



MONTY JAY

TILL DEATH
DO US PART

HOLLOW BOYS BOOK FIVE



TILL
DEATH

we give



THE OATH WE GIVE

THE HOLLOW BOYS

BOOK 5

MONTY JAY

Book made for megrourkee@gmail.com

The Oath we Give
Monty Jay
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*To everyone who never believed in fairytales because they understood the
villain.*

And to me, for finishing the series of a lifetime.

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WARNING

This is a **dark romance**. It deals with sensitive subject matter. That includes but is not limited to, graphic sexual scenes, graphic violence, serial murder, sexual assault, human trafficking, mentions of suicide and suicidal Ideations, kidnapping, and torture. If you find any of these triggering or those similar, please do not continue.

Trigger warnings for all of the Hollow Boys stories can be found at the bottom of this webpage.

<https://www.montyjay.org/hollowboys>

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PLAYLIST

Playlist

Hex Girl—Dreadlight, Maiah Wynne
Black Magic Woman—VCTRYs
Lifeless Stars—Palaye Royale
Heartless—Dermot Kennedy
I Need My Girl—The National
THE DEATH OF PEACE OF MIND—Bad Omens
Follow You—Bring Me The Horizon
Another Life—Motionless in White
Dial Tone—Catch Your Breath
Broken—Palaye Royale
Voices—Motionless in White
Destroy Myself Just For You—Montell Fish
Eternally Yours—Motionless in White
Machine—Neoni
Rain—Sleep Token
Pretty Little Fears—6LACK, J. Cole
Talk to a Friend—Rain City Drive
Alkaline—Sleep Token
Sugar—Sleep Token
Spiracle—Flower Face
Shameless—Camila Cabello
A Thousand Years—James Arthur
Desert Rose—Lolo Zouaï

Sex and Candy—Alexander Jean
Let me Be Sad—I Prevail
Unknown/Nth—Hozier
Without You—Lapalux
Infra-Red—Three Days Grace
Past Life—Sølv
Lose Control—Teddy Swims
Whiskey N Honey—Hueston
Till Death do Us Part—Rosenfeld

For the entire playlist head over to [Spotify](#).

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“Eventually everything connects ”

— Charles Eames

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I'd be eternally grateful if you'd share your thoughts about The Oath we
Give by leaving an honest review. Thank you and enjoy!

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AUTHORS NOTE

Hi! It's me, Monty! Before you jump into this book, there is a few things I wanted to say.

Firstly, thank you for reading. I love you and I appreciate you.

Secondly, this book deals with many mental health disorders. Mental health is a spectrum, it affects everyone differently and in no way am I saying that these characters I have created are the standard of these particular disorders and illnesses. 43.8 million adults experience mental illness in a given year. 1 in 5 adults in America experience a mental illness. Nearly 1 in 25 (10 million) adults in America live with a serious mental illness. I myself live with mental illness and the affects of a misdiagnoses. I just wanted to let everyone know that extensive research and care went into creating Silas and Coraline's characters, but I am in no way an expert. Silas, who he is and the trauma he experiences in this book may not be what others with this disorder have went through. So please, do not think because I have wrote my character this way it reflects for the entire community who experience and live with these illnesses. If you have questions about these mental illness, I urge you to reach out to those around you who experience them first hand.

Third, I wanted to also take this time to share some common misconceptions of Schizophrenia. It's one of the most misdiagnosed and misunderstood on the mental health spectrum. So, if you flip the page, you'll find some information taken from WEB Md.

If you or a loved one struggle with mental health, please reach out to a health professional and seek treatment. The hardest thing for anyone to do, is ask for help. It does not make you weak, it makes you so strong.

All my love,
MJ.

Myth No. 1: It means you have dissociative identity disorder (DID). This is one of the biggest misunderstandings about [schizophrenia](#). One poll found that 64% of Americans believe the condition involves DID, which means someone acts like they're two or more separate people. Some of the most common symptoms of schizophrenia are [hallucinations](#) and delusions, which include hearing voices in your head and acting on false beliefs. This isn't the same as DID.

Myth No. 2: Most people with schizophrenia are violent or dangerous. In movies and TV shows, who is the crazed killer? Often it's the character with this condition. That's not the case in real life. Even though people with schizophrenia can act unpredictably at times, most aren't violent, especially if they're getting treated. People with schizophrenia are more likely to be victims of violence. They're also more likely to harm themselves than others -- [suicide](#) rates among people with schizophrenia are high. When people with this [brain](#) disorder do commit violent acts, they usually have another condition, like childhood conduct problems or [substance abuse](#). But the disorder alone doesn't make you physically aggressive.

Myth No. 3: Bad [parenting](#) is the cause. Mothers, in particular, often get blamed.

But schizophrenia is a mental illness. It has many causes, including genes, trauma, and drug abuse. Mistakes you've made as a parent won't give your child this condition.

Myth No. 4: If a parent has schizophrenia, you'll get it, too. Genes do play a role. But just because one of your parents has this mental illness doesn't mean you're destined to get it. You might have a slightly higher risk, but scientists don't think genes are the only cause. Certain viruses, not getting enough [nutrition](#) before you're born, and other things play a role in turning on the genes. If one parent has schizophrenia, your risk of getting the condition is about 10%. Having more than one family member with it raises your risk.

Myth No. 5: People with schizophrenia aren't smart. Some studies have found that people with the condition have more trouble on tests of mental skills such as attention, learning, and memory. But that doesn't mean they're not intelligent.

Many creative and smart people throughout history have had schizophrenia. Scientists are even looking into links between genes that may be related to both [psychosis](#) and creativity.

Myth No. 6: If you have schizophrenia, you belong in a mental hospital. There was a time when people with mental illnesses were sent to asylums or even prisons. But now that experts know more about this disease, fewer people need to be placed in long-term mental health facilities. The level of care you need depends on how severe your symptoms are. Many people with schizophrenia live independently, while some live with their family or in supportive housing in their community. It's important to be in close contact with your doctor, and to have support in place to help you continue your treatment as needed. Myth No. 7: You can't hold a job if you have it. Schizophrenia can make it harder for you to land a job and go to work every day. But with the right treatment, many people can find a position that fits their skills and abilities.

Myth No. 8: Schizophrenia makes people lazy. The illness can make it harder for someone to take care of their daily needs, such as dressing and bathing. This doesn't mean they're "lazy." They just need some help with their daily routine.

Myth No. 9: It comes on with a sudden psychotic break.

Fact: Some people have a big mental event that leads to a [schizophrenia diagnosis](#). But symptoms can appear over time and are hard to notice. If you have early symptoms of schizophrenia, you might:

- Be less social
- Show less interest in normal activities
- Withdraw from everyday life

Other symptoms, like acting out delusions and hallucinating, can show up later.

Myth No. 10: It can't be treated. While there's no known cure for schizophrenia, treatment can help you manage its symptoms and lessen its impact on your life. Antipsychotic [medications](#) can help stabilize you and lower the risk of future symptoms. [Talk therapy](#) and cognitive behavioral [therapy](#) are also helpful tools that can show you how to handle [stress](#) better and live well. But schizophrenia can sometimes get worse over time. Treatment is usually required for the rest of your life.

With treatment, many people with the condition can live full, productive lives

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PROLOGUE

BEFORE FREEDOM

February

“YOU’RE NOT SCHIZOPHRENIC.”

Ten years.

I’ve waited ten years for someone other than Rosemary Donahue to say those words to me. For someone that was alive and fucking competent to confirm what I’d known for so long.

My gaze is unfazed by this statement. I hold eye contact with Jennifer L. Tako of Evergreen Health Institution. For almost a year, I’ve seen her three days every week. This short, gray-haired woman with a port-wine stain birthmark just beneath her left eye has told me the only thing I’ve ever needed to hear since I was young.

I wait. Wait for several minutes in comfortable silence. Wait for a weight to be lifted, to experience a sense of validation, but that never comes. I can’t bring myself to feel anything other than acceptance.

A lot of my life had been spent living a lie crafted to protect others. Some who didn’t deserve my silence and others who would always be given it freely. And now, I have to sit here with this truth—my truth—and try to make sense of that means for my future.

Would I know how to live a life that wasn’t a lie?

Jennifer adjusts the thin oval-shaped glasses on the bridge of her nose, crossing one dainty leg over the other, a sour expression on her face. I wonder if therapists know they give us the tools to read them too.

“I’m unsure of what kind of doctor thought this diagnosis was okay. It was extremely reckless and warranted a review of his medical license.” Her

gaze softens a bit as she looks at me across the coffee table between us. "I'm sorry we can never ask him his reasoning, Silas. You, at the very least, deserve an explanation."

I bite the inside of my cheek, holding my tongue.

Ponderosa Springs, a town she will never understand, will go to drastic measures to cover up their vile secrets and corruption. There isn't a Hippocratic oath in the world strong enough to prevent anyone, including a doctor, from lying to avoid backlash.

"Yeah," I say plainly. "Me too."

There are no lingering questions for that doctor. I know why he lied to my parents, why he forged medical reports to fit his diagnosis. I'm only sorry that he died in a boating accident before I could make him swallow his own kneecaps for what he'd done to her.

Of course, Jennifer doesn't know any of this. Doesn't need to in order to properly evaluate me. No one would ever know why Ronald Brewer made loving parents and a vicious town believe a twelve-year-old boy had schizophrenia.

A secret. An oath I'd vowed to take to my grave. To this day, I've kept my word to her. This was the only way I could still protect her.

Although my promise of keeping her safe had been broken the day of her death, I swore to her tombstone that no one would get away with hurting Rosemary Donahue. Never again.

The price on Stephen Sinclair's head was a pound of flesh, and I'd spit in the face of God to get it.

"I want to say I'm surprised by your reaction," Jennifer notes, tilting her head a bit. "But since I met you, Silas Hawthorne, you've always been a calm surface of water. No one knows the depths below, do they?"

The corner of my lip twitches in response.

"How long have you known you weren't schizophrenic?"

I relax my back into the leather chair, looking around the glass-and-steel office as I cross my arms across my broad chest and release a heavy breath.

"Since I was fifteen."

I knew when I was twelve; I knew what I saw, but they had been so good at convincing me it was all my imagination. They were adamant. "There is no girl. There was never a girl," they told me.

She did not exist. Her voice is in your head. A sick little game my mind played with me.

Over and over again.

It didn't matter what I said, no one ever believed me.

So I gave in and got quiet. Why speak if no one put weight to the words you said? Maybe they'd conditioned me so well I'd even believed them for a short time.

"Is that when you stopped taking the medicine?"

I nod slowly. "Vitamin B pills."

A smile spreads across her lips. I'm sure my therapist isn't supposed to condone swapping meds, but Jen's always been cool like that, and I think, given my less-than-common situation, a smile is warranted.

"The episode I had, when I—" I pause, hating myself for needing to ask. Hating that they had made me doubt my mind enough for me to need reassurance. "When I was committed here, that episode, what was it?"

There are flashes of last spring that I remember, fragments of a nightmare. Sage Donahue returning to Ponderosa Springs after her sister's death. The voices that came to me for the first time in my life, watching the home of Frank Donahue go up in flames while demons danced among them.

I see these moments, pieces, and half the time, it's like it wasn't even me. I'm simply watching a movie, and the main character happens to look like me.

"The episode that led to your admission was a psychotic break. You experienced an unimaginable trauma, the death of someone you were emotionally tethered to. That damage, coupled with years of no one believing you, sent you into a spiral that couldn't have stopped even you if wanted it to. It's an unfortunate coincidence, but it's not schizophrenia."

Jennifer flips through the papers on her lap, furrowing her eyebrows as she continues talking.

"If I had to guess, neither was the episode they recorded when you were young. There is barely any information in Dr. Brewer's records, not nearly enough to conclude such a serious diagnosis at that age."

I scoff, unable to help myself.

My first episode.

I was a kid screaming for help. Not because of a hallucination or delusion. No one was listening to me; they wouldn't hear me. I was panicked, scared, and no one would believe what I had seen.

“From what I’ve gathered from your parents and the scarce records, you were showing early signs of depression, which is probably why your parents brought you to a doctor to begin with. They were afraid of your sudden behavior change, and I think they always had the best intentions for you. They still do, but their trust was misplaced. I’m sorry you were the one to pay for that, Silas.”

I bring my gaze back to Jenn, knowing she means her apology. That a piece of her cares for me and what happened. A genuine concern for my health got her to this conclusion.

This explanation. An answer.

Reassurance that I hate to admit I needed.

When I was committed here, I believed everything they ever said about me. Every whisper, every lie, rumor, and stretched truth.

Because when Sage came back and Rosemary’s one-year anniversary was fast approaching, I started seeing things, hearing them in my ear. I saw them, and they ate at me until I thought they were real. Until I trusted what they told me and put weight in their false words.

I thought, holy fucking shit. They were right; I have schizophrenia, and I haven’t been on meds since freshman year of high school.

My mind became a terrifying place. I mean, it had been before that, but this was different. That year, it sprouted lethal thorns from nefarious roots. My mind leaked black slime that oozed into every pore and choked me with deception.

It twisted and crawled, slithered with creatures too scary for most to imagine. My monster, my demons, the shadows that skidded off the walls and took on humanoid shapes. They would paralyze people with fear.

Even though they’d left and have yet to return since my hospitalization, I’d accepted the memory of their existence, grown used to it. I realized I would always be a much scarier beast than my mind and the evil it can produce.

I’m frightfully worse.

Because I am and have always been real.

“Are you going to be the one to tell the townsfolk of Ponderosa Springs that the nickname ‘Schizo’ no longer applies?”

I lean forward, placing my elbows on my thighs, watching Jennifer’s face twist with sadness. The corners of her eyes wrinkle as she tries to give me a gentle, reassuring smile.

How awful, she's thinking, that this poor boy lived through all this.

"I think your friends and family can help break the news once you are released from here."

Without warning, my body tenses up, shoulders tightening and gut twisting.

"No."

Clear as possible, no room for question, no.

"Silas." Her eyebrows raise to her hairline in surprise. "I can provide extensive medical proof and data I've gathered over your stay here. I am your proof of this false diagnosis."

An itch builds in my throat, scratching and clawing at the flesh in my mouth. Cotton is lodged deep in my airway, and my hands in front of me weave together. Out of habit, I tap my thumbs.

I shake my head. "I don't want to tell them. Not yet. I'm not—" I furrow my eyebrows, rolling my lips together. "Doctor-patient confidentiality. I'm not telling anyone, and neither are you."

Jennifer watches me silently, analyzing every little movement and facial expression, I'm sure. Regardless of what her degree tells her about my behavior, I won't change my mind.

She knows that.

"You and your family were taken advantage of. You all trusted a professional to prioritize your health, and he abused you all in your weakest state. It's malpractice at the very least. There is no apology to mend what he did. But today, you can work on healing. You, your parents, your friends."

"I still have depression," I point out, leaning back into the leather chair, placing my hands behind my head to stare at the ceiling. "Chronically fucking sad. I'm not totally cured and healthy, Tako."

Her sigh of annoyance at my stubbornness makes my lips twitch. It took an entire month before I spoke to her, and even then, it took a while for me to give her more than one-word answers. She knows if I don't want to do something, I won't.

It has never stopped her from trying though, and I've always admired that about her. One strong-willed, tough-ass lady.

"Mental health is a tricky thing. A lifelong sentence of questions with few answers and a lot of lonely moments. You're allowed to have hope," she tells me. "You're allowed to start fresh and head in a new direction, Silas."

My teeth sink into my tongue, and I grind my molars, the muscle in my jaw jumping. I burn a hole through the gunmetal-gray ceiling with my eyes.

“They won’t believe me, and I don’t blame them,” I say out loud, even though it was an inside thought.

Hope.

All the times I tried to tell my parents with the hope they’d believe me. Until one day, I gave up.

Those moments I wanted to tell the guys with the hope they’d listen, but something has always stopped me.

Feeling hope for the first time when I met Rosemary, knowing I had one person on this fucking Earth that knew the truth, and now what do I have left of that hope?

I have only the pain of losing her.

Fuck hope, because it fucked me a long time ago.

“If you never give them the chance, they have no opportunity to surprise you.”

I nod, simply because there is no point in arguing with her. She wouldn’t understand. There isn’t a degree she could receive that would help her comprehend something I learned at a very young age.

It has always been better to remain quiet than risk speaking words no one believes.

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ONE DIM STARS

CORALINE

*Eight Months of Freedom
November*

THE PIECE of paper in my hand is worn.

Crinkled from being shoved deep into a pair of burnt-orange Vans that sit in the back of my closet. I'm surprised it's held the white color it had when it was originally given to me.

I smooth my thumb across the scrawled digits, the moon providing me just enough light to make them out clearly. My back rests against the side of my parents' house, the white slats digging into my back and the roof rubbing against my thighs.

The night sky is brilliant tonight. Many people don't even know that because of the complete lack of light interference, the Oregon Coast provides some of the best views of starlight and the Milky Way.

There was a time when I would spend hours on this roof, lying on my back, blowing smoke rings, and contemplating just how vast our universe was. Smiling to myself as the stars winked at me, as if mischievously saying, *You'll never know all our secrets, but you can admire our truths.*

Tears wet the apples of my cheeks, shed so casually that I don't even notice them anymore until a breeze passes by.

I'm not usually like this. Weepy and sad. I do not often stumble drunk onto my parents' roof to cry about what happened to me, to feel sorry for myself. Life is a constant pendulum of pain. Everyone experiences it, and I am not special.

So maybe it's my father's expensive cognac that I stole from his office or the smell of rain in the wind that is unearthing these emotions I carefully buried.

I keep thinking if I just continue doing things the way I did before, if I mold myself into the person I was prior to being taken, life will go back to normal. Last week, I hung out with friends from high school. We sat at the cafe we'd frequented every Thursday during our summers off school. Yesterday, my stepmother and father demanded I attend an art show, and I went. Tonight, I'm sitting on the roof to stargaze.

The tea at Luca's Cafe was bitter and cold. The friends I once knew were strangers with moving lives, while mine is stagnant. Art, which had always been something I found joy in, was lacking life. And the stars don't feel so bright anymore.

When I stand in the mirror, I look the same. I am the Coraline my family and friends recognize, but I am a different person now. I was never this afraid before. Scared to breathe, to move, to live.

On the inside, I'm still *Circe*.

I left that basement physically, but I'm still living in it mentally.

I hate it. Despise myself for living in fear, being stagnant, and not just moving the fuck on with my life. I was kidnapped, beaten, raped. So what? There are millions of people who experience that. I'm lucky. I shouldn't feel so fucking sad.

My bed I've had since freshman year of high school is too soft. There is always too much sun, and everything is loud. Food doesn't taste like anything but sustenance, and joy has become a dream just out of my reach.

Life isn't supposed to be this hard.

The wind flutters the small piece of paper between my fingers. With shaking hands, I dial the seven numbers I never thought I'd call. Promised myself I wouldn't. But this is the end of my rope. What could it hurt?

When the dial tone begins, I immediately want to hang up. This is stupid. I survived, came out on the other side with my wealthy family waiting ready to make me shiny and new. It could've been worse.

My finger hovers over the End Call button, but a scratchy voice filters through my speaker.

"Coraline."

My name slips off his tongue. It's not hurried. He takes his time with it, not rushing or shortening it, keeping it in his mouth until the last syllable is

spoken.

“How’d you know it was me?”

My heart bangs loudly against my ribs, thrashing around inside my chest from the nerves. I hadn’t expected him to answer. Maybe a part of me hoped it would keep ringing until I got his voicemail.

“I’m the heir to a cybersecurity firm,” he says plainly, as if it’s obvious. “Are you okay?”

It’s simple, three words strung together that I’ve heard on repeat for the last eight months, but coming from his throat, from him? It triggers my eyes to produce more tears and my chest to tighten.

God, I hate this.

I don’t know how to explain it, but I know he truly means it. That he’s not just asking to be polite, knowing I’ll lie and say I’m okay. In his voice, which sounds like night and crackling embers, lies genuine concern.

The sob that echoes from my chest trickles out of me, and I slap my hand over my mouth to keep the rest buried inside. My eyes shut tight as my body shakes. I fucking hate crying. Loathe showing this weakness, this vulnerability that has no room in my life or in this town.

“Where are you—”

“No, don’t, I’m fine.” I rush my words, shaking my head for no one to see, hearing through the phone the sound of him rustling around like he was getting up to come to my aid.

A complete stranger that he doesn’t even know.

I bite down on my bottom lip to keep it from shaking. “Did I wake you?”

“No,” he says simply.

Up to this point, I had no plan. I’m not even sure I really knew why I’d scrambled to the back of the closet to fish out this number from a forgotten pair of shoes.

When he came to see me at the hospital, I was bitter.

I’d thought my self-loathing and anger would push me through life. Fuel my need to live, but over the months, the rage deflated. A punctured balloon. Now, I’m left only with a hollowness in my chest that feels like being stabbed with knives soaked in memories.

A therapist I saw for a while said it was the grief. I’m grieving the girl who died in the basement and trying to make amends with the one that remains. I think I’m just tired.

Sleep rarely comes without nightmares, and the days are filled with anxiety, constantly looking over my shoulder, waiting and waiting for the day my monster makes good on his promise.

The pressure alone is too much. The weight has shattered my shoulders, and I'm tired of suffocating. I can't breathe, ever. Why can't anyone see that? Can they not see me turning purple? The hands of my mind choking me?

Because every time I look in the mirror, I see it.

"You told me you knew what it was like to fight demons you can't see," I start, not sure where I'm headed but hoping the end destination makes sense. "Did you mean that?"

There is more background noise, the sound of a bed creaking and a blanket rustling around. Muffled voices hushed in the night. My cheeks warm as I shake my head. This was stupid.

"I'm sorry, you're probably busy—"

"I meant every word," he blurts, interrupting my rush to get off the phone.

My head leans against the side of my house as I gaze up at the stars, wondering if wherever he is, he can notice how dim the usually bright sky is or if that's only a side effect of what happened to me.

Silence tumbles into our conversation, and all the buzz from his side of the phone goes quiet as the clicking of a door echoes in my ear. It's mute wherever he is now. It makes me wonder what he's doing, if he's able to keep living after everything that happened, if I'm the only fucking one still stuck.

He breaks the sound of stillness with a voice like gravel.

"Why'd you call?"

I'd laugh if I could. It's the same question I'd ask if a girl I hardly knew called me at one in the morning. I mean, why did I call him? Who even is he to me?

"I—"

"Don't lie." The intrusion isn't cruel, not a demand. Instead, it feels like a harsh truth, as if he knew what I was thinking before I spoke. "I'm just a voice on the phone. Don't think of me as a person. Just a voice, an ear."

He owes me nothing. Not an ounce of kindness or a second longer on this ridiculous phone call, but he's here, anyway. And it's that tender generosity that breaks something in me.

I have no one.

I'm surrounded by people and well-wishes, but I am utterly alone with my thoughts. There is no one I can talk to about the experience that is haunting my dreams and slowly feeding.

No one gets the fear or the shame. How it didn't just leave when I was rescued, that it exists just beneath the surface of my skin. Yet, no one cares enough to peel back the first layer, all of them too afraid of just how dark the blood I'll leak into them will be.

They all want to know the horror of the basement. News stations want an exclusive, papers want direct quotes to feed human curiosity, but no one cares about the aftermath of what it did to me.

I'm only a headline to Ponderosa Springs. A trophy for my parents.

"I don't have anyone else—" I swallow the lumpy truth in my throat. "I don't think anyone understands what's happening to me."

"They can't see the demons, can they?"

I shake my head, my cries coming out choked as I struggle with the simple reply of "No."

No one sees any of it. How one minute I feel strong, and the next, I am breaking. How I hate myself for what happened, and the guilt of my weak will eats at me. It's a shame I wouldn't wish on anyone.

"I was abducted a year ago today."

He lets the silence stretch, not saying anything. I know it's because he wants to give me space, room to gather the courage so I can keep talking. Finally speak aloud words I buried with the old Coraline.

Eight months of freedom, eight months of being locked in a new prison, and this time, I'm the warden. I've not told anyone about this, not the police, therapist, my family. It's a vault inside of me, one that I told myself if I just keep it locked, it would eventually go away.

But he's not a person I'm talking to.

He's just a voice.

"I was leaving a party." My eyes shut tightly, hoping when I open them, I'll be back to that night so I can avoid ever going out. "It was the first college party I'd went to. My first of many."

A humorless laugh rattles from my mouth as I remember the tequila my friends and I tossed back.

"Nothing bad happens when you're just starting life, right? Not to the rich and just, not me. Never me."

There are parts of that night I can recall vividly. The loud house music, all the people I knew and those I didn't. Shots of what I think was tequila and how badly my belly hurt from laughing.

I'd wrapped my arms around my high school best friend, a girl who's only a stranger to me now, and screamed, "*This is the best night of my life!*"

"A friend was supposed to drive me back, but he'd gotten wasted and crashed on a couch. I didn't want to sleep in some random place, so I decided to just walk back to campus. It was only a few miles, that was it. I don't even remember anything past walking out of the house. It's this big black hole in my mind. But I—"

I bring my knees to my chest, dropping my forehead to my knees and letting my body feel the ache of the tears as I press the phone to my ear. Allowing myself to remember, to cry and hurt freely, with no one watching.

Only a voice on the other end to hear me. To judge me.

"When I woke up, I was naked and cold. They sprayed me down with a water hose and examined me. I still feel their hands at night, can see the flash of the camera on my skin as they spoke out loud about my body. How much they could sell me for. I don't even know if I tried to scream because the drugs, they made everything fuzzy. They kept me so fucking high that by the time Step—" I bite my tongue, so hard that the metallic taste of blood fills my mouth. His name makes me sick. "I went through withdrawal the first few weeks I was in that basement. Alone. Covered in throw up, and I had these insane muscle cramps. It was mental agony, and it was only the beginning.

"I wish I died in that basement." A sob takes my voice, and I cry heavy tears into the speaker of the phone to a voice that owes me nothing. "I want to go back and die there. It took so much of me—why not just take it all? Why leave me this fucking empty!"

I shout the words to a darkened sky, begging for an answer I'll never get. There are a million questions I ask myself every day, and never once have I been able to find a single answer.

Why was I so weak? Why me? Why did I love him so much that I still feel the embers of it scorching my veins? How did he have that much control over me?

My cries are interrupted by an answer. Not from the stars but the voice on the other side of this phone.

“To fill.”

“What?” I lift my head, eyebrows furrowed.

His tone is a steady hand, calm water. “Life left you empty so that you’d have room to fill it. We are only hollow if we allow ourselves to remain that way.”

“How? Where do I even start? I don’t—”

“Learn, Coraline. You lived for a reason. Figure out why.”

“Aren’t you supposed to just be an ear?” I laugh a little, taking my palm and wiping the tears from my cheeks, inhaling a deep breath of fresh air. I’m dizzy from all the emotions.

“And a voice,” he notes, and although I can’t see him, I hear the smirk in his words.

Light rain wets my arms. Nature’s way of telling me my emotional dumping session is coming to a close. But I linger for a few minutes, sitting in the relief of having something, anything, to ground me to the earth for a couple of seconds longer.

I don’t have to be Coraline Whittaker, survivor of the Sinclair House of Horrors. I’m not the award-winning artist prodigy or the regal daughter of James Whittaker. I’m not the older sister to a girl I’ve trapped myself in this town for or the younger sibling of a brother whose own guilt is leaking into mine.

I’m Coraline. I’m not okay, and right now? That’s enough.

“I don’t want to die,” I whisper.

“Then don’t.”

The rain falls a little harder, bouncing off the roof. I lick a drop off my lips, letting the water wash away the tears on my face. Maybe if it rains hard enough, I won’t be able to tell the difference.

“I don’t know how to live either.”

“No one does.”

Forgoing boundaries, I ask him for another piece of advice. It could be the reason he hangs up on me because I don’t know a lot about the man on the other end of the phone other than rumors and seeing him around, but everyone knows what Rosemary Donahue meant to him.

“How did you live after losing Rosemary?”

I'd always thought it was beautiful, his grief. A living reminder of a love lost too soon.

To my surprise, he doesn't hang up or tell me to fuck off. Instead, he sighs. The sound of a lighter flicking makes its way through the speaker.

"I didn't."

I scoff, "So you're dead?"

"You don't know?" Once again, I can hear the smirk. In my mind, I can see only his lips, tilted up in the corners. "They say I'm dead on the inside."

"They call me cursed. I wonder which is worse?"

As the rain continues to build, I need to go inside before I slip off the roof and actually go through with my suicidal thoughts. Can you die by accident if the plan was already to kill yourself?

"Thank you. I owe you for this," I say softly, throat hoarse from all the crying.

"Okay," he mutters, not pushing me to give more than what I'm willing, accepting my declaration.

Lightning illuminates the sky, and thunder claps in the distance.

"Don't call me back. And I won't call again. I just—"

"I know." There is a pause in his voice. "You don't have to explain anything to me. I'm only a voice, remember?"

I know this phone call doesn't fix me. It doesn't heal my fears or cure my trauma, even though I desperately want something to. But it's nice to be alive and not okay. To have someone to talk to, to know there is someone out there who knows I'm battling for every breath.

After this, I'll have to go back to being cold, numb, and unfeeling just to get through the day. I'm allowing myself this one moment of weakness, but not again.

"Coraline," he says before I can hang up.

"Yes, Silas?"

The voice on the other side once again reminds me he isn't just a voice or an ear. That he's a person who feels this pain too, that emptiness inside, and he's looking for something to fill up the holes.

"I had to learn how not to live for the trauma and loss. I'm living in spite of it. Don't let him win."

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

TWO YEARS

OF FREEDOM

March

Book made for megourkee@gmail.com

TWO

STILL WATERS RUN DEEP

SILAS

LIFE IS LOSS.

The in-between spaces in time are just us figuring out how to cope with it. Distractions for all the inevitable experiences, hiding from the fact that morbidly, we all die in the end.

“Almost finished, Mr. Hawthorne, and we can recheck your vitals before letting you get out of here.”

“For a second, I thought my father was going to rise from the dead, Taylor.” A light-hearted laugh tethered to his dad joke. “Scott does just fine, like I said the first several times.”

There is a smile on my dad’s face directed at the young woman in red scrubs, despite currently having his body pumped with chemicals.

He could smile for the rest of the day; it wouldn’t matter. Eyes never lie, and his are painting the picture of a man who is bone-fucking-tired. When the nurse finishes checking the machine and quietly leaves us in the room on our own, I bend down and grab the empty pan on the floor.

My chair scratches the floor as I scoot closer, holding the basin at his chest. Just as smoothly as he’d smiled before, he bows his head and empties what little stomach contents he has.

I let my eyes find the eggshell-white wall in the opposite direction. He hates being viewed as weak, stared at when he’s at his lowest. He always has. I do my best to protect his pride now, trying to think about anything other than this disease that is slowly killing him.

In this very moment, my in-between?

Preparing for my life without my father in it. Bracing myself to teach Levi and Caleb how to live without him. Building the muscles in my

shoulders to hold the weight of my mother's grief.

But there is only so much preparation you can make for death. You can plan the funeral, buy the plot, and read the grief books, but in the end, it doesn't matter. Death still has a way of sweeping the rug out from under you every time.

The cancer is advanced. We've known that from the beginning. These treatments are for my mother, something I think only I know. Dad doesn't want to die without her knowing he tried to stay with her for as long as he possibly could.

It's selfish when you take it at face value, cruel to some, but when aren't people selfish with the people they love?

Besides, Scott Hawthorne doesn't give up on the things he loves, especially not my mother.

"Sorry," he grumbles, clutching the napkin in his palm and raising it to wipe his mouth. "Told your mom that yogurt in the fridge was bad this morning."

Yogurt, right.

Not one of the many harsh side effects of chemotherapy.

"We'll try oatmeal next time," I reply, not bothering to say the first bit. He's not blind, nor is he naïve. He just doesn't want to admit it out loud to his oldest son. Even though I see right through him.

When do parents realize that after a while, we start analyzing them too?

My father will be nothing if not strong-willed until the day he dies, and I'll do everything in my power to give him that.

"Have you gone over the data points I sent—"

"My thoughts and appraisal of Sync Tech are already in your email, dad."

I walk to the trash can, tossing away the soiled bin, before turning back around.

"Do you like the board's idea of buying them out?"

Computers have always been my thing. They make sense to me; they don't ask questions, and there is usually a code to fix issues when they fuck up. Understanding my family's company isn't an issue; it's the people that work there.

Humans are not my thing. Have never been my thing, will probably never be my thing. I understand emotions, feel them, but I actively hate them every second of the day. And people? They have a shit ton of them.

None of them have a manual. You can't override their system, and half the time, what you see is never what you actually get.

A sigh leaves me as I walk back to my seat, sinking into the chair. I'm craving a cigarette, seeking anything that takes away the smell of vomit and the clinical scent of hospitals.

These last two years have felt rushed, put on fast forward, as if the world noticed when I'd started to heal and said, "Here. This is everything you missed while you were grieving."

It's giving me a permanent headache, all the things I'm having to juggle.

"Their security consulting is impressive. Profit margins are decent. It's easy to see why the board is interested."

"But?"

When I glance over at him, his eyebrow is raised. His eyes are hollowed, body seeming more frail as the days pass. I may not understand how people work all the time, but I can read them, and I got that from the man in front of me.

"It's not enough for me to want to buy them out. Their threat intelligence is weak, and that's putting it mildly. Incident response is too slow." I press my thumb and forefinger into my eye, hoping it makes this throbbing go away. "And I fucking hate the owner."

He laughs. The same laugh I've heard nearly every day in my house for the entire span of my life. Deep and from his stomach. I wonder if that sound will echo in the halls when he's gone or if time will steal that from me too.

Death isn't the enemy.

It's time.

"Yeah, he's a bit of an ass."

I scoff. That's a mild evaluation.

"Son." His hand comes over to rest on my arm, giving it a squeeze. "I know this is a lot at your age. When I was twenty-two, I was trying to figure out what bar I was going to. I never wanted to put the company in your hands this early, but—"

"I know," I say simply. He doesn't need to waste his energy telling me something I already understand. "It's fine."

"You've always been good at that." His toothless smile appears. "Knowing."

My father's harsh diagnosis he'd received last fall meant at the ripe age of twenty-two, I'd be taking over Hawthorne Technology as acting CEO until I pass it on. I'd graduated early and had already started working beneath him at the company, much to many people's displeasure.

Maybe it would help if they knew the last thing I want is to be learning how to take over a multibillion-dollar company. However, I know it's not my age they are concerned about.

We all have to make sacrifices, and listening to the hushed whispers around the office about my mental competency is something I'm willing to put up with for him. He loves me, has done a lot for me, and giving him peace of mind that our family's legacy is in good hands is the least I can do.

"You have good instincts. The best, Silas. Trust them, always. You will not fail," he says sternly, instilling confidence in me. "I'll let the board know we aren't moving forward with Sync Tech."

My phone buzzes in my pocket as I nod at him. Pulling it from my front pocket, I find a text from Rook. Once it unlocks, the group message he created is already opened, and a picture of him with a blunt in his mouth while he lounges on a beach is the most recent text.

The sun bounces off the black sunglasses he's sporting, and there is a tan on his skin I've never seen before. There are a few new tattoos across his chest, and it makes me think of all we've missed in each other's lives due to distance. However, his smirk is still Rook, still the same kid I've always known.

Thatcher: Your chest looks like a middle school desk.

Rook: I've hugged cactus nicer than you.

I scoff at the back of my throat. The two of them have yet to grow out of their boyish bickering. Unless someone stops it, they will go on forever until someone's feelings get hurt, and it most definitely will be Rook's.

All of Thatcher's feelings are tied up to Lyra. He doesn't have any left for the rest of us.

Alistair: Shut the fuck up.

There he is. Father Caldwell to the rescue. I'm surprised he didn't tell Rook to wear sunscreen. We've grown apart, but at our core, we'll know each other until we are gray.

Time, space, distance, death.

None of it will ever take away what we know for certain—that we know each other at the core of our beings. It's never something we say out loud,

just a foregone conclusion.

We are who we are. No matter where we go or how we change, there will always be this knotted, twisted string tangling each of us together. What we found in each other as kids is something we refuse to ever let go of.

They are brothers to me. Each of them. Thicker than any blood.

Thatch is the only guy I see regularly, both of us having chosen to stay in Ponderosa Springs after Stephen Sinclair was arrested. We'd even graduated college together, and the other guys had come to support.

Two years.

It's been two years since we pressed play on a life without revenge. They feel as if they've moved so quickly, as if no time at all has passed by, and just yesterday, I was burying bodies.

Yet, in my chest, I feel it.

The time that's slipped through my fingers.

It's measured by my grief and the stages of it.

Acceptance has been the most painful.

"How are the boys?" My father coughs into his fist after asking, probably having already looked over my shoulder at my phone screen. He's always been nosey like that.

"Alive," I grunt, sinking further into the chair.

"Shocking."

The corners of my mouth twitch. He has no idea just how shocking it is. That we survived all the treachery and death unharmed and somehow were able to move forward as if it'd never happened at all.

On the outside, that is.

There are scars on each of us that will never fade. Deep wounds that bleed into each other that only we can see. We came out alive but not unscathed.

"Alistair just got married," I tell him, because that's what normal people say about their friends. Sharing the ordinary updates of their adult lives.

I feel the weight of his stare, and I glance over at him. His eyes have widened, and there is skepticism on his brow.

"And the girl was willing? She walked down the aisle of her own accord?"

A snort leaves my throat. "Seems that way."

He shakes his head as if he can't believe what I've told him. I don't blame him. Alistair Caldwell never really seemed like the marrying type. More like a brood in the corner until he died kinda guy.

My father had only ever seen him in two lights, angry or causing trouble. There are things about the guys my family would never understand. They'd never outright said they disapproved of my friendships, but I could see it on their faces. However, they refused to take away anything from me that would cause me unhappiness.

But they'd never know them like I do. No one would.

Had never seen just how much someone like Alistair cares about people. How he'd easily give up his own life for someone he loves.

In our own sick fucking way, I think we care more than most.

"You plan on walking down the aisle before I croak? Or giving me grandkids?"

I roll my eyes as I look at him. "You're spending too much time listening to Mom."

I'm not even a little surprised she's pulled him into this. If she tries to tell me about another one of her friends' *single* daughters, I'm going to stop going to family dinner.

I would do anything to give my father everything he requests before he passes. Marrying someone? Not going to happen.

"I know losing Rosemary was hard for you." He places a weak hand on my shoulder. "But you are allowed to love again, kid."

My jaw tightens.

That's everyone's favorite thing to say to me. Rosemary would want you to be happy. You're allowed to move on. She'd want that for you. As if they knew her better than I did.

Do they not think I already know this? That I don't know she'd want me to have a good life, to find someone to love? Rosie's probably turned in her grave at least a million times since she died at all the things I've done. I know she'd want me to move on.

And a part of me has. I've spent the last two years settling into the acceptance that she is gone and is never coming back. It's not my love for Rosie that is holding me back from giving myself to another person.

I've always believed love is like water, the way it flows between bodies and souls. You can't stop the flow of it because one pathway is closed off. It just finds another exit.

It's the part of me that refuses to love again. I've damned up my soul because I know what the pain of losing someone feels like. I won't do that to myself again.

"Yeah" is the only reply I give. What else is there for me to say?

My phone buzzes in my hand, and when I look down at the locked screen, it's not a message from the group chat this time. It's an email.

I silence my work email when I'm out of the office and with Dad at chemo—very responsible of me—so it's my personal one that's received a new message. I open it, expecting spam, but my brows pull together as I pull it up.

It's an unknown sender with an encrypted video file attached and one line of text.

I'm not finished with you four. Time to come home, boys.

I silently hope it's a virus trying to steal my bank information as I start to download it. The nurse walks back in, stealing my father's curious eyes away from me while she unhooks him from the chemo pump.

Fine hairs on the back of my neck stand up slowly, one by one, and the room feels a little too cold. My grip on the phone tightens as it continues to load, and it doesn't matter how much I hope, I know this isn't a random hacker.

Luck never runs on my side.

My father's voice, mingled with the nurse's, fades to the background, dripping further and further from my mind as my focus zeroes in on the video. I quickly make sure the volume is down before pressing Play.

A dark screen greets me, but it only remains that way for a few seconds. Soon, my screen is lit up, the person recording panning the camera upward. What plays out in front of me is a scene I've seen before.

A scene I've lived.

Rook, Alistair, and I stand in a circle around a budding fire. Rook builds the flames while Alistair and I grab the mutilated corpse of Conner Godfrey, tossing him effectively into the flames.

We're all covered in blood, disposing of a body in the middle of the night in Lyra Abbott's backyard. Our faces are clear—there would be no denying it or having lawyers get us off.

Every minute, on camera. On someone else's phone—God fucking knows whose phone. People I don't know, people who want something from us.

My jaw twitches, muscles straining painfully. Waves of emotions wash over me, too many of them to handle. All of them blend, roaring and tangling in rage.

“You alright, son?” I hear distantly.

Two years. That’s it?

Two years before this fucking town had to come back from the dead? It wasn’t happy with its pound of flesh? It wanted to eat us whole.

I nod, glancing up from my phone to look into his concerned eyes.

We stare at each other. I look at a face I’ve known my entire life. A man that has loved me without question, without fear, has supported me, and I don’t know how to speak to him.

Not truthfully. Not without lying.

Bitterness, overwhelming guilt, burns my insides, twisting my guts into miserable spirals. These emotions, this fucking burden that has followed me since the moment I was misdiagnosed, they are shackles, heavy and unbearable, dragging behind me with every step.

I want to tell him. Everything.

That I’m not schizophrenic; I’ve never been. I kept quiet to protect Rosemary. Words wouldn’t form after I was released from the ward because I never wanted him to hate himself for not believing me sooner, for taking me to that doctor.

There is so much I want to tell him, and his hourglass is running out of sand.

Is my father going to die without fully knowing his son?

Would there be a time when I could be honest with him? When words weren’t so scarce, and my voice was comfortable being heard?

Once again, I nod.

It’s always been better to remain quiet than risk speaking words no one believes.

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

THREE JINX

CORALINE

Am I the only person in this restaurant that feels like a mannequin?

Posed, dressed, and placed for display. When they walk by me and glance, they can admire how well put together I am. How polished my outfit is, how shiny my hair is.

None of them suspect that I'm plastic, or maybe that's their secret. The waitstaff that refills my water without asking, the Ponderosa Springs elite that walk by to speak to my father, they can all smell the plastic melting away from my flesh. They all know I'm a fake, a fraud, but they simply say nothing.

I'm a broken, sweet girl barely scraping by emotionally, trying her very best to merge back into this superficial world of sharks as a tiny minnow. I'm their favorite inside joke.

I use my fork to push away another piece of overpriced salmon. There is a fish that died to be overcooked and served to people who probably can't taste anything due to the years of smoking and lies that burn their tongues.

"Stop playing with your food."

My fingers tighten around the utensil in my hand. Do not stab her. Not in public.

I'll be twenty-two in May, two months from now, and I'm sitting here muttering an apology under my breath to my stepmother to avoid causing a scene. Once I feel her critical gaze move away from me and back to her earlier conversation, my grip loosens on the fork.

For the longest time, I never understood why Regina disliked me so much. She'd known me since birth and had always preferred to buy into the

evil stepmother archetype rather than love me like her own. It wasn't until I was older that I understood what she saw when she looked at me.

I'm a road bump in her otherwise well-paved life. I'm the product of an affair, cold feet before the wedding of her dreams, and she spent my entire life making me pay for my father's sin of falling in love with another woman.

"Have you picked out your dress for the fundraiser, Coraline?" My father's deep voice practically rattles the fine china.

James Whittaker is a force. A demand in a room full of offers. The answer to all of his questions is always yes, and looking him in the eye is a risk.

I meet his gaze, the difference in our appearance growing more noticeable the older I get. Every day, I resemble my mother more and more, and it only fuels his hatred for me. I'm the constant reminder of the love he'd lost, the love he was planning on giving it all up for.

What kind of woman makes a generational wealthy man give up his future of success and notoriety for an unstable, mediocre one?

A cursed one.

We used to be close, when my eye color was more green instead of brown. He called me his pal until I was thirteen, and we'd spend every Sunday at the dock. I'd draw in my sketchbook while he fished. Then two pieces of my hair turned white, and us spending time together stopped.

I told myself we drifted apart because of my abduction, but it's a comforting lie. His involvement with the Halo, which he claims was blackmail from college friends, only pressed harder on our strained bond.

We broke the pieces years ago and never bothered picking up them up again. We instead decided to stand atop them as strangers, letting the shattered glass slice the bottoms of our heels.

Better to remain in pain than admit the truth.

I'm thankful for it though. His distaste for me.

It taught me the most important lesson when I made it out of that basement.

There isn't a single person in this world who will look out for you better than yourself.

"I'm not going." I grab the glass of water in front of me and take a small sip, preparing myself for the onslaught of questions and passive-aggressive insults.

We're in public, which means this conversation will be hushed words and forced smiles. The vultures surrounding us are dying for scraps of gossip to spill over from someone's table, and the last thing my father wants is more negative attention.

It helps my cause because they won't push me too much with this many eyes on them. I am, after all, the child who survived. Their own personal Harry fucking Potter. It'd be bad press if they show how little they actually care.

"Why's that? Everyone is expecting us there as a family. I even told Senator Bloom's son you were looking forward to seeing him."

Carson Bloom, I think to myself, is an egotistical prick who tried to get me to do cocaine in the bathroom at his father's reelection party, doesn't believe in climate change, and thinks he's the second coming of Christ.

None of that matters, of course. Quite frankly, he could be a member of the communist party, and they wouldn't mind. As long as I marry rich, keep the gene pool overflowing with blood-soaked money and prestige.

That way, when they speak about me, they can list out all of my accomplishments on a bulleted list to their peers. As if, somehow, what I accomplish in my life is a reflection of their stellar parenting.

My molars shift together, and I give a tight-lipped smile.

"You'll have to give my condolences. I have a class to teach that evening."

Regina scoffs. "I'm sure you can cancel. It's not like it's mandatory. You're already spending so much time with them, not to mention the charity art gala coming up. I'm sure they'll understand if you miss this one day."

The petulant tone makes the urge to stab her with this fork well up inside of me again, leaving a metallic taste in the back of my throat. I get these impulses to scream until glass shatters or break everything in my line of sight, just so they all can see what really lives inside of me.

To show them and this entire rotting town how rabid and vile I am beneath the surface. That I am not plastic but a force of self-loathing and misery that would terrify their sleepy lives.

My very being would scare them so badly no one would utter my name aloud again.

There is a gentle hand from my left that lies on top of mine. I hadn't noticed I was clenching the material of my dress at my thigh until soft

fingers give mine a squeeze. I release the midnight-blue fabric, giving a reassuring smile in her direction.

She is a constant reminder of why I sit at these dinners quietly, a puppet with society's hands shoved up my ass, and swallow every wretched word. Bite my tongue and eat their pompous bullshit by the mouthful.

My little sister.

"They wouldn't mind," I correct, "but this class is one of the only healthy outlets these girls have. That seems more important than rubbing elbows, doesn't it?"

I jab a piece of fish, bringing it to my mouth and chewing slowly while waiting for their reply, silently hoping they give me a reason to snap. My jaw stays locked to protect Lilac, but there is only so much I'm willing to put up with.

"I think what you're doing is incredible, Cora." Lilac's gentle voice is a balm across my heating skin. I look over at her soft blonde curls, thankful that despite everything, she turned into a kind person. "The girls there adore you."

I'd be an entire map away from this fucked-up place if it wasn't for her. I don't resent her for her age or that Ponderosa Springs has Lilac in her chains for another year. One more year and I can take her far, far away, where she is free to become whatever she chooses, on her terms.

She's done nothing wrong and has loved me every moment of her seventeen years. I've never been cursed in her eyes, only her older sister. Lilac doesn't deserve to be abandoned by the only person who truly loves her because I can't handle the pressure.

I will suffer in silence for one more year, and then we'll both be free.

This time, for good.

"Such a humanitarian," Regina coos, picking up her wineglass by the stem, swirling the red liquid around, "How do you expect to find a husband when you're so dedicated to philanthropy? You're not getting any younger."

I open my mouth, but my father is quick to interrupt.

"Honey, you know we support you, especially your art. What you do for those girls is admirable, but—"

"But?" I bite out, snapping my head toward him.

My eyes dare him to finish that sentence, and because James is incapable of being submissive to anyone, he does.

“You shouldn’t be spending so much of your time surrounded by people like that. It’s not healthy for you.”

There it is.

Finally, some truth to this conversation.

Telling people I won the Future Generation Art Prize is a title achievement. People writing articles about my future work possibly changing the art world is impressive. The fact I teach art classes to Halo survivors is something that makes me look kind, but the thing is, I can’t *actually* give a shit about these things.

You have to pretend to be human, to have a heart. Here in Ponderosa Springs, it’s so vital to reputations that it’s almost believable. But on the inside, you must be cold and care only about how you look and the staggering amount of money in your bank account.

It doesn’t matter to them or anyone else that the piece that won that stupid fucking award was one I created in the days following my failed suicide attempt. That a voice and the will to create something bigger than me was all that kept me from dying.

I can’t care about the handful of women who come in twice a week for classes.

No, they’re all either outcasts or drug addicts, rotten apples that taint my image. They don’t give a shit that these people cannot move forward in this society because what happened keeps them frozen.

Their experiences and trauma make them turn to drugs, some of them so desperate to be numb, to forget, that they fill their bodies with chemicals. They can’t work regular jobs because most of them are afraid to leave their house. No one cares about what happens to them because they should all be *lucky* to have survived.

Like that’s fucking enough.

None of them would dirty their reputations to understand them the way I do. Inside? I’m no different from any of the girls who walk through those doors.

I’ve just got the money to dress up my trauma up in a pair of pumps made by Manolo Blahnik.

“People like what? Survivors?” I wipe my mouth, trying to get the bitter taste out of my mouth. “Did you know a fifteen-year-old comes into my studio? Fifteen. She was thirteen when she was kidnapped and then sold. Tell me, what kind of person is she exactly, James?”

“Coraline,” he warns, flicking his eyes around to remind me where we are.

As if I give a single fuck.

I shake my head at the impossibility of their privileged umbrella, tossing my napkin onto the plate in front of me.

“Sorry. Maybe you two should pick up a local newspaper for a refresher. It seems you’ve forgotten that I also was one of those girls rescued from a human trafficking ring.” I pin my father with a cold glare. “Should I thank you, Daddy dearest, that your friendship with Stephen spared me being sold? Or my mother for those cursed genes that made me special enough to keep?”

My voice is just above an acceptable level. They may give a shit about what others think, but I’ve been called cursed by this town my entire life. What they believe of me doesn’t keep me up at night.

Demons do.

“Don’t speak to us like that,” my stepmother hisses, pointing an accusatory finger at me. “It’s my money that keeps you in that apartment and allows you the freedom to give those free classes. You’d do well to remember that.”

“My father’s money, Regina. Did you forget? You married into this family with nothing but cheap shoes and hope.” My lips curve into a vicious smile. “But by all means, cut me off. I won’t need it after I sell my portion of Elite.”

Both of them seem to lose their tongues, reminded harshly that my late grandfather left me a large share in our family’s petroleum engineering company that no lawyer can take away. It would be easy for me to sell it to a rival, and that’s exactly what I plan on doing when Lilac graduates.

Irritated, somehow still hungry, and bored of this conversation, I press my hands into the table, pushing my chair back, ready to leave.

“Cora,” Lilac says delicately. “Don’t leave.”

I stand up, bending down for a moment to lay a kiss on her forehead, the smell of her perfume sweet and floral. When I straighten my back, my thumb smooths the wrinkles from her brow.

“I’ll see you tomorrow before your game. Text me if you need help with your chemistry homework tonight.”

She nods, accepting this peace offering. I’ve done my very best to protect her from everything, what I experienced, but even still, she knows

being around Regina and James is difficult for me.

I allow them to show me off, parade me around like a pony, just so they will leave her be. If everyone's attention is set on the cursed one, they won't have the time to taint Lilac. She can exist in peace.

"I'll call the car for you." James clears his throat, an apology in the back of his mouth he'll never say out loud.

"No need." I step away from the table.

"Coraline—"

"Just let her go, J." Regina wipes an invisible piece of lint from his suit, smiling. "No need to cause a scene. We'll see you Sunday at the brunch?"

I don't give her a second glance, let alone an answer. I simply walk away from our corner table, heels clicking against the floor as I make my exit. I can feel every set of eyes on me, practically hear the heads turning in my direction.

Let them look. Let them gawk at me. Maybe they'll have something better to talk about after I leave.

When I finally make it outside and the fresh air hits my lungs, it takes me only seconds to reach into my purse, feeling around for the pack of cigarettes and lighter. I need something quick to take this edge off before I cuss out a streetlamp.

My phone illuminates at the bottom of my bag with a text.

Forgoing the nicotine, I grab my phone, ready to speed walk to my apartment, but find myself unable to move. When I look down at the unknown number on my home screen, my backbone crumbles, my sharp tongue dulls, and my shields fall.

My phone tumbles out of my hands, smashing onto the concrete beneath me. Cars pass by, people are moving, but I'm stuck as my mind begins to scream, turning into a deadly roar.

Unknown: Did you miss me?

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

FOUR BLACKMAIL

SILAS

PEOPLE CONSTANTLY BATTLE two versions of themselves.

The individual they give to the world, the person that exists in public for eyes to view and the versions they hide, the person they are when no one is watching.

This isn't a bad thing, just a fact. We all have it.

My eyes follow the head of pin-straight brown hair across the busy Ponderosa Springs main street, the security camera's resolution dulling the paint splatters across her white T-shirt.

Several men make an effort to look at her, either glancing over their shoulder or stopping in their tracks completely.

I wonder if she notices.

The attention men give her.

How they can't seem to help themselves when she's around. Compelled to stare. Admire. It's not beauty that keeps their attention—a lot of women are beautiful. There is something else, something unexplainable about her allure.

I wonder if that's where her nickname came from. Far before Stephen Sinclair shouted them at me. It was a question I'd wanted to know since she flew out of that house of horrors with shredded wings.

Like clockwork, she heads into the studio at noon, just as she always does, and soon, she fades from my view. Twenty minutes—I see her nearly every day for twenty minutes across my screen, and every time, I ask myself the same two questions.

What version of her did I see the night she called me? And what makes Coraline Whittaker cursed?

Spying on people through public traffic cameras is both illegal and morally ambiguous. I'm not saying what I do is right. I am saying I could be much worse if I wanted to. I mean, technically? I could hack just about every camera she passes by on a regular basis, but that feels too far, even for someone like me.

I'm a killer, but I was also raised to respect women's boundaries.

We aren't friends, Coraline and I. I don't owe her my concern. However, I know what she sounds like when she is scared. I felt her fear through that phone, and no one deserves to be afraid like that.

So although the girl on the screen is practically a stranger to me and I'm simply a voice she heard long ago, I just want to make sure she's alright. It's sort of a comfort to watch those twenty minutes of her day, background noise to fill the void for a little while.

"Silas! You still there?"

I blink, pulling my eyes from my computer and picking up my phone from the desk, taking it off speakerphone and holding it to my ear.

"Yeah," I mutter, clearing my throat.

"What did you get from the email?"

My jaw twitches with annoyance. Not at Alistair, just at the situation. I'm not sure what irritates me more, the fact we're being blackmailed or that the person doing it is good. A black hat and fucking code jockey.

Yesterday, I'd received another email, this time no video, just another ominous sentence.

Don't make me bring home to you.

No signature or name. Just that fucking video, evidence that could send all of us to prison if it's released. All we've worked for, what we've escaped? It would be ruined with one press leak.

I can feel my headache returning, or maybe it never left.

"No," I sigh. "They transmitted it with distributed relays. There are too many nodes, and it's going to take me a minute to get back to the original sender. Whoever sent it either paid a lot of money for anonymity or is much better than me."

For my ego, I'm going to say the former.

"I'm going to pretend I know what the fuck you just said," Alistair grunts, dull buzzing in the background. Tattoo machines working overtime—that's why he wanted to wait for this phone call. He didn't want to be

home, knowing Briar would be too nosey for her own good and found out about this before we had a plan in motion.

“I can’t trace their location yet,” I say plainly.

I’d tried sending malware in my response to the email, but it’s been left unopened, which is great for the sender, but it leaves me with a long list of trails to follow that going to take me a few weeks, if I can even find a back door.

Two fucking years.

That’s all we could get? That’s all the peace I got?

Fuck this town and its inability to let anyone make it out alive. I’m sure, now more than ever, it isn’t going to stop until it buries all four of us beneath it.

I run a frustrated hand down my face, more upset for Rook and Alistair than anything else. Thatcher and I still live here, him by choice and me out of obligation. But up to this point, we’d been able to just exist quietly.

We’d gotten too comfortable in our new lives, our roles. Tried to move on and forget, build lives for ourselves that weren’t tainted with darkness, desperately trying to erase the black mark this place imprinted on us.

But there are some things we can never let go of.

Things that refuse to let go of us.

“Rook is positive it’s the coked-out daddy’s boy out for revenge. His last name took quite a hit when Stephen was arrested.”

I snort. “Easton Sinclair may have majored in computer science, but he isn’t better than me. If a tree fell over in Japan, Rook would blame it on him.”

Alistair lets out a choked laugh, and it’s a nice sound to hear. His laughter. I don’t remember us ever being the type of kids who laughed, but Alistair never did, and now it feels like he does it more.

That familiar feeling of guilt begins to settle in me, digging into the pit of my stomach and burrowing there. They’ll never say it, but I’m the reason for this. The lives they’ve tried to start? Ruined because of me. Because of my unhinged, desperate need for revenge.

Vengeance for Rosemary started with the guilt of not being there when she needed me most, and now my friends’ futures are in danger, leaving me exactly where I once started.

“He could’ve hired someone—”

Two loud knocks echo in the walls of my office. I lean up in my chair a bit, trying to compartmentalize the pieces of my life. The part of me that has to deal with my past and the version that's trying to work toward some semblance of a future.

"I have to go."

"This is the last time, Silas," Alistair says, conviction in his voice. "This is the last time I come back to that fucking place. Even if it kills me."

He means it. Every word. If we don't get this figured out and clear our slate this time around, he'll die before this place keeps him here. I'm almost jealous that he has the ability to leave, that he can be whoever he wants in Seattle, a new Alistair that no one knows.

There are no rumors or whispers. Just him existing.

I have never once known what that feels like. To simply exist without someone having a preconceived idea of who I am.

I nod, even though he can't see it. "Heard."

When the line goes dead, I tell whoever is on the other side of the door to come in, silently praying that it isn't fucking Ted from finance. That guy gives me fucking hives.

My prayers must be getting through to someone because my father opens the door, wearing his tailored suit, his head held impossibly high. In this light, it's hard to even imagine him faltering, let alone going through something as debilitating as chemo.

His steps are measured as he walks across the room, dress shoes clicking across the floor, and I suddenly wish I could jump out of one of the floor-to-ceiling glass windows behind me.

Scott Hawthorne is sporting his infamous stone-wall face, the one he used to give Caleb and Levi when they skipped school or broke one of Mom's vases. I've never been on the receiving end of one until this very moment.

"Son, we need to talk."

No shit.

I lean back as he sets himself into the leather chair in front of my desk, various papers scattered across the surface that I catch him scanning before he looks up at me.

A cough pulls from his lungs, and he takes a moment to cover his mouth with his hand.

“Do I need to call someone?” I ask, hand already reaching for my phone.

“No.” He waves me off, eyes brows pulled together as he catches his breath. “I’m fine.”

Giving him a second to regain his steely composure, I lean back into my chair, folding my arms in front of my chest.

“Your mother and I didn’t think this would be an issue, seeing as you weren’t supposed to take the reins this quickly.” He uses his thumb and pointer finger to wipe his mouth, releasing a heavy breath. “But unfortunately, the board isn’t willing to budge.”

“On?”

The vote for me taking over isn’t scheduled for months, and I’ve already secured the majority. There is no one else that can take this position—I’m the eldest Hawthorne, and the board has *never* deviated from that tradition.

Another wave of guilt hits me. Did I do something wrong? I may not love this job, but I like it enough to fight for it. For my father’s sake, at the very least.

“In order to take over as CEO of Hawthorne Technology, you have to be married.”

Since my incorrect diagnosis of schizophrenia, I’d learned quickly how to school my facial expressions, keeping everything I feel or experience below the surface of a monotone face.

It’s always been easier this way, keeping the truth to myself, keeping what I feel inside. But right now, I’m sure the shock I’m experiencing is evident in my features.

Married?

“What fucking year is this?” I find myself asking.

I have always known how strict the board residing over the company is, how disciplined they have been in the past, but this?

“I know, it’s archaic.” He presses a palm to his forehead. “But your great-great-grandfather put the stipulation into place, and they’ve never wavered from it. I have tried reasoning with them, given the circumstances, but they aren’t changing their minds.”

I actually want to laugh at the sick joke the universe has decided to play on me. I’m the never-ending punchline, apparently. I give and give, yet all it wants to do is take.

I gave my voice in exchange for silence. Gave it my peace in exchange for acceptance. And now? The one thing I never, ever wanted to do again, and it's forcing me?

Fuck off.

"Silas." My father says my name with a deep sadness in his voice, and I focus my eyes on his. "This is not what I wanted for you. Not ever. I thought you would have plenty of time, that *I* would have more time. This was—"

"I know," I tell him, because I do.

The only thing either of my parents has ever wanted for me was happiness. That's all they ever requested from any of their children.

I press my finger into my eye sockets, willing this headache to disappear, and thinking of all the techniques Jennifer taught me in therapy when it comes to handling stress.

But this stress? All of it? Seems a little too much for anyone to handle.

"I'll figure it out," I say numbly, not knowing how I'll be dealing with it but knowing I will. "How long do I have?"

If I could just have enough time to destroy that video, I could worry about finding a wife later. One that's okay with living in separate homes and signing a prenup. People have wealthy arranged marriages all the time; it's not taboo. I'll just have to go through the process of finding someone.

"That's the thing. I don't want you to."

I snap my head up, lifting an eyebrow.

"We are discussing selling Hawthorne Tech. There are a lot of investors —"

"No," I bite out, more anger in my voice than I'd like to use with my father. "You worked for this company. Our family worked for it, and it won't be ruined because of me."

I can't—

I won't have anything else be destroyed because of me. This can't fall apart. I won't let it.

My heart rate speeds up, an overwhelming amount of pressure slamming into my skull with a sledgehammer. My father is dying—do I even have the time to prepare for that now? There is a cyber villain threatening the freedom of my friends, and now I have to get married.

I feel my mind begin to crawl toward a dark place, creeping with broken arms toward a pit I barely pulled myself out of the first time. The ocean

roars in my ears, and the room seems to tilt.

I'm losing control, can feel it slipping right through my tightened fingers. If I can't control my life, how can I keep control of my mind?

"You deserve to marry for love, Silas," he says with a gentle ease. "For happiness and for joy. Not on a whim, not in a forced setting. I want you to know the happiness of family."

"Dad," I choke out, struggling to breathe.

He's dying, giving up his company because of me.

My friends are in trouble because of me.

Rosemary died because of me.

It's all my fault. All of it.

"This isn't up for debate, Silas. I've already made a plan to present to the board. Your mother has already agreed—"

Static buzzes in my brain as I tumble toward the darkness, clawing and grappling for anything to hold on to so that the evil inside of me doesn't swallow me whole.

I'm sure on the outside, I look fully composed and put together. He can't see what's happening in my mind—no one can. I'm searching for a way to save this.

Your fault. All of this is your fault.

My chest burns, words I want to say right there on my tongue, ready to beg and apologize. To scream at the world that I tried, it isn't my fault.

Don't...

Don't blame me.

My hand snags a branch in my mind, clutching onto it for dear life as I dangle right over the pool of helplessness. Creatures snap their teeth, hungry for me.

On a whim, with no other choice, I lie to my father for the very first time.

"I have a girlfriend."

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

FIVE

SILENT MIRAGE

CORALINE

I'M AN ADDICT.

To filling the void more than anything.

It just so happens that Ecstasy and alcohol are what I use to do this.

If anyone asked, I'd blame it on the drugs they pumped in me before sending me to Stephen. The chase of the high was forced on me. That's easier than admitting that I'm not strong enough to get through this life without the Saturdays I spend drunk or high.

Honestly though? If someone asked me, I'd probably just tell them to go fuck themselves.

I use the cover of smoke to slip through the lounge of Vervain, a popular hookah bar among the locals of West Trinity Falls and an illusive escape for outsiders.

Fruity. Spicy. Earthy. Hedy.

The different flowers and herbs burn into scent smoke, giving everything a hazy filter. My skin tingles as my favorite drug begins to kick in, making my skin buzz. Like lightning is just off in the distance, closing in to my position, ready to strike me at any time.

When I make it to the back, an exit door is illuminated in a red neon glow. One bouncer stands off to the side, dressed in black, towering over the patrons in the bar with a harsh stare.

I open my clutch, grabbing an old crinkled gum wrapper, and hand it over to the menacing man in front of me. He holds it between two fingers, glancing down briefly to read the words scrawled across the inside of the aluminum paper.

Silent Mirage.

The password is correct. My dress is just short enough. And luck is on my side tonight, or maybe it's the silver smokey eye and deep purple lipstick. Possibly a combination of all of them. Either way, he nods his head toward the exit, and I slip by him to press my hand to open it.

When the false door opens, fake fog leaks out around my ankles. I sneak deeper into the pits of Vervain and find myself in a toxic haven reserved for two Saturdays out of every month.

The speakeasy-inspired nightclub is alive.

Glowing. Buzzing. Burning.

It's a combination of the kaleidoscope of colors inside and the Ecstasy. I'm floating as I make my way through, mind spinning as I admire the neon tubes tracing intricate patterns along the walls, ceiling, and floor.

Music thumps through my veins. It's never sounded better than in this moment. All of my inhibitions are lowered, and all my mind can think about is finding nirvana.

In the dark of night, I seek artificial happiness to fill the void of my empty days.

I make my way to the translucent bar in the heart of the club, lit from within to create the perfect visual effect for someone tripping. When I get to the edge, my hands find the cool material of the counter, letting it cool off my warm body.

I look around at the people circulating the bar from every direction, the round build giving the bartenders a full 360 pathway around the bottles of alcohol and glasses. I catch a glimpse of purple hair, making me lift my arm to grab Tinx's attention.

The eccentric bartender with a half-shaved head gives me a knowing look, hooking her fingers around a bottle of Casamigos Blanco before working her way through customers before she reaches me and slams an empty shot glass in front of me.

"Missed you last Saturday, girlie." Her silver lip ring catches the light as she speaks, pouring the clear liquid into the glass in front of me. I'd been so jealous of her the first night I'd met her.

How she could freely wear herself on the outside like a second skin, without drugs, without repercussions. She could just be.

"You missed my money." I wink, leaning over to grab a salt shaker from caddy and handing her my clutch to hide behind the bar for the night.

“Those tips you leave pay half my rent, bitch.” She shrugs. “Can’t blame me for buttering you up.”

I laugh obnoxiously, knowing the only time I’m allowed to hear that foreign sound is because of the drugs. Sad life, isn’t it? Unable to laugh unless I’m drowning in chemicals.

Half of her rent isn’t even a noticable expense on my account records. Most of the people in here work their entire lives for a quarter of my wealth, and I’d just been born into it? It hardly seems fair because it’s not like I deserve it any more than Tinx does.

It’s all because we were born on two different sides of the coin.

Me in Ponderosa Springs and her here.

A place where rules are more of a suggestion and authority is always met with contempt. The citizens are so vastly different from those just twenty minutes away. Here, they embrace an unapologetic attitude with a passion for rebelling against the affluent.

West Trinity Falls doesn’t pretend. Its very essence is a testament to the human desire for freedom and pursuing life on your own terms. Even if it means dancing at the edge of legality and challenging the status quo.

That’s why the children of the Springs are so desperate to cross that town line. Here? Where salt water from the coast mingles with the smell of bonfires and the night electrifies your veins, we can be whatever the fuck we want.

It’s the reason I’m here now, to be whatever I want. To escape the nightmares and daydreams.

“Get me a lime, and I’ll pay it for the next three months,” I say lightly, rolling my tongue across the back of my hand before pouring a line of salt across it.

I’d give her more if she asked, but she won’t. I’d probably give her all of it, content to rot beneath a bridge for the rest of my life.

“Hey! I need another beer!”

When the devil can’t reach you, he sends a drunk, entitled man.

Some guy shoves his way to the front of the bar, knocking into me as he slams his empty bottle on the counter.

“You need to shut the fuck up.” I turn my head to flutter my eyelashes at him. “But we all can’t get what we want, can we?”

Tinx doesn’t bother holding back her laugh as she grabs the asshole’s beer, pushing it in front of him to take so he can return to his group of

friends hiding in the corner who stare at women they'll never actually have the balls to speak to.

"Bitch," he mutters in my direction, sneering as he looks me up and down.

"Thank God!" I place a hand on my chest, pouting a little. "I was worried you liked me for a second."

I'm sure he's confused as he leaves, wondering if his overused insult gave him the upper hand or not, but as my tongue cleans up the salt from the back of my hand, I can't be bothered to care.

"You've got a heart of gold beneath that bitchy exterior, Whittaker."

"Nope." I shake my head, pressing the shot glass to my lips and tilting my head back, letting the tequila burn every ounce of responsibility down my throat. "It's all a plot to trick, to get karma to stop fucking me."

I reach forward, plucking the lime from her fingers and biting into the flesh of the fruit, letting the citrus add the fire in my throat.

I'm not a good person.

I'm mean, angry, and spiteful, filled with ignored trauma and questions that will never get answers. The only person I can care about is Lilac.

I'm not good. I'm fucked-up, and there is no fixing it.

But that doesn't matter tonight. The hope is that with every song the DJ plays, every searing tequila shot I take, I'll go home numb, and for a few hours, I'll sleep. I'll feel absolutely nothing, snuggling deeper beneath the blanket of alcohol and ecstasy.

All to escape the fact my mind was so weak it allowed me to fall in love with my captor. All to avoid that stupid fucking text message that was probably a dumb prank.

All to deny how empty I still am.

Another shot goes down, and I'm ready to move to the dance floor so that when the full effect of this illegal candy hits at the perfect time, I can feel the buzz lapping at the shore, just there, ready to drown me in bliss.

"Coraline?"

I bristle, shoulders tightening, spine steeling.

The anonymity West Trinity Falls brings me is what I crave more than anything. There have only been a few times someone has noticed me in here. I've only had to slip into the version of myself I hate in the one place I find total freedom three times.

A bitter taste ruins the watermelon gum on my tongue.

When I turn my head, I see a pair of large, curious green eyes stuck to mine. Beams of light slash across our faces as I take her in, the waves of black curls, a cute red dress painting her petite figure.

She looks like everyone and no one. Distinct, small features that make it hard to believe I wouldn't recognize her, but just enough cover that I might mistake her for someone else.

"Do I know you?" I ask honestly, tone accusatory, my guard trying to slam back up but slow because of the drugs.

A small smile curves her lips as she nods. "Lyra Abbott. We went to high school together and middle school and elementary."

My eyebrows twitch, pulling together. Trying to find her in my memory is proving difficult, maybe because of the situation, maybe because I just can't remember. Everything before being kidnapped is blurry.

"It's alright if you don't remember me. We barely knew of each other, let alone spoke. But I just wanted to come over and—"

"If you're here to tell me you're sorry or ask about what happened," I snap, a deep exhale flaring my nostrils, "you can leave now. I don't talk about it. Sorry to disappoint."

My hands push my body from the bar, ready to disappear into the crowd. To her credit, her face remains peaceful, unaffected by my tone and clear accusation. Almost like no matter what I say, she'll remain kind.

"I came over to buy you a drink," She motions behind her. "Well, we wanted to buy you a drink."

Two more people stand behind her, just far back enough for me not to have noticed them at first.

Sage Donahue has only grown more beautiful as the years have passed. It's a quick lesson on why everyone was so enamored by her in high school.

Ponderosa Springs' Sweetheart with her natural strawberry blonde waves, freckled pale skin, and signature red lip. But there is more to her now. Age, maturity, softness, wait—

I drag my tongue across my bottom lip. "Why?"

It's in noticing Sage that pieces of a puzzle click together.

Lyra shrugs carelessly, taking a sip from her orange-colored cocktail that I have an urge to take a drink from. "No one needs to look this lonely in a club."

"I'm not lonely," I try to say defensively, but I think it sounds more like defeat. "Besides, shouldn't I be buying you three drinks? I mean, your

boyfriends are the reason I'm standing here, right? It's the least I can do."

"Husband." A new voice tickles my ears. "And you don't owe us anything. She's just being nice."

My eyes flick to her hand, wrapped around a glass. Sure enough, looped around her ring finger is a solid black line tattoo.

I take in my very first physical look at Briar Lowell, positioning herself a little closer to Lyra, who is several inches shorter than her. Sharp eyes that I doubt miss much watch me. She's on guard, ready to protect her friend if I make another snarky comment.

If I were a betting woman, I'd say that willingness to defend the people around her is a reason one of Ponderosa Springs' most violent and notorious men chose her.

I didn't recognize them immediately or know them really, but they sure as hell know me. The Hollow Boys played a huge part in discovering the Halo. Without them, who knows what would have happened to hundreds of missing girls.

"Listen." My throat constricts as I try to swallow, needing another drink. "I'm not the girl you need to be nice to. I'm a shit person, even worse friend. You could do much better."

"Welcome to the fucking club, chick. But Lyra here is good at picking up strays." Sage places her hands on Lyra's shoulders, squeezing playfully before looking up at me. "Oh, and the mean girl shit? Doesn't work on her. So you might as well stop fighting your Ecstasy trip and say yes. Take it from me, it's much easier that way."

High school Sage probably would've never taken a second glance at me. This version? I'm not familiar with.

My teeth skim my bottom lip.

Fuck. I groan in the back of my throat.

E is incredible. It's the best drug, but when it kicks in? It takes no prisoners. They didn't code-name it *pleasant* for nothing. When it takes over, there is nothing but beauty, even in an ugly fucking world.

Hope fizzles in my gut. Euphoria thrums through my veins, warmth spreading all the way to my toes. For the life of me, I can't find a reason to not say yes to them. I want to free-fall into the arms of the world that I deserve to be loved by.

"One shot?" I arch an eyebrow.

"Is it ever just one?" Sage smirks. "What do you drink?"

I brush my flat-ironed hair behind my back, taking my time to feel the strands beneath my fingers.

“Something other than tequila exists?”

Briar, for the first time since she came up, cracks a smile.

“Thank God,” she breathes, waving softly at Tinx. “I’m tired of getting vodka drunk with these bitches.”

Sage had been right. One shot is never just one.

With the full effects of Molly flowing through my veins and alcohol filtering through my system, everything is in full color. The club is a kaleidoscope, blinding my eyes with a haze of bliss.

Nothing bad can touch me here.

Neon lights pulse beneath the translucent dance floor under my feet to the beat of the music. The DJ mixes one song into the other, weaving them together seamlessly. A new song blasts from the speakers, and the redhead on my right squeals above the surrounding noise.

Her slim, warm hands grab my shoulders, shaking me back and forth. The glow of sweat and light across her skin makes me smile before she even speaks.

“I love this fucking song!”

My head tilts back with laughter. I’m only a small piece of an enormous world in this crowd. Bodies everywhere, roaming hands, swaying hips. My heart thrums in my chest, head swimming.

I scan the small circle of girls around me as Sage releases my body. Lyra’s and Briar’s hands are interlinked, gripping onto one another as they dance in sync. Their backs are pressed together, hair a swirl of blonde and black strains.

The small talk we’d shared earlier had been shortened further to drink orders and screams about favorite songs. Maybe we’d talked? Maybe we hadn’t? I only knew I’d never been happier to just exist around a group of people who weren’t out for information about what happened to me. No bloodsucking leeches searching for an exclusive, getting close to me just to gain their thirty minutes of fame.

We’re all here to have fun.

Them because apparently they'd just been reunited, according to Sage and me, to escape. We'd come together in the perfect silent collision.

The EDM-style harmony seems to physically animate. Swirls of light pouring from the speakers slither toward me with purpose, the crackling tentacles of music curling around my waist, urging my body to dance.

What would the Ponderosa Springs elite think if they could see me right now?

My arms lift above my head, bending slightly, and my eyes shut as I sway, the infectious rhythm captivating me. It starts gradually, ambient sounds that build tension in the room. The beat ascends, climbing slowly, making you feel every tick to the top of the roller coaster.

As we reach the peak, everything goes silent, and when my eyes open just as the sudden surge of music returns, the club moves in slow motion. The girls around me start lightly jumping to the beat, joining the rest of the bodies as we bounce.

Blinding smiles, wild hair, the lingering smell of weed.

It's euphoria.

Pure human indulgence.

But nothing good can ever last, not really.

There aren't enough drugs and alcohol in the world to deny that fact.

In my peripheral vision, I see it.

Sage has stopped jumping, right arm lifted straight above her head as she slowly moves her hips back and forth. The drink in her hand sloshes around the glass, spilling over the lip and onto the floor.

This wouldn't have caught my eye if it hadn't been for the guy slipping behind her undetected. I'm slow to react when he lifts his arm, dropping something into the contents of her drink and trying to glide past as if nothing happened.

Suddenly, I'm not at Vervain, drowning in bliss.

I'm eighteen, walking home from a college party, not remembering drinking nearly enough to be stumbling. My body doesn't feel like my own, the way it reacts out of untapped rage I wasn't aware lived inside of me.

"Hey, asshole!" I scream, my dark nails digging into the fabric of his shirt viciously, jerking him back by the shoulder. "You just go around spiking girls' drinks, you piece of shit?"

The vibe of the club shifts at the drop of a hat, hostile energy and tension so thick I can barely breathe.

“What?”

Maybe it's Briar who said it or Lyra. I can't hear that well over the continuing music thumping around.

The guy turns, greasy blond hair swaying in front of his face, anger furrowing his brows as he yanks his shoulder from my grip.

“What the hell are you talking about?” He seethes.

My teeth bite into the flesh of my tongue enough to bring blood as I lean over to grab Sage's drink from her hand.

There, floating at the top of her drink, is an undissolved pill floating at the top. My hand is shaking as I sling the liquid inside the glass in his face. Alcohol drips down the front of his mouth.

“What the fuck!” He runs his hand down his face, wiping it off with malice. “You're gonna get it, you stupid fucking bitch-”

I've never been aggressive like this before, never been the type of girl to swing first, ask questions later. But tonight is apparently the evening of firsts.

My fist slams into his nose, barely feeling the recoil in my arm. Blood spouts from his nose, leaking like a waterfall onto the clear floor beneath us. People around notice the animosity, causing chaos to erupt.

Shouting. Shoving. People trying to escape before security arrives.

It's all a blur for my eyes. My chest is heaving, mind starting to spiral, and emotions that have no business being here bubble up inside me. I hitch my arm back, ready to swing on this guy again, who is holding his nose, trying to back up from me.

I just want to see him bleed out. Choke on it and die right here on this floor.

Just as I swing again, a singular arm curls around my waist. Strength rocks my body backward into a brutally solid chest. I squirm in his grip, kicking my feet but moving nowhere.

Jesus, fuck, this security guard is big.

My nails dig into the forearm sealed around my torso, clawing at his skin, but I'm merely a kitten attacking Godzilla. He's barely fazed by my weak fighting style. He simply gets moving us back away from the crowd in front of me.

“The girls! I can't just leave them!” I scream, frantically swinging my eyes around to find the people I'd just met but don't want to leave to fend for themselves.

But when I catch a glimpse of them, there are three larger bodies covering them, guiding them away from the turmoil. My stomach churns with unease, crashing adrenaline, and alcohol, making a violent concoction in my stomach.

I'm about to throw up, about to tell him as much as we disappear from the packed club to a secluded, dimly lit hallway. Where are we going? Where is he taking me?

No, no, no. Not again. This can't happen again. Please.

My feet hit the floor, the quiet echo of music in the distance in the tail of my mind, as my back meets the wall, exposed skin tingling as the cool surface presses into me.

Muscular hands cage me in. I feel the weight of chains that shackled me to cold lonely nights. My stomach rumbles for food I'll never taste. I'm desperate for fresh air that doesn't taste like mildew on my tongue.

The fight in me earlier no longer exists. I've allowed fear to swallow me whole and leave me frozen. My hands shake uncontrollably, thoughts a jumbled mess, a chaotic whirlwind of past and present worries. The overwhelming feeling that something terrible is about to happen will not leave my stomach.

The mind is a dangerous place, and mine has been taken over by a storm, spiraling, drowning me while I desperately search for an anchor amidst the raging wind.

"Please," I beg.

God, I hate myself. The half-choked plea is bitter in the back of my throat, and I feel pathetic for speaking it aloud. I shake my head back and forth, my body slumping against the wall.

I can't go back to the basement.

I can't be a victim, not again.

I can't.

I'm choking on memories of trauma I hate. He said he'd come back for me, and it took me a while to realize he didn't just mean physically. My breaths are shallow, tiny gasps as if my lungs are afraid to take in too much air.

Stephen Sinclair would never leave me alone.

I would smell him in the air. Feel his presence behind my shoulder with every step forward I took. Hear his voice in my dreams. I'm determined only the bittersweet mercy of death's hands would deliver me from him.

I'm falling apart for everyone to see, and I can't stop it.

Time loses its grip on me. Seconds stretch out into eternity, yet everything moves in fast-forward. I'm hyperaware of every sensation, every sound, every flicker of movement around me. It's as if my senses are on overdrive, each input bombarding me relentlessly, making me feel like I'm about to unravel.

My chest tightens even more, body trembling, my muscles tensed as if ready to flee from an unseen threat. The room seems like it's closing in on me, the walls pressing closer and closer.

I need to escape, to find someplace safe, even though I don't think I've ever known what safety truly looks like.

"In 1815, Adolf Anderssen sacrificed both rooks and the queen to deliver a checkmate against Lionel Kieseritzky."

Tiny hairs behind my neck rise, chill bumps scattering and spreading across my naked arms. I can barely hear the actual words, my brain not computing sentences.

Only the voice.

Smooth and calm as the night sky.

Silas Hawthorne.

"The final move, 23.Qh6#, gave it the name the Immortal Game."

Warm hands, much larger than my own, cradle the sides of my head. Fingertips massage the spoken words into the back of my scalp, tendrils of my hair looped through the gaps in his finger as his voice coaxes me toward dry land.

My eyebrows twitch as I open my eyes. Tears slip down my cheeks, a mixture of frustration, confusion, and fear. It's dark in this hallway, nearly empty, and all I can really make out is the shape of his body.

"Bobby Fischer, the match of the century, happened during the Cold War. People for years talked about this one chess match being a symbol of political war. Fischer won, making him the first American to win the World Chess Championship."

The intensity starts to wane as he continues rambling. The tightness in my chest gradually releases its grip, and my breathing, though ragged, steadies. He's talking about what I think is chess history. Such a random, off-base topic, but it's not the context that has distracted my brain.

It's his voice.

The same one that mumbled in my ear through a phone speaker and kept me from jumping to my death. It's a blend of darkness and warmth, a low rumble that emerges from the depths of his chest. A single candle flickering in an abyss of nothingness.

"Shāh māt, the king is helpless or the king is defeated, translates to—"

"Checkmate." I choke on the word.

The Ecstasy is still pumping through my system, the alcohol and crash of adrenaline. I'm left feeling drained. Like even though the storm inside me is subsiding, I'm still standing in the pouring rain.

He holds my head in his hands, fingers curling around the base of my neck, tugging me forward. My forehead drops to his chest, nose inhaling the smell of tobacco and cologne stuck to his shirt, luring me closer.

My body seeks his, looking for...I don't know. Comfort? Calm?

The world is still hazy, and all I know is he's the only thing keeping me from falling to the ground.

"Coraline." He whispers my name like a secret. "Breathe for me, Hex. Breathe."

I let my weight fall into him, unsure if he'll be able to shoulder it but knowing somehow that he will. Shaky breaths rattle from my lips as I take slow inhales through my nose.

"Don't judge me, Silas." I squeeze my eyes tightly, feeling the tears leak down my face. "Don't—"

Don't tell anyone. Don't remember this. Don't think of me as weak.

This is mortifying.

The way my vulnerability has leaked from me like split veins, and there was nothing I could've done to stop it. It doesn't matter that it's only one person who's seen in. One person is enough.

All it takes is one person to know how weak you are on the inside, just one, to destroy you. I can't let that happen, not when I'm so close to getting out of here.

"How can I judge the way you choose to kill your sadness?"

There is a part of me that wants to push him away, run and pretend this never fucking happened. But a smaller piece is so tired, and his arms are so undeniably warm.

"Can you—"

I pause, not sure what to ask or how to ask it, just knowing I don't want him to leave. Not yet. I need a few more seconds to collapse, and then I'll

leave. I will pick up the scattered pieces of my pride and pretend this was a dream.

But I just need a few more moments.

“Anything,” he mumbles, standing steady, not making a single move to step away from me. He tilts my head back, making me look up at his face. One of his thumbs brushes a tear from my face.

It’s my first real look at Silas tonight. What little light exists in this tiny hallway casts a gleam across his face.

For a moment, we are two strangers in an empty room, connected only by our eyes. Our pasts do not overlap, and we are totally unknown to each other. It’s just a second that I allow myself to imagine a world where I can be attracted to him without repercussions.

His eyes are dark, like sodden earth, and so fucking vacant, begging for life to occupy them, aching for a spark. I track the details of him from his straight, distinguished brow to the slope of his strong nose.

Freckles, such a soft and innocent thing, dust the planes of his light-brown cheeks, and his lips are so inviting that I have a sudden overwhelming urge to see him smile. Just watch as his full mouth tilts up and shows off what I know are blinding white teeth.

There is an ache in me to touch him, but I refuse it.

I never wanted this, to know him past his reputation. For him to know me, to see me. I did not want to be two strangers in an empty room, because I know who I am and what I would do to him—any male, for that matter, that got too close to me.

I’m the spindle lover boys prick their fingers on. I leave them comatose with only the memory of my touch.

I’m not the princess. I’m the rotten apple.

The poison made to demolish happily ever afters.

I’m no good for him, for anyone.

“Let go of me.”

Book made for megrourkee@gmail.com

SIX
RETURN OF THE BOOGEYMAN
CORALINE

“MISS WHITTAKER?”

I lean over on my stool, peering around the canvas in front of me. I’m far too young to be called anything other than my first name. But it makes a little more sense when I see who is standing there.

“Hi, Faye. Coraline is fine. I’m not actually your teacher,” I tell her gently, softer with her than I am with most. Maybe because she reminds me of Lilac. “Can I help you with something?”

“Yeah, sorry. You’re right, my bad.” A blush tints her cheeks, and she tucks a piece of loose pink hair behind her ear. “I was wondering...I mean, it’s fine if not—I don’t want to be a problem or anything. I was just thinking, if I could—”

“What do you need?” I cut her off midsentence, knowing how notorious she is for rambling.

I know it stems from her youth and what she’s been through, but this world will not be easy on her, even though it should be. If she doesn’t learn to demand what she wants from life, it will take from her until she has nothing left.

Even if she’s rotting away on the inside, her voice has to stay alive, or she will have no chance of making it.

With a quick nod, she straightens herself up.

“Could I take some paints home with me? Just the primary colors would be fine. My mom said she’s trying to save up to get me my own soon, but I just wanted to see if I could borrow some until then?”

My cold, hidden heart defrosts enough to let me feel it ache for her. Her single mother is already spending money driving her from West Trinity

Falls, and with four other kids at home and the price of paint, it'll be a while before she gets them.

I swivel in my stool before standing up and walking toward the wall of materials that stretches the entire length of the studio. Cabinets, shelves, and bins are filled with different mediums and supplies.

Scooping up one of my extra satchels, I lift the flap open and start filling it. Faye is still learning, but she's incredible with watercolor. So along with acrylic, I add a pack of unopened Winsor & Newton watercolor paints, ones I'll never use because I hate it. My hands scoop out brushes, flat, round, and mop. Paper, a couple of small containers, three palettes, a roll of masking tape, some pencils, and a drawing compass.

This would be better than any art supply trip. It's expensive paint, and if she's smart, she'll keep these materials for a long time. When the bag is almost full, I quickly toss the top back over it and extend my arm toward her.

"Here."

This world took so much from her. At fifteen, she's barely got enough to give. It's unfair that before she even had time to become a person, she was given irreversible trauma.

Her round face lights up, eyes shining with a thin veil of tears.

I swear to fuck if she does, I'll kick her out.

Crying isn't something I can handle. Not for myself or anyone else. I loathe doing it, and I never know how to help anyone going through it. I prefer to avoid it best I can.

It's a waste of water and does nothing but make you feel worse in the end.

"No, no, I can't do that." She holds her palms up, refusing at first. "Those are yours."

"Which means I can do what I want with them. Take it, Faye. Everything inside is replaceable. You're good, but you need practice. Consider this more for me than you. It makes me look bad if you're not any good."

This makes her laugh as she snuffles a little, holding in her tears so that none fall. I'll make this about me if it means she will take the bag. I'll make myself look like the arrogant Whittakers I stem from if it means she can have this one good thing.

Softly, and thankfully, she grabs the bag from me, tucking her head underneath the strap and letting it rest on her shoulder.

“Thank you.” She shakes her head a bit. “I don’t know how to even repay you for this.”

“Click the light off when you go, then we are even. I’ll see you next week.” I lift an eyebrow, pulling my canvas from the easel and laying it flat on one of the wooden tables near the wall.

Soft music plays over the speakers as I clean up, tossing a rag over my shoulder. Boston by Augustana begins my early 2000s playlist.

“Is there something else?” I ask, still feeling her presence behind me.

I gather all the forgotten brushes and palettes from today, quickly tossing them into the soapy sink when she speaks.

“You always tell us to be direct with our art, and I think that’s your way of telling us to be direct in life. So I guess I’m wondering why you never go to group meetings? I think you could help some people. Letting them see how normal you are, how well you’ve adjusted.”

I bristle, spine steeling and shoulders tense.

Normal.

No one is normal. It’s a societal term slapped on people, but regardless of life experiences, no one is actually normal. Especially not me, but it’s the image I present to people. I can’t even be angry at her assuming it.

“I adjusted because my family has money. I *paid* to be okay. If I show up to those meetings with women who have real problems, it’ll be nothing but a slap in the face for them.”

“That’s not—”

“Go.” I nod my head toward the door, looking at her over my shoulder in her direction. “Tell your mom I said hello, and I’ll see you at five thirty next week.”

Taking this as me being done with this conversation, I finally hear the sounds of her footsteps retreating toward the open garage-style door. The entire front wall of the studio rolls up to the ceiling, exposing the inside of the space completely when it’s up.

It lets in gusts of fresh air inside, allowing the paint and chemical scent to go somewhere else, so I try to keep it open as much as I can, even though it’s rare ‘cause Oregon weather is a bitch.

When I turn around, her feet are on the sidewalk, and she’s looking both ways when I say her name from my place. She turns, the wind blowing her

short bubble-gum-pink hair in front of her face.

“Someone told me I survived for a reason. It was this, teaching you. Give yourself grace to find what yours is. Heal on your terms, not mine.”

I know she only asked because we are all searching for an answer on how to heal and move on, but the truth is moving on isn't a one-size-fits-all formula. It's what makes everything so much harder, trying to find what makes you want to wake up in the morning.

She smiles, giving me a small wave. “Thank you, Coraline.”

Then she's gone, crossing the street to her mother's van, leaving me alone in the studio. Faye's always the last to leave, mostly because I let her hang out until her mom can get off work, even though I know I shouldn't.

Bonding won't do either of us any good. Getting attached when I know I'm leaving. The more she's around, the more she looks at me as a role model, and I don't want that. I'm no one to look up to or admire, not really.

What happened in that basement? What my mind did to survive?

It's fucking embarrassing and weak. I barely scratch the surface of what Faye or any of those other women went through.

To Faye? I'm put together. I'm healed.

But if she could have seen me just the other night, crumbled in the arms of a man I barely knew, fleeing the moment I'd been able to catch my breath, refused to even thank him for what he'd done?

She'd see me much differently.

She would see what I do when I look in the mirror.

I roll my shoulders, telling myself to forget the memory. I've gone two years without so much as running into Silas Hawthorne. This is a one-off. I can avoid him for one more; I'll never have to see him again.

I take my time cleaning the large-sized storefront with manageable rent that was a warehouse that I converted. The interior walls are covered in exposed brick. Paint splatters adorn the concrete floors. The handful of vacant easels sitting in a circle gives each artist plenty of space to create with privacy.

What appears on someone's canvas belongs to them, unless given permission to belong to others.

It took some time, but I'd been able to create what I thought was a safe space. Even with the faint turpentine scent, the lavender candles I keep lit combat it well.

I climb down from the metal ladder, careful not to spill the watering jug in my hand. I'm surprised all the various planets hanging from the ceiling and scattered around the room have made it this long. The faux ivy along the walls need a new install, and the floors need to be mopped.

I'd gotten this place for selfish reasons in the beginning. I needed a place that I could run away to, make a mess in, create and breathe away from prying eyes. Where the walls could crumble and I could just to exist.

It's exhausting being so afraid to be anything but defensive and cold.

My parents love telling their friends that it'll be converted into my very own gallery one day, that I'm just getting my feet wet in the art world. As if I'd share anything else I create with those people.

They'd love that. Letting a stampede of nosey-ass people stomp around my one piece of solace just to get a little more recognition. I made it out of a sex trafficking organization that my father *unknowingly* supported—isn't that enough attention?

Art is intimate. It shouldn't be shared before the artist is ready for it to be viewed, completely stable in their love for the work before opening it to criticism.

As I'm placing the broom back into the supply closet, my phone rings. My heart drops for a second, just a flash, but when I reach into my overall pockets and see Lilac's name flashing across the screen, I let out a breath.

The moment I press Answer and it's resting against my ear, her voice floats through the speaker.

"I didn't know it was possible for someone to wear this much black," she says. "Did you know it was picture day, or did you purposefully dress like the fifth member of Kiss?"

I scoff, tucking the phone between my ear and shoulder. "Hello to you too, sweet sister."

"Hi, hello, answer the question."

Lilac Whittaker drained every ounce of good from her parents when she was born, only gaining more as she grew older. I truly believe it's her smile that keeps me going, and I'd give the world for her happiness.

I live for her before living for myself most days. Securing her happiness and finding her joy has kept me alive. Every time the darkness creeps in and the dreams get too real, I think of her.

Sweet little Lilac having to find out that I'd taken my own life because I was too tired to carry on. I'd never want her to blame herself or be haunted

by my pain. I wouldn't do that to her.

I'll suffer through life as long as I need to if it means she can keep her joy.

"Why the fuck are you looking through my school yearbook?"

"Found it in a box in my closet. This is fucking gold." She laughs a little, and I can hear pages flipping, "You were, like, really committed to the emo thing."

A smile breaks out across my lips as I make my way across the studio, grabbing a spray bottle of cleaning liquid and a towel to wipe down the stools.

"Black is your mother's most hated color. I was trying to rebel quietly."

There is only so much a teenager can do to revolt against her family when you grow up with parents like mine. Since I was old enough to speak, I've been testing the limits of their patience.

I gave myself just enough edge to annoy them but kept my grades stellar and art prizes on a shelf so I was still a good little prize horse in the barn. Just wild enough that I scared socialites.

When I'd turned eighteen, I no longer needed the black eyeliner and metal spikes. I could do whatever the fuck I wanted when I left for college, and it was that mentality that got me kidnapped and locked in a basement.

Playing nice to them now is courtesy for my sister.

"You and Emmet were cute. Even his eyeliner is kinda hot."

I suck in a shocked breath. I haven't heard his name in so long. How long has it been since I thought about him?

The track record of men I've ruined because of my cursed heart is short but enough to show a pattern. Emmet hurt the most, I think. We loved each other in every way sixteen-year-olds could.

Even though the official report was that his depression caused him to jump off the bridge, everyone always knew it was me. Even his parents, who wouldn't let me go to his funeral, knew.

It wasn't a coincidence that we'd broken up the day before. That I had taken it upon myself to end the relationship. It had been my fault.

My stepmother might call me a witch as a running joke in our household, but she's right about one thing.

I am cursed.

Inside of me lives a spell that crushes the hearts of men. My bones are built from a hex, dark magic that drives boys mad. This curse I live with

makes love a lethal weapon.

Falling for me is not the fear. It's what happens when I fall for *them*.

Every man I have ever loved has either disappeared, died, or lost their mind. Magic may not be something most believe. Curses may not be real to some, but things can only happen so many times before you realize that a common thread in these tragedies is always you.

"He used to bring you gummy worms when he'd pick me up for our dates. You liked him."

Talking about Emmet, thinking of the person I was in high school, feels a lot like reminiscing about an old classmate. Someone I watched and heard things about but never really knew.

It's impossible to quantify the distance between who I was and whatever it is am I now.

The distance between who I was and whatever I am now? Light years.

"Well, of course I did. I was a kid, and he brought candy. I still don't have anyone else to compare him to." Even though I'm not there, I can see her tossing her arms in the air. "You refuse to date, which means I can't grill anyone like a good little sister should."

I hope she isn't holding her breath. Another person won't be walking romantically into my life ever again. I don't mean that in the typical way where people say it as a joke or a shield 'cause they've never been given the right opportunity.

I mean it in how even if my soul mate descended from the clouds and fate wrote in big block letters in a mirror that this person was the one? I'd still turn around and walk away like I didn't even see them.

"I like being alone, Li. It doesn't bother me."

I finish the stools, sliding the cleaning stuff beneath a cabinet, and lean against one of the wooden desks holding an array of small clay sculptures.

"Yes, it does."

My eyebrows shoot to my hairline. "Sorry?"

"No one enjoys being alone, especially you, Cora. I get it, you love showing the world this cold, remote version of you who snaps at people if they get close. I don't blame you. But don't lie and say you enjoy it. I know you."

She's younger than me but not dense. I can't shield her from everything, and even though she doesn't understand all of it, Lilac doesn't need the

details. She just knows her older sister isn't the same one who disappeared that fall night.

"Should I Cash App or Venmo you for the therapy?"

"Let me come over tonight, and make me brown butter gnocchi. We'll call it even."

I let out a little laugh. "What time—"

"Oh my god," she says suddenly.

The tone of our conversation shifts from light and easy to something else. My hand reaches up to grab the phone, dropping what I'm doing so I can start looking around for my keys, ready to drive to our parents' house immediately.

Over and over in the phone, she repeats, "Oh my God, oh my God. This isn't happening, this isn't happening."

"Lilac." My voice is sharp, trying to pull her from the panic so I can figure out what's going on. "What happened?"

"Coraline, I—" she stutters. Fear has shoved its hand down her throat and strangled her vocal cords. "The news. Turn on the news."

My confusion mingles with concern. I remind myself to breathe, focus on every inhale and exhale from my lungs. When I find the television remote, it slips from my sweaty palms, clattering to the floor.

Somehow, the power button gets pressed in the process, and the screen illuminates. The random news station that appears must have taken over every channel, the emergency broadcast spanning across all local channels.

The news anchor's voice demands my attention as I try to take everything they say in. Their voices add to the chaos that swirls inside of me. Turmoil, bones, and teeth. The grave of my trauma being dug up with abandon.

"Coraline! Cora! Are you okay? Where are you? I'm on the way..."

Very faintly, I hear Lilac's voice as my phone tumbles to the ground. My weight becomes too heavy for my knees to carry as my feet stumble forward. One hand shoots out, slamming onto one desk as I struggle to hold myself up, trying not to collapse onto the floor, to keep myself standing.

I knew that text message wasn't a prank or some fluke. I should've trusted my instincts. Should've got me and Lilac out of here sooner.

A red-tinted screen appears in front of me. A singular mug shot sits to the left, depicting a face I know by memory. The smell of Old Spice wafts up my nose, dizzying nausea causing my body to sway.

“Breaking news. An inmate has escaped Rimond Penitentiary just last night. We are told the prisoner is Stephen Sinclair, arrested just a little over two years ago for his involvement in a national sex trafficking organization. Law enforcement considers this man armed and dangerous.”

A sick part of me is relieved. The waiting game is finally over. It was never an if, always a when. The moment I stepped foot from that basement, he’s been trying to find his way back to me.

I’ve been living on the edge of my seat, just waiting with bated breath for my boogeyman to return.

Stephen’s face appears on the screen again. My chest cracks open, and I feel the floodgates open.

I told them. I told all of them. Screamed it for days.

I was his Circe, and Stephen Sinclair would always come back for me.
Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

SEVEN

SHADOWS FALLING

SILAS

THE HOWLING breeze whips across my face as I make my way across the barely there path overrun with shrubs and trees. The smell of salt clings to the air, and as I come upon the mouth of the trail, I can see the long stretch of land that fades into the sky's horizon.

Three silhouettes outline the darkening sky.

The Peak towers over the rugged Oregon Coast, shadowing Black Sands Cove, a beach only locals know about. I can hear the crashing waves against the jagged rocks, and that sound alone brings on memories.

My feet haven't felt this specific piece of ground since we all parted ways. The Peak is secluded, secret, ours. It's where we grew up, went our separate ways, and now it's where we are reunited.

From the moment we found this place, it'd become ours.

Wind howls, echoing from the seaside town we'd called home for far too long. This was our breaking point. We were done living in a place overrun with treachery and secrets lurking around every single cobblestone corner.

The sun slowly sets, disappearing behind a blanket of clouds as I walk further toward the edge of the cliff.

"Welcome home," I greet the three of them, my voice caught by the wind.

Rook turns to look at me, his light brown hair peeking out from the backward flat bill. He has a grin on his face as he pulls me into a tight hug, as if this is the first time we've seen each other since they've gotten back. But it's Rook, and sometimes, you've just got to let him do what he wants.

Smoke. He has always smelled like smoke.

I pat his back, pulling away, and nod toward Thatcher in silent greeting, his hands tucked deep inside of his slacks to avoid physical contact. Alistair is the last to turn around from the cliff, a leather jacket stretched across his shoulders.

I'm pretty sure it's the same one from high school.

"Are the girls okay?"

"Currently taking over my house," Thatcher grumbles.

"No one is thrilled to be living with you, cactus. Don't look so troubled about it."

"First night back and Rook's already killed someone." Alistair's jaw twitches, running a frustrated hand across his mouth. "This place is a black fucking hole, not a home."

"I didn't kill anyone. I drugged someone and helped them off a bridge. Two very different things in the eyes of the law."

Thatcher rolls his eyes. "You've been in law school for all of two seconds. Chill out."

"Two seconds longer than you," Rook mutters, filling his hand with Skittles before shoving them into his mouth. "You might even need those seconds one day after you stab the wrong person."

We'll all be eighty years old doing this, arguing like children. Or maybe it'll just be me and Alistair pulling apart geriatric versions of Rook and Thatcher.

Thatcher, who is incapable of not having the last word, just stands there smugly as the wind blows open his suit jacket.

"Unlike you, baby boy, my family actually loved me, and I don't have to work in the judicial system to access my inheritance."

Alistair makes a choking sound, a mixture of laugh and shock, but tries to cover it with a cough. I shake my head as I look down at the ground, taking my bottom lip between my teeth and sucking in a breath.

Rook flies off the handle, muttering obscenities, while we stand there watching. But the mention of inheritance reminds me of one of the many reasons we are here.

I've never been great with communication, easing into talking points, or starting with small talk. Growing up, I just said what I needed to and moved on. No one really needed more than that.

Except the other night at Vervain.

My memory reminds me of Coraline, her hands clinging to my shirt.

For the first time, someone was desperate for me to talk. Needed it. I'd never known what that felt like, someone needing my voice. But with every word I'd muttered, she'd melted. Lost that wild look in her eyes and started breathing.

"I need to get married."

The word "fuck" draws short on Rook's lips. I lift my head, seeing three pairs of eyes on me. Expected, of course. I tug my hood up on my head as a light rain begins to fall from the darkening sky.

"Is this because of your dad?" Alistair asks. "He's not making you fucking marry someone, is he?"

"No. But the board won't give me the title of CEO until there is someone legally attached to me." That persistent headache returns, right behind my eyes. "Dad wants to sell."

"So let him sell."

"No."

I grind my teeth together, pinning Alistair with a haughty glare. He doesn't understand, and I'd never expect him to. He'd let his family's last name rot if he was in total control, and I don't blame him for that.

My family? They aren't like his.

It was one reason I felt out of place when I met them. Each of my friends had a horrible, brutal childhood brought on by their parents. While mine wasn't great because of the misdiagnoses, it was never because my mom and dad didn't love me.

They wouldn't get it.

How even though they screwed up, believing a doctor over me, they did everything they could to try and save me.

"My father has spent his entire life loving me. This is his last name, my last name. I won't let him die knowing his company was sold."

"You're gonna get married, then? Hire a fake wife?"

"I told my dad I have a girlfriend."

Not my proudest moment or smartest. But I needed him to give me time, and he wasn't going to do that unless I gave him some hope I would actually marry for love.

I did what I had to do. I always do.

"Silas, I mean this with love," Rook says, face the picture of confusion, "but what the fuck?"

He's going to be the one with the biggest problem. Me marrying someone for convenience. It'll drive him insane. 'Cause even though two nights ago, I watched him force a man to swallow a bottle of medicine and proceed to push him off a bridge into icy water because he'd attempted to drug his girlfriend, Rook's heart is gentle.

All he has ever wanted since the moment I lost Rosemary was for me to be happy. I won't ever be angry at him for that, for how protective he is over me, even if his constant worry about me taking medicine annoys the shit out of me.

Telling him should be easier, but it's because he's so protective that it isn't.

"I'll figure it out" is all I can say.

I will figure it out, eventually. But right now? I have no fucking clue what I'm going to do.

"Great." Thatcher claps his hands together. "'Cause there is something more important than your impending nuptials. Stephen Sinclair is out of prison and blackmailing us. What are we doing about that problem?"

"You're not even in the video, dickhead. You'd probably get off with a warning," Rook grunts, reaching into his front pocket to pull out a pre-rolled blunt. "How'd he even get out?"

"Help. That's what the prison informed me when I called to make sure he was the only inmate to escape."

The sound of a lighter flicking echoes just before a cloud of smoke wraps around Rook's head.

"Gotta make sure Daddy stays locked up," he mutters, inhaling deeply.

"We can't just wait for Silas to track the email. We have to move," Alistair points out. "If it's Stephen, we don't know where he is. If it's someone else, we are just as fucked."

My head pounds with building pressure.

The guilt I carry is a relentless companion, a shadow that follows me everywhere I go. It's the hollow pit of my stomach, a constant reminder that I've put these three people and the ones they love at risk.

My anger and desperation for revenge has once again uprooted their lives. If something happens, if we go to jail or someone dies, it's on me. It'll be my fault, and it's a burden that has sat with me.

The selfishness of my grief will be the damnation of them.

“I’m sorry,” I say, not sure how to take it back or say it much better than that.

“For what?”

Rook’s eyebrows twitch together, the whites of his eyes turning pink from the weed.

“This is on me.” I shove my hands into my front pockets, looking up at the leaking sky. “You guys coming back. The blackmail. All of it. It’s on me. I couldn’t let Rosemary’s death go, needed to have revenge. You don’t —”

“Shut the fuck up.” Alistair’s force rumbles with the thunder in the distance. “There wasn’t a gun to my head. We all knew what we signed on for, and I’d do it again. You’re not the only one who wanted this. We all wanted to take a bite out of this place.”

“We started it together. We end it together,” Rook adds. “We’ll finish this and leave this fucking hellhole behind. All of us.”

“That means we have to follow the only trail we have right now,” Thatcher mutters. “And Rook isn’t going to like it.”

Book made for megrourkee@gmail.com

EIGHT

VOICE IN THE CANVAS

CORALINE

“YOU’RE SAFE NOW.”

Then why do I feel so exposed? Why do I feel like I’m leaving myself the further forward we walk?

I’m being removed from the protection of familiarity, thrust toward the unknown with little explanation. My feet drag, desperate to turn around, to go back. I don’t want to leave.

However, I’ve learned it’s always better to remain obedient than deal with the agony of punishment.

Two people in uniforms flank me, police officers, each with a hand curled around my upper arm.

“172 too Central. I need an ambulance to 1798 West Crew Lane. I have a female with severe lacerations to face and arms.”

“10-4, 172, rescue en route.”

Their voices are TV static, random noise that scratches against the air, crackling on my skin. A buzz that fills my ears with little purpose. I barely recognize them as words, only sounds.

I never thought seeing other people, anyone other than him, would be such a shock. It’s a foreign confusion to my regulated system that someone other than him could come down the steps and into the dimly lit basement. That someone other than him existed.

How long has it been since I’ve seen another face? How long has it been since I’ve seen my face?

With painfully firm hands, they guide me onto the last step, then lead me through an open door and into a room pouring sunlight. I flinch, immediately shut my eyes, and tuck my head against my shoulder.

My body turns away from the harsh sun streaming into this new room. I take several moments to adjust, eyes bleary as I blink through the burning. I try to take in the space, only catching glimpses before my eyes are forced to shut once again.

The room comes to me in flashes between blinks.

Polished furniture, smart appliances, spotless interior decorations, and all the wealth seeping between. It's a mosaic, a tiny piece of a larger picture. The upstairs portion of his home.

The place I've lived beneath.

All this time, there was a home above me. People living their lives, bustling around, completely unaware of my presence just a few feet below.

I cast my gaze down as we move forward, staring at the soot and dirt covering my feet. Each step leaves a stain of filth on the gleaming hardwood floors. We pass several people on our walk to the front door, each of them blurring, unrecognizable, as I numbly allow my body to succumb to their direction. My tongue drags across my bottom lip, feeling dead skin and cracks along the seam.

When we approach the open front door, I can smell crisp air. It ambushes me the moment we step out of the house and onto the steps. It burns my throat as it enters, thirsty lungs gulping it down. My system rattles, the world spinning with the abrupt rush of oxygen.

How long has it been since I smelled fresh air?

My stomach lurches as my vision tries to adjust, my senses overwhelmed by the chaos outside, too many things happening at once. The police cars littering the brick driveway, the shouting, the sun.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up.

Above the whining sirens and noise is his voice, shouting, bitter, and furious, but it's still a balm to my raging nerves.

"Step—" My voice is strangled by the dry hands on my throat, unable to deliver his name.

A hand tightens on my thin arm, a gentle squeeze in order to bring me some form of nonverbal comfort. "It's okay. He's leaving. We are taking him away. He will never hurt you again."

I'm unsure which one says this because all I can focus on is the way my chest seizes with panic.

He's leaving?

Fear—it latches its jaw, hinges on my heart, and gorges on what little remains. Its serrated teeth tear and gnaw at the organ that is barely beating.

Fear is a starved beast, no matter how often you feed it.

Across the lawn, Stephen is thrashing against several officers, resisting them as they attempt to shove him toward an open police car. Handcuffs are sealed behind his back, and his dirty-blond hair is disheveled, swaying as he struggles.

Tears sting my eyes, sliding down my cheeks and tickling underneath my chin. That's the way his hair looked on the nights he'd stay with me.

The two of us on that thin yellowing mattress shoved into the corner of the basement. My skin felt every steady breath from his warm mouth as he rested his head on my chest. The palms of my hands remember the softness of his hair, gaps between my fingers longing for the silky strands.

For hours, we'd lie there, staring at my charcoal drawings he'd let me tape to the wall, talking about his day until he'd finally fall asleep. In those solitary moments where no words were spoken, everything felt okay.

There was no pain or sadness. Only us.

I was his. And he was mine.

“Coraline—”

My body moves, almost out of instinct. Jerking from the hands holding me, I stumble forward with the force. My frail legs wobble beneath me, struggling to hold my weight as I move. I'm uncoordinated, sluggish as I jog across the grass, finding my footing quicker than expected until I make it to a steady sprint.

The blades of grass brush the soles of my feet. My matted hair catches the wind, and I feel it swaying against my lower back.

“Stephen!” I shout. The force of my scream shreds my already tender throat, but I can't bring myself to care about the pain.

My voice grabs his attention, his head swirling in my direction, eyebrows furrowed together as he searches for me. I catch a glimpse of his blue eyes from this distance, stark and all-seeing. The force of the wind blows my stained white shirt off my shoulder, exposing the old bandage there.

His stern gaze instantly softens when it finds me, face relaxing and eyes turning down. My stomach drops, and my next movements catch the officers next to him off guard enough to allow it.

I throw myself at him.

Looping my arms around his neck, I bury my face in his chest. The sound of his back slamming the car door behind us is an echoing thud. The smell of wood and spice surrounds me.

My body clings to him as much as my soul does. He is my gravity. My earth, sun, and moon. There has not been another voice in my ears for who knows how long. I have not felt another touch or inhaled air he did not provide.

I barely remember my life without him. My own name is a foreign word.

Stephen Sinclair is my home. My wrists ache for his chains that keep me safe. His hands are the ones that fed me, his kiss the one that both broke and healed me. No one else has ever been able to love me.

It's only him.

"Don't leave me," I cry into his shirt, digging my hands into his body, pulling him closer. "Please, you promised. You promised you'd never leave me. I've been so good."

The breath of his sigh brushes my cheek. The feeling of his lips pressing to the side of my head makes me push into the gentle touch more. His voice is a hum in my ear, soothing to my fear.

"Circe, my sweet girl," he murmurs. "We can only go back if you tell them the truth. You tell them I didn't keep you down there. You wanted to stay with me. Tell them, and I'll never leave you."

Circe.

Only Circe.

The police, who were frozen in shock from my outburst, have now regained movement. Snapping to action, their hands are quick to grab at me, ripping us apart with vigor, but I refuse to let go.

"I'm—" A sob steals my words, the shake unbearable for my brittle bones. "I'm scared, Stephen. Where are they taking me? You can't leave, please!"

The removal of his body is jarring, warmth immediately replaced by the bitter cold of abandonment. I'm wrapped up and dragged backward, but I continue fighting. Hands clawing and scratching, I scream for him.

We can't be apart. I can't let him leave me.

Don't they understand? Can't they see?

He loves me. I love him.

I cry, I cry, I cry.

I sob until there is no more water for me to shed, until all I can do is dry heave and shake. Tears drown me until my eyes shut, and all I can hear are his parting words as they pulled me away.

The very last words he ever spoke to me.

“You’re mine, and I will come back for you, Circe. I will always come back to you. You belong to only me.”

Someone brushes my shoulder as they pass by me, making me blink. I take a second to remember where I’m at, what I’m doing. The buzz of people mingling fills my ears, and I refocus my attention on the people filling my studio that I’d had converted into a showcase for the occasion. I blink through the fog, wiggling my toes in my heels, trying to feel the ground of my present beneath me.

I focus on the buzz of people mingling in my ears, the bodies swirling around my studio put on display for their enjoyment. I smell the endeavors being waltzed around on silver plates.

I’m okay. He’s not here. I’m okay.

That text message I received the other day has made it more difficult to remain in my present-day life. My nightmares have gotten worse, and the flashbacks that appear out of thin air have returned.

The little work I’ve accomplished over the last two years have drifted away. A flutter in the wind. One text from someone pulling a dumb fucking prank, and I’m ripping at the seams all over again, busted open and scooping up my insides with bleeding hands.

I stand here in this room full of people, letting them admire my work, letting them admire me, wondering if deep down, they can all see the shame. If they can see how weak I am, how silly and stupid I feel for falling in love with my captor.

These people who write articles speculating about what happened and beg for excessive interviews, they judge me. As if they know what it was like, as if they could have lasted for two seconds of the torture I endured.

None of them know what it took to survive. What my body did to make it out alive.

“This piece is stunning, Coraline.”

I flinch as a soft hand touches my elbow, my head turning and shoulders relaxing once I recognize the familiar face.

Hedi Tenor.

A heartbroken mother from a neighboring town. Her only daughter, Emma, was one of the many girls rescued from my father's shipping containers after Stephen was arrested.

However, Emma's story was not one of rescue and joy. She could only hold on for three months before the extent of her injuries took her life in a cold, quiet hospital bed. It was in her memory Hedi created Light.

It's an organization that is dedicated to supporting survivors of the torturous sex ring run by the Sinclair family for decades. The Halo is responsible for thousands of trafficked, missing, and murdered women. But Light, they help provide resources for families and survivors.

Housing, free therapy, group counseling, financial advisers. Any struggles they may face while trying to integrate back into society, they help with.

"Two hundred thousand dollars seems a little steep, doesn't it? I mean, the work is incredible, but golly, that's a big price tag," She crinkles her nose, blissfully unaware of the wealth in the room around us as she lifts a flute of overpriced champagne to her lips.

At least, I think it's champagne. I know nothing about this gala except for my work being sold. I let Regina's planner handle the entire event. It's not like any of this mattered to me, anyway.

Once a gritty warehouse dominating the street corner with its industrial facade, I'd worked for months to transform it, evolving it into an art studio that allows creativity to breathe. A haven for artists.

I'd left the exterior alone, liking the weathered charm of the brick. I glance up at the original exposed steel beams on the high ceilings that blend well into the large wall of windows I'd had put in, wanting as much natural light as possible.

Concrete floors are polished with a smooth finish, and splatters of paint from a previous class still decorate the ground. The planner had done good, moving the sturdy worktables of supplies, easels, and drawing boards. The walls of the warehouse are adorned with my art, organized for guests to weave through the space. They even redesigned the small corner that was once a cozy lounge filled with vintage couches and armchairs into an elegant space.

It's sophisticated, upscale, pompous.

Everything I hate.

“Some rich asshole already paid double.” My lips tilt at the corners. “For all of them.”

Ponderosa Springs’ high society are all in attendance, along with my stepmother and father. How could they miss an event like this? Coraline Whittaker, the survivor, selling her paintings in a one-time-only private showing?

Too good for the rumor mill and deep pockets to pass up.

Hedi’s eyes widen. “There are twelve works of art here. There is no way I can let you donate this much money. You have to keep some of it for yourself.”

I pin her with a hard stare. “You can, and you will.” I cast my gaze around the room briefly at all the people with their designer clothes and noses in the air. “Don’t feel guilty about taking money from these people. I assure you, it’s much better off in your pocket than theirs.”

They use their money for drugs and blackmail, spending countless dollars on new yachts and escorts. At least this way, I have some control over where that money goes.

This is the only way I’m comfortable putting a price tag on my art anyway. Knowing it’s helping Hedi and her team. Knowing I’m doing something to help.

“You do all of this, the teaching, subjecting yourself to these people that you clearly dislike, but you won’t come to a single meeting?” She lifts a blonde eyebrow, watching me carefully.

“It’s a complex.” I shrug. “There are other people who need those meetings far more than I do. I’d only be wasting resources.”

When we first met, she tried for months to get me to go to the group session. I’d rather pluck my eyeballs out with tweezers, and I’d told her that. I’m not a fan of pouring my trauma out in front of people, and plus, I meant what I said.

There are other women who need it far more than I do.

However, when she asked if I’d be interested in offering some free classes to survivors, my answer had been an immediate yes. I refuse a lot of things, but I needed that, something to grip on to keep me from going under.

I’d never taught art life, and honestly, I don’t consider myself a teacher. I really just explain the different mediums and how best to apply them to

canvas. The rest is them. Whatever they want to create in the two hours we spend together is entirely up to them.

They can talk or be silent. Paint or draw. Sculpt or mold. There is no expectation to be anything but broken when they walk inside of here.

In art, you're given permission to be the ugliest version of yourself just so you can make something beautiful from it.

She sighs, tilting her head to the right a little as she shakes it. "I don't understand why you do that."

I arch an eyebrow. "Do what?"

"That." She motions to my body. "Just because you have money doesn't mean your experience, what you went through, isn't valid, baby. Money can never take that pain away. You're allowed to hurt. You're allowed to talk about it just as much as the next person."

There is a pit in my stomach, heavy rocks weighing me down, making me feel sick. I know she means well, and I hear what she's saying, but she'll never understand.

The guilt, the shame.

How every day I hate myself more and more when I think about how I'd crave his touch at night when it was cold, that food didn't even matter when he'd come down those steps. I just wanted to see him. To be around him.

It makes me sick knowing how much I loved him. What the fuck was wrong with me? Who does that?

Instead of replying, I nod, turning my attention back to my painting and hoping my silence is enough for her, and because it's Hedi, because she is kind, it is.

"When did you paint this?" she asks, seamlessly changing the subject.

"A little over a year ago."

I remember the four whole days I spent on it. The way I stumbled out of bed at midnight and to this very studio, just to stare at an empty canvas until the birds chirped outside.

It took me an entire day to pick up a brush. To will myself to create what I felt inside of my head. I could see it so clearly, but it was as if my hands had forgotten how to paint. Which is painful enough on its own.

The one thing you're good at, the one thing you feel like you were meant to do, and suddenly you can't? It's heartbreaking.

But when the brush touched the canvas, muscle memory kicked in. Every stroke and splatter that laid the oil painting in front of me came out like blood from a split vein.

“What’s its name? Paintings have names, right?”

I stare at the canvas.

The painting is a man’s face divided into two parts. The top half seamlessly blends into a darkening background, a tiny cosmos far off in the distance adding a surreal element. The lower half of his face is visible. It took me hours to get it right. A mouth drawn in a harsh line, a blueish-gray tint to his skin, unmoving as if he’s only a statue.

It’s impossible for anyone to know who inspired it. That most of these paintings that some stranger purchased are from a raw, deep, painful place inside of my soul.

However, the universe is keen.

As of late, it seems to constantly remind me that there is *one* person who knows about that place in me. Heard it. Witnessed it. Calmed it.

Goosebumps scatter across my arms as a familiar voice answers Hedi’s question.

“Voice in the Canvas.”

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

NINE

AN OFFER

SILAS

I DIDN'T COME HERE ENTIRELY out of the good of my heart.

When I accepted Light's invitation, I knew Coraline was the spotlight artist.

I knew she'd be here, and I wanted to see her.

After what happened at Vervain and the news of Stephen breaking out, I wanted to make sure he hadn't contacted her. It made zero sense, but I wanted to make sure she was okay.

Coraline Whittaker is a mystery to this town.

To me.

She is a mirage, a naturally occurring optical phenomenon that bends light rays to produce the image of a girl who is a familiar face but is unknown beneath the surface.

I admire what she turned herself into. How she turned her pain into rage. Bit at the hands of news crews that asked too many questions. Hardened her gaze so that the townspeople would stop approaching her in public.

She became something to fear.

I know what that is like.

How much easier it is to be scary. If people are afraid of you, they won't risk getting close.

The truth is I don't know Coraline.

Not really.

Not what makes her laugh or her favorite color. Who she wanted to be when she grew up or if she's allergic to shellfish.

That's what makes this...odd for me. Having this *connection* with a person I hardly know.

I do not know her the way most do, but I know her in a way no one else ever would.

Our trauma is a kindred spirit, emotional turmoil that two strangers on an interwoven path share. We've both been running, trying to forget, and the past is punishing us both for it.

Light, being the organizer of this event, was simply a moral bonus for me.

Hedi Tenor had come to my father's company when she had just started the organization and asked for us to be co-founders. This was a way to tether Hawthorne's name to something good, the board had said.

I'd refused.

Instead, I cut her a check whenever they need funding or a donation in Rosemary's name. I didn't want this organization, Hedi's work and her pain, to become a marketing tool for Hawthorne Technology.

Those girls deserve to be more than a pity card.

"What do you see?"

I turn just my head to look over at her, standing still at my side. There are several inches between our shoulders, creating a gap. Does she know how obvious it is? How she physically keeps others at a distance, just as much as she does emotionally?

I trace the slope of her delicate nose with my eyes, indigo-colored nails tucking a piece of white hair behind her ear.

What do I see?

A woman who nearly every man in this room has stopped to admire in one way or another.

Not just because she's the artist but her allure. That has nothing to do with her beauty. A lot of women are beautiful, but this is how she quietly absorbs attention, unaware of the effect she has on others. It's in the way she walks, gestures when she talks, her posture.

There is a detached glint in her eye that draws her lips in a straight line. It makes her unapproachable, like you don't want to disturb the thoughts that are swimming in her mind.

And yet...

You can't fucking help yourself. You almost have no choice but to see her up close.

It doesn't hurt that the silver dress she's wearing fits every curve, dips low on her chest, and exposes her left leg to right above the hip, giving a tasteful amount of skin on some but a damning amount on her.

I turn back to the painting, pushing my hands into my pockets.

"A man who thinks too much and says too little," I say, wondering if my voice still has the same effect on her in this lit room as it did in the shadows of a silent hallway.

"*Forbes* 30 Under 30 failed to mention you were an art critic." Out of the corner of my eye, I watch her slender arms cross over in front of her chest.

"You believe everything you read about me?"

"What *little* I did read seems to all be a lie." I don't miss the way she draws out the word "little," wanting to remind me of how little she concerns herself with me. "They say you don't talk much. Yet, that doesn't seem to be the case."

"With you."

My answer surprises her. Maybe it's the honesty, maybe it's her disbelief. It is true that I don't talk a lot, not to strangers or just for fun, but I like talking to her.

I like knowing my voice wants to be heard by someone, and even though she denies it, she wants to be that someone. I think Coraline Whittaker does concern herself with me more often than she wants me to believe. That there is a curiosity she has toward me because that night at Vervain? When my voice was the only thing keeping her from crashing over the edge?

I felt it.

That connection. The one I felt when I saw her leaving the Sinclair Manor. The one I felt when I visited her in the hospital. That secret language only the two of us understood when she called me. The little string of fate that refused to let me take my eyes off her in that club.

It hummed between us like a secret.

It kills her that she can't pick up the scissors and cut it.

It kills me that I want more of it.

I shouldn't be wanting more of anyone. Especially not of her.

"Is that supposed to make me feel special?"

I roll my head to the side, our eyes meeting for the first time tonight. There isn't an ounce of shyness. She holds my gaze, one dark sculpted

eyebrow arched, painted dark red lips forming a line that leaves no room for amusement.

Harshly beautiful, with very few accents of softness on her face.

Her slick brown hair slips behind her shoulders, white streaks in the front tucked behind her ears to showcase the diamonds piercing her lobes. Every movement seems calculated, as if she'd perfected the art of self-preservation in a world that had only taught her to be cautious.

"Something like that," I taunt, never breaking our eye contact.

She wants people to see her as cold.

But she can't hide the warmth in her chestnut-colored eyes. They can't lie. Despite the air of detachment, that cool indifference to remind others of the distance she puts between her and the world, there are remnants of a softer creature below the surface, only hiding.

That invisible fortress she'd erected around herself protects her from everyone. Including herself, I imagine.

"Did you hunt me down for a thank-you?" she bites out, her eyes slitting into a glare. "Or need an apology for bailing at Vervain? Let me know so I can get it over with, and we can go back to never knowing the other existed."

I think a part of me might be sadistic for enjoying this. Knowing how unbothered I am by her snark, the stubbornness that makes her mean. I'm not Coraline's enemy, but I'm a threat.

She knows this attitude isn't working on me, and it's bugging the fuck out of her.

It's cute.

"Why do I make you so uncomfortable, Coraline?"

Her head jerks, eyebrows furrowed like I've hit her.

"You don't," she says firmly, chin held high.

"You're tight," I mutter.

The corner of my lips twitches, just a little, a smirk I'm unable to prevent spreading across my mouth as her eyebrows shoot to her hairline. An undeniable pink flush tints her tan cheeks.

I may not be good with people, but I'm fucking incredible with puzzles. I'm not her enemy. I'm a threat.

Coraline is attracted to me, and that bothers her. Bothers her so much, I might get the worst of her venom if I push a little too hard.

"Excuse me?" Coraline scoffs, offended or at least trying to be.

“Your posture is stiff, arms are crossed—you’re about to leave nail punctures in your skin if you keep squeezing.” I tilt my head some, catching her releasing the grip of her arms. “Your body is telling me you’re uncomfortable. I asked why.”

A server walks by carrying a tray of bubbling champagne, and she swipes a glass, holding it gingerly between her fingers as she drops her gaze, eyes hooded. “I just want to know what it is you want me from me. I’d rather just get it over with. No need for all the foreplay.”

I roll my tongue across the front of my teeth, sucking my teeth. As I nod, giving her silent praise for the volley of sexual innuendo, she stands straight, smug, as if she just moved her pawn toward my back rank, trying to get it promoted to a queen so she can deliver a checkmate.

“What could I want from you?”

“Well.” She sighs, lifting the glass of champagne to her lips and taking a sip. “I owe you two favors now.”

I’m about to tell her that they weren’t favors. Answering the phone and calming her down in the hallway isn’t something I need repayment for. I didn’t do them with the hopes of her giving something in return, but we are interrupted.

“Silas!” My name is a shout, heavy footsteps approaching as I look at Daniel Highland, the firm’s chief marketing officer. “You didn’t tell me you’d be here tonight.”

I grab his outstretched hand, tightening my grip as I shake it.

Daniel is what I call a worm.

Worms are self-replicating malware that spread across networks without a user interacting. Daniel is a worm. He corrupts those who work beneath him, turning them all into mini pompous versions of himself.

When the board votes me in, my first act as CEO is firing him.

He’s harmless physically, but he’s toxic for the workplace. Especially considering he isn’t fond of me taking over or me in general. I don’t have the time or energy to babysit bruised egos at work.

“Running things by you isn’t a part of my job description.” My tone is much dimmer toward him versus the lighter version I’d just had with Coraline.

His grin is slimy, porcelain teeth that look too fake and too big for his tiny mouth.

“Right, right. You’re the boss. Well, almost.” He chuckles, shaking his head a bit. “I ran into your father just before leaving the office. I didn’t even know you were dating someone. No one in the office seemed to know.”

My jaw twitches, tightening, fingers flexing in my pocket. The gun sitting on my hip, concealed by my suit jacket, is practically singing Daniel’s name, a pretty little bullet just waiting in the chamber.

It was that big-ass mouth of his that told most of the firm about my father’s cancer diagnosis before he even got the chance. Daniel assured us that he was just trying to relieve some stress from my old man’s shoulders, but I saw through him like glass.

He’s the kinda guy who enjoys stripping another man of his pride just to feel like a *big man*.

“I like to keep my private life private.”

“Of course.” He nods, rolling his lips together. “It’s just, with your mental health issues, I don’t know how someone like you will be able to handle a serious relationship. It’ll be a lot on the ol’ brain once you take over fully, won’t it?”

Even if I had schizophrenia, where the fuck does he get off?

Daniel wouldn’t know mental health if it hit him in the face with a rock. Even though I’m sure he’ll commit suicide by fifty from some form of late-term depression.

He has no idea what anyone with that disorder is capable of. What they can and cannot do. To him, it’s simply a villain origin story in thriller movies. In his eyes, I’m a violent, uncontrollable manic. Which could not be further from the truth for those who live with schizophrenia.

But it’s easier for society to demonize mental health than take the time to actually learn about it.

“Who is the lucky girl, by the way? Anyone from the Springs? I’ve lived here all of my forty-five years. I doubt I wouldn’t know her.”

I knew he’d ask. Why wouldn’t he? He knows I’m lying. At the very least, he’s hoping I am. Anything to get another shot at my job.

I just don’t have an answer or even a lie ready.

“Coraline Whittaker.”

My head snaps to my right, just as her smooth hand loops through my arm, holding my forearm, and she leans into my body. The smell of lavender wafts beneath my nose.

She looks up at me, batting her dark eyelashes as if telling me to play along. Is this her way of repaying the favor? Trying to help? Coraline has no clue what she just signed herself up for. What her doing this means to Daniel, to my future.

Could the cursed woman of Ponderosa Springs be my saving grace?

“Lucky girl.” She hums with a smile that doesn’t quite touch her eyes as she returns her gaze to Daniel. “You work with Silas?”

Little needles prick the back of my neck at how she says my name, reminding me how she said it the other night. A feeling I believed long gone pools in my gut.

Desire.

Desire to hear her say my name again.

Gasp it. Moan it. Scream it.

My teeth sink into the inside of my cheek as Daniel’s eyes widen slightly, just now taking in her presence, shocked that she even exists, I’m sure.

“Indeed.” He clears his throat, shaking off the surprise but still eyeing her in a way that makes me uncomfortable. “I just saw your mother, Regina, before she left. She didn’t mention anything about you having a boyfriend.”

Her sharp nails burrow into the fabric of my jacket as she puts on a charming smile, straightening her spine.

“Stepmother,” she corrects. “Some people aren’t keen on discussing other’s private affairs. But it seems you are? A bit gossipy, isn’t it?”

Daniel’s smug smile seems to melt away, his eye twitching and masculinity deflating at the way Coraline looks down her nose at him, even though she is several inches shorter, even in heels.

This world taught her how to wear her wealth, then punished her for it. But it doesn’t take away how she owns it, like a shield.

“Huh,” he hums, furrowing his eyebrows. “Regina has always seemed like the kind of woman that is quick to share exciting news. Her step daughter getting engaged seems pretty exciting to me.”

There it is.

This is going to go over like shit.

My little white lie about having a girlfriend had spiraled into me telling my father I’d already been planning to propose. I’d panicked—he was grilling me, demanding to meet an imaginary girl.

I told him what he needed to hear so he didn't need to worry. I'd be able to figure it out, and he could continue to focus on the slim possibility of getting better.

I took over Hawthorne Tech to relieve stress, not give him more. I will not fail him, not after everything he's done for me. I can't.

So if that means lying? I will.

There is nothing I won't do for the people I love.

"Quick engagement, I'm assuming? Great timing for you though, Hawthorne. Right before the board decided not to declare you CEO because of your marital status."

The idea of shooting this guy in the face has reached an all-time high. But he's the least of my worries.

I have a woman on my arm playing the part of fake fiancée she didn't sign up for, digging her nails into my arm, ready to bolt to the nearest exit. Panic makes her fingers shake, and I know she's starting to feel the walls of this room close around her.

Carefully, not wanting to scare her more, I slip my arm from hers and curl it around her waist instead so that I can tuck her safely into my side. It's easy, like I've done it a million times before.

My large hand splays across her entire hip, the warmth of her body spreading along my side. She gasps a little, a quiet noise in the back of her throat. I take my time, maybe because this might be the only time I'm allowed to get this close without being bit.

She turns her head to look up at me, deep brown eyes shimmering from the lights. There is a softness that exists in her when her guard is down, and it's just as breathtaking as her rough edges.

Gently, I tuck a piece of hair just behind her ear before stroking a knuckle down her cheek. Hands that have done vicious things should not be allowed to touch things so delicate.

"When you know, you know," I say calmly, the lie slipping from my tongue like water.

She's hyperfocused on my face, and I refuse to break eye contact, even when Daniel makes another dull comment.

"No ring yet?"

I shake my head, picking up a strand of her white hair, rubbing it between my fingers, still looking at her as I reply.

"We're waiting to pick one out together."

My eyes tell her to keep looking at me, not to look away. Just keep looking at me. Daniel doesn't exist, and she's okay.

There is this need in me to tell her that she's safe with me. That for some reason, I know I'll let nothing bad touch her. Not when I'm around. It's probably because of her trauma, that connection between us.

"Well." Daniel clears his throat. "Caroline, it was a pleasure to meet you. I'm sure I'll see you at the company fundraiser?"

"Coraline." I snap my head, glaring, saying her name as more of a growl. "We'll be there."

As my wrecking ball of a colleague leaves, I feel her pulling away from me, slipping through my grasp, and just as I expected, she moves toward the exit. Fleeing just like she did at Vervain.

Running from me, unaware that the chase is one of my favorite parts.

I follow behind her, walking slower so by the time I'm outside of her studio, she's got a cigarette between her red-stained lips, digging around for what I assume is a lighter.

Reaching inside my jacket pocket, I pull out a pack of matches. I hold them between my fingers, offering them as a way of trying to make peace before the war truly begins.

She takes them from me, striking one up and lighting her smoke. Her back rests against the brick wall outside, head tilted toward the sky as she inhales a lungful of smoke before releasing it into the night.

"Did you do that on purpose?" she asks, taking another hit. "Set me up so you could cash in for one of your fucking favors?"

The harshness from earlier has returned tenfold.

I feel my jaw tighten, angry for no reason, angry that she thought I'd use her. But she doesn't know me. What else is she supposed to expect?

"What makes you think I don't already have a fiancée?"

Coraline rolls her head to look at me, holding the cigarette between two fingers. The air seems to tighten, charged with undeniable tension. The weight of her anger bears down on me, the elegant slopes and curves her face illuminated by streetlamps, the skin of her leg exposed to the night air.

"If my soon-to-be husband held me the way you did at Vervain, I'd kill him. This place tells stories. Stories of the evil you've done and the wicked traits you carry, Silas Hawthorne." Her words catch the night wind, drifting like the tendrils of smoke. "Disloyal isn't one of them."

There is an urge to be transparent with her, to let her know I'm not what they say I am. An urge to speak and be honest, because I think...

I think Coraline knows what it's like to have the world make assumptions about who you are before you have the time to figure it out yourself.

Ponderosa Springs loves a story. The scarier, the better. They told her she was a victim, that she would always be a victim. A cursed woman that had a habit of finding herself in toxic relationships, as if she consented to being kidnapped. They told me I had schizophrenia, that I had to be in order to cover up a crime I'd once seen as a child. A man whose silence spoke to his mental illness and not his fear of never being believed.

We stand here as two people given narratives we didn't want, trying to make some truth out of the words someone else wrote.

"My father has cancer," I tell her honestly, because for the first time in a long time? I feel like I can. "I have to be married to take over a company with my last name. If I don't, then we lose it."

Coraline nods, flicking the ashes onto the ground.

"So it's money related," she hums, making assumptions she shouldn't.

"It's family related."

A scoff echoes from her lips, just before she takes another puff, talking around the smoke.

"What's it like to have the last decent family in this piece-of-shit town?"

"I know you had no clue what you just walked into, Coraline. But this arrangement could benefit the both of us. With Stephen breaking out, I could help—"

"I do not need you to protect me from him." She pushes off the wall, a fire burning in her at the mention of his name. "I don't need anyone to protect me from him."

"It's not protection I can offer you, Hex."

The nickname slips out before I can catch it.

"Yeah? Like what? Money?" She shakes her head, a grim smile on her lips. "I have enough with my last name, thanks, hotshot."

I run my palm down the front of my mouth. Goddamn, she's fucking stubborn. So sure of herself before I correct her.

"Revenge," I say swiftly. "I can offer you a chance of revenge."

And protection, but I won't tell her that part. She needs to feel like she's the one in control. I don't mind giving it to her, for now.

She keeps her mouth shut for a few minutes, like she's debating her next words, weighing her options before she flicks the cigarette onto the street. I watch her reach into her purse, picking up a tube of lipstick and a compact mirror.

Coraline takes her time, tracing the lines of her mouth. The gentle curve of her lips seems to invite the touch of the applicator. There's an intimacy in simply observing.

Carefully, she rubs her lips together before running her pinky along the corner of her mouth to swipe off the excess.

"I don't need it."

The tiny mirror clicks in her palm as she shuts it, making me blink from the trace of her lips.

"Needing revenge means I still give a fuck. I'm out of fucks to give about Stephen Sinclair."

I stand on the sidewalk perfectly still as her heels click with every step she takes toward me. I don't think I could move if I wanted to, not with the way the shadows bounce off her skin and the determined look in her eye.

There is something about this woman. Something I can't comprehend but want to grab with both hands and squeeze until her body burns with the red marks my hands leave.

"I'm sorry about your father, Silas."

Her small palms run along the edges of my jacket, dusting off nonexistent lint from my shoulders. The movement is fake, but her eyes shine with sincerity.

"But no." She gives me a toothless smile, quick, delicate. Denying me with grace.

"You don't want to be attached to someone like me. This is me returning another favor. If you believe anything this town tells you? Believe that I'm cursed."

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

TEN

LATE NIGHT

CORALINE

MY HANDS SHAKE as I press the power button on the side of my phone, watching the screen turn pitch-black. The unanswered text messages disappear as I calmly drop the iPhone into the trash next to me, listening to it thud as it hits the bottom of the metal can.

Both hands grab the sink, head dropped between my shoulders as I breathe.

Did you miss me?

Have you forgotten what my love feels like?

You wore my favorite color today.

Do you remember what happens when you ignore me, Circe girl?

Even locked inside this restaurant bathroom with four corners I can see, I still want to check over my shoulder.

I shake my head, gritting my teeth as I feel a tear drop from my eye.

The nights are long.

I can't remember the last time I had a full night's sleep, but now, the hours trickle by so slowly. My eyes won't shut, and I spend the time sitting in my living room, staring at the front door with a small handgun in my lap, waiting.

The texts were never a prank. Not a joke.

It was him.

I've been waiting for this moment since I left the basement. Nothing feels any different, maybe except the fact I don't feel insane anymore, knowing that twist in my gut was right. I knew he'd come back for me.

Stephen Sinclair being free changes nothing for me.

Behind bars, he held me prisoner, and he'll do the same now.

I'm ready for him, and when he shows up, because I know he will, I'll put a bullet in his skull.

I told Silas the truth two nights ago. I don't want revenge. I don't want to kill him as payback. There is no urge in me to starve him for months, feed him only raw meat for a week as punishment for not saying the right things. I don't need to break his right ankle or dislocate one of his shoulders to feel vindicated.

I want him dead.

No longer existing on this rotten planet. Out of my life. Out of my fucking head.

I'm not afraid of him. I'm tired of the games.

I release a breath, looking at myself in the bathroom mirror. Quickly, I touch up the concealer beneath my eyes, covering the purple bags there. Giving my body a little shake, I practice a smile a few times.

When I'm satisfied that it looks believable, I head outside, greeted by the smell of frying oil. The bustle of conversation gets louder the closer I get to the main dining room.

Tillie's Diner is a hub in Ponderosa Springs, one of the only establishments that hasn't gotten an upgrade since the seventies and looks like it would fit better in a small hick town than here.

It's young high school kids and college students who frequent, but what do they expect? They are the only place open twenty-four hours. Where else are the stoners and insomniacs going to get food?

Tonight, Lilac and I are neither.

I return to our corner booth next to the large window. The darkness of pine trees stretches for miles just beyond the neon-illuminated gravel parking lot.

Lilac is grinning as she takes another bite of her chili cheeseburger, the remnants of her food dripping down her forearms, and it makes a genuine smile tug at my lips as I pick up a french fry.

"I can't believe you're a vegetarian," she grumbles around a mouthful of cardiac arrest. "Feels illegal."

"You're going to throw that up everywhere in five hours," I say.

She has training at eight in the morning. If I was a parent, I might've told her to go back to sleep when she came into my living room wearing pajamas and sneakers, asking to go for food. However, I'm not her mother. I'm her sister.

Her slicked-back high ponytail bounces as she shakes her head, taking another bite to prove her point. Lilac is an incredible tennis player. The best Ponderosa High has seen probably ever, and it's not because it's a natural gift.

She's disciplined beyond measure, focused and determined to be the best.

It's a trait we got from our father. However, she's able to balance her desire for success and love of life much better than myself or our paternal parent.

On the occasions that she's craving burgers, I oblige. Even though it's three in the morning and I hate Tillie's. She deserves brief moments of happiness like these.

"Your backhand looked good yesterday."

"Thanks." She grins, swallowing her food. "Coach says if I keep up this pace, I'll make nationals again."

School just ended, but her training didn't. April is the start of her off-season, and she has all summer to work before games start back up. The routine she follows during the off-season is strict, but she likes it.

I make sure I'm there to pick her up, get her fed. Sometimes I take her back to the glass mansion where her parents live, but most of the time, she's with me, living comfortably in my spare bedroom.

Regina and James only want her home when there is company over, anyway.

"Of course you will. You're the best tennis player I know."

She rolls her eyes, sitting down her burger and wiping her hands so she can pick up her phone, slammed with a million notifications. What is it about being a teenager and having so many people to talk to?

Do you grow up and just crave quiet?

Or do we grow apart from people out of survival?

"I'm the only tennis player you know, Cora."

Lilac grins at her screen, biting at her bottom lip before her fingers fly across the keys. Determined to text back as quickly as possible, it seems. There is only one reason you look at a phone like that, and it's not cat memes.

"Who's the boy?" I question, lifting an eyebrow playfully.

A sly smile spreads across her lips. "Girl."

I pick up another fry, dipping it into a glass of vanilla milkshake in front of me.

“Oh? I thought you swore off girls after what happened with Brit?”

She waves me off. “That was three months ago. I’m over it. We weren’t exclusive, anyway.”

I laugh at how very *her* that answer is.

Since Lilac could talk, she was her own little person, unbothered by the limits and rules the world gave her. When I try to remember things before being kidnapped, the only things I have in my mind are of her.

She took her first steps at ten months because she refused to crawl. I’d just turned six, and she’d taken five steps forward before tumbling into my lanky arms. We both ended up on the floor.

I helped her pull out her first tooth when she was five. I’d seen the string and doorknob trick on the internet. When I tried slamming the door to yank it out, she screamed, demanding to do it herself. Regina was pissed about the blood on her floor. We giggled about it under the covers that night.

Until I was eighteen, I did her hair for every occasion. Covered her knees with Band-Aids when she thought she wanted to be a professional skateboarder. Taught her how to put on makeup and navigate the art of periods. I held her hand through every nightmare, chased away the monster under her bed, and spent hours letting her hit tennis balls at me like a human target.

A reporter once asked me in a cafe what I missed most those two years I was gone.

I threw my iced coffee in his face, and later, when I cooled down, I thought of my answer.

It was Lilac.

I missed two years of her life, and every moment away killed me.

For months in that basement, I sobbed. Terrified that she would think I left her willingly. That I had abandoned her without a goodbye. It had been only her I wanted see when I got to the hospital.

I’d missed two years and swore I’d never miss another second.

“Are you going to tell me about her, or do I have to pry?”

She is silent for only a moment before she explodes with information. It’s never hard getting her to talk about herself—her zodiac sign is a Leo, and she never lets me forget it.

“She is so pretty, Cora. Oh! And she plays soccer. Our conversations go on for hours, and they are so much more meaningful than any of the ones I’ve had with people from Ponderosa Springs. She’s just...deep. We text about things that matter,” she gushes, and I just smile, listening to her talk.

“Does she have a name?”

“Reece.” Her face turns pink when she says it.

I let her blab about her crush, listening to her read conversations between the two of them and give my nod of approval when she shows me selfies of the girl.

I listen, let her be a teenager, and bask in her ability to feel these things. To be hopeful, to know she has her entire life ahead of her, and whatever she does with it, I’ll be there to support her.

“Is Reece practicing safe sex?”

“Oh my fucking God.” A mixture of a groan and a squeak echoes from our booth as she slaps her hands in front of her eyes. “We haven’t even hung out yet we met on our school district chat. Sex hasn’t come up, Cora!”

“I’m not shaming you. I’m just asking. They don’t teach safe sex for pansexuals in high school. You can still get herpes from—”

“Do not finish that. I will hurl this burger all over you.”

I roll my eyes. “So dramatic.”

The bell rings, the glass front door swinging open. Another late-night patron makes their way inside, but when I look because of my human nature, I silently curse the universe.

The group captures attention like a cloud of darkness. A hushed pause blankets the diner. Even the sound of clicking metal from the cooks in the back halt.

It’s the Hollow Boys effect.

A joke my group of friends used to make when they walked into a room. When you bear the weight of their last names and reputations, there is no flying under the radar.

Whether it’s respect or fear, people stop, stare, and lower their voices when they arrive, no matter where they go or appear. Their eyes scan the diner’s retro interior, gazes finally settling on an empty booth not far from ours.

Time spent away from Ponderosa Springs has not lessened their influence. It’s grown over the years. They are everything the prestigious pricks in Ponderosa Springs are terrified of.

As teenagers, they were anarchy, a vicious wildfire that needed to be snuffed out but couldn't be contained in time. Now that they are adults with total access to the money and power their legacy offers, there is no hope of deliverance.

They'll use their power to retaliate against the system that turned them into monsters the second they are tempted.

It's the rich devouring the rich.

Everyone knows the truth though.

The Hollow Boys have always have sharper teeth.

"You think they braid each other's hair?" Lilac whispers across the table, glancing over her shoulder at them for a split second before turning back around. Bold enough to make a joke, not quite enough ballsy to let them hear it though.

I snort a laugh in the back of my throat as they walk down the aisle.

Alistair Caldwell leads the line, as always; he knows nothing but first. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Dark fucking heart. If he ever had a problem, he was notorious for solving it with his fists. It was odd for someone who hated this town as much as he did to own so much of it.

In step behind him, fucking with his leather jacket until Alistair shrugs him off, Rook Van Doren. He radiates rebellion with a single match resting between his teeth, paired with a boyish grin. The whites of his eyes are stained red from weed. I'm sure his munchies are the reason they're here this late. I wonder when he'll quit, before or after he follows the men of his family by becoming a judge.

"As if Thatcher Pierson would let anyone touch him," I say making her giggle into her milkshake.

Thatcher doesn't walk; he glides, floating on his massive ego. His history is everyone's favorite scary story, being not only a founding family legacy but the son of Ponderosa Springs' one and only serial killer. He wears fear on his pale complexion almost as well his freshly pressed suit.

Lilac's laugh grabs the attention of the last member of their group. As if I needed another encounter with Silas Hawthorne. The quiet mystery that clings to his person like a shadow casts across our table as he slides into the booth beside Rook.

I'm human, with eyes, and I don't fault myself for checking him out.

He looks too big to even fit in the booth, biceps flexing as he slings an arm across the back of the booth. Muscles threaten to tear the threads of his

fitted gray graphic tee to pieces.

Tattoos from the tips of his long fingers to his throat adorn his light brown skin. Several designs that, as an artist, I'm too far away to really appreciate. His hair, which is normally shaved close to his skull, is covered with a black beanie.

Quiet, calm, steadfast, with this unshakeable confidence. His presence is a demand without words, an order with no voice. He's an unstoppable force, unchanged since high school.

I knew Silas before any of this—the call, Vervain, the art gala. Everyone did. What he looked like, his reputation, the story Ponderosa Springs built for him. The oldest son of the Hawthorne family with the stony gaze, intimidating demeanor, and diagnosed schizophrenic.

My eyes trace his face.

Artists who paint faces or sculpt bodies are always looking for the perfect balance of symmetry. Portions of excellence, without flaw. Silas, without knowing, is probably the world's greatest reference for this exact dilemma.

It's striking how balanced it all is. Sharp, well-defined cheekbones, creating subtle shadows that play across his face, accentuating his strong jawline that is currently taut. A rugged, hardened beauty that makes it impossible not to notice him in a room.

"The Schizo" people called him was both unfair and unoriginal. But if this town needs anything, it's labels. I think even back then, I related to being given a name that never fit my narrative.

We'd spent years in the same schools, our entire childhood basically, and I can count on one hand the number of times I'd passed him in the halls or ran into him. We ran in different circles, and even at a young age, once you find a group of people? You stick there, never daring to break out of it.

The universe is making up for lost time, it would seem, throwing us back into each other's space once again.

"Ohh..." Lilac hums, a knowing grin on her face. "Which one are you eye fucking?"

I snap my gaze to her, furrowing my eyebrows. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You haven't stopped staring at the booth since they sat down, so spill. Which one are you into?"

I have to physically keep my eyes on hers so that they don't stray back to Silas. Biting the inside of my cheek, I shake my head.

"Finish your food so we can get home. You have to be up in four hours."

Lilac huffs but listens, quietly devouring her cheeseburger with one hand while absent-mindedly scrolling through her phone with the other. I try to ignore the tension from my booth to his.

Which is proving difficult, considering our last conversation revolved around me being his fake wife after trying to do him a simple favor of playing girlfriend. That's what I get for trying to be nice. I get screwed and end up getting in much deeper than I planned.

I felt like shit leaving him to deal with the aftermath of that. Hopefully he can come up with a lie about me cheating or leaving him, something believable. I don't care what he says about me, just as long as I'm not tethered to him romantically. Even if it's fake.

I'm the last thing he needs to add to his plate.

I glance toward him for a quick second, wondering what's going through his mind. How he's able to handle everything. I mean, his father is dying, and he's out with his friends, the picture of unbothered.

Stop, I tell myself abruptly. *Do not get involved. Do not think about what Silas is thinking about or how he is. Stay far away.*

I'm sure he'll be able to find someone nice. Pretty, more suited for what he's looking for. It won't be hard—he's handsome and has more money than God. That's best for the both of us. Better for him, if I'm honest. Men can't get close to me and make it out.

Dead men tell no tales.

Lilac lets out a loud burp, rubbing her hands together. "Ready to go?"

I nod, grabbing my purse and pulling it up on my shoulder as I slide out of the booth and keep my head forward. I refuse to look in their direction as I walk toward the cashier at the front.

When I reach into my wallet to grab my card, the waitress appears behind the counter.

"Your meal was taken care of." She grins, like this is a good thing. A nice thing.

"That's so nice—"

"By who?" I interrupt my sister, hand tightening around the cash in my hand.

Not expecting my reaction, the server's eyebrows pull together in confusion as she silently points toward where Silas sits with his friends, unaware of our conversation.

Irritation heats my veins.

I pull out a twenty-dollar bill and hand it to her for a tip before turning on the heel of my foot.

"Cora, where are you going?"

My sweatpants slip low on my hips as I stalk toward their booth, not bothering to fix them when I make it to the edge of the table. My teeth feel like they are going to break if I grind them together any harder.

Four sets of eyes land on me.

Thud.

My palm slams onto the red surface, money sitting beneath it. I ignore the rest of them, meeting a pair of brown eyes that are much darker than my own, hiding secrets and unknown intentions.

"Since this wasn't clear enough the other night, let me be frank," I mutter, hair falling over my shoulder as I push the money toward him.

I reach into my bag, pulling out several more twenties and letting them fall to the table.

"I can't be bought, and this makes us even," I say. "Dinner's on me tonight, boys."

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

ELEVEN

DADDY'S MONEY

SILAS

MY EARS RING as another bullet pierces the target in front of me.

It's not the power of the weapon that lured me in or the damage of the bullet that keeps me married to it.

It's the smell.

A plume of smoke spirals up from the barrel, carrying a scent of controlled chaos. It's a sharp tang, burnt chemicals mingling with the metallic undertone of heated gunpowder. As it fades, it leaves behind a fleeting trace of burnt carbon, an earthiness, the raw power of the weapon.

The scent is proof of all the beauty found in violence.

My phone vibrates on the wooden table in front of me. A text from Rook illuminates the screen, letting me know he's here. I clear the empty rounds from in front of me and slam another mag into the 9mm black Canik, then slip it beneath the waistband of my jeans at my hip.

I start to clear the table, dismantling the sniper rifles I'd shot earlier in the day, sliding everything into the black duffle bag. I hold the fifty-caliber Desert Eagle in my hands for a moment. A gift from Rosemary years ago that I only use for target practice anymore. It's impractical for day-to-day use.

The two sentences engraved on the sides of the metal are what I've kept with me. Every gun I own, even the one at my hip, read the same thing.

Non timebo mala on the left.

Vallis tua umbra on the right.

The same words are tattooed along the outside of my left and right hand from wrist to knuckle. Rosie had started the tradition by engraving it on the present, knowing how much the words meant, and I'd continued it.

I place the gun inside the bag, zipping it up and throwing it over my shoulder, evading the burning sun beyond the pines.

When I make it through the back door of my parents' home, I know I won't be able to leave quickly because Rook's voice is echoing from the kitchen. Great, fucking fantastic. It'll be an hour before we're out of the door.

"It'll take two minutes. Just let me give you a trim."

When I enter, my mother is tugging at the strands of Rook's hair, standing on her tippy-toes, inspecting the length down to his scalp like he's a child and she's checking for head lice.

"I'm growing it out, Ma," he mutters, grinning, seconds from probably telling her yes. He's always had a problem telling her no.

"This was much easier when you were little and couldn't say no."

"Is that before or after you gave him a bowl cut?" My voice announces my presence as I watch them from the entryway.

"It was not a bowl cut! It was cute." She swats her hand in my direction, waving me off and letting Rook go from her motherly inspection. "What trouble are you two getting into tonight?"

Rook smirks, rubbing his hands together, and I answer before he has a chance to shove his foot into his mouth and give my mom a heart attack.

"Poker." I clear my throat. "With some friends."

Her warm, hazel eyes crinkle gently at the corners, and she shakes her head a little. I don't know if she suspects I'm lying or not. She'd probably tell people she knows when I am, but I've been lying to her most of my life, and she's never noticed, or maybe that's because she didn't have a reason to.

Zoe Hawthorne glows with a soft touch of time and experience, fading into her later years with grace. Empathy pours from every smile. Everything about her is motherly, and I've been lucky to have her.

All the guys are, especially Rook.

He's her favorite by far.

The kitchen light shines on her brown hair, gentle streaks of silver at her roots that she refuses to dye. She likes the gray, says it makes her look regal.

"While you're out, Rook, maybe you can convince my son to bring his *fiancée* around sometime. Apparently, we aren't good enough to have an

introduction.” Her voice is playful, letting me know she’s joking, but deep down, I know this entire situation has upset her.

“Soon, Mom. I promise.”

As soon as I choose a wife.

This week’s family dinner was spent grilling me. Wedding plans, who my soon-to-be wife was, why I hadn’t told them about it. Thankfully, by some act of God, Daniel hadn’t mentioned it to my father at work just yet, but it’s only a matter of time before this blows up in my face.

My plan as of now is simple.

I’m going to tell them the truth about Coraline. She’d been in the wrong place, at the wrong time, unaware of my upcoming nuptials, and tried to be a good friend by helping scare away a nosey colleague.

Which, if it goes well, should buy me just enough time to go through a list of eligible, decent women willing to be in an arranged marriage for at least two years. On paper, that sounds impossible. In Ponderosa Springs?

It’ll be easy.

Most of the daughters and sisters who remain here, what, to get ahead? Want to be the best, and the way you do that around here? Money. I just so happen to have a lot of it.

However, there is one woman in particular, one that seems to hate the idea of being tied to my money. Which is funny, considering she’s the only one I want.

Out of pure convenience. She understands what’s at stake, knows about Stephen. We have a mutual enemy, and that would make us great partners.

“Well, be safe tonight. Dad’s going to be upset he missed you, but I don’t want to wake him.” She pulls Rook into a tight hug that he returns, kissing him on the cheek softly. “Thank you for my flowers, sweet boy. Take care of my baby.”

“Always, Ma,” Rook mutters, letting her squeeze a little tighter than normal before pulling away.

When she walks toward me to give me the same love, I look down at her.

“I’m an adult, you know?”

“And? You’ll always be my baby. Give me a hug before you leave.”

I swoop down, curling my arms around her waist, bending so that she can wrap her arms around my neck. She’s always smelled like vanilla since I was a kid. Now, no matter where I am, vanilla reminds me of home.

“Next time you walk into this house, you better have that girl on your arm, or I’m going to take it personally.”

I press my lips to the side of her head. “Yes, ma’am.”

I hate this. I’ve always hated this.

The feeling in my stomach that leads to silence. How shitty I feel on the inside, knowing I’m lying to my family. Knowing it’s all I fucking do.

My mental health, this engagement, Stephen.

I don’t think any of them actually know me.

Not really, not the real me.

Coming clean sounds easy, but not when everyone has known you to be a specific thing since you were young. Not when telling the truth would make them worry.

With our goodbyes said, Rook and I clear the distance between the kitchen and the front door. The moment our feet hit my front porch, I hear the flicking of a lighter, followed by the smell of cigarette smoke.

“Scale of one to ten. What’s the likelihood of Easton trying to kill me tonight?”

“An eleven.”

Rook had decided for the group that knocking wasn’t needed. So the three of us follow him through the surprisingly empty halls of Sinclair Manor. We sometimes stumble upon luck in our debauchery.

It’s rumored that every Thursday night, Easton Sinclair gathers with his friends for poker, following close behind in his father’s footsteps by becoming the head of his family’s home.

How they were able to afford the same lifestyle after Stephen went to prison is something I want to know. You don’t have your assets seized and then continue to live in luxury.

The gun on my hip presses into my side, anger that isn’t mine making my fists tighten. It wouldn’t surprise me if Easton had known about the girl held hostage in his childhood home. The entire time, he let her rot beneath his wealth out of fear of his father’s power.

He’d been a coward our entire fucking lives; it wouldn’t have surprised me.

“How do you know where you’re going?” Alistair asks from over my shoulder while I keep an eye out for housekeepers or Lena Sinclair, who still wears her wedding ring and lives on the grounds.

“I’ve been here before,” Rook says loudly, uncaring if anyone hears him. I think he wants to be caught, just to add a little more chaos to our plan. “Fucked Sage inside the pool hall once. Something like that is hard to forget.”

Thatcher scoffs from the back, holding his tongue from saying something snarky, I’m sure.

The hatred that has ebbed and flowed between us and the only son of Stephen Sinclair goes far beyond Rook stealing his girlfriend years ago.

No, our last names have clashed since before our births.

Our rivalry is built into the foundation of Ponderosa Springs. Hatred-filled blood scattered beneath the soil. The Halo was once started as revenge, the binding together of Sinclair men who kidnapped, beat, raped the daughters and sisters of Ponderosa Springs’ founding families.

Caldwell.

Van Doren.

Pierson.

Hawthorne.

The women of our legacy were a stepping-stone to what became the larger vile organization Stephen orchestrated. Where he kidnapped young, innocent girls and made a profit by selling them to God knows who.

We were destined to hate one another, and while I’d like to think I’m above legacy feuds, it’s hard not to continue it when Easton Sinclair is a fucking cunt and has been since I’ve known him.

As we reach the end of the hallway, Rook takes a left, stopping in front of a set of heavy mahogany double doors. Music leaks from behind them, and instead of taking a second to rehash our plan, he presses two tattooed hands on them and shoves.

Full stop, no caution at all times.

His hand is forever on the throttle, and it’ll die there.

“Fucking impatient,” Alistair grumbles as he pushes them open.

“Long time no see, Sinclair,” Rook shouts, holding his arms out wide to the filled room. “Got space to deal us in?”

The four of us filter into the poker room clouded with the fog of cigars. Beyond the veil of smoke, four of Easton’s friends are slumped in their

chairs, barely paying attention to their hands, strung out on either drugs or alcohol or consumed with the women that are floating around the room.

Easton doesn't look much better. Probably the worst I've ever seen him in the years I've known him.

His face is buried in the neck of some girl in a skimpy red dress, her body, facing away from us, perched on top of the green felt table, poker chips scattered across it. The strings of her dress hang loose on her arms as he glares over her shoulder in our direction.

"Get the fuck out of my house," he demands, swatting his company on the hip, prompting her to slide from the table and toward another group of women.

The left side of his face has healed decently. Thanks to several plastic surgeries, those burn scars are white, running beneath his eye socket all the way to his chin. Striped skin, wearing a memory of Rook's hand pressing his face into the side of his motorcycle exhaust.

"Say please," Rook taunts, smirking.

Taunting him is his favorite game.

Easton's jaw is taut, twitching with anger at our intrusion, but that's the only thing familiar about him. He swings his hand, grabbing the neck of a vodka bottle. His blond hair is tousled, eyes red-rimmed, pale skin sickly.

It seems time hasn't been kind to him either.

"Suck my dick, Van Doren." He seethes, pressing the tip of the bottle to his lips and guzzling down a mouthful of liquid before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Get out, or the police can make you. Your choice."

"You're not my type, man." Rook shoves his hands deeper into his pockets, rocking back and forth on his heels. "I've got a real hard-on for redheads. Maybe try some hair dye and we can circle back to this?"

I don't need to see to know that he's wearing a shit-eating grin on his face, knowing Easton is plummeting to a pile of ashes while he gets the girl. He's deserving of everything he's living now for what he put her through.

Our last names may have given birth to our hatred. But Sage Donahue? She's the gasoline for these two.

Easton laughs maniacally, tossing his head back.

My eyebrows twitch together as I glance to Alistair, who is watching him quietly.

“Turning to booze after daddy goes to prison? What a cliché.” Rook mutters.

This sobers him up, the sound of glass shattering as he slams the bottle onto the table. His steps forward are more coordinated than I expected. He walks until he’s in Rook’s face. My friend just grins as the man who represents all of his girlfriend’s pain lifts a fist.

“Touch him.” The click of the safety on my gun rings in the air, the end of the barrel tapping Easton on his temple, “Make this easy for me.”

I watch him tense. Everyone is a tough guy until there is a gun involved.

Silence echoes in the room. Everyone has gone perfectly still.

“Clear the fucking room,” Alistair grunts toward the innocent bystanders still inside.

I listen to the shuffle of feet, hushed whispers as they scurry outside of the room, while I hold the gun to Easton’s skull, watching his glazed eyes as he keeps staring at Rook.

Obviously, Easton’s involvement in the Halo wasn’t enough to get him arrested with his father and the others involved, but we know he’s next in line to take over.

Which means whatever information he has, we want.

“You gonna sic your dogs on me? Should I expect Alistair to start beating whatever bullshit you want out of me?” Easton snarks, turning his head to look over at me.

My finger rubs the trigger. Just a little pressure and he’s dead.

“I’m too old for games with you,” Alistair answers, grabbing his shoulder and shoving him into an empty chair. “You’re going to make this easy. We ask a question, and you answer.”

I press the butt of the gun to his forehead, applying pressure for emphasis.

“Where is he?” Thatcher speaks for the first time since we got here.

“Be more specific,” He smirks. “He who?”

Alistair grabs a fistful of his hair, jerking his head back so he’s looking up at him, sickly, sweaty skin highlighted by the overhead lights.

“I said I’m too old, not that I won’t. Being a smart-ass is only gonna make it worse. Where is your father?”

Easton grins as he flicks his tongue across his dry bottom lip. “This is fucking priceless.”

I swing my arm toward the wall, pressing the trigger, feeling the slam of the hammer on the metal thrum through my arm as a bullet lodges itself into the wall. Splinters of wood filter through the air.

“It’s going to be bloody if you don’t talk.”

His jaw twitches, teeth grinding together as he moves his eyes to me.

“He hasn’t contacted me. I found out he was out from the news like everyone else. The last time we spoke? He was being arrested.”

“Bull-fucking-shit. His only son has heard nothing from him in two years? Try again, Easton.”

“I wanted out.” He shakes his head. “When I knew Sage wasn’t going to leave you, I told him I wanted out.”

“Watch your fucking mouth—”

“How much you hate me will never,” Easton interrupts Rook, jerking his head from Alistair’s grip, “*never* take away what she means to me, Van Doren. Get the fuck over it, or kill me.”

I don’t know all about what happened between the three of them. Not the trauma Sage experienced at the hands of Easton, a boy she’d known her entire life. What I do know? She was a pawn in a business she never wanted a part of. Their young relationship quickly became an exchange she didn’t consent to. A way for her father to pay off his debts, and she was the cash.

Despite all of that, one thing I know for certain? Easton Sinclair doesn’t love Sage.

Maybe in his mind with his skewed view of love, it’s real to him. Or maybe it’s the power he had over her and her life that he craves.

But he doesn’t love her. Not the way Rook does.

There is a stark difference between the two.

One would risk the girl for power. The other would give it all up for her.

Rook is my best friend, but if it meant killing me or saving Sage?

I’d be dead.

“You’re telling us you didn’t take the video we were sent?” I ask, trying to redirect the conversation back to the matter at hand. They’ll spend hours arguing, and it’ll lead nowhere.

He sighs, running his palm across his mouth. “Yeah, I took the video of you getting rid of Godfrey’s body. Followed you from town to Lyra’s cabin. I recorded it, but I don’t have it anymore. Once I sent it to Stephen, I deleted it.”

Alistair's fist slices through the air, landing a solid punch to Easton's jaw, making his head snap to the side. The impact of skin on skin echoes in the room, but it's only Easton's laugh that follows.

"You four are so fucking dense." He spits blood onto the ground, a chuckle vibrating his chest. "Heads shoved so far up each other's asses, you can't even begin to understand how much I want Stephen dead. Him being out doesn't just affect you, it fucks my life too."

"Save your daddy issues for a therapist," Rook says harshly, arms crossed in front of his chest. "We aren't on the same team here."

"I don't owe any of you an explanation for my involvement. Don't sit there and act like you know me."

"This is all very convenient for you," Thatcher presses, adjusting the lapels on his jacket. "You know nothing. You're in the dark. You are just an innocent bystander."

"I told you I don't know where he is."

"Where is the money coming from, then?"

Sweat pools around Easton's collar as he closes his mouth, rolling his lips together. The air around him has a tang to it, resentment and hostility, like a dog snarling before attacking, hackles raised.

"I'm smarter than you, Sinclair. It's not very hard to do the math. You and your mother haven't so much as blinked since he was arrested. On paper? You both should've lost everything. Yet—" Thatcher quirks an eyebrow, spreading his arms wide. "—here you are, living amongst the wealthy as if nothing has happened."

I shift the gun as he moves, leaning back into the chair and rubbing his swollen jaw before crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"Your dad is an asshole, but Wayne Caldwell takes care of his mistress." He flicks his eyes at Alistair, digging a familiar knife into his chest. "Paying for my mother's silence has a nice price tag."

The leveling of his words leaves us speechless. My grip tightens on the gun, my eyebrows creasing. I want to say I'm surprised, but Alistair's father has been sleeping around with Leah Sinclair for years.

There is weight in his words, a weight I wish didn't exist.

"Don't believe me?" He arches an eyebrow. "Statements are in my office. Code to the safe is 6598."

"My father can put his money and dick in whatever trash he wants," Alistair grunts. "I want insurance."

“Call fucking State Farm, Caldwell.”

I press the cold metal of the gun hard against his temple, and I feel him flinch. I lean in closer, my breath on his cheek, the smell of alcohol and days of sweat stuck to his skin.

“Proof, Sinclair. Proof you’re not helping your father.”

I watch his Adam’s apple contract; the fear of a bullet hangs heavy in the air, pressing against his skin like a physical weight that no amount of alcohol can free him from.

“If I help you.” His breath comes out shaky. “Then I want something out of it.”

I can feel the corner of my mouth begin to twitch, forming a rare expression: a smirk. I raise my eyebrows, sneering down at him with contempt.

“How about you give me your fucking IP address and I don’t splatter your fucking brains on the wall?”

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

TWELVE

SNOWDROPS

CORALINE

THE THUD of a paint can spilling across the floor echoes behind me.

Sticky, acrylic liquid stains the bottom of my feet as I scramble to find my keys, shoving my feet into the first pair of shoes I spot near my front door. There is a candle burning on the stove I don't bother blowing out.

Let it burn.

Ten minutes ago, I was home alone, heavy music playing over the speakers in my apartment, lost in what was going to be my new favorite painting.

Ten minutes ago, everything was fine.

My feet slap against the stairs to the parking garage, and I unlock my car before I even hit the landing. A man presses himself against the door leading to the garage, holding it open for me with a bewildered look on his face.

I'm a shock, I'm sure.

Someone in my state sprinting out of a historic apartment complex with higher rent than a mortgage payment: natural waves riddled with flyaways, tight black T-shirt with more holes than material, no bra, and jeans that fit so loosely I'm having to hold them up as I run.

This man, maybe my neighbor or someone who lives on the same floor, at least, is getting an eyeful of the waistband of my Calvin Klein underwear. I'm hoping this will distract him enough that he won't call the police for witnessing what he probably thinks is attempted burglary.

My chest surges, breaths coming out in quick puffs as I slide into the front seat of my car, forgoing the seat belt and sticking my new phone to the

mount stuck in the vents. Tears stick to my cheeks, slippery and wet. The hum of the engine coming to life makes my hands shake.

I quickly pull up Lilac's text thread, willing myself to ignore the most recent message so I can find her location, but my eyes can't help themselves. They drift to the little blue bubble, and the fear the words had elicited earlier hits me hard once again.

Lilac: Dragon fruit.

It's a stupid, silly fucking fruit, one that Lilac hates and threw up once when she was young. It's stupid, but it's our code word. I made her come up with one, and she thought it would be funny. This was supposed to be in case anything bad happened while we were apart to let me know she needed help, that she was in trouble.

She's reckless and wild, thinks the world's rules don't apply to her at times, but...she wouldn't use this as a joke. Lilac knows better, knows it's only to be used when her life is in danger. I taught her better.

Nasty, vile fucking emotions chew away at my insides.

Fear, guilt, shame.

I taught her how to defend herself. How to use the pepper spray on her key chain and the Taser beneath her seat. I taught her to get away from trouble, to run. All the things I'd wish someone had shown me, and fear is telling me it won't be enough.

I didn't do enough to protect her.

My teeth grind together, allowing the adrenaline coursing through my veins to numb everything else. My foot slams onto the gas, peeling out of the parking garage.

"Siri." I wait for her robotic reply before speaking again. "Call Lilac."

The voice repeats the command before the dreaded dial tone echoes inside the car.

Ring.

I fly through a blatant red light. The screaming of a horn comes from my left as I speed through traffic, escaping an accident by mere seconds, I'm sure.

Ring.

My tears blur the map on my phone screen, my knuckles turning white as they tighten on the wheel, jerking sharply to the right in order to avoid missing a turn.

Ring.

Her last location is twenty minutes away from me. Twenty minutes.

Ring.

It took less than five for me to go missing. One moment, I was walking home. The next, I was unconscious. Stolen. Drugged. Naked. I was gone for two years in less than five minutes. What could happen to her in twenty?

Ring.

“Hi, this is Lilac! I’m here, but I’m not answering the phone, obviously. If—”

“Fuck!” I shout, breaking off her prerecorded voicemail message. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!”

My hands slam into the steering wheel until the palms of my hands turn a violent shade of red. I’m stuck behind another car, the red light dangling above us taunting me.

I drop my head to the wheel, shaking my head as hot tears slide down my face. They are not tears of sorrow but anger, frustration tinged with panic. My body is so overwhelmed with emotion it has no choice but to leak.

It’s a morbid, awful thing I’m doing.

Hoping my sister was in a car accident or hurt herself while hiking. I’ve told her multiple times to always go with friends when she explores trails, but right now? I’m hoping she didn’t listen.

I will take her being stubborn over the alternative. I want to be a person who is optimistic, to believe in accidents. But deep in my gut, I know she’s in trouble, and he’s involved.

Stephen has always had little patience with me, especially when I refuse to speak to him.

The first few months in the basement, I refused to open my mouth. Not a word to him.

That was until he dislocated my shoulder.

For hours at a time, he would string me up. Heavy chains bolted into the concrete ceiling that locked around my wrist. I’d hang there, hovering just above the ground, my toes grazing the floor, teasing me, letting me know relief was just inches beneath me and all I had to do was talk.

He kept me there with a dislocated shoulder for two days until I learned to speak once spoken to.

This is what I get for ignoring his texts.

I thought he would come straight for me, but I was fucking stupid to think that. It's never that easy with him.

Stephen wants me broken. You see, he wants me to *need* him. He will destroy everything, starve and torture me until the only light I see is the one he gives.

There can be nothing else but him for me.

So even though I want to be optimistic, to be the girl who hopes for the best, I know he's done something to her because he knows Lilac is the only thing I care about.

Someone honks behind me, making me jump, and I press on the gas and roll through the traffic light. I try to follow the directions on the map, body shaking as I glance at my phone screen, watching the distance between us grow shorter and shorter.

Lilac won't make it, my mind tells me, and I know that to be undoubtedly true.

She will not survive Stephen.

There has always been a depravity in my bones, darkness in my soul. I'm the byproduct of an affair, born cursed, and killed my mother before she even knew me to prove that.

That wickedness, both gifted and stolen? It helped me endure Stephen Sinclair.

Lilac is not me. She is good, overflowing with light. She will not make it.

"Hey, Siri. Call..."

I'll need help, right?

Call who?

The local police? They will do nothing—half of them are probably still working with Stephen.

Our father? I'm not even sure if he'd answer the phone.

I have no one because I've made myself an island. Looked in the mirror one day and said it's better to be alone. When you're alone, no one can hurt you.

But that's the thing.

When you're alone, no one can help you either.

I bite the inside of my cheek, knowing I need to calm down. I need help, and there is only one person I can think of right now.

"Call Silas Hawthorne."

My hands turn the wheel as I go around a curve, blinking numbly while the phone rings. I'm beginning to hate dial tones.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip. Despite what happened at Vervain, my bitchy fucking behavior at Tillie's and outside the art gala, I need him to answer this phone call.

I'm selfish, fully aware of how undeserving of his kindness I am, but I still need him to pick up.

To my relief, he answers on the second ring. That calm, steady voice, like crackling embers, bounces off the windows of my car, wrapping me in the smell of cigar smoke and expensive cologne.

"Coraline."

The way he tastes each syllable of my name as he speaks makes a shiver roll through me. He says it like he already knows I'm in trouble, like he was expecting my call.

"Silas." I release a breath. "I need—"

I need help. I need help.

I need it, but I don't know how to ask. How to rely on someone.

"Whatever you need, it's already yours."

In my darkest moments, when panic claws at my chest and threatens to consume me, it has been his voice, the memory of it, that has pulled me back from the edge time and time again.

And I have no idea why.

There is something in it, a note or a hum, something that soothes. It sings lullabies to my racing heart until it returns to a normal beat. Despite everything, I can't deny what it does for me.

I'm nothing to him. I've treated him poorly, and yet, he answers. I want nothing to do with him, don't want to get close enough to possibly hurt him, yet I keep finding it harder to stay away.

His devout willingness to help me I want to take as it is, but I can't. Everyone wants something from you, and I want to know his angle. What does he want from me? Why help me?

"My sister is in trouble, and I don't know how to explain it, but I think Stephen is involved. I didn't..." I swallow the knot forming in my throat. "I didn't know who else to call."

This thing between us? It can't have anything to do with Lilac. This isn't about us or the lack thereof *us*; it's about her. Silas and I share a common enemy. Calling him helps him with Stephen too.

It's nothing but a transition between the two of us.
That is all it can be.
"Where are you."

The sun is starting to set when I pull into Black Sands Cove. It's about a mile trek from the asphalt parking lot to the sandy beach.

My chest aches as I see the empty parking spaces, Lilac's car sitting all alone. I quickly get out of my vehicle, jogging to the driver-side window of the BMW and finding her phone in the passenger seat.

From this lot are three different trailheads that can take you up and down the coast, hikes that range from two miles to ten.

She could be anywhere.

I bite down on my tongue as fury heats my insides.

If Stephen took her, it will be his ruin.

I will rip him to shreds with my teeth, pick his bones one by one until he's a pathetic meat sack. There will be nothing left of him when I'm done. I will not rest until his blood paints my palms.

My fingers tighten on my keys. Making a fist around them, I make sure one of them is striking out from the grip before I slam the side of my hand into the corner of the window. Metal colliding with glass shattering echoes in my ears.

There is a dull throb along my wrist, but I ignore it as I reach in and unlock her car from the inside. When I get the door open, I'm careful not to touch the cubes of glass scattered inside before plucking her phone from the passenger seat.

Relief pours over me when the screen lights up.

I don't know what I'm looking for when I search it. I'm invading her privacy with no remorse, scrolling through recent text messages to see if she was supposed to meet someone here today, but find nothing.

I'm working my way through her social media apps, trying to glimpse anything that can help me figure out where she might be or who is at fault when the roar of a motorcycle rumbles in the distance.

Headlights appear as the bike pulls into the parking lot, followed by Silas's iconic 1970 slate-gray Dodge Challenger. I'm not surprised he

brought his friends with him, considering the circumstances.

If Stephen has something to do with this, it's best if they are all here.

The slamming of car doors makes me flinch. The four of them move in sync, looming shadows that glide in unison. A part of me had always been jealous of them, their bond. How they were never alone, always in a pack.

I'd been fascinated by the idea that something more than their family's legacy tethered them together so tightly. You don't just connect with a person over history. What they do for each other? There is trauma and secrets binding them.

As enigmatic as they all are, I find myself only looking at Silas. Those deep-set brown eyes speak words his mouth doesn't. When dealing with someone like him, someone who doesn't speak or show any emotion, you quickly learn to pick up on the micromovements.

Like right now, with his eyebrows lowered, eyes squinted just a little as they look me up and down? He's concerned for me, checking me for injuries, making sure I'm alright.

When he stops his gaze on my hand, I instinctively glance down at it, looking at the small pool of blood gathering on the ground below. As if my brain just now reminded me of my injury, a dull throb radiates from my wrist.

I lift my hand, looking at the wicked cut that stretches from the corner of my wrist to my knuckle, leaking blood.

"What happened?"

"Nothing," I reply curtly, rubbing my wrist across my jeans to wipe away some of the blood. "Just a cut from the car window."

I am not weak.

Not on the outside.

I will not show them just how broken I really am.

Even if one of them already knows.

Regardless of my indifference toward him, my internal struggle with my attraction and need for distance, I know Silas will keep that secret. He won't tell them just how broken and scared I am.

Silas Hawthorne is the keeper of secrets. The unstoppable force and immovable object. Silent water, with unknown depths filled with mysteries he will take to his grave.

"I found her phone but can't find any mention of where she might have been going, if she even made it out of this parking lot. I think we should

split up.”

Rook, Alistair, and Thatcher watch me, the three of them conjuring up their assessments of me, drawing conclusions about what they know and what they see. Eyes on me have never made me uncomfortable, just fucking annoyed. I can deal with the stares; it’s the judgment that bothers me.

“What?” I snap. “What are you looking at?”

“No introduction?” Rook asks, lifting an eyebrow. “You pay for our meal the other night, and that makes you think you can start giving orders?”

They don’t understand me. They don’t get it, and that’s fine. I don’t need them too, but I didn’t come here to make friends with them. I’m not here to bond or talk about our sad stories.

I want to find my sister.

I didn’t call them. I called Silas. If they have a problem with that, they need to take it up with him.

“I’m not interested in introductions between us. Not when you know my name and I know yours. Right now? That’s all we need to know about each other,” I retort harshly. “The temperature is dropping. If she is somewhere on Black Sands Cove, she will not survive the elements through the night.”

“No offense, but why should we help you?” This question comes from Thatcher, hands tucked in his slacks, watching me like he can see my skeleton. “The only reason we are here is because you claim this has to do with Stephen. Why would he get out of prison just to go after your sister? If you’re taking advantage of the situation, you won’t like the outcome.”

My molars grind together, jaw twitching as I slip Lilac’s phone into my back pocket. From the corner of my eye, I watch Silas step a little closer to me before speaking.

“She isn’t the enemy here. Watch your fucking step.” Silas’s voice is harsh, slicing through my skin with heat, shocking his friend, it would seem by the look on his face.

However, I don’t need anyone to defend me.

I make direct eye contact with the man they call death. The one that’s rumored to fillet people alive for fun and falls asleep to the sounds of screams. His harsh blue eyes dig into my own, but I refuse to flinch, to look away.

“You think I’m afraid of you, Pierson?” A cruel smile pulls at the corner of my mouth. “I withstood torture that would make you shit your Brioni slacks. Don’t embarrass yourself by trying to intimidate me.”

I take a moment to look at all of them, and then I grab the bottom of my shirt and tear off a long piece of fabric, feeling the fabric give way beneath my fingers.

“At least she knows her brands,” I hear him mutter beneath his breath.

“You want Stephen dead, right? That’s great. Me too.” I wrap the black material around my bleeding wrist as I speak. “You need to find him, and I’m your best shot at it. So either we help each other, or you get the fuck out of my way.”

Thatcher tilts his head a bit, and I swear I see a flash of respect in his gaze. “I don’t care how sad your story is. We’re doing you the favor by being here.”

I can’t help but scoff.

“So you know where he’s hiding, then? What his plan is?” I shake my head at their cluelessness. “There is no one who knows him better than me. I know how he moves, how he thinks. If you’re near me? You’re ten steps closer to him.”

“And we are supposed to take your word on that?”

I take a threatening step forward. What’s the worst this dude is going to do? Kill me? He’ll have to do a lot more than that to scare me.

The Hollow Boys are child’s play compared to what I’ve seen.

“Let him lock you in a basement for two years, then you can ask me that fucking question again.”

Thatcher’s cold eyes slit, chin lifting as he looks down at me.

“You are child’s play compared to what I’ve seen. Help or don’t.” I shrug, dismissing him with my eyes before looking away. “I’m going to find my sister.”

We are running out of daylight, and I don’t have the time or patience to argue with Thatcher Pierson. He has his reasons for being wary of me, I’m sure, but I don’t give a fuck.

I didn’t call him.

I called Silas.

And right now, I’m starting to regret that decision.

I leave them to decide what their next move is without me, heading toward the wooden dock that leads to the beach. There are caves on the far end of Black Sands Cove.

Teenagers go there to smoke pot and fuck like rabbits. Lilac is smart. If she needed to hide, it’s where she would go. I force my heart to slow,

breathing through my nose and out through my mouth.

The howling wind from the ocean whirls in my ears, a salt-water-dusted breeze caressing my face as the wood turns into malleable sand. I grip the waistband of my jeans, knowing I didn't have time to change them but wishing I had. I'm one second away from taking them off and doing this hunt in my underwear.

The roaring ocean is turbulent, rushing and crashing together, dark blues and deep oranges swatched across the darkening sky. Black Sands Cove has always held an untouchable beauty, especially when it's empty.

"Lilac!" I scream her name in hopes her ears are close by to hear it. "Lilac!"

I'm answered only by the echoes bouncing between the pine trees to my left. There is only silence for several seconds before her name is shouted again from deep in the trees, by a deeper voice this time, followed by another, then another.

I feel bad for being so harsh, knowing they are helping, but I shake it off.

They wouldn't be here if they weren't getting something out of it. Remember that, Coraline. Everything comes at a price.

My throat aches as I shout her name again, chest tightening as what little hope I had starts to flutter away, leaving me to rot with panic.

I remember the pain of his strikes, how some nights I'd beg for him to hit me with his fists just so he wouldn't hang me by the chains. I lived with a constant gnawing emptiness for food and physical connection. As if a tiny creature inhabited my insides, clawing, reminding me of what I lacked.

He'd feed me only the bare minimum to keep me alive but reliant on him, desperate for his return, even if it meant being hurt in the process.

I picture my little sister in that scenario in my head, unable to keep it out. Her blonde hair tainted with blood and dirt. Athletic, healthy body ripped away by the hands of starvation. My eyes shut, hand holding my stomach as nausea sways my body.

Her screams are all around me, shrieking, rattling my eardrums as she begs for her life. Did she scream for me when he took her? Did she wonder where I was? Was she angry I wasn't there to protect her?

Hands are on my back, large, warm palms skating across my spine as the person who owns them circles to the front of my body. Fingers slide around my hips, not gripping, just resting on my skin.

The breeze catches the smell of tobacco and oak. The calming scent of fog-soaked earth in the forest, touched with something almost feminine. It's so intense, so consuming, I can practically see the drops of rain slipping from pine needles.

"Breathe for me, Hex. Breathe," Silas murmurs in a low whisper, concealing his voice from the wind as if she is listening, waiting to tell secrets to the sea. "We are going to find her."

There is a clicking sound, a shuffle of fabric moving to be heard behind my shut eyes, before I feel his fingers tug, pulling my pants up on my hips. Strong hands that feel so powerful yet so fucking gentle with me.

Like I'm fragile. Like I'm not dangerous for someone like him.

"She's the last good thing I have left. I can't lose her."

"I promise you," he says as his fingers thread something through each loop, encircling my waist entirely. "When you open your eyes, we are going to keep searching, and you're not going to think about what happened with Stephen. You are safe."

A belt.

I feel it when he tightens it around my waist, the leather keeping my jeans up as he latches it in place.

I'm mixed between thankful and irritated.

My entire life, especially after my return to Ponderosa Springs, people have looked at me like this jigsaw puzzle, broken and unworthy of being put back together, too much work for them.

Yet, for Silas, I'm like glass.

The way he sees clear through me, able to see what I need without me saying it. As if when he looks me, he can hear every thought that passes through my brain.

"Relax and open your eyes," he coaxes, dragging his thumb across my cheekbone. "Come on, open your eyes for me, Hex."

I bite down on my bottom lip, feeling my eyelids flutter open.

Silas Hawthorne owns the term *dead eyes*.

They hold an unsettling stillness, like the windows into his world are devoid of emotion. Hardened beauty and sheer masculinity that he wears almost better than his fitted black tee.

What did he look when he was alive?

"Hex," I breathe. "Why do you call me—"

"*Coraline!*"

My body jolts, electrified by the sound of Lilac's voice screaming for me. I jerk my head toward where it came from, striding away from Silas's touch and toward my sister's voice.

"Lilac, I'm here! Where are you!" I shout above the howling wind, eyes frantically searching the tree line.

I think my mind is playing tricks on me, that it was only my imagination, but I see her tumble from the trees, catching her footing in the tall weeds as she turns her head to look for me.

When she finds me, the world seems to slow down for a second.

Our feet pound against the ground as we sprint toward one another. We don't stop, not until her body slams into mine. My arms wrap around her neck, palms holding the back of her head, holding her a little too tightly to my chest.

The relief that washes over me is instant. A balloon deflated.

She smells like sweat and dirt, but the relief that washes over me is instant. I tell myself I'll never take this for granted, the feeling of her in my arms. Her safety. I vow to myself I'll never put her at risk like this again.

Nothing will stop me from doing what I need to protect her.

"I'm so sorry," she sobs, body shaking. "I didn't know, Cora. I swear I didn't know."

Just beneath the sound of waves, I hear Silas's footsteps, standing just close enough to hear our words but also providing us a moment of privacy.

"Shhh, it's okay," I soothe, patting her hair down with my palms as my eyebrows tug together. "What happened, Li? What didn't you know?"

This question elicits another cry from her throat, more tears and hiccups. I try to prepare for the worst, brace myself for whatever she needs to say, but she just cries, too worked up to speak.

"Lilac, look at me." I sandwich her head between my palms, lifting her face so that I'm looking down at her. "It's really important that you tell me the truth, okay? Everything that happened. I promise you I won't be upset."

"I'm so stupid, Cora. I should've known better. You taught me better, but I thought—" A choked noise steals her breath before she speaks again. "It felt real. It felt so freaking real to me."

I stay silent, letting her take the time she needs to speak. To get out the words the way she needs to. My teeth sink into my inner cheek, anticipating.

“I was supposed to meet Reece for the first time. We agreed to meet out here since we’re both fans of the beach. I was so excited that I got here thirty minutes early. But the person who showed up wasn’t Reece.”

My blood runs cold, the wind turning icy.

“Who was it?” I urge.

“Stephen.” Big, fat tears drop from her eyes as she looks at me. All I can see is pain. “Reece was never real. It was all a trick to get to you. All the gifts, the late-night conversations. It was a game. It was him.”

I’m feeling so much, yet not at all.

There is a numbness that overtakes me.

“What gifts?”

“Huh?”

“What kind of gifts did he send you?”

“Um, flowers,” she mutters, shoulders stilling as her body stops shaking, “An annotated copy of the book *Circe* and a couple of charcoal drawings.”

That earlier sickness returns.

He gave her my drawings, the ones that hung on the walls of that concrete cell and watched every vile thing he’d done to me. He gave my little sister my trauma as a gift.

“Did—” I clear my throat, “Did the flowers look like upside-down tulips?”

As if I need more proof that it was actually him luring her. As if I didn’t already believe every word she’d uttered. My mind is still in denial. Maybe it had been since I’d heard the news of his escape. It needed concrete evidence.

That he truly had come back for me.

“Yeah, he said they were called snowdrops. Why?” she asks, looking confused, completely unaware that the gifts she’d been given were tokens for me.

Stephen is mocking me.

My charcoal drawings.

A book with my nickname.

The flowers he used to bring me.

“In *Homer’s Odyssey*, Hermes gave moly, a magical herb, to Odysseus to protect him from Circe’s magic. A biologist named snowdrop the real-life moly,” I say absent-mindedly, spitting out words he’d spoken to me in

the night. "Stephen used to tell me when he tired of me and was ready to let me go, he'd make me choke on them."

I wasn't saying it out loud for her to know, for anyone to know. It just fell out like the memory needed to be spoken aloud.

It's fitting for him.

To see himself as the hero, Odysseus, in our story.

I am the evil, cunning Circe who had tricked him into love, forcing him to stay with me. I gave him no choice, he used to tell me. It was all my fault, he'd say while he stroked my hair.

The curse in my blood, those witchy eyes, made it impossible for him to sell me. He had to keep me. I made him keep me there in that basement. He was a prisoner of my love, my body and soul.

It was because of my curse he couldn't let me go.

The same will not be said for my sister.

I release Lilac from my hold, turning so that I can see Silas, who is standing just behind me, unmoving, watching me with the same passive look on his face he always has.

There is no sorrow, no sympathy, just dead eyes.

"We need to talk."

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

THIRTEEN

THIS WRETCHED HEART

CORALINE

“IS SHE ALRIGHT?” I hear the moment I shut the door behind me.

Silas is leaning against the dark granite island in his kitchen, arms crossed in front of his chest as he looks over at me. His apartment is exactly what I imagined it would be, not that I’d thought about it. Just on the drive here, I pictured it for a moment.

It smells like fresh coffee and his cologne, a comforting mixture.

It’s expensive, touched with a rugged masculine feel. With an open floor plan with dark wood and black accents, it’s brooding and soaked in his smell. Two bedrooms, moody lighting with deep charcoal-painted walls, the best money could buy in Ponderosa Springs.

Minimalistic, put together by a designer I’m sure, and perfectly him.

The lack of color, the cleanliness, is so different from my apartment, a physical reflection of our dissimilarity.

“No.” I exhale heavily, my chest tight. “But she’s asleep and will be okay, eventually.”

I wasn’t lying when I said we needed to talk, but I also wasn’t leaving Lilac alone. His apartment was closer to the Cove than mine. She’d fallen asleep in the car, which meant I’d probably be crashing on Silas Hawthorne’s couch tonight.

Closer than I ever wanted to be to him.

I walk through the living room, into the kitchen, standing on the opposite side of the island as him, resting my arms on the cool surface. The pendant lights softly illuminate his face, and I can’t help but quickly count the few freckles that dust his cheeks and nose.

“Thank you,” I tell him, swallowing my pride, knowing he deserves genuine gratitude from me. Even if it’s just in this moment. “For everything.”

He stares at me for a second before grabbing the white square box in front of him, clicking it open with his thumb to reveal medical supplies.

“I’m fine. I don’t—”

“I wasn’t asking,” he interjects, grabbing a few things before rounding to my side of the island. I watch as Silas lays out a piece of gauze, some tape, and what I think is hydrogen peroxide. “Don’t need you bleeding in my kitchen.”

Without asking, he reaches down, gently pulling my hand upward and flipping it palm side up before undoing the piece of fabric soaked in blood.

I can’t help but shudder at the sight of my wound. I’d barely felt it until my adrenaline wore down. The smell of antiseptic burns my nose as he cleans it. The sting is intense, but I stay still, unmoving, as if his fingers wrapped around mine are an anchor.

“You should eat something,” he mutters, wrapping the bandage around my hand. “I have leftover beef and broccoli in the fridge. I can heat it for you.”

I shake my head, staring at him while he focuses on my cut.

“I don’t eat meat.”

“You’re a vegetarian?”

“Technically a pescatarian, I still eat fish. You sound surprised? Did you peg me as a meat eater?” I arch an eyebrow, fingers pressing down on the pulse in my wrist. I wonder if he’s counting my rising heartbeat.

There is a softness to Silas, one the rumors never spoke about. A stillness that the harsh stories left out. Like he’s in tune with my emotions, everyone’s emotions around him, knowing exactly when his attention is needed.

“Not surprised, just curious.”

When he finishes, he turns his back toward me, cleaning up.

The muscles in his back flex beneath his shirt as he reaches for a coffee mug. I quickly divert my eyes, rotating my body back toward the island, elbows leaning on it for support.

“Stephen used to...” I pause, the realization that he’s one of the only people I’ve willingly spoken to about what happened to me weights on me.

The thought of being vulnerable makes me sick, but there's something safe about him.

"He used to make me eat raw steak. Now the smell makes me sick."

I hear him moving behind me before he reappears on the opposite side of the island, sitting the dark gray mug in front of him.

"Do you want him dead?" he asks. "Is that why you wanted to talk?" He picks up a spoon, dipping it into a jar of honey before swirling it into the cup. Methodical, like he does it every day.

"No. I meant what I said. I don't want revenge, Silas."

"Then why are you here, Coraline?"

A gentle silence washes over us as he continues to stir honey into his coffee, and I stare at him. Our eyes meet, and we just look at one another.

What are you thinking, Silas?

What do you see when you look at me like that?

Does he secretly see just how vile I am on the inside? Can he see my ugly, selfish parts that come out the moment I'm angry or afraid? Or does he simply see nothing? Another girl, another face in the crowd.

He is a stoic statue, meant to be admired but never truly understood. Silas embodies the idea that a person's presence can speak volumes without a single word needed.

"I came to ask if you still need someone to play fake girlfriend."

It's blunt, rushed, unashamed. It's the only way I was going to get to the point without backing out. Ripped off quickly like an old Band-Aid, it was the reason I wanted to talk to him.

"No." He swirls the spoon in a circle, gazing down and then back up at me, but the look in his eyes is different now. Crinkled at the corners, they glint with a playfulness I've never seen on him.

It's a smirk, without actually moving his lips.

"I need a wife."

If I die from cardiac arrest, the cause of death is either the way he's looking at me or the way he says wife. Maybe a combination of both, but hopefully, Lilac will be able to still collect insurance.

Wife.

Do not panic. Do not fucking panic.

This is the reason I came here tonight. The reason I'm going to sleep on his couch, why I'm in his fucking apartment.

"If I do this—if we do this—I need you to make me a promise."

Silas doesn't speak, just waits for me to continue, giving me space to talk. It's different, refreshing, to talk to someone who is truly listening, not just waiting to reply.

"No matter what happens, you get Lilac out of here." I make sure my eyes do not waver. The hues of our irises clash, a gaze of ebony and mocha, neither yielding.

"You can use me to get close to Stephen. Marrying me will piss him off. It'll lure him out. I'll hang off your arm and play the part for Hawthorne Tech. But if something happens to me in the process, you have to make sure my sister is taken care of. It's the only way I'll say yes."

Protecting her had been the only thought in my brain when she crashed into my arms. I'm not enough on my own to keep her safe, especially not from a man like Stephen Sinclair.

But four founding families could.

I may be too prideful to ask others for help sometimes, but for Lilac?

I'd beg on the streets for change.

I'd do anything to secure her future.

This was never supposed to be part of the plan, but Stephen wasn't supposed to get out of prison. I have to do what I have to do. I'm running out of options.

"Does she know?"

I blink away the mental fog. "What?"

"Does your sister know?" he asks again, squinting his eyes a bit. "That you're killing yourself for the sake of her happiness? That the only reason you're still in Ponderosa Springs is because you can't leave her?"

A sharp pain stretches across my heart. The walls surrounding me come slamming up again; I hadn't realized I'd let them slip down.

If we get married, I plan to take a vow of silence. He doesn't get to read me like this. I refuse to let him make me feel this fucking transparent.

I press my lips together in a tight line, feeling the tension building in me. I have the urge to revolt, push him away, shove him down for thinking he could get close. My tongue rolls slowly across my front teeth as I shake my head.

"No," I say firmly. "She's blissfully unaware. And it's going to stay that way. Tonight, a piece of her innocence was stolen. Over my dead fucking body will it happen again."

Silas pins me with a heavy stare. “The loss of innocence is inevitable. Happens to us all. You can’t stop fate, Hex.”

I tilt my head, lifting both eyebrows in challenge. My voice is raw with conviction. “Watch me.”

Without missing a beat, he replies, “I am.”

Like liquid velvet, he picks up his spoon and drags the utensil between his lips, cleaning off any lingering drops of coffee from its surface, never once breaking eye contact. The muscles in his arms flex as he props himself up on the kitchen island, raising the mug to his mouth.

Tendrils of thick veins beneath layers of ink on his forearms catch the light.

Silas is the quiet type of handsome.

It is not shouted. It’s whispers in your ear in the dark. He’s the sound goosebumps make when they appear along my arms, an allure mirrored only by cold air skating across warm skin.

The air stirred around us.

There will be a price for this arranged marriage, and my heart will be paying it.

The worst part is he won’t be the one to break it. It’ll be me.

I’m the only villain in this story.

I’m doing this for Lilac, but I won’t be selfish with Silas Hawthorne in the process.

His heart does not deserve what I am capable of doing to it.

“Rules.” I clear my throat. “There needs to be rules between us. How long do we need to stay married?”

He taps his finger against the side of his coffee cup. “Two years, according to the board.”

“I’ll assume you want me to move in with you. It’ll be weird if we don’t, but I want my sister to stay here until Stephen is taken care of. Lilac and I can share a room.”

He nods, agreeing quietly.

“No sex.” My teeth sink into my bottom lip, softly hiding a smile as he makes a choking sound on the drink. “You can get a mistress on the side or twelve.”

The ring of the mug against the marble island is like thunder in my ears, its clatter heating the charged air. His jaw tightens, hooded gaze boring into me. Seconds pass, and I feel them like drops of water on my skin.

“You plan on doing the same?”

My eyes slit, words tasting of defiance. “If I do?”

When he stands to his full height, the slightest sliver of his taut abdomen peeks through the opening of his shirt. I let my eyes drop for a split second until his shirt falls back into place.

There is a crackle in the air.

The mention of the word sex makes me think of it with him.

Dirty, rough sex.

Sex with Silas.

I look at his hands, large palms that he’d probably bruise my ass with. We’d destroy each other in the bedroom. Neither one of us would be willing to give up control, leaving us both littered with bruising kisses and deep scratches.

Lust hasn’t been an emotion I’ve felt in a long time, and I don’t like admitting that I miss it. The way it licked the backs of my heels, heat crawling up to my stomach and burning away inside.

I match his stance, standing up straight with my arms crossed, not saying a word as his eyes roam my body openly. It’s my ego telling me he’s thinking the same filthy thoughts as me.

Silas leans forward, eyes narrowing as he considers my words.

“No deal,” he grunts, the sound sending a tingle down my spine. “No one will believe that I’m unfaithful to my wife. They all know what happens when someone touches what belongs to me.”

“I am not yours to own.” I seethe, my jaw tightening in anger.

Heat and irritation swirl inside of me, a flame burning.

“Right now, you aren’t.” His sharp teeth grip his lower lip making my body twitch as his eyes rake over my body, “In private, you can call all the shots. But to the rest of the world? You’re fucking mine, and I don’t share.”

Electricity shoots down my spine.

I’m not a thing to be owned, never again.

But I can’t deny that the idea of letting Silas Hawthorne control my body turns me on.

I desperately need to get laid or at the very least have an orgasm before this happens.

“Then that leaves abstinence until we divorce because I am not sleeping with you.”

Even though I want to, if our circumstances were different, I'd do wicked, wicked things to him. However, we are already too close. Sex will only blur the lines, and neither of us needs that.

I can't risk it.

His gaze darkens as he silently smirks at me.

"Then you better stock up on batteries, Hex. You'll need them."

My cheeks flush, a vivid picture of him watching me touch myself with one of my toys sinking into the back of my mind. But I shake it away, furrowing my eyebrows.

"Arranged marriages are a common thing, Silas. Why do we have to put on a show for the public?"

The fire, that burn in his eyes, is snuffed out, emotion disappearing almost immediately.

"My parents." He sighs, running a hand across his rugged jaw. "It will break my mother's heart if she knows I married for anything but love. I won't do that to her. That's my only condition."

As much as dislike the concept of being owned both in private and public, I get it. I resent that I understand it, but his loyalty to his family makes me admire him in a way I never expected.

Silas doesn't want to be in this situation either. I'm sure being hitched to me wasn't in his plans.

But he'll do it 'cause he has to.

He'll do it because he loves the people around him.

We are two very different people, with very similar experiences.

I don't need to know his dreams or his favorite color in order to grasp who he is. His loyalty speaks louder than words ever could, and his unwavering urge to protect those around him mirrors my own.

That's enough for me to go forward with this.

That is enough for me to trust him.

"Play it up for the in-laws." I give him a tight-lipped smile. "Got it."

I already know his mother is going to hate me. Mothers always fucking hate me.

"Any other rules?"

"Yeah." I nod, biting the inside of my cheek.

"No falling in love. I'm not saying this to tempt you. This applies to both of us. This needs to remain as fake as possible, or else I'm gone."

It's for the best, keeping my distance, being a bitch. He'll thank me for it in the long run.

He takes another sip of his coffee, eyes lingering on my face with the movement, before speaking again.

"Is that your greatest fear, Hex? Falling in love?"

His question is so unexpected, so alien, that I laugh in answer.

"You can't be afraid of something you've never known," I reply truthfully.

Silas has loved, and from what I've heard? He gave it every ounce of himself. I could easily let him fall into me and then suck him dry. Use his emotions to my advantage. Let him get close to me, then leave once he was too far gone or simply watch him destroy himself like every man who dared try before him.

The town may call this man a villain, but inside, he's a lover boy. It gives off a smell. Good intentions and romance. His tender heart bleeds all over the ones he cares for.

It's easy to get a read on him, written on every inch of his being—someone who would give absolutely everything for those he loves.

I'm far too wicked to deserve it that sort of devotion.

"No, Silas. I'm not afraid of love," I say firmly. "But you should be afraid of me. I hurt people who try to care about me, Hawthorne. Don't let yourself become one more victim of my wretched heart."

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

FOURTEEN
HEY, ROSIE
SILAS

“SILAS, when we figure out where we’re going, can we have a garden?”

“Sure.”

“I wanna grow carnations.”

“Carnations?”

“And peonies!”

“Okay.”

“Say you swear.”

We figured out where we were going, but the only garden Rosemary Donahue has now are the flowers I have delivered monthly to her tombstone.

It’s been a while since I last stood here. I run my hand along the top of her grave. The stone is weathered, the letters of her name eroded, a painful reminder of the time that’s passed.

Pink carnations.

“Hey, Rosie girl.”

The warm breeze greets me. A gentle caress of natural air, a hello from beyond the veil of the living. Death and mourning are different for all, but for some reason, I’ve always felt like she’s here with me when I visit.

“You’ve been gone four years now. Doesn’t seem real, does it?”

A familiar feeling gnaws at my gut. My ribs are tightly bound, only allowing me to take tiny, quick breaths. It’s the paper cut along sensitive skin, an unwanted reminder.

It feels like nothing but guilt.

Greedy, time-consuming guilt.

I am alive, and she isn’t.

I wasn't there when she needed me. I could not save her.

If we switched positions, like the many times I begged for, Rosemary's life would be in full color. She would have made the most of every breath, every day. Turned even the worst moments into something beautiful, because that's what she did.

She was a beautiful existence.

The space inside me, the one reserved for Rosie, aches. It's not a choice; it's an unwavering fact. She took with her a piece of me that no one will ever have again. It's hers to keep—I'd never take it away from her.

It took time to realize that moving on, grieving, didn't take away the love I had for her. I thought if I stayed angry, if I hurt the people that hurt her, it would bring me peace. Chasing revenge only opened up more doors to pain.

I'm not proud of what I did in my mourning, of how I let my self-hatred control me. While the people involved with Rosemary's death deserved their fate for what they'd done to not only Rosie but all the other girls they'd taken, there's still a lot I regret.

Mostly, not realizing sooner that healing from her loss wasn't me trying to forget her. It was a way of honoring her. A way of maybe helping her find peace in the afterlife, knowing I'm okay here without her.

I had this dream after I was released from the ward, the night after Lyra killed Conner Godfrey.

I was watching Rosemary being pulled in two different directions. I could see her existing in this in-between place of solid white nothingness, one arm reaching toward Earth and the other being tugged in the opposite direction.

She was stuck, unable to pass over because of me. She could not let go of her mortal body because she was worried for me.

I was causing her pain by trying to heal my guilt. It was a harsh truth, knowing I'd told myself all of this was for Rosemary, to avenge her death, when in reality, it was just me trying to make amends for not being there for her when she died.

My eyes find the ground that she is entombed by. It's far too harsh to hold a girl who was too kind and far too gentle.

"When I tell you this, I hope it makes sense. I hope you're not upset and you know this time I'm doing this for the right reasons."

There is another breeze, stronger this time, knocking the hood off my head. I shake my head, running a palm across the top of my buzzed hair. She hated when I tried to hide in my hoodies.

In the beginning, breathing hurt without her. Waking up, knowing she'd never open her eyes again, made it physically impossible to inhale and exhale. Like oxygen was a reminder that I was alive and she was not.

I sometimes hate that it's easier now.

That time has, in fact, made the loss of her hurt less.

It's also made it more difficult to remember. I recall who she was as a person, what she looked like, and some of the things she'd said. She's about as real as the voices that come and go in my head. The ones that sometimes take shape and throw themselves along the wall in forms of shadows.

It's the little things I've lost along the way in healing.

Dropping pieces of her laugh, leaving them behind. Forgetting the smell of her perfume, losing the sound of her voice in my ear.

It doesn't hurt, and sometimes I wish it did.

With pain comes remembrance. The throb and ache of loss is a constant reminder of the person who no longer exists. When you hurt, you remember everything so clearly because the pain forces you to.

When you stop hurting, you forget.

The wound slowly stops oozing, skin pulling together and creating a scar. One that sometimes itches or pricks, reminding you it's there, but in the day to day, you barely know it's there.

Rosemary Donahue deserved someone who would hurt for her for lifetimes.

Two years ago, just before the boys and I parted ways, I stood in front of this very grave and made her a promise. I swore I'd leave Stephen in the past, letting him wither away in a jail cell to pay for his sins.

It's because of him I have to break yet another promise to the girl lying six feet below.

"I told you was letting it go, what Stephen did. I promised I'd do better, be better the next time I showed up." My throat burns with quiet rage, fury I've held beneath the surface too well. "But this isn't revenge, Rose. It's for the boys, for Sage. Their futures. It's him or us this time."

It isn't revenge for me this time. It's my turn to live on the opposite end of the coin. I'm trying to protect the ones I love while a man tries to get back at us for the life we stole from him.

I hope she knows everything I'm doing from this point forward is not with a vengeful heart.

Slowly, I move so that I sit against the back of her tombstone. Resting my spine on the stone, I tilt my head up to gaze at the sky. When Rosie and I were in middle school, we'd sit back to back and look up. I'd listen while she made up stories about all the bunnies in the clouds.

It's often forgotten that we weren't just in a relationship. When she died, I lost my friend.

Rose and I, we experienced a life-altering trauma that no one but us believed. We had faith in each other's words because we'd gone through it together. That event had bonded us.

So here, when I come to visit now, I tell her about the good. I talk about Alistair getting married, knowing it would send her over the fucking moon to know the angry man she'd called the "big brother" had finally let someone love him. Even though he'd hate it, I tell her about Thatcher, about Lyra, who I think she would be best friends with. I make sure she knows I'm looking out for Sage, even though Rook is doing a pretty good job all on his own.

I let her know we are okay, that regardless of the blackmail hanging over our heads, the possibility of us going to jail if it's released, we are alright. That we did okay without her.

I tell her the bad.

That the possibility of her seeing my dad is coming sooner than I'd ever thought. Which leads me into talking about work and Stephen, eventually getting to the part of my white lie of having a girlfriend. She'd laugh if she were here—she would laugh at me for panicking.

I spill out my guts to a tombstone that has no choice but to listen, and I hope the girl I once knew hears me.

"Mom will kill me if she finds out I'm lying. I just can't let Dad die knowing his entire life's work is being sold. After everything they tried to do for me, Rose, I can't let it happen." I swallow the lump of frustration in my throat, letting out a sigh as I slide my palm down my cheek. "And Coraline, she's..."

Coraline is what?

Stubborn. Strong-willed. Too fucking hardheaded. A girl I have a strong desire to kiss every time she's in the room?

In the silence of this graveyard, I let myself smirk as I shake my head a little.

“Coraline is...Coraline. I don’t know a lot about her other than she’s an artist, and Rook likes her, which isn’t surprising—he’s a fan of anyone who gives Thatcher shit.”

Did I want to shoot Thatch in the foot for how he talked to her? I had the urge, yes.

Did I also enjoy watching her chew him up and spit him out all on her own? Absolutely.

She puts on a brave face, but she’s one moment away from shattering to pieces. When we are alone, I see it. I feel it.

I saw it in my kitchen the other night. Saw it when she fell asleep on my couch, curled in a ball, protecting herself even when she’s unconscious.

Stephen hurt her. There is no one who will ever know what happened in that basement besides her and him. She’s so afraid of being seen as a victim that she won’t let herself heal.

I know what it’s like to feel that trauma, a living, breathing wound. To be attached to anger, the need for revenge. But for Coraline, it’s like her past has consumed her. It’s made her hard, unapproachable, and it drives me insane ’cause I know that’s not who she is. She shows glimpses of it but never the full truth.

“I think,” I sigh, biting down on the inside of my cheek, “I think I want to know her more. But she isn’t going to make it easy if I try. She’s in pain and fucking prideful. I can see it every time we make eye contact. It’s like an extension of herself—it lives in every room she steps in like a shadow. It’s in her art. It kills me. She knows she could find comfort if she let someone in but refuses.”

Coraline makes me want to talk.

Break myself open just so I can have her. Tug on the strings that she has wound so tightly around herself so I can see what’s underneath as she unravels for me.

There is something in the way she moves, how she talks so brazenly with an underlying fierceness in every word, the way her eyes catch the light and melt like honey when she looks at me.

That connection between us is palpable, humming through the air, and it’s becoming harder to ignore. Soon, we are going to be under the same

roof; then she won't have anywhere to hide from me. She'll be carrying my last name, existing in my space.

We're about to be bound for at least two years, and she can't resist me that long. Especially if I apply a little pressure. I've barely tried.

She's going to break for me.

I'm not afraid of a curse, especially when they look like Coraline Whittaker.

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

FIFTEEN
YOUR MOTHER'S DAUGHTER
CORALINE

“I THOUGHT you said they wouldn't be here.”

“They weren't,” Lilac mumbles as I follow her up the front steps to our parents' home. “I guess they got back early from their trip.”

I'd come because she needed help packing the rest of her things. It's normal for her to stay with me most days, but I don't want her away from me now. We'd easily been able to convince Regina that Lilac wanted to stay with me for the summer and would come home once school started again.

I'm not sure she really heard the conversation, just nodded her head while flipping through a tabloid magazine. Either way, Lilac is coming with me; the details don't matter.

Lilac's hand grabs the front door knob, only to have it pulled open from the opposite side. Inside Regina stands, wearing a perfectly ironed green dress that reminds me of a booger.

Her retouched blonde hair is up in rollers, and she has that permanent pinched expression on her face as she crosses her arms in front of her chest.

“Coraline,” she snides. “When were you planning on telling your father and I about being engaged to the eldest Hawthorne son?”

As if he heard her, my father appears from around the corner, dress pants as always. Except the look on his face is different than I anticipated. There isn't a look of contempt or disapproval; he almost looks happy.

It would appear Silas's coworker from the other night had officially spilled the beans about what he saw at the art gala.

I didn't want to see them. I really didn't want to see them now that I know they'd found out about my upcoming marriage. Because if this has to

be real in public for Silas? That means I have to make it real to the two people in front of me who call themselves my parents.

I hope to fucking God Silas doesn't want to have an actual wedding because I don't want these people seeing that. Maybe that should have been something I mentioned when I was laying out my rules. I blame it on the fact I got distracted by his arms in that shirt.

Sex brain ruins everything.

I don't like the idea of weddings to being with. Not the devoting your lives to each other, that's fine. It's having all those people around to watch it. In my mind, something like that should be shared in private. I don't want to be vulnerable to the world, just the one person standing across from me waiting to say I do. Only they get to see me in a state of softness, with all my walls down and nothing between us but hands.

"Hello, Regina." I push my sunglasses up on my head. "James."

"This is gonna be awkward..." Lilac mutters below her breath, slipping inside the house and heading toward the stairs, ready to leave with me with the vultures like a traitor.

But it's probably for the best. She's a terrible liar.

The conversation between me and Silas regarding this arrangement ended with us agreeing that I could tell Lilac the truth and he could tell his friends. Those were the only people that could know what was happening between us.

"And where do you think you're going, little miss?"

Li turns to her mother, rolling her lips together, trying her best to not look annoyed. "I'm going to pack the rest of my stuff. I'm staying with Coraline for the summer. I told you that already, Mom."

"Honey, Silas and Coraline are going to need their space. Planning a wedding, prenuptial bonding." Regina lets out a little chuckle. "No man wants to be saddled with baggage."

"But—"

"She isn't baggage," I interject, my stepmother and I making eye contact. "And we want her in our space. She's staying with me for the summer, Regina. It'll give you more free time to spend at the country club."

The thing about the woman in front of me is when met with snark, she'll always find a way to bite back. It's almost never in the form of a direct insult. Sometimes it's a backhanded compliment; other times it's pure pettiness.

When I was in high school, I'd mouthed off about something I can't remember now, that's how small it was, but after? She slept with my history teacher, and two days after, my class grade dropped to a C, which royally fucked up my grade point average.

I had no proof, but I was convinced she'd fucked him just so he'd drop my grade.

Lilac is able to slither away up the steps, avoiding the rest of this conversation.

"No ring?" Regina pushes, heels clicking as she walks toward me, snatching my hand to inspect the naked finger. Her claws scratch the underside of my palms.

"We haven't picked one out yet," I snide, jerking my limb back from her hold.

Her lips curl into a subtle smirk, head tilting ever so slightly, as if she's sizing me up. Her scrutinizing gaze tears apart my simple shorts and T-shirt. I simply lift my chin a little higher.

I don't ever remember a time when she hasn't looked at me like this. Even as a child, the weight of her condescending eyes made me uneasy. It was as if I was some threat, that my entire being was an insult to her.

But I'd grown up, got a backbone, and found out there are far scarier beasts in the world than the wicked stepmother.

I step fully inside my old home, noticing the recent remodel to fit Regina's new style of the year. Once when I was fourteen, she was so obsessed with dark mauve she'd had the pool painted that color.

"Why didn't you introduce us to him at the gala?"

I move my eyes to my father, standing with his hands in his pockets in the foyer while Regina walks behind me to shut the front door, securing me inside this house till Lilac gets done packing.

"Silas is a private person." The lie slips out easily, mostly because I think it might be true. "We both are. We didn't want to say anything until we were ready."

I'm going to have to pull context clues from what I've seen of him so far with this conversation and try to avoid setting things in stone. Regina will report every detail of this to her friends at the country club, and it will spread like wildfire.

I should've, at the very least, sat down and talked favorite colors with this dude. We didn't even work out a relationship timeline. How does he

expect me to play this up in public if we don't even know each other?

"I just can't believe it. We were afraid you'd be a spinster, but you seemed to have lucked out." She laughs as she wraps an arm around my father's waist, leaning into him. "You could've picked someone a little more mentally stable, but with that amount of money, it doesn't really matter."

She laughs like it's funny.

As if she knows him and the joke at his expense is free.

A coppery tang fills my mouth, pressure from my teeth sinking into my tongue.

Regina is but one rat in this deceitful town; these self-proclaimed honorable people who cloak their faults and skeletons beneath ego and money drenched in blood.

They walk like royalty atop their ivory towers, shoving people beneath them on their way to the top, building empires on broken bones. For years, I had been told the Hollow Boys were villains. That their reign of terror had tainted this well-respected town known to house the nation's most prestigious university.

But you can't corrupt something that is already rotten to begin with.

They were just scapegoats.

It's the reason the Halo went on so long. Small-minded, dense fucking minions had their eyes trained on boys blowing up churches and pulling mindless pranks, instead of removing the veil from their eyes and seeing the men they worshipped were false idols. They were buying and selling their daughters like scraps of meat. Turned girls into a commodity. Stripped away their humanity and turned them into nothing but cash cows.

"Regina, I put up with you for Lilac's sake." I step closer to her, hands tightening into small fists. "I play nice. I listen to your never-ending bitching and whining."

I watch her shrink a little into my father's arms, but that doesn't stop her mouth from trying to run.

"How dare you speak to me—"

"But if you say another word about Silas, if you think a negative thought about him, I'll make sure you're out on your ass with nothing but your *sparkling* personality when I take my piece of Elite." I sneer down at her as I lean forward. "Poor has a smell, and you won't like when I leave you covered in it."

Just thinking about sticking around to hear whatever words she tries to string together pisses me off. So I decide not to wait. I simply turn and walk toward the steps to help Lilac.

The quicker she packs her things, the better.

I don't want to be in this house any longer than I need to be.

So for the next thirty minutes, I swallow my rage. I let it simmer beneath the surface, taking it out on violently folding clothes and shoving them into a suitcase.

Before, I'd been able to let her comments slide off my back like water. I could ignore it and move on. I'm like that with a lot of people.

It's easier to deflect. I have more outlets and less intense emotions. I haven't gotten tired of people walking all over me just yet. Stephen changed that, and I guess that's something I have to thank him for.

He forged my silver tongue from the screams of agony and constructed my steel backbone from true despair.

I'm an exposed nerve.

Every brush of oxygen, distasteful remark, and backhanded compliment sent sharp, agonizing jolts of pain through me. And something inside me chewed that pain up and turned it into anger.

Being angry is easier than being sad.

Being angry is better than being the victim.

"You almost done getting your stuff from the bathroom?" I ask over my shoulder as her door opens, turning and expecting to find her with a bag full of her things but finding my father instead.

When I look at him, it's hard to see anything but my trauma.

I can't look back fondly on our memories anymore because now they all feel pointless. The fishing trips and late-night brownies in the kitchen. Any and all laughter we shared is faded dust.

When my father was arrested for his involvement with the Halo, he was quick to spill his guts to save his ass. Claimed that he didn't get involved until I had gone missing. He was simply complying to get me back home safely.

He'd told the police everything they needed to know and in exchange only served six months. He spent a hundred and eight days behind bars for providing The Halo shipping containers that smuggled trafficked girls. That's it.

All for me, he says. All to get me back.

Is it my bitterness toward men like him that makes it impossible to believe him? Or simply my gut telling me he's a liar.

So when I look at him, all I see is a man I used to know.

We are strangers, standing in the bodies of father and daughter.

He shifts as if he's uncomfortable standing alone in a room with me. My eyebrows furrow together, zeroing in on the white garment bag draped across his left arm.

"Regina's comment was out of line." He clears his throat after he says it, wanting to say more, but I interrupt, not giving him a chance to elaborate, narrowing my eyes at him instead.

"Are you coming to apologize for her? If so, you can save your breath." I refuse to meet his gaze, turning back to fold another one of Lilac's hoodies into a neat little square.

I can feel his presence behind me like an invisible wall, trapping me in place.

"Coraline, I..." He trails off, as if he's choosing his words carefully. "Are you happy? With Silas? Does he make you happy?"

My eyes roll so hard I'm afraid they'll get stuck, and I shake my head at his audacity. A few weeks ago, this man had been trying to set me up with a dude who offered me blow in a bathroom.

"Why do you give a shit, James?" My voice is harsh, but it doesn't faze him, only making him release a heavy sigh—a sound that holds all the weariness of our relationship.

He's never been very good at handling my attitude. The worse I get, the better chance I have that he'll just walk away, like always.

"You're my daughter, and despite what you may believe, despite some of my actions, I want you to be happy."

"Few years too late for that," I spit viciously, turning back toward him slowly. He's taken a few more steps into the room, a little closer to me than he was before.

"Did you come to ask if I could drop off your dry cleaning?" I motion toward the garment bag draped over his arm, my voice edged with anger.

"Here." His hand extends toward me. "Nora would've wanted you to have this. This was going to be the dress she wore at our wedding—" He clears his throat uncomfortably before he continues. "Take it. Get rid of it, wear it, whatever you want."

Disbelief strikes through me.

I didn't even know he'd planned to marry my mother. Hell, I think this is the first time I've heard him speak her name out loud. All I've heard is the vile shit Regina has said over the years and the assumptions from her anger.

When I don't move to take it, he steps past me, laying it on the bed next to Lilac's open suitcase.

"You kept this? After all these years?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. Eyes flicking between the bag and his face, I search for any ounce of dishonesty I can find.

"Yes," he replies, pushing his hands into his pockets. "I don't know why exactly. Regina would burn the house down if she knew, but maybe it reminded me of a time when things were simpler. When I was young and in love. Before life got in the way."

My teeth grind together.

Despite everything, the anger, the pain, the bitterness, I can see the pain etched on his face. I can see the semblance of a young man clutching a baby to his chest, all alone in a hospital nursery, tears streaking his face as he hums, knowing the love of his life lies cold in the next room over.

None of this makes sense, him giving this to me, him talking to me like this. It doesn't make sense.

"I see so much of Nora in you. The same tenacious spirit, your white streaks. You have her eyes."

I swallow the knot in my throat. "Why tell me all of this? Why now?"

I want to believe over the years, we'd both let Regina poison our relationship, that she'd been the wedge driven between us. There is truth in his words I can't deny, but forgiveness is not on my tongue.

James shrugs, running a hand through his dark hair, a sad smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "There are a lot of things I regret, Coraline. Things I hope one day we can talk about when you're ready."

He leaves me there after that, taking my silence as a response, shutting the door behind him.

I stand there, staring at the dress that was meant to be worn by a woman I never knew, and I feel the weight of his words settling in my chest. My fingers pull at the zipper of the bag, exposing the gown inside.

There are layers of lace and delicate silk with intricate beading along the bodice and ivory buttons down the back. It has a timeless elegance that has stood the test of time.

My eyebrows knit together in confusion as I notice a small, faded piece of paper tucked beneath the white tulle, its receding edges giving it a yellow hue.

They are vows.

I feel like I am peeking into a world that was never meant for me, a world that belongs to James and Nora alone. It's a reminder of a love that was lost, an unfulfilled promise, a dream that never came to fruition.

As I read, tears burn the corners of my eyes, and it leaves me wondering.

Is anyone truly who they pretend to be?

Book made for megrourkee@gmail.com

SIXTEEN LIGHTS OUT

CORALINE

“HOW MUCH FOR THE NIGHT?”

I snap my head toward the voice, pulling my cigarette from my lips.

“Excuse me?” I release a puff of smoke toward the man in front of me.

His blond hair is slicked back, blue suit freshly pressed, and his wallet is out, thumb filing through the bills.

Is he propositioning me for sex work right now?

As if silently answering my question, his eyes wander over my body, and a sick feeling settles in my stomach. I flick my gaze down at the halter dress. It’s a little short and shows some skin with the open back, but it’s hot, and it’s the middle of the fucking day. What the fuck is wrong with him?

“How much for the night?” he repeats, his voice low and almost guttural.

I take a step back from me, scoffing as I shake my head, taking another hit off my cigarette before throwing it toward the street.

My first trip to Portland in months, and this is what the city greets me with?

The sheer audacity and ignorance of some men to assume based on what I’m wearing that I’m for sale? A chilling thought crosses my mind. Is that why Stephen picked me? Because of how I look?

I squash it immediately after thinking.

Getting kidnapped was not my fault. I may have trouble accepting some things about what happened, but that isn’t one of them. I did nothing to deserve what they did to me.

“How about you back the fuck up.”

A thunderous voice, deep and menacing, reverberates from behind me.

I feel him like a dense fog, curling around me, moving like mist.

Intuitively or maybe because his tone made me jump, I take a step back, my black pumps clicking on the sidewalk as I do. My back hits his chest, head several inches beneath his chin.

Mr. Bank Broker, or maybe a stock manager, takes a step back himself, looking slightly taken aback by the sudden intervention. Fear makes him swallow roughly.

“Look, I don’t want any trouble,” he mumbles, shoving his wallet into his pocket, holding his hands up in defense. “I thought she was—”

“I don’t care. Walk away while you still have the ability.”

I stifle a laugh, not at the words but at the way the man pales, tucking his tail between his legs and scurrying away.

When he’s gone, I turn to face the knight in shining armor I didn’t want or need, intent on telling him I can fight my own battles, but decide to keep my mouth shut when I see him.

Silas’s dark brown eyes reflect the sun, stern expression sorta melting away when he looks away from the entitled man and down at me.

The gray suit he’s wearing complements my dress perfectly, like he’d been in my room while I was dressing and watched so we could match. The way it folds and bends across the muscle of his chest and arms. I bite the inside of my cheek, tilting my head to look a little closer at the tattoos sprawling up his neck, peeking out from the top of the suit.

I feel physically small in his presence.

“Do I look like I’m for sale?” I arch an eyebrow, crossing my arms in front of my chest to create some distance between us.

He scoffs, air puffing his lips. If I didn’t know better, I’d think it was a soft laugh, but I do, in fact, know better. Silas slowly lifts his pointer finger and slides a strand of white hair from the front of my face, his golden ring glinting in the light.

“You can’t put a price on you,” he whispers huskily, leaning closer, his chest touching my arms. “Men would still pay millions, but that has nothing to do with your looks.”

My stomach flips, heat rushing to my cheeks, but I scoff to cover up the effect his words have on me.

“Let’s get this over with,” I mumble, clearing my throat and turning my back to him. “I have to get back to the studio tonight.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I hear Silas's footsteps follow me as we make our way past the concrete front steps and into the entrance of the courthouse.

Once we move through the metal detectors, a security guard nods his head in acknowledgment, waving us forward before searching another visitor's bag.

I try to focus on the click of my heels as I walk, but all I can think about is the fact I'm headed to get my marriage license.

I'm getting fucking married.

I can feel Silas's gaze piercing through the back of my skull, as if he can feel my panic, peeling away each layer of apprehension with his eyes as dread seeps into my veins. We wind down a long hallway, reaching the elevator only after passing three security checkpoints.

Silas holds the elevator door open for me, and I step inside. Once our button is pressed, my palms sweat a little. I can smell his cologne, feel the heat radiating off him.

I knew this was going to happen. I agreed to this, but there is a sudden burst of panic surging through me.

What if this doesn't work? What if Stephen kills someone when he finds out? What if Silas's family learns the truth, that this is all a hoax?

What if. What if. What. If.

The clanging of metal and grinding of gears fills my ears. A gut-wrenching shriek rips through the air as the elevator suddenly jolts forward. My body shoots forward, my hands instinctively reaching out to grab the railings on either side as the lights flicker for a few seconds before returning to normal.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Silas groans from beside me, pressing the emergency help button. A dial tone fills the confined space.

I can barely hear the conversation between him and the elevator operating company over the thudding in my ears. My throat itches, heat crawling up my spine.

As if I needed another sign, the power goes out completely, submerging us in total darkness. The lady over the speaker assures us that someone will be coming to help soon, but it's already too late.

Small, dark space.

I close my eyes, trying to steady my breathing and calm my racing thoughts. No one talks about how suffocating the darkness is. How it forms

tangible hands, wraps them around your throat and squeezes until you forget what the light looked like.

Two years I spent choking on the dark.

“It’s going to be alright—”

“This is a mistake,” I spit out, leaning against the wall behind me. “This is a sign that this entire fucking thing is a mistake.”

A manic laugh spills from my lips as I shake my head.

“We don’t even know each other. We’re strangers, and this is a stupid mistake. We can’t do this—”

“Stop.” His voice bounces off the walls. “Breathe.”

My heart skips as I realize that he moved closer, his minty breath tickling my face. I thought having him so close would only increase my anxiety, but it doesn’t.

I’ve been walking on a tightrope, and he’s become this steady net beneath me. Always there for some reason when my mind spirals and the world moves too fast.

I inhale, filling my nose with the smell of him before releasing it out of my mouth.

“Good girl, Hex,” He praises softly, fingers gently touching my arm. “Ask me.”

“What?” I whisper, taking another deep breath as I open my eyes, even though I can’t see him.

“Whatever you need to know, ask me.” His voice is steady. “Ask me. Let me talk to you. Make me more than a voice.”

Let me talk to you.

That’s how this started, didn’t it? All because I went digging for his number in a pair of shoes. When I was falling apart and his voice helped me pick up the pieces.

Maybe somehow, my brain connected his voice to safety, some type of positive feedback loop. When I hear him, I feel lighter. Not this heavy, damaged person weighed down by pain.

I take my bottom lip between my teeth. How do I tell him I need him to stay a voice? That I can’t want to know him?

How do I say I want to know everything about you more than everything? What you’ll be and where you’ve been. I want to know what it feels like to touch you, really fucking touch you.

How do I tell him that I want that but can’t have it?

That it would kill him if I took what I wanted.

“What’s your favorite color?” I ask dumbly.

Silas moves next to me, his shoulder touching mine before I hear him slide to the wall, sitting down. Knowing we will be here for a while, I join him on the floor, stretching my legs out in front of me.

“Orange,” he breathes out, sighing around the words.

I stifle a laugh. “Like neon orange?”

“Like a reddish orange.”

I’m surprised by his answer. He seems like a gray kinda guy. Most people include their favorite color in their home or wardrobe. I’ve never once seen him wear orange and didn’t see it in his apartment.

It’s probably a personal thing.

“What’s our story?” I direct my gaze ahead of me, watching the black stretch before us, letting the pressure of Silas’s leg pressing against mine act as a reminder that I’m no longer trapped in that basement.

“You saw me and fell madly in love. Demanded I marry you.”

A smirk tugs at my lips as I swivel my head toward him, even though I can’t make out his features in the dark. “Did you just make a joke, Hawthorne?”

His shoulder lifts in a shrug beside me, confirming what I heard in his voice, a smirk.

“Seriously, you can’t send me into your family’s home and expect me to make this realistic if I don’t have a lie ready to go. If things were different, how would we have met?”

There is silence for a beat, just the sound of our level breathing before he speaks.

“Your studio,” he says, his leg pressing harder into my thigh. “Hedi told me to come see the work you were doing for Light. You were finishing up with a class, wearing something old and baggy, overalls or a T-shirt with too many holes in it. And I couldn’t leave without knowing you.”

My breath gets caught in my throat, and I roll my lips together. It’s just a story, only make-believe. But a secret part of me wishes it were real, even for just a moment.

“I somehow convinced you to go to dinner, which will be the hardest part of this story to get my family to believe.”

“Why?” I ask, furrowing my brow in confusion.

“Because you’re fucking stubborn.”

I laugh, loudly. A real laugh that I feel deep in my stomach, an uninhibited sound of joy, because he's right.

"I spent the rest of the night trying to make you recreate that sound." He leans into my side a little more. "The rest my mother doesn't need to hear about."

The elevator jerks, and a gasp slips from my lips. A god-fucking-awful noise rings in my ears and my hand shoots out, gripping his thigh. My nails dig into the skin as my stomach plummets.

My eyes squeeze shut, as if that will prevent my impending doom. Then my heart starts to race for an entirely different reason. Silas's arm reaches across me, gripping my hip in his large palm and hauling me into his lap.

Instinctively, my legs spread, straddling him, and my hands rest on his shoulders to balance myself as he forces me into his space further.

"Ask me another question, Hex." His breath is molten hot on my neck, the gravel in the back of his throat rubbing across my skin.

The heart radiating off his body is making it impossible to resist pushing myself against him. His fingers trace patterns on my hips.

This is bad.

So fucking bad.

An ache, deep and relentless, throbs between my thighs. I bite down on the inside of my cheek, trying to ignore it, feeling the hot flush spread across my skin. Trying not to do something stupid like grind myself against his lap like a needy cat.

"I, um." I stutter and stumble over words. I pull back from him just a little bit, hands pressing firmly on his chest to steady myself. My knees dig into the floor beneath us. "You ask me a question."

"Your tattoo," he says softly. "Why Medusa?"

I'd nearly forgotten about the black-and-gray tattoo on my upper back—out of sight, out of mind, I suppose. But the memory comes flooding back, the flash of needles and ink as it was etched into my flesh.

That's exactly what this moment feels like with Silas.

A deep burning, faint tugging as the needle penetrates skin. It's sharp and dull all at once and leaves you with a permanent reminder of the experience.

Again, the elevator jolts and shudders around us, sending me tumbling forward into his chest once again. My head is tucked tight against the side of his neck, palm pressed flat behind his head against the cold metal wall.

“I turn men to stone, why else?” My voice is tinged with heat I have no control over.

His grip tightens, painfully squeezing at my sides so hard my skin buzzes with the sensation. Everything is so warm—the pressure between my thighs, his breath hot against my ear—it feels like fire burning through my veins.

“Mhmm,” he hums, lips pressing against the side of my throat. I feel the vibration of the sound on my skin, making my thighs squeeze his waist.

“That isn’t an answer,” I choke out through the heat, letting my weight fall on his lap, nearly whimpering when I feel his hardened length beneath me pressing into my damp panties.

“I’m trying to decide if I should keep letting you tell me pretty little lies so you can continue pretending.” His teeth graze the sensitive skin on my neck. “Or tell you that I see right through you.”

My breath comes out faster, using my hand behind his head to create space, looking down. It’s dark, but I can feel his eyes on my mouth.

We lean toward one another, my forehead touching his.

I can feel his breath, like a secret. Hidden and irresistible.

“Don’t.” I shake my head slightly, I feel him freeze beneath me. “This isn’t real.”

My words are meant to remind him that this arrangement is fake, maybe pierce the veil of lust with reason.

“Nothing in the dark is,” he mutters, the tip of his nose bumping mine, “If it’s dark, it’s still not real.”

His hand moves up from my spine to the base of my neck before he pulls me in close with a bruising grip.

Our lips are so close now they are almost touching, so close yet not close enough.

Reason starts to bleed out.

Whatever happens in the dark stays here, I tell myself. I could kiss him in the shadows, and we’d forget it happened when they disappear.

But the elevator jerks one final time—the only thing around us with a clear mind, apparently, is a piece of machinery. I pull away, chest heaving as I look down at his eyes.

We are no longer covered by the darkness.

The light has returned, and so has reality.

We manage to detangle our limbs from one another, standing on our feet and naturally moving to opposite ends of the elevator. I curl an arm around my waist, cheeks warm as the silence only makes things more awkward.

Silas clears his throat just before a ding resounds and the doors open.

Outside are several staff members with looks of concern on their faces. When we step out, they immediately begin speaking to Silas. He is this man, after all, and I'm but a dainty, frail woman.

I refrain from rolling my eyes before walking a few feet away, just to get some space. My mind does that thing where it blocks everything out, falls into itself, and has conversations others aren't privy to.

The first time I'd stumbled into Vervain, searching for someone to hook up with, I was desperate to erase the memory of Stephen's body inside of mine. Wanted to shed the skin cells he'd burnt with his fingertips, shut my eyes, and not see him on top of me.

I found the only way I could do that was if I was in control. I had to be on top. It had to be quick and only for the mindless bliss that came with an orgasm. It wasn't about connection or feeling, just trying to fuck away the memory of the man who robbed my body.

Silas Hawthorne had his hands all over me, and even though I was straddling his lap, never once did I think of anything except him. I smelled nothing but his tobacco-and-oak scent.

Even in the pitch-black, it was still Silas's face in my mind. That never wavered for a second.

I'm not afraid of sex with him. I'm scared that it won't just be sex between us. Not when there is this connection between us. A whispered language. One he hears when I'm in distress that lets him know how to anchor me. Words that feel like a soothing balm on my skin after years of standing in scorching flames.

Needing a distraction, I reach into my small handbag, grabbing my phone. I'm planning on texting Lilac, asking her what she wants for dinner so I can pick it up on my way home, but there is an unknown number on my screen.

Unknown: I wouldn't have hurt her, Circe. You know I wouldn't do that to you. It was only so you could get my gifts. Did you like them? Make sure you tell the Schizo to keep his hands where they belong, yeah? I miss you. I'll be seeing you soon.

How the fuck does he keep getting my number?

“Silas,” I call above the noise of courthouse staff members.

His eyes immediately shift to mine, tuning out everyone but me. His strides close the short gap between us. Without uttering a word, I turn my phone for him to see the screen.

“Can I have that?” He motions to the phone when he’s finished reading, the energy from the elevator gone, replaced by a man who carries a look of anger. “I’ll buy you a new one.”

I nod, letting him take it from my hands.

“We need to prepare for what he’s going to do when he finds out we’re married,” I say. “He won’t take it well.”

“That’s what I’m counting on.”

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SEVENTEEN

OLD HABITS

SILAS

“WILL you stop chewing so fucking loud?” Alistair says as he kicks the shit out of Rook’s rolling chair next to me with a loud thud.

I look over, watching Rook smirk as he eats another Dorito, chomping his teeth loudly just to be a dick. His fingers are dusted with cheese dust, feet kicked up on my desk. I shake my head, thinking about how many times he’s done this exact thing over the years of our friendship, holed up in whatever cave I’ve created, eating a snack while I fuck around on a computer.

My keyboard glows deep blue beneath my hands. The faux typewriter clacks echo as I turn my head slightly to look at one of the smaller screens to the left of the large, illuminated monitor in front of me.

“What exactly are you doing, and why do I need to be here for it?”

“Bonding, Thatcher. Don’t act like you didn’t miss me,” Rook says, gesturing to the screens in front of him. “And he’s doing something cool with technology. Wormholes and digital smokescreens.”

Thatcher rolls his eyes. In the reflection of one of the screens, I watch him cross his arms, leaning back against the metal table behind him. “Do you even know what those words mean?”

“Nope.”

I huff out a laugh. He’s been around this stuff long enough. I’m surprised that’s all he’s picked up on.

Green numbers cascade across the screen to my right, a smirk tilting my lips. After weeks of tracking emails and analyzing IP addresses, the web he’s spun is unraveling with every keystroke.

I feel myself relax into my work. Everything around me seems to slow, the soft hum of the servers and blinking lights fading into white noise that envelops the basement of my apartment. It's a temporary solace from reality. The shelves of cables and circuit boards cast neon hues along the glass-and-metal desk in front of me.

My playground. My safe haven.

For weeks, I've filed through received lines and analyzed each IP address in reverse order. In a matter of minutes, if I'm lucky, I'll have the sender's original email server.

I won't be able to track their location, but I'll be able to do the next best thing.

There are rules you must follow with technology, codes and sequences that are unchangeable. But once you master them, understand the way they work, it's yours for the taking.

When I was young, my father told me that every self-respecting man needed to know how to play chess. It was while learning that game that I fell in love with computers. He would rattle off moves using algebraic notation. Pawn by Pawn, Knight is taken.

Hacking is one big chess game. It's why I'm so good at it.

"Not to rush your genius, but you need to be at the courthouse in less than an hour," Rook says next to me, as if I needed to be reminded of what today is.

Today is my wedding day.

Coraline's face appears in my mind, fingers slowing down a little on the keys as I recall the feel of her tight, warm body pressed into mine three days ago. My tongue runs across the front of my teeth, the smell of her still lingering in my nose.

Lavender and honey.

Simple ingredients, addictive on her skin.

She's ignored every signal one of my texts since then, minus today when I sent her the time to be at the courthouse in Ponderosa Springs, which got me a simple *Ok*.

Not even the full word.

I can't tell if she's avoiding me because she hated what happened in the elevator or she liked it, which scares her. Everything about her is an enigma. There is a softness that shows, only to be combated by a regal hardness that echoes across her sharp tongue.

Like her brain feels herself being vulnerable and sends bots to shut it down, choosing to snap at anyone who dares get too close to breaking her walls. I know she feels it, that connection between us.

“Speaking of your fiancée,” Rook says. “What’s up with that?”

I turn toward him a little, arching an eyebrow.

He moves his feet from the desk, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. “Does she know about your schizophrenia?”

Do you? I want to ask.

This guy has been my best friend for years. He forced me to eat when all I wanted to do was wither away. Stood by me while I was bitter, celebrated when I healed.

There’s never been a moment, good or bad, without Rook Van Doren in it.

Yet, he still doesn’t know me.

Not entirely, not fully, not the way I know him.

“She grew up in the Springs, didn’t she?” I retort.

Rook grew up in a violent home with a father who instilled in him that anguish would be his way of repenting. Every day, even when I don’t see him physically, I know he struggles to not chase the high of pain. It’s RVD’s favorite drug.

The bite, the sting, the rush of suffering.

It festers in him like a bad habit, and he’s fighting through recovery.

We used to race each other through the woods around the Peak when we were kids. I’ve been beside him while we ran from the police. I know he’s terrified of losing the good things he has in his life.

Sage. The boys.

Smiling to hide his darkest secret of all. That sometimes, he’s not happy. Sometimes, the nightmares of his past still creep into bed with him and hold him hostage.

“I just want to make sure she knows about your meds. That way, you don’t—”

“I don’t need a fucking caretaker, Rook.” My voice is harsh, cold, and cutting. The sad thing is I’m not even mad at him.

I’m frustrated at the situation.

I don’t blame him for his hovering. I know he’s only afraid of losing me after everything we went through, but it also makes him impossible to talk to.

The one person I want to tell more than anyone else, and I can't because he'll be the first one to check me back into the hospital.

My computer screen flashes at me, the original sender's IP address displaying across the front. I bite the inside of my cheek, feeling a little relief that the hard part of this is done.

"It's not Easton," I mutter.

The IP address he gave us doesn't match. Which means destroying Stephen's old office while Easton watched after we held him at gunpoint was fruitless.

All we found out was that Wayne Caldwell is, in fact, footing the bill for his mistress and her only son. I know Alistair says it doesn't bother him, schools his features and moves forward.

But I know him.

I know the young boy in him that never got the childhood he deserves from his father is hurt. Which is exactly why when I went to pick him up today, Briar was in a foul mood, and he was beating up a punching bag.

The wounds a parent leaves on their child never go away.

They only grow with them into adulthood.

"Is it Stephen?"

I shrug, looking over my shoulder at Alistair. "Probably. I don't know for sure. Either way, whoever sent it is about to have their entire hard drive wiped."

The custom software I've spent years building was built for things like this. A few minutes on, the clock ticks by before I deliver a malware to their system. They won't even have time to know it's there before it destroys their system and erases itself.

"It'll erase the video?" Thatcher asks from behind me.

I nod, leaning back in my chair and placing my hands behind my head. "Unless they made a copy, which I doubt considering how shitty their firewalls are, it'll be gone in the next twenty seconds."

One problem down, several more to go.

At least me burning a body won't be on national news.

"Feel like celebrating this little victory?"

Three heads whip toward Alistair, curiosity passing through each of us.

"Briar wants to play a game," he mutters, shoving his phone into his leather jacket pocket.

A game.

The Graveyard. The Labyrinth. The Gauntlet. The Peak.

All hosts to a different wicked game at least one of us has partaken in the past several years, varying in danger and always unhinged.

We were fifteen when we competed in the Gauntlet for the first time. The first day of spring, West Trinity Falls and Ponderosa Springs go to war. The games and locations change every year, but the adrenaline remains. The game that year was *Fugitive*. You had some kids driving cars, playing as cops, and the other half were your escaped prisoners. The goal was to steal something of value from the opposing team's town and make it back to your home limits without getting caught.

We'd won after we stole a police cruiser from West Trinity's local department. That was also the first time Rook's dad had to bail us out of jail.

We'd been playing games since we were kids. It'll always be something that pumps adrenaline through our veins like liquid fire.

Rook snorts, a smirk adorning his lips. "I'm sure that has nothing to do with your primal/prey kink the two of you are into."

"Fuck off, Van Doren. You branded Sage's ass. With a lighter." Alistair lifts his middle finger in his direction, but Rook's response is simply to stick out his tongue and wink like a child. "Plus, it wasn't Briar's idea. It was Lyra's."

Thatcher chuckles under his breath, a rare sound that only comes out when his girlfriend is around or mentioned. He presses his thumb and forefinger into his eyes, shaking his head.

Lyra is sneaky, going to the girls knowing Thatch would say no. Not because he doesn't want to play but because with everything going on, his main priority is protecting Ponderosa Springs' favorite bug queen.

"Loner Society initiation for Coraline," he says.

Despite the years that had gone by, we're still held hostage by the same captivating hunger for rebellion, our souls intoxicated for the thrill of what happens at nightfall.

We are creatures of the night always, bleeding chaos and untamable.

No matter where we went or how far apart we drifted, we would remain forever at the mercy of the darkness.

"What game?" Rook asks.

"Hide-and-seek." Alistair's mouth curls into a sinister smirk. "At Hollow Heights University."

My blood runs hot through my veins at the thought of seeking her out, proving that no matter how good of a fight she puts up, she can't escape that connection between us.

I can still feel her nails clawing into my shoulders, her trembling beneath my touch in the elevator. She wanted to melt and bend beneath me, but her mind refused.

Getting stuck in that elevator with her was only further confirmation of something I already knew in the marrow of my bones. A thought I'd tamped down and tried to deny since the moment I walked out of her hospital room two years ago.

I want Coraline Whittaker.

That ominous and painful thing inside of her that scratches and bites? The one that scares her? I want it to leave marks on me. It screams for me when she lets me in close, begging me to run my tongue along every square inch of her taut skin.

Her futile attempts to put distance between us only feed my hunger. Coraline wants me to fear her, as if that lovely, dark thing inside of her is something to run from. She's the only one who can't see that it's a siren's call.

It's not her looks that pull men to the depths of her sea, drowning themselves for a chance to touch her.

It's the aura of mystery that shrouds around her every move. That untouchable, intangible force buried in her bones.

She can fight it if she likes. It won't change anything.

Whatever she dishes out, I'll swallow whole.

"We need masks."

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EIGHTEEN

ZUGZWANG

SILAS

THE AIR SMELLS LIKE RAIN, touched with a buzz that lets you know lightning is coming soon.

“You think she’ll show?”

I drag my tongue across my bottom lip as headlights appear from between the trees. Coraline’s car hesitantly pulls through the already opened ironclad gates that lead to Hollow Heights University.

Alistair snatches the cigarette between my fingers, taking a long drag before expelling several smoke rings that drift into the darkness.

“Yeah.”

My black long-sleeve shirt stretches across my back as I cross my arms, leaning back onto my car.

I’m pleasantly surprised, considering when I texted her with the proposition of tonight’s game, she left me on read.

Stubborn girl.

She carefully pulls into one of the many open spots in the student lot, turning her car off and opening her door.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip when she steps out, the wind catching her hair immediately. It blows back from her head in a curtain of brown tendrils, and she tucks my favorite two pieces behind her ears.

“I love the smell of breaking and entering.” Rook howls as he slings an arm over his girlfriend’s shoulder.

Getting used to seeing Sage Donahue was one of my hardest challenges after I got out of the ward. She’s the twin of my dead ex-girlfriend. For the longest time, all I ever saw when I looked at her was Rosemary, but time had been a secret blessing.

I no longer flinch when she comes around or avoid looking at her. All of their differences in appearance started to become more clear. She's snarky and sometimes overdramatic, while Rose was more relaxed. Their hair is separate shades of red, eyes different colors, noses various shapes. She slowly became just Sage, no longer a mirror image of the love I'd lost.

It brought me peace that a part of Rose, no matter how small, got to live on in her happiness. I know it would make her sister happy to see her becoming the person she'd always thought her twin could be.

"It's not breaking and entering if you have keys." Alistair shakes the keys in his hand with a smirk before shoving them into his pocket.

"Is that my shirt?" Briar says, tilting her head to look at Sage's outfit.

"You literally have on my jeans."

I shake my head in amusement and let out a little puff of air from my lips as I look back over to Coraline, slowly making her way across the lot toward our group. The girls rush to her side, smiling while Coraline looks terrified from the attention. Nervous even, as if she's not already one of them.

She'd been accepted the moment she punched a grown man in the face for Sage.

I watch them interact, drowning out the sound of the guys, her shoulders starting to relax, a smile tugging at her lips before her laugh echoes to my ears.

Coraline could be happy if she believed long enough she deserved it.

When they start to walk a little closer, her eyes flicking to mine, I let her watch me drink her in.

Her sun-kissed limbs are displayed in her barely there black shorts. A tight matching black Thrasher crop top stretches across her tits, putting a graphic image of my dick wedged between them in my mind. My cock stirs behind my jeans at the thought.

This town tells me I'm dead. For a while, a part of me was.

Coraline Whittaker has woken something up in me.

Desire, longing, need.

An ache I've never felt for anyone before. I don't need her to love me. It isn't about love.

I need her to be mine.

"Rook has the same shirt," Thatcher says when she gets close enough to hear him over the howling wind, leaning on the car next to me, Lyra falling

into his chest as he wraps his around her front.

“Must have good taste, then,” she snips, adjusting the leather jacket on her shoulders.

“Debatable,” he mumbles before pressing his nose to the side of Lyra’s head, burying his nose into her loose curls like a psycho. I joke that he’d live inside of her body if he could.

Which turned into a long-winded debate about a vore kink.

“Now that everyone is here, let’s go over the rules.” Lyra rubs her hands together. “We get thirty minutes to hide. When the time is up, we each send a text message to our seeker with one clue. If you can’t find the person hiding, you’re allowed to call them for some direction. But they can only say hot or cold.”

“Who’s looking for who?” Coraline asks, crossing her arms in front of her chest and looking around at the group for someone to give her an answer.

When her gaze stops on me, the realization dawns on her.

“It’s a couple thing, got it. Stupid question,” she says as she nods. “So you’ll be—”

“Hunting down my fiancée.” I pull my bottom lip between my teeth, preventing a smirk.

Lightning cracks across the sky, breaking across the horizon like a jigsaw puzzle, accompanied by roaring thunder, warnings for the storm rolling closer.

“You guys have thirty minutes to find us,” Briar says, continuing the rules, “and you can’t help each other. You gotta hunt all alone, boys.”

Coraline raises an eyebrow. “What do the winners get?”

“That’s between you”—Rook points in her direction before jerking his thumb at me—“and the silent one.”

The couples around us began to disperse, prepping before the girls spread out to hide. Coraline takes a step closer to me, standing just inches from where I rest against the hood of my car.

Her eyes are dark, the kind of dark that looks inviting. Lures you in.

“Was starting to think you weren’t going to show.”

“I wasn’t.” She rolls her lips together, a blush tinting her cheeks. “But then I remembered hearing about all the infamous games you four played in high school. The teenager in me wouldn’t let me say no to a chance of living out a fantasy I had of being invited.”

My eyes squint a bit as I tilt my head, biting the inside of my cheek with amusement.

“You have a crush on one of the nightmarish Hollow Boys in high school, Hex?”

Her eyes roll, but the blush on her face remains. I was just teasing, but something tells me I might just be on the money with my guess.

“You wish,” she scoffs, playing it off. “So what do I get when I win?”

I push off my car, taking another step forward, and look down my nose at her with my hands tucked into my pockets. Everything about her is small compared to me.

“What do you want?” My voice is a gruff grunt, huskier than normal.

Coraline hums in the back of her throat, debating her options. I glance down at her hands, fingertips tinted blue, stained from paint.

She fixes her gaze on me, eyes determined.

“You have to tell me a secret,” she says finally, sure of herself in her words. “Something no one else knows about you.”

The howling wind carries all the whispered truths I’ve never said aloud. A thought passes through my mind without my consent.

Would you believe me?

Do I have enough faith that if I told her, she’d trust my words without physical proof? Or would she be just like everyone else, placed inside a box in my life, a box that’s just beyond my reach but I can never touch.

“And when I win?” I ask.

“If,” she points out, slitting her eyes at me with a challenge. “I’ll give you the same in return.”

She says that likes it’s enough. Like one secret of hers is all I want from her.

“Timer starts in one minute!” Lyra shouts from where she stands.

I turn my upper body, grabbing the mask that rests on the hood of my car and holding it in one hand as I shake my head.

“Nah,” I mutter, determination setting in. “I don’t want one secret from you, Hex. I want them all.”

I slip the black balaclava over my face, leaving only my eyes visible. She’s about to speak again, ready to argue, but I lean in closer, my mouth right next to her ear, the smell of lavender in her hair.

Her body shivers under my touch, making me smirk behind the thin fabric that covers my face.

“*When* I find you, not if, I’ll let you know what I want,” I whisper, dragging my mouth across the shell of her ear. “Start running.”

CORALINE

Hollow Heights University is a creep show during the day, plucked straight from the pages of a Victorian ghost story.

When the sun sets? It’s a nightmare.

The hairs on my neck stand up as I sprint through the colonnades of the Kennedy District. The rain splatters against the cobblestone, thunder rumbling in the distance.

Shadows from the Ponderosa Forest in the distance shift in the night, their trunks twisting in the wind like gnarled fingers beckoning me forward. Wails from the rushing Pacific scream from just next to me, the saltwater breeze pouring in through the archways. Gargoyles standing guard over the campus illuminate when the lightning strikes and seem to move when they are plunged back into darkness.

We invite success, the decades-old university motto reads.

The only invitations ever sent out for this place are to hell.

It is built on bones and cracked teeth. Bloody secrets soak the pages of books in the Caldwell Library. Travesty and betrayal leak from every statue and fountain on the grounds.

This is where people send their children to become great leaders, only to be surprised when they become corrupt, money-hungry animals instead.

A part of me is glad I never graduated from here.

It’s eerily silent when I push through the heavy mahogany doors. Each footstep echoes for miles down the dark corridors. It smells like dread, and a part of me is afraid to admit that I’m scared to slow down in fear of catching a glimpse of a ghost.

The alarm on my phone almost makes me leave my skin. The resounding noise piercing the silence reminds me that I’m out of time to hide. Quickly, I dip into one of the closed classroom doors on the first floor of the English department.

The door slams behind me as I move across the room. It's an auditorium-style classroom, with endless rows of seats to my left. Knowing I have to send Silas a clue soon, I decided to hide behind the professor's desk.

My train of thought is that Silas will be opening doors, peering inside each of them to find me. So I slide my back down the side of the desk, letting the large piece of wood hide me from the door.

It does, however, leave me facing a wall of tall windows that looks out onto the campus square. Surely, he wouldn't walk around outside in the rain.

With no time to change my mind, I open my phone, shooting him a text. My pulse is in my thumb as I type, heartbeat thudding in my ears. I hadn't expected this to be so fucking intense, but once we all took off from the parking lot, it turned into more than a game.

I'm being hunted.

Stalked and tracked by an apex predator rumored to stop at nothing to get what he wants.

"Rumor says if you walk where I'm hiding at midnight, you can hear the screams of a girl whose unrequited love made her take her own life."

The whoosh of my text being sent rings out in the quiet room.

I quickly remove my leather jacket, feeling stupid for wearing it, knowing I was going to be running, and toss it in front of me. I place my phone to my chest, listening to my heart beat in my ears, trying to catch my breath, and my head tilts back, hitting the wooden desk behind me.

My eyes focus on the show of electric light dancing across the sky, the sweeping darkness and wind that dance outside Hollow Heights' courtyard.

There was no real reason why I agreed to this. Not a good one anyway.

I was sitting on the floor scattered with paint-stained tarps, staring at a blank canvas while trying to decide if I should just order Thai food and watch *The Great British Baking Show*, when Lyra sent yet another text message. I wasn't going to come.

And then, this little thing.

A sparkle.

It flared and shot across my chest like a falling star. A glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, I could forge friendships. That this could be a chance to not be so fucking alone.

When I tried integrating back into my old life, visiting past friends, trying to move forward, I kept messing it up. I was too quiet or too harsh for friends I'd known since middle school. I wasn't fun anymore.

This relieved a brutal truth about my future.

I'm not deserving of the life I once had because I'm a different person.

A meaner, colder version.

My isolation from people was from fear, the fear I saw in the mirror every morning when I woke up. It lived beneath my skin, roaches burrowing into my flesh, and only I could see it. Fear that I was not deserving of anything good, because I'm not good.

So many women I've met through Light are kind. Giving, nurturing hearts that smile through the horror of their experiences. They flourish like beautiful flowers, and people admire their strength. I admire their strength to still love and trust this world after what it did to them.

No one commends what I turned into.

I am not a tulip you can pluck from the earth, sit in a vase, and admire until it wilts.

I became barren land. A desolate valley where no life could thrive. You could not scoop me into your hands without me eating away at whatever cage you tried to put me in.

They judge, they criticize me, they tell me I should be thankful and learn to heal. As if my anger isn't the result of me trying to shed old skin and mending scars. As if my fucking anger isn't me learning how to heal.

I deserve my anger, and it deserves me.

My phone's ringtone blares loudly, and I scramble to answer, needing it to shut up before it gives up my hiding spot.

"Hello?" I whisper, not having time to check the caller ID before hitting the neon green button.

"Coraline."

That fucking voice. His fucking voice.

It's criminal.

The way he says my name is like sinners who plead hallelujah. It rolls off his tongue, a prayer that he savors, letting it linger on his lips. His voice reverberates around the room, clinging to the air as if he didn't want to let it out of his mouth, wanting to keep me there.

"Cold," I murmur, remembering the rules Lyra had spoken earlier.

He could only get temperature directions. Cold when he was far away, warm when he got close, hot when he was about to find me.

“You’re not cold, Hex,” he rasps through the speaker. “I felt you burning beneath my hands just the other day.”

My stomach drops, making me swallow nervously. This conversation takes me back to that night on the roof when Silas wasn’t Silas. He was only a voice.

A voice that heals, soothes, and makes my thighs tighten.

I find it ridiculous that a person who is known to not speak talks to me. That an outcast with mystery riddled throughout lets his voice be heard by someone like me.

The man who they said was a soundless void possesses a voice that turns me inside out.

Apparently, my pussy is voice activated.

It’s just worse now because I have a concrete image of what he looks like now.

Silas Hawthorne has been lethal in the looks department since high school, lean and toned, moving like he owned the ground beneath him. While my friends and I used to joke about their reign of terror, my breath always hitched when he came into a room.

Now? He’s a man.

Arms thick with muscle, tall and imposing in the biggest of rooms, everything about him twitches with power. He’s carved from granite, built for wars in the name of the Roman Empire, but carries the heart of a Greek poet, dripping tragic love with every split vein.

A door slams in the distance, making me gasp. The empty halls make everything sound closer than they appear, like he’s right next to me.

“Is your heart racing, knowing I’m going to find you?”

I scoff, lying through my teeth. “Colder.”

My ears pick up on the sound of him releasing an exhale, like he’s chuckling. A short, quick secret laugh.

“Did you just laugh?” I whisper, unable to help myself from asking.

“Scream for me, and you can find out.” His breath hisses out, mocking me.

Another door slams, ricocheting down the hall to the room I’m in. Fear prickles down my spine, but not the kind I’m afraid of. It feels more like the

kind of fear people chase down. The kind adrenaline junkies want to bottle up and swallow when they are bored.

“Wanna know what you’re going to give me when I win, Hex?” It’s spoken like a threat, just before another slam thunders in my ear. “A taste of that witchy mouth.”

My tongue traces my bottom lip at the thought, knowing he’d devour me with his mouth if I let him. I don’t know much about Silas Hawthorne, but he doesn’t do sweet in the bedroom.

There is an undeniable energy that lets me know I’d leave his bed with bruises on my throat and scratches on my skin.

He wouldn’t just kiss me; he would devour me whole and fuck if I don’t want to let him.

My thighs press together, rubbing up and down, forcing my jean shorts to rub against my damp panties. The little spark of friction makes me want more, making me want it all.

I bite down on my tongue as the hand not holding the phone makes a trail down my body. My palm rubs against my breast, and my nipples tighten around the metal piercing them, making me arch my back into my own touch.

“Warmer,” I hum when my ears pick up on the sound of his boots touching the ivory floors.

I let my hand skim my stomach, legs outstretched as my eyes close. In the dark of this classroom, I let my mind wander, let it think about Silas peering down at me, watching me.

How his eyes would drink me in, like they did when I got out of my car tonight.

“Do you taste sweet, Coraline? If I was a betting man, I’d say yes,” he whispers, a wicked promise in the back of his throat. “You’re going to drip like honey on my tongue, aren’t you?”

His voice grows electric, tangible hands, lighting me up, practically forcing me to slip my hand beneath the hem of my shorts. I try to bite back the whimper in my throat when the pads of my fingers drag across the middle of my panties.

I’m wet, soaking the thin fabric, dripping like honey, and all I can think about is Silas licking it up.

The sound of his shoes drifts away, and my ears strain, trying to listen for another door opening, but I hear nothing. My insides feel like a coil

waiting to snap, only his breathing on the other side of the line when my fingers sneak into my underwear.

“Are you hiding somewhere no one can see you touching yourself?”

My eyes snap open, panicked, as I whirl my head around the desk, looking at the closed door. There isn’t any other point of entry, and when I look toward the tall windows, it’s nothing but rain. Not a single hint of movement.

“How—”

“If you moan a little louder next time, I’ll be able to find you, Hex.” There is a smirk on his lips—I hear it in the way his words curve and wrap around me.

“Cold,” I gasp when my middle finger slips between my folds, sending a shock wave of pleasure from the tips of my toes to my spine. An ache radiates from my core, begging me for more, begging him for more.

“When I find you with your hand still in your panties, are you going to let me replace your fingers with my tongue?”

My breath catches in my throat when his teasing banter turns into something more primal, a low growl in his mouth with every word. With my eyes shut, it’s almost as if he’s right in my ear, his lips rubbing against the sensitive skin of my neck, muttering every filthy word.

“Ice-cold,” I tease, rubbing tight circles around my clit.

I’m anything but cold. My body is burning, mind whirling with lewd images. Flashes of Silas winding his hand in my hair, jerking me backward as he leaves red marks on my ass from fucking me so hard from behind. The look in his eyes when he sees my pierced nipples for the first time, how full I would be with his cock buried to the hilt in my body.

“Tsk. Tsk.” Silas clicks his tongue. “Don’t lie to yourself, baby. Don’t pretend you don’t want me between those thighs, eating your pussy until you drench my face. ’Cause that’s what I’ll do if you just let me find you.”

Lightning cracks outside, followed by harrowing thunder. My back arches, hips pressing into my finger more as I rub myself harder. My cunt drips onto my hand, a broken moan mingling with the storm outside.

I want his dark eyes gazing up at me from between my legs, bringing me to the edge of pleasure and watching me fall right off the cliff.

“I’ll spread you open, fill your dripping cunt with my fingers. Stretching you open so it’s nice and fucking ready for my cock. You’ll be nothing but a tight hole for me to use, yeah?”

His words make me tremble, hips jerking as I chase the friction from my hand. My legs spread open as if to make room for his wide shoulders, as if he's already here.

This is so fucked, but my body has already surrendered to his voice. I'm a puppet on his vocal cords, letting him string me up and play me as he sees fit. I'd let him use my body like a little toy, nothing but a thing for him to use and abuse until he's finished with me.

"Am I getting closer?"

"Hot," I gasp, my body fucking my fingers with vigor. "So fucking hot."

"I bet you are close, aren't you, baby? I can hear that tight pussy making a mess." He groans as if it physically hurts him. "Tell me where you are, pretty thing."

Sweat drips between my breasts beneath my shirt as I work myself over, the intense waves of pleasure from my clit making me shake. I fumble to put him on speakerphone, falling on all fours as the phone clatters to the ground, unbothered by the idea of him finding me, bent over with my hand in my pants.

My hips grind against my hand, the echoes of my moans and wet cunt ringing out in the classroom. I'm so close I can taste the aftermath of my climax on my tongue.

"What if I finish before you get here?" My throat constricts around the words, ending it with a desperate whine, practically begging him to find me so he can fuck me until my body breaks open for him.

"Then you'll have been such a *good girl* for me, Hex."

The feeling is indescribable. The way that sentence bounces off the walls around me, a direct line to my clit. My hips shove forward, taking me over the edge. It hits me like a freight train, my heart pummeling into my chest.

"Silas..." I whimper as the pulsations echo throughout my entire nervous system. My cunt clenches and unclenches around nothing, wishing it were him.

I twitch, rocking through the aftershock that sends little shocks through my stomach. My chest heaves as I drop my head between my shoulders, trying to catch my breath.

"That's the easiest orgasm you'll ever get from me." His tone is menacing, laced with unquenchable lust. "You'll work much harder for the

rest.”

I shiver at the threat, hand slipping from my shorts as I lean back onto the backs of my legs, kneeling in the darkness.

The alarm goes off on my phone. A grin lights up my face, a little laugh falling from my lips. An orgasm and a win. A surge of teenage pride wells up in me. I’d just defeated a Hollow Boy at one of their own games. “I win,” I say on an exhale. “Pay up, Hawthorne. Give me your secret.”

I wonder if the rest of the girls won or fell into similar circumstances as me.

“I love watching you come.”

My eyebrows pull together, confused. The satisfaction I’d felt moments before collapses like a deflating balloon, the room too silent once again.

Then I hear it, my ego shattering. A sound that chills me to the bone, a distinct tapping noise that draws my gaze toward the wall of windows.

There is more than darkness outside now.

Just beyond the glass is Silas, illuminated by the lightning that cast an ominous shadow across his face, letting me see his eyes burning into mine.

“Get the fuck up off your knees with your mouth open like that, Coraline, before I break this glass and make you choke on my cum.”

He watched the whole thing. He won and didn’t say anything just so he could see me come on my hand.

Slowly, he traces letters onto the window with his index finger, spelling out a word with measured strokes that make my heart quicken.

Zugzwang.

“English?” I snap, chewing a hole through my tongue as I stare at him, using the desk behind me for support to stand to my feet. My knees still shake, but I refuse to show him that.

“German,” he grunts, a tone full of sarcasm. His voice is rough and hoarse from lack of use, and I hate the way it tickles my spine. “Any move you make will only worsen your position.”

“Another chess term? So? What does that mean for me?”

This entire thing was a huge fucking mistake. Coming here, doing this with him. I’ve fallen into a hole that I’ll never be able to dig myself out of. Tomorrow, I’m marrying this man. Tomorrow, it’ll be a fight to keep every remaining wall protecting him from me intact.

Tomorrow, the war to protect his heart really begins.

“Inevitable checkmate.” He’s staring at me with hooded eyes that see all the lies I’ve tried to shove deep. He knows that what we just did broke a wall I’ll never be able to rebuild.

“It means you’re mine now, Hex.”

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

NINETEEN

TILL DEATH

CORALINE

WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL, maybe eight or nine, my father and Regina took me to my first and only wedding. At the time, I didn't understand what it all meant. All I knew was it was pretty, the historic property where the couple exchanged vows.

During the reception, while parents danced and drank the night away, leaving their children to the care of nannies and caretakers, I slipped outside and through a stone archway into the back garden, where petals from roses hung like red lanterns on black branches. Small pools of light from strategically placed torches illuminated paths winding through hedges trimmed with crystals that twinkled like stars.

It was by one of those lights that a boy named Jeremy gave me a flower.

A singular red rose that I swore to keep forever. We were little and had no idea what the world held for us. But in that moment? We knew everything. We felt everything. Tiny hearts playing tag in formal wear until we fell onto the damp grass, our heaving chests and giggles echoing into the night.

He'd looked at me before he left, holding my small hand in his, and said, "*I love you.*"

It hadn't been true. We'd only just met; we didn't know what the word meant yet, not really. We'd heard our parents say it, seen it in movies when people held hands.

But to us, in that garden, it was love.

It was enough.

It wasn't until months later that I learned from Regina's gossiping friends that my curse had run full circle for the very first time. Jeremy had

died in a car accident with his parents after leaving that garden.

I don't remember if I cried, only that I'd felt guilty because I hadn't kept the rose he gave me forever like I'd told him I would.

I didn't know it yet, but my cursed heart had already claimed two lives before I even started to believe my mother had passed something witchy down to me.

A jinx.

A hex.

That's all I've been thinking about for the past twenty minutes while I stand in this hallowed courthouse bathroom, trying to tame my hair into submission, but it's still refusing to cooperate.

I press my sweaty palms onto the sink, glancing in the mirror. The stray strands fly around my face, mocking me. The elegant bun I had in mind is pointless, not when the left side of my hair simply will not stay pinned back.

"Need some hair spray?"

I look up in the mirror, the reflection of my sister clear. She's holding a familiar garment bag over her arm and what I think is her makeup kit in the other.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, turning around so we are facing each other. "And why do you have that?"

Her cute brown wedges click against the floor as she walks toward me, yellow sundress matching perfectly with her tanned skin, golden curls framing her face.

We could not be more different.

"Despite the sentiment of this dress, it's too beautiful not to be worn, and I refuse to let you get married in..." She looks my simple black dress up and down with distaste. "That."

My mother's wedding dress.

It was a relic for something more than me. I didn't want to dishonor her memory by wearing it for a wedding that's only signed papers in a courthouse. It feels like I'm disrespecting her memory.

"It's not a real wedding, kid. We don't need a flower girl. "

There is a sigh on her lips, shoulders falling as she walks closer and lays the dress on the sink beside her makeup bag.

"He looks nervous too." She leans against the sink next to me, smirking as she bumps me with her hip. "If that helps."

“When did you see him?”

“Peeked into the courtroom.” Her eyes twinkle with that mischief I’ve come to know so well.

Silas is nervous?

Wait, of course he is. It’s not like he had much of a choice in the matter either.

“When did you become so nosey?” I ask, poking her shoulder with my index finger, a playful smile on my lips.

“Dude, I used to lay under your bed while you talked shit with your friends on three-way calls,” she teases back. “I’ve always been nosey. You’re just now picking up on it.”

I laugh, shaking my head at her silliness. On the darkest of days, she’s never failed to be a light at the end of the tunnel.

“He does look hot in a tux though.”

I can’t stop the blush that heats my cheeks at her words.

“Oh my God, you like him,” she gasps like she’d caught me in a lie. “You so like him!”

My eyes roll at her overreaction, trying to wipe my feelings from my face.

Attraction is not the reason I’m not singing wedding tunes and twirling my hair with joy. I know what he looks like, know there are hundreds of girls who would kill to be in my spot.

He makes me feel vulnerable. Makes me feel safe, like I can open myself up and know he wouldn’t run away scared by what’s inside.

“No I don’t,” I lie, tasting the bitterness of it on my tongue. “Besides, it doesn’t matter, Lilac. This is...it just doesn’t matter.”

A defeated sigh leaves her lips, giving up on trying to get me excited for this moment. With nimble fingers, she reaches into her purse, plucking a silver-and-blue pin from inside. Intricately designed with tiny blue crystals and delicate silver filigree, it’s a stunning piece of jewelry.

“You need something blue.” Lilac twirls her finger, motioning for me to turn around. Deciding not to argue with her on this one, I face the mirror again.

“I know you’re scared,” she whispers, fingering through my hair and winding it together. “Pretending to know what you went through won’t make it better, and arguing for you to let me in doesn’t take it away.”

I bite the inside of my cheek as she fixes my hair, reminding me of all the times I'd done just this same thing for her. When did she grow up?

"But I think Silas could be good for you, Coraline. I think you could be good for him too. The both of you reek of sadness."

My stomach rolls uneasily.

"You don't know him." I straighten my shoulders when she ties the bun behind my head. "This is to keep you safe, Lilac. It's not about love. Not everyone dreams of that."

"You used to," she states, meeting my eyes in the mirror. "You used to dream of falling in love. You may not remember it, but I do. Every bedtime fairy tale, every date with Emmett. I admired the way you chased love. Now, you just block it out."

That was before I became unworthy of it, I want to scream.

I want her to understand but don't know how to tell her.

That there are parts of me that still live in the Sinclair basement. He took things from me I'll never get back.

I can't just chase love because I know how fucking bitter the aftertaste is.

Love is a weapon, and I've killed too many people with it already.

She's right though. I am scared.

Terrified that a good man, a great man, like Silas is going to die because of me. There are two parts of me tearing me apart on the inside. The piece that knows how this ends and the piece that wants to be selfish.

I want to know him. To know how he struggles with things that aren't there, how he copes with his mind constantly playing tricks on him. If they still haunt his days and nights. I want to know what scares him and if they are the same as mine.

I want him, but not more than I want him to live.

"I wish you could see yourself the way I do. The way others see you. You're not this cold bitch, Coraline. No matter what the world tries to tell you." Her fingers push the pin into the top of my bun, effectively keeping the strands in place. "You're kind, and your heart was made to give. You're fiercely protective, more afraid of hurting others than you ever are of wounding yourself. You are allowed to let love in, Cora. I'm not telling you to fall for him. I'm just asking if the opportunity presents itself, remain open to the possibility. I'm asking you to take a chance at being happy. Seeing you so sad is killing me."

I love my sister, and when I see the subtle tears in her eyes shining from the bathroom overhead lights, it kills me. I'd do anything to secure her happiness, but I can't lie to her.

I can't tell her I'll give it a shot because I can't.

So I do the next best thing.

"Give me the stupid dress."

SILAS

"Sir." The judge clears her throat. "If the bride isn't here in the next ten minutes, we will have to reschedule."

I look down the short aisle past the wooden pews. I'm not one to get anxious. Rarely, if ever, do I doubt myself. But I knew after last night's game of hide-and-seek, the probability of Coraline being spooked was high.

Maybe it's ignorance telling me she'll show up anyway. That she's too stubborn and strong-willed to back down. I know how much Lilac means to her, and Coraline knows I'll keep my word. That if something happens to her, she'll be taken care of.

Despite our connection, she won't risk her sister's safety.

If the email I received this morning from who I assume is Stephen, is anything to go by, she'll need my protection from him. It was one line, enough to let me know my little virus had fucked his entire plan.

You think I need a video to end you four? This game has only just begun.

"I need a moment," I say to the only other person in this room, the judge sitting at the raised platform behind me.

I stride down the aisle, pressing my palms into the large doors. When they open to the main foyer, I'm met with hundreds of people bustling around the alabaster floors. Men and women in work attire, random strangers trying not to miss their court appointments.

It's much different than the quiet room I'd just left. I reach into my pocket, fishing for my phone, prepared to call her and lure her out, but it seems I don't have to.

Amongst the sea of faceless bodies, she descends from the sweeping grand staircase. Her hair is pulled back, exposing her sharp features. The makeup she's wearing is different from her usual dark eyeliner. It's softer,

more neutral. Sunlight from the wall of windows touches every step she takes down the marble and granite.

Her white gown follows every curve of her body like a second skin.

I hadn't expected her to wear a wedding dress, but now that she has, I don't want to see her in anything else, wrapped in miles of silk fabric that I want to shred with my teeth.

"Jesus Christ," a man passing by me mumbles, stopping to watch her.

I wonder if it's the plunging neckline showing miles of her smooth skin or the delicate lace that dresses her arms that made him pause.

It would be easy to get distracted by the looks of her, but that's not what has me so transfixed. It's the way her head tilts up, unfazed by the eyes on her, not an ounce of anything but confidence in every step toward me.

The silk sweeps down, a pool of fabric that flows around her feet when she finally reaches me. There's a tight smile on her lips as she picks up the dress at her waist, waving it around.

"Too much?"

Her eyes glimmer in the sunlight, like molten gold.

Melted honey in coffee. My fucking favorite.

They have warmth that could melt away worry and a sharpness that could cut through bullshit.

The eyes never lie.

She is both gentle and fierce. Honey and chestnut. Cold and hot.

A little enigma.

"Perfect."

Pink tints her cheeks as she clears her throat, that confidence she carried just moments ago melting underneath my gaze. Like what I'm thinking makes her self-conscious.

"Ready?" I ask, reaching my hand out for her to take.

"No," she murmurs, teeth nervously tugging at her bottom lip. "I can't —"

One step forward, ten back, with this one.

"Coraline." I sigh, wondering what Stephen did to her that made her this afraid of me. What her past had told her that made her so opposed to trusting others.

"No, it's not about me." She shakes her head, a frown between her brows. "Are you sure you want to do this? I know you're doing it for your

father, but are you sure he'd want this for you? Positive that you don't want to hold out to marry someone you love?"

I hesitate for a moment before responding, inwardly aware of the passing seconds ticking away and knowing we need to meet with the judge soon.

Her questions hang in the air like dense fog, closing in on me. The truth is, I know my father wouldn't want this for me. I can't tell her that, though, because she'll use it as an excuse to get out of this, and that's all this is. Her wanting me to doubt this. Wanting me to tuck tail and run so she isn't responsible for what happens after we say I do.

I spent two years on a revenge spree because it was what I wanted.

But if I'm honest with myself? I want her. I want this with her.

It's not ideal circumstances, marrying her before we truly know one another, but I still want her. I want the two years of access to this mirage of a woman because for the first time in a long time, she makes me feel alive. There is a spark inside of me that didn't exist before, that I never believed could.

Selfishly, I want her next two years—seven hundred and thirty days of protecting her, getting to know her habits, unraveling her mystery thread by thread.

The rest of it? Luring out Stephen, saving my family's company? It's all become an added benefit.

"I'm sure. You're the only one having doubts here." I turn slightly, reaching to grab the handle of the courtroom door. "We are going to miss our chance if—"

"Stop. Just stop for two seconds," she hisses, grabbing the sleeve of my tux, tugging at me so I face her. "Stop pretending to have everything under control. Stop pretending this is what you want. Your father is dying, and the man who was responsible for your ex-girlfriend's death is out to ruin your life. For two fucking seconds, stop being such a solid foundation, and show me the cracks in your sidewalk."

I run a palm across my jawline. "What do you want me to say here to get you down the aisle, Hex?"

"The truth," she says firmly, demanding an answer I'm not sure she's ready for. "Calm, cool Silas and broken, messy Coraline. You're always there, trying to be there for me, for other people. I cannot do this if I'm the only one who leans. You've gotta lean a little on me too."

My teeth grind together. This is the problem with being silent—everyone assumes your feelings. They build your narrative without facts and spit it out at you like it's truth, using context clues and bullshit to spin a web so they can understand you.

When you don't speak, no one knows your story.

It's a war I had to create for myself, a battle I fought for Rosemary. One I've been fighting for years. Letting the world tell me who I am, what I feel, and what I'll become.

Doctors, my parents, my friends, even Rosie.

No one knows me because I never gave anyone a chance to.

"I'm months from losing the man who raised me." I look down at her, really look at her for a moment. Her tan skin glows in the sun, full mouth set in a straight line. "I'm terrified of failing him. Scared of what life looks like without him. Afraid I won't have enough time to learn how to successfully maintain our family company before he dies. But I have a mother and two brothers who can't afford to see that fear."

I step closer to her, into her space, slowly reaching up to cup her cheek in my hand. My thumb swipes just beneath her eye, and I use my fingers to tilt her neck back so she's looking up at me.

I want her to see me so she can hear these words and know they've never been spoken aloud to anyone but her. That these parts of me? No one else has. No one knows.

"I'm moments from letting the guilt of what I've done eat me alive. I can't sleep at night because I know the reason Stephen is trying to destroy my friends is because of me. All I think about, all I dream about, is sending a bullet through his skull and ending this forever."

I let her see me, unmoving. I let her know that I'm not running away from this, from her.

I'm in this with her. I'm putting my trust in her too.

"I'm seconds away from kissing your fucking mouth because you look this beautiful and still feel the need to ask me if I'm sure about marrying you." My voice is a whisper in the back of my throat.

Coraline's features soften as my thumb traces her bottom lip. The world had scared her beyond recognition, wounded and beaten her soul. Yet, she stands here, scared she'll hurt *me*.

Despite everything we've both been through, I need her to know I'm in this. Whatever comes next, regardless of what I mean to her, she will

always have someone she could count on.

More than a voice. More than a phone number.

She will always have me.

I drop my forehead down to hers, taking a breath filled with her scent.

Her breath hitches in the back of her throat, head tilting back further as if to give me access, like she'd let me explore her mouth with my tongue right here. I dig my fingers into the back of her neck, clutching to my self-control.

"But I won't," I murmur, pulling back from her face, creating space between the two of us. "The first time I kiss you, Hex, is when I make you my wife."

Coraline's tongue traces her bottom lip, catching my thumb in the process.

"There is no one else in the world I'd rather do this with," I say honestly. "Am I leaning enough?"

She clears her throat, nodding her head slowly as she takes a step back from my hold. Heat crawls up from her neck and tints her cheeks.

"We should..." She points toward the doors behind me. "We should probably get in there."

My teeth pinch my bottom lip as I shake my head. This fucking girl.

Like it was her idea all along, I extend my hand, pressing the door open for her to walk through. To my surprise, we make it all the way to the end without a peep, finally standing in front of the judge.

"Glad we could all make it," she says, readjusting her black robe and pressing her glasses up on the bridge of her nose. "Are we ready to begin?"

I turn my body face-to-face with Coraline, who does the same. Once again, I reach both of my hands out. I'm going fifty, and I just need her to come the other fifty.

She takes a deep breath before slipping her hands into mine, giving a cute nod of her head.

"Great." The judge claps her hands together, lifting up a piece of white paper and reading from it. "Coraline Whittaker and Silas Hawthorne, today you have chosen to enter into the bonds of marriage. Marriage is a commitment to life, to the best that two people can find and bring out in each other. It offers opportunities for sharing and growth that no other relationship can equal. Marriage is not just a ceremony or a piece of paper;

it is a covenant between two people to love, honor, and cherish each other for the rest of their lives.”

My thumb rubs the top of her hand as if I were trying to smooth all those years of loneliness out with one simple gesture, letting her know that I’m right here, just as broken, and I’m still not going anywhere.

“Do you have vows prepared, or should I continue reading from the script?”

I flick my gaze to the judge. “Standard vows will be—”

“Actually,” Coraline interrupts, “I have something, if that’s alright.”

I furrow my brow as she pulls out a piece of yellowing paper from inside the front of her dress. The judge behind her lifted desk laughs at her hiding spot.

She clears her throat, cheeks flushed as she begins.

“Silas, I promise to be your peace when the world provides only war. To be your secret keeper and safe haven. Today, I vow to be the one person who accepts you for who you are and who you will become.” She glances up at me, holding my gaze as she speaks the last line. “Till death do us part.”

The paper looks too old to be her own. Regardless of their meaning to her, regardless if they were meant for me, they still make my chest tighten.

How long had it been since someone had been my peace? How long had I been at war with no time to rest?

“Mr. Hawthorne?” the judge says, urging me to exchange my own promises with the woman in front of me.

I watch her fold the paper and slip it back into her dress before taking my hand once again. Coraline leans in, her voice a hushed whisper.

“You can just do the regular ones. I know that wasn’t planned or anything.”

I shake my head, using my grip on her hands to tug her closer to me.

“On this day, I vow to make your rage my own, to weather the storm of your revenge and keep you forever safe. I promise to stand by you. No matter what comes, you will never be alone. Till death do us part.”

Every word is true, every promise I intend to keep. No matter what it costs me. It isn’t just me anymore in this; it’s her too.

“Coraline, do you take Silas to be your lawfully wedded husband as long as you both shall live?”

The judge's words vibrate in the still air. Painful silence stretches before she takes a deep breath, squeezing my hands.

"I do."

"Silas, do you take Coraline to be your lawfully wedded wife as long as you both shall live?"

The reality of this situation should be setting in, but for some reason, all I can think about is the end of this—when I get court ordered to kiss the woman in front of me, my lips skimming along hers so I can taste the sweetness of her mouth, melting away all the snarky words and smirks with my tongue.

"I do."

"Do you have rings to exchange?"

Panic flares across Coraline's face, but the corner of my mouth pulls up. I may not have planned for vows, but I did for this. I reach into my pocket, retrieving both rings.

I hand her mine, a simple gold band with an engraving along the inside that says `#dd4a3d`. My little secret, considering she doesn't notice it as she slips it onto my finger.

Slowly, I return the favor, sliding the round solitaire diamond with a matching gold band down her finger. It's not flashy or obnoxiously big; it's a thing of stealthy beauty, mirroring the woman wearing it.

"By the power vested in me by the state of Oregon, I now pronounce you husband and wife." The judge sighs, like this is her least favorite part. "You may now kiss the bride."

Coraline's eyes widen as my hand slips into her hair, pulling her closer. The feel of the ring wrapped around my finger is a feeling I'll need to get used to.

"Nothing I can ever give you will resemble love, Silas."

"Then I'll pretend."

Her breath hitches but I swallow it.

My mouth presses into hers in a hungry collision. I'm not soft or gentle; patience is the last thing on my mind.

Coraline's lips part under mine, submitting before I even make her. My fingers fist in her hair, keeping our mouths shoved together, rewarding her good behavior by tracing the inside of her mouth with my tongue.

I dip in and steal my first taste of the Witch of Ponderosa Springs. The Cursed One.

For once, this town might've gotten something close to right. Her mouth is a spell.

She shivers in my hold, making her grip the front of my tux with both hands. Pulling me into her, she moves her lips slowly, thoroughly over my own. When she goes up on her tippy-toes, needing the extra height to get closer to me, as if she can't get close enough, I smirk against her mouth. My free arm winds around her waist, pressing her flat against my chest before lifting her feet off the ground.

It's everything a first kiss should never be. It's not sweet or good-natured. It's not delivered with love.

A soft whimper comes from the back of her throat, making me bite down on her bottom lip so she'll give me more of that sound. I suck it into my mouth to fill me with her flavor, that dark magic stuck deep in her veins that tastes like fucking honey and sugar in the back of my throat. Coraline's breasts rub against my chest, making me groan. Her body begs for me, for pleasure I know I can give her.

I want to fuck my wife, right in this room, and I don't care who watches. Let them see her spread open on one of these wooden pews. Let the world see how pliable and so fucking good she is for me, with her legs shaking as she begs me to stop making her come, only for me to keep going until she finishes twice more.

More. More. More.

It's the witchcraft of her tongue making me crave her in unhealthy amounts.

"Excuse me." The judge's uncomfortable voice echoes in my ears, making Coraline remove her lips from mine immediately. "There is another couple waiting to get married today."

For a split second, I wonder if I can get Rook to figure out a way to have this woman fired. Against my desires, I set Coraline back on her feet, watching her fiddle with her hair, straightening out her dress.

We are leaving this room as husband and wife.

I know this marriage is fake. I have gotten very good over the years at telling the difference between what is reality and what is my mind playing games.

But nothing has felt more real than that kiss.

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

TWENTY MOM'S MAD

SILAS

BANG. Bang. Bang.

Another loud succession of knocks on my front door.

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter, running a hand down my face.

I’d been at the office late last night going over reports only to come home and spend two hours placing a tracking device on Easton Sinclair’s phone.

Even though we didn’t find anything at the Sinclair Manor to prove he was helping his father, I wasn’t going to just take his word for it. Not when I know that he’s a fucking snake.

I yank my front door open, finding my younger brother on the other side. He’s still several inches shorter than me but looks much older than I remember from the last time I saw him.

“Levi?” I furrow my brow. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Being a fantastic sibling and letting you know hurricane Zoe will be landing at your doorstep in the next hour.” He shoves paper into my bare chest, letting himself into the apartment.

I don’t need to look to know he’s going to the kitchen, most likely to raid my fridge. Since he was a kid, he’s had an appetite that mirrors a bottomless pit.

Pulling the paper down, I feel a headache attack my brain immediately.

Wedding Bells for Tech Billionaire and Petroleum Heiress.

The *Ponderosa Springs Tribune* distastefully describes our quiet relationship, not forgetting to mention Coraline’s human trafficking horror story for added context.

As if her trauma is needed to garner more attention to their shitty newspaper. A picture of the two of us leaving the courthouse is placed in the left-hand column.

I swallow the urge to rip it in half, pulling my phone from my gray sweatpants. I call Coraline three times before she answers, sounding out of breath.

“Yes?”

“I need you at my apartment in the next thirty minutes,” I mutter, rubbing my forehead to relieve the tension. “It’s an emergency.”

“What happened?” she rushes out, the echoing of something heavy falling in the background. “Is it Stephen?”

“Worse.” I sigh. “It’s my mother.”

Coraline sucks in a breath; I can practically hear her panic through the phone. I’d told her after the wedding she’d have to meet my parents soon. I’d planned to buy her as much time as she needed, but apparently, three days is all we’re going to get.

“I’ll be there soon,” she mumbles into the speaker, not giving me any more time to fill her in before she hangs up, leaving me with an empty dial tone.

Fucking woman, choosing to panic on her own, then let me talk her down from the ledge over the phone before she gets here. She’ll be the death of me, I’m sure of it.

I shut the front door, slowly padding across the cool floors into the kitchen.

“Congratulations,” Lev mumbles around a store-bought muffin. “Mom’s gonna kill you. Feels nice to watch the golden brother fall.”

My eyes roll. He wonders why I tell him he’s the dramatic one. I walk toward the coffee machine, starting a new pot, before grabbing two pill bottles. One for my growing migraine, the other for depression. Jennifer Tako would be so proud to know I still take them and haven’t switched them out for vitamins.

“Not only did you get married before she met your wife, but she found out through a newspaper. You’re royally fucked.”

“Let me worry about our mother,” I say. “Why are you even home? Did something happen with your internship in Boston?”

I watch the coffee brew slowly, taking its sweet time, like it’s not the only thing in this room that’ll get me through what’s about to be the longest

day of my life.

“Missed you too, asshole.” My back is facing him, but I know he’s flipping me off, “Interns have a week off, and I wanted to come see Dad.”

“Caleb?”

Lev’s silent, telling me more there than any of his playful words will. When there is enough coffee, I pour it into a mug, turning to face him before repeating my question.

“You know Caleb, Silas.” He sighs, setting down the half-eaten muffin and leaning on my island. “He’s avoiding his problems. Surfing his life away, barely picking up my phone calls. Avoiding home so he doesn’t have to face the fact that Dad’s dying.”

Levi and Caleb being twins is only one of their interesting traits. They’re an array of personality traits that have changed and grown over the years. Levi is studying microbiology in Boston, while Caleb is in SoCal, only going to college so our parents will pay for his apartment on the beach.

But their bond has always remained unshakeable. Until now, until our dad got sick, and the differences between how they handle stress started to show.

Levi is a little like me, wants to face the problem so he can fix it. Caleb is...Caleb is afraid. Thinks if he just doesn’t think about it, it’ll go away. Dad isn’t sick if he doesn’t come home.

Neither of them is in the wrong, but I know one day Caleb will regret not seeing Dad more before he dies. However, that isn’t my battle. I won’t force him to cope the way I think he should. I’ll just be there for the aftermath to help pick up the pieces.

“It’s selfish, him acting this way. He won’t even talk to Mom.” His voice is tinged with an edge of venom as I look over at him.

“Caleb is dealing with it on his own time, his own way. Nothing selfish about it. Give him time to do that on his own. When he’s ready, he’ll come home,” I say calmly, scooping a spoonful of honey into my drink. “And you? How are you handling it?”

“I’m fine.” He shrugs nonchalantly. It’s robotic and practiced. That’s probably what he says to Mom, what he tells Dad, his friends on the East Coast when they ask.

Caleb may be avoiding, but Levi is deflecting.

I move closer until I'm standing next to him. Leaning back against the kitchen island, I peer down at him, waiting for him to meet my gaze.

"Lev, look at me."

After a few moments of silence, he slowly lifts his head up so our eyes meet.

"I'm not Mom. I'm not Dad. You don't need to put up a strong front for me." I cross my arms in front of my chest. "You're allowed to be sad here. Or angry. Or happy. Feel whatever you need to feel."

They may think they're men, tough and out in the world on their own, but they'll always be my little brothers. Kids who need permission to not be strong all the time.

His father is dying right in front of him; he's allowed to break.

"You ever get scared, Si?"

"All the time," I tell him honestly.

"Me too." He swallows tightly. "I'm always scared. Just waiting for the phone call that he's gone. Every time my phone rings, I fucking panic. What are we going to do when he's not here?"

Tears line the corners of his eyes, and I wish I could take his pain away. Wish there was a way to make this better, but nothing I say can do that.

"We'll live, we'll remember him, and we'll be happy because that's what he wants for us. All he's ever wanted. It won't be easy, and there will be days you struggle more than others, but learning to love the memory of someone you've lost helps. It just takes time."

It's what helped me mourn Rosemary, what will help me mourn my father when he passes. Learning to love the memory, who they were on this Earth instead of focusing on them not being here.

Grief is not an uphill battle.

It's a process that has dips and turns, not just up.

Levi nods, accepting my words but not really hearing them. He won't, not until he's ready to, and that's all I can ask of him right now.

"How do you do it?" he asks, a frown between his brows. "Dad, Hawthorne Tech, the schizophrenia? I'm fucking struggling, and you're just like a stone wall, like always."

I bite down on the inside of my cheek, trying to think of how to answer without adding more pressure on him. I'm not sure how to tell him that I don't want to be like this, but I have to. For him, for Caleb and Mom. If I

fall apart, start trying to explain the truth of my mental illness, it will be too much for them to carry.

I can't put that on them, and I don't have to—at least not right now.

Because peering in from the kitchen entry is my wife.

The ring is an adjustment, but calling Coraline mine? Easy.

All five foot nothing of her, brown locks cascading past her shoulders, framing her sharp features, curiosity glinting in her eyes, almost like she was waiting to hear my answer as well.

Hunger pools in my gut.

The leather jacket that's made several appearances hangs across her shoulders. It reminds me of Alistair and his obsession with the jacket he's had since high school.

A tiny white tank top that shows off her stomach makes me think about how easy it would be to shred the material with my teeth.

Coraline takes me in, too busy checking me out to realize I've noticed her presence, soft brown eyes tracing the lines of my shirtless body. If my kid brother wasn't in the room with us, I'd let her keep going.

"Coraline." My gruff voice makes her eyes snap to mine, a blush on her cheeks at knowing she got caught.

Levi spins his head around so quickly it gives me whiplash. I withhold my annoyance as he behaves as if he's never seen a girl before.

She gives him a toothless smile, waving awkwardly. Her hips sway as she comes further into the kitchen, teasing me with the prospect of flipping it up just to see what color her panties are.

"Hi," she breathes quietly, strangling the strap of her purse.

"Damn," Levi mutters under his breath like we can't hear him.

I instantly reach out and swat the back of his head. "Manners."

Coraline has to bite down on her lower lip to keep from grinning, and I find myself unreasonably angry at her teeth for gatekeeping it, hiding away one of the rare and beautiful things she does.

I like her smile. I like her laugh. I like *her*.

It's an odd place to be in for me, liking someone. I haven't had a crush since middle school, and this feels much more intense than I remember.

"Levi, the most attractive brother." He stretches out his hand to shake hers. "How the hell did this asshole land you?"

Fucking siblings.

They're created to constantly work your nerves. It's why Rook gets along with my family so well.

"Aren't you the younger twin? Can you be the most attractive if there is an older copy of you?" She tilts her head, blinking as she feigns confusion, taking his hand and shaking it. "And I've got a thing for silent and brooding type."

He scoffs. "Caleb wishes he had this jawline."

Like the rubber band he is, he snaps right back to his goofy self. Our earlier conversation melts away, all his fear hidden behind one blinding smile.

I watch her bust his balls for a few more minutes, listening to them banter back and forth before he heads to the bathroom, leaving the two of us alone.

"What's the emergency?" she asks, leaning to make sure Levi isn't within earshot of our conversation.

"My mother and father are on their way over here."

Her eyes widen before she looks down at her outfit and back up at me. "You didn't think to mention that before? I would've worn something, I don't know..." She tosses her hands in the air. "More fucking bridal? I look like Jackie the Ripper."

"You look hot," I mutter. "And my parents won't care what you're wearing, Hex. As long as they get to meet you."

She scoffs. "Doubtful. How did they even find out? I thought you were going to buy us time?"

I simply slide the newspaper Levi gave me across the island in her direction, then pick up my coffee and take a sip while she reads. Her nose scrunches while she scans the page.

Her nose does the exact same thing when she's about to come.

Fuck.

Do not think of that right now. Think of literally anything else, you idiot. Out of reflex, I look down at my crotch. The last thing I need is to pop a boner before my mother storms into my house.

"Finding love after the house of horrors? You think they ever get tired of the kidnapping angle?"

"Do you?" I ask. "Ever get tired of the way they still talk about what happened to you?"

“Yes,” she breathes, pressing her thumb and pointer finger into the corner of her eyes, “But I have a thick skin, so it doesn’t bother me anymore. I’ll only ever be one thing in this town, to these people. Nothing I do will ever change that. It’s just—”

“Exhausting.” I finish the sentence for her, watching her remove her hand and nod at me. As if just for this instant, she realizes we are more similar than different.

When the news stations recycled her story nationally over and over again, showing the same video footage of her fleeing the basement only to throw herself into the arms of her captor, I remember a deep sense of understanding passing through me.

I understood how she felt.

Having to listen to the narrative people made up about you because you never spoke the truth publicly. As if you owed the world your story, or they’d just make one up for you.

To this town, she may forever be the girl who was kidnapped.

But that’s not all she is, not all she’ll become.

I just wonder if she knows that.

“Was it difficult for you?” Coraline asks. “Growing up with schizophrenia and having everyone know about it?”

It hits me this is the first time she’s asked me about it. The first time the topic of my mental health has been brought up between the two of us.

“Sometimes.”

Which isn’t a lie.

It was extremely difficult knowing the truth about my own mind but still having to let people believe differently. Constantly asking myself how could they not see it? How could they not believe me? Then always finding the answer to be, why would they?

“I didn’t wanna ask about it.” She pauses, flicking her gaze across my face, scanning for any sign of emotion, “I figured if you wanted to talk about it, you would.”

I lift an eyebrow. “And if I decided never to talk about it with you?”

She lifts one shoulder, pushing a piece of white hair behind her ear, unbothered. “I wouldn’t care. It’s not my business.”

Her straightforwardness, the brash, unwavering tone, makes my lips twitch. I know her words are sincere, harsh but true. They aren’t flowery, not fake sympathy bullshit trying to make me feel better.

“You don’t care I’m schizophrenic?”

“I care that you get the support and medical care you need.” She shakes her head, reaching down and tearing off a piece of Levi’s half-eaten muffin, speaking around the treat. “I am not completely heartless. But no, I don’t care. It’s a mental illness, not the plague.”

Her voice is like a breeze of honesty blowing away all the fake sympathy and advice I’d heard over the years. I feel her eyes on me, studying me like I’ve been with her.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t.” Coraline lets out a scoff, frowning. “Don’t thank me. It’s the bare minimum. It irritates me that you feel the need to thank someone for treating you like a human being.”

How this woman thinks she’s cruel is beyond me.

“I—”

“Silas Edward Hawthorne!”

My mother’s voice pierces through my apartment, making Coraline jump. Her eyes widen, mouth falling open.

“Oh, that’s full name. You’re fucked,” Levi laughs as he walks back into the kitchen.

I peer down at Coraline, wrapping a protective arm around her waist, silently letting her know she can fall into me if she needs it. Hesitantly, she places a hand on my bare chest, blinking up at me.

“Ready, wife?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

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TWENTY-ONE

MEET THE HAWTHORNES

CORALINE

I HEARD once you don't decide you're a good parent, your child decides if you're a good parent.

I haven't met Caleb, but if Silas and Levi are any indication, Zoe and Scott Hawthorne are great parents. I'd never been privy to or been a part of a warm family dynamic. My parents did not host family game nights or debrief about what I learned in school.

They were quick to hand me over to caretakers and only pluck me from their golden shelves when I was needed to make their appearance seem more well-rounded.

I was a pawn, a spare token for an image of a happy family.

These people sitting at this table understand and move with one another like it's the easiest thing in the world.

I've never known a home that didn't feel like scattered eggshells beneath my feet, waiting to cut me open for walking too harshly.

"I've been looking for a new hobby for months. These art classes sound perfect. When do you host them?" Zoe grins, taking another sip of her red wine.

"It's mainly for Halo survivors, but next Thursday I'm letting Light host an event where some of the girls I teach will be able to sell their work. If you'd like to come, so they can meet you before you join a class?" I return the smile, before plucking a garlic green bean from my plate.

"Count me in!" she squeals, clapping her hands together. "Look at that, honey, new hobby for me."

What does it say about me that I was expecting her to bail once she found out who I taught? When she realized it wasn't a gossip pool filled

with the women of high society, but instead a therapy for girls who'd seen the cruelty of life.

I suppose I'd gotten so used to backhanded retorts and pity stares I didn't know what a genuine, kind soul looked like.

This entire dinner had shifted my expectations. I thought my job was to hang off Silas's arm and look pretty. I'd been nervous they'd view me as closed off with my outfit, too hard around the edges, expecting me to be in a dress instead. Speak when spoken to, eat with the correct fork, and never seem anything less than perfect.

But they hadn't wanted any of that from me.

Despite their intentional concerns, all they wanted was to know me. To know the person their oldest son had chosen to spend his life with. It made my chest burn—I hadn't expected to feel so guilty for lying to them, but they were so kind, so interested in who I was with genuine intentions, I couldn't help but hate myself a little for fooling them.

"God help me, I'm still paying for the last hobby," Scott mutters, elbowing Silas, who is sitting next to him. "Remember when she picked up knitting?"

"I had to wear knitted sweaters to school every single day for six months," Levi speaks up. "Do you know how itchy that shit was?"

"Language, Levi Vincent!"

"Sorry, Mom," he mumbles, shoving a piece of steak into his mouth and smiling at her with a boyish grin that tells me he's used it to get out of plenty of trouble in his lifetime.

I smile, hiding behind my wineglass and watching them exist with one another. Although Silas doesn't talk much, I can see how comfortable he is with them here. How relaxed his shoulders and facial features appear. A light in his eyes that brightens his face.

Silas's hand creeps across the table. Without notice of the others, he starts playing with the tips of my hand, rubbing circles around my nails, tracing the pads of my fingers. So casual, like he's done it a million times before.

"So you like what you do, Coraline?" Scott asks me, my attention zeroing in on him.

Maybe it's because I don't know him well or have only ever seen him in passing, but for someone battling cancer, he looks perfectly healthy. I suspect that's where Silas gets his stone wall facade from.

The weight of the world could rest on their shoulders, but they'd never let anyone else see it.

"I do." I nod. "I'd like to still get my degree in art history eventually, but I enjoy teaching. Selling my paintings is just for rent."

"Silas is going to have to give up one of these rooms for you to work. I'm sure we could get a contractor in here to expand," Zoe notes, looking around as if she can see where she'd place an extra room for me to paint.

"Oh, that's not necessary—"

"Already done," Silas interrupts, picking up my finger and sliding his thumb up and down before spinning my ring around. "I wanted to wait till Coraline got settled before turning the place into a construction zone."

I look over at him, trying to hide my shock as our eyes meet. The entire day, he's been...different. His hands never leave me; in one way or another, he's touching me. It's a convincing show he's putting on, much better than me, who just warmed up to his hands on my body.

It's fake, I know that. But sometimes, when his fingers graze my body or he pulls me into his chest, it feels a little too real.

"That's my boy." Scott slaps Silas on the back, grinning. "He's treating you well, right? You can tell me. He's not too old for me to ground."

"He's a little grouchy before he has his coffee, but nothing I can't handle."

"Well, if you need me to keep him in line, you call me for help."

"Mr. Hawthorne, respectfully"—I lift my eyebrows at him playfully—"I'm a red belt in tae kwon do. I think it'll be him trying to call you for help."

Laughter ricochets around the room. Such a common sound in day-to-day living but my ears had been deprived of for such a long time. It feels... nice.

Noticing that everyone is finishing up with their meals, I press my hands into the table, pushing out my chair and excusing myself to the kitchen to grab the dessert in the fridge that Zoe had brought with her.

I can still hear the echoes of their giggles and conversation as I unwrap the pie and search Silas's kitchen for small plates in several cabinets before finally finding the right one.

Hands curl around my waist, fingers pressing into my stomach as I set the plates on the counter. I turn my head toward my shoulder, biting back a smile.

“You touch me a lot,” I say when he squeezes me lightly. The heat from his hands feels like fire on my cold skin. Warmth pours over me, making me clench my thighs.

“You’re very touchable, Hex.”

His voice tickles my skin, making me shiver in his hold, but he only holds me tighter, dipping his head into the space between my neck and shoulder, inhaling the smell of me.

“I don’t think your parents are spying on us in the kitchen.” I place my hands on the counter, steadying myself. It’s hard to focus, to play pretend when he feels this good. Strong and steady, every muscle of his chest and abdomen pressed into my back. “We can stop pretending now.”

I gasp when he shoves me forward, pressing his lower half into my ass, forcing me to feel his hard cock against me. My skin aches for more, need coursing through my veins. My body melts and unwinds for him.

There is no explanation for why he’s the only person to touch me sexually and it doesn’t send me spiraling.

There isn’t a posttraumatic stress disorder handbook—I mean, I’m sure someone has written one, but navigating it is different for everyone. No one talks about how one minute, you’re making out with a guy in a club bathroom, and the next, you’re underneath your rapist. That one smell can put you on the floor of your kitchen with your head tucked between your knees, gasping for air.

I’d gone from a sex-positive, young college student to someone who didn’t believe in desire and sex drive anymore.

But Silas, it’s like he knows how to keep me rooted in the present. With two hands, he holds me to the earth, refuses to let go, and makes me feel everything.

It’s terrifying.

“This isn’t for them. This is for me,” he murmurs against my skin, lips dropping featherlight kisses.

“I—” A whimper steals my words as he pins my body to the counter, my core throbbing as he grinds into me from behind.

There is a throbbing desire to feel him. Skin on skin. No clothes or barriers. Just him.

“When they leave, are you going to let me christen this place?” He grits out as I tilt my head back into his chest, giving him more access to me.

“Bend you right over this counter, watch you spread your legs, and stuff you with my cock until you’re dripping on my kitchen floor.”

My eyes shut as I fall into the feeling of his hands pressing into my stomach, forcing our bodies together. He doesn’t let me doubt, refuses to let me think too long, knowing if I did, I’d pull away, force distance between us to protect the both of us from the wrath of a broken connection.

Falling is fun until you hit the ground.

When one of you is left with brittle bones and the other is dead.

A throat clears from behind us, and my face burns. I’m positive I’m the color of a fire hydrant. I slip to the side, away from Silas’s hold, seeing his parents snickering from the entryway.

“Oh my God,” I mutter at the same time Silas says, “Can we help you?” His jaw is taut, the muscle jumping in his cheek.

“Oh, don’t be so uptight. Your father and I were young once.” Zoe wraps her arm around Scott’s, pulling him into her side. “We didn’t mean to interrupt you lovebirds, but we wanted to run something by you before we headed out. Your father has an early morning.”

Code for “he has chemotherapy,” I’m sure.

“Your father and I were talking.” She glances at her husband, biting the inside of her cheek. “We know you’re legally married, and we are so happy for you two. I just would like to see my oldest baby walk down the aisle. With everything going on, I—”

She pauses, emotion heavy in her throat as she places a hand over her mouth.

“I’d like to die knowing I got to see at least one of my sons get married,” Scott says for her, shoulders square as he so casually speaks about dying like it’s something he’s already prepared himself for. Despite the chemo, he isn’t praying for a miracle; he’s just submitted to his fate. I’m not sure what is more painful, holding out for hope or accepting death so soon.

“Dad.” Silas clears his throat. “Coraline and I—”

“We’d love that.”

The words come from a place of sadness, of guilt. The last thing I need or want right now is to have a wedding, but these people, this family, they deserve something good.

His mother and father have no clue why we did this. All they know is their son appears to be happy. I don’t want to take that away from them, not yet.

“Really?” Zoe’s eyes light up. “Oh my gosh, this is fantastic! I thought I was going to have to pull out the waterworks.”

“The cancer card comes in handy,” Scott jokes lightly, a matching smile on his face.

I step into Silas, curling an arm around his waist. I know this wasn’t something we’d planned or talked about, but I can’t refuse his parents. Not like this. Not when I know I’m simply taking advantage of their kindness, spinning a pretty web of lies while their son and I work to corrupt the system.

“I don’t want to overwhelm you,” Zoe says, walking further into the kitchen toward me before she runs her palm up and down my arm, soothing, comforting, like a mother would. “I was blessed with three rambunctious boys, but I’ve secretly been waiting on a daughter. I would love more than anything to plan this wedding for you two, with your guidance, of course. We could get to know each other more because I’d really love to do that with you, Coraline.”

It hurt to know I’d never had the chance to feel accepted like this by my own mother, experienced the unconditional love between a child and parent.

I think it hurts more knowing I’m lying to her.

“Of course, Zoe,” I say.

“Fantastic! Let’s get lunch next week to go over some details?”

I nod, agreeing just before she envelops me in a hug. The smell of vanilla hits my nose, and I realize that’s the sweet note in Silas’s scent. Vanilla, like his mother, carrying her love with him wherever he goes.

When she pulls away from me, I take a breath. Scott smiles at his wife fondly, like she holds the sun. Silas slides a protective arm around my waist, and Levi joins, asking about the pie.

For a brief moment, I allow myself to imagine what it would be like if this were my family. Who would I have become if the hands meant to raise me had nurtured my spirit instead of made me hate it? If kind words were given freely and not with an acidic aftertaste?

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and when I pull it out, my eyebrows furrow together.

“Who is it?” Silas asks next to me, as if he noticed my shoulders tense.

“My landlord.” I feel a chill run along my spine.

“Hello?” I ask hesitantly, pressing the phone to my ear as I step away from the group.

“Miss Whittaker, it’s Ian from your apartment building,” he starts. “I’m sorry to call you so randomly, but security on the premises just informed us that your apartment has been broken into.”

My heart stops, and time stills.

Panic’s razor-sharp claws sink into my chest and squeeze tightly. I remind myself that Lilac is with Regina today at the hair salon, that she is safe, but it doesn’t stop the onslaught of fear.

I listen to Ian tell me the police are already there, but his voice is starting to drown out. Nothing is safe anymore—not the four walls of my home that were meant to be a sanctuary from all the chaos.

Reality returns with her swift, cold hands, reminding me that this is not my family. That I am not an actual wife, and there is a man out there who refuses to let me go.

Nothing good is ever real. Not for me.

Not forever.

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

TWENTY-TWO

HURT PEOPLE

CORALINE

WHAT USED to be a curated safe haven for me has been turned into a twisted reflection of the turmoil that lives in me. Every inch of this place is now a reminder of how much I have to fear. I'd allowed myself to drift too far from the plan. Had let Silas pull me further into him and away from danger he could not protect me from.

Stephen Sinclair has ripped through my apartment.

I can feel his presence everywhere. His malice lingers in every smashed dish. Unhinged possession exists in every shredded piece of fabric. Black paint splattered across every wall is marked with his fingerprints.

As I wander through the ruins of my home, the smell of Old Spice makes my eyes burn. He has seeped into every memory I created here, contaminating the life I'd built after him just because he could.

I barely flinch as I step over a pile of broken glass, walking toward my bedroom while Lilac talks in the background to Silas. Their voices are static, white noise.

The door creaks open with a screech. I refuse to cry, not with people here, but when I see the state of my room, I'm tempted. Not from sadness but the wrath that is boiling in my stomach, overflowing into my veins.

All of my current projects are demolished. Slashed, burnt, and wrecked beyond saving. The feathers from my pillows are spread across my broken bed. My clothes had been ripped from their places, torn and soaked in paint.

But it's the single canvas resting on an easel sitting atop the chaos that seals my fury.

Written in red acrylic paint across a piece I'd already started, a piece that used to look starkly familiar to Silas, is Stephen's scrawly handwriting.

The newspaper clipping of our marriage is nailed to it, with a note beneath it.

He will never rid your body of my memory. If you're in me, then I refuse to leave you. You'll never escape me, Circe.

"Cora?" Lilac's soft voice echoes behind me.

I am blinded by rage, red seeping into my vision from every corner. I can only feel the anger pounding through my veins, beating in my ears, pumping through my heart.

Did he not take enough of me in that basement? He had to remind me that I still had a heart, just so he could destroy the last bit of it.

There is a roaring in my ears, so intense that it nearly blinds me.

It wasn't enough to take just a part; he had to have it all. With callused hands, he broke my ribs one by one, ripping the foolish organ from my chest cavity so he could feed on it.

He was never going to fucking stop, not until he devoured me whole. Until all of me once again belonged to him, even if I wasn't alive.

I remember the night when I pleaded from the rooftop with Silas on the phone. When I begged to go back and die in that basement, left so empty I didn't want to live. All I wanted was for it to take what was left of me and leave my body in the harsh earth to rot in peace.

I suppose the stars were listening that night, and they had granted my wish.

"Hey." I feel Lilac's gentle hand on my shoulder. "We can still salvage some of these things. I know it looks bad—"

"Don't touch me," I grunt, ripping my arm from her touch. I don't bother turning to see the sadness ripple across her face. I don't have the energy to make her feel better right now. "Leave me alone."

"Coraline. I can't imagine what this feels like, but we'll figure it out together, okay? The police said they were able to catch one of the men fleeing the apartment. It's going to be alright, I promise."

"Lilac," I say on a ragged exhale, "I'm asking you to give me some fucking space before I say things I don't mean."

"I—"

"Your happy-go-lucky bullshit is not going to help me right now!" My body whirls around as I toss my hands up. "I just want you to leave me alone."

She flinches, my words growing hands and smacking her, and she retreats toward the door with glassy eyes. I've never spoken to her like that before, never so much as raised my voice in her direction.

There is just so much anger in me, so potent that I almost feel drunk from its power. I'm a volatile human being right now, and I'm afraid anyone who comes in contact with me will be left just as shredded as I feel.

"She didn't deserve that."

Silas comes into view, leaning against the doorframe, just watching me with those dark eyes. Eyes that see far too much, more than I want him to see.

"If I wanted a lecture on my behavior, I'd ask for it." I grind my teeth. "I know I'm a bitch, and I know what she didn't deserve."

"You're not a bitch, Coraline. You're just hurting, that's all," he says.

I hate how he sounds so sure of himself. Like he knows it for a fact.

Like he's positive I'm not an awful person, as if he knows me at all.

"You made me come once, and suddenly you know me?" I laugh incredulously. "Get fucking real and get out."

His eyes slit, arms crossing in front of his chest, standing his ground. "You need somewhere to put all that anger, Hex? Put it on me. Give me the best you got."

I turn away from him, distracting myself by trying to find anything in this room that might be worth saving. I kick papers and clothes around to see what's beneath the rumble.

My mouth tries to seal itself; if I had glue, I'd force it to shut to keep back the venom that is coursing through my veins, threatening to spew from my throat toward anyone who comes too close, who tries to help.

No one can help me. No one will understand that I hate myself for the way I want to hurt other people because of the way I was hurt. Not because it makes me feel better or more powerful; it makes it feel like shit afterward, but it gives all this anguish somewhere to go.

"You're stubborn. You don't want to hear it, but I know what you're doing. I can see it in your eyes, all that pain just festering beneath the surface. You cannot keep it in forever, Coraline. It'll kill you."

"You don't know shit about my pain, Hawthorne." My words are laced with poison, with intent to wound, to force him the fuck out of this room. I don't care if it hurt his feelings. I don't care if he hates me. I just want him

far away from my path of destruction before I take all the good in Silas and swallow it whole.

I point my finger at him, eyes burning with rage. “Your girlfriend died. Cry about it. My orbital socket was shattered because I didn’t open my mouth for his dick fast enough. Our stories are not the same.”

I want to be alone with my fury, hidden away so I can ache in peace. I don’t want someone here to watch me fall apart. The entire world watched me lose my mind on national television. I was the story of the century, millions of eyes seeing me erupt into shards of tiny glass only to make it worse by feeling sorry for me.

So I cut them. I let them step all over me with their bare feet, and I burrowed myself into their heels like tiny razor blades.

I want to break. I want to cry and throw things all on my own with no eyes on me, in a silence where the only thing I can hear is my own heartbeat.

“My best friend spent his entire life swallowing his pain like rusty nails just to turn it into a weapon. I watched it eat him alive, and now I’m watching him in the aftermath,” he tells me. “Being mean? It won’t make me leave, Coraline. I’ve withstood storms much more violent than you. You are not what the world tells you. You are not a bitch. You are a girl. A girl who was abused. A girl just trying to survive.”

My chest feels like it might cave in on itself, the empty space where my heart used to be only a black hole that sucks up all the kindness in the room just to spit it back out.

“Fuck you, Silas.”

He walks further into the room like my words are an invitation. He stands atop my demolished room, in the rubble of my home, like a statue. A stunning piece of sculpted art in a space of pure malice.

“If you don’t learn to accept that you were a victim before you were ever a curse, all you’ll do is continue cutting people who didn’t hurt you.” His head tilts, watching me. “Is that what you want? To cut everyone out so you’re left with no one?”

“I wasn’t the victim,” I snide, feeling the tears slip down my cheeks. I’m exhausted, tired of Silas always finding me so broken. “Can’t you read a newspaper? I was in love with him. I wanted to be there.”

I pick up shreds of canvas like they’re the tattered pieces of my heart and toss them in the air, watching them rain down on me. My voice is

almost a scream. “That’s not a victim. I’m not broken—all of my money put me back together. Can’t you see that? I *asked* for it, Silas. I asked for all of this.”

You asked for this.

You love me. Say you love me.

You want to stay here with me forever, right?

You’re fortunate you have money, girl. It’s awful for the ones that don’t.

It could’ve been worse, ya know?

You’re one of the lucky ones.

Stephen’s words and the cruel barrage of accusations from everyone around me echo in my ears, a thousand little hammers pounding away at my mind. I’m so close to exploding with a rage that could consume the world, so close to ripping apart the earth with my teeth.

But then something miraculous happens.

Silas’s fingers push a piece of hair behind my ear, palm lingering on my cheek, soaking up the tears that I had been desperately trying to contain. I look up slowly at him, eyebrows furrowed. He stares down at me before his lips turn up in a soft smile.

For the very first time since I’ve known the name Silas Hawthorne, he smiles.

An actual fucking smile. It’s sad, heartbreaking, and unmistakably genuine. As if he knew in this moment, I needed something warm, something kind more than anything else.

He is looking at me, the mess that I am, like I’m someone worth smiling at. It’s a gift that he gives to very, very few people. A gift that silently tells me I’m worthy of his kind of grace, of his kindness.

“No, Hex,” he whispers, shaking his head. “You did what you had to do so you could stay alive. That never made you weak. It never meant you asked for it. It makes you a survivor.”

A sob escapes my throat.

I’m scared.

Scared of what I’ll do to the people I care about. Innocent lives are destroyed by damaged people who were hurt before they had a chance to heal. I’m the example in this art of destruction.

I went through something horrific, I lived, and everyone told me I was lucky.

But no one showed me how to live with it. With this weight, this pain, these memories.

“You’re still living in survival mode. You just have to learn to turn it off, baby.”

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

TWENTY-THREE

A DARK SIDE

SILAS

THERE IS nothing but silence in the dark of my home office, offering my mind a chance to settle. Smoke from my cigar swirls into the air, a bourbon in my hand as I lean back into my chair.

I peer at the gun resting on the wood in front of me, the black metal glistening in the moonlight streaming in from the window behind me.

An hour ago, that was what I used to kill someone.

I can still smell the gunpowder and blood singeing the air, hear the sound a bullet makes when it pierces through a skull and passes through brain matter.

The person that had been able to console a shattered Coraline days ago does not exist in this room. Not tonight.

My fingers tighten around my glass, lifting it to my lips for a long and slow pull of whiskey.

Charlie Monroe flunked out of tech school in the late nineties. He is—well, was—employed by a nearby computer repair store. With a wife and one son at home, Charlie was a naive victim of circumstance who was offered money in exchange for both his hacking and apparently vandalizing services.

I wonder if Stephen Sinclair warned him who he'd face when he got caught. The fate he would meet at the end of my gun if I found out he was the one that fucked with my friends. My wife.

He was brave, at first. They all are.

It's why breaking them is so much fucking fun.

"Half a million for some lightweight computer work and destroying a chick's apartment?" He chuckles, the smell of stale cigarettes on his breath.

“That’s some fucking pussy.”

It took Rook less than twenty minutes to post this rat’s bail, just to shove him in the back of a car and drive him to the Peak, leaving him alone with just me.

I bet he thought he was lucky, only spending two days in jail just to get off scot-free.

The butt of my gun smacks across the side of his head with a thud. Blood pours from the wound almost immediately as he grunts, toppling onto his side, unable to clutch his throbbing head due to the ropes tethered behind his back.

“Half a million is all your life is worth,” I hum, looking down at him as he kneels on the wet ground. “How pathetic.”

There’s an untapped rage in me that I want to release on this idiot. Take my time before a bullet ends his life. Crush his skull with my bare hands or break his spine, but I want to save that.

I want to be patient and save all of my rage for the man that truly deserves it. When I finally got my hands on Stephen Sinclair, I would make him beg me to kill him, choking on his own blood. I’d make him beg me for the mercy of death.

He would regret every ounce of pain he inflicted on Coraline Whittaker.

My hands tighten on the gun in my hand, bitter rage tasting like pennies in my mouth thinking about what he put her through. What she lived through in that basement.

“Stephen has something special in store for you four. He’s getting that girl no matter how many people you kill to prevent it.” He smiles, showing off his yellowing grin.

“Charlie,” I say as I squat down in front of him. “This bullet is going into your skull tonight.”

“So get it over with, pussy.”

“If you want to take Stephen’s secrets to the grave, I won’t hold it against you.” My head tilts, watching his reaction. “But your family will. It’d be a shame if all that money you’re leaving behind for them just disappeared.”

“You can’t—”

I press the end of the gun to his forehead. “I will leave your son in the gutter of poverty. Every account you own will be sucked fucking dry, and all

that will be left of you is your wife cursing your name while she rots on the streets.”

His eyes widen, Adam’s apple bobbing as he silently debates if I’m bluffing. As if I don’t already have everything I need to ruin him, and he doesn’t even need to be alive to see it.

“One button, Charlie. That’s all I’ve got to press.”

“All this for some bitch?” He scoffs, trying to wiggle from his restraints. “You’re fucking crazy.”

In the dark of the night, with only me and the man I’m about to kill, I grin, my teeth bared in a gnarled smile. I stand to my full height, shoving my combat-clad foot into his shoulder, forcing him to roll onto his back.

“Certifiable,” I tell him as I press my boot into his throat, applying pressure. “Say another word about my wife, and I’ll leave your guts on the doorstep of your house. You think your son will enjoy finding what’s left of his father?”

Everyone has a weak spot, a point where they break. You just have to know how to find it.

“What do you want to know?”

He proved to be useless. Everything he told me I already knew and left me no closer to finding Stephen. Charlie was the hacker helping send the emails and had agreed to help vandalize Coraline’s apartment.

I hated that Stephen knew what he was doing. Purposefully leaving Charlie as bait, knowing we’d catch him. Knowing it would piss me the fuck off when I didn’t get anything from him.

All this night gave me was a fucking headache and blood on my white shirt.

Killing him didn’t relieve any anger or stress. It didn’t make me feel better. Not when I know the man responsible for hurting Coraline is still out there breathing, playing chess with me.

If anything, it only made things worse.

I’m overflowing with unshed rage that has nowhere to go. I can’t be the patient, kind man I’d been to Coraline the day her apartment was broken into.

Not with all the noise consuming me. All the guilt chewing me up from the inside. There’s no one to blame for this except me. Coraline is reliving the worst experience of her life because I’d convinced her that marrying me

was the right move. Alistair is deteriorating slowly with the weight of being in this town and having his parents breathing down his neck.

All of this to say, if I hadn't let Rosemary Donahue walk home alone from the library after that fight, none of us would even be in this position to begin with.

My selfishness has caused that argument. My selfishness has put all of these people I care about in the path of a narcissistic piece of shit who won't stop until he's no longer breathing.

I've given us no choice.

It's kill him or let him keep killing us.

More blood on my hands, regardless of who does the killing.

I flick my eyes toward my office door, listening to it creak open. Dark hair spills over Coraline's shoulder as she peeks her head through the crack in the door.

I'd made the guys stay here today while the movers got Lilac and Coraline's stuff inside and had asked the girls to come by to help Coraline unpack her things.

It'd been the perfect distraction, keeping everyone busy so she wouldn't notice my absence, wouldn't question my behavior, and by the time she woke up in the morning, all would be back to our version of normal.

At least, that had been the plan.

She slips her bare feet inside, pressing her back against the door, making it click closed. I chase the lines of her exposed legs, miles of smooth, tan skin begging for fingers to touch them.

My cock twitches behind my jeans. I'm hanging by a thread tonight, and her being in here, dressing in a slouchy T-shirt and skimpy-ass shorts, isn't helping.

It's only making my blood burn hotter. Tempting me to do something she'll regret in the daylight hours.

"These are my paintings," Coraline speaks into the silence. I follow her gaze around my office, her artwork I'd purchased at the gala hung along the slate gray walls.

All twelve of them.

"Rich asshole who paid double." I tilt my glass in mock cheers. "Nice to meet you."

Even in the shadows of this room, I can see her cheeks turn red, nerves eating her up as she rocks back and forth on her heels.

“Why’d you buy all of them? For Light?”

“They felt too private to be in any house besides mine. It was like they already belonged to me.”

Our eyes catch, locking together. The air between us thickens with electricity. She’s quiet for a moment, studying my face like she’s trying to gather the courage to say something.

“Where have you been?”

I arch an eyebrow. “Playing the nagging wife already?”

“Is it true?” she demands, not a hint of question in her tone.

My fingers tighten on the glass in my hand as I lean back in my chair, peering at her over my desk. She’s smart keeping her distance, bracing herself against the door so she can flee at any moment.

The longer she stands there, the less resistance I have against the idea of seeing just how pretty that witchy mouth of hers is stretched and swollen around my dick. I want to use her tight fucking body as an outlet for this rage. Fuck all the guilt away.

“Be more specific, Coraline. You want to know something, be a big girl and ask me.”

Her eyes slit just as she lifts her chin, glaring at me before crossing her arms in front of her chest, like that will somehow protect her from me.

“Did you kill the man who helped destroy my apartment tonight?”

The sound of his windpipe cracking beneath my boot echoes in my ears.

I nod, lifting the glass rim to my lips and taking a sip of my drink before tossing the bullet that pierced Charlie Monroe right between his eyes onto my desk.

“Souvenir,” I say above the rattling of metal against wood, watching the silver bullet roll across the desk before coming to a stop.

That made more noise than his body did when it fell from the Peak, crashing into the raging sea and rocks below.

Her eyes widen with shock, like she’s surprised by what I did.

“Oh my God.”

I feign confusion, furrowing my brows together. “Did you forget who you married, Hex? Did you forget what I am, or did you ignore all the rumors and hope I was different?”

I’d said it once before that people constantly battle two versions of themselves.

The person that wants to exist when no one is watching cares for Coraline. Wants to show her how to help herself heal. Wants to be the shoulder she falls on. That person can give her peace.

The individual I give the world? Doesn't care about how she feels right now. I'm a ruthless man who won't hesitate to send another person screaming into hell if they threaten those close to me. I've seen too much corruption and lost too many people to give a shit about how damned my soul is. This person will only bring her war.

"God fucking dammit, Silas," she hisses, running frustrated hands through her hair. "Why? Why couldn't you have just left it fucking alone?"

I lean forward in the chair, sitting my glass on the desk, eyes darkening as my jaw goes taut.

"Watch your fucking mouth, Coraline," I warn, a threat at the back of my throat. "What little patience I have left is running thin. Don't argue with me tonight."

She moves through the dark with her fists balled at her sides. A tiny, little ball of anger. I enjoy watching her try to intimidate me. Her palms slam on the desk across from me, waves of hair falling in front of her shoulders, those two white streaks catching the moonlight.

"It's not your job to protect me. I asked you to look out for Lilac. That was our agreement." She shoves her pointer finger into the wood. "I didn't agree to you playing into the asshole alpha stereotype."

"How about you do us both a favor, Coraline." I grind my molars. "Get the fuck out."

She jerks like I smacked her. It dawns on me this is the first time I've spoken to her like this. The first time I've needed to.

I'm not doing it to be mean. I'm doing it because if she doesn't leave, what I make her do next will send her to bed sated and have her waking up with a stomach full of regret.

I don't want her to hate herself for letting herself have me, even if it's just one night.

Her pink tongue darts across her bottom lip, head tilting as she plays a game she's gonna lose. "And if I don't? What are you going to do, Hawthorne?"

A smirk unfolds on my lips, my tongue rolling across my front teeth.

"I'll fuck you until you break." My voice is husky from lust. "I don't have the patience to be nice to your body. I will fuck my pent-up aggression

into your tight cunt until it leaks down your thighs. So, get the fuck out, or slide your ass on my desk and spread your legs.”

She’s stubborn, has to learn lessons the hard way instead of listening, and I’m far too gone in my head to give a single fuck about how she feels in the morning anymore.

Not when all I’m focused on is bending her ass over this desk and screwing her through my floor.

Coraline is entirely too transparent; I can see her debating the options. She wants to stay, wants to give herself to me, but she’s afraid. So afraid that I expect her to walk out.

Leave me to fuck my fist until I spill with her cursed name on my lips.

But instead, she stands and begins to circle the edge of my desk. Her loose T-shirt slips down her shoulder, allowing the moonlight to reveal a white scar that goes across her collarbone.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

Coraline slides between me and the desk, the smell of lavender on her wet hair, and lifts her ass onto the top, legs dangling just in front of my knees.

“I still owe you one more favor,” she says softly. “This makes us even.”

I smirk, running a hand across my jaw. I’ve never been the kind of man who needs repayment, but if that’s the excuse she wants to give me so I can touch her, fine.

“Take off your shorts,” I order, voice gruff in the back of my throat, hoarse from the lust trapped back there.

She does as I ask without complaint. As much as she wants to deny her attraction, she wants to be a good girl for me more. Slowly sliding her sleep shorts down her long legs, taking her time, she teases me with every inch of lost fabric. My teeth sink into my bottom lip, and I spread my thighs a little wider, falling back into my chair. My fingers undo the button of my jeans, unzipping them as I tilt my head, zeroing in on the black silk panties trimmed with lace that hide barely anything from my hungry eyes.

“Panties too.”

Her chest heaves, a shaky breath rattling past her lips as she nervously follows my instructions. Shame and desire harden her nipples, the buds taut beneath the thin shirt. It’s a deadly combination, her need to do what I say so I’ll reward her and feeling weak for taking orders with no fight.

Coraline Whittaker likes to behave.

And there is nothing I love more than turning a headstrong woman into a needy whore. Completely, utterly at my mercy, watching her whine and cry for an orgasm she can't have unless I say so.

Her underwear slips to her ankles, and before she lets them fall to the floor, I catch them in my left hand, squeezing a fist around the soft material.

I hold it between my teeth, the smell of her arousal so close to my nose making me groan as I jerk my jeans down, just enough so I can pull my throbbing cock from my boxers. The thick tip is red, aching and begging for relief.

A loud gasp makes me look up just as Coraline speaks. "You're pierced?"

The silvery moonlight catches the metal along my shaft, three barbells evenly spaced from base to mid-shaft, glinting as they stud the hard muscles of my cock.

I drop her panties to my lap before I answer.

"If you beg me to fuck you, I'll show you what they're for."

Her eyes leave my face and travel down my body, taking in the sight of my fingers wrapped around the base of my cock, the piercings cool against my palm.

"We—" She swallows, eyes flicking from my waist to my eyes. "It's not a good idea."

"Is that why you're leaking on my desk?" I grunt, motioning with my eyes toward her pussy.

Her naked, exposed pussy, pink and crying for me to make it come. It wants me so deep inside of her that she can't fucking stand it. I roll the harsh pad of my thumb against my reddened tip, smearing precum.

She blushes, pupils dilating. Coraline watches every movement as I release my cock before picking up her silk panties and wrapping them around my shaft.

The feel of my callused hands and her underwear tugging at the piercings beneath my palm elicits a hiss from my throat.

I use my feet to move forward, the chair beneath me rolling closer to the edge of the desk where she sits, forcing her to spread her legs wider to accommodate the size of my shoulders. This puts my face directly in front of her cunt, right where I've been dying to be for months.

“Don’t worry, Hex. I’m not gonna fuck you tonight. But you’re going to wish I did.”

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

TWENTY-FOUR

DEATH OF THE SUN

SILAS

“*SILAS.*”

Her whimper falls in the dark room, ghosting across the shell of my ears as I place a kiss to the top of her thigh. Coraline’s knuckles grip the edge of the desk so hard they’re turning white, like this will cure the ache between her thighs.

My balls tighten, mouth this close to a cunt that’s begging to be filled with load after load until she can’t walk without me dripping down her thighs. I keep a steady rhythm, palm rubbing up and down my shaft while my other hand runs the length of her inner thigh.

“Put your feet on the desk,” I breathe. “Make sure you keep those legs spread and that cunt in my face.”

The heat from her core lulls me in as she does what she’s told. I place my fingers right on the edge of her pussy, dragging a teasing finger up and down the seam of her puffy cunt. A huff of air breezes past my lips, ghosting across her wet skin.

“Wait, I—I haven’t done anything since...” she stutters, placing one of her hands on my head to keep me from feasting. She looks down at me with panic in her eyes and lust tinting her cheeks.

“Use your words, pretty girl. Talk to me.” I rub my thumb into her skin, trying to coax the words out of her.

“Every time I’ve tried messing around with anyone else, I don’t stay there with them.” Her teeth graze her bottom lip, looking so torn yet so needy. “I get lost in my mind, in the past. I want to stay here with you, Silas, but I don’t know how.”

My jaw tightens.

I want to taste her orgasm on my tongue. Want her to stay here with me. Whatever it takes to get there. Whatever I need to do so she trusts me.

My hand moves from between her thighs, reaching beside her hip to grab my gun while I place a warm kiss to the inside of her knee.

She turns her head to look down her side when I nudge her wrist with the handle of my gun, offering the weapon to her.

“What are you doing?”

“Making sure you stay with me,” I murmur. “And giving you control if you don’t.”

“You can’t be serious,” she breathes, chest heaving. “You’re going to let me hold a loaded gun to your head while you—”

“I said it, didn’t I?” I interrupt, dragging my bottom lip up her inner thigh, barely touching her. Her dark eyes are lit with desire as I peer up from the apex of her thighs. “If this is what makes you feel safe? If this is what it takes for you to let me taste you? Fine.”

I press my face to her skin, pulling the tip of my nose along the top of her smooth leg, inhaling and exhaling a pained groan. Just the smell of her is driving me out of my fucking mind.

“I’ll take a bullet in the skull, Hex. Just make sure you come on my tongue before you pull the trigger.”

“I—I can’t—”

“Take the fucking gun, Coraline. I won’t ask again.”

I press the metal against her warm skin until she reaches out tentatively, taking it from me, shaky palm curling around the handle.

“Good girl.” I groan as I continue pumping my hips into my fist, the friction between skin and fabric just the right amount of pain. “I’m trusting you not to kill me. You’re gonna trust me to eat your pussy.”

I dive forward, cutting off any argument she may have. My tongue licks a stripe up the seam of her cunt, forcing Coraline to toss her head back with a whiney fucking moan that makes my cock jump in my hand.

The cool metal of my gun presses against my temple, making my blood heat. This is the only way I want to die.

Her pussy tastes the way I knew it would. Musky and sweet, melting into my throat, making me desperate for more.

My hungry mouth presses deeper between her folds, and I groan as I lap up her wetness, as my tongue rolls flat against her clit, circling the bud with narrow circles.

Her cunt is hot against my lips, body trembling beneath me as I trail a teasing finger along her inner thigh, stopping just short of her tiny hole.

"Fuck yes," she whimpers, panting as her nails scratch through my trimmed hair, making a chill race down my spine.

I pull my hand from my cock, using both to explore up her body. My large palms grope her waist before sliding beneath her T-shirt, tracing the contours of her ribs before scooping her breasts up into my hands.

My fingers flick across her nipples, making me tilt my head.

"You're pierced?" I murmur, throwing the question from earlier back at her as I drop a kiss to the top of her mound.

She looks down at me, face flushed from ecstasy, giving me a cute nod as she bites her bottom lip.

This fucking woman.

A growl rips from the back of my throat as I tear the front of her shirt open, leaving her tits exposed and hanging like ripe fruits for me to dig my teeth in. Two sets of heart jewelry decorate each side of her dark nipples.

This is my Garden of Eden, and I'll sin every time if it looks like her.

I bring my palm to her mouth, squeezing her cheeks, making her pucker those pretty lips.

"Spit," I order.

And because she's so desperate to be good for me, she does.

Using the saliva from her mouth as lube, I wrap my hand back around my dick, moaning at the slick feeling of her spit and panties rubbing against every vein along my shaft.

"Does this make us even, baby? You letting me use your body? You think I'm gonna let you go after this? That smart mouth of yours is mine to fuck. This cunt will be my breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And when I'm feeling fucking sadistic, I'll shove my cock in that tight ass just 'cause I can." I seethe, my voice a whisper in the darkness. "*We'll never be even,*" I tease, my voice a hushed whisper in the darkness.

Coraline cries out as I continue my exploration, my tongue a blur as I circle her clit, applying just the right amount of pressure while I slip a finger inside her wet hole.

She tightens around me, hips lurching forward to chase the bliss my mouth is bringing her. The gun slips from my temple to rest against my shoulder, her mind falling toward release as her body loosens beneath me.

Her slippery wetness coats my hand, sloppy noises echoing in my ears as I thrust my finger in and out of her with measured strokes, teasing that soft spot buried deep in her walls.

“Silas, Silas,” she gasps, breathing becoming more erratic. Her breasts bounce up and down with the movement, making me graze her clit with my teeth. Her legs tense and press together as she stretches to meet my mouth.

I smirk against her skin, removing my slippery tongue, leaving her crashing from a high with no relief. Her eyes widen, fingers clawing at my scalp.

“No, I was right there.” It’s a broken little cry, stroking my ego almost as good as my hand strokes my cock.

“You didn’t think I’d let you come that easy, did you, Hex?” I ask.

I lean back in my chair, palming my stiff cock, moving my fist up and down. Precum slides down my shaft as I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, groaning.

“Please,” she whispers, burning with shame for needing me so fucking badly.

My hips buck into my fist, the muscles of my arms and thighs tensing as pleasure courses through me. I narrow my eyes when her fingers try to dip between her thighs.

“Play with your tits for me. Show me how bad you want it. How bad you want to ride my cock.” My choked voice is low and raspy. “And if you wanna fuck yourself, use my gun to do it.”

I’m testing her limits here, knowing she was so very close and will do anything to reach that peak. But just how far is she willing to go to come for me?

My skin is set aflame when she sucks in a breath, groping one of her breasts with her right hand, tweaking the nipple between two fingers and arching her back into the feeling.

“*Fuck yes,*” I groan, my breath hitching as she slowly guides the barrel of my gun through her soaked pussy lips and lifts her hips to grind against the lethal metal.

The same weapon I used to kill someone tonight.

She’s a beautiful, witchy thing, face burning with bliss, lips parted, and eyes half-lidded, never breaking eye contact from my throbbing cock as I fuck my hand to the sight of her clit rubbing against my gun.

My wrist twists and pulls, tugging myself closer to an orgasm.

“Such a pretty fucking cunt. All needy and ready for me. You want to be a filthy little toy for me, Coraline? Just a hole for me to warm my cock up in?”

Her pussy clenches around the gun’s shaft at my words, a long, drawn-out moan that rises in pitch like she can’t take any more. Those hushed gasps from her pouty lips tell me she’s getting close again.

I return to my earlier position, grabbing her wrist with my free hand and yanking the gun from her swollen cunt. The cry that rips from her lungs is music to my ears. It makes my balls tingle, threatening to spill cum all over my fist.

“Silas!” she begs, writhing beneath me.

My name has never sounded better, a shattered whine on her wicked lips.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

I force her fingers to relinquish its hold on the weapon, holding it myself as I teasing flick my tongue over her sensitive bud. A pool of her arousal glazes the desk beneath her ass.

“Yes! Yes, I want to be your toy, just a hole for you. Please, I’ll do anything.”

“Keep begging, baby,” I hum. “I like hearing you beg for me.”

“I need to come,” she pleads with me, sweat trickling between her breasts, unable to gather a full, deep breath. “It hurts—God, it hurts, please.”

“Here?” I offer, my tongue coming to lap over her throbbing clit. She moans with a jolt, chasing my tongue. “Is this pussy aching right here?”

My mouth caresses her core again and again, lapping at it, playing with it.

“Yes, Silas. Right there, right there.”

Fire courses through my veins as my hips thrust into my fist erratically, losing rhythm. My labored breaths mix with Coraline’s as I hum between her thighs.

“I’m so close, please don’t stop.” There are tears in the back of her eyes. God, the thought of her pretty face coated in tears because she needs to come makes my hips falter.

I suck her clit into my mouth, rolling my tongue around the bud before shoving the barrel of my gun into her wet hole, forcing her walls to stretch around it, sending her spiraling over the edge and into an ocean of euphoria.

Coraline's eyes slam shut, her back arches, and the screams of her pleasure pierce and echo around my office. The force of her orgasm leaves her shaking, her pussy contracting in tiny spasms around the metal wedged inside of her.

When her nails dig holes into my shoulder, I aimlessly rut into my hand. That inevitable climax in the pit of my stomach explodes.

"*Coraline*. F-Fuck, baby," I groan as I finally reach my release. The pressure in me finally snaps as thick ropes of cum paint my fingers, covering her silk panties.

White-hot bliss courses through me, tongue unable to help but clean up the juices leaking from her as I shake with the aftershocks of my release. The salty yet sweet taste of her arousal coats my chin as I pull my head back. She falls back onto the desk, palms resting behind her to keep her upright.

She's beat. Tired and blissed-out.

If she only knew this is only the start of where I want her before I fuck her. As if my cock agrees, it twitches, hardening as I stand up. When I step between her thighs, she blinks up at me, still trying to get her breathing under control.

I grip the back of her neck, stitching our mouths together. She moans, sucking my tongue into her mouth to drink down the taste of her cum. I've barely scratched the surface of how deeply I wanted to burrow inside of her.

She has me, and she doesn't even realize it, so consumed with trying to keep me at bay that she doesn't know I want her pain. I want her screaming hurt and aching rage. That person she hides from the world, the one she fears in the mirror.

I want her.

And I don't know what that means for me, for us. I've never been one to think clearly when something I want is on the horizon.

"Open," I command against her mouth, watching as her eyebrows furrow in confusion, but her jaw lowers, pink lips parting for me.

I hold her face in my hand before shoving the silk panties into her mouth. My cum stains the fabric, some still dripping from the lace edges.

There is a desire in my gut that's been pooling there since the moment I laid eyes on Coraline. It's a violent fire that staggers and groans, writhes beneath the earth like it does beneath my skin. It's completely unexpected

and overwhelming, like it can't get enough of itself. It bleeds and spreads from contact.

It's the death of the sun, replaced by the flecks of gold in her eyes.

"You're my wife, Coraline *Hawthorne*. If I want to cover myself in the blood of a thousand more men to protect you, I will," I tell her. "They cannot hurt you without having to answer to me."

Book made for megrourkee@gmail.com

TWENTY-FIVE OUR FOURTH

CORALINE

NO ONE TALKS about how powerful hands are.

Not the innate strength they can exude but the feeling they can provide when attached to the correct person.

Some hands can simply exist and evoke emotion.

Silas has hands like that.

Which is the most unfortunate thing in the world for me, personally.

This morning while he was making his coffee, which he does every fucking morning, annoyingly punctual with his stupid bean juice, I watched him from Lilac's room.

Technically, our room since we are sharing because I refuse to share a bed with him. I will bite my tongue and sleep on a bed that sits opposite my seventeen-year-old sister until she goes to college, just so I don't fall into the one-bed trope. I will prevail.

Anyway, his hands.

It was five in the morning, on the dot, and I had yet to fall asleep. Which isn't new—I never sleep, and if I do, it's never straight through the night. My mind wakes me up at all hours just to remind me how scary the dark can be.

I wasn't sure if Silas had been to bed or if he, like me, has chronic insomnia. Some nights, in the stillness of the night, I hear nothing from his bedroom, and other nights, I hear his door creak open before the basement door unlocks, and he disappears into his cave, not returning until five the next morning to make his coffee.

So this morning, I'm staring at him from my room, a sketchbook in my lap, and all I can focus on is his hands. And back muscles. They ripple and

bulge with each movement he makes. Well-defined, evenly spaced as they ripple along his spine into his narrow waist. Golden-brown skin mottled with shadows of sun-dappled light.

Silas Hawthorne has a slutty fucking waist.

But his hands.

Silas's hands are large, with wide palms and long fingers that move with subtle grace as he makes his coffee. The veins beneath his skin rise up like a miniature mountain range, running across his knuckles and trailing past his wrist to his arms.

They squeeze and hold things with such force but a softness I've never seen.

His hands make this feeling knot in my stomach.

Desire to feel them on me, desire because just looking at them makes me remember his touch. Every single second of it.

All morning I've spent attempting to clean up my art studio for Light's charity event today, and all I can think about while hanging decorations is his fucking hands on my body and the night in his office.

When the veil of shadows hid us away and our hands explored dangerous territory. A shiver speeds down my spine, my core tightening like I can feel the cool metal of his gun pressed against my overheated flesh.

It's been three days.

He's quietly let me keep my distance, not once bringing it up in casual conversations we are forced to have when we both collide after returning home from work. He usually gets home later than me and always asks the same question when he walks through the door.

"You two eat?"

Lilac is always the one to answer with either a yes before telling him there are leftovers on the stove or a no, let's order takeout.

It's painfully fucking domestic.

The two of them have become friends without my consent. Which I hadn't predicted being a problem before because they are so different. Lilac is loud, constantly in your face with her bubbly personality, and Silas is, well...not that.

Yesterday, I came home and found them in the living room, both sitting on the floor with a chessboard between them. He was trying to teach her

while she kept pausing the television to dive into an introspective explanation of each of her favorite scenes from *Move*.

Silas was quiet, nodding his head while she talked, and not in the way where he was ignoring her, placating her until she was done. No, when she paused, he'd ask questions. And I could physically see the way my sister would light up to answer.

There is nothing she loves more than people listening to her current theories and fixations. It's her love language.

And my love language is when people treat my sister well.

It's the equivalent of men holding babies. It does something weird to my insides.

Before bed that night, I had to remind her this was temporary, and getting attached to him would only make it more difficult for her. He wasn't a permanent thing—Silas Hawthorne was a fleeting moment in our lives. She knew the deal. But Lilac is...well, she's her, and she doesn't listen.

I'll have to be there to pick up the pieces when this ends and she misses his company.

"Shit."

The banner I'm trying to hang outside the studio once again falls from my grip. I have exactly two hours before people start showing up, and this studio is a disaster. Nothing is ready, and I'm slipping further underwater as the time passes.

"Stupid hot, sexy hands." I curse beneath my breath, strangling the banner in my hands. "Stupid cologne that smells good, stupid tongue that —"

"Looks like we showed up right on time."

I nearly fall from the small ladder I'm standing on as I turn around, the banner fluttering to the ground as I look at the people standing beneath me.

Perched on the sidewalk in front of my open studio, Sage peers up at me with black sunglasses shielding her eyes from the summer sun and a grin.

"What are you guys doing here?"

Slowly, I start to make my way down the steps of the ladder until I'm back on the ground, where feet belong. Fuck that ladder, and fuck that banner.

"Silas called, said you might need some help." Briar is wearing a smirk and what I'm assuming is Alistair's hoodie from the size of it, the way it falls to mid-thigh before fishnet leggings take over. "Looks like he was right."

“Ya know,” Lyra hums, rocking back and forth on her heels, “I’m starting to take offense that you don’t just ask us yourself.”

I bite down on the inside of my cheek, unsure if I can tell them the truth.

That I’m so used to not having support, having to do everything alone, that I forgot there were people out there willing to help me now.

“Don’t take it like that,” I say. “I’m like this with everyone. Asking for isn’t something—”

“You’re good at? No shit,” Sage interrupts, shoving her glasses onto her head. “Don’t worry, you’ll get over it with these two. I did, just takes some time.”

“Are you doing this because I’m married to your boyfriend’s best friend?” I ask, looking at each of their faces, crossing my arms in front of my chest. “If we are just civil by association, that’s fine. Or is it pity? Because of what happened to me? I just, I need to know why you’re trying so hard to be nice to me.”

Briar tilts her head. “Why are you so skeptical?”

I admire the bluntness of her question, even though I’m sure she wanted to say, *why are you such a bitch*.

It’s not like I want to be this way. Guarded and mistrusting. But it’s hard when person after person lets you down. I want to believe their intentions are good, but I can’t help but feel suspicious.

“A friend of mine from high school, Yasmine?” I offer them, fully aware everyone knows the daughter of two art tycoons, a girl I’d known since kindergarten. We fell in love with art together, and just as quickly, that masterpiece of a friendship fell apart.

“She was there for me when I was rescued. Sent me get-well packages and flowers to my hospital room. Even came over and brought these home-cooked meals, trying to encourage me to get back into painting.” I drag my tongue along my bottom lip, shaking my head as I sigh. “Yeah, well, three months after, there was a news frenzy—people knew about things I’d only told Yasmine. The scars Stephen left on me, the torture and humiliation he’d put me through, all of the secrets I’d told her in confidence were released for public consumption, and they fucking devoured it.”

It broke something in me, knowing strangers all over the world were reading about me being forced to eat out of a dog bowl and relieve myself in a bucket, listening to podcasts and news anchors talk about my mental status.

“How does someone fall in love with a person that dislocates their shoulder?”

“She had to be into some kinky shit before she was kidnapped.”

I’d been sliced open, still alive and able to feel, while people peered into my insides. Poked around with their nosey hands, making assumptions based only on what the media fed them.

I became a story. My humanity was forgotten.

It was the exact reason I’d refused to talk to the media in the first place.

Yasmine was only the first to betray my trust.

“What a fucking cunt,” Briar mutters.

“She still lives in the Springs. We could—”

“You’re not allowed to stab her. If you get arrested, Thatcher is going to blame us, and I am not dealing with his melodrama,” Sage interjects before Lyra can finish her sentence, making her roll her eyes.

“I was going to say we could slash her tires,” Lyra corrects, and although her features give an innocent, shy vibe, there is a look in her eye that tells me she’d kill someone if she had to. “Anyway, we aren’t trying to be friends to make a quick buck from the tabloids.”

“Then why?”

“Dude,” Sage sighs, as if it’s obvious. “You’re our fourth.”

I furrow my brow. “Fourth what?”

“You’ve never watched *The Craft*? 1996 cult classic?”

I shake my head, which makes her jaw drop, like I’ve just told her I’ve committed a crime.

“Movie night is in the books for this weekend. I can’t in good conscience let you walk further into this world without watching Fairuza Balk dominate,” she orders. “But for now, just know you’re our fourth. If it takes you some time to warm up to that idea, so be it.”

“You’re a part of the Loner Society now,” Lyra says. “The forgotten ones. Those who never fit into the hierarchy of Ponderosa Springs. You can still be alone; we’ll just be alone together.”

Old dogs can’t learn tricks in a day, but there’s a part of me that craves what they’re offering.

A sense of belonging.

A knowing that there are people out there that care and would miss you if you died. Knowing that you aren’t alone and you fit in somewhere, no matter how small the space.

Just like the night of hide-and-seek, that sparkle of hope ignites in my chest.

So, I offer an olive branch.

“Which one of you knows how to hang a banner?”

Several hours later, people fill the inside of my fully decorated studio. Hedi and Light’s other board members had already given short speeches, and bidding on the girls’ paintings had started.

It was a nice turnout, one I think I have to thank Zoe Hawthorne for. She’d walked in with a small army of women and men with deep pockets looking to clear their conscience with some charity.

I didn’t care who they were; all that mattered was the money going into survivors’ pockets. Money some of them desperately need to get the resources they deserve to heal.

“Miss Whittaker!”

I turn my gaze to Faye, who is bulldozing her way through people to reach me. Her tattered shorts and pink hair stand out like a sore thumb among the wealthy.

But she doesn’t care. The smile on her face can’t be dimmed by snotty people. Not today.

“Hi, Faye.” I return her warm grin.

She’s winded when she stops in front of me. “Should I call you Mrs. Hawthorne now that you’re married?”

I choke on my own spit, coughing out my reply. “Coraline is fine.”

“You’ll never believe what just happened. Someone bought my painting! The synthetic cubism you helped me with? It just sold!”

“Congratulations, Faye.”

My smile is genuine. Pure happiness, untouched by darkness. A stream of joy on a stormy night. No one is more deserving of this than her. She has her entire life ahead of her; this joy she is experiencing, this is only a small moment in what I hope is a long life.

Faye takes me by surprise, throwing her arms around me and crushing me to her body.

She’s hugging me.

I know how to hug, but being caught off guard makes me awkward as I tentatively hug her back.

“Thank you,” she breathes, tightening her grip. “Thank you. I wish those words were big enough to express what you’ve done for me.”

“No thanks needed. This was all you.” I pat her back softly, clearing my throat as I pull back. “Go celebrate with your family, and tell your mother I said hello.”

I watch her disappear into the crowd toward her family, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. Not because she hugged me but because of the blatant physical affection in public. Being seen as soft by all these people, like I care? Make me a target.

“You’re really good at this.” Sage’s sharp voice floats over my shoulder.

Turning to face her at my side, I smirk. “Standing and looking pretty?”

She arches an eyebrow. “You think you’re pretty?”

My mouth drops open a little before her mouth melts into a warm smile. For a second, I’d seen a glimpse of the girl I’d seen in high school. The infamous mean girl everyone was so afraid of.

“Just kidding.” She nudges my hip with hers. “The teaching thing—you’re good at it.”

I’m uncomfortable with all this praise today. It’s not a normal thing in my life, never has been, and suddenly, there are kind words everywhere, more than I’ve heard over my entire life, and I don’t know how to handle it.

“So, you two fucked?” she asks bluntly, smirking at me with a knowing glint in her eyes.

I cough, taken aback. “What? No? Why do you ask? Did he say—”

“Rook guessed. Said Silas had postorgasm glow.” She laughs.

“Isn’t this awkward for you? Talking to me about this after he dated your sister?” My shields slam upward, hoping she’ll back off before I slip up and say something that has no business being said out loud.

I deflect and bite when people get too close, but Sage has teeth too.

“Sweetheart, don’t try to mean girl me.” Sage’s eyes flame with the challenge, blue eyes burning as she glances down at her red nails. “I’ll hurt your feelings.”

I doubt anyone, including me, could out-bitch Sweetheart Sage Donahue. Her wrath is notorious.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just...” I bite the inside of my cheek. “Talking about shit like this makes me uncomfortable. I’m bitchy when I’m

uncomfortable. We're just—we're friends."

Friends who may have or may not have fooled around. Friends who are in a fake marriage. It's a weird friendship, but that's all it is. That's all it can ever be.

"Sure you are. That why he just showed up?"

I turn from her smirking face, ready to ask what she means, when I catch a glimpse of Silas's towering frame stalking through the front door. "Why is he here?"

He's still wearing his suit from work, the costly material stretching over his shoulders, tapered to fit his waist. He looks expensive, important even, and I'm unsure how people manage to believe he married me.

Which makes me remember we have an event with his company coming up. Meaning I'll need to figure out a way to convince people I'm someone Silas wants. Someone deserving of his last name.

Fuck me.

"Because he cares." Sage leans toward me, whispering, "No one cares like Silas Hawthorne. We all have a curse, Coraline. That's his."

Sage moves away from me, leaving me to fend for myself as I silently pray he doesn't find me, but it's impossible. It's like he has some kind of radar for me.

I decide to meet him halfway since his eyes have already found mine, and once we are close enough to one another, he's the first to speak.

"This place looks great."

"The girls were a big help. Thank you for calling them. You didn't have to come though. Work must be busy."

I shift beneath his hard gaze, unwavering from my face like he doesn't want to look anywhere else but me. The attention from someone so intense is overwhelming.

"This—" He motions to the space around us. "—Light, helping these girls, it's important to you, yeah?"

I nod quietly, unsure how to answer with words, so afraid to show anyone, especially him, how much I care.

"Then I'll be here." He lifts a hand, pushing a piece of hair behind my ear. "If it's important to you, I can skip a budget meeting for it."

His fingers trace my cheek, just lightly with the back of his knuckle. The band wrapped around his ring finger catches the light, a physical reminder of the ties that bind us.

This is the first time he's touched me since the night in his office.

My stomach warms thinking about it, thighs twitching as heat pools in my core.

"Silas." I clear my throat. "About the other night. I—"

"Well, James, I never thought I'd see the day!" Nails on a chalkboard interrupt my word vomit. "We've finally managed to track down the happy couple!"

I visibly flinch when I see Regina and my father parting the crowd, walking in tandem until they are standing before us. She's wearing a hat with feathers, and she looks very similar to a cockatoo.

Silas, ever aware of my body language, slides an intimate arm around my waist, resting his palm on my hip as he tugs me into his body.

"Regina Whittaker." She extends a hand to him. "Pleasure to finally meet you."

Silas takes her hand, shaking it to be polite. One thing I've come to really like about this man is how he never forces a smile. I mean, he doesn't really show any emotion on his face, but I like that he doesn't change his self around different people.

Silas is Silas.

What you see is what you get.

But with me, it's different. Like that statement doesn't apply when we are alone. Sometimes Silas is anything but Silas. He's something else entirely.

He's the kind of man who buys an entire collection of your artwork because he doesn't want anyone to have the secret parts of you that you do give to people willingly. He wants them all to himself.

"James."

My fake husband's jaw tightens as she shakes my father's hand, a knowing glint, a threat lingering in his eyes. Silas knows my dad; James is blithely unaware of just how well.

"Coraline, what is this outfit? Did you not have time to get changed before the event?"

I flick my gaze down at the threadbare denim overalls and white tube top. "It's a charity event, Regina. No one gives a shit about my clothes."

"Honey, that mouth, I swear." She reaches forward, tapping my cheek as she shakes her head. I withhold from biting her finger off as she pulls back. "How are you two getting on with married life? Lilac isn't too much of a

burden, is she? I tried telling Coraline a man like you would want your own space.”

I try to hide the shock on my face. Is she hitting on him? In front of me? In front of my father?

“We like having her. She’s great.”

“Well, I hope the two of them are taking care of you. I tried making sure Coraline knew how to run a household, but she was always so busy with her little drawings.”

Every time she opens her mouth, I’m reminded of why I want to stitch it shut.

“The little drawings that sold for half a million dollars my senior year of high school?” I bite out, sliding a protective hand onto Silas’s stomach, feeling the ripple of his abs beneath his shirt. “We take care of each other, Regina.”

“I’m sure you do.” She nods, eyeing me the way she used to when I’d walk down the stairs as a teenager, judging every pound of weight, every article of clothing.

“Silas.” My father clears his throat. “We’d love to have you for dinner one night. Our chef makes prime rib that pairs flawlessly with a bottle of scotch. Are you a single-malt man?”

“I drink bourbon.” The muscles in his jaw twitch, voice smooth like liquid night. “And I don’t eat meat.”

I try to hide the shock on my face but find it difficult as I look up at him. The bourbon, I knew about. He’s got a cart in his office, stocked with ice nightly, but the meat?

“Since when?” I ask.

Silas looks down, the harshness in his eyes softening, and like it’s no big, like it’s the simplest thing in the world, he says, “Since you told me you don’t like the smell.”

He almost looks offended that I’d think differently. Like it was self-explanatory that if I didn’t like something, he wouldn’t like it either.

I melt a little into those dark brown eyes, my heart tightening in my chest. It’s such a small gesture, but it’s the kindest thing anyone’s ever done for me.

My hand on his stomach slides up to his chest, and even though my parents are right there watching us, I can’t help myself from reaching up on my tippy-toes to place a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

Chaste and quick, a thank-you without words.

“Looks like we won’t have to wait long for grandchildren, J.”

The warmth from my body runs ice-cold. I place my feet back on the ground, narrowing my eyes at her.

“Regina, respectfully, why the fuck do you care?”

“Excuse me?” she gasps, eyes wide.

I hadn’t planned to say anything, but since I’ve already started, there is no stopping it.

“Never once, not once in my life, have you given a shit. And now, what? Because I marry someone with money, you care? I tried for years to earn your love, like it was something that needed to be worked for instead of given freely.” I shake my head at her audacity, a spiteful smile on my face. “I spent my childhood bending over fucking backward to be what you wanted, and it was never enough for you. So, I’ll ask again, why the fuck do you care?”

“You can’t speak to me like that. I raised you the best I could, but you’ve always been so...troubled. From the start!” Regina sputters like a fish out of water. “James, are you just going to let her talk to me like that?”

“Coraline—”

“I suggest,” Silas interrupts, speaking directly to my father, “you choose those next words carefully, James.”

My father has always been an unstoppable force, but Silas is an immovable object. They’re titans clashing, and if I had to bet, my money would be on my husband. Fake or not. Silas is a protector by nature; when you’re in his inner circle, no one can touch you.

“You two can buy something or see yourself out,” I snip, finished with this conversation, tired of speaking to them, pretending that they actually give a shit.

This event isn’t about them, and that’s what I’m doing, making it about my shitty parents. I don’t want to ruin this opportunity for these girls, so I step from Silas’s hold and go outside for some fresh air.

And just like that night at the art gala, Silas follows, meeting me in the daylight. The sun beams down on the two of us as he slides his hands into his pockets. I look at him, really look at him for a second.

Regardless of how badly I try to deny it, I like him.

Much more than I ever wanted to. He just makes it so fucking difficult not to. Everything he does, everything he says, it just makes me want to

give in.

“What do you need?” Silas asks.

“Huh?”

“What do you need?” he asks again. “You frown when you’re upset. Tell me how to fix it.”

This is exactly what I’m talking about. This observant person who has seen right through me from that very first phone call. No one has ever cared about me the way he does. Paid attention to the way I move and how I feel the way he has.

My entire life, I have been made to believe I am unlovable. That I am a cursed, hard-to-love creature undeserving of kindness, and Silas just...he makes it look so easy.

“I tell you what I need to feel better, and you just fix it? A snap of your fingers? What if I said stabbing Regina with a fork would make me feel better, Hawthorne.”

He steps closer to me, rubbing his thumb across the lines on my forehead.

“You’re in control of a monster, Hex. Whatever you need, it’s already yours.”

The scary part isn’t that he views himself as a monster.

It’s that I believe him.

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

TWENTY-SIX

BLACK HONEY

SILAS

“WHERE’S the beautiful Caroline tonight, Silas?”

My jaw tenses as I look at Daniel Highland, letting his question hang in the air for a moment. I give him a chance to correct himself, but when he’s a fool and doesn’t take it, I do it for him.

“My wife’s name is Coraline, Daniel,” I say, irritated with his blatant disrespect. “Don’t make me remind you of that again.”

He swallows the fear of being fired. Now that I’ve officially taken over for my father, approved by the board because of my nuptials, his job is hanging by the skin of his ratty fucking teeth, and he knows it.

I lift my two fingers at the bartender, who quickly pours me another drink, sliding the amber liquid across the bar toward me. I need an entire dispensary to get me through the rest of this night.

“Must have slipped my mind.” He clears his throat, coughing into his fist. “Won’t happen again.”

I nod my head at him, lifting the glass of bourbon toward him before taking a sip. He knows her name; he just wants to get beneath my skin any way he can without blatantly disrespecting me. No, he’s a fucking worm, so he’s covert about it.

My silent reply has him scampering away, excusing himself beneath his breath like a kicked dog, leaving me to brood alone for the first time tonight.

Alone with the ninety million thoughts running through my mind. Work bullshit I never expected to deal with this soon. Wedding plans from my mother, who is intent on having us married by the end of next month. Which I get, I do—we aren’t sure how much time Dad has left, and it’s not

like we are having a huge ceremony. It's private, just our families and friends at St. Gabriel's Cathedral. But it's another added stress to our lives.

Coraline has taken it all in stride, barely flinches when my mother shows up with color palettes for the rehearsal dinner and different flavors of cakes. Not to mention, Lilac is having the time of her life picking out flowers for the ceremony, and she hasn't stopped talking about wedding dress shopping for days now.

That part, I can get behind. Coraline in white is my favorite wet dream. I'm not going to mind seeing her in a wedding dress again.

Having Coraline in my apartment isn't as invasive as I thought it would be. I like having her around, even though she's very hot and cold. One day, she lets me in, and the next, she shuts me right back out.

It's a fun little game we play.

Her pretending she doesn't like me, me letting her think I believe that.

I'm not one to deny what I want; I never have been. I'm a straightforward person. If I want someone, I want them. They'll know it, and I want Coraline.

More and more, the longer she exists in my home.

My head throbs when the thought of Stephen pops into my brain. That and having to be at this godforsaken work fundraiser is making me wish I brought painkillers. It's not even a fundraiser—it's an overpriced socializing event with competing companies. Which means I have no choice but to engage in conversation.

My father was much better at this than me. He's able to entertain people, chat, and laugh. I am not that man.

But at work, here? At least I can do something. At least my hands are not idle.

The worst part about Stephen is we can't do anything. There are no leads to follow; there hasn't been a word since he broke into Coraline's apartment. We are just sitting ducks.

We know he's out there, watching us. We can feel him in the air. His presence clings to Ponderosa Springs like a virus.

With my mind bringing up the thought of Stephen, I instinctively look around for Coraline. She'd gone to the bathroom, but that had been several minutes ago, which means she's gotten caught in a conversation she most definitely needs help getting out of.

Coraline is sweet when she's comfortable, but the girl has sharp teeth. And while watching her snap them at her stepmother the other day turned me on, I really would like to avoid having to hold people back while she attacks someone for being an asshole.

I scan the ballroom, aglow with the soft golden light of chandeliers. People move around gracefully, laughing and talking to one another in their overpriced clothing. A two-piece band plays soft music in the corner while waiters go around carrying silver trays filled with hors d'oeuvres.

I'm about to move toward the bathrooms when I see her burnt-orange floor-length silk slip dress. I fucking love the way she did her hair, slick down her back, tucked behind her ears to show off her sharp jawline.

Every time she wears it like that, all I think about is winding those brown and white strands around my wrist. Use it as a handle to shove my cock into her throat.

I'm so distracted by her, by how lethal her figure is in that dress, that I don't notice what she's doing. I don't notice that she's currently batting her fucking eyelashes at a man wearing a goddamn bow tie.

Not until one of his fingers traces the length of her arm.

I roll my tongue against my cheek, downing the rest of my drink and setting it on the bar.

I can't blame him.

Coraline is dark honey.

Sweet, irresistible, but with an edge like no other.

The perfect-looking doll for high society who could slip into heels and steal the heart of any person she crossed. But beneath the surface, there is a sharpness, a wickedness that told you she'd be a minx in the sheets.

She's what every man standing in this room wants but could never have.

Because she's mine.

I step behind Coraline's small frame, looming over her to stare at the man in front of her.

"Silas—" she breathes when my chest touches her back. Something tightens in my gut, knowing she didn't even need to look to know it was me.

"Carson Bloom," Blond highlights says, reaching his hand out for me to shake. He's unaffected by my arrival, confidence in his grin.

He's definitely the son of a politician.

“Silas Hawthorne.” I take his offer, slipping my palm against his. “You blind?”

“What? No? Why—hey, man, what the fuck!” He groans as I tighten my grip, crushing the tendons in my grasp. My knuckles whiten from strangling his finger, and I can just hear the crunch of bones cracking beneath my grasp.

I tilt my head. “That’s the only excuse I can think of for why you didn’t see the ring on her finger.”

“Silas, stop,” Coraline murmurs, turning to face me, hands on my chest.

A chill spreads over me like icy venom, unaffected by the pain twisting up Carson’s face as I keep squeezing. He chokes out a grunt of pain as I narrow my eyes at him.

“Touch my wife again and the next scandal your daddy will have to cover up will be your murder.”

I release his hand, sliding my own into my slacks pocket. He clutches his wrist to his chest like he’s afraid I’ll steal it from him.

I nod my head behind me. “Thanks for coming, Carson.”

He doesn’t even spare a glance at Coraline before he bolts. If I had to guess, to get medical attention. I run an irritated hand across my jaw, peering down at the center of stress.

Sexual fucking stress.

She thinks this is a game, that I’m kidding when I say I’ll kill him if he comes too close. I’m in control of this board, and Coraline is two moves away from being checkmated.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” She seethes, glaring up at me like her scary face is actually going to scare me. She uses it on Lilac all the time. It’s fucking adorable. Like a little tiny kitten who thinks she’s a big bad panther. If she thinks me breaking bow tie’s hand is bad, just wait till she sees what I do when we get home.

“We’re leaving, Hex,” I grunt, running the back of my knuckle across her cheek. “Now.”

CORALINE

“You can’t do shit like that, Silas. If he did something I wasn’t comfortable with, I would have handled it.” I seethe, embarrassment burning my cheeks as I slam the door to his bedroom behind me.

I'm glad my sister is with her parents tonight because I have a feeling this is going to be a loud argument. Unfortunately, my things are in his massive closet, which means in order to get out of this dress, we have to have this conversation again.

"I'm more than aware of what you're capable of, Coraline."

"Then stop putting me in a position where I have to keep reminding you."

"Don't put me in a position where I have to show you how merciless I can be," he says darkly, leaning back into the chair behind me.

I stare at him through the mirror, his feet spread wide. His impossibly strong thighs are open and inviting in his black slacks.

Don't ogle his thighs, Coraline. You're angry.

"I can't even begin to explain how much you're overreacting. He's harmless."

Pulling my earrings off, I quickly avert my gaze as I set them on the dresser next to me. The material of my dress scratches my lower back.

"I don't care if he's a goddamn saint. No one touches my wife." Silas's voice is gruff, almost like he's just behind me, right in my ear.

Chills prick my arms as I turn to stare at him in his man-spread position. I cross my arms defiantly, ready to open my mouth and deliver another snarky comment, but find myself distracted.

He slips the tie from his neck and is currently winding the slick black material around his toned hand, squeezing it tightly. A violent shiver races down my spine.

"He gets close again?" He pauses, making eye contact with me. "I put a bullet in him with the gun I used to fuck your cunt with."

My stomach knots with pleasure, feeling the dampness on my panties at his words, remembering the pleasure Silas can bring my body when I let him.

"Is this what happens?" I swallow around the desire in my throat. "When you get jealous, you go on a killing spree."

And because we are alone, because it's just us and I always get a different version of Silas in the shadows, he smirks, tilting one side of his mouth, showing me his arrogance.

"I'm not jealous, Hex." There is a chuckle in his voice, dark and demanding. "I know what that uptight pussy of yours tastes like, and it's my

cock that you crave. I'm protective over what's mine. Don't confuse the two."

"I—"

"Don't fucking deny it," he snaps, shaking his head a bit. "Don't make yourself a liar."

I press my back into the dresser, feeling like I need the support. My body feels like it's giving out, but my voice remains strong, trying to keep up the image that I don't want him.

"Fuck you."

Silas carefully starts to undo the top few buttons of his shirt, exposing the golden-brown skin beneath, making my thighs rub together beneath my dress.

"You could, if you'd let yourself. Submitting to me sexually doesn't make you weak, Coraline." He watches me, fucking me with his eyes. I wonder if he can see my heart beating with that intense gaze. "You want to run the show out there? I'll lay the ground for you to walk on. In here? Let your mind go, and let me make you feel good, baby. Give me control, and I'll show you how good letting go of it feels."

Control.

Give up control.

Why would I, when I'd just got a semblance of it back? Why would I give it all up for a fucking guy?

Because you trust him.

An annoying little voice in my brain echoes the thought. My nipples tighten beneath my clothes as if my body wants to second the notion my brain put forward.

Lust is a traitor.

"And if I want to stop? If I get lost in my head and can't stay in the moment with you?"

Fear tries to take the edge over my desire, telling me that I can't have a sex life. Not a healthy one where I can live in the moment with my partner. Fear tells me I'll always be haunted by Stephen's hands.

"Then you say red, and it all stops."

"That easy?" I scoff in disbelief, always so easy. Like when he says it, that's law.

"That's the only easy part about fucking me, Coraline." His eyes burn in the darkness with lust, like he's dying for me to say yes, to give in. "But

yes, that easy. You will always be safe with me, even from me.”

My soul aches, heart actually skipping a beat and resetting rhythm. I bite the inside of my cheek, afraid.

Because I actually believe him. My heart trusts him, and I refuse to let my brain accept it. That for the first time in a very long time, I trust someone. I believe their words.

I’ve never believed in words the way I believe his. From the moment we spoke in the hospital, even then, as guarded as I was, I believed him when he said I could call him. It’s why I dialed his number because somewhere deep beneath all my suffering, I knew I could trust him.

And my body? My body wants him.

Desperately.

My heels click against the floor as I step forward, swallowing my pride in the name of pleasure. But he holds a palm up at me, motioning for me to stop.

“You want me?” He tilts his head, shadows splaying across the contours of his handsome face. “You’ll crawl.”

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TWENTY-SEVEN

CRAWL

CORALINE

I'M NOT sure what's worse, him forcing me to vocally admit how badly I want him or him making me show him just how much my body needs him.

A shaky breath skates past my lips as my thumbs hook on the thin straps of my dress. The slip-like material slides from my shoulders, cascading down my body like water. In one fell swoop, the material sinks to the floor.

I step out of the pool of orange fabric circling my feet, leaving me only in a pair of heels and my lacy underwear. I'm utterly exposed to his eyes, no barriers between my flesh and his gaze.

This is the worst part, I think.

Letting him see me, what my body looks like, what Stephen left on it. I left the basement, but the basement still lingers on my skin. A jagged white scar that starts on one shoulder crosses my collarbone and stops at the other. Little marks across my knees and thighs, and although he can't see them, I feel the shame from the paddle marks on my back. There are only a few, but they're noticeable up close.

My body is not a smooth surface. It's rigid and bumped with scars. It's not sexy—it's repulsive.

"Fuck."

I meet Silas's eyes, and my breath catches.

His eyes don't inspect me, measuring every imperfection, marking every blip.

No, they admire me.

They hungrily eat up the sight of my bare skin, his bottom lip trapped between his teeth. It's enough to start a small fire in my stomach, a sliver of confidence returning to my body.

Carefully, I kneel, placing my hands on the floor in front of me. My heavy-lidded eyes pierce his as I start to crawl, hair cascading around my shoulders, letting myself feel unashamed of my desire.

When I reach the space between his thighs, I raise up on the backs of my thighs, placing my hands on his strong legs.

Silas leans forward, grabbing my chin between two fingers. "Pout those pretty fucking lips and say please."

I bite my bottom lip softly. "Please, Silas."

As if rewarding me for my begging, his fingers undo the button of his slacks, standing up to his full height and towering above me. I have to stretch my spine to place my face in front of his waist, sitting up on my knees. Everything about Silas makes me feel small in his presence.

I lay my hands flat against his thighs, watching as he pushes down his slacks and boxers until his hard cock slaps against his abdomen, making my mouth water and nerves pool in my gut.

It's as thick as my wrist, and I don't even want to quantify how many inches. Because I'm not exactly sure that many inches will fit into my much smaller body.

"Stick your tongue out for me, pretty thing," he orders, staring down at me with quiet demand in his eyes.

With my mouth already parted, I open a little wider, looking up at him as I stick my tongue out. Silas bends at the waist, grabbing my face in one hand roughly before pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead.

A paradox of actions. The calm before the storm.

"I want you to wet my cock with your mouth, get me nice and ready for your pussy, Hex. I can't fuck your face the way I want to with my piercings in." His breath is warm against my skin, thumb lightly caressing the curve of my jaw. "Wouldn't wanna shatter those pretty teeth."

His grip on my face tightens before he spits onto my tongue, forcing me to shut my mouth around it, forcing me to swallow it down. Whiskey and heat. The familiar taste of him fills my throat, a moan rumbling from my lips.

I could drown in him. The intoxicating bourbon and smoke on his breath. My mouth stays open when he removes his hand, guiding the tip of his cock to my waiting lips.

My body stays perfectly still as he draws across my cupid's bow, leaving them glistening with precum. Unable to help myself, I flick my

tongue, tasting him, craving more as I suck the head into my mouth.

His head falls back, a tortured groan tearing from his chest as my wet tongue works. I bob my head gently, only taking a few careful inches of the metal barbells near the middle of his shaft.

I clench my inner thighs together, trying to create friction for my throbbing clit, needing his touch but needing his sounds of pleasure more.

My mouth worships him, eliciting heady moans from his throat. Fingers snake into my hair, gathering strands in his grip and holding me there. I lap at the underside of his shaft, trailing a flattened tongue down the sides, using my spit to cover every inch.

“That’a girl,” he growls just as I play with the piercings on the top, circling them before sucking his tip back into my mouth. Every second I’m on my knees makes me want him more.

I want to make him feel good. To make up for all the good he’s done for me. Every moment he’s caught me while I was crumbling, carefully guiding me back together.

I want my body to be his comfort, like his voice is mine.

The grip on my scalp tightens as he gives a few shallow pumps into my mouth, just enough to tease himself. I don’t stop moving my tongue until his cock drips with my saliva, glistening in the dim lighting. Wetness pools between my thighs when he pulls back, the need for him raging through me like a wildfire.

Destroying. Burning. Scorching everything that existed before him.

It takes over every fiber of my being. My entire chemical makeup is desperate to melt and separate until it can come back together to be everything he wants.

Silas makes me want to break apart and forget everything I was before him, only to piece myself back together into the perfect fit for him. Not this cursed, damned version of myself.

I want to be someone who deserves him.

His praise.

The hand in my hair jerks me back with a snap, and a low whine leaves my mouth as my gaze is forced up.

“You gonna be a good girl for me, Hex? Let me use your holes until they are leaking my cum?” he grunts, eyes intense and unyielding. “Be sure about your answer because I’m not just gonna fuck you. I’ll ruin you. Your

body isn't yours—it's mine. It's my temple to worship and mine to fucking destroy."

My heart soars. *His temple.*

Being turned into but a hole for his pleasure is demeaning. It should offend me. It should piss me off being stripped of my humanity, but it's everything I want from a man I trust.

Everything I crave from a man that I want.

To remove the thoughts, remove all the memories, and just *feel*.

I try to nod my head, but his grip won't let me.

"Words, baby. I need the words."

"Yes, Silas. I'll be a good girl," I mutter, licking my swollen lips.

Hunger, pure, raw hunger, swirls in his dark eyes.

Using the makeshift handle on my hair as leverage, he pulls me up from my knees, making me gasp before his mouth is there to drink it down. He devours me, arm snaking around my waist and lifting me off the ground.

My legs instinctively wrap around him, his toned stomach rubbing against my pussy making me moan into his mouth. Our tongues swirl and trace one another while he moves us toward the bed, holding me up with only one arm the entire way.

I bounce against the mattress as he lets me go, nervously scooting toward the headboard as he moves toward me like a predator ready to consume its favorite prey.

The two of us collide. We give in, letting our bodies have what they so desperately want. I give in to that craving for him, the one I tried to ignore for so long.

My hand grabs at the back of his neck when he crawls between my legs, pressing our lips back together, like I can't stand for them to be apart. Two colliding stars that waited centuries to touch, refusing to be separated.

Silas moans into my mouth when I sink my teeth into his bottom lip, tugging on it playfully. My hands roam his shoulders, palms sliding to his chest, where I grab both sides of his dress shirt, ripping it apart. Buttons clatter against the wood floors, but I can't be bothered.

"I liked that shirt," he mutters against my lips, tilting my head back to dip his tongue across my jaw and pressing open-mouthed kisses along my skin.

"I liked my white T-shirt you ripped the other night." I gasp as he bites at the column of my throat, ravenous teeth scratching my skin. "We're

even.”

I reach for his cock, needing him to relieve the ache between my thighs, but he swats my hand away.

“You’re not ready for me yet. Gotta fuck you with my mouth first, baby. I have to get this tight pussy loosened up, or I’m not gonna fit.” He grunts, settling his upper body between my spread legs.

My stomach tightens, coiling inside, thinking about him stretching me open. His fingertips slowly trace up my thighs, gathering the edge of my panties and pulling them down my legs to expose my bare pussy.

He looses a groan at the sight, pressing a hungry kiss to the inside of my thigh as he settles his upper body between my legs. “So fucking pretty, baby.”

I use my nails to scratch his scalp, raking over the closely trimmed hair, making him hum as he pushes into my touch.

“Love when you do that.”

I’m so horny that I can’t compute thoughts that aren’t directly linked to my pussy, but I try to make a mental note of that for later. I flush under his praise, my hips jerking upward as he blows a stream of air toward my soaked core.

Silas searches the inside of my thighs, running his palms up and down the skin, fingertips getting dangerously close to my center but stopping short of where I need him most and pulling back to my knees.

“Silas,” I beg, twitching beneath him, everything fucking aching. “Please.”

“Ah, come on, Hex. You can do better than that.” His voice rubs against my skin, thumb skimming my clit. “Beg me.”

“Everything aches. Make it feel better, Silas, please.”

His response is to press his thumb harder, drawing small circles, making me spread my legs wider for him, letting him in. I moan deep in the back of my throat when I feel two fingers slide inside of me, stretching me open with no warning.

“Oh, fuck—”

“That’s not even half of me, baby,” he mutters with a sinister laugh, like he’s looking forward to feeling how tight the fit will be. I’m surprised how well my pussy parts for him, letting his fingers inside my tight opening.

Silas’s mouth replaces his thumb, hot tongue swirling that sensitive bundle of nerves, toying with it like he already knows exactly what I need

to get me there. This man has a wicked mouth; every swipe and lap touches the right spot, making me arch off the bed.

I press my hips to his face, meeting every thrust of his fingers as he pumps them in and out of me. My hands claw at his shoulder, needing something to ground me before I levitate from this damn mattress.

When the tips of his fingers rub against that soft spot inside of me, I throw my head into the pillow. Overstimulating sensations cascade over me, that tightly wound band inside my stomach squeezing. My hips roll down onto the delicious circles he rubs around my clit, forcing his fingers deeper every time.

The moans spilling from me feel involuntary, drawn from my throat like they were made just for Silas. Like they'd been waiting just for him. Only for his ears.

"You're so close, baby. Go on, be good and come for me." He buries his face between my thighs, the vibrations from his voice massaging my cunt. "God, I can't wait to feel you strangle my cock like this."

The lewd noises his mouth and fingers make between my legs are driving me out of my mind. His tongue laps up every ounce of wetness from my pussy as he fucks me with his fingers with measured strokes. I'm right on the edge, and when his teeth skim my clit, just enough pain to pair with pleasure, I shatter.

My muscles bunch, eyes snapping shut, before releasing as I come with a pitchy moan, nails buried into the flesh of his back. Self-satisfaction burns through me, knowing he'll leave this bedroom marked by me.

I snap my eyes down to him, watching him continue to plunge both fingers into my tight walls, hitting the same spot repeatedly, refusing to stop, refusing to let me fall from the high of my orgasm.

"Come again. I know you want to. You can do it, little one," he says between kisses against my pussy, dark eyes flitting up to gaze at me, half-lidded and smokey.

I didn't believe his words. Didn't believe I could come consecutively like that, but when a third finger pushes into my already stuffed hole, I nearly go blind with white-hot rapture. That same formidable feeling unfurls in my stomach so much faster than I ever expected it to, and I have no time to warn him before my core is convulsing, thighs tightening around his head as my hips buck up into his mouth.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I cry because he still won’t stop, even though I’m quivering in his arms with my second climax. “Silas, stop, oh my God, please!”

He seems unbothered, simply pinning my hips to the bed with his arm. Shaking his head back and forth beneath my thighs, he delves that tongue up and down my tender cunt, leaving me no choice but to lie there and take it, twitching.

In the back of my mind, that safe word, *red*, floats around in my brain, but I can’t seem to bring myself to use it. Because I don’t think I really want him to stop. My body wants more, regardless of how overstimulated I am. With one more suck to my clit, he has mercy on my soul and releases me. A reflective wetness coats his jaw and mouth. My limbs feel like goo, melted and useless as I try to sink further into the bed.

Hazy, dark eyes drink up my body, splayed out just for him, completely unwound and at his mercy.

“Look at the mess you made.” He shakes his head, clicking his tongue before showing me how soaked his fingers are. He smirks, taking his bottom lip between his teeth, crooking a single finger at me. “Come clean me up with that witchy mouth.”

With what little core strength I have left, I push myself up from the mattress, my arms shaking with the aftershock of pleasure. I ignore my lethargic limbs, desperate to be good for him.

In this moment where I can’t think of anything, where I am only an exposed nerve, feeling everything, I want to be everything he needs. What he craves.

I use the top of his shoulders to keep me upright, my soaking wet center meeting the base of his shaft as I wiggle closer. The heat of our bodies pressed together makes a tremor pass through me.

My mouth meets his, the taste of my cum tart, an addictive flavor that I drink down. Rolling my tongue, flicking the roof of his mouth, I suck it clean before pulling away to move to his jaw.

I clean up the mess I left on his face, tongue swirling against his skin, picking up the remnants of my orgasm. His hands squeeze my hips, rocking his lower half into mine, letting me feel his hard cock pressed against my soft folds.

The rough moans in my ear spur me to lift my hips to meet his slow grinding, tightening my grip on his back. His back muscles are firm and taut

to the touch, like steel cables wound under his flesh. Every inch of him is smooth and sleek, each muscle perfectly defined.

When the grinding becomes too much, I press a kiss just below his ear. “I need you, please.”

There is only a small pause before he gathers me in his arms, laying me back on the bed. His large body looms over mine, and for a moment, I can feel his heart beating my chest.

It’s intense, the most intimate moment anyone can ever experience, to feel another’s heart against your own.

This is just sex. This is just sex. This is—

Silas’s hands run up my stomach, cupping my heavy breasts in his palms. Flicking his fingers across the metal piercing my erect nipples, he toys with the black hearts on either side of my nipple, a spur-of-the-moment decision while I was rolling on Ecstasy at Vervain that I’m glad for in this moment.

“These are fucking delicious,” he mutters before attacking them with his warm mouth. “I’m going to shove my dick between these soft tits and fuck them until I come all over your pretty face. But not tonight.”

I arch into his touch, my head feeling light and body begging to be played by his fingers. He takes his time assaulting my chest, peppering kisses across my chest before he leans back on his knees, shucking off his shirt and tossing it on the floor.

His toned stomach flexes as he wraps a large hand around the base of his cock. Several inches are left exposed from the fist he makes, leaving my mouth watering as he pumps himself a few times before guiding the tip to my wet core.

“Tonight, I’m gonna come right here, right in this tight cunt. Pump you full and leave you leaking.”

“I’m on the shot,” I moan, furrowing my eyebrows as I peer down at him, watching as he drags his dick up and down the lips of my pussy. “I’m clean. Are—”

“You think I would come this close to fucking you raw if I wasn’t clean?” His eyes soften as he tilts his head. “You’re safe with me.”

Everything was so intense earlier, overruled with desire, and now it’s not. Lust still fizzles in me, but now it doesn’t just feel like sex, because my chest is tightening.

Emotions roll through me, overflowing.

When the tip of his cock starts spreading my opening, I panic. I feel like I'm too far deep with him. I can want him physically. But I cannot have him emotionally.

I can't do this to him.

I press my hand to his lower stomach, halting his motion, peering up at him through damp lashes. "I'm going to break your heart."

He stills, jaw twitching. "You're going to let me into yours."

Too late, I think just before his words and body rob me of air. His hips press forward, pushing through my snug inner walls, slowly spreading me open, forcing my pussy to accommodate his length.

"Holy shit." I groan, wiggling my hips. "Fuck, I'm so full."

"You're not full until I'm all the way inside of you."

I don't even want to look at how much further he has to go before he's fully inside of me. My body melts into the mattress, unsure if I have room for him to fit.

Silas's hard body pushes into mine deeper, the cool metal of his Jacob's ladder touching my wet center.

"Relax for me, Hex." One of his palms moves from my hips, pressing on my lower stomach lightly. "Relax and let me in. Let me make you feel good, baby."

My thighs spread impossibly wider, eyes shooting open when he delves into me another couple of inches, those barbell piercings rubbing along the base of my pussy.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck," I murmur incoherently, "I don't think—God, I don't think I can fit any more."

My teeth bite down on the inside of my cheek, trying to breathe as he spears me on his cock. I feel like he really is splitting me in half, intent on ripping me right in two.

"That's it. That's my girl. Suck my cock inside that tight pussy," he groans when he bottoms out, staring down at where our bodies connect, watching the slaughtering of my pussy. "Look at you, Hex. Taking all of me like a good fucking girl."

He gives me a few strokes, letting me get used to being this full. Letting me feel every inch before he starts to speed up his thrusts. My body starts to meet his, the unbelievable stretch making my toes curl.

I'm already embarrassingly close, and it doesn't help when he starts to really fuck me, just like he promised. Silas Hawthorne begins to ruin me.

Inside and out.

Brutal, heavy pumps of his hips send me into orbit. The depth of his cock makes me try to back off his shaft, but he won't let me. No, he grabs my hips and yanks me right back in place so he can fuck me the way he wants.

"Fuck, Silas. It's too much. Fuck, you're in my stomach." I nearly scream, clawing at the bedsheets beneath me for support, my pussy stretched to the max. Every vein in his cock rubs against my sensitive walls, hitting something deep inside of me that's never been touched before.

Silas leans downward toward my face and keeps me right there with a savage hold on my throat. Long fingers splay across the front of my neck, squeezing the sides, feeling my pulse beneath his fingertips.

He pumps into me with thrusts that make me see stars, merciless with my body as he shoves into me all the way, letting me feel him buried to the hilt before pulling nearly all the way out, only to slam through once again.

Over and over and over.

The headboard of the bed slams into the wall with his pace, his bed shaking beneath us from the force he's using on my body.

"You're so fucking wet. So fucking tight. God, nothing has felt as good as you, baby. You're taking me so fucking good." He drops his head to my breasts, tugging a nipple into his mouth. Ecstasy fills my being as he rears back, then snaps his hips forward, faster and faster, until his hold on my throat is used to keep me still for him to pump into.

"So good—" I gasp, back bowing off the bed. "I'm gonna come again, fuck, Silas!"

The pleasure is too much. I'm too full. So overflowing with pleasure that tears stream from the corner of my eyes.

Silas gives me a groan of approval against my skin. "Cry for me, baby. Cry because it's so fucking good and you know no one's cock uses this pretty little cunt like me. Cry for me."

He sits back up on his knees, snatching my ankles in his hands, spreading me wide and forcing my body to meet him stroke for stroke. He pounds into my walls like they were made for him, molding my pussy to fit his dick seamlessly, refusing to pull out until I'm the perfect hole for him to use up.

"I'm—God—" I mumble incoherently, a jumble of words and phrases I've never heard from my lips before.

“Shhh, don’t talk. Just take it.”

I peer up at him to the best of my ability, eyes half-lidded and drooping, watching the clench of his abdominal muscles with every thrust, his body in a sheen of sweat and brows furrowed with concentration, dark eyes boring down at me with a predatory gaze.

“Come for me, Hex. Soak this cock, squeeze me.”

As if my body was simply waiting for his command, I feel my muscles contract, back bowing from the bed and a scream of ecstasy ripping from my throat. Bright lights flash behind my eyelids as I shake with breathy moans, swept under a rushing current of bliss that tastes like the sweetest ambrosia.

This is what the gods felt like, I’m sure of it.

Completely and utterly euphoric, like nothing could touch them.

I’m crashing through the waves, barely registering his husky voice above me, only feeling his thrusts stutter, shallow and quick.

“Tell me where I’m gonna come tonight,” he orders, leering above me, chasing his own release. “Say it, pretty thing.”

“My pussy,” I mutter, sinking into the mattress beneath me, content to let the plush material absorb my thoroughly fucked body. My inner walls contract, squeezing around his shaft, feeling those barbells rub against the skin inside me.

Jesus fucking Christ. Like he needed the piercings with a dick this fucking big.

“That’s right, baby. It’s all mine, all fucking mine,” he grunts with brutal, short thrusts, his hips slapping against my sticky skin as he loses pace. “Fuck, gonna fill you up. Gonna fill this cunt. Fuck, fuck—”

When he comes, pumping stream after stream of warm cum into my pussy, it’s a beautifully raw moment. There is so much emotion on his normally passive face.

Brows furrowed together, teeth digging into his bottom lip, head tilted back in pleasure as he continues to lazily pump into me, fucking his cum deep inside of me.

I’d had sex before. Before everything.

Lost my virginity my sophomore year of high school to Ian, but that wasn’t *this*.

I’d been able to fully remove my mind from the equation. Forced my head to empty, and all I could do was feel. My body hummed, twisted, and

pushed toward him, hips meeting him thrust for thrust. I was lost in a cyclone of pleasure, slowly drowning in a pool of ecstasy.

There was no fear. No memories.

Absolute, all-encompassing bliss envelops my mind and body. Silas is better than any Ecstasy I'd ever taken. There's no drug that could equal this. Nothing bad can touch me here. With him.

When there are only our heavy breaths echoing in the darkness of this bedroom, my stomach begins to quiver. My eyes burn with tears, and I know I'm going to break a cardinal rule of hookups: do not cry after sex.

But I can't help it, not when I know I'm falling for him.

Not in a brutal, brazen form that feels like fists cracking through my bones and teeth piercing my flesh, not the way love has felt in the past. Not in the way my mind convinced my love was before him.

"Coraline," Silas says, peering down at me with worry in his dark eyes. "Hey, talk to me. You still here with me?"

In this sickly sweet, soft way that makes me fucking cry.

Why now? Why him?

So many times, I have begged to be this beautiful, wanted woman who is gracious and kind. Nights I fell to my knees and prayed to any god who might listen to be the person worthy of *real* love.

I was instead told I was cast aside. Fated to be only bitter nights and tainted mornings. My entire life was to be spent cursed as one damning thing, unlovable.

But Silas takes his time with my name, like it's his favorite word he wants to keep in his mouth for as long as possible. He does not rush it like a bad omen. He instead speaks it like a prophecy that was destined for his mouth.

Silas does not make me feel cursed.

He makes me feel loved.

"Why won't you let me save you from me?"

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

TWENTY-EIGHT

THE CURSED ONE

SILAS

CORALINE IS WRAPPED in my hoodie when I come back into the bedroom. Tucked and hidden away within the black fabric, she sits against the headboard of the bed with her knees pulled up to her chest.

From the door, she looks so small, this fragile, tiny soul, and I find it hard to believe anyone had ever been afraid of her.

The warm mug in my hands produces steam as I walk toward her, sweats hanging loose on my hips as I sit on the edge of the bed, giving her space but reaching the cup in her direction.

“I don’t drink coffee,” she mutters, wiping her face with the sleeve of the hoodie. Redness stains her cheeks, tears still falling from her eyes.

I can’t say that had been the reaction I’d wanted after we had sex the first time, but she’s nothing if not unpredictable. It’s one of the many qualities I like about her.

How every day feels different, and there’s always something to discover.

“It’s lavender tea.” I clear my throat. “Lilac mentioned it’s the only thing that helps you sleep. Fresh lavender, not the fake shit. Her words, not mine.”

She blinks her bleary eyes, and my fingers have to fight not to reach out and wipe the tears away. The only way I want to comfort her is the last thing she needs.

I want to hold her, touch her, physically make her feel safe, but touch is a trigger for Coraline. It’s a hard line to walk when all I want to do is touch her.

“I thought I was out.” She tentatively reaches out, taking the mug from me and tucking it against her chest.

My hand reaches behind my neck, scratching lightly. “I bought a plant.”

“You bought a fucking lavender plant? Why?”

I refrain from laughing, because that’s what Rook said when I first told him. My head bobs up and down, a slow nod, confirming her words.

“Because you like it.”

When is she going to realize there is nothing I won’t do for her? That if it’s what she desires or it benefits her well-being, I’ll do it. I’ll get whatever it is. She wants a garden of lavender? I’ll get her two.

She deserves that.

“This is fake, Silas.”

Like she’s trying to remind herself of that, like she’s trying to force herself to believe it when I don’t think we’ve ever been fake. Not once have I ever faked anything with her.

“But it feels real, doesn’t it?”

“That’s what scares me.” She lifts the cup to her lips, taking a sip and staring at me over the rim, her face covered by the shield of the hood.

I turn my body completely, hanging one leg off the bed. “Why are you so afraid of hurting me?”

There is a beat of silence where she searches my eyes, and I can’t read her. I have absolutely no idea what she wants to say. The blank stare in her eyes breaks my heart, knowing whatever it is that makes her push me away scares her this badly.

“I know what I am about to tell you is going to make me sound crazy. Like I’m making it up or it’s all in my head, and maybe it is, but it’s real to me. It’s real enough, and if I tell you...” She inhales deeply, sniffing. “When I tell you, I need you to believe me, Silas. Promise me you won’t make me feel like I’m insane.”

Coraline has absolutely zero idea just how much I understand. The desperation of needing someone, anyone, to validate what is happening in your mind. She has no clue how far I had to go to twist the truth so it would fit other people’s view of me.

No matter what she says, I’ll believe her because I know how painful it is when no one else does.

“I promise.”

And that's all it takes. My word is enough for her to start talking. I let her, for the very first time, share her story with ears that understand what it's like to keep a secret. To withhold the truth, carry it on your back like a hundred-year war.

It's a story that starts with meeting a boy at a wedding when she was young, who gave her a flower and was the first person to say he loved her. A story that ended with that boy dying in a car accident the same night.

The cursed one's first victim.

"I forgot about him, like he meant nothing, like he was a blip in my memory. I grew up, and I didn't think about him again until I was in middle school. Until I met a guy named Riley."

My brows furrow as I listen to her speak. I find that asking questions when people have a lot to say is fruitless. When you give others the space to talk, they will tell you everything you need to know.

Coraline only needed a trusted ear to spill her sorrows to; the rest would come.

"We dated in sixth grade. He had this gap in his teeth that I thought was the cutest thing I'd ever seen. He kinda looked like Justin Bieber." She laughs, like she can still see his face in her mind. "On the last day of school before summer break, he kissed me in the stairwell. It was quick, cute, sweet. Everything you expect for a first kiss. Just before he left, he muttered an I love you so quickly I didn't even have a chance to say it back. I can't remember if I would've meant it or not. I waited by my phone that night for hours, waiting on a text or call from him, but it never came. My father told me the next morning that Riley had drowned in his neighbor's pool. Just like that, he was there, and then he wasn't."

I distantly remember that, a guy in our grade dying in a drowning accident. Things like that don't go unnoticed by the rumor mill. I just never knew Coraline was dating him.

Her silent tears turn to sobs, her hands frantically trying to wipe the tears away as her shoulders shake. Now that I'm sure her crying after sex wasn't because of a traumatic flashback, I close the distance between the two of us.

I grab the mug of tea from her, setting it on the nightstand before gathering her into my arms. My back rests against the headboard, and I place her small body on my lap.

Whether she's tired of fighting me or just physically exhausted from today, she slumps into me. Gives in, melts, and drops her head to my chest. I let her seek refuge here, in the shelter of my arms.

"And then Emmet, God, Emmet—" She chokes on the words, and my heart fucking shatters for her.

I hold the back of her head to my chest, the other running up and down her spine, soothing her. My lips press to the top of her head. All I want is to protect her from this, to shield her from this hurt, because no one else fucking had. No one looked out for her, and that both infuriates and breaks me.

"In 1997, Deep Blue became the first computer to defeat a world chess champion," I say softly, hugging her tightly to my body. "Deep Blue traded its bishop and rook for Gary Kasparov's queen after sacrificing a knight to gain position on the board."

Coraline hiccups in my arms, listening intently as I continue.

"It's my favorite match of all time because Kasparov had a chance. He was in a playable position, but he resigned, the first time in his career he conceded defeat. When he was asked about it, he said he'd lost his fighting spirit."

I feel Coraline relax slightly against me, and I pause to press a gentle kiss to her temple, my voice the softest it's ever been.

"There is no defeat when you refuse to lose. We can only be beaten when we give up on ourselves, Coraline."

She turns her head, looking up at me, her chin sitting on my chest. "How do you know so much about chess games?"

"When I was young, I kept chess matches on a loop in my headphones. It calmed me down when I had too much to say but no space to speak."

We sink into my steel-gray comforter, listening to each other's breathing. It's nice knowing that something that brought me comfort as a kid can do the same for her now.

For several moments, we sit just like that until she loses a breath and continues to talk, finishing her story with her long-term high school boyfriend Emmet, who committed suicide just after she'd broken up with him.

"Stephen was only confirmation, the only one of them that I actually wanted dead, and he got to live. He'd always been so adamant that it was my fault I ended up in his basement. That there was something in me that

turned him into an obsessive monster, made him feel like he had to have me or he'd die."

"That's why he calls you Circe," I breathe.

What was once a fucked-up joke Regina used to throw in her face turned into a very real thing for her. Coraline genuinely believed she was cursed. That she'd been jinxed to ruin the men and boys who chose to love her.

It's why she's so scared to let me in, because she's terrified she'll hurt me. Which in and of itself tells me all I need to know about Coraline. Something that she doesn't even see in herself.

She is not cruel or unkind.

She's willing to live her life alone if it means not hurting other people.

"If you value your life, I'd stop trying to make me fall for you," she mumbles against my chest.

I chuckle, the foreign noise deep in the back of my throat, a rumble of unused sound.

Her eyes widen, sparkling with a little more light than she had earlier.

"You should laugh more, Silas. Why are you so intent on hiding it so much?"

"I made a promise to someone, one I swore to protect. An oath I've held on to for a very long time, Hex."

"A promise not to speak?"

I bite the inside of my cheek. "Something like that."

This prompts her to sit up, straightening her back and straddling my lap, both of her knees outside of my hips. My hands fall behind my head, and I feel the warmth between her thighs.

"Give it to me."

"Give you what?" I arch an eyebrow, flicking my gaze to her naked lower half.

"Not that." She rolls her eyes, smiling. "I gave you my word to be your secret keeper. You took an oath, kept a secret. Now you can give it to me."

"It's my oath to give," I say honestly. "I don't know if you'll believe me."

"Silas." She tilts her head, hair spilling out from the hood on her head. "I may suck at this emotional stuff and connecting with people. I get that. But one thing I can promise you is that no matter what, I'll believe you. Your voice is the sound I trust most in the world."

What a contradiction to everything I've heard my entire life. I meant it when I said I don't know if it's my promise to give her. I don't know, and I can't ask the person for permission because they are dead.

I don't like assuming what Rosemary would want because no one knew her like she knew herself. But if I had to guess? Coraline is who she'd want me to share it with.

The only other person in my life who has spent their years depicted as something they're not, living in a story that wasn't written by our mouths.

I felt that the moment I saw Coraline. Knew that there was something in us no one else would ever be able to understand.

I look at her, knowing how much it took out of her to tell me her past. To share those parts of her with me. This is why she's dangerous for me, not 'cause she's got a bad track record with men but because I want to talk.

I want to take the leap of faith, to see if she'll return the favor of belief. I'm so fucking tired of carrying this on my shoulders alone. Tired of the world seeing me as one thing and knowing who I am on the inside.

And I know she's the one who needs to know the truth because as I sit here, looking at her, there isn't an ounce of fear in my bones. There isn't that rattling what-if bouncing in my head like there is with the guys. I know when I say what I'm about to say, she'll trust.

Because it's Coraline.

I'm the voice she needs. She's the ears that I want to speak to.

"I'm not schizophrenic."

Her eyes widen, and to her credit, she recovers well. It's better than what I expected her initial reaction to be. I feel like I've unplugged a drain in me, and the water I've kept locked up begins to flood out.

It rushes out of me like blood from split veins.

"When I was twelve—" I clear my throat. "—I had been seeing a psychiatrist for a few months. My parents were freaked about how reclusive I was. They thought talking to someone other than them would be good for me."

Even all these years later, I can see the small version of myself going into those appointments, spending hours just sitting on a leather couch, playing chess and talking about nothing.

There wasn't anything wrong with me. I was just quiet.

"I had finished my session for the day and was waiting on my mom to pick me up when I heard a girl crying. I thought she might be in trouble, so

I followed the sound. Followed it until I found my doctor abusing a little girl.” I flinch, turning my eyes away from Coraline for a second, remembering the flashes of what I saw. “I panicked, so I started screaming. I just wanted to help her, gain someone’s attention so they’d make him stop. But I only ended up learning just how far vile people in Ponderosa Springs will go to cover up their secrets.”

I tell Coraline about how they sedated me, and when I woke up in the hospital, I was listening to that scum of a doctor telling my parents that they had a son who was schizophrenic.

Rage boils within my veins as I relive the memories of that moment, feeling the sting of betrayal on my lips as I pleaded for them to listen to me, a twelve-year-old kid begging his own parents to trust him.

I died that day. Not when Rosemary was killed, but that very day, I died.

The son they knew, the one they raised, was gone. I had died and been replaced with something that didn’t belong. I became a fucking corpse, and no one could smell my rotting soul but me.

The worst part? I can’t be upset at them.

Not when they had no choice. There was a medical professional telling them everything I saw that day had been a hallucination. The thoughts in my head were now tainting my reality. My mother and father were terrified for me. All they wanted was to help.

“For a while, they actually made me believe it. That I made it all up.” I rub my hands down my face. “Then I met Rosemary.”

Then I met Rosie, and everything changed.

“She was the girl you saw, wasn’t she?” Coraline asks, scooting closer to my stomach, her hands caging in my face before her nails scratch along my scalp.

I nod. “She never would’ve told me about the abuse had I not seen it. Never told me why she was seeing the psychiatrist in the first place. Rosie was good at keeping secrets. Even from me.”

I don’t know how we never ran into each other before we were fifteen, but it was like the universe knew we needed each other to survive.

“I made her a promise that I’d never tell anyone, and she promised to believe me when I told her there weren’t voices, that I wasn’t losing my mind.”

I lived my entire life with a misdiagnosis of schizophrenia to keep her secret. To keep her safe. Because she was the only person I had, and I didn’t

want to lose her.

“My psychotic break after Sage came back was real. All the trauma of losing Rose, it just—” I exhale, leaning into Coraline’s hands. “It fucked me up, but the hospitalization was the best thing for me. If it didn’t happen, I wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t have found out the truth for myself.”

There is no headache, just complete relief.

Dams collapse upon themselves inside of me. I no longer feel trapped in my own head. I’m a rushing river, flowing, feeling.

“The guys,” she mutters. “They don’t know?”

I shake my head. “Telling them back then would’ve meant betraying Rosie. I couldn’t do that to her.”

Even though I’d wanted to. Even though I’d begged her to let me tell them, just so my closest friends would know me for who I really was and not who this town told them I was.

But she refused, and it was my secret to give them. I couldn’t make them believe Rosemary’s truth. So I swallowed it, chewed it down like nails, and lived with them stabbing my throat every time I opened my mouth.

Until I just stopped talking because it hurt too fucking much to lie to them.

“When you’re ready,” she hums, a yawn stealing her voice, “you’ll tell them. I’ll go with you. We can do it together.”

I look at her, lifting my palm to her cheek, rubbing a thumb just below her eye. A small smile tugs at the corner of her lips. Seeing her this way, vulnerable and open, fills me with heat.

This woman is not a curse, never has been.

She is a fucking gift.

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

TWENTY-NINE

PINK CARNATIONS

CORALINE

THE LAST PLACE I ever expected to be in my life was standing at Rosemary Donahue's grave.

I didn't know her.

We never once spoke, barely had classes together. I didn't come to her funeral, even though the entire school did. I didn't know her.

"Hope you like carnations," I mumble to the weathered rock in the ground, setting the flowers I bought on her tombstone. "Google said the pink ones are supposed to represent gratitude or something."

I refrain from face-palming my forehead. What is she gonna do? Return them if she doesn't like the fucking flowers?

This already feels stupid on my part, like I'm screwing this whole thing up. After last night with Silas, hearing his story, his truth, and then staying up until the sun was high in the sky talking, there had only been one thing I wanted to do today.

I wanted to talk to Rosemary.

"I know this is probably really weird, me showing up like this. We don't know each other, but you don't feel like a total stranger to me. I'm falling in love with someone who you once loved, and it feels like that connects us somehow. I mean, we gotta be sorta similar, right? We have the same type."

I'm tempted to laugh at my own joke to settle my nerves, but when silence replies to me, I just end up feeling more anxious. Maybe it's because the first time I'm outwardly admitting my feelings for Silas, it's to his dead girlfriend.

I feel like the poster child for emotional incompetence.

“Anyway, that’s not what I wanted to say, and if you’re listening, I hope you take this and know that I mean it.” I loose a breath. “Thank you. Thank you for loving him. I’ve never met someone so deserving of love every second of every day like Silas.”

I’m not even sure if the love I have to give is enough for a man like him. My heart feels like this dirty, blackened, rotten organ that I’m presenting to a person with clean hands. It’s being held together with old Band-Aids and bubble gum. It’s not intact; it’s fractured and wretched, and I know he deserves more.

He might not even accept it. If it were me, I wouldn’t.

“Thank you for loving him, for showing him how to love others. His heart has helped me in more ways than I’m capable of understanding. I think the kindness everyone always speaks about you having rubbed off on him, probably without him even noticing.”

The silence of the cemetery surrounds me, and I’m a little grateful for it in this moment. I can say whatever I want here, and it won’t change anything, but it feels good to thank her. To express my gratitude.

“I think I fight him so hard because I knew from that first phone call, ya know?” I pause, shaking my head. “You can’t answer that, I realize. Sorry. Anyway, it just felt like even before he knew me, on that roof, I was broken, and that was okay. He makes me feel like just being Coraline is enough, cursed and all.”

His voice alone had given me more comfort that night than people’s entire bodies had shown me in years. There is a safety in him I’ve never known before.

A trust.

“I’m sorry for rambling. I just wanted to thank you for everything you did for Silas, and I guess for me too. I promise I’ll try my best to protect the heart you nurtured. Thank you, Rosie.”

As I speak her name, the warm summer breeze caresses my face, making me shiver involuntarily. I’ve never really believed in an afterlife, but for right now, I want to believe it’s real and she heard me.

“Great minds, huh?”

A voice pierces my graveyard peace, and I turn around from the tombstone I’m facing, finding a copy of the girl six feet under, holding her own set of flowers.

“Sage,” I breathe, face flaming red. “I didn’t—I wasn’t—I—”

“I didn’t hear anything.” She waves me off with a smile, walking closer and setting the daisies in her arms next to mine. “Your secrets are safe with my sister.”

Relief floods through my body. Not that I’m ashamed of how I feel about him. I just don’t love the idea of everyone knowing what’s happening inside my head all the time, especially this.

Sage mirrors my stance, standing by my side to stare down at her sister’s grave, and I think it’s telling.

That we sorta feel like different versions of the same mirror.

We grew up in similar households, the same Ponderosa Springs reputation pressed into us from a young age, constantly thinking about what others think.

“You mind if I give you some unwarranted advice? Rook says I should start asking first, even though I’m going to say it anyway.”

I laugh, motioning for her to continue.

“Let him in.”

I furrow my brows. “What?”

“They will get there either way. When a Hollow Boy wants something, they get it. It’s just in their nature. I know what it’s like to wear a mask, and I know you’re afraid to take it off, but there is more to life than pretending. Let him in. It’ll be much easier on your heart than if he breaks those walls down with force.”

Sage and I, we feel like two sides of the same coin.

Two girls who hid who they were for so long because we knew if we showed this place the truth, they’d tear it to shreds. So we kept it close, too close. She’d just learned a little quicker than me how to let others in.

“What do I do if he’s already in?” I mumble.

God, how long had it been since I talked to someone about boy problems? How long had it been since I just had someone to talk to?

“Then you tell him, or he’s not going to stop.”

It’s complicated, I want to say. It’s complicated ’cause I know it’s better for me to keep my distance emotionally. Physically, we’ve already been closer than any two people should be. That man was in my fucking guts last night.

It’s better if I just keep this secret to me and Rosemary. Because if I tell Silas I love him, he won’t stop. He won’t stop until it kills him, and I don’t want to lose him.

I don't want to rob Zoe and Scott Hawthorne of their son. I don't want to steal him from the boys. Selfishly, I don't want them to hate me for taking him away.

It's easy to say the curse is in my head until you've lived through what I have. Until you've seen it hurt people.

"You're not gonna break him, ya know?" She arches an eyebrow like she can see through me, "I don't know Silas the way the Rook or the other guys do, but I know him well enough. Enough to know that he doesn't just go around touching people. He's known Rook since they were kids, and I've seen them hug maybe twice? Yet, he can't seem to keep his hands off you."

Maybe it's because I'd gotten comfortable with how often Silas touches me that I hadn't noticed him doing it. The casual hand on my hip as he passed behind me, the arm slung around my shoulder, randomly tucking my hair behind my ear.

It feels like something we do often. It's not something we struggle to do for the public eye because it's just kinda... us?

"Isn't this awkward for you?" I say, trying to get the attention off me, motioning around us. "Talking about this with me, here."

"No," she says softly, brushing her fingers across the top of her sister's grave. "I made a promise. A few years ago, after my dad was killed—"

"I thought the fire he got caught in was an accident?"

Sage drags her tongue across the front of her teeth. "You met my boyfriend?"

Good point.

Rook Van Doren and fire? Never an accident.

It's nice to know I'm not the only one with buried secrets. Comforting. I don't need to know the details, because they don't matter. It's just nice not being so alone.

"It was to Rose. She'd already died, and when our father was buried, I swore that no matter what, I wouldn't let Silas die a sad man. I swore I'd make sure he was happy. So no, it's not awkward because I can see what you could be for him, what he could be for you."

I swallow the knot in my throat.

Could I tell her? That the reason I'm scared is that I'm actually fucking cursed and it's not just a nickname, no matter how badly I wish it was?

“I hope you don’t think I’m trying to replace Rosemary by being in this arrangement with him. I’d never do that to him or any of you. I know how important she was. I respect the love he has for her. The love you all have for her.”

Which is all true.

I don’t want anyone to think I’m disrespecting her memory. I know how important she is to all of them, especially Silas.

“You’re not replacing her, Coraline. We don’t see you that way. Neither does Silas. You can’t replace what they had because what you share is completely different,” she says, looking over at me. “I like you, Coraline. I get you. I was you. And I can’t think of a better way for Silas to honor my sister’s memory than by falling in love again. It’s all she’d ever want for him.”

Book made for megrourkee@gmail.com

THIRTY

HERE COMES THE BRIDE

SILAS

“COME IN,” I grunt, already feeling a headache throbbing in my temples.

The door swings open, and the last person I want to deal with today waltzes inside. “Glad I could catch you before you left today, boss.”

I refrain from throwing the stapler on my desk at his head. Daniel doesn’t say boss with respect. It’s a dig, his passive-aggressive way of trying to remind me I’ll never be my father. That I’ll never live up to his legacy in this company.

I lean forward, shutting my laptop as he walks further inside, taking a seat on the metal chair in front of my desk. He reaches forward, sliding a stack of papers to me.

I glance down at them but don’t actually read them before I speak.

“What am I looking at, Daniel?”

“Our new endpoint security benefits and value propositions,” he says, proud of himself for doing the bare minimum. “I know you—”

“It told you the development wasn’t finished with the software,” I interrupt him, my irritation with Stephen and Daniel blending together. I grab the papers, tossing them at his chest. “Get this off my fucking desk. If sales does not have the new marketing materials for the next-generation firewalls by tonight, don’t bother coming into the office tomorrow.”

He pales, sputtering, “You can’t fire me!”

I arch an eyebrow, begging him to test me right now.

Daniel shakes his head, scoffing about how unbelievable I am about making him do his job. He picks up the papers that had fluttered onto the floor before pointing a finger at me.

“I told the board this would happen. Your mental disorder makes you unpredictable, thinking with your emotions and not your head. You are not fit for CEO.”

“Get out of my office, Highland.”

“You better hope *Caroline* and you can last in that sham of a marriage. That seat is mine the moment you sign the divorce papers.”

My jaw twitches.

The air in my office becomes this thick, heavy pressure that builds with every word out of his mouth. It’s a sweltering, suffocating heat that radiates from deep within me like heat waves off hot asphalt.

Daniel continues to ramble, standing up and running his mouth, thinking I won’t fire him because he’s worked here for so long. Losing his job is the very last thing he needs to fear right now.

My palm finds the cool metal of my gun. Like the moon calls for the tide, violence finds me. The pad of my finger traces the curve of the trigger, its familiar power thrumming through me.

When he turns to face me, ready to give me another piece of his lackluster mind, he stills, frozen in shock and terror that lasts maybe two seconds before the sound of a bullet abandoning the chamber rings out between the walls of my office.

Daniel’s girlish scream makes my ears itch. He falls to the ground, clutching his leg while dark, crimson liquid bleeds from the wound just above his kneecap.

He’s writhing in pain, trying to crawl back toward the door with tears streaming down his face as I stand. The smell of gunpowder and lead pumps liquid adrenaline into my heart.

I squat down so that we are at eye level when he cowers into the corner, trapped with nowhere to go and no choice but to face the hollow barrel of my gun.

The side of the weapon catches the overhead light.

Fear no evil. The shadow and valley are yours.

I press the butt of the gun to his throat, lifting his chin so he’s forced to look at me, wanting him to see just how very little I value his life.

“Tell me, Daniel.” I tilt my head, a smirk at the corner of my lips. “What’s my wife’s name?”

His lips tremble, and his eyes dart away from mine as he swallows hard before uttering one whispered word. “Coraline.”

“Remember that name. It’s the one that spared your life.”

My blood is still roaring in my ears when I step into the bridal shop, the sweet-scented air a direct contrast to the gunpowder lingering on my suit.

I’m lethal artillery walking into a place that reeks of feminine softness, adrenaline still pumping through my veins as I step onto the thickly carpeted floor. Designer gowns hang from racks around the room, the white dresses glowing like spotlights.

“Sir.” A lady dressed in a simple black matching skirt-and-blazer set steps into my line of sight. “Can I help you?”

“Where’s my wife?”

My hands remain in my pockets as I stare down at her expectedly. I’m in a foul mood, and the only thing that’s going to keep me from being a massive asshole to everyone I come in contact with lies between Coraline’s thighs.

My mind is at war, and I want the solace only her body gives.

Realization dawns on this woman’s face. “Mr. Hawthorne, I’m so sorry—I had no idea you would be joining the bridal party today. They are just in the back. Let me just see if they are decent—”

“You and your staff are going to take an extended lunch,” I interrupt, pulling my wallet from my pocket before thumbing out a few hundred-dollar bills and offering them to her. “Flip the Closed sign when you leave.”

I’d already bought out the shop for the day, meaning I didn’t have to worry about other soon-to-be brides filtering around. I know attention makes Coraline nervous, and I wanted her to enjoy today. As much as she could under the circumstances, anyway.

“Of course.” She clears her throat, accepting the payment. “Your privacy is our utmost concern. Is there anything else I can assist you with?”

I shake my head, already moving past her and making my way toward the back of the shop. My hands peel back the dark purple curtain that splits the store in half between the front showcase and the fitting room area.

Laughter echoes through the room, the girls clapping their hands as Coraline stands in the center of the room on a small circular platform,

spinning, her ivory wedding dress flowing around her body in waves.

“Vera Wang never fucking misses,” Sage says from her place on one of the plush couches, a flute of champagne in her hand, but Coraline isn’t paying attention.

The wall of mirrors in front of her gives her my reflection at the door. Soft pink light casts a glow across her face as she turns to look at me, dark hair fanned out behind her, long veil tucked at the crown of her head, a waterfall of tulle draping down her back.

The strapless ball gown has a plunging neckline that gives me the perfect view of the space between her tits. Expensive silk wraps around the top, tumbling into waves of tulle that sway around her feet.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip at the black silk chiffon ties at her waist.

“Silas, what the fuck!” Briar mutters, turning to face me. “It’s bad luck to see the bride in a dress.”

“It look like I give a fuck?” I reply, rubbing my jaw as I devour the sight of her in the lush material.

“Is that your way of telling us to get the hell out?” Lyra asks, arching an eyebrow.

I nod slowly, watching them giggle like schoolgirls as they gather their things. I already knew my mother had left to sit with my father for the evening, which just leaves them to say goodbye to their friend before I have her to myself.

They quietly slip outside of the fitting room as I walk closer to my wife, who has yet to move from her pedestal in the middle of the room.

“You’re crashing my girls’ day, Hawthorne,” she says, tilting her head, a little smirk on her lips. “What are you doing here?”

I come to stand on the small platform with her, placing my hands on her hips as I spin her to face the wall of mirrors in front of us. My head dips down, dragging my nose along the side of her neck, inhaling her.

“Spent all day behind my desk thinking about how you feel under my hands.” I squeeze her sides for emphasis. “I want to use this body.”

She gasps when my tongue flicks against the pulse in her throat.

“This your way of telling me physical touch is your love language?”

I smile against her skin, forcing her hips back to mine, making her ass grind against the bulge in my slacks that won’t stop throbbing till it’s drained every ounce of cum into her tight pussy.

“I think you might be my love language, Hex.”

Coraline makes a noise in the back of her throat when the material of the dress makes an awful ripping sound. I tear handfuls of tulle from the skirt, thinning it out until I’m able to feel her naked ass pressed to my crotch.

“No panties, Hex?” I hum my approval. “Were you hoping I’d show up and fuck you in one of these dresses?”

“This is a four-thousand-dollar vintage Vera Wang.”

“Not anymore. Now it’s priceless ’cause it’s going to be the dress you soak in cum for me.”

Her chest swells with a deep inhale as my palms roam the front of her body, skimming the chiffon across her stomach before dipping into the plunging neckline to cup her large breasts.

“Did something happen—”

“Talk later,” I mumble. “Right now, you’re going to watch me use you.”

Touching her isn’t enough. Twisting her sensitive nipples between my fingers, playing with those pretty piercings isn’t enough. I want to rip her apart and bury myself in the ruin. I’d die happy there.

“Are you going to fuck me now?” she asks.

I narrow my eyes at her in the reflection of the mirror and grab her face to turn it so she’s looking at me. I peer down at her, licking my lips at how fucking stunning she is.

Those snarky brown eyes swirl with lust, desperate for me.

“Open wide and say please.”

Without missing a beat, she bats her eyelashes at me and says, “Please, will you fuck your wife, Silas?”

And she drops her jaw, sticking her pink tongue out for me to spit on. Which is exactly what I do before pressing my mouth to hers, forcing my tongue between her lips, tasting and devouring every drop of her.

“Be a good slut for your husband and get on your hands and knees.” My hand swats her ass, making her jump. “Face down, ass up, pretty thing.”

I peck her lips before letting her step out of my hold, smirking as she wobbles from the platform, already weak at the knees. I palm my cock through my slacks, rubbing from root to tip, trying to tamp down the heat searing through me. But with no luck.

I’m incapable of being slow. Of being sweet and taking my time.

I want inside her. I want my cum leaking out of her so that I can push it back inside with my tongue.

With one hand, I remove my belt, keeping the leather in my palm before undoing my slacks and stepping down from the platform, following her as she crawls toward the mirror.

When she's comfortable, she stops looking at me through the reflection. Slowly, I drop to my knees behind her, flipping what little fabric remains above her waist. My hand grabs fistfuls of her bare ass, smacking it a little harder this time.

"Silas!" she whines, recoiling away from me.

I shake my head, clicking my tongue, then loop my belt around her delicate throat and through the buckle before pulling it taut. A wave of satisfaction rushes through me, making my cock twitch as she gasps for air.

"You don't get to run today, Hex." My fists wind around the leather, using it as a leash to keep her still. "You're gonna lay right here and take every fucking inch of me into your cunt."

Coraline whimpers, biting on her bottom lip with her head tilted toward the ceiling, nodding eagerly. I smirk, using my free hand to shove my slacks down, exposing my cock to the chilly air, making me hiss through my teeth.

I drag my fingers between her thighs, feeling her wetness soak my hand. A groan tickles my throat as I circle her clit, feeling her thighs spread wider to give me more access to her body.

"I love that you're already dripping for my cock." I press my hips against her ass, rubbing my shaft along her hot skin. "Love how needy this pretty pussy is for me."

Using her juices, I lube my shaft, pumping myself a few times before guiding the tip to her entrance. Coraline moans, wiggling her ass at me as I sink the tip into her sweltering heat.

I watch her vise of a pussy suck me inside of her, every inch of my hard length spearing through her warm, pink flesh until I shove myself the rest of the way in until there's no air left between us.

I'm buried deep within her.

Relieved, content, *home*.

The force of my thrust makes her place a palm on the mirror, trying to keep herself upright as I lodge myself into her tight walls. It's so warm, hot, so fucking wet I can't help but tilt my head toward the ceiling, letting a loud groan rattle my chest.

Fuck, nothing has ever felt this good. Nothing will ever feel this good ever again. The way her cunt stretches itself for me, making room, wanting all of me.

“This sweet pussy was made for me, baby,” I grunt, reluctantly withdrawing before giving another hungry thrust. “Fucking perfect for me.”

“So full. So much.” She leans harder into the mirror, her other hand pressing on her lower stomach, feeling for me there. “God, I feel you in my throat.”

I feel the heat of her inner walls pulling me inside every time I pull back, only to shove myself back inside of her, each thrust trying to put me deeper, wanting to be embedded inside every inch of her body and coated in her DNA so she can’t spend a second without me flowing through her. If I could physically remove my soul just to stitch it to hers, I would.

And yet, I doubt I’d be close enough.

Her small body lights up in my hands with every stroke, thighs shaking as her words slur together, taken over by cries of pleasure that rush over her like waterfalls of ecstasy.

I want her falling apart. I want both of us falling apart until we are shattered remains of who we were. All so that we can piece each other back together, until we are a mosaic.

My hips set a brutal pace, only pulling myself out halfway before plunging back inside, not wanting to be outside of her tight walls for too long. Her pretty ass slaps against my stomach every time I bottom out.

My dark eyes flick up to the mirror, seeing her tits spilling over the top of her dress, bouncing with the force of my strokes. Her head is bent down as she trembles in my arms, her much smaller body trying to take me in stride and stay upright at the same time. But she wants to succumb to the pleasure, wants to let her limbs give out.

“Look how fucking sexy you are.” I yank the leash I wound around her backward, making her look at herself in the mirror. Her mouth opens more, lids dropping to cover at least half of those doe eyes. “Such a pretty cock-drunk whore, baby.”

Her mascara is smeared down her face, cheeks burning red, torn dress, and legs spread wide for me to abuse her cunt until I’ve had my fix. God fucking damn, she’s perfect.

“Silas,” she begs, voice choked from the hold I have on the belt around her throat. “Silas, Silas.”

She's a divine mess. Ruined and so close to coming all over my dick. My beautiful, divine mess. I drive myself into her with more purpose, more hunger, using the sobs of bliss slipping from her lips as fuel. Hot sweat and her juices run down my thighs, her pussy joining her cries. The hollow walls of the room echo the sound back into my ears.

"You're such a good fucking girl, taking all of me like this, Coraline." My teeth grind together. "I'm going to fill you all up until you're overflowing with me."

I sound harsher than I want to, but everything feels so vicious as I try to savor every inch of my length plowing into my new home. She watches me in the reflection, eyes wet and melting for me. She's soft and soaking all around, swallowing me like a wave.

My hand releases the belt, locking both hands on her hips, gripping her soft flesh in my palms, using them as leverage to sink myself as deep as possible with every thrust. She's shuddering, moaning sweetly, so close to toppling over the edge, and my balls tighten, wanting to follow her over that cliff.

Not feeling close enough, I circle my arms around her middle, pulling her back into my body. She cries out at the change of position, my cock lodged so deep inside of her, piercings assaulting her G-spot to the point it's almost too much.

But I'll never have enough.

Her tight ass rests on the tops of my thighs as I shove her up and down my shaft, using her pussy to massage my cock like a toy. I fuck her like she's mine to ruin, because she is. I'll wreck, ruin, and demolish everything she knew before and fall to my knees in worship at the beauty of what she rebuilds into.

My lips press a kiss to the side of her neck, breath erratic in her ear as I taste the sweat dripping down her throat.

"Soak my cock, baby. Come all over me. Show me how good I make you feel," I moan, feeling her already start to come undone, that tight spring in her lower stomach snapping in two.

"Fuck, fuck, shit, oh my God," she curses, body stiffening in my arms.

Her pussy strangles me, a starved pull that sends me over the edge just as she gushes all over my thighs, throbbing around my cock until I'm filling her with my cum.

"Coraline."

Her name is a plea into the crook of her neck as I keep pumping my cum into her sopping pussy, fucking us both through the afterwaves of our orgasm. Even as she collapses into me, a puppet who'd lost its strings, she still moans and whimpers while rocking her hips back, meeting me for every thrust.

I never want to pull out, never want to leave her body.

She's opium. Some addictive substance that I never want to quit. That subtle, sweet sting of drugs being injected into your bloodstream, its tendrils wrapping around your mind, luring you into that secluded place where subtle whispers and sweet release hide.

There is peace that lies in her body. Quiet peace after the world has refused to give me only war for years. A stillness that the chaos inside of me craves.

"Silas," she whispers, her head dropping back against my shoulder. "I think you succeeded. I'm officially ruined."

I tuck my head into the crook of her neck and pepper her throat with kisses, flicking my tongue beneath the leather belt to soothe the red skin. A smile touches my lips as I keep myself inside of her.

"You've ruined me too."

Ruined the fear of loving because of imminent loss.

Death is not a maybe; it's a must for all of us. It's scary knowing at any moment, we can be taken, one second here and gone the next. It's even more chilling when you think of loving someone, knowing no matter what you do, they'll die.

But she's worth it. Worth the pain, worth the fear, worth the grief if she goes before me. Worth her weight in gold, and I'd like to destroy anyone that made her feel like she wasn't. Like loving her is a hard thing to do.

Loving Coraline Whittaker is worth inevitable death.

The quiet stillness of the air shatters like glass as my phone rings. Good things are rarely built to last and this moment of peace? Is no different.

One sentence is all it takes for war to return. Unstoppable destruction. Buildings topple, monuments crumble, and everything good turns to ash.

"We have a fucking problem."

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

THIRTY-ONE OH BROTHER

SILAS

RED and blue police lights illuminate the front of Alistair Caldwell's childhood home.

I think this is the first time he's stepped foot on this property since he left Ponderosa Springs two years ago. There was nothing that lived inside those walls worth visiting. No matter how many times his mother and father tried to beg him to come home, come back and take his rightful place, so they had a son to pass their legacy onto.

As if they hadn't treated him like a body bag of spare parts since he was a born. As if they hadn't created him in a petri dish just in case something happened to his older brother Dorian.

If only they knew how much they'd regret choosing his older sibling as their heir.

"Fucking coward! Can't even come out and face me!?"

The thud of Easton Sinclair's body being slammed into the side of a police cruiser echoes as I climb out of the front seat of my car.

I glance over at Rook, the two of us a few steps behind Alistair and Thatcher.

What did the Caldwell family have to do with this? Of all places for Easton to show up, here is where he chooses?

Thatcher slides next to the officer with his arms around Easton, trying to force him into the back seat with the cuffs locked around his back.

"Mind if we have a few minutes before you take him in?" He lifts several hundred dollar bills up between his fingers, waiting for a few seconds for the older cop to take it from him, pocketing the cash.

"You've got twenty."

He slams the car door, before spinning Easton around to face us, letting his rest on the side of the vehicle as he steps away to give us our paid time.

Easton's eyes are bleary, skin pale and sweaty. I'm not sure how long it's been, but if I had to guess? It had been months since Easton Sinclair was sober.

The smell of booze rolls off him in vile waves, my stomach curling at the scent of filth and alcohol.

"Of course, you four would show up." He bares his teeth, "Wayne Caldwell call you to rescue him?"

"What the fuck are you doing here, Sinclair? Stephen send you here to try and fuck with us?" I ask.

"Why don't you ask Alistair?"

Easton Sinclair has always been predictable. He follows orders like a beaten dog and rarely derailed from the path laid out before him.

I didn't know this guy. He wasn't the person I'd grown up hating. This person? He was a stranger. Which made him far more dangerous now, before I could predict his next stupid move. Now? There was an air of uncertainty.

But it wasn't him that blindsided me.

It was the person I'd called a brother.

"Who told you."

Something changes when Alistair speaks. Everything becomes tight making it difficult to breath in, turning the hot-blooded energy into vindictive cold.

Thatcher's shoulders stiffen as he looks at our friend, eyebrows twitching with confusion and so quick, like a fleeting star, hurt passes through his eyes before he returns to passive Pierson.

"Stephen was nice enough to call me today, just to tell me that I've been carrying the wrong last name for my entire life, he felt like it was time." Easton spits the words out like they burn his tongue. Eyes sharp as knives, the pure hatred emanating from his gaze was palpable. Disdain and disgust pouring out towards Alistair.

"Your father doesn't even have the balls to come out and face the son he never claimed."

The around us thickens, charged with tension as the bond we'd spent years cultivating frayed. I could feel the thread connecting the four us

snapping and coiling. A warning that we were on the verge of breaking something we might never be able to repair.

These are the moments when you are truly tested. Choosing to stand by someone ever after they'd deceived you.

A true test of loyalty.

I just never expected it to be Alistair Caldwell to give us that test. I'd always thought it would be me.

"What the hell are you talking about--"

"Wayne Caldwell is my father, Van Doren. Learn to read the fucking room, dumbass." Easton snaps, leaning up from the car like he might try and go for him, but he stumbles too drunk to stand on his own. "A druggie heir. A rotten spare. And a bastard. The completed trio for the king of Ponderosa Springs. How fucking ironic."

Even though I tried not to, I turned my gaze to Alistair for a brief second. Just to see his face, only to find it solid as ever.

"Where is he, Sinclair. I know he didn't call to rehash old memories." He asks, ignoring the revelation of his new brother, ignoring it because he'd already known about it, this wasn't a shock to him like it was the rest of us.

"Don't you mean Caldwell, bro?" Easton spits, painting Alistair's black shirt with saliva before grinning, proud of himself.

The sound of glass shattering rings out as Alistair grabs the front of Easton's shirt, slamming him into the side of the police car with so much force, it breaks the back window.

"You're still a sick fucking piece of shit Sinclair. You will never be family to me." Alistair seethes, knuckles white as he grips the material of his shirt, "You want a chance to bond with the dad you never knew about? Then I'll ask again, where the fuck is Stephen."

They say blood is thicker than water.

Whoever they were didn't grow up in Ponderosa Springs.

"I don't know where he is right now." He swallows, flicking his eyes to me, the pain in his back dulled by the booze, I'm sure. "But I know where he'll be on the day of your wedding."

The entire space seems to go quiet as the officer returns. Taking Easton away from us and to jail for the night to cool down. Leaving us with more answers than questions and broken faith.

"I-" Alistair starts but Rook interrupts him.

"You want to talk? You can do it at The Graveyard."

My dark boots meet the weathered and cracked asphalt. Pockmarked with weeds that grow through the splits, pitted with decades of abandonment. Despite how empty it is, the smell of gasoline and blood still hits my nose reminding me of high school.

The Graveyard is barren dead space, that gave birth to anarchy.

An abandon racetrack that the children of Ponderosa Springs turned into a haven for rebellion. Illegal fights, unsanctioned races, and pure adrenaline.

I'd spent most of my weekends here, fought in the very grass circle in the center of the track I stood in right now.

I've grown up watching Rook and Alistair fight. It's not a novelty for a kid who lives for inflicting pain and another who needs the hurt to survive.

But this was the first time where it was meant with malice.

Rook's knuckles are split open as he sends another fist into Alistair's jaw. When he rears back to attack again, I wrap my arms around his middle picking him straight up from the ground.

He fights me like a child, jerking against my hold.

"How long!" He screams towards Alistair, who is sitting on the ground wiping his hand across his bloody mouth, "How fucking long!"

I sling Rook to his feet, putting my hands on his chest to keep him from charging again. His hair sways in front of his face, rage that looks like hurt morphing his face as he points behind my shoulder.

"How fucking long did you know he was your brother!"

Alistair's jaw goes taunt, pushing himself from the ground, glancing at Thatcher who didn't bother offering a hand. We felt divided, and I seemed to be the only one who understood where Alistair was coming from.

Guilt awoke in my stomach. Hot and urgent, churning like fire waiting to consume me.

"How--"

"Two years." Alistair grunts, spitting blood onto the dying grass, "Wayne told me right before I left Ponderosa Springs, I didn't think we'd be fucking back here. It wasn't supposed to be a goddamn problem."

"You didn't think to mention it before you left?" Thatcher speaks up, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"It didn't matter. It doesn't matter now. It changes nothing."

"It changes everything!" Rook shouts, tossing his hands in the air.

Fear and pain throb in my chest.

If I told him the truth now, would it change everything? How he sees me? Would telling them the truth do more damage than good?

They may have difficulty admitted what each of us mean to each other, but I don't. I may not say it out loud, but I have always known what they mean to me.

I've never been afraid of love, just losing it.

And right now, I'm terrified my truth will shatter this shaky bond. That it will be the straw that breaks the damn.

"Oh, so who we are related to matters now?" Alistair scoffs, dark hair sticking to his sweaty face, "That determines who I am to you, Van Doren?"

"How the fuck am I supposed to trust you, how do I believe a word that comes out of your fucking mouth."

The truth sits on my tongue, begging me to let it out, as Alistair takes a threatening step forward. Tempted to throw a shot back at Rook to match his bloody mouth.

"Careful there, you sound a little like your father. Don't act so goddamn sanctimonious. You forget we didn't find out about Sage until after you'd fucked her and got your pretty boy heart broken."

My chest tightened, hands reaching inside pulling on my raw nerves. Their argument was only the tip of the iceberg, only a preview of what their reaction would be to me.

I couldn't keep quiet any longer, not when I'd gotten so comfortable speaking to Coraline. She'd given me too much confidence in my own words, how easily she'd accepted my voice.

It made it impossible to keep my lips fucking closed.

"We all have secrets." The plague inside of me spilling out, "It doesn't mean there isn't trust. Some secrets are just heavier than others. It's harder to share the weight of them."

Rook looks at me in the eyes, removing his attention from behind me. My hands are still on his chest, and a piece of me wants to grip his shirt in my palms, just to make sure he doesn't go anywhere.

"Yeah?" Rook says, jaw twitching, "What's yours?"

I see every memory we've ever had together flash before my eyes. Knowing that after this conversation, memories with Rook and the guys might be all that's left of the Hollow Boys.

My tongue drags across my dry lips, "I'm not schizophrenic."

I move my hands from his chest, stepping back and turning so that I'm facing each of them. The weight of my secrets pressing down on me as I swallow.

"I'm not schizophrenic." I say again, just to taste it on my tongue.

My mouth waters around the truth, desperate for more and I give it. I watch each of their faces as I speak every part of my story. Every detail of the secret I kept to myself for far longer than I ever should have. The secret I swore to hold to my chest, just to protect Rosemary.

I tell them because we are nothing if we can't stand next to each other in the unknowing. It was the reason we'd found each other. Each of us had unspeakable pain. This was just the first time I was talking about mine.

The words rush out of me, so desperate to share after years of torture. They have always existed right on the tip of my tongue, begging to be spoken aloud, but fear was a shield.

Coraline had helped remove it. Taught me that a little faith in someone's voice goes a long way.

"Why didn't you say anything to us?" Rooks' voice is choked with disbelief. Sorrow maybe that he didn't question me sooner. "Why'd you suffer alone?"

I look at him, knowing his soft heart will take the blame for this. That he will leave here and hate himself for not being someone I could trust with this. Like it was his fault.

But Rook has never been to blame. He's always been a solstice for me. A person who I could just exist around without being drained. He's fuel for my soul. Always has been. Forever will be.

"Would you have believed me? Or would you have thought I was just saying that, so I didn't have to take my medication?"

There is a pause, each of them knowing the answer. That without telling them about Rosemary's abuse, none of them would have taken my words as truth. Each of them would've been too afraid of the consequences of me not being medicated.

I don't blame them.

I'm not angry at Alistair.

I can't feel anything besides relief, knowing the ones I've always kept closest to me know me. Each of us have a story, unbelievably hard fucking stories.

They hurt and they bleed. When they fall on deaf ears, they become myth. But it doesn't make it any less real for us. I look at them, knowing that regardless of the lies, one truth is our solid foundation.

“We are all unbelievable circumstances that are complete truth.”

Book made for megrourkee@gmail.com

THIRTY-TWO PIERCED

CORALINE

“CORALINE, the plan is going to work.” Silas tells me again, hands in my hair as he holds my face, “I promise.”

“But what if he finds out we moved the wedding up, and then what? He shows up with a bomb strapped to his chest? This isn’t just about me and you, it’s your family to Silas.” I murmur, heart racing even though it’s been hours since he told me what Easton said.

“He’s not going to. He won’t hurt you. I just need you to trust me.”

Yeah? And what about you? I want to say, who protects you?

The piercing sound of my phone alarm rings out, making me flinch. I set down my paintbrush, running two frustrated hands through my hair.

I’m getting married for the second time tomorrow, and all I feel in my stomach is dread. I know Silas says he has a plan. I know I trust him.

But there are too many lives at risk, too many people I’ve grown to care about that could get hurt in the crossfire of this. If Stephen were to find out about what the boys plan to do, it could be catastrophic and for what?

For me.

All of this for me.

My teeth grind together as I press my hands onto the black canvas, shoving it forward and watching it smash to the floor. Paint splattering across it.

I thought spending the day in my studio would help ease the nerves, but I think it’s only made it worse. Being alone with my thoughts, with no one to talk me out of my spiral.

A spiral which was leading me into dangerous waters, ones that Silas would hate me for entering.

“Getting cold feet, Hex?”

I didn’t finish my thought because Silas is leaning against the front door. My heartbeat thumps in my throat, drumming loudly in my ears.

It’s unfair for him to look this good in a suit. Impossibly strong, muscles unable to be hidden by the slick black material. He wore a smirk, staring at me with an arched eyebrow.

“They say it’s bad luck to see the bride before the wedding day, Hawthorne.” I stand from the stool, leaving the canvas on the floor.

He pushes off the door frame, stalking further into the room, his hands deep inside of his pockets.

I hated that even though I wanted to protect him by keeping my distance, by doing stomach stupid like calling Stephen and offering myself to him to save Silas, I still wanted him close to me.

When he’s in the room, it’s hard to not want to be next to him. His entire existence is a balm for my soul. Like he was made to keep me calm.

“I have a gift for the bride. That needed to be delivered personally.” He grunts, coming to a stop when he’s in front of me. Peering down at me with a smile in his eyes.

My eyebrow lifts. “Can you stop buying me shit, please?”

“Stop being easy to buy for and I’ll think about it.” He mutters, leaning forward and placing a kiss on my forehead before producing a black box from his pocket.

Despite my fear of tomorrow, I let myself have this moment with him. Unsure of how many more I may get. Knowing in my heart that I’d do something stupid if it meant he was safe. Even if it made him hate me.

He flicks the box open with a pop.

“How very alpha male of you,” I laugh as I look down at the nipple rings resting on top the plush material. “You afraid I’ll forget your initials?”

Two silver nipple rings, crafted with the initials S and H on each side, stare up at me.

“My mom gave you her shoes for something old. Lilac gave you something blue. This is something new.” His eyes darken. Those eyes like sodden earth, steady ground in which life could grow but chose not to. A place to settle roots and bloom. “As a reminder of who you belong to.”

My teeth sink into my bottom lip. “In a fake way or in a real way?”

His fingers move to tuck a piece of loose hair behind my ear, a habit of his that I'm growing fond of. "Nothing about us has ever been fake, Coraline."

He steps closer, neither of us saying anything as I search his face, eyes darting between his gaze and his lips. Silas's breath fans across my face, slowly leaning in until his lips are barely hovering above mine.

My hands rest on his chest, pushing him back just a bit.

"I'm afraid I'll hurt you. There is something wrong with me." I mumble.

Large palms enclose around my hips, tugging me into his hard chest. "Touching you has always felt like more of a gift than any curse, Hex."

"And if it kills you?"

"Would hurt less than never kissing you again."

The pads of his thumbs brush over the curves of my hips, warming my skin. I detail every inch of his jawline with my fingers, the skin soft beneath my touch before he presses forward, sealing our mouths together.

I shouldn't be doing this. Not when I know what I'm going to do after today. I shouldn't let him in, just to break my heart and his by pushing him away.

But his lips are addictive, the way they devour every inch of me, drinking me down like he can't ever get enough of me. My body is a well that he loves to drown in.

"Be a good girl and take your shirt off." He nips at my bottom lip, tugging the material of my shirt upwards towards my chest.

Desire washes over me, wanting to succumb to the pleasure of being with Silas one last time. I just want to be selfish for one more moment. So I let my body have this and hope he touches me so deeply, I'll never be rid of him.

I abide by his rules, finishing the job of removing my shirt. He knows me well enough to know there is no bra underneath, because his palms are there to grasp my boobs. Squeezing the soft flesh, making me arch into him with a gasp.

Fire burns in my lower stomach, hands gripping his shoulders for support as he buries his face into the side of my neck. Lips settling against the soft spot between my neck and shoulder.

"Silas." I moan, feeling the pressure of his mouth. "I can't hide hickies in my wedding dress."

“Good.” He grunts, biting down on my throat to prove his point, “Let them all know that you belong to me. This body, those witchy lips, your heart. It’s all mine.”

I knew by the time we were done; my skin was going to be littered with purple and red marks. Marked and tainted by his mouth for the world to know that I’m his.

Even if it’s just for a few more days.

My arms wind around his neck, one second, I’m on the ground and the next I’m lifted by my thighs, legs wrapping around his hips causing my shoes to fall off as he turns walks us backwards.

My hands are greedy, tracing the lines of his shoulders and face as he kneels on the ground. Laying my body horizontally across the floor.

I gasp as my back hits something cold and wet.

“What—”

“Let your body make art for me, Hex.” He murmurs into my throat, working his mouth down my chest, tongue swiping against my erect nipple, making me moan.

He takes his time undressing me and himself, and I’m glad for it. I want to savor every second of this. Ingrain it deep into my brain so that it can be a secret place of happiness for me in the future. When the world turns dark again, Silas will be there as a beacon of light.

They say The Hollow Boys are pure darkness, rotted evil.

Those people have never loved one of them. Never peaked beneath the veil and so just how blinding the light beneath is.

Silas forces my thighs apart, spreading me open for him. The cool air brushes against my naked core, making me flinch, but his warm mouth replaces the chill. Just the sight of him on his knees worshipping me between my thighs is enough to send me over the edge.

His long fingers dig into the sensitive skin of my inner thighs, spreading me wide for his tongue to delve between my folds. If there was one thing I knew about him, he was always hungry. Always desperate to give me more orgasms than I knew how to handle.

He wanted me wrung dry and numb when he was finished. Fucking Silas was the equivalent of head empty, no thoughts.

His greedy tongue swipes over my clit, sucking the bundle of nerves into his mouth. My back arches from the canvas, paint stuck to my back as I

wiggle my hips against his mouth. I place a hand on his shoulder, and the other on his head, grinding myself against his skilled tongue.

“Fuck me.” I choke when a finger slides inside of my pussy, massaging my inner walls with measured skill. “God, you’re too good at this.”

His eyes slit, smirking up at me between my thighs. His large hands crawl beneath me, cupping my ass in his palms, gripping me tightly to his face before my entire world spins on its axis.

Literally.

Silas flips our bodies with ease, his back now flat on the canvas, while mine straddles his mouth. He continues to drag his lips up and down my folds, tracing circles around my clit. The pressure of my weight on his mouth makes my stomach tighten.

“You’re going to ride my face and soak my tongue like a good girl, baby.” He hums, making me shiver. “And then you’re going to ride my cock and let me fill that tight pussy up.”

I nod shamelessly, muffled moans echoing around the empty studio as I rock my hips back and forth. Core squeezing as I chase the delicious friction between my legs.

“Play with your tits while I fuck you with my tongue, Hex.”

My hands run the length of my body, cupping my breasts, toying with the piercings, evoking a hiss of pleasure from me. When I’m with Silas, everything is warm. That empty part in me, heated by his existence, and right now I’m burning up with him.

“I’m so close.” I whimper, humping his tongue faster, desperately close to the edge.

Silas flattens his tongue, pressing hard against my clit, moving his head with my jerky movements. The swell of my orgasm built in a dull but every looming wave. My breaths come in uncontrollable and erratic bursts as my hips squirm in his grasp, but he holds me close, refusing to let me stop.

When his teeth skim my clit, I scream his name on my lips as I fall over the cliff and into a pool of ecstasy. My climax moving through me like water, cascading over my entire body, making me shake with pleasure.

Silas works me over, continuing to lick and play with my pussy until I’m begging him to stop. Begging him to fuck me. My hand crashes down on the canvas as he moves me down his body until I’m straddling his chest. Red paint coats the material beneath us, swirls, and splashes of color

beneath us, marking every desire fueled movement, and I'm silently glad there will be something physical to remember this by.

We are art and destruction. Everything beautiful in-between, lost in one another.

"You gonna ride my cock? Be a good fucking wife and let your husband use that tight cunt up?" He grunts, guiding me onto his lap.

The veins of his cock press against my wet pussy, making me shiver as I grind against it. Needing him inside of me, every brutal inch.

I bite down on the inside of my cheek, lifting myself up to align him with my entrance. Slowly lowering myself onto him, relishing the sensation of his cock filling and stretching me inch by inch. The delicious pain that accompanies taking him, feeling my body open up just for him.

Silas' lips part slightly, throwing his head back onto the canvas with a groan. As he bottoms out, fully inside of me, I keep still, barely moving before I roll my hips, slowly lifting myself up before coming down again. Stroking his cock with my inner walls.

"Silas." I whimper, digging my nails into his chest for support, savoring every single inch of him buried in me. His fingers sink into my skin at my hips, helping me bounce up and down his length.

We move in sync, fucking one another like our bodies were made for it. The way he rolls his hips into mine and my body meets his.

"So good for me, baby. Taking this cock so well, what a good fucking girl." He murmurs, sitting up and placing his lips on mine. Curling his arms around my waist and using it as leverage to thrust up into me.

My tongue swipes against his swollen lips, biting down lightly. Our movements moving faster as the hunger in us builds. Silas moves one of his hands to my mouth, dipping his thumb into my mouth.

"Suck it." He orders and my tongue is already obeying, sucking slowly before he pulls it away and moves it to my throbbing clit. His thrust hit harder, making my ass recoil with every deep stroke.

"Fuck, fuck, oh fuck." I murmur, at the sensation of his finger moving circles around the sensitive bud while his cock impales me. Stretching and massaging my inner walls, those piercings along his shaft rubbing against me.

My walls tighten around him, making him groan into my body, forcing him to move with urgency. Like all he can think about is making me come.

“So fucking tight. So fucking good.” He whispers against my sweat skin, my climax fast approaching.

Silas was filling me up perfectly, every stroke hitting exactly where I craved him. His hands gripped me so tightly, burning bruises into my flesh, marking me beneath the skin. Using my body as an outlet for his sexual desires.

The knot in my stomach tightens, his name falling from my lips like a prayer.

“Come for me, baby. Milk my fucking cock.”

I met his hips once, twice, all of my nerves wound up before snapping. Another orgasm smashes through me, drenching his length in my wetness as he continues to fuck me. My inner walls clenched around him, giving him what he needs to reach his own high.

“That’s it. That’s it. Gonna, fill this cunt up.” He grunts in my ear, pumping into me until he moans against my skin, fucking his come into my body. Draining both of us before he slows, eventually coming to a stop.

We stay there, wrapped around one another on the canvas. Sweat coating our skin as we listen to each other’s breathing. My body still shaking from the force of my orgasm.

“So pretty when you come for me, Hex.”

Silas pushes my hair out of my face, painting my forehead with paint by accident as he smiles at me. Teeth and all, giving me my favorite gift.

His happiness.

“If you don’t believe in the curse, why call me hex?” I breathe, dropping my forehead to his, my limbs feeling weak.

I feel his fingers at the back of my neck, rubbing softly. “Hexadecimal.”

“Huh?”

“It doesn’t mean cursed, baby. It’s short for hexadecimal.” He mumbles, rubbing his nose against mine. “From the moment I saw you leaving that fucking hell house, there was the secret connection between us. I understood you, saw your pain, and wanted to take it away. Like I knew what you needed before you asked. I’m not calling you cursed, I’m saying you’re a special language only I can decode.”

Tears burn the corner of my eyes, slipping down my cheeks silently.

Knowing that there is no one who understands what I need more than him. In a moment of chaos, he knew how to help me find peace. How he

has never once made me feel damaged or broken.

He has always seen me as just Coraline, and that's always been enough for him.

My heart cracks. What's left of it shatters.

I love this man. I love him and that scares me. I love him and it's the only reason I know I have to leave him.

Silas leaves me at the apartment after we clean ourselves up. Honoring the wedding gods by spending the night with the boys tonight, leaving me alone with my sister to prepare for tomorrow.

Leaving me to make a choice, one that I hope he forgives me for someday. When he has some time and space to understand why I did it. That I didn't make this decision lightly and it was for him. For the people he loves.

I couldn't put him and those people at risk. Not for me. I wasn't worth that. No matter how much Silas tried to convince me otherwise.

As the night falls and my sister drifts to sleep. I sit alone in the apartment, listening to the dial tone of a phone number I never wanted to call.

"There you are, Circe. I've been waiting for you."

Book made for megrouree@gmail.com

THIRTY-THREE

DO US PART

SILAS

WHEN ARE you supposed to know the woman, you're marrying isn't showing up?

How long do you stand at the end of the aisle, waiting until you are sure she's left you stranded?

Maybe if I didn't know Coraline, I would've waited longer, but the moment I stepped foot in front of the priest ready to marry us, I knew something was wrong. Felt it in my bones, like a premonition of something evil.

"Where the fuck is my wife?"

The girls look at me, worry across their features.

"She was supposed to meet us here to get ready, but she hasn't been answering her phone and we haven't heard from her since last night." Lyra says, dressed in a reddish orange dress to match the flowers decorating the inside of the chapel.

I rub my jaw, sending my fist through the wall behind me because God damn her.

I knew I shouldn't have told her about what Stephen had planned, knew I should've left her stubborn ass in the dark but couldn't do that to her. Omission is still lying, and she would have never forgiven me for hiding the truth from her, not after all the secrets we shared. Not after I promised she was my secret keeper.

"Her phone just keeps going to voice mail." Sage mumbles looking down at her phone like it has the answers.

"Where would she go? Why would she just— "

“Because she doesn’t want us to find her. Because she did something fucking stupid.” I interrupt Lyra, just as the door to the girls dressing room burst open.

“She’s not anywhere outside the chapel or at the apartment.” Rook huffs, his pressed suit now wrinkly with distress.

I wish I didn’t know Coraline well.

Wish I didn’t know that she was going to do this, wish I didn’t leave her alone last night. I wanted to be oblivious in this moment, because maybe the unknowing would bring me more peace than knowing. I press my fingers into my eyes, releasing a heavy breath.

“She went to Stephen.” I say the words, even though they taste like poison in my throat. Fear and rage creating a toxic acid in my stomach because she’s stubborn, but I also know she’s scared right now. Scared and without me. Scared and fucking alone when she doesn’t have to be.

There is an overall sense of stress and panic that takes over the room. Everyone’s brains scrambling to figure out how to find her.

This is the good thing about knowing Coraline Whittaker.

I’ve known she was a flight risk since the moment I met her and I knew that when I told her about Stephen and our plan, I’d need insurance on her wings. So, while the nipple rings I’d gifted her, had been innocent, they were also micro-chipped.

“God damn it.” I mutter, staring at her pinpointed location.

“What? Where is she?”

“I’ll give you one fucking guess.”

CORALINE

There is no fear in me.

As I look across the room at the man tearing what is left of his office to shreds, I feel nothing. Despite the duck tap digging into the flesh of my wrists, I’m not afraid of him. Stephen Sinclair can lay his hands on my physically, but he can never touch me again. Not like he did in that basement.

Before, I didn’t know who I was. I had no identity or self-worth. Stephen was able to mold my mind, abuse my nativity and turn me into his perfect little doll. It had been easy for him to break me before, shatter my mind and make it his playground.

Now? I knew who I was, and that person would never, ever belong to Stephen Sinclair. No matter how badly he hurt me physically, he would never have me. Never have the person I am with Silas Hawthorne, that would forever belong to him.

"They took everything, whatever you're looking for is fucking long gone." I say as Stephen throws a drawer from his desk over his shoulder, the clatter of leftover things rumbling against the hard wood floors.

I'd lived beneath this office in Sinclair Manor for two years and this was the first time I'd gotten a decent look at it.

We'd made a deal when I called. I come to him willingly and he leaves Ponderosa Springs. Along with everyone in it.

It was a fair trade. Me for their freedom.

Stephen's hair hangs past his ears. The strands of limp, stringy hair sway as he snaps his gaze toward me. His lips curl back over his yellowing teeth into a snarl, eyes narrowing.

Prison hadn't been kind to the previous Dean of Hollow Heights. His once blonde hair was now dull and speckled with grey. Teeth stained yellow from neglect, skin sickly. The well stitched together skin suit he once wore was decaying. Was showing just how much corruption was festering inside, he was oozing misery.

"We need money, baby." He looks over from his manic searching, "I've got to be able to take care of you."

Bile sits in the back of my throat. The way he speaks to me like a child.

"If you just let me draw money from my account--"

"I do not need your father's money, Circe. I'm a man, I know how to take care of you."

My jaw goes taunt, molars grinding against one another. As he eyes me from across the desk, anger flaring in his gaze.

"I'd be quick, Stephen." I bite, "Every second we spend in Ponderosa Springs is another step closer Silas gets. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"You think he's gonna be your knight in shining armor, Coraline?" He sneers, his laughter seems to split the air. "You mean nothing to him. You are simply a means to an end for Hawthorne."

I scoff, rolling my eyes, "And what, Stephen? I mean something to you. I'm your special girl."

He drops the papers in his hands, stalking over towards the chair he's tied me to. I hiss as he grabs me by the hair, jerking my head up with

painful grasp, peering down at me like I'm beneath him.

That familiar smell of his wafting in my nose.

"You're mine, Circe. You loved me once, you can love me again. I would start forgetting all about Silas, it'll make this much easier for you."

I never loved him. Not really. My mind did what was necessary to survive the torture. I played dead like a possum in the road trying to avoid death from poachers. I adapted and did what I needed to survive.

There was no love in that basement.

Saliva gathers in my mouth before I spit it out at him.

"Go fuck yourself."

I expected the hand across the face, anticipated the taste of metallic in my mouth before it filled my throat. My lip throbbed from the smack. Aching with familiarity. Stephen's abuse was like walking into your childhood home, you remembered it, knew its secrets and could never escape it. It was forever apart of you.

I'd survived him once and I could do it again. Even if I didn't, I knew Lilac would be taken care of and Silas would be safe.

It would all end now, for everyone. They could be free and happy. Released from the chains, Stephen Sinclair wrapped around us all. They could all finally move on to a brighter future, and that made the pain worth it.

His hand grabs my face, holding me steady, "Am I going to have to teach you how to behave again, Coraline?"

I bare my teeth, showing the blood in my mouth, "I am not the girl you left to rot in that basement, Stephen. You will not break me this time."

Another hand cracks across my jaw, the bone in my cheek throbbing with pain. Tears burn the corner of my eyes from the force of the hit. Maybe if I made him angry enough, pushed him far enough he'd end this quickly for both of us.

His arm rears back to hit me again, but it never comes.

Thuds echo outside the door.

Once, twice, on the third wood splinters into the room. The door shoved completely off the hinges as Silas's body barrels through the entryway.

I flinch at the pure force radiating off him in waves, how he stalks into the room after just breaking down a door.

Stephen scrambles backward from my body, just as Silas peeks in my direction. He only looks at me once, before moving towards Stephen like a

wild predator.

My stomach drops as Stephen struggles to move towards the gun resting on his desk, but he's not quick enough. Just as he wraps his hand around the grip, Silas's large palm smashes down on top of it.

With a vicious hold he, picks up Stephens hand in his own before smashing it into the desk. The cracking of bone reaches my ear as he repeats the process until the gun falls to the floor and Stephen's hand is shattered.

"They say using a gun removes the personal aspect of a kill." Silas says smoothly, "This is personal."

Though his face bleeds fear, Stephen forces laughter past his lips.

"The other three dogs don't want to play?" He mutters, trying to break free from Silas's grip. With one swift movement, Silas responds by snatching his throat in an iron grasp before slamming him onto the desk.

His eyes glisten with rage, "No games tonight. This ends with you and me."

"It'll never be over." Stephen chokes, as Silas tightens his grip around his throat, using both hands to strangle the air from his windpipe. "You can't kill my memory. I will live in her forever."

"Watch me."

The veins in Silas's arms bulge as his grip tightens. Stephen's face turning a nasty shade of deep purple. Every breath becomes a struggle, clinging to life he doesn't deserve.

For years I imagined what it would look like. To see Stephen die, how the light in his eyes would dim and the color drain from his face. It was my comfort dream on that thin mattress in the basement.

I never expected his death to be at the hand of the man I love.

"Look at her, I want you to remember her face and know you'll spend an eternity in hell paying for what you did to her." Silas seethes in a quiet whisper, "If I could kill you twice. I would."

I watch as the life drains from Stephen, fear etched into his features as he gurgles for air. A part of me wants to look away, to shield myself from the violence, but I can't.

Silas has my full attention.

I have witness him shoulder the burden of guilt that was never his to carry, watched as he suffered in silence, too afraid to speak the truth. But in

this moment, as the man who nearly destroyed his life takes his last breath, I see something in Silas.

That darkness in him that frightens others. But never me.

He's not killing for pleasure or revenge, but for justice. For closure.

Death enters the room with cold hands, it fills the air and Stephen Sinclair's body, finally goes limp.

The smell of burning flesh is rancid. It carries a hint of sour sweat, an odor of raw sewage.

It's singed into the fabric of my seven-thousand-dollar wedding dress. I suppose the lingering scent is the least of my concerns, considering the state of the fabric.

Torn, muddled with dirt, splattered with blood.

This was no longer a white gown that marked the start of a lifetime commitment, but a parting dress that symbolized the end of a horror novel I'd been caught between the pages of for years.

With every crackling ember that flutters from the deep hole in the ground came a sense of relief. I feel another shackle unlocking inside of me.

I have years of healing in front of me, only the beginning of my uphill battle but for the first time since I was kidnapped?

The bars of my golden cage have melted and, as awful as the scent of charred skin may be, it smells like freedom. My freedom.

"Now what?" Rook is the first to break the silence, glancing over a Sage, who he pulls in close to his side.

The way Rook Van Doren looks at Sage Donahue, is a work of art. Like The Creation of Adam, but with eyes. Fingers just reaching out, barely grazing one another. So much emotion, in such a simple gesture.

All of us are stuck in a place of disbelief for different reasons. Liberation is vastly different for each of us. Yet, Stephen Sinclair, burning at the bottom of this grave, represents our prison.

One person connecting us all. One person who has died and set each of us free.

"Tilly's?" Lyra mutters, rocking back and forth on her heels, "We didn't eat at the reception."

The glow of the fire washes over our faces, and its Briar who laughs first. I think I can't tell because as soon as the sound hits my ears, my own joy rumbles my lips.

We are all laughing. Different tones, some chuckles, other giggles. Male and female. Pure human emotion in the dark of the night that buzzes louder than the cicadas in the trees. It's a laughter that makes my stomach hurt, causing my ribs to ache and for a hand to reach out to steady myself against Silas.

Thatcher shakes his head, kissing the top of Lyra's head softly, muttering under his breath, "What am I going to do with you, Little miss death?"

They were an unlikely pair but something about them just kinda, worked? Like ice cream and French fries. One was very sweet, and the other was very salty. But they balanced each other out.

It was similar to how Alistair gave off a very *fuck you don't speak to me* vibe in his leather jacket and Briar was very *I'm super nice, but my scary boyfriend will hit you*. He was a shadow, and she was the light. One without the other felt wrong.

Any of them without each other, felt wrong. Out of place and I guess, that went for me to now.

I look at Briar, Sage, and Lyra, knowing in this moment that I hate Stephen Sinclair, but a part of me is grateful for where I ended up. They don't make me want to relive the basement, but they make it worth it.

We weren't friends since high school or siblings forced to care for one another. Blood and time spent together had nothing to do with our bond.

It was this trauma. A horrible, nasty evil that would live with us forever, but also brought us together.

Along the road of pain, we stumbled across one another, clung to each other, and refused to let go.

We wouldn't have met without the pain. Wouldn't have loved as deeply as we do without the fear.

We hold on tight to one another because we refuse to lose it.

We know it's rare and breakable and entirely ours.

My eyes turn to Silas, finding him already looking at me. This pain also led me to him. Forced our paths to cross, weave, and lock. Until we stood here, sown into each other's souls like two torn pieces of fabric.

We didn't fit together seamlessly, but we fit together like us.

His thumb swipes across my bruised bottom lip, "Ask me what my favorite color is,

Never once since we met has, he given up on me. Never seen me as this unlovable, damaged thing. I plan to spend the rest of my life returning the favor. Not matter how cold he keeps it in the apartment.

"What's so funny?"

The foreign yet familiar voice cruelly reminds us that Ponderosa Springs is a hydra. With every head you cut off...

Two grow back.

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THIRTY-FOUR LIMITLESS

SILAS

I TURN FIRST, putting Coraline behind me, but she's quick to move to my side. I love her, but I'm not the mood for her hardheadedness.

I'm not in the mood to lose her.

"Stay behind me." I seethe in a low whisper, her brown eyes narrowing prepared to shake her head, but I stop her, "Please, hex."

I'm not being an asshole alpha male. I'm not telling her she can't protect herself.

I'm terrified of losing her.

A familiar taste fills my mouth, leaks between my teeth, and makes my stomach roll.

Fear, icy cold fear.

I cannot lose her. I won't. Not when I just got her.

Easton Sinclair stands in the darkness, creeping forward with a stagger in his walk. The building flames behind us cast a flicking light over his sickly face. He is a series of shadows and hissing orange-red lights.

No longer the guy I remember from my youth or even the one that crashed my engagement party. The purple bags beneath his eyes and hollowed cheek bones tell a disturbing story of a man that is no longer there.

Both his physical and mental health decline shines in his eyes.

He is unhinged, gaunt and holding a fucking gun.

"I guess destroying my life would be fucking hilarious to you four, wouldn't it?" He scratches his head the barrel of the gun, mania laced in his own chuckle, "Is that the smell of my dad burning? Wait, sorry, stepdad. I'm still trying to get the wording down."

There are more of us than him, but that does nothing to calm my heart beating against my chest. Even with the gun tucked in the back of my jeans, one move and he could shoot any of us before I can get a shot off.

Numbers don't matter when someone has nothing to lose.

"Easton. Look at me."

My hand wants to reach for her, as Sage takes a daunting step closer, her palms up to show she isn't a threat, like she ever was to begin with.

"It's over for all of us now. You don't have to--"

"Shut up."

On a dime his emotion shifts from delusion to pure anger, swinging his arm in her direction so she's staring down the barrel of his gun.

There is a collective gasp as Rook grabs her wrist, yanking her backwards into his chest before swinging her behind him.

"You want a pound of flesh; you can take it from me." He bargains, still holding Sage's wrist behind him with a painful grip, "Leave her out of it."

It's clear that no matter what Easton came here to do, he won't leave until someone is bleeding. Regardless of what we say to him, there is a look in his eyes that tells me his too far gone to be pulled back from this ledge.

He is shattered and the person left standing in the pieces of Easton Sinclair? Is someone we don't know how to deal with.

"Leave her out of it?" He cackles, the sound ricochets off the trees. "What do you offer this fucking group, Van Doren? Humor? Cause it sure as fuck isn't intelligence."

"What do you want, man? You want money?" Alistair asks, trying to get his attention away from a singular person. That way if he fires, he'll miss if he doesn't have a solitary target, "We can get you money. We could get you help."

"Help? I don't fucking want your help!" Easton is a bomb, ticking with the seconds passing, and we are running out of time, "Why would I take your help? Because we're blood? Fuck you! Fuck all of you!"

He's shaking with pent up rage, tears glowing in the flames. Regardless of his current state, he's just as much a victim as us. A different shade of morally grey, just colored on the opposing side.

He's our villain, just as we were to Ponderosa Springs.

And while a part of me gets it. His wrath and resentment, he's also pointing a weapon at the people I love. I don't understand him enough to spare his life if he does something stupid like shoot one of us.

"He wasn't yours to kill." He stammers, harshly wiping his nose with the back of his hand, fingers quivering around the weapon, "It wasn't your revenge to take. You have no idea what I went through, what he made me do, you fucking idiots. He was mine to end and you couldn't even let me have that!"

"You're right." I step forward, nodding my head as branches crunch beneath my feet. Coraline's fingers are buried in my suit, trying to keep me close, but I keep walking.

Until she lets go and I'm standing in front of everyone. In the corner of my eye, I see Rook shaking his head, but not wanting to make any more sudden moves.

"We don't know what happened to you and no one will if you don't put that down. You want us to know your story? For people to understand what you did?" I ask him, my palms sweating, "Give yourself the chance to tell it, Sinclair. Don't be him."

There is a riveting silence that passes in the air, no one moves or breathes as Easton stares me down.

In this light, he looks more like a sad boy than a man on a war path. At the very least, he deserves a chance. To rewrite his story, change the ending.

Evil is not made it is chosen and you can choose not to accept it.

"Just put the gun—"

"You took everything from me." He grumbles, greasy blonde hair catching the wind, dead blue eyes showing zero signs of life, "You took Sage." He swings the gun in her direction.

"You took my last name." He shifts his weapon to Alistair.

"You've taken my revenge."

It's then, that his gaze and aim locks on me. He inhales deeply. Tilting his head letting the moon shine across the tears on his face. My hand reaches for my gun at my back, and the sound of shuffling feet thud behind me.

"And now, I'm gonna take something from you."

Sometimes, no matter how badly we want to change the ending, we can't.

Sometimes, the end is just the end.

The familiar sound of a trigger being pulled rumbles through the woods.

While physical impossible, time slows just enough for me to hear the tiny explosion inside the weapon. The gas expanded and forcing the bullet

down the barrel.

It's funny how time works.

How it slows when you least expect it. Giving you the chance to let every movement of a single moment sink into your skin. Giving you the chance to remember every second that drips down the hourglass.

"Fucking catch him!"

"B, call for help."

A distance ringing rattles my ear drum, a daze in my mind and blazing sensation in my chest.

I look down, placing a hand over my white button down, only to find crimson painting the palm of my hand when I pull back.

"Fuck."

The ground sorta gives out beneath me, like I'm standing on a waterbed barely filled. My knees buckle under me, no longer willing to hold my weight and rush of air fills my head.

Arms wrap around me just as I feel the cool earth beneath my back. The smell of lavender and honey mixed with gunpowder. It makes me nauseas, smelling her with something so violent attached.

"Silas. No, no. You're okay. It's okay."

"Fuck, Coraline, he's bleeding. He's bleeding."

"Thatcher, give me your god damn jacket!"

Arms and handles scramble above me. Just past the frantic limbs, the Ponderosa Pine trees are parted just enough for me to see the night sky. Most people don't know the Oregon coast is the best place to see the Milky Way. No light interference to dim the shine of stars.

There is chaos in my ears, but there is no panic in me.

"Hey, look at me, please."

My eyes flutter, looking upwards. Coraline's hair is draped across her shoulders, hanging down in my face. I can feel the heat from her lap as she holds me to her stomach.

"You're so warm, baby." Trying to chase her touch, her smell, her. *"Can you feel how fucking cold I am?"*

"Silas, keep your eyes open for me. There you go, just keep looking at me, baby." She gazes down at me, heavy tears dripping from her face and onto me. Her smooth hands cradle my head, running along the contours of my face.

There is fear in her tone, panic I can't console because everything is so numb. I can barely feel my fingers, barely feel my hand lifting to shakily a piece of hair behind her ear.

"Could look at you forever, Hex." I whisper, the words sting in my chest.

I try to take a deep breath, but it fucking hurts. Like blades shredding the inside of my lungs. I cough, choking on spit in my throat.

Red splatters against Coraline white dress, and it tears a sob from her lips that I can feel against me.

"Please just hold on, Silas. I know it hurts, but you're going to be alright. We are going to be alright, okay?" Her voice is a sob, body shaking as she clutches me tighter, "We are gonna go home. You and me, we're gonna go home. You have to plant more lavender, you have to because I don't know how. Okay?"

Tears leak from the corner of my eyes, not from pain, but sadness I haven't felt in a long time. A deep rooted sorrow that takes away the ache in my chest.

I don't think I'm going to make it back home.

But I can't tell her that. Not when the world has robbed her of enough. I don't want her to lose faith in hope. In her future and the light that's waiting for her at the end of this tunnel.

No one deserve light like, Coraline. No one needs it more.

A few years ago, all I wanted to do was die.

Now, I can feel my heartbeat slowing.

Now, I am dying and all I want is another day with her.

Just one more day so I can soak in her laugh, feel her touch, experience her love.

One more cup of lavender tea.

One more scoop of honey in my coffee.

One more day.

"Coraline." I cough her name, my lips wet with the taste of metallic.

"Help me! Please!"

"Hey, Hey...Silas, I'm right here, man. Just hold on. Help is coming. Hold on okay? No, no keep your eyes open..."

Rook.

"You guys can't tell anyone." Rook's lip wobbles, still leaking blood onto his chin. "You have to promise."

My small fists tighten at my sides, at only eleven I'm a whopping 5'1, sometimes 5'2 when I wear certain shoes, my chance of beating the shit out of Rook's dad was slim.

But I wanted to.

I wanted to so badly that it made me want to crawl out of my skin. Uncomfortable with how much anger was washing through my body.

It's Rook.

He steals gummy worms and requires more Band-Aids than the average kid, but it's Rook and he doesn't deserve to be hit.

Not him. Not when I know how kind he is.

Especially by his father.

"Pinky swear." He grunts, rubbing his sleeve over his lip. Putting on a brave face, but I've got a feeling he we were never supposed to find out this secret.

We weren't supposed to see the shame on his face. If I'd known, I wouldn't have agreed to ride our bikes here. I never would've embarrassed him like this, showing up and discovering this secret he'd hidden for who knows how long.

I would've waited until he was ready to tell me.

"I'm not fucking pinky swearing. That's stupid." Alistair grumbles dark hair swaying in front of his eyes, crossing his arms in front of his chest, "Hit him back next time. I showed you how to make a fist."

"Then swear!" Rook shouts, "You guys don't understand. You have to swear you'll keep your mouth shut. Or I'll snitch about who put spiders in Dorian's underwear drawer."

Technically, that was all of us. Alistair was just the one who poured them in.

It took Rook and I days to find that many granddaddy long legs, not to mention we had to deal with Thatcher bitching about the dirt.

"Swearing doesn't mean anything if there is nothing to swear on." I say quietly, even though Rook didn't need to ask me. Every secret, every fear, every dream.

I'd keep for him. Keep them safe.

"I will not be swearing on my family." Thatcher reaches for one of the apples sitting in the kitchen, taking a bite from the red flesh, "That's just bad taste and it would be a lie."

"Got any better ideas then, genius?"

He walks to the fridge; I'm still confused how he didn't sweat through his sweater on the bike ride here. It takes forever to get from his place to Rooks.

"In Greek mythology, Styx is one of the river of the underworld." He murmurs, pulling out a bag of frozen peas that he hands to Rook, which he takes happily placing it on his swelling mouth, "In the Iliad and Odyssey, Homer said the gods swear by the water of the Styx as their most binding oath."

"Then we swear on the Styx." Rook says quickly, nodding his head, I'm not even sure he knows what it means, but he's too afraid not to have some kind of binding that keeps our silence.

"Wait." Alistair reaches into his front pocket, digging out a black sharpie marker. He grabs my arm first, jerking it towards him before scrawling a shitty circle with what I think is a skull inside it and words scribbled along the inner lines.

It reads, Admin One along the top and Styx Ferryman on the bottom.

"What are you doing, don't draw one me." Thatcher tries to avoid his touch, but with a little fight Alistair gets him to hold still.

"What is it?" I ask, staring at the bleeding ink in my brown skin.

"Charon's Obol." He mumbles around the sharpie cap in his mouth.

"To pay our way across the Styx to the afterlife."

My brows furrow as he draws the same image on Rook, then himself.

"There."

"What exactly does this shit do?"

He shoves the marker back into his jeans, then answers.

"This way we find a way back to each other." He looks at each of us, jaw set, "We steal. We burn. We bleed. We promise that no matter what, we make our way back, even in death."

It's a silly drawing. A silly promise we make. Who knows where we will be in twenty years? We might not even know each other tomorrow.

"You read The Iliad and the Odyssey? Did anyone else know Ali could read?" Thatcher says.

"I will fucking hit you if you call me that again."

I shake my head, looking at the mark on my arm.

Right now, this feels like the biggest moment of my life.

Like, no matter where we go or what happens, I'll remember this. I'll remember I had friends, that cared enough in this moment to make this

promise.

It feels good.

It feels like enough.

"To the Styx?" I say the question, and they respond in tandem.

"To the Styx."

Coraline cries and I ache to be there to comfort her.

Rook will.

My mind echoes.

Rook will help her carry the weight of grief, so she isn't alone. The boys will lean on one another. They will force each other to move forward because it's what we do. We move forward.

"I-I love you." I strangle out, impossibly cold clinging to consciences but sleep is a song I can't block out. Its hands are strong and it's pulling me under.

Coraline is a blur. I can't see her face, and I hope she hears those words and knows they were always meant for her.

"Silas. Don't, please." Rook begs, but there is no one to beg.

God's not here.

For the shadow and valley are mine.

I fear no evil.

"Promise m-m.."

My voice no longer works. It's left me for good this time.

"I promise, Si. I swear on the Styx, I've got her."

"No! Rook don't say that. Don't fucking say that. He's okay, alright? Don't say that! He's okay. Baby, you're okay..."

Her voice is distance chant.

I don't think her witchy lips can cast a spell that'll stop this. Not when it feels so inevitable. Death is all encompassing. It's a blanket. A shield.

"You're okay. I love you. You're okay. I love you."

There are loud sounds, floating in space but darkness is a comfort. It comes for me as the cold leaves, and nothingness takes over.

I am air and all that is in-between.

I'm limitless.

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THIRTY-FIVE COLD FEET

SILAS

NOTHING HURTS.

There is a numbness that has encompassed me like a jacket meant to protect me from pain. Bright lights blind me as I blink, eyes trying to adjust.

An eerie silence creeps in as I look down, tall grass comes up to my waist swaying against my body but there is no wind howling. Brilliantly colored flowers stretch out before me, endless in both length and color.

Wildflowers so bright they make my eyes hurt, but there are no bees humming.

I reach my hand down, unable to feel the blade of green weeds beneath my palm even though they wrap around my fingers. It was everything and nothing all at once.

The sensation of being alive but not really living was overwhelming. All the beauty around me was mocking, cruel even. It showed me life in all it's wonder, but left me trapped in an internal void of nothingness.

"Silas!"

A voice shattered the silence around me. I spun to glance behind me but saw nothing, only miles and miles of flowers. When I turned back around, my brows furrowed as a figure began to pixel in the distance.

Coming to form with every step she took forward.

"Silas!" She screams again, this time I can see the smile on her face, the joy that radiates around her like a halo.

"Rosie?" I choke on her name, tears slipping down my cheeks in a stream. Joyful tears that she's okay, that she's happy, that she's here. But they are also soaked in misery, in sadness because I'm dead.

I died, and I left Coraline alone.

She comes to a halt a few feet in front of me, waves of auburn hair swirling around her face, wearing the same outfit she had on the last day I saw her.

"I wanted to come say goodbye." She tilts her head, the freckles dotting her cheeks crinkling as she grins at me, "We never got to say goodbye last time."

My body, my soul has felt heavy for years. Weighed down by the grief of never telling her goodbye, of being the last person she trusted to see her before she was killed.

"I'm sorry, Rosie. I'm sorry I let you walk home alone." My voice is muffled in my own ears, but I know she hears them, because she starts to frown, "I'm sorry I didn't protect you, when I promised I would."

"It wasn't your fault, Silas. I died and that wasn't your fault."

Her voice is soft, gentle, reassuring. So very her.

"You're not to blame for my death" Her smile returns, the youth in her features making my chest burn. She never got to experience life, she never got to be anything. Rosemary was a world of possibility turned into a tragedy. "I died and it's okay to forgive yourself."

In the back of my mind, I hear voices. Roaring and shouting just in the distance, but there is nothing behind me. The feeling of numbness is starting to fade from me, my bones have weight, and I can feel my feet beneath me.

"My feet are freezing."

My heart drops as I look down to see her pale feet without socks. Tears burn the insides of my eyes, and I let them fall. I want to bring her back with me, so that she can have a chance to experience life. So she can see Sage again, so she can fall in love again.

I want to give her endless possibilities. I wanted that for her so badly.

"You feet always did get cold without socks on." I say, my throat tightening.

"Hey Silas?" Her voice is a whisper now, the in-between place of flowers starting to fade. The cold is returning to my body and as much as I want Rosie to be happy, I want to go back.

I want to go back to Coraline because I can't leave her alone.

I'm her curse-breaker.

I can't be another person she loses. I want to be the person that proves that she can be loved, loudly and endlessly without it killing me.

“Yeah?” I ask.

Rosemary's head tilts, a sleep smile tugs at the corner of her fading face. Drifting off to a place of peace. “Can you carry me one last time?”

I wanted to go back, but this? This was the goodbye I never got to say to the person who showed me kindness above all else. This was closure with a person who showed me how to love so that I had it down by the time I met Coraline. Who taught me so much about myself before I even knew who I was?

This was a goodbye to my guilt, for not being there.

So, I look her one last time, knowing that as long as I live, I'll carry the love Rosemary Donahue and I shared forever. As a testament to her memory, a thank you for all she did.

She died knowing she was loved by many and that's all any of us can ask for at the end of our days.

“Always, Rosie Girl.”

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THIRTY-SIX HEX CODE

CORALINE

THREE MONTHS LATER

"LILAC! You're going to be late!" I shout from the end of the hallway.

Hearing her attitude fueled footsteps stalking from her bedroom. I shake my head as she appears in front of me, jerking her bag up her shoulder.

"How do they expect us to learn anything this early in the fucking morning." She grumbles, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"It's your senior year, how are you not used to this by now? You need to start going to sleep earlier."

"Silas says being a night owl is a sign of intelligence." She mutters on a yawn, her blond hair tugged up in a messy bun. I smile at her, the two of them have been ganging up on me more and more lately.

I think it's because Silas is afraid of being the bad guy cause he knows Lilac's approval means a lot to me. So he basically spoils the fuck out of her.

"Your tennis bag is by the door, bagel with extra cream cheese is on the counter. Have a good day, Li." I lean forward, pecking a kiss to her cheek.

Before I pull away she tugs me into her body for a hug, making me huff out a laugh.

"I love you, Coraline. Thank you for being happy."

My heart aches, "Thank you for helping me find it."

I watch her walk towards the front door, slipping out the door and headed to school before going into my home studio.

The painting I'd just finished last night is sitting on the easel still drying and Silas is standing in front of it. Shirtless, in grey sweatpants.

The sweats hang from his hips. Giving me the perfect view of his body, taking in the curves of his muscles; the hollow of his hips and strength in his lower back.

His skin is sunlight brown, and whenever he flexes muscles ripple beneath the skin, dancing under his skin.

It should be a crime for him to look like this.

I creep inside behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist and pressing my cheek to his back. Breathing in the smell of his body wash.

I was never a big physical touch person until I met Silas and he showed me how to love it. Now, I feel like I can't be in the same room as him and not be touching him.

"What's this one called?" He asks, still staring at the oil painting in front of us.

One of my favorite things about him is how supportive he is of my art. Not just my work with Light and teaching, but my own art. He stays up with me for hours while I talk about concepts, giving me ideas, and always interested in the final product.

He makes me feel important, even when I don't feel that way myself.

"Curse breaker." I whisper.

The likeness of the man in painting to Silas is exact. Like he could step from the frame and mirror the man I have my arms curled around.

Silas died twice during surgery. He died and came back to life twice.

He'd died and came back to me, just to prove I wasn't cursed. I argue that it was him defying death that broken my wicked spell. Silas was willing to cross the grim reaper just to show me I was worth the return.

I wanted to spend the rest of my life returning the favor. Proving I was worth of a love like his.

"That what I am, hex?" He hums, turning around to face me, his hands cupping my face, "Your curse breaker?"

"You are everything, Silas Hawthorne. Everything." I lean into his touch, smiling as I press my lips to his thumb, "Even if you are painting your office that ugly ass orange color."

He laughs, deep and soaked in whiskey. Addictive.

"It has a name, ya know?" He tilts his head, watching me, "The color."

"Yeah I know, ugly ass orange."

"Hex code #dd4a3d." He grins, "It's name is Coraline."

"I'm your favorite color?"

"You're my favorite everything, Hex."

I've slowly learned that the past doesn't matter when you give the rest of your life to someone like Silas. When you know he'll have the start and end to all of your days. Everything before him? It doesn't exist, he won't allow it.

The pain, the hurt, the misery.

None of it matters when I'm with him. I'm not cursed witch of Ponderosa Springs. I'm not hard to love.

Silas loves me like breathing, easy, naturally, like he was made for it. And I love him carefully, tenderly like he's the only thing keeping me alive.

Our love is a living, breathing thing--it fills us up until there's no room for anything else.

Those might have been my mother's vows to my father in that courthouse, but they were meant to be said by me to him.

I will forever be his peace when the world gives only war. Every secret he spills will be kept safe by my lips and my arms will be his safety. I took a vow to be the one person who accepts him for who he is and who he will become.

"I love you." I murmur, "I love you."

Till death do us part.

SILAS

"Again."

Coraline whine's as my hand travels down the length of her stomach, nails curling into her warm, sweaty flesh. "Silas—"

"Again, Coraline," I murmur from the place between her thighs, tongue darting out to drag through her pussy. The low and gentle vibrations of my deep voice sending waves of pleasure directly to her cunt, reverberating through her clit until she's close to crying. "Didn't you brag about how could take it? Didn't you promise to be my good girl, hex?"

She arches from the bed, arms straining against the rope that keeps her wrists taut to the headboard.

"I...I—"

I look up. Clashing with her warm brown eyes, the mixture between overstimulation and pleasure mingling in her iris's.

I warned her.

Told her what I would do if she let me have her body. I wasn't content on Coraline coming. I needed her to break. To watch those walls crumble around her one orgasm at a time.

"Come on," I urge her, pressing her thighs deep into mattress to keep her spread and pliable for me. "You've been so good for me all night. You can do it."

I've pushed her to the edge. One orgasm on my gun, another on my fingers, now I wanted her on edge before making her drown my cock.

More. More. More.

I just want more of her. All of her.

Three months of pure freedom looks like heaven on her. The walls built around her have crumbled and she's let me fully into her heart. Letting me make a home there.

She peers down at me through damp lashes, the tears on her cheeks warm and glistening beneath the soft light of the lamp.

My expression darkens, sitting up on my knees and reaching over her body to the bedside drawer. I remove the silicone dildo I had her buy a few months ago.

"What are you, Hm?" I whisper, trapping the toy to her lips a silent command to open for me, "Say it, Coraline."

"I'm yours. I'm your wife." She chokes out, wiggling beneath me, "Only yours. Just...just a hole for you."

With her mouth slightly parted I shove the pink toy between her pillow soft lips, swollen from my kisses.

My hand squeezes her thigh, cock drilling a hole through my pants at the thought of them being bruised tomorrow. Her tongue swirls and mouth sucks until she lives the dildo up. I shove it further into her throat making her gag, but I just keep going until it's nice and wet.

A grin splits my face, watching her eyes spark at the thought that she's pleased me.

When I'm satisfied I return between her legs, laying on my stomach as I press kisses to her dripping cunt. Using one hand to pin her thigh to the bed and the other to drag the silicone dick through her slippery folds.

"That's right," I agree, squeezing the flesh of her thigh in my hand. "My slutty wife who lives to be filled with my cum, yeah?"

Coraline nods, eyes squeezing shut as I push the tip of the cock into her pussy. Her tight walls engulf it, sucking it in and it's not my proudest

moment being jealous of a fake penis.

But god, she's so fucking beautiful.

So fucking good for me.

A broken whine stumbles from her mouth, "Silas, I can't. It's too much. So much."

"You're okay," I reassure her, "You're gonna lay there and behave. You're gonna be a good girl for me, Coraline."

I love this.

Watching her twitch and squirm, overwhelmed with pleasure. Her pretty pink pussy swollen from all the attention.

She's all mine.

My stubborn, beautiful wife.

I shove the toy deeper, my body forcing her legs open as she tries to snap her legs close in retaliation.

"Fuck!" She screams, when I place my mouth on her clit. Sucking it into my mouth, teeth grazing the sensitive bundle of nerves, before lapping at it with my tongue.

Her stomach contracts, hips pressing towards my touch as she fights a losing battle. Her pussy wants more but her mind thinks it's too much.

I thrust the cock into her with short, quick thrusts, speeding up to match the rhythm my tongue sets. Her arousal leaks into my mouth, choking me on her pleasure.

"Silas, I'm gonna come, baby. I'm gonna come." She moans from the back of her throat, fighting her restraints as she humps my face.

This is my favorite part.

I withdraw my touch completely making her cry out in agony. She bucks against nothing, a feral little animal all riled up. A smirk paints my features as I lean onto the backs of my legs. Unbuttoning my pants and shoving them down enough to remove my aching cock.

"Please, oh my god. I need...." She gasps, not sure if she wants more or needs it to stop.

I stroke myself as she peers down at me, hair matted and wild, face burning red.

"Use your words, Coraline." I grunt, smearing my precum across the tip of my cock, "What do you need, baby? You wanna come again, don't you? Want me use that tight fucking hole?"

When she doesn't answer, only lifts her hips in the air, I crawl over her body. My hand grabbing her cheeks, forcing her to look at me.

"Open." I demand, her lips parting for me. Spit sprays from my mouth, dripping onto her tongue. "Tell me what you want. What you deserve."

I loosen my hold so she can speak, waiting for her reply that comes after she swallows.

"I want you to make me come. Fuck me, Silas please I'm begging you. I'm empty without you."

There she is.

My ruined little thing. Soft and sweet just for me. Believing herself to be so unworthy of love and affection.

"You're not a curse, baby. You're a fucking blessing."

My lips press against hers, a hungry kiss where our tongues roll against one another. I grip the base of my cock with one hand, the other resting flat beside her head.

And finally, like I've been thinking about all night, I thrust myself home.

A depraved and desolate sound rips from her lungs as she stretches around my length. Twitching around me making me groan.

"I'm already so close." She whimpers.

My mouth descends onto her tits, swirling around her sensitive nipple before my teeth nip at the pretty piercings with my initials on them. Tugging at them playfully.

I feast on her chest. Licking and sucking, taking my time as I feel them jump with every single thrust into her warm body

"Hold it." I order, against her skin, pulling out before thrusting back in with one long stroke, "You're not allowed to come yet."

She clenches around me, tightening her body to keep from exploding. I lean up on knees, playing this game with her only because I know I'm close. Making her cum. Edging her, already has me at the end of my rope.

Both hands grab her hips, using them as handles to shove her back and forth on my cock. I look down, watching as I spear into her, in and out. Her slick juices glistening along my shaft as she takes every inch.

"That's it, pretty girl." I hum, pumping my hips faster, listening to her pussy slap against my pelvis, "Does it feel good?"

She nods as she moans, tossing her head back into the pillows. "I love when you use me. Being your pretty little cum slut."

Fuck me.

“God, the way you degrade yourself makes me fucking ache.” I hiss through gritted teeth, giving her a punishing thrust. I keep myself buried inside of her, just rocking my hips.

“Look at you.” I say, peering down at her eyes when they flash to mine. One of my palms lays flat on her stomach, pressing as I pull out and thrust again, feeling my cock shove itself inside of her, “So fucking pretty. You feel me inside your cunt, Hex? Feel her begging for me to fill her up?”

“God, please...please—”

She trashes beneath me, pushing her hips to meet me thrust for thrust as I start to lose myself in her body.

The slick, tight heat that vacuums me back in every time I pull out. Forcing me to come, giving me no choice but to pump her full.

Her pussy is heaven and I’d die a thousands deaths to stay here forever.

The tingle in my balls make me light headed, my grip on her hips tighten, as I use her pussy like my own personal toy.

“Come for me, pretty girl.”

And because she’s so fucking sweet, she does.

“That’s it,” I groan, loosing rhythm of my thrust lost in chasing my climax, “That’s fucking it.”

She clamps around me, shuddering on my length and it’s all I need to shove myself into her one last time before coming.

“Yes, Yes, Yes.” She cries through her orgasm, my hips continuing to fuck my cum into her pussy, letting her ride out the bliss.

My head spins, chest heaving as I twitch inside her. My muscles ache with euphoria, not able to subdue the moans of pleasure that slip from my mouth.

I trail kisses across her chest, working my way up the column of her neck leaning then in my wake as I slowly untie her wrists. When she’s free I take my time worship the raw skin.

“You here with me, Hex?” I murmur against her angry skin. I take my time, massaging her fingers and palms.

She knows what I’m asking. Knows I want to make sure she didn’t slip back to a time before me. A time she wasn’t safe.

Coraline blinks up at me, a soft smile pulling at the edges of her lips as she nods. “Always here with you.”

I let her stretch her arms, moving from between her thighs. But staying in bed with her. Letting my body curl around hers, pulling her into my chest.

My head falls into the crook of her neck.

She's warm and smells like sweat and sex.

Her body sinks into the bed, into my body, as she murmurs, "I'm pregnant."

I peer down at her, "What?"

"I'm pregnant." She grins, hiding her face in my chest, "Found out yesterday morning."

Coraline has given me everything I never thought I would have. A family of my own and love without conditions. I'm in awe of her constantly, her strength and dedication to those in her life. And now she's carrying my child, our babies very first home. What a lucky kid.

I never got to choose Rosemary. Our connection was circumstance, a gift from something beyond us to help us through our pain. That will never take away the love I have for her, because it was real and it saved me. But I never got to make a choice.

From the second I saw her, I chose Coraline. Today, tomorrow, and every day after. I will chose to love her, to give myself to her.

Because it could be no one else but her.

It's us, forever. Inevitable death and all.

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THIRTY-SEVEN

FOREVER STYX

SILAS

FUNERALS MARK the end of life.

It's swift, sharp and no matter how well prepared you were for death to take your loved one, it still hurts. Aches in a way you can never predict and the only bandaid, the only salve that will heal the wound is the one thing you want the least of.

Time.

It's the enemy. The thief. Saltwater over a fresh wound. Until one day it's not. Until one day you look down at the gnarled scar, no longer pink, and you're thankful for how distance from the pain has helped you grow.

"How are you doing, baby?" My mother's hand rests on my shoulder, giving me a gentle squeeze.

Her face is red, stained with tears that will take months to stop. Today, my mother buried her best friend. The person she chose to spend forever with, knowing forever isn't real.

Love is wicked that way. It's all consuming and full of so much hope it makes you believe you can outrun death, that you can catch forever if you hold on tight enough.

"I'm alright, mom." I tell her as we stand adjacent to Scott Hawthornes coffin, "Can you I do anything for you?"

She blinks up at me, batting the tears away with her hand, while she stares at me. I wonder if she's reminiscing on the days of my youth or trying not to break because I look so like my father.

"I'd like you to leave."

My eyes widen, brows furrowed. In my years of living, my mother has never said anything like that to me. I can feel my jaw unhinge as I stare at

her open mouthed.

"What?"

"Not like that, silly boy!" She swats at my arm, like it's obvious what she meant. Like that wasn't the last thing I expected her to say at my father's funeral. "You've stuck around this town for everyone but yourself. It's never been what you wanted or what was good for you. Your father and I knew that, but nothing we would've said would have made you leave. You've found so much here. Ponderosa Springs will forever be apart of you, Silas, but it doesn't have to be forever."

Since I started high school, they've wanted me out of here. Far away from the whispers and rumors. I know it's what they want, what my father would want, I just never got a chance to figure out if it was what I wanted.

It would be easy to say there is nothing but evil that remains in this town. The town that turned me into a villain, a scary story, a monster, but it's not that easy.

This place holds memories that can never be moved. While life may not live on forever, memories do. Ponderosa Springs is a town that is empty yet entirely to full.

Nostalgia of childhood games lingers on the grounds of the Caldwell's family home. Echoes of laughter sit on-top of the high school roof, bloody knuckles and adrenaline find rest at The Graveyard. Victory is at home at every Gaulent and chaos is burned into every street.

Our marks are here, they'll stay here.

We can choose to leave it, but those memories stay with it.

How do you say goodbye to that?

"Dad's company, mom. I can't just pick up and leave after I just settled into the CEO position." I tell her, which is easier than explaining the rest.

"Your father cares more about your happiness than he ever did about that company, Silas. We thought you'd leave after graduation but when Rosemary died your grief kept you rooted here. I've been watching you outgrow this place for years."

But not all memories are good.

There is death that lives here too. Secrets and pain. Lies and unforgivable actions. We will never be able to walk on the grounds of Ponderosa Springs without thinking of the bodies we buried in it. The lives we took and the ones that were taken from us.

The possibility of leaving that behind? That's easy.

Building a life with Coraline that isn't constantly watched or spoken about. Giving my girl the space she needs to heal and grow. Being there to watch what she turns into without the weight of shame on her shoulders.

"I'll think about it, okay?"

"Okay, sweet boy." She murmurs.

I gather my mother in my arms, hugging her small frame tightly to me. There is not guilt in not telling her the truth about my schizophrenia. Not when the truth doesn't matter.

Whether I have it or I don't, it wouldn't change the way she loves me. The way she has always loved me. Belief isn't the validation I need from her. Belief was something I needed from myself.

The truth will only bring guilt and sadness to her life, two things she doesn't need as she embarks on her journey of grief. She'll struggle to forgive herself for trusting a doctor over her own son's words, as if she had a choice. She'll forget how scared she was for me and hate herself for not believing me.

I won't do that to her.

The people in my life who need to know, know.

That's all that matters.

My father's funeral moves forward, just like life. I shake hands to be polite, listening to condolences from people who didn't know him.

When the last person files out of the church, the newly rebuilt St. Gabriels, I'm left alone. Well, for a short moment at least.

The doors to the sanctuary open, and as I look up from my seated place on the steps of the altar, I see Alistair, Rook, and Thatcher make their way inside. Dressed in various suits, and looking much older than I ever remember us being.

It's been six months since the day we stood above an empty grave that stunk of burnt flesh and secrets. All of us dressed to the nines, one of us wearing a wedding dress, a day that supposed to mark the beginning of a new adventure.

It marked the bitter end of our vengeance.

Alistair swore never to come back here, but there was little he wouldn't do for me. He'd swallow stepping foot in Ponderosa Springs if it meant being here to celebrate the life of my father.

"How pissed you think they'd be if I burned this place down a second time?" Rook asks as he slides into one of the pews, tossing his arms behind

his head and making himself at home.

"I have a plane to catch tomorrow, if you end up in jail, you're on your fucking own."

I smirk at Alistair, silently agreeing but also knowing we'd break him out the moment they sealed him inside.

"I'm sick of funerals," Rook mutters, dark sunglasses hiding his eyes, "It's going to be nice waking up tomorrow not worried about one of you being killed."

"Did you just say something I actually agree with?"

"Can we fucking please get rid of American Psycho now?"

Thatcher slides into the pew behind him, leaning forward, "You wish, Van Doren."

It's silent for a moment. Just us existing in the finality that this part of our lives is over. The last enemy chess piece is off the board, and we have total control of the game.

Well, almost all of them, but honestly? My least concern in life is Easton Sinclair. I'm all out of revenge and he gave me an opportunity no one else had.

A chance to say goodbye to Rosemary. A chance to apologize. A chance to let go of my guilt.

So even though he shot me, if I ever see him again? I'll thank him for that and hope Rook isn't close by because he's not as forgiving with Easton as I am.

"Do you guys remember when we were kids and snuck into The Caldwell library at Hollow Heights to set off bottle rockets?" Rook says, making me recall a time when we were much smaller and even more reckless.

"I remember Thatcher throwing you under the bus," Alistair snorts, crossing his arms in front of his chest as he grins, "Even though it was his idea."

"First of all, it was *your* idea, Ali." Thatcher argues, "You were angry at your father, I simply gave you a solution. Don't blame your temper on me."

"I think we've had this argument before." I mutter, "When we were like thirteen in the back of my dad's car."

My father had been the one to pick us up from the dean's office after we'd been caught on camera footage. It was after that I was dedicated to learning how to hack security camera's. No video, no crime.

"I'm not saying I'm going to miss Ponderosa Springs but," Rook pauses, look around at each of us, "This place holds us together, what do we have without it?"

The question echoes with no answer. None of us sure how to respond, because I don't think any of us know. We've just found out we can be different people than this place expected us to be.

"We could buy this place you know." I say abruptly, not sure if I mean it, but I know I don't want to lose them.

Maybe it was my near death experience and the shock to the heart that brought me back, but I'd keep Ponderosa Springs forever, pain and all, if it meant I got to keep the boys.

"What the fuck would we do with a church?"

"I mean Ponderosa Springs." I motion towards them, "Alistair is about to inherit most of the land anyway. We each own a portion of this place, we could buy the rest and split it. We could make it ours."

Could we turn a town of horrors into a home? Or was there too much fucking damage?

"Or we could sell it," Alistair says forcefully, already set in his decision before we take it to a vote, "This town doesn't make us. We make us."

Do we keep the place that made us or sell the place that damned us?

The sanctuary doors open once again but this time it's our better halves. Coraline grins when she sees me, letting go of Sage's hand to make her way down the middle aisle towards me.

I'll never get tired of waiting at the end of the aisle for her. No matter how many times we get married, I'll wait here for her every single time.

I stand up, when she reaches the bottom step, walking down to stand in front of her. My fingers brush her hair behind her ears, thumb tracing her bottom lip.

"Hey, hex."

"Hi, baby." She breathes, wrapping both arms around my waist before leaning up on her tippy toes to peck my lips softly. It's quick, short, my favorite habit of hers.

Everything is my favorite when it comes to Coraline.

"You doing okay?"

I nod, "Better now."

"What were you boys talking about?" Briar asks from next to Alistair, grinning, completely unaware of our potentially life changing conversation.

"Memories." I say simply.

Not a lie. Not the truth.

There were roads of freedom in front of us. Roads where the reputation of the infamous Hollow Boys did not follow. A place where the distant echoes of our tortured past doesn't reach.

We'll forever be the bastard sons of Ponderosa Springs, but we know now, that isn't all we are.

We are more than rage, sin, lineage, and silence.

Alistair Caldwell is more than wrath. He is a fierce protector, an older brother, a shadow that can not exist without a little light.

To know, Rook Van Doren is not internal damnation. It's a blessing to witness his burning, his inferno that consumes and releases the embers of the ones he loves.

And Thatcher Pierson is not an apple fallen from a sinister tree. He's the reminder that our family's history does not determine our future. That love is action and never words.

I am more than words no one believes. I'm a voice to someone who needs it.

We are not unlovable creatures of the night with appetites for violence. There are people, our people, willing to convert to the shadows to show us life beyond vengeance and trauma.

Beyond the flames of our destructive rage, there would forever lay a single thread of obsidian weaving our souls together. It will linger in us as a reminder. That we were once just four boys, little kids who in the darkness of our lives, forged a family out of our despair.

We weren't blood, but that means shit in the grand scheme of it all.

It's easy to love someone who shares your DNA. A true test of unconditional love is who you choose to never give up on, regardless of relation.

That's what we are to one another.

Family.

"Where do we go from here?" Rook asks leaning forward, resting his crossed arms on the pew in front of him.

The fear of parting weighing heavy on his shoulders. I know we'll never leave each other, not really, but the possibility of different futures taking us apart scares me too.

"Wherever the fuck we want." Alistair leans over, ruffles his hair, like he used to when we were younger, "Wherever the fuck we want, Van Doren."

I pull Coraline tighter to my side, pressing my lips to the top of her head, inhaling the smell in her hair. Knowing I have my arms wrapped around the person that I'd give up anything for. Even if she's truly cursed and loving her kills me, I'll die sated.

I'll go with her scent of lavender in my nose, the memory of her touch ingrained in my skin. Full and overflowing with her I'll meet death with a thank you and a favor.

My favor will be this, give my soul a head start next go around. She's stubborn and hard as fuck to catch.

"To the styx?" I offer.

In the dawn of death, with a fresh start on the horizon.

"To the styx."

This is the echo, that is heard across lifetimes.

*The End....or is it?
Swipe to find out.*

Do The Hollow Boys keep Ponderosa Springs or sell? Find out in The River Styx Heathens, The Hollow Boys next generation coming 2024.



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RIVER STYX HEATHENS



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WRATH OF AN EXILE (Book One)

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AFTERWORD

When I was a kid, all I ever wanted was to write stories. I just wanted to pour all my soul into a book and then share it with people, just hoping it would connect with someone. I spent a lot of my middle school years alone, with books as my only company, and now I have all of you. I can't explain how emotional that makes me. That there are people out there who read these words and love them. I cherish each of you more than you'll ever understand. Thank you, for making me not feel alone. Thank you for being my Loner Society, for giving me a home. You will forever have a home in the pages of my books. This book? Silas and Coraline, they were a labour of love. I cried and screamed, writing them, almost pulled all my hair out, and then ate a whole pint of Ben & Jerry's. I adore this couple. I adore this story. Thank you for giving me the space to tell it.

The Hollow Boys was a once in a lifetime experience, it brought me all of you. These boys and their stories are something I will hold close to my heart forever. How is it over? That's crazy! This has been incredible, and I can't wait for our next adventure together.

Now gather around. This is my favorite part. You get to meet all of my favorite people!

Fletcher, always. I know I'm such a pain in the ass on deadlines. Thank you for all the snacks and redbulls.

Hannah and Jess, for letting me cancel on you when I forget I haven't hit my word count for the day and never faulting me for it. For showing up and pulling all nighters. Endlessly thankful for you.

Trilina, Ramz, and Kat. What a trio, what a fucking group. You're my forever circle. I could not have finished this book without your motivation,

inspiration, and laughter. You keep me up when I feel down. There aren't words to express just how thankful I am for you three, but I'll spend forever trying.

Sandy! I love you and I will forever send you Starbucks for putting up with me. Cassie, for creating these incredible covers for this series, you are the fucking best. AJ for killing on formatting as always! To Kelsey and Bri, for being the most amazing hype team!

Last, thank you, little reader. For joining me on these adventures and holding on tight. For being there and supporting me. I can't wait for you to see what I have for you next. You make my dreams come true; ya know?

Oh, and my favorite Hollow Boy? It's Silas. I'm a sucker for a silent killer.

All the love in my dark heart,

MJ

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BOOKS BY MONTY JAY

THE HOLLOW BOYS

The Lies we Steal

The Truths we Burn

The Blood we Crave Duet

The Oath we Give

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STAY CONNECTED

Author of edgy romance about broken heroes and the lovers who help them find their HEA's. Monty

Jay likes to describe herself as a punk rock kid, with the soul of a Wild Child who has a Red Bull addiction. When she isn't writing she can be found reading anything Stephen King, getting a tattoo, or spending time with family.



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