



Heartless (Pleasure And Prey #5)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Eighteen years ago, Cassian Byers murdered his older sister.

And I witnessed the whole thing.

For nearly two decades, I've fought to bury the memories of my troubled childhood, which includes the haunting image of my babysitter's murder. Life in Hayden Fields has been eerily calm—no big crimes or chaos—until now.

Until the first girl dies.

And I see Cassian outside of my window on the first night of October.

It seems he remembers me just as well as I remember him. And when teenagers start showing up dead, there's only one likely suspect. Except I'm the only one who seems to think so. To everyone else, he's quiet and reserved; polite enough to sway public opinion in his favor.

But I know the truth: he's responsible for these murders, and he's watching me.

Now, I must find a way to prove it—without becoming his next victim.

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Chapter

One

Someone is crying.

At first I think it's coming from the television, though the animated Halloween special isn't really sad or scary. A dog in a ghost costume bounces around the screen, and a little girl is running after him as I curl my legs up under me and reach for the popcorn again.

Carissa can't be mad at me if I don't have my shoes on with my feet on the sofa. But another sound catches my attention. Her voice comes from her bedroom above me, but Carissa doesn't sound happy or giggly like she does when she calls her boyfriend and thinks I don't realize what she's doing. It's not like I'm going to tell Mom or Dad that my babysitter isn't always present.

I like watching movies on my own, anyway. When she isn't down here, it's easier to switch the channel to an actual horror movie, then feign innocence and say that whatever she'd had on before ended. Usually, Carissa even buys it.

A thud and a yell drag my attention back to the ceiling above me, and it occurs to me that Carissa might need help. But I hesitate a moment longer before getting to my feet, swallowing the last mouthful of popcorn I grabbed from the bowl. The Halloween movie still plays, and when I pass by the windows, I see a few last trick-or-treaters roaming the neighborhood outside. I stop and look at the colorful costumes, biting my lower lip. That would've been me, if my parents were home.

Halloween was always our thing. I trudge up the stairs, frowning. Mom and Dad and I always celebrated together with pizza, movies, trick-or-treating, and a house decorated with the same intensity as Christmas. But this year, they'd changed that.

And they left me with my babysitter for the weekend. Well, my babysitter and her younger brother who I barely ever see. He's older than me, I know that, at least. Maybe twelve to my eight, and quiet, with ghostly blue eyes that send shivers down my spine.

"Carissa?" My soft voice doesn't travel far on the upstairs landing as I stand with both feet at the very top of the stairs. She doesn't answer, so I call her name again, louder this time. She still doesn't answer, though I hear another loud, almost sob from her room down the hallway.

Looking up, I can see that her door is cracked. Carissa's room is at the far end of the short hall, and I trudge toward it with a sigh, worry bubbling in my chest. Most likely, she's fine. Maybe she just needs a little bit of help with something. Maybe she's just joking around with someone.

"Carissa?" This time I'm right outside of the door, and I'm met with a soft whimper from inside, and a groan of pain.

My hand comes up, and I push open the door, just as I hear Carissa's voice from inside. "Winnie no!" she screams. "Run! Go get help!"

But I can't run. My eyes are fixed on the red splashes of blood on the walls and the stains on the wooden floor leading from her bed to where she sits huddled in a corner. She screams again, repeating for me to run, but I can't run.

I can't even move.

I'm frozen in place, heart pounding in my throat, as my eyes stay locked on the blood and, finally, on Carissa herself, curled up in the far corner. Her hands move frantically, trying to stop the blood from spilling from her thigh, her chest, and her shoulder, but it's like trying to stop a river with her hands. Blood seeps from between her fingers no matter how she pushes, staining her white shirt and denim shorts red, red, red.

A low sound pulls my attention toward the closet, and when I look, I wish more than anything I could run.

By the closet stands someone a little taller than me, wearing a too-large mask and holding a too-large butcher knife in his hand. His hand and white sneakers are stained with blood, though his clothes are mostly clean of it. I make a sound, soft and low in my throat, but it's enough.

He looks at me from behind the black eyes of the dirty mask, and his grip shifts on the knife. Carissa screams and the masked figure walks across the room; I notice something strange in the way he walks and the graceful movements he makes as he circles Carissa on the floor.

My cat, I think suddenly, eyes fixed on him. He reminds me of how Bandit stalks things in the yard. All slow, graceful movements and absolute patience. Like he knows he has all the time in the world to mess with his prey.

I can't look away, no matter how much I want to. Not when he gets on his knees in the slick red blood and reaches out to touch Carissa's hands.

I can't even move when she screams again, tears running down her face as she turns away to press her face against the corner wall. "Please don't do this," she begs, as the masked figure lifts the blade above his head. "Please— Cassian don't!" But if he hears her, he certainly doesn't listen. The masked boy plunges the knife downward

into her chest, slicing and stabbing amidst her frantic, agonized screams. He keeps going, blood spattering the wall, his mask, and every surface in between as he just keeps going.

Even after Carissa has stopped moving, stopped screaming, and stopped breathing.

At first, I don't realize the boy is on his feet. Not until he turns and takes one step toward me.

Then another.

But I still. Can't. Move.

It's like one of my nightmares, where my feet are locked in place while something comes closer to me. Like being in the front of my class with no idea what to say, but not being allowed to go back to my desk.

It's like those things, but worse. So much worse that all I can do is stare up at the bloody, dirty mask he wears and open my mouth to say nothing at all.

But he doesn't raise the knife like he had with Carissa. Instead, his free hand comes up, and he tugs the mask off to hold it at his side, then fixes his ghostly blue eyes on mine.

It's Cassian.

It's Cassian who just killed his own sister in front of me, in the house that she's been babysitting me in for years.

"Cassian?" I whisper, my eyes never leaving his face. Some part of me is screaming to run, but I don't. I can't. "What did you do?"

We both know what he did. I can see the blood. I can see Carissa's wide open, glazed-over stare even from here.

"You didn't run," Cassian murmurs in his always soft voice. He drops the mask and reaches out, bloody hand moving slowly. As he tucks my hair back, a small frown appears on his face. "I thought you were asleep."

"What did you do?" I ask again in a soft whisper, eyes still wide and on his. I can feel the wetness on my cheek from where he touched me, but I'm too terrified to even think about what it is.

"You should run," is all he says, hand falling to his side again. "You should run, or I'll hurt you." He glances back over his shoulder at the mess of blood and death behind them, then back at me. "Aren't you afraid I'll hurt you?"

"No," I reply, not quite realizing what I'm saying. "You've never hurt me. You're nice to me." My brain flashes back to last summer, when Cassian made a boy from school leave me alone when I'd been out playing with their dog and Carissa was inside doing something other than watching me. In my mind, I see it as clearly as I see Cassian covered in blood.

How he'd shoved the other boy off of me, a snarl on his lips.

How he'd told him to leave me alone, or he'd break his fingers.

How he really did it.

Something changes in Cassian's face, though I have no idea what it is. He has a strange look on his features, something I've never seen before, and he lets out a soft sigh, eyes drifting down to the floor between us as if he's ashamed.

“Run, Winnie,” he murmurs, his grip tightening on the knife again. He kneels down to pick up the mask and tugs it back on over his head. “Run away and find help, or I’ll kill you like I did her.” I don’t move, though.

Not until he takes a step forward, with the knife raised to my throat.

Not until he nicks the skin of my neck, just enough to sting and pull me out of my trance.

Not until I really think he’s going to do it.

I scream and stumble back, nearly falling down the stairs before slamming the front door open and running into the street. Without shoes or a coat, I scream and wail, begging for help and for someone to go find Carissa.

As if she’s not already dead.

But at eight years old, miracles are still real, and death isn’t.

At least, until now.

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Chapter

Two

“Look out!” Martha’s voice makes me look up in surprise from the window decals I’m fighting, just in time to see the menacing faces of a string of pumpkin lights flying down at me. I barely have time to do more than register it, and I let go of the decal in my hands half a second before the first light smacks me in the face.

But it’s certainly not the last. They tumble down onto me, the hollow plastic stinging my cheekbones and with one lucky hit, the tip of my nose. I yelp at that one, eyes welling up at the quick, sharp pain of it. Luckily, I guess, the wire the lights are connected to catches on my shoulders and drapes over me like a feather boa instead of hitting the ground. Though I’m too busy groaning and rubbing my nose to do more than stand there while the lights flicker on and off.

“You should keep those on, Winnie,” one of the diner’s regulars says with a chuckle, looking up from her paper and waffles. “They make you look real festive. You could be the diner’s newest decoration.” She laughs at her own joke as I sigh, mouth twisting in a small frown as I untangle myself from my Halloween light bindings.

“So festive,” I agree under my breath, bundling the lights up in one hand and strolling over to the step ladder the diner’s owner, Martha, is still standing on, her hands over her mouth.

“I am so sorry,” she breathes, her brown eyes searching mine. “I lost my grip on them and that middle hook isn’t secured to the wall—you’re okay, right? You aren’t hurt?”

She can clearly see my watering eyes as I hand the lights up to her, though I force a smile on my lips so she won't think I'm going to do something extreme like quit.

Not that I would. This job is my favorite way to get out of the house and have an excuse not to babysit every day for my sister. As lovely as her son Scott is, I'm more of a once a week aunt than an everyday aunt. Besides, one day I'll move out. Eventually.

When I know where to go. All I know for certain is I'm itching to get out of this suburb of Akron, Ohio, that's just far enough outside the city to be considered its own town. We even have two whole gas stations.

And a Wal-Mart.

"I'm fine," I promise, smiling. I know my face, though, and I'm sure instead of relieved I just look a little less sad.

Some people have resting bitch face.

I got stuck with resting sad face.

"They're just plastic." I finish handing them up to her and swipe the sleeve of my hoodie across my face to wipe away any tear tracks left there. "I'm just a little delicate." With my luck, I'm going to have a bruise on my face and look like the poster child for abuse. Coupled with the fact that I look sixteen instead of twenty-three, I know exactly what will happen if I have to go see the doctor about this for any reason.

Do you feel safe at home?

Do you have a boyfriend at school who has a temper?

I let out a soft sigh and smile up at my boss, trying to reassure her I'm fine and not going anywhere. Though in retrospect, I think, as I walk back to the window to slam the decal against it with all the rage of a toddler missing her apple juice, maybe she'll give me a pity raise if I do get a black eye from the menacing plastic pumpkins.

"His name was Cassian ." The words pull me out of my dreams of a seven cent raise and I look up at another of our regulars who dumps half a cup of sugar into every mug of coffee. Across from him is a woman I don't know, though I think she's been here a few times before. The Pancake Plate isn't exactly booked every day, but thanks to being featured on some guy's show about unexpectedly quality dives, we do get a steady stream of new customers checking out our twenty kinds of pancakes.

Though no matter how hard Martha tries, she can't get the pancake burrito to take off.

I can only hope she gives up on it soon.

"He was just a kid at the time. Eleven or so?" the man goes on, stirring his sugar-laden coffee absently with a spoon.

He was twelve, I reply in my head, picking up a plastic bin and pulling the dishes off of a nearby table. It might not be my job, exactly, to do it. Martha's son is our bus boy, but I never mind helping out. Especially since I know he's taking every moment to study his ass off to get into college.

"He killed his sister in cold blood. Lived a few streets over from here, actually." The man's mustache twitches as he gestures with his head toward the window, as if he's not just nodding at the movie theater and the gas station beyond it. Half of me wonders if he does know where the Byers family lived, because it's definitely not in that direction.

"Then he turned on the kid she was babysitting."

My hand jerks in shock, and spoons clatter to the floor at my feet, drawing the attention of all three of our customers. “Fuck,” I sigh under my breath, studiously not looking up at any of them as I pick up the utensils and toss them into the bin. “Way to go, dumbass.” It’s not like anyone knows, obviously. But it won’t help if I’m being obvious as hell about the fact I was the kid Cassian’s sister was babysitting.

But...he didn’t exactly turn on me. Unless my memories are fake and my brain is lying to me, which, according to my therapist, can totally happen sometimes.

Run, Winnie.

I may have forgotten a lot about my childhood—most of it purposefully—but I won’t forget that.

Not the way he’d said it, with his hand tight on the long, bloody knife that dripped crimson to the wooden floor below us.

Not his ghostly blue eyes.

And not what Carissa looked like in the corner of her room, blood seeping from so many wounds and her eyes staring lifelessly at the popcorn ceiling ? —

My hands jerk, and this time, the whole plastic tub goes crashing to the floor. I watch, unable to move, and it’s like I’m seeing it happen in slow motion. Like if I wanted to, I could just so easily reach down and catch it, instead of watching utensils and plates spill out onto the hard, tile floor at my feet.

The crash of it is just as loud as I’d expected and hoped against. Two plates shatter and a mug handle goes spinning off under the nearest booth. Utensils land like bones, crisscrossed in patterns as if I could read the future in their positions.

But all I see is the impending embarrassment from everyone here looking at me and Martha's inevitable pinched face when she gets off her stepladder to see if I need help.

"Good job, Winnie," I whisper, sinking smoothly to crouch on the floor. "Good fucking job. You're so great at being subtle." Thankfully, no one here except Martha really knows me, and even she doesn't know the truth about why I know Cassian Byers' story so well.

"Oh, Winnie." I hear Martha sigh in concern, and she kneels down on the tile to help me throw plates and utensils in the bin. "Are you okay? Did something happen?"

"Th-the plastic was wet," I lie, thinking fast to cover up the real reason I'd dropped it. "I was readjusting my grip and dropped it. I'm so sorry, Martha."

"No, no need to apologize." Martha waves it off one-handed, tossing chunks of porcelain into the bin.

"I am the worst," I laugh ruefully. "God. I can work an extra few hours to make up for—" I break off at a sudden sharp pain in the side of my hand, and I hiss, wincing as I jerk my fingers up off of the bin.

I'm bleeding.

I stare at the red line along the side of my palm as it wells with beads of blood that stay stuck to my skin for a second, two seconds.

Until they begin flowing in streaks down my wrist.

"Winnie!" Martha gasps, moving across the floor. "Oh god! You cut yourself on that plate, didn't you?"

“N-no, I—” I look up toward the window, as if glaring at the stupid decals will provide me with the inspiration to lie about why there’s definitely blood rolling down my arm. “I?—”

But then my words die in my throat and every single thought goes out of my head when my eyes lock with a distantly familiar ghostly blue gaze outside.

Cassian.

I haven’t seen him in years, but I could never forget his eyes. I’ve never met someone with bluer eyes, nor someone who’s just so...

Well, Cassian.

He’s standing across the street, staring toward the diner sign. His light brown hair curls over his ears, swept back from his face and held there either from habit or gel.

It has to be him.

Right?

“Winnie?” Martha’s voice is concerned, and her touch on my arm makes me look down, eyes wide as my heart pounds against my ribs.

“Martha...I—” My breath catches in my chest as my gaze finds the blood on my arm. It runs toward my elbow as Martha gropes for a napkin to press against the deep cut on the side of my hand, but I don’t feel any pain.

Just a dull tingling.

“Do you see—” My words come to a halt when I look up through the glass again,

searching for the familiar figure across the street.

But he's not there.

Instead, two guys around the same age laugh at something they've said, and one of them pushes his light brown hair back from his face.

It's not Cassian.

Maybe it never was.

"Winnie!" Martha's loud, panicked tone breaks me out of my thoughts and I look down at her frantic, pale face.

"What?" I ask, dazed and just a little bit woozy all of a sudden.

"Your hand!" She shakes my arm in her grip and I look down at the now bloody napkins pressed to the side of my palm. Admittedly, it's...a lot of blood. More than I'd expected to see.

"Oh. Huh." As if drawing attention to the injury is the trigger, my hand starts to sting, my palm pulsing with discomfort. "Well, that's..." I don't panic. I never panic anymore unless it's something worth panicking. "Do you think I need stitches?" I move my hand to peel back the napkins, but Martha holds them tight.

"I'm having Jeremy take you to urgent care," she says, pulling me to my feet. "Jeremy!" Her voice is loud and in seconds her eighteen-year-old son stumbles out from the kitchen, eyes wide at his mother's panicked tone.

"What's wrong— Oh ..." His face goes pale when he sees my hand, causing his freckles to stand out like dots from a marker. "Oh shit. That's a lot of blood."

“It’s a medium amount of blood,” I disagree, glancing out the window again. It’s probably a good thing I’m so distracted by what I thought I’d seen outside. Otherwise, I’m sure my hand would be hurting like a bitch and refusing to be ignored.

“Can you take her to urgent care?” Martha asks, grabbing my other hand and pressing it to the napkins. “Now, Jeremy. Go get your car and pull it around.”

“Need any help, Martha?” our regular with the thick newspaper asks, getting to her feet. “I can help you decorate or clean up.”

That drags me out of my trance, and I grimace apologetically. “Shit, Martha, I am so sorry.” I look at the mess of plate pieces and utensils on the floor, then up at her. “I can stay. Let me help?—”

“Nope!” Martha marches me to the door, her grip like iron. “You are fine, Winnie. It was just an accident, but you need to go get that looked at. Laura can help me with decorating. You heard her.”

Yeah, sure, but it’s not her job to do it, I think to myself, sinking into my guilt. My steps drag, and I open my mouth to argue, but Martha shoots me a glare that’s somewhere between maternal and commanding.

“In the car,” she orders, yanking open the passenger door the moment Jeremy’s car rolls to a stop in front of The Pancake Plate. “No arguments. And take tomorrow off.” She ushers me into the car with surprising strength, and it’s all I can do to wrestle my seatbelt from her and buckle it myself while keeping my injured hand in my lap.

“Aye aye, captain,” I tell her with a rueful half-smile. “I’m sure Jeremy will report back to you on what the damage is.” I treat it as a joke, which is my usual, but I’m

still barely paying attention to the pain in my hand or the blood.

I'm still fixated on the image of an older, taller Cassian with the same blue eyes.

Though as I glance back at the two men now making their way to a car, I frown and a touch of doubt stabs into my heart. Be real, Winnie, I tell myself silently. There's no way he'd be here. It had probably been a hallucination of my weird brain. It is near Halloween in Hayden Fields, after all.

"Aren't you off tomorrow, anyway?" Jeremy asks slowly, when we've gone through three stoplights and approach a fourth.

"Yeah," I tell him, throwing a small smirk his way. "But it's the thought that counts."

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Chapter

Three

“S o...” Jeremy’s voice cuts through my thoughts as I slump in the uncomfortable waiting room chair, paper towels pressed to my hand. “What even happened?”

Jeremy isn’t so great with blood. A fact I’ve known ever since a customer got a nosebleed and he started heaving in response. Frankly, I’m impressed he drove us the whole ten minutes to the urgent care center without puking or wrecking his car.

“Plastic bin was wet. I didn’t realize it, and I dropped it,” I lie easily, eyes still closed. My hand throbs, the ache sharp and bright. “Then I grabbed a piece of a plate wrong and it cut my hand.” Another half lie. I haven’t been paying any attention at all, and my carelessness is why I’m here now.

“Oh. Okay, that’s understandable.” But I can tell by Jeremy’s tone that he isn’t done. The teenager taps his foot against the floor, the noise distracting me enough that it’s hard not to grab his knee or beg for him to stop. Already my head is aching dully with the whispering promise of a stress-migraine. “But uh, can I just ask?—”

“Winnifred Campbell?” The voice cuts Jeremy off and I open my eyes, sitting up in my seat to see a nurse in pink cloud pattern scrubs leaning against an open door leading behind to the rest of the clinic. Getting up, I follow her wordlessly to the back, leaving Jeremy to shift in his chair and look uncomfortable about being here.

But I pause in the doorway, turning to look at him as a bolt of pity stabs through me.

“You can go back to the diner, Jeremy,” I tell him with a small smile. “I’ll get a ride home or call an Uber.”

“Okay...” Jeremy stands up, shoving his hands in his pockets. “If you’re sure, then I?—”

“Later, Jeremy,” I interrupt, knowing he’ll ramble endlessly if I don’t. To further the point, I take another step so the nurse can let the door close behind us.

“Follow me,” she sighs, like this is the least interesting part of her day. And well, maybe it is. Maybe a multitude of other girls showed up here today with deep cuts on their hands that might require stitches, leaving a trail of bloody paper towels like a fucked up version of Hansel and Gretel’s bread crumb trail.

The exam room she takes me to is as small as I remember from being a kid with strep throat, and I hop up onto the table automatically. At least this time there won’t be a wooden stick pressing my tongue down and a swab, making me gag embarrassingly.

“So,” the nurse sighs and pecks at the keyboard with her pointer fingers, making me think she was never subjected to hours of fifth-grade typing practice like I was. “What happened to your hand?”

“I cut it on a broken plate,” I answer, watching her type agonizingly slowly. Part of me wants to offer to do it myself, since even with one hand I’m sure I’d be faster than the slow tap-tap-tapping of her hunting and pecking on the keys.

“How long ago?”

“About forty minutes? I work at the diner and I came straight here,” I explain, trying not to ramble. The shorter my explanation, the less I have to watch this agonizing display of her masterful lack of acuity in typing.

She doesn't reply. Her entire attention is on the keyboard, and I wonder if I'll bleed to death before she finishes.

Somehow, it's still this century when she's done. The nurse gets up and comes over to me, plucking the paper towels out of my hand and gesturing for me to let her see. I do, scrunching my nose in discomfort as she gently turns my hand in her latex-clad fingers to look at the cut on the side of my palm.

"That's going to need stitches," she tells me, still just as unimpressed as she had been calling my name in the waiting room. "No way around it. Have you ever gotten stitches before, Miss Campbell?"

"Oh yeah," I assure her. "Yeah, I'm a pro at stitches. Okay, that's a lie. But I've gotten them a few times." Six times, to be precise. Back when I was a kid in a shitty situation with no way out except force.

"Okay," the nurse sighs again and drops her hands. "I'll go get the doctor. Shouldn't be long at all." She hands me a wad of clean paper towels that I gently press to the still-bleeding cut in my hand. She's gone in a second, her steps certainly faster than her typing.

And all I really have to do to pass the time is wait. My hand hurts too much for me to consider messing around on my phone, and the room is incredibly boring with nothing on the walls except a washed out painting of trees and a river.

But, it's all I've got. I lean forward to study it, looking for any kind of little hidden details left by the artist. Unfortunately, though, the artist really made a boring painting of trees and a river in washed out colors that blend together.

The door opens and I glance up, smiling when a woman in a white coat and black scrubs comes in. "All right, Miss Campbell?" She waits for my nod before

continuing. “I’m Dr. Morris. I hear you’ve cut up your hand pretty good, and that you’re probably going to need stitches.”

“Yeah.” I sigh, kicking my legs back against the exam table. “I uh, cut it on a broken plate.” At her urging, I pull the paper towels away, and she gives a sympathetic hiss as she takes my hand in hers to turn it so the cut faces up.

“Oh, yeah,” she murmurs, touching the edges of the slice and making me wince. My hand is sore and incredibly tender, so any brush along my skin hurts like a bitch. “Yeah, I’m going to have to put in a few stitches.” Dr. Morris moves to the cabinets against one wall, systematically pulling out supplies. “So you cut it on a plate, huh?” she asks absently as I really study the side of my hand for the first time. I’ve put it off until now, for the most part. But I figure this is my last chance to see what it looks like open and gross.

Though it’s a bit of a letdown, honestly. I poke lightly at the edges of the wound, pulling it open just a little on the off chance I’ll see some kind of gory mess hiding underneath.

But I just see red.

“Oh, please don’t do that.” Dr. Morris pulls my fingers away from the cut, her voice disapproving as she brings over a small tray on wheels. “You’re going to get it bleeding again.”

“Sorry,” I mumble automatically, though I’m not really sorry. It’s my hand, after all. I can poke at it if I want to.

Don’t be a bitch about it, Winnie, I remind myself as I watch the doctor pick up a few gauze pads soaked in peroxide. You know what happens when you piss off a doctor. Well, I’ve never pissed off an urgent care doctor, and I doubt she’s as terrifying as a

psych ward physician, but I might as well not take any chances.

“This will probably hurt,” Dr. Morris warns, a second before she dabs at the side of my hand with the gauze. I just stare, dispassionate about the blood and the sharp, stinging pain in my palm. It’ll go away, and I can breathe through it. This isn’t my first rodeo with being injured by broken dishes.

Dr. Morris continues to talk, rambling about nothing in particular while she finishes cleaning my hand and picks up a small syringe. “This will definitely hurt,” she warns, but doesn’t give me a chance to really process the words before she’s poking the needle into my hand near the wound.

“Ouch!” I grit my teeth as my stomach twists at the sharp pain. “Yeah, you’re right. That doesn’t feel great.”

“Honestly, I expected more of a reaction,” Dr. Morris admits, setting down the syringe and picking up her suture materials. “Most people say that’s the worst part. I’ve had grown men pass out when I do that on their hands.”

“Oh, yeah?” I’m not that interested in her words, or the story she launches into about some weight lifter she’d had to stitch up earlier this year. I’m focused on the tingling pressure in my hand, and watching the needle dip into my skin as she pulls the edges of the wound back together.

Slowly, the red of the inside of my hand gets harder and harder to see, and finally all I’m looking at are black sutures and the line of the wound that had been gaping open a few minutes ago enough for me to see the flesh beneath my outer skin.

And maybe it’s a little disappointing that it looks so... normal now. As if the damage hidden below was all in my head. “Thank you,” I murmur politely as the stitches are concealed under a gauze pad taped to my hand.

“Anytime. Though maybe be a little more careful around broken dishes from now on, okay?” Dr. Morris gets to her feet with an amiable chuckle and goes to the computer to type something in. “And you’re just about done. I’m going to put in an order for antibiotics at the pharmacy. You can take an anti-inflammatory for any pain or swelling. Just wait here for me?” The woman flashes me a quick, perfunctory smile and opens the door before closing it halfway behind her and disappearing down the hall.

Leaving me with the stupid river painting once again.

Before I can consider drastic action like reading a magazine or poking at my numb hand, my phone vibrates in my pocket, surprising me. Normally my service sucks in here. I can only imagine the person calling me had put out an offering to the cell phone gods to be able to successfully call where there’s very little reception.

But I wiggle my phone out of the pocket of my jeans and put it to my ear, a neutral greeting on my lips the moment it’s in place.

“Winnie?” Immediately I recognize my sister’s voice, and her panic. While it’s not uncommon, it’s certainly not what I want to deal with today. “Hey, where are you? I dropped by the diner, but you weren’t there.”

“Uh, yeah. I’m at the urgent care,” I admit quietly, glancing out into the hallway and seeing no one around. My legs swing off the edge of the exam table, back and forth, heels sometimes clipping the metal surface under me.

“What?” Genuine panic enters Lou’s voice, and I roll my eyes at my sister’s motherly concern.

“Hey, I’m fine. I just cut myself on a broken plate. I’m literally, totally fine.” The assurances are completely for her, so she doesn’t bundle me up in bubble wrap and

keep me on her sofa, feeding me lukewarm soup until she's satisfied I won't drop dead.

“ Okay... ” she trails off, and from her tone, I realize I've ruined her plans in some way.

“You need me to babysit, don't you?” I sigh, turning to gaze at the river painting. “Your sitter canceled again? You should fire her, you know.”

“ I know ,” Lou moans in agreement. “ But I can't ask you to babysit, Winnie. Not when you're in urgent care. I'm not a monster. ”

“I know you aren't. But...” I lift my hand and flex my fingers, looking at the white gauze covering the side of my hand. “I can babysit for you, Lou. I don't mind at all. Scott isn't like a hassle or anything. We'll watch movies, eat pizza, and, I don't know, plot world domination?”

“ He's really into world domination right now, that's for sure,” Lou mutters into the phone. “ Are you sure, though? I was going to ask you to stay all night. Brent and I had a date night planned and we have reservations at an Airbnb in Akron. But seriously, if you can't ? —”

“I can,” I argue. “It's no problem at all. You can just pay me double my rate to make up for it.” I'm teasing, but she and her husband could definitely afford it, no problem. “I'll be there in...an hour? Probably less.”

Lou lets out a relieved sigh, just as the door opens and the terrible typer herself walks back in, looking as bored as ever.

“ I love you, Winnie,” Lou says, though I'm barely listening. “ You're a lifesaver. ”

“No problem. But I gotta go. See you in a bit.” I hang up and shove my phone back into my pocket, the nurse looking at me as if I’ve committed a mortal sin by being on the phone in the urgent care center.

“I have your discharge papers,” she sighs heavily, like she’s carrying the weight of the world on her unskilled fingers. “And your prescription has been sent in. You’re all good to go.” She sets down a few papers on the counter, waving at them. “Those are for you.”

“Thank you.” I don’t toss the papers in the first trashcan I see, even though I want to. Instead, I wait to chuck them into the bin outside as I open my phone to call an Uber to take me back to the diner where I can pick up my car.

If I’m fast, I’ll be at Lou’s in forty-five minutes with blankets, movies, and an unlimited pizza and brownies budget. It’s not exactly everyone’s ideal example of a perfect Friday night, but I certainly have no complaints.

Not as long as I can get pineapple on my pizza.

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Chapter

Four

It takes fifty-two minutes for me to get my car, go home, change, and drive to my sister's house. My hand throbs with dull, aching pain at every movement, and it's hard to focus on anything else when I'm alone with nothing but my questionable playlist of the day thrumming through my car's abused speakers and the pain in my hand.

Martha had been worried, so now two large cups of coffee sit in my console, as if caffeine can cure all of my problems and not just ninety-eight percent of them. But she knows how much I love coffee and sent me on my way with enough of it to last for at least the next few hours, if I can keep my caffeine addiction at bay.

"You can do this," I murmur, trying not to think of Scott's most memorable 'pranks' over the last couple of years. One of which had left me with a bloody nose and gotten him grounded for a month. Normally he really is a sweet kid, and most of the time, I don't have any issues with him.

But with Halloween in a few weeks and his lust for blood and candy growing, things usually get dicey this time of year. Especially when his school starts whipping out the Halloween themed lessons and decorations. If they haven't already.

Groaning, I kick open the door of my car, pulling both cups of iced coffee out of my console to set on the shiny black roof of my Mustang. It takes a few moments of rummaging in my console to find my keys, then extricate them from the abyss of hair

ties and coffee receipts that litter my car. Last, I grab my phone, shoving it in the pocket of my sweatpants along with my keys before closing the driver's door with my hip and plucking my coffee from the roof.

"You like your nephew," I mumble to remind myself of that fact. I don't mind babysitting for my sister, Louise, but after the events of today, I'd much rather be passed out face down on my bed for the entire weekend. "You like your nephew most of the time," I clarify, just before I lift my elbow to knock on her door, since my hands are full of heavily doctored coffee.

I hear footsteps thundering towards the door of Lou's very nice suburban house, and seconds later it opens, revealing a blond, grinning boy of nine. "Winnie!" he greets happily, launching forward to wrap his arms around my waist as I tighten my grip on my coffee to avoid spilling it over us both.

"Hey Scott," I greet, a smile on my face. Absently I admire the fall-themed wreath on her door, and note that it's one of the very few things that sets her house apart from the others on this block full of cookie-cutter homes that regularly sell for way too much.

But at least she has a cool backyard and patio. A dog's loud, intimidating bark meets my ears, and I brace myself as Roscoe rounds the corner, all eighty-six pounds of Doberman launching itself at me with the same enthusiasm as Scott. "Let me set my coffee down in the kitchen," I beg, fending him off by turning away to protect the caffeine. "Then you both can climb all over me, okay?" I breeze through the foyer and into the living room, glancing around at the Halloween decor tastefully put up around the house. Though I know for a fact neither Lou nor her husband Dan were responsible. They definitely had their housekeeper do it for them. Just like last year and the year before.

They aren't exactly the DIY kind of people.

“Lou?” I call, when I’ve reached the kitchen without any sign of her. I set one cup of coffee in the fridge and keep the other one with me, turning to scratch Roscoe’s ears when he bounds to a stop at my side. “Where’s your mom?” I ask my nephew, who’s also loving on his favorite creature in the world.

“In the office, I think,” he tells me absently. “Can I try that?” he points at the coffee and I shrug.

“Sure,” I reply, handing it to him just as my older sister, Lou, breezes into the room and eyes us curiously.

“You’re not going to like that,” she informs her son, heading for the fridge and grabbing a bottle of water out of the door.

“He might,” I disagree, grinning at her. We don’t look much alike, honestly. We never have. And lately, for some reason, I’ve been noticing it more and more. With her black hair and my blonde, with her brown eyes and my blue, we don’t share many similar features from our mom. It seems both of us inherited most of our looks from our different dads.

Our personalities couldn’t be more different, either.

“He might,” I say again. “Because let’s be honest, I drink mostly flavored milk with a hint of coffee.” If I can actually taste the coffee, I’m clearly doing something wrong.

“It’s not bad,” Scott says, taking a second sip of my coffee. “What flavor is it supposed to be?” he hands the plastic cup back to me after sneaking a third sip of it while his mother isn’t looking, and I grin.

“Cookie dough,” I answer. “It’s my favorite.”

“It doesn’t taste like cookie dough,” the nine-year-old replies, kneeling down on the floor with Roscoe.

I look at the pale liquid in the plastic cup and take a long swallow of it. “Yeah,” I eventually agree with a sigh. “It really doesn’t. Definitely does not score points for accuracy, but I’m still addicted.”

“Which is something you don’t want to be,” Lou tells her son, walking past and ruffling his curly black hair. “I sent you money to your PayPal,” she tells me, glancing my way. “Do you need anything before Dan and I leave?”

“A million dollars?” I ask, bumping my hand against the counter and grimacing with a soft hiss of discomfort.

“You really did a number on yourself, huh?” Lou is in front of me suddenly, her fingers gripping my wrist as she stares at the gauze on my hand like she can see under it to the stitches below.

“What happened?” Her son is quick to notice and hops to his feet, craning his head to the side so he can see my hand. “Did you hurt yourself, Winnie?”

“Cut myself on a broken plate.” It’s the truth, and an easy one. I don’t need to tell them why I freaked out. Not like Lou would believe me, anyway. We haven’t talked about our shared childhood traumas in a long time, and I doubt she wants to dredge up the past now.

No matter how much the topic of Cassian Byers itches on my tongue.

“Ouch,” Scott gasps, reaching one hand out as if to touch it. But I slap his hand away lightly, nose scrunched in a dramatic frown.

“Don’t poke it.” Gently, I extricate my hand from Lou’s grip. “It hurts enough without you making it worse, kid.”

“Go tell your dad it’s time to go, would you?” Lou asks, smiling at Scott in a way that I know means she wants to talk to me without him in the room. But Scott isn’t old enough to understand that yet, or to pick up on the subtle changes in his mom when she’s giving him a fake reason to leave. He runs from the room, calling Roscoe to go with him seconds before I hear his footsteps pounding up the stairs.

As soon as he’s gone, I sink down into one of the stools at the counter, dropping my hand to the granite surface and picking up my coffee again. “I hope you guys have a great time tonight. You’re living like the ideal marriage. Date nights, full-time help, and personal time so none of you get burnt out on each other. Must be nice.”

“It is,” Lou tells me, leaning on the counter across from me. “And it would be still without all of that. I love Dan. And honestly?” Her gaze softens, though her mouth curls into a caring, concerned frown. “I want this for you too, Winnie. I met Dan when I was younger than you?”

“And it was love at first sight, you guys dated for a year, and you knew all along you were meant to be,” I finish for her flatly. “Yeah, I know, Lou. I was there.” I roll my eyes at her and she gently shoves my shoulder, her frown curving into an amused grin.

“I just wish you’d find someone,” she sighs. “Anyone. I’m not picky, and I know Mom is worried for you, too.”

“Because it would just be terrible to end up alone?” I ask, looking down at the brush against my ankles. Their long-haired Siamese, Minxy, gazes up at me with her crossed eyes, letting out a soft sound much more like a squeak than a meow. “Because it would just be awful of me to end up as the crazy cat lady down the

street?” I reach down with my good hand and she rubs against my fingers before trotting away, her bottle-brush tail flicking in the air behind her.

Lou just snorts, not letting herself get roped into an argument with me over this old topic. “Broken plate, huh?” she asks, directing the conversation back to my hand. “What did you do? Grab the broken end?”

“Yep,” I bemoan. “I was super distracted after dropping one of our plastic bins. Picked it up and didn’t realize it had cut me.” I survey the white gauze, flexing my fingers just a little.

“Distracted by what? Some cute guy in the diner?” There it is again. Lou wiggles her brows at me, once again leaning on the counter with interest.

And she’s not...wrong, exactly. But I bite my lip, tapping my fingers on the counter as I listen for sounds of her son or her husband on the stairs. Luckily for me, Dan is keeping Scott entertained upstairs, probably having him help with packing or last-minute preparations.

“Don’t bite my head off or get that look on your face, okay?” I ask, watching Lou’s gaze sharpen. “You know the look I mean. The ‘maybe we should go see your therapist’ look.”

Her brows twitch, eyes narrowing just a bit at my words. She tenses, obviously preparing herself for me to drop some bombshell on her that’s going to have her go into emergency mode with me for the first time in ten years.

But I’m not planning on being that dramatic. “You don’t have to start planning an intervention,” I tell her, rolling my eyes. “I dropped the bin because I was spacing the fuck out. And I cut myself because I...thought I saw someone, okay? Someone I used to know?”

“Who?” Her question is guarded, hesitant, and she searches my face as if she can see the answer there.

But I don’t answer instantly. I shift on the stool, lips quirked in a half frown. “Cassian,” I say at last, gazing down at the plastic cup of iced coffee currently cooling my palms.

And, just like I expect, Lou doesn’t say a word. My eyes flick up to hers and I cock an eyebrow at her, watching her emotions filter through her face as she processes the name. “But I was just seeing things.” I shrug. “When I looked again, it was just some guys across the street that were way too young. It’s just the time of year, you know? I get a little weird around Halloween.”

That’s always been my excuse for any weird behavior in October and honestly? It’s pretty valid.

“Oh,” Lou murmurs. She frowns with that maternal concern again and reaches out to grip the fingers on my uninjured hand. “I’m sorry, Winnie. I know this time of year sucks for you.”

“It’s fine.” I look down at our joined hands, noting the differences between us again. As usual, I can’t help but wonder what I would be like if we’d had the same dad. Her father, our mom’s first husband, had been kind, according to Lou. She remembers him a little, since he’d died when she was eight, then a year later Mom married my dad.

Who was certainly not kind. To me, at least. Lou had been out of the house by the time things really exploded, and I know she feels guilty for abandoning me, as she sees it in her mind. But I’ve never held a grudge towards her or my mother.

They don’t deserve it.

“Anyway.” I hear footsteps on the stairs and tap her hand, my smile returning. “You need to leave! Go out on your date night, go to your place, and have fun. You don’t need to worry about us.” When Scott comes into the kitchen, I sling an arm over his shoulders. “We’re going to have a great time watching Halloween movies and eating pizza.”

“And ice cream,” Scott adds.

“Ooh and Halloween candy.” His enthusiastic grin meets my wolfish one, and I drag him into a one-armed hug. “It’s going to be the best aunt-nephew bonding session ever.”

“Just don’t destroy the carpets again,” Lou intones, just as Dan comes into the room with both of their suitcases and a question on his face. “I’m coming,” my sister promises, glancing around the kitchen as if she’s forgotten something.

When she hesitates, I know what’s coming and cut her off before she can say it. “I’m fine , okay? We’re fine. It’s going to be an awesome time, and literally nothing will go wrong. It rarely does.”

“And I won’t play with matches,” Scott promises, earning looks from both of his parents as I try to muffle a snort.

“I’ll hide the matches.” Scott and I usher them out, and when their son runs to hug his mom then dad, Lou steps close to me and gives me a quick embrace.

“Call me if you need anything,” she whispers, leaning close.

“Always do.”

“And Winnie?” She pulls back enough to meet my gaze, and my heart sinks just a

little at the concern there. “Don’t do that, okay?” Her voice is soft, and I know she doesn’t want Dan or Scott to hear. I don’t either. “Don’t drag all of that up again. You need to try to forget. Stop thinking about it, stop dwelling. You know what happened last time you were convinced he was back.”

Gently, I pull away from her, eyes serious. “Yeah, Lou,” I agree quietly, the smile gone from my face. “I know exactly what happened last time, the time before that, and what happened when you left for college.” She winces, but I don’t mean it as an accusation. “Go,” I push her arm playfully. “Go have fun with Dan. You deserve it. I mean it, I’m totally fine.”

Mostly fine.

As fine as I ever get.

“I love you.” Lou opens the door to their silver, fancy sedan and gets into the passenger seat. “I love you a lot . “

“And I love you, too. With the fury of a thousand suns,” I agree, grabbing her door as Dan gets in and shuts his with a quick wave my way. “Good bye , Lou. Stop being such a worrywart.” Before she can say something to the contrary, I close her door, knocking on it like I’m giving Dan the all clear.

Finally Lou grins, and as they pull out of the driveway, she waves at both Scott and I, biting her lip over her grin.

“She’s worried,” Scott murmurs, shoving his hands in the pockets of his hoodie.

“Yeah,” I sigh. “She always worries.”

“Did she give you money for pizza?”

My grin is wide and promising as I look down at him, slinging an arm over Scott's shoulders again. "Oh, buddy..." I laugh. "She gave us money for pizza, dessert, and milkshakes. "

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Chapter

Five

“M om doesn’t like pineapple on her pizza.” Scott’s voice makes me glance sidelong at him on the sofa, where the light from the television illuminates his face in the darkness.

“Yeah, your mom is weird like that,” I reply, dunking the crust of my pizza in ranch dressing before devouring it. Scott slurps on the nearly empty milkshake cup in his hand, and I grin slightly. We’re also the only ones in the family who drink chocolate milkshakes with our pizza.

“I don’t get why she doesn’t like it.” He grabs another slice, though at a yelp from the television, his attention is riveted back onto the kids’ Halloween movie we’re watching. It’s one we’ve both seen before, though since it was a year or so ago, Scott is still thrilled to watch it.

“I’m telling you, Lou is weird. Your grandma is the same. Growing up, I was the only one who ever ate pineapple on my pizza. It was a seriously lonely life.” I sigh, pressing the back of my hand to my forehead theatrically.

“What about your dad?” The question is innocent, as all of his are. He doesn’t ask out of malice, or to get a reaction out of me. Hell, he’s not even looking at me. His eyes are still on the television as he chews the piece of pizza like a chipmunk, his cheeks bulging a little with the too big bite.

“I don’t remember,” I say, thinking back on if my dad ever ate pizza with me. But a lot of my time with him is hazy in my head, thanks to the whole trauma thing and my mind putting a wall between me and those memories.

Well, most of those memories.

“You should ask him,” Scott says matter-of-factly. “Do you know his number?”

It occurs to me that Lou has never told him about my dad, though he knows that she and I are half-sisters.

“My...uh.” I fiddle with the napkin in my lap to avoid picking at the bandage on the side of my hand. “My dad’s dead, Scott.”

“Oh.” My nephew’s reply is quiet, and he takes a minute before he asks, “What happened to him? Were you still a kid when he died?”

He really is the king of uncomfortable questions tonight. I remind myself he’s just curious and naïve to the situation, and that there was no real way for Lou to tell him delicately. Especially when it’s my business, my dad, and my problem. Honestly, I’m grateful she never told Scott about the whole situation.

And I’m not about to give him the details now.

“It was umm. It was an accident. I was twelve,” I explain flatly, trying to keep any emotion out of my voice to discourage his curiosity.

“Do you miss him?”

I could lie, I suppose. I could tell him I do miss my dad and that he was fine, all things considered.

But I know if I even try, the words will burn my lips like acid.

“No.” I glance out of the corner of my eye at Scott, who’s still barely paying attention to me and instead has his eyes glued to the television. “He and I didn’t get along that well. So I don’t miss him.”

“What kind of accident was it?”

That’s a question I absolutely don’t know how to answer. I could lie completely, I guess. It’s not like Scott would know, and I doubt Lou will tell him any differently. My fingers shred the napkin absently, and I look at the television as well, letting myself pay attention to the dog running from a ghost on the screen.

“A bad one,” I say finally. “It was a really...umm. Bad accident.” I cross my fingers that he’ll let it go, because that was the last truthful thing I’m willing to say about my dad.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and thankfully Scott seems satisfied with my answers as I fish it out from between the sofa cushion and me. For a second I’m sure it’s Lou, texting to make sure Scott is still alive and we haven’t done something to get us both arrested. Not that I’ve ever let him get in that much trouble, truth be told.

She’s just a worrier.

But my brows raise a little in surprise at the name on top of the message, and I watch as another is sent.

Hey. Her first message is brief and vague, but she’s already sent the second by the time I open my messages.

What are you up to? Reagan’s texts are always more formal than chat-speak, and I

have no idea where she learned the habit. It certainly isn't from when I babysat her for years, since I'm much more fond of shorthand in messages.

Babysitting Scott, I reply quickly, curling my knees up to my chest.

Oh fun. You guys get pizza?

Oh yeah. With pineapple. I grin as she sends back a very unhappy face at my response. Reagan despises pineapple on pizza, and bringing it up always gives her an almost visceral reaction.

Roscoe's bark makes me glance towards the kitchen, where the door to the fenced-in backyard is. He's only been out twenty minutes or so, and normally I leave him out for thirty during his last time out at night. That way he gets all of his energy out, and I know he's gone to the bathroom so I don't have to let him out at three am.

"He probably wants to come back in," Scott tells me, not looking away from the television. Normally he'd be the one to bounce up and run to get the Doberman, but he's too interested in a movie he's seen at least twice before.

Another bark seems to agree with him, and I let out a long huff and shove my phone back into my pocket. "Yeah, okay," I agree, getting to my feet. I don't put my shoes on. Not when all I'm doing is opening the door and ushering the young dog back inside so he can stare longingly at the pizza and fall asleep to snore in Scott's lap. He'll most likely stay there for the next couple hours, until Scott also inevitably falls asleep on the sofa and I fireman carry him up to his room around eleven.

In the kitchen, I glance at the counters to make sure Minxy isn't doing something she knows isn't allowed, but she's not on a counter or the top of the fridge. Instead, I see her thick, fluffy tail flicking back and forth on one of the chairs, and I swerve past the small breakfast nook to scratch her ears lightly. I'm met with a purr, and a pair of

permanently crossed blue eyes look up at me, barely visible in the dim kitchen that's lit only by a nightlight above the stove.

Roscoe barks again, prompting me to roll my eyes at his impatience. As if he wasn't thrilled not long ago to be outside when he'd been bouncing at the door to be let out. "Okay, okay," I mutter, going to the sliding glass door and pulling it open.

I expect him to come running when I whistle, but the patio remains empty except for the table and chairs. I pause, confused as hell, and Roscoe barks again from somewhere out in the big yard, past where the motion light illuminates.

"Roscoe!" I call, pitching my voice to make sure he hears me. But all I get in reply is another round of barking. "Roscoe!" Forcing my voice stern, I try again. "Get over here!"

Still nothing. I grimace, wishing I had my hoodie and shoes on, and I consider going to the living room to grab them. But...

I'm a little lazy. And surely he'll come running if I go out into the yard and call for him. Besides, it's just grass, and darkness, and the nipping cold of the first of October in Ohio.

"So nothing bad at all, Winnie," I mumble, my heart picking up speed just a little in my chest. It's not that I'm afraid of the dark. Not really. But it's certainly eerie to walk out past the patio to the sound of Roscoe's continued, frantic barking.

I call for the dog another few times, rubbing my arms as I walk farther and farther away from the patio and the light. It feels...strange out here, I suppose is the best way to describe it. I feel watched, almost, even though there's no one in either of the adjacent yards as far as I can tell. If there were, I would think the motion lights would be on above the privacy fences, and I'd be hearing some kind of noise.

But all I hear is Roscoe's barking and the wind rustling the leaves in the trees Dan so carefully planted when they moved in. I normally adore his landscaping of their yard, but tonight the branches feel ominous and reaching. They obscure the moonlight above me, casting the yard into more and more shadows.

"Roscoe!" I'm almost to the back of the yard now, where the back gate sits lower than the rest of the fence and leads to the community pool and neighborhood playground. His barking is louder, so I know I'm on the right track, and when I see a flurry of movement in front of me, I let out a long, low sigh of relief. "Goddamn it, dog," I mutter as he runs frantically back and forth along the fence, barking his head off. "We're going to get so many noise complaints, you know that?" It takes a moment, but I finally manage to grab the ring on his collar, stopping him from making another lap.

"What's your problem, anyway?" I ask, glancing around the yard for any sign of a small animal. "You never act like this." It takes all of my might to drag him away from the gate, and Roscoe yelps his disagreement with the action. "I could kennel you," I threaten, though we both know it's empty as hell. I wouldn't be able to handle his whining all night if I tried to separate him from Scott.

He twists out of my grip again, and I reach for him with a curse. "Roscoe!" I yell, frustrated, and I turn, watching him run back to the back fence. "Roscoe, there's nothing—" But my words die in my throat as I look at the heavy, five-foot-tall gate.

There's someone standing on the other side of it. He's wearing a white Halloween mask pulled over his head, obscuring every single one of his features. All I can do is stare at him, as every muscle in my body freezes with terror.

I need to get back in the house.

"Roscoe!" I scream, too afraid to get closer to the gate. It's locked, sure, but I know

for a fact the lock is half broken. Something in my tone must tell Roscoe that it's really time to go. He bolts away from the gate, still barking, and when I take off at a run he follows me, right on my heels.

"Come on!" I urge as my feet hit the patio. I keep running across the stones, hopping up the two stairs to the door and yanking it open. The Doberman surges inside without stopping, and I turn, slamming it shut as fast as I can as my eyes search the yard for signs that whoever was standing there has made it past the locked gate.

But there's nothing in the yard. Nothing except the patio furniture and the fire pit. Still, I lock the door, making sure both locks are secure before jamming the curtain shut across the glass.

"Scott!" I yell, heart pounding in my throat as my stomach twists. My hands are shaking, and belatedly I realize the stitched up wound is aching more sharply than before. "SCOTT!" I scream, following a trotting Minxy out of the kitchen. "Where are you?!"

"Right here?" Scott meets me in the hallway, bewilderment on his face as he takes a bite of the pizza in his greasy fingers. His words are a question, and his brows raise. "What's wrong, Winnie?"

"W-we need to, umm." My mind is racing, and I press my nails into my uninjured palm. "You need to hide. We need to call the cops. There's someone outside, and?—"

Someone knocks hard on the glass behind me, causing my soul to nearly leave my body in fear and shock. Scott and I stare at each other, both of us unmoving as the knocking sounds again. Roscoe whines and bolts past me, heading for the door even as I yell his name in protest, my hand reaching out for his collar and missing.

"Roscoe, no!" I shriek as he noses at the curtain, pushing it back enough for us to see

outside and for the person outside to see us.

But I don't see the white Halloween mask I'm expecting. I don't see a tall, over six-foot-tall figure knocking at the door.

"Hello?" Reagan stares at me, perplexed, her hands on her hips. "What the fuck , Winnie? Why the hell am I locked out?"

"Reagan?" I gasp, taking a few steps toward the door and my friend who's backlit by the motion lights.

"Yeah?" She jiggles the door handle again. "Who else would it be? Are you going to let me in, or am I going to die of exposure out here for your entertainment?"

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Chapter

Six

After telling her about what I'd seen in the yard, I can't stop Reagan from marching outside with a kitchen knife she grabbed from the block in the kitchen and surveying the yard. Nothing I say or yell or threaten has any effect on the redhead, who just grins and tells me she's not afraid of a guy most likely playing a prank.

If only I was so sure that's what he was, but I don't say my suspicions out loud. Especially with Scott here, leaning against me with poorly disguised fear.

No matter where she looks and how much she calls out, nothing happens. Roscoe even chills out and heads out to patrol the yard with Reagan like it's some kind of game. The sight of them—a Doberman trotting along behind my red-haired friend who stands maybe five-foot-three—has me pressing my lips together to ward off a small, rueful smile. With how dramatic they're both being, they could be auditioning for a new version of Scooby-Doo. Roscoe just needs to learn how to talk.

When she comes back in and slides the glass door shut behind her, Reagan grimaces apologetically. "Didn't find anyone," she tells me, putting the knife back where she'd found it. "Didn't see anyone at all, actually. Not even Lou's weird neighbors who always watch TV in their underwear."

"The Blankenships aren't weird." I sigh, rolling my eyes and locking the door behind her. "They're just old-fashioned."

“Oh, yeah?” Reagan opens the fridge and scans the shelves, distracted. “Tell me, in what century was the fashion to dress in your granny panties and support hose while watching Jeopardy ?” She grabs the two-liter of Dr. Pepper out of the door and pours herself a glass. She’s been here enough to know where everything is by heart, but I still roll my eyes and put the bottle back when she leaves it on the counter.

“God, didn’t I teach you anything when I babysat you? Like, how to put things back where they belong?” I close the fridge door with my hip, watching her chug half a glass.

“Uh, yeah. You taught me how not to get in trouble. But it’s been years since you babysat me, Winnie. Pretty sure the lessons have worn off.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me, prompting me to fight another roll of my eyes.

“Are you staying for a while, Reagan?” Scott walks closer to her, a smile on his face. “We were watching a movie. And we have pizza!”

“Dude.” She ruffles his hair. “I am so down for pizza and a movie. So long as your babysitter says it’s okay.”

Both of them turn to look at me, their eyes wide and expressions pitiful. “That doesn’t work on me,” I remind them, putting away the few dishes that we’d gotten out and making sure the door is closed one more time. “But you can stay, Reagan. You aren’t on Lou’s banned list as far as I know.”

“She has one of those?” Reagan asks. At my look, she snorts. “Yeah, she definitely has one of those.” Quickly, Reagan drains her cup and sets it in the sink carefully. “Why can’t your sister be like the rest of us and get plastic cups that I can toss into the sink? Her kitchen feels so fancy.”

“It is fancy.” I shoo them out of the kitchen and clean up the rest of the small mess

we made, listening to Reagan and Scott talk about what movie to watch next. But instead of going to join them right away, I head to the sliding glass door to press my face against the cool surface, fingers tapping out a small, soft rhythm. “I wasn’t imagining things,” I mutter, scanning the pitch black yard. “And I’m certainly not losing it.”

“Are you coming?!” Reagan yells from the other room, impatient. “We want to put a new movie on, but Scott says you have to approve it!”

“You’re not watching anything that’s rated R, Scott!” I call back, knowing what he’s trying to talk her into. “And I’m coming.” I let out a breath and watch as it fogs up the glass, and I wait another few seconds as if I’ll see something move if I just stand here and don’t blink.

But nothing happens. Nothing except Scott’s yell of impatience and Roscoe’s playful yip. They draw me away from the window and back into the living room, where I’ll probably have to deal with the two of them ganging up on me to watch something Lou would skin me for putting on.

“Hey.” Reagan’s soft voice from the recliner causes me to open my eyes, and I look at her in the flickering light coming from the television. Now that Scott is in bed with Roscoe snoring on his feet, we’ve changed from kids’ Halloween movies to something scarier, though I have no idea what ‘90s era slasher movie is currently playing. “You okay?”

I blink, my attention shifting back to the movie. I’d almost been asleep, but her words chase away some of the drowsiness. “Yeah,” I say with a sigh. “I’m okay, Reagan. Thanks for coming over, by the way. And for checking out the yard.”

“Anytime.” She shifts, dragging the fleece blanket she pilfered from the hall closet over herself. “Seriously, you know? You’re my best friend. If you ever need a yard

patrolman or co-babysitter, all you have to do is ask.”

“Best friend?” I repeat, eyes closing again as sleep tugs convincingly at my brain. I yawn. “I never knew you considered me your best friend.”

“Well, yeah.” She doesn’t say anything else, even though I expect her to. She just rolls onto her side, her knees drawn up to her chest in the recliner before letting out a huff and closing her eyes as well. “See you in the morning, Winnie,” she mutters.

“Yeah.” I glance at the television and pick up the remote to turn it off, plunging us into relative darkness lit only by the hall nightlight and the diffused light that seeps in through the living room curtains. “See you in the morning.”

Almost immediately I hear her snoring as I stare up at the ceiling, and I sigh ruefully, jealous of Reagan’s ability to sleep literally anywhere and at any time. Hell, I’m pretty sure if a tornado swept through the neighborhood, she wouldn’t wake up. Even if she herself was carried away.

But it takes a lot longer for me to drift off, despite being somewhat sure she was right, and what I’d seen in the yard was just some asshole playing a prank who’d run away after scaring me.

It’s cold in the janitor’s closet. Especially in my still-bloody t-shirt and denim shorts. Even though it’s late summer, it feels freezing here. Still, the cold makes the bruises and my broken arm hurt a little less, if only because it gives me something to distract me from the pain.

Outside, I hear the rushing around and yelling of the Psych Hospital staff, and I can make out my name being said or yelled in desperate attempts to locate me in this huge, cold place. Not that I have any intention of coming out.

I don't want anyone to touch me.

I'd be happy if no one ever touched me again, in fact.

When it's silent, I get to my feet, leaning my ear against the door to listen for any sign of someone walking by. But when it's been calm outside for at least five minutes, I figure I'm in the clear and they're searching somewhere else for me. Slowly, I push open the door and peek out into the fluorescent hall, giving it a few seconds to make sure there really is no one waiting to pounce. When I'm satisfied, I walk out, my sneakers making no sound on the tile floor.

I don't want to be here.

All I have to do is convince Mom and Lou that I don't need to be here. That I'd be better off at home, even with everything that's going on. I just have to make them see that I don't need an evaluation, a test, or medical care now that my arm is splinted and my ribs have been x-rayed.

Maybe this time she'll listen; once she sees I was desperate enough to get away that I've been hiding from the psych ward staff for thirty minutes and counting.

Trying to remember where I'd come from, I jog down the hallway and glance through the small glass windows set in each of the doors. Most of them are empty, and none of them are the way out. Not that I can tell, anyway. And my brain is so jumbled that I can't quite remember which way they'd led me in before I'd slipped away in the 'waiting room.'

Voices echo at the other end of the hall and I panic, pushing open the closest door without looking inside to get away from anyone who might find me and take me back. I know I'll be in trouble for this, but it'll be worth it if I can just go home.

It isn't until I trip over a chair and go sprawling that I realize I'm not alone, thanks to the low, dry chuckle from the other side of the room near the windows. Getting to my feet, I look up at the person, eyes searching their face and taking in their plain, white clothes.

"I know you." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop myself, and I take a step toward him before hesitating.

He looks me over with pale blue eyes set under curly, unkempt, light brown hair and I see a spark of recognition in his gaze as he pulls one knee up to his chest. It occurs to me that he's sitting in the middle of what looks like an activity room, against the only wall with windows, and he's all alone.

"Are you allowed to be here?" I look around, as if other people are hiding behind the walls or under tables. But he and I are the only ones here.

He quirks a brow at me, a smile hitching on his face. "Are you?" he asks in reply. "Because judging by how you're acting, and your clothes, I'd say you aren't, Winnie."

When he says my name, I suddenly realize who he is. Cassian Byers sits in front of me, in the psych ward he'd been thrown in after killing his sister.

"Cassian," I murmur, my stomach twisting nervously. I take a step back, but only one, as Cass's lips twitch into a small, wry grin.

"Winnie," he repeats. "Aren't you going to run away? You know what I am and what I did better than anyone else here."

I glance back at the door, hearing the voices in the hallway grow softer, then look back at Cassian. "No." Being here with him is preferable to being caught, I think, and

I decidedly sit down hard on the floor, wincing as I curl my legs up under me. “I don’t want them to find me.”

“So you’d rather be stuck in here with me?” His brow raises, and a look of interest crosses his face. “You must be in a lot of trouble if I’m your preferred choice.”

“I’m not in trouble,” I snap, before I can help it. But then I hesitate, not sure if that’s quite true. “I’m not...exactly in trouble,” I amend. “But I want to go home. I’m trying to find the front desk so I can find my mom and beg her to take me home. She thinks I need to be here, but I don’t.”

Something like guilt makes his blue eyes darken, and he settles back against the wall. “That PTSD from watching my sister get stabbed finally catch up with you?”

I shake my head slowly, though hearing him bring up that night so casually is...strange. It makes me nervous, for one. But it’s also sort of relieving. Everyone in my life tiptoes around the subject and never talks about it plainly.

Everyone but him, I guess.

“No. Mom put me in therapy, but I’ve done pretty well with that.” I drag my knees up to my chest and rock on the floor, shivering again. “Have you been here since then?”

“Yep.” He pops the ‘p’ in the word, eyes still on mine. “So why are you here, if it’s not because of me? This is a psych ward, you know. Not just a hospital or a clinic.”

“Yeah, I figured that out.” Absently, I run my fingers over the splint on my arm, and that draws Cassian’s attention to it. “My dad,” I say finally, not sure why I’m explaining things to a murderer when I’ve never even told my friends. “My dad he...he’s not so great.” I swallow, not sure how to go on.

“Did he do that?” Cassian nods at my arm. “And your face?” I know he’s referring to the black eye and busted lip that I have, and I anxiously lick over the newly closed cut with a wince.

“He did.” But I don’t elaborate. “I’m not here because of that, though. He’s been doing it for a while. Since before you...got here.” Something strange crosses his face, but I don’t let him say anything. Instead, I take a breath, the words of what I’d done tonight sitting heavily in my throat.

“It’s because I killed him.” I hold his eyes as I say it. “I killed my dad.”

His face falls in surprise, before he collects himself a second later and looks out the window. “How did you do it?” he asks, as if this is the most normal conversation in the world.

“I’m not like you.” My words are rushed, and I need him to know I didn’t kill my dad in cold blood the same way he’d killed his sister. But Cassian doesn’t reply right away, only raises a brow in my direction as he rolls his shoulders.

“You don’t know what I’m like, Winnie,” he tells me, a warning in his voice.

“I...” The words are on my lips, begging to be said. I haven’t let them free; haven’t uttered them out into the world. Because then it’s real. Then I really did this terrible thing that stained my sneakers red with blood. “I shot him with his gun,” I whisper, wondering if I’m quiet enough then the world won’t know and it’ll just be our little secret.

Cassian leans forward, though he’s not close enough to touch me. “Good.” His eyes are bright, and for the first time, I see him smile. “Good job, Winnie. I’m proud of you.”

But before I can ask him why, or what he means by that, the doors bang open and an orderly's shrill voice makes me wince and scramble to my feet. I don't get to say anything else to my ex-babysitter's brother as I'm dragged out of the room despite my protests and my yells for my mom.

The last thing I remember is meeting his eyes over the nurse's shoulder, his ghostly blue gaze sharp and his jaw set as he watches me go like he doesn't want me to leave.

Even though that can't be true at all.

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Chapter

Seven

“Wake up!” Reagan’s voice and the way she shakes my shoulder have me awake in seconds, and I jerk away from her in surprise with a startled gasp. “Sorry!” She holds her hands up in surrender, fingers splayed. “I’m sorry, I just?—”

Then I hear it. Police sirens wail in the distance, getting louder and drowning out her next words. “What’s going on?” I murmur, sitting up on the sofa and looking around. “Did you call the cops?” That’s the only thing I can think of, and fear makes the last of my sleepiness vanish from my brain. “Is Scott okay?” I demand, jolting to my feet. “Why are the police coming?”

“Scott’s fine,” Reagan assures me quickly. “They’re not coming here. Look.” She pulls the curtain opening, revealing heavy, charcoal colored clouds that threaten rain. Across the street and down a few houses, there are already two cop cars in the short driveway.

“What the heck?” I murmur, pressing my nose to the cold glass to try to get a better look. The two cars I’d heard approaching zip onto the scene as well, until there’s a cluster of cars ruining the yard landscaping. Seconds later, an ambulance pulls up as well, joining the cavalcade. “Did something happen this morning?” Paramedics rush into the house as the new officers stand in a small circle in the yard. This far away, there’s no way for me to have any idea what they’re saying.

“I don’t know. I woke up a few minutes ago when the first round of cops showed up.”

She stands beside me at the window, biting her lip as she watches the same spectacle as me. “Do you think someone’s hurt?”

Before I can answer her murmured question, I hear the sound of toenails on the hardwood floors, and I turn to see Roscoe trot into the room, Scott appearing behind him. “What’s going on?” my nephew asks with a yawn, his eyes still heavy with sleep and his hair the epitome of bedhead chic.

Reagan and I look at each other, both of us equally lost for words as the other. She’s the one who thinks to slam the curtains shut, and we both turn to look at Scott. “Okay, so”—I realize I should probably text Lou about what’s going on pretty fast—“something is happening down the street. There are cops out front and an ambulance. I umm...” I glance back towards the window, biting my lip. “I might go see if they’ll tell me anything.” Though I doubt they will, I feel restless. Like I need to do something.

“Can I come with you?” Scott asks as he reaches out to scratch Roscoe’s shoulder. Immediately, I shake my head.

“No. You may not,” I say. “Can you call your mom, actually? Tell her Reagan is here, and that she and I are going to go check this out. Tell her the police are there, but we don’t know why.”

“What house is it?” He wanders to the window to look out of it as well, craning his neck and pressing his cheek against the glass a lot like I had. “Oh, shit.”

“Language!” I snap. “Jeez, do you know what your mom would say if she heard you swearing?”

Scott rolls his eyes at me before looking back out the window. “That’s Lacey’s house,” he says suddenly.

“Lacey?” The name is familiar, but doesn’t quite connect in my brain. “Do I know her?”

“Uh, yeah.” Scott gives me a look and steps back. “You used to babysit her, remember? Lacey Clarke? They moved there a couple years ago.”

Oh. My heart twists in my chest. I babysat for the Clarke’s about six times, until their daughter, Lacey, had thrown a fit and bloodied my nose when I’d told her to go to bed. It had definitely been the worst babysitting job of my life, and I’d never babysat again. But I still can’t help but feel bad that something has happened at their house. It’s not the parents’ fault that their child is the spawn of Satan. And now that she’s sixteen, I’m sure she’s worse, not better.

“Go call your mom,” I say again, sliding my shoes on and pulling my messy blonde hair into a ponytail. “Tell her about the cops, okay?” I’m already unlocking the front door as I speak, and I glance up when I notice Reagan behind me, her shoes on as well. I hesitate, wondering if I should tell her to stay, but ultimately decide against it. We aren’t going far. If we do have to go someplace other than just across the street and down two houses, then I’ll either send Reagan back or come back to get Scott first.

I book it across the road, a little relieved there aren’t any other people out on the street yet. In a small town like Hayden Fields, anything that draws the attention of the police is something to leave our houses for. Because of that, I’m sure we won’t be the only ones out here for long.

Sure enough, when we’re close enough to hear the static of the radios in the police cars, I notice two couples from adjacent houses stepping out onto their porches. They definitely have just rolled out of bed, and belatedly I check the time.

“So much for sleeping in,” I mutter, grimacing at the time. At seven thirty-two, I

would normally be sleeping unless I have an early shift at the diner.

“Look.” Reagan gets my attention by gesturing at the house, and my brows jerk upwards in surprise when I see two officers rolling out the yellow tape around the front yard. “Doesn’t that mean...?”

“I’m not sure,” I reply quickly. “There’s no way it’s actually a crime.” Right?

“Yeah, I mean. There hasn’t been a murder here since...” She glances at me, sidelong, and I frown in her direction. Apart from my family, Reagan is one of the few people who know about Cassian and the fact I’d been there that night.

But she doesn’t know about me meeting him again in the psych ward the same day I’d shot my father with his own gun to stop him from hurting me again. No one knows about that, not even Lou. I’m certainly not about to tell her now as I turn back to the house to see an officer walking toward us, his face serious and his hands up in front of him, palms out.

“Morning ladies, I’m going to need you both to stay on the sidewalk,” he tells us almost apologetically. “I’d ask you to go back home, but”—he looks at the other people slowly inching closer and sighs, shoulders slumping in defeat—“I’m realistic.”

It’s then that I notice his hands are shaking slightly. Not only that, but his face is pale and drawn, as if he’s seen something that makes him unable to relax his features. But I know if I ask, he won’t tell me what’s going on. Still, I watch him, looking for any hint in his worried face as to what’s going on. Seconds later he’s repeating himself to the next four people who wander over, then again a minute later. It’s not long before the sidewalk in front of the Clarkes’ house is full of curious neighbors, all whispering and speculating under their breath.

“I heard Angie and Josh fighting last night, before they left,” I hear someone say behind me. “But they always fight. Especially when they’re leaving their daughter alone for a few hours.”

“I’d fight too if she was my kid,” someone else replies flatly. I grin humorlessly at that; she really is the worst kid I’ve had the displeasure of knowing.

That thought turns to one of guilt, however, when a paramedic appears in the doorway, pulling on a stretcher that he maneuvers down the stairs. But instead of a person, the stretcher holds a sealed, black bag that is definitely person shaped.

“Fuck,” Reagan whispers, grabbing my hand. “Do you see that, Winnie?”

“Kind of hard not to,” I reply in a soft voice. “Do you think it’s Lacey?” I feel bad for thinking about how much I hadn’t liked her. And I feel worse when I remember all the shit I’ve said to Lou about her in the past few years when I’d seen her at the diner. She was awful, yeah, but if she’s dead...? Then I’m just as awful for thinking badly of her while watching her body being taken to the ambulance.

“Lacey!” The scream splits the air just as Angie Clarke stumbles down the stairs, her face tear-streaked and blood staining her hands and clothes. She falls, tripping over the last stair, and one of the cops tries and fails to catch her before she falls. Mrs. Clarke hits the ground hard, her sobs growing louder as she struggles to her feet; not noticing the fresh scrapes on her palms that bead with blood as she does. “No! Let me ride with her!” She screams her daughter’s name again, but before she can lunge for the ambulance, two officers grab her, pulling her back even though she’s fighting with all her might to get to the stretcher.

“I think we can assume it is,” Reagan’s whisper is so soft I barely hear her. “Holy fuck. What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know.” But judging by the blood on her mom, I can assume she didn’t just die in her sleep. “Reagan?” I realize that Scott really doesn’t need to see any of this, and that his mom really needs to know what’s going on. “Can you go back to the house, please? Get Scott. Take him and Roscoe into the backyard so he can’t see any of this.”

“Yeah—I can do that,” the redhead mumbles, her face pale under her tan. “Shit. Okay.” She stumbles back, eyes still fixed on the scene, before forcing herself to turn and walk back to Lou’s house.

Not that I intend to stay here for much longer, but I do hang around long enough to see Mr. Clarke walk out of the house like a zombie, his face sapped of color and barely seeming to realize his wife is having a fit and screaming like she’s out of her mind. He says something to an officer, then stumbles, looking as if he might faint. He’s bloody as well, the red stains cover his loose white dress shirt. But less so than his wife, who looks like she might have rolled in it.

I need to go. I won’t learn anything standing here, and I need to figure out what I’m going to do with Scott until Lou gets home. “Okay,” I sigh softly, turning around to leave.

I don’t make it very far.

Not when the person standing a few feet behind me is Cassian Byers.

My heart nearly stops, and I find that breathing suddenly feels like the most difficult thing in the world.

But he’s not even looking at me. With one hand in his pocket and the other tapping against his thigh, he stares over my head at the scene still happening behind me. Yet I can’t take my eyes off of him. Hell, I can’t even speak.

Not when he's this close. He's so real in the daytime. More real than he ever is in my memories or my dreams of the night he'd killed his sister or the day I met him again. I can't help staring at him, though. I can't stop myself from looking at the differences and the similarities in his features.

When my phone starts ringing in the pocket of my pj pants, I barely notice it. I'm too busy staring at him with my chest tight and my lips slightly parted.

Finally he sighs, his eyes flicking down to mine to study my face. He takes a step closer, and it causes my heart to try to make its grand escape from beneath my ribs. My fingers tighten, nails cutting into my palms, and the stitched up wound aches.

I still can't move, not when he leans closer, and not when his lips brush my cheek as he murmurs, "You should really get that, Winnie. It feels like Season of the Witch might not be the most appropriate song to play right now, don't you think?"

His words snap me out of my trance and my face heats with shame. Fuck. He's more than a little right. My ringtone is loud, and the song is definitely off-tone for the situation. Looking away from him. I hastily grab my phone, unsurprised to see that it's Lou calling me. "H-hello?" I greet, watching as Cassian walks past me, as if all along he'd been on a walk down the sidewalk and this had just been a momentary pause.

"Are you listening? Hello?" Blinking, I realize Lou has been talking to me the whole time I've been staring at Cass's retreating figure.

"Sorry. I'm sorry, Lou." I tear my gaze away and head back towards her house, forcing my thoughts away from Cassian. "Did Scott call you?"

"Yeah. He said there were cops across the street at the Clarkes' house. What the hell happened?" Her voice is still somewhat calm, though there's a definite and

reasonable undertone of worry.

When I'm in her yard, I stop, gazing up at the window where Reagan and Scott are watching me expectantly. "Lacey's dead, Lou. Murdered, maybe," I murmur. It's a guess, but probably an accurate one if the police and yellow tape are anything to go by. Plus, of course, all the blood. "And I think..." I take a deep, nervous breath, then think better of my words. "I think you should come home soon," I say, instead of what I'd wanted to tell her in the first place.

I think I know who killed her.

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Chapter

Eight

I 'm at the door before Lou can open it, though her hand is out for the knob when I pull it open in her face. "Is Scott okay?" she asks immediately, brushing past me into the house.

"He's totally fine. And he doesn't know," I murmur, not wanting her to say something that's going to freak her son out more than he already is. "He and Reagan are in the back playing with Roscoe."

"Reagan's still here?" Lou seems a little surprised by that. "Did you ask her to come over?"

"No. I think I missed some calls from her yesterday and she showed up last night to see if I was okay." I flex my hand, wincing at the sharp twinge of the stitches in my palm. "She stayed the night. Sorry. I really should've texted you." A touch of guilt makes me bite my lip, and I hesitate. "Are you mad?"

"Hmm?" Lou looks at me, her attention already glued to the scene across the street. Dan is over there, looking jovial and polite as he talks to one of the cops. "No, you know I'm fine with Reagan. She babysits when you can't." Her words are absent and distracted, but I still breathe a sigh of relief. I don't want her mad at me for letting Reagan in. And if I would've thought better about it, I would've told her last night. Unfortunately, I'd been freaking out over the person behind their yard.

And today is...not great.

“I can’t believe this,” my half-sister murmurs. “I don’t understand what could’ve happened. You really think it was...?” She glances my way and I shrug. “Maybe it was an accident. You know Lacey isn’t exactly the most responsible kid. Plus she started drinking last year. That’s what her mom told Dan, anyway.”

“I don’t know what kind of accident would’ve left that much blood. Unless she fell down the stairs and hit every step on the way down. And uh, they were covered in knives?” When Lou looks my way, I grin nervously. “Sorry.”

“No, don’t be.” She shifts from one foot to the other. “I need to get our bags out of the car and figure out what I’m going to tell Scott. There’s no way he won’t ask everyone in the neighborhood, and I’d rather he hear it from us.”

Heading for the door, I shake my head. “I don’t envy you.” With my hand on the knob, I hesitate. “Lou?” She looks over at me, still glued to the window and the sight across the street.

“Hmm?” Distracted is an understatement, judging by the way her eyes keep darting back to the glass. “Something wrong? Well, more wrong than this?”

I don’t answer right away. My fingers tap against the heavy door, and I reconsider my words. “Scott, umm.” God, this is a hard subject to bring up. “He asked about Dad. My dad.”

That does the trick. She lets the curtain fall back into place and turns to look at me fully. I can feel her heavy gaze on me as I press my forehead against the door and tap my fingers in an incessant rhythm against the wood. “Oh,” Lou finally murmurs. “What did he ask?”

“He asked what happened to him. That’s the important part, anyway.” But I still don’t look at her. I can’t. Not when we’re talking about this. “I told him it was an accident, but I didn’t give him any details. Seriously, I was trying to be as vague as humanly possible.” I give her a tight, wry smile before dropping my hand to my side.

“It was an accident, Winnie,” my sister is quick to assure me. She crosses the room and wraps her arms around my shoulders, dragging me into a tight hug. “You were a kid, it wasn’t your fault. It was just...an accident.”

But I don’t reply. I stare over her shoulder at the window; able to see the cops standing outside the Clarkes’ door through a small gap in the fabric.

Lou can say it was an accident all she wants. At this point, I’m convinced it’s to make herself feel better, not me.

Because deep down she knows the truth that I’ve never denied, except in public when someone asks and I just want the question and the attention to go away.

It wasn’t an accident.

I’d planned it, found Dad’s gun, unlocked it, and waited for him to get home. But that night, before he could hurt me, I’d make sure he could never touch me again.

It wasn’t an accident.

And I don’t regret it, no matter what Lou or my mom want to think.

“I’m home.” My voice rings out in the open concept first floor of my mom’s house, and the only answer is the soft sound of Doom’s bell as the large, tabby cat comes trotting out of the kitchen. “Hey, Doom.” I sigh, kneeling down and running my hand over his ears. “Did you piss off Gloom, hmm?” Though I’m not surprised Doom’s

sister isn't out here right now; she isn't exactly social, after all.

Neither of my ex-feral cats are, but Doom has warmed up to me specifically enough to get love on his terms. Rising to my feet, I drop my things on the sofa, not minding that Mom won't be home until Monday. This way I can leave some stuff lying around and not feel bad about her looking pointedly at whatever is out of place. As per usual, I'll become a whirlwind Sunday night to clean up everything before she gets home.

I'm exhausted, even though it's barely noon. And if I'd been thinking about taking today as a lazy day before, the events of this morning have only solidified that for me. In fact, I barely make it through feeding the cats and rummaging through the dangers of the fridge for a snack before I face-plant my bed with a groan.

The soft sound of my phone going off to alert me to a text makes that groan louder, longer, and more pitiful. "It can wait," I grumble to absolutely no one, seeing as I'm alone here. "Literally anything can wait." Well, anything except rolling over and sitting up with my bag of Cheetos beside me. I drag my computer onto my lap and open it, wondering if Lacey's death has made it to the news yet. While I know there won't be a ton of information, or maybe any, in a news report online...there might be something, at least.

Maybe they'll confirm whether Lacey was actually murdered. But no matter how hard I look or how I search, there's nothing in the Akron news or Hayden Fields pages about the Clarkes or their daughter.

"Surprised there aren't reporters and cameras lining up outside the house," I murmur to myself, crunching on a few Cheetos. I grimace at my fingers, always hating the residue the delicious snacks leave behind. But Doom obviously feels differently. The male tabby hops up on my bed and licks at my fingers, cleaning off my hand with an appreciative purr. "Thanks. Now I'm not eating any more of them." I curl the bag closed and toss it onto my nightstand, then flop down onto my bed once more. This

time, though, instead of suffocating myself in my pillowcase that's a week late on being washed, I curl up on my side to stare at the mostly opaque blackout curtains covering my window.

"Don't do it," I mutter, but I know where my brain is heading. "Don't do this, Winnie." But well, I'm already doing it. Inevitable, really, since there's no way to keep my mind off of him for long when he's back in town.

Cassian's face fills my head as I remember his look outside of the Clarke's house. I feel like I'm scrutinizing every microsecond of our interaction, trying to look for something I'd missed before. Trying to find...something.

Though admittedly, I don't know what.

If Lacey was murdered, I think, what are the chances it was him?

My stomach curls in dread at the thought, though I don't move or even blink. He's a murderer. Hadn't he proven that when we were young? I have no idea why he'd want to kill Lacey, but I have no idea why he killed his sister that night, either.

He'd seemed so unaffected when he'd seen me, and with a jolt I realize I hadn't been imagining things yesterday. Cassian really was outside the diner when I dropped the plates.

My phone going off again finally drags me back to reality, and I pull it up to my face to read the messages. But I should've known. After all, Reagan is the most excitable creature on the planet and she's never going to stop talking about this.

You make it home??? Her first message had been about twenty minutes ago. But I'd just ignored it. Apparently for too long, judging by her next two texts that arrived back to back.

You have to be home by now.

What are you doing?

I don't answer in a hurry. I take my time typing out a reply to her, then delete it once before writing it all over again. It's not because of anything she's said, or anything wrong particularly. I'm just tired enough that stringing appropriate words together feels like a chore. Finally I manage, though, and send her something halfway intelligent back. It must be at least a little convincing, because a minute later I have two more messages that I hesitate to open.

Do you really think she was murdered?

Do you think it was him?

Fear tingles up my spine at that last message, and I turn off my phone screen instead of replying as my eyes drift back to my curtains. But I know I can't ignore Reagan forever. Especially right now when I really, truly just want to sleep.

My fingers type quickly on my phone, even before I've really formulated a reply. So I keep it simple, and easy, and send it without thinking about it too much.

I have no idea. And no, I don't

It's a lie.

It's such a fucking lie, but it's the best I can do right now. At least until I sleep, eat, and get my hand to stop aching so much today.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:10 pm

Chapter

Nine

Waking up, I barely have any idea of where I am for a few seconds. My mind spins, and I flex my toes, as if I'm reaching for something that will ground me and remind me what's going on. My chest constricts, and it feels like moments stretch into hours as I open my eyes to stare up at the dark ceiling lit only by the hall night-light.

I'm used to the quiet of an empty house. Mom is known for taking off on trips and leaving me here to watch over things in her absence. Though I've partially always wondered if she does it to get away from the memory of what happened to me while she denied anything was wrong.

But tonight...the quiet is wrong somehow. It's not as empty as usual in the house, though I can't really explain why.

"Fuck," I groan out, wishing I knew why I'd woken up with my heart racing and confusion making my thoughts swim. Absently, I turn, wanting to face my window instead of the blackness of my ceiling. But when I open my eyes, I don't see my bay window that's always been my favorite feature of this house.

At least, it's not unobstructed like it should be.

There's a figure in the window seat, sitting almost completely still and backlit by the moon outside. I can't see their face, but I sit up fast with a sharp intake of breath.

"Who?—"

The figure leans forward into the slanting illumination cast by the hall night-light and my heart stutters in my chest like it might just give out in the spot.

“The lock on your door is kind of pathetic,” Cassian informs me in his low, smooth voice. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him raise his voice, though it’s a weird thing to go through my head right now.

“What?” I ask dumbly, feeling frozen in place as he meets my gaze. “How did you get in here?”

“Picked the lock,” he says slowly, like he’s speaking to a toddler who might not understand the words. “On your back door.”

“You closed it, right?” My brain isn’t quite working the way it should, and I attribute it to the exhaustion that I’m still trying to shake off, even though I’ve probably been asleep for a good eight hours.

Cassian is quiet for a moment, and his expression slides into one of bemusement. “You’re asking if I closed your back door?” He sounds like he can’t quite believe that’s what I’m choosing to say right now, but I nod my head jerkily. “Yeah. I did. The cats didn’t get out, Winnie.” He settles back, face obscured by darkness once again. “Is that really what you want to ask me right now?”

No, it isn’t. A million questions slam through my brain all at once, each wiggling uncomfortably into the space behind my eyes in an attempt to be the first to escape my lips.

Why are you here?

Did you kill Lacey?

Why did you kill your sister?

Why didn't you kill me?

"What are you doing here?" I turn just enough to slide my fingers under my pillow, fingers searching for my phone that I always keep tethered to me for fear of not having adequate entertainment from social media drama.

Only, it isn't there. And when Cassian pointedly clears his throat, I have an idea of what I'll see when I turn around.

Sure enough, my phone lights up in his grip, showing a few missed messages from Reagan and what looks like a voicemail from my mom.

"Come on, Winnie." His tone is just a bit goading, just a little amused. "You thought I wouldn't take your phone so you couldn't call the cops instead of talk to me?" The words and the way they're said make me bristle, and I throw the covers off of my legs in case I need to do something dramatic.

And from the way Cassian Byers tenses, he's expecting it too. But I force myself to stay still, my body poised to move when I feel like I might be able to get away with it.

"It's a little embarrassing," he admits finally, when the silence between us has stretched to its breaking point. "I've been coming back here for years around Halloween to reminisce. And maybe to see you, too."

"I've never seen you before yesterday," I can't help but interject quickly.

He tilts his head to the side, just enough that one baleful eye is lit up again. "That's because I never wanted you to. I let you see me at the diner to find out what you

would do and, umm..." I swear he's smiling now. "You didn't disappoint. I wasn't expecting such a dramatic reaction from you, truth be told." His eyes flick downward, toward my hands that clench my comforter. "You certainly didn't react like that in the psych ward."

"That was years ago." My words are quick and defensive, though I'm not sure what I feel insulted by. "And it was a unique set of circumstances."

"Right," he agrees. "The unique circumstances being that you'd just shot your father with his own gun. I remember." Fuck, I hate how easily he knocks me off balance and keeps me guessing. I want him to be predictable, and not throw me for so many turns that I have no idea what will come out of his mouth next.

"You don't know anything about what happened." Restlessly, I shift again on the bed, trying to come up with a plan. I'm afraid of him. I've always been afraid of him, deep down. Except for that one time in the psych ward, where he'd been the better alternative to getting dragged away by nurses who wanted to evaluate me to see how long I'd need to stay. "Don't pretend like you do, Cassian."

"Then don't pretend like you know what happened the night you watched me kill Carissa," he replies quickly, voice still soft. "Fair's fair, after all."

I open my mouth to reply, but think better of it. He's...right to some extent. I have no idea why he wanted to kill her. Especially when he was so young, and she was just a teenager babysitting the neighbor down the street. "Enlighten me, then," I invite. It's not meant to be a real offer, but I can't help being curious.

Even though I'm pretty sure in this case my curiosity could get me killed, and no amount of satisfaction would bring me back from getting stabbed like Carissa.

"You first," he shoots back. "Tell me why you shot your father. Tell me in detail, and

I'll give you every single answer you want, and plenty of ones you don't." I hate the challenge in his words, and despise how it makes me bristle and want to jump down his throat.

I hate everything about Cassian Byers.

"You know I'm not about to do that," I whisper.

"Then you don't get the answer to your curiosity about that night." He doesn't sound particularly put off by it. He sounds conversational. Like this is something other than a horrifying situation.

Like I'm not waiting for the flash of the knife in the darkness.

"So you come back to Hayden Fields to get some sick pleasure out of remembering what you did, and I'm an unwilling participant in that," I say flatly, changing the conversation back to a less horrid topic. Though not by much. "And now you're, what, graduating to breaking into my house so you can watch me sleep? You've always been a creep, but don't you think this takes it to a new level?"

He leans forward so his entire face is in the light, and his gaze tells me I'm not getting the rise out of him I'd expected. Not only that, but he seems more amused than annoyed as he runs his fingers over the back of my phone absently.

"I've 'always' been a creep, huh?" he repeats. "That so? Even when we were kids?"

"Stop." My voice is flat when I say it, and I clench the comforter more tightly.

"Even when you were hiding from what we both knew was happening at home? When you begged me to let you hide under my bed so you wouldn't have to go back with your mom?"

“I said stop.” This time the words come out as even a whisper.

But his eyes never leave mine, and a small, wry smile twitches at his lips when he asks, “Did you know I was a creep when I walked you home so no one would bother you and you held my hand so tight I thought you might never let go? Or when?—”

“I said stop!” I’m yelling without meaning to, and I grab my pillow to launch it at his face. I can see the look of surprise in his eyes as he jerks back, and I take that moment to lunge to my feet, hitting the floor at the foot of my bed and looking around for anything I can use as a weapon. But unless I’m willing to beat him to death with an empty plastic cup or throw my fan at his head, I don’t think I have a lot to work with.

Instead, I bolt toward the hallway, just as I hear heavy steps behind me that eat up much more distance than my own. I’ve barely made it to the doorway before an arm loops around my waist and I’m jerked off my feet. A yelp of surprise and protest escapes my lips as I grope for the doorframe, hooking my fingers around it for some kind of leverage as I struggle in his grip.

“Let go of me!” I scream, refusing to give in, even as my heart pounds out a terrified rhythm.

“Never,” Cassian snarls in my ear. “Not ever, Winnie. So don’t bother asking again.” His words register in my brain and shock makes my limbs go cold. My fingers are suddenly numb enough that he can yank me off of the doorframe, and Cassian easily spins me around to toss me back onto my bed before kicking the door closed behind him and plunging us into darkness lit only by the moon outside.

I surge upward off of the mattress, hands propelling me, but a large weight knocks me off balance, pinning me on my back with my head pressed to my remaining pillow that I hadn’t used as a pathetic excuse of a weapon.

“What do you want?” I demand, though the words come out shakier than I want. My fingers twist in the comforter, palm aching dully from too much movement.

“To tell you I didn’t kill Lacey Clarke,” Cassian growls.

“Why—”

“Because I know what you think, Winnie.” Frustration laces his tone, and he shifts, settling on his hands and knees above me and giving me a few safe, scant inches between my body and his.

But it’s not enough.

It wouldn’t even be enough if he were in the next county.

“You don’t know anything,” I reply sharply. Or at least, as sharply as I can, given the circumstance and my building fear that’s about to make a mess out of me. But if Cassian is going to kill me, I won’t be like Carissa.

I won’t beg him for my life.

I won’t let him see me cry.

His laugh is soft and harsh, and he’s close enough to my face that I feel his breath against my lips. “I know what you think when you look at me. You’re not very subtle, princess. You never have been. I know you think I killed her. You’re so sure I’m the reason her mother was covered in blood this morning, aren’t you?”

He isn’t wrong in the least. But I don’t want to admit he’s right. Instead, I opt not to say anything at all, but that doesn’t seem to bother him either.

“Why would I lie to you about killing her, hmm? I’m not exactly shy with you knowing what I’ve done. I let you watch Carissa die, after all.” His voice is goading and soft. Almost a purr in his chest that has my heart slamming against my ribs in fear.

Well, mostly fear.

Because if there’s one thing I hate the most about Cassian Byers, it’s the fact that deep down, I’ve never been just afraid of him.

And now I’m terrified he knows it too.

“I don’t know,” I whisper, realizing belatedly that I’m not trying to fight him anymore. His thighs are snug around my hips, his jeans rubbing against the exposed skin from where my shirt has ridden up slightly. It shouldn’t matter. I shouldn’t care.

But now I can’t stop thinking about all of it. Of his breath against my skin, of how he’s straddling me in my bed. There’s not enough fear or memories of him stabbing Carissa in the world to make my brain stop running through the smallest details as I shift under him, uncomfortable for more reasons than just fear.

“You don’t know, or you just don’t want to admit that I’m right? I have nothing to hide from you, Winnie. Not when you’ve seen all of me for years.” I can barely see his face in the dark, but I can feel the heaviness of his gaze. “Just like I’ve seen all of you.”

“That’s a lie,” I’m quick to reply, wanting to deny it. “You’ve been gone since I was twelve. You don’t know anything about me anymore.”

“Oh, sweetheart...” he trails off with a soft chuckle. “I’m never really gone. And you’ve never really been rid of me. Don’t kid yourself.”

“I hate you.” That’s the only thing I can think of to say to him. The only words I can find, even though they’re petulant and unconvincing. “I hate you so fucking much. You ruined my childhood?—”

“Don’t give me so much credit. We both know who and what really ruined your childhood. I just tried to pick up the pieces where I could—” he breaks off as I surge upward again, trying to knock him off of me through sheer surprise so I can make a run for it.

But he doesn’t fall for it. He pushes me back down with a huff, his fingers curling lightly around the base of my throat. “Settle down, sweetheart,” he tells me, voice dripping with mocking sincerity. “Or you’re going to rip your stitches.” My lips twist into a sneer, but I swear he only smiles wider in the dark. “Oh, that’s right,” he coos. “You fucking hate that, don’t you? You just despise being told to settle .”

His face is closer than it needs to be, and every time I blink, I swear he seems a little closer. My breaths come in sharp pants, and I wrap my fingers around his wrist, holding there like he holds my throat. Though my nails dig into his skin where the pads of his fingers simply rest against mine. Not that he seems to even notice. Or care.

“If you know I hate it so much, then why say it?” I snap finally, my heart slamming against my ribs like it’s also looking for an escape.

“Because you hate it, of course.” His tone is laced with amusement. “Now pay attention, Winnie. Before I get tired of repeating myself. I.” Cassian definitely leans closer with every word; there’s no mistaking it this time.

“Did not kill Lacey Clarke.” A jolt goes through me the instant his lips brush mine when he nears the end of his statement, and I open my mouth as if to protest.

I swear, I really am going to tell him to get the hell off of me or at least sit up.

But I don't get the words out. I don't even get to start my threat. Cassian's mouth presses to mine, and he takes advantage of my need to get the last word in. His tongue dips between my parted lips, flicking against mine as the hand on my throat holds me just a little tighter. I can barely keep up with him as he explores my mouth and takes absolute control over the kiss, as if it's his right.

As if he knows exactly where this should go.

Even when he pulls away, my mouth is still open, though now it's to drag air into my neglected lungs while I stare up at him in shock. Though a small flicker of satisfaction goes through me when I realize he's a little surprised as well. Like he hadn't expected to actually do it.

Like maybe this wasn't quite in his well-laid out plans.

"Winnie..." he growls, my name is a warning, though I have no idea what I've done to provoke him. "Fuck." He leans down again as if magnetized, and my only protest is a soft whine that he swallows greedily. Eagerly. His teeth nip at my lower lip, mouth insistent against mine as he hunts for more noises or sharp little inhaled gasps that he can take for himself.

He gets them, too. More than I want him to as my brain tries to play catch up, as I try to focus on something other than his mouth and his fingers.

As I try to remember why I need a weapon or my phone.

His hand leaves my neck to splay against my stomach, fingers pressed to my skin as he slides them up gently, slowly, bringing my shirt up as well and causing my muscles to contract at his every touch. My breathing picks up, and I ask myself once,

then twice, if I'm going to let him do this.

If I'm going to let him do all of this without protest.

But just as his fingers brush the underside of my breasts and a soft, satisfied sound travels from his mouth to mine, a distant sound makes him jerk back and makes my eyes widen.

Police sirens wail outside, getting closer with every moment that Cass and I stare at each other in confusion.

"I didn't—" I begin, suddenly feeling the need to proclaim my innocence.

"I know," he interrupts. He swears and gets to his feet, glancing back at me twice. "It's fine, it's—I wasn't planning on going this far." There's a rueful, almost apologetic note in his voice. "I just wanted to tell you. I just needed you to know."

"Needed me to know...?" My brain is working much too slowly right now.

Cassian's mouth twitches in a half-grin, and he comes back to the side of the bed as I sit up so he can lean in close again.

"I needed you to know I didn't kill her," he purrs against my lips. Before I can even fathom the start of a reply he turns, walking to the door and opening it before disappearing down the hallway with cat-like silence while police sirens fill my ears and the red-blue lights light up the walls of my second-floor bedroom.

Chapter

Ten

By the time I've convinced the cops that everything is fine and whoever had called them had been mistaken, it's almost three in the morning and I want to perish on my front porch. I'm too tired to wonder who called the cops, and why, though part of me wants to believe Cassian isn't as skilled at breaking and entering as he thinks.

But I eventually manage to get a few more hours of sleep before my alarm screeches through my questionable dreams, forcing me back to the world of the living against my will to get ready for my next shift at the diner.

"You can't quit your job," I mutter as I tug open the back door that leads to the kitchen. "You cannot quit your job." But it's harder to convince myself of that when all I want to do is take a nap on the counter. Mom doesn't charge me rent, no matter how many times I've offered to pay it, and even though I chip in for groceries, bills, and streaming services, I always feel like I'm not doing enough.

It's fine, Winnie, my mom is always quick to tell me while waving off my concerns. This is just a jumping off point until you find your path in life.

Path in life, she says, like I'll find it on a map. With a degree that's not that particularly useful and zero ability to keep a relationship going for more than seventy-two hours, my path in life is shaping up to be questionably employed cat lady.

“You can’t quit your job,” I sigh, tossing my keys into my little cubby that’s marked with my name in the back of the diner. Martha can’t let go of a few old-fashioned practices, like cubbies, but I can’t complain. Not when I think it’s adorable and pretty heartfelt that she insists on doing it for everyone, no matter who they are or how long they stay working here.

“I mean, you could.” Jeremy drops his keys in the cubby next to mine with a huff. “No one is stopping you. Unlike me. I can’t quit my job.” He grimaces, freckles standing stark against his skin that looks a little paler today.

“You need to go to the tanning bed,” I observe. “You’re looking a little anemic there, Jer-bear.” He shudders at the nickname an old girlfriend had insisted on using. She may be long gone, but I will never let the nickname die. “And yeah, you’re right. Your mom would end you if you tried to quit.”

“Death is better than Friday night shifts,” Jeremy is quick to reply, turning to look at me sullenly. “How’s your hand, by the way?” He gestures to it, and eyes the new bandage taped to my palm.

“Achey,” I admit, flexing my fingers. “Doesn’t exactly feel great when I wiggle my fingers.” To illustrate my words I curl and uncurl my pinky and ring finger, even though it makes my stitched up palm sting.

“Okay then, maybe don’t ?” Jeremy recommends. “Maybe—” He’s cut off when Martha comes out of the back office quickly, her face pale and expression reminding me of someone who’s just seen a plane crash.

Not that I have personally ever met someone who’s seen a plane crashing, or seen one crash myself. Both of us watch as she nearly runs out the back door, phone clutched in her hand.

“What’s wrong with your mom?” I ask, puzzled. I’ve never seen Martha look so shaken, and I’ve watched her sit with a customer with a shattered cup stuck in his leg and burns on his hands.

Jeremy shrugs his bony shoulders just as our cook, a middle-aged veteran called Gio, rounds the corner. “She’s just runnin’ out for a bit,” the older man says in his slow drawl. “Come on, you two. Just because Martha’s not here doesn’t mean the diner isn’t opening.”

His voice is a wake-up call and I grin at him, a little embarrassed at having to be told to do my job. “Sorry, Gio,” I say, and Jeremy echoes the sentiment while Gio just rolls his shoulders in a shrug.

To my surprise, Martha isn’t back by the time we open for breakfast at seven am. Normally, her favorite part of the day is chatting with the regulars that always come in for coffee and a place to read the paper while they gossip. But today, it seems...empty. I note that a few of our regulars also aren’t here, including the woman who helped Martha clean up on Friday when I’d sliced my hand open dramatically.

From what I know of her, she’s one of Martha’s oldest customers by far. And she grew up with the diner owner. I’ve never learned her last name, no matter how many credit card receipts I’ve looked at, but I do know her first name starts with an L.

Or a C.

Maybe an A.

I shrug off the thoughts, figuring it doesn’t matter if I know her name or not, as long as I can continue to get her coffee order right.

When Martha’s car finally pulls back into the parking lot close to noon, it’s followed

by a cop car that slides into the parking spot beside her; the car is sleek and newer than most of the others in front of the diner. It's not uncommon for the local cops to eat here, but this is a state trooper, not even a county cop. Jeremy and I trade looks from across the front of the diner, and the confusion on his face shows me he doesn't have any idea what's going on either. We watch, both of us slowing at our tasks as Martha comes in the front way, her face pinched and drawn and tear stains on her cheeks.

"Mom?" Jeremy gravitates toward her as soon as the door opens, concern heavy in his voice. He sets down the tray he'd been carrying to reach for her, as if worried she's going to fall over at any moment.

The officer comes in a moment later. Sunglasses obscure his eyes, even though the day is a cloudy one. He's more in shape than half of our town police, with a mouth not made for smiling and brown hair cut in a buzz against his head. He's the definition of cop, and his picture could be in the dictionary for how cliché he looks.

His boots even shine in the bad light.

"I need both of you to come with me for a few minutes," Martha tells us quietly, beckoning me over as she does. My heart flips in my chest, though I don't know why. It's not like I've done anything wrong.

Except lying to the cops about an intruder in my house last night.

"Actually..." The officer looks between Jeremy and me. "I just need to talk to her, ma'am." He nods in my direction and this time I jerk my chin upward like I need to deny some accusation that he hasn't made.

The look Martha throws my way is worried, and she hesitates. "You can use my office, if that's all right," she says finally, nodding at me to set down the tray I'm still

holding. “I’ll take your tables, Winnie.”

“Okay.” I have no idea what’s going on, or why this cop is here. I don’t know what I could’ve done, but my brain keeps going back to Cass being in my house the night before.

Does this officer know? Worse—does he think I’m a killer’s accomplice?

I needed you to know I didn’t kill her. Cassian’s soft voice seems to sound in my ears again, but staring into the cop’s face, my confidence waivers. Somehow, for some reason, I believed him when he was in my room last night.

And I still believe him.

The cop follows Martha to her office, where she leaves us with a worried frown in my direction. She puts a comforting hand on my shoulder as the officer walks in to sit at her desk, taking up the only chair in the room and leaving me to stand awkwardly in front of the desk.

“You can close the door,” he invites almost lazily, taking off his sunglasses to look at me with small, dark eyes.

Dislike settles in my chest as I do what he says, leaning back on the door once it’s closed. I don’t like being in a small space with a man I don’t know, and my racing heart is proof of that. He doesn’t speak right away. The officer seems content to stare me down, like I might suddenly break and confess all of my sins to him.

Joke’s on him, though. My sins have been on public record for years. The thought makes my lips twitch in amusement, but naturally he notices and leans forward to rest his arms on Martha’s desk.

“I’m Officer Trudeau,” he says at last. “You’re Winnifred Campbell.”

I don’t like when people tell me my name like it’s something they can lord over me, but I force myself to remain neutral. I only nod, not saying anything out loud. It’s not like he’s asking me anything. Or accused me of anything, I suppose.

“I was surprised when I looked you up in the system,” Trudeau continues. “You had a rough time of it when you were young, huh?”

“Guess so,” I reply, forcing myself not to fidget or move like I’m hiding something. I don’t cross my arms or shove my hands in my pockets. I don’t even move except to readjust my weight against the door behind me. “Do you need something from me, officer?”

Please don’t ask about last night , I beg silently.

“The police were called to your house last night by a concerned neighbor. They said they heard a struggle and saw someone in your room around one am. But then you told the police that wasn’t true, and that you’d been asleep.” His eyes never leave mine as he talks, and he drones on flatly in a voice that would put my math teacher to shame, with how lifeless he sounds.

“That’s true. Do you need me to say it again? Or elaborate?” I ask, my words bolder than I feel.

He chuckles, but there’s no humor in it. “Calm down, Winnifred. You’re not in trouble here, I’m sure.” I don’t like the way he adds on the words I’m sure , like there’s still a possibility. “You know Edith Baker, yes?”

I blink owlshly at him, running the name through my head over and over to see if I can recognize it. “No?”

“She’s one of your regulars. A good friend of Martha’s?” Officer Trudeau prods.

“Oh!” So it hadn’t been an A or C or L like I’d thought. Apparently my memory for names is worse than the average person’s, judging by how I hadn’t even realized who he meant upon hearing her name. “Yeah, I know her. She’s here every morning. Except this morning. Did, uh, did something happen?”

If this is about her, then I really can’t be in trouble. I haven’t seen her since she hugged me on Friday and told me I’d be fine before Martha hustled me into Jeremy’s care to head for the urgent care center.

“She’s dead.” He doesn’t hesitate or soften the blow in any way. And considering the way he watches me for a reaction, I can’t help but wonder if he thinks I’m going to give something away by my reaction.

And then, belatedly, I wonder what he thinks there is for me to give away.

“Holy shit,” I murmur, sagging against the door behind me. “Dead? What happened? She wasn’t sick, right?” To my knowledge, she hadn’t been older than sixty or so. That would make sense, anyway, if she really had grown up with Martha. “Was there an accident?”

“No, Winnifred.” I hate the way he says my name. It grates on my ears like a poorly tuned instrument. “There was no accident. She was found this morning around four am.”

“I was dead ass asleep,” I reply before I can think better of it.

“And you were home alone, right? Your mom is out of town?” God, it’s creepy that he just knows that without referencing anything.

“Yeah. She does it a lot.”

“So you’re alone a lot.”

For a moment, I don’t reply. I don’t understand what he’s getting at, but I remind myself I have nothing to hide. “I’m alone a lot,” I agree at last, my skin prickling with anxiety.

“And where were you the night before? When Lacey Clarke was killed? I’ve heard you were at the crime scene that morning. Did you know about it beforehand somehow? You don’t live in that area.”

I’m already shaking my head before he’s done talking. “I was babysitting my nephew,” I say slowly, like he’s an idiot and I’m trying to explain things in simple terms. “Scott. His mother is my half sister, Louisa. I babysit for her all the time.”

“So it was just you and your nephew?” His eyes never leave mine, but he isn’t taking notes.

“Yes—wait. No.” I grimace apologetically. “My friend showed up and stayed the night, too. She was there when my sister got home as well.” I expect him to ask why, or something equally probing. “My friend’s name is Reagan Darcelle.” Maybe she can be my alibi, and I can be hers. Just in case Officer Trudeau has a grudge against babysitters.

“All right.” He gets up unexpectedly, levering himself up with his hands. With a sigh, he heads for the door, and I sidestep it so he can rest his hand on the knob. “Just one more question.” He turns to look at me, blocking the door and holding it shut.

My lungs seem to constrict in my chest, and I have to remind myself this isn’t the same situation as when my dad trapped me in his office.

If I scream, someone will hear me.

If I scream, the people around me won't ignore me and hope that things work themselves out.

"You were the girl in the house when Cassian Byers killed his sister, right?" Officer Trudeau asks quietly without looking away for even a moment.

I blink and meet his eyes, unflinching. "Does it matter?" I ask finally, my words slow and hesitant. "Does it have something to do with what's going on now?"

Suddenly Officer Trudeau smiles, and his hand twists the knob until he can push the door open. "Probably not." He chuckles, slipping his mirrored sunglasses back on. "Probably just a coincidence, you know?"

"What's a coincidence? That someone died in Hayden Fields and I was breathing a few houses down the street?" I can't help the derision in my tone, or how much I want him to leave.

His grin widens and he shakes his head in a way that makes it seem like he's watching a child playing at being an adult. "No need to be so defensive, Winnifred." I will never not hate how he says my name. "Just thinking out loud. You have a good day, all right?" He nods his head and brushes past Martha, who stands by the cubbies with a napkin twisted to shreds in her fingers. The officer nods to her as well and disappears into the front of the restaurant, and even when he's gone I stare after him, considering.

"Winnie?" Martha steps closer to me, pulling my attention to her. "Is everything okay?"

"Is Edith really dead?" I ask instead of answering. "Was he telling the truth about it

not being...an accident?"

Martha's face twists, but she forces herself to nod. "They said she was stabbed. The same way that girl, Lacey Clarke, was stabbed. It was just like..." but she trails off when she looks at me, and I don't need her to finish to know what she was going to say.

It was just like what happened before with Cassian.

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Chapter

Eleven

I expect another murder, and it's my opinion that the rest of the town does as well. With two murders in two days in our small town outside of Akron, we've unfortunately gotten famous in the news.

It's all anyone can talk about in the diner. In whispers or in loud voices, our regulars and those just here to try out the 'famous' pancakes can't seem to talk about anything else. At first, I find it interesting. Informative, even, since I don't watch the news a lot.

But then, when the talk inevitably turns to everything else that's happened in Hayden Fields, my amusement and interest in the talk runs dry. One day becomes two, and by the fourth day of no murder, I'm sick of hearing Cassian's name.

The only silver lining is that they don't know I'm the kid in the story who ran screaming for help.

It's Thursday by the time I've had enough. I can't help it, I put in a request for the weekend off, giving me four days instead of two so I can lay in bed and do my best imitation of a dead body starting tomorrow.

"You just have to make it through today," I murmur, looking up at the ring of the bell hanging on the door of the diner. "Welc —" My words come to a stuttering stop when I see the two people walking in, but I can't believe this is happening.

Not when Cassian's blue eyes meet mine and his mouth hitches up in a half grin. The man beside him cranes forward, eyeing me from under raised brows. He's taller than Cassian, and maybe a couple of years older, with messy black hair and dark eyes full of amusement.

"You have such a type," he says to Cass with a chuckle, who shoots him an irritated look. "Oh, don't tell me." I move closer to them, menus in my hand, even though I haven't rattled off my normal full greeting. "Don't tell me you were only taking home girls that look like her?—"

"Shut up, Wren," Cass says flatly, but he never looks at his friend. His eyes remain on mine as I hesitate in front of them, unsure of what to do. "Hello, Winnie."

"Should I like...pretend I didn't hear what he said?" The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. "Or do I just mark you down as being a creep if what he's said is true?" I don't know how to process what he'd said, though I wonder if Wren is simply joking.

Cass takes a step closer, one hand up on the menus in my hand. "Well, I'd prefer you didn't think I'm a creep." He gives me a soft, almost apologetic smile as his eyes glitter. "But I do try not to lie to you, so I can't really tell you otherwise."

This is definitely too much for me to handle on any Thursday. Let alone this Thursday when my nerves are fried and half the town is talking about me without realizing it's me.

"You know what?" My grin widens. "I should go on my break. Or go home. This is not what I signed up for today."

"Ah, come on." Wren swoops in and leans his head on Cass's shoulder, giving me a look that might be his attempt at a pout. "I've been begging him for years to bring me

here to see you.”

Cass’s eyes close, and he lets out a breath. “You’re not helping.”

“You’re really not,” I agree.

“At least I got you both on the same page about something.” Wren winks dramatically at me, and I roll my eyes hard enough I’m surprised nothing snaps. “I’ll give you a good tip for waiting on us. Promise.”

I waiver, thinking it over, even though I don’t really have a choice. With just me and Jeremy to wait on customers unless Martha needs to step in, I’d feel like shit for going home early. “It had better be a huge tip,” I say finally with a sniff, tugging the menus away from Cass. I turn on my heel and take them to my favorite booth in the corner without any more hesitation. But as they sit, I look them both over, surveying Cass in the daylight in public and getting a good look at his friend.

Or whatever Wren is.

“Are you sure this is okay?” I ask while busying myself with setting their menus in front of them. “What if someone recognizes you?” My own words have me glancing around the diner, but no one is looking our way.

“They won’t. They never do.” When I look back at him, Cass is resting his head on his hand and gazing up at me instead of his menu.

It makes me feel strange in a way I don’t quite understand. “Do you guys know what you want?” I don’t need to write their order down, unless they’re going to order everything on the menu with tons of customizations.

“I want chocolate milk and, uh, an order of your pecan pie pancakes? Those were the

ones on that show, right?” Wren hands me the menu as his gaze searches my face, unabashed. “And before I leave, can I get a second order? My girlfriend would love them as much as I’d love to bring them home to her.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re competing with New Wren,” Cass murmurs with a glance back toward his friend. At my confused look, he adds, “New Wren is a cat. His girlfriend is cat-sitting for our other friends. He’s feeling a little inadequate.”

“As you should. Cats are better than people,” I reply without hesitation. “What do you want, Cassian?” His name feels strange on my tongue; like a dirty word or something illicit.

Like a secret.

“What’s your favorite thing on the menu?” It’s definitely not the answer I’m expecting, and I look away nervously when I realize Cass is still staring at me.

“Look away, Cass,” Wren sighs. “You’re being creepy.”

“I’m starting to think he only has one mode and it is, in fact, being creepy.” I’m not good at filtering myself today, but Wren gives an appreciative smirk. “My favorite thing isn’t on the menu. And you’ll hate it.” I don’t actually know if he will, but I say it anyway. With another glance around the diner, my shoulders fall in a relaxed shrug. Maybe Cassian is right. Maybe people really don’t recognize him.

It’s not like his parents are here to identify him, either. They left town less than a year after Carissa’s murder.

“Can I order it, anyway?” It only takes one look at his pretty blue eyes for me to relent, and I pluck their menus off the table before heading back to the kitchen. Jeremy is a step behind me, and from the corner of my eye, I see him look at my table

in the corner.

“Do you know those guys?” he asks, seeming bored as he chucks his menus in the bin. “They seem talkative.”

“Nah,” I lie smoothly. “They just wanted to talk about the episode.” That gets a massive eye roll from Jeremy, who likes those kinds of people just as little as I do. But it’s an easy lie, and it gets his curiosity away from Cassian and Wren.

It turns out Cassian doesn’t hate my favorite dish of stuffed cinnamon toast on a waffle, topped with whipped cream and cherry pie filling. Though he does give it an incredulous look when I drop the plate in front of him. And they really do tip huge before leaving, though not before Wren gives Cass a look I don’t understand and murmurs something in his ear. When I have a second, I look up after they’ve left, only to see Wren sauntering off toward a red car, alone.

And I don’t see Cassian in the parking lot at all.

Around an hour after they left, I happen to glance up from my table to see Cassian across the street, in the same place he’d been when I cut my hand nearly a week ago. My stomach does a little flip, and I have to ask my table to repeat their drink order, thanks to the rushing blood in my ears and the too-loud thoughts bouncing around my brain.

Why is he still here, seems to be the question I consider the most. Because I can’t figure out what he’s doing.

Especially when he disappears and reappears three more times before the seven pm end of my shift. By the time I’m grabbing my keys and waving goodbye to Martha in her office, I’ve come to the conclusion that he’s stalking me.

And the conclusion that it really should bother me more than it does.

In the little employee parking lot I glance around, expecting to see him, only for it to be as empty as it usually is by the time I leave. I'm the only one that gets off at seven, since Jeremy prefers to stick around and do his homework at a table as the diner starts to empty out around eight.

"Maybe I'm just being weird," I murmur to myself as I slide into the driver's seat. But part of me is relieved. I hadn't quite known what to say at the table, and for the whole day I've been on edge, though it only really hits now that the adrenaline is fading.

Cassian had been right there almost all day. Seemingly every time I'd looked up, I'd caught sight of him somewhere nearby with a view into the large glass windows of the diner. I sit back against my headrest with a huff and close my eyes hard. A groan leaves me, but I thank my own forethought that I'd taken Friday and Monday off. Normally, Martha might have been hesitant, but she'd known my reasoning without me having to say a thing.

An idea hits me and I tug my phone out of my pocket to tap the word MOM in my contact list. But when it takes her longer than two rings to answer, I start to wonder if she's going to pick up at all.

She does, at the very last second, and my heart sinks as I hear the rush of noise in the background. She's not home. "Hello?" Her greeting comes out around a pant, and she sounds like she's walking fast. "Winnie? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just umm..." God, I feel stupid now. I drum my fingers against the steering wheel, already knowing there's no need for me to go on. Since I know what her answer will be. "I just got off work and I uh, took Friday and Monday off. So I thought we could, I don't know, do something fun? I know it's lame, but you

remember how Lou said they're doing movie nights during October of Halloween movies and snacks? I thought?—"

"I would, honey ." Mom is clearly distracted as she interrupts me, and I close my eyes hard. " But I got called away again. It couldn't wait, and there was no one else who could go. You understand, right?" There's a touch of apology in her tone, but it doesn't feel sincere.

It never does, anymore.

"Yeah. Okay." I can't help but wonder if she's telling the truth, or if she'd been looking for any excuse to be away from home again. "When will you be back? Maybe when you're back we could..."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to disappoint you." She murmurs something to someone, and at their request for her ticket, I realize she's at the airport. "I won't be back until the first week of November."

"What?" My stomach twists and I open my eyes. "The first week of...Mom that's like, three weeks away. You told me you weren't going to stay away that long anymore, after last year." I hate how defensive I sound.

And worse, I hate how she makes me feel.

"I know and I'm sorry. But the London office really does need me, Winnie. We can't all just take off whenever we want from a job that has no real responsibilities." The sharpness in her tone makes me frown. If I push her on this, she'll turn it around on me.

"Is this because of people dying this year?" My words are slow and quiet, and they're met with a deafening silence that's more telling than it should be.

“ I have to go, okay? I’ll text you when I’m at my hotel. Security is a bitch here tonight, and I’m going to have to put my phone down.” She forces out a laugh. “ I’ll take pictures for you and send them your way. Sorry I can’t do movie night!” Mom doesn’t even give me a chance to reply before hanging up.

“Whatever.” I won’t give myself time to sulk. At least not right now in the parking lot. Throwing my car into gear, I whip out of my parking spot and completely forget to look around to see if Cass is still around.

Chapter

Twelve

The house is dark and quiet when I get out of my car and slam the door a little harder than necessary. I'm not upset, exactly. My mom being gone means no pressure on me, so I can do whatever I want whenever I want. Hell, she isn't even around to critique my taste in pizza or my milkshake obsession.

And I can order as much delivery as I want without her reminding me we have food in the fridge and not to waste my money. Still, there's something like loneliness creeping up my spine to invade the space between my ribs. Sometimes, no matter how hard I work to convince myself otherwise, I don't want to be alone.

Tonight is easily one of those times.

On the porch I stop, staring down at my black and white sneakers with scuffs along the toes. They're worn in and comfortable, and I shift my weight on the welcome mat Mom brought home from a trip into Akron last week.

It is, of course, not Halloween themed at all.

The hair at the back of my neck prickles, and before I can think of what I'm doing, I turn to look behind me, toward the street.

Somehow, I'm not surprised when my eyes find Cass. He's leaning against a sleek black car, and even though he's too far away for me to see the details of his face and

the setting sun has cast him in shadow, I still know what he's looking at.

Me.

I tell myself the only reason I'm doing this is because my week has been a bitch and I'm lonely as hell. I tell myself he won't do anything, anyway.

I tell myself it'll be fine when I leave the door open behind me and stride into my mom's two-story, cookie-cutter suburban home. It isn't quite like Lou's—there's maybe a two hundred square foot difference—but it's similar enough that I'm pretty sure the same designer worked on both.

Though honestly, there's not a lot that's unique about either house. Not the white walls and light hardwood floors that line the first level, nor the staircase that marches straight up to a railed landing that's open over the front door and foyer.

The only reason I feel comfortable leaving the door open is because I know Mom closes the cats into my bathroom when our housekeeper is coming over, and she always comes on Thursdays. Unless she's done a full one-eighty, that's where they are now with her not being here and the house shining like it only does on the day of a cleaning.

I wander into the kitchen, tugging off my hoodie as I go and drop it on one of the chairs tucked under the small table against the windows. Like Lou, we have a breakfast nook and a sliding glass door that leads to our yard, though instead of a concrete patio like my sister, we have an actual deck with a fire pit and comfortable lawn furniture.

Back from when Mom actually tried to hang around and spend time with me. When she was still faking it and trying to move past what happened instead of reliving it every time she looked my way.

The front door closes, pulling me out of my thoughts just as I pull a bottle of Dr. Pepper out of the fridge. There's no other noise, though, and when I look up to see Cassian leaning against the doorframe, I jump and nearly drop my drink.

"Jesus," I breathe. "Make some fucking noise or something, Cassian. What are you, a ghost?" It's hard not to ramble when I'm nervous, and my brain to mouth filter is clearly malfunctioning today.

"You shouldn't leave your front door open." His tone is just a little admonishing, and he doesn't move from his spot in the doorframe. "What if your cats had gotten out?"

"They're closed in my bathroom since the housekeeper was here," I dismiss his concern. "I like my cats more than I could ever like a person. Did you really think I'd take a chance of them being able to run out the door into the big bad world? They're too delicate to survive." The statement isn't quite true. They did pretty well on their own before I befriended them and brought them inside to live a life of luxury.

"No." Cassian rolls his shoulders in a shrug and just...stands there.

"God, that's so creepy." I shudder theatrically. "Do you want a Dr. Pepper?" I'm already going to the fridge again as I say it, and I don't need him to answer before I set another bottle down on the counter.

"I didn't say yes." Cass pushes off the wall and steps into the softly lit kitchen. His hand goes out and he lifts the bottle to break the seal. "Thanks."

"I may have blocked out a lot of my childhood, but I still remember what soda you like," I reply dryly, lifting my bottle into the air like I'm giving a toast.

"Blocked it out, huh?" He sits down quietly in one of the chairs at the table, though his eyes never leave mine. "Where's your mom?"

It's not the question I'm expecting, and I lean my hips back into the counter behind me. "Well, don't you know just how to ruin the mood." It's not a question, and I tap my fingers along the cold plastic of the bottle. "Can we not do this in the kitchen? The cats need to be let out and when Mom isn't here, I usually hang out mostly in my room." Up there, with the cats close, I tend to feel less lonely .

"We can go wherever you want, Winnie." The way he says it has me glancing at him as I walk by on my way to the stairs, but I don't stop. No matter how much I want to challenge him on what he means by that.

I nearly trip up the stairs in an attempt to look nonchalant, and judging by the snort I hear from behind me, Cassian definitely noticed. But I just keep walking, pretending like I haven't done anything embarrassing. Reaching the bathroom door, I push it open slowly, watching the two still-scruffy cats creep their way out of the bathroom, Doom immediately trotting over to twine around Cassian's legs. Predictably, Gloom streaks away down the hall, disappearing into my room to, most likely, hide in the abyss of my closet.

"Your room, right?" Cass asks, effortlessly scooping Doom up onto his shoulder. I think about warning him that Doom is fickle and likes to bite ears...but then realize that would ruin the potential joy of seeing Cassian with my cat hanging off his earlobe.

So I don't.

Instead, I lead the way to my room that takes up a good section of the second floor, pushing the door all the way open and glancing around for anything embarrassing on my floor. But thanks to the housekeeper to whom I owe my firstborn, it actually looks pretty clean and well-kept.

"Oh, sorry," I say, tossing my keys on top of my dresser and toeing off my shoes. "I

forgot you've been in here before and could've found it all on your own." Absently, I yank open one of the heavy wooden drawers of my dresser, finding a pair of running shorts and a tee to change into from my waitress uniform. Not that my black pants and plain, long-sleeved shirt are uncomfortable, exactly. I just don't like wearing pants or long sleeves when I can help it.

"Not that hard to find, really," Cassian replies sweetly. He sits down on the bed, letting Doom clamber down to purr and nudge his arm. "All I had to do was follow the aggressive snoring."

That stops me on the way back to the bathroom to change, and I turn to look at him, expression flat and lips pressed into a thin line. "I don't snore."

"Sure, sweetheart." He grins at me. "You can believe that if you want. I'll let you." His eyes fall to the clothes in my arms, then flick back up to my face. "Where are you going?" he asks, like somehow it didn't sink in from seeing what I'm holding.

To help him out I hold up the comfortable clothes and shake them at him. "To change. Did you want something to change into as well? I have a great selection of yoga pants, leggings, and running shorts for your perusal. Not to mention all kinds of shirts with questionable designs or shitty quotes on them." I don't smile as I say it, maintaining my solemn look of seriousness.

Cassian rolls his eyes and settles back on his hands. "You always make me regret asking." He sighs heavily, though his lips twitch into a small grin as he says it.

"I can make you regret breathing if I try hard enough." He snorts at my words, shaking his head as I shift the clothes from one hand to the other. "May I go now, O curious one?"

"Of course, my subject." He bows from where he's sitting, dramatic in his

movements. “Don’t let me keep you from your evening tasks.”

“Then by your leave.” It’s a bad habit of mine to always want the last word, but before he can reply, I’m out the door and heading for the guest bath. It’s not as nice as mom’s ensuite, obviously. But it’s bigger than a lot of other guest bathrooms I’ve been in. There’s a large tub against the wall and the lights over the mirror are nicer than they have a right to be. Even in the suburbs.

Quickly, I strip out of my work clothes, changing into my shorts and tee, before I bundle up my uniform in my hands and start to leave.

Until I catch sight of myself in the mirror and stop. Unthinkingly, I’d also taken off my bra. As I do every night. It’s noticeable in my reflection, and I worry Cassian will think I mean something by it.

Do I mean something by it?

The question floats around in my head as I stare at my reflection, until I let out a breath and shake my head. “Stop overthinking it, Winnie,” I whisper, and force myself to leave the bathroom, following the same path back to my room as always.

Cassian is no longer on the bed when I return. He’s standing in front of the bay window, peering out through a small gap in my blackout curtains. He doesn’t turn to look at me when I come in, nor when I drop my clothes in my overflowing laundry hamper by the door. I’ll get to them. Eventually. When I run out of clean underwear.

For a moment, I stand in the middle of the room, watching him survey the outdoors. Doom has decided to vacate my bed, and I look over at the cat tree to see him lounging on the top platform like it’s his throne. Though I guess for him, it’s as close as he’s going to get to his dreams of royalty.

“So...” I sit down on my bed, back against my pillows, and curl my legs up under me. “You still want to know why mom isn’t here?”

My words bring his attention back to me. Cassian pulls away from the window and sits down on the bed as well, before lying down on his side with his elbow propping him up. His sky blue eyes find and hold mine, interest mixing with the infinite patience he somehow possesses no matter the situation. “Of course I do. I want to know anything that you want to tell me.”

“Don’t say crap like that, or I’ll hit you with my pillow,” I scoff, not letting the words sink in. “Mom is on a trip. A work trip, a vacation, a road trip, a shopping trip...?” I shrug my shoulders lightly. “Who knows? She’ll probably text me in the next few hours to let me know where she is. Or she won’t, and she’ll call me tomorrow apologizing about how she forgot she hadn’t hit send on the message.” I can’t help the stab of hurt that aches dully in my chest. While it used to be a lot sharper; a lot more painful...the pain from how much she chooses to be away from me never really goes away.

“Why?” That’s all he asks. He doesn’t comment on anything I’ve said, and Cassian’s eyes never leave mine.

“She...” God, this is a lot harder than I’d expected it to be. Lou is the only one who knows the truth, and it’s caused quite a few fights between her and my mom. By now they have an uneasy truce over it, since Lou has realized nothing she says will guilt mom into being around more.

So I take a breath and settle back against the headboard, picking at my thumbnail. “She doesn’t like to be around me anymore. She blames me for Dad, for what happened and what he did. My mom thinks I overreacted, that I could’ve done something different, or that I misunderstood.” I can’t help but sneer the words, and I’m too nervous to look up at Cassian.

Maybe some part of me is afraid of what I'll see in his face.

"So she takes trips a lot. She volunteers for any travel at her company, and is constantly going across the country for one thing or another." I breeze over the details, not adding that she's made sure to be far away from here on Halloween. Just like always.

When Cass doesn't reply, my trepidation of his response grows. I know he has no stake in what happened to my dad. He shouldn't care one way or the other, but I can't help my anxiety over his response. Over the possibility of—

A rustle of sheets and movement from the corner of my eye is the only warning I get before Cassian presses me back against the headboard, on his knees and caging me in against the wall. His elbows rest on the drywall on either side of my face, and he stays there until I look up at him, eyes wide and a question on my tongue.

"I wish I'd known," he murmurs. "What about your sister? She doesn't seem like she'd let your mom do that. She was always scary protective of you." A smile ghosts over his lips, and I snort.

"Are you remembering the time she threw you in the lake for making me cry?" I ask dryly, unable to focus on his eyes when he's so close that I can feel the heat from his body and smell the musky spice of his cologne.

Fuck, he has no right to smell this good. Or look this good. Or be anything that he is.

"Something like that." The way he gazes at me always seems so intense. But then, there's rarely anything casual about Cassian.

"Yeah, she umm..." I swallow and remind myself he's a murderer while trying not to focus on how close his knees are to mine. "She's had quite a few fights with mom

over...stuff.” That’s the best I can do with him this close.

A knowing smirk crosses his lips, and my heart sinks. There’s no way he doesn’t know what he’s doing to me and my ability to form coherent thoughts. “Stuff?” he repeats, leaning closer. “Winnie, don’t tell me I’m making you flustered by being this close.”

“You aren’t,” I’m quick to lie. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but your cologne is choking me. It’s hard to focus when I’m trying to breathe normally.” It’s nowhere near the truth. If anything, I want to bury my face in his neck and inhale deeply.

No. Bad Winnie , I berate silently.

“Did you know...” His eyes drop, and with a jolt, I realize he’s staring at my mouth. “That you are, perhaps, the worst liar I’ve ever met? Are you that bad with everyone, I wonder? Or just me?” Fuck, he’s definitely leaning closer.

“I think you’re?—”

“Shut up, sweetheart.” He cuts me off easily a brief moment before his lips crash into mine, shockingly possessive and intense, given the softness of his words. While I’ll never admit to it, I practically melt against him, letting him push me back until I’m leaning fully against the wall and he can pin me there with his body while he coaxes my lips open with teeth and tongue.

It’s his hand on my jaw that makes me open my mouth in a gasp, and Cass is quick to take advantage. He sighs with pleasure against my lips as his tongue explores every bit of space he can. All the while, my hands inch up, until I find my fingers inexplicably curling in his shirt.

I should push him away.

Not pull him closer.

But I can't convince myself to do the smart thing. My hands seem to have an agenda of their own as I tug him close until there's no more space between us and any breath I get to take is from the air we're sharing.

"Winnie..." I don't expect the low rumble of his voice when he pulls away enough to rest his forehead against mine. The sound of panting breaths fills my ears, and with a shock, I realize it's coming from me. I'm the one out of breath, like I've just run a mile.

"Yeah?" I ask, trying for something other than a nervous, breathy sound and failing. Butterflies I never knew existed flutter around my stomach, making me feel...strange. But it's not a bad kind of strange.

"This isn't...Fuck." The butterflies suddenly lose their ability to fly at the roughness of his words, and I draw back, just for his hand to tighten, gripping my jaw. "Wait, no." He opens his eyes, meeting mine with cold blue eyes that feel somehow scorching. "No, don't give me that look, sweetheart. You look like I kicked your puppy. I just meant." He takes in a breath, eyes closing for a few seconds before he reopens them. "I didn't come here to go so far. But then, I didn't last time, either?—"

"Why not?" The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, and when Cassian's grip on my jaw falters, I find myself moving forward, pushing him back as he moves to let me do it, until Cass is on his back and I'm straddling his hips, holding myself up above him with one hand pressed to his chest.

Frustration bubbles to life in my chest as I look down at him. "If you're about to leave like the other night after kissing me and telling me 'you didn't mean to do this,' then you might as well not come back." The words are shaky and unsure, and for a moment, I'm afraid they'll upset him.

I don't expect the quick, mischievous grin that spreads across his full lips. "The cops were on their way the other night," he points out. "I think that one was beyond my control."

"Really? You could've hidden in the closet or something," I reply, unsure why I'm arguing except for the sake of doing it.

Something flashes in his eyes, but it's gone too fast for me to identify it. "We'd just had a bit of an argument, if I remember correctly. One where you tried to run from me."

"Oh, yeah, because that totally carried through to you kissing me. Couldn't you tell?" I can't help rolling my eyes at him, and with a quick movement I nearly miss, his hand is suddenly gripping the base of my throat.

"You like to ask for it, don't you?" Cassian croons. "Tell me, sweetheart. Has no one ever put you in your place before? Has no one taught you what happens when you end up getting the last word?" I don't answer him, but not because of his grip.

It's because of his damn words. They play on repeat in my brain as I stare down at him, resurrecting the butterflies and sending them into frenzied flight. "I don't always need the last word," I deny, feeling the lie on my tongue as I say it.

Cassian certainly isn't fooled. His look turns incredulous, one brow raising and making me scoff. "Not all the time!" I press, tapping my fingers against his stomach. Glancing down, I realize his shirt had ridden up when I pushed him, and the pads of my fingers are resting on the bare skin above his jeans.

Fuck , this is such a dangerous position to be in with him.

"So that's a no?" His fingers shift slightly on my throat, and when I swallow, I feel

the press of his hand more acutely on my skin. “You’ve never had someone call you out for your attitude?”

“I don’t have an attitude.” But my words are hollow, and I look away from him, unsure what to say.

“No.” His fingers tighten. “Look at me, sweetheart. I want to see your eyes while I talk to you.”

It’s so difficult to drag my gaze back to his, and when he reaches out his other hand to grip my thigh, the butterflies in my stomach put on jet packs to bang against my insides with urgency. “So if I leave right now, I should just never come back?” he muses, gaze holding mine in an iron grip.

“Yeah,” I breathe uncertainly. “Never to darken my doorstep again.”

“And what, exactly, will it take to earn myself a humble visit to your bed, hmm?” He drags my hips down until I can’t hold myself up anymore. My hand is splayed on his stomach, and when my body meets his, he arches up into me, grinding against my core.

I can’t help the small yelp that leaves my throat in surprise and, maybe, approval. My hand tenses on his stomach, fingers curling until I’m scraping my nails against his skin. “What do I need to do for you sweetheart?” I swear to god Cassian is purring at me. “Should I kiss you until you can’t remember why you want the last word?” The hand on my throat drags me down until I’m pressed against him, on my elbows now in an imitation of how he’d been when I’d been against the wall. But now it’s me with my forearms braced on either side of his face.

Except, I don’t feel like the one in control. He doesn’t relent, instead wrapping his arm over my shoulders to urge me the rest of the way down until his lips reach mine

once more. He's gentler this time. Sweeter. At least at first. He licks and teases at the seam of my lips, taking his time before he slides his tongue against mine. The hand on my thigh slides around to my lower back, and he holds me against him as his hips arch so he can grind against me once more.

"Should I make you come? Stay here all night with you on your back and my face between your legs to taste your pretty pussy? I'll let you grip my hair and beg me for all the things your boyfriends would never do to you." He licks at my lower lip and a shiver goes down my spine.

"You don't know what my boyfriends have or haven't done for me," I mutter, just to have a say in this.

"Maybe another time I'll tell you all the things I know about the two guys you've dated." Cass chuckles, biting my lower lip before I can express my surprise. "Would that earn me the right to come back, Winnie? Or..." My breath falters when he pauses, and I'm ashamed to realize I'm hanging on every single word that comes out of his mouth.

"Or should I fuck you until you can't remember your own name, and the only thing you can say is mine?" My stomach twists at his words, and I can barely remember why I told him he had to leave and not come back. Clearly, my brain cells have melted from the heat in his words.

Cassian watches me, humor written all over his face. "Oh, you're too easy, sweetheart," he chuckles at last. His hands move, going to my hips, and before I can question why, he's rolling us over until my back is against my comforter and he's on his hands and knees above me. "So what'll it be?" he teases, searching my face. "But if you're too overwhelmed by the options, I can just make the decision for you."

"Where was the option to make tin foil hats, discussing our conspiracy theories, and

drinking sparkling water?” I ask in a voice that’s way too breathy and much too unsure. “I wasn’t replying because I thought that one was still coming.”

His snort nearly cuts me off. “You hate sparkling water, Winnie,” Cass points out dryly. “But that’s okay. I get it. That’s your way of telling me to pick. Don’t worry.” His sudden grin is predatory, wolfish in its appearance. “I’ll get in your good graces. I’m sure of it.”

“How do you think you—” His lips crash into mine again, but this time his movements are urgent and rushed. His fingers grip my tee, yanking it up and over my head without ceremony and leaving me in just my running shorts that feel incredibly too short right now.

Cassian kisses down my throat, reaching up to grip my hair and force my head back so he can have unobstructed access to my neck. His kisses turn sharp, and I whine when I feel his teeth sink into my skin while he sucks a mark that’s sure to bruise. But he doesn’t stop with one. Or two.

Or five.

By the time he’s left at least six marks on my neck and shoulders, I’m a fucking mess under him. I can barely focus on my ceiling, or anything other than the pleasant sting of the bites and the way he’s admiring his handiwork with his fingers and tongue.

“So pretty,” he murmurs. “You’ve always been so gorgeous, Winnie. And finally, all mine. Just like you should be.”

“All yours?” I parrot, trying to remember why that makes the hair at the back of my neck prickle.

“All mine,” he repeats confidently, kissing the hollow of my throat. “And I intend to

prove it to you as many times as it takes.” I shiver under him as he kisses a path down my chest, lifting his head to flick his tongue over my nipple as his hand comes up to cup my other breast. The dueling sensations are enough to have me shuddering, and my back arches off the bed as I bite back a needy whine. His words and my protests to them slide out of my mind like oil when I feel the tease of his teeth on my sensitive skin, but before I can do more than suck in a breath he’s sitting up, fingers hooked in the hem of my running shorts.

Then he stops. Just... stops. I open my eyes, surprised to find them closed, and gaze up at him in utter confusion as I wonder if I’ve given him a sign that I don’t want this. With my eyes on his face, I see the small twitch of a smile on his lips, and he shifts to press his fingers to my hips. “I just wanted you clearheaded for a moment,” Cassian murmurs. “I want to make sure you want this, Winnie.”

“I thought I was being pretty obvious with the embarrassing noises I’ve been making. None of which I’ll never admit to, by the way,” I ramble. “Even under torture.” I shift slightly, nervous at his scrutiny, only to stop when his fingers press down on my waist.

“I need you to tell me you want this,” Cassian states. His eyes never leave mine, and the weight of his gaze is unnerving enough to make my stomach twist. “I need you to tell me that, because once you say yes, you don’t get another choice, Winnie.”

My mouth twists in a nervous grin. “No takesy-backsies?” I joke weakly. “I’m not sure that’s how it works.”

“It is with me.”

“What if I say no?” I’m curious, more than anything. Will he really just...leave?
“Will you leave?”

He smiles fully, looking both predatory and mischievous. “If you say no, I’ll help you put your shirt back on and go back to just kissing you. If you say no, I’ll pull you into my lap and watch reruns of Bridezillas with you.”

It’s a little unnerving that he knows my favorite show, but I push that thought away. After all, we’ve already established that this isn’t quite normal.

“But I won’t leave . No, that’s not on the table anymore.” He drops back down to his elbows over me, brushing his lips sweetly to mine. “You opened the door for me, sweetheart,” he murmurs. “You let the monster in, so closing it now won’t make me go away.”

This time, a shudder trails down my spine, but I can’t decide how much of it is from fear and how much of it is from something way less appropriate for the situation.

“You make it sound like a threat.”

“Oh, it is one,” Cass assures me, burying his face against my throat to kiss and nip at my skin. “It’s always been a threat.”

“You make it sound like...” I trail off when he bites down, causing me to shiver. “Like you’re the bad guy or the villain here.”

He chuckles softly, but doesn’t reply for a few moments. His tongue licks a line up my shoulder, curving around my neck, until finally he licks up my jaw. “I am the villain here, Winnie,” he murmurs in my ear. “So, what’s your answer?”

“I suppose it would be rude of me to tell you I’m tired or would rather watch Bridezillas ,” I hum thoughtfully, as if it’s a decision. “But if I say yes, do I get to see you with your shirt off? Seems only fair.”

Without hesitating, Cassian sits up and tugs his shirt off over his head, tossing it to the floor near the bed. My eyes immediately fall to his chest and abs, lingering on the sharp cuts of his hips my fingers ache to touch.

At least, until I see the scars that slice across his skin. I reach up without thinking, only to stop with my hand hovering just centimeters from him. My eyes flick up to his, and in response, Cass reaches out and grips my hand, pressing it to his warm abs over one of the worst slashing scars.

“They don’t hurt, and I’m not shy,” he murmurs. “You can touch them all you want. If this is you saying?—”

“Yes, yes . This is me saying yes,” I tell him arrogantly, rolling my eyes in exasperation. “Yes, oui, si, ja—” He tackles me to the bed with a laugh rumbling in his throat, fingers gripping my hair to yank my face back up to his.

“You’re such a brat, you know that?” he growls, nipping at my bottom lip. “Fuck , Winnie.” His hand finds my shorts, and he yanks them and my underwear down without any struggle. Hell, he makes it look easy, considering I can barely get pants on without both hands and falling on my face. “Next time I’ll make you pay for what comes out of your mouth, but?—”

I cut him off with a yelp when he suddenly thrusts two fingers into me and curls them upward. “Oh, fuck ,” I whine, my hands flying up to grip his shoulders. “Cassian?—”

“Too much?” he teases softly. “Don’t even try. I bet you’ve been wet for me since I leaned over you against the wall. Your other boyfriends never knew that, did they? The way you’re just begging to be pinned and fucked and put in your place.”

“My place is?—”

His other hand grips my throat and he snaps his teeth together inches from my lips. “Shut up, Winnie.” He laughs lightly. “I want to fuck you right now, not teach you a lesson for your mouth.”

I want to push him. I want to see what he’ll do if I don’t shut up...but his fingers are a damn good argument against me doing that. At least for now. I moan in appreciation, arching my hips into his hand as he adds another finger. “Fuck,” I sigh, opening my eyes to gaze up at his face. “Has anyone told you that you’re really pretty, Cass?”

“Maybe.” He shrugs. “But I’ve never really cared about what anyone else thinks. I only care what you think.”

“That sounds a bit possessive.” The words are out before I can think better of them, and his only response is a wicked grin as he scissors his fingers inside of me. He’s so thorough that it’s aggravating, and by the time he finally pulls his fingers free, I’m writhing and almost begging for more.

“Poor thing,” Cass coos. “Finally lost for words? No, I didn’t say you could talk yet.” He reaches up to wipe his fingers over my mouth, smearing my lips with my arousal. I shudder, but I can’t tell if it’s from disgust or anticipation. “Not even taking your jeans off for me?” I huff, watching as he stands up to unbutton and unzip his jeans and shove them down his thighs.

Cassian rolls his eyes at me in response. “Don’t be obtuse. You won’t last long and neither will I. I’ve been waiting for this for way too long and you...” His eyes trail down my body, and I squirm. “Well, I’m certainly not going to leave you disappointed.”

“We’ll see. I’ll rate your performance after on a scale of—” Cassian shoves two fingers in my mouth, surprising me into a muffled protest.

“Do something actually useful with your mouth, Winnie, and clean off my fingers for me like a good girl,” he demands lazily, his other hand slowly stroking up and down his length.

His impressive length. He’s bigger than either of the guys I’ve fucked before, and I whine a question as I taste myself on his fingers, tongue lapping against the pads of them.

“What’s wrong?” His voice is teasing. “Are you scared I won’t fit, sweetheart?” He grins, stroking his fingers against my tongue before pulling them out of my mouth. “You don’t need to worry about that.”

“Because your dick can grow or shrink at will to fit your partner perfectly?” I ask lamely, voice flat.

“No, my sarcastic little brat. Because I’ll fuck you until you learn to take it and until you’re ruined for anyone else.” He doesn’t give me time to respond. Cass grabs my calf and lifts my leg to hook it over his shoulder, wrapping his arm around my thigh and gripping my waist to hold me in place. My breath catches in my throat as I shift to get more comfortable, heart pounding in my ears.

Fuck , it’s so loud I’m surprised he can’t hear the frenzied, frightened rhythm, too. But if he can, he ignores it, moving forward enough that he can rub his tip teasingly between my folds. By the third time, I’m squirming and anticipation is nearly choking me. “Come on ,” I whine. “Cassian, I’m going to turn fifty before you?—”

He rolls his eyes up to me with a small grin and thrusts in sharply, not stopping even when I howl at the burning stretch. “W-wait!” I gasp. “Oh, fuck you’re too big to just?—”

“Certainly doesn’t feel that way to me, sweetheart.” Cassian chuckles darkly. “I think

I fit just fine in your sweet, tight pussy. You can take me. I'm almost there."

My back arches, chest heaving as my toes curl over his shoulder. "You so could go slower," I whine in protest.

"And you could learn to talk back less when you're about to get fucked," is his sweet reply. "Maybe we'll both learn a lesson from this." His free hand shoves my hips down, preventing me from going anywhere at all as he finally, slowly, finishes sinking into me until his hips are flush to my body.

And then he just waits; a shudder goes through him and is accompanied by an appreciative groan. "You feel so good, Winnie," Cassian murmurs. "You don't know how many times I've thought about this...but you're so much better than anything I've imagined." He lets out a soft, murmured string of curses I can't hear over the blood rushing in my ears. My muscles clench and flutter around his length as the burn slowly fades to a perfect and satisfying feeling of being so full.

"You can...You should—" His grip on my hip tightens as if in warning and I groan. "Could you please move, Cass? I need?—"

I don't even get to finish my question. He pulls out before thrusting back in slowly, savoring the slide as I fight not to squirm too much. "Of course I can," he murmurs. "All you had to do was ask nicely. Anything you want, Winnie." His voice is rough and low and perfect in my ears. "I'll give you the world if you ask me to."

I want to say something sarcastic or taunt him. I want to remark that he's being dramatic...but when he suddenly slams back into me and makes me see stars, all the words are driven right out of my mind. He does it again, then once more, and before I can do more than catch my breath, Cassian is fucking me in a smooth, rough rhythm that's better than every way I've been fucked before.

But maybe that's because it's Cassian .

“You look so pretty getting fucked.” I hear him murmur, his hand on my waist slides down until I feel the brush of his thumb on my clit. I make a soft sound of protest, trying to tell him that if he does that, I really won't last that long. But if he cares, he certainly doesn't say it. He strokes over my clit with confident, steady motions that are a counterpoint to the way he fucks me. It's enough to make my head spin, causing me to feel a little overwhelmed by the two sensations.

I'm not sure how long he does it for.

I know that a litany of praises never stops falling from his lips, though after the first few, my heartbeat is again too loud in my ears for me to make them out. At some point I realize I'm panting, mouth open, rambling my own encouragements and pleas.

“I-I'm gonna come, Cass,” I say finally, feeling that familiar, delicious tightness in my core that makes my thighs tense, my heel digging into his shoulder blade. “I'm?—”

“I know you are, and I want you to. I want to see you come apart on my cock, all for me. Show me how much you love this, sweetheart. Show me how much you want to be mine .” I should protest his words. There's something in them, something in his voice, that has alarm bells going off in my head, prompting me to sit up and take notice.

But fuck, I can't. Not when he doubles down and strokes my clit faster, his thrusts becoming unsteady as my thighs tremble. I'm trying to delay my orgasm, if only to spite him.

“Oh, Winnie, don't do that,” Cass chuckles, as if he can read my mind. “Don't you want to be my good girl? Don't you want to come for me? Fuck ,” he curses

suddenly. “I didn’t even think about—I can pull out?—”

I hook my leg more tightly over his shoulder. “Got my tubes tied,” I mutter. “So don’t you fucking dare.”

He stares at me for a moment before his grin flashes wide on his face. “Good girl,” he tells me. “ Perfect , Winnie. Come for me, sweetheart. Come all over my cock. I know you want to. I know you’re dying to come for me.”

I don’t have it in me for any kind of comeback. Witty or otherwise. My release hits me hard, causing my back to arch off my bed as I cry out loudly enough to make my ears ring.

Suddenly I realize it’s a good thing my mom isn’t home, or even in the same county as me, with how loud I’m being.

“ Cassian ,” I keen, when he doesn’t stop stroking over my clit. “Cassian, fuck , that’s?—”

“Are you going to whine for me, sweetheart?” he chuckles, suddenly slamming into me with a shuddering groan. His thumb pauses briefly, his grip on my hip tightening as he comes before pulling my leg off of his shoulder and lunging forward to drape himself over me. His hands come up to cup my face as he pulls me into a deep kiss, and this time I wrap my legs loosely around his waist, keeping him inside me.

That makes him chuckle, but I don’t have it in me to feel shy about it. He feels too fucking good, and I’m so warm and fuzzy from my orgasm that I just want to clutch onto him like a sloth and never let go.

At least, not until I’m back in the state of mind to have second thoughts about this.

“I’ll admit...” Cass rolls us onto our sides, dragging me against his chest. He’s still inside me, even though he’s finished riding out his own release by now. “I didn’t expect you to be so affectionate.”

“I’m just full of surprises,” I murmur grumpily against his chest. “So don’t kill the damn moment. Get it?” I peer up at him. “Because you’re a?—”

“I will put you over my lap and spank you if you finish that sentence right now,” Cass informs me smoothly, his eyes narrowing as he looks at me. But I swear I see the twitch of a smile on his lips, and I snort before burying my face into his shoulder.

“You love my sense of humor and you know it,” I say, eyes closing as I drift with the euphoria of my orgasm and the feel of his fingers tracing patterns over my shoulders.

“Sure I do,” Cass chuckles, kissing the top of my head. “You keep telling yourself that, Winnie.”

Chapter

Thirteen

Even with my ringer off, it's hard to sleep through it when my cheek is pressed to the cool glass when it starts to vibrate. I groan at the feeling, not willing to open my eyes. I'm exhausted .

In the best way possible.

My phone vibrates against my face again as I sink into my memories of last night that are even better because I can still feel the soreness and the way my limbs feel heavy. I groan in protest, barely needing to open my eyes to know that I'm alone.

But the disappointment I feel when I see Cassian isn't here is impossible to ignore. Even for me, and I like to think I'm an Olympic level pro at ignoring things and pretending they've never happened.

"Okay, okay," I grumble at the third insistent vibration against my cheek. I sit up, curling my knees under me and grab for my phone blindly.

My curtains are drawn back. It takes me a few moments to realize that's the reason my room feels so bright, and I gaze outside the large bay window thoughtfully. It certainly hadn't been me who opened them, though. I prefer it dark and cool in my room, no matter the time of day. "Why would you open my curtains?" I mumble, as if Cassian can still hear me.

As if he isn't long gone.

One more vibration from my phone has me looking down to where it rumbles against my palm. Blinking to clear my eyes I tap the glass screen, seeing a few messages from Lou and another, older one from a few hours ago.

From Cassian.

Except...I hadn't given him my number.

That question is answered the second I open his message, and I can't help but snort with a quick, incredulous roll of my eyes when I read over his words.

I put my number in your phone and called myself. So now I have your number, and you have mine. See you soon, sweetheart.

My stomach twists in an unfamiliar way while I read over the message a few times, as if I'll see something else in the words that I didn't read the first time. Like maybe I can read his thoughts or his mindset when he sent the text.

As I'm considering a reply, or if I should even send one, another message shows up on my screen, reminding me that Lou has been texting me for the past few minutes.

Hey, are you up?

I'm sorry. I know it's early and I hate to ask, but can you babysit tonight? Not all night, just until ten or so. I'm sorry it's so last minute.

Babysitting really hadn't been part of my weekend plans, and a frown twitches at my lips. But being a babysitter seems to be my career of choice lately, apart from questionably unskilled diner waitress at The Pancake Plate. Neither of them seem to

have any potential for advancement, unfortunately. Especially since I have zero interest in childcare or working a dead-end server job for the rest of my life.

If only I knew what I do want.

I've just sent off my reply, telling Lou I'll be there whenever she needs me, when a distant noise brings my head up so I can look out the window once more.

"Not again." My voice is low and hoarse. I sigh into the emptiness of my room as Doom hops up onto the bed, tail flicking back and forth as he purrs and creeps toward my lap. "Where's Gloom, huh?" I murmur, scratching his head. I don't look away from the window as the wailing gets louder, and once again I realize I'm about to be privy to at least two cop cars speeding down my street.

Biting my lip I wait, and sure enough two cars zip down the street, my heart twisting nervously, as if they'll stop here for some reason. Like they did the other night when Cass broke in. "Keep going," I plead softly, unable to look anywhere except out my window. "Please keep going."

The grip around my heart loosens somewhat when the cop cars don't stop outside of my house. I let out a breath even as they slow, turning onto a street adjacent to mine. From my view I can just see them stopping outside of a house a street over, though I have no idea who it belongs to. Not to mention, it's too far away for me to see more than the flash of lights and the stark white of a cop car between houses.

Predictably, and almost like clockwork, my phone rings. I glance down, seeing Reagan's name flash on the screen, and I can't exactly be surprised. Not when she lives about four streets over in the direction the police have stopped. If I can hear them, so can she.

"What the fuck is going on?" she asks as soon as I hit the button to answer my phone

and put it on speaker. “ This is insane. There’s no way that another murder happened, right?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, getting to my feet and going to sit on the bench at my window. Curling my legs under me as I do, my nose nearly pressed to the glass as I look around my street. I’m not surprised to see my neighbors across the street are already out on their porch, though when they realize that the action is on the other side of their house they head back in, probably to spy through the windows, much like I’m doing. “I don’t know who’s house that is either. Can you see anything?” Between us I figure we can set up some kind of sad little surveillance network. All we need is a third and fourth and we’d have a perfect square around the neighborhood for learning everyone’s business.

“ Not a thing. I saw an ambulance go by and I can sort of see where they’re stopped, but it’s too far away from my house. Plus, the Browns have their Halloween decorations up, so all I can see are cringey inflatables and shit. ” She sounds annoyed, and I’m nice enough not to remind her that as a child and teenager she’d loved their decorations and begged me to ask if they’d put them up early.

Sometimes I miss the kid that Reagan used to be. Even though the adult she is now is great and I’d consider her one of my best friends. Or rather, really my only friend in Hayden Fields, apart from my nephew and sister.

But saying I’m friends with a nine-year-old feels a little bit pathetic, and I’m pretty sure my sister is legally obligated to be my friend when she wants me to babysit for her.

“Maybe it’s something normal. Like a prank? I told you someone called the cops out to my house the other night, right? They said someone reported a disturbance or something. It totally had to be a prank.” My fingers drum lightly against the cold glass as I stare at the space between houses as though someone is going to part the

walls like Moses did with the red sea.

“ Yeah, you did tell me that. That was weird. But would there be an ambulance for a prank call like this? That seems, I don’t know, excessive if it’s just a disturbance call. ” But her voice waivers, and I can hear the uncertainty in her tone. Neither of us has any idea what could be going on.

But both of us are obviously thinking the same thing.

“ I’ll go investigate since you did the heavy lifting last time ,” Reagan says finally, breaking me out of my thoughts. She heaves a sigh, and I hear movement on her end of the phone like she’s throwing stuff around her perpetually messy room. She curses, and I hear a thud like something has fallen.

“You know if your room wasn’t a disaster zone you might not have to practice your obstacle course conquering skills first thing in the morning,” I can’t help but comment. Though I realize that I’m not going to see anything, I still get to my feet.

“ Bite me, Winnie. ” Her voice is sweet and full of sarcasm. “ Anyway, I know this is a bad time since I’m going on a recon mission and all. But I wanted to see if you’d go to Dark Acres with me next Friday.”

“Uh, sure. I’m surprised you waited so long to ask.” Honestly, I haven’t thought about the haunted cornfield and barns in a while. It’s only relevant when Halloween rolls around, and Reagan can be counted on to drag me out there at least once before the season is over and it’s back to being a normal farm for families and tourists to pick apples, pumpkins, and sit on straw bales for bumpy hayrides. “Friday I can totally do.”

“ If you and your mom are doing anything, though, let me know. I don’t mind rescheduling .” When I don’t reply, silence fills the line for a few tense moments. “

Winnie ?” Reagan sounds hesitant. “ Is everything okay? Did I say something wrong?”

“Mom is out of town until November,” I say flatly, grabbing a pair of soft sweatpants and a t-shirt from my drawer full of them. “So uh, no. We aren’t doing anything special. Or anything at all, actually. I guess I’ll feel blessed if she even remembers to call me this month.” Though sometimes I wonder if it’s less about her not remembering and more about her not caring.

One day, I’ll have to face up to the fact that my mom can barely look at me, and still blames me somewhat for what happened with her second husband.

One day, I’ll have to decide if I can live with those feelings she has towards me.

But this is definitely not that day, or that week. Probably not even that century, truth be told.

“ Oh, shit. That’s...I’m sorry, Winnie. Seriously, that sucks. You know you can spend a few days or weeks here. Or I can come there if you don’t want to be alone.” Her offer is genuine, and a smile touches my lips.

Dropping the phone on the bed, I strip out of the tank top and shorts I’d changed into sometime during the night. “It’s okay. I work a lot this month, anyway.” It’s not a lie, even though I took the weekend off to make it longer. Within seconds, I’m dressed in black sweatpants and a soft green t-shirt with a faded print of a barely recognizable cat. “Anyway, yeah. I’m excited about next Friday.” Excited is a strong word, but I realize I’m looking forward to Dark Acres now that she’s brought it up.

“ We’ll make a night of it. You know, get dinner beforehand. Maybe after we can watch a movie if it’s not too late ?” I hear her door close behind her and realize she must be outside.

“Yeah, definitely.” Absently, I wander back to my bay window and sit down on the bench, eyes fixed on the road in front of my house.

And the police car that’s pulled up alongside my driveway, blocking me in if I were to try to leave. My stomach twists and I stare down at the car, confused as hell. “What?” I realize I’ve missed whatever she’s said to me, due to being so focused and in my own head.

“I said I’m going to let you go. I’ve got to put on my best sleuth act. But I’ll text you later?”

“Yeah. I’m just going over to Lou’s tonight to babysit,” I reply absently. “Let me know what you find out.” She agrees before hanging up, and I set my phone in my lap just as the window of the police car rolls down, the tinted-glass revealing the person in the driver’s seat.

Detective Trudeau stares up at me, his mirrored sunglasses nowhere to be seen. He unerringly finds my face in my window, his expression flat and thoughtful. A few seconds stretch into a minute, and I feel myself getting restless and more than a little nervous.

Why the hell is he here?

Before I can do more than just stare, however, he rolls the window back up, never looking away from me as the black glass slowly obscures his face once more. It’s another second before the police car starts moving, and I blink as he turns to the right at the end of my street, heading in the direction of the other cops already at the house a block away.

But all I can think about is how uncomfortable he makes me feel, and I rub my arms to disperse the goosebumps that have me shivering in the cool air of my room.

Chapter

Fourteen

Convincing Lou to leave with Dan, who's standing silently at the door and waits for her to go through all of her worries about leaving for a few hours, takes about as long as I'd expected it to. But at last I'm able to close the door behind her with a groan while I sag against it.

"Is it true?" Scott's voice comes from the landing, and I glance up to see him leaning over the railing at the top of the stairs. Roscoe is chewing on a toy beside him, and I wonder if Lou has a bitch of a time with the dog whenever Scott isn't here. Bonded is an understatement for these two.

"Is what true? That your mom can worry anything to death?" I ask, locking the door instinctively behind me.

"That Lacey Clarke died that morning and it wasn't an accident. And that two other people have been murdered since then." He's not quite asking, and it makes me wonder just how much he knows about the situations. But I just watch him, trying to discern any clues about his motives from his expression alone.

It doesn't work.

He really does play it close to the vest when he wants to, and he definitely gets that from my sister.

“I probably know as much as you,” I admit. “Which isn’t much. You’ll be shocked to know that the police don’t keep me informed about their investigations or leads.” Giving him a quick, dry smile, I push away from the door and head for the kitchen. He follows me, thundering down the stairs with Roscoe at his heels. Once in the kitchen, I deftly open the sliding door, letting the Doberman shoot out into the yard happily.

When Scott doesn’t follow, I look at him, brows raised. “You don’t want to go out and patrol with him?” Normally he does, even if it’s just to follow Roscoe around the yard. But Scott shakes his head and stays inside with me.

“Hey.” I sink down on one of the stools sitting against the kitchen island and rest my chin on my palm. “What’s wrong? You can talk to me, Scott. I promise I’ll only judge you a little for whatever’s wrong.”

That gets a small smile out of him. The nine-year-old sits down at the stool beside me and focuses on a napkin he picks up to shred absently between his fingers. “People at school talk.” It’s hard to hear him when he’s mumbling, but I wait for him to go on. “They say stuff, like Lacey did something bad and...” He looks up at me shyly, then away.

“And?” I prompt, perplexed.

“And I heard the teachers talking when I was picking up construction paper for art yesterday. Mrs. Miller was telling Mrs. House something that happened a long time ago, I think.”

Suddenly I know where this is going, and I wish Lou was around to deal with it better than me. My stomach twists as Scott looks up at me guiltily, and it only cements my guess as to what he’s going to say.

“Something about you and a guy. Byers? I think that was his name. She said he killed someone. Stabbed someone, and that people are dying that way again. And she said you were there.” Scott’s words are rushed and uneven, making it seem like he feels guilty for saying them.

I tap my fingers on the counter and don’t answer right away. How can I when this is absolutely blindsiding me? Scott hearing my old third-grade teacher talk about Cassian murdering Carissa was definitely not on my bingo card for this week. Or ever.

But she always was a gossip. I’d realized that when I was in high school tutoring third graders for National Honor Society service hours. Mrs. Miller would take any chance she got to go call her friends or stand around talking about the parents of the kids I was tutoring to another teacher.

“Mrs. Miller likes to talk,” I answer at last. “Honestly? She likes to talk way too much. I’m not going to lie to you. You’ll hear it eventually if you live in this town long enough.” I can’t stop drumming my fingers on the countertop, and I stare out the window to watch Roscoe amusing himself outside. “When I was a kid, my babysitter’s brother killed her in front of me. He stabbed her. I don’t know why he killed her. But I don’t know anything about him, to be honest.” I figure if I get ahead of his questions, I can maintain the narrative that I’ve never spoken to Cassian again.

Which is maybe my biggest lie of the year.

“Oh.” Scott’s eyes are wide as he looks at me, studying me as if he thinks I might suddenly fall apart. “Okay.” There’s silence in the kitchen between us that’s broken only by Minxy pushing her dry food around her bowl unhappily. The fact that she’s so clearly pissed over being on a diet is pretty relatable, though, and I grin down at where I can see her long, bottlebrush tail. “I’m sorry, Winnie.”

“Hmm?” Out of all the things he could say, that’s certainly not the one I’m expecting. “Why are you sorry, Scott? You weren’t even alive.” I force myself to stop my tapping, though it’s harder than it should be not to have some anxious movement going on while we talk about this.

“I know it’s just...it must suck having everyone remember you for something like that. That’s all I mean.” He hesitates, but I can see the gears turning in his head. “Is that how your dad died? Did it have something to do with?—”

“No.” I don’t mean to interrupt him. I really don’t. But the word comes out before I can stop it, and I see him look away at my decisive tone that leaves no room for questions. Fuck , I hadn’t meant to sound upset. I sigh and get to my feet to let Roscoe in before he can start wailing for the ASPCA to come save him from such horrid conditions, such as being out in the yard for more than five minutes on his own. “No, Scott,” I say again. “That happened later. And I don’t want to talk about it.” I never want to talk about it, and most of my family is pretty happy to oblige me in that.

My mom is too guilt-filled and resentful to bring it up, though I’m never quite sure what the worst of her guilt is for; letting it happen, or the fact that some part of her still blames me. My money, quite frankly, is on the latter these days.

Lou has just never known what to say. Even now, she avoids the subject like a very contagious plague that can be spread simply by whispering of it.

“Mom’s never said anything to me about either of those things.” I close the door as Scott goes on, dreading the curiosity in his tone. “Does she know about them?”

“Yeah, bud, she knows. Now stop dredging up the past, will you? Do you want me to cry all over our burritos while we watch the next movie on your Halloween list?” He immediately brightens at the promise of food and movies, and I can see him forget

about his curiosity. At least for now. It's lucky that we're discussing food, because it's the easiest way to distract him from a topic I'd rather not deal with.

"Can we get queso too?" His excitement is almost literally visible as it bubbles off of him. "And if we get them from Taco Talk, they have a new flavor of slushie!" If there's one thing my nephew and I share, it's a love of greasy food that makes the person regret eating it about thirty minutes later.

"Uh, yeah. Queso and salsa," I agree. "What do you want to get this time?" We don't order from Taco Talk often. Especially when his mom is here. She doesn't exactly approve of their food, especially since it really doesn't agree with her.

Personally, I think she just holds a grudge because she can't chow down on cheap Mexican food like her son and me.

Scott takes my phone when I hand it to him, the menu pulled up for him to scroll through. "Umm...what are you getting?" he asks, distracted by his scrolling.

"Chicken and cheese burrito. Extra sour cream, no guac," I rattle off. "And a large queso to split with you, obviously. Tell me what kind of slushie I should get."

Scott smiles. "You should get Kiwi Melon. Who's Cassian?" The question throws me for a loop, and I cough, choking on my breath that's caught in my throat.

"What?" I demand, hacking up a lung while my nephew watches. What a way to go. Choking on surprise from my nephew switching the conversation from tacos to murderers.

"You just got a text from someone named Cassian. He asks how you're feeling after last night." My nephew gazes up at me, and I know in this instant that this is about to get worse. "What did you do last night, Winnie?" he asks, voice full of naive

curiosity as I stare at him in hidden horror. “Did you go somewhere?”

“Uh, no. I umm.” Fuck, I need to think of an excuse. Deftly I pluck my phone back from Scott’s hands, scrolling through the menu myself just in case I’m not going to get the same thing I get literally every time. “A friend came over. We watched movies and stayed up way too late.” I roll my eyes at him, hoping he takes it in the innocent kid way, and not in a way that’s going to get me murdered by his mom.

“Is Cassian your boyfriend?” I hadn’t thought this could get worse, but here Scott is proving me wrong while I place an order for burritos to be delivered.

“I don’t think so.” I don’t know why I’m hesitant to say it when that’s the truth. Cass is not my boyfriend. No matter what we’d done last night and how I’d felt after.

No matter how his words make me squirm in the best way possible.

My thoughts drift, and I find myself having to rein them back in as my brain tries to replay the events of last night.

“Do you want him to be your boyfriend?”

I let the question sit in the air while I finish placing the order and enter my payment information. After I’ve got the confirmation that tells me our food should be here in the next forty-five minutes, I turn off my phone and set it on the counter in front of me. “I don’t know,” I say with a sigh at last. “That’s my final answer, I think. I really don’t know.”

“Oh.” Scott seems to think about that before getting up and walking to the fridge with Roscoe trailing his every move. “Does he want to be your boyfriend?”

If only Scott knew that the person we’re talking about is the person who murdered his

sister in front of me. But he doesn't, and hopefully he never will. "I have no idea what he wants," I answer at last, fingers back to tapping out an incessant, nervous rhythm on the counter while Scott pours himself a glass of apple juice.

"Heave ho, bud," I murmur, picking up Scott from the sofa where he's passed out on Roscoe. He barely stirs, and only enough to turn and wrap his arms around my neck. We've done this before, after all. He knows the routine just as well as me. "You need anything before bed?"

My nephew shakes his head against my shoulder as I carry him up the stairs in a feat so great I could clearly be a pro weightlifter. Or a firefighter, if I wasn't terrified of running into a burning building. I manage not to trip on the stairs or Roscoe, and finally I get Scott in his bed. He falls like a sack of potatoes, and I'm grateful tonight he'd decided to change into his pajamas early, to settle in for a night of movie watching and slushies.

But alas, Scott had only made it through one movie and half of another instead of his proclaimed six movies before bed. "Good night, Scott," I murmur with a soft sigh. He doesn't answer, but I'm happy that he's out like a light. "Sleep well, Roscoe." I cup the Doberman's chin as he settles on Scott's legs and grin when he gives a soft woof.

Making my way downstairs means keeping an ear out for anything in the house, and I can't help feeling more on edge and ill at ease lately with the murders that have been happening in Hayden Fields. How can I not be uneasy, after all, when it's so close to home?

Literally close to home this morning when the cops had zoomed by and stopped just two streets over.

"You're fine, Winnie," I tell myself dryly. With a quick stop in the kitchen for Minxy and a bag of chocolate-covered raisins. When I'm back on the sofa with the cat curled

up on my lap and a mouthful of chocolate, I change the movie from something animated and kid-friendly to whatever spooky movie I find first. I've never been much of a horror movie watcher, exactly, but I won't say no.

Especially when it's clear this movie is from the eighties and really not that scary. Or well acted.

My phone ringing makes Minxy glare up at me, and I frown apologetically as I dig my phone out from under her. "You could move," I tell her, even as she does her best to spread out over more of my legs. For a Siamese she is pretty big, though Lou swears she's just big boned and she's not fat.

Even though we all know she's totally fat.

"Hello?" I answer before I even think to look at the number. It's probably Lou, and frankly I'm surprised she's waited so long to call. I'd expected it earlier, given what's happened in town.

"Winnie." The voice on the other end of the line is definitely not Lou's. I place it instantly, and my muscles tense.

"Most people start with 'hi', you know," I murmur to Cassian, eyes fixed on the television even though I'm not paying any attention to whatever is playing.

"Yeah, I suppose." He sounds amused more than anything. "You're babysitting your nephew." It isn't a question, and the words send a tingle up my spine.

"If you say shit like that, you sound like a stalker." My fingers stroke over Minxy's ears, and I can't help feeling like she's judging me for this conversation. But I just frown at her, making a face at the large cat.

“ I am a stalker. Your stalker, actually. Doesn’t that make you feel special?”

“It certainly makes me feel something.” I pause, unsure of what to say for a few moments. “Is everything okay?”

“ I just wanted to hear your voice. That’s all. I’d been hoping to see you tonight but...” He laughs dryly. “ I think maybe your nephew might not like it if he wakes up and I’m in his house. So we’ll take a raincheck. ”

God, he’s definitely watching me. I can’t help looking around the room, anxious, though all I see from the glow of the television is Lou’s pristine, empty house.

It seems like everywhere I go, I usually find an empty house. Whether it be Lou’s house when she’s out on a trip with Dan, Cass’s old house that I’d gone back to only once. Or my house, which has felt empty and full of ghosts at the same time since the moment my finger pulled the trigger on his gun.

“ Winnie?” Cassian’s voice drags me out of my thoughts. “ Are you okay?”

“I’m always okay.”

“ Well, you don’t always have to be.” The words are unexpected and soft. Sweet, in a way. For a murderer. “ Maybe you could be not okay for once, and let me help you.”

I have no idea what to say to that. “I...I always make sure I’m okay.” That’s the only thing that comes out of my mouth and my eyes stay fixed on the television while my insides twist with unfamiliar feelings and a strange kind of nervousness.

“ You should let me try it. See if I can make you feel okay as well. ” There’s a teasing note in his words, and I find I hang on every single one. God, either I’m desperate or just a problem.

Maybe both.

“ I’ll let you get back to your movie, Winnie. ” He doesn’t seem to mind that I haven’t been able to say a damn thing in the past thirty seconds. “ And maybe get better candy. Chocolate covered raisins? By choice?”

“Wait—” I look down at the box in my hand. “How do you know?—”

“ Good night, Winnie. Like I said...I just wanted to hear your voice tonight.” He doesn’t let me ask a question, or at least stumble to try to find the one I want an answer for. Instead he hangs up, leaving me with my phone to my ear and the cat glaring at me in judgment.

“Oh, yeah?” I set my phone on the end table and settle back against the armrest. “You try talking to him or telling him to leave or...literally anything. He’s difficult, okay?” And a murderer. But I don’t need to say that part out loud. Minxy resettles on my lap, stretching out over my stomach when I lay down on the couch, and it’s not long before the combination of an eighties slasher and her purrs put me to sleep.

Chapter

Fifteen

“Ever heard of Dayquil? Mucinex? Literally any decongestant on the market?” Reagan’s voice is dry as I sniffle, nose running and a little raw.

“Ever heard of empathy?” I mutter in reply, my voice sounding a little off because of my allergies. “And I took some shit before we left. It just takes a bit to kick in.”

“Maybe you should take more.” Reagan watches me, silently judging when I scrub my itchy nose on the sleeve of my hoodie.

I roll my eyes at her, feet crunching on the gravel as we head toward the trio of buildings in the dark. Manic Manor has been around as long as I can remember, though it’s grown from one haunt to four in the past ten years or so. “Warehouse and manor first?” I ask, guessing from our normal routine that we’re going to do the same thing as usual. “Then the forest?” We tend to skip the smaller house, which is more for kids than adults.

Reagan looks contemplative, tilting her head from one side to the other. She bites her lip, as if this really is some big decision she’s having to make, then says, “Why don’t we mix it up this year? Forest first. Then manor. Then slaughterhouse?” She raises her eyebrows at me in question.

“Sure.” It’s not like I have much of an opinion. We’re here to do all three, so as long as that happens, I’m just along for the ride. “Why the change this year? Normally you

like your routine even more than me.”

“I’m feeling frisky .” She puts a dramatic bounce in her step and I sniffle as I watch her, wishing I could breathe normally.

My eyes flick around the open courtyard, first toward the line to the ticket booth and then toward the hot chocolate stand. It’s cold tonight, colder than it has been lately, and I blame the weather for my snotty nose and congested sinuses. “Okay, frisky . Could you grab our tickets? I’m going to go blow my nose.”

If I don’t, I worry it’ll start dripping mid haunted forest, and I can’t think of anything more embarrassing than getting startled by a man in a mask with snot running down my face. Reagan agrees with a salute and I quickly walk toward the other side of the open yard to the hot chocolate stand. One of the girls looks up at me, and I hesitate, feeling suddenly guilty for just coming over here to swipe napkins.

“Just one, please?” I request, fishing around in my pockets for my wallet. “Extra marshmallows?”

“Two, actually.” The smooth, amused voice startles me just as a hand appears at my side, handing the girl a twenty. “And you can keep the change.”

I don’t need to turn to know who’s here. The girl stares up at Cassian, a small, nervous red tint in her cheeks as she meets his eyes. “Yeah. Umm. Absolutely. Did you want extra marshmallows too?”

“Sure.” I can feel Cassian’s body heat against me even as I grab a stack of napkins and stuff them into the pocket of my hoodie. I busy myself with being as unattractive as possible, my nose sounding like a goose’s call as I blow it into one of the napkins.

“Cute.” Cass gently pushes my hair behind my ear, his hand resting at the back of my

neck. “Is that your mating call?”

“Yeah. The boys are going to start flocking around me any moment now.” I look up at him so he can see the dramatic roll of my eyes. “Thank you.” Mama raised me to be polite, after all. And he did just buy me hot chocolate.

“Anytime.” His warm hand stays on my neck and I can’t find it in me to shove him away. How can I, when the warmth is welcome and he’s...

Well, that’s the problem, isn’t it? I struggle to make the right decisions when it comes to Cass.

“You’re nicer than you were when we were kids.” I don’t know where the words come from, but they prompt the blue-eyed man to look down at me, surprise evident on his face.

“Am I?” He blinks, like I’ve surprised him. “Are you sure?”

“Well, you haven’t, ya know.” I make a ridiculous stabbing motion with my hand that has Cass raising his brows and tilting his head to the side in disbelief. “Sorry, did you want the sound effect, too?” I make the back-and-forth knife motion again, this time adding a few creaky, congested squeaks along with it.

He snorts, shaking his head. I see him roll his eyes just as he murmurs, “You’re ridiculous, princess. And I’m not that nice.”

“You haven’t given me the look this year, either.” I can’t help but keep going, even when he throws a sidelong glance my way that looks a little less amused and a little more exasperated. “You know. It’s—” My grin widens when he turns to look at me fully. “Oh yes, there it is. That one, where you do that thing with your mouth.”

“Winnie.” Cass steps closer, my name a warning on his lips. I fight not to shiver even as I sniffle, my eyes on his. “I’m going to need you to knock it off. This place is a bit too crowded for me to give you the attention you’re asking for. And you look a little too pathetic for me to feel good about it.”

“What attention am I asking for, exactly?” God, I really just can’t help myself.

Cass’s eyes narrow and my breath catches in my throat when his lips part around the words I’m so excited and nervous to hear.

“Here you guys go!” The girl has the worst timing and pulls our attention off of each other. Cass steps toward her, a friendly smile on his face as he takes both cups.

“Thank you.” I take my cup from him and flash the girl a smile. “And thank you for the commitment to the extra marshmallows.” They’re piled onto my hot chocolate and melting into the liquid perfectly.

“Anytime! I hope you guys enjoy Manic Manor tonight!”

We walk away from her as I blow my nose again, closing my eyes at the burn in my nose. “So, did you come here with anyone?” I ask, not turning to look at Cass who’d fallen into step behind me. “The guy you brought to the diner?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Are you ignoring me?” I hadn’t thought he was actually mad at me, but his continued silence makes me rethink that. “Cassian—?” I turn with his name on my lips, only to find that he’s no longer behind me. In fact, as my eyes rove around the open yard, I realize he’s nowhere near at all.

“Okay then.” With a sigh, I bundle up my used tissues and toss them into an

overflowing trash can nearby. My feet take me back across the yard and it's easy to find Reagan standing out with her bright red hair and pink and black hoodie.

"I felt guilty," I tell her, showing her my cup. "Felt weird to just steal napkins, so I bought a hot chocolate, too." There's no need to tell her about Cassian. While she knows the story, she definitely doesn't know that he's back and has been giving me a lot more attention than I'd expected.

And he's making me feel incredibly conflicted this Halloween season. It's...strange.

"Who was the guy with you?" She hands me a ticket, then shoves the other in her pocket. "Did you know him?"

It only takes me a moment to decide I'm going to lie to her. "He's come to the diner a few times. We went to high school together, but he moved away pretty soon after." The lie rolls off my tongue smoothly, and Reagan barely glances at me. There's certainly no suspicion in her eyes, and I relax when I realize she's bought my story.

Though she has no reason not to.

Who in the world would believe that I'd voluntarily talk to Cassian Byers or let him get near me? It's much easier to tell her he's just a friend from when I was younger and leave it as that.

"I didn't think you talked to anyone from high school." Reagan snorts, gesturing for us to head to the line for the haunted forest part of Manic Manor. "Except me, because you could never abandon me."

"Because you'd never let me abandon you," I amend, blowing my nose again before taking a large mouthful of marshmallow and hot chocolate. Though, it's mostly marshmallow.

Reagan tips her head to the side thoughtfully. “Yeah,” she agrees. “I can agree with that. But come on, Winnie.” She slings an arm over my shoulders as we get closer to the front of the line. “You’re my best friend. No way I’d ever let you forget about me.”

“That sounds like a threat, you weirdo.” I shove at her arm, though I’m grinning when I meet her eyes.

“Oh, it’s such a threat. Where’s your ticket? Don’t tell me you’ve lost it already.” She glances up at the masked man holding his hand out for the tickets, and I dig in my pocket with a scowl.

“No, I didn’t lose it.” I hand it over to him and he scans it with his eyes and a small flashlight before handing it back to me. “I’m not that bad.”

“Uh, yeah. You really are.” Reagan is nearly vibrating with excitement as she drags me down the start of the trail, as screams echo through the trees in the distance.

It takes until we’re done with the trail for the decongestants to finally kick in. By now, my nose is sore as hell and I can’t breathe out of my right nostril, predictably, and I would sort of rather be at home under a blanket than out in the cold for another hour or so.

But I don’t want to ruin Reagan’s night. She’s extra chatty tonight and hangs onto my arm while we both giggle at the scares in the woods. Neither of us have ever been particularly afraid of haunted attractions like this, but they still make my heart race whenever someone catches me off guard.

“What’s the theme of the manor this year?” I ask, gazing up at the three-story, renovated farmhouse that’s way bigger than it needs to be. Beside it sits the large barn that’s been converted into a slaughterhouse, and I can hear the rev of a chainsaw

from inside.

Honestly, out of all the things here, the slaughterhouse is the only part that sometimes unnerves me. It takes a moment for me to realize Reagan hasn't replied as we fall into place at the back of the manor line. My brows furrow and I turn to her, surprised to see her looking conflicted with her teeth digging into her bottom lip hard enough to look painful.

"Reagan?" I nudge her as she slips her arm free of mine. "You good?"

She looks up at me, her face morphing into a smile. "I'm good," she says finally, then tugs on my sleeve lightly. "Hey, let's do the slaughterhouse first, yeah?" She gestures to the drastically shorter line than the one we're in. "I'm impatient."

"Whatever you want." I let her drag me to the other side of the path, and we catch a spot just behind a large group that filters into the slaughterhouse door in front of us, leaving us alone in the line. The man letting people in moves to stand in front of us, breathing heavily behind his white mask.

Shivering, I gaze up at him with an unimpressed tilt of my head...at least until the chainsaw revs from just inside the door and two girls from the group in front of us scream. I can't help but flinch, which drags a snicker out of Reagan at my side.

"They're going to have fun with you, aren't they? You're jumpy as hell," the large, broad man murmurs in a deep, rumbling voice.

"I'm not that bad," I argue. My teeth chatter from the falling temperature, and I wish I had another cup of hot chocolate to take into the slaughterhouse with me, if only to warm my hands and my insides. The man doesn't reply. He just watches me, and I jump when another actor brushes past me with a low hiss in my ear.

Reagan giggles at that, and latches onto my arm. “You are such a baby tonight.”

I have a reply on my tongue when the man’s walkie talkie goes off, and he steps to the side with a nod. “Looks like you’re the only two,” he murmurs. “Sucks for your jumpy friend.”

“Not jumpy,” I insist, even as Reagan tugs me to the entrance of the slaughterhouse in front of us. But it is a little eerie. I wouldn’t have minded being part of a larger group like normal, instead of only us two as we head through the doors into the dark room beyond.

I hear the rev of the chainsaw before I see it, and Reagan laughs at me once more when I stumble away from the man in a bloody apron who lunges toward us, weapon raised.

“Shit,” I hiss, grabbing her hand. “Maybe I really am a baby tonight.” Without meaning to, I speed up, my steps taking us away from the man who prowls at the entrance.

“Such a baby.” Reagan matches my steps, and she’s the one that drags me past the butcher who gets in my face with a rotating, circular saw as he talks about all the ways he could chop me up.

Maybe next year I’ll ask Reagan if we can skip the slaughterhouse. It really does scare me more than the other haunts here...or anywhere, really. And while that might be the point, I suppose, it also makes me feel constantly on edge.

Which is a feeling I don’t really enjoy, ever since existing this way twenty-four-seven as a kid with an abusive parent.

The thought puts me in a slightly poor mood, though I try not to let Reagan notice as

we wind down the hallways and past more rooms. When the slaughterhouse path opens up into a large, chilly area where bodies hang from hooks, I slow down to look around.

“This is new. Wasn’t this under renovation last year?” I ask Reagan, who disentangles herself from me to walk over and look at one of the dripping, bloody torsos.

“Damn. This is cool.” She reaches out to poke it, staining her fingers red. “And yeah. I guess this is what they were doing?” She turns to look at me, her face falling in surprise. Before I can answer, there’s a loud crash. A man slams through the room, naturally holding a chainsaw, and sends the fake bodies swinging erratically.

I stumble away, hitting one of the props and tripping over the uneven floor under me with a shocked yelp. My knees slam against the concrete, pulling a curse from my lips, and I move to sit back on my ass. “Fuck!” I groan. “Fuuuck that hurt.” My knees sting, and I’m sure I’m going to have at least one bruise, if not more.

“You okay?” The man sets the chainsaw on the floor and kneels down in front of me, mask pulled up to show a concerned, sweaty face. “I didn’t mean to make you fall.” He offers me a nervous smile, hand outstretched for me.

“No, it’s totally my bad.” Gratefully, I take his hand and lurch to my feet. Looking around, I search for Reagan, who I’m sure is laughing her ass off at me from nearby.

Except...she isn’t.

Thanking the man again, I walk through the room, dodging around prop bodies and ignoring the screaming actor covered in blood in the corner. “Reagan?” My voice carries in the space, and I step through the black tarps hung up in the doorway leading to the hall beyond. “Where the hell did you go?” It’s not like her to leave me and skip

ahead. Normally, she likes cackling at my reactions more than that.

Another actor prowls out in the hallway in front of me, and for a moment I think it's Reagan. At least, until I see the grinning red mask the person wears and the knife held in their hand.

"Yeah, sorry, friend," I murmur, distracted. "But I really don't have time to be threatened." Barely sparing them a glance, I walk down the hallway, moving to one side to pass the person as they stand in the middle of the walkway. "You're a little off theme, don't you think?" I ask absently.

The actor moves, and I jerk to the side just as they grab my wrist to yank me back into the hallway and out of my path toward the door. I spin around, eyes narrowed in frustration. "Can you not?" I demand. "Seriously, I'm looking for?—"

The knife flashes in the strobe light from above us, seeming to move in strange, quick movements between us. But I don't realize what's happening at first. At least, not until I feel pain bloom in my arm and a yelp of surprise has already escaped my mouth.

"You..." I look down at my arm outstretched between us and the blood welling up to the surface of my skin. "You're..." I look up and step back, my arm falling to my side when the person lets go. They tilt their head at me, running gloved fingers up the knife.

I'm frozen in place while blood trickles to the tips of my fingers and drips to the floor below. The person steps toward me, knife coming up seemingly in slow motion, and that's what snaps me out of my stupor.

I pivot on my foot and run, not knowing or caring where I'm going in the slaughterhouse as long as it's away from here.

Chapter

Sixteen

My quick footsteps seem to echo in the narrow, dim hallway of the slaughterhouse. When I look over my shoulder, I see the masked person following me, their fingers dragging along the wall as they run.

“Fuck,” I hiss, my heart pounding. I have nothing on me except my phone, and for some reason, I can’t find a single damn person on this end of the haunt.

On a second look around, however, I realize this must be the last part of the building still undergoing work. The walls are unfinished, with planks and sheets of lumber propped up against them or strewn across the floor. I trip over a two-by-four, stumble and hit my knees hard enough that a shockwave of pain shoots down to my feet. But I can’t exactly take the time to moan over it. Instead, I scramble to my feet, my bloody hand sliding against the floor, and carry on sprinting down the hallway while trying not to limp.

I scream. Over and over I scream, but realize pretty fast I won’t get anywhere with that. Not when my screams are just echoes fitting in with the chorus of shrieks from the other people walking through the haunt, and the scare actors’ yells as well.

Unless I can actually find someone, no one is going to know I’m back here and having a really rough time. On a lit table ahead, I see knives scattered in a pile and I stumble to a stop, reaching out and grabbing for the hilts. But they’re plastic, of course.

Everything here is fake except the knife that cut me.

Whirling around again, my chest heaving with desperate breaths, I scan the hallway I came from which led to this more open space.

“Can’t you just find someone else?” I snap when I see the hooded, masked figure prowling toward me. My words make them stop, and the person tilts their head at me once more, as if amused, while dragging the edge of the blade along the concrete wall. The ensuing noise makes my teeth ache, and I look around for anything that might not be fake.

Anything at all.

A new noise makes me look up, and as I watch, the masked stranger bends down to pick up a cord from the floor, twisting it between their gloved fingers. With slow, deliberate movements, they plug the cord into the wall, and immediately I have to close my eyes against the bright, flaring strobe light in my face.

I shriek and stumble back, covering my eyes in surprise and knocking over the table with the fake knives. But I know I can’t just not look at what’s happening. And I’m not about to let a fucking loser in a mask at a haunted house I only sometimes like stab me while my eyes are closed.

Forcing my eyes open, I look around the room, having to squint as the strobe lights blink and flare. “What do you want?!” I yell, turning in a circle to track any movement in the bright moments of light. “Why the hell are you chasing me in a haunted house with a?—”

I barely notice the person lunge at me from the shadows, and my words break off when I’m forced to lunge sideways to get out of their way. I fall into the overturned table, yelping as pain sears up my thigh. But when I push myself up, or try to, I

realize that both of my hands are now slick with something that looks black in the strobing white lights.

More blood.

My stomach turns and I look around again, forcing myself to keep my eyes open even as the lights blink in a way that's already pushing me into a headache. From the corner of my eye, I see the masked stranger against one wall, standing still even though in the strobe lights they appear to be constantly moving. But I don't turn to face them. Not yet. Instead, I carefully search the walls, until I see the door I glimpsed when I came in here.

After all, the only other way out is the hallway, and I'd have to make it past the lights and the person with the knife for that.

I bolt, mentally crossing my fingers as I reach out for the door and yank on the handle. Expecting it to be locked, I let out a yelp of relieved surprise when it swings open and allows me to stumble out onto the ground behind the Slaughterhouse.

This area is apparently going to become something as well. Or it's just the dumping ground for renovation equipment, I suppose. Either way, it doesn't exactly matter as I search the surrounding area with the flashing light of the strobes inside, the sound of screams echoing in my ears.

Just as I hear footsteps behind me, my eyes find a pile of haphazard construction equipment. On another night, I would scoff and make a comment about unsafe storage practices of power tools. But this time, I'm thankful for their lackadaisical attitude toward things.

My hands are still slick with blood as I shove a piece of plywood away from the table. As my heart pounds so hard in my throat it might choke me, I look for anything

that will be a suitable weapon for a knife.

Too bad I don't know where the outlets are out here, I think almost ruefully as I shove a circular saw to the side. If I could plug it in, I'd feel a little better than I currently do. But finally I settle on a hammer, gripping it in my right hand.

I whirl around to face the door where the person had been heading a few seconds ago, only to meet the sight of the empty, strobe-lit doorframe. The lights, even this far away, push and prod at my headache, making me groan and press my left hand to my temple as if I can somehow convince it to stop hurting by sheer will alone.

But I back up in spite of the pain, until my shoulder hits the wall and I can stare at the only exit from the building on this side of the haunt.

It remains empty. As if there was never anyone coming through it, though the blood on my hands is proof that I'm probably not going insane.

My hands throb as I grip the hammer, and my thigh aches as if competing with the pain building in my head. I want to move, to find my phone and call for help or at least try to make it back to the other side of the building to reunite with Reagan.

But I'm too afraid to turn my back on the open doorway.

Suddenly footsteps crunch in the grass around the corner of the building, and my stomach twists, brain screaming that I'm about to get blindsided and feel the cut of the knife on somewhere probably a lot worse than my hand or arm. In an instant, I whirl around the corner, hand with the hammer raised as I search for the knife I know the person is holding.

"Whoa, whoa. " Fingers catch my wrist deftly, stopping me before I can swing.
"Winnie?"

With spots still dancing in my vision, Cassian's face is a mix of blue eyes and black, winking spots that seem fuzzy in my eyes.

"Cassian?!" I gasp, stumbling into him. "Where's—Did you see?—"

"Holy shit, Winnie." His voice is softer, less panicked than mine, and takes the hammer from me while surveying his now-bloody fingers. "What the hell are you doing? Is this— Are you bleeding?"

I don't answer right away. I turn again, looking back at the open door as my muscles tremble in the hope of relief.

"Winnie?" Cass grips my wrist, tugging me away from the door and closer to his warmth and the safety of just him. "Winnie, you need to tell me what's going on."

"There was a person in the slaughterhouse," I breathe. "I was looking for Reagan, and I—" My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I ignore it. "I thought they were just some actor." Blinking to clear the spots from my vision, I try to take a step and stumble, suddenly lightheaded.

"Whoa, hey." Cassian catches me effortlessly. "Okay. You're not making much sense and I really think this is your blood. Fuck." He moves, and without warning picks me up to throw me over his shoulder, making me yelp.

"What are you doing?" I demand, head spinning painfully as the ground is suddenly where the sky should be.

"Helping."

"This doesn't feel like helping."

“Then close your pretty eyes, Winnie, because that’s what I’m doing.” He doesn’t stop, even as my phone vibrates yet again in the pocket of my denim shorts. It’s suddenly colder out here than I remember it being when we went into the slaughterhouse, and Cassian feels like a furnace under me, his arm like a warm steel band locked around my thighs.

“Aren’t you supposed to carry me like, in your arms?” I ask, only half paying attention to my own words. It’s hard to get a bearing on my surroundings, and I can’t find the door to stare at it, as if my gaze alone can keep the knife-wielding stranger at bay.

“You mean bridal style?” His steps change, crunching on gravel instead of rustling through glass. “You want me to carry you bridal style, princess?”

“Well, it would certainly be preferable to hanging upside down like a sack of potatoes,” I can’t help muttering.

“A very pretty sack of potatoes. Tell you what. When I’m sure you aren’t going to puke on me, I’m willing to open up negotiations on how I carry you. Until then—” Without warning, he leans over and pulls me off his shoulder, until I slide to my feet on loose gravel. Without his arm around me I would’ve fallen, and I curl bloody fingers into his shirt.

“Until then, my lovely sack of potatoes, I decide how we travel.” With his eyes still firmly on mine, he yanks open the passenger door of a dark colored, sleek car and gently pushes me onto the seat.

“What are you doing?” The question is probably dumb, but I’m blaming it on having a hard night.

Cass grins, his blue eyes meeting mine. “Kidnapping you,” he answers sweetly, and

closes the door on me before I can say another word.

Chapter

Seventeen

For the first few minutes of the ride, I'm too busy looking at the cuts on my hand and arm to see where we're going. Neither of them is deep, and the bleeding has completely stopped. Now I just look like a murderer, with sticky, drying blood smeared across my hands and forearms.

"Damn, I liked this hoodie," I grumble, gesturing at the ruined fabric that's marred with drying blood as well. "I'm holding a funeral for it, and I demand you attend." With my heart still racing and my hands shaking, it's all I can do to wrap them in the napkins I stole from the hot chocolate stand.

"I'll find you one you like better," Cass murmurs from the driver's seat, eyes fixed on the road.

"To soothe my wounded heart, can we stop by the coffee place near my house so I can get a latte? A large latte?" I ask, attention on my hands as I finish wrapping the cut that had nicked my wrist. "Also, can we talk about how much my hands have gone through this October?"

His answer is a noncommittal hum. Something about it draws my attention and my suspicions.

Glancing up at him, I study his nonchalance for a few seconds, and it cements my worries that he's hiding something from me. The hair on the back of my neck

prickles, and when he still doesn't speak, I look out the window to see just how close to my house we are, and which way he's taking us.

But when we pass the only gas station in town with a red sign and rusted-over pumps, it hits me.

"You're not taking me home," I accuse, fear tingling up my spine.

"You sure about that?" There's something like amusement in his voice, and he eyes me sidelong, surveying my face as I look at him in confusion.

"Are you..." I'm not afraid of Cassian. Definitely not scared enough of him to jump out of a moving car or anything so dramatic. I value my unbroken bones way too much.

"Am I..." He rolls to a stop at the one intersection on this side of town and turns to look at me, eyebrows raised with interest and maybe a little bit of mockery. "Am I what, Winnie?" God, I could learn to hate that tone of voice. And the goading look in his bright blue eyes.

"Are you taking me to get coffee from the fancy place? It might be closed by now." My phone vibrates and I pull it out of my pocket, wincing when I bend my sore hand. My heart still flutters, and as if he knows that's not the real question I want to ask, he scoffs before accelerating again.

Even as my eyes land on the missed texts and calls from Reagan, I don't really see them. I'm not really reading them. The car's engine seems to purr too-loudly in my ears, and it's hard to focus on anything else.

"I'm kidnapping you, Winnie." Cass reaches out, his fingers hovering near my hair. I can almost feel the warmth from his skin, but I still don't look up. "That's what you

should've asked me. If you had, I would've told you the truth." He brushes my hair behind my ear and I still sit there, stiff as a board and still unable to really see the messages on my phone.

"I'm kidnapping you because apparently, I can't trust you not to get attacked by some stranger in a haunted house taking things too seriously." His fingers flex on the steering wheel and he places his other hand back on it in a perfect ten-and-two grip.

"And that's my fault?" My brows jerk upward and I stare at him, incredulous. "How is it my fault ?!"

"Because you are apparently just so murder worthy," he replies sweetly. "So I'm kidnapping you. To Akron. Until I come up with a plan to keep my pretty sack of potatoes unbruised and unmashed."

All I can do is stare at him, unable to even be mad when I'm so mortified at his pun. "That was dreadful." My tone is flat and lacking anything other than disbelief. "I'm embarrassed for you. So fucking corny, dude."

He chuckles, flashing me a sweet, puppy-like grin that almost makes my heart melt. "I live in Akron."

Surprise ripples through me. "Akron?" I repeat, my voice softer than I mean it to be. "I thought...well I guess I just assumed that you'd moved way further away than that after...you know."

"After the psych ward? Well, you didn't move at all, so at least I did better than you, Winnie." The words, the casualness of discussing that time in our lives is so unexpected.

So fucking refreshing.

There are a million questions on my tongue about him and his life. About his family, about how people respond when they tell them about the psych ward. If he tells them. But all the questions die on my tongue at the expectation of what the answers might be and how they might not be what I want to hear.

At least not yet.

“Akron, huh?” I murmur, tracing my fingers over my palms. I turn my phone over in my hands, finally forcing myself to open Reagan’s messages while avoiding her frantic voicemails.

I’m fine , I type to her, then hesitate. She definitely deserves better than that. I’d be a shitty friend if that’s all I gave her after what happened.

I’m okay. I got a little hurt in the haunted house. A friend picked me up. I couldn’t find you and I was freaking out a little. That sounds...better. I think. It’s a little better than the first message, anyway.

Reagan’s response is, of course, much longer and more detailed. But my head aches too much for me to read it more than once and I sit in the passenger seat, not knowing exactly how to respond or even if I want to.

“Hey.” Cass’s hand covers the phone, and he tugs it out of my grip before depositing it into a cup holder. “You can talk to her later. We’ve got another thirty minutes or so to my apartment.” His hand comes up, fingers tracing my jaw, before he gently but firmly shoves me back to relax in my seat. “So zone out. Take a nap. She can wait, princess.”

“You don’t know her.” I sigh, but I don’t resist. Especially not when he hits a button and the seat starts warming up under me. “She doesn’t like to wait.”

“Well, maybe she should learn some patience. Now at least close your eyes for me, Winnie. And pretend you’re asleep while I try to remember if I cleaned up all my dirty dishes and laundry.”

Pretending to be asleep lasts all of three minutes, give or take sixty seconds. After what feels like ages, I open my eyes, shifting in the passenger seat as my hand and arm throb. “I’d thank you if you weren’t kidnapping me,” I mutter with a sigh, staring out the window as street lights zoom by on the edges of the empty highway. I’m not exactly sure what road we’re on, and my stomach twists itself into a French knot at the idea of being not only alone with Cassian but also at his apartment, at his mercy.

He could do whatever he wanted to me, and there would be no one around to help me. Not to mention, I don’t know many parts of Akron very well, so running away from him if things go bad wouldn’t exactly be the easiest thing to do.

“I don’t need you to thank me. Besides, it wouldn’t be sincere,” Cassian replies. From the corner of my eye, I watch his hands shift on the steering wheel, until finally he reaches out with the one closest to me and curls his fingers over my thigh.

It’s like he needs to make sure I’m actually here, actually with him, and not going to fade away into nothing. But I know I’m probably romanticizing it in my head, and making more of this than it ever could be.

Because obsession can’t be love.

Right ?

Absently, I lift my hand, ignoring the blood on my fingers, and I spread my fingers to mimic his own, pressing down lightly against his warmth. “Good. But if you are looking for gratitude, coffee would get you there real quick.” Turning in my seat, I grin at him mockingly, and he barely glances my way before rolling his eyes.

“You’re such a problem. I was going to wait to ask what happened until we got back to my place, but if you won’t do me the favor of pretending to be asleep, you could tell me what happened?” Cassian suggests. His hand turns over on my leg, and before I can lift mine, he curls his fingers around my own, holding me in place.

But I don’t reply. Not at first, since I’m too busy looking at our interlocked hands on my thigh to think about what to say to him. I wiggle my fingers and his grip doesn’t loosen. Not that I’m really trying to get away from him; I’m just...testing, I suppose.

Myself more than him.

“The slaughterhouse portion of Manic Manor has never been my favorite.” I can hear the tiredness in my voice, and I realize the adrenaline has mostly drained out of me, leaving me feeling sleepy and a little sore. Which, admittedly, is probably because I do my best not to run if I can help it. My poor legs aren’t used to being asked for so much in such a short period of time.

“Reagan and I were the only ones, since the line was empty other than us. We got lucky. Unlucky?” I snort. “Then I got knocked down by a prop, but she went ahead. I don’t blame her. Butchers and fake hanging bodies? It was pretty realistic. Literally the moment I left the room, this guy was in the hall. I thought he was another scare actor, you know? Seeing a masked man with a knife in a haunted house isn’t exactly a red flag.” I scoff at my own words, a frown twitching at my lips as I study Cassian’s fingers.

“Don’t you mind that I’m getting blood on you?” I can’t help but ask, and when I glance at him, I see that he’s giving me that look which says more than his words ever could. “Okay, sorry. You don’t need to call me stupid with your eyes, Cassian.” I wiggle my fingers against his in admonishment for all the good it does.

“Anyway, he cut me, and I realized real quick he wasn’t part of the haunted house.

Long story short, I took off and the guy chased me, then I ran into you.” At this point, I really could fall asleep. At least for a little while. I sink back into the seat, pressing my cheek against the cool window and blinking to keep my eyes from drifting closed.

“Did you recognize him? Anything about him? And are you sure it was a guy?” There’s no accusation in Cass’s words, just curiosity. Hell, he’s being calmer about this than anyone else I know ever could be. Honestly, I prefer it. This feels a lot more productive than panicking in a bad situation.

“I’m just assuming it was a guy. Since, you know, men .” I snort, feeling my eyes getting heavier. I’m only keeping them open to spite Cassian, to prove I don’t need to take a nap. “But no, I didn’t recognize anything. It was dark. They were dressed in black with a mask. I don’t know...” I roll my shoulders in a shrug. “I don’t know.”

His fingers twitch against mine, but his hand settles a second later as he releases a long, slow exhale. “That’s okay, princess,” he promises. “We’ll figure it out later. That adrenaline finally wear off?” Amusement colors his tone. “I figured it would. Why don’t you go to sleep?”

“Don’t want to,” I reply quietly. “That means you win.”

“Then let me win this time.” His voice is a low, almost purr that makes me shiver and remember all the ways he’d touched me not so long ago. Fuck , I will never get that night out of my head, no matter how long goes by.

“I’ll consider it.” As per usual, I strive to have the last word. And this time I consider it a success, since I’m dozing off with my face pressed to the window before I hear if he replies to me or not.

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Chapter

Eighteen

When I wake up, it's not with my face pressed to the glass of the passenger seat window. There are no street lights behind my eyelids, and I can't hear the low purr of Cass's car around me.

Instead, my face is pressed against something soft, and there's a warm, comforting weight on my arm, wrapping over me almost possessively. It's...strange. But not bad, exactly. But I can't place the feeling until fingers stroke my hair back behind my ear.

"Cassian?" I mumble, eyes still closed as I stretch my legs out, shoes hitting what feels like the armrest of a sofa.

"Yeah?"

"What, and I mean this as disrespectfully as possible, the hell are you doing?"

His fingers trace my jaw, and he doesn't stop or pull away. Instead, he chuckles softly, shifting under me. "You don't remember me waking you up, do you?"

"In the car?"

"Yep."

I scan over my recent memories, trying to fill in the gaps between falling asleep in his passenger seat and now. But I can't, no matter how hard I try. "I...no," I admit finally, opening my eyes and rolling over to look up.

When I see his piercing blue eyes above me in the dimness of the room, it finally hits me that my head is on his lap. His hand moves with me, resettling across my collarbones like he doesn't want to let me go. "I woke you up and I brought you inside. We cleaned up your cuts." He picks up my arm, showing me the fresh bandages. "They aren't that bad, by the way. Your head was hurting, so I gave you something for it."

My eyes narrow suspiciously. "I swear to God, Cass. It better have been Ibuprofen."

"Does Ibuprofen knock you out for three or so hours?" Cass asks blithely, unbothered by the warning in my tone. "Come on. We both know it wasn't. You're fine. You needed sleep."

I suppose he's not wrong, and my head definitely doesn't hurt right now. I feel a little floaty, honestly. Like I'm not quite all the way here. With a groan, I shove his arm off of me, sitting up and pressing a hand over my eyes when my head spins from the quick movement. When it stops, I glance at the bandages on my arms, rubbing the pads of my fingers over them. "I need to go soon," I say at last.

Cass suspiciously doesn't reply. Normally, his silence would be expected; he's not the most talkative person in the world. But this time it seems...different. I turn to look at him over my shoulder, surveying his still-relaxed posture and the way he looks at his phone as he scrolls through notifications. No, it's too casual. Too easy.

Too innocent, even.

"Did you hear me?" The words hang between us, stagnating in the air of his

apartment. He doesn't reply at first, but I see the muscles in his jaw working like he's pissed for some reason, or trying to work through his first reaction without saying anything out loud.

A pang of nervousness twists through my stomach. His reaction doesn't feel right, that's for sure.

"I heard you," he murmurs finally, barely glancing up at me. But that's all he says.

What is wrong with him?

"I really appreciate the kidnapping to get me out of a bad situation, and this." I gesture at my arms. "It's umm..." He never makes me this nervous. Not since...well. Not since back then. "But I need to go home and?—"

"Back to your empty house and the cats that have plenty of food and water for a couple of days?" Carefully, Cass sets his phone on the table beside the sofa and gets to his feet to meander toward the other part of the large, open space. "Back to your sister, who has you babysit on your days off and doesn't give you a lot of credit or repayment for it?" He flips on a light, illuminating his kitchen and the large granite island that serves as a table and counter. Cassian leans back on his elbows, looking me over with cold blue eyes.

"Or back to your mom, who's trying to forget you exist?"

That's what does it. His words, true as they are, shatter my calm and I lunge to my feet, feeling around for my phone in my pockets. "I hate you," I hiss, heart racing. "I don't know why you're mad at me, but I hate you."

"Why?" he asks lazily, watching my frantic self pat down. "For saying what you already know is true?"

“Yeah. That.” Giving up, I look at him with narrowed eyes. “Where’s my phone? I’m calling an Uber, since you’re being so fucking weird about this. And a dick, in case you needed the clarification.”

Cassian doesn’t reply. He tilts his head to the side, still giving me that strange, almost predatory look. “Tell me, Winnie. When does the kidnapper ever let their victim leave just because she asks not-so-nicely?”

His words send a shiver up my spine. I turn to face him fully, surveying his relaxed posture and the neutral, careful look on his face. “This isn’t...” My brows furrow in confusion. “You didn’t kidnap me. That was a joke . You were helping me after?—”

“Sure, I’m definitely helping you,” Cassian agrees, cutting me off. “But I wasn’t joking about it. Someone is trying to hurt you, and you have a detective who’s really interested in things he shouldn’t be following you around. How long was I supposed to wait, hmm?” He pushes off of the counter and prowls toward me, until he can reach out and wrap his fingers lightly around the base of my throat.

I hold my breath, eyes holding his as I take a deep breath. Then another one. “Where’s my phone, Cass?” I murmur, not pulling away from him, no matter how nervous I am. My nails dig into my palms at my sides as I hold myself still.

“I’ll give it back to you when I feel like it. You should sleep more, you know?” His hand shifts, moving up so he can push my hair behind my ear and cup my jaw. “You look exhausted.”

“I always look exhausted. Don’t change the subject.” Reaching up, I swat his hand away from my face. “I’m not your victim. I never was. Don’t make me do something that one of us will probably regret.”

“Like what? Tell me you hate me? Or will you ransack my apartment looking for—”

I bolt around him, heading for the kitchen and the block of knives I see by the stove. Cass makes a sound of surprise and whirls, his arm looping around my waist before he jerks me back with a surprised laugh. “Really?” he asks, incredulous. “You’re going to stab me , sweetheart?”

“What, you think I wouldn’t?” I hiss, writhing in his grip. Fuck, he’s stronger than he should be. It’s too easy for him to drag me through his living room, and he pushes open one of the closed doors behind the sofa before shoving me into what I realize is a bedroom. If I weren’t so anxious and frustrated, I’d take a moment to appreciate the sloped ceiling made of glass that opens to the sky above Akron. I’d also appreciate the dark blue-grays of the comforter, rug and comforter.

Hell, I might even express my surprise at the live plants he has on one wall.

But not when I’m this worked up.

“No,” Cass admits with a laugh, closing the door behind him. “I think you’d do it, but I think you’d regret it...eventually. But you’re more than welcome to try to convince me in here, without knives, to let you go.”

When he tries to move away from the door, I’m quick to tangle my fingers in his t-shirt and shove him right back into it. I feel the way he tenses, then relaxes enough to let me do it. That infuriates me more; knowing he’s giving me the advantage instead of me earning it.

“Fight back,” I hiss, unsure why I say it.

His eyes narrow slightly, seeming to darken under his lashes as he looks me over. The only light in the room is what’s coming from outside, from the glow of the city lights somewhere below his apartment. “That’s dangerous of you, sweetheart. You don’t want me to?—”

“Don’t tell me what I want.” I jerk him off the wall, only to shove him back into it as my heart races. I don’t know why I do it, and I certainly don’t know why I sneer in his face with my heart racing in my chest. “If you’re just going to let me slam you into your door and stand here like a kicked puppy, you should’ve let me grab a knife?—”

I get my wish, even though it takes me a few moments to register what’s happening. Cassian spins us around easily, reversing our position, and shoves me onto my tiptoes with his hand around my throat. I gasp, hands flying up to his arm as panic surges through me, but his knee shoves between my thighs, giving me a way to steady myself so he’s not actually strangling me.

“Keep going,” Cass invites, a warning glittering in his eyes. “Keep pushing me, Winnie. Just keep being aggressive and wanting the last word. Keep going down this road and see where it gets you .”

This time, a full shudder travels through my body, and I close my eyes hard at his words, finding it hard to swallow under his firm grip. “What if I do?” I ask finally, my anxiety warring with my desire to push him. “Would you hurt me?”

The intensity in his gaze falters briefly, and something like a surprised grimace twitches at his lips. “Not like you’re implying,” he tells me finally, relaxing his grip just a little. “But I’ll certainly teach you a lesson about your mouth , since you’ve clearly not been taught it before.”

My stomach twists with something other than fear, and with a shock I realize that while I’m still angry and nervous as hell, I’m not actually afraid of Cass.

Without replying, I dig my nails into his wrist, bracing my right foot on the floor as much as I can before kicking out at him with my left. “Oh, really?” He grabs my leg, gripping under my knee and yanking it up until I yelp and scramble for balance.

“Don’t look at me like that. You’re the one who decided to kick. Why don’t you settle the fuck down, sweetheart, and maybe we can have an adult conversation instead of you acting like a toddler who isn’t getting her way?—”

“Fuck you,” I sneer. “If you won’t give me back my phone, I’ll take yours. Even if that means—” He whirls us around with a sigh, shoving me face first onto his bed.

“What does that mean, hmm?” he asks, prowling around the bed. He digs into his pocket and pulls out his phone while I watch, laying it on a shelf between two plants. “What are you going to do to me, Winnie?” There’s a challenge in his eyes that makes my blood heat in my veins, and I sit back on my knees, panting, before scrambling to my feet.

“I’ll make you sorry you asked,” I snap. Though, that’s a vague way of admitting I’m not exactly sure how I’ll either locate my phone or steal his. But the more I think about it, the more I realize going home is no longer my top priority for the situation. No, I want to prove him wrong. I want the last word, like always, and to prove that Cassian doesn’t get to make decisions for me or boss me around like he’s more than a stranger to me.

But something in me whispers that maybe, just maybe, that’s not all I really want.

“Come on then, princess. Make me sorry,” Cass taunts, lifting up a hand in a literal invitation. “Make me feel remorse for the first time in my life, won’t you?”

That brings me up short and I look at him, brows furrowed in slight surprise. “You don’t feel?—”

“Later.” He rolls his eyes. “Don’t ruin our game with feelings.” His words make me pause, and I can’t help studying his expression, even when he glares at me with irritation.

“Okay, all right. Don’t get your panties in a wad.” I hold my hands up, fingers splayed in surrender. “I get it, I so get it. You missed me so much that you stole my phone so we’d spend quality time together. Since you figured that’s the only way to make me stick around.” I glance at his phone on the shelf as he stares at me, leaning on the wall beside it.

It’s an invitation.

It’s a fucking challenge.

“I think if I can grab your phone off that shelf, you should give me back mine and pay for my ride home,” I announce, the bed between us as I prop my hands on my hips.

“Oh, yeah?” He glances at his phone, then at me. “All right, but if you get something for winning, I get something for you losing. When you can’t get my phone from the shelf, which I won’t touch, by the way, I get to teach you a lesson. I get to teach you the consequences of running that pretty, snotty mouth of yours. Fair?”

It...doesn’t sound fair. Not one bit. My stomach twists into origami shapes and untwists rapidly, leaving me feeling a little nauseous in an anxious, expectant way. “You don’t think I can get it,” I accuse, striding a few steps closer to him.

He rolls his shoulders in a shrug. “I think you’re incredibly confident, and more than a little arrogant. Tell you what.” He still doesn’t move, doesn’t even tense as I take another two steps closer. “Quit whining about wanting to go home, sweetheart. Stop trying to get my phone, and we’ll go back to the couch to watch your favorite movie. We’ll order something incredibly unhealthy and greasy, and you can sleep off all of this. I’ll take you back home...eventually.”

“Oh, wow.” I drag out the word theatrically. “Gosh, that’s such a nice offer. Really

generous. Do you know what I think, though?”

“What do you think?” he asks, voice weary, as if my attitude is tiring him out. I’d feel bad, maybe, if I didn’t see the gleam of excitement in the icy blue of his gaze.

In response, I smile sweetly at him...and launch the pillow my fingers are touching into his face. He jerks away from it, hands up to block it from hitting his face, just as I slide by him in the space between him and the bed. I duck when he reaches for me, hearing the low curses that fall from his lips as a thrill of satisfaction goes through me.

He’s too easy sometimes?—

His grip on my wrist is enough to pull a startled yelp from my mouth just as I’m reaching out for his phone. I feel a shiver of fear go through me just as he uses the momentum of me staggering back to force me to keep going until I’m once again on my hands and knees on his bed.

But I don’t intend to give up so easily. Instead, I surge upward, pushing to my feet...or, well, that’s my goal at least. Before I can make much progress, he’s suddenly over me, a snarled chuckle in my ear as he keeps me on the bed with his own frame. “A pillow?” Cass growls in my ear as I pant. “You threw my fucking pillow at me?”

“You clearly needed to be humbled if this is your reaction to a pillow in your face,” I huff, bending my elbows enough that I can slam upward into him in an attempt to get him to fall backward off of me. Instead, I end up flush against his body with his arm wrapped around my waist.

“If someone needs to be humbled here, little girl, it is most definitely you. And luckily for both of us, I’ve been wanting to do it since you opened your mouth when I

bought you hot chocolate. You know what else I think?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going to—” He cuts me off by flipping me over, my back hitting the bed just as he crawls over me to straddle my hips, one hand at my throat as he surveys me coldly.

“I think you didn’t hear no enough as a child. Being on your own and making your own decisions has made you a little arrogant, hasn’t it? Your nephew would do anything you say because he looks up to you. Reagan would never disagree with you because she’s in love with you. So you get away with all kinds of bullshit.”

“Do not,” I disagree instantly. “And Reagan isn’t in love with me, you weirdo.”

Cass only fixes me with a pointed look. “Such a bratty little thing,” he goes on. “You’ve been begging me since the night I broke into your house to put you in your place.”

“Oh, I think we’ve tried this before, Cass,” I’m quick to sneer. “My fucking place ?—”

“Is wherever I want you.” His fingers tighten, cutting off my air. “Maybe no one else has the patience or the desire to deal with a brat who always wants to have the last word, but I certainly do. Frankly, I’ve been trying to figure out how to get you here for days. I didn’t want to do it at your house that first time. I wanted to be nice to you.” He leans down slowly until his face is just inches above mine. “I didn’t want to scare you. But when you’re begging for it like this? When you’re all but demanding I give you what you need?” He chuckles and moves until his lips are brushing my ear.

“How could I ever refuse?” Cass nips at my ear, pulling a yelp from my lips. I move to grab his shirt, but suddenly my hands are slammed above my head on the mattress, accompanied by a soft snarl from him. “Keep them there, Winnie,” he murmurs.

“Can you do that for me?”

His gaze finds mine as my fingers curl against my palms, a refusal on my lips. But something in his eyes—something strange and a little bit terrifying—causes the words to die on my lips. A shudder goes through me, and I narrow my eyes at him before nodding once.

“Well, I don’t believe you. But it’s a good start.” He chuckles. Letting go, Cass quickly drags my shirt and bra over my head, leaving me squirming and vulnerable on the bed. “You’re adorable when you’re nervous.” His hands find my leggings and he watches my face as he moves to tug them and my underwear down my legs until he can pull them off as well.

“This time you have to take yours off too,” I murmur, narrowing my eyes up at him. It’s so hard not to do anything with my hands when I feel so exposed under his gaze, and I can’t help wiggling against the bed to try to work out some of the nervousness.

“I’ll consider it.” Smoothing his palms up my thighs, he lets out a soft breath of approval. “Fuck, you’re so much more beautiful than I ever could’ve imagined.”

“You make it sound like it’s something you have imagined,” I comment absently, just to talk back.

“I have.” He says it so simply, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “I’ve imagined you in so many different ways and how I’d take you over and over again.” He leans down to brush his lips against my throat. “And yet the real thing is so much better than any fantasy I could come up with.” His hands tighten on my hips and he moves, urging me to sit up as he gets to his feet beside the bed.

There’s a question on my tongue, but his grin cuts me off before I can even start. “I’m going to show you something better to do with that mouth of yours,” he purrs,

reaching up to cradle my face in his hands as I sit on the edge of the bed. “But I think you’ll look better on your knees on the floor, don’t you? No.” He presses his fingers to my lips. “I don’t need you to answer that, Winnie. I don’t need your opinion. Get on the floor, on your knees, or I’ll make you.”

A big part of me wants to see what he means by making me. But that look is still in his eyes, and it makes me unsure enough that I slide to the floor on my knees as he trades places to sit on the bed.

“Good girl. See? It’s not so hard to be good for me, is it?” I roll my eyes at his teasing, only for him to reach out and grip my chin, dragging my face up to his. “Don’t roll your eyes at me,” he warns. “So far, you still get to come tonight. But if you push it, that’ll change real quick.”

“I know how to get myself off, you know,” I can’t help mumbling. “So if you don’t—” His hand shifts to my hair, gripping it hard and yanking my head back to expose my throat. Staring at his glass ceiling, I hear the sound of the zipper on his jeans, and my stomach twists in anticipation.

And then I remember just how big Cass is.

My heart flutters at the realization, and when he finally lets go of my hair, I look down at where he’s stroking himself lightly, jeans and shirt still on. It only serves to make me feel more vulnerable, more.... exposed when I’m the only one naked.

“Come here, sweetheart,” he murmurs, cupping the back of my neck and dragging me close to him until I’m on my knees between his thighs, one hand on his leg. “What’s wrong, hmm? You look a little intimidated right now. Surely it’s not because of me, is it?”

Of course it’s because of him.

“No, nope,” I deny, lying through my teeth. “Maybe it’s just my face. I’m not intimidated or—” He tugs me forward, shifting his grip back to my head.

“Stop talking, Winnie,” Cass says with a sigh. “And open that bratty little mouth for me. We’re going to find out just how good it is for the things that matter.”

I don’t really have much of a choice. Not exactly, when his cock slides against my lips, causing me to shudder with anticipation. I open my mouth just enough to feel the weight of him, enough to cautiously taste him with my tongue.

This time, it’s him shuddering with anticipation.

“Don’t tease,” he breathes, watching me with bright blue eyes. “Open your mouth for me. Actually open it. I’ll do all the work; all you need to do is open your mouth.”

“You’re—” His grip tightens, making me wince.

“I didn’t ask for an opinion,” Cass tells me sweetly. “You wanted to push me, so now you get to find out what that gets you. Open your mouth before I put you over my knee and spank you.”

God, that shouldn’t make heat rush between my thighs like it does. But I’m definitely fucked up enough that I shouldn’t be shocked, I suppose. This time, I open my mouth without protest, watching his face as much as I can as he pulls me forward, his cock sliding between my lips and sitting heavily on my tongue.

He’s so fucking big .

My jaw aches a little when I have to open my mouth wider to accommodate him, and I release a soft sound from between my lips when it does.

“Poor thing,” Cassian goads, though there’s no pity in his eyes. “Well, I say that, but I don’t really mean it. Not when you look so good on your knees for me. And by the way, Winnie...” His grip tightens in my hair, holding me in place as he thrusts slowly into my mouth, pushing himself deeper.

“In case you ever need more clarification on where your place is?” Fuck, he’s so big and still going. I shudder when I feel him brush the back of my throat, and thank the lord I’ve never had a gag reflex. Or this would be a lot less sexy.

“It’s right here.” With one last roll of his hips, my nose presses against his skin, a full body shudder going through me. My jaw still aches, and I’m pretty sure I’m going to need Tylenol after this. “Right here . And I’ll prove it to you however many times it takes.” He pulls my head back with his grip in my hair, until I can take a breath through my mouth, before thrusting into my mouth again, just as slowly and just as deeply.

By the fourth time, my eyes are watering. Breathing isn’t an issue, really, but keeping my jaw and throat relaxed is a feat given how he feels.

“Take a nice, deep breath for me, sweetheart.” His words are accompanied by his cock resting just on my lower lip. “Just breathe.”

“Cass—”

“You’re wasting your air,” he replies, chuckling. “I’ll forgive you this time. But you’d better breathe deeply for me. Otherwise you might not like this so much.”

My stomach twists with nervous anticipation. But I do what he says, breathing deeply through my nose and mouth.

“Good girl.” He adjusts his grip on my hair, his other hand coming up to trace my

jaw. “I know you can be so good for me.”

His words send shudders through me, and I’m so focused on the feeling that it takes me a moment to realize he’s dragging my head down again. This time, he’s a little less slow. A little less accommodating, and my jaw is forced wide as he buries himself in my throat again.

“Fuck ...” He sighs, keeping me there, not pulling back as he had before. “So perfect for me. Just for me.” He leans back on one hand and tugs on my hair, forcing me back before shoving me down once again, until he’s fucking my face in a consistent rhythm.

It’s a lot different from what he’d done before. Saliva pools in my mouth, but I can’t swallow. Almost immediately, breathing through my nose isn’t quite enough, and my lungs protest as he buries himself harshly in my throat, prompting me to whine in protest.

“I’m barely even doing anything, Winnie.” Cass chuckles, rolling his hips upward the next time he drags my face down. The movement causes my eyes to burn, and I feel tears sliding down my cheeks that I want to wipe away. But I can’t. My hands are gripping his thighs, like anchor points for how he’s using my mouth for his pleasure.

It’s too much .

It’s hot as fuck.

It’s way too fucking much .

A few more thrusts have me writhing, saliva dribbling from my lips when he pulls back just to shove himself back into my mouth. My heart races, lungs protesting even louder, until I start seeing spots in my vision and my hands tremble against his thighs.

I need to?—

All of a sudden he yanks me off of him, and before I can do more than suck in a breath, Cassian has me up and straddling him. My hands fly to his shoulders as I meet his bright gaze while I pant for air.

“There you go,” he murmurs, reaching up to swipe at the tears on my cheeks. “You’re so pretty when you cry, Winnie. And your mouth is perfect, just like I thought. You know what else I think, though?” His hands fall to my hips, and slowly he urges me to sit until I feel the brush of his length against my folds.

“Cass, wait, I’m?—”

“I think what you need is repetition. To remind you of what your mouth is really meant for.” His words are a soft growl as he forces me down onto his length, rolling his hips upward so he can sink into my body in one smooth motion.

It’s so much that I can’t help burying my face against his shoulder, my entire body trembling as he just holds me there, as deep inside of me as he can go. “You’re so fucking big,” I whine against his shirt. “I’m never going to get used to?—”

His hands on my hips urge me upward, and I have no choice but to let him control our movements as he fucks me, interrupting my words by crushing his lips to mine. “Yes, you will,” he promises against my open mouth. “All you need is more practice. I’ll fuck you every day, Winnie. I’ll make sure I’m the only person you crave, and the only one who can make you feel good. You’ll get used to my cock because I’ll make you want to beg for it.”

He kisses me again, grip like iron as he fucks me, until I’m moaning into his mouth and writhing in his grip. My hands are on his shoulders, and without thinking, I tug on his shirt until he lets me yank it off of him, before I find his mouth again.

It hits me how fucking turned on I am just from him fucking my face. And how close I am now, with the drag of his cock as he continues to fuck me as thoroughly as humanly possible. I can feel him panting against me, making his own soft, needy noises as his movements become a little less controlled.

“Cass?” I whisper, pulling back and panting, hands braced against his chest.

He lifts a brow, not stopping, though his movements become a bit less rushed and a bit more fluid.

“I’m...” I don’t know why I need to say it right now. But I do. “I’m really glad you came back.”

Surprise flickers in his eyes, and he gazes up at me from under his lashes. When his hands freeze on my hips, the sharp sound of our breathing is the only thing I can hear in the room.

“Yeah?” he murmurs, finally starting to move again, though I can feel that he’s holding himself back; trying not to be rough just yet. “You sure you aren’t just?—”

This time I’m the one to grip his hair, and I yank his face toward me so I can kiss him hard . He tastes like perfection, like everything I’ve always wanted in a relationship but never found.

He tastes like home , a home I’ve never found in Hayden Fields without him.

Without warning, Cass’s grip tightens, and in a surprisingly graceful motion he gets to his feet with me in his arms, just so he can slam me down on my back on the bed, causing me to gasp in delighted surprise.

He’s not far behind. In seconds, Cass is over me, yanking one of my legs up over his

hip and burying himself inside me with a growl. “ Fuck , Winnie. If you’re trying to convince me to let you leave...” he trails off with a groan, and I can feel how desperate his movements are. How frantic .

“You’re doing a really shitty job of it. Come for me, come with me, sweetheart.” His fingers find my clit, stroking it harshly and driving me straight towards my release. “There you go. Just let go. Let me feel your cunt squeeze around my cock when you come.” He keeps going, praise and encouragements falling from his lips as he fucks me and rubs my clit in a way that’s driving me crazy.

“Cassian!” I don’t get to finish the sentence. Whatever it might be. My spine arches, head thrown back against the bed as I nearly scream with appreciation at the pleasure rippling through my body as my orgasm hits.

But any other sounds are lost in his mouth as he kisses me, thrusting into me once more before he shudders and rolls his hips into mine with small, rocking movements while he comes.

“Next time,” I pant, while my head is spinning, but I’m still holding him against me with my arms thrown over his shoulders. “You’re taking off your fucking clothes. All of them. Or I’m putting mine back on.”

Cass chuckles and nuzzles against my throat, tugging me onto my side as he rolls onto his. He keeps going, pulling me over him until my head is pillowed on his chest. “Next time you can have whatever you want,” he tells me. “And just for my own sanity...your phone is in my nightstand. I’ll take you home once we have a plan, all right?” His eyes glitter and he grins down at me. “So you can stop planning on how you’ll strangle me in my sleep.”

“I wasn’t going to strangle you in your sleep,” I argue, nipping lightly at his shoulder. “I was going to tie you up with your own bedsheets and ransack your apartment,

obviously.”

His breath hitches as I bite down, and then Cass snorts. “Obviously,” he agrees, voice dry. “What was I thinking?”

Chapter

Nineteen

“So, to clarify...” I close my eyes and lean my face against the window of the car, savoring the coolness against my cheek. Outside, the sky is still getting darker, and I’m not sure if we’re going to make it back to Hayden Fields before it starts to rain. “Our plan, your plan is?—”

“You don’t need to go over it again,” Cass interrupts wearily, knowing what I’m going to say. “We’ve gone over it?—”

“Is that you have no plan. Because apparently, you suck at planning. So you’ve packed a bag and you’ve decided to crash with me. In Hayden Fields. Our hometown. You know, the one where you?—”

“Thank you, Winnie,” he cuts me off with a sigh. “Really, thank you.”

I roll my shoulders in a shrug, grinning a little even without seeing his face. “I’m just being helpful, Cassian.” Lightly I run my fingers over the fresh bandage on my hand, unable to help the nerves that prickle under my skin at the thought of going home.

Something is going on in Hayden Fields. Someone, obviously, is now targeting me like Lacey and our diner regular, though I don’t have any idea why or who it is. But running away isn’t the right option, especially since I can’t be sure if the person won’t just follow me to Akron.

But...

“What if people recognize you?” My words are soft compared to the sound of the engine, and now my eyes are closed because I don’t know if I want to see his expression. But to my surprise, Cass reaches out to smooth his hand over my hair, tucking it back behind my ear. “What if people?—”

“I’ve been coming back to Hayden Fields for years, sweetheart,” he reminds me softly. “But I will say it’s touching that you’re worried about me.”

Finally opening my eyes, I turn to glare flatly at him. “Worried about you ?” I repeat with a snort. “You misunderstand. I’m worried about me and my reputation.”

His chuckle is music to my ears, and he flicks my cheek playfully. “What reputation? As the town’s favorite babysitter? Haven’t you heard what happens to well-known babysitters in Hayden Fields?” His humor never falters, and I open my eyes to look over at him.

“You’re so confusing when it comes to that,” I murmur hesitantly, unsure if this is a subject I’m okay with broaching at the moment. “I never know if I’m allowed to bring it up or I should pretend it never?—”

“There’s no pretending it never happened,” he replies, cutting me off smoothly as he pulls onto the street that connects to mine. “No denying it, or smoothing over it. Besides, do you think I haven’t killed anyone else in the years since then?”

His words hang in the air, and I don’t know how to respond to them. I tap my fingers on the console, nervousness making my stomach churn uncomfortably.

Fuck, I’d really never considered that as a possibility.

“Have you ever wanted to kill me?” I ask, hating how my words hang in the silence of the car.

He doesn’t answer. Not for a few seconds, anyway, and I can see him thinking about his words. The fact he doesn’t answer right away makes me nervous, and within moments, I’m fidgeting in my seat, fingers tapping against the console.

At least, until he covers my hand with his and presses it flat. “I was never going to kill you,” he murmurs. “I would never hurt you, Winnie. Maybe I didn’t understand my feelings for you back then. At least, not like I do now. But I would never hurt you. I’ve never considered it. I’d kill for you,” he adds with a small, impish grin.

He turns onto my street and I look up, a question on my lips...only for it to die in my mouth as I see the car parked in my driveway.

“Fuck,” I murmur. “Why the hell is mom here ? Umm...” I blink rapidly, putting together a plan. “Maybe drop me off and park down the block? Just for now. I want to figure out what she’s doing. She’s not...I doubt she’s staying long.” He pulls to a stop in front of my house, but before I can get out, Cass grabs my shoulder, stopping me.

“You’re forgetting something,” he tells me, his gaze meeting my puzzled expression.

“What am I—” He drags me close to him, my elbow hitting the console, and presses his lips sweetly, possessively to mine. My body tenses for a moment before I relax into him, letting him coax me into a deeper kiss.

Fuck, he’s way better at this than he has any right to be.

With one quick nip to my lower lip he lets me pull away, grinning slightly as he takes in my flushed face and panting breaths as I just stare at him. “Oh, okay,” I say

dumbly. “You’re totally right. I was forgetting. What was I?—”

“Out of the car, Winnie,” he chuckles. “Go see your mom while I find somewhere else to be in order to not look suspicious.” His fingers ghost along the back of my hand, making it harder to open the door and get out...or try to.

It’s hard to get out of a car without taking your seatbelt off, after all.

When I finally manage to disentangle myself from the belt’s stranglehold with Cass’s snickers audible in my ears, I close the door and stumble toward my house, trying to get myself together before my mom can see me.

God, she’d have words for me if she saw that.

Or...well, maybe not. Lou certainly would have questions and demands and want to talk all about it. She’d probably be able to get it out of me that it’s Cassian Byers in the car somehow. She’d bribe me with a milkshake, with cookies, with all the things necessary to get me to spill the details.

But mom isn’t really like that. At least, not with me. I push open the front door, head cocked as I listen for the sound of her existing. To my surprise, I hear the tv on in her bedroom, so I trudge up the stairs with the subtle hope and fear that maybe, just maybe, she’s decided to change her mind. That she’s going to stay here for longer than a few days.

That hope is dashed the moment I walk into her room and see the two suitcases laid out on her bed. Disappointment sears through me like a brand, but I push it as far from me as I can. There’s no point in being disappointed when I should’ve seen this coming. Especially now, only a few days before Halloween.

Mom can’t stand being in Hayden Fields around this time.

When my mother, who's the spitting image of Lou, comes back into the room, but doesn't notice me at first. She drops a pile of shirts in the bigger suitcase, brow furrowed in concentration, and it's only when she turns to go back to her closet that she notices me with a surprised gasp.

"Winnifred!" she greets, one hand pressed to her chest. Her dark hair and eyes are so different from mine that we might as well not be related at all.

But maybe that's part of the problem. I have all of my dad's features. From my pale skin, to my light grey eyes, to my nearly platinum hair. I remind her too much of the man she loved, the man she turned a blind eye to when he was abusing me.

The man I killed with his own gun.

"Hey Mom," I reply, waving one hand at her a little lamely. "I, uh, didn't expect you home. But you don't seem like you're staying?"

"No, I'm uh." Here it is. The nervousness, the avoidance, the desire to get away from me that anyone with eyes can see. "I'm sorry for being gone so much lately. There's change with the company, and—" She keeps going, using the same excuses she's used all of my life to justify not staying here. I've heard them all before, and they've never been that convincing. I'm sure I could list them all out before she gets a chance to. But it doesn't change that it hurts.

It always fucking hurts to be left alone.

"Where are you going?" I ask, hiding my hurt as best as I know how. "How long will you be gone?"

"Oh, well, I'm glad you're here, actually, because I wanted to talk to you in person about this." Her movements become more frantic as she talks, and I realize she's

about to drop a big decision on me that I won't enjoy. "When Julie and I were in San Francisco, I realized I need to be there more. We're just expanding so much, and hotels get expensive. Plus, they're not that comfortable, you know?"

"Sure," I say, feeling like my mouth is full of sawdust as I watch her continue packing. "I get it." I really don't get it, since she's certainly never invited me on any of her trips.

"So I was thinking about buying a condo out there, you know? Somewhere that I can stay without needing exact reservations." But something is off as she says it, and it clicks just as she turns to fiddle with something on her dresser.

"You already bought the condo, didn't you?" I ask flatly, trying to remind myself that I am an adult and I don't need her to be here all the time. Or at all.

Literally, at all.

"You really do know me so well, huh?" Mom laughs, beaming at me and throwing more of her clothes in the open suitcase. She closes it up and glances at her phone again. "I wish you'd been home earlier today."

No, she doesn't.

"A car will be here in a few minutes, so?—"

"If I know you so damn well after all these years, even with you doing your best to not be a part of my life, then what's your excuse for not knowing me at all?" The words come out quiet and jumbled, and it's so hard not to cry. This is far from the first time she's let me down or run off from me, but God, it hurts every single time it happens.

The silence in the room is the definition of deafening. She doesn't look up from her phone, her eyes unfocused as she stares at the screen. It's the first time I've ever brought up the giant elephant that sits in every room we're in; moving with us no matter the location.

"I don't know what you mean," Mom murmurs finally, picking up her suitcase and taking it to the door. "Would you grab the smaller one for me?"

"No." I don't move from my spot near the door. "No, because I'm tired of helping you walk out of my life. I'm tired of?—"

"You're an adult, Winnifred." Her voice is brittle and flat, cracking along the ends of words. She's never spoken to Lou like this. She's been mad at her, sure. They butt heads a lot. But she's never sounded so...disinterested.

So cold .

"You don't need me to be here with you all the time. I'm done raising you, and you can take care of yourself." She strides out of the room with me on her heels, finally spurred into motion.

"First of all, you didn't raise me. You let Dad hurt me." I don't know why I'm doing this now, but the words just won't stay bottled up. "That's not raising me. You put me in a position where I had to defend myself, and I did. You know, for a while I thought that you just couldn't handle the fact that you didn't help me. I thought you felt guilty."

I follow her back up the stairs, standing on the landing as she collects her other bag.

"But we both know that's not true, huh? And ever since then, you've worked as hard as you can to get away from me as often as you can. You know I can hear it when

you and Lou get into fights about me, right?”

My mom stands on the landing a few feet from me, but she’s never seemed more distant. Not since the first time she looked at me with this cold, detached air while I was in the mental hospital, right before she walked away.

“You just don’t understand.” Mom sighs, rubbing a hand over her face. “Things are complicated, Winnie. You can’t understand?—”

“If I don’t understand, it’s because you won’t let me understand.” My hands curl, nails digging into my palms. “I just...” Fuck, I’m going to cry. I can feel the heat behind my eyes burning, pressing, as I widen my eyes to hold the tears at bay.

“I just want you to love me.”

“We’ll talk about this when I get back.” Her words sting, hurt, ache as they twist in my chest, and I fall silent, at a loss. “I’ll text you from San Francisco. I’ll let you know my schedule.” When she looks up, her bright, fake smile is back on her face. I realize quickly she’s going to pretend none of this has ever happened.

It’s what she’s best at, after all.

“I’ll pick you up something nice, okay? Maybe a necklace to go with the bracelet I got you last time?” She walks down the stairs and keeps talking, having a one sided conversation as I just stand there. “See you soon, Winnie! Hold down the fort for me.” She turns, giving me one last bright smile before she picks up her other suitcase, and closes the door behind her with a soft, but final, slam.

“Guess I’m alone again,” I murmur, eyes fixed on the door. “Just like always.”

Suddenly, arms slide around my waist, yanking me back against a taller, solid form

behind me. “Oh, sweetheart.” Cass buries his face in my hair with a sigh. “You’re not alone.” His grip tightens possessively, and I realize a normal person would be unnerved by the possessiveness in Cass’s hold and in his voice.

“I’ll never leave you alone again, Winnie. You’re mine forever.”

I should protest. I should tell that he’s moving too fast for me, that we have so much to discuss before I agree to anything past whatever we are currently.

But I don’t do what I should. Instead, I turn in his hold, throw my arms over his shoulders, and bury my face in his shirt so he can’t see me cry.

Chapter

Twenty

The television is as loud as usual, but right now it doesn't completely drown out the arguing. Even with my eyes glued to it and my knees drawn up to my chest, I can hear Carissa yelling upstairs, probably at Cass.

She's always yelling at Cass.

This time, instead of ignoring it, I get to my feet quietly, my socks giving me stealth on the carpet as I creep up the stairs. Carissa's room is the first one at the top of the landing, and her door is half open, which is probably why I can hear her this time.

Though, it's not the first time I've heard her yelling at him.

When I peek around the frame, I see Cass sitting on her bed, his legs hanging off the side and his hands folded in his lap. He's not speaking, even as she yells at him, and the words reverberate in my ears.

But I can't understand them. They sound like warbled, muddled garbage to me as I look at Cass, whose eyes are lowered and his chin tucked as if to protect himself. He's tense all over, looking like a rabbit about to spring up, and I can tell he's forcing himself to sit there instead of running away.

His face tips upward just a little, and as if drawn there by a magnet, his blue eyes land on mine. He looks tired. Worn out and resigned, even. My fingers tighten on the

doorframe as he holds my gaze without saying a word, and my heart races anxiously for him.

When she realizes he isn't paying attention, Carissa grabs his hair, making him wince, and drags his gaze up to hers. She's yelling again, getting louder and louder, and her voice seems to shake the whole house.

But he doesn't look at her.

He's still looking at me.

Carissa realizes it and turns to glance my way, her eyes widening when she sees me. She drops Cassian and turns to almost run across the room, panic on her face. "I thought you were watching a movie," she murmurs, yanking the door almost shut behind her, so the only thing I can see is her. I stumble back, clutching onto the railing of the landing, and look away as if I've done something bad.

"I'm sorry, Carissa," I whisper, unable to meet her eyes. "I didn't mean to ? —"

"No, you're fine, Winnie." She smiles, but it's forced, and when she glances back into the room, I see her worry her bottom lip between her teeth. "Go back downstairs, okay? Finish your movie and I'll make you a snack."

"Is..." I grip the edges of my t-shirt, twisting in place. "Did Cassian do something wrong?"

Carissa doesn't answer. She looks back into the room again, her eyes hardening, before she smiles down at me with insincerity written all over her face. "Not really. He just got in trouble at school and..." she trails off, obviously losing the lie. "Just go back downstairs, okay?"

I don't argue with her. I was told by my parents to never argue with Carissa when she's babysitting me, since she's the almost-adult in charge. So instead of asking about Cass again, I turn and slog down the stairs, finding my way back to the sofa and dragging my knees up to my chest. A few seconds later, I hear the door slam, and her yelling continues, muffled enough I can barely catch any of it.

My eyes open and I stare up at my ceiling, replaying the dream in my head. It's one I haven't had before, but now I remember that day after school. It was a few weeks before Cass killed her; if I'm not getting things mixed up in my head. We carved pumpkins earlier that day, while Cass sort of picked and stabbed at his. That had pissed her off, but to this day, I don't know why.

Still...

Turning my head, I find Cass on his back beside me, still utterly asleep with his lashes fanned out on his cheeks. He's always had the longest, thickest lashes of any guy I've ever met, and it suits him perfectly.

Not giving myself a chance to hesitate, I sit up, turn, and straddle his waist. Settling back on my knees, I rest my weight on his hips, one hand pressed to his bare chest as I study him, the dream still tugging at my consciousness.

I know he's not asleep. Not anymore, at least. I can't place it, but there's a subtle shift in him; one that screams awareness and how prepared he is for anything to happen, even like this.

His sigh is weary and long-suffering, and Cass doesn't bother opening his eyes before he murmurs, "What do you want, Winnie?"

"That's a rude way to tell me good morning. Maybe I want you to fuck me again," I reply offhandedly, stroking my fingers down his stomach and watching his muscles

contract from my touch.

“No, you don’t.” It’s not a question. Somehow he just knows. “For some reason, I feel like I’m not going to enjoy what you want right now, am I?”

“Maybe not.” I can admit that much, at least. In his sleep pants and nothing else, he looks divine on my bed, which he’s been sharing with me for the past three nights.

Ever since my mom left.

Ever since he told me I’d be his forever.

“Well then, get it over with. Do I need to open my eyes for whatever it is?” he murmurs, still sweet with sleep. I don’t respond at first, except to scoff lightly and trace the waistband of his pants absently. He really is gorgeous to look at.

I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of it, honestly.

“No, you don’t need to open your eyes or sit up or anything. I actually like you quite a bit where you are. Looks good on you,” I can’t help teasing, digging my nails lightly into his hips.

Cass groans and opens one eye to look at me flatly. “Keep doing that and you’re not going to get the outcome you’re looking for,” he assures me. When I don’t reply, instead just stroking along his hips, Cass sighs and tilts his head back, giving me a full view of the expanse of skin of his neck and shoulders.

“I had a dream,” I say finally, resisting the urge to swoop down and bite to leave my mark on him. I’m sure that I’m sporting a few of his, so it would only be fair.

“Oh yeah? Must’ve been a damn good one for you to be up there. You want to fuck

me like this? With me on my back and you?—”

“I had a dream about when we were kids,” I interrupt. The moment he hears me, I feel him tense, before he forces himself to relax. “But it wasn’t just a dream. I’d sort of forgotten about it until now, but I think...I really think it happened. So umm. I wanted to ask you about it.” God, I’m so rambling now. “Since you were there.”

He doesn’t reply with a witty quip or joke. He doesn’t threaten me or tell me he’s going to find a better use for my mouth.

Cass doesn’t even look at me. He just lies on his back, tilts his head still tilted toward my wall, and throws his arm over his eyes.

I almost ask him if I should change the subject. If I should leave this for later. But now that I’ve had the dream, I can’t get the memory out of my head. Even awake, I can’t remember what Carissa was saying. It’s just...garbled and all mushed together. But surely I heard her, didn’t I?

“If you say you don’t remember, I’ll believe you,” I say slowly, knowing I’m giving him an easy out if he doesn’t want to answer. He’s still so fucking quiet, so I keep going, settling a little more comfortably on his hips. “When we were kids, there was this day that I was at your house. It was a few months before...” I trail off, figuring he knows what I mean.

I don’t miss the subtle clench of his fingers, or the way his chin jerks, just a little.

Nor do I miss the fact that he’s now looking at me from under his arm.

“Carissa put a movie on for me and said she needed to go up to her room for a few minutes. Only, the sound wasn’t so loud, and I heard her yelling. I remember going up the stairs and I saw she was yelling at you, but I couldn’t figure out what you’d

done. You didn't tell her I was there, but she saw me and closed the door between us like she didn't want me looking at you?" I can't help phrasing it as a question, unsure of my own memories from so long ago. "And told me to go back downstairs. I did, obviously. And I guess little kid me just didn't think it was that important." I stop talking, drumming my fingers anxiously on his stomach as I stare down at the hollow of his throat.

"So what are you asking me, Winnie?" Cassian asks when I don't continue, prompting me to look up at him, yanked out of my own thoughts.

"So it's something that happened, then? It's not just some fake memory my brain conjured?" It's not the question I need to ask, but I stop it from coming out. "That's not my actual question, by the way."

He's quiet again, and I wonder if he knows that just makes him more suspicious. Especially with the way he doesn't want to look at me. "What's your actual question?" he replies at last, not giving me a real answer. His tone is carefully guarded, and I figure he's going to take an easy way out, or just tell me he doesn't want to answer.

"Why was she yelling at you?" It doesn't come out as casual or conversational as what I intend it to. No, my words are a whisper, my eyes fixed on his even under his arm. I can barely see the glitter of blue from where I'm sitting, but it's enough.

"You don't remember?"

I shake my head at his words. "No, I...no matter what I do, I can't remember any of what she was saying to you. It just sounds garbled in my head, like she was one of the adults from Charlie Brown. I don't know why. It's not like that memory is particularly traumatic...for me, at least."

Yet again, my words are met with silence. Cassian adjusts his arm so his eyes are completely hidden again, and lets out a breathy sigh as he relaxes into my pillows. I don't press him for an answer. Not this time. For some reason, this is a bigger deal for him than it is for me, for all that it's nagging at my brain this morning with a chime of importance that I don't understand. Trying to be supportive, I stroke my fingers over his hip bones, tracing shapes and loops along his flawless skin.

"Sometimes I've wondered if you didn't hear her," Cassian says finally, his words quiet and hesitant. "I thought you must have, when I saw you looking at me...but the next day you didn't act like there was anything out of place." A smile twitches at the corners of his lips. "Actually, the next day you demanded I help you make a bat costume."

"I remember that," I reply softly, finding that it's true. "I wanted you to be my co-bat. We were going to have long ears and I had all this stupid fur..." trailing off, I bite my lips as I watch him, thinking. "But we didn't." God, my memories of this far back are hazy at best. "We didn't because. Umm..." I sort through the small pieces of memories and conversations in my head. "Carissa said you were too busy with a school project? I think?"

His derisive snort makes me jump, and when I relax again, I find that he's uncovered his eyes to meet mine. "It was about you," he tells me, gaze catching my own and pinning me in place. Even without his hands on me, I can't move. Not when I'm anchored by those four words as I try to figure out what they mean.

Thankfully, he doesn't leave me in suspense. "There was no project," Cass sneers, and I'm surprised to find an angry, searing heat in his eyes that I don't think I've ever seen before. "There never was. She didn't want you spending time with me. Don't you remember? After you found her yelling at me, she did everything she could to keep us apart."

My fingers clench against his skin as I press them to his stomach, my attention riveted to him. A ripple of unease travels up my spine, and I suddenly wonder if maybe, just maybe, I should've kept my mouth shut.

Maybe this is one question I don't need answered.

"She found out what you'd become to me. How I felt about you. She found out what I did to the boy who tripped you one day after kindergarten." He closes his eyes, then adds, "She found out what I was planning to do to your dad."

I yank my fingers away from his skin, eyes wide. "W-what?" I ask softly. "What do you?—"

"You think I would just continue to let him hurt you? You think I was going to sit there and let your mother bring you back to him, day after day?" He sneers his reply, and yet again his gaze is holding mine, not letting me go. "I'm not much for fire, Winnie, but when I was twelve, that seemed like the easiest way to get rid of them for you. My mom would've taken you in; we both know that. You would've been safe in my house with me ."

I can't help the tremors that run from my head to my fingertips when he says that last part, and I'm completely at a loss for words. All I can do is stay trapped by his gaze, my heart racing like a frightened rabbit in my chest, seeking any escape it can from under the cage of my ribs.

"We were kids, though," I find myself murmuring. "You didn't—You barely even liked me."

Cass sits up quickly, catching me before I can fall back. I have to adjust, sitting over his lap with my hands braced on his shoulders. "The first time I saw you cry, I could never look away from you again," he growls quietly. "You were mine . Back then

you were like the little sister I never wanted. The sister I needed to protect. Only I couldn't, because you didn't live with me. So I would've gotten rid of them. Your dad, your mom...Lou wasn't on my radar. She couldn't have taken you in back then." He reaches up, smoothing his hands down my face as he pulls me in close until our foreheads are pressed together.

"Carissa threatened me. Said I wasn't allowed to be around you anymore," Cass croons with his eyes open and so intense that it's terrifying. "She said if I didn't leave you alone, she'd tell my mom, your mom... She'd make sure you never got to come over again. For your safety, she said," he sneers that last part, lips twisted in disgust.

My hands are trembling. I realize it belatedly, with my fingers curled against his shoulders and nowhere to look but his eyes. "Is that..." I trail off, the words dying in my throat.

But Cass only grins, the darkness, the strangeness in his gaze returning. But this time, I know what it is.

He's a psychopath.

That's what I'm seeing in his eyes when he looks at me like this. His darkness, his cruelty...his obsession with me that goes past unhealthy.

Cass is crazy. I realize it now as I look into his ice-blue eyes that won't let mine go.

"Ask me," he prompts. "Ask me why I killed Carissa. You're so close. I think you've figured it out, but I know you. You'll make up some other excuse. You'll give yourself a reason not to believe it, so ask me, Winnie. Let me clear things up for you once and for all."

I can't move. His hands on my face hold me in place, but even if they weren't pressed

to my skin, I wouldn't be able to move anyway. Not with the way he's looking at me. "Did you kill Carissa because she was trying to protect me from you?" I finally barely manage to ask.

His grin is immediate and twisted; menacing and definitely not pleasant. "Yes, Winnie. I killed Carissa because she wanted to keep you from me. And nothing, nothing was or is going to do that. Not your mom, not Lou"—he presses closer, until his lips brush mine—"and not even my own sister."

Chapter

Twenty-One

My phone rings somewhere nearby, but it's not enough to break me out of this moment. My mind is at war, trying to figure out if I'm terrified or something else that's definitely not okay.

Or both.

Sure, it's petrifying to learn Cass killed his sister to stop her from keeping me away from him. But it's also...well, it's also something else.

A nervous grin twitches at the corners of my mouth as I look at him, meeting his gaze as he pulls back from brushing his lips to mine. "So what you're telling me is...you suck at planning," I murmur, amused when I see the flood of incredulous surprise on his face, his eyes widening. "Let me finish. You decided to kill Carissa to stop her from telling everyone how messed up you were...only to get caught, thrown in a psych ward, and not get let out until you were eighteen. Is that about right?"

Cass closes his eyes with a snort. "God, Winnie," he grumbles as my phone goes off again. "You really are such a fucking brat, you know that?"

"Well, I like to think of myself as—" The doorbell chimes, ringing through the entire two-story house. But for a moment all I do is stare at Cass, confused, as if he'll have the answer for who's at the door. I'm certainly not expecting any visitors, or any deliveries. I have a few hours before I need to go to the diner to work, so I'd planned

to spend it in bed, sleeping, or bothering Cass.

The doorbell sounds again and I lean back, extracting myself from Cassian's grip. "If it's Mormon boys, I'm going to scare them away with talk of Satanism," I mutter, pulling on a hoodie over the t-shirt and shorts I slept in. Cass snorts and flops back down on the bed.

"Can I go back to sleep now? Or are you planning on asking me more uncomfortable questions before breakfast?" He groans, burying his face in my pillow.

The sight of it brings me up short, and I realize I love the sight and the idea of Cass in my bed like this. Fuck, that has to mean there's something really wrong with me.

He opens his eyes to look at me as the doorbell rings again, the bright blue pinning me in place. I don't want to leave him. Especially when I'd rather go back to sleep right now, instead of being awake at all.

But the doorbell sounding again makes that impossible. I groan, tossing my head back, and turn to stomp across the landing, scooping up Doom and draping him over my shoulders as I stride heavily down the stairs. "I'm coming," I call, when the doorbell is pushed yet again. Every time I hear it, I'm a little bit closer to kicking the person on my porch right off.

With my luck, it's a random delivery from my mom, who still hasn't called or really texted beyond some polite, perfunctory greetings and updates.

Like I care what her new condo looks like. She'll certainly never invite me to it.

Absently I yank the door open, prepared to force myself to be polite to whoever is way too eager to get me here.

Only for the words to die on my lips at the sight of Detective Trudeau on my doorstep. My confidence falters, and I hold on to Doom as I look at him, feeling suddenly much more away than I had before.

“Miss Campbell.” He tips his hat at me like he’s going for charming or honest. To me, it just seems arrogant and overplayed. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“You did,” I yawn, leaning on the doorframe with my cat over my shoulders. “Can I help you, officer?”

“Detective.”

“My bad.” Tilting my head against the frame, I meet his eyes. “So can I help you with something?” I’m not afraid of him, precisely. But he’s definitely not my favorite person in the world, and not my first choice for surprising me at my front door.

He’s close to my last, honestly.

“I was hoping I could come in and talk to you. There was a report of a bit of an incident at Manic Manor a few nights ago...” His eyes drift to the bandages on my hands. “And I was hoping you could give me a few more details on it.”

I have no idea how he knows about that. Or why it’s taken him this long to show up, if he’s actually concerned. It doesn’t feel... right. “Umm...” I look down at the ground, trying to get my thoughts in order and come up with a plan for how to steer the conversation. “It was a pretty minor thing, actually?—”

“I think you should let the detective in. He’s really going above and beyond in his job, you know?” Cass’s smooth voice is the only warning I get before he wraps an arm around my waist, standing half-behind me in the doorframe.

Trudeau's face jerks in surprise, nostrils flaring and eyes widening by millimeters. But he pushes the expression away, choosing to study Cassian carefully before speaking. "Mr. Byers, right? We've never had the pleasure of meeting in person. I have to admit, this is the last place I would think to find you. Forgive my surprise." He certainly doesn't sound apologetic, and his lips press together in a thin line as he looks Cass over.

"Hayden Fields is just full of surprises, as I'm sure you're realizing," Cass replies with a low chuckle. "And you're more than welcome to come in. I, for one, would love to know the details of what happened at the haunted house the other night. I've only heard about it secondhand."

"Right." Trudeau shifts, glancing back at his car, and it hits me that he's uncomfortable with Cass here. "I thought you'd moved away, Mr. Byers," he says finally, turning back to look at us but not making a move to come into my house.

"I did. I'm just here visiting. Hayden Fields has a lot of Halloween nostalgia, you know?" God, he's enjoying this. I can almost feel his amusement from the small, almost nervous movements the detective makes, and the way he's clearly floundering to figure out where he wants to go next.

He certainly doesn't want to come in here.

"I see." The detective's voice is cold, and he's barely looking at me anymore. Instead, all of his focus is on Cass. "Well, I can see it's a bad time. And I overestimated my schedule this morning." He glances at his watch, as if to convince us the lie is true. "But I'll be back by, all right? Maybe I'll catch you at work, Miss Campbell."

That sounds like a threat.

"Anytime," I murmur as he turns and takes a step off the porch. "Wait." I don't

expect him to, but he does. “Who reported the incident at Manic Manor ?” I’m not sure if he’ll tell me, but it’s worth asking. I hadn’t thought anyone was around to have seen.

“A Miss...”—he pulls out his phone and opens it, checking his notes quickly—“Reagan Darcelle. She didn’t have many details. Just said there was some kind of incident and you might be in a bit of trouble.” I can hear the dry judgment in his tone, and I know he thinks I’m in a different kind of trouble than what he’d come here to investigate.

And, well, he’s not exactly wrong.

“Oh, yeah,” I reply lamely. “She’s one of my good friends. Sorry that she overreacted and got you involved.”

The detective shakes his head, glancing back at us one last time. “No need to apologize, Miss Campbell,” he assures me flatly. “I’ve found the trip to be very informative.” With that he marches back to his car, not hesitating before slamming the drivers’ side door and driving away so fast I’m surprised I don’t hear the dramatic squealing of tires.

“That was bold of you,” I murmur, still leaning on the doorframe and looking around the part of the neighborhood I can see. “Do you really think it was a good idea to let him know you’re here?”

Cass drags me back into the house, closing the door and locking it absently. “I think he would’ve tried to bully you if I hadn’t. He pushes you around when he talks to you, and it unnerves you enough that he can get away with it.” Carefully, Cass pulls Doom off my shoulders, kissing his forehead. That’s another thing I hadn’t expected of him, or my cats.

I'm pretty sure Gloom is in love with him, and she's never liked anyone other than me. Doom is a little less surprising, but still abnormal, considering the way he flips over in Cass's arms to let the man hold him like a baby.

"Well, I appreciate your championing of me, Sir Byers," I reply, leaning back against the door. "Do you want anything to eat? I might as well stay up and shower instead of getting up fifteen minutes before my shift starts."

Two hours later when I'm in my car and ready to leave, I finally take the time to look at my phone, having forgotten about the texts I'd been sent and too busy after Trudeau had left to even think about glancing at them.

But I should've known they're from Reagan. Four texts sit unopened, and I scan through them, registering the clear worry in her words.

Are you okay?

It's been a few days

I know something happened at the haunted house. I'm worried.

Just...text me back soon, okay ?

Guilt creeps up my spine and I immediately send back confirmation that I'm alive, before telling her I'm sorry for the radio silence. I don't have it in me to really talk to anyone right now. Especially so close to my shift where I'll have to be social for hours. Or at least pretend to be.

I'm okay, Reagan. On my way to work. I'll text you later? Sorry for going MIA.

I give her a few seconds to respond, but when the message doesn't shift to read, I

chuck my phone into my passenger seat with a sigh. She'll get back to me when she has time, I figure. Until then, I'll rehearse my apology for leaving her basically high and dry for the past few days, and come up with a better lie for what happened at the haunted house so I don't worry her.

Chapter

Twenty-Two

The fact Trudeau comes to the diner for three hours and just sits with a cup of coffee feels suspicious at best. At worst, it's a subtle threat that I work hard to ignore.

Which is hard, since he requested to sit in my section. Martha makes her presence known while he's sitting there, glancing his way every once in a while and doing everything she can to seem as inhospitable as possible.

Not that it works.

My phone going off in my pocket has me heading back to the break room forty-five minutes before the end of my shift, and I glance down to see I've missed a few messages in the past few minutes. The ones from Reagan take priority because of my guilty conscience, and I read through her rambling worries and irritated complaints about ignoring her.

Though, I'm unsure when we became such great friends that she expects me to text her back within the hour. Last I checked, we were good friends, sure. But she has her friends and I have...

Well, I have my cats.

And now, I suppose I have Cass, too. Even though our conversation and his confession from this morning play on repeat in my brain like one of those songs that

you just can't get out of your head. It's almost like elevator music. Always there, playing on repeat, no matter how distracted I am by other things.

He'd meant it. There's no way around that. And no way around the fact that Cass is absolutely, without a doubt, a psychopath .

So why am I not more afraid of that realization, like I should be? Why am I not marching over to Detective Trudeau to tell him all the things Cass told me so he can, I don't know, investigate him for other crimes or maybe chastise him at least?

Why am I so okay with it ?

After sending back a few more half-assed apologies to Reagan, I open the messages from Cass, leaning against the counter as I read through them.

I hope you're having a good day. Miss you.

A grin curves the corners of my mouth upward, and I tilt my head to think of an answer, even as my fingers tap on the screen.

It's only been a few hours.

Unlike Reagan, the text flips to read instantly, and the typing bubble immediately pops up. In seconds he's responded, and I glance up at the door, making sure I'm still alone. Not that anyone would mind me being back here for a few minutes.

You're off in forty-five minutes, right? Can I come pick you up? I thought we'd go get dinner, if that's okay.

God, he's so sweet over text. I tell him that works, and stuff my phone back into my pocket before heading back out to finish my shift.

The forty-five minutes left of it feel like days. Not just because I'm excited to see Cass and go out somewhere with him. But also because Trudeau just fucking sits there. Like a log. Like a lump.

Like an ugly, toad-eyed lump I'd like to get excised as soon as possible.

At seven fifty-five, I've had about enough of it. My patience is as frayed as the napkin he's been absently shredding, and while my other customers have been pretty unremarkable, even Martha has started dropping hints that maybe he could leave or order a second cup of coffee at the very, very least.

But he doesn't take her hints, or Jeremy's. He just sits there and smiles in that oily, polite way of his, and nurses an empty cup of coffee. His gaze makes me itch, and the hair on the back of my neck prickles constantly, but finally it's time to make my last round and let my diners know that my shift is over.

"If you decide to order anything else, detective, my replacement will be around to check on you in a few minutes," I tell him, the epitome of politeness. "I hope you've enjoyed your coffee. Martha said to let you know it's on the house." I smile sweetly at him, aware that the expression doesn't come close to genuine.

"Where you off to?" he asks absently, looking up at me with his bulgy eyes. "Back home? Or are you planning to have a fun night out?" It's wildly inappropriate, and not at all his business. But I only smile wider at him.

"I haven't quite decided."

"Isn't that Byers' car out in the parking lot?" He doesn't even look out the window, and I wonder how the hell he already knows what Cass drives. I don't fall for it or look.

I just shrug my shoulders in a show of hapless naivety. “Maybe? I don’t monitor where he goes or anything. So I guess he could be here if you say his car is outside.”

My eyes never leave his, and I fight to not look the least bit uncomfortable. I don’t want him to know how much he gets under my skin.

“This will be all for me, actually. And it’s really kind of your boss to cover it.” He nods and eases out of his seat, not leaving me a tip. I hadn’t expected him to, but my opinion of him lowers even more as he saunters out the door to the parking lot.

“What a jerk,” Jeremy mumbles in my ear, stopping to watch him go. “Not even a tip when we didn’t charge him for the coffee? Asshole.”

“At least he’s gone.” I sigh. “And so am I. Have a good Halloween, Jeremy.” It’s only two days away, and this year, I’m not dreading it nearly as much as usual.

I might even be looking forward to it, if I’m being honest.

As quickly as I can, I take my hair down and run a brush through it, then change out of my black pants and ugly but comfy shoes, into leggings and ankle boots. My shirt comes off next, replaced with an oversized hoodie that is the definition of comfortable, and maybe not very fashionable.

I’m back in the front of the diner within a few minutes, looking presentable for the outside world and smelling of fruity body spray instead of waitress suffering and contempt, like I usually do. But just as my hands land on the glass of the door, my eyes flick up and I see the problem immediately.

Trudeau is still here.

And he’s standing way too close to Cass. My heart takes that moment to thud against

my ribs in warning, like I've somehow not seen them and it needs to inform me how bad of an idea this is. Or at least, how badly this situation could go.

"Cass!" I call, surprised when he doesn't look up. Instead he's leaning against his car, ankles crossed, the picture of relaxed. In contrast, Detective Trudeau looks anything but at ease. He crowds close to Cassian, keeping him against the car, with his hands hooked in his utility belt suspiciously close to the gun he has holstered there. But Cass doesn't seem to care. His hands are shoved loosely in his pockets and his eyes radiate boredom.

Part of me wonders if it's an act to piss off the detective. That seems like something Cassian would do.

I don't slow down, even though it's clear they're having a private moment. My steps take me quickly over the asphalt, but when I open my mouth only a few feet away, my stalker holds up a hand, causing me to stop in place and not say a word.

His eyes flick to mine, a clear message that I've done the right thing. There's a smile creeping over the edges of his lips, and when Trudeau turns to look at me, his expression is anything but friendly.

"You should pick better company, Winnifred. I'd think this boy would be the last person you'd ever want to be around." His voice is low, tight, with a hint of something I really dislike. His words taste sour in my throat, and I press my lips together in an irritated scowl.

"I'm an adult and I can pick my own company?—"

"Makes me wonder what your mother would think if she could see you right now." His words have the unintended effect of making me take a step back, and he must sense that it was the wrong thing to say by the look on my face. His brow furrows,

and suddenly Cass is pushing off of the car, looming in the detective's space without hesitation.

"Stop," he murmurs, his voice barely above a whisper. "You can insult me and threaten me all you like." His words are slow, careful, and there's an undercurrent of a threat that would be impossible to miss even if I didn't know him. "You can tell me you're just waiting for me to fuck up. Tell me again how you always have your gun with you. I don't care, detective. But you will not bring her into this. You will not try to hurt her just to get a reaction from me. Do you understand me?"

Silence falls between them, and the two men just stare at each other for so long that I start to fidget. The air is cold enough that I shiver, even in my hoodie, but finally Trudeau lets out a breath. "I only meant it as?—"

"I don't care how you meant it. You don't know anything about her life, or her mother. Anything you've read in a file" —he sneers the word—"won't give you a real picture of what happened. You're not from Hayden Fields, Detective. You were never a part of what goes on here. And I suggest you stop trying to be. Go back to solving murders in Akron. Hell, do something useful and look for the person who committed murder here recently. Oh, that's right..." His smile turns mocking. "You haven't been looking, have you? Because you've been convinced it was me this whole time."

Trudeau looks back at me, and I hear the warning sound that grates in Cass's chest. "No, you don't look at her, Detective. She has nothing to do with any of this. And neither do I, not that you'll believe it. I paid for what I did all those years ago. And I'm not dumb enough to come back to my hometown near Halloween just to start killing. No matter how much you want that to be the case because of how easy it would be."

I've never seen Cass be so...in control. So sure of himself that he's all but threatening

the detective. It's kind of hot, if I'm honest with myself.

Okay, it's really fucking hot to see him standing there, uncaring and unafraid of the detective or the gun his fingers are inching toward.

"Now, unless you have something you want to officially accuse me of..." Cass reaches a hand out toward me and I stride over to him, letting him curl his arm over my shoulders and drag me against his warm, solid frame. "I'm taking my girlfriend on a date tonight. If you need anything else, I'm sure you have my number and hers. Though I'd prefer you call me and leave her alone."

I'm barely listening to the rest of what's a thinly veiled threat at this point. How can I, when Cass's words won't stop playing on repeat in my head?

Girlfriend.

My girlfriend.

I'm his girlfriend? The words have a strange effect on me; especially the way my insides twist and flutter, as the butterflies are resurrected to fly in giddy, nervous circles in my stomach. Sure, we're sleeping together. And he sort of lives with me at the moment.

And we're going on a date.

Fuck, maybe I am his girlfriend. And maybe he's my boyfriend, though those words somehow don't quite fit.

I miss whatever Cass says, but in a few moments Trudeau is wheeling around on his heel, stalking across the parking lot to his shiny, clearly new police cruiser. It's not like the ones I normally see around here. It's not scuffed and well-used and maybe a

little muddy.

It's too shiny, too pristine. Too perfect for an actual working cop. He leaves quickly, tires all but squealing on the asphalt as I gaze up at Cassian with questions on my tongue and curiosity in my eyes. He's...something.

He doesn't look down at me, but he lets out a little sigh and pulls me closer into his arms. "I know, I know," he mutters, finally turning and burying his face in my hair. "We're not officially dating. And I don't like calling you my girlfriend."

My heart starts to plummet at that, and I bite my lip, wondering if he regrets saying it.

"Because that sounds too...temporary," he huffs. "Like there's a chance of you being someone else's eventually. But we both know that's never going to be the case." He pulls me even closer, holding me tightly in his arms like he's afraid someone will try to pull me away.

Or like maybe I'll try to leave.

"Let's go get food," Cass sighs, thankfully not pushing me to answer. "I got us a reservation."

"Where at?" I ask curiously, going to the passenger door and opening it to slide into the seat. His car is much nicer than mine, and I sprawl out in the seat, legs stretched out in front of me on the very clean, pristine floorboard.

Which is definitely different from mine.

"Guess you'll see," he hums in response, reaching out to trace my jaw before his hands settle on the steering wheel. "It's a bit of a drive, but I'll get you home in one piece. And maybe even before midnight."

I snort, leaning my face against the cool glass of the passenger window. “Oh good. I wouldn’t want to be out past my curfew or anything. My parents might get mad.” My words are dry and full of sarcasm. It’s not like I have parents who care , and he knows it too.

I shouldn’t be surprised when he takes me to a Hibachi restaurant with a variety of veggie sushi on the menu. After all, Cassian clearly knows more about my preferences than any of my friends, and definitely my family. So why wouldn’t he know exactly what I like to eat, when given the chance?

“Some people would say you’re obsessive and creepy,” I tell him with my chopsticks in my hand. For his part, he’s eating a meal of teriyaki beef and stir-fried vegetables. Which I’ve made faces at for the last ten minutes. “For knowing my favorite food.”

“Yeah,” he agrees, resting his head on his hand. “You’re right. Some people would definitely say that. Most people, probably.” But he’s clearly not bothered by it. I snort, rolling my eyes at his nonchalance.

A few bites later I’m done, and I rest my chopsticks on my plate, feeling the anxiety that’s been itching at my insides come back again. “So, umm. Do you remember when I asked you about Carissa?” I ask under my breath. “And you said that you’d tell me if I told you about my dad?”

Cassian pauses, laying his own chopsticks down. “You don’t have to tell me,” he assures me slowly. “I offered up the information this morning. I didn’t push you on it.”

“No, I know, but”—I let out a breath, and grin wryly at him—“fair’s fair, right?” He doesn’t answer, and I’m sort of glad about it. I can’t handle his questions just now.

“I won’t go into detail. Not really ,” I warn, glancing around to make sure no one is

nearby. We'd gotten lucky and been seated in a rather isolated spot, and our waitress is attentive, sure, but not overwhelming. I'm not expecting her for another ten minutes or so. "You know, umm. What he was doing to me." It's not a question, and I'm not surprised when he inclines his head in a small nod.

"After you and Carissa, Dad suggested I didn't need a babysitter anymore. He said he'd change his schedule around to watch me after school. Lou fought my parents about it, but she was still at college. So, she couldn't do much." I tap my chopsticks against my plate after picking them up again, rolling the wood in my fingers.

"My dad was drunk that day, more than usual. He tried to uh, go further. He broke my arm and hit me in the face when I told him no." It's hard not to grab my wrist where it still aches sometimes from how badly he snapped the bone in a spiral fracture.

From under my lashes, I can see Cassian shift in his seat, but he doesn't speak. "Then I ran to his room and locked the door. I knew where his gun was, and I was just so scared . I was alone. Mom knew what he was doing, but she didn't care." My eyes prickle with long-shed tears that ran dry years ago. "So I thought, what's left? I'd rather be in jail or wherever instead of getting hurt by him. He broke down the door and I begged him to leave me alone. He was so drunk ."

Looking up at Cass, my lips are pressed flat and my eyes are wide. "I don't regret it," I murmur. "I don't regret shooting him five times. He didn't die right off, by the way. He laid there, choking on his own blood, and begged me to call for an ambulance." A wry grin touched my face. "But I sat on their bed with his gun in my hands and watched him die. Mom was the one who found us. And, well, she's obviously never forgiven me."

Our waitress takes that moment to reappear with our bill, which Cass pays using a hundred-dollar bill and a winning smile. The cost couldn't be half that, and when he

tells her not to worry about the change, she gazes at him like he might be a saint come to life.

“You guys have an amazing night,” the waitress insists, smiling at him then winking at me, her silent look obviously trying to tell me that in her mind, Cass is an absolute gem.

If only she knew the truth.

She wouldn't feel the same if she did, I'm sure.

Neither of us speak until we're outside of the restaurant that sits on a busy, well-lit street. There's an upscale bar on one side, and a BBQ place on the other that I'd balked at before Cass had assured me with a cackle he knows about my aversion to that type of food.

“Thank you.” Cass turns, backing me into the wall, and presses his forehead to mine as we stand there. “You didn't have to. I just...” He reaches up to cup my cheek. “I wish I could've done it for you. Because I would've without remorse.”

“It's okay.” A smile hitches the corner of my mouth upward. “I don't know; there's something vindicating about doing it myself. Like, taking back my life, you know? Though I could've done without my mom's love drying up the moment my dad stopped breathing.”

His face hardens at that, eyes cold as he keeps me in place. “I'm sorry,” he says flatly. “You deserve better, Winnie. You've always deserved better.”

Instead of replying, I reach up to grip his jacket, tugging him down into a kiss. It's sweet, at first, before I urge him to deepen it.

He takes me up on the offer almost immediately. Within seconds, his knee is pressed between my thighs, and I'm pressed hard to the wall and panting into his open mouth as he drinks in the soft sounds I can't help making while he nips and teases at my lips.

"Cass..." I murmur, trying to catch my breath as the words in my brain burn on my lips. "I think I?—"

A wolf whistle cuts me off, and both of us jerk around to see two men coming from the direction of the bar, both of them obviously drunk and grinning. "You two puttin' on a show?" one of them crows, kicking at the gravel under his feet. "Or is this an open invitation?"

His cohort cackles and lifts his hand, spreading two fingers to make an obscene gesture with his tongue toward me.

Cass snorts under his breath and I grip his jacket harder, giving him a baleful look. "They are so not worth the jail time," I tell him flatly. "Don't even start."

"I'm not, I'm not." But he does smile mockingly and return their sentiments with a rude gesture of his own. "Fuck off," he tells them too-sweetly. "Go walk in front of a semi or something, would you? I'm sure you'd be doing the world a favor."

The two men cackle at his insults, confirming my suspicion that they're too drunk out of their minds to know what's really going on. Then a group of girls catches their attention and they turn, forgetting about us as they stumble after the women who look like they'd eat these men for breakfast.

"It's getting late," I inform Cass with a grin. "I'm going to be in trouble if I'm home after curfew."

Cass huffs out a laugh and kisses the tip of my nose. “Sure, babe,” he agrees with a chuckle. “I’ll get you home before you turn into a pumpkin at midnight, I promise. I won’t even speed.”

“Good.” I drag him back toward his car. “Because from what I hear, there’s a cop near my house who’d just love the chance to pull you over.”

Chapter

Twenty-Three

Somehow, we make it to my house without getting stopped by any overzealous police officers with weird fixations on my boyfriend. He parks behind my car, and I slide out of the passenger seat and stretch up on my toes, back arched as I snap the kinks out of it.

“I hate my job,” I complain, though there’s not a lot of truth in the words. Compared to babysitting, it’s really not that bad at all.

“Quit,” Cass comments, walking behind me up to the porch and waiting for me to open the door. Though when his hands find my hips, I realize he’s not as patient as he’d like to appear.

So I slow down. I move as slow as a snail as I undo the lock once, then again, as if it’s stuck or just not cooperating.

Cassian sees through it instantly and leans forward, lips brushing my ear. “Open the fucking door, Winnifred Campbell,” he murmurs in my ear. “Or I swear to God, I’ll fuck you on this porch and your neighbors are going to get really upset when you wake them up with your howling.”

The sentiment makes me cackle, and in the next moment Cass’s hands are replacing mine to push open the door far enough for him to shove me inside.

“You’re such a brat,” he growls, and hooks an arm around my hips to yank me around to face him. “Such a big house.” His lips curl into a grin. “Makes me think of all the places I could ruin you.”

“It’s mom’s house.” I don’t know why I say it, I don’t know why it matters. But something like understanding crosses Cass’s face, and his grip becomes comforting, rather than demanding and urgent.

“I could always take you back to my apartment.” But we both know neither of us wants to wait that long. Even as he says it, he’s pulling me up the stairs by my arm, heading down the hallway toward my room.

“One of these times I’ll set up camp there and never leave.” I flash him a threatening grin, which he returns, then quickly pins me against the railing near the staircase.

“Don’t make promises I’ll have you keep.” He nips at my lower lip lightly, teasingly, making my breath catch in my throat.

I don’t falter, exactly. But the idea of making good on my words, of living with Cass, is strange. New. Different.

Good.

Shifting slightly, I lick at his mouth. “I’d kill your plants.” I sigh. “And do you even like cats? Because Doom and Gloom certainly aren’t staying here.”

“What?” Cass jerks back, giving me a quizzical, reproachful look. “Winnie, I wouldn’t let you leave your cats here. And I’ll put caution tape around the plants so you can’t wilt them with your anti-green thumb. You know there’s only one bedroom, though...” He wiggles his brows theatrically, and I reach out to tug at his shirt, intending to strip him out of his clothes before he can do it to me first.

“Is this you offering to take the couch? Wow, Cass, you’re just so—” My words become a startled yelp as he picks me up, throwing me over his shoulder just like he had at the slaughterhouse. “I believe I requested bridal style!”

“I believe you’re a brat.” He shoves a door open, and with a jolt of surprise I realize we’re in my bathroom, not my bedroom. “And brats don’t get a choice on how they’re carried.” In a smooth movement, he sets me down on the counter beside the sink, making me thankful that the housekeeper keeps this bathroom guest ready for absolutely no reason at all.

“That’s rude—Hey!” I grab his hands when he moves to take off my shirt, though I quickly move to yank at his instead. “No. No! This time you get naked.”

“Don’t worry your pretty little face, Winnie. I’m not about to take a shower with clothes on, so I’ll strip for you. Promise.” Making good on his word, he steps back and tugs off his shirt, eyes dancing as he chucks it my way. I catch the shirt, holding it in my hands as he walks to the shower to pull open the glass door and turn the knobs like he lives here. To my knowledge, he’s definitely never used our shower before, but I suppose if you’ve seen one shower knob, you’ve seen them all.

By the time the bathroom starts steaming up, it occurs to me I could help out by getting out of my clothes as well. I hop to the floor, setting his v-neck on the counter before tugging off my hoodie and bra.

Absently my hand goes to the light switch and I flick it down, plunging us into the relative dimness of the bathroom now that it’s lit only by the nightlight next to the mirror. “Oh,” I say as I turn, feeling guilty, and hold my hoodie against my chest as I look for Cass. “Shoot, I’m sorry. I should’ve asked. I’m sort of a shower in the dark weirdo, but if you like?—”

“I think I can fuck you just fine like this,” he cuts me off smoothly, making my

stomach twist and leap with excitement and anticipation.

“Well, if you’re sure—” I dodge the shoe he chucks my way, cackling as I kick off my own and shove my leggings down my thighs. I’m done before him, and it means that he’s just undoing his belt by the time I sidle up to him, my fingers on the button of his jeans.

“Let me?” I murmur, gazing up at his face. “Pretty please?” He relents, dropping his hands to watch me as I take over for him. In seconds his jeans are pooling on the floor, and he kicks them away so I can run my fingers down his body, over his scars and his sharp, angular hip bones.

“Fuck, you’re pretty,” I murmur, hooking my fingers in the elastic of his black boxer briefs. “Seriously, if no one has ever told you that?—”

He hooks my chin on two fingers, dragging my face up so I’m meeting his eyes. “I don’t care what anyone else has ever told me, Winnie,” Cass reminds me. “I only care what you think.”

His words make me feel so strange, but it’s not a bad kind of strange. It just seems like it’s too much; like he has to be saying things he thinks I’ll enjoy without actually meaning them.

Because he can’t feel that strongly about me when we haven’t really seen each other for years.

Right?

Wordlessly, I finish what I’m doing, and I tilt my head down to look at him while wrapping my fingers around his impressive length. Cass lets out a low sigh, content to watch as I stroke my hand along his shaft.

“You never stood a chance, you know,” he says suddenly, and I look up at him in confusion. “Of avoiding me. Looking like you do, and with your mouth?” A grin curls over his lips and in one swift, fluid motion he has me off my feet, urging me to wrap my legs around his hips before he strides into the walk-in shower.

“Cass!” I protest with a nervous laugh, the water soaking my back and hair as he finally lets my feet drop to the floor. “I can walk, you know. I’m not broken.”

“No, but you are mine. I can carry you if I want,” he retorts. Instead of letting me reply, he drags me against him, his fingers burying themselves in my hair so he can yank my head back and find my mouth with his. “You always taste so good,” he purrs, not breaking away.

I whine into the kiss when he nips my lip, standing on my tiptoes in an attempt to do the same. But Cass is too quick for me and jerks back, a grin on his face and his eyes dancing with mischief. “Too slow, sweetheart,” he teases. His hands find my hips and he pushes me backward until my knees hit the bench stretching along the far wall of the shower.

“What are you—” My question dies on my lips as Cass grabs the handheld shower head, unhooks it from the wall and drops to his knees lightly on the tile floor. He flashes a smirk my way, and with one hand drags me forward on the bench until my shoulders hit the wall and my ass is on the very edge.

“Come on, you’re a smart girl,” he goads, letting the warm water run up and over my thighs. “You can figure it out. Tell me if this is too hot or cold, all right princess?” From the floor, he moves the shower head up my legs, over my stomach and further up, his hand following to smooth along my now-soaking wet skin.

But his motives turn a little less innocent when he leans over me, the water trailing over my breasts and down to my hips. His free hand follows that path too, fingers

teasing my nipples and cupping my breasts as he takes his damn time.

“Cass...” I hate the way I sound whiny, and in the darkness I can’t quite see his expression, though I can hear his chuckle.

“Impatient little brat. Unless you’re going to wrestle this away from me and force me to be the one on my back...you’ll take what I give you.” His dark, promising tone makes me shudder, and his fingers curl around my throat for a moment, flexing, before he lets go.

Once more he kneels between my thighs, and I gasp when the water trickles down the sensitive skin between my legs. He’s careful, not quite letting the water go where I’m the most anxious for it, and he trails his fingers over my slit teasingly.

“Such a pretty pussy,” Cass murmurs, barely audible over my heartbeat and the rush of water in the shower. “Do you know how it makes me feel to know it’s all for me now?”

“Oh, I see we’re making assumptions,” I can’t help but taunt. “I don’t know, Cass. Maybe there’s some other murderer out there with a pretty face and—” He spreads my folds with his fingers and angles the shower head just right, cutting off my words and sending all thoughts of goading him right out of my head.

“You were saying?” he asks, pinning me in place with his arm over my hip. “Come on, Winnie. You can’t be out of words just yet.” But I am, because I’ve clearly led the sheltered life of someone who’s never used an adjustable shower head for its intended purpose.

“ Fuck !” I reply, emphasizing the word. I can’t help but writhe on the bench, and I reach out, only for him to lift his free hand to push my hand away.

“You don’t need to touch me yet, pretty girl. Why don’t you play with yourself for me, hmm? Show me how you touch yourself when I’m not around.” It takes a few seconds for his words to process through my brain, and he takes pity on me by lifting his hand and pressing mine against my upper body. Finally, that helps me get the message, and he goes right back to spreading me open for him and focuses the rush of water against my clit once I reach up to trace my fingers over my nipples.

“Like you mean it.” He chuckles, prompting me to make a face at him. But I do what he says, my touch becoming more insistent, and he rewards me with his thumb swiping over my clit. “Good girl.” Leaning in, he moves the shower head away enough that he can lick up my slit, drawing a startled yelp from me as I arch off the wall.

“You like my mouth on your pussy, don’t you?” It’s clearly a rhetorical question, and I stare at him in the darkness, watching him move as he licks me again. Soon his tongue has me writhing and panting; the addition of the water has me urging him onward with small movements of my hips.

Cassian doesn’t disappoint. His tongue licks against me, and when he thrusts it into me to taste as much of me as he can, it’s quickly joined by his fingers. The shower head ends up lying on the bench near my thigh, but I barely notice as he yanks my thighs wider with a growl.

“Gorgeous girl,” he praises. “I love it when you’re like this for me. I love being reminded that you really are all mine.” Without hesitating, Cass leans forward again, and I yelp at the long, thorough laps of his tongue against me before he focuses his attention on my clit.

This time I can’t help my fingers sinking into his hair. My free hand digs into my thigh, and my breath comes in quick pants while he sucks and laps at my clit loudly enough to sound incredibly lewd in the small space.

“Are you going to come on my tongue?” he teases, when I can’t keep myself quiet anymore. “Fuck, pretty girl, that’s really all I want. I want to taste you on my tongue while you come for me. Can you do that?”

“Maybe if you ask nicely,” I huff, voice breathy.

“Maybe I won’t ask at all.” He grabs the shower head and shoves it between my thighs, the pressure stronger than I expect as the water sprays against me. I cry out, my fingers tightening, and unconsciously I urge his face back toward me, prompting him to let out a pleased laugh.

“Don’t worry, Winnie. I know what I’m doing.” He alternates between his tongue and the water, and sometimes his fingers, pushing me further and further out of my mind with every second that ticks by.

I groan, now really unable to keep still. “Oh, fuck! Cass, I think you’re killing me. I’m dying. I’m seriously?—”

“A needy little brat.” Once more the shower head clatters against the tile and he drags my hips off of the bench entirely, so his arms are the only thing holding me up with my thighs hooked over his shoulders. He shoves three fingers into me and mercilessly licks my clit, fucking me open so effortlessly and so thoroughly that I have no chance.

I come with his name on my lips and my voice echoing around the bathroom. His tongue joins his fingers and he licks my pussy through my orgasm, drawing it out for as long as possible until I’m a panting, writhing mess who probably can’t even hold herself upright.

Not that Cassian needs me to.

Before I can register what's happening, he's the one on the bench and he has me straddling his thighs. Both of us are soaked from the shower, and I'm panting as he drags me down.

"Cass—" I begin, but he doesn't need my input. He easily lines himself up, and when he tugs me down again, it's so I can sink down onto his cock. He doesn't let up, doesn't stop maneuvering me until I'm fully seated on his lap and feeling a little stupid from how perfectly he's filling me up. Then he moves, rolling his hips upward once to get a feel for it.

After that, all I can do is bury my face in his shoulder and try not to be so loud while he fucks me. It's a losing battle, though. Especially with the way he's nipping and biting at any part of my neck or shoulder that he can reach and his hands are gripping me like he never intends to let go.

"Fuck, you're so perfect for me, aren't you Winnie?" His voice is strained, breaths coming fast, just like mine.

"Y-you should prove it then," I tell him, reaching up to twine my arms around his neck and drag his face down to mine. With my eyes wide, I can barely make out the glint of his in the darkness, and a particularly sharp roll of his hips makes me whine.

"How?"

"Come for me this time," I murmur. "Please, Cass? Just like this?"

"Just like this," he agrees without hesitation, and I can feel the intent, the new fervor in his movements as he fucks me. He doesn't last long, and I don't expect him to. With a snarled curse and a nip to my throat, he comes, dragging me down and holding me as tightly against him as he can while I pant and watch his face to see the myriad of emotions there.

God, he really is perfect.

When he finally shifts, it's only to relax his hold on me, though he doesn't let me move. Instead, he opens his eyes and leans forward, lips finding mine easily. "Perfect," he purrs again, reaching out and grabbing the shower head. He lifts it, letting the water trail over my hair and shoulders, causing me to squirm on his lap.

"You only say that when you don't think I'm a brat," I point out, my arms still over his shoulders. "So I'm not sure I believe you mean it."

"Yeah?" He laughs, and grabs the shampoo and conditioner from the shelf above us, still not letting me go anywhere. "Then the next time I have you over my lap and I'm spanking your pretty ass until you cry, I'll remind you then how perfect you are with tears running down your face too. Now tilt your head so I can wash your hair, princess."

Chapter

Twenty-Four

My phone going off isn't exactly how I want to wake up. With my nose smooshed against Cass's shoulder, I take a deep breath of his scent; the lingering aroma of his cologne is a welcome warmth in my nose. In that moment, I decide to ignore my phone, figuring there's only a few seconds left of it going off, anyway.

Thankfully, I'm right. My phone goes silent and I let out a breath against Cass's skin, relieved it didn't wake him up.

Until it starts going off again.

The moment Cass's breathing changes, I sit up just enough to snatch my phone off the nightstand, glaring down at it. I should've guessed before now that it would be Reagan, because my mother doesn't love me, and Lou has the manners to just leave a damn message if I don't pick up at seven forty-two am.

But not Reagan, who may have learned her social graces from emotionally stunted baboons.

Just before it goes to voicemail again, I slide my thumb across the screen and flop back down onto the bed beside Cass with a sighed, "Hello?" My tone makes it clear I'm not particularly amused or thrilled about her call, and I'm not surprised when she greets me with apologies.

“ Sorry, I’m so sorry, Winnie .” To her credit, Reagan really does sound regretful and guilty. “ I know it’s early as hell. But I have a babysitting job booked for tonight, and I have to cancel on them. I have strep and the girl I’m supposed to babysit gets sick so easily.” She rambles for a couple minutes, while I just gaze up at the ceiling and listen to the cats run around in the hallway like they’re on meth.

“ Could you take the job for me?” she finally asks, wrapping up her rant. “ It’s just for a few hours. Her parents are going out on a date and they won’t be long. I feel like shit , and I don’t want them to have to cancel when they’ve been planning this for weeks.” There she goes again, and I finally take a breath and open my mouth, prepared to argue with her.

“Reagan, come on. It’s Halloween. I know that sucks and everything, but I have plans.” I don’t exactly have plans, since I refuse to treat today like a holiday. Although... Turning to look at Cassian, I suddenly feel like—for the first time in years—October isn’t as bleak and shitty as it has been for the last decade or so.

Because right now I really don’t care that my mom is as far away from me as she can manage. I don’t care that I’m here without any other family in this too-big house that looks like something out of Better Homes and Gardens magazine with all the charm and none of the personality I crave.

With a jolt, I realize he’s awake and staring at me. Cass’s head is tilted just enough to watch me while maintaining the stillness he’s so good at.

“ I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. Seriously, if it was any other family I wouldn’t even ask. Is there any way you could do it? Please? Three hours max, okay?” I don’t know if I’ve ever heard her this desperate, or this close to crying. Not since she was a kid, at least, demanding her parents let me stay the night so we could watch movies and have a real sleepover.

“What time?” I see the hint of a frown on Cass’s face and grimace at him. He doesn’t understand how sad and pathetic Reagan sounds right now. If he had a heart, he wouldn’t be able to say no either.

“ Eight to eleven. That’s all, just three hours and then her parents will be home.” There’s a rush of relief in her voice, and she lets out a heavy breath. “ God, I’m so sorry. Will you do it for me? Please? I’ll owe you so hard.”

“Next time Lou wants a babysitter last minute and Scott’s in a mood, I’m making you do it. And I get paid for this tonight, not you. Plus, you owe me coffee. Not shitty coffee, either. The good stuff from the other end of town.” I really don’t want to babysit, but I really don’t have much of a choice. At least, it certainly feels like I don’t.

“ Anything. I’ll cover for you anytime. Promise . Shit, Winnie, thank you so much. You’re a literal lifesaver ? —”

“Sure,” I agree flatly. “Just go take some medicine or something so you’re better fast. Better yet, go to the urgent care center and get a shot in your ass so you’re better real fast .” I can see Cass roll his eyes at me, looking baleful, and I’m glad he hasn’t started what I’m sure is a long list of verbal complaints yet. “Text me the address and everything. Her parents know it’ll be me and not you?”

Reagan assures me she’s gotten everything covered, and promises to send me the address. Which she does, while we’re still on the phone. Finally, amidst another round of apologies, I manage to hang up on her without seeming too rude, before flopping back down on the bed with a groan.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I mutter, my eyes closed.

“How do you know I’m looking at you?” Cass sounds amused, and he plucks my

phone out of my fingers a few seconds before I hear the soft sound of it being set down on the nightstand.

“I can feel it.” Something in me uncurls, relaxing, when Cass pulls me into his embrace and I fit along him perfectly, with his body warm against mine. I really do like him without clothes on. I love seeing the marks I leave on his skin, and being given the opportunity to touch him and make more.

To make him seem like mine .

But the thought makes my stomach twist and I can’t help but remember all the things he’s said to me in the past few days, even as my fingers brush over his arm.

He killed Carissa for me.

He would’ve killed my dad for me.

“Can I ask you something?” I murmur, though I’m not surprised when he doesn’t answer. I barrel onward anyway, having already learned not to take the silence personally. “Have you umm...” I trail off, suddenly unsure if I want the answer to my question.

But what the hell. In for a penny, in for a dozen buried bodies, right?

“Have you killed other people?” My words hang in the air of my room, and the only sound is the cats nearby, who still miraculously have way too much energy this early in the morning.

My eyes open when he nuzzles my shoulder, his lips brushing lightly over my skin. “Yes,” Cass breathes against me. His hands shift, though he only moves to splay his fingers over as much of me as he can and hold me tightly against him.

As if he thinks I might run away.

“Anyone I know?”

“No.” He’s either exceptionally good at simple answers, or very bad at conversation. Maybe both. He doesn’t ramble or try to explain. He just answers my questions.

“And you really aren’t the one killing?—”

“No.” This time there’s frustration in his tone and I roll over to face him, eyes narrowed.

“Don’t sound like that. I believe you, okay? I just wanted to ask again. To see if anything had...changed.” Between us, I don’t add. I just want to see if he was lying before to avoid frightening me away.

Cass doesn’t speak.

His answer doesn’t change.

“Why?” When Cass doesn’t answer, I realize I should probably elaborate. “Why did you kill the other people? Did they do something to you? Did they?—”

“Because I wanted to.” He says it so easily and reaches out to stroke my hair back from my face. “If you think the only time I’ve killed someone is because they’ve hurt me, threatened me, or given me reason to, then I have some bad news for you.” He smiles ever so slightly and runs his thumb over my lower lip.

“What if you decide you want to kill me?”

I don’t expect the snort, or the quick roll of his eyes. Nor do I expect him to cup my

face in his hand, his fingers warm against my face. Cass kisses me sweetly, teasing at the seam of my lips until I'm panting and grabbing at his hand to urge his touch lower. All thoughts of going back to sleep are quickly fading from my mind, and judging by the feeling of him against me, I'm not alone in that.

"If I'm going to kill you, Winnie, then I might as well just kill myself." His words make my stomach twist uncomfortably, nervously, and with an excitement that doesn't feel healthy. "Since you're the reason for everything I've done. Besides, it took me this long to make you see that you're mine. Why would I go and fuck it all up by killing you, when I'm planning on you making my life hell for a very long time?"

"That sounds like you're about to propose to me," I can't help but quip, stroking my fingers over his chest. "You got a ring somewhere on you right now?"

"No. I'm woefully underprepared. I estimated it taking a few more days before you were willing to commit to me forever, Winnie." His grin is wicked and sharp, and he moves in to kiss me again.

Just before he can, however, I ask softly, "What if I say no?"

His answer is a breathy chuckle against my mouth, as his fingers curl over my hip to keep me pressed to him. "What makes you think I'd let you?"

Chapter

Twenty-Five

Leaning on my steering wheel with my eyes tracking a group of kids prancing around with pumpkin-shaped buckets makes me think that the quality of Halloween costumes has certainly gone down this year. Both in creativity and in quality.

Three little girls in the same Hello Kitty costume walk together, their hair fixed with the same exact bows as three identical white tails nearly drag along the ground. Beyond them I see two superheroes, a super villain, and a questionable boy with a blond ponytail who could be anything from a demon to a nun.

“You poor, stunted little gremlins.” I sigh, pining for the old days of Halloween, back when Mom dressed me up as a respectable and recognizable Pikachu .

Complete with my face painted yellow and cheeks stamped with red. It’s a fond memory, though Lou was the one who actually took me trick-or-treating that night. And no matter how much I begged, she refused to carry around an apple to throw at people while yelling “ I choose you!” at every house we got to. I told her she killed my dreams.

She told me they deserved to die.

The same way Dad did. The small voice in my head isn’t so friendly, and I shake my head to clear it before opening my door with my sneaker. It’s unseasonably warm this year for Halloween, and I tend to run hot. That, combined with how much I’d rather

be on a date with Cass, in bed with Cass, in a cemetery with Cass, or just with Cass, inspired me to just wear shorts and his hoodie I stole when he was in the shower.

I usually try to look semi-presentable when I babysit. Or rather, when I used to babysit. My pride keeps me from doing it anymore, save for Scott. He has family privilege, and all. Normally on Halloween I'd be getting drunk and passing out, or trying to drown myself in the shower with Mom anywhere but here.

Instead, I'm going back to the job I never quite enjoyed on what's pretty much my least favorite night of the year.

While the house was easy enough to find, this part of Hayden Field isn't one I'm too familiar with. My steps take me up to the cracked porch of the small, two-story home, and I glance around the neighborhood while worrying at my lower lip.

It's not exactly...the great side of town. When I was younger, Lou would never have let me babysit here, I'm sure. Which is definitely why I've never really been to this area. I've seen worse, sure. But not here in the town I grew up in. The houses have all seen better days, with peeling paint, cracked porches, and chain-link fences that look pretty fragile in some places. Half of the houses have their lights off, showing they either aren't there or don't want sugar-hyped children on their porch to froth at the mouth and scream "trick-or-treat!" while slamming the doorbell.

Relatable, honestly. I also keep my light off on Halloween, and I avoid costumed kids like the plague. Absently I knock on the door, foot scuffing over a crack on the porch while I wait and listen for noise inside. Small footsteps that sound rushed meet my ears, and within a few seconds, the door creaks open on its hinges in front of me.

The little girl—in her pumpkin and bat pjs and ponytail—gazes up at me with solemn grey eyes. She can't be more than eight, though I hadn't actually thought to ask at seven forty-two this morning. Or at any other point during the day.

But in my defense, I'd been busy.

"Hello," I greet, giving the girl a little wave. "You must be Sophie, right?" The little girl nods, but stays otherwise silent. "I'm Winnie. I'm your replacement babysitter for the night."

Sophie continues to just look at me, then glances toward the interior of the house. She seems unsure of something, but finally unlocks the storm door and steps back, letting me walk inside.

My first thought is that this place smells like an ad for scented candles. The second is that under the artificial cookie smell, it's... musty in here. Swallowing, I remind myself not to judge. I'm just being overly-critical because of how little I want to be here.

"So what are we doing tonight while your parents are out?" I ask, trailing after Sophie as she walks down the hallway. She doesn't reply, only turns into a room where I can hear the sound of a television and something cooking. "Are you cooking something?" A bolt of surprise goes through me. "I can make..."

When I turn into the kitchen after her, my words die on my lips.

Reagan is standing at the stove, frying up diced potatoes in oil. She ladles out the seasoned cubes as I watch, dumbfounded, before she turns and grins in my direction. "Surprise!" Reagan laughs, eyes dancing with delight.

I, however, am the opposite of delighted. "Reagan, what are you doing here?" I demand, a little curtly. The unhappiness in my tone is enough to make her smile wilt, and she goes back to ladling out potatoes onto a paper-towel covered plate. "You literally told me you had strep, so you needed me to take over for you. Remember?"

“Yeah, and I did what you said. I got in at urgent care, got a shot, and it kicked in real quick. Honestly, I wasn’t sure I was going to come until about an hour ago,” she admits. Her smile turns apologetic when she looks my way again. “And I figured it was too late to ask you to cancel. You can still have the money, by the way. I just thought we could hang out tonight. Sophie would love the extra company, right?” She turns her look on Sophie, who isn’t looking at her.

Instead, the little girl is looking at me with big doe eyes that seem to be trying to tell me something. Unfortunately, I don’t speak silent child anymore.

I offer her a smile, still trying to decide if I should just turn around and walk out. Sure, Reagan might get upset about it, but it’s not like she really needs me here. Not when she herself looks to be totally fine.

“I had plans tonight, you know.” Striding over to the table, I drop into one of the uncomfortable wooden chairs, eyes on Reagan as she cooks. “I know I normally don’t, but I did this time. It’s only a fifteen minute drive from my house to here. You absolutely could’ve called me or texted me that you were doing better.”

“Seventeen.” The mumbled word is low enough that I barely hear her, and I blink up at my so-called friend in surprise.

“Seventeen what ?” I demand. Sophie wanders over to sit down beside me, still looking at me like she’s possessed and silently asking for an exorcism.

God, I don’t miss babysitting. Sure, the diner sucks in its own ways, but I don’t have to figure out what kids really want anymore. Or if they’re about to turn feral. Still, I offer a tiny smile that Sophie doesn’t return, cementing my belief that she’s possessed.

Reagan walks over and sets down the plate of fried potatoes and another plate of

grilled chicken doused in marinara and slices of mozzarella cheese. “Doesn’t matter.” Sitting down heavily, she sighs and drops her chin into her hands to gaze apologetically in my direction. “Sorry. I didn’t think you’d be mad,” she admits. Her voice is soft and I watch Sophie stab a piece of chicken for herself, then grab a handful of potato chunks with her bare hand.

“Solid choice,” I tell her in a whisper when she squeezes sour cream out of its container onto the potatoes. The smile she gives me is the first I’ve seen from her, and I have to admit that she seems like a cute kid. “I just wish you would’ve told me. Instead of me driving over here for nothing.” Though I can still salvage my night if I leave now, I suppose.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I wrestle it free as Reagan slides a piece of chicken onto my plate. I mumble my thanks and swipe my thumb across my phone, seeing the message from Cass and frown.

Since you’re busy, I’m heading up to Akron for a bit. I’ll be back by the time you are. See you soon.

Suddenly, my main reason for leaving has driven away. Not that I’ll let that stop me. I text him back quickly, updating him but telling him he doesn’t need to rush or cancel his plans. I’ll be here for a few minutes to eat dinner, anyway. Then I can wait at home for him to get back.

“You know, my babysitter never let me text at the table.” Reagan chuckles, her mouth full of chicken.

“Your babysitter is retired and was never very good at following her own rules.” I scan Cass’s return message, silently agreeing with his question of why the hell Reagan hadn’t told me I could stay home.

Don't know. She's weird sometimes.

She's fucking obsessed with you.

I don't know how to answer that, so I drop my phone onto the table, face down, and move to cut up my chicken. "I'm not going to stay since you're here," I inform Reagan, not letting myself phrase it as a question. "Honestly, there are a million places I'd rather be than babysitting."

Glancing at Sophie, I add, "No offense. You seem cool, and I would've killed to have a kid like you with manners back when this was my job." It's only partially a lie; I'd absolutely rather have this than a feral, screaming monster who wouldn't listen to a word I'd say.

Like Reagan.

"Stay for a bit. For one movie. Come on, please?" It's hard to ignore Reagan's wide, begging eyes and she thumps her elbows onto the table to clench her fingers together in a pleading gesture. "Just one, then I'll finish out the night."

"Why?" Absently I take another bite, noting that Reagan's food all tastes a little too salty to me. Clearly I should've taught her how to cook when we were younger, and it's a failing that I'm sure will go on my résumé.

"Because I don't feel great and I miss you? I haven't seen you in a few days. And I feel guilty. That's why I made dinner. Plus I rented a movie you like, and I got chocolate-covered raisins. Which are gross, by the way, but I made the sacrifice." She spits out the words in a ramble as I chew and keeps going when I push to my feet to get a glass of water.

"Why do you feel guilty? We've gone a week without seeing each other before."

Coming back to the table, I perch on the edge of the wood, my hand held out for the sour cream Sophie hands over without a word. “Thanks, Soph.”

“I feel guilty about Manic Manor . I freaked out in the slaughterhouse and ran. So I feel responsible for that guy chasing you around with a knife. I should’ve stayed.” Her voice is heavy with conviction, but I just watch her as I eat.

“Not your fault,” I mutter finally. But now I’m the one feeling guilty. I should’ve made more of an effort to make sure she was okay, and to let her know I was fine. Instead of having her worry and giving her half-assed explanations over text for the whole night, then ignoring her completely. “One movie. And it’s a short movie. Hour and a half max,” I bargain, killing off three potato chunks in one go.

“Deal.” Her grin is quick and has the potential to be contagious, but I’m more interested in the relief in her eyes. Is it really such a big deal, I wonder, for me to stay and watch a movie with her? I go through possibilities in my head as to why, and consider that she might be a little freaked out about the neighborhood and being here alone.

Though why take this job if she didn’t love the location?

Or maybe Reagan really is just feeling lonely this year. To my knowledge, it’s the first Halloween she’s had without a boyfriend in years, and with her parents out of town, she’s alone in a big, empty house. Only, she doesn’t love it like I do.

That thought drives my guilt deeper and I settle back in my chair, glaring at my chicken and wondering how fast I can convince them to eat and if I can somehow increase the playback speed of whatever movie she wants to watch to get myself out of here even a few minutes faster. Not that I’ll tell her I’d rather be in my bed, with my cats and a horror movie, than here in this house that smells of musty sugar cookies.

We're halfway through one of my least favorite Scooby Doo movies and I'm practicing my dissociating skills when Reagan finally says something from the other end of the sofa. Though the words are fuzzy in my brain, so I blink a few times and reluctantly drag myself back to Earth.

"Hmm?" I ask, turning to glance at her. Between us, Sophie is curled up under a giraffe-patterned blanket, with a stuffed giraffe in her arms, and leaning on my shoulder. She hasn't said a word since the movie started, though as far as I know, she's still awake and interested in whatever's happening on screen.

"I was asking about your plans tonight." Reagan gives me that apologetic, sheepish smile again. "Were they with that guy? The one from Manic Manor?"

"I didn't realize you remembered him." Absently, I pick at a loose string on the arm of the threadbare couch. "Yeah. That was the first time we'd seen each other in a while, and we've been sort of reconnecting. It's nice." The words are as honest as I'm willing to be with her.

"Was he the one who took you home after what happened in the slaughterhouse?" She isn't looking at me anymore, and her eyes are fixed on the screen, though her distracted expression makes me wonder if she's actually paying attention.

"Yeah. He was outside. He'd just gone through and I ran into him." The partial lie comes easily to my lips, and I turn to look at the TV as well, my hand inching toward my phone. My last message to Cass had gone unanswered, and I definitely don't want to be the stereotypical, needy girlfriend.

Hopefully he's having a better night in Akron than I am here.

"He seemed weird." It takes her a moment to say the words. "I don't know...he just seemed really off when he was talking to you. You looked sort of nervous of him,

too. Hey, wasn't he there when Lacey was killed?"

Surprised, I glance down at Sophie, who's very much awake and can hear everything Reagan is saying. "Maybe we can have this conversation another time?" I hint, glaring at Reagan to try to communicate that this is turning into nightmare inducing territory for little kids.

She looks down as well, biting her lip sheepishly, and mumbles an apology to Sophie before fidgeting uncomfortably on her side of the couch.

"Can't believe you intimidated them off with a hammer you found on the floor," she says with a snort a few minutes later. But I'm back to dissociating, so the words barely sink in. Reagan getting up gets my attention, though, and I blink up at her. "I'm going to go disrespect the upstairs bathroom," she says in reply to my questioning look.

"Why upstairs?"

"It's nicer." With a mock salute, she disappears into the hallway, her footsteps on the stairs thumping against my eardrums a second later.

Something feels off about what she said, but for some reason my brain isn't working well enough tonight to figure out what exactly. Though I'm starting to wonder if everything seems suspicious because I'm so frustrated with how my night is going.

"She was acting strange before you got here." Sophie's voice is tiny and almost inaudible over the movie, but I look down at her, processing her words.

"What?"

"Reagan wasn't being nice. She told me I had to get you to come in, that I'd be in

trouble if you didn't. She wasn't being nice ." Sophie repeats that part, like it's the most important one. "I'm happy you're here," she adds, scooting closer to me and wrapping her arms around mine. "She wasn't acting okay when you weren't. Then she kept checking the time and snapping at me. I was scared."

My stomach twists as I look at her, and suddenly the part of Reagan's statement that had me confused clicks into place.

"Okay, Sophie," I say, easing to my feet. "Reagan just gets a little anxious sometimes. Everything's fine, all right?" Smiling, reach out to tap the back of her hand. "It wasn't cool of her to make you scared, and I'll make sure she knows that. Here." I hand her the remote, and the rest of my box of raisins, which she surprisingly enjoys. "You can totally change this if you want. I'll go yell at Reagan while she's trapped in the bathroom."

Sophie doesn't return my teasing smile, and I can't find the words to reassure her as she huddles under the blanket. "Don't be gone long," she whispers. "I don't want to be alone with her tonight if she's going to get mad and anxious again."

"Hey, no worries, okay?" It's hard to maintain my facade of calmness, but I manage. "I won't leave until your parents come home. Reagan said they'll be back by eleven, right?" I check my phone, happy to see that it's already ten forty-one.

"What?" Sophie looks up at me, confused. "What do you mean?"

"What do you mean?" I ask, already on my way to the stairs. "Reagan said?—"

"My parents won't be back until tomorrow morning." Sophie cuts me off in a small voice. "Reagan knows that, too. She had a check in with them right before you got here, and confirmed they won't be here until nine in the morning, at least."

For a few seconds, all I can do is stand there with the movie playing in the background. The stark light shines across Sophie's face as she stares at me, but I'm trying to not give her any sort of reaction to scare her.

Not until I figure out what's going on with Reagan, anyway. There's a chance Sophie's wrong or lying. Or maybe Reagan misunderstood...something.

Though I'm not sure what could be confusing about when Sophie's parents are coming home. "I'll yell at her for you," I say again, forcing myself to start up the stairs. "Don't worry, Soph. Everything's all good."

Except somehow, I'm really starting to doubt it is.

Chapter

Twenty-Six

Walking up the stairs toward where I hope the bathroom is, feels like it drags on for too long. I drag my feet down the hallway, finding a bedroom that has to be Sophie's, and another with the door partially closed. That one I push open, revealing a larger bedroom bereft of many personal touches. A mirror on the far wall over the dresser shows me my wary expression, and I frown at myself before looking at the other door in the room.

"Reagan?" I call, no louder than I need to. "You in there?" I'm not sure where else she can be. Especially with the door closed and the light on.

But she doesn't answer me. Instead, I have to walk further into the room, rubbing my arm through Cass's hoodie and setting my teeth against the bad feelings bubbling to life in my chest. "Reagan?" I call again, and I barely get her name out of my mouth before the door opens, revealing her surprised expression.

"I didn't think you cared enough to come check on me," she says, a smiling curling over her face. "Your concern for my well being is noted and very appreciated." She wiggles her eyebrows at me, her customary grin back on her face.

Now it's my turn to stay quiet. I stare at her, wondering whether I should pretend I don't have questions and just go downstairs and watch the rest of the movie with her, or if I should let her know.

It definitely feels like one of my options might not end up in my favor, but I'm not sure what else to do.

"Can I talk to you?" My words are slow, measured, and even. I don't want to sound like I'm accusing her of anything. Not yet. "Up here, where Sophie doesn't give us those big sad eyes?" I smile at her, as if sharing an inside joke, and her own grin only gets wider.

"Always." Stiffly, Reagan plops down on the edge of the bed, trying to hide her nervousness. But she's not that good of an actor when she's being confronted directly, and it only makes my heart race faster to see that she's clearly expecting the worst.

"Sophie says her parents aren't coming back until late tomorrow morning." Reagan blinks at my words, and when she looks away from me to study the comforter beside her, I know I'm right. "Even though I swore you told me that they'd be back by eleven tonight. Remember?" I want to give her a way out, an excuse. Anything to make this less than what I'm thinking.

"They changed their minds," Reagan tells me, looking guilty. "They called right before you got here. I figured I wouldn't say anything and you could still leave after the movie was over. I didn't want to make you feel like you had to stay all night, too." Her words are convincing, and she barely fidgets as I watch her, making this seem almost believable.

But not quite.

"Oh, yeah?" I move to lean against the dresser, hip cocked against it. "That's fair, I guess." I know she's lying, but her shoulders slump slightly and she pushes to her feet.

“Sorry,” Reagan chuckles. “Let’s go finish Scooby Doo and the... ” she trails off, squinting. “Yeah, okay, I have no idea which one we’re watching. The only one that really matters is Zombie Island . That’s what you’ve always said, right?” She flashes me a quick smile that I don’t return.

I roll my shoulders in a shrug. “Sure. Can I ask you one more question, though?” She’s already walking, and by the time she stops, she’s level with me and glances up at me, her eyes curious.

“You can ask me anything, Winnie,” Reagan murmurs earnestly. “You should know that.”

But I don’t know that. And whatever’s going on here isn’t making me believe it, either. I scuff my foot along the floor, gazing over at the bed as I think.

There’s no easy out for this one.

Not one that I’ll believe, anyway.

“How’d you know?” The question comes out slow and patient. But Reagan just looks at me.

“How did I know what?”

If I ask her this, if I finish my question, there’s no going back from it. My stomach twists and flips, like my own internal Olympic gymnast is kicking at my insides when I gaze at Reagan with everything in me screaming to make up a lie or brush off my question.

Because this won’t end well.

It can't .

“How'd you know I found a hammer in the slaughterhouse?”

She doesn't answer. Reagan stares at me owlshly, and I can almost see the excuses forming behind her eyes. But I shake my head, frowning. “Don't lie to me, Reagan. I didn't tell you that, so don't try to tell me that I did. The only person who knew about it was Cass.”

Reagan looks down at the floor, studying the carpet like we'll be tested on it later.

“Can't you just let it go?” she murmurs. “Everything would be so much easier if you let it go.”

I swallow, taking a deep breath as I try not to step away from her. That's enough of an answer for me, and I want to scream at her.

“Fine.” I won't let it go—obviously—but I'm not prepared for an all out confrontation with Reagan, right now. “We'll talk about it some other time.” I move toward her, only for her to step backward, blocking the door with her slim frame.

She glances up at me, guilt across her features, and worries at her bottom lip. “I can't...let you leave,” Reagan tells me finally. “I'm sorry, Winnie. But this is the only plan I can think of. I just need your help. Just for tonight, okay?”

Somehow I knew this was going to go poorly. But looking at her in the doorway, her eyes bright with anxiety and something else, I worry that this is going to go even worse than I'd expected.

“No. Move , Reagan. I'm leaving and I'm taking Sophie with me. I don't know what's going on with you, but?—”

“Of course you don’t.” Her eyes widen, and her voice is a low, suddenly disdainful sneer that makes me take a step back. “Because you’re too distracted to pay attention to me anymore.”

I have no idea what she’s talking about, and I open my mouth to say so, only for her to start speaking again.

“I don’t know what else I have to do, Winnie.” She laughs ruefully, reaching up to anxiously comb her fingers through her hair. “I tried inviting you to everything. I’ve tried showing up so you’ll hang out with me. I even applied for a job at the diner. But you just never seem to notice. Frankly?” She closes her eyes hard. “It’s pretty shitty of you.”

“Excuse me?” Indignation wars with my sudden fear and I step closer to her, shoulders stiff. “Pretty shitty of me? What are you talking about, Reagan? We’re friends, but we’re not attached at the damn hip. I have a life?—”

“No you don’t.” She cuts me off sharply and opens her eyes, hands falling to her sides before she moves to clasp them behind her back. “Get real, Winnie. Your mom hates your guts, and you’re just a free babysitter for your sister.”

The words hurt, turning my stomach into an aching, twisting knot.

“You work at a diner and live in your mom’s house. You barely have friends, and you have no life plans. You don’t have a life.” Reagan barks out a laugh and edges toward me. “God, I’ve been trying for years to help you. But you’re so difficult, you know that? You don’t realize everything I do for you.”

“Everything you do for me?” I think back on her constant texts and invitations, about her need to know what I’m doing way too often and penchant for nosing into my business. “What the hell are you talking about? We’re friends, Reagan, but let’s not

act like you've gone out of your way for me."

"You really don't think so?" She seems...surprised. Maybe even offended. Again she bites her lip, chewing on it until I'm sure it's going to bleed. "I have, though. You hated Lacey. You told me once that she was the meanest, shittiest girl you'd ever babysat. She hit you that once, remember? And lied to her parents about you?"

My fingers suddenly feel numb and cold, as if the blood is receding from them even as I flex my hands at her words.

"Yeah, but I mean...So what? She was just a kid, Reagan." My words come out softer than I intend, and suddenly I wish I'd thought to message Cass when I realized something was off.

So much for me being smart in bad situations.

"She upset you." Again she takes a step closer to me, prompting me to take a step back. "She deserved it, so don't pretend she didn't. She came into the diner a few weeks ago while you were working. Did you know that?" She sounds excited suddenly, like she's about to tell me some juicy gossip. "She and her shitty little friends. They sat in their booth and made fun of you. They talked about you, about what their parents had said about you. Even when you were nice to them and brought them free extras, they were being cruel, Winnie. " Her words become high and desperate by the end, and my heart is pounding too hard for me to reply.

"What about Edith? She was literally seventy, Reagan. She was nice to me, and left me big tips?—"

"She wouldn't stop hugging you. You don't like hugs from strangers. You barely even let me touch you. And she just wouldn't stop! You're not her grandkid, and yet she was always hugging you as if you wanted her to!"

“She was just kind!” I can’t help yelling, and Reagan steps back, obviously surprised. “She was kind to me, for fuck’s sake! So what if she hugged me? I work in the service industry, it happens!” I can feel my hands shaking at my sides as I look at her, incredulous and disbelieving. “What’s wrong with you?”

It’s the wrong question. Reagan jerks back, her expression shutting down. “You just don’t get it. But it’s fine, I sort of figured you wouldn’t.” She offers me a smile, like she’s forgiving me for something I’m certainly not apologizing for. “I know it’s a lot to take in, and I know you need a bit.”

“A bit?” God, I just can’t help myself. “I’d need a bit if I knew you were collecting my toenails or some shit. But you’re killing people to do me some...some sort of favor? Fuck, Reagan, absolutely not.” I force myself to walk forward, and she takes a few stumbling steps toward the door. “Move,” I snarl. “Or I’ll shove you right down the stairs with me.”

I probably won’t. Maybe. But it sounds good.

“I can’t.” She cringes and bites at her lip again. “I’m sorry, Winnie, I’m sorry. I know it’s not ideal, but I just don’t know what else to do. This was sort of spontaneous but it worked, so I have to go with it.” She’s rambling, explaining something to me that I have no context for.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m just trying to fix it, okay? I’m trying to fix everything, so you won’t have to worry about other people fucking up your life. You can trust me, Winnie, I swear. Let me help you. Let me in, please.” She steps forward, until there are only inches between us.

“I just have to get rid of him first.”

It takes me two seconds to realize what she means. Two seconds too long to stumble away from her when I see her hand isn't empty when it comes around her hip. I open my mouth to shriek, kicking out at her and causing her to nearly fall to the floor.

It's enough. It's just enough that I can slip past Reagan, and I lunge down the hallway towards the railing, reaching out as if it can be an anchor to pull me down the stairs and away from her.

But I didn't get as much of a lead as I thought, and a hand grabs my hair and pulls a scream of pain from my mouth. Not when something small and cold is shoved into my lower back, and the zapping sound of electricity is followed by the worst pain I've ever felt.

And it's certainly not enough when I pitch forward, my limbs no longer working, and my head hits the railing so hard that my world goes completely black and blessedly painless.

Chapter

Twenty-Seven

My head hurts.

My head really, really hurts. Before I even open my eyes I groan, shuddering at the lingering tingles in my body from what was definitely a fucking taser.

“You literally tased me,” I moan, opening my eyes to see the ceiling of the living room. Tilting my head down, I find Reagan sitting on the couch in front of me, but when I try to move, I find I can’t. “And you tied me to a chair.” Letting my head fall back I scoff. “You’re insane, Reagan.”

“Sorry about your head.” Reagan is apparently ignoring my insults, and when she shifts and stands up, I flinch away from her. “No, I-I’m not going to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt you.” She presses an ice pack against my temple, making me hiss and draw back in surprise.

“You have a funny way of showing it. I’m assuming it was you in the slaughterhouse with the knife, yeah?” I’ve used up all of my surprise for the night, so my words are dull and flat. Still I twist my wrists against the chair, realizing she’s zip-tied me.

Like a psycho.

Reagan’s huff of frustration is followed by her shoving the ice pack harder against my face, pulling a hiss of pain from my lips. “I wasn’t going to do anything else, I

just wanted to scare you a bit. I was mad. All he had to do was waltz back into town and you were all over him. You couldn't see anything else once he came back. Why?" She crowds closer to me, reaching out to grip my hair and yank my face to her, forcing me to meet her eyes.

"Why?" she demands. "He almost killed you. He's insane, Winnie! You shouldn't have given him the time of day, and instead of doing the smart thing, you fucked him!"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I have most certainly fucked him a few times." I can't help wanting to have the last word, even right now. "And I hate to tell you this, but you're calling him insane?! As if you're one to talk, right now?"

She jerks back as if I've burned her, eyes wide. "I'm not insane. I'm not," she tells me, dropping the ice pack into my lap. I frown at it, wondering what she expects me to do when my arms and legs are zip-tied to the uncomfortable kitchen chair.

"So what, then?" I try to keep the fear out of my voice, and I watch as Reagan stands beside the couch, picking at its worn fabric. "Are we going to have a heart-to-heart with me tied to a chair? Are you going to yell at me for apparently not giving you the BFF treatment?—"

"Stop it." Her voice is colder than I expect it to be, and she doesn't look at me. "You're really frustrating me. I get that you can't see how I'm doing this for you. But can't you at least pretend?"

That makes me snort. "Yeah, Reagan. How about you let me get up, and I'll pretend all you want."

Slowly she shakes her head back and forth once, then again. "Like I said, this is the only way I can think of to get him here. I sent him the address, and a picture of you

passed out. I told him not to call the cops. Not that he would.” Her smile is unfriendly and cruel. “What police officer would respond to a call from him ?”

Definitely not the unfriendly detective. But my heart races when I finally connect the dots, and I flex my hands in their bindings. “You want to kill Cass.” It isn’t a question. I don’t need to ask, especially when I see her gaze brighten.

“For you,” she’s quick to add. “I...I understand that you can’t see why right now. But it’s okay, I’m not mad.” She lifts her hands placatingly, surveying my face. “You don’t really love him, you know. How could you? If you can love anyone, you might as well love me.”

Suddenly Cass’s quip about her being in love with me doesn’t seem so far-fetched, and I wonder how in the world things got this far without me noticing. I always thought Reagan and I were just friends. Just...friends of circumstance, since I’d been her babysitter for a few years.

“What if I do love him, though? If I love him, and you kill him, then I’ll certainly never love you.” Rationally, I figure Cass can take care of himself, even if he is coming. But the idea of her actually killing him, of managing to stun him and knock him out before he knows what’s going on, has my insides doing unpleasant twists and turns.

It was the wrong thing to say, judging by her rapidly darkening expression. “Don’t say stupid shit like that,” Reagan whispers, striding closer to me. “Don’t be ungrateful, Winnie.” She reaches out and I flinch away from her, but this time she only grips my face with one hand, the other fumbling at her belt. “I don’t want to be mean to you,” she promises, ignoring my sharp intake of breath when my eyes catch on the dull shine of the knife in her hand.

Fuck.

Fuck, I have no idea what to do. My mouth opens and closes, and I cringe back when she presses the flat of the blade to my cheek. “Just don’t say things like that, okay?” She sounds like she’s begging me for a different answer, like she can threaten me into loving her.

“Reagan, come on.” Even though I’m fully aware that pleading with her won’t do any good, I do it anyway. “This is crazy. Just put the knife down and let me go.” Belatedly, I wonder where Sophie is, and the thought makes my stomach clench painfully. God, I hope Reagan hasn’t hurt her. A pang of guilt goes through me at the idea of her laying dead or dying somewhere in the house.

“I can’t. I can’t, don’t you see? Because I need him to come here so I can get rid of him for you.” Her eyes are bright and feverish, and she leans back just enough so she can meet my eyes, with the tip of the knife against my lower lip. “You understand, right?”

I really don’t. Swallowing, I part my lips just enough to feel the blade press into my flesh, but I’m determined to have the last word, and I refuse to let this go.

“I do.”

The words don’t come from me, and both of us freeze, not breathing, as we stare at each other. It’s only when Reagan straightens and turns, stepping to the side, that I’m able to look past her into the hallway.

Cass leans against the doorframe, his blue eyes bleak and hard as ice. He isn’t looking at me, but rather his gaze is fixed on Reagan standing beside me.

“She has a taser,” I groan, blinking past the ache in my temple. “And a knife?—”

“Don’t talk to him.” Reagan rounds on me, her eyes suddenly wide and furious.

“Don’t fucking talk to him, Winnie! God, I don’t get why you can’t see how fucked up it is that you want anything to do with him!”

“Yeah, I’m the one who can’t see straight. Absolutely.” My words only seem to piss her off more, though, and Reagan reaches out to jerk me back by my hair, my neck aching sharply from the motion and pulling a yelp from my mouth.

“Maybe this really isn’t the time to have the last word, hmm princess?” Cass’s voice holds a warning, and he steps into the room with his hands shoved in his pockets. “I wondered if it was you,” he goes on, his attention all on Reagan. “A few times I thought about saying something to her, but then I brushed it off. I figured she knew you well enough that if she could trust you, then you weren’t a threat.”

“You don’t know anything about me.” Reagan lets go of me, spinning to face him with the knife in her hand. Her fingers are trembling, knuckles white as she takes a step toward him.

Cassian rolls his shoulders in a shrug as I continue to fight the zip ties, my heart racing. He doesn’t seem nervous or afraid of her in the least, but she has a knife. If she manages to hurt him, to kill him?—

I force that thought to freeze in its tracks, instead trying to find some way to get free.

“It was you who called the cops on me that night in her house, wasn’t it?” Cassian takes a step back, and Reagan follows him toward the hallway into the kitchen. “You’ve been spying on her quite a bit lately, and you saw me go in. Let’s see...” He gazes up at the ceiling, thinking, and obviously dismissing any threat Reagan might represent. “You killed Lacey that night, of course. That’s how you showed up at Lou’s door so fast.”

Reagan glances at me and I just give her a blank look in return. “You think you’re so

smart, don't you?" she snaps, running her free hand through her long hair. "I'm helping her, you know. You'll hurt her again. You ruined her life before, and that's all you know how to do."

Cass's brows lift, though he doesn't reply. It's amazing to me that he just seems so...nonchalant. Like this is just a typical weekend for him.

Maybe it is.

"If you say so. Anyway..." He digs into his pocket, revealing his phone. "I'm going to call the cops now. Your kind of crazy is way above my pay grade. You don't mind waiting, right Winnie?" He finally looks at me, and for a brief moment I swear his eyes flash past me, toward the stairs opposite from the hallway he's in.

Unfortunately, whatever he's trying to tell me goes right over my head.

"Don't walk away from me!" But Reagan is too late, and Cass slips out of sight, his steps taking him toward the kitchen. Reagan doesn't even look at me. Instead, she yanks the taser out of her pocket and follows him, more threats loud on her lips.

"Cass—!" A hand covers my mouth just as I start to yell, and I jerk back with a surprised yelp to look up at the unfamiliar face above me.

"Don't scream." The dark-haired man waits for a few seconds, then drops his hand from my mouth. "My name's Virgil. I'm a friend of Cassian's. Though I'll admit, if I'm going to have to climb up drain pipes on my nights off on a regular basis, I might be rethinking that friendship."

"You...climbed the drain pipe?" I ask belatedly, watching as he checks the zip ties on my wrists and ankles. "You should go help him. She has a taser, a knife and?—"

“And he would not thank me for it. Your boyfriend is a problem, you know. If anyone needs help, it’s her.” From his pocket, Virgil pulls out a small utility knife that he flips open to saw through the plastic.

While he does, I look around, barely managing to sit still. “There’s a little girl that lives here,” I murmur, hoping she managed to get away. “I haven’t seen her since Reagan tased me, and I’m afraid?—”

“Sophie is just fine.” Virgil sounds three different kinds of exasperated as he says it, and frees my ankles from the chair just as a crash sounds from the kitchen. I jerk in my seat, terrified for Cass, but Virgil just glances at the hallway. “She’s up in her room with the door locked. Now, please don’t get up yet.” He slices through the last of the zip ties, and shoves me back down when I spring to my feet again, rolling his eyes at me in irritation.

“No, it’s fine...don’t listen to a word I say.” His voice is full of sarcasm as he leans over me, his dark eyes unamused. “My girlfriend made me go to first aid classes with her,” he adds, reaching out to push my hair back from my face and surveying my sore temple. “You probably need to get checked out in the hospital for this. It’s already bruising, and if you die in your sleep from an invisible brain bleed, he’s going to go on some fucked up spree that will end up with him in another psych ward.”

When he steps back I get to my feet, blinking a few times from dizziness and pain. “You seem very cavalier about this,” I point out, reaching out to grab the chair as a crutch to steady myself. Virgil just shrugs, watching me.

Finally I’m able to walk, and I take off quickly toward the kitchen at the sound of Reagan’s scream, rubbing my sore and rubbed-raw wrists. “Cass?!” I call, terrified of what I’ll find when I round the corner.

He could be dying.

He could be dead.

My heart takes offense to that and I slam to a stop in the doorway, my fingers curled around the frame as I try to brace myself for the worst possible outcome. I open my mouth to say his name again, ready to beg Reagan not to hurt him. But when I finally realize what I'm seeing, the words die in my throat.

"Stop!" I finally manage to gasp, lurching into the room. The table is on its side, the chairs scattered, and in the middle of the room Reagan is on her back. She's yowling and scratching at Cassian like some crazed feline while he holds her down with his hands wrapped around her throat.

"Cassian!" Dropping to my knees beside him, I reach out, trying to get him to let go as I hear Reagan start to choke and gasp from the lack of oxygen. Distantly, I hear the sound of sirens, and I briefly wonder who actually called the cops.

"She wants to kill me." Cassian's voice is flat and empty. Colder than I've ever heard it. "You know she would if she had the chance. Why shouldn't I do the same to her?"

"Cass, look at me ." There's no way to break his grip, not when it's like iron around her neck. But slowly he gazes up at me, and I fight not to recoil from the frigid detached look in his eyes. "If you do this, you'll go to prison. Halloween will suck again, and I am not going to be your prison pen pal for the next fifty years. Plus, I'm pretty sure conjugal visits aren't everything they're cracked up to be."

A small smirk flickers over his mouth, and his hands relax just enough for Reagan to take a breath. "I'd claim self defense," he points out, the sirens growing louder as blue and red lights flash through the windows.

"Yeah, no one would believe you."

“She’s right,” Virgil says and sighs from somewhere beside me. “Especially here. Stop strangling little miss insanity down there if you don’t want to end up in handcuffs tonight.” He doesn’t move or physically try to pull Cass off of her, and I can’t help but wonder why, if they’re friends like he says.

Cass slowly sits up, then surges to his feet and yanks Reagan up as well. “Here.” He shoves her at Virgil, who has her in his grip before she can do more than wail her protests. “You take her, then. If I’m the one holding her, someone might get a little trigger happy.”

I can hear voices now, but Cass doesn’t seem to care about them, or the following pounding on the door. “You okay?” he asks, reaching out to brush my hair back from my face.

“You know,” I say, grinning wryly as the front door slams open. “Not my worst Halloween so far.”

Chapter

Twenty-Eight

Within seconds, footsteps thunder down the hallway, and the roar of voices yelling similar statements rings in my ears. Cass's hands go up as two officers round the corner, guns drawn. Virgil hangs onto Reagan, who's doing a very good job of still being insane.

"She attacked me," I tell the cops before they can get the wrong idea. "She was holding me here and told my boyfriend to come here so she could kill him."

"He's not your boyfriend," Reagan sneers. "Jesus Christ, Winnie, what the hell is wrong with you?!" It's crazy to me that she's here acting like she's the wronged party.

"She had these." Virgil tosses the knife and taser to the floor, then steps away from them.

"Okay. Umm..." The cops glance at each other, and one tilts his head. The other holsters his gun and steps forward, handcuffs in his grip.

"Just calm down, okay?" he tells Reagan, holding a hand up as if to placate a wild animal. "We'll get this all figured out."

"And I'm guessing you have evidence that she kidnapped your girlfriend and told you to come here?" Trudeau rounds the corner, looking Reagan over. "That's not

necessary, Herner.” He waves off the officer, who looks unsure. “Does she really look like a threat here?”

“Uh, excuse me? Do you not see my face?” I gesture to my temple, but Trudeau barely looks interested. “The little girl we were babysitting will tell you that we aren’t lying. She was afraid of Reagan. That’s why I confronted her.” When Reagan is let go I take a step back warily.

“You expect me to believe this girl took all of you on with a taser and a knife? Especially you, Mr. Byers?” Trudeau turns his toad-like gaze on Cassian, who hitches a grin over his lips.

“Well, she didn’t win, or you wouldn’t be here.” He leans back against the wall and eyes Trudeau with dislike.

The detective doesn’t relent, but he does have his officers take Reagan outside before telling us to file out behind her. With Trudeau taking up the rear with Cassian, I strain to hear their muttered conversation. But the only thing I hear is Cass’s humorless chuckle, and something like a hissed threat from Trudeau.

“Just keep walking. They’re fine.” Virgil plants his hands on my shoulders when I start to hesitate, and shoves me out the door in a quick, forward march.

“Okay, okay.” Shooing his hands off my shoulders, I don’t miss the quick way he steps back. “You don’t like me,” I comment, and watch as he grimaces.

“I don’t really like most people. But I suppose if you stick around then I’ll have no choice but to grow somewhat attached. And judging by him , you aren’t going anywhere anytime soon. I guess.” He doesn’t really sound thrilled by it. “Don’t take it personally.” I watch as he strides away, to the side of the driveway closest to the cop cars where Sophie is hugging a stuffed elephant to her chest and twisting first one

direction, then the other. Virgil murmurs something that brings a tiny smile to her face, and I can't help letting out a breath of relief.

"She wanted to go in and get you." Cass's voice in my ear is soft and I glance up at him as Trudeau walks past us to go stand near Reagan. I can't hear whatever he's saying to her, and I'm pretty sure I don't care.

"Sophie?" I tilt my head. "You sure?"

"Yeah. She was fully ready to launch a rescue mission and had procured a pair of kid's scissors to cut you free. Virgil told her they might not work and he had something better." I can hear the smile in his words, and I lean into him with a sigh.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I feel like this is my fault. You know she did all of it, right?" Looking at Reagan I see that Trudeau is now the one holding her, and the other two officers are standing with Virgil and Sophie. Though as I watch, one moves toward the growing crowd standing on the sidewalk, throwing out the normal warnings about this being an active crime scene.

Cass nods and reaches up to brush my hair back from my face. "I know, princess. She seems pretty offended that you're mine. Shame." He leans in close and brushes his lips lightly to mine in a sweet, chaste kiss. "We're going to have to talk about this later, you know," he adds shrewdly, eyes narrowing.

Bemused, I tip my head back to narrow my eyes at him. "Excuse me?"

"You went and got yourself tied up, hurt, and had someone confess their psychotic love to you. That's my territory." His tone is teasing, for the most part, with something dark and so very him lingering in the back of his words. God, I really should be more afraid of him.

“You can lecture me on what to look for in the future so I don’t get myself into this situation again. But I’m a visual learner. Also, chocolate helps me focus.” He gives a quick, affectionate roll of his blue eyes and grins at me as Virgil wanders back over.

“The kid’s surprisingly...aggressive. She has some pretty bold thoughts about Reagan and what she did.” He glances back at the little girl, who’s twisting again with her stuffed elephant as the officer next to her rambles on the phone.

But I guess I shouldn’t expect better. With a sigh I leave Virgil and Cassian to their quiet conversation, feeling suddenly tired and older than I am. “Hey,” I tell Sophie, dropping to sit in the grass beside her. “Weird night, huh?”

“Really weird.” She doesn’t quite stop her nervous fidgeting, but she does slow down and I can see her looking at me from the corner of her eyes. “Are you okay?”

“I’m all good. I heard you were ready to lead an armed militia to save me.”

Sophie is quiet for a few seconds. “What’s a militia?” she asks finally, mostly still and actually looking at me instead of pretending not to.

“You’re making me feel old.” I cross my legs under me, leaning forward, just as a flurry of movement catches my attention from near the police cars. Someone shrieks and the movement that catches my eye is Reagan as she lunges for the cop facing the crowd while Trudeau...

Watches.

His expression is thoughtful and closed off, and I realize that with his position behind the car, the crowd on the other side can’t see how he’s not really attempting to stop Reagan.

Did he let her go ? The thought hits me just as his face falls, surprise and panic contorting his features. “No!” he barks, exploding into motion and fumbling for the gun he isn’t carrying.

For a moment I don’t understand his delayed reaction, at least until I turn back to where Reagan went. The officer is on the ground and struggling to his knees, while the other one works to free his own gun. And Reagan, for her part, is holding the stolen gun in both hands, the muzzle dipping with each tremble of her hands but not deviating much from its target.

Me.

“Reagan, stop!” Cass is yelling more than just that, but I can’t hear him over the ringing in my ears. My heart pounds, thrumming through my whole body once.

Twice.

Reagan grins, her lips parting so she can mouth the word sorry into the air between us. I see her fingers shift and I shove to my feet, my body immediately entering flight-or- faster flight mode. “Don’t,” I whisper, knowing she can’t hear me.

Is this how my dad felt, I wonder, in those few seconds while he faced down the muzzle of the gun I held?

Did every possibility in the universe flicker through his head between one heartbeat and the next as his brain screamed at him to do something ?

Was he too shocked to be truly afraid, just like I am?

The gun goes off and my stomach jolts, just as something knocks Reagan off her feet. My ears ring, and I hold my breath, expecting to feel some kind of burning pain at

any microsecond.

But I don't.

The gun clatters to the ground and is scooped up by Trudeau. When I blink, I see Cass has wrestled Reagan to the ground while she screams and writhes like a feral animal. Then he leans in closer to her, his lips moving rapidly near her ear and a savage smile on his lips that's in no way friendly or compassionate.

Whatever he says to her makes Reagan scream. She screams and screams, the sound becoming a wail as the officers drag her up and clip cuffs on her without waiting for Trudeau's permission.

They escort her to the police car and I see Virgil standing next to Trudeau, his eyes are bright and he's speaking conversationally, though I can't hear the words.

The detective's eyes flick to me, and he opens his mouth, only for my sight to be obscured when Cass grabs me, crushing me to his chest.

"Fuck, Winnie," he chokes out, his voice raw and hoarse as I struggle for air.

"She got a gun," I murmur, and when I remember it went off, I jerk back, looking at him. "Holy shit, did she shoot you? Did she?—?"

"No. She didn't hit anyone. I'm okay, you're okay." He cradles my face in his hands, eyes never leaving mine. "Fuck, you're okay." He repeats it a few more times, until I drag him closer to me and press our foreheads together.

"Holy shit," I breathe, unable to say anything else. "Like..." An ambulance rolls up into the driveway, separating us from the crowd of gawkers on the sidewalk. "Holy shit, Cass. How did she even get his gun?"

When he doesn't reply, I look up, surprised to see his eyes like shards of ice. Though the look isn't directed at me. Again he pulls me to his body, encircling me with his arms, as footsteps approach from around the ambulance.

"I am so sorry, Miss Campbell." Trudeau's voice shakes on the words, and for the first time he sounds like he means what he's saying. "She got away from me and...Well, I never thought she'd point the gun at you."

"Because you thought she'd shoot me instead." Cass's words are soft and almost inaudible, but I know Trudeau can hear him. I jerk back to look up, then glance over my shoulder at the detective.

He isn't denying it.

Before I can say anything, though, paramedics are between us, asking for details. Within seconds, I'm scooped up by my psychotic boyfriend and laid down on a stretcher. "I'm fine," I tell them, trying to sit up only for the female paramedic to push me back down.

"You've got a nasty bump on your head, miss," she informs me, not unkindly. "And I'd like to get you checked out."

"Don't argue, please? For my peace of mind?" Cass chuckles, giving me a small grin.

"Sure, I'll go. As long as you're there suffering with me. I at least get to..." I trail off when he looks away, a flicker of guilt on his face that makes my heart twist. "Please come with me."

"I can't yet. Trust me though, okay? You won't even have time to miss me, I promise." I don't know how to reply to that. I also can't figure out what could be so important that he won't come with me, so I just nod jerkily, able to see the look of

guilt he can't chase off his expression.

"Just close your eyes and I'll be there before you know it, okay princess?" Cass reaches out and tucks my hair behind my ear. "I swear."

Again I just nod, opening my eyes when the paramedics lift the stretcher into the ambulance. A smaller shape follows, and Sophie sits down on the bench near me, not caring that the female paramedic was definitely about to sit there. "Don't worry, Winnie," she says, tucking her stuffed elephant into the crook of my arm. "I'll hold your hand while you get any shots."

"If there are shots involved, I'm rioting." I sigh, leaning back against the head of the stretcher as the ambulance starts moving, crawling out of the driveway. "I hate needles." But I don't hear Sophie's answering reply, or whatever the paramedic says to her. I'm too busy staring through the small windows at where Cass and Virgil are standing on either side of Trudeau with looks on their faces I hope to never see again.

Cass doesn't show up at the hospital, but in his defense, I'm only there for a couple of hours. Lou comes to pick me up, asking questions and worrying over me enough that I don't get to go home. Instead, she demands I spend the night with her, and even goes so far as to make me the same hot cocoa she used to make when we were kids while I text Sophie's parents to make sure she's all right.

But as good as it is, it means I won't get to see Cassian tonight. There's no way Lou won't kill him, and I can't handle more of that tonight. He answers when I text, though, apologizing again for not coming to the hospital.

I promise I'll explain, he texts back. I'm sorry. I love you.

I'm not even mad. Not really. I just miss him, and I stare at my phone, reading the words again.

I love you .

Do I love him too?

What if I don't love you? I text back finally, and his answer is quick and free of any anger that I can see.

I'll present to you my six-step plan in the morning of how I'll change that. Can you try to get some sleep for me, princess? You have to be tired, and I know your head hurts. We already discussed my lack of a concussion, and my killer headache that feels like it's going to be a migraine.

While I really do want him here, I can't help but admit that more than anything I just want to pass out and leave this headache behind.

You'd better be doing something important , I finally tell him, curling my legs up while trying not to disturb Minxy too much.

Really important. I wouldn't be away from you for anything else.

And you owe me . I smile up at Lou when she makes a comment about what we're watching, though I'm not really sure what she said.

I owe you the stars, and I'll give you every single one . Good night, princess. I'll say it again for you: I love you .

I'll consider if I love you too. That's the best I'll give him, at least for tonight.

Knowing it's the end of the conversation, I place my phone on the end table and pick up my drink, fingers stroking over Minxy's ears as the cat purrs in satisfaction. My sleepy attention drifts back to whatever Halloween movie Lou has on, content to zone

out in contentment.

Chapter

Twenty-Nine

It's only because I can't sleep that I catch the five am special news report which interrupts some entirely un-relatable celebrity reality show that's predictable as hell. In my tired haze, it takes me a few seconds to realize what's happening on screen. By the time I do mentally tune in, the stern-looking woman on the screen is halfway into what she's saying.

“—in a gruesome scene this morning. There are no leads so far, and his estranged wife has not released any statement. We ask the community to respect the loss of one of our finest, as Detective Mike Trudeau served over a dozen years with Akron law enforcement.”

I stare blankly at the television, listening as the news anchor proceeds to mention how the police suspect gang involvement with the detective's death. She then reassures her viewers that despite the murders in Hayden Fields lately, this one took place in Akron, so no one should worry about it becoming a spree.

My hands feel numb as I get to my feet, and I barely manage to text Lou before I'm outside and waiting for an Uber to take me home. Since, as far as I know, my car is still at Sophie's house from last night.

Shivering in my hoodie, I fiddle with my phone, considering texting Cass but ultimately not doing it. Not yet. But the minutes pass like hours, even though I know it can't be more than eight minutes before my car rolls up.

I barely register when the driver greets me, and I don't say a word on the fifteen minute trip back to my mom's house.

"Thanks," I manage to murmur, when I step out of the car. Whatever the driver says is lost in the fog of my mind, and only when I'm up on the small porch do I realize my car is in the driveway. Probably thanks to Cass, if I were to guess.

After all, it's not like the friendly neighborhood detective is around to do me any favors.

Gazing at the door, I stare at the handle before reaching for it, somehow knowing it won't be locked like it should be. Sure enough, the door swings open easily. I step inside, eyes fixed on the floor where traces of crimson footprints show me the path the killer took through the house.

Naturally, that path leads me up the stairs. I follow the prints, covering them with my shoes as I go, like I'm trying to walk the exact same way he had, down to the centimeter. The cream carpet makes the traces visible in the near-dark, and I'm suddenly grateful for the nightlights I jammed into the hallway sockets after falling up and down the staircase of the usually empty house enough times.

My door is open, but it's too dark in my room for me to see anything. Instead, it feels like the darkness is unnatural, like a black hole swallowing everything that enters.

But I enter anyway, barely pushing the door any more open than it already is. Finally, thanks to the light from the bay window near my bed, I see a huddled figure on the bench. But I don't say a word, and I certainly don't turn the light on.

Everything seems so surreal as I kick off my shoes and yank off the hoodie I'm still wearing. It's warm and soft, and absently I consider telling him it's mine now

Not that I think my killer will mind.

When I'm left in my t-shirt and shorts I move to the bed, sitting on the side facing him with my legs curled up under me as I survey him with only the pre-dawn light to go by.

Cassian looks tired . Leaning over with his hands clasped, I can see him twiddling his thumbs together silently, though from what I can see, he isn't looking at me.

"Virgil told me to shower," he whispers finally without looking at me. "He said you might not enjoy the blood all over the house." At last he lifts his head, and I can feel his gaze on me in the dark, even though I can't see his eyes. "I didn't shower, but I did rinse my hands and face."

For a few moments, I don't reply. I don't know what to say. A low breath leaves me, and I get to my feet to take a step toward him, one hand out. "Cass..."

He catches my hand, surprising me when he stands up as well. "No," he murmurs. "I like you on the bed. With me." Without asking, he pushes me back down, crawling over me on the sheets until his knees are on either side of my hips and his hands are splayed by my face.

I swear I can smell the blood on him. I certainly feel it when I lift my hand up to trail my fingers through his dark-matted hair. It's dry now, but sticks to his curls like gel.

"How'd you do it?" I ask softly, feeling as if it's wrong to break the early morning silence.

"I tore him apart." Cass leans down, his lips brushing my forehead.

"He let Reagan go on purpose." That's not a question. I've known since last night what he did.

And maybe, just maybe, I knew why Cass didn't come to the hospital with me since

long before the news anchor mentioned the detective's murder.

"I know. That's why I made it slow." His hand grips my shirt, and he proceeds to gently tug it over my head before wrapping his long fingers around the base of my throat. "He thought she'd shoot me."

"He was wrong."

"I made sure he knew how wrong he was." Leaning down, he kisses me. Sweetly at first, with his tongue begging for entrance in my mouth. When I do part my lips for him, I swear I can taste the blood, the iron on his lips.

On his tongue.

On his teeth.

When Cass pulls away, I'm panting. My fingers itch to remove his shirt, and I yank it over his head much less gently than he had for me.

"You're a serial killer."

He chuckles at the words, tilting his head. "I'm a serial killer," he agrees.

"You didn't have to kill Trudeau." But there's no malice, no real reproach in my words. I find I don't care at all, quite honestly. And I certainly don't pity the dead detective. Cassian chuckles darkly, his fingers once more tightening possessively on my neck.

"I'll kill anyone for you. Do you love me?" The question surprises me, especially after our joking conversation last night.

I want to ask where the six steps went.

I want to ask what happens when I say no.

Instead I sit up, surprised when he lets me, and shove Cass until he's on his back and I can stare down at him, finally able to see his gorgeous blue eyes in the dawn light.

He's beautiful. Like a Renaissance painting come to life with his full lips and impossibly blue eyes. His hair, even sticky with blood, is nearly picture perfect and almost golden in the first rays of the sun.

"You should know the answer to that," I say at last, and this time I'm the one who reaches down to press my fingers lightly to his throat. Cass arches back, giving me all the access to his vulnerable, flawless skin that I could want. I stroke along his neck, feeling him swallow under my touch.

"I don't." He sounds almost unsure of himself, and a little sheepish. "That's the one thing I can't quite read about you, Winnie."

Taking a breath, I try to push away how my heart flutters nervously. How everything in me feels different when I'm around him.

How he feels like home .

"I've always loved you." I whisper the words, almost afraid to admit them for the world to hear. "You made sure I did. Ever since we were kids, I think—No." I let out a sigh. "I've always known. How could I love anyone other than you?"

His chin jerks back down, eyes wide in surprise. "Really?" He sounds...bemused. But his hands come up, hovering over me, before he cups my face in his hands. "Always , always, or just since I came back?"

Now it's my turn for my fingers to tighten, and I let him pull me down until I'm pressed against his warmth. I can feel the still-there blood making his hands rough as

they slide along my cheeks, but I don't care that he apparently needs lessons in handwashing.

"Always," I repeat, my lips brushing against his. "Always, since you made sure no one bullied me in school." I press my forehead against his and inhale our shared air. "You've never been able to make me hate you. Not even when you had a knife at my throat and you told me to run."

"You know I would've done it, right? I would've killed your dad for you." His hands slide over my shoulders, fingers dragging down my back to unhook my bra before he chucks it to the floor and pulls me against him. God, I love his warmth. I love the way my body fits against his, and how he feels perfect everywhere we're touching.

"I know." My fingers fumble at his jeans, but he stops me by flipping us back over so he can raise himself above me and meet my gaze.

"I'll kill for you."

"I know." I can't look away from his gorgeous eyes.

"I won't be able to always stop myself." His fingers curl around my jaw, and he slowly lowers his face to mine until I can feel his breath on my lips.

"I know."

"And I'll never let you go, Winnie."

Slowly, I twine my arms around his neck, dragging him the rest of the way down. Just before I pull him into a kiss, I sigh against his mouth, whispering against his lips.

"I know."