



VILLAINOUS
DELIGHTS

FROM HELL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MALLORY FOX

FROM HELL

VILLAINOUS DELIGHTS BOOK ONE

MALLORY FOX

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FROM HELL

His name is Jack... but I'm the real ripper.

Jaxon Clément knows who I am. Why else would a monster leave petals like breadcrumbs? Send love letters straight from hell? He's stalking me, taunting me, chasing me into the darkness. He knows where I sleep, eat, and even where I live. He's a brilliant surgeon and a billionaire, untouchable in every way, with a soul-sucking gaze and a predatory smile. And he knows my deep, dark secret.

But I won't go softly into the night.

Jaxon might be my weakness with a beautiful face and a divine mission who can cut my heart open with just one look and rip me apart with only a word—but I'm not another of his victims.

I won't fall for his deviant charms.

I'm the real ripper,
and I'm going to make him pay.

FROM HELL
(Villainous Delights BOOK ONE)

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*To my spirit baby.
I can't wait to meet you and love you and bring you into this world.
Mama xxx*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

From Hell is a dark serial killer romance intended for mature audiences. Some scenes contain graphic violence and potentially triggering moments. A list of all triggers can be found at malloryfoxauthor.com on the books page. Please read at your own discretion.

Love & All Things Dark,
Mallory



PROLOGUE

One Year Earlier

A letter from Hell.

It stands out against the white stone–flecked concrete porch steps of my family home, hidden among the spray of blooms. The paper is a thick, creamy white. Bold and beautiful cursive slopes across the front. Just like before...

A letter from my murderer.

My chest tightens, and fear unfurls like a ghost, kissing up my spine and clawing through me until my skin is ice and my vision blurs. Hands shaking, I snatch up the envelope, ripping the end to take in his words—him telling me how special I am.

My heart falters, and spots dance over my eyes.

It's hard to breathe.

I force myself to look past his creepy message and scour for clues, but there's nothing.

Nothing to tell me who he is.

What did I expect? He's always been so careful. Despite feeling luxurious, the paper is a standard bond that's available in any stationery shop. The handwriting has never been a match for any suspect. Even the flowers he leaves give nothing away—a mix of white lilies and red orchids, which are available from any florist. They're laid carefully with no wrapping, and instead have a single brown string that bites into the stems, keeping the bouquet together.

How did he find me?

I scan the neighborhood for any shadows still lurking. Anxiety strokes over every nerve, erupting goosebumps over my bare legs and arms, and even under the summer dress I dragged on this morning. It's an hour past sunrise, the sharp rays of early morning making me squint. My mum is still upstairs in bed, having worked a late shift. Mr. Farris, from two doors down, is stretching, preparing for his before-work jog. Mrs. Coles is collecting her milk bottles from her doorstep. She waves, a smile catching her face when she sees the flowers at my feet. I lift my palm reluctantly, then pull myself together.

I refuse to be a victim any longer.

Plucking the ghastly bouquet from its resting place, I grip it tight, knuckles white against the early morning chill. Then I toss it in the nearest trash can on my way out of the house—much to the horror of Mrs. Coles, but I don't care.

It's tempting to crumple the letter and throw it away, but I won't. I'll keep it and painstakingly compare it to the others, knowing I won't find anything different. Knowing the police can do nothing.

When the first letter arrived, eight years ago, the police were all over it. I wasn't able to look at it properly until they'd processed it in their labs. Now, they hardly care. The case has long grown cold, dead, and buried, feeding worms and weeds, mirroring what my life had become. Even if I were to call them and tell them there's another one, they won't bother to send someone out. Or if they do, it'll be that annoying Detective Carmel and his patronizing sad smile. The police think it's a prank, unrelated to the Ripper since I'm the only one with a serial-killer pen pal.

They don't believe I'm a victim of the Ripper. They ignore the fact that other women were killed around the same time I got the first letter.

The authorities told me that the killer took junkies on the streets, the homeless—the ones that society wouldn't miss. They didn't get letters. They got cold, dark graves instead. The police even asked me what I think makes me so special.

What makes me so special?

I would have agreed with their analysis before I was attacked. I saw the case as just another media-hyped horror story designed to scare us, stopping women from living their lives. Too busy studying for my exams, I didn't pay attention. Until I saw what I shouldn't have seen, and he went after me.

I survived.

I was lucky.

But no one believed me when I said that the Ripper was slaughtering girls for fun, slicing them into pieces just because he could. Taking their organs and carving a calling card onto their skin like a bathroom cubicle wall, wanting everyone to know he'd been there, done that, and got the fucking serial-killer t-shirt.

I am the only survivor. The police swore to protect me, keeping my name out of the papers and watching our London apartment day and night. The newspapers barely mentioned the other brutal murders, however, because of who they were—the lost girls that society wanted to forget. They were just faceless Ripper victims with barely a name and an age in print. I was the only one with a loving home and no drug use. The lack of similarities was ultimately how the police convinced my parents that my case was unrelated; maybe I was attacked by a snubbed ex-boyfriend who took things too far. They didn't want to link my survival to the other killings, even when I shoved the evidence in their faces.

They said the letters were fake.

But they started taking over my life, haunting me into the early grave I'd escaped, suffocating me... until my family moved away to the city, and they stopped.

Or so I thought.

My parents told me there were no more. They told me it was over. But it's not. He's still out there, looking for me, waiting for me. I can only imagine he does this to piss me off. To taunt me. His way of telling me he's still there... untouchable. I'm just glad Mum didn't find it. It's why I always wake up early and can't sleep. It was only a matter of time before he found me.

Watching, stalking.

But I'm not his prey anymore; I'm his retribution.

And I'm going to make him pay.

MY HAND CLAMPS AROUND MY PHONE IN MY COAT POCKET. PULLING IT OUT, I scroll through my contacts list, my heart beating wildly and echoing loudly in my ears, until I get to N—Nola's number. It stares back at me, daring me to

call it. She gave it to me in case I changed my mind... if life ever became too much after what happened.

Well, it became too much.

On the table is his last letter, crumpled from my hands and wet with angry tears. The server in the café is on her knees, picking up the remnants of my coffee cup that I hurled angrily against the wall. Occasionally, she gives me a shitty look, even though I apologized several times and offered to pay the cost of a replacement mug.

At least they haven't kicked me out yet.

Without another doubt, I press the dial button and hold the receiver to my ear.

"Hello," Nola pants down the line, sounding out of breath. There's a loud noise in the background, like heavy machinery. It jolts me for a second. I don't actually know what Nola does for a living. She never divulged the information, and I never asked. I don't even know her last name.

My voice falters, unable to form the words. Is bringing a stranger into this the best thing to do?

"Laine? Is that you?"

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I bring myself back to the world of the living. Fuck it. You only live once, and those girls he slaughtered didn't even get to do that. I let out a breath. "Yes, it's me. I'm in."

There's a long pause, enough to make me think she's hung up. And then, "Sage didn't think you'd have the balls."

I grit my teeth, offended by her admission. Sage is a twig of a girl. During our group talks at Stronger Together, I always thought it would take just one powerful gust of wind to snap her in half. Nola was the one I would never want to meet in a dark alley. It's her presence, and her scars if I'm honest. Not her missing eye—though the first time I saw Nola in the churchyard before my very first meeting, without an eyepatch, she scared the bejesus out of me. Now it's just part of who she is. "Just tell me where we're meeting."

"Tonight, at the old Bermondsey Brewery."

The other side of town. "I'll be there."

"As long as you know if you turn up, there's no going back."

My stomach twists. Sorrow and regret, mixed with anticipation, slash at my insides, cutting me open as the memories wash over me.

"I know," I say. Inside my head, I silently vow to see this through to the end. There's no going back. I'll bury the man who hurt me and the ones who

murdered those girls, and send them back to fucking Hell.
I just can't do it alone.

LAINE

I see him appear at the crowded bar entrance out of the corner of my eye—immaculate hair, shark-white teeth, eyes darker than his blazer. His jaw tightens, and his body stiffens when he looks around. From his face, he hates the establishment; it's not his usual members-only club. It's too common. Too crowded.

I suggested we meet here. Not me, per se. It was easy enough to get him to do anything I wanted while pretending to be a runway model on Tinder looking for a hookup. He has no idea who I am or that he's being catfished.

I stay hidden as he pushes inside, butting between bodies. When he nears the bar, I pick my bag up off the seat next to me to settle it on the back of my bar chair, and then I angle myself sideways, nose stuck in my book as I casually make room for him. He takes the bait and parks himself beside me.

A thrill sparks in the base of my stomach as I try to focus on the words in the paperback I picked up earlier in the bookstore across the road. Two men of the five I'm hunting are dead. This will be the third. I'm nearly halfway there.

The first time was a fluke. The second time was pure luck. This time, I've made better choices. I'm prepared. I'm getting better. Stronger. Faster. I'm getting confident, but I can't let that lull me into a false sense of security. Luck does, however, come in threes.

Three for a girl. Third time lucky. Three is the sacred number.

His manicured hand, adorned with a university signet ring on his pinkie finger, rests on the wood surface, tapping irritatingly as he hollers at the

bartender. His suffocatingly expensive cologne reeks of cinnamon and polished leather, and his outfit—tailored jacket, pressed chinos, and glittery wristwatch—screams disgustingly rich. I know firsthand how wealthy he is and how far his family’s reach goes, so far as having ties with London’s crime families. It’s why he’s Scotland Yard’s primary suspect in several rapes and missing persons investigations, yet walks around free as a bird. The police can’t get near him, let alone touch him.

My stomach tightens as I turn the page and finish my drink while he gestures futilely at the bartender. Earlier, I slipped each staff member a twenty with a picture of him, asking them nicely not to serve my friend’s abusive ex if he came in.

The barman finally clocks him and promptly ignores him. He looks at me as I raise my hand, peering over the edge of my book. He saunters over to serve me instead. “What can I get you, love?”

“Are you fucking kidding me? I’m waiting here,” my target huffs.

The barman, a big fellow with tattoos for days and a steel bar slicing straight through his tongue, raises a brow. “And you can wait until I’ve finished serving the lady here.”

I shake my head, playing my part. “It’s okay, Lance.” I’ve been here since mid-afternoon, so by now I know that Lance is twenty-eight, divorced, and has two adorable girls. We bonded over women’s soccer and broken hearts.

Gagging internally at the cloud of cologne in the air, I turn to the man I’ve never met but hate more than life itself—my prey—and offer him a tight smile. “Or I could just get you a drink. What are you having?”

Henry Barnaby Wickham III eyes me with his dark, wandering eyes, revulsion shuddering through my frame as he does. I’m not his date, or at least I’m not the blonde Scandinavian with the perky tits from the pictures I used to lure him here. He looks around, scanning the bar for anyone who resembles her. When he fails, he sneers in disgust at my choice of light reading: a crime thriller with daggers and chess pieces on the cover. “I’m waiting for someone,” he says bluntly.

I shrug, letting nonchalance exude with a thin-lipped smile. I close my book and slip it into my bag. “So am I. Keep each other company while we do?”

His eyes lose their hostile look, and he mimics my body language. “Fine. A beer would be fucking perfect right now.”

“Lance? Can you get—”

“Henry,” he interrupts.

I flash him a smile, then look back at Lance. “Can you get Henry a beer, please?”

“Make that two; I’m parched. Just come off from a twenty-four-hour shift at the hospital.” He glances down his nose at me. “I’m a surgeon,” he adds, attempting to impress me.

Lance gives me a look like he wants to take Henry outside and beat the crap out of him. I suppress a similar look and hold up two fingers. “Then a couple of beers for the good doctor, please, Lance.”

Lance arches a brow, but fetches the beer. “Hope you know what you’re doing, love,” he mutters as he pours three pints and places the beer glasses—plastic by the looks of it; it’s that kind of place—on the bar top.

I hope so too. This is my second attempt because I didn’t manage to take him out the first time. I got the location all wrong—too many people around.

Nola thinks the guilt is eating away at me, that my nerves got in the way. Sage doesn’t have an opinion because she’s too wrapped up in her own problems for me to lay mine on her. But she has my back if I need her. Both of them do.

With the girls behind me, I’ll never be a victim again.

My heart seizes in my chest. As if sensing my doubt, my phone vibrates in my lap, and *Maneater* by Nelly Furtado blares above the din. It seemed an appropriate ringtone for Nola when I chose it, but now I’m not so sure.

Henry grimaces at the sound of *You wish you never ever met her at all*, on repeat, so I silence the call without looking at the screen. I’ll ring her later.

I keep my eyes firmly on him, like you would a tiger that escaped the zoo. No, not a tiger. Something uglier. Tigers are stunning creatures. Henry Barnaby Wickham is a disease-ridden fungus. He doesn’t deserve to slime his way over this earth.

“Fucking bitch,” Henry mutters as he swipes through his phone messages. He’s sent Taylor, my fake online dating persona, quite a few. Scowling, he slams his phone onto the bar and snatches up his beer, downing half the liquid in one swig.

I swallow too, gathering every ounce of courage for what I’m about to do.

“Stood up?” I ask smoothly, even though my insides twist with anticipation.

He snorts, rolling his eyes at me. “Of course not. She’s just annoyingly late.”

“Women will do that.”

“She could have picked someplace less trashy if she was going to make me wait,” he spits out, earning a dark look from Lance.

Henry finishes his beer and starts on the second, gulping it down like a fish. I nod sympathetically and ask him a few more questions about his job, since he casually dropped it in the conversation. He doesn’t ask me about myself—like a typical, arrogant cockhead—and I offer nothing up because it would be lies, and I suck at lying. I can make them up; I’m just not great at keeping them straight.

He doesn’t remember me, and that’s enough. *They never do.*

Maybe it’s the wig and the contacts.

“Rita? Do you want anything else?” Lance asks while wiping the bar down with a cloth, the muscle in his jaw ticcing when he glances at Henry.

It takes me a second to realize Lance is talking to me, using the fake name I gave him earlier. “No, I’m good. Thank you,” I say, flustered.

See? I’m useless at this undercover stuff.

“...he your boyfriend?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Henry tilts his head at Lance as the barman walks away. “Is he your boyfriend?”

“No.” I force my lips to curl up, then take off my glasses. I make a show of rubbing the bridge of my nose before looking at Henry. I’m not a model, but I have an endearing smile and eyes that are *so darn blue* when in the right light. My mother used to say I would charm the cats from the jungle with them, even though their unique color is because of a rare eye condition I inherited from Dad.

If I could flutter my blue eyes at Henry now, I would, but I’ll have to settle for the brown contacts I have in.

When I have his full attention, I undo the clamp in my hair, letting loose the blonde waves of my wig to tumble around my face, and then shrug out of my cardigan. I’m wearing a lacy corset dress I borrowed from Sage that gives me ample cleavage.

Henry’s dark gaze roams over me, taking me in from top to toe, and then he smirks. It makes him somewhat attractive. I can see why the girls fall for him, if it weren’t for the predatory edge.

“Want to get out of this shithole?”

I raise my brows. “And go where?”

“Ever been to Berners House?”

Yes.

I shake my head. He smirks, pausing for effect like a wanker. “Well, you’re in luck. I’m a member.”

I pretend to look impressed. “What about your date?”

“Fuck her,” he drawls. “I’d rather do you.”

Charming. Irritation boils beneath my skin, but I keep my smile in place. This guy is unreal. “I like this place.” The truth slips easily off my tongue. Berners House is a swanky, exclusive clubhouse that anyone who is anyone would give their left arm to get into. His latest victim did one extra; she gave her life.

And the last time I was there, I nearly did too.

Every swallow is hard as a familiar stab rips through my heart. It happens whenever I think about what this bastard and his friends did and got away with....

What they’re still getting away with.

I need to be careful here.

With a tight chest as fear grips my body, turning it to stone, I give him a winning smile. “How about we go back to my place?”

Henry seems to mull over my suggestion, gulping down the last of his beer. “Why not? First, I need to take a piss. Order me another and don’t go anywhere.” He deserves to die just for being a prick. I can’t help but roll my eyes as he saunters off, disappearing around the corner.

Once he’s gone, I order him another beer from Lance. It’s only then that my heart kicks up a notch, somersaulting in my chest as I look around. No one is watching, and I don’t have much time.

It’s now or never.

Leaning forward, I cover what I’m doing with my body. I quickly take a packet from my pocket and add a powder to the drink I just bought—a mild sedative. It’s more of a relaxant, really; I don’t want him to pass out. Then I stir it with a straw from one of the dispensers on the bar and shove the empty packet in my pocket with one hand, running my fingers through my hair with the other.

A feeling of being watched slides up my spine.

The sensation is followed by mild panic.

I shoot my gaze around the bar, checking my surroundings. Everyone is wrapped up in their own boozy night out, and Lance is busy serving punters at the end of the bar. No one saw.

Letting out a breath, my pulse settles to its familiar thud in my neck, and I swallow the anxiety lodged in the back of my throat.

I've always been a good girl, so breaking the law will forever feel alien to me. Just because I'm new to being bad, though, doesn't mean I'm an idiot. I've done my research. I chose this place because I know the cameras *break down* when the cops come around. So as long as no one recognizes me or notices what I just did, all is fine.

Catching my reflection in a mirror, I'm red-faced and flustered, the heat beneath my cheeks burning them bright to kingdom come. It could be the good old Asian glow I've inherited from my mother—one glass of wine is all it takes—or it could be the result of putting my hand in the cookie jar.

Then I remember Nola's call. I open my phone and see she's sent me a message with a link to a news article. Without thinking, I click to open it.

"I'm standing outside the abandoned warehouse where the killer has struck again. The mutilated body of a young female found this morning has yet to be identified..."

It's a video, not an article.

Quickly, I mute it before the sound attracts attention. There's been another murder on the outskirts of the city. It's the same modus operandi as the killings in West London—body naked and bound, tortured, abused, organs missing, fingers burned off, and reproductive parts mutilated. It's him, the Ripper. He's back. It's not a copycat like the police seem to think. Just the thought of him preying on her has ice running through my veins, so cold it burns everything else away.

He likes to put his victims through hell before he puts them out of their misery by slitting their throats open. He rapes and tortures them first, mutilating them beyond recognition. Anger flares in my chest. I hate feeling out of my depth and right now, it's like I'm drowning.

But this is how I know what I'm doing is the right thing.

Taking down evil is a worthy cause.

Starting with the men I'm stalking.

Swiping my tongue over my dry lips, I pick up my glass of water from the bar, taking a cold sip to chase away the acidic taste building in my mouth.

“How about we just go back to my place?” Henry’s grating voice comes out of nowhere as heavy hands land on my shoulders, massaging them and making me jump in my seat.

I let out a breath.

Focus.

“I’ve got champagne chilling in the fridge,” Henry adds, his breath hot on my neck as he leans close.

My body instinctively curls in on itself. Ducking out of his grasp, I swivel in the chair so I’m facing Henry instead of having him at my unprotected back. I give him a wide smile, lashes all aflutter. “I’d rather go back to mine.”

When he isn’t convinced, I hesitate, but only for a beat. Then I’m straightening my spine, pulling my shoulders back, and brushing off any lingering dread ghosting over me. I uncross my legs so his gaze is obliged to slide to my amped-up cleavage, then down to my exposed thighs. It’s a move I learned from my favorite femme fatale movie, but it never fails to work.

Henry’s eyes gradually glaze over as he devours me with his gaze. Then he leans in, close enough to overpower me with his cloying, spicy aftershave. In one beast-like motion, he gropes my leg, palm squeezing all the way to my crotch like he owns the flesh beneath it. Disgust rises in my stomach like bile. I clamp my legs closed, but I’m not quick enough. The tips of his fingers probe the silken strip of my panties before I can stop him.

“Not here,” I rush out, cheeks hot to the touch.

Henry lets out a nasty chuckle, rubbing up and down my thighs. “That’s quite a grip. Is your pussy just as tight?”

My stomach churns.

If he were any other guy, I would punch his damn lights out and tell him to go fuck himself. But I can’t do that to him. I have to do this for the girls he hurts in cold blood. For me, even though he wasn’t the one who dragged me backward into the courtyard’s canopy of trees, hand over my mouth so I couldn’t scream. Who slashed at my neck with a knife...

He’s not the Ripper. Only God knows who the Ripper is, and He’s not talking to me since I cheated death.

But Henry is still a monster. He still hurts and abuses women, and gets away with it. And somehow, both the Ripper and Henry are connected to Berners House. I know it, even if the police don’t.

I *have* to do this. No one else will.

Jessy Burman, Holly Finsbrook, Dina Martin, Lydia Miles, Cathy Black... and Molly Hathaway. I repeat the names of the most recent missing or assaulted girls Henry and his friends are blamed for like a mantra in my head, as I do every day—a stark reminder that I have no choice but to do this. Molly was my friend, and I brought her to that frat party at Berners House. It's my fault she's missing, presumed dead.

Keeping my legs glued together as much as possible, I curl my lips, giving him a cool smile. I say nothing. If I open my mouth to speak, whatever comes out won't be nice.

Henry grins, taking my silence for acceptance. He then motions to the barman with his other hand, beckoning him over like you would a child. Lance looks fit to explode.

“A bottle of champagne from your top shelf for the road,” Henry calls out, oblivious to the death stare he's getting.

Lance scowls and strolls over slowly, taking his time approaching us from the other end of the bar. I can't help but stiffen. I don't want or need an audience for some dickhead pawing me like he has a right to, especially when Henry turns and grins, squeezing my thigh until it hurts. “You'd better fucking put out after this.”

And you'd better die quietly.

Henry moves to pay for the bottle as Lance delivers it. I shift out of his reach at the first opportunity, recrossing my legs. I'm flustered, but trying hard to be as calm as possible. It helps when Lance tops up my drink. Even though Henry keeps trying to jam his hands between my legs between mouthfuls of his beer. At least he's distracted enough not to notice if his beer tastes any different. It shouldn't, though.

The effect doesn't take long.

When Henry can just barely stand, I lean into his body. “Ready to go back to mine?” I purr. “My car is out back.”

“It better not be a fucking shit wagon,” he slurs.

I say nothing as I slip off my stool, a pasted smile on my face. “This way,” I direct, leading him through the throng of bankers getting blind drunk and propping him up like he's had too many. No one bats an eye in our direction.

I coax a drunk and drugged Henry into the passenger seat, waiting until he passes out to drive. Once we are out of view of the bar, I kick off my impossibly high heels and drag the itchy wig off my head.

Then I'm gone like a mirage, taking monster number three off somewhere to die.

JAXON

She caught my eye when I noticed her hunting the same ground as me.

I've been watching her all night. She moves like a fox in the grass, quick and cunning, undoing her hair clamp and taking off her cardigan to reveal her tight, lacy dress. He's annoyed, but then with one look at her curves, one touch of her arm on his, and she's caught him.

Another victim, he thinks... until she runs her gaze over him. There's a satisfying, bone-chilling moment when her face changes, switching from innocence to sadistic hate in the blink of an eye. He doesn't see it, but it leaves me breathless.

Her demeanor may be sweet and alluring, cheeks blooming with blush, but her eyes sparkle with rage. She's enjoying the thrill of the chase, even if she's disgusted by it. This one won't end up broken and abused in some back alley. This one isn't a victim, even though her emotions scream loud and all over the place—a choppy, messy storm beneath a peaceful, serene vista.

Does she know what he is, what he does to women? I think so. I've been watching her for a while, and though she's not his type—but she's most definitely mine—her noose has tightened with every sly look and sigh from her lips, ensnaring him like a fly. But to what end?

I sit back down and order a double whiskey.

And watch.

And wait.

This should be interesting.

When I followed Henry, it did not surprise me when his cab pulled up

here. He may be a member of Berners House and prefer the high-class bars and exclusive nightclubs, but his tastes run darker, seedier. I've been stalking him for a while for the Archkey; they keep track of their own. He usually finds some desperate girl with tracks in her arms to dominate and force himself upon behind a club or even in a motel, beating her half to death and leaving her bruised and bloodied. Or worse, dead.

Whether he kills her or not depends on his mood. Henry is an emotional monster, but not a stupid one. He goes for women who have nothing to lose or who won't be missed. Women who won't report him if they survive the night.

He's not an efficient killer.

He's a tiresome beast I have to babysit when I should be putting him out of his fucking misery. He's left too many loose ends lately, which is why I'm here—to make sure his extracurricular activities go unnoticed, or at least blamed on someone else.

So, what is he doing with a woman with perfectly styled hair and brows, manicured nails, and fox-like eyes that are brimming with malice and hatred, like fire-kissed amber gems?

I watch her work him, almost clumsily. She's new at this, relying on her charms. A soft, pink tongue teases the sounds over pretty rosebud lips. Delicate curls bounce over her shoulder with one flick of her dainty wrist. He tries to touch her occasionally, but each time she slides out of reach, a slight shudder quivering through her body when he's not looking.

She even slips something into his drink.

So that's how you do it.

Fuck, she's delightful to watch. Familiar, somehow. The kitten has intrigued me. I should order a snack for the delectable show I get to enjoy. Where's the popcorn when you need it?

Downing my drink in one chug, enjoying the burn of cheap whiskey against the back of my throat, I slip off my stool and head off into the night. Outside, the air is balmy, despite the cool, leafy surroundings. I watch as sweet vixen frowns at her phone through the glass, confusion marring her pretty brow.

She would be fun to hunt. And kill. I can taste it in the air.

Now is not the time.

Taking out my phone to dial Shepherd—my father's rottweiler, who calls the shots for the Archkey when acolytes get out of line—I turn and walk

away. I step into the shadows, out of view of the glaring parking lot lights and lone CCTV camera the club owner never bothers to switch on.

Buck's Nightclub, with its ugly red brick and glass windows, sits squat like a toad in the middle of Buck's Wood—a lonely strip of green beyond the old city walls of London Town. Behind it sits an abandoned railway line and miles of marshy woodland. It's the perfect place to kill someone, and even to dispose of a body. Henry only comes here once a month, when his itch is too much not to scratch. An easy job, if I'm honest. I'm pissed that my hands are tied.

"Jaxon," Shepherd says gruffly down the secure line, his family having dinner in the background. "Hold the line." There's the sound of him leaving to go to another room. "Right. Go ahead."

"I followed Henry Wickham, like you asked," I say calmly, keeping annoyance from my tone. I've been back less than a week and already, he has me doing his dirty work. I glance back through the club window at Henry. He has my vixen trapped against the bar, his hands all over her. Red flashes before my eyes until I get a handle on it. "He's out hunting."

"He's killed again?"

"About to."

He sighs. "Fuck. Alright. Bring him in."

"What about her?"

"Take care of it, as usual."

I pause before disconnecting the line, the edge of my teeth running over my lower lip as I contemplate what to do. I'm not a blind soldier doing whatever Shepherd wants. Henry is perverse in his tastes, so much so that his late-night activities have attracted unwanted attention, and I've been asked to follow and neutralize his urges. Bringing Henry in will be nothing but a ball ache. The easiest solution would be to kill them both and then go home since I've got an early start tomorrow. She'll be dead by sunrise, anyway. Putting my vixen out of her misery would be kindness. Killing Henry, despite orders, would be pure fucking pleasure.

Unfortunately, he's not to be touched. Shepherd may tell me what to do, but it's the Archkey I answer to.

Glancing at my watch, I mentally calculate the hours until I return to work. I have fourteen hours before the start of my shift, and I need to eat, sleep, and finish some paperwork during that period. Cleaning up this mess the right way is doable. Tight, but doable.

Fuck it. If he tries anything, he's dead.

I get as far as pushing the door to the bar open when I notice the mysterious girl is gone, and Henry is no longer inside. No one left while I was talking to Shepherd, and Henry's car is where he parked it, hanging off the curb.

Where did she go?

Fury coils in my chest. If he so much as touched her...

Then I see her drive past in a shitty BMW with Henry slumped forward in the passenger seat, out cold. I quickly retrieve my car and catch her at the lights. She's driving slowly along the lanes until she gets to a deserted cemetery. I park on the road, waiting and watching as she gets out to open the gates before driving through.

It's not hard to follow her. Pulling over beyond the gates, I continue on foot up the side pathway, close to the surrounding woods. There's nothing but the sound of trees rustling, and the threat of rain... but something feels off. Like a storm about to hit, there's a stillness in the air. And that's when I hear the scuffle, a sharp gasp, and a muffled, gurgling moan. Tree branches carve out parts of the path, making shadows and obscuring her car in the darkness under a crop of trees.

Her figure is outlined in the moonlight.

The other is a crumpled heap on the ground.

I creep closer. She's panting, her chest rising and falling sharply. Her lips are parted, and her eyes are narrowed to slits. She's barefoot, and her hair wild, darker, more lustrous in the moonlight. She must have been wearing a wig earlier. There's blood spattered on her cheek. Following the trail, I also notice the substance is coating her arm and hand, which is holding a knife. The other hand is clutching the other like it's been injured. The electric pulse that made me pay attention to her in the first place returns, jolting down my spine and thickening my cock.

Fuck. I let out a dry chuckle—she's killed him for me.

What will she do next?

I pause, hidden in the foliage, taking in her wicked silhouette. Raven hair and full lips painted jezebel red—or is it blood?—she stands over the limp form of a body on the ground, spattered with gore. She doesn't move for half a minute, so I stay where I am. My little murderess will have to drag the body away from the path at some point; the place where she killed him is the worst she could have picked, but she does nothing but stare.

You're doing it wrong.

Then, my sweet psycho bites her bottom lip, a frown forming on her brow like she's only just seen the dead man for the first time, and stumbles back. A sigh taints my breath as she keels at the waist and vomits.

Fuck, that's disgusting.

I should make my move right now and get rid of her—knock her out and take her somewhere more private to deal with. But I'm curious to see if she can handle herself better than this.

Minutes tick by, and I don't move. I stay hidden in the dark, watching until she finally pulls herself together and drags the body from the pathway and into the open. The ground is soft from the light smattering of rain, so she can move him, if a little slowly. Twice she trips over the tangled undergrowth, and each time I have to steel myself from striding into view, grabbing his ankles, and moving him for her.

Not because I want to help, but because it's fucking painful to watch.

In the end, she dumps him in an open grave. I watch with thinly veiled excitement as she covers his body with the loose soil. I'll admit, it's interesting to put a dead body where they're supposed to be. Then she goes back and retrieves the murder weapon where she left it.

Now get rid of the weapon.

But she doesn't; she holds on to it.

Caked in dirt with her dark hair plastered to her pale face, my little murderess exhales a long breath before leaning against the nearest tree. The sky chooses this moment to open up, and rain pours from it. She closes her eyes and tips her head back, wet lashes clinging to her damp cheeks as the water pelts down like a mini typhoon, plastering her hair and clothes to her alabaster skin. She's lucky. The weather will wash away any blood from her body, the evidence of where she killed him, and the vomit in the bushes that she's just plain fucking ignored.

I'm not so lucky. The rain is going to make my job of cleaning up after her harder.

Not to mention, this is a new fucking jacket.

I make the mistake of shifting my weight, causing a twig to snap. Her head jerks up and she stares into the darkness, almost looking right at me. Lightning illuminates the sky behind her at that very moment, and I swear our eyes meet.

My heart races like I've snorted a bucket of cocaine.

I don't move. I know she sees me, but I also know the shadows make it difficult to really see anything in this place. Her brow furrows before she takes a few steps in my direction, fist curled around her weapon and eyes wild with pure terror.

Fucking beautiful.

Energy pricks at my insides, almost like a thunderstorm of our own as something intangible connects us as one, an invisible cord pulling her straight to me. I can't help the smile on my lips.

She's drawn to me.

Suddenly, my body turns hot. Anger and frustration tear through my mind, accompanied by a pounding explosion behind my temples. It always begins with a headache.

I feel myself stepping toward her, the urge to do dark, terrible things to my murderess clawing at the corners of my mind. *How nice would it be to see what her insides looked like?*

No. With my fists curled tight and jaw locked, I manage to stop myself.

I'm in control.

Slowly but surely, the anger dissipates until everything is the way it should be. My sweet psycho takes another step, but then thunder rolls, making her slip in the mud and allowing me to pull back into the darkness. When she looks my way again, I've vanished. She wipes the water from her eyes and gets to her feet. I watch her looking for me for at least a minute before she calls it a night as her survival instincts kick in.

Good girl. Go home.

She slowly makes her way back to the parking lot, the edge of her skirt gathered to stop it from dragging in the dirt. I pace after her. Every so often, she turns to glance sharply over her shoulder. She doesn't see me, but she senses something... Clever girl. Good instincts. She'd make the perfect killer if she did the job properly, but no one has taught her—that much is obvious. Her valiant slash to the neck wasn't deep enough. Which she would have realized if she had bothered to check his pulse.

The thought of teaching her how to end a life the right way gives me a thrill, one that makes the blood rush to my cock. Stalking her would just be as addictive. But I should save those desires for another day.

I need to wipe Henry from the face of the fucking Earth.

As she drives off, I mentally take down her license plate. The adrenaline of the hunt rushes through my veins, and I know that whatever I decide to do

with my new vixen, I'm going to damn well enjoy it.

The rain is torrential by the time I get back to my car. I drive to the dirt road that leads into the thick of the cemetery and park. Slick mud coats the pathway that meanders into the trees. It's the closest I can get by car, but it will still be at least a five-minute walk to get to where my little fox stashed Henry's body. This is not what I want to be doing with my fucking Friday night, but here we are.

I shrug out of my jacket and fold it neatly on the passenger seat, then take my time rolling up my sleeves. In the footwell is a new pair of walking boots—a cheap brand like nothing I have at home. I slip out of my leather brogues to put them on before getting out of the car, ignoring the rain lashing in my face. I'd already prepared the trunk with a plastic tarp, ready to clean up after Henry. How ironic it's going to be used for Henry himself.

It takes over an hour to move him to the trunk and erase every trace of evidence she left behind—bare footprints, blood, the contents of her stomach that both she and the rain missed, not to mention Henry's car. I wouldn't want her getting caught. I also take time to cover my own tracks from when I was following her. It's another hour to dump Henry where I want him. By the time I'm finished, I'm covered in mud and my clothes are soaked, plastered to my skin. But there's a dark smile on my face that I can't seem to wipe off.

I love that she's a psycho.

I've found myself a twisted little soulmate.

3

LAINE

A rustle in the trees has my breathing racketing up a notch.

Get it together, Laine. Anyone could walk in on you right now. In response, my pulse thuds wildly in my ears, and I bite my bottom lip as I play back what my plan was through my mind. I can't for the life of me remember.

Move the body.

Clear away the evidence.

It's raining—light drizzle that has turned into a downpour. Wiping the moisture out of my eyes, I drag him from behind the trees. He's heavier than I thought he would be, so I grab him by the ankles and heave with all my might, then roll the body into the open grave. By the time I'm finished, I'm panting. Blood is pouring from the stinging cut on my arm, and sweat is rolling down my face, mixing with the blood—his and mine. I felt it spray hot across my skin as I gutted him like a pig. Just the thought of it makes me anxious. I'm the worst murderer in the world. I must be. What if I get hepatitis or some other bodily fluid-transmitted disease?

I'm going to need some shots after this.

Once he's hidden from view, I carefully arrange some of the foliage to conceal the burial site before returning to the scene to check that I haven't missed anything. The rain has washed away most of the evidence, rendering it just like any other woodland path. Even though I'm a mess now and I've been planning this for weeks, luckily, there's a storm tonight to help me conceal everything. I can only hope it's enough.

A twig snaps, and suddenly, I'm on high alert.

I scan the trees, but all I see are dark shadows until lightning zaps across the indigo sky, irradiating everything.

A lone figure stands under the trees.

My heart seizes in my chest, nausea surging through my insides like a sickly poison. I forget to breathe. I forget to do anything until the adrenaline in my veins kicks in and I step toward the intruder, gripping the hilt of the knife so hard it digs into my palm. My nerves are shot, and fear has taken residence in my chest like an unwanted squatter. The scar across my throat aches as a dull reminder, chasing away whatever voice I had.

I'll never be a victim again.

Fate must laugh at me because I slip and crash, a tangle of limbs I can't control that is lost in the cold mud as the thunder bellows. My gaze wavers for a split second, and when I look back up, the phantom figure is gone.

Dread twists in my stomach as I try to pierce the pitch black with nothing but my eyes. Was there anyone there, or was I seeing things?

I feel lightheaded, and my breath is coming in short pants. I clench my fists, briefly closing my eyes to ride the dizziness assaulting me. Either the blood is making me nauseous or I have a panic attack coming on. Now is not the time to be losing it. Breathing slowly and deeply, I haul humid air into my lungs and let it out slowly through pursed lips. Taking deep breaths is the only thing I can do, but as I blink, stars collide in my vision and make the world spin and tilt.

Getting to my feet, I realize that I still have the murder weapon in my hand. I wash the blade off in a puddle, then wrap it in a tissue and bury it in my pocket. I'll have to get rid of it later; right now, I should go home and put as many miles as possible between the dead man in the grave and me.

Half blinded by the rain, I traipse toward my car, careful not to run or draw attention to myself. Even without my heels, I slide all over the place. It's a miracle I make it to my car without falling over again. Every so often, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and I jerk my head around to look over my shoulder at the phantom I can feel following me.

Every nerve is screaming that he's here, and he's after me.

Nine years ago, when my would-be killer slashed at my throat with a thin blade and left me for dead, I only lived because someone disturbed him and found me in a ditch, clinging to dead leaves and gutter trash while barely breathing.

I still have nightmares.

But this is not one of those, and my almost killer isn't stalking me in a dream world. The only good thing is that he doesn't know who I am. The police assured me he wouldn't come after me to finish the job if I changed my name and moved away.

For years, I've lived in fear he would.

However, I survived the Ripper of West London and lived to tell the tale. Few can say that. No one can but me, actually, even if I feel I'm already on the other side of death's door. But that was before I became what I am now. Before he sent me more letters. Before I let the darkness in and became just like him—a monster.

If he's here, watching me... Let him come.

After my third kill...

I'm ready.

RIPPER

I watch her shrouded by darkness and flashes of light. My keeper is right—she's exquisite. I know as soon as she kills the man she lured here, carving up his flesh, bathing in his blood...

I want her.

But Mr. Uptight is in control tonight. He calls the shots. He may not know I'm here, watching and stalking her too. But he doesn't have to be aware to keep me on a leash. Sometimes, I creep around the edges of his vision, sliding into shadows he can't comprehend, but I always fall in line. What other choice do I have?

Her eyes connect with mine across the murky landscape. *Those eyes.* I've seen that fear before, tasted it with my blade. A smile slices across my lips. For a second, I can feel the rain on my skin and smell the musty earth beneath my feet. I take a step toward her just as she stumbles toward me like a marionette on a string.

But then I stop, unable to reach across the darkness and snuff her out. His orders are absolute. His control over me is as strong as iron. Frustration brews, a ball of fury in the pit of my stomach.

Fucking why?

But I know why. Mr. Uptight is going to have to clean up the mess she made. Let him. I fucking hate it. Why bother? The beauty is in the destruction of perfection and the delightful way my victim's flesh parts, like a symphony of carnage. At least I get to be the bloody conductor when he's too uptight to let go.

Soon, it'll be my turn to take control.
And when I do...
She'll be my next victim.

LAINE

His black eyes suddenly, intrusively, connect with mine, and the feeling of being truly and utterly seen slinks through me and down my spine. The longer I stare, the hotter I become and the darker his gaze gets—two bottomless pits swirling with something evil, unfathomable.

It taints and twists his aura, making my skin break out into goosebumps and my mouth turn dry. Adrenaline sizzles in a rush underneath my skin.

I can't look away...

Panting, I wake up, tangled in sheets.

There's a tepid glass of water beside the bed, so I sip it slowly while the rain outside thunders on my thatched roof, and the nightmare melts away.

Another twisted dream about my would-be killer. This time, it was brought on by the uneasy feeling of being watched tonight. It seemed like someone was there, standing in the shadows.

Despite the weather, I heave open my window, careful not to disturb the spider's web outside it. Frigid air, laden with moisture, hits me in the face, plastering my hair to my forehead as I look out. Street lamps give the wet streets a hazy glow. The jagged wound on my arm throbs with the effort of opening the window. Glancing down at it, I see that the bandage I wrapped around it before I went to bed is soaked through, bright red blooming across the fabric. I'm going to need painkillers and stitches, in that order.

I'm deathly pale when I glance at myself in the bathroom mirror before splashing cold water on my face. I look like a ghost. There aren't enough strong painkillers left or anything to help me sleep in the medicine cabinet

hidden behind the mirror, so I'm going to have to get some more.

I grit my teeth with a sigh.

At least I'm already awake.

KNOWING ME AND MY SPORADIC VISITS, THE NIGHT RECEPTIONIST WAVES ME into the private hospital where my mother works. After that, I'm in luck. She's not in her office at this ungodly hour, so it's easy to let myself in using the spare keys I swiped a few months ago and help myself to whatever medication I need.

The locked drawer in her desk is the first place I look. I keep the lights off, so I'm unable to immediately see what the bottles rattling around contain as I drag it open. In the dimness of the exterior light shining through the door window, after squinting and frowning at the various labels, I can see they're not what she takes to help her sleep. From my limited knowledge, these are stronger... more addictive.

I should speak to her about it, but my mother's been my private, personal drugstore since I was a teenager. She likes to pop pills for everything, leaving blister packs around the house or in her office. It's an unspoken rule that we don't discuss them—my nightmares and her addictions.

I pocket both bottles, glancing up at the door to ensure no one is there. The hallways furthest away from the hustle and bustle of the main hospital are usually empty.

Usually, but not this time.

Someone—a man, I realize—is staring at me through the glass. My heart plummets in my chest, threatening to drop out of the bottom of it. All I see is a flash of a handsome face and a pair of dark, angry eyes before he's gone, leaving me to wonder whether he saw me searching through my mom's drawer or if I imagined it.

He can't have seen what I did? I was angled away from him, and the lights were off.

Right?

I don't have long to ponder because the door opens, and the lights beam on. I blink at the man who glared at me through the door's window as he strolls into the office like he owns it. I have a few seconds to compose myself

before shifting my gaze to meet his. The first thing that strikes me is his soul-sucking eyes, then his white lab coat swishing open, revealing an expensive-looking black shirt and dark-blue jeans underneath. A doctor, then.

I know most of the staff at Mitre. It's Whitechapel's only hospital—even if it is private sector—so the roster is small and intimate. While he looks familiar, I've not seen him before; I would remember. Though, something niggles the back of my mind. I can't quite grasp it. Then, it floats away.

"She's not here," I say before he can open his mouth.

Instead of waiting for him to reply, I shoulder my bag and walk around the desk to leave, grimacing at the throb of pain in my arm. The doctor moves in front of me, blocking my way.

"Who isn't here?" he asks softly, almost dangerously, as he eyes me up and down.

I stare back. "Fiona. I mean Consultant Lee. I'm her daughter. I was just getting something she'd forgotten." See? I'm armed with a perfectly good excuse if he accuses me of stealing.

He frowns. "You're bleeding all over the floor."

I look down at my hand that's pouring with blood, raining spots on the linoleum. The wound must have opened up. "I, uh, cut my arm earlier."

He cocks a brow, then puts the files he was holding down and drags the desk chair around to the front. "Sit," he orders, and my muscles move to obey him for some reason. He has one of those voices that men used to getting their own way have—smooth and controlled. "I'll get a suture kit."

He walks into the office bathroom. After a few seconds, the sound of him washing his hands filters through. I'm stunned for a minute, sitting there, but when I think to escape, he comes back in, hands clean and dry, and sits in the visitor chair opposite. He pulls on a pair of surgical gloves and places my arm on the table edge between us.

"Cut? More like sliced." His silver-gray eyes bore into mine after removing the blood-soaked bandage. "How did it happen?" There's a coldness in his observation of me, clinical almost.

Who is this man? And why am I still here?

"Shaving," I say abruptly, a flush of irritation heating my cheeks at how stupid I sound.

He looks unimpressed too. "Shaving?"

He waits for further explanation, but I'm flustered. Weirdly, I'm taken aback by how devastatingly gorgeous he is, close-up, with a hawkish nose,

strong, angled jaw, and cheekbones that could slice through thin air. Even with his flinty gray eyes boring into me, his demeanor offensive and imposing as he inspects the wound, he's incredibly attractive.

My stomach somersaults at his touch as if to agree. I squash it down. It's been a long time since I got laid, that's all. After the attack...I wasn't interested.

"The laceration isn't too long, but you'll need stitches since it's over half an inch deep," he continues, voice sliding over my skin like silk. "May I?"

I nod as he sprays something freezing cold onto my skin, in contrast to the heat underneath where his fingertips have been. "Antiseptic solution with a mild anesthetic," he explains, the muscle in his jaw ticcing, not looking up from what he's doing. When everything is numb, he gets to work cleaning the wound. Despite how he looks at me, his touch is gentle, like I'm made of cut glass. Fragile in his hands. I expect him to use the steri-strips, but he takes a needle from the kit.

You might want to look away," he suggests at my wide-eyed look.

"I've had worse." I sound brave. I'm not, and I wince when he starts suturing. It dawns on me then that I'm in my mother's office, letting some strange doctor patch me up after I killed a man. I shouldn't have come here. There will be questions...

A cold whisper drags through my veins.

Only the pain is a reminder that this is not a dream. I want to snatch my arm away, but I hold it in place, my gaze landing anywhere but on the man in front of me and what he's doing to my arm. Powder blue walls. Jade green chenille sofa and chairs. Antique-looking books on the wooden shelves above the sofa. A few have strange titles, and I frown as I read them: *The Secret Doctrine*, *The Kybalion*, *The Book of Thoth*...I don't recall my mother having books like that.

He catches my eye on the books. "So, do you always go around snooping in other people's private things?"

I turn my gaze toward him, eyes still narrowed. "It's my mother's office."

He gives an amused look and goes back to task. It's the first I've seen his lips make a shape that could be interpreted as a smile. My legs squeeze together at the sight of his mouth. "No, it's not. It's mine. Your mother, Fiona, has been relocated down the hall."

Mum has been relocated? I blink at him, my own mouth making a slight O. "Those books are yours."

He nods. “You can borrow one if you like?”

My mind spins with a million things. Fuck. How could I get the wrong room? “I didn’t know.”

“I’m beginning to see that, Miss”—his silver eyes dart to my other hand, the ring finger empty, and then meet mine briefly—“Lee?”

“Summers. Lee is my mother’s maiden name.”

He gives me a strange look, a dark shadow flashing across his face, silver-gray eyes turning almost black. “Miss Summers.” His grip tightens on my arm, fingers digging in. Pain shoots through the closed wound. Whatever bedside manner he had is gone—not so gentle anymore. Panic stabs through me like a knife.

I grit my teeth to stop myself from gnawing my lower lips bloody. “Ouch. Stop. You’re hurting me.”

His hard gaze falters, and then a flicker of awareness creeps in. He looks down and then releases me so I can snatch my limb back. “Alright, you’re done,” he adds smoothly like he wasn’t manhandling me a second before. No apology, not even when I frown at him.

I resist the urge to bolt. Instead, I get to my feet. My brow creased as my mind wraps around the fact that he freaked out when I told him my name. “You didn’t tell me your name.”

“Didn’t think I had to.” He points to his door where his name badge gleams, his lips twisting in amusement at some obscure joke I’m surely the brunt of.

Jaxon Clémont.

And that’s when my heart stops beating, and I stare at him, open-mouthed.

“Good to see you again, Elaine.” The dimple in his cheek puckers, though the smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

He shouldn’t remember me. Most people from back then don’t. I’ve changed my hair, got rid of the awful fringe, and no longer wear glasses if I can help it. But knowing who this man is, the tension in my body dissipates a little.

“Jaxon,” I say his name out loud just to hear it on my lips. “It’s been years.”

He nods. “Nearly a decade.”

“When did you get back to England?” The last I heard was he left to finish his studies in America. He didn’t even say goodbye. Just up and left.

Vanished.

Not that I'm bitter about that. He was always ambitious, always chasing the next big challenge.

"Oh, I've been back and forth to London over the years."

"But you're working here?"

"I moved back to England a year ago to take over my father's company and clinic but returned to Whitechapel to start at Mitre last week. They made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

I glance around his office, and his success needles me like a prickly coat. Jaxon was in my year at medical school before I dropped out. He would be a surgical registrar by now, but having this office, my mother's office means he's fast-tracked himself to junior consultant somehow. Why not. He was first in all his classes, which used to annoy the hell out of me. "You're doing well, then." I'm breathless when I say it like I've been running for my life.

Why am I breathless?

He smirks, the young Jaxon superimposed on the older, more mature version before me. "You should wrap that. Unless you want me to do it for you?"

"I—" I glance at my arm. Each stitch is minuscule and precise. Perfect.

The last time I saw Jaxon...

I force a smile at him, burying my emotions deep down, away from the surface, and nod. "I can do it."

"So you're not completely a damsel?"

Suddenly, I'm hot, burning up. His presence is beginning to bother me like it used to. A look of displeasure crosses my face. "I should go." It comes out like a croak. I don't bother thanking him. Instead, I snatch my bag from the chair and stride to the door, ready to leave.

"Coffee?"

"Huh?" I falter and turn back. "What?"

The smirk on his lips has the dimple in full glory, but it's no longer endearing. It's a reminder of the games he played that once fractured my heart. I used to imagine kissing that dimple, believing that the warmth of my touch could thaw the icy facade of Jaxon Clémont with just one press of my lips. His eyes looking into my soul as he kissed me back, one hand sliding under my shirt, the other gripping my bare ass in an embrace that promised an eternity of devotion.

Once upon a time, I used to imagine a lot of things.

“There’s a quaint little place just across the road. They make good coffee. Would be great to catch up if you’re free one morning before my shift?” The glint in his eye is unmistakable, but it’s not desire—it’s arrogance.

I feel my head nodding in agreement, his hand offering me his card with his number. As I make my hasty escape into the dimly-lit hallways, trying to escape him and the memories that serve no purpose but to haunt me, I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve just stepped back into the past with no easy way out.

6

LAINE

Nine Years Ago.

Victoria Royal School of Medicine, Ethics and Law in Clinical Practice.

The lecture hall is packed, but I find a few seats empty at the front. It's right in view of Dr. Grant, but I slide into it, anyway. He's known for picking on students in the front row with difficult questions, but I don't mind. Taking my time and filtering out the surrounding chatter, I take out my notebook, favorite pen, and tape recorder and then read through last week's notes.

"Is this seat taken?" a deep voice fills my internal silence.

I'm a bit of a loner at university, so it's rare to have someone talk to me. Usually, no one does. I don't drink or go to parties, so why would they? But the response catches in my throat when I look up into silver-gray eyes, taking in his perfect cheekbones and angular jaw. It's Jaxon Clémont.

"No, it's free," I finally manage, looking away so he can't see the heat flushing my cheeks.

I may be a loner, but I'm not blind. Jaxon is the most popular guy in the entire university, never mind our year, although rumors are he doesn't date. He just sleeps with girls and treats them like dirt afterward. Though, it doesn't stop students, even lecturers, from trying.

A redhead with heavy eyeliner and a pouty mouth waves at him from the aisle. She bustles into the first row, knocking my notebook and pen to the

floor as she passes, and then gushes all over Jaxon like a leaky pipe. If that's not enough, I have to endure her giggling throughout the lecture, too.

"You shouldn't chew the end of your pen," I hear Jaxon mutter at me when the lights dim and the slideshow starts. "You might accidentally swallow it and one of these idiots might feel pressured to perform a tracheotomy. Although that could be fun to watch."

I swipe my Parker out of my mouth and turn my attention to him. Annoyance snaps in my chest. "I'm sorry, what?"

"You heard me," he says, keeping his eyes focused on the lecture.

"You're twisted," I say, as dismissive as I can.

He looks at me then, steel gray eyes almost black in the shadow. His stare is so intense it slices through me like a shard of glass. "I'm not the only one." He glances down at my notepad full of doodles. Most of them are harmless flowers or repeating patterns, but a couple are hearts. Not the cute symbol kind, but realistic ones with blood and severed arteries.

The muscle in my jaw tightens. What do you say to that? "We're studying medicine. They're anatomical drawings." I give a tense laugh.

"Yeah, right." He scoffs, eyes devoid of emotion. "Remarkable work, but there's one detail you've missed."

I raise an eyebrow, my curiosity piqued. "What could that possibly be? I've included all the major structures."

Jaxon leans in, his voice barely above a whisper. "The chordae tendineae."

A flush of embarrassment floods through me. The chordae tendineae of the atrioventricular valves are incredibly fine tendons, like the strings of a harp, playing a crucial role in heart function. A few minutes later, the lights are back up, and Jaxon's fuckboy mask is back. He's laughing with the redhead, flirting, no longer looking my way. Like our interaction didn't happen. I quickly sketch in the thread like tendons and label them where they should be.

When I glance up, Jaxon is watching, eyes darker than black. How do his eyes change so much?

A commotion draws everyone's attention to the rear of the lecture theatre as Addison Cochrane and Henry Wickham and their entourage spill inside, whooping loudly, disturbing the class.

They usually stay at the back but Addison spots Jaxon and howls. "Jax, my man." He saunters down to the front with Henry and a few girls in tow.

Dr. Grant takes the interruption in his stride. “Cochrane et al, hurry up and take a seat. I assume there’s a good reason you’ve missed half the class?”

Henry gives Dr. Grant a sheepish look. “Rugby, Sir.”

Addison grins at him as he takes a seat behind Jaxon, and thus behind me. “Training ran over.” Dr. Grant turns back to his lecture. Henry joins on the seat next to him far side, behind the red head while the girls they brought with them drape themselves over the boys like trashy decor.

Did I imagine it out of the corner of my eye, or did Jaxon stiffen before smirking back at his friends and bumping fists with them all?

Addison leans forward, voice hushed. “Can’t believe you ditched us for this shit, Clémont? Coach was all over us like a fucking rash with you gone.”

Jaxon mutters something back in a low voice. I catch the word *Father* and *grades* enough to satisfy his friend, and then their back-and-forth switches to the game Jaxon missed.

“What the fuck, Brainy Lainey,” a drawl hisses in my ear a few minutes later. I don’t have to look over my shoulder to see Addison leaning down, looking at my notebook.

He reaches forward...

I slam my notebook shut, catching his fingers, gnawing my lip to stop myself from saying something I regret.

“That wasn’t very nice.”

“Piss off, Addison,” I mutter under my breath, letting my annoyance get the better of me.

Addison snarls. His hand latches onto my ponytail, snapping my head back with a yank, so I have no choice but to look at him. “What did you say?”

I purse my lips.

“Bitch, I was just admiring your art—.”

“Don’t fucking touch her.” Jaxon’s voice drips with a menacing softness that sends shivers down my spine.

Addison's gaze locks with Jaxon's, and the room seems to hold its breath.

“Gentlemen, enough!” Dr. Grant’s voice slices through the tension like a knife.

Jaxon remains unmoved, his eyes locked on Addison with smoldering intensity.

Suddenly, Addison laughs. “Fuck, man, if you’re fucking her, you only had to say.” His rough hand drops away from my hair. He shoots a look at

Henry. “Come on, Wick, let’s get the fuck out of here.” He casts a glance at Dr. Grant. “This shit is boring as fuck.”

Jaxon hasn’t moved. He’s watching Addison like he wants to rip his throat out. “What a dick,” mumbles the redhead, but Jaxon remains silent. Yet, his silence speaks volumes. His eyes shift to me, their intensity drilling into mine as if he’s thoroughly disappointed, Adams’s apple bobbing in his throat.

No comforting words like “Are you alright?” or “Ignore him, he’s an asshole” escape his lips.

“I didn’t need rescuing,” I declare, tearing my gaze away to reopen my notebook on the right page.

“Then don’t act like a fucking damsel.” His soul-sucking eyes give me one last look before turns away. Dismissed.

Days later, in another lecture, I overhear two of my classmates gossiping behind me. I hate gossip, but hearing the names *Jaxon* and *Addison* makes me pause.

“...he practically crippled him.”

“Who did?” Both girls turn and stare at me looking back at them over my shoulder. I don’t usually speak, let alone engage so I ignore their strange looks.

“Jaxon smashed Addison’s hands with a hammer. Broken every bone. They say he’ll never be a surgeon.”

My mouth hangs open. “Are you sure?”

“You should know,” the blonde shrugs. Kelly, her name is Kelly something. “They say he did it because Addy touched you.”

LAINE

The next day I find out from the receptionist the location of my mother's new office and pop in to see her. Mum stops ping-ponging on her keyboard and takes a breath. "Lainey, you're here. Sit. Sit."

She waves me inside, so I close the door behind me and take a seat. I wait for her to finish her work and then she shoos me outside. As Mum locks her office, linking an arm through mine, she jars my temporarily forgotten injury. "Let's grab a coffee together before I start work."

"Okay," I submit, trying not to wince.

We reach the hospital staff kitchen in no time at all, and she ushers me to sit on a stool at the breakfast bar to pour us both a filtered coffee. "It's so good you're here. I feel like I never see you. Your father is worried," she says as she hands me a steaming cup of black liquid.

Sachet of sugar. A drop of cream. I go through the motions. I don't need a caffeine fix, but I need something to focus on or I'll faint. I forgot to take painkillers this morning. As my mum natters away about how I can't be enjoying life living alone in a small cottage in the town I grew up in, with only a cat for company and no friends. I purposely don't introduce her to Nola and Sage, so from her view, I am alone.

"Have you considered moving into one of those houses with a roommate?"

My jaw clenches and my insides crawl with annoyance. We've had this conversation so many times before, I know what she'll say next. It'll be about finding a man. "I enjoy living alone. I may not look it, but I am *thrilled* to be

single, too.”

She brushes a lock of hair out of my face, her features softening. “No, you’re not. I’m your mother. I know these things. Honey, don’t you think it’s time you returned to medicine?” she says, quickly pivoting to my career instead.

“I already enrolled.” To get my mum off my back, I applied for the only medical degree in the country that’s studied part-time and mostly online for the first three years, open only to healthcare professionals. Mum was thrilled to pull some strings. As long as I’m working in the healthcare industry by the time the course starts, I’m in.

She frowns. “Yes, and Pierre told me you deferred the admin job here for a year. Why? Are you still working at that bar?”

Her line of sight shifts to my right as the door swings open behind me.

I swivel around to see Pierre, my mother’s boss. He glances at me briefly, frowning, and then looks at my mother. “Fiona, can I borrow you for the staff meeting?”

She glances at her watch and huffs, giving me an appealing look. “Will you be around in an hour?”

“Sure, I’ve got someone to meet anyway.”

After my mum bustles out of the staff kitchen, I sit and finish my coffee. She and Pierre don’t leave right away, talking heatedly through the glass until my mum shakes her head. Pierre makes a face.

Curious, I grab my things and exit into the hallway, catching a few of their exchanged words. A surge of something hot whips through my insides as I hear one word, or name, in particular.

I would never forget *that* name, even if the world ended.

“Who are you talking about?”

My mum and Pierre turn to look at me. Mum suddenly flustered.

“Elaine, you remember Jaxon, Abe Simmons’ son? You used to go to school together.” I stare at her, trying to reconcile the Jaxon I know with the vile snake she’s dating.

“Jaxon is Simmons’ son?” I say, wetting my lips, feeling unsettled all of a sudden.

“You would know him as Jaxon Clémont. He uses his mother’s maiden name.”

“I know him, but it’s been a while since we caught up,” I say, lying through my teeth.

“You’ll catch up soon, I’m sure,” Pierre says, watching the exchange with a tense smile. His eyes dart to my arm, which I unconsciously hold with my left hand. “Dr. Clément is going to be joining us at Mitre.”

“Oh?” I let go of my arm and shove my right hand into my pocket.

My mother rolls her eyes. “What Pierre is not saying is that he’s replacing me. He’s a junior consultant, and he’s already got my office.”

“It’s not like that, Fifi,” Pierre exclaims. “He’s one of his year’s most promising and talented surgeons. His skill and finesse on the operating table is unrivaled. We would do well to have him on the team. And I promised Simon he would have the best view in the building.”

She places her hands on her hips. “At my expense.”

“No, ma chérie. He could never replace you.” Pierre smiles, eyes twinkling, as he rests a hand on her shoulder. My mother’s mouth makes a thin line, but she looks slightly appeased. I do like Pierre. He’d be a much better match for Mum if only she would stop eating him for breakfast every time he told her no. “It’s just for the next funding round,” he adds.

Wrong thing to say.

She gives him a dark look. “Right. That’s the only reason you bribed him back from DARE.”

“Jaxon was at DARE,” I scoff, unable to mask the disbelief in my voice.

Pierre frowns. “What’s wrong with Doctors Across a Rescued Earth?”

“Nothing except that it’s a high-visibility charity where privileged rich men dirty their hands with before they get a real job when all they did was fly around developing countries in a private jet and stay at five-star hotels, all to visit the medical outreach tents once a month. Not to mention the regular abuse of drugs and women,” I spout at him. “The carbon footprint of their jaunts alone is enough to lay waste to the polar ice caps in the next five years.”

Pierre looks appalled at my outburst. Behind me, someone titters, and then two nurses, Poppy Beckerman and Kelly-Anne James, skulk past, whispering to each other. I know the rumors, I dropped out of medical school because I wasn’t good enough to be a doctor and now my mother is fucking Simon and Pierre just to get me a job.

“I sometimes forget how much like your father you are. Always trying to save the planet.” My mother winces. I let out a long, practiced sigh and shut my eyes, only opening them again after a few seconds.

“Let’s not talk about this here,” Pierre offers.

Mum catches me on the shoulder. “Wait, we haven’t finished talking. Come back and see me after you meet your friend. Who is it, by the way?”

“No one you know,” I mutter.

Pierre runs a hand through his thick, black hair before disappearing with my mum in tow, looking harassed.

LAINE

I begrudgingly agreed to meet Jaxon for lunch at the Ten Bells near the hospital. As I arrive, it's early enough for fog and rain as it gently serenades the old town, so you wouldn't think it was summer at all.

Its soft melody contrasts with the tension building inside me as each drop tinkles softly on rooftops and dances over the leadlight windows, a chill in the air mirroring the unease I feel in the pit of my stomach.

Jaxon is already inside, standing out like a sore thumb in his meticulously tailored navy blue suit, a symbol of privilege that probably cost more to have made than my monthly rent.

I trudge over in my worn Doc Martens and a homemade summer dress, depositing my soaking wet umbrella in a corner.

When our eyes meet, Jaxon raises a brow in surprise as though he didn't expect me to turn up. I almost didn't. There's a pint of lager and a glass of white wine on the table in front of him. "I hope you don't mind. I took the liberty," he says, gesturing to the wine. "I've just finished an overnight shift."

Suppressing my annoyance at him doing just that, I respond, "Not at all," and settle into the chair across from him. I grasp the pint glass and take a sip.

It's warm. *Ale.*

I resist the urge to make a funny face.

Jaxon's eyes narrow slightly, a hint of challenge in his gaze. He lifts the glass of wine and teases, "You didn't strike me as—"

"A girl who enjoys beer?" I retort, a spark of defiance in my tone.

"I was going to say, someone who drinks in the middle of the day." He

lifts his glass of wine. “I ordered you a sparkling elderflower. You never used to drink?”

“Oh. Well, it’s my day off,” I shrug, taking an even bigger mouthful of the warm ale. Jaxon can have the elderflower while I get drunk on one pint. He shouldn’t assume I’m the same girl I was before.

Jaxon’s eyes seem to glint with amusement as he leans back in his chair and considers me, although that could be a reflection of the bar’s brass fittings we’re sitting next to.

The smell of hops and stale beer wraps around me like an old coat. Even though I work in a different, busier pub, The Flower and Dean, I come to the Ten Bells to sit and read. I like the big, comfy armchairs beside the roaring fire, surrounded by the patrons’ murmurs and the safety of everyone around me. That’s why I suggested it instead of the newly minted, fancy wine bar a few doors down. That and I expected Jaxon to be out of his element.

But he’s nothing of the sort. He looks quite at home with one ankle resting on the knee of the other leg, a glass of elderflower in his hands as though it’s an expensive vintage. As he looks over his shoulder, he catches the eye of the younger barman with the waistcoat and shirt.

“Miles, the usual, please.”

Miles nods as he finishes cleaning a glass, putting it away. “No problem, Jax. Be right over.”

I narrow my gaze. “You know him?”

“I come here a lot.”

“To the dingy local on the corner?”

Jaxon smirks, finishing the elderflower in one go. “I like the ambiance. I came here a lot as a student.”

Jaxon slumming with the locals was never something I ever imagined. Ever.

I chew my lower lip and sip my pint, wincing at the forgotten taste. I’m a gin girl, really.

“So. You disapprove of me donating my time for medical humanitarian action?” His voice is whiskey-smooth. “Elaine?”

Fuck my heart. In response, the organ responsible for my life lurches in my chest. “You—you heard me?”

“I didn’t.” He gives a wry smile. “The nurses were talking about you. It’s hard not to listen to gossip.”

“The staff love to talk about what’s none of their business.”

“Unlike you?”

“For the record, I don’t approve of medical humanitarian PR stunts to polish your shit for the press and the medical board.”

“Polish my shit?” Jaxon repeats, the first smile breaking over his devastatingly handsome face, making it harder to keep my composure.

“Don’t humor me. You signed up only for yourself.”

“Every unselfish act is selfish, is that it?”

I give him a pointed look. “There are better ways to save the world.”

“Is that why you dropped out?” Jaxon asks, seemingly genuinely interested. “To save the world?” His words echo my earlier outburst, and without warning, my cheeks heat, and the scar under my collar seems to throb. Only my parents know why I left medical school. Getting revenge on your murderer doesn’t leave much time for study.

“That’s none of your business.”

“Your mother said you dropped out to write a book?”

I shoot him a look. She never seems to pay attention to anything I tell her, and of all the things I’ve told her, that’s what sticks? Years ago, it was a flyaway comment when she wouldn’t stop asking what I was doing with my life. “I am.” If you count actual words, I’ve barely started.

“Impressive,” he says. “What are you writing it about?”

“The impact of extreme altruism,” I say reluctantly, blush staining my cheeks even more. I’m a walking, talking hypocrite, wallowing in self-pity. I haven’t done anything impressive, shy of killing a few rapists and murderers. When he raises a brow, I explain, “Activities or behaviors that help others but are outside socially accepted and legal boundaries.”

He cocks his head. “Like?”

“Like euthanasia or robbing the rich to give to the poor. Where you take matters into your hands.”

“Hunting down murderers?” he says casually.

I stare at the condensation running outside my beer glass, a lump suddenly emerging in my throat, almost closing it. “Yes, like that.”

“Interesting,” Jaxon muses.

“It’s just an idea. I probably won’t publish it,” I say quietly, keen to change the subject.

Jaxon smiles conspiratorially. “Too busy catching the murderers?”

“W—what?”

“Research for your book.”

A tightness sinks into my bones. *He doesn't know. It's just a coincidence.*
“Hah. I'd rather dig through your father's club's library for book research.”

He gives me a bemused look. “The Lucian Foundation, why?”

“The Foundation is said to have an extensive repository of historical medical texts.”

“It does. You think it'll help you with your book?”

“Medicine is renowned for its altruistic ideals. A double-edged sword, with certain groups in positions of power blurring the lines between genuine care and exploitation for monetary gain. It could be an interesting chapter in my book, shedding light on the origins of the complex ethical issues within the medical profession,” I say carefully.

Jaxon snorts, looking me right in the eye as he drinks his elderflower.
“You make me want to be a better man.”

“Help me access the library, and you will be.”

He stares at me for a pause and then unceremoniously places his wallet on the table. “I'd rather give you a blank check.”

I stare at him and the wallet for a second. “What?”

“Money is the best form of altruism, is it not?”

I'm wondering what to say to that when he catches my eye, smiles, and winks, filling the space with delayed charm. I blink at him. “You're teasing me.”

His eyes flash with something I can't decipher. “You've changed, Elaine. No longer a damsel needing to be saved.”

Is that how he saw me back then? I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out.

“Well, you haven't changed one bit,” I huff, finally finding my voice. Jaxon is just as privileged as I remember him. “And it's Laine.”

He stares at me a while longer. “No. I don't suppose I have, Laine.”

There's a heartbeat of silence, and I shift in my chair. Miles brings Jaxon over an amber-looking liquid in a lowball glass, eyeing me with an appreciative grin. “I'll put it on your tab, Jax.” Jaxon's eyes seem to narrow at the male attention I'm getting, but that could be my imagination. He waits until Miles leaves before resuming his study of me.

I cock my head at him, studying back. Is he jealous? I never thought I'd see Jaxon again, never mind being in a pub with him, not after what he did. It seems like a lifetime ago and such a stupid thing to accuse him of now.

“You look like you're deep in thought.”

I let out a sigh. “I never thought you’d come back to Whitechapel.”

He shrugs. “You did.”

“Why did you move away?” *Why did you ghost me?*

“Work, family commitments, expectations I had to meet,” he says without missing a beat. “And you?”

“Dad convinced Mum to move to London after university.” It’s partially true.

“Didn’t want to stay in Whitechapel?”

“No. Whitechapel was where I grew up. It had become small. London had more opportunities for my dad’s police career.”

“Not anymore?”

I shrug. “My parents split up. Mum’s family is here. So now, I’m back and part of the Harvest parade.”

Jaxon’s smile melts away at the mention of the holiday. Mentally, I berate myself. It’s common knowledge his mother died when he was only eleven years old, on Harvest Day, from an overdose of the medication she was on to deal with her myriad health issues. Jaxon was the one who found the body.

His sister died from heart failure a year later during the same holiday season, weeks later at Halloween. Again, Jack found the body. Not long after, his nanny went missing when she was supposed to look after Jaxon. Rumors have it she burned to death, trapped inside a bonfire on Guy Fawkes Day—a trinity of horror around Fall.

I wasn’t sure how much was true until I started researching his family after Jaxon broke Addison’s hand.

Small towns make for a lot of scary stories growing up. I found countless articles and press releases, with little or no insight into his personal life. It’s as if he never had one. Still doesn’t. Apart from attending events hosted by his father, his university, and his work, Jaxon is a ghost: no best friends or past girlfriends, just a brilliant medical career full of accolades and awards.

One would wonder what all that death and loss does to a young boy with so much potential, a boy who has everything but lost so much—he grows up to become a brilliant and wealthy surgeon who is as *unreachable as the stars*, New Medicine’s quote, not mine.

And someone capable of ruining someone’s career as a surgeon just for touching me.

“I appreciate your help,” I say hesitantly.

A sly smile tugs at Jaxon’s lips as he feigns innocence. “Help? I’m not

sure what you're talking about."

I shake my head, the memories of our past encounters still fresh in my mind. "For this." I lift my arm with the stitches so he knows I'm not thanking him for Addison.

His smirk deepens, and he leans in slightly. "It was my pleasure, Laine."

My tongue unconsciously sweeps along my bottom lip as I shoot him a skeptical look. I place my half-drunk pint on the table and give him a friendly smile. "I should probably head off. I have an appointment over to the hospital."

"Before you go," Jaxon's tone is smooth as silk, a seductive undertone that sends a shiver down my spine. "You haven't told me what actually drove you away," he presses, his deep voice almost caressing my senses. "I don't believe for one second that your parents wanted you to drop out of medical school."

I shrug, trying to mask my unease. "There's nothing worth mentioning."

"No intriguing story?" His gaze locks onto mine, his silvery gray eyes twinkling like mirrors, reflecting my apprehension.

"No story, I'm afraid. I'm very boring." *Unlike the secrets that you are hiding.*

"Oh, I doubt that. You are far from boring, Laine. I want to know a lot of things about you."

"Like what?" I muse.

"Like, how did you get that scar?"

Staring long enough into his eyes, the twinkle falters, and a cold, calculated shadow dances in their depths. It's the same unsettling look he gave me in the hospital through the door window, a look that draws me in like a whirlpool, chilling the warm, cozy atmosphere.

I swallow hard, a knot forming in my throat. "Scar?" I repeat, my voice trembling. Nervously, I drag a strand of my hair around my shoulders, lowering my chin to cover it.

Jaxon's cool and calculating gaze remains fixed on me, though his eyes seem to gleam. "The one on your neck that you're hiding from me? Was it the Ripper? Did he do that to you?"

The air in the room grows thin. All the breath seems to leave my body. "Where did you hear that?"

His lips curl, but the expression has no warmth. "Tell me..." he insists, his voice laced with an unsettling curiosity, "What was it like?"

“What was *what* like?” My response is sharp and choked.

“Having your life taken away from you.”

“How—how could you ask me that?” My voice is barely above a whisper.

He pauses and leans in closer, his demeanor predatory. “I’m a heart surgeon,” he says softly. “I often hold life and death in my hands. It intrigues me when I meet someone who has looked death in the eyes, escaped, and won. Sometimes, I wonder what it would be like not to save a life when I’m in theatre. All I have to do is hold my hands up. Nothing else.”

Shock ripples through me. The things he’s saying out loud no one should ever say, even if you think it. But late at night, when I’m planning to end a life of my own, thoughts about letting someone die rather than live echo through me. Only if they deserve it, of course. “You swore the Hippocratic oath,” I say, because what do you say to that?

Same. Me too. If I’m completely honest, it’s why I dropped out.

He laughs. “Did I? I guess I did.” His smile isn’t pretty despite his angelic face, and a shiver races through my bones, unnatural and unsettling.

The pub around us suddenly feels too small. Without thinking, I wrap my arms around myself, wanting to be anywhere else. The sound of everyone going about their liquid lunches seems so far away.

“Sometimes I forget that we’re supposed to be good. Don’t you?”

I was right. He hasn’t changed. The sociopath who broke Addison’s hands and couldn’t care less is still there, lurking beneath the surface. Only now, I have a reason to fear his lack of empathy—when it’s aimed at me.

When he’s digging too close to the truth.

The darkness that drew me in at university hasn’t gone away, and the fantasies I have, letting all my ugly thoughts and desires spill out into the open for him to pick at and play with, lodge deep in my throat. I scare myself sometimes with what I think.

And with what I’ve done.

Heat spills through me, making me feel dizzy. The lightest flame licks at my insides like an illicit drug, speeding my heart up. Fluttering faster and faster.

As Jaxon looks at me like a rabid wolf, running his thumb across his bottom lip, his eyes alight with those dancing shadows....

I want him to kiss me.

Fuck.

There's something wrong with me.

"I need to go," I hear myself say, getting to my feet and turning away to retrieve my umbrella, fumbling with the straps of my bag. He doesn't make a move to stop me but reaches for his wallet. I get to the doorway, half aware that I haven't even paid for my drink.

"Laine." The way he says my name sounds intimate—too intimate. *Close*. His breath is warm on the shell of my ear as places a hand on my shoulder, the heat from his body making me shiver and almost lean back into him.

Not quite.

"You're forgetting something." I turn my head to see him out the corner of my eye, expecting a demon enticing me back into Hell I'm forever trying to escape from, but all he offers is a gentlemanly smile, traces of his deviant side neatly tucked away.

"Here." He slips a card in my hand, his thumb sliding across my palm, searing it with desire. "You wanted access to my father's library. This will get you inside the club."

Then he's gone in the flurry of people leaving, and I'm left standing in the doorway, frozen from the inside out.

"SINCE YOU'RE NOT DOING ANYTHING SIGNIFICANT WITH YOUR LIFE ON THE weekend, you should go to this." Fiona Summers nee Lee waves the textured eggshell invitation with gold lettering at me. It's the one Jaxon gave me in a cream envelope.

There was also a blank check inside, which I tore up.

How dare he.

After seeing him, I ran across the road in the rain to the hospital to pick up my car and say goodbye to my mum before I drove home, but now I'm questioning that last bit of logic as I place my palm on the desk, asking for my invite back.

My mother reluctantly hands it to me. As I stuff it in my pocket, she observes me like a hawk, blinking slowly, sipping pink liquid from her favorite mug while sitting in her office chair.

She's definitely drinking again. It's not pink lemonade in the *Best Surgeon in the World* mug. However, being half-cut hasn't impaired her

observation skills. The hawk spotted the invitation in my pocket the second I walked through the door.

“An invite to the Foundation’s Annual Charity Ball doesn’t happen often,” she reminds me.

The huff in my chest deepens as I lose my patience. “I’m not going.”

“Give me one good reason.”

When I give her a sour look, she sighs. “It’s for charity. How do you think it makes me look when my daughter can’t be bothered to make an effort.” She gives me the once over, taking in what I’m wearing: my homemade dress stained with rainwater and grimaces. “You need new clothes.”

At least I kept my jacket on. If only she could see the rest of me. Battered, bruised, arm covered in stitches and wrapped in gauze. I could barely hold it under the hot water to clean it as I showered. The dull throb getting stronger by the minute, eating away at my sanity. I’ll need to take some of the painkillers I took from Jaxon when I get home.

“I’d rather stick a hot poker in my eye,” I mutter, the pain making me less cheery.

My mother takes a dainty sip of her gin. Hard to do from a mug. “Jaxon Clémont invited you. You don’t say no to a man like him.”

Since I hardly ever visit her, I forgot she likes to coerce me into attending events where she thinks I’ll find a husband, especially since she only has one incarnation of her genes to show off to her wealthy friends.

She loves to parade me in front of them, hoping to palm me off on one of England’s noble families as the perfect daughter-in-law and to make the choice she never did.

“And you would know.” It’s a low blow. My mother is dating Abe Simmons, Jaxon’s father, the Foundation’s long-standing chairperson, known for his wandering hands and cut-throat aggression in the industry, seeking underhanded *favors* for the funds he freely distributes.

I’m sure Mum owes him a hefty sum for my medical bills after the attack, and that’s why she’s dating him.

“You should go and speak to Abe about doing something more worthwhile. He still has a space on his fundraising team,” Mum continues, unfazed by my dig, twisting the knife further.

“And run around sucking up to him all day? No thanks.” Simmons might be my mother’s new political bit on the side, but he’s also a womanizer, and

I'd probably stab him before the end of my first day.

"Suit yourself," she huffs. "But the Foundation does a lot for patients who could not afford our hospitals."

I roll my eyes. "By providing medical loans that they can never repay," I say under my breath.

"You do not know what it takes to survive, what I have to do to keep my job, what I've had to give up. This town thrives on the established professions, and the ball is an annual soiree of the institutions and trusts ruled by the elite families of Whitechapel that keep the town running."

"And the cash flowing. It's a gluttonous, glorious circle jerk. I hate being part of it," I scowl.

Fiona's face darkens for a moment. "And being on the outside is better, is it? Let me tell you, being powerless, with your nose pressed against the glass, is no way to live. Your grandfather understood that. I only wish I'd listened to him more."

My mother hates I traded in success for morals when she never could. Marrying Dad was her mistake. They struggled to make ends meet when her family disowned her. Love wasn't enough. Mum missed her comforts, and Dad felt that an honest reputation meant more than how much money you had in the bank. It's no wonder they're divorced.

I shake my head, my emotions raw. "I don't feel the same way."

"You did once," she insists, her voice full of longing. "You were driven, ambitious, passionate about making a difference..." Her gaze falls to the scar on my neck, a painful reminder of our past. "Do you think I don't understand how difficult it was for you? It's why I moved us away—" she falters, her voice trailing off. She never likes to revisit what happened.

It was a mistake to come here. Our visits always end in an argument.

"My life before is gone," I remind her, pushing my chair back as I rise to my feet, resentment branding like a hot iron in the center of my chest, like the gilded invitation burning a hole in my pocket. "There is no getting it back."

LAINÉ

“**W**here did you leave the body?” Nola asks as she places two steaming cups of coffee followed by a plate of tempting chocolate chip cookies on the low table.

Bathed in the warm glow of afternoon sunlight streaming through painted white blinds, she perches on a canary yellow poof. It’s Nola’s turn to host our weekly check-in, in her house crowded with a mishmash of items she’s either found, been donated to, or stolen. A welcome departure from the stark cold of the church where we met and our Stronger Together sessions usually take place.

Cozier. Comfier. Less conspicuous. And God isn’t watching.

I nibble a biscuit even though I’m not hungry, to delay answering her question. It’s like she’s asking where I parked the car. We try not to share specifics, just to be there to aid and support each other with our *healing*...if you can call it that. But sometimes, the lines fuzz and blur like an old movie reel, and secrets surface and linger like dust on a lens. “In the old cemetery, behind the bluebell woods with the others.”

Nola arches a quizzical brow, delicately brushing away cookie crumbs from the corner of her mouth with her fingers. She’s eaten five in the time it’s taken me to eat half of one. “Near the London Line? Is that a good idea? Is it safe?”

It’s been two days since I took care of Henry, and his body has not been found yet. The London Line isn’t actually in London, but a disused railway that used to run right up to the city. Overgrown, edged with weeds and

ragged woodland: no one goes there. The old cemetery that used to run alongside it hasn't been used in decades. It was sold as a commercial lot after the bodies were moved and then abandoned when the company that bought it ran out of money. It's as good as dead.

"No one goes there."

"Except for joggers, dog walkers, and cyclists?" Nola sighs when the doorbell chimes.

Sage has arrived. It takes her a little longer to get here as Templevale, where she lives, is deep in the veins of Sacred Heart Valley, the other side of Whitechapel, the furthest away from Angelfalls, where we are now. Nola gets up and goes to let her in, so I ditch what's left of the half-eaten cookie on the plate. I'm still not sleeping, and that's affecting my appetite for sure. I stare at my tea, sinking into the faded floral couch Nola got at her local charity shop, while they speak in hushed voices in the hallway.

After a minute, soft-spoken Sage slips into the room, almost like a ghost herself. Her brown curly hair is dripping wet, plastered to her skin. She must have got caught in the rain.

Nola bustles in with a towel and chucks it at our friend. "Didn't you drive?"

She shakes her head. "I got the train. Father grounded me. I'm not meant to be out." I look at her in disbelief. Sage might be younger than us, but she's an adult. It's moments like these that make me wonder how, living only a town apart, we never crossed paths before. Then again, perhaps it's fate that brought us together, considering how vastly different our lives are.

Nola, always the nurturing one, interrupts. "Tea, love?" Sage nods. She's not a coffee lover like we are.

We wait until we're all settled in the living room, and everyone is dry and has a hot cup of something to warm their hands on to give updates. Sage glances my way and smiles, reaching out to squeeze her hand in mine. Just sitting in Nola's clean but cluttered front room with her sleeping cat curled on my lap, leaving its fur all over my legs, Sage's hand in mine, coaxes the darkest parts of myself out into the open. Terrible things I've done that I never thought would see the light of day.

The girls found me when I was at my lowest. After the attack, I stopped caring. I dropped out of med school and got a job at a local pub on weekends. That's when the letters started coming, and I met Nola and Sage, and everything changed.

We first met online at a group therapy charity called Stronger Together and later in person at one of the outreach meetings.

Stronger Together. My old self would have laughed at the thought of going to group meetings. It was Nola who urged us to meet in real life and put faces to messenger names. After the first meeting, we went for a drink, and then another, and another, which led to a tearful hug and the pact.

A year ago, we each agreed to hunt the monsters who hurt us because the police had done fuck all. It was Sage's idea to take back control. Burying each other's most treasured possessions, only getting our own one back when we're fully healed, whatever the cost. It might have started as a joke, and then a healing ritual, but the pact took a life of its own, blossoming into full-fledged revenge. And since I couldn't find my killer, I was drawn to hunt other men who pretended not to be monsters.

Sure, the guilt ate away at me for days after my first...kill. The second corroded my heart. I'm still waiting to see what joys the third brings because whenever I close my eyes...

I still see them dying.

Smell their blood on my hands.

Lie on my bed at night, staring at the cracks in the ceiling, feeling nothing, thinking nothing—just enduring bone-numbing emptiness. It took weeks, maybe months, to scrape a living one day at a time, keeping the pain at bay by hunting the next monster. And the next. It's the only thing that keeps me breathing.

If my life is worth anything, killing men who deserve to die is all I have. So what if I close my eyes and see their dead corpses staring back at me in the depths of the night? I'll get over it.

My killer did.

"Have you made up your mind what to do yet?" Nola puts directly to Sage, just like she did me earlier.

"Not yet," Sage says, sipping her tea slowly. Sage's fiancé is a psycho through and through. He killed her sister, but there wasn't enough evidence, and now her parents expect her to take her sister's place and marry him. Unlike myself and Nola, Sage comes from a wealthy family and does what they tell her...most of the time.

Nola's one eye blazes, and she opens her mouth to say something, but Sage beats her to it. "What about your monster? Any luck with finding him yet?"

Nola's monster is a ghost. That's all she'll tell us when we ask. "Nothing new," she quips. "We're here to discuss Laine's latest letter anyway."

I reach into my cardigan pocket and pull out the last letter the Ripper left for me. It's been nearly a year since I found the letter he left on my mother's doorstep, and now this one showed up two days ago, on mine. Sage takes and opens it carefully, smoothing out the creases before reading it, exclaiming, "Oh, how creepy," before passing it to Nola.

She reads through it, eyebrows raised, hissing through her teeth. "You motherfucker."

Sage looks at me. "That's it? No name signed."

"Nope. He never does."

Nola hands it back, and I slip it into my pocket so I don't have to look at it again.

I know what it says.

*"I dream about you often. How we never
got to finish what we started. A little birdie told
me you're back. I'm enjoying our little game.
Watching you bloom, baptized in red.
Soon, little bird.
Oh, so very soon."*

"And there was nothing on your doorbell camera?" Nola adds.

I shake my head. The video footage showed no one coming or going, but there was a time skip a few hours before I arrived.

Sage takes another sip of her tea. "This one feels different. He writes it like he's watching you."

Nola shoots her a look. "Scare her even more, why don't you?"

"No, it's fine." Squashing the terror clawing like ice in my stomach, I consider it for a second. "She's right. He talks of games and being baptized in red."

Sage cocks her head. "Could he be the same person who was there that night?"

I stare at her. I didn't think about that. My heart thuds loudly in my chest.

Could *he* have been watching me this whole time? *My killer*. “You said someone was following you,” Sage adds.

Nola finishes her bite of cookie, a frown easing onto her forehead. “Wait. What? Someone has been following you?”

When I answer, “No,” she looks at Sage, and our soft-hearted friend immediately crumbles under Nola’s intense stare. “Lainey, you did say you saw a figure in the dark.”

Nola turns on me. “Please tell me that no one saw you kill that son of a bitch?”

I blink at her, chest suddenly tight. My mind flashes back to the black shape under the trees. When Sage called me that evening, I told her about it, freaking out. Now I’m regretting it. Nola will misconstrue the events. “I *thought* I saw something, but it was probably just my mind playing tricks,” I say as calmly as I can manage.

Nola eyes me like I’m an outright liar. I hate lying to my friends, but if I’ve fucked up, I’ll clean my mess up. There’s no point in worrying them.

“You checked, right, and there was no one there?” Sage agrees, clearing her throat, realizing she may have made a mistake telling Nola.

“No one was there. I told you, it was all in my head.” There’s absolute conviction in my voice, enough to make Nola back down.

Nola fixes her gaze on me, her single iris searching my eyes, and then she lets out a weary sigh. “You have to be cautious. If one of us falls, we all go down.”

It’s not entirely true. If things go south, if I get caught, I’d never utter a word to the police about Sage, Nola, or our clandestine meetings, not even under the threat of death.

Nola has this notion that our destinies are mysteriously intertwined. Perhaps they are, but it’s a concept that’s a little too mystical for my taste. I never planned to become a killer. I’ve just reached a point where I’d do anything to dull the pain, even if it means doling out revenge like a bitter pill. I’ll choose the feeling of wrongness over the hollowness and numbness any day.

Maybe it was pain that brought us together, and perhaps what binds us is a shared disturbance beyond measure, but I’d never betray them. I don’t know how I coped before I met Nola and Sage. I was a wreck back then. They are the ones who keep me going. Without them and our pledge, I’d be adrift, drowning once more.

The loss of my friend was heartbreaking, and my near-death experience ripped a piece of my soul away. Finding others who've endured similar horrors, those who crave peace and will do whatever it takes to seize it, breathed life back into me.

Just.

I'm still a walking, talking ghost. We all are, but together, these girls have convinced me we're invincible. Our closets are full of more skeletons than clothes, and I wouldn't want it any other way. And as for getting caught, it's not in my plans.

My monster may believe he's won, lurking in the shadows, watching, waiting.

But soon, very soon, I'll be the one hunting him.

JAXON

I break into her house. It isn't hard.

She used her own car, which led me straight to where she lived—Crescent Drive near the Abbey, only a short drive. How easily she gave her position away. How the hell has she survived all this time? That will change. Starting with the locks of her house that wouldn't deter some random fucker strolling in off the street, let alone me.

I poke in her cupboards and probe through elegant, delicate things scattered throughout her small but perfectly formed house. Her delicious scent is everywhere.

If I didn't know who she was before, I do now—her name is on the communication in her letter tray and her transformation from the girl I knew to my vixen is on the photos adorning the walls.

Now I know who my sweet psycho is...I can't wait.

What a coincidence I've found her again, that we already know each other. I should stay away. There was a reason I left—to protect her. I only came back because I didn't expect her to come back to Whitechapel. But now we're both here, I can't leave her alone. What drives her to kill intrigues the fuck out of me. I need to know how she became like this. Was she always this way and I just didn't see it before? Was it the Ripper? Did he create her, turn her into something dark and twisted, tainted...like me?

I can hardly contain myself as I take it all in.

Bed neat and made. I run a gloved hand over the sheets, excitement spilling through me. Clothes hanging in neat lines, light colors, florals, greens, and blues, disrupted occasionally by black or leather, stir anticipation in my gut. I'm strangely amused that she likes spicy food but doesn't cook much, going by the half-empty cartons in the fridge, and that her bathroom is a temple for bathing with luxury soaps and bath soaks.

But the pièce de résistance is the killing wall in her rather messy and cluttered office, tacked with photos and news articles of all the men she's stalking.

It takes my breath away.

Enough that I want to taste her straight away. But I must be patient. I prefer my little fox running when I chase her.

I rifle through her clothes until I find the ones she was wearing that night.

Why she's kept them, I've no fucking clue, but she'll learn. Until then, I'll take care of it for her. I dump her lacy black dress in a bin liner. In the pocket is the knife she used on Henry, wrapped in a napkin from the bar. Annoyance snaps in my chest. Sloppy. I place the knife in the dishwasher and set it to the highest setting, add bleach to the detergent dispenser, and switch it on. I may be a monster, but I'm a tidy one.

And I like my prey to see me coming.

I want my sweet psycho breathless, preferably screaming when I devour her for the first time.

The sound of her returning has me heading toward the back door all too soon. It's tempting to stay and wait for her, watch her from the darkened shadows, but I have work. And I want to make this last.

I know she won't tell anyone about Henry, so there's no rush to tie her up as a loose end just yet. I want to see what happens when my little fox finds more hens. Was Henry a one-off? Or is she working her way through a shit list all on her own, as her stalker wall suggests? And why? What made her back into the corner and bare her teeth like that? Was it the Ripper? Did he remake her?

Can I make her do it again?

Questions. Questions.

And no answers, but all in good time. Now I have to work.

I exit through the back of the house into the thick wood of the abbey gardens, joining the pathway to the main road. It's late, so no one is watching, peeking through curtains as I stroll to where I parked my car a few roads over.

The drive to Berners House doesn't take long. There's a prickling energy as I step through the heavy wooden doors, to be greeted by the porter who takes my keys, and I head to the rec rooms, with showers and lockers for members. I wasn't looking forward to returning to Whitechapel, but now I know the one who got away is back and that she's my sweet psycho...

I can't fucking wait.

After a shower and a change of clothes, I retreat to my office to fire up my laptop, running her name through the search engines, intrigued by my girl and her enticing grit.

It's her...after all this time. After she disappeared, I'd almost given up looking. She changed her identity and her appearance and moved away, hoping to hide from me. It worked. *Why, then, did she come back?* I click on

a social post of her with two other friends and admire how she shines like a goddamn beacon between them—her pretty, generous mouth curving into a subtle smirk, her dark, silky tresses cascading down, fanning out over a glorious figure. Only her eyes seem lost, as though tragedy has embraced her soul.

Now I've found her again, she won't escape. My little fox may be in the henhouse amongst the wolves.

But she's always belonged to me.

LAINE

Rain falls like cold drops of reality, bringing me back with every wet kiss on my burning skin.

Leaving Nola's house in the late evening is a wake-up call. I left Sage at the station because I wanted to walk, and she can't have company when she exits on the other side. She won't tell me why, but it's easier to go on foot along the main road and up the hill where the houses sit on a crest overlooking the common.

Thoughts scatter in my mind, and I let them. The wind howls down the avenue, chasing me all the way back home to my cottage, tucked away in the middle of a low terrace.

Ever since I very nearly died, I've felt like I'm not all there—half a person. I said Sage was a ghost earlier, but I wonder how close it is to the truth for me, too.

But life goes on.

As I get to the door, my cat runs out of the dark bushes. It jams, so I kick the base to shove it open. There's a shiver of regret that I didn't leave the light on. I hate coming home to a pitch-black house. But then the lamps are lit, and the wet clothes are off, and the oven is heating my dinner for one. I go around scaring shadows away, lighting every candle I can find. By the time I'm done, the place is like a damn church, and every corner has a soft glow that melts the horrors around my heart just a tiny bit.

Cozy as can be.

As long as I don't fall asleep reading my book, burning down the entire news....

A noise, like something falling, has me sitting up, my heart pounding.

What was that?

Tigger, my adopted Siberian cat, gives me the evil eye from the top of the dresser. Whatever he was sitting on—a stack of library books—is now in a messy pile on the floor. A few of the candles around me have burned out or are guttering. After telling myself not to, I dozed off. Great. My mum would kill me if she knew I nearly burned down one of the student residential homes I begged her to let me rent.

Hefting out of my comfy armchair, I pad into the minuscule kitchen to pop my cold cup of hot chocolate into the dishwasher. A lone knife clangs as

I pull out the sliding rack and gets stuck underneath it. I have to yank the rack out to get to it, but I don't pick it up. I just stare at it, my heart beating wildly.

It's the murder weapon I used on Henry.

Everything freezes as danger reaches out from every corner, hidden in shadows to scare me into snatching the first thing I see, a pair of kitchen scissors on the drainer. I back into a wall, fumbling to use my phone.

"Laine?" Sage's voice whispers down the line with a slight urgency, like she's been crying.

Shit. "Is now a bad time?" I gasp, squashing my fears deep down where they can't make me run out of the house screaming.

"Sort of. I'm locked in the closet," my friend sniffs, her voice muffled.

I glance around the familiar outline of my cottage, spearing the darkened edges with my sharpened gaze, trying to see if there's anyone there. Concern about Sage taking over enough for me to move. I can't stay trapped in a corner all night.

"You're what?" I hiss, walking from room to room, checking alcoves and my own closets, brandishing the scissors, anger swirling like a storm in my gut. "What did that fucker do? Do you want me to come over there?" I'm not as mean-looking as Nola, being a petite Asian, but I've put down three murdering rapists already, whereas Sage has yet to hurt anyone.

"No. I'm fine. I mean, I locked myself in."

"If you're sure?"

"I'm sure. Why did you call?"

"I just...nothing. Thought I saw a ghost. I'm okay now." Convinced I'm all alone, I retreat to my bedroom, Sage still on the line. I only hang up once I've closed the door behind me and Sage has persuaded me she's okay.

Once I'm tucked in bed, the feeling of vulnerability still lingers, no matter how much I try to block it out. I'm really spooked. What did I do after I got home that night? Was I that out of it that I put the knife in the dishwasher? When was the last time I used the dishwasher? Killing the last one was difficult, and burying the body alone and in the rain was horrendous, but...

Could Dad or Mum have let themselves in and left it there? In my heart of hearts, I know my mum doesn't have a key. I purposely ensured she couldn't drop in unannounced whenever she felt like it. It's bad enough that Dad has a key for emergencies...

No. I did not put the knife in the dishwasher.

Someone was here. They left the murder weapon for me to find, just sitting there. It's a taunt. *See, look, how easily I can get into your house.* I'm mad more than anything. This is my house. My safe space.

The feel of the scissors lying awkwardly under my pillow is the only thing keeping me sane. As panic rises in my chest at the slightest noise, my fingers close around the plastic handle, reassuring me I'm not a victim. I stay like that for a few long, hard minutes, then get up to check that nothing else has moved or is missing to find the dress I wore that night is gone too.

Afterward, unsatisfied and on edge, I grab my jacket and head outside to my car. I can't sleep. May as well do some work. If the killer is coming after me, I'd rather not sit like a duck waiting to be slaughtered.

*Six Months ago.
First Kill.*

Dead girl walking.

It's like I move through the world underwater, waves crashing over my head though I'm far too deep to notice, numb to everything but one slow-burning, beating heartbeat of purpose—to stalk my killer.

Just as he stalks me back.

I wonder who will win as I follow him into a churchyard. I've done this most nights—stalking bad men, planning their deaths. It's the only way I feel alive. The only way I can breathe deep in the depths of this cold despair. Knowing I can end him. The police have yet to catch him, but the evidence is there. The law is useless. The elite upper echelons of his society protect him. But they can't protect him from me.

That's what I tell myself. It's a mantra I whisper over and over in my mind as I bring the knife out with a shaking hand and rest it over the swollen artery in his neck. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm making it up as I go along. But this is what I want. And this is where I exact my revenge—in a dense wood, towering trees reaching towards the sky like an overbearing cathedral, rain lashing at the trees, thunder bellowing through the twisted, transcendent branches.

One slash.

That's all it will take.

But my hand is slick with rainwater. I'm getting soaked—guiding his sorry ass through the mud from my car to here took me a while. I've been

stalking this one for weeks, waiting for the right time to make him pay for what he and the others did to me and those other girls less than two years ago.

Rage unfurls inside my chest, blossoming like a dark friend I already know so well. One jagged motion of my wrist, and it'll be all over. But, my hand shakes, my breathing hitches, and something akin to a tight ball of pain lodges in my throat.

He rips women apart for fun.

I have to kill him.

Gripping the knife with both hands to keep from dropping it, I bare my teeth and dig the metal into his flesh. Blood sprays from the wound, and he gasps awake with a jerk, dark eyes pinning me in place. Watching. I jump back with a scream, dropping the knife. It clatters to the floor as his body convulses, and blood goes everywhere. Coats everything.

The exposed ruby-red flesh reminds me of the inside of a pomegranate. I stare at the body, unblinking, thoughts scattered until the smell slams into the back of my throat. An animalistic sound escapes my lips as I release a strangled sob. Then I crawl into a dark corner and heave until my sides hurt and my stomach is empty. Blood mixes with the vomit, turning it pink.

He's lying on the ground when I turn around, unmoving, bleeding to death. The cloying air—heavy on my chest, stained with the acrid stench of metal—hits me again in the gut, like swallowing a jar of pennies. It makes me want to gag, but I've already brought my dinner up in the bushes behind me.

I close my eyes as the world tilts beneath me, gritting my teeth against the sensation of falling off a building without a parachute. My chest heaves, and my stomach tightens. My heart beats noisily in my ribcage, reminding me I'm not dead. But I'm going straight to Hell.

Everything has been building up until this moment.

I don't even remember killing him.

Yet I look down at my red-stained hand and can't stop shaking.

LAINE

I snatch awake like I've been shot.

A shiver slides down my spine and settles in my bones.

The dream recedes into memory but not soon enough for me to suppress the ghost of the dead haunting me or the need to inspect my hands for blood like I do every morning.

Then it comes back to me.

The killer was in my house. He was there, somehow. I know it was him. He said as much in his last letter. Did he come in other times? Did he watch me while I slept, take anything? The clothes I wore the night I killed Henry are missing. Did he take them?

Sunlight peeks through my blinds, streaking bars of it across the paperwork strewn across my desk. Outside, a lawnmower is on full kilter, attacking whatever grass my cousin has grown across his scurvy-looking lawn. I look through the blinds to see Cash in a dressing gown, mowing everything in his path.

My cousin's investigative agency doesn't have an office. Cash has a shed, which I'm welcome to use for research. It's waterproofed and has heating, so sometimes I take him up on his offer. It says a lot when you choose a garden storage container office over your own warm bed.

A lot.

I give my back a crack and sip the water I bought from the gas station before I settled here for the night. I didn't plan to fall asleep, but I'm glad I did. Despite the hideous nightmares, I needed it.

Cash jerks and switches off the mower as I emerge from what feels like a hole in the ground. Sunlight strikes me blind until my eyes adjust.

"What the fuck, Lainey." He switches the ride-on mower off, shaking his head. "Make a noise when you appear out of fucking nowhere. I almost ran you over."

Mum hates Cash because he epitomizes everything she despises in Dad... his traveler's blood, dodgy company, and reckless lifestyle. Where Dad followed his instincts and penchant for fighting into the force, Cash's mother, Sabine, went in the opposite direction and married into the Haines family. Ivan Haines, to be exact. Cashton Haines and his brother Presley, West End's answer to the Krays, have never forgiven Dad for squeezing their family into

going straight—if you can call what Cash does *going straight*.

Cash may be my cousin, but he's also a thief and a liar. He also has enough money to have an office on Kings Road, but Cash wouldn't be caught dead doing the usual billionaire thing.

I wish he would. The shed is getting old.

“Cash, I need your help.”

He raises a brow and climbs off his mower. “You need drugs?”

“What? No, I need access to the cameras outside Buck's nightclub.”

He rubs his chin. “Buck's doesn't have any cameras.” Cash was the one who told me about it.

“The grocery store across the road has one.” It's a bit of a way down, but if anyone was following me that night, they'd be doing it on the main road from the club. It's the only lead I've got.

“Come inside. I've got something you can help me with.”

“Do you have food too?”

Cash laughs. “Do I have food? Give me strength.”

Cash's house is one of those crumbling mansions. It looks lovely and grand on the outside, but once you get past the door, you realize it needs a new carpet, a lick of paint, and tons of filler for all the cracks spidering all over the walls. Like I said before, Cash has money. It's just probably stuffed in those cracks. Rumor has it he has real diamonds stashed in the chandeliers. Knowing Cash, he would think that was hilarious.

His office next to the sitting room is all mahogany wood paneling and moss-green flocked wallpaper. All the rage in the 70s, I'm sure. We pass it by, aiming for the kitchen. It's the only modern room in the entire house, from marble worktops to stark white subway tiles and smokey granite floors. Cash takes his cooking seriously. I drop my bag onto the vast kitchen breakfast bar that spans the room while Cash raids a sleek black American fridge filled to the brim.

“Here, read that while I whip you up a hearty English breakfast.” He tosses a folder onto the bar for me to look at. “It came in last night.”

I help myself to a filter coffee and then take a seat, enjoying the aroma of Cash's cooking. My stomach twists when I see what the file contains.

“Henry Wickham's family wants you to investigate his disappearance?”
Be careful what you wish for.

Cash looks over his shoulder at me, blue eyes full of mirth. “Fucker's probably shacked up with a piece of ass somewhere. I need you on this one.

It's right up your street. Didn't you go to school with him?"

For extra cash, sometimes I work for Cash—doing surveillance or research. Or even going undercover. Women have an easier time getting access to people and areas they shouldn't according to my cousin. I'm not supposed to be working for him anymore. Not since I promised my mother I would take the job Pierre had.

Lots of promises I keep breaking lately.

"Briefly," I remind him. I read over everything. Dread settles in my gut at the amount of information. If the police have even half of what I have in my hands...

Thankfully, there's nothing about his dating app profile or Buck's.

Or me.

"And the best part? All expenses paid," Cash serving up a hot plate of food just as my appetite flakes on me. "So?"

I give him a veiled look. "So?"

"Want to team up on this one? Be like old times?"

"I'll have to think about it," I say slowly, placing the folder on the table closed so Henry's face isn't staring up at me. There's not a lot to think about, I could do with the money. But there's something unethical about being paid to solve a murder you committed.

"Then think about it." He disappears and returns with something in his hand. He slams it down on the counter. "Here. Thought these might come in handy, so I got a few made."

I stare at the police badge on the marble. "What the hell is that?"

"Access all fucking areas, that's what."

"It's illegal," I hiss at him.

Cash grins. "Never stopped a Summers before."

I shouldn't take Cash's fake police badge, but I tell myself I have no choice. I need to see what's on those cameras.

The man behind the counter at the grocery store is young, probably a college student trying to keep himself in beers throughout his degree. Cash was right. It's easier to flip the badge at him and get him to show me the footage from the night than to go about it the hard way.

The video is grainy and although you can't see Buck's or the parking lot, you get a full view of the main road. I watch until my car pulls out, and then I see another car following mine a few seconds later. Black and sleek. A Maybach. Not a car that stops at Buck's often. I note down the license plate,

delete the footage, and leave before the kid realizes what I've done, and then drive home wondering what else I can use the badge for and just how much trouble I'll get into if Dad catches me impersonating a police officer.

When I get in, I send Nola's expert hacker contact, Quinn, the details of the car in the video. It doesn't take long for her to return the Maybach as registered to Berners House.

My gaze falls on the invitation still stuffed in my jacket pocket.

*You Are Warmly Invited To
The Annual Foundation Dinner
7pm on Saturday 31st July
Main Hall at Berners House*

It looks like I'm going to the ball with Jaxon after all: two birds, one stone, and all that.

LAINE

Fiona is ecstatic when I tell her I'll attend the Foundation Ball even at short notice.

"Will you and Simmons be there?" I throw into the conversation casually over the phone. My mother likes to keep her private life private, ironically.

She pauses. "Abe has been busy with his fundraising lately. I haven't asked him, but I would assume so. Why?"

"No reason." I'll have to avoid him like I have been doing since they started dating. I hang up with promises to meet her there, and before she can dig further, pawing through the clothes I grabbed from my house for something to wear. Cash was surprised when I told him I was bunking over for the night but didn't protest and didn't ask why.

He suggested I go shopping when he saw what I'd brought with me. I arched a brow at him and stalked off. When your cousin, who is tighter than a rat's ass, tells you you need a new wardrobe, you're in dire straits.

I never go shopping because my kind of shopping is spending hours rummaging through charity shops. When you're working all hours, stalking killers and murderers the rest of the time, it doesn't leave much room for thrifty fashion. My old favorite, a silver backless, bodycon number I found in a bag of clothes not yet put out for sale at an Oxfam store, which clings to the body, hiding very little sins, will have to do.

I slip it on, pin my hair up, and quickly make my eyes cat-like and smokey. I finish the look with a sweep of pink gloss.

My phone rings as I'm cramming everything I need into my handbag. It's Nola, my plus-one for tonight. If Jaxon expected me to come alone, he is in for a surprise. I told him straight—I'm not the same girl anymore. Jaxon Clémont is not standing me up twice.

As well, after I told Nola I was going to Berners House, where it all started, she insisted on being by my side. She knows what that place means, even if everyone else has conveniently forgotten.

"Hey. I'm just getting ready," I say, a little breathless from running around.

"I'm meeting you at the place, right?" Nola asks, also out of breath as it sounds. In the background, I can hear the blare of horns and the sound of heavy traffic. "I'm almost there."

“Are you walking?” I ask Nola.

“Yes, because I refuse to dish out for a taxi for this shit.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you at the entrance. Don’t...Don’t go in without me.”

“I’m not going anywhere near these rich pricks until you’re here.” She pauses. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’m fine,” I say breezily and I am. It was so long ago that it happened.

“I’m surprised your mum is happy with you going.”

Fiona wouldn’t even think that going back to the place I was nearly murdered would have an effect on me. “It wasn’t exactly at Berners House. There are houses on the grounds the members can rent out.”

Nola sighs. “And now you’re making excuses for her.”

“I’m not. I just want to move on.”

“You will. After you find and gut that son of a bitch,” she promises. Easier said than done. I still don’t know who he is, but he knows me and where I damn well live...

Breathe.

He doesn’t know what I can do now. I’m no longer a victim.

Before I rush out, I check the locks on all the windows and doors in Cash’s ten-bedroom house one last time.

“Fuck, Cuz. Are you wearing a condom?” Cash spouts when he walks past me on my way out.

I peer at myself in the hallway mirror, lips tugging into a grim line. The dress is tight, and my boobs are on display, but that was the style ten years ago—it’ll have to do. I don’t have time to change or shop for anything else to wear. I’m late.

BERNERS HOUSE, A NEOCLASSICAL MANOR IN CREAM BRICK, IMPOSING columns, and marble steps at its entrance, sits on a hill at the end of a long drive. Around it is acres of parklands and golfing ranges where I imagine the groundskeeper staff measure each blade of grass, bush, and treetop with a ruler and trim to the perfect height and shape with a pair of cuticle scissors, so nothing is out of place.

I used to love coming here as a child. It was a house out of a story where a princess lived, with a secret garden, a shining lake where mermaids lived,

and mystical forests full of fairies that go on for acres and acres.

Now, it just reminds me of death and secrets.

My taxi pulls up just outside in the circular driveway. A shudder runs down my spine as it looms in the distance, staring me down. I pay using Cash's expense card because, technically, I'm working for him after I told him where I was going. Henry was a member here, after all.

Nola doesn't see me at first, though she stands out like a beacon in her canary yellow cowl neck dress at the entrance, scowling at the drivers in the supercars arriving who want her to move out of the way. Her hair is wavy, shielding the side of her face, hiding her missing eye. The barest glimpse of a pearl eye patch flashes underneath all that hair. She looks over and then strides forward to hug me.

I'm late by at least twenty minutes.

Nola's going to kill me.

"I'm so sorry. Traffic was sluggish to the point of standing still most of the way here."

"Babe, you're fine." Nola waves the apology away just as a horn blares, startling me and almost running me over. Her eyes dance over my dress, and a smile steals her bad mood away. "Girl, you look amazing. Who did you dress up for?"

I shake my head as if to say *no one*, as butterflies erupt through my insides calling me a liar.

But Nola isn't paying me any more attention. She looks pissed enough to throw her dangerous-looking heel at someone. "If another posh wanker so much as looks down his nose at me for walking in front of his overcompensating shit wagon, I swear to God, I'm going to ram my heel up his nostril."

Not for the first time do I wonder if it would have been better to bring Sage tonight instead. But our friend is spending the weekend at the lakes with her fiancé...so Nola it is. Hopefully, she won't damage anything or anyone this time.

Nola threads her arm through mine as we walk through the huge wooden doors, showing my invitation to the staff in the foyer. "Any news from your stalker?" she hisses in my ear.

"I don't have a stalker," I say under my breath once I've dragged her through security.

Nola gives me a look. "Oh, the person who broke into your house the

other night is in your head, too?”

“Sage told you?”

“Uh-huh.” *Damn, Sage.* “And what’s the chance he’s the fucktard you’ve been looking for this entire time?” she continues.

A chill claws through my insides. “I don’t know who they are,” I admit, ignoring it as best I can. The last thing I need is to fall apart.

“You need to figure out who is playing with you because it’s all of us he’s toying with.”

Feeling like I need to escape this interrogation, I look around the room for my mother. Scanning the myriad of doors and walkways off the main room, this place is like a maze. One could get lost here easily.

Finally, I spy her talking to Pierre, who looks dashing in a peacock blue suit, his dark salt and pepper hair slicked back. And Abe Simmons, graying at the temples, an imposing figure wrapped in a well-cut black dinner jacket.

Everyone here is part of London’s elite society medicine, which my father not so affectionately calls the legal drugs trade—designing, manufacturing addictive medication en masse and supplying pharmaceuticals to the unsuspecting everyday patients who don’t need them, ramping the prices up for the national health service. My father isn’t wrong in despising everything the private healthcare sector stands for. It’s one of the reasons I find it hard to work for Pierre in the first place.

I scan the rest of the faces but don’t see Jaxon.

As if reading my thoughts, Nola side-eyes from her left. “We’re not here to party, are we?”

I shake my head.

“Then I could use a drink first,” Nola murmurs. From across the room, Fiona catches my eye.

“You go to the bar. I’ll meet you there. I need to speak to my mum, show my face.”

Nola peers over, leaning in. “Which one is she shagging again?”

I let out a sigh. “The older one with the beard.”

Nola’s brows raise, a smirk teasing her lips. “Hello, Daddy Warbucks.”

I elbow her, and she laughs and heads toward the bar. As my friend effortlessly glides through the crowd, those around her moving out of the way without realizing it, I steel myself and head over to where Fiona, Pierre, and Simmons are.

“Ah, Elaine,” Pierre slurs, already a little drunk. “Come, liven up the

party, and drink with us.”

My mother’s brow furrows when she sees what I’m wearing and sweeps her hand over my dress like it has imaginary dust bunnies clinging to it. “You’ve met Abe, haven’t you?”

I glance at the chairman of the foundation and nod. He’s fucking my mother, so yes, I’ve met him. I’ve also read every article, every press release, every comment he’s given, and the connections he has that he flaunts. Anything widely known or not about Simmons, I know it too.

For instance, he gives Pierre Sander’s clinic just enough money to do the research they want. I don’t know what he gets from the relationship, but it must be mutually beneficial, if not illegal. Rich people, in my experience, do nothing for free. They buy their cakes and eat them whole.

Regardless, Simmons shakes my hand, introducing himself like we haven’t. Now I know Jaxon is his son, I can’t help but stare at him, trying to see the resemblance.

They have the same soul-piercing eyes.

Simmons catches me staring and smiles, that dark gaze fixating on my cleavage a little too much. “Is something the matter?”

“Don’t look at the Devil too long. You might catch fire,” a whiskey, smooth voice lilts in my ear as heat prickles, racing up my spine, his presence slipping under my skin like a familiar caress. His clean, masculine cologne of sandalwood and vetiver envelopes me whole.

Jaxon.

Calming my racing heart. I turn to face him. He takes me in and offers his hand. His boyish good looks in a dinner jacket make him instantly less intimidating than the first time he was in his white coat and the last time he was in a three-piece suit. His crystalline gray eyes are lit up and warm. Very different from the grump in the hospital or the demon in the pub, which throws me off for a second.

How many faces does Jaxon Clémont have?

“Good to see you again, Laine,” he says, piercing eyes slowly running up the length of me, smile a sly one that screams *we’re sharing a hilarious secret no one else knows*, before leaning in for a cheek kiss. Hot all over from his cool appraisal because he absolutely undressed me with those eyes, I’m sure of it, I play the game and let him.

As he leans in, lips brushing my cheek, the heat of his body makes mine tingle all over. If anyone is catching me on fire, it’s Jaxon Clémont.

“You look beautiful. I still can’t believe we never kept in touch after Victoria,” he says, condescending smile firmly in place as he takes my right hand and brushes his lips over the back. “How’s the arm?”

My mother frowns and looks down at where Jaxon’s lips have strayed, but I’m wearing black silk gloves. He turns my hand over to inspect the injury anyway.

“The hand is fine,” I say, trying to snatch my hand back despite how much it hurts. My stomach gives a strange flip, and I’m too frozen in place to do anything but blink at him.

It’s awkward, me standing there trying to take my hand back, and Jaxon holding me tight, gaze boring into me like he’s caught a juicy rabbit in a snare. I’ve seen dogs look at sausages with less interest.

Panic claws at my throat, but I push it down. “Jaxon, I need my hand back...” I laugh.

Amusement teases over his full lips as he releases me, adding smoothly, “Of course. I’m just about to go to the bar. Would you like to come, Laine? Catch up on old times since you left in a hurry during lunch?” I can’t help but stare at the glass in Jack’s hand as he swirls the amber liquid in it.

“What happened to your arm?” my mother asks with a frown, still looking at it.

“Nothing happened,” I say quickly, needing to find Nola. I see her standing table further back through the crowd, with two cherry red cocktails in front of her. Using Jaxon’s invite as an excuse to leave, I force a smile at Jaxon. “Let’s go to the bar. I have a drink waiting.”

Jaxon’s eyes sparkle as he sips his whiskey. He puts his empty glass on a passing tray and offers me his arm. I don’t take it. I’d rather stick pins in my eyes. I walk off first, hoping he’ll take the hint. He doesn’t. He catches up, gently adding the pressure of his palm to the small of my back to steer me through the crowd.

My guard is up as we walk. Nola is watching us advance with a raised brow. I’m sure she has a million questions, but I have more. They’re swimming around in my head as Jaxon strolls casually beside me. I feel stiff, and a prickling sense of unease seeps into my core. My brain can’t reconcile the man in the bar, who looked at me with desire and icy detachment all rolled into one...with this charming man escorting me across the room.

Maybe I imagined him looking at me like that. Perhaps I was so overwhelmed with his probing questions that I misread the situation.

“That dress is something else,” he drawls as he guides me over to the bar.

“It’s Hervé Léger.” I lick my lips, keeping composed, contemplating how best to answer.

“That’s why my father and that leech, Pierre, was leering over you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say haughtily as I glance his way, studying him as he seems to study me.

Jaxon smirks, dark gray eyes cooling rapidly despite the warmth of the chandeliers behind his head. “You’re good, but not that good. When you lie, the tone of voice goes up a notch and your lower lip trembles. It’s fucking adorable.”

I open my mouth to retort, but nothing comes out, and we get to where Nola is standing, waiting for me to say something and introduce them. But I want Jaxon gone now.

But my body has other ideas. I stare into his eyes, unable to look away. He called me adorable; why does that make my insides feel hot and messy all at once? I bite my bottom lip. “Thank you for walking me to the bar, Mr. Clémont.”

“Always a pleasure, Miss Summers.” He smiles as a feminine voice calls out, followed by a squeal.

“Jaxon! You’re back!” To the left of the bar, behind me, a blonde girl with cat-like eyes, wearing a white dress couture dress in a more modern cut than mine, beckons him over.

Jack flicks his gaze to her for a moment and then returns his attention to me, too busy staring into my eyes to concern himself with the blonde. “You came?”

“Of course, I came,” I blurt out. “Why?”

His lips upturned twitch. “I get the distinct impression that you hate me.”

“Hate is a strong word.”

The blonde girl calls again. “Jaxon, over here.”

“She’s going to have a hernia if you don’t go over there,” Nola interrupts, shoving a glass before me. “Lainey, here’s the cherry cocktail you wanted. Drink it up before the ice dilutes it to fuck.”

I take the drink. “I think you should go.”

“And you haven’t answered my question.”

“I don’t hate you.”

His eyes shimmer with fire, making my inside curl. “Good. Because I promised you a library tour, I don’t take just anyone there.”

As he saunters away, Nola stares, taking a mouthful of her drink. “Who the fuck was he, and why were you looking at him like that?”

“Like what?” I flush, taking a small sip of my cocktail.

Nola’s brows shoot up. “Like he was about to eat you up, and you’d willingly let him.”

Cheeks hot and burning, I give a dismissive shake of my head. “He’s the new hotshot surgeon joining Mitre. Thinks he’s God’s gift.”

“Looks like you do too.” She snorts.

“I do not,” I say with a scowl.

Nola shrugs as if to say, *right*, then leans against the bar and looks around. “Your life is so weird. Did you know there’s gold on those little steak bites they keep bringing around on trays? Gold. I’m not joking.”

Letting out a sigh, I give her a look. “This is not my life. I was born in East London, just like you.”

Nola eyes me up and down. “You say that, but you fit right in with these rich bastards. Your accent is all *yah*. You’re wearing the right dress and jewelry; even how you drink is damn dainty.”

I was about to take another small sip of my cherry martini, but Nola’s words slash deep, shame coursing through my insides. She’s right. I’m not these people, and yet I fit right in. Growing up, as my mother earned more and more money, I worked long and hard to prove I could be just like her. Elocution lessons. Ballet after school and tennis and riding lessons on weekends. Charity work when I could, to fatten up my CV. I wanted so badly to have her approval, but it wasn’t just for that. I pushed myself to fit in out of everyone.

“So, what did we come here to do?” Nola asks, thankfully dropping the subject.

My gaze darts around the room. “I need to find where the accounts for the Foundation are kept,” I say under my breath as we head out into the rear foyer. Wanting access to the library was a small white lie.

Nola cocks her head at me as we walk. “Isn’t that kind of thing isn’t digital these days?”

“Not for the Foundation. They have an archives room. The business records are stored there, according to my father, who’s been trying to get a warrant for years.”

Nola tilts her head, deep in thought etched on her face. “This is going to help you how?”

“Berners House is jointly owned by the five families known in history for establishing the Foundation. Whoever was following me, their car is registered here.” It sounds ridiculous, but it’s the only lead I have. I’ve been over it a thousand times. “My stalker is a member of this club.”

He could even be my killer. The Ripper has been a faceless demon in my nightmares for as long as I can remember. I’m almost scared to unmask him...

It must show on my face because Nola touches my shoulder. “Then let’s find that archive room.”

LAINE

We wait until the speeches are underway and everyone's enraptured to slink off to the rear foyer, where staff have cordoned off the area with a curtain and a velvet rope.

We move through several private drawing rooms with rich, dark wood paneling and paintings and tapestries depicting scenes of men hunting. The plush burgundy carpeting muffles our footsteps until we get to the oldest part of the house, where there's nothing but echoing hallways, painted timber walls, and worn stone floors.

We should have heard him coming before running into him—warm, solid, and immovable. I stumble back, the flush on my face apparent.

"You know this area is off-limits?" Jaxon's eyes no longer hold the amusement they did earlier as he takes me in. The blonde is nowhere to be seen.

"We were just looking for the library," Nola says next to me, steadying me with a hand on my arm, thinking quickly on her feet.

Jaxon is close enough to reach out and touch but doesn't move. Instead, he blocks the way, paying no attention to Nola, his eyes fixed solely on me. "Then you're in luck. I was coming to find Laine for the tour."

"That's great." My words come out in a rush, like I've been running when all I was doing was walking quickly, heart in my mouth.

"I'll go find the bar, then." Nola gives me a look and my arm a squeeze, which I interpret as *I'll keep looking for the archives*.

I glance at her. "Okay, I'll find you later." We already discussed that I could keep Jaxon occupied while she did the preliminary search.

Once Nola disappears the way we came, it's just me and Jaxon staring at each other in a tight hallway.

He reaches up to run a thumb across his jaw, regarding me like something the cat dragged in. "Why are you always in the wrong place?"

My eyes narrow. "Just lucky, I guess."

Jaxon smirks and indicates with his head, taking me once again by the waist. His grip is vice-like. His fingers cast iron as they lock on, digging in so I can't escape—heat prickles along my back where he touches me. I have an urge to shrug him off, but I squash it down. "This way."

Farther along the dark hallway, around a corner, is a doorway, opposite

the side the drawing rooms were on. Behind it is a large tower room, dimly lit with velvet armchairs, leather sofas arranged around ornate coffee tables, and a fireplace crackling with logs already burning. All around are floor-to-ceiling wooden bookshelves filled with leather-bound books and antique curiosities, spiraling all the way to the top of the tower.

I stop and stare at all the books.

There are so many.

Jaxon releases me, saunters to the mini-bar, and pours two glasses from a decanter.

“I came here as a child but never went to the tower room. I didn’t know it was a library.”

“Knowledge is the key to the throne of the heavens that guides us in God’s embrace,” he quotes, walking toward me and offering me a drink. I take it, swallowing a large mouthful of whiskey until it burns.

I frown at him. “Is that from the Bible?”

He smirks. “No, The Codex of Ascendancy.” He gestures to a clear display case containing a very ancient-looking leather-bound manuscript. I go over to the glass case and try to make out the faded scrawl on the yellowing pages. “The law we doctors are supposed to abide by and the research you wanted to see of my father’s,” Jaxon adds.

“What are—” I turn around, and suddenly, he’s looking down at me with liquid silver eyes. He must have come up behind. Desire spikes through my middle, and the breath leaves my body in a gasp as he steps in closer.

“Are you really here to see old books, Laine?”

“Y—yes.”

He nods, puts down his drink, and then produces a key from his dinner jacket. He unlocks the display case and takes out the manuscript. “Sit down.” That commanding voice again. All at once, I find myself seated with the book on my lap.

And Jaxon right next to me.

The warmth of his side and thigh pressing into mine.

“There are two copies of the Lucian’s Codex. This one is the less fragile of the two.”

“Lucian?”

“Lucius Apuleius, a Roman philosopher, the first founder.”

As I turn the pages, he explains what the texts say and how they have been interpreted.

“How do you know all this?”

“I was expected to study every single word before I turned eleven.”

“Harsh for a kid.”

He looks at me like I don’t know the half of it.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Immediately, I regret saying it. The memory of the last time I was in a tower with Jaxon and the conversation we had comes rushing back. A shudder runs through me. “I never understood why a penny and not a pound,” I blather on.

Jaxon closes the book, placing it on the table. He picks up our drinks and hands me mine. “It’s not about the value. A penny symbolizes the simplest form of currency.”

“And in death, all individuals are equal,” I say, taking a sip.

Jaxon gives me a blank look.

“The Ripper. He leaves pennies on the body of his victims.” It slips out. Maybe I’m bolder now that alcohol is spiking through my veins.

His gaze holds nothing as he looks at me, not a flicker. “Interesting.”

It’s not common knowledge. Only I know because the Ripper left one on my chest. Not two like the others. Half finished. He didn’t even place it on my eyelid because he knew I wasn’t dead. My dad told me about the pennies left on the other victims’ unseeing eyes. They kept that part of his M.O. out of the press. The pennies were old. Not common. Pennies you would collect.

I still have mine—a chilling reminder.

It could be the fire’s warmth or the room’s intimacy that urges me to do what I do next. I don’t know. But using the hand not holding my glass, I sweep away the hair from my neck, displaying my scar for Jaxon to see. He’s on the right side to see it in all its jagged glory.

“You asked me about it the other day.” I look at him and then avert my eyes as I take another sip of my drink. “You were right. The Ripper tried to kill me.”

Jaxon places a hand on my neck to trace the scar, his thumb striking heat where it trails the edges of ruined skin. “But he failed.”

“Someone interrupted him. A dog walker.”

“He didn’t know what he was up against,” Jaxon drawls, leaning in.

His hand curled around my throat feels like ownership, forcing my heart to crash and burn against my ribcage over and over. But then, a warm rush fills me, spreading down to my core as his thumb moves slowly, brushing upward to my jaw and then over my whiskey-stained lips.

He's going to kiss me.

Jaxon suddenly presses down, muting me with his thumb as the distant sound of people talking and walking toward us takes over the peace.

“Wha—”

Jaw clenched, he shakes his head and stops me from speaking, waiting, listening intently until the sounds get louder. And then, his eyes, flickering with a reflection of the fire's flames, focus on me.

“Move,” is all he says.

The breath is knocked out of me as Jaxon manhandles me to my feet and practically drags me to the far end of the room, behind one of the heavy brocade curtains that drapes the large windows. Jaxon's body pressed tightly against mine has me pinned to the wood paneling. The scent of his aftershave, the heat of every contour of his body, and the sound of his breaths in my ear are dizzying. I feel faint. I want to ask why we're hiding, but with his hand roughly clamped over my mouth, his other hand gripping my waist, I can't speak a word....

“Stay very, very still. They can't know you are here,” Jaxon says ever so softly in my ear.

My heart seizes in my chest.

The people don't walk past the library but come into it. The door creaks loudly as it swings open. It's a couple. They stumble inside, laughing about something, clearly drunk. There's the sound of a cabinet opening and glass clinking.

I don't move. I don't even breathe.

“Knew the old fucker stashed some good stuff here,” says the male.

“Christian, pour me one,” a second voice sighs. Clearly female.

“Get it yourself.”

She swears, and there's the sound of alcohol sloshing. Jaxon is right on top of me, his head bent over my shoulder so his hair tickles my cheek.

“Chrissy, there's no fucking ice.”

“I told you not to call me that. And who the fuck puts ice in a three-hundred-pound glass of whiskey?”

“Who cares? Let's go back to the party.”

“Fuck the party. Come here,” Christian says, voice thick and heavy with desire. The sound of them kissing drowns out even the crackling fire. Kissing turns into heavy panting and groaning, and then all-out sex.

And there's nowhere to escape.

Jaxon is so still I'm not even sure he's breathing. I dare not look up at him, so I blink my watering eyes and try to imagine I'm anywhere but plastered against Jaxon Clément. But it's no use.

Suddenly, I'm hot. The heat of his skin, his solid presence, and the sound of two people fucking just a few steps away within the same room burn me where I stand. I want to run, but the lightest pressure of his hands has me held fast, causing flames to lick my insides, traveling like wildfire to my lower abdomen.

As the woman climaxes noisily, Jaxon shifts his weight, his thigh pressing between my legs, my mind conjuring dark, sordid thoughts. Without thinking, I clench my core, and the heat spreads lower.

"Now be a good girl and suck me off, love," Christian says breathlessly. There's the sound of her obeying. I bite my lip against Jaxon's palm. Immediately, I regret it. He tastes of salt. I moan inwardly.

"Good fucking bitch, that's it."

All I can do is close my eyes and focus on my breathing.

Jaxon's breath is hot on my neck as he holds me tight.

I ignore the slick, wet ache pooling between my trembling legs.

"What the fuck. You bit me."

"Then don't call me a bit—"

There's a loud crack, making me jump.

"Shut the fuck up. I'll call you what I want." A whimper and then a cry. "Grab the bottle, bitch. Let's go to my room. I need my cock sucked extra long and hard before I pass out tonight."

In the darkness of the curtain, I stare up at Jaxon. He's not looking at me, but his body is stiff. There's the sound of them leaving, the door closing with a bang as they go. Jaxon doesn't release me straight away.

"We need to do something," I say, but it comes out as a mumble.

Jaxon says nothing. He waits, body tense, and only after several minutes does he release me, moving off into the room, leaving me behind the curtain. I resist the urge to wilt against the wall and storm out behind the curtain after him. He's pouring himself another drink, leaning against the bar, when I reach him. Anger digs in my chest at the sight of him and his languid pose. "Do you always hide behind the curtains when a woman is getting abused?"

Jaxon sighs and looks at me, drink in hand. "I was protecting you from getting caught."

"Protecting me?" I snort. "I'm not the one who needs protecting." I'm

well aware my voice is high-pitched.

His dark eyes give me a once-over. “She’ll survive. He won’t do anything drastic here.”

I gape at him. “What kind of misogynist club is this?” I ask, even though I know. I’ve read enough derogatory articles to understand what members this place attracts.

“The kind that I can’t be bothered to interact with.”

“I’ll go rescue her myself, shall I?”

Jaxon raises a brow at me. “She won’t thank you.”

I stare at him open-mouthed. “I just...” I shake my head. “I just don’t understand you.

I’m halfway to the door, tears blurring my vision, when Jaxon grabs me. “Wait, Laine.”

I spin around, glaring at him. “What?”

He sighs, placing his drink on the bar. “I’ll handle it. I know where his room is. Stay here.”

He’s gone before I have time to react, the sound of the door being locked from the outside. I stand there like an idiot before I force myself to move again, trying the door in case I imagined him locking me in.

Nope. He did it. He locked me in.

LAINE

Nine Years Ago.

Victoria Royal School of Medicine, Turret Library

One of my favorite things is to steal into the library and hide. They call the main library on campus Turret Library instead of its given name, Thamebridge, because the turret at one end houses a spiral staircase hidden in the stacks of books that goes to an old bell tower. Victoria Royal was a monastery in the 1600s, so there are many places to get lost in, but the old choir tower is one of my favorites.

It's not my favorite today, however. Jaxon Clément is lying on the semi-circular padded window seat, his jacket folded and tucked under his head. One leg is bent, and his forearm is flung over his eyes to shield his face from the light. He's so big he takes up the whole thing. All I can see are his sculpted lips, jet-black eyebrows, and a spill of tousled hair. His broad chest moves up and down steadily, so I know he's not dead.

"You sound like a herd of elephants climbing those stairs," he murmurs.

Hovering at the threshold, I weigh up my options. I hoped to find this place empty to read and eat lunch in peace and quiet, but now I'll have to go elsewhere.

I haven't seen Jaxon around campus since he broke Addison's hands, screwing his rugby scholarship and ruining his medical career in one fell swoop. Jaxon wasn't even hauled into the principal's office, let alone suspended. That shows how much money his family contributes to the university research fund. And just how much guys like Jaxon can get away with.

Why did he do it? It couldn't have been because of me, could it? A dangerous question to ask him outright, given how much he scares me. Best to stay as far away from Jaxon as I can.

I turn to go, and his smooth-as-silk voice adds, "Plenty of space if you want to stay, Lainey."

Hearing my nickname on his lips makes me falter to a stop. I glance over my shoulder as he sits up, making room, running a hand through his mussed-up hair. His shirt sleeves are pushed up, revealing a tattoo on one arm: two

snakes curved around a sword with wings. He pulls his sleeves down when he sees me looking.

‘It’s Laine.’ *To you.*

“Laine, right, are you staying or going?” His icy silver depths pull me in as he looks into my eyes.

Heat prickles along my collar, making me hot all of a sudden. Sitting with Jaxon while I eat my lunch is harmless, right? It’s not like he owns the turret.

“Staying.” I slink into the room and sit on the other half of the window seat, as far away from Jaxon as possible, dropping my bag on the floor to rummage inside it.

Jaxon is watching me, buttoning the cuffs, his Patek Philippe watch on full display. I only know that’s what it is because I heard some students discussing how rare and expensive it was. That watch alone could pay off my parents’ debts and my education, even buy me an apartment after graduation.

Oh, how the other half live. I can’t even afford new clothes. Not that I would buy new. Secondhand is just as good.

I look up and catch his eye as I take out my books and lunchbox. He’s still staring. “Nice watch.”

He glances at it, a tightness to his jaw that wasn’t there before. “It’s an Aquanaut,” he says dismissively and indicates to my book. “What are you reading?”

“It’s a...er murder mystery.” Mild embarrassment snakes through my veins.

“Can you elaborate? I can’t see the title.”

The title is obscured by a homemade cover that seems even more embarrassing now it’s the topic of conversation.

“Sure, it’s a classic, *Murder on the Orient Express*, by Agatha Christie,” I say, expecting a snide comment back. But when he says nothing, I sit back against the cushions and open my book to the page I was reading. But I can’t concentrate. I’m aware of Jaxon, the feel of his eyes on me sending a zap of electricity down my spine.

Uncomfortable with the situation, I peer over the top of my novel. “Penny for your thoughts?”

He runs a hand through his unruly hair and my own hands itch to do the same. It looks so soft. “Your blouse is buttoned up wrong.” I blink at him and then look down. Shit, he’s right. The alignment is off.

I give him an annoyed look as I put down my book and stand to fix my

shirt. All the while, Jaxon watches like I'm the best form of entertainment he's had all day. I don't understand why he's still here. Hasn't he got anything better to do?

"Did you get dressed in the dark?"

"No. I was in a hurry," I snap back.

"You missed one."

My face flames. The problem with buying second hand is sometimes buttons are missing. I haven't had time to find a similar-looking one and replace it. "That's just the way it is." Once I finish tucking in my shirt, I sit back on the window seat.

But I'm so flustered that I knock my lunchbox onto the floor. It spills open, sandwiches flying everywhere. I scramble to pick it up, and to my surprise, Jaxon leans across and hands me a smushed-up cheese roll in cellophane wrap that looks like it was sat on.

My cheeks burn like they're on fire.

He gives my lunch a look of disgust. "Are you really going to eat that?"

"Not all of us can afford the overpriced canteen." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret saying them. My parents might not have much money, but they work hard. It's none of Jaxon's business what we can afford.

He arches a brow. "You're serious? The canteen is out of your range?"

I scowl at him, cramming my lunch into the box before shoving it into my bag. The last thing I need is for Jaxon Clément to see me eating it.

He lets out a sigh and grabs his jacket. "Come on. I'll buy you a real lunch."

My head whips up. "You don't need—" He grabs my book and slings my satchel over his shoulder, sauntering toward the staircase with my things before I can stop him.

I've never noticed the number of students visiting the library at lunchtime until Jack Clément is escorting me out of it. Even though my head is down, everyone watches. The hush-murmur of students whispering to each other at desks and the rustling sound of pages flipping between stacks is gone. In its place, a deafening silence.

It's no better outside, but there's noise and somewhere to fix my eyeline. I focus on the location of the canteen, but Jaxon makes a beeline for his car, a sleek black vintage Ferrari convertible with silver racing lines and red bucket seats. He drops my book and bag into the back seat and opens the passenger

side door.

I stare at it a little too long without moving.

“Well, are you getting in?”

“I thought we were having lunch?”

“That’s what we’re doing. Get in.”

As I slide onto the baby-soft leather, he leans down and across to buckle my seatbelt, his knuckle brushing my bare thighs as he skims over them to clip in the belt. My stomach flips, and goose bumps erupt over my skin where he touches me. Then he slams the door so hard that I jump.

What am I doing here? This is Jaxon. I’m letting him drive off campus somewhere like one of the girls he fucks and forgets—this is not me. But my body won’t move. It doesn’t want to leave the snugness of his car, even though there’s no roof and it’s about to rain. Excitement coils in the pit of my stomach, unwilling to say no.

“Where are we going?” I ask Jaxon as he climbs into the driver’s seat, folding his long legs behind the wheel.

“There’s a little place I know about thirty minutes from here.”

He dials someone that sounds like his PA. “I’m going to the field. Tell them to have her ready in ten minutes.”

Her. Who is she, and why does she need to be ready?

Ten minutes later, we pass through the gates of the local airfield, and I find out *she* is a plane, and thirty minutes travel time would be by air.

“Where are we going?” I ask him as we park next to a two-seater plane being taxied onto the runway with Jaxon’s family pharmaceutical company logo, H.E.L. (Health Elixir Labs) in bright red letters on the side.

He doesn’t answer me, getting out to speak to his ground crew on the airfield. I unstrap myself from the seat and hurry over to where he’s standing, watching the plane turn on a dime.

The wind is blustery, making my hair fly in all directions. My nerves feel the same: exposed, blasted so the ends are frayed. I have to shield my eyes to look at Jaxon. “Please don’t tell me we’re getting in that thing?”

He glances over. “If you’re worried about needing a passport, you won’t need one.” A sigh of relief escapes my lips until he adds, “We’re only flying to Le Touquet.”

I stare at him with wide eyes. “You said you were taking me to lunch.” My voice raises over the wind, loud enough to make the Jaxon’s ground crew glance at me, too.

Jaxon shrugs. “The best food is French.”

“What? No.” I shake my head, folding my arms over my chest to make a point and to stop my arms from shaking.

He raises a brow, taking in my shivering form. “If you’re afraid, don’t be. I’ve done this a hundred times.”

“That’s even worse. What planet are you on? Because last I checked, we do not need more CO₂ pumped into the air on this one.”

“What?”

I narrow my eyes. “I’m not getting on a plane for something as trivial as lunch.”

He blinks at me. “Eating good food is not trivial.”

Annoyance spreads in my chest. “Do you know how unsustainable and damaging to the environment flying is? It heavily impacts global warming and climate change, not to mention polluting the air we breathe.”

This is why I live on campus and walk to classes every day. Only prats like Jaxon drive around in their supercars to go a mile down the road.

He stares at me, jaw clenching as he thinks of something to say to counter that. He can’t unless he wants to come across a dick. “Fine, we’ll go back to the canteen.”

I gnaw my bottom lip between my teeth. “Good.”

Jaxon doesn’t say anything as we pull out from the airfield. I don’t either, preferring to stare out the window so he can’t see how red my face has become. My whole body is on fire. Did I lecture Jaxon on his own airfield in front of his staff? *Yes.*

Is there something wrong with me? *Also, yes.*

When we get down the road, I instantly recognize the sleepy chocolate box village we’re driving through. It’s Angelfalls, known for one thing, well, two, if you count the uninspired waterfall that is a hole in some rock with water pouring out of it.

“Oh, actually, can we stop here.” I point at an empty row of diagonal spaces lined in front of the main street of shops and pubs.

Jaxon sweeps a look at me but does so, pulling his car into one of the slots.

“The best food I know is here,” I say by way of explanation. “Wait, I’ll be back.”

Minutes later, Jaxon scowls when he sees what’s in my arms—a swaddle of steaming paper wrapped around two portions of Angelfall’s famous fish

and chips, mine substituted by vegan halloumi.

“If you get grease on my leather...”

“Just try one,” I say, ripping the paper open, taking out a hot, fat chip, and holding it up for him to eat. His eyes lower to the chip in my hand and then slowly back up to collide with mine.

Time slows. Light drizzle blankets the car in a fine mist, fogging the windows, but it’s clear to see we’ve gathered a crowd through them. Goulston Fish and Chips is a hot spot for the students of Royal Victoria. Realization dawns as embarrassment burns holes through me, making my cheeks heat to match the hot food between my fingers.

My breath shortens. “No, actually, these are yours.” I break the spell by jerking my attention to the rivulets of rain streaking down the windscreen, shoving a bag of fish and chips at him and the lone chip I pulled out into my own mouth. The salty potato is too hot to eat, but I’m so bewildered I swallow it whole, scalding my tongue and throat.

Jaxon sighs. “I can’t drive and eat at the same time.” He offers me his portion and then starts up the engine.

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere we can enjoy them without the world watching.”

Jaxon drives back to the airfield. The dark clouds have given way to patches of bright blue sky enough for us to sit on one of the grassy knolls opposite the runway and watch the planes taking off, eating our food off our laps.

I don’t ask why Jaxon has plastic sheeting in the trunk so we can sit on the grass and not get our clothes dirty, and he doesn’t mention me trying to feed him with my fingers. But we do talk about planes. Jaxon points out the planes as they take off and land and their owners. If he expects me to be impressed, I’m not. But give him his due, he notices.

“So flying isn’t your thing.”

“I’d rather see the world than fly over it. I much prefer slow travel. It’s cheaper to walk everywhere. Best way to go.”

“What if you wanted to go to Singapore?”

“There are less impactful ways. Promise me you’ll look into them. Bus, train, boat, or even hitchhiking.”

“I wouldn’t let you hitchhike if it was the last method of travel on earth.”

Excuse me? “You wouldn’t let me?”

“You’re a beacon for disaster.” His lips twitch as I stare at him open-

mouthed.

“I’d just drive you.”

“All the way?”

“Can’t be that far.”

I roll my eyes. “Knowing you, you’d book a suite on the Orient Express.”

“Knowing me?” He slides a chip into his mouth. His eyes are deep pools of liquid silver that I want to drown in. And in a dark part of my soul...*I want to be that chip.* At that thought, heat pools between my thighs.

Oh hell, what am I thinking? This is Jaxon. I can’t fall for him like everyone else.

Can I?

LAINE

Jaxon still hasn't returned when a muffled "Laine!" and a rattling of the doorknob snaps me out of it. It's Nola. I messaged her where to find me as soon as Jaxon left.

"It's locked," I hiss through the wooden door.

There's a clicking of the mechanism, and then the door swings open to reveal Nola on the other side, lock pick kit in her hands, a twisted smile on her face. "It's a good job I brought these with me." She steps in and looks around. "Where's Jaxon?"

I shrug. "He locked me in and left me."

Her eyes widen. "He locked you in?"

"Did you find the archive room?" I counter, not wanting to mention to Nola how toxic Jaxon can be. She knows he got me the ticket to the ball, so as far as she's aware, he's an asset.

She gives me a long, hard look and then nods. "That I did."

Nola leads. I follow her hurriedly to the end of a corridor, where a staircase descends, winding into the stone floor. At the base of the steps, an etching of a serpent slithering around a staff coils in the middle of the room like a crest. Gold-studded, ivy-covered wallpaper entwines the dark wood paneling like a starry night in a thick forest.

There's only enough light to see the archive door.

"You remember how to jimmy a lock?" Nola asks.

"No." In my pocket are her lock picks. Every so often, Nola takes me to some official public service building and makes me unpick the locks on random doors. Sometimes I can do it. Other times, I struggle with the mechanism. Once or twice, we got caught. I will say this about Nola, she can run.

"Fine. I'll do it and then come back up here and keep watch. If anyone sees me, I'll say I was looking for the ladies' room," she says.

I give my friend a nod, stark relief coursing through my body that I don't have to do it. I was right to bring Nola instead of Sage.

Nola strides over and holds her hand out over her shoulder. I shove the lock pick kit into her palm, and she gets to work. Even though we're moving quickly, it feels like we're moving underwater. I don't know how long we have; the last thing we need is to get caught.

Five seconds is all she needs.

“Okay, now you’re up. If anyone comes, I’ll send a message. Your phone is on silent, right?”

The archive room is empty when I slip inside. It’s hushed and low-lit and reminds me of a war-room bomb shelter stuffed away from prying eyes for a century, only recently discovered and updated with the minimum of tech. That’s how I know there are no cameras. The men who run this place think they’re untouchable and that they’re gods. *That they can stalk me in the woods and break into my house.*

Someone from this Foundation drives the car that followed me to the cemetery, and I will find out who.

Dusty tomes sit on rows and rows of glass shelves between salt-stained, cracked, and repaired brick walls. There’s a metal table with several chairs at one end, with a strip of green banker’s lamps down the middle. Books are open in front of one seat, like someone recently was down here, sitting, reading, filling their heads with all this forgotten lore.

A thrill sparks in the base of my stomach as I hurry through, eyes falling on the titles and consuming them, fingers tracing the spines. One section has the same book over and over, but only the years stamped in gold are different. I recognize the guest book they made me sign tonight and when I came here for the frat party all those years ago.

Next to the shelves are filing cabinets containing paperwork but nothing relating to any of the cars the club owns and who drives them.

I’m about to leave when the sight of the guest book for the year of the party stops me dead. Bile burns the back of my throat like acid. Slipping the heavy tome off the shelf, I rifle through it, my heart thumping inside my chest as I scan dates and times.

The day of the frat party has a lot of names, from the early morning to the early evening. Some are easy to read, but some of the handwriting is illegible. My breath catches, and a lump wedges in my throat when I see Molly’s name in her own hand, leaping out of the page at me. Just seeing her messy scrawl makes my eyes blur with hot tears.

A noise at the front of the archive, like someone twisting the handle, trying to see if it’s unlocked, has me almost dropping the book. Then the door swings open slowly, so I duck down, crouching at the end of the shelf with the book tucked against my middle. My chest is a rapid symphony of my beating heart and my lungs hyperventilating.

There's nowhere to escape.

A pause.

A beat of silence.

And then the person walks in.

They walk purposely to the end of the shelves, heavy shoes pounding the stone floor. The person stops when they get to where I'm hiding and then sighs, a small chuckle, deep and rumbling, making the hairs stand up all over my goosed skin. "You're entirely visible, you know. The shelves down here are made of glass," he says in a low voice, not loud enough for me to recognize him.

But it sounds like Jaxon.

My racing heart does a little flip, and embarrassment surges through me—as does a little fear trickling down my rigid spine.

"Simmons is on his way. There's an alcove further down behind the history section. I suggest you move to it."

I'm frozen in place until I gather enough courage to peer around the shelves, but he's gone, leaving the sound of his footsteps reverberating on the polished stone as he exits the room. Only when the door closes and the lock turns do I shift, shoving myself into one of the dark alcoves and praying no one finds me.

But someone found me. And then, he helped me. Why?

A ball of tension gnaws in the pit of my stomach. Especially when no one returns. Jaxon has probably locked me down here and has gone to get security. Nola might come and let me out, but what if they found her, too? I take out my phone and check my messages, the face of my phone illuminating my small corner of the darkness for a brief few seconds. None. There's no signal down here.

Fuck. I close my eyes, breathing deeply to eliminate the acrid taste stinging the back of my mouth, and tuck my phone away.

All I can do is wait.

Eventually, voices resound outside the room. I squeeze tighter into the alcove *he* ordered me into when the door unlocks, and Simmons, talking loudly, walks in. I can spy on him from where I am, silhouetted again by the garish green glow of the banker's lights.

"I don't care how this looks, just deal with them. Pay them off. Isn't what the fund is fucking for?" He looks around for something and spots it on the table. "Just deal with it. Dempsey has done your dirty work. You do the

fucking rest.”

Stalking over, he hangs up, grabs the notebook on the desk, and slips it into his front pocket. God must hate me because my phone gives a little buzz at that moment.

I’m not breathing as he pauses and looks back.

Dread has my lungs in a vice, and it’s not letting go.

He turns and takes a step—

All the blood in my veins turns to ice.

“Father,” Jaxon’s smooth voice cut through the gloom. “I have something to talk to you about.”

Simmons huffs as he paces further away. “Can’t it wait?”

“No, Sir. It can’t.”

Jaxon looks back into the room, eyes connecting with mine, staring straight at me. He smiles...a devilish one that has my heart beating down the bars of my ribcage to get out, but he doesn’t raise the alarm. Instead, he closes the door, leaving me alone with only my pulse pounding in my ears. I close my eyes and breathe, hoping for the smell of musty, old paper and the straining silence to calm me down.

When my body stops shaking and allows me to stand, I get off the floor and take pictures of the entries in the guest book on the day of the frat party. I then shove the book back on the shelves where I found it.

Nola isn’t at the top of the stairwell when I get there. That buzzing was the message she sent saying someone was coming and that she’d had to make herself scarce. My heartbeat returns to normal when I’m beyond the foyer. My stomach still churns, though, as do the questions. Jaxon Clémont helped me hide twice, once from Christian and again from his father—but why? What does he want? Someone is stalking me, hot-rinsing murder weapons, and Jaxon seems to be protecting me, helping me find out who. But why? Because of our past? He’s not one to do things out of the goodness of his heart.

I head toward the bar, chest tightening when I don’t see Nola anywhere.

Maybe she’s outside?

Drizzle falls like a heady mist beyond the solid, imposing walls of Berners House. There’s no one out here. The line of supercars arriving has long been cleared from the entrance and parked out of sight. I walk across the gravel, putting some distance between me and all the people I don’t want to be around and take out my phone. I’m ready to go home. I send Nola a

message about where to meet me. The last hour feels like a dream. Now that dread seems to have lodged itself in the pit of my stomach, I don't know what to do with the information.

My hands shake as I check the image gallery, and relief floods my chest when I see the photos I took are still there, the information my dad has been after since my attack, plain as day.

"Interesting pastime, sneaking into locked rooms and taking pictures," says a voice behind me.

I spin around, my body freezing when I see who it is, standing right behind me.

Jaxon towers over me, looking down, eyes glinting, rolling with anger. They flit between my phone and me. I close the screen before he can see what's on it, and without thinking, I shove it down my corset top. This dress has no pockets, and my purse is crammed with Nola's lock-picking kit after she gave it back to me.

"I wasn't sneaking—"

"I find that hard to believe," he says, his voice a rich bass, sliding across my skin like warm silk.

Licking my dry lips, refusing to cower. "I should get back inside. I need to find my friend." I move to go around him, but he steps in my way. His tongue swipes along his bottom lip, and he shakes his head.

"I can't let you do that, Laine."

My eyes narrow. "What?"

He holds out his hand. "Give me your phone."

"No." I snap.

The coldness of his gaze is enough to stop my breath. "You really want me to take it from you?"

I glare at him, my heart slamming against my ribcage. "You wouldn't dare."

Jaxon smiles slyly and takes me by the arm, his grip hot and solid, like molten iron singeing my flesh. I let out a yelp as he manhandles me closer, yanking me closer. His eyes burn into mine. "Last chance, little fox."

"Fuck you," I grit out, trying to get away.

"I'll take that as you want me to get it myself?"

He's too strong, and the shock as his other hand slides down the front of my dress has the breath whooshing out of me. Heart jerking against my chest, his fingers graze the mounds of my breasts. It seems to take an eternity. He

pulls the phone out, making me gasp, knuckles brushing against my exposed nipple since I'm not wearing a bra.

And then I can't breathe or move...because of the sensation of him in a place he shouldn't be. Molten lava brands my skin, rushing to the depths of my core. Memories of us pressed together behind the curtain come flooding back.

This must register with him because he stares at me, eyes obsidian, a curl to his full lips. I'm indignant from head to toe, and my cheeks are on fire as he relieves me from his hold. Disgust and embarrassment snake through me.

"Next time, just do as I say," he says, shaking his head and looking at my phone. "Now, what's the code?"

All I see is white-hot rage. "Go to hell."

He gives me a bemused look. "Are you always this cheery?" When I don't answer, he cocks his head. "Look, I'm doing you a favor. You don't want to mess with these people."

These people. As though he's not one of them.

"I could just toss it in the lake," he counters.

Fuck, he could.

He raises a brow. "Code now?"

"Fine." The anger swirls like a storm inside my chest, but with it comes mounting fear; it sticks in my throat like the heavy taste of metal when I see his hands. Not the hands of a surgeon.

Bruised, bloodied knuckles. *Did he fight with Christian after I screamed at him?*

"One-eight, eight, eight," I add after a beat. "What happened to your hands?"

His brows raise. "I was expecting six, six, six." He ignores the comment about his hands.

The misty rain has started again, and I'm suddenly ice cold inside and out. I want to wrap my arms around myself and huddle away, but I refuse to look weak in front of Jaxon. If he punched Christian, then good. The bastard deserved it.

"Interesting choice of photography," Jaxon says as he swipes through my phone and taps the keypad. The sound of the images deleting has my heart in tatters, filling me with prickling sorrow. Molly deserved better than this. At least I memorized some names. Jaxon can't take that away from me. He can't wipe my mind like he can electronic devices. I clench my teeth together to

keep from chattering.

“Here.” He holds out my phone, crystalline gray eyes locked on mine. “All done.”

I snatch it out of his hand and shove it in my purse.

He gives me a narrowed look. “A thank you wouldn’t go amiss.”

I shake my head with a scoff. “You’re delusional.”

He shrugs. “That may be, but I’m trying to keep you alive. Sneaking around. Stealing from the Foundation isn’t something to be taken lightly. Here, you’re shivering.”

He slips off his jacket and holds it out to me.

I let out a harsh laugh. Is this guy for real? “Don’t fucking come near me,” I throw back at him, storming toward the house. I’m shaking like a leaf. I need to get out of the rain and away from Jaxon Clémont as far as possible.

His arm, solid and warm around my waist, yanks me back toward him. “Don’t walk away from me.” I struggle until he seethes, all hushed in my ear, “Keep struggling, and I’ll pick you up, carry you, and dump you in the trunk of my car. I’m not in the mood, Laine.” His words seem to penetrate deep, so I stop. “Good,” he soothes. “Now, you can sit up front.”

As Jaxon drives, my mind races, trying to make sense of everything. I was so close...so close to having the names of the men there that night Molly and I were attacked. My chest feels numb, and the space where my heart should be—empty.

“We’re here,” says a whiskey-smooth voice, interrupting my dark and disturbed thoughts. I blink my eyes, suddenly self-conscious that I’m digging my nails into his butter-soft leather seat, and look around. Jaxon has driven me home, but I don’t remember getting into the car, wearing his jacket, or the journey. I don’t remember telling him where I live.

“Thanks,” I mutter thickly, undoing the seatbelt and reaching for the door. The handle pulls, but the lock doesn’t disengage. I glance at Jaxon, but he doesn’t move to open it. I try it again, but no luck. “Er, I think the child safety lock is on?”

Jaxon looks at me, irises almost black in the car’s dim interior. He doesn’t say a word and stares at me with a look that makes my skin hot and my breath catch in my throat. Desire flares deep in my abdomen as he gives me a look I can only describe as feral, as though he might pounce at any moment.

What if he did?

I shift in my seat, glancing outside briefly. The sky is pitch black. No

stars. Like it's the end of the world, it sometimes gets still like this just before bad weather hits. I should get home.

I turn to my momentary captor. "Jaxon. The door?"

He's looking at where my eyes were moments ago. "A storm is coming," he states like he just read my mind. My teeth scrape over my lower lip, my heart somersaulting in my chest. "Try not to get caught in it like last time," he adds with a curve to his lips. I stare at him, rooted to the spot, as unease washes over me.

What did he mean by that?

He disengages the lock, though I barely hear it. It takes my brain a few seconds to understand that he's waiting for me to leave. I climb out of his car and walk to my front door, not looking back to see if Jack or the pits of Hell are following me as I dig in my purse for my keys. They aren't where I usually put them, zipped inside an interior pocket where they can't fall out. After turning my bag upside down and emptying everything inside, I eventually find them in Jaxon's jacket pocket.

I'm still wearing it.

I slide it off as I walk toward his car, but he smiles when I get close, cold and dark like that day in the bar. "Keep it." I ignore him and open the door, tossing the jacket inside.

I don't close the door right away. My gaze is drawn to his hands, dried with blood.

He did that for me.

"Your hands are a mess, and you're a surgeon. Come inside, I've got a first aid kit."

What am I doing?

Jaxon gives me a look and then shifts the car into park. He follows me inside, waiting while I kick the bottom panel to make it open. He has to duck his head in the hallway because he's that tall.

"Kitchen is through here."

It's strange having Jaxon in my cottage. In his dinner shirt and suit pants, he looks out of place, larger than life. His bow tie has long since been discarded. I make him sit at the kitchen table while I rummage around for the first aid kit. All the student accommodation has one. Finally, I find it gathering dust at the back of the cupboard.

Jaxon watches me clean his hands with disinfectant and then apply an anti-inflammatory cream to reduce the swelling on his knuckles. "This must

make you happy,” he says as I apply a bandage where I can.

“What?”

“That the roles are reversed.”

“You helped me. It’s the least I could do.” Now that I’ve done my duty, nerves tremor underneath my skin, and the scent of hospitals lingers as I put everything away. I can’t look at Jaxon, so I busy myself with menial tasks like making a pot of tea. Because...When in doubt, make tea.

While making it, I’m hyper-aware of Jaxon’s dark eyes, observing my every move. I feel like Red Riding Hood, letting the wolf inside her house, and I don’t want to stare into his jaws and ask how big yet. Moths, not butterflies, swish their furry wings in my stomach like they’re trying to fly to the moon through my throat. If I had to place my finger on it, it’s Jaxon’s presence. It’s unsettling. There’s always been a darkness to him—I knew it at school and in the pub. So why do I keep letting myself be drawn to him?

Because I’m just as full of darkness, and like attracts like.

“You don’t trust me, do you?”

Suddenly, the hot water kettle whistles on the stove, making me jump. I pause before I fill the teapot with hot water to catch my breath and turn around. “You deleted the photos. I can’t forgive you for that.”

He eyes the hot water kettle in my hand. “You will. Once you realize you need me.”

“Need you,” I scoff. “You were the one who disappeared.” Without warning, my cheeks heat. Dammit, I didn’t mean to bring up the past. I got over it. I got over him.

Jaxon smirks and my chest pulls tight. I turn back to what I’m doing—making tea—but shaking so hard it spills. Steaming hot water scalds my fingers. “Fuck!”

Jaxon is behind me, his hand around mine, taking the kettle away. “Put your hand under the cold tap for a few minutes. I’ll finish it.”

“No, I can—”

“Laine.” The way he says my name has no room for negotiation. I stick my hand under the tap while he finishes making the tea, and then he makes me sit while he brings it over.

“You’re a nightmare,” he says, pouring and placing a steaming cup before me. “How you’ve survived all these years, I’ve no idea.”

My face is still flushed, but I glare at him. “I’m not a damsel.”

He snorts a laugh. I notice he doesn’t pour his tea for himself. “Aren’t

you? You keep finding your way into trouble.”

My eyes track to the room with my killing board—the urge to come clean about my late-night hobbies claws at my throat. When I look back at Jaxon, he’s staring at me intently. Like he knows what’s behind door number one. A thrill sparks in the base of my stomach as the air in the room sucks right out of it. I’m alone with the big bad wolf again, only I invited him into my house, and now he will eat me up.

But I’m a wolf, too.

I straighten my spine and take a sip of my tea.

“I don’t mind rescuing you,” Jaxon says, silver-gray eyes locked onto mine as he sits across from me. There’s a tilt to the corner of his lips like he finds that hilarious. “But if I’m going to keep on saving you, breaking bones in your honor, you’ll have to tell me what you’re fumbling around in the dark trying to achieve.”

I nearly choke on my tea, the hot water burning the back of my throat like acid. Breaking bones. What the hell did he do to Christian? “Did you fight with Christian?”

His smirk widens, curving across his lips as he leans back in his seat, utterly at ease in my tiny cottage. The shadows spread and lengthen around him, making him even more intimidating, and my body reacts, burning up under his scrutiny.

“I wouldn’t call it a fight.” He doesn’t elaborate, leaving me to imagine all kinds of evils one person can do to another. “Now, answer my question. Why did you break into the archives?”

You’ve done worse.

The voice in my head seems to come out of nowhere, taunting me, But Jaxon is waiting for me to say something, to explain my actions. And his expression tells me no lie on the tip of my tongue would suffice. How he looks at me like I *need* saving by him has annoyance balling in my chest like a bad omen. It doesn’t override the other *look* that delves beneath my clothes and undresses me with so much as a passing glance.

“Laine?” he repeats softly, cutting through the sound of my heart racing.

I wet my lips. The last thing I want to do is admit I have a stalker, but it’s better than telling him I’m trying to solve a ten-year-old murdering spree. Everyone believes the ripper was caught. He’ll think I’m crazy for believing otherwise.

“I have a stalker. His car is registered to Berners House.”

“Is that so?” His eyes flash with anger for a second, his body coiled to react, dangerous...but then he looks around my small abode, breaking contact, relieving me of his unwavering stare. “Is that why you invited me in tonight?”

I swallow. “Something like that.”

Abruptly, he gets to his feet, straightening his shirt as he takes me in. “Then you’re staying with me.” His gaze dips to my lips as I lick them, a habit I have when I’m nervous as Hell, and then to my exposed cleavage, almost popping out of my skin-tight dress. “You should grab a change of clothes. That dress looks uncomfortable to sleep in.”

JAXON

Watching my little fox panic has become my favorite way to pass the time. She's a delight when she's afraid, and then she bites.

She declined my invitation to stay, as I knew she would. So I checked all her windows and doors, even though I knew it was a waste of time so she could rest easy, and then drove back to Berners House.

When I get there, the dregs of the ball are still loitering. My father raises his head, trying to catch my eye. I ignore him and head straight down the coiled staircase to the archive room. At the far end, in the alcove my fox trembled only hours before, I press a smooth stone, and a door opens.

It amuses me she was so close yet so far from finding Henry.

And that she played her hand.

Not all of them. Just one—admitting to me that she has a stalker. Either she still hasn't pieced it together, or she's playing me like I am her.

It'll be fun to find out.

I almost let her take the evidence with her, evidence that would damn my father and his fascist friends. But where is the fun in that? Our games would end, and I'm enjoying the hunt far too much.

Henry stirs on the sterile table, eyes snapping open as I approach, and gives me a hostile look. His muscles bunch against the ropes I have around him, clothes dirt-stained and torn from being dragged through the mud. On his neck sticks a red-stained gauze from when I saved him. I don't know why I bothered to, except seeing his hands all over her that night made me want to kill him instead.

The death she gave him was too easy.

Next to him, unconscious, is Christian. He's out cold after I punched him repeatedly in the face and then injected him with a sedative to keep him quiet. His eye socket is shattered, and his nose is a mess, bloodied. It's most definitely broken in a few places. I almost killed him in front of the girl he was with, my anger getting the better of me.

I held back.

Just.

"Let me go, you sick fuck," Henry grates, barely a whisper, watching me warily.

His vocal cords were damaged when she slit his throat. I didn't bother to

repair them. He can't scream for anyone to help him. Not that they would. No one knows about these passageways but the most trusted members. Acolytes are in the dark about this place until they prove themselves.

I'm the only one who has.

"Interesting calling me that when what you do in the name of Divine is an abomination." A twisted snarl graces my lips.

"I serve. Just like you." He strains to reach me. If he could, he'd rip those bonds and strangle me with them. That's what I'd do in his place. I've left him here to rot for days, lying in his own blood and piss. "We're the fucking same."

I snort. "We're not the same." When we're called to serve, we're expected to sacrifice to prove our worthiness. Henry and the others, drunk on the establishment's power, take what they want. The Archkey is too weak to see that. "You abuse the power he gave you. You take what's not earned."

Henry sniggers, but it turns into a hacking cough. "Why do you think he gave us immunity, if not to fucking take what we want?"

Thick anger curls in my gut, but I shove it down. I don't need it yet. "You broke the rules," I remind him, opening my box of tricks where he can see.

"There are no rules for Gods like us," he grinds out.

"That's where you misunderstand. You are not a God yet." I take out a six-inch Liston knife, our ritual instrument for ascendancy, and inspect it. "I am."

His eyes widen a fraction. "I want to see The Archkey."

A dark smile plays over my lips. "I'm afraid The Archkey is unhappy with your service."

"Wait!" What's left of his voice scrapes at the sharp corners of my mind, drawing the darkness to the forefront of it. "What do you want? I can give you—"

"Shhhh." I place the blade's edge against Henry's tongue. His eyes bulge, breathing becoming shallow when my eyes flicker, and Hell takes over. He knows what's coming.

I let the Evil in.

When I come to, the sterile table is awash with blood.

Harvesting his organs may be too late, but I'll do it anyway. I'm supposed to be representing Mitre Hospital at The Foundation's after-party brunch tomorrow. My father won't appreciate me turning up late, half dead on my feet, but that doesn't bother me. It's been a long time since I sought his

approval. And I like everything neat and tidy and cleared away.

My loss of control may have cost me what Henry's heart would be on the black market, but the darker parts of me are easier to handle when satisfied.

I take the prepared scalpel and make a slash incision on another part of the body, not caring to maintain perfection. There's no audience, no life on the line this time. I can be as messy as I want. Dead blood pools dark, almost cherry black, in steel grooves like a vintage wine. I work succinctly, severing ligaments and tissue.

Until the heart can be plucked out.

I place it in a transport cooler, pack it with ice, and seal it.

Imagining it's my little fox on the table, tied up, mewling for release shoots a thrill straight to my cock...but then I see that bastard Henry and what he did to her, touching her, placing his hands on what's mine. Red clouds my vision just as much as the workspace, and I rip the rest of the corpse to shreds.

It's a ritual—a soothing one.

When I'm finished, his body is mutilated from the waist down. Perfection. If only he'd been alive, I could have punished him properly. Still, he'll serve a purpose. They always do.

Before I finish, peel back the gauze and admire her handiwork: the precise cut of her blade, the depth of the first slice—her training at medical school wasn't wasted, then. Shame she dropped out. She would have made a fine surgeon.

Christian still hasn't woken up. I check his pulse. It's weak, but he's alive.

Good.

After placing Henry's body in a cold drawer, I clean up and leave. A call on my phone lights up the screen just as I'm pulling into the driveway of my apartment. It's Shepherd checking in like he usually does.

"Henry's family are asking where he is," he says gruffly, classical music wafting in the background. "Do you know?"

"I told him to keep low." He doesn't need to know Henry is dead just yet. That little secret will stay between me and my sly little vixen.

"And the potential scandal?"

I don't hesitate. "Dealt with."

"Good. The Archkey doesn't like loose ends. He wants this harvest to go smoothly. We can't have the police poking their noses in our business."

“I never leave loose ends.”

“He’s concerned with your...harvest. Your orders are to come in and submit—”

I hang up before he regrets his words.

Shepherd thinks he’s my superior because he’s golf buddies with my father, but I’d rather chug acid than listen to him preach at me down the phone about orders. I don’t take orders from the Archkey, just as he no longer controls me. I’m a tool of the Divine. My father wouldn’t understand that, just like he can’t enforce his power over the Lucians, the acolytes without me, his instrument of death and punishment. He certainly can’t control the blood market without my contribution.

The Lucians were founded to promote a distinct code of ethics in the medical fraternity. The structure may be flat, but inherently, it’s based on family. Acolytes rise through the ranks by the strength of inheritance and their connections—what they bring to the table. Apart from knowing my father, Shepherd brings next to nothing. I tolerate him only because my father does.

The Foundation, the front for the organization the Archkey uses to manipulate his power through legitimate hoops, has always supplied those hospitals and research clinics willing to turn a blind eye with a steady source of organs, blood, and high-grade human tissue needed for all their award-winning medical advances—from stem cells to human embryos. They’ve become accustomed to having an unlimited supply until now. But prices have gone up. Sources are low. Shares and seats on the board aren’t enough, just as Foundation directors in pockets and doctors loyal to the Lucians in clinics fall short.

My father believes the Supreme Being will save him. But without sacrifice to hunt down victims, an offering of flesh, blood, and bone, he has no edge. They need me if the Lucians want to maintain control of Mitre and other hospitals in the private sector and its wealthy patronage.

He needs me.

Without my hand, they would all burn.

But while it would be fun to watch my father’s empire turn to ash, I have always been loyal to the Divine. To the Ascendant and the power promised to me if I let the darkness feed every once in a while.

Not too much, just enough to sate his hunger.

I’ll harvest who the hell I like.

Starting with what's mine...

LAINE

I'm lulled into a false sense of safety at the library...by the cozy stacks of books and the endless varnished tables filled with warm, living, breathing bodies.

Not Jaxon's body.

No, not his.

After he left me, I had a long hot shower, sticking my face under the head until I could barely think, cleansing my mind and soul of that man. How dare he come back and rip reality right from underneath me. His offer of staying with him until the police caught my stalker was so tempting I had to bite my lip and dig crescent-shaped wounds into my palms to stop myself from taking it.

How dare he come back and expect...

To pick things up where they left off.

Irritation stabs my gut at that thought as I take out all the letters the Ripper has ever sent and place them before me, smoothing over the creases in the pages to keep them flat, hand trembling with controlled rage. I may be afraid, but I'm also furious—at myself for letting my guard down and losing the evidence. At Jaxon and that presumptuous smirk of his. I will never let that man consume me ever again.

At least all the tangled emotion swirling inside me is helping me focus. Seeing the evidence I've been hoping to find for a long time in black and white, gathering dust in the archive room, has lit a fire under me.

I've always known the killer was a member of Berners House. It was there that I saw the elite crew of the rugby team rape and possibly murder my friend while I watched, frozen in place, unable to do a thing to stop them. It was there, he followed me as I ran in a drunken panic to get help. However, my memory of events and who was involved has always been hazy.

Now, proof exists. Even though it's not anything I can take to the police, since Jaxon deleted it from my phone, it's enough for me to remember and push me to keep digging. One of those names in the guest ledger belongs to the Ripper.

I know it.

"You're getting close," Nola's throaty voice soothes down the line when I call her and tell her my theory—that the person stalking me, taunting me with

murder weapons in dishwashers is the same man who tried to kill me all those years ago. It scared me when he started sending letters to my house after he'd been caught, but now I'm convinced that the person who has been following me, breaking into my house, is the Ripper. The police have the wrong person. It's too much of a coincidence.

"It's a member. Someone at the frat party followed me in a car owned by the club..."

"It could have been anyone. A club member. One of their parents. The staff." It's a debate we've had over and over. My gut tells me one thing, while Nola brings me back to earth, stating the facts.

"It's one of Addison's friends, I know it."

"You've looked at every one of them and ruled them out."

I let out a huff. "Then I need to look again." Addison Cochrane was there at night. I'll never forget his face. But while he was one of the monsters who hurt Molly, which puts him firmly on my list, he didn't follow me. Everyone saw him and Christian take Angelica Laws to his room, and she swore blind they were with her all night. In fact, every guy I saw around Molly had someone at the club who could later vouch for them. However, that doesn't mean it wasn't them. It just means they are lying, and the club is protecting them.

"What about Jaxon Clémont? Their golden boy who has just coincidentally turned up. He deleted the evidence, and he's been hanging around. Maybe he's the one you should be looking at. Wasn't he at the frat party?"

I pause, taking in what she's saying. An unsettling twinge spills through my insides. Then I shake my head. "No, the police checked him at the time. He has a solid alibi. Jaxon wasn't even in the country."

Alibis can be faked.

I keep that seed of doubt to myself. I didn't see Jaxon there. It was later I found out that he'd left the country to go to his residency program early. He was supposed to take me to the university end-of-year ball but never messaged or showed. When he stood me up, I was so furious I wanted to do something reckless. I wanted to do all the bad things I'd been avoiding all my life up until that point—get drunk, sleep with some random guy, forget I'd ever met Jaxon Clémont. That's why I dragged Molly to the frat party. That's why she's dead.

Because of me.

My emotions want to blame Jaxon, but I have to be clinical about this. He wasn't there.

Still, the unsettling feeling stays, sickening my stomach's insides like a malignant spirit refusing to be buried by common sense. I swallow it down, ignoring the acid reflux, focusing on Nola's next question instead.

"What about the guy they caught?"

"Max Lamberton?" I went once to see him, to put all the old ghosts and the nightmares they harbored to bed. It was before I met Nola and before the letters started coming again. As soon as I looked into his eyes, I knew that the police had the wrong guy, even if he confessed to all five murders and had details no one else knew—like the pennies.

But the police wouldn't listen to a girl who got letters from the Ripper himself. Why would they, when they pronounced them fake? And Molly was missing, not ripped like the other girls.

"He must know something. If you say he's not the Ripper, he confessed for a reason. Innocent men don't take the fall for nothing. Are you sure he's not the one sending you the letters?" Nola muses out loud.

"From prison? It's possible."

"Did you ever ask him?"

"No."

"Then you need to."

"I hate prisons," I sigh, making a note to visit Lamberton at HMP Hanbury. They remind me of dark, forgotten places where I might end up.

"Want me to come with you?"

I decline. As much as having Nola there would help me through it, I can't drag her into my problems more than I already have. I can't implicate her in anything else.

"Still on for tonight?" Nola's throaty voice soothes down the line. Even though we meet just the three of us, we still try to attend the Stronger Together meeting that brought us together in the first place—every Monday at 7 p.m. in St. Jude's church.

"I'll be there," I say in a clipped tone. I wouldn't miss it for the world. Without her and Sage, I would have curled up and given up.

"Good, because Sage is throwing a wobble about her parents' latest demand, and you have a problem," she sighs.

She hangs up before I can ask what the problem is, unsettling me. A gnawing creeps into my gut that I can't explain. Nola is one of my closest

friends; she has to be with all the dark secrets of mine she knows about, but sometimes, she can be bloody cryptic.

I work throughout the day, drifting between rows, researching the names I remember in the guest book on the internet and then in the news archives. I may not have access to the Foundation's files, but I can wade through a lot of public data. It would help if I could access the police evidence, too, but my father would have a heart attack if I asked him. They closed the case years ago. My father couldn't unearth the files without questions being asked.

The night steals up on me. I only know it's late when the place empties and the librarian locks the doors to prevent anyone else from coming in. It's the last straw when the lady comes over to tell me I need to leave, and I jump out of my seat. After a full day of research, I'm no closer to finding anything remotely useful, and it's eating me alive.

I should have let Jaxon throw my phone in this lake, and then at least those pictures would be on a backup in the cloud instead of permanently gone.

My car is the only one in the parking lot when I finally exit. I exhale and traipse toward it. The cold summer air is crisp, clinging to my skin like it's on the precipice of rain. If only my thoughts could be as clear, but they're not. They're in turmoil, and I'm a hot mess. The Ripper has me trapped in a maze, running in every direction.

And Jaxon is a mystery I can't solve or run away from, even if he is playing me for a fool.

"YOU NEED TO MOVE THEM," NOLA SAYS AS WE APPROACH THE CHURCH meeting. I stop walking, but Nola continues, clomping up the steps ahead until I snap out of it. She doesn't give me time to ask what she means because the rest of our group has arrived.

Nola takes one of the empty chairs, avoiding my gaze. Brow furrowed, I choose a seat too. Sage appears beside me, waves a shy hello, and takes the chair to my right, ignoring Nola's orders to sit apart for our Stronger Together meetings. As if we can pretend we don't know each other. Therapy is how we met.

Greg, the group leader, starts the session, but I'm not listening. I'm too

busy glancing at Nola, trying to get her attention...for confirmation of what she means. Halfway through, my gaze collides with hers, and she shakes her head. Her one perfectly groomed brow arches over the black eye patch matching her black jumpsuit.

Not here.

I grimace, unable to keep my emotions from sprawling across my face like the rainbow of light that dapples through the arched stained glass. When the session finally ends, I pull Nola aside at the refreshment stand.

“What do you mean, move them?” I ask in a low voice, pouring hot water into a cold black tea to revive it.

Nola glances my way, reaching for the hours-old coffee pot. “You know what I mean.”

Nola’s lone eye seems to bore into me, and she motions with her head to follow her outside for a cigarette. I don’t smoke, but Nola vapes. After she’s inhaled her mint vapor, she takes out her phone and flicks through the screen until she gets what she’s looking for. She hands it to me without saying a word.

It’s an article about the old cemetery and new developments planned for the area. The project will involve relocating every single grave.

A chill cuts through my insides. Suddenly, everything is colder and darker.

“Oh, Hell,” I say under my breath.

“I told you that was a shit place to dump them.”

“It’ll take me a few nights.” Three bodies are a lot to move in one attempt.

When we go back inside, Sage, trapped between Greg and Patty, nodding at whatever they say, looks over—a rabbit caught in headlights. As everyone leaves, I rescue her and make her walk me to the parking lot. She usually takes a taxi, but I convince her to let me give her a ride to the station and then tell her what Nola told me.

“I need your help,” I say, holding my breath in case she turns me down. “I need to move them. They’re too heavy to move alone. I struggled last time,” I admit. I won’t say outright what they are. None of us do. It helps not to think of them as dead bodies.

Sage thinks about it for a few seconds. “Sure...I can sneak out.”

Relief surges through me. “Pick you up around midnight.?” I say as I drop her off a few blocks from her parents’ vast mansion that she must rattle

around alone in. They're never home. She nods as she gets out. "Thank you. I owe you one, Sage. The second you want to get rid of your shit for brains, fiancé, say the word."

Nola explicitly said we weren't to get involved with each other's murders, but I don't care. I know how hard it was to kill my first.

Sage smiles, one of those haunted ones that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "When it's River's time, I want to be the one to cut him up into little pieces."

I nod at her, gnawing at my lower lip, understanding exactly how she feels. As Sage heads toward her mansion, not a falter in her stride, I kick the engine into gear and drive off.

Nola said Sage was having a wobble. It sure doesn't seem like that.

LAINE

A body is missing.

How could that happen? I glance at Sage, and she gives me a worried look, half hidden in the torchlight, dirt smudged on her cheeks like one of those scenes from a movie where the heroine has been baking cakes and accidentally got flour on her face. Only digging in graveyard mud is a far cry from making innocent fairy cakes. We've been hauling soil for hours trying to find the body of Henry Wickham, only to come up short.

"Are you sure you left it here?" Sage asks in a hopeful voice. "Could it be in some other grave?"

"No." I shake my head. "I specifically chose this tombstone." I gesture to it, staring down into the four-foot hole we've dug. We've found nothing but worms, rocks, and the remnants of the coffin initially buried in the plot over a hundred years ago.

Sage wipes her brow. "Maybe we have to dig deeper."

I take a seat on a fallen tree, letting my lungs deflate. "Honest to God, I did not go deeper than this. This is where I put him. I remember because it was raining and lightning lit up this damned tree—" A chill snakes through my insides, sucking the heat from my entire body.

I stare at the tree, the one that moved that night.

"What is it?" Sage asks.

With Sage here, it doesn't feel as ominous as it was...but as the darkness stretches out, surrounding us like an endless pit of Hell, the cold air plays over my skin and slithers down my spine, kick-starting my heart with a dangerous warning. "He took it."

Sage's brow furrows. "Who? The person who was following you?"

Trying not to hyperventilate, I get to my feet, scanning the shadows. "Yes...I don't know."

"He took the body? Who is he and why would he do that?" Her voice is higher pitched than usual, as though what I'm saying is ludicrous. And really, it is when you think about it. Why would anyone take a body? Any sane person would call the police. All I can think about is the knife in my dishwasher. It's still there at the bottom. Even though it's a murder weapon, I can't bring myself to touch it.

"How else do you explain it?"

“You need to tell Nola.”

I give her a look. That’s the last thing I’m going to do. “No, no. Nola can’t find out.”

Sage lifts a brow. “Why not? She might be able to help?”

“What am I going to tell her? That I lost a body?” That someone broke into my house and washed the murder weapon.

Her mouth makes a grim line. “No...that your stalker took it.”

“We don’t know that,” I lie to us both out loud, hoping it’ll be true because the alternative is horrifying. “Maybe I didn’t kill him properly, and he got up and walked away?” I let out a harsh laugh. I do know because a car registered to Berners House was following me and then someone broke into my house and took the clothes I was wearing. Why not take a body too?

Sage frowns. “That isn’t funny.”

I exhale sharply. She’s right. It’s not funny. Someone was here, and now a body is missing. Evidence of what I did is in someone else’s hands. “Fine. I’ll tell her.”

Sage nods, relief blooming across her face. “Nola will know what to do.”

Another shiver runs through me as we gather the tools to head home, turning off the lamps and plunging us into darkness.

I can only hope she’s right.

Nola picks us up from the woods after we move the bodies. We drop Sage off at Templevale station first and then make the winding journey toward Whitechapel.

It’s quiet for a few miles. She says nothing about my face covered in scratches from dragging bodies through the undergrowth or my hair matted and clothes slick with mud. I’m sitting on a tarp to keep her seats clean anyway.

As I lean my head against the cold glass and let the warmth of the blow heaters eat away at the chill in my bones, I close my eyes. The heavy sigh my companion exhales, the calming tap-tap of the rain on the car windows, and the soothing swish of the wipers bleed into the silence like water, making this feel like just any other journey at 4.30 a.m.—a nightmare into a dream.

Nola couldn’t be there tonight and couldn’t tell me why. It would irk me more if it were anyone else or any other situation but this, but she has her own demon. Not that she’s told me anything about him. The monster Nola is stalking is someone she doesn’t like to talk about.

She took the news about the body being missing in her stride, though the

atmosphere in the car is as thick as fear now, chasing me all the way home from the cemetery.

I may never feel warm again.

“What motive?” she asks, breaking the tense silence with her sultry voice.

“It’s a game to him.” My voice sounds scratchy compared to hers.

“And what’s his end goal?”

I shake my head, staring out a steamed-up window as rain drizzles like tears from heaven outside, misting up the streets so you can’t see more than a mile ahead. Even though the heater is on, a shiver slides down my spine. “Can you believe it’s August?”

Nola puffs out a lung full of air. “No, and I can’t believe you’re changing the topic, either.”

“I don’t know what he wants.”

“We’ll he hasn’t doxed you into the police.”

“No, he hasn’t.”

“Then he’s waiting for you to make a move.”

“What move could I possibly make?”

Nola shoots me a look in the dark and nods to the glovebox. I open it to reveal a cloth wrapped around a solid, heavy object. It’s a handgun, the blued steel drinking in the surrounding darkness as the polished metal reflects the streetlamps we drive past. She grins at me. “One he isn’t expecting.”

I stare at it and then bundle it back into the glovebox, closing it with a snap. “I’m not ready for that.”

Nola huffs. “It’s for self-defense.”

“Guns are illegal in this country.”

She laughs, her voice tinkling through the air. “Excuse me? Killing people is illegal.”

Having a gun in the house would make me feel safer. Not that I know how to fire one. “Fine. Just don’t tell me where you got it.”

We lapse into silence for the rest of the way home. When we get to a couple of streets from my house, Nola breaks it. “It went according to plan, right?”

“It did.”

“No one saw?”

A muscle tightens in my jaw. “No.”

“And you got rid of the evidence?”

“I did everything you told me to,” I snap. Nola’s trying to be helpful, but

that makes me irritable. *I should be irritable—I moved two dead bodies in the middle of the night.*

Nola glances at me, concern plain as day on her features. “Are you okay?”

“Great. Loving life,” I say, my right eye twitching. When that doesn’t appease her, I let out a sigh, hand rubbing over my face. “I’m just tired,” I admit, letting exhaustion grate in my voice.

“I want you to be careful.”

“I am.” I force out a reassuring smile.

Nola exhales, nods, and pulls the car over, coaxing the car partly onto the curb. She turns off the engine and looks at me. I try not to roll my eyes and work out how far we are from my house so I can walk.

I’m being a brat. I know I am, but I’ve killed three raping murderers in the last year, and the sticky hot feeling of hatred that has been choking the life out of me hasn’t gone away, not like it was supposed to.

It’s still there...lurking beneath the surface.

Waiting to kill again.

Nola keeps the engine switched off until I look at her, knowing how easily I get myself worked up only to deflate. As soon as I turn my head, allowing her one brown eye to look steadily into mine, I find myself drawn to the black patch covering the other. Seeing into Nola’s soul is almost like looking into a mirror lately. I have no desire to see how black mine has become.

“We’re in this together. One slip up, and we all go down,” she says, voice soft.

“I know,” I mutter back. “But you don’t have to worry.”

“It’s my job to worry, I brought you into this mess.”

“No, you’re getting me out of it,” I correct her.

After a few beats, she takes a deep breath and resumes driving until we reach my cottage. I’m almost reluctant to get out of the car when we get there; the world of night is so still. Nothing stirs. No birds. No breeze.

“Stronger Together,” she says as I slide out of her vehicle, her fingers crossed so that the middle is tucked around the fore, a small smile on her lips.

The corner of my mouth tilts up despite the airless shadows that seem to have grown bigger, lingering around me wherever I look these days. “Stronger Together,” I repeat under my breath.

Nola’s smile broadens, and she zooms off, leaving me alone—to the

demons in my head and the darkness of sleep when I finally crawl into bed.

*Three months ago.
Second Kill.*

I follow one of the five monsters I've pledged to stop since I joined Nola's serial killer club into an alleyway.

Out of all of them, he's the most sloppy. The police already have him as their primary suspect in the murder of a girl they found a few streets away, mutilated beyond belief. Witnesses have him with her all night, picking her up from a bar where he opened a tab with his credit card. How dumb can you get?

He's not the Ripper, but it's only a matter of time before he does it again and gets away with it. His family owns most of London. He thinks he's untouchable.

I'm going to remind him he's not.

In my head, I planned all kinds of twisted revenge. Cut him the way he cut her. Bleed him out just like she did. But my hands are shaking as I follow him down the narrow, deserted street, the cobbles making it hard to walk. My body is a quivering mess.

It shouldn't be. I've done this before.

Practice makes perfect. I've always believed that.

Still, there's a tightness in my chest, and fear claws its way up my spine, despite the hunting knife in my coat pocket and the can of mace in my hand. He's got a drunk girl hanging off his arm, so I need to get rid of her. I hang back when he pushes her against the outside wall of the bar they just exited. One hand up her skirt, the other around her throat as he devours her mouth

with his. She's out of it. Head lolling to the side, eyes fluttering closed.

He unceremoniously whips out a rope as I peer around a wheelie bin, trying not to make a sound. She barely registers that he's restraining her, his hands buried between her legs as he does. Disgust slithers through me like a rancid poison. He's a monster who likes to subdue his victims with date rape drugs, though it makes it easier for me to dispose of him if she's out cold.

But still...

Sick to the core, my hand grips the mace tighter. I pull back and suck in a ragged breath, steeling myself for what I'm about to do, while the monster I'm hunting laughs to himself like a pig—harsh sounds echoing through the alleyway.

Just a pig fit for slaughter.

I refuse to think of him as a man.

The sounds of London town beckon from beyond the narrow streets behind me. But here we're away from prying eyes. The alleyway is empty, devoid of cameras or security. He chose the perfect spot to bring his victim. Luckily, there's no one here to see what I'm about to do either.

Heart pounding, I flutter my eyes closed, letting the memory of his crimes—photographs of the scene and battered corpse—burn in my vision, pooling hate and disgust in every fiber of my being before dragging them open again.

Then I stalk toward him.

He doesn't notice me at first, and it's too late when he does. His brows arch comically. "Who the Hell are yo—"

I spray chemicals into his face. Immediately, he drops the drugged girl to the ground, bellowing like a bruised bear. Tears streaming. "What the fuck?"

There's a Taser in my pocket. My dad gave it to me on my twenty-first birthday instead of jewelry because...you know. We're that type of family now. I jam it in his balls, and he goes down like a lead balloon.

"Always knew you'd come in useful, Terrance," I say under my breath as I put the Taser back where it belongs and drag my new prey further into the alley's darkness. He's heavy, and it takes a few tries, but flying on adrenaline, every nerve-ending in my body clouded with rage, I manage. Between the shadows of the towering buildings, my eyes cast back to the girl passed out, slumped against the dirty brick wall. I expected to see her freaking out, screaming, crying, but she's away in dreamland, lids firmly shut, rope trailing around one wrist, dress rucked around her waist just as her panties are strung around her thighs.

I can't leave her like that.

"Fuck." Exhaling hard, I go to where she's heaped on the floor. She mumbles something incoherent but doesn't open her eyes when I coax her to her feet. I get her panties back where they should be, smoothing down her skirt, and then I steer her back to the main road, avoiding the CCTV, leaving her on the step of a bar.

I'm hesitant to walk away, but a monster awaits me in the alley. London might be full of scum, but this is a touristy part of town. Someone kind should send her home in a taxi. If the kindness of strangers still exists.

Now, kill him before he wakes up, says some twisted voice in my head.

How easily that thought comes. That's how fucked up I am. And how little I care that it's wrong, that I'm a murderer.

He's out cold when I get back. My heart went into overdrive as I approached. It's still slamming inside my chest as I crouch over him, the knife poised in my hand. I should have poisoned him. Bought potassium chloride on the black market and shoved it in his veins. Killing someone with a knife, no matter how evil they are, is harder than it looks. I should know.

I press the blade edge to his exposed throat, but I'm shaking so hard the steel cuts, and a bead of blood trickles down, running like red rivers over his tanned skin.

One slice. One flick of my wrist, and he's gone.

It's that easy.

Do it.

His lids flicker, and a moan escapes him, sending heart-stopping adrenaline screaming through my veins. Then his eyes fly open, and the horror dies in my throat as his hand whips up and locks around mine. A dark, demonic-rage-filled gaze freezes me in place.

I slash at his neck. He's not fast enough to stop me. The steel pierces his jugular.

"You bitch—" he gurgles, letting go of me to clamp his hand around his bloody wound.

A pathetic cry leaves me as I pull back, unable to look away as he struggles to stay alive. The stab wound to the neck is unforgiving, and his heart does what it's supposed to—pumping fresh, life-giving blood out through swollen arteries. It blooms all over the cobblestones and coats his neck, hands, and clothes. It spills onto my trainers. I shuffle back, stifling a strangled sob, one hand clamped over my mouth, the other slick with blood,

barely holding the murder weapon in my fist. Panting, nausea lodges in my throat, threatening to expose the contents of my stomach. Time slows, and the life in his eyes fades away until they are dull, empty, seeing nothing and resting on no one.

And just like that, the monster is dead.

LAINE

I've been asleep only half an hour when I bolt awake. My mouth is dry and my eyelids are heavy. Everything feels drained, me included. Sometimes the dreams aren't enough to force me out of bed, other times, there's a sense of dread that I can't shake, no matter how hard I try. I don't want to look out of the window, but I get up anyway and trudge over to the sill.

There's no one there.

The dream spooked me more than I like to admit. Too jittery to return to bed, shoulders aching from hauling earth and digging up dead bodies, I traipse into the bathroom and turn on the bath faucet, filling the tub with boiling water and some salts. I even get a few used candles from the cupboard and place them around the edges. A therapist suggested having a relaxing bath after a nightmare could help. I'll take anything right now.

When the water is nice and hot, enough that it burns when I dip my hand beneath the cloudy surface, I turn off the water and head downstairs to get a lighter for the candles.

My cottage creaks all the time, but a bang, like someone stepping too loud on the loose board in the bedroom, resounds just as I close the kitchen drawer where I keep the firelighter.

I don't move.

I don't breathe.

Nola's gun is in my bedside drawer.

Heart slamming in my chest, I stare up at the ceiling, unable to do anything else. There are no other noises, nothing to say that someone is there. But I know he is. Nola's words echo in my mind.

He's waiting for me to make a move.

Opening the kitchen drawer quietly, I close my hand around a filleting knife inside and draw it out. Then I slowly, shakily, make my way back up the stairs, turning lights on as I go. The bedroom is quiet as well as empty when I groan open the door. Only the drip of the bath taps can be heard over the ragged sound of my breathing.

The bathroom door is closed.

Did I close it? Fuck. I can't remember. Shadows dance in the gap between the door and the floor. Taking one step at a time, I advance toward it and then jerk it open.

The candles are lit, their flames licking the walls with a soft, romantic glow.

And the steaming bath is spotted with dark red...*drops of blood?*

Horror scratches down my spine, seizing the air in my lungs. Only as the light moves, flickering over the bathwater, the drops swirl and make sense, becoming familiar shapes, trailing out of the water on the wooden floor surrounding the bath.

Velvet, soft, deep red, perfumed, like a blood spatter on a white cobbled street.

Rose petals.

Hundreds of them.

I don't know how long I stay like that, staring at the rose petals tainting my bath, watching the flames melt and move over the walls, but the water has gone tepid by the time I drain it away.

And when I finally have the sense to return to the bedroom to get Nola's gun, I see him out the window, under the streetlamp.

Shrouded in the morning mist, his dark figure is watching me. I'm frozen in place—my heart clenching at the sight of him, nerves coiled tight, nails digging into my palms to wake me up in case I'm still dreaming. But I'm not.

He doesn't dissolve away. I don't come gasping awake. I'm already living the nightmare.

Anger surges, waking me up.

How. Dare. He.

Shaking, I grip the gun and run downstairs. Filled with rage, I'm still too afraid to open the door; my body won't let me, so I stand behind it, breathing hard, teeth bared, working up the courage to shoot the bastard through the wood. Even though my palms are sweaty, and Nola's gun hangs uselessly in my hands.

I should at least look through the peephole.

One. Two. Three.

Standing on tiptoes, I put my eye to the hole. The image is distorted like a fish lens, but someone is standing on my porch. I jump out of my skin when that person pounds on the door like there's a fire happening, and the gun slips from my sweaty hands, landing on my big toe.

"Fucking hell!" I fall against the wall, clutching it.

"Laine, are you okay?" a muffled voice calls through the door. It's a

man's voice—Jaxon.

Shit. What is he doing here?

It was Jaxon standing outside. Not my stalker. Not the Ripper.

Although they could be the one and the same.

I have seconds to decide if I'm going to open the door while my heart returns to its usual pace, and fear melts away into spiky annoyance as he bangs on the door again. Instinctively, I haul it open, glaring at him, blaming him for everything that just happened.

In a pristine, tailored overcoat that envelopes him like a second skin, its deep, midnight hue complimenting the suit of obsidian black beneath it, Jaxon looks...like he just walked out of a magazine. My heart does a little flip. But then he takes one glance at me, in my ratty pajamas that I shrugged on last night, the gun on the floor at my feet, and frowns.

"Is now a good time?" He holds up a tray of coffee from the expensive Italian deli down the road. "I brought you breakfast."

Ignoring how my chest squeezes with warmth, I scowl at him, wrapping my arms around me for warmth. As daylight threatens to spill over the horizon, it seems stupid to be scared over a handful of rose petals. "It's not. I was...having a bath."

His gaze flits to the gun on the floor and then connects with mine. "You always take a gun into the bath with you?" he drawls, brow raised, pushing his way inside.

The barest breath of his clothing brushes past me, making my skin tingle where the thin material of my pajamas rides up. Suppressing the whisper of anger in my gut and the rush of heat at his touch, I slam the door, retrieve the gun, and pace after him.

He strolls into my kitchen as though he does it daily and dumps the coffee and bag of what smells like bacon and cream cheese bagels on my table. I walk over to the empty bread bin and pop the gun inside it. It's the only place I can think of.

Jaxon's brow raises. "Do you know how to shoot?"

"Yes. My dad's a cop." The lie slips out.

The corner of his mouth twitches, and his eyes narrow. After a pause, "Good. If you have a stalker, you should have protection."

Huffing, I look right into his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to check on you since you said you have a stalker." His eyes narrow as he takes out the wrapped bagel and offers it to me. I stare at it, and

then my gaze lands on the coffee. Cautiously, I accept both. “Don’t hold back on my account. You look like you haven’t eaten or slept in days. Didn’t you get any sleep last night?”

I shoot him a dark look, like he knows I didn’t, and then regret it. Jaxon is being nice. He isn’t the Ripper. He’s not my stalker. He wouldn’t break in here and put rose petals in my bath and then run down the road to get me coffee and bagels, would he?

Honestly, I don’t know if he would. He confuses me. Sweet one minute, but other times, he looks like he wants to kill me. I’m so paranoid that I will believe anything. Jaxon’s just being a gentleman, coming to check on me. He’s not hiding a depraved slasher under those killer cheekbones.

I’m the one full of secrets.

I eat the bagel like I’m at a Michelin-star restaurant, As much as I want to rip it apart with my teeth, Jaxon is watching intently. Like a lion watching a gazelle nibble grass.

Liquid warmth slides over my skin from his stare. My face heats, making me almost lose my appetite.

Almost.

“I told you before,” he drawls, languishing his lean body on my kitchen stool. A lion sunning itself. “When you lie, the tone of voice goes up, and your lower lip trembles.”

I swallow quickly, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip, and put down the bagel. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“And when you’re nervous, you gnaw those lips until they bleed.”

Trying not to grind my teeth, lest he tell me what that means about my inner emotional state, I reach for my coffee to take a sip. My throat feels like sandpaper. “Thank you for the breakfast, but you really shouldn’t have.”

“I’ll ask you again. Do you know how to shoot a gun?”

“Of course I do.”

“Don’t lie to me, Laine.”

I take another sip of coffee, feeling more like myself and less like a corpse. “Fine. No, I don’t. Happy now?”

He stares at me, so sure of himself, a glint of excitement teasing the inner silver of his eyes. “No, not until you know how to kill someone with that thing.”

SURGEON BILLIONAIRES STILL MISSING—THE NEWSPAPER HEADLINE CATCHES my eye as I head toward Lucky's Waffle House early to meet my dad. Without reading the article, I know what it will say—there's a potential kidnapper on the loose, and no eligible bachelor of the wealthy elite is safe.

Not safe from me.

Jaxon had to work but practically ordered me to meet him at the shooting range after his shift. There's one at Berners House. *Of course, there is.* Is shooting guns with Jaxon at close range a good idea? It doesn't feel like one. Feels irresponsible, somehow. I'm letting him get too close after I decided he was no good for me. Maybe he's trying to help, but Nola is right; he's been hanging around a lot lately. Could it be a coincidence that he came back to Whitechapel when I did? Could he be the Ripper?

But whenever I think of his skin-scorching gaze whipping over me, my insides melt into a puddle, and I can't breathe. That's not the reaction of someone afraid.

Stop thinking about Jaxon. Just stop it.

I take a slow, deep breath in to counter the light-headedness as I step into the restaurant. A soft, ethereal glow of sunlight seeps through the windows, creating an otherworldly atmosphere in the early morning. It's too early for rush hour. It's too late to go to bed.

Not that I even went to bed. After the night I had and with Jaxon waking me up, I couldn't sleep. The cut on my arm throbbed, and images of Henry alive, suffocating in blood, flashed before my eyes whenever I closed them. An hour after Jaxon left me alone, I gave up and dragged myself out of the house.

In the breakfast diner, tired commuter faces barely notice me. But I see them. Or the phantoms my brain wants me to see. Sometimes, they look like Henry; other times, it's the previous men I've killed, ghosts still haunting me. They never go away. Even now, when it feels like a lifetime ago, I was standing in a disused cemetery, covered in dirt. At least, the hidden parts of my life feel surreal in the light of day. Like they happened to someone else, and I'm watching from afar. I can pretend like it never happened.

There are no monsters.

And I'm not one of them.

"Elaine, over here," my father's gruff voice calls out.

With his silver hair and handlebar mustache, my dad waves at me from a booth near the window. Shaking off the shudder, I head to where my dad is

sitting at our table. A steaming pot of coffee is already on it. Dad has his hands wrapped around a mug.

Since he started working in London, it's been our ritual to have breakfast at Lucky's in Shoreditch once a week before he starts his shift. It's the one appointment I make sure I show up for, and Dad never misses, even if it means he's late for work. He fills me in on his cases, and I get free food.

Only today, I don't feel like eating.

I slide into the tacky pleather seat, careful not to jolt my arm since, despite healing well, it still throbs now and again. Dad pours me a fresh brew from the pot into an empty, waiting cup while I stare blandly at the menu.

"A waffle with strawberries and maple syrup," I tell the server.

She looks at me, the heavy kohl around her eyes turning her into a panda. "Just one waffle."

I force a smile. "Just one."

She purses her lips. "You know they come in a stack?"

"I just want one."

"Why don't you get the stack? I'll have a few off your plate?" Dad offers.

"Fine, I'll take a stack." I hate waste, but I should try and eat something.

She sighs and writes it down. Dad orders his poached eggs and bacon and waits for the server to leave before furrowing his brow at me so deeply that I feel like he knows exactly what I've been up to. Maybe it's exhaustion making me paranoid. And the fact that when I lie everyone knows it, apparently.

To avoid Dad's gaze, I glance at the paper next to him on the table, left open where he was reading it. It's the same headline as out front. Dad is a missing persons detective, so he has a reason to check on what the press says, even if he tries to avoid the media because they like to twist the facts. My eyes scan the article a bit more, catching the names of the missing Forbes men—Beau Haden-Callister and Geoffery Bankes. Not Henry Wickham, because I've just crossed his face off my killing board, so no one knows he's missing yet.

I don't even know where he is.

A sudden restlessness takes hold, and my heart thuds in my chest like an internal alarm, screaming a warning at me.

Someone took Henry.

I'd forgotten for a few blissful moments.

I calm my frayed nerves by sipping my coffee. The hot liquid scalds my tongue, clearing my head.

“How have you been?” Dad asks. I hear him like I’m underwater.

I force down another mouthful of coffee, the words I want to say burning my tongue like bile. Sometimes, a confession floats just underneath the surface, and I want to blurt out—*I killed those men*, but I always catch it in time so that it sticks in the back of my throat, making my eyes water.

“Fine.” The word comes out slowly, like sticky toffee on my tongue. Sickly sweet and a lie to boot. What happened to me keeps the flames of injustice roaring deep down. It drives me to the edge, threatening to consume me if I’m not careful—a tightrope balancing act of good and evil. I used to be good, and now I’m teetering on damned. Killing rapists and murderers is...

...the only way I can survive.

Coming clean will hurt not just me but everyone around me.

“Your mum says you’re not returning her calls,” Dad grunts, closing the paper so I have to look at him, filling the silence between us so I don’t have to.

I give him a daughterly smile. “I’ve been busy.”

“Too busy to call your mother?”

“I went to her party.”

“She said you went home early without saying goodbye.” He squints at me. “She said you were with some fellow?”

Oh no. I’m not talking about my love life with my dad. “I’ll pop by the hospital and see Fiona soon. I promise.”

He frowns, not liking that I call my mother by her first name, but ultimately, that seems to stop him in his tracks because he nods and drinks the black-as-tar-looking liquid in his mug. No sugar. No creamer. Much too bitter for my taste.

“So what’s new?” I gesture to the paper in front of him, changing the subject. “Any interesting cases?” Also. I can’t help myself.

Dad’s tired hazel eyes meet mine. “Those lads are still missing.”

Missing. Not dead—the bodies haven’t been found.

Yet.

It grates me that my father calls them lads like I’ve murdered a trio of Cub Scouts. They’re not men. They’re monsters. He’s forgotten what they did to Molly that night, even if they denied it. They had alibis, so they were never suspects. Disgust fills me with the thought of what they did to her and

got away with, what they did to women after her. It sickens me to the core. Every time I close my eyes, I see snapshots of that night, like a sick, twisted horror movie.

No, don't think about it.

“Chester said you're on the list to see him.”

I blink back at my dad like I'm waking from a horrible dream, and then it comes rushing back. Chester is Dad's old friend who governs HMP Hanbury. I made an appointment to visit the man they caught seven years ago claiming to be the West London Ripper. Chester must have told my dad.

“I have questions,” I choke out.

Dad shakes his head. “Still? Don't you think it's time you moved on?”

My chest pulls, as it always does when my thoughts stray to the shit show that is the Ripper murder investigation, and I mentally flick away the dark reflections that assail me even now.

If I bring up the recent murders of women with the same M.O., Dad will say the police have a copycat on their hands, so I go for something he won't have an answer for.

“My therapist suggested it,” I counter, brushing off his concern. I glance at the newspaper again. “Anyway, back to the present...has any new evidence been found?”

Dad stares at the printed black and white pages like he's trying to work out what he can tell me, given my previous side hustle as a private investigator for his dodgy nephew, my cousin, Cash.

It annoys me that he does that; refuses to tell me things out of spite. Cash's agency is small, with a reputation as cheap as the ink smudging its print ads. It doesn't even have an office, just a website with a contact form that messages Cash on his phone. But it paid well, and my cousin gave me the job without question when I first dropped out of med school. Against my dad's wishes, yes, because private dicks aren't necessary if the police do their actual job, but it was all I had. I couldn't go back to studying all hours like nothing happened. I couldn't even sleep without a prescription.

I cock my head. “I don't work for Cash anymore. I have a job at the pub.”

“Good, his agency is a lawsuit waiting to happen.”

I ignore his dig at Cash and carry on, “What about the witnesses? Didn't you have a hotline set up?” I ask lightly, sipping my coffee.

“Are you sure you're not working on this with Cash?” Dad asks me, eyes narrowed.

“No.” It’s not a lie. I haven’t told Cash I’m going to take the case. Although now I’m sorely tempted to, given the body has disappeared. There’s actually something for me to investigate now. After a few seconds of staring me in the eye, Dad exhales and shakes his head. “No one came forward. They just upped and disappeared. The only thing they have in common is they supposedly met up with women they chatted to on some dating app.”

I bite my lower lip. I paid a hacker to make me fake dating profiles on apps to lure the men away from their usual haunts. It’s the only tie I have to each of them. My dad will figure it out. I don’t know what I will do when that happens. Run? Turn myself in? Shoot the two men on my list and then drive off a cliff like Thelma and Louise, only by myself because I couldn’t ask that of Sage and Nola?

Probably.

I’m going to Hell, anyway. I may as well go guns blazing.

LAINE

“Have you seen the news?” Sage asks, breathless on the phone the next day.

I’ve only just woken up, still tangled in my bedclothes, hot and sweaty from a humid night of little sleep, but her words send a bolt of panic straight into my heart. Fumbling with the remote control to turn on the TV, I know what the headline will say.

They’ve found Henry’s body. Mutilated beyond recognition.

“I didn’t—” *I didn’t leave him like that*, is what I want to say, but the words lodge in my chest, refusing to come out.

“Lainey, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say, mouth beyond dry.

“Do you...need me to come over?” The concern in Sage’s voice melts the ice in my veins just enough for me to snap out of it.

“No, no. I’m okay. I’m just confused. I didn’t do that to him. I was working last night.” As if I need an alibi to convince Sage.

Sage lets out a breath. “We need to meet up. It’s an emergency. We need pancakes.”

I close my eyes and nod, even though Sage can’t see me. “Okay.”

“Brunch today for the three of us at Miller’s?”

I end the call with the promise to meet before my visit with Max Lamberton and then stay glued to the news for the rest of the early morning. They found Henry dumped on Whitechapel Common close to my house. Far, far from London. It’s a blatant message from my stalker. It has to be. With every report, every shot of Henry’s body, my stomach twists.

My eyes flit to the bedside drawer where I put the gun Nola gave me last night for safekeeping, as though just having it there makes a difference. It doesn’t. I still don’t know how to use it. Not taking up Jaxon’s offer at Berners House’s shooting range seemed like the best idea at the time. It fits pretty well with staying as far away from Jaxon Clémont as possible. My life is too chaotic, too twisted to add dating to the mix. And something isn’t right with Jaxon. Although, that’s probably why I’m attracted to him.

Because something isn’t right with me.

My hands shake when I get out of bed and force myself to get dressed. As the police aren’t releasing any evidence to the press, I decide to speak to my

dad.

Calling him is easier than face-to-face, but I whip up a batch of strong coffee and bless it with a large dollop of cream and sugar before picking up the phone. I'll need my nerves and wits about me. Dad is family, but he's also a cop.

"Elaine, I can't tell you anything about this before you ask. You know that," he huffs down the phone when I eventually gather the courage to ring him.

"I know, but just this once. Please, Dad, I was friends with him at med school," I lie, unable to stop myself from gnawing my lower lip.

"You were?" He sounds suspicious.

"I'm also worried. It's close to where I live."

His tone softens. "Do you want me to come over later?"

"No need," I say quickly. "I'll see you soon, anyway. We have games night coming up. You can still make it, right?"

"Should be able to now my case has been reassigned."

"Reassigned? So, you have evidence the missing surgeons are related?"

He sighs. "Nothing gets past you, love, does it?"

I let out a stiff laugh. "Like father, like daughter."

After several more rounds of me begging, repeatedly assuring him that nothing he says to me will make it back to Cash, Dad admits that apart from the men knowing each other and running in the same circles, they have zero evidence. The body and crime scene are clean. Too clean. Staged almost.

"I shouldn't be telling you this," my dad sighs. "But the time of death puts the murder in the early hours of Sunday morning."

"You mean last Sunday?"

"No, this Sunday. Last night."

A cold chill steals over my bones.

It's been a week since I buried him. If Henry wasn't dead then and I didn't kill him...

Then who did?

"SO YOUR STALKER IS TRYING TO GET YOU CAUGHT?" SAGE ASKS, SHOVING A chocolate-covered strawberry into her mouth. Sage always goes for the sweet

toppings on her breakfast pancakes.

“I don’t know what they’re trying to do,” I admit, pushing the food around my plate. With everything happening, I’ve lost my appetite. I can’t help but watch the room, eyes drawn to every person who could be my stalker slash killer. Sage catches me looking and scans the crowd, too. Nola hasn’t arrived yet, so Sage and I are in a semi-circular booth—the perfect place to view everyone and all the exits.

I haven’t told Sage and Nola everything. They know the body was taken and dumped in a different location, but they don’t know Henry was alive when this happened. *He was alive. I messed up, and someone took care of him.*

I swallow hard, the sugary dough I’m eating clogging my throat.

“Do you think they’re here now?” Her eyes become big and round as she looks about.

“Oh no,” I say quickly, shaking my head. “Of course not.” Upsetting Sage is like pointing a gun at a bunny rabbit. I don’t have it in me. Sage seems happier about that.

“Oh, Nola is here.”

Nola appears in the doorway, shaking the raindrops off her umbrella as she spots us. She waltzes over. “Pissing down in August, who would have thought it,” she says, echoing my words from the other night, sliding into the booth beside Sage.

She orders from the server and then focuses her uncovered eye on me. Her other one hides beneath a black patch—black, meaning she’s in a bad mood. I didn’t realize our friend color-coordinated her eye patches according to her emotions until one of the Stronger Together regulars, who has a girl crush on Nola, pointed it out to me. I don’t even think Nola knows she does it.

Nola seems to take my update in her stride, and I tell her what I told Sage, that I didn’t mutilate Henry’s body.

“I told you someone is playing with you,” Nola chimes in after a long pause.

Sage makes a hmmm sound in agreement. “And it’s definitely someone at Berners House? The car that followed you that night is registered to the member’s club, isn’t it?”

“I can’t help but think it’s the same man who tried to murder me all those years ago. It has to be. The knife in the dishwasher, the body turning up. The

letters. I saw Max this morning, and he had no clue about sending me anything.”

Her eyes widen. This is news to Sage, Nola already knows my theory since I talked to her about it in the car when she picked us up from the cemetery and then she called me after my visit to the prison for an update.

“I don’t think you should be alone. What if this psycho tries something?” she exclaims. “Stay with me. We have lots of room.”

“I love you, but your parents will never agree to that. If it gets hairy, I can always stay with Cash.”

Nola gives me a look. “Fuck Cash, he lives in a rathole.”

“You’re staying with me. I’ll speak to my parents.”

“If you speak to your parents, I will.” Sage’s parents will never agree, which suits me fine. Every night, I wake up screaming bloody murder or leap out of bed with a weapon, ready to slay the monster who haunts my dreams. I don’t need the friends I’ve made a murder pact with to witness my crazy.

“Promise me you’ll do that.”

“I promise.”

I wasn’t expecting Nola to offer me a place to stay, but I’m surprised she’s quiet. When I finally returned to the event, Nola had left. Well, at least I assumed that’s what happened. She didn’t answer my texts or calls until midnight, and I was in bed when she rang back. Her mother had an unexpected visitor, and she had to go and remove him. I didn’t have the energy to be annoyed after that. I was glad Nola wasn’t locked in some room being interrogated by security guards, and sleep was calling.

Nola’s food arrives. Fries, a burger, and a black coffee. After she takes a bite, she asks breezily, “Did you decide to screw Jaxon after he screwed you?” There’s a gleam in her eye with every word.

Sage’s face brightens. “What did I miss?”

With a sigh, I explain what happened—Jaxon making me delete the evidence, and him driving me home.

Nola chews a fry. Her head cocked as though deep in thought. “You say he’s not involved, but he feels connected somehow. You should really fuck him and find out if he knows anything about the frat club he’s part of.” She gives Sage a conspiratorial look.

“I’m not fucking anyone—”

Sage laughs. “Oh, that’s a good idea. Men can’t resist gossiping in bed.”

I almost choke on another pasta twist. “No. Absolutely not.”

“When was the last time you got laid, sweetie?” Nola smiles, twisting the knife.

I scowl at her. “None of your bloody business.”

“Is he hot?” this is from Sage.

“He’s definitely Lainey’s type—all suit and square jaw,” Nola retorts.

I focus on eating, my food now cold, wondering for the life of me why I wanted friends. Living alone in my hell hole of life seemed so much better, but as they banter back and forth, teasing me about Jaxon and my lack of sex life, the dread in my gut dissipates, and the icicle of fear hanging over me melts. And then I’m laughing, too.

Sitting with my friends, the only people I can trust, warmth floods my chest because I haven’t cracked a real smile in years, never mind days.

“What *are* you going to do about Jaxon?” Sage whispers in my ear, leaning in for a hug as we say our goodbyes. “He might be a way in.”

“I don’t know yet.” After I told him not to come near me and I stood him up for gun shooting, I’ve been avoiding the hospital or any places he might be, but Sage is right, as much as I hate it.

She nods. “Call me after. Let me know if you need me. You’re not alone, remember?”

I remember, and it’s the only reason I’m still sane.

Nola comes back from the bathroom and hugs me, too.

“I need to learn how to use a gun,” I say as low as possible in her ear.

She nods. “Speak to Quinn, she’s got a private estate you can use.”

Quinn is Nola’s fixer and hacker. I met her once and couldn’t connect in my mind with the beautiful Asian model sitting in front of me, sipping cosmopolitans, and the efficient as-hell contact who sent me intel every so often. “Thanks, Nola.”

“No problem. Now make that damn move. Or I’ll do it for you.”

JAXON

I have never wanted anyone as much as I want Laine Summers.

She's like a drug.

It makes me chuckle at how much she intrigues me, at how long her ghost has floated inside my head. I noticed she doesn't chew the end of her pens anymore. Does she still draw bleeding hearts? I'll have to check her notebooks at her house another time.

When she didn't show up at the shooting range, I realized I needed to show her what she should be afraid of. I'd already moved Henry's body to the trunk of my car that morning. After my shift, it wasn't difficult to drive it to the common near her house and dump it under the shroud of darkness. I kept the scene clean but easily discoverable so any morning jogger or dog walker would find it. I wonder how she will take my gift. I would have left it on her doorstep had that not been too obvious and careless of me. I don't want her caught by anyone else. I want her desperate and clawing at the confines of the cage I put her in when she finally submits to me.

It'll make her taste so much sweeter when it ends.

"Max Lamberton had a visitor this afternoon," my father states when I enter the club lounge.

He's not in his office but drinking and smoking cigars with Shepherd while they talk business. Christian, sporting a broken jaw, a shattered eye socket, and both hands in casts where I snapped each finger several times over, bristles at me between them. Addison leans against the wall, coat still on like he just strolled in.

I squash all thoughts of my fox and walk over to the man who raised me, taught me, and gave me everything. I was on my way to deal with Christian, but it looks like he was found and treated. I carve a smile for the trio, tilting my head to Christian to show brotherly camaraderie. My father won't bawl me out for what I did to Eric De Lacy's son, not in public. Even if the De Lacys' are founders of the Lucians, just as we are.

"I never agreed with your decision to use Max as a scapegoat," I say, glancing at the empty seat my father expects me to fill. I'm not in the mood to sit and chit-chat.

"Laine Summers was his visitor. Would you know anything about that?" Shepherd points out.

I keep my face blank as her name touches his lips. I'm not surprised to hear she's been snooping around. Only angry I didn't see it coming.

"No, I don't."

My father looks over his shoulder at me, annoyed to have to look up at me but trying hard to keep the emotion off his face. "Find out what she knows, and then deal with it."

"Sir." I incline my head and turn to leave.

"Oh, and Jaxon, be discreet. She's Fiona's daughter." He pauses, eyes narrowed, aware we have company.

"Let the Ripper deal with this one?" Shepherd finishes, dismissing his caution. It's not a secret among the Lucians who my father prefers.

I snort in response. "The Ripper is anything but discreet. Not everything requires his blunt force. Finesse, in this case, would be best."

My father shoots Shepherd an irritated glance, not liking having his henchmen speak for him, and then looks at me. "I don't which of you deals with her, just do it."

Addison smirks from his languorous position and pushes off the wall to meet me at the door. He flexes his gloved hands, curling them into fists and then relaxing as he stands between me and the exit. "Fiona's daughter is Laine Summers. Wasn't she there that night?"

"Where?" I don't have time for this.

"At the lodge?"

A flicker of vexation shadows my face before I can stop it.

"Don't you think it's strange that she was there that night and then she disappeared after, and now she's back, the acolytes are going missing?"

"The Ripper took care of any witnesses at the Lodge."

"Did he? Because something doesn't sit right. Brainy Lainey is digging up the past, poking her nose where it doesn't belong. If I recall, you had a soft spot for her." He cocks his head. "Or was it a hard-on?"

"Out of my way, Cochrane." I shove past him.

When I get to my car, I glance back in the rearview mirror, and Addison is watching me, a shit-eating grin spread across his face.

It doesn't matter. He goes near Laine, and I'll make that fucking smile permanent. After the Ripper fucked up, allowing Laine to live, only I knew what he'd done. We never spoke about it, and the acolytes didn't ask who it was who saw them. They never cared about specifics as long as they are allowed to do what the fuck they like and not have to answer for any of it. In

return, they serve the Divine. That's how it works. As long as Laine stayed hidden, it would have been fine.

But now...

My father's PA sent me a message to say an appointment to see Max at HMP Hanbury has been arranged. I call in late for work and drive over there.

The guards bring Max, shuffling into the private room in a gray jumpsuit, cuffed at the waist. I watch through the one-way glass. It's been seven years since I saw him. His dark hair has grayed at the temples, his shoulders are hunched over, and deep lines mar his forehead. He looks in his forties, even though we're the same age.

He spits in the lawyer's face as soon as the guard cuffs him to the table and leaves them alone. "They said my lawyer was here. Like, what fucking lawyer? You left me here to rot."

Donald wipes his saliva away, reading through his papers. "This is the punishment you accepted."

"Like I had a choice," he snarls at him.

"Your brother is well, should you be interested."

Max's eyes bulge, and he jumps forward, making Donald jerk back. Time to cut this short. Outside the visitor's room, I motion to the guard to open the door so I can enter.

Max immediately pales as I stroll in. "I—I told the bitch nothing, I swear!"

"Max," I soothe. "How are you?"

"I swear it, Jax."

"I know, I watched the tape." I glance at the security camera in the corner, so he knows what I mean by that. The governor is also golf buddies with my father.

"She knew it wasn't me."

"Wasn't it?" I tilt my head. "Donald has an offer for you—a way to repent."

Donald slides an envelope just within reach of Max's hands. Max makes no move to open it. He stares at it like it might eat him alive.

"Your prescription," I say in a matter-of-fact tone. I let the darkness play over my features as that sinks in. Max blinks, tears streaming down his face.

"Tell my brother..." His body jerks from the emotion. "I love him." Donald has his head down, writing quickly, quietly.

Unmoved, I give Max one last look. "Make sure you take it before bed."

I leave Donald to deliver the rest of the paperwork for Max to sign. I glance at my watch. That took less than five minutes—dissatisfaction floods through my bones. The Archkey prefers things to be wrapped up this way lately, with minimal fuss and no effort. It's efficient, but it leaves a hollow in my chest. Max isn't innocent. He took things too far with his initiation, as most do, getting caught up in the lust for power. Max Lamberton was unfortunate to be picked as an example to the rest. We harvest lives, but there's an order to observe and follow.

Max made a mistake.

What a waste.

I, too, appreciate the pull of darkness. My sweet fox brings me close to the edge whenever I'm near her. I couldn't wait to bring her to heel in my own time. But now, my father has her in his sights as a threat. Before, when she was unknown, I could protect her, even when she was snooping, playing at being a killer. Now, her days are short-lived. If I don't silence her, the Archkey will send someone else. The thought of Shepherd laying a hand on her has red flickering across my vision. Addison looking in her direction has heat blistering under my skin as my blood boils.

"Sir?"

I blink, the world around me swimming in hazy focus. I'm standing outside the car that brought me here, my fist bloodied, and the rear passenger window shattered.

The driver is looking at me, worry etched on his face.

I unclench my hand, pain sliding across my bare knuckles where punching the glass obliterated the skin and sunk into bone. I barely feel it. Shepherd had better not so much as look in her direction.

"Do you need to see a doctor?" The driver opens the door, the remnants of glass tinkling as it falls from the frame. "I can stop at the club—"

"I'm fine." I grind my jaw and slip into the leather interior.

It's not Addison you should be concerned about. The voice seems to smile, intruding on my thoughts, making me well aware that I've let my guard down, allowing my weakness for her to show. My darkness is closing in, telling me everything.

The Ripper knows.

If she has that scar, I'm unsure how long I can keep him away from her, under control. It won't be long. It's only a matter of time before it comes for her again.

And it will come.
Soon.

LAINE

When Cash asked me to poke around Henry Wickham's sprawling mansion in Bishopsgate, convincing his parents and subsequently me it was important to his case, I caved. I doubt there will be any clues as to who might have killed Henry after I supposedly did, but I couldn't exactly say that to my cousin when he asked for my help. I couldn't exactly tell him no, either.

Cash usually gets his way.

Since I wasn't invited to the funeral service, I stand at the doorway of the church, watching the mourners weep over a sorry excuse for a man, and follow them to Henry's house for the open wake.

Tree-lined lanes mark the ascent. The driveway is packed with cars bumper to bumper, so I leave my car on the verge down one of the lanes and trudge through a field to a side gate entrance.

Oval shrubs and pyramid trees in a perfectly manicured garden shadow my approach. A four-string quartet plays on the lawn, and the vast glass doors in front of his house are open, the subdued party spilling onto the courtyard, floating around his parents, Mark and Tiff Wickham, with condolences hanging off their lips. A blonde girl in her early twenties, who must be Henry's sister, Margot, hovers nearby with a composed face.

A queasy feeling settles in my stomach when a server approaches me and offers me a glass of champagne, and I take a mouthful of acidic bubbles.

I really shouldn't be here.

I didn't kill Henry, but it feels like I'm intruding on something private. Seeing him as a son and a brother is messing with my karma. The best thing I can do is find his office or bedroom soon, snoop enough around to appease Cash, and then leave. Thankfully, I have on my mother's designer sunglasses that I stole from her bag because crying for a murderer and rapist isn't something I can force.

On that thought, my hand closes on the handle of a blade in my pocket, reminding me that another letter arrived this morning from my stalker. I threw the flowers in the trash like I always do, but this time, there was a dull clang of metal against the side of the can. The brown paper tied around the stems had a miniature knife with a mother-of-pearl cross on the cover taped inside of it.

*"Not long, little bird. I watch you often.
Looking for me in the shadows. When we meet
again, let's make it a night to remember. Since
you can't bring yourself to pull the trigger, how
about we even things out? Knives are better for
carving up hearts, after all. This one is special,
made just for you a century earlier.
Soon, little birdie.
Soon.*

I don't know why I kept the knife.

Cash looked at it and did an internet search, thus confirming that it is indeed a century-old, a Victorian stilleto-style blade called a prostitute's dagger. Obviously, there's an insult there.

I should have thrown it away, but something stopped me. It might have been the faded, stained cross that looked familiar, the pretty pearlescent grip that felt right in my hand, or the blade's edges that had recently been sharpened. Whatever it was, the atrocious thing's now in my pocket, a tenuous link connecting me to the monster behind the letters.

Ironically, it makes me feel safe.

The host of people gossiping about what might have happened to Henry continues as I move through the crowd. Everyone has turned out for the event of the year. Henry had a lot of admirers. I hear snippets of conversation about his demise—he pissed off the mafia, he slept with someone's wife—nothing useful but interesting all the same.

I doubt his family wants to greet me officially, so I move away from the storm of people into the kitchen, which connects to the rest of the house.

Of all the people I'm expecting to see lounging against the kitchen counter, Jaxon isn't one of them.

As bold as day, in a pristine black suit, white shirt, and black tie. A day of stubble graces his jaw and makes him look rugged but not unkempt. Stray, unwanted thoughts of what it would feel like to have his lips on mine burn me from the inside out. He's too engrossed in his phone, running a hand

through his hair, to notice me stalling at the door.

What should I do? Walk through quickly or retreat? I choose the latter and hurry the way I came, taking the stairs. It's probably better to see if I can find something useful away from everyone else.

I haven't seen or spoken to Jaxon since he arrived at my cottage that morning, arms laden with breakfast goods. I've been avoiding him like the plague. Whitechapel may have a population of 70,000, but it's small enough that bumping into people you know and grew up with happens almost every day. And now that Jaxon is back in town, it feels suffocating.

The funeral a case in point.

The girls think I can seduce him into giving me information, but it always felt like Jaxon was seducing me. I mean, why did my stomach do a little swoop just now, like I was glad to see him?

Because it's a traitor.

Suppressing all thoughts of Jaxon, deep down into the darkest parts of my soul, I hurry through the endless hallway. I don't know where anything is, so I check all the rooms until I find one resembling what I imagine to be Henry's bedroom—dark and masculine, with cherry wood furniture and black furnishings with hints of royal blue and imperial yellow decor. It's easily the biggest bedroom in the house, with a super king bed on one side facing a massive TV on the other. There's also a mirror on the ceiling—yuck.

I step inside cautiously and close the door. I've no idea what I'm looking for. Everything looks neat and in its place, except his desk, which has an overflowing, messy in-tray and a mound of scattered unopened mail. I start rifling through the paperwork on his desk.

"Why am I not surprised?" says a velvet-coated voice behind me after a few minutes of tax bills. I spin around.

Jaxon.

"What are you doing here?" I blurt out.

"Henry was my friend. This is his wake," he says, raising a brow as he shuts the door with a soft click. "I'm meant to be here, unlike some. I should ask what you're doing here. This part of the house isn't open to guests."

"Did you follow me?" I don't understand why I'm still laboring the fact. If he was Henry's friend, Jaxon has more right to be here than I do. "I saw you in the kitchen a second ago."

Well done, Lainey. What a thing to say to make yourself look guilty as sin.

“I was, but I’m staying here to help his parents. Unfortunately for you, they gave me a direct feed to the security cameras, and I’ve been watching you for several minutes blunder your way through the house.” The corner of his mouth twitches as he stalks over to me. His eyes are dark with little warmth to them. He doesn’t look happy. “You’re snooping again where you shouldn’t be. What are you looking for this time?”

As he closes the gap between us, I take a few steps back until my calves press against the bed, every alarm bell in my body going off. “Would you believe me if I told you I got lost?”

“Lost,” he repeats, working his unreadable eyes over my body, the corners of his lips curving up, flashing teeth, reminding me of the big bad wolf. “You are a terrible liar.”

My brow furrows as I stare at him. “What a thing to say.” I go to step around him.

He blocks me, his eyes bottomless pits, unfathomable as they stare me down. “Where do you think you’re going?”

The barest wisps of panic flutter in my chest, but I give him my best defiant look. “To find the bathroom.”

“Not until you tell me what you were doing in here.”

“I told you. I got lost.” I step around him again, but he grips my arm, my injured one, and wrenches me back in front of him like a rag doll, iron-clad fingers of his other hand tightening around my throat.

“Wrong answer, little fox.”

Reacting, I shove my knee into his balls. He grunts, and I scramble onto the bed to escape, but rough hands seize my waist, hauling me down and spinning me around. He slams me on the mattress, looming over me, smile not so pretty anymore. “That wasn’t nice.”

He doesn’t sound like Jaxon. Not the man who brought me breakfast and cleaned up my injuries. This is the Jaxon who likes to scare and to hurt others. But with his weight wrapped over my body like an unexpected embrace, his closeness stealing my breath and sliding over my skin like a dense, hot oil. Even his cologne assaulting my senses. The suppressed rage and pent-up frustration for a decade hijacks every cell in my body with a need I can’t control.

Nor want to.

“You’re hurting me,” I lie. “I’ll scream.”

Jaxon’s eyes glitter in the darkness. “By all means. Henry soundproofed

this room. No one will hear you. I'll warn you, you might like that, and hearing you scream will turn me on," he drawls.

His voice, like molten honey.

It drips over me, even though his grip on me is brutal and unforgiving, and I can feel him crushing my chest and hips. His hard length presses between my thighs and my ridden-up dress. Until there's nothing between us but my cotton panties and his expensive cashmere trousers.

Excitement and deeper desires flood my insides against my will. I strain to get free, but he tightens his hold, leaving me breathless. And boneless.

My back arches...

His thumb swipes across my parted lips until I let him in, tasting the salt on his skin.

A pulse lower down vibrates, and a moan catches deep in my throat.

This is what I want. This is what I need.

I want Jaxon to fuck the devil out of me.

His liquid eyes look directly into mine, a smirk on his lips. "What did I tell you?"

No.

After everything, I didn't become a killer to let a man dictate what my body does, as though I'm his toy to play with whenever he wants. Like a trigger, I snap, pulling myself together.

I bite him hard.

Jaxon's smile drops. Automatically, he grabs for my jaw and I turn my head. "Let go of me!" Closing my fist around the blade in my pocket. I slash it at his forearm, his skin blooming red as I cut through his shirt. The smell of pennies stains the air.

He doesn't release me but curls his fist around my hand with the knife, squeezing until my bones shriek, and tosses my paltry weapon away. "Nice try, but your aim is off."

Then he closes both hands around my neck.

"If I could reach your eyes, I would have carved them out," I choke. I don't sound like myself, either. I sound deranged. But I don't care. The rage inside me hasn't done anything to abate the heat spiking through my core.

It's just made it worse.

"So, you *do* have teeth and claws hidden under that delightful exterior?"

"I have more than that," I hiss, pawing at him.

"Brains, I hope, as well as beauty, to understand when you're in no

position to keep fighting me.” His thumb locks on my windpipe. “The harder you try, the more I’ll press down, Laine.”

His words make sense, so I stop moving, giving him a look of pure hatred instead.

His hands relax slightly, allowing me to gasp. “Good girl. She can follow orders. Now, why are you in here...and don’t lie? I know when you lie.”

“Because the Ripper killed Henry,” I seethe at him.

A muscle in his jaw tenses. “Is that right?”

“You don’t believe me.”

He smirks. “You have a lot of fucked up theories in that head of yours.”

“I need proof. You keep deleting it,” I spit out.

His eyes roll. “I did that to protect you. Berners House is not to be fucked with.”

“You’re blatantly protecting your boys’ club. Why? Because they’re protecting the Ripper?”

Jack’s eyes twinkle like forgotten stars. “Max Lamberton is the Ripper.”

“You would say that. You’re one of them,” I throw at him.

His mouth curves up at the ends. “For some obscure reason, part of me has decided to protect you.” The look he gives burns holes through me, igniting areas of my body I’d long ago given up on. He smiles. “I would think long and hard about accusing members of a prestigious society of being the Ripper. I can only keep you safe for so long.”

“I told you, I don’t need protecting.” That makes him chuckle.

“Yes. You do.” He leans close, still gripping my throat, his breath hot on my neck, voice like silk. “From me.”

His hard body pressing against mine makes me squirm. Warmth spreads through my body. It takes everything in me not to rub myself against him like a cat in heat. His lips brush the shell of my ear.

“Don’t—” I grit out. He inhales deeply, brushing my burning skin with his mouth. “Don’t touch me.”

“Why not? You seem to enjoy it,” he muses, pinning my wrists over my head so I’m locked down tight. “You like the part of me that treats you like a princess, but you also like the part that doesn’t.”

I hate that he’s right. I bare my teeth, my chest squeezing tight until he reaches my lips and plunges his tongue inside my mouth, burning away my protests with a bruising, searing kiss. He bites my lips, drawing blood and a soft, pliant moan out of me. My back arches without meaning to, and my legs

part involuntarily as his erection drills into the heat between my legs despite our clothing. As his hand slips under my dress, dragging my panties aside, my world falls apart.

I'm a sinner; this is how I deserve to be consumed.

His finger delves inside, feeling the wetness up to his knuckle, lighting me up with an internal flame as he strokes away all my defenses. He gives a low, vibrating chuckle.

And I realize what the hell he's doing. I jerk back. Lips swollen. Body trembling. Raw.

"Fuck you," I choke at him, digging my nails into his forearm to stop him from going further.

Jaxon stares down at me. He rips his hand away and grabs my jaw so I must look at him. His hair is mussed, and his eyes have a wild glint. Bloody half-moons scatter over the muscles of his arm as he flexes. "Don't threaten me with a good time, little fox," he sneers.

"Or what?" I've no idea why I'm encouraging him. Despite his rough treatment, heat slices through me at his nearness, and I can't help but think of him stripping me bare and devouring me here on the bed of the man I almost killed. I hate that my body reacts this way to him. It knows he's toxic, yet it wants to be poisoned.

Because I'm poison.

I knee him in the balls. He chuckles as he lets me go. It dawns on me as I'm down the stairs, dashing into a closed room, scraping the sliding door shut behind me that he let me go.

It's a game to him.

The room I've barged my way into isn't empty, which placates my thrumming heart threatening to crawl up my throat a tiny bit. Margo, Henry's sister, and some girlfriend she's clinging to, sobbing into her bosom, looks up as I stare around the room.

A casket draped in flowers.

Closed, thank God.

Margo goes back to crying, dismissing me instantly. I start backing out of the dark, somber room when the door squeaks open, and Jaxon slides inside, closing the door and coming up beside me, hands crossed in front of him in respect.

My heart kicks it up a notch, fear consuming every cell in my body.

We stand there for a full minute as he leans close, the scent of his cologne

enveloping all my senses until it feels like I'm drowning in it. "I love it when you run. You love it too," he grates under his breath.

From my lateral view, his smile deepens like he can read my mind, eyes flitting to me, now obsidian black. I've looked into the eyes of murderers and rapists, and it's the same look. He moves behind me, the heat of his body burning every contour, searing every line. "Shall we see if I'm right?"

"You're wrong. I hate it."

"You're never going to give up, are you?"

"Over my dead body." I grit back, barely a whisper.

"I've often thought about that," he breathes in my ear.

I have to fight not to tremble when he slides his warm hand over my thigh, up my skirt, stopping my heart. He eases my underwear aside with his fingers and dips into the slick wetness there I'm ashamed of. A small gasp leaves my lips.

I try to stop him, my hand closing over his, but not hard enough. Not when he swirls in that languid head and then thrusts two fingers into me.

Margo and her friend are still staring ahead, mourning over Henry. All it would take is one glance behind, and they will see.

"But you wouldn't scream anymore."

"Go to Hell," I manage.

Thick fingers plunge deep, making me shudder, bite my lip, and stifle a moan. When I'm weak-kneed and barely able to stand, leaning wantonly against his chest, he removes his hand from between my legs. He traces his wet fingers over my cheek to wrap around my jaw, as something cold ghosts over my thigh, where his hand was earlier. I don't need to look down. I know it's my knife, the one he pried from my fingers in the bedroom. I suck in a breath as Margo stirs.

"Don't say a word. Turn to me and act upset."

His command is accompanied by a sharp dig of the knife under the elastic of my knickers. I do as he says, placing my head on his chest and closing my eyes, breathing in small gasps. I hear Margo and her friend move past us, closing the door softly behind them, leaving me alone in the room with a madman and a dead one.

Then the cold blade travels up and kisses my neck like a lost lover.

Where my scar is.

I don't move, I can't. I'm frozen to the spot, just like that time. Jagged memories of being held hostage, harsh fingers digging into my neck, come

screaming back...a smooth voice telling me to stay, cold steel burning like acid as it cuts.

My captor shuffles me back until we bump the edge of the coffin. Keeping my eyes squeezed shut, I'm aware of Jaxon hoisting me on top of the casket lid and then grabbing my ponytail, tugging my head back until I'm lying on my back.

"Spread your legs."

Another command as the tip of the knife grazes down my body, over my clothes. One hand pushes up my dress, keeps my legs open, and the other slashes off what little underwear I have left, exposing me to the room. Brief pain mixed with cool air assaults me, just as Jaxon does, burying his face between my thighs, nipping the slick wet folds with his teeth.

At least, I hope it's his teeth. It could be the knife.

It's only then I realize I'm lying on a goddamn coffin. All that stands between me and Henry's dead body is a slab of mahogany.

But fear and reason float off into the void as he licks the pain away, teasing my clit laboriously with his tongue, igniting sparks in my core. Heat builds throughout my body like Hell's Inferno. Rushes of pleasure pull me under. Wave after wave swallows me whole.

Balancing on the casket, I grip the edge of the polished wood, unable to do anything but look at the intricately coved ceiling above and die a little at a time from every slow and hard suck from the Devil between my legs.

"Oh, God, please," I moan, the pressure becoming too hot, too intense all at once.

"God can't help you now," he says softly in a dangerous tone, fingers plunging inside me one last time, filling me up, fucking me hard. As my thighs quake and my body shakes, the storm raging inside me breaks, striking liquid fire through my veins.

"Jaxon." His name spills out from my lips like a cry as I come, trembling on the casket, relief wracking through my chest like misery unchecked. He stands and looks down at me, gaze dark.

I lie there, lifeless, helpless, tingling from top to toe, breathing in and out. My eyes search his for something, anything. What was that? Why does it feel like a dream?

But the polished wood beneath me, the stillness of the room we're in, and the murmurs outside bring it home. The stinging between my legs wakes me up...slowly. It's not a dream.

There's blood around his mouth.

Blood.

My gaze travels down to the knife in his hands and the red drops on the blade's edge. Jaxon blinks rapidly, silver eyes widening as if seeing me for the first time. Fear flashes across his face before he shuts it down. He grimaces then, disgust curling his lips.

"You should go."

Before I can reply, he backs away, the emotion that spilled through the mask slipping away, his body stiff like he never bruised the slender parts of my neck, didn't run a knife over it, the carnal smile on his lips a distant memory.

The orgasm he gave me...a stark reminder that I'm weak when it comes to him.

"Jaxon—"

"Get the fuck out, Laine." The coldness in his voice and the abrupt change in him bring me back with a jolt, and I hurry out of the room.

The elegant affair celebrating Henry's fake life is still in full swing when I stagger out of the viewing room, pulling my dress back into place. My heart is off to the races, my mind a jumbled mess, when I burst through the back door and into the blinding sun.

The warmth of summer slides across my bones, chasing away the demons pursuing me all the way, until I reach my car. There's something about stark, bright daylight. In all the movies, monsters turn to dust when they enter the light.

I fumble with the keys, a pricking sensation on the back of my neck making me look back.

A figure in black is watching me from the window of Henry's house.

It's Jaxon...coal dark eyes swallowing me whole like the pits of Hell, reflecting back all the bad things I've done.

And all the sins I've yet to commit.

LAINE

Nine Years Ago.

Victoria Royal School of Medicine, End of Year Masked Ball

Forced social events are the bane of my life, especially ones where obviously you've been stood up. Not that I date enough to count the number of times that has happened. This is the first and last time.

Jaxon isn't here and probably isn't coming.

Mortified, embarrassed beyond belief, I hover on the sweeping staircase landing where a wrought-iron railing encloses a small balcony overlooking the entirety of the main hall. As I check my phone for what feels like the hundredth time, students in lavish ballgowns and Saville Row dinner jackets, coming from the labyrinth of student accommodation above, sweep down the staircase as it splits into two graceful arms, curving gently on either side of the room to the first floor.

I ignore them and tuck myself further behind the velvet drapes. Below, the festivities are in full chaos mode, and I have the perfect vantage point for watching it all.

The bar is rammed, at least five rows of bodies deep. Standing tables with slender candelabras with fake wax candles add soft, flickering illumination. Garish uplighting cast shadows around the students in their masks as they mill in and out of the gothic arches, piling onto the makeshift dance floor. Music booms from the speakers around the DJ.

The atmosphere is akin to something out of a Shakespearean dream and Dante's Inferno, with everyone drunk or trying to get drunk, scooping drugs into their mouth as they're passed around like candy.

One girl is lying half-naked on a styrofoam altar, carved and painted to look like real stone, with jello shots all over her body. Frat boys suck them off her while she squeals in delight.

Another girl, giggling hysterically, allows a team of rugby guys to carry her in a fireman's lift into a photo booth with a line a mile long.

I recognize several from my year, even with masks on, but they don't see me. They don't even look up.

Until Molly spots me and waves.

She hurries up the stairs, holding the skirt of her gold leaf print gown that would trail to the floor if she didn't, her drink spilling everywhere. At the top, she grabs me and hugs me.

"Laine! Why are you hiding up here? Come down and party."

I shake my head. "I was going to head off to bed."

Her elegant eyebrows shoot up. Pink lipstick glints off her perfectly pouty lips, and her brunette curls glimmer in the dim light. Molly is one of those girls that does beauty effortlessly. "Bed?" She wrinkles her nose.

"I've got class tomorrow."

"Fuck class. Exams are over. Come and have a drink." Molly has never let me fade into the wallpaper. She's made every effort to get me involved. I don't know why. Solidarity maybe? We're both from the same grant-maintained school, both here with scholarships, and from the same working-class background. I've always liked Molly. She's down to earth and reminds me of a time before all the pomp and glitter. She doesn't look at me like I'm something the cat dragged killed and dropped on her shoe or pity-eye the pre-loved clothes I dress in. She's like me. We've been charity shopping together.

"There she is," a deep bass voice calls out. For a second, I think it's Jaxon, but the tone is too grating, too nasal. Addison strolls down the stairwell, a smudge of white powder on his nose. Henry and Christian tarry behind him.

My gaze strays to Addison's hands like they do every time I see him now, and he sees me looking and shoves them in his pockets. It took a couple of months until he was out of a cast, and another month before he was able to sit in class and take notes without one of his girlfriends taking notes for him. "Brainey Laine, you coming to the real party with us?"

Molly cocks her head, giving them a bemused look. "Real party?"

Henry smirks. "This place is fucking lame. We've got a room with a hot tub at Berner's House."

Molly glances at me. Upon seeing my reaction, she smiles at the boys. "Nah, we don't have swimming costumes."

"Who needs a costume? Underwear works just as well." Christian drapes his arm around Molly, staring into her cleavage. "Come on. Come with us. I'll be fun," he slurs, a stupid grin slapped onto his face. Molly rolls her eyes and pushes him away.

Addison sneers. "You can ask Jax why he decided to leave you hanging."

My face heats. "What do you mean?"

“Weren’t you his date for tonight?” He shrugs as though it’s no big deal and starts down the stairwell, Henry behind him flashes an ugly smile my way. “Word gets around.”

“Jaxon is at Berner’s House?” My voice sounds stretched thin. He’s bullshitting. Why would Jaxon be there?

Because his father owns it.

Molly looks at me, worry etched in their depths. “He’s probably just late.”

Maybe he is. However, it’s almost 10 p.m. The ball started three hours ago, and he’s not answering any messages or his phone. I don’t have it in me to believe Jaxon would come over in the middle of the library, in front of everyone cramming for exams, and ask me if he could take me to the party only not to turn up. I always assumed he wasn’t like the others on the rugby team.

Maybe I was wrong.

Anger simmers low in my gut. I would love nothing more than to confront Jaxon right now.

Molly must see it in my eyes because she links her arm through mine. “Do you want to go?” I give her the barest nod. She grins. “Then let’s go get wet.”

Christian whoops, Henry laughs, and Addison says nothing as he leads the way.

Henry drives us there in his car. I doubt he’s sober, but he’s the least fucked out of all of them. Every so often, Molly slaps Christian’s hand away, caught sliding up her dress and onto her leg.

Mild regret fills my gut. I should have sat in the middle, Molly is only doing this for me. She can’t stand the rugby guys because, coming from rich, entitled backgrounds, they do nothing but act like arrogant assholes, deigning to treat everyone like shit.

But when I catch her eye, she smiles, a reassuring one that says everything will be alright. If only I had her confidence.

As soon as we get to Berners House and hurl past it, the grounds swallowing us up into darkness, I know I’ve made a mistake.

“Where are we going?”

“The hunting lodge, of course. That’s where the party’s at,” Christian laughs, grabbing Molly’s leg again. She’s saved by lights glaring and music thumping, encouraging the boys to spill out of the car at the end of a

driveway. I've been to Berner's House for afternoon tea with my mother; the Orangery sometimes opens to the public on long weekends. Not the main house and definitely not the Hunting Lodge. You must be a member and pay a small fortune to have access there.

Students are partying on the lawn. Some are still wearing their masks and ball outfits. Others have stripped down to bikinis or even less to congregate in and around the hot tubs. Jaxon is nowhere to be seen.

"You said Jaxon was here," I hurry to walk with Addison into the lodge, where more students are dancing on tables or playing drinking games.

Addison gives me a sly look. "I said you should ask him. I never said he was here."

I stare at him open-mouthed as he saunters away from me toward a group of wasted girls doing lines of coke on the coffee table, but when I go to follow, Christian stands in my way with two drinks. He hands one to me and one to Molly.

Frustration flows through my veins. Jaxon isn't my boyfriend. We haven't even kissed, but we've talked many times since he took me to lunch. We've studied in the library together and hung out in the Tower. We even had lunch at the fish and chip shop again, Jaxon letting me drive his car.

Yet nothing has happened. Sometimes, his hand would linger on the small of my back, or his gaze would tarry on my lips when we both laughed at some inane joke. Current gossip is Jaxon is cold and distant toward women except his sister. That he has a string of girls ready to slip into his bed that he fucks and forgets.

But it's never been like that with me. We're friends despite my secretly wishing it could become something more. He's never let me down...until now.

Molly gives me a look as if to say, *fuck em*, and annoyance snaps in my chest, making my heart feel brave. Fuck em. I don't need Jaxon to have a good time.

We down our drinks.

I don't remember much after that.

It's a lot later when I wake up, leaning on a toilet bowl, staring at my own vomit, and sensing something isn't right. I stand up, using the bathroom walls to support me, the world around me tilting on an axis as everything warps and distorts.

My head is spinning, and my mouth is like sandpaper, as I stumble out of

the ladies' room. Molly is nowhere to be seen.

"Molly," I call out, tongue thick in my throat.

The place is quiet compared to earlier when we arrived. Empty bottles and half-filled cups take over every surface. Discarded clothing litters the furniture. There's a couple fucking on the couch and an orgy happening upstairs, but Molly isn't among any of the women.

But her gold dress hangs on a plant in the corner, ripped in several places. The glimmer on the material makes it fade in and out of focus as I hold it in my hands.

Dread curls in the depths of my gut.

I need to find Molly, and I need to sober up.

In the kitchen, I gulp down a cold glass of water, stopping for a minute to clear my head. I'm not sober, but I'm less wasted than I was a few minutes ago, enough to think. The only place I haven't checked is outside.

The cold air hits me like a slap in the face when I step out the back door. But instead of waking me up, it emphasizes just how drunk I am. I can't walk straight, needing to hold onto the rough tree trunks surrounding the lodge just to stay upright as I shuffle through the foliage.

Masonic chanting in the distance sounds like a fever dream. Adding to the surreal sight of lit torches and men in cloaks standing in a circle watching some performance, I don't know what I'm looking at until I recognize them: guys from the rugby team—Geoffery, Beau, and even Henry.

I stop breathing when I see what it is they're staring at, their faces twisted in lust—Molly, tied up to a post, naked, while two men do horrible things to her. My eyes blink, trying to comprehend what I'm seeing.

She's covered in bloody cuts, thousands of them. And her head lolls to the side, eyes shut as they rape her. I can't tell if she's out cold or dead.

I freeze in place, fear spiking through my heart.

Don't make a noise.

My hand covers my mouth, but it's too late. A whimper escapes me, the scream that's been long overdue, building in my chest as the horror I'm witnessing sinks in, balling in the back of my throat.

One guy in the middle, hurting Molly, his head whips to me, face shadowed, a snarl on his lips.

It's Addison. "Someone's here."

The other guy over Molly's body looks up. Christian. He shrugs. "The Ripper will handle it."

As I stagger back, branches snapping louder than a thunderstorm beneath my feet, I smack into someone solid behind me.

“Lost, little bird?” A grating voice growls in my ear.

I don’t think.

I don’t scream.

I run.

Trees whip past. Brambles tear at my legs. Panic screams in my veins as the world crashes and claws around me. I get as far as the woods surrounding a main road when he grabs me, his gloved hands covering my mouth and then squeezing my neck to drag me back. A sharp, stabbing pain hisses against my throat, and as the breath wooshes out my lungs, I’m thrown to the ground and lost in the undergrowth.

My hands fly to my throat as warmth spills out, coldness creeping into my limbs, making them heavy. Everything is numb.

Everything is so far away.

I try to speak, but only a choking, gurgling sound comes out. I’m not dying like this. Somehow, I crawl to the road, but the effort is like crawling through mud. My mind whirls to playing stuck in the mud with Molly at school, and then my life flashes before me.

Too exhausted to move another inch, I stop at the verge, sucking in a few shallow breaths, rolling onto my back.

The last thing I remember is a dark silhouette of a man towering over me, a hideous demon mask covering his face, his eyes like black stars, drawing me into darkness.

And his laugh, deep, harsh, rough against my skin. “Whores think they can run, but Hell will always follow.”

Why? I want to ask, and my mouth forms the word even though I don’t make a sound.

He crouches down over me.

And strangely, I’m not afraid.

“Why? Because it’s my turn, little bird, to make our victim sing. Mine!” he growls.

Then the lights of an approaching car beam over us, and I remember nothing after that.

JAXON

The video of Laine and Max is grainy, but it does the job. She asks him several questions about that night, testing his answers against what she knows. Her face has a skeptical look as she leans back in her seat, her arms folded across her chest.

On the other hand, Max fidgets like there's a rat trapped in his jumpsuit. He was the wrong guy to send down for the Ripper murders. The whites of his eyes are showing, and a sheen of sweat glistens on his brow.

I'm amazed the police bought his story, but you'll take anything to close the case when you have a signed confession and no other leads.

Max doesn't give anything away, not in words. Killing him was probably hasty of me. But I dislike loose ends. And Max was a long, overdue thread just waiting to be pulled.

The abrupt knock gives me time to turn off the video before the person on the other side cracks open the door.

"Father wants you to join us." It's my sister, Matty, her dark hair curled and pinned back the way father likes it. She only leaves it loose when she's out of the house. "Wolf is aggravating him again."

I let out a sigh. "What do you want me to do about it?"

Matty rolls her eyes. "Nothing but have dinner with us. Why did you come tonight if you're going to sit in the office all hours? You're always working."

"So are you," I counter. It's a Clémont family tradition to become a workaholic in light of the shitstorm we've endured since our mother and eldest sibling passed away.

Matty gives me a grim smile. "Just come downstairs for one course. You know Father leaves Wolf alone when you're present. And it would please Dad."

She closes the door with a soft click, leaving me to collect my thoughts.

I stare at the rain, lashing it down outside the office window. I couldn't think of anything worse than sitting in a room full of my father's friends, pretending to give a fuck.

I'm a thirty-year-old man; I do not need or care for my father's pleasure or approval, but I can never say no to Matty. And Wolf, despite his failings, is my younger brother. I'll always protect them both from him.

Because I couldn't protect my mother and elder sister.

Matty is composed but unsmiling. Wolf's jaw is clenched shut, straining against whatever smart-mouth remark wants to crawl out of his mouth. And Abe is in discussion with Shepherd when I enter the dining room. The sixteen seats at the long table are mostly filled with the five founders of the Lucian Society and their wives. A long white runner, candles, and autumnal decor cover the center, giving the entire affair an elegant look, which is the opposite of what this is. My sister must have been in charge of hosting the event. She has my mother's taste down to a T.

My father and a few of the founders look my way as I stroll toward the empty seat next to Wolf. There's one next to my father, which has been reserved for me, but I'm not in the mood to take it.

"You're late, son," Abe states, leaning back in his chair, regarding me.

I take the time to pour myself a double shot of whiskey. Wolf takes the bottle from me and pours himself a quadruple. Always one to outdo me.

"I was seeing to our problem."

"And is it sorted?" It's Shepherd asserting his authority. His long-suffering wife, twenty years his junior, Shina, makes eyes at me. She's been trying to get in my pants since her engagement party, and she realized that she'd be tied to Shepherd and his nasty streak for the rest of her life.

I could take her upstairs later and fuck her, just to piss Shepherd off, but I prefer not to make war with my father's cronies just because I can, even if I am the honored son. The one who stands to ascend to the Archkey mantel when Abe finally kicks the bucket. Shina knows that, so she thinks upgrading to me will get her a better deal.

It won't.

"With finesse," I cut back

Shepherd frowns.

I purposely don't answer until Abe asks me the same question.

"It's being dealt with."

My father grunts his approval and carries on his discussion with Eric, who looks at me with extreme hatred, his own son not here. Most of the acolytes aren't here, given two are missing, and one has turned up dead. This dinner is to smooth things with the founders and provide light refreshments while my father makes promises and ensures I keep them.

Wolf chuckles in my ear. "Dad's had Shepherd's hand up his ass all night."

“What do the founders want?”

Wolf shrugs. “Same thing they’re asking the police for, for someone to nail the bastard that’s killing us off one by one. Although everyone is a little paranoid if you ask me. Only Henry, poor fucking sod, has turned up dead. The other two are probably off on some yacht in the middle of nowhere, fucking and snorting themselves to death.”

I glance at my brother as the last course comes out. Looks like I missed dinner altogether. “You sound jealous.” Wolf is the ultimate life and soul of the party. The number of times I’ve had to restart his heart after an overdose...

“Yeah, they could have invited me.”

“You’re in rehab,” Matty hisses from the far end of the table.

“Fuck rehab,” Wolf laughs, downing the quadruple whiskey, causing two of the founder’s wives between us and Matty to stop gossiping and look up.

“I just want to know what you’re doing about the bastard who murdered my son!” Tiffany Wickham stands up, eyes and cheeks wet with tears, throws her napkin on the table, and storms off.

Her husband half stands awkwardly and then sits back down when one of the other wives goes after her so he doesn’t have to. “She’s taking losing Henry hard, Archkey,” he mutters at my father, the whites of his eyes almost as large as the dark circles squatting under them.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Wolf snorts.

My eyes flick to my father, who has turned the color purple. “My son will deal with it.”

A muscle clenches at the corner of my mouth, but I say nothing. Abe giving the assignment to me is the better option since he knows I killed Henry. The fucker was out of control. It was only a matter of time.

I dumped the body on the common as soon as I told Abe what had happened. It’s always easier to deal with my father when he feels he’s being kept in the loop. Unlike Wolf, I know how to handle Abe and diffuse his temper.

Wickham nods, relief settling in his eyes. He’s always been one of my father’s devout followers, unlike Eric, who is still burning holes in my head from his seat in the middle of the table.

As my father’s legacy, I’m entitled to punish Christian for bringing a female into the restricted areas of the house. I wouldn’t have usually bothered. Every acolyte breaks the rules, especially the lesser ones regarding

women. But he upset Laine.

No one gets to upset her.

Apart from me.

Dessert is abandoned in favor of cigars in the billiard room. Although the women usually disappear elsewhere, Shina comes too and singles me out at the corner bar.

“Thank you.”

I raise a brow. “What for?”

“Christian was taking...” she pauses, uncertainty flashing across her perfect features as she looks around, gaze darting to her husband. “Liberties,” she finally adds.

That’s news to me, although I’m also not surprised. Still, I don’t let it show on my face. What happens behind closed doors is none of my business.

“Don’t mention it.”

She steps closer, eyes giving me the once over, confident despite she’s younger than me. “You know, you’re not at all like your father.” Her hand rests on my arm briefly before I can move it away. She’s playing a dangerous game. Fortunately for her, I don’t feel anything toward her. But right now, I wish she’d take the hint.

“That’s not hard. No one is a fucker like Abe.” Wolf looms in, taking some of the heat. Shina smiles, turning her charms on my brother.

“Wolf is such an unusual name.”

He grins at her, and I take the opportunity to leave them to it. “Excuse me.”

If my brother wants to get his dick wet in shark-infested waters, I won’t stop him. He can swim.

I eye my father as I walk out. The cold look he gives me is one I know very well. It’s a warning and a reminder in one: I’m not the Archkey yet, even if I act like it.

As I walk out the door, Matty is standing alone on the porch, smoking, her hairpins pulled out so that her locks tumble around her. Duty over. The porch lights are off. She must have cut the mains so no one would know she was there.

Matty has it the hardest out of all of us—acting as our mother’s replacement in the family.

“Who is she?”

I raise a brow. “She?”

“The woman you were with at the ball. I spied you sneaking off to the library with her.” She tuts. “Punishing Christian when you were doing the exact same thing yourself.”

My eyes narrow at her. It’s unlike my sister to want something, but it feels like that’s where this is headed.

“Relax,” she breathes. “I’m not going to tattle. I was glad to see you having fun for once.”

“She’s...someone I once went to school with.” I was going to say someone unimportant, but the words just slipped out.

Matty grins. “First love or first fuck?”

I give her a blank look. “She can’t be anything. A means to an end.”

A look of disbelief slides across her face as she scoffs. “I don’t buy that for a second.”

Irritation flickers deep in my chest at her reaction. “You know why.”

“You’re not a fucking robot, Jax. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but...” she takes a drag of her cigarette. “You need to be more like Wolf.”

“Like Wolf?” I snort.

“Yes, like that bastard. Live a little before you dry up and become an empty shell like Dad.” She chuckles, biting her thumbnail.

We don’t speak for a few minutes.

Then.

“Did you do it?” she asks softly. “Wolf said you did.”

I stare at her in the dark. “Do what?”

“Kill the bastard?”

“He was a liability,” I explain.

“Good,” she huffs, putting out her cigarette with the toe of her designer heel. “The fucker deserved it.”

THE LIGHTS ARE ON AS I PULL ON THE MAIN ROAD TO HER HOUSE. KILLING the engine, I wait. People are leaving. Her father and some woman. She hugs them both and then watches them go. She waves as they drive off, and their car passes mine in the dark.

I wait until she’s settled and ready for bed. Through the amber-lit glass, she moves through the kitchen to the living room, checking doors and locking

windows. Her hair is scraped back into a ponytail, and her face is fresh from any makeup. She looks as innocent as the stars and shines just as brightly.

I watch her until she realizes the curtains remain open, letting all the bad things in, and then she crosses to the window, looking out into the darkness with a frown on her forehead.

She can't see me. My lights are off, and there are no streetlamps here. As she scrapes her teeth over her lower lip, biting down, she snatches the curtains closed, taking away my viewing pleasure.

Earlier, when I caught her, she was divine, but her reaction wasn't what I was expecting. I thought she would run and cower, I hoped she would fight and lash out. Instead, she submitted to me and opened up like a flower in bloom. Her terror was a delight to taste, but her desire was a drug that brought my darker side surging to the surface. It knocked me for six. She wasn't supposed to see that side of me. Not yet. But I can't control myself around her. It's obvious.

And now, here I am, starting a shift at the hospital in less than ten minutes, and instead, I'm parked outside her house. Watching her. It doesn't help that I see my little fox moaning beneath me whenever I close my eyes.

She haunts me, just like I plague her.

We're meant for each other.

"You're not going to give up, are you?"

"Over my dead body."

I. Did. Not. Expect. That.

Laine is no longer the blushing eco-warrior I met at medical school. She's fierce, reckless, and everything about her makes my blood boil.

It's making me careless. I put Christian in hospital, murdered Henry, and covered up her involvement. Ending her is the only way out of this mess. I should have put her out of her misery the first moment I laid eyes on her. I shouldn't be here tonight, peeping on her like an obsessed teenager, but I can't keep away. I need to taste her again, devour her, destroy her...and eventually make her mine.

Fuck everything else.

Fuck Abe and his expectations.

Even if the world were burning around me, I'd let it.

Without considering my actions, I text the hospital and cancel my shift.

Leaving the car where it is, I slip into her garden and move silently until I'm at her back door. The lock is flimsy. I should fix it so she's not exposed

and vulnerable. If I can open it, so can *he*. Though I quite like that I can access her whenever I want, that part of me isn't going to let her go.

It won't stop now I've found her.

Not even for my little fox.

LAINE

My cottage is full of noise at night, but I've gotten used to them all. Noises are fine. It's the shadows that creep me out—the ones outside that seem to wax and wane with the moonlight. I was so busy with Dad and game night that I forgot to close the curtains. Anyone could have been watching, and that freaks me more than anything.

I climb the rickety stairs once I'm happy everything is locked up, with a glass of water in one hand and a book in the other. The gun Nola gave to me put to good use, tucked into my waistband. Tigger pads after me, making no sound, and Charlie, my dad's German Shepherd, scrabbles loudly over the wood. They both follow me into the bedroom.

Cash offered me to stay at his again, but staying away, running again, is out of the question. I came back to Whitechapel for a reason—to catch the bastard. Nola is right, I need to make a move. I can't keep playing his games. At least I'm not entirely alone tonight, dad brought Charlie for a sleepover. He'll protect me while I sleep.

If I manage to sleep...

I was so angry after Jaxon caught me off guard at Henry's that I haven't slept much since. I'm hoping that tonight, physical exhaustion will win over after spending most of the day at the gym getting pummelled by Rae, my dad's ex-partner when he was in the crime investigation department. She once offered to take me through my self-defense paces as a favor to my dad and has done so ever since.

I like Rae. She's no-nonsense, and even though she was crushing hard on my dad at one point, she's pretty easy to train with. She didn't ask about the bruises around my neck, just like she has never asked about the scar. She slammed me into the mat enough times that sense was knocked into me along with determination.

Though she did make a passing comment as I left. "You were off your game tonight, El. I got the better of you more than a dozen times." Rae has always called me El because my dad has always called me my full name, Elaine.

"I went to see Max Lamberton," I admitted while toweling down. If I told her the truth, at least about the stalker, she'd have to tell Ken, my dad, and then I'd be facing more than a twice-a-week check-up. Games night and

waffle morning aside, my dad would probably demand I move back home. But I can tell her things he already knows.

Rae looked at me as if I was insane. “The Ripper?”

“Some things he said just didn’t make sense.”

“Like what?”

“Like, the killer is meant to have intimate knowledge of West London but Max didn’t seem to know where anything was when I asked him to explain the distances between the crime scenes, he didn’t mention or seem to know about the positioning of the bodies after he killed them, and when I asked him why some of the wounds were controlled, and some disorganized, he couldn’t tell me why.” Max looked dumbfounded when I asked him about the letters, too. It makes me wonder if the police even asked him or just took his word for it.

“How do you know all this?”

“I may have pestered Dad a few times,” I lie. I actually read his files one night after he passed out on the couch from sheer exhaustion.

Rae cocked her head, thinking before she said, “It was a long time ago. He could have forgotten the details.”

I didn’t press her after that.

“Doing anything nice tonight?” she asked me as I was leaving.

“Games night with Dad,” I answered.

Rae looked wistful enough that I invited her too, which turned out to be a good thing as Dad and Rae left super early, giving me more time to get ready. Tonight, I’m going to catch my stalker. I want my house back. I want my freedom.

And I need to know if Jaxon can be trusted.

I must have fallen asleep a few hours after I’m done prepping because I wake abruptly to darkness and Charlie whining.

“Charlie?” I gasp as I fumble for the lamp, gun in my hand, my heart rocketing like a firework in my chest. Light floods the room as soon as I hit the switch. The door to the bedroom is open, and Charlie is nowhere to be seen.

“Charlie,” I call again.

He comes trotting in, tongue hanging out, ears pricked forward, and licks my outreached hand. I grab his collar, pulling him close to me, stroking the warm fur on his head with a shaking hand. My eyes are still fixed on the open door.

I closed it.

I always close it.

He's here.

“Who is there?” I challenge whoever is beyond the door. “I’m calling the police.”

Tigger glares at me from the top of the dresser, where he likes to sleep, for waking him up. I slip out of bed, gun poised, phone in the other, ready to call my dad as I don’t want to make a complete fool of myself if there’s no one there.

And there isn’t anyone when I step onto the landing, just an empty stairwell and bathroom.

The spare room should be locked so that no one would be in there, but I pace up the door anyway and try the handle. When it doesn’t turn all the way or open, I breathe a sigh of relief.

The rest of the house is just as undisturbed when I check it. Charlie accompanies me to peer into every dark hole the cottage has until I’m satisfied that I’m alone. Maybe the bedroom door swung open independently, or Charlie might have nudged it—only one way to tell.

Quinn fixed me up with some security cameras, the discreet kind not on the market because most homeowners want intruders to know they’re being watched. Shakily, I turn on the monitor in my office. A dark, green-tinged picture blurs into view of each room as the cameras rotate through every room in the house and the small back and front gardens. When I’m convinced there isn’t anyone there, I press rewind.

Until I see him.

A hooded figure on the landing, feeding Charlie a few treats and giving his ears a good old rub. My chest squeezes and fear tightens every nerve in my body as I watch him.

Got you, you sick fuck.

I rewind a little more to the part where he enters through the back door after climbing over the garden wall. There’s nothing to say who he is other than he knew I had a dog, and he’s young and athletic. I’m shaken, but at least now I’ve seen him.

He’s real.

Quickly, I shove on a pair of jeans and slip on a pair of bunny slippers, grabbing my car keys. The last camera had a view of the front and a car—a Maybach. When I get outside, it’s gone, but that doesn’t stop me from

patrolling the area in my car and looking for the bastard.

“Cuz, what’s up?” Cash huffs down the phone when I call him. In the background, a male voice is cursing and wheezing, like they’ve been hurt.

“Is now a bad time?” I thought I’d be waking him, but I should have known my cousin runs his *other* business in the dead of the night.

“Nope, not for you.”

“Okay, I need another favor. I can pay you.”

He makes a mock offended sound. “You wound me. I thought we were family.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, then I need your help. I need a stun gun. Can you get me one?”

“Does a bear shit in the woods? I’ll have it for you in an hour. Come by the house. I’ll leave it on the porch.” He suddenly pauses. “No, no, no. The nails first. Leave the tongue ‘til last. How can he rat when he can’t fucking speak? Haven’t I taught you anything? Like this.” There’s a blood-curdling scream down the line from the man who was wheezing earlier.

Jesus. H. Christ.

I chew my lower lip. I don’t know what Cash is doing, but I’m thankful I’m in the dark. “Thanks, Cash. I’ll let you get back to...what you’re doing.”

“Any time, Cuz.” I can hear him grinning on the phone. I hang up, but then something pops into my mind and I quickly call Nola. “Can your hacker tell me where a car is right now by hacking into the traffic cams?”

“Quinn can pull a rabbit from her ass if I need one.”

“Okay.” I reel off the license plate, and a few seconds later, Nola sends me a location on a map. It’s in the wealthier part of town, close to where Henry lived. I drive to Cash’s to pick up the stun gun and then to where the location is with my heart racing, and my nerves shot, slowing to a crawl outside a house on the edge of Bishopsgate.

The sleek black Maybach is in the driveway with the lights on. They switch off, and a man gets out talking on the phone. He’s in a black t-shirt and jeans, his hoodie jacket unzipped. As he turns to shut the car door, the security lights flood the driveway.

I see his face clear as day.

Jaxon Clément.

LAINE

My palms are sweaty, and my head feels light as I exit my car. I'm close to throwing up. Nausea claws at my throat. It's also raining, the heavens ripping open, just like my world has.

Jaxon is my stalker.

Is he also the Ripper?

He's the one who followed me to the cemetery, dug up the body I buried, and broke into my house. He cleaned the murder weapon and took my blood-stained clothes. Did he also leave the letters? Did he try to kill me a decade ago?

That's all I want to know now.

It's what I *need* to know.

He sees me as soon as I appear in his driveway. Unlike me, his hood is up, so he's sheltered from the rain. I'm still in my pajama top even though I managed to slip on a pair of jeans. My bunny slippers soaked through. I don't care. It's keeping me from burning up because knowing has given me a fever. I feel faint, sick, close to collapsing. The gun is in my pocket, my hand is closed around it for protection.

"If you're thinking of stabbing me again, I'd advise against it."

"Don't choke me again, and I'll consider not shooting you," I say through gritted teeth.

A smile twists on his face like he knows why I'm here, holding up his hands. "Go for it if it makes you feel better, but I thought you didn't know how to shoot."

It's tempting. Anger twists in my gut, giving me the strength to stride toward him, gun aimed and ready.

Just in case.

I glare up at him, and he stares down at me. "You were in my house."

His mouth twitches, but his eyes aren't soulless like they were at Henry's. His eyes are mini winter storms, the gray swirling around a black hole. "I knew you'd find out sooner than later."

I scowl at him, the rain slicing through my clothes like cold fingers. "Is that all you have to say?"

"Come inside. We can talk."

"Fuck, no." I'm not going anywhere with him.

“You prefer to stand in the rain?” He raises a brow, unimpressed with my glare. “Because I’d rather not catch a cold.”

I don’t want to go inside. I don’t want to be anywhere near him, but my legs move without me asking them to, and I follow him in. He casts a glance at the pool of water gathering at my feet.

“Wait here. I’ll get us something to dry off with.” I stand there dripping as he disappears into the shadows and returns with two gray, fluffy towels. He hands me one. It’s fresh from the laundry and smells clean and faintly masculine. I refuse to relish his scent, so I use it sparingly, drying my hair, face, and hands.

Jaxon has taken his hoodie off and is toweling off the excess water, his thin black t-shirt lifting to reveal his hard and toned body beneath. I avert my gaze, taking in the rest of his house. Sterile, much like a hospital—cold granite floors, smooth concrete walls, and glossy black surfaces offer little comfort once the door is closed. No clutter, photos, or anything personal is on display. It looks like he just moved in. It looks like an ad for the ultimate bachelor pad.

I’m not surprised this is where he lives. Everything about Jaxon is so neat and orderly, I was convinced he had OCD back at university.

Unease pricks up my spine, slicing every nerve as I turn around to find him watching me. The familiar burn of anger has quieted within me now we’re alone.

I’m alone with Jaxon.

My stalker.

My killer.

The only noise is rainwater tapping outside the house, making the walls seem closer and the vast mansion smaller. Now that I have him in front of me, my throat feels constricted. I’d planned to confront him, but now it all seems jumbled up in my head.

He reaches for me, and I step back. “I’m just taking the wet towel from you.”

“You can’t blame me after last time,” I say, handing it to him.

Shaking his head slightly, he saunters further into the house. “This way.”

I ease off my wet slippers and walk after him to a dark gray, glossy kitchen surrounded by large windows. A living room with a horseshoe-shaped cream couch that appears like it’s never been sat on and a glass coffee table laden with heavy books that look like they haven’t been read.

Jaxon enters the utility room with the used towels and comes out wearing a clean, dry t-shirt. He then dumps a stack of two perfectly folded squares of material before me. “In case you want to change. There’s a bathroom in the hall.”

I unfold the squares to reveal a soft, gray tracksuit and a white t-shirt. Huge but dry. “My clothes aren’t that wet.”

“Suit yourself, but you’re still dripping all over my floor. Hot drink?” Jaxon is pottering around the kitchen, making what looks to be coffee. I huff out a breath and nod, taking the clothes with me as I wander into the hallway to find the bathroom. When I return, a steaming mug is on the counter before a stool. Jaxon is nowhere to be seen. I sit and sip the drink, marveling at the hot, sweet, chocolatey taste, the soft fleece of Jaxon’s clothes warming my bones, and a dark view over the valley behind Jaxon’s house drawing my attention, even though rivers of rain obscure it.

My shoulders are rigid, and my heart is racing despite the comforts. But the gun is nestled on my lap, so fuck him and the expensive car he rode in on.

Jaxon walks back in, wearing joggers himself. Only his are black. I blink at him, unable to stop my eyes from running up and down his length as he makes himself a drink. It’s my first time seeing Jaxon wear home clothes, looking uber relaxed, unlike me.

Black on black. He matches the decor.

As if feeling my eyes on him, he looks up, gaze questioning as it settles on the gun.

“Are you going to shoot me? Because it’s rude to do it when someone has just made you a hot chocolate.”

Heat pricks the back of my neck. “Just like it’s illegal to stalk someone?” I counter.

“Stalking?” He looks amused. “No, little fox, I’ve been watching you, protecting you, keeping what’s mine safe.”

“Funny way of protecting me,” I spit out. “You killed Henry—” *And you tried to kill me.* I trail off, the rest closing up in my throat, cheeks flushing as I accuse him of the same thing I’ve been doing.

Pot, kettle, black as night.

He gives me an amused look as he takes his coffee from the machine. “I finished the job for you. He was alive when you left him.”

Jesus. “But you moved him?”

“Killing him outright was too good for that fucked up piece of work.”

“Okay. But then you dumped the body in the open. Why?”

“Honestly?” Jaxon’s eyes have a wicked glint as he takes me in. “I wanted your attention.”

“That’s it?” I give him an incredulous look.

“What did you think I did it for?”

“To get me caught.”

“And I would do that why?” He looks genuinely insulted that I insinuated it.

I think back to the crime scene my dad described. It was clean. Too clean. “You removed the evidence.”

“You were all over it. The police would have easily connected the dots,” he says in a matter-of-fact voice. “You were doing it wrong.”

I blink at him. Is he for real? Doing it wrong? There’s a right way? Why am I even questioning it? Of course, there is. For pointers, Sage and I binged *Criminal Minds* and *CSI*, all seasons. I guess it didn’t help.

He tilts his head. “First-time kill?”

“No, third.” I blink at him. Why did I admit that? He already has enough leverage on me, he doesn’t need more. I need to get myself together.

But all Jaxon does is drink his coffee, leaning against the counter while the rain and wind howl at the windows behind him. “Interesting choice, a slash to the throat. I would have taken you for a bullet to the brain type of girl,” he says, like we’re discussing the crappy weather, nodding to the gun.

“I prefer to get up close and personal.” I also still don’t know how to shoot a gun, but even though he knows, saying that out loud to the man who crept into my house at night when I was sleeping feels weak.

“Still can’t shoot?” His gaze sears mine, and a slither of heat races down my spine, straight to my core, making me shift in my seat.

I bite at my lower lip. The sharp pain distracts me because I need it. This man is too much. It doesn’t help that he unravelled me the day before, reducing me to nothing but a quivering mess. I’ve not slept with anyone since my attack, unable to trust any man in my bed since then. And even if I did, the nightmares alone have them running for hills.

Now, all I can think about is Jaxon’s mouth and what he can do with it. All I feel is his tongue, a tornado of pleasure between my folds.

And it makes me ache for more.

“What about taking my clothes? Cleaning the knife?”

He exhales hard and runs a thumb over his lip as he looks at me. “That is self-explanatory, surely.”

“You cleaned the evidence.”

“Of course I fucking did.”

“But why?”

“Same reason. I wasn’t going to let you get caught, was I?”

“I don’t understand.” And I don’t. Jaxon made things very clear when upped and left me ten years ago. Not that we were dating, or that he’d ever tried to kiss me. We were friends, I thought, until he didn’t care enough to tell me he was leaving. Now, I imagine he tried to kill me and left sick letters for me to find. That he slaughtered all those women.

It doesn’t go with the picture he’s painting of some demonic guardian angel cleaning up my crime scenes, asking me how many people I’ve killed. Making me hot chocolate.

Jaxon is still talking. I close off my thoughts enough to tune back in and listen.

“...you made a lot of mistakes. Most do on their first or second. It takes time to understand the mechanics of it. Standing in front of your victim when you make the instrumental cut will cover you in blood. You want to stand behind them preferably—” He pauses when he sees how I’m looking at him. “If you want, I can teach you.”

“T—teach me?”

Lightening flashes behind him, outside the window. Darkness steals into his eyes at that moment. “How to do it properly.”

“You’re a killer,” I say quietly. Jaxon killing Henry wasn’t his first. Hell, I wasn’t his first. Like how he dealt with Addison and Christian, he’s done this before.

His eyes narrow. “Yes, like you.”

“I’m nothing like you.”

“We are the same.”

The world tilts at an angle. “No.” *Did you send me those letters? Was it you who gave me this scar?* Instead, all that comes out is, “How many?”

The muscle in his jaw tightens, but a small smile, a knowing one, blooms on his lips. “You don’t want to know.”

But I do. I need to. How can I sit with this man in his kitchen, casually drinking hot chocolate, and not know? *Because he’s like you.*

The heavens choose that moment to open up, letting a divulge of rain

shower down. The sound is pacifying...cleansing. It makes me want to stand outside and wash my sins away. But I can't. My hands are just as bloody as Jaxon's, and he knows it.

He places his coffee down and walks to the mini bar in the connecting lounge. He pours himself a whiskey neat. I can't help but admire his broad shoulders and muscular torso through his thin t-shirt and how his sweatpants mold to his bottom half. Jaxon looks good in black as well as muted gray. He looks good in all colors.

And he turns and looks at me from across the room, making my heart beat erratically. The look he gives me is one a predator might give its next meal. It's not a friendly look, but one that makes my skin crawl with heat. All thoughts about Jackson being a killer, about what I've done, disintegrate with that look.

"Was it you?" I brush the ends of my ponytail away from my scar so he knows what I'm asking.

He doesn't say anything for a minute, staring me down. My heart is banging around in my chest like it wants out.

In my lap, the gun seems bigger and heavier as I reach down and hold onto it—my only lifeline.

If he says yes, I'll shoot him.

Even if I have no idea how.

LAINE

“No,” he says finally. “That wasn’t me.” His gaze brushes lower to my thighs. “But I did other things.”

A memory of Jaxon pinning me to Henry’s casket, his mouth stained red, catches me off guard: he left mere scratches between my thighs when he cut my dress off, bloody ones. Nothing deep enough to still hurt, but will leave a mark all the same. There’s a sudden tightness in my chest, and with it comes a familiar tingle as heat slickens my groin.

I swallow and look away.

Jaxon is dangerous...in more ways than one. I’ve always known he was. He may not be the Ripper, but now I know how deranged he is. The worst thing is I can’t fault him for it. I can’t storm out of here screaming he’s a psycho because I’ve stalked and killed people, too. And knowing he has the same darkness as me...*turns me on.*

I’m just as fucked up as he is.

I have no idea what to do now. Part of me wants to leave, but the remaining fractures of my psyche, splintered by dark, carnal thoughts of what nearly happened the last time we were alone together, are pinned in place by him.

I didn’t fully think this through.

“Now you’re warmed up, something stronger?” he asks.

“Sure.” I finish my cocoa as he pours me a generous shot.

He lifts it up, offering me the glass, making no more of a move than that. I have to get out of my seat to take the drink.

When I reach him, he smirks, clinking my glass against his. “Here’s to losing your wings.”

“Wings?”

“Angel wings. You’re never getting into heaven now.”

“Then I’ll go the other way,” I quip, remembering all too well the university drinking chant.

Screaming, down, down, down.

He swallows his glass whole. Not to be outdone, I down mine, the amber liquid smooth against my tongue, but searing flames against my throat, meeting the molten heat in my middle.

Jaxon pours us another. “So, little fox, now you know my secret, are you

ready to let me help you?”

Little fox? Why is he calling me that?

His offer makes me nervous. Jaxon isn't the Ripper, but something still doesn't sit right, like a puzzle with a piece missing that you remember picking up but not where you put it.

“I work alone.” It makes me sound tougher than I am. *How can I heal if I don't do it myself?* It sounds better; blaming the pact with the girls over my own insecurities.

He cocks his head. “After I helped you with Henry? You would have been caught if I hadn't. You'd already be dead.”

“The police—”

“Know jack shit,” he scoffs. “I'm talking about the Lucians and my father. I've been protecting you from them.”

I blink at him, my chest tight, nerves jagged at the ends. My mind struggles to comprehend what he's saying, but my thoughts are jumbled, tipped on their head. It reminds me of the part in the Little Red Riding Hood story when the wolf convinces her that he's her grandma.

I clench my jaw, forcing a smile. “Thank you.” Because when a murderer says he's on your side, that's what you say, especially when you're in his house, drinking his whiskey, wearing his clothes.

Jaxon comes closer and gently palms my neck, pulling me to him with a sigh, tracing his thumb over my scar. I try not to flinch, not to jerk away. “It was my pleasure,” he drawls, resting his forehead on mine.

“Jax—”

“You know”—he breathes in the scent of my skin—“I can help you catch your next victims. Carve them until they're nothing but a pulp of blood and bones at your feet.” The words roll over me, through me, like soft, dangerous strokes.

“My next victims?” The question stumbles out of my lips, as do unexpected stirrings. Fear in the distance spikes, but my mind is muddy, clouded. I'm also drenched in desire, dueling emotions at odds with one another. My brain struggles to comprehend as I try to keep hold of myself.

“The other two men pinned to your board,” he soothes, breath hot on my neck. “The tacky one you have in your house. Three of the photos are crossed out. Two are left. You should burn that, by the way. If anyone sees it, you're fucked.”

I close my eyes as his lips graze the soft shell of my ear. “No one is

supposed to see it. That room is locked,” I mumble.

“Burn it. I’ll help you.” His arm snakes around my waist, pulling me close. The length of his body presses against mine, lighting me up inside like a bonfire.

I should burn it. I’ve stared at it long enough to see it in my dreams. The last two men tacked onto it are next on my list to take out—Christian De Lacy and Addison Cochrane. They were both there that night. I saw them rape Molly. They are as much to blame for her death as the others because, well...she must be dead. Christian, the coward from the other night, would be next, while Addison, I was saving till last.

In truth, the Ripper would be my final kill. He, out of all of them, scares me the most. He’s the only one I don’t know. Though his voice and his hands on me in the darkness, I’ll never forget. He will be the hardest, I’m sure.

Maybe Jaxon *can* help me. Although, he doesn’t know I’m stalking the Ripper. He thinks my list stops at the four on the board. It doesn’t.

Even if he only helps me with Chrisian and Addison, he could be just what I need, but Nola’s caution about not trusting anyone but myself is still very much at the forefront of my mind. We swore not to bring outsiders in without agreement from each other. If I do it without telling them, it negates my pact with the girls.

Does he know about my friends? He met Nola at the Foundation Ball, and he undoubtedly can guess she’s involved. It’s better if he doesn’t. The less I say about Nola and Sage, the better. And vice versa. They can’t know about Jaxon.

Oh, dear God, I’m actually considering this.

“I call the shots.” I form my words carefully.

His grip tightens on the nape of my neck, and he laughs softly. “That’s not how this works.”

“Then...we’re done here.” I go to push him off me, but he drags me back to him and pins me between his solid mass and the counter.

I react. I don’t even think; I point the gun at his chest.

Jaxon has trapped me, but the corner of his mouth twitches as he looks at the gun and then back at me, his languid eyes dark, bottomless pools I could drown in. “You still don’t trust me.”

“It will take more than covering up a crime scene.” I force a tight smile despite my hand shaking so much that the gun’s muzzle slips.

“What will it take?” His voice is dark velvet as his hands slide down my

body to the waistband of my tracksuit bottoms. His smile taunts me enough to make my toes curl as his mouth crashes onto mine.

I'm not expecting it. Jaxon has never kissed me before.

The gun digs into his chest, but he assaults my mouth regardless. He devours me into submission. Tongue sliding inside, wet and hot. Teeth scraping my lower lip, bruising it to hell. It's sweet and bitter, teasing and soft—gentle. But then it evolves, rough, deep, penetrating, like a storm brewing. Jaxon is something to cling to as the kiss takes away everything I am and destroys it. It's his hands gripping the waistband of my tracksuit bottoms like he wants to rip them off, the gun pinched between us, the rise and fall of our breaths, the molten heat burning in the base of my belly.

He slides off the bottoms. As his hands glide down, so does he, breaking the kiss until his face is level with my thighs. He yanks me close, pulling me against his mouth, kissing me through the soaking wet lace. "Let me taste you again, little fox."

Shamefully, I do it without question as he slips my panties aside. As he licks and sucks, pleasure becomes a knife, slicing me apart. Every plunge of his tongue has me gasping. Every tease of my ass has me grinding against him until I forget the gun I'm holding. It clatters to the floor, the noise of it loud, jolting me back together.

"No." I push him away, feeling colder without him covering every inch of me.

He gets to his feet, eyes glowing with the challenge, lips red and wet. "You weren't complaining yesterday."

I lick my lips at the thought of kissing him, tasting myself, doubting my decision. But ultimately, shake my head. "No. You can't just keep doing that."

He raises a brow. "Your body says otherwise."

"I still hate you." And there it is, the hurt little nerd inside of me that still hasn't forgiven Jaxon for standing me up. I'm so fucking petty, but I don't care. He can't just eat me out into liking him again. I try to pull my bottoms up, but he spins me around so I'm facing his countertop and then pushes me down.

"How much do you hate me?" The cold surface on my breasts through the thin t-shirt and on my cheek makes my skin feel feverish as he yanks down the clothing I tried to fix. He leans over, massaging my bare ass, his other hand winding around my ponytail with a snap. All I can do is squirm,

anticipation flooding my senses, pooling between my thighs.

“A lot,” I seethe.

“Good. Because I’m not done yet.” His words are low, gravelly in my ear. “I know your secret, and I’ve been waiting to eat you.”

The way he has me bent over, my ass pushed out to him, I can feel his cock straining against his joggers through the jersey-soft material. He grinds just once as if to drive home the point, and a lustful moan escapes my lips.

“So what is it, little fox? Do you need me, or is your body lying? You came into my house tonight and let me taste you. If your body has faith in me, do you? Or do you really hate me, and this is all an act?”

Jaxon’s hold on me is callous, bruising my insides and cutting me open. He’s dangling a rotten carrot, too tempting for me to pass up. To give in now would be a grave mistake; that’s what my psyche is screaming at me as I tremble, unable to relax with my shoulders rigid, my spine iron straight.

But I want it.

I want him.

“It’s all an act. I hate you more than anything.”

“Then, why are you here?” He yanks on my hair, making my head snap back, and grinds against me again. A sharp, pleasurable ache rolls through me. I’ve bitten my lip so hard, I can taste blood.

“To kill you.” It comes out as a whisper.

He chuckles, nuzzling my neck. “And yet, this the furthest you can get from killing me.” Caressing me like I’m a feral animal needing to be tamed. I strain against him, tense moans slipping off my tongue like little traitors as I hold onto the granite worktop. “Tell the truth. You need me.”

Another yank.

If it’s possible to hate him even more, I do now.

“I need you,” I grit out. As the words leave my mouth, I know it’s true. I don’t want to do this alone anymore. It’s not about having someone who understands the burden of what I’m carrying. I have that with Nola and Sage.

Jaxon makes me feel less like a demon...

Because he’s the bigger Devil, and making a deal with darkness is most likely a huge mistake.

“Please.” The moan slips out.

“Fuck, Laine, I love it when you beg.”

“I need you inside me,” I continue, grinding back, no longer caring, caught in the worst moment.

“I would love nothing more than to fuck you right now and have you scream my name,” he drawls in my ear, the heat of his breath turning me inside out. “But not tonight.”

“What?” I hiss at him.

“You should go to bed.”

They’re the last words I want to hear as Jaxon pulls me off the counter and into his solid arms. Flushing crimson, hot and shaky all over, I stumble away from him, hauling up my tracksuit bottoms.

The smirk on his lips begs to be slapped. Was I played? Did Jaxon play me? “Fuck you, Jaxon Clémont,” I mutter. I start walking toward the door, ignoring the woosh of light-headedness threatening to bowl me over.

He stalks in front of me, eyes unreadable. “Where are you going?”

“Home. To bed like you told me.”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “You’re not going home.”

“I’m not staying here.” Glaring, blinking rapidly. My eyelids starting to feel heavy.

His gaze flits to the gun on the floor. “Until you can shoot that with your eyes closed, I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

Suddenly, I’m tired. Too tired to argue. I throw my hands up, the world seeming to spin. “Fine.”

Thank hell for small mercies because Jaxon has a spare room. It’s just as stark and clinical as the rest of his house, but the thousand thread count sheets, the luxurious topper, and the pillows in his guest bedroom more than make up for it.

“It’s not duck down, is it?” I mumble at him, feeling hot and strange as I climb into it.

“I kill people, not ducks,” is his answer.

I guess I can live with that. I’m also too emotionally drained and aroused to argue. It’s been a night of revelations. I shouldn’t be so sleepy all of a sudden, but as soon as my head touches the lovely nest of bedding, darkness welcomes me like an old friend, drowning me in disturbed dreams as fears, old and new, fight me every step of the way.

JAXON

Something stirs in the void. I open my eyes. Like a rat cornered, anger surges, unfurling from a dark place in my mind. My hand flies to her throat. “Do not fucking touch me.”

Then I see her demon in the darkness.

Laine is straddling me, an antique-looking knife in her hands, the blade’s edge flush against my neck. As our gazes collide, her eyes bulge as I cut off her air, a snarl on her lips as the knife edge digs in. Excitement erupts in the pit of my stomach and zaps down my spine straight to my cock as pain blossoms where it bites, and my grip tightens.

She gasps.

Fuck. I’m about to kill her.

Swiftly, I break eye contact, tearing my gaze away before the rage can take over, releasing her, my fists clenching in the sheets instead. I wait until the inclination to react viciously melts away to nothing, and my breathing becomes controlled.

She coughs and splutters, catching her breath, her eyes locked onto mine.

I must have passed out and forgot to engage the lock on her door. Assuming that she’d be safe from Shepherd by keeping her here, I forgot about keeping her safe from me. How careless. I let my emotions and a pretty face haunt my dreams. Luckily, she found her knife to even the score. After our little adventure at Henry’s funeral, I put it in a safe place, but not safe enough if it’s back in her hands.

“Monster,” she hisses, voice raw. She shifts on top of me and snarls, keeping the knife poised at my neck. “I’m going to kill you.”

Why hasn’t she? Blood rushes to my cock, making it stiffen, just as desire ghosts under my skin. Fuck, she’s beautiful. I wet my lips, watching her hover over me, eyes like glittering stars, remembering how divine she tasted.

Slowly, I move my free hand to grip her waist. She’s wearing only the T-shirt I gave her and her panties, so the pads of my fingers rest on the softness of her hip. Her skin is fire. She must have got too hot and taken the bottoms off.

I could snap her like a twig, but I love that she keeps fighting. My little fox is pretty amazing. I want to whisper something fun in her ear, a brief acknowledgment from one psycho to another. But that would be

irresponsible.

Not yet.

Amusement rises in my chest. “Then do it.” I tighten my hold on her waist. Ready if she tries. I doubt she could kill me with that rusty knife, but she could quite easily injure me, and then, I can’t protect her.

Her eyes blaze, but they have a glazed, faraway look. “I’m ready for you. I’ve been waiting for this for a long time.”

My eyes narrow as I watch her. Not really here, and yet resting her entire weight on my groin.

“Laine, where are you?”

“Hunting monsters,” she hisses.

Tension seeps out of my body. Laine is asleep. She’s so pent-up that she’s confusing the waking world with her nightmares. I used to sleepwalk when I was a kid. It’s how I processed tragedy, or so one of my many therapists loved to fucking repeat after I’d wake up in a strange place with blood on my hands.

If she’s anything like me, Laine needs release. A little piquerism might help her move past this.

“Cut me, Laine. I won’t stop you,” I say softly.

She blinks, head tilted as she stares down at me. “I *will* kill you.”

“You won’t,” I reassure her.

She stabs, not at my neck, but at the fucking pillow next to my head. Stuffing goes everywhere. I snatch her hand to guide her, so she slashes at my forearm instead. White pain digs into my flesh. I ignore it, letting her carve my skin until we’ve both had enough. Then I disarm her and draw her to me. She fights me at first, like a wild cat, scratching and clawing. Then, the tears come.

“Shush,” I soothe. She sobs in my arms until she stills and calms, falling asleep on my chest.

I don’t care to move, so I lie there with her wrapped around me like a security blanket.

Blood has mingled with the innards of the pillow, staining the white cotton fluff crimson. Some of it is stuck to me. Thank fuck, my sheets are navy.

When she’s snoring, an adorable trait, I carry her back to her bed and lock her inside.

JAXON

She looks exquisitely disheveled the next morning, hair all over the place, makeup smudged. Sheepishly, she shuffles into the kitchen while I'm making coffee, breaking out the eggs and bacon while Laine watches from the doorway. I haven't been to bed. As long as she's here, I won't be able to relax or sleep. Me blacking out and her sleepwalking is not a good mix.

And the Ripper could return anytime; he can't know I have her. It would spoil everything.

She blinks at me and then finally walks toward the breakfast bar. "You didn't ask me how I like my eggs?" She drags her tongue over her plump lips when I don't respond. "There's a joke in there somewhere."

"No need, you like them poached." I've watched her make breakfast in her own cottage a few times.

The skimpy T-shirt of mine that she's wearing does nothing to hide the cheeks of her bare ass as she shuffles in. She makes a face. "Do I even want to know how you know that?"

My phone buzzes as I'm cooking. I glance at it. It's probably Shepherd for an update. Less than forty-eight hours have passed since I was given orders to handle Laine Summers. I've never needed that much time and usually check in once it's done. Shepherd will want to know the hold-up to report to my father.

But when I check the messages, it's not Shepherd but Addison.

ADDISON:

Three down, two to go. You know I have a theory that our little birdie is back. Singing all over the fucking show at Henry's wake. Another loose end that seems to have slipped through the Ripper's fingers, don't you think?

I'm going to kill him.

I silence my phone and turn my attention back to Laine, who happens to be watching me like a hawk—chin raised, eyes dark, sweet lips bitten to fuck.

She approaches me quickly, with a stiffness to her body, as though she's not quite convinced of her actions. She looks up at me from under her lashes, and then her gaze darts to the shallow cuts she gave me on my arm. Her

finger traces the dried blood. “It wasn’t a dream.”

“You sleepwalk.”

She winces. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think I’d—”

“Give me a badge of honor?” It’s the truth. Any mark my little fox gives me, I would proudly wear.

Her brow furrows. “I was going to say hurt you. At least let me clean it.”

“After breakfast. Now sit.”

Her mouth makes a straight line as she lets out a huff and sits on one of the stools.

“I thought we could go to the shooting range today.” I glance at the gun on the table.

She looks at it and then nods. “Fine, but I still haven’t forgiven you for last night.”

“Which part?” I pour her a coffee, place it on the breakfast bar, and then pour a jug of cream.

She eyes my offering and then draws the coffee and jug to her, not touching her eggs and bacon. “Don’t try and be funny. You drugged me, didn’t you?”

“Don’t be so dramatic. It was just something to calm you down and help you sleep. It didn’t stop you from sleepwalking.” I gave her a little cocktail of mine to make her easier to manage, enough to make her sleep until morning. How she was up and walking around last night, I have no fucking idea. Next time, I’ll give her a stronger dose. “Eat your eggs.”

“I’m not hungry. I’ll get something when I go home.”

With her watching me, I file through her purse until I find what I’m looking for—her keys. I confiscate them.

“Are you robbing me?”

“Robbing you? I have billions in the bank. Why would I want to rob you?”

“Give my keys, Jaxon.”

My mouth twitches as I place her laundered clothes on the counter, and then the gun on top. Then I leave Laine to get dressed. I want her to trust me, and I doubt she knows how to shoot it. Not until I teach her. I’ll have to take her to the shooting range at Whitechapel House for that.

I meant what I said, she’s not going home until she can shoot straight. Killing Laine isn’t an option anymore. And if Shepherd comes for her, and he will, I want her to put a bullet in the bastard if I don’t.

Not that it will ever come to that.

Even if I have to lock her up.

Once, I kept a butterfly locked in a jar. It died within hours. My mother found me staring at the dead insect. I was just a kid and didn't understand. She explained how selfish I'd been, that my actions killed it, but it fascinated me. I had the power and means to take or save a life.

Laine is not a fragile butterfly.

But she's never leaving my side.

I know that now.

“HOLD THE GUN WITH YOUR DOMINANT HAND, HIGH ON THE GRIP. AND THESE fingers around the base of the grip, just underneath the trigger guard.” Laine is in front of my chest, holding the Glock, allowing me to position her hands.

She still won't tell me where she got it. She has secrets, and I have mine. Only I'll find a way to pry hers to the surface.

“Like this?” She tightens her grip.

“Not too tight; don't use a *death grip*. Now keep your left hand firmly around the base of the grip, thumb forward, and under the right. And keep this hand's forefinger...” I tap her right hand. “Off the trigger until you're ready to fire.”

She relaxes, shifting back against me, the smell of her freshly washed hair, using my shampoo, brushing in my face driving me insane, and then she sighs. The sound she makes teases over the length of my cock, making me want to shove it inside her mouth for all the illicit noises she makes.

I show her how to aim and pull the trigger, and after several rounds, she hits the target a couple of times. My phone has been going off like crazy. I meant to be at work, but unless it's an emergency, I'm staying right here.

She drags off the ear protectors and safety glasses, a smug grin on her face when she sees how close to the center of the target she managed to get. “Look at that, I hit it again.”

I pull her to me and taste her lips. “You're a fucking natural.”

My phone goes off for the tenth time. Shepherd really wants to get hold of me.

She frowns. “Shouldn't you get that?”

I take it out and switch it off, not bothering to look at the screen. If it's an emergency, the hospital has my pager, otherwise, they can all fuck off. "It's not important."

Laine glances at her own phone as we walk to my car. I keep alert for anyone who might see us, but the estate grounds are deserted this far from the main house. "Shit. it's late." She looks my way. "Thank you for showing me how to shoot, but I should go home now." She holds out her hands. "I did what you said. I learned how to shoot. Now give me my keys."

"I'll take you home. You'll need clothes."

"Clothes?" she repeats, not quite understanding.

"No discussion. You're staying at mine until this is over." I open the car door for her.

"Wait, I never agreed—"

"Either you stay, or I stalk you. Your choice."

She shoots me a glare. "Jaxon, you can't just..." But I'm no longer listening, my focus is solely on the men heading toward us—Shepherd's faction, those not so loyal to my father. They wouldn't think twice about disposing of Laine once they got their hands on her.

Adrenaline spikes, becoming red at the corners of my vision.

"Get in the car."

"Jaxon?"

"Now, Laine." My tone suggests it's not up for discussion. She shuts up and climbs in the car as soon as she realizes that.

When we pull up outside her cottage, I turn off the engine and look at her, offering her her keys. "Grab what you need. Essentials. And something nice to wear. You have ten minutes."

She narrows her eyes. "I'm not staying with you. Charlie is here. He needs feeding."

Rage spills over my rough edges. "Who the fuck is Charlie?"

She shoots me a look. "My dad's dog."

"It's not safe to stay here. Ask your father to come get him."

She folds her arms across her chest. "Why isn't it safe? You still haven't told me."

I exhale, considering what to tell her. The Lucians are an extremely private following. Not many know about us and our beliefs. "The Foundation is a front for an undisclosed organization of medical practitioners."

Laine laughs, but it dies off when she sees my face and the lack of humor

there.

“We have Sanctuaries in every major city, and members in every corner of the world, using our collective resources to research and fund unregulated medical advancements. My father is Archkey of the London Sanctuary and one of its founders. I’m the heir to his seat. If anything or anyone threatens the stability of our work, the organization will remove them.”

“You mean me. The organization will remove me.”

“Your visit to Max was a mistake. It put you on my father’s radar. Your house isn’t safe.” Once my father finds out she’s still alive, if he hasn’t found out already, he’ll send Shepherd.

I don’t tell her that Addison knows who she is and that she’s back. Her turning up out of the blue at Henry’s wake, with no wig or contacts, was a blatant message to the men she’s hunting, the ones who killed her friend. The ones the Ripper is expected to clean up after like a fucking maid.

She ingests all this with the barest flicker of the muscle in her jaw. “And staying with you is?”

“It’s the last place anyone would look, trust me.”

And the last place Addison would dare show his fucking face.

LAINE

The maître d' shows us to our table. I'm tense while Jaxon holds me, making me walk beside him. Countless chandeliers hang from a midnight ceiling like stars in a crystal-studded universe. We reach a secluded table nestled against a curved wall. Draped around it is a swath of jet-black velvet fabric dotted with crystals, cascading to the floor, hiding us from the rest of the room and creating a small world where only our table exists.

Romantic.

If only I weren't here to murder someone.

Since the shooting range, I've been staying with Jaxon. He's made it pretty clear he can't protect me if I go home or go to work and that it would be better for us to work together if I stayed in his mansion. I'm unsure if I should be flattered that he doesn't want me to leave his side or annoyed that he won't let me. He still has my keys. Although he doesn't know I took a spare set when I collected things from my house.

His explanation made sense.

Though, instead of feeling like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders, dread has settled like lead in the center of my chest, pulling me down in a cold ocean of fear. I have no idea how the partnership will work.

Jaxon is the Devil. And I've sold my soul to him.

But at what cost?

Still, it only took a night and day to plan the next murder, not like my six months of going back and forth inside my head, having no idea what I was doing. Jaxon is a well-oiled machine and a wealthy billionaire who can snap his fingers and call in a personal favor to get this booking at The Dorset, an exclusive member's restaurant with a two-year waiting list, without question.

"You'd think you'd never been in a restaurant before," Jaxon says under his breath as he pulls a chair out for me like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"I've not been to one like this."

I'm underdressed in my black dress, the only one I have fancy enough for this place despite being second-hand and so obviously seasons old. Jaxon drove me home to grab some clothes. This was all I could find suitable for dinner. He took one look at me and sighed, handing me a black credit card from his wallet.

“Before next time, do a little shopping.”

“I didn’t think we were going to a fashion show,” I hiss at him, staring at the card before pocketing it.

He gives me a sardonic look. “Unfortunately, you stand out.”

“Why? Because it’s old?”

He looks over me from top to bottom, the intensity making my toes curl. “No, because you look too fuckable in that dress.”

Too fuckable. Those were Jaxon’s words.

I shed my gloves and nervously pick up my glass of water while Jaxon orders the most expensive bottle of wine off the menu. I expect him to order for me, but he doesn’t. Jaxon glances my way after the server asks what we’d like to eat. Under pressure, I pick the only thing I know I can stomach—the vegetarian option.

“Why are we eating here?” I say after the server brings over a bottle of rare Burgundy.

“Because I’m always hungry after a shift, little fox,” Jaxon says, his lips curling slightly.

Jaxon has been going to work the last couple of days to keep up appearances on the promise that I don’t leave the house. He also said that wherever I go, he would find me and drag me back, so there’s no point in running.

“Why do you keep calling me that?”

“Because you remind me of one.”

I narrow my eyes. “You’re saying I’m a pest?”

He sips his wine, the corner of his lips curving up while he savors it. Then he places his glass down and looks at me. “My father likes to fox hunt with his hounds on weekends. It’s a foul sport to watch, but there’s a sly vixen with a couple of cubs that always gets away. That’s the fox you remind me of.”

“Charming.” I taste the wine.

The intense flavor of berries bursts over my tongue, making me ravenous. Suddenly, I’m looking forward to the dinner. I haven’t been eating much lately. Jaxon has stacks of food in the house, mainly protein shakes and meat. But the last two weeks’ stress of not knowing who was following me, playing mind games, has taken its toll.

With its string quartet, incredible wine, and secluded dining, this swanky

place could easily make me lower my guard. That's probably why Jaxon has chosen it.

He doesn't stalk his prey. He lures it into his lair.

When he told me the plan, it sounded insane but much less messy. Christian might fall for my online dating app ruse, but it leaves a digital breadcrumb. Better to wine and dine Christian somewhere he frequents, like the Grand Haven, where the owner is the heir of London's most notorious crime family who just so happens to owe Jaxon a favor.

Our food arrives with all the trimmings, interrupting our pleasant and non-existent chat. Jaxon doesn't do small talk, which suits me fine. I'm too on edge to talk. Once the server leaves, I reach under the table and grip my purse. I slipped the gun inside it before we left.

"Don't look so nervous," Jaxon drawls as though he can hear my pulse racing with every twitch of the curtain. I don't know why I'm so jumpy.

I spear my stuffed artichoke. "What if someone recognizes you?"

"This place is discreet."

"And expensive," I mutter.

"Who gives a fuck. We're on a date."

Date. What does that word even mean to someone like Jaxon? While trapped at his house, I did what any sane girl would. I snooped. And when that futile search brought up nothing useful, I privately browsed his name on the internet.

Jaxon has taken a lot of women on dates. The paparazzi love a juicy story where he's concerned, being among the few eligible men in London worth billions, and the internet is awash with photos and gossip galore. It's like med school all over again, Jaxon being the most popular and coveted one, likely to fuck and forget.

And then there's me.

A dropout. A nobody. With nothing to my name but a crazy, dangerous obsession. Even my job is a joke in his circle.

Who bartends after med school?

By the time dessert comes, I'm restless. I'm not used to handing over the reins when hunting the men who make it onto my list. I haven't even told the girls, which feels reckless all by itself. I have dozens of missed calls from Sage and one probing message from Nola asking why I ditched the Stronger Together meeting on Monday night.

Because I was at Jaxon's house.

During the day, I spent most of my time biting my nails, wondering if I'd made the right decision, and the nights in Jaxon's spare bedroom, counting the raindrops sliding down the skylight until sleep hauled me under.

I can't say that or lie to them, so I haven't replied. If this goes wrong, I want them nowhere near it.

That's the least I can do for all they've done for me.

Yet my hand itches to pick up my phone and tell them where I am, just in case it all goes wrong.

"Laine." Jaxon's firm tone cuts through the haze of lost thoughts, dragging me back.

I blink at him. "I'm here."

"Good, because it's nearly time." He looks at his watch and then back at me. His gaze burns me where I sit.

I want to ask, Time for what? But I know.

What's the time, Mr. Wolf? Time to kill.

A chill slides down my spine despite the restaurant's warmth, but then Jaxon takes my hand underneath the table, anchoring me. And all the anxiety, all the worry, fades away.

I look into Jaxon's eyes, glowing with delight and debauchery, his thumb striking fire as it rubs over my palm, and my nerves spark, bringing me to life.

I am no longer underwater, behind a veil, hidden.

I'm here.

I'm electric.

With Jaxon.

"Ready?"

I nod.

But before leaving the security of our little den, something distorted and cold crosses Jaxon's face. His silver-gray eyes darken briefly. His hand grips mine, stopping me from getting to my feet.

He leans close, his hot breath cupping my cheek. "If I lose control, shoot me."

"How will I know?"

He pulls me to my feet and leads me through the corridor of curtains. "You'll know."

Jaxon knocks on a nondescript door in the restaurant hallway. I would have walked right past it another time. It swings open to reveal a dark velvet

curtain and a reception desk in front of it. A smiling hostess and security guard greet us inside. They look at Jaxon and pull the velvet curtain aside to reveal a dimly lit corridor sloping down the further we walk. Cables run overhead, and dirty white subway tiles line the walls. It's barely wide enough for a single person to pass.

"What is this place?" I ask once we're out of earshot of the reception desk, though my voice seems to echo loudly.

"You've heard of London's hidden underground tunnels?"

I nod. There are rumors of hundreds of secret tunnels, passageways, ducts, sewage pipes, and chambers below the streets of London. You are walking over one of them anywhere you go into the city.

"This is one of them. A Cold War-era escape tunnel that connects to a lost underground station and a secret bunker. The owner of The Dorset converted it to an exclusive speakeasy club a few years ago."

"Is that legal?"

"Probably not, if the Vice brothers are involved." Jaxon doesn't look at me to answer the question, which makes me bolder.

"The Vice brothers? The owners who owe you the favor?"

"Well, one of them does. The other is dead, I believe."

The door at the end of the tunnel is new, with reinforced metal around the wood edges. Jaxon pushes it open, and a blast of cool air crawls over my skin and rushes down my spine. The glow of lights and pull of music hit me at once as we alight onto a metal walkway above a cavernous club, the dance floor below filled with gyrating bodies.

"This way." Jaxon leads me past the winding staircase to the lower floor, to the right to a roped-off area, where a gallery with a bar and lounge seats overlooks the dance floor. The men on the rope nod to let Jaxon pass, eyeing me up as my heels clang on the grating, trying to keep up with Jaxon's huge strides.

We head straight to the bar where a man wearing a dark dinner jacket and trousers with closely cropped brown hair stands. He turns when he sees us, eyes ringed with black narrowing, hands in stark bandages curling into fists. It's Christian, true to timing, watching us approach.

Then he takes a tin from his pocket and pops something pill-like in his mouth, a sly smile etching slowly onto his face.

"Do you remember the plan?"

"Yes," I breathe out.

“Good. Then let’s put on a show.”

JAXON

The way Christian's eyes light up when he sees what I've brought with me, my little fox wrapped up in a fucking bow, makes my blood boil.

"So, who is this delightful piece of ass?" Christian asks, his eyes sliding over Laine like she's a ripe peach for the taking. He reaches out to caress Laine's cheek, but I drag her back, risking a glance in her direction. She is tense next to me, eyes wide, skin pale, following my instructions to a T: look afraid, say absolutely nothing.

Christian raises a brow. "Keeping her for yourself?"

I let a dark smile taint my lips despite the snarl threatening to erupt. "We have things to discuss first."

"Fuck business before pleasure," he scoffs. "Why not have both?" He gestures to a private lounge behind the bar.

I lead Laine into the curtained-off area with its own bar. There are other girls in various stages of undress, all high on narcotics, all out of their heads. There are no other Lucians. Christian was never one for sharing after the initiation sacrifices.

"Help yourself to whatever candy you want," Christian's voice has a slight slur to it, high as a kite himself, as he comes up behind us, making a sweeping motion to the baggies of pills and lines of powder on the table. "I've just ordered another case of White Heart."

As Christian turns his attention to the server bringing the drinks, I pour a shot of White Heart for Laine from the bottle and hand it to her.

She leans close, her hair tickling my neck, warm breath heating the blood at my throat. "What is it?" The urge to push her head down to where my aching erection is building has me on edge.

"Gin mixed with white absinthe," I murmur back, pouring one for myself. It'll help me relax, if nothing else. And I'll need to for the next part of this charade. Energy crackles through the air, as it always does when I'm close to releasing the side I keep locked away.

With Laine here, it's fit to explode.

Why have you brought the little bird here? I ignore the voice and knock back a shot of White Heart, letting the warm fizz of the alcohol blur the edges of reality. *To play?* I meant what I said when I told her to shoot me. Hunting always draws the darkness out. It feeds on the blood I spill, soaking up the

retribution I deliver in the name of the Divine.

The Devil inside me is aware of her now, like the flicker of a candle in the pitch black. She'll be safe if I don't let it out, as long as I feed it what it wants—destruction, carnage, death.

Starting with the fucker staring at Laine like a starved man.

Like clockwork, she downs her drink and, with a question in her eyes at me, heads to the private dance floor on my signal. I asked her to distract him, and it's working. Only a little too well. As I lean against the bar, I can't keep my eyes off her. She sashays like the vixen she is on to the stage area where there are poles. Knowing her rank sits above them, a few girls make room for her. If I brought her here, she's the pièce de résistance.

Then she dances.

I stare at her, stunned at how fucking beautiful she is, before coming to my senses. I'm here to work, not get my dick wet. True to form, Christian can't tear his eyes away from her, either. He's fucking drooling.

"Fuck, Cuz, I'm going to fucking enjoy this."

I slide a look at him. "Do you want to fuck her?"

"Fuck her? I want to come all over that sweet face and then pound raw every hole that tight little body has to offer." He grins.

Rage so intense it slices me in half, burns in my chest. I flex my fingers, trying not to rip him a fucking new one. "Are you willing to die for it?"

He shoots me a look. "Are you fucking with me? I was promised an offering." He turns to me and drills my chest with the finger of his bandaged hand. "You're supposed to bring me your fucking whore to screw."

To make up for beating Christian to a pulp, I assured the Archkey, after a meeting with him and my uncle, to smooth things over and hand-deliver my cousin an offering according to our laws.

A muscle in my jaw tics. "You want her? Send the rest away."

Christian snaps his fingers and the girls trail out until we're alone. I make a come hither gesture, not bothering to look at Laine. I know she's beside me. Her scent of vanilla and jasmine breaks through the turmoil clouding my senses. I let it anchor me. *You're just going to give her to him. She's ours*, the voice snarls inside my head. Ours? That's new.

I don't have time to pander to the voice. I take Laine's hand and offer her to Christian as I should, with a cock of my head. "She's all yours."

"That's more like it."

Laine looks at me, utterly terrified, as Christian sneers and takes her. He

drags her toward him, hands on her ass. The only fucking blessing is that he can't grope her, given his injuries.

"Come on, sweet thing, let's go somewhere a little more intimate." He glances at me, teeth bared in a shit-eating grin. "Or shall I fuck her right here? That way, you can watch me make your cunt scream."

Thunder drowns out every sound.

Red pulses across my vision in time with the beating of my heart.

Christian thinks he's won.

"Fuck him, do me right here," Laine drawls. "Make me scream, Christian."

He turns to Laine as she looks me in the eye and bites her lip. And nods. Despite being uncertain about killing him, she's not backing down. A carnal smile spreads slowly across my face as I step behind him, sliding the knife out of Laine's purse and closing the trap we've spun for our prey. I slice his jugular in half. Blood sprays all over Laine as he gurgles, unable to call for help.

He drops to his knees in front of Laine like he's worshiping her, his bandaged hand clutching his mangled throat.

He fucking should.

The prick isn't fit to lick the floor she's stood on.

But he bleeds all over her, covering her sweet flesh from top to toe in bright red, leaving only the whites of her blue eyes staring into mine.

She looks like a damned goddess.

LAINE

Jaxon escorts me to the private toilets that come with the VIP area. It's dimly lit inside, but there's enough light to see. Obsidian urinals line one side, and smoked glass door cubicles the other.

In the amber glow of the old-fashioned lamps, I see myself in the rustic glass mirrors designed to soften your rough edges, and I don't look like me. The blonde wig and blood spatter all over like demonic freckles have me as someone much more cold and calculated.

I didn't kill Christian. Though, he's still dead. That makes me an accessory. Is that a bad thing? He's a murderer and a rapist. Didn't I want him gone?

Jaxon gives me one look over as if burning every inch to memory. "Did he hurt you? If he did you, he's fucked."

"Isn't he already fucked?"

"There are other things I can do to a man than kill him," he says nonchalantly. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up." He whips out a handkerchief from his immaculate suit pocket and runs it under the tepid, cold water. Jaxon cleaning me up is where I draw the line.

"I can do it." I snatch it from him before he can try, wiping the blood off my face as much as possible while he watches. There's an amused twitch to his lips, so I focus on my reflection in the mirror.

It was hot, the spray of blood when it hit me, like being baptized with the waters of Hell. I should be shaking after what I saw Jaxon do, but I'm not. The woman in the glass is calm and collected. Cleaning off the blood is methodical, a ritual burned into my bones.

Inside...I'm coming undone.

"That bloody dress is coming off."

I stop and give him a wide-eyed look through the mirror. "You want me to strip here?"

He eyes me like I'm being difficult. "There can be no blood or evidence leaving this club, and since you're covered in it..."

Heat stains my cheeks. I'm not wearing a bra since one wouldn't fit under the dress. Getting naked in front of Jaxon is the last thing I want to do. "I'm not undressing here. Someone might see," I hiss.

"The VIP area has been cleared, and the cameras switched off. No one

will see except for me. Unless you're embarrassed about that?"

Nothing has happened between us yet...if you don't count Jaxon's mouth between my legs at Henry's funeral and at his house. And I don't. I couldn't fully enjoy it, given where we were and what I was feeling at the time.

But I'm not embarrassed. I'm broken.

I know he's a killer; I have seen him slice open Christian's throat like it was nothing. But that hasn't stopped me from wanting him to fuck me silly until I can't walk. I feel frozen because of it.

When I don't budge, he holds his hand for my dress. "Off. I need to burn it."

Grimacing, I start the zipper on my dress, my heart choosing at that moment to throw itself against my ribcage. The cool air kisses my skin as I slide the dress down my waist and over my hips until I'm standing in nothing but my panties, hands clenched at my thighs. Call it defiance, but I don't want to cover my breasts. It's like admitting he's right.

"Those too."

I follow his line of sight to my thong. "There's no blood on these."

"Better to be safe. Now off, or shall I take them off for you?" he asks, voice dangerously soft.

"Why are you fully dressed?"

His eyes narrow, but a smirk tugs at his lips. "Because I didn't get covered in blood."

He's right. His suit is immaculate. The thought that he planned this and made me step in front of Christian, for this reason, makes my blood turn to sticky hot syrup.

Slowly, I peel off my pants. His gaze is hungry, devouring every inch. While my skin is hot, pulse pounding in my ears.

He waits an entire minute, hands in pockets, as cool and casual as a magazine cover model, a slow smile gracing his lips, before shrugging off his jacket and placing it around my shoulders.

The material is soft, brushing over my bare skin. So much so that I gasp when he yanks me toward him by the front of the jacket. "You're fucking beautiful when you're flushed." His mouth bruises mine in an indecent kiss, tongue teasing, burning my lips with the taste of him.

My nerves fray when his mouth travels down the side of my neck and he licks. "You missed a spot," he drawls.

Did he just lick a drop of Christian's blood off me?

Oh, Jesus.

Molten heat slides between my thighs, and I feel the stirrings of a need that won't go away easily.

"As soon as we get home, I'm going eat every inch of you, little fox. Do you know why?" His voice is low in my ear.

"Please," I whisper, unsure what I'm begging for.

His answer to that is to open the jacket and bite the mound of my breast. "Because you're mine." The way he says it slides through me, making me slick and breathless.

I'm still breathless when Jaxon drags me out of the bathroom toward an unmarked exit. "The tunnel leads to an alley out back. There's a car ready. I'll be right behind you."

I hurry to Jaxon's car as fast as my heels allow, debating if I should kick them off since the rest of my outfit is on the bathroom floor, but I get to the end of the red-lit tunnel soon enough and push through the exit.

Damp wind blasts me, threatening to blow Jaxon's jacket right off. I clutch it like a lifeline and look around. A car is there, an unmarked black SUV, waiting like he said it would be. It isn't Jaxon's car. It's one I've not seen before, but at least it's unlocked.

I climb behind the wheel, and once I'm safe behind the tinted windows, I slip Jaxon's jacket on properly rather than keeping it draped over my shoulders, and button it up.

I'm not good at waiting. And now I'm turned on and impatient, it's not a good mix. My fingers drum on the dash, my knee bobbing with loaded anxiety as I look around. Ignoring the venomous ache down below as the butter-soft leather molds to my bare butt and the way the fine, silky inner material plays havoc with my nipples.

Where the Hell is he?

What feels like an age later, the door bursts open, and Jaxon and some burly guy with a shock of red hair emerge, supporting a plastic-wrapped body between them. They stuff it in the trunk. Jaxon takes something from the big guy and slaps him on the back before the stranger disappears into the club.

"Move over." Jaxon appears at the driver's side window. He's carrying a cold storage box, which he slips onto the back seat. "I'm driving."

I shuffle over the center console, folding myself into the passenger seat as gracefully as a girl can in a jacket that skims the tops of her thighs, barely covering anything.

I gaze into his silver eyes when I'm comfortable, seatbelt on, though that's not what's pinning me in place. Jaxon looks like he doesn't want to wait until we get home.

I clear my throat, hoping to distract him. "Who was that man?"

He blinks at me. "Hedge? He's Vice's cousin."

"Vice?" The Vice brother who owes you a favor?"

"Not anymore." Jaxon puts the key in the ignition. "Now we're even. He'll handle clean-up for us on this one."

The car roars to life and corners like a beast as he maneuvers it through the narrow roads away from the restaurant's rear entrance. A few streets away, he pulls up and rolls up his shirt sleeves, displaying the masonic-loaded ink I partly remember, partly thought I'd dreamt. Then he exits the car and opens the trunk.

I watch him through the rearview mirror as he dumps Christian's body in the corner of a dark alley.

He peels the plastic sheeting away, but then I can't quite make out what he's doing, so I make a bad decision to get out of the car. I know it's bad because the cursed wind is on the warpath, frigid with mist, taking my breath away as it coasts up the gap under the jacket.

It really is the coldest and wettest summer on record.

Crossing my arms over my front to keep warm, I come up behind Jaxon. He's squatting down next to the body, making frenzied slashes; layers of Christian's clothes have been cut away to reveal pale skin disfigured and obliterated and a bloody hollow carved into what was his chest. Thick, congealed blood oozes from the grotesque display, like a work of demonic art.

Mouth bone dry, stomach twisting in horror, I stand there and stare, unable to look away.

The stench of pennies is overwhelming.

Dragging the knife to stop, Jaxon stills but doesn't turn around, his torso moving up and down like he's breathing hard. An icy whisper chills my heart. "Get back in the car, Laine."

"Jax—"

"I said get back in the car!" It comes out like a growl, making my heart jump.

I walk slowly back to the waiting SUV, my body slick with rain. Annoyingly, I can't help that I'm shaking. It takes several blasts of the heater

to warm me up, my eyes locked on the cold storage box on the back seat.

It's a transplant transporter for organs.

What the Hell?

Fuck it. I can't take his hot and cold mood swings any longer. I'm not afraid of him. I've faced the Ripper and lived. I've killed. If Jaxon is angry, that's on him. I've done nothing wrong. He's the one keeping secrets.

The mystical tattoos. The organ box. Hell, the way the body was ripped to shreds...

Dehumanized.

Just like the Ripper.

Jaxon comes back to the car after a good ten minutes. He stuffs the plastic sheeting into the rear end. Then he comes up to the front. The menacing aura around him is gone as he starts the engine. He doesn't say anything and is silent for a few minutes while we distance ourselves from the body.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," he says, staring straight ahead.

"That wasn't nothing."

His eyes flit to me in the darkness. "Trust me. You're better off not knowing."

"Actually, I'm better off."

He cuts a glare at me, muscles ticcing in his jaw. "You really want to know?"

"I need to know. We can't keep secrets from each other if we're going to do this." *This. Killing together.*

"It's a ritual."

"What kind of ritual?"

"One that lets me harvest the organs."

"That's what the cold storage box is for?"

"For the heart. We have to make a stop at Victoria University Hospital. In its condition, it's only viable for six hours. We don't have long. The recipient is already prepped."

Victoria University Hospital is where Jaxon trained as a resident. It makes sense that he has ties there, but I'm still surprised. It's a charity hospital. "Is that why you killed Christian? To donate his heart?"

He shrugs. "I may be a killer, but I also swore the Hippocratic oath." I scoff at that. When I meet Jaxon's gaze, he's still staring at me. "But no, killing Christian was for you. We just so happened to have a match for him."

We.

Who is he talking about?

My chest warms at his words, saying he killed Christian for me, but I don't reply, looking out the window instead as we pull up to a back entrance of VUH. Dawn is peeking over the horizon. How has time gone so quickly? Jaxon disappears inside with the heart and comes out empty-handed. He glances my way as he gets into the driver's seat, eyes dark and swirling with lust.

I can't help but squeeze my legs together. "What?"

"You didn't believe me?"

"It's just... far-fetched." I'm also ashamed that I didn't think of it. I've been so obsessed with getting revenge that I forgot who I was. What I stand for. And now I know Jaxon has been killing to save lives all this time; I desperately need his body on mine. The slow-burning heat spiking through my core has become a raging inferno.

Not that I would ever admit it.

Thick clouds threaten to piss all over us as we trudge toward Jaxon's lonely house. On the doorstep, he doesn't bother asking me to towel off before I step inside. Water drips off us both, leaving pool trails across the granite.

"If you want to take a shower, you can."

Taking a breath, I undo and drop Jaxon's jacket to the floor. He stalls when he sees me.

Damn everything to hell. You only live once.

I let a small smile grace my lips and turn, allowing him a full view of me without a strip of clothing, and then stride into the house to find hot water and clean clothes.

LAINE

Citrus clings to the air as I step into the glossy black subway-tiled bathroom. Billowing steam soothes all my aches except the one between my legs as soon as I switch on the rainforest downpour in Jaxon's bathroom shower. I place my head under the water and close my eyes, letting the scalding spray soothe away my sins.

Jaxon is like me, only better. He kills better. He cleans better. He has connections. He even makes me feel safe...

This partnership makes sense.

So why is there a nagging feeling, digging under my skin, like I've forgotten something vitally important?

The door to the bathroom swings open. I bring my head up to see who it is, even though I know it's Jaxon. I didn't lock it, and it didn't take him long to follow me in here. He stalks up, a shadow in the glass until he pulls open the steamy glass door of the double shower, stormy gray eyes taking in every inch of me.

He steps inside fully clothed. Hot water soaks through his shirt, making it cling to his body.

"Why are you fully dressed?" I echo my words from earlier, looking up at his imposing form, blinking away the water running into my eyes. Then my gaze travels down to his trousers, patches of water blooming over the expensive material. At least he took his shoes off.

"Because I couldn't wait any longer to devour you."

He pulls me to him, enveloping my soaking body, lips sliding across my skin like silk, brushing the pounding pulse at my neck until they find my mouth. And then he's consuming me.

Time stops. Water rushes. Electricity sparks in the base of my stomach. The air is thick with lust and moisture as his taste wraps around me, sinking into my bones.

It smothers me until I can only breathe him.

Wet tiles wake me up, only enough to comprehend that he's holding me hostage, against them, grinding me into the wall. I break the kiss, dragging air into my lungs. It's unsettling being the only one naked, like being truly seen, warts and all, while the other person still hasn't shed their mask.

"Your suit will get ruined."

“Fuck my suit,” he drawls, biting my neck, making me arch into him.

“Take it off.” I want to see behind the mask. If we’re in this together, we need to be equal—no half-measures.

And I need to feel him on me. Skin to skin. His darkness devouring mine.

“You make a lot of demands. None of which you have any leverage for.” His hands clamp down between my legs, pushing me harder into the tiles. He groans when he feels the slickness in my folds. With every stroke, ecstasy spins me into oblivion. I want to fall into it, be swept away by the darkness.

This is wrong. He’s a killer.

But so am I.

Something hard bangs my hip. It’s not his dick since something else really is in his pocket. Water hammers down on us both as I reach a hand down inside the taut wet material, grazing the length of his rock-hard cock, to close my fingers around the hilt.

I draw it out.

It’s the thin surgical amputation knife he slit Christian’s throat with. No longer bloody. He must have cleaned it. Calming my upside-down heart and the world around it, I travel the tip of the blade over his belt, up his toned chest visible through the wet cotton, to the pulse at his neck.

“This leverage enough for you?”

Jaxon chuckles. “Baring your teeth for me, little fox?”

“More than that,” I hiss, and pop a button off his shirt. When he gives me a dark look, I tilt my head. “You said fuck your suit.” I pop off another one.

“How about you bare something else?” he growls, gripping my hips and lowering down until he’s on his knees for me. Taking one of my legs, he hoists it over his shoulder, giving him a great view of my bare slit. I still have the knife on him, now at his throat, but he pays it no attention. He curses and leans down, the knife digging in.

Then he licks, slow and leisurely, burning me up, lighting up my insides until the handle of the blade threatens to slip out of my hands. “You’re so fucking wet.” He’s close enough that his warm breath brushes my pussy.

“We’re in the shower. Of course I’m wet,” I pant, gripping the knife firmly so I’m holding him at knifepoint.

I slip the razor edge under his collar and slash the material sideways—a blush of red blooms on his shirt where I cut.

“You’ll pay for that.” Eyes dark and bottomless, his tongue slides in, plunging deep and then lathing over my clit. Shaking, I brace against the tiles

and slash the other side. In retaliation, he bites, raking his teeth over the sensitive bundle of nerves. Fierce pleasure snakes outward and through every part of me, and my mouth opens, making a silent O.

Jaxon carries on sucking and biting, teasing me into my own orgasmic Hell. Because that's where I'm headed, nothing can stop me from going down screaming. If Jaxon is the Devil, then Heaven, burn me if I ever step across that pearly threshold.

I drop the knife. It bangs against the shower floor tiles.

He stops.

"Since you like playing with knives," he chuckles darkly, reaching for it.

The shock of the hilt at my entrance makes me bolt upright, hands slipping over the sleek tiles. "Jaxon, no." I glare at him, but all he does is smirk, watching me squirm as he slides the slick metal handle in deeper.

I bite my lip, making a half whimper, half throaty moan type of noise.

"Please, don't." I don't want to come on the weapon that killed Christian.

Jaxon's look is half-lidded and almost evil as if he knows that's exactly what I want. "You ruined an expensive shirt."

"I'll buy you another one," I rasp.

He laughs, a deep rolling sound. "I've seen your bank balance. You'll have to pay in other ways." Jaxon's seen my bank balance. How? When? And just how much can a shirt cost?

I don't get to consider any of the answers because Jaxon has the handle of the knife inside me up to his fingers curled around the blade. It's long and thin, enticing waves of pleasure with every deep thrust, but not enough.

I need more.

Much to my horror, my hips tilt, and my back arches as he fucks me with the knife, chasing the sensation sizzling through my body.

"Tell me what you want, little fox," he muses.

Fuck. "I want you to fuck me."

"Then turn around and offer that pretty ass up to me."

He slips the knife from me, dropping my leg, and I do as he asks, waiting, pinning myself against the cold tiles. I shiver from the lack of heat and the thought of what he's about to do.

I sense him close, the heat of his body through his wet shirt racing up my spine as he presses into me, hands on my ass, fingering me from behind. I let out a whimper, unable to help myself.

"Admit it," he says in a low husky voice. "That you like being fucked

with this.” He teases my entrance with that damn knife again.

“No, I don’t.”

“Liar,” he chuckles, pushing me into the tiles harder, my nipples like bullets as condensation runs over them. At some point, the shower turned off. The only heat is Jaxon covering my body with his and the blood beneath my skin burning me with desire.

He pumps me a few more times with the surgical knife handle, making me moan. “Your body tells me a different story.”

“I like it,” I say quickly, hating myself for saying it because it’s true.

“Good girl. Now, come for me, and I’ll let you have what you want.”

“Jaxon, I can’t.” My voice is hushed. How many people has he killed with that blade?

The idea must thrill some dark part of me because while he strokes my clit, his hand weaving through my hair to hold me at his mercy, fucking me with the blunt end of the knife over and over, the pressure between my thighs intensifies until I’m shaking. The orgasm rips through me like a soul-shattering frenzy. My eyes flutter closed as my veins lace with fire, licking the edges of my sanity.

I grip the tiles and look back at Jaxon, parting my eyelids. At the sight of him behind me, my thighs clench. The urge to rub my ass on his crotch is too much. How can I still be horny?

His eyes are star-filled, glowing. “So eager, little fox.”

“Jaxon, please just fuck me,” I blurt out.

“You want my cock inside you?” I nod, and he slowly teases the knife out, the handle slick as it scrapes sharply down my inner thigh. I hear it clatter to the floor, and his belt come undone, and then I feel him...hot and hard, at my entrance. He yanks my head back, his other hand twisting my nipple until it hurts.

“Spread those beautiful legs,” he hisses. “I’ve been wanting to fuck you all night.”

“You have?”

“Ever since I saw you in that goddamn dress.”

I part for him, and as he seals his lips over mine, I grind back. I’m so wet, his tip eases inside, stretching me. I’m not ready for him. I might be soaked, but the knife handle was thin, whereas Jaxon is so not. Inch by inch, he pushes inside until he’s fully inside.

“You burned that dress,” I quip back.

His teeth nip hard at my neck. “Is that why you sliced up my shirt?”

Pain mixes with pleasure as he withdraws all the way and then thrusts back in, taking me right to the edge.

“Next time, you’re naked, and I’m wearing clothes,” I breathe out, drunk on the feel of him filling me up.

“You’ll have to tie me up for that to happen, little fox.” He thrusts in deep.

And then again.

And again. Until I can’t think, let alone speak.

Stars collide across my vision, and darkness claws at the corners of my mind as the slickness between my legs coats the insides of my legs more and more. I look down. There’s bright red on my thighs, flashing like a warning sign. I’m bleeding, but it’s not my period. There’s a cut from the knife.

The sight of it excites me more than it should.

I let out a breathy moan, and he fucks me harder, yanking my head back, making me scream as I orgasm a second time. He guides me to oblivion and back as he tenses, groans, and comes too, giving one last agonizing thrust.

Jaxon pulls my head back and devours my mouth. As he does, I can feel his hot cum trailing between my legs.

I don’t care about the blood or the cut. I don’t care that he’s dressed and I’m not. I don’t care that he won’t let me share his bed. This is what I’ve been waiting for.

This is what I need.

To be punished.

I’ll cry alone tomorrow.

JAXON

“I want you to teach me to do that,” she hisses as I clean and tend to the gash on her inner thigh. It was reckless to let myself get carried away. I want to do more, cut her deeper, scar that pretty flesh, and then fuck her hard, consume her in every way while bathed in her blood.

“Do what?”

I want her to scream while I destroy her, carving her into pieces like the bodies I left behind. And make her scream my name while I make her come harder than she ever has.

I don't care if it hurts.

“Kill with one cut.” She raises her eyes to mine, wetting her lips with her tongue, testing her power over me while she waits for an answer. My cock hardens, desperate to be inside her again.

“It takes practice.”

“I didn't kill Henry properly. That can't happen again.” I suppress a smile. How ironic. It happens even if you make all the intentions to snuff the life out of a person.

Little birdie got away.

I take a minute to look at what I'm doing, applying gauze. Then our eyes connect in the dim light of the bathroom mirror. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“You can do the next one. But I want something in return.”

“What's that?” Her breath quickens, and I can't help but smirk. She thinks I want something perverted in return. No, little fox. That will come later.

“I dispose of the body alone.”

There's a beat or two of silence while she considers it. “You're going to mutilate it, aren't you?”

I pause, deciding how much I should tell her and what she doesn't need to know. “The location, the positioning of the body, the ritual of sacrifice, they have to be exact.”

“If the police find the body, they will tie it to Henry's. And now Christian's. Every crime scene has a signature that fits the same pattern and profile. The police will know it's the same killer.”

“It's fine if they make that conclusion.”

“You’re not afraid of getting caught?”

“That’s not what I’m afraid of, no.”

Her eyes flare to life. “What are you afraid of?”

The darkness.

Keeping my face neutral, I give her a look. “You should get some rest. It’s late. There are some pajamas in the spare room that should fit you. I had my PA run out and get you some clothes.”

I leave her to get dressed, retrieving the instrument I used to put Christian out of his misery. The tip is stained with her blood. The bathroom must be cleaned before the housekeeper arrives tomorrow morning. Making a mental note, I retreat to the office and close the door, locking Laine and her temptations out.

Once I’m alone, I call my father.

“What the hell is going on? Eric’s son has been found dead!” he seethes down the phone.

I glance at my watch. It’s been five hours since I dumped him. Too long. I would have expected to have this conversation earlier. “He was causing problems.”

“The founders are livid. They want explanations. What am I supposed to tell them?”

I shrug even though he can’t see me. “Sacrifices must be made.” The central tenet of the Lucian philosophy is self-sacrifice. My father knows this, abusing his power as the Archkey whenever it suits him.

“And I decide what sacrifices are made. Not you. Do you hear? Do not overstep your potential, Jaxon. You are not Archkey yet.”

“No. I’m not.”

“And the Laine Summers problem? Have you dealt with it yet? Shepherd hasn’t had a check-in from you in a while, and last I heard, she was staying with you?”

My jaw clenches. “She’ll be dealt with.”

“By the Ripper? We trust him to deal with this.”

Anger bleeds into my veins. “The Ripper, not me?”

“Are we still playing this game? You are both one and the same, or haven’t you got your darkness under control yet?”

“It’s under control.”

Am I? The Ripper laughs inside my head.

“Then do what needs to be done. I don’t care how you do it. Let the

Ripper out, or don't. Just make this problem disappear. If you want to inherit my mantle, Son, do not make me wait any longer."

He hangs up, not bothering to wait for a reply. Irritation stabs my gut, so I focus on paperwork until I can work the anger out of my system. When I emerge hours later, I check the security cameras to see Laine fast asleep in the spare room.

I should kill her now and deal with this problem head-on. The longer she lives, the more fucked this situation is getting. I can only get away with killing acolytes for so long. The Archkey won't tolerate it, even from his own son.

Rage swirls in my gut, the edges of my vision blackening.

You should kill her now while she's nicely relaxed.

"Shut the fuck up," I snap.

Temper. Temper. Do you want me to do it for you? Let me out, and I'll make it twice as fun.

A laugh echoes in the corner of my mind where the darkness squats and waits, creeping over me when I least expect it. Killing Christian was meant to silence *him* for a while. Why the fuck hasn't he gone away? I can't go to sleep now.

The urge to break something, punch something, whips through me like a windstorm. Breathing deep and hard, I get up from my desk chair, haul my ruined shirt over my head, and then pull the chest from the bottom of the walk-in wardrobe into the middle of the room. It unlocks with a beep when I enter the code.

The scourge I used to use most nights sits on top, ready and waiting. It's been a long time since I've needed it. But it can keep me grounded and stop the evil from surfacing.

Pain. Death. Obliteration.

It works in that order.

Usually, I prefer to hunt and kill, send the Divine another offering, rather than torture myself in this room until I pass out.

But I saw her eyes when I sliced Christian's jugular. She loved it. But there's a part that hates it. She desires to become a God, yet she's repulsed by it too.

She's not ready.

I want her broken, not shattered. Her mind couldn't take it. What festers in me...I don't want that for Laine.

I will destroy myself and the badness within me before I let that happen.

Hours later, when I'm exhausted, and I've cleaned off the blood and bleached the bathroom, I'm about to sleep when she appears in my doorway, knife in hand, eyes misted with tears.

"I couldn't stop him," she lets out between strangled breaths, trying to slash at me.

"Shhhh." I disarm her and guide her to bed. I'm not going to sleep now anyway.

More hours tick by until I'm stiff, my arm that she's resting on is dead, and the predawn morning birdsong has spilled into the room enough to wake her; she blinks open her eyes, freezing at the sight of me.

She sits up, panic etched on her face. "What are you doing in my bed?"

I take the opportunity to move my arm and rub some life back into it. "I think you'll find, you're in mine."

Laine looks around the room. "Did I—"

"Sleepwalk? Yes." A smirk tugs at the corner of my lips as I sit up. Fuck, she's adorable.

She eyes the bloody sheets with horror. "Oh God, what did I do? Did I hurt you?"

"A few cuts. I'll be fine. Now go back to sleep." I'll probably need to see to the cuts, but that she slept in my arms was worth it.

When she's passed out, and her breathing deepens, I tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear and mutter, "Don't fall in love with a ripper. Your heart won't survive."

I don't know who I'm warning, myself or Laine.

What the fuck are you doing, Jaxon?

Ignoring my inner critic, I let my eyes close for a few seconds as sleep pulls me under.

LAINE

S hock drags me awake. I sit up, panting in the darkness. I was dreaming again. Suffocating, being dragged down into an abyss. Fumbling for the light, I hit the switch, and a soft glow fills the room, chasing away the dreaded night.

It takes me a few seconds to register I'm not at home or in Jaxon's spare room. I'm in his bed. I look around, my tongue darting out to moisten my cracked lips. How did I get here? I never sleep in his bed. Then it comes back to me. I was sleepwalking again.

Since there's no glass beside the bed and my throat is parched, I stagger into the kitchen. Light spills through the blinds. *Shit*. It must be daytime. Does his room have blackout blinds? What time is it?

The clock on the counter says it's 1 p.m. It's way past the time I needed to be awake. I look around and catch a Post-it with words scrawled on it in neat cursive. It's from Jaxon.

Headed to work. Don't go anywhere. We're out again tonight.

I'll admit, for a doctor, he has easy-to-read handwriting. Though, the longer I stare at the words, the more they blur in front of me, twisting and morphing into a desperate chill, clawing through me, mutating like a horror uncontained.

The handwriting is familiar.

I never asked if he sent me the letters. Only if he was the one who gave me the scar.

"He's not the Ripper," I say to no one but myself, a ghost of a whisper. The handwriting being the same is just a coincidence. Lots of people write in neat cursive. Or if it was him, sending me those letters, it doesn't mean he's the Ripper. I just assumed...

A shiver coasts down my spine, but I chase it away, making coffee to distract myself. But the itch under my skin is back, the feeling that I've missed something important—a clue.

I can't let this go.

It'll help put my mind at rest if I had more evidence. Like the rest of his house, Jaxon's bedroom is neat, borderline empty. His only paperwork is for the hospital and his pharmaceutical company in a briefcase. Defeated, I leave everything as I find it and head to his office, but it's locked.

I try the handle again.

No, definitely locked.

Grabbing my phone from my bag, I call Sage.

There's a muffled "Hello?" when it picks up.

"Sage, can you borrow your parents' car and come get me?"

"Laine! Where have you been? We've been worried sick."

I gnaw my lower lip. "At Jaxon's." I give her a brief update, and she promises to come and get me as soon as possible.

Half an hour later, she arrives in a sleek silver Bentley. Her eyes are full of curiosity as I get in the passenger seat, but she doesn't pepper me with questions until we're a good ten minutes from Jaxon's house.

"So you think he's the Ripper?"

"I need to compare the letters the Ripper sent me to this," I wave the post-it in her peripheral vision. Unfortunately, the letters are in my cottage.

"But why would he say he's protecting you, helping you, if he's the one who tried to kill you?"

I don't have an answer, so I shake my head. "I don't know. I'm missing something."

"It seems too much of a coincidence if he isn't. Wasn't his career thriving in America before he came back? Isn't his company worth billions? Why then take a job as a surgeon in a small town in England?" She pauses and glances at me. "Maybe he came back for you?"

Sage knows I used myself as bait to lure the real Ripper back from hiding. She's not implying he came back to date me, that's for sure. I shrug my shoulders. "At least, now I have him where I want him."

Sage gives me a worried look. The reality of it all is like a knife scoring my insides and slashing me open for all to see. Before, when I suspected it was Jaxon, I could lie to myself and pretend I was being ridiculous. Paranoid.

Now, I can't see the dark streets for the stars. He's chasing me down hidden corners, and I don't even know it. "I need to get back to my cottage." And then I'll see the letters for myself.

A message pings. I glance at the screen. It's from an unknown number.

My stomach twists when I read it.

UNKNOWN:

Where are you going?

I type back quickly.

LAINE:

Jaxon?

UNKNOWN:

Were you expecting someone else? I told you not to leave the house.

LAINE:

Too bad. I'm going shopping. I need a dress for tonight.

UNKNOWN:

Use the card I gave you.

It's not a lie. I'll make Sage drive me to a mall after we stop at the cottage.

"Er, Laine. There's a car following us."

I glance behind us; sure enough, a black Maybach is weaving after us through traffic. It can't be Jaxon, can it?

"Can you drive to the nearest shopping mall instead?"

Sage does, and the car follows us into the parking lot. The blacked-out windows make it difficult to see who is behind the wheel.

We spent the next few hours sitting in the mall food court with veggie burgers and vegan milkshakes, watching the crowds for Jaxon. My heart leaps whenever a guy with dark hair and a tailored suit walks by.

It's not him, I reassure myself, draining my chocolate oat milkshake through a paper straw until there's nothing but bubbles left.

He doesn't show, but the Maybach is back as soon as we hit the road. We can't risk going to the cottage, so Sage drives me back to Jaxon's place, and it peels away miles before we get there.

"Are you sure you're going to be alright?" she asks as I hug her goodbye.

I almost ask her to stay, but I need to face him alone.

"I'll call you if it's not," I promise. We didn't get the letters today, but I'll get them tonight when Jaxon is distracted. If I run now, he'll keep chasing me. I can't let him know that I suspect him of anything. A small voice at the

back of my head tells me I'm stalling, but I squash it down before it can do any more damage.

IT'S RAINING AGAIN WHEN JAXON'S CAR PULLS INTO THE DRIVEWAY. I'M sitting on the sofa, knees drawn up under me, staring at the wall when he walks through and calmly sets his keys and wallet on the table. He's wearing a three-piece suit, not a hair or button out of place, looking too handsome for me to hate.

"Shopping? Really?"

Dread in my gut sits like a dead corpse, heavy and bloated, unable to be moved.

"I needed something to wear." At my feet is a bag containing a cheap dress I grabbed off a rack before we left the mall. It's not something I would ever buy.

Smirking, he saunters over, his gaze sliding to mine. "You never buy new. It's not sustainable."

I blink up at him, shivering not from the cold but at the carnal way he looks at me. "You remembered."

"I distinctly recall you telling me off for adding to the landfill problem." I did. I got on my high horse when I learned how much he spent on his wardrobe every season. I cast my eyes over his assemble today. Tailored. Almost definitely. "Not that you listened."

"I'll call Pippa, my stylist. She'll sort you out."

I narrow my eyes, irritation running hot over my skin like sandpaper. "I told you, I have a dress."

He raises a brow and gives my cheap shopping bag a cursory glance. "Whatever is in there, you can take it back. Reduce landfill."

Uncurling my legs from under me, I snatch up my bag. "So I can buy something even more expensive from your personal stylist?"

"Pippa runs Rewind Wear. A styling company that loans or resells designer clothes once they've been commissioned and worn and then donates the profits to charity." He pulls out his phone, types a succinct message to someone, and then pockets it. "She'll be here in twenty minutes." He sighs. "I'll need to explain about the shirt you hacked up."

I stare at him, open-mouthed. Unable to say squat back.

When Pippa arrives with a portable wardrobe of diamond-studded dresses that must cost the earth, I like her immediately, much to my annoyance. She's direct, helpful, and honest regarding what I look like. Before she rushes off to her next appointment, having squeezed her favorite client in as a favor, she zips me into a gown made for some distant European Princess who is perfectly my size. She also leaves several dresses and outfits commissioned and donated by celebrities, such as pop idol Lana Langfield, and some eye-popping negligée with leather straps in the spare room wardrobe.

"For your time with Jaxon," she winks before air-kissing Jaxon and leaving us alone.

Time with Jaxon? I've no idea what she means by that, but I can only imagine it implies that she dresses Jaxon's dates a hell of a lot.

When I emerge from the bedroom half an hour later, with my hair and makeup done, wearing the princess dress...Jaxon's reaction is worth it. His eyes track me across the room as I saunter to his living area bar to make myself a drink.

The dress is a vision with a bodice, peplum, and a delicate shoulder shrug sweeping down to a mermaid skirt covered with black diamonds, each glistening like drops of dew across a midnight fabric. The smaller stones form intricate patterns around a larger gem at the waist, like constellations in the night sky.

I nearly threw up when Pippa told me it was a five-carat black diamond set in white gold.

I knock back a straight vodka and then meet those molten silver eyes. "What?"

"I might have to kill someone today with you looking like that."

Normally, I'd laugh like it was a joke. But with Jaxon, it's not, and to make it worse, my skin blisters hot, and warmth dips down into my stomach at his words.

Why do I like that he says things like that? What's wrong with me?

I must be broken. It can't be normal to lust after a man who rips women apart on his nights off. I don't have evidence that Jaxon is the Ripper, but I've always known it in my dark, twisted heart.

Like attracts like, that's what they say, right?

Jaxon drives us to the charity auction event to raise funds for the Foundation. In the privacy of the Maybach, he looks like any other arrogant

billionaire; classical music waltzes heavily through the air between us, and the scent of rich leather and cherries threatens to drug me as Jaxon drives dangerously fast, attacking the country roads as though they might disappear into the night.

He's so arrogant that even the traffic gives way to him. As if reading my thoughts, he looks my way. "Penny for your thoughts?"

I fidget in my seat, sweating in my diamonds. May as well come out with it. What's the worst that could happen? I stare at the darkened road, luminous with the glare of headlights, and swallow my fear. "I don't appreciate you still stalking me."

His gaze burrows under my skin, almost like it could enter my soul, even though I'm not looking at him. After a few seconds, I give in and meet his half-lidded look. "When?" There's a sharp edge to his tone.

"Today, you followed me to the mall to make sure that was what I was doing."

The muscle in Jaxon's jaw tightens.

"You can't follow me everywhere," I carry on.

He gives me a look like he could, but instead, says, "We're here."

We pull into a street packed with photographers, and Jaxon off-hands the car to the valet. The hotel is a flurry of lights. The press crowding the red carpet takes a million pictures of us arriving. They shout questions at Jaxon about me, asking if we're dating. Unexpectedly, Jaxon pulls me closer to him, shielding me from the brunt of it, telling them nothing. I let him pull me close. He smells of expensive cologne and darker promises to come. My insides flip despite my hatred toward a guy like him.

It's easy to forget in the glamour of it all; this is not the real Jaxon. There's something darker and menacing behind his charming mask. If I looked under it, I would see the real monster, a killer.

Just like the men I vowed to kill.

The real question is...can I kill Jaxon?

It scares me more than anything that the answer is no.

LAINE

The charity auction is full of rich wankers, but all eyes are on me when I walk in on Jaxon's arm. I recognize two faces: his father in one corner talking to a taller, bulkier man with dark, bushy hair and eyebrows. And Addison is at the bar with two women hanging off his every word. He sees us enter, and a syrupy smile sticks to his lips.

Jaxon's father, Simmons, and the taller man see us, and they stiffen. Simmons nods to Jaxon as if expecting him to go over there. He doesn't.

My pulse speeds up as Jaxon's arm snakes around my waist, the heat of his body causing it to skip a few beats. "Stay close."

"Scared I'll run off?" I pipe at him.

"I can't be held accountable for what I'll do to anyone who does more than look at you."

Jaxon hasn't told me the plan yet, so I let him guide me toward the bar. He orders our drinks—a whiskey for him and something sweet with a cherry in it for me.

"It would be good if I knew what the plan for tonight is," I say under my breath, sipping my cocktail. It's the same drink I had at the foundation dinner. He remembered.

"There is no plan."

I blink. "Then why are we here?"

"As a board member of the Foundation, I have obligations," he says detachedly. "You're tense this evening." He comes around and rubs my shoulders, sending shockwaves of pleasure down my spine.

I close my eyes, wanting nothing more than to lean into him like a cat and rub myself all over his warm, solid body. I slept for a long time last night.

"You let me sleep in your bed," I blurt out.

He steps close, warm breath coasting over the shell of my ear. "Is that why you're on edge?" He bites me gently on my neck, and electricity rushes through my body. If Jaxon wanted to fuck me here, in this room with everyone watching, I'm not sure I could stop him.

"Everyone is watching."

"Fuck everyone. I want them to know you're mine."

His words burn away the chill in my bones, my mind branded with chaos so that I can't think properly, let alone speak.

“Everyone here is a Lucian?”

“We call them Followers. But yes, everyone except you.”

“Then why did you bring me?”

“To make a statement. Declaring you off limits. Anyone who wants to touch a hair on your body must go through me.” His voice is like silk, caressing the darker parts of my soul.

“Won’t they just do that?”

He chuckles darkly. “That’s the fun part.”

The burly guy who was with Jaxon’s father comes over and introduces himself as Shepherd, dragging a petite woman with shining black hair on his arm along with him. “Jaxon, your father wants to speak to you,” he says gruffly, ignoring me. “Or whoever you are today.” Jaxon’s shoulder tense, his features hard, but Shepherd carries on, a half sneer stuffed full of riddles on his lips. “I mean. We don’t always know, do we?”

What does he mean by that? I look at Jaxon, but he doesn’t explain, too busy bristling. “I’m not leaving Laine alone.”

Only then does Shepherd offer me a glance, regarding me like filth marring his perfectly pressed suit. “Shina will stay with her.”

Slowly, Jaxon pulls me to his side, his eyes never leaving Shepherd. “Don’t go anywhere. Stay right here with Shina where I can see you.” His voice is warm honey in my ear.

As Jaxon and Shepherd head toward Jaxon’s father, leaving me alone with the petite brunette, she gives me a warm smile. “You’re causing quite the stir.”

“What did he mean? Whoever Jaxon is today?”

Shina shrugs and takes a sip of her champagne, looking across the room in the opposite direction Jaxon and Shepherd went in. “Not now. Later.”

I follow her look. Addison, our old university friend, strides over. I can’t help my eyes being drawn to his mangled hands.

“Jaxon said you were in town.” His cold and empty smile rakes over me.

“Addison,” I say breathlessly. “Nice to meet you again.” The lie coats my tongue. Memories of him hurting Molly flash before my eyes as bile corrodes the back of my throat.

Addison chuckles, lust flaring in his as he gives me a once-over. “Brainy Laine, don’t you look fucking edible.”

“Give it a rest, Addy,” Shina warns, her tone not quite friendly either.

“What? Can’t I say hello to the little bird Jaxon’s brought into a den of

wolves?”

Bird.

Just like the nickname on the letters.

Addison brushes a stray lock of hair from my eyes. I jerk back, suppressing a strangled sob, and slide on a humorless smile, but it doesn't feel like it fits my face. Everything feels weak and useless under Addison's scrutiny. Everything feels wrong. I suddenly don't want to be here.

But then a warm, solid presence comes up behind me, and a steadying hand grips my waist tight, tethering me to him. Jaxon. He's what keeps my breathing steady, the stronghold he has on my jelly-like body stopping me from fainting.

I'm caught between two evils. I don't know which one I should be hiding from.

“Addison, was the message not clear last time?” Jaxon scowls.

Addison's smile cracks, but he looks me up and down, dragging his gaze over my body like he owns it. “Oh, it was clear. You don't like to share your toys.”

Jaxon hand on me tightens to the point of bruising as he flashes a sadistic snarl. “I don't. So fuck off.

In my purse, my phone buzzes, letting me know that Sage is outside.

Earlier, I sent her to my house. I planned to lose Jaxon at the auction for a short while, giving me enough time to get the letters from Sage and then get back to him without him knowing. It sounded far easier in my head.

“Excuse me...I need to go and find the ladies' room.” I breathe out.

“I'll go with you,” Shina offers, but Jaxon shoots her a glare that could wither roses.

“No! I will.”

I stare at him. “Excuse me?” But I don't get time to argue; Jaxon is already dragging me like a sack of potatoes toward the party's edge, where the crowds are thinner and the air isn't thick with testosterone.

What *was* that?

Jaxon yanks me into the narrow hallway where the powder room is located. It's empty. “Why were you talking to Addison?” His voice is unnaturally calm, though it manages to wrap around my insides and squeeze.

“What?” I stare at Jaxon open-mouthed and then shake my head. Jaxon acting like the bitter, jealous boyfriend is not something I'd ever see.

“Why were you talking, smiling at that fucking bastard?” he grits out,

irises darkened by shadow as his hot hands slam me into the wall. Anger collides with fear and wins, increasing my blood temperature a few degrees. I want to slap his hands away but dig my nails into them instead.

“Get off me, Jaxon,” I snarl back.

He grimaces. “There she is. My little rabid fox.”

“She never left,” I snap.

He gives a harsh laugh, the humor not reaching his black eyes. “Are you fucking Addison?”

I scowl up at him, but...fuck, he still has a way of taking my breath away. “How could I? I haven’t seen him since university.”

“But you want to?”

“Don’t be delusional. I hate him.”

“Just like you hate me?” A tug of animosity runs down my spine and pricks the sensitive part between my legs.

Not now. Sage is outside waiting. “I’m going into the powder room alone.”

His lips curl slightly. “If you take too long, I’m coming in after you.” With that, he lets me go.

Unlike the gold and green of the hotel lobby, the ladies’ room is pastel pink with a velvet borne settee dead center. Gold-edged mirrors lit from within line the wall leading up to rose-colored cubicles. A clerestory window looms at the far end.

I exhale, walk over to it, and give the release a shove. Cool air wafts through, bringing with it a slight drizzle. It opens onto the street, the rear of the hotel from the looks of it. It’s big enough to climb through, but I’ll need something to stand on. I also need to move quickly before Jaxon comes in. There is no doubt that he will.

Dragging the borne settee over to the window does the trick. I kick off my shoes, throw them and my purse through the gap, and then hoist myself up after them. There’s a tearing sound and an odd sensation of hundreds and thousands of small sprinkles poured over my legs as I drag myself to freedom on the damp pavement. Only I know it’s not sprinkles; it’s a waterfall of sparkling black diamonds.

Oh, well. No time to cry over a ripped dress. I need to find Sage.

The back street behind the hotel is shaded in various grays, lit only by the yellow, waning moon, and orange streetlamps. Trash dumpsters hide me from the main road. The aroma of the hotel restaurant and the stench of days-old

bin bags curdles in my stomach, rising in my throat when a rat dashes out in front of me.

It's not a street I would ever walk down alone.

Shaking, I swallow hard as I slip my shoes back on, feet now wet, and locate my purse. My phone has three new messages and several missed calls. I don't bother listening to any of them. Heels clicking fast on the pavement, I hurry toward the main street, the wet wind playing havoc with my hair, skittering up my ribcage like the fingers of death, calling Sage.

"Laine, thank fuck. I've been calling you for ages."

I slow to a walk, breathing a little harder when I get to the street the hotel entrance is on, and look left. The paparazzi have dwindled to only a handful of photographers smoking and chatting under the awning. A few cars drive past, but other than that, the road is empty.

"Where are you? Did you get the letters?"

"Laine, I'm still at your house. Well, outside it."

I turn right, away from the hotel, and carry on walking despite the rain coming down again. "Outside my house?"

"You didn't get my messages? Your cottage was on fire. Some of it still is. The firefighters are trying to stop it from spreading..."

Numbness spreads over my limbs as she rambles about how no one was hurt.

"Tigger?" Dad came and got Charlie a few days ago, but my cat was in the cottage.

"Safe. Your dad is here." Relief sags my shoulders but only a touch.

"How?" I scratch out.

"They think it was curling tongs in the bedroom."

"Fuck." The letters.

"The letters were in the bedroom," I whisper.

"Laine. I think they're gone. The bedroom is gone. I'm going to try...."

Her words don't sink in. Nothing does. Everything goes dark and far away. Shadows grow and consume me. Soft rain falls like pins and needles, plastering the ruined dress to my soaked skin and sticking my hair to my face. I need to get home.

There is no home.

Then I need....

I spin around suddenly, not knowing where I am. I've been walking for a good five minutes through shitty weather. There aren't any streetlights here,

and the moon has drifted behind gunmetal clouds, making everything seem darker than it should be.

“Laine?” Sage’s voice cuts through like a beacon, and so is the noise of someone behind me. Adrenaline, causing every cell to spark under my skin, wakes me up like a vat of coffee.

“Wait, I think. I hear something.” I turn around just as the darkness at the end of the street shifts and moves.

There’s someone there.

“I need to go.”

“Wait—”

I click the phone off. Heart pounding, hurrying as fast as I can, I get to the bend in the road and duck across it to the other side. This part of the road is brighter, with cars flying left and right. A corner shop is lit up from within, but it’s locked when I reach the entrance.

Fear screams through me when I look back and see someone stalking toward me. I can’t tell if its Addison or Jaxon. But I don’t care.

I break out into a run.

A black hackney cab appears with its amber light ablaze. I all but sprint into the road to flag it down, my heart threatening to leap out of my skin. Slamming the cab door behind me, I sink into the leather seat, hand clutching the door handle.

“Where to, love?”

I repeat my address.

As the taxi turns in the street to head the other way, past the hotel, I see him watching me from the corner, scowl on his lips, eyes like two black holes devoid of emotion as they follow me to the end of the road, sweeping past him, escaping him once again. So it wasn’t him on the street, chasing me.

My phone pings.

UNKNOWN:

Leaving so soon?

LAINE:

There’s a fire....

UNKNOWN:

Where?

LAINE:

My house.

UNKNOWN:

When you've dealt with it, come over to mine. I'll have a present for you that I think you'll like.

I don't reply to that.

I've no idea what present Jaxon thinks I'll like, but it can't be good.

Sage and my dad are outside my cottage when the taxi pulls up on the mews road outside my house. There's also a crowd of nosy neighbors staring at me and whispering among themselves when I turn around after paying the taxi.

Ignoring the busybodies, I hug Sage and send her home before her parents send out a search party, with a promise to call her in the morning and then get an update from my dad.

Nothing survived.

Reeling from the shock, numb from the cold, even with the foil blanket one of the female firefighters cuddled me into, I hold Tigger on my lap, clutching his soft fur, as Dad drives me to Mum's house where I still have a bedroom. After several minutes of calming Fiona down and saying good night to Kendall, I retreat to bed.

But it's only when I go up to my old room, shock clamping down as I reach for the knife in my purse, that horror finally scratches through my insides.

There, on the pillow, rests another bloody letter.

THE RIPPER

My little bird has been hiding all this time, and now she's back.

Risen from the dead.

I've been biding my time, waiting. Playing with her, toying with her tainted emotions, seeing just how far I can push her to the edge. And now she knows I'm back, nothing can keep me from her.

Not Jaxon nor fate.

But first...

I follow Addison from the little bird's house. He has my letters. He means to use them against us.

Jaxon allowed me to take this one. See, I can almost hear him say, *occasionally, I let you have fun*. But tonight isn't just about fun, it's about respect and protecting what's mine. It's going to be fucking carnage. There's no sweet thing to stalk. This isn't one of Jaxon's carefully chosen victims that meets more than just blood type and health.

Oh, the good doctor, Jaxon, loves to ensure that those I rip apart have secrets so terrible, pasts so fucked up, they deserve to die. They have to match his standards of being morally corrupt before I'm allowed to be unleashed.

Jaxon always does what Daddy wants, finding donors for his clinics, but Father respects only me.

The Foundation relies on me.

And Jaxon would be nothing without the Ripper. I made him who is today, no one else.

Addison doesn't see me until it's too late. He reeks of gasoline from setting fire to the little bird's belongings, trying to erase her. That's my job. No one fucks with me and gets away with it.

The snarl escapes my lips as I sneak up on him as he tries to unlock his car. I smashed in the lock so he couldn't. He doesn't see me until it's too late, my hands slotting around his neck, squeezing until he chokes.

Don't kill him yet.

Usually, Mr. Uptight doesn't get involved. He likes to sleep when I'm awake, pretend what I do is a fucking dream. To have him lurking in the depths, skulking where he usually keeps me prisoner, is amusing.

"How does it feel, brother, to be at mercy to the madness?" I hiss with a

laugh.

We can share her.

“What?”

If you wanted her dead, she'd be in pieces by now. You didn't kill her last night.

With a grunt, I drop Addison to the ground, gasping. “Oh, she’s going to die. I’ll carve her slowly so you get to enjoy every scream.”

“You fucking psycho,” Addison huffs when he sees me. “I’ll kill you.”

“I’d love to see you try,” I sneer back, letting him see in my eyes just how psychotic I can be.

The fucker recoils, fear sliding into his eyes as he looks up. “You’re the Ripper.”

I run a hand through my hair and slowly take my jacket off. If I can kill him, I’m going to beat him to fucking pulp for touching what’s mine.

“Yes, I’m the fucking Ripper,” I say with a carnal smile, rolling up my sleeves, drawing out a thin blade that could flay the skin off his fucking face for even thinking he had a right to look at her.

Just don't kill him, my keeper reminds me. Always fucking supervising.

“I won’t...fucking killjoy,” I mutter. But I’ll make him pay.

Maybe after, I’ll use this fuckers blood to write my little bird a letter. Sharing never crossed my mind or his before this. It’s interesting how much Jaxon keeps from me when he wants to. But I don’t want to fucking share.

If you let her live, I'll let you have it all.

“I already do.” What more can Jaxon give me? I bare my teeth in the dark, stalking toward the fucker as he tries to get to his feet. Pages of my letters spill out all over the wet pavement. He starts to run. The first thing I will do is slice the backs of his heels so he fucking can’t.

I'll give you full control.

Considering Jaxon’s proposal, I stop hunting Addison, letting the prick run a few yards into the darkness. I’ll get him soon enough.

“You won’t like what I do.”

I don't give a fuck, as long as she's safe.

“And if I fuck her?”

A pause. *I won't interfere.*

LAINE

I move through the hospital like I'm moving through water.

Jack came to work. Not in a Maybach. In his own car, the Aston Martin. I followed him in and watched as he left it beside my mother's car in the staff parking lot.

Moving and breathing aren't easy all of a sudden, but I manage both enough to get me to where my mind has flown. If Jack is my killer, I need to keep track of him until I can figure out what to do, which shouldn't be hard given that there is only one ending to this...

I need to kill him before he kills me.

Inside the hospital, relief washes over me when I see the familiar figure of my mother, black hair pulled back into a twisted bun as she works at her desk. I consider going inside but decide against it. She hasn't seen me yet, and I'm not in the right mood to handle her. But at least she's safe.

Maybe I was being rash, worrying about my mother. The man tormenting me all these years has never threatened my family. I tread along the white-walled corridor, breathing in the scent of antiseptic, reading the signs to the varying departments as I pass. Only when I get to cardiology does the adrenaline spiking through my veins ramp up a notch.

I should confront him and demand an explanation outright. Why try to kill me and then try to protect me? After all this time. It doesn't make sense.

He's in surgery. I know because a passing nurse told me. At first, I stand outside his office, my body limp, my brain a mess. Then I use my mother's pass to go inside. I never returned it to her, so it's handy now to spy on Jaxon.

Jaxon's office is pristine, just like I remember. I'm not sure what I'm looking for. Evidence that he's the one who'd written and sent that last letter. A clue as to when and how he burned down my home. I find nothing—a few notebooks, paperwork that needs filing, his suit jacket hanging up in the closet, and a set of house keys.

I take the keys, relock the office, and hurry to a quiet part of the hospital, a back staircase that no one uses unless the elevators are out. I call Nola.

"You need to treat him like all the others," she says.

I gnaw my lower lip, considering what she's saying. "I don't have any proof yet."

“Isn’t the fact you caught him red-handed in your house proof enough?”

“All it means is that he’s my stalker. It doesn’t mean he’s the person that...”

I can’t say it out loud.

“It shouldn’t be any different.”

“He knows what I am. He knows what I’ve done. But all he’s done is help me.”

“Has he helped you? Or has he made it worse? The police know about the murders now. Yes, he cleaned the evidence, but it’s only a matter of time before they connect the dots.”

I bite my lower lip. She’s right.

She sighs down the phone. “You need closure, I get it. You let him in. That’s probably part of his sick, twisted plan. It’s okay to want to ask him why, but do it so that he can’t hurt you. We’re here if you need us.”

After Nola hangs up, I stare out the window, watching patients coming and going for their routine checkups and nurses wheeling patients on their daily rounds like everything is normal. If Jaxon is the monster I’ve been searching for this entire time, he’s right here.

I just need to kill him.

But every time I think of doing so, grief burrows under my skin, bruising my insides and splitting me open like a ripe peach.

I wait until the pain passes and then drive to his house.

All is quiet when I open the door and step inside Jaxon’s home. I open the door to his office using the keys I stole from his work. I’m not prepared for the mess inside. Papers are strewn across the floor. There are holes in the walls where someone has punched them. The chair is overturned, and the computer is on the floor. A nasty-looking whip with several tails lies innocently on the desk beside a towel caked in dried blood.

Beside the mess on the floor, in the hearth, is the ash of charred logs and remnants of burned letters. Only scraps remain, partial words obscured by the blackened edges. I pick one out of the ash and read the fragment.

*ring you bloom,
Soon, little bird.*

It’s the same paper he leaves me. The same words are on the page. I don’t

know when, but he went to my house, stole the letters, burned them, and burned my cottage down.

Jaxon is the Ripper.

I don't know how long I stare at the burnt letters for an afternoon shadow to crawl across the floor I'm curled up on, knees tucked into my chest, but it must be hours. My cheeks are damp, and there's an ache in my chest that hurts when I breathe. I know I should get up. Leave. But I can't.

Someone knocks at the door.

A few minutes later, my phone trills. I dig it out of my pocket and glance at the screen. It's Unknown. *Jaxon*. I haven't yet taken the liberty of updating his name in my contacts. It didn't seem right that he should have a permanent space in my digital world, and now I would never...can you imagine holding up my phone and saying, *Oh wait, my killer is calling. I need to take this.*

A strangled laugh escapes me. Fuck, I'm losing it. The door bangs again, and then my phone goes off.

Trembling, I snatch it up and answer it. "You bastard," I hiss.

"Charming. May I come in?"

"How could you?" My voice breaks with a sob. I'm alternating between intense rage and sadness so quickly that I can't quite keep up with my emotions as they tumble through me, a storm surging and falling, destroying everything in its path.

"You're overreacting."

"I'm overreacting? Are you sure about that?" I stagger to my feet, clutching the gun. "There's a fire here with the remains of the letters you sent me. You stalked me, you harassed me, you tried to kill me. How am I overreacting?"

"Let me in, and I'll explain."

I shake my head even though he can't see me. "No, no. You don't tell me what to do. You lost that right when you slit my fucking throat."

He snorts. "If I wanted you dead, you'd be in pieces by now."

"That doesn't reassure me," I sneer back and hang up. The phone immediately rings again, so I silence it.

He's going to come in. One flimsy door isn't going to keep him out. Keeping the gun aloft as he showed me, I stalk toward it. If he comes through, I'll shoot him. Point blank, I'll put a damn bullet in his head.

But nothing stirs. Cautiously, my heart beating so loud it's like a banshee in my chest, I look through the spy hole.

There's no one there.

Where is he? In the house's silence, faint banging can be heard. Fear plummets through every part of my body, freezing me in place.

The house is as quiet as a cat about to pounce as I check each room to be sure. The door that leads to the Jaxon's wine cellar is in the hallway. I've only been down there once, when Jaxon gave me the grand tour. There's a way to get in other than the stairs on the other side of this door leading down—a garden entryway way.

As I turn the bolt, my whole body tenses. There's no one waiting on the other side of the door. Bile burns up the back of my throat as I step through, gun poised, safety off. Only a few stairs creak, but everything else is still like time has stopped. The light is on, which in itself spikes panic in my veins.

If Jaxon is down here, I'm going to kill him. The mantra repeats in my head until I come to a stop at the bottom stair, eyes wide, pulse thumping loudly in my ears, drowning everything else out.

Addison is tied to a chair. All I can see are his eyes, twin slits of rage, as he strains against the tape over his mouth and the cable ties locking him down. His face is beat up and bloody, and his suit shirt is spattered with blood.

There's a red bow around his neck. The type you get on a wrapped gift. On the floor, in front of Addison is an urn.

When you've dealt with it, come over to mine. I'll have a present for you that I think you'll like.

Addison is the last monster on my list. He would be the hardest because he frightens me the most, so I was leaving him until the end. Unexpectedly, ice thaws in my chest a little.

But then shame curdles my insides despite it. It doesn't matter now. Our partnership, however fleeting, is over. I was saving the Ripper til last. Jaxon was going to help me get him, too. How ironic. I fell for his bullshit when it was Jaxon all along, even when I knew, deep down, that it was.

Keeping my gun firmly trained on Addison, I stalk over to the urn and grasp the lid. Inside are old, worn pennies, hundreds of them. Fuck. I dig out my phone and call my lover slash tormentor one last time.

“What am I supposed to do with him?”

“I see you've found my present.”

“You brought him home. Isn't that bad? Won't there be traces of evidence?”

“Let me worry about that.” His voice carries like he’s close, in the same room, and suddenly, he is...stepping out of the darkness between wine racks. Muscles tightening, I react, two hands on the gun, phone slipping from my ear and clattering to the floor. But all he does is smile when he sees me stagger back, swinging the gun to him, and clicks off the call.

“Stay back.”

“I just came to give you this. I made you a promise.” Jaxon steps forward, opens his hand, and offers me a shiny silver object. It’s a surgical knife. “You wanted to practice.”

My finger dances over the trigger, but I can’t bring myself to squeeze no matter how hard I try. Killing in the moment during a hunt is one thing, but taking someone’s life here, in a lit wine cellar, feels wrong.

Maybe it’s the gun. Maybe it’s Addison sitting there wrapped in a bloody bow. I can’t put my finger on whatever is off with this situation.

“Kill him, Laine. You know you want to.” His words slide across my skin like a tempting sin.

“No.” It comes out like a hoarse whisper. My palms are starting to sweat, so I adjust my grip and retreat another couple of paces until my shoes hit the lower step of the stairwell. Everything in me is screaming to kill him, but I can’t.

My vision clouds over as the hot tears gather behind my lids that I’ve held back for days. All the turmoil roiling inside me, all the frustration clawing at my guts, wants out.

I want out.

“No? But you’ve done it before. You can do it again. Get your revenge. Kill him with one deliberate incision, all the way across, just like you wanted. I’ll hold him down for you. End it, Laine.” His eyes practically glow, making my senses muddy and my body tingle. Every word out of his mouth makes sense. This is what I wanted.

To end it.

Slowly, I shake my head. “Not like this.”

Jaxon eyes darken as he crosses a shadow, but it’s fleeting. “Then I’ll end it for you.” I don’t have time to stop him. Calm as a cucumber, he strolls up to Addison and slashes his neck from ear to ear one deliberate cut. So deep that I almost imagine his head will fall off. It doesn’t.

The bow does, though.

As blood sprays.

It flutters to the ground.

Jaxon turns to me, eyes feral and soul-sucking, covered in blood. Snarl on his lips. It's how I imagined the Ripper would look after a kill. He looks like the Devil incarnate come to take my soul to Hell. He looks like Hell itself.

But also...

His presence burns, igniting forbidden heat through my middle.

Without meaning to, I wet my lips. Fear and lust and all the things in between choke me as I stand there and do absolutely nothing but imagine what that snarl would taste like.

I vowed to kill him, but he's the one pulling the noose tight around my neck.

And I'm not sure I want to escape.

He stalks over, tosses the gun from my shaking hands, and rakes his hands over my body, dragging me closer. The stench of pennies mingles with the smell of him—his vetiver and amber cologne and a masculine scent that brushes my insides like a sweet caress.

I'm putty in his hands as his lips come to my mouth, sucking my bottom lip, tasting me. He kisses me softly, hungrily. It's at odds with the violence that graced the room only seconds earlier. I let him claim my mouth because my mind is a mess. Only when I taste metal do I kiss him back, just as hungry.

There's only a tiny voice at the back of my mind.

He slaughters women for fun.

I'm supposed to kill him, not kiss him.

Sparks flame and become an inferno as his tongue delves into my mouth, chasing the voice away, quieting everything but my heart thumping in my chest and the blood rushing in my ears. I let out a moan.

He picks me up. I don't protest as he shoves me against the wine rack, bottles clanging as he grinds against me.

"Off," I bite out, grabbing the ends of his shirt. He obliges, dragging the blood-soaked material over his head. It's not until I run my hands over his chest that I feel them.

I jerk back. Kiss broken, eyes wide, I stare down.

Under my palms are thousands upon thousands of scars.

JAXON

She doesn't say a word but traces her finger over the jagged edge of a scar that cuts across my chest. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

Her eyes connect with mine. "Who did this?"

I don't want to pity so I give her a smirk. "Is my little fox worried for me?"

"These are symbols," she exclaims. "Someone carved symbols all over your body?" The pitch of anger in her voice warms the fucking blood in my veins.

"My father," that's all the detail I care to go into about that subject.

She kisses one of the scars and the licks. Blood rushes to my cock, making my eyes close. *Fuck.*

When I open them, she's staring at me, and then slowly, she ducks down. As Laine undoes my belt buckle and releases my straining cock from my trousers, my fists tighten, twisting through her hair.

Her first tentative lick draws a guttural groan from my chest. Then she sighs and takes me fully in her sweet mouth. Sucking hard, from hilt to tip, her hot wet mouth takes all of me in. I'm struggling not to shoot my load early, especially when she makes a hmmm sound, and it slides down my groin making my hips jerk.

"Fuck, baby, yes. Like that. All the way."

She bobs her head at my coaxing, like a good fucking girl, and my cock hits the back of her throat. It's too much. I grab her head and fuck her mouth, savoring the velvet way her tongue slides over my cock.

I want to thrust inside her, slow and deliberate, fucking her until she can't walk. And then spend the rest of the night with my face buried in her sweet pussy, making her scream. Addison's rotting corpse can fucking watch.

But the sound of sirens cuts that fantasy to shreds.

Laine releases me and sucks in a breath, shaking her head. "Fuck. I called them. Shit. I'm sorry." She's trembling in fear as she leans close, and slumps against me. I draw her up until her head is on my chest and carry her upstairs, inside the house. As I place her on the couch, her soft and inviting lips taunt me from this angle.

Fuck it, I don't care if I get caught.

Don't you dare go back on our deal, the Ripper snarls inside my head.

Doing up my trousers, I place a tender kiss on her forehead and run a thumb over her lips to wipe away the spots of blood. "Let them come."

"No, you need to go." She tries to push me away.

I grip her jaw and make her look at me. "I'm not going anywhere."

She scowls. "Then I'll tell them I did it."

My lips twitch. "There's a knife downstairs with my prints on them."

"Please, Jaxon. It can't end like this. I thought..." She places her forehead on mine, a sob caught in her throat. Her delicate jasmine and vanilla scent is headier now we're away from the blood. "...you were the Ripper. It was Addison, right? He called me little bird. You don't call me that."

A surge of something dark twists through my mind. Amusement weaving through my gut as he flares to life. *She's fucking delusional*, he hisses. His harsh laugh escapes my own lips and darkness stains the edges of my sight. *But you should listen to her.*

We pull back.

"No. You were right."

"Jaxon?"

"*Little Bird* is what we call a witness. I'm the Ripper, little fox." An ache spreads through my chest as I dig the penny I've carried in my wallet all these years and place it in her palm. Telling her I'm the Ripper is the only way to keep her away. Maybe she would understand that I didn't kill those women, even if it was my body doing the slaughtering. That the Ripper sleeps inside of me until I let him out. But even if she did understand, I can never trust him. And if I'm going to give him total control, I don't want her anywhere near him. "That's why I left all those years ago, to protect you."

As soon as she got the Ripper's attention by seeing what she shouldn't see, I had to leave. It was the only way to keep her safe from him. When she disappeared, changing her name, I thought it was safe to come back.

That's why I have to leave now.

It was easy to let you think that, Mr. Fucking Uptight, the Ripper laughs inside my head.

Her hands flinch away as I get to my feet, her face a contricted mask of confusion laced with fear. The pounding behind my eyes getting stronger. I'm tired. I need to leave now before he takes control and destroys her like he tried to do years before. Killing Laine wasn't anything more than my alter following the Archkey's orders and in the same token, taking away what was

mine in a fit of jealousy.

Only he failed, and he's been carrying that damn penny ever since. Making me carry it. It was only recently my blackouts have become less and less, and I've been able to communicate with him, gaining knowledge of what he does.

What he did.

Does telling yourself that help you sleep at night, brother?

Before Laine, I was content to stay in the dark and let the Ripper do what he wanted, but now the stain of it is my burden, too. I see his thoughts just as clearly as I see my own.

He mutilated women and still does. And I do nothing to stop him. I thought I had him under control. I was wrong.

The Ripper laughs, drowning out the rest of my thoughts as the banging on the door becomes loud and clear. The police are outside. Laine doesn't try to stop me as I take the stairs back down to the wine cellar where the rear entrance leads into the garden, a hidden escape route for occasions just like this.

But before I make it outside, my alter surfaces, *Ah, brother, what a mess you've made. Don't worry, Jack is back to clean it all up. I'll keep your little bird safe.*

My head feels like it's splitting open, rage engulfing me from the inside out.

Then I black out.

LAINE

Jaxon is the Ripper.

And now he's gone. I never asked him why he did it or why he didn't try and kill me again. All the questions that plagued my mind, all the answers I needed to learn to breathe again, are still there.

He left and didn't look back.

I told him to go. I had to.

He sends me letters from Hell—his dead girl walking. It's only a matter of time before he gives me a cold, dark grave, too.

I'm still sitting there, covered in blood, when the police storm the house. They don't arrest me, but they take me away to another part of the house for questioning while officers swarm all over Jaxon's things like rats picking apart a corpse. I want to scream at them to stop, but I have nothing left inside.

A little bird told me....

I feel numb.

Torn apart. Broken.

Especially when the police keep asking me questions that I can't answer. "I told you. I have no idea!" I lose my temper at one of the officers playing bad detective. "Just call my father."

"Miss Summers, I'm afraid your father can't help you right now."

My head whips to the sound of Jaxon's father's voice. "Simmons." I glare at him.

He casts a glance at the officers in the room with me. "Leave us." I'm not surprised when the detective nods. Jaxon said the Lucians have some of the higher-ups in the Met and the City police dangling on a rope. The two officers glance at each other and then reluctantly do as he says.

"Jaxon isn't here, and I don't know where he is."

Simmons snorts, taking a seat on the couch opposite. "I think you do know, Miss Summers."

"I don't."

He cocks his head. "What happened to Wickham and Addison?"

"I didn't kill them."

"No. Jaxon did. I want to know why."

"Ask him."

"I'm asking you."

I chew my inner lip.

“There’s no one here taking an official statement. Whatever you say stays between us.”

“You’re wasting your time.”

Simmons grins, a chilling mask I’ve never seen before. “Do you know how much influence I have? I could call into question your mother’s drinking or your father’s competence, or better yet, they could easily get in an accident on the way home from work.”

I glare at him. “In other words, you’re threatening me?”

He sighs and leans back in the chair. “I know you have some hold on my son, and I plan to have that removed. How I do that is up to you.” When I don’t say anything, he carries on. “Do you know why Jaxon is special? He was touched by the Divine when he was eleven years old.”

“The Divine?” I scoff.

“He killed his own mother. Did he tell you that?”

I blink at him, not wanting to believe the horror coming out of his mouth.”

“She was sick, dying. She needed a new heart. Unfortunately, no matter how hard I looked for one, there wasn’t a donor. Instead, her body and soul would be offered for the Harvest. Jaxon saw what had been done to her on the altar. He delivered the final blow.” He pauses, waiting to see my reaction.

I stay very still, giving him none. Inside, my chest squeezes tight, tears forming a thin glaze over my eyes. If I blink again, I’ll cry.

“I thought his mother died from an overdose?” My voice sounds scratchy.

“So, you’ve read the police report.”

“Freedom of Information Act,” I spout.

“As you can see”—he waves his arm, cruel smile still carved on his lips—“we own the London police, Miss Summers.”

“All I hear is that you left his mother to die, so he was forced to assist in her death. It was a mercy kill.”

“You may be right, but he didn’t hesitate and, after, became unruly. Later, we learned from various treatments, doctors, and special facilities that Jaxon’s childhood psyche had splintered. Part of him remembers that boy who killed his own mother. The rest, unfortunately, doesn’t.

Jaxon is devoted to the Society and its needs, but there’s a side of him I can’t control easily. He needs a regular outlet for his passions, or he regresses. At least during Harvest, we can use him to his full potential. He

does the work no one else wants.”

“You mean you use him to cover up your crimes.”

Simmons shrugs. “The Divine chose my son. He gives, and the society protects. Without us, he would have to answer to the authorities. Be locked away. No one appreciates his qualities like I do. Jaxon doesn’t always recall his contributions during his lost time, but he understands their importance and significance.” He gives me an unnerving stare until I have to look away. “Or at least, he did...until you.”

Outside, the police are cordoning off the entire street. It’s surreal to see them taping off the areas from the public, setting up a barrier between Jaxon’s home and the rest of the world.

“What’s your game, Miss Summers? How are you able to control my son?”

I glance back at Simmons. “I’m not controlling anyone.”

“You should be dead. My son was supposed to kill you.”

I already am. His words make my stomach twist, but I don’t give him the satisfaction of showing it. My scar feels like it’s burning. “We all have choices. Jaxon should be allowed to make his own.”

“And did he?”

He left and didn’t look back.

“I’ll make the offer one last time. Tell me where my son is and let you live, and I’ll spare your mother and father the pain of losing their lives as well as their imprudent daughter.”

“Fuck you.” It’s not original, but it has the desired effect.

“Very well.”

I don’t watch Simmons leave, but I hear him go, the swish of his fancy coat against the door. A moment later, the officers come back into the room. I’m not afraid of Simmons. He may have a transactional relationship with the police, but he can’t get to me now I’m in custody, and if he tries anything once they release me, I’ll kill him.

His threats are useless without Jaxon to do his dirty work.

I keep telling myself that all the way to the station because it’s the only I can function through the fear.

And I’m already dead.

HAVING A FATHER IN THE FORCE HELPS MATTERS. DAD SHOWS UP AND PULLS some strings, enough to end the ongoing questioning.

As we walk out, the police superintendent calls my father over. “Kendall, a word?”

My father’s tired eyes slide to mine. There’s more gray at his temples, I’m sure of it. “Wait for me outside.”

Dad disappears into his boss’s office as I shuffle into a crisp September morning, the air colder and fresher than it has been in a long time. I take a deep breath, expelling the pent-up emotions from my lungs, and stare off into the distance.

I feel naked without the gun Nola gave me, but the police confiscated it. I’ll have to get another one to protect myself from Simmons now I’m exposed. The police have nothing to charge me with.

It’s Jaxon they want.

The Ripper.

A rush of something dark grips my insides at the thought of Jaxon being the one who tried to kill me. I don’t know how I feel about that. If Jaxon suffers from lost time and does things he doesn’t remember, does he remember what he did to me?

Does it matter if he does?

When I was hunting him, I never cared to ask the Ripper why; I just wanted him gone. Now, I’m torn in two between the monster who hurt me and the man who haunts me, buried deep under my skin. There’s no going back.

“Cuz.” I look up to see my cousin, Cash, leaning against the bonnet of his car. “Kendall told me what happened. You’re staying at mine, I won’t take no for an answer.”

The next couple of days, despite Simmons’s threats, nothing happens. But I can’t sit around and wait for him to hurt my family, so after the police come around to ask more questions about Jaxon that I can’t answer, I make my mum go on that holiday she’s always harping on about. And call Rae, my dad’s ex-partner, and ask her to watch Kendall’s back.

After that, I don’t bother getting out of bed—only to take the gun Cash found for me, drive out into the middle of his estate, and practice shooting holes in the temporary range he made me, cardboard boxes stuffed with newspapers. Nola and Sage keep calling, but I prefer to wallow and shoot alone.

Jaxon stays away, but some nights, when I'm shooting late, I see a figure in the depths of the woods watching me. I can almost feel his lips against mine if I close my eyes like a ghost breathing across my bruised skin.

But when I open them, he's gone.

Strangely, I'm not afraid.

It's only when Cash asks me seriously, cigar hanging from his mouth while he pours us both a large gin and tonic in one of those goldfish bowl glasses lined with a long slice of cucumber at nine in the morning, what would it take to get me to snap out of it, I realize what I need to do.

"I want to kill Abe Simmons."

Cash doesn't blink when I explain the threat he made to our family. He nods, handing me the glass with a smirk. "Thought you'd never ask."

Two days later, Cash comes home with a bag of illegal guns and his brother, Presley, in tow. "Do you want to come, or do you want to stay by the phone and bite your fingernails?"

I raise a brow. "You're coming out of retirement?"

"I'm from Shepherd's Bush. Why would I fucking retire?"

Berners House emerges out of the darkness as we drive toward it, bright uplighting glaring for miles, polluting the area of natural beauty it squats in.

Cash grins as we get closer, glancing back at me. "I'm looking forward to this."

Pres snorts as he pulls up. "Just don't get shot. I'm not sucking bullets out of your ass cheeks this time."

Luckily, Pres is a member, meaning we drove through without issues. I felt brave until Cash told me he doesn't like to plan these things, and Pres agreed and then tucked a few grenades in his pockets. Now I'm petrified we're all going to get arrested.

"Simmons is mine," I remind them, sounding badass as I climb out of Cash's matte black SUV into the chilly night air. I should be warm in my black polo neck and black gym bottoms tucked into boots, and I am. I even have a baseball cap on with my hair tucked underneath, but occasionally, the wind rips right through me.

It's either that or the fear.

I can't tell which.

Cash chuckles, the bag of guns slung over his shoulder as he exits. "We gotcha, Cuz. You do what you have to do."

We stand around for several minutes, the boys smoking, me tapping my

foot before I ask what we're waiting for. My nerves are shot, and my shoulders are taut. I've never done anything like this. Maybe I should have stayed at home and chewed my nails.

Suddenly, the lights go out, plummeting us into pitch-black.

"That," Cash snorts. "That is what we're waiting for."

Pres looks at his watch, the face still illuminated. "Lights out, power out, guns fucking blazing."

Adrenaline kisses down my spine as the brothers stride into the dark, silent house, leaving me outside. My cousins drew the line at me coming in with them. But unease ghosts over my goosebumped skin at the base of my neck when they don't come out.

Seconds tick by.

They went to find Simmons for me. That's all they're doing in there.

"What's happening?" I ask Cash on the radio, keeping my voice low.

"Not much. It's dead as a doornail. And it fucking stinks in here."

"Of what?"

"Gasoline."

I instantly regret not going in when the connection crackles, everything erupts into chaos, and then the radio dies. I was hoping it would be easy...get in and get out, that sort of thing, but it's clearly not.

What feels like hours later, Cash emerges, a machine gun slung over his shoulder, dragging a beat-up Simmons out and down the steps by whatever hair he has left. He dumps him on the ground in front of me.

"One fucking bastard, hand-delivered for you."

My eyes dart back into the house. "Where's Pres?"

"He took one in the shoulder. Went to find some Tylenol."

I doubt Tylenol would help, but I don't say that, instead I stare down at Simmons, on his knees, panting and bloody at my feet. He's trembling.

Shaking myself, my heart crashing in my chest, I pull out the gun from my waistband and point it at him. *I can do this.* It's only then that I realize Simmons is laughing.

"W—what's so funny?"

Simmons looks up, his eyes practically glowing. "You are. This." He indicates to Cash. "It's pathetic."

"I have a gun pointed at your head. You think that's pathetic? Why?" I grit out, trying to keep my calm. Fury licks my insides white hot, fighting the terror that hasn't let go since we got here. Somewhere in my head, a voice

cries, *This isn't me*. But it's like I'm watching a movie. Everything is happening so far away.

Simmons's sides shake; he's laughing so much. I stare down at him and then look at Cash, who shrugs.

"The fucker's lost—"

Bang!

I can't react fast enough.

In slow motion, Cash slumps over onto the ground. And the burly man with the dark, bushy eyebrows I saw at the auction comes striding out of the house, his gun trained on me.

"Drop it, or I kill him."

Cash groans where he's fallen. I drop the gun as Simmons's amusement slows to a chuckle, and he gets to his feet. He turns away, no longer interested, brushing the dirt from his suit.

"Shepherd, deal with her."

The burly man, Shepherd, picks up my gun and pockets it. I step back, chest tight, frozen in place, but he doesn't seem to care. He walks right up to me and smashes his weapon onto my temple.

Lights explode across my eyes.

Then...nothing.

JAXON

From my car, I watch the scene unfold.

What the fuck is she doing?

I'm torn between striding over there and shooting everyone, including her dickhead cousin, and taking her away....

And duty.

After I blacked out, the Ripper took over. I know he did because my clothes stank of gasoline, and my knuckles were raw and bruised, bleeding when I woke up in my car, parked outside Berners House.

Just like I did outside Laine's house the night of the fire. All of the letters he'd ever sent her were strewn over the passenger seat. Despite his demands to have control, he has a hard time keeping hold of it. He wasn't meant to front all the time, and there are things I deal with that bore him. Even with my offer of giving him everything, he has yet to take it.

"Did you hurt her?" I seethed at him. She's the last thing I remember before he took over. Usually, we try not to communicate. I do my very best to pretend he doesn't exist, keeping parts of my life hidden from him even now. But, like with Addison, I needed to know.

Did you know that you dream about her often? That's how I knew you were hiding her, he chuckled.

"Did you fucking touch her?" I raged at him.

She's the reason why I signed the paperwork accepting the job at Mitre on our behalf. You thought you'd kept her from me, but I was just enjoying the game. I sent her letters.

"I saw the letters." I felt his callous smile on my lips then, and when I glanced at the rearview mirror, he was looking back at me, his eyes sinner black. *Don't get mad at me, brother. I'm not the one who wants our birdie dead. And don't fucking worry. I fixed our little problem.*

I didn't get to ask what he'd fucking done this time because an unknown matte black SUV pulled in, and to my fucking surprise, Laine got out with two men. I recognized them as cousins of hers, both well-known in London for their unsavory business dealings.

It's obvious why she's here.

"What did you do?" I demanded, but he'd already slipped back into the depths of my subconscious.

Until the moment when my father kneels before my little fox, her gun pointed blankly at his head. Until Shepherd appears and shoots her idiotic fucking cousin. Only then did my alter, Jack, emerge like a raging bull, his untapped fury spiraling through every part of my body.

So I let him out. Consciously. Something I'm starting to do more often. If he's known about Laine for a while, and he hasn't killed her yet then it's likely he's not going to.

And I need him.

But we're too far away to stop that bastard Shepherd smashing her with the butt of his gun, knocking her out cold.

Then we're running, gun in hand, executing anyone who stands in our way.

"Why do you fucking care?" I exhale between kills. "You tried to kill her."

He laughs, darkly, *That was before when she liked you better than me. She likes it when I come and watch her. Maybe you were right. She belongs to us both, brother.*

He's not my brother, but I don't correct him. For the first time, we agree on one thing...

She belongs to us both.

Laine is all that matters. I'll think about whether sharing her with my twisted darkness is a sane thing to do later.

The first time I found her, I kept my distance. When he found her, I stayed away to keep her safe from me, and ultimately him, but failed. Now, leaving her would be impossible. Bullets roar through the air, people are running, screaming. There's blood all over me, but I don't fucking care. She's mine.

Ours.

"Where is she?" I ask over and over to the men who haven't yet died, but I know where she is, where my father has taken her.

To the altar.

LAINE

Lightening zaps behind my eyes as I crack my lids open. I wince and sit up, or try to, but I can't, I'm strapped to some kind of table. Just moving my head to look makes me want to vomit.

Stars explode across my vision, making me moan, and then fade away as I focus on breathing and not retching.

"Shhh, I've got you." His voice is hushed, brushed silk across my burning skin as he runs his hands over me.

My eyes flicker open, and I see him.

Jaxon unstraps me, a buckle at a time, and gathers me into his arms. His scent, like dry grass on a warm day, is reassuring, like resting in a summer meadow, coming home to a secret garden only you know exists.

I melt into him.

Too tired, too abused to do anything else.

Jaxon carries me out. I glance once over his shoulder and see the carnage in a snapshot that will haunt me forever: men dead left and right, bullet holes to their brains, and what's left of Simmons's corpse in bloody pieces, scattered on the floor.

"He's dead," I sigh it out loud like a release.

I'm aware that I sound relieved that Jaxon's father is no longer breathing, and how rude that must be, but my brain isn't functioning well after that asshole, Shepherd, hit me with his gun.

But I needn't worry,

Jaxon's eyes darken as they look at me. "Because I fucking killed him."

I hardly ever hear Jaxon swear. It sounds rough on his tongue, a gentleman turned rogue, halfway between the Ripper and himself. I quite like it, but I don't get to tell him that because when I close my eyes again, I fall into a dreamless state, my body giving into exhaustion.

When I wake up again, I'm at Cash's place. I know because there are so many cracks on the ceiling that it looks like thousands of spiders have scrawled across it. It's a wonder the roof hasn't caved in.

I sit up.

Light-headedness spears my brain, so I stay still until it passes. When I finally get out of bed and wander into the kitchen, only Pres is there with a cup of coffee, reading the local paper. There's no sign of Cash.

Or Jaxon.

A sense of dread creeps over me. “Where’s Cash?”

Pres sighs. “At the hospital. He’s fine, though. The bullet went straight through and missed anything vital. Tough bastard.” He indicates to the kettle. “Coffee?”

I nod at him and sit on one of the breakfast stools while he fixes me a cup. “What happened? Who brought me here?” Did I dream of Jaxon? Was it Presley who rescued me?

Pres raises a brow and slides the paper across the breakfast bar to me. The front page has a photo of Berners House going up in flames. The headline splashed across the front reads, *Berners House Burns Down*. And under it in smaller typeface, *Seventeen burned to death in Berners House Hell*.

“After you disappeared. Your boyfriend brought you here. Threatened to kill me unless I watched over you,” Pres grumbles as he slams my coffee down. “Who the fuck does he think he is? Fucking toffee-nosed git.”

I don’t know why my heart sinks or tears glaze my eyes. Or why I feel disappointed that he’s gone. Jaxon is the Ripper. He slashed my neck and left me to die. He sent me all those terrible, taunting letters.

And yet.

I am.

There’s something wrong with me, I’ve known for a while. But what I didn’t understand was how fucked up I was. I want things no sane person should want.

Presley grimaces. “Fucking prick, said to give you this.” He tosses an envelope at me.

It’s addressed to me in neat cursive. I tear it open. Inside are the files from the archive room I tried to get evidence of before, the names and dates of those who attended the frat party. Molly’s name is there, and so is mine. There are also pages and pages of detailed accounts of every Lucian ritual performed every decade, which they called the Harvest, going back over a hundred years to when the organization was formed, including the names of women and the organs taken from them. Nothing else.

No note. No Post-it. No letter.

Keeping my breathing steady, I place the files on the table and drown my sorrow in the hot, bitter coffee. When I put the cup down, almost empty, my jaw tightens, and my heart hardens. Fuck him. Fuck him and the horse he rode in on.

He can go to Hell.

It's several days before I venture out of the house to meet with Sage and Nola and explain what happened. Sage hugs me like she lost and found me again, and Nola gives me a look that seems to understand what I'm going through.

It's several weeks before Cash comes home, discharged from the hospital. Presley immediately fucks off, handing over the duty Jaxon assigned him to his brother.

The police have questions about Jaxon but not Berners House since no one knows we were there that night. Another secret to add to my growing collection: It's good that I'm getting better at keeping them.

I spend the days working admin at Mitre, since what else can I do to occupy my mind? The pub gave my bar job away, and Pierre was distraught after losing the Foundation funding, and I can't defer the online degree any longer. I'm a little apprehensive about going back to med school, but it's what I promised myself after it was all over.

It's only at night when I have to lock myself in the room Cash let me take over that I wonder if it is over. Because...

He's still out there.

And I've still got the evidence. I should give it to the police, but I can't bring myself to just yet. I want to look him in the eye and ask why he did what he did. What was Jaxon and what wasn't, I still don't know.

LAINE

Mornings are always gray before the world wakes up. I'm used to it, trudging through the streets of London to meet my dad for Waffle Morning.

The broken red neon of Lucky's stands out like a blood-red thumb amongst the pumpkin-colored leaves. Walking on them produces a soft, almost hushed rustling sound—a secret shared only with those who pay close attention to the city's whispers. Commuter faces no longer look like Henry, Geoffery, or Beau. Guilt and the ghosts of my past have faded, just like the scar on my neck.

Every time I see it in the mirror, instead of reminding me I'm a victim, it jolts a memory of Jaxon's hand squeezing while he did other sinful things to my body.

I was supposed to find him and kill him, but instead, he found me and fucked me. Now I'm stuck in this gray no-go area where wrong and right are mixed up. The world is upside down, and I don't know how to right it again.

He tried to kill me, and yet, what hurts more is him being gone, like he did all those years ago when he didn't turn up for the end-of-year ball. I'm like a pathetic, nerdy teenager stood up at a party by the popular guy in university all over again.

And even though I understand why he left, both times, I hate it. And hate him even more. I really will kill him if he ever shows up again.

He'd better not wait another ten years.

At least it's not raining.

The diner is mostly empty, including our regular table. I slip into the booth and order a coffee, holding the waffles for when Dad can get here so we can order at the same time. When ten minutes pass, and he hasn't arrived, I check my phone.

DAD:

Something's come up. Eat without me, and I'll try and see you later.

There's also another unread message sent a few minutes ago. As I read it, my heart slams against my chest.

UNKNOWN:

Is this seat taken?

I look around, seeing no one, so I quickly text back.

LAINE:

You know that it's not.

I wait, heart in my throat. A minute later, he strolls into the diner. He's dressed in a perfectly fitted blue suit that brings out the silver ocean in his eyes. His mouth twitches with a smirk as he takes the seat opposite. The server comes over. He orders a coffee, and I order the house special.

Despite his edible appearance, he has dark circles, and his face is thinner. Weeks-old stubble carves over his jaw enough to cut me open if he kissed me.

I stare at him, convinced if I blink too many times, he'll dissipate into thin air. Jaxon Clément was a person of interest in Addison's murder, but somehow, the organization, much bigger than the seventeen people who died in the fire, has squashed the investigation. "I thought you'd be halfway around the world by now."

"That's a little hard to do when you made a promise not to fly anywhere."

My lips curve, but the amusement doesn't reach my eyes. "Bullshit."

"Slow travel is the best way to go."

I shake my head. "You really shouldn't be here. If anyone sees you talking to me, the police—"

"I'm not afraid of getting caught."

"Then what are you afraid of?" I ask after the server places my waffles before us, gives Jaxon an empty mug, and tops up the coffee pot on the table.

When she leaves, he sighs, pouring a coffee and running a hand through his head. "This."

I raise a brow. "Waffles?"

His lips twitch. "No, the distance between us."

I don't know if he means physically or metaphorically, but I'm not about to close the gap. Well, at least not all the way. I chew my lip and stare at my waffle, spearing a cream-topped strawberry onto my fork. But it doesn't go near my mouth. Suddenly, I'm not hungry.

"Ask me, you know you want to."

I lift my gaze to his and scoff. "Why are you here, Jaxon?" It's not the

question I want to ask, but it's a start.

He doesn't answer immediately, but when he does, he sounds resigned. "You still haven't given the evidence to the police. Why?"

"Because you'll be incriminated along with the rest of the organization."

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"No, I wanted to kill you."

He nods. "Good. You should hate me."

"You didn't kill those girls." Jaxon's name wasn't on any documents relating to the murders of those women. From what I could tell, certain members liked to take things too far. The organization protected its members from being exposed or arrested or, in some cases, provided for those needs in return for additional dedication toward their Divine cause.

But Jaxon's name was all over the illegal organ transport paperwork.

"No, I ran the operations for the blood market."

"The organs came from those girls."

"Their bodies would be left to me to utilize and dispose of."

I sit back in my chair, eyebrows raised, shocked at the callous way he explains it. Forgotten grief pricks the backs of my eyes. "*Utilize and dispose of.* How very efficient of you. Is that all Molly was? Someone to dispose of?"

Jaxon's eyes narrow, the muscle in his jaw tightening. "It wasn't..." He runs a hand through his hair, looking flustered. I've always seen Jaon cool and calm. Angry, yes, but never out of his depth. This is the first time he looks lost. "I couldn't save your friend. Sometimes, the women survived. I tried with Molly. I'm a brilliant surgeon, but she didn't make it. The best I could do was make sure her death meant something, and her organs helped those live who would otherwise die."

"The women survived?"

He nods. "There's an old converted school, a refuge for abused women near Spitalfields Hill, called Sacred Heart. Those that could be saved I patched up and took them there to an old contact of mine who could get them new lives, new identities."

"And me?"

"There wasn't meant to be any witnesses."

"Is that why you left?"

"You know that's why."

I shake my head. "But you're still here now?"

Jaxon's jaw clenches, silver eyes like shards of glass. "Hand the evidence

in.” He gets to his feet, his coffee untouched.

Any hope I have still lingering deflates, and then I hate myself for having hope in the first place. I’ll never forgive him for what he did, what he’s doing. Walking away as if it all meant nothing. Ten years of my life chasing a nightmare, wasted. “Is that all you came here to tell me?” I snap as bitter rage bruises my chest with every breath.

He pauses. “No. I came to tell you I made a mistake.”

I make myself eat the strawberry. Surprisingly, it’s really sweet. “Oh?”

“I shouldn’t have left, but after I told you who I am, I thought it best.” He rubs his jaw. “I’m sorry I didn’t explain.”

“I know about your condition. The dissociative identity disorder,” I blurt out. After everything had settled, I scoured Google for the answers I so desperately needed.

“I never wanted to hurt you, Laine.”

I spear another strawberry with a chunk of waffle and stuff it into my mouth, stopping me from breaking down. “Well, you did.” *You still are.* He stills and then makes a nodding motion. I want to ask him why he’s leaving, but my pride won’t let me stoop that low.

Jaxon is the killer, *my killer.*

I mustn’t forget that.

“Just get out. And never come back. Both of you. Or I’ll carve your heart out myself.”

A smile twitches across his lips. “Give the evidence to the police, Laine.” He drops a crisp fifty on the table. “For the coffee.” And walks out.

JAXON

I'm supposed to stay away. It's supposed to end like this.

She's supposed to hate me.

I tell myself as I walk purposely to the car waiting outside and get into the passenger side. Wolf is in the driver's seat, arching his brow at me because I don't trust anyone else.

After I razed the organization's London headquarters, the other Sanctuaries stepped in to smooth things over. Pay off the authorities. Conveniently remove police evidence and witnesses. It's what they do. They appointed me Archkey in place of my father since I've always been in line for the role, but that doesn't mean I'm not under watch.

"So that's why you finally killed our old man," Wolf muses. I shoot him a look. He holds up his hands. "I don't give a fuck. I would have put a bullet between his eyes long before this if I could."

Wolf is an acolyte, which means he's in training to become a member. If he had killed the Archkey, him being our father aside, the organization would have removed him. I, on the other hand, am protected. Power plays are common. Once you're in, you're in no matter what fucked up thing you do. But my brother's status means he can leave anytime, unlike me.

Ironic. Now I have everything I've ever wanted. Power. Prestige. Divine reckoning at my beck and call.

But I want it gone.

That's why Laine needs to give the evidence to the cops, specifically to her dad, who is one of the non-corrupt ones. Wolf can still get out and live his life, but I must go down with the mother-fucking-ship.

"Is she going to do it?"

"She will." Maybe she won't kill me, but she hates me enough to do it.

Wolf sighs and starts the engine. "You know you're signing your death warrant. Fuck the police, the Lucians will make you wish you'd burned in that house along with Dad."

"Just make sure you get Matty somewhere safe when the cleansing happens."

My entire life has been dedicated to the Divine, but the organization has stagnated. Sanctuaries are no longer run according to the ancient texts. They're run by men who no longer believe, who take instead of sacrificing,

using the Divine to fuel their addictions. It must be wiped clean.

But not by me. I don't fucking care anymore about any of it.

Miles Lamberton, Max's brother, wanted to kill me when he found out about his brother's suicide. Shina convinced him to go higher when he learned it was an order and brought him to me to make a deal. I assumed he'd crash and burn at the first hurdle, but the Lamberton family is determined, and Shina's connected more than I realized.

When I told my father there would be a coup, he laughed like he didn't believe me. Even when I cut off his air supply until his eyes bulged, kickstarting the cleansing with a Divine fire.

It was Shina who shot her own husband that night. She doesn't know that it's Jack she's been in communication with, not me, per se.

You've been busy, I aim inwardly, but there's no response. Lately, there never is. It could be the therapy sessions or it could be that Jack is biding his time. My alter has never been predictable.

Wolf's eyes roll in his head, bringing me back to the external. "You're fucking crazy. Do you trust Shina? Shina Shepherd?"

"She's a founder."

"By marriage."

"Women aren't forbidden in the texts." Some Sanctuaries allow women to become members, though not all.

"It's not because she's a woman. It's because I'm fucking her."

I stare at him, and he groans. "I didn't know she was a bloodthirsty psychopath."

A ghost of a dark smile touches my lips. "Pot. Kettle. Black."

"Touché."

Wolf drives us home to chaos. Matty was in a fit of packing when we left, telling her to be ready to leave at a moment's notice. Nothing has changed when we arrive back. The two heavies in the foyer greet us with no more than a tilt of the head while Matty ignores us. She was pissed, mainly at me, earlier. I still have no idea why.

"Do you have any idea how much shit we've accumulated over the years?" Matty's hair is unkempt, wild around her cherub face as she finally deigns to look at me. Her eyes aren't amused. Still upset. Whatever I've done, she's making me work for it.

"Leave it behind," I mutter.

"There are starving people living on the streets, and you want me to leave

things behind.”

“Then donate it to charity.” I really don’t have time for this.

She clenches her jaw but nods. “That’s a good idea. You two.” She gestures to the heavies standing guard. “Take these boxes down to goodwill.” They hesitate to do as she asks, looking to me for approval. I offer a blank look. “Don’t look at him. I’m in charge here,” she snaps.

I’ve honestly never seen men move so fast.

“I’m heading to the hospital.” It’s my last shift. After everything, I thought it best to resign. Usually, when I feel like this, I throw myself into work. But making sure the London Sanctuary is functioning *is* work. I also still have the family company to manage, which is keeping me up all hours. The last thing I need to be doing is operating on someone on minimal sleep.

“Jax.”

I turn back to the sound of my sister’s voice.

“Are you alright?”

Irritation coils in my stomach, but I suppress it. Matty isn’t someone I can take my darkening mood out on.

“All good,” I lie.

“You look like you haven’t slept in a week. And what’s with the beard?”

“Our brother’s preparing for Movember next month, aren’t you?” Wolf taunts from across the room.

Now Matty’s eyes are amused. “Is that true?”

Fuck Wolf. I hope Shina bites his dick off. “I’m heading to work.”

“Wait.” She places a hand on my shoulder. “You’d tell me if anything is wrong, right? Because we’re moving out of the family home pretty fast.”

“Of course,” I say smoothly.

“It’s not because of your university friend? That girl, what’s her name?”

My shoulders stiffen before I can force them to relax. Matty catches it; she’s that astute, but instead of getting angrier with me...she smiles and squeezes my shoulder.

“Whoever she is, I approve. You deserve to be happy, Jaxon. If you must take down that horrid patriarchal men’s club to be with her, we’re with you all the way.” She glances back at Wolf, who smirks and raises a shot glass of whatever alcohol hasn’t been packed away yet.

Shifted under the weight of her words, I make my excuses and leave.

My sister is wrong. I don’t deserve to be happy. My life was never meant to be like theirs. I’m not like them.

We're not like them, my alter adds, coming out of the darkness as I sit in the front seat of my car, staring at nothing.

"You disappeared."

I was having a holiday after all that work you made me do.

"You still haven't taken control."

Fronting full-time is fucking exhausting.

"We had a deal. You said you wouldn't hurt her."

The Ripper chuckles. *I can see what you like about her. She's feisty. Maybe we should keep her.*

I narrow my eyes, looking back at myself in the rearview mirror. "She told us never to come back."

The little bird was most definitely telling fibs. Her lower lip was trembling so fucking adoringly.

Laine is better off without me. Without us. It's the reason I left before and will again. I thought she'd evolved, but she's still the same girl I knew at university, with fractures of light and darkness. I used to think we were the same, but I have no light...not anymore.

I'm just as evil as my alter, I'm just better at hiding it.

I tell myself that as I drive over to her cousin's house, where she's staying, and watch her until the light in her room switches off and she goes to bed, before heading to work.

LAINE

Flames lick the edges of the page. Edges blacken and curl up in smoke. It's cathartic to watch.

It's been two weeks since I saw Jaxon, and he ordered me to hand the evidence in. I couldn't do it. Jaxon's name was there in black and white as the person who cleaned up every murder, carving bodies and delivering black market organs to every hospital funded by the foundation.

But the organization was profiteering off rape and murder, still is if what Jaxon says is true, and there's a Sanctuary in every major city.

I can't let that go.

So I stuffed everything that didn't have Jaxon's name on it and left it in a manilla envelope on my dad's porch—an anonymous tip. My dad isn't in the crime investigation department anymore, but he'll see that it gets to the right channels.

As for the rest of it, I'm feeding it to the light, hoping that, in some way, Jaxon's recent actions can atone for what he did. Maybe I'm delusional, but I can't bring myself to condemn him, not after what I've done.

I'm a killer, too.

Cash, recovering from his gunshot wound, hobbles into the sitting room where I'm burning the contents of the envelope.

"You alright, kid?"

I'm not, but I force a smile out. "Happy as Larry."

"Is he still stalking you?"

I roll my eyes. My stalker is back, almost like he hasn't gone away. He's followed me for the last two weeks wherever I go, in his Aston Martin. That's how I know it's him. "If you see him outside again, you have my permission to shoot him."

"Oh, I will." Cash laughs just as the bell rings. He glances out the window. "Your friends are here."

When Nola and Sage found out what happened, they wanted to see me immediately, but I wasn't in the right frame of mind. Cash convinced me to get back to normal as soon as possible. Whatever normal is? Shooting things is my only outlet, and even that reminds me of *him*.

Why did he have to teach me how to shoot? Why wouldn't it have been something useless, like cooking, and then I would have an excuse to stay

away from the kitchen? Cash cooks for me every night anyway.

Outside the house, my two-partners in crime are stretching by the low wall surrounding the garage. Our weekly cookie afternoons have morphed into weekly runs—Nola’s idea—healthy body, healthy mind, apparently.

I feel neither of those things. Just lost.

“You can’t run in jeans,” Nola huffs in her sleek black Lycra, hair snatched back in a ponytail.

“I’m not coming.”

Sage pouts, wearing the brightest colors imaginable with her hair in a top knot bun. “Come on, it’ll be fun. After, we can binge on ice cream.” She ignores the look of horror Nola gives and tosses me a canvas bag filled with clothes.

“What’s this?”

“Spare running gear. I thought after the fire you might not have any.” Warmth snags in my chest, and tears threaten to spill at any moment. I shake my head, too choked up to speak, and shove the bag at her.

Nola sighs, taking it from Sage and handing it back. “You have two minutes to get changed and get your ass out here, or we’ll make you run in your underwear. Running will do you good. Get the blood flowing.”

Five minutes later, I emerge dressed in Sage’s neon running clothes. They’re a bit snug, given she’s smaller than me, and I look like I’m going to an 80s rave, but I don’t care. Nothing seems to matter anymore.

But Nola is right. She always is. I feel better once we get going. The fresh air feels good on my skin, and the smell of wet leaves has me breathing deeper, expelling the pain I don’t want to acknowledge. Saying I miss Jaxon is like admitting what he did to me was fine. It wasn’t. There are red flags, and then there are big red signs that all point to needing therapy.

Maybe normal isn’t what I need, and I should start doing new things and opening myself up to different experiences.

“Pole dancing,” I huff at Sage.

“What?”

“Let’s go to lessons.” What am I saying? Where did that come from?

Nola smirks. “I used to be a stripper, so why not? Be good to get back on the pole.”

As we run, the hill getting steeper, Sage’s face is a picture, and I shake my head.

“I’m not sure my fiancé will let me,” Sage pants.

“Then sneak out. Fuck him,” I huff, trying not to die on the hill.

“Don’t look now, but there’s a car that’s been following us since the house,” Nola adds, sounding like she has all the lung capacity in the world.

I do look, I can’t help it. About a mile behind, at the start of the hill, is polished Aston Marten. Abruptly, I change direction, running back down the hill. I don’t look back to see if Sage or Nola are following. I’m focused on only one thing, confronting the fucker behind the wheel.

Downhill is easier. Soon, I’m flying, my feet hardly touching the ground. The wind snatches their shouts, but I can half hear the girls calling me. I ignore them, the anger blasting through my body like a wrecking ball.

I’m sick of men thinking they can do what they like, intruding on my private time. He left me, he walked away.

Jaxon doesn’t get to stalk me.

When I arrive, he’s just casually sitting behind the wheel, car idle next to the curb. I bang on the glass. “Oi!”

He winds the window down and narrows his eyes at my outfit. From my vantage point, he’s casually dressed, wearing a designer black t-shirt and jeans. He even suits the scruffy beard he’s growing for whatever reason.

“You’re not allowed to stalk me,” I say through a clenched jaw, trying to catch my breath.

“You look....”

“What? What do I look like?”

“Hot when you’re working out.”

I stare at him, my mouth fixed in a stern line. “Just stop following me.” I kick his wheel for effect.

The dimple in his cheek furrows. Urgh, I hate that dimple. Slowly, he puts the car in gear and turns around. After he drives off, I run back up the hill, again and then collapse into a mess at the top when I reach the girls, wheezing and coughing my guts up.

“You should have got him to drive you up,” Nola quips. If she wasn’t my friend, I would slap her.

We manage to run all the way into town and stop at my old local pub, Flower and Dean, for a bite to eat. I’m feeling much better, less cooped up and pissed off. For the first time in a while, I’m looking forward to eating.

“Didn’t you used to work here?” Sage asks as we take a table near the TV so Nola can watch the football.

“Part-time,” I nod, looking to the bar to see if I can catch a glimpse of

who they replaced me with. A young barman with a waistcoat and shirt catches my gaze and walks over.

“Laine, right?” He focuses his crinkly-eyed smile on me.

“Er, yes.”

He holds out his hand. “Miles, we met at the Ten Bells when you were there with Jaxon.”

Miles keeps my hand a little too long but he seems harmless, so I smile back. The upside, we get table service. He takes our food and drinks order and disappears into the back. I don’t think anything of him until he passes me a piece of paper as we are leaving. On it is his phone number.

I’m tempted to bin it, but outside, I see the familiar Aston prowling at the end of the street. “Fuck it, I want to try new things.” I take out my phone and text Miles to the look of delight on Sage’s face and the raised brow on Nola’s.

I might have been too hasty accepting a date with Miles the next night. However, the look on Jaxon’s face when he stalks me to the local cinema is worth it. He’s not close enough for me to actually see his face, but I can imagine it as his Aston pulls up in the parking lot as Miles is escorting me inside.

We stop at the counter to queue for popcorn. I’m half listening to Miles, and half looking for Jaxon, fortunately, Miles likes to talk a lot.

“I love this film. It’s been adapted so many times. Did you know there is a brief scene where Poirot interacts with a photograph of Agatha Christie...”

I tune Miles out and stare at the entrance until my eyes burn. Every tall, vaguely attractive guy looks like Jaxon and has my chest in palpitations.

He’d better not to follow me inside.

“... which one?”

I blink back at Miles. “Sorry, what were you saying?”

He runs a hand through his hair, his cheeks tinged with red. “Butter or salted popcorn?”

“Any? Both?” We get both and then filter in to watch the movie. I hardly notice when Miles goes to the bathroom. Only when a familiar presence strides into the same row and takes Miles’s seat, slow and deliberately, does everything burn—my lungs, my throat, even my eyes as I take him in.

Jaxon leans close, though his eyes remain fixed on the movie. The scent of his cologne, all sharp and citrus, clings to the air, turning me inside out as he whispers, “What did I miss?”

I want to punch him, stab him with my straw. Instead, calming the wild beating of my heart, I glare at him. “You can’t just turn up while I’m on a date,” I mutter.

His jaw clenches. “Are you fucking him?”

That’s it. I round on him, sparks building in my veins. “Are you crazy?”

“Shhh.” A few rows in front, some random person shoots a hostile look over their shoulder.

Jaxon takes a handful of popcorn and tosses it into his mouth. *Fuck him.* I’m done with this. I get up to leave the cinema the opposite way Jaxon came in, but he grabs me and pulls me back down. “Wait, *please*, Laine.”

It’s not the *please* that gets me, it’s the hushed way he says my name, the deep timbre of his voice low, soft, caressing my skin like velvet.

I wait, half turned away from him. My heart hammers in my chest, too loud to hear the movie over. I can’t look at him, though.

He sighs and pulls me back onto his chest, the beating of his heart matches the thumping of mine. It’s a wonder anyone can hear the damn movie.

“Why are you here?”

“Because I thought I could stay away, and I can’t. Leaving you is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.” He pauses, and I can count the seconds before he speaks again on both hands. “I did it to protect you from me.”

“You mean from the Ripper?”

Jaxon sighs.

“But you don’t need to do that anymore?”

“No.”

“Why?”

In response, his lips graze my temple and then stay there.

I’m stiff at first, then slowly, everything starts to relax, starting with my neck and shoulders, then my chest, our breathing going in and out simultaneously. My stomach and thighs are next, then my legs down to my toes until I’m resting on him fully.

“Miles is going to freak when he comes back.”

“Miles isn’t coming back.”

My eyes widen, but I don’t make an effort to move. Maybe that shows how much I’ve changed when it comes to violence. “Is he dead?”

Jaxon chuckles softly and bites my ear. “No, he’s just a little tied up.”

I can accept that. For a few minutes, my eyes stray to the movie while

Jaxon's hands do sinful things to my body. *I'm going to Hell*, I think when his knuckles graze my exposed thighs.

I'm wearing one of Sage's knit dresses with boots, she wouldn't let me leave the house in anything less for a date. I'm unsure if I should be glad she insisted or annoyed Jaxon doesn't have to do much to get me to roll over and spread for him.

He's the worst addiction I've ever had.

He eases me onto his lap, I let him, shifting on top of him, feeling how hard he is beneath me. His other hand kneads my breast over the soft wool of the dress. "Fuck, I've been dreaming of this. I can't wait to make you come on my cock, my beautiful girl," he breathes into the shell of my ear.

I have no words to say back, only a porn star like mew that echoes throughout the cinema.

"Will you shut the hell up back there!" is the collective response.

I groan. "I'm not fucking you here." *Or anywhere*. But I don't say the last bit. Never say never.

He inclines his head, seeming to accept that, but his fingers slip inside my lace thong, dipping inside my wetness and drawing hot circles over my clit. "I've been thinking about what you said."

"About what?" I pant softly.

"About hurting you." Every nerve in my body is liquid fire. "All the bad things I've done to hurt others, to hurt you. I'm sorry."

"You didn't do all of them."

"No, the Ripper did. And I didn't stop him."

"And now?"

"I made a deal with him. He leaves you alone, and gets full control."

I freeze. Is this the Ripper I'm grinding my ass into right now? No, no, it can't be. His whole demeanor is different. I can tell the difference.

"But he doesn't seem to want it now I've given him what he's always craved. And now I sense him coming and going less and less."

I swallow, bile souring the back of my throat. "He's disappearing?"

Jaxon shakes his head. "No. He wants something else now." He doesn't tell me what. "Please, Laine. Let me make it up to you."

My chest tightens as delicious heat tingles between my thighs. I look back at him, his lips so close, I can almost taste him. "How?" I whisper back.

Jaxon flashes a demonic smile in the dark. "How do you feel about trains?"

LAINE

I have nothing against trains. Secretly, I love them—especially ones with restaurants, private cabins, and breathtaking views.

I'm in the first-class lounge for the Orient Express, sitting at the champagne bar, clutching the ticket Jaxon left on my pillow after he broke in, getting around Cash's security without him even knowing.

A piano plays in the corner. Flutes of bubbles pop and fizz as they float past on trays, served by waiters in white blazers and black tie.

I didn't want to turn up; I was going to trash it and curse him for all eternity, but I couldn't pass up the experience.

And him.

I'm not scared of him. Not anymore.

I'm no longer a victim.

And Jaxon may not be who I thought he was or who he pretends to be. He's both dark and delicious combined—Devil and angel in one devastating form. Self-preservation should keep me far away, running for the hills, but I have a morbid curiosity I've never been able to shake. There's a darkness to me that craves to be understood. He accepts me, warts and all: the good, the bad, and the twisted.

A sudden feeling of being watched slides down my spine.

Followed by mild annoyance.

My gaze travels down the bar and collides with a man with soul-sucking eyes. The feeling of being truly and utterly seen slinks through me as he gets out of his chair and stalks toward me.

“Penny for your thoughts?” His baritone voice brushes over me, sending my pulse racing.

Rigid in my seat, I stay wary but also relieved.

He showed up.

If he hadn't, I was going to go anyway. A slow trip around the world before I start the next chapter of my life. But here he is. This time, he didn't let me down. The lightest licks of flame I felt when he turned up at the cinema rage back to life.

“I've been thinking....”

“Dangerous.”

I throw him a sour look, laced with a smile. “If you're going to be a dick

the whole trip, I'd rather go alone."

"That's what you were thinking?"

I shake my head, gaze trailing over him, handsome with a fresh shave, dressed in casual slacks and a jumper. Next to him is a compact Hermes suitcase with a jacket lain on top of it that looks like a baby next to the elephant-sized Primani backpack I'm carting around. "No, that's not it."

I sweep my eyes to connect with his as he sits beside me. "I want to talk to him. The Ripper."

He raises a brow. "Are you ready for that?"

"He saved me, right?"

He nods. "We both did."

"So he doesn't want to kill me anymore."

"No." Jaxon tilts his head as though listening to someone. "Actually, the opposite. He won't let anyone hurt you since you belong to me...to us."

A cold, dark thrill skates down my spine. I'm unsure how I feel about belonging to anyone, let alone a man who once tried to kill me, but it doesn't frighten me. As long as it's Jaxon, I feel safe.

I can stop Jack from switching to the front now, though I can't always make him come out, Jaxon explained after the cinema. He's started therapy to stabilize his system, the switches between alters, him and Jack as he calls himself, and eventually integrate. It's a long process toward healing. I still don't understand it all, but Jaxon thinks it's helping control his triggers.

Which means he thinks we could work.

"I guess if he tries anything, I can always stab you," I joke.

Jaxon chuckles. "Still got your claws out, little fox."

A message buzzes on my phone. It's from the girls in our group chat.

SAGE:

If he hurts you again, I'll castrate him.

NOLA:

I'll hold him down.

LAINE:

Should I be worried about you two?

SAGE:

Seriously though, where is he taking you?

NOLA:

Don't worry, I had Quinn slip a tracker in her phone.

LAINE:

That had better be another joke.

SAGE:

Um.

NOLA:

...

“Glad to see I’m not the only one keeping tabs on you,” Jaxon drawls in my ear.

Quickly, I shove my phone away. “Does the therapy you’re having include maintaining healthy boundaries?”

Jaxon chuckles, a low, clit thrumming sound that heats me from the core out. “Get on the train, and you’ll find out.”

We get on the train.

True to form, Jaxon has booked the Grand Suite. Between him and the room, I can’t stop staring, mouth ajar.

Rich mahogany gilds the walls, intricately carved floral motifs, interrupted only by large windows draped in heavy, rich curtains. A sumptuous king-sized bed, dressed in the finest Egyptian cotton sheets, dominates the cabin. To one side is a small dining area with a polished walnut table flanked by two velvet-upholstered chairs. A marble private bathroom nestles in the corner.

An attentive cabin steward deposits our bags near the door and then leaves.

It’s been nearly a month since I was alone in a room with Jaxon. When I agreed to be his slow travel buddy, I assumed we’d have a cabin each. Jaxon made it clear he sleeps alone. My palms are sweaty and the dress I’m wearing suddenly feels too hot. If I was alone, I’d take it off, but....

I give Jaxon a shy look, and he gives me a devilish one.

It’s been three and half weeks since he accosted me at the cinema, and every day he’s stalked me, and every day I’ve tried to push him away or ignore him until he left me the Orient Express ticket. It was a slow acceptance, getting used to him being there, watching me from his car at night, skulking in the shadows as I go about my life. Usually, I’d see him out of the corner of my eye, and when I turned and looked at him directly, he either wasn’t there, or he was but didn’t come any closer.

And now he’s right next to me, and we’re going to share a room for the

first time, I have no clue how to let him in.

Jaxon, however, has other ideas. He closes the gap between us with a few strides, wrapping his arms around me, his face buried in my neck, breathing in the scent of my skin. I reach up and place a hand on his forearm. Then he whispers in my ear. “I’m going to count to twenty, little fox, and when I’m done, I’m going to strip you, fuck you, and take you whatever way I please.”

I freeze, stock still. His words are in utter opposition to the fancy suite we’re in.

“One, two, three...”

I let out a nervous laugh. “You’re joking, right.”

“Four, five, six...”

Hell, he’s not joking. I pull away from him, turning around to look him in the eye. There’s a dark storm in his silver eyes, mocking me. Choices jumble up in my mind, making me panic.

I could stand my ground and see what would happen.

Lock myself in the bathroom.

Or I could run.

His eyes burn into mine. “Last chance to run, little fox.”

A whistle blows, and the train jerks, pulling away and leaving the station.

“Seven, Eight, Nine...” His smile is all the bad things rolled into one. Adrenaline rushes up my spine, and heat pools between my legs—fear and desire fuse, a lethal cocktail that’s soon going to get me too drunk to run.

I scramble out of the cabin, my heart racing like a horse out of the gate. The train is already moving fast, so there’s nowhere to go but through the skinny carriage walkway, the views whistling past. I’m back on the streets of London running away from him, except this time the carriage is brightly lit, full of people, and I know what happens at the end.

Hurrying through the opulent restaurant car, the crowded bar, and then into the luxurious seated carriages, I don’t look back. Until his hand snakes around my neck, he drags me into one of the empty seating compartments.

His mouth claims mine in a brutal kiss, rasping my lower lip with his teeth. He plasters me onto the smooth carriage wall, so close his body aligns with mine. His erection is rock hard, straining through his trousers. The feel of him pressing against the low heat in my belly makes me gasp and arch my back against him.

He smiles, teeth showing. “I like you like this, desperate for me.”

I tremble as his hands tangle in my hair, yanking my head back and

exposing my neck for him. He chuckles, buries his face in my throat, and licks the scar across its length. The curtains are drawn so anyone can stoop and look in. People already have.

“Jax, everyone can see—” My words are cut short by him biting me, his free hand running down the length of me, slowly, searing my flesh with every stroke and squeeze of my breasts over the dress. The only clear thought entering my mind before he yanks the dress down is that *I’m wearing too many clothes.*

JAXON

“Let them watch,” I growl. “Let them see how fucking beautiful you are when you come.” My little fox shivers beneath me, increasing my excitement as she gives the barest nod.

Pulling her dress strap down, I pinch her pink nipples. A soft moan escapes her sweet lips. Looking into her eyes, I bend down and wrap my lips around it, sucking until she’s writhing in my grasp. I snake my hand down until it caresses the tops of her thighs, tracing my fingers over her creamy, soft skin.

“Legs apart, now,” I command.

She does as I tell her, watching me with luminous eyes as I skim the edge of her lacy pants with my thumb. She’s soaking wet, trembling as I yank the thin strip of material aside and enter her.

With one hand locked around her neck, holding her captive in front of the carriage door window, I circle her clit, teasing her sopping pussy until she’s panting, biting her lip in that fucking adorable way, trying not to make a noise.

“Do you like that, little fox?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want more?”

“Yes, *please*, Jaxon.”

“Please?”

“Let’s go back to the cabin.”

I cock my head, a dark smile playing on my lips. “Why would I do that? I have you where I want you right here.”

“You’ve seen all of me. I want to see you, all of you.” It makes me chuckle that she’s figured me out. Undressing takes time; how much easier is it to pleasure a woman, fuck a woman and bring her to her knees without removing an inch of clothing to go back to work afterward.

She’s wrong. I haven’t seen all of her, tasted all of her. There are so many things I can do to her, she has no idea. But we have time. There are a few more nights on this train to Vienna.

Holding one of her thighs open with my knee, I insert a finger into her slowly, all the way to the knuckle. Her mouth opens, but nothing comes out but a silent gasp. I do it again, and she clamps down on her bottom lip. “I’ll

take you back to the cabin on one condition, my sweet vixen.”

Her eyes flash with heat. “What?”

“You scream for me when I make you come.”

She sucks in a breath, defiance slowly coming to life in her eyes. “Can you even make me scream?”

I let out a chuckle, shoving an extra couple of fingers inside her for being a brat, making her whimper out loud. Then I fuck her with my fingers until her eyes flicker closed, and she lets go, moaning loudly, her breaths coming in small pants.

“Good girl.” I reward her with a flick of her clit and then slink down to my knees, lifting her skirt to worship her warm pussy with my mouth. “Open your legs wider, beautiful, I want to see everything.”

After a few slow, leisurely licks, she relaxes, arching into me, clawing at the polished mahogany, nails scraping for purchase.

“Fuck, Jaxon,” she moans.

Her head is back, neck exposed as I swirl and plunge my tongue into her soft, warm folds. She spasms, thighs tightening around me as I do it again.

“Please,” she gasps, shaking, hips rising to meet me.

I seal my lips over her clit and suck and fuck her with my tongue. I watch her come apart, hands threaded through my hair, her whole body on the edge of release.

“Jaxon, Jaxon, Jaxon...” She says my name repeatedly, louder and louder, until she tenses, not breathing, and a sharp shudder comes over her. I bite down as she orgasms.

She screams my name, a delicious sound, so I reward her with three fingers curved inside of her, thumb pressing down on her clit, riding her orgasm until she yanks at my hair so hard. I let my little fox drag me to face her, and her mouth seeks mine to devour her cries.

The kiss is pain mixed with pleasure as she bites back. Blood mingles with the taste of her on my lips. I’m so hard that I’m straining against the confines of my suit pants.

Her fingers claw at my belt and buckle. “Fuck me, Jaxon. I need you inside me.”

“The cabin,” is all I have to say. Disappointment flashes across her face for a few seconds, making my blood boil. “Soon,” I promise her. She rights her dress, and I guide her back to our suite.

All of a sudden, she looks nervous and unsure. She gnaws her lip and

stares at me as I peel my jumper off, with a gaze so fucking heated, I want to bury myself inside her and never come up air. Then she smirks, a carnal look flashing across her face as she crosses the room and digs inside her rucksack.

She pulls out the knife, the one *he* gave her.

“How did you—” I shake my head. “Never mind.” I was about to ask how she even smuggled a knife through customs, but I don’t actually care.

“Come here,” she orders, embracing her bossy side.

I stalk up to her, take her face in my hand, and kiss her so hard we’re both out of breath when we finally pull apart. How can one woman have so many sides that drive me crazy?

I don’t protest when she cuts away the buttons of my shirt or when she drags the belt through the loops and slices through the fastener on my waistband. Halfway through, she cuts me, the slice of the blade searing the flesh of my groin.

“Oops.” Her devious gaze connects with mine.

With a sneer, I grab her wrist, twisting the knife from her grasp and into mine.

“Get on the bed.”

She hisses and scrabbles backward onto it, but she isn’t fast enough, so I hoist her onto it with one hand and straddle her. I still have the knife and use it to cut her clothes away, her dress first down the middle, then her bra. At last, her panties. Then I tease the blade over her bare skin.

Her eyes light with fire as I run it over her breasts, pausing over her erect nipples and then down her shivering stomach, where the drag makes a nick in her perfect flesh. My little fox makes a throaty moan. The sound of it has me on edge, her need crawls up my spine, just as the thrill of the chase thrums through my veins.

I want to bleed her dry, cut her into pieces, and rearrange them.

My vision flickers, my head pounds, and that’s when I know.

He’s here.

She’s mine, I snap at him internally.

Ours. Your words. Share her why don’t you, brother?

“Jaxon,” Laine says in a hushed tone. “Your eyes.”

I stare down at my prey, but she’s not afraid. Cautiously, she sits up and draws her finger along the cut on my lower abdomen, then she sticks the finger in her mouth and sucks. All the while, her eyes are on mine, glowing with lust.

“He wants you too.”

She tilts her head. “Can you both have me at the same time?”

“I can control him enough now to switch him in and out.”

She nods and lies back, but I can feel her body shaking. Her eyes are wild, driving me fucking insane with how much I want her. I take the knife, lock her fingers around the hilt, and then lay down on top of her, breathing in her delicious scent as I kiss the scar on her neck.

“If he hurts you, kill him.”

Then I let Jack out.

LAINE

He looms over me, a dark, twisted grin on his face. His eyes are bottomless pits, sucking me down in their depths. I grip the knife in two hands, my whole body shaking as he reaches down and trails a hand over my naked body.

Despite myself, heat spikes through my core, making me squirm with the threat of forbidden pleasure.

“I’ve waited a long time for this, little bird,” he growls. His voice is deeper, harsher than Jaxon’s, just like I remember it from that night. I didn’t see his face because everyone was wearing masks from the ball, but I’d never forget his voice. “Jaxon calls you fox, but we both know women are either whores to be ripped or delicate birds waiting to be devoured.” He licks his lips, crouching over me, his hand snaking around my throat. “Which one are you, Laine?” he asks, voice hushed in my ear.

“You’re him, the Ripper?” My voice comes out strangled, but my hands are steady as I slide the blade to his neck. I may be on my back, vulnerable, but I’m not helpless. This fox bites.

He chuckles, a rougher sound than Jaxon’s, and tightens his grip. “Shall we find out?”

With my knife at his throat, he kisses me. Not gentle or consuming like Jaxon, but brutal and biting. His kiss is like fighting for air, but my body responds to him, a soft moan escaping as he kicks my legs wide and grinds into me, the heat of his body pressing down on mine.

He smells the same, strong earth and citrus, and tastes like Jaxon does as he scrapes his teeth over my bottom lip. But it’s not Jaxon.

It’s Jack.

When he pulls back, I’m panting, his presence burning an ache between my legs.

Watching me with dark eyes, Jack strokes himself slowly. His trousers are wide open, and he stands to shove them off, still teasing his enormous erection. Somehow, it looks bigger, but I know it’s not. It’s still Jaxon’s body, covered in scars and masonic-looking ink.

“You look divine, my little whore,” he drawls as he straddles me again, one hand fisting himself, the other wraps around my wrist and squeezes, trying to roll the knife from my hands.

I know this trick, so I hold on, twisting the blade to catch his forearm—blood beads on his skin. “See. Not your whore,” I snap. He grins and yanks my arms up above my head instead. “I like it when you fight back.”

Heat flares deep in my abdomen, pooling between my slick thighs. I need him inside me soon. I don’t care if it’s Jaxon or Jack, that’s how fucked up I am. “If you’re going to fuck me, then fuck me.”

He cocks his head, eyes glinting with amusement. “So eager.” Running his thumb over the tip of his cock, he leans down and rubs the precum over my lips. “Beg first.”

If he expects me to struggle, I don’t. I open my mouth, and his thumb slides in. I suck slowly, the salty taste of him and the feel of his dick swollen against my thigh making me clench, the ache between them almost too much. I stare into his eyes, letting him see I’m not afraid.

Letting him see I want him.

With equal desire, he shifts between my legs, one knee prying my legs apart. The tip of his cock teasing at my entrance has my body bending to meet him. Instead, he plunges his thumb all the way into the back of my throat until I’m choking.

Seeing stars colliding across my vision.

“The last time I had you on your back, you begged. Beg for me, Laine, and I’ll show you what Divine means,” he whispers in my ear.

I can’t beg because I can’t breathe. With my hands still held above my head, I slash with the knife and try to speak. I don’t know if I manage to cut him, but he yanks his thumb out. A gasping sound, a soft groan, escapes my lips.

“What was that, little birdie?” His black eyes glitter above me as he comes back into focus.

“Fuck me, please,” I choke out.

“Hell, you rip me apart.” He grins and pushes his length into me so abruptly, filling me up so deliciously that I almost black out from the pleasure of his intrusion.

Then, he fucks me hard, his shaft dragging the whole way out before slamming back in. Each time, I’m trying not to cry out. The force of it, despite how wet I am, burns.

A whimper escapes my lips.

My eyes leak tears.

My body is on fire, every thrust is a lick of flame consuming me from the

inside out as my back arches to match his savage pace.

“Please—” I don’t know if I’m asking him for more or to slow down. All I know is I’m close to breaking. I do the only thing I can, I bite him hard on the neck, bearing down until I taste blood.

As if reading my thoughts, he slows enough for me to adjust, his thrusts becoming deliberate and languid, his strokes more intense as the pleasure has time to build.

“How’s this, little fox?” He places a gentle kiss on my damp cheek.

Fox.

I stare into his eyes, and they reflect back like silver moons.

“Jaxon?” He nods, releasing my hands so I can drop the knife and wrap my arms around him.

“I kicked him out. Fuck sharing,” he growls.

“Jealous?” I laugh at him, relieved though slightly disappointed.

Part of me wanted the Ripper to fuck me until I broke as if the damage he did to me all those years ago could only be healed if I fully let him in. Part of me wanted to taste the darkness and come back from it, like a ghost crossing over to the right side of the living. But the rest was terrified, though I’ll never admit it.

“No, but I’ll take some getting used to.”

Warmth melts and expands inside my chest, and I pull Jaxon down into a deep, passionate kiss; as he fucks me until I can’t walk if I tried, bringing me to screaming release. The imprint of my teeth is still raw on his neck. If it leaves a mark, good, it’ll be a reminder, a promise to myself to tame the Ripper inside Jaxon and make them both mine.

But that can wait...

...until next time.

TWO WEEKS LATER

“So how are the Rhône-Alpes?” Nola asks, heavy machinery noises cutting into our discussion every so often.

I promised to call her and Sage once we got to Vienna, but we didn’t get there. We took a detour to a cozy cabin in the snowy peaked mountains. I have zero signal out here, but if I wrap myself in layers, tug on some fur boots and a woolly hat, and trudge out to what looks like the edge of the world, I can just about make a call.

“Cold. Have you heard from Sage?” I ask her. I haven’t heard from her since she texted me a week ago.

Nola sighs. “Not a peep. I’m worried.”

Sage has her bachelorette party this weekend, and I wanted to make sure she was alright, but she’s not answering her phone. Nola and I weren’t invited to any of it since her mother organized it, and she doesn’t allow Sage to have friends outside of their circle of trust funds.

“Maybe she has her hands full with wedding planning.”

“She hasn’t turned up to meetings or kickboxing.”

“Fuck, maybe I should come back.”

“No, stay. Enjoy your trip. I’m sure she’s just trying to figure out her shit out before she has to share a bed with that fucker. The wedding date is not far off.”

“Do you really think her fiance killed her sister?”

Nola snorts. “Oh, he did it, alright. No man that notorious can be trusted.”

River Champion-Barrow’s family is renowned for their shady commercial dealings. Plenty of officials who have gone up against his property expansions have mysteriously disappeared. Sage let it slip once that she overheard his staff talking about the foundations of his buildings hiding bodies in the concrete.

“What about you?” Nola asks. “Any loose ends you want help tying up?”

The last thing Jaxon did before joining me on this slow travel holiday was put in motion a cleaning operation, taking down the corruption of the Lucians from the inside as well as the outside with a little help from the anonymous tip I gave the police. The Foundation, the public arm of the establishment, has already folded. It’s only a matter of time before every follower mentioned in the evidence is caught or goes into hiding.

Jaxon won't need to since his involvement burned to the ground when Berners House went up in flames. Only the papers he gave me could prove anything, and they've now gone. I made sure of that.

"There's nothing else to tie up."

"So your man is out of it now? For good?"

"He's out of it." Jaxon is so good at changing himself to be what the world wants to see that even if the police were investigating him, I doubt he would let himself be caught.

"And the Ripper? Can you accept what he did?"

I bite my lower lip and look back at the cabin, lit from within with candles. From here, I can see the rose petals on the snow, scattered like breadcrumbs, leading me back to him. Jaxon has something special planned for tonight as part of making it up to me. He's still trying. And it's working.

Slowly.

Since their masks are fully off, Jaxon and Jack seem to switch in and out more now. And it doesn't feel strange to talk to Jaxon one minute, and Jack the next, but something else is happening. I can no longer tell who is who. But that's not a bad thing since alters in therapy can eventually merge. Jaxon is nowhere near healed, but dealing with the past is helping him with control.

The best part is that sex and therapy seem to be enough to keep both of them interested and satisfied—that and teaching me survival skills. I can already make a fire. Fishing through that's another thing entirely. At least we're living off-grid, which warms the embers of my eco-warrior heart, and we're doing it in style, which means massages, natural spas, and amazing food on tap.

But ultimately, it's Jaxon's journey to healing that I'm supporting him through. It'll work as long as he keeps trying to heal and we keep talking, communicating, and dreaming of a future together.

I don't say any of this to Nola, not even when she prompts me. "Laine, you still there?"

"I'm here. I don't accept it, but I understand it."

"Okay," she says slowly. "As long as you're safe."

"I am. Jaxon won't let anything hurt me." And strangely, neither will the Ripper. "Stronger Together," I say softly before I hang up.

I can almost see Nola make the cross with her fingers, so I make it, too, inside my faux fur-lined mitten. And then trudge back inside for my pampering evening with the boys.

**Thank you for reading From Hell, the first book in the Villianous
Delights series.**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mallory Fox is addicted to tatted up bad boys, chocolate covered pretzels, and looking deep into heart-melting, big brown eyes... the canine kind.

She loves to write deliciously dark romance with wicked, twisty plots about tainted-love, sweet revenge, and all kinds of emotional-rollercoaster redemption.

Mallory currently lives in London with her bean-shaped dog and the rest of her non-furry family.

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