



Lust (Seven Deadly Sins #2)

Author: *Imogen Wells*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: "Honour thy father."

After my fiancé's betrayal, my father, Reverend Amos Kincaid, is the only man I trust.

Well, him and God.

I've honoured my father and lived my life by God's word—mostly.

Until the arrival of two men who ignite a dark and dangerous desire within me.

"Lead us not into temptation."

Reverend Roman Stone is the devil in disguise.

Blake Cassidy, the walking embodiment of sin.

Together they are an undeniable temptation.

One that puts me on the path to Hell.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

When my father is attacked, a lifelong veil of deceit is revealed.

My only choice is to trust two men who go against everything I believe in.

To survive, I must succumb to the deadly sin of lust.

Forbidden fruit never tasted so good.

* This book is part of the Seven Deadly Sins series with N.L.W. Anthologies and Collections. Each book can be read as a standalone and in any order.

Total Pages (Source): 46

CHAPTER ONE

SYDNEY

I pick up another bible from the pew and drop it into the little slot and wonder, not for the first time, why it's so difficult for people to put them back themselves when they are done with them.

I can practically hear Pa admonishing me for my ungodly thoughts as I step from the end of the last row of pews and back toward the lectern.

"Pa, I'm all done. I'll see you at dinner," I call and tilt my head, straining to hear his reply, but nothing comes. He's probably got his door closed or on the phone.

With a huff, I grab my bag and coat, sliding it on as I stride down the hall to his office, checking my watch and hurrying my steps when I see the time. I'm about to call out again when I hear a voice I don't recognise coming from Pa's office. The door is ajar, and I pause to listen. Something else Pa would lecture me on if he knew I was here eavesdropping.

"Ecclesiastes 7:21-22, 'Don't eavesdrop on the conversation of others', Sydney."

"Thank you, for your help, Father." His voice is a deep rumble yet tinged with sadness.

"Of course, Roman. And, please, if you need anything, my door is always open."

Footsteps draw closer and not wishing to get caught, I stamp my feet quickly to imitate walking, then push the door open.

There's an ooph from the other side, and I raise my hands as I crash into a hard body.

Hands grasp my elbows as I stammer out an apology. "S-sorry. I..." My words trailing off as I notice where my hands are, splayed across a man's chest while he still holds my elbows.

"Apologies, Roman. This is my daughter Sydney," Pa says as the man, Roman, releases me, and I step back. I lower my head but not before I catch Pa casting me a reproachful frown.

"Nice to meet you, Sydney," Roman says, and while sadness still hugs his tone, now it is joined with something akin to anger. Raising my head enough to see his face, I'm met with green eyes that I imagine were once a vibrant viridian green yet now seem slightly dulled. Strong, defined cheekbones and a nose that has been broken at some point given the small curve, but it's the scar across the bridge that is the biggest indicator. I can't see his hair thanks to the cap he's wearing, which no doubt annoyed Pa, but the dark five o'clock shadow leads me to think his hair is the same dark shade. And as I take in more of him, his black jacket over a tall, broad frame and dark jeans, I spy ink peeking from beneath the cuff of his coat and follow as it trails down his left hand. An altogether unexpected yet pleasurable thrill rushes through me at the sight. Thoughts of this man's body covered in dark ink invade my mind. I quickly push the sinful vision and thoughts away as Pa begins talking.

"Roman is new to town and will be joining our congregation after a recent loss."

Well, that explains the sadness I heard in his voice before. I wonder who he lost, lover or wife, maybe. Although I'm not sure he strikes me as the settle down married type.

““ Do not judge, or you too will be judged, ”” whispers Pa’s voice in my subconscious.

I nod. “It’s nice to meet you, and I’m sorry for your loss,” I say, then turn to Pa. “I have to get going. I’m already late. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Very well. See you tonight, Sydney. And don’t be late.”

“I won’t,” I call as I exit the office and speed walk down the hall, through the nave and out the doors, turning right once I reach the pavement.

I have less than ten minutes to make a walk that usually takes me fifteen to twenty minutes. Sheila is not going to be happy if I’m late again. Besides, I hate tardiness.

I dart between the crowds as I reach the high street. It’s November and the streets are filled with shoppers hoping to get a Christmas bargain or finish their lists before their friends. Pa always has a few choice words—lectures really—on the true meaning of Christmas and how much capitalism has twisted it into a gluttonous, money-making farce. He has already reminded me that Advent is coming in three weeks’ time, and I’m not talking about opening a calendar and eating chocolate every morning from December 1st to the 25th.

By the time I burst through the doors of the bookshop I work in, I’m a sweaty mess, but I’m only two minutes late having ran the last half a mile.

I strip my coat and scarf off as I head for the staff room, catching the eye of Sheila as she serves a customer. I smile and wave like I’m not late.

I grab my deodorant, giving myself a quick refresh, then shove everything in my locker and close it, pulling up short as Sheila appears in front of me.

I try to hold her glare, but I just can't do it and lower my eyes in submission.

"This is the third time you've been late this week, Sydney."

"I know and I'm sorry, Sheila. It's crazy out there and?—"

"I don't need excuses. I need reliable staff who can keep time. Take this as your verbal warning, Sydney. If you're late again, it will be a written and final warning." I nod. "There is a stack of new books that need organising and putting out. If, by some miracle, you finish that before the end of your shift, there is a list of orders that need checking off, labelling and placing in the collection box."

Finding my voice, I say, "Of course. I'll make sure it is all done." Sheila is walking away as I finish talking, muttering to herself and no doubt wishing she could sack me now and forget the red tape. My shoulders drop and I leave the staffroom. It would make Pa happy at least. He was never happy about me working, let alone in a bookshop. He insists it places me in temptation's way. If only he knew the kinds of books being read nowadays.

In the small warehouse at the back of the shop, I furiously rip into the boxes containing the new books. Mumbling about being weak, allowing people to walk all over me and how God can't possibly have meant for women to be such meek and mild humans. Doormat. That's the word that pops into my head.

I don't remember my mother and Pa hasn't dated, well, not as far as I know. No, he can't have. He's too devoted to God and the church. The only female figures in my life growing up were women of whichever congregation Pa was presiding over. There have been a few, but we've been at the church of Mary Magdalene in London since I was sixteen.

I had a few female friends in school and college, but most stayed away. Who wants to

be friends with a girl who isn't allowed to go to parties, drink, date boys. I mean let's be honest, I wasn't at the top of any party invites, and boys either thought I was weird or saw me as a challenge. Bets were made about who would be the first to kiss me, get to second base, have sex with me.

Female role models were, therefore, in short supply growing up. I became the female version of Pa. My life consisted of school then college and church. Any events were always around the religious calendar. It is how I met Paul and fell in love. A version of love. Now I'm not sure if it was love at all. It certainly wasn't the love you see in the movies or read about. And it wasn't love for Paul either.

"Sydney, would you like tea?" Cressida asks from behind me, startling me and interrupting my thoughts. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you. Daydreaming again?"

"Just thinking. Tea would be lovely, thank you." Cressida smiles and disappears back into the staff room. I finish checking off the last couple of books from this box and load them onto the trolley ready to take them out to the shop floor.

Cressida is coming out of the staff room with a tray laden with cups of tea in her hands as I reach it.

"Let me grab the door for you," I say, scooting forward and opening the door to the shop floor.

"Cheers. Your tea is in the 'hopeless romantic' cup on the counter."

"Thanks." I let the door close once she's clear and go grab my tea. Hopeless romantic, huh? Yeah, I don't think so. I carry my cup to the table and sit. Spying a box of biscuits, I help myself and proceed to dunk it. A book left open on the table catches my eye, and I get lost in the words as I lift my biscuit...

He lowers me to the bed, tearing at my clothes, quite literally. I curse and even growl at him when he rips my T-shirt from the bottom to the top in one fucking pull.

“Hey!” I say, gripping his face in my hands firmly. He lets me hold him there, but his hands have other ideas as they swiftly undo my jeans. “I don’t have a lot of clothes in the small bag, you know, so maybe go easy with the ripping, huh?”

“Fuck the clothes, Parker. I’d have you naked all fucking day.” He tugs my jeans, and I lift my arse so he can drag them down my legs. “Giving me easy access to this,” he groans, raising my legs and running his nose up my thong covered pussy. His groan turns to a growl as I raise my hips, offering myself to him and seeking my own relief as my pussy throbs. He obliges, slipping his fingers in my knickers and pulling them to one side before lowering his head and sucking my clit into his mouth.

Reality snaps back in with a plunk as half my biscuit drops into my cup, splashing tea over the side.

“Damn it!” I quickly shove the rest of the biscuit into my mouth and grab the cloth from the draining board, wiping the table and the bottom of my cup. I don’t bother with trying to fish out the biscuit. By now it will be mush at the bottom of my cup.

After rinsing the cloth, I sit back down, refusing to get drawn back into the book. I ignore the hot flush over my cheeks and the pulsing between my legs from the erotic words I just read. I slam the book closed, finish my tea and get back to work.

My shift passes quickly, but thoughts of what that man was doing to the woman in the book continue to invade my mind. Only I’m the woman and the man looks like Roman. It’s not like I’ve never experienced sexual pleasure. In fact, if Pa knew just how far I’ve taken things, he would be utterly ashamed. Reading that book earlier would be nothing compared to the real depths of my fall from grace.

While the church is a little more lenient on sex before marriage, Pa is not. He believes in saving yourself for your husband, that you should only ever have sex with the man you marry. Especially as he deems marriage a sacred vow. Strange considering he's never married, but he argues that he's married to God and his mission.

Paul and I fooled around, but we never had sex. Not until I discovered he'd been unfaithful. After discovering his infidelity, I naively believed him when he said he wasn't strong enough to fight the temptation offered to him. When he got down on his knees and pleaded with me to give him a second chance, that he loved me so much and he'd wished it was me, I lapped it up like a thirsty dog. The next time things got heavy between us, I told him I was ready and didn't want to wait any longer. So, I gave myself to him. Things were good between us, and we continued with our plans to wed three months later.

The day of our wedding arrived. I was so incredibly happy, and Pa was proud. But it all turned to dust during our vows when a woman burst into the church claiming that she was carrying Paul's baby. I was heartbroken. Embarrassed beyond belief. And so ashamed that I'd freely given myself to him, trusting him.

I'd never seen Pa so furious. I hadn't thought it possible to see such hatred in Pa's eyes. Paul left the church, left town, the next day. The last I heard they were married and expecting another baby. The good Christian in me wishes them a happy life together, but a new and ever pressing rebellious part of me hopes karma will do her worst. Not only was Paul responsible for my first experience of a false love, he is also responsible for the fact I am no longer a virgin. And the reason for all my impure thoughts of late, my growing curiosity and urge to have sex again.

Maybe Pa was right and working here really is a temptation.

A path to damnation.

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CHAPTER TWO

SYDNEY

S heila's ire at my lateness was wiped out by my having finished the jobs she set out at the start of my shift, and I feel lighter and confident that I'll keep my job as I leave Novel Notions. Darkness has fallen outside, and a light drizzle begins to fall as I walk down the street. Thankfully, I only live ten minutes away. Having forgotten my umbrella this morning, I'm hopeful I won't get too wet. That hopefulness is tossed out the window twelve minutes later as I strip off my drenched coat and scarf as they drip all over the hall floor. My clothes beneath haven't fared much better, and the cold, wet clothes stick to my skin. I've never understood how you can get wetter from a light misty drizzle than when it absolutely chucks it down. I do remember reading somewhere that running in the rain makes you wetter than walking. I've no idea how true that is.

There is no logic in somethings in life.

I hang my coat and scarf on the coat hooks in the hall and place a small hand towel beneath them to catch the drips, then I jog upstairs to shower. I had one this morning, but my bones are cold, and I need to warm up before heading to Pa's for dinner.

Once dressed in a slim fitted, knee length plain black dress and having dried my dark brown shoulder length hair, I order an Uber. Pa doesn't like me using taxis or Ubers, but it's still raining, and I don't fancy sitting through dinner in wet clothes. I've just finished applying a light coat of pale pink lip gloss when my phone pings, alerting me my Uber is here. Slipping on a pair of black ballet flats, I head downstairs, swiping

my other, dry, coat from the hall, my umbrella and my still damp handbag before leaving.

Since moving out after my relationship with Paul ended, Pa has insisted on us having Sunday dinner together every week. On the odd occasion it's been moved to a Friday, like today, or Saturday night. Pa is going away first thing tomorrow, something that has become more common recently. He's always attended conferences, that's nothing new, but when I asked why there seem to be more these past couple of years, he told me it was because the church is constantly changing these days, and he needs to keep up to date.

I get the Uber driver to drop me just out of sight of Pa's house to avoid any lecture on the dangers of getting in cars with strangers like I'm still five years old. I pull my umbrella free, opening it and holding over myself as the Uber drives away. I stay in place for several minutes to allow the umbrella to look expectantly wet for someone who walked in the rain before walking the last few feet to Pa's. There's a small tug of disappointment in myself at the deception, but I console myself with the argument that God wouldn't want me to become ill. It's flimsy but all I've got.

I raise the cast iron knocker and give it a few heavy raps. Minutes later the door opens to reveal Pa, dressed in his usual, casual ensemble of black trousers, black shirt and white collar. He may not be in church now but he's never off the clock. God's work is never done, he would say.

He looks at his watch as he steps back to allow me in. I step inside, twisting so the umbrella remains outside. I give it a good shake before collapsing it and placing it in the umbrella stand next to the coat rack.

"Five minutes early," I say as I peel my coat off and hang it.

"Very funny, child," he replies, and when I turn to face him, he's wearing a rare

smile. Pa is a serious man, and I don't remember a time when he's appeared less so or carefree.

I follow Pa through to the kitchen where he hands me a cup of tea at the perfect temperature for me to drink. He busies himself with checking the roast chicken he has in the oven. Even though it's not a Sunday, he still insists on having a roast dinner. I internally roll my eyes.

"Roast chicken again, Pa," I say, rinsing my now empty cup and placing it in the sink before collecting place mats and cutlery to lay the table.

"Yes, Sydney. If you weren't here with me, I imagine you would be eating some awful takeaway or microwave meal," he says accusingly and laced with disapproval.

"I do cook, you know, Pa. Somebody made sure of that." My words are in jest but there's some heat there too.

"You are no good to your future husband if you cannot provide a healthy meal at the end of a long day."

And there it is.

I tramp down the desire to bite back at his blatant misogyny. It's not his fault. He was raised that way, and the church has only cemented his belief that a woman's place is in the home. There aren't many things I disagree with Pa on, but this is the top of the short list.

I quickly change the subject. "What is your conference about this weekend?"

He stills for a split second before lifting the pan from the hob and turning to me. "The usual discussions around how to encourage the younger generation back into church

and God's love."

I nod as he drains the potatoes. "And what are your thoughts on how to do that?"

"We have a few ideas. But let's not talk about that. Tell me about your day. How was work?"

I frown at his obvious dismissal and switch of conversation, especially as he is usually more than happy to preach to me and is rarely interested in my work, other than to point out his displeasure.

"We were busy. But that's to be expected at this time of the year."

"Hmmm." He places the drained pan of potatoes on the pan holder and grabs the masher. "Want to mash?"

"Sure," I say, getting to my feet and assuming that is the limit to conversation about my work.

We work in silence, me mashing and Pa dishing up, then while he dishes the mash, I make the gravy. After saying grace, we eat with intermittent and random conversation between mouthfuls.

While I clear the table, Pa disappears to his office to collect some mail. It's most likely rubbish as I changed my address with everyone that matters. Returning, he hands it to me, and I flick through the small pile. As I thought, most of it will go in the bin, but there is one letter that draws my attention. I slot them in my handbag to go through more thoroughly once I'm home.

"I better get going. There are some things I need to do before work tomorrow. Is Reverend Swan over seeing your services this weekend as usual?" I ask, walking

back down the hall to the front door, Pa following.

“No, unfortunately he is unwell.”

“Oh, I hope it’s nothing serious,” I say turning to look at Pa as I unhook my coat and slide it on.

“He will be fine.”

He offers nothing more, leaving me to still wonder who will be taking his services this weekend. As if he can hear my thoughts, he says, “I’m sure Reverend Stone would appreciate your help Sunday morning.”

Reverend Stone?

Before I can ask Pa who he’s talking about, the house phone rings. “I need to take this call. I will speak to you when I return on Sunday night.” He leans in and kisses the top of my head before rushing to answer the call before it rings off.

I leave, stepping out to find the rain has stopped. It’s just after nine, and I decide to walk home. Halfway home, it begins to rain again, which is the same time I realise I left my umbrella at Pa’s.

I look up to the sky, raindrops splattering my face. “Message received.”

The walk home is wet. That’s the only word for it.

Comfy PJs and a hot cuppa are my top priorities once I’m home, and I curl up on the sofa to watch TV. I flick through the channels and swear that every channel I land on shows couples making out or having sex. I switch it off after coping an eyeful of dick—a pierced dick—on channel 4’s dating show *Naked Attraction* .

With no possibility of escaping anything sexual, I rinse my cup and head to bed.

My dreams are filled with visions of naked men and women in positions I never imagined, their faces alight with pleasure and bodies writhing, seeking more. I can hear their grunts and groans as though in the room with them. My attention focuses on a naked woman sitting on the edge of the bed with a man nestled between her open legs, his hands gripping her thighs so tight her skin blanches white. Her back arches, a hand landing on the bed behind her to keep her upright and the other comes to the top of the man's head, grasping a handful of his hair as she lets out panted breaths. As she throws her head back, mouth falling open, a long-drawn-out moan falls from her lips before becoming a piercing cry...

My eyes snap open as my own back arches, my body convulsing, as pleasure sweeps through me, and I realise the piercing cry is my own. My hand is between my thighs and a slick wetness coats my fingers.

I yank my hand away like I've been burned and throw the covers off me, jumping from the bed.

"No, no, no." I drop to my knees, hands clasped together in prayer and head bent. "Heavenly Father, forgive me my sins. I acknowledge my transgressions and repent of my actions and thoughts. Please wash me clean and bestow upon me your mercy and grace." I repeat the prayer three times, each one more urgent as I beg forgiveness.

Finished with my prayers but certain I haven't done enough to earn God's forgiveness, I shower, scrubbing my skin until it's red raw.

By the time I return to my bedroom, the sun is coming up and any chance of going back to sleep is lost. I dress, my raw skin irritated by the soft cotton, but it's a just punishment. I busy my mind and body with chores before heading to the supermarket.

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CHAPTER THREE

ROMAN

P icking up the bottle, I down a mouthful of beer, looking at my watch as I place it back on the bar.

“You keeping tabs on me again, Ro?” a voice behind me says a second before a hand lands on my shoulder with a slap. If I’d still had the bottle to my lips, I may have left here with a tooth missing. Blake comes into view, dragging the stool in front of me out and parking his arse on it.

“Your time keeping is shit. You’ll be late to your own funeral.”

“Nah, your need for control would never let that happen,” he says with a chuckle. Catching the eye of the bartender, a cute guy, if you’re into that kind of thing, who already tried to give me the come on, Blake orders two more beers, barely glancing in the guy’s direction.

“So, what’s the word?” Blake asks as the bartender places beers in front of each of us.

“Cheers,” I say to the guy before answering Blake. “Kincaid is out of town for the weekend and leaving his congregation in my hands.”

“He bought it then? Fucking trusting fool.”

“I met the daughter too.”

“And?” Blake asks, his bottle pausing at his lips.

“And what?”

“She as sickly sweet in person as her pictures show?” he presses before taking a mouthful of his beer.

I consider my answer, but Blake speaks again before I can.

“Oh, you have a boner for the sweet and innocent, virginal Sydney Kincaid.” He laughs. “I knew she’d be hot, but I didn’t see this coming.”

“Fuck off, Blake. We aren’t here for her,” I state firmly. “Unless she’s involved.”

“Okay, fine. But you do have a hard on for her, don’t you?”

I glare at him, but he’s not dissuaded. “Regardless, she’s not important for now.”

“Yeah, and, what pray tell, are you going to be preaching to the good people of Mary Magdalene’s on Sunday?” Blake asks, a wicked smirk curling his lip.

“I’m one step ahead of you. What do you think I’ve been doing while waiting for you to get here?”

“Well don’t keep me hanging.” Blake winks.

I lean forward just enough for only Blake to hear my words and feel my breath along the shell of his ear. “Oh, but you know how much I love keeping you on the edge.” I hear his sharp inhale before moving back. His hazel eyes have darkened, and he licks his lip, pausing to run his tongue over the ring through the centre of his bottom lip. An image of that tongue swiping along the rim of my cock flashes through my mind

before I continue. “I think they need a reminder of the sins of the flesh.” I finish off my drink and pick up the second one, swallowing half of it as Blake laughs beside me.

“If only they knew.”

“Hmm, if only.”

“I’ve always wanted to fuck in a church,” Blake says, his tone layered with excitement at the idea, grabbing at his crutch to adjust himself as he shifts on the stool.

“Fucking depraved.” I state, unable to stop the smile pulling at my mouth, nor the blood rushing to my own dick as the idea takes root in my head.

“You wouldn’t have me any other way,” Blake replies, and he’s not wrong.

I spend Saturday at the church, making myself available for anyone wishing to confess, which amounts to a young lad who has a crush on his female teacher and a woman in her late thirties who had wrongly judged a work colleague. After advising on how to avoid further sins and offering them a prayer, they happily went on their way.

My sins, by this point, are beyond forgiveness, and even if it were an option, I’d need to show remorse and regret. I have neither. Nobody lives a life without sin. In this world, it’s a physical impossibility. The difference between me and those who come to church are I own my perceived sins and the way I choose to live. God sure hasn’t helped me in the past, and I don’t believe he can now.

The organist arrives just after me on Sunday morning, quickly followed by Sydney Kincaid. She breezes in looking angelic with no idea she’s stepped into the devil’s

lair. Her low heels click-clack on the stone floor as she sashays down the aisle, bidding a good morning to Prudence, the organist. Her eyes scan the nave, seeking the man her father has assigned in his absence, but I remain hidden in the shadows at the back, watching as she places her handbag on the front pew then proceeds to remove her coat before moving to a small cupboard behind the lectern, which houses bibles and hymn books. Gathering a small collection of books, she walks down each row sorting and replacing missing bibles and hymn books as she goes.

Her dark shoulder length hair is tied back in a ponytail that showcases her slender neck, and the dark trousers she wears hug her body. Her top half is covered in a cream long-sleeved blouse with a high collar, falling beautifully over the swell of her breasts.

As she exits the row beside my hiding spot, I slip out from the shadows, startling her.

“Oh sh...sugar,” she exclaims, a hand going to her chest. “Roman, what...” Her words trail off as she takes in my outfit and white collar. Her eyes narrow a little as she puts two and two together. “You’re Reverend Stone?” she asks accusingly.

“I am. Nice to see you again, Sydney.” I keep my tone level of any inflection and my face blank of expression. “Your father mentioned you would be here to assist me today, should I require it.”

“I’m here every Sunday.” There is a small hint of offence in her response, like that isn’t the case. “I have placed bibles and hymn books out, replacing any missing ones. Is there anything else you would like help with?”

I sense nervousness in her words, and I like the way she obviously feels uncomfortable around me. My dick twitches, letting me know he could use a hand...literally!

Pushing the thought away, I say, “I think that is all for now. Will you be staying for the service?” Against my better judgement I step forward and stop in front of her, slipping my hands inside the pockets of my black trousers.

This close she has to tilt her head up to maintain eye contact. “Of course.” Her tone is husky, and I’m unsure if it’s the angle or an indication of something else.

Either way, I refuse to act on it. Made a little harder when I’m hit with her scent. Something tropical, sweet, with a hint of coconut. It’s the same scent I smelt the first day I met her, and one that stayed with me for the rest of the day, clinging to my clothes where her hands touched me.

She smiles, stepping back. “Okay, well... Tea!” she blurts out. Clearing her throat, she tries again. “I’m going to make a cup of tea. Would you like one?” She points a thumb over her shoulder in some indication of the small kitchen out the back.

“That would be lovely. Thank you.” She nods, then spins on her heel and hurries away.

I let the smile I was holding back at her fumbled words break free. I’ve barely taken two steps when she reappears. Before she can ask, I say, “White with one sugar, please.”

“Okay,” she mutters, vanishing from sight again.

I’m going over my service notes when she brings my tea. Placing it on the pew beside me, I thank her without looking up. She hesitates momentarily like she has something to say but changes her mind, moving to her handbag a couple of pews in front of me. Placing her own cup down, she retrieves a phone and sits, crossing her legs. My notes forgotten, I watch as she becomes heavily invested in whatever she’s looking at, swinging her leg and biting her lip.

I suppress a groan and instead grab my cup, bringing it to my lips for a sip. The hot liquid burns, but I swallow it down, angry at her ability to hold my attention so easily. I shouldn't be interested in her given who her father is. But I can't seem to help myself. My eyes—and other parts of my body—disagree.

Gathering my notes, I push to my feet and slip out, needing a moment before people arrive. I'm sure Sydney can handle any members of the congregation arriving early. I dump my cup in the kitchen sink. Resting my hands on the counter, I hang my head and breathe in deeply.

Getting myself under control, I push away from the counter, straighten my clothes and prepare to give the performance of my life. I have to be convincing or all of this will have been for nothing.

Blake slips in midway through my service, taking a seat beside an elderly couple in the last pew, and smiling widely at me. Sydney doesn't miss his entrance. Her eyes follow him and remain on him a minute longer once he's seated. I catch her gaze sliding to Blake then me several times during the rest of the service, but I keep my attention on everyone but her.

Once the service is over, I take up position outside the door saying goodbye and stopping to chat with people as they leave. Several ask where Reverend Kincaid is, but most are interested in me. Who I am, where have I moved from. My favourite is if I'm married, particularly among the young women. It never ceases to amaze me how fucking nosy people are, especially given God's condemnation of gossip.

Yeah, I did my homework. Growing up in a religious house helped, of course. That was until they discovered I like cock. I didn't stick around to explain that I don't mind a decent bit of pussy on occasion. Not that it would have changed anything. My parents are the epitome of homophobic and why I've not seen or spoken to them in years. My sexuality isn't the only reason. No, being here is the other.

Regardless of their feelings for me, I'm doing this for them. They aren't getting any younger, and they deserve peace before they die. And I want justice for Annabel.

Stepping back inside as the last couple of people make their way out of the church grounds, happily chatting away, I find Blake chatting with Sydney.

I knew the son of a bitch wouldn't be able to stay away. I stride down the aisle, ignoring them, only for Blake to call out to me.

"Reverend Stone, I was hoping to catch you for a quick word," Blake calls out. "In private," he adds as I turn toward them. Sydney stands beside him, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Planting a smile on my face, I say, "Of course." I turn my back and begin walking toward the back office, leaving Sydney. Footsteps fall in behind me, and as soon as we are out of sight and earshot, I spin around and face Blake.

"What the fuck are you doing here? We agree you'd stay out of church."

"No, you said that. I never agreed to those terms. Besides, I wanted to see for myself." He blows out a breath. "She's something."

"Fuck my life!" I exclaim before continuing down the hall, Blake close behind.

CHAPTER FOUR

BLAKE

“That’s a whole lot of blasphemy for a vicar. As penance, I think you should get down on your knees and suck my?—”

“Do not finish that sentence, Blake, so help me god,” Ro says as he whirls to face me in the small office we’ve entered. He slams the door shut and stalks to the desk, sitting in the rigid, high-back chair, which looks about as comfortable as a case of piles. Not that I’d know what that’s like never having had them but...

“This is not the time for you to fuck around, Blake. How are you going to explain our relationship?”

I move forward cautiously and step around the desk, keeping my eyes on him. I stop in front of him and half sit on the desk.

“Tell her how much you like to rail my arse every night,” I joke even knowing it’s going to piss him off. But I like him when he’s pissed—literally and emotionally.

He surges from the chair, gripping my chin, his eyes alight with fury, but before he can speak, I cut him off.

“Hey, I was messing with you.” I cup his face, enjoying the tick of his jaw and bristle of his scruff against my palm. “I’m sorry. I know how important this is to you. I was just trying to?—”

“Make me mad enough to fuck you in a church?” he says, his fingers tightening on my chin as his eyes drop to my lips.

“It’s on the bucket list.” My cock is hard as hell at the thought, but now isn’t the time. He’s wound tight but it’ll have to wait till later. I’m about to tell him I’ll settle for a kiss when his lips slam down on mine. I open instantly, letting him in, letting him take his fill. He presses his body to mine, the hard length of him brushing against my own. Precum leaks from the tip of my dick, and I release a groan. It takes everything in me to remain still, to not rub against his body and get some much-needed friction.

Breaking the kiss, our lips still touching, he whispers, “You’re going to pay for this later.”

“I can’t wait,” I whisper back. Reality crashes back in as footsteps echo down the hall. Ro steps back and I quickly move to the other side of the desk and take an empty chair in an effort to hide my very fucking hard dick. A knock comes at the door just as Ro sits.

“Come in,” he calls, and a second later Sydney appears as the door swings open.

“Sorry to bother you, but I didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye,” she says, stepping just inside the room. I twist my head to look at her over my shoulder. There’s a slight blush to her cheeks, highlighting the freckles I noticed earlier, that does nothing to soften my cock. In fact, quite the opposite. Her eyes fall to mine for the briefest of moments, then back to Ro.

“Thank you for your help today.”

“Of course,” she replies. Looking back to me, she adds, “It was nice to meet you, Blake.”

“You too, Sydney.” She prepares to leave, and I can’t help myself. Jumping from my chair, erection be damned. “Hold on, Sydney.” She pauses, then slowly drags her gaze from the floor, looking at me from beneath hooded eyes. Eyes sparking with desire. A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth.

“Is something the matter?” she asks coyly. And fuck me her innocence would make me hard if I wasn’t already.

“Not at all. I was hoping you’d say yes to meeting me for a drink sometime.” A burn drills into the back of my head from Ro’s glare. This is not part of our plan—well, it wasn’t. But this couldn’t be more perfect. I know Ro will be in once I talk him round.

“Oh.” Her eyes widen with surprise, and her mouth forms the perfect O. “Erm...” She looks to the floor before quickly bringing her eyes back to mine.

“I’d really like to get to know you better,” I say as I sense her on the verge of denying me. To seal the deal, I give her my signature smile—it’s the equivalent to a Joey Tribiani “How you doin’”. And just like that she falls.

“Okay. That would be lovely.”

“Do you have a phone?” I ask, keeping my voice level so as not to convey my satisfaction while ignoring the grumpy arse behind me. He’ll thank me later. Sydney digs around in her handbag and pulls out her mobile.

“Open it,” I tell her, then hold out my hand. She does as I asked, then hands it over. I really like the way she so easily follows instructions. Her fingers brush against mine with a delicious spark. I add my number then hit call. My phone rings in my pocket a second later, and I cancel the call, handing her phone back to her.

“I’ll call you later to arrange a time and place.”

“Okay,” she says quietly, dropping her phone back into her handbag, then awkwardly looking past me to say bye to Ro before stepping back out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Spinning around with a cat that got the cream smile plastered on my face, I wait for Ro’s wrath. His fury is beautifully devastating when I meet his stare.

I hold up a hand as he opens his mouth to blast me for my actions. I turn an ear to the door and listen as Sydney’s footsteps fade away.

“Before you bite my head off, I have a good reason.”

“Needing to get your dick wet is not a valid reason for fucking around with the daughter of the man I plan to destroy.”

“We. We plan to destroy, Ro,” I remind him with a flick of a hand between us. “While that is true, it’d be a pleasurable bonus.” Rushing to continue before he loses his shit completely, I say, “Assuming she knows nothing of her father’s past, and with her being so fucking innocent, imagine what a blow it will be to corrupt his precious daughter.” I let that sit for a minute. “Aside from that, now I have her mobile number I can track her.”

Ro rubs a hand over the scruff on his face, still eyeing me with murderous intent. “This was not the plan, Blake.”

“I know but think about it. Think about how much fun we could have defiling Sydney Kincaid while we obliterate her father’s reputation.”

Ro’s eyes darken, and I know I’ve got him. The man whose control is unwavering can’t resist the idea of destroying everything that means anything to Amos Kincaid.

Sydney might be innocent, in every sense of the word, but she doesn't need to know our true intentions. And she never will. Once Amos is annihilated, Ro and I will disappear back to our lives and Sydney will move on, better for being rid of her father and knowing the truth about who he really is.

A fucking murdering rapist.

"We?" he questions.

"Yes, we. Turn on the charm, and that girl will fall at our feet. You telling me you didn't see the interest in her eyes? I sure as fuck did."

"No, I saw it. The same as I saw it the other day when I met her. I'm certain she creamed her knickers after putting her hands on me. It was adorable. That and the?—"

"Blush of her cheeks. Mmmm. Yep, I saw," I say, shamelessly pressing against my hard cock and wondering how the hell I'm meant to walk around for the rest of the day with a hard on. Because I know Ro isn't going to ease my pain.

Ro's eyes flick to my hand clasping my junk. "Problem?" he asks, a wicked and knowing gleam in his eyes.

"You offering?" I smirk and walk to where he still sits in his chair. When he pushes the chair back, I catch a glimpse of his hand adjusting his own dick. Seems the feeling is mutual. Tonight is going to be fun.

"The hell I am. Delayed gratification, Blake." He pushes to his feet, stepping closer until his chest meets mine. "Keeping your dick throbbing in your pants all day as you think about what I'll do to you later will cause me so much pleasure," he whispers, cupping me over my trousers and eliciting a groan from me as he gives a gentle

squeeze. He leans into my neck, lips meeting my heated skin, as he trails kisses down to the collar of my T-shirt. I raise a hand to grip his hair only for him to lift his head before I can get to it. “Now, now, none of that,” he rasps out, tone deep and rich, full of controlled desire.

“You’re a bastard.”

“I know. You’ll be grateful later. I promise.” He brings his lips to mine for a hard kiss, ensuring he doesn’t get too lost in it and lose that tight control he prides himself on, then he pulls back, sits back in his chair and reaches for a large diary on the desk.

“Fuck,” I say, adjusting myself again as I leave to Ro’s laughter echoing behind me.

I hold back in the entrance of the church for a couple of minutes and wait for my dick to soften to an acceptable level for being in public. Walking down the road with a roaring hard on—a very visible one—is the quickest route to a charge of indecency in a public place. Aside from not wishing to be labelled a pervy flasher, we don’t need to the old bill looking into us too closely.

Another reason I think bringing Sydney into the fold is the best idea. What I actually mean is our bed. Keeping her sweet and fully focused on getting off instead of what we are doing is a win win.

It’s not the first time Ro and I have added a little pussy to the mix. With us both being bi, it makes the most sense. Best of both worlds. Some might consider our relationship unusual, but it’s what works for us. And you’d be surprised by how many straight women find it sexy as hell watching two guys fucking, usually while one of us fucks her.

Jesus! My train of thought is not helping the situation in my boxers. While my mind is so clearly in the gutter and with no work as it’s Sunday, I decide I’m in the mood

for a new book, something filthy, and head toward the bookshop.

Sydney's bookshop.

CHAPTER FIVE

SYDNEY

“S ydney.” Something touches my arm, startling me. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you jump,” Cressida says. “Could you show this lady to the romance section, please. I need to make a call.” Cressida guides the young woman in front of me with a hand to her back and a bright smile. Most likely to compensate for my lights are on but nobody is home behaviour and complete lack of attentiveness today.

I paste a hyperbolic smile on my face, certain I look like some demonic librarian. “My apologies. If you’d like to follow me.” I walk a step in front of the woman, peeking over my shoulder and ask, “Is there something specific you’re looking for?”

“Er...well, you know just your bog-standard romance.”

I nod despite thinking she’s not looking for the fluffy Hallmark romance she’s trying to convince me of. “Do you have a particular author in mind?”

“A couple,” she replies sheepishly, obviously not wanting to divulge that information.

“Okay,” I say, stopping in front of a wall of shelves filled with more romance than any one person can handle. Although having had a glimpse at the voraciousness of several die-hard readers that come in here almost every week, I’d say that statement is a lie. Turning to face her, I continue, “Romance starts here and”—spinning slowly with an outstretched arm to demonstrate to entire section—“finishes over there. If there is anything you can’t find, come and see me at the counter, and I’ll find it for

you.”

“Great. Thank you.” She steps toward the first section of shelves, which are what I call mushy romance, as I step back and turn away from her. Walking back to the counter, I glance behind me and see she’s moved to the smaller dark romance section. I say small, but in the last year I’ve been here, it has doubled in size. According to Cressida, it’s thanks to BookTok. Even Amazon have added a banner for BookTok best sellers.

I face forward and smack into something hard. My breath expels from me harshly as hands wrap around my waist, gripping tight to ensure I don’t fall over.

I become all too aware of those hands on me as tingles thrum where fingers press against my waist. Looking up, I’m met with a pair of hazel eyes, flecked with bronze that spark in the bright lights of the shop, and I momentarily get lost in them.

“You good,” Blake asks, snapping me from my daze.

“Oh my... Er...” I stutter, bringing my hands down to circle Blake’s wrists at my waist. His fingers tighten for a fraction of a second as I apply downward pressure, indicating for him to remove his hands.

“I’m sorry,” I say, getting myself under control. “What are you doing here?” My words come out a little more demanding and accusatory than I intended.

He chuckles. “I’d say buying a book. Is that too vague?” My eyes drop to the ring through his bottom lip as his tongue rolls over it before quickly meeting his gaze again. Humour fills his eyes and a bright, wide smile lights up his face.

“Buying a book?” I repeat, attempting to correlate the idea with the man in front of me.

He leans in close like he's about to reveal the world's biggest secret. "This is bookshop, right?" Hot breath tickles my cheek as he pulls back.

I feel my cheeks heat and imagine they are a rosy pink, giving away Blake's effect on me. I roll my eyes. "And you just so happened to pick this bookshop?"

"I heard there was a lady here who would be only too happy to assist me," Blake replies, tucking his hands in his pockets.

I frown, wondering just how he knew I worked here. Before I get the chance to ask, Sheila steps up beside me.

"Sydney, everything okay?" She scans Blake dressed in his dark jeans and plain white T-shirt. Not exactly church attire, but who am I to judge what people wear to church. And I try not to judge why he was there at all. Not the book reading or church going type—if I were the kind to judge someone by appearance.

"Everything is fine. This gentleman is looking for..." I look to Blake for him to fill in the blank.

"Crime. Thriller, to be specific." Blake winks at me. "Something with action, murder and maybe a little se?—"

"This way," I interrupt before Blake can finish and give Sheila a coronary. She may be the owner of Novel Notions, which stocks some extremely out there romance, but Sheila is what some might call a prude. I begin walking and hope that Blake gets the message to follow.

He does.

"Something I said back there?"

I don't bother to reply until we get to where the crime thrillers are. I spin to face him. "Yeah, something like that. Those on the left are our more explicit thrillers. I hope you find what you're looking for. If you'll excuse me."

"Hey," Blake says, snatching hold of my arm and stopping me from leaving. "Where are you going?"

I ignore the heat from him his fingers on my bare arm. "I have work to do. If you need any help, I'm sure one of the other girls can help you." I look to Blake's hold on me and then raise my brows as my eyes meet his in silent question.

He frowns but let's go and I hurry off. By the time I reach the staff room, I'm panting like I ran a marathon and my skin is clammy. A combination of disappointment in the way I treated Blake and anger that he has so much of an effect on me I would react that way at all.

My pa would be furious. As would Sheila if she'd heard the way I talked to a customer. I grab a disposable cup from the holder by the large water bottle and fill it to the brim. I guzzle down the freezing cold liquid attempting to temper the fire burning inside me.

What on earth is wrong with me?

I have never had this much trouble being around a guy before, and certainly not two—one of them a reverend no less. Maybe I'm coming down with something and that's why I feel so hot.

I refill my cup and start drinking as voices reach me.

"Honestly, Suzi, it was so damn hot. I've never come so hard in my life." Her voice lowers, and I place my cup on the draining board and tiptoe to the door but stay out of

sight. “He even suggested we look for someone to join us... you know, in the bedroom.”

I hear a gasp, then Suzi says, “Oh my god. Are you going to do it?” I step back from the door as they pause outside.

“I wouldn’t even know where to start with looking for someone. Can’t lie though, the idea of being fuck?—”

I stumble back, knocking a cup on the table crashing to the floor. “Damn!” I mutter and rush to grab the dustpan and brush from under the sink.

The door opens as I crouch to sweep up the broken china.

“Syd, you okay?” Cressida asks as she and Suzi step inside.

Glancing up, I notice as a questioning look pass between them. They’re now wondering if I heard.

Oh, I heard.

“Yeah. Knocked it with my hand as I was passing,” I say, dropping my eyes back to the mess so they can’t see the lie in my words. I quickly sweep the broken cup up, eager to escape the room. After putting the dustpan and brush back, I face Cressida and Suzi as they trade anxious glances.

“So...” Suzi begins, then stops as her eyes lower to my neck. “What happened to your neck?”

My hand automatically reaches for my neck, but I know what’s there. Since I can remember whenever I’m embarrassed or nervous, I get a rash. Like that doesn’t

simply heighten my embarrassment and draw further unwanted attention.

“Allergic reaction!” I blurt. The blatant lie slips easily from my mouth, and I hope they don’t question it. Of course, I’m not that lucky, and karma bites me in the backside for telling two lies in the space of five minutes.

“Fuck! Do you need an ambulance? Oh, wait I have some antihistamines. You could go into anaphylactic shock,” Suzi rambles, pacing dizzily.

Worried that it’s Suzi who may need an ambulance for a panic attack and heavy with the weight of my lies and guilt of eavesdropping—on yet another conversation—I drop my head in my open palms, hiding my face.

“I lied,” I declare.

My words are met with a stony silence. When nobody speaks after a minute or two, I drop my hands and lift my head. I’m met with Suzi and Cressida’s confused faces beaming back at me.

“I lied. It’s not an allergic reaction.” Their confusion deepens, and it only takes Cressida seconds to work it out.

“You heard us?”

I nod. “Yes. I’m so sorry for listening in on your conversation. And for breaking the cup. And lying.”

“Sydney,” Cress says, coming toward me wearing an easy smile. “It’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong. Technically, it’s not eavesdropping when people are speaking in a public place.” She winks. “So, the rash is, what?”

“A beacon of embarrassment, basically.” I roll my eyes, feeling foolish.

Suzi laughs. “You’ve obviously never spent much time with Cressida outside work.”

I don’t spend time with anyone outside work, I think to myself.

“Too true. And I think we should rectify that. Come to dinner with us tonight,” Cressida says excitedly.

“Oh. Er...I don’t know...”

“Yes, you do. You’re coming to dinner. Suzi will pick you up on her way, won’t you, Suzi?”

“Sure can. I’ll pick you up at 7.00 p.m. I’ll give you my number so you can send me your address.”

I hand her my phone and watch as she puts her number in while I wonder what it is I’ve just agreed to. Well, I say agreed to loosely.

The next few minutes are spent with Suzi and Cress arguing over whether to have Chinese or Indian. When they both look to me for a decision, I want to tell them I don’t mind either way, but I swallow down the words. Sod it. I want to go out with friends—I want to be invited to go out for a start. I want to enjoy my life, to have fun. I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to. I’m an adult, independent and can make my own decisions.

“I haven’t had an Indian in a while,” I say, more confidently than I feel.

“Perfect. Indian it is. I have to go before Sheila comes looking for me. I’ll see you both later,” Cress says and disappears out the door. Her head appears around the door

frame a second later. “Almost forgot. Syd, BYO.” Then she’s gone again.

BYO? What on earth does that mean?

Suzi laughs. “Oh, Syd. It means bring your own drinks.” There’s no condescending tone. If anything, it’s a little pitying. Not sure which I prefer, but I understand it.

“Of course it does. I knew that,” I scoff with a wave of my hand. I know she doesn’t believe me, but she doesn’t call me out.

“Great. See you at 7.00 p.m.”

Once Suzi is gone, I open my phone and send my address to Suzi. No backing out now. Realising the time, I double check I swept up all the broken china, then grab my things from my locker. When I enter the shop floor, my eyes drift to where I last saw Blake, but there’s no sign of him now. Putting my strange interaction with him aside, I head home to get ready.

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CHAPTER SIX

SYDNEY

“N o, no more,” I beg as Cressida and Suzi chant “Down it! Down it!” beside me. I pick up the shot, take a deep breath, my nose turning up at the smell, then knock it back like a pro. But I’m barely an amateur never mind a pro. The Sambuca burns a path down my throat, almost threatening to come back up along with the other...so many I’ve lost count.

“Whoop! Go Syd!” Cress bellows, fist pumping the air.

“I’m done,” I slur, flopping back against the sofa from my position on the floor of Cressida’s apartment.

Suzi barks out a laugh before composing herself enough to point a swaying finger at me. “You’re going to feel that tomorrow.”

She is not wrong. I can already feel my head thumping in time to a hangover knoll to end all hangovers. I close my eyes hoping to ease my churning stomach but all it does is make the room spin. I’ve heard countless stories of the famous spinning room. I can honestly say I’m not a fan. Immediately snapping my eyes open again and attempt to focus on my friends.

“Oh god, I think I’m going to be sick,” I say, sluggishly considering getting up to find the toilet before I decorate Cressida’s carpet.

“Did you just say, ‘oh my god’?” Suzi demands, rising to her knees and barely managing to remain upright. “She did. Cress, the holier than thou Syd just used God’s name in vain.”

“I did not. I would...” I can’t finish my sentence and not because of the alcohol—well, maybe just a little bit.

These two women are a bad, bad influence on me. An image of the lecture my pa would give me if he could see me now. But it’s gone as quick as it came and I drink the water I asked Cress to get me earlier, which has sat untouched since. The cool liquid soothes my Sambuca scorched throat, and I drink it all down.

“I think I need to go home,” I state, forcing myself upright before awkwardly climbing to my feet. The faint tinkle of laughter follows me as I stumble my way into the toilet, managing to close the door but give up with the lock when I my fingers refuse to work properly. The room spins again as I relieve my bladder, then find my way back to the living room where Suzi and Cressida are dancing round the room.

“Syddddd! Come on, let’s dance before the Uber gets here.” Suzi grabs my wrist and drags me forwards, twirling and making me dizzy.

My head feels like someone went at it with a sledgehammer as I roll over in bed.

“Arrgh!” I groan, holding my head in both hands, afraid it might break clean off if I don’t. “Why would people willingly do this?” I mumble, my mouth like sandpaper. I frown and squeeze my eyes closed tighter, but that simple movement causes splintering pain to arc through my head.

My phone rings, and I blindly reach out for it on my bedside table, desperate to stop the loud blaring ring tone. Snatching hold of it, I bring it to my face and crack an eye open enough to answer it before putting it to my ear.

“Hello,” I croak.

“Sydney!” Suzi hollows. “You’re alive then?”

“Barely. Never again,” I say, then add, “Please, no more shouting.”

Suzi laughs. “Famous last words of every hangover sufferer across the world. Get yourself some coffee, and if you’re lucky, you might feel semi-normal by lunch.”

“I thought you had work?”

“I’m at work. Bet you’re glad you aren’t.”

I groan at the thought. “There is no way I’d have been able to come in. I can’t even consider moving from my bed.” Suzi laughs again, then tells me she’ll message later with details for Friday night.

I drop the phone beside me, taking a moment before I attempt moving. My first hangover is not an experience I’m keen to repeat, especially as I can still taste the Sambuca. Although, I did have a good time. Cressida and Suzi don’t seem bothered by my lack of experience with drinking, or anything else for that matter, and are keen to educate me. Pa would call it corruption and quote some verse from the bible on temptation, but I’m beginning to think Jesus—the man who converted water to wine—wouldn’t judge me so harshly.

I drag myself from my bed and shower and dress while my head pulses like a blender, shaking my pickled brain every time I move. I take a couple of painkillers and brave some toast and a strong coffee. Feeling a little better, I decide to take a walk. Maybe some fresh air will clear my head, and once I’m certain I don’t stink like a homeless drunk any longer, I’ll pop and see Pa. I know I’ll ask God for forgiveness out of guilt. And because it’s who I am, how I’ve been raised.

My foggy brain begins to clear after the first twenty minutes, and I stroll toward the church. I decide to enter through the back door, hoping to grab another coffee before finding Pa. The small kitchen is empty when I arrive, but the distant echo of a male voice reaches me from down the old stone corridor letting me know Pa is here. I make a coffee and a tea for him and head off to his office.

I can no longer hear voice I heard when I arrived, so I give a light knock and enter. “Just me, Pa. I made you a cup— Oh.”

“Sydney. I wasn’t expecting you,” Roman says, pen paused mid-air and looking up at me.

“I could say the same,” I reply, surprised and somewhat flustered. “I was... Er, is my pa here?”

He lays the pen down and reclines in his chair. “It would appear not,” he says as he scans the room. “But I’ll take the tea if it’s on offer,” he adds, pointing to the cups in my hand.

“Oh, yeah. Sure.” I step forward and place the cup of tea on the desk in front of him. “There’s no sugar in it though as it was meant to be for Pa.”

He nods, picking up the cup and bringing it to his lips. Pausing, he says, “I think I can go without today.” He takes a sip as I stand there unsure of what to do.

“Well, I’ll just...” I point to my own drink and then over my shoulder and slowly turn to leave, eager to be away from him. I’m not sure if it’s the alcohol lingering in my bloodstream or something else but it’s feeling incredibly hot in here.

“Is everything okay, Sydney? You seem a little flushed,” Roman says, halting my exit.

“Oh yeah, everything is fine. It’s a little cold out and warm in here, so...” I say, turning back to him. I expected him to still be sat at the desk, but instead, he’s right in front of me. I suck in a breath of surprise, inhaling something spicy and rich. My head snaps up, and all the air leaves my lungs as I meet his intense gaze.

“Is that so?” I catch a glimpse of his hand out of the corner of my eye a second before his finger brushes over my heated cheek. “Are you sure there’s nothing else?”

My head shakes of its own accord while my mind tries to make sense of what is going on.

Is he flirting with me?

No, that can’t be right. He’s a reverend, a man of the cloth like Pa. Not to mention he’s got to be almost a decade older than me. No. Just no.

Clarity snaps and I step back. “I...I need to go. Sorry.” I rush from the office, abandoning my coffee on the counter in the kitchen, and out the back door. I barely notice the person outside the door or stop when they call my name.

I’m halfway home before I slow my almost jog down to a walk. My heart is racing and my lungs ache with lack of oxygen. Taking in a few deep breaths, the streets around me come back in to focus, and my thoughts turn back to what happened back at the church.

I’m so confused. My experience with men is limited, but I’m not clueless enough to not recognise flirting. Why would Roman flirt with me? I mean, reverends are allowed to marry, but I’m only twenty-two and nothing special. Surely Roman could see how taken the women were with him on Sunday, even the married ones. He could have his pick of women for a wife.

I realise how ridiculous and degrading that sounds, but it doesn't make it less true. Then there's Blake, who not only asked to meet for coffee, but knows Roman. Are they friends? Is he a reverend too?

I shake my head, stopping in the middle of the path and receive muttered cursing from the couple behind who narrowly avoid crashing into me. I turn around and head back the way I came, taking a left before the church towards town.

I arrive at the bookshop as Cress and Suzi are leaving on their lunch break.

"Syd," Cress yells as she spots me. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd still be recovering."

"I'm still feeling a little fragile, but I thought the fresh air would help."

"You know, the best way to cure a hangover is?—"

"Don't say it. I'm not drinking...ever again."

Cress and Suzi laugh, then Cress hooks her free arm in mine, spinning me around, with Suzi on her other side and begins walking.

"Whatever you say. Let's go eat."

I don't argue with her, allowing her to tow me down the street to the café. Cress and Suzi chat about an angry customer who laid into Sheila while I figure out how to ask them about what happened with Roman. I think I just need assurance that I imagined the whole thing, that he was simply being kind.

I pay no mind to the quiet voice screaming at the back of my mind that I'm wrong. That Reverend Roman Stone was most certainly flirting with me, as was Blake at the

bookshop yesterday.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

ROMAN

I hear Blake calling Sydney's name as I reach the kitchen, and a minute later he walks in, glancing over his shoulder as though Sydney is behind him. But she's not.

"What the hell happened? She ran out of here like the devil was chasing her."

I huff out a laugh at that analogy. "Well, I imagine she probably thought he was." I tip Sydney's untouched coffee down the sink and wipe up where it spilled in her hurry to get away.

"What did you do?" Blake demands, stepping up beside me.

"Ha! I like the way you assume I did something."

"You telling me you didn't?"

I slam the cup onto the draining board having rinsed it and spin to face him. "No, you can have this one. As it's all on you and your ridiculous idea of flirting with her."

Blake laughs. "Oh my god. This is too good." He continues to laugh as I move around him and head back to the office. "Where's the old man?"

"Close the door," I tell him as he steps into the office with me. "He called me late last night to say he'd be away another day. When I asked if everything was okay, he

told me he had some other business to take of care and would be back later today”

“Okay, that’s not fucking suspect. We’ll get to that in a second. Tell me what happened with Syd first.”

I cock a brow at him. “Syd?”

“Yeah, you know, short for Sydney.” He rolls his eyes and waves a hand for me to stop delaying and get on with it.

I drop into the chair and explain what happened.

“I knew she was innocent, and I joked about her being virginal, but...”

I can’t ignore how much that idea arouses me, and from the look on Blake’s face, he feels the same. But I did my homework. Sydney isn’t a virgin.

“She’s not. And besides, while I agree it would be fun to fuck with her, she is not why we are here. And given her reaction to me just now, I’m not sure messing with her won’t bring trouble we don’t need.”

Sydney’s ex sounds like someone who deserves a few broken bones, and I can’t promise I won’t deliver if I ever have the displeasure of meeting him.

“Doesn’t matter. Leave her to me,” Blake says, getting to his feet. “I’ll see you at home later.”

After Blake leaves, I spend another hour going through Amos’s desk and office looking for anything I can use to help tarnish his so-called good name. He’s obviously not stupid enough to keep stuff here. That means he either has it stashed at his house or somewhere else.

Around four o'clock, I'm out in the main room checking and tidying, for the hundredth time, when a guy enters the main door. He's in his late twenties-early thirties and wearing blue jeans and a hoodie. I can't see his face properly due to the baseball cap he's wearing. I keep my head down as I pretend to read through a passage in the bible from my position seated on the far end of the front pew and watch as he strolls down the centre aisle, scanning as he goes.

As he reaches the front and realises whatever or whoever he's looking for isn't here, I finally make my presence known.

"Can I help you?" I ask, dropping the bible onto the pew and walking toward him.

Catching my movement and looking my way, he scowls. The frown deepens as he takes in my collar. "Where's Reverend Kincaid?"

"He's not here at present," I tell him. "I'm Reverend Stone. Perhaps I can help." He begins shaking his head before I've finished introducing myself.

"Nah, I'm good," he says, dismissively. "You know when he'll be back?"

This guy is not your usual God loving do-gooder. He looks like me when I'm not preaching the good Lord's word, and I doubt he's here to confess his sins, of which I'm sure he has plenty. Certain he's not going to talk to me, I consider what to tell him while noticing his bruised knuckles.

"He will be back later today. Early evening, I believe."

He watches me carefully for a moment as though I'm lying. "Guess I'll come back later then," he drawls before spinning on his heel and marching back the way he came.

I follow silently, letting him exit the main doors fully before I crack open the door. The street is busy, but it doesn't take me long to spot him hurrying toward the train station. I track him all the way to the entrance, then as though he can sense me watching him, he looks back at the church. With the setting of the sun, casting the church in shadow, and the door partially blocking me from view, I doubt he can see me. A second later he vanishes inside the station.

Heading back inside, I consider whether it would be worth sticking around once Amos arrives and see if the guy comes back, but while I'm curious as fuck to know who he is and what he wants with Amos, Blake and I need to discuss our chances of breaking into Kincaid's home to nosy around.

Blake isn't in when I get home just after six. I make quick work of unbuttoning my shirt and ripping the suffocating white collar free, tossing it aside, then throw on some joggers and a tee. I grab a beer and settle on the sofa.

Ten minutes later the front door opens.

"Hi, honey, I'm home," Blake singsongs as he enters. "I bring food," he adds as he steps into the open plan living room-kitchen, carrying takeout from the chinese up the road.

I shake my head as he places the bags down on the kitchen top. Leaving my beer on the coffee table, I make my way to him. He smells of soap and given his clothes aren't covered in dust, he's obviously been home and showered and changed from work before grabbing dinner. When we relocated here, Blake was able to score some construction work on a new high rise, not that money is an issue. This flat is nothing like our house back home, but it will do while we are here.

"So, did the elusive Rev return from his little trip?" Blake asks as he begins emptying the bags, and I grab a couple of plates.

“He did. Sporting a bandaged hand and a bruise on his cheek, which he attempted to cover unsuccessfully.”

“Well, fuck me,” Blake says, pausing to look at me.

I nod, ignoring the temptation to do just that and continue dishing up dinner. “I hope there’s spring rolls in here.” Blake rolls his eyes and holds out a small white paper bag to me. Taking the bag, I open it and find four mini spring rolls. I place two on Blake’s plate, one on mine and stuff the other into my mouth while Blake dishes up the rice and grabs forks for us both.

“So, what excuse did he give you for his injuries?” Blake asks as we sit down to eat.

“He claims he fell down some steps.”

“That’s original,” he says around a mouthful of food. “Did you find anything at the church?”

I shake my head. “No, nothing. Which means, we need to find a way inside his house.” Blake frowns. “What?” I ask.

“Just thinking how hard that might be considering the guy doesn’t seem to leave the house after dark.”

“I know. I’m going to tail him for the next couple of days and see if he visits anywhere else, then we can decide.”

I tell Blake about the guy who came looking for Amos, and he agrees it’s suspicious. After that we eat in silence, and my mind wanders to my sister. She’s the reason we are here. My parents might not want anything to do with me, but I’m determined to get justice for them and Annabel. And all the other women Kincaid has raped and

murdered. We know Amos Kincaid isn't his real name. From what we know, the real Amos Kincaid went missing over twenty years ago. His identity was stolen around the same time he went missing—I'd lay money on him being dead and buried in some shallow grave somewhere. The fact he had no next of kin, no living family to miss him, made it easy for Sydney's father to assume his identity without raising any suspicions.

We aren't even certain if Kincaid is Sydney's real father. That's another puzzle piece we need to find. The only thing we know for sure is that Amos Kincaid is really Warren Burns, and he was there the night my sister was murdered three years ago. By all accounts, he was the last one to see her alive.

"Here," Blake says, interrupting my thoughts and holding out another beer. "What's got you thinking so hard?" he asks as he drops down on the seat beside me.

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"About Annabel?" I nod. "We'll get him, Ro. We'll make him pay." He rests his free hand on my thigh, gently rubbing it.

"Too fucking right we will," I tell him, then take a mouthful of beer. I rest my head back and close my eyes as Blake's hand soothes me.

There's a clunk of glass on wood as Blake places his beer bottle down on the coffee table, and the sofa creaks as Blake shifts position. His hand trails along my thigh to my knee, and I sense him positioned on the floor between my legs. He pushes against my knees, forcing me to widen my legs, and I don't fight it. But I do raise my head a fraction and crack an eye open as Blake begins a torturous stroking of my cock through my joggers. Watching me with hooded and lust filled eyes, I snatch hold of his hair and lift his head. My eyes drop to his mouth as he wets his lips, his tongue pausing on his piercing. My cock jerks beneath his hand.

“Thinking about my lips wrapped around your cock, huh?” he teases.

I tug at his hair. “I don’t need to think about it. You’re about to make it a reality.” His hands grip either side of my joggers, and I lift my hips just enough for him to tug them down, letting my cock free. His move to get his mouth on me is instant, and I let him get within a breath’s reach before I pull him back with a deep chuckle.

He groans. “Please, Ro. Fuck my mouth,” he begs.

Normally, I’d torture us both with delayed pleasure, but I don’t have the patience tonight. My thoughts have been scattered and somewhere between grief and relief since we arrived and confirmed Amos is here.

Blake wraps one hand around my shaft, his grip firm, and any restraint I might have mustered is lost. I shove his head down, and he takes my aching cock into his warm, wet mouth. He swirls his tongue around the rim, just how I like it, before I thrust up into his mouth, and he gags, mouth full, as I hit the back of his throat.

“Fuck! That’s it. Suck me good, Blake,” I hiss through gritted teeth.

He tightens his lips around me, almost to the point of pain, and sucks as he pulls all the way back to the tip. I thrust up again, causing him to gag, and I hold him there, enjoying the tightening of his throat as he groans around my crown. My balls tighten as Blake works his mouth over my cock again and again. I feel him thrusting his own hips against the sofa, desperate for release, and with one last thrust into his mouth, I shoot my load down his throat, gripping his hair tight as my cock pulses with my release.

As my breathing levels out, I tug his head up and watch as he uses his thumb to wipe a drop of cum from the corner of his mouth, swiping it on his tongue.

Smirking, I say, “Up. Bedroom now. I want you naked, on your knees and arse in the air.”

Blake chuckles as he gets to his feet, sporting a damp patch from his leaking and painfully hard cock tenting his trousers. “You don’t need to tell me twice,” he retorts and strides off in the direction of the bedroom. By the time I arrive, Blake has stripped naked and is on all fours, arse in the air, as ordered, with a bottle of lube beside him as he strokes his cock leisurely, watching me over his shoulder as I enter the room.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BLAKE

I slip from the bed, trying not to disturb Roman. Now Amos is back, he has no reason to get up at this ridiculous hour. I'm pulling on a pair of boxers when a hum of approval comes from behind me.

"That's a view to wake up to," Ro mumbles, the sheets rustling with his movement.

Spinning, I find him on his back with his hands behind his head, the duvet resting at his hips, his abs and tattooed chest on full display. I lick my lips as memories of last night flood back in, but I don't have time to indulge in a repeat performance. Stalking to the bed, I lean in and kiss him.

"I need to shower and get to work or I'll be out of a job," I tell him, pushing away from the bed and toward the en suite. It's about the only decent thing this place has. And even that is bland and lacking any sort of character.

I find Ro in the kitchen once I'm showered and dressed and a coffee waiting for me.

"Is this what they call domesticated bliss?" I joke, picking up my cup and drinking. When Ro doesn't answer, I look over to find him staring at me. "What?" I look down at myself in a battered pair of blue jeans, smattered with paint, and a white T-shirt with a high-vis vest over the top and a utility belt hanging from my waist.

"Jesus! Get out of here before I take you back to bed."

I laugh. “Yes, boss,” I say, knowing it will wake his dominant side. I rinse my cup and call goodbye as I leave.

The first time I put these jeans on, Ro almost came in his pants. It’s no surprise I was late for my first day on the job and spent the rest of the day with a delicious ache in my arse every time I caught a glimpse of my reflection. Who knew Ro had a builder kink. But this is one thing I intend to carry back home with me.

I love Ro in his reverend collar too, but not for the same reasons. He looks hot for sure, but it’s more of a taboo thing. I like the idea of corrupting a man of God, and even more so Syd. The girl has no idea how fucking sexy she is. Virgin or not, I intend to tempt her, corrupt her until the only innocent thing about her will be the way everyone else sees her. Or maybe not, depending on exactly how far she’s prepared to fall.

Sydney is the modern Eve, and I fully intend to make her fall from grace spectacular.

When it begins pissing down around lunch time, work is called off, and I find myself heading for the bookshop. Ducking in out of the rain, I spot Syd chatting to a guy I don’t recognise, but her laughter that has me moving on automatic.

I slip down the aisle next to them and listen as the guy smoothly switches gears and asks her if she has a boyfriend.

“No and I’m not looking for a relationship at the moment,” she says apologetically.

“Okay.” The guy pauses, watching her, as though he’s debating whether to say more. Deciding to chance it, he says, “How about just plain old fun? You know, friends with benefits.” He leans against the bookshelf, one arm above Syd’s head, and winks.

She laughs. A sweet giggle but one that hides shock at the guy’s balls or the whole

idea of fucking a random bloke. Most likely both.

Screwing her nose up, she says, “That’s not really me.”

“A romantic, huh?” he counters.

“Not really. Just not interested in meaningless...sex,” she retorts, and it’s clear from her hesitation how hard it was for her to get that word out without stuttering.

Taking pity on her uncomfortableness, and pissed the guy can’t take a hint, I step round into their aisle, catching Syd’s attention immediately.

Striding up to her like it’s the most natural thing in the world, I say, “Hey. You ready to go?”

She frowns but catches on fast. “Sure. Let me grab my bag and tell Sheila I’m going on my break.” Turning to the guy, who is busy scanning me from head to toe, she says, “Nice chatting to you, Ewan. Good luck with university.”

“I’ll wait at the entrance,” I call as she heads off to the staff room. I look back at Ewan , and I want to laugh at the look on his face, but instead, for once, I take the high ground and walk away.

“Prick,” Ewan mutters.

I can’t help myself this time and spin around, making sure he’s watching, I give him the finger as I continue to walk backwards. “Have a good day, Ewan,” I call, snatching the attention of several people nearby, who all turn to look at him. His face reddens. Mission accomplished.

I wait by the entrance for five minutes with no sign of Syd. Determined to not let her

duck out on me, I go in search of her or someone that knows where she is.

There's no sign of Ewan, but I do find Sheila.

"Excuse me," I say, interrupting her counting. I don't like the woman. She turns, and I continue, "I'm looking for Sydney."

Her eyes narrow momentarily, then realisation hits. "You were here the other day. Is there a problem?"

"No, no problem. I'm meeting Syd for coffee and can't seem to find her." Her eyes trail my body, scrutinising my face.

She harrumphs. "Just a moment. I'll fetch her for you." She marches away to a door with a sign saying PRIVATE on it and disappears inside.

I bet she has a direct line to Amos and is filling him in on the inappropriate man asking for his daughter right now.

Several more minutes pass before the door opens and out steps Syd with Sheila following behind. Sydney's posture has taken on a straightness and a deep frown is creasing her brow. As she reaches me, she glances quickly over her shoulder to where Sheila now stands a couple of feet away.

"Look, I don't know what your game is, but you can't just show up at my work and demand I go to coffee with you. Not that I'm not grateful for getting me away from Ewan, but I didn't think you were serious," she whispers, eyes darting around the shop as though everyone is watching her.

I take note of the bag slung over her shoulder and the coat she's wearing. "Don't you have lunch now?"

Looking down at herself, she says, “I do. But...”

“So let’s go.” I gesture for her to go ahead before she can respond, placing my hand on the small of her back and guiding her toward the exit. “If you really don’t want to have lunch with me, once we get outside, we can go our separate ways, although I don’t think you will.”

Her head spins and she glares at me. “Seems Ewan isn’t the only one who can’t take no for answer.”

Outside, we walk until we are out of sight of the shop and its occupants, particularly Sheila, who I know watched us all the way, then Syd rounds on me.

“What are you doing here, Blake?”

I roll my eyes. “Like I said, taking you to lunch, coffee, something else, if you fancy,” I say with a laugh and a wink.

She sighs and throws her hands up in the air. “I don’t know you. Did I agree to coffee with you? Yes, I did. Did we agree a time or place? No, we did not. Do I want to go to lunch with you? N?—”

“Sure you do,” I say, interrupting her and cutting off the ‘no’ I know is coming. “It’s just lunch or coffee, whatever you want. And, in case you didn’t know, every relationship starts with two people who don’t know each other.”

She shakes her head. “This is...not that. And does taking the mick usually work for you as a chat up line?”

“It’s called a sense of humour, Syd,” I reply dryly, losing patience with this charade and contemplating throwing her over my shoulder.

She baulks at my words. “I have a sense of humour, I’ll have you know.” She pouts like a petulant child, crossing her arms.

I laugh. It’s impossible not to when she’s looking at me like that. Not impressed, she stomps past me, nudging my shoulder as she goes.

“And stop calling me Syd. I sound like a little old man,” she calls back, making me laugh harder.

I jog after her. “Okay, I’m sorry. Come to lunch with me? We can talk about that stick Sheila has up her ar?—”

She twirls around and slams a hand over my mouth, unaware of how close I was. Her hand smells of soap and vanilla, and I hold back the desire to swipe my tongue out and lick her palm or kiss it. Time stops for a second as she looks at me. I can see the war waging inside her. A clean split down the middle between giving in or to keep walking.

She yanks her hand away. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to...” She takes a step back, and I think she’s going to run. “Okay, let’s go to lunch. But it’s just lunch, Blake. It’s not the start of anything and doesn’t mean anything either. And no more turning up at my work.”

Fuck me if my dick isn’t hard listening to her laying out her terms. I’m so lost to it that I miss the part where I’m supposed to answer her.

“Deal,” I state, holding out my hand. Clearly confused, I add, “Shake on it?” She rolls her eyes but places her dainty hand in mine and my fingers wrap around it easily. Giving it a couple of shakes, I then release it and say, “Where to, Syd...ney?”

“That’s better. I know the perfect place.”

Syd leads me to a small bistro hidden down one of the many lanes. The outside is simple yet welcoming with its plain cream awning, the name Fork it was her ex.

“So, what’s good?” I ask, opening my menu.

“Dirty fries,” she states simply.

CHAPTER NINE

SYDNEY

“So, what’s good?” Blake asks, scanning the menu.

“Dirty fries,” I say, my mouth watering at the thought of the delicious fries loaded with crispy bacon, BBQ sauce, aioli and topped with crispy onions. Blake laughs, and I look over to him. “What?”

“Dirty fries?” he questions with smirk.

“Yeah, so?” I counter, a little offended he’s making fun of my favourite food.

He scans my face, and I’m not sure what he’s hoping to find. Hit with some sudden realisation, he lowers his menu and leans forward. “So, it’s not what I was expecting you to say, that’s all.”

I lick my lips and watch as his eyes snap to the action, then it hits me why he would think that. “Oh, so because I’m the daughter of a reverend, dirty fries is funny. Like, if I were to say dirty washing, does that bring the same level of humour for your small brain?”

“Maybe,” he says, one side of his mouth kicking up and his eyes spark with amusement.

“Eww, that’s just...weird,” I say as Tina arrives to take our drinks order.

I order a coke and Blake orders a beer. I roll my eyes at his stereotypical selection.

“I saw that,” he says as Tina leaves to fetch our drinks. “I’m not allowed to pass comment about your food, but you’re allowed to judge my drink of choice. Just so we’re clear on the double standard.”

I begin to protest but realise he’s right, even though I won’t admit it. Hiding a smirk and in an effort to step away from the banter, despite enjoying it more than I should, I ask, “Did you enjoy your book? You know, the one you came to buy the other day.”

Blake doesn’t miss a beat. “Sure did. It was riveting. That’s why I was there today,” he says, closing his menu and placing it on the table.

I’m nodding along and smiling because I know he’s lying. “What was it about?” I ask casually.

Tina delivers our drinks and takes our food order, mine of dirty fries, at which I can’t help smile when I say it. When Blake orders the same, my mouth drops open.

“What?” Blake asks as Tina collects the menus and trots off. “I want to know just how dirty these fries are.” His tone is serious, then he winks and all pretence drops away.

Unable to refrain, I laugh. It’s a deep and true laugh, one I’ve not experienced in a while—well, not until the other night with Suzi and Cress. Before that though, I’ve not laughed so freely in a long time.

The moment breaks some of the tension I’d been feeling, and I begin to relax in Blake’s company. I’m surprised at how easy it is. I’m not good around men. Certainly not confident, anyway. And my relationship with Paul hasn’t set a great precedent or instilled any trust in my ability to judge people and their motives. Not

that I think Paul had any specific motives. He's just a guy who allowed his desires to guide him. Pa has always said we must be true to God's words and refrain from temptation. It's been harder to avoid temptation and believe that since Paul and as I've gotten older.

In this past week, alone, I've slipped several times; drinking, reading inappropriate books, even just a glance, impure thoughts about Roman and Blake and masturbating, even if it was in my sleep. And now here I am, eating lunch with a man I hardly know and someone who I'm not entirely sure is safe regardless of his obvious connection to Roman.

Thoughts of Roman are another example of my lack of judgement. The idea that he was flirting yesterday is ridiculous. I never managed to ask Cress and Suzi about it at the lunch yesterday because we were too busy eating and talking about Sheila's angry customer.

"Earth to Sydney. You okay?"

I snap back to now, brushing my thoughts aside. "Yeah, sorry. What did you say?"

With a chuckle, Blake says, "Nothing." Looking over my shoulder, and picking up his napkin he adds, "This must be our dirty fries."

Doing the same, I wait for Tina to place my plate—although it's more of a bucket—down before picking up my fork to tuck in. My nose is hit by the tantalising scent of BBQ sauce and aioli mixed with bacon, and I hum appreciatively as I load my fork and bring it to my mouth.

As the flavours explode on my tongue, I moan and close my eyes, savouring that first taste. "Hmmm, it's so good." I open my eyes to see what Blake thinks of this only to find him staring at me. His hand holding his full fork hovers between his food and his

mouth. But it's the look on his face that has me almost choking.

"That noise is altogether too salacious, Syd," Blake murmurs, and for a second, I think I misheard him. But as my cheeks heat and, no doubt, turn a flaming red, my thighs tense, squeezing together involuntarily.

"What are you doing?" I blurt, my usual filter broken and feeling flustered. "That's...it's..." I stammer, unable to form a coherent sentence to describe how utterly inappropriate Blake's words are.

Shaking his head as though coming out of a trance, Blake says, "Sorry. You're right. But that was so fucking h?—"

"Don't!" I hiss. "Do not finish that sentence." Using my napkin, I wipe my mouth and search the restaurant for Tina. Catching her attention, she hurries over.

"Everything okay, Sydney? Is there a problem with your food?"

I shake my head as I struggle with what I want to say. "No, no. It's... Er, could you please put this in a takeaway box and bring the bill. I have to leave."

Tina's gaze flicks back and forth between Blake and me, her brow creased in confusion. "Of course. Give me a couple of minutes," she says, taking my plate.

Blake doesn't say a word. He sits there, napkin and fork discarded on the table, and stares at me like I've lost my mind.

Maybe I have.

Coming here with him was a mistake. I can't be here. I can't...I just can't.

Within five minutes, Tina has returned, handing me my takeaway box and placing the bill on the table. Before I can grab it, Blake has snatched it up and is pulling his wallet free. He tosses some cash down on the table without looking at the bill, tugs his jacket from the back of the chair and follows as I walk toward the exit.

I speed up, needing to get far away from him. Far away from temptation. My mind spirals with thoughts of if I did something to lead him on, make him think that way. Was agreeing to go to lunch a date to him? He doesn't try to stop me as I wind my way down the street, but he stays no more than two steps behind me.

When I turn off the high street and in the direction of Pa's house, he hurries his steps to catch up to me.

"Syd, where are you going?"

"None of your business. This was a mistake. I'm sure you're a really great guy, but I don't need...anything from you. I'd prefer if you left me alone." I walk a little faster, but it makes no difference. Each of his strides is easily two of mine. I turn down a side street with no idea where it goes, just that I need to go. Our footsteps echo between the walls of the tall buildings, and I realise we're alone.

"Hey," Blake says as he snatches hold of my arm, stopping me and spinning me around. I stumble, hitting the wall as Blake crowds me.

Oh god. I can't help the thought as it jumps unbidden through my mind. I'm not worried about taking the Lord's name in vain, all I'm concerned about is the man, twice my size, caging me in against a wall down an empty street; a man who made my innocent words sound somehow suggestive, sexual, and who has a strange effect on my body. An effect I'm not equipped to deal with or should even be having.

"Blake." The name falls from my lips like a whispered prayer, and I scan his face,

desperate to read his intentions. His eyes are no longer the warm, welcoming brown from earlier, and instead they've darkened, flashing with an unknown emotion.

He leans in, his nose touching mine, and I can feel his breath against my lips. "Oh, Sydney. So sweet, so innocent and untouched by sin." His words are slow and condescending.

I shake my head because neither are true.

"No?" he questions, running a finger down my cheekbone and along my jaw. "You ever been kissed, Sydney Kincaid?" He brushes his thumb over my lower lip, my breath catching and sending a shiver through my body. "Oh, I know you have."

I frown at his words, struggling to understand how he could possibly know that. Fighting with the fear of what he's going to do to me and the twisted and sinful realisation that I want to know what his lips feel like against mine. Like he can read my mind, he smiles.

"But you've never been kissed like this." His lips meet mine, tentative at first, then harsher.

I'm so shocked, so utterly and completely entranced by his taste, by the warm, smooth glide of his lips over mine that I'm frozen in place. This is why I don't fight him, so I tell myself, and nothing to do with the intoxicating desire rushing through me. And its desire that has me kissing him back and fisting his jacket.

My mind empties, narrowing till there is only Blake and me and this delicious throbbing at my core. My hands unfurl and skate up his body, locking around his neck as my back arches. Blake deepens the kiss, his tongue slipping inside to tangle with mine, and as he groans, I feel his erection pressing against me.

Reality slaps me in the face, and I break the kiss, shoving Blake away from me, then I run.

CHAPTER TEN

ROMAN

I take my coffee back to bed and climb under the covers, but it doesn't last when my phone rings five minutes later.

"Oz, what's up?"

"I'm sending you the investigation details of the last victim. But I also got a hit from Kincaid's car reg in that area a day after the murder."

"Son of a bitch! Did you find anything on Sydney?" When Blake posed the idea of using Sydney as another route to bring Kincaid down, I asked Oz to dig a little deeper into our seemingly innocent reverend's daughter.

"Nah, the girl is clean as a whistle. The only black spot in her perfect life is that prick of an ex she was set to marry."

"Well, he's out of the picture."

"You planning on using her?"

"Possibly. Kincaid came back injured. Check hospital reports for hand injuries and anyone matching his description. If he did go to the hospital, I doubt he used the name Kincaid."

“Will do.”

I end the call and open Oz’s latest email. Opening the first attachment, it’s a medical examiner’s report detailing the victim’s numerous injuries. A quick scan is all I need to confirm whoever did this is the same person who killed my sister. Kincaid is smart enough to not hit the same county twice and he adjusts small details of his MO to throw off any chance of them being linked. It goes at least some way to explaining why the old bill haven’t linked them yet.

I shower and dress before heading to the spare room we’re using as an office. Paperwork is spread out over the large desk and pinned to the walls is a timeline naming all the victims over the last few years.

Pauline Lees, aged 22, dark hair, green eyes.

Jessica Trent, aged 20, dark hair, brown eyes.

Donna Sharpe, aged 22, blonde hair, blue eyes.

Kylie Ackers, aged 19, blonde hair, green eyes.

Susan Bell, aged 21, dark hair, brown eyes.

The names keep going to include another half a dozen, and these are the ones we know about. My eyes land on my sister’s name; Annabel Stone, aged 23, dark hair, blue eyes. There is no specific type, no pattern as to how he chooses them. It all seems random. But they are not spur of the moment. He comes prepared, hunting until he finds just what he’s looking for.

The front door slams, snapping me from my thoughts, and I look at my watch. A second later, Blake appears in the doorway, looking tense and flustered. He marches

into the room, without so much as a hello, and right up to me, then grabs my face between his hands and kisses me.

“What the—” I stop and lick my lips, tasting something sweet. Leaning in, I sniff Blake’s neck, jolting backwards when I’m hit with the scent of coconut. “Is that?—”

“Syd? Yep, and ain’t it the sweetest fucking thing you ever tasted?” Blake replies, locking his hands behind his head and pacing the room.

“You kissed her?”

“Uh-huh. She kissed me right fucking back too. God, it was divine.”

“Seems she left you hanging though,” I say, with a gesturing nod toward the front of his jeans. Stepping into his path, I stop his pacing and grab a hold of his painfully hard cock. “Need me to relieve this for you?” I ask wickedly and fully on board with the idea as I give him a rough squeeze.

He groans a garbled response, which I read as a yes, and I begin unbuttoning his trousers as I trail a path of kisses and nips along the column of his neck. Reaching his mouth, I kiss him, drowning out his moans as I wrap my hand tightly around his shaft. After a couple of hard pumps, with Blake thrusting into my fisted hand, I release him and spin him as I push him against the wall.

Shoving his jeans down his legs as he kicks his trainers off, I free one leg before kicking his legs wide and covering his back with my front.

“Look how fucking hard you are, Blake,” I whisper in his ear as I take him in my hand again and swipe my thumb over his crown, which is dripping precum, then press my thumb on my tongue, tasting him. Keeping my hand wrapped around his cock, I drop to my knees and bury my head between his legs, licking a path along his taint up

to his puckered hole. Letting his dick go, I grab his arse cheeks, spreading them, my skin blanched white from the tight grip, then I swirl my tongue around his rim as he moans and pushes back into my mouth.

Pulling back and rising to my feet, I reach behind me to the desk drawer, finding the lube I know is in there. Blake watches over his shoulder as I lower my joggers, my cock springing free and slapping against my stomach, before squirting lube over my dick and tossing the tube aside. Sliding my hand up and down my shaft a couple of times before looking back to Blake.

Still wet with my saliva, I ease a lube-coated finger into Blake's hole to the first knuckle, eliciting a groan from him. As he adjusts, I push deeper, then add a second finger, the tight muscles contracting around the intrusion. I hook my fingers, caressing the small smooth gland in a come-hither motion before giving it a couple of rapid taps, a move guaranteed to have him riding the edge of orgasm in minutes.

"Roman," Blake growls, and I smirk.

I smirk. "Hands on the fucking wall, Blake," I order and watch as his eyes glaze over with need before he does what I asked. Removing my fingers, I grab his hips, yanking them back, arching Blake's back. "Keep those hands on the fucking wall," I demand, rubbing the head of my cock against his ring.

"Ro!" Blake growls again, pushing his arse back, demanding and desperate for me to fuck him.

I push forward, slowly easing in as Blake relaxes and opens for me. My crown slides past the first tight ring of muscle, drawing a deep groan from Blake.

"More! Harder!" Blake begs, slamming a hand against the wall.

“Patience.” I chuckle, sliding in further, my head tipping back and eyes closing as his passage tightens around my cock. “Fuck!”

“Jesus, Ro, just fuck me.”

Unable to hold back any longer, I slam into him. I pause, allowing Blake to adjust as he hisses at the intrusion. Gripping his hips, I ease out, then pound into him, panting with each thrust of my hips as Blake moans and I set a punishing pace.

“You wishing you could sink your throbbing cock into Sydney’s tight little cunt, Blake?”

“Y-yes. Fuck yes!”

The image is easy to envisage and has me pumping harder and faster as my balls tighten. I feel Blake’s arse contracting, squeezing, as his own orgasm rises. Reaching around, I fist Blake’s cock as I continue to fuck his arse.

“Oh fuck! Ro, I’m...going to come.”

“Yes, you fucking are. I’m right there with you,” I cry, slamming into him.

Blake lets out a roar as he comes, shooting strips of milky cum up the wall and on the carpet, and milking my cock, drawing my own orgasm from me.

I squeeze his hips, dropping my head onto his back as my breaths even out.

“Holy fuck!” Blake murmurs.

I hum my agreement, slipping free from him and stepping back. He winces and turns to me, wearing a satisfied smile.

“You still unsure about bringing Syd in? ’Cause I think the sooner the better. I’ve tasted her, tasted her desire, and, let me tell you, the thought of corrupting her gets me fucking hard.”

I step toward him and cup his scruff covered face. “I agree.” I press a kiss to his lips. “Let’s clean up, then we’ll talk.”

“What you really mean is”—he looks down at my semi-hard dick, his lips kicking up in a smirk—“you’re going to fuck my mouth in the shower first.”

I laugh, slapping his arse as he turns away, then follow him to the bathroom. He’s not wrong and he’ll be choking on my dick before the water is even warm.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SYDNEY

With a pounding heart, a heaving chest and sweat coating my back, I check over my shoulder again to be sure Blake hasn't followed me then slow to a walk as I turn down the road to Pa's house. I'm a hot mess and can't let Pa see me like this.

Pausing, I rest against the fence of a house that burnt down a few months back and take a few deep breaths. A litany of bible verses delivered by my reverend father play like a reel in my head as it scrambles to make sense of what just happened. How I allowed myself to be tempted so easily and give into my lustful thoughts.

I don't need to think about why I liked it so much. It is the very nature of temptation to be enjoyable, to draw you in, to be almost addictive. So much so, you would abandon everything you've been taught and believe to be true. My biggest concern right now is ensuring Pa doesn't find out—the man is creepily accurate at reading me—and avoiding a situation that could lead to a repeat.

I force myself upright, shoving all thoughts of Blake deep down, straighten my clothes and run my fingers through my hair and force myself to believe that everything will be okay. I'll go and see Pa, we'll chat and he'll tell me all about his weekend away. Then tonight, when I get home, I'll bathe before asking God for absolution for my transgressions.

Yes, that's it. That's all I need to do. Everything will be fine. I'll avoid Blake and Roman, focus on my work and allow God to show me the way.

Feeling confident and sure I have it all under control, I walk the rest of the way to Pa's and knock on the door.

A smile tugs at the corner of my lips as I hear Pa's footsteps coming down the hall to the front door. The smile I so successfully plastered on my face is wiped away the second Pa opens the door and I see the bruise on the side of his face.

"Oh gosh, Pa. What happened? Are you okay?" I demand as I step inside, scanning the rest of him and noticing the bandage covering his hand.

"It's fine, Sydney. Don't make a fuss."

"But, Pa?—"

"It was a small accident. That is all. Nothing for you to worry about," he says cutting me off sharply, turning and striding back down the hall.

I close the door, taking my shoes off quickly and follow him. "As long as you're okay. How did it even happen," I press, stepping into the kitchen.

He sets cups out and switches the kettle on. "I tripped as I was leaving the hotel. And before you ask, I got checked out at the hospital. Nothing broken, just some bruises and a sprained wrist."

I nod as he picks up the kettle and fills the cups. "Getting clumsy in your old age, Pa," I joke.

Ignoring my jesting, he says, "How was Reverend Stone?"

I suck in a breath at the mention of Roman's name and avoid Pa's gaze as he brings the tea over. "Fine. He's fine," I say a little too quickly, and realising it sounds like

I'm saying he's fine , which he is, I try again. "Er, he got on well," I stutter, finally looking up at Pa.

He's watching me with an assessing gaze. "Yes, a few parishioners I spoke to yesterday enjoyed his service."

I hum, fearing opening my mouth will only lead to more suspicion, and instead pick up my cup. It's burning hot, but I need something to keep me focused.

"I'm considering asking him to stay on and take over a few duties."

I cough and splutter, choking on my mouthful of hot tea. "Sorry," I say, wiping a hand across my mouth. "Went down the wrong way," I add before asking why.

"Well, as you so subtly pointed out, I'm not getting any younger and perhaps it's time I began preparing someone to takeover."

I baulk at the idea of having Roman around long term. "I don't think that's necessary, Pa. I was only joking about you being old. I can help out more." I internally wince at the idea of spending more time at the church, and that alone is cause for concern. Shouldn't I want to spend time with God? Especially as I seem to need reminding about living life free from sin.

"I've made peace with you making your own way in life outside the church, Sydney. I might not like some of your choices, particularly your choice of work, but overall, I'm proud of the woman you've become."

I almost choke again, this time on the emotional lump that formed in my throat at his words. I dip my head to hide the tears I know have welled in my eyes.

"Besides, it's not about needing extra help. I love my work, which is why I would

like to spend more time travelling around the country spreading God's word."

I'm not surprised as we've moved around quite a lot over the years. When I question him about it, he explains that another reverend has asked him to be part of a programme to help spread God's love to those who need it the most.

While Pa takes a call in his office, I take the time to wash our cups and put them away. I'm tidying a pile of paperwork on the counter when a receipt catches my eye.

Pulling it free from the rest, I lay it on top to read. It's from Green's Guest House in Oxford. Scanning the page, I see it was for a stay this past weekend. Strange. I'm sure Pa said his meeting was in Surrey not Oxford.

Footsteps echo down the hall as Pa returns, and I quickly slot the receipt beneath some others, straightening them and placing them neatly on the side a second before he enters.

"Sorry about that. Are you going to stay for dinner?" he asks.

"Actually, I need to get going." I begin walking toward the hall but pause and turn back to Pa. "Did you manage to visit our old church while you were away?"

"No, not this time. Why do you ask?"

"No reason. I just wondered because you know how much I loved it there." He nods and I leave as quickly as possible.

Pa just lied to me. I can't believe it.

It wasn't a small lie or a slip up. No, this was an outright, blatant lie. Why? Why would he lie about where he was? And if he lied about that, what else has he lied

about?

I make it to the end of the road before I turn back around ready to go back and confront him but stop when a man I've never seen before walks up the front path. He's wearing dark clothing, maybe jeans, and a baseball cap. It reminds me of the first time I met Roman, but this man is shorter and not so muscular.

He knocks on the door, then his head swivels in my direction, and I duck round the corner out of sight. By the time I risk a peek, I only catch a glimpse of his jacket as he disappears inside with Pa.

I head home in a daze, paying no mind to the direction I'm going in. I've always trusted Pa, never had a reason not to. But lately something has felt different. Thinking about it now, I've noticed a change in him over the last few years. Nothing I can really put my finger on, but there's something.

It's a miracle I make it home and not the other side of town considering how distracted I've been. I walk up the path to my front door feeling sideswiped, like I've been hit with a wrecking ball.

I forgo the bath I was so sure I was going to have, skip dinner—certain my stomach couldn't handle anything anyway—and for the first time since I was a child, I don't get on my knees and pray. Instead, I go to bed, curl up in a ball and cry.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ROMAN

I 'm heading to the church to meet with Kincaid after he called me yesterday. I'm not concerned about why he wants to talk. I'm more worried about where Sydney has been since she and Blake kissed on Tuesday. It's been two days and neither of us have seen her, and she didn't go into work yesterday. Blake went there yesterday after work to talk to her about what happened between them. When he couldn't see her anywhere, he asked one of the girls, Suzi, I believe, who told him she was sick. We discussed one of us going to check on her but decided just turning up on her doorstep might work against us. I plan to press Kincaid on her today, just enough to not raise suspicion.

The main vestibule is empty when I arrive, and I find Kincaid in his office.

"Ah, Roman, come in. Take a seat."

I do as he asked, taking the seat across from him. I notice that the bruise on his cheek as faded, but his hand is still bandaged. I take satisfaction in knowing someone hurt the bastard.

"Thank you for coming. Tell me, how was last weekend?"

Having already discussed this, albeit briefly on his return, I'm unsure of where this might be going.

“Like I said on Monday, it went well and everyone seemed happy. Why, is there a problem?” I ask, keeping any inflection of annoyance from my tone.

“No, not at all. In fact, if you’re open to it, I’d like for you to stay on and assist when I’m not here.” He clasps his hands together on the desk, tapping them in anticipation of my answer.

Now I work harder to keep my surprise and suspicions hidden, especially as he seems nervous. “Of course. I’d be happy to. After everything that’s happened recently, it’s nice to find somewhere I feel I could settle,” I say gratefully and laying it on thick.

“Wonderful,” he exclaims, then proceeds to explain the logistics and what is expected of me.

We agree that I will take a few shifts during the week and services when he is away at weekends, which he expects will be every other weekend for now.

My hands fist in my lap at the thought I’ll be freeing him up to commit rape and murder every other weekend, at the least, but I keep a lid on my fury. Fuck knows how, but I do. I smile in all the right places and keep my answers short to avoid my emotions bleeding into my words.

He’s escalating and that means Blake and I need to move up our plans too. There is not a fucking chance in hell I’ll let him do to another woman what the sick son of a bitch did to my sister.

With my foot in the door, our first act is to plant the seed of doubt. The second I’m outside, I call Oz.

“Change of plans. Everything ready for phase one?”

“Jesus. What happened?”

“I don’t have time to explain now. Is everything set or not?” I snap as I march down the street towards Blake’s site office.

“Yeah, man, it’s ready. When do you?—”

“Do it now, Oz.” I don’t wait for him to reply and end the call.

By the time I make it to the site office, I’m about ready to fuck or fight, so getting stopped by some prick Blake works with doesn’t exactly go down so well.

“Hey, you. You can’t be here,” the guy yells from a few feet away and begins stomping toward me.

“Mind your own fucking business and get back to building.” I continue to walk only for him to plant himself in front of me.

“You can’t be here,” he states again, like I didn’t hear him the first time.

“Look, I know you think you’re important with your little lanyard and clipboard, but I don’t give a shit. Get the fuck out of my way.”

His nostrils flare and his face reddens, causing me to smirk, but before he can respond, another guy steps in between us.

“Okay, okay. Let’s cool down. I’ve got it, Skeet.” The guy—Skeet—gives me one last look before spinning on his heels and heading back where he came from. “You’re Roman, right?” the new guy asks, moving so I have to turn and can no longer see Skeet.

I nod, scanning the site for any sign of Blake. “You know Blake?”

“Sure. But you missed him. He left thirty minutes ago.” He gestures toward the exit.

“He say where?”

He shakes his head. “Nah, sorry. But if it’s Blake you’re pissed at, I wouldn’t want to be him when you find him”

“Cheers,” I call out over my shoulder as I stride away. “Sneaky fucker,” I mutter, turning left out of the site toward Sydney’s work.

I hit call on his number as I walk, but it goes to voicemail instantly. I bet the fucking idiot forgot to charge it again. At the bookshop, it doesn’t take long for me to work out that Sydney isn’t here and there’s no sign of Blake either. I was so mad and rushing to get away from Kincaid before I knocked the fucker on his arse that I forgot to question him about Sydney.

Back outside, I try Bake again only to get his voicemail again . With no other option, I decide to head for home—via Sydney’s house. I haven’t thought about what I’ll do once I get there but fuck it. He who dares wins, right?

When we agreed to come after Kincaid, we did our homework and always knew that Sydney might be a good option for leverage. After what I just heard with Kincaid, I’m ready to use whatever means necessary to bury this cunt. If the cost is breaking precious Sydney Kincaid’s heart, then so fucking be it.

I watch Sydney’s house from across the street looking for any sign she or Blake are there. Ten minutes in, I get the first glimpse of movement inside and still full of vengeful fury, I stalk across the street and right up to her front door. Before I can think better of it, I’m pushing the doorbell, then with impatience riding me, I hammer

my knuckles on door, shaking the damn thing in its frame.

A second later the lock clicks and the door opens a fraction, just enough for Sydney to peer at me with one eye.

“Reverend Stone, what are you doing here?” she asks, nervousness lacing her words.

My eyes scan her tired face before dipping to the small V of bare skin visible from her neck down to her cleavage. Tracking the movement, her free hand comes up, tugging the cotton dressing gown tighter around herself.

My nostrils flare as I inhale that addictive coconut scent that always clings to her. Bringing my eyes back to meet hers, I say, “You’ve not been at work. Why?” The words come out harsher than intended, but if she’s scared or shocked by them, she hides it well.

“I’ve not been well, not that it’s any of your concern. How did you know?” she demands, opening the door more and straightening her spine.

Hmmm, she’s got some fire. I like that.

“I went there to look for you. And now I’m here checking on you,” I tell her. “Aren’t you going to invite me in?” This time she’s not so successful at covering her surprise.

“No. I don’t think that would be appropriate,” she says, shifting her feet and lowering her gaze, and I notice she’s placed one foot against the bottom of the door.

The move brings a smile to my face, and I watch as she takes a deep, nervous breath. “And why is that, Sydney?” I ask smoothly, drawing out her name. It sounds innocent, even to my own ears. It’s anything but. Never mind surprising her, I’ve fucking shocked myself.

She stutters, her hands fumbling at the collar of her dressing gown and her cheeks reddening, and my cock hardens beneath my trousers.

“Invite me in, Sydney.” You know you want to, I think but don’t say. I don’t need to. She can read it in my tone, see it in my face. I want her to invite me in, and she knows it. I think she has a damn good idea of what would happen if she did.

Temptation is riding her hard, and I can feel the indecision coming off her. It’s so thick I can practically taste it. I’m reminded of Blake’s words about how delicious she tastes, and I can’t think of anything but tasting her for myself.

“No, I...that’s not a good idea,” she stutters. “I think you better leave before I call the?—”

“Police,” I say, finishing for her, then laughing at the very idea she’d be dropping her dear old dad right in the shit. Stepping closer to the door, I rest a hand on it and give it a gentle push. “Let me in, Sydney.” This time I push harder, and it’s enough for her to take me seriously. Whether through fear or curiosity, she moves her foot and steps back, letting the door swing open.

I don’t waste a second and step over the threshold as she continues to retreat. Her eyes flick between me, the door and behind her as she searches for any possible escape.

“What are you doing? You shouldn’t be here. What do you want?” she demands, licking her lips and her chest rising and falling rapidly.

I don’t hurt women. I won’t hurt Sydney—at least as long as she’s unaware who her father really is. But I can’t deny how much I like that she’s afraid. Nervous anticipation fills the air like steam in a sauna.

“What do I want? Now, isn’t that an interesting question,” I say, shoving the door closed before walking toward her.

“Who are you?” she asks as her back hits the door frame of the room behind her, startling her. Wide-eyed, she gasps, gripping the frame as I close the distance between us. “I thought you were a man of God, but no such man would treat a woman like this,” she whispers as I reach her, bringing our faces within an inch of each other.

All pretence of who I really am has vanished, and in his place stands a man of darkness.

An avenging angel.

I bite my tongue on revealing how fucking wrong she is about that. And it’s so hard with her ragged breaths whispering over my lips and her wide, terrified eyes staring at me.

“That’s what you believe?” I ask with a growl.

“It’s what I know,” she responds. “It’s what God decreed,” she states firmly, positive in her words. Certain that she is correct.

I wish I wasn’t here in her life to shatter that pretty illusion. “And what does God tell you about those who harm others, huh?”

She frowns, confused as to why I’d be asking her this when as a reverend I would know. “Maybe you should go home and study your bible a little better.” This time she fires the words at me with a fierce conviction.

“Maybe I should. And will you be on your knees praying for forgiveness after I

leave?”

Her eyes spark with knowing, and she sucks in a small breath before she hides it with a mask of denial. “I have nothing to ask forgiveness for,” she says affronted.

“No,” I tease, leaning in to whisper in her ear. “Are you sure? Because I hear you kissed a man in an alley like a dirty little whore, and you liked it, didn’t you?”

She shakes her head causing her cheek to brush against mine. “N-no. I...”

“Lying too. Naughty, naughty, Sydney.” She shakes her head again. Unable to deny myself, I press a chaste kiss below her ear, thoroughly enjoying toying with her. She stills instantly, trapping her breath in her lungs, and because I’m a bastard, I take advantage of her surprise and press my body against hers as I continue to pepper kisses along her neck. I can barely contain myself when I reach the pulse point in her neck, feeling the rapid thrumming beneath her delicate skin.

In barely a second, her breath rushes from her in a ragged exhale, ending on a whimper as her body relaxes.

I grip her hips, adjusting her slightly, and pressing into her, grinding against her core.

“Ahh...oh my g—” Her words are cut short as her phone rings from somewhere in the house. It snaps her from her lusty haze, and she shoves me away. Wrapping her arms around herself, her phone continues to ring, but she makes no move to answer it. Instead, she stands straight and glares at me.

“Get out. Get out of my house.”

I turn to face her fully, unabashedly adjusting my hard cock. “Is that what you want?” I ask.

“Yes! Leave. Stay away from me.”

“I’ll go,” I say casually and turn to leave as her phone starts up another round of incessant ringing. Pausing, I look back. “See you in church, Sydney. You should get that. It might be your father.”

I leave her hugging herself, confused and turned on.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SYDNEY

My fingers dig into my sides as I hug my body tight while watching Roman walk out the front door. The door shuts with a loud click, but I remain frozen. Stuck in a continuous time loop with my mind screaming at me to move but my body unable to process the messages as Roman's words echo around me.

He called me a whore.

Am I?

Accused me of liking Blake kissing me in that alley.

You did.

He was turned on. He wanted me.

So were you. You wanted him.

I argue back and forth with my conscience, my phone ringing in the background. Then I drop to the ground and pray.

I pray for forgiveness. I pray for my soul. I pray for strength. Strength to overcome this test God has seen fit to give me. Strength to resist temptation, to banish impure thoughts and desires.

Through all of this, I can't deny the part of me that wants to give in, that hungers to be touched, to let this desire take over me.

I'm dirty. I'm sullied. I've already succumbed to temptation once before. It's wrong and I shouldn't want this.

So I pray. Kneeling on the floor, I pray until my legs are numb, my throat sore and my voice hoarse. When I feel I've repented enough, I haul myself to my feet. On shaky legs, I stumble my way to the front door and check it's closed properly before flicking the lock in place. As I grab my phone from the living room, it starts to ring again. Caller ID says it's Cress. All the missed calls were from her, but I send it to voicemail. I just can't right now.

Roman thought it was Pa, and I wonder why he would say that. But the thought is forgotten when I spot my bible on the coffee table and pick it up, dropping the phone down in its place. I flip through the pages as I carry it back to the sofa and sit down. I seek the verses Pa would tell me to read, to ground myself in God's love, to remember Eve's fall and what happens when you eat forbidden fruit.

And I have a feeling Roman and Blake are more than forbidden fruit.

After claiming to be sick all week to avoid work and Cress and Suzi—another lie, another sin—and spending the latter part of the week studying the bible for hours at a time and praying every night hoping to cleanse my soul, Saturday rolls around bringing with it a dilemma.

I'm meant to be at the church this morning to help Pa. If I drag my lie out anymore, yes, I lied to him too, I'm not going to be able to keep him away, especially as tomorrow is our weekly family dinner. But I'm not ready to face Roman or Blake.

Despite everything I've done this week, my unconscious mind is determined to undo

it all while I sleep. Filling my mind every night with erotic dreams of two faceless men doing unholy things to my body, bathing me in pleasure and sin that has me startling awake mid-orgasm. The men might be faceless in my dreams, but I know who they are.

Showered and dressed and cradling a cup of coffee in my hands, I sit on the sofa weighing up the chances I might run in to either of them if I risk going to help Pa. But knowing I need to do everything in my power to earn God's good graces again and with the need to please God and Pa greater than the chance of Roman being there, my resolve is somewhat fortified. With no other valid option, I put on my coat, grab my bag and leave.

My heart races and anxiety spikes as the church comes into view, but somehow, I keep going. On the walk here, I shored up my defences just in case. Planning to stay around others in the main vestibule in the hopes I can avoid any awkward moments or being alone with Roman or Blake if either of them are here, I enter through the front doors.

It's quiet, disconcertingly so. Sunday is always busier, of course, but I don't remember a Saturday when it's been this empty, not since Covid. As the door clangs closed ominously behind me, every pair of eyes turn on me. As disconcerting as the quiet might be, it's nothing compared to the half a dozen pairs of eyes now trained on me as I walk up the centre aisle toward Pa where he stands at the altar, head bent and reading.

They see you. They know your sins. God is watching.

My chest feels heavy as the thought flows through me, but I hold my head high and continue to walk, smiling as I pass those watching me.

Stepping onto the dais, Pa finally lifts his head. "Sydney, I wasn't expecting you

today. I take it you're feeling better?" Pa asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

I nod, not sure I can keep the unsettled emotions from my voice yet, and uncomfortably aware of being watched. Looking over my shoulder, Pa reads my thoughts.

"Come, let's talk in my office."

Once safely sequestered inside his office, I find my voice. "It's so quiet today. Have I missed something?" I ask, a strange sense of foreboding snapping at me.

Pa sighs. "Idle gossip. Nothing to worry about." Before I can press him further, he continues. "Now, tell me what's been going on with you?"

The question sends my mind into a tailspin. And I'm certain he knows. Is that what he meant about idle gossip? Did someone see me with Blake or Roman? Did Roman tell Pa what I did? Question after question and all pointing to me and my indiscretions.

"Sydney?" Pa calls my name, snapping me from my thoughts.

"Sorry. I'm fine. It was just a bad cold or maybe the flu, but I'm feeling much better now."

More lies. Lie upon lie.

"That's good to hear. I have something I need to discuss with you. I had planned to wait until tomorrow, but... Well—" A knock at the door interrupts him. "Come in," he calls.

The door opens, creaking loudly, and my heart thumps inside my chest as my mouth

dries. I clutch the back of the chair in front of me, squeezing so tight my knuckles whiten and pain shoots through my wrist.

“Ah, Roman. Come in, take a seat.” Roman moves into view, stepping around me to take a seat in the other chair. “You remember my daughter Sydney,” Pa says, gesturing to me and smiling.

Swallowing thickly, I look to Roman and force a watery smile. “Hello,” I croak out before quickly looking away again. “I’ll leave you two to it.” The words are almost a plea as my need to escape reaches a peak. My vision blurs and my legs tremble.

“You’re looking a bit pale, Sydney. Are you okay?” someone asks, Roman, I think, but it’s muffled. Chairs scrape against the stone floor, clothing rustles and voices chatter somewhere as blackness claims me.

Consciousness seeps back in one molecule at a time. As I become more aware of my surroundings, I hear faint voices in another room. Peeling my eyes open, I roll my head to the side to take in the room, wincing when a dull thud takes up residence inside my skull. Recognition registers as I see my bedside table and the bible I keep there. My eyes scan the room, as much as possible without moving my head, and I see my dressing gown hanging on the back of door, which is ajar.

Taking a deep breath, I prepare for pain as I shuffle into a seated position, resting my head against my headboard. The pain lessens with each breath until I can finally move without feeling like it’s about to crack open.

Spilling all your sins.

I bat the thought away and ease my legs over the side of the bed, pausing as nausea roils in my stomach. Once it’s passed, I push to my feet and amble toward the slightly open door and the voices I hear when I first woke. The voices become clearer the

closer I get, and the nausea returns. Panic assaults me but it's soon overridden by an emotion I'm not used to and have no real clue how to deal with it. It's this emotion that drives me forward and propels me into my living room where I explode.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SYDNEY

“What the hell are you doing in my house? Get out!” I screech as I burst into the living room where Blake and Roman startle and turn toward me. I throw a hand out to the wall to steady myself as a wave of nausea rolls over me. I see the concern on their faces as I continue into the room, but it doesn’t quell the anger raging inside me.

“Sydney—”

“Do. Not. Come. Near. Me.” I take a steady breath. “What are you doing here?”

Roman and Blake share a look, then Roman takes a tentative step toward me with his hands raised, palms out. “You fainted, and I brought you home.”

I frown. Not at the fainting part because the brass band and lump on the back of my head attest to that fact. But Roman bringing me home?

“Where’s Pa? Why didn’t he bring me home?” My eyes flick between them and the seemingly smaller room with these two imposing men filling the space.

“He’s at the church. He had a meeting, and I have a car,” Roman says, taking another step toward me.

“We didn’t want to leave you alone in case you had a concussion, which I’m guessing you do given how unsteady you are,” Blake chimes in, but unlike Roman he remains

where he is.

I avoid looking at him. It's the first time I've seen him since he kissed me in the alley, and I don't know what to think or do or say.

"Well, thanks, but you can go now," I state, raising my head and looking straight at Roman, who has managed to move even closer to me.

"You don't sound very grateful, Sydney," Roman says, his tone rough and the words layered with dangerous meaning.

My mind fills with images from the numerous dreams I've had of the two of them over the last few days, and I struggle not to react. But as Roman invades my personal space, it becomes a battle of wills.

These men are servants of the devil sent here to tempt me beyond redemption. I don't know if I'm strong enough to keep resisting them. Why are they doing this? I need to get them out of my house and stay far away from them. But how when they keep showing up in my life, finding ways to be alone with me.

In the few seconds I'm distracted by my thoughts, Roman hasn't just invaded my personal space, he's obliterated it beyond repair.

I gasp as he takes hold of my wrists, thumbs pressing firmly against the pulse there. It's racing. I can feel it.

"Something the matter, Sydney?" he asks, caressing the spot in a circle.

"W-wh-what are you doing?"

"Making sure you don't fall over and injury yourself more," Roman replies, but

something in his words gives me pause.

Maybe it's not his words and more the small, soothing caress of his fingers against the inside of my wrist, or the way he's watching my face—for what I don't know. Or perhaps it's the very real and terrifying reality that Roman is looking at me like he wants to devour me and some inner and innate part of me is almost wishing for it.

How far have I fallen that I would be looking at this man and his friend to defile me in such a way?

"I don't know what you're doing, but you need to leave. This is not right," I say, my voice timid and unsure.

Roman, still holding my wrists, steps closer, crowding me and forcing me to take a step back. I don't have anywhere to go and end up pressed against the back of the sofa.

"I think you're lying, Sydney. I think you know exactly what we are doing. But more importantly, I think you like it, want it," he whispers against my cheek.

I should be thinking of how I can escape, but the only thing remotely coherent in my mind is how much I want him to kiss me, to touch me, somewhere other than my wrists. This is the same thing that happened with Blake in the alley. And as though the thought conjured him, the sofa creaks behind me, and there he is.

"It's okay, Syd," Blake murmurs in my other ear, and the heat of his words and breath over my skin make it impossible to deny, to protest.

I shake my head. It's all I can manage with this insane and uncontrollable desire racing through my body. In complete synchronisation, Blake and Roman lower their mouths to my neck, just below my ear, leaving a trail of heat behind. My body

responds involuntarily; my head dropping back a fraction. Roman wastes no time in using the action to his advantage, kissing down my throat to my collar bone.

There's a soft whimper, and it takes me an age to realise the sound came from me. Before I can fully comprehend what's happening, rough, calloused fingers sweep up my side to my breasts, and I gasp at the sensation.

"No, no...oh." The words come out breathy and not at all like I mean them.

A deep rumble vibrates along my neck. "If you're going to say no, Syd, say it like you mean it," Blake says, his voice full of amusement.

Roman's fingers skate across my breast, circling my nipple, then with the barest of touches, he sweeps a thumb over my hardened nipple, and I jolt as though hit with an invisible electrical current. The exquisite sensation flows through my body, hitting my core in a pulsing bloom. He does it again, harder this time, giving it a small tweak before moving away. I almost feel bereft and arch my back, seeking more.

My reaction is met with a hum of appraisal and a dark rumble of laughter, but the moment is shattered with a sharp knock at the door.

I gasp, Roman's hand falls away and Blake's mouth stills at the crook of my neck. When a second knock comes, Roman steps back, standing tall, and pulling me up with him. Blake drops on to the sofa, slouching casually as though he were simply sitting and hadn't just had his mouth on me.

"Expecting someone?" Roman asks, raising a curious brow.

"No, no one," I say, shaking my head as I try to calm myself.

"Do you want me to?—"

“No!” I say sharply, cutting off his offer to answer the door. “I’ll get it.” This time my words are softer, and I fidget with my clothes, straightening them out, as I head for the front door.

Through the glass, I can make out the blurred outline of at least two people. Looking behind me one last time to ensure Roman and Blake haven’t followed, I take a steadying breath and open the door.

I don’t know what I expected but finding the police standing on my doorstep, wasn’t it.

“Miss Kincaid, Sydney Kincaid?” the female officer asks, her hands tucked inside the side pockets of her duty vest.

“Yes,” I say, looking between the two of them. “What’s going on?” But the dour expression on their faces is sign enough.

“Miss Kincaid, I’m sorry to have to tell you, but there’s been an accident involving your father, Reverend Kincaid.”

My hands fly to my mouth, smothering some of my cry of despair, and when my legs buckle beneath me as the policewoman explains Pa is in hospital, someone catches me from behind.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BLAKE

As Syd disappears down the hall with the nurse to her father's room, Ro says, "Call Oz and see what he can get from the CCTV from outside the church."

I pull my phone from my pocket and hit dial on Oz's number as I head back outside. I'm pissed we were interrupted, but I'm more pissed about why. Kincaid getting attacked is a problem, not only because the cops are going to be all over this, as will the community—a reverend attacked in his own church is never going to go down well—but also because it begs the question of whether it was random or something else.

"Blake, what's up?" Oz greets.

"Kincaid was attacked."

"What the hell? When?"

"An hour ago at the church. I need you to hack the cameras," I say quickly, moving around the side of the building, away from the smokers and earshot of anyone.

"On it. Give me five minutes. I'll call you back when I have something." He ends the call, and I lean against the wall while I wait for Oz to call me back.

After a few minutes, I push off the wall and begin pacing, running possibilities

through my mind. When my phone rings five minutes later, I answer before the first ring ends.

“Tell me you’ve got something?”

“Maybe but it’s not a great image.” I wave my hand for Oz to hurry up and get on with it, even though he can’t see me. “The guy is wearing a cap and got his head down, so no facial. But he does have a limp, and there’s a logo on his jacket that isn’t any of the usual brands,” Oz says.

“Send me what you have, and I’ll see if Ro recognises the guy. Check all the vehicle registrations and run a background check. Anything that looks off, I want to know about it.”

“Will do. Kincaid still breathing?”

“For now. Ro’s trying to find out details.” My phone pings as Oz sends through the image, and I promise to call him if I find out anything more.

When I arrive back inside, Ro is sitting in a small waiting area, and I make my way over to him.

“Oz get anything?”

I open the message from Oz and drop into the seat beside Ro to show him. “That’s it,” I say and hand over my phone to him.

Ro scans the image, zooming in, trying to get a better look at the guy from the CCTV still. He hands it back to me.

“We aren’t identifying this guy from that.” He’s just as pissed as I am.

“I asked Oz to check all the vehicles and owners, but I wouldn’t hold your breath. Whoever this guy is, he knew how to avoid being seen.”

I don’t say what I’m really thinking because if Kincaid dies, I’m not sure Ro is going to deal with it well. He’s been searching for his sister’s murderer for the last three years. To get so close only to have someone else steal your revenge is fucked up. The past few weeks have been made harder because Ro is constantly putting on a performance when he’s around Kincaid and Syd. The quiet, reserved and kind reverend persona he’s currently displaying is so far from his real personality. I can imagine how draining it is for him.

“If you want to get out of here, I can stay?”

He shakes his heads. “Not a fucking chance,” he hisses out, keeping his voice low. “I need to know what we’re dealing with here.”

It’s an hour before the doors swish open and a tired and emotionally strung-out Sydney walks back out. I nudge Ro’s leg to get his attention away from the spot on the floor he’s been intently inspecting for the last thirty minutes.

Getting to our feet, we move towards her. She has her head down and doesn’t see us until we stop her at the exit.

“Hey, Syd. How’s your father?” I ask, trying to catch her gaze, but she’s proficiently avoiding looking at me. Risking a scene after what happened before the police arrived earlier, I reach out and grasp her chin, tilting her face up to look at me. Her eyes are red and puffy and her bottom lip trembles. “Hey,” I say gently. “Talk to me, what’s going on?”

Her shoulders slump and she releases a heavy sigh, pulling away from my hold. “He’s...er, he’s stable. But they are concerned about internal bleeding and—” Her

hands come up to cover her mouth as a sob breaks free.

I sense Ro tense beside me, and I know he's thinking about the real possibility of Kincaid dying before he gets what he needs to relief himself of the guilt he feels over his sister's murder.

I put my arm around her and slowly lead her out of the hospital. "He's in the best place, and he's strong and fit. He can fight this, Syd." She allows me to guide her to where we parked the car, then help her inside. "Let's get you home," I say as I'm clipping her seatbelt into place.

"No, no, I need to go to Pa's and get some belongings for if...when he wakes up," she says, grasping my arm. "He'll hate having to wear a hospital gown and be more comfortable in his own things."

My eyes catch Ro's as he looks over from the driver's seat, eyebrows raised. "We'll take you," I tell her, and she nods.

I climb in next to Ro, and as he begins to drive, Syd tells him her address completely unaware we know where he lives. There are many things Syd isn't aware of, and I'm torn between low-level happiness that Kincaid has at least felt some measure of pain but sadness for the pain this is causing Sydney.

I'm almost certain Sydney has no idea of who her father really is. And if she did, I'm not so sure she'd be sitting in the backseat of our car with her hands clasped together in prayer.

Sydney has calmed some by the time we arrive at her father's house. When Ro and I climb out to enter the house with her, she stops to look at us.

"I don't need any help."

“Maybe not, but I’m not letting you go inside until we’ve checked it’s safe,” Ro tells her, broking no argument. He holds his hand out for Sydney to give him keys.

“I don’t have a key with me, but Pa keeps one under the mat in the porch.”

Ro shakes his head, muttering under his breath as he strides toward the porch. I smile, placing a hand on Sydney’s back as we follow. It’s highly inappropriate but I can’t help the small jolt of arousal at touching her or deny how eager I am to continue what we started earlier. Of course, that’s not likely to happen any time soon given the current situation. She might be the daughter of a murderer, but that doesn’t mean she is. I’m not so innocent and will take every opportunity I get to comfort her, and if that leads somewhere, then all the better.

Ro unlocks the door and indicates for me to follow.

“Stay here. Don’t come in until we tell you to, okay?”

Sydney rolls her eyes. “This is ridiculous but fine,” she says, and it’s nice to see she’s perked up a little since leaving the hospital.

Ro and I do a quick search of the house before letting Syd come in to collect some things for her father. While she’s busy do that, we take the opportunity to have a more thorough poke around, particularly in Kincaid’s office. If I didn’t know better, I’d say Kincaid’s attack was timed perfectly as we’ve been contemplating on how to get access to his house without raising suspicion. Of course, Ro was meant to be having dinner with Kincaid and Sydney tomorrow. Something I’m guessing she wasn’t aware of.

After looking through his kitchen cabinets and the lounge but coming up empty handed, I head upstairs to find Syd.

As soon as I reach the top of the stairs, I can hear her crying and find her sitting on her father's bed, holding his pyjamas. I drop to my knees in front of her and lay my hands over hers.

"You okay?" I ask, even though it's a stupid question.

"Yes...no," she says, then shakes her head. "I don't know. And I don't understand why someone would want to hurt Pa."

I bite my tongue and let her speak, rubbing my thumb over the back of her hand.

"I know he's strict and most people my age don't understand him, even me sometimes, but he's a good father and tries to do what's best for me." She raises her head and looks at me, her eyes filled with tears.

God, she's fucking beautiful. And dangerous.

I might have only had a small taste, but it was enough to know this woman has the ability to toss all our plans into chaos.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ROMAN

“ F or Fuck’s sake,” I curse as I close the last unlocked drawer in Kincaid’s office. I’ve searched every possible area of this room, careful not to disturb things too much, and found nothing. We already have evidence of Kincaid’s true identity and a plan set to unravel his comfy little life, but I want tangible evidence, something solid before I blow up Sydney’s life in the process. Despite who Kincaid is, I don’t think Sydney has a clue about her precious pa .

Leaving the office, I head back to the living room. I scan the photos of Sydney on the mantel piece and hung on the walls at various ages. There’s something missing though and it takes me a couple of minutes to figure it out. There isn’t one picture of Sydney with her mother. In all our digging into Kincaid, we’ve never come across any mention of Sydney’s mother. We aren’t even aware of any of Warren/Amos’ girlfriends at the time Sydney would have been conceived.

I make a note to ask her about her mother, and maybe she’ll giveaway something she doesn’t realise is important. I walk through the house again then go in search of Sydney and Blake to find out what’s taking so long.

The first room I come to was obviously Sydney’s before she moved out. Minus her personal belongings it looks how I imagine it did when she was here. Hushed voices reach me from the room next door, and I peer through the open door.

Blake is on his knees in front of Sydney, who is sitting on the end of her father’s bed.

His hands are clasping hers in her lap, and they are staring at one another. The air shifts as Blake lifts a hand and brushes a tear from her cheek before cupping her face. I know what's coming, but we can't do this here. I don't give a shit where we fuck Sydney when it happens, which it will, but I know she won't be able to wrestle with committing a sin and in her father's bed too.

I step into the room as Blake is ready to lean in and claim her lips.

"We ready to get out of here?" I ask, roughly, and they jump at the sound of my voice. I'd like to say my frustrated tone is all due to finding nothing useful here, but I know it's not. Sydney Kincaid is gradually becoming an issue, an unexpected problem. Maybe once we fuck her, the desire for her will subside and we can finish what we came here for without distraction, then we can get back to our lives.

Blake rises to his feet, shooting me a scowl as he takes the pyjamas Sydney was cradling and stuffs them into the small holdall on the bed. Sydney avoids my gaze as she pushes up from the bed, smoothing out the creases in the sheets from where she sat.

I go to zip up the bag, but Sydney says, "Wait. I need some things from the bathroom." She doesn't wait for me to respond and enters the small en suite bathroom. There's a crash and a muttered "sugar" before she returns carrying a small toiletry bag. She pulls the holdall on the bed toward her and stuffs the smaller bag inside, then continues to zip it closed. Sydney slips her hands under the handles, preparing to pick it up, but before she can raise it an inch from the bed, I grab it and take it from her.

"Hey! I can manage."

"Never said you couldn't," I tell her as I leave the room and descend the stairs.

She jogs after me with Blake a step behind. I head for the front door, leaving her and Blake to lock up. I throw the bag in the boot and get in the car, switching the engine on and wait.

There is something strange about Kincaid's house, about the pictures of Sydney specifically. The guy is a sick fuck, yet his house is...normal, what you'd expect for a single man with a daughter. And I get that people can put on a show for others to ensure their true identity remains hidden, but this is different.

Five minutes later and still trying to figure out what is bothering me so much, Blake and Sydney exit the house. Neither of them say a word as Blake climbs in beside me and Sydney gets in the back.

I can feel Blake's gaze as I drive. When we stop at a set of traffic lights, I glance in the rearview mirror and find Sydney's attention is intently focused on something outside her window, so I look over to Blake. He raises a brow.

"Nothing," I say quietly, knowing he's silently asking what's wrong. I'm frustrated, pissed off and wanting answers. I'm beginning to think we are missing something.

I don't like being wrong.

Pulling up to the hospital, Sydney opens her door and Blake gets out too.

"Thank you," she says, not looking at me.

I shake my head. "Blake will go with you to drop off your father's things, then we will take you home," I tell her.

"No need. I was planning to stay here for a while with Pa," she says, avoiding looking at me, and climbs out before I can say more.

“For fuck’s sake,” I grumble, switching the engine off and get out. Blake slams the boot closed and joins Sydney. “Visiting hours are over, Sydney, and I don’t want you travelling home alone.”

Her eyes widen at my sharp tone, or maybe it’s the perceived authority. Either way, she’s not happy about it. Seeing she’s ready to argue, I step towards her, invading her space. Trapped between me in front and Blake behind her, she has nowhere to go.

“It’s not up for discussion. Drop your father’s things off, make sure he’s okay, then we will take you home.” Her eyes narrow, and I can see the fire she tries so hard to keep at bay. I like what I see, and I plan on pushing her over the edge—in more ways than one.

A second later, her shoulders slump and she sighs. “Fine.” She sidesteps from between the two of us and mutters a “thank you” as she heads for the entrance. Blake winks at me, and I know he saw what I did.

Sydney Kincaid is a woman restrained by her upbringing, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. A woman ready to break the shackles and offer a big fuck you to the world.

As I watch them enter the hospital, my mind fills with all the ways I plan to set her free.

I don’t bother getting back in the car, despite the cold, and call Oz.

“Oz, I need you to go back over everything we know about Warren before he became Kincaid,” I tell him when he answers.

“What am I looking for?”

“Any woman Warren was friends with, knew, hooked up with. Anything. Do you

have a copy of Sydney's birth certificate?"

He grumbles down the line. "I'll check again, but I already went through everyone he knew back then with a fine-toothed comb."

"Not fine enough. We're missing something when it comes to Sydney and who her mother is."

"Okay, I'll check again. And that's a negative on Sydney's birth certificate. We were never able to find one, or any details about her."

I rub a hand over my lower face. "How the fuck is it possible for someone to have no birth certificate?" It's a stupid question. One I already know the answer to.

"My guess is her real name isn't Sydney Kincaid," Oz says, mirroring my own thoughts.

"Then find out who the fuck she really is." I end the call as my eyes catch on Blake and Sydney exiting the hospital.

The earlier fire I saw in Sydney has been damped down, and she looks exhausted. Blake is walking a few steps behind her and catches my eye as Sydney climbs into the back seat without a word.

As she closes the car door, Blake says, "He's still hanging in there."

I'm about to get in the car when my phone pings with a message. It's an unknown number, but something tells me I need to read it.

I scan over the message, and my eyes widen when I read who it's from.

“What is it?” Blake asks, half in half out of the passenger side.

“I need to take a piss. I’ll be back in ten.” Blake doesn’t question me, but I can see his confusion. I don’t turn around as I enter the hospital, but I feel Sydney’s eyes burning a path along my back the whole time.

I quickly find the private room and slip inside unseen.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BLAKE

I get in the car and close the door, then turn in my seat to check on Sydney.

“You okay?”

“Fine. He couldn’t wait until he got home?” she says sarcastically.

“His bladder isn’t what it used to be,” I reply with a laugh. My attempt at humour falls flat on its face. “He won’t be long, then we’ll get you home. How’s the head?”

“Throbbing.” She instinctively reaches up to rub the lump on her head.

I have something of my own that’s throbbing.

What does it say about me that I’m thinking about sex at a time like this?

“I’m not surprised. From what Ro said, you took quite a knock.” I’m still twisted in my seat, facing Syd, but she’s looking at her hands in her lap and twirling her thumbs over one another. “Is there someone else you need to call, family maybe, to let them know about your dad?”

She shakes her head. “No, it’s just us,” she says, raising her head and looking out of the window towards the hospital entrance.

“What about your mum?” I ask, knowing I’m pushing it, but these are usual questions to ask someone you don’t know and whose only parent is in the hospital.

She doesn’t say anything for a long moment, and I start to think she isn’t going to answer.

“I never knew my mum,” she says, her voice sad and wistful. “Pa said she died when I was little.”

“I’m sorry.” I really do mean that. It’s not Syd’s fault her dad is a cunt! I’m curious about the woman who was unfortunate to shack up with Kincaid.

“It’s okay. You can’t miss what you never had, right?” She looks up at me with a small smile, then turns back to watching the hospital doors. “God, how long does it take to go to the toilet?” She claps a hand over her mouth, and her wide eyes meet mine.

“What?” I ask, not sure what has got her so afraid. Then I realise and can’t help but laugh.

“I can’t believe I used the Lord’s name in vain. It’s not funny, Blake,” she scolds.

“Come on, Syd. He’s not going to strike you down for saying his name. He’s not Voldemort.” That comment earns me a sharp glare. “You’re not seriously telling me you believe you’ll be damned for saying his name in the wrong context?”

“Not in this world, no. Judgement comes after death,” she says, and her tone implies she’s not happy having to defend her beliefs.

“Well, I guess judgement day is going to be fucked up for most of the world then, including me.” My words are harsh because the things I’ve witnessed, the things I’ve

done, don't lend much faith in there even being a god. I spin in my seat and face the windscreen, not wanting to talk anymore.

Syd's thoughts are so loud, and I can feel her eyes pinned on the back of my neck. There was a time I prayed for God to save me, but I guess the pleas of a neglected and often beaten child aren't all that important.

"Hey," Syd says as she places a hand on my shoulder.

I shrug her off, ignoring the small stab of regret at my reaction. "It's fine. Just forget it." A couple of minutes pass in silence. Long enough for my pain and anger to push forward and propel me to swivel around and face her. "You know, Syd, the world isn't as black and white as you seem to think. Sometimes good people are forced to do bad things just to survive. I wonder what your Lord Almighty thinks about that. Next time you're on your knees praying, maybe you should ask him."

The driver's side door opens, and Ro drops into the seat beside me. Sensing the smothering tension in the car, he looks between the two of us before settling his gaze on me.

"What the hell is going on?" he barks.

"Nothing," I snap back like a petulant child.

"Blake was just enlightening me on his thoughts about my beliefs," Syd snaps from the back seat with a huff.

I roll my eyes before turning to meet Ro's intense stare.

Syd continues unperturbed, "I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on the matter, Reverend Stone !"

“You really don’t want me to answer that,” Ro says, starting the car and quickly driving away.

“No, you’re right, I don’t. That would surely reveal you as the fraud you are,” Sydney says, her tone cutting.

Ro chuckles, deep and menacing, taking a corner at speed, and if I weren’t so irked by Syd and concerned about what caused Ro to be in such a foul mood, then I’d be leaning over the centre console and giving Ro some mind-blowing head.

A huff comes from the backseat, and I know Syd is protesting Ro’s driving. The closer we get to Syd’s house, the more anxious I become, tapping my foot in the footwell. Something is going on, and the sooner I can get Ro on his own to ask the better.

The second we pull up outside Syd’s, she’s tugging at the door handle to escape. Ro is right on her heels, marching after her as she heads for her front door.

I’m in no hurry because there’s not a fucking chance Ro is going to leave this—whatever it is! At a sloth-like pace, I get out and traipse up the path to Syd’s. I don’t hear any shouting—yet. My guess is that neither of them want the neighbours to see or hear what’s about to go down.

Stepping over the threshold, I close the door behind me. The click of the catch echoes in the silence, which is broken less than a second later.

“Who are you?” Syd asks as I step into the room, then she waves her hands and continues. “Actually, don’t answer that. I don’t want to know, but I do want you to leave. I don’t want you here, and I certainly don’t need your help.”

“Anyone else have a sense of déjà vu?” I mutter, striding to the sofa and sitting down.

A dual “Shut up!” is aimed my way from Ro and Syd, and I hold my hands up in surrender. “I’ll just sit here and let you two work it out.”

I grab the bible sitting on the coffee table and begin flicking through the pages while surreptitiously throwing glances in the direction of Ro, who is standing with his arms crossed and leaning against a large dresser.

Sydney blows out an exasperated breath, her head hung between her shoulders and hands resting on her hips. Raising her head, she pins Ro in her sights. “Thank you for bringing me home and helping to get my pa’s things, but I’ve got it from here.”

“What do you know about your mother?” Ro asks, blindsiding Syd and me.

Where the fuck did that come from?

Syd’s gaze swings to me, and she frowns. I don’t blame her seeing as I was asking questions about her mother in the car not thirty minutes ago.

“I don’t see how that is any of your business,” she says defensively, and more than a little cautious.

“Answer the question, Sydney. I don’t have time for games,” Ro says, pushing off the wall and moving in her direction.

I close the bible and place it back on the coffee table as I get to my feet. I have a strong feeling I need to be ready to intervene. I watch Syd’s reaction, and her whole demeanour changes. Her bravery vanishes and is replaced with fear—no, not fear. Curiosity and something else. As Ro closes the space, I move in beside him—deja vu, like I said. My own anger at Syd still lingers but there are more pressing emotions circling right now.

“Ro, what’s going on?” I ask quietly and calmly. But Ro is not listening, I’m not sure he’s even still in the room. “Ro, Syd told me earlier that she doesn’t remember her mother.” That is not news to either of us. Despite extensive digging into Warren James’, a.k.a. Amos Kincaid, background, we weren’t able to find anything on the woman who gave birth to Sydney.

“Okay. How about your earliest memory?”

Sydney shakes her head, looking between the two of us. “I-I remember...”

“Come on, Sydney. You must have a significant memory as a child. What is it?”

My eyes catch Ro’s over Syd’s head, silently asking him what this is all about. His eyes are clear and alive with the same fury he had after his trip to the toilet at the hospital. He gives a small shake of his head, telling me to leave it alone.

“Why are there no pictures of you with your mum, or you as a baby in your father’s house? Come on, Syd. Answer the damn question!” Ro’s voice rises with the last part, causing Syd to jump in fear or surprise, or both. “It’s not that fucking hard. Do you even know who you are? Who your father is? Or your mother? Who is she, where is she?”

Ro throws question after question at her, his anger and frustration growing with every one. Syd’s shoulders slump, and each question hits like a punch to the stomach.

Tears well in her eyes, her chest heaves and her breathing becomes ragged as Ro fires another round of questions like arrows from a bow. “Do you fucking know anything?”

It’s the final strike, and Sydney crumbles like a house of cards under the weight.

“Stop! Stop! I don’t fucking know anything!” She screams, stumbling back in shock from the force of her words. A sob bursts from her, and she slaps a hand over her mouth to smother it.

Ro shoots forward and grabs her arms. His eyes scan every inch of her face, then he brings his face close, nose to nose. “No, you’re right. You don’t know anything. But know this, this delusional, God-fearing world full of love and happiness bubble you’ve been living in just fucking burst. You’re going to learn the real world is far from what you think.” Releasing her, and without another word or even a look in my direction, he stalks from the room. The front door slams, and a second later an engine revs before screeching away.

Sydney rushes past me, fleeing to the sanctuary of her bedroom.

Leaving me in the middle of the living room with no damn clue what just happened and only the muffled backdrop of sobbing coming from Syd’s room.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SYDNEY

My body shivers, and I feel cold to the bone. Curling tighter into a ball on my bed, I hug my knees and clutch the cross I wear on a chain around my neck. I don't understand why Roman acted that way, or why he would be asking questions about my mother. Did he know her? No, that's not possible.

My thoughts whirl, tossing me from one to another in rapid succession as nausea thrives in the pit of my stomach. I push my brain, reaching for that first memory Roman was so keen for me to remember. But I've got nothing. Nothing before a bright, sunny day and a sparkling silver bike with a yellow basket and bell. Pa held the seat and ran along beside me as I pedalled my little legs. I must have been around five or six, early in my school life, because I remember falling off and grazing my knee, then proudly showing friends at school the next week.

I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling the gritty dryness of having shed so many tears, and my chest aches like someone took a crowbar and cracked it open. As my short, stuttered, panting breaths slow, I unfurl. Releasing the cross around my neck, pain blooms in my palm, and I look down to see two tiny red indents where it dug into my skin. Rubbing at them, I shuffling to a sitting position, drawing my knees up to my chest and resting my chin on them. After a couple of minutes, I turn to lay my head on my knees, facing the dark window. The curtains are open and streetlights glint off the glass, bathing the room in a warm yellow glow. Another tear falls as I think about my outburst. I know it's a sign of my recent conflict over my faith. I've been questioning everything lately, and the arrival of Roman and Blake in my life seems to

have only furthered my confusing thoughts and feelings.

I'm not sure how long I sit there, but I know my backside is numb and I have pins and needles in my arms. I wouldn't have bothered to move, enjoying the numbness, if it wasn't for the clatter of plates coming from my kitchen.

I guess that means Blake is still here. I sigh at the idea of facing either of them, especially after Blake's mood in the car earlier. These men are too confusing for me to figure out with everything else that's going on.

One thing I do know is that I need to get them out of my house.

My earlier headache has worsened thanks to all the crying I've done, and I'm in desperate need of a drink and some painkillers. I'm sure I'm hungry too but that can wait.

My muscles ache in protest as I stretch and rise to my feet. I pull the curtains, and feeling chilly, I snatch a jumper from my wardrobe, throwing it on, before quietly opening my door. The aroma of stone baked dough and melted cheese assaults my nostrils. Mmmm, pizza. My stomach growls in response.

Entering the living room, I find Blake casually stretched out on my sofa, stuffing pizza in his mouth. The TV is on low with some action film playing, and there is a bottle of beer on the table.

He can't see me from my position, and I watch him. Some part of me should be offended he's made himself so at home, but another part, the part I've been denying for so long, quite likes seeing a man as handsome as him in my house. He's easy on the eye, as is Roman, and a league above Paul, my ex. I cut short thoughts on other areas they're better than Paul in.

“You going to stand there all night, or come and eat?” Blake’s voice startles me, and I wonder how he knew I was there.

“I’m not hungry, but make yourself at home, yeah,” I say, my tone dripping with sarcasm. Moving into the kitchen, I grab a glass and fill it with water. “How did you know I was there?” I ask, spinning to look at the back of his head.

He points to the TV. It takes me a second to understand why, but the longer I look, the clearer my reflection on the screen becomes.

“Not so smart and spatially aware as you thought, huh?” I find some headache tablets in the medicine cupboard and pop two into my hand, swallowing them down with a large glug of water.

Deciding to leave him to it, despite the warning in my head that I should send him away, I head back towards my room.

“Syd, you need to eat,” he says as I reach the hall.

I pause, weighing up the pros and cons of joining him. Stepping back into the room, I say, “No, I really don’t. I’d tell you to go if I thought you might listen, but in lieu of that, I’d rather go to bed hungry.”

“We need to talk,” he states, now turning to face me, slinging an arm of the back of the sofa.

“Again, no, we don’t. There is nothing to talk about.” Before I’ve finished talking, he’s leapt over the sofa and standing in front of me a second later.

“There is, but for now, just listen. Please?” He raises a hand as though to reach out to me but thinks better of it and stuffs his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans.

I shake my head and roll my eyes. Blake isn't perturbed and takes me still standing here as a sign to continue.

"Sit?" he asks, waving to the sofa, but I cross my arms and glare at him. "Okay, here then. Look, firstly, I want to apologise for my reaction in the car earlier. It's not on you." Blake scans my face for...acceptance, maybe. I nod. "I'm not apologising for Ro, because that's for him to do, but—" The shattering of glass from the hall cuts off the rest of Blake's words, and he reacts instantly, pulling me behind him.

"What—"

"Shhh," Blake holds a finger to his lips. With one arm stretched wide, keeping me behind him, we move towards the hall. A cold breeze blows in through the smashed upper window of my front door and flames flare to life, growing bigger by the second.

"Fuck!" Blake curses. "Back door."

I slowly back up as Blake closes the living room door, then scans the room, searching for something. I move for my bag on the kitchen counter at the same time as Blake reaches for the throw on the back of the sofa and begins packing it at the bottom of the door.

A loud pop from the hall makes me jump, and I let out a small squeak. Blake, grabs my wrist, tugging me to the small utility room off the kitchen where the back door is. I almost trip over my own feet, and my heart races. Reaching the back door, Blake yanks it open and steps out, still holding my wrist, but the second his foot hits the back step, his body jolts, falling backwards and crashing into me with a grunt.

"Mother fucker," he roars.

“Blake,” I cry as he steers me against the wall, covering me with his body. I’ve no idea what happened until I feel the warmth of something wet beneath my hand resting on the front of his shoulder. “Is that...oh my god. You’re bleeding.” I scrub my hand down my top and fumble in my bag for my phone. I know it’s in there. It has to be in there. Blake groans as I knock into him, jostling his shoulder. “Where the hell is it?” I demand of nobody, my frustration getting the better of me. “Got it. Hold on. I’m calling for help, Blake.” I dial 999, but before it has even had a chance to connect, Blake snatches the phone from me. “Hey! Wh?—”

“No cops! Call Ro.” I glare at him in disbelief. “Syd, trust me. Just call Ro,” he implores, wincing as he adjusts our position, moving us further away from the door.

But it’s not further from danger as smoke begins to fill the kitchen, slowly seeping into the utility room. With no option but to listen to him, I hold out a hand for my phone.

He slaps it into my palm. “Ro, no one else,” he orders, stepping away from me and pulling cupboards and drawers open while rattling off Roman’s number to me.

It starts ringing as Blake pulls out a couple of tea towels, runs them under the cold water tap in the small sink. “Put it on speaker,” Blake says as he comes back over.

I do as he says, but the call rings off, going to voicemail.

“Ro, where the fuck are you? We’ve got a big problem,” Blake says as I begin to cough. He ends the call, tucks my phone back into my bag, then proceeds to wrap the wet tea towel around my head, covering my mouth and nose.

I stand and watch as Blake does the same to himself with the other tea towel. It feels like I stepped into an episode of Station 19 , and I wonder what’s coming next. The roof caving in? An explosion maybe.

What has become of my quiet life?

My pa is in the hospital fighting for his life while I'm the victim of an arson attack and Blake gets shot, at least I'm guessing that's what it was. Not that the thought makes any of this better. Because who shoots someone?

This can't be real. I must have hit my head harder than I thought. This is all a dream.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ROMAN

I need to hit something. I'm so fucking mad. That son of a bitch knows who I am. He knows I'm no fucking reverend, and he knows why I'm here.

When I read the message outside the hospital, I had every intention of going in there to throttle the bastard and finish the job. But once I go in there, he made damn sure I wouldn't hurt him.

No, instead he put Sydney's safety all on me. Let's not forget the little sweetener of him knowing the person responsible for his attack and, apparently, the murder of my sister. So, if I want to find them, I'd need to make sure he and Sydney both stayed alive.

I shouldn't give a fuck about Sydney or him taking their next breath, but a part of me—one I'm not happy with right now—is keeping me from saying fuck it and doing what we came here for.

And here I am, sitting outside the hospital and fighting myself with doing just that. Amos gave me a name, but as I stare at the Google search results for John Smith, I can't help but laugh. It's not his real name, which Kincaid refused to give to me, and before I could force the matter, the nurse came in when his machine started beeping and threw me out.

The fact Kincaid knows this person has me wondering if they are working together.

Or were at some point. There has to be another way to find this fucker, a connection between Kincaid and the victims we can follow.

My phone rings, flashing Sydney's name across the screen. I let it go to voicemail. I can't talk to her right now. Not after the way I fucking badgered her earlier. I let my emotions get the better of me, but between Kincaid's attack, not finding anything in his house, then his revelations, I was ready to blow at anyone.

When a voicemail message pops up on my phone, I hit play.

"Ro, where the fuck are you? We've got a big problem." Blake's panicked voice fills the car, then before the call ends, I hear Sydney coughing in the background.

"Fucking hell! What the fuck is going on now?" I mutter, starting the engine and driving away from the hospital. I hit redial and try to call Sydney back, but no one answers, and I put my foot down. Thankfully her house isn't too far from the hospital.

Pulling up to the house, I see the burnt orange colour of flames licking up the front door and the glass is broken. Smoke billows out from inside the house, and there's no way for me to get inside from the front.

Jesus fucking Christ!

Jumping from the car, I duck down the narrow alley at the side of Syd's house, which leads to the back gardens of the houses either side, and as I draw closer, I can hear the blaring of her fire alarm. At the end of the alley, it splits to the left and right. Bending, I pull a small blade from a sheath beneath my trouser leg, then use the fence for cover as I peer round the corner in the direction of Sydney's back gate. It's pitch black, and the single streetlamp down this part of the alley is out, making it impossible to see even my hand in front of my face.

With no other option, I edge along the fence until I find the back gate, only it's already open. Pushing on it gently, the old, rickety wooden frame creaks as it swings inward, revealing the empty back garden.

I've no idea if they are still inside. Sirens echo in the distance, growing louder as they draw closer. Slipping through the gap, I walk the edges of the garden, using the shadows to hide me. If nothing else, it makes it clear how unprotected Sydney is in this place.

Her back door is accessed via the utility room to the side of the house. As I sidestep along the wall, keeping tight to the house, light fills the space, spilling from the back door, which is obviously open. Maybe they got out. But where the fuck did they go?

My patience at an all-time low, I move again. But I'm halted a second later when the brick beside my head splinters, dust and grit fly around me, getting in my eyes and blurring my vision. Stepping back, from what I assume is the line of sight of whoever the cunt is taking pot shots at me, I rub my eyes, swiping my face down the sleeve of my coat.

"Blake! Sydney! You there?" I call out, needing to know they are safe.

"Find the fucker, Ro. The fucking house is going up in flames," Blake yells back, although the sound is dulled slightly.

With no weapon, other than a piddly fucking blade, which ain't going to do shit long range, and not enough time to go back round the front and find this guy, I take a few steps back towards the garden and hope like hell this is going to work.

Finding my phone, I switch the torch on low and scan it round the garden. As the leg of a garden table comes into view of the dim torch light, I head to it and hope the shooter can't see me from his position—wherever that is. I'm guessing, without

looking over the fence, either in next door or on the flat roof of their extension. I tuck my phone and blade away and pick the square table up. It's a rusty metal thing that's seen better days, but it should do what I need it to.

This time when I reach the path to the back door, I switch sides, and slide along the fence until I'm standing in front of the open back door. Smoke is slowly filling the room, but I can just make out two shadows hunched together.

Raising the table over my head, I take a step forward. When nothing happens, I take another and another. Reaching the back doorstep, there's a ping of metal on metal. Happy to see the table isn't as flimsy as I thought, I hurry the rest of the way and cross the threshold.

"Blake, Sydney!" I hiss, placing the table down as they step through the smoky air in front of me.

"Took your fucking time, man. What the fuck are you doing with the...oh, I see. Good move."

My eyes scan him from head to toe, noting the dark wet patch on his shoulder, which is growing every second. Then I scan Sydney, who looks unhurt.

"We need to get out of here before the cops arrive," I say, noting Sydney's frown. I'm guessing she's wondering why the fuck we're avoiding the cops. Setting that aside to explain later, I continue, "Once you get to the fence, you need to stay tight to it. He can't get a shot that way. Sydney, I'll take you first and come back for Blake."

"No, take Blake. He's injured." She pushes him forward a little and steps in behind him.

"Not happening. Now let's go," I demand, raising the table over my head and turning

to face the back door. “Hold on to my waist, and we’ll take small steps, starting with the left leg, okay?”

I can hear Blake whispering to her that he’ll be right behind her, then I feel her hands at my waist, fisting my coat. Turning my head, I say, “Closer, Sydney.” She moves closer while sending daggers my way. “Good. You ready?” She nods, and I start walking slowly.

When the first bullet hits the top of the table, Sydney let’s out a squeal and pushes me forward so that we crash into the fence opposite. After that, I get Blake across quickly and we get the fuck out just before the fire brigade arrive.

Sydney is quiet in the back of the car as I drive toward our place. And while I’ve no doubt she’s in shock and has a million questions, which she’s cautious about asking given our last conversation, I’m more concerned about getting Blake’s gunshot checked.

As I turn off and head out of London, I feel Blake look over at me. “Where are you going?”

“Where do you think?”

He looks over his shoulder to Sydney, then lowering his voice, he says, “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“You got a better one? Besides, things have changed.”

Vance is at the gate house when we pull up thirty minutes later, and I roll down the window as we stop beside him.

“Wasn’t expecting you to be back so soon. The old guy d?—”

“Just open the gate. Blake’s been shot,” I say, cutting him off. Probably should have messaged ahead so he didn’t open his big fucking mouth. Hopefully, Sydney is still too shocked to have caught on.

“Oh fuck!” Vance says, stepping back inside to open the gates.

I hear a gasp from behind as I drive through the gates and down the smooth tarmac driveway.

“What is this place?” Sydney asks, and Blake twists in his seat to answer.

“Welcome to Stonebridge Manor,” he drawls, pride ringing in his tone. “This is Ro’s home.”

I look in the rearview mirror to see a wide-eyed Sydney scanning the grounds, taking in the high walls and huge manor house up ahead.

Any hope of keeping Sydney in the dark about who I really am, who my family are, and why I was posing as a reverend at her father’s church is about to be shot to shit.

It feels good to be home, but it’s not the homecoming I envisioned when Blake I set out to catch Annabel’s killer. Not only have we not done that, but we’re bringing the daughter of the man we suspect into my home.

“Our home,” I correct him as I keep my focus on parking the car.

“Hold on...this is...you...” Sydney stammers as Blake and I get out, neither of us waiting for her.

A car door slams behind us as we reach the front steps, then heavy footsteps crunch across the gravel.

“Wait...I don’t understand.”

“You will, but after I fix Blake’s gunshot wound up. Come on,” I say, heading up the steps and in through the front door as it opens for us.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SYDNEY

I follow behind Blake and Ro as they enter the huge house. Blake called it Stonebridge Manor, and a manor is a fitting description. I can't believe this is Roman and Blake's home, and I'm confused about the two of them. I thought they were friends. But something tells me I read that wrong—so wrong.

A tall, thin woman greets them, but neither stop to introduce me, leaving me to offer her a small, uncertain smile as I pass and follow along like a lost puppy. My eyes can't focus on any one thing, jumping from the wide central staircase to the ornate spindle banisters, the wood floor, shiny enough to see my reflection in, and the dark stained doors scattered around the entrance and the hall Blake and Roman are walking down.

The house is old, but despite the nod to its history, it's bright and airy, modern almost. I nearly slam into the back of Blake when he and Roman pause outside a door.

Roman pushes inside, and as I join them my eyes widen impossibly further when I'm met with a...a medical room. There's a bed in the centre with cupboards lining most of the other walls, and a counter runs around half the room with all manner of equipment and devices that wouldn't look out of place in a hospital—I'm certain that's where they are from.

"Blake," Ro says, pointing to the bed. Blake hops up onto the bed, his legs dangling

over the side, as Roman opens cupboards, collecting supplies.

I open my mouth to speak but close it again when nothing comes out. I'm unsure where to start. I don't know which questions to ask first, like do I want to know why someone just set fire to my house, essentially trying to kill me, or do I want to know who these two men really are. Because while I've suspected for some time that Roman most definitely isn't a reverend, it means there is a reason they infiltrated my pa's church.

"Why?" I blurt out as the thought strikes me like a bolt of lightning. That one question is like an avalanche and a multitude of quick-fire questions tumble from me. "Why are you pretending to be a reverend, Roman? Who are you? Why is someone trying to kill me? What do you want with me? Or Pa? "Are you...lovers?" I slap a hand over my mouth to stop myself just as Blake removes his top, revealing a tanned, ripped body. His upper chest is inked with three skulls and a quote across his abs, which I can't read fully from this position. My body involuntarily carries me forward until I'm standing mere inches away from him while staring intently at his tattoos.

Blake laughs as I find myself bending and leaning forward to get a better look. "You want me to lay down so you can inspect me thoroughly, Syd?"

"Er...oh damn...uh...no, sorry." My words trip over one another as Blake's voice brings me back, and I retreat, hitting a solid figure behind me with a yelp.

"Not the time, Blake," comes Roman's gruff voice next to my head, his breath blowing in my hair. He places a hand on my hip, gently steering me to the side so he can get to Blake.

I desperately try to ignore the tantalising electric current from Roman's touch, but it's incredibly difficult to do as my eyes are drawn back to Blake's bare upper body.

“It’s a sin,” my mind reminds me.

“I don’t care,” I argue back internally. And I might actually mean it. Maybe having my mortality so blatantly thrown in my face has made me realise how precious life is and how incredibly short lived it can be.

“It’s a through and through. You’re bloody lucky, Blake. I can’t believe how stupid you were,” Roman says, bringing me back to the room, as he begins cleaning the blood from Blake’s shoulder. “They’ll need suturing.”

“Not for first time, Ro,” Blake replies, and for some reason, I’m not at all surprised by that statement. “And I wasn’t stupid, just more interested in protecting someone.” His eyes lift to meet mine, and Roman turns his head, eyeing me over his shoulder.

I feel my cheeks heat at his confession initially, but then guilt wipes that away quickly enough. I’m about to apologise for Blake getting hurt, but Roman’s voice stops me.

“I need your help, Sydney,” he says, waving me forward.

I stand awkwardly at the side of Roman, but with a frustrated huff, he grabs me round the waist and forces me where he wants me to be. Clutching my hands in his, he lifts them, placing them either side of Blake’s shoulder, front and back, to hold the gauze in place.

“Apply pressure. Don’t move,” he instructs.

“I...er...” My words trail off as I avoid making eye contact with Blake, looking everywhere but at him and trying not to think about the fact I’m touching him—not skin to skin but enough to cause my heart to race.

“Relax, Syd,” Blake whispers and reaches out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. His fingers brush over my cheek as he does, and he chuckles as my whole body shivers. “Damn! So receptive.”

The action has me unintentionally pushing a little too hard on his wound, and he omits a groan.

“Sorry,” I say, despite my brain automatically imagining that groan in pleasure and not pain.

“You liked that, huh?” And in the event I didn’t know what he’s referring to he lets out a longer groan, this one rougher and deeper, and I feel the rumble vibrate through his chest, which slowly turns to a chuckle.

“Do you think this is funny? You were shot, Blake. At my house after it was set on fire. And you think it’s amusing to...flirt with me, make fun of me,” I snap, angry at him and myself for letting him affect me in such a way.

He grips my chin, turning my face to him. “I’m not making fun of you, no. Flirting? Yes, one hundred percent.” His grip tightens as I try to look away from him, feeling too vulnerable under his gaze and words. “I’d have to be dead inside not to be attracted to you, Syd.”

I scoff. “Attracted to the idea of me, maybe.” I don’t want to think about how much I dislike the idea of that. But what other possible reason would Blake, and even Roman, have for being attracted to me?

Roman returns, looking between the two of us, his eyes darkening and pupils dilating at Blake’s grip on my chin before placing a suture kit on the bed.

“You can let go now, Sydney. You too, Blake,” he says, and as I release my hold on

Blake's shoulder he lets go of my chin, and I move aside.

I quietly watch Roman stitch Blake's wounds and marvel at not using any anaesthetic. Other than a few winces, Blake's expression remains blank, and he doesn't make a sound. Roman is methodical and clearly knows what he's doing. Again raising numerous questions, which I seem unable to get answers to.

Once Roman has finished, I follow he and Blake to a kitchen where he grabs two beers from the fridge. After handing one to Blake, he turns to me.

"Beer?" I shake my head. "Okay, something else?"

"No, thanks. Just tell me what on earth is going on?" My frustration at knowing nothing and their casual attitude bleeds through. I don't think either of them understand how disconcerting it is being in a house miles from home with two men who are not what I thought. Two men who are dangerous in all the wrong ways.

Blake gestures to a small seating area overlooking the expansive dimly lit gardens, and with a sigh, I walk over and take a seat. When Roman joins us, he places a glass of water on the table in front of me.

"Drink. You inhaled a lot of smoke."

I look from the glass to him, watching as he takes the seat opposite me. "Yeah, that happens when your house is set alight and you're trapped inside." I can't help the contempt in my words. He's right, irritating me more, but I reluctantly pick up the glass and drink down half of it, my parched throat grateful for the cool liquid. Blake guzzles his beer, and I catch Roman's small smirk as he sits, bringing his own bottle to his lips.

I cradle my glass and wait for one of them to speak. When it's obvious neither of

them plans to start, too busy drinking and probably working out what lies they can sell me now, I break the silence.

“Talk. Surely the alcohol has loosened your lips enough by now.”

“Maybe you should have a drink, then we can get answers too.” I frown at his cryptic reply, but before I can question what he means, he continues, “What do you want to know?” Roman says unemotionally.

His response takes me by surprise, and now with the opportunity to get the answers I want, I struggle to order my thoughts enough to ask anything.

“Everything,” I state simply. “I want answers about who you are, why you’re pretending to be a reverend, why was my house attacked and Pa too? This all started when you two arrived in our lives, so I want answers.”

Roman scoffs, getting up and grabbing two more beers from the fridge. So I look to Blake for answers.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SYDNEY

“B lake?” I question, imploring him silently to give me something to explain all this. I am completely and utterly out of my depth and have no clue how to deal with all this. It’s driving me a little crazy. Combined with my growing attraction to two men I have no business being attracted to, or even knowing, and my recent questioning of my faith, I’m beginning to spiral.

“Is someone going to give me some answers?” I demand.

Roman rejoins us, handing another beer to Blake. Once settled in his seat, he looks to me. “Roman Stone, not a reverend”—he points to Blake—“Blake Cassidy, currently a builder. That’s who we are.” He takes a mouthful of beer. “Why we are here is a little more complicated. So, let’s start with a question I asked you before. What do you know about your mother?”

“What does she have to do with any of this? I don’t remember the woman, and Pa has told me nothing about her.” I don’t understand his obsession with the woman who gave birth to me. She’s dead.

Roman rolls his eyes and drops his head back to the chair. “Don’t you find that strange? To not know who your mother was, not even her name.”

I want to argue with him, but it’s something I’ve often wondered since I was a kid old enough to realise I didn’t have a mum like the other kids in school.

“Pa doesn’t like talking about her.”

“No, I’m sure he doesn’t,” Roman mutters.

“Ro,” Blake says, throwing him a warning look. “Syd, I get this is all a bit confusing, but it’s important.”

“Important for who? Me, you, Pa? Is it going to help catch the person who put him in hospital or set my house on fire? If the answer is no, then it’s not important.” I take a deep breath. “None of this makes sense, and neither of you seem interested in giving me answers, well, answers that mean something.” I push to my feet, searching inside my bag for my phone. Finding it, I say, “I’m leaving. I’m sorry you got hurt, Blake, and thank you for getting us out, Roman, but I can’t be here.”

“You can’t leave,” Roman states, his tone peppered with warning, and it lights a small spark of defiance in me.

“The hell I can’t.” I march in the direction of the exit, but I don’t make it more than two steps before Roman is in front of me, blocking my path.

“Let me rephrase that in case you misunderstood. You’re not leaving.” His nostrils flare as he stands with his arms crossed, an imposing figure.

Finding a bravado I wasn’t sure existed in me, I step forward until we are toe-to-toe. “Try and stop me,” I challenge, and without looking I unlock my phone and type 999 into the keypad, then holding it up, I turn the screen to face him. “I’ll do it if you don’t let me out of here.” I’m shocked by how calm and level my voice is, but inside I’m shaking head to toe. Every muscle is taut, almost to the point of cramp, and I feel sick.

I’m so focused on Roman that I don’t see or sense Blake behind me before it’s too

late. Fingers wrap tightly around the wrist of my hand holding the phone. Panic blooms inside me, spreading like a nuclear explosion until it reaches the tips of my finger and toes.

“I’m sorry, Syd, but we can’t let you leave. For your own safety.”

“Bullshit!” The word flies from my lips, and I don’t feel an ounce of guilt or a burning desire to repent. Something I’m realising is increasingly common around these men.

Roman smiles, it’s wicked and far from previous smiles I’ve seen from him. Eyes on me, he reaches for my phone, peeling my fingers open when I resist, earning me a seductive chuckle.

“That’s it, Sydney, let her out.”

“Wh-what are you talking about? Who?” I’m asking but I know. Since Paul’s betrayal I’ve been hiding, keeping subdued, this other person inside me. A person who doesn’t fit with Pa’s or God’s vision—she doesn’t even fit my own vision—of the person I want to be.

“The real you, Sydney. The one who has been shackled her whole life, restrained, hiding behind the shadows of her faith. The one who wants all these answers, an explanation, a justification.”

Blake’s thumb rubs against the inside of my wrist, caressing in time with my rapid pulse, as he moves in closer behind me. A sense of deja vu washes over me. His hard body aligns with mine, brushing against me.

Shaking my head, I say, “No, you’re wrong.” But my words are weak, without heat or intention.

Roman finally takes my phone, locking the screen and tossing it onto a chair with a dull thud, before his hands come up to cup my face, tilting my head so I'm looking directly at him, no option to look away from the truth. "I'm not wrong. I'm never wrong." His forehead creases for a split second, then it's gone.

I know what he and Blake are doing. The rational part of me knows they are distracting me to avoid answering my questions, but as Roman lowers his face, his lips whispering across mine, all I can think about is the answer to another question that's been on my mind since the day I met Roman Stone in Pa's office.

What would it be like to fuck him?

Dirty thoughts and dirty words be damned. I want this, that part of me I've resisted, wants this so desperately she is willing to forgo answers to everything else just for a taste of freedom.

We can have some fun and get our answers after. Imagine how good it will feel.

The thought is manifested to life as Roman takes my mouth. He's gentle at first, but my body is hijacked by another, and I drop my bag to the floor, wrapping my arms around his neck, and his kiss turns savage.

Roman thrusts his tongue into my mouth with a groan, and my body is pressed against his as Blake pins me between them, his hands grasping my hips.

Roman threads a hand through my tangled hair, gripping it at the base of my neck and pulling me back so he can look at me. His eyes are black like the soul of the devil. "Blake, kiss her," he orders, then turns my head to the side.

Blake's lips meet mine, and as I open for him Roman releases his hold on my hair and trails his hands up my sides, slipping beneath my top and raking his fingers up

my rib cage. When he reaches my bare breasts and tweaks my nipples, I can't contain a whimper, which Blake swallows before sucking on my bottom lip.

Blake breaks the kiss, and I turn back to see Roman watching us. So out of my depth. I've no real experience with one man let alone two. Roman rolls my nipples between his thumb and forefingers, squeezing and tugging, and like there's a direct line to my pussy, arousal soaks through my underwear.

"Take off her trousers. I want to see her, to see her pussy weep for us," Roman orders as he continues teasing my nipples, working me into a frenzy.

I shove down my fear at being exposed and concerns about my inexperience. But I do find myself praying I don't come too quickly. I don't question my choice of prayer topic and just allow myself to enjoy what is happening.

Blake leans in and whispers, "You okay, Syd?" I nod, unable to speak, and he undoes my jeans, shoving them and my knickers down my legs. I feel him crouch as he lifts one leg and then the other, removing everything below my waist.

Running his hands up my thighs, he taps my legs. "Open, Syd."

I do it, and a second later, I feel Blake's breath right there. Blowing hot breath across my opening before moving back further to my... Oh shit!

I instantly tense, never having been touched there before. "Relax. We aren't going there tonight." Then his fingers slip into my folds, dipping in and out of my pussy before caressing my clit.

Sensing that I'm spinning out a little, Roman grasps my chin with one hand and kisses me.

“How many times have you had sex, Sydney?” Roman asks when he breaks the kiss.

I struggle to focus on his words as Blake drives a finger into my pussy slowly.

“Er...oh, uh...arrgh,” I cry as he hits a spot that sends a jolt of pleasure through me.

“Sydney, focus. How many times?” Roman presses.

Irritated at his pushy question, I find my voice. “Maybe tell Blake to stop...then I might be able to answer you.” He just laughs as Blake increases his pace, pumping in and out and curling his fingers every now and then. “Oh god...a few times, okay?”

Roman hums. “Did he make you come, Sydney?”

“N-no,” I snap, angry at being reminded of my biggest mistake; letting that idiot touch me in the first place.

“Selfish bastard,” Blake growls, and doubles his efforts, clearly intending to do the job Paul failed at.

I find myself nodding as the first signs of my orgasm tug low in my belly. My back arches, and my legs weaken, spreading wider as they almost give way beneath me. Blake fills the space, and I realise I’m practically sitting on his face. There’s no question that I am actually sitting on his face as heat covers my pussy, and he sucks my clit into his warm, wet mouth. I don’t have time to be embarrassed. My orgasm slams into me, my arms tightening around Roman’s neck as I cry out.

“Oh...oh...shit!” My eyes close as I ride out my release, a release like I’ve never experienced before, not at someone else’s hand, and one that floods me with dopamine.

I don’t have time to wallow in my glorious post-orgasm bliss as Blake rises, taking

me with him and breaking my hold on Roman.

“On the floor,” Roman orders, his tone thick and rough.

Blake kisses me, as I’m carried a few steps, and I can taste myself on him. It’s a heady combination. He lowers me the floor, onto a soft and fluffy rug, then hovers above me, staring into my eyes before lifting my T-shirt from my body.

“You good?” he asks, and, again, I simply nod. Words elude me. I’m in a world of bliss right now.

“Strip,” comes Roman’s gruff voice, and I look over to find him naked as the day he was born.

Good freaking Lord!

Clothes do not do this man justice. They hide the body of a god. Lord, forgive me, but it’s true. Thick muscular legs, abs you could slice bread on and his... My mouth gapes open as I take in his dick, which he is currently fisting slowly as Blake moves and begins to strip.

Licking my dry lips and attempting to calm my racing heart, I let out a slow breath. It doesn’t ease my sudden self-consciousness, but I stay still, refusing to hide away from him, them, myself. If I’m doing this, I’m going to own it.

“Fuck me!” he curses as his eyes rove over my naked body, pausing briefly between my legs, which I know are wet with Blake’s saliva and my arousal. “Are you ready, Sydney? Ready to be dirtied up. Last chance to back out, but be warned, if you choose not to continue, I’m going fuck Blake in front you,” Roman says kneeling between my legs, and my eyes follow him—shamefully focused on his cock and the small bead of precum leaking from the tip.

Done with nodding my head, I manage to muster enough control to speak. "I'm ready," I say as Blake comes back into view, stripped bare.

Blake drops to his knees behind my head, and I arch my neck to see him. His erect dick almost touches his belly button, and not for the first time since seeing them naked, I wonder how either of them will fit inside me. Paul was seriously lacking in the tackle department if these two are average. But something tells me there is nothing average about Blake Cassidy and Roman Stone.

I'm mesmerised as I watch Blake's hand slide along his shaft. And when his thumb swipes over the tip and comes away gleaming, my mouth waters with a desire to taste him.

"Patience, Syd," he says, and my eyes snap to his. He's wearing a knowing smile that has my cheeks heating.

A shadow falls over me as Roman leans forward, and I almost have an orgasm as Blake and Roman kiss above me. Their tongues tangle, twisting and tasting, and I find my hands moving of their own accord. Roman flinches as my fingers track up his firm chest, a rumble vibrating through him.

"Sorry," I say and go to pull away, but Roman stops me.

"Don't stop," he groans against Blake's mouth before kissing him again, and I continue my exploration of his body.

My wandering hands cover every inch of Roman's torso until I reach the deep V at his hips, and without pausing to think about it, I seek out his cock. It jolts as my fingers wrap around it, and I love how warm and heavy it feels in my hand. The sinful, wanton whore that resides in my body is happy dancing as I begin moving my hand up and down, Roman's shaft.

“Fucking hell, that’s hot.” I hear Blake whisper, and when I look up, they are both watching me as I fist Roman’s dick.

“Blake,” Roman says, his voice strained as he sits back on his heels, forcing me to release him. They quickly swap positions, Blake taking the place between my legs, and I immediately raise my legs, wrapping them round his hips. I have a sudden, desperate need to feel him inside me.

Roman tosses something to Blake, and he catches it with one hand, the other holding him up. Leaning on his knees, I watch as he tears into the packet with his teeth, revealing a condom. I thank god that someone was thinking about protection because my brain appears to have evaporated into a lusty haze.

He rolls it on, and I’m agitated as I wait, anxious butterflies taking root in my stomach, but I swat them away as Blake cages me in and lowers his head, taking a nipple into his mouth.

I wriggle beneath him, digging my heels into his arse cheeks, then Roman is above my head, standing over me. Blake releases my nipple with a pop, then lines himself up and gently pushes inside while watching me.

It’s been a while, and I’m glad he’s going slow, although my body has other ideas. I don’t know who am right now. I’m not sure I ever did. But I focus on the here and now, the insane pleasure that is coursing through me, and the pressure that’s building at my core as Blake stretches me.

“So fucking tight,” he says between gritted teeth, sliding in to the hilt.

“Ahhh,” I keen, and when he begins to move, my breaths turn to pants with each thrust.

Good god, why have I waited so long?

Blake rests back, lifting my hips over his knees, taking me deeper, and as he does so, Roman moves into position.

He grips Blake's hair, tugging his head back until he's looking at him. "Beg. Beg to suck my cock while you fuck Sydney," Roman says, and Blake gasps as the walls of my pussy convulse around his dick. It's the filthiest, most depraved thing I've ever heard, and I'm so turned on.

Roman looks down at me, a twinkle of devilment in his eye. "Does our girl like that, huh?"

"Squeezed my cock like damn vice, Ro," Blake says, then adds, "Please, Ro. I'm not going to last much longer." And he's not the only one.

Blake's thrusts don't falter for a second, not even when Roman orders him to open his mouth and drives his cock into Blake's mouth. Keeping hold of Blake's hair, Roman fucks Blake's mouth, their thrusts in time, and I'm teetering on the edge of another orgasm in minutes.

A kaleidoscope of images flash through my mind, each one heating my blood and bringing me closer to orgasm.

"Ohgod, ohgod...oh...my...god," I pant as Blake's dick thickens inside me, and Roman's arse cheeks clench, his pace faltering.

As I come undone, the room fills with a roar, a cry and a groan in unison.

It's like a chorus, a hymn, lamenting a rebirth.

‘Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BLAKE

When I look down to check Syd, her breathing is laboured and her eyes are closed, but she's wearing the most incredible serene look.

"Syd?" I question, looking up to Roman as he steps back, then crouches beside her, trailing his fingers across her flushed cheeks.

She hums, seeking out the contact. "Well..."

Both Roman and I laugh at her sleepy, sated attempt at words. I tap her calf, indicating for her to release me. She does, dropping her thighs wide open and offering a perfect view of her pussy still stuffed with my cock. I groan and roll my eyes, wanting more than anything to roll my hips and fuck her again. But not only is she going to be sore, she's going to want those answers now.

The prospect of that conversation fully deflates my softening cock, and I pull out slowly. Her eyes open and meet mine, and she watches as I tie off the condom before turning to look at Roman.

I see the exact moment doubt creeps in and realisation of what just happened, but before it can fully manifest itself, I say, "Don't go there, Syd. Nothing we did is wrong."

Scooting back and sitting up, she closes in on herself, covering her naked body with

her arms. “I’m not sure my people would agree with you there,” she says sullenly.

Roman tuts and rises to his feet. “And have you ever asked any of them if they had sex outside marriage?”

“Of course not,” she barks, offended on their behalf. Another trait from her religious upbringing.

“I think you’d be shocked if you did. You can still be a good Christian and enjoy life, fuck who you like when you like, marry who you want. Some of us are beyond that, and no matter what we do the pearly gates of heaven will not be waiting for us on the other side.” His words are harsh yet true—for most of the people in our circle. We may have broken some of Syd’s barriers down, but when the truth comes out, it’s going to take a lot more than a couple of orgasms to justify any of it and to turn her black and white view of the world to a muted grey.

“Ro,” I say, a gently warning to take it down a notch and not ruin the moment. I’m not sure where his head is at, but mine is still lingering on the fact I just how fucking good being inside Syd was.

He waves me off, then strides from the room, grabbing his clothes as he goes. I look to Syd to reassure her that he’s not mad at her, but I’m stopped when she speaks before me.

“Wow, there was me thinking sex is supposed to put you in a good mood.”

I smirk, happy at her attempt to lighten the mood. “He is, he just has a difficult time showing it right now.” I get to my feet, then offer my hand to Syd. She takes it, surprising me with a smile and a muttered thanks.

“Come on. I’ll show you to the guest room and you can shower,” I say, slipping my

boxers on and balling up the rest of my clothes.

She gathers her clothes and follows me. “Then you’re going to give me answers,” she states, and I peer at her behind me. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten just because of some great sex.”

“Busted,” I say, slapping my thigh as I stop and face her. “Seriously though, keep an open mind, Syd. Forget what you’ve been told, and use your own instincts,” I implore as she gazes up at me, her brow furrowed. With a hand on her back, and not waiting for an answer, I guide her to the room beside ours. It’s the only other room with an en suite.

After showing her into the room and where everything is, I jog next door and grab her one of my T-shirts to wear and a pair of joggers, which will no doubt be huge on her.

Handing the clothes to her, I tell her to meet us downstairs when she’s ready. She nods, looking awkward, and I leave her to it.

Ro is exiting the bathroom as I enter, looking broody and not at all like someone who just got his cock sucked.

“What the fuck, Ro. That was a little harsh,” I say, grabbing some clean clothes to throw on once I’ve showered.

“Sure,” he mutters with no real feeling other than disinterest and pulls on joggers and T-shirt. “You showering?” he asks as he grabs the towel from where he dropped it on the bed and heads toward the bathroom.

“Yes. I told Syd we’d meet her downstairs to talk once she’s cleaned up.”

“You’ll need this then,” he says shoving the towel into my chest as he passes me.

I snatch hold of his arm, pulling him back. “What is going on? What happened at the hospital earlier?”

He’s all hard edges and fury, but as he looks at me, his eyes soften. With a deep sigh, he steps toward me, and I loosen my hold on his arm to more of a gentle caress.

“We fucked up,” he says, pulling back and sitting on the edge of the bed.

“What are you talking about? Do you mean with Syd?” I ask, searching my mind for what he could be talking about, but I’ve got nothing.

He shakes his head. “Kincaid.” His hands tighten on the bed, scrunching up the duvet. “He knows who I am. He’s known from the start.”

“No!” I say incredulously. “How the fuck does he know that, Ro? We were careful.”

Ro laughs. “Apparently not. But that’s not the funniest bit. He claims it wasn’t him.” He scoffs, then breaks into a hearty laugh that to anyone else would seem merry, but this laugh is laced with disbelief and fury and pain.

“Bullshit!” I hiss, gritting my teeth. “There’s no way we got the wrong guy, Ro. It was him. He murdered those women, he murdered Bell.” I crouch in front of him, grasping his face. “We aren’t wrong, Ro. Amos Kincaid is a fucking murderer, and he will?—”

A gasp behind me has me spinning to find Syd in the doorway, having pushed the door open fully. Her face is drained of colour, mouth open and tears on the precipice of falling from her eyes in a tsunami capable of drowning civilisation.

“Syd—”

“Wh-what d-did you say?” Her words are fractured, full of torture and a plea for her to have misheard me.

Ro gets to his feet, and I almost fall flat on my arse as he strides past me. He marches straight at her, forcing her to retreat, his muscular back contracting and his hands fisting at his sides. He doesn’t stop, despite my calls to him, until Syd is pinned against the wall in the hall.

She squeals as he cages her in, and I race to his side, tugging at his arm. “Hey, she’s not a part of this, Ro. She’s innocent,” I implore, trying to break through the dark haze that has fallen over him.

“She’s not innocent. Not anymore,” he says, his face twisting into a tortured frown. “We ruined her.” His words are solemn. “We got it wrong and ruined her in the process.”

I tug at him again, trying to pull his attention to me. “Roman, tell me what Kincaid said to you?”

“You spoke to my pa?” Syd says, finding her voice, which is now strong and full of accusation. I watch as she pieces it together. “That’s where you went at the hospital.”

Ro takes a strand of her wet hair and twirls it around his finger. She doesn’t pull away, and I’m not sure what to make of that. The fear I saw in her earlier has vanished or she’s masking it fucking well.

“Yes. And do you know what he told me, Sydney?” He pauses, waiting for her to respond.

I’ve known Roman for six years, we’ve been lovers for most of that time. I’ve seen him at his worst and his best, but I’ve never seen him this...lost. That’s the only word

I can think of describe him right now. Not even after Annabel's death. And that was fucked up.

But this right here? I have no understanding of.

"No," she finally answers when she figures out she'll get no more from him until she does.

He tugs on her hair, drawing their faces closer together, and if I didn't know Ro as well as I do, I'd worry he was going to hurt her. Our lives are not spent playing happy families. They are dark, filled with death and destruction.

"He told me to protect you. He knows what kind of men we are, yet he begged me to keep you safe. Can you believe that?"

She shakes her head, and a tear rolls down her cheek. "Why? Who do you need to keep me safe from?"

Roman closes the distance between them, his mouth ghosting across her lips, and my cock inappropriately jerks behind my boxers.

"Your father. The man who raped and murdered my sister, Sydney, that's who. But"—he chuckles—"apparently, I got it wrong." Then he licks the tear from her face, drops her hair and walks away.

Sydney sags against the wall, drawing deep breath after deep breath, her whole body vibrating.

"Syd," I say, reaching for her, but she holds up a hand, stopping me.

"No, don't touch me." She sucks in another fortifying breath, then swoops round me

and into the guest room, slamming the door closed. A second later, I hear something being pushed up against the door, and I know she's barricaded herself inside.

Fuck!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ROMAN

Fuck Amos Kincaid for screwing up my perfect revenge. Not only has he a daughter that is like nectar to a bee, but he's now got me doubting everything Blake and I worked on. I can still taste her salty tear despite the bottle of beer I drank when I came to hide out in the office. And I can still smell her on my skin even though I showered. It's a quiet kind of torture.

I flick the papers on the desk in front of me away, pissed that I can't find anything on this so-called John Clark slash John Smith. It was obvious when Kincaid told me the name, it would be impossible to locate a single John Smith in a world where that surname is as common as a cold.

I don't care if Kincaid isn't the killer, the man still has to answer for the things he's done, and I intend to start with how a man like Kincaid has a child while no one around him or in his past as Warren Burns knows of any woman he was close to.

I go back to the file in front of me, but all I can see is Sydney's face as I pinned her to the wall. Devastation. I know what that feels like—it's been the only real emotion I've felt since Annabel died. My phone pings, even though it's almost 1 a.m. Picking it up, it's a message from Oz.

OZ: I got a hit on a vehicle reg outside the church.

I hit call, and he answers immediately. "What have you got?" I ask.

“Yeah, hello to you too. What are you doing up at this time?”

I sigh. “Figuring out how we fucked up so bad. But give me the details.”

“We didn’t fuck up, Roman. We worked with what info we had.” When I don’t bother replying, he gives me the details of the car make and reg and the owner.

“And this car was parked outside the church at the time Kincaid was attacked?”

“Yeah, man. I went back a few days too, and it’s been there almost every day.”

“Almost every day?” I question.

“Accept when Kincaid was out of town. Which is suspicious as fuck. Unless the guy?—”

“Followed Kincaid back here,” I say, finishing his sentence for him. “Okay, go back and see where else this car has been in the last month or so. And, Oz?”

“Yes, boss,” he says expectantly.

“Find me a John Smith linked to Kincaid or Burns.”

“I’ll try.”

I slide my phone onto the desk and pick up my drink. I needed something a little stronger than beer and opened a bottle of bourbon.

I go over the victims’ names, the ones we know about, again. Something Kincaid said in the hospital comes back to me and I call the only person who can give me access to what I need.

Finding a serial rapist and killer with no clear type or identical MO every time is making our job impossibly hard. It's what has kept him from having the old bill on his arse and connecting the victims all this time. But with Kincaid revealing he knows the guy, I'm beginning to think this started as something personal.

"Well, well, well. What is it you think I can do for you at this ridiculous time of night, Stone?"

"As if you were sleeping," I snark back. "I need a solid contact in homicide who can get me some info."

"And what makes you think I can help? Did you miss the part where I'm not a cop anymore?" I hear a grumbled "Fuck off, Stone!" in the background.

"Nice to see someone is as grumpy as always. Look, I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important, and I know you still have some friends on the force."

She sighs. "Annabel?" I grunt. "Stupid question, huh. Fine. I might have someone. Send me what you need, and I'll see what they can do."

"I owe you one, Rox."

"Yeah, you fucking do. I'll be in touch. Now fuck off, Stone."

I can't help laughing at her friendly farewell. I spend the next hour putting together details for Rox's contact, then send it to her via a secured email.

I'm staring out the window, my back to the door, when I sense I'm no longer alone.

"Where is she?" I ask without bothering to turn around .

“In her room.” Feet brush over the carpet as he enters the room. “If you knew all this earlier, why didn’t you stop it before we went too far?”

“That’s like asking an addict why they need their next hit. One taste of Sydney Kincaid was all it took.” He appears in front of me, leaning against the window ledge, arms crossed. “Said it yourself, Blake.”

“I did. I wasn’t wrong,” he says, and I finally look up at him. “Are you sure Kincaid isn’t our man?”

I nod, swallowing down the last of my bourbon. “Enough to make me question everything we know.” I rest the glass on my knee and spin it.

“Did he really ask you to protect her?”

“Yep! And I know he’s holding back. He gave me a fake name, an alias, for the real killer, but he refused to give me anything more. How the fuck does he expect me to protect her if I don’t know who I’m looking for?”

Silence fills the room for a couple of minutes, then Blake steps forward, resting his hands on each arm rest, caging me in like I did to Sydney. “Then make him tell you.” Blake arches a brow.

I level a glare at Blake as my mind whirs with several ways I could force Kincaid to tell me what I want. The only real way I can see him giving it up is by using Sydney.

“We’ll take her to see him in the morning.” He nods, confirming he had the same idea. I put aside my feelings over involving Sydney because guilt isn’t something I’m accustomed to. My life doesn’t allow for that type of emotion, you own your choices, even if they are a mistake. Blake leads me to bed with a silent promise of fucking my anger away. It’s not therapy level appropriate, but it’s what we do. It works for us.

And I have a feeling it's going to be something Sydney could get on board with.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SYDNEY

I slam the door, resting back against it to catch my breath. I feel like I ran a marathon. Oxygen fills my lungs and kicks starts my brain to think straight again. I scan the room for anything I can use against the door. Spotting the chair in the corner, I rush over and pick it up, then ram it under the door handle. Stepping back I admire my work but instantly deflate as it dawns on me that will never keep them out if they really want to get in here.

Shoving the thought aside, labelling it as nonsense, I step away from the door and listen intently for any indication Blake is going to try to speak to me or come in here. I can't face either of them right this second. My mind is at capacity of what it can cope with. Several minutes pass before I drop onto the bed with a sigh.

I cover my face with my hands and allow my tears freedom. Freedom. Such a simple word that defines a person's life. Before tonight, I had thought I was free, but I was wrong. I wasn't free at all. Every decision I've ever made has been with the approval of God and my pa, the silent acceptance of doing the right thing. But the right thing for who? Roman's words about sex outside of marriage hit hard because I did it. I had sex with my fiancé to stop him from straying—again. Look how that ended?

My sobs grow heavier as I think about Pa, the man I trusted the most, the man who raised me, protected me. Why would Roman and Blake think Pa was a rapist, a murderer? Roman's words come back to me about being wrong and ruining me, Pa telling him to protect me and Blake mentioning someone called Bell. The only thing

that makes any sense is if they came here for revenge. And I was clearly part of that.

Let's defile the innocent daughter to destroy the man.

Nausea roils in my gut, bile burns my throat, and I rush for the bathroom.

It's empty.

My stomach is empty just like me.

I shower, going through the motions, before climbing into bed, curling into a ball and willing sleep to take me. It does—eventually—but it's not peaceful.

I lay in bed and watch the sunrise through the open curtains. I didn't close them last night, not that it would have made a difference to the amount of sleep I managed. Burnt orange spreads across the sky just before the sun crests the horizon, bringing a heavenly glow as it rises higher.

I heard movement from next door about thirty minutes ago, but neither Roman nor Blake have attempted to speak to me. I guess I shouldn't really be surprised. They achieved what they set out to.

I roll over onto my back and stare at the ceiling. My phone vibrates on the bedside table, and I consider ignoring it, but it could be the hospital. I reach for it blindly, swiping and bringing it to my ear without really looking at the caller ID.

"Hello." My greeting is met with silence. "Helloooo?" I say again with a huff. Again nothing, then as I pull the phone away to end the call, I hear my name.

Putting the phone back to my ear, I'm unsure if I imagined it, but then it comes again.

“Sydney, help me,” comes a haunting whisper.

“Who is this?” I demand as unease spreads through me. “Hello?”

“Sydney...no, no, please...” the voice trails off, transforming into a piercing wail, then the line goes dead.

Hesitating for a moment, the familiarity of the voice washes over me. With my phones gripped in my hand, I leap from the bed, and after a quick wrestle with the chair I jammed in front of the door last night, I yank the door open. Not caring what I might find on the other side, I burst into the room next door.

“Cress—” My words halt, and my mouth falls open. I was not at all prepared for the scene before me, and even less prepared for the burning shot of lust that hits every erogenous zone on my body.

Roman is above Blake on the bed, in a position mirroring my own last night, and thrusting into him as Blake fists his dick. Precum glistens from the head, and my reason for being here falls to the back of the thought process as an intense desire to taste that glittery bead of sin runs rampant through my body.

“Syd. Sydney,” Blake calls, and I shake the dreamy vision of me joining them from my head.

“Er, shit...sorry, but...” My reason for being here slams back into me and I’m moving forward, holding out my phone. “Cress...work...she called, no, someone else...she’s in trouble.” And as I reach them, I direct my phone to Roman. When he doesn’t take it straight away, I shove it into his bare chest, my fingers brushing his hot, damp skin. I fight against the feel of it.

What on earth is wrong with you?

I shake my head again and try to articulate coherently. “Cress, my friend, was on the phone, calling my name, but she sounded scared and was crying, then she screamed. She was begging...” The whole long sentence spills from me in a rush. A hand on my back startles me, and I twist to find Blake sat up.

“Breathe, Syd,” Blake says, trying to calm me.

Roman’s hand wraps round mine, dragging my attention to him. I keep my eyes on his face and away from his deliciously tempting naked body. He takes the phone with his free hand, keeping hold of my hand with the other. He turns the phone to me, activating face ID and unlocking it.

“Did you hear anyone else?” Roman asks, frowning at the screen.

I shake my head. “No, just her. I didn’t realise who it was at first. She sounded hurt and so scared. We have to find her.” My phone pings, and Roman opens the message, then he looks at Blake, silently conveying some message. “What? What is it?” I look back and forth between them. When neither offer an answer, I make a grab for the phone, but Roman is faster, raising it out of reach.

“No, Sydney.” He shakes his head, and I can feel the sympathy in his words and the way he is looking at me.

“I want to see,” I demand, all the while he shakes his head and shuffles back away from me. “Give me my phone, Roman!” But my words fall on deaf ears as Blake’s arms wrap around me stopping me from getting any closer. I fight, pushing and pulling at his arms, wriggling my body, but I’m no match for him, and they both know it.

“I don’t think you want to see that, Syd,” Blake whispers in my ear as I continue to struggle.

“Arrgh!” I scream, throwing my head back against Blake’s chest, then go limp in his arms. I watch as Roman pulls on some boxers then finds his own phone, and I’m guessing he airdrops the message to it. I might have lived a sheltered life, but one thing my pa did was teach me how to defend myself. Blake’s hold loosens a fraction, no doubt due to his injury, and I know this is my chance. I raise my leg and stamp my heel down on Blake’s foot. The second I have enough room, I slam an elbow into his ribs, letting me slip free. I dive at Roman, catching him by surprise and knocking him off balance. I grab my phone and jog to the other side of the room, putting distance between these two men.

I should have listened.

My eyes take in the image on my screen, and I heave, slamming my free hand over my mouth.

The background is dark and blurry, but the centre image is crisp and clear. A woman, stripped naked, blood pooled between her legs. Her face is littered in bruises and smeared with blood, but it’s the deep gash from one side of her neck to the other that has me dropping the phone and falling to my knees.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BLAKE

I drop down in front of Syd, where she's cradling her face and sobbing. I pick up her phone, glancing quickly at the image before locking the screen and handing it off to Roman who is now standing behind me.

Roman shakes his head as I look up at him, disappointed that Syd had to see her friend like that.

"Oz is on his way, Hopefully, he'll be able to trace where the call came from," Ro tells me. "Stay with her while I shower, then we can swap."

I nod and watch as he disappears into the bathroom. Turning back to Syd, I reach out and grip her wrists. "Syd," I say as I give testing tug on her hands covering her face. "Syd, look at me."

Hiccupping sobs grow louder, and I gently peel her fingers from her face. Her eyes are red and puffy, snot drips down from her nose, and she twists her head to wipe her face on her top—my T-shirt I gave her last night.

"I...oh my god, Blake. He killed her, he killed Cressida." She sucks in a stuttered breath. "What he did to her..."

"I know, I know. I'm so sorry, Syd." I cup her face, wiping new tears from under her eyes with my thumbs.

“I should have listened to Roman.” She pulls my hands from her face and climbs to her feet. “We need to call the police. Tell them what happened...”

I’m shaking my head as I rise to stand in front of her. “No, Syd. We can’t involve the police.”

Her eyes search my face, trying to understand what I’ve told her. “What do you mean?” she asks, her words cautious like she can’t have heard correctly. “Someone killed my friend and sent me a picture of her... We don’t have a choice. It’s the right thing to do.” She tilts her head, imploring me, begging for some kind of sense.

“It’s too risky.”

“Too risky?” she asks incredulously and pushes away from me. “It’s too risky to not call them, Blake.”

I sigh, wondering how the fuck I’m meant to tell her why we can’t involve the cops.

“Blake, someone killed my friend, attacked my pa and tried to burn me alive. How can we not call them?”

“Because if you do, your father will go to prison,” Ro says, walking towards us with a towel hung low on his hips.

Syd gasps, then narrows her eyes. “For what? You said you got it wrong and it wasn’t him. Surely the fact he was attacked and now Cressida is dead too, while he was in hospital, proves it can’t have been him.”

“Maybe, but?—”

“Maybe? What the fuck is maybe,” Syd yells.

Ignoring her interruption, Ro continues, “But, maybe he had an accomplice. Then there’s the small matter of his real identity.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Ro,” I grumble. He’s not known for his tact, something I usually admire. But on this occasion, I have a feeling it might have been helpful.

Syd waves her hands in a stop gesture, not wanting to hear any more. “No more riddles, Roman. I’m not as fragile as you seem to think, so you can stop beating around the bush and give it to me straight. Or I’ll walk out the door and find answers myself.”

There was me thinking Ro had been too blunt while Syd feels it’s not blunt enough.

“I’m going to need a cold shower if you keep that up, Syd,” I mutter, not even bothering to hide my blatant arousal—a little difficult as I’m naked. I know for a fact that Roman and I were moments away from finding our release when she burst in here. Blue balls aren’t uncommon between Ro and I due to his penchant for delayed pleasure, but I don’t usually have to deal with a spitfire sporting my clothes and putting Ro in his place.

Syd’s eyes meet mine, then her gaze lazily lowers to my semi. Her eyes spark, and the tip of her tongue swipes across her lower lip. It takes every ounce of restraint not to fist my cock, bringing it to full mast, and steer this moment in a completely different direction.

Syd straightens and shocks the shit out of me.

“Yeah, that’s not happening until I get some answers,” she says, and given the blush that creeps over her cheeks, she’s shocked herself too.

I smirk and Ro laughs. Sensing her confidence waning, I say, “Let me take that

shower before Oz gets here, then we'll talk." I step forward and trace my fingertips along her cheek. "I'm sorry about your friend, but we will get this guy," I tell her, then head for the bathroom.

As I reach Ro, he peels the towel from his body and hands it to me. I hear Syd gasp, then it transforms into a small moan as Ro grips my chin and plants a savage kiss on my lips. It's a promise to finish what we started later.

I hurry through a tepid shower, not that it helped, and by the time I step out and dry off, I'm already rock fucking hard again.

"Jesus!" I groan as my boxers rub against my cock. I've no idea how the hell I'm supposed to get through a serious conversation with all this pent-up desire.

I find Ro and Syd downstairs in the kitchen, each of them holding a cup of tea, and one for me next to Syd where she sits on a stool. She's no longer wearing just my clothes but a combination of Ro's T-shirt and my joggers. A sense of possessiveness fires through me, and I see the same look in Ro's eyes. Despite his growly countenance, I know he's feeling it too.

Syd takes a sip of her tea as I approach, and I can see her leg shaking. The adrenaline that was driving her earlier as let up and now her emotions are getting the better of her. Before I can offer her comfort, Oz arrives.

"This better be good, getting me up this early..." His words trail off as he notices Sydney. He looks between Ro and I, then takes in Syd again. He walks forward, and I tense, unsure what his reaction will be. "Sydney Kincaid, nice to meet you," he says, offering his hand for her to shake.

She tentatively extends a hand, shaking his. "Oz, right?" she hedges.

“I see these two have been bigging me up. Now, I’m guessing you’re the reason I’ve been dragged from my warm bed at this time in the morning?”

Ro steps forward, pulling Syd’s phone from his pocket. “The last call, I need you to trace it. There’s also an image in the messages I need you to look at too. I want some fucking idea of where it was taken, or at least as close as you can get.”

Oz’s takes the phone, checking the image first. “Fuck! Really? Didn’t think to warn me first? Who is she?”

“She’s my...was my friend,” Syd says sullenly. “Her name is Cressida Owens. Her address is in the messages.”

“Well damn! Okay, I’m not making any promises because he’s too smart to have not covered his tracks. Leave it with me. Anything else?”

Ro shakes his head. “We’ll be checking out the address you gave me last night while I wait for some info. Sydney is also going to speak with her father today. But keep looking into that name I gave you.”

“What name?” Syd asks, eyeing Ro suspiciously.

Ro ignores her question until Oz leaves, then he turns to her. “John Smith.”

She barks out a laugh that is somewhere between humour and incredulity. “Pa gave you this name?”

Ro nods. “It’s an alias. But I get the impression your father knows this guy’s real name.”

She downs the rest of her tea, places the cup on the counter, then jumps down from

her stool. “I’m assuming that’s why you want me to talk to Pa this morning, right? To find out the person’s real name.” Ro nods. “Then let’s go.”

As we follow her out, I’m starting to think that Ro and I highly underestimated her. I’m looking forward to discovering exactly how much.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SYDNEY

A nxiety and nausea battle for dominance as we drive to the hospital. Seems they are my overriding emotions lately. Ever since Blake and Roman arrived on the scene, I've had to fight a pressing desire, a lust that has no boundaries and the devastating realisation that Pa might not be who I thought he was. I have tried to ignore the whispering and questioning voice inside my head that reminds me of Roman's questions about my mother and who she was.

The more Roman reveals, the less confident I am that anything in my life is what I thought. According to Roman and Blake, my pa's real name is Warren Burns and he stole Amos Kincaid's identity. The McDonald's breakfast we stopped to grab on the way is very close to coming back up. Maybe I'm not as strong as I thought because I'm certain I've almost reached my limit for revelations. I laugh internally at the irony to the Book of Revelation and the overthrowing of evil. I just never imagined that Pa would fall into the category of evil. He might not be the rapist and killer Roman and Blake thought, but he is guilty of living a lie. And god knows what else he's done over the years to cover up his real identity.

As we pull into the hospital car park, clarity slaps me round the face, and I realise the reason we moved around so much was part of keeping Warren Burns hidden. But at what cost? And if Pa does know the man responsible for all these deaths, he has to share the guilt for them too.

And that thought is the most difficult to reconcile.

Even above my epic fall from grace into pure sin.

As we reach my pa's floor, a doctor and a nurse are exiting his room, and I hurry forward wanting to get an update.

"Ah, Miss Kincaid, good timing."

"How is he?"

The doctor places a placating hand on my arm momentarily. "He's doing well. His latest scan shows the swelling around his brain has significantly decreased, and if he continues to improve, with no further complications, then he should be able to go home in a couple of days."

I sigh in relief, but it's short lived when I realise that he can't go home alone while this guy is still out there.

"That's great. Thank you. Can we..."

"Of course. Go ahead. But he may tire quickly, so don't be alarmed if he falls asleep."

The doctor and nurse head off down the corridor, and I face the door to Pa's room. I blow out a deep breath, hesitant to go in there knowing the conversation we need to have.

"I know what you're thinking. But one thing at a time," Roman whispers into my ear from behind me.

I throw him a frown over my shoulder. " 'One thing at a time' ? Yeah, that's working so far," I deadpan, then push into Pa's room.

I'm pleased to see him sitting up, and he smiles when he sees me. But the smile falters as Roman and Blake come into view behind me. Something about his reaction irritates me and reminds me of what we are here for.

"Sydney," he says as I take a seat in the only chair beside his bed. "Are you okay?"

I hold his gaze before finally answering. "No, Pa, I'm not."

The spark from seeing me disappears from his eyes. "Sydn?—"

"No!" I cut him off. I don't want his apology or excuses. I shore up my defence and think about all the women who have suffered because my pa kept quiet. "Someone set fire to my house and shot at us, Pa." His eyes lift to Roman and Blake standing sentry behind me. "Don't look at them. If it wasn't for them, I'd be..." I shake the thought away. "You need to tell us who this guy is. You need to tell me everything."

He pushes himself further up in the bed, trying to appear dominant from his submissive position. "You need to understand that I was trying to protect you."

I'm shaking my head before he's even finished his sentence. "Trying to protect me or yourself!" I fire back. "Warren Burns," I add using his real name.

Shock splays across his face fleetingly before anger replaces it. "You told her?" he snaps at Roman.

"Yes, I told her," Roman responds calmly. "You asked something of me that can only be achieved with honesty. Something you seem to have left behind with your old life."

"This is not what we discussed," Pa says, his tone furious.

I hear Roman step closer to me, and I watch as Pa's eyes widen. With a quick glance over my shoulder, I see Blake's hand on Roman's arm, holding him, soothing his fury, whichever it is, Pa doesn't like it. And I know why.

"We barely discussed anything, Kincaid. You asked me to protect you and your daughter with nothing more than your word and a useless fucking name in return. So you can shove your indignation and disapproval where the sun doesn't shine."

The beeping from the machine Pa is hooked up to increases, and I know if I don't calm the situation we'll be told to leave.

"How dare?—"

"Okay enough. Pa, you need to give us this man's real name."

Pa stares at me before lifting his gaze and taking in Blake then Roman. With a heavy sigh, he says, "His real name is John Charles Clark."

"JC?" Roman questions.

Pa nods. "He was my best friend for years."

"Your best friend who is supposed to be dead?" Blake asks, clearly not buying it.

"Yes. I thought he was dead too, for the first couple of years. Then a woman I had been seeing was murdered. Thankfully her daughter wasn't there that night..." His sorrowful eyes meet mine, and my mind goes exactly where his words had intended. I'm shaking my head as he continues explaining. "I'm sorry, Sydney. I know I should have told you, but I?—"

"You said her daughter, so are you even my real father?" I hold my breath as I wait

for him to answer. Out of everything that's happened to me, especially the last couple of days, nothing has me more terrified than waiting to discover if I'm not even me.

"Of course, I'm your real father. How could you think otherwise?"

He sounds so surprised, and I laugh at the ridiculousness. "Maybe because you've been lying to me my whole life. It's all been a fucking lie!" Blake wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me against his chest, and Pa's eyes narrow at the intimacy. "Oh wow!" I let out a disbelieving laugh. "Don't you dare sit there and judge me. All these years of you lecturing me, the disapproval and disappointment, making me feel undeserving of God's love or any kind of love. And all this time you've been running away from your own mistakes. Lying to me, to everyone, and yourself." I push out of Blake's arm and step closer to the bed. "And to think I was worried about you." I push past Blake and Roman, neither of them stopping me, and exit into the corridor. I race through corridor after corridor, looking for the exit and needing some air. I crash into a woman as I burst through the automatic doors.

"I'm sorry," I call to her as the doors close behind me and cold rain pelts me from above. I look up at the overcast sky and curse God for the rain and my messed-up life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ROMAN

“Sydney!” Kincaid calls after her, but she’s gone before he’s finished saying the first syllable.

I turn to Blake. “Go after her. I won’t be long.”

With a nod to me and a final scathing glare at Kincaid, Blake follows Sydney. As soon as the door closes, I focus all my attention on the bastard in front of me.

“Was that the truth?”

“Yes, I wouldn’t lie about that.”

“The lone truth in a litany of lies. How very fucking noble of you.” I rest my hands on the bar at the foot of his bed.

“A commonality.”

“Don’t try and justify your bullshit lies,” I grit out between clenched teeth, rattling the bar. I’m still struggling with the idea that Kincaid isn’t the one who killed my sister. For the past three years he is all I’ve thought about day and night. My every waking moment has been spent planning his downfall then death.

“I lied to protect my daughter!” His tone defensive and pitch rising.

“Bull-fucking-shit! You lied to protect yourself.” I toss back at him, matching his indignation. Dropping my head, I take a deep breath, calming myself before I get thrown out or worse go through with my original plan of murdering Kincaid and walking away guilt free and full of justice for Annabel.

When I look back at Kincaid, he’s watching me knowingly. “Assume I believe you, you’ve been following JC’s movements, but how do you know where he’ll be each time?”

“It’s his little side game. Punishment of sorts. He knows I won’t go to the police, so instead he taunts me with his location and gives me twenty-four hours to save his next victim.” He visible shakes as he says the words. And against every fibre of my being, I might just believe him.

“If that’s true, why the fuck did my sister end up dead?”

He frowns. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t fuck me around, Kincaid, because I swear to god I will kill you. I’m talking about three years ago in Richmond, Annabel, and you were the last one to see her.” I pull my phone from my pocket and find a picture of her, turning it to show him.

“I remember her, of course. We spoke for over an hour. I was upset because I was too late to stop JC that night.”

“Hold on, are you saying that Annabel wasn’t his only victim that night?” He shakes his head as understanding dawns, but I’m already there. “Then he was watching you. He thought she was important to you, so he fucking killed her to hurt you.” My mind spins with the possibility that JC has been picking his victims based on women who have had some kind of contact with Kincaid.

A nurse enters the room, coming up short when she sees me. “Visiting hours are over. You’ll have to come back later.”

I tap the bar, then turn to leave. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Roman, wait. What about our agreement, Sydney?”

I stop at the door and turn back to him. “We’ll take care of Sydney. You take care of staying alive until tomorrow.” He scowls, and I know he understood my veiled double meaning.

I find Blake and Sydney at the car waiting for me. But I’m not in the mood for explaining and ignore Blake’s efforts to interrogate me.

I thrash the shit out of the car on the drive to Sydney’s house after she asked me to stop by. Fuck knows why. I’m sure there’s nothing left but blackened debris and ash.

I was partly right. Half her house is still standing, but it’s cordoned off, and while it would be easy to slip inside, it’s not worth the risk of the whole building collapsing on us. Blake suggests stopping at the supermarket on our way home so she can get some clothes and basics. He takes her inside while I wait in the car, stewing on everything Kincaid said.

It seems I was right after all, and whatever happened between Kincaid and JC made it personal. His revelations about Sydney’s mother at least explain why there are no pictures of Sydney as a baby or with her mother. Talking about Annabel with him hurt like fuck. But it does reveal something about how JC chooses his victims. If Annabel was killed because he saw her talking to Kincaid, then it poses the question of if all his recent victims have been chosen for the same reason, and I wonder if Kincaid has ever actually saved any of the women. I make a note to ask him about it tomorrow.

I call Oz for an update into tracing the call Sydney received and tell him to keep looking for John Smith. Now we know who this guy really is, we can focus on looking for him. We already knew who JC was, but with him being dead—supposedly—we never spent any time on looking into him.

I've just finished my call when Sydney and Blake return carrying a shit load of bags, and I feel my bank card ching-ching with all the money they've just spent. Good fucking thing money isn't an issue.

I don't really care if I'm honest. She can have whatever the fuck she wants. If that were to include a repeat performance of last night, then all the better. The mental image has me shifting in my seat, and feeling Blake's stare, I find him watching me with a knowing smirk.

He leans over to whisper in my ear. "What's the matter, Ro, feeling a little tight in those jeans?"

"Fuck you!" I mutter as he rests back in his seat with a laugh.

"Is that an offer," he parries back, not bothering to keep his voice low. Using the rearview mirror, I watch Sydney as she watches us. She didn't miss our conversation, but she seems equally affected as she shuffles and crosses her arms to cover her hard nipples.

Despite her obvious arousal, I won't be pushing her tonight. Blake, on the other hand, better be ready to soothe my feral beast.

Five minutes from home, Sydney finally breaks her silence. "Did you talk to Pa about your sister?"

I swallow my desire to bellow at her for bringing Annabel up and give myself a

second to calm before answering.

“Yeah. It seems Kincaid spoke with her after she realised he was upset.” I’m not surprised. Annabel was always conscious of other people’s feelings even when they didn’t give a fuck about hers.

“You think that’s why JC killed her, don’t you?” Blake asks, reaching over to rest a hand on my thigh.

I flick my eyes to him. “Yeah. I fucking do.”

When we arrive back home, Sydney disappears off to her room and Blake and I talk in the kitchen with a beer after ordering pizza, neither of us in the mood to cook.

“She say anything to you when you found her at the hospital?”

“Nope. She’s processing. It’s a fucking lot to take in, Ro.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve had years to get my head around this shit, but even I’m struggling to understand it.” I balance my beer bottle on my knee, holding it up with one finger on the rim as my thoughts scatter. “What I don’t understand is why JC didn’t just kill Kincaid.” It’s something that’s been bugging me since Kincaid revealed he knew the killer. “Why then go after Sydney?”

“He’s toying with him. If you’re right and JC has been picking his victims based on interactions with Kincaid, then it makes sense for him to go after her.”

The pizza arrives, and Blake takes a plate up to Sydney. She takes it but he doesn’t think she’ll eat it.

“You think he’ll go after Kincaid again?” Blake asks as we eat.

“Probably. If it was me, then I would. But I’d also want Sydney.” I let that thought fester for a minute as I try to dissect my feelings on it. “She’s the obvious choice and the most hurtful.” I squeeze my beer bottle as thoughts of what that bastard will do to her if he gets his hands on her. I’ve seen the police reports, and they do not make for pretty reading.

“Switch it off, man. She’s here and she’s safe.” Blake gets up, collecting the empty pizza box and beer bottles. “How about I make you feel better. You can tell me what you were thinking in the car on the way home that got you so hard.”

I let Blake distract me—I need it. Getting up, I step up to him. “I was thinking about being balls deep in pussy while Sydney sucked your cock. But as that’s off the table, I’ll only be too happy to watch you come as I fuck you.” I groan at the visual my words created and adjust my cock over my jeans. I spin Blake around and push up against his back so he can feel just how ready I am. Then I force him forward, matching his steps as he deposits the rubbish in the kitchen before heading to our room.

By the time we reach our bedroom door, I’ve stripped him of his T-shirt and pulled his joggers down over his arse cheeks to release his cock. His steps falter as I push him against the door, stroking his shaft, adding a twist as I reach the top and swiping my thumb over his leaking head.

“Look at you weeping for me,” I say, grinding my hips into his arse, seeking some relief. His head drops as he pushes back against me, and I bring two fingers up to his mouth. “Suck,” I tell him, and he instantly opens, drawing my fingers into his warm mouth. When my fingers are drenched in his saliva, I pull them free and rub them over his tight hole before slowly inserting one finger, stretching him, then adding a second. “Relax. Let me in, Blake.” I keep stroking his shaft as he breaths out, letting me slip in further and further.

He slams a hand against the door as I curl my fingers inside him, hitting his prostate.

“Shh, do you want Sydney to hear?” I ask with a chuckle, knowing both of us would be happy to have her joins us. “Open the door, Blake,” I order, and he does. I push my fingers deeper inside him, tugging his cock harder as we step inside.

Releasing his cock, I grip the back of his neck, forcing his head down and bending him over. I quickly undo my jeans, pulling my cock free and fisting it tightly. Dropping to my knees and taking Blake’s joggers down with me, I scissor my fingers inside his arse, and hum as his muscles contract around my fingers. He knows what’s coming. Slowly drawing back, I grip his arse cheeks, opening him to me, and my mouth waters at the sight. I press my face into his arse, licking a path from his balls to his hole before running my tongue around the rim. My hips lift involuntarily, and Blake grabs my cock, fisting it tightly. I draw back and spit, shoving two fingers back in his arse, as he continues to jerk me off.

I suddenly become aware we are no longer alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SYDNEY

I manage to eat one slice of the pizza Blake brought to me earlier, but it tastes like sawdust and turns my stomach inside out. There are too many things flying around my brain to focus much attention or energy on eating.

In just three days, my life has been ripped from under me. And I'm struggling to make sense of any of it. Something else I'm struggling with is my faith, but that's not new. If there's a god, then why does he let bad shit like this happen? Why does he allow the devil to tempt people so easily? Like me. Why am I so drawn to Roman and Blake? Why am I so easily corrupted after years of believing in God's word? My own father has lied to me since I was a child, kept secrets from me—secrets that have prevented me from knowing my mother. He could have shared his memories of her with me so I would have at the least felt some kind of connection to her. Instead, he's hidden me away and made me complicit in his crimes.

I don't feel protected; I feel violated.

What do you do when the devil has been in front of you the whole time, living with you, manipulating you?

A bang in the corridor startles me, and I can vaguely make out whispered voices. I get up and place my ear to the door. All my senses heighten as I hear a groan and their bedroom door open, and my pulse thrums with excitement about what they are doing. An insane desire washes over me, and I find myself reaching for my own door

handle. Pulling the door open, I quietly step out and find their bedroom door wide open. Curiosity and something much more potent—lust and desire—pulls me forward until I’m standing in their doorway. My mouth falls open at the sight of Roman on his knees behind Blake pumping two fingers in and out of his arse. My nipples harden beneath my thin pyjama top, and I’m hit with a jolt low in my belly, flooding my knickers with arousal. My thighs rub together, needing friction, pressure...something to help ease this insane, intense desire in me.

With a small tilt of his head, I know Roman knows I’m here. I shove all my thoughts, worries and shame for what I’m about to do, again, and step into the room, closing the door behind me. As I get closer to Roman, I can see Blake watching me as his hand slides up and down Roman’s dick. It’s slick with precum, and I want to taste it. I never did it for Paul, just the thought of his dick near my mouth made me feel sick. But this is different—so very different. And it’s the reason why I find myself dropping to my knees, then crawling toward Blake. As I draw closer, he releases Roman’s dick and straightens slightly so that when I rest back on my heels, I’m looking straight at his hard cock. I watch as, in tandem, they both take their own dicks in their hands and slowly begin to move. I whimper, unable to keep hidden how turned on I am.

“Remove your top, Sydney,” Roman demands, his gruff, desire laced baritone rolling over me.

Slowly crossing my arms, I hook the hem of my top in my fingers and lift it over my head, revealing my breasts. They feel heavy and tight and aching for some attention.

“Now touch yourself,” Roman says, one hand still moving up and down his cock while he continues to finger fuck Blake’s arse.

His request causes me to hesitate for a split second as my mind conjures a memory of the lustful nature of masturbation, but I shut the door on because I think we’ve gone

beyond that, then he says, “Show us what you like, Sydney.” Blake’s eyes roll back in his head as Roman does something to him, and I couldn’t deny him even if I wanted to. He is the master and my body is the subject.

I cup my breasts, tugging at my nipples, almost painfully, working them to tight, hard buds, and I moan as my clit pulses with each pinch.

“That’s it, get yourself nice and wet for us, Sydney,” Roman encourages, and I let my head drop back, closing my eyes as I get lost to the pleasure. I sense movement around me, but I don’t stop. I keep going, letting one hand trail down my stomach, breaching the top of my shorts and knickers and sliding between my pussy lips. My thighs tense as I pass over my clit, and as hands grip my hair, I open my eyes to find Roman still on his knees in front of me. His cock is swollen and veiny, jerking between his legs as he watches me playing with myself.

“Show me your fingers. Let me see your juices.” I gasp as hands grip my hips, and I withdraw my fingers from myself, showing them to Roman. I can smell myself, sweet and musky, and I stare amazed as Roman leans forward and sucks my fingers into his mouth. His tongue flicks the full length of them, between them, and he hums in approval. Releasing them with a pop, he says, “Fuck me, you taste good.” He lowers my hand to his cock while the hands at my hips begin to lower my shorts and underwear, tapping me to lift my arse so Blake can push them past my backside, the each leg until they are removed completely.

I wrap my fingers around Roman’s cock and start to move up and down. My breathing grows heavy, and I bite my lip as a bead of precum leaks from the head.

“Damn! I’m going to fuck your mouth so hard, Sydney.” And he pushes my head down. I spread my thighs wider for better access as I swirl my tongue around the head of his cock, over the top, tasting his salty precum before taking him fully in my mouth. I groan around his length as Blake sweeps his fingers through my wet pussy.

“Fuck!” he exclaims. “She’s fucking soaked, Ro.” Pushing two fingers inside me, I arch my back, pushing against the pressure and forcing Roman’s cock deeper into my mouth.

I gag, but I don’t care. All I can think about is how good it feels, how full I feel, and I wonder how much better it would be if it was Blake’s cock instead of his fingers fucking my pussy.

Like he read my mind, Roman says, “Fuck her, Blake. Fuck her pussy while I fuck her mouth. I want to feel her as she comes all over your cock.”

Raising my arse in the air, I silently give Blake the green light. I hear the rustle of a foil packet, then a tearing sound before a second later, the head of Blake’s dick replaces his fingers as he drives into me.

I cry out around Roman’s dick, and I feel him swell with the vibrations. A muffled curse echoes around the room as Blake thrust into me over and over again while Roman grips my hair tight, holding my head as he fucks my mouth.

Good fucking god I think to myself, and if I wasn’t so lost to these two men as they pleasure me, ruin me utterly and completely, I’d laugh at the irony.

It’s not long before I feel the first stirrings of an orgasm building and pulling at my core, and as Blake’s dick swells inside me, I instinctively know he’s close too. He increases his pace as I blow ragged breaths through my nose, and my arm almost buckles under me as I drop off the edge, spasming around Blake’s cock as he pulses inside me with his own release.

My mouth drops wide on a cry, and my eyes water as Roman hits the back of my throat, making me gag while heightening my already intense orgasm.

Roman pulls on my hair, his dick slipping free from my mouth, as he forces me up and backward. Blake is still seated inside me as I look into Roman's eyes.

"Let's see how much you can take, Sydney, because now it's my turn. And I've been waiting to fuck your pussy."

"I'm ready," I say, my voice steady and clear, although a little breathless. Excitement thrums through my whole body at the idea of being fucked again, by Roman this time.

Blake leans up to my ear and as his fingers glide over my forbidden hole, he whispers, "One day, soon, I'm going to take this virgin hole, and when I do, Ro is going to fill your sweet little cunt."

My breath catches in my throat at the filthy promise and a rushed "Okay" falls from my lips. I've no clue who this version of me is, but I like her.

Roman leads me over to the bed as Blake disposes of the condom. He lies on his back and beckons me to straddle him. A rush of nerves hit me having never had sex in this position, but I climb up, a knee either side of him. Resting on one elbow, he wraps a hand round the back of my neck and pulls me forward, my lips meeting his, and I can taste myself on his tongue as it strokes against my own.

The bed dips as Blake moves in behind me, and I feel him as he grasps Roman's cock. When Roman breaks the kiss a second later, letting out a deep groan, I twist my head to see Blake sucking Roman's cock.

"Oh my..." My words trail off as Roman sucks a nipple into his mouth, and I feel light and heavy all at the same time. Every touch is like lightning, every breath is like it will be my last. Blake releases Roman and rolls on a condom, then leans forward to kiss me, and this time I can taste myself and Roman. It's delicious and dirty and I

want more.

“How do we taste, Syd?” Blake asks, moving to the front of me and taking my other nipple into his mouth. The dual sensation is out of this world, and I can barely think let alone answer.

“It’s...we t-taste...perfect,” I manage to stutter out a second before Roman lines himself up with my entrance and slowly eases me down onto him. He’s a little thicker than Blake, and I groan as he stretches me.

Once he’s fully seated inside me, I begin to roll my hips, gasping at the depth of the angle.

“Fuck,” I exclaim as Roman drops back to the bed and Blake moves to stand over the top of him facing me.

“Fuck indeed, Syd,” Blake says, his eyes dark and pupils wide. “This what you had in mind, Ro?”

“Damn fucking straight it is!” Punctuating his point with a thrust of his hips that has me crying out. “I’m not going to last long in this tight fucking pussy,” he growls out, thrusting again.

Blake fists his cock as he steps forward, then rubs the head along the seam of my lips. Resting my hands on his thighs, I open, taking him into my mouth as far as I can, gagging before pulling back a little.

Roman moans as my pussy clenches around his dick. “Holy shit!”

Buoyed by Roman’s obvious pleasure, I do it again and again until tears stream down my face, my pussy clamping down on Roman’s dick as I ride him and a second

orgasm builds low in my belly.

Blake growls as he swells in my mouth. “Going to come, Syd, right down your throat,” he grits out between clenched teeth. A second later, he releases a guttural roar, shooting cum down my throat, as Roman’s thrusts become faster and rougher as he chases his own release. And as he finally falls over the edge, holding my hips and pumping into me, the combination sends me crashing headlong into another orgasm.

My body shudders as tremors race through me and using Blake’s thighs I push back, releasing him from my mouth as a stuttered scream rushes from me.

Pants and moans fill the room, and as I look down, I find Roman licking cum from his lips, and the salacious sight has my heart skipping a beat and my blood heating.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SYDNEY

I 'm surrounded by heat and hard bodies, and I'm too hot. I throw my arms up and over my head in an effort to escape the suffocating heat coming from Roman and Blake. It's not enough. I flick the quilt off me, and subsequently them too. Cool air hits my skin, and I blow out a relieved breath.

Raising my head, I see a tangle of limbs, but as my eyes climb upwards, I'm met with tanned skin and an array of ink against my pale and blank skin. The contrast is stark. And for a moment, self-consciousness taps at me, but I swat it away as I remember last night.

These two men chose me, whether by design or fate. Either way, I don't care. I don't regret it. I don't feel any shame or guilt. What I feel is alive. The binding ties that started to fray after Paul have finally snapped, freeing me. I plan to embrace it. Starting now as my eyes rove over Blake's body from his tight backside, peaking out of the top of the quilt, and up to his ink covered back. When I've had my fill, I turn to Roman the other side of me and find him watching me as he lays on his side facing me.

"Morning," I say as he smiles at me.

"Enjoying the view, huh?" he asks with a wink. "It's a nice view."

"Yes, it is." I have so many questions flying around my head, but most of them will

ruin this moment right here, but I don't want to go there yet.

"How are you feeling?" Roman asks.

"That's a difficult question to answer," I say, and I know it's vague, but it fits with what I was just thinking.

"Okay, let me be specific. How are you feeling about last night?" There's a thin thread of trepidation in his tone.

"Are you asking me if I enjoyed it?" I tease.

"No, I know you did. What I'm asking is if you regret it."

"We'll ignore your giant ego and skip to the main part. No, I don't regret it." I pause, then add, "I think it's the first time I haven't regretted a decision."

"That's sad, Sydney."

"I know, but I've had a very different life to you." A small part of me wonders how our differences will impact our relationship—if there is one. That's another area I want to avoid discussing, so instead I ask, "What do you and Blake really do, you know for work?"

He shifts, rolling onto his back. "That's a difficult question to answer," he says, using my words from moments ago.

I roll to my side so I can watch him and prop myself up on an elbow. "Try," I tell him, making sure to keep my focus on his face and not his dick, which I can see out of the corner of my eye.

“I’m not sure you’re ready for this conversation, Sydney.”

His answer pisses me off. “Hey, that’s not for you to decide. I don’t need someone else making decisions about what’s best for me, Roman.”

“It’s not about making decisions for you. It’s about whether you’re ready to hear and accept it. You said it yourself, we’ve lived different lives.”

“He’s worried you’ll run when you find out who we really are,” says a muffled voice.

I laugh. “Really? I mean, it’s not like you’re murderers, so how bad can it be?” I say, looking at Roman. But his serious face and the deathly silence stop my humour in an instant. I sit up, pulling the quilt around me and spin to face them both. “You’re not serious?”

Roman sighs and sits up, resting against the headboard. “You’re a fucking idiot, Blake. And to answer your question, we don’t go around just murdering anyone, but?—”

“You’ve killed people?” I blurt out. “Oh my god!” I scramble down the bed away from them, almost falling off the end as I become tangled in the quilt.

“For fuck’s sake! This is exactly why I said she wasn’t ready for this conversation,” Roman says, getting up, his semi-hard dick swinging between his legs, and storms off into the en suite.

“Explain,” I demand, whirling around to face Blake, only he’s still face down on the bed, leaving me staring at his arse.

His hot as hell arse.

“Blake, what do you mean. What do you do? Who are you?” I demand again, and this time, I slap his bare arse to make sure he understands.

He groans. “Do it again,” he says, his arse cheeks clenching.

I huff, throwing my hands up in the air. “I’m serious, Blake.”

“So am I,” he says, lazily turning his head to look at me. His eyes are half closed, and his cheek and one side of his lips are squished against the pillow. He groans again as he rolls his hips.

I growl in frustration, toss the quilt over him and leave.

“Ridiculously infuriating men!” I moan to myself as I enter my room and head straight for the shower.

After showering, I get dressed and find my phone. There are several missed calls from Sheila at work, and a couple from Suzi too along with a message.

Suzi: Sydney, where are you? I hope you’re okay. Have you heard about Cress?

I drop down on the end of the bed and stare at my phone, unsure what to do. It’s not like I can call Suzi and tell her that the killer sent me a message. Then again, maybe I should warn her. She might be in danger if this JC guy is going after my family and friends.

I begin typing a reply, just letting her know I heard and she should be careful. I also let her know that I’ve not been around as Pa was attacked. Then I call Sheila.

I’ve just finished my call with Sheila, who was surprisingly understanding, and devastated about Cress when I hear raised voices coming from downstairs.

“What’s going on?” I ask as I step into the kitchen. Roman and Blake are standing on opposite sides of the room, yelling at one another.

I look to Blake as he is the one most likely to give me answer. “Well, someone going to tell me what all the shouting is about?”

Roman steps forward and jabs a finger into some papers on the counter. “This. This is what all the yelling is about.” He then picks some of them up and begins spewing names at me like I’m supposed to know who these people are.

“Wait, wait. What is all this?” I ask, stepping up to the counter and picking up one of the sheets. It’s a police record, or at least part of one. There’s a thumbnail sized image of a young girl in the top left corner, then her details; name, eye colour, age, description etc. As I scan over the page, it starts to make sense.

“These are all the unsolved rape and murder cases of young women over the last twenty years that match elements of JC’s MO.”

My eyes snap to Roman’s. “There has to be over twenty cases here.”

“And this is not including the ones we already know about,” Roman snaps, dropping the papers back onto the counter.

“That means he’s a serial?—”

“Killer...and rapist. We know,” Blake says.

“But why aren’t the police looking for him, or warning the public about him? We have to tell them.”

Roman shakes his head. “They aren’t looking for him because he’s smart and never

kills in the same place twice, and he doesn't have a set MO like most serials. The police look for patterns, hunting area, things to link the murders or rapes, but JC's are all different."

I pick up another sheet, scanning the document, but like Roman just said, there is nothing to connect these women or link them to one killer. "So how do you know these are all him?"

"We don't. Not for certain," Blake says, joining me at the counter. "But after speaking with your father yesterday, Roman thinks that JC picks each victim based on women that interact with your father."

"I don't understand. How would JC know what women he speaks with?" I feel like I'm missing something here.

"He tells your father where he'll be and gives him twenty-four hours to save his next victim."

I feel sick to my stomach. This is a messed-up game to this man. A man my pa used to be friends with. I place my hands on my hips and turn away in disgust. After pacing back and forth for a few minutes, I turn back to them. "We have to stop him. How can we stop him?" I ask the question, but my mind is already running scenarios. None of which are possible or ethical. And I'm even more surprised at the direction my mind has gone in.

CHAPTER THIRTY

BLAKE

Roman scowls at me, but I don't give a fuck. He was already pissed at me for earlier this morning, so a little more isn't going to make a difference. Besides, we can't keep what we do from her indefinitely. Not if we are planning to make her ours, well, officially. I know how I feel about her, and I'm certain Ro feels the same, though he won't admit it so freely.

I can't wait to see Kincaid's reaction when he realises that we've defiled his precious daughter—the one he's so sure he was protecting all these years, and who is currently pacing the kitchen.

"We have to stop him. How can we stop him?" she says, spinning to face us expectantly like we have all the answers.

We did when we thought Kincaid was our man, but now everything is fucked up.

"You have a plan, right?" she presses, her gaze flicking between the two of us like a game of table tennis.

"We did," I say.

"Shut the fuck up, Blake," Ro snaps.

"Oh, really. Okay, then I'm going fuck off. You should stay, and perhaps Syd will let

you fuck all your frustration out on her.” I leave the pair of them wide eyed and yelling after me.

I take the other car and decide to go see Oz. Maybe he’s got some news on this prick JC’s whereabouts, or at the least a place to start looking.

I ignore my phone as it rings on and off several times on the way to Oz’s house. By the time I arrive, Ro’s got the message and stopped calling. I feel a little bit bad leaving Syd to deal with his shitty mood, but maybe she’ll be able to get him to chill the fuck out. I know and understand why he’s pissed off. All our plans have gone out the window, Syd is more than either of us expected and now she’s in danger, something neither of us wanted once we discovered she was clueless about who her father really was. And I know he’s gutted that Annabel’s life was snuffed out for simply being nice to some old guy, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not the usual case for someone like JC. Serial killers and rapist are meticulous in picking their victims; the right eye and hair colour, or a particular career, and they stalk them, learning their routines.

JC’s random selection process is more than unusual. It somehow makes him more dangerous, more unpredictable and a whole lot crazier and cold blooded.

I park next to Oz’s car and knock on the door before walking straight in.

“Oz, you here?” I call out as I stroll through the large open space. God, I hope he hasn’t got a woman here like the last time I turned up uninvited. At least I know to steer clear of the room with the black door now. What goes on in that room is too much even for me. All of it consensual, of course, but Oz has some twisted sexual preferences.

I call out to him again, and this time he answers, “Down here, Blake.” I make my way down the stairs leading to the lower level and find him sat at his desk, four

computer screens in front of him.

“Glad to see you wearing some clothes this time,” I joke as I drag a chair over and join him at the desk.

“Fuck you,” he retorts. “Not my fault if you went poking your nose around my gaff.” His words are light-hearted. “So, what can I do you for?”

“Needed to escape a pissed off Ro. I left Syd to deal with him.”

He side eyes me. “That a good idea?”

“Guess I’ll find out when I get back. What’s this?” I ask as my attention is captured by one of the screens.

“Ah, well, this you’re going to love. Seeing as the cops are shit at linking all of JC’s victims, I’ve built my own database. And with the info Roxy sent over yesterday, we have ourselves something close to a pattern.”

I watch as Oz takes me through the map on the screen. Zooming out to show a map of the whole of the UK, different coloured pins litter it. Some areas appear to be one big pin due to the high number there.

“So, as you can see, this full map shows you locations with rape and-slash-or murders that we believe are JC. The green pins represent cases we know for certain are JC, the yellow pins are the cases Roxy sent, and the red pins are ones we don’t know much about but were still flagged as a possible link. You with me so far?”

I nod, then he zooms in a little. “The main bulk of cases is down south, no surprise, but this is where it gets really interesting.” He moves to an area in the Midlands where there are only four pins, two green and two yellow. He switches to another

screen and taps away for a second until a spreadsheet appears, then he clicks a few more buttons and four lines are highlighted. “This”—He points to the screen—“is these four here,” he says and points to the pins on the map.

“Okay...” I say, waiting for the punchline.

“Kincaid and Sydney lived in this area between 2020-2022.” He sits back in his chair, proud as punch.

“Is that the same for all the areas with a bigger number of cases?” I ask, realising what this means.

“Yep! They moved around a lot, and every place they’ve lived for the last twenty years, has at least one pin in it.”

“Well fuck me!” I’m gobsmacked at the sheer number of pins on the screen. It’s more than we thought. “How come there are so many?”

“I might have figured out a way to hack into the police forensics database. Those are the red ones.”

“Show me London and the surrounding areas,” I ask.

Oz does and when the data loads on the spreadsheet, Annabel’s name is there. But that’s not what catches my eye. No, it’s the strange pattern surrounding London.

“He lives in London. Right?”

“I reckon so, yes. According to this, he’s been jumping in and out of London and the surrounding counties since Kincaid moved here two years ago.” Oz taps a couple of buttons, and the pins change colour to orange, purple and blue. “Each pin colour

represents a different year. Blue is 2022, as Kincaid moved here late 2022, then orange is 2023, purple 2024.”

“You’re a fucking genius, Oz. The force were fools letting you go,” I praise him, slapping him on the shoulder as I get to my feet. “I need to show this to Ro, then we need to pay Kincaid another visit.”

“No problem. I’ll send you the link and add any more cases I find.”

“Perfect. I take it you didn’t have any luck with actually locating him?”

“Nah, but if we had a photo of him, I could try an image search.”

I tell him I’ll see if Kincaid has one, then thank him again before leaving.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ROMAN

I slam my phone down on the counter as Sydney walks back in. “He still not answering?” she asks, and there’s a hint of sarcasm in her question. “What’s your problem anyway? You’ve been prickly since this morning.”

“I’m not fucking prickly.”

“If you say so,” she says, laughing. She fills a glass up with water and turns to face me, leaning against the counter.

I watch as she takes a mouthful, her throat working as she swallows, and I thank god I’m behind the counter and she can’t see how hard I am. Her eyes meet mine as she pulls the glass aside, holding it aloft beside her face.

This goes on for a couple of minutes, and like a kid having a staring contest with a friend and unable to hold out, I say, “What?”

“Nothing,” she says with a shrug. “So, are we going to talk about the elephant in the room or just continue to ignore it?”

“No. Because there’s nothing to talk about.” I pick my phone up again, checking to see if he’s messaged even though I know he hasn’t. I just need something to focus on that isn’t her. Blake’s words as he left have been on a constant loop inside my head. I mean, he isn’t wrong. My go-to is to fuck away my frustrations. But just like I’m not

sure she's ready to know what Blake and I do, I don't think she's ready for angry fucking either.

She pours the rest of her water away and places the empty glass upside down on the draining board, then walks toward me. Something in her eyes and the wicked smirk she's wearing tell me I might just be proved wrong.

She stops directly in front of me, as close as she can get without touching me, and quickly takes my phone from my hand before I have a chance to stop her. She lays it on the counter beside her and shoves it away out of reach.

"I was just about to try Blake again as we need to visit your—" Her hand covers my mouth.

"I'm sure he'll come back when he's ready. And I don't want to talk about Pa right now." Her eyes run the length of my body, and she pauses on the obvious bulge in my joggers before bringing her eyes back to me.

This crazy minx is trying to top me from the bottom. I'm sure she has absolutely no idea that's what she's doing though and just thinks she's seducing me. Well, now I'm intrigued to let this play out a little and see how far she can get before I flip on her.

"Sydney," I warn, but she carries on as though she didn't hear the threat in my tone.

"What," she asks innocently, even fluttering her damn eyelashes at me, as she presses a hand to my chest. She holds it there before trailing it down my body to the waistband of my bottoms.

"This is not a good idea," I say with a growl.

"I disagree. Quite vehemently, actually." She slips her hand in the top of my joggers,

just under the waistband, and runs her hand along it, brushing against my skin. “You need to relax, and I need to focus on something else while satisfying a craving you and Blake are responsible for releasing.”

Her words shake a little, hinting at her nerves. And she should be nervous. Because if she continues down this path, I’m going to let all my fury free on her.

Sliding her hand down further inside my joggers, her fingers brush the head of my cock, already slick with precum—something that has become normal around her. She sucks in a sharp breath before wrapping her fingers around my shaft and squeezing as it throbs in her hand.

Lightning fast, I grab her waist and spin her, pinning her against the counter and trapping her hand between our bodies. Her eyes widen in shock as I cup her throat.

“Be absolutely sure this is what you want, Sydney. I won’t go easy on you. This is not like before.”

She fucking licks her lips, and just as she did the first night we fucked her, she says, “I’m ready.”

“We’ll fucking see,” I reply, moving back enough to unwrap her hand from my cock, then I bend and throw her over my shoulder.

“What the f—” she squeals, cutting off sharply as I slap her arse.

“Oh, Sydney, you might regret teasing this beast. And cursing too. How far you have fallen,” I tell her, carrying her to the bedroom while she squirms in my hold.

I collect a few things, placing them on the bedside table out of view, before dropping her to the bed. I keep her attention on me by slipping my joggers off and allowing my

cock to spring free. Then I drag her down the bed by her legs, until they are hanging off the end, and remove her leggings and underwear before spreading her legs wide.

“Look at this slick pussy waiting for my cock.” I trail a finger through her folds and watch as her back arches at the touch. “So desperate to be filled,” I say, swirling my finger through her juices, then I dip lower, brushing over her arse and circling my finger there as she prepares to protest.

“Rom—”

“No. I warned you. Now you will accept what’s coming.” I continue my teasing of her tight hole, knowing she’ll get on board soon enough. She’ll be so drunk on lust, she won’t be able to deny me. And just to prove myself right, I apply a little pressure, gauging her reaction. “Breathe, Sydney,” I croon as the tip of my finger pushes past the first tight ring of muscle. I crouch and swipe my tongue up her slit.

“Oh,” she moans, her lips forming a perfect O.

“That’s it,” I praise, gripping my cock firmly before diving back in for another taste. With her entirely focused on the pleasure I’m delivering to her with my tongue, I slide my finger in another inch, then another, up to my knuckle. I keep going, circling her clit, working her up, until she’s teetering on the edge. Then I stop everything, slowly pulling my finger from her arse as she mewls at the loss of her orgasm. She even has the audacity to reach for her pussy, to finish herself off.

“Nah-uh, your orgasms are mine. Try it again and I’ll keep you riding that edge all day,” I tell her, and I mean it. I’m a fucking master at edging. I keep her waiting in pained anticipation for a couple more minutes before resuming my ministrations, only to stop again, and again, denying her each time.

She’s a writhing, sweaty mess as I rise to look over her, to look at the beautiful,

desperate woman laid out before me.

“Roman, please. I need to come. Please let me come,” she begs, gripping the bed covers and trying to close her legs to ease that deep ache I know she’s feeling. It’s an ache that can drive you wild with need.

I push her legs apart and step between them, running the tip of my finger the length of her cunt as I lean over, bringing my face an inch from hers. “I like you begging, Sydney. But let’s see how far you can go. I want you out of your fucking mind with the need to come, to feel me inside you, fucking you.”

“Yes,” she moans, arching her back, seeking friction as my cock brushes against her entrance. Her eyes find mine, and I see her submission.

I kiss her, stealing her breath, then I whisper, “Are you on birth control, Sydney?” I trace kisses and nips along her jaw, down her neck, pushing her top up as I go, pulling the cups of her bra down to reveal her breasts. “Sydney?” I press, then flick my tongue over a nipple.

“Er...yes, erm, the pill.”

“Good, ’cause I’m going to fuck you bare.” I suck her nipple, then release it with a pop. “But first...” I step away for a second, collecting what I left on the bedside table earlier. Her eyes widen, pupils blown, as she sees the anal beads I’m holding. “Hmm, a little bit of fear. I like that.” I lower it to her pussy, letting the tip glide through her lips and over her clit. Her eyes remain on me the whole time, and my dick aches as she whimpers.

I’m tempted to see if Sydney likes a little bite of pain with her pleasure, but I’m already hanging on by a thread and so is she. I snatch up the tube I dropped on the bed, coating the length of the anal beads in lube. Then I press it to her puckered hole.

I feel her tense. “Eyes on me, Sydney. Relax, don’t fight it.”

Applying more pressure, I circle her clit with my thumb. I feel the moment she relaxes, letting me in completely as the beads slide in past the first two. I keep up the rubbing of her clit as I ease the beads the rest of the way in.

“Holy shit, Roman,” she groans. Then she says something I wasn’t expecting, although I shouldn’t be too surprised as she’s slowly been letting herself go more. “Fuck me. I...I want you to fuck me, Roman.”

“With fucking pleasure.” Removing my thumb from her clit, I press it to her lips. “Suck,” I order, and she does without so much as a second’s hesitation. As she swirls her tongue around the tip, I drive into her in a single thrust. Her teeth clamp around my thumb, just enough to hurt, as she cries out.

“Fuck yes!” I say, holding still as her warm heat envelopes me. I can feel the anal beads through the wall of her pussy as I begin to fuck her and almost come instantly at the exquisite feeling of being bare inside her.

I hold off as long as possible—long enough for her to come twice, squeezing my cock like a fucking vice, but as she comes down from the last one, I grip her hips and fuck her like my life depends on it.

“Fuck...ing hell!” I roar as I finally let myself come, releasing inside her. Spots flash in my eyes and my mind goes blank momentarily, and just when I think I’m done, I pull the beads from her arse, causing her pussy to clamp down on me as she’s thrown into a third orgasm. My cock pulses inside her, milking the last drops of cum from me.

Sydney’s chest heaves with exertion, a light sheen of sweat glistening on her body, as she fights to keep her eyes open, watching me as I slip out of her. Stepping back, I

marvel at the beautiful sight that greets me; my cum seeping from her swollen pussy.

I lean over her, pressing a kiss to her lips. “That was something.” My words are met with a hum of agreement. I laugh as I push up and head to the bathroom for a cloth to clean her up.

When I return, she has shuffled up the bed and curled onto her side. Her breathing has slowed, and I’d be forgiven for thinking she’s asleep.

With nothing more than a few moans, I clean between her legs, feeling disappointment at washing away my cum, my mark, from her flesh. But I have every intention of repeating this again—as many times as I can.

After cleaning myself up and throwing on some boxers, I sit in the wingback chair and watch her sleep.

And that is where Blake finds me an hour later.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

SYDNEY

My dream drifts away, and I become aware of hushed voices. Blake and Roman. My back is to them, so I keep still, dozing, and listen as they talk.

“What the hell did you do to her? She’s almost comatose,” Blake says with a laugh.

“I assume you’re feeling better now, less of an asshole?”

“Excuse the pun, huh? And to answer your question, yes, I’m feeling fucking chilled as fuck right now, so I hope you aren’t going to sour my mood.”

Roman knows, just as I do, that Blake is about to do exactly that.

Someone sighs, Blake, I think, then the bed dips as he sits. “I went to see Oz. And before you ask, he’s still working on a trace from the call to Syd’s mobile. But he’s been busy.” There’s a pause, and I sense fingertips hovering just above my skin a second before they touch. Blake runs his hand the length of my leg, and I have to fight hard not to give myself away.

“Okay, so what’s he got?”

There’s movement and rustling of clothes, then the mattress lifts before dipping down again. Silence follows and I assume Roman is looking at something Blake has given him.

“Jesus fucking Christ. He’s been following them around the fucking country.”

Another silent pause, and I’m not sure how much longer I can keep this up.

“Breathe, Sydney, before you fucking pass out from lack of oxygen,” Roman says.

I roll my eyes then spin to face them both. “Thank fu—goodness for that,” I say, sitting up a little.

“I think the phrase you were going for is ‘thank fuck’. No need to be shy after you begged me to fuck you little more than an hour ago.”

Blake groans and adjusts his dick inside his jeans. “Do you mind? Some of us missed out and have blue balls right now.”

“Aww, poor baby,” I tease, shocked at how easy it is to be me around these two men. But more sex will have to wait. “Seriously though, what is this about being followed?”

Blake explains to Roman and me everything Oz told him, revealing that while Pa has been thinking he’s the one chasing JC, it’s actually been the other way around. Everywhere we’ve lived, he’s been there too. Picking his victims, watching us and taunting my pa with the possibility of saving these girls.

“We need to speak with Pa,” I state, climbing from the bed. I tell Roman and Blake I’ll meet them outside before nipping to the bathroom. I use the toilet, then look at myself in the mirror as I wash my hands. I look like I just got out of bed, which, if you think about it, I have. I splash some water on my face, run my fingers through my hair and try to look less like I just got screwed until I practically passed out. I spot a small mark on my neck and tilt my head to get a better look.

“Damn it!” I mutter when I realise it’s a love bite. I don’t even remember Roman doing that. I drag my hair over my shoulder, covering it—barely—then dress before heading out. I’m not ready to have a conversation with Pa about my relationship with any man, let alone two. And if it does come up, I promise myself to be open and firm, to stand by my decisions, my choices. Pa hasn’t really got a leg to stand on telling me how to live my life.

I sit in the back as we drive to the hospital, thinking about how we are meant to catch this guy when I don’t even know what he looks like. My thoughts turn to what happens when we do. Based on my conversation with Blake and Roman about what they do for a living, which I still need to find out more about, I have a feeling that taking JC to the cops won’t be on the list of outcomes.

I have no clue how I feel about them killing this man if they catch him. The bible states an ‘eye for an eye’, but realistically, I’m not sure if I’m happy with that. But while it doesn’t necessarily sit well with me, I can see why Roman would want his revenge. Isn’t that why he and Blake came here in the first place, to exact their revenge on my pa.

“Syd, you okay?”

Blake’s voice snaps me out of my own head, and I look up to see him watching me over his shoulder. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just thinking.”

“I know my cock is difficult to forget...” I swat him on the shoulder as he laughs.

We park up and head inside, but when we arrive at the room Pa was in, it’s empty.

“Where is he?” I ask out loud and catch a passing nurse. “Excuse me, where is the man who was in this room, Reverend Amos Kincaid?”

She looks at me then Roman and Blake before settling back on me. “Who are you? Family?”

“Yes, I’m his daughter,” I say, fighting the anxiety over her answer.

She frowns, as if she’s not sure to believe that or not. “He discharged himself early this morning.”

“And you just let him walk out of here?”

She scowls at the accusation in my words. “No, Miss Kincaid, it was against doctors’ orders. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have patients that need me.” She strides off down the corridor, leaving me wondering where the hell Pa went.

“You reckon he’s gone home?” Blake asks.

“Maybe.” But something tells me he won’t be there.

“Let’s go and find him,” Blake says, and I watch as he and Roman share a look. A look that says they think the same as me.

The guys turn to leave, but I enter the room, scanning the empty bed and thanking the lord the room is empty because Pa stupidly discharged himself and not for another reason. Shoving the thought aside, I go the small cabinet beside the bed and open it. It’s empty. I search the rest of the room, but there isn’t a trace of Pa here, or that he was ever here.

“He took all his things,” I say out aloud but more to myself than anyone else.

“Come on, Syd, I’m sure he’s at home,” Blake encourages, coming over and placing a hand on my lower back to guide me from the room.

It's nearly dark by the time we pull up outside Pa's house, and without entering I know he's not here. There are no lights on and no movement inside.

But I go through the motions; retrieving the key from under the porch mat, unlocking the front door and go inside. It's cold and empty. Nobody is here.

I head for the kitchen, switching on lights as I go in case he left a note. "Pa," I call even though I know it's pointless.

"Is there somewhere else he would go?" Roman asks as he steps up behind me.

I shake my head. "No, the only other place is the church, but why would he go back to the place he was..." My words trail off as the answer materialises the same time as Roman speaks.

"Because he's looking for something or someone."

I race from the kitchen and up the stairs.

"Sydney, what are you doing?" Roman says following behind. He catches up with me as I reach Pa's bedroom, grabbing my arm and pulling me back before I can open the door. "Wait," he orders.

I step back, rolling my eyes and shaking my head, because as if there is going to be someone hiding in there.

Roman opens the door slowly, and a sliver of light from the hall grows bigger as the door opens. While the room is cast in shadow, it's clear there's nobody there.

"All safe, officer," I joke, pushing past him and flicking the light switch as I enter. I immediately open the wardrobe, shoving the hanging clothes to the far end and

revealing a small safe in the back wall.

“Do you know the code,” Roman asks, looking over my shoulder.

“It’s been a while since I’ve opened it, but providing Pa hasn’t changed it since, then, yes, I know the code.” But I hesitate because I’m suddenly struck with the realisation that there could be incriminating evidence in there, or more specifically, details about who my pa really is. I mean, I know he’s not who I thought, but to see it there in black and white...

“What are you looking for?” Blake asks as he enters the room, joining Roman and me at the wardrobe.

“I’m not really sure. Maybe something that will help us figure out where he’s gone. Pa is smart, well, he’d have to be to have kept his identity hidden all these years. But he’s also sentimental.”

I shake my arms, loosening them like I’m limbering up to go to battle. An emotional one, not physical. Then I step forward and put in the last code I used to open this safe.

The wait for the click feels like an eternity, but it’s mere seconds. The door pops open, and I swing it open all the way and peer inside.

There are two shelves, one containing paperwork and money, but it’s the top shelf I’m most interested in. Pushed to the very back is a metal box the size of a shoe box. I reach up and drag it forward, the screech of metal scraping against metal fills the silence. As it reaches the edge, I lift it, flicking it up and sliding it forward at the same time.

Strong arms reach over the top of me and pick it up. “I’ve got it,” Roman says, lifting it down and turning to place it on the bed behind us.

What I had hoped would be easy, just got a lot harder as we're faced with a keypad on top of the box, and I have no clue what the code is.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

SYDNEY

I look to the ceiling, quietly praying to God—a God who is probably disgusted with me right now—to help me open this damn box. I try to rationalise what I’ve done with the idea that I can save any other women suffering at the hands of JC. And maybe, just maybe, God will forgive me my transgressions and those of my pa. Either way, I’m not going to walk away. I can’t. If I do, JC is going to keep coming after Pa and me and hurting people.

I look to Roman, who is already watching me, and as I turn to look at Blake, I realise he’s on the phone.

“Oz, get your arse to Kincaid’s house and bring your code breaker.” Pushing the phone back into his pocket, he says, “He’ll be here in fifteen. In the meantime, I’m guessing you don’t have any thoughts on what it might be?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m surprised the safe code was still the same.” I stare at the box. “It’s not like I really know who my pa is anymore.” My words are flat, uncaring, but that’s a far cry from what I truly feel.

What I do know, is whatever is inside that box has to be important. Why else would he have put it in a box only he can open? I walk around the bed and drop down onto it. But I quickly get to my feet. This feels so wrong being in here knowing what I do. This room, this house, feel like strangers. Every memory I’ve ever had in this house feels off, tainted, dishonest.

Needing some air, I go downstairs and step out into the back garden. It's small but neat and tidy. One of the patio chairs has been moved away from the table and faces out to the garden. Pa must have been sat out here recently. The thought sends a pang of sadness through me, and it's quickly joined by anger.

I wrap my arms around myself as I sense someone behind me. Blake's distinct scent envelopes me as his arms join mine, wrapping around me over the top of my own.

"You okay?"

I shake my head, afraid to speak for fear of breaking down.

"You know, and this is not an admission of approval, but Kincaid clearly cares about you." I try to spin around, but his arms tighten. "Hear me out, Syd." I sigh and relax a little. "Good. He's lied and protected himself by not going to the police about JC. But he's also protected you."

I scoff. "Yeah, how's that?"

"What do you think would have happened to you had he gone to the cops when he realised what JC was doing?"

"Well, obviously, dozens of girls would still be alive, but Pa would be in prison. Your point?"

"And you? What would have happened to you if Kincaid had gone to prison when you were just a child?"

My shoulders sag in understanding and a little defeat. "I'd have gone into care, but that's not reason enough to have hidden who he was, who my mother was and certainly not enough to have almost protected JC all these years. By keeping quiet,

he's just as responsible for all those girls' deaths as JC."

Voices drift out from inside the house. Oz must have arrived.

I break Blake's hold on me and spin to face him. Before I can say anything, he kisses me. I'm not sure why, but I get the impression this kiss is to reassure me I'm safe, that even if Pa isn't here to protect me, he and Roman will be. I take it, but I don't give all my hope to it.

No man can truly protect you, no matter how much they wish it. Besides, once this is over, they will return to their lives while I try to piece together my shattered one.

Breaking the kiss, Blake tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "Turn it off, Syd. We aren't going anywhere."

"So you say now. But once this is done, you'll find something prettier and more thrilling to fill your days with, Blake. I know it and so do you. Let's not kid ourselves." I push out of his arms and head inside.

I find Roman and Oz in the kitchen, the black metal box sitting ominously on the table. Roman catches my eyes as I enter, and I know he and Oz heard our conversation. Something in his eyes hints he's not happy with what I said, but I don't care. Not caring seems to be becoming a theme for me lately. And I should be concerned about that, but I'm not.

Turning my attention to Oz, I watch as he gets to work. He attaches a small black hand-held device, similar to a mobile phone, then we wait while it runs through all the possible code scenarios. Thankfully, it's only a four-digit code, narrowing the possibilities from one million for a six-digit code to a mere ten thousand.

Numbers flash across the small device at an incredible speed and within ten minutes,

the box clicks open.

Oz detaches his device and steps back, allowing me to take the space in front of the box. Reaching out, I lay my hands on the top, preparing to open it. With a deep breath and a quick look at Roman and Blake either side of me, who both give me a weak smile and a nod, I lift the lid.

I'm not sure what I expected to find, maybe a Jack-in-a-box laughing hysterically, but it wasn't this.

I was not prepared for this at all. Releasing the lid, which drops back and hits the table with a clunk, I step back, desperately trying to look away from the photo sitting front and centre. But it's impossible to look anywhere but at the woman and man and the child in between them.

This is my mother.

A woman who has been nothing more than a thought inside my head all my life. A question, a dream, a ghost.

My chest squeezes like a vice around my heart, and I can barely take a breath. Something solid meets my back, snapping me from my trance, and I realise I've stepped back into Oz. He grips my arms, holding me steady, as Roman and Blake both reach for me. I want to turn away, to run, to forget ever seeing this. But I'm not a coward. And if I do that, it makes me no better than Pa.

"I-I'm okay," I say, flipping off the hands on me and moving towards the table. Switching off all my thoughts and emotions, which I'll process later, I take the photo out and lay it face down on the table, then I begin removing everything else.

Two birth certificates, a marriage certificate, two passports, a notebook, more photos

and a stack of other papers.

As I remove the final stack of papers, a small velvet box is revealed. I know what I'll find in there. Another truth revealed. All these things bring nothing but questions, and I don't have the strength to look at them. Running from the room, I lock myself in the downstairs toilet.

Sliding down the door, I sit on the floor and cry. They were married, in love, had a child together, and it was all ripped away from them. For the first time since this all began, I finally, truly understand some of what Roman feels about his sister's murder.

It's a chaotic spiral of hurt, grief and righteous fury.

The empty pit in my gut fills with hatred, a need to exact revenge for everything I've lost at the hands of one man.

I swear to God, right here on the floor of Pa's toilet, that I will get justice for all those lost lives and end JC's reign of death and misery even if it's the last thing I do. Sins be damned.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

ROMAN

I watch as Sydney races from the room. “Give her a minute,” I say picking up the notebook and flicking through the pages. It’s filled with notes on locations, dates and even names, some of which match those of the dead women. Blake thumbs through the stack of papers while Oz looks through the photos.

Kincaid’s records are good and will help put the puzzle pieces together, somewhat, at least. Especially, the locations. Putting the notebook aside, I reach for the box and drag it towards me. The small velvet box slides inside, hitting the side, along with something else. I put the ring box, which I’m going to guess contains wedding bands from Kincaid and Sydney’s mother, on the table, then slide my hand around the inside of the box. My hand brushes against something solid, and I pull it out.

A phone.

It’s a fucking phone. The son of a bitch had a way to contact JC all this time.

The old flip phone is switch off, so I turn it on and wait for it to load. When it does, I’m met with a fucking pass code screen.

“Oz,” I say, holding out the phone for him to take. “I’ll be back in a second.” I stalk down the hall to the small downstairs toilet and knock on the door after trying the handle. “Sydney, open the door.”

Her muffled sobs reach me through the door. “J-ju-just give me a minute, please.”

“Not a fucking chance. Open the door. Now,” I demand, hoping that if nothing else, my demand will piss her off enough to come out. Clothes rustle and feet shuffle on the floor, and I imagine her getting to her feet. A second later, the lock clicks, then the door swings open, revealing a red, puffy-faced Sydney.

I smirk at the frustration practically spilling from her. “You can be miserable later. But right now, we need to find your father.”

“Arsehole,” she mutters as I walk back to the kitchen.

The smile on my face grows, and I silently promise to make her pay for it later. When I reach the kitchen with Sydney, Oz has already unlocked the phone and hands it back to me.

I scroll through the messages, noting the dates. There is no pattern to the messages that I can see, and often there are months between JC’s initial message each time and the next one. I bet my fucking arse that each message to Kincaid will co-inside with dates Kincaid has been away.

The battery alert flashes, letting me know it needs charging. I gather everything up and shove it back in the box.

Thanking Oz, I say, “It’s getting late. Let’s go back to the house, so I can charge this. And we can eat while we go through all it all.”

The mood is sombre as we lock up and leave. I know Sydney is struggling, but no good can come from wrapping her in cotton wool.

Back at the house, Blake heads to the kitchen to make food while I take the box to the

living room. I'm not alone as I set the box down on the coffee table. Her footsteps echo in the large room, and I slowly turn to find her right behind me, staring at the box like it's going to leap off the table and attack her.

"I want to hurt him, Roman. I want him to hurt like all those girls, like me, like you do." She looks up at me, tears slashed with pain roll down her cheeks. "Does that make me a bad person?"

I step into her, cupping her face. "Fuck no, Sydney. It makes you human." I can see she doesn't believe me. "Listen to me, you're not a bad person for wanting the bastard to pay for what he did. An eye for an eye, right?"

She shakes her head, refuting me. "Yes, but I've also struggled with that. How can you be a good person if you want to inflict the same misery on someone else no matter what their crime?"

"Again, because you're human. You believe God created you, yes?" She nods, as much as my hold on her face allows. "Right, then if those emotions, those feelings, were wrong, why would he have made it so you can feel them? And don't tell me that's the devil's work, Sydney. Because that's bullshit. They are the things that make us human, inherently so, and synonymous with humanity and humility."

Her tears fall faster now, and I know she's getting it. "You've killed people before, haven't you?"

I'm not sure where she's going with this, but it's a conversation we need to have, whether now is the right time or not. "Yes," I say firmly, making sure she understands I don't regret the things I've done.

Her eyes drop momentarily, and when she raises them again, I sense nerves. "What's it like?"

I hope I do a good enough job of hiding my shock. I kiss her, then step back and sit on the sofa. “You’re not talking about the physicality or mechanics of it, are you?”

“No,” she says, joining me on the sofa as I scrub my hands over my face. “It’s a blot, a stain, on your soul each time you do it. And that stain spreads like a cancer. For some, it takes over them completely, that is the devil at work, wiping out all the goodness inside you. But for others, me and Blake, I like to think, those stains become a way to honour the dead. Not those we’ve killed, because they deserve no honour, but the ones those people hurt. Just like JC.”

“I like that idea,” she whispers as she tucks one leg under herself and turns my way. “Tell me about your family.”

This is definitely not a conversation I want to have, even less than talking about all the people I’ve killed. “What about them?” I ask, unable to hide the bite to my tone.

“Where are they? Do you have any other siblings?”

“They live in Richmond, and I haven’t seen or spoken to them in years. And no, I don’t have any other siblings. Annabel was it.”

“Why? Why don’t you speak to them?”

“Because they don’t approve of my lifestyle, and I’m not talking about how I murder people.” I push to my feet, needing to get away from this conversation.

I pass Blake on the way out, and he grabs my arm, stopping me. “Hey?—”

“I’m good. Just leave it. I’ll be back in a minute.” He lets me go, and I jog upstairs to our room, slamming the door behind me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

BLAKE

I watch as Ro disappears upstairs, then enter the lounge. Syd is sitting on the sofa, staring off into space.

“Hey, dinner won’t be long,” I say as I sit beside her.

“Thanks,” she mumbles without looking at me. “I think Roman is pissed off with me,” she adds, finally facing me.

“What happened?”

“I asked him about his family,” she says with a shrug.

“Yeah, that’s a sore subject. Not your fault though. You weren’t to know.”

“I guess.” She looks at her hands in her lap, twirling her fingers. “So, you cook, huh?”

I sit back, happy for her change of topic. “Don’t sound so surprised. I went to culinary school for a year before I had to leave.”

“What are you making?”

I’m glad she didn’t ask why I left culinary school. Like with Ro’s family, my reasons

for quitting my dream job are a conversation best left to another time. We have more than enough to work through.

“As long as you like pasta, you’ll be fine.” I give her a wink. We sit in silence for a couple of minutes, and I can see her gaze flicking back and forth to the box on the coffee table.

“You don’t need to wait for us if you want to look through it,” I tell her, leaning over and picking up the box. Placing it between us, I flip the lid open. I reach in, pulling out the photos and hold them out to her.

She looks at the photos then to me, holding my gaze.

“Just look through them. I know it hurts, but it might help too.”

She finally takes them, but instead of looking at them, her hand drops back to her lap where it remains.

“Just going to check on dinner,” I say as I get up and leave her to it.

I check on the pasta before heading upstairs to find Ro and check he’s okay. I find him laid out on the bed like a fucking starfish.

“Where is she?” he asks without moving.

“Looking through the photos from the box, well, I left her with them. Whether she does or not is another question.” I climb onto the bed and lay beside him, propped up on my elbow. He cracks an eye open, side-eyeing me. “She thinks she pissed you off.”

“Whatever made her think that,” he deadpans and closes his eye again.

At the risk of actually pissing him off, I push up and swing a leg over so I'm straddling him.

"Don't push it, Blake," he warns.

I drop over the top of him, an arm either side, and say, "Why, what are you going to do about it?" And like a child poking the bear, I roll my hips as I lick the side of his face before leaping off and running downstairs.

"Blake," he roars as he stomps after me.

"Sorry, got to check on the food," I call back. Passing the lounge, Syd looks up wearing a frown, but I don't stop, though I'm happy to see she has been going through the photos.

Roman doesn't follow me to the kitchen, and my guess is he stopped to talk to Syd, so I dish dinner up, then carry it through to them.

"Careful, the bowl is hot," I say as I pass Syd hers along with a fork.

"Thanks." She takes it and tucks right in. A second later a groan of pleasure comes from her, causing Ro and me to stop and look at her. "Wow, Blake this is delicious," she says, stabbing another forkful, then looking up to find the pair of us watching her. Tilting her head, she smiles and says, "This is another dirty fries moment, right?"

I laugh as Ro looks on bemused. "Yeah, it is. Watch those noises, Syd, unless you want to become the meal."

"Oh," is all she manages to say.

It pleases me to see that despite the dark cloud of revelations and her missing father

she can still appreciate a little humour. With a sprinkle of burning desire for good measure.

After that we eat in silence, and I see Ro found a charger for Kincaid's phone. Once we have finished, I clear the bowls and bring back beers for me and Ro and a coke for Syd.

When I hold it out to her, she raises a brow. "You want me to swap it?"

"No, it's fine. Probably not a good idea for me to drink anyway." She opens it and takes a mouthful. "Did you find anything we can use to locate JC on the phone," she asks,

"Nothing yet, but Oz will be round in the morning to see if he can trace the messages," Ro tells her, although he doesn't sound enthusiastic.

She rummages around in the box until she finds what she's looking for. "So, it seems my name isn't even Sydney. It's Summer." She leans over and hands the pieces of paper to Roman along with a passport. "The top one is a copy of the birth certificate I have with the name Sydney and is the one I used to get a driving licence. I didn't even know I had a passport. Just another damn secret."

Roman passes the documents to me, and I note the quality of the counterfeit certificate. The passport is the same, but the surname is different. "This is his backup plan, Syd."

"What do you mean," she asks as I give the documents back to her.

"Kincaid was smart and made sure that if he was ever discovered as Warren Burns, you'd have a way to leave the country."

"And that's meant to make all this better? It's okay, Sydney, your whole existence is

a fucking lie, but here's another lie so you can avoid being discovered."

Ro leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and looks up at her. "He was, still is, trying to protect you."

"I bet it hurt getting those words out," she bites back flippantly. She sighs, tossing the documents back into the box. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. It's just... I don't even know what it is." She flops back against the sofa, looking tired.

"Look, it's getting late, and emotions are high. We can't do anymore tonight," I say, hoping to relieve some of the tension.

Syd picks up a couple of photos she had separated from the pile and passes them to me. "I found these. That's Pa and I think the other guy is JC. I doubt they are much use as he probably looks nothing like that now." She places the box back on the table as she stands. "I'm going to bed. Thanks for dinner, and again, I'm sorry for snapping, Roman. Night."

I wait until I hear Syd close her door, then I say, "Where do you think Kincaid is?"

"Fuck knows. The guy seems to have vanished. I had Oz swing by the church on his way home, but there was no sign of him." He pauses, seeming to consider his next words. "Honestly, I think he knows where JC is, or JC found him. Considering the state he left him in, the hospital is the only place he could have been."

"Yeah, I'm still not sure why JC didn't finish him off. Leaving him alive is a risk."

"Not really. Think about it, Kincaid has been keeping his secret for years, why would he give JC up now? It's all part of the sick fucker's game."

Makes sense that Kincaid's attack would bring questions possibly from the police,

but especially from Syd. Maybe that was his plan all along. I don't want to think about how much that plan aligns with our original one. Hurting Sydney to get to her father is a big fuck no now.

Before following Ro up to bed, I send a message to Oz telling him to find this son of a bitch.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

SYDNEY

I wake early the next morning and find Blake in the kitchen when I come downstairs.

“Hey, how did you sleep?” he asks, grabbing another cup from the cupboard.

“Okay.” I take a seat at the table. “Where’s Roman?”

“Taking a shower,” he says as he places a cup of tea down in front of me. “You want some breakfast?”

I shake my head. “No, I’m good. Thanks for this,” I say, nodding to my tea. I stare out the sliding doors into the garden, which is covered in a light early morning mist, and try to work out what’s bothering me—well, aside from Pa being missing and being on JC’s hit list.

“Where are those photos I gave you last night, the ones of the guy we think is JC?”

“I’ll grab them.” He disappears for a moment, then comes back carrying the photos and the box. He hands me the pictures and places the box on the table. “What do you want them for? Did you remember something?”

Grabbing his tea, he comes and joins me as I look over the photos again.

“I don’t know... There’s something about this guy, like I’ve seen him before.” I bring

one particular photo closer. It's of Pa and just JC, but it's cleaner than the others. I scan it carefully, looking for anything I might recognise. "I don't know," I mutter, throwing them back to the table as Roman enters the room.

I watch as a half-naked Roman picks up his coffee, walks towards Blake, tilts his chin up and kisses him. I squirm on my chair at the sight and squeeze my thighs together as Roman's tongue tangles with Blake's. I look away because now isn't the time to be thinking about sex. Seconds later, a hand in my hair startles me as my head is forcibly turned and Roman's lips land on mine.

I can taste toothpaste as his tongue slips inside my mouth along with the scent of two very different aftershaves. When he breaks the kiss a second later, I'm left in a daze.

Blake laughs, and before I can gather myself, he leans over and kisses me too. My head spins, and I'm not sure I'm even on this planet anymore. This whole experience is surreal.

"What are you doing with those?" Roman asks, pointing at the photos I discarded.

"Oh, I was sure this guy is familiar, but I don't know." I look at the haphazard photos splayed out before me, but I still can't grasp what is bothering me.

Roman and Blake chat around me as I drink my tea, lost in my thoughts. But when I hear Roman talking about a guy who came to the church to see Pa, a light bulb goes off in my head.

"That's it!" I exclaim. They both look at me. "I was at Pa's, and after I left, I watched a guy knock on Pa's door. I didn't get a good look at him, but he was wearing a baseball cap just like this one," I say, stabbing a finger at the photo of Pa, the guy we think is JC and another guy.

“And you’ve never seen this guy before?” Roman asks, picking up the photo.

“No. Pa doesn’t have a lot of friends, and certainly none that visit the house.”

And as if his timing couldn’t be more appropriate, Oz walks into the room. He’s carrying a laptop and a bag, which looks heavy.

“Morning.” He pauses. “Why do I get the feeling you guys were talking about me?” he asks, stepping slowly towards us and placing his bag on the floor and the laptop on the table.

“We weren’t, but your timing couldn’t have been better. I’ll make you a coffee while you get set up. In here or the office?”

“The office is probably better suited.” Oz picks up the laptop, and Roman grabs the bag.

“Sydney, bring the box and photos. Blake, you grab the phone on your way through,” he orders.

Doing as he says, I collect the box, photos and my tea and follow them to the office. Oz begins setting up his equipment with Roman’s help. When Blake joins us, carrying a coffee for Oz, Roman hands the photo of the man I saw at Pa’s house.

“Run this through the facial recognition software first, then while we wait for that, you can get started on tracking JC’s burner.”

I watch completely stunned and feeling like I stepped into some crime movie as Oz begins running the image through facial recognition. Faces flash across the screen at a rapid pace, and the longer I watch, I begin to catch the markers the software uses to determine a likeness.

Before running a trace on the phone, Oz hands out several sheets to us all. “The top page lists every place, that we know about, where Sydney and Kincaid have lived the last eighteen years. The second page is the same list and beside each place are the names of known and possible murders of women during the time they lived there. The last page is a scaled down map, showing Sydney and Kincaid’s location along with a pin for each murder.”

I scan over the two first pages, but when I reach the third, the true scale is visible.

“Oh my god, are you sure about all these deaths?” I ask the room.

My question is met with a resounding and sullen yes. Oz proceeds to explain his pin colour code; green for known cases, yellow are unconfirmed but highly probable and the red pins represent possible matches.

Some of these names I recognise from news reports, but there was never any suggestion they were connected. With the different MO and locations, plus the large gap between deaths, the police were never going to connect the dots.

There’s a ping from the screen with the facial recognition, and we all stop, then move to look at the screen. There’s an image of a guy wearing a baseball cap, the logo matches that of the one on the cap in the older photo.

Robert Richards, a year younger than Pa, and he lives fifteen minutes from here.

“And it seems our guy works for the passport office. Explains how Kincaid got his hands on good quality counterfeit passports,” Oz says, clicking through details on the screen.

Blake and Roman share a look, and I know what they’re going to say, so I make a pre-emptive strike.

“I’m coming with you,” I state, looking at each of them and waiting for one of them, or both, to refuse. “What, no arguments?”

“Short of tying you up, we can’t stop you,” Roman says, which is a surprise as I thought he’d be the most likely to contest me coming. With two fingers, in a come-hither motion, Roman gestures for me to follow him.

I’m ashamed to admit the hand gesture reminded me of his finger in my...and my cheeks redden. I pass him, and he steps in alongside me, our shoulders rubbing together.

“You look a little red there, Sydney. You okay?” he asks.

I look at him from the corner of my eye to see him smirking. “You’re not funny, and this isn’t the time.”

He holds up his hands in surrender. “It’s not me with the filthy mind.” He strides past me, quickly glancing back at me over his shoulder with a wink.

“Where are we going?” I ask as we enter a side of the gigantic manor house I’ve not been to yet.

“You’ll see. But keep an open mind, Sydney,” he says, his tone serious.

We stop at a door with a biometric keypad, and Roman places his hand on the scanner. A couple of seconds pass before it flashes green, and an automated voice confirms his name. The door whooshes open, revealing a staircase.

Lights switch on as we enter, and I nervously follow Roman down. There’s a momentary worry that I am in fact being taken to a room to be tied up and left here while they go and see Robert, but it vanishes the second we reach the bottom.

Guns, knives and weapons I have no clue what they are line the walls. There are shelves housing ammo and cabinets with vests and belts. This place is like an armoury

No, not like. It is.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

ROMAN

I move into her line of vision, and with a finger under her chin, I close her mouth. Adjusting my hand, I grip her chin and kiss her.

Her eyes are closed when I pull back, and she slowly opens them. “What in the world, Roman?”

I know I’ve been a bastard to her about divulging what Blake and I do, but there is a reason. “Look, I know you’re confused, and I know you have questions?—”

“Many questions,” she says, interrupting me, and her brows furrow as her eyes look past me.

I give her chin a little shake, bringing her attention back to, then I nod. “Fine. I promise to answer them. But...after we find your father and JC is dealt with. Can you wait? Can you trust that Blake and I aren’t a threat to you, that what we do isn’t as bad as it looks, as bad as you think?”

Her eyes search mine, looking for something to convince her my words are true and she can trust them. There’s fear, confusion but also curiosity.

“Okay,” she says, and it’s almost a whisper.

“Okay?” I repeat, questioning the validity of her acquiescence.

“Okay, I can wait. Okay, I trust you both. And okay, I’ll keep an open mind.” She sighs. “I know you think I see the world in black and white, Roman, but I don’t. What Pa has done goes against God, but I wouldn’t be who I am today if he hadn’t. I’m prepared to look past the surface and see the depths below.”

“Fuck me,” I say.

“As much as the idea appeals to me, now isn’t the time,” she says, reaching up to kiss me quick. “Come on, let’s go see Robert, and hopefully, he’ll know where Pa is.”

I release her and step back. As I turn around, I adjust myself. She’s right, now isn’t the time. But I make another promise, a silent vow, to fuck her into oblivion later.

I grab two small handguns, bullet proof vests and a couple of weapons belts. Putting one of the belts on, I load it with ammo and a blade, plus two throwing knives. I lay the same on the table for Blake. Sydney watches me silently for a while before she moves around the room, inspecting the array of weapons.

“Sydney, come here,” I call to her once I’ve collected everything we’ll need.

She walks over and stops in front of me, scanning me from head to toe. I see the approval and lust in her eyes. She likes this. Not what I was expecting, and I doubt she did either. But it pleases me while easing some of my concern over what comes next. But her next words seal the deal.

“Brings a whole new meaning to dressed to kill, huh?” As soon as the words leave her, she slaps a hand over her mouth and her eyes grow wide.

I laugh and pull her hand from her face. “Nice, and yes, it does.”

She’s shaking her head, trying to deny the words came from her. “Oh, Lord, have

mercy on me,” she pleads.

Footsteps come from the stairs, and a second later, Blake appears.

“We ready to roll?” he asks, taking in my smiling face and Sydney’s bright red one.
“What’d I miss?”

“Sydney’s cracking jokes,” I tell him with a raised brow, knowing he’ll be as pleased and surprised as me at how well she’s taking this.

“Let me guess, dressed to kill?”

“How did you know that?” she asks around a laugh.

“Because I said the same to him the first time I saw him all kitted out. It’s hot, right?”

She shuffles awkwardly, folding her arms as her face flushes even more and nods. Blake steps to the table, pulling on his vest and attaching his belt as I put the smallest vest I could find on Sydney.

Once we are done, we head back upstairs to where Oz is waiting for us. He tosses a burner phone to me and one to Blake.

“Just in case,” he says. “I did a trace on Kincaid’s cell again, but it’s still off. And I’ve still got nothing on the other phone, but I’ll let you know if anything pops up.”

“Thanks, man,” Blake says, tucking the burner into a chest pocket on his vest.

We head to the garage, and I collect the keys for the black BMW. It’s one we use for jobs like this. Basic and less conspicuous. The plates are fake and are switched out after each use so the cops can’t trace it. I open the boot and pull out three plain black

jumpers.

“Put this on,” I tell Sydney as I hand her one as Blake and I do the same.

Fifteen minutes later, we pull up outside Robert’s address. It’s a small semi-detached house in a relatively good neighbourhood. There’s a car parked on the drive, but it looks like it hasn’t moved in a while. At this time of day most people will be at work, so we should avoid any curtain twitchers.

Turning in my seat, I face Sydney. “You stay behind me, and do as we say, understand?” She nods. “I mean it, Sydney. We have no idea what’s inside or whether he’s friend or foe.”

“I got it, Roman. Stay behind you and be a good girl,” she says sarcastically.

Blake sniggers, and I send him a glare before getting out of the car.

The minute we reach the slightly open door, I know something isn’t right. I look at Blake behind me and signal to him.

“Robert?” I call as I push the door open further. Stepping inside, I draw my gun, and peer down the dingy hall. There are stairs to the left of me and single door on the right. “Robert,” I call again as I signal to Blake to check the room on the right. I hold a hand out behind me, seeking Sydney, and she grips my fingers for a moment before letting go. “Stay close,” I whisper.

“Empty,” comes Blake’s voice behind me, and I keep moving down the hall.

All the doors are open except the end one, which I’m guessing is the kitchen after checking each of the others I pass.

I call out again, and this time a muffled groan comes back. I listen at the door for a moment, long enough for Sydney to get impatient.

“What are you waiting for? He’s in there, Roman.”

“Yes, but I don’t know what the fuck is on the other side of this door,” I grit out between clenched teeth.

Blake pulls her back. “It could be a trap. Just give him a minute.”

With only muffled cries coming from inside, I slowly lower the handle. Opening the door a crack, I stop and wait again for any sound. Pushing it a little further open, I peer through the gap, but the angle only allows me to see a back door and not much else.

The cries coming from inside grow louder, and it sounds like he’s fighting against something. Another couple of inches and the corner of a table comes into view. Stepping back, I rest my toes against the bottom of the door, then I silently count to three before pushing my foot down and swinging the door open all the way.

In the time it takes for me to realise what I’m looking at, a clock chimes, drawing my attention. Lifting my eyes, I find a timer on the wall behind the table as it begins to count down five minutes.

A gasp comes from behind me as Sydney steps forward. “Oh my god!” she exclaims, attempting to push past me. “You have to free him. Roman, Blake, do something.”

I wish I could, but there is no way to stop what’s coming. All we can do is try to get as much information from him as possible before the timer runs down.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

SYDNEY

I tug on Roman's arm. "Did you hear me? Do something." He just looks at me, then he walks toward the man strapped to the kitchen table.

Robert's legs hang over the end of the table, each ankle tied to a table leg, and his torso is held down with straps, ones you usually see on lorry. None of that is why I'm struggling not to empty my stomach. No, it's the contraption over him—the guillotine waiting to fall once the timer on the wall reaches zero.

I hold my breath as Roman reaches over and carefully removes the gag from Robert's mouth.

"Please help me. You need to stop it. I don't want to die," Robert begs, tilting his head back to try and look at us.

"Robert, right?" Roman asks as he shifts to the side, bending to look under the table.

"Yes, but please just get me off here."

"I need you to keep calm, Robert. Can you do that?" Roman asks.

"How the fuck am I supposed to keep calm when I'm about to lose my head, literally. Just get me off here!"

I step forward, but Blake stops me going too far. “Robert, hey. I’m Syd?—”

“Sydney! Thank god. You can help me.”

I watch as Roman creeps around the table and decide it would be best to keep Robert talking while we try to figure out a way to rescue him.

“We’re going to try, but...do you know who did this?”

“Course I fucking do. Only JC would be sick enough to set this shit up.” He stretches, straining to see me, but his head drops back to the table with a thud.

“Where’s Pa? Do you know?” I ask, and I’m thankful Blake as his arm wrapped around me.

“Ro,” Blake says suddenly.

I look to Roman who has reached the end of the table, and it takes me a second to realise why Blake called out to him. Running from the timer on the wall, which is encased in a clear sealed box, to the top of the guillotine is a rope, but as the next minute ticks by, a small blade slices through one thread and the guillotine drops an inch.

Four minutes.

“Oh my god,” I cry, covering my mouth with my hands. Shock takes a back seat as I realise how little time I have to find out where JC and Pa are. “Robert, do you know where Pa and JC are? If you do, you need to tell me. Please.”

“Free me, and I’ll tell you what I know,” he says.

Blake snarls beside me. “Fuck you. Tell us what you know.”

Blake’s words seem harsh for a man about to die, but the reality is this man knows something and is trying to bargain with it for his life. I have no doubt Robert knows he’s not getting out of this alive, yet he’s still prepared to risk saving Pa to save his own skin. Is that an example of a desperate man or the true nature of the man?

“If I tell you, you’re just going to leave me to die,” Robert argues.

“You’re going to die either way. JC made sure of that,” Roman replies from the other end of the table.

Robert huffs and thrashes about as much as the restraints allow before becoming completely still. He raises his head as another minute ticks past, another thread is severed.

Three minutes.

“I don’t know where they are only that JC has Amos. He told me you’d come looking and to tell you he’d be in touch.”

After all that, the information is worthless. Had we never discovered Robert we would still be in the same position.

“How long have you known Kincaid was alive?” Roman asks, making his way back toward us.

“Since the start. I helped him change his name and get new documents for him and later for Sydney. I told him to leave the country, but he refused, and at the time I wasn’t working at the passport office.”

“And JC, how long have you and Kincaid known he was alive?”

“After Cathy’s murder, Amos came to me with you, Sydney. Cathy and his daughter were the reason he wouldn’t leave the country. I got him a fake birth certificate, changing Summer to Sydney, and I had friend who was able to wipe Amos and any connection to Cathy from existence. But he knew to be careful never to gain the interest of the cops and have them dig too deep. It’s why he became a reverend. Said maybe God would forgive him and protect Sydney. Then when JC contacted him, taunting him with the possibility of saving the girls, Amos was determined to stop him.”

“Cathy was JC’s first victim?” Blake asks, wrapping his arms around me. I appreciate the comfort because this whole conversation while a guillotine hangs like a silent spectre over Robert is so damn hard.

“No, there was another.” He pauses, raising his head to look at the timer as another minute passes.

Two minutes.

Then he continues, “JC had a sister, a couple of years younger than him, called Charlotte.”

“No,” I whisper, and Blake squeezes me a little tighter.

“Charlotte and Amos, then Warren, had been seeing each other in secret, but when JC found out, he... The cops questioned Amos after JC told them that Amos and Charlotte had argued that night and Amos killed Charlotte in a fit of rage when she broke things off with him.”

One minute thirty seconds.

Robert fights, hopelessly, for a couple of seconds, then defeated, he stills again. “The cops had nothing concrete, and before they had a chance to really make the case, Amos and JC were killed in a car crash.”

One minute.

“All he ever wanted was to protect you, Sydney. He came to me a few years ago and asked me to get you a passport under a new name so if anything happened, you could start afresh.”

Thirty seconds.

“Tell him I’m sorry.”

Twenty seconds.

“Blake, get her out of here. Now!” Roman shouts.

Ten seconds.

Blake spins me, pushing me toward the door, and as Roman joins us in the hall, there’s a rattle as the guillotine slices through the air, ending with a loud thud as it meets the wood. My hands cover my ears as a reflex, as if I can eliminate the sound from my memory.

But I’ll never be able to forget that sound.

“Don’t touch anything. Let’s get out of here,” Roman states as we move toward the front door.

Blake has to support me as I begin to sob into his shoulder.

I don't remember getting into the car, the drive home, or being carried to my room, stripped down then laid on a bed.

My next memory is horror when there's a loud thud, and I scream as a severed head rolls across the floor, stopping at my feet. Blank, soulless eyes stare up at me.

"Hey, hey, you're okay. You're safe, Sydney." Arms wrap around me as I open my eyes to find Roman holding me.

"Oh my god...his h-head. I saw it, Roman. I-I saw his eyes just staring at me," I sob, gripping his top, tugging on it like it will save me. But there is nothing that will ever be able to rid the image from my memory.

I'm not sure how long he holds me, but by the time my heaving sobs begin to subside, a headache throbs in its place. I curl into the warm body holding me and fall back to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

BLAKE

I slip into the room and see Syd curled into Ro's large frame. It's five in the morning, and I know Ro will be awake and wanting to get a head start on any new info from Oz.

"Hey," I say as I reach his side. "Go shower. I'll take over so she can sleep a little longer."

"She's been restless for the last half hour, but no more nightmares," he tells me as he gently untangles himself from her. Once standing, he kisses me. "Thanks. See you in a bit."

He leaves, pulling the door to behind him. Syd shifts positions, her hand reaching out across the now empty bed. I quickly lift her hand and slide in beside her.

"Shh, it's okay," I soothe, brushing her hair back from her face. "It's just me. Go back to sleep."

She settles, but I know she's not asleep, her breathing is too fast and deep.

"Blake?" she questions.

"Yeah, it's me."

“Where’s Roman?” she asks, rolling over and tucking herself in the curve of my body.

“He was here before but had something he needed to do.” I ignore the feeling of her arse resting against my cock, which is slowly stirring behind my boxers. She relaxes, and I think she might actually fall back to sleep.

She shifts again, and this time it’s followed by a low groan.

“Syd,” I say, an edge of warning to my tone.

“Hmmm?” She rolls her hips into me.

“Keep still,” I say, gripping her hip to stop her.

“I don’t think I will,” she tells me, humour lacing her words.

This woman amazes me more every day. When I first met her, she was quiet and submissive in character, but it was hiding the real her; someone strong, resilient and sexually confident despite her lack of experience.

“Touch me, Blake. I need to feel alive. To remember I’m still here...that I’m worthy and...”

“Loved, Syd. You’re loved and worthy and here and alive. And Ro and I are going to do everything we can to make sure you stay that way.” She tenses at my words, and if I had to guess, it’s because in an awkward as fuck and roundabout way I just told her I love her—we love her. Then I allow my mind to have unfettered reign over my body. Starting with my hands as they explore her and my lips as they kiss her neck.

She yields to me, exposing her neck in a show of trust and willingness, then opening

her legs as my hand slips beneath her knickers, finding her pussy, already soaked before I've barely touched her.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Syd, you're so wet."

"I know," she murmurs as she arches her hips, seeking more from me. "You do this to me. You and Roman. No man has ever had this effect on me."

I growl at the idea of another man touching her, especially her ex. Wanker. "Fuck no. No man will ever lay a hand on you again."

She giggles, thrusting her hips as my fingers part her folds and find that sweet bundle of nerves, guaranteed to send her wild. I tap against it with the tip of a finger a couple of times and feel as her thighs tense, attempting to close and trap my hand.

"Nah-huh. Keep them legs open, Syd."

"Or you'll deny me like Roman?" she asks on a breathy moan.

"No, edging is his area of specialty. Mine, on the other hand, is to make you come so many times, you'll forget your own name." And to prove my worth, I circle her clit, increasing my pace, building her up, until her body shakes, and she cries out as she shatters. As she comes down, I drive two fingers into her still convulsing pussy, which instantly grips my fingers and squeezes around them, practically begging for more.

"That's it, Syd, give me all your pleasure." And then I build her up again, pumping in and out as the heel of my hand slams against her sensitive clit.

"Blake...fuck, I'm going to..." Her words trail off as I curl my fingers inside her, hitting her G-spot, and sending her over the edge again.

I pull my fingers free and have her on her back, legs spread wide as I settle between them before she's caught her breath.

"Now, you're going to come on my tongue while I fuck you with my fingers again." I trail my fingers through her slit again, dipping in to coat my fingers thoroughly, before circling her arsehole. She gasps at my touch there, but I know Ro already started training her so she'll be able to take us both. I lower my head and lick the length of her slit as I ease a finger into her tight, puckered hole.

Her back arches, forcing my finger further inside her. "Easy," I say as I suck her clit into my mouth.

"Argh!" she cries out, and I add another finger to her arse.

As soon as I'm fully inside her, I scissor my fingers, stretching her.

God, I can't wait to sink my cock inside her tight little arse.

She writhes as I eat her pussy and fuck her arse with my fingers, and within minutes she's screaming out as a third orgasm thunders through her.

She breathless, panting and looks fucking beautiful as she lays there, wide open, pussy glistening with her juices and my saliva. I pull my fingers free slowly, and she raises her head to look at me.

I rest back on my heels and slip my boxers down, freeing my cock, which is slick with precum. Gripping my cock, my hips automatically thrust forward, looking for relief.

"Blake," she pleads, and I drop over her, taking a pebbled nipple into my mouth while I continue to fist my cock, rubbing the leaking head against her gaping

entrance.

Releasing her nipple with a pop, I switch to the other one, laving, biting and sucking it until Syd grips my hair and tugs me away.

“Now, Blake. I want to feel you inside me,” she whispers against my lips before kissing me.

“Fuck me, you’re perfect,” I tell her a second before thrusting forward and driving inside her in one motion.

Holy...argh!” she cries out as I stutter out a breath at the exquisite pleasure running the length of my spine.

I begin to move and break the kiss so I can change position, needing to be deeper inside her. I pull her up with me as I rest back on my heels, so she’s straddling me.

“Ride me, Syd. Fuck me hard,” I demand.

She wraps her arms around my neck, using my shoulders for leverage as she begins to ride me, her tits bouncing between us. Her nails dig into my skin as she nears another orgasm, and my cock swells inside her, rubbing perfectly against the walls of her pussy as she contracts around me.

“Yes, yes...fuck yes!” she pants out, and her rhythm falters as she explodes, milking my cock and pushing me over the edge with her.

I lay her back down, hovering over her to kiss her before slowly pulling out of her. I hop off the bed and grab a cloth to clean her up. I’ve just finished cleaning her up and she’s just pulling on a T-shirt as the door opens.

Ro stands there a moment, rightly assuming what we've been doing as a smirk curls up the corner of his mouth. Then he turns serious.

“You need to see this,” he says, then turns and strides away.

CHAPTER FORTY

SYDNEY

My sex high deflates faster than a burst balloon at Roman's words, and I hurry around the room looking for some bottoms to put on.

Spinning around, Blake stands there holding a pair of shorts. When I go to take them, he pulls them out of my reach.

"Blake," I warn, not in the mood for games now.

"Hey, breathe, Syd. You'll be no good to anyone if you panic," he says, then holds out the shorts for me to take.

Despite my initial jolt of anger at him telling me not to panic, I do as he suggested and take a breath. Quietly berating myself for succumbing to my desires while others suffer.

"Thanks," I say, then we head after Roman.

When we get downstairs, Oz is in the kitchen with Roman.

"What's happened? Is it Pa?" I blurt out, panic rising again.

"Where's your phone?" Roman asks.

“Er, I...think it’s in my room. Why?”

“Your father’s phone pinged an hour ago.” He holds a hand up as I open my mouth to speak. “It was only for a few minutes before it blinked out again.”

I’m running up the stairs before he’s even finished talking. The floor is littered with the clothes I was wearing last night, and I search for the vest. I find it and pull out my phone from the pocket.

There’s a message. From Pa.

I stare at it like it’s a bomb.

I hear Roman calling my name and snapping me from my daze. When I get back downstairs, all three of them are watching me as I approach holding the offending phone like a fragile China doll.

“There’s a message...from Pa,” I say nervously.

Blake steps forward. “What does it say, Syd?”

I shake my head, looking up and meeting his eyes. “I don’t know. I’m scared to open it.”

He holds his hand out. “May I?”

I nod as I pass it to him, holding my breath as he opens the message. His brow furrows a little as he reads, and it only heightens my anxiety.

“What is it? What does it say?” I ask, firing questions at him while shifting from foot to foot.

“It’s an address,” Blake says, meeting my eyes. He turns the phone so I can see it.
“Do you recognise it?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Blake passes the phone to Roman. “That what I think it is?”

I’m confused. What does he think it is?

“Yeah. Oz?” He looks to Oz for confirmation, but I’m still unsure of the relevance of the address.

Oz gives an almost imperceptible nod of his head.

“What is it? Is someone going to tell me what the hell is going on?” I demand, anger and anxiety mixing in a lethal combination.

“That is JC’s childhood home, Sydney,” Roman tells me. “That’s where they are.”

“Back to where it all began,” I whisper. This is JC’s big finale. He’s already got Pa, and now he’s drawing the rest of us there so he can eliminate everyone who knows who he is, his true identity. “You know this is a trap, right? He’s planning to kill us just like he did to Robert and Cress... Hold on, he killed Robert to tie up loose ends, but why kill Cress? Did he pick her because she was my friend, opportunity, or did she know something she shouldn’t have?”

“It doesn’t really matter why, Syd,” Blake says. “What matters is we know where he is, where your father is, and we know he’s going to be expecting us.”

I’m suddenly struck with an incredible wave of grief as I realise I’m most likely the reason Cressida is dead. And I could be responsible for the deaths of these two men

within the next twenty-four hours, plus myself.

“Okay, JC’s house is a good three hours drive away, so if we want to get there before nightfall and scope the place out, we need to leave within the hour,” Roman says.

“Come on,” Blake says, gesturing for me to follow him.

I do, but on autopilot. Just like when I shower, dress and pack a small rucksack Blake loans me. It’s like my mind is wiped every five minutes, and I’m thrown back to Roman telling me we have to go back to JC and Pa’s town.

When I arrive back downstairs, I find Oz and Roman in the kitchen, heads huddled together and deep in a hushed conversation. I clear my throat to announce my presence and walk over, dropping my bag to the floor. The woman I saw when I first arrived is here too. She’s quietly packing food and drink, like we are going on a day trip and not travelling to take down a serial killer, while ignoring our presence all together. She’s much better at pretending to be invisible than I am.

There’s a clatter in the hall seconds before Blake appears in the kitchen. “Syd, give me hand loading the car.”

I grab my bag and follow him to the hall, casting a quick glance back to Roman and Oz. “Wow, what is all this?” I ask Blake when I see several bags by the front door.

“Supplies,” he says, picking up two of the bags and throwing them over his shoulder. He points to the final bag. “Grab that one, please.”

I do as he asked and follow him out to the garage. I’m a little thrown by his serious attitude.

“You okay?” I ask, dropping the bag next to the other two beside a Land Rover.

“Fine.”

That’s it. Fine .

“Did I miss something because you don’t seem fine?” I ask, leaning against the side of the car while Blake loads the bags into the boot.

Shoving the last bag inside, he closes the boot, then turns to me. His eyes trace a path over my body, which is immediately reminded of earlier, before settling on my face.

“You should stay here,” he says, dropping his gaze.

“Excuse me?” I lower my head, trying to look into his eyes. “You’re joking, right?” He steps forward to take my rucksack, but I step out of his reach. “If you’re going to tell me not to come, Blake, at least have the balls to look at me when you do,” I grit out.

His head snaps up, pinning me under an intense stare. “Okay. I don’t think you should come.”

His words hit me a second time, and the force behind them... I laugh. “Because the sweet little church girl can’t handle it, right?”

“What the fuck? No,” Blake exclaims, stepping forward and grabbing my arms to stop me backing away. “That is not what this is. Not at all.” He blows out a breath.

A breath ghosts over my ear a second before someone—Roman—says, “I’m inclined to agree with him, but short of tying you up, which I prefer to keep for in the bedroom, and arseholes, you’re coming. If JC fucking touches you, hurts you, I’ll gladly return the pain. Now get in the car, Sydney. And you, Blake.” He kisses my neck before moving around to the driver’s side and getting in.

Before I can move, Blake grabs my face and kisses me. I sense he's pouring all his feelings into this kiss, letting me know his words were from a place of love and protection and not meant to hurt.

Without another word, he gets in the passenger side, leaving me to climb into the back. As we pull out of the drive, I watch Oz leave in the opposite direction.

“Where's Oz going?”

“He's not coming,” Roman states bluntly, but based on their little chat earlier, I interpret his unsaid words. Oz is staying behind to ensure no matter what happens to us, JC will be dealt with.

The thought leaves me unsettled about what lies ahead.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

ROMAN

Getting out of London at this time of day isn't too bad, but an accident on the M6 just past Birmingham delays us. The tension in the car is already at a high and this just adds to it.

"How much fucking longer!" Blake grumbles beside me.

"Not long. We'll stop at the next services."

"Good. I need some air," he states, slanting a glance to Sydney in the back.

I know he's not happy about letting her come with us, but there was no other choice. And I don't trust JC. After his stunt at Robert's house, he's a lot smarter and more resourceful than we gave him credit for. I wouldn't put it past the cunt to ensure he gets Sydney anyway he can.

And that's not fucking happening.

The traffic begins to move at a pace faster than a snail, and I hope we are nearing the other side. With one lane closed, the traffic has to merge, and like always there's one dickhead who waits till the last minute, causing even more of a jam. The hoot of a horn blares up ahead, and I rest an elbow on the door, dropping my head into my hand.

Twenty minutes later, we pull into the services. The second I park, Blake is out of the car and heading for the entrance. I sigh and unbuckle my seatbelt.

“Come on, let’s go,” I say, opening my door and expecting Sydney to do the same. When she doesn’t move, I look over the headrest at her. “Sydney?”

“I’ll wait here,” she says quietly.

“The hell you will.” I get out, slamming my door closed and open hers. I take a steadying breath before crouching in the open door. “Why are you so pissed at him? It’s not like I didn’t agree with him about bringing you along.”

“Oh, I see, it’s bringing me along now. What, like a suitcase you take on holiday?” She scoffs and turns away.

“Not what either of us meant, and you know it.” I run a hand over my face. “Look, you want to be mad, fine. But you think we can do it after we’ve rescued your father and gotten rid of JC?”

Her shoulders sag as she releases a long, slow breath and finally turns back to me. “I get why you think I shouldn’t be here, that I’m not tough enough...too sheltered, but while Pa might not be perfect, he did teach me how to defend my?—”

“Against murderers?” I snap, interrupting her.

“No, Roman. Against anyone who tries to hurt me, including rapists. You seem to be under the impression I don’t know all the bad in the world, but you’re wrong again. It’d be hard not to nowadays.” She pauses and frowns. “I wasn’t blind to it, just naive and believed God would make things better.” She huffs out a disbelieving laugh.

“Yeah, I believed my parents would accept me, accept my sexuality, because their

precious God made me that way, right? But I was wrong. And after Annabel died, it was clear they blamed me. Said it was God punishing us for my choices.”

I see the same doubt in her eyes, but then she shakes it off. “I’ve always thought that if something bad happened in my life it was because I displeased God. Like with my ex?—”

I growl. “Paul was a fucking cunt!”

She gasps, then laughs. “Why am I not surprised you know about him. And I agree...now. But for a long time I thought it was Him punishing me for not saving myself for marriage, but I know that’s not true. I see it as more of a lesson to be careful who you trust, who you give yourself to, heart and body. My experience with Paul was more a saving grace than a hail Mary.”

“The guy didn’t even make you come. Such a fucking waste because it’s a beautiful sight,” I say, ignoring my rapidly growing dick at the image.

She slaps my shoulder in mock horror. “Well, you and Blake seem to be making up for his shortfalls,” she says with a smile. “Come on, let’s go find Blake. I need a coffee.” She pushes me gently, but it’s enough to almost have me on my arse.

It doesn’t take us long to find Blake. He turns, holding three takeout cups with a box resting on top, just as we reach him.

Sydney tells us she need to use the toilet, and Blake points her in the direction. She rushes off and we trail behind.

“I don’t like this, Ro. He’s got too much control over the situation and had too much fucking time to orchestrate one hell of a welcome party.”

“And it’s not just us this time, right?” I say what he omitted.

“Yeah, that.”

We stop outside the ladies and wait for Sydney. Blake passes me a cup, and the rich aroma of coffee mixed with milk permeates my senses. “Cheers.”

“Did Oz send you details on the property?”

“He did.”

He looks at me, expecting me to elaborate. “And?” he presses when I don’t respond.

“And it’s a farmhouse with several outbuildings and no neighbours for a couple of miles. The perfect fucking spot.” I explain to Blake that Oz sent me blueprints for the original farmhouse, but he said it’s undergone some renovation in the last two years by the now owners; a family with a teenage daughter.

“Jesus Christ! And this family, they alive?” he asks, but I nudge him as I spot Sydney exiting the toilets.

“Later,” I mutter under my breath, just loud enough for him to hear, a second before she reaches us. “All set?” I ask, plastering a fake as fuck smile on my face.

She nods and takes the cup Blake is holding out to her. “Thank you.” Then he hands her the box. “What’s this?”

“You’ll see,” he says before walking ahead of us.

With no spare hand to take a peek, she lifts the box to her nose and smells. “Hmmm, something lemony. My favourite.”

Blake is waiting for us when get back to the car. “Go any slower and you’ll stop. Chuck me the keys, and I’ll drive the rest of the way,” he says, holding up his hand for the keys, which I pull from my pocket and toss to him. He catches them with ease and climbs into the driver’s side.

We rejoin the motorway happy to see that most of the traffic has eased now.

“Oh...my...god, this is delicious,” Sydney moans from the back seat as she eats the lemon tart Blake got her. “You are forgiven,” she tells him.

“Is that so...”

I tune out their banter as my mind wanders to Blake’s questions about the family. From what Oz has been able to find out, the father has been seen in town a few times, but there’s been no sign of the mother or daughter. According to Oz, anyone who’s asked after them has been told they’ve gone on a girl’s holiday.

If you believe that, you’re a fucking idiot.

I feel sick at the thought of what JC’s been doing to them both for the last few weeks or so. And those thoughts now extend to what he’s got planned and what he’ll do to Sydney if he gets his hands on her.

I drop my head back against the headrest and close my eyes, trying to ease my anxiety.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

SYDNEY

The lemon tart and coffee Blake bought are exactly what I needed, but the pleasurable feelings they induced don't last long. Vanishing completely as we leave the main roads behind and join a small country lane.

I try to imagine Pa growing up here, but even that thought is marred with thoughts of what awaits us at JC's house.

"Do his parents still live here?" I ask, trying to get either of them to give me some information, which has been in short supply.

"No, his parents sold up and moved away after his apparent death," Roman says, and I note a I don't want to talk about this to his tone.

"Okay, so who lives here now?" The instant the question leaves my mouth, I know the answer.

Blake catches my gaze in the rearview mirror. "A family...with a teenage daughter."

"No!" I exclaim, shifting forwards, poking my head between the seats to look at Roman. "Please tell me they aren't dead or hurt," I plead, but his momentary silence is answer enough.

"We don't know for sure," he finally says.

I flop back against the seat, looking out the window and scanning the beautiful dusk painted landscape. How can we live in such a bewitching world filled with monstrous people? How can God have created this only to allow it to be corrupted by such wickedness?

My thoughts are halted when Blake turns the headlights off, plunging us into darkness. We turn down a small dirt track surrounded on both sides by barren fields, which in the summer I imagine are filled with crops.

There's a passing place about halfway down, and Blake pulls over, cutting the engine.

"Why are we stopping?" I ask, and even I know it's a ridiculous question.

With the sun almost set, any chance at scoping the place out, like the guys originally planned, is gone, and we have to go in almost blind.

Blake and Roman climb from the car, and I follow. My breath is trapped in my lungs at the chilly air. Reaching back inside the car, I grab my jumper and throw it on. As I go to close the door, a hand grips it, stopping me. Roman raises a finger to his lips, then gently pushes the door until it clicks closed.

I walk a couple of paces forward, squinting at the large silhouette of the house up ahead, as Roman and Blake grab things from the boot. There are no lights on in the main house, but there is a dim flicker in one of the outbuildings to the right.

The soft crunch of footsteps behind me has me swivelling my head to see Roman and Blake approaching.

"You know the drill," Roman whispers, holding out a vest for me to put on.

I quickly put it on. If nothing else, it will keep me warm.

“You ever used a gun, Syd,” Blake says close to my ear.

My head snaps back and I pin him with a what do you think glare. “And I don’t want one either,” I whisper firmly.

They exchange looks, both sighing in resignation.

“I’ll stay close, and I won’t go off on my own. I’m not stupid.”

Roman moves in front of me, and Blake steps in behind me. When Roman glances over his shoulder, we move forward. Every sound is heightened as we make our way down the dirt road; the crunch of a stone, snap of a twig, even our breath betrays us.

“There’s a light on in the building to the right,” I whisper as we reach a fork in the road.

“Son of a bitch is leading us right where he wants us,” Roman grits out and takes the right turn.

The cold I felt earlier is suddenly replaced with heat as we draw closer to what I can now see is a large barn. Nervous energy swims through me, and my arms and legs tremble. My mouth goes dry, and I swallow, swirling my tongue around my mouth and lips, trying to wet them, but it does absolutely nothing.

When we near the barn door, Roman holds his hand up, and we stop. He takes another couple of steps forward, turning his head to listen at the door.

Stepping back, he shakes his head. I don’t know what that means, but before any of us do or say anything, there’s a piercing scream from inside the barn.

“Why don’t you join us, Sydney and Roman and Blake,” JC calls out. “We wouldn’t

want sweet little Hannah here to pass out and miss all the fun before we've even started, would we?"

I fight the need to barge in there and save that poor girl, to take her place.

"Daddy's here too, Sydney. Or should I call you Summer? I actually prefer the name Summer. Anyway, don't you want to see your precious father, the almighty and righteous Reverend Amos Kincaid." The venom in his words is unmistakable. And to prove he isn't lying, another cry shatters the silent night.

This time I can't help the shout that flies from me. "Pa! Pa, are you okay?"

Roman spins, covering my mouth with his hand. "Shhh, I know. I know," he whispers angrily.

My wide eyes bore into his, apologetic and pleadingly. His soften in understanding, but when the barn doors swing open a second later, his hand vanishes and he turns, aiming his gun at the man standing just inside the barn.

He's not alone. Pa is there, his face even more battered and bruised, wearing nothing but a pair of boxers. JC is holding a knife to his neck, and I can just make out a small trickle of blood running down his torso.

I whimper, my legs turning to jelly beneath me, and I almost tumble to the ground. Blake's arm circles my waist, holding me up with one arm while the other is pointed at JC.

"Now, now, gentlemen, put those away. Better yet, toss them over here. Such hostility, and I've no idea why."

"The fuck you don't!" Roman shouts, and I can feel the anger rolling off him.

“Ooh, I’m going to enjoy watering down that fire, Roman Stone.” JC winks as a smirk grows wide on his face. “Toss the fucking guns before I get ahead of myself and stab this cunt in the neck.” And to show he means it, he pierces Pa’s neck again, causing him to grimace.

Roman and Blake both toss their weapons aside as Blake whispers to me, “It’ll be okay. We’ve got you.”

“Wonderful,” JC exclaims gleefully, and if he wasn’t holding a knife to Pa’s throat, he’d be clapping. “Now, hands up in the air, let me see those fingers wriggling.”

Blake slowly removes his arm from around my waist, raising both hands above his head, as Roman and I do the same. “Shall we,” he says, moving to the side in invitation.

Roman walks forward as we follow, keeping me between the two of them. But the further in we go, the closer JC gets, like he’s walking parallel to us. I get my first proper look at the man responsible for so much death and pain and misery. He’s wearing a pair of tatty jeans with rips in the knees, a dirty white T-shirt and no shoes. Around the same height as Pa, but despite them being the same age, JC looks older, more weathered.

I feel it. The shift in the air, a moment of anticipation, then like a viper, JC jerks forward, snatching hold of my vest and tugging me to him as he releases Pa, shoving him in the direction of Roman and Blake, who catch him.

I scream and Roman roars, holding himself back as Blake steadies Pa on his feet.

Cold metal meets my skin as JC holds the knife to my neck, mirroring his hold on Pa moments ago. I quiet instantly, my eyes meeting Pa’s as tears roll down his bloodied face.

“This is much better,” JC drawls as he runs his free hand over my body. “Hannah was lovely, but she doesn’t have your rack, Summer,” he says, grabbing at my breast, and I see Roman and Blake’s eyes blaze with fury. “Now we are all here and everyone is almost where they’re meant to be, just the little matter of tying you up first, I’m sure you understand, the fun can begin,” he declares and drags me over to a metal framed bed beside an identical one where Hannah lies, arms and ankles tied to the frame, completely naked. Her body is covered in bruises and bite marks and blood smears her inner thighs.

He calls Roman and Blake, and Pa over, and they don’t refuse knowing it’ll be me who suffers if they do. He orders Roman to chain Pa and Blake up to a bar that runs the length of the barn, which looks recently installed, and once they are secured, he has me do the same to Roman, keeping the knife to my throat the whole time. But I shut it out and only focus on Roman.

As I slide the last cuff around Roman’s wrist and click it shut, a tear rolls down my cheek, and I whisper, “I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head and opens his mouth to say something, but JC pulls me away. Tossing me down on the bed, he drops over me, the knife in his left hand beside my head.

“I wonder...does Daddy know you fucked them both? Ooh, who was first? Maybe we need to give him a visual so he can see what a dirty fucking whore you really are.”

His words hit me where he wanted, only they hit different and not as he expected.

“Fuck. You!” I spit out, and ram my knee between his legs, but he moves at the last minute. As he laughs at my failed attempt to escape, I clench my hand into a fist and strike his ribcage. This time my hit is true, but it does no more than cause him to puff out a breath.

“Oh, Summer, Summer, Summer, this is not how this goes,” he says, his tone like ice spreading across my skin. My fists rain down on him, and I kick out, hoping to hit something, but when he cracks me across the face with a fist, my fight leaves me, heading spinning and black dots dance in my eyes.

“That’s it, have a little cat nap while I set everything up,” he whispers in my ear as shouts from Roman, Blake and Pa fill the barn.

I try to fight the pull of darkness, but I can’t, and a second later, it envelopes me.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

ROMAN

“ Sydney!” I roar as he punches her in the face. “Sydney, Syd!” My shouts are echoed by the same from Blake and Kincaid. “You fucking?—”

JC spins and strides towards me, all up in my face. “You might not want to finish that sentence...unless you prefer me not to wait until our little Summer comes round from her nap. I like a fight when I fuck, but I can also perform when, well”—he leans in to whisper in my ear—“when they’re sleeping like a baby.” He jumps away laughing when I snarl at him and rattle the chain as it pulls taut, stopping me from wrapping my hands round his scrawny little fucking neck. I’d snap it like a fucking twig.

“You know, there was this one time, at band camp...” He laughs raucously. “I’m sorry. Couldn’t help myself. Anyway, as I was saying, this one time, I had a fighter. She was a spitfire, fought me every second. But just like Summer over there, she needed a moment to get herself under control. Can’t help it if the girls go crazy over me,” he says, cupping his dick like he’s auditioning for Magic Mike and not a fucking rapist.

“Shut up, JC. That’s my daughter you’re talking about,” shouts Kincaid.

“And isn’t she the sweetest,” he coos, walking over to Sydney on the bed, still unconscious. He trails a hand down her body, and mutters to himself.

I can’t hear him, but I can imagine what vile fucking things he’s whispering to her.

Springing back up and facing us, he says, “I almost forgot. I’m going to need you to strip. Can’t have you feeling left out when everyone else is wearing their birthday suits, now can we?” He waves a finger in mine and Blake’s direction, indicating for us to get up and take our clothes off.

Yeah, that’s not fucking happening.

“Come on, guys. I thought you’d be keen to show off your bodies. Or are you hiding something?” he asks, walking back towards us. “You know what they say, men with muscles often have...” He holds his pinkie finger up and wiggles it. “Small dicks,” he finishes, imitating a whisper.

He claps his hands. “Up, up,” he cheers before glancing at Sydney, who is slowly coming around. “Now!” His shout echoes in the vast space, and the young girl on the bed beside Sydney jumps.

I slowly climb to my feet. “You’re a sick cunt!” I see Kincaid sigh in relief at Blake and me doing as JC asked.

“Yay for me,” JC says like he’s celebrating my description of him as a win. He’s almost dancing as he watches Blake and I undress, tossing our clothes at his feet in some fucked up idolisation ritual.

I unzip my jeans, wishing to god the bastard wasn’t watching us so closely so I could slip a small blade...somewhere. I’m not relishing the idea of sitting in my boxers completely unarmed while he does whatever the fuck he wants to our girl. I chance a sly glance to Blake, who’s expression mirrors my own.

Like my prayer has been answered, in a skewed kind of way, Sydney groans, drawing his attention. He turns and walks over to her, and I quickly pull the blade from a pocket on my vest, shoving into the waistband of my boxers, thankful for Armani’s

thick and tight elasticated waistband that should hold it in place...for now.

The fact JC has us chained up with a significant length of chain for movement does not bring me happy vibes. If anything, it's terrifying me.

The deranged fucker has this place set up like some sleazy brothel, and the fact he's already defiled the poor girl Hannah, and her mother from the look of her torn underwear as she's huddled beside her husband the other side of Kincaid, only intensifies my fears for what he has planned for us.

He spins back around a second later as though he forgot himself. "Well, well, aren't you two a pretty sight. Shame you do nothing for me or we could have had some fun together." He waves a dismissive hand. "Never mind, what I have planned will be just as enjoyable...for me. Not sure how the rest of you will feel, particularly you, my old friend," he says, walking forwards and kicking Kincaid's legs. He collects up our clothes and carries them to the other side of the barn, dumping them with everyone else's.

My eyes find Sydney's. Dried blood covers her face, and a bruise is starting to bloom on her cheek. She looks resolved to her fate, and the thought guts me.

"I love you," I mouth to her. Her eyes widen at my confession—the timing is far from perfect, but I'm hoping it will give her some strength and hope.

Her eyes close as she mouths back, "I love you too."

"Aww, how fucking sickening," JC snarls, catching our exchange. "While I'm eager to test the new merchandise for myself," he says, waving a hand in Sydney's direction, and sounding like he's pitching a new product to his investors. "I'm feeling a little sentimental. Perhaps it's the thought of watching my sister fuck my best friend, or maybe the idea of Roman's spitfire sister, Annabel?—"

“Arrgh!” I roar, yanking and tugging on the chains keeping me from killing this motherfucker.

JC laughs, and there’s pride at my reaction, but despite my rage, I sense bitterness. “Oops, sorry. Is that a sore subject for you?”

I lower my head because if he sees the murder and conviction in my eyes, I’m worried what that’ll mean for Sydney.

“Leave him alone,” Sydney cries out, raising her head to look at me.

“Sydney, be quiet,” Kincaid admonishes.

I lift my eyes, pinning her with a warning to listen to her father. He’s trying to protect her, and I agree.

“Oh, I love this,” JC states gleefully. “Amos, I’m sorry to have to do this...well, not really, but anyway, which one of these strapping young men would you like to see fucking your precious little girl? My money’s on Blake, but...”

“You’ll pay for this, JC. God will judge you and cast you down to Hell.”

“Oh,” he says, forlorn, like he’s disappointed at the prospect. “You mean the pearly gates will be closed for me? What a god damn fucking shame. Like I give a fuck about you, your god, or anyone else for that matter.” He’s becoming more manic and psychotic every second. He storms over to us, pointing a finger at me. “You.” He smiles wickedly. “I know your type. You and I aren’t so different, you know? Dominant and controlling in the bedroom. I’m right, aren’t I? Yes, yes.” He snatches the chain over my head and unlocks it with a key hanging from a chain around his neck, then he gathers the loose chain and tugs me toward Sydney. “Sorry, Amos, but you were too slow and too boring, so I made the decision for you.”

As we reach Sydney's bed, she watches my face. JC throws the chain over the metal frame above Sydney's head, shortening it before securing it again.

"Now then, I bet you're an all fours man, right?" he asks, but when I don't respond, he continues regardless. "Well, not today. It can't always be about you, Roman. So selfish," he says, rolling his eyes.

I block out the sobs coming from Hannah's mother, and the burning of Kincaid's eyes as he prepares to watch me screw his daughter. I actually feel for him.

JC walks around to the other side of the bed and begins tearing at Sydney's clothes. She thrashes about as much as she can, but he just laughs.

"Get your fucking hands off her!" I growl, climbing on to the bed and attempting to get my hands on him.

"Someone's eager." He leans in conspiratorially but remaining out of my limited reach. "She's that good, huh?"

"No, but if I'm being forced to fuck her, the least you can do is let me unwrap her myself," I snap. The words burn, but I promise to wipe them from her memory later, once this is over and JC is fucking dead. That's a solemn vow.

"Ooh, I like you, Roman. I admit, I thought you'd already sampled her, but I can admit when I'm wrong." He steps back and gestures for me go ahead. Then he grabs a lone chair, dragging it over, then sitting.

I face Sydney, seeing the confusion on her face, but I keep my expression blank. I don't for one second believe JC's buying my act, but I'll take every opportunity I can to protect Sydney from him, even if it hurts her temporarily.

I slowly begin to undress her, tearing her top open, but when I get to her trousers, I realise we have a problem. Hating it, I turn to JC, and ask, “Got a knife?” Gesturing to her trousers.

He’s smiles, rising from the chair as he pulls a flick knife from his back pocket. “May I?” he asks, like I have any other choice. I nod, and he moves to the bottom of the bed, slicing up one trouser leg before coming round to my side. I turn, hiding my back and the blade from his view.

As soon as he turns to return to his chair, I grab the blade in the waistband of my boxers and lay it alongside Sydney’s body, hidden from view. I bring a finger to my lips, signalling for Sydney to keep quiet.

“Don’t do this, JC. Please. Whatever you want, but not this,” Kincaid begs from behind me.

“You know,” he says, settling back in his chair. “My sister said something similar before I punished her. It seems to be a catchphrase for women, especially those associated with you. Cathy was the same.”

I kneel on the side of the bed and look down at Sydney. Fuck! This is harder than I thought. But I need to suck it up if I want us to get out of here alive and for Sydney not to need a lifetime of therapy.

She juts out her chin, and I hope I’m reading her right.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

SYDNEY

The cold steel of the blade Roman laid along my side burns my skin, reminding me of what's at stake. My arms ache from being tied above my head, which throbs equally thanks to the hit from JC. While I'm scared and Roman's words struck a chord, I know he didn't mean them. And I'm so thankful it's Roman hovering over me and not JC.

I can't imagine how much this is torturing Roman and Pa, but I refuse to be a victim. Besides, if I hadn't given away our position, we might not be in this position at all.

I see the indecision on Roman's face as he looks at me. Wanting to reassure him, I jut my chin out and pray he understands.

"What are waiting for, Roman?" JC asks, tilting his head. "What's the matter, got a little performance anxiety? Maybe we need to get Blake up here to help you out."

"The fuck we do," Roman spits back at him. He slips his boxers down, freeing his dick, which despite the situation is surprisingly semi-hard. I try not to think about the reason why, certain he can't be turned on by our situation. My thoughts fracture as he takes himself in his hand, beginning a slow, leisurely stroking of his length. I keep my eyes on his, intermittently dropping my gaze down to watch as he strokes himself to full mast. Suddenly, I become aware of a stirring between my legs, and I realise it's not the situation but him that is turning me on, which must be the same for Roman.

He positions himself between my legs. He's angry. His face is scrunched in pain at the idea of what he's about to do. He drops over the top of me, and I quickly whisper, "It's okay, Ro." I've never called him Ro before, and he can't hide his surprise. But I want him to know I don't blame him, that I love him, because I was telling the truth when I mouthed it to him earlier, and that I'm okay. We have to do this to save us and the poor family JC has tortured for god knows how long. My heart breaks for Hannah and what she's suffered. She can't be more than 15-16 and now her life is ruined.

Roman's nostrils flare, eyes boring into me, speaking deep in my soul. "I'm sorry, Sydney," he says roughly as his cock presses against my entrance. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he repeats, over and over, pushing in further.

"Well, this is all very drab and not at all exciting. I say we liven it up a little." He claps his hands and gets to his feet. He walks around the bed, heading for Hannah, and my breath stills.

No, no, no.

Roman freezes above me, and we watch as JC undoes his jeans, slipping them off to reveal his bare arse.

"I'm not seeing much pain or fear or anguish over this little fake fucking thing you two have going on over here. And why should you have all the fun? So, let's have a race." Hannah begins to sob along with her parents. "If you finish first, Roman, then, once I'm done, of course, I'll let precious little Hannah and her family go. I fucked the mum too, but loose pussy does nothing for me, so not a great loss. But, and here's where it gets interesting, so pay attention if I finish first, you all die and Sydney and I are going to live happily ever after."

I can't help the gag that forces its way up my throat. Hannah screams as JC grips his dick and walks toward her head.

“Suck,” he orders, and she turns her head away. “I. Said. Suck,” he grits out as he grabs her face and turning her back to face him. Tears stream down her face as he squeezes her cheeks, forcing her mouth open. Kneeling on the edge of the bed, his small, vile dick an inch from her lips, he says, “Suck it, Hannah, or I’ll make mummy pay.”

Her parents are screaming at her, at JC, and I turn away as she opens her mouth.

“And go, Roman. Race to the finish,” JC calls.

“Oh god, Roman. We need to do something. Now,” I whisper, burying my face in his arm as JC praises Hannah, and muffled whimpers join a chorus of sobbing.

I look at my tied hands. “Cut the ties,” I tell him urgently.

“What?” he hisses, already shaking his head.

“Do it, while he’s distracted.”

Roman looks over to see JC fucking Hannah’s mouth as she gags and sobs, but he’s not in the least deterred. With one last look at me, I nod. He grabs the blade at my side and begins cutting the rope holding my wrists.

“How you doing over there, Roman? Are you close? ’Cause as soon as I sink into Hannah’s tight little cunt, I’m going to fucking explode.” He groans and is about to look this way.

“Wait,” I whisper, and Roman stops cutting and pistons his hips and groaning like he’s fucking me, which would be impossible given he’s no longer hard, but JC doesn’t need to know that.

My eyes find Blake's, and he looks devastated he can't do anything. He mouths, "Keep going," and I offer him a small smile, then check JC is still distracted.

Roman has already begun cutting at my bound wrist again, and I arch my head to see the threads of the rope fraying, but not fast enough. He doubles his efforts, and a second later the rope snaps as I tug on it.

My heart leaps. We're so close, but there's no way Roman can cut the ties the other side without JC seeing.

Blake begins rattling his chains and calling out to JC, and Amos quickly follows.

"Now who's got performance anxiety, or maybe you can't get it up at all." Blake keeps going, goading JC until eventually he stops, stepping away from Hannah and scowling at Blake.

"You fucking jealous, Blake? You feeling left out? Guess that's what happens in a threesome. There's always one sad fucker on the outer circle."

"You'd fucking know, JC," Blake fires back as JC closes in on him. He doesn't miss a beat as he lands a bone-crunching punch to Blake's jaw. I bite my lip so hard trying to contain a scream that I draw blood

Blake laughs as he turns back to JC. "Talking about small dicks, I've seen bigger on a dog. No woman would willingly fuck you!"

JC roars as he lands another hit to Blake's face, and I have to close my eyes, wincing at the sound of flesh meeting flesh.

"Fuck, Ro, hurry up." My other wrist springs free. Roman shuffles down to cut the rope at my ankle but quickly realises his chains won't reach.

“Oh shit!” I mutter, sitting up a little and taking the knife from him. “Let me do it,” I tell him while he tries to position himself so JC won’t see if he looks over here.

I hack at the rope binding my ankle, and I swear I see smoke at one point from the rapid sawing. I can hear fighting to the side, and Blake’s waning taunts are suddenly bolstered by Pa’s voice.

I tune out and focus solely on cutting this damn rope.

I’m just starting on the other ankle, and the final tie holding me hostage, when I hear JC holler at us.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” His bare feet slap against the concrete as he stomps toward us, and I slice faster. My heart racing along with the blade as it tears at the final thread. The flimsy mattress shifts as Roman rises to his feet, blocking JC.

A quick glance at Blake, who is slumped against the wall with his eyes closed and blood pouring from...I don’t even know where spurs me on.

“I’m finished, so you can let the girl and her parents go now.”

“Bullshit!” JC curses, walking away from Roman to come round the bed. As he nears the end of the bed, the rope snaps, and I rise to my knees, holding the knife up and pointed it at him.

“Come near me, and I stab you.” My voice shakes with fear and adrenaline.

JC laughs, and the sound grates on me. “Oh, Summer, it’s sweet you think you’d be capable.” He stalks closer, and my hand shakes as I hold the knife out. “Give me the knife,” he snarls.

I don't. He'll have to fight me for it. Because he's not hurting anyone else.

"Give me the fucking knife!" he bellows, his face turning a deep shade of red, and his jaw tics as he grinds his teeth.

I can feel Roman beside me as he tugs against his restraints, growling and snarling like a rabid dog. If I didn't know him, didn't love him, then I'd be terrified by him.

JC jerks forward, trying to snatch the knife from me, but I swipe my arm in an arc. He hisses, pulling away, as it slices his forearm, leaving a long slash in his skin. Blood spills from it, dripping to the ground, but I don't dare look away.

I wasn't lying when I told Roman and Blake that Pa taught me self-defence. And now I know why. All the years of preaching, all the moments I felt the suffocating disappointment from him and God, all my mistakes, they led me here, to this moment. My life and those of people I love, innocent lives of a family who will forever be tainted by this, hang in the balance.

"Eye for eye."

"Life for life."

The principal of reciprocal justice. Until this moment I didn't understand how God could condone such an act of revenge.

"Fuck!" JC hisses as he turns his arm to inspect the wound I just inflicted on him.

"I warned you. Come near me again and I'll fucking kill you." I spit the words at him, full of venom and promise. "Key. For the chains, give it to me," I demand.

His lip curls up, and his nostrils flare. He reaches for the chain hanging around his

neck and slowly slips it over his head. Holding it up, just out of my reach, he says, “Here you go, sweet Summer. Come and fucking get it.”

Roman has stopped, and his upper body is turned in our direction. “Sydney,” he whispers, warning in his tone. I know it’s a trap, and as soon as I reach for the necklace with the key, JC is going to make a move for the knife. But I don’t have a choice.

I lean further forward, closing the distance between the knife and JC’s face, and reach for the necklace. There’s movement in the corner of my eye, but I don’t dare acknowledge it, keeping JC’s gaze, as I place my hand palm up under the key. Slowly raising my hand, I feel the key brush against my palm, and I begin to close my hand around it. I think I’m safe, that I’ve done it.

I was wrong.

I squeeze the key and withdraw my hand, but instead I’m yanked forward. I let out a cry as I lose my balance and my hand holding the knife is twisted sharply. Managing to keep a grip of the knife, I fall forward as Roman yells behind me. The knife skims across JC’s face as my arm is thrust upwards a second before he’s body jolts forward.

“Arrgh! Fuck...you!” he cries, and I catch a glimpse of Hannah’s mother behind him as she raises her arm. Light glints off metal a second before JC’s body jerks again, and he releases me to spin around. I crash to the fall, managing to protect my face.

“Fucking cunt. I’m going to kill you, you bitch!” he screams, punching her in the face. She stumbles backward, something clattering to the floor, and I see it’s a knife, which she must have gotten from the guy’s clothing.

He dives at Hannah’s mother, landing on top of her with a thump, and immediately begins punching her, face, her torso, anywhere he can land his fists.

“Sydney! Sydney!” Roman’s shouts pull me away from the horror in front of me. I turn my head to see him waving a hand. “Give me the key. The key, Sydney.”

I push to my feet, ignoring the pain that flashes through my body, and hand the necklace with the key to Roman.

“Hey, hey, you okay?” he asks, but I’m not listening to him, and before he can stop me, I’m turning around.

I walk toward JC as he continues to rain blow after blow on Hannah’s mum’s limp body. My hand tightens around the handle of the knife I’m still holding, and I raise it up, then slam it down. The blade sinks into skin and muscle, and I don’t think about the blood splattering across my face as I withdrew it and bring it down again and ag?—

Arms wrap around my waist, dragging me away as another peels the knife from my fingers. I scream. I scream so loud and so long. My voice cracks, cutting off as sobs wrack my chest. I have no comprehension of anything other than Roman’s soothing voice in my ear.

“I’ve got you. You’re safe. It’s okay, Sydney. Shh.”

I don’t know how long we sit there, but eventually other sounds and emotions break through. Hysterical crying, shouting, hurried feet shuffling on the ground, and a blanket of bone-deep sadness and sorrow.

My eyes are fixed ahead as flashes of colour and movement flick in and out, and in my peripheral, lights flash red and blue.

Something soft is laid over me as hushed voices filter in slowly.

“I’ll come back in a moment, okay?” a feminine voice says beside me.

“Thank you,” Roman says. “Sydney, can you hear me?”

I nod, feeling like my head isn’t attached to my body.

“Good girl. In a couple of minutes we are going to move to somewhere more comfortable, okay?”

I nod again, then my head drops back against Roman’s shoulder, and my eyes close.

I hoped for darkness, but all I see is JC as he beats Hannah’s mum, then blood, a shower of blood. Arms tighten around me, and I draw some comfort from them.

Comfort I don’t feel I deserve.

I killed someone.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

BLAKE

I groan as screams penetrate my foggy brain, and I pain lashes at my face as I move my head.

“Fucking hell,” I say, but it comes out as more of a mumble, and I realise my lip is split and swollen. My one good eye latches onto a blur of motion, and I peel the other open, trying to understand where I am and what happened.

“Kincaid, catch!” echoes a voice I’m sure I should recognise. A second later, it hits me. Roman. That’s Roman’s voice. Reality crashes down on me like a damn bursting. Hands tug at my wrists, and I try to fight them off.

“It’s Amos, Blake. Let me get these cuffs off.”

Kincaid.

I hear the rattle of chains and another tug on my wrist as my eyes roll to the back of my head.

Damn! Everything hurts, and my tongue feels like cotton wool in my mouth. Despite the sting, I lick my split lip and raise a hand to wipe whatever it is that’s making my vision blurred.

“Fucking hell,” I curse as white-hot pain stabs at my eye when I touch it. Dropping

my hand, I spot something red—blood.

A piercing scream echoes around the room...no, a barn, we were in a barn. Cognizance slowly returns as hands pull at me, and I hear Kincaid talking to someone.

Then he's gone.

I'm gone.

I lean over, slipping my shoes on, and wince as my ribs smart at the movement. "God damn you," I grumble.

"You're not still complaining about your ribs, are you?" Ro teases as he enters my room. The clean, crisp clinical walls and that bleachy, medicinal smell are things I won't miss of this room. And the food. Anyone who rates hospital food has obviously never had a decent meal.

"How is she?" I ask, changing the subject to something more important than a couple of broken ribs.

His face drops, and he hangs his head. "She's okay," he says unconvincingly. "She'll be okay," he adds.

"Yeah, she fucking will." I push to my feet gingerly and grab my things from the bed. "Let's get the hell out of here and take our girl home."

Roman opens the door, and I pause to cup his face, feeling the bristles of his stubble scratch against my palm. "And you?"

He kisses me gently, conscious of my split lip, and that's answer enough for now.

The last twenty-four hours have been fucking exhausting and emotional. I can't wait to get home and sleep. But before we can do that, we need to check on Hannah and her dad, then we need to break the news to Sydney about her dad.

Roman leads me to the female ward across from this one where Hannah is recovering. Knocking on the door of her private room, a male voice calls out to enter, and Roman pushes the door open slowly.

"Hey, Brian." Roman greets, walking over to where he is sitting beside Hannah's bed while she sleeps.

"Roman, Blake," he says, getting to his feet to shake our hands. He directs us away from Hannah's bed, not wanting to disturb her while we talk. He looks back over his shoulder to check she's still sleeping before he speaks. "The cops came by this morning to talk to Hannah, but she was sleeping and the doctor told them she wasn't well enough to talk yet." He's saying the words but there's no emotion, no inflection, it's monotone and like he's just going through the motions.

His gaze wanders back to his daughter. "I need to...to organise Trisha's funeral and speak with Hannah's school and look at a therapist, but I?—"

"Hey, Brian. Brian, slow down. You don't need to think about any of that right now. Just focus on Hannah," I tell him, and he nods.

"How's Sydney?" he asks.

"She's doing okay. She's being discharged today, but I'm sure she'll want to check in on Hannah," Roman says.

"Yeah, that's...I'd like to thank her, for you know..." His words trail off.

A nurse enters the room, nodding to Brian before her gaze lands on us, and she scowls.

“We’re going,” Roman tells her as she prepares to reprimand us for being in here outside visiting hours. Ro pulls a card from his wallet and holds it out to Brian. “We’ll check in with you in a couple of days, but if you need anything before then, call me. Okay?”

Brian takes the card, slipping it into his pocket, and nods. “Thanks.” Then he walks back to his daughter.

We leave him to it and head down to Sydney’s room. She’s dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed when we enter. She lifts her head to look at us. “Hey, we ready to go?” She hops off the bed without waiting for an answer and walks toward us.

Her bruised cheek and nose look worse today, and I wish I could bring the motherfucker back from the dead to torture him over and over.

“Syd—”

“Let’s go,” she says bluntly, cutting me off. “Please,” she tacks on the end, softening her tone.

Ro shakes his head when I gesture to her as she walks past us to the door. “We’ll tell her once we’re home,” he says before following and almost getting hit by the swinging door.

As I suspected, this conversation isn’t going to wait until we get home. The second we leave the hospital in the opposite direction of her father’s house, she’s asking questions.

“Pa’s is that way. I need to check on him.”

“Let’s get home first, then we’ll go and see him later,” Ro tells her.

“No, I want to check he’s okay, and I think I might stay with him for a bit.”

I spin in my seat, wincing as an arc of pain shoots up my right side. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Why?” she scowls at me. “What are you not telling me, Blake Cassidy?”

“He’s not there,” Ro states casually.

“No, then where is he?” Neither of us answer for a few minutes. “Roman, where is he?”

I dip my head and sigh. Looking back up at her, she looks to me, and I know she can read it my eyes. “He was arrested last night, Syd.”

Her face morphs from anger to resignation, and she slumps back in her seat, looking out the window.

“It’ll be ok?—”

“Please don’t say it’ll be okay. Nothing about any of this is okay, Blake.” She turns her tortured expression on me as tears well in her eyes. “He’s going to prison, isn’t he? And don’t lie to me. No more damn lies.”

“It’s possible, yes. But we got him a good lawyer and he can argue extenuating circumstances. It’s not an open and shut case.”

She looks away, staring out the window again. “And Hannah, how’s she?”

“We popped in to see them before coming to you, and she’s doing good.”

“Is she? Is she really, Blake? Her mum just died, and she’s been... I doubt she’ll ever be good again.”

She drops her head back and closes her eyes, effectively cutting off any further conversation. We drive the rest of the way in silence.

Syd heads straight for her room, the one she was using before all this shit went down, and Ro and I go to the kitchen, giving her some space.

“This is a fucking mess, Ro,” I say, sitting on one of the stools as Ro opens the fridge.

“You want one of these?” he asks, holding up a beer.

“Hell yes! I think I might become an alcoholic. At least it will numb the pain. Why the fuck are broken ribs so painful?” He hands me my beer, and I take a healthy mouthful, letting out a satisfied sigh as I pull the bottle away from my mouth.

Ro leans against the counter beside me, drinking his own beer. “Roxy called this morning. She’s given me a number for a friend who works with victims of sexual assault, specifically trafficking.”

“Sounds good. Maybe we can get Syd and Hannah to go together?”

“She mentioned she might have some work for us, if we’re interested.”

“If it involves taking out vile cunts like JC, then count me the fuck in.” I don’t even need to think about it. And it’s not like it will be far from what we’ve been doing

anyway.

“You spoke to her about what went down in that barn?” I ask, knowing it’s been playing on his mind. It’s been playing on mine.

He shakes his head. “I will.”

“Good. Sooner rather than later. Don’t let it fester and grow more heads.”

He chuckles. “Yes, doctor,” he says, around a smile.

“No, nurse. I’d look good in a nurse’s uniform,” I say, an idea forming in my head. Ro arches a brow as he looks at me, his bottle paused halfway to his lips. “Yeah, thought you’d like that idea,” I tell him with a wink.

“Filthy!” he says, placing his bottle down.

And we set about making some dinner. We’ll be okay. It’s going to take some time, but we’ll get there.

SYDNEY

After getting back from the hospital, I hide out in my room. I can't deal with questions and the slew of emotions assaulting my already battered body and mind.

I shower, washing any trace of that awful hospital smell from my body, avoiding looking at my bruised face. It's another reminder, like I need one, of what happened. Dressing in comfy pyjamas, I climb into bed, dragging the covers over my head and hoping to vanish like a magic trick.

The news of Pa's arrest was a blow but not unexpected if I'm honest. Just another thing to pile on top of everything else. It's too much. And I've not even tried to unpick what happened between Roman and I, what JC did to us.

Tears roll down my face as I remember the anguish on his face as he laid on top of me. I shake the memory away, squeezing my eyes closed. I don't blame him. I told him it was okay. And it was—in a messed-up way. But he's barely been able to look at me since, and the self-conscious part of me can't help feeling like he can't stand the sight of me.

You're being ridiculous, Sydney.

I must fall asleep and wake sometime later sobbing. It takes me a few minutes to realise I'm safe and not back in that barn. Not covered in blood after stabbing a man, not looking at the beaten and bloody body of a young girl's mother...

My door opens and Roman steps in, his eyes finding mine for a second in the semi-

darkness that of the early evening.

“You okay? I heard you crying,” he says, stepping further into the room, and dropping his gaze.

“Just a dream.” I shuffle into a sitting position, swiping at my damp face, as he comes fully into the room. “Roman?—”

“No, let me talk, please.”

“Okay,” I say, patting the edge of the bed for him to come and sit, but although he draws closer, he remains standing.

“I understand if you bl?—”

I bolt from the bed and slap my hand over his mouth before he can stop me. “No, no. God, no.” I shake my head and implore him with my eyes. “I don’t blame you.” I swallow down my fear, my guilt and all the other thoughts racing through my mind to focus on just this moment. “I told you I love you, and I meant it. I didn’t know it till then, but I love you and Blake.” I slowly lower my hand from his mouth as his arm snakes around my back. And my body sighs in relief at his touch. It’s an innocent touch but means so much more.

“And we love you. But I’m scared.”

I’m shocked at his words. Roman Stone doesn’t strike me as someone who’s scared of anything. “Scared of what?” I whisper, watching vulnerability wash over his face.

“Scared you won’t...that when we’re together again, that’s all you’ll see.” His eyes close against the pain of that possibility.

I shake my head. “I won’t let that happen. I won’t let that man take anything else

from me, from us.”

There’s a rap of knuckles on the door, and I look over Roman’s shoulder to see Blake there.

“Everything okay?” he asks cautiously and slowly stepping into the room, taking in our position.

I call him over, and when he reaches us, I reach a hand out, brushing across the many bruises on his face.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, my voice cracking.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. This is not on you, Syd.”

“Doesn’t feel that way.” I push the guilt back inside it’s box and kick it to the corner. “But I know it’s not. I’m just...” I don’t know what the word is, so I change the subject. “I’m okay. We’ll be okay.” I lower my head, but it’s lifted a couple of seconds later.

“Hey, together we’ll get through this. I love you, Syd,” Blake says, and I can’t hold back the tears now.

“I love you too,” I manage to choke out, then I’m swept up in two pairs of arms. Wrapped in warmth, safety and love.

One month later.

I unlock the door, tossing my keys on the side table and head toward the voices in the kitchen.

“Hey, I’m back,” I say as I enter the kitchen, pulling up short when I see two cops

standing there with Roman and Blake. “Oh... Hi, sorry to interrupt.”

“It’s fine Miss Kincaid. It’s you we came to talk to. Shall we sit,” the woman says, gesturing for me to sit—in my own house, no less.

I remain standing, and getting the message, the policewoman continues, “Okay, well, we wanted to let you know that the charges against you have been dropped.”

And now I’m wishing I’d taken that seat. Roman and Blake both smother a laugh as I try to stay on my feet.

“I-I don’t understand. How...what...”

“The death of John Clark has been deemed self-defence. That’s all we know.”

I look to Ro because I just know his friend Roxy had something to do with this, but he just winks. My solicitor told me even with the claim of self-defence my case would likely involve a long trial given the ferocity of my attack on him and because he had his back to me. It’s a little difficult to claim self-defence when someone is facing away from you.

She places her mug down on the counter and steps toward me. “We just wanted to let you know. Now, we’ll be going.” As she draws level with me, she leans in and whispers, “No court in the land was going to charge you with manslaughter of that piece of shit,” She pulls back and nods. “Goodbye, Miss Kincaid, Mr Stone, Mr Cassidy. Have a good day.”

Her colleague nods as he passes, and I stand there shell-shocked until the door slams closed behind them.

“Oh my god!” My brain can’t comprehend what just happened. “You!” I say pointing at Ro. “This was you and Roxy wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he says, feigning surprise.

“Whatever!” I say, walking to the counter, resting my hands on the edge and hanging my head. My head snaps up a second later. “And Pa?” I ask, my gaze flicking back and forth between them, waiting for someone to answer me.

They both grin. “He’s at home. Suspended senten?—”

I don’t let Blake finish before I’m leaping at the pair of them. “Thank you! Thank you!” I yell as they hug me.

They lower me to floor, but I’m too excited to standstill and proceed to jump, dance and run around the kitchen.

“Hey, hey!” Ro calls, catching me around the waist as I fly past him. “How was the session?”

I spin in his arms, kissing him on the lips, then turning to do the same to Blake beside us. “It was good. Hannah’s doing great, considering.”

The first week after everything was like living in an alternate universe. I had moments of sadness, happiness, depression, guilt and shame, you name the emotion and I felt it at one point or another. When Ro suggested I see someone and maybe Hannah could come, I agreed. I wanted to help Hannah, and I knew if I didn’t talk about what happened, with someone outside my circle, things would only get worse.

Two days after Trisha’s funeral, Hannah and I went to meet Milly, a therapist Roxy recommended. And she’s been amazing. Not only has she helped me to deal with what happened but also with my feelings around my unusual relationship with Ro and Blake.

God still plays a part in my life, I don’t think that will ever change, but my decisions

are my own and not made because of some unrealistic expectation or belief. I know our relationship isn't for everyone, but it is for us. It works. And it seems we aren't the only ones it works for either. I've spent many a night chatting to Roxy about her and Maddox and Zak.

"We are going to help Milly set up some extra sessions where we do Q&As. And Suzi is going to join us."

"That's great." Ro says, looking at his watch.

"Keeping you from something important?" I tease.

"Actually, yes," he says as he and Blake share a devilish look.

"What's going on? I ask, stepping back to watch the pair of them. They're up to something for sure.

"Well, we thought you'd like to go and see Kincaid," Blake says, and it feels like there's more, but he doesn't elaborate.

"Okay," I say tentatively. "What else?"

Blake and Roman hook an arm under each of mine and head for the front door.

"The rest is a surprise, so you'll have to wait till tonight," Ro says cryptically.

THE END