the way her eyes scanned the room—familiar, yet distant.

I tried to act like I didn't see her, but I couldn't help it. She looked so different, but at the same time, she looked exactly the same. Like the girl I used to know, the girl I used to care about, the girl I never stopped thinking about, even after everything.

I finished my set, wiped the sweat from my forehead, and forced myself to look away. But she was still there, near the mats, stretching with that same effortless grace. The kind of focus I remember, the kind that made me fall for her in the first place.

I don't know why I didn't walk over right away. Maybe it was the fear. The fear that I'd say the wrong thing, that she'd look at me like I was some stranger...the fear that I would fall right back in. But the truth is, I've been carrying this weight of regret

around for too long. And today? Seeing her? It felt like the universe was giving me a second shot, like I wasn't going to let this moment slip by without at least trying.

Our history is messy even if we are the only ones to know the truth. I left her feeling like she was nothing and I've never regretted something more in my life. She hasn't escaped my mind in years, and because of that, I haven't laid a hand on another woman since her.

So I did what any guy who's still holding onto the past would do.

I pulled out my phone.

Rafe: Hey, Little Poison. It's been a while. You still up for movie nights?

I pressed send before I could overthink it.

I couldn't stop staring at the screen, my thumb hovering over the keyboard, waiting for her response like a little kid waiting in line for an ice cream cone.

What if she doesn't want to hang out? What if she's moved on? What if she thinks I'm just trying to make things right because it's been so long?

But, the thing is—if there's one thing I've learned, it's that life doesn't wait. If you're not going after what you want, you're letting it slip through your fingers. So, I decided to take the chance, even if it meant risking that the door I'd closed a long time ago might stay locked.

The vibration from my phone pulls me out of my thoughts. I check the message, half-expecting it to be one of the other guys on the team, asking about dinner plans or practice. But it's not. It's from her.

Charli: A movie night sounds nice. What do you have in mind?

I blink, once, twice, to make sure I'm not seeing things. My heart starts to beat a little faster. She wants to hang out. She's willing to give this a shot.

Rafe: Just the classics. You know, the ones we used to watch until we fell asleep halfway through. You remember?

I bite my lip, the nervousness settling in my chest again. I'm not sure what I'm even expecting. Maybe I'm hoping for some kind of closure, or maybe I'm hoping this is just the beginning of something I'd been too afraid to try back then.

Her response is almost immediate.

Charli: That sounds perfect. I'll bring the popcorn. When should I come over?

A grin spreads across my face, a relief flooding through me. It's like that weight I didn't even know I was carrying has finally lifted, just a little bit.

Rafe: How about 7? I'll text you the address.

I hit send, feeling that familiar excitement bubbling up in my stomach, the same excitement I used to feel before I'd pick her up for a date or when I knew we were about to get lost in some random movie, talking about everything and nothing until we'd both fall asleep on the couch.

I stare at my phone for a moment, half-expecting her to change her mind or tell me she's busy. But the little bubbles telling me she's typing start to pop up, and then the message comes through.

Charli: 7 sounds good. See you then. :)

I feel like I'm on cloud nine. I can't stop the stupid grin from spreading across my face.

I throw my gym bag over my shoulder and head toward the locker room, my mind racing. I haven't felt this giddy in so long. Maybe it's because of what Charli and I shared back then, or maybe it's because I know this could be the chance to fix everything that went wrong.

But one thing's for sure—I'm not going to waste it. I'll make it right, even if it's just one night, one movie, or one small moment at a time.

I just hope she feels the same way.

When I get home, I go straight to the living room, tossing the gym bag onto the couch. I look around for a second, trying to remember what it was like when it was just me here, no distractions, no regrets. It's been a while since I've had someone over—since I've cared about anyone this much.

I set up the TV, throw a couple of blankets over the couch, and clean up a little bit before taking a quick shower. As the clock ticks closer to 7, I find myself pacing between the door and the couch. Every time I hear a car outside, I swear my heart skips a beat.

Finally, the doorbell rings, and I almost trip over myself to get to it.

I open the door, and there she is.

My Little Poison.

Her smile is like an anchor to my soul. And for the first time in what feels like forever, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

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Chapter Eight

CHARLI

Standing in front of Rafe's door, my fingers hovering over the doorbell, heart thudding so loudly I swear he can hear it through the walls. This wasn't how I pictured my evening going—certainly not like this, with my nerves almost getting the better of me.

I never thought I'd be in this position again. At least, not with him. I mean, sure, Rafe's always been around. He's my brother's best friend, the guy who showed up at family barbecues with that cocky grin, the one who could beat everyone at basketball without even breaking a sweat. And back then? I never thought twice about him. He was just... well, Rafe. Always in his own world. Until one day, I truly knew what I was feeling and stopped ignoring my true feelings about him, even if I didn't act on them for a while.

But something's different tonight. Maybe it's the way his smile made my stomach flip when he asked if I wanted to come over for a movie. Or how casually he said, "you're still up for it, right?" or how he used the nickname he gave me years ago, Little Poison, like it was just a normal thing, like the fact that we're here now, in this weird, gray zone between awkward acquaintances and something... more, isn't an issue.

But that's the problem. It is an issue.

I suck in a breath and press the doorbell. It chimes its melody, then a beat of

hesitation, before the door opens.

And there he is.

Rafe .

He's standing in the doorway, wearing a loose shirt and sweatpants, his hair still wet from what I assume was a shower. He looks completely... normal. But not normal at the same time. There's something different in the way he looks at me—like he's extra aware of me now and not just as my brother's best friend.

“Hey,” he says, and his voice is rough in that way I've heard before but never really paid attention to. Like he's just woken up, or he's been working out all day and is now trying to catch his breath.

I clear my throat, suddenly self-conscious. “Hey, Rafe. You, uh, got any beer?”

His eyes flicker down to the bag of snacks I brought—because, of course, I did that. I wasn't going to show up empty-handed.

“You brought snacks?” he grins, a little teasing. “Guess I'd better get the good movies ready, then...and grab you a beer.”

There's that smile again. That crooked, playful thing that makes my heart trip over itself.

I bite my lip, trying not to show how ridiculous I'm being. Focus, Charli. Focus .
“Yeah, thought you might need some fuel for the movie marathon.”

He steps back, motioning for me to come inside. “You're a lifesaver.”

The moment I step in, I feel like I've crossed some invisible line. I've been around this man a hundred times before, but this time it feels different. More intimate. More personal. Maybe because it's just the two of us with no fear of my brother seeing. It's like I'm seeing everything with new eyes. The way the living room is set up, the slight mess on the coffee table, the movie posters on the walls—none of it seems like the Rafe I know anymore. It just feels like a space that belongs to a new person.

I shake the feeling off and follow him to the couch. He pats the spot next to him without missing a beat. "Make yourself comfortable."

I sit down cautiously, way too aware of the few inches between us. It's a stupid thing to worry about, but I'm not sure where the lines are anymore. Are we still just casual? Still the way we were before? I mean, that's what I'm supposed to think, right? Because I've known him forever. But the way he's looking at me now, it's different. Too much weight in his gaze. My body is on fire, I feel alive

"So," he says as he grabs the remote, flicking through the list of movies. "What are we watching?"

I'm tempted to say something light, something easy, like we always did when we were younger. *Maybe a rom-com?* Or, *How about that action movie you love?* But the words don't come. Instead, I just shrug. "I don't know. You pick."

His brow furrows for a second, as if he's trying to read me, before he nods and settles on a random movie—something I'm sure we've both seen a thousand times. But I barely register it, too caught up in the fact that we're sitting here, in *his* space, and I feel like there's this tension between us that wasn't there before.

He presses play, but neither of us seems to be paying attention to the screen. I can feel the space between us closing in, and not in the comfortable way it used to be when we were younger, sitting together with no care in the world. No, this is

different. Every time I glance at him, his eyes are already on me. When I look away, I feel the weight of his gaze on the side of my face.

The silence stretches, and I have to fill it with something. “So, uh, how’s everything been? How’s the school year and the team?” I manage to ask, but it comes out too stiff, too forced.

“Good. Busy. You know how it is.” He laughs softly. “Same as always, just with more college stuff piled on top.”

I nod, trying to ignore the way my heart seems to beat in time with the background music of the movie. He shifts, his knee brushing mine in that accidental way that feels like it was anything but. It’s like a spark, just a small jolt that lights up my whole body. I can’t help but freeze, unsure if I’m overreacting or if something actually is happening between us.

“Charli,” he says, his voice a little quieter than before, a little more serious.

I turn my head, meeting his gaze full-on for the first time all evening. His eyes are soft, but there’s an intensity there that makes my pulse quicken. For a moment, we just look at each other, and I feel like the room shrinks around us.

“What is it?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

He hesitates, then looks away, shaking his head like he’s trying to brush it off. But I see it. I see the way his jaw tightens, the way his fingers tap nervously on the armrest.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “It’s just been weird, you know? Being around you like this. We used to be so... normal. But now—” He cuts himself off, clearly frustrated with whatever’s running through his mind.

I don't know what to say, so I lean forward slightly, breaking the space between us. "I know what you mean. It's different. But..."

He looks back at me, and I swear I see the hesitation in his eyes shift into something else. Something wilder. He doesn't answer, but his gaze lingers, and for a heartbeat, neither of us moves.

Then, he finally speaks, voice barely audible. "Maybe we should stop thinking, then."

Before I can respond, his hand brushes mine, and my breath catches in my throat. I don't pull away. Neither of us does. For a moment, all the noise in my head quiets, and it's just the two of us in this small space, like we're finally seeing each other for who we really are.

And maybe—just maybe—we're finally going to figure it out.

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Chapter Nine

RAFE

I lean into her, taking in the smell of vanilla and flowers. Her comforting scent makes my dick twitch in my pants and the sudden fear of possibly rushing her too much pops in my head.

She raises her hand up to my cheek so gently that it sends chills down my spine. Staring into her eyes, I lean in slowly, hoping that I'm not about to fuck everything up.

To my surprise, she leaned in, and our lips met. The moment becomes more intense, and she deepens the kiss. It feels like we've both been waiting on this for a lifetime, and now that it's finally happening again, I don't think I'll be able to stop myself.

I can feel as her confidence in her actions increases and her kisses become more needy, more dominating. My mind is lost in the moment, and I never want it to end.

Placing my hands on her waist, I lift her effortlessly and place her on my lap as I lean back into the cushion of the couch. My hands instinctively go to her ass as she rolls her hips. The feeling is like nothing else. I haven't felt this amount of need for anyone or anything until her. She's addicting, and I can't get enough.

I pull her body down onto mine harder, looking for more friction as a soft whimper leaves her lips. The sound turns me on even more. I start holding myself back and place my hands at the hem of her shirt and slowly start pulling it up her body. Her

arms go up, allowing me to slide it over her head, and my excitement skyrockets. She pulls my shirt up my body and places her hands on my chest once it's off. She pushes off to stand up and begins to slowly slide her leggings down her smooth legs

Her matching red, lacey thong and bra tells me she was also planning for things to intensify throughout the night, and that calms every nerve in my body. As she stands there in front of me, completely at my disposal, I can't help but stare at how perfect her body is. Her tits are plump and round, and her legs are long and smooth. She clearly makes it a habit to be in the gym as regularly as possible with a body like that. Her stomach is toned, and it shines in the dim light. Her eyes don't leave mine as I stand, pull my sweatpants down, and bring her body back on top of mine

As she straddles my waist once more, I keep my eyes on hers as I lean my head towards her neck and kiss down from her ear to the top of her chest. Slowly, I bring my hands around her back as I continue to kiss up and down her neck and collarbone. I unclasp her bra and remove it from her body. I pull her body close to me so that her ass is hovering in the air, giving me access to what she's been subtly begging for. Lowering my hand behind her, I move her panties aside and gently rub my finger against her core. A shutter rocks through her body and she grips my shoulders tighter.

I push my finger through her opening and slowly bring it back out just to push it in once more. Quiet moans leave her lips as she begins to press her body down on my hand, looking for more friction.

Without warning, I flip her onto her back on the cushion beside me, and in one fluid motion, I pull her panties down her legs, removing them entirely. She gasps as I push her legs open and throw them over my shoulders. I lay down below her body on the couch as my eyes meet hers, looking for her consent. When she nods her head, I grip her thighs and eat her cunt like I've been starving for years.

Her fingers tangle in my hair as she moans and her body rocks. I make sure to give

the little bundle of nerves some extra attention because the feeling of her thighs shaking around my head each time I do makes me never want to stop.

I bring one hand up and stick two fingers inside of her as I suck on her clit. Her body writhes as she pulls my head closer to her center. My fingers pump in and out of her as I look up at her face and see nothing but perfection. Her face as she moans is like nothing I've ever seen before, and I don't know how I went this long without it again. I could never forget what she likes and what gets her off. Her face as she moans is magical, and if it was the last thing I saw before I died, I would die a happy man.

I remove my lips from her clit before speaking. "Come on, sweet girl, give it to me. I'm nowhere near done with you just yet, this is only the beginning. I've gone way too long without this." A loud moan leaves her lips as she explodes, and her release splashes up onto my hand and my face.

My Little Poison is absolutely perfect in every way.

Chapter Ten

CHARLI

I forgot how good at this he was. His mouth is pure ecstasy. It's like he woke something up inside of me, and I need more...but the urge is back. The hunger is taking over, and I can't be around him when I feel like this.

I shoot up from the couch and grab my clothes, quickly redressing.

"I'm so sorry, Rafe. I shouldn't have let it go that far. I'm so so sorry. I need to get going." Rafe stops me in my tracks and puts his hands on my face.

"We went too fast, I'm the one that should be sorry. But, I'm not sorry that I made you moan, I'm not sorry that I wanted to make you feel good. I'm not sorry that I needed this, needed you. But if you feel you need to go, I won't stop you. Just know that either way, I'm not done with you," he says so smoothly that it causes goosebumps to rise on my skin.

I leave his place with the taste of him still on my lips, the heat of his skin still burning into mine. But the warmth isn't enough to quell the storm inside me. The anger, the hunger. The gnawing need that's been building for so long. I should've stayed. I should've let him hold me, let him make me forget. But I couldn't.

I slip into the cool night air, the sounds of the city washing over me. The night is alive, pulsing, the streets vibrant with energy. It should feel like freedom, but instead, it feels like suffocation.

I want to scream, but I don't. I want to punch something, anything, until I can't feel my fists anymore. But I don't.

Because I know what I really want. I don't just want to hurt—I want to kill.

The craving is insatiable, like a deep well inside me that only fills when I'm feeding it.

I hate myself for it. But I can't stop.

I walk through the streets, the low hum of the city filling my ears, and I feel the familiar shift inside me. I'm not Charli anymore. Not the girl who had laughed and kissed and whispered sweet things to the man I still love just an hour ago. No. I'm something darker now. Something primal. Something dangerous.

I know where I need to go. The club isn't far. It's the kind of place where people forget who they are. Where they let go of their inhibitions. Where I can find the release I need.

I push open the door to the club, the bass from the speakers vibrating through the floor, the air thick with sweat and perfume. The lights flash in strobe patterns, catching the faces of people lost in their own worlds. No one notices me. No one looks twice. And I like it that way.

I move through the crowd, my eyes scanning. The thrill of the hunt is already pulsing in my veins. I'm not here for a drink, not here to dance. I'm here for something more.

I spot him in the corner. A man, tall, broad-shouldered, with a rough, cocky grin that tells me everything I need to know. He's confident. He's used to getting what he wants. And he's exactly what I need.

I make my way over, feeling my heart pound in my chest, the adrenaline starting to buzz. His eyes flicker over me when I approach, recognition and interest flashing across his face. He's the type of man who thinks he's entitled to everything, who thinks he can take whatever he wants without consequence. He doesn't know it, but he's already mine for the night.

"Hey there," I say, my voice low, seductive. It comes out smoother than expected. I'm not even faking it anymore. The hunger inside me is taking over.

He looks me up and down with that predatory grin, his eyes lingering a little too long. I feel a spark of anger flare up inside me, but I swallow it down. I have to stay in control.

"Hey," he responds, leaning in a little. "You come here often?"

I smile, slow and deliberate, and lean a little closer. "Not usually. But tonight, I'm looking for something... different."

His grin widens, and he steps closer, as if I've already said everything he needs to hear. He starts talking about himself—his job, his friends, how he's always out here picking up girls. I let him talk. Let him think he's in control.

But it's me who's driving this. It's me who's pulling the strings.

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Chapter Eleven

RAFE

I'd never been the type to reflect much. I didn't like dwelling on things. I always had the mindset that life was about moving forward, getting to the next thing, and pushing through the chaos. But that was before my Little Poison.

I hadn't expected to see her again. But I did, and she ran away from me...again. Here I am, alone with my thoughts, trying to sift through a mess of feelings I thought I'd buried long ago.

I close my eyes for a second, and I'm back in that old house three years ago. It was a Sunday afternoon, the sun streaming in through the windows, making everything look warm and easy. Charli and I were sitting on the porch swing, my arm around her, the sound of crickets and wind rustling through the trees in the distance. Her entire family had gone away for the weekend, but she stayed back, claiming that she was sick.

It wasn't a big deal back then. At least, that's how I thought about it. But the truth is, I knew. Even then, even when we were just two dumb kids, I knew I was falling in love with her.

She was different. I mean, every time she smiled, it felt like the world tilted just slightly in the right direction. I'd never met anyone like her. She had this quiet confidence, this calm that made me feel like everything was possible when she was around.

But that was the problem, wasn't it?

I was too young. Too focused on my future, on everything I was trying to prove. I didn't know how to balance it all—the relationship, my career aspirations, the pressure of living up to expectations. And maybe I thought I could just...wait it out—that we could be one of those high school sweethearts who somehow stayed together through it all, despite everything pulling us in different directions.

But it didn't work that way.

I let my fear get the best of me. I was so afraid of losing JD and becoming more of a disappointment to my father.

I remember the last time we were together, like it happened yesterday. The night she finally told me she needed more than I could give. She needed to grow—to experience life in a way I couldn't understand. And I fought it, I fought her. Because it felt like she was slipping away, like she was becoming something I wasn't part of anymore.

“You don't get it, Rafe. I'm not just your secret girlfriend,” she said, her voice shaking but determined. “I'm me. I need to figure that out.”

“I'm not coming back,” she had said softly, like she was already grieving the end, even though we hadn't gotten there yet. “I have to let go of this, of you. It's the only way I don't lose who I am.”

That was the last time I saw her for months.

And when she did come back? She wasn't the same Charli. She was stronger. More confident. I think she was happier too. And that hurt.

It hurt so damn much.

I didn't reach out at first. I couldn't. I was trying to figure out what I wanted, where I was going—but I knew, deep down, that I didn't want to see her moving on without me. But that was the reality. She was out there, living her life, while I was stuck in the past. She wasn't waiting for me anymore and I did that to myself.

I ran into her a year later. At a bar, of all places. She was with some guy, laughing, like nothing ever happened between us. Like we didn't share everything—late-night talks, stolen kisses, the feeling of being so damn close you could almost feel each other's heartbeats sync.

She saw me first. I could tell because the moment our eyes met, there was a flicker of recognition. A flash of something in her gaze. I swear, for a second, I thought I saw it—a hint of the girl I used to know. But then it was gone, replaced with that confident smile she'd perfected.

“Rafe,” she said, like it was just another casual greeting.

I tried to act normal, tried to smile, but my chest felt tight, like something was lodged in there and wouldn't let go.

“Hey, Charli. You look good,” I said, but it came out too quickly, too stiff.

She laughed softly, her eyes lighting up. “Thanks. So do you.”

The guy she was with—David, I think—was a total contrast to me. He was clean-cut, polished. The kind of guy who had his life together, probably had the world figured out. I wasn't that guy. I didn't even know who I was anymore, let alone what kind of future I was supposed to have.

I didn't stick around long. I made some excuse, something about needing to catch up with JD, and left before I could embarrass myself any further. But as I walked out of the bar, I felt like a failure.

Charli was moving on.

And I was still here, in the same metaphorical place I'd been before, too afraid to take the next step, too caught up in my own damn head to realize I was losing her.

I had thought about reaching out. I thought about calling her, sending a message, apologizing for being the dumb, selfish prick I was. But I didn't. Because what if she was better off without me?

Because the truth is, I never really let go of Charli. And I never will.

Chapter Twelve

CHARLI

The flashing lights of the club pulse like a heartbeat, and the music—heavy, thumping—fills the air with a kind of energy that makes me feel alive in ways I can't help but love.

I glance over at Jake. He's handsome, easy-going, laughs too loud, says all the right things. The kind of guy who's fun to be around but doesn't really make you think too hard. At least, that was the appeal. At least, I thought that's what I wanted.

But my mind keeps drifting back to him.

Rafe .

I should've stayed home with him. Should've stayed on the couch, tangled in each other, let things unfold naturally. I shouldn't have gotten dressed up, should've refused when the urge to make someone bleed arose. But I did. I let it lead me out of the comfort of Rafe and into this chaos.

I let myself forget.

But I didn't. Not really.

I think about the way Rafe smiled at me when I looked at him, the way my heart still skips a beat when I see him, even after all this time. He was the one..

And I... I stayed in the ruins. Waiting. Hoping.

But now? Tonight, in this dimly lit club, there's no waiting. There's no hope. There's only what's in front of me and the fun I'm going to have.

Jake smiles at me from across the table. He's holding a drink, a casual kind of grin on his face, like he's completely unaware of what's happening behind my eyes. He's not really here. Not in the way Rafe was. I should care. I should be trying to make small talk, keep up the illusion that this night is going how it's supposed to. That I'm enjoying it.

Instead, my fingers brushed against the small syringe I had slipped into my bag earlier. The one I've been saving for a moment like this. For someone like Jake.

He leans closer, and I can smell the cheap cologne on his skin. "You wanna get out of here? Maybe we could head back to your place?" he asks, his voice barely audible over the music.

I nod before I can even stop myself. "Yeah, let's go."

The night feels like a blur: the drive to my apartment, the way he keeps talking about nothing important as he follows me into the elevator, the stupid, meaningless chatter that makes my skin crawl. He doesn't notice. Of course, he doesn't. He's too busy making jokes, thinking I'm playing hard to get, when in reality, I just don't care anymore. I don't care about him. I don't care about anyone except the version of Rafe who's stuck in my head.

I get the door open and motion for him to follow me inside. It's dark—intentionally. I want the shadows to swallow me whole.

"Make yourself at home," I say, my voice a little too cool, a little too detached. He

shrugs and tosses his jacket onto the couch, stepping into the kitchen without asking.

I walk over to the counter and pull the small syringe out from the inside pocket of my bag, carefully removing the cap. The liquid inside glints in the low light. It's not much—just a few drops. Enough to make him dizzy, enough to make him think it's just a side effect of drinking too much. He won't know the difference until it's too late.

I empty it into his glass when his back is turned. It's seamless. He won't even notice.

"Want anything else?" I ask as I walk toward him, the glass now in my hand.

He turns, grinning. "Nah, I'm good. Let's just sit down and... see where this goes."

I hand him the drink, watching as he takes it without a second thought. Drink it, Jake. Drink it all. He does, like he's thirsty for more, like he's starving for something he doesn't understand.

I lean against the counter, watching him as he sips the glass, feeling a strange calm wash over me. It's not satisfaction. It's not revenge. It's just... peace. The kind of peace you get when you finally make the world fit the way you've always wanted it to.

His face slowly shifts, his eyes blinking harder, like he's trying to focus on something. "You okay?" I ask, my voice sweet.

He rubs his temples, squinting at the light. "Yeah, I think I just need to sit down for a minute."

I nod, my lips curling into a tight smile as I follow him to the couch. "You'll be fine. Just relax."

Jake slumped onto the cushions, his body slurring with every movement. His eyes begin to glaze over, his words slurring into unintelligible mumbles. He's losing control, slipping further into the fog I've set in motion. It's exactly what I wanted. It's exactly what I needed.

I move toward the window and take in the view, watching the lights and speeding cars from the street. I don't know why I'm doing this. I'm not sure I care. I don't even know if I want to explain it, even if someone asked me why I let it get this far. Why did I let him get me here?

All I know is that I've waited long enough. Waited for Rafe to come back to me and for us to start over and try again.

Jake is still on the couch, barely conscious now, his head tilted back, his breathing shallow.

It's done. The final step, the final release. No more waiting. No more yearning.

I turn and look at him one last time, my breath steady, my heart calm.

"Sleep tight," I whisper. "It's over."

I walk into the kitchen, grab a glass of water, and take a sip, like this is just another night. Just another chapter of my story.

And tomorrow, I'll be a little further from the girl I used to be.

A little closer to the one I'm becoming.

Chapter Thirteen

RAFE

I didn't mean to follow her. At least, not at first. It wasn't some grand plan. But when Charli left my place—well, there was something in her eyes, something I couldn't shake. Something that told me she wasn't telling me the whole truth.

She'd been distant the last hour or so. We were still doing the same things, the same routines. She'd smile, laugh, and kiss me, but something felt... off. Like she wasn't really there.

I had tried to push it down. I tried to brush it off as nothing—maybe she was just stressed from school, or maybe I was just being paranoid. But tonight, when she kissed me goodbye with that extra softness in her touch, I couldn't ignore it anymore. So when she left, I decided to follow her.

I didn't know where she was going. I didn't even know why I felt like I had to find out. But I needed to know. Something had changed, and I was starting to get this sick feeling in my gut that told me whatever it was, I wasn't part of it.

She was walking quickly, heels clicking against the pavement, head down like she was trying not to be seen. I kept my distance, staying behind her, blending into the shadows of the quiet street. She didn't look back. Didn't seem to notice I was there, following her every step.

When she reached the club, I stopped a few yards away, hidden behind a parked car. I

watched her disappear inside. I didn't know what I was expecting—maybe that she'd turn around and see me, or maybe she'd wave, just to let me know everything was fine.

But she didn't. She went inside like it was a routine thing. Like she wasn't worried about anything.

I stood there for what felt like an eternity, my heart hammering, unsure of what to do next. Part of me told me to just walk away. That it was stupid to be doing this. But the other part, the one that couldn't quiet the gnawing in my chest, told me to stay.

So I stayed and wondered why she didn't just tell me she was going out tonight. I could've moved plans around to make time for her another night. I never would've said no.

It was a while before Charli came back out. She was with someone. A guy. I couldn't make out much at first—they were too far away—but the way they were talking, the way they were laughing, it didn't sit right. There was a familiarity in the way he touched her arm, the way she responded, that I couldn't ignore. It was... different.

My throat tightened as I followed them at a distance, keeping to the shadows, staying out of sight. They made their way through the city, heading toward a part of town I didn't recognize. I had no idea where they were going, but I couldn't bring myself to look away.

They stopped at an apartment building—one I hadn't seen before. She didn't live here. I knew that much. But the way she looked at the building, the way she gave the guy a smile that seemed a little too bright, a little too familiar... it didn't feel like just a friendly walk home.

I stayed across the street, hidden behind the corner of a building. My heart was racing

now, a pit opening up in my stomach as I watched them stop at the entrance. She turned to the guy, a small laugh leaving her lips as she fumbled with her keys.

I don't know what I thought would happen next. Maybe she'd just turn around and head back to her own place. Maybe she'd call me, text me, or something. But she didn't. She went inside. With him.

I stood there for a long time, staring at the door. It felt like hours. The whole world seemed to freeze at that moment. There were a million things I could've done. I could've gone back home, pretended I hadn't seen any of this. I could've told myself it wasn't a big deal—that maybe it was just a friend, maybe she was just helping him with something.

But none of that felt true.

As I stood there, the cold creeping in, I felt a part of me starting to unravel. The air around me felt thick, like I couldn't breathe. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the apartment door, waiting.

The worst part? I could hear them inside. Not them specifically, but the muffled sound of their voices, their laughter. The way it sounded like they were comfortable with each other, too comfortable.

I moved closer, stepping onto the sidewalk, my sneakers barely making a sound against the pavement. I was drawn to the door now, like I couldn't pull away even if I wanted to.

And then, like an instinct, my hand reached for the door handle. I step inside the lobby as they enter the elevator. Thankfully, it's one of those elevators that shows what floor it's stopping at on the outside.

I patiently wait until it stops on the ninth floor.

Once it comes back down to the lobby, I push the number nine and wait as it goes up. Nothing is going through my mind. Everything is blank. I'm moving on autopilot.

I get to the floor, and at the very last second, I see Charli and that guy enter a room, and the door shuts. I quietly make my way over to the door and look at the number on it—ninety-two.

I don't know what I was expecting, what I thought I'd hear if I pressed my ear up against the wood. Maybe I thought I'd hear something—something that would explain all of this, make sense of it in a way that wouldn't shatter everything I thought I knew about Charli.

But it didn't.

I just stood there, listening to nothing but the quiet hum of the city, the steady beat of my heart in my ears, wondering what I was even doing here.

I wanted to walk away. I did. But my feet wouldn't move. I was stuck in this moment, this space between confusion and reality, unable to make sense of it.

And then, just when I thought I couldn't take it anymore, the sound of a door opening came from inside. Charli's voice drifted through the wood, just faint enough that I could barely catch the words, but clear enough to send a shiver down my spine.

"Sleep tight," she said, her voice soft, too soft. "It's over."

Chapter Fourteen

CHARLI

I lean against the kitchen counter, staring at the glass in my hand. It's empty now. The last sip, swallowed quietly as Jake slurred out a half-hearted joke, was the one that did it. He's asleep on the couch now—his breathing steady, deep, almost peaceful. The kind of sleep that only comes after a night of too much alcohol and something much darker.

His body sprawled out on the couch is almost a relief, as strange as that sounds. But tonight, I felt the need for domination take over me and knew I couldn't do that to Rafe ever.

There was no hesitation to go do this...per usual.

The liquid in the syringe—just a drop, mixed into his drink. He didn't even notice. And for that, I'm grateful. He made this even easier than the last idiot. He never suspected a thing. Not even when he started to feel off. Not when I smiled at him as his eyes began to slowly shut.

I walk into the living room and sit down on the armrest of the couch, watching him, watching the slow rise and fall of his chest. His mouth is slightly open, his hair messy, his jeans still on, untucked. He looks pathetic like this. Helpless. Just how I need him to be so I can enjoy my night.

I've been doing this dance for so long, pretending to be friends with these men,

pretending that the way they touch me, the way they smiled like we shared something deeper, didn't make my stomach twist in knots. Because I "wanted" them...or so they thought.

He should've looked deeper and seen what was sitting in front of him. Maybe he could have saved himself. But instead he was thinking with his dick and wanted to chase that high.

But that's not how it went. Thank all that is holy. He only saw what he wanted. And now, I get to fulfill my own needs of the night.

I stand up slowly and walk over to the window, staring out at the city below. I could go out there. I could go back to Rafe and see what more comes of the night.

And if I'm being honest with myself, there's a part of me that feels... free.

The poison was simple—clean. He won't remember any of this in the morning, if he even wakes up at all. Maybe he'll think it was just too much alcohol, a bad night. Maybe he'll never know that it was me, the girl he had intended to use to get himself off tonight. Maybe he'll never realize that it was me and we could try this again another night.

My eyes flick over to him, his face still relaxed in that sleep, unaware. It's almost... pitiful. But I can't feel sorry for him. But I can feel sorry for Rafe.

I take a deep breath and walk into the kitchen to clean up. The silence in the apartment feels strange, but not unwelcome. It's the first time in so long that I feel like I've taken control of my own life but also the first time I wonder if it's all worth it when Rafe is so close and so in reach now.

And in the silence, the weight of it settles over me like a blanket. It's not over. Not

yet. And I think I might be okay with that.

When I hear him stir, my heart doesn't race. It doesn't jump in fear or excitement. It simply... steadies. Like the calm after a storm.

I make up my mind and grab a butcher knife from the drawer before making my way over to Jake's unmoving body. Without a second thought, I bring the blade across the front of his throat and listen as he chokes on his own blood, reveling in the glorious sound of life fading away.

Chapter Fifteen

RAFE

I stand there, my breath steady, the faint metallic tang of blood filling my nostrils. My hands are slick with it, slicker than I expected. I wipe them on my jeans absently, not really caring because it's already done. The rush—the beautiful, terrifying rush—still surges through me. I've done it again, and it feels almost... perfect.

The body on the floor isn't even cold yet, but I don't think it ever will be for me. Not when I can still feel the weight of the knife in my hand, can still hear the gurgled gasps. It was quick, though. And he shouldn't have felt too much.

But now that it's over, I feel this... emptiness. A vacuum where the hunger used to be. It's nothing new. It happens every time. The first few moments after, the adrenaline wears off, and I feel the silence creep in, settling into my bones.

I hate the silence.

But then, I hear the knock. It's sharp and unexpected, making me jump. My heart skips in my chest before I even realize it's just a knock—nothing more. But it still sends a chill up my spine, like my body knows something's wrong even before my brain catches up. I'm not sure how, but my body knows when he's near and I know it's him.

Rafe .

I feel the familiar surge of panic claw at my insides. I shouldn't be feeling this. I shouldn't care that it's him. He's just my childhood love. But I can't let him see this. Not him. He's not supposed to know.

My eyes flick to the body on the floor again, and the panic spikes, tightening my throat. I move quickly, as if doing something will make it go away. I wipe my hands again, even though it won't do any good. I can't hide this. There's no hiding it.

Another knock. This one more insistent. A fist against the wood.

I stand frozen, paralyzed by indecision. Should I answer? Should I pretend nothing's wrong? But I can already hear him—Rafe, always so direct, always so sure—call my name from the other side of the door.

“Charli?”

He's close now. So close, the sound of his voice slicing through the tension in the room. My stomach clenches. I can't let him see me like this. Not with what's on the floor. Not with that look in my eyes.

My pulse starts to race. I know it's stupid, but I find myself walking to the door, reaching for the handle. My fingers tremble. What do I even say to him?

I swing it open before I can think twice, and there he is. Rafe. Tall, broad-shouldered, his curly hair tousled from the wind. His eyes are bright, full of that warm, reassuring affection I've always loved. His eyebrows furrow when he sees me, but it falters the second he looks past me into the room.

I follow his gaze.

His eyes fall on the body—Jake's body—lying on the floor in a pool of crimson. And for a split second, I see everything flicker in his face. The recognition. The confusion.

The horror.

“Charli...” His voice cracks, just barely, but I catch it. His smile is gone now, replaced by that familiar intensity, the one that’s always been there when he gets worried. But this time, it’s different. This time, it’s fear. And I can’t blame him.

I can’t speak.

I stand there, trying to make sense of it, trying to make it all go away. But the weight of his stare on me is suffocating. I can see it in his eyes—the disbelief, the questioning, the need for answers.

I want to run, but my feet are rooted to the floor. I don’t know what to do, what to say.

His voice is softer now, almost a whisper. “What the hell is this?”

His words cut through me, sharp and raw, and suddenly, the silence in the room is deafening. I swallow hard, trying to find my voice, but it’s stuck in my throat. The world feels like it’s closing in on me, and I’m drowning in the weight of it.

He can’t know. He can’t know what I’ve done.

I glance back at the body, my mind spinning. But when I look at Rafe again, his face is a mask of confusion and fear. The kind of fear that makes my chest tighten, makes my hands shake. He’s going to hate me, and I can’t handle that.

“You... you killed him? Did he do something to you? Did he hurt you?” he asks, his voice almost disbelieving, his eyes wide, still glued to the lifeless body on the floor.

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out. There’s nothing I can say. Nothing that would explain this. Not to him. Not to anyone.

“I—I didn’t—he didn’t...” I stammer, but it’s a lie. I know it’s a lie. I know what I’ve done.

Rafe takes a step forward, eyes darting from the body to me, then back again. He’s still processing it. His mind is trying to make sense of the horror in front of him. But it’s hard to think straight when everything’s already fallen apart.

“You killed him,” he repeats, his voice shaking with something between anger and disbelief. And I can see it now. The hurt in his eyes. The betrayal.

He trusted me. He loved me. And now, I’ve ruined it.

I feel something shift in my chest, something sharp and jagged, like a crack running through my ribcage. He doesn’t understand. He can’t understand.

“I did it,” I say, and it sounds wrong. It sounds empty, like an excuse. “I—I had to.” But the words are hollow. They don’t mean anything anymore.

Rafe shakes his head, his hands raised as if trying to put some distance between us. “Had to? Had to?” He laughs bitterly, his voice cracking. “What the hell do you mean, Charli?”

The words hit harder than I expected. His words pierce through me, cutting deeper than anything the knife ever did. The anger in his eyes, the disbelief—it’s all too much. Too much for me to bear.

I can feel my heart pounding in my ears, my palms sweating. The world around me spins, and for a moment, I think I might fall apart right here in front of him.

“I needed to hurt him,” I say, trying again, but I can’t get the words out fast enough. He needs to know the truth. The hunger was always there. Always. Just waiting. Waiting for the right moment.

Rafe steps back, his eyes locked on me, like he's looking at a stranger. His mouth opens, but nothing comes out. And that's when I know. He's done. He's not going to be able to stay with me. Not after this.

His voice is low, almost a whisper, but it feels like a slap. "Why didn't you just call me, Charli?"

I wish I could respond. I wish I could tell him I'm fine, that this is just the way I am. But I can't. I can't lie to him anymore. Not now.

His face twists, and for the first time, I see something darker there—something that wasn't there before. Pride. Pride for me and what I've done.

And I don't know what to do or how to feel.

"I'm confused," I whisper, but it doesn't matter at all. His lips crash on mine, and he devours my mouth, pushing the door shut behind him.

Rafe Thornson, my love, my person, my Depraved Valentine.