



Pretty & Wrecked

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Love didn't save me. Hate did.

I died in a Louisiana bayou fifteen years ago. Or at least, that's what they thought when they left me there.

Now I'm back—forged in trauma, sharpened by rage, and hungry for the kind of vengeance that doesn't just bleed... it burns.

They thought they could break a little girl and forget her. Instead, they created a monster.

And monsters? We always come home.

I'm not here for redemption. I'm here to tear their world apart—starting with the man who ruined me... the man I can't forget.

Because the thing about scars? They don't fade. They fester.

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One

you oughta know

chapter-seperator

These things I know should have killed me long ago. They morphed into secrets, festering inside me like poison. Or maybe they were always secrets, and I'm the lie that grew around them. Am I the keeper of secrets or the harbinger of lies? Is there any fucking difference when both are killing you slowly?

How long can a person merely exist—a drug-riddled, empty shell with no soul? Someone who needs to obliterate her mind just to silence the screams of a conscience weighted with shadows of awful truth.

Fifteen fucking years.

I have died many times in those years. For a very long time, I wished one of them would stick.

At first, it was what Mama would call blind luck that saved me. Then, in several instances of happenstance—described by me as bad luck—paramedics revived me.

Now I know why death rejected me, why all my accidental overdoses—which were anything but accidents—never worked. Because I was meant to expose a tragedy buried so deep even hell couldn't hide it anymore.

The truth of it is a common bond he and I share, one that needs to be severed with a knife.

I couldn't live knowing what he did, so I merely existed. I pumped poison into my veins until I couldn't feel—what I saw, what I know, what he did, and the blood that followed. Until I got clean... because dead girls can't get revenge.

Now I know I'll never find peace unless I atone. His sin is my sin too, because I held it inside me until it consumed everything—until it ate my soul and left nothing but hunger.

I will make this right, even if it means I die trying. Death at the hands of outlaw bikers was never my preference for how I'd leave this earth, but destiny's a cruel fucking mistress with a taste for irony.

I'm no longer a greedy, selfish bitch. It no longer matters—my wants, my needs. God, did it ever?

Walking through those double doors into the Mayhem clubhouse feels like stepping into my own nightmare. The familiarity from my haunted past, when my mom, Nadine, was their best whore. The horror for all the years that followed—and that day the final shreds of my naivety and innocence were ripped away forever.

My name was Naomi Weston.

But who I am now is justice for all those innocents harmed—those like me, whose lives were forever ruined by an outlaw MC called Mayhem.

I am their comeuppance. I am the reaper.

And reapers never come empty-handed.

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Two

vengeance

chapter-seperator

I 'd gone through this scenario a million times in my head, each version ending in blood. Had I accounted for every possible reaction? Contingencies were hard-learned by me, drilled into my ass over the months and years since I'd last set foot in this place. The scars made sure I'd never forget the lessons.

I don't know how I fucking survived until now—to have this chance, this opportunity that'd been ignored or outright denied for far too long.

Sometimes it takes the heart and the mind years to come to the same conclusion, to finally meld in the truth. To accept that survival and vengeance are the same thing.

I grew stagnant in the trash they tossed me into, believed I had no value—but my holes did. Men like them made sure of that. The biggest gaping wound, even after all the years of rape and sodomy, after every brutal violation, will always be in my soul. They took more than my body—they carved out any chance of self-worth I might've scraped together by now, if only things were different.

But fuck all that melancholy, strychnine-flavored cocktail. The ifs, the maybes, the somedays are poison. Apathy is death in slow motion, and I'm done dying slowly.

I'd recorded a confession on my phone, in case one of them shot me in the head

before I could speak. My last words preserved in digital clarity—a final fuck you to their brotherhood of lies.

As the seconds ticked away on the remaining minutes of my miserable life, literally with my back to the wall, I had an epiphany. Alcoholics called it a moment of clarity. This was the dumbest idea to ever sift through my drug-damaged brain. But even the biggest fools stay the course, because once you cross the threshold where turning back's no longer a viable option, it's full thrusters ahead, Scotty. The chaos that inevitably ensues after that point is just collateral damage.

That fucking bastard, more commonly known as Jason French, was in there—behind those sealed wooden doors—having church. That suited me just fine because I came here to testify. My body remembered every mark he'd left on my heart, every scar that whispered his name.

Truth is just one of those things people claim to want—hell, they even demand it—but they'll seldom thank you for it. One reason: it fucking hurts. But not as bad as a vengeful bullet or an innocent knife to the gut. Sometimes, it even kills.

Turns out, love isn't the villain. It's the monsters we become because of it.

Although that'd also be true for my life. I learned to love the darkness I was thrust into. I love it in me, even now. I slithered at the bottom, swimming in the cesspool with sharks, surviving on the carnage and the fragments of those devoured. Their violence became my air.

I love what I hate.

I hate what I used to love.

After I said my piece, I'd send both of us straight to hell. It was time he had a taste of

what he turned my life into. He threw me away like garbage—treated everyone like that—getting away with it because his daddy, Luke, was boss of this little corner of backwoods bayou. Now it was his turn to be discarded.

I had a moment of doubt, imagined the door might be locked. It wasn't. I wouldn't let the fear control me—the fear of not knowing what'd happen next. That'd been my life for so long, you'd think I'd be used to it, but fuck no. Fear never gets easier; you just learn to wear it like a second skin.

So I barged inside the cheap, wood-paneled den of misogynistic evil and slammed the door behind me. My heart decided it'd be cool to pound clear through my ribcage in that moment. I was surprised not to see it waltz across the raggedy floor, leaving bloody footprints in its wake.

Being in the same room with that many outlaw bikers sent ice through my veins, the familiar stench of leather and testosterone making my skin crawl. But like hell it'd stop me, because they weren't the Jackals. They hadn't earned that level of fear.

Not yet.

Guilt by association, motherfuckers.

I recognized Edge first. He was furthest away, at the end of the table. He looked so much older than I remembered. It's weird, the tricks my mind played—I still pictured him the way he was... long ago... with her. Before everything went to hell and stayed there.

At the end of the table, in the seat reserved for their outlaw leader, was Jace.

They'd made him president?

WTF?

Did they have so little loyalty for the senior French who used to sit there? The thought made bile rise in my throat.

Not that Luke was any better. He was the reason that sorry excuse for a man even existed. He created a monster, utterly clueless in his fatherly devotion to a son who deserved none of it. Like father, like son—both of them masters at destroying lives.

A hug from Jason French was simply him looking for the best place to stick a knife. Nobody was safe around him, yet there he was, surrounded by fools who had no idea what he was truly capable of.

But I did.

I carried the proof etched into my flesh.

It was time to clue them all in.

A litany of curses hit my ears like a dull drone. I stood firm, like a statue of pissed-off.

“You lost, darlin’?”

“The fun doesn’t start till after the meeting.”

“Get this bitch outta here.”

“I don’t remember ordering junkie gash to be delivered.”

“Yo, earth to crazy cunt, what planet are you on right now?”

There was snickering too. Nothing I didn't expect or hadn't heard before. Men are so predictable—these types of men, particularly so. Their words were nothing compared to what I'd survived.

But Jace turned a shade paler than tan, like he'd seen a ghost in those few seconds. That made sense—I looked like death even now. I stared at the man who'd taken my life along with another, more precious than my own, as I pulled my pistol out and aimed it at him. The metal felt cold against my palm, familiar as an old lover.

I expected, in the next moment, to hear a loud BANG—then lights out.

When I was still alive a moment later, I focused my attention solely on the source of my fury and bitterness. I wouldn't miss—not this close. I'd practiced for just shy of a year. But then it truly felt like every moment that'd passed since I last saw his face was practice for this moment. It'd taken me that long to work up the guts—and sobriety—needed to face him one last time.

This was a day of reckoning for both of us. Judgment day comes for everyone eventually.

Then I heard several guns cock all at once. I don't know how I didn't shit myself. But it wasn't the first time guns had been pointed at me—just the last.

“You got shit for brains, coming into our home and drawing down on our prez,” a gruff voice said behind me.

“Nobody fires,” I recognized Edge's voice—calm, deep, tinged with a cruelty that wouldn't soon vanish. “Hey, look at me. You got a beef with Jace, you won't be the first, but you can't come in here acting like one of those psycho cunts.”

I glanced at him. He was so close to Jace that it didn't split my focus. “You don't

understand, Paul. This is the sanest thing I've done in fifteen years. It only seems crazy to you because you don't know what I do."

He blinked, and the air in the room shifted because I knew his real name—and that wasn't common knowledge. Plus, only one person ever got away with calling him that, and she was the reason I was here. Everything I was about to do was for her, because whoever I might've become died years ago in that bayou.

My adrenaline amped so high I was shaking from it. I thought I might pass out if not for the vodka I'd drunk before to calm my nerves. It enabled me to enter another MC clubhouse. The burn in my throat kept me present—kept me focused on what needed to be done.

Jace hadn't spoken a word, but his hand twitched toward the inside of his cut. That worn-out piece of denim, with its misguided patch of loyalty, was a mockery on a man like him. A man who'd never been loyal to anything but his own demons.

"I will fucking shoot you, motherfucker!" This wasn't how I expected it to go, but I needed them to hear me—needed them to understand what kind of monster they'd crowned king.

Then, for a single moment in time, I entertained the thought that they wouldn't care—it wouldn't matter—and Jace would come out on top like he'd always done. Like he had that night when he—

He froze, glancing down the table at his brothers. "You got less than two seconds to haul your skinny ass out those doors."

"Every man in their seats. Right now. Guns on the table, or I pull the trigger. You can all kill me after I say my piece." I'd never meant any words more than those. Death was an old friend by now.

Silence echoed loudly, but in my head, I always heard the screaming—not just mine.

“Do you remember me?” I asked him, tasting copper on my tongue.

He looked at me with utter distaste. “I think I’d remember a skank like you. You want money, dope, whatever—but you’re gonna stop pointing that gun at MY DAMN HEAD. What you fail to register is that we don’t give a flying fuck what you have to say.”

He was clean—I could tell. He’d somehow gotten past the demons he forced on me. Maybe he didn’t remember any of the things he did back then, in his crank-fueled deliriums.

How fucking convenient for him.

How heavenly would that be, since I was doomed never to forget them? The memories were carved too deep to ever fade.

“Why didn’t you report her missing?” I directed my question at Edge.

“Who in the fuck are you?” He pushed back in his chair, the legs scraping against wood like nails on a chalkboard.

“I used to be her shadow,” I told him. That’s what he referred to me as back in the day.

His eyes widened in shock. “Naomi?” The room began to stir. No doubt some of the older members remembered my mother and me. No doubt they also presumed me dead a long time ago—that is, if anyone thought of me at all. My bet would be on the nope for that, after my mother drank herself to an early grave, having lost her only daughter and her old man going to prison for the rest of his natural life. Mom never

was very strong—not a survivor. She floated through life, subsisting on the men she thought she needed to feel complete.

“I haven’t been Naomi Weston since that day fifteen years ago, when your president right there traded me to the Jackals for a bag of meth because I knew too much.”

Jace looked like an animal, his face the harshest scowl. “You lying cunt, you’re dead.” He charged at my aimed gun as I stepped back into the wall.

Hesitating...

I nearly pissed myself. He scared the fuck out of me. I had no friends there. I had no friends, period—but that was beside the point.

My hands shook as I squeezed the trigger.

Click.

How could I miss at that close range?

“You forgot the safety, bitch. Here, let me show you,” he snarled, his pistol emerging as he grabbed my throat, the barrel pressed against my forehead. He cocked the hammer back, the fury in his eyes replaced by shock, then horror, as he realized I wasn’t lying about who I was.

But it was too late to turn back now.

It was too late years ago.

Maybe it was too late when we were born onto this rotten earth, destined to crash into one another until one or both of us were obliterated and no more.

The bullet was already leaving the chamber on a dead man's path towards my—

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Three

prey

chapter-seperator

My head smacked into the wood-paneled wall hard as I jumped back. Imagination and fear derailed my focus. I couldn't let that nightmare fantasy happen. But as I stepped up to turn the doorknob, it rattled like bones in a grave.

I startled when the door slammed open, swinging free on creaky hinges, creating a gust of wind that blew my long dark hair back. The gesture felt like fate's cold fingers running through my tresses.

The son of a bitch who instigated the maneuver was as big as a bear and almost as hairy. He was more beast than man and smelled, oddly enough, of cucumber and Aqua Velva. He was so surly, in fact, that he lacked the ability to offer a greeting that wouldn't make the receiver piss themselves.

But I had been exposed long ago to much scarier men than him—psychos and deviants, the evil scum you don't want to know actually exists in the real world and not just your nightmares. The kind that smile and wink while they discover knew ways to make you scream.

The prez he served blindly, for one.

A shudder racked my spine as I fought back the memories of what men like that

could do to anyone helpless and weak, anyone who lacked the strength or ability to fight. Of course, it was easier to keep them drugged up and compliant. So stoned they didn't know where they were most of the time. Allow them a few conscious hours to feel the withdrawals and listen to the screaming. It kept them in line—obedient little holes. The drugs make you forget everything except the pain—that stays branded on your soul.

“What the fuck you lookin’ at?” His eyes squinted his displeasure, but if he was trying to frighten me away, he would have to try much harder. I’d waited long enough, dammit. Fear was an old friend by now.

I managed to step away from the wall, and fucking hell, there he was in the doorway, pushing that huge fucker out of his way. My body remembered him before my mind could catch up.

I made the mistake of looking in the direction they both were. It’s always best to know what’s coming at you before it arrives. But just for a second, the distraction was enough to further derail my plans.

Jace’s hand wrapped around my throat, his body so close I could smell his breath, those sadistic honey-colored eyes, like diluted bourbon, fixed on me. “You’re not fucking real.”

Maybe he was right for once. Maybe this was some drug-filled hallucination—this and the past year, my year of sobriety, my year of penance, of having to feel everything for the first fucking time in years. Every violation, every scar, every memory I’d tried to drown.

It took its sweet time coming back, just like I did.

My gaze diverted to the scar on his formerly perfect and handsome cheek. I gave him

that scar fifteen years ago before he threw me to the wolves. The things he did that night. He was always leaving me to score. I couldn't stop the shudder that racked my body or the way it pushed me into his much harder physique. The familiar press of him made my skin crawl with want and revulsion.

He took that as an invitation, like he needed one. Men like him just take what they want; they don't ask, and consequences be damned. How did I ever like it? Want it? He pressed me into the wall, nosing my cheek, nostrils flaring. I could feel how much the dynamics between us still made him hard—his darkness calling to the shadows he'd planted inside me.

Whatever was there, what had always been there, was wrong in a way that could never be right. We both deserved to go straight to hell. Maybe we were already there.

His grip tightened for a moment in time that felt like my very last. "I thought..." His gruff voice broke—more like shattered.

Then his lips slammed down hard on mine, and his cruel tongue swept away my reason, my purpose, the last fifteen years. But nothing, not his burning mouth or aggressive hips, not the desperation fueling the kiss—hello or goodbye—could erase the pain. It lived in my bones, deep in the marrow, so that it was forever a part of who I was now. His mark, permanent as a brand.

That part where I thought I had bid adieu to the reckless, greedy girl I once was? Complete bullshit, because I took what he so generously offered. My body betraying me like it had been trained to do.

Jace was a destroyer.

What did that make me? The willing sacrifice or just another victim?

Would he always turn me into a liar?

I needed to turn the tide before it was too late. I'd spent a year convincing myself I could finally do this, that I had to do this.

Where was the justice?

The ground shifted under my shaking feet as he spun us around, kicking open the church room doors. The table where these awful men made their bullshit decisions without caring who they hurt met my back. The wood was cold through my thin shirt, like a corpse's embrace.

I needed time to think. I needed to run.

"GET THE FUCK OUT! Church is canceled, fuckers," Jace growled with a grimace.

This was not supposed to happen. It was never one of the endless scenarios I prepared for. Talk about a landslide of turmoil. My nightmares had never prepared me for the reality of his touch.

This was the exact opposite of my nightmare fantasy that had assaulted my brain only moments before. It was far scarier, too. Because part of me still wanted him.

As the bikers grumbled and cursed during their exit from the room, he locked the door after their retreat. Jace kicked a chair out of his way, then he was on me again.

All over me, like a sweater you never wanted to wear again, so uncomfortable in its perfect fit. I didn't see my darkness reflected in him because he gave it to me—like a disease, a goddamn fatal one. Every touch was poison I couldn't help but swallow.

Rough hands grabbed my face, pushing my hair away as he jerked me closer. I

couldn't escape the evil gravity of him as it pulled me down, sinking into the abyss. If I had known it was a possibility he could affect me this way, I'd have had the common sense to be terrified. At that moment, I was less frightened of what was about to happen but more so of what my reaction to it would be.

He was acting like the past fifteen years hadn't happened, like that night never happened. Like he hadn't sold my soul to the devil himself.

He was different, changed in some way I couldn't pinpoint with our pelvises jamming into each other. The familiar rhythm of violence and need.

"Where have you been?" His anger was clear in his tone regardless of the words.

In hell. You sent me there.

Before I could offer any retort, his mouth stole mine again. There's no way he didn't remember... Was that even possible? Or was this just another game, another way to break me?

This presented a dilemma because I was here to kill him. But so far, he was the one killing me again—with his words and hungry, soft eyes, and his hard body. I'd forgotten all of this, how we ignited when with each other, like kerosene near an open flame. I'm not sure which of us burned hotter nor which would burn out first.

No, don't do that, I protested, raising my hands. But by the time I could place them on his chest to push him away, it was bared to me. More ink decorated the skin I was once familiar with. He'd aged gracefully; he was beyond fit. His cut was gone, leaving only his shoulder holsters and pistols. He always carried two. A predator never goes unarmed.

His cut, with the president patch and all that outlaw biker bullshit, lay next to us on

the table. But when my hands touched him, before I could stop myself, he grabbed them and forced both up and around his neck as he came at me again. His control was as absolute as it had always been.

It brought back memories of long ago. He couldn't still want me the way he had back then. Not after everything that had happened in all the years in between. Not after what he'd done to me.

But he did. I saw it highlighted in his eyes, in those same mannerisms he employed. The same darkness that had drawn me in before it devoured me whole.

It was... No. I would not go there and fall into that trap. I wanted to purge the past. I couldn't do that if I gave in to Jace. But my body remembered its training too well.

"Come here, kitten." His fingers snaked inside my jeans as he jerked me closer, my zipper torn down in his haste to touch me, to get inside me. To claim what he'd once thrown away.

"I'm not yours," I managed to choke out, betrayed by my own body. Through years of use and abuse, I was trained to automatically react certain ways to certain stimulation. Pain and pleasure had become the same thing long ago.

"Then why are you wetter than a slip-n-slide right now, Naomi?" His lips devoured the point I was confident I could make. He wouldn't like to hear it, the truth—that it wasn't really him that elicited this response. At least I hoped that was still true. It was my body's programming: to be a good little slut for the nasty biker. Get wet, get open, take it all, and either sound like you love it or don't make a fucking peep.

I didn't want him. My pants weren't down around my ankles, and Jace wasn't freeing his lying cock from his pants at that moment.

Except he was.

And I was letting him.

Denial. That's how I survived for so many years. I went someplace else in my head. It was the only means I had to escape.

But there was no escaping him now.

Jace stepped on my jeans and popped my feet free of them, then swung my legs up over his shoulders. I braced a hand against his rock-hard abs to slow him down. I knew I couldn't stop him, really. Didn't even know if I wanted to anymore.

"I missed you so damn much," he hissed as he dragged the head of his thick cock through my wet slit. Like he had any right to miss me after what he'd done.

The sound of wood splitting and fracturing broke through the panting breaths in the room as the doors flew open. One of them slammed against the wall, leaving a doorknob-sized dent. A monster didn't occupy the space, but a very pissed-off female with a Louisville Slugger baseball bat.

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Four

shattered

chapter-seperator

An almost inhuman sound left the throat of the baseball bat wielding psycho. Her hair was pulled back like she came prepared to fight, dressed in leather and denim, she looked the part of a biker bitch down to her severe make-up. The rage in her eyes promised violence.

“You promised, Jace! No more whores!” she screamed. She swung and missed because her target moved. The bat came crashing down on the table hard enough to bounce back at her, wood splintering like shattered bones.

Jace grabbed the bat on the next swing and with a reversal move used it to knock her down on her ass. There was the old Jace, full of fury if denied something he wanted. The monster I remembered so well, wearing the skin of a man.

“Who do you think you’re talking to, woman?” he demanded. He snatched her up by the hair, then slammed her into one of the chairs closest to us. The sound of her body hitting wood echoed like a gunshot.

If I had to guess she was his old lady, one he’d cheated on far too often. She didn’t look like his type and that was the biggest compliment I could give her. She hadn’t been broken enough yet.

“Don’t move, kitten,” he ordered before he tackled the woman, tying her hands behind her back. Trapping her in the chair, he grabbed her face.

“I want you to watch this,” he growled. “If I’d known you would have so much trouble knowing your place, I never would have fucked you that first time. You see, you’re a stupid cunt, which is fine for the most part, but when you lack the sense to keep yourself alive, now that’s bad. You coming at me with a bat? You’re going to pay for that, Misty.”

I should have moved, how ingrained in me was it to obey the big bad biker. I underestimated my weaknesses, my limitations. I needed to figure a way out of this, before he killed her because of me. Didn’t she know what he was? When she lay next to him, didn’t she know she was sleeping with the fucking devil incarnate? That his touch left scars on your soul?

Was I triggered?

Yes, hell yes, I fell down the rabbit hole, and these moments became like all the ones I survived over the years. It was as if I were still with the Jackals... my body remembering every violation, every forced submission.

“Fuck you, Jason!” She seethed as she struggled to free herself from her bindings. Her wrists were already raw from the rope.

He stepped closer to me, then pointed at her, leaking venom with his eyes and his words. “You fucking watch this, bitch,” he snarled.

I had no time to brace myself or process a clearly coherent thought without the fog Jace created in my brain. He slammed inside me with a grunt, he tore the scab off of my feelings as they all surged up. Every dark memory, every twisted moment between us.

I whimpered at the brutal carnality of it all, whimpered then a moan was torn from my chest when he looked over at his old lady and spoke.

“Every time I fucked you, I was pretending you were her. It wasn’t your gash, it was this pussy I nutted inside, you stupid cunt,” he taunted.

Misty screamed in supreme hostility a torrent of obscenities at Jace’s naked ass and thrusting hips, jerking around until her chair fell to the floor. The thud of her body hitting ground couldn’t drown out his grunts of pleasure.

“See? Stupid cunts, I hate ‘em.” He smirked as her eyes shot venomous glances at him and the door.

Did she think someone would save her?

What about me?

I didn’t want to feel anything, but my body was easily manipulated, not difficult for anyone to master now. Jace rode my pussy hard, his attention divided between my face and hers. It was getting him off big time, her anger and my surprise. The power he held over us both.

I couldn’t think of my gun while taking his, but what killed me most were the orgasms he so easily wrung from my body. An automatic response to stimulation, any sexual stimulation. Years of conditioning made me the perfect victim.

I was like a machine, with no emotion involved, not the kind he assumed I had. The only one I felt at all was regret for ever coming back here. For thinking I could face him again and put a bullet in him.

I knew now I couldn’t hurt him, even after every horrible thing he’d done. But he

didn't suffer that same pathetic affliction.

His mouth swallowed all sounds except for his own, which magnified then culminated in the most brutal thrusts my body ever received. My eyes locked with hers for a moment and she blinked, a real fear overtaking her and filling her with the common sense to finally shut the hell up.

Didn't she know?

She was likely dead already.

Nobody crossed Jace French...and lived to brag about it.

Not even sisters.

Especially not that.

How could he suck me into the past so easily?

For a few moments it was fifteen years ago...

We were in his bed here in the clubhouse, hiding from everyone as Jace showed me how much I loved his fat cock. I did, I loved him, I never wanted anything but him as he promised we would always be together, that nothing could tear us apart. As he rode me and my heels dug into his ass the same as my nails in his back while he whispered such pretty, nasty things in my ear that made me cum every time.

So what, everyone wanted a do-over at some point, didn't they?

For me I would have run away with him the first time he suggested it, then everything would be different. Wouldn't it?

Part of me, deep inside just imagined I would be the one tied up in the chair watching my old man fuck some new young thing. But the age difference never mattered to me then or now, nor the hypocrites who tried to point out we were brother and sister just because my mom and his dad fucked on the regular.

Jace corrupted and ruined me but I was the most willing victim in the history of willing victims. It never took much for me to see the world as he wanted me to. His darkness called to something inside me that should have stayed buried.

As I looked up into his honey colored eyes, the same as his sisters, filled with lust but more than that...confusion? Doubt? A horrific memory resurfaced for the first time in over a decade leaving me paralyzed with terror and the overwhelming compulsion to run.

It was a huge mistake...coming back here.

My best intentions were absolute shit.

There was no way to win now.

We were both going to burn to ash.

None of us were getting out of this shitshow alive now.

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Five

bound

chapter-seperator

J ace tossed me over his shoulder, caveman style, and marched through the clubhouse to his room...pantsless. His possessive grip promised darker things to come.

I bounced on the bed, not having time to notice the changes to the decor over the many years since I was last here in this place. He fried my brain; everything about him, his demeanor, discombobulated my assuredness and swept it away like ashes in the wind.

Apparently, the last fifteen years had been very different for him. I didn't know why I had never considered that possibility before... while I was being broken, he was becoming king.

My body jostled as he knelt on the bed, his mouth covering mine in an intense and too-brief kiss. It was a distraction for the handcuff he slapped around my wrist, securing me to his headboard. The cold metal bit into my skin like an old friend.

“Don't move, kitten,” he said as he moved reluctantly off the bed. “I've got to take care of something, then I'll be back, and we can talk.”

Sure, that's what he said, but his predatory eyes told a different story. They promised pain wrapped in pleasure.

Panic rose up inside me like a rocket blast. I couldn't be locked up in a room ever again!

No fucking way!

Never again!

I pulled at the offensively binding steel as I screamed like a torture victim. The memories of chains and darkness flooded back.

"What's wrong with you?" He turned before reaching the door, hearing my shrill wail of grief.

It was a moment before I realized I was chanting to myself, not again, not again, not again, not again, not again, not again...

As Jace approached with a concerned look, I finally pulled my gun out and aimed it at the cuffs, not at him. My hands shook with remembered terrors.

"What the fuck are you doing? You're gonna blow your damn hand off, Naomi!" He tackled me to the mattress. His rage didn't scare me. Nothing he did could compare to the monsters I carried inside. The gun went off as he wrestled it from my free hand. The sound echoed like thunder in the small room.

"Let me go, please just let me go." I needed to run further away than I ever had before. But my body betrayed me, remembering his touch too well.

"No, you came back to me, kitten. I'm never going to let you out of my sight again. Understand?" He kissed my forehead before he beat feet fast across the room, my gun still in his hand! His possessiveness wrapped around me like barbed wire.

What a fucking idiot I was!

That was my only damn weapon!

The metal of my bindings bit into my skin, sharp enough to break it. I didn't stop pulling. Pain was better than feeling nothing.

I quickly surveyed the room for anything I could use to free myself from the cuff before Jace's return. I didn't doubt he would keep his word on that. I didn't know how long I had until that event happened. Until he came back to claim what he thought was his.

I stretched across the bed until I could open a bedside table drawer. It was full of condoms, a bottle of lube, and an old cigar box. I pulled it out to see if the key was inside. It was a futile hope at best.

My heart almost stopped beating when I saw the contents. There were old Polaroids of me, of us, and the jewelry he'd given me that I left behind unwillingly all those years ago... Each piece a reminder of the lies he'd wrapped me in.

My throat seized as I touched those gifts—necklaces, rings, bracelets—that he gave me on my birthdays and at Christmas. He kept everything that had ever meant anything to me. Like a shrine to the girl he'd destroyed.

Why would he do that?

Either he truly didn't remember what happened all those years ago, or he felt deep remorse for having done them. Maybe it was both. Or maybe he was just that twisted.

No, wait, that didn't make sense. My brain fogged as I tried to clear it. It was funny how memories worked—some were so crystal, and others were like muddy water,

murky as hell and twice as treacherous.

I remembered how much of an asshole Jace was, to everyone except me. How he never capitulated to anyone about anything, but when his father, Luke, had found out about us, he commanded that Jace and I wait until I was old enough. It was the only time he bent to another person's will, and he did it because he wanted me that much. Could you imagine a big bad biker having a girlfriend he didn't and wouldn't fuck?

That lasted until Luke went away, which was just before the end of my world. Before he wrecked me completely in a way I would never fully recover from. Before the monster showed his true face.

Jason French was the living, breathing embodiment of the duality in men. He was the light and the dark, but there was so much dark. I was even loathe to admit now that back then his moods scared me. They turned on a dime, and yet he never pointed it at me. He never hurt me... until he did. Until he broke every promise he'd ever made.

Honey, his sister, was my only friend. I never had any siblings, not even step ones with any of my mom's boyfriends. But that's what she was to me. She never needed or had any requirement to spend time with me, but she did. She always checked on me and did girl things with me, like makeup, hair, and shopping. I wanted to be like her, a glamorous model type, but I'd never have the kind of stunning looks she possessed. One word summed her up: gorgeous. Now she was gone, and her own brother was the reason why.

I knew from personal experience that drug use could leave gaping holes in your memory. To be told you'd done certain things but have no clue what the accuser was talking about. A huge portion of my young adult life was a blur, a life of fractures, most of them dark, and they felt forbidden. I didn't pick at the scab over them because what I did remember was enough of a warning. Some memories should stay buried.

If Jace realized I knew what he did, if any of the past came back to him because I was here, I was dead. I knew I was planning on dying to avenge Honey, but that was my choice. No woman wanted her choices taken from her. Sometimes that was all we had left—the choice of how we checked out of this shitshow. This broken amusement park ride of lost dreams and sister-stabbing psycho boyfriends who shagged like a Greek god from mythology.

There was nothing heroic about Jace. He served himself and was true only to his own ego. Whereas his sister's beauty was no mask—she was equally beautiful inside—Jace had those angelic good looks too, but they were a camouflage for the demon he really was, had always been. My mama used to say the devil's greatest trick was convincing the world he didn't exist. And I'd fallen for every one of his lies.

For a time, Jace convinced me he was the illusion and not what lay beneath the gorgeous facade. The years had been kind to his beauty; he grew more fully into his hotness. It was absolutely terrifying how much I still wanted him, even knowing what he was.

It took several years, throughout the torturous confinement and abuse, to reconcile a horrible fact. It was true before I learned it; it's always been so. All women lived in a perpetual state of danger because we shared the world with those who could easily kill us. If a girl lived, it was by the grace of a man who loved her, who hadn't grown bored or tired of her. In an outlaw world, devotion and loyalty were for the club, for their brothers. They had so much of it there was nothing left for anyone else. Not even for sisters.

I needed to escape for the second time in my life, from a very dangerous group of outlaws. Their leader was the most lethal. Very soon, he would change. He would turn on me because he turned on everyone, and then it would be too late.

The sound of footsteps in the hallway made my blood run cold.

Time was up.

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Six

unraveled

chapter-seperator

The last thing I remembered after exhausting myself trying to get free of the damn cuffs but only hurting my wrists instead was Jace offering me a drink. The bruises would match all my other scars.

Like an idiot, I drank it, realizing only too late that he'd slipped something in it. Some type of opiate, the feeling all too familiar and horrifying for a junkie one year sober. My throat felt like sandpaper, my head pounding. I didn't ask for water. I didn't deserve the relief.

I floated into oblivion, not even my panic or anger enough to rouse me from the coma of sleep. The darkness took me like an old lover.

The feel of his sheets against my bare skin was too much, that or his wicked, whiskered mouth torturing my pussy. My body remembered this dance too well.

Oh no, oh yes. No dammit, oh god.

His shoulders pressed into my thighs, spreading them so wide it was uncomfortable, his hands digging into my ass, holding my body still as he ate and ate and ate like a starving soul. Like he wanted to devour every part of me that was left.

My legs shook as my body betrayed me yet again, rubbing friction against the chiseled scruff of his jaw. Outside, the sounds of sinful partying broke through the walls, things broke, but not as much as my free will. Inside, just between the two loathsome creatures on the rickety bed, the sounds were more erotic, my panting breaths, Jace's moans as he swallowed. The devil consuming his sacrifice.

He pulled the orgasm from my clit with deliberate sucking, hard then soft, then a fuck of a lot harder still. That's what did it for me...the pain. My trigger, more reliable than any man-made weapon and for my own safety far more dangerous too. Pain and pleasure had become the same thing long ago.

My body shook in a convulsion against the well-worn sheets as he growled, flipping me over and stretching me out until my arms hurt in their bindings. I couldn't let this happen. But my body remembered its training too well.

Oh God, where was my fight?

The sound of his zipper brought it back as I drew my leg up and kicked backward...hard.

He cursed as the bed shook. "You want to fight me, kitten?" he growled. A dark chuckle left his pussy-flavored lips before his hand cracked down onto my ass. The sting sang through my nerve endings like electricity.

"Untie me...right NOW!" I demanded, pulling with all my strength until the headboard groaned its own form of protest, mocking my own.

His weight covered me, smothering me into the too-soft mattress, but in a moment, maybe two, my hands were released and with it my full will to fight returned like a breath of new air. Though my wrists still bore his marks.

I slapped him with a resounding crack as I tried to move away, to get my feet beneath me. “You drugged me, asshole! I’ve been clean for...” I couldn’t confess everything. He hadn’t earned it, any of the truth, my truth. The truth that would get me killed.

“Shit,” he swore, scrubbing one hand down his face as he let me up fully. Then he grabbed my chin, looking in my eyes with those dangerous honey-colored orbs of his. “I’m sorry,” he said. The words felt like poison from his lips.

“I want my gun,” I demanded, jerking away, sliding off the bed and standing on my feet at last.

“So you can make an extra hole in my dick? I don’t think so, kitten,” he sneered.

Why did he have to look the way he did, years older but like not a moment had changed him? Like the devil himself had preserved him while I rotted.

“Where are my clothes?” I asked, flipping on the lamp to better search them out.

“Not where you can get ‘em,” he said as he crawled across the bed, his still-open jeans giving peaks of his thick cock that hadn’t softened yet. “Get your ass back in this bed.” His voice carried that old command that made me weak.

Did I really need clothes to leave?

How had it come to this? Weighing my desire to run away with my desire to cover the ugliness which was all that was left of me after... after everything they’d done to me.

His hand sliding across my bare hip made me jump. I shouldn’t be so startled by his reach, it was always more than I estimated it to be with us. I didn’t even know I was shaking so badly. The fear was a normal feeling that I’d held onto for fifteen years.

My body's memory of pain and violation.

But it wasn't the only one.

Feeling lust for the man who destroyed my life? On a list of wrongs that could hold the premium spot. Desire for Jace was never a problem for me. That was the most debilitating thought to permeate my mind over the years. Sometimes desire can consume everything, even your self-preservation instincts. Sometimes the monster's touch burns so good you forget he's going to destroy you.

Those little scraps of dignity that kept me alive for the past decade and a half. I was going to flush them down the toilet if I remained in the same room with him a second longer.

I'd be damned if I was going to be another biker's whore!

My arm punched out as my body pivoted running for the door. I realized I had a constant fear of locked doors now. The idea passed swiftly through my mind, as swiftly as my body passed through the threshold. My feet ate up the grimy hard flooring with great haste down the hallway in my bid to escape. Each step echoing with memories of the last time I tried to run.

I didn't look it now, but I was a hell of a sprinter, long legs helped with that.

I barely noticed the gravel as it cut into the soles of my feet, the compound gate nearing me or I it, as my lungs burned for oxygen. Freedom was so close I could taste it.

I would always wonder what would have happened if I had cleared it before...

Some long-forgotten memory scratched at the corners of my mind threatening the

tenable hold I retained on my sanity. If you could call it that. Like claws dragging across my consciousness.

It was more like déjà vu, a sickening feeling that churned my stomach, but its empty state meant nothing would come from the intense nausea.

A body slammed into me, hurtling me to the ground. The impact further depleted my oxygen levels as I struggled to catch my breath and fight whoever had tackled me. It jarred my bones, but my adrenaline was so amped I couldn't feel any possible fractures. My naked skin scraped raw against the gravel.

Most of my life was spent experiencing injuries I never felt at the time. I was too out of it, too high, or zoned out in another world, oblivious of my own body.

The sound of flesh hitting flesh turned my head in the direction of my tackler and his assailant.

Jace pummeled his brother with neither care nor thought given to the damage he inflicted. His concern for others was never paramount on his list of priorities anyway. The blood sprayed like a twisted baptism.

“You ever touch her again, I'll cut your head off and put it in your mama's bed, bitch!” he roared.

The psycho was out in full force, on beautiful and terrifying display. I should have been running away again, but it was like a car wreck you couldn't look away from. The sheer violence, the magnitude of it after my safe year-long reprieve was too much. As warm droplets of blood sprayed over my naked and shaking body, I contemplated things Jace's protectiveness shouldn't still invoke in me.

Everything was so wrong and so fucked.

Everything, but most especially me.

For a moment, watching him destroy another man for touching me, I almost forgot he was the one who'd destroyed me first.

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Seven

despair

chapter-seperator

Despair was more than a feeling; it was a state of mind, a constant companion, the closest thing I had to a real friend for so many years. It wrapped around me like a lover's touch, familiar and toxic.

Not feeling any sort of kindness or even mere compassion could permanently alter even the strongest person, so when Jace picked me up like a baby into his much larger arms, I froze solid. My body remembered both safety and danger in his embrace.

He noticed. "Whatever's going on with you, kitten, I promise I will fix it or fuck up whoever caused it. You know you don't have a thing to be afraid of when you're with me, don't you?"

If only he knew he was the monster I needed protection from.

My lack of response, due to my paralyzed vocal cords, didn't distract or faze him at all.

"Tell me who hurt you and it's done, you know that, right?" His lips brushed against my forehead as he walked us back inside, each gentle touch a mockery of the violence I knew he was capable of.

Deep inside, it felt like whatever was left of my blackened soul was being torn apart.

By his kindness.

If there ever was a more perfect dichotomy in actual living tissue for Jekyll and Hyde, it was Jason French. He was both the devil and an angel, but only with me. The demon who wore an angel's face.

It had been so long since he held me, I forgot what his skin felt like against mine, simmering warm, like dangerous velvet. So long since his heart beat so close to mine, since I felt his breaths or could hear them. Each touch a reminder of what he'd taken from me.

I broke down. Whatever tenuous fragments of myself I'd clung to as I fled only moments before were gone, shattered like the girl I used to be.

Hysterical sobs racked my torso as he picked up his pace and squeezed me closer.

Back to where this mess started, in his room, he kicked the door so hard it not only didn't close but bounced back and left a dent in the wall. Violence always followed in his wake.

By that time, he was settling his more-than-fine backside onto the less-than-plush mattress. The frame groaned a pathetic acknowledgment of its burden, the abomination of human flesh and the amnesiac man who held it. The devil cradling his broken toy.

Jace could never know any of the things that happened to me, the vile things that would make monsters of men and nightmares of once-innocent dreams. Hope was lost long ago to me, and yet here he was, trying to give it back. But he wouldn't bother if he knew the truth. If he remembered what he'd done.

It felt like I was perched on a high wire stretched between two skyscrapers, just waiting for a gentle breeze to tilt the world and me with it. The balance was practically nonexistent, so I held onto what I knew was true. If I stayed, even to indulge the masochistic side of me that always loved this very bad man, he would remember that night. If that happened, I didn't know what would matter more—my silence or his love for me.

I could hear my mom's chastising voice, always admonishing most of the things I attempted. "Don't pick that scab, girl. It will never heal right if you do."

It was a misconception most citizens had that just because something bled, it hurt. I remembered very clearly over the years something along that sentiment being told to me when I was too young to understand. Pain only hurt you if you let it. What ached the most were the scars, because those bitches never faded.

Jace was my scar. He was the seeping, pulsing wound over my heart. The reason I knew was because never once in all those years we were apart did I feel it at all... until now. Until his hands reminded me what it was to feel anything at all.

As I struggled for enough air to inflate my lungs, to make some sense of things long past that couldn't, in reality, ever be righted, I almost fell again. Honey eyes anchored me more than his arms and fierce hands. Those same eyes that had watched while they broke me.

The first time I saw Jace, the first time we looked into each other's eyes like this, something shifted in the world—something irreparable, something terrible and wonderful and unmistakable. Something that would eventually destroy us both.

Up until that moment, I operated on the idealistic notion that I was a good girl. I tried very hard to be, even in light of my mother Nadine's insistence that I was the devil's daughter, rotten to the core. Maybe she saw the darkness in me even then.

When those honeyed whiskey orbs searched mine, they found me. The Naomi I was always too afraid to be. How could one look free a girl? Jace's did. It was an acceptance of everything about me, both good and bad, but mostly the bad. He saw the monster I could become.

"Kitten?" His hands smoothed most of the salty moisture from my flushed cheeks. "Do you want a shot?"

I misunderstood his meaning, immediately tensing, and the worst part of all, my veins began to itch like they had ears of their own and misinterpreted his offering too. The familiar call of oblivion sang in my blood.

I shook my head, huffing out a "No" that sounded far too weak and timid to be convincing.

"Fuck it, I'm having one," he grunted, "or six."

Carefully placing me beside him, he crossed the room swiftly and grabbed the whiskey bottle off the dresser, the predator momentarily distracted by his own demons.

Jace necked it with a great guzzle, eyeing me like I was a dangerous animal the entire time.

Maybe a sideshow freak.

"You're going to have to start talking to me, Naomi. Like where the fuck have you been for the last fifteen years?!" He swiped his mouth with the same hand that still held the half-empty bottle while his stare pinned me down, like I was prey he'd finally caught.

A predator's look.

Was I always his prey?

How was I ever content to be that?

I operated under the wrong assumption that Jace would never hurt me... until he did. It was the same type of delusional thinking that plagued owners of dangerous, exotic, or venomous animals or reptiles—they will never bite the hand that feeds them. The lesson is often learned the hardest way, but isn't that what they wanted all along? To dance with death until it finally claims them.

To die for their obsession, to convince everyone theirs was the greatest.

Is that what I had done?

Was I obsessed with Jace, even now after everything? After every scar, every nightmare, every violation that started with him?

The answer gnawed at my guts, scratched at my already raw conscience until it bled.

In the past, his volatile temper would have surfaced by now due to my muteness. Jace was not a man who liked to be kept waiting for anything. It probably made him a good president, an efficient killer, definitely made him an exciting, phenomenal lover, but also a deplorable human being. A monster wearing a crown.

"Knock over any armored trucks lately?" Those words slipped past my lips before I could retrieve them. They were both a threat and a memory of the events that led up to his father Luke's incarceration. The beginning of the end.

One blonde eyebrow shot up as a smirk slightly lifted one corner of his devilish

mouth. He set down the bottle abruptly before moving swiftly to me.

“Can you imagine doing one thing in your stupid youth, in a drug-fueled mania, and never being allowed to live it down? I like it when your claws are out, kitten.”

“That’s bullshit! Why did you do it?” I meant to ask—How could he do it? Hurt her like that night. Kill the only person who ever truly loved either of us.

His hands balled into fists so hard I could hear his knuckles pop as he dropped down onto his haunches to look me in the eye.

“I didn’t just do it for more drugs. I did it so we would have the money to run away together. To get the hell out of this damn bayou like we wanted.”

Something about that confession rang too true to my burning ears, even if it was a lie. Why he still lied to me I couldn’t begin to fathom. Maybe part of him was still infatuated with me after all these years. Or maybe the monster just missed his favorite toy.

“On a list of colossal stupid, that choice would be at the top!” I didn’t want to feel what he made me feel, the way I did years ago for him. To know it never went away. I had just forgotten. Like a wound that never truly healed.

“You think I don’t know that?! It cost me every damn thing!”

The timbre of his voice, along with the yelling, made me shudder, and upon seeing it, Jace stormed out of the room, locking the door after him. The sound of the lock clicking was like a death sentence.

He was wrong about everything. It made him president, and he still had that.

At least I could breathe and think without him in the same room.

But that was another lie.

Because even alone, his darkness still lived inside me.

It always would.

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Eight

flayed

chapter-seperator

“ W here the fuck is Edge?” The voice was deep and burly enough to denote its owner even if I had only ever heard it once before, in the hallway yesterday when Jace accosted me.

Was that yesterday? I didn’t even remember falling asleep, but it sure as shit felt to my brain like I had pulled an all-day sleep crash. The familiar fog of forced unconsciousness.

“You ask a lot of questions.” Someone accused that huge bearlike motherfucker.

One of my eyes cracked open to see Jace standing in his doorway. His back covered in tattoos blocked most of my view, but the tension in his shoulders spoke volumes, like a predator ready to strike.

“Fuck off out of here, bitch,” he snarled. “Did you hear back from your informant? I need to know what the fuck is going on now.”

“Why don’t you try asking her...in a non-threatening way?” That deep baritone rumbled again.

“Bitch, my kitten ain’t talking,” Jace growled. “Now I don’t know how well you

know your ladies, but mine ain't gonna tell me shit that's the truth, and I'm running out of time and patience!"

Jace's hand threatened to crumble the door jamb, his knuckles white with barely contained violence.

"We burned her clothes, found this in the pants pocket," the bear of a man spoke one final time.

Oh shit, they burned my clothes! Was I next? Another thing for them to destroy and discard?

But that thought only lasted until I glimpsed my phone in Jace's hand. The phone I had recorded my confession on! The truth that would get me killed.

I couldn't let him find it and listen to it, not until I could figure out a way to escape. I couldn't gamble on the very real chance he would kill me if he realized I knew the truth of what happened that night. That I knew what kind of monster he really was.

Just thinking about it set my brain to throb. They say head trauma can cause migraines and headaches for years after the initial injury heals. Those were worse than withdrawals where your brain felt like it would scratch its way out of your skull. I had so many over the years, too many to count. Each one a reminder of what they'd done to me.

I fled the bed and was halfway to Jace before I even realized my body was in motion. Was that a symptom of long-term brain damage, the kind done by drugs or abuse? Or just my body's learned response to him, still eager to please after all these years?

I think it was clear I had poor impulse control, which was why I was back inside the Mayhem clubhouse after so long. But in truth, I had always exercised impulsiveness,

especially as a child if you were to believe my mother Nadine. Like a moth drawn to the flame that would destroy it.

I was terminally nosy, as she put it.

“I want my phone,” I demanded, holding my hand out, not really expecting him to give it to me.

I had only ever in my life been wrong about Jace once, that was enough, just the one time. The time that destroyed everything. This exercise didn’t change those statistics.

A smirk almost touched his fine lips. “How bad do you want it, kitten?” he taunted. Then he shoved it down the front of his pants. The devil’s bargain written in his eyes.

Was it childish? Yes. Was I going to let it stop me? Hell no.

It got hot in the bayou, even the loud swamp coolers couldn’t completely keep a body from perspiring in the sultry southern air. Jace’s bare torso had a fine sheen that my fingers easily slid across as I reached for my prize in his worn-out denim jeans. His cock jumped as my hand grazed it in withdrawal of my reward. My body remembering this dance too well.

No sooner than I freed it, his much larger hand clamped around my wrist and pushed it back inside his pants. My phone was stolen with his other hand and pitched onto the bed like it mattered nothing.

Oh god. He was already thick and hard, getting stiffer with each moment as he spoke. “Touch me, kitten,” he commanded, his voice making my knees weak.

I was grateful not to be naked in that instance; he’d dressed me in one of his well-worn and soft t-shirts. It hung down to mid-thigh and dwarfed my slight frame. I

wasn't always waifish, but that's just what years of drugs among other things could do to a body in transforming it to something ugly...hideous. Each scar a reminder of what I'd become.

I couldn't blame him if he hated seeing it so much he covered the abhorration.

I couldn't think clearly, but one thing I knew for certain was that so long as Jace was distracted, he wasn't using my phone and therefore wouldn't find what was on it. The truth that would get us both killed.

"I've missed your claws," he murmured as he nosed my neck, my hand squeezing the thick meat in its grasp. His body still knew exactly how to make mine respond.

When my response was not what he wanted, I couldn't allow that part of myself to take over, he pulled back and looked into my eyes. "Did you really come back here just to give me shit about a mistake I made fifteen years ago? You don't want me no more, Naomi, you are going to have to open those pretty lips and tell me that."

How blasé was it to refer to what happened all those years ago as a mistake? Like buying the wrong brand of aspirin or cheating on the big science test in school. Just a mistake, no big deal, everybody makes them. Not everyone sells their sister's best friend to monsters.

Oh fuck that. It wasn't a matter of want, because if I ever could again, I would want Jace. Faking it appealed to me about as much as what happened between us in the club's room they held church in. What we did was disgusting and beautiful and awful and should probably never happen again. That was, until I could get my head clear and screwed on straight again. Until I could find my way back onto the path I'd been on, to justice or vengeance. Were those ever the same things anymore?

"I hate what you did," I whispered, my voice cracking even though I didn't want it to.

I hated that I so badly wanted to forget and forgive him so it wouldn't feel like I was being flayed alive by loving him again. Like my heart was being torn from my chest piece by piece.

The seriousness of his features could bely anything underneath; he could be about to kill me or fuck me again. I wasn't sure which. It was a huge part of his appeal, and why every woman wanted him, tried to fuck him, whether he was single or not. The beautiful monster who could destroy you with a touch.

"Okay, kitten," he said softly. "I'll get you what you need to leave, clothes, car, money. But you're going to have to kiss me when you say goodbye. That's my only condition." His words carried the weight of a death sentence.

I had nothing to say. How could I deny such a reasonable demand? If it meant my freedom. If it meant escaping before he remembered the truth.

Jace gave me his back as he crossed the room, any sexual notions were gone, replaced with a finality that felt almost fatal. My darkest moments never felt like this in all these years without him, hating him. Then wanting to kill him so I would finally escape that night fifteen years ago. All those years of horror between then and now? Were they just penance? Some fucked up form of karma like contrition for not doing the right thing before the irreparable damage ensued. So many lives would be different, if I were different, stronger when it came to this man who always tied me up in knots.

He was leaving!

He was always fucking walking away from me dammit!

Panic surged up furiously quick inside my chest, flipping my stomach inside out in anger and disgust. "I came here to kill you!" I shouted.

Well, I couldn't take that back. It would be better to lock up my loose lips or bite them off than utter one more devastating truth to the man who stole everything from me, my youth, my innocence, my goddamn heart!

Your heart's as black as your damn daddy's, mama used to tell me. I had no idea who he was and she would never tell me. I guess I was lucky she hated me slightly less than him.

Jace raced to me so swiftly I stumbled back, his hands grabbing my head and neck, twisting in the length of black hair down my back.

"You succeeded, kitten. You just did that!" he growled as his lips ground into mine, stealing any resistance or resolve, taking my fucking breath away when I needed it most. "I know you don't want to know this but you're gonna. I know I hurt you, I was high all the time back then and I know I fucked up a lot. Losing you fixed me, I've been clean everyday we've been apart and I would never ever fucking hurt you again. I would die first, kitten. I would fucking bleed out first!"

A swift wind tossed my hair as he sped out of the room in a rush to get away from me. Running from the truth neither of us could face.

Amid the sound of various objects being broken and shattered down the hallway, in the main room of the clubhouse, another sound joined it. The sound of my sobs, horribly loud and empty to my ears. The sound of a heart breaking all over again.

Jace didn't hold a patent on fuck-ups. I was quite capable of my own...like coming back here. Like thinking I could face the monster without becoming one myself.

A fool believes he can accomplish anything until he or she learns otherwise.

I was tortured and abused for over ten fucking years, but none of it hurt as much as

what I'd just done to Jace. Nothing ever hurt as much as this. Not even the night he sold my soul to the devil.

It felt like something scratching inside my brain was calling me a liar, trying to make me remember something that probably never should be. It was all worth forgetting, every kiss and every touch, every lying I love you, I need you, I can't live without you. All worth erasing from my brain, every second we spent together, but like a strong poison I would never purge it entirely from my veins. His darkness had become part of me.

How stupid was I?

I thought I could kill him when in reality, in the gritty, dirty, nasty real world the only person who would perish if I did that was not who you would presume it to be. The victim becoming the monster.

I shot up so much dope, filled my guts with enough narcotics to numb a perpetual insomniac forevermore, but it never erased him. Some people in your life were like that, impossible to get over, to get past after you crash together and fuck everything up. They become the scars you wear on your soul.

My mind knew it made sense to never see the man again, the outlaw destroying the other room and trying to tear down the clubhouse single-handedly. It sounded like a terribly cruel bayou ballad. The saddest one.

I just wished someone could explain it to my black heart why I still loved the monster who'd destroyed me.

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Nine

hollow

chapter-seperator

The keys that were pitched at my face gave me a scratch across my cheek that could have mirrored the scar I gave Jace years ago. Blood for blood, mark for mark.

He hadn't returned, but I was given clothes and cash like he promised. They both fit like they were someone else's. My guess would be the cunt shooting more than keys in my face, her eyes furious daggers of hate. Another woman he'd broken trying to get to me.

Misty. Odds were she wouldn't be the last woman scorned by Jason French, just a tally mark on the scoreboard. If she hadn't realized that yet, then that was her dumbass problem. Some women never learn that monsters don't love—they consume.

Maybe Jace truly had changed, because she appeared unharmed visibly, just very pissed off. She must like the feeling, to still be here, trying to get rid of a woman who was already gone a long time ago. The ghost he'd created when he sold me to the devil.

I knew how she felt, but Jace never cheated on me with another girl; it was always the drugs. Her reward for nothing other than being here when I wasn't was an apparently clean and sober Jace who had grown something that resembled a conscience. I

wondered if he apologized for tying her up and making her watch him fuck me in the most sacred of outlaw biker places. If she knew what other sins he was capable of.

The location of that debauchery was as telling as the circumstances of the act itself.

“I know who you are,” she declared as she stepped inside the room like she didn’t want the conversation to be overheard by any other souls. “If you come back here again, I will kill you. Jace is mine.”

She was so wrong, about so many things. Jace didn’t belong to anyone; he wasn’t the type of person who could be owned. I guessed that’s why he was so appealing. Misty was afraid, cornered dogs growl and snap at the one who backs them into that position. But she had no idea what real fear was. What real monsters looked like.

I looked at her. She was pretty enough; she tried too hard to look tough. That was something you could paint on and style yourself into being.

“That’s the most traumatic experience a person can have,” I said quietly. “More traumatic than a severed limb or being the one forced to cut things off of someone else. In the abstract, killing is simple; people throw that phrase around like it doesn’t happen everyday, just because if they’re lucky they’ll never feel it for themselves. They will never have to do it, kill someone, never be forced to choose between their own life and another’s. Words are easier, it’s the deeds that are hard.” Each word carried the weight of memories I’d rather forget.

Misty blinked in shock and took a step back as I approached. It would have been comforting to see she had some self-preservation instinct, if I cared at all. If I hadn’t already learned what real monsters looked like.

She needn’t worry; I was damn sure leaving and not looking back. There was no such thing as justice, not for anyone. Only survival and revenge.

The clubhouse appeared vacant except for the talking coming from the church room. The fool in me was going to make good on the bargain Jace and I had struck on the conditions of my leaving, the goodbye kiss. But I should have just fucking left. Some doors should stay closed.

Through the gap in the double doors, I viewed two shadows, one very large moving around inside the room. I couldn't actually see the owners; I wished I couldn't have heard them as well. Too late now. Some truths can't be unheard.

"You're wrong, your facts are dead wrong, that's impossible," Jace's voice shook with emotion I could feel through the wood panel doors.

The sound of feet shuffled. "I'm not," the deep voice responded. "Naomi Weston up until a couple years ago was a patient at the Jackson A. Lee mental asylum in Mississippi. You remember the one the feds busted and shut down for its involvement in a human trafficking ring led by the fucking Dixie mafia! If you're saying she ain't talking and isn't acting like herself, that would be my best guess as to why. If she wasn't a fucking psycho before she went in there, she is now. You don't want to know the kind of shit they were doing to the girls they ran through there."

"That's not fucking possible!" Jace roared. Hands beat down onto the hard surface of the table, causing whatever was on it to jump and clatter. The sound echoed like gunshots in my skull.

"The feds found snuff films and the type of porn you and I would never fucking watch, man. The kind that would make anyone but the cruelest sadist fucking vomit."

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Jace bellowed. Footsteps, almost like stomping, sounded in the room, something crashed. Each word bringing back flashes of memories I'd tried to bury.

“What do you want to do?” the other man asked.

“Bitch! Again with the fucking questions!” Jace snarled. “You ask more than an interrogator! Get the fuck out of my club, you big nasty son of a bitch! Get the fuck out! NOW!”

It felt like my skull would split open, as a flood of memories poisoned what little sanity my brain possessed. I hunched over and vomited in the gravel and dirt parking lot that ran alongside the clubhouse. Then I was back at the running again. Running from the truth, from the memories, from what they’d made me become.

Only one car fit the type of key I was given as I hauled ass over to it. Horrific flashes assaulted me mentally as I struggled to get a grip, but it felt like I was slipping too far down to ever climb back up again. Back into that darkness they’d created.

“Bitch! You think you’re scary?” Misty screamed. “You can come here and fuck my man and then get away without me kicking your ass!”

A blow to my head knocked me face first into the car door. Then the gravel and sharp little rocks cut into my back as I tried to regain a focus on the expanding twilight of the sky as hands clenched around my throat. The weight of a pissed off female body pressed me into the dirt. Teased out hair didn’t move much and she grimaced in exertion and smiled in triumph at me.

But I had been choked enough to understand something she didn’t. She was doing it all wrong. I didn’t reach for the hands choking me; instead, I gouged at her eyes, grabbed that over-hairsprayed hair and pulled down. My teeth sunk into the flesh of her nose in an attempt to remove it from her face. Years of survival had taught me there were no rules in fighting monsters.

Her blind panic afforded me the upper hand and the freedom I longed for as we

continued to fight in the dirt. She wasn't as tough as she thought she was. It was like I told her before, words and deeds. Make sure you can follow through on your threats. Some lessons are learned the hard way.

Unconscious and bleeding, she didn't look nearly as dumb as she was in reality. Her blood, on my hands smeared, refusing to fade. Good. I didn't deserve clean hands anyway.

"Come with me, Naomi," that gruff baritone belonging to the one they called Griz sounded behind me. "I can help you, get you the help you need. I know what you've been through, I saw some of the tapes. I can help you, but you have to come with me."

I turned to look at the behemoth of a man who embodied his road name. It suited him, but not his eyes. Eyes are the windows to the soul; they tell you everything the person they belong to won't. His held secrets I recognized too well.

Griz's were kind and decent, too decent to belong to an outlaw biker the likes of which would hang out with Jace French. The kind of eyes that didn't belong in this world of monsters.

He saw what they did to me? What those men made me do?

Flashes erupted behind my eyes—the chaos of the federal raid, gunfire shredding the dark, men screaming, girls crying. I remembered pulling two of them by their frail wrists, dragging them over broken bodies and shattered glass, shoving them toward freedom even as my own legs trembled. I waited to run. I had to. I needed more than freedom. I needed sobriety, needed the strength to face it all without the haze, without the crutch. Otherwise, I wouldn't have survived long enough for it to matter.

He wanted to save me?

He was fifteen years too late! The girl who needed saving was already dead.

If he saw those things, he was either one of those men—or a fucking cop. And Griz didn't have the stink of a monster on him. His eyes weren't dead inside like theirs. No, his guilt was too clean, too sharp, like it came from watching bad things, not doing them. I'd never forget a single one of their faces—or their cocks. He wasn't one of them.

But he saw them.

It wasn't the type of material you could just stumble upon, like some cursed VHS at a garage sale. No, the feds confiscated all of it during the raid—while I escaped. But I didn't need tapes to remember. Each memory was burned into my brain like a brand.

I went with the hunch in my gut, the one that kept me alive for years. “Why don't you arrest me, officer?” I challenged. “I just assaulted this woman.” The words tasted like poison on my tongue.

His mouth worked, a sigh emitted harshly. “It was self-defense. I saw her attack you.”

He didn't deny my accusation. Another man with secrets.

“Was it?” I asked as I stood up slowly. “If you really saw those tapes, then you know what I'm capable of doing to another human being. That makes this situation decidedly less fair, doesn't it? Don't answer that, a better question is this: Why aren't you running yet?” My voice carried the edge of the monster they'd created.

“Don't threaten me, Miss Weston,” he warned. “I'm trying to help you. I'm trying to give you a way out of this.”

“You should be more concerned with your own longevity, officer... Um, what is your

real name?” I asked, terribly curious if he would tell me the truth. If he’d admit to being another wolf in sheep’s clothing.

He turned as if to leave me there; I couldn’t help myself. To ask more questions from the supposed biker who had so many of his own, according to Jace. You know who asks a lot of questions? Cops.

“Hey, which is stronger?” I called after him. “Your desire to be a do-gooder and take down the big bad bikers or your deathwish?” I flirted my lashes at him as I waited for some action from him. Playing the broken doll they’d made me into.

“You’re a psycho,” he admonished, looking at me like it was the first time he ever saw me. Maybe it was; I couldn’t get the chance to ask him before he sped off on his huge Harley fatboy.

I didn’t need to see the probable undercover agent leaving to know I should split too. Griz headed west, but I was heading east...to Mississippi to finish some unfinished business with some evil men who made these outlaw bikers look like boy scouts.

Time to show them what kind of monster they’d created.

Ten

unforgivable

chapter-seperator

Forty minutes. That's how long it takes to cross the Mississippi-Louisiana state line from the clubhouse on the outskirts of that backwater bayou Mayhem called home. Forty minutes to leave one hell for another.

A myriad of other terrible things could be accomplished in that same amount of time, two-thirds of an hour. I would give percentages but I was always better at fractions than those decimal points. Maybe if I had finished school. Maybe if I hadn't been sold to monsters.

Maybe if so many things were different, I wouldn't be on my way to try to mete out some long-overdue justice to some men who were long overdue to receive it. It felt like déjà vu, like I was running in circles chasing my tail. Now pointing my finger at more of the guilty. The monsters who made me what I am.

I couldn't hurt Jace; I thought I could, but I was wrong. But whatever fate had in store for him, it was probably exactly what he'd earned. Some sins couldn't be washed away.

His club's—no, his daddy's club, the one he'd been in charge of for over a decade—had been infiltrated by law enforcement right under his nose. There was only one reason why they would be doing that with a club as small as Mayhem. They

were ragtag compared to other MCs, even their own founding charter to the north. The feds were still looking for all that money Jace and his friends stole all those years ago. If the president of the southernmost Mayhem charter hadn't sobered up, maybe they would have found it too.

Jace was way more reckless back then in his youth. Before he learned how to hide his darkness better.

I broke our deal; I didn't kiss him goodbye before kissing that shithole goodbye. Some goodbyes were better left unsaid.

He had a lot to be angry at me for: coming back, not wanting to fuck him or explain where I'd been all this time. Who could blame me for that though? Not even saying goodbye or fuck off, not informing him that the apparent source he went to for information inside the club was likely a federal agent, kidnapping his old lady because the bitch pissed me off.

She was in the trunk.

Hard-learned lessons were rarely forgotten. I'd probably let her out in one of these coastal towns before I got to Biloxi. Hitchhiking back to Louisiana should give her some time to contemplate where she fucked up. Where she made the mistake of threatening a monster.

I looked like I'd been in a fight, but I'd looked far worse than this before while nobody noticed I was dying by inches, fractions of six feet each day over the course of years. I took over the digging when my sadistic torturers were gone. It was familiar, and even the most fucked familiar was better than nothing at all, than uncertainty with no direction. Sometimes the devil you know is better than the one you don't.

Returning to the men who hurt me so badly might be me at my most masochistic or my bravest. I wasn't that for fifteen years, but it took a measure of bravery to face the music, accept the things that couldn't be changed and finally change the one thing you could. To face the monsters who made you one.

I was going to hurt those motherfuckers. I was going to kill them or die trying.

Who was I kidding?

Jace said he would bleed out for me, before he ever hurt me again. Would I be a woman worthy of that type of devotion if I weren't willing to do the same for all those victims? The ones not as lucky as I, who weren't willing to do anything to survive, then escape. The ones who died screaming.

If I could prevent them from hurting anyone else, it would be worth it.

Jace was lucky to forget what happened, to have a clean past, even if it was a lie. I hoped he never remembered that night and what he did. I was glad his last memory of me wouldn't be my walking away. Some memories should stay buried.

It was like reading the book of my fucked up life in reverse chronology as more and more horrific memories surfaced, flashing by faster than the mile markers. My brain was splitting open and all its secrets were spilling out ugly and revolting. I stepped on the accelerator so that I could arrive at my final destination before my final lost memory did and with it what little was left of my sanity.

It was like peeling a rotten banana getting deep inside the vast horror of my mind. How could a person suppress so much and not even realize they'd done it? Not to the extent I had done. Was it only all the drugs I'd taken and had forced into me to blame? Or was it the mind protecting itself from horrors too dark to face?

The asylum had indeed been closed down, but that was just a front. A place to keep bodies until they were too broken to be useful or profitable anymore. After all, it was the ideal scenario, the perfect set-up; if anyone talked who would believe them? They were a bunch of psychos, mentally incompetent women unable to care for themselves, needing strong psychiatric drugs and shock therapies. The kind of care they got from the Jackals filled that bill and broke it too. Broke us all.

Not everyone was a noted patient of the facility and they didn't do the most heinous shit in the institution. There was a converted small warehouse/loft nearby that they turned into their ideal torture chambers and movie studio. Where they made their monsters.

That's where I was and just laying eyes on it again had me opening the car door and emptying my stomach onto the shitty, broken and cracked asphalt. This street, the entire area had been long forgotten long before the new business tenants squatted here. A perfect place for nightmares to breed.

There wasn't a cash pie in Biloxi that didn't have the Dixie mafia's fingers in it, more often than not it was their pie to begin with. But everyone wanted a slice of that kind of money. Blood money.

My scalp burned with a searing flash of pain as someone grabbed my long hair and yanked hard, jerking my neck back. This was starting off just peachy; there went my element of surprise, but if I'd been thinking clearly I would have parked further away. If I hadn't been lost in memories of blood and screams.

If I had been clear-headed I would have done what I said and let Misty out up the road instead of remembering my failure as my throat choked on bile and gas station burrito.

Stupidity was unforgivable, especially my own.

His face was familiar; he might have had a name in his normal life, that is if he had one of those at all. They were all named sir to me. Each one a face from my nightmares.

He dragged me by the hair inside the building as he laughed at how stupid I was to come back. I had to agree with him, but he didn't know why I was there. Didn't know what kind of monster he'd helped create.

As he shoved me to my knees and spit in my face, I pulled the knife from its sheath on his hip. This was the one who liked to cut and carve; they called it blood play, but it wasn't that at all. It went beyond the pale and most girls didn't survive a session with him. I kept all the horror of it in my mind as I plunged the blade into his smirking smug face. The blade sliding home like a lover's kiss.

He didn't think I would do it, until I did. Until his blood painted my hands red.

Two others came in, alerted by his bellow of pain. It took a long time to die from a knife to the gut; it could take hours, many pain-filled hours. Just like they'd taught us.

"She wants to play?" one of them growled as he looked down at his bleeding accomplice. "Strip that cunt and string her up, we'll oblige her, the stupid bitch."

I sprinted across the room, evading them. I wanted to divide them so they couldn't gang up on me. I knew from past experience they were unstoppable together. Their lessons carved into my flesh.

One finger was just a finger, but put five of them together and you have a fist, decidedly more powerful. I think I read that somewhere. I couldn't say why the things that were popping into my head were doing so as I scrambled away from my would-be attacker. Maybe they were the final remnants of sanity. Going, going, gone.

I probably would have heard the sound if not for the ambient noise inside the large, cavernous room. But at that moment I was scrambling for a weapon that could hurt this motherfucker since the first one didn't do shit. He was a tough son of a bitch to walk around with a scalpel sticking out of his foot. It bought me enough time to slide under some tables and get away as the other one approached the door we'd just come through moments earlier.

"We got company," he hissed. "Grab that bitch and keep her quiet."

Hands gripped my foot and yanked hard enough to make my hip pop in pain. I kicked with the other and clipped his chin. The familiar dance of predator and prey.

Oh yeah, that pissed him off.

I blinked in horror at what I saw at the door.

Jace.

Then blinked in it even further as I watched what he did to the men I planned on killing. Beating me to the punch. His violence beautiful and terrible to behold.

It was terrifying and thrilling.

Was I numb to the visual of buckets of blood after all the years?

Apparently, because what would disturb any other sane person didn't affect me at all. They'd burned that part of me away long ago.

There were more clues to catch here than in a dog-eared mystery novel.

I should have noticed Jace's mood, but I was so grateful he didn't die. It should have

scared me to death to be facing down a man who could do what he did to the sadistic assholes who made my life hell for years, but it didn't. One monster recognizing another.

I couldn't have been prepared in a million more years to be asked the question that came from his sultry lips. The very same ones that gave me my first kiss and let's face it the only ones that ever really mattered at all in my heart. The lips that had promised to protect me before he destroyed me.

"Where the hell is my sister, Naomi?" he demanded with more anger than I ever saw in him before, although many others had, I'm sure. His darkness finally showing its true face.

Did they live to tell?

Would I?

A great dam burst inside me as all the breath left my body like a deflated balloon. But I didn't fly around the room making inane noise; no, I went down hard.

I hit my knees as the memories of that night, the real memories, replaced the imagined ones that were easier to believe than the horrific truth. The truth I'd buried so deep even I couldn't find it.

"I loved her so much!" I wailed. The grief was as fresh as that night and all the ones that followed before my mind helped me cope. Before it locked away the truth to keep me breathing.

It was just too much, what went down, the abuse and torture after. I shut it down, but just because you lock that door doesn't mean nobody will ever have the key to open it again. Jace was my key; that's why I'd been desperate to get away from him since

that hallway at the clubhouse. He was the one thing that could break the walls I'd built.

I couldn't feel it again, I couldn't survive it again, I couldn't breathe.

Jace grabbed my shirt and yanked me close, his nausea scant inches away, so close I could smell his breath and feel its heat. "Tell me goddammit, Naomi!" he roared.

The monster demanding answers from the monster he'd created. The circle complete at last.

Eleven

that night

chapter-seperator

That part of the bayou smelled strongly of magnolia blossoms that time of year. Honey and I both preferred it to the more pungent areas where the gators shit and fishermen cast off fish guts and stuff like that. The sweet scent would forever remind me of death.

It was pretty with low-hanging weeping willows and lily pads in the water, like a scene from a painting of coastal life. The perfect backdrop for nightmares.

The argument that was ensuing was anything but...pretty.

"I'm not gonna let my daddy rot in prison for something my idiot fucking brother did," Honey spat. "It's always the fucking drugs, and now he's got you using them too, Naomi! When does this insanity stop? Don't try to fucking lie to me. I saw you last night."

"It was the only time," I whispered. My answer was meager and rather pathetic, far lacking any conviction. Like all the lies we tell ourselves before the world shows us its true face.

Luke was arrested, Jace was gone, he just left me, he never said a word, not when he'd be back, just nothing. I got to take care of some shit, he didn't even kiss me

goodbye for fuck's sake! I was freaked out. The first abandonment of many to come.

Her slap shocked me. Honey wasn't violent; she was sweet, if anything too sweet. The sting lingered like a promise.

As I touched my burning cheek, a tear slid down her face in empathy. "I'm sorry, Naomi," she said softly. "I'm trying not to freak the fuck out over this godawful mess. But Jace isn't good for you. I know you can't see it yet. I couldn't see it either, until my fiancé tried to beat me to death one night. You don't belong with him; he's going to take you down with him and I won't let that happen, not to the only sister I've ever had."

Was she trying to break my heart and make me hate her at the same time?

It was working, both in equal measure.

When I remained mute and reluctant to help her in her witch hunt of the love of my life—her own brother—she paced away wringing her hands. "Say some fucking thing," she demanded.

"Some fucking thing," I replied.

Her eyes scrutinized my face. "Don't be a smart ass," she warned. "If you know anything, if Jace told you anything about where the money he stole is, you need to tell me now. Right fucking now, Naomi!"

I shook my head slowly from left to right, never taking my eyes off her. My loyalty to the monster who owned my heart too deep to break.

She was so fucking gorgeous, even when pissed off and sweating in the bayou sultriness. Perfect until the end.

I would give anything to look like her, for people to pay me money to take my picture. Was she out in Hollywood living up that golden opportunity?

Hell fucking no, she was squandering it in this shithole, fucking an outlaw biker and trying to clean up messes that weren't hers. Some angels try too hard to save the devils.

"No you don't know anything or no you won't tell me?" Her finely arched eyebrow quirked even higher on her pristine face.

"Both!" I snapped, turning to walk my way out of there, go home and wait for my boyfriend to come back. Like a good little girl waiting for her monster.

"You think he's coming back for you?!" she shouted. "Don't be stupid, bitch!" Her footsteps sounded a moment before she grabbed my shoulder, spinning me around.

"Where is your fucking loyalty, Honey?" I demanded.

That had her taking a step back. "I don't think anyone can help my brother at this point, after what he's done," she said quietly. "But I can help my dad! Why don't you want to do that? He's been a good stepdad to you for years. Are you really that ungrateful?"

"I should bend over backwards to help him because he fucks my mother? He doesn't want Jace and I together!" I stamped my foot, realizing how childish that maneuver was only too late. The petulant child who didn't know she was playing with fire.

"I'm trying to save the only good man left in this fucking mess, and you're defending the one who put him there!" she cried. "Grow up, Naomi. This is real life, not whatever dream scenario you have in your teenage brain. You have to do the right thing. Do it for me, please, come with me."

“To talk to the police?” I shrieked loudly, causing a flurry of birds to take flight from a nearby magnolia tree, startling both of us. Nature itself recoiling from what was about to happen.

No way was I doing that, no fucking way.

I couldn’t do that to Jace. My monster, my love.

“Do you really think my brother wouldn’t backdoor you if given the chance?” she sneered. “I mean you’re too stupid and naive to realize he’s already done that! Did he tell you he was about to commit a major felony?”

Honey kept pacing, stalking away, then doubling back. She was creating a path in the grass and wildflowers that littered the earth beneath our feet. Like an angel trapped in a cage.

He never told me much and I never asked about club stuff. I figured if he wanted me to know something he would share it. Ignorance was my shield.

Was that wrong?

She smirked at my silence then her face sobered and became more sullen. “I’m going back to California,” she said. “You can come with me. Have a fresh start. They have some good colleges out there.”

“I’m not leaving Jace,” I declared. “I would never do that. I love him, he’s everything. Don’t you understand?” My obsession already complete, my fate sealed.

Why couldn’t anyone get it? Nobody understood how it felt to be us, to have everyone against us being together; it made us more determined to prove them wrong, that’s for damn sure. You can’t really be too young or stupid to be in love. Only fools

think that way or those too jaded to experience true love for themselves.

“You’re not going to end up with him, Naomi,” she stated firmly. “He’ll get tired of you just like the others. There’s no happily ever after waiting for you. I’m offering you a chance at that. Anyway, say goodbye to him. I’m going to make sure he goes down for what he did and they let daddy out.”

The anger and panic that surged up inside me quickly took over my actions. In moments we were fighting on the ground. It was just a reflex, something Jace had taught me about how to defend myself. I never even thought about it; I certainly never wanted to stab her with the knife I carried in my pocket. Jace had given it to me; it was what they called a butterfly knife. I always thought it was pretty until that night. Until it tasted blood.

It was silver and shiny and quickly saturated in the closest thing I ever had to a sister’s blood. The bayou claiming another sacrifice.

I freaked out. “I’m sorry!” I screamed. “Oh my god, oh my god no!”

She grabbed my hand, stilling my attempt to pull it out. “Don’t, leave it,” she commanded, her voice steady even as her life leaked away.

I thought I heard a noise on the backroad we’d driven down to get to this particular piece of bayou. I should have known Honey was trying to butter me up for something by bringing me to our favorite spot. Should have known paradise always hides snakes.

“What are we going to do? I’m so sorry,” I sobbed. I couldn’t stop my sobs, the way my chest wanted to burst or cave in completely; I wasn’t sure which. I hurt her. The first blood I’d ever spilled.

I never wanted to hurt her, never.

Oh god, help us, please help Honey. I sent a silent prayer up to whoever was listening up there as I cried and panicked hysterically. But God had abandoned this place long ago. He'd abandoned me one night when I was a little girl and my mother brought home some bikers who took us from my home and never let us return. This is what was left, this was all that was left for that lost little girl.

But she was calmer than me, comforting me, as the noise grew louder. "You can drive me to the hospital if you calm down, Naomi," she said softly.

She looked in my eyes and I burst into fresh hot tears again. "I'm so sorry. I love you so much. I'm so sorry."

"I love you too. It's going to be okay, just breathe sis," she commanded gently, wiping at my tear-streaked face. Her touch gentle even as death approached.

I finally managed to fill my lungs with much-needed oxygen when I heard a car door.

I looked around. "Did you hear that?"

"Maybe they can help us?" she offered with half a smile. Her last act of innocence.

Why hadn't I thought of that?

I sprinted away from her body propped up next to her Jeep to beg whoever it was to drive us to the hospital in Baton Rouge. My desperation making me blind to the danger.

Who drives a plain unmarked van this deep into the damn bayou?

Fucking poachers hunting gators out of season?

That thought only lasted until I saw the masks they wore, one of them carrying a shotgun. The kind they wear in winter in places where it actually gets cold enough to need them. The faces of nightmares approaching through the mist.

I tripped over my own feet getting back to Honey who was trying to stand up. She took one look at my face and asked, “They don’t plan on helping us, do they?”

She could read the fear on my face that fast. “I don’t think so,” I whispered.

“Help me up, Naomi. Now,” she begged. Her blood painting my hands as I tried.

She hunched over awkwardly with the silver knife handle still protruding from her abdomen, moving closer to the passenger side door of her vehicle. We’d rode out here with the windows down and the music up. I no longer cared that she was lulling me into a false sense of security to drop her little bombshell on me.

I just wanted to get us the fuck out of here. But darkness had other plans.

But it was too late. The masked men cleared the trees, intent on us. Predators scenting blood in the water.

“Ouch, that looks like it hurts,” one of them chuckled.

“Ya think?” Honey retorted with her best ditzy blonde California voice as he stepped nearer. Playing the angel one last time.

Blood spilled from her wound and his eyes, which were the only aspects of his face we could see, widened with shock as she plunged the blade into his chest, all the way. Her final act of defiance.

The next moment she reached inside the open window and pulled her revolver out and shot him before he was done cursing in pain over being stabbed.

Bam!

Bam!

Two shots, masked assailant number one went down, but we didn't get the opportunity to climb inside her vehicle and haul ass out of there like we both desperately wanted to do. It was written as plainly on her lovely features as it was reflected in absolute horror on mine. The moment hope died.

"I'll blow this bitch's brains all over that perfect face," the deeply southern voice intoned behind me as something blunt and metal tapped the back of my skull.

A slow hot trickle of urine released from my bladder down my legs to pepper my flip-flops. I was afraid to die. I could see something in her honey-colored eyes I never wanted to see again. The same eyes her brother had, now filled with a different kind of darkness.

It was almost like goodbye.

I wasn't fucking ready!

Where was Jace? What was he doing at that moment the world was ending? While his monsters claimed new victims.

People worry and fear the end of the world, but they are thinking on a cosmic scale. The world ends several times a day; it's a broken record. Knowing it's your final few moments on this earth makes some people brave, but not me.

I was terrified. I didn't want it to all be over yet. I didn't want to see my sister being fearless in a way I never could. The angel preparing for her final flight.

"Don't shoot her yet," the other one called out as he moved closer cautiously. "This bitch is fine as fuck even bleeding. I want some of that. I bet she's a screamer."

As I was pushed to the ground, a weight on my back so intense I could scarcely breathe, two of them ganged up on Honey. The predators closing in for the kill.

"You can fuck my corpse, you piece of southern fried shit!" she spat. She got off two more shots before they pinned her to the ground. Fighting until the end.

She wounded them, but not enough to save either of us. I blocked out the sound of the shotgun, the visual of losing my sister, my friend. Of these evil fucking men turning someone supremely beautiful into something hideously fragmented to the point I couldn't recognize her anymore. The moment an angel became meat.

Nothing else mattered after that shotgun blast destroyed Honey. It destroyed me too; it was the first step and it was a fucking doozy. The birth of a monster written in blood.

I screamed and sobbed for her for hours until they found some creatively painful methods to silence me. Each scream a prayer to a god who wasn't listening.

They dragged her body out to the water for the gators and I couldn't do a thing except burn in horror at the knowledge. I could hear them speaking as the van bounced up and down over the rough road. Tied up in the back with their bleeding out buddy. The beginning of my descent into hell.

"Don't look at me like that, man," one voice said. "The bitch was dead already. Did you see how much she was bleeding?"

“We don’t kill them right away,” a solemn voice answered the question that may have just been rhetorical. A promise of horrors yet to come.

The bayou swallowed angels and spat out demons. I was about to learn exactly how that transformation worked.

Twelve

blood rush

chapter-seperator

“ I never meant to hurt her,” I sobbed from my place on the shitty floor. Each word tasted like ash and blood.

Jace stood stoic the entire time, barely blinking while I confessed what happened that night Honey disappeared. His darkness gathered like storm clouds, thick and oppressive.

His jaw clenched so tight I thought his teeth might shatter. A muscle in his cheek ticked, betraying the storm brewing beneath the surface. His chest rose and fell in shallow bursts, breath rattling like it didn’t belong in his body anymore.

For a fraction of a second—just a breath—something flickered in his eyes. Not just rage. Not grief. Something worse. Something he buried faster than I could name it.

Then he moved.

He scrubbed his hand down his face, rose up on the balls of his feet, and let out an animal-like sound—raw, guttural—before he began destroying everything.

Anything nearby, it didn’t matter what it was. It was useful to purge the shock and pain, I guessed. Or maybe it was to drown out the truth echoing in his skull. The

monster showing its teeth.

I could have offered the truth; it wouldn't work, nothing helped. It was always there because she no longer was and never would be again. Some sins couldn't be washed clean.

But God, I wanted to be forgiven. Just once. By someone. Even if it was the wrong person, even if it was him. The ache felt like it lived inside my bones now, fused to the marrow, a weight I'd never shake off. I hated myself more than he ever could—but I still wanted him to hate me less.

Another truth?

I kind of wanted it to be over now so I wouldn't have to feel it anymore.

Loss is something you never get over; nothing can replace what's gone. If I could go back now, I would have gone with her; we would have left together. I would have lost Jace but that happened anyway and I lost one more—myself. Lost to the darkness that claimed us both.

I was a selfish, stupid girl and I reaped the rewards of my terrible choice, of that impossible choice.

All of the horrible things since then, I earned.

I couldn't feel how harshly the cement floor treated my knees or how tightly my hand gripped the knife. I didn't even remember picking it up. The blade calling for more blood.

Jace's hand wrapped around my wrist. "What are you doing, kitten?" he asked softly. His eyebrow quirked up in that way I always found so sexy before. Before the

darkness claimed us both.

It reminded me of how Honey looked at me in those moments before she died. That was a moment forever frozen in time in my brain. Some memories brand themselves on your soul.

“Making it stop,” I croaked. It was all I could manage. There were too many words that fought to be released from my vocal cords. But none of them fucking mattered; they wouldn’t change anything. I couldn’t ever take back what I did. Some stains don’t wash away.

“Fuck that, you’re not leaving me. I just got you back,” he declared as he tossed the knife and pulled me into his strong arms. His darkness wrapping around me like a shield.

Sitting on that shitty floor that had so many disgusting things perpetrated on top of it, Jace rocked me until my sobs were under control again. The monster gentling his touch for his broken toy.

“Kitten? Which one of these men murdered my sister?” he asked softly as he peppered kisses against my hair which hung limply in front of my face, shielding my ugliness from him. Each kiss a promise of violence to come.

“I killed her, Jace. It was my fault. Don’t you get it?” I cried, pushing at his shoulders but couldn’t budge them an inch. The truth clawing its way out of my throat.

His resolve was far stronger than mine. “Which one pointed a shotgun at my sister’s face and pulled the damn trigger?” he demanded.

I could answer that easily. “He’s not one of them. I don’t think he’s here.”

Spider, he was the worst one. The arachnid tattoos, he had more than one, baby spiders hatching from eggs inked into his cock, some sick horrific warning. He delighted in terrifying his victims. He liked to use both his tatted appendages at the same time. A monster among monsters.

He was noticeably absent which wasn't altogether odd. He was obviously the monster in charge; he seemed to always come and go as he pleased whereas the others worked shifts—rotating like clockwork, cogs in the machine he controlled with a flick of his venom-laced grin.

The asylum had been their perfect front. Legitimate medical records tucked neatly over sins no prescription could cure. A cover story with paperwork to match, hiding the real business—trafficking girls like me. Girls they broke, not just with fists, but with chemicals. Dependency disguised as treatment until you couldn't tell the difference between the need and the pain.

There were always four. But there were only three bodies strewn akimbo on the unforgiving floor. I was fairly certain Jace had killed them; if not then their last breaths were imminent. His violence painting the walls with their sins.

That made me happy and if I weren't still reeling from recollections, I probably could have managed a smile. The monster in me recognizing his.

"It wasn't your fault, you hear me?" he insisted, tipping my face up with a single knuckle under my chin. "You made a mistake; you were going to fix it, get help for her."

My shoulders shook with the horrible tumult of feelings in a fresh wave of sorrow. "They wouldn't let me, Jace!" I cried. The screams still echoing in my head.

He hugged me so tight I could scarcely breathe. "It's going to be okay," he soothed,

running his hands down my back.

He couldn't know those words killed me so, an echo of hers.

"No, it won't. It won't ever be again," I whispered. It hurt so much, like bleeding out in micrograms, so slowly the agony was prolonged. Some wounds never heal.

"Just give me some time, kitten. I'll make it better, somehow," he murmured as he pushed the hair away from my face, his lips a soft brush against mine. A sweet, chaste kiss of comfort.

It worked.

I wanted more. My hand moved to the back of his blonde head as I kissed him back. It was the first time I needed to or wanted to since... since they broke me and remade me in their image.

Jace only gave in for a second before jerking back and looking at me like a crazy person.

Maybe I was now, maybe I would forever be broken in a way that couldn't be fixed. But I needed to know something.

"Do you still love me?" I asked softly. I couldn't blame him if he didn't. He didn't know of the horrors I endured under this very roof. He could kill me if he wanted, if that sated his need for vengeance. I would die for him, for what I did back then, for what I did to Honey. Jace killing me would hurt far less than if he stopped loving me.

"How can you even ask me that? Look what I did to these men who hurt you," he replied, gesturing openly at the symbols of death lying around us. His violence a love letter written in blood.

“I thought you did that for Honey,” I said quietly.

“Naomi, I didn’t know what happened to my sister when I tore them apart,” he explained, shaking me just a bit to make certain I understood him. His hands gentle even in their strength.

I guessed that was right. That was how it happened. Jace came, he killed, I confessed, in that order.

He still didn’t answer the question directly, until his lips did.

I could still remember the first time he kissed me; it was just like this, with this much heat and passion. An ardor that couldn’t be easily quenched. A desperation you couldn’t escape. The darkness calling to darkness.

I felt like me for the first time in I couldn’t remember how long. The me that wanted Jace more than air, more than food or sleep. Oh, the hunger was fierce.

He was never unsure about anything, but I could feel his hesitance all the same. That brief and furious fuck back on that table in the clubhouse with a witness wasn’t our reunion; this was. This claiming among the dead.

It had to be.

Maybe some sick and broken part of me needed the carnage, the blood, the wrongness to feel right. Maybe I would never truly feel normal again, not the way I did before that night so many years ago. Maybe I’d become the kind of monster who needed blood to feel alive.

The purge, the expulsion and unburdening of all those horrible things that happened, helped. Jace was helping and he wasn’t even aware he did it just by being the Jace I

always loved. He had found his way back to man he was before all the drugs made him go insane and do some colossally stupid shit. Found his way back to my monster.

“Please,” I begged him with only an infinitesimal amount of shame. My body already remembering his darkness.

The floor seemed slightly more forgiving with Jace’s weight pressing me into it. Yes, this felt right, to be with him here in this awful place. To make a good memory to erase some of the bad or at the very least push them back into the deeper recesses of my brain like I’d done that night. I just wanted to forget for a few moments, to feel something besides bad, besides hurt and pain. To let his darkness consume mine.

Jace swallowed my moan, offering one of his own as his hands traveled my body, touching me in ways I’d forgotten I found so thrilling or so damn hot. For years I was touched without permission in a million monstrous ways by a million monsters. But the only touch I ever wanted was this man who had the blood he just shed for me all over. My beautiful demon.

Clothes ripped and were shed like a snake does its skin as we fucked in the goddamn degradation of that horrid place. Jace drove deep the reminder that I needed him with pounding hips as my nails dug into his fine, firm ass in a futile effort to control the ecstasy his body always served mine. Each thrust claiming what was his.

“I missed your claws, kitten,” he whispered against my cheek. The sweat from his exertions, from both of ours, lubricating the way our bodies moved and slid together in a debaucherous act that felt more sublime than mere fucking ever should. Like demons dancing in hell.

I missed everything about my life before, but especially him. I wanted as much of my life back as I was allowed to have karmically speaking.

I hoped it included Jace.

His name was a prayer on my lips as the sounds of fucking rang like the sweetest music to my ears. I loved his groans, every sound he made really. Heaven could never feel this amazing, no more a salvation than this abandonment of every morality except love on a dirty floor, surrounded by the bodies of our enemies. Our darkness merging into one.

I felt like I was soaring, the ringing that increased in my ears as body parts tingled and went numb with too much blood flow or too little; I wasn't sure which. I didn't even know if that was an orgasm; I'd never felt it before, not like that. Like being consumed by fire.

I was about to ask Jace about it when I realized the ringing wasn't just in my head. It was the sound of a phone. But that wasn't shocking; phones ring all the time, at all hours.

It was the very obvious sound of it being answered, upstairs, in the loft. It was where the men sometimes slept and did normal shit when they weren't torturing helpless young women. Where they planned their monstrosities.

The sudden shock of Jace leaving my body startled me. I'd never seen any man take so many stairs at one time. I definitely didn't notice him grab a pistol. There's something unforgettable about a man who while naked could keep his head in the game and would grab a pistol instead of pants. Priorities. A predator ready to hunt.

With no visual, the sound of flesh popping flesh was louder somehow. Punches?

"You didn't have to stop fucking on my account. I was enjoying the show. It'll make a hell of a movie," a voice chuckled before Jace sent him ass over teakettle down the stairs. The spider finally showing himself.

I thought for sure the fucker had broken his neck, but he was still chuckling in a heap when he reached the bottom rung. Evil refusing to die easily.

Oh my god!

It was him, the spider.

I was surprised Jace hadn't already torn him apart. Instead, he grabbed a handful of hair and dragged him over to me. It was then I noticed the pistol he'd had when he went upstairs was gone in favor of a shotgun, which he handed to me. Moving behind me, he helped me hold it, aim it at the motherfucker who killed Honey. Justice coming full circle.

He was getting to see what she saw. The poetry of it was so damn perfect my love for Jace doubled instantly. My hands didn't shake because he was there to support me. The rhythm of our excited breaths joining more frightened ones. Jace's presence steady behind me, letting me know this was right. That vengeance was mine to take.

The guy looked pissed or indignant. "You're not even going to give me any last words?" he sneered.

"You just used them, bitch!" Jace hissed next to my ear.

"Why? You didn't give our sister any!" I screamed with all the fury I felt for this piece of shit who had taken someone so precious to us both.

The last thing that entered his mind before it was scattered across the shitty floor was shock and confusion. I would have liked fear, but at least it was done. The final monster slain.

People always get what they deserve.

My mind was a whirlwind of excited electrical impulses all firing at the same time. The darkness we shared consuming us both, erasing every horror with new memories. The explosion building inside me, the intensity of tumultuous feelings ricocheting in my brain and heart made me scream.

Our reflections in the mirror showed what we'd become—monsters who'd found their match. Beautiful and terrible and perfect together.

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Thirteen

ruined

chapter-seperator

J ace found us some clothes to wear that weren't covered in blood and gore. We almost looked normal in them too. Almost human again.

There were two vehicles to choose from besides the one I arrived in. What I knew that Jace didn't was that we couldn't go back, because of Griz. Jace wanted me to drive a different car for his own reasons that I couldn't spare the brain power to figure out his motivations. Some secrets need to stay buried.

Because my mind was too busy adding up things I never bothered to before. Torture and mental anguish can be very distracting, but all those tingly scratches at my brain were trying to tell me something, trying to wake me up, finally. The truth clawing its way to the surface.

By now the feds were probably taking the MC apart, searching the clubhouse in vain for all that money they'd never found, not even with infiltration and a good deal of subterfuge. Cops are clever like that, but you're never the cleverest person in the room. Even Jace isn't as clever as he thinks. I will always love him; I know that now more than before. I can't hurt him, but I can't trust him either. Some monsters you love from a distance.

As he checked the back of the Bronco, I took the hypodermic I'd palmed inside

before we stepped out of all that horror and plunged it into his neck. I knew for a fact the contents worked faster at that delivery point. In fewer seconds than it took to register the confusion and surprise in his eyes, he was off to lalaland. To catch some heavy zzzs with rip van winkle. He'd be out for hours; awareness would return long before he could regain use of his body. I needed him to know how it felt for all those years in the hell he consigned me to. Betrayal for betrayal.

Timing it just right meant his body naturally slumping over did most of the work for me in getting his much larger form into the vehicle. My monster temporarily tamed.

I positioned his body fully inside and covered him with a blanket so at first glance it wouldn't look weird. Nobody was looking for me; nobody ever did...in fifteen years, my picture was never on a milk carton. But the feds would be looking for him shortly if they weren't already. Some predators are too dangerous to leave free.

He'd probably be pissed about leaving his bike, but they'd be looking for it too, after they failed to find the money.

When Honey asked me all those years ago if I knew where it was, I lied to her. My blind love for the man snoring in the back, as I tore up the miles between that horror we left in our wake and my next destination, made me feel justified in that lie. I always knew where the money was, not that I could ever tell anyone.

It isn't where Jace buried it anymore; that was the first stop I made before I hit the clubhouse a few days ago.

Nobody will ever find it; it vanished, those millions, the same way Honey did. Just another girl who was never reported missing. Another angel lost to the darkness.

It's because Jace thought he knew where she was all this time, but he was wrong. I served her punishment for wanting to rat on him; I served it as penance for what I did

to her. For my part in that tragedy, I paid the price; I'll pay it for however long I have left topside.

As I tossed those stacks of hundred-dollar bills as kindling into the fire, I was flooded by too few beautiful memories of my sister. Do you ever get enough, if you truly love someone?

In our spot, the spot where she passed, I sat frozen staring into the sparks shooting off into the dark. An echo of memory of another night when the world was set wrong. Old money burns up quickly; if only revenge could be meted out as quickly. But everything takes time, especially healing.

As I destroyed one of the things responsible for why she died, I contemplated the nature of greed, the nature of never having enough. I was always so greedy for Jace, for whatever scraps of affection he tossed me when he wasn't using and scoring more drugs. Some hungers can never be satisfied.

The only thing you can do with regret is make damn certain you don't create anymore, that you try to make amends in any way you can and move on. But some sins leave permanent marks.

It wasn't bad enough she vanished; they had to smear her name, make her the reason Luke went to prison when she would never betray her daddy. He'd earned her loyalty, and I don't know why they arrested him first except maybe they couldn't find Jace and wanted him to talk. I'm not an expert on all people French, but I know that man never would turn on one of his kids.

I love Jace even still, but he is the reason his sister is dead. He's the reason I spent the last fifteen years in a hell both mental and physical. Some loves are meant to destroy us.

You see, there's only one way those men, those Jackals, could have found us in that remote patch of bayou on that night so long ago. Only two other people in the world knew about it, knew of Honey and I's love of spending time there together, and one of them is serving life in prison for a crime Jace committed.

It wasn't a random happenstance or any coincidence that an unmarked van pulled up on two girls in the heat of an argument and in full-on panic mode. It was why Jace exploded when I overheard him and Griz speaking before I left the clubhouse.

I didn't really believe I could kill however many Jackals would be inside that warehouse, but my hunch was right that Jace would follow me and totally could. That he would want to tie up as many loose ends as possible. Anyone who might have a perspective on what went down all those years ago and shed a different light on an incident that coincided with it. Two women disappeared; you would think law enforcement would have put two plus two together at some point by now, but no. They want to find the money that no longer exists.

After all, the friends who helped him rob that armored truck have never ratted him out. It's good to be the last man standing; at least that way you know your secret is safe.

I have to try hard not to forget that part. To keep it in the forefront of my mind when dealing with the man I still love. He's more dangerous than any gator in that bayou where Honey died. The most beautiful monsters always are.

I have several more vials of that drug with me to keep Jace under control until I can decide what to do with him. Until I decide if love is enough to overcome the darkness we share.

As I head north, watching the mile markers flip by faster and faster, I'm reminded that no matter how far you drive, you can't outrun what's inside you. The real

monsters don't hide under beds—they ride shotgun, tucked into the corners of your heart where love and hate blur together.

Some circles need to be closed. Some monsters need to face what they created.

And as I glance in the rearview at Jace's sleeping form, I wonder which of us is truly the monster now.

Maybe we all are.

Maybe that's exactly what love is supposed to be, pretty and wrecked all at the same time.

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Fourteen

pretty & wrecked

chapter-seperator

The drug burns through my veins like a molotov cocktail, but my mind's awake before my body can move. Trapped in paralysis, I listen to the road eating miles beneath us, feel every turn as she takes us further from the bayou I call home.

My kitten thinks she's claimed her revenge. Thinks drugging me is punishment enough for what she thinks I did. If she only knew the truth about me. About what I became in those fifteen years she wasn't here to ground my more sinister desires.

She doesn't understand - watching her become the monster I have always craved. An equal. It was the sweetest kind of torture. Every brutal move, every dark impulse, every drop of blood she spilled... perfect. The way she took down Spider with my shotgun? I've never wanted her more.

Fifteen years I spent getting clean, building an empire, searching for her. Now she's found me, broken and beautiful and mine. She thinks hate made her stronger.

She's not wrong. Hate keeps you alive, keeps you focused, makes you hard enough that nothing can ever hurt you.

Love is conditional, fleeting, but hate lasts forever.

I taught her that.

And when this drug wears off, I'll teach her so much more. Starting with what happens to little girls who try to cage monsters.

My kitten's home is with me, and this time I'm never letting her get away. There's no escape...