



# Painter's Obsession, Volume II

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**Category:** Horror

**Description:** MM EROTIC HORROR

Some stories aren't just painted in blood—they're carved into flesh, leaving nothing but ruin in their wake.

I survived his world, but not without changing me. Not without sinking me with him into the void. Turns out, sometimes, in order to set something free, you have to destroy it.

The game isn't over. The lessons aren't finished. And the deeper I go, the harder it is to tell where he ends and I begin.

THIS IS NOT A ROMANCE. THIS IS STOCKHOLM TOXIC WITH NO ABSOLUTELY NO HAPPY ENDING.. THIS IS MORE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EROTIC HORROR.

LEVEL VOID III

**Total Pages (Source):** 28

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:16 pm*

Ren

Weeks Later....

“Do you love me?” she whispers again. I bite back the urge to snap at her. It never ends well. It’s better to give her what she wants. To pretend. To not feel. I am nothing but a vessel for her to mold. There’s no room for the real me to exist. Not that I would even know who or what I am. But if I had to define myself, I would be a void.

Her hand moves over my hip bone. Her warm, naked body flushes against mine as she praises me for being so good—such a good boy. Her breath fans the side of my face. She tells me she loves me. Warm, salty tears slip down my cheek before her lips press against mine again. My mind goes blank, but my body obeys—just as she programmed it to.

“Do you love me, Ren?”

Again, the same question. Her guilt gnawing at her... for her twisted need. But love doesn’t exist here.

“Tell me you love me,” she pleads, turning me onto my back. Within moments, she’s on me, straddling my cock. I look up at her—short, black, silky hair falling around us as she leans closer, her nose brushing against mine—breathing me in.

“Tell me you love me.”

“I—“ The lie sticks in my throat as her hips begin to roll. Soft, slow movements.

“Please, sweet boy.”

Tears fall onto my chest, her nails digging into my skin, cutting through flesh.

“Do you love me?” she asks, running her soft hands down my chest. My body shivers from the touch. My skin is clammy, my hands are sweaty, my stomach is twisting ready to empty, just like I feel inside. Dead. Devoid of life.

My hands grip her hips absentminded, instinctive chasing the high, the ecstasy, the only feeling I’ve ever known. I move with her slowly... closing my eyes as she moves with more desperation... more need.

Then—her skin shifts under my touch. Soft curves turn solid. Smooth flesh becomes rough. Soft moans dissolve into quiet grunts. The scent of jasmine and honey is replaced by cannabis and leather.

I keep my eyes closed as my fingers trail up his broad back... over the scars, the shifting muscles beneath his skin.

“Do you love me?” His voice is deep, hoarse, almost tender as his inked hand wraps around my neck. The grip is tight. Unyielding. Holding me in place.

“Do you love me?” he asks again, his tone sharpening, demanding an answer.

But I can’t speak.

My throat is locked. My breath won’t come. The question rings in my ears, an empty echo in my skull. Do I love him? I smile, despite the hand threatening to steal my very breath.

Love doesn’t exist here.

Empty. Void.

His grip tightens. His nose presses against mine. His breath heavy, suffocating. His voice morphs, blending into hers—soft yet cruel, sweet yet suffocating.

“DO YOU LOVE ME?” their voices demand. Two bodies. One voice. One need.

Fingers tighten around my throat. My head grows fuzzy. My lungs burn. My body trembles.

I open my eyes—but I don’t see him. His face is blurry, fading, dissolving into something softer. Something familiar. A gentler body. A crueler love.

I climax.

I blink, breathless, shaking. I look again—

She’s there.

My mother.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:16 pm*

### Chapter One

Ren

My eyes blink open, the morning light filtering through the room. My mouth is dry—burning for water. I look around frantically, trying to piece together what the hell happened. The last thing I remember is watching my Thorn walk away with his sister in his arms. Leaving me. Despite everything.

Despite pulling him into my darkness. Despite welcoming him. I try to move, but pain crushes me back down. My chest screams. The steady beeping of the monitor fills my ears. The IV line tugs at my arm, tethering me here. Then it hits me.

Kevin .

I'm alive—thanks to him. I guess.

But Kevin doesn't do things out of the kindness of his heart. His timing is never coincidental. I know that much. But first, I need to get better. Then, I'll figure out what his game is. A soft voice from the TV catches my attention. The news. And that's when I see him.

Byron.

Byron and his sister walk hand in hand out of the courthouse. In the corner of the screen, a photo of me—a smirking ghost in black and white. His prison fade is now gone, and his hair is slightly longer, forming small waves of curls, which makes me

question—how long has it been?

I look down at the IV still hooked into my arm just as Byron says my name on the screen.

“Ren Sato tried to take my life... my freedom. But I’m here for justice.” He says it while looking straight into the camera, jaw clenched, and my attention zeroes in on him—the black dress-down shirt hugging his muscular frame. Using my fingers, I draw circles in the air around my creation .

My Thorn and his Rose.

I could laugh at the irony of all this, but my situation isn’t funny. I should pick up and leave. But when his eyes lock onto mine, just for a moment, I feel like he’s here with me. My gaze drops to the lines on his face, the sharp angles of his jaw, and the furrow in his brows. He takes a deep breath, his chest expanding beneath the fitted shirt.

I notice the way his sister looks at him—her eyes full of admiration and concern. She whispers something in his ear, and he nods slightly; his eyes never leaving mine. The camera zooms in on his face, and I feel like he’s speaking directly to me.

“I’m here to make sure the truth is known. And if he is out there, he won’t escape. I will make sure of it.”

A slow smirk spreads across my face as I lean back into the bed, my eyes glued to the screen.

“Ren Sato, a well-known and respected lawyer, turned out to be the infamous Laguna Bay Painter. Turns out monsters don’t only exist in movies.”

The second anchor chimes in.

“No, they’re your neighbors, and apparently, your lawyers, too.” His voice drips with sarcasm. Dickhead. I shift, trying to prop myself up in this shitty, makeshift hospital bed. It takes a few tries, but I finally manage. The pain in my body is sharp and deep—a reminder that I shouldn’t be breathing—yet here I am. , My eyes never leave the screen as I watch Byron begin to speak again, but this time his voice breaks—just a little. “I want to thank everyone who has shown support for us.” Clearing his throat, the camera zooms in and we are once again staring at one another. “And if Ren Sato is alive, I will stop at nothing to find him... to make him pay for what he did to Laguna Bay...” he pauses, jaw clenching as if he was in pain, but I know that look and that’s shame. “...and for what he did to me.”

Does he regret it? Leaving me. Call me delusional, but this sounds like an invitation to me. I wonder if any part of him wishes he were back in that studio with me? Bent. Bleeding. Perfect.

Gabriela speaks next, answering questions. Her voice is firm, controlled, almost rehearsed. She calls me charming, conniving, a master manipulator. The interview is short. Dramatic if you ask me. And then I learn something new. To the world, I’m dead.

My body was never found. But with the injury I sustained, I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t be anything. The official story? If I did escape, I didn’t make it far. I must have stumbled into the body of water near my property. Drowned. Gone. A monster swallowed by the water. How poetic.

So that’s it then. I’m a ghost now.

And no one hunts for the dead.

I lean my head on the headboard, the wood cool against my scalp, grounding me in the present. I hear heavy footsteps approaching, followed by a low, familiar whistle

from the other side of the door. Kevin.

“Ahh, you are finally awake?” Kevin chimes, his voice laced with something between amusement and relief. He opens the door, and I don’t have to ask—I see the camera above the door, its unblinking eye trained on me. Of course. He’s been watching.

“I guess I am.” My voice is rough, my throat dry. I need water, but I won’t ask. Won’t give him that satisfaction.

“Good, I was worried for a moment. Thought you were a goner. Lucky for you, I’m a universal donor.” He drops into the chair in the corner, legs spread wide like he’s making himself at home. His eyes flick to the TV, where my face fills the screen.

Kevin shakes his head. “I can’t believe it. I mean, I suspected it, but fuck.”

“You suspected?” I ask, tilting my head. Did I slip? Did I leave crumbs? I didn’t think I was that obvious, but I guess I was wrong if even Kevin could connect the dots. If Kevin saw it, Byron must have too.

“Dude, I was cleaning up an infected dick,” he deadpans, crossing his arms over his chest while disgust flickers across his face.

“He’s suing your estate. Tell me you’ve got a way out of this shit. I mean, what I did for you wasn’t cheap.”

There it is—the real reason. Money.

I exhale slowly, keeping my face blank. He doesn’t need to know how prepared I am. Thankfully, I always think ahead. I have money outside the country—buried in cash, crypto hidden under false companies. Enough to disappear if I need to.



But I won't tell Kevin that. Not yet. Not while I'm weak. Not when my masterpiece isn't finished yet.

I need to have some form of worth. If I don't, I'm disposable, and no one keeps dead weight around. My eyes remain on Kevin as he looks at me for an answer, and I understand now how he figured me out. He isn't quite like me—but in some ways, he's worse. An opportunist. Sure, you could argue that I'm no better, but I own what I am. I'm a monster in my category, and that's a rat. Opportunist, but I would rather not die. Not after being granted the opportunity to live.

“Did you hear me?” His voice cuts through my thoughts, sharp and impatient.

I dip my chin. “I did. I have enough to help pay for your troubles.”

That's all I say, but it's enough. Kevin uncrosses his arms, kicks his feet out, and relaxes into the chair.

“He's all over the news like some national hero. ”

Mmm. Of course, he is. My Thorn, basking in the light while I drown in the dark, but it's okay, I can swim and adapt. Could he do the same? Or would he drown?

“How long was I under?”

Kevin clears his throat. “It's been weeks, Ren. You were in bad shape. That wasn't me exaggerating. At one point, I thought I'd have to put you out of your misery.”

He should have.

Later, he'd realize the consequences of his mistake. I've been asleep for weeks while my Thorn has been living and thriving—without me.

Why do I care? I don't know.

Call it possessiveness. Call it obsession. It doesn't matter.

He's mine.

And I'll make sure he never forgets that.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:16 pm*

### Chapter Two

#### Byron

I drive down the street, the same road I've come to learn... to memorize. The gravel crunches beneath the truck's tires as I pull into the driveway. Nothing is pristine... clean like him. Ren's pristine and elegant home has been vandalized more times than I can count. It's like a circus, especially during those first couple of weeks after the incident. It was always packed with reporters, people wanting to get famous for visiting the home of the Laguna Bay Painter. But me... I was here for very different reasons—reasons I don't even understand myself. Not even the yellow tape, the warnings from the state... not even the fear of him being out there kept me away.

Grabbing the bag with the tacos and beer, I open the door of the truck and step out into the night. Tonight was rough—emotionally and mentally. The meetings should be helping... Being with Johnathan should be helping... My sister being safe and happy in Montana should be helping.

So why do I feel so empty?

Why do I feel like I left something in this fucking studio... with Ren. Something I can't get back... and the worst part is I don't even know what it is that I'm missing. I'm not sure what I need or what I'm looking for, but for some reason, here is where I don't feel like some kind of prop. It's a cold, rainy night. Tonight, I was supposed to be on a date with Johnathan. He's done nothing but give... and all while I have shit to give back. I take a lot—like Ren. Grabbing the beer from the bag and opening it before taking a swig, I wish I could mean my words and wasn't a fraud... but here we

are .

My phone dings somewhere in the truck, but I don't bother to check it. Closing the truck door, I make my way up the driveway and toward the back. I don't feel scared now. I would be lying if I said I didn't before either, but now it's become routine. At first, I expected to find him here... to make him pay... but now I just come here for silence. Somewhere to sit with my guilt.

As usual, the door to the studio is wide open. Garbage litters the outside, and just like the inside of the house, everything is broken, littered, and none of his artwork remains. Everything was taken for evidence, and anything that wasn't was destroyed by the people in town.

What they did find... was my foreskin. I chuckle at the thought as I step into the studio. The fucking asshole kept my foreskin in a fucking jar. I still don't know how to feel about it, or about the piercing in my gooch which I left untouched as a reminder that I survived.

And then there's the painting—done in blood—of my fucking face...

I don't know if I should feel grateful that his obsession saved not only my life but Gabby's too. But I don't, which is another reason I come here—to remind myself of the ones who didn't make it out. No matter how badly people destroy this space—urinate, defecate—I can still smell the blood... the bleach.

I still picture him naked. I picture him, bat in hand, as he hits Theresito over and over... I chug down some more of the beer. I picture Theresito dead, laying on the ground, her head caved in. I think of her... decapitated and posed her body as some kind of twisted, headless ballerina.

The bag of tacos falls from my hand and my appetite is gone, as I stare at the spot

where I found Theresita that night. Tears blur my vision, but I look up, taking a deep breath in and sucking it up. Taking a seat on the floor, I stare at the spot, and if I close my eyes, I can hear the wet sounds that came with every connected hit.

When I close my eyes, I can see her. Tears run slowly down my cheek as I think of my friend. She didn't deserve any of it. I did... but she didn't.

"I'm sorry," I sob into the darkness. Sobs wreck my body, and I chug the remainder of the beer and chuck it at the wall. The silver of the chain calls me, luring me into the past. Begging to be around my neck. And I get on my hands and knees.

Slowly, I crawl to my spot in the studio, grabbing the cool metal links and taking a deep breath in. I hold it for a moment, then I tie it around my throat. A noose around my throat.

And I sob.

Not because I miss him... I miss me. I miss who I was before Prince Charming came into our lives. Before he infected me with his sickness.

I was ruined before... but now I don't even know who I am. I mean, I'm trying. But even looking at my dick is a constant reminder. Fuck, I can't even let anyone touch me. All of it just brings me back here. Back to the monster who created me. And the worst part is, that deep down... I enjoyed it.

Even though it destroyed me in the process... I was me. No mask. No pretending. Just an unfiltered need that I learned to tuck away at a young age.

Yet I can't give myself to Johnathan. I try. But that's all it is—me just trying. There's no romance, no spark, despite him being a lifeline, being nothing but patient and a friend. I'm an illusion, someone who will lead him astray. In a way, I'm happy I'm

leaving. He's gone through enough without me adding more baggage.

But I need to get better for Gabriela's sake, I have to keep pushing. I have to keep up with the meetings. I sob harder, tightening the chain around my neck because I'm a fraud, an illusion, and because I still see him.

From the corner of my eyes—I see him in my meetings, in my dreams... It's an obsession.

Everywhere. I feel him.

It's like he's playing with me...

So why isn't he finishing what he started?

That way I can end the game... end the haunt. So I can finally live... I can finally breathe.

I want to be happy. I want to mean the words I say during my meetings. In days, I'll be going to Montana, and this place will be nothing but a memory...

But I still remain here .

The chains tighten around my neck painfully, and as my vision blurs, I see Ren, naked, walking around the studio, bat in hand. The blood clings to him like a second skin. I don't dare to look down at the blood that soaks my knees or the dead body of my friend. Holding the chain, I fight the urge to breathe. The fight response burns like a rampage in my brain, and I angrily release the chains as I choke in a breath, falling to my hands.

I vomit the beer onto the ground.

“FUCK YOU, REN SATO!” I scream, as I feel my dick grow between my legs...

And like the monster I’ve become, I give in to my twisted needs. Shame and need burn through me as I pull out my throbbing cock and fuck my hand with roughness. Hard and demanding, I move up my shaft with the memories of Ren...

Our last encounter has lived in my head. I can’t escape his lips... his darkness... his sickness. Heat pools in my stomach, and I can’t breathe. My heart beats hard in my chest, each beat matching the intensity of my movements. From the corner of my eyes, I can see Theresita. The shame and pain in her eyes causes mine to blur. Throwing my head back, I focus back on the memory that continues to haunt me.

Ren’s lips on mine... the heat of his skin... the red ink on his back.

Me on my knees for him as he destroyed me.

My pain transforms into something entirely different. A moan mixed with soft sobs escapes my lips as I feel the buildup—the great high—before I’m cumming on my hand as my knees buckle, and I collapse on the floor once again.

And he is still watching... smiling while I’m wanting more... and I hate myself for it. A secret; no, a shame that I’ll take to the grave.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:16 pm*

### Chapter Three

Ren

My hands tighten around the steering wheel as I watch him step into the building. It's been weeks since we have been face to face, , but little does he know, I've been watching—always watching. I'm planning our reunion while he continues to pretend to pick up the pieces, but I see the real him. I see the mask.... And the brokenness behind it and he looks just as mesmerizing—if not more. To have survived me... I chuckle, true to his fucking name—a thorn in my ass.

If only he knew the danger that lurks while he lives out his pitiful life thinking he's moved on... healed. I guess it's time to help him remember, to sprinkle... no, pour salt on that wound, and make it clear that there's no life for him outside of me.

Nothing.

"I hope you've missed me," I mutter, watching the man who has been hanging around Byron walk into the building where he holds his group therapies—for men who are coming out or are sexual abuse survivors. It's become my favorite pastime, watching him. Causing the small noise in the background of his life, just enough to make him uneasy. To make him feel my presence. But watching is no longer cutting it. I ache to create, and nothing seems to inspire me as much as he has. But soon, we will both have our reunion.

It's kinda admirable how my Thorn has really tried to continue on with his life, thinking I was just a bump in the road, an obstacle he crossed over. But what he



doesn't know is that this free time is borrowed—he's been on borrowed time from the moment we met. But soon, he will realize it .

Both he and Gabriela think they've won. That they've outsmarted me. That they'll just take my money and run off to Montana.

But our story isn't done yet. Happy endings don't exist for monsters. And I, for one, intend to finish what I started.

I tap my finger on the steering wheel while listening to Karma Police by Radiohead. As much as I want to go inside, to watch what he's up to, to hear his testimony and the lies he feeds everyone in there... I can't. I need to be out here. Watching. Waiting.

Today is the day of reckoning.

While I healed, Kevin kept tabs on them. Of course, I had to slowly feed him cash—and I still do—at least until he proves to be no longer useful. But for now, he's been quite resourceful. I guess I wouldn't even be here if it weren't for his ambitions. Like Byron, he's also on borrowed time. But unlike my Thorn, he's completely disposable.

I wait outside the building for almost an hour. I know he's almost done. My heart rate begins to spike, causing my hand to grow sweaty. The anticipation has me going crazy. I want to go inside, sit through a session. Listen.

Hear him babble on about our encounter. Like I have plenty of times while infiltrating myself into his life all while he remains oblivious to the small void sucking up his light. I won't lie and say that it doesn't make me feel this weird sensation when I hear him talk about me as if he's grateful for everything I put his body through. Proud to have survived a serial killer. But it does... I also know that it's all a facade. A mask to hide his truth but I see it.

Because I'm good at reading people and Byron I can read like a book. So much that I think it's more than that.

I'm buried in his mind. His body. His soul.

And soon... his ass.

I palm my cock, which jolts in the fabric of my pants. Eager to be inside him, eager to feel something more than my hand wrapped around it. Taking a deep breath in, I take a quick glance at the clock on the dashboard and smile .

A few more minutes pass before he steps out the building, phone in hand, talking with a smile plastered on his face. Shifting the SUV into gear I pull up, but he's too consumed by his conversation to notice he's walking right into the start, or maybe the ending, of our story. He might have survived me last time, but let's see if he can a second time because I won't make the same mistakes again. This time I'm not just going to show him the void—it will consume him until he's begging for just a small sliver of light... of hope, and I'll be the only one to give it. The only one to offer him that sweet relief. I will snuff out the fire only to rekindle it again... and again, until he's begging me to end it all. And then, maybe then, I will. But first, he must break...

Securing my mask in place, I watch as he slides into the SUV completely unaware of the chemicals infused in the AC. The door closes, and I'm sure by now that his cell service has shut down, thanks to my service blocker. I can see his hand move to the door handle, but that won't help him. My little bird is trapped in his cage, and I'm the only one with the keys. I watch as his phone slips from his hand, and his breathing slows, chest rising shallowly and unsteady. His body goes slack, head rolling back against the seat just as a faint wheeze leaves his lips.

Fuck .

The sight makes my fingers tighten around the wheel, heat pooling low in my stomach. I roll down the divider window, facing him just as the drugs flood his system. “Ren.”

My name falls from his lips like a revelation, voice hazy, barely above a whisper. His eyelids flutter, and I watch, mesmerized, as his body succumbs.

“Good boy,” I mutter, rolling the divider window back up as I move to face the front and put the SUV into motion to drive us to our little piece of hell.

I will show him what life has been like for me. There will be no mercy and no special treatment. He’s mine, and since I can’t do what I enjoy most, then he will become my everything. My puppet, my project, my canvas—whatever the fuck you want to call it—just mine. He will learn, even if I have to program him like I was. He will learn to live, to breathe only for me. There won’t be room for him to think about anything but Ren.

REN.

REN.

REN fucking REN.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:16 pm*

### Chapter Four

Ren

I pull the SUV into the secluded, wooded area that, thanks to Kevin, I was able to buy and secure while he handles business for me elsewhere. He's come in handy in more ways than one, and as much as I hate to admit it, I need him, just for the moment. After all, he's doing something very important for my corruption of Byron. What do you do when someone has a reason to fight? You take the reason away.

Poof.

With a smile on my face, I unclip the seat belt before opening my door, moving to walk around the SUV to open the back door—where my Thorn lies, sleeping soundly. His mouth is slightly open, and a small amount of drool slides down the corner of his lips. Still smiling, I use my finger to collect his saliva—just like the night he spit on my face. I bring my finger to my lips and lick it clean. Consuming him. He's in for a rude awakening, but first, I will indulge in my need to feel him... to chase the high. Crouching, I stare at him for a moment as his thick eyebrows furrow; even in his dreams, he can't escape me, that I'm certain of. He thought he was safe. But I proved that to be a lie. I watched and waited until his guard was down... until he could touch freedom with the palm of his hand, only to rip it all away.

My hand moves to his cheek, smearing the small bit of drool that's there across his lips before slipping the base of my thumb into his mouth. His tongue twitches at the intrusion—a small, involuntary reaction. My cock twitches in my pants. Fuck, he is magnificent. If only he could see himself through my eyes, see how perfectly

imperfect he is .

I don't understand emotions, and if I'm quite frank, I don't really care to.. But art... beauty... pain... fracture. Those I understood, and Byron was all of it wrapped in a six-foot package.

Now you would think, if I didn't care for him, why do all this? Why go through the trouble? The answer is simple—I wanted to. Could I have picked someone else and carved them up, forgetting about my Thorn and his Rose? I suppose, but where is the fun in that? Where is the art? Where is the dedication?

I promised he would be my greatest masterpiece, even if I have to give up everything for it. Nothing like a little sacrifice to create something out of this world. To bring forward his full potential... all the broken pieces, letting them fall, exposing him.

From my crouched position, I grab his limp arm, throwing it around my shoulder as I drag him out slightly, then stand, pulling him up with me. His body is warm, his skin damp from his sweat against mine. The fucker is like dead weight... so fucking heavy, muscles slack, breath uneven. But art demands sacrifice, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't eager to show him what he created—to show him what I've become because of him.

His actions forced me to make improvements, to perfect my craft, to take it further. I guess in a way, we helped each other. He shattered me first, so it's only fair I return the favor. Once I get him fully out of the SUV, his body sways against mine, head lolling forward, I use my foot to kick the door closed and drag him toward his new place.

But first, I need to make him obedient, teach him what it means to be mine.

And I have a special place for bad boys who don't listen.

I didn't buy this place for its remote location, but more so for the secret residing beneath it—an underground bunker the previous owner had installed. A secret that not even Kevin knows exists; a place untouched by the world, waiting to swallow my Thorn whole. But like I've said before, nothing I do is without reason .

Dragging my Thorn to his new home, I stop when I make it to the dead tree that sits right in front of the entrance. The bark is rough, splintering under my touch as I steady myself. Using my foot, I kick the leaves around, brushing them out of place until I see it—the thick, coiled rope buried beneath.

I'm not careful as I drop him on the ground, I need my hands free to pull open the entrance. His body crumples like a puppet whose had its strings cut. Byron lands with a soft thud . The sound is music to my ears causing a slow smile to stretch across my face. I hope it hurts.

I want it to hurt.

All of it.

I want it all to hurt so bad that he has no other option but to turn to the dark, to understand that he was never meant to live in the light. Because the truth hurts when the light shines on it. Grabbing the rope, I pull open the entrance, grunting with effort. The fall from here won't kill him, but it will teach him. This part won't be pleasant—at least not for him. Hopefully the thin mattress catches his fall. Or maybe i'll miss just for the fuck of it, I haven't decided yet.

Moving toward Byron, I grab his ankle, dragging his body closer before rolling him into the bunker. The moment his weight shifts, he tumbles down, hitting the mattress before his shoulder slams against the ground. A dull thud echoes up the hollow space.

That's gonna leave a bruise.

I follow behind, savoring each step as I descend the stairs. The air is stale, thick with the damp scent of mildew and decay. Everything waits for him.

A bucket for his waste.

Another with a little water.

Food... Well, that depends on how well he listens. This isn't a hotel, after all.

This is his hell.

My personal masterpiece. He took away my passion... my art. And now, he will help me find my inspiration again. But right now, I have more pressing matters. My cock throbs, aching, demanding release. How many nights did I dream of this moment? How many nights did I touch myself with Byron's name falling from my lips, his face burned into my mind as I came?

Byron has become a need. An addiction.

And like a true addict, I need my fix.

Removing the button of my shirt, I watch the slow rise of his chest, the steady rhythm making my own breath hitch in anticipation. I take my time removing my clothes, savoring the moment, letting the cool air kiss my bare skin as I bask in the power I hold over him. Savoring my victory even though it is small in comparison to everything that I have planned. Once I'm fully naked, I move towards his sleeping form. Watching the slow rising on his chest, the moon illuminates his golden skin. His body seems relaxed but I see the muscles twitching slightly as if sensing what's to come while his brows knit together, and his lips purse together, scrunching the scar above his lip.

My hands hastily work to rip open his white tee and then remove his pants, his scent hitting me full force—musky and intoxicating. His scar is jagged and thick around the tip of his cock. My finger traces my mark causing his dick to jolt in my hand but I pull away. I don't need his cock to be hard for what I'm about to do. It's not about that. This is about me taking what I need.

I spread his legs apart, drinking in the sight of him—his vulnerability, his absolute helplessness. When I spot the silver metal glinting under the moonlight. My finger curls around it, tugging it gently. Ahh... he even left in the piercing I gave him, a warm feeling spread through me as I tug on the hoop harder this time. My erection throbs, spitting on my hand and moving towards his puckered hole, watching the way his muscles twitch involuntarily, his body responding to my touch even in sleep. Massaging my spit into it before my fingers play with it, causes a small sigh to escape his lips—a small sound so fragile, so unknowing. Even sleeping, my Thorn reacts so beautifully.

With my free hand, I stroke my needy cock, the heat pooling low, my breath uneven as my fingers tighten around my length. Gripping my thick shaft, I move up and down in slow movements, matching the precise rhythm of my fingers working Byron's ass. Using the bead of precum gathering on the head of my now pierced cock, I run it up and down his asshole before I begin to push in. Slowly. Torturously.

Once the head pushes in, I hiss as my body tenses, feeling the way he clenches down around me even in unconsciousness. "So, fucking tight," I lift his thick, muscular thighs up because I want to see it. I need to see it. I need to see how my cock disappears inside him, the way his body unwillingly takes me in. I need to see it painted red with his blood.

Slowly, I move, pistoning my hips forward while watching his face. His brows smooth momentarily, his lips parting before his body instinctively tenses, reacting to the intrusion. Even in his state, his cock hardens as I continue to rock my hips, each



thrust picking up intensity. His body tightens, the resistance adding to the high, to the heat coiling low in my stomach. My hand releases his leg and focuses on his cock. His thick, heavy length twitching in my grip, warmth spreading through my palm. My delicate hand grips his thick shaft, my thumb tracing the scar left from me as I slowly move up and down.

“You feel so good,” I moan, my voice strained with pleasure as I begin to pound into his ass, his unconscious body jolting beneath me with each thrust. Small noises and grunts continue to escape him, his lips parting slightly, his breath uneven.

“So tight.” Another thrust. “Bleed for me, Byron.”

I fuck him so hard his entire body moves upward with each thrust. My knees ache from the ground but still I keep fucking him, ignoring the ground burning my skin. The slap of skin echoes through the space, the wet squelch of his body giving way to mine. His ass feels wetter, and I look down, pulling my cock halfway out to see the residue of blood, and you don’t want to know what else.

“That’s it, Thorn, take everything I got to give,” I mutter, knowing he won’t listen. Not willingly but I couldn’t wait for him to be awake and alert while I fucked his asshole. I wanted his fights, it’s no fun this way, but the need was too great. It’s always too great. I know for a fact if I didn’t do this, I wouldn’t have been able to sleep. Not with the way I crave him, need him.

A full week away will be hell, especially when he will be so close. But this is his punishment, what’s worse than being left in the dark, with no one to talk to but your demons? I bet he has plenty, this is a very needed step towards the right direction. Take everything away and deprive him of light.

My balls tighten, the pressure mounting, heat rising to my spine, and all I can focus on is how his thick, veiny dick jumps with each thrust. Precum drips off the side as I

mercilessly continue to pound into him. The sight is intoxicating, consuming. I don't even think as I bend down and take his cock into my mouth.

The warmth of him floods my senses, his taste heavy on my tongue. The saltiness of his cum invades my senses as my tongue swirls around the head, tasting him. Tasting the essence of what I own. I focus on swallowing him deeper, his cock sliding down my throat, my lips stretched wide around his length. My tongue moves frantically because who am I kidding? I don't know what I'm doing, but I want—no, I need—him to feel this minute of heaven I'm offering just before I give him hell.

I hollow my cheeks, taking notes from all the women who have been on their knees for me, as I take him deeper, hitting the back of my throat over and over. Saliva pools at the corners of my mouth, my throat convulsing around his thick length.

I groan as his cock jolts in my mouth, his body reacting against his will. My hands cup his balls as I continue to fuck my mouth.

It doesn't take long to push him over the edge.

His body tenses, muscles flexing, his cock twitching one last time before he spills into my mouth. His cum is warm, thick, and salty, a taste I'll commit to memory. I pull back, spitting his cum onto my cock before pushing back in, grinding my hips deep, deeper, claiming every last inch.

I fuck him into oblivion until I find my own release.

“Fu—“ I moan, my voice breaking as I slow down, my balls emptying.

I bury myself inside him, filling him up, marking him.

I breed him like the bitch he will be.

Slipping from inside his warmth, I take a step back and watch his body twitch. His breathing is slow, rhythmic. From my point of view, he looks peaceful. How ironic. This will probably be one of the last peaceful sleeps he will ever have. Because in order to rebuild, you have to completely destroy the foundation. Turning away, I walk over to my discarded clothes before bending down to grab them. The cool air clings to my skin, a final reminder of what I've taken. Naked, I move towards the stairs attached to the wall of the bunker, my hand meeting the cold metal.

One last glance.

His chest rises. Falls. So unaware.

One week, Thorn.

Let's see if you can survive the dark. Will it break you? Or will you welcome it?

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:16 pm*

### Chapter Five

#### Byron

My limbs feel heavy, the weight of something unseen pressing down on me. Fog surrounds me, thick and suffocating. I look down—so much blood covers my hands, warm and sticky, dripping from my fingertips. The smell of iron fills the space, sharp, overwhelming, clinging to the back of my throat. My body shakes despite the warmth spreading through me, a deep, unnatural heat that does nothing to stop the cold sweat clinging to my skin. So much blood.

A woman lays before me, naked and still, her body lifeless but not at peace. Her brown hair covers her face, long strands tangled in the blood pooling around her. From where I stand, I can't make out her features. Something inside me tells me I don't want to. I try to move, but the thick blood pooled on the ground clings to my feet, holding me prisoner. It's like quicksand, dragging me deeper, refusing to let go. The woman's head lolls to the side, her neck twisting unnaturally, like something broken. Her face is a blur as my body moves away from her, as if something else is pulling me back.

With her hand now outstretched, she reaches for me... her fingers trembling, weak, slipping against the blood.

For salvation.

I look down at my bloody hands, my breath catching in my throat, my chest tightening. My hands... They feel foreign, like they don't belong to me. Then I look

back to the woman in front of me.

“By,” the soft, familiar voice croaks, cracked and raw, as if forced from a throat that’s already gone silent. “Hel—pp me.”

The familiarity of the voice sinks into me like a blade, slow and agonizing, twisting deeper the longer I listen .

“Gab—“ I whisper, my voice breaking, the sound fragile, barely there. I try to move closer, my body trembling, muscles straining as I fight against the invisible restraints that hold me in place.

“Gabby.”

She just begins to sob, a broken, choked sound that rattles inside my skull. Her hand moves to the gash on her throat, blood pouring between her fingers, dark and endless. The only noise coming from her is a silent scream, lips parted, eyes wide, but nothing escapes except the sick, wet gurgling sound of her drowning in her own blood.

That’s when I see the masked figure...

Standing just beyond the haze. Still. Watching.

I’m sure it’s Ren. It has to be.

I want it to be.

“GABRIELA,” I shout, but my voice is breaking, shaking, unrecognizable. I scream over and over until my voice grows hoarse, until it feels like I’ve been screaming for years, until it feels like it will never be enough. My knees crumble from the weight of my pain as I collapse onto them, my hands sinking into the blood, its warmth seeping

into my skin as my nails scraping against something solid beneath it. Bone.

“HELP ME,” a voice whispers from behind, so close that I feel the breath on my ear—cold and damp.

Cold hands wrap around me. I try to turn, my body tensing as the instinct to fight kicks in, but it’s useless. The hands dig in deeper, their grip bruising, unshakable.

I can’t move.

I can’t run.

They keep me staring at the body of my sister.

“HELP.”

Can she see that I can’t? That I tried? That I failed?

The realization slams into me, ripping through my stomach like a punch. My body spasms as I heave, emptying the contents of my stomach. My airway constricts as the cold hands wrap around my neck, tightening, squeezing, stealing the last of my breath.

“Breathe.”

But I can’t.

How the fuck am I supposed to breathe ?

The cold woman’s hands throw me to the ground with force, the impact jolting through my spine, the weight of her pressing down. My hands move to my throat,

desperate, clawing, nails digging into my own skin as I try to break free.

I still can't breathe.

Choking on my vomit, drowning in it, gasping for something that won't come. Through the blur of my vision, shapes twist and shift—dark, wrong. Then I see her.

Theresita.

She kneels before me, expression unreadable, like something carved from stone. Turning my body to the side, her grip unyielding, her touch cold but sure. Then—a hard slap to my back, pain exploding across my ribs.

“brEATHE.”

I wake up spluttering, vomit spewing from my mouth and nose, burning my throat as I choke on the taste. My body shivers from the cold, a bone-deep chill that refuses to leave me. Opening my eyes, I see nothing. Nothing but darkness. The smell of piss, vomit, and mildew fills the air—thick, suffocating, making me gag all over again.

“Re—“ I begin to call for him, but the name dies on my lips.

I know it's no use.

There's no saving me.

He's back.

Back to end what he started.

But at least she's far from him.

At least...

Ren can't hurt her.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I roll back onto the cold ground, naked and captured. The chill seeps into my bones, but I don't move. A chuckle escapes past my lips—dry, humorless. If the fucker thinks this time I wasn't prepared, he has something else coming. Let him think he's won. Let him believe I'm broken. I might have left his studio physically, but mentally, I remained chained up. I was never truly free.

The moment I learned his body wasn't where we left it that night and realized he was still out there, I had a feeling it would always end this way, that it was inevitable I knew I was on borrowed time. Every day that passed was just another second stolen before he came back to collect. He will finish what he started. I can feel it in my gut.

This is why I sued his estate, and got my sister as far away as I could from me... from him. She's the only thing that matters. I wanted to be prepared for when the devil came back to drag me to hell, but this time, I refuse to go quietly. This time, I will make sure Gabby is kept safe and he's put down for good, even if I have to sacrifice myself in the process.

My eyes begin to adjust to the darkness. I could move, crawl to the small mattress on the ground, but what's the point? He wants to break me, but there's nothing left to break. There's no fear left in me, no fight for survival. I welcome death if it means keeping her safe, because that's all I have left now.

Protecting her from falling apart.

It took me a while to get her to feel safe—to piece her back together—along with the help of the guy she's been talking to. A good man. At least, I hope he is. With what



little I know, he seems steady, strong, and hopefully, he will keep her safe and far away.

I know she must be worried that I didn't show up, but I warned her. Told her that if I vanished, she had to trust me. That I would find my way back.

But as much as Ren had unfinished business with me, I did as well. And that's the god's honest truth.

Let's see who wins this battle, because this isn't just a fight—it's the end. Only one of us, or maybe neither of us, will walk out of this breathing.

His obsession with me led him to my sister.

It started with me.

And it will end with me.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:16 pm*

### Chapter Six

Ren

It's day two of the week-long deprivation of light... of human contact, of food. I'll deprive him of everything until there's nothing left but me. I want him to need me, to crave me in the way I have craved him. Just like I have since that fucking day we met.

My obsession with my Thorn started long before I was inside him, long before I even touched him. All it took was the wild look on his face, the way his presence filled the room as he stepped into that small office, dressed in orange and bound. Even then, he belonged to me. Ever since that day, I've wanted nothing more than him and to mold him, to carve him, to create him in different ways.

From the hidden camera in the bunk, I watch him puke nothing but bile onto the ground. His body convulses, shaking, and for a moment, I was worried I had to intervene. But luck, or maybe the devil, intervened instead. He shifts onto his side, just barely avoiding choking on his own vomit. Good boy.

I continue to watch him as I sip on my coffee, its warmth doing nothing to settle the hunger gnawing at me—but not for food. The eggs and bacon in front of me sit untouched. I can't stomach it, not with him like this. In a way, I've become just as much of a prisoner as he is. This isn't just his torture, it's mine too.

The buzz of my phone pulls my gaze away from the frame, but not for long. Having my Thorn back has awakened something in me, something I thought had dulled in his

absence. He's my muse, as true as he will be my greatest piece to date. My fingers twitch with the need to paint him—his suffering, his submission, the moment he finally realizes there is no world beyond me .

A smile curls at the corner of my lips as I bring my elbows to the desk, clasping my hands together. The lesson is ready. The stage is set. I watch for a while longer as he lays motionless on the ground, one hand resting on his abdomen, the other beneath his head. That infuriating will of his. Still fighting, even with the situation he's in. No fear. No surrender. Nothing.

He gives me nothing.

But I will take everything.

Even if I have to force it.

Pushing away from the desk, I stand, leaving the office in frustration. My feet carry me toward the bathroom before I even make the decision. Not even having him here could banish her from my mind. That sickness that creeps up whenever I lay in a bed, whenever I step into the shower. She haunts me.

My soul—if I have one—feels out of my body as I slip out of my sweats, and continue dragging myself into the bathroom as if I don't have control of my own limbs. My hand moves on its own—learned. Turning the water to the hottest setting, I stare at the plum-colored tiles, my vision locking onto the crack in the corner. The same place my eyes always go.

I hear the sound from inside my room—the sharp, angry voices that have been ongoing since last night.

“You are too suffocating,” my father yells at my mother. “Overbearing.”

My mother screams back profanities and insults, a fight I've heard too many times before. Then I hear the door slam, followed by the sharp click of her heels. My fists clench at my sides, my breath catching, my stomach tightening in anticipation. My heart pounds as her steps grow closer. A rhythm I know too well.

I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing myself to be still, to breathe like I'm sleeping. Mother didn't like it when I heard their fights. She preferred me quiet, unaware.

But then, she would come to me. Every time.

Mother is lonely. Mother is sad.

And I make it better.

When she drinks her special drink.

But it's early. Too early. She never drinks this early. Not when he's home.

Her footsteps stop right in front of the door. A hesitation.

I turn softly onto my side. She prefers it that way.

She doesn't have to look at my face.

Just feel my warmth.

The door opens. Softly. Too softly.

Then it closes.

The bed shifts with her weight. A familiar sinking, a familiar silence.

I hope she believes I'm asleep. I hope she leaves.

But I know she won't.

She never does.

A tickle from the sweat on my neck brings me out of the trance. The bathroom is full of steam from the hot water, heat suffocating the air as I step inside. My body continues its learned behavior, my muscles tightening on instinct, my mind slipping into that familiar state. In a way, still ready... still waiting. Waiting for help that would never come, for hands that will never touch me again, because I ended it.

But loneliness is the condition. A side effect of survival. Is this what it is? Is this the price of my freedom? Am I lonely? I never cared for people. I never needed them. I never really cared for human interaction, but in the outside world, beyond my head, I thrived. I controlled everything—the game, the rules, the players. But having it all taken away has essentially stripped me of the persona I created. Ren Sato was a construct, a mask I wore for the world. Without that world—without my control—who the fuck am I?

Am I even Ren Sato?

Who am I?

So many questions flood my mind as I wash my body, sitting under the water, letting it burn, letting it strip me down further. I welcomed it. The pain. The heat. The sting. This feeling was familiar. Something solid. Something I could hold onto. Everything else inside me feels foreign, like a sickness I can't purge.

So fucking strange.

Maybe this is my fall. The moment my empire crumbles. Like the Roman Empire, the prodigal child has finally fallen .

It's not like I can live my life in the open here, not with my face all over the news. Despite all my fucking money, I can't buy what I truly want... what I need. I could leave, start over, wipe my name from existence, but I refuse to leave him behind.

I won't.

But I also know that I need him willing. Not just obedient. Not just compliant. Willing. Loyal. Devoted. Dependent. Everything must be willing.

This is why our lessons are important. Because control isn't enough.

I took a note from my mother's handbook. Love isn't something that blossoms—you have to strip it down, mold it, condition it. Make it necessary. Make it the only thing that exists.

And I will.

Turning off the water, I shuffle towards my room, opening a drawer. My movements are automatic, rehearsed. I pull out sweats, but it's not like I'll be doing anything other than watching. Waiting. Planning. Always planning.

The burner phone I use to communicate with Kevin rings, and that sound is music to my ears. A sharp pulse of excitement runs through me, cutting through the fog in my mind. Quickly, I slip on the navy blue sweats, ignoring the water clinging to my skin, soaking into the fabric. There's no point in drying off. Nothing matters but this.

I make my way to the office across the hall, the only space that truly feels like mine. Another piece of the puzzle, waiting to move.

“How’s the little bird?” I lean into the chair, fingers already steeped in front of me.

“Ready to fly.” Short. Efficient. That’s how I know he can’t talk too much or too long. I prefer it that way—brief, controlled, straight to the point.

The call ends, and I take my seat, exhaling slowly as I turn my gaze back to the screen. Continuing to place the pieces on the board. One move at a time.

My first lesson will happen in exactly five days. Five days of hunger, thirst, silence. Five days before the body gives in. But he needs to be willing. It has to feel like a choice, even when there isn’t one.

Which will be no issue—for someone who needs to eat.

Sure, humans can survive a couple of days without eating, even drinking, but humans are creatures of need, and need is the easiest thing to control.

You don’t notice how time moves when you’re holding the leash. It feels slower, dragging on, stretching itself thin, teasing the moment before it snaps. Day one and two all he did was sleep. Useless, wasting away, letting the hunger gnaw at him like a beast with no teeth. By day four, he was too weak to even carry the waste bucket far enough away from him so the smell wouldn’t assault him. Good. Let it linger, let him sit in it. Let him learn that in order to survive me he will have to accept the darkness.

Now, here we are—day seven.

It’s a bright, chilly morning, and here I am, prepping an all-star breakfast. Not just for him, but for me too. I’m starving. But it’s not just hunger—it’s anticipation, buzzing under my skin, pooling in my gut, pressing against my ribs like something caged.

The last couple of days, I’ve done nothing but watch, plan, and wait. It’s been a slow

unraveling, a careful game of restraint. Now, I get to see the first real shift. The first crack.

Anticipation hums through my body. Not just eagerness—something deeper, something vital. I'm eager to see how compliant he will be. How far he's fallen. How much further I can push him.

For this lesson, we will do an art project. A simple lesson.

The first step in stripping him down completely.



### Chapter Seven

Byron

I don't know what's killing me faster—the smell in the bucket in the corner of the room or the hunger pangs that claw at my stomach. Each breath I take is filled with rot, thick and suffocating, pressing against my ribs like something living. The scent seeps into my skin, settles in my throat, refusing to leave. The darkness doesn't bother me as much, but I hate being trapped like an animal. The walls feel closer as if the space is shrinking with each passing second. This is worse than prison, worse than anything I could have imagined. So bravo to him for making this dehumanizing. He didn't just cage me. He stripped me down to nothing. He knew exactly what he was doing.

But my mind dissociates, and with hunger and thirst weakening me, all I've done is sleep. Drifting in and out, losing sense of time, and my body too frail to fight as my mind slips between nightmares and memories, between the past and the monster waiting for me. Maybe this is how I die—slow and painful, revisiting my childhood, my failures... my nightmares that replay over and over. Gabriela naked and bleeding.

Dead. Always dead.

I'm surrounded by my dead in this space, and I hate that more than anything. Their whispers crawl under my skin, slipping into my ear like a blade pressed against my skull. They taunt me, whispering my failures, carving their accusations into the walls. Taunting me that once again, I didn't protect her. I failed her. Over and over until their voices bleed into my own. But being isolated has made me consider something I

never would have before. Maybe I'm looking at this all wrong. Maybe I was never meant to win. Maybe I don't need to fight him. Fight this.

Instead, maybe I should give in.

What's the worst that could happen?

I could close my eyes and let the void take me. Let it pull me under, carry me far away from my failures, from my shame... from this sick, gnawing need to see him again. To hear his voice, even if it's only to break me further.

To feel him.

Because the truth is, it's not fear that I have for Ren—it's need. A raw, festering wound that refuses to close. Twisted. Sick. Deep enough to rot me from the inside out. I must be demented to crave the very thing that made me sick. But what can I say? Hunger is hunger. Craving is craving. Even when it kills you. Even when it rips your soul apart piece by piece.

Closing my eyes, I drift off to where he waits for me—the big bad wolf, waiting to consume me.

The sound of flesh falling to the ground snaps me back into the dream, but I know better. This isn't a dream. Or maybe it is. Or maybe it never was. I watch as Ren carves into his victim, his knife humming, his hands steady. Steady in a way that makes my stomach turn. This time, familiar brown eyes look my way. Wide. Glassy. Unblinking.

Gabriela.

I watch in horror as Ren continues to carve; angry, uneven chunks of flesh are

missing from her body in various places. Her ribs. Her collarbone. The soft flesh of her stomach peeled away like layers of paint on a canvas. Her body is motionless, but her mouth hangs open. Her brown eyes rimmed with red, soaked in silent tears.

“Come,” Ren demands, extending a bloody hand, the electric knife humming in his grip.

My feet move before I even make the choice.

“Show her who you belong to, and her pain stops.” Ren’s bloody hand brings mine to his lips, his breath warm against my knuckles. I feel the stickiness of blood there, drying against my skin. My stomach lurches, but I don’t pull away.

“Show me who you belong to,” he murmurs against my skin.

And like a puppet, I fall to my knees, giving him what he wants. Not thinking. Not resisting. Just moving, just obeying. Not bothering to look behind me. I can’t. I don’t want to see the judgment, the disgust in my sister’s eyes.

My mouth falls open as his blood-slick fingers cup my chin, tilting my face up toward him. A single command unspoken between us.

He slips his cock into my waiting mouth.

His grip on my chin is firm as he thrusts, pushing deep, hitting the back of my throat, forcing me to take all of him. My throat contracts, body revolting, but I swallow it down. I gag, coughing around his length, as my hands are clenching into fists against my thighs. But Ren needs control. Ren always needs control.

So, I give it to him.

Because it's my choice. That's what I tell myself. That's the lie I let myself believe. He can't take shit from someone who's giving it away.

Slowly, he pulls back, dragging his cock against my tongue, my lips parting further to taste him. The warmth, the salt, the weight of him. My body betrays me, tongue sliding along the underside of his shaft. I surprise myself as my cheeks hollow, as a small whimper escapes me when he pushes back in. Like I've done this before. Like I know him in ways I shouldn't.

Spit drips from the corner of my mouth as he uses me, as I let him. My lips stretch, my throat burns, and yet, I sink deeper. My knees are wet from the pool of blood beneath me. Or maybe it's piss. Maybe it's both. Maybe I don't care.

My hand moves on its own, cupping his balls, feeling them tighten against my palm. He's close.

And I take him further.

My hand and mouth work together as he starts pulling away. Slower, deliberate strokes, as his moans are low, satisfied.

“Open. ”

And I do.

My eyes never leave his—those black voids of nothing, endless and hungry. His warm, salty cum splashes onto my lips, onto my waiting tongue. I drink him in, my mouth remaining open...

Until the warmth shifts.

Until the stench of urine hits me, sharp and rancid. Coughing, choking, I spit the foul taste from my mouth, scrambling back despite my body's weakness.

“HAHAHA,” Ren chuckles, shaking his cock, small flecks of silver glinting beneath the dim light. He's pierced now? When the fuck did that happen? Wiping my mouth with my trembling hand, I glare at the devil himself as he pushes his onyx strands from his forehead.

“What?” he grins, unbothered, unashamed. His lips are still red, raw from biting down his own pleasure. “Don't look at me that way. You looked thirsty, so I helped.”

His gaze drifts downward—to my own softening erection.

His smirk widens.

“Would have helped with that too,” he muses, “but you need to eat, which brings me here.”

I swallow past the dryness in my throat, past the lingering taste of him.

“What the fuck do you want?”

“For you not to die,” he answers simply, kneeling in front of me, dressed in nothing but sweats. No shirt. No shoes. Bare, vulnerable, raw. But he's never vulnerable. Never anything less than in complete control. I catch myself staring too hard at him. At my personal sin. At my sickness. At the one thing in this world that is mine, even if I never wanted it.

At the one thing I want more than I want to breathe.

And yet, I also want to tear it away, rip him apart, burn us both to the fucking ground.

“What?” I demand, voice hoarse.

Placing a hand on my thigh, his grip firm, possessive, final, he looks into my eyes. Sees me. Sees everything. Like he always has. Like he always will.

“Create something for me,” he murmurs, “and you can eat. ”

“No.”

His fingers tighten around my thigh, the pressure unmistakable, his disapproval is like a brand on my skin. But I don’t care.

I’m not a killer. Not yet.

And that’s the sickness that separates us.

I might be a shadow. But Ren is a void. A black mass that consumes everything it touches.

“Fine,” he says as he pulls away his hand, his touch disappearing too fast, leaving behind a phantom warmth. My body already misses it, but I refuse to react. Refuse to show him what I crave. He turns to leave. A shadow pulling away, a presence leaving a void behind. But then, he turns.

“Choices have consequences, Byron. Always remember that.”

I do.

I open my mouth to speak, to snap something back, to push, to hold onto the only power I have left. But I don’t give him the satisfaction. He wants to break me? Then he better fucking work for it. He wants me to give in? Then he’ll have to force it.

But I also can't die. Because if I die, who will keep the monster from going after Gabriela? And just like that, the words are ready to spill, a surrender poised at the tip of my tongue. But then the sunlight stuns me—sharp and blinding, like a cruel joke. Before I can speak, before I can decide whether I want to stop him or let him leave, he's gone.

And I'm left behind.

In the dark.

Once again, left with my dead.

I fall back, bones pressing into the cold ground, stomach twisting in on itself. The hunger pains dig their claws deeper. The ghosts press closer. And my mind continues to betray me.

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### Chapter Eight

Ren

Once I close the underground door to the bunker, I take a moment to compose myself. My breath is shallow, uneven, and fighting against the tightness in my chest. My hands run down my face as I take in air, but it's not enough, it never fucking is. My heart beats loudly in my ear, a steady pounding that drowns out my thoughts, and fuels the fire burning in my gut. My stomach flutters, bile threatening to come out.

Fucking Thorn in my ass.

I give him choices. I try to be generous, to give him the illusion of control. I want him willing, I fucking need him willing. But I guess I will have to force it. Make him see. Make him understand.

Fuck him!

He wants me to force him... he wants me to consume him.

So fine.

Ready, little piggy? Because here I fucking come.

Storming towards the house, heat coils around my spine, burning, suffocating, thick with the need to act. I grab the food I made him, my arm swiping the table set up for him and I. Dishes crash, silverware clatters, the scrape of ceramic against tile sends a



jolt through my skull before my body slumps into the wall and slides down.

Click. Clack. Click. Clack.

Her heels grow louder and louder. Rhythmic, deliberate, echoing in the hollow space inside my chest. My legs move toward me, curling up, and pulling me inward, small, contained, and wrapped up like I used to be.

The sound stops beside me.

Close. Too close .

My eyes remain on the shattered white piece of glass, a sharp, jagged remnant, waiting for purpose.

I need to create.

Pain.

“My sweet boy,” her voice purrs, soft, sweet, and wrong, always wrong. I feel her nails—long and pointed—scrape my skull, slow enough to send chills racing down my spine.

“Let Mother make you feel better.”

No.

Moving of its own accord, my hand reaches for the glass. A gift, an offering, a demand. Biting into my arm, I slice downward.

Red.

Bright. Sticky. Right.

It appears on my skin, blooming, warm and thick. The pain is nothing, insignificant, a whisper beneath the roaring in my head. Using my fingers, I dip into the warm blood. It coats my skin, smooth, familiar .

All I see is red.

The blood. Her nails. Her lips as they wrap around my cock. My fingers move towards my face, dragging, smearing, painting.

Red.

So much red.

My cock hardens, my memory pulling me under.

I can't escape her.

I can't escape him.

The good thing about being a psychopath is that you have little to no regard for others. Empathy is an inconvenience, one I've never had to worry about. I wasn't only devoid of emotions but also morals. A body without a conscience, a mind without restraint.

I'm always planning, always two steps ahead, watching the board shift in my favor before anyone else realizes they're a pawn. And with some outside help, I was able to get two birds with one stone. A masterpiece in motion. And this little art project will come to fruition. He will see. He will understand.

I will show him the way, and I know exactly how ...

Pushing to my feet, I storm to the small room where my little birdie lies asleep. Soft breaths, the steady rise and fall of her chest, untouched. Unmarked. A canvas waiting for its first stroke. The Rose missing her Thorn—but it's okay. It's better this way.

I walk over to her sleeping form, naked and just waiting to be carved into. A perfect offering.

I smile.

Walking back to the kitchen, I grab something that I can use. The lack of my preferred tools is inconvenient, and not having them might prove difficult, but true art is about adaptation. Grabbing the sharpest knife from the block, I head back into the room and get to work. Precision matters. Placement matters. I gently smack her thigh before pressing the blade to her flesh, testing the resistance—the way her skin yields under the slightest pressure.

It's hard work slicing flesh without the help of a motor, but it's therapeutic. The pull of the blade, the slow give, and the way the body reacts, even in sleep. To see all the red. To see silent pain in the subtle twitches of her muscles—trapped in her own nightmare. Can't escape it. Can't see it, but can feel it.

This I can control. This I can claim.

I need to stop giving room for light to creep in. The darkness suits me—it's the only thing that ever has.

If I couldn't be Ren Sato, then I needed to be the Laguna Bay Painter.

The killer.

The artist.

The piece of flesh falls into my waiting hand. Still warm, still twitching with the last remnants of life. I don't bother to stop the flow of crimson. The body will take care of that on its own. After all, we are on a tight schedule.

I will teach him a lesson, a very important one. A truth etched into bone and carved into flesh.

Walking to the kitchen, a slice of dark meat in one hand and a knife in the other, I place the flesh on a plate resting on the counter and throw the knife into the sink. Turning on the faucet, washing away the blood from my hands and then from the flesh. It runs down the drain in pink rivulets, the water scorching hot against my skin, but I barely notice.

I pull a pan out and place it on the stove along with a gracious portion of butter, and turn the burner on. Then, I collect some seasonings—garlic, thyme, rosemary, and oregano. Familiar comforts. I add the seasonings to the flesh while I burn the butter with more garlic before adding the main ingredient. Its sizzle is sharp and loud. The scent fills the kitchen, rich and gamey. It smells like something familiar. Something comforting. Funny how the brain doesn't discriminate—it only recognizes food.

After searing both sides, I wait a bit longer, letting it cook medium-well, tender and savory. The heat pulls the juices to the surface, searing flavor into the fibers. I don't know if this is the correct way to do this, but instinct tells me it is.

What's the difference between cow and human?

Nothing.

Nothing if you ask me. Meat is meat. Hunger is hunger. We are all animals.

### Chapter Nine

Byron

The hunger continues to torment me, sleeping is impossible, and honestly, I don't really want to close my eyes. Despite the hunger and thirst gnawing at me, something deeper keeps me awake—something worse. I want to give in, to let him break me, but there's a voice in my head that tells me to fight.

“Help her.”

Cold fingers trace my jaw, nails scraping my skin. Small, lifeless hands caress my face—Theresita. Her headless body sits beside me, leaning close, whispering like she's just sharing a secret.

I'm really fucking losing it .

“Stay alive,” she repeats over and over, her voice layering, distorting—no longer hers, but something unholy. My throat tightens, my lips parting as if to respond, but the shape of her flickers like a dying lightbulb, and then it's my mother's voice I hear.

“Protect her,” she murmurs.

I want to—I really do—but I'm too weak.

I need food.

I can barely keep my eyes open, but again, I don't want to close them. I can barely move. This is the longest my body has been without nutrients, and I don't even know how long it's been since I last had water. A day? Two? The walls breathe around me. My vision pulses.

I have to admit it.

I should've taken the deal.

Just like that, a thin stream of light filters into the space, slicing through the darkness as Ren descends the stairs with a container in his hand.

Food .

My mouth instantly begins to salivate, like a dog needing its bone. Shame burns through me, but not enough to stop the need.

“Good. Still alive.”

I want to punch him in the face. I want to choke the smirk off his lips. But I also want to sink to my knees and rip the food from his hands. It's pathetic, but survival doesn't give a fuck about pride.

“No more choices from now on, only consequences. Eat.”

The container hits the floor beside me, the thud loud in the silence. Lifting the side of the red lid, I see the contents inside the clear plastic. Meat. Cooked. Maybe chicken.

Didn't care.

I also don't care that Ren watches me like I'm some kind of entertainment, his smirk

curling like a cat toying with a dying mouse. “Tell me, Byron, did you think I would have refused your invitation?”

I stare at Ren as he looks at me with curiosity. Invitation? I scoff. If this is what he thought I was doing, inviting him to come seek me, man, he’s more fucked up in the head than I thought.

“Invitation or bait?” I question. Ren rolls his neck. “Whatever you want to call it, you wanted me to find you.” He points at me with a condescending look on his face. “You want me to destroy you and create you. Whole.” His voice drops, but I don’t answer out of fear that he’ll hear the lie in my voice. “Did you know, Byron, that’s why I create? To feel.”

“You think you can create? Ren, you destroy. You’re sick, and a killer.”

Ren shrugs. “Then what makes you? Did daddy not beat the want out of you?”

I clench my jaw together, resisting the urge to kill him with my bare hands, but I continue to eat because my body needs it. And deep down... his words aren’t lies.

“Is that why you came for me? To finish the job?”

Ren smiles. “No. I came for you because you belong to me, and I want you to understand pain.”

“Whose pain? ”

He straightens up, slipping on the mask of the monster—beautiful and charming.

“Mine, of course. All my creations share my pain, Byron. It’s not about you. It’s about me.” His words would be enough to make me not want to eat, but I couldn’t. I

needed the substance.

“Then bring it,” I say with a smile.

“It smells awful in here,” he says, changing the subject, and pinching the bridge of his nose like I disgust him. I know what he’s doing. The false repulsion, the condescending amusement—he wants to humiliate me further, to make me feel like the filth he claims I am. But I don’t care. I stink, this space stinks. Yet coming from a man—let me correct myself, a monster—like Ren? It’s too childish.

The insults, this entire set-up... it’s child’s play for him. “Why did you bring me here?”

“What if I was just lonely,” he answers, his voice dropping. Lonely. I laugh at how weak and pathetic that is. I groan as I force myself up, my elbows trembling under my weight. My fingers are uncoordinated, shaking and desperate as I grab another piece of the meat with my bare hands. Ren hums, shifting in place. “You need help Ren.”

“That’s why you’re here—to help.” His tone is casual, almost lazy—but I know better. “Do you wish to help me?”

So instead, I ignore him and sink my teeth into the meat. I don’t need to savor it... I just bite and swallow, barely chewing.

The meat slides down my throat—thick, greasy, warm.

One bite.

Two.



Three.

And just like that, it's gone.

Ren moves closer. I feel his presence before I see him, the air shifting. His body heat pressing into my skin as he gives my head a slow, condescending pat. His fingers weave through the soft curls beginning to grow — longer than usual, the fade completely grown out. “I like the curls growing in. You look less convict, more vogue.” My jaw tightens, but I don't pull away. Suddenly, he moves away. While I lick the grease and blood left by the meat from my fingers, my eyes snap up to his. He's watching. Always watching.

“What are you looking at?” I mutter.

Ren smiles. That all-knowing fucking smile.

“Nothing.” But before I can reply, Ren sighs and runs his hand through his hair.

“I want you to see me. See pain, Byron, understand it. See how I do. Can you?” He kneels in front of me, his voice so soft, so sickeningly sweet. “I think we understand each other, and I can offer you acceptance.” Taking a deep breath in, “So now that you've eaten, I'll try this again,” he says smoothly. “Paint with me, and I'll allow a shower. Maybe if you behave extra well, a good night's sleep.” My body betrays me, aching at the thought of warmth, of water running over my filth-covered skin. As much as I want to smash his face into the ground, I have no choice but to play his game.

He thinks he has me beat.

Let him .

Let him believe it.

I'll keep playing until it's time to make my final move—the checkmate that will balance the scales.

### Chapter Ten

Ren

“Since you ate all your food, I’ll be a good host. Let’s get you cleaned up, and then we can have some fun.”

I step closer despite the stench of rot and sweat thick in the air. The vulgar smell coats the back of my throat, but I don’t grimace. I don’t react. I remain in control—because between us, this is the only place I still have it.

“Continue to behave and I might let you have some fun.”

I extend my hand, knowing he won’t take it. He never does. Not yet .

Byron shifts, his body slow, sluggish—the kind of exhaustion that sits in the bones. His hands twitch at his sides, fingers flexing like he wants to hit me but knows he doesn’t have the strength. Good. He’s still fighting, but he’s losing.

Then, he moves—brushing past me with a weak but deliberate arm check. A flicker of defiance. A final, fleeting ember refusing to go out.

I smile.

Such a zesty man.

I’ll enjoy breaking him to nothing.

Let's see if, once I'm done with him, he still has the will to fight— that small, flickering light that refuses to die. Some things aren't meant to be fixed. Some things are meant to be destroyed. Byron makes it to the bottom of the stairs like a good boy waiting for his master.

“Ladies first.”

I tilt my head toward the stairs. There's nowhere else to go. The woods around here all circle back to the same place. If he were to run, I'd enjoy the chase—the thrill of the hunt, the satisfaction of dragging him back. But all my comment earns me is a scowl and a grunt. He doesn't speak, doesn't resist, but he does move.

Progress.

He's learning.

For now.

We step into the daylight, and I look at Byron as he uses his hand to shield his eyes from the sun. He flinches, blinking rapidly, as if the light itself is foreign to him, like he's forgotten what it feels like.

“This way,” I say as I begin to walk towards the cabin. We make it inside with no incident... no words... only the weight of something unspoken pressing between us.

“Shower first.”

Grabbing the back of his neck, I guide him towards the bathroom, careful he doesn't get a glimpse of my... no, our project.

My first lesson.

He hesitates at first, his body locking up, stiff with resistance. But it's nothing a little pressure on his neck and a low, "Walk," can't fix.

Just a gentle push, a reminder of who's truly in charge here. I only release the back of his neck when we make it to the bathroom, and I close the door behind us. I move towards the shower, but Byron stops in front of the mirror, I watch him curiously as he stares at himself.. His reflection is still. Too still. Like he's trying to decide if it's really him staring back or a stranger.

"What you looking at?" he snaps as our eyes lock in the mirror, cupping his dick in his hands, a weak attempt at hiding from me. But there's no hiding from the void.

"Nothing, wondering what you're thinking."

I answer honestly because I can be who I am with him. There's something between us, camaraderie... maybe. But definitely something deeper, something I don't even recognize. Something that makes me want to be truthful—to an extent, of course—but for the most part, I don't mind sharing my thoughts with him.

"Why do you care?"

"Didn't say I cared, curious. That's it. Curiosity. "

Turning on the water, my eyes move to the running water, fixating on the white tiles, sharp and blinding under the fluorescent light.

Then, the sound.

A shift in the air. A presence.

The sound of heels moving closer pushes into my brain like a needle threading

through my thoughts. I shake my head, my hand fisting under the water. I'm here. This is real. The water is scalding but it's not enough. Not enough to burn her away.

"Such a good boy."

The ghostly touch of my mother moves up my back, phantom nails trailing cold over my spine, sinking into me like rot. I stumble back—a rare slip, a crack in the surface.

Meeting with something solid.

Byron.

"The fuck was that about?"

"Nothing." I push away from him, returning to my task of getting him cleaned up for his lesson. He's now fed. Clean. And then— obedience.

Complete. Utter. Surrender.

That's the goal.

I need... No, I want him obedient. Desperate. I want him to be the best boy. So taking a page from her handbook—

"In."

Byron stumbles forward, his body resisting even as it obeys. His back tenses, muscles locking up as I step in behind him.

"Ren," he starts, but I silence him.

My hand grabs the clean washcloth I had set aside for him, lathering it with Castile soap before wrapping my fingers around his cock.

“R—“

He stops.

The shame chokes the words in his throat, kills them before they can live. His cock hardens in my grip, and that betrays him more than anything ever could. It’s hard to sell a lie when your body speaks the truth. My own cock hardens, pressing against his back. “How was it, being out there? Pretending you didn’t enjoy the things I did?” My hand moves slow, cruel in its patience, deliberate in its intent. Soap bubbles slide down his thick, veiny girth, the warm slickness making each stroke more unbearable.

Byron bites back a small moan.

But I see him shudder. Feel it. His body doesn’t lie.

“Words are empty when your actions speak so loudly, Byron,” I whisper into his ear.

His breath stutters, his whole body coiled like a wire pulled too tight.

“You don’t know shit.” He sneers as his hand moves over mine, stopping me mid-stroke. “I want to put you down, Ren.” His honesty doesn’t catch me off guard. It excites me.

A slow smile pulls at my lips, sharp and knowing. I tighten my grip, feeling the betrayal in his pulse, in the way his body fights him harder than he fights me. “Oh, Byron.”

I lean in, close enough that I know he can feel the heat of my breath against his skin.

“I’d love to see you try.”

And I mean that.

But I know there will be none of that in his future. By the time I’m done with him, Byron will be nothing but a shell for me to fill.

Then—cold, sharp, inescapable nails claw down my back.

Too real. Too deep. Too much.

My grip falters around him... a crack in my control. A slip I can’t allow.

My body freezes, tension locking my limbs like rusted chains.

I focus on the sensation of her. The presence that shouldn’t be here.

It’s not real.

Not Real.

My grip tightens around him, forcing myself back into the present. Back into this. My nails dig into his skin, hard enough to leave marks, to feel his pulse pound against my fingertips.

A sharp inhale.

A shudder .

He moves.



He strokes into my touch—mindless, instinctual—a twitch of surrender he doesn't recognize, but I do. Byron doesn't know, doesn't realize how that single movement throws me a safety net, so I don't drown in her. Pressing harder against him, seeking, grounding, controlling, owning, as my cock slides up between his ass.

“Show me how much you like it, Byron.” The words spill from my lips before I can stop them.

Foreign. Unbidden. Not fully mine.

Byron stills.

Refusing. Even now, even like this.

Not without a fight, no doubt. It doesn't matter how much his body wants it when his heart... his brain... his very essence fights it.

Fights me.

The nails dig in deeper.

A force beneath my skin, inside my bones. A whisper, a laugh, a shadow that doesn't leave. I rest my head on his shoulder, the wet heat of his skin beneath me, the scent of water and something deeper—something breaking.

“Such a good boy,” I whisper, but it's not just me. My voice twists, morphs, warps—pulling hers into mine. My nose drags along the length of his neck, slow, deliberate, tasting the sweat, the heat, the battle inside him. I continue to stroke him, matching the thrusts of his body against my hand.

“St-”

A lie.

Another refusal to admit the truth.

I bite him.

Not softly. Not gently.

Teeth sinking deep into the tender spot of his neck while my hand moves more frantically, as if trying to wring something from him, from myself, from whatever the fuck is clawing its way out of me.

“Stop lying.” I groan into his skin before I rip my hand away, and slam him into the tile. The water pours down his face, slipping past parted lips that gasp for something unspoken. The look on his face is feral. Devastating.

Something shattered. Something ruined.

“Hold our cocks, Byron.” I groan as I slowly stroke my own cock. “Make us come.” My voice comes out needy, too fucking desperate, and I fucking hate it. The moment the words leave my lips, I feel the weight of them, the weakness, the raw need slipping through the cracks of my control. The lack of control I’ve had in my life since he walked into it. Since he unsettled everything inside me. Since he made me want things I don’t understand.

Viciously, I grab his cock, yanking him forward, forcing him closer, and forcing his body to acknowledge what his mind won’t. They say you can’t teach an old dog new tricks, but I’ll prove this theory wrong. There is no choice. There is only surrender. Byron will learn that when I say jump, his only response will be how high.

I look up at Byron, the water cascading over us as I place our cocks in my hand while

my other moves to his neck, forcing him to look into my eyes. Forcing him to face himself. Bringing him into the void, he won't escape this moment... his truth or how I'm about to make him cum.

“Look at us, Byron.”

I dig my nails into his neck, forcing him to look at us as our cocks slide out of my hand in sync. The friction is slow, measured, and meant to break him in degrees, not all at once. Our skin rubs against each other, and I see the little movement in his brows, his own mask cracking slightly as his truth comes to light. A flicker. A moment of weakness. The exact thing I was waiting for. His cock slides into my hand as mine slides out. In and out. Slow and deliberate...

Dragging it out. Savoring it.

Making me desperate for more friction... harder... but I need this. I need to see how far I can push him before he collapses. We need this. After all, control is the goal here.

Forcing his neck up, I lock eyes with Byron as I continue my torturous pace. His struggle is beautiful, infuriating. His eyebrows knit together as he sucks in his lower lip, causing the scar on his top lip to protrude. That scar. A mark of past battles, but this is the one he's losing. His body willingly moves into my hand, and the moment is too much... almost unbearable.

My body feels like it's floating, drifting away from her presence... I can't feel her right now. Not in this moment. She isn't here.

All I see is the feral need in front of me as his cock thrusts into my waiting hand. A rhythm neither of us can stop anymore.

Moving my hand and body, I press our cocks together, side by side, skin on skin, heat against heat. The final step in making him see.

“Give in, Byron.”

My voice breaks from the need... a confession I didn't mean to make.

“Fuck,” he breathes. “You.” His voice is rough, guttural resentment laced with surrender.

And just like that, we cum together as one.

The moment should be final, but it isn't. I won't let it be. Carefully, I take my hand away from the water so our essence doesn't wash off. Proof. He needs to see it. Feel it. Understand it.

“Taste, Byron. Taste your truth...”

I smile as I wait for him to open his mouth, but he doesn't, as expected. Stubborn, even now. Even when the truth is right there, clinging to his skin. With a smile, I rub it on his lips, tracing the scar over his Cupid's bow. Dragging it across him, letting him wear it like a brand.

“How did you get that?”

“Fight,” he replies, his voice tense. But of course he did. Of course he fought. That's what he does. That's why he's here.

“Come, let's get the show going.” I say as I grab the soap and finish the job. Cleansing him. Resetting him. But we both know—he's already ruined.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:16 pm*

### Chapter Eleven

Byron

After we showered, Ren of course left me naked, saying something about how creating in your most vulnerable state makes it more magical. Personal.

Truthfully, I don't give a shit, but the words linger anyway, unwanted and intrusive, crawling into the back of my mind.

But if I want to survive long enough to put him down, then I needed to play his game. I needed to sink into the role so deeply that even I started to believe it. I needed him to believe the dream I was selling. That's all it was. A dream. Not a confession. Not a truth. Just another lie I had to tell to survive. So why does it feel more real every time I say it? All I've known is defiance, resilience—it's like second skin to me, woven into my bones. There's no bowing down. There's only fight.

Standing in front of the window, I try to focus on the trees, on the way they dance in the wind twisting, bending, but never breaking. Focus on anything but the intrusive thoughts clawing their way in, anything but the memory of whatever happened in the shower. My father must be turning in his grave to know he was right all along. That thought alone makes my stomach twist, a sick satisfaction at knowing he'd choke on his own certainty.

I was sick. Not because I was gay.

It was because of him.

The man who ripped off the mask and forced me into the light.

The man I will destroy.

My gratitude will be the knife in his back, the very thing that will unmake him.

The knife that puts him out of his misery. Or maybe mine .

After a few minutes of pacing around the room, each step only feeding the restless energy clawing beneath my skin, frustration begins to boil to the surface just as Ren enters the room, smug as ever and naked with a black blindfold in hand. Of course, he's enjoying this. Of course, he's making a show of it.

“Ready for your first lesson?” It wasn't a question, just another command, another moment of control he expects me to hand over. So I don't answer, and despite the urge that I have to beat the shit out of him, to wipe that smug expression off his face, I'm too weak to overpower him in my current state. Or maybe that's a lie I tell myself. Maybe it's easier to pretend I have no choice than to admit something darker.

No, Byron . I dig my nails into my palm, grounding myself.

The truth is, I'm sure Ren isn't working alone; his very presence is proof of that. He was injured and almost dead. He should be dead. So whoever helped him could be out there, and Gabriela could be in harm's way. I can't afford to make a mistake. The only way to win this game is with calculated movements and patience. No matter how much it burns inside me, no matter how much my skin crawls in his presence, I will endure.

I'll endure it all for her... for the only person I can't ruin, for the one piece of my life that still belongs to me.

So I turn around, allowing him to blindfold me. The fabric brushes over my skin, a soft contrast to the weight of what's happening. Holding my hand, he walks me out of the room. His grip is firm but easy, like he expects me to follow. Like he knows I will.

“Where are you taking me?”

“To the studio.”

My stomach drops at the nonchalance in his voice, and I know what my first lesson will be. The realization settles over me like ice, slow and numbing.

“For what?”

I ask even though I know the answer. I don't need to hear it. I knew the moment he walked in here, the moment he brought up lessons. Ren is a killer, after all, a psychopath with a need to create .

“Why do you ask questions you already know the answers to?”

He squeezes my hand, a warning disguised as a touch, “Byron. I told you we can create together. I have the perfect idea, and I need you.”

“Need me?”

“Yes. You're the muse... to the art and everything in between.”

I laugh at that, but not a small chuckle—no, one that booms off the walls. Too loud, too sharp. A sound that doesn't belong in this moment. Tears sting my eyes, and I'm glad that he can't see the emotions behind the blindfold. Glad he can't see how much his words burrow under my skin.

Unlike Ren, I have emotions, and as complicated as they are, I wouldn't be me without them. Wouldn't be the same person who loves, who protects, who still clings to something human inside me.

That's where we are different.

And I wasn't a killer. Not yet.

A fighter, yes. But a killer? Maybe. If you push me. If you force it on me.

But killer or not, I needed to become whatever I needed to for Gabriela's sake, even if it meant becoming something I'd never recognize again.

Even if I have to destroy myself in the process.

We don't walk far, which means his studio is inside the cabin. The smell of iron and urine hangs in the air, sickening and intoxicating. Each step forward only makes the stench thicker, coating my throat, clinging to my skin like something I'll never be able to wash off. My mind drifts to Theresita lying lifeless on the ground as he beat her over and over until her head was nothing but a bloody pulp. The sound still echoes somewhere in my skull, a sickening, wet crunch that refuses to fade.

"You see, Byron, in order to create you need to learn two things—patience and determination." His voice is light, amused, like he's teaching a child how to paint, not how to carve people into his twisted idea of art. I can hear him push something and then his hand wraps around mine. Too soft, too careful, like he's handling something fragile.

"Patience is needed to visualize the recreation, to bring your vision into fruition, and determination is needed to see it through." He chuckles as he slaps my arm. The contact is jarring, too casual, like he doesn't see the horror sitting in my throat.



“Sit,” he says as he helps me to the ground. The ground is sticky. The smell of blood clings in the air and now to my skin. It seeps into me, into every pore, like it’s making a home inside me. I don’t have to remove the blindfold to know I’m sitting in blood right now, but I don’t react. I can’t.

This is all a test, and he can’t break me. I repeat it in my head, but the words feel thinner every time.

“Now create, use all that pent-up anger.” His hands massage my shoulders as he leans in closer, taking a nibble from my ear, his breath too warm, too steady, like this is intimate. Like this is normal.

“Show me what you can do, Byron. Show me the dark.”

He pulls away, then within moments, he opens my hand. His touch is slow, deliberate while tracing the lines of my palm like he’s reading something in them. A map. A prophecy. Then a cold, thin object meets my hand. A scalpel. No mistaking it, no denying it, and no escaping what he’s about to make me do.

My hands quiver as they close around it. Tight, then loose, then tight again, like my body is unsure of what to do. I could end it all, and I consider it. One clean slice, one moment of courage, and this could all be over.

“A rose is so fragile when the thorns aren’t on the stem to protect it. So easy to pluck.”

And my stomach drops. My mind drifts far away as my hands feel for the warmth, fingers ghosting over something too soft, too real. I find it. Skin, trembling. Jasmine and iron choke me, twisting in my lungs, making me want to puke.

With shaky hands, I make the first cut because it’s better her than my sister. Because

I don't have a choice. Because Ren already decided for me .

I'm sorry. I think it over and over, but the words never reach my lips. My hand moves over and over, cutting and tracing. A sick rhythm. A dance. Thankful that at least I can't hear anything but low, feeble grunts and the rush of blood in my ears.

“Amazing,” Ren coos. His hand moves down my arm as he guides it. Like I need help, like I'm not already doing exactly what he wanted.

“You're gonna love it.”

I'm not, and we both know it.

But I comply because this is what he wants. Because this is what survival looks like now.

I don't know how long I carve up the person before me. Time doesn't exist here, only the weight of the blade and the pull of flesh beneath it. All I know is the scalpel feels heavy. My hands are sweaty and sticky from the blood.

“End it. End her misery.”

Ren removes the scalpel from my hand and helps wrap my fingers around a delicate throat. Too easy. Too practiced. Like he's done this a thousand times before.

I take in a deep breath, but it stutters in my throat. My fingers tremble against the delicate skin, hovering—just for a second—like I can still choose. Like I still have control.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't force myself to end it. I wasn't a killer... I'm not. I'm not. I can't be.

“What’s holding you back, Byron?”

Ren’s arms wrap around me, his chin resting on my shoulder. A cage. A whisper of something worse.

“End it. End the pain. The shame. End it all.”

My hands wrap tighter. A slow squeeze. A test. A moment of hesitation before something inside me cracks.

And I hear the faintest sound. A whimper. A last, useless fight.

Despite all that was done to her, she tries to fight, but there’s no use. There’s no mercy here. My hands grip her neck tighter and tighter.

I can hear the way Ren’s breathing picks up.

“That’s it, my Thorn, show me the dark.”

And I do. Because I already lost .

Ren moves from behind me, and I hear him frantically grabbing stuff, enthusiasm in every step. Like a child on Christmas morning. Like an artist finishing a masterpiece.

“Ahhh... Byron, you did it. Magnificent. Even better than I could have expected,” he coos behind me as a salty tear rolls down my nose and into my mouth. I squeeze long past the point of her being gone. Her pulse, once weak, is now nothing, but my hands refuse to let go.

Not until Ren is behind me. Not until he speaks.

“How did it feel to squeeze the light shielding you from the darkness?”

No.

NO. NO. NO. NO.

My blood rushes through my heart, almost stopping as a sob wrecks through me, recognizing the meaning behind the words. Something inside me tears. Not a slow rip, but a violent, gutting tear that leaves nothing intact. I heave, falling to my hands, bile choking me. My stomach revolts, my body shaking so hard it feels like I’m coming apart at the seams.

“NO. NOOO.”

The room spins, and everything is still black. Still blind. Still trapped. I can’t hear what he says, not even when he removes the blindfold and the world comes into view. Nothing registers. Nothing makes sense.

All I can focus on are the brown waves. The shape of her. The blood on my hands.

“Beautiful,” is all he says before I lunge at him, desperation making my movements reckless. Pain blinding me, consuming me.

Ren only laughs, clapping every time he dodges me. Like this is a game. Like my grief is something to be amused by.

“Focus, B,” he taunts, standing there like I’m some fucking portrait. Like I’m something new and fascinating.

“It’s not Gabriela,” he whispers, the words slow and deliberate, pulling me back just enough to make me look. To make me face the truth. Ren helps me focus on the dead

woman in front of me, removing the mask so I can see her face.

And my knees buckle, causing me to fall.

Because I was wrong. So fucking wrong.

I thought I could control something. I thought I could win.

I couldn't save my sister.

Because I can't even save myself. The world tilts sideways, and I hit the ground too hard, but I don't feel it. I don't feel anything. I thought I was playing his game. That I could outthink him, outmaneuver him. But I never had a chance. Not when the board was already set, and I was just another fucking piece.

### Chapter Twelve

Ren

“Byron...” I look at the man in front of me laying on the ground like a child weeping for a mother. “It was a lesson.” Seriously, can he not see that the masterpiece he created is not his sister. Gabriela is safe, away from the darkness. This was just a canvas, someone to show him the way, to pull him under long enough to understand. I thought he would understand like I did. I swallow the lump in my throat, and slowly, I creep towards him, each footstep feeling heavier as I step in the blood pooling in the room.

All I see is red. My hands. The floor.

“RED,” I whisper as I clutch my hair.

“Red. What?” The knife falls from my hand as I step back to look at her before doubling over to puke. “Did I do?”

Confusion.

So many unfamiliar sensations and emotions overtake me. I can't tell where my body ends and the room begins. Everything is bleeding into everything else as I stare at the open gashes on her stomach. It's so... so much. The smell is thick, sweet, and suffocating. It clings to the back of my throat and seeps into my skin. I cut down what made me sick but I think this made me terminal. The small, almost translucent body part that sticks out from the abomination within her. A small, almost translucent limb

twitches from the gaping wound, slick with blood. I puke again, not able to stomach looking at her face or the remains within her. My hands are sweaty, my heart beats uncontrollably, my ears ring, and all I can see is red.

RED.

RED.

All fucking red .

My mother laid on the bed, staining the white comforter and tiles... Staining the room as much as she stained my life. My vision blurs. Using my arm, the part not covered in crimson, I wipe away whatever is clouding my vision but it still blurs. It burns. I can't breathe, and then I feel it—an unfamiliar reaction.

I feel the warmth sliding down my face. It doesn't make sense.

It shouldn't be me.

I don't do this.

I slap my face over and over, and suddenly I'm back. There's red, but it's on him. This time, I'm not the one covered in it. "Why do you still cry? Gabriela isn't dead," I whisper as I crouch beside him, licking away the large tear sliding over his lips. But he doesn't react. He just lays there, allowing me to turn him on his back and straddle him.

"Byron." I cup his face in my hands, forcing him to focus on me. "She's alive. Your light shines to see another day." But still, nothing... and frustration boils within me. He can't be broken. This couldn't have broke him. It was a prank, just a small glimpse of what could happen if he were to leave me. "Stop acting this way," I yell

into his face, pushing my forehead into his.

“STOP FUCKING ACTING THIS WAY.” I slam my forehead into his. Harder. Again. Again. “IT’S PATHETIC.”

But even as my forehead smashes into his, there’s no one home. He’s checked out, and I refuse to let him fall into the void. We are supposed to live in it... mold in it... not drown in it. This was not what I expected. I wanted him willing, not fucking broken. Slamming my forehead into his once again, I feel the warm sticky substance that slides down both of our noses, mixing with the sweat and grime, and finally, he looks at me. What are you doing to me? His gaze isn’t filled with fear or hate, just an emptiness that gnaws at something inside me, something I don’t want to acknowledge.

Everything is too unfamiliar... too unstable, and I hate it. Maybe I should finish the creation, what’s the point of making him great when he wants to be nothing. So I should just let him be nothing, where’s the fun in that? The challenge? I release his face and stand, placing my foot on his face, pressing down just enough to make him squirm, feeling the bone shift slightly beneath my heel.

“You want to be nothing? This all you have to give?” I sneer, bending down so he can see my face, the bloodied mess he’s made of me, the proof of my patience.

“This was a lesson to show you what I will do.” My foot presses deeper into his face, my big toe entering his eyeball, the soft tissue giving way as warmth pools around the pressure.

“YOU FIGHT!” Digging deeper now, the squelch ringing in my ears. “OR she really dies,” I say before removing my foot from his face, and grabbing him by the back of the neck, my fingers threading through his short, damp curls that are growing in, forcing him to see his beautiful creation. The lines are uneven from his hesitation and



anger, yet so beautiful, a form of expression truer than words. I'm so sick of giving him choices when all he does is choose to do nothing.

I place his upper body between her legs and kneel behind him, and begin stroking my cock, the heat pulsing through my hand because nothing makes the void hungrier than control. Than destroying. Also, I needed to drown out that annoying little voice screaming to be heard, the one gnawing at the edges of my mind, whispering doubts I refuse to acknowledge. To drown out whatever is happening inside me, because I see the small cracks, hairline fractures, creeping into places I don't want them. I stop mid-stroke as I look at his back, at the small freckles all over it, ones I never noticed until today, like tiny constellations scattered across his skin. Get it together, Ren.

Maybe I should finish this... finish him. Destroy the Thorn and move on with my life. Yet I'm holding back. The frustration, anger, all things that I would contain within until they no longer existed in my world, overtake me and I stroke harder. This will hurt, and I want it to hurt. Desperately. The need coils tight in my gut, the urge to push past the hesitation and to take, to ruin, to silence every thought that dares to make me hesitate. So I push into him, causing him to tense—finally a reaction—but his ass is tight, unlubricated, and painful; his muscles clenching so hard it's like he's trying to push me out. But I welcome the pain. And soon he will too, his back arching toward me like his body already knows surrender.

"Relax, look at her," I say, dropping some spit onto my dry-ass cock, watching it drip down to my tip before working it around his tight hole. It's barely enough to ease the burn, and not nearly enough to prepare him. "You're so tight." I groan, pushing in, using my hand to hold him in place, feeling him struggle against my grip. "Relax."

"Fuck—" Ahh, there he goes. He tries to finish his words but I don't let him. Grabbing his hips, I force myself inside him, splitting him open, dragging him onto me as his body chokes around my cock causing the most exquisite sound to come out of him followed by a small sob—a pathetic, broken sound. But I fuck him through it,

savoring the way his body trembles, the way his breath stutters, and the way his pain carves itself into something I can claim.

I pound into him as he continues to sob... soft, pathetic sounds, and no matter how much I try to reach my climax... my happy place where I can escape... there's nothing. Only movement. I wanted this, but not like this, I expected more, and it fucking angers me. This is not how I expected it to go down. I grip his neck, lifting him up until his body is flush against mine, and do the only thing I can do. Not because I pity him. Not because I regret anything. But because I need him to stay, and I don't know how else to make him stay. Slowing down, trying to bring him back to the light, not that I know what the fuck I'm doing, but I'm sure this could help. I cover his eyes with my hands, and my mouth kisses his back as I slowly move inside him.

"She's safe," I whisper. "Stay with me and keep her safe." I don't even know what I'm saying, but it feels right. This feels right... "Just hear my voice." My hand releases his neck, moving down his tight abs and towards his cock. I've never wanted anyone like this but there is something about Byron—maybe it's the fact that being around him helps me forget. Unlike her, he's all muscle and scars. No softness.

Byron quiets my mind because he's not her... and the feeling of his skin on mine makes heat pool in my core as I continue to move with him, kissing the salty tears from his jaw and neck. "Feel this," I moan into his skin. "How good we feel." Another slow stroke of his cock while I press deeper into his ass. "How good I make you feel." Licking the tear trailing down his neck, I bite into his flesh as I move in sync with my hand. He will never top me, but he deserves a little pleasure after all the pain.

"Good boy," I whisper. "I was lonely, a victim ... of my own prison." I continue to fuck him causing his body to tremble against my body.

Byron's body begins to react beautifully. His precum coats my hand, and this feels right. Two souls broken, shattering beautifully for one another. Byron breaks in my arms, his body wrecking while sobs shattered him. He clutches me, not fighting, not pushing away, just holding on, drowning in something deeper than pain. I feel his fingers digging into my skin, but there's no strength left in them.

"I need you, B." The words surprise me. "Join me." Not in love. Not in forgiveness. But in the only thing left between us—ruin. I moan as my dick jumps inside his ass. His moans are soft... as he resists the unspoken truth between us. And we come together, both moaning, both covered in blood... both utterly and completely broken, no longer holding the pieces together, but I hold him through it. I don't even know why I bother with all this, but holding him is all I want to do. Holding my masterpiece as he comes undone, until my cock softens inside him, his tears stop falling, and my cum leaks between his legs.

### Chapter Thirteen

#### Byron

“B yron, you need to be a man,” Pops says as he lights up a smoke and hands me one. I grab it because, for the first time, he wants me around. He wants to bring me into his world, and I need to make him proud. “And as a man, you need to fuck some good pussy.” Pulling at the cigarette, he stares at me, using his mouth to motion to the strip joint behind us.

“I’m not old enough to be inside yet, or drink,” I mutter as I bring the cigarette to my lips, lighting it and taking a pull. The minty smoke makes me want to cough, burning my throat on the way down, but I gather my balls and hold it in. Making Daddy proud. But my stomach drops as I look at him, slowly watching the disdain in his eyes from the shame his son brings him. It’s so loud, so suffocating, that it makes me uncomfortable and forces me to look down at the cigarette dangling between my fingers.

His large, calloused hands tousle my short curls. “Cut this hair off. Men don’t wear long hair, son. That’s for bitches,” he says, giving a strong tug at my hair before he lets go, the force making my scalp sting. We smoke in silence. Well, mostly me. He’s busy talking to the bouncer and the woman who would show me how to be a man. Looking up at the clear night sky, the stars twinkle before me, flickering like they’re laughing at me, and all I can think about is what I’m about to do.

What if it doesn’t work? What if I can’t get hard again?

I just wished he knew that I had tried... I tried with Sandra, and it almost worked... almost. But I don't know what holds me back, what kills the moment.

"Pa," I mutter, trying to keep my voice firm as I turn to watch my dad, his eyebrows pinching together as he finishes his cigarette, his muscles on display thanks to the black beater he's wearing. Looking like he came straight from work, so mom doesn't notice, but I know. And the shame burns greater, the guilt all consuming, sinking into my stomach like a stone, heavy and inescapable. I look down. We wear the same jeans with the same stains, a black beater, and Timbs. We dress alike... share the same DNA... but we're so different, worlds apart in ways that can never be bridged.

Dad chuckles into the phone. "Trátalo bien. Treat him well" he jokes as he ends the call, slapping the back of my shoulder hard enough to jolt me forward, a forced show of camaraderie that makes my skin crawl. I force out a smile as I follow my dad into the Red Den, my stomach twisting with every step.

The bright red lights from the door shine off us, casting everything in a hellish glow, and I feel like I'm being dragged into something I can't crawl out of. The smoke from the hookahs and fog machine pours from the door as Dito—a mammoth of a bodyguard—stands at the entrance, his gaze heavy and unreadable, like he's seen this happen a thousand times before. My father slides him a bill, and he opens the door for us, the scent of sweat, smoke, and sex thick in the air, clinging to my skin before I even step inside.

My dad chuckles deeply as he clasps my shoulder before whispering in my ear, his breath thick with tobacco, "Show her that you're your father's son." And his voice hits like a freight train, the weight of expectation slamming into me, suffocating.

His son. His prodigy.

Nothing greater for a man than his firstborn to be a son... a mini him.

But my daddy couldn't have a son who likes men.

I was a disgrace in his eyes. I don't even think I'm gay. I'm just confused. But I guess I need to figure that out soon because Dad expects me to perform. A woman comes from behind the club dressed in a skin tight black dress and fishnets, her red curls bouncing with every step. And my heart sinks, the air around me turning thick, suffocating as I realize that it's my best friend's mother, Yolanda, walking toward me with a smile tugging on her red lips, eyes knowing, unreadable, like she understands exactly what this is.

"About time," she says as she walks up towards me, voice smooth, too casual, like this is just another night. My dad slaps her ass, and she winks at him as she wraps her arms around me, her perfume too strong, too sweet, making my stomach twist. My mouth begins to open to speak, words forming but failing before they leave my tongue.

I couldn't do this.

Not with her, of all people.

But from the corner of my eye, I see the smile on my Pop's face, his pride settling into the lines of his face like cement—thick and permanent—and I swallow my shame. Cupping her ass and pulling her to me, my hands tremble despite my best efforts to keep steady. Her soft lips crash against mine, and suddenly, all I see is her son.

My dick comes alive at the memory of that night, the softness of his lips as they slowly pressed into mine, warmth and heat, something forbidden and unspoken.

"No one has to know," he whispers into my lips as my hands ball into fists at my side, the ghost of his breath still lingering, still haunting me. Closing my eyes, I let her

tongue slide into my mouth, her soft hands moving inside my shirt, the guilt pressing harder, sinking its claws into me, dragging me deeper.

Harder...harder... and I push her off.

“I’m sorry, I can—“ My words are cut off by a strong blow. I don’t register who hit me until I’m on the ground, mouth full of blood and the taste of her tongue. My father’s hands bury themselves in my curls as he pulls me up, his fingers twisting too tight, yanking my head back so I have no choice but to look at him. “Open up, Yolanda. Let him taste a fucking cunt.”

Tears sting my eyes, blurring my vision as I watch her lay on the leather booth and spread open, legs parting like this is nothing, like I’m nothing.

“Da—“ I choke out, slapping his hand away, the sting lingering on my palm. Does he know that she is the mother of my friend?

“Grow the fuck up, Byron. BE A MAN,” he says, his voice sharp, venomous, as he presses me into her cunt, but I couldn’t.

I can’t.

I have a girlfriend... that I hide from everyone.

My sister.

And Yolanda’s son.

Armando.

I try to get out of his grip, but my dad is like a madman, his fingers digging into my

scalp like he's trying to rip me from myself. I look around the club, but it seems like everyone is too blasted to care, too busy inside someone to see.

“LOOK, THIS IS HOW YOU DO IT.” My dad's voice booms over the music as he tosses me to the side, my body hitting the seat hard enough to knock the breath from my lungs. “Sit.”

And then he walks over to Yolanda, his belt undone, the leather sliding through the loops like a slow, deliberate threat, and the bile rises in my throat as I think of him at home.

Does Mom know?

Does Gabriela ?

He isn't like this with her—will he ever treat her that way?

I couldn't force myself to look at my father as he fucked another woman, and I couldn't contain the bile clawing up my throat. Pushing myself off the seat, I run.

Run as fast as I can, stumbling into the bathroom, shoving open the green graffiti-covered stall, and emptying the contents of my stomach into it.

Suddenly, I feel a sharp pat on the back.

“Why are you puking?”

Ren's voice is stern as I open my eyes, but I guess he's behind me because all I see is the digested food he fed me earlier, bile and acid mixing into something foul on the floor. The smell of bleach and herbs fills the air, sharp and suffocating, burning the inside of my nose as I breathe in.



Was it real? Or am I losing my mind along with my body and my morals... my dignity?

“Don’t tell me you’re pregnant,” he teases from behind me .

I shrug him off and fall on my back, my limbs heavy, my breath shallow. The room looks back to normal, all clean and pristine. Except for the pile of puke beside me, and the red that still stains my hand, drying in the creases of my fingers and under my nails, refusing to be forgotten. Ren stands above me, one foot on each side of my face, his weight pressing down, making his presence impossible to ignore. “It’s getting dark out, and it’s almost time for dinner.”

I scoff.

Does he think I care?

“Go eat,” is all I say, causing Ren to laugh while pushing his onyx strands behind his ear, his movements slow, deliberate, knowing. His hair is longer... and he’s much leaner, but still so effortlessly handsome and put together, like he was sculpted for this moment, for this world.

He’s all dressed up now wearing a black turtleneck, black pants that fit him like a glove, and some black loafers that are now pressed into my throat, firm and unwavering .

Still expensive... still charming... still lethal and depraved.

“ You will join me. I have a surprise for you.”

“I don—“ I try to choke out as his foot presses deeper into my throat, cutting off my words, cutting off my air.

“It was not a choice,” he presses deeper, his gaze sharp and unwavering. “Not a request.”

Maybe I should let it all end here. If I die, maybe, just maybe, he will be too disappointed to go after Gabby. If her big brother was so breakable, what would be the fun in tearing her down? Then his phone rings, the sound slicing through the air like a blade, and he releases his hold on my throat as he steps back, answering the call with a menacing smile on his face.

Pressing a finger to his lips, “behave,” he says as he slides to answer the call, his voice is light and amused, just another game to him.

And the sound of my sister’s voice freezes me.

“Kevin, stop,” she muses, breathless.

“Fu—“ she moans. “Kevin.” She continues to call out to him as he fucks her into the mouth of a wolf.

### Chapter Fourteen

Ren

I've never been so addicted to a feeling than when watching a grown ass man with muscles, scars, and trauma bend to the sound of a woman's voice. Maybe this is why I'm so fascinated with my Thorn. I guess, in a way, we were both prisoners to a woman, though his might not have been as sick and twisted as mine. But it's prison—what else would you call the look in his eyes, how immediately his defiance left the building the moment her voice sounded through the phone? No fight. No catatonic state. Only one thing. Protection.

Even in his circumstances, Byron fights to protect the one thing he holds dear. I still don't get it. How can someone have so much effect on another? I cut down my sickness. Could he do the same? Would he be capable of turning off his light and freeing himself from the shackles that bind him to his prison? I doubt it, but I would love to test the theory. How far can I push him? To me, love is sickness, and I prefer the cure... and I'll show him the recipe.

Gabriela moans, and the sound of skin slapping interrupts my thoughts. I see the anger he hides from me, but there's no hiding from a mirror. I'm a reflection of all he could be if he would just step into the void, but it's okay—I'm here to guide him. My greatest masterpiece.

Walking towards him, I circle him like prey, not that I view him that way. No, Byron isn't prey... he's a predator. He just needs a little push... the right determination.

With a smile, I crouch behind him, and using my free hand, I grab his neck and pull him towards me. My nose trails up his thick neck as I press the phone to his ear, letting him hear my control. My reach.

I let him understand the threats behind his sister's moans. The last canvas was a decoy, a simple test of what I can do and will do. And Byron understands. His neck straightens, and I can feel the clench of his jaw, so I end the call.

"Do you understand?" I whisper against his skin.

He nods, but it's forceful, full of anger, and I smile, pulling away and standing.

"You're naked and bloody, so a shower and then food. Let's go."

Begrudgingly, he stands and follows my instructions like a good boy. He's my puppet, and I pull the strings.

"Bathroom first," I say, grabbing him and bringing him into the master room—my room. It's not the luxuries I'm accustomed to, but it's cozy, clean, and dare I say, homey. Byron steps into the bathroom and then into the shower. The water cascades down his body, crimson blending with the water rivulets falling from his inked skin.

My hands twitch, my dick aches, and I don't know what to do with myself. I should be moving. I should be talking. But instead, I just stand there like a creep, watching as he washes his body, as if there's some thrill in restraint. Maybe there is.

Byron's voice catches me off guard, and I fucking hate it. "Was it Kevin who helped you that night?"

I watch as he turns around to face me, rinsing the soap from his body. His arms are above his head, his V-cut defined, and the snakes inked on his side stretch. Who

would have thought my fascination would come in the body of a man?

“You ask a lot of dumb questions, but given your education, I should expect that. But to answer your question, yes.”

Byron turns off the water with a scowl on his face. I hand him a white towel, and he snatches it from my hand.

Feisty. Just how I like him.

It will make taming him so much tastier.

He doesn't know it— yet, but we're already past the point of choice.

Before we walk out the bathroom and into the bedroom he stops, the towel wrapped around his waist, and he looks at me over his shoulder. “Why?”

Why? The question really pulls the rug from under my feet, and given the look on his face, he must have noticed the small reaction he pulled from me. Fuck, even I felt that. Felt. I could laugh at the thought that I can feel anything but satisfaction and pleasure, but right now, something else stirs. Something I don't fucking want.

“I like breaking and remaking things, Byron. You lack perception, and maybe this is why you're here with me.” I pause and smile. “Again.” I finish with a wink before moving past him, but I feel the quickening in my heartbeats, and the way my stomach twists in a knot. I don't fucking get it. Why?

Why?

Why?

What the fuck am I supposed to answer? Why I kill? Why I create? Why am I fascinated with a man even though I know I'm not gay? From the very start, I was forced to love soft curves, black long hair, red manicured hands. And he... he's nothing like her. NOTHING. My hands involuntarily fist at my sides, nails digging into my palms so hard I might break skin, my vision focusing on the bed. The sheets are black, but I can still see the red... still see the stain.

"My sweet... sweet boy," she purrs against my ear, my hands grip her waist, driving her into me all while I drive myself out to the abyss... the void... that consumes me whole.

From behind me, Byron coughs, and for once, I'm thankful his presence pulls me out of the void. The air is too tight in my lungs, my throat too dry, but I push through it, latching onto the anger instead. "Get dressed, the clothes are on the bed," I say before storming out of the room, leaving him alone and heading towards the kitchen. There's not many places he can go, and I'm in the mood for a hunt... to destroy... but first, my second surprise, another step toward dark. Then we can play. Then I can continue feeding my addiction.

After our little session, from the shock I'm assuming, or maybe it was the sex, Byron fell asleep on the floor. I close my eyes and picture him laying on the ground, blood trailing down from his forehead. My hand involuntarily moves to the sore spot on mine. Red puffy eyes from his tears, and I can still taste the saltiness from them. But that wasn't enough, not for what he will need to do in the end.

He needs more conditioning.

I didn't become Ren Sato in just one day—it took years to mold this monster. But I don't have time. Kevin can only keep his sister busy for so long, soon she will begin looking for her brother, so time isn't my ally here. If she finds him before I finish, then all of this—all the work I put into him—will be wasted.

I begin to plate our dinner with a smile as I take a step back after placing the hot plates on the small dining table. Two lit candles sit in the middle of the wooden table, with two plates on each end. I even have a joint rolled in the middle, sitting between the candles, and two beers. A little reward goes a long way when conditioning, and this is his.

It takes me a moment to gather myself, something I never needed to do until now. I don't know why, but I breathe in deeply, then I open the door.

Byron stands with his back toward me, sporting a cashmere knit sweater and dark blue jeans and no shoes. He didn't need those—I want it to hurt when the time comes.

“You look handsome, Thorn.” I say, coming up from behind him, but he doesn't turn, doesn't flinch, doesn't even breathe differently when my arms wrap around his waist. That... irritates me. Nothing, not even when I place a soft kiss on the crook of his neck, intoxicating myself with him.

“Dinner is ready, indulge me with your presence,” I say before pulling away, grabbing his arm, and walking him out of the room. Really, more like dragging him. He's on autopilot, but his body, while compliant, still has that lingering defiance.

That won't do. Not for what comes next.

I watch as he takes a seat, taking in his surroundings, and I take my seat in front of him. Twisting off the caps from the cheap beer, I hand him one. “You know, despite my success, I never had this.” I use a finger gesturing between us.

Byron raises an eyebrow as he reluctantly takes the beer and takes a swig, then another. “You never had a meal with someone?”

Good. He's talking back. This might turn out better than expected.

“I mean, yes, but I always wore a mask for the world. It’s nice to be me,” I say as I take a swig from my beer. “It’s lonely being one way and pretending to be another. To hold an image in order to be digestible for others.” Placing my elbows on the table, I use them to lean in. “Aren’t you tired of pretending?”

Byron takes a long sip of the beer, then picks up his fork, playing with his food, or rather, inspecting it. “I don’t pretend.”

I follow his lead, grabbing my own fork and stabbing into the broccoli. “You do. I watched you always pretending to be one way.” Pointing my fork at him. “You went back there, to the studio. You wanted me to find you...” Leaning in closer. “To take you.” Bringing the fork to my mouth, I take the broccoli and chew it, slowly, before finishing.

“To fuck you. You want me, and that’s what you hate about yourself. You like every fucking twisted thing I did to you.”

Byron doesn’t react to my words as he begins to eat. “Maybe I did.” He pauses, and through his thick curly lashes, he looks up at me. “All that proves is that I’m sick and liked being fucked.”

His honesty humors me, and I smile, at first. But he doesn’t, and that pisses me off. My smile fades because I see that, like my mother, I will fail. I tell myself I won’t. That I’m in control. That he’s mine.

But I know the truth.

You can’t condition love.

And that’s the one truth I can admit.



Byron is proof of that—his love for his sister is unwavering, willing, and true.

Nothing will touch that.

But I will be the thing that haunts it. When he looks at her, when she looks at him, they will see me between them.

### Chapter Fifteen

Byron

I continue to eat, trying to contain the small tremors in my hands or how crazy my heart is beating inside my chest. Ren couldn't realize how much saying those words out loud affected me. How much this entire situation is affecting me. Taking a piece of the meat, I begin to chew it slowly, feeling the weight of Ren's eyes on me from across the table. Looking up, I catch him smiling, beer in hand. "How does she taste?"

I choke on the pieces of chewed up meat, bile roaring like a tsunami up my throat. My eyes move with him as he brings a piece of meat—of her—to his mouth and eats it. Immediately, the contents of my stomach spill to the ground as Ren watches. The humiliation burns hot, but the anger boils brighter, and I don't think. Grabbing my plate from the table, I hurl it towards Ren. "You sick fuck, what the fuck is wrong with you?"

Ren cocks his head to the side, avoiding the hit, dusting off a piece of meat that fell on his shoulder. "Everything," he says before he resumes eating. "Sit."

My anger is uncontrollable, my body is shaking.

"Why?" I demand, smashing my fist on the table, picturing it was his devilish face. How can someone so privileged in life be so cruel? Or is it this privilege that has made him this way, so out of touch? Why the fuck is Ren so fucking twisted? And why the fuck does he affect me the way he does?, What kind of sick fuck am I? Ren

stops eating, reaching over the table casually as if he didn't just force me to eat... eat... I can't even say it, and he— and I bite back the urge to heave. “WHY?”

“I told you I like to destroy things, rebuild them?” Ren brings the joint to his lips and lights it up, shrugging as he takes a pull from the herby smoke. “Byron, sometimes you have to evolve, or in my case, adapt. I can't immortalize my creations, so I make them part of me.” He pulls the joint from his lips and passes it to me. My hands move too quickly to process as it smacks Ren's hand, the joint falling to the ground. Pulling back his hand, Ren pushes his chair back and leans onto it.

“What, it pisses you off that I'm honest? That I'm me and own it?” There's no emotion in his voice, he's just reading me to filth. Am I this transparent to him?

“Does it make you mad that I do what I want, or,” pointing his finger to his temple, he presses it hard against it, “does it piss you off that you don't understand what goes on in here? Byron, there's no reason. I just want to.” His finger falls from his temple. “Maybe I was never taught to be anything more than just Ren Sato,” he says. His voice shows the smallest hint of emotion, but he recovers quickly and stands, walking over to the discarded joint, and then grabbing a remote. “You see, when you live a life like I did, you learn the ugliness of the world.” He turns on a screen that's mounted on the beige wall above the small living area across the room. “So you learn to survive, to adapt, to always remain ahead.” The screen cuts on and I stare at the screen. I expected to see my sister—I know Ren has her in his hands. But what I didn't expect to see was Johnathan.

“You see, I watched... I waited, and I planned. Control is what helps you win,” he says with a smile, and whatever anger I had burning in me is now showered by an icy cold bath of realization of Ren's fucked game.

“If you—“ I begin to say, but Ren cuts me off, waving his hand to silence me. “Before you finish, let me show you.” With a pep in his step, Ren walks toward a

box, his back covers what he's doing, but then I see my phone in his hand and a burner one.

“You see, I saw you get close to Mr. Tavarez, but I also know he has certain kinks.” He laughs at that like he just said a great joke, but I didn't understand what I was missing. “But boy, does he have the hots for you and a thing for underground glory holes where he schedules meetups. Perfect place to encounter me. And well, I was inspired. ”

My stomach tightens in knots, and I can see it in his face—he's satisfied with my reaction. There's no denying the horror I convey through my features.

“Why?” I ask again, because I need to understand what drives this compulsion with me, his obsession. He might fight it, deny it, and pretend, but I'm assuming any other serial killer would have given up by now. Or did we both come to the same conclusion—we gotta finish what was started. Ren doesn't acknowledge me. With a smile on his face and the joint between his lips, he begins to text, and then my eyes move towards the screen. My chest tightens, dread licking at the edge of my ribs.

Johnathan sat on the corner of his bed, naked with a towel around his waist, when his phone screen lights up, and with a smile, he grabs it. My pulse spikes as my eyes snap to Ren's hands.

But it's not Ren's burner phone that lights up... it's mine... My breath hitches, and I feel my stomach clench tighter, colder.

Ren holds it triumphantly. “You see? So happy to hear from Byron and his adventures in Montana.” My heart sinks—I've been so in my head that I don't even know where I am. A cold sweat begins to crawl across my neck.

“Are we in Montana?” I ask, hating the small shake in my voice. It betrays me.

Ren shakes his head. “No. I wanted to stay close by.”

“For what?” I ball my hands into a fist as I walk towards Ren, when he places the phones back into the box, and takes a pull of the joint that burned in his lips. My eyes don’t leave his hands, don’t trust what comes next.

Storming towards me, he cups my jaw, his nails digging into my skin just deep enough to make me wince, not bleed, but still painful enough to remind me he could. Then his lips press into mine and the familiar marijuana smoke invades my mouth, followed by his tongue. My body stiffens. It’s not a kiss—it’s branding. A possession. A fucking violation. I push him back, spitting at him .

Ren lets out a barky laugh before he backhands me. Pain explodes across my face. My ears ring. I stagger.

“Break or not. I’ll still find a way to make you submit. I don’t need your fear, Thorn, just your obedience. And when I want, your body.” His voice is cold, final, not a threat but a law. And somehow, that’s worse.

“RUN,” he says angrily, as he begins to remove his shirt. “If you want your freedom, earn it. Because if you let me catch you, Byron,” he looks at me. “I won’t just fuck you, I’ll destroy you.”

Cold shivers run down my spine at his words. I don’t even know if I want to run or just let him get this over with. Whatever sick game he’s playing, I know there’s no escape for me. So I walk slowly backwards until my back hits the table, and I grab my beer, taking a long sip, my eyes never leaving Ren as he rolls his neck. His lean muscles stretching with each movement, the crack of his joints sounds louder than it should.

“I’m giving you a choice, which I said I wouldn’t do, but fuck, you always make the

stupidest one.”

He wasn't wrong. It's like all my survival instinct goes out the door for him, and all I want to do is submit. To be in that studio with a chain around my neck and his cock buried in my ass. Because for the first time, I was me—the true me. My body trembles, my knees go weak, and my hands begin to feel clammy. I can't breathe. The room feels smaller, my vision unfocused, and I'm no longer standing in Ren's cabin, but in the club, fucking Armando's mother as my father fucked her mouth, I close my eyes.

I feel delicate hands on my face, and when I come back into it, Ren's dark void stares back at me, and I feel the burn in my eyes. Fuck, I don't want to cry. Not here... not in front of him. So I do what I've always known—my head moves back and then forward, connecting with him.

“WHAT THE FUCK,” he growls, but before he recovers, I'm already running. My hand touches the door handle, and when it opens, I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding, and I run into the dark night.

### Chapter Sixteen

Ren

I hold my nose as I watch the fucker slip out the door and into the darkness. Then my hands move to my pants, removing them and then my shoes. Walking naked into the kitchen, I grab a steak knife from the drawer. Tonight I'm carving... creating under the moonlight as he comes undone for me. I was hoping it would turn out this way, that he would willingly give me the chase... play into my hand. , And, oh how beautifully did he react. Always so willing, even though he hides behind resistance. On my way towards the door, I grab the beer on the table and finish it, letting him run as far as he can since he will only circle back to me .

And that makes this game so much better... so much more fun... because there's no escape, and I win. I smile as I twirl the steak knife in my hand, picturing his face as I fuck him and carve him up, his pain and ecstasy blending into one beautiful color. My dick hardens between my legs, and fuck, I've never been this aroused by someone. So moved by someone... I don't know if I want to keep him or break him. But I guess we will have to see if he survives me first.

Walking towards the door, I close my eyes, breathing in the cold air, welcoming the cool breeze that regulates my burning body, and listening to the woods that surround us, when a thought comes to my mind... one of those moments that sticks with you.

I run after the new maid—my new play toy—and her giggles fill the woods. Mom is away for business and won't be back... but my blood freezes when I catch up to the woman. A knife protrudes from her chest when she turns around. Blood pours from

her mouth.

“Ren,” she whispers, her hands trembling as they reach toward the knife. “Hel—“ she tries to speak, but I pull out the knife and bring it to her neck, my eyes never leaving the pair watching us.

The approval in them as I slash her throat open from ear to ear. Melanie or Marie—not sure if I remember her name correctly—collapses on the ground, gurgling on the blood. Choking. Her teary eyes remain on me, and I watch as the light fades from them. My eyes lock on the river of crimson flowing from her neck stilling, as her perfume overpowers the smell of dirt and blood.

“Good boy,” she says as she tussles my hair before me, pulling me towards her.

Instantly my dick reacts, and I hate how easy it’s become. It’s instant... it’s conditioned... I’m branded...

I come out of the trance as I fall on the ground, tripping on a dead branch. I notice I’m deep in the woods, and then I hear a branch snap from behind me. And just as I turn around, my face connects with a branch and I stagger back, falling on my ass as the steak knife cuts me as I fall.

And I laugh as my Thorn steps into view, “That was unexpected,” I say calmly .

But before I can rise, his foot is on my chest. And it’s invigorating... my dick reacts to his command, and I hate it.

“I hate you,” he sneers, and for me, being a man of control... I’m about to play my most risky hand. Burying the steak knife in the small pile of dead leaves and debris, I pray he doesn’t realize that I’m playing him. I want this. I wonder what he would do. “I hate you,” he repeats.



I smile as I taste the blood that's streaming into my mouth from my nose. "You say that, but what will you do about it? Wanna know what I did with my sickness? Killed it. Killed it while it bore our abomination. I killed them both."

Byron's face shows pure, utter horror. He shakes his head. "What happened to you?" he asks, his voice firm, trying to hide his concern for me. But I should be the last person he should pity. I didn't need it. Didn't want it.

"Nothing. I was just born this way... or created. Still debating on that one. "

Byron presses his foot on my throat, thinking he's won, and I'll let him taste his victory. Let him get to the high of his glory. "I'll ask you again. What do you plan on doing?" Come on, Thorn. Learn a little bit.

Take. Take. Take.

And he contemplates fighting his moral compass... his desires, and I wonder which one will win—his head or his dick. I bet it's the latter. There's no denying the bulge between his legs. I see it, and I'm sure he feels it.

"Ahh," he screams at the sky as his foot presses deeper. "How does it feel to not have any control?" he asks.

And that causes me to laugh.

I laugh so hard that I feel tears pricking the corners of my eyes. If he only knew. But even with what little I've said, he should be able to piece it together. Or maybe I'm giving him too much credit.

"What's so funny?"

“You.”

That earns me a kick. And then another.

“How does it feel?” he asks again.

But all I can do is laugh.

I laugh because I never actually had control... that’s the ugly truth. For as long as I can remember, I was shackled to her... even now, I remain shackled to her... to my void... to my compulsion. I just pretend that I’m in control. I guess I am—in a way—of others’ lives. And I guess that’s why I do what I do. Because it’s the only thing I can control. How it ends.

I open my arms, as he looks down at me, chest moving up as he takes me in. “Why are you sick?” he chokes out a sob, touching his chest. “Why am I sick?” He looks like a wounded dog. “Why do I—“ he stops himself as his hand moves to his cock.

Causing my smile to widen.

“Maybe I’m your cure. Maybe I wasn’t infecting you but curing you,” I say, looking up at him as he continues to battle his morals and his needs.

Byron runs a hand over his head before kicking me one last time. “I should do to you what you’ve done to others.” His voice shakes as he lands another kick. “Me. You didn’t cure me. You infected me. ”

Then, whatever restraint kept him in place unleashes, and his hands move frenzied to release his cock from his pants. Grabbing a fistful of my hair, he doesn’t even look at me. “Open your filthy mouth so I can fuck it and make it my cum rag,” he growls.

He doesn't wait for me to follow his command, his dick pushes into my mouth, and I look up at him and feel something.

Proud .

Tears sting my eyes as he pushes into my mouth, my lips stretching over his thick length, and using my hair, he moves my head. Not looking at me, his eyes look up at the sky, but I look at him. And my heart feels like it grows inside, because I was right about him, and nothing is more beautiful than him at this moment. The shame, the desire, the need, pain, and disgust all blend to form the perfect picture that my hands twitch to create, but I bite back the urge and let him fuck my mouth.

His hips move into my face with such force as he hate-fucks my throat, causing me to gag and cough around his dick. I never thought I would ever be in the position where I let another man choke me with his cock, but what can I say—sometimes you gotta lose some. And if I'm being honest, I'm actually enjoying this... enjoying Byron. My hand moves up his leg as he goes deeper, up his v-cut, and I moan. I fucking moan, and so does he.

Then he looks down, and I feel small dots of rain but it's not raining. It's Byron's tears which makes the moment sweeter. Using my hand, I cup his balls, softly massaging them as I let him get his way with my throat.

"I fucking hate you," he groans out.

"Sure you do," I coo around his length before pulling away, licking the precum that had escaped from his slit. "But your dick loves me."

Once again, he tightens his hold on my hair and slams his dick in my mouth. This time I have no room to breathe. I choke on my spit, on the lack of air. My hand moves to the ground, searching for my ace, as he holds his cock in my throat.

“Fucking—“ he pushes deeper, still holding my head in place. “Choke.”

Ropes of warm cum invade my mouth, and this is a first for me. My hand encloses around the handle of the steak knife, and just as he’s about to pull out, I bite down—stabbing the knife into his upper leg. Not deep enough to kill or truly hurt him, but to show him that I’ve been in control. Not him.

I look up to see him looking at the knife in his leg. Pulling back, I place a soft kiss on the tip of his dick before twisting the knife in his hip, causing him to scream out in pain.

“How did it feel, Byron? How did it feel to taste control...”

Byron falls to his knees when I pull out the knife and stand, placing the blade on his throat, and slicing just enough to make it burn.

“You look so beautiful when you shatter. Truly.”

Using my free hand, I rip off his shirt. Then, on his chest, I begin to carve... a thorn, right in the middle.

Mine .

The knife doesn’t do justice to my work, the lines jagged due to the dullness. But he takes it like a trooper.

“You know, I thought I would have to stop creating now that I’m kind of a fugitive—but this is fun,” I say, spreading the blood across his chest.

Both of us are on our knees, but only one has submitted.

“Thank you for being my muse, inspiration, and canvas,” I say, as I finish the only thorn that sticks out of the thin stem I carved into his chest.

“My Thorn,” I whisper, before leaning in, using my tongue to clean off the blood on his chest, and my hand moves down to his hardened cock.

“You enjoy our game so much, but no more fun for you. Now it’s my turn,” I say before standing, my thumb moving to his lips as my other hand strokes my cock. Blood covering my pierced member.

“See this?” I show him the ladder under my cock. “I did them for you. So you can enjoy it. Mouth or ass?” I ask, giving him a choice—but I didn’t care about his answer. He took too long, so ass it is.

“Get on all fours, pet. Lay down and let your owner claim you.”

He fights it, but I slap him. Grabbing the knife again, I place it on his throat. I don’t actually need him on all fours. Positioning myself behind him, I spit into my free hand while my other hand remains on the knife that sits against his neck.

Using as much spit as I can, I lube up my cock, then spit some more on my fingers and massage it around his tight hole. His body shivers against mine.

I don’t go hard. I take my time, letting him sit in his shame under the stars. I make love to him. Corrupting him, I press into his back, my nose running along his skin... poisoning him. Forcing his will to bend to mine. Slowly, I push harder against him, my knife still on his neck as I kiss the length of his neck. He moans softly, and I do too. We are both here. Present. Enjoying it. And I feel something strange—something that makes this too much. Gritting my teeth, I pick up my pace and fuck him harder.

“Fu—“ he begins to say, but the pain quiets him. I feel the warmth of blood on my

hand, so I drop the knife, afraid I'll kill him. I push his face into the dirt and fuck him until there's nothing left but cum and shame.

### Chapter Seventeen

Byron

“Mmm that’s it.” the sound of Kevin’s voice followed by the sharp sound of skin slapping and in sync with the soft moans of my sister. It’s my own personal melody, one I’ve grown to loath. I swear he has the sound on replay just to torture me, the hunger didn’t bother me... but knowing I can’t protect her, that hurts. That’s the true torture.

“Who’s your daddy?” and with that I almost lose my complete fucking shit. “REN!” I shout but it’s no use. Ren isn’t coming for my punishment. I don’t know how long it’s been since I saw Ren, I just been here dying slowly. The days have passed by slowly... blending together with hunger. I don’t even know how long it’s been since I ran, and I took him under the stars thinking I had won. The door only opens when I’m asleep, so I know he’s been looking. Aware of my current state.

Watching how slowly he’s killing me with the sounds of my sister’s voice filling the underground space. It’s hell.

Crushing my hands to my ears, I smack them over and over.

“Make it stop!” I yell. “REN!”

But there’s no stopping this, the hell Ren created... There’s no stopping my torture, but I need to endure for her. But fuck, I’m struggling.

I'm starving.

Weak and cold.

The sounds of Gabriela fill the room, the moans over and over. I've listened to Kevin play my sister like a fiddle. The wolf is inside our home and my sister doesn't even know, she doesn't know the danger she is in.. I need to win. I can't let him break me down... no matter how much he's tried... No matter how far I sink into the darkness, I have to save her, even if, in the end, it means destroying myself.

"REN!" I scream again weakly, my voice hoarse from yelling into the void. Even my nail beds are torn from digging into the soil trying to find the camera or the speaker.

To make it stop.

I couldn't listen to my sister being devoured while I let him tear me down. What if I break and there's nothing left to save us both. I'm aware and Gabby isn't. There is no choice but to break. I look at the plates piling up in the corner. Flies buzz around them and I can see the maggots moving in the dark on the rotting meat. Ren continually tries to feed me. The smell of the rot and human waste is overbearing. I hiccup, staring into the void, trying to bite back the humiliation, the acknowledgment that it's working....

My dad's voice whispers over and over. "Maricón, weak..." as the sting from his belt ghosts my back. "I didn't raise a bitch." Another lash. "I raised a man." More lashes come, harder and harder. I bring my legs towards my chest and curl into the fetal position.

Theresita's cold hands cup my cheek, and I look at her face, caved inward, the bat Ren used engraved in her head over and over. Teeth are missing, but her eyes remain the same.



Glassy. Teary. And dead.

She doesn't say anything, her mere presence is my haunt.

"Ren," I whisper into the ground, calling out to the God who has shunned me—a cruel God who won't hear my prayers.

But this time is different, the earth opens and light sprinkles in the dark. My eyes burn trying to adjust to the brightness in the room. Using my elbow, I weakly prop my body up, trying to moisten my lips with my non-existent saliva as I watch my savior covered in sunlight. Dressed in all black, the prince of Hell has come to bring me salvation. "Ren."

"Do you understand now?" he asks as he walks towards me, unaffected by the filth, by the smell. It's as if he welcomed the rot, the destruction, and I wanted to kill him for it. Wrap my hands around his pretty neck and push my cock deep in his throat, watch me fuck the life out of him. If he wants me to create, he will become my final creation. If he was going to destroy me, it was only fitting I return the favor, but he holds my emotions like a leash. A puppet orchestrated by his movements because he holds my heart in his hand, and he's more than capable of crushing it. Devouring it.

He bends in front of me, his onyx eyes inspect me like I'm some form of specimen, lifting my eyes, I meet his. There's nothing. No emotion. No connection.

"Do you understand?"

I dip my chin slowly, before I respond weakly. "Yes."

"Good, I have just the lesson for you." He smacks my cheek weakly. "Or test, it all depends how you look at it. But first, a shower and food."

Food .

I know I shouldn't. I know what I'll be eating, but I also know what I need to do... what is needed of me.

Shower.

Food.

I repeat it in my head like a mantra, and again I dip my chin, watching as a devilish grin spreads across his gorgeous features. "Good, I was hoping we could come to an agreement." Ren pats my head like I'm a dog before he stands, cocking his head towards the light. He offers me his hand, and I could break down. I can let myself die here, end it all, because the light in my case doesn't mean salvation—it's damnation. My soul... myself, offered up on a silver platter. His muse.

My hand trembles as it moves towards his, a fitting moment of the Creation of Adam, but it was the fall of Byron. Our hands connect, his delicate long fingers intertwining with mine before he squeezes my hand, grounding me to him, to this moment. I couldn't disconnect, no matter how much I wanted to. I follow his lead out of this hell and into the light... into the devil's lair. The cabin is warm with the smell of herbs filling the air, and my hunger pangs intensify. My mouth salivates. I cast a look at the set table, the plates placed for us, and the steam that comes from the area .

"Shower first," Ren chimes from in front of me, as if sensing I'm like a dog waiting for its meal. Days that I've gone without food or water... and yet the need to protect my sister is what moves me. The one feeling that's become unyielding... it's not a need. It's a will that was imprinted on me the day I held her in my arms. I made a promise that I will always protect her, and it's one I intend to keep.

He guides me towards the bathroom, but my eyes lock in on the door that holds his

studio, and I think back to that woman. Making my stomach churn at the thought that I ate... ate... no food.

No.

No.

Eat. NO.

“Byron,” a soft, deep voice calls to me as soft hands cradle my face. My devil comes into view, his short eyebrows knit together—a master of faces. “Why resist the unavoidable?” he whispers, leaning into me, pressing our noses together.

“Cannibalism was a form of love in ancient times.”

Rubbing his nose against mine as his hands press harder against my cheeks.

“To consume means to love. It’s immortalizing that,” he breathes.

“It’s creation, one I wouldn’t have found if it weren’t for you... my muse. If you wouldn’t have destroyed my foundations.”

Ren pulls back.

“Don’t fight it. It’s pointless. Just let me consume you,” he says, before turning away and walking towards the shower, and turning it on. Rolling up his sleeve, “Come, you’re filthy,” he says, but there’s no disdain or disgust in his tone. It’s actually the opposite—it’s caring and soft. Begrudgingly, I move slowly towards him. Stepping into the shower, I turn my back to him and soak under the hot water that stings my skin. We don’t speak, but I know he’s still there, watching.

“Love,” Ren says behind me, and I still.

“That’s why.”

Love and Ren aren’t words that go together, and to say the least, I’m stunned .

“I became intrigued with the love you have for your sister, breaking you and destroying it.”

I grit my teeth, my hands rest on the tile anchoring me, preventing me from passing out from the steam as I listen to his twisted words.

“You hate me because I love my sister?” I ask, confused.

“No. You intrigue me. I cut down my sickness—love. It made me weak, a servant to someone else’s will, and I ripped it off.”

His hand wraps around the back of my neck, turning me to face him. We both stare at one another.

“Why won’t you rip out yours? Gut it. End it all?” he asks, and there’s emotion in those voids; it may just be confusion, but there’s at least something. And I wonder how much pain his mother had inflicted on him to create such a void.

“You can’t rip out love, Ren,” I say, before weakly pulling away and grabbing the bottle of body wash. Squeezing it onto the washcloth left there, his scent fills the air—cedar, linen, and bourbon. Even his fucking body wash smells rich and arrogant. I couldn’t escape him, not even to breathe.

“I’ll prove you can,” Ren whispers behind me, before I hear his footsteps, then the sound of the door opening and closing. I let out a shaky breath, pressing the

washcloth into the white tile. I lean my forehead on it, pressing hard as I look down at my erection.

I'm grateful that he spared me from further humiliation, but angry at my traitorous body that craves his pain and torture. After a few minutes, I'm able to catch my breath, regulate the rhythm of my heart, and calm my thoughts. But no matter how much I scrub my body, I still feel filthy... rotten... ruined.

Turning off the water, afraid I'll pass out in the shower, I grab the white towel left for me and dry my body. Shuffling toward the bathroom door, I'm surprised to find the knob turns freely. It's not locked.

I step into the hall and hear humming—like a siren's call. I follow the sound, leading me to a door. The door to his studio .

My hand trembles as I reach for the handle. My chest tightens. The world goes quiet except for the rush of blood in my ears. Then the sound of Radiohead's "Man of War" fills the air while Ren hums it.

I remain frozen in front of the door. Slowly, I turn the knob and open it. Ren doesn't flinch. He sits naked on the floor on top of a clear plastic tarp that covers the wooden floorboards, and he's covered in crimson.

How long was I in the shower? It couldn't have been more than five minutes. Bile rushes up my throat as I take in the sight leaving me speechless.

"You inspired me, and you're too weak to carve," he says, as he continues to slice off tiny pieces of flesh making what seems like a macabre ying yang symbol. "Don't look at me like that, it's not right to stare." Finally he looks away from his carving. "Talk."

But what can I say. How do I rationalize what I'm looking at? My brain takes a moment to catch up, but when it does, it hits me like a bulldozer. Knocks the breath out of me as my eyes clash with blue, puffy, familiar ones.

Johnathan.

He lies on the ground—bloody, carved, trapped within his own body, and pieces of him are missing. I look at Ren, who continues to carve, resting his chin over his hand, lazily dragging the scalpel across Johnathan's side.

“How long?” I ask.

“Long enough,” he answers nonchalantly, not bothering to look my way. I'm not a threat to him.

My focus goes back to Johnathan. Tears stream down the side of his face. His eyes pleading. Begging.

I don't think. I move on autopilot.

I walk toward the cart that stores Ren's supplies and pick up another scalpel. Ren stops, looking at me through his lashes as I walk toward Johnathan. I give him a small smile.

“I'm sorry,” I mouth, holding back tears and cementing my decision. Pressing the scalpel under his jaw, I slice, making sure I go deep enough to kill him.

My eyes remain on Jonathan's, not caring what happens to me for destroying Ren's creation.

“Don't move,” Ren whispers .

I hear the tarp shuffle, and from the corner of my eye, I watch him pull out a sketchbook and lean against the wall.

“This is fucking perfect, Thorn. Perfect.”

My hands beg to release the knife at Jonathan’s throat. I silently beg to not watch him choke on his blood. Instead I remain staring at his eyes desperately begging for help that will never come.

I watch as the man who tried to help me heal is destroyed, and I was the one who held the blade that turned off his light. Those vibrant blues dull— as he gargles on wet breath in. The pressure of my hand cuts deeper without me realizing. My vision blurs and I try to blink away the tears be anywhere but here.

“Don’t move. Just let me get the basics,” Ren says, before resuming his sketch. “So many emotions. You are truly magical.”

“Fuck you,” I seethe, pulling away from Johnathan, who is long dead, and chucking the bloody scalpel into the wall.

Ren watches me as I lose my shit.

“FUCK YOU!” I scream, picking up anything I can and smashing it against the wall.

My knees buckle. The hunger... the pain... the guilt drowns me.

And I see stars. Followed by Ren. Then the room spins—and it’s all black.

The void consumes me.

### Chapter Eighteen

Ren

My pencil finishes making the final traces, stopping right on Byron's face. I focus on the look on his face—so many emotions on display, none that I can recreate. Not like him, but my pencil can. Or at least immortalize it. I put the pencil and sketchbook down, focusing on a sleeping Byron. The emotional and psychological toll on his body hit its limit and crashed him out.

But he is surviving me. He should be proud. I know I am. But now I need to nurse him back to health if I want to keep playing. I didn't lie to him when I said he intrigued me. Like him killing his friend—lover—whatever blue-eyes meant to him. That was totally unexpected, but totally welcomed. I can't deny the feeling of satisfaction that crept up my body when his hand sliced open blue-eyes' throat and covered his palm in crimson. Even if it was only for pity, it was a start. Which means he's learning. But let's push him harder... let's see how much he can take. How much will he let me take?

I stand from my spot and walk out of the studio and down the hall to my room to grab the burner phone. Flipping it open, I call the only number in its storage.

“Yo,” Kevin's voice booms through the speaker, irritating my nerves. “How can I help?”

“Any idea how to set up an IV? Also, where did you leave the medical supplies for emergencies?”



He laughs, barks and annoys, causing me to roll my eyes. “Breaking your toys already?”

I don’t answer. Hopefully, my silence tips him off that I’m not in the mood for a chat. This is business. A simple transaction.

“In the kitchen, under the sink. Red bag,” he answers .

“And the Rose?” I ask as I make my way out the room and toward the kitchen. He chuckles again.

“Not wilting yet, but she’s not buying the texts. She’s worried about her big brother, wants to go see him.”

Using my shoulder to prop up my phone, I open the steaming pot holding a chunk of meat—my pot roast for tonight’s dinner —and add in the potatoes and celery that were already chopped up on the counter. I smile. I actually like domesticated life. Creating, fucking, and eating—what more could I ask for?

Someone who is here for me. The real me, not the illusion. Byron could have simply killed me plenty of times, but he chooses not to. He chooses me, even if he hasn’t acknowledged it yet. His mistake was not choosing me sooner.

“Okay, so get her distracted. Fuck her, knock her up.”

He laughs harder. “How’s it going for you? Has he denounced his light and become your brainless fuck toy?”

Anger causes me to stop, wishing Kevin was here so I could kill him and filet him like a fish. Not to eat... not to immortalize... but just because.

“Just keep her off my trail. How’s the outside?” I ask. I try to stay away from watching TV. If I’m not creating, I’m reading some horror novel or texting with Johnathan pretending to be Byron. But now my choices are limited now that I’m a fugitive of the law and blue eyes dead. But the walls are closing in and I’m running out of time. Killing Johnathan was a fatal mistake—one that will most likely lead the cops directly to me. So Byron needs to make a choice, or I’ll be forced to make it for him. It’s just easier.

“How long are we going to keep this up for?”

Annoyed, I open the door to the cabinet under the sink. “Shouldn’t take much longer. Then you should have your money, and I’ll disappear.” With that, I grab the bag. “I got the bag. Now what?”

“You grab the butterfly needle, tape, IV lines, and saline bag. Hang it somewhere, find a vein, and you’re a smart man, so the next step you should be able to do on your own,” he says, and I end the call, walking back toward the studio.

Byron’s breaths come in fast. Small sniffles escape his body, shaking it. He looks pathetic. Nothing like the Byron I first met. The violent offender, walking through life like everyone should be punished. Like a feral animal.

Placing the bag of supplies on the floor and walking over to him, I haul up half of his body. Noticing his missing body muscle and how much thinner he is, stirs something in me.

I walk him toward my room, place him in my bed and just watch him for a moment. His eyebrows knit together, his body twitches. My finger lightly brushes over his cheek as if I can chase away his demons. I wanted to be his only torment. Poor Byron. Tortured in his waking moments and in his sleep, so much like me.

So why won't he let me help? I'm giving him the cure, but he resists taking it.

Walking from the room, I retrieve the bag and then return to my room. My eyes look at the black screen of the TV in the room, tempted to see what's going on in the outside world. To see what is the latest on the manhunt for Laguna Bay Painter. It's only a matter of time now. I've been reckless, but there's no going back. I gotta finish what I started. I also gotta deal with Kevin, but Byron is more important. I think he's learning—or at least coming to the same conclusion.

Opening the bag, I grab the things I need before opening an alcohol wipe and cleaning the area. I open the butterfly needle package before smacking at a noticeable vein and inserting the needle, and finally hooking up the line. After connecting the line to the IV bag, I hang it up on the bed frame and finish tucking him in before I leave him to clean up another mess.

I stop in front of the door to the studio. Blood covers the floor, and I'm thankful I placed the tarp down... easy cleaning. But the more I focus on the red, the ground shifts and I'm no longer in the cabin.

I'm in my room.

Naked. My hand is shaking, still gripping the knife.

"Mo—" I try to say the word, to call the name she dreaded coming from my lips. The tears burn my eyes, and I sniffle them up.

Shaking my head, I focus now on what I need to do. On what's real—and not the monster I killed and buried. Walking up to the bloody canvas, I kneel beside him. His bright blue eyes remain open, glassed over and dulled. Using two fingers, I close his eyes, allowing him one final mercy. After all, his death was the catalyst for the rebirth of Byron.

This will help him understand. Sink him quicker. Where I can feel him.

I stand and walk over to the armoire in the corner of the room. Opening its wooden drawer, I pull out what's become my favorite piece of all. There's something personal in cutting up the pieces to arrange them into something whole.

My gift to him will be his immortalization.

So I begin the process, my hand resting on his thigh while my other begins to saw at the area that connects to his hip. It's not easy sawing off body parts, but this is what makes the results worth it. You're creating with your hands, memorizing each cut and muscle. Then you recreate, and attach the pieces to create something beautiful. Byron, in his own way, cared for this one, so maybe one day he will appreciate my efforts—because it's a lot. Applying more pressure to disconnect the layers of muscles, I continue to hum the song my mother would sing to me.

Beautiful Boy by John Lennon.

My eyes focus on the blood that stains my father's desk, no matter how many times it's been cleaned. If I focus enough, I can still see it and smell it which causes my stomach to knot. My fists ball at my sides as I think of all the times I would go into his office looking for a father who was never there.

“Dad—“

My dad would raise a hand, silencing me the moment I walked through the door. Work was always more important... we didn't matter.

This time was no different .

So, I barge out of the office and run down the hall, trying to calm my heart and the

tears that run down my face. I run straight to the room where I feel safe... where I'm wanted. Quietly, I open the door to her room. She lay sleeping, her onyx soft waves splayed on her pillow like a halo, her red lipstick smeared along with her mascara. Like she's been crying... she was always crying... always angry... but I make her feel better.

And maybe she helps me feel better... We make each other better. Mommy says I only need her. Only her. Forever her and I. Softly, I peel back the white comforter and slip in the bed with Mommy. Her warm body soothes me.

My fingers dig deeper into his thigh, my will fighting with my mind to remain in the present... to remain here.

"Fuck," I say through gritted teeth, finally breaking the thigh free. The flesh tears away with a final yank, and the coagulated blood oozes out from the piece of bone that pokes through. The memory of her perfume still lingers. My head pounds, and the gut feeling that I have made a grave mistake is too loud to ignore. But I need to get on with this... and it takes me forever to dismember and clean the pieces.

To clean the room.

After spending quite some time dismembering blue-eye, cleaning up my mess, and storing the meat, it's finally time to clean myself... but no matter how much I try, I cannot scrub away the red. It stains me entirely. My hands move on autopilot, turning the faucet to make sure the water is hot enough to boil away the memories and keep me grounded long enough to shower without her interrupting.

But it's happening again. I'm slipping...

Washing my hair, I feel her nails caress my back, then feel her small delicate hands as they wrap around my traitorous cock. Slapping my head, over and over, but I still feel

the warmth of her mouth as she sobs. Always crying.

“Look at me,” she sobs around my length, but I stare at the tiles, trying to imagine that I am anywhere but here. Soapy water runs down my face, burning my eyes as her nails dig into my hips which causes me to thrust into her throat, causing her to gag—to cry. My chest tightens and I can’t breathe. The steam from the room suffocates me. Her mouth on me destroys me, and I can’t tell if it’s the water or my tears that stream down my face as I look down and see my eyes staring back at me.

The pain of my hand slapping my head pulls me out. Quickly, I scrub off the memory, but it’s never enough. Turning off the faucet, I don’t bother to dry myself off as I walk out of the bathroom, and down the hall to the kitchen. I’m no longer hungry, and truthfully, Byron will be out for a while. I turn on the small TV while I wait for the pot roast cooking on the stove to cool down, and lower the volume. No news on Byron’s disappearance yet... nothing for his friend either.

But I’m still wanted.

Still talked about even weeks later...

Frustration boils within me. I shouldn’t have stuck around, but this compulsion... obsession with Byron has kept me rooted. Walking over to the cookie jar, I open the small ivory container and pull out the pre-rolls Kevin left on his last visit. Well—I asked for them. They were good to have around to reward my Thorn, but they also served to calm my nerves. Something I’ve never needed before,. but every day, I feel more and more like her.

So, smoking helps.

Turning off the news and lighting up the joint, I smoke in the silence of the kitchen until the joint burns down to nothing, scorching my fingers. Letting the small piece

fall into the sink, I turn on the water, washing it down the drain before putting away the pot roast I made for us. My feet drag as I walk into my room. I stand at the door, looking at the man who has become my Achilles' heel— a weakness that I need to deal with.

But maybe he can make me feel better...

And I him. Like I did with my mother.

I slip into bed beside him. His warmth envelops me like a blanket. Like a child, I angle myself so he's holding me. Then, placing his arm over me, and throwing my leg over his lower half, I lay my head on his chest.

I used to listen to her heartbeat like this too until I realized it beat for no one but herself.

But he's not her. He's not the monster in this story.

I am.

### Chapter Nineteen

Byron

“Byron, what did he do to you?” Gabriela’s voice is soft and shaky, but she’s trying to keep it together for me. I look at my sister’s face—the terror, guilt, and shame written on her skin.

“Nothing that wasn’t done before,” I say, chuckling a little, trying to humor her with my response. But it’s not going to change anything. I know my sister well enough to know this will eat her up alive if I let it. But I also couldn’t tell her the things that happened in that studio—what Ren, her boyfriend, did to me... and worse, what I did.

Shame hits me, and I look away, unable to meet her eyes. I focus on the IV, and even that brings me back to him.

“By—“ she begins, swallowing back a small sob as her hand moves over her mouth.

And my heart can’t take it. Despite the pain, I embrace my sister.

“I’m—“

“Shh, it’s okay,” I say as I rub circles on her back. “Shh... it’s okay. I got you,” I whisper into her hair as her body begins to shift beneath my touch.

Her vanilla and cinnamon scent is gone, replaced by the scent of him.



I open my eyes, and I'm no longer in the hospital. And it's not my sister that I'm holding.

It's Ren. Naked. In my arms.

I feel the guilt wrapping around my throat tighter than the chain he placed on me. My hand burns from the contact, and how it rests on his back as if it was always meant to be there. His scent overpowers anything else in the room, and I feel the blood rushing to my cock where his leg rest. I should push him away... but I remain here.

Tethered to him... smelling the faint remnants of his shampoo. Closing my eyes, I inhale deeply, trying not to see those dead, dull eyes that have haunted me—Johnathan's, Theresita's, Gabby's, mine. I feel a tear leave the corner of my eye. I should be fighting... screaming. But instead, I breathe him in like I've never wanted anything more. My arm involuntarily tightens around him, bringing him closer to me while I clench my teeth. The movement itself is physically painful, emotionally scarring—but still, I do it.

“Did he?” she asks, pulling away, wiping the tears and hair from her face. “Did he ra—“ she can't even finish her words. Gabriela found us both naked—it wasn't hard to connect the dots—and she has always known about my sickness, even though I tried to hide it. Her soft hand cups my face, begging me to look at her, but I couldn't because I knew she was falling for him. As for everything that happened before she arrived... was it rape?

Or did I want it?

Did I welcome my sister's boyfriend's cock inside me, not caring what he was doing—because of how I was feeling?

I don't look up as her hand falls from my face and she collapses on my bed, crying

into the sheets. My hands shake as I move to console her, but I freeze... the shame keeping me in place. I wasn't the victim here... she is, as is Theresita—not me. I wanted him from the moment I had met him as my lawyer...

My biggest secret was what I felt when I walked into that room. His presence suffocated me, and unnerved me so much I couldn't wait to leave. That night, I watched him fuck her, but she was background noise, and all I saw was him.

I was no victim...

I've always been a willing participant.

Removing my hand from around Ren, I remove the IV, careful not to startle him or make myself bleed too much. Once I get it out, I get up to use the bathroom in his room. The smell of Ren is everywhere, and once I'm done with my morning business, I stare at myself in the mirror, not recognizing who I see. I look thinner, sunken, and dull-eyed. Slowly, I'm sinking into the darkness where her light can't reach me, but his can.

I try to swallow my anger, but I can't—my fist connects with the mirror, over and over, until the mirror gives in to my hand. Shards of glass embed in my knuckles but I don't care. I welcome the pain because it means it's real.

This is real.

“FUCK YOU!” I scream as I continue to punch the mirror, the sharp glass continuing to penetrate my skin, but it's not the physical pain that's killing me... destroying me... it's what's inside.

The feeling I can't rip away. My commotion must have woken up the monster, feeling his warm arms wrap around me. It's like water splashing on fire. Sun and

moon colliding, creating the perfect bloody eclipse.

“Shh,” he coos in my ear. “I’m here,” he says, as if that’s supposed to be reassuring or comforting.

“You,” I growl, trying to break free from his hold. “You did this to me.” I sob as I continue to thrash in his arms. Feeling my blood coat my fingers and drip to the floor.

“Byron, stop.”

But I don’t. The pain... the anger... is all too much to swallow down. “You did this to me,” I repeat softly as I continue to thrash around until my face is smashed against the wall.

“Then let me cure you.” His voice snakes up my spine, wrapping around my heart like thorns. “Let me cure you,” he breathes into my neck before sinking his teeth into my flesh. My ass arches toward him, desperate and pathetic. But I’m way past caring. I want to stop feeling this way. I want to be me again, or at least something close to it, so I say words that I never expected to leave my lips because I accept his cure.

“Fuck me, Ren. Cure me. Infect me. I don’t care, but make me feel nothing but you inside me.”

Ren stops, pulling away from me, his warmth gone, and I stand, the cool of the wall grounding me too much. His rejection is loud. Deafening. Like a final nail I didn’t see coming.

“REN,” I say with desperation, but he says nothing, and I hear him walk away from me, which infuriates me.

Fuck him.

Fuck Ren.

Fuck him.

Storming into the bedroom, I catch up to him and tackle him to the ground. He quickly maneuvers around me, laughing as he wraps his arm around my head, placing me in a chokehold. “What’s the matter, Byron. You need to be fucked and bred? You miss my cock tearing through your tight hole” he whispers in my ear as we struggle, him trying to keep me down and me trying to free myself. I’ll show him what I need. I’ll show him what he’s made out of me but before I can, he presses his erection into my back, rubbing it on me.

“Is this what you want, Thorn? Beg for it,.” he says as he pushes me to the ground, releasing his arm and shoving my face into the cold floor.

“BEG!.” he roars from behind me as he rubs his cock between my ass. Warmth spreads through me, my brain wants to fight but my body fully surrenders to his cruelty as his large hand spans my ass causing me to arch up like a bitch in heat. I want to scream. I want to shove his face into the same floor he’s pressing mine into, but all I can do is moan like a fucking animal. Why does it feel so good? Why do I ache for it?

“Pathetic,” my father’s voice echoes inside my head. “Always were.”

“So pathetic..” he says as he presses me even deeper into the floor.

“Fuck you.”

I want to say more. I want to bite him, bleed him—but my cock is hard. My traitorous fucking cock presses into the floor and all I feel is shame and heat.

“Oh. I’m gonna and it’s gonna hurt.” Good. I wait for the intrusion but this pain is different. His hand smacks my ass harder, causing me to let out a weak yelp. Followed by another then paired with a slow rub.

“You like pain, pet.” Smack. “You like my cruelty.” Smack. “Say it,” he orders, rubbing my warm, burning ass cheek. But before I can respond— another smack. And then another, this one stinging so bad I yelp.

Smack.

The pain has me closing my eyes, and I see Theresita’s sad eyes. Then, I see Johnathan’s face—blue eyes dulling. I hear Gabriela sobbing.

And yet, I moan. God forgive me, I moan. And I let the tears fall, because this is what he’s made out of me.

Smack.

My dick painfully presses into the ground, begging for him... needing his touch.

“Ye—“ I stutter. “Yes.”

“Good boy, such a good fucking boy,” he says, before landing another smack that causes me to cum where I lay.

I cum like an animal. Like a slave. Like the man I swore I’d never be.

Disgust and embarrassment overpower the high of my release, and nothing sinks me deeper into my shame than watching Ren stand and walk out of the room.

And I just lay there. Broken. Sticky. My cum soaking me.

A ruined canvas...still begging for the artist.

### Chapter Twenty

Ren

I storm out of the room, leaving him there broken and full of shame. Sex without control means nothing to me, so why am I reacting this way? My heart beats in my ears, and I can barely contain the shakes in my hand... the urge and hunger to consume it all. Running a hand over my head and pushing my hair back as I step outside and take a deep breath in. Trying to erase the smell of him, to regain the control I almost lost when I heard his words. I wanted him willing but not to use me, no—this is not how it works. I control the narrative... down to his submission .

I needed to get away, to remind him that this is not some fairytale where the villain gets redemption. That's not why he's here... not why I brought him here.

“Ren,” her voice pulls me into a trance as I look at the trees moving with the wind as a tear slides down my cheek, warming up the spot. “Do you love me?” she asks. But I can't answer that. I never could. I'm not capable of loving, only consuming and controlling. She made sure of that. My hand moves to my chest, something inside hurts, and I yell.

“AHHHH,” I scream, breaking away from her touch, her memory, but I remain tethered to whatever he's doing to me. Looking behind my shoulder, I expect him to come to me, to help me... he did this. He created this obsession... this sickness. Byron thinks I did something to him but it's the opposite—it's me being affected and I fucking hate it. Everything changed for me. I can no longer create, live freely, or wear the mask I had perfectly created for myself. Instead, I'm here—stuck in the

middle of nowhere, not knowing what to do. I have never not known what to do. But what can I do when everything inside me feels foreign? It's like a stranger has taken over my body and I'm just the passenger.

I laugh as tears slide down my face, my knees giving out, sinking me into the cool ground, and I'm laughing so hard that I can't tell the difference between if I'm crying because I'm laughing so hard or if I'm just crying. because it's a natural reaction to have when something inside you is breaking?

I take a deep breath in, bringing me back to center, back to who I need to be to survive. I stand, and storm back inside to do the only thing a man like Byron understands.

He still lays there pathetically, and I hate it, so I kick him right in his ribs, my foot landing hard on his side.

Byron doesn't say anything, doesn't scream, and doesn't fight as I kick him over and over.

"Fight," I say, kicking him again—but nothing. At this point I'm past talking, but I need him to understand. "You don't get to ask me for anything," I sneer, as I grab a fist of his short curls, my nails digging into his scalp.

"You don't make demands. I take. You obey."

Smashing his head into the ground, "Whatever game you think you're playing, quit it. Don't think because I'm going through all this trouble that it's because you mean something." Bringing his face back up, I lean into him, making sure he can see my eyes. "You mean nothing. I just hate leaving things unfinished, Thorn," I say before smashing his face in again and again. Until I see red, until his eyes roll back and he's out like a light.



Letting go of his hair, I stand. Using my feet, I turn him over to see what damage I caused. His eyebrow was split from the impact and will probably need stitches but I don't care. Fuck him for damning me, for ruining my life. If only he was like everyone else, I would have ended it a long time ago. But I know now how to end it.

End it all.

For a second, I lost who I am—distracted by all the inconveniences around me. But all it took was Byron begging me to make him forget. Begging me to make him feel. I didn't need his terror. I wanted his submission as partnership in my darkness. I didn't need his light shining through my cracks. I needed to remind myself who I am.

And that's fucking Ren Sato. Fugitive and all.

Stepping over Byron, I make my way to the bathroom. My mind automatically looks for her as I turn on the faucet. The water stings as it falls over my body. Her manicured hands wrap around my waist anchoring me to my reality. To my essence.

And for the first time... I welcome it.

Closing my eyes, I wash my hair while accepting her touch, accepting my depravity. Allowing her darkness to swallow me as deep as she swallows my cock. Once I'm done in the shower, I grab a towel, stepping over the glass that Byron bashed in earlier. I leave the bathroom, and step into the bedroom.

He still sleeps. His hands—bloody with pieces of glass sticking out from his knuckles, and a small puddle forms beneath the side of his face. Walking over to him, I crouch beside him and dip my fingers in the small puddle.

“To love is to consume, Byron,” I whisper, as I rub my index and thumb together, playing with his blood before bringing them to my lips and sucking my fingers clean.

He looks so beautifully broken. Byron is a mosaic of shattered pieces—rough around the edges, his own masterpiece built from pain and violence. I stand, walking over to my nightstand and pulling out my sketchbook. I sit back beside him. Using my fingers and his blood, I trace the man who did what not even my mother was able to do and that's ruin me.

The sad thing is that he thinks he's the only one being ruined, but I am too.

The portrait comes out messy, bloody, its lines rough much like Byron. Tossing the book to the side, I grab his hand and remove a piece of glass. Couldn't have my creation dying of an infection—learned my lesson the first time. So I take care of him, not because I care, but because I need him alive. I'm not ready to end things yet, but we definitely need boundaries.

I laugh to myself as I push his small curls back, moving his head to face me, to look at his gash.

“Did you think I would kidnap you and love you?” The gash is deep, the flesh torn, but the bleeding is stopping which means it will heal with an ugly scar, but doesn't really need stitches.

“Or do you think love is why you're here?” I ask, even though he's unconscious due to the beating. “You did this, not me.”

Once I'm done cleaning him up and have gotten dressed, I lock the door to my room from the inside, and grab the keys to the SUV—the same one I used to bring him here. I leave to do the only thing I know how to do. I need to give him time to heal, only so I can break him again and again. Until I'm ready... until I'm done.

I was being reckless, I know, but what else do I have to lose? I'm a man with compulsions and nothing to lose. Stepping outside into the night, I get into the driver

seat and leave the cabin that has kept me safe from the outside.

The trees become a distant memory as a new landscape opens up. My destination: a small, dead-end bar. What I'm looking for? Not sure but I will know when inspiration strikes. Slipping on a baseball cap, I use it as a mask. I look like an average Joe—blue jeans, black sneakers, and a normal red wine, long-sleeve shirt.

Taking a deep breath in, I control the shake in my hand. Scanning the area for cameras—I find none, but I still take my time looking at the locals until I feel satisfied with what I see. After a few minutes, I deem it safe enough and step out, and after locking the SUV, I make my way inside.

The smell of cheap beer, perfume, sex, and sweat invades my senses. Repulsion creeps up my spine, but I push it away as I walk past a couple making out. Once I make it to the bar, I sit in its darkest part. The man behind it welcomes me, and when I look at him—all I see is Byron.

“Whiskey on the rocks,” I ask, placing a twenty dollar bill on the counter. He nods and gets to work. After a few seconds, he slides the warm liquid towards me .

“You're not from around here?” he says.

Cupping the glass in my hand, I swirl the liquid. “I am, just always working.” The lie comes out smoothly.

“I would have recognized you if that was the case,” he says cheerfully, as he props himself on the bar counter.

But I don't look his way or give him the attention he's seeking from me, and that's when I hear my muse calling for me. Soft sniffles catch my attention despite the low music playing in the background. Looking for the source of my calling, I find it,

startling me.

Her almond eyes—puffy, swollen from her tears. Short, thin eyebrows. Perfect button nose. And to her dismay, she's in a red dress. Red lipstick. Her black short hair sits on her neck.

And I smile.

Closing my eyes, I hear the sound of her heels closing in. My body tenses, but still, in a perverted way, it anticipates. It willfully craves her touch... her attention.

"I'll take another," I say, trying to contain my excitement, watching her out of the corner of my eye. I keep my eyes on her, and obviously, the bartender does as well. Containing my curiosity, I keep my attention on her while also appearing completely uninterested in her... in him, and I play the role of the loner who drinks at a bar with nothing to say. I order another glass just as she stands and heads towards the bathroom. It's dark, and I'm taking a great chance that she'll recognize me, but it was fate that we are both here. That I'm certain of.

I wait for her to be done and exit the bathroom, and in a rush, I get up and accidentally walk into her.

"Oh my God," she says as she steps back, the warm liquid spilling on her breasts.

"I'm so sorry," I say, hesitant to move out of the darkness. She turns back into the bathroom, and then I take my chance—risking it all for a redo.

She's back from the dead to haunt me.

I startle her again. "I'm so sorry, I wasn't looking," I say as I take paper towels off the roll.

“It’s okay,” she breathes as she accepts the paper towels from my hand.

The woman in red pauses for a second, her brow furrowing together. “Have I seen you somewhere?” she asks, trying to place me—but no evidence of recognition.

I shrug. “You could have seen me around town, I’m kind of a loner after my divorce.” The mention of divorce makes her soften.

“Divorce?” she whispers as she looks at the stain and presses the paper to it. “Welcome to the club, I understand.”

“Well, I’m Kevin,.” I lie with a tender smile.

“Vivian,” she says. I dip my chin, placing my hands in my pocket, pretending to be bummed out over something that never occurred, but I imitate her. A mirror reflecting her own emotions and insecurities.

“So you’re divorced too?”

She stops, angrily throwing the towel into the trash can. “Yes, as of two months ago. I was abandoned and blindsided with divorce.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. He cheated with his assistant, and well... now I get to start over and find happiness,” she lies, and I read her like a book.

“Is that why you had cried at the bar?” I ask, hoping I don’t ruin the moment but she smiles, and her fate is sealed.

“Maybe.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not good at interacting with people after...everything.” I look up, pretending to choke, playing the role of heartbroken husband. “To be honest, I don’t like bars, but I needed to get out. I needed an escape.” Her breath hitches, every reaction fueling the act.

“I understand.”

“Do you want to get a drink with me?” she asks timidly. “I’m also not good at this, but I don’t want to be here, and I also don’t want to go home,” I answer while holding back a smile.

“My place isn’t too far from here. I know I’m a stranger but—“ She silences me with a kiss.

I like her. Straight to the point. Thankfully, it was more of a light tap and not a tongue-fueled kiss, but it was enough to know I had won .

“I’ve done some very questionable things of late, so yes—one drink. It’s not too late and the creeps are about to swarm this place.”

Oh, even better to go now. “Okay. I also have some pot roast.”

“Food and drinks sounds like a date.”

I smile, reaching toward her and pushing her hair behind her ear.

“Do you love me, Ren?” her voice claws through my mind, and it’s no longer a stranger in front of me but the monster who had brought me into this world and consumed me whole.

“You came back for me?” I ask out loud, instantly regretting it when she pulls back a

bit.

“What?” she asks, confused at my words.

But all I can do, in a moment of panic, is kiss her—whispering against her lips.

“You are beautiful to me.”

I kiss her again. This time I deepen the kiss, my tongue moving inside her mouth, the taste is unfamiliar.

My body rejects her, craving the roughness... the scar... and not the softness of her.

### Chapter Twenty One

Byron

“Mijo, you need to stay strong.” My mother’s voice soothes me. In the darkness, my body hurts and I can’t move. “You are strong, a fighter.”

But she’s wrong, I’m none of those things. I curl my body in on itself, even though the blanket that covers my skin stings. The welts on my ass are burning, branding me like fire as I stifle back a cry.

I’m sorry,“ I whisper, and my mom’s arms envelop me. “Don’t be. I’m sorry that I failed to protect you, Mijo. Your father means well.” But the pain in my body from his beating is enough to argue her lies.

“I like girls, Ma,” I say. “I like girls,” I repeat turning to face her with tears in my eyes. My mother bites her lower lip as she cups my face. “I know,” she lies. “You are just confused.”

But I’m not, I know what I felt. I know what I wanted to do with Armando. It’s true what dad thinks of me, and I deserved to be beat. Maybe he can beat me into liking girls, into being normal. Maybe then he can have the son they both deserve, not one who’s picturing what it will be like to be inside a man, but one that can get hard from a woman’s tits. Instead he has me, his greatest shame.

I wake up covered in sweat, with my head pounding. I wince while slowly opening my eyes. My hand moves towards the source of pain. “Fuck,” I mutter, remembering



everything that went down. Ren's words, followed by his beating, reminded me so much of my father that I had locked up. The room smells of stale blood, sweat, and old cologne—Ren's scent clings to the walls like a ghost that won't leave. The ache in my ribs is sharp, each breath dragging against bruised lungs. The pillow beneath me is damp, not just from sweat, but also from tears I don't remember shedding.

The sound of a car approaching, makes me move; every part of my body hurts, and I'm still naked. Using my elbow, I prop myself up, wincing with every move. That fucker has a mean kick, and I feel disgusting from all the sweat and blood. My vision blurs and I have to grip the bed frame to keep from collapsing. The sound of a car door opening causes my heart to flutter in my chest, not knowing what to expect. At this point, I didn't know if Ren wanted to fuck me or kill me, so I stay alert. Or try to.

I hear the sound of the door to the cabin opening, then a familiar voice that sends chills down my spine.

“REN,” the voice calls out. I choke up, and then rage bubbles over. “Ren,” he calls again, his voice drawing closer. My jaw tightens and I clench my fists, ready to burst through the door and beat him to a bloody pulp. Then Ren wouldn't have his leverage. She would be safe and I'd end it all. The element of surprise is all I got right now. Moving towards the door. it be just my luck that the bastard locked it, and in anger, I try to pry the fucking door open.

“Ren” Kevin's voice calls from outside the door., He's so close but there's nothing I can do to force it open.

“Byron.”

I stop.

“Ah, it is you. He left you all alone,” he teases, clapping his hands. “I have to say, I

was wondering when he would be tired of you, does it mean he left?"

But I say nothing, I just use the strength I have to try and rip this fucking door open and kill the asshole, but that causes him to laugh. "I'll assume he has put you on time out, but where is he?" I still don't answer as the door rattles, then his phone rings.

"Ah, my sweet piece of ass, your darling sister."

My blood runs cold. The weight of those words sucks the air from my lungs. "If you know what's good for her, I would suggest you remain quiet." And I do. For her sake, I swallow my venom and poison myself.

"Hey," her voice comes through and soothes me. "Did you make it to the trailer? "

"Hey beautiful, I did but there's nothing. Are you sure he didn't run off with a secret lover?" he teases which causes a small chuckle from my sister before she sighs, I can picture her right now, pacing around the room biting her nails nervously.

"I went by the place where he went to his meetings," she says nervously.

"I told you I would go with you."

"I know but Johnathan, the guy that Byron befriended, hasn't shown up." I can tell she's piecing things together, but not the biggest one, the piece of shit that her man is. Poor Gabriela sure knows how to pick them.

"Oh yeah? Strange."

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"But hasn't your brother been texting you?" And my heart sinks with those words,

knowing now the true depth of Ren's depravity and cruelty.

"He has, but I don't know, Kev. Something inside tells me that something is wrong." Kevin sighs and his voice sounds honest.

"I know, princess, this is why we are here. We will figure it out, I promise."

She takes a deep breath in, "Well, okay, just hurry back. I need you."

A tear slides down my cheek, and then another. My body trembles, my knees threatening to buckle. I rest my head on the door, wishing it would dissolve under the weight of my need. I whisper her name under my breath like a prayer, knowing she can't hear me. If only I could say something—anything.

"I'm still here, Gaby," I whisper to the wood. But there's no answer, just the sound of her soft goodbye.

I listen to their I love yous and goodbyes, each word like a knife to the heart. A memory floods back—Gabriela at ten years old, holding my hand after our mother left for her third night shift in a row. "We'll always take care of each other," she whispered. And I failed.

"I will kill you," I whisper, my hand resting on the door, as I pray for a miracle, but there's nothing .

Kevin laughs. "Gotta survive Ren first. Well, let Ren know I stopped by. Stay strong, I got a tight pussy waiting for me."

His words snap my restraint and I lose myself in the anger, not caring about the pain. I violently shake the door handle trying to open it. Quickly, I scan the room for anything that might break open the door, opting for a small wooden nightstand. I can

hear Kevin's footsteps and laughter getting further away.

Grabbing the nightstand, I hurl it towards the door. Anything I can get my hands on gets thrown at the door.

"REN!" I shout, as I exhaust myself throwing anything and everything at the door, but Ren doesn't answer—neither does Kevin.

I'm hopelessly alone. Again.

### Chapter Twenty Two

Ren

“It’s beautiful around here.” She takes a deep breath out the window, her hair dancing in the wind as I drive. The night went ridiculously smooth, probably because it was fate for us to meet. She came back to find me... I could laugh. I was always meant to be hers—only hers. We promised.

“So beautiful.” The word scrapes against my memory like a blade across bone. My throat tightens. Vivian’s voice rattles in my head, the words triggering my mother’s voice as if I needed more confirmation, more signs that she has come back from the dead to haunt me, from her grave to my gut—poison, whispers, rot and perfume. From the corner of my eyes, I catch her staring. “You look so familiar,” she whispers, and I can feel the air shift.

There it is. The awareness. Her body knows before her mind can catch up.

Good reason to be, but I don’t need her to fight me now. Not when we are so close. We are deeps in the woods with no neighbors, really no one to hear her scream. “I have a familiar face,” I tease, trying to relax her, “I didn’t even know this existed back here.”

I look at her for a moment, fixing my face to match with one that is warm and inviting. “No one really did, it’s been in the family, and after my divorce, I decided to move out here”

The lie comes smooth. Practiced. Sweet as venom. The mention of that word is an instant potion. Vivian relaxes, the atmosphere going back to normal, and she smiles as she looks up at the moon.

“Sometimes, it is better to start over. I’ve been wondering if I should go.” She speaks like she’s already halfway gone, floating like a ghost who’s unaware of her own death. Her words should pull something out of me, but truthfully, they mean nothing. I feel nothing but anticipation, just as I did back then. The hunger beneath my skin rises—twisting, alive, pulsing almost like a second heart. I will once again be inside her, but not as before. I smile again knowing we are getting closer. “I hope you’re ready for the best meal of your life.”

She smiles before leaning over and placing a kiss on my cheek. “It better be worth coming to the house of a complete stranger in the middle of nowhere.”

I look at her. “It’s to die for,” I say with a wink before returning my eyes to the road, and my smile widens when I see the cabin. “We’re here.”

“It’s nice and cozy,” she says nervously as I pull in and park the SUV. Immediately, I notice tire marks on the mud and a light on in my room.

My gut twists. That light shouldn’t be on. No one should’ve touched that room. My jaw clenches and my hand tightens on the steering wheel. “Everything okay?”

I compose myself taking a deep breath in. “Yeah, I forgot to turn the lights off again. It happens a lot, and sometimes it makes me think she’s here.” An academy-level performance and she’s eating it up. Vivian places her hand on my thigh, giving it a soft squeeze.

“It’s like that for me, too. Small things like garbage or measurements.” She takes a deep breath in, trying to control the quiver in her voice while pushing her short onyx

strands behind ear.

“It’s hard to grieve someone who’s still alive.”

That line should hurt. It doesn’t. It stings, but only because it reminds me of how much of me died with her.

“Yes, it is.”

“Should we go inside?” she asks timidly as if she’s helping me go over the finish line rather than helping me dig her grave. “Sure.”

We both get out of the SUV, and once outside I can hear the screams.

“REN!” Byron shouts with his voice breaking a little, and my body tenses as I look over to Vivian as her body tenses and her dark brown eyes widen, looking even paler than her normal milky complexion.

“I know who you are.” Her voice wavers, cracking like a frozen branch under pressure.

“Oops,” I say with a warm smile. “I lied.”

Tears fill her eyes, her breathing picks up, and right on queue, she screams.

It’s delicious. Panic paints her beautifully.

Removing the baseball cap, I toss it to the side, no longer needing to hide. “You should have known.” I sneer looking at the woman before me, dressed in red, her favorite color.

“I know who you are?”

“And I you.” I close the distance, gripping her arms firmly and placing a tender kiss on her forehead. “Mother.”

But before she can fool me, I silence her—my hand clamping over her mouth—and I force her to walk toward the cabin. Her body resists. Futile. Still, she fights. Much like my Thorn.

“Walk.”

She begins to cooperate, but as we near the door, her body stiffens—fear paralyzing her. And I’m tired of this.

Byron is losing his shit, still screaming my name, so I toss her over my shoulder. Her screams echo into the night, but no one will come to her rescue. No one will grant her mercy. I reach the door—unlocked. My jaw clenches.

I always lock the door. I always lock the door. My nose flares. I know who was here. But that’s a problem for later.

Storming down the hall—

“I’m not your mother!” Vivian shrieks, punching my back with all her might.

“Scream all you want.” I smirk. “I welcome it.”

She sobs, her fists falling flat against my back. I pull the key from my pocket and unlock the door with one hand, shoving it open.

“Ren,” Byron breathes.



The room is destroyed. Torn apart. And Byron looks just as pathetic and shredded as this room. He's on his knees, his eyes wide and broken. I throw her into the room causing her to hit the floor with a thud.

"Ow," she yelps, but I ignore her and focus on my bleeding Thorn. "Byron."

"I'll do anything..." Byron starts, crawling toward me. "Anything, but let her go."

For a moment, I think he means Vivian. But no. That's not an option. Mother has come back from the dead to haunt me but she can't have me. Not anymore.

And now I see it. I understand it. My heart races. My lips curl into a smile. I feel warm.

He's waiting for me. On his knees. For me.

But I compose myself.

"Why are you screaming?" I build up the wall, the one that's kept me sane. Safe. I pull myself back in.

"You ruined something once again," I snap, slapping him across the face. "You'll do anything? Then here's your chance."

I walk toward Vivian, grabbing her by the hair. "Please." She claws at my hand, sobbing—

"Let me go... please—" Still ignoring her pleas, I toss her toward Byron.

One word. One demand.

“Create.”

Byron understands. His eyes shift first to her, then to me. “Gabriela,” he whispers so softly I’m sure Vivian couldn’t even hear her own death sentence.

But it will be beautiful. Because my ghost will become his. My trauma will mirror his own and we will become one. I perfected what my mother failed to do with me. She made me beneath her. But this... this is equal.

We will be on the same footing, my Thorn and I.

### Chapter Twenty Three

Byron

I don't look at the woman... I don't even see her... this all for a reason. She's an anchor. A path to my destruction, but to save the only thing good and full of love left in me. My sister. "Okay."

Ren pats my head, "Good boy," he says before he continues on his way out the door and into his studio. "Now Byron, this is Vivan." with a smile he turns to her. "Vivan, that is Byron." he introduces as if we are just meeting for coffee but I know it is bigger than that. He's giving me a name. Something tangible, something that I'll hold on forever.

I take a deep breath in as I stand. My knuckle hurts, and my ribs burn from the pain. The sting flares every time I breathe too deep, like a warning. The room smells like iron, sweat, and the faint hint of cologne. Memories of my sister crying when she was being bullied and I had protected her the only way I knew how—with violence. I was a piece of shit and I owned it. To protect my sister, I would carry on the darkness.

"Please," she begs, her face full of tears and snot. "Please." But then— "Byron..." she says my name trying to reach to my humanity , but that only belongs to my sister.

My stomach knots. For a second, the floor tilts.

My hand curls into her silky hair, and I feel like an executioner ready to deliver punishment. Her nails dig into my forearm, raking down. "Please." She thrashes as I

drag her to the studio. Her breathing is rapid—sharp, uneven—I feel every hitch against my arm.

My mind drifts to a happier time—

“I don’t wanna fall, Byron.” Gabriela pouts as I remove her training wheels. “Then how will you learn to ride? It’s okay if you fall, I’ll be here.”

She bites her nails. “But I don’t want it to hurt.” Softly, I pinch her chubby cheeks. “Then, I’ll kiss it better, but if you tell anyone, I’ll say you’re lying.” Gabriela stops biting her nails and jumps into my arms, giving me a strong hug. “You’re the best big brother.” And with that, she climbs on her bike, with my help of course, and then I guide her.

“On the count of three.” I say, running with her as she gains momentum. “One,” we count in unison. “Two.” And without realizing she’s on her own, I watch as she rides her bike with no training wheels, and without me. “Three,.” I whisper just as she squeals from excitement.

A soft whimper pulls me back. The weight in my hand is real. Her scalp, tight in my grip. Her tears, hot against my skin.

The cool of the scalpel brings me fully back to the present—to the cries, to the pleas, and to the part of me I know now I can never get back. I grip it tighter. My vision wavers, not from pain, but from clarity. This is the fall. There’s no training wheels now. No brother waiting to catch me. Just Ren and his darkness, ready to embrace me.

Ren walks towards her. She’s managed to crawl backwards into the corner of the room, frozen in horror, the fight has long left her body. But still, she can’t accept her fate. Gently, he grabs her leg causing a small whimper to escape her body followed

by bloody screams as he cuts her Achilles tendon.

And I just watch. Because if it's her... it won't be Gabriela.

"Pleas—" She's silenced with a bloody finger.

"Do not ruin the moment. We will make you anew, beautiful, no longer broken, and no longer in pain. Thank you for your gift." He leans closer. "Scream for me." And she does as he slices her other Achilles tendon.

Looking over his shoulder, "She's all good to go."

I blink through my tears, my body moving on its own. This is for Gabriela. This is the price. If I bleed for Ren, maybe she never will.

Tears build up in my eyes as I move closer .

"Byron," she sobs in my arms as I cradle her in my embrace.

"What's wrong?" I ask, confused as to why my sister is crying.

"He dumped me," she sobs, followed by words I can't understand while I pull her away from me.

I cup her face in my hands. "Who that asshole? Armando?" I swallow down the shame and guilt from knowing what we did, and what he did to be closer to me without suspicion. I hug her tightly knowing I'm the cause of this heartbreak, all because I'm sick. "Shh... I got you,," I whisper into her hair.

"I'm sorry," she sobs, clutching my shirt, then pulling away and wiping her tears with her arm. "Why, pendejo, you didn't do anything but be best friends with the asshole.

You warned me.” She hiccups. “And I didn’t listen.”

“I’m sorry, I hate seeing you sad.” I catch a tear and brush her cheek. “Want me to beat his ass?” She slaps my hand away playfully and scoffs. “No, but maybe scare him a little,.” she teases as a smile lights her face.

And I made a vow that day that I would never be the source of her pain.

So now, I make someone else carry it. If hurting her means Gabriela stays clean, stays untouched by Ren’s sickness—then I’ll do it. I’ll be the monster she never has to meet.

And with that, my hand moves down her neck, trying to sever her vocal cords but not kill her. I’m sure not hearing her screams will piss off Ren, but I couldn’t bear to listen any longer. It was enough that I’m willing to slice her skin.

“Forgive me. This isn’t for you. It’s for her.”

I’m no artist but I do what I can, carving intricate lines on her body as she thrashes, using anything to defend herself.

“I’m saving her. This is how I save her.”

From behind me, I feel my darkness consuming us.

Soft lips pepper my back with kisses as I continue to create—her skin coming away like paper in my hands. My skin feels sticky and warm, and the smell of iron and urine overpowers her peony perfume. But I don’t focus on the softness of her skin, the terror on her face—only the red. All I see is red... all I see is red.

“That’s it, Thorn. Turn off the lights. Look at those eyes,” Ren whispers against my

skin as his hand wraps around my cock, jerking it. Disgust and heat swim within me as my dick hardens in his grip. Tears mix in with my sweat as blood splashes across my face.

Her mouth is open in a silent scream. Her body is here, but her mind is long gone. Like mine. But Ren pulls me back, refusing to let me slip—forcing me to be here, anchored to him. To his ghost... my ghost.

I moan as his thumb circles pre-cum around my tip.

“Be free,” he whispers. I look into her eyes and make one final cut, and our eyes remain locked—until the light leaves hers. Looking down, I see her blood on my hands, and I bring them to my face, painting it all red.

Red .

Red.

RED.

“You are devastating, so much strength.” He kisses my shoulder before placing a bite on it. The skin breaks. Not deep, just enough to remind me I still have a body.

The tethers to my sanity snap, leaving only carnal hunger. The scalpel falls from my hand as I turn to Ren, the weight of it vanishing like it never mattered, like I traded in my last tool for instinct.

Smashing my head into his, causing him to fall on his ass, he smiles welcoming the challenge. The violence. The carnage. The invitation.

“That’s it,” he coos. “Take.” As if I needed permission.

I wedge my body between his legs. He still has clothes on, too much for what I need. They cling to him like lies. I want him bare. Raw. I want him real .

Grabbing him by the neck, and pulling him towards me, I command, “Off.”

Ren gives me a devilish grin. Releasing my grip on his neck, I rip off his shirt while he works on his pants. His breath shudders—somewhere between anticipation and worship. I will bury my shame in his ass. My hand grabs a fistful of his onyx strands, and I crash my lips into his, causing both of us to moan into each other’s mouths while our tongues dance for dominance. Volcano meeting tornado. Wildness with no intention of mercy.

My free hand moves lower to where the blood is pooled, and I dip my hand into it, coating it with the wet, sticky substance. Pulling back from him, I paint him red. A crown of carnage. A lover’s mask. He is mine now. Branded.

“Beautiful.” I groan before kissing him again, consuming him. He bites down on my lips until he breaks the skin, and the taste of iron fills my mouth. I moan against him—feral, starving, sick with need.

We don’t talk, we just move in sync, our hunger consuming us both. Two beasts in borrowed flesh.

Pressing him into the ground, I take the lead showing him what he should have been shown—love. But not the soft kind. The kind that splits skin. That leaves marks. That says I was here.

Showing him what it’s like to truly want someone, even if it’s an act of mercy. Even a death row killer gets his last meal, and we will be each others.

Each others’ end.



Each others' altar.

I swallow his moans with my mouth as my hand moves between us, and I pull away, peppering kisses along his jaw, and down his neck and chest, then all the way down to his thighs where I place his long, thick cock into my mouth, taking it as far back as I can. My throat burns, but I don't stop. His taste is heat and salt and violence.

Ren arches off the ground, pressing deeper into my mouth, his hand fisting my curls as he pulls my head up to look at me. His eyes shimmer, wide and wet, almost reverent. Like he's looking at his god.

"Beautiful."

Moving from his cock, I use both of my hands to push his legs up, and start licking his tight hole as I work my free hand down my shaft, mixing my arousal with some spit from my lappings to his ass. His muscles twitch beneath my tongue, a tremble that betrays how much he wants this. Or needs it. Or maybe he doesn't know the difference anymore. Neither do I.

Ren moans, and as much as I hate to, I hum in approval of his arousal. His moan isn't loud. It's strained, like he's holding something back—fear, maybe. Or something softer. Something he would never admit.

"I'm going to split you open." I groan against him. "Do your worst."

My blood hums from the heat, the need, and the sickness as I stand, lining up my cock with his tight entrance, and using my other hand I tug on his hair to make him watch as someone takes him. I want him to see. I want him to remember. This is what I look like when I break.

"I see you,." I say, catching him off guard, his eyes shimmer just as I begin to push

in, his body reacts, jumping to break free from me, but I wasn't lying when I said I will split him apart. He gasps, wide-eyed—not from the stretch, but from being seen. Truly seen.

The sun begins to rise, and the room is filthy with blood and sin. Golden light crawls across the red-stained floor like it's trying to cleanse something it never could.

I flatten out my hand on his chest, forcing him still... forcing him to accept me. I don't ask. I take. Because asking would make this real.

We both groan as my head enters him, and I almost cum right then and there. I have to stop and catch my breath, but when I look at him, I feel hate, devotion, disgust and need. Everything I've never said, everything I've buried, lives in that single glance.

Pushing in further, he squirms as I watch his greedy asshole begin to take me in. "Fuck, Ren." I bite into the flesh of his legs as I bring him closer to me, making each painful thrust harder and deeper. The pain makes it real. The blood makes it ours.

I feel the wetness and smell the iron of the blood coating my dick, and I smile. Looking to where we connect, I pick up my pace as I finally see emotions in those voids. Pain. Lust. Something akin to worship.

I fuck Ren with passion, with hatred until I can't tell the difference between where one begins and the other ends. His name is a prayer I spit out through clenched teeth .

My balls tighten and heat pools in my core, but I don't ask as I pump slower and slower, taking it all in. Memorizing this moment and filling him with me just as he had done to me. . My body shudders. Not from release—but from loss.

He kicks me off, my dick ripped from his ass as he forces me to the ground.

“My turn,” he says before slamming into me, using the cum slipping from his ass as lube. His eyes are wide, wild. Not triumphant. Not cruel. Just... desperate.

He fucks me until there's nothing left of us except destruction and darkness. Not two bodies. Not two men. Just a grave made of skin and teeth and ruin.

### Chapter Twenty Four

Ren

I collapse beside Byron, the floor sticky with grime, my body sweaty and spent, but I couldn't stop the grin of satisfaction spreading across my face. The sweat on my chest cools too fast against the cold floor, but I don't move. I just stare at my Thorn. The sun illuminates the contour of his body, making him shine in this ethereal golden hue, like some fallen god dipped in gold.

“Why are you smiling? It's weird,” he says, his sleepy voice doing something to me. It's raspy, thick with exhaustion, and it slides over my skin like a hand I didn't ask for but don't want to let go of. But all I can do is lay back, spent, while this warm, fuzzy, and unfamiliar feeling, almost like static fuzz, rattles through my chest where the void usually lives. Is this joy? Happiness maybe? A lie I can breathe in like a drug?

The birds chirp from outside the window, but under that, there's the sound of his breath. Steady. Real. I don't answer Byron, instead I turn my body towards him grabbing him by the waist and pulling him towards me. Holding him. Welcoming the muscles, the body hair, and the scent of him—sex, sweat, and something that smells like safety, but feels like a trap I want to fall into anyway.

“Ren,” he begins, but I bring my finger to his lips, soft and warm like it's never been touched by blood.

“Shhh. Don't ruin the moment. For one second, let's play pretend. Let's pretend this

isn't ruin. That there's hope. That I am not Ren and you're not Byron. We are just existing." The words almost break in my throat because they feel like a wish, and I don't get those. Not anymore .

If I only get this moment with him of whatever this is—I want to indulge in it. I want to consume it. I want to burn it into me so the void has something to choke on. I want to feel the warmth of his light, even if it's temporary. I want to believe the sun is touching me, not passing through. I'm so tired of the void. So tired of it chewing holes in me, of it dragging me back every time I try to reach for something beautiful.

Byron doesn't pull away. That's the part that kills me, even though I know part of him wants to pull away. He lets me, even when he shouldn't.

Closing my eyes, I breathe him in, trying to fight the feeling of warmth and comfort, but my body relaxes. The sun rays cover us, and the steady rhythm of his breathing lulls me into tranquility. My eyes finally close... my body drifting to sleep, to a place where this can be a reality... to a place where I am not a monster and he isn't my victim.

For the first time, I drift off. Real sleep. The kind I forgot existed. The kind I haven't felt since I was too small to be worth hurting.

The sound of clapping erupts through the room—slow, loud claps. My body flings to action before my brain has time to catch up. My heart slams against my ribs, and for a split second, I can't tell if I'm still dreaming—if this is a memory, punishment, or something worse.

Beside me, Byron rises like the dead, like a vicious dog ready to attack.

"Look, you were all worried about your brother," Kevin teases, yanking someone by the hair.

He's standing in the doorway like he's walked in on a private joke, shoulders loose, face smug, like he's proud of himself. Smiling. Enjoying this. Then I follow Byron's line of sight, blinking away the sleep, and my eyes register the woman beside him—brown eyes wide open, brown skin, long brown hair... Gabriela.

She shakes her head in disbelief. She can't scream. Gagged. Bound. Forced to witness her brother's depravity.

Byron goes to move, but my hand moves to his chest. "No."

Mascara runs down her bloody face, a cloth is wrapped around her mouth, and her hands bound to front of her chest. She's still wearing a pink nightgown, so he must have grabbed her in a surprise move... Fucking cockroach.

Byron's chest rises beneath my palm, his body trembling. His face has gone pale—eyes wide, not with shock but with shame.

"Kevin?" I ask, already understanding his game and regretting letting myself play right into it. Right into his opportunistic trap.

This isn't a warning. It's bait. He wants me to crack. I should have killed him when I had the chance. But I guess now is as good a time as any.

Kevin laughs. "You don't get to ask questions or make demands. Let's just say the cops got a nice tip, and I'm here to collect before shit hits the fan."

He leans into Gabriela and licks her face. "This right here is insurance," he says, focusing back on Gabriela, who shivers at his touch. "You were fun and such a good girl."

The gun traces her jaw, and she looks at her brother. There's no anger—only worry,

relief even, but no disgust. Only love .

“Let her go,” Byron’s voice cuts through the tension as he slaps my hand away, slowly rising to his feet. I follow behind, ready to intervene. Not that I cared to save anyone besides myself, but right now, Kevin is a fucking threat. I needed to kill him and get the fuck away, and I wasn’t leaving my Thorn behind even if I have to rip him from his Rose.

“You can have the money, but I have to show you where I buried it.”

He laughs, shaking his head. “How about we all go?”

He kisses Gabriela on the shoulder, causing her to sob into the cloth around her mouth. Her whole body trembles as Kevin kisses her shoulder again, her eyes wide and pleading, searching Byron’s face for comfort, for promise, for something. But we’re both too broken to offer it.

Byron goes to move, and a shot rings out. The sound is deafening, but not surprising. It echoes off the walls like thunder. He drops to his knees, and for a flicker of a second, I feel nothing. Just silence. Then instinct takes over .

“I’m not Ren. I don’t give a fuck about you or about burying my cock in your ass,” Kevin snaps, as Gabriela screams for her brother through the gag.

I clench my jaw, not bothering with Byron and focusing on my prey. Reminding myself what needs to be done for me to win. What I need to do to survive.

“Help your boyfriend. Let’s go,” Kevin says, and I bite back the urge to slit his throat and make him choke on his own blood.

Crouching beside Byron, I look at him, and we lock eyes—a silent interchange of

words. Letting me know he's okay while also pleading for my help. And I hated that I couldn't resist his demand.

Throwing his arm over my shoulder, I lift him onto me—carrying him... carrying his burden much like he carries mine. After all, we are one in the same. His body is limp with pain, his breath shaky against my neck. His blood smears across my chest like ink.

“Can we put clothes on?” I ask, looking down at our naked bodies before we walk out of the room .

Pointing the gun at us, with a smile. “Make it quick.” Kevin's smile twitches—he's bluffing and we both know it. He needs us alive. For now.

Begrudgingly, I dip my chin, bringing us to my room as Kevin watches from the doorframe. “Where I can see you, Sato.”

I walk Byron to the edge of the bed, helping him sit before walking toward the dresser that holds my daily wear—shirts, sweats, pajamas. I pull out a grey pair of sweats for Byron and a black pair for me. Grabbing a white V-neck shirt, I throw it over me before pulling on my pants. No time for underwear, but whatever.

I need to be quick. This place is no longer safe. I need to burn it, along all with the evidence. Ren Sato needs to die today. But so does my Thorn. We need to die in order to survive. But right now, we need to live.

I grab another white shirt, and walk over to Byron. Quickly, I inspect his wound. The bullet exited through the back, but the bleeding is too much. Ripping off a piece of the sheet from the bed, I wrap it around him, causing him to wince. We exchange another silent look. Another conversation.



He hisses through his teeth, eyes squeezing shut. I want to tell him to shut up. I want to tell him it's okay. But I say nothing.

Instead, I smile. Don't worry, Thorn. I won't be leaving you to die. Not today. But after today, there's no going back. Only fire.

Once we are both dressed and have shoes on our feet, I walk us out of the room... the cabin... and into the woods. The air is colder out here, and the sky is dark with whatever storm is brewing above us. Kevin follows behind me with a crying Gabriela. Man, was I tired of her sobbing. I'm actually thankful that he gagged her. If not, I would have done it myself. The sound of her whimpering grates against my skull like static.

When we get to a small cliffside space, I let go of Byron. The earth here is soft and damp, the wind biting. The drop behind us hums like a silent threat.

"The money is buried around here, now let her go."

Kevin doesn't smile this time. "Dig it up. "

"I don't have a shovel."

"I don't know, Ren. Use your hands."

My nose flares. My chest rises with each deep breath I take, adrenaline spiraling within me, coiling tighter with every second. My palms twitch. My fingers curl. I was going to enjoy killing him. Looking over at Byron, I hoped he could understand my look—a silent command buried in a plea. I needed him with me. For us to survive, he needs to be with me, not with her.

But—his eyes aren't on me. They are with her. Not even once does he look my way,

and that's when I feel it. A sharp, hollow snap inside my chest. It was always going to end this way. Blood. Bones. And Byron choosing his light.

### Chapter Twenty Five

#### Byron

My eyes focus on Gabriela as Ren continues to dig up the soil. “You know, Sato, you should have taken my advice and left when you had the chance. Jail won’t suit you,” Kevin teases as he continues to torment my sister, gripping her waist, feeling her up all while I’m hopeless because he has a gun to the head of the only person worth saving. The kicker.... the bullet too the heart is that, no matter what, she looks at me as if I can fix it. Big brother will come to her rescue. “You know, Byron, I was looking forward to this moment,” he says looking at me .

“Why? Just that desperate for me to gut you like a pig?” I ask, leaning on a nearby tree, using it to support my weight. “No, so I can watch you fail to protect her for a second time.” The words are like a knife piercing straight into my heart. My leg is bleeding causing me to feel weaker than I already do; it’s not like I was getting five star level treatment from my friendly psychopath. The dirt turns with every scrape of Ren’s hands, the sound of it too loud, too calm. The wind cuts through my shirt like teeth, and Kevin’s laughter makes it colder. I let out a breath, and look over at Ren who must have found the bag of money considering the look on his face. “Kevin, let her go,.” he says with finality and a coldness in his voice, that sends shivers down my spine. I should be afraid of him. I should hate him. But right now, I’m praying he doesn’t stop. My leg is throbbing. Every heartbeat pushes fire through the wound. It’s getting harder to stay upright, but I can’t go down. Not now.

I couldn’t fail her again, even if I bleed out... even if I die here, it will be for everything. “I hate repeating myself Kevin,” Ren says, causing me to look at him, to

focus on the determination in his coldness, and to see Ren for who he truly is and be able to determine what he will do next. He was no hero, Ren was a villain through and through, but he will offer me an opening. But this wouldn't come for free, this was a bargain—her life for mine. Giving me a silent deal, one he knew I wouldn't refuse. In order to save my sister, I need to surrender myself to death. Pushing away from the tree, I say, "Hey, asshole, did you hear him? Let her go."

And just like that, Kevin focuses on me—so quick to take the bait. A small man with an ego too big. The wind hisses between us, sharp and biting. The air feels tight, like it knows what's coming. That's the second that Ren needed—the moment the scales flipped.

Ren hurls the bag of money, and all I see is the bag moving across the air as Ren moves in— a blur of precision, violence waiting to snap.

The gun falls to the side, catching Gabriela in the eye. Her head jerks, but she doesn't cry out—just gasps, a muffled sound against the gag. I don't have a chance to register my movements, but my body acts on instinct. My arms wrap around my sister just as I see Kevin pull a knife from behind his back.

I take a deep breath in. Closing her into me, I flip us around, my back connecting with the knife. The sharp end pierces my skin, tearing through the muscle. The world goes quiet. The knife slides into me like it belongs there—like I was always meant to die this way.

I thought I'd be brave. I thought I'd be ready. But the pain makes a liar out of me. It feels like fire and ice. I feel the cold twist inside me, causing me to scream out in pain. Gabriela chokes on her screams, and I hear the sudden, sickening sound of Ren's wrath.

I hear the sound of a rock connecting with bone. Over and over. The sound of bone

and rage and finality. Kevin doesn't get a chance to pull the knife from my side. His hand loosens its grip mid-twist, and I can finally breathe again.

The smell of home, of cinnamon and roses—my sister.. I pull her back to look at her, almost collapsing into her as I hear the wet sounds of Kevin's skull being bashed in. Each impact lands with a sick rhythm—meat and stone, hate and love. The sounds of wet flesh and Ren's grunts fill the air as I remove the gag from my sister's mouth.

“Byron,” she breathes, her lips quivering before she's sobbing again. “Oh, Byron.”

I hug her. “You're okay?”

She sobs harder, her shoulder moving with each violent sob, her tears soaking my shirt.

Her breath is shaky, and warm against my chest. I don't know how much time I have.

If this is what it takes for her to live—then let me bleed. Because what comes next... doesn't matter.

She's safe.

The woods spin around me. I'm so caught up in the moment checking on my sister—that I don't even register the second he's behind her. My hand moves too slow.

“No,” I shout. “Ren, stop”

Everything slows. “Why? ”

I see the rock arc through the air like it's been waiting. I hear the dull crack before

she slumps into me limp, warm, and still.

Cradling her head, I feel her blood before I see it. It spills between my fingers. Hot. Familiar. Terrifying.

My ears ring. My chest tightens. My throat locks. I can't speak. Can't think. Only feel. Her blood on my hands. Her weight in my arms. Her silence screaming through me.

I look down at her face. Eyes fluttering. Lips parted.

Then—a breath.

Soft. Shaky. Warm against my chest.

She's breathing.

And for the first time in forever—so am I.

My eyes rise.

Ren stands there, blood across his face, red tangled in his strands of onyx. Unblinking. Calm. As if what he's done was sacred.

“Why?” I whisper. But the answer is clear now, and it hurts more than the blood still pooling beneath me. Shakingly, I collapse with my sister in my arms, cradling her head, shielding her, and grieving her. Making him believe he won to spare her. I sob as I kiss her forehead, the sound of sirens closing in catches my attention, growing louder with every breath. Salty tears roll down my nose onto my lips, bitter and warm.

“I love you so much, pendeja,” I whisper into her hair before I cradle her firmly, close to me, pressing her into my chest like I can keep her there forever. Before laying her on the ground, I lean over her, placing one final kiss like a blessing and a goodbye. “Live, kid. For the both of us.”

Before turning my attention to Ren, sobbing, I try to find the strength to stand. We are so close to the edge, but I can’t even stand. My legs tremble, my vision spins. “Ren.” I call to him like a god, desperate and delirious, as I crawl pathetically to where he stands; knife still stuck inside me, bleeding, weeping, and broken.

“Ren.” Finally, my God listens, falling to his knees. I see his tears mixing with the blood.

“It has to be this way, we need to leave,” he repeats over and over, like it’s a mantra he’s trying to believe. As he helps me to my knees, cupping the back of his neck, I press our foreheads together. The warmth of him floods into me like I’ve finally made it home.

“I see you, Ren.” And my free hand moves over the knife handle in my side, tightening my grip around it as I pull it out while crashing my lips into his. I kiss him. Devour him. My tongue greedily demands entrance as we both cry; our tears mixing with the blood that invades our lips, the salt stinging but grounding us. My hand moves, burying my knife into his chest, causing him to bite down on my lip. His pain is mine. Our breaths are one.

“By-” he whispers against my lips before his eyes move down to where we connect, and he smiles and kisses me again. As I turn my hand, causing him to groan, I move in deeper, hugging him with death’s embrace, and he lets me.

This is how it would always end for us—bloody, breathless, and bound. You can’t redeem a monster. And sometimes, you just don’t heal. You break .

I pull away from our kiss. One final time, I look at my heart and see the steady rise of her chest. She's alive. Peace washes over me, despite the void that consumes me. My lips stretch into a weak smile as I turn to the man who saw me, and I smile again—blood-stained lips trembling—as he coughs, and I can feel myself growing weaker.

“Byron,” Ren breathes weakly, as his body wobbles a bit, barely holding on. “You were to stay with me.”

Weakly, I cup his cheek, my fingers shaking. “I’ll follow you.”

“Good.” He coughs up blood, splattering my neck, sticky and hot. “I...” he chokes out his words, voice thready and trembling. “Like.” A single tear slides down his face just as I pull out the knife, casting it to the side like the final act of mercy. “That.” He looks up at me again, his voids finally full of life. “In.”

“Another life.” I finish his sentence before placing a kiss on his lips and letting him fall to the ground. My body collapses, and I face my mirror—my shadow, my sin, my twin. His hand stretches out for mine and mine for his, but then—the light leaves his eyes and nothing is left. No breath. No warmth. Just stillness.

I smile as my body begins to drift, my limbs going cold, blood soaking the earth beneath me. “By...” her voice, cracked and broken, calls me home.

I don’t turn. I don’t need to. She’s safe.

The sirens close in and the sounds of dogs filter through the woods, distant but coming. And my eyes close, my body shuts down, and the void swallows me whole—but this time, I don’t fight it. Because I know he’s waiting, and the dark doesn’t scare me anymore.



## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:16 pm*

Gabriela

It's been exactly five months and six days since my brother drew his last breath, and I was forced to move on like he wanted.

I shed a lot of tears before I was able to walk into the house we had picked out together in Montana. One of the very last things left of him, something I will forever hold on to. We painted the kitchen walls together that first week. He hated the color halfway through and said, "Fuck it—leave it. Ugly is honest." I never changed it.

The other is this studio, opening on the six-month anniversary of his death. The scent of fresh paint still lingers in the air, mixed with lavender and something faintly metallic like dried blood you've tried to scrub from your skin. I wanted a place for people to heal. To create. That was the message I took from all this tragedy.

From something terrible, I created something new. The Garden of Thorns. This studio isn't just for them. It's for me, too. For the version of me that still needs saving. The version of me who still needs her brother. There were nights I woke up screaming his name, clawing at the sheets like I could pull him back from wherever he went. I stopped looking in mirrors. I couldn't stand the eyes that looked back at me—they were mine, but they weren't mine anymore.

Grief is the most complicated process. You go from rage, to tears, to rage again. But today, I choose to heal.... to move on and truly let him go. I wonder if he knows, if from where ever he is, he can see. I smile as I look at the envelope that's been haunting me, begging me to tear it open and read the contents, but I knew I wasn't ready then.

Fuck, I'm still not ready now.

I take a seat behind the desk, resting my elbows on the surface. I stare at the envelope, the same one that's sat untouched since the cops returned it from evidence. It's just paper, ink, and memory, yet it weighs more than anything in this room. The world views Byron as a victim. Their story became the most fucked version of Romeo and Juliet, and I was angry at him for leaving me, for choosing him.

Until I was forced to face the truth.

In their own way, they destroyed each other. Because I refuse to believe all those portraits, all that chase from Ren, wasn't anything but this twisted form of twisted love. That—I can accept. That, like me, Ren loved him in his own fucked-up way. That Byron's pain wasn't all for nothing. That there was love there, even if it was born in blood.

A single tear slides down my cheek as I look at the urns that remain side by side, sitting on a floating shelf. One white. The other as black as his soul. They died together, reaching toward each other. I feel it's fitting they remain side by side. It took me a long time to get there, to want what destroyed us besides what I adored the most, but in the end, my brother chose love, and I learned that I didn't need to understand their dynamic—not sure I ever can. But he died reaching for him and that has to mean something... so I kept it as a reminder that not even the greatest darkness can overcome the light.

The studio is quiet. Sunlight slips across the floor, touching the easels. The bare walls still waiting for art. This was supposed to be my place of healing. His legacy. But some days it feels like I'm just surviving between ghosts. I used to be the strong one. The steady one. The girl who fixed everything and never cried in public. And now... now I talk to ashes and sleep with the lights on.

My vision blurs.

After postponing the letter, dodging it, fearing it, pretending it didn't exist on the day of the grand opening of his legacy, I exhale a shaky breath. My hands tremble as I rip open the white envelope. For a second, I almost stop. My fingers hover over the seal like I can still walk away. Like I can delay the collapse one more time.

But I don't .

The smell of my brother remains frozen in time, and my lips tremble as I bring the paper to my nose, inhaling the familiar scent of weed and linen.

“By,” I sob out weakly, careful not to wet the letter as I open it.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:16 pm*

Gabriela

The letter falls from my hand onto the desk.

The tears flow down my face, and I have to cover my mouth to keep myself from screaming.

It's like the wound has been reopened again—stitched over, but still bleeding. Still aching.

“By,” I sob, just as I feel the softest kick.

My hand instinctively moves to my light.

Byron didn't know that day... He didn't only save me. He saved the little boy growing in my womb. And I cry—not angry tears. Not even sad tears. But tears of love. Because I know he meant every word. Because I know I'll see him again. It might not be tomorrow... But until then, I will continue to spread my light and his truth. His life will not only be a tragedy. I look down at my swollen stomach and cry tears of happiness.

Today, I set you free, Byron.

And with that... I bring life to your legacy.

My unborn child, who I will name Byron. Like his uncle. The man who protected me. And the man I love most.

“Till we meet again,” I whisper, placing the letter back into the envelope.

Collecting myself, I glance out the window.

The rain begins to fall.

He always cried with me.

And for the first time in a long time, I feel peace.

Real peace.

Knowing it will be okay.

I rise slowly from the desk, fingers brushing over the envelope one last time. I walk to the studio doors—my hand on the knob—and open them wide. The scent of rain seeps in. It’s soft, fresh, and full of promise. Behind me is grief. In front of me—life. And somewhere in between... Byron.