



Of Angels & Absolution (Fallen Gods of Thorncrown Universit #2)

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Category: Sport

Description: Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.

That's how it began.

My childhood friends heard my confession, and they blackmailed me.
Now they have me in their clutches.

Heath, the wild boy I sent to jail, now hellbent on revenge.

Angel, the boy with a mouth of sin who leads me deeper into hell
every day.

Saint, the brother I loved all my life, who now hates me most of all.

And then there's Father Salvatore—my guide, my confessor, my
temptation.

Each man has corrupted me in his own twisted way. Each act of
penance leads me closer to their forgiveness, closer to finding the
truth about my missing best friend... And further from the path of
purity I aspired to walk when I enrolled at Thorncrown University.

Except now it's not purity I crave. It's the pleasure that only they can
deliver.

But at what cost?

Total Pages (Source): 20

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:14 am

The Merciful

I pull my cardigan closed around me and duck my head against the wet, chilly wind as I hurry across campus toward the chapel. A twinge of pain pierces between my thighs with each step, as if my body is reminding me of last night's sin.

It's not nearly punishment enough.

Images flash through my mind as I increase my pace along the path through the manicured lawns, now a tawny brown for the winter.

The pain when they pushed their fingers inside me, piercing my chastity.

The sight of them standing over me, licking my virgin blood from each other.

The fear and shame and pleasure when the doctor stood over me and pushed a sleek statue of the Virgin Mary inside me.

My pulse pounds harder the nearer I get to Father Salvatore's confession booth.

I can't tell him. What will he think of me?

But how can I not tell him?

I have to tell some, to get it out if I have any hope of absolution, and I don't have any friends, thanks to the three boys who made it their mission to ostracize me from the rest of the student body at Thorncrown University. Three boys who have made my

life hell, who sacrificed me for their sins, who devoured my purity like hungry demons. Three boys who killed my best friend.

Probably.

The fact that I'm doubting it unsettles me. If they didn't do it, then I got them sent away for nothing. If they didn't do it, their anger—and by extension, my punishment—is justified. Because if they're innocent, then they're not the bad guys. I am.

I wish I knew what the police found, what evidence. My testimony alone couldn't have sent them away. But since it was a juvenile case, it was never released to the public. I've devoured details of other juvenile cases online—a girl who took her life after being bullied, whose parents and friends posted details and kept her memory alive as they added to the fire of outrage, taking shots at the bullies until their parents got involved and posted more details in defense and retaliation. A boy who was beaten at school and every witness posted a video of themselves recounting what happened, but conveniently no one had thought to video the actual event.

But Eternity's parents never posted anything. They were quiet, retreating to their private grief. No shots were fired at the boys who took the blame, and in turn, none of their parents posted anything that could be called a clue. No one even took to the internet to drag me. The only shots fired at me were bricks through the windows.

No one really knows what happened except her killers.

Having let those thoughts distract me, I'm calmer by the time I reach the small Catholic church on the edge of campus where mass is held, and where, last night, I was strapped to a cross and violated until pleasure overcame me. My cheeks burn with shame at the thought, and I duck my head and hurry through the quiet sanctuary, my footsteps echoing in the high ceilings, the comforting, familiar scent of incense

lingering in the air along with faint traces of that smell that all old buildings earn over time.

In daylight, in this holy place, last night's earthly debauchery feels far away, more like a dream than an experience. I couldn't possibly have come here and been defiled by a statue, a man in a plague mask. I couldn't have been touched, my purity erased, by my own brother, a brother I've loved for so long I can't pinpoint the moment that love changed into something less than innocent. I couldn't have watched him taste my blood off the fingers of my childhood friend, who violated me in a different way six years ago.

If it really happened, I certainly wouldn't have enjoyed it.

A throb squeezes at the sinful place between my thighs, and I close my eyes and take a breath to collect myself before stepping into the confessional.

I pull up short, a gasp clogging my throat.

My brother is sitting there already.

I start to back out, but he grabs my hand and yanks me inside and down onto his lap. The breath I was holding escapes me, and I open my mouth, but he clamps a hand over it before I can make a sound.

"Do what I say, or I can't protect you from what will happen."

My mind is spinning, and it settles on the most terrible image from last night—not what happened here, but what was waiting when I got back to my room. A human tongue, nailed to my door, along with a warning to keep my mouth shut.

Is that what will happen if I disobey?

If Saint didn't put it there, who did? Who wants me to keep quiet if not my brother? It must be the boys from the Quint, but what do they want me to keep quiet about, exactly? I already spoke the truth that got them sent to a juvenile detention center. Are they scared I'll tell what they did to me last night?

I nod mutely, my heart pounding wildly in my chest. Saint is so near, so warm and animal and alive, bringing back the primal, visceral sensations of last night, reminding me it wasn't a dream. In this place of high ideas and ritual and sanctity, they desecrated my flesh like savage beasts.

"Good girl," Saint says. "Now take off your panties."

I tense, and he scoffs quietly in my ear. "I'm not going to touch you. You're the pervert who wants to fuck her own brother."

My cheeks burn, and I reach down and hike up my ankle-length jean skirt. I have to lift up from Saint's lap, but I manage to work my underwear down over my thighs, my knees, my clumsy clogs. At last, I pull them off and hand them to my brother.

He leans away. "Put those away, you sicko. You think I want your used panties?"

I swallow past the lump in my throat, stung by his harsh words, the hate in his t. I ball up the panties and shove them into the pocket of the cardigan I crocheted for myself last winter while sitting under a blanket with my aunt, marathon watching *Gilmore Girls* and sipping hot cocoa from of her old, chipped mugs.

The thought of that simpler time stabs deep into my heart. Everything was easy then—easy and lly and filled with a sadness so deep and cold I'm not sure I can bring myself to miss it, even now.

Saint releases my mouth and roots around in the pocket of his wool peacoat that

probably cost as much as Aunt Lucy's entire house, old and falling apart as it was. It was home, though, and every wobbly chair and creaking door added to the charm.

He pulls out a crumpled wad of fabric. "Put these on."

I take it tentatively, only recognizing my own panties when they unfurl from my fingers. It's the pair I was wearing on HAVOC night, the pair he took off me as I was held in place by the plague doctor, dragged into sin while all twelve of the Hellhounds watched, apostles to the evil prophet who forced pleasure into my body until I couldn't hold it anymore.

I bend to put them on, only then pulling them open to see that the gusset is filled with a sticky, whitish substance that resembles glue.

"What is that?" I whisper, recoiling.

Saint's arm tightens around my midsection, where he's holding me to him. "What do you think, little sister?"

I swallow hard. "I—I don't know."

"What do you think three men would do with a pair of smelly panties? Use your imagination, little lamb."

I shake my head in silent embarrassment.

When I don't produce a further answer, he makes a quiet scoff of derision. "You don't have to say it. But you do have to put them on."

Gritting my teeth, I gingerly draw them to my knees, then stare into the pool of stringy, half-dried cream. "I can't."

“Oh, I think you can,” Saint croons. “I believe in you, little sister. Now pull them all the way up, so your dirty pussy is buried in the filth, where it belongs.”

On the other side of the screen, I hear a priest arrive. For second, my heart stops, and I’m afraid it’s some else. I made the appointment with Father Salvatore because he knows about my sins already, but maybe it’s too much for him. Maybe he sent another priest, and a stranger will sit on the other side of the screen and ask for my confession. I can only see motion through the tiny holes, and then he settles in, and his familiar, enticing scent of sandalwood and leather wraps around me.

I shiver with both relief and dread as his warm, velvet voice pours through the screen, wrapping around my body, gripping my trembling thighs.

“Are you there, lamb?”

“Yes,” I say, and I pull the panties up in swift motion, lifting my hips at the same time. I suck in a breath when the cold moisture hits my warm skin, and Saint drags me back down onto his lap, his other hand wrapping around my throat.

“Don’t say a word,” he breathes into my ear. “I want to hear you lie to a man of God who thinks you’re an innocent little lamb while you sit in my cum. We both know what you really are.”

“Forgive me, Father,” I choke out, my words a rush. “It’s been—I don’t know—it’s been a few days since my last confession, I—I think. I really don’t remember. The sins are so many, it feels like weeks. How can I do so much to stray from God in a single day?”

“Take a deep breath, lamb,” he says. “Why don’t you tell me what’s happened since we last spoke?”

So, I do. The words pour out of me like a dam broke, unstoppable and chaotic. I don't even falter in my embarrassment—maybe the hard heat of Saint's body under mine provides enough distraction that I don't stumble the way I did in my first confession, or maybe I've gotten used to unburdening myself this way. For years, I held it all bottled up inside, but now, I have someone to listen, to hear me and support me. Someone who at least tries not to judge and condemn me to hell for the weakness of my flesh and the wantonness of my mind.

"I just want it to go away," I beg the priest, my voice trembling with desperation. "Please, Father. I sacrificed myself to them, but it didn't cleanse me of my sins or rid me of my desires. Tell me how to get this wickedness out."

"Did it help?" he asks, his tone gentle and even.

"Help with what?"

"When you found your release, did it help, even for a short time? Or did your desire remain constant even then?"

"I—It did help," I admit, remembering my determination when I was alone in my room again. For once, I wasn't tempted to slide my hand between my thighs, to ease the ache. They left me with a different kind of ache, from being well used and spent. My mind was clear for the moment, a clarity I find so seldom.

"And you enjoyed it?" he asks, his voice a seductive rumble, as if it would lead me down a path of temptation I can never unfollow.

"Yes," I whisper, a tear of pure, hot shame rolling down my cheek.

"And what would you do for penance?" he asks. "God put this desire in you, lamb. I cannot rid you of it. I can only offer a suggestion."

“Please,” I cry, the tears coming faster. “I’ll do anything. Help me, Father.”

“Do you trust me?” the father asks, and I hear his robes rustle as he shifts, across the partition and out of sight.

“Of course,” I say without hesitation. Pathetic as it makes me, the priest is the closest thing to a friend I have here, the closest thing the Hellhounds will allow. I am their sacrifice, here for purpose only—in their eyes, at least.

I know my true purpose, why I won’t leave this holy place and its unholy inhabitants. I need the truth. I won’t leave until I know what happened to Eternity that day, why I lost not only my best friend but all my friends. She was murdered, and if they did it, then they were no more my friends than hers. Friends can’t be counted on, but maybe Fathers can.

But if I can’t tell him the deepest truth, can I really be absolved? If I’m not ridding myself of the sin, maybe it’s because some part of me doesn’t want to let it go. Some part of me likes it. Not just what they did to me, but the pleasure of my own body. That’s the addiction. That’s the disease. Saying a thousand Hail Marys can only stifle it, like a painkiller can soothe a toothache. But the root is still festering, and without digging down into the darkest, dirtiest, most rotten core of it, it will never go away.

I tell myself that the reason I don’t do it is because my brother is here, and it was shameful enough to admit I enjoyed his fingers inside me last night. I can’t say that I enjoyed more than that, that I enjoyed being bound, unable to escape, so I was powerless to live out the fantasy I’ve had of him all along.

“I want you to try something for me,” Father Salvatore says, his voice as dark and sultry as sin itself. “I want you to put your hand on the place from which your perceived sin stems.”

I take a shallow breath, then close my eyes, a tremor running through me. Slowly, I slide a hand under my skirt.

“Yes, Father,” I whisper, my lips cold and stiff, barely moving.

“How does that feel?” he asks.

“Good.” My fingers brush the damp fabric of the panties I’m wearing, and instead of being disgusted by the knowledge of what’s inside them, a hot throb of hot desire ripples through me.

Saint grips my hair, pulling my head back on his shoulder, his other arm still banded around my middle. “Don’t be shy, little sister,” he whispers into my ear, so softly only I can hear it. “Finger your cunt the way you do at home when you think about your big brother watching.”

I shudder against him, desire pooling heavy in my center.

“Are you touching yourself?” the father asks, his voice soft and deep as a caress to my hungry flesh.

“Forgive me, Father,” I say, my voice trembling as I move my fingers harder, working the grimy, slick fabric into my slit.

“I want you to continue until you find the same relief you did last night,” he says.

My breath catches, and my chest heaves. It’s too good to be true. I must be dreaming, that he’s allowing me this sin, telling me it’s permitted. Slowly, I begin to knead my flesh.

Saint’s breath becomes shallower, and his fingers tighten in the sides of my skirt,

drawing it up my thighs. The brush of fabric over my fevered skin makes me shiver with longing, my mind racing ahead, to when he'll slide his hand between my legs, help me. I bite my lip to keep from whimpering as I picture his long, thick fingers tugging aside my panties, pushing into me slow and deep, like they did last night.

"Oh," I gasp, feeling my panties grow suddenly wet.

"What is it, lamb?" Father Salvatore asks, and maybe it's my imagination, but I think his voice sounds a little rougher than usual.

"It's—it's nothing," I whisper, my cheeks flushing. I drop my gaze just in time to see Saint pause with my skirt just at the apex of my thighs. His fingers clench again, knotting in the fabric, and my skirt slides up to reveal my small hand between. He sucks in a slow breath, and I feel something hard move under me. I gasp, somehow knowing what it is without having to be told. My shame heightens to an unbearable level, and I want to get up from him, to run from the booth and never stop running.

"Go on," Saint whispers against my neck. "Show your big brother how you finger your tight little cunt for him."

"I—I don't know how," I admit. "I've never d this before."

I realize a second too late that I spoke aloud, that Father Salvatore doesn't know I have company. If I could die of humiliation, I would.

"Tell me what you're doing," he commands.

"I'm—I'm touching myself."

"Tell me what you see."

“My fingers,” I say breathlessly. “Rubbing my panties.”

“Are they wet?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Does it feel like last night?”

“No,” I admit.

“Better?”

“Not as good,” I say, closing my eyes and praying I’ll expire before I have to see my brother’s face again.

“Find the spot where your pleasure is highest,” Father Salvatore. “Work your fingers around it.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Are you ready to slip your fingers inside your panties?” he asks, his rich, sinful voice strained.

An erotic charge shudders through me, and I picture him watching me do what he said, look at my throbbing, sinful flesh. I picture him on his knees the way we kneel for him at communion, tasting me the way the boys did last night. I’m panting so hard I feel lightheaded.

But then Saint shifts under me, and I can feel the hard ridge of his desire, impossibly thick. I feel the grimy fabric I’m rubbing into myself, the slickness I’ve revived in the dirty panties by drenching them with my own wetness. My shame is unbearable.

I close my eyes and draw a shaky breath. “No, Father.”

“Very well,” he says. “Work on that, lamb. I want you to do it again until you have found the relief you had last night. Then come back and see me.”

I hear a rustle, see movement through the screen, and then the sound of him exiting the booth echoes through the empty space around us.

“Good ,” Saint says, chuckling and shifting his hips again. “You’re so disgusting even a priest couldn’t stick around to hear your confession. Now rub your brother’s cum into that dirty cunt like the whore you are and squirt like you did for us last time. I’m getting bored.”

Tears fill my eyes unbidden, and my breaths become ragged with sobs.

“I can’t,” I choke out. “I don’t know how.”

“You think I’m going to show you?” He scoffs and then dumps me into the seat, standing at the same time. I fall back on the bench, my head striking the wall, my skirt around my hips, my fingers still lodged between my thighs.

Saint shakes his head, his lip curling in disgust. “At least you’re pretty when you cry,” he says. “But know this, little sister. I’ll never stop finding reasons to make you shed those pretty tears until you leave this campus for good.”

With that, he turns and leaves the confessional, leaving me sobbing and al. In the depths of my shame, I cling to the small seeds of hope he left.

He thinks I’m pretty.

He isn’t ready to replace me as the Hellhounds’ sacrifice just yet.

I still have a chance.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:14 am

The Merciful

I slide into my seat in the lecture hall and shrug off the coat I wore against the nasty weather outside. Opening my phone, I scroll through the familiar tabs, news articles about Eternity's disappearance that I've read so many times I have every word memorized. The only one I don't open is the one about them finding her body. Even four years later, it makes me sick to think about it. My mind, of course, tries to go there the moment I tell it I don't want to remember my best friend's body being dragged from the river, headless and bloated.

That always brings me back to my other childhood best friends, the remainder of our group, The Quint. The three boys who now hate me for testifying against them, for telling the truth about that day. I didn't see them decapitate her before throwing her body in the river. I didn't even see her clothes, stained with blood and bodily fluids, that the police found on the bank. But I saw them go under the bridge with her. I saw them come out without her.

Are they planning to get rid of me like they did her, after they have their fun punishing and breaking me? She didn't know better, didn't know who they really are, what they're capable of. I do. If I fight back, they might punish me even more savagely than they already have. I console myself with the knowledge that I can stop any time I want. I can walk away, or I can fight back in ways they don't expect. They don't know what I'm capable of, either. Not yet.

What if I have it all wrong, though? What if I had it wrong all along?

If it wasn't them, then her killer is still out there.

Is that who's been following me, warning me, watching me? I shiver at the thought of a stranger, a killer, entering my room when I wasn't there, touching my things, leaving it trashed. Is he playing with me like a cat plays with a mouse before she devours it?

Or is that wishful thinking, ignoring the obvious, when the three boys who like to toy with their food are right in front of me, and they'd like nothing more than to scare me into leaving campus by pinning a bloody, severed human tongue to my door to remind me of my betrayal?

I talked, after all. When Eternity disappeared, I had nothing to hide, so I told the truth.

They wouldn't tell the police anything. That refusal tells its own truth. Only a guilty person won't speak. If they didn't know anything, they'd have nothing to hide, either.

I shudder, relieved for the distraction when the three people who always sit in front of me take their usual places. Even though we're in a big lecture hall, most people find a spot in the first few weeks and remain there out of habit. Sometimes their chatter bothers me, but today I welcome it. As long as Annabel Lee doesn't remember me, the way I remembered her the first time I saw her face instead of just the back of her head or her cheek, I'll keep sitting in the spot I picked the first day of school too. So far, she's been too busy gossiping with her friends to look closely at the people in the row behind her.

"What are we doing for Halloween?" the goth girl asks Ronique. "My parents are having a party, but I'd rather just go to one on campus, if there is one. My family is... Intense, shall we say?"

"You don't say," deadpans the boy with white hair who sits with them every day. Since the lecture is so impersonal, I still don't know his name.

“Let me guess, they’re all as weird as you?” Ronique asks.

“Hey,” Annabel Lee protests, adjusting the bejeweled spider she’s wearing in her hair. “Just because I’m a freak doesn’t mean my whole family has to be.”

“But they are,” the boy says, then turns to Ronique. “Don’t believe her if she says otherwise. She just said so, and she can’t take it back.”

“I’ve seen your cousin around campus,” Ronique says, then sighs. “With Saint Soules.”

“Oh, he’s not intense,” Annabel Lee says with a dismissive wave of her hand. “He’s just a whore.”

I wince, ducking my head and lining up my pens by color, clipping each one to the top of my notebook.

“Then why won’t you introduce us?” asks the boy, pushing his shoulder into hers.

“Do you really want to be more involved in my family than you already are?”

“Basically, what you’re saying is that you’re part of the Addams family,” Ronique says. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Looks can be deceiving,” Annabel Lee says. “For all you know, my family is full of sparkly unicorn rainbows and sunshine.”

“And that’s how you became a storm cloud,” the boy says, putting an arm around her. “My favorite little raindrop.”

“Are you going to let him talk to you like that?” Ronique asks. “Y’all are sick.”

“What, a girl with a morbid imagination can’t have a cute nickname?” Annabel Lee asks. “Besides, look at the gorgeous day outside. Who likes the sun? Gross.”

“Um, lots of people,” Ronique says, “Who aren’t vampires .”

“It’s too bright,” Annabel Lee says. “You don’t need that much light. It’s like it’s trying to blind you. Plus, hello, sunburns?”

“Maybe you wouldn’t get burned if you left your cave once in a while.”

They go on bantering, but I stop listening and color code my notes as the professor talks for the rest of the class. I try not to think about my next class—Finding God in Science. The class itself is fine, though I can’t say I’m able to focus on the topic like I can here. But the fact that Father Salvatore teaches it makes my heart gallop, my palms sweat, and my knees threaten to buckle at the mere thought of attending again.

I’m brought back to the confessional, the dirty thing he made me do. What would he do if he knew I wasn’t alone? That not only was I touching myself while sitting on my brother’s lap, but that I was rubbing his sticky release into me, as if could absorb it, suck it up into me, keep those tiny seeds of him inside me forever. Just the idea has me squirming, my core throbbing with need.

What if Heath recorded that one too?

I will expire.

I tug at my necklace, thumbing the back of the cross, where the word SHAME is etched. It doesn’t begin to describe how I feel after my confession. The things that have gone through my mind warrant more than one further confession, but if I do that, will Father Salvatore order me to try again? If I fail again, will he want to try something else?

My knees clench together, and I have to close my eyes and steady my breathing so I don't start panting at the images whirling through my mind. I scold myself and slip the cross between my lips, clenching them around the metal before yanking it out. The cross tears the skin inside my lip, and the sweet tang of my coppery blood spreads over my tongue, soothing me.

I am here. I am alive. I am human.

I'm on my way to my next class, dragging my feet and working up my courage, when a familiar hush falls around me. Girls giggle under their breath, dart glances from under their lashes, play with their hair, and cast coy smiles behind me. I tense, dread pooling in my belly, but I don't look back. Instead, I duck my head and grip my books tighter, quickening my pace.

I don't make it far before a hand falls on the back of my neck, fingers firm and dominant.

"Running away from me, little sister?" my brother's voice taunts.

I pause a second, letting my traitorous heart quell for him, and then I steel myself and lift my head. Like usual, Saint is flanked on either side by Heath and Angel—his best friends, formerly mine as well. I quickly tear my gaze from Heath's before I can see the hatred in his teal-blue eyes.

"Just trying not to be late for class," I say, careful to keep my tone even. I don't have any classes with the three Hellhounds in front of me, which means I only see them when they seek me out. It hasn't happened since the night in the chapel—except for Saint, who found me at confession. My pulse skips at the memory of last night, the filthy thing we did in that booth. I pray Heath doesn't know, that he won't blackmail me into further depravity with the knowledge he has now.

“I bet you are,” Saint says, smirking down at me. “Tell me, when you sit in front of him with your bruised knees crossed like an innocent little lamb, are you really squeezing your sloppy cunt between your thighs to masturbate in a room full of people?”

I gasp out loud, glancing around to make sure no one overheard. It’s clear that Heath and Angel did, but other people are also watching, whispering. Did they hear what he said to me? Do they know it’s true?

“Are you so pathetic as to picture a priest defiling you while you get off in front of him?” he asks. “Or do you think about fingering your crusty panties into that foul hole just to get a drop of your big brother’s cum in your cunt, the way you always wanted?”

Shame shimmers through me, hot as a mirage. I want to tell him he’s wrong, that I hate him, I hate them all, but I have enough sins on my conscience without adding another lie.

“You know that’s the only way you’ll ever get it, don’t you?” Saint asks, his voice harder.

“Get what?”

“My cum,” he says flatly. “I will never fuck that greedy little cunt, let it drink my cum to quench its thirst. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

I swallow hard, not trusting my voice, and try to walk away.

Saint grabs my arm, yanking me to a stop and spinning me to face him.

“Isn’t it, little sister?” he asks, backing me into the wall.

I meet his gaze, even though a shock of pain knocks the breath from me when I see the loathing in his amber eyes, the hard set of his jaw. Heath looms behind him, bouncing on his toes, straining forward like a racehorse trapped in its stall, eager to run.

Saint steps closer, shoving his knee between mine and rocking forward, his muscular thigh flexing against my center in one cruelly efficient stroke. I'm instantly weak, my core trembling, my flesh drenched.

Angel chuckles and looks me up and down, his gaze downright indecent.

"Saint," I whisper, fighting not to grind on the thigh he's pinning me with, sending ripples of pleasure through every inch of my body. It feels so good I think I'll lose control at any moment, ride his thigh until it's soaked right here in the hall, in front of all these people.

He smirks down at me, heartlessly sweeping a strand of hair off my cheek, sending a rush of tingles through me. I close my eyes to keep them from rolling back at the contact.

"Answer me, my thirsty, sick sister."

I nod, my throat aching, my heart twisting in pain, my core clenching with pleasure. What is wrong with me? I know he's torturing me for his own enjoyment, hurting me to give himself pleasure. It shouldn't affect me this way, but it does.

He scoffs quietly, tensing his thigh harder, forcing my pleasure to rise higher with one last slow, ruthless grind. "Too bad I'm not an incestuous freak like you," he whispers, so close I can feel his warm breath on my lips like a kiss, one that I've hungered for since before I knew what that hunger meant.

He leaves me with that, striding off down the hall with his friends like he doesn't notice the girls fawning for his attention, the guys reaching out hands to congratulate him on his achievement. Meanwhile, I'm left to bear the humiliation on my own, the stares from the girls that hold a mixture of envy and disgust; resentment and hunger from the guys.

I know the disgust that the girls feel all too well, having felt it for myself for so long, but the envy is foreign to me.

I know the hunger the men feel, but I've never felt that other thing they show so clearly, as if they want to destroy me both for my weakness and because they weren't the ones I chose to exploit it.

I ponder that to distract me from the shame of shuffling to class, trying to hide the change in my gait caused by my swollen sex throbbing between my thighs like a hot ember. My brother is the one who gave in, who touched me, and yet, he is celebrated for his apparent victory, while I have to do the walk of shame to class when I did nothing to invite attention.

When I reach Father Salvatore's room, I dart to my seat, ignoring the murmur of interest my presence brings. Word travels fast on a campus this small, and some already seem to know about my confrontation in the hall with a member of the revered Hellhounds group.

At least most of them don't know he's my brother. I don't know if I could bear that shame.

The shame of seeing Father Salvatore again is more than enough. The moment he strides into the room, purposeful in his tailored slacks and black shirt and collar, I can't catch my breath. His gaze sweeps the room, and our eyes meet. A charge of electricity shoots like lightning down my body, striking in white-hot pulses between

my thighs. I bite my lip not to cry out, squirming in my seat, clutching the edge of my desk. A lethal combination of humiliation and arousal flushes my face with a feverish heat. The priest's eyes fall on my bitten lips, and his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. Then he breaks eye contact, clears his throat, and pushes up his thin, wire-rimmed glasses.

"It's such a nasty day outside, I thought I'd bring something to cheer you up," he says, sounding so completely normal that I burn even hotter with embarrassment.

I'm over here simpering like I have no self-respect, and he doesn't even know who I am. I'm just another student to him, one of his flock. He doesn't know I'm the girl from the private confessional, the girl he told to touch herself while he sat just on the other side of the screen, listening to me pant and gasp as I pleased myself. He doesn't know that I was thinking about him when I did.

Father Salvatore produces a big Tupperware container and hands it to the first person in the row.

"You made cookies?" the girl asks, looking up at him like a lovestruck puppy.

At least I'm not the only one mooning over him.

Of course not. Look at him. He oozes masculinity, dominance. His gorgeous, sculpted face and dark eyes are commanding, his broad shoulders and narrow hips and muscular thighs invite sinful thoughts, and his voice...

God, that voice.

He chuckles, and the low, sultry sound rolls like thunder down my back, shaking like an earthquake in my core.

“I didn’t make them,” he says. “Though they are homemade. Okay, everyone take a cookie and then we’ll get started. They’re gluten-free and nut-free, but they have all the good stuff—butter and eggs and sugar.” He winks at the class, and every girl in the room must feel her panties melt simultaneously.

I take the tub, select a cookie and a napkin from the stack he passed along with it, and set them on my desk. As the cookies continue around the room to exclamations of happiness and gratitude, I nibble at mine. Father Salvatore said he didn’t make them.

So, who did?

I try to picture him at home. Does he live with his mother, or a relative like I did? Maybe a sister or cousin.

Or maybe he’s married.

The thought is like a shock of cold water to the face. But it’s not out of the question. Priests are allowed to do that now. There was no mention of a family when I researched him online, but I’m not good enough with technology to find anything besides the public information available in a basic web search. Still, if she’s not a wife, she could be a fiancé or girlfriend.

Those thoughts are only slightly less comforting.

I set my cookie down, feeling ill. I know it’s dumb, that it’s impossible for him to date a student. Of course we’re not going to be together. Even if he knew who I was, he couldn’t relieve me of my sins in the way I want him to. I’m a student. He’s my teacher.

The disappointment is crushing, nonetheless.

I didn't realize I'd built up something so big in my head. It's not like I sit around daydreaming of walking down the aisle with him—though I might now that it's crossed my mind—but I put him on a pedestal. I've done everything he said, booked my confessions only with him, fantasized about him while I did something sinful, the first time I'd ever let myself do that.

And now I find out the man I've been dreaming about has a life. He's not just a fantasy. He's reality, and the reality sinks like a stone into my stomach. He's not just my confidant, my advisor, my confessor. He's not my savior. He's a real man, with real needs, a life I know nothing about.

I console myself with the thought that one of the nuns made the cookies.

That lasts for a few minutes, while I picture the grouchy nun at the front desk of my dorm having a soft spot for Father Salvatore, a man so far from home, so alone.

But then I remember not all the nuns are pickled old grumps. Some of them are young and pure, more chaste than me, their thoughts as unsullied as their bodies. Some are reformed wild women with sins much deeper and greater than mine, who repented and found another path. Do they confess their most depraved carnal sins to him? Are the cookies a seduction they sent him under the guise of gratitude when he absolved them? Will some Jezebel far more clever and worldly than me succeed in leading him down a path of temptation where I'm too timid to even take a step?

I spend the class battling a new sin today—envy. When it's over, I start back toward my dorm, as bleak and miserable as the cold, rainy day outside. I'm so busy churning with inner turmoil that I don't notice the footsteps behind me for far too long. When I finally do, and I turn to face them, I find myself standing alone against the seven Sinners.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:14 am

The Angel

At first, I think nothing of it when I see the Sinners lurking over by the girls' dorm. They have one downright evil sister among their group, and she has a room there, though she spends almost all her nights with her brothers in the creepy old gothic tower on the edge of campus that used to house the priests. I heard it was condemned and was going to be torn down before their father pulled some strings to acquire it for them. It only has six bedrooms though, and I don't even want to think about which bed the she-wolf sleeps in. I wouldn't be surprised if she made the rounds—one night of the week in each brother's bed, and one night in her dorm room.

Or maybe they all sleep hanging upside down like bats.

I could charm more information out of one of the unfortunate souls who's gone home with a Sinner at some point, but I really don't want to know.

The Sincero family belongs to Diablo's Disciples, the rival gang to my family's, and that's all I need to know. That beef's been going on for decades, and though I don't know all the details, I know they're the reason my mom's face is bisected by a gnarly scar.

She wears it well, with equal parts grace and sass. I'm lowkey proud to have a badass mom who could make a mean pancake or make a bitch disappear, depending on her mood.

That doesn't mean I'll ever forgive the Disciples for causing it.

The Sinners are all fucking psychos, so seeing them harassing some poor freshman who's just trying to make it through the drizzle on her way to class is hardly new. But then I'm reminded that Mercy is one of the poor freshmen they've been known to harass, and all logic goes out the window. I storm that way, ready for war, and charge in like a bull.

I know I look scary as hell—at six-foot-four inches of pure muscle, I look more like my uncle than my dad, and I spend as much time under the needle getting inked as I do in the gym getting ripped. On the inside, I like to think I'm more golden retriever than Doberman, but when the situation calls for it, I'm not above using my size and looks to intimidate people. Unlike Heath, I don't usually go looking for trouble, but I've never backed down from a fight. If I did, I wouldn't be in the Skull and Crossbones, no matter who my family is.

When I reach the wall of four Sinners standing shoulder to shoulder and shove them apart, I don't find the scene I expected. Instead of Mercy huddled and terrified, she's standing with her feet planted wide, fists raised, blue eyes blazing with defiance. Three of the Sincero boys are on the rain-soaked ground at her feet—one clutching his throat, another his nuts, a third one apparently out cold. I take them in, then return my gaze to Mercy, a low whistle escaping me.

Damn, girl.

Taking care of business like she did when we were kids, except then, she had the rest of the Quint backing her up. Now she stands alone in the rain, blood dripping from a busted lip and hair coming unmoored from its usual tight bun, cheeks flushed with adrenaline. She's never looked more fuckable in her life.

“Are we done here?” I ask. “Because I think Saint showed y'all what happens if you fuck with his sister. Did you forget so soon?”

“Why don’t you run and tell him?” Bain taunts, twirling his oversized umbrella over him, his sister, and his pretty-boy brother. “We’ll finish her off for you while you’re gone. We all know you can’t get the job done.”

His sister sucks her teeth and then grins, canines like fangs between her red lips, as she looks me up and down. “I’d let him try.”

“What?” I bark.

The others snicker and nudge Morticia, and I realize they think I’m caught up on what she said, which is vaguely interesting, since I always thought she was a lesbian. But I don’t really care what she does in her spare time, as long as my dick isn’t part of it. In fact, my testicles are crawling back up into my body just thinking about it, and even the frigid October rain couldn’t do that.

But no one gets to question my ability to get a girl off, not even these assholes. I am a certified sex god and a stud, and no one better even hint differently.

I bow up and glare down at Archer, since looking up at Bain makes my puffery less effective. Archer’s the only one not huddled under the umbrella, so he’s an easy target.

“Did you say you were going to finish her off?” I ask, nodding to their fallen comrades. “Looks like she was doing a fine job finishing you off. I knew hockey players were pussies, but I didn’t know a chick could singlehandedly take down all seven of you.”

Hey, if they’re going to hit me in my point of pride, I’ll hit them in theirs.

I smirk down at the boy. “Got something to say back to me, little guy?”

Bain shoves the umbrella handle at his sister and steps out from the shelter, getting up in my face so his brother can melt back into his place.

“You think you’re going to disrespect my brother like that and walk away?”

That word triggers an automatic response in me—people die over shit like that on our side of town. The taunting is over. My hands ball into fists, my gaze sweeps them for weapons, and adrenaline courses through my bloodstream like a shot of heroin.

Bain throws the first punch, and I absorb it as best as I can because he’s quicker, but I’m stronger. Pain explodes up my side, but I stand my ground and return the blow, going for his face. He ducks, and my fist glances off the fucking razor-edge of his jawline. He jumps back, then swings again, his long limbs letting him connect fully while I have to step in. The result makes his blow more powerful, since he has my momentum on his side. But my next blow connects squarely with his gut, and he doubles over in pain, the breath knocked out of him. He lunges, tackling my legs like he’ll take me down. Too bad I’ve been on the receiving end of plenty of those moves on the football field, from guys who weigh twice what this gangly bastard does.

I ram my elbow down into his back, letting him push me back a few steps so I don’t lose my balance. Then I box him in the ear, and he loses his hold and crumples. Grunts and cries of pain echo around us, and I spin to find Mercy facing off against Cruella and the last standing Sincero brother. He lunges for her, and she sidesteps, but he catches the collar of her uniform. A ripping sound echoes through the rain, and her shirt gapes open, the jagged tear exposing one of her tits, clad in a nude bra that doesn’t quite hide the point of her nipple in the cold.

Ah hell no.

I grab the Sinner by the back of his neck and hurl him to the ground before jumping on him. I don’t restrain myself as my fists pound his face in. He’s lucky I don’t tear

his eyes out for seeing Mercy that way like Saint would. I'm a civilized heathen, though, so I settle for making sure they'll be swollen shut for a week.

Bain scrapes himself off the ground and comes at me again, knocking me off Rafe. When I roll away, I see Mercy and the evil queen rolling around on the grass. Mercy's so docile and obedient that it's hot to see her throwing a punch and not just ducking and cowering. I might spontaneously ejaculate if I saw her mud wrestling any other chick, but Sister Sincero is so vile that not one dude on earth would want to fuck her. Unless he's into having his dick dissolved in a pit of acid, that is, since that's definitely what resides between her legs.

I'm distracted enough that Bain gets in a few hits, anyway, including busting my eye and lip. The taste of my own blood fills my mouth and clears my head, and I slam a fist into his jaw so hard he flies backwards off me and thuds to the grass in an unconscious heap. I scramble up in time to see Evil Incarnate sitting astride Mercy, both hands wrapped around her throat, squeezing until Mercy's face has turned a shade of scarlet that's bordering on maroon.

I've never hit a girl before, but I'm not about to let Salem choke out our lamb. Not when I know she's not just bigger and tougher than Mercy, but she fights at the underground, bareknuckle fight club my cousin runs. She could probably knock me out if I'm not careful.

I grab the red-lipped Sincero bitch by the high braid she's wearing today and haul her backwards. She gives a cry of fury as she loses her hold, probably pissed that she was yanked back from the edge of victory. She spins and slashes her pointed claws through the air, shrieking and hissing like a possum. Her nails rake down my cheek and neck before I toss her away from me. She goes tumbling across the grass, and I turn back and hold out a hand to help Mercy up.

More than half the Sinners are still conscious, but since they seem disinclined to

continue fighting, I decide to call it a day. I'm not looking to get arrested for murder, and I need to get Mercy somewhere safe.

"You'll pay for this," swears Killian as we walk away.

Ignoring the Sinners entirely, I lead Mercy towards her dorm. There's always something to pay for, some new injury in the latest brawl. We're always out to get each other with escalating violence. That's what happens when you have rival gangs on the same campus. The Skull and Crossbones were here first, and we bring a lot of benefit to this town. If every Disciple disappeared from Faulkner tomorrow, no one would lose any sleep over it. They're nothing but trouble.

"Are you okay?" I ask Mercy as we reach the steps of her dorm. "Did she hurt you?"

"No," she says, shaking her head. I can tell she's trying to be brave, and even though I can't tell for sure if the wetness on her face is just rain, I think she might be crying.

"Let me come in," I say. "I'll get you fixed up."

"I'm fine," she says, her lips tightening. The motion sends a fat drop of bright blood oozing from her broken skin, and she winces.

"Let's get you cleaned up," I say, striding up the steps and waiting at the door for her to unlock it with her keycard. There's no way I'm going to let her go back to her room and sit there alone, beaten and shaken. Fighting takes a lot out of a person, not just physically. There's a psychological toll to violence that I know all too well, and even if Mercy doesn't, that's all the more reason for me to be with her right now and help her process her emotions.

She looks like she's debating whether to argue further, but she must see that my mind is made up, because she sighs and unlocks the door. We hurry inside, ducking our

heads so the nun at the front desk won't see that we're both battered and bleeding. Fighting is strictly forbidden on the Thorncrown campus. Some bullshit about Jesus turning the other cheek.

I know better. If my mom had turned the other cheek to a Disciple, they would have slashed that one too.

"You weren't half bad back there," I say, watching Mercy from the corner of my eye as we climb the stairs. "Not even sure you needed my help. You might've polished off all seven Sinners if I hadn't intervened."

She scoffs. "Beginner's luck. They weren't expecting me to fight back. I just took them by surprise, that's all."

"Hard to get the jump on seven people."

"Well, luckily you did intervene," she says, stopping at her door and turning to me. "Thank you."

"Don't act like this is goodbye," I say, tipping my head toward her door. "Let me in."

"Angel..."

"Mercy," I say, stepping closer and lowering my voice. I smile down at her, my fingers ghosting over her waist. With her shirt plastered to her from the rain, I can see all her curves, the beautiful womanly figure that she tries to hide. All I can think about is peeling those clothes from her body, tasting her skin, her nipples, her cunt. If it takes all day and night, hell, all my life, I will kneel before her and worship her like the goddess she is until she stops pretending otherwise.

"What are you doing?" she asks, a tremor in her voice.

“Just making sure you’re okay,” I say. “When I’m sure you are, I’ll leave, no questions asked.”

“I’m okay.”

“I need proof,” I say. “Sometimes it takes a minute for the aftereffects to kick in. We’ll just hang out until then.”

“Aftereffects?” she asks, her brow furrowing.

“Yeah,” I say. “When people are the victims of random violence like that, it can make you feel... A lot of emotion. Anger, fear... I’ve heard of people getting attacked once and they literally were scared to leave their house in case it happened again, and they became this total recluse. Can’t let that happen to my little M, can I?”

“I’m not going to become a recluse because of that,” she mutters, like I’m silly to even suggest it, but she unlocks her door, and that was the goal anyway.

Inside, I push the door closed behind her and pull her close.

“It’s our job to protect you,” I say. “We promised we would if you came to the chapel, and you did. We’ve already failed you today. We didn’t realize you needed a guard around you at all times, but now I’m thinking you do.”

“I’m fine,” she insists, trying to pull away.

I pull her back and start undoing her buttons. “Obviously, you’re not. Look at you. You’re covered in dirt and blood, your shirt is torn, your lip is busted, your throat is bruised... We didn’t protect you, but we’re going to do better from now on. Let me make it up to you.”

“This isn’t—I’m fine, really,” she says, but there’s another tremor in her voice.

The adrenaline must be leaving her, and I’d bet money she’s going to start crying at any moment.

“I’m going to make it up to you,” I say, peeling her wet shirt open. Goosebumps sweep over the exposed globes of her breasts above her bra, and all the blood in my head rushes to my dick. It’s all I can do not to drop to my knees and worship them.

“Angel,” she whispers, her breaths coming quicker, which only makes her tits heave, which makes my dick harder and my head emptier.

“First let’s get you out of these wet clothes so you don’t catch cold,” I say, peeling the torn garment off her and tossing it into a wastebasket in the corner. “Then we’ll warm you up.”

Slowly, I trace my knuckles down her taut tummy, stopping at her belly button. She wears her skirt low on her hips, so it’ll cover more of her legs, and I get a little lightheaded seeing the goosebumps sweeping over all that bare, ivory skin. It’s unclaimed land, just begging to be taken, bitten, bruised. I want to leave my mark on her, not to hurt her, but to know she’s wearing it under her clothes. To know she’s mine, and her body bears the mark of my claim as surely as mine wears the tattoos that show I belong to the Skulls.

I thumb her bellybutton, the soft swell of her lower belly, her skin cool and so soft it makes my mouth water and my fingers twitch to spread over it, to touch every untouched part of her that remains.

“You can do mine,” I say, taking her hand and raising it to my chest. “I know you want to. I’ve seen you looking. It’s okay to touch, lamb. I want you to.”

She shudders and draws an audible, shaky breath.

Encouraged, I press her fingertips to the top button on my shirt. "I'm all wet too," I murmur, dropping my forehead to hers. "Just like you."

Her eyes flutter closed, her rosy, pink lips parting in a gasp. Her finger curls, slipping between the buttons of my shirt. She hooks it around, then stops herself, hanging there like she's clinging to me more than undressing me. I grab the front of my shirt and rip it open. Her eyes fly open, and she gasps as buttons click and roll across her floor. Before she can step back, I grab her hand again, pressing her cold palm to my hot skin.

Slowly, she raises her eyes to mine. I press her little hand harder against my muscled chest, letting her feel the fevered heat of my body when she's near, the thunder of my heartbeat. Holding her gaze, I trace my thumb down her body again, hooking it into the top of her skirt. I bear down, pushing the waistband low enough that my thumb finds the swell of her mound, the soft curls of pubic hair inside her underwear.

I suck in a breath and drop to my knees, unable to hold myself back any longer. I grab her skirt in both hands and drag it down, her panties with it.

She cries out and grabs for me, but before she can push me away, I yank her hips forward. I bury my nose in her and inhale, a moan slipping from me unbidden when I fill my lungs with her delicious scent again.

"Angel," she cries, gripping my head.

Ignoring her, I slide my tongue out, dipping it between her lips. I like that she's not shaved, like the sensation of her soft hair against my lips. It's sensual in a way I haven't experienced, so raw and primal for such a buttoned-up girl. Somehow, it makes her seem both more innocent and more wild than the brazen girls with hairless

bodies who expertly ride us the first chance they get, eager to add us to their lists of conquests. I've gotten bored of them, bored of the lack of variety. After a while, all the shaved, perfumed pussies taste the same.

Mercy is the first thing that's been new in a long, long time. I love her purity, her untamed tangle of red hair, her natural taste and scent. I plunge my tongue into her slit, teasing her open until I reach her hot, wet center. She cries out, her thighs quaking. Without breaking the kiss, I lift her hips, holding them to my face while I pull her legs over my shoulders. I move across the room on my knees, crawling to her bed and laying her back on it, my mouth suctioned to her sweet, wet pussy. I suck her folds between my lips, caress them between my tongue and lip, then work the tip of my tongue into her opening.

"Please," she gasps out, her hands fisting in her crochet blanket.

I spread her thighs wide and take one look at her delicate pink pussy before I feast. I drive my tongue into her opening, fucking her deep with it, listening to the sweet, unbidden moans and gasps and whimpers that fall from her lips as pure as dewdrops in the morning. I ravish her, eating and sucking, biting and fucking, moaning in pure, animal satisfaction.

I want to rise up and slam my cock home inside her, but I know she can't take me yet. I've never fucked a virgin, and I never will. I don't need to. I'm so big everyone feels tight to me. I usually don't even want to, but Mercy is making me lose my mind.

Usually, I like to eat first, get girls warmed up, force an orgasm from them when they're trying to wait, to save it for Saint or Heath's dick. But they always cum on my tongue before they get to go on, to cum on their cocks. Then I can sit back and watch my brothers stretch them out and wreck their cunts. I'm the pinch hitter who comes back in at the end to take it back when the girls are all loose and spent and think they can't go another minute. They always can, and dragging that last orgasm from their

trembling bodies as they beg for relief is as sweet as making them lose control that first time.

My fantasy is to find a girl who's never fucked anyone else, so we can do it raw—all of us and maybe the Master too. I want to watch them destroy her one after another, taking turns with her until she's so full she can't hold another drop, and their cum is oozing out of her stuffed, gaping cunt. Then I want to sink my cock into it. I love the thought of their cum soaking me, oozing out around my girth as I stretch a cunt to its furthest limit.

But that's such a filthy fantasy I can't even put Mercy into it. Maybe if we corrupt her thoroughly enough, she'll let us run a train on her bareback, but when she moans, bringing me into the moment, the fresh taste of her virgin cunt drenching my tongue is the most erotic thing I can imagine. Her slit is slick and hot, and I drag my tongue up it sensually, then latch onto her swollen, red clit and suck. It pulses wildly, and she cries out. I suck harder, and she bucks, releasing the bed and tangling her fingers in my dark hair. She drags me in, rocking wildly, gasping and panting and lifting for me. I slide my tongue down with one slow stroke, stretch her open with both my thumbs, and sheathe my tongue deep inside her tight, throbbing cunt.

I feel her shatter, the moment of surrender. It's my favorite moment, even better than my own climax. She stops grinding and goes still, her knees opening and closing slowly like butterfly wings on either side of my head, her pussy shimmering in waves along my tongue, her cum spreading over it in a thick, salty glaze.

I'm not entirely unselfish. I love going down. Nothing else in the world tastes quite like pussy, and no one tastes like Mercy. I don't even have time to reach down and unzip. The moment she cries out in bliss, a throb jolts through me, and I cum before I know it's happening. I let out a groan into her quivering cunt, and she whimpers and shudders under me, her thighs trembling uncontrollably.

Fuck. I just came in my pants like a teenage dirtbag who goes off the second a girl touches him. I wasn't expecting that, didn't know I was that close. I wasn't paying attention to my own pleasure, only hers. I've never gotten there this fast, not even from fucking. Usually I can go all night, and I'm a little salty about the fact that I lost control and came so soon.

I shouldn't be surprised, considering I wasn't just eating out any girl. I can't compare it to the usual. This is Mercy fucking Soules. I could keep sucking her sweet pussy all night. Just because it's over for me, doesn't mean it is for her. She's so innocent, she doesn't even know what that sound I made meant. I moan again, dragging my tongue through her center, collecting her release and swallowing it like the sweetest nectar. Then, over her half-hearted protests, I start again, pushing her over the edge a second time, then a third.

I can't get enough. I want to do it all, but if I did more, she'd probably end up pregnant, and persuading anyone that she's still a virgin might take a little more convincing in the information age than when our fierce queen Mother Mary was around. Not sure anyone today would believe she hadn't given up that cat and just miraculously turned up bun-in-oven one day. But then, a few hundred million people still don't see that Mary pulled one over on them, so maybe I'm giving humanity too much credit.

Giving credit where credit's due, that chick pulled off history's greatest con, and it's still going. Most wives who step out on their man go with the whole "he was just over fixing the sink" excuse or get a divorce. They don't gaslight their husband into agreeing, brainwash an entire population, convince the world they banged God, and their son is therefore also God, and create a whole-ass religion out of it. Gotta give Mama Mary the recognition she deserves.

Then again, maybe old Joe wasn't so gullible. Maybe he hadn't nailed her. Maybe like me, he just had strong swimmers in the family, and he finger-banged her with

some cum for lube, and here we are. To the best of my knowledge, I haven't caused an immaculate conception yet, but you can't be too careful. My dad and my uncle both spawned five kids without even trying. Mom was even on birth control when two of us "Came knocking like Publisher's Clearing House," as she likes to tell people. And if Saint thought I fucked his sister without his permission, and then lied about it... Well, they'd hate me more than they hate Mercy for what she did.

I'm going to be in enough trouble as it is.

But since I'm already here, already in, I go for one more, dragging a last orgasm from Mercy before she's sobbing and begging me to stop, saying her clit is so tender it hurts. Finally, I haul her up onto the bed, then lie down with her. I shove my pants off and toss them off the bed, then drag her leg over my hip. She's still bloody, dirty and bruised, but her face is a flushed mess of tears for a different reason now.

I draw her chin up and kiss her quivering lip.

"You'll get used to it," I promise her. "Just let go and accept the pleasure next time. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Easy for you to say," she sniffles, shivering and huddling against me.

I pull the blankets over us, tangling my legs with hers. I kiss her forehead this time, stroking her damp hair back. "You'll be okay," I say. "You just have a few bruises. I'll hold you while you fall asleep."

"How can you say that, like nothing just happened?" she asks.

"Trust me, that wasn't nothing for me, either," I say, though I can't say more, can't admit how much it meant. "But you're safe with me. I'm not going to fuck you. You can relax."

I hold her until she stops shivering, until her body melts against mine and she goes still, her breathing deep. I marvel that after all this time, she still trusts me enough to fall asleep on me, even after all we've done to her. I've violated her with the others, and I haven't done anything to show her I can be trusted. She's naïve to even consider it, especially when I can't help but slide under the blankets and eat her out one more time while she sleeps. I drag my hand over my cock this time, painting her thighs with my release while I suck hers from her slumbering, relaxed pussy. I spit it into her wet panties and pocket them to bring to the others.

Then I tuck her in, settle her teddy bear in her arms, and lock the door on my way out.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:14 am

The Merciful

“I got your files,” Dynamo says, striding into the back room where I’m waiting. “Had to get a paper copy like a caveman so I wouldn’t leave a trace, and they can’t leave this room.”

He flashes me a grin as he closes the door and strides across the room to pull out the chair opposite me. He swings it around backwards and sits astride the seat before opening the folder.

“Now, there’s a lot of legal jargon in here, but it’s all there—stenographer notes, evidence files, judges’ findings, everything. You know how to read all that?”

“No,” I admit, groaning inwardly at the thought of having to find someone who can figure it out without also drawing suspicion.

“Then I’ll just sit here on my phone while you read, and when you find something you don’t understand, holler.”

“You know how to read legal jargon?”

He shrugs and shoots me a grin. “Don’t act so surprised. I know lots of things.”

He knows how to run an underground fight club and illegal street races, how to find fighters and racers and the audience for both, how to avoid being busted for years. But if he knows anything about the legal system, I’d have guessed it was from the other side of the bars.

“How do you know?” I ask, narrowing my eyes.

“You have your secrets, I have mine.”

“Then how do I know I can trust you?” I ask. “You could tell me anything, and I wouldn’t know the difference.”

“Aww, you’re killing me, Red,” he says, giving me a pained look and clutching his chest. “What reason would I have to lie to you?”

“I don’t know, since I don’t know you at all.”

He sighs. “I have a lot of attorneys in the family. I’ve picked up stuff over the years, and then I read through the file and asked everything I wasn’t clear about so I could help you out if you had questions.”

“Sorry,” I mutter, touched that he went to such lengths to help me, and guilty that I didn’t trust him. I should know better. He knows me well—at least the side of me I keep hidden from the rest of the world. I clearly only know one side of him too. I’d never have guessed a guy with tats from fingertip to chin who coordinates multiple illegal activities would have “a lot” of attorneys in the family.

“Sorry enough to make it up to me with that date you keep promising?” he asks with a lazy grin, leaning back and pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and tossing it onto the table between us.

“I never made any such promise,” I point out. “And do you really want to guilt me into a date?”

“Hey, a guy’s gotta take what he can get.”

“I’m sure you can get more than a pity date.”

“Not with you,” he says, nudging my foot with his. He swipes the pack of cigarettes from the table and nods to the folder. “But we’ll be here all night, so I’ve got plenty of time to charm you into a real date. Go ahead. Get started.”

“Okay,” I say, nervously licking my lips before opening the thick file. Half an hour later, my head is spinning, and I can’t make heads nor tails of half of what I’m reading.

I sit back with a sigh, watching Dynamo tilt his head sideways to light another cigarette, a little frown of concentration between his brows as he pinches the filter between his lips and angles the tip of his cigarette into the flame cupped in his palm.

“You read this entire file?” I ask, hopelessness weighing down my tired limbs as I thumb through the huge stack of papers remaining.

“Yep,” he says. “Got a question?”

“Only a million,” I admit with a little laugh.

“Shoot, why didn’t you ask?” he says, spinning the folder toward him and pulling it over.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I didn’t want to look dumb.”

He tips his chin back and exhales, taking me in through the stream of smoke. “There’s a reason people go to law school to learn this shit,” he says. “Want me to give you the gist, and then you can read through for details, already knowing the basics?”

“God, yes,” I say, sinking back in relief.

“Basically, everyone involved in this case is happy it’s sealed, and there’s a reason it can’t leave this room,” he says.

“What does that mean?” I ask, my heart skipping.

“It means there’s a lot of fuckery in this file,” he says. “Maybe even more than the average case.”

“Such as?”

“Basically, as soon as they got the DNA back from her clothes, the prosecutor decided it was gang related and made up his mind about what happened. Then they found some evidence to support that, got eyewitness testimony from a Mercy Soules—” He raises a brow at me and drags on his cigarette before he goes on. “And then a body showed up, no dental records obviously, but it fit her description well enough that they were happy to call it a day, case closed. It was a terrible, rushed, sloppy job, but because of the prosecutor’s track record with the judge—which is of course not supposed to be a factor, but in a small town, how can it not be?—he was trusted, and the defense... Something was going on there too. In the end, though, prosecutor got a win, judge got one more tally on his list of cases that made good on his campaign promise to clean up the town, reduce crime, and crack down on local gangs. Everybody wins—except the three kids who went to juvie.”

“The defense,” I say, staring down at the pages in front of me, since I can’t look him in the eye. I wish he hadn’t looked at the case. I’d rather have gone to a stranger, hired some paralegal online to dumb it down for me. I don’t want a guy I respect to know what I did.

Dynamo takes a slow drag on his cigarette, slumping back in his chair with his wrist

resting on the top of the back of it, which is up against the table.

“Everyone seemed happy enough with the outcome except the father of said Mercy Soules, who got a new, better lawyer for his son. Money doesn’t buy everything, but it does buy freedom. The minute Daddy lawyered up, suddenly the son got out on good behavior and time served, and everyone went away happy. At least everyone who was going to make noise.”

“What about Angel?” I ask, starting to flip through more pages. “The Norths have money.”

“Yeah, I found that interesting too,” Dynamo says. “He was in for under a year, though, so not too long. My guess? His parents knew he had protection in there from some other Crossbones who were doing time, and they didn’t want to bring more scrutiny to the organization, knowing their son was safe and it would be risky to try to buy off a judge. They’ve got people in their pockets, but this guy wasn’t one of them.”

I take a few minutes to absorb that as I look through the file, and then I go back to the beginning. I stare at a grainy, photocopied picture of her bloody clothes in the dirt. I’m glad it’s not in full color. Juvenile trials are closed, and the details were never shared to the public, but I had to look at this picture once before, identify them as the same ones Eternity was wearing that day. The blood splatters slither into my thoughts unbidden at random times or creep into nightmares just when I think I’ve locked them away for good.

Maybe that’s what I was trying to do to the boys too, stunned with the pain of rejection and her death. I couldn’t contain that amount of pain, so I locked away every reminder of her, as if I could seal my pain like a confidential file, never have to examine it too closely again. But it’s been ripped wide open now.

“Talk to me about this,” I say. “The main piece of evidence, right?”

“Until they found the body,” he says. “Which turns out, didn’t have the impact you’d think. They didn’t even bother with an autopsy. But then, decapitation is a pretty obvious cause of death.”

“So, the defense thought they were guilty too,” I say, mostly to myself. “They were afraid what the autopsy would find, and that it would make the murder charge stick.”

“Could be,” Dynamo says, flicking his cigarette into the trash can in the corner. “They rushed a plea deal as soon as the body was found, which the prosecution was all too happy to take.”

“Which means... One of them probably confessed to something,” I say, feeling sick. “Even if it wasn’t murder.”

“That, I don’t know,” he says. “My guess is, we’ll never know, unless you find those boys and get them to tell you themselves.”

Why would one of them confess, if they didn’t do it?

The only explanation is... They did.

They did something to her, and even if it wasn’t outright murder, it led to her death.

I shiver, my skin crawling at the reminder of Saint’s rough hands, Angel’s soft mouth, my own trembling surrender.

“I do know this,” Dynamo says, draping his other hand on top of the one with the missing middle finger and burn scars under the tattoos. “Beheading is not the Crossbones signature kill.”

I swallow hard, darting a glance at him. I'm not surprised he knows that, and I'm not naive enough to ask how. He does illegal work on this side of town, and he carries the marks of the violence he's endured both on his body and in his eyes. If he's not a member of the Skull and Crossbones, he's had plenty of occasion to deal with them.

"Do you think it was really them?" I whisper, my fingertips ghosting over the photo of her clothes. There are photos of the body later, but I don't want to look at them.

"It doesn't matter what I think," Dynamo says. "But if it were me, I'd find the DNA test, or find a way to get one."

"There's no DNA test?" I ask.

"I couldn't find one," he says, nodding at the file. "If there ever was one, it's not in there now. My guess is, if they identified the body later and it wasn't your friend, they didn't want any proof on the record that they'd ever known. That's the sort of thing that gets you put on a podcast about shady criminal justice systems, bribery, and botched trials. My girlfriend watches those true crime shows, and nine times out of ten, when a case isn't solved, it's because the cops fucked it up."

"I saw DNA tests, though," I say, riffling through the papers.

"The lab sent back DNA from the clothes," he says, helping me sort through to find them. "They found sets of DNA on the clothes. Hers, and three more." He pulls out the papers and slides them across to me. "As soon as they got a match and saw it was someone who'd already been arrested for a violent crime, and that it was gang related, the trial was basically over before it began."

"Angel," I whisper, reading the top of the page. "I remember that fight. The parents of the other guy were going to bring assault charges, but they dropped them."

“There were two more sets of DNA on the clothes,” Dynamo says, passing over two more pages, then another. “And here’s the findings that say one of them had shared DNA with the first. I couldn’t find the DNA tests from the other two kids, if they took them. Like I said, there’s a lot missing or a lot of assumptions. Probably both.”

“No, that makes sense,” I say, scanning the pages. “Heath is Angel’s uncle.”

“His cousin.”

“What?” I ask, looking up.

“He’s his cousin,” Dynamo says, sliding the explanation page on top. “See, it says the DNA was a 13.5% match. An uncle would be about twice that.”

“But... That’s not possible.” My head is spinning. I already have a hard enough time figuring out how all their family is related. If somebody was cheating, and one of their fathers is not really their father, I’ll never be able to figure it out.

“What about grandparents?”

“Same as uncle or aunt,” he says. “Half-grandparent would be the same as a cousin.”

“And a half-uncle,” I say, nodding with relief. “Okay, this makes sense now. Heath and Angel’s mom are half-siblings.”

At least I don’t have to tell Heath some really bad news about his parents. I remember him standing up there with me that day, refusing to let me go down to the river with them, saying he had to stay with me because he was her brother but refusing to tell me why. I remember how tense he was, bitter and resentful and angry at the world, kicking rocks and fuming and pacing. When did he go back?

“What about her DNA?” I ask. “They matched it with Heath’s?”

Dynamo shakes his head and turns the paper over to find the back is blank. “It doesn’t say.”

“So, they matched Angel’s DNA to a sample already in the system, then said another sample matched, so it must be Heath, and the last one didn’t, so it must be Saint, and that was enough?”

“Like I said, there’s probably a reason so much is gone or was never investigated to begin with. Bagging the son of one of the heads of the Crossbones is a huge political win.”

“So, the judge wanted that on his resumé more than actual justice,” I say, feeling sick. “And I gave them exactly what they wanted.”

“It’s probably not your fault,” he says. “The second they found North DNA on her clothes, they would have been salivating to make the arrest.”

I drop my head back, so tired I can hardly keep my eyes open. “Why do I feel like I got more questions than answers out of this?”

Dynamo yawns and then stands, sweeping the pages back into the folder. “I think that’s enough for tonight. Hit me up if you want to look over them some more or need me to look up anything. For now, we could both use some sleep. My house?”

“Ha,” I say, rolling my eyes. “There are three boys who possibly murdered someone who might have something to say about that.”

“Damn,” he says. “Why didn’t you start with that? I would have stopped asking you out a long time ago.”

“Really? That works?”

“Yeah, Red,” he says. “Been there, done that, never going down that road again.”

“Good to know.”

“Let me walk you to your car,” he says, then chuckles to himself. “Or you can walk me to mine. Sounds like I’m the one who needs protection, and my track record with self-defense is about as sound as this file.”

He gives a wry smile and wiggles his disfigured hand, which he hides from most people. But we aren’t in Catholic school anymore. Here, we’re all a little more real, a little more accepting, a little more able to laugh at the dark humor most of us possess to cope with whatever demons brought us to this place to begin with.

We’re halfway across the parking lot when he speaks again. “Hey, I know you can take care of yourself, but be careful, okay? The Skull and Crossbones is a pretty major enemy to have.”

“They’re not all my enemies,” I say, trying a joke to lighten the mood.

“There’s one of you, and a lot of them,” he says. “No matter how badass you think you are, you can’t fight your way out if an entire gang comes for you. If you want my advice, steer clear.”

“Wait, so you’re still worried about me even if I won’t go out with you?”

“Hey, I can’t lose my money maker,” he says, flashing me a grin.

“I’ll be careful,” I say, though I’m already beyond that. I’m in far too deep for caution to help me now.

“Listen, I have something for you,” he says, stopping at his truck.

“More?” I ask. “I’m really going to owe you a date if you keep this up.”

“Is that supposed to stop me?” he asks, opening his door. He takes out a small pet carrier. “I know you can defend yourself, but this is for those moments when you don’t know if you need to.”

“What is it?”

A tiny mew answers from inside the crate.

“You’re giving me a cat?” I ask, staring at him.

“They’re good judges of character,” he says, lifting the crate to peer in. “My sister had one. She didn’t listen to its instincts, but you can. He might even be from the same line. They look similar, and cats get around.”

“I can’t have pets,” I say. “I live in a dorm.”

He arches a brow. “You do? Hm. Interesting.”

I wince, cursing myself. There’s not really a reason he shouldn’t know, just that anonymity is something I’ve grown to treasure in his world.

“I found this little guy hanging around behind the warehouse, and I didn’t want him to run into the road,” Dynamo says when I don’t answer. “He was crying because he was so hungry. I think his mom must have been hit or picked up and brought to a shelter. The guys told me to bring him in too. But I think he deserves a good home. Don’t you?”

“You’re manipulating me.”

“Clearly.” He laughs and sticks a finger through the grate on the front of the carrier, and the kitten bats at it with one unsure paw.

“How would I even take care of him?” I ask.

“You’ll figure it out,” he says, releasing the latch and gently lifting out the little ball of grey fluff. He holds it up next to his cheek and makes puppy dog eyes at me. “How can you resist this little face?”

“I think you’re asking me for a favor more than doing me a favor.”

“Just point him at anyone you’re uncertain about, and he’ll tell you whether to trust them,” he says, depositing the little creature into my hands.

I’m about to protest, but the tiny kitten looks up at me with the wide blue eyes of an angel, and then he licks my thumb with his tiny, rough tongue, and my heart melts into a puddle.

“This is an ambush,” I protest, laughing as I rub my cheek against the kitten’s fur. It’s so soft I can hardly feel it. “You’re not fighting fair.”

I’m not fighting anymore, though. My heart is already so filled with love it hurts. If there’s such a thing as instalove, I just fell headlong into it.

“Hey, you’re getting a deal,” Dynamo says. “I’ll even throw in the crate and a couple cat toys for free. We don’t have cats anymore so...”

“Fine,” I say, not even able to put up the pretense of an argument. “Since you did me a solid with all that information. Seriously. Thank you.”

He holds out a hand to give me knuckles. “Anything for you, Red. Who knew you were such a softie behind the mask?”

“Don’t tell anyone,” I say, glowering at him. “You’ll ruin my reputation.”

“I don’t know,” he says, pulling out his cigarettes. “A baddie who can’t say no to a stray kitten? I like it. I bet it’d sell tickets.”

I just shake my head. “I’ll call you.”

“You always do,” he drawls, closing the door and strolling around his truck to climb into the driver’s side.

I stand in the lot holding the kitten for a minute, until he mews and rubs the top of his head against my palm. Cupping him between my hands, I lift him to my face to see into his eyes again. “You’re going to need an important name if you’re going to help me solve a murder.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:14 am

The Merciful

I crouch at the edge of my bed and lean down, peering under the dust ruffle.

“There you are, you little devil,” I mutter.

Dr. Jekyll stares out at me with wide eyes, like he’s afraid I’ll reach in and grab him by the tail. I won’t even reach under to touch him—when I tried petting him under there before, he clawed the heck out of me, and I still have the marks to prove it. Dynamo said he could tell me who to trust, but I didn’t expect him to say I couldn’t trust myself. He was so sweet when I held him the first time, but the moment we got back here and I let him out of his crate, he turned into a hissing demon-kitty.

Hence the name.

“Come on, you have to use the litter box eventually,” I say, wiggling his little cat toy at him. Maybe he doesn’t like it because he can smell the other cat on the old toy that Dynamo got from his sister.

At last, I give up and climb to my feet with a sigh. I put some food into his dish and grab my jacket to head for the dining hall for my own dinner. Jekyll comes out to eat when I’m not in the room, and he even used the litter box once, so I guess he’s doing okay, even if he hates me.

Like usual, I check my reflection in the mirror before going out, but I don’t linger. My strawberry blonde hair is plaited into two tight braids, and I wear my usual clogs, knitted tights to keep my legs warm, a flowered skirt that skims my calves, and my

puffy jacket with a hat I crotched my first winter with Aunt Lucy. Satisfied that I look adequately sexless, I leave my room.

The moment the door opens wide, a grey streak shoots past my legs and down the hall, disappearing down the staircase.

Crap!

I race after him, cursing Jekyll and Dynamo and myself for taking him. Pets are not allowed in the dorms. I could probably be kicked out for having one. At the very least, they'll make me get rid of him, and since I don't know anyone who will take him, I'd have to bring him to the shelter and hope someone adopted him. Then again, maybe that's what he wants. He'd obviously be happier with anyone else. Maybe he'll be Mr. Hyde for his new owner.

I step onto the stairs and spot the little fluffball on the landing for the next floor. He looks up, his blue eyes round, and then disappears like a wisp of smoke down that hall.

I grit my teeth and clatter down after him, cursing my clogs now. I'm going to need a confession after all the swearing I'm doing in my head over his cat. But it's evening, when everyone is home, or coming and going from dinner, and the chances of someone seeing a forbidden cat running around in the hall are higher than at any other time of day.

I've never been on the second floor, since I don't have any reason. I don't have any friends, and my room is on the third floor. I glance up and down the hall, but it's the same as mine. A few doors have decorations, some left from the beginning of the year when the sisters put our names on each one, some signifying that the girls are in the one sorority on campus. A few are decorated with personal touches by the craftier girls. One that looks like they left up their Halloween theme swings open ahead of

me, and suddenly, I'm standing face to face with the white-haired boy from the lecture hall.

I've never seen his face up close before, since I'm usually staring at the back of his neck as he gossips with Annabel Lee and Ronique. But now he stares back at me, as startled as I feel, and I realize how beautiful he is. He looks like a K-Pop star, with a slender, elegant build that towers over me, white hair tousled in a casually cool way, as if he just ran his fingers through it, chiseled cheekbones, pouty lips and bedroom eyes, and smooth skin that has a radiance most girls would kill for.

"Did you just see a cat?" I ask, halfway convinced that Dr. Jekyll ran into the room. He's so fast, I don't even know if I saw him dart in or not.

"A cat?" he asks in that purr of a voice he uses in class.

"I—I saw a grey cat," I stammer, trying not to blush, trying not to give away that I'm the one with a contraband animal. "It went this way. Not that it's mine, I just thought... Maybe you'd seen it."

The K-Pop idol cracks a smile as he saunters toward me, so we're within normal conversing distance. "Oh, don't worry, the girl down the hall has a bunch of rodents." He waves lazily behind him. "I'm sure your pussy is not a problem."

"I—It's not..."

He looks me up and down and cocks his head to one side. "What are you supposed to be?"

"What?"

"Are you dressed up as Heidi or something?" he asks, gesturing to my clothes. "Pippi

Long Stocking? The Wendy's girl?"

"I'm not—" I shake my head and refocus. "You didn't see a little grey kitten come by?"

"Only kitty I've seen is Annabel's," he says, glancing back as a ghostly goth girl slips from the room like a shadow and appears at his elbow, cradling a black cat in her arms. "Speak of the devil."

"Hi," I say on a breath, hoping she doesn't remember me. I remember her. Even with all the makeup, the black lipstick and piercings, I'd recognize Angel's cousin anywhere. His mom once joked that North blood was so strong that every single one of them looked like siblings, no matter how different their moms looked. She's right. They all have the same Colombian features, jet-black hair, dramatic lashes, and striking eyes. While Angel is tawny complected with opaque, jade green eyes, though, Annabel Lee has alabaster skin and eyes as golden as her cat's.

The slightest twitch of her black-nailed fingers is her only greeting, and I can't read anything in her blank, sullen expression. I can't tell if she knows who I am. We never hung out—she's on the gang side of Angel's family, which my parents didn't want touching our lives. Heath and Eternity were from the law-abiding side, so they were allowed.

"This is our resident Wednesday Addams, and that wraith in her arms is Edward Gorey," the K-Pop star says, catching the black cat as it launches itself like a projectile from Annabel Lee's arms to his. "Oh, and I'm Manson. Like Marilyn, not like the serial killer. I assure you, I'm totally harmless. Unless you fuck with my friends, in which case..." He looks me up and down and raises a brow, a little smirk on his face as he strokes the cat's head.

"He will poison you with something entirely untraceable but that kills you in a slow,

agonizing, indescribably gruesome way,” Annabel Lee says, the corners of her mouth lifting into a sadistic smile, as if that prospect is the only thing that brings light to her dark world. “For me.”

“Noted,” I say. “I’m just looking for my cat. And there he is.”

Dr. Jekyll comes trotting down the hall toward us, tail straight up, like nothing happened. I hurry to scoop up the little fluff ball before retreating.

“You have a familiar?” Annabel Lee asks behind me.

I wince, but it would be rude to walk away when she’s talking to me, so I stop and turn back slowly. “I have a kitten,” I say evenly. “I know I’m not supposed to. It’s just...”

My throat catches, and suddenly I have the terrible urge to cry. After all I’ve gone through, I can’t stand the thought of being alone in that room again, even when the alternative is a demon cat who hates me.

“They can see people’s auras,” the goth girl says. “They can sense if they’re here to do you harm. Bring her over. You’ll see.”

I slowly return to them. The black cat hisses fiercely, and Jekyll shrinks down in my arms like a turtle trying to pull its head into the shell.

“I’m not—” I start, horrified that she’ll think I mean her harm, and she’ll have a reason to rat me out for having a pet. Or get her boyfriend to poison me. Maybe she’s finally making good on the threats her family threw with the bricks through our windows.

“She’s not hissing at you,” Annabel Lee drawls, sounding unbothered. “She doesn’t

like strange cats.”

“I’ll put her up,” says Manson. “It was nice meeting you...?”

“Mercy,” I say, realizing I never introduced myself. “Mercy Soules.”

“Well,” he says, drawing up to his full height of at least six feet, cradling the spitting cat in his arms. “May God have mercy on all our souls.” He whirls dramatically and starts off down the hall, trench coat flapping behind him like Dracula’s cape.

“That’s quite a name,” Annabel Lee says, before cracking the tiniest, rueful smile. “Then again, I’m one to talk. I’m literally named for Edgar Allan Poe.”

I know.

I almost say the words before I catch myself. She doesn’t seem to remember me, and since the last thing I need is one more person on campus who hates me, I’m not about to remind her.

Stepping forward, she holds out a finger to pet the top of Jekyll’s head.

Instead of hissing like I’m trying to shove him in a bathtub and drown him, he reaches up his nose like a sweet little angel and bumps it against her finger.

“Who’s ziss wittle guy?” Annabel Lee asks in a baby voice that I wouldn’t have thought could possibly come from a girl who wears all black and has spikes everywhere from her platform boots to her belt to the dog collar around her neck. She even has a spike extending from a piercing between her lower lip and chin. Maybe it’s to keep herself pure, so her boyfriend can’t kiss her.

“This is Dr. Jekyll,” I say, cradling the kitten protectively, though I have no idea

where that instinct comes from, since it's clear the feelings between us are not mutual.

He sniffs Annabel Lee's finger, then closes his eyes and rubs his head against it.

"See?" she says, giving him a few more pets before straightening. "Looks can be deceiving to humans, but never to cats. They don't judge books by their covers."

"I wasn't—" I start, then break off.

Her white teeth flash in a grin. "Of course you were."

Of course I was. She looks like the kind of person who holds satanic rituals to call in actual demons, curses people with witchcraft, or otherwise consorts with dark forces. But now I notice the stylized cross hanging from her neck, although she also wears a pentagram and an evil eye, which only leaves me more confused. I can't tell if it's just part of an elaborate costume, meant to look tough and gothic, or if she really has sold her soul. And I guess that's her point.

"Sorry," I mutter. If she's a witch, that's even more reason not to get on her bad side, though I'm not sure why she'd be at this school if she worships the devil.

"Forgiven," she says. "I prefer to let people show me who they are before I make my own judgments about them."

I swallow hard. "So, you do know who I am."

Manson and Ronique emerge from her room, and she smiles at them before turning back to me. "We're about to go eat. Wanna come with?"

"Oh, thanks," I say, looking down at Dr. Jekyll, who's now curled up and purring like

the sweetest kitten on earth. “I should get him back to my room before anyone sees, though.”

“Maybe next time,” she says, already turning to her friends.

My chest hollows out into a cold, empty pit, and I duck my head and hurry away before her friends can talk to me. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, why I want to cry as I hurry up to my room, shielding Dr. Jekyll from view with my jacket when a group of girls passes me on the stairs. Maybe it’s because for the first time since I arrived here, someone was nice to me—besides a priest, who is obligated to be—and I can’t be friend with her because her cousin is one of the boys making my life hell.

My mind flashes to that day in my room, in my bed, his sensuous mouth caressing me with damning strokes of the purest pleasure, prying my fingers loose from their death grip on my self-control, plunging me deeper into hell each time I lost it. He led me down a path that I don’t know if I can ever find my way back from. If he’s not as cruel as the others, it’s not because he’s kind. It’s because he’s not after my body. He’s ferreting out my soul.

I cradle Dr. Jekyll close to my chest, thankful for him. He might hate me almost as much as the boys, but he’s mine. He’s all I have, all I’m allowed. I can’t make friends with the dramatic Annabel Lee and her gorgeous boyfriend and her sensible friend. Choosing other friends, even ones completely different from Eternity, would be an insult to her memory. I can’t replace her, so I’ve never tried. All my focus has to be on finding her, and surviving the Hellhounds, and evading the Sinners.

So that’s what I’m focused on as I hurry down the hall to my room and slip inside. I pull up short, my breath catching. There’s a plain white envelope lying in the center of my bed.

I spin around, and Dr. Jekyll squirm and hisses. Making sure my door is closed, I set

him down, then hurry through the room, checking every corner and crevice to make sure we're alone. My heart is hammering as I turn back to the letter. I trudge toward it, dreading opening it, knowing I will anyway. I can't stop the curiosity. I can't just throw it away.

Someone was in my room again.

This time, I left the door unlocked in my rush to follow the kitten. Which means it could be from anyone. But I know before I even pick it up that it's not random. It's for me. And it's from the same person who's been here before, who's been leaving me threatening messages since I arrived. Fingers trembling, I turn it over and pull out the single sheet of white paper.

“For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:14 am

The Merciful

“Lord have mercy, it’s Mercy,” a voice sings out when I enter the quiet of the library sitting area in search of an empty table or chair. I turn to see Manson lounging at a table with Ronique and Annabel Lee, slouched in his seat like he’s too cool to sit properly, his long legs spread confidently and spilling out into the walkway.

I glance around the cozy area in the center of the first floor with its couches and armchairs flanked by end tables with softly glowing lamps and potted plants. Though the place is no longer used for research now that everything is available online, it’s designed for a bygone era, when students would congregate here for late night study sessions and pull all-nighters to get their papers written. Now they’ve installed power stations where everyone can charge their laptops and phones, even providing some wireless chargers, and added a self-service coffee bar at one end to entice people to use the old building.

I regret not using the place more often. Not only is it inviting for social gatherings, but it’s the most beautiful building on campus besides the chapel, with a tower that rises several stories from the lounge area. The floors above have balconies that look down into the center and more shelves of books behind. Far above, the apex of the tower is an observatory with a stained-glass ceiling that looks out over the campus and the town.

I look around again, but every seat is taken by a person or a bag, and no one moves their things so that I can join them. A few people are watching, whispering, staring. I grit my teeth and ignore them, cursing the Hellhounds under my breath. If not for them, no one would know who I am, and they certainly wouldn’t pay me any

attention. Now, no matter how plainly I dress, I'm a curiosity simply because I've been claimed by the three men that every girl on campus lusts after the most.

"Hey."

I turn to see Annabel Lee's black, spiked moto boot kick out the last chair at their table, the one next to Manson and across from her and Ronique. She nods at it, but I hesitate, not wanting to sit next to her boyfriend in case it sets off the guys. They won't like it if they hear I was sitting with another guy, even if he has a girlfriend. They jumped all over me when I so much as acknowledged Royal, and we were working on a paper together. I have no excuse for sitting next to Manson.

But no one else is making space for me, and the longer I stand here, the more they stare. At last, I scurry over and pull the chair as far from Manson as possible before sliding into it and setting my books down. Ronique just raises her brows, shakes her head, and goes back to her laptop.

"Anxiety?" Manson asks, watching me with those dark, inky eyes framed by long, inky lashes. They're even more striking in contrast with his perfectly styled, stark white hair.

"Something like that," I mutter, glancing across the table at Annabel Lee.

She must not have told him everything, but I can't tell how much he knows about my history with her family without asking and revealing it to all of them.

"Then you'll fit right in," Manson says. "Welcome to the freak show."

Ronique snorts and rolls her eyes.

"What's that about?" Annabel Lee asks.

“Oh please. You want so badly to be edgy and different, but let’s face it, we’re outcasts by choice,” Ronique says. “You’re a witchy goth, and he’s a bitchy gayth, and I’m a vegan metalhead. We’re an exclusive clique of our own making. I bet half the kids on campus wish they could hang out with us.”

“Too bad they’re too straight-edge to be themselves, or we’d let them,” Annabel Lee says.

“Is that what I’m doing here?” I ask. “You asked me to sit with you because you think I’m a freak?”

“You’re the most straight-laced of them all,” Manson says. “Obviously not a freak, and definitely not being yourself.”

“As much as any of us are,” Ronique mutters, glancing at my clothes—cable knit sweater, floor-length linen skirt, clogs.

“How are we not being ourselves?” Annabel Lee asks, her brows drawing together. She’s usually so cool, it’s disconcerting to see her show emotion, and anger is not the one I’d have chosen. But maybe that’s only because I know who her family is. She’s always intimidating, but it’s not in the same way that the Sincero sister is. Instead of looking tough and tattooed like the guys in her family, Annabel Lee is tall and slender, with a dark elegance that belongs in another age, like an ink drawing on the cover of a gothic novel or a woman in mourning in an impressionist painting, a skeletal parasol held aloft in one long-fingered, black-gloved hand.

“For starters, your family controls half this town,” Ronique says to her before turning to Manson. “And yours must be the richest family in Arkansas, aside from the Waltons. You have a freaking helipad. That’s not normal, Manson.”

“That’s our families, not us,” Manson argues. “Besides, lots of people have helipads.”

Ronique rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

Annabel Lee gives her boyfriend a grateful look. “He’s right. Just because my brothers are gangsters, it’s not like I’m doing drive-by shootings in my spare time. If someone tried to fight me, I’d let them knock me out before I’d throw a punch.”

“Exactly,” Manson agrees, reaching across the table to stroke her pale, slim fingers. “Can’t risk these treasures.”

“Besides, my mom is a teacher at a public school,” Annabel Lee says. “It’s not like we’re all criminals. I just happen to embody my name, while my brothers embody theirs.”

“Okay,” Ronique says, clearly unconvinced.

Meanwhile, I try to recall the names of Angel’s other cousins, but I can only remember the oldest one, who everyone called Mad Dog. I shiver and open my book, trying not to imagine what kind of person embodies a name like that. Though I’ve met all the North cousins in passing once or twice, and I could pick them from a lineup easily enough based on likeness, I don’t know anything about them aside from what my parents said when they warned us away, calling them ‘bad news.’

Angel never really talked about them around us, though I know he’s close with his whole family. He always kept that part of his life separate, as if he knew their reputation would make us uncomfortable. Or maybe he liked the reprieve from having to act tough or live up to his family name. Around us, he could be himself, a normal boy who liked basketball and orange Fanta and snuggling on the couch during movies.

A normal boy who’s just entered the library on one side of my brother, while Heath takes up his usual position at his other side.

“Saint Soules,” Ronique whispers with a reverence of which I wouldn’t have guessed her capable. “I need to lie down.”

Apparently even the most pragmatic girl loses her mind around my brother. Grabbing my stuff so fast I fumble it and nearly drop it, I catch it at the last second and dart away from the table and up the staircase that winds slowly up the side of the circular room. I curse the design, which leaves me exposed to the view of everyone below. Ducking my head, I pray the boys aren’t in the mood for games today. They’ve left me alone lately, since the encounter with Angel, though I see them watching me. Maybe they’ve given up on getting me to drop out and are content with what I’ve given them.

I wish I were too.

“Well, if it isn’t my cousin Al,” Angel drawls behind me. “Taking in another stray for your menagerie?”

“The only animals I see here are y’all,” Annabel Lee drawls back.

“Freak show,” Heath sings out, and I hear a few snickers echoing in the silence of the study room.

“Baby boy, you have no idea,” Manson says. “There’s a reason it’s called getting freaky .”

“Mercy is ours,” Saint growls.

I peek down from the corner of my eye and see that every head has turned their way as usual. The girls all look starstruck, while the boys’ expressions range from jealous to resentful to worshipful to petrified. Ronique looks like she might be having a stroke.

“That’s between her and y’all,” Annabel Lee says. “But even your girlfriend needs a place to sit.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Saint snarls, the veins on his forearms popping out when he rests his hands on the edge of the table and looms over her. “She’s my sister.”

“Whatever you say, Fabio,” Annabel Lee says, sounding bored.

I tear my gaze from the obscene display of my brother’s bare forearms and creep up the stairs, praying the old wood won’t squeak and draw attention to me. My heart is hammering, and a funny feeling is throbbing in my lower belly. Why am I like this? Normal people don’t get wet from seeing someone’s arms.

Do they?

I make it to the landing and almost crumple with relief. But I have to get out of sight of the study area before I’m safe, so I dart between the stacks before I let out the breath I was holding. I sag back against the shelves and close my eyes, clutching my books to my chest. My relief is short lived. Not a minute later, I hear heavy footsteps on the stairs.

My breath catches, and I turn that way, but I can’t see past the high, dark wood shelves lined with dusty, yellowing old resource books. When the approach continues, I duck down and hurry further along the row, trying to keep my footfalls silent on the old carpet. Clogs are not meant for stealth, and all I can do is hope it’s just another library patron and not the boys seeking me out. I slip behind a shelf and slide down, letting my back rest on the smooth wood as I sit huddled with my books in my arms and my knees pulled to my chest.

“Little lamb,” a voice sings out, the edge of threat it carries making a shiver wrack my entire body. I gasp, then bite down on my lip, my heart stopping.

Heath.

“Wait,” says a quiet, masculine voice. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” asks another.

“I think she went this way.”

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” sings the sadistic first voice. His footsteps are light and quick, and I know I don’t have much time. I scramble up, not caring that my books scatter with heavy thuds on the carpet, and I run.

Gleeful, triumphant laughter echoes through the rows, up into the center of the building, to the ceiling of the tower far above.

I dart behind a bookcase just as footfalls turn into my aisle. I press my back to the shelves, trying to breathe. This cannot be happening, not here, with so many people just one floor below.

“Gotcha!” A grinning face appears just inches from mine.

I shriek with surprise and throw myself sideways, using the momentum when I crash into the next shelf to turn my body and propel it forwards. I race down the aisle between the stacks, praying one of the others won’t step into my path. Just when I think I’ll make it around the end of that shelf, Heath’s footsteps quicken behind me. His fingers close around my arm as I dive for the end. He drags me back, pushing me against the books.

I gasp out a breath when he leans in, resting a palm on either side of my head, caging me in. His teal eyes are alive as the sea, sparkling and restless and wild. “You know how much I enjoy the chase, little rabbit,” he says, his voice a taunting purr. “Is that

why you keep running?”

“Leave me alone,” I warn, my hands curling into fists. All the ways I could incapacitate him flash through my mind—a knee to the groin, an uppercut to the jaw, a chop to the throat. But I’m trying to cross the line from enemy to friend, and that won’t get me there. So I grab his arm, and when he instinctively pulls it in, trying to trap me, I duck under his elbow, twisting away and taking off again.

I’m almost back to the stairs, my mind set on escape, when suddenly, a fist wraps around my French braid, wrenching my head back and dragging me to a stop as a cry falls from my lips.

“Thought you could run from us?” my brother’s voice growls in my ear. “That’s not the agreement we made, was it, little sister?”

“You come when we call,” Angel agrees, appearing at his side.

A heavy tome thuds to the floor at our feet, and I jump, a little cry escaping me.

“Or when the Master commands it,” Heath says, and his grinning face appears in the gap left where the thick book stood between two others. “Then she really cums.”

“You agreed to accept our protection for a cost,” Saint says, ignoring him. “I shouldn’t even be surprised that you’re not holding up your end of the deal. You always were a liar.”

“I’m not,” I cry. “I’m sorry.”

“I did my job the other day,” Angel says, resting an elbow on the shelves and crossing his ankles as he smirks down at me. “After all I did for you, this is how you repay me?”

“This calls for a punishment,” Saint says. “Should we teach her the error of her ways, or let her face the consequences of her actions? Maybe she’ll be more compliant for the Sinners. She seems to think we’re the enemy.”

“Please,” I hiss at my brother when Heath’s face disappears and his quick footsteps make their way along the next row, toward the end, where he’ll circle back to us. “I’m sorry I ran. You can punish me. Just don’t let Heath do it.”

Angel cocks his head. “Who do you want to punish you, Em?”

“Saint,” I whisper, dropping my gaze from Angel’s, my cheeks flushing hot at the memory of what he did to me in my room. It was shameful enough there, when only he saw it. I can’t face the humiliation of losing control like that in front of my brother, not to mention what Heath would do, how he’d throw it back in my face and laugh at my torment.

Saint scoffs. “Like I would touch you.”

“You did before,” I whisper at the floor.

“Because the Master commanded it,” he grits out. “You think I wanted to finger my own sister’s dirty cunt after watching you give it to two other men? You disgust me, Mercy.”

My eyes burn and my throat aches, and I can’t answer. He said he’d protect me. That I was still his sister. His hot and cold act is burning me with frostbite. My own shameful desire feels even more dirty now that I know he doesn’t share it. He made me rub his release into me in the confessional, but he didn’t do it himself. He didn’t want to touch me, just wanted to prove that I wanted him, that even his dried, crusty emission would make me wet enough to release my own.

I suddenly regret asking him to punish me. His rejection is punishment enough every day, the loathing in his eyes, the revulsion when he looks at me. Even Heath's sadistic urge to intentionally hurt me would be better.

"Let me at her," he says, practically skipping down the aisle to grab me. He grips my hips and slams them forward into his, grinding into me when we meet. "I want to hear her beg and scream for mercy while I wreck her with my pierced cock."

"No," I cry, fear stabbing into my center like a knife, clenching up every muscle in my body.

"The Master hasn't said it's time," Saint says, drawing me back to him, away from Heath.

My relief is short lived.

"We'll put her on display," Saint announces. "Show everyone what a whore she really is."

"No," I blurt again, tears pricking my eyes at the sting in my scalp when he winds my braid around his fist.

"Would you rather I let Heath pick your punishment?" he growls.

Drawing a shaky breath, I manage to shake my head, staring at the floor to avoid seeing the heathen's reaction.

Saint releases me, pushing me into Angel's arms. I cling to him, shaking with fear at the thought of how close I came to being given to Heath. If he gets his way, it's not just my purity he'll destroy. It's my sanity.

Angel's strong arms wrap around me, and he cradles my head against his chest. "Don't worry, little mama," he murmurs into my ear. "I'll make sure you enjoy every second of it, just like I did the other day. You can trust me."

With that, he scoops me up and carries me back toward the center of the room. When he reaches the walkway, he sets me on my feet and pushes me against the railing. His hand snakes down the front of my body, cupping my breast and massaging. I squirm to get away, but he pushes me flush against the railing, pinning me in place on the balcony. Only a couple people below notice, and I comfort myself with that knowledge.

"Let's give them a show," Heath says, dropping to his knees beside us. With one swift, sharp tug, he yanks my skirt to my feet.

"No," I cry, then wince when a dozen pairs of eyes from below turn our way. Snickers echo through the room below as they look up at us, elbowing their friends to get their attention when they see my skinny, bare legs. Angel slides his hand slowly down my body, burying it in my panties.

"Angel," I whisper, squirming against his hand and ducking my head. "People are watching."

"Good," he says, moving his hand so everyone in the lobby below can see what he's doing if they look this way. "Let them watch me spread this greedy little pussy and make it beg for me to finger fuck it until cum streams down your thighs."

"No," I hiss, trying to pull his hand away without making a scene and bringing more attention to us. Then my heart freezes.

Below, Father Salvatore has just walked into the room. If I call to him, will he help me?

I open my mouth, then close it. If he stops the boys from punishing me, it won't be over. They'll retaliate the moment they're done being disciplined, punish me ten times more severely. This is like HAVOC night. I have a choice, but the alternative is too awful to consider.

Father is halfway across the room before he notices us on the balcony. Our eyes meet, and he stops still, his jaw clenching. A flicker of some emotion crosses his face, and I want to disappear forever.

Angel hooks a finger inside my panties, pulling the fabric away, exposing me. Father Salvatore's eyes widen, and I can see him gulp all the way from here.

"Angel," I grit out, squeezing my knees closed and starting to squirm again. "Father Salvatore is watching."

"Let him see what he can't touch," he growls, gripping my chin and twisting my head around until our eyes meet. "But you watch me, little mama. I want your eyes on me while your world comes undone. I want to see the moment you fall apart for me."

Heath drags my knee aside, holding me open as he kneels beside us. Angel's finger moves in a slow, sensual rhythm around my bud.

"Let me show you what I can do for you," he murmurs in my ear. "You're going to need me, my lamb. When Heath fucks you, you'll want someone gentle who can kiss it better."

My core throbs at the memory of him kissing it before, and he chuckles against my neck, sending shivers through my already trembling body.

"You liked that, didn't you?" he whispers. "You want me to kiss this sweet, wet cunt until you beg me to fuck it like you did last time?"

“No,” I protest, my hips trembling as they rock in traitorous rhythm, without my bidding.

“You want me to bend you over this railing and drive my fat cock to the hilt inside this tight little hole, make you scream?” he murmurs, lazily dipping his finger into my slit, coating it with my pooling arousal.

“Please,” I whisper, squeezing my eyes closed and praying I die right here. It’s not just the four of them watching this time, not just the Hellhounds. It’s other students, random strangers, seeing the helpless response of my body, its shining proof of my sin, that I want this.

“Please fuck you so deep you scream my name for the whole campus to hear?” Angel asks, rocking his hips against mine from behind. I can feel the unforgiving, unflinching iron of his own desire pressing into me like a rod.

“No,” I beg. “Angel, please.”

Spare the rod, spoil the child, I think hysterically as I remember that it’s not just other students watching him open me, show my glistening pink inside for their examination. It’s my friends, as much as I have them, Annabel Lee and Ronique and Manson. I can’t look, so I squeeze my eyes closed, refusing to see their reaction.

“Tell me what you want, lamb,” Angel rumbles in my ear. “Tell me how you like to be fingered until your cum rains down like a blessing on everyone below.”

“Stop,” I beg, my voice catching, my whole body an inferno of shame so unbearable I think my heart will stop beating. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“You want Father Salvatore to do it, don’t you?” he purrs into my ear. “You want him to suck the cum out of your tight little virgin cunt while you cry his name like a

benediction.”

“No,” I say on a gasp, but the flood of wetness on his fingers tells the truth when my lips refuse.

“You do,” he says, his voice a tease. “You want to smear this sweet cunt all over his face, ride it until he says you’re forgiven, absolves you of your sin while you drown him in it.”

“I don’t,” I gasp out again, my hips rocking, seeking the blessing and the curse they showed me I’m capable of, the pleasure my body now knows and can never unknow.

“You do,” Angel says firmly. “You want to make a priest fall to his knees and drive his tongue into your tight, wet cunt. You want to bathe and baptize him in it until he’s as lost as you are, little lamb.”

As he speaks, he circles his finger around and around the spot where I need him, refusing to press the pad of his finger to it, to give me the release my body is screaming for.

“Please,” I gasp out, no longer sure what I’m begging for. I’d say anything to get him to release me from this torture of pleasure that spirals higher and higher as he moves his finger lower without giving me satisfaction, now circling the throbbing, hungry entrance where he lodged his tongue last time to plunge me into complete madness. I don’t want that to happen now, in front of the crowd gathered below to watch, but I need it, need it so badly I start to writhe, frantic for him to impale me, fill me, relieve the pressure that’s threatening to rend my soul in two.

“Tell me you want it,” Angel whispers, his hot breath caressing my ear, sending spirals of pleasure still higher inside me. “Tell me you want him as gone for you as all of us, so you can prove this unassuming little pussy can conquer even the fiercest

lion, leave a man of god on his knees, whimpering and quivering, as helpless as you are.”

“I do,” I cry, my hips bucking, bearing down, finally finding the tip of his finger. I impale myself ruthlessly, driving his hand down as I slam my hips onto it. He responds by ramming it upwards, tearing a cry from my lips as my head falls back onto his shoulder and I give in.

“Kinky little nympho,” he says, chuckling his approval. “I like it. Now squirt for me, my needy little cum slut.”

I imagine it’s Father Salvatore inside me, his thick manhood stretching me instead of Angel’s second long finger driving deep into my desperate, clenching core.

“That’s it, that’s it,” Heath pants, still on knees at my feet. “Look how fat and red her little clit’s gotten. So big I want to sink my teeth into it and listen to her scream while blood gushes down my throat.”

Angel fucks me hard and fast, without mercy, pumping in and out of me so deep my flesh makes a wet, slippery sound that echoes wetly through the library every time his palm slaps down on the burning mound of shame under it. He grinds the heel of his hand against the very place I need, and my back arches in a helpless bow of ecstasy.

“Yes, baby,” he growls, his solid chest heaving against my back as he presses a finger coated with my slick to my other entrance. “Give me that tight virgin ass too.”

I bear down without question, the ring of muscle as loose and needy as the other entrance, and his slick finger enters with little resistance. He groans into my neck, and his body jerks against mine. The heat of his desire and the deep, masculine rumble of his pleasure electrifies me. My back bows again, my feet leaving the floor, and blackness envelopes me. I can feel my body pulsing and convulsing, quaking

from head to toe. A tightness builds and squeezes inside me, painful in its intensity, an ache that throbs and quivers like its own living entity.

“Bring her back,” my brother’s voice rumbles beside us, and I can feel Angel swing around, still holding me. I feel my brother press in close, and the comfort lets me let go, and then I’m lost to everything except waves of pure, erotic bliss for minutes on end.

At long last, I begin to feel tingling in my fingers and toes again, and a raw gash through the center of me, like they’ve ripped into me with more than fingers. But when my eyes flutter open, I’m still in their arms. Saint cradles me from the front, his hands supporting my bottom, and my legs are wrapped around his hips. But he’s still fully clothed, his brow furrowed with concern and his eyes softer than I’ve seen in a long time. Angel is behind me, holding me tight to his chest, one arm draped forward over my shoulder, his fingers still inside me. They’ve stepped back from the railing, into the stacks, so we’re hidden from everyone’s eyes.

Everyone but Heath, that is.

He stands a few paces off, and for one second, a fraction of a second, he looks like I remember him in his most vulnerable moments, lost and unsure. But when our eyes meet, his mouth twists into a cruel smile. “Mercy’s a freak,” he crows. “She wants to get railed by a priest.”

“Fuck,” Angel groans, dragging his nose up the side of my neck. “I came in my pants. Her asshole is even tighter than her cunt.”

“Let me feel it,” Heath says, bouncing on his toes and giving me a feral, unhinged grin.

“No,” Saint says sharply. “She’s had enough. I’ll take her home. I don’t trust either of

you not to fuck her before it's time.”

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:14 am

The Heathen

“This is bullshit!” I kick the chair across Saint’s spacious, well-lit penthouse suite. It crashes into his desk, where his big, fancy Mac is set up. I don’t care if I break it. I hope I do. I want to break him too, and her, and Angel’s smug face while I’m at it.

“It’s not bullshit,” Saint growls, righting the chair. “We have to wait until the Master—”

“Why?” I demand, wheeling on him. “He chose her. We all drill the fuck out of the sacrifice—all twelve of us. Why is she special?”

“Because she is,” Angel says.

“Because she’s my sister,” Saint says at the same moment.

They stare at each other.

“You better stop that shit,” I yell, grabbing the edge of a painting on the wall. I lift it down, almost toppling backwards when the weight shifts towards me. I tip it forwards before it can and hurl it sideways across the floor. Saint takes a step back, so it doesn’t take him out at the knees, and stumbles over Angel’s legs. Angel steadies him.

“Calm the fuck down,” Saint snaps, striding toward me.

“You calm the fuck down,” I bellow, charging him. I barrel into him, tackling him

around the middle. Instead of falling, he hooks his strong hands under my arms, dragging me back. When his legs hit the edge of his bed, he lets me plow him down at last, and we wind up in a tangle on his neatly made bed, courtesy of a goddamn maid who comes to clean his room every day like he's a fucking king.

"Don't tell me to fucking calm down," I rage at Saint, pummeling him with my fists. "You have no fucking idea what it was like in there. Cocksucking rich bastard, they never laid a finger on you!"

"Come on, cuz," Angel says, trying to wrestle me off our friend, our brother.

"Fuck you too," I scream at him, wheeling around and whaling on his shoulder. "You don't know either. You have Frederick and the whole organization behind you. Then you want to sit here and look at each other like I'm fucking crazy for wanting to get one goddamn thing? One fucking time, I want to be first."

"Damn," he says, gripping his shoulder and giving me a wounded look, which is funny, since the guy is twice my size and could snap my neck with his bare hands if he wanted. "You don't have to hit me. I looked out for you, bro."

"When you were there," I seethe. "And even then, you were a fucking prince among thieves, so don't act like you were some asshole guards' little bitch just because you got sent to juvie."

Saint wraps his legs around mine, trapping them, and flips me onto my back, looming over me. "You're no one's little bitch, so stop acting like one," he snaps. "Got it?"

I wrestle to free myself until I tire myself out. There's no way I can ever overpower him or Angel the way they can me, the way the guards did. But then, I wasn't armed. Now I flail and twist sideways, yanking the blade from my boot in a second flat. I hold it at Saint's throat, staring up at him as he holds me pinned.

“What now, pretty boy?” I taunt. “Should I give you a nice big Joker smile to match mine?”

I grin wide, showing all my teeth, and turn the blade so the sharp side presses into his skin, just shy of hard enough to draw blood.

“Fucking psycho,” he growls, but he doesn’t move away. His amber eyes flame with a strange heat, and I stop straining. For a second, we only gaze into each other, some flicker of understanding too deep for words moving between us. I drag the sharp edge of the blade down his skin, scraping his stubble, and his Adam’s apple bobs. My breath comes quicker, and the rage burning inside me turns into a different kind of burn.

After what happened to me, I should want to murder any guy who comes within two feet of me, but because I’m a fucking psycho, that’s not what happened. My body has other expectations, like it knows something it can’t forget, something that should have stayed a question forever.

“Hot as this is, if you’re not going to fuck and get it out of your systems, can we figure this shit out, so he stops acting like a heathen and you stop acting like a caveman every time Mercy comes up?” Angel asks, lounging back on the pillows beside us with one arm folded behind his head.

Saint grabs my throat, shoving up off me and forcing me deeper into the soft mattress at the same time. He rolls up and shrugs his shirt straight on his broad shoulders.

“No one fucks her until the Master gives the okay.”

“You mean until you give the okay,” I mutter, pushing myself up on my elbows.

Saint swallows, his gaze raking down my body and then away, toward the window.

He frowns. “Yes,” he grumbles. “Until I give the okay. She’s my sister.”

He doesn’t say the other part, that I had to give the okay for my sister. That I knew what they were doing, and that’s why I was up on the road with Mercy while they went under the bridge, to the bank of the river. I couldn’t watch.

But this is different. Mercy’s not his blood.

“What does it matter?” I snarl, pissed at the reminder of my failure, the one that started everything. “Are you going to fuck her?”

“No,” Saint says, scowling at me.

“Then why can’t I?” I demand. I remember the way she shrank away when he asked if she wanted me to punish her. It should make me hard, but it only twists the blade deeper in, one I’ve carried around in my back since the day she told the judge what I did to her on Eternity’s floor. “Angel already went down on her. Today he got to finger her. I’ve barely touched her, and I’m the one who deserves to punish her.”

“Hey,” Angel protests lazily. “Trust, when I go down on a girl, it ain’t a punishment.”

“Exactly,” I snap, jumping up and pacing the room again. “Why are we suddenly getting her off and eating her out? I thought we were supposed to be making her pay and then leave campus in shame.”

“She’s paying,” Saint says. “You can scare her if you want. But no one takes her virginity.”

I scoff. “Why? You think she’s pure? You saw the Master fuck her with that statue of the Virgin Mary. She came all over it. Hell, she squirted us all in the face.”

“That was hot,” Angel says, lazily rubbing his dick through his jeans.

I throw an arm out in his direction. “Today she came in front of the whole school at the thought of a priest busting her cunt wide open. She’s not your innocent little sister anymore, Saint. She’s a fucking nympho slut who’s probably getting herself off to the thought of all twelve of us running a train on her, starting with her very own brother. I think we should make her dream come true. Except I go first.”

“That’s what you want?” Saint asks. “You want to give her to all the guys?”

As much as she deserves that punishment, I have to admit the thought of anyone touching her besides us makes me feral, and not in the good way.

“No,” I grumble, flicking my tongue against my lip ring in irritation. “They don’t deserve her tears. I’m the one she fucked over. I want revenge. I want to be the one who punishes her—the only one. I want to know she’s lying in bed quaking in fear every night, wondering when I’m coming for her, if I’m coming for her. I want to hear her scream when rip into her. I want to hear her whimper with every step she takes, every fucking day, because I’ve fucked her bloody the night before.”

The others stare at me a second, and I realize maybe I went too far, said too much. Sometimes even they get freaked out by the dark places my mind goes.

“No,” Saint says quietly, simply.

“Fuck you,” I say, punching a stupid ceramic vase off his desk. It flies across the room and hits the wall, shattering into a million pieces, white and blue shards raining down on the hardwood like junkie needles.

“Cut it out,” he snaps. “You’re not so fucking special. Everyone feels like an outsider.”

I snort with laughter. “That’s a good joke, a great joke even,” I manage. “The golden boy on campus, who every girl wants to fuck, and every guy wants to be, feels like an outsider. Outside what, Saint? You’re not just the norm in every single fucking way, you’re the goddamn standard it’s all based on, the prototype we’re all supposed to aspire to be.”

“And you don’t think that makes me feel like an outsider?” he demands. “Yeah, my dad’s a rich prick, big fucking deal. I hate him. I hate all of it. It doesn’t mean shit. What you two have—” He gestures between me and Angel. “That means something.”

“Can y’all go back to almost fucking?” Angel asks. “That was hotter than watching two privileged assholes compete in the trauma games.”

“Fuck off,” I say. “Your family’s loaded too.”

“Speaking of money, I’m off to work,” he says, rolling up from Saint’s bed. “I’ve got a shift at the club tonight. Come by if you want to see Magic Mike.” He winks and starts for the door before calling back over his shoulder. “That’s my dick, in case you were wondering.”

When the door closes behind him, there’s a beat of tense silence while Saint and I adjust to the new dynamic.

“I’m going to the gym,” I mutter. “Sorry about the mess.”

He shrugs. “The maid will clean it up. I’ll come with.”

I wish he wouldn’t, but I don’t own the fucking gym, so I shut my mouth all the way there.

When we walk in, we stand there a second before I nod to the treadmills. “I’m doing

cardio.”

“Weights,” he grunts, turning and heading that way without looking back.

I jump on, turn up the speed as high as I can handle, then keep pushing it further until I’m drenched in sweat and my muscles are on fire and my heart threatens to explode.

No matter how fast I run, though, it’s not fast enough to outrun all my demons.

*

“Hey, kiddo,” Charlie says, looking up from under the hood of a ’93 Hilux when I stroll into the open bay of the best garage in all of Faulkner. “How’s it hangin’?”

“Hey,” I say, heading for the fridge in the corner. I pull out a couple Buds and return to the truck. “What you workin’ on?”

“Sexy beast that someone treated like a piece of shit.”

“Fuck off.”

Straightening up with a grin, she grabs a towel on her way around the front end. I hand over a can, and she pops the top. “Don’t tell on me,” she says, tipping her beer toward me before taking a swig.

“Hey, I’m twenty-one. Mom can’t give you hell anymore.”

“Anymore,” she says, shaking her head. “You little shit.”

“Not my fault you snuck me beer when I was underage.”

“What are favorite aunts for?” she asks, sinking down on the bumper of my truck. “Besides, if she accuses us of day drinkin,’ you can tell her it’s like the old song goes. It’s five o’clock somewhere.”

I scoot my ass onto the bumper next to hers. “Pretty sure no one has said that in at least three decades.”

“Oh, right,” she says. “What is it you kids are saying these days? YOLO?”

“Fuck no,” I say, holding up a hand to stop her. “That’s worse.”

She grins and rubs a strand of hair off her cheek with the back of her hand, leaving a smudge of grease behind. “What brings you to this neck of the woods, kiddo?”

“You got the mods done on that Trans Am?”

She sighs. “Sure did. You know that was your aunt’s car back in the day. She okay with you tricking it out like this?”

“She gave it to me,” I point out. What I don’t point out is that Scarlet is not my aunt. She’s my sister. People get weird about that, even people who are related to us and know the whole story, including what relation we are to each other. It’s more comfortable for Charlie to refer to Scar as my aunt, so I let her. She’s my favorite aunt, the only person on earth who can make my southern accent come out, even though I swear I don’t have one.

I fuck with her, because she’s the only adult who I could always shoot the shit with like we were equals, even when I was a kid. She never treated me as anything less. She’s the one who took me to get my ears pierced, and later, my first tattoo. If I asked her to keep a secret, she did it, even if it meant I was doing some dumb shit that might put me in danger. She trusted me to learn my own lessons, and she’d come bail

me out instead of calling my mom if I got busted by the cops.

“Come on back,” she says, standing and waving a hand for me to follow. She ambles deeper into the garage, her dark hair hanging halfway out the back of her ballcap in a messy loop, her Docs scuffing the cement floor, grease rag hanging from a back pocket of her Levi’s. In the far corner, she pulls the cover off our latest project—my half-sister’s 1994 white 25th Anniversary Pontiac with blue trim. It was her daily driver for years, and once she upgraded, it sat rotting in Dad’s garage for over a decade before they wanted to get rid of it. They were happy to let me take it off their hands, and if they don’t know what I did with it, well, that’s probably for the best. Charlie might be cool, but it didn’t rub off on the other adults in my life.

“Your mama’s gonna kill me double if you get hurt in this thing,” she says.

“I know how to drive,” I say, though I’ve never driven what she just got done putting under the hood of this beast. It may have been garage kept all those years, so it looks pretty damn good for its age, but besides the exterior, not much is original. That’s just another excuse to take her out tonight, though, get her on the road and test her before I race her against other cars. Most of the guys in the circuit are rich assholes like Royal Dolce who can afford a shiny new Lambo if they wreck. Only a few old heads remain, and they come to reminisce and ogle the cars, not drive.

“You gonna watch me take her out next time there’s a race?” I ask.

“I never miss,” Charlie says, reaching into the car to snag the keys. “Take care, kiddo.”

She tosses them to me, and I catch them in my fist while she hits the button to open the back door of the garage so I can pull out. I slide behind the wheel, start her up, and wave to Charlie before I tip my seat back, shift, and gun the engine a few times. She stands in the open door, fists planted on her hips, squinting into the sun.

Whenever I start to wonder how the fuck I came from my lame-ass parents, how Eternity did, I think about Charlie in her garage, and I think maybe I belong in this family after all.

I take off before that thought can really take root, and this time, I don't have to rely on my feet to carry me away. This time, I'm not limited by my own body. I have Charlie's beast purring, then whining, and finally roaring as I let her go on the open road. Behind the wheel of the car that belongs to the sister who's old enough to be my mother, I'm finally fast enough to outrun the family name, the family shame.

That's why I race.

Not for the money or the title; not for the thrill or the girls or the glory. For this.

So for an hour now and then, everyone can forget that I'm the son of a scandal, the brother who raped his own sister.

And I do it for her.

So we can both be winners again, no matter our name. So that I can pretend she's beside me like when I was sixteen and I'd hotwire a car and sneak out with her to meet our friends; that if I look over, she'll be in the passenger seat, flattened from the acceleration, her mouth stretched into a grin of pure deviousness and delight. So that for a moment, she's still with me, and that moment is all of eternity.

The Merciful

“Shouldn’t you be in class right now?”

I look up to find Manson falling into step beside me. I duck my head, my face an inferno when I think about him seeing me the way he must have the other day. The only pair of eyes I dared meet was Father Salvatore’s, and I instantly wished I hadn’t. I didn’t keep my eyes open to see the other students in the common area staring at me, watching. I don’t want to know what the others thought. It was stupid of me to even hope we could be friends.

“How do you know that?” I mutter at the ground when Manson doesn’t walk away. His black boots appear in my line of vision with each step, leather with straps crisscrossing over them, his regulation uniform trousers tucked into them in a baggy, casually disheveled look that no one else on earth could pull off. At least not while making it look like a high fashion ad from a coveted designer brand.

“Ronique said you’re in Father Salvatore’s class with her,” Manson says. “And since she’s in class right now, I’ve therefore deduced that you’re skipping.”

I don’t answer. I shouldn’t have to tell him that after the other day, I can’t face the priest. Even if Father doesn’t know I was picturing him defiling me in the most sinful ways when I lost control, he still saw me do it. I can’t go to his class again. I can’t go to confession, either. I’ll have to drop his class and never attend mass again.

I’m about to make an excuse and pretend I’m going to lunch so that I don’t have to see Manson either, but just then, I catch sight of Heath walking with a girl, his arm

draped over her shoulders while she ducks her head, tucking her hair behind her ear bashfully. I remember his fingers curling around my knee as he held me open for Angel, his grinning face like a demon's as he leaned close, describing what he saw. My heart skips a beat, and I match my stride to the goth boy's, hoping Heath doesn't notice me since I'm not alone for once.

"I'd never miss Father Hottiepants's class," Manson says, jogging up the steps to my dorm and waiting to open the door for me. I scan my card, and he holds it open, beckoning me to enter first. I do, and he follows, holding up a paper bag by way of explanation. "I'm bringing Annabel Lee lunch. She's on her period."

"Okay."

He laughs. "Come on, you can eat with us. I brought plenty."

"I should check on Dr. Jekyll."

"Cool," he says, following me up the stairs, past the second floor. I don't know how to tell him that I can't eat lunch with them either. I can't face anyone. I shouldn't have ever left my room this morning. Maybe this is what finally gets me to drop out of school and leave campus altogether. Saint probably knew that would do it. That's why he told Angel to put me on display. He knows my shame is the only thing stronger than my loneliness.

"Holy shit."

I stop at my door, my stomach going sour, my blood cold. I'm not even surprised to see the message scrolled there. Nothing surprises me anymore. I'm tired, and beaten, and done with all of it.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.

I unlock the door without comment, without stopping to gasp and stare. Inside, Dr. Jekyll lifts his head from where he's sprawled on my bed, looks at us with bored indifference, and lays back down, as if he's caught my ennui and can't be bothered, either.

I check his litter box, food, and water. Nothing is out of place.

"You can go," I tell Manson, not turning his way. "I'll just hang out here."

"Um, no?" he says. "First off, we've got to call someone about this."

He gestures at my door, looking at me like I'm insane.

"Why?" I ask. "They'll just write something new if I wash it off."

His eyes widen further. "This has happened before?"

I shrug and unwind my handmade scarf. "A few times."

"Who's writing it?" he asks. "The other girls?"

I shrug again, turning to hang up my coat.

"Okay, here's what we're not going to do," he says. "We're not going to accept... That. What we are going to do is go bring Annabel Lee her food before she murders me due to blueberry muffin withdrawals, and then we're going to figure out who's behind that and make them stop."

"It's fine," I assure him. "It's not a big deal. They've been doing it all year, and I've handled it. I'm not going to drag you into this."

“Hello, already in.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

He sighs. “Look, I’m all for strong independent bitches, obviously.” He shakes the bag at me. “But everybody needs somebody. Now come eat lunch in a room that’s not running with... Let’s call it paint. Otherwise, I’m texting Annabel Lee to come eat with us, and she’s going to be grumpy about leaving her bed. Until she sees the blood, and then she’ll probably insist on doing a séance or something. So. What’s it going to be?”

“Fine,” I say. “But don’t say anything about this to her.”

I stomp out of the room, and Manson follows. I don’t understand why he wants to lure me away from my room so badly, unless he’s somehow involved. Maybe Annabel Lee is the one leaving the messages. Apparently she’s been here all morning, and she could have lied about forming her own opinion of people regardless of her family. I should know better than anyone how loyal that family is to each other.

Maybe she wants revenge for her cousin.

Maybe she wants me to stay away from him.

Or maybe she just thinks I’m a whore like everyone else.

Probably all of the above.

And just like that, I have an explanation for the messages. I found someone with motive and opportunity, someone with access to my dorm. Now that it’s solved, I just have to figure out what to do about it.

“By the way, Annabel Lee dragged us out of the library after you went upstairs the other day,” Manson says. “Just so you know.”

A mixture of relief and mortification swirls through me. Relief that they didn’t see what Angel did to me, which means maybe we can be friends, and I’ll still be able to meet their eye, and mortification that they know what happened. Word gets around on a small campus, and Manson wouldn’t feel the need to tell me he didn’t see anything if he didn’t know what everyone else saw.

“Why would she do that?” I ask, since it doesn’t make sense for her to protect my dignity if she hates me. She should want to humiliate me as much as Angel does.

“She said she can’t bear witness to her family’s crimes, and she was pretty sure her cousin was up to no good.”

“Thanks for telling me,” I mumble.

Manson taps an intricate pattern on the door to the room I thought left its Halloween decorations up. I’m not sure I want to enter now that I suspect she’s behind the bloody messages. They feel more threatening when I know a girl like her left them, someone with what looks like a voodoo doll hanging on her door, photos of candles set up in a pentagram shape, cutouts of crows and black cats and bats, a few plastic spiders, a poster from a very old Dracula movie, and a snake skin that sways gently, rasping over the paper decorations with an eerie rustling that sounds like slithering that makes my skin crawl.

Inside, the room looks more or less normal, though she has a half dozen plants and a series of stacked crates covered with different cloths against one wall, the last of which is strewn with strange items and candles. An odd, earthy smell lingers in the room, something wild and animal, like she might have been in the woods dancing around a fire or digging for poison roots recently.

A groan sounds from the pile of blankets on the bed, and Edward Gorey crawls out, looking annoyed. He stretches one back leg and then the other, then drops off the bed and lopes over to the crates before disappearing inside one.

“Please tell me you brought the chocolate,” Annabel Lee says, poking a finger out of the blankets and opening a space just big enough to peer out from. “I was about to eat Gorey.”

“One hundred percent cacao, as requested,” Manson says, handing her a small paper bag. He holds up the plastic bag on one finger. “Also, blueberry muffins, fried rice, and a friend. The monstrosity you call coffee should be delivered at any minute.”

“I hope you’re not including me in the food,” I mutter, glancing at the makeshift altar that looks suspiciously like it’s from some form of occultism. I’m pretty sure there’s a human tooth sticking up from a little bowl of dirt.

“We’re all cannibals here,” Annabel Lee says, wriggling to sit up and push her comforters down around her midsection. “Hadn’t you heard? We save the babies for special occasions, but adults are our everyday fare.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Manson says, handing over the bag. “We’re both vegetarians. No food with a face.”

Annabel Lee’s mouth curves up at the corners into a smile worthy of Harley Quinn. I wonder suddenly why she wasn’t the fifth member of the Quint instead of me, and that reminds me of Eternity, and a stab of guilt pierces into me. I’m supposed to be solving her murder, but all I’ve done so far is let myself become a victim of the boys we grew up with and look at files I barely understand. I need to go back, to ask Dynamo to help me go through them again, figure out their meaning. I need to know for sure if the boys are innocent, because if they are, that means her killer is still out there.

I shiver, and Annabel Lee cackles, taking it as a response to her evil grin.

“Sit,” Manson says, patting the foot of her queen bed and scooting onto the head of it beside her. “Our girlie here had a very interesting message. Tell her, Mercy.”

I glare at him, since I specifically told him not to say anything. He’s oblivious, already taking containers of food from the bag and setting them in the center of her duvet, which depicts the phases of the moon and some astrological shapes and symbols that I don’t know. Mom and Dad didn’t allow that kind of thing in the house, saying it was satanic. I’m not sure I want to sit on it, but then, Mom and Dad abandoned me at Aunt Lucy’s, so I decide I’m done following their rules. I’m done with all this.

I plop down on the foot of Annabel Lee’s bed. “Did you do it?”

She pauses, her expression indecipherable, but then it goes smooth and serene, completely devoid of expression. I’ve seen Angel do the exact same thing, and it creeps me out that it’s a family trait.

“Do what?” she asks, staring back at me, golden eyes unflinching.

“Did you write those messages on my door?”

“No,” she says. “Next question?”

I swallow hard. I thought she’d beat around the bush, avoid answering. “Are you... Do you worship the devil?” I ask, figuring I might as well get it out of the way if she’s being so boldly, bluntly honest.

“No,” she says. “Next.”

“Do you hate me?”

“No. Next.”

“You know who I am, right?” I press. “You know our history.”

“I don’t have any history with you whatsoever, so I don’t see it as relevant.”

I nod slowly. “That’s very generous of you, considering.”

She shrugs. “There’s a lot of people on this campus who my family says I should hate. Not just you.”

I wince. “You’re lumping me in with the Sinners?”

“Diablo’s Disciples,” she corrects.

“What’s the difference?”

“The Disciples are a gang,” she says matter-of-factly. “The Sinceros are just one family within that gang. Though, granted, an important one.”

“Like the Norths are to the Skull and Crossbones,” I say with a shiver.

“Something like that,” she says, picking up a pair of chopsticks and peeling off the paper. “My turn. Did you write the messages on your door?”

“Of course not,” I say. “You think I’m making it up?”

“Do you worship the devil?”

“What?” I exclaim. “No!”

“Do you hate me?”

“Why would I hate you?”

“See? Pretty silly, isn’t it?”

We stare at each other a few seconds, and then Manson hands me a packet of chopsticks and a box of takeout. “Hope you like tofu.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I’m sorry if I offended y’all.”

There’s a knock, and Manson goes to retrieve a tray of takeout coffee cups with a normal coffee and one that looks like it’s filled mostly with whipped cream and caramel and toffee bits.

“We’re at a Catholic school,” Annabel Lee says to me. “Trust, you’re not the first person to ask, and you won’t be the last.”

“So, let’s talk about who wrote that on your door,” Manson says, settling back in and handing his friend the giant cup of caramel. “You got enemies?”

I glance at Annabel Lee. Her eyes are closed in bliss as she sucks the sugary concoction in big gulps through a wide straw.

I guess she still hasn’t told him.

“A few,” I mutter to Manson.

“And it’s happened before,” he says. “When did it start? Is it the same every time?”

“More or less,” I say. “Though once there was a picture, and once someone left... A tongue.”

“A tongue?” Manson asks, gaping. “What kind of tongue?”

“Human,” I say, breaking apart the chopsticks. “I think.”

“Someone left you a human tongue?” he asks, glancing at Annabel Lee.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Explains the silence,” he says.

“What am I missing?” I ask.

“One of the Sinners was out for a week, and he came back a changed man,” Manson says. “A quiet one, if you get what I’m saying.”

My stomach turns, and I set down the tofu rice I was eating. “How quiet?”

“No one’s heard him say a word,” Manson says.

We all sit in silence for a long minute. I thought the tongue was a warning for me to keep my mouth shut, and maybe it was. But it was a punishment for someone else too.

At last, Annabel Lee speaks. “What was the picture?”

“The picture?”

“You said there was a picture on your door.”

“It was a picture of me and Angel,” I admit. “I was thinking the Sinners might be behind the messages, but if it was one of their tongues...”

“Annie could find out for us,” Manson says, wiggling his brows at Annabel Lee. “Maybe give him a reason to use his tongue.”

“Hard pass,” she says. “Been there, done that, never going back again.”

“You dated a Sinner?” I ask, unable to keep the shock from my voice.

She rolls her eyes. “Dated? No. Was morbidly curious, so I worked my way in so that I could get an invite to their freaking amazing, creepy gothic house and see what the hype was about? Hell yeah, I did.”

“Does your family know about this?”

She pops a cube of tofu into her mouth. “Does it look like I care what my family thinks?”

“I don’t know.”

“Besides, if anyone has an in with the Sinners, it’s Manny here,” she says, her foot moving under the blanket to nudge Manson’s hip. “Why don’t you inspect his tongue?”

“I might just do that,” he says lightly.

I swallow hard. “What’s your connection with them?”

“I don’t have one,” he says. “Well, I mean, I’m on the hockey team with them.”

“The tonsil hockey team,” Annabel Lee teases.

“Hey, we all know straight guys aren’t straight,” Manson says. “If they want to use me to figure that out, who I am to say no? I’m doing a public service, if you think about it.”

She rolls her eyes. “Such a good Samaritan.”

“Wait, you’re gay?” I ask, my head spinning. “I thought you were her boyfriend.”

They both roll with laughter, falling back on the pillows and howling. That gives me time to process, to put together what I’ve already seen with the new information. At last, Manson sits up, wiping tears from his eyes.

“Babe, I’m gay as the day is long,” he says. “Is that a problem?”

“No,” I say honestly. “I just didn’t know.”

“How did you not know?” Annabel Lee asks, still choking with laughter.

“I don’t know,” I say, tugging at the cross on my necklace. “I just thought you were both dramatic. How does that work at a Catholic school?”

“Honey, it works the same everywhere,” Manson says. “People are just more open with their ignorance here.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I guess that’s me.”

“I’m not talking about that kind of ignorance,” he says. “Have you ever even met a gay person before?”

“No,” I admit. “I grew up Catholic, and then I was homeschooled.”

“For the record, I’m not Catholic,” he says. “But as you can imagine, there’s not a lot of ice hockey teams in Arkansas, so here I am.”

“He’s being modest,” Annabel Lee says. “His family moved here from up north and basically created the entire hockey program at Thorncrown for him.”

“For my dad,” he corrects. “But honestly, I don’t mind the religious stuff. It’s refreshing when people say what they mean instead of pretending they’re cool while wishing you don’t exist. I dealt with enough of that petty bullshit in Shallow Creek.”

“And now you deal with the Sinners,” I say. “They all play hockey? And like men?”

“Even Salem,” Annabel Lee says. “The hockey part, not the men. She’s pretty badass, to be honest. Her family threw some big fit about them not having a women’s team, and instead of creating one, they caved and let her play on the men’s team. Can you imagine?”

“I really can’t,” I say, my palms getting itchy at the thought of all those collisions, the fights, violence.

The blood.

“Okay, back to your problem,” Manson says, picking up a fortune cookie from the pile in the center of the bed. “If a Sincero is missing a tongue, it wasn’t them, which means it was... the Hellhounds?” He glances at Annabel Lee, but she doesn’t react.

“It’s fine,” I say, feeling suddenly self-conscious and stupid for coming down here. The Hellhounds will think I’m a rat even more than they already do if I pull someone else into this. After the picture of Angel, I na?vely assumed it wasn’t the boys leaving

the messages. I should never have involved anyone else in my problems.

“What do you mean, it’s fine?” Manson asks, looking at me like I’m crazy.

“I can take care of myself,” I say. “I’m not afraid of the Hellhounds.”

“Um, hello, you should be,” he says. “Do you know who they are? You don’t want to mess with them. Tell her, Annabel Lee.”

“Or maybe they don’t want to mess with me,” I say. “Maybe they should be afraid.”

“Girl, no,” Annabel Lee says, giving me a pitying look, like I’m a child who got bullied at school and is vowing to take on the whole class on the playground tomorrow. “They have an entire gang at their back. You really don’t want to get involved with my family. Hell, I don’t even want to be involved, and they’re my family.”

“I know, but it’s okay,” I say. “Trust me. I can handle it.”

I can’t explain to them why I’m not afraid, why I’m smiling. I must look insane. Their expressions confirm it. But I know the guys won’t hurt me—not in the ways these two think.

They might be angry, but I realize as I sit there that some part of me knows they will protect me. They meant what they said when I gave myself to them. They might humiliate me, push me beyond my limits, corrupt me until I’m as sick and sinful as they are, but they won’t let anyone else hurt me. Only them.

They cut off a Sinners tongue for me. And though that should make me sick, and in a way it does, it also makes me feel all warm and cozy inside.

Because they are still mine. My boys are still mine.

Manson and Annabel Lee exchange glances before he turns to me. “Look, I support anyone’s right to delusions of grandeur, but unless you have a secret identity as a superhero, I don’t think you can fight all the bad guys in Gotham,” Manson says. “So, what exactly is your plan to ‘handle it’?”

“Not in Gotham,” I say, standing from the bed, ignoring the hiss that comes from one of Annabel Lee’s crates. “But in Faulkner? Yeah. I can handle them.”

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:14 am

The Merciful

The visit with Annabel Lee renews me, and I head back upstairs after thanking her for lunch and telling her that her room is lovely. After cleaning my door, I lock myself in my closet before prying the sole from my clog to take out the burner phone I ordered online. Not only did the information I found out—that it likely isn't the Sinners messing with me, but my own friends—inspire me to dig deeper, but the guilt of hanging out with someone besides Eternity has me on edge. I can feel the truth just beyond my fingertips. I just need to get a little closer.

“Hey,” drawls a familiar voice on the other end of the line when I charge and dial. “How's my favorite little psycho?”

“I need a job,” I says. “Can you get me in on Friday?”

“For you?” he asks. “Always.”

I close my eyes and say a silent prayer of gratitude that I can always count on him. You never know when people will turn on you.

“Thank you,” I say, letting myself relax. “I'll be there. I won't let you down.”

Friday night, I pull open my dresser and dig to the bottom of the drawer. Like a phone or its charger, clothes hidden in a special place would look suspicious.

I take out my one pair of jeans and pull them on. They're medium blue, no name brand, no pocket stitching. Not too tight, not too loose. I pull a skirt over them so no

one will think I look different than usual if I get caught. Then I pull on a white tee, layer on an old cardigan, and slide my feet into my clogs. I'd rather wear tennis shoes, but I won't leave my emergency phone here, even when it's turned off. I slide a pair of flip-flops into my purse for backup, then head out.

The November night is dark and foggy, and I'm jumpy as I slip between shadows, making my way toward the edge of campus. I look over my shoulder every few steps, sure I'll see that I'm being followed, but no one appears from the mist. At last, I step off campus and dart behind a tree, waiting for a car to pass. I told the rideshare driver to park around the corner, so I won't be seen leaving at night. Now I jog to the car, climb in, and direct her to a store.

In the parking lot, I squirm out of my skirt and cardigan in back seat, replacing my clogs with the flipflops. Inside the store, I'm just a girl in jeans, a t-shirt, and flipflops, buying a cheap mask and ball cap. It doesn't matter what they look like. I'll toss them at the end of the night. I never wear the same ones twice. Back in my car, I pull my hair up, then pull on a wig cap, not wanting even a strand to escape and give me away. I tug the hat low over it, then pull on the mask and direct my driver to the warehouse over near the tampon factory.

There, I climb out under the orangey glow of the security lights and approach the tall, chain-link fence.

The gate is opened by the usual blond guy with tattoos to his chin, a missing finger, and eyes that guard as many secrets as mine.

"Hey, Dynamo," I say, bobbing my chin at him.

"Mercy me," he drawls.

"Can we look at the files again later?"

“Hope you’re ready to put on a show first,” he says. “The place is packed. Everyone thought you quit.”

“Gotta keep ‘em on their toes,” I say, flashing him a smile. Adrenaline is coursing through me, slow and steady.

Inside, I step into the back room where they let us dress and clean up injuries. I lock the door and quickly strip out of my clothes, knowing someone will bang on the door at any moment, wanting to use the room. No one else requires privacy, but I can’t risk my identity. I change as quickly as I can, keeping the mask and hat for my exit. With my face and hair covered, no one will be able to describe me further than height, approximate size, and maybe, if they look closely, eye color.

I pull on the spandex suit I keep for the occasion, rolling it over my bruised thighs and settling it into place over my chest before pulling on the hood. When I stand, I’m a different person. Like Superman emerging from his phone booth, I’ve transformed. I open the door for someone banging impatiently.

Then I wait with the other girls who trickle in to change and get ready. Some of them are smoking or drinking, but I just wait, the adrenaline pooling inside me until I feel almost sick when I hear Dynamo call my name. I punch my hand into my fist once, then jog out of the changing room. He’s right. The place is packed, so filled with smoke I can hardly see as I shove my way through the crowd, ignoring the whistles, jeers, and groping hands.

I hop down into the ring, the dirt floor stained with blood, the walls crumbling and giving off the smell of a dank basement. I take one moment to inhale the familiar, spine-tingling scent, letting its deliciousness ripple through me all the way to my toes. The Slaughterpen is the only place on earth where I can let out the other kind of urges that overtake me—the violent ones. They might be less shameful than the lustful ones, but only slightly. Girls are supposed to be demure and soft, not want to beat

people to a bloody pulp.

But when the blonde giant they've paired me with drops into the pit, and the crowd standing around it chants for blood, it awakens a thirst whose quenching is far overdue.

The blonde grins at me to show off a missing tooth before spitting on the dirt and raising her fists. She's wearing athletic shorts and a sports bra to show off abs that could rival any man's. She's broad as a truck and probably six feet tall. She looks like a professional athlete.

Perfect.

I bounce on my toes, dancing forward. The crowd is louder now, the hum of excitement and bloodlust washing over the place and sinking down into the pit, where it finds its target—me. I breathe it in, my muscles coiling as I take the first swing. It connects, and the crowd roars their approval.

I feel a smile stretch across my lips, though none of them can see it. Inside my costume, I'm as hidden as the superhero Manson suspected. It doesn't matter, though. My performance is not my face. It's my body. I suck in their excitement like a vampire drawing blood. But I'm not a parasite. This relationship is symbiotic. They want something, and I give it to them. Their frenzy fuels me, and I perform.

I don't suck blood. I draw blood.

The blonde curses savagely when I land an uppercut to her jaw. She spits blood this time, then swings at me, barely glancing off my shoulder. I turn into the blow, grabbing her arm and dragging her forward with her own momentum, using it to send her stumbling into the wall. I spin and land a kick to the back of her knees, knocking her to the floor.

The crowd is screaming now. I grin wider, raising both arms and motioning for them to give me more. They do. I do a little lap around the pit, hyping them up. This is why they come to see me. Not just for the fight, but for the entertainment. They're here for me, not just what I can do. That's why I'm priceless. That's why Dynamo will find a spot for me every time I come, even if he has to move someone else off the roster or double book me. He takes a cut, after all.

Everyone wins tonight.

Everyone except the spitting woman they pitted against me.

She lunges for me when my back is turned, but I can read the crowd well enough to know when she's coming. I drop to my knees when she swings at the back of my head. She tries to pull up short, but she stumbles into me. I wrap my arms around her legs and yank them from under her. Her back hits the floor, her eyes widening with pain and shock.

I jump up and dance backwards, energy buzzing through my body like the sweetest drug. The crowd's frenzy rises to a fever pitch when she comes up, snarling and cursing as she dives for me again. I duck aside, and they laugh and jeer at her as she tries to correct. I lead her around the ring, wearing her out as we exchange a few blows. She gets in one hit for every four I get. Dynamo says the price of admission for a fight is blood, but I almost never bleed. When I do, it's hidden in my hood. But that's okay. I draw enough blood from my opponents that no one complains.

The crowd is on their feet, yelling and stomping as I bring my opponent to her knees for the tenth time. I'm not the only one who will be nursing bruised knees tomorrow. Next time the guys tease me about it, I'll hold my tongue like I always do, but I'll remember this moment. They'll never know what gives me the strength to go on, to endure, to keep quiet. They think I'm weak.

They don't know how merciless I can be.

Just like the crowd doesn't know that as much as they love me, I love them more. As much as they want to see me fight, I need them to. They don't know they're feeding me, that I live on the attention they provide. No one here would believe it if I told them who I was in real life, just like no one from Thorncrown would believe it if they could see me now.

That's why I wear a costume when I become Merciless.

That way, I can become someone else entirely. I don't have to hold back. I don't have to lie and pretend, simper and beg. Here, I am powerful. Here, I am adored. I am someone with iron fists and mixed martial arts skills. Someone who can goad a girl until she's nearly sobbing with fury, one eye swollen shut, blood pouring from her nose and mouth and down her chest, soaking her sports bra and slicking her bruised abdomen. I don't put her out of her misery. I never KO before surrender.

A KO is a cheap win, a hollow victory. What good is beating someone if you never hear them admit defeat?

At last, she sags against the dirt wall, the cockiness gone along with another tooth, and motions she's done. A chorus of boos erupts from the crowd, so loud the place shakes. My cheeks hurt from smiling so hard and long, but I don't stop myself. No one can see me now, behind the mask. And I can't walk around grinning like a clown later. I have to look normal when it's over.

I stalk forward, and the crowd surges. I can feel their energy, their ecstasy, their sadism, lifting me on a cresting wave as they begin to chant.

"No mercy! No mercy! No mercy!"

“Yes, Mercy,” I whisper into the spandex mask.

Then I swing. I hit my opponent’s jaw, and she crumples, falling face down in the dirt, motionless.

I turn and hold up a fist, then bow dramatically in each direction, the crowd roaring their approval at deafening volumes.

Dynamo jumps down into the ring, grabs my hand, and holds it up again.

“You don’t have to knock people out after they’ve already tapped out,” he reminds me over the cheers.

“I have a reputation to uphold,” I call back. “How could I be Merciless if I spared them?”

Dynamo is the only person in the fight scene who knows my name, if only my first name. He knows if I showed mercy, I wouldn’t be upholding the title he gave me.

“I hope I never run into you on the street,” he says. “You’d probably mop the floor with me with one hand behind your back.”

“I could,” I say. “I probably wouldn’t, though.”

I think of the three men who have made my life hell since I started school. I imagine one of them on the floor in the dirt instead of that random fighter I knocked out. How sweet it would feel, a much sweeter victory than this.

But I won’t blow my cover.

So, I wait in the dressing room until everyone is gone, and then I change back into

my jeans and t-shirt. I take the money Dynamo hands me, and I tell him about Dr. Jekyll, and we go over the case files until I'm satisfied. When it's nearly dawn, I walk out. Dynamo drives me to a gas station, where I toss the mask and hat and pull on the long skirt and cardigan over my clothes. And then I go back, like a lamb to the slaughter. I crawl into bed in my dorm, lie down like a good sheep waiting to be devoured by wolves.

I am not a sheep, though. I'm not the little lamb they think I am. I'm not the prey they desire, ready to be torn limb from limb because I'm so meek and mild that I don't even bleat to draw the attention of the shepherd who could chase away the wolves.

I am not even a wolf in sheep's clothing, though the predators may think so if they could have seen me tonight, if they'd realized that all along, I could have ripped out their throats.

But I didn't. I waited. Because I am neither sheep nor wolf.

I am the hunter.

The Saint

My feet pound the gravel, and I clench my fist around my phone, glancing at the screen for the hundredth time since I woke up. As usual, I picked up the phone to watch Mercy, the way I always do when I can't sleep. Seeing her lost to the world, with her lumpy, handmade crochet blanket pulled up to her chin and the raggedy teddy bear I gave her tucked into her arms, soothes me as much now as it did when we were growing up. Then, I could slip into her bed, wrap my arms around her, cuddle her into the safety of my embrace.

Now, I can only watch.

I get a sick satisfaction from the fact that she's as helpless to bridge the divide between us as I am. Not only that, but I can see what she's doing any time I want. She has no idea what I do when she's not around—especially that I watch her. Lost in slumber, she's oblivious to the cameras we have above her bed, the ones through which we can see her sleep, do homework, play with her contraband kit. The one through which we watched her in bed with Angel, watched him force orgasm after orgasm from her reluctant body.

He knows, of course. He made sure we had the best view possible. Not of her pussy dripping with his spit and her cum when he fucked it with his tongue and his fingers, but of her chest heaving with sobs, her face twisted with helpless fury and bliss as she succumbed to the pleasure, tearstained and devastated. The thought makes my cock stiffen even as I slow and let myself back into the dorm.

I wipe sweat from my forehead and head up the stairs. Unlike the girls' dorm, the

boys don't have a Father at the desk watching. They don't care about our chastity, about who we might sneak into our rooms in the night.

I consider going to Angel and Heath's room, the same way I did when I woke up and saw that Mercy wasn't in bed. I checked the other cameras and saw her creeping through the dark, slipping off campus, before I believed it. Even then, I didn't go to the others. They would have opinions I'd feel obligated to take into account, urges to quell and considerations on what we should do. That would take too much time. I already took too much time running to her dorm to check, to make sure she hadn't tampered with the cameras, that my little mouse of a sister really left campus by herself in the middle of the night.

Fury throbs in my temples as I pad along the hallway on the fourth floor.

What the fuck is she doing?

I pound my fist on the door I want, then wait, checking my phone again, as if she'll have reappeared so soon. It's been twenty minutes. If she had a craving for ice cream, she's had time to get it. She should be returning at any moment. I know she wouldn't do something so reckless, and yet, I hold onto the impossible, naive hope that could more accurately be described as denial.

I'm about to knock again when the door creaks open and a boy peers out, his brown hair mussed and sticking up on one side in a cowlick. With his glasses askew and the scowl on his face making his lower lip draw in, he looks like an owl.

"I need to know where someone is."

"Not my area of expertise," he says, his voice raspy with sleep.

"Let me in," I order. "And make it happen."

“This is outside my regular business hours,” he says. “I charge twice as much after hours, and four times if you fuck up my sleep schedule.”

“Fine,” I say, shoving my phone at him. “That’s not an issue.”

The kid sighs and pulls open the door, raking a hand through his hair, which only makes it stand up more atrociously. He’s wearing flannel pajamas buttoned to the neck to combat the damp chill in the room caused by the half-open window.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” he asks, waving the phone at me.

“I don’t know,” I say, frowning down at him. “Aren’t you the hacker?”

“What do you want me to hack into?” he asks. “Your video feed hasn’t been disabled or put on a playback loop. It’s still going.”

“I know that,” I grit out, gesturing to the still campus shown on the screen before narrowing my eyes at him. “How can you tell?”

He shrugs. “I’m good.”

“Humble too,” I mutter, glowering down at the scrawny nerd. I could break him in half with my bare hands.

He arches an arrogant brow. “You want good, or you want humble?”

“Asshole.”

He cracks the slightest smile. Nate Swift is an enigma—no friends, no girls, no known attachments, only connections in his own dark web. No one knows for sure how far and wide that goes, though there are rumors of the powerful people who owe

him favors. He's known for his discretion and certain skill set that makes him invaluable to men from every walk of life, from fathers like mine to ones like Angel's. He can get in and out without leaving a trace just about anywhere that the internet reaches—for a price.

That price is never cash, though.

"Time's ticking," he says, tapping the screen with a blunt, clean fingernail trimmed so close it looks painful.

"I want to know where she went."

"You want me to hack into a closed-circuit security camera?" he asks, handing back my phone and powering up his tech center, which looks like something out of a spy movie. "Which one?"

"I don't fucking know," I say, throwing myself down on his rumpled bed. "Figure it out."

"Off. My. Bed." He stares at me with eyes so unflinching I'm reminded of those favors he's owed by men far more dangerous than me.

"My bad," I grumble, shoving off the mattress. It was a dick move to drag him out of bed and then toss my sweaty ass on it. Besides, the recently vacated sheets are disconcertingly warm. I'm not opposed to a little sword crossing when I'm sharing a slut with the bros, but there's something uncomfortably intimate about feeling a stranger's warmth in his sheets.

Nate turns back to his monitors and taps away like nothing happened. From the back, with his bedhead hair and ears sticking out, he looks like the guy that got wedgied by guys like me in high school. But he's not a wimpy brainiac doing the homework of

the popular jocks. It might seem like it at first. Protection is the first favor he asks—he'll do something online for you that you can't figure out yourself, and in return, you'll guarantee that none of your crew will bother him.

But if at some later time a person finds himself in need again, he pays however and whenever Nate asks. If someone tried to refuse, he wouldn't just have proof of whatever illegal thing they'd asked him for, but anything that's ever existed in the furthest reaches of the internet. The kid can find anything. By now he's racked up enough favors to earn him his own status, more untouchable than anyone on campus, including Hellhounds and Sinners. He plays both sides—on campus, in the town, in Washington, if the rumors are to be believed.

I sit down to watch him work, though I know there's no way I'll remember enough to replicate the steps he takes when I'm back on my own computer. That's probably why he lets people watch. He pulls up a fucking hologram a minute later, probably just to show off. My phone's video feed hovers in the air over his fingers. It moves backwards, a timer counting the rewinding numbers in the bottom corner, until Mercy comes into view, moving backwards in jerky, speedy steps. She goes backwards through the door, and then the campus is still again.

Nate acts without instruction, and a minute later, she's in her room, getting dressed.

“Don't watch that,” I snap as her clothes disappear—skirt, then jeans, until she's in her underwear.

Nate shakes his head, but he doesn't stop the feed. “That's the least interesting part of my job.”

And then Mercy's back in bed, and the screen hovering in the air disappears. “So, she got up at midnight, put on double clothes, and left campus,” I say. “How does that help?”

“I can only trace actions, not motivations,” he says, switching over to another screen. He leans in, examining a still from the video, the place where Mercy left campus. He pulls up an aerial map and studies it, then types for a minute. A dozen dots appear on it.

“I’ll look at these cameras, but it’ll take a while to hack into each one,” he says. “Get comfortable. But not too comfortable. Don’t touch anything.” Without looking away from his screens, he gestures to a fancy leather office chair in front of another computer.

I sit and watch, and we get lucky on the third try. The convenience store security footage is grainy and silent, but there’s Mercy, buying a hat.

“What the fuck?” I mutter, leaning forward and watching her. She leaves, and Nate freezes the feed, takes a screenshot of the license plate of the car she climbs into that’s barely visible through the window. He works on clarifying that for a few minutes, then traces it and somehow finds that it’s a registered rideshare.

“Can I ask you a question?” I say, sitting there in awe while he hacks into the rideshare app. “Why are you at a shitty college in Arkansas? Shouldn’t you be running cyber security for Black Rock or... I don’t know, the government?”

“It’s just undergrad,” he says. “I’ll go to an Ivy League for grad school, but I learn more on my own anyway. I doubt any school can teach me anything I don’t already know, so what does it matter where I go?”

“Connections? Impressing potial employers?” I wince at how much I sound like my dad when he starts in on his lectures. Nothing he could say would make me leave Heath and Angel, no matter how much he threaed to cut me off and disown me like he did Mercy. Eventually, he gave up trying to make me follow in his footsteps, though he can’t figure out why that’s the last thing on earth I want to do.

But Nate doesn't have loyalty to anyone, so it's a mystery why he'd insist on staying in Faulkner.

He chuckles. "I've already got connections."

"Not the same ones you'd make there, though."

"Not going to scold me about how humility is a virtue again?"

"I didn't scold you," I grumble.

"Her rideshare dropped her off here," Nate says, zooming into his map again.

I stare at the Fred's store that's been closed and boarded up for years. "What's she doing there?" I demand.

Nate shrugs. "Store's closed. No cameras."

"I know that," I grumble, yanking the tie from my hair in frustration. "Fuck!"

Nate watches me from behind his glasses, his eyes serene but wary. "I can check a couple intersections, but there aren't a lot of cameras in that area," he says. "Mostly industrial buildings."

I tell him to go ahead, and I sit and stare at the map he left up while he works at another screen. I remember that Fred's store. The Quint used to go in and buy sodas and candy. The last time we went in, we were walking around for a while, until an employee accosted us.

"You need to buy something or leave."

Heath argued they were kicking us out unfairly, that there was no law that you had to buy something when you shopped. The guy said there was a law you couldn't shoplift. Mercy got all offended and said they were profiling us, even though Angel was the only one who wasn't white. We left, though, and we weren't even out of sight of the shop when Heath pulled a half dozen bags of chips and candy out of his hoodie, and Eternity pulled bottles of nail polish and makeup from her pockets.

We laughed and high-fived, because we'd got one over on the guy, but Mercy wanted to go back and return it. She pouted for an hour and refused to speak to us.

"Stealing is wrong," she said, and even though she was right, I was embarrassed of her, not my friends who had stolen. That has to say something about my morals and hers, about some people being born good and others not.

But what is a good girl with strong morals doing at an abandoned store? There's nothing to do there but break in, and Mercy wouldn't do that.

"If you can't find her, how can I find out where she went?" I demand of Nate when the traffic cams come up empty.

"If you can get me her phone, I can install something for you to track," he says. "But she'd have to take it with her, and if you check that video you have of her room, she left it on the charger."

"Fuck," I mutter. I didn't even notice that. I need to watch more closely, to monitor her more thoroughly. We only did it to fuck with her, to get video of her in her room, invade her life and violate her privacy. Now, it's more than that. Now, she has a secret, and Mercy doesn't get to have secrets.

"So how do I keep tabs on someone who leaves their phone at home?"

He scoots back from his desk and ambles over to the wall. He moves aside a framed poster from The Matrix and reveals the front of a high-tech metal safe. “If you really need someone’s location, you can put a tracker on their person,” he says. “It’s not a camera, but you’ll know where she is.”

“How do I do that?” I ask, thinking about those ugly fucking clogs she wears all the time. I could track those.

Nate is doing a retina scan to open his safe, and he doesn’t speak until it beeps, allowing him to put in a code next. “It’s a bit difficult to do it without her noticing, since it goes inside her body,” he says. “Would she agree to that?”

“What do you think?” I snap.

“I think you’ll need to make a small incision or shoot it through her skin,” he says. “She might feel it in there even if she doesn’t know when you’re doing it. But I’ve got something that will help her sleep through the insertion, if you’re interested.”

He hands me a baggie from the safe. I scowl at him, realizing this is a whole new level of violation I hadn’t considered. I relish the thought of it. Not just knowing where she is, being able to follow her every move, but doing it without her knowledge or consent. Picturing her fury and hurt and indignation when she finds out has my cock stirring, especially when I think about plunging it to the hilt inside her while she howls with rage.

Fuck. I can’t think like that. She’s my sister, for god’s sake.

I snatch the bag from Nate and stuff it in my pocket. “What do I owe you?”

He looks me up and down, as if considering what he could use a guy of my size for. I don’t like the thought of being his goon, beating up guys I don’t know for crimes I

can't imagine, but I knew when I came here that I'd do whatever he asked.

He stands and stretches, then motions me to the door. After stepping out into the hall, I turn back.

"I'll call you," he says, and before I can give him my number, he closes the door in my face.

"Asshole," I mutter, but I turn away and hurry out of the dorm. I may have lost Mercy, but she'll come back to me. A lost lamb always returns to its flock.

I consider waiting for her at the spot where she left campus, but I don't trust her to return the same way, so in the end, I make my way to her dorm.

I'm lying on her bed when she steps into her room a few hours later.

She only pauses a second before pulling the door closed behind her. "What are you doing here?"

I sit up and swing my legs off the side. I can't believe my sweet little sister has the audacity to ask me that when she's been sneaking around doing god-knows-what all night, until the window shows the first light of dawn outside. But then, maybe she's not such a meek little lamb after all.

"I think the better question is, what were you doing?" I ask, stroking the head of the grey kit that made itself comfortable on my stomach while we waited. "Where exactly have you been, little sister?"

She takes her time turning back, unwinding the scarf from around her neck, and shrugging out of her cardigan. She hangs them on the back of her chair and then slips off her clogs, pushing them under the edge of the bed. "I can't believe Dr. Jekyll let

you pet him,” she says, eyeing the cat. “He hates me.”

“Don’t avoid the question.”

She sits down on the edge of her bed, curling her toes inside her white socks, burying them in the fuzzy rug next to her bed. “I went to meet someone who had information about Eternity,” she says, rubbing her temples. “Now I’m tired, and I’d like to get some sleep, if you don’t mind.”

Of all the things she could have said, that one surprises me. In truth, I didn’t expect her to answer at all. I thought she’d fight me, hedge and avoid, and maybe, as a last resort, lie. I thought maybe she went to meet that bastard Royal, or some asshole from one of her classes who she knew we wouldn’t let her go out with. Guys only want one thing when they call a girl at midnight, but she’s probably too naïve to know that. I thought she’d try to make excuses, say whoever she met was just a friend. I didn’t think she’d be playing detective.

“Who?” I ask.

“What?” she asks, sounding exhausted.

“Who did you meet?”

“I don’t know his name,” she says. “Juvenile cases are closed, so getting files isn’t exactly legal. It was all very discrete.”

“Where are they?” I ask. “The files you were supposedly getting.”

“I only read them,” she says. “He said it would be incriminating if he gave them to me.”

“Of course it was a guy,” I say. “And what did you give him for this information?”

She sighs. “Money.”

“I don’t want you leaving campus to meet guys in the middle of the night,” I say. “Especially criminals. You don’t know what he could have asked of you—or taken without asking.”

“Like you?” she challenges, and I see a flash of that fire I remember so well. Sure, she was my pain-in-the-ass, goody-two-shoes little sister who wanted to bring back a pack of Starbursts when we shoplifted, but she stood her ground. She didn’t eat a single one, not even when we waved them under her nose tempting her to join us and made a big show of eating the pink ones, her favorite.

“Like me,” I say blandly.

“But you’ve taken nothing,” she says, standing and going to her closet. She opens the doors and steps inside, but I catch movement in a sliver of mirror. I watch her drop her skirt, then the jeans she’s wearing under them. I swallow hard and tear my eyes away.

She’s your sister.

I take the opportunity to ask her a question I’d rather ask when I don’t have to see her reaction, analyze it. “If you want to know what happened to Eternity, why don’t you just ask us?”

I can hear her moving in the closet, but I refuse to look, no matter how much I want to.

“Would you tell me?” she asks at last.

I swallow and glance at the mirror, and then I wish I hadn't. Her back is turned to the gap in the door, but a stripe of light illuminates her bare skin, her narrow waist, the flare of her hips. She's wearing full-coverage cotton underwear, almost aggressively unsexy. For some reason, that captivates me more than if she was wearing a black lace thong or another popular choice that one of the numberless, nameless girls I've fucked showed up in. Now that I've caught sight of her undressing, I can't look away.

Her ass is only hinted at through the sturdy fabric, but I can see its shape, plump and round, can almost feel its weight in my palms as I support it, fucking into her slow and deep while her head falls back, her hair tumbling down her back, tears of silent agony dripping from her temples.

I pull one of her throw pillows into my lap to hide what she's doing to me.

She reaches to grab a garment from the rack in her closet, her muscles stretching. Her back is toned, her ass, her thighs, her shoulders. I picture myself stepping in behind her, sliding my hands around her, cupping her heavy breasts, squeezing her nipples. I can hear the gasps and whimpers so clearly I think she's really making the sound for a second. Then she drops one of her long nightshirts down over her body, and my cock strains against the underside of the pillow, and I know the moment is over. She opens the closet and marches back to the bed.

"Would you?" she demands.

I shake my head, trying to clear it, to remember what she asked instead of how tight she was around my finger or the sweet smell of her cunt.

"You wouldn't?" she asks, watching me for an answer.

"Wouldn't what?"

“I asked if you’d tell me what happened to Eternity,” she says, sounding annoyed, like I’m playing games with her on purpose. “The truth.”

“We didn’t do it.”

She scoffs and turns away. “And that’s why I didn’t ask you.”

I snag her hand and tug her back to the bed, for a half-second contemplating whether to toss the pillow and slam her down on my erection. But judging from how eagerly she smeared my dried up old cum into her pussy, she wouldn’t hesitate to milk the fresh, warm stuff from my cock the moment she had a chance, and one of us has to be strong.

I just didn’t think it would have to be me.

I pull her down beside me, wrapping a tight arm around her shoulders. “We didn’t do it.”

She stares at her knees, bare below the hem of her oversized shirt. “You swear?”

“On our mother’s grave.”

“Your mother.”

“ Our mother’s grave,” I say again, my fucking chest hollowing out at the small, defeated tone in her voice.

She raises her gaze to mine, and I see all the hope and fear and confusion churning there, and for once, I don’t want to make it worse. I want to wipe it all away with her tears, kiss it better, the way I did when we were kids.

“Promise-swear?” she asks, just like she did back then. “Cross your heart and hope to die?”

“Stick a finger in my eye.”

“I want to believe you,” she whispers, dropping her gaze. She stares at the pillow instead of my eyes. “That’s why I had to know what was in those files. So I would know if you were telling the truth. I want to trust you again, Saint, like I used to. Don’t you want that?”

She lifts her gaze again, swallowing hard as she searches my eyes for some answer I can’t give her. I want her to trust me, but not the way she used to. I want it all to be different now, and I want her trust for different reasons. I want it so that I can break it, and break her, and watch her shatter into a million beautiful pieces that never make me feel this way again.

“If you want us to trust you, tell me what you found,” I say, turning away.

“I don’t think you did it,” she admits. “Not anymore. Did you know they never did a DNA test on that body they found, the one they said was hers? They just said it was her, closed the case, and moved on. What if it wasn’t her, S?”

That nickname is a knife between my ribs. She hasn’t called me that in years, not even before it all fell apart. I wanted to be cool, tough, adult. I wanted Eternity. I didn’t want her to think of me as a little boy anymore, the one called by an initial, as we all were. Of course, she still called me S to annoy me, but Mercy didn’t. She had more respect.

And yet, it didn’t bother me when Eternity did it. Nothing she did bothered me that year. Everything was flirting. When she called me Clown Shoes because my feet grew before the rest of me; when she gave me wet willies; when she put ice cubes

down the back of my shirt at the diner to make me jump up and look like an idiot in front of a table of popular girls from my school. I didn't care what any of them thought. I only cared what E did.

"You should get some sleep," I say, standing and going to the electric kettle Mercy has on an old wooden table near the window. Of course she has to have her hot tea. Angel's mom always said she must have been an English lady in another life. Our mom didn't believe in things like that. If she'd known, she would have said it was heathenism to believe in past lives, and Mercy would have parroted her because she wanted so badly to be loved that she'd say anything, believe anything, if she could believe that someone loved her.

I hope she still does.

I drop the pill Nate gave me into her tea before delivering it in the tiny cup on the tiny saucer with flowers around the rim. She might object to what I'm doing, but it's for her own good as well as my peace of mind. It's not like I'm some pervert who's going to touch my own sister once she's asleep.

I even erase the video feed from the night, in case the others check it over. They might not like what I've done, though it's for the good of all of us. I don't want them to know she left, to wonder where she went or get pissed that I went easy on her. I believe her, but they might not. For now, I'll keep tonight between us. Next time, I'll know exactly where to find her, and when I follow her, I'll know if she was telling the truth or if she's lying like she did before.

The Merciful

The campus is already halfway empty on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. Students who are traveling for the holiday have already gone home, and the professors don't want to teach something important that they'll just have to redo once half the class comes back, so they take it easy on us or let us out early. I'm on my way back to the dorm when I hear footsteps behind me. My spine stiffens, and I glance back, expecting one of the Sinners to be on my heel again, ready for another confrontation. Instead, a pair of teal eyes fixes on mine, hard with malice.

My heart stops.

Worse than the Sinners, it's Heath. And though I know I'll have to speak with him eventually, especially if I want every perspective on Eternity's disappearance, I'm not ready. Not yet.

I turn back, relief rushing into me when I spot a trio of familiar figures in front of me, one with a pile of black hair that looks like it might be a nesting area for rooks, one with white hair in a series of spikes so sharp even a bird wouldn't perch on them, and one with a sensible knit cap pulled to her ears.

"Hey," I say, shuffle-running to catch up in my chunky clogs.

They turn back, and suddenly I feel stupid that I called out to them, since I have nothing important to say. I dart the quickest glance back and see that Heath has slowed, his hands in his pockets now, his pose casual as he strolls along, watching a few crows reel through the sky like he didn't even notice I was here.

“What’s up, Mercy me?” Manson asks.

“I just—I didn’t expect to see you here,” I say. “I figured you’d ditch and go home all week.”

Manson sighs. “My mother ‘doesn’t believe in celebrating a holiday that rewrites colonial genocide as a breaking of the bread among friends.’ She says if they treated it more like the Last Supper...”

“She has a point,” Ronique says.

“Okay...” I say, glancing from them to Annabel Lee.

“I have to go home today, or my parents will hunt me down and drag me there kicking and screaming,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“And probably force feed you turkey,” Manson says.

Annabel shudders. “Ronique’s coming with me, since her family lives in Ohio and didn’t fly her home this year. I’d invite you, but... Y’know.”

She unlocks the door, and we all spill into the entrance of the dorm, but not before I catch one more glimpse of Heath standing there, a scowl on his face at being thwarted. The nun at the desk glowers at us too, probably wishing we weren’t here so she could have a break.

“Oh, no, it’s fine,” I say quickly. “I was planning to stay here anyway.”

“A lot of people don’t leave campus,” Ronique says, giving me a sympathetic smile. “People who can’t afford to fly home twice so close together, since Christmas is in a month, people without family... I’d be staying too, if it weren’t for Annabel.”

“Thanks,” I say, offering her a smile, since it’s the first time she’s been nice to me.

Upstairs, Annabel Lee invites me to come hang out for a few minutes, and even though I feel a little awkward around them, Manson insists. I need to ask them about something, anyway, so I acquiesce without much resistance.

“Oh, look, Brandon Lee Jr. is out,” Annabel Lee says when we step into her room. She scoops up a skunk from her floor and gestures us to come inside. “Don’t worry, he won’t spray. His scent glands were removed.”

“You know, if you and Mercy were roommates, it would be like Snow White’s dorm room,” Manson says, dropping onto her bed and propping himself up with one elbow. “Her room is all cottagecore pretty, and yours is full of animals and wild things.”

“If she had a roommate, it would be me,” Ronique points out.

I wince. Is that why she doesn’t like me? She thinks I’m trying to replace her. I think about how I felt when Eternity started to pull away, and that was only the beginning. If she had made other friends when we went to high school and abandoned me, I would have never recovered from the devastation. I hate myself for thinking that probably, she would have. I was too shy, too anxious, too much of a rule follower. I never belonged in the Quint. Not really. I was only there because Saint said I did, and I’m not even sure that he belonged.

“These little guys are my roommates,” Annabel Lee says, lifting the cloths to peer into each of her crates. “Hey there, pookie-wookie-snookiepants.” She makes her baby voice and reaches in to pet some critter I can’t see.

“True,” Ronique says, plopping down on her friend’s bed. “I wouldn’t want to wake up to find a snake wrapped around my neck. Besides, they kinda smell funny.”

“Rude,” Annabel Lee says, lifting the cover of one of the crates, which looks like a terrarium of some sort with a red light inside. I suck in a breath when I see that the thick branch behind the glass is actually a snake.

“Cheers to the weirds,” Manson says, pulling a flask from his backpack. “Let’s have a little celebration of our own before you go traipsing off to enjoy your politically incorrect holiday.”

The other two crowd around him, and I hesitantly sink into the lone chair in the room while they take shots.

“Let’s play fuck-marry-kill with the staff,” Manson says.

“Too easy,” Annabel Lee says. “We’d all fuck Father Salvatore.”

My heart flips at his name, and my thighs tremble. I haven’t been able to meet his eye in class since that day in the library. I need to go to confession, but I can’t bring myself to.

“How about with the Sinners?” Manson asks, taking a swig from his flask and passing it to me. He wiggles his perfectly shaped, manicured, bleached eyebrows. “You first, Mercy.”

“I don’t know any of them,” I say. “Or even their names.”

Still, I don’t want to be totally left out, so I take a drink. It takes like one of the syrups Aunt Lucy put in her coffee—if it fermented before she could use it. I barely manage to swallow it, and my eyes water at the sting.

Manson laughs and accepts the drink back before handing it to Ronique.

“I’d rather do the Hellhounds,” she says. “I would fuck, marry, and kill Saint Soules.”

“We know,” Annabel Lee and Manson say in unison, like they’ve had this conversation a million times.

“I’m just saying,” Ronique says. “He can have all of me, even my kill. Hell, I’d let the whole dozen run a train on me if I got to have him as the caboose.”

The others laugh, and I think I’ll throw up.

“Okay, now do the Sinners,” Manson says, lounging back on one elbow.

“I’d fuck Salem,” Ronique says. “Humble her and make her my bitch. I’d marry... Which one stopped speaking? Was it Knox? If so, I’d marry him. Then he couldn’t annoy me. And I’d kill Killian.”

“What’s in a name?” Annabel Lee quotes, accepting the flask. “I’d kill Bain. Cut the head off the beast so the whole thing would die. I’d fuck Greyson because he’s the hottest one. I’d marry Archer because he seems like he could make me laugh and we could be unhinged together.”

The others make comments of approval, and she drinks and hands the flask on. I try to remember the names, so that later I can figure out which Sincero sibling is which.

“I’d fuck Rafe,” Manson says, drinking and handing the bottle to me again. “He’s dreamy. I’d marry Salem just to fuck with everyone’s head, plus, with all those brothers, you know she knows how to handle a man, which means she could keep my ass in line. And I’d kill... Archer. Something’s not right about him.”

“Is one of them really smart?” I ask. “Like, a computer genius or anything?”

The three of them stare at me like they forgot I was here.

“The triplets are all pretty smart,” Manson says slowly. “Why?”

“I—I have something I need to find,” I say. “Something sensitive that’s hidden online.”

“Oh, dear Lucifer,” Annabel Lee says, flopping back on the bed. “Please tell me no one uploaded a video of what my cousin did in the library, and you need it scrubbed from the internet.”

“No,” I say quickly. “It’s something else. A file with some pages missing. I thought there must be a backup online. Maybe it’s complete.”

“Sounds like a job for Nate Swift,” Manson says. “Boys dorm, room 417. He’s probably already gone, so catch him after the break. And be ready to do him a favor in return.”

“What kind of favor?” I ask, my throat tightening. “Like... A sinful one?”

They stare at me a second, and then they all burst into laughter. “Okay, I’m going to need the video evidence of what I heard happened in the library, because there’s no way you did that,” Manson says when he recovers.

“Not a sexual favor,” Annabel Lee assures me. “Nate’s not interested in that kind of thing.”

“More like, you owe him one,” Ronique explains. “I heard he doesn’t even call most of them in. He just likes the power of knowing you’re in his debt.”

The thought sits uneasily with me, but they don’t have any other suggestions, and I

don't have anyone else to ask for alternatives.

That evening, when the last classes and labs are done and the campus sits quiet except for an occasional student crossing to the dining hall, I head for the boys' dorm. They said Nate was off campus, but I want to check anyway. I'm just reaching the fourth-floor landing when I hear footsteps in the stairwell above me.

I freeze, caught between the instinct to run and the one to stay still and quiet and hope whoever is there passes me without notice. As they move quickly down the stairs, I realize how foolish I was to go into the boys' dorm on a night like this. Almost no one is around to help me if I need it, to hear me if I scream. What if the remaining guys on campus banded together like a lawless pack, like the Hellhounds, and attacked me?

The thought is more thrilling than it should be.

"Well, hello there, little sister," comes a familiar, cruel voice on the stairs above.

I swallow hard and drag my eyes up, my heart hammering in my chest. My words catch in my throat when I see Saint standing there in a pair of grey sweatpants and a black tee that stretches taut across his muscular chest and shoulders. His tattooed forearms are bare, corded with muscle and threaded with veins that make me lightheaded. I tear my gaze back to his.

"Sneaking around again, are we?" Saint asks, a taunt in his deep voice.

"I—Why aren't you home?" I blurt.

"Because my father is a power-hungry fraud who uses his children to reflect his moral superiority while treating them like disposable, subhuman vermin behind closed doors, and my mother is a spineless piece of shit who lets him. But then, you

already know that, don't you?"

"But... They chose you," I whisper.

A sardonic smile twists the corner of his lips. "Indeed. But you haven't answered my question yet. What are you doing here, M?"

My heart nearly stops when he calls me by the nickname. I never expected any of them to remember, and when Angel used it, I thought it was already too good to be true. I never even hoped the others might.

"The same thing I was doing the last time," I admit. "I was hoping to find a copy of the digital file, maybe see if the missing pages are present online. I heard there's a guy here who might be able to help."

Saint stares at me a long moment, then comes down the stairs between us. "You need to stop digging," he says, his voice flat and hard, more commanding than I've heard it before.

"What?" I ask, taking a step back. The railing stops me, and Saint steps forward, trapping me against it.

"There are things you don't know, that you don't need to know," he says. "You're going to fuck up the balance of this whole town if you don't keep your nose where it belongs."

"What are you talking about?" I whisper, my throat closing as I stare at my brother, who looms over me like a threat. His clear eyes are as cold as ice, a stranger's eyes, moments after he reminded me we are the furthest thing from it. We share an upbringing, parents, a family. And yet, we don't share the one thing that matters—the truth.

That day is what separates us, and despite his kindness the day he caught me sneaking into my room at dawn and made me tea, he's telling me now that he doesn't want that obstacle removed.

"You don't know what you're doing," he warns. "You're going to piss off the wrong person, and it'll be a fucking war, Mercy. This whole town exists as it does right now because the people at the top of each faction pull their string to keep the powers in balance. If you disrupt that..."

"But it's a lie," I say. "If covering up Eternity's murder is keeping the town in balance, then the town is built on a lie."

"The town was built hundreds of years before any of us came along," he says. "This is how it's always worked. You're not going to change that. All you're going to do is get yourself killed too."

"If the truth will do that much damage, then maybe this town needs disrupting," I say, refusing to back down. Saint's jaw clenches, and he stares down at me with disbelief and fury. I'll take it. It's better than the chilly indifference of a moment ago.

"You don't know what you're fucking with," he grits out.

"The man who murdered her is out there, Saint," I say, pressing a hand to his chest. He doesn't yield, forcing me to look up at him from a position of supplication instead of facing him across the space of the stairs. I go on anyway. "If she was even killed. If she wasn't, the one who knows it, who knows why it was made to look that way, is probably right here in Faulkner. And he doesn't want us to find out. Don't you want to know why?"

"No," he growls. "If you're smart, you won't either."

“You’re wrong,” I say. “You can force me to do all the sick things you and your perverted friends want, but you can’t change what I know. You can’t change who I am. I’m going to find out. I have to know what happened. Why don’t you, Saint? If you’re innocent, and you didn’t do it, why don’t you want me to know who did?”

His palms crack down on the railing on either side of me so suddenly I jump back, jostling against it. The sound echoes up and down the stairway, and I lean away from Saint, whose eyes blaze with fury now. “Because it doesn’t fucking matter,” he yells. “She’s gone, Mercy. She’s gone, and she’s never coming back. It doesn’t matter who did it, or why, or what you know. It won’t change anything. All it will do is make you disappear too. So let it go and walk the fuck away from this.”

I know I should be scared, that he’s bigger and meaner than the boy I knew, that he’s filled with rage and pain that could destroy me. But I know that rage and pain all too well, so I reach for him like someone reaching for a cornered, injured animal, and I cup his stubble-strewn cheek with my palm. “I’m not going anywhere,” I promise. “I won’t disappear on you again.”

He slaps my hand away, scowling down at me with a thunderous expression. “That’s not what I care about. I care about her, just like you did. More than you. I loved her, Mercy. But I won’t throw away my life on something I can’t change.”

“Then nothing will change,” I say. “And maybe for you, that’s okay. Maybe that’s good. You shouldn’t have to throw away your life. You have a life worth saving. Not everyone does.”

We stare at each other a second before he finally pushes off the railing and steps back, to the wall on the far side of the stairs. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means you have a good life, Saint,” I say quietly, evenly.

He regards me with suspicion. “How so?”

“In every way,” I say, gesturing at him. “You have parents who love you, even if they’re tough on you. They want what’s best for you. They want you. They have expectations about your future, and they support you. You’ll be graduating next year, and you’ll probably go to an Ivy League grad school, because you can. You have football and the team and the Hellhounds. You have friends who really know you, and love you, and want you to be happy. Probably girlfriends.”

I break off, an unexpected stab of anguish sliding into me at the thought. My brother is a good-looking guy. He always was, even if I didn’t notice when we were kids, and he was just the brother who left his sweaty socks on the living room floor and wore the same shirt for three days in a row and put ranch on things that had no business being defiled that way. Now he’s gorgeous, and popular, and all the things that normal girls like Ronique want. Of course he wants them back.

“And let me guess,” he says. “Poor little Mercy has nothing, and I’m supposed to feel sorry for her.”

I draw back. “I’m not feeling sorry for myself. I’m stating facts. You have a lot to lose. I don’t.”

“Bullshit,” he growls. “You have your whole life to lose.”

I shrug. “If you don’t want to risk getting involved, I understand why. I don’t blame you or think less of you. But I have more reasons to push ahead than go back, even after what you told me tonight. And you have to understand that.”

“I don’t.”

“Then tell me one thing, besides my life itself, that I stand to lose. Because I don’t see

it.”

“Your innocence.”

We stare at each other a long moment. “Then take it,” I say quietly.

“That’s what this is all about?” he asks with an incredulous laugh. “You’d go to these lengths to get some dick? I’d be impressed if I didn’t know the reason you have to go this far is because it’s your own fucking brother you’re trying to seduce.”

“I’m not,” I grit out. “I don’t even see how I still have my innocence, according to you. Because I don’t think I do. I think you’ve already taken it, brother or not.”

He swallows hard, and I see something flicker in the depths of those eyes, like a creature lurking far below the surface of a lake of fire. But then he smiles cruelly again. “Do you realize how pathetic you sound, saying your life isn’t worth living if you’re not my girlfriend.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“No, but you’re jealous that I have girlfriends. I could see it all over your face the moment you said the word. You don’t like that I fuck other girls, but no guy will fuck you.”

“Angel would,” I mutter, my cheeks burning with shame as I stare at the stone steps between us.

Saint laughs. “No, he wouldn’t. Heath might, but he’d rip you to shreds and probably kill you if we let him. Is your greedy little pussy that desperate for dick?”

He prowls forward, this time moving in a sultry sway as he pins me to the railing

again. I suck in a breath, preparing for the onslaught of desire and confusion when he pushes his thigh between mine like he did in the hallway that day. But he pulls back instead, letting out a silent breath of a laugh. “You think you can convince me to fuck my own sister by telling me you’ll kill yourself if I won’t fuck you? Because that’s what you’re doing if you keep digging.”

“And you don’t think it’s suspicious that it would cost another life to find the truth?” I demand, bending my head back to look up at him. “You don’t think that in itself makes it worth finding?”

“What’s the truth ever done for me?” he asks. “Or for you, for that matter?”

I open my mouth to answer, but then I close it again. If I hadn’t told the truth at the trial, I would have all the things I listed that make his life worth more than mine is now—friends, parents, activities that my parents funded until I found my passion, without the fear of leaving the house that kept me trapped in isolation at Aunt Lucy’s for all those years.

And yes, maybe I’d have a boyfriend. Is wanting that so terrible?

“Lying is wrong,” I mumble at last. “It’s in the Bible.”

Saint chuckles, then reaches out and lifts my chin, forcing my gaze to his. “Then go home and fuck your Bible.”

I pull away. “It’s not about that. I don’t care about that, and I don’t care about this illusion of innocence you think I still have, even though you saw what happened every single time. You know it’s gone. Why pretend?”

“Oh, you poor, dumb little lamb,” he says. “If you think that’s all we can do to you, you’re even more innocent than I thought.”

“Then take it, or don’t complain when someone else does. I’m not going to stop until I find out what happened to her, and why, and where she is, dead or alive. So, if there’s anything else you want to tell me before I keep digging, or anything you want from me you haven’t already taken, now’s your chance.”

He stares at me a long second, and then he slides his hand behind my neck. His body sways to meet mine at last, and fireworks explode from the point of contact, bursting through my entire body. He rolls his hips in one slow, hard grind, making my knees buckle and my fingers curl into his shirt to support myself.

“Promise me something,” he says, his eyes fluttering halfway closed, his nose brushing against mine.

“What?” I gasp out.

“Don’t talk to Nate Swift about this,” he says.

“Why?” I manage, though my thoughts are flooding from my head like the roaring through a broken dam. I can feel the hard ridge of my brother’s desire building against my center, and I think I might faint. I’ve never been sure that he wants me back. He’s told me it was all in my head, all one-sided. But that doesn’t happen if a man doesn’t want you.

Does it?

“I know of someone else who can get us the information we need,” he says, holding me pinned with his hips. “He’s still in high school, but he’s just as good as Nate, and he doesn’t have ties to the same people. If you go to Nate, the people who took Eternity will know within the hour that you’re looking, and that will be the end of it.”

“What?” My chest heaves as I struggle for air, my nipples like spikes inside my bra

as my breasts skim against my brother's chest with each ragged breath.

“If I can't stop you from looking, at least I can stop you from doing it alone,” he says, his lower lip skimming mine as softly as a feather, making my mind go entirely blank. “You'll get yourself killed that way. And I loved her too. So, let's find her together.”

The Merciful

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.” I take a breath, trying not to notice the scent of sandalwood that makes me almost as dizzy as my brother’s body pressed to mine. “It’s been... Over a month since my last confession.”

“What is on your mind today, lamb?”

“It hasn’t gotten better,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “If anything, it’s gotten worse.”

“Did you follow my orders?”

I pause, remembering his eyes on me in the library, the flicker of something I saw when I was too deep in shame and pleasure and humiliation to read it. He was disappointed in me. That’s what that look has to have meant.

“I’m not sure,” I say. “I can’t bring myself to do it at night, by myself.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“What if... What if once I do it, I can’t stop?” I ask. “It’s gone beyond lustful thoughts. The things I’ve done... Let people do to me...”

“What things have you done?”

My heart skips, and my breath catches. I remember his rich voice guiding me, a

seductive rumble of smoke and velvet that lured me to the hell I've tried to resist.

"You know what," I whisper, my eyes stinging with shame when I remember him standing there, watching.

I hear him shifting on the other side of the partition, his robes rustling. "Is that all?"

"Is... Is that all?" I choke out on an incredulous laugh.

"Yes," he says blandly. "I've told you, your body's pleasure is not a sin, lamb."

I grip the cross on my necklace, rubbing my thumb over the back of it hard enough to make my skin burn. "No," I admit at last. "It's not all. There's a lot more."

"What's weighing on you today?" he asks gently.

"I... I want to find my friend," I say. "The other girl I told you about, from the Quint. I thought she died, but now I'm not so sure."

"That sounds like a noble goal."

"Yeah," I say, letting my head thump back on the wall. I can't admit how terrible I am with my eyes open, as if closing them can hide the bleak nature of my true, craven self even from me. "And I still want that, don't get me wrong. It's just... My brother said he'd help me."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"He said he'd help me because he loves her too," I whisper. "How can I be jealous of a dead girl?"

“Emotions often defy logic.”

“But the worst part is,” I say, drawing a shaky breath. “If we find her, and he loves her, then he’ll never love me.”

“We cannot know the future,” he says. “Only He can know what lies ahead.”

“I know,” I say, squeezing harder, until the cross breaks the skin between my fingers.

“But how can I think that, Father? I’m a monster!”

“Will you stop looking because of this fear?”

“No,” I admit. “I’ll never stop. Not until I find the truth.”

“Feeling is not sin,” he says. “In fact, it’s what makes us human—the perfect humans that God intended. A sin would be acting in a way you knew was wrong, so that you could gain something for yourself, against the welfare of another. Is that what you’re doing?”

“No.”

“Is it what you want to do?”

“No,” I concede. “I wouldn’t even consider it. But some tiny, mean part of me does, even though I try to pretend it isn’t there. Who even has a thought like that? It’s sick.”

“You do, lamb,” he says, his voice lowered in a way that sends heat rolling across my body like thunder across an open plain.

“I just want... I want him,” I whisper.

“In what way?”

A hot tear squeezes from between my lashes and tracks down my face. “In every way.”

“And what do you want him to do?”

“I want him to love me.”

“Everyone wants to be loved, lamb.”

Hearing him say those words makes me feel valid in a way I’m not sure I’ve ever felt. It’s okay to want what I want. It’s okay to need what I need. A rush of gratitude fills me, so warm it creates an ache that feels like love when it settles in my chest.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my throat tight.

“Do you want anything else from your brother?”

“Yes,” I admit, emboldened by his confirmation. “I want him to want me back. To do... To do things to me like Angel did. How can I want that? He’s my brother.”

“Perhaps it’s a harmless fantasy,” he says. “Do you really want that? Or do you simply find the thought tantalizing because it is forbidden?”

Those words, spoken in that smoky sin of a voice, makes my insides quake with need. I remember what he had me do last time, and the yearning demands my attention. I squeeze my fingers around my knees, so I won’t move them higher. “I want it.”

“What else do you want?” he asks, his voice drenched in sin itself.

You.

The word springs into my mind instantly, without a moment's contemplation, stark in its simplicity. But I don't let it past my lips. I don't tell him what I pictured that day when I saw him watching, the sacrilege of imagining a priest defiling me in the lewdest way, and that the image is what finally shattered me. It's what made me come undone in Angel's arms, and it's what has kept me from confession for the past month.

How can I want not only this sin, but to wallow in it with my own brother? How can I want to drag a man of God into the pit of this hell with me?

"I want to stop feeling like there's something wrong with me."

"There's nothing wrong with you, lamb," he says, his tone both reassuring and so, so sexy that I can't help my hands from moving up my thighs, toward the place that damns me every single time. "Haven't I told you that?"

"Will you tell me again? Tell me what to do, Father," I say breathlessly. "Please. Like last time."

There's a long pause, and I can hear him breathing on the other side of the partition. I tell myself his breathing is labored too, but I can't tell for sure.

"You liked that?" he asks at last.

"Yes," I whisper, sinking a hand between my legs.

"What did you like about it?"

"I liked you giving me permission," I say, pressing my fingers against the fabric

covering my soft flesh. “I liked hearing you say those words, hearing my innermost desires spoken aloud. And I liked the way you commanded it, and listening to your voice while I did what you told me to do.”

“What did I tell you to do?” he asks.

I swallow hard, my thighs clenching around my hand. “You told me to touch myself,” I whisper.

Before he can answer, a rush of cool air bathes my feverish skin. My eyes fly open, and I yank my hand away. My brother is standing in the door of the confessional, staring at me. My face burns even hotter than before, and by the cruel smirk twisting his mouth, I know he saw what I was doing before I could jerk my hand back. With only a moment’s hesitation, he steps inside and pulls the door closed.

We’re so close I could lean forward and press my lips to the front of his pants; the place he never lets me touch. Shamefully, my mouth waters at the thought, and my knees squeeze together.

Saint pulls me up, slides onto the narrow bench, and pulls me back down, so I’m sitting in his lap. In my state of heightened arousal, it’s all I can do not to whimper and press my bottom deeper into him, seeking the curious ridge of his desire I felt on the stairs that night.

“Lamb?” Father Salvatore asks from his side of the booth. “Are you still here?”

“Yes,” I say, my voice breathy with desire.

“She’s here,” Saint says, his voice laced with derision. “Fingering her cunt in the confessional.”

“Don’t,” I hiss, but it’s too late. He’s already told on me, the way I told on him, the way I told the judge that he went under the bridge with Eternity, and she never came out.

I hear the groan of wood in the other side of the booth, and then the door opens again, and I’m staring up at Father Salvatore. He looms over us, his face inscrutable, his dark eyes burning with intensity behind his wire-rimmed glasses.

I try to rise, but Saint clamps his arm around my middle like he did the last time.

“Show him,” he says harshly.

“No,” I gasp out, wanting nothing more than to flee back to my dorm and never return.

His arm tightens around my ribs even further, crushing the breath from me. “Show him,” he growls again, dragging my skirt up my thighs. They’re flushed red from my arousal, and my panties between them are soaked through in the center. I’m sure he can see the wet spot, and I want to expire.

“Let me see,” Father says, his voice gentle but firm. “What were you doing, lamb?”

“N—nothing,” I stammer.

“Lying is a sin,” my brother taunts in my ear. “Now pull aside your panties and show him that glistening, wet pussy, or I will.”

I swallow hard, my finger trembling as I obey, drowning in humiliation, unable to breathe as Father Salvatore watches. I spread my knees, and I pull aside the wet fabric, and I let Father Salvatore see the depth of my shame. Unlike when he saw me in the library, this time it’s up close and personal, with just the three of us. The secret

coils inside me like a snake, like victory and defiance twined with my shame. Some sick part of me wants him to see, just as it wanted him to be as excited by our time in the confessional as I am. Just as part of me was always sick, sick enough to like what Heath did to me on Eternity's bedroom floor that day six years ago.

"Look at that disgusting display," Saint says with scorn. "Her pussy is drenched. She would fuck anything right now. You, a goddamn priest. Me, her own brother."

"How do you feel about that?" Father Salvatore asks gently.

"What?" Saint demands.

"Does that make you feel good, that she wants you?" Father asks. "Do you feel ashamed that you want her too?"

"You do?" I whisper, looking up at my brother with so much hope it rends my heart in two.

"Of course not," Saint snaps. "I'm not a freak like you."

"Your desires are not a sin," Father says. "Nor are hers. They are a natural expression of the body God gave you."

Saint huffs out a breath. "You want me to fuck my sister?"

"I want you to listen to God when He speaks to you," Father says. "We know what she wants. What do you want, my son? You would not have come to this confession if you didn't also have something to confess. Perhaps you share her forbidden desire?"

"I don't," Saint snaps, dumping me off his lap.

I tumble to the floor on all fours, my skirt in disarray, my hair coming askew and sliding down the side of my face.

“Do you believe what you’re saying?” Father asks. “Do you think she believes it? Who are you lying for?”

“For—for the sake of decency,” my brother says.

“Who told you deceit was decent?” Father asks. “Look at your sister there, on her knees. What gave you the desire you feel for her, if not God?”

A troubled frown knits Saint’s fine brow as he studies me.

“Lamb, tell your brother what you told me,” Father says. “Let there be no deceit between you. You may lay yourself bare before him, as you have me.”

“Don’t tell me,” Saint says, glancing from me to the priest.

He was always so good, too good. And it strikes me now that he’s not the one leading me into sin, the one destroying and defiling me one encounter at a time. I am the temptress, Eve with her apple, promising him the sweetest bite.

“You,” I say simply, sitting back on my heels. “I want you, Saint. We both know it’s a sin, but we don’t have to pretend we don’t feel it.”

They both stare at me a second, and then Father Salvatore nods, his lips tight.

I know then that I said the right thing. Pride swells inside me. I pleased him, and he’s proud of me. I told the truth, and that’s always right. This time, I don’t have to tell it alone. I have someone on my side, someone who supports me the way a father should.

“Kneel before your brother,” Father commands.

I obey his command eagerly, wanting to see him nod his approval again, for him to say I did something right. It’s an urgent need, one that has me crawling on my knees to Saint’s feet, kneeling as I do every Sunday when the priests tell me to.

“This is sick,” Saint says. “She’s my sister.”

“Mercy?” Father says, raising a brow at me. “Do you have something to say to your brother?”

“It’s okay,” I say, touching Saint’s thigh gently. “I want you to.”

“Nothing you desire is sinful,” Father says. “You were given these cravings of the flesh for a reason. Don’t fight them. Give them over to God.”

“I don’t want to touch her,” Saint says, stepping back, his lip curled in disgust.

“It’s your choice,” the priest says, his eyes kind behind his glasses. “I am here to guide you. Listen to God, my children. What is He telling you?”

Saint looks from me to the father, and back to me where I wait on my knees, desperate to obey.

“Take off your panties,” he says flatly.

I gulp, my eyes widening, then look to Father Salvatore. He nods once, and relief pours into me. He will tell me what’s right, so I don’t have to guess anymore, don’t have to be punished for years for something I didn’t know was wrong.

I drag my dress from under my knees, lifting it while both men stand watching. I am

anchored firmly in my body, unusually present, as if my mind has completely disengaged, leaving my body raw and exposed. My heart is hammering erratically, and a pulsing need is throbbing through me, and every cell in body sizzles with electricity. I can feel the fabric of my skirt dragging against my skin as if the sensation is magnified, can feel the cold air hit my wet, hot flesh when it reaches my cotton panties. I slide a hand under my skirt and draw them down my thighs, lifting one knee and then the other before tugging them over my feet.

“Give them to me,” Saint orders, and I obey as I would obey the priest.

Saint balls the fabric in his fist, then presses it to his nose. His eyes drop closed, and he inhales slowly, dragging in the breath as if it’s painful. I know it is. Breaking that barrier, turning away from the path you’ve always known so that you can follow the righteous path that this father lays out, trusting him to lead the way, is both a relief and a ripping away of all we knew before.

A total surrender.

Saint unzips and shoves his hand into his pants. His forearm flexes as he pumps up and down, up and down. The hunger inside me twists, urgent, seething. I want to see what he’s doing the way he saw me, but I can only see the extensive length that his arm moves with each pull.

It must be long.

My core trembles with fear and excitement at the thought of seeing him for the first time. Will he be pierced like Heath?

Father slides his thumb along my plump lower lip, and I part for him in a gasp of pleasure as sensation rolls over my body, nestling between my flushed thighs. I can feel slickness beading my skin like dew, the full ache of the place he had me strip

bare. It feels like something too big to be contained, a tsunami of churning, burning need that can only be filled by them.

“Open for your brother, my lamb,” Father says, sliding his thumb between my lips.

My eyes meet his, and I see the heat shimmering there like a mirage. My lips close around his thumb, and I suck gently. His eyes blaze, and he slides it deep before drawing it slowly from between my lips. He rolls my lower lip down, his gaze rapturous. When his thumb is almost fully withdrawn, he hooks it over my bottom teeth, urging my mouth open.

I obey wordlessly, breathlessly, my tongue searching for a taste of him on the air.

“Bless her for her obedience,” he commands Saint.

Saint steps forward, and at last, he draws himself free. His cock is thick and smooth, his fingers barely able to close around the girth, with a bell-shaped tip that he drags his hand up and over.

“Receive this communion,” Father says in the same low, worshipful tone he uses when he breaks bread.

I wait, open as I do each Sunday for the sacrament. Saint grips his thick, hard shaft and brings it to my lips. I fight the urge to open wider, to lean in and take him in. Instead, I timidly reach my tongue out barely past my lips, just enough to lick the glistening pearl collected in the tiny slit on his tip.

Saint groans, grabbing my hair in his fist to jerk my head back as his hips jerk forward, as if involuntarily. Thick, warm liquid spurts over my face. I open wider, welcoming the benediction in his sacred essence. He curses under his breath, the next ropes of salty slime shooting onto the roof of my mouth. Another jet erupts, coating

my tongue, spreading over it and pooling in the back of my throat. I fight not to gag, my throat closing up, so it doesn't slide down.

"Very good," Father says, leaning in to see into my mouth, where the cream is pooled while the rest of it drips as gooey blobs from my chin. Saint's fingers are still buried in my hair, his member hovering just above my lips. He rubs his thumb over the crown, milking out another drop. It falls onto my lower lip, sliding off the bottom and slowly trickling down my chin. Both men stare down at it, captivated, their eyes dark and unreadable past the blazing of fire I can see in both sets.

"Swallow your brother's blessing," Father Salvatore orders, that sinful depth of his voice making my thighs quiver as I obey.

Both men stand over me and watch with rapt focus as the warm, salty puddle in my mouth goes down my throat. I shiver again, the pulsing between my thighs coming quicker at the thought of what we just did. That same stuff that Heath wasted on my belly is now inside it, but it belongs to my brother, not his friend. I have my brother inside me, not in the way I fantasized, but in a deeper, more intimate way.

The secret sits warm as the hot coal of his seed nestled there, and I know I'll go home and lie in my bed with my hand on my belly, imagining I can feel its hot glow through my skin. He is part of me now, in a way I never even imagined in my deepest, darkest desires. His essence is inside me. Without even touching, we are one in a way I never knew we could be.

We are one, and yet, I suddenly understand that we are condemned to the deepest pits of hell together for what we've done here today. My shame returns as the fog begins to clear, and I realize what we've done.

"Release her," Father says, and Saint obeys as automatically as I do.

I sit back on my heels, my core throbbing with a heavy, unfulfilled need, my head spinning, my heart imploding with the knowledge of what we just did. The fact that I wanted it, encouraged it, instead of Saint pushing me into it fills me with the deepest shame I've ever felt. I can't say that I was forced to do it, that I was protecting someone else. It was me who crawled on my knees to him and begged for his sin.

I am the sinner here, not him. Is this how Eve felt when she swallowed the bite of apple, when she realized what she had done and that it had condemned her to a terrible fate that she could never undo?

"You may go," Father says to me.

My eyes, my throat, my core ache at the callous dismissal. "Now?" I whisper. "I'm supposed to walk out of here like nothing happened?"

"No," he says. "Crawl on your knees."

The Saint

“Dude, what got into you tonight?” Heath asks, hitting the button to turn on the jets. “You were savage out there. I’m surprised they didn’t give you a technical and eject you after the second guy you injured.”

“Excessive force,” Angel agrees, clamping an ice pack to his shoulder while the rest of his body remains submerged in the scalding water bubbling around us. “You know, my cousin can get you into that fight club downtown if you want to beat the shit out of somebody. Football field is probably not the place for it.”

“Count yourself lucky I didn’t take it out on you,” I mutter.

“What’d I do?” Angel protests, looking wounded.

“Besides fingering his hot sister in front of the whole library?”

“Somebody had to do it,” Angel says, flashing a grin.

My fists clench, and I fight the urge to knock the smugness out of him.

“And hey,” he adds. “It’s not like you could do it.”

“Not while he’s still pretending she’s his sister,” Heath agrees, grinning too. But he’s watching me, waiting for a reaction while he plays with his lip ring, tonguing it like a dare. Goading me.

“She is my sister,” I growl. An image swims before me unbidden—Mercy on her knees before me, face flushed, lifting her skirt in a slow, torturous tease. Her lips parted for me, eyes wide with innocence, while I shot my load into her greedy little mouth. If Father Salvatore had asked her to bend over and hold her virgin cunt open for me, she would have broken her back to get in position before I could refuse.

“If you stop calling her your sister, maybe you can finger her next time,” Heath says.

“Or taste her,” Angel says, licking his lips in an exaggerated, lascivious gesture. “It’s not my fault you’re too much of a pussy to eat hers. Take it from me. It’s delicious.”

“I don’t fucking need this,” I say, standing and sloshing water from the hot tub as I climb out.

They both laugh, obviously having the times of their fucking lives.

“Good thinking,” Heath calls. “You shouldn’t be in a hot tub when you’re on your period anyway.”

“Fuck you,” I say, slamming out of the locker room.

They don’t understand.

Maybe they would if I told them, but how can I tell them what I did? I would have to admit that I’d also erased the video feed from the night Mercy went out, and then I’d have to explain why. Close as we are, there are some things I just can’t tell them because they don’t know what it’s been like for me.

They don’t know that I’ve spent a decade repeating the same mantra in my head—she’s my sister. She’s my sister. She’s my sister.

That when puberty hit like a ton of bricks, and I was so horny I would hump my own bed when I thought about her in the shower next to my room, sometimes I'd pull her down into my lap and rub my dick on her like an animal when she didn't even notice because she was too innocent. That a few years later, when I thought I'd gotten hold of myself, puberty hit her, and I'd see her budding nipples poking against her shirt or the way her tiny tits bounced without the support of a bra, and I'd have to go in the bathroom and rub one out, all the while steeped in a shame so deep I couldn't bear it. That I used to see her maxi pads in the trash can in the bathroom, and I'd take them out and jerk off into them, imagining her cunt sliding over me with the blood.

They don't know that once, my dad found one in my drawer at home, licked clean but still bloodstained, and he made me go to an old priest to confess. And that the old priest made me watch from another room while he wrapped a wire around some other kid's dick and shocked it while the boy pleaded and writhed in agony. Afterwards, the priest came in and told me that this was the punishment for sins of sexual transgression, and if I did something like that again, I would face the same.

I told him that my father would never let him do that to me, and he said, "Who do you think brought you here? Who brings them all here? Do you think this boy's parents aren't fully aware and in support of our methods of treatment?"

I didn't know what to say.

"This was your warning," the old creep said. "Next time, you'll be in that room, and someone else will be here—hopefully someone who heeds their warning."

I had nightmares about that boy's cries for months.

But I never told Heath and Angel, because their fathers would never make them witness something like that, let alone endure it. But then, they weren't deviants. I'm sure neither jerked off to the fantasy of his sister's wet pussy sliding up and down his

shaft while she begged him to stop before their parents caught them; or her refusing him but turning over and offering her ass so she could please him but still be a virgin when she got married.

If they did, they didn't share it with me, so I knew not to share my indiscretions with them.

I stomp up the stairs to her dorm a few minutes later and bang on the door. She opens after a second, peering out the crack like she thinks someone is here to rob her of her precious innocence, the one she never had. She was probably rubbing it out thinking about me the whole time I was thinking about her. I just never knew it until now because I was too busy stewing in my own shame.

"We're going to see the guy who can hack into the files," I say. "Come on."

"Now?" she asks.

"Yeah, now," I say. "What, you got a date?"

"No," she says, scowling through the crack at me. "Don't you? It's Saturday night."

"I don't fuck after games," I say, which isn't entirely true, but she doesn't need to know my habits. If she cared that much, she could put up her own damn cameras and watch me.

"Okay," she says, opening the door to let me in. "Just let me get ready."

I step inside her homey little room, lit by a couple candles and a stained-glass flower lamp on her bedside table. Soft Christmas music playing from a small speaker in the corner next to her teapot, and her teacup sits upside down with the saucer, as if just washed, beside a tin of cookies. The room smells sweet and buttery, like baked

goods. Her cat stands from where he was curled up on the handmade blanket, against the teddy bear I gave her when we were kids. He stretches his back in an arch before hopping off the bed to prowl over and wind himself between my feet.

Suddenly I feel crude and out of place in the soft, cozy little haven she's made for herself. It's everything she always loved, everything our parents wouldn't allow her at home. Mom wanted to hire a decorator, make sure the art on the walls was sized and spaced correctly, that it complemented the décor, that each item in the room had purpose and beauty and didn't create a sense of clutter. My father insisted every room be presentable in case someone from the church stopped by, as if they would insist on looking into the bedrooms. And so, our bedrooms looked like the rooms a church elder would imagine for a child, not the rooms of actual children.

Now, Mercy's room is all her own, full of quirky, girlie things. She's embraced her feminine, but not in the overly pink, sparkly art Mom put up when she was little, or the overly flowery, frilly things she chose when Mercy became a teen. This room looks like the inside of a cottage where an eclectic, old woman lives alone in the forest rather than the dorm room of an eighteen-year-old college student.

This time, when Mercy steps into her closet to change out of her flannel nightgown, I look away. I picture the bruises on her knees from where she knelt for me, and I have to adjust myself.

"Why can't we go to Nate Swift?" she asks from behind the door. "Manson says he's the best."

"Manson probably wants to fuck him," I say, annoyed that she dropped another man's name, like she trusts him more than me.

"That doesn't mean it's not true."

“Baron’s just as good,” I snap. “Besides, Manson plays hockey with the Sinners. You shouldn’t even be talking to him.”

“According to you, I shouldn’t be talking to anyone.”

“If you chose someone better to talk to, I wouldn’t object,” I say. “Manson has connections with the Disciples through the team. Nate’s family has their own connections. You can’t trust any of them. The Dolce kid isn’t from around here. He doesn’t have any loyalties except to his own family.”

“What about Annabel Lee?” she asks. “Am I allowed to talk to her, since she’s a North?”

“Yes,” I say grudgingly, though Annabel Lee is a wildcard even in Angel’s family. There were even rumors she was hanging with one of the Sincero boys at one point. But that’s for Angel and his family to deal with. It’s not our business, and I respect that they handle things in their own way, and it might be different than ours.

Heath and Eternity were different from us too. Their mom grew up in the trailer park on the east side of town, and even though they didn’t, they were always a little rough around the edges, seemingly oblivious to the rules of polite society that our parents instilled in us—forks on the left of the plate, spoons on the right; use your manners; don’t talk about money, politics, religion. Eternity could pocket mascara and candy at the store while we were right beside her, and we’d never see her do it. Heath could also shoplift without batting an eye, while Angel, whose parents were professional criminals, always balked at the idea.

So maybe he’s the wildcard in his family, not Annabel Lee. Maybe that’s why we all fit. We didn’t belong anywhere else, not even with our families, but we always belonged with each other.

For the first time, I really think about what we're doing, the implications if we find something. If what Mercy said is true, and we can find Eternity, what happens then? Will we all be together, belong to each other, like we did before?

I get the distinct sensation that I'm being as naïve as Mercy. There's a reason Eternity disappeared, and it wasn't just because she got in the wrong car on the wrong day. A reason none of us ever saw her again. There's a reason she never came back, and a reason no one ever tracked her down. And maybe those reasons are bigger than any of us—big enough to swallow people like the river swallowed the body that washed up a month later, the one they claimed was Eternity. Big enough to bury us the way we buried the secret of what happened that day. We're more likely to find our own graves than hers; more likely to join the list of people who disappeared from Faulkner than find someone else who did.

But I'm not letting Mercy do this alone, so if she disappears, I'm disappearing with her. Whatever happens, at least this time, we'll be together.

The Angel

I pull up to the diner and enter through the back, heading upstairs and bypassing the doorman, who knows better than to fuck with me. Inside, I make my way from one stage to the next, working my way through the themed, private rooms in Infernal Vices, one for each of the seven deadly sins. The girls are all hot as hell—the powerful clientele who frequent the exclusive club doesn't pay to see ugly—but Dad picked a good variety. There's something for every inclination, from girl-next-door types to tattooed, leather-clad baddies; girls who appeal to rich, upstanding deacons like Saint's dad to hardened criminals like the head of the Skull and Crossbones, an ugly-ass old man with big fish lips and small, dead eyes who's in Pride tonight.

I do my last dance in Envy. The new girl on the pole is like her room—green. She's sexy though, and I get to do my Magic Mike routine for a group of panting onlookers. Most of them are equal opportunity horndogs when it comes to watching us perform. If their trophy wives caught them at our show—hell, if they were questioned under oath—the politicians and high-powered attorneys and judges would claim they were picturing themselves in my shoes. That they were envying me as I roll my hips sensuously between Gloria's thighs.

But if they didn't have to give the expected response, if they told the truth, half of them would admit they're wishing I was on top of them. It's no coincidence that Gloria's most popular routine is the one where I join her on stage. Eventually, men who can have anyone get bored of only having women.

Even though I'm not interested in dudes, I can't deny the rush of being on stage, untouchable, admired, desired.

Gloria must feel it too, because she arches her back and hooks her leg over mine. I roll us over, and she kneels over me while I thrust my hips up like I'm fucking her from below. Gloria swings her long blonde hair around, running her hands up her bare body.

I run my hands up her thighs, and she throws her head back and rolls her hips, riding me hard. I could fuck her if I wanted. Maverick says she's easy, and even though he's fucking her, that's never stopped me before. We've been known to share a bitch on occasion, and this one is smokin' hot. The only question is, why don't I want to?

She's writhing on top of me like a thirsty bitch, and it's doing nothing for me. Maybe my dick is broken.

Except that can't be true, because just thinking about Mercy makes shit start tingling.

Is that normal? Maybe I need to go by Dr. Swift's, have him check me out, see if I suffer from Tingle Dick Disorder.

It's not just tingling, though. Lately, whenever I catch a whiff of her scent on my clothes, my cock instantly takes notice, and if I let myself think about why the smell of her is all over me, it's standing at attention in sixty seconds flat.

So, it's not my dick. That makes me wonder if it's Gloria, or any girl who isn't Mercy Soules. I'll have to study the topic further, gather some data. I'm not ready to throw in the towel, admit I'm whipped like a dog.

It's definitely never happened before. I've never cared about a connection beyond the physical. Sure, I'm a little more discerning than Maverick, whose motto is "If there's a hole, there's a goal."

I'm not a prude by any means—my motto is "the more, the merrier" when it comes to

my buddies and my bed—but I’m downright old-fashioned by Mav’s standards. I prefer my partners have at least three holes, even if I can’t use them all at once. I can always loan them to a couple friends, make a party of it, and it never bothers me if a few swords cross in the process.

The big difference, though, is that I believe in happy endings and other fairytale shit, the very suggestion of which Maverick would find hilarious. My parents remain madly in love and concerningly obsessed with each other to this day, and they’ve never attempted to hide it. It’s embarrassing, and I’d never admit it to them, but I want that.

It doesn’t matter that I’ve never had a serious relationship. I always knew I would. I was waiting for the right girl, so I could have that kind of fairytale ending. I want to embarrass my kids by fucking my wife so hard the headboard busts a hole in the drywall.

Is Mercy that girl? It’s hard to imagine someone less likely to knock a hole in the wall than an uptight little virgin, but maybe there’s a tiger in there just waiting to be unleashed. I always figured the girl would be someone more like Gloria, who owns her body and her sexuality and isn’t afraid of anything. But clearly she’s not the one. My dick has made that abundantly clear.

When I finish my set with her, I go downstairs to the diner that is both my mom’s passion project and a front for the more fun stuff that goes on upstairs.

“Angel baby,” Mom calls, hustling from a table to wrap me in a tight hug. She could work in the back, or not at all, but she still waits tables between rushes so she can chat up the locals, pick up bits of important intel, and keep abreast of the more salacious gossip in town. I think part of her likes to freak strangers out with the huge, gnarly scar that bisects her face too. It makes people wonder about her, and she never corrects the rumors and lore that circulate about how she got the scar. I think she likes

that too, so I never weigh in when people speculate in whispers behind their menus or on the sidewalk in town.

Even as a kid, it never embarrassed me, not even when other kids called her Scarface Scarlet. I liked to watch her swing around and fix them with her fiercest scowl, making her scar crinkle. Without uttering a word, she'd sending them scattering like rats. Then we'd laugh and high five.

If one of them got brave enough to ask, she'd always say, "It's natural to be curious, but there's no excuse for being rude."

She never forgot the ones who didn't listen, and she'd turn them right back out the door if they tried to come back later, even if it had been a year since they insulted her.

I hug her back, then sit when she insists I stay for dinner. Mom loves serving people she loves. That's how she shows it, by taking care of us.

"Any of your friends coming?" she asks. "Heath, or the one who puts ranch on everything?"

"That was one time," I say, laughing. "Maybe two. How do you remember that?"

But I don't need to ask. Mom remembers everything.

Fifteen minutes later, she carries out two plates of steaming buckwheat pancakes, my favorite, and slides into the booth across from me. "Well, isn't this a treat?" she says. "Figured I'd make myself a plate too. I never get to eat with my firstborn son."

"I see you every weekend," I point out.

"Yes, but that's the whole family," she says. "I get you all to myself tonight."

“I did want to talk to you about something,” I say, glancing up at her as I spread the pad of half-melted butter across the top of my stack.

“Shoot, baby,” she says. “You know you can ask me anything.”

I do, but I don’t know how she’ll take this. She never forgets, and rarely forgives, and Mercy sent away her eldest son. And even though Heath is right about how I was treated in there—basically like royalty, thanks to my family’s close connection to Fish-Face Frederick upstairs—to Mom, she will always be the girl who took away her boy at just sixteen.

“I was wondering,” I say, dumping the cup of strawberries onto my flapjacks. “How do you know if you’re in love?”

Mom thinks it over while she spreads her own butter. “I’m going to be honest with you,” she says. “Now, a lot of people will say you just know, or if you have to ask, you aren’t in it. But the truth is, not everyone loves the same. If you got a big heart, it’s all filled up with love, and it’s all too easy to give it to the wrong person. I made that mistake once, before I found your daddy.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, cutting a triangle from the edge of my stack. “How did you know that wasn’t the right one, and Dad was?”

“Because he loved me back,” she says. “In all the ways I wanted and needed to be loved. People with hearts as big as yours, I think you could love just about anyone, and she’d be lucky to have you. But the one who deserves that love is the one who can match what you give her, and then some. That’s how you know she’s worth giving that big heart to.”

I think about that all night, and I wonder, after everything we’ve done to Mercy, could she ever love any of us? And if she could, would she even choose me to love?

The Merciful

“I was thinking about Christmas,” I say, holding the phone between my ear and shoulder while I pet Dr. Jekyll, who has deigned to sit in my lap today and is grudgingly allowing my show of affection.

Aunt Lucy doesn’t say anything.

“Have you gotten out the tree yet?” I ask, a sinking feeling in my stomach, though I’m not sure why yet. “I could come down this weekend and we could put it up.”

We always put up the tree together while Christmas music blares from the speakers and a fireplace crackles on the TV. We put up every single one of Aunt Lucy’s million mismatched ornaments—the ones inherited from parents and grandparents; the ones she got great deals on from garage sales and thrift stores and drug store clearance aisles; the handmade ones Saint and I glued together in class or Sunday school when we were kids, which our mother sent to her instead of hanging them on one of the perfect, themed, and color-coordinated Soules family trees.

Once, I joked, “This is where Christmas ornaments come to die,” as I hung a crinkled, construction paper snowflake that was crusty with glue, having lost most of its glitter and sequins in its ten years on her tree.

“Or it’s where they come to live, ” she said with a wink and a smile that made dimples sink into her soft cheeks.

“Oh—yes,” Aunt Lucy says after a long pause. “I just got it out last week. I didn’t

think you'd want to come down for that, now that you're all grown up and away at college with all your new friends."

I swallow past the lump in my throat, but I can't bring myself to tell her I don't have many friends, that I don't want to be grown up. I want to be back in her cozy, cluttered house with her awkward attempts at conversation, her comfortable silences while we watched TV together and did needlework.

Except at Christmas.

Tree trimming was the only night we didn't put on a show and get lost in it, so we didn't have to think of things to say to each other. After the tree was assembled and trimmed, we'd sit on the sofa under our blankets, with mugs of hot cocoa warming our hands, the little marshmallows floating on top and a candy cane tucked into the side for stirring, and we'd just watch the tree twinkling. I'd think about my parents and my brother at home, and I'd tell myself this was better.

"Oh," I say at last. "Okay. Well, I guess I'll just see you at Christmas."

"Oh..."

That sinking feeling comes again, but this time, it feels more like nausea. "Aunt Lucy?"

"The thing is," she says, then doesn't continue.

"What is it?"

"Well, it's just, I thought now that you were eighteen, and you moved out on your own..."

“That your duty was done,” I say, slumping back against my bed. “It is. I’m sorry. I don’t know why I thought—”

“No, honey, it’s not that at all,” she says, but I know she’s lying. I was a burden dumped on her doorstep, a stray cat like Dr. Jekyll that no one wanted. She must have always hoped my parents would come back for me, the same way I did. When they didn’t, she told herself it was only a few years until I was eighteen, only a year, only a few months. And then she was free of her responsibility.

I don’t blame her. She once told me she never got married because she didn’t want the expectations and responsibilities that came with it. She didn’t say kids, but it was implied. She liked her quiet life, her own company, her independence. She was settled in her ways, and even when I came along, I was old enough that she didn’t have to rearrange her life for me the way a mother does. She didn’t deviate from her routine, so I fit my life in around the edges of hers and tried not to disrupt her comfortable existence any more than my mere presence did.

I never wanted more. She’d already given me far more than I had any right to ask for—a place to live, to rest, to heal, and to hide.

And she never signed up for any of it. All she signed up for was a weekend visit with my mom, maybe a few days of hanging out with her niece beyond that. She never wanted to adopt a kid. She didn’t agree to a lifetime of Christmases with me. She didn’t even agree to one.

I wasn’t in foster care, but I’ve aged out of the system anyway. I’m on my own now.

“I’m sorry,” I say quickly. “It was presumptuous and rude of me to even ask. I’ll just—have a merry Christmas, Aunt Lucy. Thank you for... Everything.”

“Wait,” she says before I can hang up.

My throat aches, and I can't find any more words.

"It's just... I'm spending it with your parents," she says in a rush. "They thought I'd be alone, so I'm going there for Christmas dinner. I thought you'd reconcile when you went off to school, especially when you told me your brother was there. I can cancel if you want. We can have dinner like we always did."

"No, it's okay," I say quickly. I realize she doesn't know how colleges work, that we have more time off than a job that closes for a day or two during the holidays. She thinks I was only coming home for Christmas day, and she didn't even make space in her life for that. She certainly doesn't want me there for weeks.

"Don't cancel your dinner," I add. "You should be with your family. I'll be fine. I have a lot of work to catch up on anyway, and I have tons of friends here who already asked me to come to dinner and meet their families. I might even stay with them for a few days."

I say my goodbyes as quickly as I can, racing to hang up before the tears come.

The following weeks crawl by. Everyone else seems excited, a spring in their step at the prospect of a long winter break ahead, the fun they'll have and the presents they'll receive. I dread the empty campus, the loneliness, the feeling of abandonment that will surely crawl inside me and take hold, even when I tell myself it's silly, that no one owes me a Christmas experience.

At last, the last day of classes arrives, and someone asks me the dreaded question.

"Where are you going for Christmas?"

I look up after a long beat of silence to find Manson and Ronique staring at me, waiting. I had assumed he was talking to her, since they've been chatting about his

upcoming holiday in Switzerland while I sit in Annabel Lee's chair, wondering why I'm here. She invited me over, but she went out into the hall at least minutes ago, leaving me alone with her friends. She must've gotten caught up with other girls in the dorm. I have to remind myself that most people have friends, and more than two or three. She probably knows lots of people on her floor, and they obviously like her enough not to report her for her collection of strange pets.

An opossum is currently sniffing around on the floor at my feet.

"Um, nothing," I say, avoiding their gazes. "I don't—I'm just staying on campus."

"Really?" Manson asks, his eyes widening. "Are the dorms even open?"

"I mean, the nuns and priests live on campus," I say, thinking about Father Salvatore out there, knowing I'm alone here, waiting. A rush of trepidation and want rolls over my skin like fever. "They said I could stay. I just have to get my own food when the dining hall is closed."

"Aren't you related to Saint Soules?" Ronique asks.

"Yum-my," Manson says, exaggerating each syllable. "I'd go home for that dish."

"Amen to that," Ronique says, crossing herself. "The things I would let that man to do me."

"He's my brother," I blurt out.

"Oh right," Manson says. "Sorry."

"I'll trade you," Ronique says. "You can have my family for Christmas, and Saint can take me home. I'll crawl into his bed every night after his parents are asleep and let

him absolutely ruin my life.”

“It would be worth it,” Manson says, then sneaks a look at me. “Sorry again.”

“What is she doing out there?” I say, glancing at the door.

“She’s just saging the hallway,” Manson says. “She’ll be back in a minute.”

“She’s what?”

“Saging?” Ronique asks, looking at me like I’m a dumb, clueless kid, which I guess I am. I’m certainly not climbing into beds at night, and if Saint is ruining my life, it’s not entirely by choice.

Okay, maybe that’s exactly what it is, but not in the uncouth way she says it.

The door swings open, and the opossum keels over.

“Oh my god,” I gasp, jumping back.

“Jack Skellington, you little monster,” Annabel Lee says, breezing in surrounded by a cloud of woodsy, acrid smoke. She scoops up her pet, who lays in her arms on his back with his legs straight up in the air. “Don’t worry, he’s just being dramatic. He likes to scare my visitors by playing dead.”

“Oh,” I say, feeling silly all over again.

She deposits a charred bundle of pale green sticks onto her altar.

“He’s still a wittie bittie joey, so you have to forgive his pranks,” she coos, scratching his belly. “He was bald as a baby and half-starved when I found him. His mama

possum probably got hit by a car or hunted by another animal. But now he's all clean and parasite free and fattened up like a pig. Aren't you, Skelly-welly?"

"Can you not?" Ronique asks. "That voice nauseates me."

Annabel Lee laughs and slides the opossum into one of her crates. "So, what'd I miss when I was out there hexing anyone who messes with my room while I'm gone for break?"

"Hexing?" I squeak. "Do you really do that?"

"Sure, why not? If some cunty-bee messes with my room while I'm gone, they deserve it."

"Isn't that... witchcraft?"

She wiggles her black-nailed fingers at me. "Catholic by birth, heathen by choice."

"You missed Ronique admitting she wants to get boned by a beefcake," Manson says, draping himself lazily over Annabel Lee's pillows like a fashion model. "Our little Ronnie's growing up."

"Never thought I'd see the day," Annabel Lee says, covering her heart theatrically. "Tell me everything."

"She's scheming how to pull a Freaky Friday with Mercy here so she can slide up on Saint Soules," Manson announces. "Sans clothes."

He sits up and catches his reflection in her mirror, then starts fussing with his bleached hair to perfect the artfully tousled look he's sporting today.

“Too bad you’re going home,” Annabel Lee says to their friend.

“I know,” Ronique says, flopping back on the bed. “So lame. I’ll be in Ohio while y’all are skiing in the French Alps together.”

“You ski?” I ask, remembering a trip to Aspen with my family. A blindingly white, sunny slope filled with smiling, neon-clad skiers is the last place I can picture the gloomy, black-clad goth girl in front of me.

Annabel shrugs and melts onto the foot of the bed in the same way Manson does, an effortless pose that looks like she’s simultaneously sitting for a Victorian portrait and dreadfully bored. “My parents drag us to France every year, and eventually, we branched out from Paris to explore other options.”

“How tragic for you,” Ronique mutters, rolling her eyes.

“I wasn’t complaining,” Annabel Lee says. “We didn’t get a choice growing up, but I still loved it. No one does elegant indifference quite like the French.”

I glance from her to Manson. Maybe that’s what truly sets them apart—not the clothes they wear or who they want to kiss or the hexes they do, but the worldly air about them that only the truly wealthy possess, one they’ve picked up, intentionally or not, from traveling far and frequently enough to experience other cultures.

“Now that I’m on my own, I could stay home if I wanted,” Annabel Lee says, petting the black ball of fur next to her. “But where’s the fun in that? Plus, it’s a free trip to France. It would take me months working at the store to earn enough for that. And you know how my parents like us to all be together for the holidays.”

I try to imagine it, the side of Angel’s family that our parents wouldn’t let us associate with, the ones who threw bricks through our windows, the rough gangsters

who inspire lore about the wrong side of the tracks, sipping lattes in Paris cafés, prancing through the Alps like the Von Trapps. I stifle the urge to laugh.

“I think it’s sweet,” Manson says, patting Annabel Lee’s calf. “That you still go, and that they still go.”

“Oh yeah, it’s great—until you hear them trying to recreate their honeymoon, or whatever they went to that hotel for before they had us. From the sounds of it, it was to conceive. It’s a little less sweet when it’s your parents traumatizing you with their sex noises.”

“I don’t know, your mom’s kinda a MILF,” Manson says. “I don’t blame your dad for still being horny for her after five kids.”

“And... Yep, it’s official. My brain just imploded.”

I glance at Ronique this time, wondering if she feels a little awkward, a little left out, when the other two go on about things with the comfortable familiarity of friends who have known each other for far longer than their college years. But she scowls and looks away when our eyes meet, then changes the subject to some explosion that just blew up part of the abandoned mall, killing one person.

Predictably, Annabel Lee wants to go see the scene of the crime.

When they’ve all packed up and gone—I stayed as long as the invite lasted, even though I felt like an outsider, just to have some company—I take Dr. Jekyll out, and we wander the quiet campus together. My footsteps squelch in the wet, dead grass, and the damp, cold air makes me huddle deeper into my coat. The buildings are locked, so there’s nowhere to go, and eventually I head back to my room. My dorm is empty except for me, the lobby quiet and dark. I even miss the grumpy nun who usually mans the desk.

At least I don't have to look over my shoulder every other step, prepared to dart around a corner or into a nook if I see Heath or the Sinners.

In my room, I stare out the window at the quiet campus. Everything is closed except for the church, which will have several services over the break.

Before I can consider the implications, I find my feet carrying me in that direction. My heart beats erratically, and I clutch the cross on my necklace. Will Father Salvatore be there? Will he be alone? Do all the priests stay here during the break?

I step inside the church, out of the wind, and take a breath before heading through the atrium and the ancient wooden doors the sanctuary. It's dark within, only lit by a few wall sconces and the light filtering through the stained-glass windows. I move down the center aisle, my wooden clogs making my footsteps echo hollowly in the cavernous room. When I reach the front, I slide into the second pew and lower the kneeler.

I don't know how long I kneel there, praying, before I hear the soft scuff of footsteps and know I'm not alone. I know I shouldn't, but I can't help peeking from the corner of my eye to see what other unfortunate soul is here on the last day of classes. I'm surprised to see one of the Sincero boys sliding into a pew across the aisle, a few rows back. My spine stiffens, and my mind races through possible scenarios. I might be able to fight off all seven of them, but without Angel's help this time, it'll be a challenge.

My heart starts hammering harder as adrenaline slowly courses through me, uncoiling inside me from where it was nestled, waiting like a snake to strike. Luckily I was already angry, thinking about Aunt Lucy making other plans, as if she eagerly washed her hands of me the moment I moved out. She probably didn't even keep my room for me, instead using it to display the porcelain dolls she collects at flea markets. My fingers tighten into fists, but I don't address the Sinner.

“A master of your skill doesn’t start fights,” our sensei told us before adding a good-natured wink. “We only end them.”

I pray I get the chance. Violence churns inside me, restless as a storm-tossed sea, seeking a way out. It’s too soon to return to the Slaughterpen, but this could be an even better outlet. Dynamo never books me a steep enough challenge. I always know I can win. Tonight, I’m uncertain, charged with fear as well as anticipation.

Paying me no mind, the Sinner clasps his hands, resting his forearms on the back of the seating in front of him, and bows his head. The acoustics in the nave make it impossible for anyone to sneak up on me, but I remain alert. I watch him pray, his lips moving almost imperceptibly, his throat working to swallow. I wonder if he’s really missing a tongue, and that’s why it looks so difficult for him. I wonder if it’s my fault.

His head snaps up, his gaze piercing into mine, and in the blazing hatred I find the answer.

He pulls one of the tiny pencils and a prayer request slip from the holder in the back of the bench seat and scribbles on it. Then he slides along the pew, hesitates, and stands. When he does, the slip of paper flutters to the floor in the center aisle.

He gives me one more long, loathing look before he dusts off his shoulder, turns on his heel, and walks out with long, rapid strides, as if he can’t put distance between us quickly enough. I slump back against the pew, dropping my forehead to my folded hands. Maybe feeling slightly sick at the thought of what my brother did to that boy, and for so little reason, makes me a hypocrite. After all, I beat girls to a bloody pulp for nothing more than my need for validation.

But those girls sign up for it. That violence is controlled, scheduled, chosen. That violence is warranted, wanted even. The pain is temporary. I’ve seen people do

permanent damage at those fights, but I know how to avoid it, how to maximize blood loss and minimize severe injury. So, while I've caused a few visits to the dentist and trips to the hospital to get a broken nose set, it's rare and unintentional.

I've certainly never disfigured someone in such a brutal way. I shudder at the thought of them holding him down, slicing through the organ while he choked on his own blood, drowning in it, and the agony he must have felt.

And for what?

I don't even know him, don't know if he deserved such a cruel fate as to not even be able to utter a cutting word to the girl who caused his dismemberment. Without talking to the Sinners, I have no way of knowing if they're as bad as the Hellhounds make them out to be, or if they're simply the enemy and therefore abhorred. Even Annabel Lee, whose family is in the opposing gang, didn't seem to think they're particularly dangerous or loathsome. What if they're not the bad guys? What if the Hellhounds are?

I slide down the pew and pick up the prayer request, my stomach queasy with certainty that he'll have asked God for his voice back.

Instead, scrawled in boyish handwriting, are five words that freeze me in place.

I know who you are.

I struggle to understand what it could mean. That they know I'm the Hellhound's sacrifice? Or does he know I fight in disguise? I can't see why he'd care about either of those things. But there are other options, ones that make me weak with dread. Heath could have shared the confession or uploaded it somewhere that Nate Swift hacked into in exchange for a favor from the Sinners. Do they know I'm the girl who said those things?

Or do they know that I'm the girl who ratted out her friends in juvenile court, three boys who are in their rival gang? Saint warned me that if I started digging, the Disciples would find out. And now, it looks like they have. I can't tell yet if that's a bad thing. Maybe this is some kind of peace offering, a reward for the same crime the Hellhounds are punishing me for. I got their enemies locked up, after all. This could be a notice of respect, a ceasefire, if they think that I'm on their side.

Saint said the Disciples were responsible for Eternity's disappearance. But what if he was only saying that so I wouldn't talk to his enemies? What if they know the truth, and they're willing to tell me, and that's why the Hellhounds have been trying to keep me from them all along.

There's only one way to find out.

The Merciful

I stand, ready to go after the Sincero boy and see if I can catch him, but when I turn to go, Father Salvatore is standing in the doorway. Our eyes meet, and my heart stops. It's like that day in the library, when he watched, except today, we're alone. I swallow hard, my heart racing. After a long moment's hesitation, as if he's giving me a chance to flee, he begins moving slowly down the aisle toward me.

"Lamb," he says, that velvet voice rolling across the pews, echoing in the rafters overhead. "Why haven't you gone home yet?"

"I'm—I'm not going home," I say, retreating into my pew. "I got an exception to stay on campus. I don't have anywhere to go."

To my horror, my voice cracks unexpectedly. I don't want him feeling sorry for me. I want to be fine with being alone, to be a strong, independent woman now that I'm eighteen. But the truth is, I'm not that kind of girl. I'm not fierce and careless like Eternity, or droll and blasé like Annabel Lee, or tough and practical like Ronique.

I'm lonely, and I ache for somewhere to belong, someone to belong to. I want somewhere to call home, somewhere safe, that I can call my own, where I can be myself. I want to find the person that I can be myself with too, my person; the one who accepts me and loves me just as I am, for who I am.

And I'm terrified he doesn't exist.

I'm afraid I'll never find him, because I am unlovable.

“Can I offer you some comfort?” Father Salvatore asks, stopping in front of the first pew.

I nod, swallowing hard and willing myself not to cry. He doesn’t want to sit next to me, won’t even sit in the same pew. He must think I’m dirty and disgusting after all I’ve said to him, all he’s witnessed.

He sinks onto the pew in front of me, and his scent envelopes me, that masculine scent of sandalwood and leather that makes my head spin and my knees squeeze together. I close my eyes and take a breath, my fingers moving automatically to my cross, wrapping around it. When I open my eyes, he’s watching me from behind his glasses, his gaze watchful and sympathetic. His pose is casual this time, his body slanted at a sideways angle, elbow resting on the back of the pew that separates us.

“What does it say?” he asks.

“What?”

He nods towards my necklace. “It has an engraving on the back, yes? I catch glimpses when you toy with it in class, but I’ve never caught the word.”

“Oh,” I say, my cheeks heating with the knowledge that he’s been watching me that closely, noticing me in his class, remembering how I fidget. “It says SHAME.”

I turn it over to show him the letters I’ve rubbed with my thumb so many times they’re beginning to wear away.

“Shame,” he repeats. “Interesting choice to have put on a cross. Do you imagine that’s what Jesus would want associated with the way in which he died?”

“No,” I say quickly. “I mean, it does say that, and yes, I use it to remind me of my

own shame, my sins. But it stands for the Quint. I think we were a little bit proud when we figured out our initials spelled the word—Saint, Heath, Angel, Mercy, Eternity. I wouldn't have liked it by myself, but they owned it, so I did too. We all got them. Matching necklaces of shame.”

I laugh feebly and slip the cross back under my shirt, feeling silly.

“And you still wear it,” Father Salvatore says. “Even now.”

“I still love them,” I admit. “Maybe I had ulterior motives for getting close, but I do.”

“Do you think any of them still have their necklaces?”

I snort out a laugh. “No. They probably flushed them down the toilet.”

Father Salvatore rests his chin on his shoulder as he looks at me, and it's the most adorable thing I've ever seen. I've never pictured him like this, hanging out and talking, like a person and not a priest. But he's not so old, not that much older than us. He must have friends, sit around talking with them, wearing jeans, doing regular things. Before I can ask what he likes to do, he speaks.

“What are these ulterior motives you mentioned?”

“Oh—nothing. I just wanted to find out the truth, you know. What happened to Eternity.”

“Ah yes. The noble goal.”

“Is it?” I ask, tucking my hands under my thighs. “How do you determine that?”

He smiles a little, his lips smooth and slightly red, and I can't stop staring.

“Determine what, lamb?” he asks.

A wobbling, melting shimmer climbs my spine, and I can hardly breathe. He cannot use that word right now, when he’s sitting so casual, chatting with me like we’re not a priest and his congregant, like we’re a man and a woman.

“How do you know right from wrong?” I manage. “Who makes the rules?”

“You listen to yourself,” he says. “The answers are inside you.”

“What if the answers inside me are wrong?” I whisper, searching his night-dark eyes for the truth, for some flicker of judgment. I don’t find one.

“They’re not,” he says firmly. “I think you know that. If you look inside yourself and let yourself believe it, you’ll know.”

“Then why does it feel so wrong?” I ask, my cheeks heating again.

“What feels wrong?” he asks, his voice low, alluring.

I swallow hard. “What we’ve been doing. What I’ve done.”

“What have you done?”

My lashes flutter as I dart a gaze up and then back down, knotting my fingers in my lap. “You know. You saw.”

“Tell me. Say it out loud, Mercy.”

I gulp down my nerves, my core trembling at the command in his rich, low voice. “I touched myself,” I whisper, my cheeks on fire.

“Didn’t it feel good?”

“Yes,” I admit in a rush of breath. “But... But it’s wrong. Right?”

I dare to lift my gaze to his, and I find his eyes on fire with a dark heat behind his glasses.

“You know my answer to that,” he says, turning his hand over, offering it to me. I stare at his palm, his fingers, wondering how I never noticed how huge his hands are. His fingers must be four or five inches, thick and long, strong and calloused.

“You promise?” I ask, lifting my hand to his but stopping just short of taking it. I hesitate, searching his gaze, praying I can trust him.

“You’ve been taught your whole life not to trust the answers inside you,” he says. “It takes time to unlearn that. But you will, lamb.”

I slide forward off the seat, onto the kneeler, and let my hand sink into his. His strong fingers close around mine. I gasp with shock at the hot, roughness of his palm against my soft, cold one, the way his hand engulfs mine like a father’s hand enveloping his child’s.

“Your body is holy, Mercy,” he says gently. “It is no sin to give it what it needs.”

I nod, staring at our hands.

“Did it feel like a sin when you knelt for your brother?” he asks, his voice a sultry rumble.

I hesitate only a moment. “No.”

“How did it feel?”

“It felt... In the moment, I felt powerful,” I admit, the admission making me squirm.

“You are powerful.”

I swallow hard. “I don’t feel powerful now, Father. I feel... Disposable. Everyone throws me away.”

I force my eyes to his, force myself to admit this deepest, most vulnerable fear while I face him, only inches between us.

“Perhaps it’s not you at all, but their own desires that push them away. People are often uncomfortable facing their own desires. You know this misplaced shame firsthand.”

“Who desires me?” I whisper.

“Do you have to ask?”

“Yes.”

I hate myself for needing him to say it, for even wanting him to. He’s a priest.

But he’s someone.

“I think you know the answer to this question, too,” he says gently.

“I don’t,” I say, my voice catching. “Even after what I did, Saint said I was repulsive to him. Maybe because of what I did. And Heath—he wants to hurt me, Father. Maybe he wants to kill me, like Eternity.”

“Is there anyone else who might?”

My heart is beating so hard I can't hear my own whisper of breath when I dare to ask the most forbidden question of all. “You?”

“I am not allowed the luxury.”

“Of course,” I blurt, the heat of shame in my cheeks unbearable. “Forgive me for asking, Father.”

I try to draw my hand away, but he holds on, his grip firm, commanding.

“Your turn,” he says. “What do you desire, lamb?”

You.

I want to say it, but I can't. Not after he told me he didn't want me. There are too many people I love who feel nothing in return. I can't bear to be told one more time, that one more person doesn't care about me the way I care about him.

“I want to be loved,” I admit, feeling raw and naked admitting it aloud.

“You are loved,” Father Salvatore says. “God loves all His children.”

“Maybe I want one of His children to love me too.”

“There is one,” he says slowly. “One of his children that you can make love you.”

“Really?” I whisper, not daring to breathe, to hope. I would do anything he asked, no matter how impossible, how revolting, if he could feel it too. “How?”

“It’s you, lamb,” he says gently, giving my hand a comforting squeeze.

“Me?” I ask. “How am I supposed to do that?”

“You must first know yourself,” he says. “Just as it is for anyone else. You can’t control someone else’s heart. You can only let them know you, and if they choose to love you, that is a blessing you can choose to accept or refuse.”

If only it were that easy. I can’t tell him the truth though, that I let people know me, and they hate me now. I don’t want him to think I’m unlovable, or to take it as self-pity, when it’s simply a statement of fact.

“What if I can’t do that?” I ask.

“The body is an easy place to start,” he says. “Knowing the parts of yourself you can see and feel with your fingertips, understanding your desires, accepting that they are God-given and holy, is a gateway to the soul.”

“I thought the eyes were the windows to the soul,” I say, a bit shakily.

He doesn’t smile, his dark eyes earnest and gentle behind the lenses of his wire-rimmed glasses.

“Sorry,” I mutter, shifting on the kneeler to take some of the pressure off my kneecaps.

“Would you like to practice now?” he asks.

“Practice?” I whisper, my throat going dry. “Like... Like I did in the confessional?”

He doesn’t answer, just keeps watching me squirm on the kneeler in front of him. It

was one thing to do that when he couldn't see or didn't know I was doing it. How can I do it now, here, while he's watching me like that? While we're in the church, with the huge cross looming over us and Jesus watching from the stained-glass mosaics?

"Is that what you were doing in the confessional?" he asks.

I feel a prickle of sweat at my hairline at the thought of telling him. I can't do it. He knows.

"You saw," I whisper, staring at the gold wristwatch around his wrist. It's such a masculine thing to wear, an adult thing. I feel like a child who was caught doing something wrong, forced to confess what she did before she receives her punishment.

"Tell me," he says, confirming my fears. "I want you to say it every time, until you can do it easily, with no shame."

"I touched myself," I whisper.

"Do you want me to tell you to do it again?"

"Yes."

"Then ask."

I swallow hard, my whole body flushed, my heartbeat erratic. "Can I?"

"Can you what, lamb?" he asks gently, patiently, even though he should be disappointed that I can't say it without shame like he instructed.

"Can—Can I touch myself, Father?" I blurt.

“You may.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding, not moving. Now that I’ve said it aloud, I can’t do it. Not while he’s watching.

But then, he’s watching.

He’s waiting.

I can’t let him down. I remind myself of that brief, momentary swell of power I felt, as if I were holding all the cards for once when I knelt at my brother’s feet, when he couldn’t bring himself to refuse.

I lift one knee and then the other, tugging my velvet skirt free. My bare knees press into the warm leather cushion of the kneeler, and I shiver when the cool air meets my thighs, bare above my knee socks. I slip a hand up, under the skirt, and then down, into my panties.

Father Salvatore doesn’t move.

“Like this, Father?” I ask, my throat thick.

“Does that feel good?”

I nod, then bite my lip so I don’t make any embarrassing noises. We’re so close I can see the ring of blue-black around his irises, and that his dark eyes that look inky are actually the deepest, darkest shade of brown, like the bitter, one hundred percent cacao Manson brought Annabel Lee.

The father’s gaze emboldens me somehow, as if I’m daring him to stop me. I move my fingers, exploring myself in a slow, methodical way I’ve never done before. The

skin is soft and damp, a strange feeling as I finger apart the layers. Inside and lower, I find something different, a secret pocket of wet heat just big enough for my fingertip. I gasp, and Father's eyes flare.

"What is it, lamb?" he asks, his voice so low I feel the rumble more than hear it.

"It's... Wet," I say, a shudder of bliss rolling through me.

Our eyes meet again, and I hold his gaze while I slide my finger up and down my slit, gasping again when I hit a spot that feels so good it makes my hips jerk back, as if they know it's too much pleasure, more than I deserve. My other hand wraps around the top of the bench seat in front of me, gripping tight, keeping me anchored. I bite my lip and try again. Father Salvatore's gaze fuses to my mouth with a blazing heat, watching my teeth cut into my lip. When our eyes meet again, a searing hot electricity charges the air between us, and arousal drenches my fingers in a rush.

I gasp again, and his fingers close over mine on the seat, holding me in place. My breath comes quicker, in ragged, panting gasps. "Father," I manage, then lose the rest of the thought.

"What are you thinking about, lamb?" he prompts, his voice so seductive my thighs quake, yearning to open for him, to wrap around his hips as he lays me down on a pew and teaches me the holiness of our bodies together.

"You," I breathe.

"Mercy..."

"Help me," I blurt before I can stop myself, before he can stop me.

"Let me see," he says, his thumb stroking across my hand.

“What?”

“Show me your other hand.”

I don't want to stop, but I reluctantly withdraw my other hand from my panties and hold it up for him to inspect. I drop my gaze, my pulse suddenly racing, sure he'll scold me or slap my hand for what it's done. Instead, he draws it close, inhaling a long, slow breath. His eyes fall closed for a second, just like Saint's did when he smelled me, and in some flash of daring, I remember how I drew my brother in after that, and I tip my finger forward, dragging it across the priest's lower lip.

He jerks back, his eyes snapping open, a thunderous frown darkening his brow.

“I'm sorry,” I cry, trying to pull away, to bolt from the church and never return.

He holds me fast, his grip on my wrist like a cuff, harder than the ropes the boys used to tie me to the cross.

“There's no need to apologize,” he says. “What do you want, Mercy Soules?”

“I—I don't know,” I blurt out, desperate and humiliated.

“You do,” he says gently, reaching over the back of the pew to bring my other hand back to my lower belly. “Tell me. What do you need?”

“You,” I admit, my cheeks flaming. “You do it. Please, Father. I can't.”

He hesitates a long moment, and then he releases my hand. “I'm not able to relieve you of this craving. But someone will come if it is His will.”

“No,” I gasp out. “Not my brother. Please.”

“Your friend, then?” he asks. “You’d like Heath to join you?”

“No,” I cry, shaking my head. “I want you .”

“Put your hand in your panties again,” he commands, his voice sharper now, almost angry.

I don’t know what I did wrong, and I want to cry, but I bite my trembling lip and hold it back. If I obey, maybe he’ll be happy with me again, forget I touched him like that without permission, after he said he didn’t want me. Maybe I can please him if I submit to his demands, and he’ll forgive me. I can’t bear the thought of losing one more person, even if he was never really mine.

He watches while I obey, slipping my trembling fingers under the thin cotton fabric. He watches my hand move, its ministrations hidden from his view.

When the pressure inside me has built until I’m gasping for something I can’t find on my own, distracted by my own pleasure, he rolls his lips in, and I see the barest glimpse of his tongue dragging between them. The realization that he’s tasting me makes my hips buck, a fluttering ache stab into me so fiercely I cry out. The soft sound echoes through the church with my panting breaths.

“Bury your finger in your cunt,” he growls.

I obey, wincing at the ease with which I can slowly sink it inside myself, how wet I am, dripping for him. Ragged breaths tear from my open lips, my eyes rolling back with pure pleasure when I can’t go any deeper.

Suddenly, I hear the creak of old hinges, and the air sweeps over the sweat misting my skin, making me shiver. I yank my hand from my underwear, but Father Salvatore’s other hand pins mine to the back of the pew, silently commanding me to

stay.

“We’ve been expecting you,” he says. “Come and take communion.”

I turn and find Angel, and a sick, guilty sense of relief sweeps through me when I remember how well he pleased me in my room. Without a word, he strides down the aisles, slides into the pew with me, and lifts me. I cry out as I tip forward when he lifts my hips higher, level with his shoulders. He swiftly lowers my panties, then deftly slides his arms between my thighs above the fabric as it binds my knees, and parts my legs wide. A loud groan echoes through the church, then breaks off suddenly when he buries his face in me.

Hot, rough pleasure slams into me. His sounds are muffled as they vibrate through my flesh, sending the most delicious shocks of ecstasy rippling through me. He moans again and again, his lips and tongue assaulting my overstimulated flesh. He’s not slow and gentle this time, not playful. His mouth moves with sure absolution, hungry and primal and fierce, leaving nothing untouched.

I cry out, gripping the pew in front of me to steady myself as he lifts my hips higher, dragging me harder against his face. His tongue probes at my entrance, and I whimper when the tip dips into me.

Father Salvatore’s hand closes over mine again, firm but warm, steadying me.

“This is God’s will for you, my lamb. Can you surrender to Him?”

“Yes,” I cry, my back arching, needing more even as I struggle to contain the bliss already wracking my body. “Please.”

Angel’s tongue plunges into me, stretching me, stretching to reach deeper. I try to close my thighs, but he pushes them wider, stabbing into me.

“Forgive me, Father,” I cry, tears filling my eyes as the pleasure builds higher, higher. It’s uncontainable, unbearable.

“Forgive you for what, my child?”

“For—for thinking my body wasn’t made for this.”

“What was it made for, lamb?”

“For you,” I say without a moment’s hesitation.

“For me?” he asks, brows drawing together. “For what purpose?”

“Anything,” I cry. “I’ll do anything you ask, anything you want. It feels so good.”

“My God,” he mutters under his breath like a curse.

“Tell me what to do,” I gasp out. “It’s all yours. My body is yours. Tell me what it needs.”

“Let go,” he coaxes. “Let him worship and awaken the divinity inside you.”

Angel’s tongue strokes relentlessly, driving into me in sensuous, rhythmic strokes. He growls into me, his tongue stroking faster, harder, before he withdraws, his lips sucking rhythmically, sealed over my entrance. I lose my breath as silent ecstasy washes over me. I want him to suck harder, to turn me inside out, to ravage every part of me until there’s nothing left.

“Father,” I gasp, gripping the priest’s hand, staring into his eyes that burn with a hunger so deep it steals my breath, my soul.

My core trembles as I stare back at him, into the mirror of my own longing. I understand then that even if he can't say it, can't let himself have this, he wants it with the same maddening desperation that I do. Since he can't let himself take me, though, he's giving me to someone else, taking whatever small, vicarious pleasure he can derive from watching someone else take what he can never have, touch me in ways he is not allowed, glut himself on something of which he will only ever have the barest taste.

"Give him your body," he says, his voice low and husky. "Surrender it completely."

I open my mouth to say I can't, but suddenly, Angel's mouth retreats, and his hands snake behind me, stretching me so far open pain ripples into me. Cool air shocks my drenched, fevered flesh for one second as he looks at me, stretched to the point of pain, engorged, throbbing and dripping with need. Then, his tongue spears deep inside me. The hunger I've felt building, the clenching, sucking need, is suddenly stuffed full. My entire body convulses, writhing in the sudden fulfillment, the ecstasy that courses through me as if I'm being electrocuted. I cry out in breathless, wordless abandon as wave after wave crashes through me, stealing all control, all thought, all sin from me as it washes me clean.

The Salvation

I carry my lamb across campus, her body limp but trembling occasionally against mine as I cradle her in my arms. Her forehead is dewy with sweat even in the cold, her cheeks flushed with high color, as if she's running a fever. I know it's a dangerous thing to do, even in the dark that falls so early this time of year. Someone could see us, and this would be very hard to explain away.

Still, it's all worth it when she lays her head on my chest, trusting me completely. I'd throw it all away for her, my life's work, my position, my church. She is without her flock, and she needs me right now. That matters more than the arbitrary rules the university puts in place. I'm certain in my convictions, in the God I serve, far more than the rules I bend.

In her room, I lay her on the bed, removing her shoes and setting them neatly under the edge. Her room is both cozy and sparse, without decoration but adorned with knickknacks that appear to be homemade and an old, threadbare stuffed animal on her bed. A grey cat is curled in a ball on her windowsill, almost unnoticeable between her tea kettle and a tiny toaster oven. He spares us only a glance before going back to watching the blue twilight outside the window.

"I presume you already know pets aren't allowed on campus," I say. "Nor are toaster ovens in dorm rooms."

"I know," she says. "I'll get rid of it. I just wanted to make cookies one time, for Christmas."

“In a toaster oven?” I ask, drawing her skirt down over her legs. Her white cotton panties are soaked, stained with her release. I momentarily lose my train of thought as I stare at them, the wet spot between her smooth, plump thighs.

“I tried making them in the oven in the kitchen downstairs,” she says, as if wholly unaware of the sight of her body and what it does to a man, even a supposed holy man. “But when I went to take them out, they were gone.”

“Someone stole your cookies?” I ask, frowning as my attention returns to her. I quickly strip her skirt away and search through her dresser for clean panties and pajamas.

“Twice,” she says. “I gave up and got the toaster oven. It works fine, but I can only make a few at a time.”

“What kind do you make?” I ask, returning to her bed, where she lies as I left her, for once unashamed. I swallow hard and tear my gaze from her sex before I can become transfixed. I look at the corner of the ceiling as I work her panties down, then quickly tug up another pair before my own lustful desires can overtake me. I’m tempted to push one finger into her slick cunt, just to see how wet she is, how hot, how eager.

“All kinds,” she says. “I like to bake.”

“Me too,” I say, my voice husky. I barely hear myself over the raging in my blood when she lifts her hips to allow me to pull the pajama pants over them.

“You bake?” she asks, her eyes widening as she stares up at me with the complete trust of an innocent who has never considered that damning thoughts plague me as constantly as they do her.

“Uh—yes,” I say, giving my head a small shake to clear it. It’s unlike me to be

overcome by desire for young flesh. I don't allow myself to look at students, to think of them, in this way. But Mercy is not just any student. "Mostly bread."

"I make bread too," she says, her blue eyes lighting up, seeming not to notice as she lifts her arms for me to pull her shirt off over them. Her breasts are full, the pale globes swollen over the cups of her white cotton bra. She's talking about banana bread and pumpkin bread, but I don't hear a word as she reaches behind her to undo the clasp of her bra, then lifts her arms for me to draw it off. Her nipples are delicate pink rosebuds, peaks standing stiff in the cool room. I can almost feel their weight in my palms, the whimpering gasps of pleasure that would fall from her lips when I tweaked them, the silent ecstasy on her face when I took them into my mouth and slowly sucked until she was rocking her hips in that unconscious way she does, yearning, seeking...

"What kind of bread do you make?"

The question jars me back to reality, and I pull on the pajama shirt that matches her pants, my heart hammering, my cock stiff against my leg, where it's trapped by my boxer briefs.

"Yeast bread," I say, covering her with her blankets. "For communion and general consumption. It's soothing for me, like a ritual. The rising and kneading, the smell of it... In a way, it's its own type of prayer, a communion with God before the communion with the congregation."

"I love that," she says, her gaze full of naked, open admiration that pierces my sternum. "It sounds much more meaningful than adding nuts to banana bread." She gives a small, self-deprecating laugh and snuggles into her pillows.

"Maybe I'll make you some," I hear myself saying.

“I’d like that,” she says, smiling up at me, looking sleepy and satisfied. “Thank you.”

I sink onto the edge of the bed and stroke her hair back from her forehead. “How do you feel, Mercy?”

“Good,” she says. “Cleansed.”

It’s as if she knew exactly what I wanted to hear before I knew it, like her words in the church. I will never be able to forget those words, those promises that fell from her lips like a benediction.

“Mercy,” I say, searching her sweet blue eyes. “What you said back there... Did you mean it? Or was it born from your desire in the moment?”

“What did I say?”

“That your body is mine.”

We stare at each other a long moment. At last, she nods shyly.

“If you want it,” she whispers, her gaze hopeful now and so painfully innocent. She doesn’t know the things she’s promising, the dark desires that lurk in my heart.

“Lamb,” I say, linking my hand with hers and pressing it to my chest. “Any man would be lying if he said he didn’t. Your body is a sacred temple. It would bring any man to his knees. But if you meant those words, I want you to know what you’re promising.”

“What about you?” she asks timidly. “Would you go to your knees?”

“Only for God,” I say. “I took a vow, when I joined the priesthood. Not to the church,

but to myself.”

“Could I?” she asks, looking up at me through her lashes with a look that is far more temptress than lamb. “For you?”

I smile down at her, stroking her hair across the pillow. “Not for me,” I say with regret. “But you’ve been such an obedient lamb. Maybe you could kneel for your brother again.”

“It’s not a sin?” she asks.

“No, child.”

“Is it a sin to want you?” she asks, casting her gaze down.

“Your desire is a gift, but it’s not a gift for me,” I say gently.

That may be the deepest regret of my life, especially when she squirms over on the bed and looks up at me with those big, imploring eyes. “Will you stay? Just until I fall asleep?”

It’s all I can do not to let my imagination run wild again. But I keep it in check and nod, then rein in my impulses as I set my shoes next to hers. I lie on the bed facing her, our faces inches apart, and link my fingers through hers, holding them between our chests, so we can’t press in too close.

“Will you sing to me, Father?”

I murmur a hymn to her, and after a time, her lids flutter closed, and she sleeps like only the innocent can. I would envy her that if she wasn’t so deserving.

*

The next day, I step out the back door of the church and pause, taking in the grey day before me. When I need solace and peace, I walk out into the graveyard and beyond, into the garden. Growing up, I didn't have many green spaces around, and my knowledge doesn't extend beyond the basics of the plants around me, but I've learned to enjoy the view from the front windows of the rectory. When I'm up early, before anyone else rises, kneading dough or sitting down to prayer, I often spot birds and animals out the kitchen windows. This time of year, it's quiet, though, as if the wildlife has fled campus along with the students.

Still, I like taking stock of the garden, walking the labyrinth while in contemplation, watching the world change before my eyes from one season to the next. Even now, when the earth lies dormant, my feet on the solid ground remind me of my foundation, the one I've made here, in this new life. The cold, wet wind in my face reminds me that I'm far from home, from the demons that haunted my life before this one. In New York, we would have snow, biting cold, but despite the warmer temperatures here, the wetness in the air creeps in like a chill that never goes away. I don't mind so much. There are worse things.

I descend the steps and walk through the graveyard with its greying stones, the oldest crumbling, the newest looming stark against the blur of fog under the grey sky. I spot a young woman from our congregation at her father's grave, on a square of sod that hasn't taken root and won't until spring. Her head is bent, and her shoulders shake. I think of my own father's unremarkable headstone in an endless cemetery back home, one of the many departed souls in a city that doesn't so much as blink at death, even when it's a respected priest.

No tears were shed on his grave, and none will be.

I offer comfort, but the woman asks for solitude, so I leave her and make my way out

further, to the fence, and through the gate to the garden. I'd like to bury my hands in the soil, as if they are roots, ties that can anchor me to this plot of earth. But for now, I only stroll the circular design, trying to find my way to some kind of clarity that hasn't been offered to me in a long time.

I'm already thinking ahead, thinking about the warm dough waiting for me in the small, simple rectory where I live behind the church. I'm imagining how I will use it to work out my frustrations, how I will smooth my hands over the ball of warm dough, dust it with flour, and slide it into the oven. How I will wrap it in a cloth when it's done baking, how it will warm me as I carry it across campus. How she'll smile when I deliver it into her waiting hands, still warm and fragrant. I picture us sitting together in her room, tearing off pieces with our hands, breaking bread together in our own private communion.

I hurry through the rest of the garden and go inside to check if the dough has risen.

Later, I cross the campus toward the dormitory, my steps increasing in speed as I approach. Is she sitting at the window, and will she see me coming? Will she be as eager to see me as I am her? Suddenly, I'm convinced I am nothing but a fool.

I slow my pace, and just then, I spot a lone, still figure standing under a barren tree just a few paces from the entrance. A momentary flicker passes through me, as if I'm still a child, one being caught sneaking into a place where he doesn't belong. Fear and guilt twist together into a braid of defensive self-righteousness, the kind which my father loved nothing more than to beat out of me, relishing each stroke like the sweetest morsel.

We stare at each other for a few seconds, each of us debating the next step, the next word. I must tread carefully. I am the guardian of these children, the guide, however misguided. I should not be here. But he should not be the one to tell me that.

“Hello, Saint,” I say. “You do know campus closed yesterday, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he says, scowling at me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, my tone measured, inviting his confidence.

“I came to see if Mercy wanted to go home for the holiday,” he says. “But that’s stupid. Of course she doesn’t want to spend Christmas with the family that rehomed her like an unwanted puppy. If she wanted to be part of our family, she wouldn’t have fucked us over.”

“Is that really what you imagine happened?” I ask.

He works his jaw back and forth, glowering at me like a petulant child. I know better. I’ve known Saint Soules as long as I’ve known this town. He was one of the first students I worked with individually. I know his story well—and now I know the other side of that story.

“I guess not,” he admits.

“I think you should speak to her,” I say. “Come. I’ll go with you. It’s time you put all this behind you.”

“All of what?” he asks, but he follows me into her dorm.

“This attachment you both have to your shame,” I say, leading him up the stairs.

I meant to visit her alone, to talk with her again, but now another idea is forming in my mind. I remember her words in the church, as she held onto me and let go of everything else, what she said she’d do for me.

Anything.

Maybe it's time to put her word to the test.

It's pushing a limit I have no right to push, crossing a line that I can't go back from. Maybe it's something I've been suppressing too long, longer than this pair has held onto their shame, their lust for each other. Maybe it's this damned holiday, the memories it brings. But whatever it is, I've reached my limit on the topic, and if I need to be a bit more assertive in my mediation, so be it.

I knock on Mercy's door while Saint stands back, a troubled frown on his brow. After a minute, Mercy opens the door wearing a pair of flannel reindeer pajamas. Her eyes widen when she sees me, lighting up with a joy that should be reserved for kids on Christmas morning.

"Hi!" she says, then sees Saint. Her expression falters, her smile slipping away, replaced by confusion and an edge of suspicion. "What is this?"

"A peace offering," I say, handing her the loaf, still warm inside its towel.

"Oh," she says faintly, stepping back. "Thank you. Come in."

I smile at her politeness, the manners her mother surely instilled in her. She couldn't tell us to leave after bringing her a gift even if she wanted to. And I know that under the hurt and fear, she wants us to be here. To stay, so she's not alone, however misguided that notion.

"Why are you here?" she asks Saint when we're inside her cozy little nest of domesticity, and he's seated in her desk chair. "Shouldn't you be home for Christmas? The midnight service is tonight."

“He’s here to clear the air,” I say. “In fact, you both are. As an advisor to you both, I think it’s past time for you to sit down and talk this out. You’re family, and nothing should come between a brother and sister, especially not the anger that is separating you now. I’ve heard both of your confessions. Now I think it’s time for you to confess to each other.”

Saint glances at me and then at Mercy. He swallows, and I can tell this is hard for him. But he’s going to do it. He will obey because I ordered him to.

The familiar swell of power rises inside me, the one that lead me to the priesthood. Holding and protecting people’s darkest secrets, the ones that could destroy them, is its own kind of power. At first, that’s what I was drawn to. But later, I saw the depth of my power. A shepherd not only protects his flock, he guides it. When I don the collar, people obey, sometimes against their baser desires, sometimes giving in to them with relief.

The swell of power I feel when they surrender to me is a high like no other, worth far more than the worldly pleasures I’ve given up as penance for this exultation. I’m playing God, but when they bow down to me, I can’t resist. It’s my one weakness, and if it costs me my eternal soul, then it was never really mine at all. The calm, peaceful radiance of a moment of complete control over another person is the closest a man like me will get to heaven. It’s my nirvana, my absolution, and one day, it will be my undoing.

That’s part of the exhilaration.

“What should I confess?” Mercy asks, looking almost as uneasy as her brother.

“The truth.”

“I... I love you,” she whispers, sinking onto the edge of her bed and facing him.

“That’s the truth, Saint. I always loved you.”

He snorts. “Funny way of showing it.”

“I did what I thought was right,” she says. “I told the judge exactly what I saw. Maybe if you’d told me what really happened, I would have understood.”

“I fucked her,” he says. “We all fucked her. Is that what you want to hear?”

Mercy winces. “I know. There were three sets of DNA in her—clothes.”

“Her underwear,” he says flatly.

She nods, twisting her fingers in her lap.

“We didn’t rape her,” he says. “She wanted to. She planned it. But she didn’t want us to tell you, so we respected that.”

“But... why?” Mercy asks, looking so wounded I want to go to her, to take her in my arms. I won’t interfere, though. This is something between brother and sister.

“Because you’re so damn pious and sanctimonious, she knew you wouldn’t understand,” Saint says, throwing up his hands.

Mercy gives the slightest nod, biting down on her lip when it starts quivering.

“Tell her why she asked you to do that,” I prompt.

Saint frowns. “That’s not really something you talk about.”

“Mercy is your sister,” I remind him. “She’s not a stranger. It won’t endanger anyone

for her to know.”

Saint hesitates, then crosses his arms and leans back, his gaze shuttered. “She was swearing into the Skull and Crossbones. Her initiation was coming up, she didn’t know exactly when. They don’t give you a fucking appointment. She asked a couple guys to break her in so she wouldn’t go in a virgin. You know. For the gang bang.”

I can tell he’s enjoying the shock on Mercy’s face, choosing the crudest way to explain it and relishing her reaction. I let him have it. It’s not just for her sake. It’s for him too. I know this is harder for him to talk about than he wants her to know, than he wants anyone to know. Telling it in rough terms is easier for him than showing vulnerability, admitting his grief and hurt.

“Good job, son,” I murmur.

He scowls at me. “We done here?”

“Does that satisfy your curiosity, lamb?” I ask.

She nods.

“You told your brother you loved him,” I say. “That was brave. Saint. You have not finished your confession. Do you feel the same?”

“I protected her, didn’t I?”

“From what?”

“From... From the others,” he says, gesturing vaguely with one hand.

“Why?” she asks, watching him intently.

“Because you’re my sister.”

“And?” I press.

“And she’s innocent,” he snaps. “You know what they’re like. What we’re like.”

“You protected her from your own baser urges as well as theirs?”

“Yes,” he grits out.

“Is that because you want her innocence for yourself?” I ask.

He glares at me, gritting his teeth. He doesn’t want to say it, just as she didn’t want to admit what she was doing in the church. But naming our demons strips them of their power.

“If you admitted it, would that rid you of this attachment to shame you’ve developed?” I ask, clasping my hands behind my back. “Or would you have to take her innocence to find relief?”

He glances sideways at Mercy.

“She will let you,” I say gently. “If you ask that of her.”

I turn to her to make sure, and she nods eagerly. “I will, Father.”

“Do you want him to?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says, her cheeks coloring and her fingers wrapping around the cross she uses as her own form of self-flagellation.

“I don’t fucking want you,” Saint snaps, shoving up from the chair and pacing in agitation. “What’s wrong with you? You’re my sister. And you’re fucking pathetic if you’d let me. I’ve done nothing but disrespect you since the day you got here. If you’d spread your legs for me after the way I’ve treated you, you’re a desperate slut, and I don’t fuck desperate sluts. Especially not my ugly stepsister.”

“Are you sure?” I ask. “You’ve suffered long enough, Saint. You’ve earned her submission, if you choose to accept it. She has given it to you to do with as you see fit. Will you accept this gift from her as penance for the harm she’s caused you?”

Saint wheels on me. “No,” he growls. “I told you. She’s fucking hideous. She dresses like a little girl. She doesn’t even shave her cunt.”

“I want you to be certain before you refuse.” I turn to Mercy. “Show him what he’s turning down. He will have to live with the fact that someone else will accept the gift he didn’t, if he can’t admit the truth, that he wants this as much as you do.”

“Show... Him?” she asks, chewing at her lip in anxiety. “How?”

“Like you showed me,” I say, nodding to her pants. “But without those. Can you do that, lamb? For me?”

Her breath hitches, but after a second, she nods. She stands slowly, stripping off her pants and panties together. She steps out of her fat Santa slippers and slides her bottom back onto the bed.

“Scoot back,” I order. “Put your feet on the edge of the bed and spread your legs.”

She obeys, then hesitantly brings her fingers to her exposed cunt. “Like this, Father?”

“Yes, lamb,” I assure her. “Just like that. Now show your brother how wet you get for

him.”

The sense of heady power rises in me, amazement and awe filling me when she obeys without question. After a minute of touching herself for us, her flesh glistens with arousal, and she starts breathing harder, her cheeks pinkening.

“You too,” I tell Saint, unable to tear my gaze from Mercy’s perfect, pink cunt.

Her brother stands beside me, equally transfixed, as he unzips and pulls himself out. He’s already hard, his cock springing free and standing thick and straight. He grips it, jerking himself in rough, angry strokes.

“Doesn’t she look divine?” I ask as her head falls back, her hips moving in slow circles to match her finger as she smears it over her drenched flesh, opening herself, offering herself to him.

“Divinely desperate,” he grunts, jerking harder, his cock stiff in his hand. After only a minute, it throbs out a spurt, then another. It falls in ropey strands to the floor, leaving creamy loops and splatters on the tile.

“Oh,” Mercy cries, her eyes rounding as she watches her brother unload his cum shot while watching her pleasure herself.

“There,” he grunts out. “Now you know how I feel. I already know how you feel. You’d get on the floor and drag your ass in my cum like a dog if it meant you’d get some in your pussy.”

“Would you?” I ask Mercy.

Hurt pools in her blue eyes, but after a second, she bites her lip and nods, looking guilty.

“Show him,” Saint snarls, shoving his dick back into his jeans. “Show him what a pathetic, desperate, horny little slut you are.”

She turns her gaze to mine, imploring.

I nod. “Show me, lamb.”

She hesitates a moment, then slides gingerly from the edge of her bed to the floor. I watch in awe as she lowers herself onto the splatters her brother left, sliding in small circles in it, coating her bottom. The sense of power that swells in me is more than a tide, it’s a tsunami.

“You can do better than that,” Saint taunts. “Show me how much you want me, little sister. Show Father how much you love my cum. Scoop it up and stick it in your dirty cunt. You know you want to.”

Her shoulders shake with sobs, but she smears her fingers in his mess, scooping it up. Trembling globs of white coat her finger, and she sucks in a shuddering breath as she pushes it inside herself. With a mewling cry of surrender, her head falls back. Her hips jerk, bucking, riding her hand. She drives her delicate finger into her hungry cunt over and over, stabbing her brother’s cum into it with startling violence. She goes up on her knees, back arched, and rides out her orgasm with silent sobs wracking her body. At last, she collapses into a heap in the smears of Saint’s release that coat her floor, curling into a ball.

“Disgusting,” Saint says, but he sounds gratified. He leans forward and spits, the glob dropping onto her tear-stained cheek before he turns and walks out the door, leaving me alone with the greatest temptation I’ve ever known.

The Heathen

Grampa's lake house is full on Christmas Eve, so full it's as if they're trying to fill the space Eternity left, as if cramming every living relative into the place can erase the fact that she was once here and now she's not.

Except she is here, even when younger cousins have filled her place at the kids' table, and I've moved to the adult one; even when there is no stocking with her name hung on the mantel with mine. She's in the echo of kids' laughter down by the water, the herds of running feet as nieces and nephews and grandkids thunder across the wooden deck Dad added onto the place, now wrapped with strings of Christmas lights.

We used to be those kids, when we were kids.

Dad's parents are in their nineties, but supposedly they still want everyone to come, the way they did when Dad was a kid on Firefly Lake. Every year, Mom says it might be the last time we're all together. I know she's talking about my grandparents passing, and not Eternity, but I felt guilty enough to attend once again.

Though I never met my grandparents on Mom's side—probably why she makes such a big deal of spending time with the ones I have left—she has a big family. The entire, loud Irish hoard has taken over the place, and Dad's parents don't seem to mind. Then again, they don't mind much these days. Grampa is asleep in his wheelchair, snoring with his head resting on his shoulder, and Gramma is barely cognizant, being followed around by some distant relative of Dad's to make sure she doesn't fall or wander into the lake. Mom only invited her siblings and their

immediate families, so at least we don't have to sleep in shifts.

I'm tucked in a corner next to the scraggly tree they cut from the woods near the lake—a Stone family tradition—sipping a whiskey and waiting for church when a text comes in.

ASoullessSaint: we need 2 talk

AHeartlessHeathen: u breaking up w us?

AnAvengingAngel: now???

ASoullessSaint: wya

AHeartlessHeathen: lake house

AnAvengingAngel: home. its xmas eve.

ASoullessSaint: can u get away?

AHeartlessHeathen: yeah bored anyway

ASoullessSaint: Diner 1hr

AHeartlessHeathen: kk

AnAvengingAngel: k

I heave myself up from the chair and head for the door. It's cold out tonight, and people are talking about a white Christmas like it might actually happen. Charlie and Frankie are sitting on my tailgate, and they give me a little shit about leaving, but not

too much. They're both cool enough to not alert Mom of the fact that I'm taking off. She probably won't notice for a while, at least, maybe not even until I'm back. She's busy trying to drown her own losses in the sea of people that remain.

I pull up at the Downtown Diner an hour later, throw the truck into park, and head inside, hand on my piece. The place is owned by the Skull and Crossbones, so it's our place on our turf, but I'm always on guard. The dirty Disciples aren't above jumping a guy headed to church on Christmas Eve.

Saint is already there, fingers tapping, knee bouncing, half-empty cup of black coffee in front of him.

"What's up?" I say, sliding into the booth across from him. I shrug out of my jacket and stuff it down behind me. Saint's expensive wool peacoat is laid out carefully on the seat beside him with his slick leather gloves because he's a rich, preppy asshole, but he's not dressed for church yet.

He downs the rest of his coffee and fills the cup from a carafe on the table before offering it to me.

"How's my favorite little brother?" Scarlet asks, sidling up and winking as she ruffles my neatly styled hair.

"Your only little brother," I point out. "And don't fuck up my 'do or Mom will kill you."

"Still my favorite," she says, pulling a pad from her apron pocket. "What'll it be? Hot cocoa with the little marshmallows?"

"You know me," I say. "And keep 'em coming."

Saint looks tense, but he doesn't say anything, just watches the door.

"What's up?" I ask again. "How's your break? Your dad still a dick?"

"I got the usual lecture," he grumbles. He doesn't have to tell me what it was about. I see the guilt and uneasiness in him, and I know it was the one about how he's ruining his reputation, compromising his future, by associating with heathens like me and Angel. Saint isn't a member of the Skulls, but some blood runs deeper than gang affiliation. He's still our brother, and he always will be. I know that's what he says to his father when the asshole lights into him about it. I know he defends us, fights for us, even when we're not around.

At last, Angel comes in. He talks to his mom for a minute, and then she comes to the table with him and my drink. At last, we're alone, Angel and I sitting across from Saint, waiting.

"I'm going to fuck Mercy."

"What?" I snap, sure I heard him wrong. "Since when?"

The guy has been insisting she's his sister since day one—and promising I would get to exact my revenge on her when the time came. She wasn't his to take.

"Yesterday," he says.

"I tongue-fucked her again the other day," Angel admits. "Her pussy's so fucking juicy. She tasted ready."

"I've barely touched her," I growl, glaring at Saint. "Because you told me she was your sister, and she was special, and no one was supposed to fuck with her until you said so. But I guess that rule doesn't apply to Angel, who gets to play with her pussy

whenever he feels like it. And apparently it doesn't apply to you either."

"I haven't done it yet," Saint says. "I went to ask if she wanted to come for Christmas, but the Master caught me going in. He thinks if I fuck her, we'll be even or some shit."

"So this is your thing now?" I demand. "You're just going to fuck everyone's sister, even your own?"

He flinches, rubbing his thumb against the side of his mug, and I know I shouldn't have hit him there, but it's true. He's no more to blame for what happened than the other guys, or Mercy, or me. But he did fuck my sister. It seems only right that I fuck his.

"Better not even think about my sisters," Angel says, his voice unusually fierce. Sometimes I forget he's as dangerous as the rest of us. Usually, he's such a teddy bear I forget he got his bones before me and most of his family.

"I'm not fucking your sisters," Saint growls, glowering. "The Master ordered me to fuck M at our next ritual, so I'm going to. I'll probably fuck her in the ass. I don't want her pussy. If you do, it's all yours, but I'd get it sooner rather than later if you want to bother with that shit, because if the Master tells me to take it, I'll fuck that too. Not that it matters. It's probably as trash as her ass."

He drains his coffee, slams down the cup, swipes his coat, and storms out.

"That must have burned the fuck out of his throat," Angel says, snagging the coffee and pouring himself a cup.

"I can't believe Master chose him," I mutter. "She's supposed to be mine."

“I can’t believe he’s going to do it,” Angel says. “Though maybe once he stops denying he wants to fuck his sister and gets it over with, he’ll stop being such a dick up our asses.”

“Fuck him,” I snap. “He doesn’t get to have everything and then act like a little bitch about it. He’s been promising I can fuck her first since she showed up.”

“Maybe he needs some dick up his ass,” Angel says. “Know anyone who could do him that favor?”

“Fuck you too,” I say, and I shove my hot cocoa away and stomp out of the diner. I can’t stomach the thought of all that sugar when I’m so pissed my guts are churning with it, a toxic cauldron of anger and resentment and rage. Saint’s already gone when I reach the parking lot, and I’m way too pissed to be with my family right now. Good thing I know exactly where to find the person who deserves to be on the receiving end of my fury.

I shoot Dad a text saying I’ll meet them at midnight mass, and then I hop in the Hilux and head that way. Ten minutes later, I swing open her door.

She sits bolt upright, clutching her blankets to her chin, her eyes wide with terror. Home Alone is playing on her TV, and candles flicker around the room for light. Her room is warm and smells like toast and butter, an inviting scent that draws me through the door. I slam it behind me. Her dorm is empty. No one will hear it.

“Surprised to see me, lamb? ” I ask, tossing an envelope onto her bed.

“What’s that?” Mercy asks, staring at it like it might be a bomb.

“Someone left you a note,” I say. “Why don’t you read it and see what it says?”

“It’s not from you?” she asks, narrowing her eyes.

“Why would I leave you a note when I can come in your room and see you any time I want,” I say, twirling my keychain around my finger. “That’s so much more fun, isn’t it?”

“What are you doing here?” she asks, muting the TV and then gripping her blankets like a shield again.

“You think that’s going to protect you?” I stride over and yank off her blankets. She lets out a little shriek and grabs for them, but I wrench them from her hands and drop them to the floor.

“What are you trying to hide?” I demand. “Were you fingering your cunt to a Christmas movie?”

I spot a threadbare, raggedy brown bear on her bed and stare at it in disbelief. I snatch it up, remembering the way she dragged the dumb thing around like a security blanket when we were kids. She reaches for it, but I hold it away from her.

“Give it back,” she cries.

“Is this the bear Saint gave you when you were like, five?” I snort with laughter. “Fuck, M. You have it bad for your own brother. Were you rubbing this on your pussy and thinking about him wrecking it while you watched a fucking kid’s movie? You’re sick.”

“No,” she protests, holding out a hand. “Now give it back. It’s mine.”

“I don’t blame you, babe, this guy’s pretty sexy,” I say, fending her off with one hand and rubbing the bear against my dick with the other. “I’d fuck him. I might even think

about your brother while I did it.”

“Stop it,” she says, twisting to try to grab the bear again. “You’re defiling Raphael.”

That only makes me laugh harder. “ Oh, Saint, stuff me like this bear,” I mock, thrusting against the stuffed animal. “Do you rub his face in your cunt? Is that why he’s so matted? Maybe pretend he’s licking your pussy, rub his little nose on your clit when you cum?”

“You’re sick,” Mercy seethes, launching herself from the bed at me.

Her weight slams into me, and I stumble backwards. The thick tangle of blankets catches my feet, and I crash to the floor with her. I roll over, every muscle in my body tight, coiled to react. I grind my dick between her legs once, hard, and she cries out, her eyes flying wide.

“Heath,” she cries.

“Yeah, baby,” I say, grinning down at her with malicious triumph. “Say my name when my dick is owning you.”

“Please,” she gasps, struggling to free herself. “Let me go.”

“Now where’s the fun in that, little lamb?”

I grind again, this time nice and slow, so she can feel the pierced monstrosity that’s going to be ripping her open. Her pupils dilate, and I realize she wants this. She’s as hot for it as I am.

“You want to run, don’t you?” I ask. “Like you did on HAVOC night. That’s it, isn’t it? You wish I’d caught you that night, that I hadn’t spared you. You wish you’d

gotten fucked to within an inch of your life. Admit it, and I'll let you go."

"No," she manages, still scrambling under me.

I reach down, shoving her flannel nightgown up and thrusting my hand between her legs. Her underwear is soaked, and the warmth of the damp fabric makes my cock strain inside my pants. I hook my finger under the strip of cotton and tug it aside, then work my middle finger through her slickness to her opening.

"Wait," she cries, the sound so fucking hot on her hitching breath that I can't stop myself. I watch her face as I slowly sink a finger in, forcing it to the last knuckle inside her tight, wet heat. She gasps, her hands clamping onto my shoulders, nails digging in. I curl my finger, and her eyes roll back, her lids fluttering and her mouth dropping open in the silent torment of bliss. Enraptured by the sight, I slowly drag my finger out, then drive it deep again, so hard her body scoots up on the floor. Her back arches, and a helpless cry of pleasure falls from her lips, and I nearly cum in my pants from the sound alone.

I want to hear it again, so I repeat the motion, fucking her with my finger, curling it inside to hit the sweet spot that makes her heels dig in, her hips rock, her breath catch.

"Saint," she cries, lifting her hips for me.

I yank my hand back, and the next second, my palm smacks across her cheek, bringing her back to reality. I grip her chin, shaking her. "You think Saint wants to fuck your cunt after you've passed it around to all his friends?" I demand. "You think he'd make you feel that good? He's the one who would hurt you, Mercy. He's the one who would laugh at your tears and make you cry again just to get off on them."

I'm so pissed I can't see straight. I jump to my feet, grabbing her bear. I wrench it in both hands, and with a ripping sound that echoes through the room, it tears in two.

There's one second of brittle silence. I stare at my hands, the mangled body in one, a cottony hole where its head used to be. Mercy's cry of anguish breaks the stillness, and she snatches the head from my other hand. She scoots away, backing to the side of her bed, staring at me like I just murdered her cat.

"You want Saint?" I demand. "I can be Saint. All I have to do is think of ways to make you cry. How's this one?" I wrench open my belt, yank my dick out, and stuff it into the bear's neck.

Mercy lets out a mewling cry, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"You like that, huh?" I ask, jerking her bear's body over my dick. It's soft inside, like jerking off into a sock. I stumble over to her and fall forward, bracing my free hand on the edge of the bed.

She cowers down, clutching Raphael's head against her chest and staring up at me, her wide eyes magnified by tears. "Please," she whispers.

"I can't hear you," I sing out, jerking my dick in her face. If I pulled the bear off, I could shove it down her throat, listen to her gag.

"Please," she says, reaching for my hand, trying to rescue her stuffed animal. The moment her dainty little fingers wrap around my hand, though, the picture is too close to the one I want—Mercy on her knees, both hands wrapped around my dick while she chokes on it. Pressure explodes at the base of my spine, and the next second, it barrels along my shaft. I want to pull the bear off my dick and shoot my load all over Mercy's face, but Saint would never do that.

I commit to the bit and finish inside the cottony sheath of tattered fur instead.

"Hey, look at that, I am like your brother," I say, dragging the soggy body off my

dick and tossing it aside. “You don’t get me off, and I’d rather fuck anything than you.”

With a sob, Mercy dives after her bear while I pull gooey threads of cotton off my piercing before tucking myself away. I expect Mercy to curl up and cry about it, but she snatches the bear and shoots to her feet, taking off for the door.

Taken by surprise, I don’t react for a second, not until she’s out the door, leaving it swinging behind her.

Oh fuck. She wants me to chase her.

She must. She knows I will, that I’m into that. I barely take the time to buckle my belt before I take off after her.

By the time I step out of her room, she’s already disappearing down the stairs. I pound down the hall, adrenaline surging inside me like it does when I’m behind the wheel at the starting line; like I just did a line of Maverick’s finest, purest cocaine.

I hear the door to the next floor bang open when she exits the stairwell just as I reach it. Too bad. I would have liked to fuck her on the stairs. I reach the second floor and take off at a dead sprint. She’s fast—faster than I expected.

I’m faster.

In the first-floor hallway, I crash into her from behind, and she goes to the ground, falling flat on her belly. I hear the air whoosh from her lungs, rendering her speechless. She can’t even scream when I yank up her nightgown again, yank aside her panties, and bury two fingers deep, deep inside her. I groan at the tightness, the wetness. She’s soaked, her pussy drenching my fingers and gripping them so tight I swear I black out for a second.

I'm still punching my fingers into her sloppy cunt when I regain my wits, the sound echoing through the empty hallway with her choking pleas for mercy.

"I'll give you something to beg for," I growl, dragging my fingers out of the tight suck of her cunt. I reach into my boot and yank out my knife, flicking it open.

She shrieks in terror, but before she can even try to roll away, I flip her over and thrust the hilt deep inside her. She shrieks again, arching to get away. I drag the knife out and slam the handle back into her, stabbing her over and over and over in a frenzy, as if I'm fucking her with the blade. She's screaming and sobbing, and when I look down and see that she's drenched in blood, I think for a second I blacked out again and turned the knife around. Then I see that my hand is sliced wide open between my finger and thumb, so deep I can see white inside my skin where the tendons show. I didn't even feel it through the fury and soaring, rapturous joy.

I yank open my belt. Even though I just came, my cock is aching already, so hard it springs free the instant I unzip.

I grab it and shove it between her thighs, groaning when it slicks through my warm blood before notching at her entrance.

"Please," she sobs. "I'll do anything you want, Heath. Anything! Just please don't put it all the way in."

"Who are you saving it for?" I demand, my fingers wrapping around her throat, my gaze drilling into hers. "If I can't have you, then tell me who can."

"I don't—"

"Then it's me," I snap.

“No!” she cries, her words tumbling over each other as she rushes to speak before I can take the innocence she holds so dear. “Saint. If one of you is going to take my virginity, I choose Saint. Please, Heath. You can do it after, just let me choose this one thing. It’s all I’ll ask for. I promise. I’ll do anything you want, as long as you want. I’ll be your slave. Just let me have this one thing. I’m begging you.”

I’m blind with lust. Seeing her pussy painted in my blood is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen in my life. But even in that state, I hear what she’s offering.

“Just the tip,” I growl, and I grind my tip in a half inch, then force the thickest part of my crown past her entrance.

“Please!” She writhes in agony, popping her pussy off the pierced tip of my cock.

With a growl, I drag her back, gripping my cock just below the head and forcing it past the tightness of her opening again. She shrieks and bucks, but the slickness of my blood is the lube I need to enter her. With one sharp thrust, my tip is gripped in the snug, hot sheath of her entrance a third time. I pull out and shove back in, fucking her tight opening looser and looser with each shallow thrust, until I can pass into it easily. She’s sobbing and shaking under me, but her entrance sucks greedily at my tip each time it nestles into the squeeze of her bloody, virgin cunt.

My head swims with the image of driving myself to the hilt inside her, watching her writhe like a butterfly pinned to a cloth as she lies there, impaled and ruined, voiceless and breathless with agony.

I grip my cock tighter, barely holding on. My ragged breathing echoes through the hall like the agonized last breaths of a dying man. The Master didn’t give me permission. The thought of being cast from the Hellhounds for this transgression is the sliver of conscience I need to stop me from burying myself balls deep inside her and feeling her clench in waves along my length, crushing my shaft in the death-grip

of her resistance.

The image undoes me, though, and I jerk forward, my cock straining for another inch that I won't give. Gripped inside her battered, swollen, fevered skin, the head of my cock throbs, the vein thickening in my fist as my cum spills into her, filling her entrance. It oozes out around my shaft, white globules mixing with the blood as it drips from her delicate, stretched skin, over my fist, down my balls as they draw up, emptying another round inside her.

For a long, long moment, neither of us move. Her shaky breaths mingle with my labored ones, and I lean down, running the flat of my tongue up her cheek, gathering her tears and tasting them with the greedy delight that Angel gets from eating pussy.

"Am I... Am I still a virgin?" Mercy asks, sounding dazed.

"For about..." I push up from her and check my watch. "Half an hour longer."

"What?"

"You said you'd do anything I wanted if I didn't fuck you."

"But—"

I clamp a hand over her mouth. "Stop trying to get out of your promises. You didn't add exceptions. Now shut up and obey like a good little lamb."

I carry her to the church, finding the sanctuary unlocked and quiet, ready for the midnight service.

"No," she says, starting to struggle. I stride up the center aisle toward the apse, past the holy water, up the steps, and finally deposit her against the railing where we kneel

for communion. She pushes off it, but I clamp a hand on the back of her neck, forcing her forward over it.

“Either you hold up your end of the deal, or I fuck you right here and now,” I growl.

When she doesn’t answer, I reach for my belt, and she starts panting out little sobs of terror again. “Okay,” she says. “Please!”

“Good,” I say. “Now stop being such a fucking cock tease. Tonight, the whole church will walk in for midnight mass and find you ass up for all to see, pussy dripping cum and blood, and they’ll know what you are.”

She starts to protest, but I’ve heard enough.

“We had an agreement,” I snap, yanking off my tie and shoving it into her mouth. “You don’t get to back out now. Believe it or not, I’m an honorable man. I held up my end of the deal. Now you can show me you’re not a fucking liar who makes promises you never intend to keep just to get what you want, and you uphold yours. You said you’d do anything if I didn’t fuck you. You’re about to learn what a mistake that was.”

“Mmhn” she yells behind the gag, thrashing to free herself. I loop her necklace over her head to hold the gag in place.

“You didn’t choose me, so I didn’t fuck you,” I say, twisting the chain so it won’t come loose. “You should’ve let me. If you knew the kinds of monsters that are out there, the ones I’ve come face to face with, you’d be begging for a heathen like me to take your virginity. I’d be gentle compared to them. But don’t worry, lamb. If the big bad wolfie Saint wants you, he can eat you all up.”

She goes limp over the railing, her body shaking with sobs.

“I think you’ll find out soon enough that you saved your precious pussy for nothing,” I say as I slide my belt off and wrap it around her and the railing, buckling it around both. “I don’t know how many times I have to tell you. Your brother doesn’t want you, Mercy. He thinks you’re a pathetic little girl. You disgust him.”

She whimpers softly but doesn’t move.

“It’s far past time you learned a lesson about running your mouth,” I say, yanking her knees wide. “Words have consequences. Now you face the consequences of yours.”

As I speak, I use my knife to cut the nightgown from her body. She revives then, but I hold the knife to her throat to gain her obedience. I tear the ruined garment into strips with my teeth and quickly bind her hands to her knees, spreading them to the furthest rung they’ll reach in the railing. All the while, she makes mewling cries and more angry shouts of protest behind her gag. Even muffled, it’s the sweetest sound. I’m finally getting what I’ve wanted for four fucking years.

Revenge.

Her begging makes me hard all over again, especially knowing it’s fruitless, that she has given away her autonomy, and all her cries in the world will fall on deaf ears. She doesn’t seem to understand that the harder she fights, the sweeter my victory.

I find a sash to cover her eyes, and at last, I step back and survey my handiwork. It’s... A masterpiece. Her glistening cunt is clearly used, dripping with her arousal as well as my release, the skin rippled and stretched, bloody and beautiful. It’s ready to be used again and again, by every man in the congregation if he wants it. Still, it’s missing something.

I look down at the blood dripping off my hand onto the floor, and I have an idea. Stepping forward, I write two words in blood in big letters, one on each thigh.

“FREE” on one.

“USE” on the other.

Then I turn and walk out, leaving her blindfolded and gagged, bent over the railing with her wrecked pussy and bare ass exposed, naked and open, ready to be fucked raw by anyone who wants her. My revenge is complete. She won't show her face again on campus after this. She'll have to leave, and I'll never have to see her again.

Once, she put me in a situation where I didn't have a choice in what happened to me. Now she knows what it feels like. This time, she doesn't get to choose.

The Merciful

I'm alone. The church is quiet, so quiet that my every breath echoes in the cavernous silence. Heath left me. He hurt me, violated me, and yet, he didn't go further than I allowed. He stopped when I told him to stop, didn't take what I asked him to save. But then he left me here, like this. The chapel won't be empty for long. Midnight mass is tonight, the Christmas service. Families will be coming in to sing These Three Kings and Silent Night , to hear the story of Jesus's birth.

My friends will be coming. Aunt Lucy. My parents.

I can't do this.

It's not just people I know who will see me. It's strangers.

Children.

I thought I could be a match for my boys, that if I toughed it out, weathered their anger, let them take their revenge without complaint, that I could be one of them again. I let them beat me at every game, let them blackmail me to keep me close when really I wanted to be there, to be forgiven, to finally hear the truth from their lips. But I haven't found the truth. All I've found is my limit.

I can't do this. I'm not strong enough. They've finally found my breaking point.

I let Heath tie me here, but I can't let the whole church see me like this. Shame is one thing. Humiliation I can endure. But this...

I can't do it. Even if it means Heath never forgives me, I'll have to take that chance. I can't endure the punishment he chose. If I had known this was the only alternative, I would have let him take the last shred of my innocence, even if it wasn't in a bed on my wedding night. Even if it was on the floor in the hall like an animal. There are more important things than chastity after all. A sin worse than lust, shame greater than the one I feel for not being able to control my body's urges and desires.

I thought if I obeyed their orders, that would be my penance. I thought they could absolve me. But this is not absolution.

Heath said people would start to arrive in thirty minutes, which means I have about ten left. I fight down my rising panic and begin to test the knots, tensing and releasing my muscles, slowly loosening them. It feels like it's been an hour already. My hip bones are grinding against the wooden railing, throbbing with pain. My shoulders ache. My insides feel raw and burned where Heath stabbed the handle of his knife into me, and I'm shaking all over from cold in the drafty church.

Still, the knots are coming loose. I'm going to get away.

And then I hear a door creak open.

In the echoing cavern, I can't tell where it is. Where he is.

Was it the first parishioner come to worship?

A priest coming to prepare the mass?

Or is it Saint?

Did Heath go and get him for me, tell him I chose him, that I'm his to take. He won't do it here, not like this. He'll untie me, carry me home like he did before. He'll tuck

me into bed, kiss my forehead. He'll tell me he loves me, that I passed the test, that I was willing to do even this to prove myself. Maybe that was all they needed, to know how far I'll go, that I was ready to sacrifice it all.

I only get a moment's warning, a soft footstep in the nave, a slight echo like water dropping in a cave.

A blind flash of the most crippling hope burns through my humiliation. Maybe it's Father Salvatore, even one of the other priests, here to rescue me.

Then someone is behind me, so close I can feel the air moving against my wet legs, my wet center. I struggle to breathe, fear knifing into me in sharp, clean strikes. I scream behind the gag when a hand lands on my hip. My whole body goes tense, and I forget to work the knots slowly, yanking at them frantically instead.

I hear fabric rustling, and I curse Heath for the blindfold, curse him with all the hatred and vitriol and violence I've kept bottled up all this time. I yank harder, a high whining sound escaping me. I hear the unmistakable sound of someone spitting, feel a hot glob of wetness land in the most shameful place, running down my crack, settling into the burning entrance Heath tormented earlier.

And then I feel the hot steel of his cock notched where Heath's was. I scream behind the gag, trying to jerk my arms free. A big, gloved hand rests on one hip, as if he's trying to reassure me, and then the pressure starts. It sends a searing pain into me, and tears pour from my eyes, soaking the blindfold. A thumb and finger open me, trying to fit me around him. Heath's girth stretched me, but I'm also swollen, and I can't tell if this one is Heath again or someone even bigger.

He has to press so hard my thighs are bruised with the force against the railing. His thumb makes small, comforting strokes on my hip, as if he's reassuring me. At last, something gives, and he pushes inside my entrance, shallow like Heath was. Pain

ripples through my skin, but he's not done. He presses deeper, opening another inch. I'm so full I think I'm going to tear in two, but he keeps going, a steady, unbearable pressure that sinks him in another inch, then another. It feels like he's slowly grinding a foreign object into my body, one that's unnatural and far too large, like pushing a baby back in.

I feel the moment he meets some blockage inside me, and I think he's done, he's reached my depth. He draws back, giving a few slow, powerful thrusts, forcing past the tightness, breaching my depths. Agony crashes in waves over me with each slow drag back and each new, unapologetic intrusion. He's so deep I think he must have ruptured something inside me. I can feel him all the way up to my aching stomach, my expiring heart, my tear-clogged throat. He's not just inside me. He invaded me, and now he's taken every part of me.

A sob wracks my body, but to my horror, I feel the first soft throb of pleasure at being stretched to the limit on his next pass. Suddenly, I imagine the three boys walking in, finding some stranger taking what was theirs. I imagine Heath slicing his jugular, his blood spewing over me like a geyser, and the straining eases when he drives in slow and deep, forcing past what I think I can endure. I imagine the devastation in Saint's heart when he realized he threw me away and now this will never be his, and my own wetness eases the strokes along with the blood and what's left of Heath's release. I imagine Angel, my sweet, gentle Angel, going feral and letting slip the side of him I've never seen, the one he keeps for the gang. I hear his breathing deepen into a sigh, and pleasure mingles with the pain when he pushes in slow and deep, filling me so completely I want to scream I can't take it.

The hand that held me open is now wrapped around his shaft, and I feel it press solidly against my flesh each time he drives in so deep I start to panic that he's going to puncture my insides. I realize with a slash of crippling fear that there's more. He's holding back at least a few inches, wrapping his fist around it so it won't go deeper than my body allows. A shudder goes through me, and another sob chokes out of me

behind the gag.

He keeps going in the same slow, relentless, methodical strokes, claiming me anew with each thrust, taking the very depths of me over and over again, as if reminding me that I will always be his in this primal way, that I can never give this to anyone else. He's the first and only man who will take this from me, claim it, possess it. It's his. I can never get it back. He owns this, and he always will.

His hand on my hip drags me back an inch from the railing, and the new angle makes blackness swim in my vision. I choke out a strangled cry, then try to stop myself, scared I'll drown on my own tears from hanging upside down like this. I try to focus on thoughts instead of the devastation of my utter helplessness.

He increases his speed fractionally, pumping into me with measured strokes, taking me with ritualistic efficiency, as if I am the wine this evening, as if this is the breaking of the bread and not the breaking of a girl. I hang there, unable to stop him from taking the one thing I asked Heath to leave me. He claims it over and over, erasing any hope that I could forget who it belongs to.

Except I don't know.

I can't tell if it's Heath, if he came back knowing I won't know it's him. I've never done this before, can't judge how he'd feel inside me. I search for a sensation that might give away the piercing, but I'm stuffed so full that's all I feel. The stretch, the fullness, the agony and the sliver of pleasure snaking along it.

Heath knows I'm here. He's the only one.

But he could have told my brother or even Angel. Maybe it's one of them.

Maybe he told Saint I wanted him to do it, so he is, but he's too ashamed to let me

know it's my fantasy come true. The thought sends heat throbbing into my aching, mangled core, and suddenly, he's gliding in and out smoothly, quicker now. Is this what it feels like to be his, to receive his claim, both agony and ecstasy?

Or... What if it's not them? What if it's a stranger?

My body goes cold, and my thighs clench, though they can't move from their spread position. My core tightens in fear and resistance, and his breath hitches in the silence. His strokes become more erratic, quicker, more urgent. He moves easily in my slickness, slamming to my depths over and over, the only sound that of my muffled pleas and the wet, visceral slap of our bodies joining. It's obscene, carnal, and somehow ancient, like the sound of animals feasting on their kill.

I'm reminded of the noises I heard in the tunnel on HAVOC night, and the full knowledge of what they were doing right under me makes me feel dirty in a new way. Because I knew what they were doing before, but now I truly know. New slickness coats the shaft stretching my tortured flesh when I realize it could have been me that night.

Instead, it's another stranger, like it would have been then. Except then, I would have known it was one of the Hellhounds. Now, it could be anyone in town who goes to midnight mass. What if it's the person who keeps leaving messages on my door, who I've seen dart behind a bush or a building when I turn. He's been following me. Is this what he's been waiting for?

And who is he?

And when is it over?

He takes me in totality, in silence, fucking into the depths of my bound body. He's a god receiving his sacrifice, accepting it with gratitude, devouring and decimating it,

body and soul. Suddenly it feels like an unbearable indignity that I don't even know who he is, that he's taken this from me and will carry that knowledge forever, while I will forever remain naïve, seeking the answer like I do the killer.

Is it the killer?

My skin crawls, and I start to struggle again. He's wearing gloves. Is that to keep his DNA off me? I try to feel if he's wearing a condom, but I don't know how to tell, having no basis for comparison. A shiver wracks my body, and I sob aloud behind the gag. I remember the news, the articles that mentioned semen in the clothes they found. Was it really Saint's, like he said, or was it the killer's? Is this what happened to her, the final indignity before her death? Is this history repeating, or a punishment for not leaving her buried in the past? Saint told me people in powerful positions wouldn't want me to find the truth. That they would know I was looking.

Suddenly, I remember that Sincero boy in here alone, silent.

I know who you are.

Is that why he's silent while he takes me? How much would he love the knowledge that he's fucked Saint Soules's sister? How much will he gloat? Maybe he'll keep going until they walk in, just to see their faces.

In the silence, I can hear him breathing, quick and shallow, as his thrusts grow more urgent. They hit my center, fill it, split it in two all over again, before it can recover from the last stroke. He pumps into me harder, crushing me against the railing, each thrust brutally deep and seared into my brain like a brand. Tears spurt from my eyes again when he grinds in a final time, and somehow, impossibly, he pulses thicker, deeper. I shriek into the gag, tears streaming into the blindfold, my whole body shaking with unending, unendurable pain. I feel his release like a blood sacrifice, hot and messy and deep as a death blow.

He didn't wear a condom. Instead of relief that I'll have evidence, all I can think is that he's inside me, so deep inside me I'll never be able to get him out with a thousand showers. He'll be there forever, lodged too far for anything to expel. Not even an exorcism will remove what he's done to me, get rid of his claim on me, his flesh buried in my flesh, our bodies joining in this carnal way that can't be reversed.

And just when I think it can't get any worse, I hear a door open somewhere. The man pulls out, and I hear quick footsteps, and the door beside the altar clicks shut, and he's gone. I wait for the shame to overtake me, the humiliation that someone will see me this way, the fear of what comes next.

But it doesn't come.

My body is still filled with his heat, but I'm cold all over. I'm so bone tired I think I could sleep and never wake, and yet, my mind is sharp and alert. My heart is racing, and yet, I am calm, still. Fear seems far away now. There's nothing anyone can do to me now that will hurt, that will heal. The whole congregation could file in and take me like communion, and I would remain untouched.

I'm aware of the contradiction, and a sense of quiet settles over me, a sense of awe.

I had been waiting for that, dreading it, craving it, for six years. Now it's done. It's over. I have lost the thing I thought I wanted so much, that I've sacrificed so much to protect, and I realize it was never mine at all. It was a burden someone else placed on me before I understood, something they told me was a blessing. It wasn't a blessing. It was a curse. I never asked for it, never wanted it. And now, I never have to carry it again.

It doesn't matter who was here, who was inside me. His identity doesn't matter. He will always be my savior.

What he spilled inside me wasn't a killing blow. It wasn't a deadly poison.

It was a baptism.

His release also released me. I still feel the pain in my body, but inside my mind, my soul is quiet.

For the first time in six years, maybe in my whole life, I feel no shame.

Finally, I have been absolved.

Thank you for reading Of Angels & Absolution !

This chapter is a one-off that doesn't affect the plot, so it's optional and just for fun. It takes place a few weeks before Christmas.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:14 am

“This is a big-ass funeral,” Heath says as he hops down from his seat and surveys the cars parked along the narrow, curving, residential street as far as we can see. “You sure you’re ready to give a eulogy in front of all these people?”

“They asked for me,” I point out, closing the passenger door.

“I bet they did,” he says, cracking a grin. “I wonder whose idea that was.”

“That’s irrelevant,” I say, straightening my collar in the reflection in the window.

“I still think it’s funny that you don’t drive,” he says, leaning an elbow on the hood of his truck and watching me.

“I’m from New York,” I say, the answer coming automatically after years of practice, slipping as effortlessly as the truth from my lips. It’s not a lie, but it’s not the truth either.

May I be forgiven this sin of deception.

I check my sleeves, making sure they’re even.

“You nervous about speaking in front of the rich and famous?” Heath asks.

To him, it must look like I’m fussing, not as if I’m remembering the muffled thud of a body folding over a car’s hood.

Thou shalt not kill.

“I wouldn’t call anyone in this town famous,” I comment as we start for the expansive, manicured back lawn of the lavish Dolce home.

“I heard the governor is going to be here,” Heath says.

We arrive at the back lawn where they’re holding the memorial service. The Dolces have wide connections, and there are people from all areas that the family patriarch influenced, from the local government and his businesses to his personal friends and the Church.

The Finnegan boy veers over to greet us, saying hello to me first.

I grip his hand firmly, searching his distracted face. “How are you holding up?”

“I get by with a little help from my friends,” he says, holding up the flask that dangles from his other hand.

“Isn’t it a little early to be getting wasted?” Heath asks.

Colin turns to my companion. “It’s never too early to get drunk at a funeral,” he says with a smile that never touches his eyes. “How’s my little cuz?”

Heath hesitates, but then he slaps his hand into Colin’s and clasps it when the younger boy offers. “I think you got that backwards,” he says with a nod, though his gaze remains troubled.

We make our way to the front. People are still milling, but most of the chairs are full. Royal Dolce comes up to introduce me to his partner, a girl who looks like nothing but trouble. Then again, most kids their age are. It seems an incongruous match, but it makes sense somehow. I’ve known Royal since he started attending services at Thorncrown. Over the years, I’ve watched him grow angry, bitter, and despondent, but lately, I’ve watched him change. He’s matured into someone calmer, someone

who might show love to a girl like the one with whom he's settling into his seat.

"Hey, Colin," says Duke Dolce, striding over to the boys still standing close by. "I need to talk to you."

"So talk," Colin says, taking a swig from his flask.

Duke glances at Heath and back with a frown. "Not here."

Colin throws his arm around Heath. "Anything you got to say to me, you can say in front of my cousin."

I watch them from the corner of my eye, since I wasn't aware that Heath was close with any of the distant relatives he has around town. He has enough first cousins that I forget he's part of the troubled Finnegan family too. I like to know where all my congregants reside in the web of Faulkner families that's woven through Thorncrown, but I keep a special eye on the boys under my watch.

"I didn't mean him," Duke mutters, and I just catch the meaningful glance he directs my way as I'm shaking hands with another mourner.

"You think he cares?" Colin asks, chortling with laughter. "He doesn't give a fuck. He's not one of the good guys. There are no good guys. We're all fucked."

Duke scowls. "Yeah, but it's about... Baron leaving town. You saw him last."

"I'll let you in on a little secret," Colin says, not bothering to lower his voice. "Even if you fold your hands all prim and proper like a little bitch and say your prayers every night before bed, God doesn't pick you. He can't hear you. He's not on your side because He doesn't exist."

"You don't know that," Duke says.

“Probably not the time, Colin,” Heath warns.

“You know it’s true,” Colin says. “You don’t believe in Him either. I know all about my little heathen cousin. But guess what? It doesn’t matter. In the end, we all die alone.”

“You’re drunk,” Heath says. “Let’s go sit down.”

“Who’s that kid?” Colin says, swinging his flask toward a skinny little girl skipping along the perimeter of the lawn.

“Don’t even look at her,” Duke growls.

“I was just asking,” Colin protests. “Why, you saving her for later?”

Duke lunges for him, and I just have time to step in and intervene before it comes to blows.

“Take him to sit down,” I order Heath, holding Duke off with a firm hand.

“Are you okay?” I ask him, turning to grip his shoulders so he can’t indulge in the violence he obviously craves.

“I don’t blame you,” Colin calls over his shoulder, laughing and goading Duke as Heath drags him away. “I got a few marked for when they’re off the clock too.”

I squeeze Duke’s shoulders. “How are you holding up?”

He strains to follow the scent of chaos for a moment, then relents and shifts his focus to me. “Fine,” he says, shrugging me off. “What’s a funeral without a drunk asshole making a fool of himself?”

I nod to the vacant seat in the front row, between his brother and sister, each with their respective partners. Duke's lone chair sits empty, without a companion seat for a partner or even his twin.

"Come talk to me after the service," I murmur to him. "Or any time."

"Sure, Father," he says, then reluctantly heads for the chair. Every seat is full, and the remaining townsfolk who came to pay their respects have congregated around those seated.

"Yo, Dante," says a voice off to my left. I turn to see the misfit Delacroix boy loping across the lawn, the last to join.

Oblivious to the crowd and the solemnity of the moment, he offers a big smile and strides up to shake my hand. "I've been meaning to talk to you," he says. "I quit my job—again, I know—but I wanted to ask about yours."

"About the priesthood?" I ask, drawing back in surprise.

"Yeah, yeah," he says. "I thought maybe I'd join."

"Can this wait?" I ask, arching a brow and cutting my gaze toward the crowd.

"Oh, sure," he says, seeming to notice for the first time that we have an audience. "For sure. Thanks, Daddy Dante." He drops a wink before ducking back to join those standing around.

Having diffused the moment's tensions, I step up to deliver the eulogy. Afterwards, the family, friends, and associates of the dearly departed come up to mourn his death and speak on his life. The wake is held at the family home, but the burial will be back in New York. I try not to think about that as I sit listening to the town's powerful elite pay their respects. I never go back there, not even in my mind.

When it's over, the attendees mill around, picking at the food, drinking, networking. That never stops in these circles, not even for death. They won't be so crass as to say it aloud, but already someone is laying the groundwork to fill the void left by his absence. Probably several people jockeying for position, vying for the empty spot he left at the table.

Across the lawn, I spot a lone figure, a lost lamb, her red hair swept up into a severe knot, her pale skin in stark contrast with the simple black dress she wears. Unlike her school uniform, she can't adjust this one in an unflattering manner or wear socks pulled to her knees. Without thought or intention, my feet carry me in her direction. Before I reach her, though, she's edged her way over to where Royal Dolce is talking to someone at the end of a long table laden with hors d'oeuvres.

"Hello, Mercy," I say, nodding to her when she pulls up short and looks around anxiously.

"Father," she says, relaxing visibly. "That was a lovely service."

"Thank you," I say. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. You're looking lovely today."

"Oh," she says, letting out a little self-conscious laugh and tugging at the hem of her dress. "I don't have much that's suitable for a funeral."

"I'd say you did very well," I say, smiling down at her and popping a canape into my mouth. She gulps, watching me chew. Her dress is conservative, with a modest neckline and a cut that stops just above her knees, but it hints at her womanly figure better than her usual, ill-fitting attire. It strikes me that her hiding might be intentional, and I make a note to talk to her about it at a more appropriate time, to coax her to cherish the body God gave her in all its glory. The thought has my cock stirring, and I turn my attention back to the food to distract myself.

Just then, the person talking to Royal walks away, and Mercy steps in. "I'm sorry for

your loss,” she says.

“Thank you,” he says, smiling an empty, automatic smile at her, the one he’s giving to every person finding him to offer condolences. “Thanks for coming, Mercy.”

As if drawn by the threat of another man in her orbit, Saint appears at her elbow.

“What are you doing?” he demands.

She shrinks, and I frown at him, but he doesn’t notice my presence.

“Hi, Saint,” Royal says, holding out a hand like a robot. “Thanks for coming.”

“Yeah, sure,” Saint mutters, barely glancing at him, not offering so much as a word of sympathy before pulling Mercy past me, letting another guest step in to speak with Royal.

“You’re being rude,” Mercy protests.

“I thought I told you not to talk to that guy.”

“You told me not to talk to any guy,” she points out.

“So you do remember,” he says. “And you’re just disobeying to get attention.”

“It’s a funeral.”

“Well, you’ve got it,” he says. “You have my attention. What do you want now? Punishment?”

“No,” she protests. “I was just offering sympathy.”

“I’m sure he’ll get plenty of sympathy play without scraping the bottom of the barrel to find you.”

“Saint,” I warn, my voice a low rumble.

Without answering, he turns and stalks off. Mercy hurries after him, hanging her head in shame.

“That looks like it went well,” Royal says, apparently having overheard some of the conversation between accepting condolences.

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose under my glasses.

Angel steps up to shake Royal’s hand. “Sorry for your loss, man,” he says. “Gotta be a tough one.”

“Thank you, Angel,” Royal says, going instantly back into business mode. “And thanks for coming.”

“Hey, I heard your brother can get things done online,” Angel says, craning his neck. “He around here?”

Royal scowls. “No.”

“Really?” Angel asks, drawing back. “Oh, damn. That’s harsh. Know when he’ll be back?”

“Never, if he’s as smart as people say,” says a female voice on my other side.

I turn to see a thin blonde girl who doesn’t attend Thorncrown, picking up a canape.

Royal scoffs. “You think Baron’s afraid of you?”

“He should be,” she says lightly, popping the food into her mouth.

“He doesn’t live here anymore,” Royal says coolly, turning back to Angel. “I don’t know when he’ll be back. If you need anything urgent, I recommend Nathaniel Swift.”

Angel’s brows rise. “You’re rec’ing your brother’s competition?”

“That’s not really how hackers work,” Royal says, the corner of his mouth rising the slightest bit.

“Yeah, okay,” Angel says with a sigh. “My dad says he’s shady, but my cousin gets shit from him. I guess I’ll have to ask for a hookup.”

“If you don’t want to use him, your dad’s probably the next best option,” Royal says.

Angel shakes his head. “Nah, not this time. Thanks, though.”

Royal greets someone else, and Angel turns and sees me. His face cracks into a big grin, and he throws an arm over my shoulder. “Hey, Father S,” he says. “Want to introduce me to one of your devout followers?”

“Not my followers,” I correct. “A follower of Christ.”

“Sure, Pops, whatever you say,” Angel says easily. “But I’d bet at least half the chicks at Thorncrown are there for you more than God.”

“Nathaniel is a man.”

“So, even a priest isn’t above eavesdropping,” Angel says, looking delighted. “And don’t worry, Father. I’m sure a few of the guys are there for you too.”

“Nathaniel wasn’t a member of the church until he started school there,” I say. “I’m not sure he’s a devout follower of anything except his own path.”

“Good to know,” Angel says. “So, you gonna hook me up or not?”

“I suppose I could,” I say, nodding to where the younger boy is hovering at the periphery of the crowd, alone as usual. “He’s just over there.”

“I know who he is,” Angel says. “I’ve seen him around plenty. Just never talked to the kid except in passing. Kind of a scrawny looking thing, isn’t he?”

I shrug, and Angel removes his arm from my shoulder to grab a cocktail shrimp and pop it into his mouth, looking quite smug. Aside from Royal Dolce, practically everyone at the party is ‘scrawny’ compared to Angel—or at least smaller than he is.

“It would be wise not to underestimate him,” I say, then add, “Or anyone else, for that matter,” when my gaze finds the black-clad figure of Mercy in the crowd again. She hovers at the periphery, alone like Nate, but on the far side of the lawn.

My lamb.

I fight the urge to go to her, to introduce her to someone, so she’s no longer alone. Or to scoop her into my arms and carry her away from everyone, keep her for myself.

That is what would be unwise.

To be alone with her. To underestimate the effect she has on me. To stray from my path for a single taste of forbidden fruit.

I have gone hungry for so long.

Would one small taste be such a bad thing?